Definitions of Middle English Romance

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II

What, then, are the criteria by which we can distinguish between *romances* and narratives of the *chanson de geste* type?[20] It should be noted immediately that the *romance* and the *chanson de geste* would appear to have much in common. Both types of narrative are essentially aristocratic and deal with the qualities of the warrior class, such as courage, skill in arms, loyalty, and generosity. Both most frequently illustrate these virtues through the medium of combat. The difference lies in the emphases placed on these qualities, on the ends which they are made to serve, and on the contexts within which they operate. The following distinctions are necessarily of a general nature and are not intended as a complete description of the preoccupations and techniques of the two genres. Since no two works of art are exactly alike, and since the narratives under discussion catered for a wide variety of needs and tastes, it is more than likely that no one poem will be found to contain all of the features of any one of the divisions. It is, however, possible to claim that if a poem is found to contain most of the essentials of one division rather than

of the other, then that poem can best be evaluated by considering it as belonging to that particular division. For example, it has often been pointed out that the thirteenth-century *chansons de geste* have assimilated certain features which belong more properly to the *roman courtois*, yet these poems are judged according to their predominant tone, which is still heroic, not romantic.

The *chanson de geste* is a type of heroic poem dependent on values essentially associated with war. Valour is the main ingredient of a warrior's character, but this valour need not be tempered by *mesure* or by *courtoisie* as it must be in a romance hero. At the same time, valour, to be admirable, must be employed in the defence of a worthy object, this generally being in the *chanson de geste* a combination of God and King. That is, the hero of a *chanson de geste* displays great, sometimes immoderate valour in the cause of his king or overlord, who is usually portrayed as the supreme champion of Christianity. W. P. Ker saw the essence of the *chansons de geste* as lying in their preoccupation with the problem of heroic character and in the dramatic variety with which this was expressed (pp. 292-95), and Dorothy Everett agrees with this: "The characters speak for themselves, whereas in the romances we are always conscious of the storyteller and his manipulation of episode and character." Certainly, if we examine the Charlemagne poems in English, *The Destruction of Troy*, *The Wars of Alexander*, *Alexander A* and the alliterative *Morte Arthur*, *Sir Gawain*, and *Sir Perceval of Galles*, it will easily be observed that one of those groups makes far more use of direct speech and behaviouristic description than the other. It will also be observed that the concept of the hero differs widely between those groups: that in the first group the hero tends to fight in defence of his lord or society, or in the furtherance of political ends, whereas in the other the hero is conceived of basically as an individual, not as essentially a representative of his society, and that the combats in which he engages or the experiences he undergoes rarely have any direct relation to nation or church. Even such broad distinctions as the above clearly do have some relevance to Middle English narratives. The first group of narratives mentioned above evidently meets the loosest definition of *romance*, that is, a tale involving knights and combat, but bears no other significant resemblance to the second group. Each group manifests a very different attitude to experience — a difference sharply evident in the two *Mortes*. To classify them together and define their common characteristics is an exercise of very limited usefulness. For example, to perceive that feasts, combats and the marvellous are "characteristics" of *romance* is of some interest, but cannot be taken as definitive of a genre, since these elements occur also in

classical and feudal heroic literature. It is the function of these elements and the author's way of presenting them that distinguishes *romance* from heroic.

It is in the concept of the hero that the greatest and essential difference is to be found between the *chanson de geste* and the *romance*. In the *chanson de geste* the group is dominant. As C. B. West has observed of the French *chanson de geste*, "Roland and Oliver may and do stand out as distinct personalities, but they are first of all members of Charlemagne's *maisnie*, of the French *barnage*, and of the Christian Church in the service of which they are ready to die against the infidels."[21] This is true also of the heroes of many Middle English poems, particularly, of course, the so-called "Charlemagne romances," but also of the heroes of *The Destruction of Troy*, the *Alexander* romances, the *Siege of Jerusalem*, and *The Sege of Troye*. At the same time, one will notice that there is another, more common attitude to the hero. In most of the narratives the individual, as distinct from his social function, is of supreme importance. The sentiment of feudal loyalty will be found to play little part in those narratives. The emphasis will instead rest on the exploits of the hero, not insofar as they may relate to the furtherance of politico-religious ends, but as they win renown *(los et pris)* for the individual. As Gaston Paris noted, "Ce qui caractérise . . . le roman . . . en regard de l'épopée, c'est . . . que celle-ci subordonne les héros particuliers à l'ensemble dont ils font partie, et que celui-là met les individus au premier plan et se plaît au developpement nuancé de leur caractère et de leur façon de sentir."[22] Both *chanson de geste* and *romance* heroes are known through their prowess, but while the former employs his skill in a public context, the latter does so solely or usually in pursuit of a private ideal.[23]

