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Writing Romance Readers in Early Modern Paratexts

Louise Wilson

The paratexts of early modern romances perform a more complex role than merely advertising the text to potential bookbuyers; they serve less as straightforward, rhetorical testimonies to the profit and pleasure of the text and instead engage their readers in intricate ways which can be read as participating in the creative culture of the early modern printing house. Romances attracted readers from all social and intellectual levels and were bought and consumed in large quantities, yet they remained sources of concern for commentators dubious as to whether they could be considered suitable reading material. The romance preliminaries I cite both address the status of real reading communities and produce irreverent fictional constructions of readers and their readerly engagement with this much-criticised genre. By reading romance front matter alongside contemporary criticism of the genre and textual traces of the late Elizabethan book trade, I argue that these paratexts are significant sites in which the value of reading romances is defended as it is simultaneously subjected to ironic scrutiny.

Much recent criticism of popular romances has acknowledged the role which paratexts¹ play in shaping our understanding of early modern

¹ Gérard Genette describes the paratext as “a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)” (2).

readers and reading; this criticism has tended to put forward the argument that prefatory matter served as a marketing technique and was engaged in the work of attracting buyers to the book. Helen Hackett writes that “[a]ristocratic patronage of literary works seems to have declined markedly in the late sixteenth century, forcing the development of marketing techniques by printers, booksellers and writers” (11). Michael Saenger writes, “One of the most valuable ways to understand front matter is to recognize that these pages constituted an early, coherent, and very versatile system of advertising. . . . As such, they employed techniques of irony, personification, humor, and readerly involvement, geared around a very specific and rather crucial act of reader response: the purchase” (5). Saenger usefully remarks on the sophistication of early modern paratexts, so often dismissed as dull, formulaic adjuncts to the text they accompany, yet his emphasis on the “purchase” still subordinates the status of the paratext to its text. Writing of the lively atmosphere of the professional printing house in early modern London, Steve Mentz observes that “early modern prose fiction authors did not simply produce imaginative fictions; they also wrote combative, egotistical, contradictory prefatory letters and made thinly-veiled intertextual allusions” (5-6). While Mentz illustrates that these authors and publishers were attuned to amusing themselves in the process of constructing their books, we might usefully extend this idea to say that the intertextual and mischievous references I will go on to discuss were destined for a wider network of readers, stretching far beyond the narrow confines of the printing house or the limited circles of the London book trade to the broadest community of readers who were no doubt aware of the opportunities for sophistication and levity afforded by the paratextual conventions of the fiction they bought and consumed in such large quantities. As I will go on to argue, the producers of books of the much-maligned genre absorb or deflect the criticisms aimed at it while signalling to their readers that they are producing texts or, at least, paratexts worthy of all readers’ attention; in this way, the preliminary material of early modern romance is often engaged in subtle and witty strategies, deflecting contemporary concerns about the intellectual and aesthetic qualities of the genre in humorous paratextual apologia and, in the process, imagining a diverse range of responses to such texts by its wide readership. While early modern writers and their agents were undeniably concerned with the necessary task of attracting buyers to their books, or of signalling their participation in the printing house, I argue that we must read these paratexts as being equally concerned with constructing readers’ approaches to the text *after* the purchase and continuous with the pleasure afforded by reading the romance texts.

The many readers and readerly positions which are articulated in the preliminaries of romances suggest a form of engagement on the part of the paratextual authors which at once reflects the wide readership of romances and its many and varied responses to the genre, revelling in the abundance and diversity of early modern readers, while also producing obvious fictions which might rival the narratives they preface. In relation to the romance genre, such paratextual strategies as the classical example, modesty topos, and Horatian claim to profit and pleasure serve as significant sites of creativity for writers and their agents, engaging both with widespread criticism of the genre and the prominent position of romances in the book trade to produce an extension of the delight of these fictional narratives even as they seek to position their texts as “profitable” reading matter.

Heidi Brayman Hackel argues that early modern “[p]reliminaries acknowledged the “great Variety of readers” but, in the very act of stratifying those readers, pushed them towards a single reading posture of sympathy, pliability, and friendliness” (69). Brayman Hackel goes on to define early modern paratexts as “interpretative guides” which reflected efforts on the part of the writer or publisher to circumscribe and control the reading experience of a broadening anonymous readership whose anticipated approaches to texts were a source of anxiety. While it is undoubtedly the case that the publishers of early modern books sought to engage with potential modes of interpretation employed by their readers and would welcome a sympathetic response, it does not necessarily follow that this engagement produced a favourable “single reading posture.” In fact, it is the very impossibility of eliciting such a posture which animates many paratextual addresses in early modern romances.

