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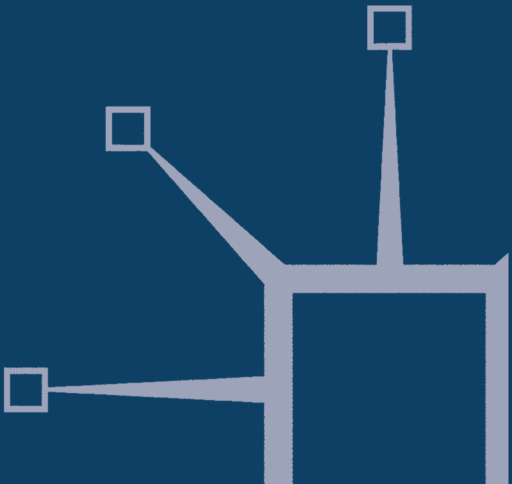
Representing Women and Female Desire from Arcadia to Jane Eyre

Marea Mitchell and Dianne Osland



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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-1-4039-4331-6

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First published 2005 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-349-52200-2 ISBN 978-0-230-50437-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230504370

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Mitchell, Marea, 1959–
Representing women and female desire from Arcadia to Jane Eyre / Marea Mitchell and Dianne Osland
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English literature–History and criticism. 2. Women in literature. 3. Austen, Jane, 1775–1817–Characters–Women. 4. Sidney, Philip, Sir, 1554–1586. Arcadia. 5. Women and literature–Great Britain. 6. Desire in literature. I. Osland, Dianne, 1950– II. Title.

PR151.W6M57 2005
820.9′3522–dc22 2005047465

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

for our mothers
Marjorie and Lorna

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Acknowledgements

We are pleased to acknowledge the assistance of all the people and institutions who have helped us with this book. First, we thank Macquarie University and The University of Newcastle for research grants and study leave that have enabled extensive periods of study. In particular we thank the Department of English and the Literature and Cultural History Group at Macquarie, and the Department of English and the School of Language and Media at Newcastle. Students and staff at various seminars in Newcastle, Sydney, Kalamazoo, Leeds, and Macquarie have provided helpful stimulation and provoked further thought in a number of areas. Libraries in London, Canberra, Sydney, Newcastle, and Oxford have provided various kinds of support, as have document supply centres, particularly at Newcastle and Macquarie universities. Brigid Rooney provided much needed research assistance at the beginning of this project.

In particular we thank colleagues and friends who have helped and encouraged us, including Virginia Blain, A. D. Cousins, Hugh Craig, Peter Goodall, Wayne McKenna, Ros Smith, and John Stephens. We are also especially indebted to the readers at Palgrave Macmillan who persisted in pushing us to work through our ideas more rigorously – this book is better for their persistence and we thank them for it. Thanks to Emily Rosser for starting off with this book and to Paula Kennedy for seeing it through.

Beyond all other help we acknowledge the love and support of our families, for their patience, their interest, for being there, and sometimes for not being there, for giving us the space to get together and get on with it. Thanks and love to the Mitchell tribe and to Robert Mackie, and to Grant, Luke and Anna Osland.

Introduction

Representing women and female desire

> A miller had wooed abundance of girls, and did lie with them, upon which he refused to marry them. But one girl he did solicit very much, but all would not do. Then he married her, and told her on the marriage-night, if she would have let him do as the rest did he would never have had her.
>
> 'By my troth, I thought so', says she, 'for I was served so by half a dozen before.'[1]

This seventeenth-century jest calls into play common assumptions about the conventions of sexual relations between men and women. These conventions, with which we are all familiar, dictate that it is men's role in courtship to solicit and women's to resist, but the jest also shows that there is still ample room to manoeuvre, and ample opportunity for women in particular to intervene in order, as Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford observe, 'to influence the courtship process and promote their own interests.'[2] The jest illustrates the way in which female desire can take advantage of the constraints against it: chastity, for example, is not just a moral imperative but a renewable resource that can be strategically deployed. Overtly acknowledged in the plebeian world of the jest, this understanding of the uses of the feminine code covertly informs many of the representations of literary heroines with which we deal in this investigation of the representation of women and female desire from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1593) to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

In exploring this broad range of material, our intention is to make a series of local and strategic engagements with texts that focus on female desire and agency.[3] Through these engagements our hope is to contribute to the debates concerning women's agency from the late sixteenth century through to the mid-nineteenth century, specifically as they relate to the representation of female desire not simply as a predatory instinct that the 'good woman' ought to suppress but as an inevitable complication of an interest in female subjectivity. Jonathan Goldberg usefully argues that the description of female desire in 'stigmatized ways' resulted in scholarship that, in defending women against such imputations, asserted the decorum and propriety of women in ways that were ultimately constraining.[4] Our focus is on women who directly and indirectly articulate their own desires and tackle the problems of stigmatization associated with achieving those desires, who demonstrate complex understandings of what is at stake in the risky business of female agency. From Sidney's Pamela to Brontë's Jane Eyre, we are interested in the continuing fascination with women who are more than passive ideal types or demonized sexual aggressors.

