



PROJECT MUSE®

The Romance of Criticism

Joel M. Childers

New Literary History, Volume 52, Number 1, Winter 2021, pp. 1-26 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2021.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/789865>

The Romance of Criticism

Joel M. Childers

And now at once, adventuresome, I send
My herald thought into a wilderness.
John Keats, *Endymion*¹

I

LITERARY HISTORY BEGINS—in multiple senses—with romance. From the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the moment we now call its revival or rehabilitation, romance was taken to inaugurate a distinctively “English” literary tradition.² It was also taken to make the origins of that tradition knowable by capturing how history was experienced—how it was lived in and felt. Romance offered, in this tangled way, a *literary* form of history. In doing so, George Saintsbury once observed, it altered the very “grounds of criticism.”³ No longer was the critic’s task evaluation but interpretation; no longer was the art “adapt[ed]” to the critic but the critic to the art.

Romance changed what criticism could do—the knowledge it could attain, the ends to which it could be made to go. Its disregard for conventions of probability and narrative cohesion once led critics to see romance as, at best, the stuff of children’s literature and, at worst, a corruption of judgment and good taste—a literary “Contagion,” as Richard Blackmore had put it.⁴ However, by the turn of the nineteenth century, romance was made to substantiate the *idea* of English literature. By 1800, romance was a virtual shorthand for *poesis*, a kind of poetry whose imaginative excesses were exemplary of our “creative mind.” At the same time, it named a specific form or body of writing, the product of a certain age and certain events—1066 CE, say, or the Crusades, or the fall of the Roman Empire. Romance was read in two ways at once. This required a new “philosophical” kind of criticism, one that could reconcile a “natural” view of poetry as grounded in psychological or cognitive processes with a historicism that insisted on framing interpretation within poetry’s relative conditions of production.⁵ Criticism had to account, in other words, for what it wanted romance to be: a

“species” of poetry whose continuity was irreducible to history but that, in any given case, existed inevitably within it—reflecting history, and so giving history a shape.

Throughout the period of romance’s revival, attempts to furnish such a criticism resulted in a proliferation of theoretical essays, nearly every one of which was confronted with the same problem: how to coordinate a historically particular sense of romance—one whose animating questions were how and when it emerged, and whether it was a practice exclusive to northern Europe—with the sense that romance as a natural phenomenon could obtain in any time or place. Walter Scott’s is an emblematic case. Writing in 1824, Scott summed up a half century of critical opinion and identified its signature tension when he defined romance as an “aboriginal style of poetry” whose origins were identical to that of “real history.”⁶ To label romance “aboriginal” signaled that it was, in several senses, “indigenous.” For Scott, romance named a kind of writing, a northern European vernacular tradition spanning from the early Middle Ages to the present. Its first form (like that of all literature) was oral poetry, “the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents.”⁷ Romance is datable and contingent. Its continuity or “progress,” as Clara Reeve had earlier put it, allows us to track the evolution of literature alongside that of society and so better determine how literature figures social change.⁸ Yet romance is also a thing we do: the process by which “real history” is transfigured into imaginative and fantastical language. Romance is primitive in origin and universal in practice, “invented in every part of the world, for the same reason that grass grows upon the surface of the soil in every climate and in every country.”⁹ We find romance in the early stages of social development, including that of modern Britain, because it is an “aboriginal” practice: indigenous to “nations,” Scott reasons, because indigenous to people.

Seeing romance in this way enabled Scott and the critics who preceded him to reconcile the demands of an incipient historicism—the demands of recognizing and accounting for human difference—with an image of “man” whose universality could be observed in the form of writing we now call “literature.” It enabled them, in other words, to invent literary history. As such critics perceived it, the conceptual labor of the literary historian was not only to ascertain the causes and patterns of literature’s development but also to understand through its formal properties how literature was *immanently* historical—how it could provide a trace of history where that history might otherwise remain unknown (or unknowable). Hegel put it like this: literature is a record of the past, of a “particular view of the world” and “mode of feeling,” but only insofar as it is a “transformation” or figuration of historical experience and so

the *form* by which “human spirit” in its development is manifest.¹⁰ What literature knows about the past is more than what it describes. It is also, crucially, what it contains. Scholars of romance were the first to practice literary history in these terms, for it was romance, as they understood it, that made the procedures of literary history seem necessary to begin with. Romance was, as many liked to put it, a “memorial” to the past—or, better perhaps, a memorial to *passing*. It represented history not as an event but as a force; not as a “fact,” to borrow from Hegel again, but as “a collision in human experience.”¹¹ Any given romance offers the hopeful critic a way of inhabiting another, sometimes long-forgotten world. Yet the persistence of romance, its presence at seemingly every turn in history, makes its continuity (and so the continuity of literature) impossible to ignore. What Georg Lukács once said about Scott provides a useful emblem here, for it is what Scott himself believed to be true of romance: it “*makes history live*.”¹² It allows the critic to feel their way into the past, and so write the history that it knows.

For critics of the twentieth century no less than the eighteenth, the peculiar challenge of romance has been that interpretive tension Scott aimed to ease—or ease over—by calling romance “aboriginal.” In the following pages, I trace this tension as it surfaces (and resurfaces) in the romance of criticism—criticism, as I understand it, that takes romance for its object of study but also, and in doing so, becomes itself a romance. My aim is not to consider whether or the extent to which critics of the eighteenth century were right about this genre, though it is worth noting that much of what they say anticipates, even allows for, what recent scholarship has taken romance to be: a “revolutionary” form, a product of “postimperial fragmentation,” a tool in the formation of racial discourse, a timeless or transhistorical mode predicated on its mediation of the past.¹³ Neither is it my aim to consider what scholars have long recognized as the influence of the romance revival on the development of the novel or on that period to which it eventually lent its name, Romanticism.¹⁴ Rather, my aim is to offer readers a sense of what critics of the eighteenth century believed romance could tell us about the past and our place within it, and how debates about romance participated in that century’s theoretical reconstruction of “human” history. For all its perceived importance, strikingly little attention has been paid to *what* critics of the romance revival said. Where attention has been paid, as in René Wellek’s influential *The Rise of English Literary History* (1941), it has focused principally on the revival’s break with neoclassicism rather than on the kinds of history that romance let critics of this era imagine and therefore tell. My hope is to indicate the stake of these histories by examining them, first in the writing of three early

scholars of the revival, including Thomas Warton—the first practitioner of literary history as we understand it today—and then, in conclusion, as they inflect a reading of the Middle English romance *King Horn* (ca. 1250), a romance Warton took to mark the very origin of English poetry. But I also mean to indicate how such criticism reaches beyond the moment it was written to shape the interpretive methods we employ in the literary humanities today. Critics of the revival sought to establish a convention—to set the terms—by which knowledge of human history, in all its variation, might be achieved through the study of literature. The result of their attempts is a way of doing criticism that remains very much with us today, a criticism that sees history not only as an object of knowledge but as the logic by which it takes conceptual, and indeed disciplinary, shape.

