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The Meanings of Romance: Rethinking Early Modern Fiction

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Early modern scholars often use the term “romance” in speaking about Renaissance literature. Loose and ill-defined as it is, “romance” still seems the best fit for all those curious older form of fictions we cannot quite call “novels,” distant as they are from the conventions of modern realism. Today we use “romance” quite broadly: we speak of chivalric romances such as Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* (1516, 1532), pastoral romances such as Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* (1504), or Greek romances like the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus (third or fourth century CE), for example. “Romance” has become the word that indicates one of our most powerful genre categories, inspiring a long tradition of theory from W. P. Ker, Erich Auerbach, Northrop Frye, Patricia Parker, David Quint, and many others.¹ But for sixteenth-century readers, the term as we understand it now did not exist. Much of what we today call Renaissance “romance” was, in its own day, a genre without a name—if, in fact, the authors of the new modes of fiction believed they worked within a common genre at all.

I do not mean that words such as *romance*, *romanzo*, and *roman* were never used then, or that Renaissance theorists did not have their own sophisticated ideas about what such terms should mean. They did, though their ideas are not identical to ours. What I will argue instead is more complicated: that the meaning of “romance” and its cognates changes radically between 1550 and 1670. Word and meaning even become a site of struggle: a focal point for vehement debates over the status of fiction, over male aris-

1. See W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1908); Erich Auerbach, “The Knight Sets Forth,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1953), 123–42; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1957), and *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Patricia A. Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton University Press, 1979); and David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

tocratic virtue, and ultimately over the rise of women writers on the literary market. I want to propose that for the early modern scholar, “romance” can be more than an ambiguous genre category. It is, rather, what Raymond Williams once called a cultural “keyword”: a term whose semantic shifts open a window on social and historical upheavals of a far greater scale.²

* * *

In their earliest form, words such as *romanz*, *romant*, and *roman* once meant only “a romance language,” a vernacular derived from the old speech of the Roman Empire.³ By the late twelfth century, the Old French *romanz* had become a term not only for the vernacular but also for the stories written in such vernacular. When Chrétien de Troyes declares in *Cligès* (ca. 1176) that “cest romans fist Crestiens” (Chrétien made this romance), he announces both his authorship and a name for a distinctly modern genre.⁴ This new narrative clearly proclaims its descent from Rome. Yet it marks a difference as well: Chrétien’s tale is not in Latin but in the language of the people. As “romance,” the word is adopted into English around the year 1300. Parodies of the genre were soon to follow: Chaucer could already lampoon the conventions of the “romances of prys” with his Tale of Sir Thopas (ca. 1392).⁵

But words once popular do not always stay current. By the sixteenth century, “romance” had become old-fashioned, seldom used. If we look for the term in Elizabethan England, we hardly find it. George Puttenham is one of the few to use it, and for him the word is mired in the past. “Romance” meant the old metrical tales of medieval origin: “stories of old time, as the *Tale of Sir Topas*, the reports of *Bevis of Southampton*, *Guy of Warwicke*, *Adam Bell*, and *Clym of the Clough*, and such other old romances or historical rhymes.”⁶ Its medium was verse, not prose; it described older compositions, not contemporary fiction. Edmund Spenser, though he writes in verse and

2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

3. On the medieval word *romance*, see Rita Copeland, “Between Romans and Romantics,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33 (1991): 215–24; and Paul Strohm, “Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives,” *Speculum* 46 (1971): 348–59.

4. Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligès*, ed. Stewart Gregory and Claude Luttrell (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), line 23; this translation and all further translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

5. Geoffrey Chaucer, Tale of Sir Thopas, fragment 7, line 897, *Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 216.

6. George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 173.

draws much upon this earlier tradition, never names himself a writer of romances. He is a “poet historical,” and his *Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) “an historical fiction.”⁷ And when Philip Sidney speaks of books such as *Amadis de Gaula* (1508), the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus, and *Orlando furioso*, he never calls such works “romances,” as a modern critic is wont to do; to Sidney, they are instead types of the “heroical poem.”⁸

Even in the most likely places, the English word “romance” is absent. John Lyly and Robert Greene never use it in the prologues to their fictions; even Anthony Munday, translator of the *Amadis* books, never mentions the term. Roger Ascham, who rails against the “bookes of fayned chevalrie” read “in our fathers tyme,” clearly has a sense of the genre but never uses the word.⁹ The same could be said of Juan Luis Vives and his contemporary English translator, Richard Hyrd. Where Vives gives a list of books he considers dangerous for women to read, Hyrd adds a number of popular English tales to the list: “those ungracious bokes, suche as be in my countre in Spayne Amadise, Florisande, Tirante, Tristane, and Celestina the baudemother of noughtynes. In Fraunce Lancilot du Lake, Paris and Vienna, Ponthus and Sidonia, and Melucyne. In Flaunders, Flori and Whitflowre, Leonel and Canamour, Turias and Floret, Pyramus and Thysbe. In Englande, Parthenope, Genarides, Hippomadon, William and Melyour, Libius and Arthur, Guye, Bevis, and many other.”¹⁰ With Hyrd’s additions, this list includes works in prose and verse; many feature knights but others lack them. Hyrd believes these books are all of a kind despite their differences. But neither Vives (writing in Latin) nor Hyrd (writing in English) yet has a name for such a group, a generic term that might invoke the whole list in a succinct single word.

In the age of Shakespeare, no one used “romance” in the broad ways in which we employ it today. “Romance” was a limited term, an old-fashioned term, certainly not a catchall name for then-contemporary fiction. Even on the Continent its sense was clearly bounded. If the Old French *roman* once covered vernacular literature of all kinds, the passage of four centuries had narrowed its meaning.¹¹ For the sixteenth-century reader, a *roman* was a tale

7. Edmund Spenser, “Letter to Raleigh” (1589), in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 2001), 715.

8. Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 81.

9. Roger Ascham, *Toxophilus* (1545), ed. Peter E. Medine (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 2002), 41.

10. Juan Luis Vives, “The Instruction of a Christen Woman”: A Critical Edition of the Tudor Translation,” ed. Ruth Kuschmierz (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1961), 29.

11. On the French word *roman*, see Marian Rothstein, “Le genre du roman à la Renaissance,” *Études Françaises* 32 (1996): 35–47; Neil Kenny, “‘Ce nom de roman qui estoit particulier aux livres de chevalerie, estant demeuré à tous les livres de fiction’: La naissance antidatée

in prose, a story of knights-errant. Etienne Pasquier in 1596 gives us a glimpse of how the word has changed:

Comme ainsi soit que le Roman fut le langage Courtisan de France, tous ceux qui s'amusoient d'escrire les faits heroyques de nos Chevaliers, premierement en Vers, puis en Prose appellerent leurs ouvres *Romans*, et non seulement ceux-là, mais aussi presque tous autres, comme nous voyons le Roman de la Roze, où il n'est discouru que de l'Amour, et de la Philosophie.¹²

[Since Romance was thus the courtly language of France, all those who amused themselves by writing of the heroic feats of our knights, first in verse, then in prose, called their works "romances." And not only those, but almost all other works [were called "romances"], as we see in the *Roman de la Rose*, where only love and philosophy are discussed.]

Pasquier gives the familiar definition first: *romans* are stories of chivalry and heroism. But he reminds his readers that the word once encompassed much more—even stories without a trace of knighthood in them, like the *Roman de la rose*. Yet with its older senses forgotten, *roman* was now a restricted genre term. True, chivalric narratives like *Amadis de Gaule* were called *romans*, and the French translators of the series prefaced their books with praise for the genre.¹³ But when Jacques Amyot translates a Hellenistic tale such as the *Aethiopica*, the word *roman* never enters his vocabulary. His Greek author fills his tale with shipwrecks, separations, and lovers' reunions—surely the very essence of what we now call romance. But in Amyot's own day, ancient prose fiction of this kind had no fixed name. Instead, Amyot calls his Greek adventure a "fabuleuse histoire."¹⁴

d'un genre," in *Le roman français au XVI^e siècle; ou, Le renouveau d'un genre dans le contexte européen*, ed. Michèle Clément and Pascale Mounier (Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2005), 19–32; and Pascale Mounier, "Quelques substituts de *roman* au XVI^e siècle," *ibid.*, 33–50.

