The essays in this volume take a representative selection of English and Scottish romances from the medieval period and explore some of their medieval contexts, deepening our understanding not only of the romances concerned but also of the specific medieval contexts that produced or influenced them. The contexts explored here include traditional literary features such as genre and rhetorical technique and literary-cultural questions of authorship, transmission and readership; but they also extend to such broader intellectual and social contexts as medieval understandings of geography, the physiology of swooning, or the efficacy of baptism. A framing context for the volume is provided by Derek Pearsall’s prefatory essay, in which he revisits his seminal 1965 article on the development of Middle English romance. Contributors: MARIANNE AILLES, NANCY MASON BRADBURY, SIORHAIN BLY CALKIN, MICHAEL CICHON, ROSALIND FIELD, JOHN A. GECK, PHEILIPA HARDMAN, YIN LIU, DEREK PEARSALL, NICHOLAS PERKINS, ROBERT ROUSE, JUDITH WEISS, EMILY WINGFIELD.
Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts
This series aims to provide a forum for critical studies of the medieval romance, a genre which plays a crucial role in literary history, clearly reveals medieval secular concerns, and raises complex questions regarding social structures, human relationships, and the psyche. Its scope extends from the early Middle Ages into the Renaissance period, and although its main focus is on English literature, comparative studies are welcomed.

Proposals or queries should be sent in the first instance to one of the addresses given below; all submissions will receive prompt and informed consideration.

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Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts

Edited by
RHIANNON PURDIE AND MICHAEL CICHON

D. S. BREWER
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Acknowledgements

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Most importantly, we offer our heartfelt thanks to our respective families: Neale, Isaac and Russell; Lisa, Signy and Soren.

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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANTS</td>
<td>Anglo-Norman Text Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library, London</td>
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<td>CUL</td>
<td>Cambridge University Library</td>
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<td>EETS</td>
<td>Early English Text Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>EUL</td>
<td>Edinburgh University Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>MED</td>
<td><em>Middle English Dictionary</em>, online at quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAS</td>
<td>National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh</td>
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<td>NLS</td>
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Introduction: Romance and its Medieval Contexts

RHIANNON PURDIE and MICHAEL CICHON

No literature exists in a vacuum. Meaning is generated through context, or rather contexts, since there will always be several that apply at any one point and these will change and multiply over time. This is no less true of medieval romance than of any other genre of literature, and no single study is likely to address all of the relevant contexts for a genre as widespread and popular – in sheer numbers and variety of readers – as medieval romance. The aim of the present collection of essays is to take a selection of English and Scottish romances from the medieval period and explore some medieval contexts that might deepen our understanding of them. The contexts explored here include more traditional literary concerns with questions of genre and rhetorical technique or literary-cultural questions of authorship, transmission and readership, but they also extend to such broader intellectual and social contexts as medieval understandings of geography, or the physiology of swooning, or the efficacy of baptism. This is a two-way process: the romances studied here are illuminated by the various contexts in which the volume’s contributors set them, but so too are those contexts enriched and altered by romance’s interaction with them. The medieval audience for romance was relatively broad and varied: old and young, women and men, clerical and lay, nobility, gentry, merchants and those who could not afford – perhaps could not read – their own manuscript or print copy of a Middle English romance. This socially ubiquitous quality gives romances the potential to collect, encode and sometimes interrogate a similarly broad range of ideas and social concerns, as the following essays demonstrate.

The texts studied range from the very well known (Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, or *Guy of Warwick*) to those which have received scant critical notice, such as the Middle English fragment known as the *Song of Roland*, the late medieval Scottish romances of *Eger and Grime*, *Rauf Coilyear* and the *Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour*, or the entire field of thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman romance, almost squeezed out of the picture between the exciting birth of the genre in the preceding century, the launch of Middle English romance by the fourteenth century and the greater retrospective prestige of continental French literature generally. This is not a survey volume but an exploration of the arresting potential of reading medieval romances against a variety of medieval contexts.

