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**ROMANCE REVISITED: TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE MARITAL  
LOVE TRIANGLE IN WOMEN'S FICTIONS**

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## **Acknowledgements and Declaration**

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I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary and electronic) have been specifically and properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of my text.

Signed:

Date: 31<sup>st</sup> December 2004

# **Romance Revisited: Transformations of the Marital Love Triangle in Women's Fictions**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The triangle is a model of a sort, or rather a whole family of models. [...] They always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations. (Girard, 1976: 2 - 3)

The graphic schema and the theoretical frame of analysis of this study is what David Lodge has aptly described as a familiar novelistic situation: the 'eternal' love triangle (Lodge, 1981: 143). As a structural literary device, the love triangle artificially stabilises impulses of desire into a fixed set of erotic positions. In other words, it is a 'figure by which the "commonsense" of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations' (Sedgwick, 1985: 21). From the legendary Tristan and Iseult to the American soap epic *Dynasty*<sup>1</sup>, from Jewish mythology<sup>2</sup> to postfeminist fiction, triangular models have always engaged the interest of generations of listeners/readers/viewers and, over the centuries, the notoriously enduring and seemingly transhistorical appeal of the love triangle has affirmed itself. Narratives abound with love triangles and triadic configurations construct standard and paradigmatic narrative situations that, using Umberto Eco's terminology, could be termed 'intertextual archetypes' (Eco, 1988: 448).<sup>3</sup> Triangular constellations of human interaction are not only inscribed within Western culture but are also formative erotic models that are

embedded in a shared socio-cultural script and that, as a result, contribute to the ideological construction of the iconography of love.

Focused rather than encyclopaedic, this thesis does not purport to put forward a definitive or totalising analysis of love triangles. Instead, this study concentrates on the permutations of love and desire engaging a husband, a first wife and a second wife. So far ignored by criticism, this specialised version of the love triangle is a highly variable constellation with a changing set of ideological implications. It is a dynamic and versatile configuration rather than an unvarying and mechanical model. As I will demonstrate, the marital triangle is a persistent and re-emerging structural convention of popular women's fictions. In my analysis, I will trace the cross-historical tenability and the cross-generic heterogeneity of this specific triangular formation. In the process, I will delineate a literary network that links historically and ideologically diverse texts through the overarching geometric structure of the marital triangle. Highlighting the interrelated nature of varied generic phenomena, this study unveils a structural continuum that is spun across what Annette Kuhn terms 'gynocentric genres' (Kuhn, 1997: 145). As Kuhn notes, such genres construct women-centred narratives motivated by female desire and processes of identification governed by female points of view. Within this framework of female-based genres, I forge inter-connections between the contemporary romance, the Victorian sensation novel, the modern female Gothic, the popular feminist and the postfeminist text, arguing that the dynamics of the marital triangle change according to the dictates of the above genres. In this way, I contend that the romance genre breaks up the erotic triangulation to celebrate the male-female bond while the popular feminist text concentrates on the female-female tie to underline notions of sisterhood and female collectivism. The female Gothic in its turn focuses on the erotic irregularities of the triadic plot and

complicates the romantic break-up of triangulation. Centring on one particular component of the marital triangle, the sensation novel and the postfeminist text explore how the figure of the first wife is affected by generic dictates and illustrate how this character is silenced, vilified or empowered in their generic constructs.

The aim of this thesis is twofold. As stated above, I seek to trace the textual network held together by the convention of the marital triangle. In addition, I also engage in a specialised study of genre and genre expansion. The generic point of reference of this investigation is the romance. In Kuhn's terms, the romance is a 'gynocentric' genre *par excellence* as it typically focuses on female desire and points of view. A culturally authoritative form, it promotes a powerful meta-text that informs erotic expectations. Dedicated to the celebration of dyadic heterosexism, the genre invariably gives precedence to the male-female tie. Translated into the terminology of the marital triangle, this means that triangulation in the romantic context inevitably gives way to a bipolar constellation as one female component of the female-male-female configuration is eliminated from the triadic structure. This course of events remains constant throughout the romance genre and delineates generic boundaries. While the romantic plot is thus regulated by certain generic dictates, this thesis refutes the notion of the genre as immutable and monolithic. Intent on making discriminations inside the form, this study argues that the romance is a variegated genre and that the romantic marital triangle is a variable structure. Asserting that similar textual parameters need not be uniform, I emphasise the diversity of romantic narrative strategies and explore multiple romantic triangular scenarios. I maintain that the romantic marital triangle is capable of expressing a distinctly conformist content as well as of incorporating progressive (although not radical) movements inside its romantic structures. In the process, I distinguish between the conservative romantic marital triangle as a

distinctly patriarchal structure and the innovative romantic marital triangle as a progressive constellation informed by popular feminist discourses of sisterhood and bonding.

Affirming the plurality of romantic triadic models, I promote a differentiated approach to the romance. Delineating the shift from the conservative to the innovative romance, I also assert that generic boundaries are not fixed but in motion, sites of revision rather than of straightforward and immutable inscription. Highlighting the ideological differences between the conservative and the innovative romance, I analyse the ways in which generic boundaries are mobilised and re-set, thereby allowing the insertion of progressive cultural materials within the extended romantic meta-text. Emphasising generic expansion, this examination pays attention to the level of innovation available inside the romantic form. While the innovative romance remains duty-bound to its generic contract, it develops and extends itself within the structures it describes. Registering cultural change, it expands the romantic plot by incorporating feminist demands for egalitarianism and female collectivism. In particular, I aim to explore how far the genre can expand itself before generic coherence starts disintegrating and how far-reaching generic innovation can become before it starts causing a shift in genre. In short, I seek to explore at what point generic expansion turns into over-expansion. For this purpose, I draw attention to four genres that I define as the romance's generic mutations: the Victorian sensation novel, the female Gothic novel, the popular feminist and the postfeminist text. Held together by the overarching convention of the marital triangle, these genres do not only help delineate the structural continuum of the triadic constellation but they also emphasise the breaking points of romantic generic integrity. The four forms in question articulate a variety of non-romantic triadic scenarios. Testing and breaching romantic boundaries, these mutations redirect the narrative and thematic focus of the romance plot, thereby relocating the axes of

importance within the triad and bringing a different range of ideological implications to the fore.

Dividing theory from praxis, the first half of the thesis is dedicated to theoretical exploration while the latter half is committed to textual readings. In the first half, René Girard's notion of mimetic desire and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reflections on homosociality figure as theoretical points of departure. As this study asserts, the mimetic and homosocial triangles developed by the above theorists are masculinist structures propagating elitist conceptions of culture. In comparison, I define the female-based marital triangle as a complementary counter-model that highlights the drawbacks and negations of Girard and Sedgwick's formulations. Concentrating on my genre of reference, the next theoretical section provides a definition of the romance as an ideologically heterogeneous form that inhabits a paradoxical space between conservatism and progressiveness, between continuity and change. As this examination maintains, this generic heterogeneity can only adequately be described by a non-reductive determinacy that accounts for both generic unity and transformation. This heterogeneous tactic has for the most part been neglected by the critics of the romance who, as the third theoretical section argues, have persisted in viewing the genre in oppositional terms, as either monolithic or subversive. Highlighting the elitist and the populist failings of much romance criticism, this investigation affirms that the genre is not the locus of either continuity or change but that it extends itself between these two poles. In particular, I propose that the innovative romance is characterised by a non-dichotomous understanding of generic homogeneousness and transformation as it re-assembles and combines these dualities in the romantic meta-discourse. In the following, I persistently argue for the relativity of research methodologies and I steer a theoretical course that takes into account both the conformist underpinnings

and the progressive potential of the innovative romantic plot. Concluding the theoretical explorations, the last two sections thematically return to the structural convention of the marital triangle. I first discuss the marital triangle in the romantic setting and define the differences between the conservative romantic constellation and the innovative romantic structure. Moving beyond the boundaries of the romance genre, the last theoretical section explores the non/post-romantic variations of the marital triangle that govern the plots of the romance's extra-generic mutations.

Focusing on textual analysis, the second half of the thesis applies the theoretical findings to a large corpus of genres and texts, starting with a case study of Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre* (1847). A model for (conservative and innovative) romances as well as for generic mutations, Brontë's novel is particularly revealing inasmuch as its diverse triadic discourses articulate a romantic ethos and establish well-worn romantic orthodoxies as well as allowing narrative spaces for both overt and latent post-romantic meanings. From this single novel study, I broaden my analysis to a genre study of the contemporary romance. Putting into practice a differentiated approach to the romance genre, I discuss both conservative and innovative romances. Paying particular attention to innovation within tradition, I investigate generic developments within the normative romance framework and particularly explore the influence of feminism on romantic triadic parameters. Moving beyond generic limitations, the next four sections examine the post-romantic marital triangle and its varied representations in the romance's generic mutations. I first explore the sensational rendering of the triadic plot in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). I then investigate the feminosocial potential of the female Gothic triangle in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera* (1921) and Ellen Glasgow's ghost-story 'The Past'

(1920). The next section concentrates on the popular feminist variation of the triangular scenario in Olivia Goldsmith's *The First Wives Club* (1992), Stephanie Bond's *Our Husband* (2001) and Cindy Blake's *Second Wives* (1996). The thesis concludes with an exploration of the postfeminist marital triangle in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983).

Considering the historically and ideologically varied nature of the above catalogue of works, this study intends to affirm the versatility of the marital triangle convention and asserts the diversity of the textual network it describes. As an interpretative tool, the marital triangle functions as a variable constellation staging the scenario of the erotic exchange. As a structural device, this particular configuration is a sensitive register for generic dictates and changes. Foregrounding elaborate complications of both genre and gender, it can be used for a multitude of ideological purposes and adapted to a variety of forms. While the marital triangular motive is not automatically a self-sufficient compass for charting the permutations of narrative desire, it is a flexible geometrical trope that explores the workings, affiliations and limitations of the romance genre and sheds light on a structural continuum so far undetected.



## **1.2 Delineating the Theoretical Context: The Masculinist Triangle in René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick**

Delineating the persistence and variability of the marital female-male-female triangle in popular women's fictions, this study enters largely untrodden critical grounds. The majority of critics on the love triangle have focused on the male-female-male configuration – most prominently René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick whose theories on mimetic and homosocial desire have concentrated on the masculinist constellation as a pervading and insistent literary, social and cultural formation.<sup>1</sup> It is in relation to these two theorems that I place my investigation here. As I argue, the popularised and female-based trope on which this thesis is based functions as a corrective structure to the elitist and male-centred models of Girard and Sedgwick. Testing the limits of their triadic constructs, the aim of this section is to uncover the shortcomings of the concepts of mimeticism and homosociality and to highlight the complementary nature of my gender-reversed diagram. Investigating an erotic structure so far ignored by criticism, I intend to fill the analytical gap left open by Girard and Sedgwick and, in the process, to begin fleshing out the structural continuum of the first wife-husband-second wife triangle that, as this study argues, is persistently spun across a range of popular gynocentric genres. Exploring the broader theoretical context of the love triangle convention, I will discuss the notions of mimeticism and homosociality as distinctly male-centred conceptions that fail to account for the subverted and female-based triangulation of the marital triangle. Before such criticism can be applied, a thorough understanding of both concepts is essential.

‘Triangular desire is the basis of the theory of the novelistic novel’, René Girard notes in his ‘journey through novelistic literature’, revealing that ‘the idea whose central role is constantly being confirmed, the basic idea from which one can discover everything is triangular desire’ (Girard, 1976: 52). In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), Girard deals extensively with triangular patterns of human interaction and firstly elaborates his theory of mimetic or imitative desire, a concept on which all his latter interpretative and explanatory claims are either directly or indirectly based. Analysing the surface structures of conventional man-woman relationships in the male-centred novelistic tradition of European high culture, Girard claims that continental fiction from Cervantes to Proust replicates the tripartite structure of imitative desire. Expanding his theory’s domain of application far beyond literature and formulating a general theory of culture, Girard’s entire corpus of work gravitates around the idea of mimetic desire. He maintains that triangular erotic constellations delineate the structures of all forms of desire and related modes of interaction.<sup>2</sup> As a mechanism of motivation, mimesis is said to generate ‘patterns of action and interaction, personality formations, beliefs, attitudes, symbolic forms, and cultural practices and institutions’ (Livingston, 1992: xii). Undermining the prevalence of binary social surface structures, Girard’s general thesis calls into question the independent agency of motivational processes and denies the existence of an exclusively linear exchange between desiring person and desired object. For him, the individual subject is wrongly believed to desire spontaneously and independently, that is, in a direct and immediate relation to the object of desire. An object is desirable only insofar as it is desirable for another person whom the subject has chosen as a role model. In the Girardian drama, no form of desire points directly from subject to object as every exchange between the two is invariably mediated via a more important third pole. This third pole, the so-called

“mediator” between desirer and desired, functions as a rival who inspires the subject’s desire for the object. While mediation heightens and sustains desire, the mimetic process comes into play prior to all object selection. The desiring subject depends on the rival’s desire for the object to sustain and legitimise his own. In this way, all desire can be interpreted as an imitation of the mediator/rival’s desire and is therefore mimetic. The individual subject is never motivated by purely spontaneous or autonomous wants and preferences as his desire is always a *désir selon l’autre* - a desire according to the other. As Girard explains, ‘desire chooses its objects through the mediation of a model: it is the desire of and for the other. [...] The subject is unable to desire on his own; he has no confidence whatever in a choice that would be solely his own’ (Girard, 1978: 39; 66).<sup>3</sup>

In Girard’s view, the obsessive rivalry and intense fascination that exists between the two active members of the erotic triangle (the desiring subject and the mediator) control and motivate all action in such a way that they ultimately overshadow the subject’s desire for the object. In fact, Girard sees ‘the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determined of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved’ (Sedgwick, 1985: 21). In the Girardian trigonometry, the object of desire receives little attention: as the mimetic desire of the subject turns towards the rival/mediator, the object recedes into the background and it is emptied of its concrete value. Mimesis undercuts all pretensions of value that desire might otherwise confer upon the object. Acting as a catalyst rather than a critical or active component within the triangular structure, the object of desire never gains a subject position of authority and agency. For Girard, the only relationship of value or consequence in the mimetic economy is between the desiring subject and the rival. Moreover, as the mimetic rivalry between these two figures increases, the difference between them

diminishes: the mediator becomes the subject's double. As Girard affirms, 'doubles are the final result and truth of mimetic desire' (Girard, 1978: 48). Caught in a violent and inescapable double-bind, the two desiring agents find themselves perpetually oscillating between power and submission with respect to one another. Rivalry thus comes to be seen as an end in itself and the mimetic struggle becomes self-supporting. At the same time as devaluing the subject-object relationship and stressing the predominance of the subject's erotic deviation towards the fascinating rival-as-double, Girard also emphasises the inevitable circularity and inescapable nature of triangularity. Trapped in an increasingly violent reciprocity, the desiring subject has no wish to triumph over the rival nor does he want the mediator to attain final possession of the object: the strains of the triangular relationship are less painful than a decision that would resolve it in one way or another. In this way, the Girardian triangle is an inherently open-ended model whose absence of closure and resolution underscores the unsettling restlessness and the unstable flux of desire that characterise the triadic structure. In Girard's words, 'no resolution of the deadlock is really satisfactory. The only tolerable situation is for rivalry to go on. The triangle must endure' (Girard, 1978: 66).

In his corpus of work, Girard is eager to demonstrate the all-encompassing ubiquity of mimetic desire and the universal applicability of his theory. In the following, I pay particular attention to his examinations of mimeticism in literature and aim to establish a contrast between his male-orientated framework and my female-based model. In his readings of numerous literary texts (ranging from Greek drama to James Joyce's modernist novels), Girard maintains that the mimetic phenomenon is quintessentially literary by nature. For him, the mimetic process is most radically and clearly revealed in what he considers to be the literary masterpieces of Western culture. Singling out literature as vital,

revelatory and expressive of essential human structures, Girard argues that 'literature alone has faithfully described the deluded and mechanical aspects of human relations, a certain geometry of desire and misunderstanding that is always identical to itself and that reappears *as such* only in the greatest writers, reproduced with clockwork accuracy' (Girard, 1983: xii; xiv). For Girard, literature is appraised depending on whether it reveals the truth of mimetic desire or whether it propagates the 'the lie of spontaneous desire' and the 'illusion of autonomy' (Girard, 1976: 16). As Girard notes, the 'romantic' writer maintains the 'illusion of spontaneous desire' and therefore 'cannot achieve novelistic depth because he is unable to reach the Other', his flattering but ultimately misleading preoccupation only spreading 'new romantic lies destined to prolong the Promethean dreams to which the modern world desperately clings' (Girard, 1976: 28; 146; 258). Girard argues that the subject of triangular desire canonises literature and that dealing with this subject is a mark of literary sophistication. In this way, in contrast to 'the romantics and neoromantics, a Cervantes, a Flaubert, and a Stendhal reveal the truth of desire in their great novels' (Girard, 1976: 16). 'Novelistic genius' thus 'begins with the collapse of the "autonomous" self' and 'great novelists [...] in their revelation of the completely imitative existence of the passionate being, illuminate the darkest depths of the Western soul' (Girard, 1976: 38; 179). According to Girard, "great novelists" have throughout history been drawn to the topic of mimeticism, thereby producing a quasi-theory of mimetic desire. Shunning more "romantic" celebrations of instinctual and autonomous desire and love, 'the great writers [...] alone are capable of seeing that the sexual side of the matter is far from being primary and must be subordinated to mimeticism' (Girard, 1987: 338). Praising the "mimetically-conscious" traditions of these "great writers", Girard's theory is intent on formulating a monolithic and distinctive literary canon that limits itself to an exclusive range of works

and that demands a strict evaluative segregation of those mimetic works from the residual cultural expressions that fail to meet the critic's required standards of quality – the thematic immersion into the mimetic topic.

Highly selective in his appraisals, Girard concentrates exclusively on a narrow band of male writers (ranging from Cervantes and Shakespeare to Stendhal and Joyce). For him, the revelation of the mimetic truth is communicable and available only to the few (invariably male) 'great writers', whom he considers to be, the 'secret sharers' of the mimetic experience, upholding and creating cultural, social and literary standards (Girard, 1983: xiv). Girard's formulation of a literary canon is clearly tainted by this reductive focus as he not only ignores female authorship but also constructs a purely male-based catalogue of works. In this way, Girard's evaluations reflect his literary elitism as well as his affiliation with patriarchy. As will be argued, this masculinist tendency is mirrored in Girard's subject matter as the mimetic process turns out to be inherently blind to female desire and subjectivity and centres exclusively on male desire and activity. Attempting to demonstrate the persistence of his male-based model in male-authored texts, Girard's endeavours as a literary critic ultimately aim to pass off his list of mimetic works as an equivalent to the literary canon. For him, "mimetically-conscious" authors and texts rank highest in the cultural hierarchy. In the process, he constructs a hierarchical and gendered register that is invariably male-dominated and male-orientated. In contrast to Girard, this study focuses on a female-based constellation in female-authored texts. Investigating the tenability of the female-male-female configuration in gynocentric forms, this thesis aims to connect different genres under the structural and topical umbrella of the marital triangle. This congruence of works exists outside and in opposition to Girard's male mimetic

catalogue and it essentially functions as a gender-reversed counter-continuum that thrives within women's fictions.

Disregardful of the masculinist tendencies of his literary appraisals and theoretical model, Girard nonetheless underlines the all-encompassing qualities of his mimetic schema, asserting that it is both flexible and universal at the same time. He upholds this controversial claim with extensive and inventive argumentation. According to Girard, his triangular diagram can give expression to different forms of desire, ranging from (what he considers to be) deluded object-orientated eroticism to the mimetic submersion with the same-sex rival. Girard views these diverse mimetic formations as part of one universal process that originates in the functional subject-object relation and culminates in the violent relationship between mimetic doubles (Girard, 1987: 311). Girard's entire work makes strong claims about the 'dynamic continuity' of his mimetic theory, 'its evolution or better yet, its historicity' (Girard, 1978: 48). He alludes to the different 'stages' or 'levels' of the mimetic process, thereby suggesting that his schema is a dynamic and flexible mechanism that is open to contextual determinants.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Girard is also eager to emphasise the unity and universality of the mimetic phenomenon. His theory is meant to identify certain invariant patterns and processes that regulate and determine Western religious, social, cultural, political and erotic life. As Paisley Livingston notes, Girard's geometrical model thus seeks to 'combine an emphasis on positing dynamic invariants and constraints with an emphasis on his theory's openness to contextual determinants' (Livingston, 1992: 55).

In his anthropological, social and historical work, Girard aims to bypass this seeming paradox and demonstrate the flexible, yet all-encompassing, quality of his geometrical model by maintaining that different periods in human history represent

different stages within the mimetic process. Modern society has thus developed in a steady progression from the more stable and hierarchical forms of external mediation to the competitive forms of internal mediation.<sup>5</sup> Trying to delineate the successive stages of mimetic manifestations in history, culture and social sciences, Girard states that

Between madness and reason, between violence and peace, between undifferentiation and culture, there is only a grading of intensity in the mechanism of conflictual mimesis. All are continuous on the level of the mechanism that lies at their base. [...] All that we are ever dealing with is a particular moment in the mimetic process. (Girard, 1987: 316; 330)

In his literary analyses, Girard's explanatory claims follow a similar strategy, as he is intent on revealing both the 'unity of novelistic literature' and the novels' 'irreducible singularity' (Girard, 1976: 52; 23). He asserts both the flexible variability and the historical continuity of literary representations of mimesis, suggesting that narrative diversity is a result of novelists observing and emphasising different aspects of desire - different stages of one mimetic process - in their works. For him, the 'novels of Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoyevsky are so many stages along the same road' (Girard, 1976: 139). Seeking to formulate a "topology" of imitative desire', Girard argues in favour of a progressive logic in literature. At the same time, he attempts to delineate the omnipresent existence of the mimetic topic in narrative and demonstrate that 'triangular desire is *one*' (Girard, 1976: 48). Trying to accommodate the flexible, yet universal, aspects of literary mimeticism, Girard maintains that the 'laws of desire are universal but they do not entail a uniformity of the novels' (Girard, 1976: 169). While there is 'only one metaphysical desire', this desire is 'a dynamic structure extending from one end of novelistic literature to the other' (Girard, 1976: 83; 95).



Calling into question the generalisability of Girard's endeavours, this study affirms that his all-explanatory claims as a literary critic are undermined by the restrictive and elitist focus of his readings. Foregrounding the mimetic structure that is 'common to all great novelists', Girard's analyses centre exclusively on "great writers" capable of revealing and reflecting the mimetic presence of the mediator in their works (Girard, 1976: 230). Girard is eager to point out that these novelists always reproduce a similar story as their narrative focus on mimetic desire remains remarkably consistent throughout history. Although Girard attributes dynamic qualities to his mimetic model, his literary spectrum only describes "canonical" texts in which the mimetic phenomenon is revelatory and recognisable. Despite his claims for universality, Girard's literary parochialism cannot render a truly informed and all-encompassing view of the logic of progression he puts forward and his all-explanatory claims are called into question by the limited focus and exclusivity of his design. Simply ignoring and dismissing less mimetically-conscious forms of expression, his ultimate aim is not to reveal the variability of literary mimeticism but to formulate a mimetic continuum that is unified and continuous. As a result, his triangular schema comes across as a rather prescriptive blueprint or mechanism that, in varying degrees, always comes into play, pre-determines the dynamics of the plot and fixes the set of erotic narrative positions from the beginning.

Consequently, I maintain that Girard's limited approach to literature is detrimental to his supposedly all-encompassing conceptions of literary theory. While his restrictive focus gives a certain rigidity to his theorising, my primary aim here is not to evaluate Girard's contribution to literary scholarship, nor do I want to settle the question whether his readings contribute to a realistic knowledge of literary history. Foregrounding the multi-axial flexibility and diversity of the female-based marital triangle, I set my own

investigation in opposition to Girard's single-axial exploration of mimetic desire. Centring on the spectrum of desire that binds subject and mediator, the mobility of Girard's model is operative only on a solitary relational side of his triadic constellation. In contrast, this study does not concentrate on just one relationship of its triangular structure but argues that different relational axes take prominence in different genres. While Girard emphasises that his analyses work 'at a level which is no longer that of *genre* criticism', I stress both genre- and gender-awareness and intend to perform a diversified examination of the permutations of triangular desire in narrative (Girard, 1976: 23). Exploring the dissemination of the marital triangle in a multitude of historically and ideologically diverse genres, I seek to offer a generically varied account of my triangular motive. Expanding Girard's limited and masculinist focus, I trace my triadic model across a whole range of gynocentric fictions, all of which reproduce strikingly different triadic scenarios, thereby highlighting a logic of transition, rather than progression. In my analysis, the marital triangle consistently comes across as a specifically inter-generic phenomenon with shifting sets of ideological meanings and generic possibilities. Most importantly, this triangular convention reveals itself as particularly receptive to contextual variants, readily displaying its multiplicity of function and sensitive ideological reflexivity by its inter-generic mutability.

Unlike Girard, I do not aim to install elitist conceptions of culture, nor formulate a version of the literary canon. Demonstrating the inter-relationships between diverse traditions of women's writing (exemplified by critically acclaimed fictions such as *Jane Eyre* as well as typically maligned forms such as the contemporary romance), I challenge critical perspectives (such as Girard's) that are intent on constructing hierarchies of taste and characterising culture in terms of negation. Moreover, highlighting the varied and heterogeneous manifestations of the marital triangle, I also intend to depict the diversity,

the internal contradictions and tensions within popular culture phenomena and thus, counter elitist theories that portray popular forms as necessarily and inevitably homogeneous and standardised. Throughout this study, I advocate a critical view that makes differentiations *within* popular culture, thereby avoiding an indiscriminating unification of it. While exhibiting a ‘mass cultural sensibility’ that, as Stuart Hall argues, is crucial for an understanding of contemporary culture, this investigation will steer a theoretical course that explores the literary terrain of popular women’s narratives without resort to the disabling tendencies of, on the one hand, a disarming and “anti-intellectual” populism and, on the other, a dismissive and selective elitism (quoted in Modleski, 1986b: xiii).<sup>6</sup> Focusing on the interrelatedness of a wide range of texts and genres, I seek to hold a precarious balance between an awareness of the differences between literary materials and a logic of transition that foregrounds the connections between diverse literary phenomena and resists the adversary and elitist aesthetics that Girard seems to promote.

Rather than investigating the literary merits of an exclusive range of narratives, I propose to examine the diverse uses to which the pattern of the marital triangle is put and, in the process, to highlight the notion of genre as one of the main denominators determining the plot dynamics and the axes of importance within the triangular structure. While analysing the dissemination of the marital triangle, this study also explores the notions of genre and generic expansion. Aiming to fill in the analytical gaps of Girard’s reasoning, my genre of reference is the romance - a typically female-based and popularised form that I consider the most neglected by Girard’s masculinist and elitist formulations and that I have therefore chosen as a generic counter-model. Not only is the gynocentric potential of the romance inherently opposed to the male-based underpinnings of the mimetic theory but the genre’s subject matter also draws attention to the fissures and

negations of Girard's literary focus. Girard explicitly sets up his elitist formulation of the mimetic canon in opposition to the debased romantic preoccupation with autonomous desire. "[N]ovelistic" genius' is thus 'won by a great struggle against these attitudes we have lumped together under the name "romantic" because they all appear to us intended to maintain the illusion of romantic desire and of a subjectivity almost divine in its autonomy' (Girard, 1976: 28 - 29). Celebrating autonomous desire, the romance typically concentrates on the relational stages that Girard does not consider worthy of critical/literary exploration. In the romantic exchange, the object of desire remains the principal pole of affectivity and desiring activity and the subject-object relation functions as the determining and primary axis of importance within the trinitarian constellation. In this case, individual agency is (still) perceived as the effective locus of direct and autonomous motivational processes, giving expression to, what Girard terms, *un désir selon soi* – a desire that is a self-sufficient and spontaneous manifestation of an individual's wants and preferences. In contrast to Girard's mediated "second-hand" desire, these immediate motivational processes express and emphasise more "romantic" conceptions of the individual and of human interaction.<sup>7</sup> As Paisley Livingston notes, 'mimetic desire can in this way be contrasted to "romantic" myths of the individual's spontaneity' (Livingston, 1992: 2). With its rigid focus on mediated desire between same-sex agents, mimesis is ultimately dismissive of the notions of individual agency and instinctual love. Eager to detect latent mimetic inclinations in apparently instinctual modes of interaction, the Girardian diagram blocks out certain areas of human experience that might give precedence to the essentially optimistic affirmation of human instinct and autonomous desire.

Developed and hailed by Girard as a superior and more informed expression of human experience, the complicated mimetic psychology differs fundamentally from

romantic conceptions of relationality. The latter stress the predominance of the subject-object relation in their celebration of agency, individualism and spontaneity of desire. These self-affirming and object-orientated relationships are forcefully expressed in the romance. Dedicated to the optimistic depiction of instinctual love between two human beings, this particular genre calls into question the unstable triangularity of mimeticism. It is based on the assumption that such erotic irregularities can be resolved and discarded for the greater good of dyadic love. While I do not wish to draw pre-emptive conclusions about the genre, it is nonetheless helpful to make a number of precursory remarks and comparisons at this stage. Underlining the primacy of the libidinal subject-object relation and stressing the predominance of the heterosexual dyad, the normative romance thematically feeds on the conviction that *amor omnia vincit*. It structurally and ideologically depends on the existence of an active and independently desiring subject whose desire for the object is an unmediated and spontaneous expression of instinctual wants and preferences. The romantic focus on the linear movement of the subject towards the desired object and the romantic emphasis on instinctual desire appear diametrically opposed to the Girardian insistence on triangulation, the focus on the same-sex mimetic relationship and the mechanical duplication of desire. The conflictive and pessimistic basis of Girard's entire construct, the model's absence of closure and its denial of the instinctual appear equally irreconcilable with the resolving, harmonious and optimistic patterns of the romance. While the normative romance celebrates the man-woman dyad and the libidinal object-tie, Girard's model attempts to estrange heterosexual erotic ties by eliciting a gender-reversed deep-structure. Opposing the notion of symmetrical sexual relations and denying the autonomy of desire, Girard undermines bipolar social constellations and dyadic erotic configurations. Whereas the romance thrives on the assumption that dyadic love is

autonomous, overwhelming and spontaneous, the mimetic concept negates such an understanding as it defines love as an automated and mediated social response that always engages the mechanisms of triangular rivalry and fixes its object at the dictates of a third.

Centring on the subject-object relation and celebrating the autonomy and spontaneity of the erotic drive, the romance tests the epistemological limits of the mimetic model and highlights the limiting partiality of Girard's literary focus. Girard occasionally shows an uncomfortable awareness of the limited reach of his literary theory and his topic's unsatisfactory emotive appeal to the wider public. Finding evidence of mimeticism in Shakespeare's pastoral comedies, Girard addresses the unpopularity of the mimetic topic and, in passing, alludes to the more satisfactory pleasures of "mimetically-unconscious" fictions. As he states, 'mimetic desire is not popular with most audiences. Most people prefer the nice pastoral lie over the rather distressing verities of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalries' (Girard, 1990: 92). Notwithstanding such drawbacks, Girard remains convinced of the superiority and universality of his design. For him, mimetic desire is an ultimately more enlightened expression of interpersonal relationships. Mimetic triangularity is seen in opposition to the stifling and deadening linearity of heterosexual eroticism and instinctual desire appears characteristically deceptive, monotonous and naïve compared to the informed "truth" of mimesis. Dismissive of direct and straightforward relational exchanges and revelling in the mimetic complexity, such claims are undoubtedly elitist in outlook and partial in focus. As has been argued, such conceptions also go hand in hand with a definite and misogynistic gender-blindness that operates in both Girard's literary readings and formulation of the canon as well as in his general description of the mimetic phenomenon.

Although Girard declares the universal validity of his theory and maintains that his ideas on mimetic rivalry/desire are gender-neutral and can be applied to anyone or

anything, he only traces triangles in which two active males rival for an unspecified and apparently passive female. In the mimetic drama, the concept of desire of the conventional man-woman love story is mostly turned upside down by a second man who functions as the mediator. With the exception of the fictional Emma Bovary, Girard does not consider women as desiring subjects.<sup>8</sup> For him, the two active members of the love triangle, the desiring subject and his rival-as-double, are generally male, while the passive object of desire that functions more as an object of exchange between two men rather than an active agent in the triangular structure, is invariably female. Reduced to being eroticised objects of desire, women in Girard's proto-triangles take on value only in circulation among men in a sex-gender system that is male-dominated and stresses the primacy of male mimetic bonds. Illustrating what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) refers to as the patriarchal 'traffic in women', Girard's fictional triangles give voice to male points of view, silencing and objectifying the female component within the triadic constellation (Sedgwick, 1985: 25).<sup>9</sup> Unlike the romance that is female-orientated and typically gives expression to female subjectivity and desire, Girard's readings centre exclusively on male-authored representations of desire that, as Teresa de Lauretis points out, have traditionally recognised masculine desire as narrative motor and have focused on the male 'hero as mover of the narrative, the center and term of reference of consciousness and desire' (de Lauretis, 1984: 112).<sup>10</sup>

Eclipsing the role of women and highlighting the primacy of male mimeticism, the Girardian model reinforces definite gender categories and power relations. It undeniably articulates androcentric paradigms and masks or negates female subjectivity and desire. Despite Girard's claim that 'rivalry [...] occurs in an absolutely symmetrical way in both sexes', feminist critics convincingly assert that there is no compensatory heightening of the

feminine in the Girardian triangle. In their view, his structure of desire invariably leaves the female component to act either as the marginalised cipher of the subject/mediator's desire or, in the "best case scenario", as a deceptively self-sufficient and narcissistic 'coquette' (Girard, 1987: 337).<sup>11</sup> Criticising Girard's all-encompassing and generalising theories, feminists Toril Moi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have underlined Girard's affiliation with patriarchy and have questioned the universal validity of his claims. Drawing attention to his patriarchal shortcomings, Toril Moi attacks Girard on the ground of his androcentricism and highlights the failure of the mimetic theory to account for female desire. For Moi, 'Girard's theory of mimetic desire cannot account for feminine desire' because he does not consider the female as a subject who can actively express desire/rivalry, nor does he take into account the role of the mother (Moi, 1982: 21). Comparing Girard's erotic triangle to Freud's oedipal triangle, Moi maintains that 'if Girard manages to lose the mother in his discussions of the oedipal triangle, it is largely because he refrains from all mention of the pre-oedipal stage' (Moi, 1982: 27). She concludes that 'Girard has to posit heterosexuality as an inborn instinct in human beings in order to save his reading of the Oedipus complex' (Moi, 1982: 21). Formulating a thorough critique of Girard's androcentricism, Moi attempts to resolve the problems posed by Girard's devaluation of the female object by re-positioning the origin of the mimetic triangle in pre-oedipal stages of development. According to her, changing the sex of the mediator and replacing Girard's Don Juan figure with an equally fascinating and powerful woman, 'the pre-oedipal mother', will not only eradicate the phallogocentrism of the Girardian structure but such a manoeuvre will also account for and assert female desire. Stressing the existence of a pre-oedipally inspired triangular structure that posits the maternal mediator as the initial source and origin of desire, Moi not only claims to uncover a 'fatal flaw in [Girard's] proud patriarchal and



oppressively monolithic theory' but she also attempts to develop a feminist alternative to the Girardian triad (Moi, 1982: 29).<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in her discussion of what she terms the counterplot of lesbian fiction, Terry Castle imitates Moi's endeavour to uncover the shortcomings of the patriarchal/Girardian male-female-male triangle. Castle attempts to redirect the ideological implications of Girard's triadic constellation by changing the gender of the participants and by promoting an alternative triangle that puts female desire and female relationships centre stage. Castle's subverted triangulation grouping two women and a man is intended as an elaboration on female or, in its most radical form, lesbian bonding. According to Castle, a female homosocial triangle in which a male term occupies an in-between position is an expression of erotic counterplotting 'against the seemingly indestructible heterosexual narrative of classic European fiction' (Castle, 1992: 134). Asserting the subversive nature of her alternative female-based triad, she states that a 'world in which men are "between women" rather than vice versa [...] is an insult to the conventional geometries of fictional eros' (Castle, 1992: 146). Castle maintains that the female-male-female triangle is inherently subversive of patriarchal norms as it promotes female homosociality or even lesbian bonding. As she asserts, this work of erotic counterplotting 'dismantles the real, as it were, in search for the not-yet-real, something unpredicted and unpredictable' (Castle, 1992: 146). Focusing on the female-male-female triangle as a possible site for lesbian bonding, Castle particularly singles out 'novels of post-marital experience' as pertinent narrative bases for lesbian plots (Castle, 1992: 142). As Castle notes, 'in such novels, it is the very failure of the heroine's marriage or heterosexual love affair that functions as the pretext for her conversion to homosexual desire' (Castle, 1992: 143). Exploring feminosocial rather than straightforwardly lesbian intra-gender relations, this study

complements Castle's contention, arguing that the gynocentric plot of female bonding also finds apt expression in the inter-marital (rather than post-marital) experience. As my discussions of the innovative romance, the female Gothic and the popular feminist text will show, the marital triangle binding a first wife and a second wife functions as a possible locus for the articulation of popular sisterhood and female-based modes of interaction.

Revising the Girardian triangle by introducing a second female term into the triadic constellation, Castle attempts to develop an alternative, subversive and female-based triangular configuration. Her subverted triangulation grouping two women and a man clearly echoes and recalls the erotic structure of the marital triangle on which this investigation is based. Despite these similarities, I do not share Castle's optimistic view that a simple change in gender will necessarily subvert and re-direct the ideological implications of the triadic structure and allow for a feminist articulation of female/lesbian desire. Although gender inversions within the triadic structure *may* allow for an exploration of the power/gender disparity that otherwise would remain concealed and *may* highlight specifically female/feminist subjectivities and desires, changing the gender of the triangle's participants does not by definition bring about a reversal of the ideological content. Introducing a second female term is not necessarily a feminist manoeuvre but a two-way tactic. In fact, I contend that the marital triangle is a slippery ideological platform with the potential for both feminist resistance and complicity with patriarchal structures. In this way, the conservative romance for example uses the marital triangle to express a distinctly patriarchal content. Negating female bonding and sociality, it promotes typically Western polarisations that classify women in terms of a good/bad, virgin/whore, sane/mad, pure/impure dichotomy.<sup>13</sup> Within the relational context of the marital triangle, such intra-gender divisions typically oppose a good second wife to a mad/bad first wife, the husband

functioning as a term of reference and focus of competition between the two women. In contrast, innovative romances often use the same constellation to highlight specifically female forms of collectivism and sociality, set in opposition to the binary system outlined above. In these scenarios, the two wives connect and bond with each other. Rather than rivals and opposites, they are confidantes and friends.

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), American gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick echoes Moi's feminist critique of the Girardian model in her refutation of his claim to universal validity. Criticising Girard on account of his 'historical blindness', Sedgwick argues that a dialectic of power, which ignores the male/female gender dichotomy, fails to effectively represent the asymmetrical power relations that motivate and fuel triangular desire (Sedgwick, 1985: 24). She accuses Girard of not taking into account 'the asymmetries of gender' and treating the erotic triangle as an 'a-historical, Platonic form, a deadly symmetry from which the historical accidents of gender, language, class and power detract' (Sedgwick, 1985: 24; 27). Nonetheless, in her rereading of Western patriarchal cultural history, Sedgwick draws on the Girardian model of the masculinist triangle in order to introduce the concept of male homosocial desire. She explicitly describes her work as a 'recasting of, and a refocusing on, René Girard's triangular schematization of the existing European canon' (Sedgwick, 1985: 17). As I intend to argue, Sedgwick's analysis shares many characteristics with Girard's reasoning insofar as she focuses on the same triangular male-female-male structure, foregrounds a similar all-male spectrum of desire and formulates a conceptualisation of the literary canon. A self-affirmed 'high culture girl', she, like Girard, is prone to certain elitist shortcomings (quoted in Chinn et al., 1992: 89). Unlike Girard, however, Sedgwick is

aware of the limitations and the gender prescriptions of her own homosocial model and is interested in demonstrating the debilitating effects of male-male relations on women.

For Sedgwick, the male-female-male triangle is a 'sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment' (Sedgwick, 1985: 27). In her discussion of what she perceives to be a structural continuum in European social and psychological structures, Sedgwick focuses on the ways men bond with each other through the female as an object of desire/exchange and she establishes links between male homosocial desire (which she carefully delineates as not homosexual, but blatantly homophobic) and patriarchal power. Arguing that the masculinist erotic triangle nurtures homosocial bonding and perpetuates the notion of male entitlement, Sedgwick maintains that patriarchal power and institutions have been organised around a ritualised traffic in women (as in the institution of marriage). Stressing the subordination of women in the homosocial network, Sedgwick draws attention to the female position in the triangular erotic structure, arguing that women are 'the ultimate victims of the painful contradictions in the gender system that regulates men' (Sedgwick, 1985: 134). In this way, the 'sexually pitiable or contemptible female figure is a solvent' that binds together two men, so that they will be able to 'exchange power and to confirm each other's value' (Sedgwick, 1985: 160). Underlining women's function as conduits of homosocial desire, Sedgwick, like Girard, does not interpret male heterosexuality as an uncomplicated and linear exchange. For her, men's heterosexuality is secretly 'motivated and, potentially, sapped by its true homosocial object' (Sedgwick, 1985: 65). Stressing the inescapable nature of the heterosexual detour of male homosocial desire, Sedgwick notes that 'the male

path through heterosexuality to homosocial satisfaction is a slippery and threatened one – although for most men, in at least most cultures, compulsory’ (Sedgwick, 1985: 50).

The threat to which Sedgwick alludes in the above quotation is presented by the intimate connections that exist between normative male homosociality and deviant male homosexuality. As the two opposed poles of the homosocial spectrum, these two relational models are distinctly separated from each other. The cultural authority of heterosexual homosociality is thus safeguarded by the intervention of a homophobic mechanism that divides and manipulates the homosocial continuum. As Sedgwick argues, patriarchal structures depend on the maintenance of highly charged but strictly defined male-male attachments. For male homosociality to uphold patriarchal structures, it needs to be clearly distinguished from male homosexuality as every overt eroticisation and explicit sexualisation of male bonds potentially undermines the conceptual male/female distinction on which patriarchy is founded. For this reason, Sedgwick is eager to distinguish between “functional” homosocial bonds – bolstering the structure of male domination and power – and those that weaken it – the explicitly sexual attachments between men that blur the putative difference between male and female. Addressing the patriarchal need to curb homoerotic desire in the service of the heterosexual norm, Sedgwick recognises homophobia as a regulating social mechanism that keeps desire between men in check, as a ‘tool of control over the entire spectrum of male homosocial organization’ (Sedgwick, 1985: 115). While this homophobic mechanism splits the homosocial continuum in order to maintain the patriarchal status-quo, the danger of the collapse of this ideological barrier is nevertheless impending as ‘the schism in the male-homosocial spectrum created by homophobia’ is ‘based on minimal and undecidable differentiation’ (Sedgwick, 1985: 201). If the homophobic mechanism succeeds, it will sustain a distinctly patriarchal culture. In

Sedgwick's words, male homosocial bonding, 'if successfully achieved, is not detrimental to "masculinity" but definitive of it' (Sedgwick, 1985: 50).

Importantly for this study, Sedgwick attempts to trace the persistence of the male-female-male homosocial paradigm in English writing and demonstrate that cultural (particularly literary) artefacts produced within patriarchal culture have a tendency to imitate this masculinist triangular configuration. Sedgwick's project thereby recalls Girard's literary endeavours as she seeks to formulate her version of the literary canon and to emphasise the canonical authority of the male-male relationship. Sedgwick argues that English literature since the Renaissance has a homosocial tendency insofar as its hidden topic has always been male bonding – the bond between two men through the female body and soul. While preserving the male-female-male erotic paradigm, literary works are shown to emphasise, with almost paranoiac insistence, the necessity of triangulation. Stressing the 'compulsory and double-edged involvement of women in all the male homosocial bonds', Sedgwick maintains that the standard plot mechanisms of classic English fiction reassert masculinist triangular patterns (Sedgwick, 1985: 66). Like Girard, Sedgwick perceives the male-female-male paradigm as an inescapable but necessary stabilising structure that triumphantly re-establishes itself at the end of each novel as a sign of the remobilisation of patriarchal power. Like Girard, Sedgwick is intent on foregrounding both the 'unbrokenness' and the 'suppleness' of her homosocial continuum (Sedgwick, 1985: 2; 28). In fact, Sedgwick's theoretical construct inherently depends on the mobility of the homosocial structure as the danger for patriarchy lies expressly in the possibility that the two male terms move from the normative homosocial realm to the deviant homosexual one. While stressing the dynamism of the homosocial spectrum, Sedgwick, like Girard, also extends her theories to wider fields of reference, claiming an almost universal validity for

them. In the most ambitious formulation of her argument, she asserts that the entire European canon since the seventeenth century and the whole 'heterosexual European erotic ethos' might be described as a massively elaborated statement on male homosociality (Sedgwick, 1985: 16). Sedgwick makes clear that she does not want to delineate 'a separate male-homosocial literary canon' and instead asserts that 'it will be essential to my argument to claim that the European canon as it exists is already such a canon, and most so when it is heterosexual' (Sedgwick, 1985: 17). Consequently, while it appears that 'literature canonizes the subject of male homosociality; in return, it would seem, the subject of male homosociality canonizes the work of literature' (Castle, 1992: 131).

What makes a literary work canonical for Sedgwick is precisely its degree of absorption in the issue of male homosociality. Such a claim is inherently tainted by the masculinist bias of Sedgwick's literary focus and subject matter. Concentrating on a narrow band of (predominantly male) writers and emphasising their immersion in the male homosocial topic, Sedgwick's formulation of the canon does not only create exclusive literary hierarchies but it also restates the male-dominated canon's efficacy. For both Sedgwick and Girard, the male-female-male erotic paradigm is an essential feature of the Western literary canon. Their respective theories seem to imply that the preoccupation with this masculinised version of the love triangle is a mark of literary achievement and sophistication. Like Girard, Sedgwick can as a result be charged with a certain amount of male-centred literary elitism. Unlike her male counterpart, however, Sedgwick is acutely aware of the limitations of her own model. In a series of introductory admissions, she candidly acknowledges the omissions of her construct. Unlike Girard, she indirectly reaffirms the importance of genre, admitting that 'the violence done by my historicizing narrative to the literary readings proper shows perhaps most glaringly in the overriding of

distinctions and structural considerations of genre' (Sedgwick, 1985: 18). Moreover, Sedgwick also notes that her 'almost exclusive focus on male authors' has the 'effect of impoverishing our sense of women's own cultural resources of resistance, adaptation, revision, and survival' (Sedgwick, 1985: 18). Similarly, she recognises that her reluctance to distinguish between what she calls 'ideologizing' and 'de-ideologizing' narratives may have led her to present 'the "canonical" cultural discourse in an excessively [...] inescapable [...] form' (Sedgwick, 1985: 18). Unlike Girard, Sedgwick freely concedes that, despite her all-encompassing endeavours, her claims to universality may be 'at present, perhaps, to some extent unspecifiable' (Sedgwick, 1985: 19). While both Girard and Sedgwick's conceptions of a male-oriented literary canon reproduce gendered and elitist evaluations, Sedgwick, unlike the French critic, is gender-conscious, admitting for example that her highly selective and male-orientated theory cannot uphold her totalising claims of validity since it fails 'to do justice to women's own powers, bonds, struggles' (Sedgwick, 1985: 18). Unlike Girard, who fails to detect a female presence inside the canon, Sedgwick investigates the epistemological boundaries of her exclusive and masculinist literary theory, specifying female-orientated relationships (female homosociality) as an intellectual no man's land for which her argument cannot account. Aware of gender disparities, Sedgwick addresses the topics of female homosociality and female-based triangular structures, recognising that 'there are many and thorough asymmetries between the sexual continuums of women and men' (Sedgwick, 1985: 25). While gender is thus 'expected to alter the structure of erotic triangles', Sedgwick concludes her admissions with the rather perfunctory remark that 'much better analyses are needed of the relations between female-homosocial and male-homosocial structures' (Sedgwick, 1985: 23; 18).



While the above admissions attest to Sedgwick's critical alertness and gender awareness, her own preliminary attempts at describing the differences between male and female homosociality are not only cursory but also unconvincing. This is hardly surprising considering that the male-based terms of Sedgwick's argument do not allow any in-depth consideration of female-centred forms of bonding and female-based triangular structures. It is because Sedgwick maintains the primacy and the canonical power of male-male bonds that she cannot focus on female collectivism and the female-male-female structure. To do so would mean damaging, if only schematically, the masculinist triangle that she is intent on elaborating. In the few paragraphs that she dedicates to female bonding, Sedgwick dismisses female homosociality as a form of female homosexuality, stressing the 'apparent simplicity – the unity – of the continuum between “women loving women” and “women promoting the interests of women”' (Sedgwick, 1985: 3). For her,

It seems at this moment to make an obvious kind of sense to say that women in our society who love women, women who teach, study, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities. (Sedgwick, 1985: 2 - 3)

In the following, I suggest that such a point of view is limited in perspective as it obscures female heterogeneity and diversity. Defining women as a monolithic category that homogenises female relationships, aims and pursuits, Sedgwick can be charged with parochialism as her statements concerning female homosociality are inadequate to deal with varied and diverse female bonds. Conversely, this investigation contends that female relations are far more complex than Sedgwick acknowledges. In this way, I argue that generic form and reading experience intrinsically depend on what form of female

relationship is depicted - whether it is female antagonism, lesbian fascination, women's bonding within the context of feminist sisterhood or postfeminist relationships advocating individual advancement rather than politically significant action. Elaborating on the differences between female-homosocial and male-homosocial structures, this study asserts that, unlike the pro-patriarchal "functional" forms of male homosociality, female bonding is often disruptive of the patriarchal status-quo, challenging the heterosexual man/woman dyad on which phallogocentric structures are based. While it is important not to essentialise or sentimentalise female bonding, one can nonetheless maintain that patriarchy is ultimately in favour of, if not dependent on, female rivalry and the severing of female-female bonds. In a patriarchal context, female homosocial bonding appears doubly perilous as it not only removes women from their function as objects of exchange but it also devalues the heterosexual tie in favour of a same-sex relation that potentially annuls male primacy. To prevent such bonding, patriarchal strategies frequently draw on the ideological practice or imaginative convention that defines women in dualistic terms. In this way, the conservative marital triangle is based on the structural juxtaposition of the two wife figures. Dependent on the antithetical circumscription of women, this schematisation functions as a patriarchal zoning that rules out female homosociality as a threat to male-orientated structures.

Describing a variety of intra-female relationships ranging from rivalry, lesbian fascination to feminist sisterhood and postfeminist relations, this investigation focuses on the multiplicity of function and contextual mutability of the female-female bond. I argue that female intra-gender relationships change according to the ideological parameters of the respective genre in which they are depicted. Whereas the romance typically dismisses the female-female bond in favour of the heterosexual dyad, romantic mutations often tend to

shift emphasis from the male-female bond to the same-sex female relationship. In the process, they frequently call into question romantic paradigms and articulate feminist/anti-patriarchal perspectives. Whether depicting female rivalry or female homosociality, the female-female dyad of the marital triangle functions as an indicator reflecting generic variants and ideological beliefs. Moreover, I also insist that introducing a second female term into the triadic structure is not necessarily a feminist manoeuvre as the subverted form of triangulation is not *per se* a means of feminist counterplotting but a double-edged and slippery ideological platform. In fact, I affirm that the nature of the female-female tie changes according to genre and that it reflects the contextual/ideological determinants expressed through generic form.

Despite Sedgwick's admissions and critical insights into the omissions of her own model, her theoretical construct exhibits similar shortcomings to those of Girard's elaboration. Like Girard, Sedgwick asserts that the male-centred Western canon pivots around the subject of male-male attachments. Literary preoccupations with the male-male tie are established as *the* mark of artistic sophistication and the male-female-male triangle is set up as *the* standard and conventionalised structure of literary representation. In the process, Sedgwick constructs elitist literary hierarchies and formulates a specifically male-orientated literary canon. To highlight the primacy of her respective theories, Sedgwick, like Girard, has recourse to an uncompromisingly oppositional aesthetic that is reminiscent of modernist conceptions of the high/low culture divide.<sup>14</sup> Such an aesthetic limits high art to a specific corpus of practices and a definite canon of works – in the cases of Girard and Sedgwick, those works that focus on and explore mimeticism / homosociality. By implication, it appears that the female-based marital triangle is inherently and inevitably excluded from the realm of high culture since it does not give expression to the male-male

mimetic bond or homosocial desire, said to be the markers for literary standards. From both Girard and Sedgwick's perspectives, it would appear that the female-male-female constellation is automatically relegated to the realm of low culture as it misses the second male term that constitutes the canonical male dyad and, instead, focuses on either the female-male or the female-female tie. In other words, Girard and Sedgwick's theories articulate the kind of 'gender dichotomy' that, as Andreas Huyssen notes, 'has been inscribed, in subtle and not so subtle ways, into the theories of the Great Divide' (Huyssen, 1986: x). Their literary schemes are tainted by their masculinist bias as they imply the exclusion of the feminised triangle from the realm of "high art" and its categorical relocation to the realm of "low art".

Tracing the persistence of the female-male-female triangle in popular women's fictions, the focus of this study could falsely be perceived as introducing through the back door the same adversarial and gendered evaluations that constitute Girard and Sedgwick's elitist and male-based formulations. My line of reasoning could be misinterpreted as follows: whereas Sedgwick and Girard seek to demonstrate the tenability of the male-female-male triangle across the male-based literary canon, my thesis inversely attempts to delineate the existence of the female-male-female triangle in female-based popular fictions. Such argumentation would inevitably reinstate a gendered division of culture in which the canon of high culture is seen as masculine and superior and popular culture as feminine and inferior. However, my aim is distinctly different from the above hypothesis. Refuting categorical cultural segregations, the focus of this study spans across a wide variety of texts and genres. It includes critically acclaimed and "canonical" narratives such as Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, formulaic fictions such as contemporary mass-produced romances and texts that evade clear literary classification such as du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Weldon's *The Life and*

*Loves of a She-Devil*. Connecting all these narratives and genres under the topical umbrella of the marital triangle, I do not aim to reinstall elitist conceptions of culture but to demonstrate the persistence of the marital triangle across these different forms. Stressing a logic of transition rather than progression, I seek to make inter-connections between different genres and texts rather than evaluative judgements on the basis of their originality of construction. Undoubtedly, it is important to remain aware of the differences in literary materials. In the following, I therefore do not intend to endorse in an uncritical or one-sided glorification of popular culture - an approach which Andreas Huyssen rightly calls 'the mindless pluralism of anything goes' (Huyssen, 1986: ix). On the other hand, I also want to avoid making the divisive evaluations that confine criticism to formulating sterile and rigid aesthetic hierarchies.

Highlighting the inter-relatedness of diverse genres and texts, I pay attention to the negotiations within plot formulas and the subtle nuances of the triangular constellation that potentially disrupt the economy of the romantic form and the dynamics of the triadic structure. While both Girard and Sedgwick attribute a certain dynamic quality to their masculinist constructs, the mobility of their models is restricted to one side of the triangle as only men's relations with each other seem to initiate relational variability. Unlike Girard and Sedgwick, I explore multi-axial triangular settings and affirm that different sides of the triangle can take precedence in different genres. Tracing a structural continuum that is diverse and changing, I maintain that all three relational sides of the marital triangle are active and dynamic and that the constellation can be used in different generic settings and adapted for different ideological purposes. Moreover, rather than bearing witness to its non-canonical nature, the continued and persistent re-employment of the female-male-female triangle in women's fictions demonstrates that the female-based triangle lends itself

particularly well to explorations of female-orientated subject matter. As two of its components are women, the marital triangle is a distinctly feminised structure with an increased feminocentric potential. With these arguments in mind, my textual network should not be understood as the feminised and inferior other to the masculinist canons of Girard and Sedgwick but as a varied counter-continuum spun across a whole range of diverse women's fictions.

Challenging the masculinist canons of Girard and Sedgwick, I also contest the well-established and gendered divide of culture that their theories appear to promote. Describing the tradition of gendered aesthetics, Andreas Huyssen and Tania Modleski emphasise the gender inscriptions of the high/low culture debate, arguing that, throughout the nineteenth- and the early twentieth-century modernist period, popular/mass culture has explicitly and insistently been gendered as feminine and inferior. Tracing the history of the perception of mass culture as feminine, Huyssen claims that modernism was formed out of a desire to distance the threatening "feminine" aspects of mass culture. As he notes,

It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities. (Huyssen, 1986: 47)

Mass culture thus traditionally appears 'as monolithic, engulfing, totalitarian, and on the side of regression and the feminine' (Huyssen, 1986: 58). Drawing attention to the 'countless critics who persist in equating femininity, consumption and reading, on the one hand, and masculinity, production, and writing on the other', Tania Modleski similarly claims that 'our ways of thinking and feeling about mass culture' are 'intricately bound up

with notions of the feminine' (Modleski, 1986a: 41; 38). She shows how the terms used to assess mass culture and subordinate it to high culture are derived from sexist constructions of femininity and masculinity. Damned as 'mobs of scribbling women' (in Hawthorne's famous phrase) and attacked for their 'poverty of brains' (to use George Eliot's words), women are thus 'held responsible for the debasement of taste and the sentimentalisation of culture' (Modleski, 1986a: 38).

Exploring the notion of gender as a textual determinant, Huyssen and Modleski's analyses of the high/low culture divide draw on issues relating to the gendered construction and distribution of literacy. The two critics delineate a literary hierarchy in which the masculine-as-text is portrayed as the normative and invisible standard while the feminine-as-text emerges as the deviant and distinctly gendered aesthetic. Highlighting the gendered stigmatisation of mass culture, Tania Modleski stresses the outdated nature of this form of cultural misogyny. As she contends, 'once it is recognized that a misogynistic attitude lies at the very core of the high/mass culture opposition, the need for new ways of thinking and new theoretical paradigms becomes obvious' (Modleski, 1986b: xiv). For both Modleski and Huyssen, postmodernist practices that blur the distinctions between high/low and feminist interventions that re-evaluate formerly devalued/feminine forms of expression, are specifically appropriate to resist and diffuse the gendered conceptions of the high/low culture divide. Huyssen optimistically claims that, with the increasingly visible presence of women in high art and with the emergence of postmodernist and feminist cultural forms, 'the old gendering device [...] has lost its persuasive power because the realities have changed' (Huyssen, 1986: 62).

In fact, Huyssen makes a valid point when emphasising the anachronistic nature of the modernist gendering of the cultural divide. The elitist demand for an uncompromising

and gendered segregation of high and low has certainly lost much of its persuasive power in contemporary culture in which, on the one hand, women actively and authoritatively engage with all aspects of cultural expression and in which, on the other hand, popular forms are no longer marginal on the cultural platform (Storey, 1993: 19). Yet even though the selective ideology of modernism might be outdated, it is too early to proclaim the end of these elitist critical practices. As Dominic Strinati asserts, 'the idea of mass culture is still very much alive' and as Angela MacRobbie notes, 'despite the breaking down of the old distinctions between high art and low culture, we have not entirely abandoned the notion of art' (Strinati, 1995: 21; McRobbie, 1994: 94). In the following, I maintain that radical feminist criticism is particularly prone to resort to the exclusive conceptions that characterise modernist thinking. Even if such criticism may not believe in modernist theory as a whole, it nonetheless and unwittingly runs the risk of having recourse to a selective elitism in its vilification of popular women's genres such as the romance. These feminist evaluations enter into an unlikely alliance with institutionalised modernism - labelling and rejecting popular feminine forms as substandard categories that fail to meet the required standards of a (still predominantly male-orientated) high culture. Consequently, I argue that despite current developments in cultural theory and practices, the belief in the "Great Divide" (with its aesthetic, political and gendered implications) is still present in contemporary academic thinking. Although the pedestal of high culture no longer occupies a privileged masculine space and although the diffuse literary activities of postmodernist culture are harder to contain in stable categories or institutions, critics such as René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reiterate modernist propositions of quality and therefore contribute to the longevity of the high/low culture divide. Bound to an elitist and



masculinist paradigm, their formulations of a male-dominated literary canon remain caught within modernist adversarial aesthetics.

