

Introduction

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... history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.

T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding."

Romance, one might say, is situated in and speaks of timeless moments. The celebrated romance images that spring to mind often encapsulate such moments – the images of Tristan and Isolde drinking the fateful potion; of the Holy Grail appearing to the Knights of the Round Table; of Guinevere led out to the fire, clad only in her shift; of the hand clothed in white samite, "mystic, wonderful," taking back the sword Excalibur; of the black-robed queens who weep and shriek as they bear Arthur away in the barge. The imagistic nature of romance is clear from its recurrence as a subject in visual art, especially but by no means exclusively in the nineteenth century. These romance moments have a powerful appeal, not just because they are visually compelling, but because they convey fundamental human emotions: they are trans-historical. Classical writers used such moments long before the term romance emerged, and we inherit from them some of the most powerful instances of all – Dido and Aeneas, sheltering in the cave from the storm; Medea, weaving her fearful enchantments; Apollonius, guessing at the riddle of incest. These in part provided the medieval *romanciers* with their material, and certainly shaped their imagination. The story matters they wove, of Arthur, of Troy, of the Celtic other-world, have slipped in and out of fashion – more often in than out – ever since, but, even more importantly, the great motifs of medieval romance – the knight errant, the quest, the chivalric test – became foundation stones of literature, shaping and influencing subsequent writing across a whole range of genres.

The pervasive nature of romance, however, also means that it is inherently slippery, and the difficulty of compiling a *Companion to Romance* is that the *genre* of romance is

impossible adequately to define. This is not so surprising when we recall that the term finds its origins in the French word *romanz*, meaning simply literature written in the vernacular, the romance language of French. Such works could differ vastly, and were linked most of all by their function as entertainment rather than serious moral instruction. Yet what is striking is that in the course of the twelfth century, romance became a literary genre – though a very fluid, varied one. Perhaps it is not fanciful to view romance as a genre waiting to happen, a story already told, situated in those moments of classical writing, inherent in the earliest of fictions and fundamental to human nature. Medieval romances treated an extraordinarily diverse range of material: classical (the subject of the earliest, twelfth-century romances), historical (the matter of both England and France), legendary (in particular, Arthurian), and spanned both popular and courtly, oral and literary culture. Despite their variety, however, the romances of the Middle Ages are linked by the motifs that echo through the genre: exile and return, love, quest and adventure, family, name and identity, the opposition between pagan and Christian. Such motifs form the backbone of romance. Romances require heroes and heroines, figures distinguished from the everyday by their ideal quality, and offset by similarly extreme, negative figures; they typically oppose a social, usually conservative, ideal of order with the threat of disorder of various kinds. The focus is not the nation represented or protected by the hero so much as the individual and the ideals he or she embodies. The pursuit of love, the special realm of the individual, is the particular but by no means the only subject of the romance, and love is often combined in medieval romance with the pursuit of chivalry. Romances offer escape and frequently open onto an exotic or in some way aggrandized world, whether that of faery or of Charlemagne's France. They can also allow for incisive social reflection and comment, for the exploration of gender and relationships, for engagement too with the deep structures of human existence, on a level that we might call psychological, sometimes through a dream-like interweaving of fantasy and reality. Romance is a genre of extraordinary fluidity: it spans mimetic and non-mimetic, actuality and fantasy, history and legend, past and present, and is striking in its open-endedness, if frustrating in its capacity to defy classification or resolution.

Most influential in developing a kind of grammar of romance has been Northrop Frye, who argues in *The Anatomy of Criticism* that romance is both an historical mode and a *mythos*, rather than a genre (1957: 186–206). The notion of a mode derives from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which distinguishes types of heroes (lesser, greater, or the same as ourselves): Frye argues that in the romance mode, the hero is superior in degree to others (rather than of god-like or mythic status), as in medieval romance. By contrast, classical literature tends to present mythic heroes, and later writing to focus on heroes closer to reality, in mimetic or ironic modes. Frye also, however, elaborates a non-historical notion of the romance *mythos* or generic narrative form. This grows out of a sense that, both with regard to the hero and more generally, romance reflects a "tendency . . . to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to 'realism,' to conventionalize content in an idealized direction." Literature stemming from this romance impulse suggests "implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely

associated with human experience," and hence plays on archetypes, large patterns, conventions, and repetition of motifs (1957: 137). According to Frye's definition, romance is not a genre, but rather a "generic plot"; it consists in a distinctive structure and form that may be found in novel, poetry, or drama (1957: 162). Frye elaborates the idea of this generic plot in his study, *The Secular Scripture* the very title of which points to the powerful influence of romance structures on Western thought. Romance is "essentially a verbal imitation of ritual or symbolic human action" (1976: 55): it is characterized by a focus on the development of the hero, and the winning of the heroine, by an emphasis on the great cycles of life and death, by the opposition of the ideal to its converse, and by patterns of ascent or descent to "otherworlds," which are linked to the shaping of identity and the process of self-realization. As the *mythos* of summer, romance leads from a state of order through darkness, winter, and death, to rebirth, new order, and maturity. Adventure is central to romance, as is the quest form: the hero moves through conflict and death-struggle to self-realization. Frye notes the "wish-fulfillment" quality of romance: it both projects social ideals and reflects "new hopes and desires" of the individual; it is frequently nostalgic, seeking a Golden Age (1957: 186). Romance is thus both escapist and socially pertinent, looking backwards and forwards. Perhaps what Frye does not emphasize enough is the oddly mixed mode of much romance: at their most sophisticated, romance narratives are characterized by irony, parody, self-consciousness, and comedy – and sometimes by a sense of deep failure and loss.

Critics of romance have been divided between mimetic and non-mimetic approaches. Erich Auerbach in "The Knight Sets Forth" (in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 1953) identifies the archetypal pattern of medieval romance as the movement from court to forest, "setting forth" in search of adventure. For Auerbach, the function of romance is primarily social: it engages with and shapes the values of the new, chivalric class of twelfth-century France. Susan Crane (1986), similarly, has treated English medieval romance as growing out of and reflecting the conservative social concerns of the barony. Social contextualization offers critical analysis a valuable specificity, and such specificity may work as well for romance of any age as it does for medieval romance. At the same time, one of the striking aspects of romance is its universality, and it has proved fruitful to approach romance as Vladimir Propp (1958) did the folk tale, in terms of deep recurring structures. Cultural anthropology, mythology, and psychoanalysis provide further ways into the deep structures of romance, complementing Frye's work. Derek Brewer's *Symbolic Stories* (1980), for instance, considers romance from the point of view of the folk tale: Brewer traces the recurrent pattern of growing up, of separation from and return to the family. Romance can also be seen as about the liminal or transitional period between one state and another, in particular from boyhood to manhood, and as treating the *rites de passage*, the initiation or testing undergone within this period. The genre may be fruitfully interpreted from both Jungian and Freudian perspectives: Anne Wilson, for instance, in *How Stories Mean* (1976), reads the dream-like and ritual quality of romance narrative, in particular its magical elements, as providing keys to the unconscious mind.

What much criticism brings out is the universality and timelessness of romance: it is not a literary form or *mythos* specific to the Middle Ages, but is found prior to them, in Greek stories and late classical works, and survives long after in works of diverse genre, function, and status – Shakespeare's plays, Gothic novels, Romantic poetry, modern fantasy, Mills and Boon, postmodern fiction. As W. R. J. Barron argued in *English Medieval Romance* (1987), romance treats values that have remained constant, and is characterized across the ages by idealism and symbolism, evident especially in the use of familiar patterns and motifs. At the same time, there is frequently a mimetic aspect to romance, meaning that it is marked by a dualistic quality. The ideal is necessarily linked to models of social order, and thus romance often provides pertinent social commentary. The varying emphases of romance, its more or less mimetic aspects, and the precise shaping of its *mythos*, are closely linked to its social, intellectual, and literary contexts. Romance is often self-conscious, reflecting some degree of choice against realism, and demonstrating over the course of literary history the enduring power and relevance – social, intellectual, emotional – of a mode of writing underpinned by the imaginative use of the symbolic and the fantastic, by idealism, and by universal motifs such as quest and adventure.

