

WOMEN AND
ROMANCE FICTION IN THE
ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page vi
<i>List of abbreviations and a note on the text</i>	viii
Introduction	i
1 The readership of Renaissance romance	4
2 Renaissance romance and modern romance	20
3 Novellas of the 1560s and 1570s	33
4 Spanish and Portuguese romances	55
5 Fictions addressed to women by Lyly, Rich and Greene	76
6 The <i>Arcadia</i> : readership and authorship	101
7 The <i>Arcadia</i> : heroines	116
8 <i>The Faerie Queene</i>	130
9 Shakespeare's romance sources	140
10 Lady Mary Wroth's <i>Urania</i>	159
Epilogue: The later seventeenth century	183
<i>Notes</i>	194
<i>Bibliography</i>	216
<i>Index</i>	230

CHAPTER I

The readership of Renaissance romance

RENAISSANCE ROMANCE AS WOMEN'S READING

Various kinds of evidence support the view of Louis Wright and others that the commercial success of Renaissance romances was attributable to a new female readership. Many Elizabethan and Jacobean romance authors included in their works dedicatory prefaces and incidental narrative asides which specifically addressed 'gentlewomen' readers, that is, women of middle rank. John Lyly began *Euphues and his England* (1580), the sequel to *Euphues: the Anatomy of Wit*, with an epistle 'To the Ladies and Gentlewomen of England', beseeching them to 'take the pains to read it, but at such times as you spend in playing with your little dogs', and to have 'Euphues . . . as often in your hands, being but a toy, as lawn on your heads, being but trash'.¹ Barnaby Rich included a similar dedication 'To the right courteous gentlewomen' in *Rich's Farewell to Military Profession* (1581), a collection of romance-type stories, explaining that he had turned away from military pursuits in favour of the more fashionable entertainment of ladies. His title page declared his tales to have been 'Gathered together for the onely delight of the courteous Gentlewomen . . . for whose onely pleasure thei were collected together'.² Robert Greene informed 'Gentlewomen' readers of *Penelope's Web* (1587), another collection of romance tales, that it was aimed at 'discovering [i.e. revealing, publicising] the vertues of your sex'.³

By the early seventeenth century, foolish female readers of romance had become favourite subjects for satirists and moralists. A Chambermaid in the 1615 edition of Sir Thomas Overbury's *Characters* 'reads *Greenes* workes over and over, but is so carried away with the *Myrrour of Knighthood*, she is many times resolv'd to run out of her selfe, and become a Ladie Errant'.⁴ Thomas Powell in 1631 gave the following instructions for how to educate 'a private Gentlemans

daughter': 'In stead of Song and Musicke, let them learne Cookery and Laundrie. And in stead of reading Sir *Philip Sidneys Arcadia*, let them read the grounds of good huswifery.'⁵

Some modern critics have surmised that Renaissance romance appealed to women readers because of protofeminist narrative ingredients, like frankness about sexual matters, and the centrality of independent female characters. Tina Krontiris argues that chivalric romance, in particular, constituted an 'oppositional genre':

First, by its portrayal of daring heroines the romance often encouraged women to ignore social restrictions . . . Secondly, by its construction of an ideal world, the romance . . . could make the female reader critical of her position in the real world . . . Thirdly, romances tended to provide experiences unattainable for women in actual life. Amazons and warrior women are found primarily in romantic fiction.⁶

It is noteworthy that feminist critics like Krontiris and Caroline Lucas have wholeheartedly adopted Wright's view that Renaissance romance was primarily women's reading. We can deduce several reasons for this. For one thing, the relative invisibility of women on the literary and historical scenes in the period makes it refreshing and heartening to come across apparent evidence of female activity, and moreover activity which may have had a significant shaping influence on the kind of literature written and the way it evolved. For another, this model is attractive because of its connotations of female pleasure and subversiveness. Much of Wright's evidence for female romance-reading takes the form of admonitions by moralists and educationalists *against* the suitability of the pastime for daughters and wives, like that of Powell quoted above. This suggests that women chose romances for their reading matter in the face of strong disapproval, with their own enjoyment defiantly in view, in preference to the devotional texts, herbals and books of household management otherwise available to them. All of this indicates an encouraging female independence of spirit. Moreover, this apparent disreputability of Renaissance prose romances in their own time, combined with the fact that in our time they tend to be less well known and less studied than the poetry and drama of the period, also lends to discussion of them an exciting sense of challenging the literary canon and conventional hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' culture.

