

Feminist Sex?

It's in His Kiss

Sharon Kaye

His thighs settled between hers, and she felt him at her opening, large and demanding. His fingers were still between them, holding her open, readying her for his manhood.

Are you blushing?

Don't blame me. That's just a quote from the seventh novel in Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton* series—*It's in His Kiss*.¹

Romance novels are often regarded as “guilty pleasures”—as though there's something shameful about them. No doubt this is due to their explicit sexual content.

In our liberated era, there's no reason to be ashamed of reading about sex. But perhaps there is reason to be ashamed of reading about *bad* sex. After all, any novel that celebrated bad activities, such as slavery or Nazism would be a bad novel, and a genuinely shameful pleasure. Likewise for any novel that celebrated bad sex. But if there's nothing wrong with the sex portrayed in a novel, then there should be nothing wrong with enjoying it. Those looking to defend their enjoyment of the *Bridgerton* series must therefore consider the question: Is the sex portrayed in these books bad?

But how to evaluate sex? Isn't it just a private matter that isn't any of anybody else's bee's wax?

No! That way of thinking is exactly how terrible abuses (such as pedophilia and marital rape) have been perpetrated again and again throughout history. We absolutely must take a look at what we're doing in the bedroom and make sure it's consistent with our principles.

Fortunately, feminist philosophers have been working on the problem of evaluating sex for a long time. While there is plenty of disagreement among us, there are some fairly standard feminist principles we can use to distinguish good sex from bad sex.

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Section 1

In which I daintily consider ... on a Tuesday afternoon ... the vexing question of what feminist sex might be.

The history of feminism is rooted in the mid-nineteenth-century battle for equal rights for women. A landmark feminist victory was the right to vote, which was granted in both Great Britain and the United States by 1920. In the 1930s women were at last admitted to universities and began filling public positions (as doctors, lawyers, politicians, athletes, etc.) that were once reserved for men. As women flooded the workplace, feminists turned their attention to the various forms of sexual harassment, both in public and in private, that enable men to maintain power over women. Today feminists continue to work for the political, economic, personal, and social equality of all genders.

The *Bridgerton* series takes place in the “Regency” period in England, which spans the first third of the nineteenth century, just before the official advent of feminism. Hence, it would be anachronistic to call any of its characters “feminist.” Yet feminism did not pop into existence out of nothing; plenty of proto-feminists paved the way. Three basic principles have been, and continue to be, essential to the feminist movement.

1. Equality

Feminists are committed to promoting equality between the sexes. It is a fact that the average human male is bigger and stronger than the average human female, and that our bodies have different reproductive functions. So, it would be pointless to treat men and women the same. Nevertheless, the difference between the sexes should not prevent us from having equal opportunities.

2. Freedom of choice

Feminists are committed to promoting the same self-determination among women that men have traditionally enjoyed. Although our reproductive functions tie us more closely to bearing children, it would be unfair to allow this fact to limit us. Men and women should share domestic responsibilities so that both are able to choose the life they want to live, exploring many options along the way.

3. Resisting stereotype

Feminists are committed to promoting unconventional conceptions of womanhood. Throughout history, women have been expected to be feminine. This means being pretty, sweet, delicate, and pure. Though these qualities can be positive, they also set men up for the masculine role of dominance. Feminists therefore strive to show that women can transcend femininity in creative ways.

These are the three basic principles of a feminist perspective. As a feminist, I argue that sex reflecting these principles is good sex.

Section 2

In which I enthusiastically dissect the novel's three main sex scenes.

First, the background story.

It's in His Kiss centers on Hyacinth, the youngest of the eight Bridgerton siblings. She's an outspoken twenty-two-year-old. Entering her fourth season of marital eligibility, she is still unwed because her sarcastic wit has a tendency to "reduce suitors to tears" within a month. Her favorite person in the world is a crotchety, cane-wielding old woman named Lady Danbury. Hyacinth reads romance novels to Lady D every Tuesday afternoon and they enjoy each other's unladylike company.

Gareth is a rakishly handsome Cambridge student, the grandson of Lady D. Although he is supposedly the son of the Baron St. Clair, he is actually a bastard. Given his devotion to his grandmother, it's not surprising that Hyacinth finds him appealing. Furthermore, Gareth is unabashedly irreverent and therefore more interesting to Hyacinth than other men.

Hyacinth and Gareth are thrown together when they discover a diary that tells of a hidden cache of jewels. When members of the ton notice them skulking around together, they convince the couple to consider marriage. Gareth proposes, Hyacinth accepts, and they are engaged.

But the story takes a twisting turn when Gareth decides he needs to have sex with Hyacinth before the wedding so that, if she finds out he's a bastard, she won't be able to back out. (Since there wasn't any good contraception during the Regency period, any unwed woman who had sex was immediately considered "compromised.")