René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's works on the love triangle and their endeavours to question seemingly unconcealed symmetrical gender structures undeniably influence this investigation. Despite Girard's lack of feminist/female awareness and despite both critics' disregard for the complexities of popular literature, their respective theories provide a fruitful ground for further critical elaboration and analysis. This study takes up their attempts to uncover triangular desire at the root of dyadic configurations and to lay bare the asymmetrical economy of desire of the textual deep-structure. The critics' insistence on the inescapability of triangulation and the resilience of the triadic structure also underline the findings of this investigation. Like its masculinist counterparts, the marital triangle proves to be a persistent structure, re-emerging time after time in women's genres. However, since both Sedgwick and Girard concentrate on the male-male attachment in a male-female-male triangular constellation, it is clearly not possible to inter-change and transpose their ideas into this analysis. In fact, as I have argued, the female-based marital triangle essentially functions as a complementary structure for which Girard and Sedgwick cannot adequately account. Briefly comparing the masculinised to the feminised triangle, one can make a number of observations. Reflecting male points of view within a male-female-male structure, the masculinised version of the love triangle is typically pro-status-quo and the male-male bond of this structure essentially functions as the repository of patriarchal power. While functional homosocial/mimetic attachments form the relational base of authority underlying the triadic constellation, triangulation appears compulsory. No axes of desire ultimately prevail as the heterosexual dyad is not meant to endanger the dominance of the functional homosocial/mimetic bond and the male-male relationship is

not meant to overrule safe heterosexual desire. In the process, the male-based triangle negates or represses female subjectivity and in this masculinised context, women are typically presented as objects of exchange between the two men.

Often depicting a female point of view and having one single male occupy the “in-between” position between two females, the feminised version of the love triangle inevitably displaces male homosociality/mimeticism. It typically accounts for female desire and introduces, at least hypothetically, the possibility of subversive female bonding. Whereas the male-female-male triangle helps to maintain the patriarchal “traffic” in women and to uphold patriarchal power structures, a patriarchally informed female-based triangle needs to suppress all possibility of intra-gender bonding in favour of an assertion of heterosexual ties. Without drawing cursory and pre-emptive conclusions about the romance and its generic mutations at this point, one can nonetheless assert that a patriarchal appropriation of the marital triangle is dependent on the disintegration of the female-female bond. In contrast to the Girardian and Sedgwickian masculinist triangle, triangulation in this context needs to be effectively dismantled in favour of the normative heterosexual dyad. In this way, the feminised triangle remains different in substance from the male-based one as its normative/patriarchal manifestations are based on different relationships. While both feminised and masculinised triangles are ideologically receptive structures with the potential for both resistance and collusion, they exhibit a gender-reversed ideology. Whereas the romantic female-based triangle depends on the disarticulation and collapse of the triad in favour of the closed heterosexual bond, the normative male-based model evades resolution and reaffirms the open relationality of the triadic form. Whereas the disruptive female component of the conservative feminised triangle generally faces narrative elimination (signalling the structural transcendence beyond the triangular mode), the male

rival of the masculinised triangle seems much more resilient and potent and is not as easily discarded, silenced or repressed.

While I do not intend to discredit or invalidate Girard and Sedgwick's theories and while their findings may indeed furnish an accurate description of masculine desire under patriarchy, I still maintain that the astonishing uniformity and correspondence of their theories is partly due to their relative disregard of genre and gender.<sup>15</sup> In their eagerness to provide all-encompassing and generalising theories for the entirety of the European literary canon, Girard and Sedgwick fail to elaborate on gender differences and the concept of genre in their respective analyses. Although Sedgwick is distinctly aware of the shortcomings and gender prescriptions of her model, her literary readings, like Girard's, are highly selective and exclusively focus on what she perceives to be the male-dominated canon of Western literature. Preserving rigid aesthetic boundaries, Sedgwick and Girard are bound to modernist fixities. Masking female desire, subjectivity and women's authority/authorship, their literary elitism and their male-orientated focus reinforce definite gender categories and articulate androcentric paradigms. In contrast to Girard and Sedgwick's conceptualisations, the main objective of this thesis is neither to formulate nor to determine the workings of the Western literary canon. As a result, the readings in this study can be far more diverse in terms of genre and formal complexity as they reflect an ideologically and contextually varied literary arena. Tracing a structural continuum that transcends cultural divisions of high/low, this study seeks to provide insights into theoretical areas that Girard and Sedgwick's theories did or would not cover. Focusing on specifically female-orientated texts and putting the female-based triangle centre stage, I aim to uncover the patriarchal shortcomings of the theories of mimeticism and homosociality and to explore how the gender-reversed triangulation of the feminised triangle functions and changes in different

generic settings. Expanding Girard and Sedgwick's masculinist literary focus, the thesis affirms that only by investigating a variety of materials that are historically diverse and generically distinct, is it possible to gain a varied picture of the triangular erotic motive in literature. In this way, intent on formulating a logic of generic transition, this study picks up what René Girard refused to investigate and where Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick left off.

### 1.3 Defining the Genre: Romantic Paradigms and Innovations

In the 1870s, novelist Anthony Trollope maintained that ‘a novel can hardly be made interesting or successful without love [...] love is necessary to all novelists because the passion is one which interests or has interested all’ (quoted in Polhemus, 1990: 2). In a similar line of thought, French writer Georges Sand affirmed that ‘presque tous les romans sont des histoires d’amour’ while, in the 1920s, British novelist E. M. Forster equally observed that ‘if you think of a novel in the vague you think of a love interest – of a man and a woman who *want* to be united and *perhaps* succeed’ (quoted in: Constans, 1991: 24, Boone, 1984: 66). Various critics confirm these novelists’ impressions, perceiving the love plot as particularly suited to narrative representation. In *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Peter Brooks describes desire as a primary narrative motor, generating a dynamic force that moves the narrative forward and sustains the action in the novel. Desire is thus a ‘dynamic of signification’ that is ‘central to our experience of reading narrative’ (Brooks, 1984: 37). Highlighting the novelistic tradition of love and desire, Ellen Moers and Leslie Fiedler similarly argue that the ‘novel [is] synonymous with love story’, ‘[love is] as necessary and as expected as battle in Homer or revenge in the Renaissance drama’ (quoted in Boone, 1986: 375; Fiedler, 1966: 25). Seemingly indigenous to the novel, the concept of love, the nature of the romantic relationship and its possibilities of outcome are primary thematic and form-giving devices that figure as symbolic centres around which novelistic narrative structures coalesce. Despite the novel’s general dependence on the themes of love and passion, it is nonetheless the romance novel that springs most readily to mind when the

term “love” is mentioned. If love is a distinguishing feature of the novel, *only* the romance novel centres *exclusively* and *by definition* on feelings and love. Its literary existence depends on and is restricted to the thematic focus on passion and emotions. Kay Mussell confirms that ‘the only formula to a romance is a love story’ while Rachel Blau DuPlessis maintains that ‘what I call a romance [...] is the use of conjugal love as a telos and of the developing [...] love relationship as a major, if not the only major, element in organizing the narrative action’ (Mussell, 1997a: 215; Blau DuPlessis, 1985: 200). As a literary terrain solely dedicated to the celebration of romantic relationships, the romance exclusively affirms the ultimate triumph of love, the belief that love will prevail and overcome all obstacles and difficulties.

Depending on narrative progression and the unfolding of plot, all fiction portrays obstacles and difficulties. Vital structuring devices, conflicts, problems, misunderstandings, separations etc. set the plot in motion and keep the reader’s interest alive. In fact, ‘there is no literature without obstacles – literature is conflict’ and ‘conflict is the life-blood of the novel, the means by which its plot and its characterization are dynamically set in motion’ (Andrist, 1989: 56; Daleski, 1984: 7). Since any theme is most forcefully dramatised in terms of conflict, narrative structure relies on and requests the overcoming of obstacles. In the case of the romance, this means the conquest of barriers in the name of love. The romance plot typically places impediments in the love affair’s trajectory and the quest for love is effectively delayed by a series of obstacles that keep the lovers apart and threaten the fulfilment of their union. In its relentless affirmation of the supremacy of love, the romance plot is structured by and focuses on the provisional obstacles and barriers that love must permanently and definitely overcome. As Janice Radway affirms, ‘every romantic

narrative must create some form of conflict to keep the romantic pair apart until the proper moment' (Radway, 1987: 65). In this way, the 'classic romance can be characterised as the quest for love delayed by a series of obstacles which desire must overcome' (Stacey and Pearce, 1995: 36). Advancing the romantic action, the delay of the lovers' union and the barriers placed in their way are not only structural prerequisites but they also heighten the intensity of the love relationship and function as important stimuli in animating romantic desire. Thomas Hardy's Damon Wildevic voices a similar conviction when asserting that 'obstacles were a ripening sun to his love' (Hardy, 1969: 205).

Analogously, in line with the Girardian affirmation of the mediator/obstacle as the primary incentive of desire, Freudian readings of romantic love confirm that the pleasure of love and desire depends upon the satisfaction of overcoming barriers. Freud asserts that 'an obstacle is required in order to heighten libido; and where natural resistances to satisfaction have not been sufficient, men have at all times erected conventional ones so as to be able to enjoy love' (Freud, 1977b: 256 - 257). In his classic formulation of Western desire *Love in the Western World* (1983), literary theorist Denis de Rougemont similarly affirms the essential and stimulating qualities of 'the exciting obstacle' (de Rougemont, 1983: 378). Echoing the Freudian insight, he declares that 'secretly we desire obstruction. And this obstruction we are ready if needs be to invent or imagine' (de Rougemont, 1983: 52). Ultimately, it appears that 'there can be no love story unless love meets with opposition' (de Rougemont, 1983: 235).

While it is questionable whether erotic attraction and romantic love always require the opposing intermediary of the mediator/obstacle, one cannot deny that both plot and narrative intensity are activated, heightened and stimulated by the existence of such a narrative impediment. Although these obstacles may come in many forms, themes and

types, this study focuses on the erotic irregularities of the love triangle (in particular the marital triangle) as primary barriers obstructing the path of romantic love. Constructing problematic erotic patterns and undermining the symmetric stability of the romantic dyad, the unstable triangularity of the love triangle is infused with emotion and rich conflict as it functions as a staple structural impediment hindering the course of love. A genre dedicated to the overcoming of obstacles in the name of love, the romance unsurprisingly abounds with love triangles. In her structuralist analysis of the semiotics of popular literature *Reading the Romance* (1987), Janice A. Radway confirms the ubiquity of the romantic triadic constellation, giving the example of researcher Margaret Jensen who ‘found that 98 percent of her sample of Harlequins [...] included either a male or a female rival’ (Radway, 1987: 122). Stressing that triangulation is almost endemic to romance plotting, Rosalind Coward also perceives the existence of a rival as ‘almost obligatory’ while Kay Mussell underlines the narrative dominance of the triadic model, stating that almost all romantic scenarios feature ‘a man, a woman, and another woman’ (Coward, 1984: 193; Mussell, 1997a: 217). Accordingly, this study maintains that the romance, as the genre most commonly associated with the concept of love, offers a highly productive frame of reference and is a particularly revealing point of generic departure from which a consideration of the transformations and deviations of the marital love triangle can most effectively be launched.

As will be argued, the romance is characterised by an ideological heterogeneity as it occupies a paradoxical space between conservatism and progressiveness, continuity and change, complicity and resistance to patriarchal relations. On the one hand, the romance is not a monolithic or unvarying genre as it is capable of registering and processing ideological change. On the other hand, the genre is at the same time governed by a set of



ideologically infused and naturalised conventions that contribute to its fossilised appearance. During the course of my analysis, I assert that the romance is not a site for either continuity or change. An ideologically heterogeneous form, it operates in the contested middle space between these polarities. In Barry Rutland's terms, the genre does not develop according the 'exclusionary logic of either/or' but it thrives within the 'inclusionary logic of both/and' (Rutland, 1999: 74). In line with the ideological hybridity of the romance, the romantic marital triangle is an ideologically slippery and versatile platform whose possibilities of meaning are determined by the stable, yet changing discourse of the romance. The romantic triangular structure is not a rigid narrative trope as it is capable of absorbing and reflecting cultural developments and contextual determinants. Yet, at the same time, it is also bound to the premises of the genre and thus can only conditionally administer change and transformation.

In fact, any consideration of the romantic marital triangle and any critical examination of the generic boundaries of the romantic plot must begin with a definition of the romance. As a pre-condition of my analysis, a clear understanding of the limiting case or the ideal-type of the romance is essential. The formulation of such a theoretical model is complicated by the difficulty of pinning down a general definition of the genre, by the looseness of usage and the variety of applications that the term "romance" has undergone over time. There are multiple conceptions of the romance that cover a wide range of divergent literary materials, the totality of which does not seem to fit any fixed generic definition very comfortably. As a literary classification and an aesthetic term, the romance resists definition as it both uses and abuses conventional categories of genre. Grouped under the topical umbrella of the romance, there is a variety of culturally and historically distinct narratives, ranging from the classical Hellenistic romance, the heroic medieval and

Renaissance romance to the nineteenth-century sentimental women's romances and contemporary mass-produced and female-orientated romantic fiction. Due to the apparent diversity and the historical mutability of its representations, the romance is not a fixed or invariable formation. Instead, it has to be discussed as a semantic field strewn with multiplicity and uncertainties. For the purpose of definition, the term always seems to demand a modifying specifier or adjectivisation (for example medieval, sentimental, classic, heroic, modern, feminine romance, etc.). Throughout history and within different cultures, there have been multiple discourses of the romance. Romantic forms, codes and conventions have changed along with variations in ideological and cultural contexts. As a broadly inclusive topical field and a protean entity, the romance has many levels and many forms. As a result, instead of fixing one generalisable model, it might be more to the point to talk about dominant forms of the romance or varieties of the romance.

Despite the disparate uses of the romance and its historical variability, some critics have perceived the topical and structural diversity of the term not just as the product of sloppy categorisation but as the result of a variegated, yet on some level coherent, history. Stressing the unity of the generic phenomenon, Jean Radford describes the romance as 'one of the oldest and most enduring of literary modes which survives today' (Radford, 1986: 8). Similarly, in his discussion of the generic 'mythoi' of literature, literary theorist Northrop Frye has equally sought an underlying structural unity for different forms of the romance, attempting to illustrate the continuity of the romantic literary form across time and cultural differentiations (Frye, 1957: 162). Frye defines the romance as the literature of wish-fulfilment, stimulated by 'the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality' (Frye, 1957: 193).

For the critic, the genre is a utopian fantasy that aims to restore ‘some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space’ (Frye, 1957: 186). Whereas the nature of this fantasy or ideal may vary with ideological and cultural conditions, it is the utopian impulse or vision of the romance that makes this particular genre so important and central. Tracing the historical development of the romance from its Greek roots, Robert Ellrich also highlights formal continuities and singles out persistent features of the genre throughout its history. In this way, he notes that ‘from the start it was a popular rather than a learned genre’, that it ‘was intended, at least in part, as entertainment for leisure time’, that it ‘crossed class lines’ and that it captured ‘the story of individual human beings pursuing their precarious existence within the circumscription of social, moral, and various other this-worldly problems’ (Ellrich, 1997: 271; 274 - 275). While it is thus possible to uncover underlying continuous features of the romance, I assert that the evolution of the genre is mostly characterised by change, multiplicity and transformation rather than cross-cultural and transhistorical continuity. Although Frye, Radford and Ellrich’s generalising and homogenising statements may be useful in highlighting the similarities and cross-references between seemingly diverse narratives, their insights are ultimately too broad in scope and can only be applied at an abstract level. For the purpose of this study, it is important to acknowledge the thematic and structural variations of the romance. Faced with a historically and culturally distinct version of the romance, I believe that a more detailed consideration of the genre is essential. Such a theoretical move demands a finely drawn set of definitional parameters and highlights the romance in its historical specificity.

In the following, I will not survey the historical mutability of the romance across time, nor will I provide a detailed account of the transformations of its codes and conventions across the two thousand years since its emergence in ancient Greece. However,

a few tentative and introductory remarks will have to be made at this point in order to illustrate and underline the historically and culturally diverse nature of the genre. Defining the romance as ‘the genre par excellence of modern culture’, Robert Ellrich claims that, whereas the romance appeared only sporadically between the Homeric *Odyssey* and medieval chivalric narratives, it re-surfaced as the dominant genre in twelfth-century France (Ellrich, 1997: 274). A ‘sequential and processional form’, the vernacular medieval chivalric romances narrativised a hero’s life into a quest (Frye, 1957: 186). As Stephen Benson notes, these ‘wish-fulfilment tales, with their strongly fantastical vein [were] powerfully masculine narratives, and [provided] a sequential model of an idealised masculine life’ (Benson, 1996: 105). In the seventeenth century, the romance underwent a process of feminisation that is particularly relevant for this study.<sup>1</sup> The shift from what Lidia Curti calls a ‘male’ to a ‘female’ genre and the (con)textual move towards a specifically female heroine, author and readership were accompanied by profound changes in format and subject matter (Curti, 1988:156). This it is hardly surprising considering that the trials and tests faced by the hero of the medieval heroic romance fundamentally differ from the obstacles and problems faced by the heroine of the more recent feminised romance. While it is possible to chart the stages of the romance’s process of feminisation from its masculinised origins, it is not the aim of this examination as I investigate the generic expansion of the contemporary popular romance. As a genre gendered feminine, the modern romance aims at a female readership and primarily deals with subject matters deemed feminine – love, desire and marriage. The lineage of the popular feminised romance can be traced back to the sentimental novel of the eighteenth century (in particular Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740)) to Jane Austen’s societal romances and Charlotte Brontë’s darker representations of the genre. Taking Charlotte Brontë’s Victorian classic

*Jane Eyre* (1847) as a chronological point of departure and analysing the marital triangle in conservative as well as progressive contemporary romantic settings, the subject matter of this study exclusively revolves around the more recent forms of the feminine version of the romance.<sup>2</sup> Within this frame of reference, this investigation seeks to provide insights into the ideological transformations and the generic limitations of the romance plot. Rather than an unvarying and monolithic form, the romance engenders a spectrum of creative variations and is a composite filled with conformist as well as innovative meanings. In its progressive manifestation, the romance particularly expands generic dimensions and incorporates notions of egalitarianism and female sisterhood, thereby engaging with female-related developments such as popular feminism.

In order to account for such recent contextual developments, this project puts forward an open and mobile definition of the romance that is flexible enough to accommodate the continuity of the genre as well as its innovative qualities reflecting ideological variants and contextual determinants. In the process, this study primarily pays attention to the possibility of innovation within tradition. On the one hand, it considers the contextually-bound transformations that modernise the contemporary romance and turn it into an accurate mirror of contemporary *Zeitgeist*. On the other hand, it also takes into account the generic conventions and tropes that contribute to the unity of the romantic form. This investigation aims to provide a definitional model that diversifies and mobilises generic boundaries and explores at what point generic innovation becomes a generic shift or rejection. The theoretical model I advance here is meant to delineate both the wholeness of the romance genre and its material/historical/cultural situatedness. Foregrounding the ideological heterogeneity of the romance, my methodological tactic seeks to account for both the specificity of romantic variations and the articulated forms of unity they constitute.

The premises of the genre can only be theorised by a non-reductive determinacy that accounts for both continuity and change, generic sameness and variation. In this way, my analysis seeks to counter reductive strategies that formulate a monolithic and uniform generic construct in order to classify the romance as unvarying and static.<sup>3</sup> Refusing to homogenise and simplify diverse and multifaceted romantic practices into one common and homologous *praxis*, my project aims to give credit to contextual specificities and generic developments. Distinguishing the conservative version of the romantic triangle from the progressive romantic triangle, this study promotes the idea of theoretical discrimination *inside* the form and highlights the plurality *within* the generic construct of the romance. I examine the ideological versatility of the romantic marital triangle in order to demonstrate the genre's non-uniform and dynamic framework that links diverse romantic narratives in a pluralistic unity. In the following, I will delineate a romantic meta-schema that is supple and variable enough to accommodate contextual specificities and transformations within one generic construct.

In order to determine generic convergence and continuity, my project has to address the notions of genre and genre-boundedness. Inasmuch as genres are 'horizons of expectation' for readers and 'models of writing' for authors, they function as signifying paradigms and textual determinants (Todorov, 1990: 18). As Mary Gerhart notes, genres are 'epistemological because they are constitutive of meaning' (Gerhart, 1992: 9). Providing clear frames of reference for both readers and authors, they establish a generic contract that imposes textual order and generic coherence. The 'law of genre', as Jacques Derrida terms it, tames and controls the narrative and imposes semantic types of finalization that limit the range of textual multiplicity and fix the narrative possibilities of the text (Derrida, 1980: 203). As Derrida explains, 'as soon as the word "genre" is sounded,

as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. [...] as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line' (Derrida, 1980: 203). While generic imperatives thus limit textual possibilities and impose textual coherence by regulating all formal and thematic parameters of the narrative, I also maintain that the generic contract is by no means authoritarian and static. Stressing the ideological and historical variability of genres, Mary Gerhart confirms that 'genres are historical rather than timeless, a priori categories' (Gerhart, 1992: 9). Similarly, theorists Fredric Jameson and Tzvetan Todorov have argued persuasively that the concept of genre is a social practice as well as a literary category, a 'socio-symbolic message', which should be seen as a flexible and historically changing set of codes rather than a fixed formula (Jameson, 1983: 141). Thus, Todorov defines literary genres as dynamic rather than static entities, revealing that 'genre est une entité aussi bien socio-historique que formelle. Les transformations du genre doivent être mises en relation avec les changements sociaux' (Todorov, 1981: 124).

Consequently, the notion of genre can be described as a complex cultural phenomenon characterised by both continuity and change as it accommodates the prescriptive and homogenising imperatives of the 'law of genre' as well as the flexible and culturally variable qualities delineated by Jameson and Todorov. While a genre is bound to contextual/narrative imperatives, it is also culturally and historically variable and free to react to ideological/cultural changes. As a free-yet-bounded entity, a genre is both contextually reflective and textually prescriptive. While generic imperatives contribute to the fossilised appearance of textual parameters, these narrative constraints are not ahistorical or unvarying and are open to change and transformation. Taking into consideration the degree of mutability available *inside* the generic construct, I maintain that, just as ideological/contextual developments *inside* society are rarely radical in nature,

generic developments (reflecting ideological/contextual change) *inside* the form are frequently discrete rather than drastic. Giving witness to small-scale developments inside society, generic change is possible and arguably necessary for any form to remain culturally relevant. At the same time, echoing the stable features of the cultural agenda, generic continuity provides common and identifiable frames of reference that allow the generic contract to take place. While a genre cannot stray too far from its recognisable formula or conventions, it must also include innovative elements that modernise the generic formula and keep it relevant within a specific society. To succeed, a genre must walk a fine line between what John Cawelti calls ‘conventions’ and ‘inventions’. Whereas conventions ‘represent familiar shared images and meanings and [...] assert an ongoing continuity of values’, inventions ‘confront us with a new perception of meaning which we have not realized before’ (Cawelti, 1984: 55). In this way, ‘conventions help maintain a culture’s stability while inventions help it respond to changing circumstances and provide new information about the world’ (Cawelti, 1984: 55). On the one hand, a genre must offer a recognisable and stable set of codes and conventions implying generic unity and coherence while, on the other hand, generic parameters must also be flexible enough to accommodate cultural changes in order to remain pertinent within the culture in which the genre continues to exist and excite. The act of naming and defining a genre thus involves an attempt to account for the unity and the persisting continuity of the generic phenomenon as well as being attentive to the changes and transformations inside the form.

In keeping with this generic duality of purpose, the romance is characterised by both textual persistence and innovation. Bound to the ‘law of genre’, its narrative possibilities are clearly regulated and restricted by a number of ground rules that determine generic convergence. While these generic constants impose a predetermined narrative



focus, they are not ahistorical but culturally variable. Despite the imperatives of the generic law, generic innovations can materialise inside the narrative schema of the romance. Speaking from within and in relation to its material and discursive structures, the romance expands *within* its specific cultural context, thereby allowing progressive (rather than radical) generic transformations to take place. Narrative possibilities and variations arise and develop within their cultural frame of reference. Clearly inscribed within the structures it describes, the romance registers and processes societal changes more than it shapes them. The romantic genre is not a transcendent form but is ultimately defined by and reflective of its respective culture. The romance is thus a relational discourse whose definition is fixed in context. Characterised by a set of (con)textually stabilised codes and conventions, the romance walks a tightrope between conservatism and progressiveness, between continuity and change. It is therefore characterised by an ideological heterogeneity that incorporates its (conservative) collusion with patriarchal norms and structures as well as its expression of (more progressive) feminist ideas. While being descriptive and prescriptive, the common meta-text or foundational story of the romance discourse is also liable to absorb and reflect contextual changes. The aim of this study is to explore how far-reaching and unsettling these contextual determinants may become before they undermine the generic coherence of the romance and thus necessitate a shift in genre.

Despite all disagreements and variations possible within a single generic construct, I contend that there is a genre of romance fiction. Like all genres, the romance is known through a set of common codes, conventions and narrative patterns. Intent on analysing what Propp (1968) has termed a 'logic of narrative possibilities', this study aims to flesh out a textual skeleton comprising different (conservative and progressive) manifestations of the romance and to lay down the hypothetical and situated ingredients of the genre. Rather

than adopting a strategy of indefinitely postponed definition and without further ado, I consequently and broadly define the term romance as any narrative whose central focus is on the development and optimistic resolution of the love relationship between two individuals. Within this wide-ranging explanatory framework, I specifically focus on the normative heterosexual romance and seek to underline the innovations *within* this relational configuration. While I do not deny the existence of homosexual, ethnic or class-related appropriations of the genre, my analysis investigates the articulation of progressive contents (related to egalitarian gender relations and feminist ideas) within the heterosexist, white, upper/middle-class romantic plot.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, I insist that, although expressive of a patriarchal meta-text, the heterosexual romance includes diverse and pluralistic manifestations as it describes the conservative man-woman love story with all its ideological implications while also embracing romantic narratives that depict more innovative themes and discourses. Articulated within a predominantly patriarchal world, contemporary Western romances continue to be inherently affected by the erotic norms of their originating framework as they express the romantic adventure between two white upwardly-mobile heterosexuals and celebrate the patriarchal institution of marriage. While the delimitation of romantic signification is localised and stabilised in a patriarchal context, this investigation asserts the progressive potential of romantic variations (including for example the possibility of male romance readers/writers and the romance hero as emotive centre). In this way, I argue that it is essential to maintain a definitional and forward-looking broadness that envisages possible generic innovations and stretches the generic boundaries to incorporate both generic conservatism and progressiveness.

However, even the broadest definition is highly exclusive insofar as a range of possible textual practices and narrative possibilities will necessarily be excluded. Generic

coherence and order invariably impose what Bakhtin has called a 'monologic' structure onto the text that is accompanied by the silencing/omitting/repressing of certain perspectives/voices/stories (Bakhtin, 1981: 274). In the case of the romance, the narrative is carefully controlled and tightly organised around a dyadic/monogamous/exclusive love relationship that closes down or diminishes the possibility of all other desires. Romance writer Mary Jo Putney thus observes that the 'heart of a romance *must* be the relationship' while Jayne Ann Krentz reveals that 'if I ever found myself wanting to tell a story that did not focus on the positive resolution to the relationship [...] I would need to move to another genre' (Putney, 1992: 102; Mussell, 1997b: 50). Underlining the notion that a person is incomplete without a dyadic relationship, the romance depends upon the belief that the successful union of a loving couple is the most satisfactory conclusion for a plot. The romantic reality is reduced to this primary and exclusive dyad and everything else is just a function of it. Translated into the structural context of the romantic marital triangle, this means that triangulation must effectively be dismantled in both the conservative and the innovative romance in order to give precedence to the dyadic tie. One component of the marital triangle must always be eliminated from the generic plot to guarantee romantic closure. As I intend to argue, the narrative strategies working towards this triadic break-up are diverse and ideologically telling as they can articulate both conservative/patriarchal as well as innovative/popular feminist meanings.

Apart from the romantic emphasis on dyadic bonding, my definition also singles out the romance's optimistic closural patterns as characteristic of the genre. Underlining the romantic imperative of the happily-ever-after, Suzanne Simmons Guntrum notes that 'whatever the odds against them', the two protagonists must 'come together in the end and live happily ever after. Indeed, if the above is *not* true, then either the book is flawed or it

isn't a romance' (Simmons Guntrum, 1992: 153). Resolving contradictions and moving towards a finite and satisfactory denouement, romantic textual strategies propose a unitary or closed "truth" that moves towards a state of narrative equilibrium and ideological closure. Suppressing generic inconsistencies, ambiguities, gaps and excesses, the romance is an internally persuasive, monolinear and end-orientated discourse. It fulfils the desire for finality that Joseph Conrad refers to in his statement that 'perhaps the only true desire of mankind [...] is to be set at rest' (quoted in Lodge, 1981: 150). As the cultural theorist John Fiske notes, 'the narrative resolves the question it posed, makes good its lacks and deficiencies, and defuses its threats' (Fiske, 1987: 180). In this way, 'the impetus toward closed endings [...] reflects the wish to believe in a stable organization underlying social reality and cultural convention', imposing 'an image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe' (Boone, 1984: 69). As an internally persuasive discourse, the romance demands a finite solution according to which the tensions that have been aroused must not only be resolved but also resolved happily. In this way, the romance is not simply a love story since it has to focus on the protagonists' developing love and commitment and depict them as living happily ever after.<sup>5</sup> Despite classic "tragic" manifestations of the genre (such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Gone with the Wind*), this study identifies the romance as an essentially optimistic form that affirms the closed truth of the romantic ideal and the final stasis of the happily-ever-after.

In fact, one can distinguish a number of textual constants that determine the codes and conventions of the romance, including the selective focus on the loving couple, the exclusivity of this dyadic relationship and the closed and optimistic romance myth that love will prevail and triumph. The romantic obsession with the concept of love particularly contributes to the ideological and cultural positioning of the genre. Love continues to be

defined as a uniform and universal feeling, especially within the Western patriarchal context where it is naturalised and essentialised as an unambiguous discourse and structured around seemingly transcultural systems and codes. As Teresa Ebert emphasises, the ideological discourse of love ‘simulates globality so successfully as to appear universal and natural while at the same time almost completely erasing its own historical construction’ (Ebert, 1988: 27). Promoting a conception of love as natural and therefore static, this essentialising or what Roland Barthes terms ‘mythologizing’ strategy conceals the contextual constituent of love, transforming ‘history into nature’ (Barthes, 1988: 129). As Barthes notes, such a stance ‘transforms that which is socially particular and historically specific into something which is natural and inevitable, about which nothing can be done because it has always been the case’ (Barthes, 1988: 140).

In contrast, opposing traditional understandings of love as a natural or pre-social essence, various critics have described the concept of love as a culturally constructed emotion, reflecting ideological imperatives and contextual conditioning. As Michelle Rosaldo convincingly argues,

Feelings are not substances to be discovered in our blood, but social practices organised by stories that we both enact and tell. [...] We create for ourselves a sense [...] of what being “in love” is, through learning scripts, positioning ourselves within discourses, constructing narratives of self, drawing on whatever cultural resources are available to us. (Rosaldo, 1984: 143)

Refuting naturalising explanations of romantic love, Rosaldo asserts that human subjectivities, including the part one terms emotions, are specifically shaped by the social and cultural milieu one inhabits. For her, love uncontaminated by cultural and social

structures is inconceivable. Similarly, Stevi Jackson affirms the cultural construction of love, stating that

Rather than treating romantic desires as given, we should consider the ways in which they are culturally constructed. [...] Emotions should not be regarded as pre-social essences, but as socially ordered and linguistically mediated. This means that they are also culturally variable. (Jackson, 1995: 49; 51)

As the concept of love is regulated and shaped by social and cultural structures, it is not an *a priori* and static cultural constant but a flexible social practice and cultural resource that changes along with transformations in society and culture.<sup>6</sup> Socially and historically constituted, love is both liable to react to and reflect contextual changes and ideological shifts.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, the concept of love seems to be simultaneously constituted by its context as well as naturalised within it. As the genre most closely associated with the concept of love, the romance unsurprisingly echoes the cultural complexities of its subject matter. Just as love is naturalised into seemingly universal institutions and structures, the romance discourse conceals its own contextualisation and often appears to articulate fossilised and invariable codes and conventions. Just as love is localised and context-specific, the romance is inherently expressive of its originating framework. It is only within this contextual structure that its signification is fixed and stabilised. For all their persistence and apparent immutability, the concept of love and the romance discourse are not ahistorical, universal and monolithic but historically and culturally variable. As Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce observe, the 'continued success of romance as a cultural institution might be seen to depend, in large part, on its *ability to change*' (Stacey and

Pearce, 1995: 12). As a discourse relating to the concept of love, the romance is neither monolithic nor static but develops in accordance with ideological changes in society and culture. When love evolves, the romance is liable to reflect and express these changes in its discursive and narrative structures.

Defined and stabilised in context, the romance engages and reflects the erotic and social norms of its originating framework. As such, it remains situated within a specifically Western cultural tradition. Although ethnic and homosexual romances are published, the genre still evolves in a mainly white, heterosexual, middle- or upper-class world. As the product of a still predominantly patriarchal culture, the normative romantic discourse is regulated by a common meta-text that is conditioned by distinctly patriarchal conventions. Highlighting the genre's inscription within patriarchal practices, Bridget Fowler dismissively argues that the traditional romance 'colludes with patriarchy, expressing its rhetoric not as fatalistic common sense but as ideal principles' (Fowler, 1991: 175). Circumscribing the ideology and symbology of love, the Western romantic ideal continues to be constrained by and defined around the tropes of heterosexuality, monogamy and marriage. The normative ideal of romantic love thus remains framed by the context of a patriarchal social order. In contrast, refuting Fowler's disparaging interpretation, Jayne Ann Krentz maintains that, despite the romance's affiliation with heterosexuality and monogamy, the genre is able to extend itself within the bounds of this cultural order. She notes that

There are no rules or limitations [...] so long as the focus of my story remains on the positive resolution to the natural conflicts that exist between a man and a woman attempting to forge a monogamous bond [...] As long as this is the story I want to tell, I shall be content to tell it within the romance genre. (Mussell, 1997b: 57)

As the next section demonstrates, Fowler and Krentz's evaluations are expressive of the wider critical debate on the romance that labels the genre as either regressive and conservative or as revisionist and innovative. In comparison to such oppositional claims, I argue that the romance should not be considered as a blueprint for either patriarchal collusion or progressive articulation and contend that the ideological heterogeneity of the genre requires a more inclusive methodological tactic.

Located within a patriarchal framework, the heterosexual romance, whether conservative or innovative, develops inside a patriarchal norm that shapes and determines romantic solutions and ideals. Binding human desire to monogamous heterosexuality, the romance continues to be based on the establishment of the heterosexual couple and the genre's eroticised demands for exclusivity are still tied to the traditional man-woman dyad. Stressing the importance of the heterosexual bond, Janice Radway affirms that 'the most striking characteristic of the ideal romance [is] its resolute focus on a single, developing relationship between heroine and hero' (Radway, 1987: 122). In this way, the romantic predisposition towards the conventional man-woman love story is involved in the construction of the 'compulsory heterosexuality' that, according to Adrienne Rich, typifies patriarchal discourse.<sup>8</sup> In 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980), Rich denounces the institution of heterosexuality as one of the key mechanisms and central social structures that underlie and perpetuate male dominance, condemning the 'idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising' (Rich, 1980: 638). Apart from the romantic fixation on heterosexuality, the genre also supports its thematic requirement of an exclusive and monogamous love relationship by holding up the patriarchal institution of marriage as one of the ultimate routes to a fulfilled subjectivity. Like heterosexuality, the institution of marriage has often been criticised as ideologically



tainted since, 'by supplanting other choices and turning women into economic appendages to husbands', it is associated with 'a gender system that subordinates women' (Juhasz, 1988: 247). Although marriage is no longer an essential prerequisite of contemporary romances, romantic wedlock continues to be perceived as the most promising way to female success and happiness and the most desirable conclusion to the romantic adventure. As Mairead Owen observes, 'most romantic fiction, by definition, holds out marriage or the stable heterosexual pairing, as the happy ending, the essential feature for fulfilment in a woman's life' (Owen, 1990: 237). The prospect of marriage still functions as the epitome of romantic love and the genre's utopian promise is still most forcefully displayed by the monogamous marital bliss between two heterosexuals. Heterosexual marriage continues to be perceived as one of the greatest achievements and rewards of the individual subject and the marital ideal still functions as a means of precipitating the narrative's climax and of providing the closed "truth" and final stasis of the happily-ever-after. Functioning as the 'the all-subsuming, all-organizing, all-containing contract', romantic marriage is seen as 'the most desirable end of existence and, hence, as a virtually unassailable, closed truth' (Tanner, 1979: 15; Boone, 1984: 65).

Closely linked to the concept of marriage, my specific field of investigation, the romantic marital triangle, offers a particularly revealing theoretical platform. Depicting an optimistic marital resolution, this triadic structure lays bare and underlines the seductive nature of the social ethos of marriage. Dependent on the collapse of one marital dyad at the expense of another, it also introduces a critical element that threatens the imposition of ideological closure and that therefore has to be effectively silenced/de-activated in order to reaffirm the primacy of heterosexual bonds in marriage. The triangular configuration depolarises the marital binary and establishes a new range of relationships between

husband, first and second wife. The dualistic understanding of marriage that pairs husband and wife is problematised by the insertion of a third member who undercuts the monogamous and exclusive sanctity of the marital bond. The ethos of marriage is thus destabilised and potentially transformed as it undergoes a pluralisation and triangulation. In the romantic setting, this destabilising element has to be effectively dismantled and disarmed so that romantic heterosexist closure can be imposed. Consequently, one female component of the triadic structure has to be eliminated in order to transform the irregular triadic into the normative dyadic plot. As I assert, there are diverse romantic strategies that work towards the imposition of romantic closure and the relegation of the second female term. These strategies are versatile as they can give expression to both conservative/traditional as well as progressive/innovative romantic scenarios, thereby attesting to the ideologically variable nature of the romance genre.

While the marital triangle produces a change in the relationality of the binary pair of husband and wife, it does not annihilate the patriarchal concept of marriage as its various members are held together by and joined in the marital alliance. Stressing the contextual positioning of the genre, I emphasise that the heterosexual romance is still normative and that the romantic ideal is still clearly inscribed and embedded within patriarchal structures and institutions. Thus, the romance's potential for innovation is never conceived as a transcendence of patriarchal determinants and romantic progressiveness is always bound up with and implicated in patriarchy. Formulated in a patriarchal context, the innovative romance is not a radical discourse that expresses alternative or subversive meanings. It does not aim to actively interrogate or overthrow patriarchal codes and conventions as the genre's manifest love story remains located within the discourse of patriarchy. While contemporary romances no longer limit women's spheres and desires to the trajectories of

heterosexual love and marriage (articulating discourses of female independence, work, friendship and intra-female bonds), generic prerequisites still affirm the supreme status of the male-female dyad and stress that ultimate satisfaction is still dependent on the positive and optimistic union of these two parties. As Jayne Ann Krentz observes,

A romance novel does not focus on women coping with contemporary social problems and issues. It does not focus on the importance of female bonding. It does not focus on adventure. A romance novel may incorporate any or all of these elements in its plot, but they are never the primary focus of the story. In a romance novel, the relationship between the hero and the heroine *is* the plot. (Krentz, 1992b: 108)

Speaking from within and in relation to patriarchal structures, the romance is an inherent part of what theorist John Fiske terms a ‘feminine aesthetic’, constituting ‘not an oppositional feminist culture, but a feminine culture that asserts the value of feminine characteristics and pleasures *within*’ patriarchy (Fiske, 1987: 197; my italics). As Dana Heller argues, the genre is positioned within a cultural agenda in which ‘there is no outsider position available, no safe place from which to view patriarchy brooding stoically in its “natural” habitat while I remain critically detached and observant’ (Heller, 1990: 120).

Unlike some feminist strains that define themselves as outside or in opposition to patriarchal relations of power and domination, the romance exists and develops within the structures it describes. Consequently, romantic textual innovations and generic changes can only be negotiated within this prescribed framework and thus they always harbour a certain risk of complicity and collusion.

While the heterosexual romance in all its manifestations is based on an essentially patriarchal foundational text, it would be precipitous and erroneous to conclude that the

genre is therefore immune to generic developments and that it cannot accommodate and incorporate inputs from contemporary cultural agendas such as feminism. Rather than acting as an unproblematic and monolithic site of straightforward patriarchal inscription, the contemporary romantic text functions as a locus of negotiated meanings, a terrain of resistance and appropriation as well as subjection and patriarchal conditioning. Refusing to make overtly celebratory claims for the romance, this study argues that, although feminist intervention into the field is frequent and possible, it is often a de-politicised, “soft” or popular version of feminism that comes into play and exists more or less harmoniously within the patriarchally tainted meta-text. While the romance’s impetus towards ideological closure generally cuts short the radical and socially interrogative potential of feminism, the absorption of feminist ideas inside romantic structures should not necessarily be seen as a politically invalid neutralisation of feminist principles. Rather than a collusive co-option to patriarchal structures, they suggest a widening of the terrain of feminist thinking. This study asserts that it is important to remain alert to the conservatism of the romance and its embeddedness in patriarchal institutions. At the same time, I also maintain that it is equally as important to register the genre’s potential for transformation and change and its ability to incorporate and administer potentially progressive cultural agendas. Accordingly, this investigation affirms the need to explore generic innovations within tradition, a progressive move that works within and inhabits the generic norm in order to introduce variation and diversification. Despite its patriarchal meta-text, the romance discourse offers a platform for a variety of generic revisions relating to gender and feminism. Aiming to gain a more discriminating insight into the narrative possibilities of the romance, I advocate a differentiated view of popular culture and explore what Raymond Williams considers one of the most neglected aspects of mass culture: ‘the production of certain conventions and

modes of communication right *inside* the form' (quoted in Heath and Skirrow, 1986: 14; my italics). Dedicated to the reception of the romance, the next section argues that critical evaluations have often based their perceptions of the genre on oppositional conceptualisations, defining the form as either conservative or emancipatory. Contrastingly, I propose a non-dichotomous understanding of the romance that takes into account both its reactionary and progressive potential.

## **1.4 Delineating the Critical Context: The Elitist/Populist Readings of the Romance**

Delineating the critical debate surrounding the romance, this section draws attention to the failings of much criticism on the genre and argues that interpretations have often been oppositional, portraying the form as either regressive and conservative or as progressive and empowering. Refuting such extreme positions, this study asserts that the ideological heterogeneity of the contemporary romance necessitates a more diversified approach that makes discriminations inside the form and offers a more varied portrayal of the romantic discourse. My analysis thus stands in contrast to critical (particularly radical feminist) stances that focus exclusively on the romance's collusive investment in the patriarchal institutions of heterosexuality, monogamy and marriage. In fact, feminist commentators have often taken a dismissive and elitist critical position, denigrating and denouncing the genre for solely reproducing and inscribing patriarchal gender ideology. Defining the romance as a monolithic mode of gendered social organisation and a means of cultural inscription, critics such as Teresa Ebert argue that 'the most powerful texts for reproducing gender distinctions are romance narratives' (Ebert, 1988: 21). Describing the 'ideological engendering practices of romance narratives', Ebert draws attention to the naturalising mechanisms in the romance that 'reassert the "natural" "inevitability" of female subjectivity' and 'participate in the representation of the phallus as already given and natural' (Ebert, 1988: 39; 33). Similarly, Rachel Blau DuPlessis maintains that romances are crucial sites for the operation of patriarchal ideology, claiming that 'the romance plot,

broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole' (Blau DuPlessis, 1985: 5). For these critics, the romance invariably functions as a site for the construction of gender differences. It not only represents but also produces and reproduces the affective patterns associated with masculinity and femininity. The genre is interpreted as a cultural discourse associated with and serving as, what Teresa de Lauretis (1987) calls, 'technologies of gender'. For de Lauretis, 'the construction of gender goes on today through the various technologies of gender [...] and institutional discourses [...] with power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and "implant" representations of gender' (de Lauretis, 1987: 18). From such perspectives, the romance serves as a tool for inscription, engaging readers in a process of engendering and acculturation. In what follows, I certainly do not deny the engendering potential of the romance. However, I argue that the exclusive focus on the patriarchal embeddedness of the genre leads to a uniform appropriation of the form that cannot take account of the discrete changes and variations within the generic norm.

It would stretch beyond the purpose of this section to explore how and why actual readers construct feminine/gendered identities through the romance reading process. Privileging text over context, this study debates the meaning of textual content rather than the act of reading itself and it firmly retains the notion of text as its primary analytical category. With its textual focus, this investigation is not primarily attempting to determine how and to what extent the gender-differentiated positions produced within the romance, are taken up by concrete readers. Such explorations into the nature of readership should be reserved to ethnographic/psychoanalytic inquiries into the field. However, while the primary aim of this work remains text-related, it is important to account for the genre's socialising and engendering potential and explore the reasons for the romance's enduring

popularity with its readership.<sup>1</sup> This critical detour seems worthwhile as it allows for a declaration of allegiance and in so doing, positions this study within the wider critical debate on the issues of the romance's popularity and the genre's transmission of a gendered culture.

Investigating the enduring appeal of romance fiction, research on the genre has speculated on the reasons why romantic narratives continue to be so popular. Such commentary has mostly drawn on psychoanalytic theories to infer from the textual experience a psychological disposition towards the reading experience. Providing possible reasons why romance novels continue to be widely read, it has thus been suggested that the genre offers emotional involvement without risk, that the novels facilitate women's 'disappearing act' or the 'desire to obliterate the consciousness of the self as a physical presence' thus 'transcending the divided self', that they supply the reader with 'vicarious emotional nurturance [...] and satisfaction' reinforcing the reader's 'sense of self' and that the narratives embody a psychodynamic content that demonstrates that 'loving and nurturing are not two plots but one'.<sup>2</sup> In brief, such criticism explains the popularity of the genre by detecting a regressive and engendering fantasy that underlies the narrative structure and fulfils basic feminine desires. The fictional text thus provides a locus in which the female readership might re-experience and rework unresolved fantasies and fears that date back to earliest infancy. Viewing romance narratives as 'the nearest thing a woman has to the oedipal myth', Jayne Ann Krentz claims that the enduring popularity of the romance bears witness to the genre's reverberation 'on the deepest level of feminine understanding' (Krentz, 1992a: 2). Janice Radway equally maintains that the romance permits the ritual retelling of early psychic processes, thereby allowing an 'experience of visceral regression to an infantile state' (Radway, 1983: 63). In *Female Desire* (1984), Rosalind Coward



similarly argues that romance fiction is directly reminiscent of infantile fantasies as it restores the childhood world of sexual relations, replaying an oedipal scenario of parental seduction in which the daughter/heroine marries the father/hero and replaces the mother/rival in the father's affections (Coward, 1984: 196).

A more psychoanalytically-minded critic might indeed be tempted to read the romantic marital triangle in terms of female psychological traits and to explain the triangular constellation of younger woman-older man-older woman in terms of the family romance.<sup>3</sup> Working from a Freudian model, it would be possible to identify the actors of the romantic triangular scenario with personages in the family romance: the oral mother, the potent father, the daughter jealous of the rival mother and eager to seduce the paternal figure. Drawing on neo/post-Freudian theories, it would also be possible to define the generic mutations of the romance as narratives that are what Teresa de Lauretis (1987) calls 'oedipal with a vengeance', as texts that stress the duplicity and limitations of the romantic scenario and investigate narrative/psychoanalytic possibilities that exist outside romantic/oedipal boundaries (de Lauretis, 1987: 108).<sup>4</sup> In this line of argument, Sandra Gilbert sees novelistic desire as directly reminiscent and expressive of familial relations, claiming that father-daughter incest is the culturally constructed paradigm of female desire that, in submerged form, inherently shapes the plots and possibilities inscribed in the novel. For her, women are encouraged by patriarchal society to 'commit incest as a way of life' and overt father-daughter incest 'represents only the furthest point on a continuum – an exaggeration of patriarchal family norms, but not a departure from them' (quoted in Gilbert, 1985: 372). Matching familial relations with textual ones, Lynda Zwinger similarly declares that the father-daughter relationship lays the foundation of culturally sanctioned heterosexual desire, arguing that 'if the spectre of father-daughter incest, as a literal

rendering of desire, is the cornerstone of anything, it is not civilization so much as heterosexual desire' (Zwinger, 1991: 9).

On the one hand, the above analytical models help to explain the enduring appeal and power, both economic and psychic, of the genre and to formulate a plausible basis for the engendering implications of the romance. On the other hand, such explanations offer abstract and general conceptions that put emphasis on generic similarities and narrative generalities rather than the differentiated texture of each book's staging of the romantic tale. In the following, I do not wish to rule out the possibility that certain emotional needs and desires constituted through early experiences of nurture are reflected in the romance narrative, nor do I want to negate the role of unconscious processes in the reading experience. However, a theoretical model couched in purely psychoanalytic terms appears inadequate to accommodate the ideological heterogeneity of the genre as it reduces romantic scenarios to a universal monolithic story and invalidates differences and variations in text and context. Such a model seems subject to the flaws of much psychoanalytical criticism that makes no allowance for historical change or women's heterogeneity. Consequently, I maintain that psychoanalytic determinism and generalisations often imply an ahistorical, asocial and abstract conception of text that prematurely forecloses the possibility of generic innovation, thereby precluding recognition of textual multiplicity and variation. In this way, all narratives are reduced to one common meta-fantasy that automatically comes into play and regulates textual possibilities and reading experiences. This form of criticism runs the risk of being reductionist and flattening out the specificity and polysemy of texts. Allowing no space for developments inside the generic form that could amount to new patterns of definition and explanation, the inevitable return to the familial situation fixes and unifies textual possibilities, reading experience and

reader profile. Inscribing uniform subject positions onto the textual fabric, this critical discourse constructs inescapable points of identification for the reader to be taken up indiscriminately. In its tendency to address the subject-in-general (not historically determinate social subjects), psychoanalytic criticism is prone to essentialism. Based on the universal workings of the female psyche, the trajectory of feminine subjectivity leaves little room for diverse positions of readership as subjective complexities are invariably reduced to early infantile experiences. As one romance reader observes, such criticism 'turns me into a child, without any insight into my own condition' (Gilles Seidel, 1992: 175).

Ascribing the (reading) positions of women to oedipal experiences and conflicts, such an approach is often characterised by a patronising aloofness as it situates the "grown-up" discourse of the psychoanalytic critic against the childlike and self-indulgent pleasures of the reading public. Reducing individual readers to a single and universal subject position, it fails to consider reader diversity. Matching psychic positions indiscriminately with textual ones and applying psychoanalytically derived theories wholeheartedly to literature, such criticism does not only assume a model of fiction as the simple and straightforward reflection of women's early infantile experiences but it also constructs the text as expressive of an invariably monolithic and static meta-fantasy.

With these reservations in mind, I echo Mairead Owen (1990), Ien Ang (1996) and Jackie Stacey's (1994) critiques of much psychoanalytic work and their theoretical tendency towards criticism based on ethnographic studies of readership. Denouncing the essentialist universalism of psychoanalytic studies of the romance, Owen highlights the supremacy of the ethnographic approach, proclaiming that 'it seems a practice of arrogance to impute motives to [...] readers, from a reading of the text only. An exploration of the attraction of romantic fiction must be rooted in the experience of the readers' (Owen, 1990:

202). Ien Ang also speaks out in favour of ethnographic fieldwork among audiences as this 'helps to keep critical discourses from becoming closed texts of Truth, because it forces the researcher to come to terms with perspectives that may not be easily interpreted into a smooth, finished and coherent Theory' (Ang, 1996: 100). Drawing attention to the unequal distribution of power in the critic/readership relationship and to the loss of readership agency in psychoanalytic criticism, Jackie Stacey argues that 'to analyse their [the readers'] responses in terms of their unconscious psychic structures which the researcher, but not the researched, can identify is to impose the greatest degree of power difference between the two parties' (Stacey, 1994: 77). This study asserts that, to prevent a hermetically closed theoreticism, explorations of readership should always rely on ethnographic studies and should take account of readers' conscious experiences of the text. With all the necessary caveats about broad generalisations, I reaffirm Ellen Seiter's belief that readership is 'much more complicated than the poles of activity and passivity can accommodate' (Seiter et al., 1989: 2). In their conscious enjoyment of the narrative, romance readers cannot be defined as mere subject positions or as abstract "ideal readers", entirely determined in terms of textual mechanisms and operations. The genre's readers appear more active and critically aware than many psychoanalytic critics allege. Similarly, the reading experience itself can be described as a heterogeneous cultural practice that cannot be reduced to an unproblematic and direct transmission of ideological and socialising codes and conventions. In its theoretical outlook, this interrogation aligns itself with critics such as Ien Ang and Jackie Stacey who argue that 'successful gender identifications are not automatic nor free of conflicts, dependent as they are on the life histories of individual people and the concrete practices they enter into' (Ang, 1996: 121). In this way, 'processes of identification and recognition are always partial' as 'women are subjects, as well as objects

of cultural exchange, in ways that are not entirely reducible to subjection' (Stacey, 1994: 217; 185). While I have emphasised the drawbacks of critical analyses of the romance expressed in purely psychoanalytic terms, my critique does not imply a denial of the existence of unconscious processes in the reading experience. A critically rounded exploration of romance readership should therefore be based on an analysis of both conscious and unconscious pleasures derived from the text. The genre's persistent appeal ultimately depends on its ability to relate to its readers in heterogeneous and pluralistic ways that take into account both their unconscious and conscious experience of the text.

Rather than promoting an absolutist model with abstract prescriptions, this investigation argues for the relativity of research methodologies. Negating the ideological heterogeneity of the genre, uniform critical appropriations of the romance are always bound to emphasise the textual parameters that echo and reflect their own critical positions while ignoring or downplaying those that do not. While psychoanalytic criticism can be charged with reducing the romance narrative to a monolithic and invariable meta-text, ethnographic (and, as will be argued, populist pro-romance) enquiries also run a risk of downplaying the realities of patriarchal conditioning and over-emphasising the readers' agency and the text's emancipatory potential. Such investigations might end up portraying romance readers as exploiting culture for their own ends and the romance text as actively subversive. This kind of analysis could become a banal form of cultural critique if the popular text and its readership are not seen as thoroughly implicated in their political, social and cultural context. Just as the romance can only be approached by a non-reductive determinacy that takes into account both continuity and change, the complexities of the reader (experience) necessitate a heterogeneous theoretical tactic combining the specificity of the ethnographic method with the unity-seeking generality of the psychoanalytic approach. Although I do not

deny the difficulties in combining a generalised with an individualised approach, feminist critics such as Janice Radway (1987) have attempted to unite psychoanalytic analysis with ethnographic explorations into the field. As I will discuss, although making use of a commendable methodological tactic, Radway's analysis still exhibits the failings of many feminist critiques on the romance. Based on unequal power relations between critic and readership, her examination ends up constructing a deep chasm between the ideological world of the readers and the intellectually superior and enlightened critical insight of the feminist investigator. Viewing the readers as critically unaware and the romance text as monolithic, such a feminist view draws dangerously close to a form of feminist moralism.

Focusing on the heterosexual romance's collusion with patriarchal institutions and structures, feminism, unsurprisingly, has had an uneasy relationship with the genre. In this context, romance fiction has come under scrutiny for de-problematizing and celebrating the romantic ideal of monogamous heterosexuality and patriarchal marriage. Radical feminist theory has been adamant that the romance plot is a patriarchal construction expressing, encoding and enforcing a narrative of women's oppression. 1970s Second-Wave feminism in particular has been unanimously critical of the romance. Within this theoretical framework, both romantic form and readership have been dismissed for their regressive complicity with patriarchal structures. Adrienne Rich thus stresses her desire to see young girls grow up in such a fashion that 'the socialization of women into heterosexual romance and marriage would no longer be the primary lesson of culture' (Rich, 1979: 16). Lee Comer equally affirms the oppressive nature of the patriarchal conception of love, stating that 'romantic, monogamous love is an imposed law' (Comer, 1974: 220). Underlining the dominant and exploitative nature of the romantic ideal, Kate Millett claims that romantic love legitimates 'emotional manipulation' and obscures 'the realities of female status and

the burden of economic dependency' (Millet: 1977: 37). In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1979), feminist critic Shulamith Firestone perceives romantic love as pathological. She asserts the repressive and deceptive ideological function of the romance, arguing that it 'is a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their condition' (Firestone, 1979: 139). For her, 'love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today' (Firestone, 1979: 121). At the same time as love appears an ideology that naturalises women's oppression, the romance is interpreted as a politically dangerous discourse, (re)producing patriarchal culture and legitimatising the emotional and sexual exploitation of women. Characterising love as a 'cheap ideology' or 'dope for dupes', Germaine Greer bitingly dismisses the romance form/reader as 'escapist literature of love and marriage voraciously consumed by housewives' and criticises the genre for reinforcing 'false consciousness' among women readers (Greer, 1971: 170; 240).

The above criticism constructs a conception of the romance as a monolithic and historically unchanging discourse and as an unproblematic site for the transmission of an exploitative ideology. Reproducing a conspiratorial version of popular culture/romance and treating the genre as an invariably pernicious and disabling ideology, 1970s Second-Wave critiques of the romance give expression to a politicised form of culture criticism. Such views can theoretically be associated with conservative and elitist culture theory and early Marxist conceptions of 'false consciousness'.<sup>5</sup> Early feminist condemnations of the genre argue that the romance reinforces patriarchy and that, through a kind of 'false consciousness', it leads to women's complicity in their own debasement. The genre appears as a seamless text of oppressive meanings held together by ideology and as a powerful and deceptive mechanism exclusively serving the systems of patriarchy. This form of criticism views the production and consumption of romance fiction in terms of a conspiracy theory, a

means, 'of keeping women quiet, complaisant, heterosexual and home-and-family orientated' (quoted in Flint, 1993: 31). It depicts love and romance as ideological baits that trap women into marriage, as exploitative means of gaining women's acquiescence to their submission and thus rendering them complicit in their own subordination. Inspired by 1970s dismissals of the genre, Rosalind Coward also sees female desire as being constructed through collusive feminine pleasures. Coward notes that such pleasures 'may be tying women to structures which in the end are destructive of joy', concluding that being a woman means having one's desires 'constantly lured by discourses that sustain male privilege' (Coward, 1984: 14; 16). As a mechanism working to seduce readers into accepting oppressive patriarchal reality, the romance is thus part of what French Marxist Louis Althusser terms the 'ideological State apparatuses', 'hail[ing]' or 'interpellat[ing]' concrete individuals as ideological subjects (Althusser, 1971: 136; 162).<sup>6</sup>

Dismissing romance readers as gullible and passive victims of the deceptive romantic ideal, the above feminist critics position themselves as outside and in opposition to the engulfing and totalitarian romance discourse that, it is argued, reproduces patriarchal ideology and, therefore, has to be resisted and exposed by the more enlightened feminist investigator. Presuming the intellectual inferiority of the romance reader, the intellectual and moral distinctions thus drawn reinforce notions of feminist authority and superiority. Romantic pleasures, it seems, should be repressed in favour of a feminist morality. The romance appears monolithic, deceptive and on the side of regression while the romance reader is seen as passive, critically-unaware and duped. Contrastingly, feminism appears progressive and indicative of an intellectual supremacy and the feminist investigator is correspondingly hailed as a critically aware and politically correct observer, committed to raising the consciousness of the unenlightened romance reader. Eager to expose the



patriarchal failings of the romance-reading mass, these feminist critics present themselves as a cultural elite, intent on highlighting their own intellectual difference from the duped mob of readers. As Kathleen Gilles Seidel argues, viewing romance readers as ‘other, as someone less enlightened, less analytic’, ‘the undercurrent throughout feminist criticism of romances is that these scholars and critics know what is right for other women’ (Gilles Seidel, 1992: 172).

