

Gaily Ever After: Neo-Victorian M/M Genre Romance for the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract:

This article examines the subgenre of M/M (gay) genre romance set in the nineteenth century, focusing on a corpus of 2017 to 2018 novels as well as shorter works by authors K. J. Charles and Cat Sebastian. Their writings are rooted in the legacy of Georgette Heyer's Regency romances and the history of M/M romance, a recent genre which owes as much to digital fanfiction as it does to queer publishers in the 1960s and 1970s. I explore the idea of a queer Happily Ever After as a *topos* and *telos* that allows the narratives to re-write the past through creating a happy queer 'archive', while also engaging critically with the representation of marginalised gender, sexual, and racial identities. Although there are problematic aspects to these portrayals, I posit that the passionate community of romance readers and writers shows a popular, affective, and truly neo-Victorian engagement with the nineteenth century.

Keywords: K. J. Charles, fanfiction, genre fiction, happy ending, Georgette Heyer, m/m, popular, queer, romance, Cat Sebastian.

You cannot have a romance without a happy ending. According to the Romance Writers of America's (RWA) definition, genre romance is characterised by "a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (Anon. 2017: n.p.). This definition was designed to be as inclusive as possible: elements like time, space, length, tone, or the level and amount of explicit sexual content were not defined, as they depend on the subgenre and the individual author's choices. Most importantly, however, this new definition sought to recognise the evolution of the market, and especially the fact that a heterosexual wedding or partnership could no longer serve as a commonplace ending for all. That being said, Pamela Regis's seminal work, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, published around the same time, solely focuses on heterosexual pairings, stating that "a romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of

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the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (Regis 2003: 19). *The Journal of Popular Romance Studies* was founded in 2010; genre romance scholarship is still a new field, and has to contend with the sheer mass of output from a rapidly evolving billion-dollar industry while trying to catch up to a backlog of nineteenth- and twentieth-century works hitherto deemed unworthy of critical attention. M/M romance is one of those blind spots. As such, in this article, parts of genre history have been drawn together from partial information and speculation, hopefully to be fleshed out and nuanced by further research.

This article deals with M/M neo-Victorian romance, that is to say, novels written in the twenty-first century but set in the Long Nineteenth Century, with a central love story between two male characters and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending, which are generally written by female authors and for a mostly female readership. Despite the potential confusion with ‘gay fiction’ (written by and for gay men), the term ‘gay romance’ will be used interchangeably with ‘M/M romance’ from time to time, reflecting the overlap of categories in the history of the genre. I examine the points of connection between the particular sub-genre of M/M romance set in the nineteenth century and neo-Victorianism through the lens of two authors, K. J. Charles and Cat Sebastian, focusing on the following works: the *Sins of the City* trilogy (2017), ‘Wanted, An Author’ (2018), *Unfit to Print* (2018) and *Band Sinister* (2018) by Charles, and *It Takes Two to Tumble* (2017) and *Unmasked by the Marquess* (2018) by Sebastian. In addition to these five novels, one novella and one short story, I also refer to the rest of these writers’ backlists and M/M works by other authors. In *Unmasked by the Marquess* and *An Unsuitable Heir* (2017, the third *Sins of the City* book), the main couple includes a protagonist who is on the transgender spectrum but does not identify as exclusively male. The ‘M/M’ editorial category can be used inclusively in such cases, with ‘queer romance’ serving as an alternative umbrella term that often includes F/F and M/F with bisexual protagonists.

The selected books are representative of what the subgenre can do in terms of raising up marginalised voices and building a fictional past of joyful queerness from a popular perspective. However, this choice of corpus is also determined by my personal reading preferences – and the personal is always political. The mass of published works comprises some very obscure books and a lot of problematic ones, which reiterate heterosexism,

queerphobia, and other forms of discrimination.¹ Even a scholarly overview of the romance field is selective, depending on when and how one started to read romance. Nevertheless, it seems more productive to try and be aware of that bias rather than step outside of one's preferences entirely, thus setting aside the familiarity with tropes and market realities that is necessary to develop a genre expertise.

I am interested in the idea of a 'Gaily Ever After', or the modalities and implications of narratives which have to resolve the queer love story happily in a time and space when a public acknowledgment (including but not limited to marriage) would be deemed both illegal and immoral.² As the central *topos* and *telos* of romance, the happy ending is impossible to reconcile with concepts of queer theory such as Sara Ahmed's critique of happiness and her defence of the importance of unhappy queer archives (Ahmed 2010: 88-120) or Lee Edelman's rejection of reproductive futurism (Edelman 2004). The goal here is not to counter such concepts, but to acknowledge that progress and revolution are expressed very uniquely in genre romance. The heteronormative and bourgeois underpinnings of happiness as a moral imperative (which are also key aspects of the Victorian novel) evidently left a strong mark on the generic codes of romance, and the imagery of at least symbolic (but often also literal) fertility is central to Regis's analysis of the structure of romance novels.³ Despite this conservative legacy, the desire to create happy 'archives' that is obvious in the corpus can be constructed as subversive, liberating both the re-imagined past and the projected future from the fatality of tragic love. Presenting queer desire, sexual acts, and negotiations of consent as natural and joyous is part of the politicisation of the domestic sphere, creating a safe haven in the margins of history where the characters can explore power dynamics. This does not mean that Charles's and Sebastian's books are without conflict, or indeed beyond reproach: they are products of a romance industry that centres normative whiteness as well as cis-genderism, able-bodiedness, and neurotypicality. Indeed, representation and the pitfalls of 'Writing the Other' are important issues for genre fiction in the twenty-first century (see Anon. 2009: n.p.).⁴ However, before delving further into these questions, I will first establish some historical landmarks for M/M romance in order to contextualise the genre expectations that Charles's and Sebastian's novels exploit and/or defy.

1. A Brief History of M/M Romance (1960s–2019)

The whole corpus of this article is set in the United Kingdom, yet when reviewing the history of M/M romance, the focus should be on American publishing. As an American writing stories set in England in the Regency era, Cat Sebastian is the norm rather than the exception in the historical romance community. K. J. Charles is one of the exceptions, a British writer who worked in UK publishing, including Mills & Boon, for twenty years before becoming a full-time author. However, the difference is not immediately obvious when reading their books, possibly reflecting the shift of “the geographic center of romance writing and publishing [...] from Great Britain and the Commonwealth to North America” that occurred after 1960 (Mussell 1999: 8). The 1971 purchase of Harlequin Enterprises (founded in 1949) of their British counterpart and predecessor Mills & Boon (founded 1908) is one manifestation of that shift.

