Romance Structure

Romance originally denoted languages (esp. French) derived from Latin (i.e., Roman), later came to refer to something written in French, and then referred as well to anything having characteristics associated with writings in French. The term came eventually to have a very broad application.

We can, nonetheless, describe in a general way what the word means when applied to medieval narrative. The basic material of medieval romance is knightly activity and adventure; we might best define medieval romance as a story of adventure--fictitious, frequently marvelous or supernatural--in verse or prose. Earlier romances in English are in verse; those in prose (Malory, for example) are generally late.

Perhaps surprisingly, any "love interest" is likely to be incidental to the story of a medieval romance. An exception to this rule may be found in the *breton lai*: the term refers both to the relatively brief form of medieval French romances, professed to have been sung by Breton minstrels on Celtic themes, and to the English medieval poems written in imitation of such works. These romances often wove their stories around a famous legendary figure (Arthur, for example, or Tristram) and took as their immediate subject matter a love story of some kind.

Structurally, the medieval romance often follows the loose pattern of the quest, tending thus to be merely episodic--to have a plot structured by *and-then* rather than *hence*. A romance like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of course, goes beyond this typical structure by imposing an artificial structure on the inherited

structure, combining the plots to explain (insofar as explanation is possible); note, however, that the "duple structure" of *SGGK* explains not in terms of causation ("this was caused by that," "hence"), but in terms of juxtaposition and analogy ("this is like that"). (For a more detailed discussion of ME romance, see More on Romance and Selected ME Romances: Classifications below.)

More on Romance

Traditional Classification

Jean Bodel, a twelfth-century Frenchman, developed a three-part classification of romance, by "matter" (i.e., subject matter), that is still frequently used: the Matter of France, the Matter of Britain, and the Matter of Rome the Great (often called the Matter of Antiquity). A fourth matter--the Matter of England--has been added by modern scholars to more accurately describe the medieval English romance.

Some of the Classic Treatments of Medieval Romance

Ker, W. P. *Epic and Romance* (1896): treats the earliest French "chansons de geste" as heroic poems, real epics; useful for his treatment of French romances, but his assertions do not apply so well to English romances.

Griffin, Nathaniel E. "The Definition of Romance." *PMLA* 38 (1923): 50-70. Treats the development of the term *romance* much as Dorothy Everett does (see below).

Everett, Dorothy. "A Characterization of the English Medieval Romance." *Essays and Studies* (1929); rpt. in *Essays on Middle English Literature*, by Dorothy Everett (Oxford, 1959; Westport, CT, 1978): 1-22. [PR255 .E9 1978]

"In both French and English the history of the word 'romance' is a similar one. It originally denoted the vernacular language of France as distinct from the Latin from which it was derived, but it soon extended its meaning to cover works written in French, so that the medieval English word can often be translated into modern English as 'the French book'. Very gradually there is a further alteration of its meaning and it comes to be used for those tales of knights and their doings for which the French were first famous, without regard to the language in which they were written. But owing to its previous wider connotation, there is always a tendency to use it to mean any kind of fictitious narrative, and even books of other kinds in the French tongue" (2-3). Everett restricts herself in this essay to "romances of chivalry."

Her considered definition of *medieval romance*, then, is as follows: "Medieval romances are stories of adventure in which the chief parts are played by knights, famous kings, or distressed ladies, acting most often under the impulse of love, religious faith, or, in many, mere desire for adventure. The stories were first told in verse, but when, later, prose versions were made, they were also called romances. In length the verse romances vary from a few hundred lines to tens of thousands. . .; the prose ones are mostly very long" (3).

Everett notes that whatever the original provenance of a hero, he is always made to conform to medieval conceptions of a knight: everything is medievalized (true of most if not all medieval literature, not just romances). Everett believes that romances appealed to the fashionable society of the day, largely through their (then)

modernity. Our distance, Everett argues, lends a mysterious charm to the heroes (etc.) of romance, but the mystery was probably a great deal less for a medieval audience.

Q: How realistic? **A:** Few as realistic as *SGGK*. Most are made of "high life idealized": heightening of characters and action, accompanied by a simplification of "character-drawing": "The half-tones of ordinary human nature are not for the romance writers; every man is either a hero and a good man, or a villain. . . . Poetic justice reigns supreme. . ." (9).