One of our interests, then, is in exploring the ways that selected texts demonstrate an awareness of the difficulties for women in expressing their desires. Far from being 'natural', essential or unproblematically given, the experience of being female is 'constituted', as Judith Butler puts it, 'through discursively constrained performative acts.'[5] The performance of gender, Butler argues, 'must be understood not as a singular or deliberative "act", but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.'[6] What has often been seen as an 'origin and cause' of identity categories should in fact be seen as 'the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin'.[7] In seeking to identify the ways that writers have presented the tensions between what women might want and how they are supposed to behave we have an interest in exposing 'the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity' that Butler identifies with Marxism.[8] From another perspective we are also interested in beginning to explore, as Louis Montrose argues, how fictional texts are 'inextricably though complexly linked to other social discourses, practices and institutions', and are 'engaged in shaping the modalities of social reality and in accommodating their writers, performers, readers, and audiences to multiple and shifting positions within the world that they themselves both constitute and inhabit.'[9] While conduct books, for example, have advocated codes of behaviour for women that are prescriptive and constraining, the effectiveness of these prescriptions is questioned by the representation of women in fiction and the practice of real women, including women writers. We are interested in the stories that women tell about themselves in fictional texts, and the emphasis that they give to the work required to be a successful female protagonist. As Dennis Kay argues, the boundaries between fiction and actuality are less stable and clear-cut than either fiction or didactic material might suggest. Throughout this book we explore the 'consequences of the permeability of literary discourse to other modes of discursive practice'[10] and connect particular literary texts with some of the circumstances of their production.

In part we are also engaging with recent debates that challenge received notions of female behaviour from the late sixteenth century onwards. While Suzanne W. Hull's *Chaste, Silent and Obedient* was very important in focussing attention on the kinds of books being written for women and in identifying the concern with, or anxiety about, female behaviour in terms that valued the 'chaste, silent, and obedient' ideal, challenges to this stereotype have come from two directions.[11] First, recent work has questioned the pervasiveness and meaning of certain stereotypes associated with women, such as silence and passivity, arguing that these characteristics are less uniformly understood and applied than has been assumed. Rather than inevitably denoting passive obedience, for example, silence could also operate as a powerful rhetoric in itself. So Christine Luckyj provides suggestive readings of early modern texts that emphasize women's use of dominant norms for their own purposes, assuming silence for specific ends, not as passive self-effacement, but as an assertion of a non-compliant will.[12] Second, a number of critics have suggested that, rather than reading the increase in the number of conduct books written for women (predominantly by men) as evidence of escalating attempts to control and constrain female behaviour, it is also possible to read them as evidence of the recognition of the significance of women's roles and abilities. As Michael R. Best argues, texts like Gervase Markham's *The English Housewife* (1615) demonstrated that 'the housewife's role is far from being passive and subservient', and that the 'importance of the wife in the domestic economy can scarcely be exaggerated.'[13] Markham's own literary career suggests a further interest that we have in questioning the sharp distinctions often made between conduct books and fictional or recreational writing.[14] While Markham wrote manuals of advice on a wide variety of issues, his continuation of Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1607–13), as we explore in Chapter 3, offers compelling examples of an interest in the ways that women might act upon their own initiatives without incurring social condemnation. The interest in female agency that can be inferred from the plethora of conduct books can also be seen in the number of romances that, far from assuming 'chaste, silent, and obedient' heroines, portray women with minds of their own positively engaging with circumstances less than propitious.

We can see here the development of what Frank Whigham describes as 'the rise to theoretical consciousness of the reification of the subject insofar as such behaviour involved "the effacement of the traces of production on the [subject]."'[15] By focusing on female characters who clearly have designs and wills of their own we are also telling the story of how female subjectivity is constructed or made, or, in Whigham's terms, how female identity is built on 'achieved rather than ascribed characteristics'.[16] From this perspective our study suggests that a longitudinal analysis such as we attempt here reveals the way that female behaviour, often idealized as natural or essential, or at the very least artless, has nevertheless long been understood as carefully and sometimes painfully worked at. Again, as Whigham suggests, following Kenneth Burke, what can be seen here is 'the character of the ordinary lived human experience of performance, by noting the obverse of the heroic potential – the performative life as predicament'.[17] Femininity that seems to consist of certain inherent and natural characteristics can be seen, then, as the product of labour and conflict, particularly in relation to the ideological constraints that govern gendered behaviour.

