

1 A Feminine Genre: Romance and Women

Defining the genre

La femme de lettres aime et chante presque exclusivement l'amour, voilà le fait . . . C'est la grande question, l'éternelle question pour les femmes et les romans de femme. L'amour, l'amour, l'amour!¹

(Bertaut 1909: 231)

Qu'elle était judicieuse, la remontrance d'un de mes maris: 'Mais tu ne peux donc pas écrire un livre qui ne soit d'amour . . . Est-ce qu'il n'y a pas autre chose dans la vie?' Si le temps ne l'eût pressé de courir — car il était beau et charmant — vers des rendez-vous amoureux, il m'aurait peut-être enseigné ce qui a licence de tenir, dans un roman et hors du roman, la place de l'amour . . .²

(Colette 1991a: 285–6)

Although, as Colette ironically observes, romantic love is one of life's most compelling experiences for both sexes, writing and reading about love are strongly associated, at least in contemporary western cultures, with women. It has not always been so, for the love story is an archetypal narrative of western literature, the majority of which has been authored by men, and romance pervades oral and written story-telling as far back as can be traced. Fairy tales, their origins lost in time, mutate as they travel through centuries and shifting cultures, but continue to make the discovery of mutual, passionate love the condition of living happily ever after. When, in twelfth-century France, literature first began to be written in the vernacular or 'romanz' language rather than in Latin, the narrative of love and courtship soon became the dominant literary mode, so that the word 'romance' took on the meaning it has retained to this day. Old legends from the oral tradition were taken up and reworked

¹ 'The woman of letters cares for and sings of nothing but love, that is a fact . . . Love is the one great, eternal question for women and for women's novels. Love, love, love!'

² 'How wise one of my husbands was when he remonstrated: "But is it impossible for you to write a book that isn't about love . . .? Aren't there other things in life?" If he had not been in such a hurry to get to his amorous rendezvous — for he was handsome and charming — he might perhaps have taught me what can take the place of love, in a novel or out of it' (Colette 1979: 18–19).

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to fit different cultures and different historical moments, so that the same story was told in numerous versions. Perhaps the most powerful of these was *Tristan et Iseult*, the tale of two passionate young lovers forced apart by the inexorable demands of family and social duty. Their story echoed through the courtly romances of medieval Europe, gathering the potency of a founding romantic myth whose legacy can be traced through centuries of love stories.³

It is the very pervasiveness of love as theme and narrative component that makes a closer definition of romance essential, for the majority of literature touches in some way on erotic and emotional relationships, but not every story containing love is best thought of as romance. The concept of genre is useful here, not in the sense of a fixed, ahistorical form, but in the sense of a consensual literary structure that provides an *horizon d'attente* (horizon of expectation) for readers and a *modèle d'écriture* (model of writing) for authors,⁴ and that within these broad patterns of consistency can shift, adapt, and respond to a changing context. Romance, as I will argue, takes on a recognizable set of formal and thematic parameters, and acquires a particular and lasting social importance, towards the end of the nineteenth century, but the modern genre has deep taproots that lead all the way back through literary history to medieval romances, and to a pre-literary oral culture. What defines the romance, from *Tristan et Iseult* to the Harlequin series, is first the centrality of the love plot: what drives the plot, what motivates the turning of the pages, is the question of whether and how the two primary characters will achieve, or fail to achieve, a lasting union with each other. Other characters may populate the story, but they are secondary: they may merely function as what one analyst of the popular modern romance calls 'utilités' ('utilities', Constans 1999: 20) and another 'fricatives' (Paizis 1998: 75), or they may introduce important external dimensions to the drama of the relationship, but they are rarely centre stage. The basic narrative structure of romance—on which innumerable variations have been played—is that of meeting, negotiation of a series of obstacles both internal (psychological and emotional) and external (social and material), leading to a *dénouement* that may be happy (the couple united) or unhappy (separation and loss).

³ In *L'Amour et l'Occident* (first published 1939) Denis de Rougemont asserts but deplores the lasting legacy of the Tristan myth, which he defines as a primitively irrational belief in the irresistible and anti-social power of love. The continuing potency of the myth, he argues, 'se trahit dans la plupart de nos romans et de nos films, dans leur succès auprès des masses' ('can be seen in most of our contemporary novels and films, and in their popular success', de Rougemont 1972: 17).

⁴ These concepts are used in most modern genre theory; see, e.g., Todorov 1970: ch. 1, 'Les Genres littéraires'; Schaeffer 1989; Combe 1992.