In the light of these reflections, it appears that the cultural power of the feminist intellectual stems from hierarchical intra-female relations that presume the expertise and authority of the feminist intellectual, respectively the lack of intellectual insight and the critical incompetence of the romance reader. Sustaining the superiority of academic feminism, the feminist power position is based on the intellectual’s supposed ability to ‘designate what is legitimate, on the one hand, and what can then be governed and policed as illegitimate or inadequate or even deviant, on the other’ (quoted in Hollows, 2000: 35). Feminist cultural politics thereby reduce and limit the (pleasure of the) reading experience to an ideological transfer and the romance reader to an agency-deprived and critically-unaware “cultural dupe”, a victim of what Stuart Hall describes as ‘an updated form of the opium of the people’ (quoted in Storey, 1993: 129). Such an explanatory approach inevitably fails to take into consideration the possibility of romantic innovations *inside* the form. It reproduces a monolithic and undifferentiated view of both the romance reader and narrative that echoes modernist adversary aesthetics and reiterates elitist distinctions of culture. Both modernism and Second-Wave feminism attack mass culture/the romance on similar grounds: stressing the debasing effect of the reading experience and representing readers as resistant to intellectual challenge and as robotic in their devotion, these theoretical approaches hold up the intellectual and authentic values of modernism/feminism

and they highlight the role of the enlightened artist/critic. Paradoxically, the patriarchally-tainted modernist movement and the radical feminist critiques of the romance form an unlikely alliance. Sharing a similar theoretical approach, they are both based on the formulation of an elitist and restricted view of culture and a dismissal of the mass culture text in favour of the supposedly authentic and intellectually superior critical discourse/high culture.

Positing romance readers as gullible victims of the patriarchal ideology of love and viewing the romance plot as a dominant ideological discourse brainwashing women into patriarchal subservience, “modernist feminism” constructs a monolithic and essentialist view of both romance reader and narrative.<sup>7</sup> In this way, it echoes the reductionist and critically indiscriminate flaws of much psychoanalytic work on the genre. Focusing on the generality rather than the specificity of individual texts, feminist evaluations minimise narrative possibilities and treat romance texts as identical, interchangeable and indistinguishable. Such views homogenise the genre by representing it as an undifferentiated monolith in which all forms are reduced to a single story. Failing to consider the variability of the romance, these critical approaches focus exclusively on the conservative parameters of the romantic text and they cannot depict the innovations available inside the generic form. As one romance writer complains, ‘this academic sloppiness is the product of a mindset that refuses to see romance novels not only as a valuable genre but also a varied one’ (Crusie Smith, 1997: 82). As a result, the romance appears as a static and fossilised discourse that is immune to cultural changes and developments, as ‘one single monolithic story that is cranked out over and over again’ (Krentz, 1992: 4). Ignoring the plurality of the popular culture text, many feminist critics interpret the genre as necessarily and inevitably homogeneous and standardised.

Consequently, they often run the risk of being reductionist in their theoretical and textual generalisations. Offering an elitist and dualistic view of culture, such cultural politics can be charged with a patronising parochialism and critical imprecision. Moreover, viewing romance readers as impressionable and critically unaware, this kind of criticism de-individualises and unifies distinct readers into one indistinguishable reading mass, thereby negating any notion of agency among reading subjects. Agency, it seems, is ultimately reserved for the enlightened and “ideologically-uncontaminated” feminist critic who sees through and exposes the patriarchal lie of romantic love. Drawing attention to the patronising elitism of such feminist cultural politics, Ien Ang calls out for more flexible and differentiated ways of theorising popular culture. In her view, feminism must break with ‘the paternalism of the ideology of mass culture [in which] women are [...] seen as the passive victims of deceptive messages. [...] In this context an ideological atmosphere arises containing an almost total dismissal of and hostility towards narrative genres which are very popular among women’ (Ang, 1985: 118 - 119).

However, it is important to realise that not all feminist criticism of the romance has been as unambiguously and relentlessly dismissive of the genre as 1970s evaluations. Rather than adhering to a unanimous condemnation of the romance, various feminist researchers have argued that the text and its consumption are complex and contradictory social phenomena, detecting a counter-discourse of liberation within the romantic frame. Tania Modleski (1984), for example, identifies elements of protest in the romantic form and suggests that the genre expresses a revenge fantasy and a utopian longing for a different world. For Modleski, romances articulate ‘utopian ideals’ as well as granting the vengeful ‘satisfaction’ of ‘bringing the man to his knees’ (Modleski, 1984: 58; 45). Similarly, Janice Radway uncovers female forms of discontent during the reading experience, maintaining

that ‘romance reading originates in [women’s] very real dissatisfaction and embodies a valid, if limited, protest’ (Radway, 1987: 220). Although Radway confirms that romance texts ultimately confirm conservative patriarchal relations, *Reading the Romance* (1987) also illustrates how actual readers ‘use traditionally female forms to resist their situation as women by enabling them to cope with the features of the situation that oppress them’ (Radway, 1987: 11). Pursuing a critical strategy that aims at depicting ‘the complexities of actual romance reading’, Radway’s ethnographic study of the “Smithton” readers seeks to delineate a differentiated conception of the reading experience (Radway, 1987: 6). Radway wants to demonstrate how the active engagement with the romance text can function as a means of protest against a patriarchal context and how the practice of reading can thus become a form of resistance to patriarchal material situations. Emphasising diverse readers’ active involvement with the text, *Reading the Romance* pays attention to varied reading experiences and rejects the notion of the passive and duped abstract reader. In Radway’s case, ‘ethnography is more than just a method of inquiry, it is an explicitly political way of staging a new feminist “reconciliation” with “the problem” of romantic fiction’s popularity’ (Ang, 1996: 100).

Discussing the psychoanalytic resonances of the romantic narrative in terms of female psychological needs for emotional nurturance and heterosexual love, Radway’s ethnographic interrogation uses a variegated methodological tactic that promises to combine the unity-seeking generality of psychoanalytic criticism with the individualised contextualisation of ethnography. Yet, while her analysis transforms the reading experience from an unproblematic and passive ideological transfer to an active and complex social process, Radway still maintains a clear distinction between the (limited) protest embodied in romance reading and the disempowering ideology embedded in the romance text.

Ignoring generic developments available inside the form, she still envisages the romance as a regressive and monolithic patriarchal discourse that, despite allowing moments of subversive pleasure, ultimately serves to indoctrinate women into an oppressive patriarchal system. For Radway, the vicarious pleasure and consolation derived from the reading experience are only temporarily satisfying. Helping to maintain patriarchal power relations, they are ultimately collusive and offer only illusory or imaginary solutions to the “real” contradictions and problems existing within patriarchy. Although Radway’s psychoanalytic approach uncovers a certain subversive potential at the level of consumption, *Reading the Romance* preserves clear distinctions between the romance reader/text and the feminist investigator/critical discourse. Radway cannot conceive of the romantic text as open for transformation and receptive or expressive of feminist ideas and principles. At the same time as the romantic text remains static and regressive, textual transformations and generic change seem impossible. Moreover, Radway’s ethnographic analysis of what she terms ‘our culture’s “pink ghetto”’ persists in maintaining distinctions between “us-feminists” and “them-romance readers” (Radway, 1987: 18). Within Radway’s conceptual framework, the distribution of identities appears clear-cut inasmuch as the construction of feminist identity involves the differentiation of the feminist from the romance reader, Greer’s “housewife”.<sup>8</sup> Holding on to the profound intellectual separation between “us” and “them”, Radway imagines a post-romantic age in which ‘we as feminists [...] might join hands with women who are, after all, our sisters and together imagine a world whose subsequent creation would lead to the need for a new fantasy altogether’ (Radway, 1987: 220). However, before such a feminist utopia of female sisterhood can be envisaged, the feminist investigator needs to lead the way and recruit the romance reader to join the feminist cause. In this way, Radway seeks to transform the popular text and the reader seduced by it by

aligning them with the politically correct and intellectually superior feminist discourse. Her critical approach thus remains tainted by and bound to an elitist and exclusive form of cultural politics. Adhering to an orthodox mode of address and retaining a precarious form of academic authority, Radway does not grant any critical power to the popular culture text, finally conceiving of romance novels as antithetical to feminism.

Positioning herself as outside and against the popular romance discourse, Radway is not alone in her dismissal of the genre as inherently monolithic and immune to change. Discarding the form as 'disadvantageous to women', Sarah Webster Goodwin views the romance as resistant to generic change, stating that 'change in romance causes particular problems. We want it to change, but it is by its nature deeply conservative, even regressive' (Webster Goodwin, 1997: 233). Discussing the 'conflict between feminism as emergent ideology and romance as residual genre', Ann Rosalind Jones similarly notes that few writers 'can ignore feminism; but none can work out a seamless fit between the claims of modern women and the old rib-bones of romance' (Jones, 1986: 204). Negating any possibility for generic developments, Rosalind Coward underlines the fossilised conservatism and the seemingly anachronistic imperatives of the genre, noting that it is 'a frozen and repetitive form, unable to lay claims to being serious literature because it no longer deals with the main problems of contemporary life' (Coward, 1984: 178). Discussing feminist interventions into mainstream culture, Anne Cranny-Francis also rejects the possibility of a feminist appropriation of the genre, maintaining that 'feminist romantic fiction seems to be a contradiction in terms, a parody in practice [...] subverting this genre seems an almost impossible task, given the discourses it encodes and its fetishisation of an unequal gender relationship' (Cranny-Francis, 1990: 28; 204).

Underlying the above critical premises is the sceptic disbelief in the genre's ability to manage cultural change and the assumption of a supposedly uncompromising tension between the feminist discourse and the romantic imperatives. Focusing exclusively on the static or "frozen" elements of the romance, these critics construct the text as invariably monolithic and historically unchanging. Based on an orthodox feminist position located outside and in opposition to popular culture, their evaluations are dependent on the conceptual incompatibility of feminism and the popular culture text. Moreover, they are built on the elitist conception of feminist authority as firmly situated within the bounds of academia. Portraying academic/theoretical feminism as the legitimate site of "true" or authentic feminism and the romance text as its debilitating other, the above feminist criticism cannot accommodate the notion of feminist intervention into mainstream culture and the complex generic innovations available inside the romance. Isolated within the confines of theoretical feminism and ignoring the 'fragmentation, dispersal and the marketability and notoriety of certain aspects of feminism', such an approach fails to consider the selective production and the varied distribution of feminism within and across culture (Skeggs, 1997: 141). Intent on preserving feminist integrity, these views are inadequate to critically encompass the ideological heterogeneity of the romance. In the following, I argue that the romantic oscillation between constancy and transformation, between generic convention and invention is not accounted for by either elitist feminist evaluations or by populist pro-romance analyses. Instead, the ideological heterogeneity of the genre is most forcefully encompassed by a complex methodological approach that highlights the romance's conservative dictates as well as its generic innovations.

In opposition to the elitist feminist conceptions outlined above, pro-romance critics have not only perceived the genre as a receptive and accessible site for feminist

intervention but, in outward celebration of the gynocentric potential of the form, they have heralded the romance as the locus *par excellence* for feminist cultural articulations, as the ‘most pro-female genre there is’ (Witkowski: 1). For Kay Mussell, the romance offers a ‘powerful counterweight to patriarchy – a genre of popular fiction dominated by women, celebrating women’s sphere’ (Mussell, 1997c: 8). Similarly, Mary Ann Doane affirms the subversive and politically engaged nature of the romance, claiming that the genre ‘has the potential to interrogate the woman’s position – to explode in the face of patriarchal strictures’ (Doane, 1987: 118). Justifying her choice of literary expression, romance writer Barbara Samuel underlines the genre’s feminist underpinnings and political potential, arguing that in ‘romance novels, women’s issues take centre stage’ and the texts can therefore be seen as ‘a powerful force for social change’ (Samuel, 1997: 79). Echoing Samuel’s defence of the genre, writer colleague Jennifer Crusie Smith perceives the romance as inherently expressive of a feminist consciousness. For her, ‘romance fiction is the best vehicle available for writing about emancipated, aggressive women’ (Crusie Smith, 1997: 84). Stressing that the genre can function as a site for decidedly feminist literary practices, Jayne Ann Krentz equally believes that reading and writing a romance may be among the most subversive acts a woman can engage in when it comes to challenging patriarchal culture. She emphasises the ‘inherently subversive nature of the romance novel’, declaring that the texts ‘invert the power structure of a patriarchal society because they show women exerting enormous power over men’ (Krentz, 1992a: 5). For these critics and writers, contemporary romances dramatise ‘colorfully and dramatically, a battle of the sexes in which [...] woman inevitably emerges victorious’ (Owens Malek, 1992: 75).

Exemplifying recent pro-romance criticism, the above celebratory and enthusiastic appraisals of the romance concentrate on the innovative possibilities of contemporary



romances. In particular, such interpretations draw attention to the more egalitarian power dynamics of the love relationship, to the celebration of women's sphere, to the expression of female sexuality and a female-orientated *ars erotica*, to the incorporation of social and psychological issues inside the plot, to the narrative focus on women's career, ideas of equality and liberal individualism, to the heroine's independence and authority and the hero's caring commitment to a loving relationship between two equals.<sup>9</sup> Highlighting that 'romance novels have been extremely responsive to the social issues raised by mainstream feminism', Kathleen Gilles Seidel thus emphasises textual changes in 'the notion of what the heroines can be and what they can do. They can be older. They can be sexually experienced. Some are divorced; some are mothers' (Gilles Seidel, 1992: 170). Similarly, Jennifer Crusie Smith notes that contemporary romances 'feature heroines who are independent and aggressive and who form equal relationships that foster and complement that independence' (Crusie Smith, 1997: 89). While romance heroines are 'strong, capable women who *can* and *do* succeed on their own terms', heroes are no longer 'invariably authority figures' and 'may show more emotional vulnerability than before' (Witkowski, 1; Mussel, 1997c: 4). More 'egalitarian and tender' and 'ever more nurturant', such heroes remain 'adequate protectors', even though the power differences between the protagonists become less distinct (Frenier, 1988: 99). For Mairead Owen, 'the movement towards feminism, to equal rights for women [...] puts forward the ideal of a much more rounded notion of fulfilment' (Owen, 1990: 71). Affirming the progressive nature of the genre, Rita Hubbard concludes that the changes in romantic patterns reflect 'the ongoing changes in social structures and the gradual movement from patriarchy towards equality of the sexes' (Hubbard, 1992: 487).

Echoing the above views, this study asserts that the changes in characterisation of romance hero/ine, the textual focus on social issues and career, the expression of a decidedly female-orientated eroticism and the incorporation of new points of view are clear indications of the variability of the genre and the influence of feminism on romantic structures. These feminist impulses are translated and incorporated into the dynamics of the marital triangle. Although romantic paradigms necessitate a transcendence of the triangular mode and although romantic structures depend on the supremacy of the erotic dyad, the narrative strategies used to attain the concluding objective of the happily-ever-after (including all its attributes of exclusivity, monogamy and heterosexuality) are diverse and ideologically varied. In this way, the resolution of the conservative marital triangle typically relies on the complete elimination/vilification of the mad/bad first wife and is inspired by patriarchal dualistic conceptions of womanhood. Conversely, while breaking up erotic triangulation in favour of dyadic eroticism, innovative romances use multiple narrative strategies that oppose the dichotomy of the good/bad wife and that are based on a more affirmative and inclusive view of women. In these texts, the two wives are not moral opposites but confidantes and friends. In this line of argument, Kay Mussell discusses the re-valorisation of formerly vilified characters in contemporary romances, observing that 'characters who would earlier have served as romantic rivals are portrayed as sympathetic in their own right' (Mussell, 1997c: 4). Ranging from binary opposition to feminosocial bonding, the female-female dyad of the romantic marital triangle is appropriated for diverse ideological purposes. Expressing varied attitudes to womanhood, the intra-gender tie effectively functions as a cultural and ideological barometer. The ideologically reflective nature of the triadic convention and the different ways in which the romantic resolution can

be achieved attest to the variable nature of the genre and the influence of feminist ideas of sisterhood and female bonding on romantic structures.

Drawing attention to the innovations and variability of the genre, pro-romance critiques are important additions to the critical debate on the romance insofar as they refute the conception of the text as ideologically transparent and historically static. Highlighting generic change, such criticism offers a welcome and much needed exploration of the genre, not as an invariable monolith, but as a discourse that is open to transformation and capable of registering cultural change. Emphasising the innovative elements that modernise the contemporary romance, this approach maintains that the 'genre romance is not monolithic but diverse and ever-changing' (Putney, 1992: 99). Analysing romances in terms of their incorporation of feminist ideas and their pluralistic rendering of the romantic adventure, such affirmative views depend on the perception that 'there is a great variety within the romance genre' and that it would be 'a serious mistake to assume that all the books are alike' (Krentz, 1992: 4). Attacking feminist criticism on the grounds of its sweeping generalisations, pro-romance critics oppose the notion of the genre as simplistic, uniform and static. Moreover, they contest the critical conception of women readers as 'so lacking in imagination and intellectual curiosity that they will read the same basic narrative over and over again. It doesn't get more basic, crude, and essential than that' (Chappel, 1997: 107). As Kay Mussell suggests, there is a 'wide variety of types of romances and the voices of their authors' (Mussell 1997c: 10). Rather than being interchangeable, romances exist as 'the identifiable products of unique women who are differentiated by their special styles and by their individualized approach to genre' (Rapp Young, 1997: 43). Propagating a discriminating approach that refuses to make all too broad generalisations about the entirety of the romance genre, these views are inspired by a more differentiated and inclusive form

of cultural politics that pays attention to the specificities and particularities of diverse contemporary romances.

Underlining textual variations, pro-romance criticism offers a constructive critical perspective that calls into question the political moralism and the generalising imprecision of much feminist criticism on the genre. Breaking down elitist conceptions of culture and feminist authority, such views grant legitimacy to the popular culture text and to the forms of feminism expressed in it. Stressing generic innovations and textual multiplicity, this affirmative criticism counters discourses that treat the romance as a homogeneous, ideologically transparent and monolithic genre, immune to historical variation and development. Calling out for a more differentiated approach to popular culture, pro-romance criticism draws attention to the diversity and multiplicity of romantic articulations and refutes the hegemony of elitist feminist criticism that flattens out the differences between romance novels. In the process, these affirmative accounts frequently argue in favour of textual readings of individual authors and single-novel studies. Observing that romances have not been examined as discrete single works, Pamela Regis stresses the lack of critical interest in the analysis of individual romance novels/authors, complaining that the 'examination of a single writer's work is a standard critical practice not much employed in criticism of the romance, which usually equates all romance writers along with the romances themselves and their readers' (Regis, 1997: 146). While Regis makes a valid point when attacking the lack of critical precision and differentiation regarding romance texts and authors, this thesis will not follow the anticipated move towards a detailed single-novel study. Although my interrogation is clearly interested in exploring generic possibilities and differences, it also shares Raymond Williams's concerns about 'the danger of narrowing our notion of text *too much*, of analyzing "the discrete single work" and by

doing so of missing the normal or characteristic experience of mass culture' (quoted in Heath and Skirrow, 1986: 14). Such a singularised critique runs the risk of obscuring romantic generalities and overemphasising textual originality and autonomy. Moreover, it also draws close to a populist mode of interpretation that, as will be argued, potentially underlies much pro-romance criticism. Holding on to the notion of genre, this study aims to evade the dangers of populism by remaining alert to the patriarchal conditioning and the pluralistic unity of the romance. Consequently, it discusses the diversity of romantic narrative strategies and calls out for a differentiated analysis of the generic texture.

While pro-romance criticism acts as a necessary corrective to the elitism found in many radical feminist critiques of the genre, the celebratory appraisals outlined above, however well intentioned, could be interpreted as populist overreactions to elitist theories of popular culture. In particular, they risk overemphasising the genre's subversive potential and downplaying its embeddedness within patriarchal structures. Focusing on the variability of the narrative and the incorporation of feminist ideas, these accounts concentrate on the innovative elements of contemporary romances, therefore potentially ignoring narrative generalities and ideological conditioning. Drawing dangerously close to a populist glorification of the popular that, as neo-conservative critic Jim McGuigan (1992) laments, is part of much contemporary criticism, pro-romance critics are intent on revalidating the popular text. In the process, their critical detachment is frequently in danger of giving way to a fan-like admiration of the romance. As Tania Modleski observes, 'immersed in their culture, half in love with their subject', such critics 'sometimes seem unable to achieve the proper critical difference from it' (Modleski, 1986b: xi). Verging on an uncritical endorsement, such an approach might produce the kind of populism that embraces the (pleasure of the) text as unproblematically progressive and innovative. As

Seiter et al. cautiously point out when warning against ‘the danger of lapsing into a happy positivism in our methodologies and an overreading of points of resistance’, ‘there is nothing inherently progressive about pleasure’ (Seiter et al., 1989: 7; 5). While elitist feminist criticism tends to isolate itself within the traditions of theoretical feminism and to focus on the conservative and fossilised elements of the romantic plot, pro-romance analyses in turn tend to stress the innovative or even subversive potential of contemporary romances, thereby failing to investigate the popular culture text as thoroughly implicated within patriarchal ideology. Both approaches effectively ignore the ideological heterogeneity of the romance and the complex ways in which the genre oscillates between collusion and resistance, between continuity and transformation.

Advocating a critical view that makes evaluative discriminations within popular culture, this study steers a theoretical course that explores the romance without resort to the disabling tendencies of a disarming and “anti-intellectual” populism, respectively a dismissive and selective elitism. The pluralistic unity of the genre requires a complex methodological approach that takes into account the patriarchal underpinnings as well as the innovative potential of the plot. While it is important to explore the incorporation of feminism inside romantic structures, it is equally important to remain alert to the romance’s ideological boundaries and to retain an analytical distance to the text. In this way, both the ideological consequences of romance consumption and the cultural meanings of the genre should be continuing objects of critique and subjects for feminist investigation. However, I insist that to argue for critical distance and an analytical dissection of the romance is *not* to advocate a return to a position that celebrates the theoretical discourse and devalues the romantic text as monolithic and static. Moreover, there is also nothing inherently populist about the suggestion that the romance is a varied and differentiated genre, nor does the

recognition that romantic conventions are ideologically variable, have to lead to a glorification of the form. Intent on preserving critical distance and remaining aware of the subtle changes available inside the romantic meta-text, this investigation aims to follow Jennifer Crusie Smith's demand for a 'fair romance criticism' that takes into account both the multiplicity and diversity of romance fiction as well as its adherence to patriarchal strictures (Crusie Smith, 1997: 83).

While this study pays attention to the plurality of romantic articulations, it refuses to equate the evidence of feminist components with the populist conclusion that the romance is therefore a feminist form expressing a radical or subversive content. Ignoring the romance's ideological heterogeneity, such a conclusion neglects the continuing patriarchal structuring of romantic codes and conventions. Instead, this investigation maintains that the genre does not develop in a linear or uniform trajectory of progression. In this way, the conservative romance does not die out but persists and coexists alongside the innovative generic versions. Moreover, the latter should not be considered beyond criticism as they are far from being straightforward or "untainted" expressions of feminist principles and ideas. Innovative romances occupy a complex cultural terrain between adherence and revision, between complicity and resistance. Intermingling change and constancy, they cannot be defined by easily identifiable cultural classifications. Operating broadly *within* the institutional and textual parameters of patriarchal romance, their ideological multiplicity resists and breaks down dualistic conceptions of popular culture and feminism.

Working within as well as upon the genre, the innovative versions of the romance are complex cultural phenomena expressing progressive, rather than radical, generic contents. Drawing on John Fiske's distinctions between textual radicalism and progressiveness, this study defines as radical any text that 'in its rejection of the dominant

conventions for representing reality, tries to exclude the dominant ideology from any role in the production of meanings from the text' (Fiske, 1987: 46). Such a radical text would for example attempt to subvert and deconstruct the ideologically conservative elements of the romance and try to rework and replace them with new forms of textualising desire. As Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker note,

Romantic subversion is not, therefore, simply a question of retelling the same story with different players, or a different plot, or in a different context, but of more radically disassociating the psychic foundations of desire from the cultural ones *in such a way that the operation of the orthodoxy is exposed and challenged*. (Pearce and Wisker, 1998: 2)

Interrogating and potentially destabilising patriarchal institutions, the proposed romantic rewriting and radical renegotiation would alter the codes and conventions of the traditional romance. Doubtful that such a radical romantic text could function as a valid and popular alternative to the traditional romance, this investigation remains unconvinced that the genre could simultaneously stay true to both romantic imperatives of ideological closure and feminism's radical potential. An overtly radical questioning of traditional romantic structures and a feminist celebration of deconstruction seem opposed to the optimistic and finalised promise of the romance and its demands for a harmonious and closed resolution. Given the cultural authority of patriarchal inscriptions of desire, it is uncertain whether a radical text could be popular on a wide scale and whether it could take over the genre's supreme status in mainstream culture. Providing a pessimistic answer to Ann Rosalind Jones's question of 'how successful might a hybrid novel combining feminist depth of analysis with a plausibly positive ending be', this study maintains that a radical reworking of the romance would not only potentially undermine optimistic romantic imperatives but it



would also necessitate a shift in genre rather than advancing generic developments (Jones, 1986: 215). Generic innovation and development are far more likely to be articulated through the progressive (and less radical) romantic text located within a patriarchal framework. As John Fiske observes, the progressive text functions as an 'agent of popularity, accessibility and understandability' (Fiske, 1987: 47). According to Fiske, the cultural situatedness and ideological embeddedness of the progressive text do not obstruct its potential for innovation and social change. He notes that

Social change in industrial democracies rarely occurs through revolution, which is the sociopolitical equivalent of the radical text. Rather it occurs as a result of a constant tension between those with social power, and subordinate groups trying to gain more power so as to shift social values towards their own interests. The textual equivalent of this is the progressive text, where the discourses of social change are articulated in relationship with the meta-discourse of the dominant ideology. (Fiske, 1987: 47)

In this way, 'change is more often the product of a slow struggle that goes on day by day, *within* capitalism, and *within* patriarchy' (Gamman and Marshment, 1988: 1; my italics).

Although this study is less enthusiastic about proclaiming the progressive romance as an effective instrument for social change, Fiske's notion of the popular progressive text as extending itself within dominant ideology, is a valuable vantage point from which to analyse the cultural position of innovative romances and their complex articulation of feminism. While feminism undeniably has had an impact on the parameters of the romance, this study echoes Marian Darce Frenier's contention that, within the genre, 'feminism existed, although it certainly wasn't always swallowed with ease' (Frenier, 1988: 87). Located within and expressive of patriarchal institutions and structures, the progressive romantic text articulates not a radical feminist discourse but a negotiated or patriarchally

appropriated form of feminism that simultaneously legitimises and de-politicises feminist ideas. Paying attention to what Beverley Skeggs calls the ‘diversification of feminism [...] across a range of sites’, I assert that feminism is ‘not a unitary category with readily identifiable boundaries and consistent set of ideas’ but ‘a contested site, a category under continual dispute and negotiation’ (Skeggs, 1997: 141). The conceptions of feminism thus range from an orthodox position which installs academia as the legitimate site of “authentic” feminism to feminist articulations within popular culture, expressing ‘new forms of femininity that are not “feminist” but do not conform to “traditional” forms of feminine subjectivity either’ (Hollows, 2000: 196). Expressive of the feminist fragmentation across diverse cultural planes, the incorporation of feminism inside romantic parameters is not devoid of conflict. Nonetheless, feminist inputs exist and operate on the textual level of the romance. Far from being a monolithic text, the innovative romance thus acts as a possible site for the articulation of “popular feminism”.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than a subversive articulation of radical feminist principles, the romance’s feminist stance represents a complex and heterogeneous cultural practice existing within rather than in opposition to patriarchal strictures. It is a cultural terrain that, to quote Angela McRobbie, exists ‘between feminism and femininity’ and is stimulated by the ‘inventiveness of women’ to ‘create new social categories’ (McRobbie, 1994: 8). Satisfying the genre’s optimistic and finalised promise, the innovative romance reassuringly suggests that the progressive elements of feminism may, at least partly, be reconciled and combined with the more conservative agendas of heterosexism and marriage and that it is therefore ‘possible for women to find contentment, fulfillment, peace, and happiness *within* our culture’ (Gilles Seidel, 1992: 174; my italics). Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the textual manifestations arising from the intersection of feminism and popular culture are

neither free of discord nor ideologically transparent. Echoing Shelagh Young's demand for a continued critical interrogation, this study argues that it is imperative 'to look more closely at the internal contradictions and tensions that affect feminism's relation to popular culture' (Young, 1988: 177). As Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment maintain, 'we cannot afford to dismiss the popular by always positioning ourselves outside it. Instead, we are interested in how feminists can intervene in the mainstream to make our meanings part of commonsense' (Gamman and Marshment, 1988: 2).

Stressing the downside of feminism's entry into the popular, Beverley Skeggs is unaffected by Gamman and Marshment's affirmation of feminist intervention into mainstream culture. She warns against the conformist potential of popular feminism as a 'site of obfuscation where links between individual and collective are blocked, in which individualism is seen as the only form of address' (Skeggs, 1997: 145). Denouncing the imprecision of feminist involvement in the romantic symbology, Deborah Chappel maintains that 'it is just this refusal to take sides, to participate fully in the feminist argument, which feminist scholars have found most objectionable about women's romance' (Chappel, 1997: 111). Skeggs and Chappel's perspectives are expressive of many, in particular radical feminist, critiques of popular feminism, for which the movement's entry into the popular has not been unproblematic. In particular, such critiques argue that feminist themes have been appropriated in the romance, losing their radicalism and becoming attached to conservative agendas. In the process, feminism 'has supposedly been "made safe" and has done little to disturb or subvert "traditional" femininity' (Hollows, 2000: 195). Maintaining that the entertainment media are trying 'to capitalize on feminism while trying to contain it', such criticism sees popular feminism as being harnessed to conservative discourses that defuse the political potential of feminism and cut short any

radical or thoroughly subversive critique of patriarchal institutions (Douglas, 1994: 223). For Susan Douglas, one of capitalism's (and possible patriarchy's) great strengths 'is its ability to co-opt and domesticate opposition, to transubstantiate criticism into a host of new, marketable products' (Douglas, 1994: 260). Imelda Whelehan similarly warns that 'if this is the logic of a new feminism, there can be no social or ideological change in structural terms, only cosmetic alterations' (Whelehan, 2000: 22). According to these views, feminist interventions into romantic structures are only a matter of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. As Diane Calhoun-French describes it, 'while purporting to present *new* women', innovative romances are 'really recounting the *old* lies' (Calhoun-French, 1987: 119).

This study agrees with the above views inasmuch as it contends that the incorporation of feminism inside the romance is clearly accompanied by a certain de-politicisation and individualisation of radical feminist principles. Detaching feminist ideas from their social, political and systemic origins, innovative romances are not unproblematic or undisputed vehicles for the distribution of feminism across cultural planes. Nonetheless, I suggest that, although feminist involvement into mainstream culture is accompanied by a certain loss of radical content and by de-politicisation, one should not hastily dismiss and reject these forms of feminist articulation. As Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment point out, 'if feminism can only enter the mainstream through forms of pleasure which are ideologically implicated, this need not totally neutralise its impact' (Gamman and Marshment, 1988: 4). As a popular platform where feminism can actively be negotiated, the innovative romance acts as a contemporary site for distributing and stimulating feminist discourse. However problematic and contradictory, it offers a way in which feminism can escape the elitist ivory tower of academia and enter a wide cultural arena. I maintain that

the romance's appropriation of feminism is a double-edged sword. While innovative romances accommodate progressive movements within existing power structures and contribute to the distribution of feminism across mainstream culture, they also, inevitably and simultaneously, propagate a patriarchally tainted symbology that strengthens and maintains the cultural authority of patriarchal structures. Working from within rather than in opposition to patriarchal culture, innovative romances cannot be contained within mutually exclusive cultural agendas and cannot be classified as either anti-feminist or feminist, as either collusive or resistant to patriarchal ideology. Combining feminist ideas of an egalitarian love relationship, of female sisterhood and bonding with the romantic imperatives of heterosexuality and erotic exclusivity, the textual parameters of innovative romances develop and extend themselves ideologically and structurally within the bounds of a patriarchal meta-text. Such texts offer revealing platforms from which to launch an exploration of changing conceptions of womanhood and the influence of feminism on mainstream culture. Highlighting the variability of the romance text, the next section re-focuses on the structural convention of the marital triangle and distinguishes between the conservative romantic constellation and the innovative romantic structure.

## 1.5 From Conservatism to Progressiveness: The Marital Triangle in the Romance

Dedicated to the portrayal of the romantic marital triangle, this section explores the development and the ideologically variable manifestations of this particular structure. Within the parameters of the triangular model, this study investigates the ideological extension available inside the romance and maps out the generic/structural limitations of the romantic plot. It therefore seeks to put forward answers to Jean Radford and Michele Roberts's questions of 'how far can the genre be changed without collapsing into a new form' and 'how much anger and nastiness a romance could contain before it stopped being a romance and turned into something else' (Radford, 1986: 17; Roberts, 1986: 233). In the process, I make a broad distinction between the conservative marital triangle that depends for its romantic resolution on the vilification of the mad/bad first wife and on dualistic conceptions of womanhood and the innovative marital triangle that rejects the notion of the mad/bad first wife and finds new ways of achieving the romantic conclusion. Particularly expressive of the genre's heterogeneous cultural position, the marital triangle is a revealing ideological trope, reflecting generic change and development. Perpetuating an erotic asymmetry that threatens to undermine heterosexual relations, the triadic scenario complicates the balanced mutuality of romantic pair bonding. It institutes a potential threat that has to be eliminated and diffused if ideological closure is to be achieved and the imperatives of the happily-ever-after are to be imposed. I argue that if this state of equilibrium is not reached at the end of the narrative, romantic codes and conventions have

been breached. While the break up of triangulation and the collapse of the triadic constellation into an erotic dyad are compulsory in the romance, the genre features diverse narrative strategies that explore the movement of sameness and difference between the two female figures of the triadic structure. From solidarity, tenderness and understanding to tension, hostility and hatred, the intra-gender relation has many nuances and ideological variations. Romantic strategies articulate variable conceptions of womanhood, ranging from the inclusive and emancipatory visions of female subjectivity in innovative romances to the patriarchal and dualistic descriptions of women in conservative romances. As I will discuss, the latter versions of the romance are particularly susceptible to narrative disruption (and hence to a generic shift) since they potentially articulate the agitation or the conflict that the romantic structure seeks to hold in check. Relying on the celebration of one marital bond at the expense of another, the conservative romance depicts an oppositional rendering of the marital experience, thereby threatening to destabilise and desecrate the romantic ethos of marriage. It thus harbours a pattern of frustration - an inherently subversive ideological paradox unique to the marital triangle - that, if not sufficiently silenced/ignored/omitted/trivialised, will disrupt the romantic narrative and cause a shift in genre.

Based on the structural and moral juxtaposition of the two wives, the conservative marital triangle breaks down the unstable erotic triangulation and installs narrative and ideological closure by forcefully opposing the two female components of the triadic structure. In most cases, it uncompromisingly celebrates the heterosexual dyad uniting the husband and the “good” second wife, to the detriment of the first wife who is vilified and structurally eliminated. This handling of the triadic plot exemplifies the kind of narrative scenarios that, for Molly Hite, ‘are inherently aligned with an ideology of marginality: of

whom readers should and should not look at, at whose story is worth the telling, of what sorts of people ought to prove dispensable, means to an end' (Hite, 1989: 42). In this instance, the romantic resolution entails the severing of bonds between women and the hierarchical dichotomy of first and second wife. Acting as a mere and negative counter-model whose elimination brings about the euphoric conclusion, the first wife is categorically pushed to the margins of the plot. Constituting a dualistic couple system that orbits around the male, the two female figures are defined purely in terms of their primary relationship to the male protagonist. They are arranged and narratively separated according to a stereotypical conception of womanhood based on a patriarchal version of femininity. This conception allows female diversity to be bifurcated into a binary system and expressed in a linear and schematised mode of thinking. Emphasising the distinctly patriarchal nature of female categorisation into moral/sexual/social opposites, Patricia Duncker argues that this is 'precisely how patriarchy works, either on the page or in the world: by dividing the women' (Duncker, 1992: 25).

While the doubling of women into moral opposites (into Madonnas and Magdalens, as Eric Trudgill (1976) calls it) is a distinctly patriarchal practice, the logic of oppositional splits also gives expression to what Laura Mulvey (1975) terms the determining male gaze. According to the critic, the male gaze functions as a mechanism of social control that works predominantly by stereotyping, objectifying and defining women solely in relation to or through men as points of reference or foci of competition. Textualising the male gaze and playing off women against one another, the narrative practice of isolating and segregating female characters into polarities controls female heterogeneity and encourages an overall patriarchal ideological thrust. As Lynda Zwinger maintains, the articulation of binary social categories is the 'most common, perhaps most effective, technique of managing the fear



and anxiety provoked by sexual difference' (Zwinger, 1991: 4). As Karen F. Stein puts it, 'objectifying women and casting them as praiseworthy or blameworthy types diminishes the threatening power which women hold for men' (Stein, 1983: 124). In this respect, it would be a critical misjudgement to interpret the figure of the socially disruptive mad/bad first wife as an empowered feminist heroine as she, along with her positive counterpart, is ultimately denied agency to define herself outside the parameters of the male gaze. Based upon patriarchal needs/fears/experiences and embodying cultural anxieties, the mad/bad first wife is not a progressive subject of feminism but a symptom of patriarchal socialisation and discomfort about feminism/feminist sisterhood among women.

Repudiating intra-gender bonds, the conservative marital triangle is ultimately opposed to commonality or sisterhood, which, according to Susan Douglas, is the most dangerous of all concepts and principles advanced by feminism to the status quo (Douglas, 1994: 224).<sup>1</sup> Portraying heterosexual and feminosocial relationships as mutually exclusive, the conservative romantic plot and resolution ultimately depend upon the othering of the mad/bad first wife and the non-permissive first marriage. Within this framework, female sisterhood and bonding (of the two wives) are inconceivable and set in opposition to the romantic adventure. Dismissing female-female bonds in favour of female-male ones, the message implied in such scenarios is clear: untroubled romantic relationships with men should be valued above all else and especially above relationships with other women. While the two female components of the triadic structure 'never imagine for each other the possibility of a female-female relation outside a narrative centered on a man as the coveted prize', the narratives 'set up categories of identity that shut off the flow of pleasure between women, who can occupy only one oppressive position at the expense of the other' (Ostrov Weisser, 1994: 278; 279). In this way, 'women are made taboo to women – not just

sexually but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators' (quoted in Blau DuPlessis, 1985: 137). Anticipating a pattern of female antagonism and rivalry, the internal dynamics of the conservative marital triangle underline the critical contentions that 'in any case, what is crucially missing from mass literature is any form of female solidarity', that 'there is no sisterhood' in romances and that the narratives thus 'take female rivalry for granted' (Franco, 1986: 137; Margolies, 1982: 9; Weibel, 1977: 37). In this respect, it appears that 'patriarchy not only structurally includes female rivalry, it *requires* it' (Ostrov Weisser and Fleischner, 1994: 4).

Negating female bonding, the conservative marital triangle achieves romantic closure by employing a hierarchical and dualistic logic that construes a categorical difference between the two wives. While such polarisation functions as a means of socialisation and cultural simplification, it is far from being infallible and is particularly prone to narrative disruption. In fact, I argue that the conservative marital triangle carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction and incorporates a subversive ideological paradox that implicitly questions conservative romantic parameters. On the one hand, the male gaze determines the roles and status of the two female figures and produces a categorical contrast between them. On the other hand, this gaze also binds and connects the two women. Defined solely in relation to the male protagonist (as his wives), the two female figures occupy the same social position from a patriarchal point of view. Neither woman is allowed access to difference or definition outside the bounds of patriarchal conceptions of womanhood. Both are consigned to an inevitable repetition of the same, enacting an unintended but inescapable mimesis of the other. The social indistinguishability and equivalence of the two wives potentially undercuts the categorical opposition upon which the romantic resolution of the conservative triangle is based. It therefore introduces a

subversive element that has to be effectively negated/omitted/ silenced if the romantic text is to uphold its conservative agenda.

Generic contradictions become especially acute when triangular paradigms are used to explain dualistic/oppositional conceptual patterns. While the social identicalness of the two wives threatens to undermine the narrative practice of sexual polarisation, the conservative marital triangle also implicitly questions the romantic celebration and glorification of marriage. Dependent for its satisfactory conclusion on the ultimate failure and collapse of the husband's first marriage, the conservative erotic scenario cannot assume that all marriage is successful and cannot depict marriage as an unfailing point of narrative and ideological closure. Portraying marriage not as a stable locus of union but as a site of failure and repetition, such a scenario opens up the institution of marriage to readings other than those preferred by the conservative romance. Conservative romantic strategies thus build an ideological threat into the romance's paradigmatic celebration of heterosexual bonds in marriage. They narratively combine what Evelyn J. Hinz calls the two versions of the wedlock plot: the romantic or optimistic version where the emphasis is on "wed" as well as the tragic version which problematises the notion of the happy marriage and in which the emphasis is upon "lock" (Hinz, 1976: 902 - 903). Basing its depiction of a successful marriage on the required failure of another, the conservative marital triangle inevitably introduces disruptive portrayals of marital antagonism. In this instance, the marital bond is simultaneously affirmed and questioned. Although the ideal of a happy marriage may never explicitly be attacked, representations of marriage are nevertheless shot through with contradictions. The inviolability of the marital telos is invariably challenged and questioned by the existence and the failure of the first marriage. In this context, the conservative romantic text implicitly questions its own ideology. It contains within itself

the critique of its own values, a critique that has to be repressed or silenced if the internally persuasive romantic discourse is to fulfil conservative generic imperatives. Camouflaging narrative contradictions and hiding the social symmetry of the two wives and the parallelism of the two marital situations, conservative romantic strategies install erotic singularity by categorically vilifying/negating/omitting the non-permissive first marriage and the disruptive figure of the first wife. Manipulating the plot so as to maintain order in the conservative romantic world, such fictions install discursive silences, choosing to obscure, to deny or quieten any disruptive storyline or rival voices that might undermine the conservative dynamics of the narrative. Repressive and non-permissive, such strategies create a false sense of erotic originality, silencing the sub-texts that find expression in some of the romance's generic mutations.

Attempting to uphold a sense of erotic singularity, conservative romantic structures omit/silence/repress the non-permissive elements or ideological paradoxes that potentially undermine their ideological superstructure. In contrast to the repressive and non-permissive strategies of the conservative marital triangle, the progressive strategies of innovative romances are expressive of a decidedly more affirmative view of women. Refuting binary modes of erotic schematisation and inspired by popular feminist notions of sisterhood, innovative romances demonstrate that feminine subjectivities do not have to be conceptualised dichotomously. Portraying female-female and female-male bonds as harmoniously coexisting within the bounds of the romantic text, such romances are predominantly governed by relational rather than dichotomous thinking. Informed by a feminist consciousness, they feature non-dominating erotic ties that bind husband and wife in an egalitarian marriage and non-oppositional intra-gender relationships in which the two female figures interact and bond with each other. While the characterisation of the wives

thus fluctuates according to romantic conventions, the ideological figure of the mad/bad first wife is replaced in innovative romances by a more sympathetic character who is in turn pitied, liked, befriended, understood or harmoniously put to rest. Similarly, the first marriage is not depicted as a necessary and absolute failure but is mostly portrayed as a loving and compassionate relationship that has ended and does not pose a threat to the new, even more loving and passionate, bond. Even though such a non-dualistic and inclusive approach is not necessarily employed without narrative tension and conflict, innovative romances typically end on a note of reconciliation with, friendship to and understanding of the female predecessor. Rather than negated or repressed, the previous marriage is harmoniously integrated inside the narrative structure. In the process, innovative romances cannot hold on to the erotic singularity that characterises the conservative romantic versions. They therefore re-define the concepts of love and desire not as something unique and original but as something that might and can be repeated and re-experienced. While the conservative marital triangle is bound to repressive strategies to uphold notions of erotic originality, the progressive romantic text evades the ideological paradoxes underlying the conservative versions by extending romantic imperatives to include intra-gender ties and egalitarian, if less singular, extra-gender relationships. Articulating a more expansive notion of love and desire and a more inclusive view of marriage, innovative romances are less dependent than their generic counterparts on non-permissive narrative techniques. As a result, they are less susceptible - though not immune - to generic slippage and they are less likely textual models for generic derivatives.

Yet, while innovative romantic developments clearly expand the genre, I reject the conclusion that they therefore operate outside the bounds of patriarchal ideology or are expressive of an overtly feminist consciousness. Constrained by the generic imperatives of

monogamy, heterosexuality and the inevitable happily-ever-after, innovative heterosexual romances remain bound ideologically and structurally to a patriarchal meta-text and their articulation of feminism is negotiated and de-politicised. Although heterosexual bonds and feminosocial relationships are not mutually exclusive anymore, the innovative romantic text is still governed by a strict topical hierarchy that delineates generic parameters. Within the framework of the heterosexual romance, the female-female relationship should always be secondary to the primary male-female bond and should not displace the romantic plot from the centre of the text. Like the repressed subplots of the conservative marital triangle, the feminosocial strategies of the innovative romance also harbour the potential for a generic shift, in case the female-female dyad moves centre stage. Generic integrity is dependent on the primary narrative focus on couple formation and the overt celebration of the male-female dyad. While romantic imperatives necessitate the overcoming of conflict and the successful elimination of all threats to the heterosexual bond, romantic integrity is safeguarded mostly if the narrative conflict is not posed by the second female term but is articulated within the economy of the heterosexual couple. As Jayne Ann Krentz observes, 'the hero in the romance is the most important challenge the heroine must face and conquer. The hero is the real problem in the book' (Krentz, 1992b: 108). However, if textual conflict arises from obstacles existing outside the emotional centre of the narrative and the textual interest revolves around a relational axis other than the heterosexual one, there is an increased possibility that this obstacle/this axis will draw attention away from the love story and create a new narrative situation that might entail a shift in genre. Within the bounds of the romance, the triadic conflict invariably has to be suppressed and the female-female dyad inevitably has to be established as secondary. Increasingly coming to the fore, this conflict is imaginatively recovered and erupts in the romantic generic derivatives. This

study therefore asserts that the final step in escaping the confines of the romance is the move to other genres.

## 1.6 Beyond Generic Limitations: The Marital Triangle in the Romance's Mutations

Having delineated the variability, development and extremities of the romance genre, this section looks beyond generic restrictions and focuses on the non/post-romantic relations and perspectives generally excluded from the romantic exchange. This critical move beyond the romance leads this study to four main areas/genres of investigation: the Victorian sensation novel of the 1860s, the modern female Gothic novel, the contemporary popular feminist and the postfeminist text. While this list of generic mutations is by no means intended as a conclusive or finalised enumeration (the catalogue of non/post-romantic strategies seeming far more diverse and wide-ranging than this study can hope to identify), my choice of derivative genres is inspired more by historical and ideological variety than by any absolutist claims to definiteness. Shifting the narrative focus onto perspectives outside romantic dynamics and relational arrangements other than heterosexual attachments, the four generic mutations examined in this study are extremely diverse from a historical point of view; they range from the thoroughly Victorian discourses of the sensation novel to the ironic postmodernism of the contemporary postfeminist text. Due to their historical diversity, the above genres offer a variety of non/post-romantic techniques, effectively highlighting the ideological versatility of the marital triangle convention. In short, the post-romantic re-scripting often works through the deliberate withholding of the balanced mutuality of romantic pair bonding, through the continued re-institution of triangular modes of exchange and through the narrative relegation onto non-



romantic perspectives and relationships. As these strategies will be discussed in detail in the corresponding textual sections, this part of the thesis intends to map out the structural groundwork and the common features of the mutations' triangular constellations.

Expanding the romantic plot emotionally and structurally beyond generic limitations, the romance's mutations investigate and, to varying degrees, breach romantic imperatives of ideological closure and heterosexual resolution. Even when the romantic ideal continues to function as an ideological backdrop and even when the romance continues to operate as a genre of ideological reference, the notion that *amor omnia vincit* often proves to be unachievable and is in turn rendered suspect, parodied or de-valourised. Complicating the romance's happily-ever-after, the genre's mutations often disregard, replace or de-naturalise the pair-bonded resolution. Whereas some Gothic narratives reject or vilify heterosexual couple formation, popular feminist narratives relegate the male-female dyad to a secondary narrative rank and offer an alternative euphoric plot of female bonding. If successful, the heterosexual tie figures only marginally or, inversely, is de-naturalised as an ideologically tainted and constructed formation. Both the sensation novel and some female Gothic texts draw attention to the patriarchal underpinnings of romantic ideology and install ideological closure only through overtly contrived and non-permissive narrative strategies. The postfeminist text in its turn radically exposes the artificiality and exploitability of romantic imperatives, thereby potentially disarticulating their cultural authority. Unsurprisingly, ideological conflicts remain acute in these narratives: the partial, manufactured or unsatisfactory resolutions often disrupt or threaten to disrupt the closural patterns. Traditionally 'the natural goal of love's progress', marriage increasingly comes under scrutiny in these genres as they concentrate on the myriad obstacles and complications that oppose the happy resolution in marriage (Boone, 1984: 65). The marital

telos is invariably questioned or complicated: either the failure of the first marriage is echoed by the decline of the second relationship or both marital situations are de-valorised and de-romanticised. In popular feminist novels, marriage plays only a secondary role whereas in the postfeminist text, it figures as a distinctly anti-romantic and exploitable relational option. In the female Gothic, the glorification of married love particularly gives way to explorations of failed or disintegrating *wedlock* that increasingly question the socially redeeming value of marriage and refuse to grant readerly repose. If the marital bond remains intact (as in some sensation novels or Gothic texts), it is often upheld artificially through the contrivances of patriarchal strategies of negation, thereby drawing attention to the constructed-ness of romantic ideology.

While romantic imperatives become increasingly de-mythologized and de-naturalised, generic mutations do not chronicle the developing love relationship between hero and heroine but instead, relegate the narrative foci onto non-romantic characters and relational axes. They can therefore be defined as ‘failed romances’, as narratives that, to quote Janice Radway, ‘consistently fail to satisfy the [...] primary stipulation that the romantic fantasy focus only on “one woman – one man”’ (Radway, 1987: 161). As the heterosexual relationship becomes increasingly marginal/vilified/de-mystified, the narrative focus shifts from the romantic couple to either the first wife or the female-female relation of the triangle. Traditionally expelled from the romantic plot, the figure of the first wife invariably gains in complexity and status in the romance’s mutations in which she is in turn de-vilified, re-valorised or authorised. Taking centre stage, she becomes the mover of the narrative, the centre and term of reference in the sensation novel and the postfeminist text. Fascinating or sympathetic, she is a model to be imitated or a possible confidante for the second wives of the female Gothic and popular feminist texts. Giving precedence to the

intra-gender dyad, the latter genres hail feminosociality as a relational alternative to, often stifling if not abusive, heterosexism and concentrate on the bonds of sympathy and understanding between the diverse wives of the marital triangles. While the first wife or the intra-gender dyad become more central, the male component of the marital triangle is consistently deprived of his romantic allure: the husbands of the sensation novel and the popular feminist text are sidelined; the postfeminist husband is ridiculed and disempowered; the Gothic male in his turn is often vilified, thereby replacing the first wife as the centre of antagonism and negativity. With the first wife increasingly commanding narrative attention and continuing to be a sustained presence in the marital plot, triangulation inevitably proves persistent in the four genres. Whereas the break-up of the triadic structure is compulsory in the romance, the genre's derivatives deliberately reinstitute triangularity within their erotic structures, thereby producing and refusing to resolve the agitation and conflict that the romance seeks to hold in check. In the sensation novel and the female Gothic, triangular relations continually disrupt dyadic heterosexism as the male-female bond offers only an illusory and manufactured stasis. Uncovering metaphorical triangular relations underneath the apparently dyadic resolution, the postfeminist text similarly demonstrates the endurance and persistence of the ever-resurfacing triadic configuration.

Translated into the terminology of the marital triangle, the romance's mutations articulate the ideological versatility of the marital convention as all four genres give expression to forms of triangularity that extend beyond romantic parameters. From a structural point of view, the mutated triangular configurations are based on conservative as well as innovative triadic models. While the sensation novel, the postfeminist text and some female Gothic narratives revise the discursive omissions and ideological negations of the

conservative marital constellation, other Gothic plots and popular feminist texts expand the ideological implications of the innovative marital triangle in order to concentrate on notions of feminosociality and female bonding. Highlighting the ideological paradoxes of the conservative marital triangle, texts such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Daphne du Maurier's Gothic text *Rebecca* (1938) and Fay Weldon's postfeminist narrative *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) particularly lay bare the paradoxes of the conservative structure and expose the patriarchal underpinnings of this constellation. Uncovering the coercing mechanisms of gender binarisms, these narratives and genres reveal the rigidity of patriarchal ideology and the constructed-ness of the stereotypical good/bad woman divide. Presenting wives that confound this dichotomy, they complicate and display patriarchal schematisations, thereby drawing attention to the underlying politics of such dualisms. Undermining the conservative suppression and linguistic negation of the first wife/marriage, such genres problematise patriarchal practices of vilification and categorisation. In this way, they retrieve the discursive silences of the conservative romantic structure and imaginatively recover the submerged plots, figures and relationships typically suppressed in the conservative scenario. Highlighting the parallelism of the two marital situations and the symmetry of the two wives, these generic mutations revise the ideological paradoxes of the conservative romance and explore the complex relationship between the two women.

The intricacies of the intra-gender bond, however, are most forcefully depicted in the female Gothic and the popular feminist texts in which female bonding and collectivism often become the determining narrative motors. Dismissing the paradigmatic primacy of the heterosexual tie, these genres are frequently modelled on the innovative romantic triangle, expanding its feminosocial potential beyond romantic limitations. In these cases,

narrative attention focuses primarily on the female bonds of the marital triangles, the wives' collective sharing of experience and the satisfaction or fulfilment derived from their relationships. Shifting the axis of importance from heterosexual to feminosocial, these generic mutations extract alternative meanings from the triadic structure, thereby demonstrating the ideological variability of the marital triangle. Promoting a relational hierarchy in which ideals of sisterhood are given precedence over romantic heterosexism, they give expression to rival versions of relationality. While the feminosocial potential of the female Gothic typically fails to uproot gender inequalities and counteract the tragic or pessimistic undertones of its heterosexual plots, the popular feminist texts offer alternative euphoric narratives in which the collective bonds between the diverse wives bring about an emotional gratification and optimistic resolution traditionally associated with the romantic male-female dyad. Drawing attention away from the romantic experience onto non-romantic characters and relationships, the four generic mutations all give voice to alternative storylines and perspectives. They effectively explore what forms the marital triangle may take once romantic paradigms have been breached and at what points these generic shifts occur. Articulating different forms of triangularity, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) functions as a model for both romances and romantic mutations. The novel simultaneously depicts a paradigmatic romantic situation and allows narrative space for the expression of non-romantic meanings. As such, this classic novel figures as a revealing and introductory case study that will be explored in the next section.

## 2. Generic Possibilities and Semantic Hybridity: The Relational Triangles in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Starting off the textual analysis sections of the thesis with a case study of a novel as unambiguously popular and indisputably canonical as Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a critical move that does not seem to require much justification given the novel's exemplary status in the annals of literary history and the critical frenzy with which it continues to be discussed, explored and analysed. Deemed by its early reviewers as a 'book to make the pulses gallop and the heart beat, and to fill the eye with tears',<sup>1</sup> the text has rightly provoked praise from the highest ranks<sup>2</sup> and has justly proven itself, in Angela Carter's words, 'the most durable of melodramas [...] a perennial bestseller' (quoted in Allott, 1974: 68; Carter, 1992: 161). While the literary prestige and qualitative pre-eminence of *Jane Eyre* guarantee and validate its position of privilege *à part* from all the other texts discussed in this thesis, the novel's generic ambiguity and semantic hybridity also justify and exact discrete critical attention. Not only do they offer revealing insights into the workings of the romance genre - the text functioning as a pool for well-worn romantic topoi and erotic models - but they also introduce non/post-romantic meanings and ideological points of contradiction that expand beyond romantic generic limits and are relevant for the genre's diverse mutations. Engaging with a spectrum of possible critical readings, this study defines Brontë's novel as an internally contested romance. In this way, the narrative creates a paradigmatic romantic situation and modes of interaction as well as granting narrative space to both overt and latent dialogic meanings that re-introduce the

open relationality and erotic asymmetry of the triadic form into the romantic structure and that find concrete expression in the sensation novel, the female Gothic text, the popular feminist and the postfeminist narrative. As a pertinent model for both romances and romantic derivatives, *Jane Eyre* occupies an exceptional and intriguing position within the list of readings undertaken in this study. Given the plurality of its ideological and generic dimensions, it is appropriate to discuss it as a separate and introductory case study.

A continuously popular and culturally central text, *Jane Eyre*, in line with so many “timeless” great works of art, presents a peculiar challenge to academic criticism as it occupies a complex historical/trans-historical position that functions as a mark of both literary sophistication as well as longevity. Inevitably situated within and expressive of its originating moment, the novel necessarily engages with historically specific issues of class, gender and race and it unavoidably remains grounded to a contextually-defined frame of discourses.<sup>3</sup> A perennial bestseller (to echo Angela Carter), Brontë’s text also evidently transcends the discursive fixity of its originating framework and it, at least partly, needs to disengage the historicity of its discourses in order to stay culturally relevant for generations of readers and stay amenable to diverse historical and ideological contexts. While the novel is necessarily bound to its contemporaneous origins and while it therefore possesses a certain documentary quality, the text’s enduring cross-historical appeal also suggests that the narrative is not wholly circumscribed by the discursive and ideological frame of its epochal context but that it incorporates flexible narrative spaces/voices/discourses that invite and remain open to historical re-reading and re-appropriation. Along these lines, Charlotte Brontë herself voices her belief in the trans-historical life of her work and implicitly envisages future re-appropriations of her text, noting that ‘the writer [...] owns something of which he is not always master [...] it will perhaps for years lie in subjection

[...] then without warning of revolt there comes a time [...] when it sets to work' (quoted in McClure Smith, 1996: 115). As Antony Easthope maintains, this cross/trans-historical status confers literary merit onto the text and characterises artistic excellence. For him, literary value is measured by the extent to which a text 'has exceeded the conjuncture of its production, has engaged with altered ideological contexts and has been reproduced in different contemporary readings' (Easthope, 1991: 57). Maria Corti, with reference to Umberto Eco's writing on dissemination, similarly notes that 'the more artistically complex and original a work of art, the higher it rises over the works that surround it, the greater is its availability to different readings on both the synchronic and the diachronic levels' (quoted in Easthope, 1991: 58 - 59). Bakhtinian theory in its turn might explain the enduring allure of classic works of art (such as *Jane Eyre*) as a result of their 'unfinishedness', of 'the interrupted process of their social and ideological re-accentuation' (Bakhtin, 1981: 421). As Bakhtin explains,

Thanks to the intentional potential embedded in them, such works have proved capable of uncovering in each era and against ever new dialogizing backgrounds ever new aspects of meaning; their semantic content literally continues to grow, to further create out of itself. (Bakhtin, 1981: 421)

Viewed in this light, artistic excellence seems bound to engender an interpretative diversity that is distinctly trans-historical. Literary value thus appears reserved for those works of art for which historical distance is not a barrier to understanding but an opportunity for interpretation, providing new socio-linguistic contexts in which the text may be re-read and dialogised and in which its unrealised possibilities may be made to speak. Judged according to the above parameters, *Jane Eyre* certainly deserves its place of



privilege within the literary canon since, as theorist Pierre Macherey would term it, this particular text has decidedly 'not finished being read' (Macherey, 1978: 70). A boldly ambivalent narrative, Brontë's text persists in powerful and meaningful ways beyond its originating moment. Engaging with ever-new ideological and historical contexts, the novel continues to be culturally relevant for generations of readers. Over the centuries, it has produced a plethora of strikingly diverse interpretations relating most notably for this study to the long-standing critical problem of the text's indecisive partaking in matters of genre, to its ostensibly paradoxical status as both 'one of the most passionate of romantic stories' and as a 'cult text of feminism' (Nudd, 1993: 140; Spivak, 1985: 244). Stressing *Jane Eyre's* affiliation with the romance, Tania Modleski, Geoffrey Wagner and Catherine Belsey have interpreted Brontë's narrative as a quintessentially romantic text, positioning it at the foundation of virtually all contemporary romance, 'inventing many of the characters and situations of the popular romantic mythos',<sup>4</sup> as 'probably *the* love story' that is 'reproduced endlessly in other works of fiction, other love stories' (Modleski, 1982: 31; Wagner, 1975: 244; Belsey, 1994: 32). In contrast, feminist theorists and critics have also claimed the novel for their own, praising it for its 'feminist outbursts' (to quote Diane Long Hoeveler) or its 'rebellious feminism' (to echo critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar) (Long Hoeveler, 1998: 212; Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 338). Similarly, whereas one reader admits that she 'prided herself [...] on reading great literature like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, but [that she] read and loved them as romance novels', another equally self-assured reader claims that 'rereading *Jane Eyre*' leads her 'evidently [...] to feminist issues' (Lyon Clark, 1996: 360; quoted in Culler, 1991: 510).