It is in this ideal that the *romance* hero differs so much from the hero of the *chanson de geste*. Whereas the character of the *chanson de geste* hero — indomitable courage in the face of danger and almost certain defeat — can be said to be no more than a heightening of reality, the character of the romance hero is largely an idealization which bears little relation to social reality and certainly did not spring from it.[24] The romance hero conforms to a code of behaviour which was largely a literary creation and convention, rarely observed in practice. As Painter points out,

> The relation between ideas and practice in the period of decay was quite different from that which had prevailed in the period of growth. By the middle of the 14th century the noble class of France had accepted the ideas of feudal chivalry and was

> carrying them out in practice to a greater extent than at any earlier time.[25]

The attempted revival of chivalry in the fourteenth century, manifested in the creation of the Order of the Round Table by Edward III and by a similar move in France, seems to emphasize that where chivalry was practised in reality, it was in an attempt to emulate an already established and formulated ideal, to conform to a code largely created by and disseminated through literature. To a large extent, the *chanson de geste* is closer to the "actualities" of the warrior class of the late Middle Ages than is the *romance*. The best romances and the greatest period of *romance*, of course, come in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries — that is, they precede considerably the period when chivalric ideas are most observed in practice. It is generally true to state that heroic literature *reflects* in a heightened manner rather than *creates* the system of values it expresses, whereas the *romance*, at least in its greatest period in France, creates a code and expresses values not generally current in society.

The basic paradigm of the *romance* is expressed in the formula, "The knight rides out alone to seek adventure":

> Thane weendes owtt the wardyne, Sir Wawayne hym selfen,
> Alls he that weysse was and whghte, wondyrs to seke.
> (*Morte Arthure*, 2513-14)

The lone knight rapidly finds himself in an unknown landscape (usually surprisingly close at hand and not requiring the strenuous journey Gawain undertakes), and encounters some perilous and often supernatural event. He resolves the problem presented by his skill in arms, and then rides on to yet another adventure. It is this formula which the alliterative *Morte Arthure* uses to point a contrast between the meaningful heroic struggle against the anti-Christian giant and the Roman invaders and the meaningless, purely personal glory-seeking of Gawain; this same formula is raised and rejected time and again in *Sir Gawain*, and parodied in *Sir Thopas*. This form, which stresses the sensational (and often tedious) succession of chivalric victories over ever-mounting odds, is the most common, particularly in England. The basic definition of *romance*, therefore, is that it is a tale in which a knight achieves great feats of arms, almost solely for his own *los et pris* in a series of adventures which have no social, political, or religious motivation and little or no connection with medieval actuality. At this level, it is not unlike the basic cowboy film, or the simple novel of action in which the hero undergoes a series of adventures, which sometimes become a progressive sequence, and

emerges victorious and unscathed at the end. A not inconsiderable number of the episodes in Malory clearly correspond to this pattern and level of significance. The basic romance is the *romance of adventure.*

The aristocratic or courtly romance, as perfected or created by Chrétien, takes this basic pattern and develops it, not by changing the form, but by giving the elements values and functions. In Chrétien the basic structure becomes the vehicle for a presentation and examination of the chivalric ethic. Where in the popular romance adventure exists purely for the demonstration of prowess, in Chrétien it exists as a test of more than the hero's martial skill. Motivation is provided by the presence of some amatory connection, direct or indirect. The meaningless (or purely glory-hunting) series of adventures becomes in Chrétien a progression: each adventure demonstrates different things about the hero, represents a stage in his journey towards internal harmony. Adventure becomes more than simply a chance encounter or a daring feat; it becomes something destined for the particular hero.[26] Where in earlier heroic literature Fate or chance had appeared accidental, though in its workings actively inimical to the individual, the new realization of Fate or chance is of something which is no longer accidental but rather "happens" to the individual in the sense of "destined for."[27] In *Ywain and Gawain*, for example, the adventure of the magic fountain is destined for Ywain.

Present in Chrétien's romances, therefore, is the idea of a personal, predestined office which is expressed by, and finds its proper manifestation in, chivalric adventure. Moreover, the locales and frames of each adventure become a meaningful part of the structure. When the hero encounters a castle or a person in Chrétien, such incidents are rarely purely decorative or circumstantial. Most frequently they are either related to the knight's moral progress or are expositions of the nature of aristocratic life. To some extent, sophisticated, courtly romance is educative: it proposes a model of fitting behaviour, *courtoisie*, which is expressed in three main areas of experience, combat, social intercourse, and the service of women. In *courtly romance*, these are vitally linked. The arrival at a castle during the quest for adventure and the giving or receiving of hospitality are significant in the scope they give for the display of *courtoisie*, as is the devotion which inspires the quest or the return of devotion which is the reward of success. The three main areas for the expression of *courtoisie* are united in the adventure which provides the means of proving the hero and preserving or developing his chivalry. As Auerbach has remarked: "Trial through adventure is the real meaning of the knight's ideal existence. . . . The series of adventures is thus raised to the

status of a fated and graduated test of election; it becomes the basis of a doctrine of personal perfection through a development dictated by fate."[28]

Adventure, then, is the real core of *romance*, whether it be popular or courtly. The manner of treating or seeing adventure, the context in which it is placed, the way it is related to the hero — these are what distinguish *courtly romance* from the simpler *romance of adventure*. They are also frequently concomitants of literary value. Most other elements which have been urged as essential features of *romance* are in fact less fundamental, and less preponderant, than the two essential elements defined above — the concept of the hero, and the nature and meaning of the episodic action.

