

Radial Categories and the Central Romance*

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Definition of medieval romance as a genre has been bedevilled by the inability of scholars to reach a consensus on the essential features of romance. “Of all the dimensions of human experience explored by the romance genre, eros is by far the most essential,” remark Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee in their introduction to an important collection of essays by various scholars on the evolution of European medieval romances.¹ Yet eros is neither mentioned nor implied in Paul Strohm’s report of consensus: “modern critics have a fairly tidy sense of the mediaeval romance as a narrative poem dealing with the adventures of a chivalric hero.”² Nor is it mentioned in Newstead’s definition in the Wells-Severs *Manual of the Writings in Middle English*: “The medieval romance is a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or in

* This paper is based on a version delivered at the Canadian Society of Medievalists conference at London, Ontario, in May 2005, and on prior research for a larger project. I would like to thank my colleague Len Diepeveen for many discussions since 2001 of Lakoff and radial categories that inspired my application of them to the genre of romance, and I would like to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for my research in this area. After delivering this paper at the CSM conference I learned from Dr. Yin Liu that she and I had independently and unbeknownst to each other been pursuing a very similar argument. She has kindly sent me a copy of her draft; those interested should consult her article “Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre,” forthcoming in *Chaucer Review* 40, no. 4 (2006). My paper, however, insists on the historic specificity (for fourteenth-century England) of the Middle English catalogue evidence and therefore comes to somewhat different conclusions about the range of its application.

1 Brownlee and Brownlee, *Romance: Generic Transformations*, 20.

2 Strohm, “*Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie*,” 354.

prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience.”³ In part this difference is accounted for by the difference in bodies of romances being read: if the Brownlees are reading Chrétien and *Le Roman de la rose* while Strohm and Newstead are reading *Havelok* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, it is no wonder that the scholars of romance languages see eros as essential and the scholars of Middle English do not. But there is a fundamental disagreement between Strohm’s and Newstead’s definitions, too: Strohm disallows prose romances, such as Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, while Newstead allows them.

Further critical attempts to define the romance add to the problems. For John Finlayson, romances involve chivalric adventure: “The basic paradigm of the *romance* is expressed in the formula, ‘The knight rides out alone to seek adventure.’”⁴ For Fredric Jameson, romances abound in the supernatural and the marvellous; it is magic that makes romance. At a moment when

the experience of evil can no longer be invested in any definitive or permanent way in this or that human agent, it must be expelled from the world of purely human affairs in a kind of foreclosure and projectively reconstituted into something like a free-floating and disembodied realm in its own right, that baleful optical illusion which we henceforth know as the realm of sorcery or of magic, and which thus completes the requirements for the emergence of romance as a distinctive new genre.⁵

For Erich Auerbach, romances model courtly behaviour:

A self-portrayal of feudal knighthood with its mores and ideals is the fundamental purpose of the courtly romance. Nor are its exterior forms of life neglected—they are portrayed in leisurely fashion, and on these occasions the portrayal abandons the nebulous distance of fairy tale and gives salient pictures of contemporary conditions.⁶

These are all useful observations, but they jostle each other where they claim the status of marking *the* trait that defines romance. Disenchantment with the attempt to circumscribe the genre by identifying its “essential” (“most obvious,” “basic,” “fundamental,” “required”) element had begun to set in even before some of these formulations were proposed. Thus, Pamela Gradon writes in 1971, “We have tried to point out some of the characteristics of romance but the reader will no doubt have observed how fluid

3 Newstead, “Romances: General,” 11.

4 Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance,” 55.

5 Jameson, “Magical Narratives,” 161.

6 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 131.

the limits of romance are. It is doubtful whether the romance can be indeed regarded as a genre at all.⁷ By the 1980s and 1990s, others resisted proscriptive definition: “insofar as observations about the generic nature of medieval romance can be made, they must be fluid and contingent, seeking to clarify the nature of single works rather than to classify them,” remarks Susan Crane,⁸ and William Calin advises that “rigid, conceptual definitions of medieval genres...are...to be avoided.”⁹

Genre criticism is frankly uninspiring when articulation of what trait makes a genre leads only to arguments that a given work should now be excluded from the genre, or included in it. But, in truth, cutting genre boundaries is just as problematic when there are multiple criteria being applied. The laudable goal of grasping the genre is doomed to failure as long as it is confined to the Chomskyan effort to name a full set of characteristics which, when combined, will account for all romances, and only romances. To take one problem, romances share some traits with other genres. Romances have protagonists of knightly or noble or royal blood; as Northrop Frye observes tartly, “One very obvious feature of romance is its pervasive social snobbery.”¹⁰ But saints’ lives share this characteristic. And some traits are found primarily in romances, but not in all romances: eros is conspicuously absent in *Havelok*, for example, where the hero’s wedding to the heroine is forced and unwelcome to both. Apparently a happy marriage ensues, but rather than an exploration of the psychological process of falling in love, what the poem focuses on is the important revelation to the princess Goldeborw that her new husband is royal and that therefore she has not been disparaged beyond hope of reclaiming her inheritance.¹¹

