

“Running With a Crown on Your Head”

Heterotopic Queer Performances Against the Gay-Bildungsroman

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Abstract: Why was Season One of Netflix’s *Heartstopper* (2021–present) such a prominent moment in LGBT television in 2022? What about *Heartstopper*’s warm, feel-good plot draws us in, captivates us, and what is *really* behind the sense of longing it provokes? Through analyzing of *Heartstopper* vis-à-vis the traditional bildungsroman, and against another LGBT Netflix show from the year prior, *Young Royals* (2021–present), the plot of *Heartstopper* is revealed to be part of a larger liberal literary project: the gay-bildungsroman. In a comparative analysis of care, protection, property, and the Foucauldian heterotopia, the affective mechanisms of the gay-bildungsroman plot are exposed by a queer of color critique of these shows and their star couples.

The Netflix Original Series *Heartstopper* (2022–present) took its position as the wholesome pre-Pride LGBT cultural moment of 2022. Following a predictable plot progression that has become the industry standard in LGBT popular media, *Heartstopper* cashes in on a genre it has further solidified in its popularity and wide reception: a plot which I refer to as the *gay-bildungsroman*, a liberal transposition of the normative bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel) plotline onto LGBT narratives.¹ To theorize the popular appeal and political stakes of this generic structure, I will analyze *Heartstopper* against another Netflix Original Series LGBT drama from the year prior, *Young Royals* (2021–present). Through this comparison, I seek to find the slippages, shortcomings, and seductive assimilationist forces of the gay-bildungsroman in *Heartstopper* through *Young Royals*'s inversion, convolution, and critique of the normative gay love story. Powerful analytics arise in *how* this critique is made between the two shows: set in a boys' school and a sex-segregated elite boarding school respectively, the plots of *Heartstopper* and *Young Royals* are both endowed with the qualities of the Foucauldian *heterotopia*, or "other space." Through a comparative analysis of the social relations between and around the series' star couples, I investigate the heterotopic qualities of Hillerska Boarding School in *Young Royals* and their ability to subvert the form and expectations of the gay-bildungsroman genre. This relational analysis will shed light on the star couples' dynamics of care, *petting*, and other classed and queer convolutions.

It is important to consider the ends of the gay-bildungsroman as a political formation; the gay-bildungsroman inherits all the characteristics of a feel-good sentimentality of bildungsroman plots past. It is built on the original coming of age novel's promise that the common person/reader can dream of accessing normative respectability, love, and/or a favorable social position. What distinguishes the genre of the gay-bildungsroman from its literary parent plot is that in preserving the feel-good sentimentality toward normative success and coming of age, it also gains a liberal, queer-assimilationist valence, one rife with identitarian ideals and politics of purity; the gay-bildungsroman may appear to be the simple transposition of the straight coming of age plot onto LGBT subjects, but in doing this, it pushes a homonormative agenda: the idea that queer liberation is realized through rubrics of straight citizenship. As the 19th century bildungsroman emanates forward onto present-day flesh, in this case the televisual, several analytic modes arise along the axes of performance studies, queer of color critique, and Foucauldian theory. These analytics expose *Young Royals*'s subversion of the gay-

¹ To understand the precedent of the gay-bildungsroman and its generic structure, I recommend other pieces of 21st century LGBT media (by no means exhaustive): *Love, Simon* (2018), its Hulu Original spinoff *Love, Victor* (2020–present), or Casey McQuinn's 2019 YA novel *Red, White, and Royal Blue*.

bildungsroman as the genre has come to mark popular consciousness through a wide swath of media (such as film, television, streaming series, and young adult fiction, just to name a few).

Foucault (1986) describes the heterotopia as an “other space”—a space that is in fact real, but lives with a different set of governing structures—a space full of what the quotidian world would see as deviance or transgression, a place against which the quotidian—“normal”—world and its normative governing structures are articulated (p. 24). The boys’ school is a historically evident heterotopia in its altered sense of desire and homosocial norms, often seen in literature as a site of experimentation or otherwise-forbidden acts, what Foucault calls a place for “the first manifestations of sexual virility [which] were in fact supposed to take place ‘elsewhere’ than at home” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). He cites the boarding school as an iteration of a *crisis heterotopia*: “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis,” or, in my reading of these shows, queer becoming, subject formation (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

