

Repeated Pleasure: Reading the Threesome Ménage Romance as Digital Literature

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“Hey, Mandy,” I started. “I hope I didn’t scare you by barging in like that before.” “No-no, it’s fine,” she assured. “I’m just so happy to have this opportunity.” “Well, we’re happy to have you,” I assured. “And the Plemmons brothers—we can’t help ourselves when it comes to a damsel in distress, so we found you a place.” “Oh, my God, seriously? Already?” she said, her big beautiful eyes going wide. “Yeah,” explained Clayton. “Carl reminded me: We have this summer rental near the beach. This time of year, no one’s using it. You’d actually be doing us a favor by staying in it and keeping an eye out on the place.” “Wow, I don’t know how to thank you guys,” she gushed. “I insist you charge me something.” “Honestly, we were paying to have the place cleaned. You clean it, you can stay there until you find some place better,” assured Carl. “As for thanking us...” “Carl!” interrupted Clayton. “What? I gotta come clean,” said Clayton. “About what?” she asked. “You are very qualified for this position, the most qualified in fact. But when I saw your picture on LinkedIn, I was smitten. Seriously. Just like my brother here. We have similar tastes in women. I hope you don’t find that weird,” said Carl smoothly. “No, it’s very flattering,” she blushed. “I find you both very attractive.” “Well, the thing is—and this is completely separate from our offer to let you stay at our beach house,

mind you—Clayton and I might like to share you, if you get my meaning. Is that something that interests you?”

*(Sparks/Conners 2017: loc. 643 to 687 of 24 822, Kindle)*¹

Sex with multiple partners is cited as the most common sexual fantasy in Justin Lehmiller’s 2018 survey of a sample of over four thousand adult Americans. As Lehmiller observes, “sex with multiple partners is a staple of Americans’ fantasies” and eighty-nine per cent of the sample “reported fantasizing about threesomes”. Women’s fantasies about multipartner sex were particularly elaborate (Lehmiller 2018: 16) and threesomes with the surveyed individual at “the centre of attention” (ibid.: 17) were the most common type of threesome fantasy. The survey’s results highlight the centrality of multipartner sex as sexual fantasy material, and thus begs the phenomenon to be taken seriously when considering people’s erotic desires from a scholarly view. If sexual fantasy is a type of fiction, in Lehmiller’s context reported in written form, then it makes sense to examine the kinds of elaborations of this fantasy emerging in erotic fiction outside pornography, disseminated through electronic platforms such as the Amazon Kindle and currently booming in the literary marketplace.

This paper examines a corpus of English-language threesome or ménage romances in the subgenre of erotic romance in a digital format targeted to adult audiences. The most striking feature of these powerful literary texts aimed at titillating and pleasuring readers is their reliance on repetition as the ground rule of romance. The titles studied here all recycle certain well-known elements of e-romance, such as alternating first-person narration (or, alternatively, internally focalised third-person), wealthy love partner, and heightened erotic tension, but they also bring in the added element of multipartner *romance* instead of pornography’s focus on the act of *sex* alone. While these threesome romances highlight strongly erotic scenarios and explicit sex scenes, they do not satisfy themselves with merely sex, but also feature a deeply romantic, consensual and committed relationship forming between the female protagonist and her two male suitors. Despite the erotic make-

1 In the following, all quotations without any reference specified are taken from this literary excerpt.

up familiar from pornography, the stories are monogamous and conservative at heart and as such, fairly traditional popular romance narratives operating within the heterosexual matrix.²