However, a problem with most of these kinds of evidence of women's reading – whether prefaces by romance authors, mocking

satires, or moralising prohibitions – is that they are themselves literary texts. As such, they were composed for various kinds of rhetorical effect, and cannot be claimed as authoritative proof of what women were actually reading. In addition, the assertion that romances foreground positive female characterisations and must therefore have appealed to women depends upon highly subjective, and possibly anachronistic, definitions of what is ‘positive’. Indeed, some other kinds of evidence may unsettle the idea that romance was especially popular with women.

REAL WOMEN READERS

It is questionable whether the female readership did indeed possess the ‘enormous resources’ that Linda Woodbridge claims. On the contrary, according to David Cressy, ninety-five per cent of women in 1550 were illiterate, a figure which did not decline much by the time of the Civil War, when he estimates ninety per cent.⁷ However, these figures are based on ability to write a signature, and it is very likely that the ability to read was a more widespread attainment. Keith Thomas regards Cressy’s statistics as ‘a spectacular underestimate’,⁸ and Paul Salzman, citing E. H. Miller, estimates fifty per cent literacy by 1600; he relates this to statistics showing that the period 1558 to 1603 produced three times as much published fiction as the period 1475 to 1558, and he regards women as playing an important part in this new reading public.⁹ Overall, though, it has to be confessed that solid evidence as to the size of the female readership remains frustratingly elusive; as Cressy resignedly acknowledges, ‘Unfortunately, reading leaves no record’.¹⁰

A few individual women of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries did leave records of their reading habits. On the whole, these tend not to provide a picture of widespread romance-reading, and the evidence for the Elizabethan period is especially thin. We know from Margaret Tyler’s 1578 translation of *The Mirror of Knighthood* that at least one Elizabethan woman was reading romances, and doing so with enjoyment and close attention. However, the diary of Lady Margaret Hoby for the period 1599–1605, which records extensive reading, refers almost exclusively to the Bible and devotional works.¹¹ Lady Grace Mildmay, in her journals for 1570–1617, similarly displayed a predominant concern with godliness, combining this with a special interest in

medicine which led her to spend much time reading herbals. She appears to have taken to heart the warning given in her youth against the seductive dangers of dubious books: she was advised 'to take heede of whom I received gifts, as a book wherein might be some fine words whereby I might betray myself unawares . . . for that wicked companions would ever presente treacherous attempts'.¹² Jacqueline Pearson, in a survey of women's reading between 1500 and 1700, admits that evidence of women's recreational reading is extremely hard to find, especially earlier in the period. She may be right to suppose that 'women tended not to record recreational reading because they had absorbed the conservative anxiety about it',¹³ but this remains impossible to prove.

In the next generation, the journals of Lady Anne Clifford (1590–1676) for the period 1616–19 detail works read to her by her servants which do include romances, namely *The Faerie Queene* and the *Arcadia*.¹⁴ Indeed, such was her admiration for Spenser that she commissioned his memorial in Westminster Abbey and composed the epitaph herself.¹⁵ Her 'Great Picture' of 1646, a triptych whose side-panels show her both as a girl and as a middle-aged woman surrounded by her books, also displays the *Arcadia* and Spenser's works among the reading matter of her youth, along with *Don Quixote* and 'Godfrey of Boloigne', a translation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. On the other side, the reading of her maturity includes John Barclay's *Argenis* (1621), a political *roman à clef* in romance form.¹⁶ Even in later life, she does not appear to have laid the *Arcadia* aside: a surviving copy of the 1605 edition bears notes in her handwriting, including, on the verso of the title page, 'This Booke did I beegine to Red over att Skipton in Craven aboutt the Latter=ende of Januarey and I made an ende of Reding itt all ower in Apellby Castell in Westmorland the 19 daye of Marche folloing, in 1651.'¹⁷