Heartstopper embraces the (homo)normative encounter between Nick (Kit Connor), the “straight,” masculine, popular rugby star at Truham Grammar, and Charlie (Joe Locke), the out, gay, feminine, nerdy art kid. In true gay-bildungsroman fashion, *Heartstopper*’s plot takes a familiar shape: Charlie falls in love with Nick, crushed by the impossibility of their love. Nick, catching an eye for Charlie, goes on a journey to understand and label his bisexuality identity (to much of Charlie’s emotional expense). The *teleological* aspect of this plot—the fact that it has a clear end which the entire narrative arcs toward—is what lends it the bildungsroman’s structure: despite social and familial pressures, Nick is ultimately able to explore and label his sexual orientation, and they frolic on a beach in lovely gay infatuation with one another (Oseman, 2022a). Nick’s coming of age, then, is marked and measured by his ability to fit into and see himself within normative *identitarian* frameworks—being able to label his sexuality by a set, homogenous category or identity and then entering a relationship which will reinforce his masculine subject position. Charlie’s coming of age is marked by “getting the boy”—by supporting and caring for Nick through his crisis of sexual identity, Charlie gains access to a normative relationship as well as Nick’s petting, adoration, and protection, which acts as a marriage-like extension of Nick’s social capital. In episode two, the viewer is let into Nick and Charlie’s Instagram direct message exchange. As Charlie describes issues he is having with his closeted ex, he praises Nick: “thank you for being my supportive straight friend haha”—reading this affirmation of his straight masculinity, Nick goes on to pledge his devotion to protecting Charlie—by any means necessary. “If he ever comes near you again I’ll kick his ass”—Charlie’s face is illuminated by the screen as he casts a wide, warm grin (Oseman, 2022c, 1:39). As Charlie reasserts Nick’s heteromascularity, Nick casts a shield of protection over him, a dominating, violent, masculinist sense of defense—ownership—which conjures themes of sexual and heterosexist dominance. This is what I will call Nick and Charlie’s top/bottom dynamic—by transposing the heterosexist machinations of the marriage plot onto gay juvenility, Charlie becomes a fleshy piece of private property: to be protected by Nick, to be adored only by Nick—to be, in a sense, owned by Nick, protected in exchange for his *cuteness* and ability to care for

Nick as he explores and normatively labels his sexuality, all the time preserving Nick's masculine, Adonis figure. This implicitly sexualized top/bottom dynamic is elucidated in dynamics of petting, property relation, and the marriage plot; through a later analysis of these dynamics, I will theorize the top/bottom dynamic as a key generic formation of the gay-bildungsroman plot. Narratively, the gay-bildungsroman also endows *Heartstopper* with enough "wholesomeness" (read: politics of purity) and semblance to normative marriage that conceals this normative, implicitly sexualized relation and makes audiences—straight and gay—swoon with feelings of warmth and fulfillment with homonormative sentiment—"gays can have that too."

Young Royals also presents a gay romance plotline, but its setting and the star couple's complicated relationality renders it an ill fit into the gay-bildungsroman genre. Wilhelm, Prince of Sweden (Edvin Ryding), also known as Wille, is sent to the elite Hillerska Boarding School following some trouble at his prior high school. Simon (Omar Rudberg), a working-class, Latino, mixed-race son of an immigrant mother finds himself at Hillerska on scholarship, not boarding like the other students, veritably ostracized along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. He comes to Hillerska with his sister, Sara (Frida Argento), who faced bullying at their previous public school over her neurodivergence. In Wille and Simon's relationship, *Young Royals* troubles notions of a top/bottom dynamic between Wille and Simon—transgressions against the generic cast and structure of the gay-bildungsroman cause slippages in this binary opposition. *Young Royals* initiates this by inverting *Heartstopper's* direction of desire: it is Wille—the young, powerful, and masculine Adonis—who falls in love with the out, reserved, and studious Simon (Ambjörn, 2021a). Simon's class consciousness leads him to disdain Wille at first, but he is quickly seduced—not by Wille's power or by the social promise of a relationship with Swedish royalty, but by what seems to be blind desire (Ambjörn, 2021b). However, Wille and Simon's relationship is forever altered halfway through the series, where Wille's older brother, the Crown Prince of Sweden, suddenly dies in a car wreck (Ambjörn, 2021c).