Before discussing the romance preliminaries which afford such views of readers and reading practices, it is necessary to mention the actual constituents of romance readership in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries since this is undoubtedly significant to the ways in which paratextual authors position their constructed readers. The notion that popular romances were aimed primarily at a non-elite readership is perpetuated in some current criticism: Barbara Fuchs suggests that “[c]hivalric romance becomes, in a sense, the first mass genre, purveying quantities of prose to a literate but relatively uneducated audience in search of comforting familiarity” (79); meanwhile, Marta Straznicky notes “the extremely popular prose romances that were inarguably downmarket publications” (61). However, recent work on early modern popular reading tends to agree that a definition of popular literature should also encompass readers from high social and intellectual ranks: it is clear that romances categorised as “popular” were read by all levels of society from the monarchy and nobility through to those with the most

rudimentary literary skills, as well as being heard by the illiterate who had the narratives read aloud to them. As Roger Chartier writes, “popular readers did not have a ‘literature’ that was exclusively theirs during the Renaissance. Everywhere in Europe texts and books circulated throughout the social world, shared by readers of very different social conditions and cultures” (274). Although there is scant evidence of the actual engagement of readers with these popular texts, there are many textual witnesses of their ownership and use in the period. For example, Alex Davis, in his book *Chivalry and Romance in the English Renaissance*, provides information which refutes the idea that romances such as popular Iberian translations or Arthurian texts were “downmarket” or for a “relatively uneducated” audience; he cites those possessed or sought after, and seemingly enjoyed, by royal and aristocratic readers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He notes that Mary Queen of Scots’ library contained, in 1569, the French translations from the Iberian originals of *The Historie of Palmerin* and, in 1578, the first book of *Amadis of Gaule*, two volumes of *Lancelot du lac*, the ninth book of *Amadis de Gaule*, and *Orlando Furioso*. In 1599, Sir Robert Sidney wrote to William Herbert, the third earl of Pembroke, wishing to borrow the earl’s copy of *Amadis de Gaule* in its original Spanish (Davis 28-30).²

The profusion of paratextual material in romance editions anticipates the widening readership of the time, composed of readers of various social ranks, professions and levels of literacy. It is still common to find readers addressed as “gentle” or “courteous” in the titles of their prefatory addresses, such as “To the courteous Reader” in Emanuel Ford’s *Parismus* (Aiiiii), or Richard Johnson’s epistle to *The Seven Champions of Christendom*, “To all curteous Readers, Richard Iohnson wisheth increase of vertuous knowledge,” a distinction which politely anticipates a favourable reception from a distinguished reader. The titles of two of Gervase Markham’s romances suggest a more honest appraisal of their readers, even as they parody the titles of such addresses: in his translation of the French romance, *Meruine*, the epistle is “To the Readers whosoeuer they be” although the epistle itself begins with an address to the more exclusive “Gentle Reader” (Aiiir); in the second part of the *English Arcadia*, Markham’s epistle is entitled “To the vnunderstanding Reader, for hee which hath knowledge needes not my wordes” (Aiiiii). The variety of readers is recognised in other forms of front matter, too: the title page to the 1653 reprinting of Anthony Munday’s *Palmendos* acknowledges its suitability for a broad readership by stating succinctly that it is “most Profitable and Delightfull for all sorts of People.”

² Davis includes a very useful and extensive discussion of the wide readership of romances (23-32); see also Newcomb, *passim*.

The Horatian construction of profit and delight, or profit through delight, is especially prominent in the paratextual defences of romance.³ While the expression is to be found in most texts of the time, it appears to take on added significance when expressed alongside romances. The sixteenth century saw a vast number of romances flood the English marketplace of print and, through their front matter, the producers of these books regularly entered into debate with current concerns about the genre's suitability for widespread transmission. The prominence of delight in the constructed reading postures is a thorny problem; romance motifs and narratives were widely known at the time, yet the status of the genre was contentious with those who were especially concerned with the utility of texts, objecting primarily to the romance's capacity to provide only one aspect of this Horatian formula, delight without instruction; opinions ran that the solely delightful narrative and the great length of the texts would lead to idleness on the reader's part; and a lack of vigilance was dangerous with regard to the genre's prime themes of love and war which the unskilled or unwitting reader might mistakenly read as examples of good conduct.

