

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

SERIES EDITOR: JOHN DRAKAKIS, UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

The New Critical Idiom is an invaluable series of introductory guides to today's critical terminology. Each book:

- provides a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse) of the term
- offers an original and distinctive overview by a leading literary and cultural critic
- relates the term to the larger field of cultural representation.

With a strong emphasis on clarity, lively debate, and the widest possible breadth of examples, *The New Critical Idiom* is an indispensable approach to key topics in literary studies.

Also available in this series:

<i>Autobiography</i> by Linda Anderson	<i>Irony</i> by Claire Colebrook
<i>Class</i> by Gary Day	<i>Literature</i> by Peter Widdowson
<i>Colonialism/Postcolonialism</i> by Ania Loomba	<i>Metre, Rhythm and Verse Form</i> by Philip Hobsbaum
<i>Culture/Metaculture</i> by Francis Mulhern	<i>Modernism</i> by Peter Childs
<i>Discourse</i> by Sara Mills	<i>Myth</i> by Laurence Coupe
<i>Dramatic Monologue</i> by Glennis Byron	<i>Narrative</i> by Paul Copley
<i>Genders</i> by David Glover and Cora Kaplan	<i>Parody</i> by Simon Dentith
<i>Gothic</i> by Fred Botting	<i>Pastoral</i> by Terry Gifford
<i>Historicism</i> by Paul Hamilton	<i>Realism</i> by Pam Morris
<i>Humanism</i> by Tony Davies	<i>Romanticism</i> by Aidan Day
<i>Ideology</i> by David Hawkes	<i>Science Fiction</i> by Adam Roberts
<i>Interdisciplinarity</i> by Joe Moran	<i>Sexuality</i> by Joseph Bristow
<i>Intertextuality</i> by Graham Allen	<i>Stylistics</i> by Richard Bradford
	<i>Subjectivity</i> by Donald E. Hall
	<i>The Unconscious</i> by Antony Easthope

ROMANCE

Barbara Fuchs

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

INTRODUCTION

Romances are generally composed of the Constant Loves and invincible Courages of Hero's, Heroins, Kings and Queens, Mortals of the first Rank, and so forth; where lofty Language, miraculous Contingencies and impossible Performances, elevate and surprize the Reader into a giddy Delight which leaves him flat upon the Ground whenever he gives of, and vexes him to think how he has suffer'd himself to be pleased and transported, concern'd and afflicted at the several Passages which he has Read, viz. these Knights Success to their Damosels Misfortunes, and such like, when he is forced to be very well convinced that 'tis all a lye.

William Congreve, "Preface to *Incognita*, 1691"

"Romance" is most often used in literary studies to allude to forms conveying literary pleasure the critic thinks readers would be better off without.

Margaret Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, 15

Romance is a notoriously slippery category. Critics disagree about whether it is a genre or a mode, about its origins and history, even about what it encompasses. Yet, paradoxically, readers are often able to identify romance

almost tacitly: they know it when they see it. My students call it "that fairy-tale feeling," a mixture of the archaic and the idealizing, much like the ingredients that the Restoration dramatist William Congreve identifies above. As Doody reminds us, however, despite this accessibility or perhaps precisely because of it romance has often been singled out for censure as an unworthy form of literature.

This volume charts the multiple, protean transformations of romance throughout literary history. Instead of settling on a single definition in the hope of capturing romance in its original shape, it demonstrates how different conceptions of the term emerge dynamically, in opposition to other types of literary production. Moreover, it argues that romance, as a critical idiom, may be most useful to contemporary readers if it retains some of its historical commodiousness and is conceptualized as a set of literary strategies that can be adopted by different forms. Thus, although the chapters that follow focus on texts that have been generically identified as romances, however controversially, in different periods of literary history, they simultaneously present an understanding of romance as strategy. Focusing on what romance does and enables within a narrative not only reveals its bones, but shows most clearly how it appears within a variety of genres. The dialectical movement between the many kinds of romance as genre and romance as strategy affords the fullest sense of the term. While no one book could encompass all the manifestations and varieties of romance, the following chapters aim to provide a broad theoretical and historical survey of its multiple incarnations.

Precisely because the history of romance is so complex, the term serves as a touchstone for larger questions of literary and cultural theory. By exploring various definitions of romance, readers may find ways to conceptualize broader problems of genre, reception, and the political import of imaginative literature. To this end, this volume considers the following questions: How does the history of romance as a category force us to rethink the historicization of literary forms? What kind of definition can we provide for our own time that is both historically situated and yet flexible enough to help us recognize and analyze new forms of romance? Also, how do reactions to romance register cultural attitudes towards the marvelous or to narratives with a broad popular appeal? To what extent is the resistance to romance a resistance to the imaginative force of literature, or to readerly pleasure?

