The Meanings of Romance: Rethinking Early Modern Fiction

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Early modern scholars often use the term “romance” in speaking about Renaissance literature. Loose and ill-defined as it is, “romance” still seems the best fit for all those curious older form of fictions we cannot quite call “novels,” distant as they are from the conventions of modern realism. Today we use “romance” quite broadly: we speak of chivalric romances such as Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* (1516, 1532), pastoral romances such as Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* (1504), or Greek romances like the *Aethiopica* of Helliodorus (third or fourth century CE), for example. “Romance” has become the word that indicates one of our most powerful genre categories, inspiring a long tradition of theory from W. P. Ker, Erich Auerbach, Northrop Frye, Patricia Parker, David Quint, and many others. But for sixteenth-century readers, the term as we understand it now did not exist. Much of what we today call Renaissance “romance” was, in its own day, a genre without a name—if, in fact, the authors of the new modes of fiction believed they worked within a common genre at all.

I do not mean that words such as *romance*, *romanzo*, and *roman* were never used then, or that Renaissance theorists did not have their own sophisticated ideas about what such terms should mean. They did, though their ideas are not identical to ours. What I will argue instead is more complicated: that the meaning of “romance” and its cognates changes radically between 1550 and 1670. Word and meaning even become a site of struggle: a focal point for vehement debates over the status of fiction, over male aris-
tocratic virtue, and ultimately over the rise of women writers on the literary market. I want to propose that for the early modern scholar, “romance” can be more than an ambiguous genre category. It is, rather, what Raymond Williams once called a cultural “keyword”: a term whose semantic shifts open a window on social and historical upheavals of a far greater scale.2

* * *

In their earliest form, words such as romanz, romant, and roman once meant only “a romance language,” a vernacular derived from the old speech of the Roman Empire.3 By the late twelfth century, the Old French romanz had become a term not only for the vernacular but also for the stories written in such vernacular. When Chrétien de Troyes declares in Cligès (ca. 1176) that “cest romans fist Crestı¨ens” (Chrétien made this romance), he announces both his authorship and a name for a distinctly modern genre.4 This new narrative clearly proclaims its descent from Rome. Yet it marks a difference as well: Chrétien’s tale is not in Latin but in the language of the people. As “romance,” the word is adopted into English around the year 1300. Parodies of the genre were soon to follow: Chaucer could already lampoon the conventions of the “romances of prys” with his Tale of Sir Thopas (ca. 1392).5

But words once popular do not always stay current. By the sixteenth century, “romance” had become old-fashioned, seldom used. If we look for the term in Elizabethan England, we hardly find it. George Puttenham is one of the few to use it, and for him the word is mired in the past. “Romance” meant the old metrical tales of medieval origin: “stories of old time, as the Tale of Sir Topas, the reports of Bevis of Southampton, Guy of Warwicke, Adam Bell, and Clym of the Clough, and such other old romances or historical rhymes.”6 Its medium was verse, not prose; it described older compositions, not contemporary fiction. Edmund Spenser, though he writes in verse and

2. Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
4. Chrétien de Troyes, Cligès, ed. Stewart Gregory and Claude Luttrell (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), line 23; this translation and all further translations are my own unless noted otherwise.
draws much upon this earlier tradition, never names himself a writer of romances. He is a “poet historical,” and his *Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) “an historicall fiction.” 7 And when Philip Sidney speaks of books such as *Amadis de Gaula* (1508), the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus, and *Orlando furioso*, he never calls such works “romances,” as a modern critic is wont to do; to Sidney, they are instead types of the “heroical poem.” 8

Even in the most likely places, the English word “romance” is absent. John Lyly and Robert Greene never use it in the prologues to their fictions; even Anthony Munday, translator of the *Amadís* books, never mentions the term. Roger Ascham, who rails against the “bookes of fayned chevalrie” read “in our fathers tyme,” clearly has a sense of the genre but never uses the word. 9 The same could be said of Juan Luis Vives and his contemporary English translator, Richard Hyrd. Where Vives gives a list of books he considers dangerous for women to read, Hyrd adds a number of popular English tales to the list: “those ungracious bokes, suche as be in my countre in Spayne Amadise, Florisande, Tirante, Tristane, and Celestina the baudemother of noughtynes. In Fraunce Lancilot du Lake, Paris and Vienna, Ponthus and Sidonia, and Melucyne. In Flaunderes, Flori and Whitlowre, Leonel and Canamour, Turias and Floret, Pyramus and Thysbe. In Engelande, Parthenope, Genarides, Hippomadon, William and Melyour, Libius and Arthur, Guye, Bevis, and many other.” 10 With Hyrd’s additions, this list includes works in prose and verse; many feature knights but others lack them. Hyrd believes these books are all of a kind despite their differences. But neither Vives (writing in Latin) nor Hyrd (writing in English) yet has a name for such a group, a generic term that might invoke the whole list in a succinct single word.

In the age of Shakespeare, no one used “romance” in the broad ways in which we employ it today. “Romance” was a limited term, an old-fashioned term, certainly not a catchall name for then-contemporary fiction. Even on the Continent its sense was clearly bounded. If the Old French *roman* once covered vernacular literature of all kinds, the passage of four centuries had narrowed its meaning. 11 For the sixteenth-century reader, a *roman* was a tale

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11. On the French word *roman*, see Marian Rothstein, “*Le genre du roman à la Renaissance,*” *Études Françaises* 32 (1996): 35–47; Neil Kenny, “‘Ce nom de roman qui estoit particulier aux livres de chevalerie, estant demeuré à tous les livres de fiction’: La naissance antidatée
in prose, a story of knights-errant. Etienne Pasquier in 1596 gives us a glimpse of how the word has changed:

Comme ainsi soit que le Roman fut le langage Courtisan de France, tous ceux qui s’amusoient d’escrire les faits heroyques de nos Chevaliers, premierement en Vers, puis en Prose appellerent leurs ouvres Romans, et non seulement ceux-là, mais aussi presque tous autres, comme nous voyons le Roman de la Roze, où il n’est discouru que de l’Amour, et de la Philosophie.12

[Since Romance was thus the courtly language of France, all those who amused themselves by writing of the heroic feats of our knights, first in verse, then in prose, called their works “romances.” And not only those, but almost all other works [were called “romances”], as we see in the Roman de la Rose, where only love and philosophy are discussed.]