Marvels or the supernatural have been urged, since the Renaissance, as the essence of *romance*.[29] While they are to be found in most of the works designated "romances," they are also to be found in classical and feudal epic literature and, indeed, throughout most medieval literature from folk tale to allegory. The supernatural, then, is not peculiar to *romance*, but it is clearly characteristic of it. What is notable is not its presence but its employment. It is, as Everett and Kane remark, a "property" rather than an essence,[30] and it is exploited in very many different ways, from the rather spare use in *Ywain and Gawain* where, although not essential to the *sans*, it is structurally significant and the instrument of episodic progress, to the pure sensationalism of the superabundance of marvellous incidents in *Sir Perceval of Galles* and *Lybeaus Desconus*. While the marvelous is not the essence of *romance*, it is clearly more than an optional "property." In most *romances* it either initiates the action or defines the nature of the action. In its proper or best use it creates the special atmosphere of the *romance* world where elements of social reality and the unnatural commingle, not for the purpose of sensational contrast between the real and the unreal, but to provide "a balance between fiction and verisimilitude."[31] The marvellous, while not treated within the better *romances* in terms of wonder or awe, nevertheless contributes to a sense of mystery because it is frequently used to initiate the action or to introduce a new turn to events. That is, it motivates the action, but the very form of the "motivation" enhances the "irrational" quality of romance:[32] the "reasons" given for the actions of the hero have nothing to do with what we would recognize as reasons, and the marvellous seems almost always inseparable from, indispensable to, this atmosphere of unmotivated (or unrealistically motivated) action. To take an example: *romance* and heroic poems frequently begin with a challenge. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, in the midst of feasting, Roman senators arrive to

demand tribute of Arthur; in *Sir Gawain*, in the midst of festivities, the Green Knight arrives to challenge Arthur. The pattern is identical, but the atmospheres and results are quite different: in *Morte Arthure*, the challenge is issued in terms of political or historical claims and the response is, first, a council of state and then national warfare to defend political interests; in *Sir Gawain*, the "causes" or terms of the challenge have nothing political, social, or historical about them, and the response to the challenge is individual and purely in terms of a special, and again personal, concept of honour (that is, any challenge must be met, regardless of causes, justification, or consequences): the response is a severing of a head, with no observable or normal consequences, a tryst, and a quest. The nature of the two actions here clearly differentiates the two genres, and highlights an important aspect of *romance*, namely that the nature of the action (the whole action — response and activity) is dependent on the initiating marvel: the fact that a challenge is issued by a *green* man with a disposable head both permits and creates the type of response and activity which follows. It is a world in which there may be *causes* for events, but there are no *reasons*. The use of the marvellous can, of course, and frequently does in works like Sir *Eglamour*, decline into the sensational, but it still remains necessary to the kind of action. While there are a few romances in which the incidents are not initiated or "motivated" by marvels, the action is still of the same kind (lacking in probability or reasonableness): where there is no marvel, the initiating factor is generally love of the courtly kind, which, of course, suspends all reason, as in the *Knight's Tale*:

> Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,
> Than may be yeve to any erthely man; . . .
> A man moot nedes love, maugree his heed.

The "modernity" of the romances is often noted as a definitive characteristic, and is undeniably present and noticeable from our historical vantage point. However, it is also a general characteristic of medieval histories, that is, of medieval man's way of regarding the past. Chaucer alone among Middle English writers can be said to have much sense of historic succession and cultural relativity,[33] and in his work there are probably far more instances of historical errors and a contemporizing of the past than of a realization of the historical differences.[34] "Modernity," then, is as characteristic of medieval literature as the rhetorical *descriptio* of spring — a characteristic of an age rather than of a genre.

Paradoxically, in the *romance* there is little attempt to authenticate the story in terms of actual political, geographical, or economic condi-

tions: the hero meets giants and encounters miracles without ever seeming to find them disturbing or unnatural, and time and place are of little importance. There is rarely an attempt to give the reader or audience a *reason* for what occurs, and if an explanation is offered, it is of the kind proposed to Gawain, an explanation which belongs to the closed, fictitious world of *romance*, not the world of nature and probability or history. The *romance* is contemporaneous in its manners, dress, and architecture, but totally outside of time and place in its actions. It may superficially contemporize, but it is not concerned to actualize.

