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WOMEN READ THE ROMANCE: THE INTERACTION OF TEXT AND CONTEXT

JANICE A. RADWAY

By now, the statistics are well known and the argument familiar. The Canadian publisher, Harlequin Enterprises, alone claims to have sold 168 million romances throughout the world in the single year of 1979.¹ In addition, at least twelve other paperback publishing houses currently issue from two to six romantic novels every month, nearly all of which are scooped up voraciously by an audience whose composition and size has yet to be accurately determined.² The absence of such data, however, has prevented neither journalists nor literary scholars from offering complex, often subtle interpretations of the meaning of the form's characteristic narrative development. Although these interpreters of the romance do not always concur about the particular ways in which the tale reinforces traditional expectations about female-male relationships, all agree that the stories perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and structures. They do so, these critics tell us, by continuing to maintain that a woman's journey to happiness and fulfillment must always be undertaken in the company of a protective man. In the words of Ann Snitow, romances "reinforce the prevailing cultural code" proclaiming that "pleasure for women is men."³

The acuity of interpretations such as those developed by Snitow, Ann Douglas, and Tania Modleski certainly cannot be denied.⁴ Indeed, their very complexity lends credence to the secondary, often implicit claim made by these theorists of the romance that their proposed interpretations can also serve as an adequate explanation of the genre's extraordinary popularity. However, a recent ethnographic study of a group of regular romance readers clustered about a bookseller, who is recognized by authors and editors alike as an "expert" in the field, suggests that these explanations of reading choice and motivation are in-

complete.⁵ Because these interpreters do not take account of the actual, day-to-day context within which romance reading occurs, and because they ignore romance readers' own book choice and theories about why they read, they fail to detect the ways in which the activity may serve positive functions even as the novels celebrate patriarchal institutions. Consequently, they also fail to understand that some contemporary romances actually attempt to reconcile changing attitudes about gender behavior with more traditional sexual arrangements.

The particular weaknesses of these interpretations as *explanations* of reading behavior can be traced to the fact that they focus only on the texts in isolation. This reification of the literary text persists in much practical criticism today which continues to draw its force from the poetics of the New Criticism and its assertion that the text, as a more or less well-made artifact, contains a set of meanings that can be articulated adequately by a trained critic.⁶ Interpretive reading is an unproblematic activity for these students of the romance because they too assume that the text has intrinsic power to coerce all cooperative readers into discovering the core of meaning that is undeniably *there* in the book. Moreover, because their analysis proceeds under the assumption that a literary work's objective reality remains unchanged despite differences among individual readers and in the attention they devote to the text, these critics understandably assume further that their own reading of a given literary form can stand as the representative of all adequate readings of it. Finally, they assume also that their particular reading can then become the object of further cultural analysis that seeks to explain the popularity of the form and its appeal to its audience. In the end, they produce their explanation merely by positing a desire in the reading audience for the specific meaning they have unearthed.

New theories of the literary text and the reading process have been advanced, however, the basic premises of which call for a modification of this standard explanatory procedure. Although the myriad forms of reader-theory and reader-response criticism are too diverse and too complicated to review in any depth here, all acknowledge, to a greater or lesser degree, that the reader is responsible for what is made of the literary text.⁷ Despite their interest in the *making* of meaning, reader-theorists do not believe that literary texts exert no force at all on the meaning that is finally produced in a given reading. Rather, most argue that literary meaning is the result of a complex, temporally evolving inter-

action between a fixed verbal structure and a socially situated reader. That reader makes sense of the verbal structure by referring to previously learned aesthetic and cultural codes. Literary meaning, then, in the words of Stanley Fish, perhaps the most prominent of reader-theorists, is "the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce."⁸

Clearly, the reader-theory emphasis on the constitutive power and activity of the reader suggests, indeed almost demands, that the cultural critic who is interested in the "meaning" of a form and the causes of its popularity consider first whether she is a member of a different interpretive community than the readers who are her ostensible subjects. If she is, she may well produce and evaluate textual meaning in a manner fundamentally different from those whose behavior she seeks to explain. None of the early students of the romance have so foregrounded their own interpretive activities. Because of their resulting assumption of an identity between their own reading and that of regular romance readers, they have severed the form from the women who actually construct its meaning from within a particular context and on the basis of a specific constellation of attitudes and beliefs. This assumption has resulted, finally, in an incomplete account of the particular ideological power of this literary form, in that these critics have not successfully isolated the particular function performed through the act of romance reading which is crucially important to the readers themselves. In ignoring certain specific aspects of the romance readers' daily context, they have also failed to see how the women's selection and construction of their favorite novels addresses the problems and desires they deem to be characteristic of their lives.

To guard against the ever-present danger of advancing a theory about the meaning of a text for a given audience on the basis of a performance of that text, which no individual in the group would recognize, one must investigate exactly what the entire act of romance reading means to the women who buy the books. If the romance is to be cited as evidence testifying to the evolution or perpetuation of cultural beliefs about women's roles and the institution of marriage, it is first necessary to know what women actually understand themselves to be doing when they read a romance they like. A more complete cultural analysis of the con-

temporary romance might specify how actual readers interpret the actions of principal characters, how they comprehend the final significance of the narrative resolution and, perhaps most important, how the act of repetitively encountering this fantasy fits within the daily routine of their private lives. We need to know not what the romantic text objectively means—in fact, it never means in this way—but rather how the *event* of reading the text is interpreted by the women who engage in it.⁹

The interpretation of the romance's cultural significance offered here has been developed from a series of extensive ethnographic-like interviews with a group of compulsive romance readers in a predominantly urban, central midwestern state among the nation's top twenty in total population.¹⁰ I discovered my principal informant and her customers with the aid of a senior editor at Doubleday whom I had been interviewing about the publication of romances. Sally Arteseros told me of a bookstore employee who had developed a regular clientele of fifty to seventy-five regular romance readers who relied on her for advice about the best romances to buy and those to avoid. When I wrote to Dot Evans, as I will now call her, to ask whether I might question her about how she interpreted, categorized, and evaluated romantic fiction, I had no idea that she had also begun to write a newsletter designed to enable bookstores to advise their customers about the quality of the romances published monthly. She has since copyrighted this newsletter and incorporated it as a business. Dot is so successful at serving the women who patronize her chain outlet that the central office of this major chain occasionally relies on her sales predictions to gauge romance distribution throughout the system. Her success has also brought her to the attention of both editors and writers for whom she now reads manuscripts and galleys.