The Crown Prince's death destabilizes a future where Wille and Simon can have a romantic relationship. Previously, his relationship with Simon was perhaps possible or even liberally respectable in Wille's position as a lesser prince who did not need to have children to continue the royal bloodline; now, Wille's inherited crown demands him to conform strictly to the demands of a heteropatriarchal familial structure. While mourning his brother, Wille must face the impossibility of his queer, anti-monarchical, anti-patriarchal desire. After a period of trying to push Simon away in light of these new expectations, one night on an intense party drug trip stranded on a football field in Bjärstad, Wille telephonically confesses his love to Simon. Simon rushes to the field in the dead of night to care for Wille and help him back to Hillerska, and after Wille sobers up the morning after, they proceed to have sex in Wille's dorm. Passing outside the building, Wille's second cousin August (Malte Gårdinger) sees him in the heat of this intimate encounter. Not knowing Wille's company was Simon (or a boy at all, in fact), and in an attempt to embarrass Wille, August begins to take a video—quickly realizing it was Simon, he stops recording in shock (Ambjörn, 2021d). Later, in a fit of jealousy for Wille's monarchic

power, August leaks the video from a school computer (Ambjörn, 2021e). Wille's mother, the Queen of Sweden, forces him to publicly deny that it is him in the video, but this leaves Simon devastated in the face of unrelenting media attention, as his face was clearly shown in the tape. After days of Simon pushing Wille away, they have an exchange where Simon declares that he will not engage in the hidden relationship Wille demands of him (Ambjörn, 2021f). In contradistinction to the script of the gay-bildungsroman, Simon refuses to take on the type of care labor which Charlie takes on for a questioning Nick in *Heartstopper*. The season ends with the students leaving for Christmas break, where Wille offers Simon a heartfelt farewell, and to the surprise of everyone around them, a tender embrace (Ambjörn, 2021f).

Just from comparing the plots of the two shows, there are already major divergences in *Young Royals*'s from the gay-bildungsroman genre. In comparing the heterotopic qualities of *Heartstopper*'s Truham Grammar High School and *Young Royals*'s Hillerska Boarding School, the star couples' relationalities against each other, and their respective dynamics of care, *Young Royals* emerges as a critique or subversion of the gay-bildungsroman form.² While Truham Grammar and Hillerska certainly share some heterotopic qualities in their gender separation, their differing levels of class homogeneity are central to *Young Royals*'s inversion of the gay-bildungsroman. In *Heartstopper*, nothing is remarkably classed—all of them are depicted as broadly upper-middle class, removing class altogether from Nick and Charlie's relationality (as class consciousness is antithetical to the liberal, assimilationist ends of the gay-bildungsroman). At Hillerska, however—even before the addition of Simon and Sara—there is a class differential, albeit bourgeois; this is shown most boldly in a blue-blooded secret society composed of Hillerska's wealthiest men. "There are actually two criteria you need to become a member. You have to be of noble birth, and a first-born son. [...] Take Per for instance, [...] he owns 5,500 hectares outside of Lund. And Krille here, he owns 7,500. [...] All of us have one thing in common. We are all equally loyal to the monarchy" (Ambjörn, 2021d, 32:22). At Hillerska, there is a distinction between the already-wealthy students and the most affluent economic figures of Sweden, who all hold an additional degree of heteropatriarchal dominance. Then come two critical additions: Wilhelm, the now-Crown Prince, the hegemon-of-all-hegemons, who assumes his place at the very top of Hillerska's social-capital pyramid, with other students literally pledging their allegiance to the well-being of the monarchy as an initiation into an elite secret society (Ambjörn, 2021d, 29:06). Then along comes Simon, the proletarian outlier: son of a Latina immigrant working-class single mother, on scholarship, unable to pay the room and board cost. All the raced, classed—*queer*—nicks in *Young Royals*'s plot and cast accentuate Hillerska's heterotopic qualities. While Wilhelm retains his social/economic capital within the walls of the boarding school, he is still subject to Hillerska's laws of being and becoming, such as his hazing, where he is bound, paraded about, and forced to drink the spit of his peers (Ambjörn, 2021a). And while Simon is presumably regarded on the rowing team as a complete equal, "the class journey personified" as August says, he is in a way excluded from these traditions along the line

² If *Heartstopper* is the formulaic gay-bildungsroman Jane Austen, *Young Royals*'s heterotopian elsewhere renders it a queer of color critique-steeped Thomas Hardy.

of class because he is unable to live at Hillerska (Ambjörn, 2021b, 40:12).³ The most pertinent slippage in Hillerska's heterotopic structure manifests in the romantic space between Wille and Simon, a space of queer deviance which threatens both status quos: of monarchical and class dominance and of neoliberal myths of the model minority.

