JOHN D. LYONS

# Introduction

Literature could be defined as the repertory of those texts that survive long after the moment of their composition. Of course, there are many other ways to say what literature is. Aristotle said that poetry is distinguished from history by its fictional quality, and on this view poetry is what tells of those things that could have happened rather than what actually did happen. Thus, even if history were written in verse, it still would not be poetic. The linguist Roman Jakobson, on the other hand, described the 'poetic function' by reference to the formal features of a text, independently of judgments about reality and fiction, and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literary experimentation – including novels written for Twitter and texts that arbitrarily omit a certain letter of the alphabet – lends weight to this view. However, readers are probably not deeply concerned with such boundary disputes. And in the academic study of literature, particularly of French literature, fiction and non-fiction, prose and verse, manifestoes and slogans, aphorisms and editorials, pamphlets, emblem books, and treatises – all have found their place.

The broad and pragmatic view – the view that what successive generations have chosen to save, reread, adapt, and perform constitutes literature – is especially appropriate in the context of French culture, which has over the centuries and through various means created an extensive canon of readings that educated people recognize, at least by name, as landmarks (*points de repère*) and signposts of French culture. In the course of centuries, French has spread around the globe, and publications in French have increased exponentially. Precisely because so much today is written in French, this *Companion* focuses intensely on writing in France itself, making the necessary distinction between 'French literature' and 'literature in French'. This choice is not evaluative but simply practical: it would be impossible in a volume of this size to provide an in-depth and comprehensive introduction to all the literature that has been written in French in more than a millennium. Yet, as several chapters will show, what is written in France – the traditional

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'Métropole' or figurative 'Hexagon' of the French map – reflects activity of writers across the globe.

It may be useful to think of each of the following chapters as windows onto French literature over the ages. The view from some windows overlaps with the view from one or more other windows, but in each case the viewpoint onto the outside landscape will be different. All contributors are deeply knowledgeable scholars/critics invited to provide not a standard survey with the goal of coverage but rather personal and perhaps even controversial insights into this living and evolving literary tradition. William Faulkner wrote once, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past' (in *Requiem for a Nun*) and this is an idea worth keeping in mind for this *Companion*. Despite the hallowed and quite reasonable practice of organizing our knowledge of texts according to the centuries and decades in which they were written, with a bit of reflection it is easy to realize that a book from the fourteenth century may belong just as much, and in some ways even more, to the nineteenth or twentieth centuries than to the Middle Ages. How can this be? This can happen not only because more recent readers may have psychological, linguistic, historical, and even medical insights that confer a new and different significance on the book, but also because, quite simply, the book is available to more readers now than it was then. Unread manuscripts can turn up in archives and be printed, erupting into the literary marketplace centuries after the death of their authors. We can take as an example the works of the notorious Marquis de Sade, whose works were not widely available during his lifetime but all of which are now available in excellent editions. Should we consider Sade a writer of the eighteenth century, the century when he lived and wrote? Or should we consider Sade a writer of the twentieth century, the century in which his writings first reached a wide public?

The combination of timeliness and timelessness that literature offers can be perceived in the web of essays that constitute this *Companion*. This book is intended as a 'companion' in the old and simple sense that it is available to accompany you in your explorations of French literature, wherever they begin. Just as there is no 'right' and no 'wrong' place to start reading French books, no logical inaugural text, there is also no necessity to read the chapters of this *Companion* in any particular order. The chapters of this book are interlaced just as the French literary tradition itself consists of connections, often unexpected, from period to period, author to author, book to book.

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# 1

KAREN SULLIVAN

# Romance, *roman*, and novel

According to a certain linear, progressivist view of literary history, the romance was superseded by the novel because it failed to represent reality as it actually is.[1] In eighteenth-century England, writers such as Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe, and Samuel Richardson composed the first novels just as a new middle-class reading public was emerging, eager to consume their works. Influenced, directly or indirectly, by Enlightenment philosophy, it is said, this public conceived of truth as something attained through observation, rather than imagination, and as a result appreciated the real, empirical world depicted in novels over the ideal, fantastical world of romances. Whereas romance forefronted types, such as valiant knights, beautiful princesses, and crafty sorcerers, the novel featured individuals, such as Tom Jones, Emma Woodhouse, or Oliver Twist. As types, the characters of romance were either extremely good or wicked; while, as individuals, those of the novel presented more complicated combinations of virtues and vices. Whereas romance recounted marvellous adventures, such as the slaying of dragons or the casting of magic spells, the novel related everyday occurrences, such as the finding of a new job or the meeting of a new love interest. Finally, whereas romance was set in some unspecified time and place of the distant past, the novel was set in a named village or city of the present or near-present day. The improbable and therefore incredible characters, plots, and settings of romance, it seems, naturally gave way to the probable and therefore credible characters, plots, and settings of the novel. Although this shift from romance to the novel occurred over 250 years ago, the novel remains the privileged literary genre today, it has been argued, because it was perceived, and continues to be perceived, as representing life 'as it really is'.

