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Introduction
Romantic economies

This book investigates the evolution of British romance between 1740 and 1830. It defines romance as a genre uniquely but diversely imbricated with political economy. It argues that the genre alternately competes with, supplements, and works with its readers to displace the contemporary philosophical and social debates of political economy, yet remains thoroughly invested in the questions political economy addresses. I argue for the recognition of generic struggle and change as powerful agents in the social order, and later in the nationhood, of Britain. Genre, political economy, social and national change and cohesion provide the analytic framework for a literary history extending from Samuel Richardson's romances – his best British remedies for a "World . . . debauched by pernicious Novels"[1] and the influence of France – to the ironic counter-romances of Frances Sheridan, Frances Burney, and Mary Wollstonecraft, politically polarized but united in contesting the gendered injustice of a social order produced in large part by the genre of romance; and to the self-conscious embrace of romance as Jane Austen and Walter Scott grant the genre a new, specifically national, respectability and stability. If this framework risks abstraction, it is because it is a work in translation, bringing to bear a late-twentieth-century critical vocabulary on the formal definition and social role of romance, two major preoccupations of the eighteenth-century and Romantic fiction and criticism this book discusses. The most appropriate place to begin, therefore, is with the introduction to an earlier work on the history and theory of fiction: a Romantic literary history that names with great precision the central questions with which the present book is engaged, but which also places them in the context of their contemporary significance.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld's essay "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing" establishes a literary history for European fiction, extending from classical antiquity through medieval courts into the

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nineteenth-century present. It prefaces her pioneering edition of *The British Novelists* (1810), which instituted a canon of "standard" British fiction. Its conclusion is explicitly modern. Enacting the interval in which the past and future of British fiction come into unsettling collision, Barbauld admits the continued pressure of a still-unanswered national political question and makes a plea for Britain's future:

> It was said by Fletcher of Saltoun, "Let me make the ballads of a nation, and I care not who makes the laws." Might it not be said with as much propriety, Let me make the novels of a country, and let who will make the systems?[2]

An important work by a relatively minor writer, the essay occupies me here for two reasons. It identifies a narrative genre that is defined by its unsettled engagement with the changing contemporary forms of political economy and British social order; and it rejects the genre label "romance" in a manner germane to the historical moment it self-consciously captures in positioning "the novel" (in both senses of the word) between the Britain of the future and the past. What the essay's climactic conclusion poses is an avowedly contemporary problem that remains in the forefront of critical debate on British fiction even into the present. But Barbauld's question had also been, as we will see, a self-consciously pivotal, indeed defining, concern of romance as a genre since the middle of the eighteenth century. My purpose here, broadly speaking, is to propose an answer to Barbauld's question about the relation between the "novels" and "systems" of Britain and to historicize the terms in which the question is asked. To do so will be to begin defining the categories and assumptions of my own literary history while starting to unfold the history itself.

Writing amid the uncertainties of the Peninsular Wars, Barbauld trusts to the stability of literary historical and national retrospect in the same measure as she seeks to bestow this stability on Britain's precarious future prospects. On the one hand, to the extent that the "propriety" of conceiving fiction as an ordering force within "a country" remains the subject of an unanswered question, the future relations between fiction and nation necessarily remain uncertain. Thus the univocal assent of British readers is the means by which this national role of fiction must be institutionalized, and the orderliness of prose fiction may be legitimated by consensus for, Barbauld notes, fiction is "a species of books which every body reads" (59). On the other hand, the reader's answer depends to a large degree on the evidence of national and literary history. The query is predicated on the accepted existence of "Britain" as "a coun-

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More information

try," one that avowedly incorporates and unifies not just England, but Scotland and Ireland as well. Equally, the reader's answer to the question of Britain's future depends on Barbauld's proof that works of fiction and their readers have collectively produced the Britain now extant. Only thus can Britain's fiction, now and in years to come, effectively supersede competitor "systems," and only thus can the answer to Barbauld's nationalist plea be "yes."