DEFINITIONS

The definition of romance in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) reads a little like Borges' fable of the Chinese encyclopedia, with categories that range from the minute to the universal and which are often mutually exclusive.

Here is an abridged version, limited to definitions relevant to our purposes:

Romance:

- I. 1. The vernacular language of France, as opposed to Latin. In later use also extended to related forms of speech, as Provençal and Spanish, and now commonly used as a generic or collective name for the whole group of languages descended from Latin.
- II. 2. A tale in verse, embodying the adventures of some hero of chivalry, esp. of those of the great cycles of medieval legend, and belonging both in matter and form to the ages of knighthood; also, in later use, a prose tale of a similar character.
Orig. denoting a composition in the vernacular (French, etc.), as contrasted with works in Latin.
3. A fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life; esp. one of the class prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries, in which the story is often overlaid with long disquisitions and digressions. Also occas., a long poem of a similar type.
The immediate source of this use was app. F. roman.
b. A romantic novel or narrative.
4. A Spanish historical ballad or short poem of a certain form.
From Sp. romance, whence also F. romance. Attributive uses, as romance-book, -verse, etc., are common in works on Spanish literature.
5. That class of literature which consists of romances; romantic fiction. spec. a love story; that class of literature which consists of love stories.
b. Romantic or imaginative character or quality; redolence or suggestion of, association with, the adventurous and chivalrous. spec. a love affair; idealistic character or quality in a love affair.

6. An extravagant fiction, invention, or story; a wild or wanton exaggeration; a picturesque falsehood.

The definition ranges from the linguistic to the literary, and eventually escapes the realm of language altogether, to settle on what is perhaps the most frequent meaning of the word in common parlance: a love affair.

While all these meanings are important for literary notions of romance, the critical idiom needs to be disentangled from other definitions. The term that I will discuss is not specific to the romance languages; in fact, as we will see, the cognate terms for "romance" in those languages have very different meanings. Neither is the term historically specific: although critics working in different fields and national traditions might argue that theirs is the true or original romance, the force of the term comes precisely from its transformations and reiterations over time. Nor is literary romance necessarily concerned with eros, although this popular sense of the term often permeates it. Finally, literary romance must be distinguished from the category of the *Romantic*, which describes a specific period in literary history (and is the subject of another volume in this series).

GENRE, MODE, STRATEGY

In the narrow literary sense, *romance* is the name given to a particular *genre*: the narrative poems that emerge in twelfth-century France and quickly make their way around Europe (as in OED II.2). These popular poems were known as romances because they were written in the vernacular, or *romance*, languages derived from Latin (OED I.1), as opposed to Latin itself, which was the traditional language of learning. These poems are typically concerned with aristocratic characters such as kings and queens, knights and ladies, and their chivalric pursuits. They are often organized around a quest, whether for love or adventure, and involve a variety of marvelous elements. This is the genre from which we derive our popular sense of romance, as in the epigraph above.

But this more restricted definition of romance quickly becomes problematic, as we realize that the thematic preoccupations of the genre, and at least some of its formal characteristics, continue to make their appearance throughout Europe for many centuries. The term is variously applied to everything from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, to Shakespeare's

late plays, to seventeenth-century French classicizing fictions, to Harlequin romances. Moreover, medieval romance reaches back in time as well as projecting forward: many of the twelfth-century romances take their plots from much earlier stories, and seem as closely related to prior literatures in their subject-matter as to each other in their form.

The tendency for certain characteristics of the medieval chivalric form to overflow its specific limits has led some critics to propose a different, much broader notion of romance, one that transcends the specificities of genre and can be variously applied to verse or prose texts in a variety of historical settings. The most influential exponent of this sense of romance in the twentieth century was the structuralist critic Northrop Frye, who described romance as one of the central *modes* of literature in two seminal studies, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (1976).

Frye follows Aristotle to suggest that fiction may be classified "by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same" (Frye 1957: 33). Romance is one of the modes that features a superior hero:

If superior in *dégré* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established.

(Frye 1957: 33)

This definition focuses on the hero to the exclusion of other elements (begging, for example, the question of the *heroine*), and leaves much unspecified. It also threatens to set romance apart from other kinds of literary production, as though the category were impermeable and self-sufficient. Despite these problems, however, it usefully expands romance from a particular genre into a more general type of literary production.

