MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE AS PROTOTYPE GENRE

by Yin Liu

One of the more fascinating histories in the study of medieval literatures is the history of scholarly attempts to define Middle English romance as a genre.[1] The polemical declarations of scholars, their dodges, embarrassments, sleights of hand, gestures of despair, have often been as compelling as the adventures of the knight himself, as he overcomes formidable opponents, negotiates unexpected setbacks, puzzles out marvels beyond the scope of his prior experience, in a convoluted and bewildering quest whose object recedes constantly below a misty horizon. And, since romance has proven itself inexhaustibly and infinitely expandable, I make no apologies for taking yet another run at the meaning of "Middle English romance" as a generic term. It will not be the last attempt, especially if it is successful, for the approach I describe here is intended not to be definitive but to be descriptive, not to provide closure but to open up further areas of exploration. At the same time, I wish to suggest a system of ideas that may serve as a guide to exploration, and to point out some implications of this approach for our understanding of medieval English literature. The framework for this approach is loosely based on the prototype theory of categorization in cognitive linguistics, and so this paper may serve as a case study for the application of prototype theory to literary genres more broadly.

I have alluded already to the figure of "the knight himself," the stereotypical protagonist of medieval chivalric romance, but of course the problems that this paper addresses would not exist if the essence of this medieval genre were so easily recognizable. The definition of Middle English romance is difficult for a number of reasons. The first is that the word *romance* itself has had a complex history of polysemy, so that Latin *romanus*, pertaining to Rome, eventually generated English "romantic," with its associations of magic, escapist nostalgia, sexual adventure, and emotional intensity.[2] As is well known, the texts with which scholars of Middle English romance are concerned were composed at a time when *roman* or *romaunce* could still mean a text in a Romance vernacular (such as French) but could also apply to a type of narrative in any language.

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When the common formula "in romance as we rede" appears in a Middle English poem, it is not always clear whether "romance" refers to the language of the poem's source or to the genre of the poem itself.

The second difficulty, therefore, is that not every medieval English text that calls itself a romance is what a modern scholar would like to call a romance, and not every medieval text that a modern scholar would like to call a romance actually calls itself a romance. In some cases, for example, a text identifies itself as a romance for linguistic rather than literary reasons: that is, it is based on a source in a Romance vernacular. A glance at two scholarly lists is instructive. The first occurs in a study by Reinald Hoops, listing twenty-four Middle English texts that identify themselves as romances; alongside such unsurprising items as *Bevis of Hampton* and *Sir Perceval of Galles* we find unexpected items such as the *Myrour of Lewed Men*, a life of Saint Gregory, and *Meditations on the Life and Passions of Christ*.[3] The second list is that compiled by Helaine Newstead for the *Manual of Writings in Middle English*; it still serves as a starting point for any study of Middle English romance. Newstead's list features over a hundred items of bewildering variety. They appear in a range of verse forms, as well as in prose; they span four centuries, from the early thirteenth-century *King Horn* to the sixteenth-century translations of Lord Berners; their sources are Anglo-Norman, continental French, English, Latin, Italian, possibly Celtic, or simply unknown; they feature legendary and historical kings, slandered queens, local heroes, biblical figures, warrior-saints. A formula that applies to every item on the list seems impossible; many of the items do not fit Newstead's own definition, "A narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or in prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience."[4] And, of course, not every item in this list calls itself a romance; any of these texts is just as likely to self-identify as a *lai, histoire, geste,* or *tale*. Thus, whether one chooses a medieval or a modern list of so-called medieval English romances, the variety of the items in such a list hinders any scheme of classification.

The third difficulty is that attempts to define Middle English romance are very often entangled with literary value judgments and anachronistic assumptions. For example, one of the most influential definitions of the genre has been W. P. Ker's *Epic and Romance* (1896). Ker, whose ideas of "romance" were heavily influenced by the Romantics, privileged the "weight and solidity" of epic over the "mystery and fantasy" of romance.[5] This move also allowed him to devote four-fifths of the book to Epic and only one section to Romance, which he associated with "the mystery and the spell of everything remote and unattainable."[6] This definition of romance *against* epic exerted a baleful influence over studies of medieval English romance for decades, so that as late as 1987 W. R. J. Barron, in

his useful survey of the field, finds it necessary to caution readers that "No absolute distinction between epic and romance on grounds of form and theme has proved possible."[7] Still, we find Andrea Hopkins in 1990 engaging with the history of the distinction, pointing out nevertheless that, like "romance," "the term 'epic' is not itself susceptible of hard and fast definition."[8] But more important than the difficulty of maintaining the epic/romance distinction is the fact that medieval authors and audiences did not seem to be aware of it; any attempt to formulate the distinction can be shown to involve assumptions imposed upon the primary material by the post-medieval scholar.[9]

Faced with such complications, some have suggested that the definition of Middle English romance is a project doomed to failure, and that we would be better off defining romance not as a genre but as something else—for example, following Northrop Frye, as a mode.[10] There is some value to such an approach, but denying the problem will not make it disappear, for we have strong evidence that "romance" did operate as a genre in late medieval England: that is, it acted as Hans Robert Jauss's "horizon of expectations,"[11] influencing the ways in which medieval people adapted, composed, collected, and responded to texts. Paul Strohm's two articles on the subject demonstrate that the *idea* of romance as genre was meaningful enough to affect significantly the structure and focus of the *Laud Troy Book*, which calls itself a *romaunce* as opposed to an *histoire*.[12] Romances were marked and organized in manuscript collections in ways that acknowledged both their affiliations with the genre and their differences within the genre.[13] The very existence of parodies of romance—for example, Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* or the anonymous *Tournament of Tottingham*—presupposes recognizable and characteristic structures to imitate in the first place.[14] And, finally, we have medieval English texts that call themselves romances or are designated in manuscript as romances, as well as texts that list romances for the purpose of positioning themselves in or against that tradition.