Pasquier gives the familiar definition first: romans are stories of chivalry and heroism. But he reminds his readers that the word once encompassed much more—even stories without a trace of knighthood in them, like the Roman de la rose. Yet with its older senses forgotten, roman was now a restricted genre term. True, chivalric narratives like Amadís de Gaula were called romans, and the French translators of the series prefaced their books with praise for the genre.13 But when Jacques Amyot translates a Hellenistic tale such as the Aethiopica, the word roman never enters his vocabulary. His Greek author fills his tale with shipwrecks, separations, and lovers’ reunions—surely the very essence of what we now call romance. But in Amyot’s own day, ancient prose fiction of this kind had no fixed name. Instead, Amyot calls his Greek adventure a “fabuleuse histoire.”14
In Italy, the word *romanzo* covered a similar semantic ground, that is, stories of chivalry above all.  

The spectacular success of one particular chivalric poem—Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*—launched the genre term to prominence all over Renaissance Italy. Ariosto’s admirers praised the *romanzo* as the modern heroic genre, featuring a dazzling variety of plotlines no ancient epic could match.  

Cultured readers argued passionately not only about the *romanzo* but about the *romanzesco*, those modal qualities that seemed unique to the kind. But critics decried the violation of timeless artistic laws and brandished Aristotle’s newly printed *Poetics* as their authority. Many rallied behind Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) as a proper epic poem, modern in idiom but respectfully classical in form. The preference for Tasso or Ariosto, epic or romance, became one of the most hotly debated questions of the day, and everyone (including a young Galileo Galilei) seemed to have an opinion on the matter. At stake was not merely who was the better poet but whether new compositions ought to follow ancient or modern rules. Even Cervantes and Milton took notice of the debate, and we might view their own ambitious genre experiments as a response to their time in Italy.

Yet in all the arguments over epic and romance, certain forms of fiction never enter the picture. Even among its critics, a *romanzo* denoted only a high mode of literature, centered on the deeds of illustrious men. The name itself seemed virile: some derived it from the Greek word *rhômê*,


16. It is worth noting that even as they celebrated the poem’s modernity, Ariosto’s defenders still found ways to link *Orlando furioso* to the epic past. They sought precedent for Ariosto’s wide diversity of characters and events in Homer’s *Odyssey*, for example. See Cinzio, *Discorso dei romanzi*, 101; and Giovan Battista Pigna, *I romanzi* (Venice, 1554), 23.

17. To my knowledge, the earliest instance of *romanzesco* occurs in Pigna, *I romanzi*, 21.


meaning “strength.” 21 Without such strong warriors, there could be no romance: Sannazaro’s pastoral Arcadia, for example, was never called a romanzo. 22 Indeed, for a sixteenth-century Italian, a romance of shepherds would have been a contradiction in terms. A romanzo was a “poema eroico” (heroic poem), and the first Italian dictionary (a product of the Accademia della Crusca) proudly proclaimed it as such. 23

Romance, romanzo, roman—in the sixteenth century, each of these terms covered only certain kinds of stories and not others. In Spain, the word romance did not even primarily denote a written literary kind. Romances were popular ballads or else indicated the vernacular language itself; 24 chivalric adventures were instead called libros de caballerías, “books of chivalry.” “Romance,” as it turns out, nowhere has the meaning we expect. Even when understood as a literary kind, the values contemporary critics associated with the genre were often quite different from ours.

Today we think of “romance” as a vast literature of love. But in the literary debates of Italy and France, martial exploits were the genre’s sine qua non. The knight in love must still be able to fight when called upon, and stories without such warriors did not even merit the name. Hence, the Italian romances were also called libri di battaglie (books of battle), as if war rather than love were their most important subject. 25 The title pages of the French Amadis translations sometimes promised “adventures d’armes et d’amours” (adventures of arms and of loves). Yet at other times they heralded only “les guerres et discordz” (wars and discord), with no mention of a more tender subject. 26 The books called “romances” could radiate eroticism—but it was their martial elements that critics valued more. Giraldi Cin-
zio, one of the earliest to theorize the genre, calls them “poema e composizione di cavalieri forti” (poems and compositions of strong knights). The heroes of romance were defined by their class and vocation, and the works themselves were commonly known by their great warriors’ names: Orlando, Amadís, Lancelot, and the like. Even in the English case, Puttenham’s “romances” are all named after fighters, most of them wellborn, all of them renowned for their courage and combat prowess.

Sixteenth-century women never called their own works “romances,” and their writings rarely trespassed into so virile a subject. There were noteworthy exceptions: in England, for example, Margaret Tyler penned the *Mirrour of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (1578), translating a Spanish work filled with war and chivalric adventures. Yet Tyler admits in her preface to the reader that her story seems “a matter more manlike then becommeth my sexe.” In Italy, Moderata Fonte composed her heroic poem *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581) in bold imitation of Ariosto. But when Fonte’s male readers praised her work, they did so in a tone of mystified wonder: a laudatory sonnet by Fonte’s own uncle marvels that a “non esperta verginella” (an inexpert little virgin) could write about battles and voyages to distant lands.

In the sixteenth century, romances were understood as books of arms and chivalry, and to write one was to venture into a male domain. This is not to say that such tales lacked prominent heroines or passionate loves. (And indeed, moralistic critics often bemoaned those features the most.) But if in the sixteenth century the books called “romances” often included love, martial valor was their single most prized ingredient—at least in the theory of the day.

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What is startling about “romance” in the Renaissance is how much the term excludes. Sixteenth-century readers never speak of pastoral “romances” or Greek “romances”: the word was not broad enough to include

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such diverse narrative kinds. But the word’s limitations shed some light on the status of fiction in the early modern age. In fact, the sixteenth century had few terms for imaginative literature in general. Works of fiction and nonfiction alike were often simply titled “book” (livre, libro). A lengthy tale might be called a “history” (histoire, historia), but that term could also denote a factual narrative—“history” in our modern sense. Theorists throughout Europe commonly cited the many kinds of poetry: epic, lyric, tragedy, comedy, satire, and the like. But they showed little interest in a classifying system for narrative alone. And if they did, they often accepted divisions based not on what we would call “generic features” but on a work’s perceived truth content. They could cite the rhetorical definitions of Cicero and Quintilian, for example, which classed all narratives as either historia (factually true), argumentum (fictitious but plausible), or fabula (neither true nor plausible).