A sign of literary merit, this interpretative diversity and lack of critical consensus are greatly encouraged by the text's semantic complexities and the multitude of its (often

oppositional or competing) discourses that lend the novel to ever-new interpretations and historical re-readings. Disturbing strict generic categorisations, the novel's seemingly conflicting allegiances to the ideological camps of both romance and feminism<sup>5</sup> are played out on the structural level: the romantic trajectory is thus couched in the overall plot of *Bildung*<sup>6</sup> as well as interrupted by Jane's flight from Thornfield and her resulting feminosocial experiences in the Rivers family. Importantly, these two different social *ethoi* are also articulated on the more intimate level of the heroine's consciousness. Expressing what has been interpreted as her feminist desire for gender equality and independence, Jane famously advocates that 'women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do' (Brontë, 1987: 96). At the same time, she also formulates her romantic longing for relationality, stating that 'there is no happiness like that of being loved by your fellow-creatures, and feeling that your presence is an addition to their comfort' (Brontë, 1987: 216). As this study maintains, far from being arranged in a straightforward or uncomplicated hierarchy of significance, these feminist/romantic discourses are mobile on the textual scale of priority.<sup>7</sup> Different discourses can thus assume semantic dominance depending on the historical or interpretative framework in which they are placed. While *Jane Eyre* cannot be termed an interpretative *carte blanche* (a textual mirror reflecting all historical contexts and open to all sorts of ideological appropriations), this investigation asserts that the novel features an unstable discursive hierarchy in which semantic priorities are not completely fixed or stable but are reasonably flexible and liable to adapt to different historical contexts and interpretative backgrounds. Affirming the variable nature of the novel's discursive priorities, this theoretical position helps to explain not only the enduring and trans-historical appeal of the narrative but also the critical dissent around the text as principal

consequences of the novel's unstable semantic hierarchy. Unattached to one particular critical framework, such a stance is not bound to the limiting theoretical objective to impose ideological coherence and to uncover a definitive content or univocal message in the text. Moreover, this position is also inherently supportive of the semantic ambiguity of Brontë's novel as it allows for the description of the narrative's conflicting generic classifications (as both a proto-romance and a feminist manifesto) not as mutually exclusive categorisations but as textual possibilities that co-exist within one narrative frame and that, depending on the interpretative context, can both assume discursive priority.

Rather than offering a conclusive or straightforward evaluation of *Jane Eyre*, this investigation looks neither for an authoritative or single cause/ideology in the textual manifestation nor for a final reading that would impose a satisfactory or in Bakhtinian terms 'monologic' closure onto the narrative.<sup>8</sup> Like Patsy Stoneman, I assert that 'one reason that the novel continues to fascinate readers [...] is that its meanings are unstable and ambiguous' (Stoneman, 1996: 88). In this analysis, I echo Jean Wyatt who suspects that 'many modern readers, including feminists like myself, are attached to *Jane Eyre* because it reflects so well our ambivalence. [...] Brontë advocates feminist ideals [...] while underneath flows, unchecked, a passionate desire for the fusions of romantic love' (Wyatt, 1985: 213-214). This study affirms that the novel's enduring and cross-historical appeal is ultimately dependent on its "unfinalisable" quality and on the plurality of readings and reading positions that can and have been made/taken. An "organic" text adjustable to a variety of historical/ideological/interpretative settings, *Jane Eyre* is notorious for the diversity of its textual possibilities and its formal and connotative complexity, its 'bold mixing of genres [...] powerful ideological dialectic' and its 'opposed poles of energy and value', all of which draw attention to the layers of meaning in the novel (Clarke, 2000: 695;

Mann, 1978: 31). A melting pot of diverse discourses/perspectives/ideologies, Brontë's text resists straightforward or monologic readings and calls into question what French theorist Gérard Genette calls 'une certaine idole du texte clos' (quoted in Nowak, 1994: 29). The text's generic instability and ideological indeterminacy suggest not so much a finalised or closed meaning than 'an excess in narrative', the semantic richness of a text-in-progress that in Derrida's words continues to be 'constantly "re-read" and "re-written", with "diverse meanings" and "plural effects"' (Becker, 1999: 11; quoted in Stoneman, 1996: 2).<sup>9</sup> Following this line of thought, it does not come as a surprise that the critical debate around Brontë's novel has provoked strikingly varied interpretations and that the text, rather than allowing for critical consensus, has often left readers with an unsettling sense of 'something strange, disturbing, inassimilable in *Jane Eyre*', the sense of 'something working beneath the surface', 'of an unresolved discord' in the narrative (Glen, 1997: 24 - 25; Kloepper, 1989: 28; Stephen, 1973: 154).

Investigating the novel's unstable discursive hierarchy and its diverse possibilities of meaning, this study is not calling out for a definitive reading of Brontë's classic. Throughout this section, I define *Jane Eyre* as an internally contested romance. Such referential terminology should not be understood as a conclusive and self-explanatory classification, nor as inscribing the text into either a romantic or a feminist framework. Instead, this generic labelling should be seen as a formulation that relates to a flexible hierarchy of discourses rather than one monologic meaning and that resists the readerly impulse to impose interpretative closure and therefore solipsistic mastery onto the text. Admittedly, my investigatory frame (the marital triangle) is highly selective. In this section, I explore those discourses of the novel that mostly relate to the triadic scenario and those episodes in which the triangular drama figures prominently. Despite this selective focus, I

affirm my choice of theoretical model, asserting that this interpretative structure is particularly expressive of the novel's flexible discursive priorities and the different layers of meaning available. As this investigation intends to argue, the novel's triadic character formations articulate a whole strata of ideologically varied discourses. They effectively exemplify *Jane Eyre's* prototypical affiliations with the conservative and the progressive romance as well as its thematic linkages to the romance's generic mutations: the Victorian sensation novel, the female Gothic novel, the popular feminist and the postfeminist text. Although my reading can be charged with textual truncation (favouring the courtship and marriage plot to the detriment of the heroine's childhood experiences in the Reed family and her formative schooling at Lowood), such a reading seems excusable, if not justified, in the light of Umberto Eco's assertion that cult objects (such as *Jane Eyre*) necessarily produce cultural receptions and readings that are partial and dislocated.<sup>10</sup> As Eco notes, 'in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole. In the case of a book, one can unhinge it, so to speak, physically, reducing it to a series of excerpts' (Eco, 1988: 447). Put simply, while this study performs a selective reading in line with *Jane Eyre's* cult status, it at the same time asserts that its triangular theoretical model is neither limiting nor forcefully implemented but that it remains perfectly indicative of the possibilities of meaning available, of the novel's flexible discursive hierarchy and its ideological oscillations and complexities.

A novel rich in emotional reverberations, *Jane Eyre* not only abounds with love triangles but most of the narrative's relational configurations are arranged according to a triangular pattern. Jane's early friendships with fellow Lowood pupil Helen Burns and model schoolmistress Miss Temple and her later feminosocial relations with sisters Diana

and Mary Rivers conform to the triadic model. Moreover, the novel's heterosexual exchanges are also bound to the triangular paradigm. Desire in Brontë's narrative is never strictly dyadic, symmetric or linear but highly charged, always engaging a third participant in the erotic drama. Exploring the workings and dynamics of the marital triangle, this study concentrates its investigatory focus on four main triadic constellations: the metaphoric marital triangle formed by the heroine and governess Jane, the socialite Blanche Ingram and Jane's boorish lover and employer Mr Rochester, the literal marital triangle between Jane, Rochester's mad/bad first wife Bertha and Rochester, the alternative relational triangle between Jane and her cousins Mary and Diana Rivers and lastly, the triadic structure binding Jane, the frivolous but kind-hearted Rosamond Oliver and Jane's austere and ambitious cousin St. John Rivers. In its discussion, this investigation will proceed more or less sequentially, starting with an exploration of the Jane-Blanche-Rochester constellation as a metaphoric marital triangle that functions as a conservative romantic constellation and at the same time prefigures the literal/Gothic marital triangle engaging Jane, Bertha and their eventually mutual husband.

Modelled on what this study has referred to as the conservative marital triangle, the erotic episode engaging Jane, Blanche Ingram and Rochester is decidedly patriarchal in outlook and tone. Based on the structural and moral opposition of the two female figures, this early relational configuration expresses a highly traditional and conservative romantic ethos and it insistently articulates a typically patriarchal rhetoric of female-female rivalry and antagonism. Vilifying the snobbish socialite Blanche for her calculating sangfroid during the (unknown to both women) mock courtship that Rochester has set up to arouse Jane's jealousy, Jane herself eliminates her supposed rival by comparison. In this instance, the heroine functions as the accomplice and the principal executor of the patriarchal logic

that works by the juxtaposition of women into moral/sexual/social opposites. Drawing a portrait of herself and one of Blanche, Jane at first contrasts her own chalk of the 'governess, disconnected, poor, and plain' to the finely painted ivory of 'Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank', only, on second comparison, to come to the conclusion that her supposed rival is actually 'a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling. [...] She was showy [...] she had a fine person [...] but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature' (Brontë, 1987: 141; 163). Seemingly devoid of any sense of feeling and honesty, the romantic rival Blanche appears to Jane an utterly cold-hearted, arrogant and greedy gold digger whose own feelings at being deceived by Rochester's 'dishonest coquetry' can conveniently be forgotten and passed over as irrelevant and non-existent, all possibilities of her feeling 'forsaken and deserted' deemed 'impossible' by both Jane and her employer (Brontë, 1987: 231). At odds with Jane's outspoken denial of patriarchal definitional powers and her often-cited condemnation of the 'rigid [...] restraint' and 'stagnation' imposed on women, such an evaluative practice seems dubious from a radical feminist position (Brontë, 1987: 96). It uncomfortably calls to mind what Jennifer Shaddock describes as women's complicity in the 'more socially pervasive forms of misogyny' (Shaddock, 1994: 106). As Shaddock notes, 'flattered by and covetous of male attention, willing to align ourselves with male power even at the cost of our own freedom and integrity [...] women enact on a day-to-day basis the plot of a deeply embedded sexist narrative' (Shaddock, 1994: 106). Highlighting the patterns of intra-female rivalry in Brontë's text, Patricia Duncker comes to a similar conclusion when pointing to 'the hostile and denigrating representations of women in women's writing, even in writing which, like *Jane Eyre*, has been claimed as feminist fiction. So, women beware women, we are our own worst enemies' (Duncker, 1992: 25).

With Jane acting as the main purveyor and primary agent of a stereotypical and binary version of femininity, the Jane-Blanche-Rochester triangle is strictly opposed to any form of female-female commonality.<sup>11</sup> This metaphorical marital triangle functions as a typical model for the conservative romance that, as will be argued in the next section, is based on the structural division of woman into the good, passionate but innocent young girl and the bad first wife/the 'Bitch figure' and 'Terrible Third' who, according to Susan Ostrov Weisser, 'defines and delineates "the problem" in terms of the binary gender system and the romantic couple system. If she can be extruded, all will be well' (Ostrov Weisser, 1994: 269; 276 - 277). With its structural pairing of opposing females, the early erotic constellation ostensibly conforms to a conservative romantic ethos. However, instead of progressing towards the romantic imperative that 'all will be well', this configuration significantly unfolds to reveal what Patsy Stoneman calls the Gothic staple that '*it has all happened before*' (Stoneman, 1996: 144). As I intend to argue, the Jane-Blanche-Rochester triad does not determine the dynamics of the novel's romantic trajectory as much as it serves as a preliminary relational structure, anticipating the novel's main, more complex marital triangle engaging Jane, Rochester and the mad/bad Bertha.

Functioning as a foreboding and metaphoric pre-model for the later literal Gothic marital triangle, the Jane-Blanche-Rochester triangle does not define the erotic drama as much as it introduces a situational doubling that refuses to be instantly resolved and continues to disrupt the romantic dyad. That Blanche should figure as a lurid stand-in for the hidden and unrepresentable first wife Bertha is notably demonstrated by the social and physical parallels between the two women. While both belong to the same stratum of upper-class womanhood, Blanche offers herself as willingly as the first wife as a sexual trophy on the marriage market. Moreover, the young socialite Blanche also serves as a



physical model in Rochester's description of the former appearance of the first wife - the exotic Creole Bertha having been 'a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram; tall, dark, and majestic' (Brontë, 1987: 268). Blanche's metaphoric substitution of Bertha, however, becomes most apparent in the game of charade that Rochester and his houseguests engage in with Jane as a spectator. The first part of the dumb show describes the 'pantomime of marriage' that figuratively weds the marital couple Blanche and Rochester. The second part of the charade tellingly complements the first term "Bride" turning it into "Bridewell", transmuting, as Karen E. Rowe describes it, 'Thornfield as a mansion for a "Bride" [...] suddenly into "Bridewell", a prison for demented past wives' (Brontë, 1987: 160; Rowe, 1983: 83 - 84). Unfolding in front of Jane's eyes, the game of charade functions as a primal-scene-alike and condensed re-enactment of Rochester's marriage to Bertha and the latter's demise into madness and subsequent imprisonment at Thornfield.<sup>12</sup> Most importantly, it should also figure as a warning to the spectator Jane of a (hi)story that cannot be expressed yet, of a living mad wife who still remains hidden and locked away and whose elusive presence can at this stage only be expressed metaphorically, through distant noises and her unwitnessed but threatening actions. From the beginning, Jane's stay at Thornfield is overshadowed by taciturn but visible (in the case of the charade) / unseen but audible (in the case of Bertha's 'demoniac laugh' and 'eccentric murmurs') forewarnings that prefigure future developments and lend an alarming aura to the whole of the courtship period (Brontë, 1987: 130; 96). This transcending and threatening atmosphere pervades all of Rochester and Jane's engagement, up to that revelatory moment where Bertha's presence and her husband's dishonesty are finally revealed.

Strewn with disquieting and sinister notes, Jane's courtship and engagement period clearly does not conform to a typically harmonious romance sequence. The collapse of the

Jane-Blanche-Rochester triangle equally does not bring about the customarily euphoric pair-bonded conclusion: the happy ending. While Blanche is effectively vilified and eliminated as a possible rival and while the metaphoric triadic structure is successfully disintegrated in favour of the dyadic erotic relation, Jane is clearly not satisfied with the achieved status quo as she starts resenting Rochester's attempts to attach her to himself like a possession. During the period of their (unknown to her) sham engagement, Jane, rather than feeling like the 'free human being with an independent will' that she proclaims herself to be, is increasingly degraded and offended by Rochester's cavalier attentions, by his expensive gifts and the resulting 'crowded obligations' that make her feel like a 'slave', an inmate in the 'harem' of Rochester's laid-off continental mistresses (Brontë, 1987: 223; 237). Expressed in terms of violence and oppression, Rochester's generosity does not convey his love as much as his patriarchal dominance and his desire for ownership, his longing to 'put the diamond chain round [Jane's] neck' and to 'attach' and impose on her the roles of the 'little nervous subject', the 'little English girl' and 'bonny wee thing', all of which he wants her to be (Brontë, 1987: 227; 238; 248; 236; 238). On their wedding day, the element of oppression in Rochester's behaviour becomes especially acute. '[C]ruel in [his] love', a man of 'quarried marble', he holds Jane's hand 'by a grasp of iron', 'without speaking, without smiling, without seeming to recognise in [her] a human being' (Brontë, 1987: 253; 254; 255). Unlike any other customarily optimistic romantic resolution, Rochester and Jane's supposedly joyful engagement seems predestined to fail, overshadowed, as it is, both by Bertha's unexplained but insistent intrusions (her laughs, her murderous intentions on Rochester, her nightly visit to Jane's room) as well as by Rochester's dominant and oppressive behaviour towards his young fiancée. Both of these characteristics - the disruptive presence of the first wife and the heroine's 'fears of and

confusion about masculine behavior’ - strikingly link Brontë’s narrative to examples of the female Gothic discussed in this study (Modleski, 1982: 60). Termed a novel that ‘shamelessly reduplicate[s] the plot of *Jane Eyre*’, Daphne du Maurier’s famous *Rebecca* (1938) also concentrates on an unnamed second wife’s enduring obsession with and haunting by a first wife (quoted in Horner and Zlosnik, 1998a: 99). Echoing Brontë’s depiction of male dominance, Elizabeth von Arnim’s lesser-known *Vera* (1921) in its turn recalls a young heroine’s sense of oppression at the hands of her husband, focusing on the second wife Lucy’s increasing fear of her tyrant husband Everard whose petty and violent cruelty has already driven his first wife Vera to commit suicide and now creates a domestic hell for Vera’s young and frightened successor.

Disrupting the romantic ambience, the sinister undertones of Jane and Rochester’s engagement period culminate and are finally literalised during the marriage ceremony that, if successfully completed, would make Rochester a bigamist and would probably turn the novel into one of those Victorian texts dealing with such “sensational” contents. In line with such argumentation, Brontë has actually been credited for producing in *Jane Eyre* a ‘prototype of the sensation novel’ containing ‘many of the elements which’ a sensation writer such as ‘Mary Elizabeth Braddon was later to rework in *Lady Audley’s Secret*’ (Pykett, 1998: 19 - 20).<sup>13</sup> Latent but unexplored, this (textual) fate is prevented by the intervention of Richard Mason, Bertha’s brother, who breaks up the marriage ceremony, reveals Rochester’s bigamous intentions and literally draws the Jane-Bertha-Rochester marital triangle from the Gothic subplot onto the textual surface. A literal marital triangle, the latter constellation is decidedly more disturbing/direct/darker and is distinctly more complex and ideologically ambiguous than the introductory and metaphoric pre-model engaging Blanche. The literalisation of the earlier triangle, the triadic configuration binding

the young governess, the first wife Bertha and their (eventually) mutual husband reintroduces the open relationality of the triangular constellation into the romantic structure. Effectively disrupting the text's already unstable romantic trajectory, the repetitive nature of the triadic drama and the resulting situational doubling complicate any notion of a straightforward or standard happy ending. Like the earlier pre-model, the latter triangular formation in its turn superficially functions as a conservative romantic model. Unlike the Jane-Blanche-Rochester triangle, however, the Jane-Bertha-Rochester triad also emphasises important parallels and sympathies between Jane and her predecessor, similarities that have especially been noted by feminist critics and that have influenced the more progressive contemporary romances in their portrayal of the first-second wife relationship.

Echoing the ideological and erotic implications of the metaphoric pre-model, the literal marital triangle articulates on the surface the patriarchal binarism of the good/bad woman, with young English Jane serving as the moral and sexual opposite of the older Creole Bertha. The violent other to Jane's normative femininity, Bertha's threatening persona has already firmly been established before actual confrontation between the two women occurs. Describing Bertha's audible presence as 'oral oddities' expressed in the 'voice [...] of a mocking demon', Jane's first descriptions of the hidden wife invariably taint and direct reader expectations (Brontë, 1987: 96; 185). Her later dreamlike impressions of Bertha during the first wife's nocturnal visit to Jane's room reaffirm the derogatory connotations of Jane's initial reactions. Through Jane's eyes, the first wife now appears a 'foul German spectre – the Vampyre', a 'wild beast' or 'fiend' with a 'savage face' and 'red eyes' (Brontë, 1987: 250; 185; 249). The most obvious and significant confrontation between the normative Jane and the other Bertha, however, takes place after

Bertha's hidden presence in the attic of Thornfield has finally been revealed. Exhibiting his deranged and violent wife to the shocked marriage party, Rochester invites direct comparison between the two women, hoping by way of this visible demonstration to justify his attempted bigamy. To him, the division is absolute. Whereas Jane is 'my good angel', Bertha is a 'hideous demon' and a 'fearful hag' who has dragged him 'through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste' (Brontë, 1987: 277; 264; 270). Stressing his own victimisation and his self-diagnosed 'despair' and 'sufferings' during his 'hell' of marriage to Bertha, he refutes possible derogatory comments and criticisms of his factually criminal behaviour, drawing attention to the absolute polarity of the two women (Brontë, 1987: 270; 271). As Rochester exclaims,

This is *my wife*, [...] And *this* is what I wished to have [...] this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectively at the gambols of a demon [...] look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask – this form with that bulk; then judge me. (Brontë, 1987: 258)

In keeping with the textual movement towards literalisation, the later marital triangle retraces the oppositional logic of the good/bad woman not to the female accomplice but to its more direct patriarchal origin. In this instance, Rochester, rather than Jane, serves as the principal bearer of the assessing male gaze and the purveyor of the patriarchal dualism. Rochester's classificatory evaluation firmly locates him at the ideological centre of the plot. His patriarchal gaze effectively objectifies the two women into complete opposites, eradicating all possible parallels between them and reducing them to a state of what theorist Laura Mulvey awkwardly but aptly terms 'to-be-looked-at-ness'

(Mulvey, 1989: 19).<sup>14</sup> Despite Jane's tentative attempts of redefinition (stating that contrary to Rochester's characterisations, she herself is 'not an angel' and that Bertha, 'that unfortunate lady', cannot help being mad), the novel ardently refuses to cast Rochester as guilty and accountable for his actions (Brontë, 1987: 229; 265). 'I am not a villain', he asserts, 'nature meant me to be, on the whole, a good man', all his misbehaviour and 'bad eminence [...] owing [...] rather to circumstances than to my natural bent' (Brontë, 1987: 119). Emphasising Rochester's suffering at the hands of his mad first wife, the text insistently defers blame from the husband to Bertha, stressing her 'gross, impure, depraved' nature and the 'crimes' and 'vices' of the 'at once coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile [...] true daughter of an infamous mother' (Brontë, 1987: 269 - 270). Although Jane charges Rochester with cruelty in so despising his first wife, she readily forgives him his criminal behaviour regarding both the legitimate Mrs Rochester and herself - whom he had hoped to marry dishonestly - and she clearly expects the reader to follow her example. 'Reader!', Jane states, 'I forgave him at the moment, and on the spot. There was such deep remorse in his eye, such true pity in his tone [...] I forgave him all' (Brontë, 1987: 262).

While Brontë's novel clearly exposes the restrictive dynamics of the classificatory male gaze, the text refuses to condemn Rochester and hold him responsible for imposing such limitative and ideologically-tainted evaluations. As Helen Small points out, 'the novel asks us to take Rochester at his word: to look at the two women in order to find in them an absolute difference' (Small, 1996: 167). Controlled by Rochester's male gaze, Bertha appears irrecoverable for femininity and humanity, her otherness and monstrosity emphasised through Jane's replicating eyes. 'Some strange wild animal', a 'clothed hyena' that moves 'on all fours', with 'a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane', Bertha elicits a wide range of zoological comparisons from her almost successor (Brontë, 1987:

257 - 258). To Jane, Bertha not only appears to have crossed the border from human to animal but she also becomes masculinised in the process, being in her words 'a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband' and showing 'virile force' in her contest with Rochester (Brontë, 1987: 258). Unsurprisingly, this damning description has left some critics convinced of Jane's complicity with the male gaze and her unquestioning acceptance of the oppositional patriarchal logic. Nina Baym thus cannot 'ignore the work Brontë has put into defining Bertha out of humanity. Not a scintilla of recognition of Bertha's likeness to herself disturbs Jane's consciousness, or fashions an ironic narrator discourse by which she might be corrected. The creature is wholly hateful, and no wonder: she has *stolen Jane's man*' (Baym, 1992: 156). Asserting 'the essential difference' between the two women, Nancy Armstrong interestingly notes the process of legalisation that the binary logic engenders, arguing that by 'putting Bertha in the position of the demonic savage, Brontë recasts the potentially adulterous Jane as the legitimate wife forcibly separated from her rightful home and husband' (Armstrong, 1998: 389). Joyce Carol Oates similarly stresses Jane's complicity with the male gaze, observing that the heroine 'naturally feels no kinship - in truth, very little human sympathy - for the woman who has become a beast, beside whom *she* appears to distinct advantage' (Oates, 1985: 50 - 51).

Emphasising Jane's complicity with dualistic patriarchal conceptions of womanhood, the above views are representative of an increasing number of critics that have drawn attention away from Jane's voice as a paradigm of feminist resistance. Instead, these critics focus on Brontë's deployment of conservative epochal discourses of race, gender and class in constructing the nymphomaniac, mad, half-breed, Creole aristocrat Bertha as Jane's other. For Cora Kaplan, Brontë was certainly 'no political radical' and the novel's textual politics are conservative, rather than subversive (Kaplan, 1992: 874). Bertha thus

‘must be killed off, narratively speaking, so that a moral, Protestant femininity, licensed sexuality and a qualified, socialized feminism may survive’ (Kaplan, 1992: 874). Stressing the documentary quality of the novel, Sally Shuttleworth also points to Brontë’s embeddedness in the discursive reality of her time. She investigates the traces of Victorian ideology in the author’s work, noting that to ‘figure woman as a sexualized creature, liable to outbreaks of insanity, is not to move beyond the parameters of Victorian thought [...] but rather to give them explicit inscription’ (Shuttleworth, 1996: 164). In line with such argumentation, Robin Elizabeth Sherlock, Susan Meyer and Jina Politi have called attention to the conservativeness of the novel’s discourses, reading the text and its heroine as mouthpieces of a repressive ideology and discovering a politics of sameness underlying the narrative’s seemingly egalitarian message. For Sherlock, Brontë’s novel figures primarily as an educative text that endorses, upholds and reinforces patriarchal gender stereotypes and ‘socially sanctioned codes of female conduct, rather than patterns of female rebellion’ (Sherlock, 1996: 52). Investigating the narrative’s colonial implications, Susan Meyer argues that *Jane Eyre* asserts British superiority as it questions but ultimately reaffirms imperialist ideology through the construction - and ultimate destruction - of Bertha (Meyer, 1991). Underlining Jane’s complicity in exploitative structures of power, Jina Politi finds in the novel an altogether more insidious narrative, one by which the social arrangements and dominant ideological assumptions of early nineteenth-century England are, in the end, not questioned, but endorsed (Politi, 1997). According to Politi, Jane’s is a story not of rebellion but of ‘quiescent socialisation’ and Bertha does not figure as Jane’s repressed double as much as she is distinctively and emphatically other (Politi, 1997: 79).

The above critiques draw attention to the inevitable historicity of the social *ethoi* within which Brontë’s representation of her heroine is framed and to the novel’s invocation



of normative rather than subversive discourses. In the process, they highlight the often-neglected conservative and contemporaneous aspects of Brontë's classic and offer a challenge to any uncritical identification with the heroine's perspective. Firmly binding the novel to its originating framework, such readings however have also distinct drawbacks. Stressing the contemporaneous fixity of the text's discourses, these critiques leave important issues unexplored. They fail to address the novel's progressive elements and its trans-historical status suggesting an at least partial transcendence beyond the narrative's originating ideological framework. These trans-historical issues have especially been noted by feminist critics who have found in the novel not a conservative adherence to Victorian thinking but an interrogative ideological openness. Taking a decidedly different stance from the above historicist readings, feminist critics have often praised Brontë's novel for its progressive relational politics and its latent as well as explicit feminist potential. In this way, the Jane-Bertha-Rochester triangle appears to a well-numbered chain of critics a rather less straightforwardly conservative and a less conclusive constellation than it might initially appear. In this respect, Brontë's portrayal of Bertha and her rendering of the first wife-second wife relationship have been singled out for their feminist implications. That Brontë was not principally opposed to a more sympathetic reading of her mad female character becomes apparent in one of her correspondences to her publisher W.S. Williams. 'It is true that profound pity ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation', the author states, 'Mrs Rochester indeed lived a sinful life before she was insane, but sin is itself a species of insanity: the truly good behold and compassionate it as such' (quoted in Small, 1996: 165). Brontë's implied compassion with her female character has inspired and has been pursued by feminist critics who have detected in the novel an underlying structure of female-female sympathy and who have noted significant similarities

between Jane and her mad predecessor. Undermining the seemingly absolute juxtaposition between the two women, the textual parallels drawn between Jane and Bertha have been well documented by feminist criticism: the similarities between the red room in which young Jane is confined at Gateshead and Bertha's prison attic, the Bertha-like references to young Jane as a 'wild' and 'mad cat', as a 'compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity', as a 'fiend' liable to 'tantrums' and 'repulsive' in her 'violence', the older Jane's frantic pacing 'backwards and forwards' in the third storey of Thornfield recalling the imprisoned Bertha's running 'backwards and forwards' on all fours in Thornfield attic and Jane's famous question to housekeeper Mrs Fairfax, 'am I a monster', echoing Rochester's description of Bertha as a 'monster' - all of these draw attention to the latent connections between Jane and Bertha.<sup>15</sup>

Focusing on the parallels between Jane and Bertha's situations, feminist critics have uncovered a whole network of often-submerged pathways between the two women. Rather than opposites, Jane and Bertha emerge in these readings as doubles that suffer from a same set of patriarchal oppressions and lodge a common protest against patriarchy. Sandra M. Gilbert thus construes Bertha as a champion of female rebellion, as 'Jane's truest and darkest double', as Jane's 'angry aspect', her 'ferocious secret self' (Gilbert, 1987: 480). Echoing Gilbert's evaluation almost to the word, Elisabeth Bronfen equally describes Bertha as 'Jane's darkest double, as her ferocious secret self [...] Acting for and like Jane, she enacts the violence Jane would like but can't express' (Bronfen, 1997: 200). In line with such argumentation, Terry Eagleton discovers a submerged structure of intra-female connection, portraying the mad first wife as a 'projection of Jane's sexually tormented subconsciousness' (Eagleton, 1987: 495). Disputing the oppositional subjectivities that Rochester's male gaze has constructed for Jane and Bertha, Linda Kauffman argues that the

similarities in the two women's positions in relation to Rochester signify an empathy between them. Jane's narration thus enacts a vocalisation of Bertha's mute suffering, 'speak[ing] the silence that is woman' (Kauffman, 1986: 193). Similarly, Susanne Becker emphasises the element of 'likeness' in the situations of the two women, affirming that 'in relation to both Rochester's love and his power, Jane and Bertha have something in common rather than acting as rivals' (Becker, 1999: 53). Echoing these views, Elizabeth Baer discusses the novel in terms of the 'sisterhood' between Jane and Bertha, describing the two characters not as 'polar opposites, nor a handy dichotomy, but [as] sisters, doubles, orphans in the patriarchy' (Baer, 1983: 147).

Attributing the novel's visionary and persistent appeal to its latent feminist potential, the above critiques respond to Brontë's classic as an "organic" text capable of transcending the discursive limitations of its originating moment and engaging with new ideological contexts. Putting emphasis on the innovative and experimental qualities of Brontë's work, this process of feminist re-evaluation relates the text to contemporary concerns, therefore contributing to its longevity and its continued cultural relevance. Yet, while accounting for the trans-historical and progressive elements of the narrative, such readings also have distinct drawbacks as they run the double-edged risk of downplaying the narrative's conservative elements and inevitable embeddedness in the ideological structures of its time. Overlooking the historicity and conservativeness of Brontë's classic in favour of its progressive potential, such laudatory interpretations as these at times seem to speak more to the desire of feminist critics than to the novel's cultural and textual effects. Negating the historical difference of Brontë's writing by simply converting its past concerns into current feminist categories, they sometimes appear to indulge in an uncritical celebration of the narrative. As Judy Simons notes, such a position risks effacing the

essential otherness of the past writing and therefore 'imposing a twentieth-century ideological awareness, together with its attendant politically attuned sensibilities, on a text which is firmly grounded in its historical moment' (Simons, 1998: 112). This study asserts that both historicist and feminist readings have critical strengths as well as shortcomings. In my analysis, I do not aim to eradicate the novel's ideological complexities or to situate the text within either of these interpretative camps. *Jane Eyre's* historical/trans-historical status clearly complicates such critical siding. Moreover, rather than interpreting the above views as mutually exclusive and conflicting categorisations, this investigation maintains that this critical debate and the diverse evaluations are symptomatic reminders of the narrative's unstable semantic hierarchy and its flexible semantic priorities. The original text harbours both progressive as well as conservative potential and it allows different possibilities of meaning simultaneously to come flooding into the text.

Uncovered by feminist criticism, the latent pattern of female-female communality between first and potential second wife importantly recalls the innovative and progressive textual strategies of contemporary romances. As will be argued in the next section, these texts replace the overtly patriarchal logic of polarisation and the all too obvious othering of the first wife with non-dominating heterosexual and non-oppositional intra-female relationships. Although Brontë could as a result be termed a visionary forerunner and her novel a model for innovative romances, it is important to point out that whereas the progressive romances integrate feminist ideas of sisterhood and bonding within the overall romantic texture, intra-female bonding and communality are still clearly situated outside the romantic structure in Brontë's novel. Here, the female-female bond figures more as a secondary and inferior substitute than a complementary addition to the erotic heterosexual dyad. Brontë's classic undoubtedly explores notions of feminosociality. The latent parallels

between Jane and Bertha and the heroine's more explicit ties with Helen Burns and Miss Temple and with her cousins Mary and Diana Rivers testify to such narrative preoccupation. Importantly, however, this pattern of female-female bonding remains clearly distinct from the romantic plot. As a result, Brontë's concerns with intra-female relationships must be seen as competing with, rather than harmoniously blending into, the heterosexist erotic trajectory. While the feminosocial bond between Jane and Bertha remains latent and is effectively uncovered by the detecting feminist reader alert to the submerged "mirror-text", developed "underneath" the romance plot', *Jane Eyre* also overtly investigates dialogising non/post-romantic materials and explicitly explores the possibility of female community as a relational alternative to heterosexual bonding (Becker, 1999: 50). Jane's stay at Moor House and her friendship with Mary and Diana Rivers thus function as a tranquil haven and 'momentary "island"' of peace and understanding after the sensational revelations and erotic turbulences at Thornfield (Cosslett, 1988: 11).<sup>16</sup>

Fulfilling Jane's 'craving [...] for [...] sisterly love', the triadic constellation binding the heroine and the Rivers sisters offers a vision of sororal bonding and female community that, unlike the Jane-Bertha dyad, exists completely outside the relational dynamics of the marital triangle and that is ostensibly more explicit than the latent feminosocial relations between the two eventual wives (Brontë, 1987: 341). After Jane's hurried flight from Thornfield and her desolate wanderings over the countryside, her refuge with the Rivers and her flourishing friendships with Mary and Diana figure at an important turning point in the narrative. Disrupting the romantic trajectory structurally as well as ideologically, this particular sequence portrays an alternative triangular structure untainted by the emotional excesses and the mediated desire of the marital triadic configurations.

Opening up paths for Jane's intellectual and emotional development, her stay at Moor House leads to her discovery of familial relations and to her financial independence as the Rivers turn out to be long lost cousins who make Jane's inheritance known to her. Most importantly, this episode also introduces non/post-romantic lines of action that fragment and decentre the romantic trajectory and present an alternative living structure based on sisterly solidarity and intra-female support and friendship. Gratifying Jane's desire for contact and relationality, the exchanges with Diana and Mary provide in her own words the 'pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles', 'a wealth to the heart', 'mutual happiness', 'intimacy' and the 'full satisfaction' of 'mutual affection – of the strongest kind' (Brontë, 1987: 307; 339; 340; 308). Seeming utterly satisfying to Jane in its combination of nurturance, support and intellectual challenge, the female-based triangle is presented as an ideal of human interaction in which 'thought fitted thought; opinion met opinion: we coincided, in short, perfectly' (Brontë, 1987: 308). Celebrating the intimacy of intra-gender ties, Jane's words call to mind Luce Irigaray's description of female bonding as the 'exhilarating pleasure [...] to be partnered with someone like oneself, with a sister, in everyday terms [...] What need, attraction, passion, one feels for someone, for some woman, like oneself' (quoted in Kaplan, 1996: 89). Echoing Irigaray's feminist celebration of intra-gender attachments, Nina Auerbach argues that fictional depictions of communities of women are particularly potent from a feminist perspective, possessing a 'subtle, unexpected power' and contributing to an 'evolving literary myth [...] that does allow women an independent life beyond the saga of courtship and the settlement of marriage' (Auerbach, 1978: 11). Stressing the feminist potential of novelistic portrayals of female friendships, Deborah Rosenfelt Silverton similarly claims that the 'movement toward [...] the bonding of [...] female figures [...] constitutes one of the most pervasive of

feminist narrative strategies' (quoted in Taylor, 1993: 18). With these critical conceptions in mind, it does not come as a surprise that Brontë's female triad has been interpreted by some critics as a distinctly feminist constellation, celebrated for its familial portrayal of a sisterhood (with all the belonging symbolic feminist connotations) and hailed as an important 'alternative to the stereotypical rivalry of women; we see women in real and supportive relationship to each other, not simply as points on a triangle or as temporary substitutes for men' (Rich, 1987: 475).<sup>17</sup>

Relating Brontë's feminosocial concerns to one of the romance's generic mutations, it is precisely the sense of collectivism and comradeship between Jane and her 'symbolic sisters' that links the novel to the examples of the popular feminist text discussed in this study (Kaplan, 1996: 89). Based on relational exchanges existing outside and in opposition to both the male-female tie and the asymmetrical cross-gender dynamics of the marital triangle, the celebratory description of Brontë's female-based triad brings to mind the resolutely optimistic portrayal of female camaraderie, of "sisterhood" and cooperation in popular feminist narratives. Like *Jane Eyre*, these contemporary texts assert the intra-gender bond as an ultimately nurturing relationship that revolves around interests other than heterosexual attachments and functions as a valid alternative to the male-female dyad. Yet, unlike the popular feminist texts and despite *Jane Eyre*'s celebration of feminosociality, female-based relations do not assume semantic dominance in Brontë's novel. Structurally couching the intra-gender triad in between two heterosexist triangles, the narrative contains the celebrated female-based pattern within the overall heterosexist plot so as to suggest a devaluing of female-female bonds as opposed to female-male ones. Although such narrative containment does not necessarily negate the imaginative impact on the reader's mind, Brontë's vision of sororal bonding cannot fully be developed within her own

novelistic structure. The female community ultimately remains an unacted upon rather than operational alternative to heterosexism, a not-unwelcome but short-lived detour on the overall heterosexist romantic trajectory. For Brontë, Jane's desire for relationality can only adequately be fulfilled by heterosexual relationships. The heterosexist triangle ultimately possesses more narrative and ideological potency than the female-based one. Re-inscribing the male-female dyad as the primary relational configuration and refuting the incentives of female kinship in favour of the excitements of the old romantic dream, the novel does not end with Jane blissfully installed at Moor House with her sisterly companions. Instead, it famously resolves with her return and marriage to a now chastised Rochester, their union being described as an idealistic synergy of equal alter egos, as a merger of elective affinities in which, according to Jane, 'I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am; ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh [...] we are precisely suited in character - perfect concord is the result' (Brontë, 1987: 396 - 397).

In keeping with the novel's unstable semantic hierarchy, Brontë's marital resolution has provoked strikingly different interpretations. Praised for its egalitarian and inspirational qualities, Jane and Rochester's marriage has been perceived by some critics as a successful reconciliation of the social *ethoi* of romance and feminism, as 'marriage radically understood for its period, in no sense merely a solution or a goal. It is not a patriarchal marriage in the sense of a marriage that stunts and diminishes the woman; but a continuation of this woman's creation of herself' (Rich, 1987: 475). In contrast, Jane's "supernaturally"-strong bond and return to Rochester have also been deplored by some readers as conservative rejections of female community in favour of the conformist romantic fulfilments of heterosexual love.<sup>18</sup> Jean Wyatt thus reads Jane's return to



Rochester as harnessing romantic idealism to the task of enforcing a presumably conservative cultural myth. As Wyatt notes,

To introduce the possibility of a community of women based on shared intellectual pleasures and mutual affection, only to reject it without question for a man, does not so much suggest an alternative to convention as reinforce the cultural myth: time spent with other women is merely a prelude to marriage [...] evidently a community that offers only respect and self-respect based on productive work and financial independence, along with family warmth and female solidarity grounded in shared intellectual pursuits and emotional kinship, isn't enough; passionate love is. (Wyatt, 1985: 210)

This study agrees with Wyatt's reasoning insofar as it asserts the secondary status of feminosociality in relation to romantic heterosexism. Within the overall romantic trajectory, the transitional and intermediary position of the Moor House episode clearly contributes to the semantic devaluation of the feminosocial alternative: female bonding seems but a short interlude and a pale substitute for the fairytale attractions of the romance. Unlike the above critic, however, I refute that the ideological relegation of female bonding is brought about by Jane's return to Rochester. In contrast to Wyatt, this study maintains that the dynamics of the female-based triangle are not directly disturbed by Jane's return to Rochester or her love for him. Instead, I argue that the authoritarian presence of St. John Rivers and the latter's enforcement of a new metaphoric marital triangle put an end to the practice of female bonding.

Fragile and transitory, the delicate idealism of the feminosocial triad is from the beginning limited in time and is overshadowed by St. John's authoritarian and patriarchal claims on Jane. Only 'two months' grace', St. John tells her, 'I allow you for the full enjoyment of your new position [...] but *then* I hope you will begin to look beyond Moor

House [...] and sisterly society' (Brontë; 1987: 344). A self-proclaimed 'cold, hard, ambitious man', St. John Rivers is an epitome of pride and callous authority, defined solely in terms of his religious idolatry, his instrumentality and his visions of grandeur at the service of British and Christian imperial claims. His manipulative drive and overwhelming patriarchal presence exert such a domineering and stifling power over Jane's natural rhythms and relational preferences that she 'could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by [...] in his presence every effort to sustain or follow any other became vain' (Brontë, 1987: 330; 350). Stripped of all romantic allure, the definitional authority and patriarchal dominance that had before disturbed Jane in Rochester's courtship is now fully manifested and laid bare in St. John's oppressive behaviour towards his cousin. Faced with his "self"-negating demands on her, Jane complains that 'to please him [...] I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation' (Brontë, 1987: 351). Disrupting the harmonious dynamics of the female-based triangle, St. John's unexpected and commanding marriage proposal and his invitation to join him in his missionary pursuits in India put an abrupt end to Jane's feminosocial time-out from the erotic chaos at Thornfield. Moreover, his proposal also forcefully catapults Jane into acting out an unwelcome new role in the metaphoric marital triad involving herself, St. John Rivers and the beautiful but frivolous Rosamond Oliver.

The precarious idealism of the female-based triad soon gives way to the obviously more potent dynamics of a new heterosexist triangle. The relational configuration binding Jane, St. John Rivers and Rosamond Oliver not only overpowers and puts an end to the female-based alternative but it is also decidedly non-romantic in nature. Characterising (and misapprehending) Jane in terms of his own definitions and purposes, St. John's drearily

quotidian proposal is motivated not by love but, as he proclaims, by Jane's ability to 'labour uncongenial to [her] habits and inclinations', by her revelling 'in the flame and excitement of sacrifice' and her 'docile, diligent, disinterested' nature (Brontë, 1987: 355). Claiming his cousin 'not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service', the aspiring missionary St. John insists that Jane is 'formed for labour, not for love' (Brontë, 1987: 354). Analogously, he scorns his own feelings for Rosamond Oliver (the true object of his affection) as an 'ignoble [...] weakness', as a 'mere fever of the flesh' and a 'convulsion of the soul' (Brontë, 1987: 330). Instead of erotic drives, St. John's relational preferences are determined entirely by their suitability to his 'great work' (Brontë, 1987: 329). Since 'Reason, and not Feeling, is [his] guide', he seeks a companion solely 'fitted to my purpose [...] fitted to my vocation' (Brontë, 1987: 330; 357). Although the rich coquettish charming Rosamond is 'exquisitely beautiful, graceful, and fascinating' in St. John's eyes, her failure to comply with imperial requirements - to be 'a sufferer, a labourer, a female apostle' - is decisive in his judgment and rejection of her as a suitable wife (Brontë, 1987: 329). While Rosamond can only offer 'promises' that are 'hollow' and 'offers' that are 'false' for St. John, Jane seems predestined to marry him since 'God and nature intended' her 'for a missionary's wife' (Brontë, 1987: 329; 354).

Defining and categorising Rosamond and Jane purely in terms of his own claims and purposes, St. John, not unlike Rochester, places himself at the ideological centre of a relational system of opposing females whom he assesses and judges. Yet, unlike Rochester who now despises having followed paternalistic/imperial dictates in marrying his colonial bride Bertha 'for the sake of making his fortune' and keeping 'up the consequence of the name', St. John makes a reverse judgement when choosing his preferred bride (Brontë, 1987: 112). Rather than following the dictates of his heart like the reformed Rochester, St.

John rejects all notions of romanticism, wishing to mate 'not the insignificant private individual - the mere man, with the man's selfish senses' but 'the missionary' in need of a fellow labourer who will help him 'to spread [his] Master's kingdom' and labour 'for his race' (Brontë, 1987: 357; 331; 398). For Rochester, the marriage to Bertha has been little more than a mere legal contract for the sake of property and rank and has proven to be an abusive and dehumanising affair that can in no way compare to his romantic attachment to Jane. Conversely, for St. John, a marriage based on a patrilineally mediated structure of authority and at the service of imperial and colonial claims is ultimately preferable to romantic fulfilment. In this way, while the Jane-Rosamond-St. John triangle is governed by decidedly anti-romantic dynamics, it, at the same time, presents an ideological inversion of the Jane-Bertha-Rochester triangle. Jane now figures as the unloved and purely instrumental (potential) first wife, chosen solely for imperial/paternalistic purposes and destined for a colonial life alongside an unloving and misapprehending husband who exerts definitional power over women and assesses them in dualistic pairs.

Faced with reversed repetition, Jane finds herself in a position on the relational triangle very similar to that of Bertha - the above triad thus generating yet another similarity between the two women. The heroine's example sheds light on the potential plight and sufferings of an unloved first wife. The Jane-St. John dyad thus re-creates a revisionary parallel of Bertha's life with Rochester. No sexual attraction between Jane and her new suitor blurring the issue, the thought of life with St. John creates not images of madness, however, but of imprisonment and of self-annihilation in Jane's mind, of a 'rayless dungeon', an 'iron shroud' and of a 'premature death' at his side (Brontë, 1987: 355; 356). Envisaging the catastrophic consequences of marriage to St. John (of a Bertha-like colonial existence beside an unloving spouse), Jane, like Bertha, runs the risk of

completely losing her self and voice to the definitional power of her would-be husband. Fearing for her sense of selfhood at the side of St. John, Jane foresees her colonial fate. As she notes, marrying and joining her cousin in India would mean abandoning 'half myself' and rushing 'down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own' (Brontë, 1987: 356; 368). Loss of will or loss of sanity, the colonial fates of unloved first wives in both cases seem to involve psychological decline and ultimately self-annihilation. Ironically and luckily enough for Jane, she is spared this Bertha-like fate by the realisation of a first wife's destiny predicted by/for herself. It is not Jane however who meets an untimely death in India but Bertha who opportunely dies in the fire she herself has set to Thornfield, her death being the only circumstance that legally allows Jane to return to Rochester in order to become a loved second, rather than an unloved first, wife. Drawn back into the realm of romance by Rochester's transcending voice (his call defeating both the physical distance between them and the sadomasochistic dynamics of the Jane-St. John dyad), the heroine is quick to leave her austere cousin behind and to rush back to the side of the newly made widower. Having vainly attempted to save the life of his incendiary mad wife, the latter is now blind, crippled (and rightly chastised as some critics point out), living a dreary existence among the 'damp walls' of Ferndean estate, a place renowned for the 'unhealthiness' of its 'situation' (Brontë, 1987: 264).<sup>19</sup> Oblivious to all negative or pessimistic implications however, it is only at Ferndean that Jane - 'supremely blest' after her reunion and subsequent marriage to Rochester - experiences, in her own words, 'what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth' (Brontë, 1987: 396).

With the anti-romantic Jane-St. John-Rosamond triad thus effectively disintegrated in favour of the romantic Jane-Rochester dyad, Jane's return and marriage to Rochester figure as clear refusals of circumstances that are bleakly quotidian and morally oppressive.

The end of the novel expresses clear recognition of a powerful romanticism that shapes the overall ideological dynamics. Jane's professions of marital happiness leave little doubt that the heroine's decision in favour of romance is meant to be perceived as right and valid. The overall thrust of the narrative also suggests that this ending should be understood as a happy one. As John Maynard declares, Brontë 'concludes the novel as a whole with a clear assertion of loving sexual union', with 'a storybook ending, a paradise of satisfied love' (Maynard, 1984: 143). This study agrees with Maynard's contention insofar as it views Jane's romantic reunion with Rochester as the only truly valid option and desirable resolution to the relational dynamics. However, reading the novel's ending purely in terms of its romantic effects does not only domesticate the text into an unproblematic romance but such an interpretation also ignores the non-romantic and dialogising materials that, up until the end, continue to complicate strict generic affiliations and disrupt the supposedly satisfactory closure. In this way, Rochester's diverse handicaps and maimed condition problematise any notion of a happy ending: the now docile and mutilated lover seems but a conditionally satisfactory companion for young Jane. Moreover, the claustrophobic environment, the isolation and dank atmosphere of the Ferndean estate also cloud the sense of romantic wish-fulfilment, forming but a poor romantic backdrop that ill accords with Jane's euphoric assertions. Most important in the line of anti-romantic irreconcilables is the intrusion of St. John's voice in the last paragraph of the novel. Rather than closing the narrative with a repeated affirmation of romantic fulfilment (the customary conclusion to any romance), the last lines of Brontë's novel purposely deflect from Jane's claims to perfect happiness and are dedicated to an elegiac peroration to a dying St. John. Re-enacting the premature colonial death that Jane had foreseen for herself, the austere cousin

is still profoundly devoted to the imperial cause, patiently awaiting 'his sure reward, his incorruptible crown' in India (Brontë, 1987: 398).

Refusing to be silenced, the voice of the dying St. John presents a distinct anti-climax after Jane's euphoric claims of marital happiness. Moreover, the shift in perspective from Jane to St. John engenders narrative indeterminacies incompatible with generic prerequisites of romantic closure. As Carolyn Williams argues, St. John's final patriarchal intrusion perceptively functions as a 'radical gesture' that 'puts [Brontë's] narrative closure at risk [...] opening the text to the almost overwhelming influx of the other just at the moment of attempting to close its frame' (Williams, 1997: 246). St. John's open-ended final words tellingly point towards death as he speaks almost from the grave. Importantly, his words also leave traces of triangular dynamics. Despite Bertha's final exit and despite Jane and Rochester's happy reunion, triangulation continues to haunt even the happiest marriage and the safest retreat. Thoroughly unromantic, St. John's closing invocation re-introduces an extraneous voice that re-triangulates the supposedly romantic dyadic resolution. It serves as a last(ing) reminder of the kind of triadic relationality that, throughout Brontë's narrative, has erupted in ever-new guises and that, despite repeated attempts of dyadic pairing, still refuses to be thoroughly expelled. While the Jane-Rochester dyad remains the only truly operational relationship by the end of the novel, St. John's haunting voice at the same time allows triangular discourses to throw up one last flare of meaning. The triadic paradigm thus functions as a persistent situational revenant that Brontë's novel time after time de-constructs, only to re-enact again with different players and different ideological implications.

Tracing inter-generic parallels between Brontë's classic and the romance's extra-generic mutations, this study asserts that *Jane Eyre's* hesitation between happy and open

ending leads the way towards the thoroughly ironic and self-consciously artificial happy ending of the postfeminist narrative. The latter contemporary text gives full expression to the only mild closing disturbances of Brontë's novel, articulating a textual world of liminality and "in-betweenness" in which characters have seen through all romantic pretensions but continue to live in a wide-awake bad faith in them. A simultaneous model for conservative/progressive romances as well as for romantic derivatives, *Jane Eyre* functions as an amalgamation of romantic as well as post/non-romantic meanings. On the one hand, the novel remains at all times deeply invested in romantic idealism. At the same time, it articulates dialogising materials that, as Carla Kaplan observes, are 'heterocritical [...] of romance conventions', critical but 'from a vantage point located firmly within heterosexual ideology and even within romantic idealism itself' (Kaplan, 1996: 88).

Throughout the course of the narrative, Brontë's classic lays bare the discursive urgency and the ideological potency of the romantic script, upholding the romantic heterosexual dyad as *the* definitive relational ideal. Simultaneously, the novel also exposes the fragility of romantic idealism by constantly complicating romantic couple formation and by having the heterosexual dyad continually disrupted by ever-persistent triangular dynamics. An internally contested romance, *Jane Eyre* provides invaluable insights into the workings and limitations of the romance genre. Given its diverse inter-generic affiliations, it serves as a particularly apt textual introduction to a more extended genre study. Moving on from the discrete single text to a wider field of investigation, I now proceed to explore intra-generic variability and expansion. Demonstrating the diversity of romantic triadic scenarios, the next section presents readings from conservative as well progressive romances, thereby stressing the pluralistic unity of the romance genre.



### 3. Generic Expansion and Innovation: The Romantic Marital Triangle in Contemporary Romances

‘With the right husband, I know I can have it all. Home, family and career’, the heroine of Debbie Macomber’s *This Matter of Marriage* (1997) states, exemplifying the complex social and cultural position of progressive contemporary romances (Macomber, 1997: 8 - 9). Textualising a popular feminist stance, these innovative romances increasingly and insistently affirm the importance of female advancement and independence, while at the same time retaining the notion of heterosexual dyadic love as *the* primary and definite objective of female aspiration. Incorporating progressive contents within the heterosexist romantic meta-text, such narratives particularly articulate the ideological heterogeneity of the romance as they give expression to both generic continuity and change. Extending themselves and operating within patriarchal structures, these romances often give expression to progressive, rather than radical, social positions. They present a modernised model of desire that takes into account feminist demands for an egalitarian love relationship and for female authority and bonding as well as resisting patriarchal schematisations of women into moral and sexual opposites. Using the convention of the marital triangle as a revealing indicator of ideologically varied attitudes to womanhood and demonstrating the influence of feminism on popular culture, the primary aim of this section is to investigate romantic textual possibilities and generic expansion. Distinguishing between conservative and innovative romances, I emphasise the importance of a differentiated approach to the popular culture text and affirm the pluralistic unity and ideological diversity of the romance

genre. Moreover, highlighting the generic shifts from the conservative to the progressive heterosexual plot, I also explore the mobilisation and flexibility of generic boundaries and examine the changes to the romantic marital triangle that the generic expansion engenders. In the process, this study considers diverse innovative strategies that, while confirming the romantic *sine qua non* of heterosexuality, monogamy and marriage, also introduce issues of social and psychological depth and foreground female-orientated concerns, relating to popular feminism and feminosociality.

Dealing with current social and cultural developments such as popular feminism, the textual readings in this section purposely feature a collection of the most recently published narratives discussed in the thesis. I analyse a variety of romantic generic types, ranging from the short, contemporary series romances (such as those published by Mills & Boon) to longer single title releases that utilise contemporary as well as historical temporal settings and backdrops. Focusing on generic developments rather than the specificities of individual romance texts, this section does not engage in a detailed single-novel study but instead looks analytically and critically at diverse romances and in the process, stresses inter-generic differentiation. In its pursuit of a sensitive critical vocabulary emphasising discrimination inside the form, this study seeks to stay alert in its evaluative judgements to the differences between various texts and highlight the diversity of erotic scenarios in contemporary romances. In the light of these theoretical aims, this study maintains that the genre does not develop in a uniform or linear trajectory of progression. Although the focus in this section is primarily on innovative romances, it is important to realise that such generic innovation across the form is not homogeneous, standardised or uniform but often uneven and asymmetrical. Notwithstanding the romantic generalities of heterosexism and the happily-ever-after, contemporary romances are far from being identical,

interchangeable or ideologically indistinguishable. Despite the attempts of innovative re-scripting, the conservative or retro-conservative romance (with its patriarchal gender ideology) continues to be produced and read today. Demonstrating the irregularities of generic innovation, this examination highlights the uneven incorporation of feminism within romantic structures and finds ideological diversity and heterogeneity at the root of contemporary romances. Tracing the shift from the conservative heterosexual romance to the innovative heterosexual romance, I also investigate the mobilisation and dynamism of generic boundaries. A diverse and broadly based matrix, the romance encompasses a pluralistic, rather than uniform, unity of romantic contents. Its generic wholeness does not rely on starkly polarised categories of either innovation or conservatism but it is consolidated in a complex and protean intermingling of progressive and reactionary constituents. Grouped under the generic umbrella of the contemporary romance, one discovers texts that continue to rely on conservative/patriarchal patterns of relationality as well as narratives that expand generic limitations and introduce innovative plotlines and structures inspired by feminist principles. In favour, if not celebratory, of feminism, such innovative romances adopt a textual position that confirms the compatibility of a feminist consciousness (illustrated and exemplified by the narrative insistence on egalitarian love relationships and on female bonding and sociality) with the heterosexual romantic enterprise. Decidedly less approving of the feminist movement, conservative contemporary romances complicate wholehearted admissions of feminist ideas and principles. These retro-conservative romances often introduce dissenting perspectives and voices that are critical of feminist advancement and keep alive the mythology of dominant male sexuality and female submissiveness. Giving expression to a form of retro-sexism and arguing against a harmonious or unproblematic congruence of feminism and the romance, such

texts nostalgically argue in favour of a return to a conservative and patriarchal social order.

In these retro-conservative romances, women are often confronted with their own anachronistic femininity and they cannot help submitting to the domineering and primitive sexual authority of the male hero.

Voicing a clear dislike for the species of the 'modern, liberated woman', the hero of the Mills & Boon romance *Smoke in the Wind* (1987) can aptly be described as an example of what Joanna Russ terms the 'dark, magnetic, powerful brooding, sardonic *Super-Male*' (Donald, 1987: 22; Russ, 1983: 32). Demanding the heroine's 'surrender', he not only 'breathe[s] authority and strength, a fundamental masculine arrogance' but he also represents 'a real threat to [her] independence' (Donald, 1987: 137; 22; 17). In her turn, the heroine Venetia, while successfully advancing her career as a journalist and writer, readily admits and gives in to the sexual dominance of 'her conqueror' (Donald, 1987: 45). Relishing in the 'invasion by his vital male force', she cannot help wondering whether her independence and 'her vaunted self-reliance had been unbreached simply because she had never met a man powerful enough to get behind the walls' (Donald, 1987: 33). While Donald's heroine is aware of feminism as a cultural development and even tentatively affirms the importance of career and emotional independence (her 'work was necessary to her. It would always be'), she simultaneously questions her own self-sufficiency and voices disbelief in her own self-reliance (Donald, 1987: 104). Defining feminism in opposition to her romantic desires, she admits that although 'she had thought herself so independent, so self-sufficient [...] at heart she had been a romantic' (Donald, 1987: 95). Authoritarian and overpoweringly masculine, the hero of Robyn Donald's later romance *The Colour of Midnight* (1994) is equally removed from any model of "the sensitive modern man". The heroine Minerva is clearly seduced and attracted by his (anachronistic) dominating

presence. In her words, Nick Peveril was ‘made of much more primal stuff’ and ‘blazed with the primitive appeal of dominant man, a primary, elemental attraction’ (Donald, 1994: 9; 64). Offering herself as ‘some primitive sacrifice to his virility’, Minerva is equally sceptical of her own self-sufficiency (Donald, 1994: 83). Faced with the hero’s sexual superiority, she has to reconsider her pretensions to independence and renounce any desire for an egalitarian love relationship. As she reveals, although the hero is ‘no gentle lover [...] she wouldn’t have it any other way’ and it is ‘ironic that she, a career woman with a stimulating future all planned, should only be able to show her feelings in the traditional woman’s way’ (Donald, 1994: 170; 72).