The difficulties do not disappear, but they do become more interesting and more fruitful, if we start from a radically different set of assumptions and acknowledge that the genre "Middle English romance"—or, indeed, any literary genre—operates not as a classical category but as a prototype category. The distinction between Aristotelian or classical categories and prototype categories has been discussed in more detail elsewhere,[15] and I will merely summarize the important points here. A classical theory of categorization presupposes that a category is clearly bounded; that its boundary can be defined by a finite array of essential characteristics; and that the individual members of the category all fulfill these membership requirements equally well. The prototype theory that is now a standard feature of cognitive linguistics claims, on the

contrary, that a category is defined not by its boundary but by its best examples (its prototypes); that the attributes of the prototypes are not necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the category but rather describe relationships between members; and that membership is graded, so that some members of the category are considered better examples of that category than are others. Usually, prototype theory is applied to ordinary-language categories, such as FURNITURE or BIRD, but there have been suggestions that it may also serve to map out more complex categories, such as that of literary genre.[16]

Prototype theory offers a number of advantages in the study of literary genre. The first is that, in prototype theory, the wide and often confusing variety of members in a complex category (which "Middle English romance" must be) is not an embarrassment, as it would be in a classical theory, but rather an expected outcome of the way human beings think and use language. We should expect such categories to show change, ambiguity, and diversity both synchronically and diachronically. Thus many categories are not homogenous but rather polysemous, displaying what George Lakoff calls "radial structure": "where there is a central case and conventionalized variations on it that cannot be predicted by general rules."[17] The radial categories are not subcategories of the central case but are related to it by what John Taylor calls "meaning chains": item A is related to the central case by shared attributes, B is related to A by (possibly different) shared attributes, and by the time we get to C or D the similarities between it and the central case may be minimal or nonexistent, but the relationship can be traced back through the meaning chain nevertheless.[18] "Romance," as a generic term describing a particular kind of medieval narrative, is itself a radial category, linked by such a meaning chain to the earlier sense in which "romance" is a literary work in a Romance language.

At the same time, prototype theory does not claim that categories are subject to arbitrary definition. It suggests, on the contrary, that categories are organized in ways that can be described and even quantified. Many of the ideas of prototype theory arose from the goodness-of-example experiments performed by psychologist Eleanor Rosch and others.[19] These show that ordinary-language categories are graded in predictable ways, so that, for example, North Americans are more likely to think of *chair* or *table* than of *ashtray* or *telephone* as an example of the category FURNITURE. When the results of such experiments are analyzed, it can be shown that the best examples of a category share certain attributes; but not all examples will display every attribute, and not all to the same extent. Furthermore, the results of these experiments may depend on cultural or physical environments; thus we should expect different results for the category FRUIT in the United States than for FRUIT in

Singapore. One way in which to conceptualize such cultural contexts for categories is in terms of systems variously called *models, frames,* or *domains.*[20] A model (I will use Lakoff's term) is a cognitive structure that provides a context for the understanding of specific concepts: for example, the concept BACHELOR presupposes, for most English speakers today, a cultural model in which heterosexual marriage between adults is assumed to be a social norm, and in which a "bachelor" is an unmarried but marriageable male—but BACHELOR involves a different set of presuppositions for the student of medieval chivalry, in whose model a "bachelor" is a junior knight, and who is therefore concerned rather with social and familial status, martial accomplishment, and feudal relationships.[21] It is likely that a complex category such as "Middle English romance" will have attributes that we need to understand in the context of such models. The point is that a theory of genres as prototypes will not produce simple, discrete definitions that can shuffled mechanically about in a universe of literary ideals; prototype descriptions of genres as categories will be complex, but they will reflect the complexity of language, literary activity, history, and human thought generally; and, furthermore, this complexity will not be random but can be subjected to reasoned and systematic analysis.

Finally, prototype theory supports a usefully empiricist methodology; it sets up claims that ought to be testable on actual human beings. This feature is especially advantageous in light of a prevailing tendency in past studies of "Middle English romance" to be prescriptive rather than descriptive—to impose the scholar's theory of genre on the texts rather than to formulate theories that explain the texts. We have expended a great deal of effort, in other words, in telling the texts how to behave, and then trying to corral the recalcitrant exceptions; the resulting conclusions may tell us a great deal about our own presuppositions and forms of thought, but very little about what medieval authors, scribes, and audiences expected and thought. Now we cannot, obviously, subject long-departed medieval minds to the same kind of studies set up by cognitive psychologists; but we do have some scanty data from medieval texts that will allow us to make some tentative observations.