Romances were denounced as unprofitable or worse, detrimental, reading matter from numerous quarters, particularly humanist educators and Reformers; these criticisms were impossible to avoid as they were circulated from Latin humanist texts to the pulpit. Davis writes that "romances fill a space logically implied by and created by humanistic literary theory: the structurally necessary Other of Erasmian reading practices," and that they are, moreover, "an image of the humanistic nightmare: of books that gain mastery over their readers" (15). I extend this idea to consider the constructions in romance paratexts which show that they are aware of their detractors and that they endeavour to point out, often in jest, the ways in which these texts might be of use to the humanistically trained reader. Therefore, while I am arguing that the preliminaries of early modern books reflect the proliferation of readers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the consequent diversity of reading practices, I want to suggest, furthermore, that the producers of romances address these criticisms in their paratexts in oblique and playful ways: they stratify their readers in numerous ways, and the fictional readerly responses they envisage are always engaged with the criticisms of idleness and immorality which afflicted the genre at the time.

Such concerns were long in their gestation. From the introduction of printed romances in England in the late fifteenth century, much was written on the need to avoid such material which would be detrimental

³ For a discussion of this particular ideal, see Matz, *passim*.

to the well-being of the individual and the commonwealth. In *The office and duetie of an husband*, written in 1529, Juan Luis Vives asserts that rather than merely providing incredible levels of delight, the texts would unquestionably corrupt their readership, inspiring them to live their lives wickedly; the English translation by Thomas Paynell in 1550 reads, “These bokes do hurt both man & woman, for they make them wyllye & craftye, they kindle and styr vp couetousnes, inflame anger, & all beastly and filthy desire” (O7^v). In what has become the most commonly cited objection to the romances, Roger Ascham writes in *The Scholemaster* that (231) “the whole pleasure of [the *Morte Darthur*] stands in two speciall poyntes, in open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye: In which book those be counted the noblest Knightes, that do kill most men without any quarell, and commit fowlest adouleries by subtlest shiftes.”⁴ While Ascham’s remark is often interpreted as an attempt to distance the Protestant present from Catholic medievalism (Ferguson 56; 70), Robert P. Adams discusses the comment’s place in the line of such humanist critics as Sir Thomas More, Erasmus, and Vives, who were keen to distance themselves from the apparently medieval elements of warmongering, tyrannicide, chivalric honour, and sensual women (223-26).

Such humanist concerns with the moral health of the reader were reiterated throughout the sixteenth century but, with the burgeoning book trade of early modern London later in the century, criticism began to take a distinctly material turn. The high demand for printed romance in the last decades of the century coincided with the rise of book production – from writing to printing and selling – as a viable profession in early modern London. Accordingly, there is a distinct shift in the terms of the attacks on romance; the suspicion remains that the reader will either not gain profit from the reading of such texts or be harmed by exposure to them, but is now grounded in a greater awareness of the material conditions of publication and of the various ways in which readers buy and subsequently engage with books and texts.

Thomas Nashe, a contemporary critic of the late Elizabethan vogue for chivalric translations and a new “man in print” himself, took pains to differentiate his occupation and literary output from those of chivalric romance writers and translators; in *The Anatomie of Absurditie*, he rails against the narrative matter and the incomprehensible popularity of such fiction, asking of the paratextual authors:

⁴ For further discussion, see, for example, Cooper 320 and Davis, 7.

Are they not ashamed in their prefixed posies, to adorne a pretence of profit mixt with pleasure, when as in their bookes there is scarce to be found one precept pertaining to vertue, but whole quires fraught with amorous discourses, kindling Venus' flame in Vulcan's forge, carrying Cupid in triumph, alluring euen vowed Vestals to treade awry, inchaunting chaste mindes and corrupting the continenst. . . . what els I pray you doe these bable bookemungers endeuor, but to repaire the ruinous wals of Venus Court, to restore to the worlde that forgotten Legendary licence of lying . . . those worn out impressions of the feyned no where acts, of Arthur of the round table, Arthur of little Brittain, sir Tristram, Hewon of Burdeaux, the Squire of low degree, the foure sons of Amon, with infinite others. (10-11)

Nashe's text restates earlier humanist arguments on the immorality and implausibility of romances, but these are now situated in the context of the London printing house. While the concern remains that "there is scarce . . . one precept pertaining to virtue," this is now accompanied by the material description of "whole quires" of inappropriately lascivious subject matter. The popularity of such texts is confirmed by the double sense that the "impressions" are "worn out," not only in that the matter they contain is old and stale but that the high demand for these texts has resulted in the wearing out of the blocks of type of the printing press. Furthermore, Nashe's comment that these writers, in their paratexts, "adorne a pretence of profit mixt with pleasure" is telling: while it shows an awareness of the conventions of book production in citing the increasingly common "prefixed posies," it is explicitly aware of the writer's need to include the claim that his or her text is both profitable and pleasurable and tellingly identifies this as a "pretence."