According to an alternative anti-linear, anti-progressivist view of literary history, however, romance was never really superseded by the novel because the earlier genre had never, in fact, failed to represent reality.[2] In England, the triumph of the novel over romance is less clear than it may seem. While critics

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of the eighteenth century often contrasted the novel and the romance, through the middle of that century they also used these two terms synonymously. By the end of that century, the novel had definitively displaced romance in the literary marketplace; but romance had infiltrated the novel, making its characters, once more, very good or very evil, its plots twisted and supernatural, and its settings dark and exotic. The Gothic novel advertised its affiliation with romance in its titles: Ann Radcliffe published *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho: A Romance* (1794), and M. G. Lewis produced *A Monk: A Romance* (1796). Meanwhile, in France, the victory of the novel over romance is even less evident. While French literary histories distinguish the 'romance' (*roman*) of the Middle Ages, the psychological 'novel' (*roman*) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the realist 'novel' (*roman*) of the nineteenth century, with its modernist and postmodernist successors, the fact that the French language (like all major European languages, except English and Spanish) uses the same word for romance and the novel prevents the contrast between these two genres from becoming absolute. If novels appear to differ markedly from romances, it may be, not so much because they represent reality in a way in which romances fail to do, but, rather, because they employ conventions, such as the journey of self-discovery or the marriage plot, which are sufficiently familiar to us to have blinded us to their own artificiality. Even if one were to accept that the commonplaces of the novel are closer to reality than those of romance, it is still questionable whether such closeness is actually what audiences seek. Although the ordinary characters, plots, and settings with which the novel is historically identified remain privileged today in elite, literary fiction, the extraordinary characters, plots, and settings with which romance is associated continue to flourish in popular genre fiction, including fantasy, science fiction, and children's literature.

Instead of postulating the alleged anti-realism of romance, as a way in which to highlight the alleged realism of the novel, it may be helpful to attempt to understand what 'realism' would have meant in the Middle Ages, at the time when the first romances were being composed. Like modern novelists, medieval thinkers recognized the desirability of texts that represented life 'as it really is', but they tended to conceive of such texts, not simply in and of themselves, but in terms of the effects they would produce upon their readers. Scripture, the most truthful of all texts, was thought to function as a mirror, reflecting the reality outside it. Augustine refers to Scripture as 'a faithful mirror . . . which indicates, not only the beauties of the people drawn toward it, but also what are deformities and vices'.[3] Gregory the Great, echoing Augustine, writes, 'Holy Scripture opposes to the mind's eye a kind of mirror, so that our inner face can be seen in it'.[4] Bernard of

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Clairvaux affirms similarly, 'The testimonies of the Scriptures . . . are mirrors. In them, the souls of the just consider themselves, as in a mirror.'[5] Literally speaking, of course, Scripture represents Abraham and Isaac, Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and St Peter and St Paul, not the reader who is studying its pages. Nevertheless, in representing these holy figures, Scripture also, in some sense, represents the reader, who naturally compares him- or herself to these models and finds him- or herself to fall short of them. Because Scripture is a mirror, Augustine advises, 'See if you are what it says. If you are not this, shudder that you may be it.'[6] Because Scripture is a mirror, Gregory counsels, 'It relates the deeds of the saints and provokes the hearts of the weak to imitate them.'[7] Because Scripture is a mirror, Bernard urges, 'Consider all that is shining in the mirror. If you apprehend in yourself something crooked, correct it; something right, hold onto it; something deformed, reform it.'[8] Not only Scripture, but any truthful text, even a romance, can function like a mirror in which we see certain characters but also, by way of contrast, ourselves: it inspires us to imitate or warns us to spurn these models. Romance is true, for its authors, in the same way in which an example is true: it is the concrete illustration that makes an abstract argument become comprehensible and, therefore, persuasive.