I have mentioned that there appear, in some Middle English texts, lists that purport to describe the typical subjects of romances. I will examine six of these: they appear in the *Cursor Mundi, Richard Coer de Lyon* (two separate lists), the *Speculum Vitae* attributed to William of Nassington, Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas,* and the *Laud Troy Book.*[22] They are not, of course, the results of a controlled experiment in which certain individuals in late medieval England were asked to provide examples of the literary category ROMANCE, but they are the closest that we can come to

collecting such data. The earliest of these texts, the *Cursor Mundi*, dates from the late thirteenth century, and the latest, the *Laud Troy Book*, from *circa* 1400, so that the diachronic range of the evidence is about a century. Since we are investigating the hypothesis that such a category was stable enough to have some kind of generic force in Middle English literature, the time spread is manageable enough. It is also worth noting that the lists appear in different contexts and for different reasons. The *Cursor Mundi* and the *Speculum Vitae* produce these romance lists in order to distance themselves from the romances, to declare themselves a very different sort of text; *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* (parodically), and the *Laud Troy Book* invoke the tradition in order to declare themselves exemplary within it. I will be treating the passages from *Richard Coer de Lyon* as separate instances. This procedure is arguably problematic, since it is roughly the equivalent of accepting two separate responses from the same individual in a survey, but the items in the two lists are different enough to suggest that conflating the lists would be at least as questionable. The passages in question are provided in full in the Appendix.

I will begin by investigating one of these lists in more detail. A similar close reading can be performed on any of the others. Here is *Richard Coer de Lyon:*

> Ffele romaunses men maken newe,
> Off goode knyȝtes, stronge and trewe;
> Off here dedys men rede romaunce,
> Boþe in Engeland and in Ffraunce:
> Off Rowelond, and off Olyuer,
> And off euery Doseper;
> Off Alisaundre, and Charlemayn;
> Off kyng Arthour, and off Gawayn,
> How þey were knyghtes goode and curteys;
> Off Turpyn, and of Oger Daneys;
> Off Troye men rede in ryme,
> What werre þer was in olde tyme;
> Off Ector, and of Achylles,
> What folk þey slowe in þat pres.
> In Frenssche bookys þis rym is wrouȝt,
> Lewede men ne knowe it nouȝt—
> Lewede men cune Ffrensch non,
> Among an hondryd vnneþis on—;
> Neuerþeles, wiþ glad chere,
> Ffele off hem þat wolde here

Noble iestes, j vndyrstonde,
Off dou3ty kny3tes off Yngelonde.

(7–28)

Richard Coer de Lyon is a Middle English poem from the early fourteenth century, an almost entirely fictionalized account of the life of Richard I of England. Judging from the seven medieval copies that survive, the poem was reasonably popular, especially for a secular work. It is also a text that one of its scribes explicitly identifies as a romance.[23] Indeed, the poet seems insistently concerned to position his composition within some kind of romance tradition; he provides a list of this sort twice, first at the opening of the poem, and second at lines 6725–34, just before Richard attacks Jaffa. But it is immediately apparent that the fourteenth-century poet's sense of the romance tradition will not rest easily within many modern definitions of the genre. We recognize Arthur and Gawain as inhabitants of romance, of course, but we are more likely to think of Roland and the other Twelve Peers in connection with the Old French *chansons de geste*, and less likely to think of Alexander the Great at all. Stories about the siege of Troy are more likely to recall the classical epic, and should not a narrative about a demonstrably historical person like Richard I have closer ties to the chronicle? Perhaps the poet is anxious about the generic status of *Richard Coer de Lyon* precisely because it is not a typical romance—but, given the variety of examples here provided, what *is* a typical romance?

The poet does give us some clues about the kinds of expectations set up when a poem is aligned with this tradition. The relationship of English romance to French is invoked: romance, this passage suggests, originates in "Frenssche bookys," but now also extends to English versions composed for men without an educated knowledge of French. We know of no single French source for *Richard Coer de Lyon*; the source material was probably a mix of various chronicles, legendary histories, and oral accounts in Latin, French, and English. Therefore, the suggestion that the English poem is a translation of a French source is very possibly not to be taken literally, but instead serves as a generic marker, a conventional formula for identifying the poem as a romance. The poem is thus positioned within a linguistic model (both sociolinguistic and linguistic-literary) in which French and English are both connected and contrasted. Next, the typical subject matter of romance seems to be, for this poet, "goode knights." The ideal candidate for this list is "stronge and trewe," "goode and curteys," and "dou3ty," and he displays these virtues in military combat. The model here invoked is that of medieval chivalry, that complex and contentious mix of the ideological, literary, political, military, religious, and quasi-religious. Finally, the poet suggests that

narratives of this sort form cycles or conglomerations of stories, so that a story associated with Alexander, Charlemagne, Arthur, or Troy can immediately be identified as a romance; the list recalls Jehan de Bodel's oft-cited classification of romance into three "matters" of Rome, France, and Britain—the Troy, Charlemagne, and Arthurian cycles respectively—but also indicates that romance is not restricted to those three subjects. This attribute presupposes a model of literary intertextuality that depends on the author's and audience's familiarity with other narratives customarily associated with the one in question.