There are three sex scenes in the novel, along with plenty of sexually charged lead-up. I'll present evidence of our three feminist principles in reverse order, saving the most important for last.

1. Gareth's sexual attraction to Hyacinth demonstrates resistance to stereotype.

The hunt for the hidden jewels gives Hyacinth and Gareth several opportunities to meet in the middle of the night. On their first foray, Hyacinth dresses in a pair of men's breeches and a waistcoat. Gareth, though shocked by this highly unusual outfit, is nevertheless turned on by it.

Gareth just stared He didn't know where she'd acquired her costume—it had probably belonged to one of her brothers in his youth. It hugged her body in a most scandalous fashion, outlining her curves in a manner Gareth would really rather not have seen.

He didn't want to know that Hyacinth Bridgerton had a delectable figure. He didn't want to know that her legs were quite long for her somewhat petite height or that her hips were gently rounded and that they twitched in the most mesmerizing fashion when they weren't hidden beneath the silky folds of a skirt.²

Several days later, when Gareth proposes to Hyacinth, he tells her how much he admires her athletic body, which is slim, but with a hint of roundness and strength.

“You’re a bit of a sportswoman, aren’t you?”

She nodded.

He curved his lips into a half smile. “I can see it in the way you walk, the way you move. Even”—he stroked her arm one last time, his fingers coming to rest near her wrist—“the shape of your arm.”

He leaned in, until his face was near hers, and she felt kissed by his breath as he spoke. “You move differently than other women,” he said softly. “It makes me wonder ...”³

Wonder what? How she will be in bed, of course.

Hyacinth demonstrates her ability to transcend femininity on many occasions throughout the novel, for example, in her determination to translate the diary from Italian to English and in venturing out alone after dark. What is striking, and most relevant for our purpose, however, is how her unconventional conception of womanhood is eroticized in her tussles with Gareth.

2. Gareth’s seduction of Hyacinth demonstrates freedom of choice. Gareth can’t wait to find out how Hyacinth is in bed. Although he tells himself he will seduce her in order to prevent her from backing out of the marriage, the astute reader realizes that this is a lame excuse. Gareth’s father has kept Gareth’s bastardy a secret from the beginning, and it seems highly unlikely that he would spill the beans to prevent the wedding. No, Gareth simply wants Hyacinth and, more importantly, wants to know whether she wants him.

Having promised Hyacinth that he would make a solo midnight search for the jewels, he instead sneaks into her bedroom. Their encounter begins with all the marks of a traditional seduction. Hyacinth is startled to discover him waiting for her in the dark, invading her private space uninvited. Gareth advances on her with determination, commanding her repeatedly to “relax.” He explicitly appeals to her feminine side:

“So pretty, so soft.”

Instead of devolving into date rape, however, the scene takes a surprising turn. The usual dynamic of dominance and submission becomes a playful trope. He instructs her to be silent, pressing her lips shut with his finger. She, in turn, demands to be allowed to speak.

“All right,” he acceded. “but the only words I’ll allow from your mouth are, ‘Oh, Gareth,’ and ‘Yes, Gareth.’”

He lifted his finger.

“What about ‘More, Gareth?’”

He almost kept a straight face. “That will be acceptable.”

She felt laughter bubbling up within her. She didn't actually make a noise, but she felt it all the same—that silly, giddy feeling that tingled and danced in one's belly. And she marveled at it. She was so nervous, or rather, she had been.

He'd taken it away.

And she somehow knew that it would be all right She felt free, untamed.

Daring.

... His muscles leapt wherever she touched, and when she moved to his belly, to that spot between his navel and the last of his clothing, he sucked in his breath.

She smiled, feeling powerful and so, so womanly.⁴

Gareth teases Hyacinth until she begs him to make love to her. He goes slowly, concerned not to hurt her. He thinks to himself he should win a medal for restraint. Still, once he enters her, he notices her stiffening.

“Do you think you might see your way to enjoying yourself again?”

Her lips pursed into that expression of hers—the one she made when she knew she was being teased and wished to return in kind. “I would like to, yes.”

... He flicked his tongue behind her ear, distracting her as his hand found its way between her legs. “I might be able to help you with that.”

“With what?” she gasped, and he knew from the way her hips jerked that she was on her way back to oblivion.

“Oh, with that feeling,” he said, stroking her almost offhandedly as he pushed farther within. “The *Oh, Gareth, Yes, Gareth, More, Gareth* feeling.”

“Oh,” she said, letting out a high-pitched moan as his finger began to move in a delicate circle. “That feeling.”

... It was all too much—the sight, the smell of her, and he felt himself shuttering towards completion.

He gritted his teeth. Not yet. Not when she was so close.

“Gareth!” she gasped.