There are some other examples of women of aristocratic families whose reading included romance. Most prominent are the women of the Sidney family. Mary Sidney (or, to use her married name, Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke) evidently had a close knowledge of both the *Old* and *New Arcadias*, the former of which her brother Philip described as written 'only for you, only to you',¹⁸ and the latter of which she supervised through its publication in 1593. Her niece, Lady Mary Wroth, displayed detailed knowledge of the *Arcadia*, *The Faerie Queene* and other romances in her own 1621 *Urania* (see chapter 10 below). These Sidney women might be regarded as

unrepresentative, however, because of their membership of a distinctively literary and romance-oriented family. Two other women of the early seventeenth century, Lady Elizabeth Southwell in 1605 and Lady Arbella Stuart in 1610, donned masculine disguise to elope with their lovers, suggesting by their translation into real practice of a conventional romance trope their familiarity with the genre.¹⁹ In 1601 Mary Fitton, one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, was rumoured to have adopted male disguise to make clandestine visits to the chambers at court of her lover William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke.²⁰ These cross-dressers, though, were scandalous, far from typical cases. In general, aristocrats and courtiers such as these last three, the Sidneys and Lady Anne Clifford may well have enjoyed more licence to read secular works than did women in less privileged circumstances, and may also have enjoyed more licence to admit to such reading. They do not furnish evidence of a sizeable female romance-readership.

In any case, in both Anne Clifford's diaries and portrait the named romances form only a fraction of the reading matter catalogued. Graham Parry comments that the library depicted in the portrait of the young Lady Anne consists primarily of stoical works of philosophy and religion, and that it is debatable whether this 'genuinely reflected Anne's mood as a young woman of fifteen'.²¹ This reminds us that the Great Picture is very much a statement of the public identity which she wished to project, and although she includes 'high' courtly romances like *The Faerie Queene* and the *Arcadia*, she does not include, say, works by Robert Greene or Barnaby Rich which presented themselves as catering to female tastes. However, the range of works shown is in other ways very broad, encompassing religion, moral philosophy, history, classical literature, languages, geography, botany, poetry and architecture, and giving no particular prominence to romance. Similarly, works dedicated to women of the Russell family over the period 1570–1620 included the likes of Robert Greene's *Penelope's Web*,²² but also embraced religion, geography, history, travel, modern languages and Montaigne's *Essays*.²³ The letters of Lady Brilliana Harley (c. 1600–43) to her son Edward, which often discuss books exchanged between them, include a reference to Bishop Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moon* (1638), a narrative of a fantastic voyage, which she compares to *Don Quixote* (endearingly spelled 'Donqueshot'). Again, though, these references to romance-related fictions

are relatively isolated among more numerous mentions of books of devotion, history and topical debate.²⁴

As we move towards the mid seventeenth century, we do find more numerous examples of more extensive female romance-reading. Mary Rich, Countess of Warwick (1624–78), born Mary Boyle, was apparently addicted to romances in her youth; her father, Richard Boyle, first Earl of Cork, presented her with the *Arcadia* when she was twelve and encouraged her romance-reading, but admonished his sons against such frivolity.²⁵ One copy of the *Urania* by Lady Mary Wroth is three times inscribed ‘Dorothy Long her booke’.²⁶ By the 1650s we find Dorothy Osborne an avid devourer of the new monumentally proportioned French heroic romances like *Cléopâtre* (1646–57) by Gauthier de Coste de la Calprenède, and her favourite, *Artamène, où le Grand Cyrus* (1649–53) by Madeleine de Scudéry. She is breathlessly eager to discuss their plots and characters, her ‘old acquaintances’, in the letters she exchanged with Sir William Temple.²⁷ By 1664, Margaret Cavendish could include in a list of the kinds of works commonly written by women not only ‘Devotions’, ‘Receipts of Medicines’ and ‘Complemental Letters’, but also ‘Romances’.²⁸

Such evidence as these individual women provide is unquestionably fragmentary, but does point towards certain conclusions. Significantly, it strongly suggests that ideas of a large Elizabethan female readership for romance are exaggerated. Nevertheless, by the mid seventeenth century female romance-reading, and even writing, seems to have become accepted as fairly unremarkable. Some process of growth in the female romance-readership must have taken place between these two points, possibly by the gradual dissemination of romances from privileged aristocratic readers to their female servants and to socially aspiring women of the gentry and trading classes. Wright and his followers tend to put together material from, say, the 1580s and the 1630s as if they are all part of the same scene, but it looks as if we need to be careful to distinguish between different moments in a period of transition and process.