The list also suggests that the subject matter of romance can be typified by the invocation of certain names. This is a list of subjects, not of titles; that is, romances are *about* these people, and the items of the list cannot be assumed to correspond exactly with specific medieval French or English texts of which we have knowledge. Furthermore, although there is a strong tendency to conceptualize the subject matter of a romance as an exemplary individual,[24] it seems equally possible to conceive of romances about, say, the siege of Troy, or the Twelve Peers of France collectively. Nevertheless, these names are useful labels for us, as they were for the poet, in providing examples of the category ROMANCE. If the category is graded, as prototype theory would suggest, we should expect some items to show up more commonly in other romance lists of this sort, and the most common items would be those a late medieval English audience would consider most typical of the genre. And indeed we find that the second list in *Richard Coer de Lyon* repeats six of these items: Alexander, Charlemagne, Arthur, Gawain, Ector (that is, Hector of Troy), and Achilles. And if we compile the data from the other four romance lists I have mentioned, we arrive at the following result, arranged by the frequency with which the names appear. Within each rank, I have ordered the items according to the number of extant manuscripts that contain Middle English romances pertaining to the items, from the most to the least; and then, when there are no other criteria for differentiation, alphabetically.

In 4 out of 6 lists:

Bevis of Hampton
Guy of Warwick
Charlemagne

In 3 out of 6 lists:

Arthur
Alexander
Gawain
Roland
Octavian

In 2 out of 6 lists:

Siege of Troy
Isumbras
Horn
Tristan (and Isolde)
Ector
Achilles

Single instances (where at least one Middle English romance is extant):

Libeaus Desconus
Partenope
Ipomadon
Havelok
Lancelot
Percival
Turpin[25]

Single instances (no known surviving Middle English romance):

Aeneas
Aglavale
Amadas[26] (and Ydoine)
? Archeron
Brutus[27]
Cassibeldaun
Hercules
Jason
Julius Caesar
Kay
Ogier the Dane
Oliver
? Owain
? Pleyndamour
Urrake
Urry
Wade
Yonec
Ypotys[28]

Now these results, a properly scientific critic will object, are based on too small a sample, and one that includes too many variables, to allow any definitive conclusions.[29] I agree. But even this inadequate survey

suggests that we need to adjust many long-cherished assumptions about Middle English romance, and to pay closer attention to the texts themselves. There are surely implications, some unexpected, of such evidence that a late medieval English poet, when required to name a subject for "romance," would have thought more readily of Bevis of Hampton or Guy of Warwick, or even of Charlemagne, than (say) of Lancelot or Tristan.

One implication is that language is a significant attribute of this category, and thus that "Middle English romance" is demonstrably distinct from continental versions of romance. The passage from *Richard Coer de Lyon* quoted above shows one poet's awareness of a geographical/linguistic dimension to the genre. Romances, we are told, are read "Boþe in Engeland and in Ffraunce," but they seem to be composed mainly in French or Anglo-Norman. However, the poet of *Richard Coer de Lyon* claims to be working within a related but distinct *English* tradition—English not only in language but also in subject matter. Richard I of England, by this means, is raised to the eminence of such select and legendary figures as Charlemagne, Achilles, and Alexander the Great. One function of the lists in *Richard Coer de Lyon* is, therefore, to invoke the canonical romance tradition, but another function is to suggest innovation, that is, the addition of a new romance hero to the old lists. Thus, an English romance will not necessarily show the same array of features that we should expect of a French romance, and, indeed, studies of English romances have identified matters of style and subject matter that seem characteristic of a distinct English romance tradition.[30] Instead of comparing English medieval romances to French romances (especially those of Chrétien de Troyes) and finding the English texts wanting because they do not conform successfully to the expectations set up by the French romances, the English romances need to be evaluated on the basis of their own expectations.[31] To mention just one example, the English writers' preference for "satisfaction and not conflict"[32] means that the tension between the demands of chivalric prowess and those of *fin' amor*—a tension that occupies a central place in Chrétien's romances—is seldom a feature of the English romances[33] not necessarily because they lack subtlety, but because they project a different ethos.

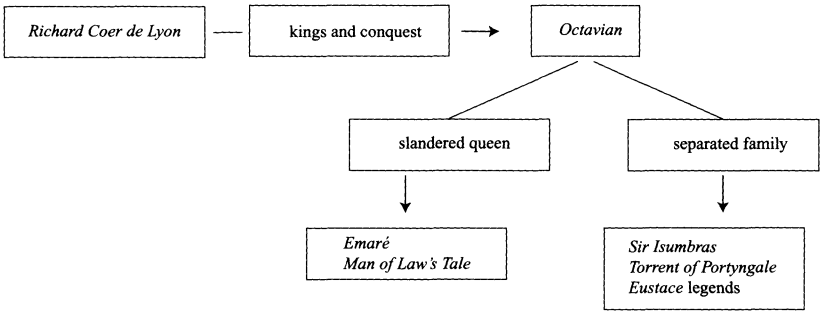
Another implication is that the canon of Middle English romance formulated by modern scholars is very different from the "canon" of the romances' medieval audiences. The modern scholar, if we accept the evidence of student anthologies and academic publication, is most interested in *Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Malory;[34] while medieval English romance audiences seem to have preferred romances about Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hampton, and the Twelve Peers of