Positing feminist advancement and romantic fulfilment as conflicting, if not irreconcilable, objectives, the above texts articulate a reactionary and retro-sexist cultural position that seems to unmask the failings of much feminist “propaganda”. The message implied in these scenarios does not only question the validity of feminist ideas of independence and equality but it also celebrates the sexual difference between hero and heroine as a natural hierarchy or order that cannot be resisted and that ultimately expresses “real” relations between men and women. Exemplifying the asymmetrical distribution of feminism across romantic structures, these romances articulate cultural positions that range from unashamedly anti-feminist commentary and a nostalgic celebration of conservative gender roles to limited and tentative affirmations of female independence and social advancement. As such, they textualise a cultural grey area between what social theorist Susan Faludi (1992) terms the conservative backlash against feminism and a more permissive postfeminist stance that promotes distinctly patriarchal institutions and structures as well as confirming the validity of certain feminist issues and/or goals.<sup>1</sup> While the above romances make half-hearted concessions to certain aspects of the feminist

doctrine in their treatment of female work and career, the texts' overall erotic politics are inspired by backlash rather than postfeminist rhetoric. They define and propagate a distinctly reactionary/patriarchal romanticism that eroticises male authority and dominance. Reassuming the primacy of traditional gender roles and advocating a return to "natural" sexual differences, such narratives reflect what Faludi refers to as a 'new traditionalism' that creates 'restrained women' who 'conform to comfortingly nostalgic norms' and who 'choose' their 'conditions twice – first as a woman and second as a feminist' (Faludi, 1992: 92; 93). Confronted with their own anachronistic femininity and positing their longings for conservative romantic fulfilment as primary to and distinct from their would-be feminist endeavours, the heroines of such romances often realise with 'something of a shock [...] how wildly romantic' they are (Macomber, 1997: 166). Reverting to patriarchal modes of behaviour and gender divisions, they express the supposed tension between feminist demands for gender equality or social female advancement and the assumed "innate" and "natural" female longing for masculine dominance and conservative romanticism. In the process, they celebrate a distinctly naturalised and static conception of love and desire that appears immune or resistant to cultural developments such as feminism. These texts thereby demonstrate a culturally reactionary position that Margaret Atwood's heroine Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* (1976) describes as being 'romantic despite myself' (Atwood, 1982: 150). Such a position is aptly paraphrased by cultural theorist Suzanna Danuta Walters's account of how

We thought we wanted liberation, but we found out that we really love too much. We thought we wanted equality, but realize instead that we can't have it all. We thought we could finally be the prince in our own fantasies of power and pleasure, but discover our Cinderella complex weighs on us all too mightily. (Danuta Walters, 1991: 107)

Finding herself 'for the first time in her life utterly helpless before the dominance of male physical superiority', the heroine of Catherine George's Mills & Boon romance *Devil Within* (1984) experiences similar feelings of natural female inferiority, confronted, as she is, with eroticised male dominance (George, 1984: 162). Aroused by the hero's 'massive, dominant presence' and termed by the latter 'contractually, at least' as his 'property', the governess Claudia is willing and eager to 'deliver herself up to' her employer Saul Treharne 'on whatever terms he wanted' (George, 1984: 121; 266). Portraying Claudia's eager return to a patriarchal social or family order, George's text articulates a backlash rhetoric and celebrates a distinctly narrow and conservative form of romanticism, concluding with the heroine 'deeply satisfied' with the prospect of marrying 'one of those chauvinists who consider woman's place in the home' (George, 1984: 285). Using intertextual references to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) as means of narrative alignment and of introducing manageable - dualistic - myths of femininity, *Devil Within* alludes to supposedly prototypical narrative predecessors to reflect back on and differentiate the heroine/prospective second wife from the bad first wife. From the outset, Claudia's self-construction involves an active negotiation and identification with the earlier Brontë text and its heroine, with her acting as a latter-day and adventurous Jane Eyre and her employer taking over the role of a boorish and dominating Mr Rochester. Drawing parallels between herself and her Victorian predecessor, the heroine's understanding of Brontë's classic seems more limited than informed, grossly misreading *Jane Eyre* as an unproblematic romance and ignoring the earlier text's questioning of male authority (a feature that is celebrated and eroticised here). While Claudia identifies with Jane Eyre, Saul Treharne's first wife Elaine is textually and morally associated with du Maurier's beautiful but debauched heroine Rebecca. In the words of one

character, the book 'was her favourite. You might say Elaine was obsessed by it' (George, 1984: 117). Like Rebecca, Elaine was a 'most beautiful young woman [...] but unfortunately her soul didn't match. Elaine was selfish, cold. I don't mean physically [...] To be old-fashioned, I think I mean her heart' (George, 1984: 87). Offering reductive readings of the two narrative predecessors, such intertextual references are not only used as a means of narrative affiliation and familiarisation but, most importantly, they also function as a means of polarisation. Aligning the two women with Jane Eyre and Rebecca allows their differentiation into supposedly romantic, respectively anti-romantic, types, thereby deliberately concealing their social identicalness as potential wives to the same man. As Claudia reassures the hero, her 'literary hang-up' has always been '*Jane Eyre*, not *Rebecca*' (George, 1984: 121).

Based on the categorical polarisation of the two wife figures, the underpinnings of this marital triangle go hand in hand with an overall conservative/retro-sexist ideological thrust as the constellation underlines male authority and patriarchal powers of definition. Similarly, the contemporary Mills & Boon romances *Smoke in the Wind* (1987), *The Colour of Midnight* (1994) and Isabelle Holland's single title novel *Darcourt* (1977) feature marital triangles that apply clear and hierarchical value judgements to their female figures, structurally limit the narrative presence of the first wife and downplay the emotional validity of the first marriage. Whereas the hero of *Smoke in the Wind* complains that his former wife 'didn't understand' him and that she was only 'a pretty imitation in mother-of-pearl' compared to his second wife, a 'pearl of great price', the hero of *The Colour of Midnight* reflects on his disastrous first marriage and the mediocre emotional bond with his first wife, stating that 'I didn't hate her, I didn't love her, I was just totally sick of the wasteland our marriage had become' (Donald, 1987: 182; 185; Donald, 1994: 99).



Convincing their second wives that ‘we go together, you and I, two halves of the one whole’ and that ‘I love you more than I have ever loved anyone’, both heroes invalidate their first marriages as either unsatisfactory or a sham (Donald, 1987: 185; Donald, 1994: 187). In the process, they maintain the emotional supremacy of their second union and uphold notions of strict erotic exclusivity and singularity. Equally inspired by patriarchal strategies and stereotypes, Holland’s *Darcourt* features a dominating and authoritarian *Super-Male* hero who ‘will not be disobeyed’ and whose ‘motives are devious, if not diabolical’ as well as a mad and leprous first wife, a ‘tall’ and ‘huge’ Bertha Rochester look-alike who diabolically plans to eliminate the new couple and who, like Bertha, makes her existence known only through ‘odd, eerie’ laughs (Holland, 1977: 52; 222; 354; 57). Based on the conservative marital triangle, Holland’s text plays off the two female figures against one another in the pairing of the sane heroine against the deranged first wife, a pairing which, according to Helen Small, is a ‘standard feature in popular romance’ (Small, 1996: 140). Making the first wife’s presence known only through indistinct glimpses or sounds, this narrative insists on categorically abolishing and omitting her from the text, therefore creating an easily eradicable linguistic non-presence that does not pose a real threat to the successful union of the new couple. As Small describes it, ‘as a figure of rage, without power to alleviate her suffering or to express it in terms which make sense to society, she [the madwoman] sums up virtually everything feminism might wish to say about the suppression of women’s speech’ (Small, 1996: 26).

Dependent for its romantic conclusion on repressive linguistic strategies and the categorical othering of the first wife/marriage, Amanda Quick’s historical romance *Seduction* (1990) is equally based on the structural juxtaposition of the two female figures. In this instance, the first wife, the hated, ‘beautiful, mesmerising, witchy’ Elizabeth, is

pushed to the extreme margins of the text and acts only as counter-model to the young and unspoilt second wife Sophy (Quick, 1990: 14). With the first wife a virtual non-presence, Sophy never actively comes into conflict with her predecessor and the text is insistent on maintaining a categorical difference between the two women. The hero and husband Julian thus makes clear that he 'had selected Sophy for his wife because of the vast difference between her and Elizabeth and he fully intended to ensure that his new bride stayed different' and that 'his second marriage was not going to go the way of his first' (Quick, 1990: 87; 144). Exorcising and structurally eliminating Elizabeth by portraying her as a mad woman, afflicted by 'a sickness of the mind and spirit that could not be cured', *Seduction* installs erotic singularity by establishing Sophy not only as the polar opposite of the unfaithful first wife but also as the hero's only 'true wife' (Quick, 1990: 289; 302). Vilifying/repressing/negating the textual presence of the first wife/marriage and promoting typically patriarchal schematisations of femininity, all the above romances are bound to narrow and seemingly static generic imperatives. Devoid of the dialogic meanings and ideological complexities that make *Jane Eyre* so compelling and timeless, these contemporary texts propagate distinctly conservative forms of romanticism. Limited to reactionary rather than progressive gender politics, their contributions to genre expansion and innovation are unsurprisingly scarce. Their frequent retro-sexism and simplistic categorisations are inherently expressive of a backlash rhetoric. Considering the romance's often maligned and already simplistic image, their topical fixation does not necessarily advance the genre's cultural standing nor promote its status as a potentially progressive form.

In the light of these revelations, one can note that some contemporary romances (both series and single title novels) continue to utilise and be dependent on conservative

romantic strategies to implement narrative and ideological closure. Such texts reflect current cultural tendencies towards a nostalgic traditionalism, promoting a return or adherence to a more conservative sex/gender system. Intent on looking analytically and critically at diverse romances, I have included such narratives to maintain a discriminating approach to the popular culture text and to demonstrate the non-uniform and pluralistic unity of generic contents. Despite such overtly reactionary expressions, this investigation nevertheless affirms the changeability and potential progressiveness of the romance. Although generic developments and innovations may not be all-encompassing and homogenised, I assert that there is a generic movement or tendency within the heterosexual romance towards more inclusive strategies and a more progressive symbology. Inspired by popular feminist demands for a more egalitarian love relationship and female sociality, these innovative romances expand the conservative romantic plot and find non-dualistic/non-repressive ways of instigating the romantic happily-ever-after. Featuring heroines who take pride in their own independence, heroes who are decidedly less authoritarian and love relationships that are based on egalitarian terms, such romances are evidently inspired and affected by feminism. Rejecting all too radical linguistic evasions and omissions, they mobilise and reset the generic boundaries of the conservative romantic text. In the process, they express a romantic ideology without having recourse to the dualistic and negating strategies of the conservative plot. While adhering to patriarchal strictures of monogamy, heterosexuality and marriage, such narratives articulate a progressive cultural position that does not interrogate patriarchal codes and conventions as much as it gives expression to a form of popular feminism existing with(in) the patriarchal meta-discourse.<sup>2</sup> As will be argued, such romantic innovations are not necessarily free of conflict. They expand romantic limitations but thereby also run the risk of outgrowing

generic strictures. Although the innovative romances are less susceptible to the ideological paradoxes of the conservative romance, they can equally transcend formal boundaries and function as possible models for the popular feminist mutation of the romance. In this way, their innovative potential can potentially be over-expanded and give rise to generic shifts.

Delineating a generic trend rather than an all-embracing formal change, this study aims to highlight various innovative textual tactics. Rather than structurally bracketing or linguistically omitting the first wife and cancelling the emotional validity of the first marriage, these tactics resist overt linguistic omissions and schematisations. They take the figure of the first wife and the experience of the first marriage out of parenthesis into the story and actively negotiate and incorporate them into the textual fabric. Bound to generic imperatives, such textual re-articulations still have to respect the primacy of the romantic master-narrative and cannot give precedence to the marginal discourse of the first wife/marriage (a tactic that Jean Rhys adopts in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)). While there are genre-specific limitations, innovative romances choose to confront the 'dreadful first-wife complexes' that underlie many of the conservative types (Howatch, 1972: 66). In other words, unlike the conservative romances that are aligned with an 'ideology of marginality', the innovative romances textualise the silenced/omitted margins and 'validate the parenthesis' by 'writing the other into the story' (Hite, 1989: 42; Mezei, 1994: 68). Diverse and multifaceted, the adopted narrative strategies operate on all textual levels, from plot and characterisation to structure and reader identification. This investigation particularly pays attention to progressive strategies that work either by the re-focalisation of the novel's emotive centre, by the division of the plot into multiple storylines and by the re-valorisation and re-vocalisation of the first wife and the female-female bond. Asserting the emotional permanence and validity of non-heterosexual relational models, such innovative strategies

introduce notions of female sociality and bonding into the romantic framework. They attest to the incorporation of feminism inside generic structures and particularly explore the compatibility of intra-gender sisterhood and romantic heterosexism. Structurally affirming and emotionally validating the presence of the first wife and the existence of the first marriage, such strategies question the strict erotic singularity of the conservative romances and articulate more inclusive and progressive, though less singular, conceptions of love and desire.

Valuing female bonding as a source of positive solidarity and encouraging less hierarchical modes of interaction, the following romances share an innovative approach to the problematic of the marital triangle. They establish romantic closure without resorting to the dualistic and non-permissive textual strategies that continue to characterise the more conservative contemporary romances. While innovative romances thus articulate more progressive and permissive notions of desire, it does not necessarily follow that the texts also depict a simple or straightforward break-up of the erotic triangulation. As a narrative scheme and erotic configuration, the marital triangle persists in giving expression to conflict-ridden scenarios that do not unfold without tension. The bonding of the two wives is not necessarily a natural given but often involves struggle and reappraisal. For the heroine of Debbie Macomber's *This Matter of Marriage* (1997), the presence of the hero's first wife thus 'stuck like a fish bone in her throat' and she doubts at first whether she can 'deal with the negative feelings his first marriage brought out in her' (Macomber, 1997: 334; 338). Jealous of the first wife's 'lingering presence', the heroine of Angela Arney's *The Second Wife* (1997) is similarly afflicted by the emotional dilemma faced by many of her generic counterparts, stating that 'it's not easy being a second wife [...] It doesn't matter much whether the first wife is dead or an ex and alive; the ghost of her always

lingers [...] It was a presentiment that had always been there, lurking in the background' (Arney, 1997: 24; 268; 241). As many heroines continue to voice their dislike of 'being second best' and hold on to the belief that 'women want to be loved. They want to be loved exclusively. A woman wants to be the only one her man can see', the innovative romantic plot has to find ways of integrating notions of female homosociality within the overall heterosexist plot (Donald, 1994: 164; Brown, 1991: 254). Due to generic imperatives, the erotic asymmetry of the marital triangle needs to be disarticulated sufficiently to guarantee ideological romantic closure. Ultimately, romantic parameters still require the break-up of triangulation and the installation of the bipolar and heterosexual relational model.

Even though the triadic erotic scenario remains a locus of narrative conflict, the innovative strategies of contemporary romances avoid radical structural omissions and linguistic repressions by actively engaging with the disruptive figure of the first wife and the institution of the previous marriage. Pitying and strongly identifying with her mad predecessor, the heroine of Maggie Osborne's *A Stranger's Wife* (1999) for example refuses to ignore the memory of the first wife Miriam and promises 'not to forget that my change in fortune came about because of your possible misfortune' (Osborne, 1999: 70). Dismissing repressive romantic strategies and believing that it is not possible to systematically wipe out the presence of the first wife Sarah 'as if she never lived here, as if your marriage never happened', Kathryn, the heroine of Karen Ranney's *Heaven Forbids* (1998), equally refuses to disregard and discount the first marriage of her lover Hugh (Ranney, 1998: 263). Rather than installing the hierarchical division between sane heroine/deranged first wife, this second wife accepts her own involvement in bringing about Sarah's madness and subsequent suicide, realising that none of them can 'render the deed undone, the action untaken. There was responsibility to be assumed, guilt to be

apportioned' (Ranney, 1998: 297). While linguistic repression and emotional evasion are thus not possible anymore, it appears that it is only through the active and responsible integration and incorporation of the first wife/marriage that a truly undisturbed and harmonious second relationship can be achieved. As the heroine of *The Second Wife* (1997) emphasises, 'a second marriage could never dispel the remnants of the first. And that fact in itself was nothing to worry about. It was only bad when that element was allowed to be disturbing and provocative, and allowed to undermine the foundations of a new relationship' (Arney, 1997: 476).

Attributing narrative space to the first wife and granting emotional validity to the previous relationship and the intra-gender bond, the innovative romances discussed here introduce additional storylines, perspectives and relationships that modernise and challenge conservative romantic dynamics and potentially affect or reposition the emotive centres of the texts.<sup>3</sup> As the parenthetical discourse revolving around the hero and his first wife is validated and brought to the textual fore, the first marriage is transformed from a nightmarish and unspeakable experience to a much more loving relationship. Correspondingly, the figure of the husband is no longer portrayed as an unstoppable or impenetrable emotional cipher and is depicted as a much more vulnerable and emotionally open character. His thoughts and emotions are often accessible and, along with the romance heroine's, invite readerly engagement and identification. As Carol Thurston argues, 'readers are no longer satisfied with seeing only how the New Hero responds, they now want to look inside his head' (quoted in Kinsale, 1992: 34). Acting as possible emotive focal points of the romantic adventure, this new breed of heroes allows for an innovative cross-gender identification that, if one believes Linda Barlow, is a mark of generic sophistication since 'in the best romances, we are just as engaged with the hero as we are

with the heroine' (Barlow, 1992: 49). Such heroes exemplify an innovative generic approach that, for romance writer Nora Roberts, is typical of contemporary romances. Roberts argues that, while romance writers in the 1980s 'added [...] the hero's point of view to the stories [...] Into the 90s this remains true, with the heroes often the focal point of the books. It is now at least as much his story as hers' (quoted in Mussell, 1997e: 157).<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, various critics contend that emotionalising the hero and letting the reader into his thoughts is 'the most important innovation', 'blurring the distinctions between male and female and creating more fluid gender categories within which hero, heroine, and reader can move' (Frenier, 1988: 89; Chappel, 1997: 109). Such a generic move invariably creates more vulnerable and readable male characters and importantly, often goes hand in hand with a more affirmative and inclusive view of the first marriage. Rather than eroticising male dominance or justifying the hero's emotional indifference as an understandable consequence of his suffering at the hands of a mad or depraved first wife, romances such as Sandra Brown's *Texas! Chase* (1991), Stephanie Mittman's *The Marriage Bed* (1996) and Nicole Jordan's *The Heart Breaker* (1998) textualise the heroes' grieving and healing processes. They feature male characters whose emotional tribulations after the death of their first wives determine and direct reader identification, narrative focus and textual progression. Concentrating on the heroes' overcoming of grief and emotional healing by the forging of a second, equally strong and loving, bond, the above narratives consistently depict the first marriage as a loving and compassionate relationship. Whereas the hero of *Texas! Chase* 'had shared a special love' with his first wife Tanya, Nicole Jordan's hero Sloan McCord wants to 'remain true to the memory of his late wife' and feels that 'there was still - and would always be - a haunting sense of loss' (Brown, 1991: 8; Jordan, 1998: 73; 347). Although this hero still expresses his desire for erotic singularity at



the outset of the narrative, convinced that ‘a man only...finds love like that once in his life’, he and his generic counterparts are proven wrong during the course of the narratives as they abandon strict notions of erotic singularity and find emotional healing and fulfilment in their second marriages (Jordan, 1998: 270). Unlike their conservative equivalents, these heroes abandon inflexible notions of erotic singularity (heralding the ideal of the “one and only” love that occurs only once in a lifetime) in favour of a more permissive notion of erotic exclusivity (celebrating love relationships that are exclusive and absolute in their turn). Such romances question the conservative and narrow ideal of an once-in-a-lifetime bond by portraying characters having loving relationships with more than one person. While love is thus not strictly singular anymore, erotic exclusivity nevertheless dictates that triangulation must effectively be destroyed in favour of the new heterosexual dyad. It is only through the reinstatement of the dyadic bond that the new relationship can be exclusive and absolute. Preserving generic integrity, the novels must persuasively and irredeemably put the first wife to rest and grant exclusive erotic authority to the second wife. In this way, emphasising that their union is one between ‘true husband and wife’ and accepting (rather than repressing) the memory of his first wife as an integral part of his past, Sloan McCord voices his profound and fundamental commitment to his new marriage, declaring that, although he will ‘always cherish her [the first wife’s] memory, always grieve for her [...] the pain of losing her is gone’ (Jordan, 1998: 362; 360). Similarly, overcoming his grief and finding emotional fulfilment in his new relationship, the hero of *The Marriage Bed* underlines notions of erotic exclusivity and commitment, affirming that he has ‘got a second chance now’ and that ‘no dreams haunted him, no memories assailed him’ (Mittman, 1996: 225).

Giving expression to a more inclusive conception of love and discarding erotic singularity in favour of erotic exclusivity, the above romances present marital triangles that emotionally validate the first marriage. They instigate the romantic conclusion not by playing off the two wife figures against one another or by vilifying/repressing the textual presence of the first wife but by incorporating her into the narrative and textualising the husband's grieving and healing process. Evading the non-permissive textual strategies of the conservative romantic text, romances such as *Texas! Chase* and *The Heart Breaker* distinctly contest notions of female jealousy and rivalry, featuring heroines who refuse 'to be put in competition' with the first wife and who are not interested in 'taking [her] place' (Jordan, 1998: 187; Brown, 1991: 110). Refuting female antagonism, such texts promote non-competitive forms of female interaction and co-existence. They work towards a harmonious integration and acceptance of the first marriage by stressing the tolerant and understanding nature of the second wife and by indirectly ensuring the supernatural blessing and goodwill of the deceased predecessor. Although the hero of *The Marriage Bed* is not necessarily 'seeking [his first wife's] approval' of his second marriage, he has 'no doubt that he would have received it' (Mittman, 1996: 246). The hero of *The Heart Breaker* is equally convinced that his first wife 'would have been happy [...] that I found someone to fill my heart. Happy that I love you' (Jordan, 1998: 361). Sandra Brown's hero Chase Tyler echoes similar feelings, affirming that his first wife Tanya 'wouldn't have wanted it any differently. Her capacity to love had been so enormous that she would have been the first one to encourage him to love again [...] What was so bad about that? Nothing' (Brown, 1991: 315).

The above novels utilise innovative romantic strategies that re-direct or broaden the emotive centre of the narrative and that, in the process, grant (emotional) validity to the

first marriage/wife. Utilising another strategy, other innovative romances evade the linguistic omissions of the conservative romantic text by dividing the plot. They introduce additional storylines that textualise the developing love story between the (prospective) second wife and husband as well as paying attention to the romantic adventure of the (now living rather than dead and benevolent) first wife. Different in narrative structure and plot organisation, Maggie Osborne's historical romance *The Wives of Bowie Stone* (1994) presents two heroines with two different storylines, set apart from each other in separate chapters. While the love story between Rosie Mulvehey and the supposed-to-be-dead Bowie Stone introduces issues of social depth (dealing with Rosie's alcoholism, the sexual abuse by her dead stepfather and her emotional catharsis and salvation through love), the plotline revolving around Bowie's unloved and estranged first wife Susan is primarily a story about her emotional and social emancipation and progression towards independence. Initially defining herself solely in relation to a patriarchal social order, this first wife evolves from being an utterly reliant woman who 'cannot live without a man to depend upon' and who admits that 'on my own, I can't *do* anything. I can't make decisions, I can't cope' to being a hardworking and independent single mother who at one stage deliberately rejects marriage and chooses celibacy, declaring that 'I don't want to be clinging and dependent [...] I can make it on my own. It isn't easy, but I can do it' (Osborne, 1994: 80; 106 - 107; 299). Widening the traditional romantic subject matter, the first storyline employs social issues with psychological sophistication. More than mere plot devices, such topics are used 'realistically as part of the fabric of romance' (Mussell, 1997c: 5). Informed by popular feminist demands for equality and independence, the second storyline not only re-vocalises the figure of the first wife but also introduces her as a possible focal point. While the episodic and polyphonic structure of the text and the presence of two heroines

with two separate love plots potentially fragment the novel, the innovative romantic strategy of dividing the plot into two separate storylines contributes to the re-vocalisation and re-valorisation of the figure of the first wife. In doing so, this novel distinctly challenges and expands conservative romantic parameters.

Portraying the romantic adventures of both wife figures and re-vocalising/valorising the first wife, Susan Elizabeth Phillips's contemporary romance *Fancy Pants* (1989) adopts a similar textual tactic. However, this novel takes the innovative strategy of re-valorisation even further by granting emotional validity to the female-female bond and by introducing notions of female sociality inspired by popular feminist conceptions of sisterhood. In this instance, female sociality articulates a popular/de-politicised version of sisterhood that does not promote political action as much as emotional bonding and female-female solidarity on a purely individual (rather than political/social/organisational) level.<sup>5</sup> Highlighting the compatibility of the romance and feminism, the text features a hero who, according to his first wife Holly Grace, 'despite his good ol' boy demeanor, had always been the most liberated man she'd ever known' and describes the 'bond of love and friendship' between Holly and the prospective second wife Francesca (Phillips, 1989: 322; 313). In the process, Phillips's text also gives expression to a popular feminist position that, although affected by a certain amount of de-politicisation and individualisation, introduces and affirms notions of female emancipation and intra-gender bonding across the popular media platform. Portraying the non-antagonistic and non-competitive emotional ties connecting all three components of this marital triangle, *Fancy Pants* depicts an unconventional family structure made up by the hero and the 'two women who meant everything to him - one the love of his boyhood, the other the love of his manhood' (Phillips, 1989: 474). While *Fancy Pants* clearly stays within generic limitations

(maintaining a strict topical hierarchy and centring on the romantically exclusive adventure between prospective second wife Francesca and husband Dallie Beaudine), the text validates the first marriage and the possible interaction between the two wife figures. It thereby articulates a more inclusive and affirmative notion of love and desire, expanding conservative generic limits based on erotic singularity and introducing notions of female bonding and feminosociality inside romantic structures.

Echoing the feminocentric strategies of the above text, Maggie Osborne's historical romance *A Stranger's Wife* (1999), Angela Arney's *The Second Wife* (1997) and Penelope Williamson's novel *The Passions of Emma* (1997) exemplify a similar position, giving expression to a popularised version of feminist sisterhood. The three texts describe processes of female-female bonding that develop alongside the romantic adventure and that (if not clearly and definitely subordinated to the romantic enterprise) risk outgrowing romantic boundaries and transgressing generic limitations. Re-validating the figure of the first wife and authorising intra-gender relational models, such texts stretch (and potentially outgrow) generic parameters. Demonstrating generic changeability, they at the same time illustrate the influence and incorporation of feminism inside romantic structures. Pitying and identifying with the mad first wife Miriam, Lily, the heroine of Osborne's *A Stranger's Wife* (1999), is intrinsically bound to her predecessor. Not only are the two wives physical replicas of each other – a fact that allows the released criminal Lily to impersonate Miriam in front of her would-be husband, the ambitious politician Quinn Westin – but she also feels connected to the first wife on much deeper and intense levels of affiliation and identification. Whilst looking at Miriam is 'like gazing into a distorted mirror', Lily feels that the first wife 'is part of me in a way [...] it goes deeper than just looking like her. I understand her in so many ways [...] She's me, and I'm her' (Osborne, 1999: 347; 291;

292). Affirming her solidarity and “sisterhood” with her mad predecessor, this heroine declares that ‘I loved her as if we were indeed the sisters she believed us to be’ (Osborne, 1999: 362). Emphasising the physical/social identicalness of the two wife figures, Osborne’s text introduces notions of female sisterhood and bonding inside the romantic plot. At the same time, staying within generic limitations, the novel also installs romantic and ideological closure by granting singular erotic authority to the second wife and by devaluing the emotional validity of the arranged first marriage. Stressing that ‘whatever I felt for Miriam, it wasn’t enough [...] Miriam and I were mismatched’, the hero Quinn assures his second wife of his singular as well as exclusive commitment (Osborne, 1999: 153). Ignoring the pattern of sameness and connection identified by the heroine, Quinn rejects notions of female similitude, stating that ‘you are so unlike her [the first wife] that I wonder I ever thought you were similar [...] It’s you I see, and you I want’ (Osborne, 1999: 230). Although the second wife emphasises the parallelism between her own and the first wife’s position, it is important that this recognition of sameness is only felt by the heroine and not by the hero. Eliminating threats of undifferentiation, this pattern of recognition introduces an intra-gender connection that remains distinct from and secondary to the romantic adventure. Whereas *A Stranger’s Wife* is informed by popular feminist demands for female solidarity and collectivism, the integration of feminism within romantic structures is not all-encompassing and uniform as the romantic imperatives in this instance still require and dictate the reclamation of female individuality and (conservative) erotic singularity. The installation of the romantic conclusion goes hand in hand with the inevitable downgrading of the intra-gender relationship and its definitive relegation to a secondary position in the textual hierarchy. Harboursing conservative as well as innovative elements, narratives such as *A Stranger’s Wife* illustrate the generic restrictions of the

romance plot. Accordingly, I maintain that, although generic expansion and change are possible and essential for any genre to remain culturally relevant, there are still clear limitations to the available level of expansion. Generic innovation is thus not a clear-cut and homogenised development but often co-exists alongside conservative romantic parameters.

Granting emotional validity to the female-female dyad and valuing female bonding as a source of positive solidarity, Angela Arney's *The Second Wife* (1997) and Penelope Williamson's *The Passions of Emma* (1997) similarly illustrate the incorporation of the feminist ideal of sisterhood within popular culture. Yet, unlike the above romance, Arney and Williamson's texts ultimately fail to give primacy to the romantic master-narrative. Rather than merely mobilising and expanding generic limitations, they voice competing storylines that threaten to displace the romantic plot from the centre of the text. Consequently, they transcend limits of generic expansion and therefore, they cannot be considered "authentic" examples of the romance. Dedicated to the portrayal of the love-hate relationship between the first wife Samantha and her successor Felicity, Arney's *The Second Wife* (1997) recounts the latter's emotional journey and progression from an intense antagonism to a sympathetic understanding of the first wife. Wanting at first to eradicate 'all reminders of Samantha, all reminders that there'd been another wife before she arrived', Felicity ends up accepting the terminally ill first wife as an 'integral part [...] of the total fabric of their lives', intent on showing a "sisterly" and caring solidarity for 'a woman who needed the sanctuary which was within her power to give' (Arney, 1997: 268; 476; 477). Although Arney's novel is distinctly marketed as a romance (my edition displayed a particularly lurid couple-based cover) and although the text thus tries to limit the range of available readings, its subject matter and textual focus ultimately relate more to

the changes and progression of the female-female bond than to the heterosexual romantic adventure. As a result, the novel, unintentionally one wonders, outgrows generic limitations. While the intra-gender bond between Felicity and Samantha is the most dynamic and engaging relationship in the novel, the marriage between second wife Felicity and husband Tony is remarkably stagnant and drained of romantic excitement and interest. Although Felicity reassures herself that ‘no matter how much they might quarrel, no matter how many problems there were, she knew she would always love him. No one else. Only him’, the text insistently sets apart the disillusioning “reality” of marriage from her romantic dreams and aspirations (Arney, 1997: 323). While ‘Tony stubbornly refused to step into the realms occupied by the New Men of the nineties’, Felicity is faced with ‘her own anger at the situation, her own resentment, her own very real unhappiness that marriage to Tony had not turned out quite the way she’d thought, or wanted it to be’ (Arney, 1997: 229; 278). Introducing a portrait of marriage that undermines the ideal of the romantic happily-ever-after, the textual dynamics of Arney’s novel give textual precedence to the female-female relation and thus they ultimately expand beyond romantic generic limitations. Consequently, the narrative seems more in line with the vision of female community and solidarity displayed in Ellen Glasgow’s ghost story ‘The Past’ (1920), in which the heroine overcomes her animosity towards the ghost of the vengeful first wife and conquers ‘conflicts centered around love and betrayal with a greater form of love – sisterhood’ (Branson, 1994: 5).

Depicting the bipolar passions of Emma Tremayne for the terminally ill first wife Bria and the latter’s husband Shay McKenna, Penelope Williamson’s novel *The Passions of Emma* (1997) echoes Arney’s insistence on female solidarity and bonding. The text features a marital triangle that, instead of prioritising the heterosexual dyad between second wife



and husband, puts equal emphasis on all three axes of desire within the triangular constellation. Whereas the bond between Irish-born immigrants Shay and Bria is loving and compassionate, the tie between working-class Bria and upper-class Emma transcends all class divisions and is marked by exceptional intensity and identification. As Emma declares, Bria is the 'dearest, best friend in the world', a 'real friend' who 'isn't your other half, she's the whole of you, of your soul. She's the reflection you see in the mirror' (Williamson, 1997: 283; 210). Returning feelings of equal intensity for her 'true friend', Bria expresses the level of her own identification with Emma, affirming that 'I know her as well as I know myself, for we are the same in our deepest places' (Williamson, 1997: 300; 303). Unlike *A Stranger's Wife*, Williamson's novel does not impose a strict textual hierarchy and celebrates the female recognition of sameness as a potent textual stimulant. Echoing the benevolence and goodwill attributed to earlier first wives by their widowers, the almost saintly Bria literally and directly decrees and names Emma as her successor, asking her husband to 'mourn me, weep for me, and miss me sorely. But after a time I want you to ask our Emma to be your wife' (Williamson, 1997: 302). While the first wife thus assures the new couple of her blessing, her dying wish also de-romanticises the evolving erotic relation between Emma and Shay as it provides a direct motivational impulse other than a shared, mutual attraction. Even after Bria's death, triangulation prevails, as the dead wife remains the common factor in the developing relationship, 'the mirror to both their hearts' (Williamson, 1997: 363) In the words of the hero, 'their love for Bria was the one real thing they shared [...] they had formed a triangle – he and Emma and Bria. Bria had been the base of it, holding them together' (Williamson, 1997: 376). Although the new couple manages to forge a strong and exclusive erotic bond in which, as Shay states, there will 'never be anyone else for me. I love you with all my heart, and I'll be doing it forever',

the text does not give precedence to these developments. Rather than centring on the new romantic adventure, the novel remains as much a story of the friendship and love between two women as of the development of the heterosexual bond between Shay and Emma (Williamson, 1997: 394 - 395). Instead of portraying the break-up of erotic triangulation and the referral of the female-female plot to a secondary narrative rank, the novel insistently celebrates female bonding as an equivalent alternative to heterosexism. The first wife-second wife relation remains a primary emotive focal point of the narrative. Although supportive of the new heterosexual dyad, the intra-gender tie ultimately diverts attention from the romantic enterprise and offers a competing and alternative storyline.

Like Arney's *The Second Wife* (1997), Williamson's novel grants textual primacy to the female-female bond. While both novels cannot be classified as feminist fiction, their popular feminist emphasis on feminosociality nevertheless outgrows the limits of romantic generic expansion. Rather than romances, they can more aptly be described as female-related narratives of both love and friendship. Failing to uphold generic integrity and celebrating female bonding as much as heterosexual fulfilment, the topical hierarchy of both novels is not clearly defined and remains 'indeterminate', a factor which according to Robert Miles 'is a license for generic transgression' (Miles, 1994: 137). Investigating the outer limitations of the romance genre, the next four sections further explore the notion of generic transgression. Investigating the workings of the marital triangle outside the romantic setting, they introduce as "failed romances" examples of the Victorian sensation novel, the female Gothic novel, the popular feminist narrative and the postfeminist text. In the process, these four genres also delineate the persistence of the female-male-female constellation across a range of historically and ideologically diverse gynocentric genres, thereby contributing a tracing of the structural continuum of the marital triangle that runs

parallel to the canonised spectrum of mimeticism and homosociality. In particular, while the popular feminist novel and some female Gothic texts rely on the structure of the innovative marital triangle insofar as they centre on alternative bonds of female sociality, the sensation novel, the postfeminist text and other Gothic narratives are based on the conservative marital triangle as a counter-model. They articulate the storylines, perspectives and voices generally bracketed/omitted from the conservative romantic text. Having delineated generic extremities in this section, this investigation will subsequently examine the notion of generic transgression and analyse the non/post-romantic forms of the marital triangle expressed in what this study has referred to as the romance's extra-generic mutations.

#### 4. **Moving outside Generic Limitations: The Mutations of the Romance Genre**

Before analysing the mutations of the romance, I think that a short introduction to the phenomenon of generic transgression and the extra-generic marital triangles is helpful at this stage. Dedicated to non/post-romantic articulations of the triadic structure, the next four sections explore the workings of the marital triangle beyond the bounds of the romantic text. Ideologically varied, the four derivatives either articulate the submerged plots of the conservative triadic constellation or expand the feminosocial potential of the innovative triangle beyond romantic limitations. Stressing the diversity and tenacity of the marital triangle trope, the female-centred genres thus highlighted continue to flesh out a structural network spun across popular women's fictions. So far, this congruence of works has been traced through Brontë's classic and the contemporary romance genre. Foregrounding the variability of the triadic spectrum, I will proceed to uncover the marital triangle as a structural device and an erotic trope in the sensation novel, the female Gothic, the popular feminist and the postfeminist text. While this study will make interconnections between the diverse mutations when such linkages seem critically valuable, its primary foci are the varied relations of the generic derivatives to the romance, investigating the changes to the romantic marital triangle that the extra-generic re-scripting engenders. A few words on the sequential ordering of the sections may also be useful at this stage. As a group, the four generic mutations are arranged loosely chronologically (starting with mid-Victorian texts and concluding with Fay Weldon's late twentieth-century novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983)) as well as according to the degree of subversion with which they treat the romantic master-genre (explaining for example the positioning of the later-date popular feminist

narratives ahead of the earlier postfeminist text). As the following section will show, first in line of generic derivatives, the Victorian sensation novel of the 1860s blatantly underlines the reasons behind the almost-compulsory expulsion of the mad/bad first wife from the conservative romantic scenario. In this way, the sensation novels discussed here centre on the first wife's ambiguous and transgressive duplicity and her chameleon nature that invariably pose a threat to conservative romanticism and strict moral coding. This threat is effectively translated into the structures of the marital triangle, the triangular constellation figuring as a perfect medium for registering and putting into play the contradictions and ambiguities around dualistic Victorian ideologies.

#### 4.1 **Fighting for Remembrance: Textual Revenants in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret***

If she had been faultless, she could not have been the heroine of this story; for has not some wise man of old remarked, that the perfect women are those who leave no histories behind them, but who go through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as leaves no footprints on the sands of time. (Braddon, Mary Elizabeth 1999 [1863]. *Aurora Floyd*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 393)

Taken from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Victorian bestseller *Aurora Floyd* (1863), the above epigraph provides a telling characterisation of the kind of "sensational" heroine discussed in this part of the thesis.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably flawed, prone to fits of madness or criminal behaviour, the main protagonist of this section is the mad/bad first wife who, traditionally vilified and expelled from the conservative romantic script, now takes centre stage in one of the romance's generic derivatives: 1860s Victorian sensation fiction. Distinctly narrower and more sinister in narrative focus than the romantic master-genre, with solitary crime rather than dyadic love figuring as the main narrative motor, this particular generic mutation does not centre on the typically dyadic interplay between romantic hero and heroine nor the latter's characteristic progression from singledom towards heterosexual bonding. Instead, it pays tribute to and imaginatively recovers the conveniently left-out or distorted story of the mad/bad first wife whose invariably unlawful actions and transgressive body traditionally necessitate romantic exclusion and whose distinctly singular state and ultimate failure to connect constitute a complementary trajectory to the romantic movement towards coupledness. Whereas the romance text is generally bound to the depiction of heterosexual mutuality and whereas the romantic marital triangle inevitably gives way to romantic duality, the examples of

sensation fiction discussed below recount the concomitant narrative of the first wife's progressive isolation, leading the way towards the break-up of triangulation and the institution of the romantic dyad. They concentrate on the first wife's diverse crimes or sins that justify disregard, solitude and ultimately complete annihilation (both physical – in death – and symbolic – in the sense that her existence should be wiped out from the memories of the remaining/romantic characters). Consequently, Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) embark on a highly ambiguous and contradictory textual project. On the one hand, they assert and legitimise the (romantic) expulsion and forgetting of the first wife by emphasising her crimes and rightful punishment. On the other hand, they put this functionally transgressive figure at the active centre of the plot, thereby perceptively contesting her linguistic omission and figuring as tangible testimonies to her story and remembrance. Put differently, while these two sensation novels clearly function within the ideological systems of control they expose, imposing the harshest of judgements and the severest of punishments on their female offenders, the register in which they operate their logic at the same time forcefully draws attention to and affirms their sensational protagonists and the moral inconsistencies they embody. The sensation genre as a result inhabits a paradoxical semantic space in between subversion and conservatism that, as Lynda Hart observes, risks 'the excesses of paradox, where that which is to be warded off instead overtakes the *doxa*' (Hart, 1994: 4).

Before drawing any pre-emptive conclusions, a short introduction to the still slightly obscure and short-lived<sup>2</sup> genre of sensation fiction serves to clarify some important issues and is necessary at this stage. Characterised, to the chagrin of its Victorian contemporaries,<sup>3</sup> by its name-giving ability to cause a physical sensation in the reader, to generate 'in the mind some deep feeling of overwrought interest by the means of

some terrible passion or crime', to produce 'excitement, and excitement alone', the genre has traditionally been defined in terms of its aimed-for reading responses of fright, horror or amazement as well as by its thematic obsessions with crime, murder and madness and its extramarital fantasies of adultery, divorce and bigamy (quoted in Carnell, 2000: 153; quoted in Skilton, 1998: xxi).<sup>4</sup> A genre in which 'everything that was not forbidden was compulsory', sensation fiction has increasingly come under contemporary critical scrutiny and has been identified as profoundly expressive of its originating moment. For Jonathan Loesberg, the genre evokes typically mid-Victorian anxieties over the loss of class identity<sup>5</sup>; for Elaine Showalter and Richard Nemesvari, it functions in turn as a fictional reaction to the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act<sup>6</sup> or as a documentary form tapping 'directly into a series of Victorian anxieties about gender roles and sexual identification' (Showalter, 1977: 158; Nemesvari, 1995: 516).

Exploring the inevitable symbiosis between text and context, these historicist interpretations offer necessary explanatory models that understand the genre as arising out of particular confluences of certain historical conditions (in this case mid-Victorian anxieties about changing class and gender roles and nineteenth-century concerns about femininity, female sexuality and domestic ideology). While the sensation novel's historical embeddedness and contemporaneity are undeniably key factors for interpretative analysis and generic positioning, the often-noted gynocentric potential of the 'by definition "feminine"' sensation genre is particularly relevant for the purpose of this study (Pykett, 1992: 31).<sup>7</sup> This investigation asserts that the dynamics of the marital triangle are inherently linked to Wood and Braddon's gendered subject matter and to the way in which their transgressive heroines blur ideological patterns of intra-gender schematisation.<sup>8</sup> Arguing that "sensational" femininity is often portrayed as an ambiguous spectacle that eludes or threatens to elude the conservative dictates of



dimorphic gender boundaries, Lynn Pykett observes that the typical sensation heroine 'cannot easily be accommodated either to the category of normal, proper femininity, nor to that of deviant, improper femininity' but instead 'offers a complex and contradictory range of significations' that embody 'an uncertainty about the definition of the feminine, or of "woman"' (Pykett, 1992: 19). The ideological indeterminacies that such characterisation engenders are effectively translated into the structures of the marital triangle, the triangular constellation upholding as well as subversively laying bare the distinctly non-romantic mechanics underlying conservative romanticism.

Offering a particularly apt example of the morally and structurally ambiguous heroine identified above, Ellen Wood's phenomenally popular Victorian bestseller *East Lynne* (1861) recounts the tale of the beautiful, aristocratic and passionate Isabel Vane.<sup>9</sup> Trapped in a mediocre marriage with the well-intentioned but spiritless Mr Carlyle, the latter is tempted by the 'dangerous sophistries' and lies of her former suitor Levison (the defamations relating to Carlyle's supposed illicit relationship with Barbara Hare, the latter having always harboured an 'almost idolatrous passion' for him) to abandon her husband and children and to run off with her tempter (Wood, [n.d.]: 128; 209). Immediately repenting her social and sexual transgression, Isabel secretly returns to her former home, now horribly disfigured after a deemed-fatal-for-herself train crash, in the guise of governess, to jealously watch over her children and her husband's happy second marriage to Barbara. Proving that 'lady angels' can 'go wrong sometimes' and that any 'high-principled gentlewoman' can fall 'from her pedestal', Wood's novel offers a voyeuristic documentary of melodramatic emotionalism and masochistic pietism (Wood, [n.d.]: 325; 274). The text follows 'poor Lady Isabel' on her downward course from loneliness and marital neglect through moments of jealousy, weakness and folly to her long-drawn-out suffering, isolation and her final sacrificial death - an

outcome that the novel insists is rightly commensurate with the magnitude of her temptation and downfall (Wood, [n.d.]: 211). Relentlessly branding Isabel's acts of desertion and adultery as irrevocable crimes against morality, religion and society, the text, from the beginning, ascribes the role of sinner to Isabel - the narrator's early insinuations of her impending downfall working to such effects. In addition, the novel asserts that the first wife's diverse sexual and moral transgressions inevitably, if not rightly, meet unparalleled punishment.<sup>10</sup> Having 'wilfully abandoned her husband, her children, her home [...] cast away her good name and her position [and] deliberately offended God', Isabel cannot help being plunged into 'an abyss of horror, from which there was never more any escape', her future existence being 'one dark course of gnawing retribution' (Wood, [n.d.]: 288; 274; 275). Seemingly predetermined from the outset, Isabel's textual fate appears irrevocably fixed. Cast into the role of transgressive first wife, she must fatalistically act out and follow her downward course, leading towards her death and to her final expulsion from the triadic formation binding herself, Carlyle and Barbara. On the one hand, Wood's novel leaves little doubt about the irreversible and rigid nature of the sinful role that the delicate Isabel is doomed to play. The novel's official morality and relationality are thus distinctly conservative in nature. On the other hand, this conservative mould paradoxically allows for a more sympathetic portrayal of the transgressive first wife. With Isabel's culpability firmly established and with no prospect of social rehabilitation, the reader is not meant to attest her guilt through a progressive process of detection (as in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*) but is free to sympathise with the poor repentant sinner and to take pity on her during the various stages of her 'prolonged, luxurious orgy of self-torture' (to use Winifred Hughes's aptly phrased description of Isabel's course of suffering) (Hughes, 1980: 115).

Deciding to ‘*take up her cross daily*’ and to ‘bear it as she best might: she had fully earned all its weight and its sharp pain’, the revenant first wife (in her guise as governess Madame Vine) embarks on a masochistic and ultimately suicidal course of self-torture, subjecting herself to the now-unattainable vision of all she has irrevocably lost, ‘to see Mr Carlyle the husband of another [...] to live in the same house with them, to witness his attentions, possibly his caresses’ (Wood, [n.d.]: 389; 290; 389). Not only is the guilty Isabel tormented by sexual jealousy as she witnesses the endearments between the husband she now loves and his second wife but the vision of Carlyle’s marital bliss with another ultimately becomes the novel’s primary and in the end fatal means of punishment. ‘Had there been no Barbara in the case, she might have lived and borne it: as it was, it had killed her before her time’, a dying Isabel confesses, implying that as soon as the marital triangle is in place (Barbara having married the divorced Carlyle), Isabel’s death becomes inevitable (Wood, [n.d.]: 585). It is her function to become redundant and to be erased from the triangular constellation in order to be replaced by the obviously more suitable and virtuous second wife. Isabel’s fate is fixed, irrespective of her own desire for her former husband or the relative benefits of her maternal presence to her children (her self-forgetfulness and excessive love being contrasted to Barbara’s competent but withdrawn mothering).<sup>11</sup>

A structural necessity, Isabel’s death importantly lays bare the distinctly non-romantic and rigid mechanisms underlying the conservative marital triangle. It exemplifies the kind of “cosmic” or essentialist’ ending that according to Rachel Blau DuPlessis befalls women when ‘energies of selfhood, often represented by sexuality [...] are expended outside the “couvert” of marriage or valid romance’ (Blau DuPlessis, 1985: 16; 15). With Isabel stringently punished and her physical annihilation an inescapable consequence of her transgressions, *East Lynne* clearly makes a didactic case

against moral and sexual female transgressions. Judged by the severity of the punishment it engenders, female adultery in this instance appears indeed as ‘the most transgressive form of sexual deviancy’, as Lynda Nead argues (Nead, 1988: 48). As Nead maintains, ‘for women, there could be no movement from one category to another, a fall from virtue was final’ (Nead, 1988: 49). In contrast, this study asserts that, while Isabel’s crimes clearly and irrevocably exclude her from the realm of what Lynn Pykett terms the ‘proper feminine’, her transfer to the realm of the ‘improper feminine’ resists ideological completion and is clearly not as unproblematic and clear-cut as Nead implies (Pykett, 1992: 16). Rather than effortlessly ‘[passing] through the mirror of oppositional gender discourse and [landing] on the other side’, *this* first wife largely fails to switch moral categories and, throughout the novel, remains suspended in an in-limbo position that indefinitely places her in between ideological intra-gender extremities (Hart, 1994:2). As Lynda Hart points out, rather than affirming oppositional gender discourses, Wood’s novel effectively demonstrates that ‘the path from “normal” femininity to “fallen” womanhood [is] a slippery slope, not two parallel lines incapable of meeting’ (Hart, 1994: 1).

Blurring distinctions between good and bad women, the forever-suffering Isabel is an ideologically ambiguous (and in its most literal sense two-faced) character – a trait which arguably facilitates the formerly beautiful Isabel’s successful impersonation of the facially disfigured governess. Resisting vilification, Isabel does not fit the structural mould of the bad first wife that she is doomed to fill, not the least because the narrator insists that such characterisation is inappropriate for this heroine. The reader thus should ‘never doubt the principles of poor lady Isabel [...] her spirit was earnest and true, her intentions were pure’ (Wood, [n.d.]: 211). Rather than a morally depraved bad first wife, Isabel is portrayed as ‘a poor outcast’, ‘a miserable, friendless creature’ who

tragically ‘marred her own happiness’ (Wood, [n.d.]: 288; 615). Encouraging reader identification, the narrator not only beseechingly calls out for pity and understanding but also places him/her in a position of complicity with the first wife, asking ‘are you quite sure that you would not have done the same under the facility and the temptation?’ (Wood, [n.d.]: 211; 586). The reader’s emotive engagement with Isabel and the melodramatic appeal of the latter’s heroic fortitude and endurance resist strict moral judgement and contribute to the ideological indeterminacies of the first wife’s position. In line with such argumentation, Lynn Pykett singles out the reader’s emotional involvement with the heroine as the primary ‘source of the potential subversiveness of the text’, arguing that the ‘reader’s investment with Isabel creates a space for resistance of the text’s “official” morality’ (Pykett, 1992: 132). Although the text radically condemns any of Isabel’s transgressions as crimes beyond repair, the novel applies these rigid moral judgements almost mechanically. Rather than simply re-establishing the dictates of the conservative marital triangle, *East Lynne* exposes while installing the rigid mechanisms of the triangular structure. In the process, the novel lays bare the contradictions of the conservative ideological apparatus, with Isabel simultaneously blurring distinctions between good and bad women and fatalistically acting out her role in the conservative scenario.

Unsurprisingly, the ideological inconsistencies of the first wife’s position are reflected and effectively translated into the structures of the marital triangle within which she is implicated. On the one hand, with the first wife laid to rest and the triumphant new couple established at the end of the novel, the text features an ostensibly conservative form of triangular relationality. On a purely structural level, the triadic constellation binding Isabel, Carlyle and Barbara is based on a conservative erotic script that relies on the ideological expulsion of the disruptive first wife and the

juxtaposition of the two female figures. Refuting notions of female-female bonding, *East Lynne* superficially promotes patriarchal patterns of intra-gender opposition.<sup>12</sup>

From the beginning, the text establishes the relations between the two eventual wives as fraught by rivalry. At the outset, Barbara enviously begrudges the still virtuous Isabel her marital state with Carlyle. Seeing Carlyle married to 'that other, *her*' makes Barbara feel 'like one isolated for ever, shut out from all that could make life dear: *they* were the world, she was out of it' (Wood, [n.d.]: 128; 156). Analogously, Isabel resents Barbara's emotional attachment to her husband, instructing Carlyle that should he ever envisage such a match after her death, Barbara would surely 'ill-treat my child; she would draw your love from it, and from my memory' (Wood, [n.d.]: 173). Unlike the benevolent wives of the innovative romances, Isabel withholds her blessing from the second marriage, thereby complicating and undermining the romantic aura of the Barbara-Carlyle dyad. Making her then-husband promise never to marry her supposed rival and 'let her usurp my place', Isabel warns that failure to comply with her request would disturb her eternal peace since she would not be able to 'rest in her grave' (Wood, [n.d.]: 173). Given this warning and Carlyle's break of promise, it seems a matter of due consequence that Isabel should not be able to disappear after her deemed-fatal train crash (and rest in her symbolic grave) but should return as a literal revenant to her former home in order to structurally disturb the newly-forged bonds between Carlyle and Barbara. By returning to East Lynne, Isabel not only fulfils her earlier premonition but she also counters the process of symbolic annihilation/forgetting that typically accompanies the first wife's romantic expulsion. A matter of ideological necessity, this symbolic annihilation or forgetting of the first wife is an emotional prerequisite of the conservative romantic triangle, a fact of which the jealous Barbara is well aware as she does not seek any further emotional connections with her predecessor.

In this way, the second wife is convinced that Isabel's children 'had better forget' their mother and that her husband would happily 'blot out all recollection of her [Isabel], were it possible' (Wood, [n.d.]: 398). The novel eventually conforms to these repressive linguistic politics as the disruptive revenant Isabel is ultimately stripped of all social titles, forgotten by the remaining/romantic characters and buried pseudo-anonymously after her death. At the same time, the narrative opposes such out-and-out linguistic suppression and silencing as the whole novel is dedicated to recovering and giving emotional credit to the first wife's story.

Based on patterns of intra-female rivalry, *East Lynne* superficially confirms the complementary relationship between the two wives.<sup>13</sup> Isabel's early virtue and marriage to Carlyle distress the jealous Barbara just as much as Barbara's later marital happiness in turn contributes to the sufferings and death of the now insanely jealous Isabel. As Barbara's mother rightly observes, her daughter's supposed romantic happy-end has only been secured and brought about by Isabel's ruin and downfall, her 'false step [...] while it must have secured her own wretchedness, led to the happiness of my child' (Wood, [n.d.]: 421). Highlighting the diametric links between Isabel and Barbara, Mrs Hare's observation rightly lays bare the tragic flipside of the romantic scenario and exposes the non-romantic and morally simplistic mechanisms upholding conservative romanticism. It is only because Isabel is isolated and cast as the transgressive first wife that Barbara can become the virtuous and victorious second wife. 'Terribly, indeed, were their positions reversed', a suffering Isabel observes, 'Barbara was now the honoured and cherished wife, East Lynne's mistress. And what was she? [...] an interloper; a criminal woman who had thrust herself into the house' (Wood, [n.d.]: 424). Yet, while Isabel and Barbara's destinies seem strictly complementary and despite the characters' mutual dislike for one another, the novel refuses to impose binary intra-

gender schematisations indiscriminately and to place the two wives as direct opposites, the ideological inconsistencies of Isabel's position complicating such clear-cut polarisation. Rather than effortlessly imposing the binary dynamics of the conservative marital triangle, Wood's novel, in an excruciating litany of carefully doubled scenes, draws attention to the relative symmetry of the two women's positions and the repetitive nature of their actions. On her return to East Lynne, Isabel, in the guise of Madame Vine, is forced to witness Barbara occupying a whole series of positions – singing the same songs at the piano and saying the same loving words to the same husband – and in possession of an endless series of things – a bracelet, a hairbrush, the respect of Isabel's children, Carlyle's affections – that she once enjoyed herself (Michie, 1992a: 76). It is not Barbara's separateness or difference from Isabel that torture the first wife the most but their similarities, the parallels of their lives and the symmetry of their physical actions and gestures that most painfully draw attention to all she has lost. Rather than opposites, the two women are unwilling doubles, both sharing the same social identity (as Carlyle's wives) and each in turn repeating the other's actions and positions.

Given the novel's ambiguous portrayals of both Isabel (being that most striking of paradoxes: 'the whore as madonna', the sinner as saint) and of the first-second wife relationship (the wives' roles being both complementary and identical at the same time), the text's ending is unsurprisingly fraught by contradiction and ambiguity (Pykett, 1992: 134). As stated, the narrative complies with conservative structural prerequisites of the first wife's physical/symbolic annihilation. At the same time, it complicates Isabel's linguistic suppression by allowing her to make her ambivalent voice heard one last time. Resisting her inevitable symbolic omission, the dying Isabel makes a powerful case against her family's forgetting and vilification of her, entreating Carlyle to 'remember the loving days [...] how happy we were with each other' and to keep 'a



little corner in your heart for your poor lost Isabel' (Wood, [n.d.]: 610; 612). Describing her sufferings, her loneliness and jealousy to her husband, the first wife exposes the unforgiving mechanisms upholding the moral happy ending. In the process, she de-romanticises Carlyle's supposedly happy union with the virtuous Barbara, re-affirming her own passionate love for him and wishing to make undone that which is to her 'a hideous dream' (a terminology to which Barbara and Carlyle would certainly object) and to be again 'as in the old days, in health and happiness, your ever-loving wife' (Wood, [n.d.]: 611). Fighting for remembrance and defying clear-cut vilification, Isabel re-states her existence and re-defines the notion of happy ending, envisaging a time when 'my sin will be remembered no more [...] and we shall be together with our children for ever and for ever' (Wood, [n.d.]: 612). Ignoring Barbara, Isabel's fantasy of the afterlife importantly belittles Carlyle's purely "earthly" happy union with his second wife. Her vision implies that the eternal happy-end shall nevertheless be hers: the first wife's sacrificial death thus appears less of a final act of expulsion and absolute punishment. Seemingly fruitless however, Isabel's deathbed desire for remembrance and emotional attachment are effectively disregarded once she is dead. Immediately after her death, Carlyle and Barbara are eager to exorcise the first wife's disruptive presence, to 'never let it come back again [...] Neither need her name be mentioned again between us. A barred name it has hitherto been: let it so continue' (Wood, [n.d.]: 619). Left to be forgotten, Isabel ends without a name, without a past or being remembered by the remaining characters, with only initials carved on her tombstone. The novel thereby illustrates that narrative closure and conservative requirements for erotic singularity will necessarily engender the isolation and the physical/symbolic disposal of the first wife. While the text assures the re-institution of narrative stability and closure by structurally complying with conservative dictates of the first wife's

linguistic omission, the text also makes sure that *this* first wife will not be forgotten or vilified but will be pitied and remembered by the reader whose sympathies and emotional involvement have throughout the novel centred on Isabel. Emerging as an ambiguous textual project, *East Lynne* allows the reader ‘the permanently appealing chance to “have it both ways”’ (Fahnestock, 1981: 65). In this way, the novel produces a double hermeneutic which follows a conservative erotic script that punishes, isolates and kills off the “bad” first wife as well as giving free range to the reader’s subversive sympathies that are continuously called out towards the transgressive sinner.

Deemed the ‘essential Sensation novel’, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) is similarly dedicated to the portrayal of an ideologically ambiguous heroine (Boyle, 1989: 147). Dangerously blurring bifurcated intra-gender distinctions, Lady Audley’s moral inconsistencies also call forth a conspicuous punitive process of stabilisation that is designed to dispel obscurities, resolve ambiguities and re-install vigorously marked binary patterns of coherence. In contrast to Wood’s melodramatic sentimentalism and mechanical morality, Braddon’s novel depicts a sequential process of detection that attributes guilt to the female offender, authorises her symbolic annihilation and establishes semantic order and narrative closure. Thoroughly sensational in its depiction of bigamy, attempted murder and madness, the text qualifies as a distinctly unromantic fantasy of female transgression. Relishing its heroine’s felonies, the narrative ruthlessly lays bare the rigid fixities of patriarchal gender discourse and the ideological necessity of strictly polarised patterns of intra-female schematisation. A professed rather than an accidental sinner, Braddon’s heroine is not the overtly pathetic and suffering Angel-in-the House-gone-astray but a scheming, duplicitous and unrepentant transgressor. Lady Audley shamelessly exploits her childlike physical appearance and behaviour (which closely match that famous

Victorian ideal of the “Angel in the House”) in order to cloak a strong-minded character willing to dare bigamy and plan murder with calm and premeditative deliberation.