A framing context for these essays is provided by Derek Pearsall’s preface essay, ‘The Pleasure of Popular Romance’. No student of medieval
romance can move far without encountering Pearsall’s work, and his 1965 article ‘The Development of Middle English Romance’ is perhaps the single most quoted article in the field (if not always approvingly these days, as Pearsall wryly observes).1 His essay here is explicitly presented as a personal ‘retraction’. It acknowledges the changes that have taken place in the study of medieval English romance over the past forty-odd years, and in particular the decline in the importance attached to aesthetic evaluation and the correspondingly greater emphasis on historical and social contextualisation, both of the romances and their audiences. Returning finally to the idea of aesthetic evaluation, Pearsall calls for a new, more romance-relevant analysis of narrative structure and poetic form, with more attention to the function of standardised episodic form and formulaically repetitive style in relation to a listening audience: ‘repetition of motifs, a common stock of language and metaphor and incident, fast pace, predictable outcome, are what is to be enjoyed in medieval popular romance – anathema to any form of post-medieval aesthetic…. All that needs to be done to release the energies of romance is to put these features at the centre rather than at the margins of our attention.’2

Nancy Mason Bradbury’s essay begins the exploration of medieval contexts with a study of the literary expression of peasant identity in Rauf Coilyear, an unexpected thing to find in a genre normally defined by its near-exclusive focus on the opposite end of the social scale. The socially governed aspects of Rauf’s use of language in his encounters with Charlemagne are thrown into relief by comparison with the Middle English prose Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf. This comparison leads to a recognition of Rauf Coilyear’s exploitation of two literary subgenres, the proverb and the popular complaint or ‘poem of social protest’. Bradbury demonstrates the surprising extent to which ‘their represented speech makes use of recognisable verbal genres, as opposed to ordinary, unstructured “talk”’ 3 to construct this peasant identity.

The study of specific medieval literary contexts continues through the next three essays. Bradbury’s focus on medieval conceptions of peasant identity and its relation to proverbial literature is complemented by Michael Cichon’s study of proverbs in Eger and Grime. As Cichon notes, ‘proverbs have tended to escape serious critical notice because of their simplicity and ring of cliché’,4 and yet romances are similar to proverbs in the way they function to reinforce social ties, beliefs, attitudes, values, fears and perceptions. Where Bradbury concentrates on their use in the construction of peasant identity, Cichon looks more broadly at the ways in which Eger and Grime ‘deploy its traditional

2 ‘The Pleasure of Popular Romance’, below, p. 11.
4 Cichon, ‘Proverbial Context’, below, p. 43.
paroemiological material to control audience response and to establish itself within a referential context wider than that normally associated – at least by modern readers – with medieval romance. Even (or perhaps especially) the most banal examples of proverbs and proverbial comparisons resonate with wider literary or cultural traditions, and it is this that allows them to work as a kind of embedded gloss on the narrative – explaining and justifying or, conversely, introducing shades of doubt and ambiguity.

A different technique for amplifying meaning is explored by Nicholas Perkins’ study of the rhetorical figure of ekphrasis – the vivid description of things and actions – in the representative Middle English romances of Emaré and Eglamour of Artois. Ekphrasis, he argues, is the means by which romance interacts with material culture to generate meaning. Middle English romances are known and valued for their ‘liveliness and brisk pace and sheer appetite for narrative’; rather less so for their rhetorical powers of description. Their characteristic fascination with luxury objects tends to be dismissed as mere surface decoration or a simplistic expression of social aspiration. Perkins offers a useful corrective here in stressing ‘how natural was the integration of the visual and verbal/textual to a late-medieval public … reminding us that certain contexts are neither easy nor necessarily productive to separate’.