Ideologies of womanhood

The period with which we are dealing witnessed what Thomas Laqueur describes in *Making Sex: The Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* as the change from a one-sex to a two-sex model of female physiology, and with this change the relocation of the explanatory model of gender difference from scripture to nature. In the one-sex model – developed from the humoral theories of Aristotle and Galen but still influential through to the seventeenth century – the difference between men and women was understood, as Robert Shoemaker notes, as essentially hierarchical rather than oppositional: women were a less perfect version of men, their reproductive organs having failed to emerge externally because, according to humoral theory, the cooler and moister composition of their bodies failed to generate enough dry heat and their genitalia remained inverted inside their bodies, resulting in 'an innate desire to achieve perfection by coupling with men.'[18] It was woman who was considered the more lustful of the two sexes: 'because men had what women lacked, women were thought to have a fundamental desire to copulate with men and obtain their hot, dry semen'.[19] Because of their cooler, moister constitution, women were also thought to lack the heat necessary to drive blood to the head, which resulted in them being governed, not by the brain but by the uterus, making them peculiarly susceptible to 'hysteria, loquaciousness, lust, and irrational behaviour.'[20] In any argument from this perspective, all roads led back to Eve.

Between the seventeenth century and early nineteenth century, however, the one-sex model gradually gave way to the two-sex model, in which women's bodies were seen as not so much inherently imperfect as different – no less prone, perhaps, to weaknesses of intellect and temper, but appropriately constituted for the role women were ordained to fulfil. But they were still prey, not now to the uterus, the 'animal within',[21] but to their nerve endings, which made them vulnerable to sensation and less rational than men, though also, increasingly throughout the eighteenth century, more delicately attuned to the softer promptings of the moral sensibility. As Shoemaker observes, they were also, increasingly, understood to be 'sexually passive, even passionless', and a woman's sexual pleasure was no longer deemed essential to conception. By the mid-eighteenth century conduct books no longer dwelt on the dangers of female lust,[22] and by the end of the century, as Anthony Fletcher notes, 'the traditional defence in rape cases, that if pregnancy followed the woman must have enjoyed the sexual act, was no longer seen as valid.'[23] Mid-century, in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Lovelace could still allow himself to exalt in the possibility that Clarissa might be pregnant after he has raped her, with all that might imply about the spuriousness of her virtuous resistance; by the beginning of the nineteenth century a woman's 'nerves' had already become, for Mr Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* at least, comic familiars:

> 'Mr. Bennet … You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves'.
>
> 'You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least'.[24]

Parallel to the change in the understanding of women's biological makeup was a change in the understanding of gender difference reflected in the advice literature directed at regulating female behaviour. While women were regarded as inherently sexually voracious, driven by bodily desires that their inferior rational powers struggled to control, advice literature emphasized, as Fletcher argues, prohibitions that would establish a system of behavioural defences, chief amongst these being 'the scriptural case for obedience which men saw as the basic solution to women's wiles and weakness.' From the Restoration onwards, however, Fletcher identifies a more positive ideology of womanhood, and with it a steadily growing stream of advice literature that assumed women could be educated to 'internalise the prescriptions which men seek to impose', rather than simply subordinating themselves to patriarchal control.[25] Fletcher suggests that initial signs of this more positive attitude – and of systematic attempts at modern gender construction – can be seen in 1631 with the publication of Richard Brathwait's *English Gentlewoman* (discussed here in Chapter 3), which, although still founded on the 'bedrock' of scripture, is also 'tinged with the secular ideological emphasis' that was to characterize the new generation of conduct books directed specifically at women, most notably from Richard Allestree's *The Ladies Calling* (1673) and the Marquis of Halifax's *Advice to a Daughter* (1688) to James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) and John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774).[26]