Frye is also interested in the meaning of romance (what Fredric Jameson calls the semantic, rather than the syntactic, register [1975: 136]) as a

mythos or archetype, a kind of universal paradigm for fiction. Frye's mythos of romance involves a series of adventures, collectively labelled the *quest*, that pits the hero against his antagonist in a simple, dialectical structure. As Jameson points out, romance is organized around the conceptual opposition between good and evil (Jameson 1975: 140). Characters are generally for or against the quest in a straightforward fashion, although of course the villains may practice deceit. A general example of this archetypal plot is the story of the hero who kills the dragon or sea-monster that terrorizes a kingdom, and then marries the king's daughter (Frye 1957: 186-9). Perhaps one of the most famous versions of this plot in English literature is the story of the Redcrosse Knight (aka St. George) and his fight against the apocalyptic dragon who terrorizes Eden in Book I of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1591, 1596).

The presentation of these archetypes in romance, Frye suggests, is characterized by idealization and wish-fulfillment: the projection of the social ideals of a ruling class onto literary heroes and heroines. Thus romance generally involves aristocratic protagonists, or ones who are miraculously revealed as such after living a lower-class existence, in a kind of "blood will tell" move in which social status is ultimately disclosed. Romance also generally upholds such normative values as fealty and chastity, although not always in an uncomplicated fashion. While Frye himself is not particularly interested in political readings of romance, he describes its engagement with dominant ideologies as the "kidnapping" of romance in order to "reflect certain ascendant religious or social ideals" (Frye 1976: 29-30). Conversely, Frye notes, romance is often marked by a persistent nostalgia for some other time (or, one might add, place) that undermines the social ideals of the here and now. The idealization of romance is often achieved through a nostalgic purchase on the past. Romance values the antique and the exotic, and expresses a powerful longing for what came before,

In fable or romance of Uther's son
 Begirt with British and Armoric knights;
 And all who since, baptized or infidel
 Jousted in Aspramont or Montalban,
 Damasco, or Marocco, or Trebisond,
 Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore

When Charlemagne with all his peerage fell
 By Fontarabba.

(Milton, *Paradise Lost*, l. 580-8)

The nostalgic evocation of other times and places, complete with exotic nomenclature, as in the passage above, challenges our understanding of romance as a socially conservative form. Through the lens of nostalgia, the past can pose a significant challenge to the present. This sense of romance as an alternative to contemporary reality proved very powerful for the Romantics, in the early years of the nineteenth century, when the return to an idealized past was perceived as a reprieve from the cultural ravages of industrialization.

Part of the problem with Frye's notion of a romance mode is that it relies very heavily on an archetypal idea of literature, according to which all texts fall into one category or another, and exhibit certain inherent characteristics. This works less well when we attempt to describe hybrid texts, or those which seem to include moments of romance without existing fully in the "mode." One challenge when defining the critical idiom thus involves accounting for romance as one aspect of a text, rather than simply the category into which the whole will fit.

Frye also necessarily subsumes the differences among texts to his interest in identifying a continuity or tradition. Jameson notes that although Frye's approach does not limit romance to one historical moment, it tends to erase the markers of history and to make romance self-identical over the course of time (Jameson 1975: 155-6). Jameson, as a historical materialist, is more interested in accounting for the form that romance takes in specific historical and ideological contexts. He reads medieval romance, for example, as a response to the "emergent class solidarity" of the feudal nobility: the knight who appears evil by virtue of his unknowability and oppositional stance is eventually revealed as a version of the self, while evil is projected onto an otherworldly realm of magic (Jameson 1975: 161). This understanding, as I discuss in Chapter 3, has been refined and challenged by medievalists who have attended to the specific and local historical contexts of individual romances.

In more general terms, Jameson recalls for us the importance of envisioning the history of romance as a reflection of particular ideological contexts:

A history of romance as a mode becomes possible, in other words, when we project it as a history of the various codes which, in the increasingly secularized and rational world that emerges from the collapse of feudalism, are called upon to assume the literary function of those older codes which have now become so many dead languages. Or, to put it the other way round, the fate of romance as a form is dependent on the availability of elements more acceptable to the reader than those older magical categories for which some adequate substitute must be invented.

(Jameson 1975: 142-3)

Jameson's inquiry is thus concerned with tracing the function of romance in a particular time and place, as well as with charting how romance is updated to fit the changing "codes" of its culture.

Although Jameson never makes it explicit, Frye's notion of the "kidnapped romance" animates his investigation; what for Frye is a deformation or deviation from romance's enduring nature is for Jameson the whole point of an inquiry into mode or genre. For our purposes, it is important to recognize that romance, like many other literary forms, is allusive and self-referential, constantly harking back to a literary and cultural tradition, while also highly adaptable to particular historical and ideological contexts.