Where the first three papers dealt with juxtapositions, that of Marianne Ailes deals with an often confusing proximity: the genres of romance and chansons de geste in Anglo-Norman literature. Otinel and La Destruction de Rome have traditionally been categorised as chansons de geste while the Roman de Horn is assigned instead to the genre of romance. Ailes demonstrates that, despite their differing modern labels, all three texts inscribe their works carefully and consciously within a chanson de geste tradition. This is only to be expected in the case of the first two texts, which are both attached to continental chanson de geste cycles, but to move the purely insular narrative of Horn into this category is to recognise in Anglo-Norman literary culture a different, more creative kind of participation in the wider context of continental literary traditions.

Phillipa Hardman also explores generic identity, in this case that of the fragmentary Middle English Song of Roland (as its editorial title has it) in relation to both the French Chanson and the fragment’s more immediate context – the local tradition of Middle English romance. Reading the Song of Roland within the latter context, rather than simply against the Chanson de Roland, Hardman demonstrates that this text is not an inept mishandling of the Chanson tradition written for a safely ignorant English readership, but a distinct, innovative treatment of the material which depends for its full effect on the audience’s familiarity with the story. One is reminded of Pearsall’s renewed appreciation of Middle English romance in his prefatory essay when

5 Cichon, ‘Proverbial Context’, below, p. 44.
7 Perkins, ‘Ekphrasis and Narrative’, below, p. 47.
she concludes: ‘this version of the Roland legend can thus offer both the pleasure of recognition in the retelling of a familiar story, and the accompanying pleasure of difference, as the reader or listener becomes aware that new episodes and changed emphases are producing a fresh take on the story’.8

Hardman’s probing of the validity of the identity given to a Middle English text by its modern editors shares similarities with the essay by John A. Geck. He also looks at insular English literature in relation to continental French traditions, although the focus of his study of the Middle English Floris and Blancheflor and its source, the Old French Floire et Blanceflor, is more precisely on the relationship of the Old French source to variants that occur across the manuscript tradition of the Middle English romance. He observes that although the Auchinleck manuscript version of the Middle English Floris is usually accorded the greatest textual authority by modern editors thanks to its closer agreement with the Old French, variants in the other three Middle English manuscripts work to present a heightened ambiguity in the presentation of Floris’s faith throughout which parallels the much more obvious ambiguity in the presentation of his gender. This additional English highlighting of the themes of ambiguity and transgression is largely absent from the Auchinleck manuscript version which modern readers are likely to encounter in critical texts edited on a ‘best-text’ principle. Geck’s analysis reaffirms the value of studying variation in a medieval romance’s manuscript tradition, no matter how authoritative one version may seem. It also reconfirms the keen interest of the medieval English audience in questions of faith, an interest that will be brought to the fore in the essay by Calkin.

In the remaining essays by Calkin, Weiss, Rouse, Liu, Field and Wingfield, the volume shifts its focus from principally literary contexts to the interaction of romances with their wider social, intellectual and cultural surroundings. Siobhain Bly Calkin compares baptism scenes in the Middle English romances of The King of Tars and Sir Ferumbras to writings on baptism by such authorities as Thomas Aquinas or John Myrc, observing that ‘although it is not particularly helpful to sift romance depictions of religious ceremonies for evidence about liturgical practices, it is intriguing to reverse the process and consider the ways in which romances engage the cultural ideas of their day’.9 Her finely detailed study reveals that, where theologians emphasised the efficacy of the words of the baptism ceremony, romances instead ‘suggest that physical acts, experiences and sights, not words, change religious identity’, a surprising finding which, however, is entirely consistent with romances’ ‘artistic ability to translate emotional and mental states into physical actions’.10 Calkin’s analysis illustrates the ability of romances to

8 Hardman, ‘Roland in England: Contextualising the Middle English Song of Roland’, below, p. 104.
9 Calkin, ‘Romance Baptisms and Theological Contexts in The King of Tars and Sir Ferumbras’, below, p. 105.
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capture and transmit an aspect of medieval thinking on baptism not registered in the formal theological writings of the day.