This dimension of the happily-ever-after romance as a mandatory part of these stories clearly differentiates them from sexual act-oriented pornography, and as such represents an interesting amalgam of sex and romantic love removed from the time-honoured equation of two people at the centre of the romance. For the purposes of this collection, my question concerns the *power* of these literary texts. How does their power emerge and how does it operate on the level of the text and on the level of reading as can be gleaned from their textual construction? The novels' power as literary texts designed for the express purpose of providing pleasure and satisfaction in the reader, as mentioned above, lies in their use of repetition in multiple ways. Lynne Pearce has aptly remarked, that repetition is "the life-blood of romance" (Pearce 2011: 1). The way these novels perform their function of eliciting pleasure in readers is through repetition of various elements within the text, which pertain to linguistic choices, narration, characters, and themes such as safe sex. The first part of my discussion focuses on the basic trappings of threesome stories as a subgenre of the New Adult romance, after which I move on to discussing a close reading of one of the novels in an effort to highlight the typical mechanics of this form of digital literature, where the format is crucial to its make-up. My final remarks draw together my discussion and consider what this might mean overall for the act of reading, which, based on my analysis, emerges as both sexual in its own right as well as regulated by the digital format.

1. Between Pornography and Literature: The Threesome Ménage Erotic Romance

New Adult (NA) literature is a genre geared towards audiences above the target age of Young Adult (YA) literature meant for teens and preteens. This adult form of literature is the perfect playground of sexual fantasy. To name but a

2 Only one of the titles examined in this paper includes non-heterosexual activity between the partners, and only two of the titles explicitly refer to the word polyamory or polyamorous to characterise the relationship. The corpus is detailed in the following section and summarised in the Appendix.

few, the highly explicit topic content of these books can range from stepsiblings in blended families falling in love (see Valovirta 2019), or a royal prince falling in love with a commoner (see Valovirta 2020), or threesome romance as examined here. E.L. James' bestselling *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012) is a landmark of the genre, temporally coinciding with women's growing consumption of pornography (Illouz 2014: 33). The sexually explicit romance is a natural extension of how "sexual freedom, for women, is complexly entangled with the longing for intimacy" (ibid.: 34), which partly helps explain the success of the NA erotic romance. Readers today want sexual content, but within the frame of romance and intimate relationships.

The new type of romantic love explored in recent NA literature, the three-some ménage romance, is a curious mixture of multiple partner sexual fantasy as seen in pornography, yet following the very formulaic conventions of monogamy and happily ever after -driven romance writing. The six titles in my corpus include novels, novellas or stories with explicit reference to the desired relationship constellation from the very outset, as their titles usually refer to two love partners. The titles are: *Two Close for Comfort* (2014), *In Two Deep* (2015), and *Two for One Special* (2015) by Marie Carnay; *Not Safe for Work* (2017) by Charlotte Stein; *Two Billionaires for Christmas* (2017) by Sierra Sparks and Juliana Conners; and *Twice the Fun: A Bad Boy MFM Menage* (2017) by Juliana Conners. All are examples of the 'reverse harem' or 'MFM ménage' (mostly, and therefore henceforth, spelt without the accent) e-romance category, which capitalises on the erotic and exotic obstacle of two male friends or brothers falling in love with — and, ultimately, sharing — the same woman. The table attached as an appendix charts my corpus in more detail, and allows some general remarks to be made by their shared features summarised. All novels were published in the past five years and purchased from the Amazon Kindle Store for not more than a few US dollars apiece. One title, *Twice the Fun*, came with the purchase of another one in a so-called bundle, a typical selling strategy to acquaint the reader with further titles by the same author at no extra cost.

At a first glance, already the covers of the novels in my corpus communicate their power through repetition: they are almost interchangeable by title and cover image, which makes them instantly recognisable. The cover image of all e-books features two, mostly shirtless, men and one woman in a passionate embrace. In two cases, the men are wearing suits and ties to accentuate the corporate setting of the novels; in both cases the men are the heroine's bosses. The word two appears in all but one title, and the word menage ap-

pears in them all as a subtitle. These factors communicate, that the novels need to be instantly recognisable to the reader looking for their desired story type.