ROMANCE AS A FEMININE GENRE

In particular, we need to ask why, in the 1580s, when, as far as we can tell, the female romance-readership was not at all extensive, authors like Lyly, Rich and Greene were blatantly addressing their

fictions to women readers. This disparity draws our attention to the fact that all that we can certainly deduce from such textual evidence is that these authors wished their works to be *perceived* as directed at gentlewomen. It appears that some sort of connection was developing between women and romance which had less to do with actual women's reading habits than with cultural perceptions of romance as 'women's reading' and cultural constructions of romance as a feminine genre.

In fact, even before the Elizabethan fiction boom, romance had been associated with imagined female readers. This originated as concern as to the dangers which might ensue if literate women got hold of romances. Early in the sixteenth century, the works in this category were mainly popular chivalric romances like *Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton* which had been in circulation for centuries and were beginning to appear in printed form. Juan Luis Vives, the Spanish humanist, wrote a tract on the education of girls at the instigation of Catherine of Aragon for the instruction of her daughter Princess Mary.²⁹ He listed romances, including 'Arthur, Guye, Bevis', and 'in my countre in Spayn Amadise', as being 'fylthe and vitiousnes . . . playne and folysshe lyes'. He elaborated: 'though they were never so wytty and pleasant, yet wold I have no pleasure infected with poyson: nor have no woman quickened unto vice. And verely they be but folisshe husbandes and mad, that suffre their wives to waxe more ungratiously subtyl by redyng of such bokes.'³⁰ The Protestant reformer Heinrich Bullinger also expressed disapproval of romances in *The Christian State of Matrimony*, translated by Miles Coverdale in 1541. He advised for the education of daughters:

let them avoyde idlenes, be occupied ether doing some profytable thyng for youre familie, or els redyng some godly boke, let them not reade bokes of fables of fonde and lyght love, but call upon God to have pure hertes and chaste . . . Bokes of Robyn hode, Beves of Hampton, Troilus, and such lyke fables do but kyndle in lyers lyke lyes and wanton love. (fo. 75r-v)

Bullinger voices a fundamental anxiety which accompanied the humanist educational programme: those of the unlearned who were given literacy in order to read godly books had also become equipped to read books of the opposite moral character.

Such pronouncements are based on three premises: that romances exercise undue freedom concerning erotic matters; that women are especially susceptible to the charms of such erotic entertainments; and that the consequent effect of romance upon women will be to

make them sexually unruly. This may tell us less about what women liked to read than about how male moralists constructed and evaluated their categories of 'romance' and 'women'. As Michael McKeon observes, 'From Dante on the fear that women's morals will be corrupted by reading romances is quite conventional, and its articulation . . . may provide evidence less of the rise of the reading public than of the persistence of anxiety about women.'³¹ 'Women' and 'sexuality' were clearly closely associated categories in these condemnations of romance, but in a paradoxical fashion: in so far as women embodied sexual attractions for men, romance was identified with women as itself a form of eroticised pleasure; yet in so far as women's own sexuality was regarded as wayward and in need of restraint, romance was regarded as something to be kept from women.

These cultural constructions further produced an inverse position whereby for an author to declare that his book was designed for the pleasure of women was in effect for him to advertise his wares to readers of both sexes as racy, lightweight and fun. Aristocratic patronage of literary works seems to have declined markedly in the late sixteenth century, forcing the development of marketing techniques by printers, booksellers and writers. Prefatory materials like epistles to women readers need to be read in this context: they are designed to attract the potential buyer browsing in the congested marketplace of St Paul's Churchyard.³² In the cases of Lyly, Rich and Greene, intrinsic to their dedications to women readers is the presentation of their works as toys and playthings to be enjoyed in hours of delinquency from duty. Significantly, all of them set these epistles to women alongside dedicatory epistles to male readers; they clearly expected to have male readers to whom a flirtatious address to women readers would announce that titillating reading pleasures were to follow.

