I

Opening perspectives

CHAPTER I

Romance and history: designing the times

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Romance *in medias res*

Shortly before the middle of the past century, one of the most distin-
guished literary historians of the modern period sought to trace the
"representation of reality" [*Wirklichkeit*] in Western literature. To exem-
plify the perspectives of medieval romance, he chose a twelfth-century
French narrative by the founder of Arthurian romance, Chrétien de
Troyes.[1] His discussion of Chrétien's *Yvain* opened with an account of a
retrospective passage near the beginning of the poem, in which a knight
tells members of the Arthurian court about an adventure he had some
seven years beforehand. After riding through a forest, the knight recalls to
his listeners, he had eventually reached an exotic spring and poured water
from it onto a special stone. A torrential downpour suddenly followed;
the defender of the spring soon appeared and vanquished the knight; the
discomfited adventurer later made his way back to the Arthurian court.
Closing his long-untold tale, the knight admits to his audience that he felt
like a "fool" then and considers himself a "fool" now for relating the story.[2]

For Erich Auerbach, offering in *Mimesis* a mid-twentieth-century retro-
spective on romance, the circumstances of this tale exposed a broad
tendency to escape from the very "reality" that he sought to find repre-
sented in literary form. In his account a conspicuous aspect of that
tendency was the treatment of history and time in the romance. Though
some seven years had elapsed since the knight told his tale, when one of the
listening knights subsequently (and more successfully) replayed the adven-
ture, it seemed as if temporality had been suspended in the interim. In
Auerbach's words, "Nothing has changed; the seven years have passed
without leaving a trace, just as time usually does in a fairy tale." While
Auerbach granted that courtly romance included "colorful and vivid
pictures of contemporary reality," he argued that such literature lacked
the "politico-historical context" of the *chanson de geste*.[3] The view was

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conventional at the time he was writing. By the middle of the twentieth
century, the notion that chivalric romances were elaborate ways of eliding
the temporal world was itself already *in medias res*, and the notion had been
developing for far more than seven years.

In a sense it had been developing for more than seven hundred years.
Even a glance back at only a few of its diverse expressions displays chronic
anxieties about the treatment of history and time in romance – from the
invention of events to the inversion of chronology. In the eighteenth
century, a translator of an influential treatise on romances articulates its
caution about "Histories stuffed with Falsities" that underlie a multitude of
such stories.[4] In the sixteenth century, a critic of an expansive romance
complains that it moves "backward" and "forward" in temporal orienta-
tion, "without paying any attention to the continuation of time" [*senza
avere alcun riguardo alla continuatione del tempo*].[5] In the fourteenth
century, a learned poet slights those who elaborately compose "dreams"
of "errant" knights [*erranti*], yearned for by an "errant" populace [*vulgo
errante*].[6] And as for encountering an exotic spring with water that can
provoke a rainfall, in the twelfth century (shortly before the composition of
Yvain) a more exacting adventurer, the historian Wace – determined as he
is to distinguish fact from "fables" – seeks the spring and reports that
he failed to find anything of the sort. A "fool I went there," he remarks in
retrospect; "a fool I returned from there."[7]

If only he could have known how the future would change his past. By
the middle of the thirteenth century, that rain-provoking spring – having
been treated not just in the poetry of Chrétien de Troyes but also in
scholarly discussions of the natural order – comes to be regarded not as
mere matter for romance, but as one of the divinely created wonders of the
phenomenal world.[8] That transformation suggests how the very concept of
what is historically authentic can change with the changing categories of
human minds. To recognize this process it is not necessary to be an avid
partisan of postmodern theory. The issue is already raised in premodern
practice. In the case of romance, that practice involves more than the
general principle that the act of shaping history is constantly subject to
modulating beliefs and allegiances. The case of romance involves a special
kind of self-consciousness.