The late 1960s are also when “the origins of contemporary popular queer romance can be traced to the explosive birth of the gay liberation movement following the Stonewall riots” (Barot 2016: 393). Len Barot’s focus on lesbian romance means that her history does not exactly map onto the topic of this article, since the ‘parallel but separate’ evolution of the gay and lesbian movements also applies to publishing, but the scarcity of sources available on gay romance makes even the small overlap precious.⁵ Charting the evolution of queer narratives from tragedy and ‘happiness with a price’ to coming-out stories and then beyond, Barot highlights the domination of independent lesbian feminist presses like Naiad Press (founded in 1973) in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of quantity, while the handful of gay romances released in the same timeframe were mainstream titles.⁶ Then came the “Evolution of the Revolution”, brought about by the Internet: Barot marks the evolution of popular romance and its move away from post-Stonewall activism around the turn of the millennium with the founding of new lesbian publishing houses, which primarily published fanfiction with the serial numbers filed off (Barot 2016: 398-399). While she focuses on the influence of the television series *Xena* (1995–2001), m/m fanfiction (as opposed to M/M published romance fiction) predates the turn of the millennium significantly,⁷ having arisen within yet another phenomenon of the late 1960s: the *Star Trek* fandom.

The first fanzines dedicated solely to *Star Trek*, *Spockanalia*, and *T-Negative* appeared in 1967, when a predominantly female fandom was

unusual in the science-fiction community.⁸ The product of a labour of love, these zines contained different kinds of stories and art involving the characters and universe of the show, including the depiction of Kirk and Spock as a couple, which came to be marked as Kirk/Spock or K/S. The slash, denoting a romantic and/or sexual relationship as opposed to friendship (marked by an ampersand), became shorthand for homoerotic content, and soon spread to other media fandoms and later to the romance publishing industry. Slash fiction remains m/m by default to this day, with variations being marked as femslash (f/f) and hetslash (m/f). The Internet obviously revolutionised the way in which fanfiction was written, shared, and consumed; for slash fiction in particular, one major landmark is the creation of *Archive of Our Own* in 2009, which occurred in response to a number of power abuses (under the pretence of moral panic) by big companies in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The primary focus of the non-profit Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) has always been the defence and preservation of predominantly female labour:⁹ the legal and technical safeguards put in place have ensured that millions of words cannot just be erased from their archive overnight.

In the same timeframe, M/M romance publishing was telling a very different story, showcasing the ephemeral nature of digital archives. Indeed, a lot of new small independent e-publishers specialising in LGBTQ+ fiction and/or romance appeared in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but most of the ones listed in the 'M/M (Male/Male) Romance' entry of the *Encyclopedia of Romance Fiction* have now disappeared (Markert 2018: 197), leaving behind abandoned websites or no websites at all.¹⁰ Even Ellora's Cave, founded in 2000 as the first e-publisher of erotica and sometimes serving as a gateway to gay romance through its M/F/M titles, closed in 2016.¹¹ This rapidly changing and evolving publishing market is not limited to small and medium independent presses: Loveswept, Penguin Random House's digital-only imprint for romance and women's fiction, which published Charles's *Sins of the City* trilogy, closed in early 2019, and one of Charles's self-published series, *A Charm of Magpies*, started out with Samhain Publishing (2011–2017). Avon Impulse, the digital imprint which released most of Sebastian's books, has been in operation since 2011 with no sign of trouble, yet she has also ventured into self-publishing with her post-WWII M/M romance *Hither, Page* (2019). While some romance authors choose the self-publishing route from the beginning in order to exert

more control or to curtail a lack of interest in their pitches from traditional publishers, others move to it partially or completely after having had bad experiences with publishers (and once they have established a loyal readership). M/M romance relies more on e-publishers than heterosexual romance and is therefore more beholden to the rapidly shifting market, but also more flexible out of necessity. Charles's and Sebastian's hybrid publishing models are representative of an industry where success can be built through word-of-mouth but where recognition is still marred by gatekeeping (especially when it comes to big industry awards like the RITAs).

The tangled history of M/M romance seems to be dominated by coincidence as much as correlation. The very fact that it is referred to as 'M/M romance' rather than 'gay romance' points to its fanfiction roots (as in 'm/m'), yet it is difficult to distinguish that influence within the marketing imperatives and poetics of romance in general in the twenty-first century. One of the visible connections is that such writing is seen as less focused on unique ideas and individual genius than in partaking in a communal conversation where tropes are celebrated and recycled,¹² where canon can and should be transformed by anyone who is so inclined – it could also be argued, however, that this is general trait of genre fiction. In his foreword to Anne Jamison's book on fanfiction, Lev Grossman singles out two literary works that debuted in 1966, the same year *Star Trek* started to air: Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. He argues that "[these] three things [...] changed the way we think about fiction" (Jamison 2013: n.p.). Yet beyond their 1960s context of emergence, the histories of slash fiction, queer romance, and neo-Victorian fiction should still be treated as parallel but separate phenomena. According to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's definition, neo-Victorian texts "must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). However, romance (like fanfiction) is first and foremost about reproducing what their readers enjoy, so one might wonder exactly how "self-conscious" acts of reinterpretation and revision can be within M/M romance in general. For neo-Victorian M/M romance specifically, the deliberate work put in by Charles and Sebastian's novels becomes evident in

the way they engage with a classic of the romance canon: Georgette Heyer's Regency romance novels.