My knowledge of Dot and her readers is based on roughly sixty hours of interviews conducted in June 1980, and February 1981. I have talked extensively with Dot about romances, reading, and her advising activities as well as observed her interactions with her customers at the bookstore. I have also conducted both group and individual interviews with sixteen of her regular customers and administered a lengthy questionnaire to forty-two of these women. Although not representative of all women who read romances, the group appears to be demographically similar to a sizable segment of that audience as it has been mapped by several rather secretive publishing houses.

Dorothy Evans lives and works in the community of Smithton, as do most of her regular customers. A city of about 112,000 inhabitants, Smithton is located five miles due east of the state's second largest city, in a metropolitan area with a total population of over 1 million. Dot was forty-eight years old at the time of the survey, the wife of a journeyman plumber, and the mother of three children in their twenties. She is extremely bright and articulate and, while not a proclaimed feminist, holds some beliefs about women that might be labeled as such. Although she did not work outside the home when her children were young and does not now believe that a woman needs a career to be fulfilled, she feels women should have the opportunity to work and be paid equally with men. Dot also believes that women should have the right to abortion, though she admits that her deep religious convictions would prevent her from seeking one herself. She is not disturbed by the Equal Rights Amendment and can and does converse eloquently about the oppression women have endured for years at the hands of men. Despite her opinions, however, she believes implicitly in the value of true romance and thoroughly enjoys discovering again and again that women can find men who will love them as they wish to be loved. Although most of her regular customers are more conservative than Dot in the sense that they do not advocate political measures to redress past grievances, they are quite aware that men commonly think themselves superior to women and often mistreat them as a result.

In general, Dot's customers are married, middle-class mothers with at least a high school education.¹¹ More than 60 percent of the women were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four at the time of the study, a fact that duplicates fairly closely Harlequin's finding that the majority of its readers is between twenty-five and forty-nine.¹² Silhouette Books has also recently reported that 65 percent of the romance market is below the age of 40.¹³ Exactly 50 percent of the Smithton women have high school diplomas, while 32 percent report completing at least some college work. Again, this seems to suggest that the interview group is fairly representative, for Silhouette also indicates that 45 percent of the romance market has attended at least some college. The employment status and family income of Dot's customers also seem to duplicate those of the audience mapped by the publishing houses. Forty-two percent of the Smithton women, for instance, work part-time outside the home. Harlequin claims that 49 percent of its audience is similarly employed. The Smithton women

report slightly higher incomes than those of the average Harlequin reader (43 percent of the Smithton women have incomes of \$15,000 to \$24,999, 33 percent have incomes of \$25,000 to \$49,999—the average income of the Harlequin reader is \$15,000 to \$20,000), but the difference is not enough to change the general sociological status of the group.

In one respect, however, Dot and her customers may be unusual, although it is difficult to say for sure because corroborative data from other sources are sadly lacking. Although almost 70 percent of the women claim to read books other than romances, 37 percent nonetheless report reading from five to nine romances each week. Even though more than one-half read less (from one to four romances a week), when the figures are converted to monthly totals they indicate that one-half the Smithton women read between four and sixteen romances a month, while 40 percent read more than twenty. This particular group is obviously obsessed with romantic fiction. The most recent comprehensive survey of American book readers and their habits has discovered that romance readers tend to read more books within their favorite category than do other category readers, but these readers apparently read substantially fewer than the Smithton group. Yankelevich, Skelly, and White found in their 1978 study that 21 percent of the total book reading public had read *at least* one gothic or romance in the last six months.¹⁴ The average number of romantic novels read by this group in the last six months was only nine. Thus, while it is probably true that romance readers are repetitive consumers, most apparently do not read as consistently or as constantly as Dot and her customers. Romances undoubtedly play a more significant role, then, in the lives of the Smithton women than they do in those of occasional romance readers. Nevertheless, even this latter group appears to demonstrate a marked desire for, if not dependency upon, the fantasy they offer.

When asked why they read romances, the Smithton women overwhelmingly cite escape or relaxation as their goal. They use the word "escape," however, both literally and figuratively. On the one hand, they value their romances highly because the act of reading them literally draws the women away from their present surroundings. Because they must produce the meaning of the story by attending closely to the words on the page, they find that their attention is withdrawn from concerns that plague them in reality. One woman remarked with a note of triumph in her

voice: "My body may be in that room, but I'm not!" She and her sister readers see their romance reading as a legitimate way of denying a present reality that occasionally becomes too onerous to bear. This particular means of escape is better than television viewing for these women, because the cultural value attached to books permits them to overcome the guilt they feel about avoiding their responsibilities. They believe that reading of any kind is, by nature, educational.¹⁵ They insist accordingly that they also read to learn.¹⁶

On the other hand, the Smithton readers are quite willing to acknowledge that the romances which so preoccupy them are little more than fantasies or fairy tales that always end happily. They readily admit in fact that the characters and events discovered in the pages of the typical romance do not resemble the people and occurrences they must deal with in their daily lives. On the basis of the following comments, made in response to a question about what romances "do" better than other novels available today, one can conclude that it is precisely the unreal, fantastic shape of the story that makes their literal escape even more complete and gratifying. Although these are only a few of the remarks given in response to the undirected question, they are representative of the group's general sentiment.

Romances hold my interest and do not leave me depressed or up in the air at the end like many modern day books tend to do. Romances also just make me feel good reading them as I identify with the heroines.

The kind of books I mainly read are very different from everyday living. That's why I read them. Newspapers, etc., I find boring because all you read is sad news. I can get enough of that on TV news. I like stories that take your mind off everyday matters.

Different than everyday life.

Everyone is always under so much pressure. They like books that let them escape.

Because it is an escape, and we can dream. And pretend that it is our life.

I'm able to escape the harsh world a few hours a day.

It is a way of escaping from everyday living.

They always seem an escape and they usually turn out the way you wish life really was.

I enjoy reading because it offers me a small vacation from everyday life and an interesting and amusing way to pass the time.

These few comments all hint at a certain sadness that many of the

Smithton women seem to share because life has not given them all that it once promised. A deep-seated sense of betrayal also lurks behind their deceptively simple expressions of a need to believe in a fairy tale. Although they have not elaborated in these comments, many of the women explained in the interviews that despite their disappointments, they feel refreshed and strengthened by their vicarious participation in a fantasy relationship where the heroine is frequently treated as they themselves would most like to be loved.