Whatever the ending, love is a transcendent value in romance. It is a uniquely powerful emotion, as *Tristan et Iseult* establishes through the narrative device of a love-potion, which both lovers drink, inadvertently, while in each other's presence, with the result that 'Love, waylayer of all hearts, . . . planted her victorious standard in their two hearts and bowed them beneath her yoke' (von Strassburg 1960: 195). More contemporary romances dispense with the material catalyst of the love-potion, but depict love as equally inexorable. But it is the difficulty of realizing desire that forms the stuff of the narrative. The romance deals with the conflict between a personal will to absolute fulfilment, and the intractability of the real, which most often takes the form of social imperatives that frustrate the desire to be with the loved one. Tristan and Iseult know briefly the supreme happiness of a consummated love, during their shared exile in a magical forest that has overtones of the Garden of Eden. Here, as one version has it, they live in perfect harmony, each providing all that the other needs: 'They made an even number: there was simply one and one' (von Strassburg 1960: 263). Marital, dynastic, and chivalric duties will put an end to their idyll, and the story ends with their separation and death. Tristan and Iseult experience, and then lose, perfect happiness in each other. Whether happy or sad in its dénouement, the romance is always structured as a quest for union with the beloved, and its narrative material is provided by the hurdles that lie in the path of that imagined perfection.

The feminization of romance

The constant elements of the romance genre then are the narrative centrality of a single love relationship, the narrative structure of a quest for love's fulfilment through conflict with a series of obstacles, and the representation of love as a powerful, indeed a transcendent force. Romance for writers of both sexes—and the majority of published writers have always been male, in France as elsewhere—has been a means of imagining the ideal relationship with the Other, and of exploring or rehearsing the conflicts between individual desire and all that contains and limits that desire, in particular the demands of society. Within these broad parameters, the genre (like all genres) has evolved and changed, both in response to external social forces, and internally, in reaction to or imitation of other literary works. But from the medieval period on, as French literature developed, diverged into the genres of theatre, poetry, and prose fiction and into numerous sub-genres, it returned (as did all European literatures) again and again to the romance plot. This was

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particularly the case with the novel, the French word for which, 'roman', retains the connection with medieval courtly romance, and implies a semantic link with romance in the sense of 'stories of love'. Some of the most celebrated early examples of the novel form, for example Honoré d'Urfé's seventeenth-century bestseller *L'Astrée* (1607–27) and (in a much more austere mode) Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), are centrally concerned with the desire for and the possible consummation of love. In the eighteenth century, 'the love-interest was . . . central to most novels' (Hall 2000: 111) and the 'roman sentimental' dominated a growing market in which women authors such as Marie-Jeanne Riccobini and Isabelle de Charrières published alongside the better-known names of Antoine-François Prévost and Denis Diderot. Love, courtship, the possibility of reconciling the satisfaction of personal desire with social duty, these were staple ingredients of the novel form from the outset.

But from the latter part of the eighteenth century, and increasingly in the nineteenth, the romance started to be identified as a feminine mode of writing and reading. First, the Napoleonic era ushered in a more radical separation between male and female spheres, as women, under the succession of new regimes, were legally, economically, and politically excluded from the public domain and from the exercise of power or authority. At an ideological level, this meant the attribution to men of all those virtues that the post-Enlightenment century valued, whether these were the bourgeois virtues of rationality, pragmatism, and restraint, or, in the milieu of the artistic avant-garde, the qualities of creativity, intellectual daring, and political engagement. In these terms, it is clear that romance, with the importance it accords to marital and domestic arrangements, its emphasis on the quality of personal and emotional experience, its deployment of a narrative formula with its roots in myth and fairy tale, belonged firmly on the feminine—hence the inferior—side of the binary line. Moreover, the enormous popularity of the novel made it ripe for revalorization from a somewhat despised new arrival on the literary scene, to a serious literary form: the novel needed the credentials of virility, and this entailed the deprecation of women novelists. During this phase of the novel's rise to success, women's contribution to the genre was deemed to be 'limited by their intellectual and biological inferiority: they [were] granted the "feminine" virtues, finesse, sensitivity, spontaneity, but "male" virtues, strength, imagination, creative capacity, [were] deemed necessary to create truly "great" novels' (Hall 2000: 103).