2. Queering Heyer's Regency: Beyond Historical 'Accuracy'

The corpus for this article is split evenly between the Regency era and the high Victorian era in terms of settings, but while the term 'Victorian romance' (under which Charles shelves *Sins of the City* on Goodreads) is ambiguous, 'Regency romance' is a largely fixed signifier within genre romance and a twentieth-century creation. Georgette Heyer is known as the Queen, the Mother, and now the Grandmother of that specific subgenre of historical romance, which she started to mould with *Regency Buck*, published in 1935. Her first romance, however, was set in the 1750s, as was her first big success, *These Old Shades* (1923). Heyer published a total of thirty-two historical romances, as well as a few contemporary romances and a number of mysteries and historical novels. Released in mass market paperbacks in the United States in 1966, her romances were described as "in the tradition of Jane Austen", but for the many novelists who followed in her footsteps, the greatest honour would be to be situated "in the romantic tradition of Georgette Heyer" (Robinson 2001: 322). While the Victorian era tends to cannibalise its neighbours into a Long Nineteenth Century, particularly through the perspective of neo-Victorian fiction, Regency romance overshadows romances set in the Victorian era proper (and arguably all of historical or period romance) as far as recognition and branding are concerned. However, Heyer's Regency was also passed down in the genre with its overlay of Victorian sensibility, thus making the Regency romance genre skew subtly toward the end of the nineteenth century in regard to certain customs and to class anxiety.

Set for the most part in the world of the wealthy upper-class, Heyer's Regency romances revolve around the marriage market as represented by the London season, where fashion is of capital import and subject to lavish descriptions. Heyer's "distinct, light-hearted style" is easy to recognise, as is her ample use of period-appropriate Regency jargon (Spillman 2012: 87). Her meticulous attention to details of everyday life is well-known: editor Max Reinhardt, when trying to offer "helpful editorial suggestions [...] was told roundly that no-one in the country knew more about Regency language than Miss Heyer" (Byatt 2001: 298). In fact, within a collection of essays published by the Heyer society, Sebastian pointed out that "she did such a

compelling job of worldbuilding that sometimes her version of early 19th century England seems more salient than actual historical fact” (Sebastian 2018b: 35). Heyer’s Regency is familiar and comfortable for most romance readers, whether they are aware of it or not, and “since [it] has been reproduced so many times in modern historical romance, a story centering on a character outside of Heyer’s narrow world doesn’t ring true to most readers” (Sebastian 2018b: 36). More often than not, this skewed notion of accuracy is used to justify queerphobia, racism, xenophobia, and classism, which seems all the more disingenuous given how “we are capable of suspending reality [...] to overlook the deus ex machina in many of our favourite books” (Ganesan 2017: n.p.). Given her influence on the genre, Heyer’s responsibility in relation to the diversity and accuracy problem of historical romance cannot be overstated. The extreme whiteness of the sphere in which her heroines evolve participated in erasing the reality of Regency London as a cosmopolitan city with people of every skin colour and origin, including among the upper classes. But what little trace of diversity there is does not improve the situation much: the light comedy of reader-favourite *The Grand Sophy* (1950), in particular, is offset by the text’s flagrantly antisemitic caricature of a Jewish moneylender villain. Felicia Grossman argues that this portrayal is all the more revealing of the author’s bigotry given the date of publication and that “by writing antisemitic characters who are not challenged and are instead the heroes of the story, as well as the stereotype, Heyer not only excuses antisemitism but erases the real heroes of the era” (Grossman 2020: n.p.).

The issues of gender and sexual orientation are harder to address definitively. The literary and theatrical trope of the cross-dressing heroine is used in several of Heyer’s novels, Regency or other: Penelope in *The Corinthian* (1940) only passes herself off as Penn Creed, Richard Wyndham’s nephew, for a few days to escape an arranged marriage, but in *These Old Shades* (1923), Léonie spends most of her early life as Léon Bonnard and has to learn what it means to be a woman in her late teens. Are her ensuing struggles with female clothing and appropriate behaviour a simple rebellion against restrictive gender norms or an expression of gender dysphoria? The trope of utilitarian male cross-dressing is so widespread in genre fiction and especially in historical romance that it is easy to dismiss as meaningless, and probably obscures the nuances that lie beneath. In Heyer’s *The Masqueraders* (1928), the cross-dressing of the twin protagonists Robin

and Prudence Tremaine, meant to protect them from being exposed as Jacobites, creates complete alternate identities as siblings Kate and Peter Merriott. Nevertheless, Jodi McAlister states that it “is not an especially queer novel (which is hardly surprising, considering it was written in 1928 in a social context when ‘queer’ was hardly a concept Heyer would have known or approved of)” (McAlister 2016: 4).¹³ This echoes a popular misconception about Heyer’s limited worldview that can be traced back to her brother Frank. When asked whether *The Great Roxhyte* (1923) was intended to have a “homosexual slant”, he stated that she “would have disapproved of homosexuals if she had been aware of them” (Kloester 2011: 60). However, we know from her letters that Heyer worried about how her detective novel *Penhallow* (1943) would be received by Hodder & Stoughton, with its cast of illegitimate children including one daughter who was “obviously a lesbian (I shan’t actually say so, but anyone would have to be soft-headed not to grasp it)” (Heyer qtd. in Kloester 2011: 234).

Heyer’s novels do not feature queer representation that is at once explicit, positive, and happy, but her work is certainly open to queer readings of sexuality and gender identity, and, for the purposes of this article, ripe for contemporary re-tellings centred on explicitly queer happy endings. There are two examples in the corpus discussed here: Charles’s *Band Sinister* (2018), which is a rewriting of Heyer’s *Sylvester* (1957), and Sebastian’s *Unmasked by the Marquess*, which is a rewriting of her *Frederica* (1965). In the latter, the eponymous Frederica, freshly arrived in London with four siblings in tow, essentially bullies the Marquis of Alverstoke into launching her beautiful sister Charis into society. The plot, spurred on by jealous relatives, an unruly dog, and a daredevil younger brother who goes on a balloon ride, subsequently draws Frederica and Alverstoke together. In *Unmasked by the Marquess*, Alistair, the young but cantankerous Marquess of Pembroke, falls for the younger Robert Selby, who is trying to secure a coming-out ball for his sister Louisa. The truth, however, is that Robert Selby died two years earlier, and is now being impersonated by his former housemaid and lover, born Charity Wakefield and AFAB (assigned female at birth). The deception started out at Robert’s behest, as he had no interest in going to university, and is being kept up to save Louisa from destitution – at least in theory. Progressively, the main character realises that she is neither Charity nor Robert, but Robin, a non-binary person, and that taking on the clothes and role of a woman would be

the real deception. This is a good example of supposedly utilitarian male cross-dressing allowing a character to discover their transmasculine identity, but there are issues with the non-binary representation to which I will return.