The romance has come close to being dismissed as a genre altogether. Recognition that what were being called romances did not have a fixed set of shared characteristics has often accompanied uneasiness over differences between the medieval and the modern uses of the term *romance* itself. Pamela Gradon shows this anxiety: “The romance is in origin merely a narrative in the vernacular and the texts that we call romances merely a somewhat arbitrary selection from medieval narrative.”¹² Notoriously, *romanz* as a

7 Gradon, *Form and Style*, 269.

8 Crane, *Insular Romance*, 10.

9 Calin, *The French Tradition*, 522, n. 6.

10 Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 161.

11 See *Havelok*, ll. 1128-31, 1148-53, and 1248-1353; despite the voyeuristic titillation of a later scene in which the naked couple, asleep and half-exposed, is admired by Ubbe and his knights (ll. 2130-37), and despite the conclusion in which their great love is insisted upon (ll. 2963-77) their falling in love is never addressed but rather assumed.

12 Gradon, *Form and Style*, 269.

term first referred to northern French, then to works written in French (for example, saints' lives as well as chivalric narratives); for the later period in England, Reinald Hoops collects a dizzyingly motley array of texts labelled and referred to as romances in Middle English.¹³ But happily a recurrently expressed frustration with the fluidity of the category and the medieval uses of the label has not after all resulted in an abandonment of the very idea of the genre of romance. Perhaps it has not led to such an abandonment because of the work of Hans Robert Jauss on genre. His formulation of the "horizon of expectations"¹⁴ that a reader brings to every work, expectations based on past experience with works of that genre, has an easily recognized usefulness, a simple brilliance that is attested by the number of times the phrase is cited directly or alluded to. At one and the same time Jauss's work points to a significant benefit arising from identifications of genre and takes away the threat that fluidity has seemed to be to a genre's very integrity. Grasping a genre means grasping what its first readers expected a new work in that genre to do. Horizons of expectation change as readers change, gaining experience of other members of the genre which do this but not that, and perhaps add something quite different; the genre itself changes as writers change the horizon. Perhaps as importantly, writers may raise expectations precisely to frustrate them, in parody or challenge.

The rhetoric of caution about the fluidity of romance endures, but has been supplemented by a rhetoric of celebration of its flexibility and dynamism. In *A Companion to Romance from Classical to Contemporary*, Corinne Saunders does sound the cautionary note that "the *genre* of romance is impossible adequately to define," but then goes on to detail its "extraordinary fluidity" and "striking...open-endedness" before concluding her paragraph in acknowledgement of its being "frustrating in its capacity to defy classification or resolution."¹⁵ Recent work by Simon Gaunt on the genre of romance points to its dialectic with other genres and its pluralism, and concludes, "it is perhaps its proclivity for absorbing paradigms from other genres to enable ideological debate within its own highly flexible generic parameters that leads to its undoubted triumph over rival genres such as the *chansons de geste* in the later Middle Ages."¹⁶

The most prominently placed current attempt to give the genre an identity is based in Derek Pearsall's observation, quoted as a working definition by Rosalind Field in the

13 Hoops, *Der Begriff "Romance."*

14 Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 23 *et passim*.

15 Saunders, "Introduction," *A Companion to Romance*, 1-2.

16 Gaunt, "Romance and Other Genres," 57.

1999 *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, that romance is “the principal secular literature of entertainment of the Middle Ages.”¹⁷ As far as it goes this is almost true, though any study of the function of romances must recognize a heavily didactic component especially in the fifteenth century (which, to be sure, lies beyond the scope of Field’s chapter in the *Cambridge History*). But it does not go very far. With this definition alone, one would be at a loss to begin to reason through an answer to a question such as “Is *The House of Fame* a romance?” or even “Is *Guy of Warwick* one?”