The novel that consecrates the divide between the intellectually and aesthetically serious novel, and the foolishly feminine romance,

is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). Itself a formal *tour de force* as well as a deeply persuasive expression of moral disillusionment, *Madame Bovary* condemns the discourse of romance as both tawdry and pernicious. Fed on a diet of *romans d'amour*, Emma misinterprets the world around her, imagining searing passion where there is only sexual appetite and self-interest, failing to recognize the fatal incongruence between her dreams and reality.

L'amour, croyait-elle, devait arriver tout à coup, avec de grands éclats et des fulgurations—ouragan des cieus qui tombe sur la vie, la bouleverse, arrache les volontés comme des feuilles et emporte à l'abîme le cœur entier.⁵
(Flaubert 1983: 124)

If the romantic young student Léon shares Emma's escapist fantasies for a while, his masculine pragmatism soon asserts itself: what for Emma is a matter of life or death is for him a youthful interlude, to be left behind in his pursuit of a career and wealth. For Emma's second lover, Rodolphe, romance is merely a cynical strategy of seduction. Though Flaubert famously empathized with his heroine ('*Madame Bovary, c'est moi*'), and with her bitter dissatisfaction with a narrow destiny, his perspective on her is also detached and critical, and makes of her not the exceptional individual she longs to be, but rather a *petite bourgeoise* typical of her sex and class. Though Emma's dreams invite more readerly sympathy than the prosaic materialism that surrounds her, the form they take is treated caustically. Emma's imagination fails to rise above the clichés provided by the mass-produced fiction of the day, thus her dreams never attain the dignity of uniqueness, but are shared with her fellow consumers, who—it is clear—are mainly women.

In its acute observation of the ordinary, its refusal of idealism, and its depiction of the social texture of its time, *Madame Bovary* is one of the great realist novels. Realism, and its offspring naturalism, dominated French narrative fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century, and both defined themselves as the very antithesis of the emotion-centred, idealizing mode of romance. The realist project was mimetic and, in their depiction of reality, realists and naturalists accorded aesthetic priority to the concealed, darker face of the contemporary world, or to what Naomi Schor summarizes as the 'unsightly' (Schor 1988: 63). The Goncourt brothers produced, and extolled the virtues of, a literature that would face the harsh reality of modern urban living, defining realism's aims

⁵ 'Love, she believed, had to come suddenly, with a great clap of thunder and a lightning flash, a tempest from heaven that falls upon your life, like a devastation, scatters your ideals like leaves and hurls your very soul into the abyss' (Flaubert 1992: 80).

as 'des études sur le vrai, sur le vif, sur le saignant' ('studies of what is true, live, and bloody', Gengembre 1997: 47). Love is certainly not absent from the great realist texts: Zola, theorist and most famous practitioner of naturalism, but also a great and a popular storyteller, incorporates romance plots into the complex tapestries of his novels. *Germinal* is a novel about politics, power, and the mining industry, but it is enriched by the narrative strand of the love story between Étienne and Catherine, and its final, sad consummation; *Au Bonheur des Dames* dramatizes the rise of consumer capitalism under the Second Empire, but its epic social history is underpinned by a love story between a retail magnate and a shop girl. However, naturalism, like realism, remained firmly on the virile side of the gender divide: rational and scientific in its aims (Zola famously compared his work to that of a surgeon dissecting a dead body), unflinching before the harsh realities from which the gentler sex had to be shielded, situated squarely in the public, social domain. If the most successful woman novelist of the nineteenth century, George Sand, was never quite admitted to the Pantheon of great writers, this was because despite the range of her work she never adopted the conventions of realism. Indeed, Sand displayed a consistent tendency to envisage social and philosophical issues through the narrative lens of romance.

In the course of the nineteenth century, then, romance became a feminized and a denigrated genre. In his 1895 journal, Jules Renard encapsulated in a rhetorical question the sense that no author who wished to be taken seriously could possibly align himself with the genre of the love story: 'Qui de nous oserait écrire un roman avec ces mots vidés de leur sens "Je t'aime" et "amour"?' (Constans 1999: 173).⁶ As we have seen, the devaluation of romance was closely connected with the ideology of gender, but it was also determined by developments in the publishing trade, and by the complex question of the writer's social status in a market economy. As the market for and production of literature expanded in the nineteenth century, due to technological developments in printing and communications, and to the growth of retailing and that of literacy, so the demand for and the number of professional authors increased. Writers became more dependent on the market, rather than on the direct or indirect patronage of rich individuals or institutions. But in a market economy, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, Art defines itself precisely by its transcendence of the market, and those who aspire to the status of artists disdain the market as the arbiter of aesthetic quality. Indeed, the quality of a work of art may well be defined

