

the explicit theme of her book. Her heroine, Leonora, is more than physically cut off from her family and earlier identity. The victim of a shipwreck, she suffers from severe amnesia. When she is rescued by the hero, she possesses only two distant memories—one of a loving woman, the other of a terrifying man. Because she fears all men as a consequence, she refuses to respond to Dominic who falls in love with her almost immediately. Barr's subsequent treatment of his efforts to prove his love makes the regressive impulse at the heart of the romance unusually explicit. Consider this passage detailing the way he comforts her after a nightmare:

He went across to her, and held the shaking body close to his, stroking her hair. . . .

He lay on the coverlet, putting his arm around her and cradling her head against his shoulders. Leonora sighed once, deeply, and her lids fluttered over her eyes. In a little while she slept. . . .

In the fireplace, the dying coals fell with a soft crash, making Leonora start and tremble in her sleep, until he soothed her with the touch of his fingers on her cheek, and she slept again. (pp. 86–87)

Barr here embodies an ideal hero's love for his heroine in the image of a mother who stays with her child through a storm to soothe away its fears. In fact, she later writes that Leonora recalls that night with "a clear picture of [a] man, one who had stayed with her through the long night, holding her as carefully as though she had been a sick child. *That* memory warmed her, put soft color in her cheeks" (p. 89). This romantic heroine is not excited by brutality but sensuously aroused by the promise of being nurtured as a child is by its mother. Barr's descriptions make it unusually clear that the fantasy that generates the romance originates in the oedipal desire to love and be loved by an individual of the opposite sex *and* in the continuing pre-oedipal wish that is part of a woman's inner-object configuration, the wish to regain the love of the mother and all that it implies—erotic pleasure, symbiotic completion, and identity confirmation.

Barr renders this most obvious in the final pages of *The Sea Treasure* when she has Leonora explicitly connect her love for her mother with her newfound love for Dominic. At the moment when she confronts sure death, Leonora thinks of "her mother, who had loved her so selflessly, and whom she had loved deeply in return." The sentence continues, however, with a "but" that indicates that a new love has replaced that primordial one. Barr continues, "but the realization of her great love for Dominic Pengallion was a new and frightening thing" and adds later that now Leonora "realized how much she loved the man who had brought her from death to life" (p. 191).

In finally rescuing Leonora from danger, Dominic once again tenderly carries her against his chest, calls her his "Sea Treasure," and insists, de-

spite her returning memory, that she will always be Leonora (a name he gave her) to him. But even as he demands that she relinquish her old identity, he also restores it to her by reuniting her with her real mother. It is only then, when she has regained her mother both actually and symbolically, that Leonora finally declares her love for Dominic. He is the ideal male partner who is capable of fulfilling both object roles in this woman's triangular inner-object configuration. His spectacular masculinity underscores his status as her heterosexual lover and confirms the completeness of her rejection of her childlike self. At the same time, his extraordinary tenderness and capacity for gentle nurturance means she does not have to give up the physical part of her mother's attentions because his "soft" sexual attention allows her to return to the passive state of infancy where all of her needs were satisfied and her fears were erased at her mother's breast. The symbolic recovery of primary love and the total security and identity confirmation it implies finally enable her to embrace her new identity as a mature woman.

Thus the romance originates in the female push toward individuation and actualization of the self, but because it is written by women who have been engendered within a patriarchal family characterized by exclusively female "mothering," that drive is embodied within the language and forms created and prescribed by patriarchy. Consequently, to achieve *female* selfhood in the romance, which is an expression of patriarchal culture, is to realize an identity in relation not merely to one but to two important others. The romance does deny the worth of complete autonomy. In doing so, however, it is not obliterating the female self completely. Rather, it is constructing a particular kind of female self, the self-in-relation demanded by patriarchal parenting arrangements.

It is obvious, then, why the romance must also concern itself with the nature of masculinity and its implications for women. The stories are written from a perspective that is well aware of the difficulties posed by male autonomy and reticence and, as a result, they are exercises in the imaginative transformation of masculinity to conform with female standards. This is precisely what occurs when the emotional standoff between hero and heroine is partially broken in the ideal romance by the hero's act of tenderness (function 8). What makes this so interesting, however, is not the fact that it occurs. This is, after all, a woman's fantasy and, as such, it fulfills desires and satisfies wishes that are basic to her psychological construction. Function 8 of the ideal romance is intriguing precisely because it is *not structurally explained* by the narrative *at the time that it occurs*. No action on the part of the hero or, for that matter, on the part of any other character can be said to cause or explain the magic transformation of his cruelty and indifference into tender care. The abrupt transformation simply takes place.