This volume begins with a retrospective, as Elizabeth Archibald looks back at late classical fictions to find in them the seeds of the romance genre, as well as some of the story matters and motifs so formative for the Middle Ages. Her essay is telling in its demonstration that, although a cohesive group of classical romances did not exist, the "grammar" of romance very much did; perhaps, as Frye suggests, these late works were a step on in literary development from the highly sophisticated classical genres of the epic, drama, and pastoral. The next several essays treat the medieval period, when romance first became a recognizable genre, and when it connected with ideas of England and Englishness to gain a distinctive national identity, particularly apparent in the emergence of the new form of Anglo-Norman romance discussed by Judith Weiss. These narratives allowed for engagement with a variety of historical themes alongside the mythic, and with questions of values, behavior, and ideals. In Derek Brewer's exploration of the popular metrical romances of the Middle Ages, he illuminates how folk material, with its recurrent motifs, such as those of growing up and of the "fair unknown," may be both mimetic and non-mimetic, providing the "imaginative ground of culture" and fulfilling an educative function of a social and literary kind. Alongside this, W. R. J. Barron surveys the development of the most famous romance matter of all, that of Arthur, again showing the roots of romance in historical matter, and the impulse of the age to elaborate already present romance elements by creating works that explored new issues of nation, identity, and the ideal. As Barron and many subsequent contributors suggest, at their most sophisticated such works tend to question, undercut, or treat the failure of the ideal, and this is especially the case with Chaucer's writing, explored by Corinne Saunders. Chaucer both composes some of the most elevated of romance works in English, and calls into question the very foundations of the genre.

This questioning is taken forward in very different ways in the works of Malory, Sidney, and Spenser. In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, discussed by Helen Cooper, the use of

prose allows for a new kind of English Arthurian romance. Malory's narrative of epic grandeur, arguably the most influential of all English romances, both looks back nostalgically to the never-never world of Logres, with its glimmering hopes and failed ideals, and is firmly rooted in contemporary mores and concerns, and the practical possibility of chivalric education. Cooper examines Malory's narrative in light of other transitional prose romances, to find in them elements of the realism and sentiment of their literary descendants, the novels of the eighteenth century. Lori Humphrey Newcomb looks further at prose romance in the Renaissance, and in particular at the relation between gender and genre, as women come to be specially associated with the writing and reading of romances. The mixed mode of Sidney's *Arcadia*, discussed by Andrew King, plays on the notion of a coterie of women readers and also addresses, often with a high degree of irony, more general questions of virtue, behavior, and rule, alongside experimental questions about writing itself. The variety of Renaissance romance is demonstrated by its very different manifestation in Spenser's epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, also discussed by King, which employs the naïve veil of romance to treat the deeper issues of aspiration to perfection and the mutability of the fallen world. Shakespeare's equally questioning stance is shown by David Fuller, who argues for the worthwhile perspectives on the last plays that may be gained through an awareness of the structures of romance. Romance, he suggests, allows for the treatment of extremes of experience free from contingent circumstances, by using familiar motifs, idealized or stylized characters, and the qualities of magic and wonder so appropriate to stage performance. Like the writing of Chaucer and Spenser, however, Shakespeare's drama is sophisticated precisely in its uneasiness, its mixed mode, and its unanswered questions.

A transition to the eighteenth century and beyond is provided by John Simons' exploration of the specialized genre of chapbooks, in which some medieval romances maintained a half-life for centuries, and which as literacy increased provided the means for the motifs of romance to reach a much wider popular audience. Chapbooks functioned and were viewed in terms not so much of escape as of education, opening windows onto culture. David Fairer's essay also provides a transition, tracing the recovery of romance and the growth of Spenserianism in the eighteenth century. A new model of affective reading allowed for the rediscovery of "fairy ground" for the adult world, and for a new mode of writing that looked both to the real and beyond. One of the most popular forms of this new mode was to be the Gothic, and Jerrold Hogle explores the origins and cultural implications of this powerful sub-genre. Again, romance proves a mixed mode, employing old structures to new purposes, often at war within itself, and offering society a mirror in which its "ghostly" or "monstrous" aspect is reflected through a process of "abjection." Gothic writing, perhaps more than any other form, expresses the repressed, the unconscious, through the interplay of horror and wish-fulfillment. Lisa Vargo examines the special relation of women writers to the Gothic, going beyond the easy association of the form with profound conservatism to suggest how it could also prove liberating and experimental. Women writers wove together romance and realism in ways that probed