Epic (épica, poema eroico, ouvre heroïque) was the supreme narrative genre, the reference point for all talk of fiction. Other forms of narrative proliferated wildly throughout the era—novellas, picaresque tales, and pastoral love stories, to name only a few—but these experiments went ignored by major literary theorists, or else they were redefined in terms of epic. As Julius Caesar Scaliger once put it, “For objects of every kind there exists one perfect original to which all the rest can be referred as their norm and standard. In epic poetry, which describes the descent, life, and deeds of heroes, all other kinds of poetry have such a norm, so that to it they turn for their regulative principles.” Epic sets the standard for everything else. The new romanzi were merely epic’s most modern incarnation or a monstrous deformation, depending on one’s point of view. Theory lags behind praxis. Although the sixteenth century abounded in humbler forms of fiction, we find few new words to categorize its latest imaginative products.

Yet as the ruling rubric for fiction, “epic” had its limits. True, the term could cover narratives in prose as well as in verse (according to some critics...
at least). But according to ancient precept, an epic’s most appropriate subject was war. In practice, Renaissance heroic poems from Ariosto’s Orlando furioso to Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene to Alonso de Ercilla’s Araucana (1569, 1578, 1589) were mixed in nature, promoting arma as well as amor as spheres of heroic activity. But, in theory, whether an epic could legitimately center on love was a thorny question: treatises by Torquato Tasso, by Alonso López Pinciano, and by Philip Sidney all hesitate between yes and no. Perhaps a lesser epic could be about love, Tasso mused, but the best kind would celebrate those deeds “gloriously undertaken to establish the faith or exalt the Church and Empire.”

As a term for fiction, “epic” was restricted in other ways. Its protagonists were invariably illustrious, men and women of the highest birth. If the heroic poem was indeed a “little world,” it was largely scrubbed of the seedier elements of society. Miguel de Cervantes made a joke of such exclusions, turning one of the more pedantic characters of the Quixote (1605, 1615) into an enforcer of the epic “rules.” The Canon of Toledo dreams of reading an ideal heroic poem, one that might contain

naúfragos, tormentas, recuentros y batallas, pintando un capitán valeroso con todas las partes que para ser tal se requieren . . . pintando ora un lamentable y trágico suceso, ahora un alegre y no pensado acontecimiento; allí una hermosísima dama, honesta, discreta, y recatada; aquí un caballero cristiano, valiente y cometido; acullá un desaforado bárbaro fanfarrón, acá un príncipe cortés, valeroso y bien mirado; representando bondad y lealtad de vasallos, grandezas y mercedes de señores.

[shipwracks, tempests, incounters, and battels: delineating a valorous Captaine, with all the properties required in him [. . .] Deciphering now a lamentable and tragicall sucesse, then a joyfull and unexpected event; there a most beautifull, honest, and discreete Ladie, heere a valiant, courteous, and Christian knight, there an unmeasurable barbarous braggard; heere a gentle, valorous, and wise Prince: Representing the goodnesse and loyalty of subjects, the magnificence and bountie of Lords.]36

34. War was canonized as the official subject of epic in Roman literary theory; see Stephen Hinds, “Essential Epic: Genre and Gender from Macer to Statius,” in Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society, ed. Mary Depew and Dirk Obbink (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 221–44.
35. Tasso, Discourses on the Heroic Poem, 50, and see 48–50. See also Pinciano, Philosophía antiguá poética, 460–69; and Sidney, Defence of Poetry, 81, 105–6.
The Canon is a learned man, his words a recitation of fashionable Italian ideas. His epic will have valiant captains, beautiful ladies, Christian knights, and courteous princes: men and women of the highest rank and only the most exemplary of each kind. These tales would in turn shape other great men, teaching “all those parts that make a worthy man perfect.”37 Yet the elevated fiction the Canon describes is hardly the one we are reading. Rather, Cervantes’s book is populated by impoverished hidalgos and prudent peasants, the cross-dressed daughters of wealthy farmers, convicts and charlatans who dream of writing books of their own. When the Quixote was first published, its title proclaimed it not an epic, but a historia. Cervantes probably delighted in a word that could mean either “story” or “history.”38 But there were few alternatives available to him: words for pure fiction were still scarce indeed.

If the heroic poem could cover stories about kings, heroes, knights, and ladies, it was a name less apt for the shepherds of Arcadia, or the intrigues of clever city dwellers, or the rogues of the picaresque world. Within his lifetime, Cervantes had witnessed a veritable “fiction explosion,” fueled by the print revolution and a general rise in literacy.39 Both the pastoral love story and the picaresque tale made their debut on the literary market, spreading from Italy and Spain to all of Europe. Older genres such as the novella flourished in print, energized by new collections from Matteo Bandello (1554, 1573) and Marguerite de Navarre (1558) as well as translations like Belleforest’s Histoires tragiques (1559–82). And after centuries of obscurity, ancient prose fiction fell upon Europe with the force of a revelation, thanks to the printing of rare manuscripts written by Heliodorus (1534), Achilles Tatius (1544), and Longus (1559).40

37. Cervantes, Don Quixote of the Mancha, 533. Cervantes’s own attitude toward such elevated fiction is hard to determine. According to Riley (Cervantes’s Theory of the Novel, 47–49), the Canon’s epic is not Cervantes’s own ideal of the novel. But it is nevertheless a form of fiction that Cervantes respected and tried to reproduce in the Persiles (1617). For a contrasting opinion, see Francisco Márquez Villanueva, “El Quijote: Épica y narratividad,” Boletín de la Real Academia Española 85 (2005): 443–59.