This may include a suggestion of voyeuristic pleasures: to read a book of courtship narratives which would 'normally' be read by a woman is at once to read about women's erotic secrets, to spy upon the imagined woman reader's private communion with her erotic book and to penetrate the private space of a woman's bedchamber or closet where she is supposed to indulge in such reading. Thus Lyly declares in his epistle to women readers that 'Euphues had rather be shut in a lady's casket than open in a scholar's study',³³ while Rich in his epistle to women explains that he has taken up romance

writing because 'I see now it is lesse painfull to followe a Fiddle in a gentlewomans chamber: then to marche after a Drumme in the feeld.'³⁴ Greene informed gentlemen readers of *Penelope's Web* that 'I was determined at the first to have made no appeale to your favorable opinions, for that the matter is womens prattle, about the untwisting of Penelope's Web' (the book depicts Penelope and her ladies telling one another stories while they unweave her web in her chamber by night in order to keep her suitors at bay). However, he changed his mind on 'considering that *Mars* wil sometime bee prying into *Venus* papers, and gentlemen desirous to heare the parlie of Ladies'.³⁵

For such rhetorical purposes it was clearly in the interests of the male author to exaggerate the extent and enthusiasm of his female readership. Rather than reading their addresses to women literally as evidence of real women's reading habits, it seems that we need to read them *literarily*, as part of the fictions which they frame and punctuate. The imagined woman reader may even be construed, on closer inspection, as a man in drag. As Maureen Quilligan points out, Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* indicates that male readers were habituated to reading as women in order to judge the rhetorical effectiveness of erotic writings by fellow men.³⁶ Sidney complains that 'truly many such writings as come under the banner of unresistible love, if I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love: so coldly they apply fiery speeches'.³⁷ The male reader may adopt a female persona in order to assess male writing apparently addressed to women, and to enjoy metaphorical access to women's bedchambers and other spaces of courtship.

WOMEN AND THE ORAL TRADITION

The cultural construction of romance as having a special affinity with women was based not only upon ideas about women's reading, but also upon ideas about women as storytellers. As we have just seen, *Penelope's Web* claimed to give men access to the kinds of tales which women tell one another in private. The stories of Penelope's ladies are described as 'merrie chat' designed to 'beguyle the night with prattle'; they are entertainments which enliven time which would otherwise pass slowly.³⁸ The activity of narration is also closely identified with the archetypal feminine activities of spinning and weaving: one of Penelope's maids is described as 'applying as

well her fingers to the web as her tongue to the tale', while later when Penelope takes her own turn at storytelling her maids listen 'setting their hands to the Web, and their eares to hir talke' (pp. 155, 162). The 'endlesse web' of cloth (p. 233), whose ravelling and unravelling makes time stand still and seems able to go on forever, becomes in effect a metaphor for the generation of a potentially limitless thread of female story.³⁹

In fact the word 'text' derives from the Latin word for weaving, *texere*; and further classical myths present women who literally wove narratives, such as Philomel and Arachne.⁴⁰ Their stories combine positive and negative aspects of spinning or weaving metaphors for female storytelling. Philomel was able to tell the truth about her rape, even though her tongue had been cut out, by depicting it on cloth; female weaving is thereby represented as equivalent to a female voice, and as a vivid means of communication. Arachne defeated Minerva in a weaving contest by her depiction of the many affairs of the gods, associating female storytelling with the capacity to draw upon an abundant fund of story. The idea of making an intricate narrative fabric from a thread also suggests skill in plotting. On the other hand, though, thread connotes linearity and a tendency to run on and on, such that the metaphor can represent women's narration as the undirected, unlimited and unthinking flow of a 'natural' facility. This is emphasised by Minerva's punishment of Arachne: she metamorphoses her into a spider, an image which does invoke the intricate structure of a web but also reduces spinning, and the female narrative for which it stands, to the status of a spontaneous bodily emission. Webs could also have sinister associations with the weaving of magic, an occult feminine art.⁴¹

The idea that women were especially liable to tell idle and foolish tales was well established by the sixteenth century and was already described in the phrase 'an old wives' tale'. In *Amadis de Gaule*, the heroine Oriana, on being parted from her newborn baby, fears that his wetnurse might 'sit gossiping with her neighbours, telling vaine tales and fruitlesse fables'.⁴² In Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, the protagonist scoffs at Mephistopheles's talk of hell and damnation with the words 'Tush, these are trifles and mere old wives' tales'.⁴³ Alinda in Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynd* refers to foolish popular assumptions as 'but old wives' tales'.⁴⁴

George Peele's play *The Old Wives' Tale* (c.1593) is, just as its title suggests, grounded upon this idea of the fantastical women's story.

