A Natural History of the Romance Novel

PAMELA REGIS

University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia

3

The Definition

A romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines.

As this definition is neither widely known nor accepted, it requires no little defense as well as some teasing out of distinctions between the term put forward here, "romance novel," and terms in widespread use, such as "romance" and "novel." I begin with the broadest term, "romance."

The term "romance" is confusingly inclusive, meaning one thing in a survey of medieval literature, and another, not entirely distinct, in a contemporary bookstore. Ask at a bookstore for a copy of the *Morte Darthur* and the clerk will take you to the "literature" section; a glance at the book's introduction will inform you that Malory's prose account of King Arthur is called a "romance." Ask for a romance and the clerk will take you to the (generally) large section of the store stocked with Harlequins, Silhouettes and single-title releases by writers such as Nora Roberts, Amanda Quick, and Janet Dailey. Can Malory's *Morte Darthur* and Quick's *Deception* both be romances? They can be and are, but only *Deception* is also a romance novel as I am defining the term here.

Robert Ellrich hazards a definition of the old, encompassing term "romance": "the story of individual human beings pursuing their precarious existence within the circumscription of social, moral, and various other this-worldly problems. . . . the romance . . . means to show the reader what steps must be taken in order to reach a desired goal, represented often though not always in the guise of a spouse" (274–75). A bookstore clerk

acting on a request for this sort of book could plausibly lead a customer to most of the fiction (and all of the self-help books) in the store.

"Romance" in this its broadest sense begins at least as early as the Greeks. Margaret Anne Doody describes texts as old as the fourth century B.C. that tell a story of passionate love, separation, and triumph (6). Jean Radford notes that this larger sense of romance includes "Greek 'romances,' medieval romance, Gothic bourgeois romances of the 1840s, late nineteenth century women's romances and mass-produced romance fiction now" (8). Northrop Frye explains, "In the Greek romance we find stories of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies about the future contortions of the plot, foster parents, adventures which involve capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, recognition of the true identity of the hero and his eventual marriage with the heroine." The conventions of the romance are very stable; the basic story, Frye notes, has not changed in the centuries that followed its advent in ancient times (*Secular* 4). For Frye, the essence of romance is the "idealized world" it embodies in its texts (*Anatomy* 367). All popular genres—mysteries, thrillers, horror, science fiction, and, of course, the romance novel itself—are romances in this broader sense. It is this larger group of texts that Radford refers to when she defines the romance as "a non-mimetic prose narrative focusing on emotion" (8). Combining these definitions we have the romance presenting an ideal world, whose representation takes considerable liberties with verisimilitude (mimesis) and focuses on emotion. Describing not the text but "the reader, the writer, and their experience," Kathleen Gilles Seidel claims that "fantasy is the most important element in the appeal of popular fiction" (159). In Seidel's account of readers and authors, the idealized world, the non-mimetic representation, combined with the focus on emotion, become "fantasy." These definitions of romance in the largest sense focus on what is depicted—an idealized world—and how—non-mimetically—and on that depiction's status in the minds of authors and readers—fantasy. This ancient, ideal, non-mimetic fantasy world can be represented in verse, either dramatic or narrative, or in prose. It includes a huge variety of texts including most of the popular works ever written. But it groups together rather than distinguishing Quick's *Deception* and Stephen King's *Dead Zone*.

If "romance" presents one set of confusions to the romance novel's definition, then "novel," that relatively new form that now dominates literature, confuses in a different way. Is a novel a romance or are the two forms distinct? This question has preoccupied critics since the English novel began its advance toward literary preeminence. The term "novel," came into

use in the late seventeenth century. The next century saw the burgeoning of the novel's popularity, and by 1785 Clara Reeve in her *Progress of Romance* felt a need to distinguish the older form, romance, from the upstart novel. She defined the novel as "a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written," whereas the romance "in lofty and elevated language, describes what has never happened nor is likely to" (111). This is the "ideal, non-mimetic, fantasy" world that we have seen in later definitions of the romance. Reeve's definition of romance is taken up by Sir Walter Scott and Nathaniel Hawthorne (among others) in the nineteenth century, and Joseph Conrad in the twentieth. Deborah Ross claims that this novel/romance distinction has been manipulated to argue that women always write the wrong sort of books—"novelists" such as Henry Fielding could scorn "romancers" such as Eliza Haywood. Then, years later, when the aesthetic wheel had turned, "romancer" Sir Walter Scott scorned "novelist" Jane Austen (2–5). This slippery distinction, which Ellrich has called "critically distortive and ideologically pernicious," is of little help in defining the romance novel (277). Doody collapses the distinction as well, by applying the newer term "novel" to the ancient texts she studies: "the Novel as a form of literature in the West has a continuous history of about two thousand years" (1). The distinction hangs on "mimesis," but when, in a given work, mimesis shades off into the ideal of fantasy without actually becoming supernatural, whether or not the work is mimetic is a matter of some judgment, and the assigning of one or the other term—romance or novel—becomes invidious. For example, romancers Hawthorne and Melville used the distinction to assume the aesthetic high ground; they looked down upon the mere "novelists" in the area below. This distinction tells us little, however, about the texts that either camp writes, including romance novels.

When critics consider "romance" and "novel" together, that is when they narrow their scrutiny to prose fiction love stories, they begin to focus on the elements most associated with the popular romance novel: love and the happy ending. In his brief glance at the romance novel, which he calls "the romance," John Cawelti offers this definition of the genre in its popular incarnation: "The crucial defining characteristic of romance is not that it stars a female but that its organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman. . . . The moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (*Adventure* 41–42). Kay Mussell offers *Pamela* as an early example of the romance novel and notes that "the central plot

device of vicissitudes and trials giving way to a happy marriage is standard for such books" (*Women's Gothic* 3). She notes that all romance novels "focus on love, courtship, and marriage" (*Fantasy* 29). Radway polls the "Smithton" readers who respond that "a happy ending" and "a slowly but consistently developing love between hero and heroine" are the two most important "ingredients" in a romance novel. These readers also "project themselves into the story," they "become the heroine" (67). Deborah Chappel identifies the "basic structural definition" of the romance novel: "the central conflict is always about the love relationship between the hero and heroine and the hero and heroine always end up together" (7–8). These definitions have in common, first, love between a heroine and hero; second, the triumphant, permanent, happy ending, usually in marriage; and finally, discounted by Cawelti but emphasized by the readers Radway studied, the importance of the heroine.

Recall my definition: *A romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines.* This definition focuses on the narrative essentials of the romance novel—those events, including the happy ending, without which there is an incomplete rendering of the genre. In naming the narrative elements of "courtship" and "betrothal" and in emphasizing the heroine, this definition departs from earlier efforts to define the romance novel. "Courtship" and "betrothal" translate the love and happy ending elements of these earlier critics' definitions into narrative events. Heroines and heroes in love conduct a courtship—that is the action in the novel that expresses the love noted by all of the critics. Courting couples become betrothed—that is the action that leads to the universally endorsed happy ending. The wedding itself is often omitted, but it is always promised in a betrothal. This shift from a statement of theme ("love relationship") to a designation of narrative elements makes the identification of romance novels straightforward. If the narrative elements are present, a given work is a romance novel.