40. Heliodorus’s Aethiopica was first printed in Greek, Achilles Tatius’s Leucippe and Clitophon (second century CE) was first published in Latin translation, and Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe (second or third century CE) was first published in French translation. For their full translation and publication history, see Victor Skretkowicz, European Erotic Romance: Philhellene Protestantism, Renaissance Translation and English Literary Politics (Manchester University Press, 2010), 27–165.
Much of this unclassed fiction could hardly be called “heroic” in the warlike sense. The ancient Greek tales, for instance, featured heroes far more passive than the wrathful Achilles or even the love-struck, furious Orlando. Their protagonists were usually lovers who endured shipwreck, separation, and kidnapping before their fidelity was rewarded by marriage. In Heliodorus’s story, Odysseus himself appears in a dream and likens the young couple’s wanderings to his own.\(^{41}\) Like Odysseus, Theagenes and Charikleia survive through patience, a little cunning, and the friendly force of providence. Yet Homer’s hero was a war veteran, and upon his return to Ithaca he slays the suitors usurping his home. Heliodorus featured the shipwrecks but not the slaughter. To Renaissance readers, his male hero Theagenes was clearly no warrior: “Il ne fait executer nulz memorables exploitz d’armes” (he achieves no memorable feats of arms), as Jacques Amyot once complained.\(^{42}\)

In their time, the Greek prose tales had negotiated new values for a changed political stage, one dominated not by the independent city-state but the Roman Empire.\(^{43}\) The tales resurfaced in the Renaissance during a transition equally profound. The traditional values and identity of the aristocracy were under pressure, challenged by both a new culture of humanism and the exigencies of the early modern state. Reformation and Counter-Reformation, too, contributed to the shock of social upheaval. Many pioneers of the new fiction (noble and commoner alike) launched their careers under this complex constellation of influences. The best-selling author Jorge de Montemayor, for example, spent his life serving the Spanish crown at court and on the battlefield. His earliest compositions were religious poems, imbued with the introspective spirit of Catholic reformism. But in the wake of a Protestant scare, his books were deemed heterodox and banned by the Inquisition.\(^{44}\) Barred from spiritual explorations, Montemayor turned his energies instead to the inner world of his secular

42. Amyot, “Proesme du translateur,” sig. A3r.
43. On the invisible presence of Rome in the Greek prose tales, see David Konstan, Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres (Princeton University Press, 1994), 218–31. Note that classical rhetoric, too, had lacked a term for prose fiction and that Greek writers such as Longus and Heliodorus produced their masterpieces in the absence of any generic rubric.
44. On Montemayor’s religious poetry and its censorship by the Inquisition, see Bryant L. Creel, The Religious Poetry of Jorge de Montemayor (London: Tamesis, 1981); and Elizabeth Rhodes, The Unrecognized Precursors of Montemayor’s “Diana” (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 20–107. Both authors argue that Montemayor’s poetry was strongly influenced by pre-Tridentine Catholic reform movements in Spain and their shared focus on spiritual withdrawal and interiority.
shepherds. The melancholy men and women of the pastoral Diana (1559) sing that “los que sufren más son los mejores” (those who suffer most are best): true virtue lies in the patient endurance of an adverse Fortune.45

Print accelerated the circulation of new and old narrative kinds. But it also encouraged their combination in experimental forms. A thriving print market brought ancient, medieval, and modern tales side by side on European bookshelves, and many sixteenth-century best sellers were born out of the mixture of all three. The popular Amadís books were quick to blend the adventures of brave knights and gentle shepherds. Montemayor, for his part, structured his pastoral Diana like a Greek prose tale, filled with chance meetings and embedded narratives. But among his shepherds he included a warrior maiden out of heroic poetry, and her woeful history is a retelling of a novella by Bandello. Sidney famously praised the mingling of “matters heroical and pastoral,” and his own New Arcadia (1590) combined elements from the Amadís books, from Montemayor’s Diana, and from Heliodorus’s Aethiopica, among many others.46

What we call the era before the novel, in other words, was anything but a dark age for fiction. When Cervantes began his literary career, in the 1580s, there were more kinds of fiction available than ever before, produced in greater quantities than anything the pre-Gutenberg world had ever seen. And much of the new material marked a departure from the martially oriented traditions of heroic poetry and chivalric romance. Cervantes himself experimented with nearly all the new narrative modes of his day, penning novellas, pastoral books, picaresque tales, and Hellenistic adventures both before and after the Quixote. But while the sixteenth century abounded in fiction, its theorists expressed discomfort with the naming of new and mixed literary kinds.47 If Aristotle didn’t mention the genre, it faced a hard fight for legitimacy.

I have argued, thus far, that only a small stratum of fiction qualified as “romance” in the Renaissance, while many more fictions simply went unnamed. Their lack of a fixed designation suggests a lack of cultural prestige: they are not considered works of true literature, nor do they warrant a set vocabulary for intellectual discussion. Of the various kinds of invented nar-

47. See, for example, the controversy that erupted between Giovanni Battista Guarini and Jason Denores over the “tragicomedy,” summarized in Weinberg, History of Literary Criticism, 2:1074–105.
rative, the Spanish theorist Pinciano mused that “pure fiction” (fición pura) was the least valuable. 48 By “pure fiction,” he meant works of entertainment built wholly from the imagination: these he considered less worthy than stories based on true history or fables that taught a moral lesson. In its most distilled, essential form, fiction had little to recommend itself. We might remember that Sidney called his Arcadia “but a trifle, and that triflingly handled.” 49 Such disavowals were a commonplace for fiction writers, particularly if their fiction was in prose.

What “romance” means—and what it doesn’t—speaks volumes about the sixteenth-century attitude toward fiction. A “romance” was a heroic poem: a story of great men and, indeed, written chiefly by men. If there was as yet no name for much of what we call Renaissance “romance,” it was because other kinds of stories commanded only a dubious esteem. Yet this multitude of nameless narratives offered a powerful critique of aristocratic virtue and its emphasis on lineage and martial prowess. In fact, it may be precisely because of their alternative values that such fictions were never called “romances.” Being aware of such inclusions and exclusions may help us recognize the true ideological diversity of Renaissance fiction. It may also help us reassess certain scholarly truisms: the idea that romance was a woman’s genre, for example, or a genre centered on love. These are late seventeenth-century assumptions, and they have gained much traction ever since. But what a seventeenth-century reader means by “romance,” as we will see, is a different understanding altogether.

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Energized by the print revolution, literary production far outstripped the existing vocabulary for fiction in the sixteenth century. But in the seventeenth century, authors, readers, and critics begin to assign a term to such nameless narratives: they become “romances.” Starting in France in the 1620s, and then in England in the 1630s, “romance” and its cognates utterly transform in meaning. Commentators begin to speak of “romance” not as a genre of male heroics but one of imagination and the passions. Female authors gain new prominence, praised for their special understanding of the genre. By the time our word “romantic” is coined, in 1650, “romance” has even become a word for fiction itself, gathering all imaginative literature under its immense shadow.