More satisfactory has been Helen Cooper’s assessment in *The English Romance in Time*, which is tellingly headed “Recognizing Romance” rather than “Defining Romance”: her concern quite wisely signals a contemporary shift away from marking the boundaries to finding the resemblances:

Drawing up a list of the common features that cumulatively indicate family resemblance, generic identity, for romances presents few problems so long as one bears [this] caveat in mind: that no single one is essential for definition or recognition taken individually. Equally, related genres will share some features even though other unshared elements signal generic difference.¹⁸

One catch, as Cooper goes on to admit immediately, is that “Various observers may come to varying conclusions with regard to texts that keep the characteristics of different genres in balance.”¹⁹ Her own position “in time” allows her to examine *The Tempest* and *Havelok* as members of the same genre; a reader in the fourteenth century would have found the notion of a play as a romance to be outlandish, well beyond the horizon, and the fourteenth-century reader’s perspective is both limited (in that it does not allow the long view of the transmission of memes that Cooper portrays) and privileged (in that that reader’s sense of what a romance is has an undeniably better informed authority for the fourteenth century, though not beyond).

Following Jauss, ideally, one would work both from and to a medieval understanding of the medieval genre, and one would acknowledge that the medieval understanding is not fixed but rather something that shifted over time. But reading medieval uses of the label to define the genre is not straightforward. *Romanz* clearly shifts its field of reference in Anglo-Norman usage from language to work, and even by the time it is

17 Pearsall, “Middle English Romance and its Audiences,” 37; cited as her working definition by Field, “Romance in England,” 152.

18 Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 9.

19 Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 9.

used in Middle English and has become more reliably a generic label, Paul Strohm reminds us,

Reinald Hoops finds that ME *romaunce* could mean a work in or translated from French, a work in or from Latin, a narrative poem, any sort of narrative, or an authoritative source; works calling themselves or called romaunces could be as varied in character as *Beues of Hamtoun*, the *Myroure of Lewed Men*, *St. Gregory*, *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ*, and the *Romaunt of the Rose*.²⁰

Scribes or authors can be playful, too, and their generic sophistication can trouble later readers. So, for example, when an Anglo-Norman *fabliau* is labelled a *romanz* in its manuscript (MS CCCC 50), the label is placed at the back of the book among “Rejected readings” by its editors who evidently judge (in my view, absolutely correctly) that it is not a romance.²¹ Yet the label is surely an acknowledgement by author or scribe that the tale plays with romance conventions. When a comic King and Commoner poem like *The King and the Hermit* refers to itself as a “romans” (l. 14) it runs the risk of being categorized as a romance by modern scholars who would nevertheless not have any difficulty in recognizing that *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* do not have the same generic status although they do bear the same generic label. Thus, even titles containing the label *romance* or references to a work as a romance are not reliable in constructing an understanding of the medieval boundaries of the genre.

George Lakoff’s concept of radial categories, developed in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, is helpfully liberating. Like Cooper’s concept of the family resemblance, his work has an acknowledged intellectual debt to Wittgenstein. Lakoff’s concept of radial categories can help to make clearer how the generic category *romance* may have worked for medieval readers. In order to investigate how the human mind understands categories, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* uses the case of the Australian aboriginal language Dyirbal and its four classes of nouns. The

20 Strohm, “*Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie*,” 354.

21 The *fabliau* is titled “De un chivaler e de sa dame e de un clerk” by its Anglo-Norman Text Society editors; Short and Percy, *Eighteen Anglo-Norman Fabliaux*, 18; the rejected manuscript reading, which appears at the bottom of the first column in the manuscript, is “Romanz de un chivaler e de sa dame e de un clerk”; Short and Percy, *Eighteen Anglo-Norman Fabliaux*, 37. Willem Noomen (*Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, vol. 10) uses the manuscript wording for his title of the diplomatic version of the text (p. 121), but “Un chivaler e sa dame e un clerk” for his critical version (p. 128). For more elaboration on the manuscript context, see Melissa Furrow, “A Fabliau Called a Romance.” For the genre of King and Commoner poems, see Rachel Snell, “The Undercover King,” 136-37.

second class contains “women, bandicoots, dogs, platypus, echidna, some snakes, some fishes, most birds, fireflies, scorpions, crickets, the hairy mary grub, anything connected with water or fire, sun and stars, shields, some spears, some trees, etc.”²² This apparently chaotic grouping proves to have certain principles underlying it: for example, many of the members are dangerous things though as Lakoff forcefully argues, not all of them are. The principles at work in the classification of nouns in Dyrbal, Lakoff claims, “show up again and again in systems of human categorization.”²³ The ones that are relevant to the understanding of medieval romance proposed here are the principles of *centrality*, *chaining*, *experiential domains*, *absence of common properties*, and *motivation*.

Lakoff’s principle of *centrality* allows for an understanding of genre that works, not by outlining boundaries, but working from the core outward. For Dyrbal class II nouns, the principle of *centrality* means that “What we have called the basic members of the category are central...Stinging vines, gar fish and the hairy mary grub are less central members of category II than are women.”²⁴ For medieval romances, the implications are that certain romances may be identifiable as central to the genre, others less so. *Guy of Warwick* and *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ* may both be called romances by medieval writers, but the term does not then become nonsensical. If *Guy* is central, and *Meditations* is not, then *Guy* will better exemplify central romance characteristics.