The virtue informing the construction of womanhood in all these works is modesty – a modesty that in its broadest sense is no different from the moderation earlier enjoined on women in subjugating themselves to masculine authority as a 'due measure' of their inferior status, but increasingly understood, or at least increasingly discussed, more narrowly as a personal delicacy that prompts a woman to shrink from notice or self-assertion. In the spread of advice literature over the 200 hundred years from 1650 to 1850, there is no steady progress from the misogynistic tradition to 'the cult of womanhood' that Mary LeGates argues had emerged by the end of the eighteenth century, though there are identifiable milestones that, in retrospect, allow us to see how it is possible to get from an image of woman as lustful, loquacious, and wilful to one that is naturally rather than prescriptively chaste, silent and obedient. From subjugation to external authority, to a capacity for self-discipline (where modesty rests on the moderation of self), to a natural reticence or 'a certain agreeable fear in all [a woman] enters upon',[27] to a delicacy of thought and feeling deriving from the heightened sensitivity of finer nerves, to an instinctive recoil from sexuality – her own or others' – are all small enough steps in the direction of the moral refinement and saintliness of the nineteenth century ideal of womanhood to be accounted for in generational change. But one notion of femininity was not simply replaced or modified by another; rather, in the social construction of womanhood, beliefs seem to have accumulated in layers, with faultlines never far below the surface that threaten to expose more misogynistic preconceptions.

'A *ticklish* Foundation' for virtue

The major fault-lines in the more positive constructions of femininity can be found in contradictory accounts of a modesty that is understood as instinctive yet in need of vigilant supervision. As Ruth Yeazell observes in *Fictions of Modesty*, from the late seventeenth century onwards,

> It is a commonplace of the advice literature that women's modesty is instinctive, but the very existence of the literature testifies to the belief that the 'instinct' must be elaborately codified and endlessly discussed: woman's 'natural' modesty must be strenuously cultivated, the argument goes, lest both sexes fall victim to her 'natural' lust. So *The Ladies Calling* pronounced modesty at once 'natural to the sex' and 'the most indispensible requisite of a woman' – and then prescriptively declared that women who lacked the 'instinct' were not truly women at all. ... In the centuries that followed, countless authors of printed advice for middle-class readers exhorted English-women to guard their modesty – even while insisting that true modesty is not conscious of itself and knows nothing of what might violate it.[28]

As a species of self-control, with the underlying meaning of moderation, modesty implies the discretion of temperate judgment – a virtue to be admired in men as well as women, though requiring a rational and measured way of thinking not traditionally (or even currently) associated with female stereotypes. But discretion, or at least the appearance of it, can also be achieved through the adoption of behavioural codes or customs that curb excess – in dress, deportment, conversation, and consumer lifestyle, all of which are targeted in the advice literature, and more specifically directed at women. The surest path to discretion in social situations, however, is a self-control that gives nothing at all away about a person's opinions, regarding either self or others, and that allows the self to intrude as little as possible on another's attention.[29] In this broad sense, without embracing distinctions of gender, a modesty that encompasses both self-effacing humility and public decorum is the cornerstone of social harmony, but for women modesty was more often understood as a sexual rather than a broadly social virtue, and as such more safely understood as a matter of instinct rather than policy. Where powers of judgement are considered weak or unreliable, and where the fear of a voracious sexuality still lingers, a modesty that is sustained by prescribed behaviours and the disguise of personal feelings can conceal a multitude of sins. As Yeazell observes, 'if woman's modesty is not instinctive, then her virtue is built, as Mandeville slyly remarks in his *Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1724), "upon a very *ticklish* Foundation".'[30]

But an instinctive modesty also has its drawbacks, particularly in sexual relations, since it requires that a woman be unconscious of precisely what it is from which she shrinks, which necessarily makes her all the more vulnerable to male offensives. A downright aversion to sexual advances would, of course, be highly inconvenient from the male perspective, and a natural modesty is usually understood more as a barrier that love can penetrate only with some violence to a woman's sense of her personal integrity – the mental equivalent of the hymen, perhaps, an image brought to mind by Gregory's description of the moment when a woman is forced to recognize an attachment, the existence of which she has instinctively suppressed:

> Though a woman has no reason to be ashamed of an attachment to a man of merit, yet nature, whose authority is superior to philosophy, has annexed a sense of shame to it. It is even long before a woman of delicacy dares avow to her own heart that she loves; and when all the subterfuges of ingenuity to conceal it from herself fail, she feels a violence done both to her pride and to her modesty. This, I should imagine, must always be the case where she is not sure of a return to her attachment.[31]