Outwardly possessing ‘the innocence and candour of an infant’ and officially declared by ‘everybody, high and low [...] the sweetest girl that ever lived’, the fragile, fair, rosy-lipped and much-loved governess Lucy Graham seems an embodiment of the feminine ideal, a Cinderella who fittingly deserves her fairy-tale elevation to the rank of Lady Audley (Braddon, 1998: 6; 52).

Describing the governess’s profitable marriage to the elderly Sir Michael Audley, *Lady Audley’s Secret* evidently participates in the popular *Jane Eyre* myth about the poor, young, educated woman who marries the master of the house. Setting up a conventionally conservative erotic script, the text initially places the young second wife Lucy in opposition to Sir Michael’s unloved first wife, contrasting his previous marriage, a ‘dull, jog-trot bargain, made to keep some estate in the family’ to his ‘love - this fever, this longing’ for his second wife (Braddon, 1998: 6; 7). While the novel thus envisages a typically conservative romantic form of triangular relationality, it immediately de-constructs any resulting romantic illusions and emphasises the purely material rationale underlying the marital ‘bargain’ between Lucy and Sir Michael, the latter ‘romantic old fool’ having to contend with being ‘married for his fortune and his position’ alone (Braddon, 1998: 11; 12). While Braddon’s novel is thus engaged in a continuous process of romantic disillusionment, it also, more subversively, reverses the romantic master-plot by transforming the apparently virtuous and idealised second wife into a vengeful, murderous mad/bad first wife. To put it briefly, the seemingly so innocent second wife Lucy hides a whole array of former identities and assumed names, most importantly the one of Helen Talboys, née Maldon, daughter of an impoverished and good-for-nothing father, deserted first wife of the adventurer George Talboys. In

order to avoid dependence, drudgery and humiliation and to escape from her limited roles of impoverished daughter and abandoned first wife, Helen reinvents herself as the governess Lucy Graham, risks bigamy and attempts to murder her re-surfaced first husband after illegally becoming the second Lady Audley. In this way, Braddon's novel puts into action Wilkie Collins's sensational project 'to revolutionize our two favourite sisters' and transform the 'short charmer with the golden hair' into 'a serious, strong-minded, fierce-spoken, miserable, guilty woman' (quoted in Carnell, 2000: 154). By inter-changing and merging the two wife figures, the text importantly conflates the marital triangle and subversively blurs the two - typically ideologically distinct - female components of the conservative triangular constellation, thereby dangerously confusing moral boundaries and social categorisations.

A subversive tale of identity multiplications and permeable social categories, Lady Audley's story disturbs patriarchal gender ideology. Her paradoxical marital status (as both a mad/bad first and good second wife) essentially confounds the stereotypical social polarisations that place women into binary classifications of good/bad, sane/mad. Offering a 'covert protest against the restrictions of domestic respectability', Lady Audley's hybrid position and fluid identity not only pose a dogmatic threat to the patriarchal schematisation but they also call forth the disturbing suggestion that 'the respectable ideal, or proper feminine, may simply be a form of acting', staging 'the feminine as spectacle' (Showalter, 1976: 2; Pykett, 1992: 90; 91). A "self-made" woman, Lady Audley is most distinctly characterised by her elastic ability to consciously and continuously construct and reinvent herself, a quality that the novel explicitly marks as criminal. In this line of argumentation, Helena Michie cites Lady Audley's subversive abilities to reproduce herself as the central anxiety of the narrative. Michie draws particular attention to the text's double structure working towards

apprehending that skill so that Lady Audley's transgressive identity can be restored to a unitary and stable status, 'a single identity, a single answer' (Michie, 1992a: 64).

Composed of complementary storylines, Braddon's novel counters and contains Lady Audley's subversive tale within a stabilising and equal narrative of detection. This regulatory tale turns George Talboys's homosocial companion and Sir Michael's effeminate nephew, Robert Audley, into a pseudo-detective and assigns him the sheer epic task of installing ideological closure.<sup>14</sup> A normalising agent, Robert is supposed to master duplicity and fix one single identity (that of the mad/bad first wife) onto the female transgressor, in order to keep it unitary, stable and within clearly intelligible social perimeters.

Functioning as Lady Audley's nemesis, Robert Audley's immediate task is to find out about the Lady's past, to progressively uncover her shed identities and discover the fate of his disappeared friend George. On a broader scale, his deductive efforts work towards meeting and containing the threat posed by the female offender's multiplicity, towards preventing semantic chaos and reinstating definitional order. Translated for the purposes of this study, Robert's detective work goes hand in hand with dispelling Lady Audley's "second wife allure" and firmly casting her into the mould of the bad first wife. In Robert's words, it is a matter of turning Sir Michael's child-like, innocent and sweet-natured second wife into a 'worthless woman', an 'arch conspirator', an 'all-accomplished deceiver', a matter of revealing her 'artifices', her 'diabolical delusion' and 'hellish power of dissimulation' and of irrevocably branding her as 'the most detestable and despicable of her sex - the most pitiless and calculating of human creatures' (Braddon, 1998: 252; 253; 256; 217; 274; 268). As has been noted by various critics, this process of vilification is accompanied by a complementary process of masculinisation and socialisation that turns the formerly selfish, physically timid and

desexualised Robert into a pillar of patriarchal society.<sup>15</sup> As Lynda Hart notes, ‘Robert *needs* Lady Audley as an object to be investigated in order to “realize” himself, in order, that is, to take his place in the social order as a man-of-the-law, or as a lawful man’ (Hart, 1994: 8). Containing the subversive feminine tale within the masculinising detective plot (Lady Audley’s subversive transgressions only coming to light through Robert’s deductive efforts), Braddon’s novel, by engaging the reader in the process of evidence gathering, clearly does not encourage such a thoroughly sentimental involvement with its melodramatic heroine as Wood does. This textual containment undeniably affects the narrative’s discursive hierarchy as Lady Audley’s tale is never allowed a discrete existence and is ultimately taken over by Robert’s masculine narrative. However, this discursive internality does not necessarily negate the subversive appeal of the feminine text since, contained or not, the transgressive tale (the tale of the transgressor) still manages to find expression. Paradoxically, it is only through Robert’s stabilising tale of detection that the female offender is given a history, her own story of poverty, desperation and abandonment out of which a multifaceted character, rather than a one-dimensional villainess, with a set of complex motivations, may be constructed (Gilbert, 1997: 104). Taking advantage of this interpretative gateway, Pamela K. Gilbert construes the ominous Lady not as a deceiver who hides her own innate wickedness (her first wife potential) behind the mask of virtue and childishness (her second wife allure). Instead, Gilbert defines the heroine as a rather more ambiguous ‘person who has been driven to desperation by adversity and the betrayal of comparatively powerful males [her alcoholic father and deserting husband] who failed to meet their obligations to her’ (Gilbert, 1997: 104).

Allowing narrative space for such interpretation, *Lady Audley’s Secret* does not impose binary gender ideology indiscriminately. Complicating simplistic

categorisations, the text provides telling glimpses of the first wife's 'hateful past' and revealing asides that give expression to the Lady's ambiguous rather than wicked voice (Braddon, 1998: 250). Resisting straightforward vilification, Lady Audley stresses her inability to 'plot horrible things [...] my brain isn't strong enough, or I'm not wicked enough, or brave enough', her 'worst wickednesses' being 'the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply-laid plots' (Braddon, 1998: 298; 297). Deemed by her closest friend, the maid Phoebe, 'a kind mistress' even after her crimes have been revealed, Lady Audley, like Wood's Isabel, speaks out against Robert's categorical defilement of her (Braddon, 1998: 411). She affirms that 'I think I might have been a good woman for the rest of my life, if fate would have allowed me to be so [...] Fate would not suffer me to be good. My destiny compelled me to be a wretch' (Braddon, 1998: 354). The latter statement exposes the rigid and coercing mechanisms of patriarchal gender binarisms, the irony being of course that the Lady's transgressions are ultimately aimed at achieving and preserving the idealised status of the Victorian Angel in the House. Expressing her moral ambiguity rather than straightforward depravity, the Lady's words also complicate Robert's black and white morality. For him, Lady Audley appears 'no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer and feel' but she more simplistically becomes 'the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle' (Braddon, 1998: 345). Obscuring binary gender ideology, Lady Audley's own admission hints at a more complex and morally inconsistent character that cannot be contained within Robert's rudimentary morality. Offering a (admittedly contained) forum for the first wife's transgressive presence, Braddon's novel only spasmodically invokes the reader's sympathies for her heroine (unlike Wood who engages the reader's sympathies throughout by overt narratorial commentary). Nonetheless, the narrative gives a powerful portrayal of a truly

subversive and unrepentant female offender. As the text makes clear, Lady Audley's rebellious personality can only be controlled by the most conspicuous of punitive processes. Like Isabel's, her ambiguous voice continues to reverberate beyond (or beneath) the narrative's official morality, thus counteracting the ideological/symbolic annihilation that the text appears to promote.

A Herculean effort of ideological containment, Robert's deductive work of symbolic annihilation can (ironically) only be accomplished not by his own endeavours but by Lady Audley's own admission that she suffers from hereditary madness (transmitted from mother to daughter).<sup>16</sup> This damaging acknowledgement allows Robert to isolate and banish the bad and now mad first wife, incarcerating her (with the medico-legal help of his patriarchal accomplices) in a Belgian asylum, her 'living grave', where she is left to be forgotten so that the remaining characters will never again 'hear that person's name' and narrative stability and closure can be accomplished (Braddon, 1998: 391; 398).<sup>17</sup> As has been noted by various critics, the heroine's supposed hereditary madness - a plot device so popular 'as to be nearly canonical' - is not only a highly questionable but also an extremely convenient affliction, Lady Audley's real secret being according to Elaine Showalter that 'she is *sane*, and, moreover, representative' (Stern, 2000: 43; Showalter, 1976: 4).<sup>18</sup> This uncomplicated diagnosis of an intensely complicated woman is a simplistic solution to the ideological problem that is Lady Audley (Stern, 2000: 43). Translated into the terminology of the marital triangle, this study maintains that the narrative both exposes and reinstalls the rigid mechanisms of the conservative marital triangle. Concluding with 'the good people all happy and at peace', the now duly socialised Robert - being a 'new man, with new hopes, new cares, new prospects, new purposes' - ends up being married to George's sister Clara ("proper" romance thus apparently being restored after the first



wife's expulsion) and living together with both siblings in a rather peculiar *ménage à trois* (Braddon, 1998: 447). The patriarchal homosocial triangle between Robert, George and Clara (who figures as an overt and patent substitute for her brother) successfully replaces the more subversive conflated marital triangle engaging Lady Audley.<sup>19</sup> While this idyllic and private world of blissful domesticity seems truly unpolluted by any remainder of the Lady's presence (it appears that she has been successfully exorcised for the remaining/romantic characters), it is nonetheless clear that this conservative "happy ending" has only been secured by the suspicious expulsion of the disruptive first wife. As a result, the novel remains haunted for some of its readers by the lingering presence of its illegally incarcerated heroine, appearing not a closed narrative but an open textual arena that stages more than it contains the transgressive first wife. As Pamela K. Gilbert observes, 'the epic ending of *Lady Audley's Secret* does not and cannot negate the subversive insistence of the Lady's voice' (Gilbert, 1997: 105). A thoroughly ambiguous textual project, the novel does not reveal or dictate meaning as much as it poses moral questions. On the one hand, Braddon's novel, like Wood's *East Lynne*, supports the patriarchal dictates of the conservative marital triangle, with Lady Audley firmly established as a mad/bad first wife, isolated and then banished from the conservative scenario. On the other hand, the text displays the suppression process of the subversive and morally ambiguous heroine (the narrative's textual revenant), thereby laying bare the rigid fixities of the patriarchal plot. In the process, the novel exposes the ways in which patriarchal ideology and oppositional gender discourses are dependent on the linguistic repression and silencing of the mad/bad first wife. *Lady Audley's Secret* explicitly uncovers and then attempts to contain the patriarchal paranoia that is brought about by the subversive coming-together of the two ideologically distinct figures of the mad/bad first wife and the good second

wife, a patriarchal fear that is also addressed in female Gothic texts. Highlighting the persistence of the triangular paradigm in yet-another gynocentric genre, the next section analyses the marital triangle within the context of the female Gothic, exploring this genre's latent as well as explicit explorations of feminosociality and intra-gender bonding.

## 4.2 From Gothic Romance to Marital Gothic: Variations of the Marital Triangle in Women's Gothic

As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier, the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if the drama were over then: the doubts and struggles of life ended: as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but to link each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition. (Thackeray, W. M. [1847] *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero*, <<http://thackeray.thefreelibrary.com/Vanity-Fair/26-1>>)

Taken from W.M. Thackeray's 1847 *Vanity Fair*, the above satirical and clichéd account of the conventional happy-end firmly locates the examination of romance outside the framework of marriage, the romantic exchange figuring as a transaction that typically precedes wedlock and the marital resolution functioning as the romantic conclusion to the courtship plot.<sup>1</sup> While the innovative romances discussed in this study have lifted the “dropped curtain” and demonstrated that the romantic plot of love triumphant can be played out just as effectively *after* the ceremony at the altar, this section also explores wedded life beyond the traditional marital ending but in its turn reveals the often horrific/Gothic drama of life unfolding beyond the “matrimonial barrier”. The female Gothic texts discussed here, in varying degrees, discard the ideology of the marital happy ending and complicate the social fiction of everlasting connubial bliss by introducing darker portraits of marital detachment, schisms or antagonism. In its exposure of what Evelyn J. Hinz terms the ‘locked’ condition of *wedlock*, this part of the thesis rejects the notion of the female Gothic as a fixed or synchronic monomyth (Hinz, 1976: 902). Instead, I investigate a variety of early/mid-twentieth-century female Gothic texts, tracing a textual sequence that describes an

increasing romantic disillusionment and a gradual focal shift from the heterosexual to the feminosocial dyad.<sup>2</sup> The readings in this section range from Daphne du Maurier's pseudo-romantic Gothic *Rebecca* (1938) through the feminosocial Gothic in Ellen Glasgow's more innovative ghost story 'The Past' (1920) to the marital Gothic of Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera* (1921).<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, the above texts delineate an increasing incorporation and acceptance of feminocentric materials. Moving from the heterosexual to the feminosocial plot, this shift in axes of importance/sympathy typically occurs at the expense of the heterosexual dyad that in turn becomes de-romanticised, marginalised or gothicised within the triangular scenario.

Tracing a development from pseudo-romance to romantic disillusionment, this investigation asserts the variability of the female Gothic and the term's typical 'inconsistency and incoherence' (Howard, 1994: 15).<sup>4</sup> In this analysis, I draw together different generic variants that fluctuate between the definitional poles of this particular literary form. The female Gothic figures both as an 'affirmative'<sup>5</sup> genre promising that despite the implicit disturbing emotional 'transformation from love into fear', 'Mr Right can and will be found' and a genre that explicitly uncovers 'the terror of the familiar: the routine brutality and injustice of the patriarchal family', that lays bare the 'horrors of female marital experience and entrapment' and 'reverses the theme of love triumphant [...] by showing its violent side'.<sup>6</sup> While none of the texts in this section strictly conforms to the affirmative or romantic prototype of the female Gothic, their relative adherence to the contrasting definitional pole and their gradual disarticulation of the romantic ideal vary in both substance and intensity. Highlighting the cultural authority of the romantic mythos, du Maurier's *Rebecca*, obsessively but ineffectively, attempts to maintain the prevalence of the conservative and affirmative romantic ideal. Replacing the heterosexist with a feminocentric plot, Glasgow's 'The Past' in turn marginalises the

romantic adventure and the marital happy-end. Von Arnim's *Vera* figures as the most unconcealed depiction of wedlock-gone-wrong, the latter novel overtly trying to give expression to the marital horror that according to Susanne Becker is still "the unspeakable" in popular gothics. Articulated only in soliloquies but not communicated to anybody, it remains a private and somehow unreal problem' (Becker, 1999: 87). In all the above texts, the gradual romantic disillusionment/marginalisation goes hand in hand with a re-focus on the concomitant meta-narrative of female bonding and feminosociality. The female-female bond of the marital triangle becomes progressively more potent/sympathetic as the heterosexual dyad (either structurally or ideologically) degenerates. Heterosexual romance has still a superficially redeeming function in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Here, the first and second wife are still defined in terms of the 'female competition' that according to Helene Meyers is 'endemic to the Gothic romance' (Meyers, 2001: 32).<sup>7</sup> In contrast, both Ellen Glasgow's ghost story and Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera* are intent on portraying the two female figures not as natural rivals but as a much more sympathetically-inclined dyad (in Glasgow's case) or even as possible allies against an unjust social order (in *Vera*). With the first wife increasingly being de-vilified and the female-female bond becoming a much more empathetic relation, the dynamics of the marital triangle unsurprisingly change accordingly. Offering an implicit critique of marriage, 'The Past' places the relational exchange between the two wives at the textual centre, thus re-directing the axes of importance from heterosexual to feminosocial. De-vilifying the first wife, Elizabeth von Arnim's more explicit marital Gothic reverses the conservative triangular dynamics that still govern the surface narrative of du Maurier's *Rebecca*. In *Vera*, the husband, rather than the first wife, becomes the centre of antagonism and negativity, the bad "other" - a cruel and narrow-minded *homme fatal* who entraps the young heroine in a matrimonial

state of irresolvable impasse and forces her to re-enact the tragic fate of the suicidal first wife.

A variation on the traditional tale of Cinderella, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) has been hailed as an 'exquisite love-story' that 'has got everything a romance needs and *more: jealousy, mystery, adultery and murder*' (quoted in Forster, 1993: 136; Light, 1997: 335; my italics). While the above-mentioned romantic excess carries extra-generic meanings that work towards undermining the romantic superstructure, du Maurier's novel also deals directly and self-consciously in the prototypes and the textualities of heterosexual romance (Simons, 1998: 119). An avid consumer of romantic fiction, the unnamed heroine, from the beginning, compulsively tries to weave romance from her own rather matter-of-fact relations with the austere and inscrutable widower Maxim de Winter. Initially, the latter's distinctly non-romantic and dispassionate marriage proposal evokes momentary disappointment in the young girl (she complains that 'in books men knelt to women, and it would be moonlight. Not at breakfast, not like this') (du Maurier, 1992: 57). Maxim's detached proposal is, however, quickly and consciously romanticised and thus authenticated 'by being filtered through the chimera of textuality generating in turn a pre-packaged scenario with its own validating discourse' (Simons, 1998: 120). Through the heroine's eyes, Maxim's marriage offer and their hurried (and importantly "off-stage") wedding in turn become 'romantic. That is what people would say. It was all very sudden and romantic. They suddenly decided to get married and there it was. Such an adventure' (du Maurier, 1992: 61). Throughout the first months of marriage, Mrs de Winter (the only name to which the anonymous heroine answers to in the novel and the only identity to which she desperately clings) frantically attempts to uphold the fiction of romance. At first, this is only for the benefit of herself and her husband. She thus tries to convince both of them

that ‘our marriage is a success, a wonderful success [...] It’s not just me? We are happy, aren’t we? Terribly happy?’ (far from rhetorical questions in fact) (du Maurier, 1992: 154). Gradually but persistently, their marriage continues to disintegrate and unravel because of Maxim’s supposed ongoing affection for his first wife Rebecca. At the lowest point of their relationship, the second wife has given up all personal romantic illusions. No longer able to distil her own sobering marital experience through the validating lens of romance, her only hope for maintaining social standards and fulfilling her role as wife is to stage romance, each partner ‘play[ing] [their] part’ for the benefit of their environment. ‘If he had no more tenderness for me, never kissed me again, did not speak to me except on matters of necessity, I believed I could bear it if I were certain that nobody knew of this but our two selves’, she states, thus describing her own romance-gone-awry (du Maurier, 1992: 242). As will be argued, du Maurier’s text can only reapply the most superficial of romantic textual layers by radically intercepting the normative course of action, by imposing the most drastic of romantic strategies and by replacing the initially ambiguous/innovative and persistent triangular formation by the most conservative (and short-lived) of marital triangles.

Before this extreme intervention re-installs ideological coherence and closure and (at least superficially) re-affirms the conservative discourse of dyadic romance, the novel’s thematic concerns and structures insistently constitute a *ménage à trois*. A seemingly ‘wonderful person’ and ‘a very lovely creature’, the first wife Rebecca is at once rival and correlative measure for the plain, inexperienced and rather ordinary narrator, appearing to her as an epitome of the feminine ideal or ego ideal (du Maurier, 1992: 131). ‘[C]lever and beautiful and fond of sport’ and combining ‘beauty, brains, and breeding’, the all-accomplished Rebecca sets the standards to which the young girl aspires (du Maurier, 1992: 131; 285). Viewed through the latter’s eyes, Rebecca’s

perfected persona acquires an ever-more-potent presence that cannot be eradicated from the triangular constellation and increasingly undermines the ever-more-sterile relationship between Maxim and his second wife. Although Rebecca has no textual existence outside other characters' constructs of her, her elusive but powerful presence has been distinctly stamped on the ancestral seat of Manderley. The house primarily functions as a physical extension of her haunting presence, decorated, as it is, according to her supreme taste and cramped with reminders of her (her clothes, her scent, her letters, etc.). As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik point out, these reminders leave 'traces of Rebecca's body' and attribute a 'corporeal charisma' to the first wife that pervades the whole novel (Horner and Zlosnik, 2000: 212). It seems that whereas the heroine lacks a name and identity, Rebecca's name and identity cannot be contained by death and are omnipresent, her distinctive signature being found in books and letters and her initials being embroidered on her clothing. As Horner and Zlosnik maintain, Rebecca's 'strong presence in the novel is due not just to other characters' memories of her but to a sense of indelibility which continually surfaces in her signature' (Horner and Zlosnik, 1998b: 2). Upholding Rebecca's lingering legacy, housekeeper Mrs Danvers is still masochistically devoted to her dead mistress, reminding her seemingly inadequate successor that Rebecca is 'still mistress here, even if she is dead. She's the real Mrs de Winter, not you' (du Maurier, 1992: 257). Susceptible to such suggestions, the heroine is too indistinct a persona to differentiate herself from her predecessor. Never allowed access to difference, she is continually consigned to act out an unintended mimesis of the first wife, treading in her footsteps, wearing her clothes and repeating her actions and movements to the extent of imitating her facial gestures in unguarded moments (Simons, 1998: 115). She confesses, 'I had so identified myself with Rebecca that my own dull self did not exist [...] I had been Rebecca' (du Maurier, 1992: 209; 210).



The oppositional yet symbiotic conjunction between the two wives intensifies with the heroine's increasing identification, fascination and (as some critics maintain) homoerotic desire for her dead predecessor.<sup>8</sup> Analogously, the heterosexual "romantic" relation between Maxim and the second wife is increasingly de-romanticised and gradually deteriorates to a level of resignation and social make-believe. Following the normative course of action, the decline of the romantic dyad appears unstoppable, the triangular constellation irresolvable and Rebecca indestructible. Although Maxim voices his desire for Rebecca's symbolic annihilation ('I want to forget [...] Those days are finished. They are blotted out') and although the heroine's romantic task is clearly spelled out as 'lead[ing] us away from' the past 'not to take us back there again', she miserably fails to banish Rebecca from the romantic scenario (du Maurier, 1992: 43; 141). For her, 'somewhere [the first wife's] voice still lingered', her writing is 'alive' and 'full of force' and her smile is 'not forgotten' (du Maurier, 1992: 47; 62; 47).

Resisting symbolic annihilation and fulfilling the prophecy spelled out on her aptly named boat "Je Reviens", the first wife is kept alive by the memories and fascination of the remaining characters. Her lingering presence introduces an increasingly disruptive feminosocial component within the marital situation that undermines the ever-blander and distinctly non-romantic heterosexual dyad. At the peak of romantic disillusionment, the heroine admits defeat to the model wife she believes Rebecca to have been, she accepts triangulation and gives up all social claims for the identity of "Mrs de Winter" and all romantic illusions for herself and Maxim. Convinced that the latter is still in love with his first wife, she declares, 'he did not belong to me at all, he belonged to Rebecca [...] Rebecca was still mistress of Manderley. Rebecca was still Mrs de Winter [...] her I could not fight. She was too strong for me' (du Maurier, 1992: 243; 245).

Left to their own devices, husband and wife have evidently failed to uphold romantic standards and banish the haunting presence of the first wife from the heterosexist adventure. As triangulation continues to prevail, the novel at this stage leaves little hope for a romantic resolution to the erotic dilemma. As stated, the most drastic structural intervention is needed in order to avert this distinctly non-romantic line of action and to re-install (at least superficially) a romantic super-structure onto this apparent tale of wedlock-gone-wrong. Du Maurier's novel manages to re-direct the textual course onto an arguably muddled generic path of pseudo-romance by replacing the initial ideologically ambiguous triangle (giving expression to female-female fascination at the expense of the declining heterosexual dyad) with a thoroughly conservative marital constellation. A simplistic and unambiguous structure, this second configuration is based on the supremacy of the heterosexual romantic relation, on the strict moral opposition of the two female figures and on the relentless vilification of the bad first wife. Importantly, the ideological shift towards conservative romanticism is instigated by Maxim, who, like Rochester, functions as the perpetuator of a discriminating and dualistic patriarchal logic. Imposing his patriarchal definitional power and gaze onto Rebecca, Maxim intercepts the non-romantic course of action and introduces a new "romanticised" scenario by denouncing himself as the (morally righteous) murderer of his first wife. Maxim presents his murder as a matter of self-defence in view of his suffering and degradations at the hands of the depraved Rebecca. According to his patriarchal logic, the first wife was not an epitome of idealised femininity but 'vicious, damnable, rotten through and through' (du Maurier, 1992: 284). His previous marriage to Rebecca was thus a 'dirty damnable bargain', a 'lie we lived, she and I. The shabby, sordid farce we played together. Before friends, before relations, even before the servants', his description of marriage coming dangerously close to the

marital future of make-believe that the heroine had foreseen for herself and Maxim (du Maurier, 1992: 291; 286). Re-installing a conservative romantic status of erotic singularity, Maxim romanticises his second marriage by de-romanticising his first relationship ('we never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together') and by presenting his first wife as a distinctly anti-romantic character, a simulator of love, ('Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency') (du Maurier, 1992: 284). His revelations clearly aim to de-validate any previous fascination that the heroine (and the reader) might have felt for the first wife and to establish a conservative and controllable erotic constellation based on dualistic femininities and heterosexual supremacy.

The surprise revelations of Maxim's confession (Rebecca's depravity, his hate for and murder of her) and the resulting changes in Rebecca's characterisation (from model to depraved wife) are pulled out of the hat as semantic solutions that miraculously resolve the ideological ambiguities of the initial triangular formation, installing in its place a thoroughly conservative triangle that supposedly allows for dyadic coherence and romantic resolution. Compulsively vilifying the first wife and preparing the stage for her symbolic annihilation, Maxim's patriarchal intervention allegedly manages to sever the connections between the two wives, to break up triangulation and to redeem romance. Demonstrating the definitional power of the husband's male gaze, the second wife observes, 'now that I knew her to have been evil and vicious and rotten [...] Rebecca's power had dissolved into the air [...] I was free to be with Maxim, to touch him, and hold him, and love him' (du Maurier, 1992: 298). With the first wife seemingly laid to rest and the romantic dyad re-installed, du Maurier's surface plot clearly draws on the familiar structural dictates of the conservative romance and on the symbology of the conventional happy-end. In this

way, the heroine reassuringly presents her final merger with Maxim as an idyllic and romantic accord. She states, 'we march in unison, no clash of thought or of opinion makes a barrier between us' (du Maurier, 1992: 9). As a result, the patriarchal intervention and the substitution of marital triangles seem to intercept the normative course of action and cut short the critique of marriage and the process of romantic disillusionment that the first part of the novel anticipates. At the same time, the first wife's disavowal makes for a highly convenient and contrived twist in the tale. Failing to convince most critics, this interpretative shift ultimately does not manage to dispel the remnants of the earlier critique nor the distinctly unsettling and non-romantic undertones of the novel's conclusion.<sup>9</sup> The chronological and structural endings of the novel clearly lack romantic lustre, concluding with Manderley burnt to the ground, with 'no estate and no heirs to inherit it', with the still dispassionate and non-romantic couple rootlessly wandering the continent and with the second wife remaining overshadowed by Rebecca (Horner and Zlosnik, 1998a: 107).<sup>10</sup> Rather than a completed symbolic annihilation, erotic closure and a happy ending, the text's conclusion suggests an ongoing fascination with the first wife, a prevailing emotional triangulation and a matrimonial state of impasse and disillusionment.<sup>11</sup>

While the conventional romance is still the textual ideal that the narrative aspires to uphold, du Maurier's novel at the same time foregrounds the destructiveness of the heterosexual plot and lays bare the structure of violence and female complicity that underlies the conservative romantic construct.<sup>12</sup> In *Rebecca*, only murder and female complicity to male crime sanction the structures of romance. Repudiating her initial, more ambiguous construct of Rebecca, the second wife is willing to duplicate the male gaze and align herself with Maxim against a now common enemy. Du Maurier's novel presents two different versions of the marital triangle, an ambivalent but repudiated

constellation that registers marital discord and feminosocial fascination and a conservative but contrived structure that is based on female vilification and heterosexual supremacy. Employing two different erotic formations to describe one marital situation, *Rebecca* not only introduces competing triadic constructs within the textual whole but the text ultimately refuses to eradicate the ideological and dialogic friction that the co-existence of these two configurations (with the ensuing clash in worldviews) engenders. While this potentially subversive ideological friction continues to call into question the validity, authenticity and effectiveness of the romantic plot and to de-romanticise the heterosexual relation, the narrative also makes clear that heterosexual romance is still the only structurally (re)presentable option and that only the romantic relation can be represented on centre stage. For Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, du Maurier's text consequently appears as a 'generically hybrid novel', torn between the still-binding structural dictates of the conservative romance and what du Maurier herself calls a 'rather grim' and 'unpleasant' critique of marriage and male power (Horner and Zlosnik, 1998c: 62; quoted in Forster, 1993: 137).<sup>13</sup> An ambiguous project, *Rebecca* illustrates the structural perseverance of the conservative romantic ideal as well as exposing the drastic and contrived measures necessary to uphold it. In the process, the novel draws attention to the morally simplistic and biased nature of the patriarchal equation that prescribes that in order to break up triangulation and make the romantic dyad prevail, the first wife must inevitably be vilified and feminosocial relations be severed, whatever the cost.

Echoing the innovative strategies of contemporary romances, Ellen Glasgow's ghost story 'The Past' (1920) partly revises this conservative equation by portraying the feminosocial dyad as supportive of, rather than straightforwardly obstructive to, the heterosexual relation. In this case, the break-up of triangulation hinges on the

recognition and acceptance, rather than the severing, of intra-female bonds. Unlike the innovative romances however, Glasgow's narrative, while accidentally concluding in dyadic coherence, importantly de-centralises and marginalises the ineffectual heterosexual tie in order to focus on the distinctly stronger bonds of sympathy between women. The story thus highlights the submerged feminosocial plot that remains latent but unexplored in *Rebecca*. Told from the perspective of the secretary Miss Wrenn, the tale recounts the ordeal of her delicate and kind-hearted employer, the rich and beautiful second Mrs Vanderbridge. The latter is haunted by her predecessor killed in childbirth fifteen years ago. The spiteful ghost of the first wife materialises whenever the still guilt-ridden Mr Vanderbridge is thinking of her, the husband being completely unaware of the supernatural consequences of his imaginings. The first wife's presence is perceptible only to Mrs Vanderbridge and the female members of the household (Miss Wrenn and the maid Hopkins). As a result, the ghost('s) story is played out primarily among women. The erotic drama unfolds in a distinctly gendered environment in which only women have the power of perception and the ability to resolve triangulation. Although labelled 'one of the best men in the world' with 'no lack of love or tenderness on his side', the far from exemplary Mr Vanderbridge not only conjures up the ghost of his first wife (his inability to finalise her symbolic annihilation calling into existence the triangular scenario) but he also remains consistently imperceptive of and insensitive to his second wife's visible suffering (Glasgow: 4; 5). So steeped in the memories of an 'unforgettable past' that 'the present was scarcely more than a dream to him', Mr Vanderbridge 'can't help her because he doesn't know. He doesn't see it', the couple remaining ultimately 'divided' (Glasgow: 14; 12 - 13; 4; 5).

While the husband's ignorance and apathy make him a distinctly ineffectual romantic hero, the tasks of erotic resolution, emotional support and personal interaction

are left entirely to the female community characterised in turn by the kind of sympathy, compassion and understanding lacking in men and in heterosexual relations, so the tale implies. Instantly drawn towards her tragic and kind employer by 'a bond of sympathy', the utterly devoted Miss Wrenn is 'passionately' resolved to 'stand between Mrs Vanderbridge and [the] unknown evil that threatened her' (Glasgow: 1; 9). Willing to 'do anything in the world to comfort her', the secretary is encouraged by the elderly maid Hopkins to be a much-needed 'real friend' to her employer, 'somebody who will stand by her no matter what happens' (Glasgow: 14; 4). Transcending and replacing dyadic heterosexism as the ideal of interpersonal interaction, female communality functions as a more operational, active and fulfilling alternative to Glasgow's stale and sterile version of marriage. Importantly, the intra-gender community is extended beyond the natural world to include the 'Other One', the ghostly first wife (Glasgow: 8). Before becoming an object of female sympathy however, the ghost of the first Mrs Vanderbridge is defined entirely in opposition to her saintly successor, the apparition becoming increasingly more malignant as the husband immerses himself in memories of her. Initially, the dead first wife seems only a 'selfish', 'wilful and undisciplined' 'spoiled child' who does not yet pose too much of a threat for the observing Miss Wrenn (Glasgow, 6). She states, 'I couldn't think of her as wicked any more than I could think of a bad child as wicked' (Glasgow, 6). As the husband becomes increasingly entranced with the past, the ghost appears ever more sinister and malignant, becoming an ever-more-apt representation of the prototype of the bad first wife. In keeping with this characterisation, Miss Wrenn discovers a set of love letters highlighting the first wife's unfaithfulness and lack of morality. Moreover, as Mr Vanderbridge becomes ever more lost in memories, the ghost appears increasingly possessed of a 'malignant will' and seems to pursue a 'sinister purpose' (Glasgow: 15).

While gradually vilifying the first wife and setting the stage for a distinctly conservative marital situation, 'The Past' also exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of the simplistic triangular structure. As the second Mrs Vanderbridge makes clear, her ghostly predecessor has no substance beyond her husband's imagination. His male gaze and memories control and are responsible for the ghost's threatening and evil demeanour. She notes that '[the first wife's ghost] is his thought of her', 'his thought of her is like that, hurt and tragic and revengeful' (Glasgow: 11; 12). However, while laying bare the patriarchal reasoning underlying the conservative marital triangle, Glasgow's text nonetheless refuses to install the simplistic ideological structures it initially constructs. Like du Maurier's heroine, the second Mrs Vanderbridge, at one stage, resigns and gives in to triangulation. Yet, unlike *Rebecca*, 'The Past' does not compulsively impose conservative erotic structures in order to re-establish dyadic coherence. Glasgow's narrative breaks up triangulation not by the means of patriarchal ideological reasoning but by the means of feminosocial bonding. Refusing to act out the morally simplistic scenario prescribing the inevitable vilification of the first wife, the second Mrs Vanderbridge, unlike du Maurier's heroine, resists (complicity with) the male gaze. Instead, she chooses to destroy rather than exploit the scandalous and compromising material (the letters proving the first wife's unfaithfulness) that would establish conservative erotic relations. Turning the ghost into an object of sympathy rather than vilification, Mrs Vanderbridge refuses to fight her dead predecessor with patriarchal weapons, stating 'I cannot fight you that way. I give up everything [...]' Nothing is mine that really belongs to you' (Glasgow: 16). By throwing the incriminating letters into the fire, the second wife extends the vision of female sympathy and community (that has inspired the text from the beginning) onto the first wife. By this act of compassion and generosity, the second wife releases her predecessor



from her bondage of hate and transforms the patriarchal construct of the bad first wife into a feminosocial ideal of a loving companion. The vanishing first wife appears in her last apparition ‘young and gentle and [...] loving. It was just as if a curse had turned into a blessing’ (Glasgow: 16). Dyadic heterosexism remaining ineffectual and marginal, female communality is not only the primary form of interaction in Glasgow’s tale but also the means of textual resolution. While the first wife’s act of sympathy en passant breaks up triangulation and presumably installs a successful heterosexual relation, it most importantly articulates a vision of female friendship and community that exists clearly outside marriage and transcends the ineffectual and passive ties between husband and wife. Putting female “sisterhood” and bonding centre stage and emphasising the incompetence and inadequacy of the male hero, Glasgow’s ‘The Past’ shifts the axis of importance from heterosexual to feminosocial and explores intra-gender community as a preferable alternative to its stale version of heterosexism. In the process, the text celebrates the strength of female bonding and harbours an implicit critique of marriage.

Like *Rebecca*, Elizabeth von Arnim’s *Vera* (1921) takes its title from a dead first wife. Unlike du Maurier’s text, however, the textual progression in von Arnim’s narrative does not evolve from intra-female fascination to superficially normative heterosexism but inversely, from romantic coupledness to a feminosocial triadic structure in which the husband rather than the first wife becomes distinctly other. While in *Rebecca* and ‘The Past’, the dead spouse remains the Gothic epicentre, *Vera* locates the dark, unsettling and disruptive qualities of the Gothic entirely with the male. The novel thereby functions as the most overt example of what Michelle Massé terms ‘marital Gothic’, a generic variation in which the husband rather than the first wife ‘becomes the avatar of horror who strips voice, movement, property and identity itself from the

heroine' (Massé, 1992: 12). Left desolate after the death of her father, the young Lucy Entwistle desperately rushes into a marriage with the considerably older Everard Wemyss, 'overpowered [...] into a torpor, into a shutting of her eyes and her thoughts, into just giving herself up' (von Arnim, 1983: 57). Initially appearing 'so transparently good, so evidently kind', the recent widower seems a 'wonderful friend' to the orphaned Lucy (von Arnim, 1983: 24; 50). For the latter, Everard's dominant nature and simplistic reasoning (his 'plain division of everything into two categories only, snow-white and jet black') promise a retreat from impending adulthood and the regressive pleasure 'of being a baby again in somebody's big, comfortable, uncritical lap' (von Arnim, 1983: 64; 96). While 'all [Everard] ask[s] in a woman [is] devotion', his 'own little wife' Lucy is relieved from all adult responsibility, 'no thinking needed [...] She hadn't got to strain or worry, she had only to surrender' (von Arnim, 1983: 128; 66; 64). Demanding minute devotion to his needs and a complete surrender of self, Everard commands mental as well as physical submission - 'her thoughts were to be his as well as all the rest of her' (von Arnim, 1983: 129). Although Everard envisions marriage as a merger of identities ('Everard-Lucy. Lucy-Everard. We shan't know where one ends and the other begins'), it is not so much romantic union he requires as a complete silencing of the female voice and a total absorption of the female into the male self (von Arnim, 1983: 139). Consequently, Lucy feels 'so much muffled and engulfed that her voice didn't get through' anymore, her identity 'every day disappearing further [...] into Wemyss's personality' (von Arnim, 1983: 80; 120).

Like Sir Michael Audley, Everard constructs an innocent and childlike persona for his second wife. Yet, unlike Lady Audley who encourages and knows how to exploit such characterisation for her own advantage, von Arnim's heroine becomes increasingly stifled by her husband's paternalistic and overbearing classifications. As Everard will

have ‘no buts’ from his babified wife and denies her freedom of action and thought (‘the right way was his way’), Lucy’s self and identity gradually start vanishing, turning her into an ‘unresisting blank’ (von Arnim, 1983: 133; 172; 237). Willing to give up her personhood for ‘that great, glorious, central blaze’ of love, Lucy resolves, ‘she wouldn’t think at all. She would just take things as they came, and love, and love’ (von Arnim, 1983: 194). While this strategy of complete self-abnegation represents a self-destructive and hopeless attempt to weave romance even from the most perverse of circumstances, the intellectually superior Lucy cannot help resenting Everard’s petty and egotistical cruelties. Failing to merge her identity entirely with his, she grows increasingly estranged from and frightened of the domestic tyrant that is her husband. Tracing the conversion of the ‘lover and husband’ into a ‘pitiless, cruel [...] strange man’, von Arnim’s novel completes the plot of marital antagonism cut short in *Rebecca* (von Arnim, 1983: 188). The text explicitly and chillingly illustrates the transformation ‘from love into fear’ that according to Tania Modleski is integral to the female Gothic (Modleski, 1982: 60). ‘She was afraid of him [...] Perhaps she had been afraid of him unconsciously for a long while’, Lucy states (von Arnim, 1983: 218). Her words accurately describe the conversion of the formerly romantic husband into the ideological seat of Gothic otherness. In this novel, the male replaces the first wife as the source of disruption and unhappiness. His behaviour is distinctly anti-romantic, his sadistic person an acute threat to the disempowered heroine.

While *Vera* traces the gradual “othering” and “gothicisation” of the male component of the triangular constellation, the text also explores the concomitant meta-narrative of female bonding that accompanies the process of romantic disillusionment. Romantically clinging to her husband, Lucy is at first afraid of the first wife’s memory, shrinking from ‘the intrusion of Vera’ and eager to have ‘all traces of Vera’s life’

removed (von Arnim, 1983: 144; 141). Systematic in his affections and indignant at his first wife for falling out of a window after fifteen years of marriage (her death having caused well founded but to Everard ridiculous suspicions of suicide), the husband has little difficulty in carrying out the first wife's symbolic annihilation. For him, the 'only safe way to deal with [the past] is to forget it' (von Arnim, 1983: 65). While Everard seems only too eager to replace the older Vera (with her annoying inclination to 'lean out of dangerous windows if she wished to') with the childish Lucy (with her 'sweet obedience of perfect trust'), Lucy on the other hand finds it increasingly impossible to 'get away from Vera' (von Arnim, 1983: 29; 31; 177). As the heterosexual dyad deteriorates, the second wife turns to her dead predecessor for assistance and help against Everard's silencing and self-abnegating regime of obedience and surveillance. Faced with the husband's petty cruelties, Lucy feels that the 'only person who could have told her anything, who could have explained, who *knew*, was Vera. [...] Vera would help her [...] If only, *only* Vera weren't dead!' (von Arnim, 1983: 189; 190). As the second wife feels increasingly drawn towards her dead predecessor (she tries with a 'starving hurry to get to know, to get to understand, Vera'), the heterosexual dyad gives way to a feminocentric triangle in which 'Lucy, Vera – Lucy, Vera' replaces the earlier 'Everard-Lucy. Lucy-Everard' in the heroine's affections (von Arnim, 1983: 199; 312; 139).

Yet, even as the novel substitutes the feminosocial for the heterosexual dyad on the axis of sympathy, the text also illustrates that the gothicised male component remains too potent to be discarded from the triadic structure. Although empathetic, the female-female tie is ultimately ineffectual against male tyranny. Rather than pointing towards a way to escape from the marital situation, the bond between the two wives insistently expresses a process of mimetic replication and repeated victimisation.

Instead of a pro-active alliance, it describes fatalistic ties engendered by a common fate than none of the two wives can escape. As the novel insinuates, just as Vera's longing for freedom (her collection of travel books suggesting 'such tiredness, such a – yes, such a wish to escape') has been subdued and her husband's stifling regime has finally driven the first wife to commit suicide, so Lucy seems destined to act out an inescapable mimesis of Vera and to replicate and eventually share the same tragic fate (von Arnim, 1983: 289). History seems bound to repeat itself when Lucy's intrepid but powerless aunt Dot warns Everard that Lucy 'hasn't the staying power of Vera' and that if he continues his suffocating expectations, 'it won't take fifteen years this time' (von Arnim, 1983: 310; 311). As the incorrigible Everard remains livid at such warnings (what he projects as the presumption of all women, who 'invariably started by thinking they could do as they liked with him'), the novel predicts no happy-end for this couple (von Arnim, 1983: 316). The text concludes with the increasingly powerless Lucy trapped in a marriage and bound to a husband who will presumably either kill her or force her into committing suicide. Highlighting the state of female powerlessness, immobility and enclosure that define the marital Gothic, von Arnim's text aptly articulates Virginia Woolf's narrator's experience in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) who declares, 'how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and [...] how it is worse perhaps to be locked in' (Woolf, 1994: 29). Ending in a state of Gothic impasse, *Vera* radically reverses the theme of love triumphant and discards the ideology of the happy ending in favour of a chilling study of the horrors of female marital experience and entrapment. The novel therefore makes explicit the implicit critiques of marriage in both *Rebecca* and 'The Past'.

De-naturalising, marginalising or vilifying the heterosexual bond, the three texts discussed in this section complicate the romantic mythos and introduce darker portraits

of marital discord, alienation or antagonism. At the same time, they also demonstrate the cultural authority, tenability and power of the heterosexist plot. They illustrate the extreme and contrived measures taken to uphold the romantic ideal or highlight the inescapability of the most perverse of male-female ties. While the three texts, in varying degrees, give expression to the Gothic plot potentially underlying the conservative romance, they also highlight the antithetical relations between the meta-discourses of romantic heterosexism and feminosociality. In their depictions, the female-female bond invariably strengthens as the male-female bond declines. Whereas female communality remains ultimately ineffectual in *Vera*, the next section focuses on the power and the prevalence of female bonding that is hinted at in Glasgow's ghost story. Highlighting the persistence of the female-male-female structure in yet another gynocentric genre, I proceed to investigate the manifestations of the marital triangle in popular feminist texts. Unlike the female Gothic, this genre will popularise and celebrate the triumphant female-female bond at the expense of the marginalised or disparaged cross-gender relation.

### 4.3 Sisterhood is Powerful\*: Popular Feminism and the Marital Triangle

Defined as the ‘daughter of capital F Feminism’, as a type of feminism that ‘is widespread, common to many, and [...] that emerges from the realm of popular culture’, as ‘the feminism that can be marketed. It is the sort that pervades our commonsense’, popular feminism has played a significant part in shaping the dynamics of the marital triangle in progressive contemporary romances (Stuart, 1990: 30; Erdman Farrell, 1998: 5; Skeggs, 1997: 144). As has been argued, the innovative romantic plot provides a fitting stage for the articulation of a popularised and de-politicised version of feminist sisterhood that continues to operate within the romantic superstructure. Equally dedicated to feminist intervention within popular culture, this section also explores the possibilities and pitfalls inherent in the mainstreaming of the feminist ideal of community but in turn analyses texts that expand the feminosocial potential of the innovative romance beyond romantic limitations. The focus here is on popular feminist variations of the triangular configuration that dispute the social, emotional and narrative precedence of the romantic master-genre and express what Rachel Blau DuPlessis terms the ‘postromantic’ plot of ‘female bonding’ (Blau DuPlessis, 1985: xi). Using the concept of sisterhood (considered one ‘of the most compelling themes evoked by feminism’) as an interpretative tool to investigate the incorporation of feminist themes within popular culture, this section asserts that the rhetoric of feminist sisterhood has been diversified, reinvented and translated into the mainstream cultural arena in the guise of a popular feminist discourse of female communality and collectivism (Erdman Farrell, 1998: 36). This popular feminist discourse describes an engaging but arguably

simplistic vision of female empowerment and sisterly permanence that develops within the context of a still-patriarchal (yet not overtly proto-romantic) world. Articulated within the discursive frame of the patriarchal meta-discourse, popular feminist sisterhood is a progressive rather than radical concept, oscillating between patriarchal co-option and an invigorating widening of feminist thought. In this analysis, I assert that, despite contemporary feminist disavowals of a too-generalised sisterhood<sup>1</sup> and despite current postfeminist tendencies towards self-centred individualism<sup>2</sup>, there is an ongoing need for a popular version of the feminist “we” and ‘a notion of women as a group’ (Mann, 1997: 232). As Deborah L. Siegel and Magdalene Ang-Lygate maintain, ‘it is not easy [...] to say “we” yet we must’, ‘so, sisters, the trick is to keep sistering’ (Siegel, 1997: 62; Ang-Lygate et al., 1997: 6).

As I argue, the mainstream negotiations of sisterhood attest to the entry of feminist themes into the popular cultural arena and to the continued allure of what Iris Marion Young calls ‘the ideal of community’ (Young, 1990: 300).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the narrative focus on women as a collective group marginalises and calls into question the supremacy and prevalence of the romantic master-plot. I maintain that these sororal representations find apt expression through the relational framework of the marital triangle. As the triadic structure is based on the social connections between the two wife figures, the marital constellation lays a structural base ready to be exploited for the collective purposes of popular feminism. Drawing attention to intra-gender collectivism and solidarity, the texts discussed in this section highlight processes of transformation in which women become strong and gain independence through each other. In the process, they explore the concept of popular sisterhood, establishing female-female relations that flourish either within the crevices of the marital triangle or across a range of marital triangles. Here, the marital triangle essentially functions as an initial situational site that



brings a diversity of women into contact with each other. In this way, Cindy Blake's *Second Wives* (1996) traces the 'unholy alliance' between the figures of the first and second wife across multiple triangular structures in which most women come to realise that 'we're the same person. We have different faces and we're different ages, that's all' (Blake, 1996: 224; 127). Stephanie Bond's *Our Husband* (2001) in its turn eliminates the male component of the erotic structure and substitutes the heterosexual marital triangle with a mono-gendered triadic configuration. This relational structure unites the three very dissimilar wives of a polygamous relationship (a doctor, an erotic dancer and a socialite) on a journey motivated by their common interest in finding the murderer of their untrustworthy mutual husband. Most importantly, this journey leads the metaphorical 'sisters' to the discovery that 'despite their marked differences in age and personality [...] they had more in common right now than any three women on the planet' (Bond, 2001: 83; 310). Celebrating female bonding as a valid substitute for the often-denigrating and cruel relationships between men and women, Olivia Goldsmith's *The First Wives Club* (1992) follows up the trend of the first wife's de-vilification and like the previous novel, replaces the original romantic triad with an alternative triangular structure grouping three very different middle-aged first wives. These include an old movie star, an outspoken and overweight mafia daughter and a refined and initially reluctant intellectual, all seeking revenge and eager to prove that 'we can't simply be discarded' (Goldsmith, 1997: 114). Rejecting the stereotypical notion of the mad/bad first wife and casting their men-bashing vendetta in terms of justice and vindication, these first wives and symbolic 'sisters' are looking for the 'total destruction [...] Emotional, financial, social' of the men who used and thrust them aside, their motto being 'we don't get mad, we just get even' (Goldsmith, 1997: 247; 118; 119).

Featuring numerous sets of marital triangles or broadening the triadic constellation to include a third wife, the above novels convey a shared rather than singular experience that binds a multitude of women. The accumulation and diversification of marital triangles allow women from different constellations to bond and connect. This multiplication in marital triangles/the introduction of another wife figure importantly distinguishes the popular feminist from the singular romantic plot. Engaging more than two women, it provides a particularly apt narrative base for the articulation of popular sisterhood. Grouping together sets of women in their collective experience of either wedlock-gone-wrong or wedlock-temporarily-in-trouble, the texts stage a female communal plot of romantic disillusionment followed by group-induced empowerment. This common narrative is set explicitly in opposition to the singular plot of the romantic heroine whose search for and discovery of the perfect partner are perceived as extraordinary and exceptional. Set against romantic notions of erotic exclusivity, the three texts stress community rather than individualism and recount a shared rather than singular experience. Giving centre stage to the ever-stronger bonds between women of all ages, class and personality, the novels also hold out the promise that intra-female differences in generations, education and outlook can be reconciled for the greater good of a diverse but unified sisterhood. Re-enacting the ideal of much contemporary feminist thought on the concept, the three texts articulate an ethics of sameness and commonality that does not obliterate necessary differences among women and does not negate female individuality.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on intra-gender bonding, these popular feminist narratives displace the structural weight and emotional aura of the individual romantic heroine and of the romantic heterosexual couple into a female communal protagonist. Sharing many characteristics with Adrienne Rich's well-known notion of 'lesbian continuum', this gendered group formation leads both action and

readerly affiliation away from male-female romance.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the use of a female choral protagonist is also a strategy that Susan Carlson identifies as part of much feminist comedy.<sup>6</sup> Inasmuch as 'the difference in women's comedy depends on optimism' and a 'positive vision', the three novels discussed here clearly deserve such denomination, considering the texts' overall optimistic tones and their positive endings celebrating female strength, independence and friendship (Carlson, 1991: 307).

As feminist comedies, the narratives conclude in uplifting visions of female solidarity and sisterhood in which the protagonists become stronger and more independent through each other – female bonding going hand in hand in these instances with empowerment and self-sufficiency. Depicting men getting their comeuppance from the women they have wronged, Goldsmith's topic is not only a ripe subject for comedy but it is also touched by a feminist rhetoric of female independence. Initially vilifying their cruel/deceiving/cheating ex-husbands, Goldsmith's first wives come to realise during their wonderfully vicious vendetta that 'those men, those big, powerful, scary men [...] weren't tough or invincible' (Goldsmith, 1997: 220). Stressing the cathartic power of female vindication and communal empowerment, these 'righters of wrongs' ultimately manage to 'free' themselves from the 'cage' of exploitative marriage and to disengage themselves from their marital situations to find happiness elsewhere (Goldsmith, 1997: 447; 459). Forming mostly successful intra-gender bonds with their marital predecessors that exist apart from the marginal heterosexual relationships, Blake's second wives stay married yet without being fooled by all-too-romanticised notions of heterosexual bonding. Using vocabulary directly reminiscent of feminist terminology of female empowerment, these wives stress 'our position, our power' and crudely heed themselves not to forget 'what assholes [men] can be. Not entirely. So we better be a powerful force ourselves' (Blake: 1996: 391). Growing together despite their

differences and through their mutual disappointment with their deceiving murdered husband, Bond's trio of wives not only puts into practice the concept of diversified sisterhood but the text also resolves the heterosexual drama by eliminating the male component from the marital equation. Killing off the polygamous husband at the beginning of the narrative, the text is free to explore the affective value of female collectivism that, as in the other narratives, functions as a valid alternative to dyadic romance. Ending with an optimistic vision of female solidarity and community, the novel concludes that 'if Raymond Carmichael [their mutual husband] performed a single deed to warrant grace in the afterlife, it was bringing the three of them together' (Bond, 2001: 357 - 358).

Rather than being key players, the novels' husbands are often relegated to being marginal/instrumental characters or mere physical causes of discontent that unite and bring together groups of women. In these instances, the male components of the marital situations are invariably sidelined, vilified or eliminated, thus leaving textual space for the celebration of intra-gender ties. The three texts transfer narrative focus and readerly sympathy onto the bonds created between the female participants of the matrimonial structures. They thereby draw attention to a web of female-female relations spun either within one polygamous marital configuration or across different marital triangles. While these popular feminist novels are thus touched by a feminist ethics of empowerment, independence and female bonding, it is important to realise that their vision of intra-gender solidarity and sisterhood still develops within the context of a patriarchal world. In particular, their popular feminist solutions do not exclude female rivalry or heterosexual romance. Rather than envisaging a feminist utopia of an all-unified sisterhood, the three narratives do not necessarily extend their vision of female friendship and solidarity to all womankind. Instead, they celebrate and give precedence

to a female-based subculture that defiantly thrives within rather than outside the bounds of a patriarchal world in which female rivalry and antagonism are still largely in operation. While the web of sisterhood binding Goldsmith's first wives is firmly established, their ex-husbands' 'newer, taller, blonder second' wives and branded 'new trophies' remain for the most part alien individuals who singularly suffer the consequences of the first wives' rightful retaliation (Goldsmith, 1997: 117; 114). In this case, popular sisterhood spans across a multitude of matrimonial configurations rather than within the separate marital triangles. Incorporating female antagonism within the textual structure, Bond's *Our Husband* similarly features a murderous ex-girlfriend Blanche seeking revenge for an old betrayal that saw Beatrix (the first wife) steal Blanche's boyfriend and unrightfully make him her husband. The first wife's initial un-sisterly action thus set 'in motion twenty-some years ago [events] for a woman who had once called her a friend' (Bond, 2001: 348). More poignantly still, whereas the majority of the first-second wife couples in Blake's novel drop enmities and connect, *Second Wives* also gives voice to a rogue first wife who refuses to be taken in by the general mood of reconciliation. The first wife Jackie thus expresses her murderous hate for the second wife Leo, declaring 'what gave *her* the right to step into my place as if I were dead. I deserved to be loved. [...] I wanted to get rid of *her*, the person who robbed me. [...] I was looking for justice' (Blake, 1996: 386 - 387). Most importantly, all three novels ultimately gloss over such disparaging voices to conclude in triumphant and optimistic celebrations of popular sisterhood and female empowerment. Their insistence on female collectivism is clearly intended to overrule their random and solitary articulations of un-sisterly disturbances. Nonetheless, the existence of female rivalry and antagonism alongside the heralded ideal of female solidarity and friendship points more towards a negotiation of feminist themes within an overall patriarchal structure

than to a simplistic reversal or straightforward replacement of the latter ideology by a more radical feminist vision. Rather than a utopian and over-optimistic depiction of female commonalities, the novels' portrayals of female rivalry co-existing alongside their single-sex homosocial networks attest to the ambiguous and socially aware negotiation of female sisterhood within mainstream culture.

While female antagonism cannot totally be eradicated for the sake of an all-encompassing form of sisterhood, egalitarian heterosexism also remains a desirable (if marginal) relational option that exists harmoniously alongside the altogether more central female-based collective. As Jacinda Read puts it, 'what [is] at stake here [is] not an authentic feminist politics, but a negotiated version of 1970s feminism in which sisterhood and heterosexuality, angry women and nice men [can] coexist' (Read: 9). Although husbands function as the main source of problems and heartache in the narratives and although women derive collective strength only through each other and against men, the novels contextualise rather than vilify heterosexuality and they repeatedly salvage the scrutinised male-female relation. Although sidelined, egalitarian heterosexism retains most of its charisma and it is often integrated within the overall sororal plot. In this way, most marriages of Blake's second wives remain intact and are strengthened by the bonding of the diverse first and second wives (with the exception of the above-named rogue first wife Jackie). Similarly, Natalie, one of Bond's wives, and all of Goldsmith's heroines form new loving relationships after their disastrous first marriages, one of which in Goldsmith's case is notably lesbian. While the popular feminist focus on sisterhood is distinctly post-romantic, love (whether heterosexual or lesbian) continues to matter for the popular feminist heroines. With dyadic heterosexism and female antagonism remaining integral (if marginal) parts of the popular feminist narrative, the novels' negotiations of sisterhood are in Fiske's terms progressive rather

than radical. To recapitulate, rather than radically rejecting 'the dominant conventions for representing reality' and rather than excluding 'the dominant ideology from any role in the production of meanings', the progressive text gives expression to 'discourses of social change [...] articulated in relationship with the meta-discourse of the dominant ideology' (Fiske, 1987: 46; 47). In other words, instead of drastically replacing the old order with a utopian and mono-gendered feminist alternative, the popular feminist plot introduces a progressive and popularised discourse of female commonality which ambiguously extends itself within a patriarchal world and in which female rivalry and heterosexism still operate at the margins.

In touch with patriarchal structures as well as touched by a feminist ethics of empowerment and collectivism, the popular understandings of feminist sisterhood are neither ideologically transparent nor free of conflict. While the continued existence of female rivalry and heterosexism at the texts' margins is more evidence of a socially aware negotiation than a utopian counter-practice, the overall discourse of female bonding is characterised more by its easy and optimistic rendering than by its cultural sophistication or political relevance. Unsurprisingly, popularising and mainstreaming the concept of sisterhood have triggered criticism and have opened up such discourses to charges of simplification and trivialisation. For some readers, the novels' overall feel-good mentality, their optimistic tones and comedic terms – speculating that female bonding will always lead to empowerment and happiness – may come dangerously close to a clichéd and simplistic rendering of the concept. Myra Macdonald thus denounces the engaging but ultimately limited rhetoric of popular sisterhood, asserting that in 'popular media terms [...] feminist sisterhood [has] mutated into sentimentalism [...] In the public space, the resolution and strength of female solidarity gives way to conventional romantic responses' (Macdonald, 1995: 64; 65). Moreover, translating the

formerly radical and thoroughly political concept of sisterhood into a distinctly personal and everyday discourse of friendship has also provoked charges of downplaying, appropriating and de-radicalising feminism. For Bonnie Dow, 'feminism gets watered down, negotiated and limited' in the popular representations of 'female bonding and alternative family forms' (Dow, 1996: 101). Applied to the texts in question, this study clearly underlines that the empowerment of Bond and Blake's heroines remains based on the personal and that Goldsmith's more explicit sex-war equally becomes operative on a purely individual level. In this line of argument, I assert that, while the intimate dynamics of the marital triangle encourage such privatisation, the personalisation of sisterhood inevitably divorces the formerly political concept from its broader systemic context, thereby articulating an individualised feminism that is necessarily reduced and compromised.