For since the origins of medieval romance in the twelfth century, its
development has recurrently provoked questions about which texts com-
posed *en romanz* belong to a specific genre, and which episodes of those
texts exhibit or elude history. Even when the questions are not systematic-
ally expressed, they are frequently implied, as in the early use of the term

romance (and its cognates) for divergent forms of writing, or in the intriguing arrangement of various texts in early manuscripts. It is often noted, for example, that the scribe of a thirteenth-century manuscript directly inserts Chrétien's five Arthurian romances (with slight alterations) in the midst of a "history" of early Britain by Wace himself, a history that in the manuscript is itself the codicological (and chronological) sequel to the "romances" of *Troie* and *Eneas*.[9] But the phenomenon passes beyond this codex. In a late thirteenth-century manuscript of Jehan de Malkaraume's versified *Bible*, most of the *Roman de Troie* is inserted after the account of the death of Moses, along with the comment that the crossing of the Red Sea was contemporary with the destruction of Troy.[10] In still another manuscript, the *Quest of the Holy Grail* is included with detailed annals of the Church to 1281.[11] More broadly, by the end of the Middle Ages, variegated elements of romance – from brief Arthurian episodes and allusions to extensive tales about figures as diverse as Havelok the Dane and Richard Coeur de Lion – are repeatedly incorporated in historical chronicles.[12]

This is not to say that those who configure such texts do not distinguish between romance and history. It is rather to stress that their designs suggest some of the complexities of clarifying the relation between the two realms, especially at a time when history itself is coming to be composed in the vernacular – *en romanz*. As romance develops into a leading narrative form in the Middle Ages and passes into the early modern period, it becomes a critical literary site in which questions about the historical status of imaginative events are negotiated.

Nothing more conspicuously exposes the historical conditions of such negotiations than the celebrated early classification of narrative by the French writer Jehan Bodel in a *chanson de geste* dating from about the late twelfth century.[13] In distinguishing "three matters" [*trois materes*] – the matter of "France," the matter of "Britain," and the matter of "Rome" *la grant* – Jehan divides the narrative world not only according to space, but also, as it were, according to time and function. He observes that the matter of Rome (which evokes the world of antiquity) is edifying [*sage et de sens aprendant*]. But he pointedly specifies that the matter of France (which evokes the Carolingian world to which he himself turns in his *chanson de geste*) is not only true [*voir*], but also evident every day [*chascun jour aparant*]. As for the matter of Britain (which evokes the Arthurian world), it is emptily entertaining [*vain et plaisant*] – with *vain* perhaps suggesting that the legendary milieu of ancient Britain is an illusion.[14]

For Jehan Bodel in his *chanson de geste*, the dismissal of the romance of "British" antiquity is a correlate of the French politics of his own day.

Whether or not for him the contemporary extension of "Rome" is the
Holy Roman Empire,[15] his classification of the places and times of narra-
tive is virtually a narrative of his own times and places. Not the least irony
of his narrative of history is the future of the "matter of France" and its
alignment with "truth" in later critical theory. Following the transform-
ation of that matter in the late medieval and early modern periods, the
altered "matter of France" becomes a recurrent reference point for the first
systematic theories of the non-historicity and fantasy of romance in
sixteenth-century Italian discussions of the *romanzo*.

Jehan's distinction nonetheless has a far-reaching afterlife. For gener-
ations it remains the locus classicus for critical divisions of medieval
narrative into antique, Arthurian, and Carolingian subject matter,
although even medieval romance (to say nothing of narrative at large) is
broader in scope. (The examples of Havelok and Richard Coeur de Lion
noted above are only two cases in point.[16]) More specifically, the distinc-
tion between escapist romance and engaged *chansons de geste* continues to
influence scholarship to this day. In some respects it underlies Auerbach's
mid-twentieth-century argument that courtly romance lacks the "politico-
historical context" of the *chanson de geste*.[17] Various aspects of that argu-
ment still have considerable force, and in many romances such a context is
not apparent. But in the decades since *Mimesis*, its general stance concern-
ing the "representation of reality" in romance has been, if I may use the
expression, saturated by a virtual downpour of studies about the historical
and temporal features of the genre.

A number of important studies of the subject have been provided over
the years by contributors to this volume, and an overview of their new
contributions in this collective study appears later in this chapter. But even
aside from their critical research – and even if an account were limited to
book-length works alone – it would be possible here only to note some of
the significant investigations of recent years.