Judith Weiss investigates another area of interaction between wider medieval learning and romance in her study of the controversial swoon of Troilus in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. To interpret this action, she looks first to the literary context of swoons in a variety of Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances. She then tests the viability of the meanings imputed by modern readers to these literary swoons against medieval medical understandings of swooning: ‘the latters’ objective accounts and explanations of the phenomenon provide a welcome antidote to some of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century approaches adopted in recent studies of Chaucer’s masterpiece’. Weiss, ‘Modern and Medieval Views on Swooning: the Literary and Medical Contexts of Fainting in Romance’, below, p. 121. This study offers a particularly good example of how much would be lost if such robustly historicist approaches (whether New or Old) were to be abandoned in the modern criticism of medieval literature: the meanings attributed to the fainting heroes and heroines of romance by medieval authors and audiences are radically different from those generated by reading from within a modern cultural context, and the individual romances do not offer enough clues on their own as to how we might adjust our view.

With an amused nod to modern cultural contexts, Robert Rouse’s essay offers to set medieval romances such as *Guy of Warwick* in the unexpected context of ‘the aspirational reading of Lonely Planet guidebooks’. Rouse, ‘Walking (between) the Lines: Romance as Itinerary/Map’, below, p. 135. He argues for the ability of romance to articulate geographical knowledge and provide its medieval readers with a context in which to understand the world. It is widely accepted that romances communicate moral values, social attitudes and even lessons in conduct, but Rouse demonstrates that they could both encode and influence more esoteric branches of knowledge too.

This idea of a two-way interface between medieval romance and other branches of knowledge is also at the heart of Yin Liu’s essay, for which *Guy of Warwick* is again the catalyst. In this case, it is the interface between romance and genealogy which is put under the microscope as she studies the use made of *Guy of Warwick* by the fifteenth-century Warwickshire chantry priest, John Rous, in the preparation of armorial rolls for his patrons, the earls of Warwick. Rous’s work is dismissed by modern historians thanks to his use of the romance *Guy of Warwick* as a source, but Liu carefully demonstrates how much more tightly interwoven were what we now label ‘fiction’ and ‘history’ in Rous’s day: ‘the fictionality of incendiary shields from heaven, tree-wielding giants, pilgrim-knights recognised only on their deathbeds, or — for that matter – Saxon earls bearing Norman coats of arms, would not have been obvious even to a scholar like John Rous, who had, after all, authorities like Geoffrey of Monmouth and artefacts like the Cup of the Swan to back
him up’.13 This reminder of the difficulty of modern-style historical research in the medieval period – without the benefit of carbon-dating, palaeographic study or even, in some cases, records of any kind beyond the twin repositories of memory and imaginative literature – puts Rous’s efforts to reconstruct Warwick family history into perspective. It also reframes the medieval relationship between historical writing and romance, granting the latter a far greater role: ‘romance in the fifteenth century was not necessarily an escapist genre but directly relevant to immediate social and political concerns’.14

The complex web of relationships between medieval authors, patrons and texts remains the subject of the final two essays of this volume by Emily Wingfield and Rosalind Field. Wingfield’s essay studies the relationship between the fifteenth-century Scottish Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour and the flamboyant late sixteenth-century owner of both its extant manuscripts, a Sir Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy who grandly described himself as ‘the blakest laird in all þe land’.15 His keen interest in all things Alexandrian (he also owned the only known fragment of the Alexander-cycle romance Florimond of Albany) suggests that he found pleasingly personal relevance in the romance’s combination of advice to rulers with an exciting narrative of empire-building. Through a study of manuscript signatures and inscriptions combined with a survey of Campbell’s other known books, Wingfield reconstructs the lively literary community in which the Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour was read in the late sixteenth century, over a century after its original composition.