II

Let us begin, then, nearer the present, with two scholars whose distinctive theories of romance extend (or as Geoffrey Hartman once playfully remarked, “fulfill”¹⁵) the claims of the romance revival and so provide a useful vantage point from which to read those claims afresh. Consider, to start, the work of Northrop Frye. No modern critic more faithfully pursued two interpretations of romance at once: what we might call the theoretical or structural interpretation, according to which the features of romance exemplify an essentially human practice of symbolization, and an historical one, by means of which romance is taken to mark a critical juncture in the development, even origination, of literature. In his *Anatomy of Criticism* and again in *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Frye defines romance as a genre with a particular historical provenance and as a narrative structure or “*mythoi*.”¹⁶ In the former sense, romance signals a process of “*displacement*” from myth to the realist novel—a process, beginning with Chrétien de Troyes, in which narrative “archetypes” are gradually endowed with descriptive and psychological depth. In the latter sense, romance is itself an archetype—a “cornerstone of the creative imagination.”¹⁷ In romance, Frye argues, humans build a “world of art . . . out of nature,” one that is “between the world we want and the world we don’t want”; it recognizes what does not exist by expressing what should, and so performs a “ritual or symbolic human action.”¹⁸ Romance—unlike any other mode or form of writing—is an index of the historical development of literature and, at once, witness to its “total form” (AC 118).

Frye's theory of romance teaches the particular lesson that structural and historical interpretation cannot be disentangled. A key passage from *Anatomy of Criticism* thus asserts the centrality of romance as contingent form, one responsible for the shift from primitive mythography to realism's social consciousness, and as "tendency"—a process evident in the thing rather than the thing itself. "Myth, then," Frye contends, "is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that term to mean . . . the tendency . . . to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to 'realism,' to conventionalize content in an idealized direction" (AC 136–37). History is the condition of the possibility of displacement, but it is also the structural principles displaced at any given time that respond, or rather make visible, historical (dis)continuity. Myth isolates the structural principles of literature and realism displaces them into a context of plausibility. Romance stands between these two "extremes." Its relation to history is both cause and effect. As Frye understands it, here and elsewhere, romance is the clearest instance and so another name for what "literature" *does*—the "tendency," over time, to respond and reinvent. But it also explains, in strictly historical terms, what that "tendency" looked like, what form it took. Romance is between the mythic and the realist, then, in two senses: as that which marks the "tendency" to pass from one to the other and as its actual passage, insofar as it was in Western literature the principle contribution of a Middle Ages historically positioned between classical antiquity and the twentieth century.

Romance allows in this intricate way for what Frye calls "total literary history"—the synoptic view of literature in its totality, "and not simply the name given to the aggregate of existing literary works" (AC 16–17, 118). Frye's entire body of work might be well characterized by its concern, emblemized in the phrase "total literary history," for reconciling the belief in a timeless "verbal order" with an awareness of historical causation and relativity.¹⁹ Otherwise, the central means Frye has for effecting this reconciliation is a dubious anthropologism, according to which the transcendent structures of the "verbal order," the parts by which the mythical whole are apprehensible, are most easily observed in the concentrated form of primitive myth. "Total literary history," Frye writes, "gives us a glimpse of the possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture" (AC 16–17). In the case of romance, the appearance of such formulas or archetypes through time effectively demonstrates a coherence *in* history but one not subject *to* history. Romance is the first to "complicate" the unattainable desire that primitive myth projects into human social terms, making "it the nearest of all literary

forms to the wish-fulfillment dream," a dream that Frye understood to possess "a genuinely 'proletarian' element," such that "no matter how great a change may take place in society, romance will turn up again, as hungry as ever, looking for new hopes and desires to feed on" (*AC* 186). The origin of romance lay in the twelfth century; it responds to the particular conditions of the Middle Ages (though Frye doesn't name them). But romance is also, more profoundly, a signal of that greater human need, irreducible to any one moment in time, that expresses social desire. Romance teaches us that literary history becomes "total" we when recognize that "literature" is more than just "the aggregate of existing literary works," each of which possesses its own extrinsic relationship to history, but a "human form" with its own historical logic, or spirit, indexed in the various and evolving iterations of this mode. "Total literary history" is the highest aim of criticism, for in it lies the dream by which we, in good Enlightenment fashion, can see "art" as "part of civilization" that reveals itself as it "develops" and yet, at the same time, as the product of an intrinsic, unchanging order—something like the universal mind of man (*AC* 112, 113).

Readers will recall that Frye's notion of romance as the codification of social desire elicits the praise and censure of Fredric Jameson, Frye's principal adversary in twentieth-century romance theory. In "conceiving of the function of culture explicitly in social terms," Frye is able, in Jameson's view, to wrest himself free from "the great bulk of garden-variety myth criticism."²⁰ Yet Frye's intractable humanism—"grounded on a certain conception of 'human nature'" (*PU* 59)—results in a culminating gesture of what Jameson calls "recontainment," the process of ideological closure whereby true dialectical interpretation is momentarily opened only to be then closed off again (*PU* 71). As Jameson sees it, Frye's interpretive method takes as its final aim—its horizon—not an explication of collective struggle but rather that very mythological universe whose ultimate referent is "the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way" (*AC* 119, quoted in *PU* 72). Thus "the culminating struggle of the collectivity is [in Frye] curiously redirected, rechanneled and indeed recontained, by the image of Blakean absolute 'man'" (*PU* 73). The verbal order that forms the human's self-created mythological universe is, in the end, nothing more than an image of the individual in his apocalyptic creative vision. It is not the community of which that man is a part.

Jameson attempts to invert Frye's method by taking "History," understood as social totality, as that which is apprehended in the forms and figments of literature, "a space in which History itself becomes the ultimate ground as well as untranscendable limit of our understanding

in general and our textual interpretations in particular" (*PU* 100). Yet for Jameson, too, romance is the generic mode by which an animating contradiction of literary criticism can be overcome. This is the contradiction by which a text in a given genre can be interpreted diachronically, as the result of certain forces within a developmental history, and synchronically, as an instance of a larger transhistorical structure of intelligibility, without any clear sense as to which of these two interpretive procedures is the prior or the superior one. This contradiction belongs to literary theory as a whole but is captured in the more local arena of genre criticism in the impasse between what Jameson calls the "*semantic*" and the "structural or *syntactic* approaches."²¹ "The weakness" of the semantic approach—whose task, Frye shows us, is to give "an account of the *meaning* of the genre," what a genre signifies apart from any text but is contained intrinsically within it—"lies in the prospect of the invention of a whole series of imaginary entities and abstract personifications after the fashion of German idealism."²² Its form is that of "Hegelian idealistic historiography" at its worst (*PU* 136). Romance is especially vulnerable to such a method because of its historical continuity: its identifiable structures (wish-fulfillment, Manichean conflict, narratives of ascent and descent) emerge at a specific moment in time, the late twelfth century, but persist to such a degree and with such regularity that critics are liable to argue, as one critic recently has, that romance "is situated in and speaks of timeless moments," which are free from history because it is able to "convey fundamental human emotions."²³

The persistence of romance in Jameson's view is a testament to an altogether different structure, one emphatically *not* reducible to the human mind. This structure—"History" itself—is available to knowledge only obliquely, "never directly as some reified force," but rather through its "effects" (*PU* 102). Here again romance reveals its potential. Its central conceit is precisely that mechanism by which history moves and makes itself felt: conflict and its resolution. Jameson's understanding of romance takes the perpetuation of this central conceit as the means by which history discloses itself as a process of "transitional moments" and the collective struggle from which and through which such moments occur (*PU* 148). In every instance, romance stages and resolves conflict. In doing so, it exemplifies (as romance ever seems to do) a larger aim of literature, one that Jameson famously describes as providing "an imaginary 'solution' to . . . real contradiction" (*PU* 118). In the end, the achievement of romance is its ability to (magically) provide this resolution and to disclose along the way the historical "world" in which a poet lives and writes as a matter of feeling rather than of direct perception and representation. The conflicts and crises of a poet's world are only

ever felt, only ever absorbed into the poet's forms, through which they are then, to the perceptive critic, made knowable. Medieval romance is the first and clearest instance of this achievement, for it emanates from "transitional moments" of particular social violence. Yet romance flees almost at once from this particular history into "History" at large—it is witness, at last, to a timeless connection between "literature" and social life, from Arthurian romance to the novel, from Chrétien to Joseph Conrad. Romance remains, in other words, a metaphysics.