This conception of romance reading as an escape that is both literal and figurative implies flight from some situation in the real world which is either stifling or overwhelming, as well as a metaphoric transfer to another, more desirable universe where events are happily resolved. Unashamed to admit that they like to indulge in temporary escape, the Smithton women are also surprisingly candid about the circumstances that necessitate their desire. When asked to specify what they are fleeing from, they invariably mention the "pressures" and "tensions" they experience as wives and mothers. Although none of the women can cite the voluminous feminist literature about the psychological toll exacted by the constant demand to physically and emotionally nurture others, they are nonetheless eloquent about how draining and unrewarding their duties can be.¹⁷ When first asked why women find it necessary to escape, Dot gave the following answer without once pausing to rest:

As a mother, I have run 'em to the orthodontist, I have run 'em to the swimming pool. I have run 'em to baton twirling lessons. I have run up to school because they forgot their lunch. You know, I mean really. And you do it. And it isn't that you begrudge it. That isn't it. Then my husband would walk in the door and he'd say, "Well, what did you do today?" You know, it was like, "Well, tell me how you spent the last eight hours, because I've been out working." And I finally got to the point where I would say, "Well, I read four books, and I did the wash and got the meal on the table and the beds are all made and the house is tidy." And I would get defensive like, "So what do you call all this? Why should I have to tell you because I certainly don't ask you what you did for eight hours, step by step."

But their husbands do do that. We've compared notes. They hit the house and it's like "Well, all right, I've been out earning a living. Now what have you been doin' with your time?" And you begin to be feeling, "Now, really, why is he questioning me?"

Romance reading, as Dot herself puts it, constitutes a temporary "declaration of independence" from the social roles of wife and

mother. By placing the barrier of the book between themselves and their families, these women reserve a special space and time for themselves alone. As a consequence, they momentarily allow themselves to abandon the attitude of total self-abnegation in the interest of family welfare which they have so dutifully learned is the proper stance for a good wife and mother. Romance reading is both an assertion of deeply felt psychological needs and a means for satisfying those needs. Simply put, these needs arise because no other member of the family, as it is presently constituted in this still-patriarchal society, is yet charged with the affective and emotional reconstitution of a wife and mother. If she is depleted by her efforts to care for others, she is nonetheless expected to restore and sustain herself as well. As one of Dot's customers put it, "You always have to be a Mary Poppins. You can't be sad, you can't be mad, you have to keep everything bottled up inside."

Nancy Chodorow has recently discussed this structural peculiarity of the modern family and its impact on the emotional lives of women in her influential book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*,¹⁸ a complex reformulation of the Freudian theory of female personality development. Chodorow maintains that women often continue to experience a desire for intense affective nurturance and relationality well into adulthood as a result of an unresolved separation from their primary caretaker. It is highly significant, she argues, that in patriarchal society this caretaker is almost inevitably a woman. The felt similarity between mother and daughter creates an unusually intimate connection between them which later makes it exceedingly difficult for the daughter to establish autonomy and independence. Chodorow maintains, on the other hand, that because male children are also reared by women, they tend to separate more completely from their mothers by suppressing their own emotionality and capacities for tenderness which they associate with mothers and femininity. The resulting asymmetry in human personality, she concludes, leads to a situation where men typically cannot fulfill all of a woman's emotional needs. As a consequence, women turn to the act of mothering as a way of vicariously recovering that lost relationality and intensity.

My findings about Dot Evans and her customers suggest that the vicarious pleasure a woman receives through the nurturance of others may not be completely satisfying, because the act of caring for them also makes tremendous demands on a woman and

can deplete her sense of self. In that case, she may well turn to romance reading in an effort to construct a fantasy-world where she is attended, as the heroine is, by a man who reassures her of her special status and unique identity.

The value of the romance may have something to do, then, with the fact that women find it especially difficult to indulge in the restorative experience of visceral regression to an infantile state where the self is cared for perfectly by another. This regression is so difficult precisely because women have been taught to believe that men must be their sole source of pleasure. Although there is nothing biologically lacking in men to make this ideal pleasure unattainable, as Chodorow's theories tell us, their engendering and socialization by the patriarchal family traditionally masks the very traits that would permit them to nurture women in this way. Because they are encouraged to be aggressive, competitive, self-sufficient, and unemotional, men often find sustained attention to the emotional needs of others both unfamiliar and difficult. While the Smithton women only minimally discussed their husbands' abilities to take care of them as they would like, when they commented on their favorite romantic heroes they made it clear that they enjoy imagining themselves being tenderly cared for and solicitously protected by a fictive character who inevitably proves to be spectacularly masculine and unusually nurturant as well.¹⁹

Indeed, this theme of pleasure recurred constantly in the discussions with the Smithton women. They insisted repeatedly that when they are reading a romance, they feel happy and content. Several commented that they particularly relish moments when they are home alone and can relax in a hot tub or in a favorite chair with a good book. Others admitted that they most like to read in a warm bed late at night. Their association of romances with contentment, pleasure, and good feelings is apparently not unique, for in conducting a market research study, Fawcett discovered that when asked to draw a woman reading a romance, romance readers inevitably depict someone who is exaggeratedly happy.²⁰

The Smithton group's insistence that they turn to romances because the experience of reading the novels gives them hope, provides pleasure, and causes contentment raises the unavoidable question of what aspects of the romantic narrative itself could possibly give rise to feelings such as these. How are we to explain, furthermore, the obvious contradiction between this reader em-

phasis on pleasure and hope, achieved through vicarious appreciation of the ministrations of a tender hero, and the observations of the earlier critics of romances that such books are dominated by men who at least temporarily abuse and hurt the women they purportedly love? In large part, the contradiction arises because the two groups are not reading according to the same interpretive strategies, neither are they reading nor commenting on the same books. Textual analyses like those offered by Douglas, Modleski, and Snitow are based on the common assumption that because romances are formulaic and therefore essentially identical, analysis of a randomly chosen sample will reveal the meaning unfailingly communicated by every example of the genre. This methodological procedure is based on the further assumption that category readers do not themselves perceive variations within the genre, nor do they select their books in a manner significantly different from the random choice of the analyst.