The shift to narrative elements also invites an "opening out" of the one-sentence definition of the romance novel by identifying the common elements of the romance. This identification, in turn, invites analysis, permitting, as it does, a comparison of works across time and space and directing the focus of that comparison to the meaning of the action that makes a romance novel a *romance* novel. Such comparative analysis of plot elements has focused heretofore almost entirely on sex scenes, which are optional or accidental occurrences in the romance novel. See the early analysis of such scenes in Germaine Greer (179–83) and in Ann Barr Snitow who argues that such scenes are pornography (151–60). Carol Thurston provides the most extended examinination of such scenes in *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity.* A larger narrative surrounds such scenes and precedes the highly scrutinized ending. Analyzing the essential elements of this narrative will yield a far more balanced, significant view of the romance novel. This opening out will also explain the final element of the proposed definition: its focus on the heroine.

A WORD ABOUT FORMULA

The term "formula" is often confused with "genre," and this confusion is particularly widespread in critical work on the romance novel. "Formula" denotes a subset of a genre. It is narrower than a genre. The elements of the genre are all present in the formula, but their range of possible embodiment has been constricted.

The connotations of "formula" are quite negative. The term implies hack-work, subliterature, and imagination reduced to a mechanism for creating "product." An indication of how loaded this term is can be gathered from the sentence, "*Pride and Prejudice* is a work of formula fiction." In some meanings attached to the term by critics of the romance novel this sentence is denotatively accurate, no matter how connotatively absurd. The term "formula" has its place. It is not, however, a synonym for genre, which is a less loaded, more accurate term for the romance novel.

The romance novel has often been described as being written according to a formula. When, for example, Gabriele Linke states "category romances are based on variations of the same narrative archetype—the romance formula" (197), she follows the lead of John Cawelti, who inaugurated the contemporary discussion of the genres of popular fiction and who used the word "formula" to denote these genres. Cawelti was interested in a variety of "popular" forms and devoted very little space to the romance novel. This use of the term obscures the relationship between popular titles and canonical works that no one regards as "formula" fiction, but that, in fact, share what Linke calls a "narrative archetype." It also highlights the inessential "accidents" of the formula and obscures the underlying essential elements of the genre. This emphasis on accident invites criticism that misses the point of the romance novel.

A second source for the "formula" designation is tipsheets—the descriptions of publishers' separate lines issued to guide writers. Modleski

cites tipsheets in her discussion of the "formula" in Harlequin romances (35–36). These guidelines do indeed specify the requirements of a given formula, which makes works written to these specifications formula fiction. But the issue is complex. Not all writers of category fiction use the guidelines. Nora Roberts, one of the most successful writers of Silhouette romances in a variety of that Silhouette's lines, does not (Mussell, "Interview with Roberts" 162). The current Silhouette "Editorial Guidelines" never offers a description of the larger genre, the romance novel, itself. Instead, it lists descriptions such as the following:

> SILHOUETTE YOURS TRULY. 50,000 words . . .
> Category romance, very contemporary, fast-paced, fun, flirtatious, entertaining, upbeat and sexy. Real-life hero and heroine meet directly or indirectly through a form of written communication. Let romantic conflict build to a satisfying happy ending. Marriage not required.

This tipsheet does define a formula within the larger genre to which such a book would also belong—the romance novel. A Silhouette Yours Truly must include a meeting of heroine and hero which takes place via written communication. This is just one possible fulfillment of a narrative element that every romance novel contains—the meeting of heroine and hero. It seems reasonable to speak of formulas within the romance novel genre. They provide a description of what Nora Roberts calls the "culture" of each series (Mussell, "Interview with Roberts" 162). Of course, the formula still satisfies the requirements of the genre as a whole: it is a wholly contained subset of that larger genre.

If "formula" is sometimes substituted for "genre," the reverse also happens. What is actually a formula, a subset of a larger genre, is mistaken for that larger genre, and conclusions based on a narrow set of texts are indiscriminately applied to the larger genre. Radway makes this error. Like all formulas, hers is too narrow to define the genre as a whole. Like many, it leads to destructive conclusions about the larger genre when its strictures are applied beyond the narrow list of texts to which it applies.

Radway lists the "thirteen logically related functions" that account for the heroine's "transformation" in the romances designated as ideal in her 1980 survey of a group of romance readers. The first function she lists in "the narrative structure of the ideal romance" is "the heroine's social identity is destroyed" (134). Radway's description of the ideal romance is formulaic rather than generic because it expresses only one possible fulfillment

of the genre's initial action—the disordering of the old society that will be replaced at the novel's end by a new society, represented by the union of heroine and hero. Narrower than genres, formulas describe a possible (and perhaps widespread) embodiment of a given element of a literary type rather than describing all possible embodiments of that element. The test is simple: if we can name any romance novel that does not begin with the destruction of the heroine's social identity, then Radway's description is formulaic, not generic. *Pride and Prejudice* is such a book; it does not begin with the destruction of Elizabeth Bennet's social identity. (Elizabeth's social identity is threatened by Lydia's elopement, but this event does not occur at the beginning of the novel, and does not, ultimately, result in that identity's "destruction.") Radway's description, then, is a formula, a subset of the genre. Yet her conclusions concern the genre as a whole. To cite one instance of many, she claims: "*the romance* continues to justify the social placement of women that has led to the very discontent that is the source of their desire to read romances" (217, emphasis added).

4

The Definition Expanded

Chapter Four

Thus far interpretation of the romance novel has focused heavily on the ending in part because the other essential narrative elements of the form have remained unidentified. A romance novel—a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines—requires certain narrative events. They are essential, for without them the work is not a *romance* novel. In this chapter I expand my basic definition to identify and define the eight essential narrative elements of the romance novel as well as the three incidental elements that sometimes occur and are typical of the romance novel, if not essential to it. In identifying these narrative elements I provide critics with an expanded vocabulary for discussing the romance novel. I hope, too, that identifying the essential elements will direct discussion of the genre to its core and permit critics to view distracting particulars—such as the sex scenes—in the context of the genre's essential elements—those that establish a given work of prose fiction as a romance novel.

I have chosen to illustrate each element with episodes from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which fulfills the requirements of the basic definition: it is a work of prose fiction, and it tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines—of Elizabeth Bennet, in depth; of her sister Jane Bennet, in outline; of another sister, Lydia Bennet, and of Elizabeth's friend Charlotte Lucas, in fragments. It is probably the best-known

canonical romance novel. Its familiarity to many readers will aid in understanding the elements I identify. Its masterpiece status will help lay to rest the notion that all romance novels are hack-work. To counter the opposite idea—that contemporary romance novels must be mere corruptions of the great works of the past such as *Pride and Prejudice*—in a final section I analyze a contemporary romance novel, Kathleen Gilles Seidel's *Again* (1994), to demonstrate the continuity of the form and its vitality in the hands of a popular novelist.