Although the hero's punishment of the heroine results in his separation from her, the separation is never connected explicitly *at this point in the story* with his ensuing act of kindness. Because the hero does not indicate overtly either in his thoughts or in conversation that this separation causes him to recognize his dependence upon the heroine, function 7 is not presented as the effective agent in the transformation of function 6 into function 8. The separation simply occurs and then the hero demonstrates miraculously that he can be tender with the heroine. Of course, the fact that this transformation has been prepared for surreptitiously by earlier descriptions of the hero, which contain a clue to the underlying softness hiding behind his impassive facade, makes the shift palatable to the reader. But in relying on the reader's greater knowledge, the romance author avoids having the hero openly declare his dependence on a woman. He continues to be seen as a supreme example of unchallenged, autonomous masculinity. Later in the text when hero and heroine are finally united, he confesses that it was the prospect of losing her that frightened him and prompted his decision to woo her with tenderness. In falling back on this kind of retroactive interpretation, however, the romance avoids considering the problem of the contradiction between admission of dependency and relationality and the usual definition of masculinity as total autonomy. The hero is permitted simply to graft tenderness onto his unaltered male character. The addition of the one, the romance implies, need not transform the other. Consequently, the genre fails to show that if the emotional repression and independence that characterize men are actually to be reversed, the entire notion of what it is to be male will have to be changed.

The romance inadvertently tells its reader, then, that she will receive the kind of care she desires only if she can find a man who is *already* tender and nurturant. This hole in the romance's explanatory logic is precisely the point at which a potential argument for change is transformed into a representation and recommendation of the status quo. The reader is not shown how to find a nurturant man nor how to hold a distant one responsible for altering his lack of emotional availability. Neither is she encouraged to believe that male indifference and independence really can be altered. What she is encouraged to do is to latch on to whatever expressions of thoughtfulness he might display, no matter how few, and to consider them, rather than his more obvious and frequent disinterest, as evidence of his true character. In learning *how to read* a man properly, the romance tells its reader, she will reinforce his better instincts, break down his reserve, and lead him to respond to her as she wishes. Once she has set the process in motion by responding warmly to his rare demonstrations of affection (function 9), she will further see that his previous impassivity was the result of a former hurt (function 10). If she can recognize that, she will understand, as the romantic heroine always does, that her man really

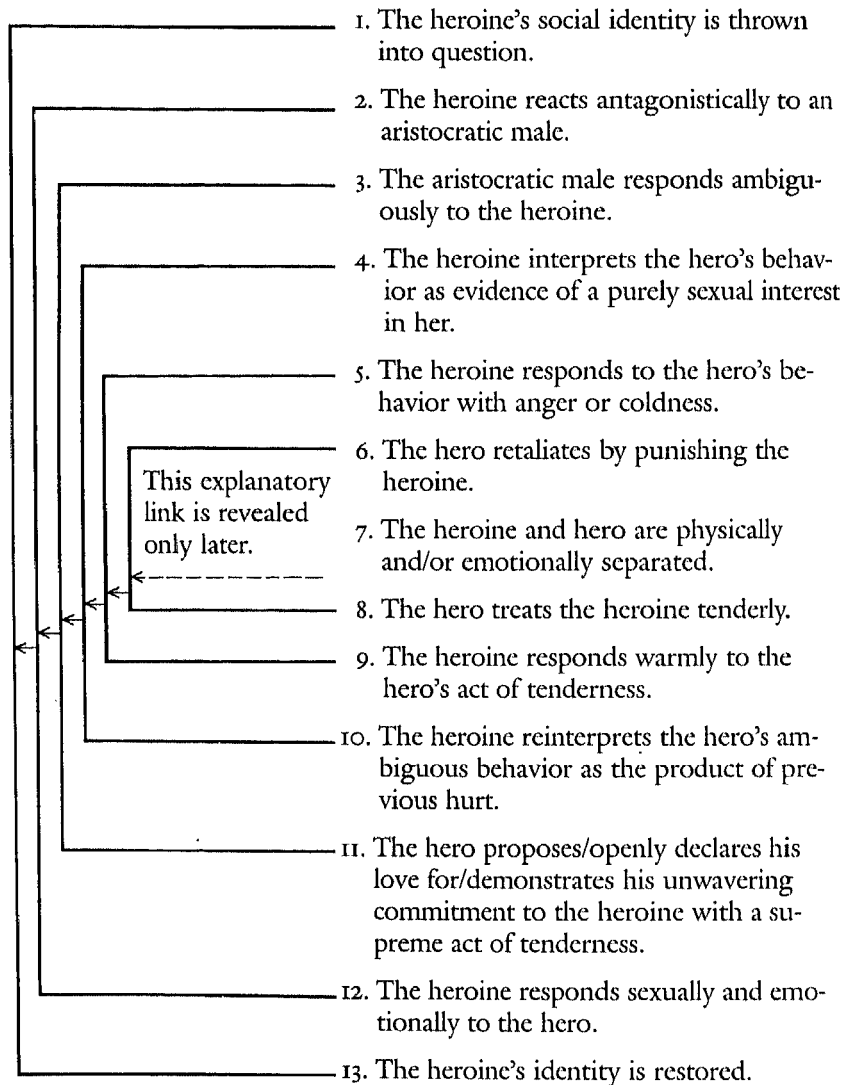
loves her and that he is dependent on her even if neither of them wishes to admit it openly.