The principle of centrality and its application through the trope of cataloguing will be the focus of the argument below. But an examination of others among Lakoff’s principles will show why centrality alone cannot define the genre and will help to account for the apparent logical chaos of Hoops’s list of works labelled romances by medieval writers and readers. *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ*, like the hairy mary grub, finds its way into its category by the process of *chaining*. Lakoff tells us that

Complex categories are structured by chaining; central members are linked to other members, which are linked to other members, and so on. For example, women are linked to the sun [by mythology], which is linked to sunburn [causally], which is linked to the hairy mary grub [because its sting feels like sunburn]. It is by virtue of such a chain that the hairy mary grub is in the same category as women.²⁵

By similarly arbitrary links the *Meditations*, for example, is called a romance: the story *Tristan* by Thomas is linked to *Amadas et Ydoine* (both are written in the vernacular

22 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 93.

23 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 95.

24 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 95.

25 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 95.

language *romans*), which is linked to *Havelok* (both are written in vernacular languages), which is linked to *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ* (both are written in the vernacular language English). It might be objected that in that case anything written in French, and then anything written in English, might have been called a romance. And of course that is true: it accounts for the untidiness of the lists assembled by Hoops and Strohm of works to which the label *romance* has been applied. It also suggests that someone not immersed in medieval culture cannot simply study lists of works to which the label has been applied by medieval writers and expect to derive a conceptually integrated category that accounts for all the members of the list but excludes all possible works that would not, for a medieval reader, have belonged on that list. The principle of chaining will not draw a boundary around the genre, but it opens an interesting area for future study: the connection between shifts in the evolving genre and the links such as language of composition that worked at a given time, but perhaps not later or earlier, in the chain.

The links in the chain, according to Lakoff, can often be accounted for by what he calls *experiential domains*. An example will clarify what Lakoff means by such “basic domains of experience”:²⁶ for Dyrbal class II nouns, such links are evident in the inclusion of fighting implements like spears and of fighting ground in the same category as fighting itself. Fighting as a domain of experience links objects (like spears) and places (like battlefields) in the same grammatical category. The principle of experiential domain fits easily with one traditional ground of definition of genre, namely, subject matter: romances are about love and chivalry, to take the two largest and the two that have inspired the most confidence in modern attempts to define the genre. The power of experiential domain to forge links that chain otherwise disparate works into the same category can be seen best in the problematic case of *The Romance of the Rose*. Medieval titles are unstable, and medieval titles with the generic label *romance* included are relatively rare. In England at any rate the best-known work repeatedly labelled romance by medieval people, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la rose*, or *The Romaunt of the Rose* in its Middle English translations, has not, for all the frequent appearance of the label, been among the works usually studied among romances, probably because it is so unlike other romances in its narrative strategies. But the genre does include narratives of sexual love, and the *Roman de la rose* analyses that domain of experience.

I have already objected, though, that eros is not present in some Middle English romances; so it may seem as if it cannot logically be one of the domains of experience

²⁶ Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 95.

that matter in Middle English romance. But Lakoff's principle of *absence of common properties* accounts for the apparent paradox:

Categories on the whole need not be defined by common properties. There is no reason to believe that the Dyirbal find anything in common among women, fire, dangerous things, etc. Nor do they assume, so far as is known, that there is anything feminine about fire or danger, or anything fiery or dangerous about women. On the other hand, common properties seem to play a role in characterizing the basic schemas within a given category (edible plant, human male, human female).²⁷

The implication for the study of genres is that there does not need to be even one single defining trait that characterizes every member of the genre.²⁸ A particular work can be a romance even if romances are in the vernacular and it is in Latin; or if romances are about chivalric exploits and it is about the dilemmas of women; or if romances claim to describe real events and it is an allegorical dream vision. This implication is radically liberating: it means no more racking the brain to find a definition that will cover a motley collection of texts, both a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman poem in octosyllabic couplets about a baby girl abandoned by her mother who grows up to find happiness, identity, and a wanted marriage, and a fifteenth-century English collection of prose pieces which centres on the life of King Arthur and tells of the rise and fall of his Round Table and the chivalric achievements and piteous deaths of his knights. But it is also radically disturbing, for it suggests no ready way of drawing a boundary line around the genre.