Concerns similar to Nashe's are further articulated in the work of Nathaniel Baxter, a Calvinist clergyman, writer and Greek tutor to Sir Philip Sidney, who writes in the "Epistle Dedicatorie" to Sir Francis Walsingham, Sir John Brockett and Sir Henry Cocke of his translation of Calvin's *Lectures or daily sermons . . . vpon the prophet Ionas*:

We see some men bestowe their time in writing, some in printing, and mo men in reading of vile & blasphemous, or at least of prophane & friuolous bokes, such as are that infamous lege[n]d of K. Arthur (which with shame inough I heare to be newly imprinted). . . . For if any good booke be written, it lieth in the printers handes, smally regarded, seldome enquired after: so that the printer is scarce paied for the paper that goeth to the booke. And this maketh many printers which seeketh after gaynes, to take in hande rather those thinges that are profitable to the purse (though thei be ridiculous) & so satisfie mens humors, then to printe without profite those bookes that be godly: which being once printed, serue for nothing els but for waste paper, acceptable to very few. (Aii^v-Aiii^v)

Baxter details the wide-ranging misuse of time and resources involved in the production and consumption of romances, from writing to printing to reading. His despair that Malory's *Morte Darthur* is proving so popular as to merit reprinting gives way to a discussion of the economics of romance popularity and the fact that these books prove lucrative for the printer who cannot hope to make financial gains from the printing of some "good booke" which will remain neglected by bookbuyers: for Baxter, economic profit is achieved at the expense of readerly profit. In the above examples, the concern about unprofitable textual matter is located in book production: the economic and popular success associated with reprinting, and the conventionally "prefixed posies." It is in such dissembling "prefixed" material that we find the numerous ripostes to such concerns.

One strategy employed by paratextual authors is to point up the similarities between the instructive ends of reading articulated by humanists and the profitable outcomes of reading achievable in reading their texts. In this sense, I disagree with Mentz, who argues that:

These books' prefatory material reveals that Elizabethan authors and publishers defined their products by positioning them against their generic rivals. To a large extent these efforts were marketing gambits, but in marketing their books authors defined their literary ambitions. The front matter of most books of Elizabethan fiction reveals broad similarities – all claim they want to please the reader, and most apologize to anyone who is not pleased – as well as aggressive efforts to distinguish themselves from their rivals. (35)

Mentz's view that early modern front matter contains broad similarities is indisputable, yet his assertion that various genres take pains to "distinguish themselves from their rivals" is not always borne out by the preliminaries of romances;⁵ these texts, I would argue, emphasise their proximity to other, less vilified genres; in doing this, they are sometimes imitative, sometimes parodic, and always engaged with the widest spectrum of readers and readerly responses.

⁵ Peter Mack devotes a chapter of his book, *Elizabethan Rhetoric*, to the common features of histories, conduct manuals and romances. He writes that they have in common, "moral stories, ethical sentences, techniques of amplification, speeches and letters, debate, and shared themes" (135), and that these are the product of Tudor rhetorical education; Goran V. Stanivukovic, shifting the emphasis from constructions of women's suggestible reading of romance, has also recently argued that narratives of early modern romances were fashioned as conduct books for young men, through such common romance topoi as a young man leaving home, male friendships, and loving a maiden ("English renaissance romances as conduct books for young men" 60-78).

Defences of the virtuous delight to be found in reading the genre can be found in many romances: for example, the dedicatory epistle to Simon Wortedg in Richard Johnson's *Tom a Lincolne* suggests that "The History (I present) you shall finde delightfull, the matter not offensiue to any" (Aiii^r). The title page to Pedro de la Sierra's *The Second Part of the Myrror of Knighthood*, translated by Robert Parry and printed by Thomas East in 1583, describes it, more defensively, as "verie delightfull to be read, and nothing hurtfull to bee regarded." Similarly, Anthony Munday's translation of *Palladine of England*, printed by Edward Allde for John Perrin in 1588, contains on its title page the statement: "Heerein is no offence offered to the wise by wanton speeches, or encouragement to the loose by lascivious matter."