12. Etienne Pasquier, *Les recherches de la France* (1596), ed. Marie-Madeleine Fragonard and François Roudaut, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1996), 3:1503.

13. See, for example, Guillaume Aubert's preface to *Le douziesme livre d'Amadis de Gaule* (Paris, 1560), where he defends his work from those who believe *romans* such as his are merely useless entertainments.

14. Jacques Amyot, "Proesme du translateur," sig. A3r, in *L'histoire Aethiopique de Heliodorus*, by Heliodorus of Emesa, trans. Jacques Amyot (Paris, 1547). The *Aethiopica* was a difficult text for early modern critics to classify. Amyot remarks there that the *Aethiopica* is structured like a heroic poem but lacks martial exploits. Tasso, Sidney, and Pinciano each called the *Aethiopica* a lesser kind of epic that focused on love. See Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 48–50; Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*, 81, 103–6; and Alonso López Pinciano, *Philosophía antigua poetica*, ed. José Rico Verdú (Madrid: Fundación José Antonio de Castro, 1998), 460–69.

In Italy, the word *romanzo* covered a similar semantic ground, that is, stories of chivalry above all.¹⁵ The spectacular success of one particular chivalric poem—Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*—launched the genre term to prominence all over Renaissance Italy. Ariosto’s admirers praised the *romanzo* as the modern heroic genre, featuring a dazzling variety of plotlines no ancient epic could match.¹⁶ Cultured readers argued passionately not only about the *romanzo* but about the *romanzesco*, those modal qualities that seemed unique to the kind.¹⁷ But critics decried the violation of timeless artistic laws and brandished Aristotle’s newly printed *Poetics* as their authority.¹⁸ Many rallied behind Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) as a proper epic poem, modern in idiom but respectfully classical in form. The preference for Tasso or Ariosto, epic or romance, became one of the most hotly debated questions of the day, and everyone (including a young Galileo Galilei) seemed to have an opinion on the matter.¹⁹ At stake was not merely who was the better poet but whether new compositions ought to follow ancient or modern rules. Even Cervantes and Milton took notice of the debate, and we might view their own ambitious genre experiments as a response to their time in Italy.²⁰

Yet in all the arguments over epic and romance, certain forms of fiction never enter the picture. Even among its critics, a *romanzo* denoted only a high mode of literature, centered on the deeds of illustrious men. The name itself seemed virile: some derived it from the Greek word *rhōmē*,

15. *Romanzo* applied to chivalric tales in verse or prose, whether medieval or modern. See Giraldo Cinzio’s comments in “Risposta di Giovambattista Giraldo a Messer Giovambattista Pigna” (1548), reprinted in Giovambattista Giraldo Cinzio, *Discorso dei romanzi*, ed. Laura Benedetti, Giuseppe Monorchio, and Enrico Musacchio (Bologna: Millennium, 1999), 227. On Renaissance theories of the *romanzo*, see Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (University of Chicago Press, 1961), 2:954–1073; and Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of “Orlando furioso”* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

16. It is worth noting that even as they celebrated the poem’s modernity, Ariosto’s defenders still found ways to link *Orlando furioso* to the epic past. They sought precedent for Ariosto’s wide diversity of characters and events in Homer’s *Odyssey*, for example. See Cinzio, *Discorso dei romanzi*, 101; and Giovan Battista Pigna, *I romanzi* (Venice, 1554), 23.

17. To my knowledge, the earliest instance of *romanzesco* occurs in Pigna, *I romanzi*, 21.

18. Giorgio Valla’s Latin translation of the *Poetics* was published in 1498, and the Greek text in 1508. In 1536, Alessandro de’ Pazzi produced an influential new edition featuring both the Greek and Latin, sparking critical interest across Europe. See Joel Elias Spingarn, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 16–18; and Weinberg, *History of Literary Criticism*, 1:352.

19. Galileo preferred Ariosto. See Galileo Galilei, *Considerazioni al Tasso* (Rome, 1793), 7–8.

20. On Cervantes and Italian literary theory, see E. C. Riley, *Cervantes’s Theory of the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968); and Alban K. Forcione, *Cervantes, Aristotle, and the “Persiles”* (Princeton University Press, 1970). On Milton and Italian theory, see Gordon Teskey, *Delirious Milton: The Fate of the Poet in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 129–47.

meaning “strength.”²¹ Without such strong warriors, there could be no romance: Sannazaro’s pastoral *Arcadia*, for example, was never called a *romanzo*.²² Indeed, for a sixteenth-century Italian, a romance of shepherds would have been a contradiction in terms. A *romanzo* was a “poema eroico” (heroic poem), and the first Italian dictionary (a product of the Accademia della Crusca) proudly proclaimed it as such.²³

Romance, *romanzo*, *roman*—in the sixteenth century, each of these terms covered only certain kinds of stories and not others. In Spain, the word *romance* did not even primarily denote a written literary kind. *Romances* were popular ballads or else indicated the vernacular language itself;²⁴ chivalric adventures were instead called *libros de caballerías*, “books of chivalry.” “Romance,” as it turns out, nowhere has the meaning we expect. Even when understood as a literary kind, the values contemporary critics associated with the genre were often quite different from ours.

Today we think of “romance” as a vast literature of love. But in the literary debates of Italy and France, martial exploits were the genre’s *sine qua non*. The knight in love must still be able to fight when called upon, and stories without such warriors did not even merit the name. Hence, the Italian romances were also called *libri di battaglie* (books of battle), as if war rather than love were their most important subject.²⁵ The title pages of the French *Amadis* translations sometimes promised “adventures d’armes et d’amours” (adventures of arms and of loves). Yet at other times they heralded only “les guerres et discordz” (wars and discords), with no mention of a more tender subject.²⁶ The books called “romances” could radiate eroticism—but it was their martial elements that critics valued more. Giraldi Cin-

21. Cinzio, *Discorso dei romanzi*, 35.

22. Cinzio mentions shepherds as secondary characters in romances, meant to augment “i re e le reine e gli altri gran personaggi” (the kings and queens and other great personages) (*Discorso dei romanzi*, 101). But he stresses that they must be “rozzi” (rude), and the shepherdesses “semplici e male accorte” (simple and uncultivated), as befits their lowly station (101).

23. *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (Venice, 1612), s.v. *romanzo*.

24. Covarrubias defined *romance* only as a language derived from the Romans. See Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (Madrid, 1611), s.v. *romance*. On the Spanish word *romance*, see Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *Romancero hispánico*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1953) 1:5; Miguel Garci-Gómez, “Romance según los textos españoles del Medievo y Prerrenacimiento,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1974): 35–62; and Daniel Eisenberg, “The Romance as Seen by Cervantes,” *El Crotalón: Anuario de Filología Española* 1 (1984): 177–92.

25. See Paul Grendler, “Form and Function in Italian Renaissance Popular Books,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 46 (1993): 473–75. See also David Scott Wilson-Okamura, “Errors about Ovid and Romance,” *Spenser Studies* 23 (2008): 215–34. Even *Orlando furioso* was called an “opera di battaglia.” See, e.g., *Lettere di Lodovico Ariosto*, ed. Antonio Cappelli (Milan, 1887), 355.

26. These phrases appear in the subtitles of Nicolas de Herberay’s *Le premier livre de Amadis de Gaule* (Paris, 1540), and *Le tiers livre de Amadis de Gaule* (Paris, 1542), respectively.

zio, one of the earliest to theorize the genre, calls them “poema e composizione di cavalieri forti” (poems and compositions of strong knights).²⁷ The heroes of romance were defined by their class and vocation, and the works themselves were commonly known by their great warriors’ names: Orlando, Amadís, Lancelot, and the like. Even in the English case, Puttenham’s “romances” are all named after fighters, most of them wellborn, all of them renowned for their courage and combat prowess.