The last principle, *motivation*, will be the most frustrating for anyone hoping for an analysis of a system that generates all and only the categorizations acceptable within that system. *Motivation* explains but does not predict: "Dyirbal speakers simply must learn which domains of experience matter for classification and which myths and beliefs matter,"²⁹ and linguists must learn which ones matter to Dyirbal speakers. The implication is critical: medievalists must learn which domains of experience and which principles of chaining mattered to medieval readers of romance, and besides, we must learn which ones mattered when. "The theory of categorization makes predictions about what human category systems can and cannot be like. It does not predict exactly what will be in a given category in a given culture or language."³⁰ In other words, what Lakoff's

27 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 96.

28 It is important to note that according to Lakoff's principles there can be sub-genres that do have defining characteristic traits or "common properties": e.g., the modern category hagiographic romances, or Arthurian romances, or Breton lays.

29 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 96.

30 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 96.

theory suggests for genre studies is among other things that modern critics will never be able to rule definitively on marginal works whether they should or should not have been read as romances, although we may be able to see why given works were labelled romances by their authors or readers.

Such an inability to draw a boundary around the genre leaves a modern critic in frustration only if drawing a boundary around the genre has to be a goal. True, any kind of generalizing thesis about romances needs a basis in a shared idea of romance. But that shared idea can be developed out of a recognition of what was *central* to the genre, what romances were seen as the core of the group. What modern readers can know (what is at the heart of the genre) is more important than what modern readers cannot know (where exactly to draw a line around it). Medievalists need to be inquisitive about what was or was not seen as central to romance in its original culture, while alert to those changes of culture and changes of tongue of men and women reading romances over three hundred and more years that shifted what was expected of romance even within the medieval period.

Lakoff's argument about how the human mind constructs categories—and a genre is clearly a category—holds that no domain of experience will be essential. The domains are still important, though, for they underlie the chaining that expands the genre. Jameson and Auerbach, Finlayson and the Brownlees are not to be rejected in their arguments, except for the single critical point that the trait each identifies is not after all essential to romance, though it may be frequently represented. Instead of essential elements, Lakoff points to the need to find central members. For grasping the genre of romance, then, one could identify central romances. But how?

The medieval trope of cataloguing is a useful way to gain access to a medieval idea of the central members of the genre. It is not an answer to the question of generic centrality for the whole of the medieval period because the extant Middle English lists all stem from the hundred years from about 1300 to about 1400, not long enough to provide evidence as to the reception of Chaucer's romances or the many new prose romances of the fifteenth century. Nor is there enough evidence from the period before 1300 to give a clear picture of the centre of the genre then, although the one Anglo-Norman list extant is very suggestive. But cataloguing does provide clear evidence for what fourteenth-century English readers thought of when they thought of the genre of romance.

What are the catalogues that count, the principles of inclusion? There are many lists in Middle English literature and of necessity some of these lists name romances, but they do so in a context that does not make it logically necessary that every member of the list is understood to represent a romance. For example, Gower's list of knightly and

successful young lovers in Book 8 of *Confessio Amantis* begins with Tristram and Ysolde, Lancelot and Gunnore, and Galahot and “his ladi” and continues with Jason and Creusa, Hercules and Eolen, Theseus and Phedra, Thelamon and Eseonen, Ector and Pantaselee, Paris and Eleine, and Troilus and Criseide (and Diomedé).³¹ While some of these figures from antiquity would have been known to a medieval audience from works such as the *Roman de Troie* or the *Roman de Thèbes* or Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, others could have been encountered in Latin school text sources. Lydgate’s poetry is full of lists: the one of lovers on the wall in *The Temple of Glas* begins with Dido, Medea, Adonis, Penelope, Alceste, and Griselda, moves on to Isolde and Tristram, incorporates such diverse figures as Lucretia and Palamon, and even includes Mercury and Philology, whose wedding was the subject of an important Latin allegorical poem by Martianus Capella.³² These lists are helpful as showing which of the romance heroines were most remembered, but they do not differentiate the heroines of romance from the heroines of works that the medieval compiler of the list must have thought of as generically different. All the lists cited below actually name the genre at stake as *romance*, with the one exception of the William of Nassington citation from his *Speculum Vitae*. I have included it because it uses key words usually attached to romances by their detractors (*veyn*, l. 36; *vanyte*, l. 48); because it names the two domains of experience most conventionally associated with romances (*dedes of armes, amours*, l. 37); and because the presence of *Guy* and *Bevis* on the list makes it clear, in combination with the other lists, that this is the genre William has in mind to attack. I have not included such other lists as the one in *Generides*, which is akin to the lists cited but does not use the genre label.³³

The extant insular lists which use the generic term *romance* are all Middle English and date within about a hundred years of each other: most straightforwardly the prologue to *Cursor Mundi* (early fourteenth century); the two versions of the prologue to *Richard Coeur de Lion* (also early fourteenth century) and another list occurring later in the same poem; and the prologue to the *Laud Troy Book* about a century later. There are romances named in Chaucer’s “Tale of Sir Thopas” in the late fourteenth century, but this list is to be read with caution. Then there are the attacks: William of

31 John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 8: 2500–2539.

32 John Lydgate, *The Temple of Glas*, ll. 55–246.

33 *Generides* makes mention of the deeds of doughty men and their suffering for ladies: it lists Guy of Warwick, Tristram, Bevis of Hampton, Percuiale, Gaweyn, “And othir knightes as Sir Owayn” (ll. 13–16) as examples of such men; thus, it is clearly consonant with the more explicitly generic lists in its contents. This list was kindly brought to my attention by Jeremy Citrome.