In fact, the Smithton readers do not believe the books are identical, nor do they approve of all the romances they read. They have elaborated a complex distinction between "good" and "bad" romances and they have accordingly experimented with various techniques that they hoped would enable them to identify bad romances before they paid for a book that would only offend them. Some tried to decode titles and cover blurbs by looking for key words serving as clues to the book's tone; others refused to buy romances by authors they didn't recognize; still others read several pages *including the ending* before they bought the book. Now, however, most of the people in the Smithton group have been freed from the need to rely on these inexact predictions because Dot Evans shares their perceptions and evaluations of the category and can alert them to unusually successful romantic fantasies while steering them away from those they call "disgusting perversions."

When the Smithton readers' comments about good and bad romances are combined with the conclusions drawn from an analysis of twenty of their favorite books and an equal number of those they classify as particularly inadequate, an illuminating picture of the fantasy fueling the romance-reading experience develops.²¹ To begin with, Dot and her readers will not tolerate any story in which the heroine is seriously abused by men. They find multiple rapes especially distressing and dislike books in which a woman is brutally hurt by a man only to fall desperately in love with him in

the last four pages. The Smithton women are also offended by explicit sexual description and scrupulously avoid the work of authors like Rosemary Rogers and Judith Krantz who deal in what they call "perversions" and "promiscuity." They also do not like romances that overtly perpetuate the double standard by excusing the hero's simultaneous involvement with several women. They insist, one reader commented, on "one woman—one man." They also seem to dislike any kind of detailed description of male genitalia, although the women enjoy suggestive descriptions of how the hero is emotionally aroused to an overpowering desire for the heroine. Their preferences seem to confirm Beatrice Faust's argument in *Women, Sex, and Pornography* that women are not interested in the visual display characteristic of male pornography, but prefer process-oriented materials detailing the development of deep emotional connection between two individuals.²²

According to Dot and her customers, the quality of the *ideal* romantic fantasy is directly dependent on the character of the heroine and the manner in which the hero treats her. The plot, of course, must always focus on a series of obstacles to the final declaration of love between the two principals. However, a good romance involves an unusually bright and determined woman and a man who is spectacularly masculine, but at the same time capable of remarkable empathy and tenderness. Although they enjoy the usual chronicle of misunderstandings and mistakes which inevitably leads to the heroine's belief that the hero intends to harm her, the Smithton readers prefer stories that combine a much-understated version of this continuing antagonism with a picture of a gradually developing love. They most wish to participate in the slow process by which two people become acquainted, explore each other's foibles, wonder about the other's feelings, and eventually "discover" that they are loved by the other.

In conducting an analysis of the plots of the twenty romances listed as "ideal" by the Smithton readers, I was struck by their remarkable similarities in narrative structure. In fact, all twenty of these romances are very tightly organized around the evolving relationship between a single couple composed of a beautiful, defiant, and sexually immature woman and a brooding, handsome man who is also curiously capable of soft, gentle gestures. Although minor foil figures are used in these romances, none of the ideal stories seriously involves either hero or heroine with

one of the rival characters.²³ They are employed mainly as contrasts to the more likable and proper central pair or as purely temporary obstacles to the pair's delayed union because one or the other mistakenly suspects the partner of having an affair with the rival. However, because the reader is never permitted to share this mistaken assumption in the ideal romance, she knows all along that the relationship is not as precarious as its participants think it to be. The rest of the narrative in the twenty romances chronicles the gradual crumbling of barriers between these two individuals who are fearful of being used by the other. As their defenses against emotional response fall away and their sexual passion rises inexorably, the typical narrative plunges on until the climactic point at which the hero treats the heroine to some supreme act of tenderness, and she realizes that his apparent emotional indifference was only the mark of his hesitancy about revealing the extent of his love for and dependence upon her.

The Smithton women especially like romances that commence with the early marriage of the hero and heroine for reasons of convenience. Apparently, they do so because they delight in the subsequent, necessary chronicle of the pair's growing awareness that what each took to be indifference or hate is, in reality, unexpressed love and suppressed passion. In such favorite romances as *The Flame and the Flower*, *The Black Lyon*, *Shanna*, and *Made For Each Other*, the heroine begins marriage thinking that she detests and is detested by her spouse. She is thrown into a quandary, however, because her partner's behavior vacillates from indifference, occasional brusqueness, and even cruelty to tenderness and passion. Consequently, the heroine spends most of her time in these romances, as well as in the others comprising this sample, trying to read the hero's behavior as a set of signs expressing his true feelings toward her. The final outcome of the story turns upon a fundamental process of reinterpretation, whereby she suddenly and clearly sees that the behavior she feared was actually the product of deeply felt passion and a previous hurt. Once she learns to reread his past behavior and thus to excuse him for the suffering he has caused her, she is free to respond warmly to his occasional acts of tenderness. Her response inevitably encourages him to believe in her and finally to treat her as she wishes to be treated. When this reinterpretation process is completed in the twenty ideal romances, the heroine is always tenderly enfolded in the hero's embrace and the reader is permitted to identify with her as she is gently caressed, carefully protected, and verbally

praised with words of love.²⁴ At the climactic moment (pp. 201-2) of *The Sea Treasure*, for example, when the hero tells the heroine to put her arms around him, the reader is informed of his gentleness in the following way:

She put her cold face against his in an attitude of surrender that moved him to unutterable tenderness. He swung her clear of the encroaching water and eased his way up to the next level, with painful slowness . . . When at last he had finished, he pulled her into his arms and held her against his heart for a moment . . . Tenderly he lifted her. Carefully he negotiated the last of the treacherous slippery rungs to the mine entrance. Once there, he swung her up into his arms, and walked out into the starlit night.

The cold air revived her, and she stirred in his arms.

"Dominic?" she whispered.

He bent his head and kissed her.

"Sea Treasure," he whispered.

Passivity, it seems, is at the heart of the romance-reading experience in the sense that the final goal of the most valued romances is the creation of perfect union in which the ideal male, who is masculine and strong, yet nurturant, finally admits his recognition of the intrinsic worth of the heroine. Thereafter, she is required to do nothing more than exist as the center of this paragon's attention. Romantic escape is a temporary but literal denial of the demands these women recognize as an integral part of their roles as nurturing wives and mothers. But it is also a figurative journey to a utopian state of total receptiveness in which the reader, as a consequence of her identification with the heroine, feels herself the passive *object* of someone else's attention and solicitude. The romance reader in effect is permitted the experience of feeling cared for, the sense of having been affectively reconstituted, even if both are lived only vicariously.