In earlier conceptualizations of modesty, such subterfuges – themselves problematic, as Yeazell points out, because of questions about 'the origin of those ingenious "subterfuges" in a consciousness innocently unaware of the feelings they hide'[32] – are avoided by a modesty that does not admit of love where a woman 'is not sure of a return of her attachment.' Early in the seventeenth century, the truly modest woman found in Brathwait's *English Gentlewoman* is not so much incapable of intemperate or rash desires as diverted from them by a heart already 'pre-occupied' by religion: 'the Sanctuary of her Heart is solely dedicated to her Maker; it can find no roome for an inordinate affection to lodge in'.[33] In the later secular, naturalized modesty, however, there is not simply 'no roome' in the heart of a truly modest woman but no possibility of a love that develops prior to a man's attachment to her, making any love that is not sure of a return 'inordinate' in the older sense of 'disorderly' or 'unlawful'. That, at least, is the theory, though parallel to the ideal promulgated by the advice literature is a more pragmatic caution – and a custom widely assumed less natural than prudent – that is best served by a woman giving nothing away about the state of her heart before she is sure of her man.[34] In the circumstances, with two competing explanations for a woman's silence – one in which she says nothing about her feelings and the other in which she has nothing to say – the safest option would seem for a woman to remain sublimely unconscious of as much going on around her as possible, and as Yeazell observes, 'the pattern young lady of the conduct books does tend to exhibit an increasing blankness of mind.'[35]

It is hard to imagine such 'blankness of mind' as a condition to which real young ladies might aspire, and we have no way of knowing, of course, what women of this period privately thought of the advice that had begun to flood the market: whether, for example, as with Lydia in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, conduct books were something from which to flee; whether, as with Henry Fielding's Shamela, they were merely for show;[36] or whether, as with Richardson's Pamela in her response to Mr B's 48 injunctions on how to be a good wife, they were the occasion of silent bristling. In recent decades the trend in social history has been to question the extent to which the advice literature provides an insight into the way in which women themselves understood what it was to be a woman. Fletcher, for example, acknowledges the impact of Lyndal Roper's argument in *Oedipus and the Devil* that when we work from advice literature, mainly written by men, 'gender history threatens to become a reinterpretation of the thought of powerful thinkers' that ignores 'individuals' capacities to make their own meanings.' Fletcher concedes that 'women may have understood in their own consciousness and through their own feelings much about being a woman of which the male ideology took no account.'[37] In examining court records for evidence of the workings of patriarchy, he continues:

> The problem, in considering how the female honour code worked to sustain early modern patriarchy, is that we can only work with

> women's recorded words and actions. We are deaf to what was really going on in their minds. What is clear is that we can find women corroborating male constructions of them in legal situations in a manner which was often more manipulative than passive. There was nothing women could do in this society to resist the way men insisted upon reading them, but there was much they could do about using those readings to their own advantage.[38]

Whatever the case in the society of this period, at least in the literature there was much that women *could* do to resist the way men read them. Writers consistently portrayed women who were prepared to take the initiative in the amatory adventures in which they were almost wholly engaged, but without descending into the voracious and predatory sexuality of the misogynistic tradition. The female characters with whom we are mainly concerned in this study are not prepared to sacrifice their virtue as conventionally defined, though neither do they unquestioningly conform to the prescriptive ideal. As Ingrid Tague argues, there were countless ways 'in which women could ignore, accept, or even exploit ideals of feminine behavior depending on their particular circumstances, often in ways quite different from the intentions of the theorists who propagated those ideals.'[39] But first, in fiction at least, they needed strategies for circumventing one aspect of the feminine ideal that severely limits their capacity to take part in a story at all: the erasure of will.

The feminine ideal and female agency: the case of *Arcadia*

When Sidney in *Arcadia* describes the princess Philoclea as having 'obediently lived under her parents' behests, without framing out of her own will the forechoosing of any thing',[40] he is clearly describing an ideal – the exemplary daughter who is not simply obedient but essentially will-less because harbouring no unsatisfied desires – but he is also describing a state of affairs that cannot last if Philoclea is to have much of a part in this story. The ingenuity with which Sidney manages to cultivate unsatisfied desires in Philoclea without implicating a delinquent will (discussed later in this study) testifies both to the intransigence of the ideal and to the intractability of the obstacle that needs to be overcome before a heroine can take charge of a plot. A heroine needs to want something, and to be prepared to pursue it, or else the story will go nowhere. Yet, between being a daughter living obediently under her parents' behests and becoming a wife whose desires are subject to her husband's will,[41] there is not much room to move unless the period in which the heroine is 'between' responsible sets of adults can be protracted. Hence the propensity for romance heroines to be orphaned, shipwrecked, abducted, or abandoned. On the one hand, as an unprotected female, she is exposed to adventure – as Deborah Ross notes, '"adventure" literally denotes events that come to one from without'[42] – and, on the other hand, she is more or less obliged to exercise her will, even if only to find a safe haven.