In *Sylvester, or the Wicked Uncle* (1957), aspiring writer Phoebe Marlow has taken revenge for a slight by Sylvester, the arrogant Duke of Salford, by using him as the model for the villain of *The Lost Heir*, the Gothic novel she has written, not anticipating that said novel would be very popular. The fictional portrayal has consequences for Sylvester's real-world reputation, culminating in his silly sister-in-law Lady Ianthe abducting her son Edmund, whose guardianship he holds. In trying to make amends and recover the child, Phoebe and Sylvester's confrontational relationship eventually transitions into romance. In Charles's book, Amanda Frisby, sister to the very proper Guy, writes an anonymous Gothic novel portraying their neighbour, Philip Rookwood, as the villain. The book establishes a light-hearted intertextuality with its model: while Guy is terrified that Amanda will be sued and ruined if the truth comes out, Philip and his 'Murder' (the nickname for the group that comprises his close friends and lovers) are amused rather than insulted by the portrayal.¹⁴ More generally, the way in which Amanda's intra-textual book *The Secret of Darkdown* serves as catalyst for Guy to address his repressed attraction to Philip (and become part of his queer found family) appears as a *mise en abyme* both of the tradition of the *roman à clef* in Gothic fiction and of the community-building potential of romance novels. One reviewer points out how Charles builds up certain genre expectations the better to question them in both intertext and paratext, since the cover art suggests a love triangle with two men competing for one woman's affection, linking this cliché love triangle "to a novel where gay and polyamorous relationships are the dominant paradigm" (CharlotteRomansdeGare 2020, n.p.). When exploring the notion of the queer happy ending as a place blurring the private and the public sphere, family dynamics are key.

3. (In)Visible Safe Spaces: Found Families and Marriage

As it is unusual for romance authors to question their main characters' Happily Ever After once it has been achieved, romance series generally build on reader loyalty by marrying off one by one a group of connected people: close friends and families (nuclear or extended) are a popular choice. Sebastian's *Seducing the Sedgwicks* trilogy (2017–2020) has paired

off three of the five Sedgwick brothers: Benedict, Hartley, and Will. K. J. Charles's *Sins of the City* trilogy explores family blood ties in a roundabout way, since the central mystery of the series involves finding the rightful heir to the Taillefer title, born out of the hasty and never annulled first marriage of Edward, older and legitimate half-brother to Clem Talleyfer (hero of the first book). That heir, Clem's nephew, is Pen Starling, one of the main characters of the third book, but the way Pen's love interest Mark Braglewicz is connected to Clem and to Nathaniel Roy (who finds love in the second book) is through a place: the Jack and Knave, a public house where only those who are vouched for make it past the doorman. Frequented by gay men, lesbians, and individuals of different genders in drag, with Phyllis, a transgender woman, holding the bar, it is not unlike The Boy in the Boat pub where Florence Banner brings Nancy King towards the end of Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998). As such, it conflates contemporary, post-Stonewall queer spaces with places of queer subculture from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries like molly houses, sodomite clubs, and other suspected meeting-places.

This raises a paradox with regard to the erasure of said queer subculture. Rictor Norton points out that "we would know virtually nothing about early eighteenth-century homosexuals if it were not for the Society for the Reformation of Manners" (Norton 2013: n.p.). The queer past is pieced together partly through unhappy archives, through the criminalisation and public exposure of queer acts. One could argue that real-life examples of happy queer romances left little to no trace in recorded history, and that M/M historical romance is reconstructing through fiction a legacy that cannot be found in facts, in line with Waters's novels "insisting on a continuum of same-sex desire" through history (Joyce 2007: 154). And much like Waters's first novel offers "a 1990s-flavoured lesbian Victorian London" (Waters 2018: 475), Charles's and Sebastian's depictions of queerness are geared toward their twenty-first century readers, framing sexuality as a matter of identity rather than as acts. Their male-presenting protagonists seldom use labels (contemporary or historical), but they are very aware of (and at peace with) their attraction to men, and there are never any misunderstandings in regard to mutual attraction with their love interests. Moreover, the *telos* of the happy end guarantees that they will not be exposed to the legal system or social ruin, and grants a form of invisibility in-world, something played upon by the title of the first *Sins of*

the City book, *An Unseen Attraction* (2017). This narrative promise is close to a romance cliché, which seems to be known only as “invisible nookie”: the fact that “once the hero and heroine start riding the booty train, they will never get caught” (Wendell and Tan 2009: 105). It should be noted that heroes in M/M historical romance are much more careful than most heterosexual romance protagonists, and that the threat of exposure never completely disappears. However, all the selected novels also take place before the Labouchere Amendment of 1885, which explicitly included sexual acts between men occurring in public *and* private within the sphere of the law.¹⁵

Romances are centred on the private, domestic sphere, yet the public sphere does play a role in the prototypical structure: for Regis, the first narrative stage is defining “the society that the heroine and hero will confront in their courtship [... which] is in some way flawed”, and the last stage is often followed by a “wedding, dance, or fete”, showing that “[s]ociety has reconstituted itself around the new couple(s) and the community comes together to celebrate this” (Regis 2003: 31, 38). The promise of children is part of a symbolic healing or rejuvenation of this society, a return of spring after the passage of the point of ritual death. *Tipping the Velvet* is a perfect example of a queer variant on that imagery, with Florence and Nancy sharing a kiss while the adopted child they are raising plays nearby, and there is “a muffled cheer, and a rising ripple of applause” in the background, as if the world was blessing their union (Waters 2018: 472). Several of Sebastian’s happy endings also involve children finding a home with reconstituted families of choice, in particular *It Takes Two to Tumble* (2017), which is loosely inspired by Robert Wise’s 1965 film *The Sound of Music* and therefore has Benedict fall in love with Philip’s children as much as he does with Philip himself. This is also the novel that features the most overt queer rewriting of the marriage trope:¹⁶ during his last sermon as a country vicar, Benedict talks at length about the story of David and Jonathan and about the miracle of love, “whatever shape it comes in” (Sebastian 2017: 266). His parishioners are mildly confused, but he is not really speaking to them: he is making a promise to Philip and taking a vow before God. As soon as they are out of sight of the congregation, the lovers kiss and reassert their vows in private, before Benedict asks Philip to “take [him] home” (Sebastian 2017: 269). Since there is no real way to show progress in a wider society which criminalised

homosexuality more and more as the nineteenth century went on, the healing tends to be restricted to the found families and safe spaces that extend further and further with each book in a series. Nonetheless the progressive drive is still present. *Band Sinister* features a particularly meta-literary play on the public/private distinction: the last chapter finds Guy and Philip reconciling in the garden, in full view of the living room where Guy's formidable aunt is upbraiding Amanda for getting engaged to her Jewish physician, David. Unable to touch, they resort to story-telling, and narrate their own engagement:

“Yes,” Guy said. “Yes, please, Philip. I'd love to be with you. And I'd like you to imagine I'm kissing you back as hard as you've ever kissed me.”

“I truly am. Good. Good. Might I get back on my imaginary knees? I have work to do there.”

They were simply standing in a vegetable garden, not even touching, looking at one another, and Guy could feel Philip's touch all over his skin. (Charles 2018c: 234)

This invisible yet public performance of queer love and desire is the culmination of the important role given to language in their relationship: part of Philip's seduction of Guy involves teaching him how to express his desires and fears, how to give and receive informed consent, and their exchanges highlight the erotic potential of open communication.

This leitmotif is, in turn, connected to the preoccupation with authorship in the corpus, the evident “desire to re-write the historical narrative [...] by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, [...] and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian” that makes it neo-Victorian (Llewellyn 2008: 165). But just because the desire is genuine does not mean that the final product is not flawed. Do the authors do these marginalised voices justice? And whose voice, in the end, gets to be heard?

4. Writing Marginalised Voices

In their review of *Unmasked by the Marquess*, Corey Alexander, who is a transgender non-binary author and reviewer, links to other non-binary readers' positive reactions, for instance in regard to having a non-binary

protagonist use she/her pronouns. They record a different reaction for themselves, however, pointing to the different ways in which “[t]he non-binary trans character is *framed overwhelmingly by lies and deceit*, and in particular lies and deceit about *gender and identity*” (Alexander 2018: n.p., original emphasis). The title of the series, ‘Regency Impostors’, is unfortunate in that regard. The revelation of a trans-coded character’s ‘real’ gender being used as a narrative twist is regrettably quite common in (neo-Victorian) fiction, like Ruth Vigers in Waters’s *Affinity* (1999) and Elizabeth Cree in Peter Ackroyd’s *The Limehouse Golem* (1994). Though *Unmasked by the Marquess* never ‘deceives’ the reader, a lot of fear and hurt is channelled into Alistair’s discovery that Robin was AFAB. As Alexander states, despite alternating between points of view, “it’s an *acceptance narrative*, centering the cis MC’s needs and feelings, and the impact on the cis MC” (Alexander 2018: n.p., original emphasis). The name Robin (which could be an homage to Heyer’s *The Masqueraders*) is even chosen by Alistair.¹⁷

By contrast, ‘Pen’, the name of the genderfluid protagonist of *An Unsuitable Heir* (which is also an homage to Heyer’s *The Corinthian*), signals his ability to write his own identity and narrative. He and his twin sister were christened Repentance and Regret; ‘Pen’ and ‘Greta’ are obviously much more practical options, but they also regularly utter the phrase “No repentance, no regret” as a rejection of how society judges them (Charles 2017c: 7). ‘Starling’ is their stage name as trapeze artists, and the bird imagery fits Pen’s desire to rise above his body. The deception and conflict in his relationship with Mark is solely linked to the latter knowing his legal identity as the Taillefer heir, never about gender per se. Mark reads Pen immediately as genderqueer, and asks the right questions – in my opinion, this is not an ‘acceptance narrative’. While *Unmasked by the Marquess* ends with a wedding, resolving Robin’s dysphoria by having Alistair inform everyone that his spouse is eccentric and wears trousers, Mark and Pen get him out of his inheritance, knowing that impersonating a man at all times would kill him by inches. He is literally un-suit-able.¹⁸ It should be noted that both Sebastian and Charles are (as far as we know) cisgender women, and as such, neither Robin’s nor Pen’s stories are OwnVoices.¹⁹ Policing who gets to tell which stories is a particularly sensitive topic when it comes to gender and sexuality, as it might involve

outing an author. On the other hand, there is a case to be made for transgender narratives not being appropriated by cisgender voices.

Continuing the trend of titles featuring a negative prefix, the novella *Unfit to Print* engages directly and subversively with the question of authorship, as the protagonist Gilbert Lawless runs a pornographic bookshop. As the mixed-race illegitimate son of a nobleman who was cut off by his half-brother Matthew Lawes as soon as their father died,²⁰ he has almost the same background as Clem Talleyfer – though with a mother of African rather than Indian descent, and a widely different personality. Clem’s brother turns out to have been a bigamist; Gil’s, ironically enough, collected pornography, and following Matthew’s death, Gil is hired by his horrified relatives to dispose of the books and photographs. An investigation into a missing young Indian man featured in some of the photographs puts him back in contact with Vikram Pandey, a successful young lawyer with whom he was inseparable at school, and slowly rekindles their love after sixteen years apart. The novella features a very down-to-earth depiction of the pornography trade. While Maud Lilly’s turn to pornographic authorship at the end of Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002) can be read as a way for her of leaving her trauma behind, taking control of the narrative, Gil’s occasional writing is just a way of supplementing his income, and he ultimately decides to sell the business, realising that there is no point in “stay[ing] in [the gutter] as a sod-you to [Matthew]” (Charles 2018b: 137). He is, however, genuinely interested in one of the books he recovers from his sibling’s collection, *Jonathan: or, The Trials of Virtue*, a rare cross between a pornographic novel (with the obvious homage to the Marquis de Sade) and a Gothic novel with an all-male cast, of which only ten copies were printed.