The essential narrative elements of the romance novel derive in part from the larger genre to which it belongs. Just as narrow romance formulas are subsets of the more extensive romance novel, the romance novel itself is a subset of both comedy and of romance in its larger sense (as we saw earlier). The boundary between these quite extensive genres—between comedy and romance—is not sharply drawn. Rather, Northrop Frye tells us, "comedy blends insensibly into romance" (*Anatomy* 162). The romance novel is located in this area of overlap between comedy and romance in the larger sense. Here the sublime absurdity of comedy is not completely pure, and the ideal fantasy of romance in the larger sense has not completely faded. In drama and film a genre has been named using these two sweeping terms: Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is a "romantic comedy," as is George Stevens's *Woman of the Year.* Frye links the romance's plot to comedy's: "A romance is normally comic, in the sense that usually the heroine's wiles are successful and the story ends with marriage or some kind of deliverance" (*Secular* 92). The essential elements of the romance novel's plot can best be identified and analyzed through the set of narrative events linked to comedy's ending in marriage with suitable changes made to account for the heroine's central role in the romance novel.

The writers of Greek New Comedy, a form that emerged three hundred years before Christ, established the pattern of comedy, which the romance novel would modify some twenty-one centuries later. For most of this time comedy's protagonists have been male. "What normally happens," Frye tells us, "is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will." The context of comedy, its setting, is society. Comedy's "movement . . . is usually . . . from one kind of society to another" (*Anatomy* 163). This, then, is the usual sequence that the reader encounters—an old society (which is often corrupt, decadent, weak, or superannuated), a hero, his intended, paternal opposition to his intended becoming his wife, a removal of that opposition,

the hero's triumphal betrothal, and a wedding symbolizing a new, vital society.

Although the heroine is essential to the sort of comedy Frye is delineating, she is not the focus. She is, after all, the object of the hero's desires, not the one desiring. The romance novel puts the heroine at the center of the book, at least coequal with the hero, or occupying more of the spotlight than he does. Her desires are central.

What are the consequences of this shift to a female protagonist? The typical conflict in comedy between the hero and his father, in which the father as *senex iratus* (angry old man) blocks his son's attachment to the heroine, and, in some instances, pursues the heroine himself, loses its psychological force. The primal conflict between father and the protagonist, his son, in competition for the same woman changes beyond recognition if that protagonist is a female. In the romance novel, the protagonist, who is the heroine, and her same-sex parent, her mother, are rarely in competition for the same man. Such situations do exist; however, in most romance novels the comedic conflict shifts from the parent-child rivalry of the *senex* and hero to a heroine who is without parents (they are dead as in *Jane Eyre*) or practically so (they are absent from the scene as in *Pamela* or ineffective as in *Pride and Prejudice*) and who must struggle against other impediments to achieve union with the hero. Male comedic protagonists, who typically enjoy full freedom outside of their families, must overcome their fathers. Female comedic protagonists—the heroines of romance novels included—must overcome the laws, dangers, and limitations imposed upon them by the state, the church, or society, including the family (Jane Eyre had no immediate family; Pamela Andrews and Elizabeth Bennet had useless families). For most of the history of the romance novel, these restrictions were placed upon the heroine simply because she was female. The romance novel's focus on the heroine, then, is a focus on women's problems.

Another consequence of a female protagonist hinges upon the freedom that characterizes the final society in comedy. Frye tells us, "The society emerging at the conclusion of comedy represents . . . a kind of moral norm, or pragmatically free society. Its ideals are seldom defined or formulated. . . .We are simply given to understand that the newly-married couple will live happily ever after, or that at any rate they will get along in a relatively . . . clear-sighted manner" (*Anatomy* 169). This creation of a couple that gets along clear sightedly is the goal of most romance novels. Accomplishing this "pragmatic freedom" is, Frye claims, "a movement from illusion to reality . . . [h]ence the importance of the theme of creating and dispelling

illusion in comedy: the illusions caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage" (170). Like her male counterpart, the female protagonist achieves freedom at the end of the work. Unlike him, she does not so much throw off the threat of an overbearing parent in competition for the same goal as she rejects various encumbrances imposed by the old society to arrive at a place where society stops hindering her. Her movement in the romance is from a state of unfreedom to one of freedom. This freedom is limited—"pragmatic" as Frye would have it. For a heroine, especially, it is not absolute. It is freedom, nonetheless.

THE EIGHT ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE ROMANCE NOVEL

Eight narrative events take a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free. In one or more scenes, romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. These elements are essential.

In addition, the romance novel may include scenes depicting a scapegoat exiled, bad characters converted to goodness, and the wedding, dance, or fete that traditionally ends the comedy. These elements are accidental—optional—although they occur often enough to be characteristic of the romance novel.

Elements both essential and accidental can appear in any order. The wedding between heroine and hero, for example, can occur before any of the other elements. In this case the resulting marriage of convenience must overcome barriers to become a true marriage. Elements can also be doubled and even tripled in the same scene or action; that is, a single action can accomplish the narrative purpose of two or more elements. Declaration and betrothal, for instance, often occur together, as heroine and hero declare their love and propose in the same scene. A single element can also occur more than once. For example, a novel can depict more than one proposal between the same heroine and hero. In addition, any element can be diminished, so that it is merely reported after it happens "off"; that is, a writer, without dramatizing a certain element, without representing it with action and dialogue, can, in the voice of the narrator or one of the characters, let

the reader know that it has happened. Conversely, any element can be expanded to any length and dramatized in detail with action and dialogue, thus becoming a governing element of the novel. This flexibility is as evident in romance novels, which are often accused of being all the same, as it is in any other genre. Indeed, looking at the embodiment of any given element in any given romance novel can be key to understanding what is at stake in that novel.

Society Defined

Near the beginning of the novel, the society that the heroine and hero will confront in their courtship is defined for the reader. This society is in some way flawed; it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and hero. Sometimes, as in some Harlequins and Silhouettes, this society is barely sketched—the heroine and hero may be the only representatives of it that we see. In Victorian novels it can be a large community or even an entire nation. In historical romance novels the society is carefully drawn and its unfamiliar principles explained.

In *Pride and Prejudice,* Austen sketches this society in her first chapter in which Mrs. Bennet tells her husband that Darcy and Bingley, the novel's heroes, have moved into a neighboring estate. Mrs. Bennet's talk of Bingley's income and her report of the preemptive visit of Sir William and Lady Lucas, the other leading family in the neighborhood, to the rich young bachelors is the primary vehicle for the reader's construction of the initial condition of society in this novel. As much as Mrs. Bennet discloses in her short conversation with her husband, a great deal of the information needed to complete this picture of late eighteenth-century country life would have been in the mind of Austen's contemporary reader. The scene or scenes defining the society establishes the status quo which the heroine and hero must confront in their attempt to court and marry and which, by their union, they symbolically remake.