The answers I propose, however, are necessarily equivocal, and not only because of the long perspective lent by hindsight. Contemporary responses to the question of British fiction's future were equally uncertain. In part, they were ambivalent because the continuing histories of the country and the "species of books" alike had lost little of the particularity and indeterminacy that had characterized them throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, remaining fractious and refusing a coherent teleological form even as the "modern" works of Barbauld and her younger contemporaries Austen and Scott passed into the literary past. But contemporary responses to the problem of social order were fundamentally divided as well as historically uncertain, not least because the propriety of modelling Britain's national order continued to be called into question from divergent perspectives expressed in certain works of fiction. Pairing the tasks of "making a novel" and "making a country" meant rendering culturally respectable those works of past and present fiction that productively engaged the form and dynamics of social order, and sidelining those that did not. These tasks were complicated by Barbauld's use of the term "novel" to designate this group of works – as we will see, a genre more usually and more properly identified as "romance" – and by the internal tensions of romance itself.

It should be clear by this point that to examine the evolving relations between Romantic-period Britain, its fiction, and its philosophies and methods of producing a national social order in the face of disorderly modernity, this book must also trace the historical mutations of the "species of fiction," especially through the rival categories of "novel" and "romance" within it. These changes cannot be outlined without addressing their relation to the intersecting ideas of "propriety" and "system," and the constitution of the united, ideal Britain they came to produce and to regulate. Beginning with the schematic terms of this introduction, to be extended and complicated in the chapters that follow, I aim to explain how the idea of a united Britain emerged from transformations that took place within the genre of romance as diverse

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romances echoed and revised the developing logic of contemporary theories of social order, conceived first in theological, then in political economic, and later in national terms. It is equally this book's business to show how these transformations threatened the Britain they helped to produce.

THE GENRE OF ROMANCE AND THE SPECIES OF FICTION

The notion of a distinct and autonomous "species" of prose fiction was of mid-eighteenth-century provenance. To the writers who used it, the implications of the category were both broadly comprehensible and highly specific. As a metaphor for a literary genre, "species" derived from natural history, a subject with complex investments in theology, moral philosophy, and political economy, but one that even middle-class young women were permitted by the rules of propriety to study.[3] Unlike the stable Aristotelian framework of genres to which the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetics of Sidney and Dryden were subscribed, the notion of "species" was fraught with development and change. Used in literary history, it sat athwart Enlightenment notions of progress in national history and development in nature as processes unfolding in discrete, recoverable stages. Such taxonomic natural histories of fiction allowed for the subgrouping of individuals within the species as distinct but related kinds – sometimes, in disregard of taxonomic accuracy, also identified as "species" – marked by surviving traces of earlier stages of the larger species or differing from the standard in some shared subset of traits.[4] These two conceptions of the generic subgroup characterize the contemporary confrontations between rival accounts of romance within the larger and more unified conception of prose fiction as a species, a major preoccupation of eighteenth-century literary criticism as well as of recent criticism of eighteenth-century literature.

The conflict of romance and novel has often been understood within Enlightenment intellectual frameworks, that is to say developmentally or teleologically. Eighteenth-century and Romantic literary historians such as Clara Reeve, Richard Hurd, and Scott postulated that "the novel" developed as the result of the confrontation between seventeenth-century French courtly romances and discerning readers hungry for verisimilitude as well as for moral instruction, though not always with happy moral consequences. Twentieth-century criticism has made similar formal claims, often with comparable ethical conclusions. It was for many years the consensus in Anglo-American criticism, shaped by

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Excerpt
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Ian Watt and his revisers, including some literary historians who dissent from large aspects of his argument, that the novel "rose" (Watt), "emerged" (J. Paul Hunter), or reached "'institutional' stability" (Michael McKeon) as the dominant form of fiction in Britain by 1740.[5] In these readings, the novel is usually, though not invariably, shown to arrive at maturity by breaking loose from its Œdipal struggles with the fallen romances it is said to incorporate, to transform dialectically, and finally to supersede.[6] (The novel histories of Lennard Davis, Nancy Armstrong, and Hunter are important exceptions, sidelining romance ancestry in favour of newspapers, conduct books, and chapbooks.)[7]

Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in these literary histories is a fixed association of romance with aristocracy, folk tradition, and conservatism, inherited from Northrop Frye's classic conception of the genre as a displaced but highly stable wish-fulfilling myth, as well as from eighteenth-century historical critics such as Hurd and Reeve, equally invested in notions of tradition and development, who assimilated the "roman" of modern Europe to the chivalric histories of medieval knights.[8] Romance itself appears, in extreme forms of this argument – exemplified by Tobias Smollett's categorical denial in 1748 that novels have anything to do with "Romance," which "owes its origin to ignorance, vanity and superstition" – as an effete antique survivor, easily finished off by the novel, a genre named to emphasize its contrasting hearty modernity.[9] But the relations between romance and novel can also be seen in less organically developmental and more conflicted and contingent terms. It is in such terms of difference rather than development that Watt's consensus about the conquest and near-demise of romance has been challenged in the last decade by a lengthening series of books that refashion the genre as crucial to the shaping of nationhood in the Romantic period. As James Chandler, Ian Duncan, Ina Ferris, Katie Trumpener, and Nicola Watson variously argue, romance does not "persist," as McKeon has put it, in reactionary anti-novels or in ghostly or nostalgic traces within novels, not knowing it is dead. Rather, it lives and grows within the species of fiction, declaring itself distinct from the novel but also emerging at discrete moments within novels, providing the present with the images and influence of a lost, beloved, but invented past. Trumpener and Watson in particular emphasize the political roominess of this role: in the romance works they discuss, the oppositional potential latent in nostalgia and nationalism is occasionally fulfilled. Producing various pasts for itself and the Britain it represents, Romantic romance takes on new and energetic kinds of life.[10]

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In calling for a broadened and diversified cultural role for romance in early-nineteenth-century Britain, this book is indebted to these recent reconsiderations of the genre. Nevertheless, it differs from them in two respects. One is a relatively minor matter of historical emphasis. My understanding of romance as it evolved during the Romantic period is founded on a continuing process of intertextual conversation and mutation rather than shaped by a model in which submersion or repression is followed by a surfacing or return. Consequently, my discussion departs from recent literary histories of the ties between romance and nationhood by addressing the writing of romance in the mid-eighteenth as well as in the early nineteenth century, and by discussing the relations of romance not just to nationalist discourse but to the more general theorizing of social order that preoccupied eighteenth-century political economy. A larger philosophical difference lies in my approach to genre theory and therefore in my historical method. I treat romance not as a stably definable Romantic mode, but rather as a hybrid or conglomerate genre. Its sustained internal dynamics and changing angles of confrontation with political economic intertexts, and the resulting dialectic of recognition and transformation in its relation to its readers, make it uniquely capable of conveying more than one approach to tradition and more than one conception of nationhood. The question of intertexts and romance's diverse ways of coding them is one to which I return in subsequent sections of this introduction. For the present I want briefly to outline some theoretical and historical implications of my treatment of generic change, which also seem to me necessary consequences of the eighteenth-century conception of genres as "species" of texts.

Among Anglo-American literary theorists writing in the late twentieth century, Ralph Cohen has pioneered the historical study of generic fluidity. Outlining the large, overlapping variety of genre definitions that can be arrayed to explain particular groups of texts at any given moment in literary history, he rebuts the Aristotelian and archetypalist notions of genre, as well as post-structuralist attacks on genre theory as an outmoded essentialism, without reducing generic identities either to short-lived products of chance perception or to each reader's personal choice among infinite possibilities.[11] Cohen's account of generic identities as contingent historical and institutional products has been further historicized by Clifford Siskin, who argues the force of generic fluidity and aggregation as a motor of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century cultural formation and social change.[12] Read from the perspective of