III

Critics have long understood the search for what romance "knows" to be itself a kind of romance—speculative, elaborate, totalizing. In a paper delivered to the English Institute in 1966, Geoffrey Hartman suggested that we think of Frye as "the fulfillment of Bishop Hurd," for as Hartman saw it, *Anatomy of Criticism* marked "the revival of a Romance poetics," the return of an ill-fated "quest" to find in romance the "basis for a universal criticism" and so become, in its attempt to do so, the very thing it studied.²⁴ Frye is the "fulfilment" of Richard Hurd, the eighteenth-century critic whose *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) can be said to inaugurate the romance revival, because Frye's work, like Hurd's, is more than just about romance: it is Romance. Jameson echoed Hartman's comments fifteen years later when he wrote with less ambivalence that "*The Secular Scripture* is itself the strongest contemporary renewal of romance"—that it "may be added into its own corpus" (*PU* 130). In both cases, Frye is the target of the critic's lance. But the idea that romance lends itself to a uniquely *romantic* criticism is as old as the revival itself. Witness, for example, the famously irascible Joseph Ritson on Thomas Warton's "Dissertation on the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe," an essay prefixed to his monumental *The History of English Poetry* (1774–1781): "this eloquent and flowery historian, whose duty it was to ascertain truth from the evidence of facts and ancient documents, and not to indulge his imagination in reverie and *romance*, without the least support, or even colour, of veracity or *probability*, has not the slightest authority for this visionary system."²⁵ Warton's problem is that his history isn't factual but "poetical"—imaginative, rhetorical, very much like the thing it knows. In his search for an origin of romance, Warton discovers and then writes a *History of English Poetry*. He becomes not just a historian of literature but also, much to Ritson's chagrin, a *literary* historian.

Hartman and Ritson were right, of course, each in their own way. During the early phase of the revival, writing about romance was a genre

in its own right—its singular feature that critics attempt to uncover, or recover, romance’s “real history.” In these writings, one discovers early attempts to understand romance as the “displacement” or “codification” of historical life—signature features of “magical narrative,” as Geraldine Heng (following Jameson) understands it, “identified by [its] *structure of desire* . . . rather than by any *intrinsic* subject matter, plot, style, or other content.”²⁶ The idiom has changed, but the idea remains the same: what romance knows—and continues to know—is found, above all, in its form. Christopher Cannon teaches us much about the stakes of this insight, both for criticism and for the “literature” it purports to know, by showing that in the “romance form” of Middle English we detect most clearly the revolutionary process by which the “idea” of English literature is given material shape—a form, like that of the commodity, in which this “idea” is both contained and transformed.²⁷ “Romance form is not the set of words found in any particular manuscript or printed book, but rather the thought which seems to be projected—as if into the ether itself—by the aggregation of all such texts . . . the result of the kind of perceptual error routinely made within a certain species of metaphysics.”²⁸ It is through this “perceptual error,” Cannon contends, that “the spirit of English romance became the spirit of English literature.”²⁹ In the eighteenth century, this “spirit” was made historical. From the 1760s on, critics began to invest the form of romance with a form of history that was, as Raymond Williams put it, a “continuous and connected process [of] *human self-development*.”³⁰ Romance was made to speak of the new “spirit” of history—a “spirit” that was progressive, teleological, traceable in and through human culture. What constituted the “revival” of romance, indeed, was that its study preceded from an anthropological rather than evaluative premise. Romance was supposed to demonstrate, perhaps more than any other artform, the human’s capacity for creative self-expression. Yet it was also taken to express its own historicity. Romance was understood to depict, even as it emerged from histories of conquest, (settler) colonization, migration, and racial or ethnic intermixing, the conditions through which “England” and “English literature” were made meaningful. Romance had a particular story to tell, one that compelled critics to write literary history that was from the start *genetic* history—a history of genre, but also a history of *gens* or peoples.

IV

In his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, Hurd proclaimed that “the only criticism, worth regarding, is . . . the philosophical,” for only this

criticism lets us see that poetry is a matter of knowledge rather than of rules (*MP* 3:299). From the outset, the study of romance was taken to enable a more sophisticated critical practice than what preceded it, in part because it saw that poetry took “nature” not as its object of imitation but as its foundation. So, Hurd further claimed, poets need not “follow *nature*” if that means describing “the known and experienced course of affairs in this world” (*MP* 3:303). Poets *already* follow nature, insofar as their poetry corresponds to conceptions of the world that may be fantastical but that are nevertheless grounded in perceptions of “external” reality. With Hurd, and the philosophical critics who followed in his wake, criticism turned away from procedures of evaluation toward those of interpretation, that is, away from poetics in a prescriptive sense toward poetics in a hermeneutical one. Thus in his early “Discourse on Poetical Imitation” (1751), Hurd sees poetry as the process by which “life” is “present[ed] . . . to the imagination,” and in his subsequent *Letters*, he suggests that it is romance which typifies this process and so constitutes an essential—perhaps the essential—form of poetry, one whose principal achievement is the figurative embellishment of real sociohistorical experience (“life”) presented to the reader as an inhabitable, experienceable world.³¹

The polemical and recuperative thrust of Hurd’s *Letters* relies on leveraging a naturalized sense of romance to draw the comparison between “classical” and “gothic” poetics. The contrast is particularly salient with respect to the question of unity; among its detractors the paradigmatic complaint was that romance possessed little or no structural coherence, that its formal heterogeneity—its multiple, often discontinuous plots—was taken to be in violation of Aristotelian unity of action. Hurd acknowledges romance’s formal idiosyncrasies but attempts to undermine these complaints by arguing that romance is in fact structured by a *natural* “unity of design,” one whose coherence consists in its apparent digressions and deviations (*MP* 3:278). “Romancers,” as Hurd calls them, establish coherence by unifying the many threads of which their plot is formed, the “separate avenues or glades” through which the reader travels, each of which possess its own “destination” and “proper object,” but that nevertheless shares a “common and concurrent center” (*MP* 3:273). By likening romance to an “English” garden and figuring the reader as someone who inhabits romance as an “enchanted ground” (*MP* 3:260), Hurd suggests that romance is not a practice of imitation so much as the formation or formalization of a poet’s “own . . . world,” one that is “*supernatural*” but not “*unnatural*” (*MP* 3:303–4, emphasis mine). The poet’s imagination performs, in Hurd’s view, a kind of world building that appeals to and determines the reader’s own aesthetic experience.