Sixteenth-century women never called their own works “romances,” and their writings rarely trespassed into so virile a subject. There were noteworthy exceptions: in England, for example, Margaret Tyler penned the *Mirroure of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (1578), translating a Spanish work filled with war and chivalric adventures. Yet Tyler admits in her preface to the reader that her story seems “a matter more manlike then becommeth my sexe.”²⁸ In Italy, Moderata Fonte composed her heroic poem *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581) in bold imitation of Ariosto. But when Fonte’s male readers praised her work, they did so in a tone of mystified wonder: a laudatory sonnet by Fonte’s own uncle marvels that a “non esperta verginella” (an inexperienced little virgin) could write about battles and voyages to distant lands.²⁹

In the sixteenth century, romances were understood as books of arms and chivalry, and to write one was to venture into a male domain.³⁰ This is not to say that such tales lacked prominent heroines or passionate loves. (And indeed, moralistic critics often bemoaned those features the most.) But if in the sixteenth century the books called “romances” often included love, martial valor was their single most prized ingredient—at least in the theory of the day.

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What is startling about “romance” in the Renaissance is how much the term excludes. Sixteenth-century readers never speak of pastoral “romances” or Greek “romances”: the word was not broad enough to include

27. Cinzio, *Discorso dei romanzi*, 35.

28. Margaret Tyler, *The Mirroure of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (London, 1578), sig. A3r. Note that like other English writers of her time, Tyler never mentions the word “romance.”

29. Giovanni Nicolò Doglioni’s sonnet is printed in Moderata Fonte, *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (Venice, 1581), sig. *4r. On the challenges faced by Moderata Fonte and other early modern Italian women writers, see Virginia Cox, “Fiction, 1560–1650,” in *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy*, ed. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 52–64.

30. For a reassessment of our traditional association between women and romance, see Lorna Hutson, *The Usurer’s Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 91–114; and Helen Hackett, *Women and Romance Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

such diverse narrative kinds.³¹ But the word's limitations shed some light on the status of fiction in the early modern age. In fact, the sixteenth century had few terms for imaginative literature in general. Works of fiction and nonfiction alike were often simply titled "book" (*livre, libro*). A lengthy tale might be called a "history" (*histoire, historia*), but that term could also denote a factual narrative—"history" in our modern sense. Theorists throughout Europe commonly cited the many kinds of poetry: epic, lyric, tragedy, comedy, satire, and the like. But they showed little interest in a classifying system for narrative alone. And if they did, they often accepted divisions based not on what we would call "generic features" but on a work's perceived truth content. They could cite the rhetorical definitions of Cicero and Quintilian, for example, which classed all narratives as either *historia* (factually true), *argumentum* (fictitious but plausible), or *fabula* (neither true nor plausible).³²

Epic (*épica, poema eroico, oeuvre heroique*) was the supreme narrative genre, the reference point for all talk of fiction. Other forms of narrative proliferated wildly throughout the era—novellas, picaresque tales, and pastoral love stories, to name only a few—but these experiments went ignored by major literary theorists, or else they were redefined in terms of epic. As Julius Caesar Scaliger once put it, "For objects of every kind there exists one perfect original to which all the rest can be referred as their norm and standard. In epic poetry, which describes the descent, life, and deeds of heroes, all other kinds of poetry have such a norm, so that to it they turn for their regulative principles."³³ Epic sets the standard for everything else. The new *romanzi* were merely epic's most modern incarnation or a monstrous deformation, depending on one's point of view. Theory lags behind praxis. Although the sixteenth century abounded in humbler forms of fiction, we find few new words to categorize its latest imaginative products.

Yet as the ruling rubric for fiction, "epic" had its limits. True, the term could cover narratives in prose as well as in verse (according to some critics

31. When such works were discussed at all, they were either assimilated to older kinds like the eclogue or the epic or placed in more miscellaneous, ad hoc categories. In 1598, for example, Mareschal listed Jorge de Montemayor's pastoral *Diana* not under "poesie et fables" or under "histoire" but under "meslanges ou oeuvres traictans de divers subjects" (mixtures or works treating of diverse subjects) (Philibert Mareschal, *La guide des arts et sciences* [1598; repr., Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971], 401). For a discussion of Mareschal's categories, see Kenny, "Ce nom de roman," 30.

32. See Cicero, *De inventione* 1.19.27, in *De inventione, De optimo genere oratorum, Topica*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (London: Heinemann, 1976); Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1933), 2.4.2; and the pseudo-Ciceronian, *Ad C. Herennium de ratione dicendi*, trans. Harry Caplan (London: Heinemann, 1954), 1.8.13.

33. Giulio Cesare Scaliger, *Select Translations from Scaliger's Poetics*, trans. Frederick Morgan Padelford (New York: Holt, 1905), 54.

at least). But according to ancient precept, an epic's most appropriate subject was war.³⁴ In practice, Renaissance heroic poems from Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* to Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to Alonso de Ercilla's *Araucana* (1569, 1578, 1589) were mixed in nature, promoting *arma* as well as *amor* as spheres of heroic activity. But, in theory, whether an epic could legitimately center on love was a thorny question: treatises by Torquato Tasso, by Alonso López Pinciano, and by Philip Sidney all hesitate between yes and no. Perhaps a lesser epic could be about love, Tasso mused, but the best kind would celebrate those deeds "gloriously undertaken to establish the faith or exalt the Church and Empire."³⁵

As a term for fiction, "epic" was restricted in other ways. Its protagonists were invariably illustrious, men and women of the highest birth. If the heroic poem was indeed a "little world," it was largely scrubbed of the seedier elements of society. Miguel de Cervantes made a joke of such exclusions, turning one of the more pedantic characters of the *Quixote* (1605, 1615) into an enforcer of the epic "rules." The Canon of Toledo dreams of reading an ideal heroic poem, one that might contain

naufragios, tormentas, rencuentros y batallas, pintando un capitán valeroso con todas las partes que para ser tal se requirieren . . . pintando ora un lamentable y trágico suceso, ahora un alegre y no pensado acontecimiento; allí una hermosísima dama, honesta, discreta, y recatada; aquí un caballero cristiano, valiente y comedido; acullá un desaforado bárbaro fanfarrón, acá un príncipe cortés, valeroso y bien mirado; representando bondad y lealtad de vasallos, grandezas y mercedes de señores.

[shipwracks, tempests, incounters, and battels: delineating a valorous Captaine, with all the properties required in him[.] . . . Deciphering now a lamentable and tragicall sucesse, then a joyfull and unexpected event; there a most beautifull, honest, and discrete Ladie, heere a valiant, courteous, and Christian knight, there an unmeasurable barbarous braggard; heere a gentle, valorous, and wise Prince: Representing the goodnesse and loyalty of subjects, the magnificence and bountie of Lords.]³⁶

34. War was canonized as the official subject of epic in Roman literary theory: see Stephen Hinds, "Essential Epic: Genre and Gender from Macer to Statius," in *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society*, ed. Mary Depew and Dirk Obbink (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 221–44.

35. Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, 50, and see 48–50. See also Pinciano, *Philosophía anti-gua poética*, 460–69; and Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*, 81, 103–6.

36. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. Luis Andrés Murillo (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1978), 566; Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The History of the Valorous and Wittie Knight-Errant, Don Quixote of the Mancha*, trans. Thomas Shelton (London, 1612), 553.

The Canon is a learned man, his words a recitation of fashionable Italian ideas. His epic will have valiant captains, beautiful ladies, Christian knights, and courteous princes: men and women of the highest rank and only the most exemplary of each kind. These tales would in turn shape other great men, teaching “all those parts that make a worthy man perfect.”³⁷ Yet the elevated fiction the Canon describes is hardly the one we are reading. Rather, Cervantes’s book is populated by impoverished *hidalgos* and prudent peasants, the cross-dressed daughters of wealthy farmers, convicts and charlatans who dream of writing books of their own. When the *Quixote* was first published, its title proclaimed it not an epic, but a *historia*. Cervantes probably delighted in a word that could mean either “story” or “history.”³⁸ But there were few alternatives available to him: words for pure fiction were still scarce indeed.