Evidently, the mainstreaming of feminist sisterhood has clear limitations: it gives expression to a muted, oblique and ambiguous version of feminism; its muffled rather than explicit politics derive not from any social movement or from direct feminist positions but from the private experiences and the personal behaviours of the individual heroines. As a result, feminism is subsumed under character traits and personal conduct rather than maintaining its overtly social and political character, its macro-cultural efficiency becoming necessarily reduced in the process. Consequently, this investigation maintains that it is important to maintain a keen sense of the limitations of mainstream media logic and to stay alert to the fundamental differences between the commodified feminism described here and the political and intellectual work feminists have done and continue to do. At the same time, I also insist that the popular portraits of female solidarity discussed here have noticeable feminist resonances. They offer discourses that, within their own limitations, help disseminate in broad and accessible strokes a



selection of feminist ethics across widespread popular consciousness. As Julie D'Acci observes, 'a mainstream, commercial, realist text [...] may nonetheless be part of a feminist project and a rallying point for pleasure and politics' (D'Acci, 1994: 9).

Although displacing direct political positions, such negotiations can nevertheless be read for their feminist dimensions as they help reinforce feelings of sympathy between women and solidify women's sense of themselves as a group. Inasmuch as the feminist rhetoric of collectivism is thereby absorbed and filtered into mainstream consciousness, this study largely agrees with Jacinda Read's contention that the 'popularisation of feminism, in disseminating feminist ideas beyond the ivory towers of academia is to be welcomed' (Read: 2). As Bonnie Dow observes, the danger is therefore not in enjoying such discourses but rather in 'mistaking them for something more than the selective, partial images that they are' (Dow, 1996: 214).

While my intention here is neither to condemn nor to celebrate the popular feminist understandings of sisterhood as valid or defective reflections of feminism, it is clear that, however reduced and mediated, feminist fragments continue to find negotiation in such texts. Within the limits of their popular packaging, these narratives help keep images of female sisterhood in circulation. Offering contradictory and mediated rather than fixed or easily identifiable versions of feminism, the texts attest to the plurality of feminist perspectives. They bear witness to the kind of widening of feminist thought that Janice Winship describes when noting that 'feminism no longer has a simple coherence around a set of easily defined principles [...] [it] is a much richer, more diverse and contradictory mix' (Winship, 1987: 149). While there are certainly gains and losses in creating a popular feminism, the three texts discussed in this section irrevocably demonstrate that, although reduced, negotiated and de-politicised, the notion of women as a group continues to engage popular consciousness.

They prove that the ‘pleasure to be “we”’ can successfully be popularised and marketed for a broad cultural matrix (Snitow, 1990: 10). Based on the social sameness of the wife figures, the personal rather than systemic dynamics of the marital triangle offer a particularly apt narrative base from which to capture the popular need for female connectivity and commonality of purpose. For Teresa de Lauretis, this need for ‘community [...] sisterhood, bonding, belonging to a common world of women or sharing what Adrienne Rich has poignantly called “the dream of a common language”’ is particularly expressive of an ‘ethical drive’ which she perceives as inherently opposed to the ‘erotic, narcissistic drive that enhances images of feminism as difference, rebellion, daring, excess, subversion, disloyalty, agency, empowerment, pleasure and danger’ (de Lauretis, 1990: 266). According to de Lauretis, while these two concurrent drives are ‘often in mutual contradiction’ and ‘are forced into open conflict’, they importantly ‘characterize the movement of feminism [...] [its] essential condition of contradiction, and the processes constitutive of feminist thought in its specificity’ (de Lauretis, 1990: 266).

Translated for the purposes of this study, the above feminist dialectic is symptomatic of the fundamental differences between the popular feminism discussed here and the kind of postfeminism addressed in the next section. Investigating these differences, this study argues that popular feminism and postfeminism are not consecutive nor ideologically distinct but connected and concomitant discourses, the sum of which articulates a holistic symbolic of two contradictory truths: women are both the same and different. Whereas popular feminism gives expression to the power and the allure of the ideal of collectivism, postfeminism is dedicated to portrayals of liberal and competitive individualism, stressing individual choice, singular empowerment and differences among women rather than group identity. As Bonnie

Dow observes, the ‘element missing from postfeminist programming’ is ‘female bonding or sisterhood’ (Dow, 1996: 101). Contrasting the collective “we” of popular feminism to the singular “I” of postfeminism, this study maintains that the tension between popular feminism and postfeminism represents the simultaneous ‘pull between sisterhood and competitive individualism’ and that the contemporary understandings of sisterhood can often be understood as responses to and ways of countering the solitary postfeminist chimera (Douglas, 1994: 283).<sup>7</sup> While the friction between popular feminism and postfeminism articulates the tensions between sisterhood and individualism within feminism, the structures of the marital triangle are particularly receptive to and expressive of this feminist dialectic. Whereas the popular feminist marital triangle generally undergoes either multiplication or diversification in order to include more women and facilitate the portrayal of sisterhood, the postfeminist marital triangle of Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) forcefully compresses and reduces the marital triad. Weldon’s novel gives centre stage to a first wife who breaks up triangulation by taking the shape of the second beloved, thereby creating an ambiguous postfeminist “I” that condenses both women into a disturbing and exploitative rather than harmonious merger. Investigating the postfeminist manifestation of the marital triangle, the next section completes this study’s analytical journey through gynocentric genres, affirming the variability and persistence of the marital triangle and contributing to trace the structural spectrum of the female-male-female constellation.

#### 4.4 The Postfeminist Marital Triangle in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*

'The years of general, emotional, sisterly hand-holding [feminism] are over', states Fay Weldon in her 1984 article 'How to Be Feminist', thus giving a critical evaluation of the kind of post-sisterhood and (as this study maintains) postfeminist scepticism that had already shaped the mode of her earlier novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (Weldon, 1984: 354).<sup>1</sup> First published in 1983, the latter text offers a distinctly different reading experience from the optimistic and comedic celebrations of popular sisterhood discussed in the previous section. For Weldon, gone are the hopeful days of women bound across generational, educational and class lines as her heroines are no longer sisters but once again sexual rivals and opposites. Where Goldsmith and co. express the ideal of collectivism, hope and a kind of overarching optimism, Weldon's novel expresses disunity, doubt and a kind of rugged individualism that this study classifies as inherently postfeminist. Placing the novel's complex and dual agenda within the context of postfeminism not only allows fitting the text into a broader cultural framework but such positioning also allows this study to explain Weldon's ideological re-visioning of the marital triangle in terms of the creation of a distinctly ambiguous postfeminist self. Judith Stacey's well-known definition of postfeminism as 'the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism' clearly underlies this study's understanding of the concept (Stacey, 1987: 8). Within this definitional frame, this section singles out a particular strand of the undoubtedly more complex postfeminist agenda and concentrates on the postfeminist negotiation of the individualistic (rather than collective) aspects of feminism.<sup>2</sup> Due to

the aim and subject matter of the thesis, the focus here is primarily on the solipsistic stance and the lack of collectivism that for critics Vicki Coppock, Bonnie Dow and Susan Douglas are part of postfeminist consciousness. In this way, Coppock stresses that the 'construction of "post-feminism" has led to, and emphasised, differences between women', implying therefore for Dow that 'women's problems, and their solutions, are individual and do not require group identity' (Coppock et al., 1995: 7; Dow, 1996: 99). As a result, instead of 'group action, we got escapist solitude. Instead of solidarity, we got female competition over men' (Douglas, 1995: 266).

While postfeminism endorses competitive individualism (the impossibility of community), privileges fragmentation (the impossibility of connection) and puts emphasis on female differences (the impossibility of commonality), Weldon's fictional world of female envy and individualistic solutions describes a post-sisterhood scepticism and a post-political sense of empowerment that seem to coincide with the postfeminist re-conception of the feminist agenda. Giving centre stage and voice to the betrayed wife, sad mother, ugly and oversize suburban housewife Ruth, *She-Devil* pays tribute to the mad/bad first wife traditionally expelled from the romantic scenario. Tracing the latter's course from expulsion to empowered but disillusioned re-inscription into the heterosexist script, the novel recounts a complex tale of retribution and envy that sees the discarded first wife first take revenge on and destroy both socially and psychologically her unfaithful husband Bobbo and his new petite and rich fiancée, the romance-writer Mary Fisher, only to drastically reinvent herself in the end, with the help of plastic surgery, as the physical replica of the second beloved and to take her place again in that form beside a now broken and disempowered Bobbo. Depicting Ruth's deliberate return to clearly post-romantic heterosexual coupledness and her conscious exploitation of knowingly limitative patriarchal stereotypes, Weldon's text is

fraught with ideological inconsistencies. A contradictory textual project, the novel occupies a paradoxical semantic space in between subversion and conservatism, between complicity and critique.<sup>3</sup> Adamantly resisting interpretative closure, the text's ambivalent agenda is distinctly doubly coded: the narrative thus evokes and reveals established stereotypes of femininity while de-familiarising their "natural" existence; it repeats typically limiting patriarchal power structures but focuses on women's empowerment within such frameworks. Most importantly for this study, Weldon's narrative replays and mimics the conventions of the conservative romance while de-mythologizing and undermining their established effects. Translated into the interpretative terminology of the marital triangle, this means that the novel evokes the structural and topical core conventions of a conservative triadic structure (intra-gender polarisation; vilification of the mad/bad first wife; conclusion in dyadic heterosexism) but it overturns such romantic orthodoxies by reversing or de-naturalising their customary implications and objectives. In the process, it expresses a multiplicity of post-discourses, simultaneously articulating a post-political version of female empowerment, a postfeminist emphasis on individualistic solutions, a post-romantic reversal of romantic conventions and a post-sisterhood scepticism of female collectivism.<sup>4</sup>

Based on dualistic patterns of intra-female antagonism, Weldon's marital configuration initially constructs a typically conservative form of triangular relationality. On a purely structural level, the novel starts by setting up a distinctly patriarchal erotic script that places the discarded and supposedly unlovable first wife Ruth in opposition to the desirable and supposedly lovable Mary Fisher. For the husband Bobbo, the two women are direct opposites. Whereas the beautiful and feminine Mary inspires 'love, success, energy, health, happiness', the obese and

unattractive Ruth is deemed 'essentially unlovable', not 'a woman at all' but 'a she-devil' (Weldon, 1986: 36; 40; 42). '[S]mall and pretty and delicately formed', Mary's stereotypical hyper-femininity starkly contrasts with the first wife's mannish 'jutting jaws', 'hooked nose' and her 'broad and bony' shoulders (Weldon, 1986: 6; 9). While Bobbo's patriarchal gaze thus envisages a polarised structure of intra-gender schematisation, the novel relentlessly complicates such simplistic and dichotomous categorisation. Firmly engaging the readers' emotional investment, the first wife's authoritative voice commands narrative attention from the beginning and it effectively nullifies the above distribution of sympathies (opposing the lovable Mary to the unlovable Ruth). Moreover, the text particularly complicates Bobbo's feminine classifications by highlighting the parallels between the two rivals and by gradually bringing together their supposedly polarised representational identities - an approach that culminates in Ruth's embodiment or fusion of the constructs "she-devil" and "Mary Fisher". Drawing parallels between the two women, Weldon's text traces Ruth and Mary's exchange in status, image and body throughout the course of the narrative, demonstrating thereby that their oppositional relations are far from being fixed or stable. A complementary pair, the sexual rivals have diametrical fates and their trajectories are strictly concomitant. Just as the first wife's initial distress and betrayal goes hand in hand with Mary's romantic fulfilment, Ruth's gradual empowerment, beautification and physical transformation are diametrically echoed by the second beloved's disempowerment, physical deterioration and final death. Switching images, the first wife's empowering metamorphosis into the authoritative "Mary Fisher" closely mirrors the second beloved's degenerative conversion into an increasingly Ruth-alike 'suburban housewife', lacking in feminine allure, unappreciated by her familial environment and ultimately betrayed by the still philandering Bobbo (Weldon, 1986: 101). Far from

placing Ruth and Mary as polar opposites, the inverted symmetries of the rivals' positions and the reversed parallelism of their lives distinctly situate the two women as doubles, each in turn embodying the authoritative feminine construct that is "Mary Fisher".

The original version or host of that stereotype, Mary starts out as much 'her own creation' as Ruth ends up being (Weldon, 1986: 107). The 'heroine of her own life', the writer initially models her public persona on her own romantic fiction, shaping her appearance, history and lifestyle to fit a socially approved image that grants desirability, sexual control and power to its bearer (Weldon, 1986: 96). It is essentially this romanticised public fantasy or construct of the second beloved that Ruth sets out to copy and exploit when modelling her own self on publicity pictures of the rival. Subjecting herself to excruciating amounts of plastic surgery, the first wife transforms herself into the exact replica of Mary's stereotypical and ultra-feminine image, into 'an impossible male fantasy made flesh', the desired effect being one of excessive feminine allure and 'childish innocence' (Weldon, 1986: 224; 235). Contesting the notion of essential or authentic selves, the most desirable identities for Weldon's heroines are always constructed and performative and inevitably come in standardised or stereotypical formats. In this fictional world, internal empowerment (empowerment within society) is largely dependent on women's successful embodiment of cultural stereotypes, irrespective of the connotations of such classifications. Ruth's initial empowerment thus goes hand in hand with her transformation into that most negative of patriarchal stereotypes, the mad/bad first wife or she-devil. Far from being an original act of self-creation, her vilified image clearly derives from Bobbo's patriarchal prescriptions and characterisations. Classified by him as '*mad*', as '*a bad mother, a worse wife and dreadful cook*', Ruth wholeheartedly welcomes her own vilification,



intent on exploiting the potential for individual empowerment that the “she-devil” position appears to offer (Weldon, 1986: 35; 42; my italics). In keeping with the novel’s dual agenda, Weldon’s text employs the conservative stereotype of the mad/bad first wife but refutes the ideological implications and linguistic omissions that typically come with such labelling. In this way, the narrative puts Ruth at the active centre of the plot and focuses on her empowerment (rather than symbolic annihilation) through vilification. Embracing the stereotype of the “she-devil” that Bobbo has stamped out for her, the heroine states, ‘I can take what I want. I am a she-devil! [...] I want revenge. I want power. I want money. I want to be loved and not love in return’ (Weldon, 1986: 43).

Demonstrating that there ‘is no such thing as the essential self’, the first wife goes on to extend her image across the whole spectrum of feminine representation. Switching her appearance from one representational extreme to another, she successfully conceals her initial she-devil persona “underneath” the equally ideologically tainted stereotype “Mary Fisher” (Weldon, 1986: 219). Doubly coded, the text repeats and evokes dualistic conceptions of femininity (characteristic of the conservative romance) but de-familiarises their “natural” existence. Bringing together and blurring typically polarised categorisations, the heroine’s switch in physical stereotypes has potentially subversive implications. Ruth’s successful embodiment of feminine extremes thus demonstrates that polarised patterns of intra-female classification are not stable or immutable but exchangeable and constructed. Such polarised schematisations can be reversed and manipulated for postfeminist/post-political empowerment. Translated into the terminology of this study, the final amalgamation of mad/bad first wife and ultra-feminine second beloved not only denotes a potentially subversive approximation of representational opposites but it also

ambiguously and deceptively compresses the marital triangle. It approximates feminine extremes up to the point where the triadic structure becomes unrecognisable and resembles a dyad. Fusing conflicting ideas of femininity into one postfeminist self, Ruth's appropriation of the "Mary Fisher" construct is ultimately exploitative in nature, more an act of postfeminist trickery and parasitic copying than of sisterly merger and harmonious union. What is at stake here is not so much the creation of one communal female personae or the embodiment of female community than the creation of an indefinite postfeminist self who callously imitates her rival's public image for her own advancement while at the same time detesting and discarding the latter as a person and fellow woman.<sup>5</sup> Consuming and literally taking over the stereotypical image of the second beloved, the first wife's envious copying ultimately makes the rival's physical existence obsolete. Given Ruth's draining exploitation of the "Mary Fisher" construct, it seems a matter of due consequence that the second beloved should die (lose her patriarchal existence), the more the first wife takes over her former attributes. For Elisabeth Bronfen, Ruth's self-creation 'permanently installs an uncanny double – she is Mary Fisher in body and the vindictive Ruth in spirit' (Bronfen, 1994: 81). Leaving ambiguities of subjectivity unresolved, the final amalgamation of the two feminine constructs is a more complex and indistinct intermingling than Bronfen's clear-cut division between body (Mary Fisher) and spirit (she-devil) acknowledges.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, this study argues that the postfeminist fusion of representational opposites creates a powerhouse of conflicting ideas that de-polarises the patriarchal binarism of the mad/bad first wife - second beloved and deceptively compresses the marital triangle into dyadic shape.

Interestingly, Weldon's novel is reminiscent of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, concluding with the triumphant mad/bad first wife parading around in

the guise of the second beloved. Like Lady Audley, the “self-made” Ruth is characterised by her elastic ability to re-invent herself. Conflating the conservative stereotypes of the mad/bad first wife and the second beloved into one ambiguous postfeminist self, Weldon’s heroine shares the same paradoxical marital status as Braddon’s sensational character. Unlike Braddon’s novel, however, *She-Devil* spares its heroine the punitive process of retribution and ideological regulation that Lady Audley undergoes. Unlike Braddon, Weldon allows its first wife to trick the patriarchal gaze and pass undetected and unpunished as the socially empowered replica of the second beloved. While Ruth fails to disengage herself completely from the fixities of patriarchal gender discourse (her ideological mobility and representational choices remaining at all times determined by a patriarchal frame of reference), her successful imposture of the second beloved is at the same time an act of postfeminist trickery, a testimony to her manipulation of and empowerment inside the ideological structure within which she is implicated.

Despite the reversed symmetry of Ruth and Mary’s lives and despite them sharing the same image at one time or another, Weldon’s text never envisages the possibility of connection or dialogue for the two women. The two rivals remain distant and hostile - Ruth rarely stopping to profess her ‘hate’ for the second beloved and Mary adamantly denied access to the authority of first-person narrative (Weldon, 1986: 6). In this instance, the intra-gender relation of the marital triangle remains distinctly detached and antagonistic, no sign remaining from the general mood of understanding and commonality of the popular feminist text. While sisterhood is not an option for Ruth and Mary, it does not necessarily follow that the narrative is wholly unaware of or uninformed by feminist demands for female collectivism. In line with Weldon’s dual agenda, *She-Devil* juxtaposes feminine misogyny (governing the marital triangle) and

feminosociality (existing outside the hostile triadic framework). Underlining the existence of modes of sexual, social and economic viability other than institutional heterosexuality as well as alternative modes of interaction between women other than shrewish rivalry, Ruth's brief excursions into lesbianism with Nurse Hopkins, her creation of the woman-centred Vesta Rose Employment Agency and her short membership of a separatist feminist commune all indicate post-patriarchal possibilities of female friendship and sociality. For Nurse Hopkins, the liaison with Ruth is centred on a lesbian sense of sisterhood and solidarity. She cheerfully proclaims that 'women like us [...] must learn to stick together' (Weldon, 1986: 117). Similarly, Ruth's involvement with Vesta Rose also has clear feminist reverberations, assisting and supporting women who, discarded from the traditional roles of wife and mother and deprived of all self-esteem, would otherwise be unemployable.

Yet, while the feminist resonances of Ruth's enterprise and relationship are noteworthy, her female-centred designs are first and foremost highly exploitative ploys and pragmatic means to advance her vengeful schemes. Using Nurse Hopkins's capital to finance her revenge and the fellowship of "Vesta Roses" to sabotage and destroy her husband's flourishing business, Ruth's undying need for retaliation and unsisterly desire to annihilate her nemesis Mary surpass any desire for female sisterhood that she might entertain. The first wife's sojourn with the separatist 'Wimmin' is thus far from being an attempt to opt out of patriarchy (Weldon, 1986: 199). Her stay in the commune is not motivated by a feminist need for bonding but by the rather more individualistic postfeminist desire to lose weight and prepare her body (through manual labour and dieting) for the hardships of extreme surgical intervention. Although female sociality is not without its attractions (Ruth 'almost wanted to belong to [the Wimmin], for the sake of their good cheer'), these popular feminist charms ultimately give way to the more

murky appeal of postfeminist empowerment (Weldon, 1986: 204). Belonging 'to a different species' from the ultra-feminist Wimmin, the first wife remains inherently sceptic of the notion of 'Women with an upper case "W"' (Weldon, 1986: 204; 121). While Ruth's feminosocial bonds complicate and complement the post-sisterhood relations of the marital triangle, the feminine misogyny of the triadic structure clearly overshadows her female-centred designs. Ultimately, all of Ruth's dealings with women (within and outside the relational bounds of the marital triangle) are exploitative means to an end. In her own words, ultimately 'it's every woman for herself' (Weldon, 1986: 82).

Refuting utopian conceptions of an all-inclusive feminism (blending individualism and sisterhood), Weldon's postfeminist version of the survival of the fittest clearly devalues and incorporates the plot of sisterhood within its overall narrative of individual advancement. Giving voice to post-sisterhood scepticism, Ruth has little problems turning her back 'on love and peace, and the creative joy of pure womanhood' (Weldon, 1986: 210). Steadfastly steering from the path of political correctness and renouncing female-centred modes of interaction, the first wife has no desire to stay in a world lacking in 'glitter at the edges' and chooses instead 'to live in the giddy mainstream of the world, not tucked away in [the] muddy corner of integrity' (Weldon, 1986: 199; 200). In other words, refusing well-intentioned but arguably easy or artificial popular feminist solutions, Weldon's text indicates the existence of female-orientated or collective ways of life, only to foreclose such options and to see its individualistic heroine return to a patriarchal heterosexist script, fully aware of its limitations but willing to abide by its rules of representation. Admittedly 'no revolutionary', the extraordinarily clever and resourceful first wife has no intentions to put her talents to use to contest ideology and prefers instead to claim agency within

patriarchy, exploiting and manipulating its dualistic stereotypes and structures for her own advancement (Weldon, 1986: 203). As Kathy Davis observes, Ruth ‘plays the game, assessing the situation with its structural constraints and making her choices, knowledgeably, within the context in which she lives. She knows what she wants, but, at the same time, she knows how limited her choices are’ (Davis, 1995: 66). More doubtful than optimistic of societal change, more aware of cultural limits than transgressive of patriarchal boundaries, Weldon’s first wife wavers between critical awareness and fatalistic collusion, her ambiguous motto being ‘since I cannot change the world, I will change myself’ (Weldon, 1986: 56).

Distinctly post-revolutionary in mind, Ruth intentionally abandons female collectivism in order to seek individual empowerment and agency within rather than outside patriarchal culture, her representational choices and aspirations remaining at all times enmeshed in social norms. According to Bonnie Dow, such an emphasis on women’s choices (what Elspeth Probyn terms ‘choiceoisie’) and on individualistic solutions is ‘classic postfeminism’ (Probyn, 1990: 152; Dow, 1996: 160). For Weldon (as for postfeminism), the route towards individual empowerment is decidedly centred around the malleable female body as both a site of self-objectification and an emblem of personal agency. Elaborating on the ‘post-feminist “return” to feminine pleasures’, critics Esther Sonnet, Charlotte Brunsdon and Shelley Budgeon comment on the body-beautiful as a source of female potency, discussing woman’s manipulative and controlled ‘use’ of femininity and her ‘physical appearance as an avenue to empowerment’ (Sonnet, 1999: 170; Brunsdon, 1997: 86; Budgeon, 1994: 66). Unsurprisingly, the postfeminist correlation between female beauty and empowerment has provoked widespread critical dissent on the grounds of its ideological indeterminacies and post-political nature. Rosalind Coward thus reads the postfeminist

emphasis on female beauty as a 'sign that women are as much as ever tied to male approval' while Susan McKinstry has criticised the regressive and collusive satisfactions of such self-definition, arguing that voluntary self-objectification necessarily plays 'into the hands of the culture that equates body with self' (Coward, 1997: 359; McKinstry, 1994: 112). Susan Douglas therefore concludes that 'narcissism as liberation is liberation repackaged, deferred and denied' (Douglas, 1994: 266). In a similar line of thought, the postfeminist emphasis on personal (rather than collective) empowerment and the postfeminist paradox of choice (choice as the expression of both individual preference as well as social/cultural constraints) have been hotly debated and more often than not denigrated for their apolitical qualities. Critical dissent has focused on the 'dystopian individualism' that 'contrasts greatly with the much more complex, politicised vision of many feminists today' and on the social validity of postfeminist empowerment (Klein and Hawthorne, 1997: 66; Budgeon, 1994: 68). For Imelda Whelehan, the postfeminist vocabulary of control and choice is clearly tainted by the collusive and misogynistic underpinnings of its rhetoric. 'The power of definition', Whelehan states, 'is all about being "in control" and "making choices" regardless, it seems, of who controls the "choices" available' (Whelehan, 2000: 4). Arguing that female collusion with patriarchal processes 'may be rational for some women at the individual level', Rosemary Gillespie makes certain concessions to postfeminist claims to empowerment but like the above critics, ultimately remains convinced of the political and social downfalls of such practices, asserting that at 'the social level [...] such action can be seen to go against women's collective interests and perpetuate wider social inequalities' (Gillespie, 1996: 69).

Informed by patriarchal prescriptions and modelled on patriarchal stereotypes, Ruth's transformation into the body-beautiful "Mary Fisher" has clear postfeminist

traits and as such, suffers from the ideological drawbacks and cultural limitations identified above. Operative only on the personal rather than macro-societal level and reducing 'feminist social goals to individual choices of lifestyle', the first wife's individualistic empowerment through beautification is distinctly post-political in nature and detached from any collective efforts or systemic structures (Budgeon, 1994: 59). Negotiating her body within the representational constraints of a patriarchal order, Ruth undoubtedly colludes with patriarchal stereotypes and consciously collaborates with self-objectifying practices. Consequently, this study affirms that the social validity of Ruth's apolitical empowerment is deservedly under scrutiny and that the element of collusion in her transformation cannot be denied. Nonetheless, I also insist that the active and self-aware aspects of Ruth's individualism, with its emphasis on entitlement, self-gratification and power, deserve just as much notice as her claims to 'agency, or significant action' (Mann, 1997: 225). Far from being a Foucauldian 'docile body', Ruth is a knowledgeable agent struggling to become an embodied subject rather than an objectified body (Foucault, 1977: 138; Davis, 1995: 60).<sup>7</sup> I therefore maintain that Ruth's undeniable complicity with patriarchal structures should not be collapsed into straightforward and uninformed identity with patriarchal compliance. As Teresa de Lauretis astutely notes, complicity must be distinguished from 'full adherence' since it remains unclear to what extent the 'consciousness of complicity acts with or against the consciousness of oppression' (de Lauretis, 1987: 11). No mere cultural dupe, Weldon's first wife is distinctly aware of the limitations of her personal choices and the artificiality or constructed-ness of cultural orthodoxies. Seeing 'the script as *script*', Ruth is both a conscious collaborator and an informed agent (Hebert, 1993: 22). Her ambiguous position of "free-yet-boundedness" effectively highlights a cynical and disillusioned condition of cultural awareness that theorist Peter Sloterdijk terms



‘enlightened false consciousness’<sup>8</sup> and that Slavoj Žižek accurately sums up in the ‘post-ideological’ formula ‘they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it’ (Sloterdijk, 1987:5; Žižek, 1989: 33).<sup>9</sup>

Making life choices with irony and detachment, Weldon’s first wife has seen through social pretensions and has identified cultural orthodoxies (such as heterosexism, romance, polarised stereotypes) as artificial dominants that (although not disarticulated) can at least be de-naturalised, reversed or manipulated for individual empowerment. In this line of argument, Ruth’s deliberate return to heterosexual coupledness at the end of the novel could not be further from a romantic happy ending and essentially figures as a parodic and manifestly post-romantic mimicry of romantic conventions. From the beginning and throughout the course of the novel, Weldon’s heroine has insistently expressed her disillusionment with love (which to her is a source of weakness and disempowerment) and has been adamant in her defamation of the romantic mythos. Eager for ‘hate to drive out love’, she has persistently denounced the ‘lies’ informing Mary Fisher’s romantic fiction (Weldon, 1986: 43; 5). As a ‘hymn to the death of love’, *She-Devil* articulates a distinctly post-romantic agenda (Weldon, 1986: 7). In this way, the text deflates the romantic formula and in turn de-mythologizes the typically optimistic heterosexist conclusion. When Ruth takes Bobbo back, her return to heterosexual coupledness (‘on my own terms’, as she insists) does not denote her enchainment to the myth of love but figures as the cynical endpoint of her course of retribution which leaves the husband completely disempowered (Weldon, 1986: 75). For Ruth, ‘it is not a matter of male or female [...] it never was, merely of power. I have all, and he has none’ (Weldon, 1986: 240). Far from being a romantic hero, the philandering, untrustworthy and mediocre Bobbo has been a poor point of reference or focus of competition from the outset, unworthy of Ruth’s staggering efforts and

provoking pity rather than love. Robbed of his control over the patriarchal gaze, Bobbo has irrevocably lost the definitional power of the conservative romantic or sensational hero. Belittled rather than vilified, he is no Gothic villain but (like the popular feminist husband) a marginal player in the overall female-centred plot. Like Goldsmith's husbands, Bobbo ends up socially as well as psychologically tamed and disempowered. Unlike the latter male characters who are rightfully punished and then left behind without regrets, Weldon's husband remains entranced in an anti-romantic and disillusioned state of stasis that continues to bind him and his first wife. As in *Vera*, there will be no escape for both spouses, both Ruth and Bobbo remaining entrapped in a completely de-mystified relationship. Like Wemyss, Ruth locks Bobbo in an ultimately exploitative state of impasse, the husband figuring as a powerless marionette in her plot of revenge. In this way, the novel exhibits a gender-reversed power structure in which the first wife, rather than the Gothic husband, controls and exploits the marital situation. Bobbo's final disempowerment and transformation into a 'poor confused creature' who 'loves me [...] pouring my tea, mixing my drinks, fetching my bag' is as much a sign of his weakness and deception as it is a testament to Ruth's accomplishment as a postfeminist trickster (Weldon, 1986: 239). While the first wife's successful deception and manipulation of the patriarchal gaze attest to her authority and agency, her conscious decision to live in a wide-awake bad faith is clearly not an automatic act of defiance or a sign of her ideological opposition. Although Ruth's consciousness of complicity demonstrates that she is no hapless victim of patriarchal conditioning, this study argues that her critical awareness is fraught by ideological inconsistencies and is insufficient evidence to uphold over-optimistic claims to female triumphalism.

A tale of progressive empowerment and rightful retribution, Weldon's novel clearly has its emotional gratifications. However, recounting not only Ruth's

postfeminist empowerment but also her increasing isolation, the text at the same time lacks the relentlessly affirmative and optimistic lustre of the romance or the popular feminist text. Unable/unwilling to bond with either men or women, Weldon's postfeminist heroine has lost or rejected all relational ties and consequently emerges as a distinctly solitary individual. Her social cynicism negates all human interaction and in the process, de-mystifies both heterosexual romance and female bonding. Having rejected female collectivism as an alternative to mainstream heterosexism, Ruth's empowered but disillusioned self-re-inscription into the heterosexist script should not only be understood as evidence of her manipulative powers but also as a bleak acknowledgement of the inescapability of patriarchal discourses, as a recognition of the difficulties of affecting societal change and contesting ideology. In comparison to the other generic derivatives, Weldon's postfeminist novel is most prominently characterised by its loss of faith. Unlike the sensation novel or du Maurier's *Rebecca*, *She-Devil* no longer attempts to uphold the myth of romance or grant ideological resolution. Revelling in its own indeterminacies, the text is most painfully aware of the limitations of its heroine's choices but, unlike popular feminist narratives, it chooses not to replace the heterosexist script with a feminosocial alternative. Disallowing either characters or readers a space from which to opt out as well as unflinchingly exposing the orthodoxies of patriarchal culture, the novel shares the double-coded rhetoric of critique and impotence that Linda Hutcheon attributes to parody.<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon's critical insights ring true and have particular bearing here. 'There is no outside', Hutcheon states, 'all [parody] can do is question from within. [...] culture is challenged from within: challenged or questioned or contested, but not imploded' (Hutcheon, 1988: xiii).

Distinctly doubly coded and in that sense parodic, the novel's dual agenda is reflected and effectively translated into the structures of the marital triangle. On the

surface level, the contours of the triadic structure are influenced by the core conventions of the conservative marital triangle, evoking the figure of the mad/bad first wife, replaying dualistic intra-gender relations and superficially concluding in dyadic heterosexism. While the silhouette of the plot is thus loosely consonant with the conservative romance, Weldon radically reverses romantic processes and emotions. In other words, *She-Devil* mimics the structural conventions of the conservative marital triangle, yet for post-romantic purposes and with strikingly different effects. Far from authorising her symbolic annihilation, the first wife's patriarchal vilification thus becomes a tool for her post-political and individualistic empowerment. In a similar way, the typically limitative dualism of the first wife and the second beloved becomes a means of laying bare the artificiality and constructed-ness of patriarchal gender discourse and schematisations. As far as the eye can see, the novel's dyadic closure seems to echo the conventional ending of the conservative romance, uniting the husband and (what looks like) the more feminine and therefore loveable second beloved. In effect, the text's conclusion is the sinister endpoint of Ruth's empowering course of retribution, a testimony to her post-political power as a postfeminist trickster and her manipulation as well as cynical embeddedness within the patriarchal script. Just as the she-devil Ruth creates a postfeminist illusion when taking the romantically acclaimed form of the second beloved, the marital triangle creates the illusion of closure when it becomes condensed into the form of a typically conclusive romantic dyad. Compressed to the point of non-recognition (the triad appearing like a dyad) and with Mary eliminated as a physical threat, the marital triangle appears resolved, but only superficially or physically so. On a metaphorical level, the triad remains intact. The representational extremes of "Mary Fisher" (the romantic construct developed by the second beloved) and "she-devil" (the first wife's initial image) continue to co-exist,

fused into one ambiguous postfeminist self rather than divided between two distinct human beings. In the end, Weldon's novel emerges as a text that seeks to illustrate the deceptiveness of appearances on all levels, both physical and structural.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I reaffirm that there are inter-generic connections between diverse feminocentric genres, connections that have not been realised in their totality before. These inter-generic relations go hand in hand with the discovery of the marital triangle as a persistent and versatile literary device that functions as a gender-reversed counter-model to the masculinised triangle of mimeticism and homosociality. Using the marital triangle as an overarching model of reference, this study has investigated the epistemological boundaries of the romance and the possible variations available within one single narrative construct. In the process, I have firmly embraced the genre as a changing and socially engaged form. A possible locus of transformation and innovation, the romance emerges as a diverse and broadly based matrix; its boundaries in practice, fluid; its conventions malleable and changing according to social climate. The romantic marital triangle has proven particularly receptive to social cross-fertilisation as its dynamics react to and incorporate feminist demands for sisterhood and female bonding. Within this interpretative framework, I have chronicled the expansion of the romance genre and the generic transgression into romantic mutations. Forging inter-generic connections between historically and ideologically diverse genres, the thesis has consequently introduced the sensation novel, the female Gothic novel, the popular feminist and the postfeminist text as articulations of extra-generic meanings. Bound together by the convention of the marital triangle, these four genres have helped to delineate the breaking points of romantic generic integrity and have drawn attention to the ideological paradoxes, the constructed-ness and the limitations of the romance plot. At the

same time, the four mutations have also underscored the cultural authority and persistence of romantic parameters. As I have shown, the sensation novel and the female Gothic go to great lengths to (try and) re-impose ideological closure and romantic stasis. In the process, they often highlight the politics underlying their normalising strategies. Heterosexual coupledness ultimately proves too strong a formation to disintegrate, even when it is vilified (as in *Vera*). Although marginalised (as in the popular feminist texts), romantic heterosexism remains an extremely appealing relational option. As the most pronounced attempt of romantic interrogation, even the postfeminist text compulsively returns to the contrivances of the now de-naturalised and de-mythologized “romantic” staples. Despite the mutations’ attempts of re-plotting/disclosure/destabilisation, their critique of the romance goes hand in hand with a re-articulation of the ideology’s cultural authority. In all cases, the romance, or the illusion of romance, continues to exert a power too strong to deconstruct or implode. Its cultural authority battered but not diminished, the genre continues to function as a discourse that informs social inscription and erotic expectations. More than anything, the readings in this thesis confirm the inescapability and the continued allure of the romance discourse. In the end, my analyses re-affirm Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker’s observation that ‘romantic love (and its cultural representations) is probably the last glasshouse that any of us throw stones in’ (Pearce and Wisker, 1998: 17).

While this investigation has functioned as a study of genre expansion and transgression, the analytical journey has also traced the structural convention of the first wife-husband-second wife triangle across different periods and within different genres. So far ignored by criticism, this female-male-female configuration has been interpreted as a complementary structure to the male-female-male models of mimeticism and homosociality developed by René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Set up in contrast to their male-

orientated and elitist formulations of the literary canon, the marital triangle informs a textual counter-continuum that is distinctly female-based and transcends cultural divisions of high/low. Throughout this study, I have recorded a variable and dynamic literary network that, until now, seems to have gone undetected and that defies historical and genre boundaries. Distinctly cross-generic and cross-historical, the marital triangle has emerged as a recurrent and persistent constellation in popular women's fictions. Uncovering triadic dynamics underlying a variety of gynocentric texts and genres, this thesis has demonstrated the historical longevity, resilience and ideological versatility of this particular trope. In the process, it has unveiled a textual continuum that might just prove to be the gender-reversed alternative to the canonised fictions of mimeticism and homosociality. Unlike its masculinised counter-parts, this female-based continuum is conveyed in distinctly feminocentric genres. I can only hope that future studies will complete the process of uncovering that this thesis has started and contribute to an even fuller understanding of the wide-reaching and cross-historical implications of the erotic spectrum encompassed within the marital triangle convention.



## **Endnotes**

### **1.1 Introduction**

<sup>1</sup> Based on the opposition between the “good” second wife Krystle and the vilified first wife Alexis, the marital structure of the prime-time serial *Dynasty* is directly reminiscent of what this study will term a conservative marital triangle. Although this similarity is noteworthy, the aim and scope of this study do not allow an in-depth comparison of the marital triangle in fiction and television. Keeping in mind the generic specificities of the prime-time serial (‘the nature of soap, with its interminable narratives and lack of “happy endings”, means that [...] contradictions are never truly resolved’) and of the television medium in general (television providing ‘a different context of reception and therefore a quite different set of subject positions’), it is probable that there are medium-specific differences between the marital triangle in fiction and television (Gamman and Marshment, 1988: 105; Morley, 1989: 26). For more information on the television medium, see: Seiter, Ellen et al. (eds.). 1989. *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, London: Routledge; Brown, Mary Ellen (ed.). 1990. *Television and Women’s Culture: The Politics of the Popular*, London: Sage. For information on *Dynasty*, see: Press, Andrea L. 1990. ‘Class, Gender and the Female Viewer: Women’s Responses to *Dynasty*’, in *Television and Women’s Culture: The Politics of the Popular*, ed. by Mary Ellen Brown, London: Sage, 158 - 180; Budge, Belinda 1988. ‘Joan Collins and the Wilder Side of Women: Exploring Pleasure and Representation’, in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, London: Women’s Press, 102 - 111.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> In his article on the value and prerequisites of cult objects ‘Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage’, Umberto Eco defines an intertextual archetype as a ‘preestablished and frequently reappearing narrative situation, cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts and provoking in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déjà vu’ (Eco, 1988: 448).

## 1.2 Delineating the Theoretical Context: The Masculinist Triangle in René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

<sup>1</sup> In addition to Sedgwick and Girard, H. M. Daleski and Jean E. Kennard also focus on the convention of the masculinist love triangle. In *Victims of Convention*, Kennard elaborates his view on what he calls 'the convention of the two suitors', a convention based on the triangular structure grouping a heroine, a "right" and a "wrong" suitor. The two suitors are set up against each other in binary terms, the wrong suitor embodying qualities that the heroine must learn to reject. She resolves the conflict and the triangular structure by choosing the "right" suitor. According to Kennard, 'the convention of the two suitors exists in some form in almost every novel with a central female character' (Kennard, 1978: 12). He illustrates his views, focusing mainly on various Jane Austen novels, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urberville* and *Jude the Obscure*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*. Similarly, in *The Divided Heroine: A Recurrent Pattern in Six English Novels*, H.M. Daleski concentrates on the male-female-male love triangle in *Wuthering Heights*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Tess of the d'Urberville*, D.H. Lawrence's *The White Peacock*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Daleski argues that 'the pattern of the love triangle may be seen as offering the novelist an alternative means of handling inner conflict' (Daleski, 1984: 19). In his analysis, the heroine is perceived as being torn between two men who embody opposed tendencies within herself. Unable to reconcile these opposed forces within a unified self and choose between the two men, the heroine cannot resolve the triangular conflict and consequently is divided. Her disintegration ends either in madness or in death.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout his career, Girard has expanded his theory of mimetic desire, presenting it as a way to explain not only his notions of great works of literature but also all forms of human behaviour. In *La Violence et le Sacré* (1972), he transports his trigonometry into the fields of primitive religion and anthropology, arguing that imitative desire is the basis for religion and sacrifice and putting forward the hypothesis that the immolation of a scapegoat (what he terms a societal *pharmakon*) insures that unrestrained mimetic rivalry will never destroy a society. Language, myth, ritual and culture are perceived as constructions designed to create and maintain a stable system of differences within a community. In his 1978 *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard reads the Old and the New Testament in the light of his theory and declares the universal validity of his ideas. In *To Double Business Bound* (1978), Girard further reveals the mimetic motivation behind social relations, basing his theory on the works of Dostoyevsky and in contrast to Freud's notion of the Oedipus complex. See: Girard, René 1972. *La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris: Grasset; Girard, René 1978. "To Double Business Bound": *Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press; Girard, René 1987 [1978]. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, London: Athlone Press.

<sup>3</sup> There is an interesting correlation between the Girardian triangle and the Freudian investigation of neurotic male eroticism. According to Freud, neurotic men never choose as

love-object 'a woman who is disengaged – that is, an unmarried girl or an unattached married woman – but only one to whom another man can claim right of possession as her husband, fiancé or friend' (Freud, 1964: 166). One of the preconditions of neurotic male sexuality is that there should be 'an injured third party': this 'precondition provides an opportunity for gratifying impulses of rivalry and hostility directed at the man from whom the loved woman is wrested' (Freud, 1964: 166). Like Girard, Freud stresses the inescapable nature of triangularity and the importance of the male-male bond within the triangular constellation. From a Freudian perspective then, male mimetic desire and rivalry could be interpreted as neurotic. See: Freud, Sigmund 1964 [1910]. 'A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men (Contributions to the Psychology of Love I)', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 11, London: Hogarth Press, 165 - 175.

<sup>4</sup> In *Models of Desire: René Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis*, Paisley Livingston provides an illustrative description of Girard's conception of the subvarieties of mimetic desire. He notes,

Girard asserts that the diverse forms of the mimetic triangle are organized within a "universal structure". He likens this structure to a falling object, the shape of which changes as the speed of its descent increases. If different novelists emphasize different aspects of desire, it is because they observe the object at different stages of its fall. (Livingston, 1992: 9)

<sup>5</sup> In *La Violence et le Sacré* (1972), Girard describes that the mimetic formula yields at least two different kinds of motivational states and that mimetic desire divides into two significantly different kinds, internal and external mediation. These are determined by the "distance" between the subject and the mediator in terms of time, space or condition. In external mediation, the subject never meets his mediator as he competes against an internalised rival/model. Real, imaginary, legendary or historical, the mediator is removed from immediate interaction with the subject and he never comes into direct conflict with him. External mediation thus involves a desiring agent's relation to, what may be called, a hierarchical model: the subject accepts the mediator's superiority and aspires to be like him. The mediator is a culturally inscribed ideal who never poses more than a spiritual or metaphysical challenge to the subject. The distance between mediator and subject ensures that no direct and personal rivalry or competition can ensue. Such a peaceful triangle cannot be maintained in internal mediation. Here, the model is physically present and shares the time/space condition of the subject. Internal mediation involves an agent's relation to a model that is by definition conflictual and violent. The mediator comes into direct social or physical confrontation with the subject and the two agents are caught in a violent double bind. For Girard, the passage from external to internal mediation becomes the overarching and inevitable tendency of history and Western society. He argues that in the world before the Enlightenment, man openly copied the desires of models that inhabited the transcendent world of gods and royalty. In the modern world, rivals are trapped in an increasingly violent reciprocity. Mimetic desire can better be tolerated in a modern society than in primitive ones that do everything to mitigate it and deflect violence outside by means of sacrificial victims who bear the ills of the community and whose deaths, in a

climatic blood sacrifice, re-establish necessary hierarchical distinctions and power relations. Whereas, pre-Enlightenment society is regulated by the hierarchical dynamics of external mediation, the modern era and modern society are chaotic and conflict-ridden platforms re-enacting the progressive stages of internal mediation. See: Girard, René 1972. *La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris: Grasset.

<sup>6</sup> By populism, I mean that branch of cultural studies that focuses on re-evaluating formerly devalued forms of cultural expression, for example by proclaiming the liberating nature of mass culture. Leslie Fiedler thus indulges in a celebration of the ‘antinomian or dionysiac impulses’ of mass culture (Fiedler, 1982: 84). While this approach to popular culture is invaluable for opening up new trains of thought and bringing the elitism of the high/low culture divide to the fore, it also carries the threat of an uncritical reversal of cultural dichotomies, by celebrating formerly debased forms as the authentic expression of the people. Neo-conservative critic Jim McGuigan contends that there has been an uncritical drift towards populism. He defines cultural populism as ‘the intellectual assumption [...] that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a Capital C’ (McGuigan, 1992: 5). McGuigan claims that populism’s focus on consumption and the uncritical celebration of popular culture have produced a crisis. He deplores this ‘crisis of qualitative judgement’ and challenges the ‘uncritical populist drift in the study of popular culture’ by desiring a return to modernist hierarchies (McGuigan, 1992: 79). For more information, see: Fiedler, Leslie 1982. *What is Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society*, New York: Simon and Schuster; Modleski Tania (ed.). 1986. *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Storey, John 1993. *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, second edition, London: Prentice Hall; McGuigan, Jim 1992. *Cultural Populism*, London: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> In this instance, I use the term “romantic” to designate both the female-orientated and popular narrative that is my generic point of reference and the literary/philosophical theory of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Romanticism that tends to see the individual as the centre of all life and creation. While I do not deny that I am oversimplifying Romanticism’s agenda here, for the sake of highlighting its contrast to Girardian theory, I understand Romanticism as a cultural movement that emphasises spontaneity, feeling, emotional intensity and directness of personal experience. All further reference to the term “romantic” will however purely refer to the female-orientated and popular kind of narrative that circumscribes my field of investigation.

<sup>8</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Toril Moi have noted Girard’s curious blindness to female authorship and experience, as he uses masculine pronouns throughout his discussion of triangular desire when referring to authors, the subject and the mediator in a particular love relationship. See: Moi, Toril 1982. ‘The Missing Mother: The Oedipal Rivalries of René Girard’, *Diacritics*, volume 12, summer, 21 - 31; Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>9</sup> In her discussion of the patriarchal traffic in women, Sedgwick relies and draws on Gayle Rubin's argument that patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of a traffic in women. According to Rubin, women function as an exchangeable, perhaps even symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men. She discusses how the giving and receiving of women by men, especially through marriage, is a way of organising and maintaining a sex-gender system in a society where women are systematically oppressed. Rubin's argument is itself based on and shaped by the Levi-Straussian description of marriage as a form of exchange which links two groups of men and treats women not as partners but as objects in the exchange (Sedgwick 1985: 25 - 26).

<sup>10</sup> In *Alice Doesn't* (1984), Teresa de Lauretis discusses the absence of female subjectivity in male-authored narrative representations of desire. The Oedipus myth, which she sees as 'paradigmatic of all narratives', focuses on the male hero and masculine desire as the narrative motors of the plot and the dynamic centres that sustain the action and readerly interest (de Lauretis, 1984: 112).

<sup>11</sup> Girard's concept of the coquette has to be seen in relation to Freud's essay 'On Narcissism' (1914) in which he makes the distinction between an anaclitic and narcissitic object-choice. An anaclitic object-love of attachment is characteristic of heterosexual men while a narcissistic object-choice is common in women. For Freud, the main difference between male and female object love is that only males transcend primary narcissism, developing a desire for a love-object that is outside the self (anaclitic desire). Women, especially if they grow up with good looks and develop a self-containment which compensates them for the social restrictions imposed on them, are characterised as being basically narcissistic, loving themselves with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. Whereas woman is perversely self-sufficient and indifferent to man, man has given up this original libidinal position in favour of object love. For Girard, woman's blissful narcissistic state, or what he calls 'coquetry' is a strategy used to seduce and conquer men. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1987), Girard accuses Freud of misinterpreting female narcissism. He argues that the narcissistic woman feigns desiring herself as a manoeuvre to attract the desires of men. The coquette seeks to be desired because she needs masculine desires, directed at her, to feed her coquetry. She has no more self-sufficiency than the man who desires her, but the success of her strategy allows her to keep up the appearance of it, by offering her, as well as him, a desire that she can copy. For Girard, the self-sufficient woman is unavoidably deceitful and he contends that Freud erred because he did not recognise the mimetic essence of desire. As Girard notes, Freud was tricked by women into believing in female self-sufficiency as the 'coquette knows a lot more about desire than Freud does. She knows very well that desire attracts desire [...] Freud misinterprets as an objective description the trap into which he has fallen' (Girard 1987: 370). See: Freud, Sigmund 1957 [1914]. 'On Narcissism', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 14, 73 - 102; Girard, René 1987 [1978]. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, London: Athlone Press.

<sup>12</sup> In his turn, D.S. Neff criticises Moi's pre-oedipal solution as limited and prescriptive. According to this critic, Moi's alternative triangular paradigm, though accounting for female forms of desire, 'predicts universal male homosexuality' and 'creates an even more compelling bind for heterosexual men and women' as the female mediator cannot engender male heterosexual desire (Neff, 1988: 388; 390). Neff's solution is to put hermaphroditic figures in the role of mediator as these will potentially liberate both masculine and feminine desire and will 'restore symmetry to the triangular structure by synthesizing the masculinity of Girard's Don Juan and the femininity of Moi's preoedipal mother' (Neff, 1988: 390). Neff has a legitimate point insofar as Moi's pre-oedipal alternative triangle is equally exclusive as Girard's phallogocentric one since it clearly privileges female desire and pre-oedipal relationships over heterosexual erotic ones. Yet, Neff's solution in androgyny seems to evade the problematic of gender and to opt for the "easy way out". See: Neff, D.S. 1988. 'Two into Three Won't Go: Mimetic Desire and the Dream of Androgyny in *Dancing in the Dark*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, volume 34, number 3, 387 - 403.

<sup>13</sup> Nina Auerbach maintains that 'women exist only as spiritual extremes: there is no human norm of womanhood, for she has no home on earth, but only among divine and demonic essences' (Auerbach, 1982: 64).

<sup>14</sup> In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen defines the Great Divide as 'the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture' (Huyssen 1986: viii). According to Huyssen, this elitist discourse is essentially modernist in nature and its validity is called into question by postmodernist aesthetics that reject the theories and practices of the Great Divide and challenge the canonised high/low dichotomy. An in-depth exploration of the historical development of the high/low culture dichotomy and the aesthetic and political implications associated with the notion of the literary canon falls outside the range of the problematic discussed here. At the risk of oversimplifying cultural theory, I define the high/low culture divide as particularly affected by modernist standards of aestheticism that insist on the categorical separation of high art and mass culture. This theoretical perspective originates in nineteenth-century conceptions of culture, particularly with Matthew Arnold, who famously characterises high culture as 'the best that has been thought and said in this world'. Early twentieth-century modernist theorists of the Frankfurt school such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, defend high art as the last preserve of the utopian promise once offered by religion and they condemn mass/popular culture as the threatening other of culture. For a historical account of the modernist/postmodernist cultural divide, see: Huyssen, Andreas 1986. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Macmillan. For information on the various theories surrounding the high/low divide, see: Arnold, Matthew 1960 [1869]. *Culture and Anarchy*, London: Cambridge University Press; Storey, John 1993. *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, second edition, London: Prentice Hall.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, there is a strong etymological connection and proximity between the words "genre" and "gender", which are one and the same word – genre/genere – in French/Italian. The two words have the same origin (from Greek, Latin to Old French), namely "gen" meaning "to produce".

### 1.3 Defining the Genre: Romantic Paradigms and Innovations

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the feminisation of the romance, see: Mitchell, Juliet 1984. *The Longest Revolution*, London: Virago, 108; Batsleer, Janet et al. 1985. *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class*, London: Methuen, 71.

<sup>2</sup> While I perceive the genre as distinctly feminised, I do not want to rule out the possibility of male romance readers and writers. Diverse critics discuss these issues. Kay Mussell claims that the romance is read by a great number of closet male readers while Clover Williams and Jean R. Freedman estimate the number of male romance writers using female pen names to be as high as 30 percent. In this line of argument, my own discussion of contemporary romances will present the romance hero as a possible emotive centre of the narrative. See: Mussell, Kay 1997. 'Interview with Janet Dailey', *Paradoxa*, volume 3, number 1, 214 - 218; Williams, Clover and Freedman, Jean R. 1995. 'Shakespeare's Step-Sisters: Romance Novels and the Community of Women', in *Folklore, Literature and Cultural Theory: Collected Essays*, ed. by Cathy Lynn Preston, London: Garland Publishing, 135 - 168.

<sup>3</sup> Such a reductive approach can be illustrated for example by a psychoanalytic or a structuralist reading of romance texts. Psychoanalytic appraisals of the romance will be discussed in the thesis. The presupposition of the structuralist project implies that individual narratives are simply expressions of underlying structures or ground rules, common to whole groups of narratives. Early structuralist studies were concerned with the logic of narrative possibilities, of actions and their patterned arrangement, stressing for example the logic of a diachronic unfolding of the actions performed by the characters (Propp's "functions" and "dramatis personae") or the logic of a paradigmatic distribution of semantic macro-units (Levi-Strauss's "mythemes"). Most famously, the structuralist Propp examined the fairy tale as a narrative form, delineating its semantic functions and concluding that its typical motivator is a villainy or lack that disrupts a status quo. The task of the tale is to restore order to the world of the narrative by vanquishing the villain or liquidating the lack. For more information on structuralism, see: Storey, John 1993. *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, second edition, London: Prentice Hall; Strinati, Dominic 1995. *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London: Routledge; Propp, V. 1968 [1928]. *Morphology of the Folktale*, second edition, Austin, TX and London: University of Texas Press.

<sup>4</sup> Discussing Sarah Aldridge's *Keep to Me, Stranger* (1989), Suzanne Juhasz defines the generic parameters of mainstream lesbian romance as governed by a 'fantasy in which a world structured by feminosocial bonding will become normative rather than aberrant, central rather than marginal', claiming that 'there exist hundreds of lesbian romance novels, written by lesbians' (Juhasz, 1998: 78; 67). For more information on the lesbian romance, see: Juhasz, Suzanne 1998. 'Lesbian Romance Fiction and the Plotting of Desire: Narrative Theory, Lesbian Identity, and Reading Practice', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, volume 17, number 1, 65 - 82; Palmer, Paulina 1998. 'Girl Meets Girl: Changing

Approaches to the Lesbian Romance', in *Fatal Attractions: Rescripting Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film*, ed. by Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker, London: Pluto Press, 189 - 204. For information on ethnic romances, see: Nkweto Simmonds, Felly 1995. 'Love in Black and White', in *Romance Revisited*, ed. by Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 210 - 224.

<sup>5</sup> Anne K. Kaler cites romance readers who stress the importance of the happy ending and the comfort of convention. Thus, one reader affirms that 'I craved the happy ending like the cherry on the top of the sundae: it satisfies me' while another confirms that 'romance satisfies me for the simplest of reasons – it has a happy ending, always and in all ways' (quoted in Kaler, 1999: 2; 4). See: Kaler, Anne K. 1999. 'Introduction: Conventions of the Romance Genre', in *Romantic Conventions*, ed. by Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1 - 9.

<sup>6</sup> Various critics have discussed how the concept of love has changed and evolved historically. In *The Family, Sex and Marriage* (1977), Lawrence Stone investigates the rise of "affective individualism" during mid and late eighteenth century. According to Stone, the idea of romantic courtship and companionate marriage grew directly out of what he terms affective individualism that emerged after Renaissance humanism. In the course of this period, Stone argues, English men and women developed stronger affective bonds in the family and in their relationships. In earlier times, social relations were cooler, even unfriendly, according to the critic. Edward Shorter (1976) also perceives affective sexuality as being paramount in modern times and discusses the rise of romanticism in the late eighteenth century. Bernard Murstein emphasises that the concept of romantic love arose in the twelfth century with the flourishing of courtly love (Murstein, 1974) while Alan Macfarlane claims that the idea of romantic love and marriage is 'a by-product of the rise of capitalistic, contractual and individualistic societies' (Macfarlane 1986: 325). For more information on the historical and cultural development of romantic love, see: Stone, Lawrence 1977. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 – 1800*, London: Penguin; Shorter, Edward 1976. *The Making of the Modern Family*, London: Collins; Murstein, Bernard I. 1974. *Love, Sex and Marriage through the Ages*, New York: Springer Publishing Company; Macfarlane, Alan 1986. *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300 – 1840*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>7</sup> Rosaldo and Jackson's persuasive arguments and their contention that love is not a pre-social phenomenon but that it is clearly inscribed within and regulated by its cultural/historical context can be critically aligned with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's formulation of desire as a politicised social phenomenon, delineated in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983). Starting from the Reichian axiom that 'desire is revolutionary in its essence', the two theorists affirm that 'to code desire [...] is the business of the socius' and they focus on the ways in which desire's productive and revolutionary energies have been organised, tamed and confined in order to serve a society's needs (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 116; 139). Providing insights into the ways human emotions have been channelled and controlled within closed social structures, Deleuze and Guattari describe desire as "territorialized" or colonised inside society as it is morally regulated by the discourses, institutions or practices of a specific culture. Underlining Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis



on the politics of desire, the romance discourse clearly partakes in the social positioning or “territorialization” of love and emotions. See: Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>8</sup> In ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1980), Adrienne Rich echoes Lee Comer’s earlier conception that ‘romantic, monogamous love is an imposed law’ and she presents heterosexuality as an institution that has been imposed on women and maintained by force (Comer, 1974: 220). She suggests a reconstruction of the term “lesbian” in terms of a cross-cultural and transhistorical lesbian continuum that can capture women’s ongoing resistance to patriarchal domination. This lesbian continuum is identified as a disruptive power and a woman-centred resistance to heterosexual closure, as it threatens the genetic cycle and exposes the elaborate coding of binary sexuality. Rich’s concept of lesbian continuum describes a wide range of “woman identified experience”. As Rich notes, it is ‘not simply the fact that a woman has had a consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman’ but expands ‘to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women’ (Rich, 1980: 648). Providing an ahistorical and universal definition of lesbianism across cultures, classes and races, Rich presents an essentialising concept that oversimplifies and romanticises women’s bonds and resistance to patriarchy. See: Rich, Adrienne 1980. ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, volume 5, number 4, 631 - 660; Comer, Lee 1974. *Wedlocked Women*, Leeds: Feminist Books.