Although the ideal romance may thus enable a woman to satisfy vicariously those psychological needs created in her by a patriarchal culture unable to fulfill them, the very centrality of the rhetoric of reinterpretation to the romance suggests also that the reading experience may indeed have some of the unfortunate consequences pointed to by earlier romance critics.²⁵ Not only is the dynamic of reinterpretation an essential component of the plot of the ideal romance, but it also characterizes the very process of constructing its meaning because the reader is inevitably given more information about the hero's motives than is the heroine herself. Hence, when Ranulf temporarily abuses his young bride in *The Black Lyon*, the reader understands that what

appears as inexplicable cruelty to Lyonene, the heroine, is an irrational desire to hurt her because of what his first wife did to him.²⁶ It is possible that in reinterpreting the hero's behavior before Lyonene does, the Smithton women may be practicing a procedure which is valuable to them precisely because it enables them to reinterpret their own spouse's similar emotional coldness and likely preoccupation with work or sports. In rereading this category of behavior, they reassure themselves that it does not necessarily mean that a woman is not loved. Romance reading, it would seem, can function as a kind of training for the all-too-common task of reinterpreting a spouse's unsettling actions as the signs of passion, devotion, and love.

If the Smithton women are indeed learning reading behaviors that help them to dismiss or justify their husbands' affective distance, this procedure is probably carried out on an unconscious level. In any form of cultural or anthropological analysis in which the subjects of the study cannot reveal all the complexity or covert significance of their behavior, a certain amount of speculation is necessary. The analyst, however, can and should take account of any other observable evidence that might reveal the motives and meanings she is seeking. In this case, the Smithton readers' comments about bad romances are particularly helpful.

In general, bad romances are characterized by one of two things: an unusually cruel hero who subjects the heroine to various kinds of verbal and physical abuse, or a diffuse plot that permits the hero to become involved with other women before he settles upon the heroine. Since the Smithton readers will tolerate complicated subplots in some romances if the hero and heroine continue to function as a pair, clearly it is the involvement with others rather than the plot complexity that distresses them. When asked why they disliked these books despite the fact that they all ended happily with the hero converted into the heroine's attentive lover, Dot and her customers replied again and again that they rejected the books precisely because they found them unbelievable. In elaborating, they insisted indignantly that *they* could never forgive the hero's early transgressions and they see no reason why they should be asked to believe that the heroine can. What they are suggesting, then, is that certain kinds of male behavior associated with the stereotype of male machismo can never be forgiven or reread as the signs of love. They are thus not interested *only* in the romance's happy ending. They want to

involve themselves in a story that will permit them to enjoy the hero's tenderness *and* to reinterpret his momentary blindness and cool indifference as the marks of a love so intense that he is wary of admitting it. Their delight in both these aspects of the process of romance reading and their deliberate attempt to select books that will include "a gentle hero" and "a slight misunderstanding" suggest that deeply felt needs are the source of their interest in both components of the genre. On the one hand, they long for emotional attention and tender care; on the other, they wish to rehearse the discovery that a man's distance can be explained and excused as his way of expressing love.

It is easy to condemn this latter aspect of romance reading as a reactionary force that reconciles women to a social situation which denies them full development, even as it refuses to accord them the emotional sustenance they require. Yet to identify romances with this conservative moment alone is to miss those other benefits associated with the act of reading as a restorative pastime whose impact on a beleaguered woman is not so simply dismissed. If we are serious about feminist politics and committed to reformulating not only our own lives but those of others, we would do well not to condescend to romance readers as hopeless traditionalists who are recalcitrant in their refusal to acknowledge the emotional costs of patriarchy. We must begin to recognize that romance reading is fueled by dissatisfaction and disaffection, not by perfect contentment with woman's lot. Moreover, we must also understand that some romance readers' experiences are not strictly congruent with the set of ideological propositions that typically legitimate patriarchal marriage. They are characterized, rather, by a sense of longing caused by patriarchal marriage's failure to address all their needs.

In recognizing both the yearning and the fact that its resolution is only a vicarious one not so easily achieved in a real situation, we may find it possible to identify more precisely the very limits of patriarchal ideology's success. Endowed thus with a better understanding of what women want, but often fail to get from the traditional arrangements they consciously support, we may provide ourselves with that very issue whose discussion would reach many more women and potentially raise their consciousnesses about the particular dangers and failures of patriarchal institutions. By helping romance readers to see why they long for relationality and tenderness and are unlikely to get either in the form they desire if current gender arrangements are con-

tinued, we may help to convert their amorphous longing into a focused desire for specific change.

The strategic value of recognizing both the possibility that romance reading may have some positive benefits and that even its more conservative effects actually originate in significant discontent with the institutions the books purport to celebrate becomes even clearer when one looks more carefully at the Smithton readers' feelings about heroine/hero interactions in ideal romances. Those feelings also indicate that small changes are beginning to occur in women's expectations about female and male behavior. Dot and her customers all emphatically insist that the ideal heroine must be intelligent and independent, and they particularly applaud those who are capable of holding their own in repartee with men. In fact, three-fourths of the Smithton women listed both "intelligence" (thirty-three women) and "a sense of humor" (thirty-one women) as being among the three most important characteristics of a romantic heroine. Although "independence" was chosen less often, still, twenty of these readers selected this trait from a list of nine as one of three essential ingredients in the heroine's personality. These readers value romance writers who are adept at rendering verbal dueling because, as one woman explained, "it's very exciting and you never know who's going to come out on top."

Their interest in this characteristic aspect of romantic fiction seems to originate in their desire to identify with a woman who is strong and courageous enough to stand up to an angry man. They remember well favorite heroines and snatches of dialogue read several years before in which those heroines managed momentarily to best their antagonists²⁷ Dot and her customers are quite aware that few women can hope to subdue a man physically if he is determined to have his way. As a consequence, they believe it essential for women to develop the ability to use words adroitly if they are to impose their own wills. The Smithton women reserve their greatest scorn for romances with "namby-pamby" heroines and point to Barbara Cartland's women, whom they universally detest, as the perfect example of these. Their repeated insistence on the need for strong and intelligent heroines attests to their wish to dissociate themselves from the stereotype of women as weak, passive, and foolish individuals. Clearly, their longing for competence could be encouraged by showing such women how to acquire and to express it more readily in the world beyond the home.