Post-structuralist theory invites us to consider romance in terms of what it performs as opposed to what it is. Thus Patricia Parker's reading of romance focuses on what it *does* and *undoes* within texts. One of Parker's central contributions is to recognize that romance can appear within texts that are not necessarily in a romance genre or mode. Parker reads romance primarily as an undoing or complication of narrative progression in texts that range from epic to lyric. In this view, romance is "a form that simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object" (Parker 1979: 4). Resolution becomes elusive, and identity fraught, in texts characterized by "the connection between naming, identity, and closure or ending" (Parker 1979: 5). Parker is interested more in the dilation and error of romance, in the ways that it interferes with the teleological progress of the narrative, than in the quest itself: "For poets for whom the attainment of an end is problematic, or impossible, the focus may be less on arrival or completion than on the strategy of delay" (Parker 1979: 5).

For purposes of this discussion, I would like to adapt Frye and Parker's contributions to consider romance as a literary and textual *strategy*. Under this definition, the term describes a concatenation of both narratological elements and literary topoi, including idealization, the marvelous, narrative delay, wandering, and obscured identity, that, as Parker suggests, both pose a quest and complicate it. I find this the most useful notion of romance because it accounts for the greatest number of instances, allowing us to address the occurrence of romance within texts that are clearly classified as some other genre and incorporating the hybridization and malleability that, as we shall see, are such key elements of romance. The instrumental notion of romance as a recurrent textual strategy allows us to recognize its many manifestations and transformations throughout literary history; it may well be our best chance to capture its protean nature, as well as to address the broadest definitions of the term. But it also allows us to deconstruct the many oppositions set up by literary history, such as romance versus epic or romance versus novel. These become more complicated once we identify the presence of romance within its ostensible opposites.

ENGLISH ONLY?

Part of the problem with defining romance as I have endeavored to do above is that while critics may apply the term to literature in a variety of languages, those languages do not have a word for this sense of romance. *Roman* in French or German now means simply *novel*, as does *romanzo* in Italian. *Romance* in Spanish is a short ballad form (OED 4A). Conversely, when Spanish critics wish to refer to the sense of romance that I have been discussing, they call it *lo novelesco*. This peculiar situation has led some critics to challenge the very term romance as outdated or limited by the constraints of a particular critical tradition.

Margaret Doody argues that critics working in the Anglo-American academy essentially invented the distinction between novel and romance in order to imagine an English origin for what was a much older form (Doody 1996). In this schema, she argues, literary theory adopts as its gold standard the notion of progress towards realism: "The Novel replaces the Romance as Reason replaces Supersituation, and as the Model-T Ford replaces the horse and carriage" (Doody 1996: 3). Doody is interested in

tracing a longer history for the novel while avoiding progressive or teleological models. To this end, she proclaims: "Romance and the Novel are one. The separation between them is part of a problem, not part of a solution" (Doody 1996: 15).

Rather than rethinking the hierarchy or the terms of the classification, Doody discards the category of romance altogether. This seems a case of throwing the baby out with the bath-water. The applicability and usefulness of the notion of romance we have sketched out transcend the particular myth of literary history exposed by Doody. Yet any critical definition that takes her important argument into account must present romance as something other than a bad alternative or insufficient predecessor to the novel. In fact, we can avoid the progress narrative altogether by turning to an instrumental understanding of romance as a literary strategy that appears in a variety of genres, as I have suggested above. This redefinition accounts for the self-conscious use of romance by authors working within a variety of traditions, and accommodates romance as one of the many voices within the novel, instead of its poor cousin.

This study gives a sense of the place of romance within several national traditions. Romance does not, as we shall see, respect those boundaries, and this approach allows us to move beyond the Anglo-American paradigm identified by Doody. Because I have consistently aimed for the broadest possible definition of romance in the European tradition, however, I will necessarily focus on central moments in this tradition instead of providing anything like a comprehensive history. Even so, it is important to bear in mind that romance relies heavily on allusion and reflexivity, and that it is necessary to trace the historical change in romance as well as its continuity.

In addition to addressing the occurrence of romance in various times and places, this book foregrounds the vexed treatment of romance in literary history. For romance, especially in the instrumental sense I have adopted here, is often defined relatively rather than absolutely, and retrospectively rather than contemporaneously. That is, texts are read as romance primarily in relation or comparison to other texts – as in the opposition between epic and romance – or in order to distinguish them from their successors – as in the distinction between romance and novel.

The frequent controversies over romance that involve questions of definition and scope, and of its value for readers, may, I conjecture, teach us as much about the dynamics of literary theory and history as about romance itself.