One of the significant differences noted by Charlotte Morgan between *Arcadia* and the early Greek 'romances' with which not only *Arcadia* but also much seventeenth-century romance has a good deal in common is 'the shifting of the interest forward from the adventures ensuing on the elopement … to those concerned with the wooing of the heroine.'[43] One effect of this is also to shift interest to the mind of the woman wooed, and this is one reason we start this study with *Arcadia*: for all that its heroes and heroines represent ideals, individual character matters, as the reason for action, while it tends not to matter in much other fiction of the period.[44] Another reason for beginning with *Arcadia* – and a more contentious one – is that it exemplifies a particular strain of romance in English fiction, and an accompanying set of conventions, that has persisted to the present day. In current discussions of romance, particularly in terms of its relation to the novel, *Arcadia* tends to be ignored, despite the fact that it is 'often reckoned to have been the "best loved" or "most admired" work of English prose fiction in the seventeenth century'.[45] Its aristocratic values, political allusiveness, and rhetorical exuberance certainly distance it from the early novel, though in this particular study we are more interested in conventions that persist *despite* generic discontinuities. Romance is, moreover, a term that can be so loosely defined as to include almost any fictional narrative or so tightly defined as to exclude any work not central to a particular argument.

Defining romance

The most common problem in talking about romance, as Patricia Parker notes, 'has always been the need to limit the way in which the term is applied.' She herself uses the term neither as 'fixed generic prescription nor as abstract transhistorical category' but as 'an organizing principle' for the interpretation of a poetic form stretching from Ariosto to Mallarmé,[46] another category that we could add to Ian

Duncan's list of recent usages in *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel*:

> In the last fifty years [romance] has signified a courtly or chivalric fiction of the late Middle Ages, a fanciful or erotic or sentimental enhancement of a situation or event, any unlikely story, a love affair, highly conventionalized mass-marketed novels read by women, a narrative with a quest in it, four of the last plays of Shakespeare, the American novels of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, and a super-genre containing all fictional forms and figures that is ultimately the form and figure of a transcendental human imagination. In the first half of the eighteenth century romance meant any prose fiction in the vernacular tongue, particularly those associated with 'the last age', and more particularly those French *romans héroïques* or *romans à longue haleine*, filled with dilemmas of love and honour and adorned with improbable exploits, written to amuse the *salons* of the age of Louis XIV.[47]

Going back beyond the eighteenth century, 'romance' originally distinguished works in the vernacular (the romance languages) from works in Latin, the language of scholarship, the term signalling the influence of a more 'popular', lay or courtly audience seeking entertainment or moral guidance rather than erudition, and to which the works of writers such as Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France were directed in twelfth-century France. In English narrative, romance has a long and distinguished history from the thirteenth through to the sixteenth century, but in the seventeenth century it began to be overshadowed by the popularity of French heroic romance, at least in the minds of the contemporary literary establishment (though it is difficult to tell how much of the impact of this dangerous French and predominately female folly was indeed in the mind of native English men of letters). Some general characteristics of romance remained the same between the thirteenth and the seventeenth century: romances addressed the courtly ideals of the audience to which they were largely directed; they focused on the exploits, chivalric and amorous, of well-born, idealized heroes and heroines; they were set in geographically remote locations in historically remote ages; and they indulged a taste for the marvellous. French heroic romance – most notably the works of Madeleine de Scudéry and La Calprenède – formalized some of the conventions of narrative style under the two rules of *vraisemblance* and *bienséance*, the former having more to do with historical consistency (loosely interpreted) than with probability (Madeleine de Scudéry's *Clelia*, for example, manages a flood *and* an earthquake within the first two pages of its 30 volumes), [48] and the latter concerned with the moral and social decorum appropriate to the *salon* culture within which the romances were written. In debates about the origins of the English novel, French heroic romance and the rules by which it is governed figure prominently in arguments for rupture rather than continuity in the emergence of what eighteenth-century writers themselves understood as a new species of fiction, though it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the term 'novel' was consistently applied to the new form rather than to works that could be dismissed in the same breath with 'romance'.[49] There is good reason for singling out French heroic romance as, in Ros Ballaster's words, the 'hegemonic form' that the novel displaced,[50] since for eighteenth-century theorists it was what made 'romance' synonymous with wanton fancy and that came to represent everything the novel was not – though, in exploring the difference between novel and romance, the focus on heroic romance makes more sense from the eighteenth century looking back than from the sixteenth century looking forward.