We may never know when “romance” was first used in a new sense; every-
day speech may change first and the written record only later. But one striking
instance comes from a woman of letters, Marie de Gournay. Though
most famous for editing the works of her dear friend Michel de Montaigne,
Gournay also authored books of her own: classical translations, an essay in
defense of women writers, and a short work of fiction entitled Le proumenoir
de Monsieur de Montaigne (1594). The Proumenoir tells the story of Alinda, a
Persian princess, whose elopement with her lover ends in tragedy. Its original
edition called the work only a livret or histoire, a tale apparently re-
counted to Montaigne during a long walk with Gournay.50 But by 1626,
when Gournay republished the story, the roman was the genre most on her
mind. In a new preface, Gournay cites her critics, who complained that a
roman like hers should not contain so many philosophical discourses and
Latin quotations. Rather than refuse the genre label, Gournay argues for its
elevation: “Un Roman de mérite est aussi glorieux qu’un autre genre d’ou-
vrage” (a roman of merit is just as prestigious as any other kind of work).51
Her ensuing list of praiseworthy romans includes some surprising examples:
works such as Heliodorus’s Aethiopica, the Diana of Montemayor, Cervan-
tes’s Don Quixote, John Barclay’s Argenis (1621), and even an Arcadie that
may be Sidney’s New Arcadia, recently translated into French.52

Gournay was hardly alone in discussing the new prose fictions. Charles
Sorel’s Berger extravagant (1627, 1628) followed in her wake, attacking a vari-
ety of books under the name of the roman. As his mouthpiece Clarimonde
puts it, “Nous avons encore maintenant une autre genre de livres contre
lequel je me suis deliberé de parler. Ces livres s’apellent des romans, et
c’est proprement une poësie en prose. Il y en à d’une infinité de façons”
(There is yet among us another kind of Books against which I am resolved
to speak. These Books are called Romances; and to speak properly, ’tis
Poetry in Prose; there are many fashions of them).53 Under the term roman,

51. Marie Le Jars de Gournay, L’ombre de la damoiselle de Gournay (Paris, 1626), 651. On
Gournay’s preface and the evolving definition of the roman, see Cathleen M. Bauschatz, “Les
Puissances de Vostre Empire’: Changing Power Relations in Marie de Gournay’s Le proumenoir
de Monsieur de Montaigne from 1594 to 1626,” in Renaissance Women Writers: French Texts/American
Contexts, ed. Anne R. Larsen and Colette H. Winn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press,
52. Sidney’s Arcadia had appeared in competing French translations, by Jean Baudoin
(1624, 1625) and by Geneviève Chappelain (1625), and was famous enough to be explicitly
named by Gournay’s contemporary Charles Sorel. On the Arcadia’s French translations, see
91.
13, pages 61–62.
he includes not merely the romances of chivalry but also the Greek prose tales and the new books of pastoral fiction. Honoré d'Urfé’s Astrée (1607–27) comes under fire but so too do older titles: Heliodorus’s Aethiopica and Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe, popular imports such as Montemayor’s Diana and Sidney’s New Arcadia, and political allegories like Barclay’s Argenis. Sorel is not against fiction per se; rather, he criticizes such books for their more implausible, far-fetched elements. Sorel even coins a new adjective to describe this fictive, fantastic quality. For his foolish hero Louis (a bourgeois overly fond of reading), to sleep outdoors on the ground is “une chose bien romanesque”: a truly romance-like adventure.54

None of Sorel’s targets were called romans when first published, either in France or any other Western nation. Nor were they usually discussed as a group, Hellenistic, chivalric, pastoral, and others all rolled together as one. Sorel’s word roman in 1628 already reaches farther and more flexibly than its sixteenth-century counterpart. It stretches back into the Greek past and forward into the modern era; it covers stories about men and women who never once bear arms; it accepts sixteenth-century works that once had no genre to call their own. In the writings of Gournay and Sorel, critical discourse seems at last to catch up to the fiction boom of the sixteenth century. The term roman expands to fill a void, and critics and proponents alike finally share a vocabulary to discuss the literature of their day.

But in the process, our medieval term sheds much of its earlier specificity. Gone is the stress on martial heroics, vernacular language, modern form. For Sorel, a roman means a fiction in prose. There are, he adds, “many fashions” of them. And, indeed, seventeenth-century writers (unlike their sixteenth-century counterparts) begin to speak of the roman as a single genre with many branches. When Madeleine de Scudéry launches her prolific literary career with Ibrahim (1641), she declares the roman to be her “principal object” and devotes a preface to the rules of the genre. A roman must be unified, its many actions tending toward a single end, and it must be plausible, employing enough accurate detail to create the illusion of verisimilitude. Such were the principles established by Heliodorus and “ces fameux Romans de l’Antiquité” (those famous romances of Antiquity).55 As sixteenth-century theorists once composed rules for the heroic poem, so too does Scudéry delineate rules for the prose roman—as if her ancient, chivalric, and pastoral sources were all variants of a single tradition and governed by a single set of principles.

If the French now spoke of the roman in unprecedented ways, Sorel did not let the linguistic slippage pass unnoticed. By the time of his Bibliotheque françoise (1664), he mused that the term roman could now cover any work of

55. Madeleine de Scudéry, Ibrahim; ou, L’illustre Bassa (Paris, 1641), sig. 6-iv.
fiction at all: “Ce nom de roman qui estoit particulier aux livres de chevalerie, estant demeuré à tous les livres de fiction, ainsi que l’usage en a ordonné” (this word roman, which used to be specific to the books of chivalry, [is] now left to all books of fiction, as common usage has dictated). The word could still denote exotic stories of highborn heroes, as in the romans héroïques of Scudéry and La Calprenède. But a roman could now encompass prose fiction throughout the literary spectrum—even satirical or picaresque tales. These Sorel calls romans comiques: he praises the inventions of Miguel de Cervantes and Mateo Alemán in particular. In the sixteenth century, such tales were still nameless intruders on the literary scene. But when the word roman becomes simply an abstract term for fiction, we have arrived at a society in which no single kind of fiction predominates.

The older sense of roman was still remembered, but it was fast becoming a target of ridicule. By midcentury, Sorel’s countrymen Paul Scarron and Antoine Furetière were publishing books with such titles as Le roman comique (1651) and Le roman bourgeois (1666), making open mockery of the once-heroic notion of the genre. Furetière even begins his work with a swipe at the poets of old:

Je chante les Amours et les aventures de plusieurs Bourgeois de Paris de l’un et de l’autre sexe. Et ce qui est de plus merveilleux, c’est que je les chante, et si je ne sc¸ay pas la Musique. Mais puis qu’un Roman n’est rien qu’une Poésie en prose, je croirois mal débuter, si je ne suivois l’exemple de mes Maistres.