The Meeting

Usually near the beginning of the novel, but also sometimes presented in flashback, the heroine and hero meet for the first time. Some hint of the conflict to come is often introduced. In *Pride and Prejudice,* Elizabeth and Darcy, as well as Jane and Bingley, meet at the ball at Meryton. Bingley dances every dance. In the gathered society of his new neighborhood his actions bespeak friendliness, and dancing itself is a symbol of harmony. Darcy's behavior bespeaks unfriendliness and his refusal to dance with any-

one except the ladies of his own party is a symbol of disharmony. He makes this discord personal when Elizabeth overhears him saying of her, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me" (9). Thus begins the conflict between Elizabeth and Darcy, the barrier to their eventual betrothal.

The Barrier

A series of scenes often scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry. The romance novel's conflict often consists entirely of this barrier between the heroine and hero. The elements of the barrier can be external, a circumstance that exists outside of a heroine or a hero's mind, or internal, a circumstance that comes from within either or both.

External barriers include elements of the setting, especially the society in power at the beginning of the work, as well as the heroine or hero's family, the economic situation of either or both halves of the couple, and coincidence. Setting includes geography—physical separation is sometimes part of the barrier—as well as society and its rules. In older comedies the *senex* often embodies these strictures in his opposition to the match between heroine and hero. Economics includes the income that the heroine and hero can bring to a potential union as well as their prospects for future prosperity. Coincidence includes events, such as a natural disaster, over which the heroine and hero have no control that impede their union. Elements of internal barriers include the attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs held by heroine and hero that prevent the union. Many recent romance novels have barriers that are entirely internal—they grow out of the psychology or subjective state of the heroine and hero.

The barrier drives the romance novel. It is spread throughout most instances of this literary type, and it encompasses a wide variety of issues. Through this element a writer can examine any situation within the heroine's mind or in the world itself. Literally any psychological vice, virtue, or problem, any circumstance of life, whether economic, geographical, or familial can be made a part of the barrier and investigated at whatever length the writer sees fit. At stake in the romance novel, then, is more than the marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice* there are four barriers between the four bridegrooms and brides to be: simple ones between Charlotte and Mr. Collins, between Lydia and Wickham, and between Jane and Bingley, as well as a far more complex one between Elizabeth and Darcy. Multiple heroines mean multiple barriers which the writer can array so as to intersect, comment on each other, echo, contradict, and so on. The barriers between all four couples in *Pride and Prejudice* will later be examined at length (chapter 8), but here a sketch of the barrier between Elizabeth and Darcy will illustrate the concept.

Most of the usual external barriers function at one time or another in their courtship. The society in power at the beginning of the book, best represented by Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, tries to impede the union; she expresses that society's objection to the lowness of Elizabeth's family. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet each act as barrier at one time or another: Mrs. Bennet by her offensive, overbearing fatuousness; Mr. Bennet through his inability to prevent Lydia from bringing scandal down upon the entire family. Money is a consideration. Darcy's £10,000 per year is two hundred times greater than Elizabeth's income from the settlement that she could bring to the union—interest of about £50 per year. There is a false heroine, Caroline Bingley, and a false hero as well, Wickham. Caroline, by seeming to be attached to Darcy, and Wickham by actually attaching himself to Elizabeth, impede the union between heroine and hero. The internal barrier elements are named in the title, of course—Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice prevent them from seeing each other clearly. Overcoming these internal barriers helps to brush aside the external ones. In many romances, *Pride and Prejudice* among them, components of the barrier are in virtually every scene until the heroine and hero are betrothed.

Removal of the barrier usually involves the heroine's freedom from societal, civic, or even religious strictures that prevented the union between her and the hero. This release is an important source of the happiness in the romance novel's happy ending. The barrier's fall is a liberation for the heroine. It is a moment of rejoicing for the reader, whose response to the heroine's freedom is joy.

The Attraction

A scene or series of scenes scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry. The attraction keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier. Attraction can be based on a combination of sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society's expectations, and economic issues. In modern works, these separate motives get lumped together under the rubric "love." Some romance novels interrogate this notion of love, others simply assume it.

In *Pride and Prejudice* we have four instances of attraction. Charlotte and

Mr. Collins, for whom even the temperate term "attraction" is almost too warm, are drawn together because he is an eligible man with connections and economic prospects enough for a rapidly aging near spinster, and she is a suitable wife for a clergyman whose conscience can be at rest after he proposes out of duty to Elizabeth, his distant cousin. Lydia and Wickham are sexually attracted; they actually live together without marrying. They have little else to keep them together, and, despite their marriage, they eventually drift apart. Jane and Bingley each possess a good-natured disposition. In addition, Jane is a great beauty and Bingley is sexually attracted to her. Bingley is also wealthy, although not as rich as his friend Darcy. Elizabeth and Darcy come to share a friendship, a crisis (leading to shared goals and feelings), and sexual attraction (and for Elizabeth, of course, there is the fact that Darcy is one of the richest men in England). The money works ironically—it is not enough of an inducement for Elizabeth the first time Darcy proposes, but the reader is glad it is there the second time he offers his hand, and she accepts him.

The Declaration

The scene or scenes in which the hero declares his love for the heroine, and the heroine her love for the hero, can occur anywhere in the narrative. Their variable placement helps create the variety of plots within the set of possibilities open to the romance novel. Move the declaration scene up, coincident with the meeting scene, and the novel presents a love-at-first-sight situation. Love at first sight is common in hero-centered comedy, where the heroine does not need to be wooed, merely wrested free from societal (especially parental) strictures that prevent the hero from marrying her immediately. Move the declaration to the very end of the novel, and the heroine and hero declare their love for each other after the novel's barrier has been surmounted; often enough, the barrier was their inability or unwillingness to declare for each other, and the declaration scene marks the end of this barrier. With the heroine in the center of the narrative, it usually becomes a story about the courtship, about the choice of a spouse, with the heroine's declaration scene placed correspondingly late. Often, too, there is a separate declaration scene for the hero and the heroine.

Pride and Prejudice provides an instance of this splitting of the declaration. Darcy declares for Elizabeth in the middle of the novel: "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (189). Elizabeth declares for Darcy at the end of the novel: "Elizabeth . . . gave him to

understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances" (366). *Pride and Prejudice* rejects the love at first sight convention, presenting instead the slow development of love and regard between heroine and hero.

Point of Ritual Death

The point of ritual death marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever. The happy ending is most in jeopardy at this point. In coining the phrase "point of ritual death," Frye has noted how often, "comic stories . . . seem to approach a potentially tragic crisis near the end" (*Anatomy* 179).