Q: If the romances are not "romantic" in Ker's sense of the term (for Ker, *romantic* is "the name for the sort of imagination that possesses the mystery and spell of everything remote and unattainable"), how do we explain the pervasive use of the "marvelous"? **A:** The division between the possible and the impossible was not so sharp to the medieval audience as it is to us, according to Everett (cf. Carolly Erickson's *The Medieval Vision* [1976]). Everett finds the display of the marvelous in ME romance excessive and decides that it was employed to satisfy a medieval popular thirst for "incident" (writers--and their characters--tend to take a rather matter-of-fact attitude toward marvels) (10).

In her essay, Everett attempts to develop distinctions between the romance and the saint's life, the romance and the ballad, the romance and the *chanson de geste*, and the romance and the tale.

Kane, George. *Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, and Piers Plowman* (1951).

"Wherever we turn . . . classification's usefulness [is] diminished by their refusal to run true to form."

Mehl, Dieter. *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (1969).

Pearsall, Derek. "The Development of Middle English Romance." *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965): 91-116. Pearsall is concerned with romances written between 1240 and 1400 in England (1240 is the date of the MS in which *King Horn*, etc., appear). (In another article, Pearsall has specifically treated fifteenth-century English romances.) "Any sophisticated historical morphology of romance involves a knowledge of date, dialect, manuscript provenance, metrical form, exact class of audience, type of source, type of story, and the range of the art." Pearsall's classification takes into consideration both the form and the content of the romance, then, as well as the date.

Selected ME Romances: Classifications

1. Classification by "Matter"	
The Matter of England	**The Matter of France**
King Horn (ca. 1225, SWMid or SMid) *Havelok the Dane* (ca. 1280-1300, NEMid) *Athelston* (ca. 1355-80, EMid) *Gamelyn* (ca. 1350-70, NEMid)	*The Sowdon of Babylon* (ca. 1400, EMid)
The Matter of Britain	**Arthurian**
Sir Degaré (before 1325, SWMid) *Sir Orfeo* (beginning of 14th c., SE) *The Earl of Toulouse* (ca. 1400, NEMid) *Emaré* (ca. 1400, NE)	Layamon's *Brut* (chronicle-romance; late 12th c., WMid) *Ywain and Gawain* (ca. 1300-50, N) *Sir Perceval of Galles* (ca. 1300-40, N) *Sir Launfal* (later 14th c., SE) *The Avowynge of King Arthur* (ca. 1425, N)
Composite	**The Matter of the Orient**
Ipomadon (late 14th c., NMid) *Eger and Grim* (ca. 1450, N) *The Squyr of Lowe Degre* (ca. 1500, EMid)	*The Seven Sages of Rome* (early 14th c.) *The Lyfe of Alisaunder* (early 14th c., S) *The Destruction of Troy* (1350-1400, NWMid)

Miscellaneous	
Floris and Blancheflur (ca. 1250, SEMid) *Chevalere Assigne* (ca 1350-1400, EMid) *Sir Cleges* (late 14th c., NMid) *Roberd of Cisyle* (late 14th c., SEMid) *King Edward and the Shepherd* (late 14th c., N) *The Tournament of Tottenham* (1400-40, N)	
2. Metrical Classification	
Couplets (mostly octosyllabic)	**Tail Rhyme (Rime Couée)**
Havelok the Dane *Sir Degaré* *Sir Orfeo* *Ywain and Gawain* *Eger and Grim* (tetrameter couplets, not necessarily octosyllabic) *The Squyr of Lowe Degre* *The Seven Sages of Rome* *Floris and Blauncheflur* *Roberd of Cisyle* *King Horn* (trimeter couplets)	*Athelston* *Sir Launfal* *The Earl of Toulouse* *Emaré* *Sir Perceval of Galles* *The Avowynge of King Arthur* *Ipomadon* *Sir Cleges* *King Edward and the Shepherd* *The Tournament of Tottenham* (with a bob-and-wheel stanza)
Alliterative	**Unrhymed Non-Alliterative Long Lines**
Layamon's *Brut* *The Gest Historiale of the Destruction of Troy* *Chevelere Assigne*	*Gamelyn* (about 50% of lines alliterate) *The Tale of Beryn*
Other	
The Sowdon of Babylon (alternate rhymes)	