However, the ideal heroine who temporarily outwits the hero often symbolically "pays for" her transgression later in the same chapter when he treats her brusquely or forces his sexual attention upon her. This narrative may well betoken ambivalence on the part of writers and readers who experience a certain amount of guilt over their desire to identify with a woman who sometimes acts independently and with force. Still, I have placed the "pays for" in quotation marks here because neither the books, nor apparently do the readers, consciously construct the interaction in this particular manner. When questioned closely about such a chronology of events, instead of admitting reservations about the overly aggressive nature of a heroine's behavior, Dot and her customers focused instead on the unjustified nature of the hero's actions. Not only did they remember specific instances of "completely blind" and "stupid" behavior on the part of romantic heroes, but they also often went on at length about such instances, vociferously protesting this sort of mistreatment of an innocent heroine. Given the vehemence of their reaction, it seems possible that the male violence that does occur in romances may actually serve as an opportunity to express anger which is otherwise repressed and ignored.

Although I did not initially question the Smithton women about their attitudes toward the commonplace mistreatment of the heroine, principally because I assumed that they must find it acceptable, the women volunteered in discussions of otherwise good stories that these kinds of scenes make them very angry and indignant. They seem to identify completely with the wronged heroine and vicariously participate in her shock and outrage. When I did wonder aloud about this emotional response to the hero's cruelty, Dot's customers indicated that such actions often lead them to "hate" or "detest" even especially memorable heroes for a short period of time. The scenes may function, then, as a kind of release valve for the pent-up anger and resentment they won't permit themselves in the context of their own social worlds.

However, it is also likely that in freely eliciting feelings of displeasure and even rage, the romance defuses those sentiments in preparation for its later explanation of the behavior that occasioned them in the first place. Having already imaginatively voiced her protest, the reader is emotionally ready to accept the explanation, when it is formally offered, of the hero's offensive treatment of the heroine. Like the heroine herself, she is then in a

position to forgive his behavior, because what she learns is that his actions were the signs of his deep interest in her. It is because the ideal hero is always persuaded to express his love with the proper signs that the Smithton women interpret his discovery that he actually loves the heroine as the heroine's triumph. The power, they believe, is all hers because he now recognizes he can't live without her. In actuality, what is going on here, as I have noted before, is that active process of justification whereby the reader is encouraged to excuse male indifference and cruelty if it can be demonstrated that these feelings are also accompanied by feelings of love. The romance may therefore recontain any rebellious feelings or impulses on the part of its heroines or readers precisely because it dramatizes a situation where such feelings prove unnecessary and unwarranted. The reader of the ideal romance closes her book, finally, purged of her discontent and reassured that men can indeed learn how to satisfy a woman's basic need for emotional intensity and nurturant care within traditional marriage.

The reassurance is never wholly successful, however. That reader almost inevitably picks up another romance as soon as she puts her last one down. If we can learn to recognize, then, that the need for this repeated reassurance about the success of patriarchal gender arrangements springs from nagging doubt and continuing resentment, we will have developed a better picture of the complex and contradictory state of mind that characterizes many women who, on the surface, appear to be opposed to any kind of change in female-male relations. Strengthened by such comprehension, we might more successfully formulate explanations, arguments, and appeals that will enable at least some women to understand that their need for romances is a function of their dependent status as women and of their acceptance of love and marriage as the only routes to female fulfillment. If they can be persuaded of this, they may find it within themselves to seek their fulfillment elsewhere, to develop a more varied array of their abilities, and to demand the right to use them in the public sphere ordinarily controlled by men.

Although romances provide their readers with a good deal more than can be delineated here, again, the dynamic surrounding their status as both a figurative and a literal escape from present reality indicates that romance reading may not function as a purely conservative force. In fact, it appears to be a complex form of behavior that allows incremental change in social beliefs at the

same time that it restores the claim of traditional institutions to satisfy a woman's most basic needs. It is true, certainly, that the romantic story itself reaffirms the perfection of romance and marriage. But it is equally clear that the constant need for such an assertion derives not from a sense of security and complete faith in the status quo, but from deep dissatisfaction with the meager benefits apportioned to women by the very institutions legitimated in the narrative. When romances are used to deny temporarily the demands of a family, when they are understood as the signs of a woman's ability to do something for herself alone, when they are valued because they provide her with the opportunity to indulge in positive feelings about a heroine and women in general, then their popularity ought to be seen as evidence of an unvoiced protest that important needs are not being properly met. It is the *act or event* of romance reading that permits the Smithton woman to reject those extremely taxing duties and expectations she normally shoulders with equanimity. In picking up her book, she asserts her independence from her role, affirms that she has a right to be self-interested for a while, and declares that she deserves pleasure as much as anyone else.

To be sure, this kind of defiance is relatively mild, because the woman need not pit herself against her husband and family over the crucial issues of food preparation, childcare, financial decisions, and so on. But for women who have lived their lives quiescently believing that female self-interest is exactly coterminous with the interest of a husband and children, the ability to reserve time for the self, even if it is to read a romance, is a significant and positive step away from the institutional prison that demands denial and sublimation of female identity. It is unfortunate, of course, that this temporary assertion of independence is made possible only because the manifest content of the novels holds out the promise of eventual satisfaction and fulfillment in the most conventional of terms. As a consequence, the Smithton women materially express their discontent with their restricted social world by indulging in a fantasy that vicariously supplies the pleasure and attention they need, and thereby effectively staves off the necessity of presenting those needs as demands in the real world. Simultaneously, the romance short-circuits the impulse to connect the desire to escape with the institution of marriage or with male intolerance precisely because it demonstrates that a woman like the heroine can admit the truth of the feminist discovery that women *are* intelligent and independent and yet

continue to be protected paternally by a man.

At this particular historical moment, then, romance reading seems to permit American women to adopt some of the changing attitudes about gender roles by affirming that those attitudes are compatible with the social institution of marriage as it is presently constituted. This is not to say, however, that its success at papering over this troublesome contradiction is guaranteed to last forever. Perhaps it will not if we begin to admit the extent of romance readers' dissatisfaction and to point out that discontent not only to ourselves, but also to the women who have made the romance business into a multimillion dollar industry. If we do not take up this challenge, we run the risk of conceding the fight and of admitting the impossibility of creating a world where the vicarious pleasure supplied by romance reading would be unnecessary.