Love, or, rather, courtly love is usually urged, from Ker onwards, as one of the chief distinguishing features of *romance*. For Ker the psychology of love is the centre of *romance*. Yet even in Chrétien, love is not the centre, but rather one of the two main components of the knight's persona. The search in Chrétien is not for the perfection of love, but for a harmonious balance between prowess and love. While most romances can be distinguished from the *chansons de geste* in containing some reference to sentimental love, it is by no means of the essence. While *courtly romances* make love an essential part of the character of the knight, and use it as a motivation for the plot, the trial by adventure still remains the core of the work: the lady, or love, is achieved through *prowess*, which may be enhanced by love, but nevertheless exists separate from it. When we turn to the Middle English romances, we find that only a few, such as the *Knight's Tale*, *Sir Gawain* (in a highly ambiguous fashion in both), *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Degrevant*, make courtly love in any way crucial to their plot. For the others, love is either simply one of the rewards of prowess (generally accompanied by a kingdom) or is used to motivate an episode and then casually abandoned. While it may be, therefore, a common characteristic, its treatment and importance vary widely. A possible explanation is that, since most Middle English romances are of a crude, popular nature, the absence of a full-fledged courtly love motif is due to a lack of understanding on the part of audience and composer. Whatever the reasons, the facts are clear enough: in most Middle English chivalric narratives love is peripheral or decorative, rather than central. Where love is central is, of course, in works like *Aucassin et Nicolette*, *Floris and Blancheflor*, and the *Franklin's Tale*, which are *romances* only in the catchall sense we noted at the beginning of this essay: the personages are aristocratic, and their love is subjected to a number of hazardous events. There is nothing here of the concept of the knight's search for self-fulfilment through adventure, of the necessity of proving personal, military prowess, of adventure as a special, fated task. In other words, the

works mentioned may be romances in a modern sense, stories of love under trial, but they are probably best understood as quite different from chivalric romances, a genre of their own, the courtly love poem.

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Part II will appear in the next issue.

1. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932), p. 15.

2. Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: University Press), p. 58.

3. Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 15.

4. See also Ojars Kratins, "The Middle English Romance *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography," *PMLA*, 81 (1966), 347, and A. C. Gibbs, ed., *Middle English Romances* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), pp. 1-3. Gibbs' introduction contains many valuable remarks on the problem of definition of genre, though I disagree with many of its conclusions.

5. Other classifications have been attempted on the basis of metre and area of composition: D. A. Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," *Mediaeval Studies*, 27 (1965), 91-116; of theme: A. H. Billings, *A Guide to the Middle English Metrical Romances*, Yale Studies in English, 9 (New York, 1901; rpt. New York: Haskell, 1965); and of length, Dieter Mehl, as above. Since the first two do not claim to define the genre and base their assumptions about romance on W. P. Ker and Dorothy Everett, I have seen no reason to consider their views here. My views on Mehl's thesis appear in a review, *Anglia*, 90 (1972), 220-24. The most recent study of the form of the romances, by Kathryn Hume, "The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance," *PQ*, 53 (1974), 158-80, accepts the existing bibliographical designations and categorizes "romances" according to "a spectrum of narrative types generated by varying the relation of hero to background" (p. 169), an approach which, though often leading to particular conclusions similar to those in the present study, is fundamentally different in its premises and general conclusions.

6. See Sir Walter Scott, "Essay on Romance," in *Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1852), VII, 130-33.

7. "The Definition of Romance," *PMLA*, 38 (1923), 57, n. 4.

8. "A Characterization of the English Romances," in *Essays on Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), pp. 6-10. This essay contains many perceptive insights and has been extremely influential on subsequent commentaries on the romances. It is because her definitions are both seminal and typical that I have chosen most frequently to refer to her work, rather than to that of her successors.

9. *Middle English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1951), p. 4.

10. Edmond Faral, *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et romans courtois* (Paris: E. Champion, 1913), p. 391.

11. I use these terms in the sense in which they are employed in semantics: see G. L. Brook, *A History of the English Language* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1958), pp. 178-79.

12. Reinald Hoops, "Der Begriff Romance in der mittelenglischen und frühneuenglischen Literatur," *Anglistische Forschungen*, Heft 68 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1929), 34-37. The poems listed are *Sir Beues, Arthour and Merlin, Richard Coer de Lion, Sir Perceval of Gales*, Minot's *Poems, Octavian*, Barbour's *Alexander* and *Bruce, Myrour of Lewed Men, St. Gregory, Sir Eglamour, Meditations on the Life and Passions of Christ, Laud Troy Book, Bone Florence, Rowland and Ottuel, Sir Gowther, Sowdone of Babylone, Romaunt of the Rose, Dyoclecyane, Sir Isumbras, Torrent of Portyngale, Partenay, Partenope*, and *Lancelot of the Laik*. A recent, more extensive and sophisticated study by Paul Strohm, "The Origin and Meaning of Middle English *Romaunce*," *Genre*, 10 (1977), 1-28, confirms the concurrent generalization and specialization of the word. He states that there seems to have been a generally shared concept of *romaunce*, but that the term is used in some strange ways and not with uniform precision. See Strohm, pp. 5, 7, 12-13.