Naturally, as dictated by the genre, all the novels end in full closure and happily ever after. On one hand, the subgenre capitalises on the eroticism of the multiple partner fantasy, but at the same time, is clearly marked romantic literature by not advocating open relationships. As such, they differ from the cultural phenomenon of consensual polyamory, such as the one promoted by Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton's landmark book, *The Ethical Slut* (2017), where the idea is to foster multiple relationships in a consensual, committed and ethical way. The ménage romance, in contrast, stays firmly within the confines of monogamous, heterosexual romantic love, but its hook, the romance between two men and one woman, provides a sufficiently exotic scenario for those readers looking for a titillating new romantic scene. As Lehmler's study suggests, the proliferation of threesome fantasies may help explain the emergence of this subgenre: readers interested in threesomes perhaps seek to broaden their horizons by venturing to explore the fantasy, but from the safety of reading fiction.

The contemporary e-romance constantly needs new fuel for its formula varying relatively little yet needing a gimmick on which to capitalise. Threesome romance is therefore a prime example of a key ingredient in "the winning formula" (Valovirta 2019: 172): it offers the traditional obstacle to love always required by romance, but is completely new in that there are two prince charmings instead of one. This threesome scenario offers heightened tension creating thrill and suspense in the reader. The utopian element of the threesome romance frees the romance script from societal norms, while at the same time stays confined to those norms, as the end result is without fail a loving, consensual and committed relationship between the three romantic partners.

A romance narrative always needs of an obstacle challenging the budding love between prospective partners, as without hardship, there would hardly be a great love story (see Belsey 1994: 22). At the same time, this obstacle needs to be overcome in an effort to satisfy the requirement of happily ever after, the selling point of the romance narrative. In the case of the MFM ménage, the obstacle complicating the plot is the social taboo of multipartner romance and romantic relationship, as the monogamy-driven social order becomes fundamentally undone in the prospect of a heroine romancing two suitors. At the same time, for the sake of achieving the mandatory happy ending, the obstacle

needs to be overcome fairly effortlessly so as not to disturb the narrative with too much unwanted drama, which would stir feelings outside of the affective matrix of pleasure, fascination, titillation and arousal. The love obstacle in NA romance is therefore more of a minor speed bump than a genuine dealbreaker seen in tragic romances like *Romeo and Juliet* and its multiple retellings. The technique is quite utilitarian: take a social taboo, create a love story around the issue rendering prospective relationship precarious, but in the end, resolve the conundrum in one fell swoop. The threesome romance is a prime example of how this formula works in practice, as will be demonstrated in the following.

2. Close Reading with Feeling: Repetition and Specificity

A representative passage selected for close reading in this section is from the novel *Two Billionaires for Christmas: An MFM Menage Romance* (2017) by Sierra Sparks and Juliana Conners. While all the novels in my selection feature explicit sexual acts in abundance, the excerpt here portrays developing sexual tension between the female protagonist, Mandy, and the men fancying her, Clayton and Carl. The acts of sex themselves are portrayed as deeply erotic and mutually consensual, but do not necessarily offer interesting material for close reading in terms of the strategies by which the novels aim to impact their readers. The argument put forth by way of this close reading exercise clarifies, how the novels work to establish a mutual value base and carefully negotiates consent before entering a sexual stage in the relationship. All novels in the corpus contain a similar development, where the interested parties come to terms with and negotiate the potential relationship. Such a scene serves the purpose of speeding up the plot and clearing out obstacles leading to the main action, sex. The two brothers at the centre of Sparks and Conners' narrative, Clayton and Carl, run a successful airplane engine parts company and have hired Mandy as an assistant. At the same time, they decide to offer her a place to stay in their beach house as she has just broken up with her meth-dealing boyfriend and is at the risk of being homeless.

The two gentlemen coming to the aid of a "damsel in distress" is explicitly referred to in the narrative, when Carl speaks on behalf of the two brothers: "We Plemmons brothers—we can't help ourselves when it comes to a *damsel in distress*, so we found you a place [to live]" (emphasis added). This nod to con-

vention shows how self-aware this type of romance is in recycling romances of the past.