The author of *Jonathan* is a mystery to Gil, but not to the reader if they have read a short story of Charles’s, ‘Wanted, An Author’ (2018), which acts as a delayed epilogue for the novella *Wanted, A Gentleman* (2017) and introduces a character from *Band Sinister* ahead of the latter’s publication. In the short story, John Raven, who is part of Philip Rookwood’s polyamorous found family, finds himself asleep in Theo Swann’s kitchen on 24 February 1807. Theo writes Gothic novels under the pseudonym ‘Mrs. Swann’, and John wants him to write a Christmas present for Lord Corvin (another of Philip’s scandalous close friends and lovers in *Band Sinister*). Their conversation is drily humorous, but as Theo later explains the project to his lover Martin St. Vincent, he is honestly moved to

be able to write a story “about people like [them]” (Charles 2018a: 12). Once more, an intra-textual book becomes a way of queer community-building: the different mentions of *Jonathan* across Charles’s body of works connect Martin and Theo, “a coal merchant and a scribbler” (Charles 2018a: 12), with their contemporaries John and Corvin, who are part of the upper classes, and then to Gil in 1875, like a secret network of gay men across the nineteenth century. Moreover, Theo’s decision to write a happy ending for *Jonathan*, “be damned the conventions of the Gothic that demand everyone die” (Charles 2018a: 14), also connects to optimism and the belief in progress on a historical level, considering the date at which Charles’s short story is set. Indeed, the Atlantic slave trade has just been abolished; Theo, as a white abolitionist, has been campaigning for that event alongside his black neighbours and friends and especially his partner Martin for a long time. However, he does not know that the man who is commissioning him for the novel is a freed slave: John was bought as a child by Lord Corvin’s father, his last name ‘Raven’ chosen as a joke by the former Viscount before it was reclaimed as a genuine sign of family and belonging through his bond with Corvin and Philip.

Charles is a white author, and although she regularly speaks out against racism in her own reviews of historical romance novels, some harmful stereotypes in regard to Jewish and East Asian minor characters have been remarked upon (see Whalen 2017: 45). Generally speaking, Charles does seem to portray the marginalised voices in her books with sensitivity and nuance, and restricts racist views to antagonists. By contrast, her queer-found families and communities (such as Philip’s ‘Murder’ or the Jack and Knave regulars) are safe spaces with no hate speech of any kind. While Charles’s writing does not shy away from the structural racism of the historical period, she also does not subject her characters of colour to constant racist micro-aggressions and instead reminds the reader that Victorian London was a multicultural city:

Clem had moved to this part of London because it was so mixed [...]. Nobody in Clerkenwell looked twice at him; nobody called him an Indian or a foreigner, let alone the other words he’d grown up hearing. On Wilderness Row he was not “an” anything. He was simply Mr. Talleyfer of

Talleyfer's lodging house, and that was how he liked it.
(Charles 2017a: 53-54).

Clem is also on the autism spectrum; his neuroatypicality is not a barrier to be overcome in his relationship to Rowley, nor something that is 'cured' through love, as is often the case in romance novels (see Cheyne 2019: 142). Part of their courtship involves sharing a cup of tea in the evening, and Rowley has learned early on to let Clem prepare everything without distracting him through conversation, hurrying him or forcing his help upon him. This makes Clem's brother Edward seem like even more of a bully when he berates him towards the end of the book for not being able to make "a simple cup of tea", upon which Clem finally snaps and shoots back: "You've been barracking me since I was a child and you've never once noticed that it only makes me worse" (Charles 2017a: 255). The one who has trouble paying attention is Edward, not Clem, and the reader's antipathy towards the people who belittle Clem is built consistently throughout the book, showing how "romance can make prejudice felt" (Cheyne 2019: 160). Having a partner who listens to his needs and desires is no less than Clem deserves, and when he remarks jokingly that he wouldn't be very good at Rowley's skilled job as a taxidermist (because fine motor control and speed are difficult for him), Rowley responds with a frown that he himself "shouldn't be a very good lodging-house keeper", and that Clem's ability to make the place homely "[is] a rare and precious gift" (Charles 2017a: 10). Once again, the private sphere is put forward as an antidote to the bigoted society of the past (and, implicitly, the present).

The affective focus of the romance genre can go a long way towards depicting the inner lives of characters who are marginalised in different ways, as long as the authors do their research and get help from sensitivity readers to avoid harmful tropes. However, individual diligence does not erase the structural problems of an industry that is still overwhelmingly white, cisgender, able-bodied and neurotypical.²¹ The racism of the romance industry in particular is deeply ingrained: the numbers recorded over the last four years in The Ripped Bodice's annual 'The State of Racial Diversity in Romance Publishing Report' speak for themselves (Koch and Koch 2020), but the recent implosion of RWA (originally founded by black romance editor Vivian Stephens), catalysed by the targeting of Asian-American author Courtney Milan, made it even more obvious (see Romano and Grady

2020). The representation of marginalised voices in romance may be progressing in small increments, but the ideological inertia of the industry remains a big impediment.

5. Conclusion: An Affective Engagement

In *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, Geoffrey Knight sets out to answer the burning question of M/M romance, and although his interviews with a number of readers provide different hypotheses, there is no definitive answer. The fetishisation of gay men always looms as an obviously problematic issue; some readers will argue on the contrary that M/M romance helped them become more accepting and progressive, and sometimes invested in LGBTQ+ activism as an ally. These extremes are not mutually exclusive and, once again, just because the intentions are good does not mean the final product cannot also be harmful for the represented minority. Surely, for female readers, it can be liberating to invest emotionally in a relationship where the heteropatriarchal policing of female bodies and minds is completely off the table. Therefore, even as it engages with different kinds of oppression, M/M historical romance provides a double escape through the gender of the main characters and through the past setting. The fact that “MM Romance may be *about* gay men, but it isn’t really [*theirs*]” is judged differently by different writers within the minority of gay male romance authors, but Jamie Fessenden, for one, finds putting up with the genre tropes worth it to get a happy ending, rather than the tragedy of realism that gay fiction often presents (Fessenden 2014: n.p., original emphasis).

