Introduction

> The importance of a new class of readers, composed of women from the middle ranks of society, deserves attention, because the influence of feminine opinion, an influence which has grown continually more powerful in English and American literature, began to be felt in the sixteenth century . . . Since women in general have never subscribed to realism, romance in strange opera lands and love stories with happy endings found favour with the Elizabethans even as with feminine readers today.[1]

So wrote Louis B. Wright in 1935, in his eminent study of Elizabethan popular reading which laid the groundwork for much subsequent scholarship. How true, though, is the story he tells, of a rising Elizabethan female readership craving romance?

In the first place, many others concur that the last quarter of the sixteenth century saw a 'fiction explosion'.[2] Much of that fiction is little known today, although in recent years it has begun to receive more critical attention.[3] It can require some acclimatisation from the modern reader, since it operates not by the familiar principles of the novel, but in the fantastical, non-naturalistic mode designated by the term 'romance'.[4] It tends to be concerned, for instance, with the adventures of elaborately named knights and ladies in exotic lands and/or in periods of distant mythologised history. Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, the source for Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, is a typical example; it tells the story of the King of Bohemia, his daughter Fawnia and her lover Dorastus, Prince of Sicilia, set in some unspecified past age when perplexed rulers were inclined to consult the Oracle at Delphos. Another example is *Amadis de Gaule*, the popular Spanish romance, recounting the chivalric exploits of the eponymous knight and his secret love for Oriana, daughter of an ancient king of Britain.

These fictions usually also involve supernatural interventions, amazing coincidences and twists of fate, amidst a general ambience of the marvellous and wondrous; and their style is highly rhetorical, aiming primarily at the display of prowess in verbal artifice rather than the realistic simulation of natural speech and of psychology which we have come to expect of the novel. In *Pandosto*, for instance, Fawnia, who has been brought up as the daughter of simple shepherds and does not yet know that she is a princess, laments her unworthiness of Dorastus in a far from rustic or uneducated style:

> Unfortunate Fawnia, and therefore unfortunate because Fawnia! thy shepherd's hook sheweth thy poor state, thy proud desires an aspiring mind: the one declareth thy want, the other thy pride. No bastard hawk must soar so high as the hobby, no fowl gaze against the sun but the eagle: actions wrought against nature reap despite, and thoughts above fortune disdain.

So she goes on for a lengthy paragraph.[5]

Renaissance romances can be long and highly digressive, often consisting of many strands of narrative; Philip Sidney's *New Arcadia* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* are obvious examples. These two romances underwent ongoing processes of revision and expansion by their authors and were left unfinished at their deaths, features which suggest open-endedness and the potentially infinite self-generation of the narrative. A similar effect is conveyed by the amplitude of the very popular cycles of chivalric romances translated from Spanish and Portuguese, of which *Amadis de Gaule* was one, along with *Palmerin* and *The Mirror of Knighthood*. *Amadis* inspired in its original Spanish no fewer than eleven sequels chronicling the exploits of the titular hero's descendants through seven generations. The *Palmerin* cycle, beginning with *Palmerin d'Oliva*, ran to four sequels and five generations, including *Primaleon*, concerning Palmerin d'Oliva's son, and *Palmerin of England*, concerning Palmerin d'Oliva's great-nephew.[6] The adventures of such descendants often echo those of the original protagonists, creating what can seem like an endlessly circling spiral of narrative, and presumably catering to a reading public with an appetite for more and more of the same. The Iberian cycles seem to be an early example of the market as a generator and shaper of narrative: commercial success encouraged a fertility of narrative which in turn was based upon the fertile progeneration of each central fictional dynasty. Primaleon the

fictional heir was synonymous with *Primaleon* the book; volumes begat sequels just as heroes begat heirs.

Since Wright, the popularity of Renaissance romance has frequently been attributed to a rise in female literacy. This theory is often accompanied by suggestions that romance gave prominence to female characters; that it was especially concerned with love, courtship and other private and personal areas of life which might be classified as 'feminine'; and that women have a special affinity with escapist fictions. Margaret Spufford, in her invaluable study of popular fiction and its readership in seventeenth-century England, accepts that chivalric romances were 'the favourite reading of women to whom the romanticized love of the chivalric works appealed'.[7] Linda Woodbridge, in her feminist study of *Women and the English Renaissance*, states that prose fiction from the 1560s onwards was 'obviously slanted towards female readers', and that romance authors like Robert Greene 'obviously hoped to tap into the enormous resources of the female reading public'.[8]

However, one fact about Renaissance romances which is immediately striking and which might complicate ideas of them as 'women's literature' is that they were all written by men – with the two notable exceptions of *The Mirror of Knighthood*, which was translated from Spanish by Margaret Tyler (1578), and the *Urania* (1621), which was written by Mary Wroth. The present study aims to examine the relationship between women and romance in the English Renaissance in detail and in a number of different senses, including not only the relationship between romance and a female readership, but also the related subjects of the representation of women in romances, and what happened when these two remarkable women, Tyler and Wroth, made their singular interventions into the genre. It aspires to be a feminist study, although it participates in the process of debate which has always characterised feminist criticism, and I may therefore sometimes differ from some other feminist critics. I begin by looking further at the question of the readership of romance.

CHAPTER 1

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 Bologne'*, 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', 'Receits 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 subtyle 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 occupyed ether doing some profytable thynge for youre familie, or els redynge 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