If the heroic poem could cover stories about kings, heroes, knights, and ladies, it was a name less apt for the shepherds of Arcadia, or the intrigues of clever city dwellers, or the rogues of the picaresque world. Within his lifetime, Cervantes had witnessed a veritable “fiction explosion,” fueled by the print revolution and a general rise in literacy.³⁹ Both the pastoral love story and the picaresque tale made their debut on the literary market, spreading from Italy and Spain to all of Europe. Older genres such as the *novella* flourished in print, energized by new collections from Matteo Bandello (1554, 1573) and Marguerite de Navarre (1558) as well as translations like Belleforest’s *Histoires tragiques* (1559–82). And after centuries of obscurity, ancient prose fiction fell upon Europe with the force of a revelation, thanks to the printing of rare manuscripts written by Heliodorus (1534), Achilles Tatius (1544), and Longus (1559).⁴⁰

37. Cervantes, *Don Quixote of the Mancha*, 533. Cervantes’s own attitude toward such elevated fiction is hard to determine. According to Riley (*Cervantes’s Theory of the Novel*, 47–49), the Canon’s epic is not Cervantes’s own ideal of the novel. But it is nevertheless a form of fiction that Cervantes respected and tried to reproduce in the *Persiles* (1617). For a contrasting opinion, see Francisco Márquez Villanueva, “El Quijote: Épica y narratividad,” *Boletín de la Real Academia Española* 85 (2005): 443–59.

38. On the two meanings of *historia*, see Bruce Wardropper, “Don Quixote: Story or History?,” *Modern Philology* 63 (1965): 1–11.

39. “Fiction explosion” is the colorful phrase of Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475–1640* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1982), 74–75. Paul Salzman also discusses the “sudden proliferation of modes of fiction” in his *English Prose Fiction, 1558–1700: A Critical History* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

40. Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* was first printed in Greek, Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon* (second century CE) was first published in Latin translation, and Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe* (second or third century CE) was first published in French translation. For their full translation and publication history, see Victor Skretkowitz, *European Erotic Romance: Philhellene Protestantism, Renaissance Translation and English Literary Politics* (Manchester University Press, 2010), 27–165.

Much of this unclassed fiction could hardly be called “heroic” in the war-like sense. The ancient Greek tales, for instance, featured heroes far more passive than the wrathful Achilles or even the love-struck, furious Orlando. Their protagonists were usually lovers who endured shipwreck, separation, and kidnapping before their fidelity was rewarded by marriage. In Heliodorus’s story, Odysseus himself appears in a dream and likens the young couple’s wanderings to his own.⁴¹ Like Odysseus, Theagenes and Charikleia survive through patience, a little cunning, and the friendly force of providence. Yet Homer’s hero was a war veteran, and upon his return to Ithaca he slays the suitors usurping his home. Heliodorus featured the shipwrecks but not the slaughter. To Renaissance readers, his male hero Theagenes was clearly no warrior: “Il ne fait executer nulz memorables exploitz d’armes” (he achieves no memorable feats of arms), as Jacques Amyot once complained.⁴²

In their time, the Greek prose tales had negotiated new values for a changed political stage, one dominated not by the independent city-state but the Roman Empire.⁴³ The tales resurfaced in the Renaissance during a transition equally profound. The traditional values and identity of the aristocracy were under pressure, challenged by both a new culture of humanism and the exigencies of the early modern state. Reformation and Counter-Reformation, too, contributed to the shock of social upheaval. Many pioneers of the new fiction (noble and commoner alike) launched their careers under this complex constellation of influences. The best-selling author Jorge de Montemayor, for example, spent his life serving the Spanish crown at court and on the battlefield. His earliest compositions were religious poems, imbued with the introspective spirit of Catholic reformism. But in the wake of a Protestant scare, his books were deemed heterodox and banned by the Inquisition.⁴⁴ Barred from spiritual explorations, Montemayor turned his energies instead to the inner world of his secular

41. Heliodorus of Emesa, *An Ethiopian Story*, trans. J. R. Morgan, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 462.

42. Amyot, “Proesme du translateur,” sig. A3r.

43. On the invisible presence of Rome in the Greek prose tales, see David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 218–31. Note that classical rhetoric, too, had lacked a term for prose fiction and that Greek writers such as Longus and Heliodorus produced their masterpieces in the absence of any generic rubric. On ancient fiction and its lack of a name, see Tomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 1–4.

44. On Montemayor’s religious poetry and its censorship by the Inquisition, see Bryant L. Creel, *The Religious Poetry of Jorge de Montemayor* (London: Tamesis, 1981); and Elizabeth Rhodes, *The Unrecognized Precursors of Montemayor’s “Diana”* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 20–107. Both authors argue that Montemayor’s poetry was strongly influenced by pre-Tridentine Catholic reform movements in Spain and their shared focus on spiritual withdrawal and interiority.

shepherds. The melancholy men and women of the pastoral *Diana* (1559) sing that “los que sufren más son los mejores” (those who suffer most are best): true virtue lies in the patient endurance of an adverse Fortune.⁴⁵

Print accelerated the circulation of new and old narrative kinds. But it also encouraged their combination in experimental forms. A thriving print market brought ancient, medieval, and modern tales side by side on European bookshelves, and many sixteenth-century best sellers were born out of the mixture of all three. The popular *Amadís* books were quick to blend the adventures of brave knights and gentle shepherds. Montemayor, for his part, structured his pastoral *Diana* like a Greek prose tale, filled with chance meetings and embedded narratives. But among his shepherds he included a warrior maiden out of heroic poetry, and her woeful history is a retelling of a novella by Bandello. Sidney famously praised the mingling of “matters heroic and pastoral,” and his own *New Arcadia* (1590) combined elements from the *Amadís* books, from Montemayor’s *Diana*, and from Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica*, among many others.⁴⁶

What we call the era before the novel, in other words, was anything but a dark age for fiction. When Cervantes began his literary career, in the 1580s, there were more kinds of fiction available than ever before, produced in greater quantities than anything the pre-Gutenberg world had ever seen. And much of the new material marked a departure from the martially oriented traditions of heroic poetry and chivalric romance. Cervantes himself experimented with nearly all the new narrative modes of his day, penning novellas, pastoral books, picaresque tales, and Hellenistic adventures both before and after the *Quixote*. But while the sixteenth century abounded in fiction, its theorists expressed discomfort with the naming of new and mixed literary kinds.⁴⁷ If Aristotle didn’t mention the genre, it faced a hard fight for legitimacy.

I have argued, thus far, that only a small stratum of fiction qualified as “romance” in the Renaissance, while many more fictions simply went unnamed. Their lack of a fixed designation suggests a lack of cultural prestige: they are not considered works of true literature, nor do they warrant a set vocabulary for intellectual discussion. Of the various kinds of invented nar-

45. Jorge de Montemayor, *La Diana*, ed. Juan Montero (Barcelona: Crítica, 1996), 173.

46. Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*, 94. On his *Arcadia*, see A. C. Hamilton, “Sidney’s *Arcadia* as Prose Fiction: Its Relation to Its Sources,” *English Literary Renaissance* 2 (1972): 29–60. On *Amadís* and its pastoral innovations, see Sydney Cravens, *Feliciano de Silva y los antecedentes de la novela pastoril en sus libros de caballerías* (Chapel Hill, NC: Estudios de Hispanófila, 1976). On the generic mixture of the *Diana*, see Carroll B. Johnson, “Montemayor’s *Diana*: A Novel Pastoral,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 48 (1971): 20–35.

47. See, for example, the controversy that erupted between Giovanni Battista Guarini and Iason Denores over the “tragicomedy,” summarized in Weinberg, *History of Literary Criticism*, 2:1074–105.

rative, the Spanish theorist Pinciano mused that “pure fiction” (*ficción pura*) was the least valuable.⁴⁸ By “pure fiction,” he meant works of entertainment built wholly from the imagination: these he considered less worthy than stories based on true history or fables that taught a moral lesson. In its most distilled, essential form, fiction had little to recommend itself. We might remember that Sidney called his *Arcadia* “but a trifle, and that triflinglye handled.”⁴⁹ Such disavowals were a commonplace for fiction writers, particularly if their fiction was in prose.