Further details about Mandy and the two brothers desiring her are dropped throughout the story in order to establish an air of authenticity and relatability between the reader and the text's characters. Mandy characterises herself as 5'6" tall, curvy, and she looks "a little like Rebel Wilson, but with auburn hair and a prettier face" (*Two Billionaires*, loc. 138 of 24822, Kindle). In more than one case, in fact, the heroine is described as plus-sized, like in *In Two Deep*, which is by its subtitle referred to as a BBW (Big Beautiful Woman) romance. In the story, Julie refers to "her plump backside" (*In Two Deep*, loc. 38 of 703, Kindle) and in *Two For One Special*, Macy is aware she "might not be razor thin", but that "men liked a round butt and ample boobs" (*Two For One*, loc. 31 of 552, Kindle). This deviation from the body norm is needed to accentuate the female protagonist's voluptuous sensuality and, perhaps, also to interpellate the expected target demographic of 'ordinary women'. Mandy's suitors, the Plemmons brothers, in turn, golf, wear tailored suits, but have tattoos, and are obviously billionaires.

Naturally, as it becomes clear, despite their muscular, tattooed bad boy outlook and street credibility, all the men in the novels always make sure to practice safe sex and wear condoms when having sex with the heroine. The only case in the corpus, where condom use is not explicated, is in Carnay's *In Two Deep*, where the woman, Julie, lets her friends-turned-lovers, Jake and Conner, know that she is on the pill and thence further contraception is not needed. In all other novels, the lovers eventually discard condoms after having "the Talk" securing exclusivity. Such an attention to detail means credibility, anchoring the narrative into specific little minutiae like tailored suits and what cars they drive (Mandy, for example, has a 2002 Hyundai) in order to make it appear authentic. Readers are clearly not satisfied with just sex, as in visual or textual pornography, which usually only offer vague pretexts that fly out of the window the moment when sex begins. Here the prelude to sex is the long build-up needed before the narrative's climax.

The passage in a chapter narrated by Carl in *Two Billionaires* begins with Clayton and Carl's one on one discussion probing the possibility of both of them pursuing Mandy instead of having to decide which one of the two gets her:

Clayton and I had run into this situation before. "We could share her," I prof-
ferred. [...] "Dude, this is crazy enough, that we both want to fuck our new

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Recurrent features in this passage, which best exemplify typical forms in this genre, are the plain, conversational style and first person plural dialogue, where the brothers profess a shared mindset as a sign of unity and consent. “We” and “us” are mentioned some twenty times during the scene from which the above passage is abridged. This is a common scene in the novels, where the initiative comes from the men; it is explicitly what they want. Furthermore, it is not just a threesome that they desire, but a relationship thus tying the novels into the romance genre and its maxim of happy ending. The func-

tion of this negotiation is also to add a dimension of the real to the narrative; you do not just jump into a threesome without establishing common ground. In pornography, such a move would be possible, but not in erotic romance fiction.

The rules of the genre, in other words, require this back and forth told in alternating first person narrative perspective (or alternatively, third person omniscient), which ascertains that each party relates their thoughts straight to the reader without leaving out any of the relevant angles out of the figuration. When the reader gets access to all three main characters' thought-processes, the narrative is able to establish a relationship of intimacy with the reader, who in a sense is the fourth wheel in this carriage proceeding at a steady pace towards its climax, threesome sex.

In the chapter following the brothers Clayton and Carl's deliberation, Mandy's inner monologue reveals to the reader her decision-making process, serving the reader with Mandy's musings on the intriguing proposal and thus advancing the plot:

I couldn't believe the day I was having. God, I get so down sometimes and then the whole day just turns around. Not one, but two amazing bosses. So nice (so attractive), and so willing to go out of their way just for me. [...]
I had a proposal to think about: two billionaire, boss brothers at once. [...]
[T]he brothers had made it clear that they both wanted me. How could I choose between those two? I mean, they were both amazing looking. Clayton was young, taut and dreamy. Carl was rugged, wild and manly. Just thinking about them got me wet.
[...]
I thought I would choose, but it was inevitable that I was going to be with both of them at the same time. The three of us had to do it. (*Two Billionaires*, loc. 713 to 786 of 24822, Kindle)

After this meditation, Mandy is saved the trouble of verbalising her consent, as when she has settled into her new beach house given to her to live in for free by the brothers, they walk in on her masturbating to the thought of sex with the two brothers. Threesome sex proceeds followed by establishment of a threeway relationship. There is one further complication of plot by the re-appearing ex-boyfriend, when heroes fight the villain and the threesome has sex again to celebrate. Afterwards, the brothers propose with two diamond engagement rings and the narrative closes with plans of a future together.