⁶ Which of us would dare to write a novel containing those words now bereft of meaning "I love you" and "love"?

as being in inverse proportion to its marketability. Bourdieu traces how, in late nineteenth-century France, the author could gain social and cultural 'legitimacy' (recognition, status) according to three competing and hierarchized principles. Most prestigious was consecration by the literary community itself, by fellow producers; second came legitimacy bestowed by the dominant class in the form of success in a cultured 'literary' market and the awarding of public honours; last and certainly least came consecration from a mass popular audience, or commercial success (Bourdieu 1993: 50–1). Romance fiction, from the eighteenth century on, never ceased to be a widely read and popular genre, gradually extending its reading public as serialized *feuilletons* and cheap mass-produced novel series entered the market. It was politic for serious writers who aspired to the highest form of legitimacy to distance themselves from romance as a genre, and (as we shall see below) romance's lack of legitimacy remained constant throughout the twentieth century.

By the end of the nineteenth century, fiction whose narrative and thematic core was romantic love was firmly associated with women. Women readers were castigated for indulging in such self-indulgent fantasy ('rien ne les intéresse, pourrait-on presque dire, que par quelque rapport visible ou caché avec l'amour,'⁷ sighed Professor Henri Marion in a Sorbonne lecture series (1892–4) entitled 'Psychologie de la femme' (Marion 1900: 110)), and women writers were criticized for the narrow, repetitive range of their concerns, in terms still current well into the twentieth century.⁸ According to the scientific authorities of the day, irrationality and an excess of emotion were innate female qualities, and proved that the allocation of the public sphere to men, the private and domestic sphere to women, merely conformed to the natural order. Women's liking for romance was condemned, but condemned with condescending affection: a preoccupation with men and marriage was, after all, part of women's charm, and it confirmed male superiority. Throughout the twentieth century too, popular romantic fiction has consistently attracted more disdain than any other popular genre,⁹ and

⁷ 'one could almost say that nothing interests them unless it has some visible or hidden connection with love.'

⁸ The critic Jean Larnac, in his 1929 survey of the history of women's writing in France, professed conclusions very close to the dominant discourse of the late nineteenth century: 'Pendant que son compagnon se tourne vers le dehors, l'objet, elle reste repliée sur elle-même, le sujet. L'homme écoute les rumeurs du monde. La femme entend les rumeurs de son être.' 'While her [male] companion turns outwards towards the object, she remains turned in on herself, the subject. Man listens to the sound of the world. Woman hears only the sound of her own being' (Larnac 1929: 269).

⁹ 'Le roman sentimental moderne, type Harlequin, est sans doute actuellement le type de littérature populaire ayant le moins de raison d'accéder à une forme ou une autre de légitimité' ('The modern romantic novel of the Mills and Boon sort is currently the type of popular literature least

'serious' women writers, as Colette wryly acknowledges in the quotation at the start of this chapter, have often been tainted by association with a despised and feminine genre.

A sound feminist response to this is to dispute the identification of women's literature with romance. Because the reduction of all women's writing to the love story has been used to belittle and patronize, it is crucial to point out that, both generically and thematically, women's writing across the centuries has in reality been extremely diverse.¹⁰ But having established this, we also have to acknowledge that the centrality of romance to female writing and reading is not solely a matter of hostile critical distortion. Many women writers, the canonized and the forgotten alike, do display a preference for the love plot as their primary narrative form, and romance has indisputably remained the most popular type of fiction for women readers, in France as elsewhere, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and up to the present day, with Harlequin-France, the largest publisher of popular romances, still bringing out over 500 new titles and selling twelve million books each year.¹¹ Although across the centuries the love story is one of the most recurrently used and intimately affecting narratives for both sexes, in the late nineteenth and still more in the twentieth century it comes to be—and not only in the patriarchal imagination—a genre favoured by women, both as producers and as consumers of fiction. Two questions arise from this. One is why this should be the case; if we reject the essentialist view, how do we explain the consistent connection between women and romance? The other is: does a taste for romance need justification? Is romance the inward-looking, regressive and formulaic narrative form that its detractors imply, or is it a genre that offers more liberating and creative possibilities?

Why women like romance—and should they?

