It is widely supposed—in my view correctly—that the five romantic Greek novels, by Xenophon, Chariton, Longus, Achilles Tatius, and Heliodorus, are more or less cut from a similar piece of cloth. As Sophie Lalanne has recently stated (2006: 47): “Tous les romans grecs racontent la même histoire d’amour et d’aventures, avec des variantes qui, bien que nombreuses, ne modifient pas la structure d’ensemble”. Lalanne goes on to indicate the major features of this common story, including love at first sight between two aristocratic youths, a subsequent journey by sea which typically results in a shipwreck and the separation of the couple (this element is missing from Daphnis and Chloe), and a series of adventures and dangers that threaten them in various parts of the world until, “au terme de cette mise à l’épreuve, les deux adolescents sont réunis et rentrent triomphalement dans la cité de leurs pères” (ibid.).

If we accept that this pattern does in fact inform the Greek novels, can we say that it serves as the vehicle of a particular theme or content—that is, does the narrative trajectory identified above itself function to some degree as a signifier, in the way that Roland Barthes...
affirms for certain myths (Barthes 1957)? Or is it rather the case, as I suggest below, that a single paradigm may be the bearer of different, even opposite, meanings? What is more, some of the novels, while conforming loosely to the structure set out by Lalanne, nevertheless diverge from it in important ways; might such a deviation be the product at least in part (as I believe) of two (or more) intersecting narrative paradigms? If so, what effect does such a double structure have on the novel’s theme? Finally, the plot patterns that are characteristic of the Greek romantic novels have also been identified in tales of a quite different stamp, such as the various so-called apocryphal acts of the Christian apostles and the lives of saints. Do these narratives, then, also have something in common with the novels at the level of theme, despite the apparent diversity of their context and purpose?

In my book, *Sexual Symmetry* (1994), I argued that the story pattern of the novels was particularly suited to illustrating the steadfastness of love, or more specifically of *erōs*, in the face of numerous trials and temptations, and, what is more, that these tales celebrated what I took to be a new conception of erotic passion as a mutual and stable sentiment that might serve as a basis for citizen marriage. In genres other than the novel, I maintained, erotic desire was typically conceived as one-sided or asymmetrical: it was a relation between a lover (*erastēs*) and a beloved (*erōmenos* or *erōmenē*), rather than a reciprocal form of affection. *Erōs* was powerful but transient, as opposed to the more enduring bond represented by the Greek term *philia* (and to some extent also by *storgē*). To demonstrate the long-term durability of *érōs*, it was necessary to put it to the test. In the end, the fidelity of the protagonists overcomes all hardships, and provides a solid foundation for a new ideal of marriage, predicated on reciprocal (symmetrical) desire and commitment.

This is not the only significance, however, that may be associated with the narrative format of the novels. Sophie Lalanne, for example, in the book cited above, offers a quite different interpretation. In the three moments of enamorment, separation, and reunion of the young hero and heroine, Lalanne sees a version of the rite of passage, the structure of which was set forth almost a century ago by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1981; 1909). Van Gennep posited three stages in such rites of initiation. As Lalanne describes it, “Ces rites de passages prennent la forme d’un passage matériel qui consiste le plus souvent à traverser une porte, une rivière, un lieu ou une frontière; ils peuvent se décomposer en trois phases, elles-mêmes divisibles, de séparation, de