13. W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1908), p. 321.

14. A. E. Taylor, *Introduction to Medieval Romance* (London: Folcroft, 1930), devotes a chapter to the "Charlemagne romances," which are all little more than translations, with occasional abbreviation, of Old French *chansons de geste*: that is, they are of a kind of poetry recognized to be fundamentally different from romance. Similarly, George Kane refers to the English Charlemagne narratives as "romances" (pp. 15-16).

15. Mehl, p. 28: "It is practically impossible to generalize about the romances because there is so little they all have in common."

16. See, for example, Dorothy Everett: "The Charlemagne romances probably have least of the spirit of chivalry, being affected by their origin in the chansons de geste" (p. 5, n.1), and "One romance, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, on a theme which roused more patriotic enthusiasm in an English poet than the doings of Charlemagne and his peers ever could, comes very near to claiming a place among heroic poems in English" (p. 21). See also George Kane, who recognizes that the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is "heroic not romantic" (p. 69), but later makes the paradoxical statement that "in the end the effect is heroic as it is in none of the other romances" (p. 73). The difficulty is most clearly faced by J. P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English* (Manchester: University Press, 1935), p. 24, who classifies the *Destruction of Troy*, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and the three Alexander fragments as "chronicles in the epic manner" because "the alliterative poems dealing with the legends of Troy and of Alexander the Great are not romances in the ordinary sense of the word, and . . . the central figures are never mediaeval knights representative of the spirit of chivalry, but heroic supermen of the epic type."

17. See Pamela Gordon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 217, who points out, in a wide-ranging and perceptive chapter on "the Romance Mode," that the *chansons de geste* continue to be translated into English in the fifteenth century. Note also the continued popularity of heroic chronicles in England and Scotland until much later; see Morton Bloomfield, "Episodic Motivation and Marvels in Epic and Romance," in *Essays and Explorations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press), p. 117: "It (the epic) continued to flourish at the periphery . . . in Iceland, Scotland (whose *The Bruce* and *The Wallace* are really retarded epics) and posssibly Ireland . . . and persisted in debased form in France and England and Germany themselves."

18. Everett, p. 20.

19. Mehl, pp. 4-6, more charitably suggests that they were aimed at a broader cross-section of society than Continental romances, which may explain their lack of art, but does not necessarily excuse it.

20. The following generalizations bear obvious relationships to the broad dis-

tinctions made by W. P. Ker in *Epic and Romance* and Eric Auerbach in *Mimesis*, but are also less specialized. The necessity of making such preliminary distinctions is also affirmed in three recent discussions of romance: Gradon, pp. 213-21; Gillian Beer, *Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 24-26; and John E. Stevens, *Medieval Romance* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 76-77, 90-95. Some of the material in the next few pages has already been presented in my introduction to *Morte Arthure* (London: Edward Arnold, 1967) and in an article, "*Ywain and Gawain* and the Meaning of Adventure," *Anglia*, 87 (1969), 312-37. Strohm, p. 6, notes "the evidence for the emerging sense of difference between the typical content of the *chançon* and the *romans*" in the debate poem, "Les Deux Bourdeurs Ribauds," where the speaker distinguishes between *chançon de geste* and *romanz d'aventure*.

21. C. B. West, *Courtoisie in Anglo-Norman Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1938), p. 2.

22. Gaston Paris, "Le roman d'aventure," *Cosmopolis*, 11 (Sept. 1898), 768-69. Although I later propose the term *romance of adventure*, it is not employed in the same way as Paris's *roman d'aventure*.

23. This is not to deny that romances occasionally provide some sort of extra-personal motivation. Gawain, in theory, accepts the challenge in defence of Arthur and his society, but in practice it is Gawain's person that is at stake, not the court. Only indirectly, finally, and subtly is Gawain's adventure other than purely personal. In the Arthurian romances in particular knights go forth from Arthur's court and return to it, as they do from Charlemagne's, but there is a conspicuous difference between the defence of an ideal fantasy against dragons, witches, and wicked barons of varying hues and the defence of a realm against Saracen armies. Again, this is not to deny that feudal relationships and bonds exist in *romance* (as in the relation of Ywain and the lion, or in Horn's conflict with Saracens), but these are completely subordinated to the interest in the individual or the adventure.

24. See the analysis of the relation of ideal and practice in M. A. Gist, *Love and War in the Middle English Romances* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1947), chapters 7 and 8; also K. Lippmann, *Das ritterliche Persönlichkeitsideal in der mittelenglischen Literatur des 13. and 14. Jahrhunderts* (Diss. Leipzig, Meerane, 1933).

25. *French Chivalry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 63.