In exploring this difference, primarily through the contrast with heroic romance, Lennard Davis is the most uncompromising of the 'rupture' theorists, arguing in *Factual Fictions* that 'the romance is not usefully seen as a forebear of, a relative of, or an influence on the novel',[51] and like J. Paul Hunter and Michael McKeon, he seeks causes for the emergence of a generically distinct form that, rather than simply growing out of romance, has its roots in the multiplicity of uses – non-literary more so than literary – to which narrative could be put in the early eighteenth century and in the social changes such narratives reflected and served.[52] This distinction – or, as Lennard Davis would have it, the 'discursive chasm' – between novel and romance is the keystone of much recent criticism that has rightly challenged simplistic post hoc arguments about continuities and influences, though the extent of the 'chasm' very much depends on the way romance is defined and the distance from which the critic is coming. The gap that opens up between romance and novel is nowhere wider, for example, than between French heroic romance and the novels of Daniel Defoe; in some respects, however, it is less imposing between *Arcadia* and the novels of Richardson or even Fielding, particularly when we take into account the gap that already exists between *Arcadia* and other works over a period of 500 years that we are also prepared to call romance.

This is not to argue that generic distinctions are irrelevant or can be ignored – even if, as critics such as Margaret Doody and Philip Stewart argue, the concern to separate novel from romance is a conspicuously English affair, most other European languages not even distinguishing them by name[53] (a fact acknowledged by Davis when he comments that 'the French word *roman* can be translated as either "romance" or "novel" – a confusing inconvenience given our interest in distinguishing the two'[54]). A study such as the one in which we are engaged, spanning material from the sixteenth through to the mid-nineteenth century, will inevitably be seen to be participating in the debate about the origins of the novel and its relation to romance, simply by virtue of the assumption that it makes sense to talk about this 250 years of fiction as if the conventions of romance and novel addressed comparable social and ideological issues in the representation of women. This is not, however, an argument about the origins of the novel or the validity of generic boundaries, and we acknowledge that generic expectations profoundly affect an understanding of the parameters of acceptable and unacceptable conduct. But our argument does assume that the dynamics of narrative also impose certain kinds of demands on characters and enable certain kinds of strategies that are no respecters of genre.

A degree of permeability in generic boundaries is also inevitable if the genres are defined broadly enough. Stewart, for example, defines romance primarily in terms of its tendency towards idealization, which is a characteristic, he suggests, of all fiction, though more obvious in some forms than in others:

> Any reader anticipating a story encounters an intrinsic measure of idealization conferred upon characters and action by the medium itself; it is reinforced by the necessary selectivity of representation. Incapable of enacting all the motions of a living creature, a character is always to some extent a schematic creation, in which only a finite number of attributes can be stressed. In this sense, fiction is always, however supposedly mimetic, bigger than life. … Some novels are more romantic than others, in that the degree of idealization is more conspicuous, and there are romantic fictions that are not novels; nonetheless, it may be misleading to set up the two terms as evident antonyms.[55]

The idealization of the heroes and heroines of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century romance is certainly more conspicuous than the idealization of the heroes and heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, though, in the selection of character traits that the latter exhibit, an ideal of sorts certainly emerges, and in the case of Jane Eyre the fact that she is not a beauty only reinforces the difference in the criteria that support that ideal, as does Richardson's Pamela's humble origins. The idealization of both types of heroine needs to be understood, moreover, in the context of a more generalized tendency towards idealization in romantic fictions that elevates certain kinds of desires to a realm of experience that transcends common reality, and that 'prove' themselves against the conventional values that they defy (usually in the form of duty to a husband or wife, or a father, or a king, or a nation). Most often, such desire takes the form of love, though not exclusively, despite the tendency in common usage today to equate romance with a love story.[56] This kind of idealization also underlies the wish-fulfilment so often disparaged in romance, but is arguably inherent in what Duncan calls 'the essential principle of fiction: its *difference* from a record of "reality", of "everyday life".' In this 'rhetorical' definition of romance, fiction 'is the effect above all of plot, conspicuous as a grammar of formal conventions, that is, a shared cultural order distinct from material and historical contingency. To read a plot – to take part in its work of recognition – is to imagine a transformation of life and its conditions, and not their mere reproduction.'[57]

Selecting the texts

If the term is defined broadly enough, most of the texts we deal with here could be called 'romances' (though some of them we would not want to stop also calling 'novels'). Avid readers of modern popular romance of the Harlequin or Mills and Boon variety, for example, are often pointed in the direction of *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* in histories of the genre, and at least one directs unsuspecting readers to *Pamela*.[58] Our interest, however, is not in identifying generic continuities, but in exploring the shared 'grammar of formal conventions' that establishes courtship plots as 'sites of contest',[59] areas where contradictory expectations about female behaviour are played out.