France. What a different picture of medieval English romance might we present to our students if we had them read, as a prototypical romance, not Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* (which Chaucer never identifies as a romance) but *Kyng Alisaunder*—or if, at least, we presented such a prototypical romance alongside Chaucer's tale to show Chaucer's distance from, as well as his relations to, the Middle English genre. A study of *prototypical* Middle English romance would, indeed, draw attention to a number of texts that have suffered disproportionate neglect from modern scholars: Alexander romances such as the *Alliterative Alexander Fragments*, Charlemagne romances such as *Otuel and Roland*, Troy romances such as the *Laud Troy Book*. Furthermore, such study would provide a more accurate context in which to locate particular narratives and, even, allusions. For example, identification of the hunting king as "th'emperour Octovyen" at the beginning of the dream vision in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* (line 368) is likely, in such a context, to refer not to the historical Augustus but to the legendary emperor Octavian who gave his name to two versions of a Middle English Octavian romance, and whose story circles around patterns of loss and recovery.[35]

The presence of Octavian as a high-ranking member of this list also shows ways in which the category "Middle English romance" can be structured to include apparently disparate texts. Two of the attributes of the prototypical romance, according to romance lists found in *Richard Coer de Lyon*, are that it concerns a king and that it features knights who accomplish stunning military feats. *Octavian* is about a monarch whose sons are separated from him shortly after birth and are raised by foster parents. In spite of being cut off from their noble heritage, the sons prove that nobility is innate and become notable and distinguished knights—slaying Saracens, for example, with an energy that recalls the legends of Richard Lionheart himself. But *Octavian* also introduces another narrative motif, one derived probably from folktale sources: the sons are separated from Octavian because they are exiled with Octavian's wife, who has been unjustly accused of wrongdoing. If we focus on the separation of the family, especially the kidnapping of the children by wild animals, we get a narrative like that of *Sir Isumbras* (which, in its more hagiographical versions, shades off into the legend of Saint Eustace) or *Torrent of Portyngale*. Or it is possible to highlight the slander motif, focus on the female character, and produce a story about a slandered queen who is exiled, endures various hardships, and is finally reunited with her family: and thus we end up with the romances of the Constance saga, such as Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and the anonymous *Emaré*. Thus narratives that at first glance seem irreconcilably different—*Emaré* is a story about a woman threatened by incest who spends most of her time sewing and drifting about in boats, whereas *Richard Coer de Lyon* is about a king who

spends most of *his* time butchering his enemies—can be linked by the kinds of "chaining" relationships that we should expect in a complex category (see Figure). We should note, also, that these chains may reach over traditional genre boundaries, connecting romance with saint's life or chronicle.[36]

FIGURE. Chaining within the Category of Middle English Romance



N.B. The diagram maps subject matter shared by these narratives; it does *not* represent source relationships.

Other patterns may appear in a "goodness-of-example" list of this sort. I offer one more example. For many critics of medieval romance the paradigm is, to quote John Finlayson's influential article, "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."[37] This description, which Finlayson offers as a definition of Middle English romance, may fit the poems of Chrétien de Troyes, but it does not always describe the Middle English romances well. Indeed, Finlayson excludes most of the items on Newstead's list from the genre because they do not fit his definition. But one striking feature of the ranked "goodness-of-example" list I have generated above from Middle English sources is its emphasis on narratives of imperial conquest. The prototypical romance protagonists win kingdoms, fight for or against emperors, become crusaders. Their *los et pris* or—since an English term would be more appropriate in this context—their "worship" *is* socially, politically, and religiously motivated: it resides not in the knight's own person but in his land, his family, his king, and his faith. And a growing body of criticism attests that the Middle English romances are not purely escapist, but that they are, on the contrary, deeply concerned with "medieval actuality." If we had paid more attention to the prototypes that appear in the Middle English romance lists, we might not have had to wait for

the application of postcolonial theory to medieval literature to notice the genre's deep investment in the war of conquest and in the ideological apparatus that supports such wars.

But perhaps I have not, after all, uncovered anything startlingly new about the Middle English romances, nor formulated an easy definition that will enable subsequent students of the genre to classify texts as romance or not-romance with unthinking ease. Perhaps, indeed, I have found only another way of saying that this genre is complicated, resistant to easy definition, fuzzy around the edges—problems of which scholars have been complaining for over a century. But my point is that this is precisely what a literary genre should look like, that Middle English romance is not less of a genre because it is cannot be defined as a classical category. Indeed, it is in such recalcitrant complexity that our best hopes for further discovery rest. My point is also that complexity is not shapelessness, and that it should be possible to map out relationships within the genre, to identify attributes of the genre, to position individual texts in relation to the prototypes of the genre, and, by so doing, to recover a little more knowledge of the expectations with which a medieval reader or listener may have approached these texts.

It is fitting for Middle English romance to be defined in terms of prototypes, of "best examples," for these texts are about exemplarity. The protagonist of a Middle English romance is unfailingly described as the best knight of the world, or the most beautiful woman; the knight's personal armor is always the best ever made, his horse the strongest, his battles the most spectacular; the protagonist's hardships are invariably the worst ever suffered. Just as a prototype provides information about the category for which it is a central case, the prototypical romance protagonist provides information about the ideological systems of which he or she is imagined to be exemplary. It is in this way that the Middle English romances image "medieval actuality"—not because medieval people typically went about slaying dragons or rescuing their fiancées from hostile Saracens, but because the concerns of the romancers and their audiences are projected onto the text in larger-than-life, black-and-white, shadow forms. Here are not only dragons, but also lost inheritances, frustrated loves, imperialist projects, legal entanglements, truth and treachery, religious conflict, death in battle, the demands of faith, the comfort of friends. Many of the recurring structures of the Middle English romances are firmly rooted in their social contexts: a culture of performance, the equation of land and lineage, tensions between public and private lives, ideals of courtly culture. Thus Middle English romance is a cognitive category at another level. The attributes of this genre provide for us glimpses of some ways in which late medieval people understood and imagined themselves

and their world. To acknowledge the complexity of this genre, and particularly the complexity that arises from the ways in which it configures medieval ideas of language, literature, culture, social organization, and history, is to recognize that there is plenty of fascinating work yet to be done.