In *Heartstopper*, the economy of care is generically sound with the assimilationist guise of the gay-bildungsroman. Charlie supports Nick as he comes to terms with his sexual orientation, and in return, Nick protects Charlie from the rugby boys' ridicule, his abusive closeted ex, and other bullying that predates their relationship (Oseman, 2022b). After Nick comes to terms with his bisexuality with Charlie's support, this economy takes the shape of a *petting* relation, a form of protection elicited from an object deemed *cute* in the dominant gaze: "Cuteness [...] is first of all a physical, affective response — a feeling we may refer to as the 'Aww' factor [...] to preserve a helpless, unthreatening object from harm" (Dale, 2016, 5–6). With Charlie as his cute object of adoration, protection, and preservation, Nick takes him on as another piece of social capital, mere private property—to be owned, petted, and protected by Nick and Nick alone. For example, in episode seven, after Nick invites Charlie to the movies with his friends from the rugby team, Harry (Cormac Hyde-Corrin) begins to berate Charlie for being gay—immediately going on the defensive, Nick steps between them to protect Charlie from this bullying (Oseman, 2022b). Minutes pass, and things come to a boil between Harry and Nick. "You can't help wanting to protect him, can you?" Harry taunts, "because he's a *pathetic little fag*"—almost reflexively, Nick punches Harry in the face with all his force (Oseman, 2022b, 8:58). Nick's violent devotion to Charlie solidifies their petting relation as protector and protected respectively, conjuring the normative formation of top/bottom and reinforcing Charlie's characterization as Nick's adorable piece of private property. This dynamic of ownership/protection is sexualized by Nick's masculine aggression, the guttural affective response to *his* object of affection being disturbed, resulting in physical violence. This dominant relationality, the top/bottom dynamic, is instrumental to the gay-bildungsroman plot because it conjures into it the ownership dynamics of the marriage plot in the traditional bildungsroman, transposing its heterosexist logics of domination and private property onto the bodies of Nick and Charlie, presenting this scene as a heroic act of protection in the heat of passion.

Again, this relation translates the bildungsroman's traditional marriage plot to the juvenile gay-bildungsroman: young audiences watching *Heartstopper* are shown that this relationality is heartwarming and romantic, rather than heteromale and possessive, awwing them into subjugation. LGBT audiences are promised their chance to one day assimilate into this plot by virtue of *following their heart*, and straight audiences are promised that these same-sex relationships will not shake up the status quo: the public is enchanted by *Heartstopper's*

³ August patronizes Simon in a study conversation, speaking to the liberal, colorblind ethos at Hillerska: "This really is the best thing about rowing. It brings people together, it's really wonderful, isn't it? You know class, ethnicity, it doesn't matter. Everyone has the same chances" (Ambjörn, 2021b, 23:15)

homonormative, *they're-just-like-us-therefore-they-deserve-state-rights* rhetoric. The classed and raced levelness between Charlie and Nick, working in tandem with Truham Grammar's less imposing heterotopic qualities as a day school rather than a boarding school, allows for a more normative, recognizable, and legible pattern of care, in line with the gay-bildungsroman and its parent genre.