The heroine is often the target of ritual death, and beneath her very real trials in the narrative is the myth of death and rebirth, which echoes, however remotely, the myth of Persephone. In brief, Persephone, a virgin, is loved by Hades, who abducts her and carries her off to his underworld kingdom of death to be his wife. Her mother, Demeter, goddess of corn and hence of agricultural bounty, searches for her, leaving the earth barren. Persephone is returned to her mother, and fruitfulness is restored to the earth (Hayes 195–200). Just as Persephone must escape the kingdom of death to restore fruitfulness, increase, and fecundity to the entire earth, the romance novel heroine must escape her "death" to live to see her betrothal and the promise of children that it brings. When the romance novel heroine was depicted as a virgin (as she was for most of the genre's history), this restoration of fecundity was made all the more poignant.

Frye notes that this rescue of the heroine from the underworld is sometimes "vestigial, not an element of the plot but a mere change of tone" (*Anatomy* 179). Often enough death itself, or an event equated with death, threatens or actually transpires at this point when the barrier seems insurmountable. The death is, however, ritual. The heroine does not die. She is freed from its presence, and this freedom is the mythic counterpart of the freedom that results from the lifting of the barrier. The reader's response, again, is joy. The reader rejoices in this escape, however symbolic, however merely hinted at.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the point of ritual death is Lydia's elopement with Wickham. From the perspective of the developing relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy, Lydia's timing is perfectly wrong. Austen, writing in

Elizabeth's point of view, tells us, "[N]ever had she so honestly felt that she could have loved [Darcy], as now, when all love must be vain" (278). Lydia's elopement is spoken of by family members in terms that could be used to refer either to a dead sister or to one who is cohabiting with a man who is not her husband. Ever-hopeful Jane asks, "[C]an I suppose her so lost to everything?" (275). The blunter sister, Elizabeth, says, "[S]he is lost forever" (277). During the long search for the fugitive couple, Mr. Collins writes a letter of condolence to his cousin, Mr. Bennet, which puts Lydia's elopement in grim perspective: "The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this" (296–97). Lydia's elopement is spoken of as if it were a death. Elizabeth suffers at the same time a social death, which puts in place an apparently unbridgeable gulf between her and Darcy.

No one actually dies. Lydia is dead to her family—lost like Persephone, willingly abducted by the one truly evil character in the novel. Reaching back as it does to the mythic foundations of narrative, the point of ritual death can evoke a complex response from the reader. Yet the point of ritual death always functions comprehensibly within the narrative. An unsophisticated, inexperienced reader responds to the peril of the situation, or to the darkened mood, even if the mythopoeic meanings do not resonate for her. A more sophisticated reader, or a reader more experienced in reading romance novels, responds to the peril, the mood, and to the repetition of the imagery of death.

The Recognition

In a scene or scenes the author represents the new information that will overcome the barrier. In older comedies, where the opposition to the marriage is paternal, the hero is often recognized—that is, revealed to be of noble parentage—and so worthy to marry the heroine. Sometimes the heroine's true lineage is revealed, or, as in some of Shakespeare's comedies, the heroine's true gender emerges from beneath the man's clothes she has been wearing. In either case the protagonist is recognized for who he or she truly is, and this recognition fells the barrier and permits the betrothal to go forward.

In romance novels, the heroine is at the center of the recognition scene, where any number of things can be "recognized." If the barrier has been external, these impediments are removed or disregarded. Far more common in contemporary romance novels is an interior barrier, in which case the recognition scene consists of the heroine understanding her own psyche better. In the course of the book she has learned to know herself and to distinguish sound perceptions from unsound. She sees the hero clearly and realizes her love for him. Both what is recognized and when it is recognized vary enormously. In an upbeat, rapidly paced book, the recognition scene may be in the last few pages and lead directly to the ending. In a bittersweet, slower-paced book the recognition scene may be quite early, and the barrier, which eventually falls, does not do so quickly.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth's recognition of her own prejudice is paralleled by Darcy's tempering of his own pride. This recognition happens over a series of scenes, beginning near the center of the book. After Elizabeth has read Darcy's long letter explaining his actions towards Wickham, we learn that Elizabeth's views have changed not only regarding Darcy, but regarding herself as well. Elizabeth says to herself, "I have courted prepossession [prejudice] and ignorance, and driven reason away. . . . Till this moment, I never knew myself" (208). Elizabeth's revaluation of Darcy means a simultaneous self-revaluation. At the conclusion of Lydia's marriage contract with Wickham, when it becomes clear that Elizabeth's sister and Darcy's enemy will, indeed, be married, Elizabeth thinks again of Darcy, knowing that a match with him is impossible given the "gulf impassable between them" that Lydia's marriage to Wickham represents. "She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper . . . would have answered all her wishes. It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance" (312). The internal barrier—Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy—has fallen. She had been disguised from herself, prevented from knowing her own mind. Elizabeth recognizes that Darcy has told the truth about Wickham, that he has engineered Wickham's marriage to Lydia, and that she loves him. The heroine is free of the barrier; it falls before her newly recognized state of mind; she is released to act on her love for the hero.

The Betrothal

In a scene or scenes the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the heroine asks the hero, and he accepts. In romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century marriage is not necessary as long as it

is clear that heroine and hero will end up together. If the betrothal is split into a proposal scene and an acceptance scene, the novel's focus often turns inward, to confront the internal barrier that prevents the proposal scene from also being an acceptance scene.

Such is the case with *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy proposes twice. Midway through the book, disastrously, just after declaring himself, he asks for Elizabeth's hand in such a way that she angrily turns him down. In the clearest fantasy element in the novel, Darcy, one of the richest men in England, whose self-absorption and ideas of his own importance have been a life-long fixture of his thinking, asks again at the end of the work. Elizabeth's self-examination has led her to understand him, and she accepts. Together the proposal and the acceptance constitute a betrothal. The heroine's freedom to accept the hero's proposal has been granted her both by her escape from ritual death (a mythical escape) and by her defeat of the barrier (a realistic escape).

THREE ACCIDENTAL ELEMENTS CHARACTERISTIC OF THE ROMANCE NOVEL

These eight essential narrative events provide a romance novel with its basic structure. Without these, the work is not a romance novel. Three other narrative events are frequent but not essential in romance novels: the wedding, dance, or fete; the exile of a scapegoat character; and the conversion of a bad or evil character.

Wedding, Dance, or Fete

In a scene or scenes the promised wedding is depicted, or some other celebration of the new community is staged, such as a dance or a fete. The emphasis here is on inclusion, and this scene is promised in every romance, even if it is not dramatized. Society has reconstituted itself around the new couple(s) and the community comes together to celebrate this. For the heroine, this society represents a place to exercise her newly acquired freedom from ritual death and from the barrier, however compromised that freedom might be by the very society she joins with in celebration.

In *Pride and Prejudice* we get a mere mention of Elizabeth and Jane's wedding: "Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters" (385). The last chapter, however, includes an account of Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy's circle,

offering a portrait of the new society that is the final outcome of the romance novel.

Scapegoat Exiled

In a scene or scenes a representative of wrongheadedness in the romance novel, a character who, wittingly or not, prevents the heroine and hero from marrying, is ejected from the new society formed by their union. In *Pride and Prejudice,* there is no thoroughgoing scapegoat. Wickham is the nearest possibility, but his exile is only partial. "Though Darcy could never receive *him* at Pemberley, yet, for Elizabeth's sake, he assisted him farther in his profession. . . . with the Bingleys they [Wickham and Lydia] . . . frequently staid" (387).