The romantic narrative demonstrates that a woman must learn to trust her man and to believe that he loves her deeply even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary. The fantasy's conclusion suggests that when she manages such trust, he will reciprocate with declarations of his commitment to her (function 11). That commitment, the romance further insists, which also implies his need for her, is the condition for her free and uninhibited response (function 12). Once she responds to his passion with her own, she will feel as the heroine does, both emotionally complete and sexually satisfied. In short, she will have established successfully an external connection with a man whose behavior she now knows how to read correctly. The romance's conclusion promises her that if she learns to read male behavior successfully, she will find that her needs for fatherly protection, motherly care, and passionate adult love will be satisfied perfectly. The explanatory structure of this argument is represented in Table 4.2.

Clifford Geertz has observed that in attending a cockfight, the young Balinese receives from this essential art form of his culture "a kind of sentimental education."<sup>20</sup> "What he learns there," Geertz writes, "is what his culture's ethos and his private sensibility . . . look like when spelled out externally in a collective text."<sup>21</sup> The experience of reading the romance is little different for Dot and her customers. In effect, they are instructed about the nature of patriarchy and its meaning for them as women, that is, as individuals who do not possess power in a society dominated by men. Not only does the romantic drama evoke the material consequences of refusal to mold oneself in the image of femininity prescribed by the culture but it also displays the remarkable benefits of conformity.

Equally significant, however, the romance also provides a symbolic portrait of the womanly sensibility that is created and required by patriarchal marriage and its sexual division of labor. By showing that the heroine finds someone who is intensely and exclusively interested in her and in her needs, the romance confirms the validity of the reader's desire for tender nurture and legitimizes her pre-oedipal wish to recover the primary love of her initial caretaker. Simultaneously, by witnessing her connection with an autonomous and powerful male, it also confirms her longing to be protected, provided for, and sexually desired. The romance legitimizes her own heterosexuality and decision to marry by providing the heroine with a spectacularly masculine partner and a perfect marriage. In thus symbolically reproducing the triangular object configuration that characterizes female personality development through the heroine's relationships, the romance underscores and shores up the very psychological structure that guarantees women's continuing commitment to marriage and motherhood. It manages to do so, finally, because it also includes a set of very

TABLE 4.2  
*The Narrative Logic of the Romance*



usable instructions which guarantee that *she* will not reject her current partner or hold out for the precise combination of tenderness and power that the heroine discovers in the hero. Because the romance provides its reader with the strategy and ability to reinterpret her own relationship, it insures patriarchal culture against the possibility that she might demand

to have both her need for nurturance and adult heterosexual love met by a single individual.