The Generic Plot

Description

The following summary of themes of descent and ascent is adapted from Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976). For a clear example of both sets of themes in a modern novel, see Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For a completely different story with the same themes, see Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Other works where the "generic plot" may be seen quite clearly include the following: *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, The New Testament, *The Divine Comedy* of Dante, *King Horn*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the movie *Labyrinth*, and even the first *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie.)

We can describe a "generic" (or "archetypal") plot shared by

many romances, one that manifests itself in many and highly varied particular plots. This plot can best be defined in terms of its "themes of descent" and "themes of ascent." In doing so, we should keep certain qualifications in mind:

> (1) These themes may appear in a displaced form. (Frye defines *displacement* as "the adjusting of formulaic structures to a roughly credible context.") Thus, for example, the story of Kirkê in *The Odyssey* might be retold elsewhere (and probably later) in such a way that Odysseus's men become bestial men rather than literal beasts.
>
> (2) Though we can define a "generic" or traditional plot, we cannot safely draw from it automatic ("generic") interpretations. Thus we must continually ask questions: How is the generic plot realized in the particular one? What details of the particular plot correspond most closely to the generic one? What details differ most sharply? What difference do these differences make? What sorts of meaning emerge from reading the particular plot in light of the generic one? Does doing so violate any commonsense rules of interpretation? And so forth.

Frye notes that four levels of a "mythological universe" were consciously recognized by the first eighteen centuries of the common era and unconsciously understood both before and after: Level 1 is "heaven, the place of the presence of God." Level 2 is "the earthly paradise or Garden of Eden, where man lived before the fall." Level 3 is "the world of ordinary experience we now live in." And level 4 is "the demonic world, or hell." Movement among these levels, of course, entails descent and ascent.

The themes of descent may be of two kinds: (1) those that

suggest descent from the sky (in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the sky means heaven or Eden) and (2) those that suggest descent to a lower world than the world of ordinary life. When treating medieval romance, our concern is generally with the second sort of descent. Frye asserts that the "normal road of descent is through dream or something strongly suggestive of a dream atmosphere." Such a descent begins with what Frye calls the Motif of Amnesia: the "catastrophe . . . may be internalized as a break in memory, or externalized as a change in fortunes or social context" (Frye). Whatever its narrative form, "the structural core is the individual loss or confusion or break in the continuity of identity, and this has analogies to falling asleep and entering a dream world" (Frye). As the descent deepens, we find increased erotic intensity, frequently manifesting itself in a hunt; sometimes identity is established between the hunter and the hunted; and, in any case--hunt or not--animal imagery frequently surrounds the depths of descent. At the lower levels of descent, the night world predominates and becomes "a world where everything is an object, including ourselves" (Frye). Pushed to its logical conclusion, plainly, this *thingification* (my coinage) would take the characters in such a plot beyond individual problems of identity to a world where no meaning exists because the discreet objects that make up the world have no relationship to each other, can form no intelligible patterns at all. "Every aspect of fall or descent," Frye claims, "is linked to a change in form in some way, usually by associating or identifying a human or humanized figure with something animal or vegetable," and "[a]t lower levels the Narcissus or twin image darkens into a sinister doppelganger figure, the hero's shadow and the portent of his own death or isolation."

The themes of ascent may also be of two kinds: (1) those that suggest ascent from a lower world and (2) those that suggest

ascent to a higher world. In thinking about medieval romance, our chief concern is generally with the first sort of ascent. The chief conceptions here are these, though not necessarily in a fixed sequence: escape ("the Houdini motif" for Frye), remembrance, discovery of one's real identity, growing freedom, the breaking of enchantment, and the reintegration of society or self. As Frye points out, "One of the things that comedy and romance as a whole are about, clearly, is the unending, irrational, absurd persistence of the human impulse to struggle, survive, and where possible escape."

Outline of the Themes

Themes of Descent and Ascent