An explanation of why women read and write romance must start from the social and material conditions of their lives, which have clearly predisposed them (us) towards a concern with personal and domestic

likely to achieve any form of legitimacy') (Péquignot 1997: 65). 'Serious' bookshops in France often have sections devoted to detective fiction, horror, science fiction, but almost never to romantic fiction.

¹⁰ For the diversity of women's writing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, see Holmes 1996; Stephens 2000; Finch 2000.

¹¹ See below, Ch. 6.

relationships. Beauvoir's sharp dissection of romance in *Le Deuxième Sexe* debunks the idea that women are naturally inclined to prioritize love, and establishes instead a causal link between social dependence and emotional over-investment. 'En vérité, ce n'est pas d'une loi de la nature qu'il s'agit. C'est la différence de leur situation qui se reflète dans la conception que l'homme et la femme se font de l'amour' (Beauvoir 1976: 547).¹² If women have tended to see love and courtship as the essential dramas of life, and to favour stories that do the same, this is because economic, legal, and social dependence have meant that the choice of a partner has determined the security and happiness of women's lives to a much greater extent than those of men. The priority accorded by women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century societies to the choice of a mate and the quality of intimate relationships is closely connected to their restriction to the domestic, private sphere, and their subjection to the authority of father, then husband. It is not by chance that the production of cheap mass romantic fiction coincides with the thorough domestication of women. In France, as we have seen above, the separation of spheres by gender, and the cult of female domesticity, were propagated with a new intensity from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Napoleon's supremely patriarchal legal code (the *Code Napoléon*) enshrined the subjugation of women in law in 1804, and a gradual move from home-based to factory production in the second half of the century strengthened the ideology and (for most people) the lived reality of a gender-based division of labour and of space. The serialization of novels in the popular press (the *roman-feuilleton*) started in 1836, and very soon the *feuilleton* became synonymous with 'women's stories', and with romances, which by the end of the century were also being produced in cheap collections. Though the proportion of female authors remained low in France and does so to the present day,¹³ the romantic novel was (and still is) one genre where women could find opportunities for publication since, as Bourdieu shows, it is the popular novel that is 'abandoned to writers issuing from dominated classes and women writers' (Bourdieu 1993: 190). It is the subordinate status of women that has determined their intense interest in the script of courtship and marriage, both as readers and as writers, and the romance novel has

¹² The fact is that we have nothing to do here with laws of nature. It is the difference in their situations that is reflected in the difference men and women show in conceptions of love' (Beauvoir 1972: 653).

¹³ It is hard to give firm figures for this, since those that exist are contradictory. See Dudovitz 1990: 76–7. All literary historians are agreed, however, that women made up a small proportion of the overall number of authors in the nineteenth century, and recent figures published at the start of the twenty-first century set the proportion women/men at 30%/70%. (See Morello and Rodgers 2002: 9)

provided a shape for the representation and the exploration of female experience.

What the socio-historical argument fails to explain, however, is the consistent popularity of the romance in the later twentieth century, despite a dramatic improvement in women's status and social opportunities, and a decline in the social and material necessity of marriage. There is no doubt that the genre has changed and adapted with the times, but nonetheless the basic narrative structure and the thematic focus on—in the vast majority of cases—heterosexual love remain constant. If we agree with Beauvoir that women's greater (or men's lesser) interest in romance is not determined by any 'law of nature', but by a difference of 'situation', then we need to look not just at the different material and social conditions of men's and women's lives, but also at how subjectivity and emotional identity are gendered in infancy and childhood. The part that gender plays in the construction of the self is clearly shaped by prevailing, and evolving, social practices and ideologies, but it takes time for social change (for example economic and legal reforms) to translate into the intimacy of family relationships. If, throughout a century of rapid social change, far more women than men have remained predisposed to choose stories in which love and the couple are central, then it may be useful to turn to a psychoanalytical perspective on the formation of female and male subjectivities in childhood. Although Freud's theories tend to ignore the socio-historical specificity of gender roles and childcare arrangements, and to universalize the socially contingent, they nonetheless provide the first serious investigation of how adult emotions and sexuality are shaped by experience in infancy, and they posit a gendered difference in that experience. Later feminist writers (notably, for the purposes of this argument, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, and Jessica Benjamin) have drawn on Freud's legacy to theorize how, in patriarchal cultures, men and women develop with somewhat different emotional identities.