What “romance” means—and what it doesn’t—speaks volumes about the sixteenth-century attitude toward fiction. A “romance” was a heroic poem: a story of great men and, indeed, written chiefly by men. If there was as yet no name for much of what we call Renaissance “romance,” it was because other kinds of stories commanded only a dubious esteem. Yet this multitude of nameless narratives offered a powerful critique of aristocratic virtue and its emphasis on lineage and martial prowess. In fact, it may be precisely because of their alternative values that such fictions were never called “romances.” Being aware of such inclusions and exclusions may help us recognize the true ideological diversity of Renaissance fiction. It may also help us reassess certain scholarly truisms: the idea that romance was a woman’s genre, for example, or a genre centered on love. These are late seventeenth-century assumptions, and they have gained much traction ever since. But what a seventeenth-century reader means by “romance,” as we will see, is a different understanding altogether.

* * *

Energized by the print revolution, literary production far outstripped the existing vocabulary for fiction in the sixteenth century. But in the seventeenth century, authors, readers, and critics begin to assign a term to such nameless narratives: they become “romances.” Starting in France in the 1620s, and then in England in the 1630s, “romance” and its cognates utterly transform in meaning. Commentators begin to speak of “romance” not as a genre of male heroics but one of imagination and the passions. Female authors gain new prominence, praised for their special understanding of the genre. By the time our word “romantic” is coined, in 1650, “romance” has even become a word for fiction itself, gathering all imaginative literature under its immense shadow.

48. Pinciano, *Philosophía antigua poética*, 174–75.

49. Philip Sidney, “To My Deare Ladie and Sister, the Countesse of Pembroke,” in *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1963–68), 1:3.

We may never know when “romance” was first used in a new sense; everyday speech may change first and the written record only later. But one striking instance comes from a woman of letters, Marie de Gournay. Though most famous for editing the works of her dear friend Michel de Montaigne, Gournay also authored books of her own: classical translations, an essay in defense of women writers, and a short work of fiction entitled *Le proumenoir de Monsieur de Montaigne* (1594). The *Proumenoir* tells the story of Alinda, a Persian princess, whose elopement with her lover ends in tragedy. Its original edition called the work only a *livret* or *histoire*, a tale apparently recounted to Montaigne during a long walk with Gournay.⁵⁰ But by 1626, when Gournay republished the story, the *roman* was the genre most on her mind. In a new preface, Gournay cites her critics, who complained that a *roman* like hers should not contain so many philosophical discourses and Latin quotations. Rather than refuse the genre label, Gournay argues for its elevation: “Un Roman de mérite est aussi glorieux qu’un autre genre d’ouvrage” (a *roman* of merit is just as prestigious as any other kind of work).⁵¹ Her ensuing list of praiseworthy *romans* includes some surprising examples: works such as Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica*, the *Diana* of Montemayor, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, John Barclay’s *Argenis* (1621), and even an *Arcadie* that may be Sidney’s *New Arcadia*, recently translated into French.⁵²

Gournay was hardly alone in discussing the new prose fictions. Charles Sorel’s *Berger extravagant* (1627, 1628) followed in her wake, attacking a variety of books under the name of the *roman*. As his mouthpiece Clarimonde puts it, “Nous avons encore maintenant une autre genre de livres contre lequel je me suis délibéré de parler. Ces livres s’appellent des romans, et c’est proprement une poésie en prose. Il y en à d’une infinité de façons” (There is yet among us another kind of Books against which I am resolved to speak. These Books are called Romances; and to speak properly, ’tis Poetry in Prose; there are many fashions of them).⁵³ Under the term *roman*,

50. Marie Le Jars de Gournay, *Le proumenoir de Monsieur de Montaigne* (Paris, 1594), 1–2.

51. Marie Le Jars de Gournay, *L’ombre de la damoiselle de Gournay* (Paris, 1626), 651. On Gournay’s preface and the evolving definition of the *roman*, see Cathleen M. Bauschatz, “‘Les Puissances de Vostre Empire’: Changing Power Relations in Marie de Gournay’s *Le proumenoir de Monsieur de Montaigne* from 1594 to 1626,” in *Renaissance Women Writers: French Texts/American Contexts*, ed. Anne R. Larsen and Colette H. Winn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 192–95.

52. Sidney’s *Arcadia* had appeared in competing French translations, by Jean Baudoin (1624, 1625) and by Geneviève Chappelain (1625), and was famous enough to be explicitly named by Gournay’s contemporary Charles Sorel. On the *Arcadia*’s French translations, see Albert W. Osborn, *Sir Philip Sidney en France* (1932; repr., Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1974), 65–91.

53. Charles Sorel, *Le berger extravagant*, pts. 3–4 (Paris, 1628), 59–63; Charles Sorel, *The Extravagant Shepherd; or, The History of the Shepherd Lysis*, trans. John Davies (London, 1654), bk. 13, pages 61–62.

he includes not merely the romances of chivalry but also the Greek prose tales and the new books of pastoral fiction. Honoré d'Urfé's *Astrée* (1607–27) comes under fire but so too do older titles: Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* and Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, popular imports such as Montemayor's *Diana* and Sidney's *New Arcadia*, and political allegories like Barclay's *Argenis*. Sorel is not against fiction per se; rather, he criticizes such books for their more implausible, far-fetched elements. Sorel even coins a new adjective to describe this fictive, fantastic quality. For his foolish hero Louis (a bourgeois overly fond of reading), to sleep outdoors on the ground is “une chose bien romanesque”: a truly romance-like adventure.⁵⁴

None of Sorel's targets were called *romans* when first published, either in France or any other Western nation. Nor were they usually discussed as a group, Hellenistic, chivalric, pastoral, and others all rolled together as one. Sorel's word *roman* in 1628 already reaches farther and more flexibly than its sixteenth-century counterpart. It stretches back into the Greek past and forward into the modern era; it covers stories about men and women who never once bear arms; it accepts sixteenth-century works that once had no genre to call their own. In the writings of Gournay and Sorel, critical discourse seems at last to catch up to the fiction boom of the sixteenth century. The term *roman* expands to fill a void, and critics and proponents alike finally share a vocabulary to discuss the literature of their day.

But in the process, our medieval term sheds much of its earlier specificity. Gone is the stress on martial heroics, vernacular language, modern form. For Sorel, a *roman* means a fiction in prose. There are, he adds, “many fashions” of them. And, indeed, seventeenth-century writers (unlike their sixteenth-century counterparts) begin to speak of the *roman* as a single genre with many branches. When Madeleine de Scudéry launches her prolific literary career with *Ibrahim* (1641), she declares the *roman* to be her “principal object” and devotes a preface to the rules of the genre. A *roman* must be unified, its many actions tending toward a single end, and it must be plausible, employing enough accurate detail to create the illusion of verisimilitude. Such were the principles established by Heliodorus and “ces fameux Romains de l'Antiquité” (those famous romances of Antiquity).⁵⁵ As sixteenth-century theorists once composed rules for the heroic poem, so too does Scudéry delineate rules for the prose *roman*—as if her ancient, chivalric, and pastoral sources were all variants of a single tradition and governed by a single set of principles.

If the French now spoke of the *roman* in unprecedented ways, Sorel did not let the linguistic slippage pass unnoticed. By the time of his *Bibliothèque françoise* (1664), he mused that the term *roman* could now cover any work of

54. Charles Sorel, *Le berger extravagant*, pts. 1–2 (Paris, 1627), 516.

55. Madeleine de Scudéry, *Ibrahim; ou, L'illustre Bassa* (Paris, 1641), sig. ē4v.

fiction at all: “Ce nom de roman qui estoit particulier aux livres de chevalerie, estant demeuré à tous les livres de fiction, ainsi que l’usage en a ordonné” (this word *roman*, which used to be specific to the books of chivalry, [is] now left to all books of fiction, as common usage has dictated).⁵⁶ The word could still denote exotic stories of highborn heroes, as in the *romans héroïques* of Scudéry and La Calprenède. But a *roman* could now encompass prose fiction throughout the literary spectrum—even satirical or picaresque tales. These Sorel calls *romans comiques*: he praises the inventions of Miguel de Cervantes and Mateo Alemán in particular.⁵⁷ In the sixteenth century, such tales were still nameless intruders on the literary scene. But when the word *roman* becomes simply an abstract term for fiction, we have arrived at a society in which no single kind of fiction predominates.