Three pages named Antic, Fantastic and Frolic who are lost in a wood are taken in by a smith and his wife, Madge, whom they address as 'gammer'. They entreat her to tell them a story:

ANTIC Methinks, gammer, a merry winter's tale would drive away the time trimly. Come, I am sure you are not without a score.

FANTASTIC I'faith, gammer, a tale of an hour long were as good as an hour's sleep.

FROLIC Look you, gammer, of the giant and the king's daughter, and I know not what. I have seen the day, when I was a little one, you might have drawn me a mile after you with such a discourse.⁴⁵

Madge accedes to their request with the words 'So I am content to drive away the time with an old wives' winter's tale' (lines 98–9), accepting their evaluation of her story as merely a little better than doing nothing. However, she puts up some slight resistance to their accompanying evaluation of it as equivalent to a sleep: she asks 'that you will say hum and ha to my tale, so shall I know you are awake' (lines 110–11). Her story begins: 'Once upon a time there was a king or a lord or a duke that had a fair daughter, the fairest that ever was; as white as snow and as red as blood; and once upon a time his daughter was stolen away, and he sent all his men to seek out his daughter . . .' (lines 113–17). Madge narrates in this style for a while, then the characters appear on stage to act out the tale, but with periodic interruptions from the pages and Madge to remind us of the oral narrative frame of teller and audience.

Peele achieves dramatic evocation of the oral tradition in several ways. First, the interruption of the narrative by questions from the pages and explanations by Madge depicts the audience participation characteristic of a tale told 'live' and in a circle. Secondly, Madge is shown actively making choices between formulaic motifs which she puts together to construct a plot. The motifs are common to both fairy-tale and printed literary romance, like the beautiful princess, the lost child and the quest. Their familiarity is part of their entertainment value; originality is not a measure of worth in this context. Madge's ongoing selection suggests that she is rummaging in a bottomless chest of such motifs. The indecisions, muddles and loops in her narratorial style also evoke a spontaneous oral delivery: she frequently interrupts herself with phrases like 'O Lord, I quite forgot! . . . O, I forget!' which provide occasions for elaborations and digressions (lines 122–8).

Margaret Spufford has further examples from the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries of women's involvement in various oral traditions like ballad singing and the sharing of bawdy tales and jokes, as well as fairy tales and folk tales.⁴⁶ Such evidence often takes the form of affectionate reminiscences of childhood pleasures, just as Frolic in *The Old Wives' Tale* nostalgically recalls 'when I was a little one'. John Clare (born 1793), for instance, remembered that in his rural childhood 'the old women's memories never failed of tales to smooth out labour; for as every day came, new Giants, Hobgoblins and Fairies was ready to pass it away'.⁴⁷

These depictions and recollections are no doubt partly a reflection of real life: since women were less educated and literate than men, their storytelling was likely to take oral forms and to be relatively 'foolish'. Equally, it was usually women who looked after children, and who would therefore seek to occupy them with stories; and the boring yet often communal nature of women's tasks like weaving and spinning would lend themselves to simultaneous storytelling. All the same, I think we can surmise that the association between women (especially old women) and oral fantastical stories became an entrenched cultural construction for several other reasons. First, it might be called a fantasy of maternal origin, for the following reasons. The combination in fairy tales of simplicity, familiarity and fantasy means that they are readily identified with a vaguely remembered past, a primitive time of beginnings, something which can be sunk back into comfortably but from which the individual must move on; all of these qualities make them readily identifiable with a child's relationship with its mother. Secondly, the idea of these stories as unstructured, boundless and indeed oral, conceptualises them almost like a biological flow – something which just pours out; and women have historically been identified with the fluxes of the body, especially mothers who personify bodily sources of production. Thirdly, we can see the association of fantastic stories with women as an example of the kinds of parallel binary oppositions which have historically configured patriarchal culture.⁴⁸ Even before the advent of print, oral culture was the culture of the unlearned and was therefore 'low': the hierarchical oppositions learned/unlearned and high/low map onto the further hierarchical opposition male/female.