The romance thematizes the activity of interpretation and reinterpretation for a very good reason, then. In suggesting that the cruelty and indifference that the hero exhibits toward the heroine in the early part of the novel are really of no consequence because they *actually* originated in love and affection, the romance effectively asserts that there are other signs for these two emotions than the traditional ones of physical caresses, oral professions of commitment, and thoughtful care. When the heroine retroactively reinterprets the hero's offensive behavior as equivalent expressions of his basic feeling for her, the reader is encouraged to engage in the same rereading process in order to understand properly what she is offered daily in her own relationship. The romance perpetuates the illusion that, like water into wine, brusque indifference can be transformed into unwavering devotion. Its value derives from its offer of a set of procedures that will accomplish the transformation. In learning how to read male behavior from the romance, a woman insulates herself from the need to demand that such behavior change. As Geertz has said of quartets, still lifes, and cockfights, the romance is not merely the analogical representation of a preexisting sensibility but a positive agent in its creation and perpetuation.<sup>22</sup>

As a coda to the argument presented in this chapter that some romance fiction is as much about recovering motherly nurturance and affection as it is about the need to be found desirable by men, I would like to point out that romances vary considerably in the explicitness with which they acknowledge and represent this persistent desire to merge with a wholly attentive, gentle other. Kathleen Woodiwiss, for instance, places heavy emphasis on the nurturing abilities of her heroes but does not concern herself overtly with the heroine/mother relationship. Elisabeth Barr, on the other hand, parallels her love story with another tale about the heroine's efforts to recover her lost identity and her real mother. Despite such internal variation within the genre, however, all popular romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members. Consequently, the romance functions always as a utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy through which women try to imagine themselves as they often are not in day-to-day existence, that is, as happy and content. Some writers are simply more successful than others at refusing the language of desire and satisfaction offered to them by their culture. A few have managed to retain a semblance of a more independent voice in order to say that it is not hardness, indifference, and emotional cruelty that women want but an exclusive and intense emotional relationship with a tender, life-giving individual. This longing, born of relational poverty, is implicit in all romantic fiction; only occasionally does it manage to forge for itself

a language of forms capable of giving it fuller expression. This has occurred, however, in one of the novels in the sample selected for this chapter. I would like to close, then, by looking at *Green Lady* by Leigh Ellis to show what can happen when the desire that inhabits all romances refuses to be contained completely within patriarchal forms.

*Green Lady* (1981) was written by the mother-and-daughter team of Anne and Louisa Rudeen. Educated at the University of Kansas (Anne) and at Yale (Louisa), they are much more conscious of literary history and generic conventions than most typical authors of romances. Their literary consciousness in part explains their ability to see that the romance is an alterable set of generic conventions rather than a natural and immutable organic form. Although their book has been published by Avon as a romance complete with the standard cover and blurbs, in fact it takes important liberties with the genre's conventions. The novel employs many standard characters and events, but its plot structure does not conform to the usual pattern. Its deviations are significant because, in altering the romantic plot, the Rudeens have made more explicit the romance's usually submerged concern with the mother-daughter relationship. I should add that Dot awarded the book five stars, reviewed it enthusiastically as a "unique" offering, and featured a short biography of the authors in her May 1981 newsletter. She also urged her customers to read it and reported that the many who did agreed that it was a very good book.

*Green Lady* opens conventionally enough with the heroine's entrance into a London disco. It differs almost immediately from the typical romance, however, because Dorinda Westerly is accompanied by her actress-mother whom she very obviously admires (p. 11). It soon becomes clear that the story will focus on both women. As soon as they enter the nightclub, Dorinda and Emma encounter a man they knew long ago in Newport. In conversing with Emma, this friend makes it immediately clear to the reader that all three witnessed a murder some years ago. When Emma and Bill agree to meet the next day, it is obvious that the mystery will also figure centrally in the narrative.

The second chapter returns to the usual concerns of the romance as it describes the first encounter of the two women with the men who become their suitors. While waiting for her mother to audition for a play, Dorinda is transfixed by another waiting actor, Paul Innowell, who is typically handsome and sexually attractive. She thinks to herself, in fact, that "[n]ever in her life had she felt so powerful an urge just to pounce on a strange man and start kissing him" (p. 24). She does not have to wait long, for on the next page, after asking her permission, he kisses her passionately. As in most romances, it is obvious to the reader that they have fallen in love instantly. Her encounter with Paul is paralleled by her mother's introduction to Trevor York. His "adventurous" appearance im-

mediately distinguishes him from her former husband who was "more an ardent fan than a dashing lover" (p. 23).