As is clear from the seminal scholarship on reading practices by such writers as Grafton, Jardine, and Sherman, humanist readers were trained to be pragmatic readers, expected to find examples of practical instruction in their texts. It is this active, pragmatic reading which the romance preliminaries address, protesting – a little too much – that their material is instructive and a valuable use of the reader's time. The paratexts take great pains to set out for various types of readers the quality of profit and/or pleasure s/he will obtain in reading the text. Henry Robarts' *Pheander the Mayden Knight*, printed by Thomas Creede in 1595, contains on its title page the reasonably conventional claim that it is "Enterlaced with many pleasant discourses, wherein the grauer may take delight, and the valiant youthfull, be encouraged by honourable and worthie aduenturing, to gaine fame." Alongside such advertisements which appear careful to stress the instructive qualities of the text or at least to reassure that it is not overtly harmful are arguably less serious injunctions to the imagined reader: the title page to Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, first printed in London by Thomas Orwin for Thomas Cadman in 1588, includes the tongue-in-cheek claim that it is "Pleasant for age to avoyd drowsie thoughts, profitable for youth to eschue other wanton pastimes, and bringing to both a desired content."

In his dedicatory epistle to Brian Stapleton, accompanying *Ornatus and Artesia*, Emanuel Ford writes of his history that it:

presenteth it selfe in his naturall and selfe expressing forme, in well applied words, not in tedious borrowed phrases: wherein neither the lewde can finde examples to sute their dispositions, the virtuous no tearmes to discontent them, nor the well affected any cause of offence. Here shall you see lust Tyrannizing, auarice, guilty of murther, & dignity, seeking his content with vsurpation, yet all subuerted by virtue. (Aiii^r)

Ford chooses to describe his spectrum of readers by their dispositions: “lewde,” “virtuous” and “well affected” and insists that no disposition will be ill-served by reading the text. His assurance that the various narrative elements such as “lust Tyrannizing” and “vsurpation” are “all subverted by virtue” surely draws attention to the text’s various delights while mildly suggesting that the triumph of virtue renders the narrative suitable for all readers. The title page of Munday’s translation of *Palmerin d’Oliva* contains a dilated description of many and various readerly outcomes:

Palmerin D’Oliva. / The Mirrour of nobilitie. Mappe of honor, Anatomie of rare fortunes, Heroycall president of Loue: Wonder for Chivalrie, and most accomplished Knight in all perfections. / Presenting to noble mindes, theyr Courtlie desires, to Gentles, theyr choise expectations, and to the inferiour sorte, howe to imitate theyr vertues: handled with modestie, to shun offence, yet all delightfull, for recreation.

The title page provides a defence of the text which belonged to the cycle of *Palmerin* romances which, along with those of the *Amadis de Gaule* cycle, were frequently cited as the most unprofitable and licentious of all romances. In such a context, it is difficult not to read the description of *Palmerin d’Oliva* as “The Mirrour of nobilitie. Mappe of honor, Anatomie of rare fortunes, Heroycall president of Loue” *etc.* as a hyperbolic and not entirely serious claim to the value of reading the text. The further claim that the text is suitable for all from noble minds to “the inferiour source” imitates the stratification of readers alongside defined modes of reading in a highly idealistic way. Another stratification of readers by both social rank and interpretative ability is put forward by Thomas Purfoot, in his epistle, “The Printer to the Reader,” to Henry Watson’s translation of *Valentine and Orson*. Having stated that the text has been reprinted many times and has enjoyed a readership “as well of superiors, as of inferiors” (Aii^r), he adds:

The History for the strangenes, may well beare the title of courtly delights, wherein growes flowers of an extraordinary savor, that gives a scent even into the bosoms of Nobility, Ladies, Knights, and Gentlemen: It gives also a working to the minds of the dull country swaynes, and as it were leads them to search out for Martiall atchievements, befitting many pastimes, & active pleasures. (Aii^v-iii^r)

Purfoot’s claim is that these socially polarised readers will approach the text in different ways: its seemingly bounteous levels of instruction and delight can “even” affect the most high-ranking of readers, while it also contains instruction for “dull country swaynes.”

The configuration of the wide reading community of such romances and the requirement to advertise a level of instruction and delight to all of its constituents produces in these romance paratexts extravagant fictions of the utility and pleasure afforded to various readers and their reading postures. We see an awareness of the real, varied readership of this genre, transformed both by the criticisms of the genre and the material conditions, as well as the playfulness of agents, of the early modern book trade; this results in a series of paratextual addresses which themselves afford fictive pleasures even as they seek to dress their narratives as virtuous and instructive.

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