Nassington, in the later fourteenth century, disdains works dealing with “dedes of armes [and] amours,” and the late fourteenth-century *Mirror* attacks lying “romaunce & gestes.”³⁴

The lists show that the three great Matters, of Arthur, Charlemagne, and classical history, are recurrent in central romances in England. The continental French writer Jean Bodel had named these matters, “De France et de Bretaigne et de Rome la grant,”³⁵ as the only three that people paid attention to in the France of the twelfth century, though he had not assigned any generic label to them. In England, these domains are not exclusive to romance, since chronicles may also use the Matter of Britain and the Matter of France; the Matter of Rome the Great, widely interpreted, covers the history of Rome and Troy and Thebes before it, and thus can appear in every genre from *exemplum* collection (“There was an emperor who...”) to dream vision (e.g., *Somnium Scipionis*) to saint’s life (e.g., the legend of St. Cecilia) to chronicle as well as romance. But the lists make clear that the matters are important domains of experience for central romance in England. From these, the key figures Arthur, Gawain, and Charlemagne (sometimes with Roland) appear most often (in both *Richard* lists, in *Cursor Mundi*, in the *Laud Troy Book*³⁶); Ector appears in the *Richard* lists and is the one whom the *Laud Troy Book* leads up to with its list: the poet’s sense that there ought to be a romance in English about Ector suggests that the lack of a key romance from this Matter had frustrated expectation.

The later lists suggest a growing importance of other stories, especially of what has been called by modern scholars the Matter of England: *Horn* is mentioned twice (*Laud Troy Book* and Chaucer), *Bevis* and *Guy* are mentioned several times (by these two and William of Nassington as well as the second list in *Richard*; *Guy* also in *The Mirror*). William of Nassington’s sense of the centrality of *Octavian* and *Isumbras*, both of which he rejects, is supported by the appearance of *Octavian* in the *Laud Troy Book* list as well as the second *Richard* list, and *Isumbras* in the list in *Cursor Mundi*. *Alisaunder* appears in both *Richard* lists and in *Cursor Mundi*. Tristram, sometimes with Isolde, is named

34 The lists I have used are to be found in *Cursor Mundi*, ll. 1-26; *Richard*, ll. 11-20 (in two slightly variant versions in different manuscripts) and a different list at ll. 6725-34; *Laud Troy Book*, ll. 11-30; Chaucer’s from “The Tale of Sir Thopas” (*Canterbury Tales*, VII.897-901); William of Nassington’s *Speculum Vitae*, ll. 35-48; and *The Mirror*, pp. 1-2.

35 Jean Bodel, *La Chanson des Saisnes*, l. 7. Thanks are due to Carol Harvey for advice on the translation of the passage.

36 I am counting *The Laud Troy Book*’s unexplained reference to “Archeroun” (l. 19) as being a mistake for Arthur, with the not uncommon confusion of *c* for *t*, and *-oun* as a mistaken expansion of a final scribal flourish.

in three of these lists—*Cursor Mundi*, the *Laud Troy Book*, and *The Mirror*—and it is not surprising that they also recur in other, not genre-specific, lists of lovers. Of all the love stories in romance, the story of Tristram and Isolde occupies the clearest position of centrality by this measure.

A recurrent trope making romance figures rivals to Christ suggests a shift in the centrality of the narratives already distinguished by the fourteenth-century catalogues. Guy of Warwick eventually becomes so central as to take over the role earliest occupied by Arthur, Gawain, Tristram, and Charlemagne in the affections of readers. Around 1200 Peter of Blois remarks that people weep at stories of Arthur, Gawain, and Tristram.³⁷ In that passage Peter echoes Ailred, writing as early as 1141-42 about how moving stories of Arthur are.³⁸ According to Dominica Legge, Angiers, a canon at St. Frideswide's, makes a similar remark around 1212 in his *Dialogues of St. Gregory*: "He was inspired to write because he was distressed to find that stories of Arthur of Britain and songs of Charlemagne were more popular than the Gospels."³⁹ By the fifteenth century, an anonymous preacher places Guy of Warwick, or rather Guy of Warwick's lion, in the role of the central romance hero. Andrea Hopkins reports that in MS. Harley 7322, fol. 49, a sermon refers to

the story of the man who...hearing the deeds of Guy of Warwick read aloud, when he came to the place where it dealt with the gratitude of the lion and how it was cut into three, wept uncontrollably. Reproving him, a brother said: O ungrateful wretch who drops so many tears for such a trifle, yet does not grieve for Christ who was condemned and put to death for your sake.⁴⁰