Among them are works of wide-ranging scope, beginning a decade after
Mimesis with Erich Köhler's *Ideal und Wirklichkeit in der höfischen Epik*
(1956),[18] and developing expansively (at times in the form of collected
essays from extended periods) by the 1990s and the beginning of the
twenty-first century: for example, Dominique Boutet, *Charlemagne et
Arthur, ou le roi imaginaire* (1992);[19] Emmanuèle Baumgartner, *De l'histoire
de Troie au livre du Graal: Le temps, le récit (XIIe–XIIIe siècles)* (1994);[20]
Fritz Peter Knapp, *Historie und Fiktion in der mittelalterlichen Gattungs-
poetik* (two volumes, 1997 and 2005);[21] the collection coordinated by Jean-
Claude Faucon in *Temps et histoire dans le roman arthurien* (1999);[22] and

D. H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (2002).[23]

Yet even these far-reaching volumes only suggest the extent of recent attention to the historical and temporal dimensions of romance. Already before the 1990s the subject is diversely treated in books by R. Howard Bloch, Susan Crane, Georges Duby, Anthime Fourrier, Stephen Knight, Richard Lock, Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, Cesar Segre, Philippe Walter, and others. Since the 1990s the pace has accelerated. Some studies, such as books by Frank Brandsma, Mark Chinca, Francis Ingledew, Lee Patterson, Matteo Residori, and Bart Van Es, have examined aspects of the question while focusing on individual works or authors from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. Other volumes, such as studies or collections by Laura Ashe, Martin Aurell, Horst Brunner, James P. Carley, Patricia Clare Ingham, Richard J. Moll, Michael Murrin, Helen J. Nicholson, Klaus Ridder, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Richard Trachsler, and Michelle R. Warren, have explored changing approaches to the topic over broad periods. These and a host of other important works, including formative essays – many of them indicated in the chapters of this volume – have increasingly exposed the interplay of romance, history, and time.

Such research has discerned in romance more than timeless realms of exotic fantasy. It has shown, for example, how already in the formative period of the twelfth century, stories of enterprising knights wandering from a court are evoking tensions in the contemporary social world, from relations between orders of the nobility and the monarchy to the conditions of personal mobility. It has aligned the uses of genealogy in thirteenth-century romance plots with aristocratic concerns to ensure legitimacy by tracing continuous lines of descent over time. It has linked the emergence of prose romance during this period with an effort to authenticate the very idiom of discourse. It has examined the functions of local and pragmatic concerns in some thirteenth- and fourteenth-century romances, and in quite different narratives of the fourteenth century it has probed the complex interaction between individual decisions and communal destinies. It has investigated the influence of patronage and nationality on the historical and narrative designs of romances in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And it has explored how the temporal maneuvers of romance – from beginning *in medias res* to "interlacing" the time lines of diverse plots – can alter the assessment of temporal experience.

Yet, for all the richness of such research, it remains difficult to develop composite views of the interaction between romance and history. During the centuries in which it flourishes, romance undergoes radical shifts in

orientation, and scholarship on the subject registers the strain. Systematic
analyses of approaches to romance and history in particular texts are dispersed
in a multitude of scholarly settings. Even the broadest studies of the topic
tend to concentrate on limited periods (such as the early generations of
romance), or to investigate specific matters (such as Arthurian romance),
or to offer disparate essays about variegated developments. With regard to the
rare and valuable volumes that include sustained analyses of romances
from both the medieval and the early modern periods, to my knowledge
none focuses on relations between romance and history.

Given such a vast and protean subject, any single book about it must be
radically selective in scope. But with inquiries *in medias res*, sometimes
even a partial and provisional framework can open new opportunities for
comparative analysis. This cooperative study aims to offer a framework of
that kind. It is designed not to survey the genre, which includes a variety of
texts in which temporal reference points are remote, but to investigate
collectively a range of major works – including some of the central works
of romance – in which such reference points are indispensable. Though
the volume devotes attention to a number of issues related to the medieval
and early modern genre, from the orientation of epic to the disposition of
chronicles to the development of critical theory, it focuses on changing
configurations of romance itself. The question with which it is principally
engaged is not whether texts of this kind "are" or "are not" historical in
complexion. The question is what aspects of history – and, more deeply,
what kinds of history – such texts evoke.

Matters of romance, modes of history

It should be stressed that in any response to that question the categories of
analysis are themselves implicated in the temporal process that they aim to
describe. In writing about approaches to history, there is no *hors-histoire*.
By the same token, past categories, even when qualified by later events,
have a continuing conceptual interest for the present. The diverse
"matters" of Jehan Bodel exemplify the point. However partisan his
classification, the "three matters" display over time distinct generic ten-
dencies and different historical trajectories that need to be considered in
any assessment of changing narrative approaches to temporal experience.
The format of this volume reflects a concern to take such categories into
account while engaging in a contemporary critical dialogue with them.
The overviews below draw upon the essays specifically contributed to this
collective effort.