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APPENDIX. Passages Containing Romance Lists Used in This Study

1. *Cursor Mundi* (London, British Library MS Cotton Vespasian A.iii)

Man yhernes rimes for to here,	
And romans red on maneres sere,	
Of Alisaundur þe conqueror;	Alexander
Of Iuly Cesar þe emparour;	Julius Caesar
O grece and troy the strang strijf,	Troy
þere many thosand lesis þer lijf;	
O brut þat bern bald of hand,	Brutus
þe first conquerour of Ingland;	
O kyng arthour þat was so rike,	Arthur
Quam non in hys tim was like,	
O ferlys þat hys knythes fell,	
þat aunters sere I here of tell,	
Als wawan, cai and oþer stabell,	Gawain, Kay
For to were þe ronde tabell;	
How charles kyng and rauland faght,	Charlemagne, Roland
Wit sarazins wald þai na saght;	
[Of] tristrem and hys leif ysote,	Tristan and Isolde
How he for here be-com a sote,	
O Ioneck and of ysambrase,	Yonec, Isumbras
O ydoine and of amadase	Amadas and Ydoine
Storis als o ferekin thinges	
O princes, prelates and o kynges;	
Sanges sere of selcuth rime,	
Inglis, frankys, and latine,	
to rede and here Ilkon is prest,	
þe thynges þat þam likes best.	

(1–26)

2. *Richard Coer de Lyon* (Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 175)

Now herkenes of my tale soþ,	
Þow3 j swere 3ow none oþ!	
J wole rede romaunce non	Partenope, Ipomadon
Off Pertenope, ne of Ypomadon,	Alexander
Off Alisaunder, ne of Charlemayn,	Charlemagne
Off Arthour, ne off Sere Gawayn,	Arthur, Gawain
Nor off Sere Launcelet-de-Lake,	Lancelot
Off Beffs, ne Gy, ne Sere Vrrake,	Bevis, Guy, Urrake
Ne off Ury, ne of Octauyan,[38]	Urry, Octavian
Ne off Hector, the stronge man,	Ector
Off Jason, ne off Hercules,	Jason, Hercules
Ne off Eneas, ne off Achylles.	Aeneas, Achilles

(6723–34)

3. *Speculum Vitae* (Cambridge University Library MS Ll. 1.8)

I warne how ferst at þe begynnyng,	
I wil make no veyn spekyng	
Of dedes of armes ne of amours,	
Os don mynstreles and oþer gestours,	
Þat make spekyng in many a place	
Of Octouian and Isanbrase	Octavian, Isumbras
And of many oþer gestes,	
And namely whan þei come to festes,	
Ne of Beus of Hamptoun,	Bevis
Þat was [a] knyht of gret renoun,	
Ne of sir Gy of Warewyk,	Guy
Al þow it mowe som men like,	
I thenke my spekeng schal not be;	
For I holde þat nowht bot vanyte.	

(35–48)

4. Chaucer, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

Men speken of romances of prys,	
Of Horn child and of Ypotys,	Horn, Ypotis
Of Beves and sir Gy,	Bevis, Guy
Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour—	Libeaus Desconus

But sir Thopas, he bereth the flour ? Pleyndamour
Of roial chivalry!

(VII 897–902)

5. *The Laud Troy Book* (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 595)

Many speken of men that romaunces rede
That were sumtyme doughti in dede,
The while that god hem lyff lente,
That now ben dede and hennes wente:
Off Bevis, Gy, and of Gauwayn, Bevis, Guy, Gawain
Off kyng Richard, & of Owayn, Richard, Owain
Off Tristram, and of Percyuale, Tristan, Percival
Off Rouland Ris, and Aglauale, Roland, Aglavale
Of Archeroun, and of Octouian, ? Archeron, Octavian
Off Charles, & of Cassibaldan, Charlemagne
Off Hauelok, Horne, & of Wade;— Cassibeldaun
In Romaunces that of hem ben made Havelok, Horn
That gestoures often dos of hem gestes Wade
At Mangeres and at grete ffestes.
Here dedis ben in remembraunce
In many a fair Romaunce.

(11–26)

1. Significant attempts include W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (1896, rev. 1908; rpt. New York, 1957); Nathaniel E. Griffin, "The Definition of Romance," *PMLA* 38 (1923): 50–70; A. C. Gibbs, ed., *Middle English Romances* (London, 1966); Helaine Newstead, "Romances: General," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, ed. J. B. Severs, Albert E. Hartung, and Peter G. Beidler, 11 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1968–2005), 1:11–16; Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1968); Paul Strohm, "*Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie*: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 348–59, and "The Origin and Meaning of Middle English *Romaunce*," *Genre* 10 (1977): 1–28; John Stevens, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* (London, 1973); Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin, Tex., 1978); John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980): 43–62, 168–81; Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington, Ind., 1983); Edmund Reiss, "Romance," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville, Tenn., 1985), 108–30; W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London, 1987); and Robert B. Burlin, "Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre," *Chaucer Review* 30 (1995): 1–14.