The older sense of *roman* was still remembered, but it was fast becoming a target of ridicule. By midcentury, Sorel’s countrymen Paul Scarron and Antoine Furetière were publishing books with such titles as *Le roman comique* (1651) and *Le roman bourgeois* (1666), making open mockery of the once-heroic notion of the genre. Furetière even begins his work with a swipe at the poets of old:

Je chante les Amours et les adventures de plusieurs Bourgeois de Paris de l’un et de l’autre sexe. Et ce qui est de plus merveilleux, c’est que je les chante, et si je ne sçay pas la Musique. Mais puis qu’un Roman n’est rien qu’une Poësie en prose, je croirois mal débiter, si je ne suivois l’exemple de mes Maistres.

[I Sing the Amours and Adventures of certain Citizens of Paris of both Sexes, and though it may seem strange that I sing having no Skill in Musick; yet Romances being [epic] Poems in Prose, I should do ill by any other Exordium to deviate from the examples of my Masters.]⁵⁸

Ariosto had once boasted that he would sing of “le donne, i cavallier, l’arme, gli amori” (ladies, knights, arms, and loves), outdoing Virgil’s mere “arma virumque” (arms and the man).⁵⁹ Furetière, on the other hand, sings only of love, leaving out the arms entirely. And though he too will sing of men and women, his protagonists will be people of a middling class: “personnes qui ne seront ny heros ny heroïnes, qui ne dresseront point d’armées, ny ne renverseront point de royaumes, mais qui seront de ces bonnes gens de mediocre condition” (Persons that are neither Hero’s nor

56. Charles Sorel, *La bibliothèque française* (Paris, 1664), 162.

57. *Ibid.*, 172.

58. Antoine Furetière, *Le roman bourgeois* (Paris, 1666), 1–2; the translation is from the erroneously named *Scarron’s City Romance, Made English* (London, 1671), 1.

59. Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, ed. Marcello Turchi (Milan: Garzanti, 1974), 1.1; Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.1, in *Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

Heroines, that neither defeat Armies nor subdue Kingdoms, but being honest People of an ordinary condition).⁶⁰ From now on, the books called *romans* need not be so heroic after all.

And what of the English “romance”? Around the 1630s, the term so seldom used in previous decades begins an extraordinary expansion. Henry Reynolds, in his *Mythomystes* (1632), praises the poets of Spain for “those prose *Romances* they abound in,” naming picaresque tales such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and *Guzman de Alfarache* (1599).⁶¹ When Sir Richard Baker translates the letters of Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac in 1638, he uses “romance” for ancient Greek tales and modern chivalric stories alike.⁶² John Evelyn links the genre with pastoral in 1654, noting that Salisbury Plain reminds him of “the pleasant lives of the shepherds we read of in romances.”⁶³ Influenced by its French counterpart, the English “romance” was gradually becoming an all-purpose word for fiction.⁶⁴ In 1648, Matthias Prideaux could already use “romance” for almost any narrative that was not true history: Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* was a “morall romance”; Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, a “satyricall romance”; More’s *Utopia*, a “politicall romance”; and so forth.⁶⁵

In contrast to its sparse sixteenth-century usage, “romance” in the seventeenth century is a word that sells. From the 1650s onward, bookshops announce translations such as *The History of Don Fenise: A New Romance* (1651); *Cassandra: The Fam’d Romance* (1652); *Artamenes; or, The Grand Cyrus: An Excellent New Romance* (1653).⁶⁶ After the Civil War, English works, too, begin to claim the title for themselves. In 1653, Percy Herbert could complain that “for many years past, not any one Romance hath been written in the English tongue.”⁶⁷ His own *Cloria and Narcissus: A Delightfull and New Romance* promises to remedy the lack. “Romance” encompassed both Herbert’s political allegories and pure historical fictions, and the applications only grew wider as the century progressed. Madame de Lafayette’s *Princess de Clèves* (1678), which we hail as a masterpiece of psychological realism,

60. Furetière, *Le roman bourgeois*, 28, and [Furetière], *Scarron’s City Romance*, 2.

61. Henry Reynolds, *Mythomystes* (London, 1632), 5–6.

62. Jean-Louis Guez [seigneur de Balzac], “To Madam—Letter XIII,” in *New Epistles of Monsieur de Balzac . . . Being the second and third volumes*, trans. Richard Baker (London, 1638), 3:31.

63. John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), 115.

64. The *OED* suggests that the later sense of “romance” as “a fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life” derives from the French *roman* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “romance,” def. II.3.a).

65. Matthias Prideaux, *An Easy and Compendious Introduction for Reading all Sorts of Histories* (Oxford, 1648), 346.

66. See Arundell Esdaile, *A List of English Prose Tales and Romances Printed before 1740* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1912), 194, 191, 302. “Romance” appears as a popular title word only from 1651 onward.

67. Percy Herbert, *Cloria and Narcissus: A Delightfull and New Romance* (London, 1653), sig. A3r.

was translated and published as “The Most Fam’d Romance.” So too was Paul Scarron’s *Roman comique*, the “comical romance” of a lowly troop of actors.⁶⁸ Such was the allure of the genre term that even older books once titled “histories” begin to be repackaged as “romances.” When Honoré d’Urfé’s pastoral *Astrée* was first published in English, for example, it was as *The History of Astrea* (1620). But when John Davies retranslates the work in 1657, he titles it *Astrea: A Romance* and opens with a prologue praising romance as the highest of all fictional genres.⁶⁹

Why should so many books, representing very diverse values, begin to be collected under “romance”? They had little enough in common besides their invented nature. But with the advance of early modern science, “romance” was becoming not merely a genre term but an epistemological category.⁷⁰ When Sidney once spoke of fiction, he used the term “poesy,” contrasting the golden world of the poet to the historian’s “brazen” world of nature. But for Roger Boyle, in 1655, the word is not “poesy” but “romance”: “Besides, Romances tell us what may be, whereas true Historyes tell us what is, or has bin.”⁷¹ “Romance” was a word deployed not merely by poets and booksellers but by the men of the nascent scientific revolution. To the spokesmen of the Royal Society, it was the opposite of everything they stood for. “What a Romance is the story of those impossible concaemerations, Intersections, Involutions, and feign’d Rotations of solid Orbs?” asks Joseph Glanvill in 1661, attacking the old Aristotelian image of the cosmos.⁷² According to Thomas Sprat, six years later, the natural histories of Pliny and Solinus were filled “more with pretty Tales, and fine monstrous Stories; than sober, and fruitful Relations. . . . It is like Romances, in respect of True History.”⁷³ In a culture in which truth and untruth were redefined as objects of empirical study, “romance” becomes a way of naming nearly everything that was not fact.

New meanings produce a new genealogy. For if “romance” now simply means “fiction,” it must be as old as humanity itself. As John Davies asks in

68. Madame de Lafayette [Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne], *The Princess of Cleves: The Most Fam’d Romance* (London, 1679); and Paul Scarron, *Scarron’s Comical Romance; or, A Facetious History of a Company of Strolling Stage-Players* (London, 1676).

69. The ancient Greek prose tales receive a similar treatment: Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe* becomes *Daphnis and Chloe: A Most Sweet, and Pleasant Pastorall Romance for Young Ladies* (London, 1657), and Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* is retitled *The Triumphs of Love and Constancy: A Romance* (London, 1687).

70. See Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*, 15th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 25–64.

71. Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*, 78; Roger Boyle, preface to *Parthenissa: A Romance* (London, 1655), sig. Blv.

72. Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (London, 1661), 173.

73. Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society of London* (London, 1667), 90.

the 1657 *Astrea*, “For, what were the Oracles, what all ancient Mythologies, what Numa’s pretended correspondence with his Nymph Aegeria, but so many politick Romances?”⁷⁴ For Davies, romance is no longer the quaint medieval genre of “historical rhymes” that it was for Puttenham some seventy years earlier. On the contrary, romance now predates the Middle Ages, and even the Romance languages themselves. Romances are the source of all myth and fable; they are “the highest and noblest productions of man’s wit.” As the premier genre of fiction, “romance” has become a name to conjure with. And in 1650, “romantic” is the word invented to describe this unbridled imaginative capability, in all its favorable, unfavorable, and even purely neutral senses.⁷⁵

By the latter half of the seventeenth century, “romance” and its cognates have acquired profound new values. Romance even begins to be theorized as a separate genre entirely. In the influential treatise of Pierre-Daniel Huet (1670), the *roman* is not a variant of epic so much as an autonomous—and alternative—literary tradition. Epics dealt with war and politics, but *romans* were “fictions d’aventures amoureuses”: fictions with love at their center.⁷⁶ Epics demanded erudition, but *romans* only the exercise of the imagination. Far from being a Western vernacular tradition, the writing of *romans* was a basic inclination to fiction and the fabulous. Huet even suggested that the genre was invented in the ancient East, though all nations indulged in “la poesie romanesque.”⁷⁷ And although he acknowledged that the older chivalric *romans* had mingled battles with their love stories, this was merely because they were the product of the more barbarous Middle Ages. In his own day, Huet believed, the *roman* had been restored to its original purity—and nowhere better than in the amatory fictions of women writers like Scudéry and Lafayette.⁷⁸

Thus, even as “romance” begins to denote a natural, universal form of fiction, it also acquires feminine associations. In France, a flourishing salon culture gave rise to a generation of prominent women writers, and critics and defenders alike were quick to call them the ultimate representatives of

74. John Davies, “To the Reader,” in *Astrea: A Romance* (London, 1657), sig. A2r.

75. “Romantic” first occurs in Thomas Bayly, *Herba Parietis; or, The Wall-Flower* (London, 1650), described on its title page as “a history which is partly true, partly romantick, morally divine.” On “romantic,” see Fernand Baldensperger, “‘Romantique,’ ses analogues et ses équivalents: Tableau synoptique de 1650 à 1810,” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 19 (1937): 13–105; and Hans Eichner, ed., “Romantic” and Its Cognates: *The European History of a Word* (University of Toronto Press, 1972).

76. Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Traité de l’origine des romans*, in *Zayde: Histoire espagnol*, by Madame de Lafayette [Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne] (Paris, 1670), 2. Huet’s treatise was written at Lafayette’s request as a preface to *Zayde*.

77. Huet, *Traité de l’origine des romans*, 11, 74.

78. See *ibid.*, 96–98.

the romance. After 1650, even the few English women in print began to be linked with romance in particular. When Mary Wroth had penned the *Urania* in 1621, she never claimed her own fiction as a romance. But for Margaret Cavendish in 1653, Wroth is now “the Lady that wrote the Romancy.”⁷⁹ Cavendish’s own works were praised as “poeticall romances,” and by 1664 she could remark that “when any of our Sex doth Write, they Write some Devotions, or Romances, or Receits of Medicines.”⁸⁰ In the late seventeenth century, “romance” at last becomes the name for a genre in which women, too, could excel.

From a word for heroic fiction (with its focus on male martial exploits), “romance” transforms into the name of a supergenre: a literature of imagination and fancy, devoted not to war but to love. We still feel the effects of this remarkable semantic shift. Today, *roman* serves as the standard name for all forms of fiction in France; the same has become true of the Italian *romanzo*, the German *Roman*, the Portuguese *romance*, and the Russian *roman*. Something similar could be said of the English “romance” until the late eighteenth century, when it was eventually superseded by the term “novel.”⁸¹ Spain flirted briefly in the early nineteenth century with both *romance* and *novela* as synonyms for long fiction, though *novela* has become the dominant term today.⁸² All in all, this is a momentous change, a precipitous rise in the fortunes of our medieval genre term. Rather than the heroic poem, it is “romance” and its cognates that govern our understanding of fiction today.

Thus, for all the times we invoke romance as an a priori literary genre, it may well be worth remembering the opposite perspective. Our wide-ranging, powerful category of romance is, in fact, an a posteriori response, a product of our complex early modern history. The print revolution, the pressures of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the rise of empirical science—all these currents exert their pull over early modern authors and audiences. Europe was weathering a long political transition, turning from feudalism toward the modern sovereign state. The aristocracy saw their old roles transformed; the urban bourgeoisie, though limited in influence, were growing more numerous and mobile. Writers began to tell new kinds of stories, to explore the capabilities and inner world of their protagonists in diverse ways. A new reading public was emerging, and aristocratic women (and

79. Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies* (London, 1653), sig. A3v.

80. For “poeticall romances,” see Elizabeth Toppe to Margaret Cavendish, in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, sig. A5v; for Cavendish’s remark on women and romance, see Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* (London, 1664), 226.

81. In English, “romance” and “novel” become crystallized as opposed terms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. See, e.g., Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (London, 1785), 7–8. Note also McKeon’s comments in his introduction to *Origins of the English Novel*, xx.

82. Russell P. Sebold, “Lo ‘romancesco’ y la novela y el teatro romantico,” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 349 (1979): 516–36.

some bourgeoisie as well) were gaining prominence as authors and arbiters of taste. With time, the cumulative force of these technological, epistemological, and social upheavals would alter not merely the kinds of fiction that we write but our very understanding of fiction itself.

* * *

Earlier, I proposed that “romance” and its cognates could be considered cultural keywords. They are “key” because they are tied up with larger social values, and this at times makes them into sites of struggle. That controversy could erupt over a word such as “romance” seems today a strange proposition. But one such spark of contention blazes in the late seventeenth century, in the polemic over the modern French *roman*. It is at this point, as France begins its long period of cultural dominance over the Continent, that we can trace the origin of one of our most basic critical assumptions: that a romance deals with love.

Today such a statement seems self-evident, even banal. But before the influential ideas of Pierre-Daniel Huet, love was rarely understood as the genre’s most indispensable ingredient. In his *Traité de l’origine des romans* (1670), Huet explains how the books called *romans* have changed:

Autrefois sous le nom de Romans on comprenoit, non seulement ceux qui estoient écrits en Prose, mais plus souvent encore ceux qui estoient écrits en Vers. Le Giraldi & le Pigna son disciple dans leurs traittez *De Romanzi*, n’en reconnoissent presque point d’autres, & donnent le Boiardo, & l’Arioste pour modeles. Mais aujourd’huy l’usage contraire à prévalu, & ce que l’on appelle proprement *romans*, sont des fictions d’aventures amoureuses, écrites en prose avec art, pour le plaisir et l’instruction des lecteurs. Je dis *des fictions*, pour les distinguer des histoires véritables; j’ajoute d’*aventures amoureuses*, parce que l’amour doit être le principal sujet du roman.

[Heretofore under the name of Romance were comprehended not only those which were writ in Prose, but those also which were writ in Verse. Giraldi and Pigna his Disciple in their treatises *De Romanzi* scarce take notice of any others, and give the Boyardos and Arioste for models. But at this day the contrary usage has prevailed, and they which are now properly called Romances, are Fictions of Love-Adventures, writ in Prose with Art, for the delight and instruction of the readers. I say Fictions, to distinguish them from true Histories; I add, of Love-Adventures, for that Love ought to be the principal subject of a Romance.]⁸³

83. Huet, *Traité de l’origine des romans*, 2; the English translation (translator unknown) is Pierre-Daniel Huet, *A Treatise of Romances and Their Original* (London, 1672), 2–3. By “Boyardos and Arioste,” the translator means Boiardo and Ariosto.

Huet points to the outcome of a long linguistic transition. The word *roman*, he tells us, used to designate works such as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, heroic poems (often in verse) about the many adventures of knights-errant. But it has come "at this day" to mean a work of fiction, in prose, that explores the terrain of the human heart. In modern English, of course, Huet's genre term *roman* could mean either "romance" or "novel," though to translate it either way is to make an inevitably polemical choice.