The matter of Rome (and realms to the east): approaches to antiquity

There is more than divisiveness underlying that programmatic division of early narrative into the matters of France, Britain, and Rome. While the formulation reflects an acute historical rivalry between France and Britain, it also evokes the shared sense of a broad formative past, the foundational milieu of Roman antiquity. Whatever the limitations of such a notion, it is Rome "*la grant*" – all the more so if its scope is extended to include the remote conquests of *Alexandre le Grand* – that provides the matrix for some of the initiating works of medieval romance itself. The poetic narratives that emerge *en romanz* in the twelfth century on Thebes, Aeneas, Troy, and Alexander are primal moments in both the history of romance and the romance of history. How is that shared ancient history framed in such texts?

It is customary to treat the twelfth-century romances of antiquity as sustained exercises in historical transmission – exhibiting the transfer of empire (*translatio imperii*) from the ancient past to the medieval present by the very act of translating antique learning (*translatio studii*) into a contemporary idiom. Yet the historical progressions portrayed in these works are fraught with unsettling disjunctions of desire, lineage, and order. In Chapter 2 of this volume, Christopher Baswell explores some of the ways in which the romances of antiquity both evoke such transgressive drives and seek to contain them. His analysis suggests how the carefully crafted forms repeatedly depicted in these narratives – massive walls and elaborate tombs and decorated fabrics – call attention to temporal disorder while seeming to suspend it through their craftsmanship. In this sense, such forms are virtually imaginative codes inside the romances for the artful codex that contains the *roman antique* itself. But there are twelfth-century accounts of the ancient past that engage the anxieties of history with a more open-ended sense of art. The point is exemplified in the treatment of the wide-ranging Alexander, whose pressing concerns – from doubts about his own paternity to struggles with powerful adversaries – do not wholly suppress his capacity for resourceful ingenuity, even a kind of exuberance. No less than Troy or Rome, Alexander's empire is finally subject to dissolution. But already in its emergent forms, medieval romance is exploring alternative ways of turning historical disintegration into new artistic designs.

If ancient history cannot be wholly contained, can it at least be clarified? In the thirteenth century that aim seems increasingly attainable as history comes to be written in vernacular prose, a way of writing frequently

regarded as closer than poetry to the direct presentation of events. In
Chapter 3 of this volume, Catherine Croizy-Naquet compares two
accounts of ancient history in thirteenth-century prose, one focusing on -
Caesar and Rome (the *Faits des Romains*), the other focusing on the
civilization of Troy (the *Roman de Troie en prose*, an adaptation of the
roman antique in verse). The authors of both works seek to give their texts
historical authenticity – invoking authoritative sources, situating events in
temporal order, associating individuals with significant lineages. But they
differ substantially in their ways of conceiving history and their styles of
communicating it. The *Faits*, which compares Caesar to the contemporary
French king and variously aligns the Roman figure with Aeneas, Alexander
the Great, and Troy, is from one perspective the more "politically"
oriented work. Yet it is the author of the *Faits* who conspicuously deploys
"literary" techniques to fashion his history – for example, presenting a
warrior fighting for a collective cause as a knight drawn from epic or
portraying Cleopatra as a beauty adapted from romance. By contrast, the
author of the prose *Troie* recurrently reduces the imaginative flights of his
romance source, treating them as an extravagance at odds with authentic
history and with his didactic message of a Troy doomed by its passions. In
effect, these two works – one of which tends to "romancify" history, the
other of which aims to "historicize" romance – suggest some of the deep
ambiguities involved in the very definitions of such categories. What is at
stake in such ambiguities is finally the question of how to elucidate primal
events in the movement of a civilization.

The matter of Britain: social and spiritual drives

"Emptily entertaining" – thus Jehan Bodel at about the turn of the twelfth
and thirteenth centuries dismisses the matter of Britain. But what he
regards as British fluff becomes for others the stuff of history. In England
the historical construct of an Arthurian era comes to be inseparable from
an emerging sense of national identity. From the early twelfth century,
when Geoffrey of Monmouth composes his formative *History of the Kings
of Britain*, to the late Middle Ages, when vernacular versions of that
history (especially in the Prose *Brut*) are diffused at a breathtaking pace,
the precedent of Arthurian civilization increasingly informs the highest
circles of the English social order, from "Round Table" tournaments to the
imperial ambitions of contemporary kings. On the European continent,
where the treatment of Arthur is less national in orientation, the Arthurian
age at large nonetheless comes to be correlated with a providential design