2. See Rita Copeland, "Between Romans and Romantics," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33 (1991): 215–24.

3. Reinald Hoops, *Der Begriff "Romance" in der mittelenglischen und frühneuenglischen Literatur* (Heidelberg, 1926), 34–37.

4. Newstead, "Romances," 1:11.

5. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 4.

6. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 321.

7. Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, 58.

8. Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford, 1990), 6.

9. An early protest was voiced by D. M. Hill, "Romance as Epic," *English Studies* 44 (1963): 95–107.

10. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), 33. This approach is taken by Barron, *English Medieval Romance*. For a discussion of romance as mode *and* as genre, see Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7 (1975–76): 135–63, republished in an expanded and revised version as "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism" in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), 103–50.

11. See Hans Robert Jauss, "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982), 76–109.

12. Strohm, "*Storie, Spelle*," 354–56; see also Strohm, "Origin and Meaning," 13.

13. See Murray J. Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure* (Montreal, 1995); Frances McSparran, ed., *Octovian*, EETS OS 289 (London, 1986), 5–6; and Maldwyn Mills, "Generic Titles in MS Douce 261 and MS Egerton 3132A," in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge, Eng., 2002), 125–38.

14. Finlayson, "Definitions," 47.

15. See especially Eleanor Rosch, "Principles of Categorization," in *Cognition and Categorization*, ed. Eleanor Rosch and Barbara B. Lloyd (Hillsdale, N.J., 1978), 27–48; George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago, 1987); Friedrich Ungerer and Hans-Jörg Schmid, *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics* (London, 1996); and John R. Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 2003). Alastair Fowler makes essentially the same point in *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 37–38, when he argues that literary genres are not classes (i.e., Aristotelian or classical categories) but types (defined by exemplars, as are prototype categories). Fowler's Chapter 3, "Concepts of Genre," 37–53, explores some implications of the distinction. An early move in this direction was made by John Reichert, who argued that genres are best defined by paradigm cases ("More than Kin and Less than Kind: The Limits of Genre Theory," in *Theories of Literary Genre*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka, *Yearbook of Comparative Criticism* 8 [University Park, Penn., 1978]: 57–79).

16. See John M. Swales, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), 49–52; Mark Turner, *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, 1991), 150; David Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (University Park, Penn., 1993), 62–65; Irma Taavitsainen, "Genres and Text Types in Medieval and Renaissance English," *Poetica* 47 (1997): 49–62; Hans-Jürgen Diller, "*Genre* in Linguistic and Related Discourses," in *Towards a History of English as a History of Genres*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Diller and Manfred Görlach (Heidelberg, 2001), 3–43; and a useful summary in Michael Sinding, "After Definitions: Genre, Categories, and Cognitive Science," *Genre* 35 (2002): 181–220. Mark E. Amsler, in "Literary Theory and the Genres of Middle English Literature," *Genre* 13 (1980): 389–96, suggests that the flexibility of what he calls "fuzzy concepts" (an early version of prototype theory) may be useful for the study of Middle English genres, although he does not attempt a systematic application of this idea. In these studies, as in mine, the aspect of cognitive categorization that is presented as most useful for genre theory is the prototype structure of categories; to my

knowledge, no detailed work has been done to apply to genre theory another aspect of the cognitive theory of categorization, that of the "basic-level" category.

17. Lakoff, *Women, Fire*, 84.

18. Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, 108–22.

19. Descriptions of the foundational work can be found in Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley, 1969); William Labov, "The Boundaries of Words and their Meanings," in *New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English*, ed. C.-J. Bailey and R. Shuy (Washington, D.C., 1973), 340–73; and Eleanor Rosch, "On the Internal Structure of Perceptual and Semantic Categories," in *Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language*, ed. Timothy E. Moore (New York, 1973), 111–44.

20. Lakoff, *Women, Fire*, 68–90; Ungerer and Schmid, *Introduction*, 45–55, 205–11; and Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, 87–93.

21. *Frame* is Charles Fillmore's term and is discussed by David Lee, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2001), 8–12. The BACHELOR example (a classic) is also Fillmore's and is discussed by Lakoff, *Women, Fire*, 70–71. The medievalist's model for BACHELOR also includes a *script*, a sequence of events that has meaning within the culture—in this case, the script describes the accepted process by which a young aristocratic male attained the status of a knight; for scripts see particularly Ungerer and Schmid, *Introduction*, 211–17. Both senses of BACHELOR, that concerning marriageability and that concerning knightly rank, were current in late medieval English, as the *OED* entry for the word attests.