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such theories and histories that pair generic confrontation and change with social transformation, eighteenth-century romance looks less like Smollett's stable mode than like a historically inflected composite genre, the moving point of intersection for a shifting array of intertexts. None of this is to suggest, as Laurie Langbauer proposes, that romance became by the mid-eighteenth century little more than an unfixed term of abuse hurled by critics at whatever narratives depart from "masculine," serious, artistic, and novelistic convention.[13] Rather, as a genre cross-cut by the narrative conventions and obsessions of political economy as they evolve and are transformed throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, romance provides a mutually recognized field for thinkers about and debaters of social and national order whose backgrounds, assumptions, and principles seem otherwise irreconcilably diverse. The genre is never so formless or so borderless that writers do not know, in employing or encountering "romance" and the associated terminology it often shared with political philosophy – "chivalry," "sentiment," "romantic," "gothic" – that a genre is their referent and meeting-place.

Yet even viewed from within this conception of romance as a generic common ground where ethical and historical debates on political economy could be enacted and encouraged, it is evident that the distinctness, the fluidity, and the national investments of the genre within the larger species of fiction are more than the preoccupation of late-twentieth-century literary theorists engrossed in dialectics. A glance at Ioan Williams's *Novel and Romance, 1700–1800*, a compilation of précis that address the genre in its battles with the novel, reveals the multifarious and complex generic definitions that contemporaries advanced.[14] To illustrate this generic fluidity more concretely, therefore, we should return to Barbauld's question at the end of "Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," and to the eighteenth-century romances and the debates on their connection with social order and competition with novels that together form its context. Barbauld's conclusion reprises representative arguments made by William Godwin, Maria Edgeworth, Reeve, and Wollstonecraft about romance between 1785 and 1801. It was, I will argue, the continuing political discord between such contemporary writers and critics, within and about the romance genre, that provoked Barbauld to rename what her predecessors called romance and thus to reframe what they assumed was the mutually enabling bond between romance and British social order as a question awaiting her reader's answer.

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In a 1797 essay "On History and Romance," Godwin proposed "romance" as a means "to understand" what he called, in political economic terms, "the machine of society." He assumed, as a rationalist and perfectibilist, that for his readers to understand how social order worked was for them "to direct it to its best purposes." Thus romance provided Godwin with an allegorical antidote to the lassitude-inducing "generalities of historical abstraction," the shapeless facts that characterize "national history" as well as the political economy he himself had written and restlessly revised in *Political Justice*, which could offer little insight into the specific principles of British society's ideal or actual functioning. Where political economy and history were without effect, romance was to spur British nationals to "fruitful . . . activity."[15] The argument provides a reader's guide to Godwin's radical gothic romance *Things as they Are; or the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, in which practical demonstration and functional critique of the British class and legal systems are woven together with his hero's experiences and responses. In a preface to her national political fiction *Castle Rackrent* (1801), Edgeworth similarly asserted that every nation's history is "so decked out by the fine fancy of the professed historian" that the synecdochic romance of "secret memoirs" (a subset of romance I discuss in chapter 1, and which was associated in particular with the Jacobite feminist writers Aphra Behn, Delarivière Manley, Eliza Haywood, and, later, Sophia Lee) provides the only keys to the principles of human nature and so to social and national improvement.[16]

Edgeworth and Godwin implicitly accept Reeve's developmental definition of *The Progress of Romance* (1785), which was to influence developmental histories of European fiction from Barbauld through Watt by drawing the "progress" of fiction "through the land of romance" to its teleological endpoint in modern Britain.[17] Reeve argues that contemporary Britain is divided between "modern Romances," in which "fictitious stories" and "true history" are "so blended together, that a common reader could not distinguish them," and "novels," in which "such things, as pass every day before our eyes" masquerade as factual narrative (1: 64–5, 111). The difference between the genres, as McKeon will similarly argue, rests on a distinction between history and verisimilitude – but Reeve defines the characteristic historicity of romance as the enactment of national problems and events in avowedly representative, private narrative form.[18] Although she calls novels "a public evil," producing "false expectations" of society and false pictures of legitimate domestic and social authority, she notes their "striking

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resemblance" to romance, which "prejudice only" denies (I: 24, II: 7). The genres blur together as Reeve cites the reviewers' conviction that Frances Sheridan's 1761 "modern novel", *Sidney Bidulph*, had represented "true history": the second genre borrows the identity of the first (II: 24). "Novels" emerge as a brief digression in literary history, a sport of nature produced by the progressive evolution of romance – unlikely to multiply too much, and already dying out. Meanwhile "romance" itself, as Reeve's title implies, continues to "progress."