desire and voiced the conflict between public and private, often subverting expectations. Romance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not, however, confined to the Gothic novel. Clive Probyn discusses the new eighteenth-century mode of parodic romance, deeply influenced by *Don Quixote*, but also manifesting the kind of irony already evident in the works of Chaucer and the *Gawain* poet. For writers like Johnson, Lennox, and Smollett romance becomes "a licensed vehicle for otherwise transgressive ideas." Parody was balanced by the new bourgeois and national romance of Richardson, discussed by Fiona Price. Richardson's works weave together the cynicism and idealism of earlier French romances, and the conventions of the Gothic, to create a narrative where economics and spiritual edification meet. His reliance on the reader's familiarity with the grammar of romance illuminates the vast influence of the genre even while novelists were responding against what they frequently saw as a clichéd and flawed form.

The nineteenth century would usher in another face of romance, that of Romantism. So associated with a political and intellectual movement of the nineteenth century has this term become that it has nearly lost its original association with romance – but the root of the word rightly implies the fundamental influence of the romance genre on the period. In the reactions of writers and artists against the Enlightenment, and the growing emphasis on the individual, nature, the affective and the sublime, medievalism and romance narrative more generally played formative roles. Fiona Robertson surveys the especially influential place of Scott as both medieval scholar and novelist, examining his use of romance motifs, patterning, and symbolism, as well as story matters themselves, to shape a new kind of historical narrative that looks both forward and back. Through close consideration of the poetry of Coleridge and Keats, Michael O'Neill evokes the way that romance becomes "a many-colored dome" in the poetry of the period: this visual image is crucial, for the vivid strands and images of romance allow for a poetry of heightened imagistic effect, as in Romantic art. Romance opens out new narrative matters, enchanted worlds of pasts and futures at once familiar and unknown, worlds of dream and symbol, which provide ways into the deepest fears and pleasures of the human psyche.

This extraordinary visual, enchanted effect is carried through into the Victorian period, and is famously evident in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites with their repeatedly medieval subjects, but also in much of the great literature of the period. Like Scott, Tennyson was especially influential in the shaping of romance in his time, and most of all the Arthurian material: Leonée Ormond traces Tennyson's reading of medieval texts and his use of them to create works that address complex and contemporary moral and psychological questions of ideals and reality, often in a highly pictorial way. Richard Cronin's closely linked essay examines Victorian medievalism further, looking at a range of poets to tease out the complex balance between seriousness and sport in their writing. The new and old are twisted together with a self-consciousness that allows for the probing of human experience and of the questions haunting the Victorian imagination, especially those of love, loyalty, and adultery. The ambiguous relation of the Victorians to romance, their attraction to the

ideal but also their fear of failure, is traced in a different way by Francis O'Gorman, who examines the ways that romance influences autobiographical narratives, in particular that of Ruskin, for whom medieval aesthetics and the writing of Scott were important influences. The structuring pattern of the progress narrative, so closely related to the quest narrative, and the tension between real and ideal, are also evident more generally across Victorian prose. Andrew Sanders explores what the term "romance" meant in relation to the fiction of the period, and traces the use of this label by a series of writers, demonstrating how Dickens, for instance, chose to employ ideas of the marvelous and a certain ideality of incident. Dickens' Christmas books hint at a newly burgeoning sub-genre, that of fantasy, while romance elements are also evident in the historical novels of the period and in the sensationalism of another new genre, that of the mystery or detective novel. Fantasy is considered further by Robert Fraser, who shows how the apparently naïve and sentimental, fairy-tale type of romance may mask parody, satire, and self-referentiality: journeys that seem literal become internal, subjective, and symbolic in the works of writers such as Meredith, Carroll and Stevenson, so that fantasy and reality blur, and the darkness of the divided self is revealed. Ulrika Maude explore how these many new faces of romance manifest themselves in the other world of America, where the force of the primitive and the sense of distance infuse literature with new potential.