NOTES

I would like to thank all of the participants at the November 1981 American Studies Association Session in Memphis on Remembering the Reader for their perceptive comments and questions about an earlier version of this article. Their remarks were immensely helpful to me as I tried to refine the logic of my argument about romance reading. I would also like to express my gratitude to Peter Rabinowitz and to two anonymous reviewers for *Feminist Studies* for their written responses to that same early draft. Their thoughtful readings have helped me to improve both the argument and expression of this article.

1. Harlequin Enterprises Limited, Annual Report 1979, 5. Can be obtained from Harlequin Corporate Office, 220 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3J5.
2. Although Harlequin Enterprises, Fawcett Books (CBS Publications), and Silhouette Books (Simon & Schuster) have conducted market research analyses of their prospec-

tive audience, none of these companies will disclose any but the most general of their findings. For descriptions of the three studies, see the following articles: on Harlequin, Phyllis Berman, "They Call Us Illegitimate," *Forbes* 121 (6 Mar. 1978): 38; on Fawcett's study, see Daisy Maryles, "Fawcett Launches Romance Imprint with Brand Marketing Techniques," *Publishers Weekly* 216 (3 Sept. 1979): 69-70; on the Silhouette study, see Michiko Kakutani, "New Romance Novels Are Just What Their Readers Ordered," *New York Times*, 11 Aug. 1980, C13.

3. Ann Barr Snitow, "Mass Market Romances: Pornography for Women is Different," *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring/Summer 1979): 150.
4. Ann Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," *The New Republic*, 30 Aug. 1980, 25-29; Tania Modleski, "The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances," *Signs* 5 (Spring 1980): 435-48.
5. The complete findings of this study are summarized and interpreted in my forthcoming book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*.
6. For a discussion of the lingering influence of New Criticism poetics, see Jane P. Tompkins, "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," in a volume she also edited, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 201-26; see also Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
7. Two good collections of essays that survey recent work on the theory of the reader have recently appeared. See the volume edited by Tompkins mentioned in note 6 and Susan Suleiman and Inge Crozman, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
8. Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 322. It was Fish's work that persuaded me of the necessity of investigating what real readers do with texts when the goal of analysis is an explanatory statement about why people read certain kinds of books.
9. I do not believe that attention to the way real readers understand their books and their reading activities obviates the need for further critical probing and interpretation of potential unconscious responses to the texts in question. I also do not believe that an adequate cultural analysis should stop at such an account of their conscious behavior. What careful attention to that conscious response can produce, however, is a more accurate description of the texts to which the women do in fact consciously and unconsciously respond. In possession of such a description, the critic can then subject it to further analysis in an effort to discern the ways in which the text-as-read might also address unconscious needs, desires, and wishes which she, the critic has reason to believe her reader may experience. This procedure is little different from that pursued by an anthropologist whose goals are not merely the description and explanation of a people's behavior, but understanding of it as well. As Clifford Geertz has pointed out, descriptions of cultural behavior "must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews or Frenchmen . . . place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them." Descriptions of romance reading, it might be added, should be no different. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Cultures," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 14.
10. All information about the community has been taken from the 1970 U.S. Census of the Population *Characteristics of the Population*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Social and Economic Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, May 1972. I have rounded off some of the statistics to disguise the identity of the town.

11. Table 1. Select Demographic Data: Customers of Dorothy Evans

Category	Responses	Number	%
Age	(42) Less than 25	2	5
	25-44	26	62
	45-54	12	28
	55 and older	2	5
Marital Status	(40) Single	3	8
	Married	33	82
	Widowed/separated	4	10
Parental Status	(40) Children	35	88
	No children	4	12
Age at Marriage	Mean-19.9		
	Median-19.2		
Educational Level	(40) High school diploma	21	53
	1-3 years of college	10	25
	College degree	8	20
Work Status	(40) Full or part time	18	45
	Child or home care	17	43
Family Income	(38) \$14,999 or below	2	5
	15,000-24,999	18	47
	25,000-49,999	14	37
	50,000 +	4	11
Church Attendance	(40) Once or more a week	15	38
	1-3 times per month	8	20
	A few times per year	9	22
	Not in two(2) years	8	20

Note: (40) indicates the number of responses per questionnaire category. A total of 42 responses per category is the maximum possible. Percent calculations are all rounded to the nearest whole number.

12. Quoted by Barbara Brotman, "Ah, Romance! Harlequin Has an Affair for Its Readers," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 June 1980. All other details about the Harlequin audience have been taken from this article. Similar information was also given by Harlequin to Margaret Jensen, whose dissertation, "Women and Romantic Fiction: A Case Study of Harlequin Enterprises, Romances, and Readers" (Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 1980), is the only other study I know of to attempt an investigation of romance readers. Because Jensen encountered the same problems in trying to assemble a representative sample, she relied on interviews with randomly selected readers at a used bookstore. However, the similarity of her findings to those in my study indicates that the lack of statistical representativeness in the case of real readers does not necessarily preclude applying those readers' attitudes and opinions more generally to a large portion of the audience for romantic fiction.

13. See Brotman. All other details about the Silhouette audience have been drawn from Brotman's article. The similarity of the Smithton readers to other segments of the romance audience is explored in greater depth in my book. However, the only other available study of romance readers which includes some statistics, Peter H. Mann's *The*

Romantic Novel: A Survey of Reading Habits (London: Mills & Boon, 1969), indicates that the British audience for such fiction has included in the past more older women as well as younger, unmarried readers than are represented in my sample. However, Mann's survey raises suspicions because it was sponsored by the company that markets the novels and because its findings are represented in such a polemical form. For an analysis of Mann's work, see Jensen, 389-92.

14. Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc., *The 1978 Consumer Research Study on Reading and Bookpurchasing*, prepared for the Book Industry Study Group, October 1978, 122. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine from the Yankelovich study findings what proportion of the group of romance readers consumed a number similar to that read by the Smithton women. Also, because the interviewers distinguished between gothics and romances on the one hand and historicals on the other, the figures are probably not comparable. Indeed, the average of nine may be low since some of the regular "historical" readers may actually be readers of romances.

15. The Smithton readers are not avid television watchers. Ten of the women, for instance, claimed to watch television less than three hours per week. Fourteen indicated that they watch four to seven hours a week, while eleven claimed eight to fourteen hours of weekly viewing. Only four said they watch an average of fifteen to twenty hours a week, while only one admitted viewing twenty-one or more hours a week. When asked how often they watch soap operas, twenty-four of the Smithton women checked "never," five selected "rarely," seven chose "sometimes," and four checked "often." Two refused to answer the question.