The “more sublime and creative poetry” of romance “address[es] itself solely or principally to the Imagination”; it “has no need to observe those cautious rules of credibility” (*MP* 3:305–6). Whereas the dramatist is circumscribed by such conventions, romance can give way to its “fanciful exhibitions.” And in being so liberated, it can induce a kind of reverie in the reader—a “*divine dream*, and delirious fancy”—as if to read romance is to be lost within a “fairy Land,” wandering its pathways as the present scene of reading (and one’s self-awareness) dissipates (*MP* 3:308–9, 261). To write romance is to construct “new worlds” by imagining them. It is, in fact, to “range in” the world of one’s own creation, and by “addressing” the imagination of the reader—as though speaking to it—it is to invite that reader to traverse its “avenues or glades” (*MP* 3:304).

Like all scholars of the romance revival, Hurd aims to transvalue romance by interpreting rather than dismissing its apparent faults. At issue, however, is not just romance’s structural (dis)unity, but also the presence of supernatural and improbable phenomena—the “Gods, and Faeries, and Witches” that people the romancer’s world (*MP* 3:304). This is an epistemological as well as aesthetic problem. Thus Hurd suggests that one way to explain their appearance is simply the author’s “vulgar belief of enchantments,” an ignorance or credulity that fosters their love of the ludicrous (*MP* 3:228). But Hurd cautions against an overly quick attribution of romance to ignorance, and therefore against a dismissal of romance as “the usual caprice and absurdity of barbarians,” in favor of a more complex understanding of poesis (*MP* 3:194). If neoclassical aesthetics sees the “Gods, and Faeries, and Witches” of romance as worthy of censure, Hurd argues, a new poetic system that incorporates the supernaturalism for which romance is known into its theory can see these same figures as indicative of an aesthetic primitivism, as exemplary of what poetry in its most basic form achieves. Following this, it is Hurd’s insight to see romance as enabling a rhetorical theory of poetry in which what is “natural” is the poet’s use of trope and figure to express “what immediately and actually happened,” to recall Hegel.³² “We hear much of Knights-errant encountering *Giants*, and quelling *Savages*, in books of Chivalry,” Hurd observes, not because the authors of such books necessarily believe giants exist but rather because the fictitious elements of romance are the traces of real historical events (*MP* 3:226). This is poetry as Jameson’s “socially symbolic act,” and it underwrites Hurd’s interpretation of Spenserian supernaturalism in what is his clearest statement on romance’s allegorical form: “These Giants were oppressive feudal Lords, and every Lord was to be met with, like the Giant, in his strong hold, or castle. Their dependants of a lower form, who imitated the violence of their superiors, and had not their castles, but their lurking-places, were

the Savages of Romance. The greater Lord was called a Giant, for his power; the less, a Savage, for his brutality" (*MP* 3:226).

The allegorical or metonymic function of romance is to transpose a "lord" and his "dependants" into the romantic emblems of "giant" and "savage"—a function poetical in nature and social in orientation. Incorporating the supernaturalism for which romance is known into a poetic system as forms of natural allegory enables the critic to conceive of its generic fixtures—giants, savages, witches, and so on—as elements of poetic invention. As signs indicative of a social order outside the text, which give coherence to its irrational features, an allegorical treatment of romance pulls the rug out from under a neoclassical desire to order or hierarchize poetry, in which romance occupies a position at the bottom (near comedy, beneath epic and tragedy), by insisting that the task of the critic is one of interpretation, not evaluation. Romance is historical, not (only) because it exists within an historical moment that can be read independently of romance, its frame of reference, but (also) because it is moments in history—the experience of such moments—that romance transmutes in the form of phantasm. What the "quelling" of giants and savages allows the critic to grasp is the social logic by which a given romance is written: in the case of its nominal form, a social-political system predicated on "perpetual violence, rapine, and plunder," one whose defining ideology, chivalry, is "the *natural* and even sober effect of the feudal policy; whose turbulent genius breathed nothing but war" (*MP* 3:202, 226, 204). As the (con)questing knight "quells" the savage and his lord, he performs in poetry what is in "real history" the "quelling" of people—their subjugation or death. Romance's allegories of violence, then, secure coherence for a historical period whose "darkness"—its brutality and obscurity—is thereby illuminated (*MP* 3:253). The allegory of romance is the violence of history—what gives this history its form and so its meaning.

To think of romance as a practice of narrative and linguistic figuration, as Hurd did, was to contribute to the reframing of poetry within a developing anthropological idiom. "Neither erudition nor hypothesis," quipped Robert Southey, is needed "to explain why poetry is universal, nor why that peculiar species of fiction, which we call Romance, should be found in the early literature of every country, of which the early literature has been preserved. The mind has its instincts and appetites, as well as the body, and they are the same every where."³³ The presumed ubiquity of romance enabled critics like Southey to reconstruct a universal—indeed global—network of human meaning-making: through romance human identity comes into view. Yet romance was also used to mark various forms of cultural, social, and racial difference. In particular, romance raised the

question of how poetry, understood as a cultural artifact, was supposed to relate to the observed characteristics of a given people or nation from which that poetry came. What can the physical and behavioral traits of a people tell us about their poetry; and, conversely, what can poetry tell us about a people's innate characteristics? Romance encouraged critics of this era to coordinate "poetry" and "people," and in doing so participate in the formation of racial categories as meaningful objects of human scientific thought. Did warmer climates, to take one prominent example, produce variations in skin tone, body hair, and disposition? Were those who lived in such climates less or more active than those who lived in, say, northern Europe? And did those variations contribute to or detract from the lively imagination so important to romantic "fine fabling" (*MP* 3:337)?

Narratives of racial identity and difference received an early stimulus from the study of romance; with its rehabilitation came a flowering of rac(ial)ist historiography. The axis around which such histories revolved was the question of the extent to which romance derived from particular, though broadly conceived, ethnolinguistic groups, above all the "Gothic" peoples of northern mainland Europe and Scandinavia, and the peoples of the Islamic Middle East, who typically figured in medieval romance narratives by the epithet "Saracen." This question was taken up forcefully by Thomas Percy in his landmark *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, notably in his "Essay on the Ancient Metrical Romances," which was begun in 1763, just a year after Hurd's *Letters*. Percy's view of romance as "ancient metrical" verse elaborates an ethnological fascination with poetry as the locus of human identity—a shared, ongoing practice of human meaning-making—and an index of various forms of difference—social and cultural, psychological and physiological—whose own variations testify to the world's vast, racially heterogeneous population. Romance plays a crucial role in this aesthetic, for in Percy's mind it isolates several functions of poetry and allows the critic to construct historical theories predicated on the material effects of geopolitical conflict, especially between Britain and its "Gothic" invaders.³⁴

In this respect, Percy is the less palatable acolyte of Hurd. "The true origin" of romance, he maintains, is a disposition—a Gothic predilection, even a weakness for "the monstrous extravagances of wild imagination."³⁵ Yet where Hurd is concerned above all with how romance works, Percy is decidedly more interested in the history this disposition lets us track. The difficulty, however, is that "history [is] altogether silent on this subject"—that there is little, if any, documentary evidence on the period from which romance initially derives.³⁶ The only recourse of the critic, Percy suggests, is conjecture. And that's precisely what Percy

does, beginning with the observation that romance appears in Britain and France at nearly identical moments, independent of each other. Prior to insular romances like *Tristan* or the continental romances of Robert Wace or Chrétien, “both nations,” Percy argues, performed in spoken language the historical figuration that culminated in the written romance tradition, “without either of them borrowing [this practice] from the other.”³⁷ These oral performances could furthermore be said to share the same aim, emblematic of a later chivalric ethos: “to encourage and foment a martial spirit.”³⁸ One can imagine, as Percy himself did, Norman soldiers singing songs of Roland at the Battle of Hastings, or, theoretically as likely, Anglo-Saxon soldiers singing at the same time songs of their own heroes past. The point is that romance comes from a way of thinking and feeling—or rather, that romance is a way of thinking and feeling contained in the song more than it is the song itself. In Percy’s mind, these observations amount to an injunction: we must understand romance as an idea that is effectively inaugurated (or implanted) through the repeated incursions of “Gothic” peoples into Britain and France from the fifth century to the eleventh century, and the widespread cultural transformation they fostered as the result of violent conflict and gradual acculturation. “The ideas of chivalry prevailed long before in all the Gothic nations,” Percy contends, “and may be discovered as in embryo in the customs, manners, and opinions, of every branch of that people.”³⁹ Romance—written or spoken, British or French—is the form by which that idea becomes a phenomenon.