The motif of the journey, fundamental to romance from its earliest origins, finds a new manifestation in the transitional, "imperial romance" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, examined by Susan Jones. Here the imperialist venture of colonization provides the subject matter of a new mode of adventure story, which rewrites the motifs of quest, battle, and otherworld through different and ambiguous treatments of race, gender, and place, to raise uneasy political and psychological questions. Unease will be present throughout the writing of romance in the twentieth century, a crucial aspect of modern and postmodern perspectives. As Edward Larrissy shows, the modernist poetry of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot looks consciously back to the matter of romance, most famously the legend of the Waste Land and the Fisher King, but also the faery matter of Ireland and the material of the troubadours. These fragments of the past respond to the crisis of identity in the modern world by providing ways into other worlds, and hence opening the possibilities of social and sexual renewal – although they always remain fragments, shored against our ruin but never coalescing into the ideal beyond the moment.

The more unashamedly fantastic genres of the twentieth century are also more optimistic. It is striking that, as Raymond Thompson demonstrates, the Arthurian matter has retained its appeal right across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, and he argues persuasively for the way that such retellings may react against but can never escape their romance identity. They rely on romance's building blocks – the marvelous, the archetypal, the struggle of dark and light, and nostalgia for an idealized past, though they play too with the dynamic between romance and realism, their effect rooted in the interweaving of difference and familiarity, this world and another, so characteristic of romance. Richard Mathews surveys the development of

non-Arthurian fantasy in the twentieth century, looking back to the Victorian models of Morris and MacDonald to trace the ways in which writers play on the powerful ideas of quest and otherworld, often by using differences of perspective. Fantasy sets alternative realities against ideas of progress, time and change, and thus highlights questions of belief. The growth of fantasy is also closely connected to technological advances – the popular explosion of film, animation, and comics or “pulp,” all forms that use the basic building blocks of the romance genre in what is, in one sense, a simplified way, though each new medium finds its own sophisticated forms. A similar use of the building blocks of romance is evident in the sub-genre of science fiction discussed by Kathryn Hume, in which the journey takes on a new aspect as the marvelous is replaced by scientific devices, and the otherworld becomes that of outer space. As Hume shows, however, the replacement is not as simple as it seems, for medieval notions of the spirit are succeeded by modern distinctions between mind and body, and a prominent theme of contemporary science fiction becomes the possibility of escaping or transforming the confines of the body, and even of remaking the mind.

Romance has not departed from the more mainstream genre of the novel in the twentieth century. As Clare Morgan shows, the twentieth century saw a neo-Romantic movement in both art and writing, which brought with it a new emphasis on ideas of Englishness as rooted in the past, in place, and in myth, on the power of archetypes, and on the possibility of the dream or fantastic world as opening out different kinds of knowledge. This neo-Romantic emphasis has been sustained from the 1950s to the present, so that both the postwar novel and the postmodern novel may become “narratives of enchantment,” as Morgan demonstrates in her analysis of the writings of Iris Murdoch and A. S. Byatt. Her essay is in certain ways closely related to that of Lynne Pearce, whose first subject is that of popular romance of the Mills and Boon kind. As Pearce shows, however, no easy distinction can be made between popular and literary romance, for popular romance simply demonstrates more clearly how the deep structures of the mode allow us to access our traumas, fears, and hopes. It is an interesting phenomenon of postmodern, experimental writing that popular romance structures have found their way out of Mills and Boon into the much more self-conscious, ironized “literary” work of novelists such as Jeannette Winterson, as well as into film at all levels. Romance, as Pearce argues, provides an Ur-story that society cannot, does not wish to, escape.

This study, then, offers a way through the tangled web of romance. Its aims are several-fold: to clarify the definition(s) of romance; to consider the historical and literary development of this mode, from its classical origins to the present day (with a focus on English literary perceptions of romance); to survey both its continuity and its permutations; to examine the changing readership of romance (with particular emphasis on women readers); and to discuss a wide range of specific and influential literary examples. Essays may be read sequentially or in isolation; cross-references are offered at the end of each to suggest different paths through the book. It will be evident that the essays fit into chronological groups, but also groupings of other

kinds: Arthurian romance, fantasy, poetry, prose fiction, travel writing. Perhaps they do not lead to the rose at the heart of the maze – but, at the very least, it is hoped that they will offer some delights along the way – and will open the possibility of many other worlds, many further quests into the romance world and its enduring promise of adventure and transformation, its constant potential for metamorphosis of the mundane into treasures untold.

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