For Freud, the relationship of an infant with its parents forms the bedrock of emotional life for people of both sexes. Freud posited a close connection between adult desire and the unconscious memory of the first, symbiotically close bond with the mother: the extreme pleasure of love satisfied and reciprocated returns us to that infant experience of bliss, and if the pain of love lost or withheld in adulthood can sometimes seem disproportionately intense, this is because it reawakens echoes of the first separation.¹⁴ Separation is nonetheless necessary to becoming a

¹⁴ In *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Barthes refers repeatedly to the way in which separation from a loved one is lived through the memory of early maternal absence. A patient acceptance

functioning individual, and brings its own rewards, but here development diverges according to gender. Both girl and boy infants (provided they are not the victims of sustained neglect or abuse) experience the same early feelings of sensual plenitude, but the need to recognize the difference between self and other, and to assert the self as separate from the mother, is lived out differently by each sex. For Freud, the boy child relinquishes the joy of maternal identification to gain the greater good of acquiring masculinity, through the Oedipal drama of rivalry and identification with the father. The girl, though, confronts the difficulty that her adult role model is the mother, the very figure from whom she must separate. Her achievement of selfhood will involve a contradictory play of rejection and internalization of the mother, and will demand a difficult repression of the wish to identify with the father ('penis-envy'). Thus male and female subjectivities are differently constituted.

Post-Freudian feminist theorists agree that sexual love holds a unique fascination and promise for people of both sexes because it 'resonates', as Dorothy Dinnerstein put it, 'more literally than any other part of experience, with the massive orienting passions that first take shape in pre-verbal, pre-rational human infancy' (Dinnerstein 1977: 15). But they also de-naturalize what in Freud seems to be a necessary and universal process, and point out the historical and social determinants of this particular configuration of early development. It is in the patriarchal family that the mother is reduced to the selfless source of inchoate bliss, the object of infantile drives who must be left behind for the self to be formed, and that the father represents the adventure, excitement, and autonomy to which the emerging infant self dimly aspires. And this cultural devaluation of the mother, and overvaluation of the father, produces not just sexual difference, but also what Benjamin terms 'fault lines' (Benjamin 1988: 76) in both masculine and feminine identity. The masculine fault line arises from the necessary and radical repudiation of the first close relationship with the mother, the over-emphasis on separation and self-sufficiency driven by the fear of being reabsorbed, which produces a tendency to control affective relationships by an emphasis on rationality or by the exercise of domination. The girl's fault line, conversely, is more likely to be the opposite of this: uncertainty about her own separateness as a person, with a resulting emphasis on the self-in-relation rather than the autonomous self; idealization of the father or of father figures, since they represent what she can only partially aspire

of separation is described thus: 'J'agis en sujet bien sévéré; je sais me nourrir, *en attendant*, d'autres choses que du sein maternel' ('I behave as a properly weaned subject; I can find nourishment, *in the meanwhile*, elsewhere than at the maternal breast') (Barthes 1977: 20).

to, and an incapacity to exert sexual agency. The connection between this and gendered reading practices is not hard to see. Freud and the Freudians acknowledge the initial bisexuality of all human beings, so that there is no suggestion here of an absolute divide between the sexes: men also like to read about love. But in patriarchal cultures, it is not surprising that a genre devoted to the narrative quest for a passionately intimate relationship with an adored Other, often at the cost of some loss of personal agency, should also be a 'feminine' genre.

Indeed Janice Radway, author of an ethnographically researched and persuasively argued study of popular romance in 1980s North America, draws on Nancy Chodorow's work to read the romance as a pleasurable re-enactment of the girl's Oedipal drama, with a happy ending. In the 'best' romances, as defined by Radway's representative group of readers, the heroine normally begins the story alone, separated from friends and family, almost invariably motherless, in a situation that echoes the child's attempts to seek individuation and emerge from the initial fusion of self and mother. In this solitude there is both a sense of emptiness, and a sense of adventure as the heroine tries to establish her autonomy through the 'masculine' routes of work and independence, identifying (as it were) with the father. But this attempt at separation will be rewarded not with social success or power, but rather with the love of the ideal partner who defines the heroine's identity as essentially that of a self-in-relation, and who simultaneously returns to her the joy of the lost maternal bond. Radway sees the tall, broad-chested heroes of popular romance not just as idealized objects of erotic desire, but also as maternal figures who offer the nurturing warmth that adult women mostly find themselves dispensing rather than receiving: they provide 'the reestablishment of that original, blissful symbiotic union between mother and child' which is really 'the goal of all romances despite their apparent preoccupation with heterosexual love and marriage' (Radway 1987: 156).