Moreover, an entrenched idea of women as purveyors of recreational narrative can also be traced through to 'high' culture and printed literature. The participation of women in group tale-telling was central to several influential courtly models for Elizabethan

fictions, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349–51), in which seven young ladies and three young men divert each other with stories while on a pastoral retreat from plague-ridden Florence; or Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (*The Courtier*, 1528) a dialogue presided over by the Duchess of Urbino in which women contribute equally with men to the game of *questioni d'amore*, or questions of love. In the vernacular, the *Canterbury Tales* showed female narrators among the male ones. What is significant about these examples too is that they show women as deliverers of oral, not written, narratives; and the purposes of those narratives are to fill in idle time, implying their entertaining qualities, but also, crucially, associating them with the idleness for which they substitute. All sorts of sources and influences, then, showed women as storytellers in such a way as to connect them with stories which were diverting but also foolish and pointless, and this connection was in turn invoked in male fiction-authors' characterisations of their works as stories for women.

'WOMAN' AS SIGN

Various feminist critics have shown over recent years how texts which appear to be about women, or addressed to women, do not necessarily give us documentary evidence of the nature of women's lives. Lisa Jardine's 1983 book, *Still Harping on Daughters*, for instance, challenged the assumptions of earlier feminist critics that the prominent and active heroines of Shakespeare and his contemporaries could be regarded as evidence of a Renaissance emancipation of women. Instead she argued that:

the strong interest in women shown by Elizabethan and Jacobean drama does not in fact reflect newly improved social conditions, and greater possibility for women, but rather is related to the patriarchy's unexpressed worry about the great social changes which characterise the period – worries which could be made conveniently concrete in the voluminous and endemic debates about 'the woman question'.⁴⁹

Women were symbols of the property and power held and exchanged by men, whether as daughters deployed in marriage alliances, or as wives and mothers whose chastity ensured the perpetuation of the name and estate of the male head of the family. Expressed anxieties about women who pursued their own wills and sexual desires, and about the difficulty of detecting their 'impurity',

were therefore homologous with anxieties about the instability of male economic and social status and of *masculine* identity.

A number of other critics, including Nancy J. Vickers, Linda Woodbridge, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Patricia Parker, have drawn attention to ways in which Renaissance texts which appear to be about women may tell us more about masculine anxieties.⁵⁰ Texts which use women as their subject matter may do so in order to display masculine rhetorical prowess in working variations on a conventional theme, to construct a relationship of what Sedgwick calls 'homosocial exchange' between male author and male reader, and to define a masculine subject position in opposition to the feminine other. For instance, Vickers shows how in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* the heroine is described in terms of 'fragmentation and reification', such that, in short, 'this text explicitly dedicated to the celebration of a woman' ultimately provokes the question 'Is there a woman in this text?'.⁵¹ Although 'woman' as sign is endemic in Renaissance texts, this may be to the exclusion of women as beings with their own subjectivities.

This critical attention to 'woman' as sign has many kinds of relevance to Renaissance romance. Parker shows how the expansiveness and digressiveness of romance narrative, and the pleasurable distraction from duty which it represented, were associated with the lability and seductiveness of the female body. This was expressed metaphorically in attacks on romance by writers like Roger Ascham and Stephen Gosson, who described Italianate fictions as full of 'the enchantments of Circe';⁵² and was also a shaping concept within romance narratives, as evil but alluring enchantresses like Spenser's Acrasia deflected virtuous knights from their quests, thereby extending and diffusing the narrative.⁵³ Wendy Wall, in her study of the construction of the role of author during the Elizabethan expansion of print culture, finds that writers contending with the 'stigma of print' and striving to legitimate publication often metaphorically feminised the text as a means of asserting their masculine authority. We have seen how the language of romance prefaces feminised and eroticised the text; Wall explores in detail how the relations of author, and reader, to the text were mediated in 'a gendered and sexualised language – replete with figures of courtly love, cross-dressing, voyeurism, and female desire'.⁵⁴ Meanwhile Lorna Hutson offers a sophisticated analysis of the new 'economies of friendship' between men which developed in the sixteenth