16. The Smithton readers' constant emphasis on the educational value of romances was one of the most interesting aspects of our conversations, and chapter 3 of *Reading the Romance*, discusses it in depth. Although their citation of the instructional value of romances to a college professor interviewer may well be a form of self-justification, the women also provided ample evidence that they do in fact learn and remember facts about geography, historical customs, and dress from the books they read. Their emphasis on this aspect of their reading, I might add, seems to betoken a profound curiosity and longing to know more about the exciting world beyond their suburban homes.

17. For material on housewives' attitudes toward domestic work and their duties as family counselors, see Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1975) and *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1975); see also Mirra Komorovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage* (New York: Vintage, 1967) and Helena Znaniecki Lopata, *Occupation: Housewife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

18. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). I would like to express my thanks to Sharon O'Brien for first bringing Chodorow's work to my attention and for all those innumerable discussions in which we debated the merits of her theory and its applicability to women's lives, including our own.

19. After developing my argument that the Smithton women are seeking ideal romances which depict the generally tender treatment of the heroine, I discovered Beatrice Faust's *Women, Sex, and Pornography: A Controversial Study* (New York: MacMillan, 1981) in which Faust points out that certain kinds of historical romances tend to portray their heroes as masculine, but emotionally expressive. Although I think Faust's overall argument has many problems, not the least of which is her heavy reliance on hormonal differences to explain variations in female and male sexual preferences, I do agree that some women prefer the detailed description of romantic love and tenderness to the careful anatomical representations characteristic of male pornography.

20. Maryles, 69.
21. Ten of the twenty books in the sample for the ideal romance were drawn from the Smithton group's answers to requests that they list their three favorite romances and authors. The following books received the highest number of individual citations: *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), *Shanna* (1977), *The Wolf and the Dove* (1974), and *Ashes in the Wind* (1979), all by Kathleen Woodiwiss; *The Proud Breed* (1978) by Celeste DeBlasis; *Moonstruck Madness* (1977) by Laurie McBain; *Visions of the Damned* (1979) by Jacqueline Marten; *Fires of Winter* (1980) by Joanna Lindsey; and *Ride the Thunder* (1980) by Janet Dailey. I also added *Summer of the Dragon* (1979) by Elizabeth Peters because she was heavily cited as a favorite author although none of her titles were specifically singled out. Three more titles were added because they were each voluntarily cited in the oral interviews more than five times. These included *The Black Lyon* (1980) by Jude Deveraux, *The Fulfillment* (1980) by LaVyrle Spencer, and *The Diplomatic Lover* (1971) by Elsie Lee. Because Dot gave very high ratings in her newsletter to the following, these last seven were added: *Green Lady* (1981) by Leigh Ellis; *Dreamtide* (1981) by Katherine Kent; *Made For Each Other* (1981) by Parris Afton Bonds; *Miss Hungerford's Handsome Hero* (1981) by Noel Vreeland Carter; *The Sea Treasure* (1979) by Elisabeth Barr; *Moonlight Variations* (1981) by Florence Stevenson; and *Nightway* (1981) by Janet Dailey.

Because I did not include a formal query in the questionnaire about particularly bad romances, I drew the twenty titles from oral interviews and from Dot's newsletter reviews. All of the following were orally cited as "terrible" books, labeled by Dot as part of "the garbage dump," or given less than her "excellent" or "better" ratings: *Alyx* (1977) by Lolah Burford; *Winter Dreams* by Brenda Trent; *A Second Chance at Love* (1981) by Margaret Ripy; *High Fashion* (1981) by Victoria Kelrich; *Captive Splendors* (1980) by Fern Michaels; *Bride of the Baja* (1980) by Jocelyn Wilde; *The Second Sunrise* (1981) by Francesca Greer; *Adora* (1980) by Bertrice Small; *Desire's Legacy* (1981) by Elizabeth Bright; *The Court of the Flowering Peach* (1981) by Janette Radcliffe; *Savannah* (1981) by Helen Jean Burn; *Passion's Blazing Triumph* (1980) by Melissa Hepburne; *Purity's Passion* (1977) by Janette Seymour; *The Wanton Fires* (1979) by Meriol Trevor; and *Bitter Eden* (1979) by Sharon Salvato. Four novels by Rosemary Rogers were included in the sample because her work was cited repeatedly by the Smithton women as the worst produced within the generic category. The titles were *Sweet Savage Love* (1974), *Dark Fires* (1975), *Wicked Loving Lies* (1976), and *The Insiders* (1979).

22. See Faust, *passim*.

23. There are two exceptions to this assertion. Both *The Proud Breed* by Celeste DeBlasis and *The Fulfillment* by LaVyrle Spencer detail the involvement of the principal characters with other individuals. Their treatment of the subject, however, is decidedly different from that typically found in the bad romances. Both of these books are highly unusual in that they begin by detailing the extraordinary depth of the love shared by hero and heroine, who marry early in the story. The rest of each book chronicles the misunderstandings that arise between heroine and hero. In both books the third person narrative always indicates very clearly to the reader that the two are still deeply in love with each other and are acting out of anger, distrust, and insecurity.
24. In the romances considered awful by the Smithton readers, this reinterpretation takes place much later in the story than in the ideal romances. In addition, the behavior that is explained away is more violent, aggressively cruel, and obviously vicious. Although the hero is suddenly transformed by the heroine's reinterpretation of his motives, his tenderness, gentleness, and care are not emphasized in the "failed romances" as they are in their ideal counterparts.

25. Modleski has also argued that "the mystery of male motives" is a crucial concern in all romantic fiction (p. 439). Although she suggests, as I will here, that the process through which male misbehavior is reinterpreted in a more favorable light is a justification or legitimization of such action, she does not specifically connect its centrality in the plot to a reader's need to use such a strategy in her own marriage. While there are similarities between Modleski's analysis and that presented here, she emphasizes the negative, disturbing effects of romance reading on readers. In fact, she claims, the novels "end up actually intensifying conflicts for the reader" (p. 445) and cause women to "reemerge feeling . . . more guilty than ever" (p. 447). While I would admit that romance reading might create unconscious guilt, I think it absolutely essential that any explanation of such behavior take into account the substantial amount of evidence indicating that women not only *enjoy* romance reading, but feel replenished and reconstituted by it as well.

26. Jude Deveraux, *The Black Lyon* (New York: Avon, 1980), 66.