A post-Freudian reading of the romance then explains its attraction for women readers by the fact that it offers an imaginary replaying of the fundamental drama of female selfhood. The necessity for separation is represented through the heroine's initial solitude, but unlike the heroes of popular male genres (for example the lone detective of *noir* fiction), the selfhood achieved by the heroine is very much defined by her relationship with another: it is by loving and being loved that she achieves a happy ending. The idealized hero is both the father whose approval confers a sense of achieved identity, and the lost mother returned in a socially acceptable adult form. This kind of reading goes some way to explaining the ubiquity and consistency of the genre's success, and provides a useful

perspective on the evolution of the popular romance in the twentieth century.

However, to see the romance genre as simply an endless replaying of formative childhood experience is problematic in a number of ways. The feminine identity produced by Freud's psycho-drama, even in its critical feminist version, can still be seen as a subjugated identity, premised on the identification of mother with a private, domestic, and finally claustrophobic world, and of father with the 'world out there' with its potential for self-discovery and creativity. Moreover, the ideal conclusion of the Freudian narrative, like the classic happy ending of the romance, demands that its heroine accept her own place within this gendered and inexorably heterosexual distribution of roles, and renounce further adventuring in favour of herself becoming a wife and mother. If the genre offers no more than a pleasurable confirmation of the rightness of this pattern, and of its capacity to provide women with happiness, then it seems to be (as some of its feminist critics have claimed) irremediably reactionary—an 'outil prodigieux, bon marché' ('a prodigiously effective and cheap tool', Coquillat 1988: 5) wielded in the anti-feminist cause. And this view in turn means the acceptance of a very negative assessment of past and present readers of romance. Harlequin-France calculate that around 20 per cent of the female population of France read their books in any given year. Since Harlequin are by no means alone in the popular romance market, and since I want to argue for an extension of the category 'romance' well beyond the mass-marketed product with which it has become virtually synonymous, the total proportion, even at the start of the twenty-first century, is clearly much higher. Are we to see all these female readers, and their predecessors across the century, as deluded, mystified, or masochistically colluding in their own subjection?

The argument for a close connection between the apparently inexhaustible pleasure of romance, and the female reader's formative Oedipal drama, is a persuasive one, but the vast range of romantic fiction cannot be reduced to a single, reactionary set of meanings. Despite Freud's assumption—unsurprising in the context of his day—that the healthiest outcome of a woman's emotional development was her acceptance of male authority and motherhood, his theories in fact provide the basis for a much more open-ended story. Freud posits an initial bisexuality common to both sexes, and identifies, in the theory of women's 'castration', the 'psychic cost to women of entering a culture in which our subordination is a *sine qua non*' (Hamer 1990: 135). Renunciation of her own phallic position in favour of being loved by the phallic father/lover may be the girl's most approved trajectory, but it is by no means the only

logical possibility. As Janice Radway's work suggests, the appeal of the romance lies not just in its depiction of a final, rewarded surrender, but also in its acknowledgement of that 'pre-castrated' self who is at once nostalgic for the mother as primary love-object, and fully engaged in the self-invention that separation allows. Typically, the romance heroine begins her story in some sense alone and separated from a familiar world: she is the seeker, the agent of the narrative quest, discovering new realities—in the early twentieth-century popular romance, for example, loss of family fortune often forces her into paid employment far from home, frequently in exotic locations. The encounter with the hero is itself a challenging encounter with the unknown: if to win him means, at one level, renunciation of the quest, it also means the satisfaction of intensely felt desire. The function of the mass-market romance is to provide an enjoyable fantasy, therefore it offers its readers the imaginary pleasure of a perfect convergence between the selfish imperative towards emotional and erotic fulfilment, and the social imperative to take one's place in the gendered social order. Other forms of romance offer no utopian resolution, but address the potential conflict between desire and social acceptance directly, answering the genre's central question—can these two mutually desiring people find lasting happiness together?—with a qualified 'yes' or even with a clear 'no'. Romance provides a narrative form in which to address the difficult reconciliation of personal desire with social imperatives, and the particular forms that this takes for women.