[I Sing the Amours and Adventures of certain Citizens of Paris of both sexes, and though it may seem strange that I sing having no Skill in Musick; yet Romances being [epic] Poems in Prose, I should do ill by any other Exordium to deviate from the examples of my Masters.] Ariosto had once boasted that he would sing of “le donne, i cavallier, l’arme, gli amori” (ladies, knights, arms, and loves), outdoing Virgil’s mere “arma virumque” (arms and the man). Furetière, on the other hand, sings only of love, leaving out the arms entirely. And though he too will sing of men and women, his protagonists will be people of a middling class: “personnes qui ne seront ny heros ny heroïnes, qui ne dresseront point d’armées, ny ne renverseront point de royaumes, mais qui seront de ces bonnes gens de mediocre condition” (Persons that are neither Hero’s nor

56. Charles Sorel, La bibliothèque françoise (Paris, 1664), 162.  
57. Ibid., 172.  
58. Antoine Furetière, Le roman bourgeois (Paris, 1666), 1–2; the translation is from the erroneously named Scarron’s City Romance, Made English (London, 1671), 1.  
Heroines, that neither defeat Armies nor subdue Kingdoms, but being honest People of an ordinary condition). From now on, the books called romans need not be so heroic after all.

And what of the English “romance”? Around the 1630s, the term so seldom used in previous decades begins an extraordinary expansion. Henry Reynolds, in his Mythomystes (1632), praises the poets of Spain for “those prose Romances they abound in,” naming picaresque tales such as Lazarillo de Tormes (1554) and Guzman de Alfarache (1599). When Sir Richard Baker translates the letters of Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac in 1638, he uses “romance” for ancient Greek tales and modern chivalric stories alike. John Evelyn links the genre with pastoral in 1654, noting that Salisbury Plain reminds him of “the pleasant lives of the shepherds we read of in romances.” Influenced by its French counterpart, the English “romance” was gradually becoming an all-purpose word for fiction. In 1648, Matthias Prideaux could already use “romance” for almost any narrative that was not true history: Heliodorus’s Aethiopica was a “morall romance”; Cervantes’s Don Quixote, a “satyricall romance”; More’s Utopia, a “politicall romance”; and so forth.

In contrast to its sparse sixteenth-century usage, “romance” in the seventeenth century is a word that sells. From the 1650s onward, bookshops announce translations such as The History of Don Fenise: A New Romance (1651); Cassandra: The Fam’d Romance (1652); Artamenes; or, The Grand Cyrus: An Excellent New Romance (1653). After the Civil War, English works, too, begin to claim the title for themselves. In 1653, Percy Herbert could complain that “for many years past, not any one Romance hath been written in the English tongue.” His own Cloria and Narcissus: A Delightfull and New Romance promises to remedy the lack. “Romance” encompassed both Herbert’s political allegories and pure historical fictions, and the applications only grew wider as the century progressed. Madame de Lafayette’s Princess de Clèves (1678), which we hail as a masterpiece of psychological realism,

60. Furetière, Le roman bourgeois, 28, and [Furetière], Scarron’s City Romance, 2.
64. The OED suggests that the later sense of “romance” as “a fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life” derives from the French roman (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “romance,” def. II.3.a).
was translated and published as “The Most Fam’d Romance.” So too was Paul Scarron’s *Roman comique*, the “comical romance” of a lowly troop of actors.68 Such was the allure of the genre term that even older books once titled “histories” begin to be repackaged as “romances.” When Honoré d’Urfé’s pastoral *Astrée* was first published in English, for example, it was as *The History of Astrea* (1620). But when John Davies retranslates the work in 1657, he titles it *Astrea: A Romance* and opens with a prologue praising romance as the highest of all fictional genres.69

Why should so many books, representing very diverse values, begin to be collected under “romance”? They had little enough in common besides their invented nature. But with the advance of early modern science, “romance” was becoming not merely a genre term but an epistemological category.70 When Sidney once spoke of fiction, he used the term “poesy,” contrasting the golden world of the poet to the historian’s “brazen” world of nature. But for Roger Boyle, in 1655, the word is not “poesy” but “romance”: “Besides, Romances tell us what may be, whereas true Histories tell us what is, or has bin.”71 “Romance” was a word deployed not merely by poets and booksellers but by the men of the nascent scientific revolution. To the spokesmen of the Royal Society, it was the opposite of everything they stood for. “What a Romance is the story of those impossible concamemonations, Intersections, Involutions, and feign’d Rotations of solid Orbs?” asks Joseph Glanvill in 1661, attacking the old Aristotelian image of the cosmos.72 According to Thomas Sprat, six years later, the natural histories of Pliny and Solinus were filled “more with pretty Tales, and fine monstrous Stories; than sober, and fruitful Relations. . . . It is like Romances, in respect of True History.”73 In a culture in which truth and untruth were redefined as objects of empirical study, “romance” becomes a way of naming nearly everything that was not fact.

New meanings produce a new genealogy. For if “romance” now simply means “fiction,” it must be as old as humanity itself. As John Davies asks in


69. The ancient Greek prose tales receive a similar treatment: Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe* becomes *Daphnis and Chloe: A Most Sweet, and Pleasant Pastorall Romance for Young Ladies* (London, 1657), and Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* is retitled *The Triumphs of Love and Constancy: A Romance* (London, 1687).


the 1657 Astrea, “For, what were the Oracles, what all ancient Mythologies, what Numas’s pretended correspondence with his Nymph Aegeria, but so many politick Romances?”74 For Davies, romance is no longer the quaint medieval genre of “historical rhymes” that it was for Puttenham some seventy years earlier. On the contrary, romance now predates the Middle Ages, and even the Romance languages themselves. Romances are the source of all myth and fable; they are “the highest and noblest productions of man’s wit.” As the premier genre of fiction, “romance” has become a name to conjure with. And in 1650, “romantic” is the word invented to describe this unbridled imaginative capability, in all its favorable, unfavorable, and even purely neutral senses.75