22. For other discussions of these lists, see Kathryn Hume, "The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance," *Philological Quarterly* 53 (1974): 158–80; and, briefly, Reiss, "Romance," 112. Editions of these texts are as follows: *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS OS 57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 99, 101 (London, 1874–93), lines 1–26; *Der mittelenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz*, ed. Karl Brunner (Vienna, 1913), lines 7–28, 6723–34; *Speculum Vitae*, lines 1–370, in J. Ullmann, "Studien zu Richard Rolle de Hampole," *Englische Studien* 7 (1884): 415–72, at 469, lines 35–48; *Thop* 897–902, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), 213–17; and *The Laud Troy Book*, ed. J. Ernst Wülfing, EETS OS 121, 122 (London, 1902–1903), lines 11–26. Similar lists of names appear in other medieval texts, not necessarily explicitly as examples of romances: see, for example, lines 65–72 of Thomas of Hales's *Love Rune* (Susanna Greer Fein, ed., *Moral Love Songs and Laments* [Kalamazoo, Mich., 1998], 11–56, at 34), or the detailed account of the Nine Worthies and other exemplary figures in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* (M. Y. Offord, ed., *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, EETS OS 246 [London, 1959], 12–29).

23. London, British Library MS Additional 31042 (the London Thornton Manuscript) titles the poem "The Romance of Kyng Richerd þe Conqueroure," and the explicit reads "And thus endys þe Romaunce of Richard oure Kyng." On this scribe's use of the generic term "romance," see Mills, "Generic Titles," 135–36.

24. See Strohm, "*Storie, Spelle*," 355–56.

25. That is, if we consider Turpin to be the central figure of *The Sege of Melayne*. I am grateful to the editors for this suggestion.

26. The reference to "Amadace" in the *Laud Troy Book* is clearly *not* to the hero of the Middle English romance *Sir Amadace*, of which two manuscripts survive, but to the hero of the French romance *Amadas et Ydoine*, itself based on an Anglo-Norman version. See also Reiss, "Romance," 128n19.

27. The poet of the *Cursor Mundi* was doubtless thinking of some version of the *Brut*, although no specific "Romance of Brutus" has survived.

28. The popular Middle English poem generally titled *Ypotis* (surviving in fifteen manuscripts; see Francis Lee Utley, "Dialogues, Debates, and Catechisms," *in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, ed. J. Burke Severs, Albert E. Hartung, and Peter

G. Beidler, 11 vols. [New Haven, Conn., 1968–2005], 3:740–41, 898–99) is not generally considered a romance, and there has been some speculation that Chaucer listed it as a joke. See Dorothy Everett, "A Note on 'Ypotis,'" *Review of English Studies* 6 (1930): 446–48. Again, the inclusion of "Ypotys" alongside "Horn child" in *Thop* (VII 898) brings genre into question: was Chaucer listing the name because it was considered a subject of romance or because it was not?

29. It is worth noting that this list describes the subject matter of romance, not individual romances themselves. It can therefore contribute to a definition of medieval romance only insofar as the genre is a function of its subject matter.

30. See especially Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley, 1986); and, for a specific instance, Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, eds., *Ywain and Gawain*, EETS OS 254 (London, 1964), xvi-xxxiv.

31. David Matthews, "Translation and Ideology: The Case of *Ywain and Gawain*," *Neophilologus* 76 (1992): 452–63; Myra Seaman, "Engendering Genre in Middle English Romance: Performing the Feminine in *Sir Beves of Hamtoun*," *Studies in Philology* 98 (2001): 49–75, especially 51–52.

32. John Ganim, *Style and Consciousness in Middle English Narrative* (Princeton, 1983), 48.

33. Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, 217.

34. When I surveyed eleven anthologies of Middle English romances published from 1802 to 2002, I found that the most commonly anthologized text was *Orfeo* (9 out of 11); then poems about Arthur or Havelok (6 out of 11); then Gawain romances, *Floris and Blanchefleur*, and *Launfal* (5 out of 11); then *King Horn, Emaré, The Squire of Low Degree*, and *Ywain and Gawain* (4 out of 11). Of these top-ranking items, only Arthur, Havelok, Gawain, and Horn appear in the medieval romance lists. Of course, an anthology will naturally be biased toward shorter texts such as *Orfeo* rather than vast rambly narratives such as *Bevis*, although the episodic nature of many longer romances should make it fairly easy to anthologize extracts. In anthologies of medieval English literature generally, the only verse romances to appear commonly are *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and, to a lesser extent, *Orfeo*, although extracts from Malory and, of course, Chaucer often appear.

35. Editors—for example, Colin Wilcockson in *The Riverside Chaucer* and Helen Phillips in her edition of *The Book of the Duchess* (Durham, Eng., 1982)—prefer Augustus, on the basis of allusions to that emperor in two of Chaucer's sources, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*. But the frequency with which the name "Octavian" appears in the Middle English romance lists suggests that Chaucer's audience, if not Chaucer himself, would be at least as likely to think of the romance emperor as of the historical one.

36. This phenomenon is well documented; see, for example, Diana T. Childress, "Between Romance and Legend: 'Secular Hagiography' in Middle English Literature," *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978): 311–22; Sumner Ferris, "Chronicle, Chivalric Biography, and Family Tradition in Fourteenth-Century England," in *Chivalric Literature: Essays on Relations Between Literature and Life in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle (Toronto, 1980), 25–38; Hopkins, *Sinful Knights*; and Rhiannon Purdie, "Generic Identity and the Origins of *Sir Isumbras*," in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge, Eng., 2002), 113–24.

37. Finlayson, "Definition," 55.

38. The scribe of the Auchinleck MS substituted two names from the Charlemagne cycle, "Oliuer" and "Otuan" (i.e., Otuel), in this line.