## History

According to one tendency in medieval literature, a romance is a 'history' (*estoire*) rendered 'in a romance language' (*en romanz*), as opposed to Latin. Over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, works appeared in Old French about the history of Greece, Rome, and France, but those about the history of Britain would have the longest-lasting effect. These writings were inspired by Geoffrey of Monmouth, a cleric from Oxford, who recounts in his *Historia regum Britanniae* (1130s) how King Arthur beat back the Saxon invaders from Britain, conquered thirty kingdoms, and established a glorious if short-lived court. Wace, a Norman-French poet from the island of Jersey, translated Geoffrey's book from Latin prose into French verse in his *Livre de Brut* (1150–5) and thus enabled the Arthurian material to make the transition from Latin 'history' (*historia*) to French 'romance' (*roman*). The context of Arthur and his Round Table provided the backdrop for the verse romances of Chrétien de Troyes, especially the *Chevalier de la charrette* (*The Knight of the Cart, c.* 1170–82), which introduced the character of Lancelot of the Lake, the lover of Arthur's queen, Guinevere; and the *Conte du Graal* (*The Story of the Grail*, 1181–90), which brought in Perceval and the Quest of the Holy Grail. So intriguing was the unfinished *Conte du Graal* to audiences of the time that a series of continuators added 54,000 verses to

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the work's original 9,000 lines and so finally brought it to a conclusion. As the years went by, more authors took advantage of this rich material. At the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Robert de Boron composed a verse *Joseph d'Arimathie* and *Merlin*, and either wrote or inspired prose versions of these works, as well as the prose *Didot-Perceval*. Between the 1210s and the 1240s, the anonymous authors of the prose Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles provided a continuous narrative of the Arthurian saga from the first appearance of the Holy Grail at Jesus Christ's Passion; to the translation of that vessel to Britain; to the rise of Arthur as the destined monarch of Britain; to the love between Lancelot and Guinevere; to the quest of the Holy Grail; to the final wars between Arthur and Lancelot and, then, Arthur and Mordred. A century later, the author of the lengthy *Perceforest* (1330–44) contributed a pre-history to Arthur's Britain. While these Arthurian texts refer to themselves as 'romances' (*romans*), they also refer to themselves as 'histories' (*estoires*). Romance thinks of itself as true because it records what actually happened in the past, yet it also thinks of itself as true because it furnishes exemplary characters – mirrors, if one will – whose precedent one should follow.

Medieval authors believed that history could be understood to be true since it relied on eyewitness testimony or trustworthy sources. For Isidore of Seville, the sixth- and seventh-century compiler of the *Etymologiae*, 'Histories consist of true deeds that have happened.'[9] Deeds can be known to have happened, first, if one has seen them oneself; Isidore writes: 'Among the ancients, no one would write history unless he had been present and had seen those things which were to be written down.'[10] John of Salisbury, the twelfth-century historian, affirms similarly in his *Historia pontificalis*: 'In what I am going to relate, I shall, by the help of God, write nothing except what I myself know to be true, through sight or through hearing.'[11] Because medieval authors so valued eyewitness testimony, they privileged *De excidio Trojae historia* – the account of the Trojan War attributed (falsely) to Dares Phrygius, a Trojan priest who was said to have seen this conflict – over the *Iliad* attributed to Homer, who was said to have lived many centuries after the war. In his *Roman de Troie*, Benoît de Sainte-Maure writes of Dares: 'Each day, he wrote down that which he saw with his eyes ... We should believe him and hold his history to be true more than he who was born five hundred years or more afterwards and who ... knew nothing of the facts, except through hearsay.'[12] Second, deeds can also be known to have happened, it was believed, if one has consulted well-informed and trustworthy sources. In addition to what he has seen and heard about the popes, John of Salisbury asserts that he will write in his history 'what is

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supported by the writings and the authority of credible men'.[13] With their insistence upon believing only what they have seen or what they have found in a trustworthy source, medieval authors assumed a critical stance towards the history they recounted.