Despite the complication provided by the mystery, the love plots remain central to the novel for several chapters. Dorinda's involvement in particular deepens rapidly; when she and Paul make love after their first date, it becomes even clearer that *Green Lady* is different from other ideal romances. The one feature it shares with the others is its emphasis on the hero's tenderness in sex and on the feeling of complete union the heroine achieves with him. Nonetheless, when the following description, which evokes the climactic passage usually found on the final pages of a four-hundred page historical, appears on page 43, the reader cannot help but wonder what kind of misunderstanding could possibly separate them. At this early stage in the novel, the heroine achieves the kind of oceanic merging with a nurturant, heterosexual lover that is the final goal of every other romance:

[H]e bent over her and started to kiss her, beginning at her throat and working downward, evoking delicious sensations that again quickly became so intense that she held onto his shoulders with both hands and felt pleasure spiraling through her body until even her perception of herself was swept away and she felt boundless and pulsing, helpless to stop the tide of feeling that swept over her and left her only after an ecstatic moment that went on unendurably, past all boundaries shattering in its impact. (p. 43)

What is even more astonishing than their early lovemaking is that nothing occurs to distance the lovers from each other. Their mutual attachment continues to grow because they are both open and honest. As a result, there is no need for the usual romantic skill of reinterpretation. The relationship between Dorinda and Paul simply develops as an ideal romantic passion. The fact that there are still 150 pages to be read suggests, even if only implicitly, that this idyllic union is still somehow incomplete.

In the meantime, Emma's connection with Trevor York stalls because she soon becomes convinced that the Mafia is murdering all witnesses to the killing in Newport. She is terrified because she knows Dorinda was known to have been in the club at the time. When she feels certain her daughter is being stalked, she formulates a plan to protect her; Emma proposes to fake her own death in order to guard her daughter surreptitiously.

There is no need to recount the rather complicated story that ensues, but one incident is crucial here. When Emma's death is successfully staged on the island of Ibiza, Dorinda returns to England with Paul while looking everywhere for her mother who promised her she would never be far from her though she would be disguised. At one point, Dorinda goes to

a nightclub thinking she might draw her mother into the open. When she sees a familiar-looking woman, she is convinced she has found her mother. Dorinda approaches her and offers her a drink. Taken aback, the woman agrees, telling her she looks like "a little girl who's lost her mother" (p. 116). Of course, Dorinda takes this as a sign that the woman is indeed Emma. She accepts an invitation to go to her apartment thinking that then they will be reunited. Later, exasperated that her mother does not reveal her identity, she exclaims, "Mother, honestly, what is this?" She is shocked when the woman kisses her and tells her that she is not old enough to be her mother, but "will be, if that's what you'd like" (p. 120). Realizing that the woman is a lesbian, Dorinda runs out thinking to herself, "The countess hadn't anything to do with Mother!" (p. 120).

It should be clear by now that *Green Lady* is preoccupied explicitly with the search for the lost mother. Although I think it unfair to attribute deliberate intent to the writers here, it is obvious that this scene has been included as a kind of red herring. Subliminally aware that longing for reunion with the mother overrides taboos on homosexuality, the authors have included the scene to demonstrate otherwise, to assert, in effect, that mother has nothing to do with lesbianism! Having assured themselves of that, the Rudeens are free to imagine otherwise unimaginable possibilities.

The first half of the book ends at this point with Dorinda's vow to return to America. The second half chronicles her efforts to find out the truth about the Mafia killing in the hope that she will learn enough to tell the police. In the course of the narrative she gets involved with an attractive but cruel man whose brutal sexual attentions she merely endures. She eventually stumbles across the real killer, of course, tries to bait him, and is wounded seriously for her efforts. When she passes out only a few pages from the end of the book, the unsuspecting reader is left almost totally at sea. Then, in a surprising third section, the reader learns that the Dorinda of Part 2 was, in fact, Emma. In order to protect her daughter, she decided to *become* her daughter. She had plastic surgery to change her facial features and then set out to draw the murderers out into the open before they found her real daughter.