By the latter half of the seventeenth century, “romance” and its cognates have acquired profound new values. Romance even begins to be theorized as a separate genre entirely. In the influential treatise of Pierre-Daniel Huet (1670), the roman is not a variant of epic so much as an autonomous—and alternative—literary tradition. Epics dealt with war and politics, but romans were “fictions d’aventures amoureuses”: fictions with love at their center.76 Epics demanded erudition, but romans only the exercise of the imagination. Far from being a Western vernacular tradition, the writing of romans was a basic inclination to fiction and the fabulous. Huet even suggested that the genre was invented in the ancient East, though all nations indulged in “la poesie romanesque.”77 And although he acknowledged that the older chivalric romans had mingled battles with their love stories, this was merely because they were the product of the more barbarous Middle Ages. In his own day, Huet believed, the roman had been restored to its original purity—and nowhere better than in the amatory fictions of women writers like Scudéry and Lafayette.78

Thus, even as “romance” begins to denote a natural, universal form of fiction, it also acquires feminine associations. In France, a flourishing salon culture gave rise to a generation of prominent women writers, and critics and defenders alike were quick to call them the ultimate representatives of

77. Huet, Traité de l’origine des romans, 11, 74.
78. See ibid., 96–98.
the romance. After 1650, even the few English women in print began to be linked with romance in particular. When Mary Wroth had penned the *Urania* in 1621, she never claimed her own fiction as a romance. But for Margaret Cavendish in 1653, Wroth is now “the Lady that wrote the Romancy.” Cavendish’s own works were praised as “poeticall romances,” and by 1664 she could remark that “when any of our Sex doth Write, they Write some Devotions, or Romances, or Receits of Medicines.” In the late seventeenth century, “romance” at last becomes the name for a genre in which women, too, could excel.

From a word for heroic fiction (with its focus on male martial exploits), “romance” transforms into the name of a supergenre: a literature of imagination and fancy, devoted not to war but to love. We still feel the effects of this remarkable semantic shift. Today, *roman* serves as the standard name for all forms of fiction in France; the same has become true of the Italian *romanzo*, the German *Roman*, the Portuguese *romance*, and the Russian *roman*. Something similar could be said of the English “romance” until the late eighteenth century, when it was eventually superseded by the term “novel.” Spain flirted briefly in the early nineteenth century with both *romance* and *novela* as synonyms for long fiction, though *novela* has become the dominant term today. All in all, this is a momentous change, a precipitous rise in the fortunes of our medieval genre term. Rather than the heroic poem, it is “romance” and its cognates that govern our understanding of fiction today.

Thus, for all the times we invoke romance as an a priori literary genre, it may well be worth remembering the opposite perspective. Our wide-ranging, powerful category of romance is, in fact, an a posteriori response, a product of our complex early modern history. The print revolution, the pressures of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the rise of empirical science— all these currents exert their pull over early modern authors and audiences. Europe was weathering a long political transition, turning from feudalism toward the modern sovereign state. The aristocracy saw their old roles transformed; the urban bourgeoisie, though limited in influence, were growing more numerous and mobile. Writers began to tell new kinds of stories, to explore the capabilities and inner world of their protagonists in diverse ways. A new reading public was emerging, and aristocratic women (and

80. For “poeticall romances,” see Elizabeth Toppe to Margaret Cavendish, in Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, sig. A5v; for Cavendish’s remark on women and romance, see Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* (London, 1664), 226.
some bourgeoise as well) were gaining prominence as authors and arbiters of taste. With time, the cumulative force of these technological, epistemological, and social upheavals would alter not merely the kinds of fiction that we write but our very understanding of fiction itself.

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Earlier, I proposed that “romance” and its cognates could be considered cultural keywords. They are “key” because they are tied up with larger social values, and this at times makes them into sites of struggle. That controversy could erupt over a word such as “romance” seems today a strange proposition. But one such spark of contention blazes in the late seventeenth century, in the polemic over the modern French roman. It is at this point, as France begins its long period of cultural dominance over the Continent, that we can trace the origin of one of our most basic critical assumptions: that a romance deals with love.

Today such a statement seems self-evident, even banal. But before the influential ideas of Pierre-Daniel Huet, love was rarely understood as the genre’s most indispensable ingredient. In his Traité de l’origine des romans (1670), Huet explains how the books called romans have changed:

Autrefois sous le nom de Romans on comprenoit, non seulement ceux qui estoient écrits en Prose, mais plus souvent encore ceux qui estoient écrits en Vers. Le Giraldi & le Pigna son disciple dans leurs traités De Romanzi, n’en reconnoissent presque point d’autres, & donnent le Boiardo, & l’Arioste pour modeles. Mais aujourd’hui l’usage contraire a prévalu, & ce que l’on appelle proprement romans, sont des fictions d’aventures amoureuses, écrites en prose avec art, pour le plaisir et l’instruction des lecteurs. Je dis des fictions, pour les distinguer des histoires véritables; j’ajoute d’aventures amoureuses, parce que l’amour doit être le principal sujet du roman.

[Heretofore under the name of Romance were comprehended not only those which were writ in Prose, but those also which were writ in Verse. Giraldi and Pigna his Disciple in their treatises De Romanzi scarce take notice of any others, and give the Boyardos and Arioste for models. But at this day the contrary usage has prevailed, and they which are now properly called Romances, are Fictions of Love-Adventures, writ in Prose with Art, for the delight and instruction of the readers. I say Fictions, to distinguish them from true Histories; I add, of Love-Adventures, for that Love ought to be the principal subject of a Romance.]83

Huet points to the outcome of a long linguistic transition. The word *roman*, he tells us, used to designate works such as Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, heroic poems (often in verse) about the many adventures of knights-errant. But it has come “at this day” to mean a work of fiction, in prose, that explores the terrain of the human heart. In modern English, of course, Huet’s genre term *roman* could mean either “romance” or “novel,” though to translate it either way is to make an inevitably polemical choice.

Let us remain with “romance,” because that is the word that Huet’s first translators chose and because our distinction between romances and novels would not yet have made much sense in Huet’s day. Huet knew that he was not the first to discuss romance and its difference from other literary kinds. He acknowledges his Italian forerunners, citing earlier theorists like Giraldi Cinzio and the defenders of “Arioste” (Ariosto). Linking himself to the old Italian debate, Huet establishes a certain continuity. The older *romanzo* and the modern French *roman* still formed part of one and the same literary tradition, no matter how sophisticated the latter had become.