He slid his hand between their bodies again. He found her, swollen and wet. And he pressed, probably with less finesse than he ought but certainly with as much as he was able She was tense, she was quivering, and then she spasmed around him.⁵

After she climaxes, he climaxes, amazed by the intensity of the experience. Though Gareth had enjoyed sex many times before, he had never had such an enthusiastic partner. He finds her willing participation intoxicating.

“Is it always like that?” she asks during the afterglow. He shakes his head, and they have another good laugh.

It should be noted that Hyacinth also demonstrates the ability to say “no” to Gareth. When he attempts to seduce her on another day,

she puts him off, due to her more urgent desire to hunt for the jewels. Hence Gareth's seductive power is not a threat to Hyacinth's independence. In turning the conventional roles of dominance and submission into a game, they preserve freedom of choice in their sex life.

Feminism may have inadvertently earned a prudish reputation over the years, just like Lady D. In an effort to combat the appalling problem of rape, feminists have argued for the importance of consent as the hallmark of good sex. In a world where "yes" meant *yes* and "no" meant *no* there would be no sexual exploitation ... but there may not be any good sex there either.

The Canadian and American philosopher Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) argues that good sex requires negotiations that go well beyond consenting to and refusing requests for sex. They write:

We try to teach teenagers and college students about the dangers of sex and the wrongs of rape, but we don't systematically train them to use language to enable pleasure, agency, and sexual possibilities.

Consent, including completely autonomous, unmanipulated consent, is never going to be sufficient to make sex go well—we can consent to all sorts of lousy sex, including demeaning, boring, alienated, and unpleasantly painful or otherwise harmful sex. Hence, good-quality sexual negotiation requires more than the skillful and appropriate negotiation of consent.⁶

Kukla goes on to say that good sex often begins with the language of invitation (would you care to dance?) or gift-giving (I want to kiss you). Both invitations and gifts require acceptance, which is different from consent. Consent merely gives someone permission to do something *to you*, whereas acceptance implies interaction and exchange, a solid foundation for negotiating good sex.⁷

Where do we learn the subtle language of sexual negotiation? From romance novels (and Netflix series), of course. So, if anyone tries to shame you for being a pro-sex feminist, just give them a withering smile and loudly thwack your cane.

3. Gareth and Hyacinth's mutual sexual satisfaction demonstrates equality.

Orgasms are not exactly the same for women and men. While they do share the same physiological responses (increased heart rate and blood pressure, for example) and similar patterns of brain activity, men have the advantage of achieving orgasm more consistently through penetrative sexual intercourse alone, while women are built to experience successive orgasms. Still, equal opportunity should always apply between the sheets, as much as it does in the workplace and in society at large.

Thanks to not one but *two* extended epilogues, the reader gets to follow the doting St. Clairs for twenty-two years. We learn that their marriage is an exceptionally happy one and Quinn tells us why: they have a great sex life. Quinn conspicuously mentions that, despite tackling parenthood, they continue to champion skimpy lingerie, smutty Italian phrases, and rendezvousing in dark corners.

In the second epilogue, Quinn takes us back into the bedroom (actually, it happens in the office). In this sizzling encore, Hyacinth reiterates her commitment to unconventional womanhood and freedom of choice, while driving home the value of equivalent opportunity.

“More?”

“God, yes!” she groaned.

He slid his hand under her skirt, until he could tickle her senseless. “Such token resistance,” he murmured. “Admit it: You always want me.”

... “*Almost* always,” she conceded. “I *almost* always want you.”

He sighed for dramatic effect, even as he smiled into her neck. “I shall have to work harder then.”

He looked up at her. She was gazing down at him with an arch expression, clearly over her fleeting attempt at uprightness and respectability.

“Much harder,” she agreed. “And a bit faster, too, while you’re at it.”

He laughed out loud at that.

... With one easy movement, he bunched her skirts well above her waist and slid down until his head was between her legs

“Oh. Oh. Oh ...”

“More?”

“Definitely more.”

He licked her then. She tasted like heaven. And when she squirmed, it was always a treat.

“Oh, my heavens. Oh my ... Oh my ...”

He smiled against her, then swirled a circle on her until she let out a quiet little shriek. He loved doing this to her, loved bringing her, his capable and articulate wife, to senseless abandon.

... He knew her so well, knew the curve and shape of her body, the way she moved when she was aroused. The way she breathed when she wanted him. She was close.

And then she was gone, arching and gasping, until her body went limp.⁸

Having enjoyed her climax, Hyacinth reciprocates by inviting Gareth to climax inside her.

Although the process of moving from arousal through orgasm is not the same for men and women, Hyacinth and Gareth have figured out how to give each other what they need for satisfaction.

In this scene, Quinn suggests that even twenty-two years down the line, both of her heroes fully expects to achieve equivalent satisfaction from every sexual interlude. Their first simultaneous orgasm when they were young was not a case of beginner’s luck. It was an ideal they prioritized for the long haul.