The Bad Converted

In a scene or scenes, we see one or more opponents of the marriage converted to an acceptance of it and incorporated into the society formed by the union at the end of the novel. In *Pride and Prejudice,* Lady Catherine, acting like a scapegoat, at first exiles herself, "all intercourse [between Lady Catherine and the Darcys] was at an end." Elizabeth heals the breach, and Lady Catherine "condescended to wait on them at Pemberley" (388). Aldous Huxley and Jane Murfin, writing the screenplay of the 1940 MGM film version of *Pride and Prejudice,* turn the indignant, disapproving Lady Catherine of the novel into an affectionate (if crusty) guardian to her nephew, Darcy. She not only approves of but also brokers the marriage between him and Elizabeth. In the romance novel, with its emphasis on inclusion, the bad can become good with comparative ease.

THE STRUCTURE OF KATHLEEN GILLES SEIDEL'S *AGAIN*

To demonstrate that the form of the contemporary romance novel is not simply a corruption of timeless masterpieces such as *Pride and Prejudice,* I offer an analysis of Kathleen Gilles Seidel's *Again* (1994). As a student of narrative form—Seidel wrote a dissertation on how novels end—she manipulates these elements more consciously than many authors. Still, her books are commercial. Her presses—Harlequin, Pocket, NAL/Oynx—publish many romance writers with no claim to writing "literary fiction." Seidel incorporates the eight essential elements of romance, and two of the three incidental ones, in a manner so masterful that it leaves no doubt as to the vitality of the form in contemporary hands.

In *Again,* heroine Jenny Cotton is the creator and writer of a soap opera set in the period of the English Regency (1811–20) called *My Lady's Chamber.* The soap opera provides a plot within the novel's plot, and Seidel uses the soap plot to mirror, sometimes ironically, the action in the contemporary plot. Not surprisingly, she also doubles many of the elements of the romance novel in the soap's plot line.

The society defined in this novel is presented in the personal histories of the heroine and hero, and in the interactions of the group of people who work on the soap. By way of ironic contrast, the society is also defined by the social strictures of the society of the English Regency—the divisions and limitations imposed by that period's rigid class structure.

The heroine's childhood was motherless, and her father, who had traveled as a professional billiards player, ran a pool hall in the Midwest town where Jenny grew up. On the school bus one morning she met the "other man," (the false hero) Brian, a fatherless child of an alcoholic. They left their Midwestern hometown after high school: he to act, she to write. At the book's opening they have been a couple for fourteen years and are living together, unmarried. Childhood society in her hometown, revolving around girls and their mothers, made the motherless Jenny feel marginal. As an adult, she has turned her workplace into her only society, where she has become absolutely essential—too essential—the only problem solver. Even Brian, her boyfriend and housemate, works for her as an actor on the soap. At the beginning of this novel, in the initial set of conditions that help to define society, this heroine creates her own society in order to have any place in society at all.

Hero Alec Cameron is a new actor appearing on Jenny's soap opera. The hero's society is also in part a heritage of his childhood. In his home in Nova Scotia, his family had to confront and surmount the grief of losing one of his sisters to leukemia. Later his first marriage, to an emotionally needy wife, fails. His experience with women is of "the slowly dying younger sister, the high-strung, fragile wife" (353). The hero's society is less flawed than the heroine's. He has not had to create his society. Within his society, however, his most important relationships were with two women (his sister and his ex-wife) who made demands upon him which he could not meet. The hero needs to expand his society to include relationships with women whose demands he can meet. Jenny needs a different society altogether, one that has a place for her that she does not have to create and sustain single-handedly. It is the work of this novel to forge that new society.

The meeting between heroine and hero takes place at the studio where the soap opera is taped. When the false hero says to the heroine, by way of introducing the real hero, "Jenny, meet our new duke," the dual temporal settings on which this book operates—Regency and contemporary—are introduced (20). Jenny has hired Alec to play the duke of Lydgate, a character which Jenny has created and whose story she writes. The meeting reinforces the theme of the disordered society that this comedy must put right: Jenny has created the reason for Alec's entrance into her society and the society itself that he enters. The false hero introduces change when he presents Alec to his significant other; he will act as a change agent at another crucial point as well. The meeting between heroine and hero contains, in embryo, the entire action of the book.

We read an account of the meeting between the heroine and the false hero, Brian, told in flashback. They met on the bus on the way to high school in their small Oklahoma town the first day of their sophomore year. Later, we are asked to consider the idea of meetings when Jenny walks down the hero's street in Manhattan and identifies it as a perfect New York street, the kind that got used in movies that were romantic comedies, movies where the characters "met cute" (330). Significantly, there are no meetings represented in the soap opera plot. The soap plot in this novel, like real soap plots, is open ended, episodic. Alec is new to the show, but his character is not—another actor had originated the role of the duke of Lydgate.

The attraction that the false hero, Brian, feels for Jenny is his response to her freedom. He longs to be free from his past—his alcoholic father and controlling mother—and she represents this to him. Alec, the hero, finds her fresh and uncomplicated, he is "enchanted" by her capacity to have fun (21). His attraction is also physical; there is sexual chemistry between them. Above all, he is attracted to her imagination.

Jenny's attraction to Brian had been gratitude that someone had noticed her, despite her tomboy, outsider status in her hometown. She had assumed that their lack of sexual spark was her fault. By contrast, Jenny's attraction to Alec is sexual, and she also responds to his goodness, his concern for others, his desire to be responsible for everyone all the time. She rescues him from the excesses of this impulse, but responds to it nonetheless. Jenny's waning attraction to Brian is registered in the soap plot. The characters Lady Varley and Lord Courtland are supposed to have loved each other from childhood (just like Jenny and Brian) and are supposed to have a love that stands in contrast to "the other characters' flighty passions or rigid coolness;" they go three months without expressing that love (145).

Her attraction to Alec is registered when Jenny introduces a new female character, who is fun-loving and breezy (like Jenny's best self) and is attracted to a character who is like Alec's best self—gallant, protective, but not overwhelmed by the responsibility to fix everything for everybody all the time. In the contemporary plot, Jenny's shifting attraction to Brian wanes and her attraction to Alec intensifies.

The barrier is doubled because the heroine is involved with two men. She lives with Brian. They are acknowledged as a couple by everyone, yet their relationship has not progressed to the expected and required outcome of the romance: it has not progressed to betrothal. The barrier between Jenny and Brian is, paradoxically, the freedom that Brian would have to give up if he were to marry her. He is self-centered in his demands for freedom. This self-centeredness is reflected in his unwillingness to help buy the house that he and Jenny had been looking for. She buys it herself, alone, but he moves into it with her. Alec helps illuminate this barrier in his interpretation of his character in the soap, the duke of Lydgate. Alec plays this character based on Brian as if his attitude is the same as Brian's toward everything: "I'm all that matters" (111).