All of these anecdotes ultimately owe their origin to St. Augustine's shamefaced report in the *Confessions* of his own susceptibility to feeling the sorrows of Dido, but they are revealing because of their contemporary twist.⁴¹

What might be called the trope of misplaced affective piety confirms the evidence of the fourteenth-century lists that, early on, Arthur and Gawain, Tristram, and Charlemagne, then later also Guy are figures whose stories are well known and even loved.

37 Peter of Blois, *De Confessione Sacramentale*, col. 1088D.

38 Ailred of Rievaulx, *Speculum Charitatis*, col. 565D.

39 Angiers, *Dialogues of St. Gregory*, cited by Legge, *Anglo-Norman in the Cloisters*, 62.

40 Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, 75.

41 Augustine, *Confessions* 1: 13, as cited by Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 37. The medieval remakings of the trope are of their own time both in making romance figures the focus of sorrow, and in making the appropriate alternative the suffering Christ; for Augustine the true object of pity should have been his own dying soul.

Naming Arthur or Tristram or Guy, of course, does not identify a particular romance in the same way that naming *Bleak House* identifies a particular novel: many stories are told about these figures, in different languages, and sometimes in different genres besides romance. Arthur and Gawain are visible in Latin chronicles earlier than in vernacular romances; Guy enters history and ethical instruction once he is famous in romances. But when we are looking at catalogues explicitly of romances, and those catalogues have shared members, we can reasonably conclude that romances of these heroes are central to medieval readers' sense of the genre in England.

Counting the two *Richard* lists as separate, then, the numbers for repeated names are these:

Guy 5	Alisaunder 3
Bevis 4	Ector 2
Arthur 4	(or 3 if one counts the
Gawain 4	<i>Laud Troy Book</i> itself)
Charlemagne 4	Isumbras 2
Tristram 3	Horn 2
Octavian 3	Roland 2

What is surprising about these lists? Perhaps the inclusion of the names of Isumbras and Octavian: they are clearly not as central as Guy or Tristram, but more than one reader of romances (or rejecter of romances) thinks of their story as exemplary of the genre. Perhaps it is surprising, too, that Havelok (like Wade) is mentioned only once, in the list in the *Laud Troy Book* around 1400; after all, Robert Manning thought of Havelok's story as very important. But then he thought of it as history rather than romance.⁴² More significant is the inclusion of Charlemagne and Roland, who might be supposed to belong to a different genre category, the *chanson de geste*. But I would argue that the *chanson de geste* and romance do not belong to separate genres in England, and my argument is supported by yet another list in the Anglo-Norman *Miroir* by Robert

42 Bot I haf grete ferly, þat I fynd no man,
 Pat has writen in story, how Hanelok þis lond wan.
 Noiþer Gildas, no Bede, no Henry of Huntynton,
 No William of Malmesbiri, ne Pers of Bridlynton,
 Writes not in þer bokes of no kyng Athelwold,
 Ne Goldeburgh his douhtere, ne Hanelok not of told,
 Whilk tyme þe were kynges, long or now late
 Pei mak no menyng whan, no in what date.

(Manning, *The Story of England*, 3: 25)

of Gretham, source of the late fourteenth-century *Mirror* whose list we have already been looking at. In the early thirteenth century, Robert wrote to his patroness Dame Aline about her fondness for “Chançon de geste e d’estoire,”

Veëz si ço pot estre vair
 Que uns enfes oüst poair
 Cum dist la chançon de Mainet,
 U del orfanin Sansunnet,
 U de la geste dan Tristam,
 U del bon messenger Balam.