Like history, a romance about Arthur and his knights can be considered to be true, according to its authors, if it fulfils these criteria. Early Latin records had provided only brief, scattered references to Arthur, but Geoffrey of Monmouth was able to furnish a full account of this king's life and career, he claims, because he had consulted 'a very old book in the British language' (presumably Welsh) given to him by Walter, an archdeacon at Oxford.[14] Wace does not identify Geoffrey's *Historia* as his source, as it must have been, but he too claims that his account of these kings is a translation of an earlier text: 'Master Wace, who recounts the truth about it, has translated it.'[15] Like Geoffrey and Wace, Chrétien de Troyes cites written sources for some of his romances. In his romance *Cligés* (1176), he writes: 'We find this history [*histoire*], which I wish to recount and retrace to you, written in one of the books of the treasury of [the cathedral of] my lord St Peter at Beauvais. The story was drawn from there, which testifies that the history [*estoire*] is true.'[16] At times, such as in the Second[17] and Third Continuations[18] of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, the *estoire* on which authors base their works seems to be not so much a written 'history' as an oral 'story' that preserves the authentic tradition of what happened. At other times, such as in Gerbert de Montreuil's Continuation, the *estoire* remains a written, if unnamed, text.[19] While neither Chrétien nor his Continuators identify the author of the 'history' or 'story' (*estoire*) upon which they depend, Robert de Boron attributes his Arthurian tales to Merlin, who, he states, dictated these events to the cleric Blaise, who in turn wrote down what he heard. The Vulgate Cycle attributes its accounts to the Knights of the Round Table, who were said to recount their adventures whenever they returned to court; to four clerics who supposedly transcribed in Latin the testimony of these knights; and to Walter Map, a chaplain of Henry II of England, who allegedly found these clerics' records in the treasury in Salisbury and had them translated into French. By presenting their texts as translations of earlier texts, medieval authors located their authority in the 'translation' or 'transferral of learning' (*translatio studii*) from ancient Greece and Rome to modern Britain and France or in a similar translation or transferral of learning from older vernacular sources to their own works, even as they transformed or invented that which they were allegedly transmitting. The tendency of the authors of Arthurian romance to insist that they are writing 'according to the history' or 'according to the story' provided by such sources establishes that they, like medieval historians in general, will report only what they know to be true.

While history was understood to be true in that it relied upon eyewitness testimony or trustworthy sources, it was also understood to be true in that it promoted exemplary characters from whom one could learn a lesson. Bede, who completed his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* in 731, writes: 'If history records the good deeds of good men, the solicitous hearer is instigated to imitate what is good. If it commemorates the evil deeds of wicked men, the devout, pious listener or reader is aroused to avoid all that is harmful and perverse.'[20] As Bede sees it, when the historian writes down what happens, he necessarily gives form to the inchoate matter of these events; he distinguishes between good and evil acts; and he records the former so that they may be imitated and the latter so that they may be spurned. Twelfth-century historians similarly saw themselves as exposing the workings of God in the world and the moral lessons that could be obtained from such interventions. Henry of Huntingdon, who composed his *Historia Anglorum* in five editions between 1129 and 1154, represents himself as revealing how God ensures that good men are rewarded and evil men are punished. As a result, he states: 'In this work the diligent reader will find that which is to be followed and that which is to be fled. If, with the cooperation of God, he is improved through the imitation and the avoidance of these things, this would bring to me the most desirable satisfaction.'[21] John of Salisbury writes of all chroniclers: 'Their intention has been the same, that is, to relate worthy matters so that, by those things which are done, the invisible hand of God will be made manifest and so that, by the examples set forth of reward or punishment, men will be rendered more careful in fear of the Lord and in the cultivation of justice.'[22] History is valuable, these historians agree, not just because it provides us with particular facts about this or that ruler's fate, but because it provides us with universal truths one can see reflected in that fate and that one can use to guide one's own behaviour.

Like history, Arthurian romance can be considered to be true, according to its authors, if it promotes exemplary characters whose lives might prove instructive. In *Yvain* (1170s), Chrétien de Troyes speaks of 'Arthur, the good king of Britain, whose prowess teaches us that we, too, should be valiant and courteous'.[23] Not only Arthur, but Arthur's knights should inspire us to emulate their virtues. According to the Vulgate Cycle's prose *Lancelot*, of all these knights, none is more worthy of imitation than Lancelot. He is the 'the best knight in the world',[24] 'the best knight presently alive' (vol. 8, pp. 74 and 207), and 'the best ... knight who ever lived' (vol. 4, pp. 187 and 209; vol. 8, pp. 58–9). What distinguishes Lancelot from other knights is, not the absolute difference of the 'ideal' and the 'real' – the word 'ideal' did not exist in Old French – but the relative difference of the best and the good. Although he stands on the highest step of