26. For a full discussion of the concept of "adventure" see R. Bezzola, *Le sens de l'aventure et de l'amour* (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1947), pp. 83ff.; E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), chapter 6; E. Köhler, *Ideal und Wirklichkeit in der höfischen Epik*, Beihefte zur *Zeitschrifte für Romanische Philologie*, 97 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1956), chapter 3; M. Wehrli, "Roman und Legende im deutschen Hochmittelalter," *Worte und Werte, Bruno Marckwardt zum 60 Geburtstag*, ed. G. Erdmann and Alfons Eichstaedt (Berlin: 1961), pp. 428-43.

27. Bloomfield, p. 123.

28. Auerbach, pp. 135-36.

29. See Arthur Johnston, *Enchanted Ground* (London: Athlone, 1964), pp. 8ff.

30. See Everett, p. 13; Kane, p. 101.

31. Gradon, p. 235.

32. See Bloomfield's remarks on the "rational" epic and the "irrational" romance, pp. 106-07.

33. Bloomfield, "Chaucer's Sense of History" in *Essays and Explorations*, p. 18.

34. C. S. Lewis, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*," *Essays and Studies*, 17 (1932), 56-57.

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by John Finlayson

Part II*

III

If any guiding principle emerges from the attempt to distinguish medieval heroic poetry from *romance,* it is this: that they are not distinguishable primarily by their subject matter and the larger elements of their composition, but by an attitude to that matter and these elements. The hero in both is a feudal, aristocratic chevalier, but they are distinguishable by the concept of the nature and function of the warrior. The differing concepts of the feudal warrior are controlled by a total attitude (in fiction at any rate) to the aristocratic world and its experiences.

What are some of the consequences of the definitions I have proposed? The first is that a number of Middle English narrative works can be disestablished from the canon of *romance.* Though most literary histories and general studies of Middle English *romance* tend to categorize narrative poems based on chronicles as *romance,* a number of critics have implicitly or explicitly recognized that they cannot usefully be described as *romance,* unless the word is to be taken in the loosest sense of "a narrative involving combat and aristocratic *personae.*" Even the term "chronicle-romance" is misleading, since it suggests that the mode of these works is *romance,* whereas in the case of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *The Destruction of Troy* in particular the dominant mode is the heroic: in both, the pseudohistorical connection is of primary importance in giving shape and meaning to the sequence of episodes; in both the deeds of the heroes are to be understood in relation to the defence and destruction of a specific society which is conceived of as having a historical existence. This is very different from the mythical society of the Round Table in Arthurian romances, where the society or king provides a loose frame for event, but no attempt is made to suggest a historical reality, or, in most cases, to tie the individual achievement to the existence of that

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society. It is the difference between "this scept'rd isle" and "the coast of Bohemia."

Similarly, the amount of fabulous material in the *Alexander* narratives has led critics to call them *romances*, based on the assumption that the marvellous or exotic is a necessary and therefore definitive feature of the *romance*. However, the fabulous material in these works is drawn largely from their sources, occasionally augmented from Mandeville's *Travels*, which are not usually described as romances. Moreover, many of the exotic elements in the *Alexander* narratives are presented, not as deliberate departures from the natural world, but as testimonies to some of the curious things which are to be found in remote regions. The presentation of a dragon in the Forest of Broceliande is a deliberate act of fantasy, since the medieval audience *knew* that dragons no longer inhabited Europe; the statement that in India some men stand on one leg with their heads under their shoulders is proposed, however, not as fantasy but as fact. Mandeville may occasionally appear a little sceptical about some exotic elements, just as William of Newburg casts a sceptical eye on Geoffrey of Monmouth's history,[35] but these clearly do not represent conventional or influential views of the fabulous histories. What is important in *romance* is not exotic material, but the attitude to it and its function. Science fiction, for example, would once have been definable as *romance*, because flights into space were an act of fantasy. We cannot label something a fantasy because we no longer credit its existence: the Ptolemaic universe was "real" enough for some time. The marvellous or supernatural, therefore, is not a thing but the product of an attitude. Since the supernatural and the exotic occur quite prominently in *Beowulf* (the indispensable dragon of romance as well), the *Iliad*, and the *Aeneid*, its mere occurrence in a poem is clearly no indication of genre or mode.

Similarly, the "Charlemagne romances" are best considered as largely heroic works. It is a curious perversity to recognize that they differ little from their sources, are quite different from Arthurian romances, and display little interest in love or courtly behaviour, and yet to insist on evaluating them as *romances*. Though in them individual combats and assorted giants are a fairly prominent feature, these encounters are placed in a larger context. Like the dream of the dragon and the fight with the giant in *Morte Arthure*, or the individual victories of Hector and Achilles in *The Destruction of Troy*, they have their meaning as elements in either a continuing struggle of Christian against heathen or the defence of a society. In no case are these encounters part of a process of self-realization, the progress to the *mesure* of *romance*. While individuals have and seek *los et pris*, like Roland

and Beowulf, this is always motivated by reference to a sociopolitical reality which may be considerably heightened in art but is not a mythical ideal. Individual episodes in the Charlemagne poems may be difficult to distinguish from episodes in the cruder Middle English *romances of adventure,* if taken in isolation. However, placed in the context of the whole work, the differences in kind are clear enough. Where love enters these works (an element often cited as evidence of the "romanticization" of the *chanson de geste,* as in the *Sowdone of Babylone*), it is not love of the courtly type and the adventures are in no way motivated by this love, though the hero may find his way out of a tricky situation because of love, like Jason. Social courtesy and refined laws of combat have nothing to do with events in these works. Indeed, Froissart's *Chronicles* are frequently more "romantic" than the Charlemagne "romances."