As the works of Hurd and Percy differently suggest, the signature contribution of romance theory to the philosophy of history was to conceive of historical causation in large measure as the product of human violence: the forcible relocation or elimination of indigenous peoples, the appropriation of their land, their subsumption within dominant (settler-) colonial groups. These are the conditions in which romance is said to emerge, and they are available to general theorization precisely insofar as romance is able to “trace” them. In this respect, the romance theory of history reflects—and, more to the point, promotes—an important shift in the European historiographical imagination. As Henry Laurens has argued, across the eighteenth century “invasion” and “conquest” were increasingly thought to be a “driving force of history.”⁴⁰ The event to which these ideas had been hitherto attached was the destruction of Rome by Germanic peoples from the third to fifth centuries. But with the formation of a “universal” concept of history, Laurens suggests, “invasion” and “conquest” were no longer understood as the “singular occurrence” of late antiquity, but rather the regular, even necessary,

phenomena of world-historical development.⁴¹ The eighteenth-century reader of romance did not have to look far to see that “Gothic” invasions were not an isolated phenomenon. In fact they were so common to the early Middle Ages that they seemed to be an intrinsic feature of them. Nor was it difficult to see that “Gothic” peoples were not alone: no less consequential, indeed, were the invasions of and conflicts between Muslim and Euro-Christian people, from the seventh century to the thirteenth century, from *La Chanson de Roland* to *Richard Coeur de Lyon*. According to the eighteenth-century view, in romance violence is the rule. Among its central lessons, as George Ellis memorably put it, is “the mere honour and glory of *producing destruction*.”⁴²

A particular kind of violence haunts romance, however: the violence of settler colonialism. Scholars of the eighteenth century did not have, nor arguably were they interested in having, the language to describe the “technologies of violence,” in Patrick Wolfe’s terms, by which settlers achieved their aims: the transference of land possession through warfare and physical brutality, the subsequent construction of new social relations through (in the Middle Ages) iconoclasm, the suppression of language, and the redistribution and enfeoffment of land.⁴³ Yet this is precisely what romance theoreticians had to consider when reading of the Norman Conquest, for example, or Merlin’s prophecy that “death will lay hands on the people and destroy all the nations. Those who are left alive will abandon their native soil and will sow their seeds in other men’s fields.”⁴⁴ James Beattie is an instructive case here. Of the “Gothick” invaders of Britain, Beattie has this to say: “to exterminate the natives, seems not to have been their intention: they only wished to settle among them, to introduce their own customs and form of government, and to have the territory, or as much of it as they might have occasion for, at their disposal.”⁴⁵ Beattie continues: “that no instance of extermination took place, during the period of Gothick Conquest, cannot be affirmed, if we admit the testimony of contemporary historians. Several instances might have happened; and other horrid deeds, whereof there is no record, must have been perpetrated, while so many violent and extensive revolutions were going on.”⁴⁶ In other words, though the invasion and conquest of England by the Saxons was possibly bloody (it was), its primary goal was settlement through the imposition of “customs and form of government.” Extermination may have taken place (it did), but extermination was not itself the aim. This “feudal plan of subordination,” Beattie concludes, “became at length almost universal in Europe.”⁴⁷

V

The idea that romance developed within a racialized history of violence, one whose patterns of colonial conflict romance commemorated in the allegories and metonyms of its mode, reached its apex with the publication of Warton's *History of English Poetry*, the first history of literature with a developmental narrative. For Warton, the question of the origin of romance becomes a question of the origin of English literature itself. The historical argument Warton constructs with respect to romance is therefore intended less as a reappraisal of this neglected mode than as the starting point for an explanation of the emergence of English literature as a meaningful category. In his "Dissertation," Warton attempts to reconcile the conflicting racial theories of romance by suggesting, *pace* Percy, that the Gothic disposition to romance is, in fact, an Asiatic one, traceable through the migration of Eurasian people into Scandinavia as a result of Roman imperial expansion. The "oriental" imagination that earlier critics such as Pierre-Daniel Huet argued lay behind romance is here reintroduced as the germ from which later, definitive forms of European romance flourish. The tendency to romanticize is "natural" to Asiatic people, Warton contends, and their interaction at various stages in history with the people of Europe results in the spread of that tendency until it is "endemic" to European literary culture. The effect of the "Dissertation" is to emphasize, even more than Percy had, the settler-colonial conditions by which "English Poetry" comes into being. This includes the encounter not only between indigenous Celts and their Saxon colonizers, nor Anglo-Saxons and their Norman colonizers, but also the European colonization of and by North African and Levantine Arab peoples. For Warton, the study of "Poetry"—beginning with the study of romance—requires not only an anthropological perspective, according to which romance is, like all poetry, a primitive ritual practice, but also a historical perspective attuned to the specifically racial dimensions of historical development, that is, how history is propelled by racial encounter and conflict. At the heart of English literary history, Warton shows us, is an incipient theory of settler colonialism.

Two conditions of historical life that romance reveals are central to Warton's theory of the historical ground of romance: the elimination of indigenous populations, either through eradication or forced removal, and the "intermixing" of peoples and cultures as a result of mass migration and settlement.⁴⁸ As forces of historical change, elimination and "intermixing" are taken to explain romance as a contingent form, from which romance develops, *and* as an aesthetic form, that which romance seeks to represent. Warton's "Dissertation" therefore isolates

several instances in which these conditions occur, strung together into a chronological narrative that continually doubles back upon itself. Of particular importance is the case of Britain and France, specifically the Arthurian romances of French, “English,” and Welsh tradition. The appearance of Arthurian matter in the romances of these traditions—in *Culhwch ac Owen*, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and *Roman de Brut*, for instance—suggests the transmission of folk oral culture, both as a result of the Battle of Hastings and, prior to that, a *longue durée* of regional contact. To account for this (and to account for the similarity in Welsh, Cornish, and Breton languages) Warton posits that Brittany was “newly peopled in the fourth century by a colony or army of the Welsh, who migrated thither under the conduct of Maximus a Roman general in Britain” (O 1:3). The forced migration and eventual settlement of the Welsh in Brittany, in other words, a product of Roman imperial expansion, enabled the communication of peoples hitherto unknown to each other; the subsequent imperial neglect of this colony fostered their ongoing intimacy. “The migration of the Welsh into Brittany or Armorica,” Warton continues, “which during the distractions of the empire, in consequence of the numerous armies of barbarians with which Rome was surrounded on every side, had thrown off its dependence on the Romans, seems to have occasioned a close connection between the two countries for many centuries” (O 1:5). This explains, Warton contends, “not only that Wales should have been so constantly made the theatre of the old British chivalry, but that so many of the favorite fictions which occur in the early French romances, should also be literally found in the tales and chronicles of the elder Welsh bards” (O 1:4–6).