Confronted with a variety of obstacles, the female protagonists discussed here all try to pursue their interests and desires without tarnishing their reputations. These conflicts and confrontations emerge in the focus on interiority or self-exploration that has been associated with the rise of Protestantism,[60] and Sidney's *Arcadia* is one of the early texts, we argue, to provide women characters with emotions and insights equal to or superior to male counterparts. When Mary Beth Rose argues for the redefinition of heroism from the late sixteenth century such that it privileged 'the capacity to endure [danger] … to resist it and suffer with patience and fortitude',[61] she emphasizes the opportunities this provided for reconsidering female virtue. An emphasis on the private, interior and internal potentially provides women with greater authority than codes that valorise physical courage, strength and public endeavour. Like Rose, Lorna Hutson also suggests that the increased significance of women 'as addressees and subjects' is directly linked to the 'humanistic disparagement' of values associated with chivalric romances and the shift to civil rather than martial forms of social agency.[62] It is also part of our argument here, though, that there are many occasions when women in fiction do more than simply resist danger or temptation but rather actively seek out ways of attaining their ends, and that in this process we see 'the intersection of the female with problematic agency, or agency beset by contradictions and compromise.'[63]

In focusing on texts that raise significant issues about female agency and women's pursuit of their own desires, we have elected to consider texts by men and women writers, though on the understanding that the 'early-modern organisation of sex and gender boundaries', as Alan Sinfield argues, 'was different from ours.'[64] To explore the issue of designing women without considering some of the men who designed female characters (particularly such influential designers as Sidney and Richardson) risks constructing a tradition that isolates women as much as it reifies them, and abstracts them from their cultural and literary contexts. Gender is certainly a factor to be considered in the production of Wroth's *Urania*, as are her class and family, as critics have argued, [65] but gender issues also intersect with social issues in ways that complicate simple binary oppositions between male and female writers. Sidney's position as a male writer, for example, is also inflected by having to negotiate the difficult social and political terrain of life as an ambitious courtier under Elizabeth I. If agency is generally problematic for women, fraught with contradiction and compromise, then this is arguably true for a number of men in Elizabethan England, caught between their status as part of an educated and political elite, and subservient to a female monarch. In acknowledging the 'articulation of women's power'[66] that is a focus of the texts that we have selected, it is also important to us to keep gender in a dynamic with other factors that influence how men and women write about desire in fiction and the stories that they tell. Sidney's *Arcadia,* for example, has long been seen as having particular sympathy for female representation,[67] perhaps partly because of the audience of educated women readers like his sister the Countess of Pembroke, for whom it initially seems to have been intended. It is also likely that the thwarting of his political and social ambitions might have given him a particular interest in the merits of patience and stoic resistance to threatening forces, and in seeing how far a hierarchy 'can be manipulated from below.'[68]

The redefinitions of heroism that arose from humanist and Protestant discourses had particular implications for the development of the female protagonist that can be most clearly seen in texts and incidents that deal explicitly with designing women. We mean by this phrase a particular concern with women who plot or scheme to develop and pursue their desires rather than simply wait for fate to deal them their hand. The scenes we discuss foreground a woman's conscious awareness of her position and the ways that she engages with the possibilities and constraints of that position, as that awareness interacts with shifts in narrative dynamics that can be best understood by exploring works across a broad historical period. Peter Brooks's discussion of 'the female plot' demonstrates one way in which women's designs can be accommodated by narrative. 'The female plot,' he argues, 'takes a more complex stance towards ambition, the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood in resistance to the overt and violating male plots of ambition, a counter-dynamic which, from the prototype of *Clarissa* on to *Jane Eyre* and *To the Lighthouse*, is only superficially passive' and, we suggest, is one that has its origins prior to the nineteenth-century novel that is his main focus.[69] As Hutson argues, however, narrative can also be used 'as a method for the emplotment or reinterpretation of circumstances in the interests of a fortunate end' (p. 96). In this sense, women's designs and plotting can be related to a specific form of prudential activity: 'that is, the constant and unceasing emplotment of present circumstance to prevent future disaster and ensure good fortune.'[70] Reading romance in the broad sense that we mean here, and across generic boundaries, enables an understanding of how plot and character combine in the body of the designing woman.

The material here has been structured so that the texts in the first three chapters grow out of *Arcadia*, while the texts in the last three chapters could all be seen to grow out of *Pamela*, providing us with a broadly chronological structure. While the interests of the study are consistent across the material, the differences between the texts necessarily invite different kinds of treatment, particularly where the earlier