Given the intersection between slash fiction (i.e. fanfiction) and M/M romance, Knight’s title probably warrants a correction: the 2013 *Archive of Our Own* census showed that the proportion of m/m fans who identified as both female and heterosexual was between 25 and 36%, and that the largest demographic was bisexual/pansexual women (see Anon. 2013: n.p.).²² M/M romance readership is estimated to have the same demographic as romance in general (82% female and 86% heterosexual according to RWA), but these numbers would benefit from being updated and based on a larger pool of participants. At any rate, Cat Sebastian, as a bisexual woman who started to write romance professionally after having children, is right at the intersection of these demographics.²³ Beyond this demographic overlap, there is a comparable disconnect between, on the one

hand, the revolutionary spirit often attributed to M/M romance and slash fiction poetics and, on the other hand, how the diversity of their stories compares to today's standards. Barot's focus on the pulp, feminist, and counter-cultural roots of queer romance highlighted the political power of a genre of fiction written from both a marginal and a popular place from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. However, it is sometimes difficult to see (r)evolution in a market where the most successful titles are those focusing on white cisgender monogamous love stories, sexuality notwithstanding. The same holds true for slash fiction: just because it established male homosexual desire as its norm does not mean that this type of fanfiction is not afflicted by bigotry. The (understandable) desire to defend reading and writing fanfiction as a worthwhile activity has long pushed valid criticism into the background, especially when it comes to racism (see Pande 2018). Similarly, some of the old guard in the romance industry consider themselves under attack whenever the structural issues of the field are pointed out, making marginalised writers and readers fight for every inch of progress. Many critics argue that the romance genre "is based on the idea of an innate emotional justice in the universe" (Crusie 2000: n.p.); yet reality often falls short of that ideal.

The rise in popularity of M/M romance as a genre with a recognisable market identity is situated around 2009 (2004 at the earliest), which makes general conclusions about its evolution (beyond the rise and fall of e-publishers) challenging. I hope that Charles's and Sebastian's works are representative of the direction in which it is evolving: not only toward more diversity when it comes to the identity of their protagonists, but also with authors who try and uplift marginalised writers so that the Gaily Ever After can be a safe space for all. I believe that their books have already helped to expand the popular conception of queer lives before the twentieth century, going beyond a linear conception of historical progress to show happiness as something that can and should be fought for. The most notable change in terms of depicting queer identity is perhaps that some of Charles's and Sebastian's most recent works have been focused on M/F and F/F pairings. The bulk of queer romance will likely continue to be M/M, but expanding and diversifying market expectations are good signs. Olivia Waite's *Feminine Pursuits* series, which released its second book in 2020 (*The Care and Feeding of Waspish Widows*), is being published by Avon Impulse. Meanwhile, Courtney Milan's self-published *Mrs Martin's*

Incomparable Adventure (2019) stands out for featuring two heroines over seventy, whose happy ending includes literally burning down the patriarchy. Moreover, there is some anticipation for Rose Lerner's upcoming *The Sea May Burn* (February 2021), which, as a F/F romance retelling of *Jane Eyre* (1847), will no doubt offer new insights into the relationship between queer historical romance and neo-Victorian literary fiction.

Finally, I would like to bring up the paradox of Heyer, and whether her work could be described as neo-Victorian: I posit that the deconstruction of the historical 'accuracy' myth around her work leaves that possibility open, and her exclusion from neo-Victorian criticism is mostly due to the lack of scholarly consideration for mass market genre romance. Moreover, though Heyer may have been marketed as low-brow during her life (and she explicitly looked down on her romance novels, much in the same way that Conan Doyle did on his Sherlock Holmes stories), her millions of readers had widely diverse class backgrounds. From the perspective of the twenty-first century and the veneer of respectability Heyer has acquired, her work could most accurately be classified as middlebrow, and as showing the enduring potential of popular, affective (rather than intellectual) engagements with the Long Nineteenth Century, which are no less subversive for being centred on pleasure, escape, and the pursuit of happiness.

Notes

1. This is why Vincent Virga's *Gaywyck* (1980), hailed as the first gay Gothic romance, is not included in the history of M/M romance in the second section. Despite being ground-breaking at the time (and fondly remembered by some readers), it had no real influence on historical M/M romance as it exists now. It also reinforces homophobic tropes by associating male homosexuality with trauma, incest, rape and paedophilia. While this is not out of line with the rapist heroes of heterosexual romance in the 1980s, I do not wish to put such elements forward in a historical overview.
2. I presented a virtual lecture entitled 'Gaily Ever After: Neo-Victorian Romance' over Zoom in June 2020 as part of the 'Romancing the Gothic' free online education project, created and helmed by Dr. Sam Hirst. The recording is available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zycd0B3bbk>.

While it is based on the same central idea and research as this article and analyses some of the same examples, none of the wording is taken from the article and the overall style and direction are quite distinct.

3. Inspired by Northrop Frye's analysis of comedy in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Regis compares the reunion of the lovers after the 'point of ritual death' (the moment when all appears lost) to Persephone, the goddess of spring, "escap[ing] the kingdom of death to restore fruitfulness, increase and fecundity to the earth", since the final betrothal brings "the promise of children" (Regis 2003: 35).
4. Although this conversation started in the speculative fiction community, initiatives which grew out of it, like the *Writing the Other* masterclasses by Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward or the We Need Diverse Books non-profit organisation (co-founded by Ellen Oh and Dhonielle Clayton for children's books and Young Adult), also apply to the rest of genre fiction.
5. For both, there is case-by-case sorting to be made between, on the one hand, classics of queer fiction like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) or Patricia Nell Warren's *The Front Runner* (1974), whose tragic endings disqualify them from the romance genre, and on the other hand, the handful of trailblazers like E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (1971) or Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah* (1971), which did "suggest [that] happiness was a reasonable and attainable goal for a [queer] couple" (Barot 2016: 391). *Maurice* is difficult to categorise as a romance novel given how close to the end of the book Alec appears in the protagonist's life, yet the terminal note puts great emphasis on the "imperative" happy ending as a way of escaping real-life homophobia and censorship (Forster 2011: 247).
6. Wallace Hamilton's *Coming Out* (1977) was published by Signet, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Catch Trap* (1979) was published by Ballantine, and Gordon Merrick's Peter & Charlie trilogy, starting with *The Lord Won't Mind* (1971), was published by Avon. This nascent trend of mainstream gay titles was however terminated due to the homophobic stigma of the AIDS epidemic.
7. It is customary to use uppercase (M/M) for published romance and lower-case (m/m) for fanfiction. While tags are not case-sensitive, a significant number of titles and author pseudonyms on fanfiction archives are not capitalised at all, possibly to mimic the informal, friendly context in which writing and consuming fanfiction takes place. Individual uses can of course vary, and some critics or publishers will use 'M/m' or 'MM' to refer to either published romance or fanfiction.