Yet for Warton the theory of Welsh-Breton contact could serve only to explain the transmission of romance, its spread. It could not determine what romance is or where it came from. Another theory was needed to address romance from a structural or poetic perspective—a theory that could reconcile the aesthetic and the historical, not by subordinating one to the other but by bringing them dialectically together. Percy’s racialist history proved to be a compelling approach: to argue that romance derived from a “Gothic” disposition, spread through the successive waves of “Gothic” colonization, was to show how and where romance developed. But for Warton this was still not enough. Percy’s argument, while largely correct, failed to consider the influence of Euro-Arab encounters on the production of romance. It also failed to consider the history of the Goths themselves, who, Warton maintains, are “Asiatic” (O 1:24). To advance upon Percy’s theory one had to outdo Percy—and in Warton’s hand, this meant taking the theory of romance one step closer to romance itself.

The study of romance, as Warton sees it, must be a study of the encounters between Euro-Christian and their Muslim “other”; and this study must begin not with the Crusades, nor with the Muslim conquest of Spain, but centuries earlier with the Roman conquest of northern Europe and the Roman empire’s expansion into the geographical region between the Black and Caspian seas. “A few years before the birth of Christ,” Warton writes, “a nation of Asiatic Goths, who possessed that region of Asia which is now called Georgia, and is connected on the south with Persia, alarmed at the progressive encroachments of the Roman armies, retired in vast multitudes under the conduct of their leader Odin, or Woden, into the northern parts of Europe, not subject to the Roman government, and settled in Denmark, Norway, [and] Sweden” (O 1:24). As the name of the leader of this Georgian people suggests, their forced migration leads them into Scandinavia, where a preexisting oral culture is refashioned into an at once indigenous northern European and non-European, “Asiatic” literary hybrid. These people, whom Warton refers to as “Odin’s Goths,” “were hospitably received by the natives, and by degrees acquired a safe and peaceable establishment in the new country, which seems to have adopted their language, laws, and religion” (O 1:24–25). Originally from Georgia (and so “Asiatic”) but now transplanted with great influence on Scandinavian religious-literary culture, “Odin’s Goths” possessed a unique “skill in poetry, to which they were addicted in a peculiar manner”: “their poetry contained not only the praises of their heroes, but also their popular traditions and their religious rites; and was filled with those fictions which the most exaggerated pagan superstition would *naturally* implant in the wild imaginations of an Asiatic people” (O 1:29, emphasis mine). From Persia to Georgia to Scandinavia, the “operations of fancy” that are natural to “Asiatic” people and are fostered by warmth of climate and lethargy manifest in that tendency to romanticize that spread like a disease into Europe (O 1:31).

In Warton’s speculative history, romance is inaugurated by a fusion or melding of cultures and peoples that is a necessary condition of romance’s flourishing. “Intermixing,” as Warton calls it, is always the product of migration and colonization—always the product of the circulation of people, either those forced to flee from their homelands, such as the Georgians, or those, such as the Romans, who deliberately and systematically expand the reach of their power. “In the early ages of Europe,” Warton writes, “revolutions, emigrations, and invasions, were frequent and almost universal. Nations were alternately destroyed or formed; and the want of political security exposed the inhabitants of every country to a state of eternal fluctuation” (O 1:32–33). Revolution,

migration, fluctuation—the history of romance, like romance itself, is digressive, circuitous, and seemingly endless.

VI

The ability of romance to attest to the eradication and “intermixing” by which English poetry is first produced is demonstrated by what Warton deems to be “the most antient English metrical romance,” the thirteenth-century Middle English *King Horn* (O 1:38). Warton’s analysis of this poem anchors the transition from his “Dissertation” to the *History* proper, and thus the transition from philosophy of history to the scholarly narrative of literary development into which that philosophy is folded. The significance of *King Horn* to Warton’s project is owed to its status as the oldest extant romance in English and its testament to the conditions and experience of violence that form the unstated core of Warton’s historical theory. Thus far I have considered how an idea of romance shaped criticism, above all in its search for the “spirit” of history. To conclude, I want to briefly look away from writings about romance to romance itself, for doing so will let us see how romance, in Warton’s terms, mediates the cultural and racial complex at the origin of English poetry.

King Horn, and the French *The Romance of Horn* on which it is based, tells the story of a prince exiled from his homeland in “Suddene” (roughly southwest England). After a foreign army invades, kills Horn’s father, and takes possession of his land, Horn is set adrift at sea. He eventually lands in Brittany (Westnesse in the Middle English version), and after various (con)quests there and in Ireland, returns home, dispatches the invaders, and reestablishes his rightful possession of the land. As Susan Crane notes, the Horn narrative is a “romance[] of land and lineage,” in which the quest for vengeance encodes a feudal ideology of rightful belonging.⁴⁹ However, this ideology—and the “colonizing process” it tacitly endorses—is, as Laura Ashe has argued, “displac[ed]” onto a past that neither the author of *King Horn* nor Thomas, the author of *The Romance of Horn*, identify.⁵⁰ Both narratives foreground their own historicity: they call attention to a past that is, to borrow Lukács’s apt phrase, a “precondition of the present.”⁵¹

Absent any specifiable date, the historicity of the Horn romance is provocatively registered in the brutality and pathos of the violence it portrays. Looking back upon the scene of invasion—and the moment of loss—that inaugurates Horn’s tale, the poet of *King Horn* depicts the encounter between indigenous “English” and foreign invader as one

of unrepentant annihilation. In the following passage Horn's father, Murry, discovers the invaders newly arrived on the beach and learns of their intentions:

He fond bi þe stronde
 ariued on his londe.
 Schipes fiftene
 wiþ sarazins kene.
 He axede what isoʒte
 Oþer to londe broʒte.
 A Payn hit ofherde
 & hym wel sone answarede:
 'Bi lond folk we schulle slon
 And alle þat Crist luueþ vpon
 And þe selue riʒt anon,
 Ne schaltu todai henne gon. (lines 35–46)⁵²

[He found by the shore that fifteen ships, with bold Saracens, had arrived on his land. He asked what they sought or brought with them. A pagan heard it, and answered right away: "We shall soon slay your people, and you, and all that Christ loves. Today you shall not go hence."]

The subsequent murder of Horn's father and "lond folk" at the hand of settling "sarazins" is the impetus of the narrative; it is what initiates Horn's journey and motivates his brutality.

In Horn's path to maturation, marriage, and the restoration of "ri te" [right] is depicted in stages of violence and personal growth (line 1342). The repetitive structure of these stages, and the nearly indistinguishable moments of slaughter that occur within them, underscores the cyclicity of colonial violence in this historical world. Thus, as Horn moves from Suddene to Westernesse to Yrlond, he encounters Saracens at every turn, defeating them till "ne lefde þer non in þende" [there was none left in the end] (line 1378). After Horn is adopted by Ailmar, the king of Westernesse who has fallen in love with his daughter Rymenhild and has been, as Warton puts it, "educated in hawking, harping, tilting, and other courtly accomplishments," Horn successfully defends Ailmar's land from the same invading Saracens that conquered Suddene (O 1:39). The slaughter is preceded by a moment of recognition nearly identical to that which opens the poem:

He fond o schup stonde
 Wiþ heþene honde:
 He axede what hi soʒte
 Oþer to londe broʒte.