#### 1.4 Delineating the Critical Context: The Elitist/Populist Readings of the Romance

<sup>1</sup> According to the Romance Writers of America Inc., romance fiction comprises 18 percent of all books sold (not including children’s books) and more than half of all paperback fiction sold. See: <<http://www.rwanational.org/Statistics.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> See: Modleski, 1982: 36 - 37; Radway, 1987: 113; Juhasz, 1998: 65. Psychoanalytic studies such as Tania Modleski (1982) or Janice Radway’s (1987) are too complex and multi-faceted to be reproduced in the main text. In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski views the reading of the romance as a sophisticated process which involves the reader in regressive fantasies, ‘both angry fantasies and fantasies of being wholly protected and cherished’, that offer women a means by which they can work through psychic conflicts generated by the unequal distribution of power in family relations (Modleski, 1982: 32). Although the romance exposes the contradictions of women’s oppression, depicting elements of protest or “revenge” against oppressive male behaviour, and although the reading experience signals forms of female discontent, the critic makes clear that the genre is essentially pro status-quo. It thus reproduces women’s subordination in patriarchal cultures and offers regressive solutions that are found lacking in comparison with those offered by feminism. In her ethnographic study *Reading the Romance*, Janice

Radway draws on Nancy Chodorow's neo-Freudian feminist theories, arguing that women emerge from the Oedipus complex with an intact triangular psychic structure. According to Radway, the romantic fantasy thus originates in an oedipal desire to be loved by an individual of the opposite sex and in the continuing pre-oedipal wish to regain motherly love and all that it implies - erotic pleasure and symbiotic completion. Radway argues that the ideal romance would provide perfect triangular satisfaction in the form of the hero: fatherly protection, motherly care and passionate adult love. Although Radway finds that the practice of reading is a form of resistance to patriarchal social reality, she asserts that the texts confirm patriarchal relations and are inferior to her more enlightened and intellectually superior feminist stance. See: Modleski, Tania 1982. *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, London: Archon Books; Radway, Janice A. 1987. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, London: Verso.

<sup>3</sup> Rather than confining myself to Freud's definition of "family romance" (by which he describes the infantile fantasy of heroic illegitimacy, of being freed from one's family and joining one of higher social standing), I use the term in the sense of a love triangle replayed in the familial context. See: Freud, Sigmund 1977 [1909]. 'Family Romances', in *The Penguin Freud Library: On Sexuality*, volume 7, London: Penguin, 217 - 225.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), neo-Freudian critic Nancy Chodorow defines the daughter's asymmetrical engendering process as an oedipal situation that is continually unresolved. She focuses on the latter's ongoing longing for the mother and her internal relational triangle. Put simply, her theory is that because primary parenting is always done by women, not men, the identities of male and female children are formed differently. While boys can use their maleness to differentiate themselves from the mother, girls stay locked in a mother-daughter confusion of identity by virtue of their gender. Their identity is more fluid and the daughter's individuation process is incomplete. Although the girl "turns" towards her father, "this 'turn' cannot be absolute because of the depth of her maternal attachment and because of the emotional and physical distance of her father. [...] An oedipal girl [...] oscillates between the attachment to her mother and to her father" (Chodorow, 1978: 129). The girl does not abandon her attachment to her mother, but rather adds to it her libidinal attachment to her father in a complex triadic relationship. Both mother and father remain love objects for the girl, whose development, Chodorow claims, will be marked by an oscillation between the pre-oedipal mother-related concerns of fusion and the oedipal concerns of male-female relations. It would be possible to read texts such as Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) in terms of the theory of the girl's "internal emotional triangle", with the narrator being torn between the engulfing and omnipotent presence of the older first wife and the fatherly sexual attraction to her husband. My quarrel with this position is that such a reading reduces and fixes the text to one general and immutable model and erases textual distinctions. See: Chodorow, Nancy 1978. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton states that 'false consciousness may mean not that a body of ideas is actually untrue, but that these ideas are functional for the maintenance of an oppressive

power' (Eagleton: 1991: 24). For more information on the notion of "false consciousness" and the classic Marxist position that ideology is a distorted (not simply false) view of reality, see: Mike Cormack and Terry Eagleton's discussion of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's *The German Ideology* (1845-46) in Cormack, Mike 1992. *Ideology*, London: B.T. Batsford; Eagleton, Terry 1991. *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Althusser defines ideology as a material practice that exists in the "lived" relation between men and their world. It is a lived, material experience, not just a body of ideas and it is mainly reproduced through the practices and productions of the "ideological State apparatuses" (for example organised religion, family, education, organised politics, media, the culture industry). Althusser distinguishes the ideological State apparatuses which 'function massively and predominantly by ideology' from the repressive State apparatuses (for example the police, military, the institutions of court and prison) which function 'massively and predominantly by repression' (Althusser, 1971: 138). He uses the term "interpellation" to describe the way in which ideology calls out to individuals. All ideology works or functions by taking individuals and placing them, that is "hailing" or "interpellating" them, as subjects within the framework of ideology. Ideology thus implies a process of misrepresentation and distortion that represents and shapes reality in such a way as to reinforce the legitimacy and acceptance of dominant forms of power. See: Althusser, Louis 1971 [1968]. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London: New Left Books.

<sup>7</sup> I draw here on Michèle Barrett and Anne Philips's notion of "1970s modernist feminism" that they distinguish from "1990s postmodern feminism". Whereas the earlier form can be seen as a more universalistic and unified cultural current based on a clear understanding of the different causes of women's oppression (the cause being always found at the level of the social structure), postmodern feminism deconstructs the notion of "Woman" in favour of women's particularity and the differences between women. Whereas modernist feminism is clearly opposed to women's consumption of potentially regressive goods (clothes, make-up etc.) and genres, postmodern feminism is more permissive about the pleasures of feminine consumption. For Charlotte Brunsdon, postmodern feminism is related to postfeminism as 'both are dependent on but transcendent or dismissive of the impulses and images of 1970s feminism' (Brunsdon, 1997: 84 - 85). See Brunsdon's discussion of Barrett and Philips in Brunsdon, Charlotte 1997. *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*, London: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> As Ien Ang points out, 'Radway, the researcher, is a feminist and *not* a romance fan; the Smithton women, the researched, are romance readers and *not* feminists [...] what Radway's conception of political intervention tends to arrive at is the deromanticization of the romance in favour of a romanticized feminism' (Ang, 1996: 102; 104). Underlying Radway's project, according to Ang, is a 'recruitist conception of the politics of feminist research' that is based on the 'construction of romance readers as embryonic feminists' and that feeds on the moralistic belief that feminism automatically possesses 'the relevant and effective formulas for all women to change their lives and acquire happiness' (Ang, 1996: 103). Focusing on the ideological function of pleasure rather than 'the *pleasurableness* of the pleasure of romance reading', Radway cannot align her conception of feminism with

the romance and for her, the conservative ideology of romance texts is still very much at odds with a feminist identity (Ang, 1996: 104). See: Ang, Ien 1996. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> See for example: Krentz, Jayne Ann 1992. 'Introduction', in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. by Jayne Ann Krentz, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1 - 9; Gilles Seidel, Kathleen 1992. 'Judge Me by the Joy I bring', in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. by Jayne Ann Krentz, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 159 - 179; Frenier, Marian Darce 1988. *Goodbye Heathcliff: Changing Heroes, Heroines, Roles, and Values in Women's Category Romances*, London: Greenwood Press; Mussell Kay 1997. 'Where's Love Gone? Transformations in Romance Fiction and Scholarship', *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres*, volume 3, number 1, 3 - 14; Hubbard, Rita C. 1992. 'Magic and Transformation: Relationships in Popular Romance Novels, 1950 to the 1980s', in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. by Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 476 - 488; Mussell, Kay 1997. 'Quickie with Kay Mussell: Are Feminism & Romance Novels Mutually Exclusive?', in <<http://www.likesbooks.com/mussell.html>>; Witkowski, Karen. 'Feminism & Romance – Romance Lovers Respond', in <<http://www.likesbooks.com/mussell2.html>>; Asaro, Catherine 1997. 'A Quickie with Catherine Asaro – On Feminism & Romance', in <<http://www.likesbooks.com/quick16.html>>.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout this study, I draw on Beverly Skeggs's definition of popular feminism as 'the feminism that can be marketed. It is the sort that pervades our commonsense' (Skeggs, 1997: 144).

## 1.5 From Conservatism to Progressiveness: The Marital Triangle in the Romance

<sup>1</sup> As one of the main ideas that founded the radical feminist movement in the early 1970s, sisterhood stresses female collectivism, egalitarianism and cooperation as means to achieve political solidarity between women. Sisterhood and women's communalism may rightly be described as constituting the very heart and centre of early Second Wave feminism. Thus, Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne argue that 'without the theoretical construct of "sisterhood" [...] feminism could not exist' (Klein and Hawthorne, 1997: 57). For Vann, sisterhood is 'more than a word. It is a responsibility' while for bell hooks, it is 'the outcome of continued growth and change. It is a goal to be reached, a process of becoming' (quoted in Nkweto Simmonds, 1997: 19). See: Klein, Renate and Hawthorne, Susan 1997. 'Reclaiming Sisterhood: Radical Feminism an Antidote to Theoretical and Embodied Fragmentation of Women', in *Desperately Seeking Sisterhood: Still Challenging and Building*, ed. by Magdalene Ang-Lygate; Chris Corrin and Millsom S. Henry, London:

Taylor & Francis, 57 - 70; Nkweto Simmonds, Felly 1997. 'Who are the Sisters? Difference, Feminism and Friendship, in *Desperately Seeking Sisterhood: Still Challenging and Building*, ed. by Magdalene Ang-Lygate, Chris Corrin and Millsom S. Henry, London: Taylor & Francis, 29 - 30.

## 2. Generic Possibilities and Semantic Hybridity: The Relational Triangles in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

<sup>1</sup> From an unsigned review in *Atlas*, 23 October 1847. See: Allott, Miriam (ed.). 1974. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

<sup>2</sup> Writing to Brontë's publisher W.S. Williams, W.M. Thackeray for example emphasises the appeal of the text, stating that 'I wish you had not sent me *Jane Eyre*. It interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it [...] I don't know why I tell you this but I have been exceedingly moved & pleased by *Jane Eyre*' (Thackeray, 1987: 430). Novelist Elizabeth Gaskell praises the text as 'a treasure for her daughters' while Virginia Woolf stresses the 'continuing appeal of *Jane Eyre*', stating that, at the end of the reading process, 'we are steeped through and through with the genius, the vehemence, the indignation of Charlotte Brontë' (Gaskell, 1987: 445; Woolf, 1987: 455; 456).

<sup>3</sup> Historicist and contextualist studies of the novel include for example: Chase, Karen 1997. 'Jane Eyre's Interior Design', in *New Casebooks: Jane Eyre*, ed. by Heather Glen, London: Macmillan, 52 - 67; Politi, Jina 1997. 'Jane Eyre Classified' in *New Casebooks: Jane Eyre*, ed. by Heather Glen, London: Macmillan, 78 - 91; Meyer, Susan 1991. 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*', in *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism*, ed. by Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 159 - 183. Reading the novel against the background of European imperial expansion, Gayatri Spivak famously explores the text's collusion with nineteenth-century imperialism. See: Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 1985. 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, volume 12, number 1, 243 - 261.

<sup>4</sup> Modleski defines the typical romantic formula as follows,

A young, inexperienced, poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced, wealthy man, older than herself by ten to fifteen years. The heroine is confused by the hero's behavior since, though he is obviously interested in her, he is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal. By the end, however, all misunderstandings are cleared away, and the hero reveals his love for the heroine, who reciprocates. (Modleski, 1982: 36)

Although this staple formula recognisably mirrors the plot of *Jane Eyre*, it is also different in important ways, not taking into account the female *Bildungs*plot, the Gothic repetition of the marital triangle and the underlying as well as explicit female-female sympathies and acts of bonding in Brontë's text.

<sup>5</sup> Although I refer to the novel's thematic concerns with female issues of independence and female-female friendships as feminist, I do not interpret Brontë's text as consciously foretelling the feminist future. Such a reading would not only neglect the historical embeddedness of the novel in its own socio-cultural context but also negate the historical difference of Brontë's past writing by simplistically converting its past concerns into current feminist categories. While Brontë should not be credited with a conscious retelling of the feminist future, the semantic richness and plurality of perspectives of her "organic" text nevertheless remain open for trans-historical re-accentuation and the text's concerns with female-related issues of independence and feminosociality clearly have resonances for contemporary feminism. The textual discourses that this study defines as feminist should therefore not be understood as motivated by a self-conscious feminist impulse on the author's side but should rather be seen as flexible narrative spaces that allow for contemporary feminist interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Brontë's classic stages the tension between the social scripts of *Bildung* and romance that characterises the plots of many nineteenth-century fictions dealing with women. According to Blau DuPlessis, love and quest are ultimately incompatible and cannot coexist or be integrated for the nineteenth-century heroine. The standard resolution to narrative conflict in such fictions is generally 'an ending in which one part of that contradiction, usually quest or *Bildung*, is set aside or repressed' (Blau DuPlessis, 1985: 3 - 4). While this study on the one hand finds a similar discursive problematic governing the dynamics of Brontë's plot (the novel struggling to blend its feminist and romantic potential), it on the other hand detects narrative attempts of semantic reconciliation in the text's ending. I reject the above critic's understanding of the text as a closed narrative with 'romance as its final term', maintaining that the narrative's narrative stance and resolution are far from being monovocal or closed to alien discourse (Blau DuPlessis, 1985: 201). Rather than closing down the narrative to competing discourses, Brontë continues to juxtapose, until the end, the romantic ethos with other dialogising materials.

<sup>7</sup> In opposition to the progressive contemporary romance that incorporates a feminist ethic of feminosociality within the romantic texture, *Jane Eyre*, while portraying female-female bonds of sympathy and understanding, segregates these issues from the overall romantic trajectory.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin defines as monologic any authoritative discourse that is 'self-sufficient, hermetic', imprisoned 'as it were, in the dungeon of a single context' (Bakhtin, 1981: 274). He contrasts monologism as a model of ideological dominance to his literary theory of dialogism by which he understands the incorporation and interweaving of various voices in one single utterance/text. In the sense that the meaning of *Jane Eyre* is always "not one" and that the text has been read differently in different socio-cultural contexts, the novel

resists the monologic drive and could be described as a 'historical, organic hybrid' in which 'not only two languages but also two socio-linguistic (and thus organic) world views are mixed with each other'. As Bakhtin makes clear, such hybrids 'have been [...] profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new "internal forms" for perceiving the world in words' (Bakhtin, 1981: 360).

<sup>9</sup> In keeping with Derrida's observation, there is an increasing number of writers who continue to "re-read" and "re-write" *Jane Eyre* for diverse purposes and with strikingly different results. Such intertextual engagements interact with the earlier text by either complementing or further expanding the already-existing semantic ambiguities/subplots in Brontë's classic, by further problematising the canonical text or by simply domesticating and replicating the novel's romantic plot. While Jean Rhys's famous post-colonial derivative prequel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) springs most readily to mind when considering intertextual re-readings of *Jane Eyre*, Robbie Kydd's revisionary *The Quiet Stranger* (1991), Lin Haire-Sargeant's *H. The Story of Heathcliff's Journey back to Wuthering Heights* (1992), D.M. Thomas's historiographic and thoroughly intertextual *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000), J. Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (2001) and Sharon Shinn's simplistic romance *Jenna Starborn* (2002) also use Brontë's classic as a pre-model to be either replicated or critically re-envisioned. For more details, see: Rhys, Jean 1997 [1966]. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, London: Penguin Books; Kydd, Robbie 1991. *The Quiet Stranger*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing; Haire-Sargeant, Lin 1992. *H. The Story of Heathcliff's Journey back to Wuthering Heights*, New York: Pocket Books; Thomas, D.M. 2000. *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre*, London: Duck Editions; Fforde, Jasper 2001. *The Eyre Affair*, London: Hodder & Stoughton; Shinn, Sharon 2002. *Jenna Starborn*, New York: Ace Books.

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Patsy Stoneman argues that, like fairytales, a famous text like *Jane Eyre* acquires a special status that might aptly be described as mythological: it is part of those 'modern myths' that according to Chris Baldick 'prolong their lives not by being retold at great length, but by being alluded to [...] This process [...] reduce[s] them to the simplest memorable patterns' (quoted in Stoneman, 1996: 4).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, stressing the parallels between Blanche and Jane, a 1879 melodramatic stage adaptation of *Jane Eyre* adopts an opposite position, portraying an abandoned, starving and ruined Blanche who after a series of rather unbelievable coincidences, stumbles upon a forgiving and merciful Jane. Both women decide to be "sisters" and after Jane's marriage to Rochester, Blanche lives with the couple, a humbled and penitent woman. This adaptation 'simultaneously dramatizes and domesticates the anger of the novel by containing it within a master trope of sisterhood' (Michie, 1992a: 17). See: Michie, Helena 1992. *Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Freud describes the primal scene in the 1918 'Wolf Man' case as the child's traumatic witnessing of an act of parental intercourse. Although this study has expressed reservations about the monolithic, ahistorical and static qualities of a theoretical model couched purely in psychoanalytic terms and although Jane's witnessing of the charade does not bring about

traumatic results, it is nevertheless tempting to read the charade episode as a metaphorical primal scene engaging Blanche (as the metaphoric representation of the “maternal” Bertha), Rochester (as the paternal figure) and Jane as the young spectator/daughter witnessing the parental act of becoming one – the dumb show marriage ceremony. In line with such psychoanalytic argumentation, Jean Wyatt also interprets the novel in terms of its parallels to the familial situation. For her, the erotic patterns of *Jane Eyre* replay the daughter’s maturation process in a patriarchal society, the relations between Rochester and Jane reproducing ‘in many obvious ways the power structure of father-daughter relations in the patriarchal family’, with Bertha figuring as the forbidding and rival mother figure whose ‘presence also keeps the oedipal dream of marrying one’s father from becoming too true’ (Wyatt, 1990: 27; 29 - 30). Viewed in this light, *Jane Eyre* appears as an oedipally organised narrative, portraying the oedipal journey in which the young daughter (Jane) is kept from the desired father/lover (Rochester) by the rivalry of the bad mother (Bertha). See: Wyatt, Jean 1990. *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women’s Reading and Writing*, Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press. For more information on the primal scene, see: Freud, Sigmund 1957 [1918]. ‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 17, London: Hogarth Press, 7 - 122. For more information of the daughter’s oedipal maturation process, see: Chodorow, Nancy 1978. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press.

<sup>13</sup> Stressing the continuities between Brontë’s work and *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), Lynn Pykett for example claims that ‘Brontë’s female protagonist, like Braddon’s, is the liminal figure of the governess who is discontented with her lot’, that both novels ‘contain a bigamy plot’ and that in ‘both narratives a violent and unstable wife chooses fire as her instrument of vengeance’ (Pykett, 1998: 20). See: Pykett, Lynn 1998. ‘Women and the Sensation Business’, in *Writing A Woman’s Business: Women, Writing and the Marketplace*, ed. by Judy Simons and Kate Fullbrook, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 17 - 30.

<sup>14</sup> In her widely acclaimed ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), Laura Mulvey investigates the implications of the controlling and scopophilic male gaze and highlights the role of the male spectator as the sculptor of a passive and objectified femininity, observing that the ‘determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly [...] The man [...] emerges as the representative of power [...] as the bearer of the look’ (Mulvey, 1989: 19; 20).

<sup>15</sup> See: Brontë, 1987: 14; 9; 10; 203; 95; 257; 233; 272. For more detailed descriptions of the similarities between Jane and Bertha, see for example: Gilbert, Sandra M. 1987. Extract from ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress (1979)’, in *Jane Eyre: A Norton Critical Edition*, second edition, ed. by Richard J. Dunn, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 476 - 483; Griesinger, Emily Ann 1989. ‘Before and After *Jane Eyre*: The Female Gothic and Some Modern Variations’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Vanderbilt University, Tennessee).



<sup>16</sup> This insular metaphor is inspired by Janice Swanson's description of female friendships as 'islands in a tossed sea of relations between rivals. These islands are generally comprised of no more than moments when women, suddenly aware of the forces which separate them, come to a deep sharing of that recognition' (quoted in Cosslet, 1988: 11).

<sup>17</sup> Helena Michie stresses the feminist reclamation of familial bonds in the form of "sisterhood", maintaining that there is 'within feminism, a mirror tendency to reclaim the family and to reproduce it in altered form. The figural response to patriarchy is the "sisterhood" invoked as its challenge' (Michie, 1992b: 58).

<sup>18</sup> I refer here of course to the climactic and providential sequence in which Jane's prayer for guidance (relating to the decision whether or not she should accept St. John's marriage proposal) is supernaturally answered by Rochester's voice calling out to her through the night and drawing her back to his side. This call, Jane's resulting return to and marital bliss with Rochester are presented as works of fate and nature and they seem above reasoning and questioning.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on Rochester's "symbolic castration" by the Thornfield fire, see for example: Rich, Adrienne 1987. Extract from 'The Temptations of a Motherless Woman (1979)', in *Jane Eyre: A Norton Critical Edition*, second edition, ed. by Richard J. Dunn, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 462 - 475; Modleski, Tania 1982. *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, London: Archon Books; Rowe, Karen E. 1983. "'Fairy-Born and Human-Bred": Jane Eyre's Education in Romance', in *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, Lebanon, NH and London: University Press of New England, 69 - 90; Moglen, Helen 1976. *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived*, New York: Norton; Bell, Millicent 1996. 'Jane Eyre: The Tale of a Governess', *American Scholar*, volume 65, number 2, 263 - 271.

### 3. Generic Expansion and Innovation: The Romantic Marital Triangle in Contemporary Romances

<sup>1</sup> Susan Faludi's argument is too complex to be reproduced here. In short, her "backlash" thesis argues that during the 1980s, there was a backlash against feminism in both the US and the UK, according to which feminism has made women miserable. In this way, the backlash ideology attempts to turn back the clock and erode the progress brought about by feminism. It implies a rejection of feminist principles and ideas in favour of a return to conservative subordinate female roles. In contrast to this, this study defines as postfeminist a cultural position that is not anti-feminist but assumes, acknowledges and takes for granted certain ideas and principles of feminism while, at the same time, de-politicising the movement and accepting a patriarchal superstructure. See: Faludi, Susan 1992. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, London: Vintage; Dow, Bonnie J. 1996.

*Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement since 1970*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>2</sup> While the incorporation of specifically postfeminist ideas within contemporary romances cannot be explored in detail in the main section of the text, it remains an interesting point for discussion. While popular feminist in outlook, texts such as Susan Elizabeth Phillips's *Fancy Pants* (1989), Debbie Macomber's *This Matter of Marriage* (1997) and Angela Arney's *The Second Wife* (1997) also have postfeminist elements, featuring heroines who assume woman's right to work *and* to mother and who affirm their individualistic right to choose between work/career and motherhood/life as a housewife. Exemplifying the postfeminist discourse of what Elspeth Probyn (1990) refers to as 'choiceoisie', these heroines articulate an ideology of choice, 'realizing that they want to be more than burned-out carbon copies of men' and 'tired of buying into all those male yardsticks of success' (Probyn, 1990: 152; Phillips, 1989: 424; 425). For the heroine of Macomber's *This Matter of Marriage*, all her 'goals have shifted from my business to my home life. For now, anyway. And that's just fine' (Macomber, 1997: 378). The heroine of Arney's *The Second Wife* similarly finds herself 'surprisingly happy' at the prospect of being 'metamorphosed into a full-time wife and mother' (Arney, 1997: 453). Yet, rather than portraying these life choices as a return to a natural order, these texts stress the element of individualistic choice between the home or the career, the family or the successful job. See: Probyn, Elspeth 1990. 'New Traditionalism and Post-feminism: TV does the Home', *Screen*, volume 31, number 2, 147 - 159.

<sup>3</sup> I describe as emotive centre a character whose emotions are principally focused on in the text and who functions as the main focus of attention and identification for the reader.

<sup>4</sup> Jayne Ann Krentz similarly points out that 'reader identification is far more complex than critics have realized. Sometimes the reader identifies with the heroine, sometimes [...] the heroine functions simply as a placeholder; and sometimes the reader identifies with the hero' (Krentz, 1992a: 7). See: Krentz, Jayne Ann 1992. 'Introduction', in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. by Jayne Ann Krentz, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1 - 9.

<sup>5</sup> As Myra Macdonald describes it, 'in popular media terms, feminist sisterhood mutated into sentimentalism, as the difficult task of building solidarity and campaigning for change in organizational and personal practice was reduced to a matter of emotional bonding' (Macdonald, 1995: 64). See: Macdonald, Myra 1995. *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*, London: Edward Arnold.

#### 4.1 Fighting for Remembrance: Textual Revenants in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

<sup>1</sup> Although *Aurora Floyd* (1863) features a conservative marital triangle binding the flamboyant heroine Aurora, her timid and self-effacing cousin Lucy and Aurora's early suitor and Lucy's later husband Talbot Bulstrode, this triangular constellation is only of secondary importance in the novel's hierarchy of meaning. The text focuses primarily on the bigamous marriages of the likable, emancipated and assertive Aurora whose erotic and moral transgressions are in the end not severely punished (as in my two primary texts) but ultimately endorsed – Aurora ending happily married to the trusting Mellish with all her “crimes” forgotten and forgiven.

<sup>2</sup> Highlighting the short-lived popularity of the sensation novel, Patrick Brantlinger rather dismissively describes the sensation novel as ‘a minor subgenre of British fiction that flourished in the 1860s only to die out a decade or two later’ (Brantlinger, 1982: 1). Lynn Pykett also specifies the 1860s as ‘the sensation decade; a decade of sensational events and sensational writing’ while Jonathan Loesberg notes that whereas throughout the 1860s, the sensation genre was ‘extraordinarily popular’, ‘by 1870 the genre itself seems to have lost definition and to have ceased to be controversial’ (Pykett, 1994: 1; Loesberg, 1986: 115).

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary nineteenth-century reviewers often condemned the sensation novel for its style, form, subject matter, its supposed lack of quality and corrupting effect on the reader. Launching a fierce critical and moral attack on the genre, Henry Mansel's 1862 *Quarterly Review* article most elaborately views sensation novels as ‘indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want they supply’ (quoted in Skilton, 1998: xxi). Describing sensation novels as ‘one of the abominations of the age’, W. Fraser Rae in his 1865 article in the *North British Review* particularly dismisses Mary Elizabeth Braddon for her supposedly simplistic language and her corrupting material, stating that the author ‘may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing Room’ (quoted in Brantlinger, 1982: 7; quoted in Carnell, 2000: 208).

<sup>4</sup> Both of my novels feature bigamy plots, as even the divorced Mr Carlyle cannot help feeling that ‘he must be a man of two wives’ (Wood, [n.d.]: 609). According to the Victorian reviewer Henry Mansel, bigamy was the most popular crime of the sensation novel. ‘So popular has the crime become, as to give rise to an entire sub-class in this branch of literature’, Mansel observes (quoted in Showalter, 1978: 107). Relating the popularity of the bigamy convention to real-life cases such as the notorious 1861 Yelverton bigamy divorce trial, Jeanne Fahnestock also observes that of all the ‘hidden crimes, bigamy can claim title as the quintessential sensation device’ (Fahnestock, 1981: 48). She explains the psychological appeal of the sensation novel and the bigamy convention in terms of allowing the reader the ‘permanently appealing chance to “have it both ways”, to sin and be

innocent, to renounce a desirable object and then be rewarded with it, to see unsocial desires fulfilled and duly punished' (Fahnestock, 1981: 65). For more information on real-life Victorian bigamy cases, see: Frost, Ginger 1997. 'Bigamy and Cohabitation in Victorian England', *Journal of Family History*, volume 22, July, 286 - 306. For more information on the Yelverton case in particular, see: Erickson, Arvel B. and McCarthy, John R. 1971. 'The Yelverton Case: Civil Legislation and Marriage', *Victorian Studies*, volume 14, 275 - 291; Lyndon Shanley, Mary 1982. "'One Must Ride Behind": Married Women's Rights and the Divorce Act of 1857', *Victorian Studies*, volume 25, 355 - 376.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Loesberg argues that the defining characteristic of sensation fiction is the loss of class identity on the part of the characters, a concern which he relates to the second Reform Bill debates, noting that 'sensation novels evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity' (Loesberg, 1986: 117).

<sup>6</sup> According to Elaine Showalter, the 'Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 still limited women's rights to obtain a divorce, making it possible for a husband to petition on the grounds of adultery, while the wife had also to prove desertion, cruelty, incest, rape, sodomy, or bestiality. But at least the Act recognized that the Victorian home so rapturously celebrated in theory could, in reality, be a prison or a madhouse. The Divorce Act, according to Margaret Maison, "caused a minor social revolution in England"; and in part it is the revolution of rising expectations' (Showalter, 1978: 106 - 107).

<sup>7</sup> Observing that the sensation novel is 'perceived as feminine' and 'generally features a female protagonist', Pamela K. Gilbert quotes Winifred Hughes when noting that 'even the sensation novels written by men focus on the feminine point of view; both Reade and Collins draw effortless portraits of mature, sophisticated, sexually aroused women, heroines as well as adventuresses' (Gilbert, 1997: 74; quoted in Gilbert, 1997: 74). Lynn Pykett also perceives the genre as clearly gendered. She argues,

The emphasis on mechanistic, commercial production, and passive, appetitive consumption, marked the sensation novel as a feminine form, irrespective of the gender of the particular sensation author [...] sensation fiction was by definition "feminine", according to the terms of a gendered critical discourse in which the masculine (positive) term was reserved for work that offered itself as the unique expression of individual genius. (Pykett, 1992: 31).

Similarly, Marlene Tromp notes that 'the Victorians considered the genre itself to be feminine, and certainly the great bulk of sensation novels were produced (and consumed) by women' (Tromp, 2000: xviii).

<sup>8</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert identifies the texts' use of outrageous female protagonists as genre-specific, noting that 'aggressive female characters seem to be the real key in defining the novels as sensational' (Gilbert, 1997: 79).

<sup>9</sup> The publication date of my edition of *East Lynne* is unknown. I therefore use the abbreviation [n.d.] in my quotations. Discussing the popularity of *East Lynne*, Guy

Barefoot traces the astonishing success of *East Lynne* during mid/late Victorian and early twentieth-century periods – the novel being continually reprinted and repeatedly adapted for stage and cinema during that period and declining in popularity from the 1930s onwards. See: Barefoot, Guy 1994. 'East Lynne to Gas Light: Hollywood, Melodrama and Twentieth-century Notions of the Victorian', in *Melodrama Stage Picture Screen*, ed. by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill, London: BFI Publishing, 94 - 105.

<sup>10</sup> Gail Walker observes that Isabel is guilty of other minor crimes leading up to her final act of adultery: the 'first "sin" of Isabel Vane is that she marries without that sentimentalized fiction of love which supposedly authorized a delicately nurtured female to submit to her husband'; 'her second "sin" is that prior to her acceptance of Carlyle she experiences an attachment, clearly based on sexual attraction, to Captain Francis Levison [...] She has, in fact, violated the Victorian ideal of true womanliness long before her conventional "fall" into the trap of seduction'. In this way, her 'previous lapses from "virtue" have prepared the way, psychologically, for her final "fall"' (Walker, 1987: 26; 27; 28).

<sup>11</sup> According to Lynn Pykett, Isabel and Barbara are clearly contrasted in terms of their maternal qualities. As Pykett notes,

The central narrative of *East Lynne* is certainly structured around maternal experience and competing definitions of motherhood. The novel's double structure involves two heroines, Isabel and Barbara, and turns on a comparison of their roles as mothers, and their differing conceptions of motherhood. Barbara, the "successful" heroine, in many respects represents the type of the modern mother. (Pykett, 1992: 128)

In contrast, Isabel 'loves too much. Her maternal feelings, like other aspects of her emotional life, are characterised by excess' (Pykett, 1992: 129). While Pykett makes a valuable point drawing attention to the contrast in maternal qualities in Barbara and Isabel, the ideological decision in favour of the modern motherhood of Barbara is not as clear cut as Pykett notes, especially with reference to Barbara's lack of interest in Isabel and Carlyle's dying son William and her final admission to Carlyle that there is a 'feeling in my heart against your children, a sort of jealous feeling [...] because they were hers; because she had once been your wife' (Wood, [n.d.]: 620). Although Barbara hopes that maternal love for Isabel's children will 'come with time', the text leaves little doubt that Isabel would have been the more affectionate and sincere mother (Wood, [n.d.]: 620).

<sup>12</sup> In opposition to the conservative depiction of female-female rivalry in *East Lynne*, Kate Flint provides an example of a sensation novel that features more progressive patterns of intra-female bonding. Thus,

Matilda Hays's *Adrienne Hope* (1866), reviewed as a sensation novel, and influenced by prevalent fashions in some of the elements of its plot (Adrienne unwisely enters into a secret marriage with a man who subsequently publicly marries another woman) is actually far more feminist than the novels of Braddon,

Broughton, and Wood, with the two women eventually finding mutual support in one another after their husband's death. (Flint, 1993: 285)

<sup>13</sup> According to Lynn Pykett, Barbara and Isabel are also complementary characters in relation to the reader's sympathies. She notes,

It would appear that the reader's sympathies usually lie with the character who forms the excluded third term of this triangle. Thus, the highest point of the reader's sympathetic identification with Barbara is in the first part of the novel when she is positioned as the jealous outsider, spectator of Carlyle's and Isabel's wedded bliss. Indeed, the reader is most closely involved with Barbara's emotional life in those scenes in which she transgresses those norms of the proper feminine which she is later used to exemplify [...] once Barbara has effectively changed positions with Isabel, she is viewed from a more distanced perspective and becomes of less emotional interest. In a similar way the reader's emotional involvement with Isabel intensifies as she, in turn, becomes the spectator in the triangle: first, when she suspects the constant *têtes-à-têtes* between her husband and Barbara (when they are in fact consulting about Barbara's brother), and (most powerfully) in the final volume when Isabel is living at East Lynne disguised as governess to her own children. (Pykett, 1992: 133)

<sup>14</sup> Apart from a conflated marital triangle, the novel also presents a perfect example of Sedgwick's homosocial masculinist triangle. Throughout the text, Robert shows his homosocial affection for George, wondering how it is possible that he 'should care so much for the fellow' and asserting that he would 'freely give up all and stand penniless in the world to-morrow, if [...] George Talboys could stand by my side' (Braddon, 1998: 94; 161). The homosocial/sexual tendencies between Robert Audley and George Talboys have been well documented. Emphasising the 'homosocial and homoerotic bond between men', Lynda Hart argues that Lady Audley 'stands in for the disavowal of desire between men. Lucy Audley serves as the catalyst to Robert's desire for George *and* an obstacle to be overcome [...] The paradox of the criminal woman is thus her positioning as, at once, problem and solution to the homosocial economy' (Hart, 1994: 7). Similarly, Simon Petch draws attention to 'Robert Audley's repressed homoerotic desires' for George (Petch, 2000: 1).

<sup>15</sup> See for example: Nemesvari, Richard 1995. 'Robert Audley's Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley's Secret*', *Studies in the Novel*, volume 27, number 4, 515 - 528; Pykett, Lynn 1992. *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, London: Routledge; Hart, Lynda 1994. 'The Victorian Villainess and the Patriarchal Unconscious', *Literature and Psychology*, volume 40, number 3, 1 - 25.

<sup>16</sup> The daughter's tendency to inherit maternal insanity is a well-established Victorian physiological belief. Victorian physician Andrew Wynter thus argues that 'the tendency of the mother to transmit her mental disease is [...] in all cases stronger than the father's; some physicians have, indeed, insisted that it is twice as strong' (quoted in Stern, 2000: 42).

<sup>17</sup> Robert can only exorcise the disturbing presence of Lady Audley with the collaboration of medical, legal and familial authorities, in particular with the help of Dr Mosgrave. Having spoken to the supposedly mad Lady Audley, the doctor's initial assessment fails to comply with Robert's patriarchal wishes, diagnosing not madness in Lady Audley but an employment of 'intelligent means [...] she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that' (Braddon, 1998: 377). After hearing her transgressive story however from Robert (his version of her tale), Dr Mosgrave revises his judgement, converting the cause of acquittal into one of criminality, now detecting a 'latent insanity', 'the lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr Audley. She is dangerous!' (Braddon, 1998: 379).

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Stern argues that 'hereditary insanity is only a convenient answer to many more complicated problems'; in 'a society increasingly troubled by duplicity, alienation, and permeable social boundaries, the discourse of heredity seemed to offer the body as solid ground for various aspects of identity' (Stern, 2000: 47; 40). Similarly, D.A. Miller perceptively notes that madness as a diagnosis 'lies in wait to "cover" – account for and occlude – whatever behaviors, desires, or tendencies might be considered socially deviant, undesirable, or dangerous [...] The "secret" let out at the end of the novel is not, therefore, that Lady Audley is a madwoman but rather that, *whether she is or not*, she must be treated as such' (Miller, 1988: 169). Jill Matus also argues that 'madness is pulled out of the hat as a solution and the means of plot resolution' (Matus, 1993: 335).

<sup>19</sup> Throughout the novel, the text makes clear that the formerly misogynistic Robert is only interested in Clara because of her astonishing resemblance to her brother: 'she was so like the friend he had loved [...] that it was impossible for him to think of her as a stranger', Clara's 'dark-brown eyes' being 'so like the eyes of his lost friend' (Braddon, 1998: 202; 371). In opposition to the subversive conflated marital triangle engaging Lady Audley, the masculinist triangle between George Talboys, his sister Clara and Robert Audley is directly reminiscent of Sedgwick's portrayal of the homosocial triangle since it is not only distinctly patriarchal in nature but it also nurtures the homosocial bonds between George and Robert. This homosocial triangle places the George-look-alike Clara as an ideological buffer that curbs the latent homoerotic desire in the service of the heterosexual norm. Robert's love for Clara not only depends entirely on her physical likeness to George but it is this likeness that enables Robert (when he eventually marries Clara and lives together with her and George) to both enjoy his homosocial bond with George and reinstate himself in the heterosexual economy of the patriarchal family. In this line of argumentation, Robin Elizabeth Sherlock argues that in 'eventually choosing George's sister, Clara, as his wife, Robert effectively conceals his "unnaturalness" by allowing his obsessive desire to be expressed through socially acceptable channels' (Sherlock, 1996: 205). Similarly, Helena Michie asserts that Clara 'forms a bridge to, a compromise with, the homosocial economy of the text' (Michie, 1992a: 70). Similarly, Richard Nemesvari notes that Clara's physical similarity to her brother places her as 'the mediating point in a triangulated relationship'; Clara 'serves to cement the homosocial bond between Robert and George even as she camouflages its potentially homosexual nature' (Nemesvari, 1995: 524). In this way, 'Clara provides

Robert with the perfect object of transference and offers him the opportunity to turn his “illicit” homosocial desire for George in a socially acceptable direction’ (Nemesvari, 1995: 524).

## 4.2 From Gothic Romance to Marital Gothic: Variations of the Marital Triangle in Women’s Gothic

<sup>1</sup> Tania Modleski distinguishes between the romance and the female Gothic according to similar guidelines. For her, the two plots correspond to ‘two different stages in a woman’s life: roughly, courtship and marriage’ (Modleski, 1982: 61). As stated, this thematic breakdown is clearly over-schematised as the marital plot of the innovative romance demonstrates.

<sup>2</sup> Rather than discussing early female Gothic plots such as Anne Radcliffe’s, I will only deal with twentieth-century representations of the female Gothic in this section. I also do not have space in the main text to investigate the differences between male and female Gothic representations of the marital triangle. As Anne Williams observes, the differences between male and female Gothic ‘arise from the male’s and the female’s different cultural positions: it is all in the “I”. [...] The Gothic has two plots, two sets of narrative conventions, two tales to tell about the desires and fears of the self in the world – tales determined by the gender of that self’ (Williams, 1995: 107). In line with such argumentation, it seems a matter of due consequence that the dynamics of the Gothic marital triangle should also be gender-specific. The examples of the female Gothic discussed in the main section present a distinctly feminine point of view, focusing on women’s diverse experiences of marriage (as non-romantic, as ineffectual, as entrapment). Inversely, male Gothic is bound to represent the marital triangle from a distinctly masculine point of view, in turn perceiving ‘a world of cruelty, violence, and supernatural horrors grounded in “the female”’ and expressing ‘the horrifying instability of the female “other” seen in the male gaze’ (Williams, 1995: 109; 107).

In this way, Edgar Allan Poe’s short story ‘Ligeia’ (1838) gives expression to a male experience and to the patriarchal horror following the collapse of dualistic femininities. Tied to the enigmatic Ligeia with the ‘most passionate devotion’, the notoriously unreliable narrator of Poe’s tale is left desolate after the death of his idealised first wife (Poe, 1980: 38). Taking refuge in drugs, he marries Ligeia’s opposite, the Lady Rowena whom he ‘loathed [...] with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man’ (Poe, 1980: 47). While Ligeia and Rowena are ultimately controlled by the male gaze (both having no existence outside the narrator’s constructs of them), the two women are described as opposites: the ‘fair-haired and blue-eyed’ Rowena is thus contrasted to the ‘raven-black’ Ligeia (Poe, 1980: 45; 39). After the mysterious death of the second wife, the narrator is lost in reveries about Ligeia as he watches over the corpse of Rowena. Each time his mind turns to the first wife, the corpse shows signs of revivification. Describing the ‘unspeakable horrors of that night’, the tale ends abruptly and climactically with Ligeia’s



apparent return from the dead and her horrific resurrection in the second wife Rowena's undead body (Poe, 1980: 50). As the narrator notes, "here then, at least", I shrieked aloud, "can I never – can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love – of the lady – of the LADY LIGEIA!" (Poe, 1980: 52). While the tale has engendered a dizzying array of critical readings relating to the reliability of the narrator, the nature of the mysterious Ligeia and the verity of the account, this study interprets Poe's text as registering the patriarchal horror brought about by the collapse of dualistic notions of femininity. The two women merge into one Gothic body that houses both wives, an impossible and horrific fusion of irreconcilable opposites. As the hated second wife metamorphoses into the loved predecessor, the boundaries between opposite female identities break down. The narrator witnesses an either imagined or "real" patriarchal nightmare scenario in which binary definitions collapse and patriarchal definitional control falters. As Linda Ruth Williams observes, "Ligeia" is more concerned with the transformation of one woman into another, changing forwards and back, than with the fixed identities of either Ligeia or Rowena' (Williams, 1995: 61 - 62). While Poe's tale switches the normative pattern of sympathy (the second wife rather than the first is vilified), 'Ligeia' clearly establishes a conservative marital triangle based on patriarchal notions of dualistic femininity. The text articulates the patriarchal horror produced when this structure collapses and reveals the female Gothic body, a subversive synthesis of ideological opposites. This kind of synthesis is also described in Weldon's postfeminist *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) that portrays the merger of representational opposites into one postfeminist self. In this instance, the metamorphosis is however depicted from a female rather than a male perspective.

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Massé has coined the term 'marital Gothic' to describe narratives in which a recently married woman discovers with horror that the husband who was supposed to 'lay horror to rest has himself become the avatar of horror who strips voice, movement, property, and identity itself from the heroine (Massé, 1992: 12). As Massé notes,

Horror returns in the new home of the couple, conjured up by the renewed denial of the heroine's identity and autonomy. The marriage that she thought would give her a voice (because she would be listened to), movement (because her status would be that of an adult), and not just a room of her own but a house, proves to have none of these attributes. The husband who was originally defined by his opposition to the unjust father figure slowly merges with that figure. The heroine again finds herself mute, paralyzed, enclosed, and she must harrow the Gothic in an attempt to deal with that reality through repetition. (Massé, 1992: 20)

<sup>4</sup> With reference to the definitional problematic surrounding Gothic fiction, Anne Williams notes that the 'word's omnipresence and imprecision may remind the reader of Justice Potter Stewart's memorable standard for the obscene, which in effect stated: "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it' (Williams, 1995: 14). Jacqueline Howard also believes that 'the Gothic novel is a type in which the propensity for multiple discourse is highly developed and that it is *dialogic* because of its indeterminacy or its open structure. The Gothic only plays at being totalized or closed' (Howard, 1994: 16).

<sup>5</sup> For Anne Williams, the traditional female Gothic formula 'demands a happy ending, the conventional marriage of Western comedy. This plot is affirmative [...] The Female Heroine [...] is awakened to a world in which love is not only possible but available' (Williams, 1995: 103). None of my readings confirm this purely affirmative and romantic interpretation of the Gothic since even *Rebecca* ultimately fails to portray the romantic meta-narrative as victorious or realistic.

<sup>6</sup> See: Williams, 1995: 103; Modleski, 1982: 60; Meyers, 2001: 56; Winter, 2001: 91; Becker, 1999: 33.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Juliann E. Fleenor observes that the 'social division of women into either pure and chaste, or as impure and corrupt, defines the basic dichotomy in the Female Gothic [...] For the Female Gothic does not establish any new definitions of female sexuality [...] That is beyond its scope' (Fleenor, 1983: 15).

<sup>8</sup> Janet Harbord for example maintains that '*Rebecca* offers a vision of eroticism sustainable only for and between women' (Harbord, 1996: 102). Mary Wings asserts the 'enormous sexual tension between the female characters' and 'the lesbian atmosphere' of both Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation and the original novel, arguing that the 'exciting text evokes desire: forbidden desire, overwhelming and lesbian' (Wings, 1994: 12; 18).

<sup>9</sup> Gina Wisker argues that du Maurier's novel 'leaves us unable to bury the spectre of discomfort' and refuses 'the comforting closure of conventional popular fictional narrative forms'; the novel is 'ostensibly and lingeringly a romantic fiction' as well as a 'Gothic text' that 'questions the status quo, the stability of relationships and the curtailing of women's power and sexuality' (Wisker, 1999: 23; 30). The 'disturbances Rebecca and her power brings into their world and into the narrative trouble any neat ending [...] Rebecca's fascination lingers on for us as readers as it does for the second wife' (Wisker, 1999: 30).

<sup>10</sup> The chronological ending recounting the couple's rootless wandering is located at the beginning of the second wife's retrospective tale that structurally ends with the burning of Manderley.

<sup>11</sup> In line with such argumentation, the numerous revisionist fictions that *Rebecca* has inspired clearly imply an open-ended rather than a closed/romantic textual experience. As Slavoj Žižek observes, the dead only keep returning '*because they were not properly buried*, i.e., because something went wrong with their obsequies' (quoted in Zeitlin, 1998: 167). Focusing on the inherent contradictions and open-endedness of du Maurier's pre-text, Susan Hill's sequel *Mrs de Winter* (1994) highlights the second wife's ongoing fascination with her dead predecessor and explores the couple's estrangement/the structure of violence underlying their bland relationship. In the sequel, the gulf between Maxim and the narrator has become increasingly defined. Unlike du Maurier's heroine, the second wife confesses,

It is a mistake to believe that we can always share another's thoughts, however close they may be to us, however much we may feel that we are a part of their innermost selves [...] For twelve years, in so many ways we had been as one,

everything had been shared, there had been no secrets. Yet, the past still held secrets, the past threw its shadows, and the shadows sometimes separated us. (Hill, 1994: 6 - 7)

No longer able to repress the thought that Maxim is a murderer, Hill's second wife is increasingly haunted by the past, both longing and fearing to return to Manderley. She realises, 'the seeds had lain with me, and like weeds that will spring up here and there, without apparent reason, but quite inevitably, had come to life, at last. I had done this, the fault was mine' (Hill, 1994: 275). Ultimately, the marriage breaks down and all romantic illusions are shattered. The novel ends with Maxim's death or suicide as he dies in a car crash on his way to Manderley, his death appearing as a rightful punishment for his crime. The second wife remains alone, a widow. Developing the Gothic undertones of du Maurier's novel, Hill's sequel explores the critique of marriage cut short in *Rebecca* and revises the superficial and contrived romance of the pre-text by focusing on the underlying structure of violence.

In its turn, Sally Beauman's sequel *Rebecca's Tale* (2001) introduces an array of narrators, all providing different views on Rebecca and subverting the final vilified portrayal of the first wife in du Maurier's text. The multiple perspectives highlight that the truth is not 'a fixed thing [...] Truth fluctuates, it shifts' (Beauman, 2001: 135 - 136). Most importantly, Beauman's text also gives a voice to the formerly silenced Rebecca, transforming the construct into a character and remedying the fact that she 'had been condemned to silence for twenty years. She can't defend herself, or correct the lies' (Beauman, 2001: 32). Stating that 'I don't want to be silenced, I won't be silenced: I want to talk', the first wife presents herself in her own account as a strong, loving and independent woman and Maxim as a cold-hearted, arrogant and misogynistic husband (Beauman, 2001: 303). Contesting other characters' constructs of her, Rebecca is eager to challenge the 'lies about me by people who never loved nor understood me' and to articulate her own feminist voice ('Revolution is in the air: the women of the house have waited long enough, and now there's an uprising') (Beauman, 2001: 290 - 291; 327). Putting the first wife centre stage, this sequel dismisses the pre-text's account as complicit 'hearsay, in any case, her version of Maxim de Winter's version of events' and it presents the first wife as a feminist role model for both the reader and young Ellie, Colonel Julyan's daughter (Beauman, 2001: 466). As Ellie states, 'I no longer wanted to listen to the second wife, it was the first wife's voice I needed now' (Beauman, 2001: 470). Giving expression to the other side of the story, Beauman's novel echoes the revisionist strategy of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and exemplifies what Adrienne Rich has famously described as 're-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' (Rich, 1979: 35). For a postfeminist re-writing of *Rebecca*, see: Freely, Maureen 2000. *The Other Rebecca*, Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers.

<sup>12</sup> The text clearly registers the sense of complicity on the part of the second wife upon hearing Maxim's confession. She notes, 'I had listened to his story, and part of me went with him like a shadow in his tracks. I too had killed Rebecca' (du Maurier, 1992: 297).

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Forster describes the author's resistance to attempts to label her novel within existing conventions (Forster, 1993: 137). Judy Simons also notes that the novel's 'hybridity disturbs strict generic categorisation, and its textual liminality conflates the borderlines between popular and serious literature' (Simons, 1998: 118).

### 4.3 Sisterhood is Powerful: Popular Feminism and the Marital Triangle

\* I echo here of course the classic feminist slogan and the title of Robin Morgan's well-known Second-Wave anthology called *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*.

<sup>1</sup> In *Feminist Nightmares Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood*, Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner define sisterhood as existing in a predominantly white, middle-class and heterosexual context. They draw attention to 'the problematics of sisterhood', stating that 'the insistence on sisterhood as a characteristic (rather than ideal) trait of women has led to what we see as a distressing split between theory (and ideal), on the one hand, and the everyday experience of many women, particularly those less privileged' (Ostrov Weisser and Fleischner, 1994: 3; 4). Similarly Judith Roof argues that 'the unification of different women into a single sororal protagonist pitted against a figurative father [...] tends to complete the erasure of positional differences among women (and all issues relating to position)' (Roof, 1995: 57).

<sup>2</sup> As will be argued, popular feminism and postfeminism are simultaneous rather than consecutive cultural movements staging 'the pull between sisterhood and competitive individualism' (Douglas, 1994: 283).

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Hollows states that while 'the concept of sisterhood is far less central in much of contemporary feminism, it is still influential in many forms of popular feminism. The emphasis on a "familial" bond between women acting collectively to support each other is one feature of the ways in which feminist concerns have entered into "mainstream" popular forms' (Hollows, 2000: 8).

<sup>4</sup> Magdalene Ang-Lygate et al. for example observe that 'while sistering involves at the outset a recognition of our "sameness" – where as women we have commonalities in our skins – there must also be a shared recognition and understanding of our "differences"' (Ang-Lygate et al., 1997: 2). Similarly, Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner claim that 'ignoring unequal differences can only weaken feminism, as it leaves open the occasion for our exploitation of each other in everyday life' (Ostrov Weisser and Fleischner, 1994: 14).

<sup>5</sup> Rich redefines the category of lesbian to include not only those women who are erotically bound to each other (what she calls “lesbian existence”) but also women who are in any way affiliated with other women or not connected to men. The notion of lesbian continuum thus encompasses a variety of women as well as any activity of nurturance and support in which women are mutually engaged. She states, ‘I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience [...] we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support’ (Rich, 1980: 648 - 649). While the popular sisterhood discussed here lacks the political and systemic dimension of Rich’s notion, the two concepts share an emphasis on female-female bonding, support and collectivism.

<sup>6</sup> In her treatment of the history of dramatic comic theory, Susan Carlson identifies the group protagonist as a prevalent strategy in contemporary British feminist comedy. This strategy challenges the audience’s concept of an individual hero(ine). Carlson writes, ‘plays that conclude with groups of women usually drop both men and marriage from their definitions of happiness’ (Carlson, 1991: 238). Although it is important to stay alert to the differences in artistic mediums, the use of the group protagonist in both popular feminist fiction and feminist comedy seems noteworthy.

<sup>7</sup> Iris Young believes that we continue to need the notion of women as a group to contrast with liberal individualism. See: Young, Iris Marion 1990. ‘The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference’, in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson, London: Routledge, 300 - 323.

#### 4.4 The Postfeminist Marital Triangle in Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will refer to Weldon’s novel as *She-Devil* for the remainder of the section.

<sup>2</sup> For information on the critical links between postfeminism, postmodernism and poststructuralism, see: Danuta Walters, Suzanna 1991. “‘Postfeminism’ and Popular Culture”, *New Politics*, volume 3, number 2, 103 - 112.

<sup>3</sup> Such terminology inevitably calls to mind postmodernist theory, particularly Linda Hutcheon’s well-known conception of a ‘paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique [...] that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century Western world’ (Hutcheon, 1989: 11).

<sup>4</sup> As Myra Macdonald observes, the post- prefix describes more a 'reaction *to*, rather than *against*, its predecessor' (Macdonald, 1995: 33).

<sup>5</sup> The post-sisterhood *She-Devil* thereby differs from Weldon's earlier and pro-collective novel *Remember Me* (1976) in which the discarded first wife Madeleine takes over the body of Margot (secretary to her ex-husband) after her own death, in order to protect her daughter Hilary from the disastrous effects of custody given to Jarvis, Hilary's inattentive father, and Lily, her insensitive and greedy stepmother. Unlike *She-Devil*, *Remember Me* affirms female collectivism, stressing the unity between Margot and Madeleine ('I am Margot and Madeleine in one, and always was. She was my sister') as well as the sisterhood between first and second wife (Madeleine states that 'Lily [...] You are my sister too') (Weldon, 2003: 277; 271).

<sup>6</sup> According to Mr Ghengis, Ruth's surgeon, 'the body reshapes itself to fit the personality', an observation to which Ruth replies, 'I am quite sure I will settle happily enough into my new body' (Weldon, 1986: 202 - 203).

<sup>7</sup> In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault describes the disciplinary practices that regulate the body, discipline being in this case 'methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operation of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility. [...] The human body was entering a machinery of power that produces subjected and practised bodies, "docile bodies"' (Foucault, 1977: 138).

<sup>8</sup> In *The Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), Peter Sloterdijk puts forward the thesis that ideology's dominant mode of functioning is cynical. The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he nonetheless still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it". Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it. Sloterdijk writes,

Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered. (Sloterdijk, 1987: 5)

<sup>9</sup> In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Slavoj Žižek develops his famous inversion of Marx's classic "false consciousness" thesis ("they do not know it, but they are doing it"), proposing instead a redefinition of ideology and considering the notion of a post-ideological society. In place of Marx's definition, he invokes Peter Sloterdijk's formulation of cynical ideology, what Sloterdijk terms "enlightened false consciousness", summing up the latter theory by the formula 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are

doing it' (Žižek, 1989: 29). Ideology in this sense is the cynical accommodation to circumstances that are understood as being beyond the interventional grasp of any form of critique. However, Žižek further amends Sloterdijk's formula: ideology is thus the condition where 'they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it' (Žižek, 1989: 33). Žižek writes,

We can account for the formula of cynical reason proposed by Sloterdijk: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it". If the illusion were on the side of knowledge, then the cynical position would really be a post-ideological position, simply a position without illusions: "they know what they are doing, and they are doing it". But if the place of the illusion is in the reality of doing itself, then this formula can be read in quite another way: "they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it". For example, they know that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation, but they still continue to follow this idea of Freedom. (Žižek, 1989: 33)

<sup>10</sup> Susanne Becker describes Weldon's text as a 'reverential parody of the gothic romance pattern' (Becker, 1999: 190). Taking into account Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as 'repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity', this study remains reluctant to term Weldon's text a parody of romance (Hutcheon, 1988: 26). Although *She-Devil* shares the dual agenda of parody, the novel's critique of romance is based on deep-reaching and biting dissimilarity rather than Hutcheon's more subtle 'ironic discontinuity [...] revealed at the heart of continuity' (Hutcheon, 1988: 11).

## Appendix

There is a structural and thematic correlation and overlap between my chosen field of study (the marital triangle) and the mythical triangular constellation grouping Lilith, Adam and Eve. This correlation is worth alluding to at length since narrative representations of the two triangles show interesting similarities. Firstly developed and elaborated in the eleventh-century midrash *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, the Jewish mythical narrative attempts to explain away structural uncertainties in the biblical account of Genesis and provide an alternative myth of human origin, according to which God created both Man and Woman, Adam and Lilith, simultaneously out of dust. Lilith asserted her apparently God-given equality to Man by refusing to lie beneath Adam during intercourse and by openly defying his claims of superiority. According to the midrashic account, Lilith managed to free herself from the potentially stifling and oppressive relationship with Adam by pronouncing the holy (and therefore secret or unpronounceable) name of God and by turning into a demon, flying away to the Red Sea and giving birth to an enormous number of devils. Consequently Adam asked God for a more submissive and inferior companion, as a result of which God formed the presumably more dependent and unassertive Eve out of Adam's rib.

Literary depictions of Lilith are interesting insofar as they develop or mutate in a similar trajectory to the marital triangle in women's fictions. The figure of Lilith and the structure of the marital triangle are inherently cross-generic literary phenomena and slippery ideological platforms, which can both be used to either validate or undermine patriarchal binary systems of thought. A comparison of the literary evolutions of the figure of the mythical first wife and the triangular structure is illuminating since Lilith's story explicitly voices the often silenced narrative of the first wife of the conservative romantic discourse. Although briefly alluded to in Goethe's *Faust* (1808), Lilith's literary success story begins with Pre-Raphaelite depictions of her, notably in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem *Eden Bower* (1869). In these and many succeeding works such as Victor Hugo's novel *La Fin de Satan* (1886), Remy de Gourmont's play *Lilith* (1892), George MacDonald's fantasy novel *Lilith* (1895) and Marc Chadourne's *Dieu créa d'abord Lilith* (1935), the first wife mainly functions as an epitome of the femme fatale, a destructive, cruel and completely sexualised seductress who can easily be associated with figures such as Brontë's Bertha or du Maurier's Rebecca. Like the first wife in the marital triangle, Lilith undergoes a literary (r)evolution and is increasingly de-vilified and subjectified in modern representations of her. Emancipatory attempts to rehabilitate Lilith's original image tend to either humanise or deify the character of the first wife. Bernhard Shaw presents Lilith as an Ur-Mother, a primal and powerful life force in his play *Back to Methuselah* (1922). Ann Chamberlin attributes a divine status to Lilith, depicting her as the Great Mother Earth in her ecofeminist novel *Leaving Eden* (1999). Revisionist writers such as Sara Maitland, Dagmar Nick, Judith Plaskow and Michelene Wandor humanise the Lilith figure and make her into a feminist role model, hailing her as an epitome of female autonomy and independence (as in Dagmar Nick's novella 'Lilith' (1998), Sara Maitland's



short story entitled 'Lilith' (1983), Judith Plaskow's feminist tract 'The Coming of Lilith' (1992) and Michelene Wandor's collection of poems *Gardens of Eden* (1984)).

As a figure, Lilith appears to lend herself to the enterprise of feminist revisionism and myth making. Without claiming that the authors discussed in this study consciously construct their narratives around the mythical figure of Lilith and the corresponding alternative myth of origins, one can nevertheless make the point that the literary histories of Lilith and the marital first wife develop in very similar ways. Both are vilified and de-subjectified in conservative accounts and both are put centre stage and rehabilitated in more innovative narratives. While the romantic marital triangle and its compulsive break-up in favour of the second wife-husband dyad illustrate the compelling desire for coherence, order and love, literary preoccupations with the first wife/Lilith equally emphasise the enduring appeal of the unruly and seductive first wife. Literary representations of Lilith can thus be viewed as articulations of the subdued and silenced voice of the first wife of the conservative marital plot.

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