Section 3

In which a highly annoying objection threatens to derail our progress toward a satisfying conclusion, but is successfully dismissed, Hyacinth-style.

Gentle reader, for sex to be truly good, both partners should be satisfied. It's just not sporting for a man to satisfy his own needs and ignore his partner's. That would be akin to going out to a nice restaurant with your male partner and letting him order the filet mignon while you sip a cup of soup that leaves you hungrier than you were when you started.

Orgasm is an extreme benefit; if one person gets it and the other doesn't, you have sexual inequality. Period.

If the benefit in question were just a matter of pleasure, I might relent, on the grounds that pleasure is highly subjective. Who am I to deny that there may be some women out there who truly prefer to watch someone else experience Nirvana while they themselves are merely doused in body fluids?

But it's not just a matter of pleasure, my sisters. As we all should have been taught in sex ed., but probably were not, due to the abysmal quality of sex ed. in many countries, orgasm has significant health benefits. During orgasm, your body releases dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin, and serotonin. These "feel good" hormones trigger happiness and counteract the "stress hormone," cortisol. Orgasm has also been proven to improve sleep, relieve cramps, boost the immune system, prevent heart disease, and so much more!

So, no, it's not just a subjective matter. Orgasming is objectively better for your body than not orgasming. And more than that: bringing you to orgasm shows that your partner cares about your needs, not just his own.

This having been said, a man like Gareth, who magically knows exactly how to bring a woman to orgasm during intercourse (even the first time!), is as rare as the Phoenix. This draws attention to the importance of women knowing their own bodies, understanding their own desires, and being able to satisfy them. Masturbation and self-stimulation are topics on which Hyacinth's sister Daphne Bridgerton is infamously expert (see the Netflix series, season 2).

Conclusion

Which brings me, at last, to the title of the novel—*It's in His Kiss*. In Chapter 10, the reader finds out that this title is actually the answer to a question, namely: How do you know whether a gentleman loves you? Here is what Hyacinth learns about Gareth:

His lips were soft, gentle. He waited for her to sigh, for her body to soften against his. He wouldn't take until she made it clear she was ready to give.

And then, he would offer himself in return.

He brushed his mouth against hers, with just enough friction to feel the texture of her lips, to sense the heat of her body. He tickled her with his tongue, tender and sweet, until her lips parted ...

He deepened the kiss, his hands sliding down the length of her back until one rested on the curve of her bottom and the other at the small of her back. He pulled her against him, against the rising evidence of his desire. This was insane. It was mad. They were standing in her mother's drawing room ...

And yet, he couldn't stop.⁹

It was in the middle of this kiss that Gareth decided to ask Hyacinth to marry him. Gareth seems to know that physical intimacy is the heart of a marriage. It needs to be good.

It may be overly simplistic to suppose that the man who knows how to kiss you is the man who truly loves you. But one thing's for sure—a man who's willing to promote equality, freedom of choice, and unconventional conceptions of womanhood in the bedroom over the course of a lifetime is quite a gentleman indeed.

At any rate, neither plague nor pestilence nor perfidious paramour should prevent us from concluding that the sex in this novel is nothing to be ashamed of. (And if shame itself is what turns you on, then you will need to look elsewhere.)

The excerpts I have painstakingly collected in the foregoing pages were not (or not just!) a prurient interest of mine. On the contrary, they provide solid evidence that feminist principles are essential components of Gareth and Hyacinth's physical intimacy. I conclude that the novel *It's in His Kiss* portrays good sex that is well worthy of our enjoyment.

First Epilogue

In which I confess that it may be unfair to judge the entire Bridgerton series on the basis of just one of the novels. Hence, I will stop short of giving the entire series a feminist's stamp of approval. However, I may be justified in leaving it to you, dear reader, to apply a similar analysis to the rest.

Second Epilogue

In which I mention, in parting, that the entire purpose of philosophy from its very beginning in ancient Greece more than 2000 years ago is to discover the good life for human beings. Therefore, how about applying a similar analysis to ourselves? Oh! ... Yes! ... More!

Notes

1. Julia Quinn, *It's in His Kiss* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 254.
2. Quinn, *It's in His Kiss*, 155.
3. Quinn, *It's in His Kiss*, 238.
4. Quinn, *It's in His Kiss*, 251–252.
5. Quinn, *It's in His Kiss*, 255–257.
6. Rebecca Kukla, “That’s What She Said: The Language of Sexual Negotiation,” *Ethics* 129 (2018), 72.
7. For further discussion of feminist conceptions of consent, see Raja Halwani, “Sex and Sexuality,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sex-sexuality/#Cons>.
8. Quinn, *It's in His Kiss*, 387–389.
9. Quinn, *It's in His Kiss*, 211–212.