An hund him gan bihelde,
 Pat spac wordes belde:
 ‘Þis lond we wulleȝ wynne
 & sle þat þer is inne.’
 Horn gan his swerd gripe,
 & on his arme wype;
 Þe sarazins he smatte
 Þat his blod hatte;
 At eureche dunte
 Þe heued of wente.

. . .
 He sloȝ þer on haste
 On hundred bi þe laste
 Ne miȝte noman telle
 Þat folc þat he gan quelle:
 Of alle þat were aliue
 Ne miȝte þer non þriue.
 Horn tok þe maisteres heued,
 Þat he hadde him bireued,
 & sette hit on his swerde
 Anouen at þan orde. (lines 597–610, 615–24)

[He found a ship with heathen hounds at anchor. He asked what they sought or brought with them. One hound saw him, and spoke these bold words: “this land we will conquer and slay all the inhabitants therein.” Horn grips his sword and wipes it on his arm. He struck the Saracens and his blood grew hot; at each and every blow a head went flying . . . He killed there, quickly, one hundred in the end. No one might count how many folk he killed. Of all that were alive, none survived. Horn took the leader’s head, which he had deprived him of, and set it on the point of his sword.]

The moment of Horn’s recognition in this passage mirrors the prior moment in which Horn’s father discovers, in precisely the same manner, the invading Saracens; the repeated phrase, “He axede what hi soȝte / Oþer to londe broȝte,” echoes the event with which the poem began.⁵³ Father and son are doubled. Yet where the father fails, the son succeeds—signaling the success with which a younger generation rights the wrongs of the past.

At the poem’s end, another doubling occurs. This time, however, the triumph of Horn’s revenge is subtly undermined by the violence it evokes. In this passage, Horn is not his father but the invading Saracen. His promise to flay the inhabitants of Suddene alive echoes the fear that Horn’s father, at the poem’s beginning, had for his son: “Payns him wolde slen / Oþer al quic flen” [Pagans wanted to kill him, or flay him alive (lines 85–86)]. Arriving on the shore of Suddene, Horn announces:

Icom to Suddenne
 Wiþ mine irisse menne:
 We schulle þe hundes teche
 To speken vre speche.
 Alle we hem schulle sle
 & al quic hem fle.' (lines 1365–70)

[I come to Suddene with my Irish men: we shall teach the hounds to speak our language. We shall slay them all, and flay them alive.]⁵⁴

What these passages reveal is a poet whose consciousness of history is a consciousness of loss—the loss of life, of land, of language. The past of *King Horn* is distinguished by the frequency with which this loss occurs, even if the poem's "imaginary resolution," as Jameson would have it, is to narrate this loss's gradual though no less violent reversal (*PU* 77).

The historicity of *King Horn*, however, is complicated by anachronism, illustrated above all in the poet's use of the term "Saracen." As John V. Tolan informs us, "Saracen" could refer to paganism in general, though it was always inflected by anti-Islamic rac(ial)ism—an ambivalence that *King Horn* exploits in making "sarazin" signify at once the people of the Muslim world and the Germanic peoples upon which a later propagandistic rac(ial)ism was based.⁵⁵ Scholars have noted, in fact, that the "sarazins" of *King Horn*, sometimes referred to by the poet as "emirs" and "sultans," reflect the poet's awareness of "contemporary Islamic power structure[s]." At the same time, however, the "sarazins" of the Horn narrative have been identified as Danish raiders or "Vikings."⁵⁷ Of the Anglo-Norman *The Romance of Horn*, for instance, Judith Weiss argues that "the principal names in it are Scandinavian/Germanic, and in its depiction of repeated raids by heathen invaders on Ireland and the south coast of England, it probably reflects the Viking raids on Britain in the eighth to tenth centuries."⁵⁸ The Saracens of the Horn narrative thus designate a pagan invader that, in terms of name and historical setting, arguably reflect the "Vikings" that in their ideologically repurposed form reflect the Islamic "other" with whom, at the time of *Horn's* composition, Britain and much of northern Europe were attempting to eradicate and whose lands they were attempting to colonize.

The past *King Horn* portrays is thus oddly proleptic: it hints at a future of conquest and colonization that could not have been known to the people of the poem's world. *The Romance of Horn* builds this prolepsis into its conclusion. Having concluded Horn's narrative, the poet gestures to a future in which poetry and colonial violence become mutual inheritances. "Revenge" and its chronicling become features of a shared tradition, from the ambiguous past of the poem to the present moment of writing: "When matters were thus concluded, [Horn] returned to Brit-

tany and glorious Rigmel, and remained there as long as he pleased. In the time he stayed there, he fathered on Rigmel the valiant Hadermod, who conquered, and then ruled, Africa and took revenge for all his kin. In bravery and wisdom he surpassed them all, as he who knows the story can reveal. I leave this to my son Wilmot to tell, who after me will compose the poem well—he will be a good poet: he inherits that from me!”⁵⁹ *The Romance of Horn* ends with a “perspective” onto the future, as Lukács understood this term, with an evocation of something that is “not yet reality” [*noch nicht Realität*] but that is “the tendency in reality toward its realization, through deeds and through actions, through the thought of certain men, in whom a great social tendency expresses itself.”⁶⁰ Together, the concluding promise of retribution in the form of colonial dispossession and the ambivalent figure of the Saracen augur a future that is for the reader not a future at all but the “social tendency” of the present. In Warton’s eyes, the eradication of the Saracen clears the way for the intermixing that is the poem’s imaginary resolution. The very setting of *King Horn*—England, Brittany, and Ireland—demonstrates the various forms of intimacy that exist between these regions as a result of their shared experiences of conquest and settlement: the cultural, linguistic, and legal norms that enable Horn to move successfully between them on his way to retaking Suddene. Horn’s mobility is evidence, in Warton’s terms, of the intermixing that took place between these regions; indeed *King Horn* narrates precisely *how* such intermixing occurred by depicting a dispossessed English hero who must travel to other lands besieged by the same pagan invaders.

Warton reads *King Horn* as the first romance of England, a romance that looks back upon its own prehistory. Its form reflects a desire to express social and racial homogeneity that belongs, in Frye’s terms, to man’s “mythological universe.” But *King Horn* is also the first distinctively “English” poem, as Warton saw it. It resolves into one historical layer the successive moments in which the romantic imagination, as Warton put it in his racialized idiom, was introduced to and ossified in the European mind—moments whose violence are the very condition of possibility for “English Poetry.” For Warton and the other revivalists, to read romance is to confront in the language of phantasm violence, racial conflict, and settler-colonial life—not just at a single moment in time, but across time; not as the byproduct of history, but as its fabric. Few scholars today would share in the quiet triumph that underwrites Warton’s view of romance as it inaugurates the English poetic tradition—and fewer still in the celebration of triumphs to come that conclude Horn’s tale. But it is vital that we recognize what for Warton and the critics of his era romance was made to do—the beliefs it was made to endorse and the kind of criticism, what today we call “literary history,”

those beliefs were made to form. For in our own time still, as Frye and Jameson differently teach us, the allure of romance remains the history that it knows, the history that it lets us write. But this allure has its own past, its own stories to tell. And herein lies the challenge romance sets. What future histories will we write? What loss of life and land have shaped, and continue to shape, our practice?