Romance is not a monolithic genre,[36] but in its more sophisticated practitioners a mode which we can often characterize by isolation of elements such as the concept of the hero, the treatment of the marvellous, of time, and of place, the nature and function of adventure, and the episodic nature of structure. It is genre, however, in that certain types of episode become the indispensable forms to express this attitude in the Middle Ages. A particular kind of activity becomes the vehicle for the presentation of an attitude to experience and comes to be representative of a whole system of values. It becomes a formula whose elements stand for the attitude to experience, so that in less talented hands they are repeated mechanically with little sense of the experience they were designed to release. At the same time they are so ritualized that even the worst exposition of them might be expected to evoke a generalized sense of the ethos which they represent.

The difficulty or danger for criticism arises if, in isolating elements which exhibit the attitude to experience of the writer, the mode of expression, we make of these elements the *essences* of the genre, rather as we mechanically define a pastoral elegy. If, however, we accept *romance* as essentially a way of presenting and an attitude to experience, then the distinction between the heroic and the *romance* becomes much clearer, despite the obvious overlap in matters of content and rhetorical expression. The way of seeing controls the nature of the action, so that it is the total action, not its parts, which is *romance.* At the same time, if we take certain "characterizing" elements, not as rigid essentials, but rather as indicators of the precise nature of the particular artifact, then it becomes evident that within the basic genre there are specific types. For example, the presence or absence of an erotic element is not an indicator of whether or not the work is *romance,* but an indicator of the particular area of experi-

ence the author proposes. In fact, only two elements are of sufficient weight to modify significantly the basic pattern or preoccupation of *romance*, the trial by destined adventure of the lone knight, without at the same time turning the genre into something else: these are courtly love and its related *courtoisie*, and the spiritual quest. The distinction between *romances* which are wholly or mainly concerned with adventure and those which deal with adventure in relation to love has been made earlier. It is a distinction which is partly the central *sans* of *Ywain and Gawain*,[37] and it is central in one way or another to the *Knight's Tale*, *Sir Gawain*, and Malory, as well as *Sir Degrevant*. There are, in fact, numerically few *courtly romances* in English, but they are usually regarded as the best, and most frequently for a modern reader they characterize the genre.[38] In those works, while the love interest is not the dominating element, it is nevertheless of at least equal importance with and is in fact inseparable from adventure, and from the meaning of the work. The type is to be defined, not simply by the presence of an element, but rather by the significance of its function.

There are comparatively few *courtly romances* in Middle English, and most of them (the *Knight's Tale*, *Sir Gawain*, Malory) are too well-known to need comment here. *Ywain and Gawain*, because it is a fairly close translation of Chrétien's *Yvain*, most closely exemplifies the paradigm suggested earlier in this paper, but since I have already written at length on it, I hope I may simply refer the reader to my article. Since the *Knight's Tale* and *Sir Gawain* can be interpreted as, to differing extents, critical examinations of the *romance* ethos, *Ywain* and certain parts of Malory are the only fully achieved *courtly romances* in English.

However, a small number of less well-known works exhibit attempts to emulate this particular type. *William of Palerne*, for example, though not as polished a work as its French source, nevertheless demonstrates a laudable ability to handle courtly material. As an early commentator notes, the Middle English writer does not simply translate, but rather renders his understanding of the *matter*.[39] My own comparison of this work with its source indicates that the English author very frequently expands or reexpresses the courtly material, and the combat descriptions are new creations, using Middle English formulaic diction. While the work as a whole is often repetitious and the plot too reliant on coincidental relationships badly handled, much of the author's (or paraphraser's) interest clearly lies, not in the magical occurrences or the obligatory battle scenes, but in the love element and in the physical settings. The inner dialogue of Melior on her love-pangs,[40] though derived in substance from the source, is

reexpressed by the English poet in a manner which recalls the inner dialogues of Troilus:

> Nou certes, seþþe it is so to seie þe trewþe,
> Þann haue y had gret wrong myn [hert] so to blame,
> For eni werk þat he wrouȝt seþþe i wol it hold,
> ne wold i it were non oþer al þe world to haue.
> (454-57)

> Mi siȝt may in no maner more harme wirche,
> but ȝif myn hauteyn hert þe harde a-sente.
> (471-72)

> I sayle now in þe see as schip boute maste,
> boute anker or ore or ani semlyche sayle. . . .
> (567-68)