8. This part of fanfiction history is well documented (see e.g. Jamison 2013: 74-103).
9. The homage to Virginia Woolf was carefully chosen to “evok[e] the importance of owning space—albeit virtual space today, *server space*—for women writers in particular, and also serv[es] as a reminder that fanfiction was (and still is) written overwhelmingly by women” (Coppa 2013: 306, original emphasis).
10. The last update left on the website of Amber Quill Press (one of the first e-publishers to launch a GLBT erotic line, Amber Allure, in 2002) warned readers to download all titles from their bookshelf and Order History before midnight, 30 March 2016, when the company officially ceased all operations. Smaller ones like Less Than Three Press left neither websites nor ways to access their ebooks behind, essentially erasing some of their authors’ backlists for the time being (since not all of them have the time or means to self-publish).
11. Only Bold Strokes Books (founded in 2004) and Riptide (founded in 2011) are still properly in operation as far as LGBTQ+ e-publishers are concerned. ManLoveRomance Press, founded in 2010 by Laura Baumbach to “g[o] after those women who read M/M romance” (Markert 2018: 199), seems to be doing well, but Dreamspinner Press, founded in 2006 by Elizabeth North with a similar goal, has been in upheaval since 2019 over unpaid royalties and other issues.
12. Cat Sebastian, a vocal fan of Stucky slash fiction (Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes from *Captain America*), often uses tags in her promotional material, and described *Two Rogues Make a Right* (2020) as “this is Only One Bed: A Novel” on Twitter (Sebastian 2020: n.p.). She is, however, not an example of someone who started out as a fanfiction writer before moving to published fiction; K. J. Charles does not read or write fanfiction at all.
13. McAlister’s dismissal of Robin’s “performative queerness”, the idea that “the effeminate could only ever be a costume for a man, not an intrinsic part of his identity” (McAlister 2016: 4), could easily be problematised. The emphasis put on his “normative heterosexual masculinity” (McAlister 2016: 6) systematically equates gender and sexual attraction as if the two were necessarily linked, and it seems a strange oversight not to have Judith Butler in the critical bibliography of the article. On the question of cross-dressing in Heyer, also see Fletcher 2016: 49-72.
14. This is a pun on the phrase ‘a murder of crows’ which plays on the fact that Sir Philip Rookwood, Lord Corvin and John Raven all have corvid names

- while acknowledging their scandalous reputation. However, no one outside of their group seems to understand that it is an inside joke rather than a threat.
15. In Charles's *Proper English* (2019), which is set in 1902 at a country house party, the villain is blackmailing a gay couple, threatening to report them for gross indecency. His murder removes the immediate threat, but motivates the heroines to find the killer before the police can get involved.
 16. Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End* (2016) solemnises the union between Thomas McNulty and his partner John Cole with a ceremony in front of a half-blind priest (and Thomas wearing female clothes). Paradoxically, this book does not qualify as a romance novel because the protagonists' love is so unproblematic: it is central to Thomas's identity, but not to the plot. Defending the family they form with their adopted daughter Winona is a source of conflict and tension, but it still reads very differently to the way the found family trope is used in genre romance, possibly because the retrospective narration dwells on the past more than it opens onto the future.
 17. E. E. Ottoman's *The Doctor's Discretion* (2017), set in 1831 New York City, does show William, one of the heroes, feeling confused, hurt and betrayed when discovering that Augustus is a transgender man. It also includes the revelation that another transgender character is a spy. There are no hard and fast rules about what kind of tropes are harmful, but writers who are portraying a character whose marginalisation they share (Ottoman is transgender himself) have a leeway that others do not.
 18. The titles in the *Sins of the City* trilogy are ripe with puns subverting queerphobic tropes: for instance, the 'unnatural vice' in the second book is not homosexuality, but Justin Lazarus's trade as a spiritualist con man (which his love interest Nathaniel Roy disapproves of).
 19. This concept first arose within the Young Adult fiction community, launched by author Corinne Duyvis's use of the hashtag #ownvoices in September 2015, and soon spread to the rest of genre fiction. It was meant to uplift the stories told by authors who shared one or several aspects of their characters' marginalised identity – to celebrate rather than police, but also think about whose stories get to be told.
 20. Like Clem, Gil is given a variant of the family name by his father to claim him as a natural child while still making clear that he is not legitimate. But although Clem's last name is simply a transliteration of the English pronunciation of 'Taillefer', Gil's last name, 'Lawless', sounds like a particularly cruel joke given his complete lack of legal recourse when his half-brother cheats him of the personal bequest their father left for him.

Initially keeping the name out of spite, Gil regains some faith in justice (if not in the law) during the course of the novella through his love for Vik and their search for the missing young man.

21. Cat Sebastian is not neurotypical: she speaks openly about her depression on social media and does have several protagonists with depression, anxiety, trauma or chronic illnesses, although not in the novels of this corpus.
22. Although much of the conversation on writing/reading slash fiction as a way of exploring a queer identity safely is centred on sexuality, it also applies to gender: see Neville 2018 for a wide-scale mixed-methods sociological study of over 400 participants (with an extensive literature review) and Busse and Lothian 2017 for a literary and sociological analysis of ‘genderfuck’ texts within the *Stargate: Atlantis* slash fandom.
23. A male writer would have been an interesting counterpoint, but the big names in nineteenth-century romance, be it veteran Alexis Hall (who is gay) or more recent newcomer Jordan L. Hawk (who is transgender and queer), write steampunk and supernatural versions of the Victorian era, and including that aspect would have sent this article down yet another avenue. Sebastian Nothwell’s *Mr Warren’s Profession* (2017) is an interesting example of a M/M cross-class romance set in Manchester in the 1890s, but the author’s recognition within the genre is not comparable to Sebastian or Charles.

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