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

NOTES

My thanks to the participants of the 2019 ACLA conference seminar, "Towards New Theories and Histories of Romance," for their feedback on an earlier version of this essay. Special thanks to my co-organizer Jared Hickman, and to Mary Favret and Christopher Cannon for their timely corrections and criticism. This essay is better because of their generosity.

1 John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 2.

2 The most comprehensive historical study of the romance revival remains Arthur Johnston, *Enchanted Ground: The Study of Medieval Romance in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Athlone Press, 1964). For more recent commentary, see Susan Manning, "Antiquarianism, balladry and the rehabilitation of romance," in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 45–70.

3 George Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, 3 vols. (London: Blackwood, 1900–1904), 3:80.

4 Richard Blackmore, "An Essay on the Nature and Constitution of Epic Poetry," in *Essays upon Several Subjects* (London: E. Curll, 1716–1717). Quoted in Johnston, *Enchanted Ground*, 8. On romance and romantic as epithets, see Raymond Immerwahr, "'Romantic' and its Cognates in England, Germany, and France before 1790," in *'Romantic' and its Cognates: The European History of a Word*, ed. Hans Eichner (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), especially 17–53.

5 The need for a specifically philosophical "criticism" is Richard Hurd's suggestion, from *Moral and Political Dialogues; with Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 3:299 (hereafter cited as *MP*). I discuss this work and its aims below.

6 Walter Scott, "Essay on Romance," in *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Cadell and Co., 1827), 6:167, 6:160.

7 Scott, "Essay on Romance," 6:155.

8 Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance, through Times, Countries, and Manners; with Remarks on the Good and Bad Effects of it, On Them Respectively*, 2 vols. (London: J. Robinson, 1785). This work is a signal contribution to romance theory in the latter eighteenth century. It shares and indeed synthesizes many of the views explored in this essay, for example at 1:13–14 and 1:44. However, I do not engage more closely with it for the emphasis it places on prose romance and for its concern more generally with the "merits" of romance relative to the development of the novel (1:viii). My focus here is largely limited to hermeneutic rather than evaluative claims, and on the interpretive procedures that enabled critics to write literary histories that were also ethnic histories.

9 Scott, "Essay on Romance," 6:206–7.

10 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2:977, 2:993, 2:978.

11 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:994.

12 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984), 53 (emphasis mine).

- 13 Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 173; Rita Copeland, "Between Romans and Romantics," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33, no. 2 (1991): 216; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003); Corinne Saunders, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Saunders (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 1–3; and Jon Whitman, "Romance and History: Designing the Times," in *Romance and History: Imagining Time from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Whitman (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), 3–20.
- 14 See René Wellek, "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History," in *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), 128–98; and, more recently, David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 145–60. For romance and the novel, see Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1760* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), especially 52–65; and Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992).
- 15 Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Ghostlier Demarcations," in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966), 130.
- 16 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), 162 (hereafter cited as AC).
- 17 Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), 36.
- 18 Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 58, 55.
- 19 Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 15.
- 20 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 68–69 (hereafter cited as PU).
- 21 Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7, no. 1 (1975): 136.
- 22 Jameson, "Magical Narratives," 136.
- 23 Saunders, *A Companion to Romance*, 1.
- 24 Hartman, "Ghostlier Demarcations," 130.
- 25 Joseph Ritson, *Ancient English Metrical Romances*, 3 vols. (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1802), 1:xxii, emphasis mine.
- 26 Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 2, 3–4.
- 27 Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature*, 14.
- 28 Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature*, 175–76.
- 29 Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature*, 176.
- 30 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), 146–47.
- 31 Hurd, *The Works of Richard Hurd*, 8 vols. (London, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811), 2:111.
- 32 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:993.
- 33 Robert Southey, *Specimens of the Later English Poets*, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1807), 1:ix.
- 34 On the "semantic minefield" of eighteenth-century uses of "Gothic," and on Percy's use in particular, see Nick Groom, *The Making of Percy's Reliques* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 68.
- 35 Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (London: J. Dodsley, 1767), 3:iii.
- 36 Percy, "An Essay on the Ancient English Minstrels," in *Reliques*, 1:xxi.
- 37 Percy, *Reliques*, 3:ix
- 38 Percy, "An Essay on the Ancient English Minstrels," in *Reliques*, 1:xviii.

- 39 Percy, *Reliques*, 3:iv.
- 40 Henry Laurens, *Europe and the Muslim World in the Contemporary Period*, in John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein, and Henry Laurens, *Europe and the Islamic World: A History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2013), 279.
- 41 Henry Laurens, "Europe and the Muslim World in the Contemporary Period," in John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein, and Henry Laurens, *Europe and the Islamic World: A History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2013), 262.
- 42 George Ellis, *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1811), 1:18.
- 43 Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), 15.
- 44 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966), 173.
- 45 James Beattie, "On Fable and Romance," in *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, W. Strahan, 1783), 528–29.
- 46 Beattie, "On Fable and Romance," 528.
- 47 Beattie, "On Fable and Romance," 533.
- 48 Thomas Warton, "On the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe," in *The History of English Poetry: From the Close of the Eleventh Century to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century*, 3 vols. (London, J. Dodsley, 1774), 1:5 (hereafter cited as O). In this edition of *The History*, the dissertation "On the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe," which is prefixed to *The History*, includes no page numbers. Pagination in this edition begins after "On the Origin." For the sake of citation, however, we have included page numbers as if they had been included in this edition.
- 49 Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 30. See also Crane, "Anglo-Norman Cultures in England, 1066–1460," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 35–60.
- 50 Laura Ashe, *Fiction and History in England, 1066–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 121, 157.
- 51 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 21.
- 52 Gg. 4. 27. 2. University Library, Cambridge. Translation from *King Horn: A Middle English Romance*, ed. Joseph Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901) (line numbers cited in text).
- 53 In the MS. Harleian, 2253. British Museum, London and MS. Laud, Misc. 108. Bodleian Library, Oxford the repeated phrase read: "he askede whet hue sohten / oþer on is lond brohten" (lines 43–44) and "He acsede wat he sowte / Oþer to londe broucte" (lines 43–44), respectively.
- 54 Horn's promise to "fle" the Saracens "quic" occurs in MS. Gg. 4. 27. 2. University Library, Cambridge.
- 55 John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002), 105–35.
- 56 Diane Speed, "The Saracens of *King Horn*," *Speculum* 65, no. 3 (1990): 593.
- 57 In Hall's terms, "This poem, as we have it, is a story of Danish raids on the south coast of England. It is, in the main, Teutonic in spirit and details: the names of the persons and places are mostly Teutonic or assimilated to Teutonic forms," *King Horn*, ed. Hall, liv.
- 58 Judith Weiss, *The Birth of Romance in England: Four Twelfth-Century Romances in the French of England* (Tempe: Arizona State Univ. Press, 2009), 3.
- 59 Thomas, *The Romance of Horn*, trans. Weiss, in *The Birth of Romance*, 136–37.
- 60 "Es ist aber die Tendenz in der Wirklichkeit zur Verwirklichung dieser Realität, durch Taten und durch Handlungen, durch Gedanken bestimmter Menschen, in welchen sich eine großen gesellschaftliche Tendenz ausspricht." Lukács, "Das Problem der Perspektive," in *Schriften zur Literatursoziologie*, ed. Peter Ludz (Neuwied: H. Luchterhand, 1961), 254–55.