These sentiments are, of course, the standard coinage of courtly love, but their expression here, while not as achieved as Chaucer's rendering of Petrarch's sonnet 88 in the *Canticus Troili,* are nevertheless not without merit. For the purposes of this paper, it is worth noting that the English poet has *not* excised the courtly matter or botched it; clearly, he understands the sentiments and the manner. It is also worth noting that the English writer amplifies the *descriptio loci* he finds in his source. For example,

> Faire floures þei founde of fele maner hewes,
> Þat swete were of sauor & to þe siȝt gode;
> & eche busch ful of briddes þat bliþeliche song,
> boþe þe þrusch & þe þrustele bi xxxti of boþe,
> Meleden ful merye in maner of here kinde.
> & alle freliche foules þat on þat friþ songe,
> for merþe of þat may time þei made moche noyce,
> to glade wiþ uch gome þat here gle herde.
> (817-24)

Passages such as this are more than competent translations of the source and indicate the writer's awareness of the "high" or courtly style necessary to the context. In a number of places, the English writer heightens his matter with rhetorical *descriptiones* not found in his source, and in one good passage makes the *descriptio* a necessary part of the action: the discovery of William is brought about in the Middle English version because the boy comes out of his cave attracted by the spring song of the birds —

> What for melodye þat þei made in þe mey sesoun,

Þat litel child listely lorked out of his caue,
Faire floures forto fecche. . . .
(24-26)

The Squire of Low Degre is a much more sophisticated example of the courtly romance, and demonstrates a literary self-consciousness found in very few Middle English works. The author's references to other romances in lines 78-82, and his inclusion of a summary of an incident in *Lybeaus Desconus* in the speech of the King's daughter to the Squire (613-36), are valuable indications both of his literary self-consciousness and of medieval awareness of genre. It is a work packed with very elaborate *descriptiones* of people and things of the sort one expects of *romance*, but very rarely finds; a *romance* where attention is focused at least as much on the splendour of the created world and the rhetorical elegance of the sentiments as on the knightly adventures and the love story. Stylistically, in fact, it is a little overripe; the writer so clearly enjoys demonstrating his rhetorical ability to handle the various *figures* and *topoi* that one sometimes wishes he would get on with the story. This poem alone would be evidence enough that English writers were aware of the distinction between the simple *romance of adventure* and the *courtly romance*, and had the rhetorical skill to create in the courtly mode.[41]

Other romances such as *Sir Degrevant* demonstrate the same clear understanding of the nature of the *courtly romance:* the courtliness of the hero is established at length (st. 3), there are elaborate descriptions of hunts, castles, dress, heraldic devices and social rituals, and love and prowess are explicitly associated by the author (sts. 57 and 61), as well as providing the motivation and the central organization of the narrative.

The distinctions between these works and the *romance of adventure* are quite clear, even when the central story line is similar. *Sir Perceval of Galles* is, like *William of Palerne*, basically a romance of "nurture," but the centre of the work has nothing to do with the *courtoisie* of *Sir Degrevant*, nor with the love motifs of either *Palerne* or *The Squire of Low Degre*. The first adventure maintains a ballad-like spell, the sense of a wild naif let loose in a complex society and riding roughshod, but successfully, over its practices because of his innocence and innate nobility. The process of his adventures is the progress to his identity, that is, to his name and his proper role. It is also one of the most coherent examples in Middle English of the *entrelacement* which Chrétien created as one of the most striking structural features of Old French romance. As a whole, however, it is of uneven quality and too frequently betrays an imperfect grasp of the essence of

romance: there is much carelessness about plot coherence, a considerable uncertainty as to whether Perceval is sustained because of his basic innocence and inherent (and inherited) nobility or simply because of the magic ring; the uncertainty does not contribute to a sense of numinous, symbolic action, but seems rather the product of an imperfect conception on the author's part. It is, however, a fairly typical example of the Middle English *romance of adventure* in that it sometimes creates its own meaning quite persuasively, but often depends on the formulaic value of *romance* rituals.[42] It is also, of course, a typical example of how much Middle English *romance* was generated, since it is clearly the result of the reductive capacity of a far from sophisticated mind. *Perceval le Gallois, ou le conte du Graal* becomes *Sir Perceval of Galles,* and the reflective, symbolic aspects of the work are stripped away to reveal a "rattling good adventure story" with lots of corpses, a certain amount of primitive suspense, and a happy ending. Clearly, the English author's intentions were vastly different from those of his possible source. It is equally clear that he intends a *romance of adventure,* rather than anything religious or courtly. However, this difference of intention, which is often stated in blanket fashion to be characteristic of Middle English romance, should not be taken as an excuse for the avoidance of literary evaluation. *Sir Perceval's* intentions are both different and imperfectly executed; its artistic clumsiness and coarse sensibility are rather splendidly caught by lines such as

> Percevell made þe sonne othe
> Þat he come never undir clothe
> To do þat lady no lothe.
>
> (1933-35)