The barrier between Jenny and the hero Alec is, for half of the book, Brian, the other man, to whom Jenny has promised to be true. Then, inexplicably, Brian marries another woman and that barrier is removed, at least in the sense that Brian is no longer available to be Jenny's husband. However, the emotional backwash from this betrayal of Jenny lingers, and Jenny must deal with the feeling that she had failed as a woman in keeping Brian. This is made more difficult by Brian's choice of a wife—a young actress whose foremost asset is her extremely sexy body. Brian was a primarily external barrier—Alec could not express his attraction for Jenny while Brian was around. This barrier element also has internal consequences in Jenny's psyche. He has reinforced her feelings of inadequacy as a woman. When Brian is no longer a part of the barrier, the focus shifts to the soap opera itself, to her involvement with it, to her having made it her life. Alec explains to her, "You get everything you need from it. I can't compete with that" (335). This is his analysis of the barrier. She immediately understands that this analysis is incomplete, but it is some time before she can articulate how. Alec believes, falsely, that in order to get love, he needs to continue behaving the way he always has, the way his family and his first wife expected him to: he must help people. But Jenny doesn't need help. So, he concludes, she cannot love him. This is wrong. The identification of this

barrier, which Jenny makes with the aid of the story she has been writing for the soap frees Alec to move beyond it.

Jenny's barrier must fall as well. Brian is gone. She exorcises his demon by understanding and identifying with her long-dead mother, who possessed a powerful imagination and who bequeathed it to the heroine. She might not be as sexy as Brian's new wife (no one is as sexy as Brian's new wife), but she has power—her imagination—and it is feminine power because it has come from her own mother. Acting through this power, Jenny convinces Alec that he should not equate giving love with helping her, and the barrier is finally down.

The barrier, then, in this romance, is more than the obstacles to marriage that the hero and heroine must overcome. It includes the larger ideas that this romance interrogates—the effects of one's family of origin on one's adult behavior, the nature of the romantic choices a given person makes, and the way emotional problems can be solved. As in many contemporary novels, the final barrier here, the one that seems insuperable, is self-knowledge.

The point of ritual death occurs when Alec simply does not show up for work one day. In an inversion of the mythic pattern whereby the heroine, or someone who represents her, disappears into the underworld, Alec simply removes himself from the world of the heroine. This, too, resonates much more strongly in the emotional world of the book than in the workaday world. Jenny simply writes him out of the taping for a few days, but his emotional behavior is the real issue: "Alec had been angry for a moment, for one flashing, red-hot moment, he had been angry at Jenny. He wasn't angry anymore. And it was a form of death" (345). The union between Jenny and Alec seems impossible.

The declaration in this novel is fragmented into four parts as heroine and hero each declare their love for the other, first to her- or himself, and then to their beloved. Alec declares his love for Jenny to himself very early, but cannot act on the knowledge because she is still Brian's partner. Jenny declares her love for Alec to herself very late. In the time between these two declarations the barrier, with all of its emotional complexity, plays itself out. Alec's declaration to her is unstated, but communicated all the same. He begins to tell her, "Surely you've realized—" but she stops him, "Alec . . . I don't know anything" (209). As a gentleman addressing another man's woman, he stops. The next chapter, written from her point of view, opens with "Alec was in love with her" (210). Later, she actually announces her

love for him, "I love you" (357). The heroine's declaration is the strongest, but her doubt—her internal barrier—was the largest. In this novel the strength of the declaration balances the seriousness and height of the barrier.

In this instance, and in the case of many contemporary romances that have an internal barrier that hinges on the emotional lives of the characters, the declaration of a character to herself that she loves the hero (or to himself, that he loves the heroine) is as much a recognition as it is a declaration. It is part of the new information that will help fell the barrier, and in modern books, the key piece of information, the knowledge without which the book cannot go forward is "This is *love*." Indeed, in *Again* the recognition is the psychological analysis that leads to these declarations of love. Both heroine and hero come to understand their pasts and how those pasts have made them behave. With this understanding they recognize their true selves just as if they had been disguised, which, of course, was a common form of recognition in earlier comedies.

The betrothal takes place after the heroine seeks out the hero who has stopped coming to work at the studio. Recall that by this action he reverses the classic ritual death in which it is the woman who disappears. Jenny explains to him why it is that he needs her (to keep him from ossifying into a man who is only and always the responsible one), and she tells him that she loves him. The role reversal—with the heroine seeking the hero who enacts ritual death—ends at this point. He proposes: "I don't want this to be a 'relationship,' Jenny. . . . I want us to be married" (363). She accepts, and the betrothal is complete.

Two of the three incidental but frequent elements of the romance novel are also present in *Again*. The wedding of Jenny and Alec is reported—it happens "off"—in a fond, funny memo by the soap opera's publicist to the editor of a soap fan magazine. The wedding, as a final action, defines how the old, corrupt society is reformed and made into a new society by the union of the heroine and hero. The old society had been corrupt, in part, because it was incomplete. It was a workplace, but Jenny had turned it into her entire society. By marrying Alec at his home in Canada, with her father in attendance, along with most of the cast and staff of *My Lady's Chamber*, Jenny and Alec subsume the old society into their newly formed one as Jenny's life becomes expanded to include a truly personal side, with a family other than the soap family. The change is not enormous; this reform impacts mostly Jenny and Alec (although when she stops treating the soap opera's employees as her family, they can, in turn, distance themselves from their workplace in a healthy way). The scapegoat, or, in this case, the scapegoats, are exiled from the celebration of the new society that this wedding represents. Brian, the false hero, and Rita, his new wife, are invited to the wedding but cannot afford the airfare to Prince Edward Island, where the ceremony takes place. This absence from the new society's celebration of unity and harmony does not commence their total exile from the new society because Brian and Rita keep their jobs as actors on the soap opera. The continued employment of the false hero and his wife by the heroine is one more signal that her society has been reformed—the soap opera is, after all, a workplace, not a family or a community.

The romance novel form is continuous from Jane Austen (and, as we shall see, from the birth of the novel in English) through Kathleen Gilles Seidel. Although writers will employ the form in different ways, Seidel in *Again* creates a complex, formally accomplished, vital romance novel. The form is neither moribund nor corrupt. Arguments about hack-work must confront *Again* and others like it being written and published today.

5

The Genre's Limits

Chapter Five

The eight essential elements of the romance novel represent the core of the genre. In addition to the three optional elements which appear in some, but not all, romance novels, other kinds of material, other sorts of scenes, are often incorporated. As long as the focus stays on the core, essential elements, the work is a romance novel.