As we can expect readers to, generally speaking, consume erotic romance literature for its affective and sexual quality, these conventions detailed above (such as the brothers' first person plural propositioning and Mandy's inner monologue) have a function in driving the plot and the story. Questions like "opacity" or "gap-filling" which Leech & Short mentioned as factors of the writer and reader's creativity alike (Leech/Short 2007: 24), actually seem to have little function in contemporary popular romance writing. Readers are not expected to be creative, but rather, the texts are transparent in revealing what they need to communicate for the reader to be safe to enjoy themselves. Readers are served by the text and nothing is hidden. As Eva Illouz remarks, romance is full of "insistent meanings" (Illouz 2014: 40) and she calls for reading strategies pointing out those meanings which are "explicitly and consciously intended to cater to the readers' expectations" (ibid.). This way, we get access to those mechanisms, which lend these texts their power.

Another important factor in serving the reader with transparency, are the paratexts revealing major plot points about the novels before the reader has even purchased their copy. I have previously remarked on the paratexts surrounding the books on their Amazon pages and in text samples, such as no cheating and HEA (happily ever after) as a warranty establishing shared value base with the consumer (Valovirta 2019). The reader is then free to 'go' with the text when not having to doubt its design. The text's mechanisms thus enable a very safe seduction, when the reader gets access to all motives, thought-processes and decision-making surrounding the budding romantic and sexual relationship, and does not need to be kept on their toes regarding whether the resolution is what they want: full closure and a happy ending.

An important point in the passage from *Two Billionaires* advancing the plot is Mandy's decision: "I was going to do it". This is her decision and moment of consent, which further reassures the reader that the juicy material (sex) will soon materialise. Such rationalising helps alleviate the concerns that would surround a real-life corporate HR nightmare thanks to the power imbalance involved in the scenario of two bosses sleeping with an underling. These types of obstacles quickly disappear, when love conquers all takes over as the ultimate rationale. Mandy's explicit voicing of her consent to the reader finds its counterpart in the excerpt at the beginning of this section, where the brothers essentially perform a very quick and efficient SWOT (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) analysis of the prospect of sex with Mandy and decide to move ahead with the plan.

Another aspect smoothing the way to a safe reading experience besides these negotiations under my close reading is the fact mentioned earlier, that all novels in this genre practice safe sex. Sex scenes in contemporary erotic romance very conspicuously mention faithful condom use when practicing intercourse (see Valovirta 2019: 170). For example, in the seminal book of the genre, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, condoms are mentioned nineteen times, whereas in the author's latest novel, *The Mister*, published in 2019, there are a total of thirty-three mentions. The same strategy applies to the novels in my corpus: condom use is dutifully mentioned at each onset of intercourse (save for one novel, *In Two Deep*, where the lovers already know one another as friends). The readers of contemporary erotica need not just any old romance for pleasure and leisure: the text also needs to cater to their values. Such a relationship of trust between the text and the reader facilitates the act of reading and thus increases pleasure, which then means that the novels *work* for the intended purpose.

In its persistent tendency to repeat itself, the threesome romance narrative relies heavily on the power of repetition to satisfy readers. Pearce notes that the romance genre in general owes a huge debt to repetition, to the point of compulsion, as the Western civilisation has been preoccupied with retelling the same story and “romance has become synonymous with the promise of ‘happy endings’” (Pearce 2011: 7). In this case, the repeated elements, such as the negotiation between the two men in the above passage, including their use of the first person plural, and repetition of the personal pronoun *we*, are about confirming to the reader, that the novel's content will adhere to the expected romance script. This promises to the reader, that both pleasure and happiness will be repeated in due course and not by only one, but two lovers.