The final scene of the novel takes place in Emma's hospital room. Now mirror images of each other, mother and daughter are reunited. Emma's delirious memories are interspersed with the crooning of a nurse who calls her "baby" and tries to get her to eat. Then, suddenly, she hears a voice call, "Mother." Her subsequent thoughts are especially revealing. Although she recalls that she is a mother, what she really wants is to *have* a mother: "It was the voice of a young girl; almost her own voice. Had she spoken? But she would never call, 'Mother.' The idea of having a mother—she had been a mother, but she had never really *had* a mother,

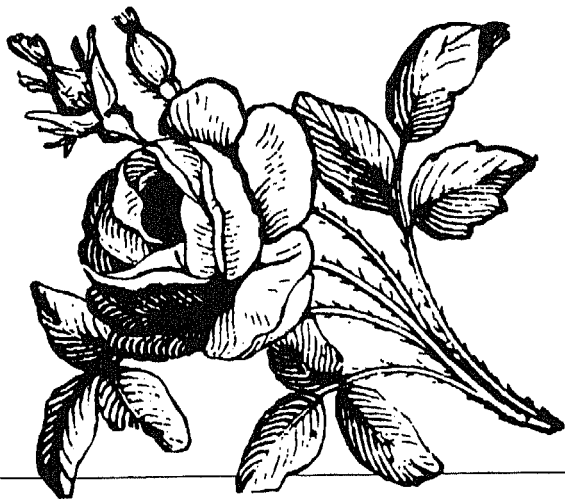
not since so long ago when she had been ordered to leave home" (p. 206). Again, I hesitate to attribute conscious intent here, but the passage is a remarkable illustration of Chodorow's argument that behind a woman's desire to mother a child hides her own wish to be mothered. Emma's longing to be taken care of is granted, but not before she establishes with her daughter the fact that they are safe. As she regains consciousness, Emma tries to recall what she has done to protect her daughter: "The man who had frightened her for so long was gone," she wondered, "[w]asn't he?" (p. 207). When Dorinda responds that he is dead, she adds, "We're safe. You did what you wanted to do—you saved us both."

In a book written, marketed, and read as a romance, it is indeed curious that mother and daughter are restored to each other *only* when the male threat has been eradicated. Not only has Emma killed the man who wanted to take her daughter from her, but Paul is not permitted to witness their reunion. Free of all male presence, then, mother and daughter reverse roles as Dorinda reassures Emma that she will be fine by tenderly pressing her mother's hand to her cheek. When Emma protests that she will have to have the plastic surgery reversed, Dorinda answers that although Trevor might prefer it *she* likes Emma's face the way it is. In this utopian female fantasy, male wishes are ultimately ignored. Mother and daughter, who are now actually one person, lose themselves in each other's gaze. The final two lines of *Green Lady* describe the real merging, which is the deepest desire of the ideal romantic heroine who usually must rest content with a symbolic satisfaction of that desire through union with a nurturant hero. Here, mother and daughter merge into each other without the disruptive, intermediary presence of a man: "Emma's dark eyes widened as she gazed into her daughter's. Together, they laughed" (p. 207).

Although *Green Lady* is obviously different from most other romances, it need be considered aberrant only if one assumes, as so many students of the genre have, that the romance originates in female masochism, in the desire to obliterate the self, or in the wish to be taken brutally by a man. Investigation of romances highly valued by their readers reveals, however, that the fairy-tale union of the hero and heroine is in reality the symbolic fulfillment of a woman's desire to realize her most basic female self *in relation* with another. What she desires in this imaginary relationship is both the autonomy and sense of difference guaranteed by connection with someone experienced as "other" and the erasure of boundaries and loss of singular consciousness achieved through union with an individual indistinguishable from the self. Romances vary in the emphasis they place on the one, usually achieved through the spectacularly masculine hero, or the other, granted by his nurturant, essentially "effeminate" attention. *Green Lady* differs only in that it finds the perfect union with this nurturant male

still unsatisfying. The desire to recover the life-giving care of the primary caretaker is so strong here that it can be fulfilled only through a literal recovery of the lost mother. What the ideal romance usually grants the heroine covertly in the person of a strong but tender man is here given Dorinda overtly in an unmediated union with her mother who is, in fact, indistinguishable from her. *Green Lady* closes with the reestablishment of that original, blissful symbiotic union between mother and child that is the goal of all romances despite their apparent preoccupation with heterosexual love and marriage.

*Reading the Romance*  
*Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*



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