When the writer focuses on other kinds of narrative elements, the novel is another kind of thing, a member of another genre. In all genres, however, love plots of various kinds are the norm rather than the exception. Considering only popular forms, there are love plots in science fiction, in which, traditionally, the hero gets the plucky girl as a sort of trophy after he completes the adventure plot. Their relationship is often not a courtship at all. It is represented by adventure scenes involving sexual tension and the couple's exit together at the narrative's end. In detective fiction a frequent pattern portrays a hero who is attracted to a woman who turns out to be a betrayer, or even the perpetrator of whatever crime is being solved. The detective-hero must expose her role in the crime so that knowledge of the crime (the goal of all detective fiction) and justice (the result in many instances) can triumph. There are love plots in the Western, in which the woman often represents the antithesis of the cowboy experience or an alternative to life on the range. The cowboy-hero sometimes marries this woman and sometimes leaves her. These love subplots usually lack one or more of the essential elements of the romance novel.

A reader sometimes constructs a romance novel from the love plot in a given book whether or not the book contains all eight essential elements of the form. His or her knowledge of the genre—gathered from reading romance novels, or from situation comedies on television (most of which, in the course of their runs, contain all of the elements of the romance novel except the betrothal), or from film—guides such a reading. This reading is often inaccurate. It may include events that are not depicted or implied anywhere on the page. The reader, in other words, fills in missing romance novel elements. This reading is usually incomplete. The reader often discounts, skips, or otherwise disregards scenes that the writer did include but which contradict the romance novel paradigm that the reader is using to work through the novel she is reading.

Two popular love stories that are often misread as romance novels will illustrate the genre's limits: Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Both are "near misses." *Rebecca* contains fragments of a romance novel. *Gone with the Wind* has most of the elements, and, when misread in a very common way, seems to contain all of the elements of the genre.

Rebecca occupies fictional territory beyond the boundaries of the romance novel form. The barrier and point of ritual death reveal Rebecca's departure from the form and help define the limits of the romance novel. The work is certainly a love story between the heroine/narrator, who is never named, and Maxim de Winter, owner of an estate called Manderley. The barriers to the heroine's union with the hero are her youth (she is twenty-one, exactly half his age), station (she is a penniless orphan), and the impropriety of his courting her at Monte Carlo while she is employed as a paid companion to an older woman vacationing there. Maxim sweeps these impediments aside and marries her after a courtship that lasts less than a month and occupies about a quarter of the novel. The work of the romance novel is done at this point. The story of the courtship and marriage of a heroine has been told. There is a further barrier to the marriage—not to the courtship: Maxim's possible implication in the death of his first wife, Rebecca. The balance of the narrative splits its focus between solving the mystery of this woman's death and the heroine's efforts to fill Rebecca's place in the Manderley household. As the mystery is revealed the narrator becomes less dependent upon her husband; he, in turn, must depend upon her. The novel ends with the events surrounding Rebecca's death and Maxim's role in them known to the heroine but safely kept from the authorities. Maxim was in danger of being charged with murder; the heroine helps him save himself. The threat of a murder charge is his ritual death. He is saved by the heroine and is freed. But he is not freed to marry her—he has already done that. He is freed from the specter of his first wife.

Rebecca is a gothic tale. Like many such tales, it focuses on a house, Manderley, and the dark events that transpired there. The novel begins and ends with Manderley—in the heroine's dream at the outset and in ashes at the end. Romance novels can be gothic novels as well, but they must balance the focus on the house typical of gothic novels with a correspondingly strong focus on the courtship and betrothal. *Rebecca* depicts the courtship and betrothal, but does not focus upon them. They are preconditions for the story that follows rather than being, themselves, the story.

Gone with the Wind is a nearer miss than *Rebecca*, but still fails to be a romance novel. It is, as everyone knows, a gripping love story. Mussell sees this very popular work as an "antiromance" because the heroine, Scarlett O'Hara Hamilton Kennedy Butler, loses Rhett, the man she loves (*Women's Gothic* 13). All eight essential features of the romance novel are present in the work, but the barrier never completely falls. In addition, *Gone with the Wind* focuses on the effect of the Civil War on the way of life in Georgia, which further removes it from the territory of the romance novel.

Although the love plot does interest her, Mitchell devotes far more space to showing us Scarlett's career as a widow whose land, family, fortune, and society have been ravaged by the war. She shows us Scarlett reconstructing herself from spoiled Southern belle to businesswoman. She shows us a heroine who keeps her family together, defends her land, and runs the businesses she buys. By the time she marries Rhett, she is twice widowed and the mother of two, which takes Scarlett some distance from the ingenue heroine frequent in romance novels.

The barrier between Scarlett and Rhett is chiefly Scarlett's love for Ashley Wilkes, but at other times it includes her marriage to Wade Hamilton, then to Frank Kennedy; the war itself, which carries Rhett into the Confederate army; and Belle, a prostitute whom Rhett takes up with. In the romance, when the wedding precedes the declaration, the marriage is one of convenience. *Gone with the Wind* employs this marriage-of-convenience sequence for ordering events. Heroine and hero are betrothed (page 827) without a declaration from the heroine. By the time Scarlett declares that she loves Rhett, (page 1015), he no longer loves her. At no point in the novel have the two lovers declared for each other at the same time. In other words, the barrier never completely falls.

The barrier created by Scarlett's desire for Ashley falls in Scarlett's

recognition scene when she realizes she does not want him now that she can have him. Then Rhett offers her a divorce and announces that he does not love her anymore, speaking his most famous line: "My dear, I don't give a damn" (1023). In this antideclaration, Rhett erects a new barrier, and it does not fall before the end of the novel. Heroine and hero do not end up together, do not, together, remake society (Scarlett has done this single-handedly), and their child, that other promise of the society to come, is dead. We are left with an image of Scarlett standing alone. *Gone with the Wind* is not a romance novel.

Why, then, do people think it is one? It is a love story, and love is the emotion on which the romance novel is predicated. But not every love story is a romance novel. Many readers, I think, read for the scenes between Rhett and Scarlett, even though in the novel there are far fewer of them than the film would imply. They see in those scenes many of the elements of the romance novel. They ignore Rhett's request for a divorce, overlook his having assumed Ashley's old values, overlook Bonnie's death, and credit instead Scarlett's statement that she will get him back. This selective reading results from the genre expectations that readers assume once they have become familiar with a given genre such as the romance novel. These expectations permit a reader to weigh some events in the narrative more heavily than others. The screenwriters did the same when they eliminated one of Scarlett's marriages and both of the children she had before marrying Rhett. In making her the childless widow of only one man killed in the war they restore some of Scarlett's ingenue status. The screenwriters make her into a romance novel heroine.

In both *Rebecca* and *Gone with the Wind* the marriage of heroine and hero in the middle of the book arouses our suspicions that the works are not romance novels. *Rebecca* fails to include several other essential elements. Maxim, for example, never actually undergoes a recognition of his love for the heroine. *Gone with the Wind,* despite its inclusion of the eight essential elements, never manages to deliver a barrierless relationship between heroine and hero, and that unconquered barrier, along with the novel's extensive depiction of Scarlett's life as a twice-widowed businesswoman, prevents *Gone with the Wind* from being a romance novel.

Love plots abound. Sometimes they can drive the reading of a book. Nonetheless, only some of these love-driven books are romance novels.

PART III

The Romance Novel, 1740–1908