century's post-feudal age of humanism, commerce, careerism and print culture, and of the ways in which they crucially depended upon 'fictions of women'. She suggests that Elizabethan fiction

is primarily concerned with the emergence of textual communication as the new medium in which manhood is to be tried . . . its preoccupation with lengthy speeches of courtship made to women, rather than lengthy descriptions of combats between men, may have less to do with the anticipated pleasure of women readers than with the displacement of masculine agency from prowess to persuasion.⁵⁵

All these recent contributions to feminist critical debate encourage us to look at women in Renaissance texts less as mirror-images of women in real life than as figures who stand for something metaphorically, and are being used for some rhetorical and ideological purpose. Hence neither addresses to women romance-readers, nor moralistic or satirical characterisations of women as romance-readers, constitute proof that the female reader of romances had a material existence. In fact it would be possible to argue that the female audience addressed in romance dedications and narrative asides was a phenomenon entirely imagined in the texts and projected by the authors, with no real existence at all.

This would be a pretty depressing conclusion. In general, the kinds of feminist criticism which attend illuminatingly to 'woman' as cultural sign can sometimes have the simultaneous gloomy effect of returning real women to invisibility and re-erasing female action from the historical scene. We have hardly any women authors of romance in the Renaissance; to follow through these kinds of arguments to their furthest extents would be to leave us hardly any female readers either. In terms of the narrative or dramatic content of texts, it can be bleak to learn that what look like stories of women making their own choices in love are less about female agency than about the operations of masculine persuasive power. In terms of the readership of romance, it would be disheartening to think that no women disobeyed the prohibitions of moralists and indulged in the private and *risqué* pleasures of romance-reading, and influenced the fiction market in the process.

Of course, the fact that we would like to think that Renaissance women read romances is by no means legitimate grounds for asserting that they did so. However, evidence for a case that *no* Elizabethan women read romances is ultimately no more substantial than the evidence that numbers of them did read them. Indeed, it is

counter-intuitive to argue that there was no female romance-readership at all: the fact that male authors could refer to a female readership as a recognisable phenomenon suggests that it did exist on some scale, even if they exaggerated it; and the established female romance-readership of the mid seventeenth century must have had its origins somewhere. I suggest that we attempt to sustain a sense that textual material does have some extratextual reference, while simultaneously paying heed to the literary (as opposed to literal) nature of textual evidence.

Lori Humphrey Newcomb's study of the reading history of Robert Greene's *Pandosto* is helpful in mapping out a middle course between ideas of the maidservant romance-reader as either a real person or a complete fiction.⁵⁶ She cites the edition of Overbury's *Characters* quoted above, in which a chambermaid's reading of Greene and *The Mirror of Knighthood* makes her yearn to be a lady errant. Newcomb points out that these works would have been too expensive for a servant; *Pandosto* became no cheaper over the period from 1585 to 1615 ('The Romance of Service', p. 128). The maid was most likely to have obtained a copy by borrowing it from her mistress. The satire therefore expresses anxieties about both the extension of literacy and new, less stable structures of service based less on feudal loyalty than social mobility and economic aspiration. Hence the chambermaid's longings for greater scope are ridiculed in order to rewrite 'the legitimate ambitions that induced the young to go into service as the foolish fantasies of an oversexed and overreaching female' (p. 127). The designation of certain cultural materials as degraded and the assignation of them to women and servant readers attempted to reinforce wavering social boundaries (p. 123). Thus the maidservant romance-reader could be simultaneously a real phenomenon *and* an ideologically loaded literary construction.

Piecing together all the diverse evidence gathered in the present chapter, it seems plausible to surmise that some female romance-readership did exist in the Elizabethan period. At the same time, though, ideas of the profusion of women romance-readers, and of their frivolity and credulity as readers, are exaggerations and caricatures with clear rhetorical purposes, probably constructed by male authors implicitly addressing a male audience.