Let us remain with "romance," because that is the word that Huet's first translators chose and because our distinction between romances and novels would not yet have made much sense in Huet's day. Huet knew that he was not the first to discuss romance and its difference from other literary kinds. He acknowledges his Italian forerunners, citing earlier theorists like Giraldi Cinzio and the defenders of "Arioste" (Ariosto). Linking himself to the old Italian debate, Huet establishes a certain continuity. The older *romanzo* and the modern French *roman* still formed part of one and the same literary tradition, no matter how sophisticated the latter had become.

At the same time, Huet's opinions betray a startling shift from the genre consciousness of the sixteenth century. A romance, to Huet's avowed predecessor Cinzio, was still a species of heroic poetry, different in form but not in content from the great epics of Homer and Virgil. But for Huet, the two genres are definitively sundered. Epics, he tells us, are written in verse, whereas romances today are written only in prose. Epics contain more of the marvelous, whereas romances tend toward the verisimilar. Above all, epics and romances explore two realms of experience that Huet marks out as separate: "Enfin, les poèmes [epiques] ont pour sujet une action militaire ou politique, et ne traitent l'amour que par occasion; les romans, au contraire, ont l'amour pour sujet principal, et ne traitent la politique et la guerre que par incident" (In fine, [epic] Poems have for their subject some Military or Politick action, and treat not of Love but upon occasion. Romances on the contrary have Love for their principle Theme, and meddle not with War or Politicks but by accident).⁸⁴ No matter what the word once meant, a *roman* now is above all a genre of love. The great matters of war and politics lie outside its nature; they are (if present) merely accidental to the species, not the heart of the thing itself.

What has become for us a casual, everyday association—romance equals love—was in Huet's time the fuel for a full-scale culture war.⁸⁵ To Huet's

84. Huet, *Traité de l'origine des romans*, 7; Huet, *Treatise of Romances and Their Original*, 6. Note that Huet's account never mentions the *Odyssey* as a predecessor of romance. To Huet, epic and romance are two separate traditions with separate histories.

85. On the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* and the "culture wars" of late seventeenth-century France, see Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

contemporary (and bitter enemy) Nicolas Boileau, the modern *roman* was nothing but a deformation of the classical epic. No longer concerned with the great deeds of kings and heroes, it had become a genre full of sentimental ladies, effeminate gallants, and (even worse) frivolous bourgeois whose entire lives revolved around amorous intrigue and affairs of the heart. In his satires, Boileau complained of how far such books had strayed from the proper epic virtues. As he declares sarcastically in *Les héros de roman* (ca. 1665), “N’est-ce pas l’amour qui fait aujourd’hui la vertu héroïque?” (Isn’t it love that constitutes heroic virtue today?).⁸⁶ If Huet’s treatise illuminates the changing meanings of *roman*, Boileau’s work may be the first time the word “hero” is used (albeit with scathing irony) to describe simply the protagonist of a literary work rather than a person of great stature and achievement.⁸⁷ The only thing these besotted “héros” share with the great figures of the classical past, he protests, is the fact that “ce sont eux qui ont toujours le haut bout dans les livres” (it is they who have always had the most prominent place in books).⁸⁸ The hero of the *roman*—the modern hero—is the main character of a story and nothing more.

Boileau and Huet were both to become members of the Académie Française, that institution founded by Cardinal Richelieu to perfect the French language and establish national standards of literary taste. In their day, the debate over modern literature and what it stood for splashed over the pages of newspapers like the *Mercure galante* and could descend, quite literally, into shouting matches on the Academy floor. For Boileau, the *romans* and their degenerate focus on love were a threat to the very fabric of society: they blurred the boundaries between aristocrat and bourgeois and sapped the male military virtue needed to support monarch and state. His dialogue reserves a special place of disgust for female authors such as Scudéry, whose works are at last thrown into the river Lethe by the denizens of the Underworld. For Huet, by contrast, the *roman* was the pride of the nation, an autonomous genre that had always been devoted to its own separate values. And the form had been perfected, he adds, thanks in large part to women writers like Scudéry and Lafayette. Indeed, Huet believed it was the greater social freedom women possessed that had allowed the *roman* to thrive in France as nowhere else. Both Huet and Boileau cannot help but notice,

86. Nicolas Boileau Despréaux, *Les héros de roman*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane (Boston: Ginn, 1902), 208. Though Boileau’s dialogue was not published until 1688, it was read in public gatherings around 1665. Huet was probably acquainted with Boileau’s text either in manuscript or through a public reading and began his own countertreatise in 1666. On Boileau versus Huet, see Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 159–99.

87. See Edith Kern, “The Modern Hero: Phoenix or Ashes?,” *Comparative Literature* 10 (1958): 325–34.

88. Boileau, *Les héros de roman*, 207.

however, that the values tied up with the word seem irrevocably to have changed. What the *roman* meant for readers in their day was no longer the same as for an earlier era.

Perhaps we may consider Boileau triumphant, since the female authors he so scorned have been largely written out of literary history. But in terms of the French language, at least, Huet may have won a small victory. Earlier I mentioned the *Vocabolario* of the Italian Accademia della Crusca, the first vernacular dictionary to define romance as a literary kind. In its dictionary debut in 1612, the *romanzo* is a heroic poem, illustrious in content while modern in form. But when Richelet's *Dictionnaire françois* was published in 1679, it offered a very different take on the genre. Citing Huet nearly word for word, it called the *roman* "une fiction qui comprend quelque aventure amoureuse écrite en prose" (a fiction that consists of some amorous adventure written in prose). Eleven years later, Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) described the *roman* as a tale of "amour et chevaleries" (love and chivalry) and sketched a history following the outlines of Huet's treatise.⁸⁹ When the *roman* makes its debut in the earliest dictionaries of the French language, it is as a genre of love.

I began this essay by proposing that much of what we now call Renaissance "romance" was, in its own day, a genre without a name, a crowd of uncategorized literary experiments not heroic enough to fall under any existing rubric. But by the late seventeenth century, theorists such as Huet begin to speak of fiction as no longer an integral realm of heroic poetry but, rather, as a twofold world. On one side was epic, a literature of wars and great affairs of state. On the other was romance, devoted to an erotic domain believed to lie outside war and politics. The codification of "romance" as a second, fully autonomous narrative category inaugurates a shift in our conceptual framework for fiction. It clears a space for new fictional kinds with new values, granting them prestige and legitimacy—if not the political significance reserved for the epic. Yet this process of separation and autonomy is by no means smooth. The acrimonious exchanges of men like Boileau and Huet are the culmination of decades of cultural anxiety: over the purpose of imaginative literature, over the decline of the male aristocratic warrior ideal, over the legitimacy of women writers on the literary market. For all the ease with which we use the word "romance" today, the birth of the category itself was a contested and tempestuous affair.

89. Pierre Richelet, *Seconde partie du dictionnaire françois* (Geneva, 1679), s.v. *roman*; and Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (The Hague, 1690), s.v. *roman*. For Huet's influence upon these dictionary definitions, see Nathalie Fournier, "Comment définir un genre? La lettre sur l'origine des romans," in *Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630–1721): Actes du colloque de Caen (12–13 Novembre 1993)*, ed. Suzanne Guellouz (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1994), 109–17.

We tend to forget the troubled history of “romance.” But the extra edge of awareness may displace some of our most entrenched beliefs about the genre and help us chart the contours of our own literary past. After the print revolution, prose fiction expands to explore not merely aristocratic martial exploits but other subjects, other virtues, other forms of heroism. Yet our validation of the new narrative modes comes only belatedly, and not without heated social debate. The transformations of “romance” can help us navigate between different phases of this long cultural transition. With them we can distinguish between an era flush with new, nameless literary kinds and their delayed canonization (and public acceptance) as “romances” in the following century. With them we can understand how Renaissance intellectuals first theorized epic and romance, and how this heroic continuum cleaved apart within the next hundred years. And with them we can trace the movement from a century in which women’s fiction is virtually nonexistent to a century in which women have become some of the most famous fiction writers on the market. The history of early modern fiction still remains a largely undiscovered country. “Romance,” in all its changing senses, can serve as our map and guide.