For Barbauld, however, as the final question of "Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing" implies, the role of romance in social order – indeed, the social role of fiction – was less certain than Reeve had hoped and Edgeworth and Godwin insisted. Questioning the stability and national effects of the genre, even as her title echoes Reeve's, Barbauld replaces "romance" with "novel-writing," defining "*the Novel*," which has "within half a century" become the dominant form among "works of fiction," as "the lighter species of this kind of writing" (34). By limiting the scope of romance to the presumably "heavier" narratives of medieval and seventeenth-century Britain, she moves the genre into the past – although, like Reeve, she also blurs its edges, referring to Reeve's recent works of fiction as "romances" and to Aphra Behn's seventeenth-century secret histories as "Novels" (24, 35).

Barbauld may well have been made uneasy by the vicissitudes of romance as it was framed by such writers as Sheridan and Burney in their disagreements with Richardson, which registered dissent from the political economic assumptions his romances of female suffering and reward sustained. As I show in the second chapter of this book, these conservative women ironized Richardson's genre in ways that enacted the corruption, lawlessness, and female suffering they feared in societies shaped, and gendered, by romance writers seduced by liberal political economy. More troublingly, romance passed into the hands of radicals, including the pugnacious Wollstonecraft. Her *Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (posthumously published in 1798) insisted in Godwinian terms that its heroine's experiences are those "of woman" rather than "of an individual," but at the same time explicitly parodied gothic romance as a pallid failure to capture those depths of real female social, economic, and legal oppression that she, like Burney, saw as products of romance. Wollstonecraft attacked the pseudo-organic basis on which romance-writers cooperated with political economists to erect the avowedly natural socioeconomic order of modern Britain. In her fictions, and in the generic parodies she embedded in her political treatises, Wollstonecraft

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wrote radical romance while attacking the genre in all its forms, from the "romantic enthusiasm" of French revolutionaries who literally elevated women to pedestals while denying them *les droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, to the "romantic sentiment" of popular fictions that taught female readers to "look for happiness" only in the impossible utopia of (heterosexual) "love."

When the British press united to repel Wollstonecraft's sallies, painting them contradictorily as "romantic" excess and "cool, calculating, intellectual wickedness," it was above all the romance of *Wrongs* that made romance disreputable: as early as 1801 Edgeworth used another label for the genre she, in identical terms to Godwin's, recommended.[19] Austen, as I show in chapter 4, was to direct the romance burlesque of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* against Wollstonecraft's counter-romances, upholding a British social order actively and explicitly produced by the romance-reading and -writing of women within millions of individual British homes. But it was not until she and Scott began publishing their romances that the genre of romance was relegitimated.

THE VALUE OF SYSTEMS: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Defined in large part by its enactment and narrative reshaping of the dynamics of social order, romance is the eighteenth-century genre most likely to go head-to-head with questions of social organization. As the practical debates on romance between Burney and Richardson, Wollstonecraft and Austen suggest, the genre could be used to convey a variety of positions oppositional to or supportive of contemporary social organizations from the domestic to the political; it could, with equal effectiveness, enact conservative or radical social critique in its gendered generic terms. Romance did not, however, characteristically address a society unmediated by philosophies of human nature, ethics, and political order. Whether because its writers envisioned contemporary British society as an inadequate product of political economy or because they sought to forestall the practical effects of the political economic innovation they feared and protested, the objects as well as the acts of romance social criticism exist well within the "republic of letters" or its prosaic counterpart, the "reading market."[20] As Godwin and Edgeworth argued, romance was more adequate to social reform than were the discourses it supplemented, and so it presented itself as a superior successor to the politics and history that were its objects of critique.

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