But *Young Royals* has different plans for the affective register of its plot. In the power differential between Wilhelm, Crown Prince of Sweden and Simon, there are layers of classed, raced, and gendered charges in their economy of care. *Young Royals* denies the petting and adoration of the gay-bildungsroman plot, and this denial is intensified by this power differential. For the greater part of the season, Simon provides care for Wille at every turn: smuggling alcohol for his initiation party, being there for him after the loss of his brother, and rescuing him from his harsh drug trip on the Bjärstad soccer field, Simon cares for Wille under an expectation which is fundamentally classed and raced (Ambjörn, 2021a, 2021d). A young, working-class, immigrant queer of color like Simon *should* (according to the bildungsroman and its associated capitalist desire for Simon to gain a more favorable social position) want to be with Wille by any means necessary. Simon *should* be happy caring for him despite Wille's refusal to disavow his monarchical power, despite how Wille chooses this patriarchal and familial power over Simon. Instead, Simon asserts his agency over the demands of the gay-bildungsroman in a tearful, cold, breathy scene, where Wille shows up at Simon's house after days of silence: "I'm not asking you to [come out]. You just expect everything to be on your terms. [...] You need to figure out what you want. And you can take all the time you need. And I respect that. ... But you have to do it by yourself. ... I don't want to be anyone's secret" (Ambjörn, 2021f, 29:26).

A component of *Heartstopper*'s snug reception into the gay-bildungsroman genre comes in its rigid purity politics. As the star couple celebrates their 15th birthdays, they are instrumentalized; in the same fell swoop of corporate logic, Netflix is able to preserve the respectability, purity, and non-sexual nature of the gay-bildungsroman plot while offering LGBT representation which adds to the show's "heartwarming" affective register (Oseman, 2022d). Sweeping normative audiences off of their feet with its "wholesomeness," *Heartstopper*'s plot perpetuates the idea that LGBT media is obligated to be family friendly or "wholesome" in the name of respectability. "Wholesomeness" on the lips of the audience is a derivative of "respectability," "clean," "pure," "non-threatening," "apolitical." If you take *Young Royals*, however, there is a critical lapse in wholesomeness; not only is there a depiction of a sexually intimate scene between Wille and Simon (who are around the same age of Nick and Charlie), but the show also deals with a video of said act being leaked globally. Not only does this plot point deny the feel-good sentimentality in its largely somber story, but its inclusion also exposes the normative, corporate, and generic motives driving *Heartstopper*'s age setting. The broken tie between onscreen abstinence and a feel-good ending becomes most apparent in *Young Royals*'s season one ending sequence—Wille's empty gaze over Simon's shoulder—caught, puzzled glances—a separated, dissociated, suffering gaze into the viewer (Ambjörn, 2021f).

Young Royals leads us to a critique of the gay-bildungsroman genre by leveraging the heterotopic qualities of Hillerska Boarding School. Within the governing structures and social rules of Hillerska, August found it acceptable to secretly record a video of a Wille having sex from outside his window. The heterotopic permeability of the dorm building is what justifies August's action; because students at Hillerska often use the side windows to sneak in and out to avoid being reprimanded, this means *it could have been anyone* who recorded and posted the video, which emboldened him to post it online. In the moment, August was completely content in his actions, even giddy for the chance to make fun of his friend the Crown Prince, until he witnessed an act of queer transgression before him. But because of Wilhelm's actions and their incompatibility with heteropatriarchal monarchical power, and out of his own anger, August further decided to post this tape publicly on the internet—again, a situation wrought wholly from the heterotopic governing structures of Hillerska Boarding School. This heterotopic space sets the stage for the *queer* performances with which the gay-bildungsroman and its associated purity politics are undermined—Wille and Simon's transgressive, queer love and August's deviant performance against his dear cousin.

The queer performances in *Young Royals* are shaped by the heterotopic governing structures of Hillerska Boarding School on several valences: in the performance of care, in the performance of queer transgression, and a larger structural performance against the liberal assimilationist ideals of the gay-bildungsroman genre. These performances critique respectively the intentionally classed and raced homogenous structure, purity politics, and gay-bildungsroman generic structure of the latest feel-good LGBT Netflix obsession, *Heartstopper*. This dialogue shows the stakes of heterotopic queer performances and their role in narratives of queer subject formation. In this case, heterotopic queer performances within the storyline of a Netflix Original Series give rise to a critique of a gay-bildungsroman genre which upholds the long-withstanding, state-sponsored ideal of gay assimilation. The rule-bending nature of queer performance has always been apparent, but *Young Royals's* heterotopic critique further pushes the boundaries of its analytic and critical potential. Harnessing the power of one of Foucault's prime examples of the heterotopia, Hillerska Boarding School becomes a site of exploitative care, of juvenile queer deviance, of scandal—and most remarkably, of *resistance* against the idea that queer art owes the public a comforting, feel-good sensibility or a warm hug.

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