3. The Act of Reading: Digital Reading Requires Repetition

Empirical studies of digital reading help explain the connection between these repetitive features such as the negotiation, voicing of consent and condom-use and the way they are supposed to affect the reader. On-screen reading is perceived to be “less emotionally involving” and there is a shared cultural belief that digital reading provides less pleasure (Benedetto et al. 2013). Repetition is therefore needed to drive the point home. Furthermore, readers tested reading on screens are poorer at predicting their performance in comprehension as well as regulating their metacognition (Ackerman/Goldsmith 2011). There

are also studies that indicate that transportation (the feeling of being ‘transported’ into the storyworld) is less common when texts are read on digital screens (Mangen/Kuiken 2014). Spelling out and explicating the plot’s turning points is thus needed in order to make up for the reduced capacities of retaining information and forming predictions and to facilitate transportation. At the same time, these “impairments” on readers reading digitally may serve to increase their excitement levels as they are not as concerned with reading analytically when reading for leisure. Studies also show that readers are more detached from the text when reading on screen (Mangen 2013: 95), which means that more help in immersion (and therefore, potentially, arousal) is needed by repeated, familiar conventions such as condom-use. Lack of safe sex might lead to a pause in the flow of reading, when the reader might stop to think whether potential sexually transmitted diseases are at stake.

Therefore, ensuring that the literary content is belief-consistent with the reader is part and parcel of customer satisfaction, as the reading process must flow uninterrupted by unwanted complications challenging the capacity of the reading experience to elicit pleasure. Eye-tracking studies charting readers’ cognitive processes establish, that readers are likely to have less lookbacks and take less time to read a text which is in line with their own prior beliefs (Maier et al. 2018).³ The reading process is likely to be faster than when encountering conflicting beliefs. Fixating less on those elements of a text that are consistent with one’s own beliefs also means that the texts fit a contemporary, busy everyday life, where moments for reading may be few and far between. For example, the Amazon sales page for one of the stories, *In Two Deep*, explicitly mentions the time required to finish the reading effort: the story promises to be one of “a series of sexy romances made to heat up your eReader one hour at a time”. Here potential readers are provided with information on the time investment required to consume a title, and one hour here is deemed suitable a time to be mentioned.

3 Obviously, eye-tracking tests on empirical readers of romance would be required to fully ascertain such results in this context, as most eye-movement tests in general are more interested in cognitive processes like reading skills (see Hyönä/Kaakinen 2019: 242) instead of other processes, such as affective responses like pleasure. Furthermore, it is questionable, whether eye-movement research would yield sufficient evidence on the matter (let alone whether scholars might be able to find test subjects willing to test their arousal levels).

As genre fiction is designed for consumption, the book needs to be an easy read and to be finished in one sitting. An easy narrative keeps the reader swiping pages forwards, while not having to refer back in an effort to secure comprehension, which they are more likely to do in case of cognitively difficult texts (Hyönä/ Kaakinen 2019: 259). The market needs the reader to finish the book and purchase another one. We would need more empirical studies examining how digital vs. paper media impact on readers' affects and sensations (such as arousal) in reading the romance, but the results of the studies mentioned above apply to the overall scenario of digital reading and readers' values. Encountering belief-inconsistent material slows down the reading process (Maier et al. 2018: 182) and is hence likely to hinder pleasure, whereas popular romance as leisure reading needs to be sufficiently unchallenging in order for the reader to not be disturbed by unnecessary complications. Such a freedom from everyday strife with its complications, in fact, is a factor behind reading the romance in the first place, as established by Janice Radway's classic study on how and why women read romance novels (Radway 1984).