At the same time, Huet’s opinions betray a startling shift from the genre consciousness of the sixteenth century. A romance, to Huet’s avowed predecessor Cinzio, was still a species of heroic poetry, different in form but not in content from the great epics of Homer and Virgil. But for Huet, the two genres are definitively sundered. Epics, he tells us, are written in verse, whereas romances today are written only in prose. Epics contain more of the marvelous, whereas romances tend toward the verisimilar. Above all, epics and romances explore two realms of experience that Huet marks out as separate: “Enfin, les poèmes [epiques] ont pour sujet une action militaire ou politique, et ne traitent l’amour que par occasion; les romans, au contraire, ont l’amour pour sujet principal, et ne traitent la politique et la guerre que par incident” (In fine, [epic] Poems have for their subject some Military or Politick action, and treat not of Love but upon occasion. Romances on the contrary have Love for their principle Theme, and meddle not with War or Politicks but by accident).84 No matter what the word once meant, a *roman* now is above all a genre of love. The great matters of war and politics lie outside its nature; they are (if present) merely accidental to the species, not the heart of the thing itself.

What has become for us a casual, everyday association—romance equals love—was in Huet’s time the fuel for a full-scale culture war.85 To Huet’s

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contemporary (and bitter enemy) Nicolas Boileau, the modern *roman* was nothing but a deformation of the classical epic. No longer concerned with the great deeds of kings and heroes, it had become a genre full of sentimental ladies, effeminate gallants, and (even worse) frivolous bourgeois whose entire lives revolved around amorous intrigue and affairs of the heart. In his satires, Boileau complained of how far such books had strayed from the proper epic virtues. As he declares sarcastically in *Les héros de roman* (ca. 1665), “N’est-ce pas l’amour qui fait aujourd’hui la vertu heroïque?” (Isn’t it love that constitutes heroic virtue today?). If Huet’s treatise illuminates the changing meanings of *roman*, Boileau’s work may be the first time the word “hero” is used (albeit with scathing irony) to describe simply the protagonist of a literary work rather than a person of great stature and achievement. The only thing these besotted “héros” share with the great figures of the classical past, he protests, is the fact that “ce sont eux qui ont toujours le haut bout dans les livres” (it is they who have always had the most prominent place in books). The hero of the *roman*—the modern hero—is the main character of a story and nothing more.

Boileau and Huet were both to become members of the Académie Française, that institution founded by Cardinal Richelieu to perfect the French language and establish national standards of literary taste. In their day, the debate over modern literature and what it stood for splashed over the pages of newspapers like the *Mercure galante* and could descend, quite literally, into shouting matches on the Academy floor. For Boileau, the *romans* and their degenerate focus on love were a threat to the very fabric of society: they blurred the boundaries between aristocrat and bourgeois and sapped the male military virtue needed to support monarch and state. His dialogue reserves a special place of disgust for female authors such as Scudéry, whose works are at last thrown into the river Lethe by the denizens of the Underworld. For Huet, by contrast, the *roman* was the pride of the nation, an autonomous genre that had always been devoted to its own separate values. And the form had been perfected, he adds, thanks in large part to women writers like Scudéry and Lafayette. Indeed, Huet believed it was the greater social freedom women possessed that had allowed the *roman* to thrive in France as nowhere else. Both Huet and Boileau cannot help but notice,

86. Nicolas Boileau Despréaux, *Les héros de roman*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane (Boston: Ginn, 1902), 208. Though Boileau’s dialogue was not published until 1688, it was read in public gatherings around 1665. Huet was probably acquainted with Boileau’s text either in manuscript or through a public reading and began his own countertreatise in 1666. On Boileau versus Huet, see Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 159–99.


however, that the values tied up with the word seem irrevocably to have changed. What the *roman* meant for readers in their day was no longer the same as for an earlier era.

Perhaps we may consider Boileau triumphant, since the female authors he so scorned have been largely written out of literary history. But in terms of the French language, at least, Huet may have won a small victory. Earlier I mentioned the *Vocabolario* of the Italian Accademia della Crusca, the first vernacular dictionary to define romance as a literary kind. In its dictionary debut in 1612, the *romanzo* is a heroic poem, illustrious in content while modern in form. But when Richelet’s *Dictionnaire françois* was published in 1679, it offered a very different take on the genre. Citing Huet nearly word for word, it called the *roman* “une fiction qui comprend quelque avantrure amoureuse écrite en prose” (a fiction that consists of some amorous adventure written in prose). Eleven years later, Antoine Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) described the *roman* as a tale of “amour et chevaleries” (love and chivalry) and sketched a history following the outlines of Huet’s treatise.89 When the *roman* makes its debut in the earliest dictionaries of the French language, it is as a genre of love.

I began this essay by proposing that much of what we now call Renaissance “romance” was, in its own day, a genre without a name, a crowd of uncategorized literary experiments not heroic enough to fall under any existing rubric. But by the late seventeenth century, theorists such as Huet begin to speak of fiction as no longer an integral realm of heroic poetry but, rather, as a twofold world. On one side was epic, a literature of wars and great affairs of state. On the other was romance, devoted to an erotic domain believed to lie outside war and politics. The codification of “romance” as a second, fully autonomous narrative category inaugurates a shift in our conceptual framework for fiction. It clears a space for new fictional kinds with new values, granting them prestige and legitimacy—if not the political significance reserved for the epic. Yet this process of separation and autonomy is by no means smooth. The acrimonious exchanges of men like Boileau and Huet are the culmination of decades of cultural anxiety: over the purpose of imaginative literature, over the decline of the male aristocratic warrior ideal, over the legitimacy of women writers on the literary market. For all the ease with which we use the word “romance” today, the birth of the category itself was a contested and tempestuous affair.

We tend to forget the troubled history of “romance.” But the extra edge of awareness may displace some of our most entrenched beliefs about the genre and help us chart the contours of our own literary past. After the print revolution, prose fiction expands to explore not merely aristocratic martial exploits but other subjects, other virtues, other forms of heroism. Yet our validation of the new narrative modes comes only belatedly, and not without heated social debate. The transformations of “romance” can help us navigate between different phases of this long cultural transition. With them we can distinguish between an era flush with new, nameless literary kinds and their delayed canonization (and public acceptance) as “romances” in the following century. With them we can understand how Renaissance intellectuals first theorized epic and romance, and how this heroic continuum cleaved apart within the next hundred years. And with them we can trace the movement from a century in which women’s fiction is virtually nonexistent to a century in which women have become some of the most famous fiction writers on the market. The history of early modern fiction still remains a largely undiscovered country. “Romance,” in all its changing senses, can serve as our map and guide.