Feminist reworkings of psychoanalytic theory have contested some of its more historically inflected assumptions, in ways that again suggest the possibility of more varied narratives, both lived and fictional. Dinnerstein, Chodorow, and Benjamin argue, for example, that the Freudian identification of the mother with an undifferentiated unity that must be left behind for individuation to occur, and of the father with escape and adventure, is strongly shaped by the patriarchal culture of its time, hence contingent rather than essential. Benjamin's argument in particular insists on the inter-subjectivity of what is more often characterized as a fused, symbiotic relationship between baby and mother. Rather than being fixated on the breast as object, she argues, the infant almost immediately takes pleasure in recognition of the mother, and in the interplay of looks, smiles, voices. The mother (before the father) 'embodies something of the not-me' (Benjamin 1988: 24), and the relationship with her brings not only the joy of total safety, of belonging, but also 'the joy and urgency of discovering the external, independent reality of another person' (*ibid.*: 44). If this first relationship is itself incipiently social, then it becomes possible to acknowledge the contradictory but

equally powerful desires for, on the one hand, the security of belonging and, on the other, the excitement of freedom and agency, without tying them so firmly to gender. The romance might resonate with formative emotional experience, yet contest the necessary assignment of seductive otherness to the father's realm, and identificatory fusion to the mother's. Often, for the romance to end happily, the hero/father must be revealed or taught to possess a 'maternal' capacity for tenderness and intimacy; through secondary female characters, or through the heroine herself, a female capacity for adventurous self-assertion is claimed and approved. Thus it is not always only men who embody the excitement of difference in romance, and although it is heterosexual romance that dominates the field, the genre's codes and structures extend easily to love stories between women. The pleasures of romance are illuminated by a psychoanalytic reading, but the genre does not merely replay, but also contests and reworks, the classically gendered version of the Oedipal narrative.

Romance, then, despite its association with mindless sentimentality, deals with serious ethical questions: how to reconcile the fierce egoism of sexual and emotional drives with social responsibility, how to negotiate the boundaries between self and other, between loving desire and possessive control, between fascination with and fear of difference. It is the relevance of these issues to most readers' lives that produces, in part, the pleasure of reading. But that pleasure resides equally in the fact that romance is the genre in which women have been able to write and read about sex, in a century when—until relatively recently—erotic writing was predominantly male, and the taboos surrounding explicit discussion of sex were considerably stronger for women. The very structure of the romance lends it erotic potential: the first encounter with the loved one arouses desire; the body of the narrative plays with this desire, in some cases endlessly deferring its satisfaction, in others partially fulfilling and thereby heightening it, until the climax of either perfect union, or loss and separation. As Catherine Belsey points out, from the mass-market romance to the most formally sophisticated, what these texts have in common is that 'by evading, by teasing, they elicit the desire of the reader, thus demonstrating the degree to which desire is an effect of the signifier' (Belsey 1994: 19). From the Belle Époque seamstress snatching a few minutes to read the latest episode of her romantic serial, to the feminist academic reading a critically lauded twenty-first-century love story, the romance reader finds not only her head but also her senses engaged, as the very bodily experience of desire is—obliquely and metaphorically, or directly and explicitly—evoked, and mirrored in the urgent, sensuous experience of reading itself. Across the century, romantic fiction, along with women's magazines (in which romance

has generally featured), has been the principal forum—public, popular, and socially inclusive—in which women have collectively explored and enjoyed their sexuality, and attempted to define what constitutes good sex from a woman's point of view.¹⁵ Avis Lewallen's half-joke description of one American romantic blockbuster as 'pornography for women' has some relevance for the entire genre (Lewallen 1988).

Many feminist critics (for example Greer 1970; Firestone 1972; Coquil-lat 1988) have deplored women's taste for romance as a form of false consciousness, and seen the genre—at least in its popular form—as the opium of the mystified female masses. Others (for example Modleski 1984; Radway 1987; Constans 1999) have sought to explain what positive pleasures women find there, and explored the reasons why its readers have experienced romance as enabling rather than mystifying, empowering rather than undermining. The dangers of romance as a genre that insists on the inexorable centrality of love—in most cases heterosexual love—to women's lives demand serious consideration. But this book considers romance above all, despite its hazards, as a narrative form chosen by women writers and readers, across classes and across three centuries, not only for its capacity to provide pleasurable fantasy, but also for its ability to reflect and reflect on their lives. Romantic fiction represents a largely female space, an 'entre-femmes' ('amongst-women', Irigaray 1986), in which stories are told in order to make sense of experience, in which fears are identified and dreams indulged, dangers are confronted and extremes of happiness imagined.

¹⁵ Several feminist commentators on romance have pointed out that the plot structure of the popular romance, where most of the narrative deals with anticipation rather than sex itself, 'may well correspond to many women's experience of sex as better in anticipation than in action' (Jones 1986: 200).