Then how does the literary text operate through power affecting the reader, who is engaged in their seemingly harmless, uncomplicated enjoyment of literature — literature, which at the same time is consciously designed to manipulate their desires? Rita Felski (2008) writes, how we might engage with literature through *enchantment*, a way to become seduced or enchanted by texts. She contends that “Women are often seen as especially prone to such acts of covert manipulation. Susceptible and suggestible, lacking intellectual distance and mastery over their emotions, they are all too easily swept up in a world of intoxicating illusions” (Felski 2008: 53). She also points out, however, that no cultural critic worth her salt would view woman consumers of popular cultural products — like romance — as uncritically yielding to the lure of the text (ibid.: 60). I share this view of attributing more intellect and critical attitude to the readers than the limits of the genre they consume may suggest. While Felski hardly mentions works of popular romance in her meditations on the uses of literature, she nevertheless is an ardent defender of the “ordinary reader”. She writes that “literary theory would do well to reflect on — rather than condescend to — the uses of literature in everyday life: uses that we have hardly begun to understand” (Felski 2015: 191).

One way to understand the uses of erotic romance literature, as suggested in this paper, is through the Felskian lens of enchantment when viewed in connection with Lehmiller's study on sexual fantasy; these stories, simply put,

provide readers with masturbation material. Curiously, there is no mention at all in Radway's early study on masturbation as one of the uses of romance. This has changed conspicuously as, at the risk of stating the obvious, the erotic romance is designed with the express intent of stimulating and exciting readers — that is, ordering their desires for enjoyment. If readers' needs are met in providing arousal through reading, the texts have quite simply fulfilled their purpose; they work.

If the novels' sexual acts correspond with the act of reading as a sexual act, as claimed by Elin Abrahamsson (2018), we need to further consider the masturbatory function of such novels as their primary pleasure point. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal essay, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" (1991) posits auto-eroticism as a prototype of modern sexual identity, something subject to prohibitions and pathologising, especially for women. Thomas Lacquer remarks in his cultural history of masturbation, how it is a persistent taboo, hovering "between abjection and fulfilment" (2002: 13). At the same time, feminist and health studies like the tellingly titled *Masturbation as a Means of Achieving Sexual Health* (Coleman/Bockting 2013) reiterate the fact that masturbation reinforces sexual empowerment and healthy self-image, and is beneficial to well-being, but these results come foregrounded by the taboo history.

Abrahamsson's view of romance reading as primarily a sexual act for the Sedgwickian "female onanist" helps us infer, how it is the act of reading itself which rises as significant in the consumption of digital literature. Reading in its own right is the act, which provides arousal, titillation, seduction, and pleasure — perhaps even orgasmically speaking. Textual strategies dissected in this paper are not only needed in order to establish a relationship of trust between the text and the reader, but also in order to facilitate the act of reading and thus increase pleasure. The requirements placed on the text to fulfil certain criteria help us see them as results of readers negotiating their deal-breakers when looking for the perfect match, just like a successful romance is a contract negotiated before and during the act of reading. The repetitive loop of textual nods and gestures as explored in this paper, offers the reader pleasures and enjoyments in a highly formulaic and seemingly banal form of literature, which in the end reveals itself to be very consciously constructed and disciplined — something to be taken seriously.

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Appendix: List of Ménage Romance Texts

List of *ménage* romance texts

| Title | Au- thor(s) | Year of Pub- lica- tion | Price (USD) | Publisher | Safe sex | POV |
|---|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--------------|---|
| Two Billion- aires for Christmas: An MFM Menage Romance | Sierra Sparks, Juliana Conners | 2017 | 1.23 | Cosmic Letterz | con- doms | 1 st person alternates |
| Twice the Fun: A Bad Boy MFM Menage | Juliana Conners | 2017 | gift with pur- chase | self- published | con- doms | 1 st person alternates |
| Not Safe for Work: A Billionaire Menage Novella | Char- lotte Stein | 2017 | 2.10 | New York, St Mar- tin's Press | con- doms | 3 rd person omniscient, internal focalisation on her |
| In Two Deep: BBW Menage Romance (Mill Creek Menage Book 3) | Marie Carnay | 2015 | 1.23 | self- published | pill | 3 rd person omniscient, internal focalisation on her |
| Two For One Special (Menage Romance) | Marie Carnay | 2015 | 1.23 | self- published | con- doms | 3 rd person omniscient, mostly internal focalisation on her |
| Two Close For Comfort (Menage Romance) | Marie Carnay | 2014 | 1.23 | self- published | con- doms | 3 rd person omniscient |