[Consider if this could be true
 That a child could have strength
 As the *chanson* says of Mainet
 Or about the wretched Sansunnet,
 Or about the story of Sir Tristam
 Or about the good messenger Balam.]⁴³

This catalogue of *chanson de geste* and (hi)story (of which Robert heartily disapproves) includes both Tristram and Charlemagne (the story of whose *enfances* is told in *Mainet*) together with a couple of other stories now classed as *chansons de geste*. The trope of listing makes a very important point about genre divisions and what counts as central to romance in England: the picture is decidedly different from that in France, where the *chansons de geste* have traditionally been considered a separate genre. Despite the similarities and interdependencies pointed out by scholars such as William Calin, more recent genre studies such as the Brownlees’, Kay’s, and Gaunt’s continue to treat romance and *chanson de geste* as distinct genres.⁴⁴

As for omissions, the absence from these lists of anything identifiably by the most prolific of English romance writers, Geoffrey Chaucer, does not in itself mean that his

43 Robert of Gretham, *Le Miroir*, l. 5, ll. 29-34. His allusions are to the *enfances* of Charlemagne (in the *Chanson de Mainet*); the messenger Balan in the *Chanson d’Aspremont*; probably Sanson the son of Ganelon, perhaps in the *Chanson d’Aye d’Avignon*; as well as to Tristram. We know from elsewhere that the *Chanson d’Aspremont* was read in England: Andrew Taylor cites evidence that a monk in the Benedictine Abbey of St. Augustine’s, Canterbury, owned a copy; Taylor, *Textual Situations*, 59.

44 See William Calin in “Rapport introductif,” 2: 407-424. This is an important introductory essay to a section by various scholars on “Rapports entre chanson de geste et roman au xiii^e siècle,” 2: 407-582, in *Essor et fortune de la Chanson de geste*. Calin lays emphasis on the shared traits and crossovers between the genres. Nevertheless, the romance is addressed as generically distinct from the *chanson de geste* by Brownlee and Brownlee, “Introduction,” in *Romance: Generic Transformations*; Kay, *The Chansons de geste in the Age of Romance*; and Gaunt, *Gender and Genre* and “Romance and Other Genres.”

romances were not considered central ones, since the relative dates are such that only the *Laud Troy Book* might post-date Chaucer: the absence proves nothing either way. The entire fifteenth century, with Lydgate, Malory, Caxton, and the newly important prose romance, goes without leaving a record of reception as pertinent as these explicit lists of contemporary categorizations of central romances from the fourteenth.

Most notable about the omissions from the catalogues is that the better-known erotic romances circulating in medieval England are mentioned relatively infrequently. It is true that *Tristram* is included; however, *Tristram* is a chivalric as well as an amatory hero. But *Partonope*, *Ipomedon*, and *Lancelot de Lake* are mentioned only in the second *Richard* list, while *Amadas et Ydoine* and *Yonec*, as the only one of Marie de France's *lais*, appear in the *Cursor Mundi* list. Yet *Amadas et Ydoine* was a very well known story. It was one of the books donated by Guy de Beauchamp to the Cistercian Bordesley Abbey in 1306.⁴⁵ It is alluded to in the thirteenth-century *Donnei des Amants* and, later in the century, by Thomas of Hales in his *Love Rune*; in the mid fourteenth century in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*; and in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, in *Emaré* and in *Sir Degrevant*, all three in the late fourteenth century.⁴⁶ Denis Piramus attests (begrudgingly) to the popularity of both *Partonopeus de Blois* and Marie de France's *lais*.⁴⁷ *Ipomedon*, besides its circulation in Anglo-Norman, has three Middle English versions.⁴⁸ And *Lancelots* (probably in French prose) are among the identifiable romances most frequently owned by women of the Middle Ages.⁴⁹ Thus it is clearly not the case that these stories had little impact in England. There is an important distinction to be made here between how well loved the story is and how central it is to contemporary conceptions of the genre of romance. These central love stories are not the first things thought of when fourteenth-century readers in England are naming romance: they are not as central to the genre then and there. One has only to recall the remarks of the Brownlees about the role of eros as the most essential dimension of human experience explored by the romance to recognize the magnitude of this difference between a generalized and a geo-

45 See Bell, *The Libraries of the Cistercians*, 4-10.

46 *Le Donnei des amants*, ll. 391-406; Thomas of Hales, *Love Rune*, ll. 65-72; *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, ll. 612-15; John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 6: 875-89; *Emaré*, ll. 121-32; *Sir Degrevant*, ll. 1489-96.

47 Denis Piramus, prologue to *La Vie Seint Edmund le Rei*, ll. 25-56.

48 The three translations of Hue de Rotelonde's Anglo-Norman *Ipomedon* are the tail-rhyme *Ipomadon* (late fourteenth century), the couplet *Lyfe of Ipomydon* (before 1425), and the prose *Ipomedon* (ca. 1460).

49 For the frequency of *Lancelots* among recorded medieval Englishwomen's books, see Meale, "alle the bokes that I haue," 139.

graphically and historically specific perception of romance.⁵⁰ And for that piece of information alone the catalogues are well worth the study.

Dalhousie University

50 Brownlee and Brownlee, "Introduction," *Romance: Generic Transformations*, 20.

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