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the ladder of excellence, all noble men can be found perched on one of its rungs. The best of knights, Lancelot is also the 'mirror' of knights. In the prose *Lancelot*, King Bademagu attests: 'Never did God make him except to be a mirror for other knights' (vol. 4, p. 187). With Lancelot a 'mirror for other knights', the prose *Lancelot* functions as a 'mirror for knighthood'. It represents Lancelot in a series of complex circumstances, where it is difficult, at first, to determine how the best knight should act. How should a lover respond when, having rescued his lady from her abductor, he is rejected with no explanation? How should he act when, through his fidelity towards his lady, he risks bringing about the death of a damsel who languishes because he does not return her love? What should he do when his lady and his closest friend both seek his company? The interest in all of these episodes lies in seeing how the best knight (i.e. Lancelot) will apply abstract principles to concrete situations and, hence, in learning how lesser knights – such as our-selves – should behave in such circumstances as well. Arthur has Lancelot's adventures written down, the texts make clear, only so that there may be some record of their excellence for posterity. The prose *Lancelot* relates that he did so 'in order that the descendants who came after him might know the marvels Lancelot had accomplished during his life' (vol. 6, pp. 53–4). Romance enables the many mediocre people of the present to remember the few exemplary people of the past, and it stirs them to try to imitate their behaviour.

If romance is history, then, it may not be literally true; but it is figuratively true. Lancelot, it must be recalled, never existed. He was a fictional character dreamed up by Chrétien or by an oral tradition with which Chrétien was familiar. Not only did Lancelot never exist, but a knight as excellent as he is said to have been could never have existed. No man could have fought other knights throughout his entire adult life and never have suffered defeat, as he is said to have done. No man could have loved one woman throughout all that time and never have been unfaithful to her in deed or in thought, as he is said to have been. Because Lancelot never existed and could never have existed, the account of his adventures that Lancelot supposedly provided at court, that the clerics supposedly transcribed, and that Map supposedly translated is all a lie. Yet the romance itself might respond to that critic by arguing that it *is* history, because it is real, but it is real in the sense that it is true. According to the prose *Lancelot*, as a youth Lancelot is being instructed in the ways of chivalry by the Lady of the Lake, and he is overwhelmed by the number of extraordinary qualities she says that a knight should possess. He asks his tutor: 'Since knighthood began, has there ever been a knight who had all these virtues in himself?' (vol. 7, p. 255). He wonders if such a perfect knight could exist, not just as an idea in one's mind, but as a reality in the

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world. The Lady of the Lake replies that, before Jesus Christ, John the Hyrcanian and Judas Maccabeus possessed all the virtues she lists and that, after the Passion, Joseph of Arimathea, King Pelles of Listenois, and Helain the Fat achieved a similar feat. In the past, there have existed knights who exemplified chivalry, the lady affirms, and, in the future, there will exist knights who do so again – including, she clearly hopes, her own pupil. If there are good and better knights, as we know that there are, there must be, logically speaking, a best knight, and that knight is the one we know as Lancelot. Like the Lady of the Lake's examples of great knights of the past, the prose *Lancelot*, and romance in general, is a rhetorical device used to illustrate that truth.

## Romance as poetry

According to a second tendency in medieval literature, a romance is not 'history' (*estoire*) but 'poetry' (*vers*). The influence of contemporary trouba- dour (or Old Provençal) and trouvère (or Old French) lyric upon romances guaranteed that they addressed love affairs far more than their source texts had done. While Virgil's *Aeneid* depicts the union of Aeneas and Lavinia, the daughter of the king of Latium, as the product of political expediency, the romance of *Enéas* portrays it as the result of amorous passion. While Geoffrey's *Historia regum Brittaniae* focuses upon Arthur, the great military leader, Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrette* and subsequent romances con- centrate, instead, upon Lancelot and Guinevere, the great lovers. While these allegedly historical romances, in prose as well as poetry, were accentuating amorous themes, a series of non-historical verse romances were devoting themselves wholeheartedly to love. The anonymous *Floire et Blancheflor* (1150–2), Thomas of England's *Tristan* (1155–60), Béroul's *Roman de Tristran* (1170–90s), Jakemés's *Le Roman du Chastelain de Couci et de la Dame de Fayel* (late 1200s), and, most famous of all, the *Roman de la rose*, begun by Guillaume de Lorris (*c.* 1225–30) and completed by Jean de Meun (*c.* 1275), are just some of the better-known love stories of this era. At the core of these romances' claim to truth lies their assertion, not that their lovers really existed and really acted as they depict them as doing, but that their author understands love from his own personal experience and is therefore able to represent this sensation, faithfully and accurately, in this text. As the author of the *Roman de la poire* (mid-1200s) puts it: 'He greatly wastes his work and his pains who makes effort to rhyme about love if he neither feels nor has felt that sickness.'[25] Romance thinks of itself as poetry and, there- fore, as true because it records what the poet actually felt, even when it transposes this emotion onto his character.