Where the rest of the essays in this volume have tended to focus on one or two representative texts, Field’s concluding essay raises questions about some fundamental aspects of Anglo-Norman romance as a whole, questions which are also relevant to romance in Middle English. She suggests that what she terms the ‘chivalric glamour’ of the noble patrons of medieval romance has distracted us from another agenda, that of the clerical bureaucrats, lawyers and churchmen engaged in an examination of rule and rights: ‘any attempt to understand the position of the authors in their local and literary culture has to take into account this network; the picture of the household cleric in an isolated castle clobbering together a pedestrian narrative to entertain the family in the winter evenings is not adequate’.16 Comparing the interaction between nobles and clerical writers in the creation of Anglo-Norman romance to the collaboration between these same two groups in the drawing up of Magna Carta, Field argues that the romances, too, are more concerned with matters of good government than with individual or dynastic ambition. She finishes by calling for the lessons of her study of Anglo-Norman clerical

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14 Liu, ‘Romances of Continuity’, below, p. 159.
15 Edinburgh, NAS MS 112/22/2 (containing the fragment of Florimond of Albany), p. ii.
16 Field, ““Pur les francs homes amender”: Clerical Authors and the Thirteenth-Century Context of Historical Romance”, below, p. 180.
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authorship to be applied to Middle English romance, where they may be used to break down the often unhelpful binary opposition in modern critical writing between ‘courtly’ and ‘popular’.

All of the medieval contexts explored in this volume contribute something vital to our understanding of medieval romance, and the romances, in turn, inform our understanding of those same contexts. The medieval contexts for romance are of course not the only ones that signify: modern readers cannot pretend that they do not carry their own assumptions and beliefs with them even when they attempt to resituate a medieval text in some of its original medieval contexts. The self-awareness brought about by modern literary and historiographical theories can mediate this, but there are aspects of medieval texts that will remain stubbornly inaccessible in any context other than a medieval one. We hope that readers will find their understanding of the medieval romances discussed in this volume deepened by the various medieval contexts in which our contributors have set them.
This piece aims to provide a particular context for the essays that follow by revisiting an essay on Middle English popular romances that I published nearly fifty years ago. It is an essay that has been frequently cited, though in a manner that is instructive of historical change. In early years, it was quoted with sometimes enthusiastic approval, but in recent years it has been increasingly singled out for criticism as an example of an outdated mode of approach. A recent scholar, writing on *Havelok*, is representative: she quotes one of the essay’s many caustic criticisms of popular romance and says that it ‘typifies an early tradition of reading romance as hack-work written for a peasant or bourgeois audience’.

The ostensible point of the 1965 article was to provide a place for Middle English popular metrical romance in a formalist literary history, and to do so by concentrating on metre. The main body of Middle English metrical romance – the term ‘metrical’ being conventionally understood to exclude alliterative romance – was to be recognised, it was argued, as belonging to one of two significantly different metrical traditions, the one characterised by its use of the short octosyllabic couplet, the other by its use of tail-rhyme, in its various forms. The latter had been identified as a group and discussed at length by Trounce in a series of essays thirty years before, but his attempt to define a specifically East Anglian cultural milieu for tail-rhyme romance was flawed and his other arguments therefore subsequently neglected. The aesthetic distinction I saw between the two formal traditions, and in particular

the difference in emotional ‘affect’, was only briefly developed, the formal classification succumbing from the first to an item-by-item classification of the romances in terms of literary value. I had read all the fourteenth-century Middle English romances for that paper, and I was determined to mention them all. And so I did, usually with some scathing dismissal of them for their triviality, banality, incompetence and general all-round inconsequence:

‘grotesquely inept’ (Arthur); ‘hack-work’ (Guy); ‘every possible concession to popular taste … vivid, gross and ridiculous by turns, though never dull’ (Beves); ‘a not at all contemptible example of what the professional romancer could knock together when pressed’ (Degarre); ‘third-rate fumbling in an enfeebled tradition … a wretched piece of work’ (Roland and Vernagu); ‘a mechanical shuffling-together of stock incidents’ (Eglamour); and finally, ‘There may not be much interest in what is going on, but at least there is always something going on.’ (Tryamour)⁴

It is easy and tempting to ladle out abuse in this way and there is much fun to be got out of it. Some of the phrases were recycled in my 1977 book on Old English and Middle English Poetry, and so acquired a wider and continuing currency.⁵

This sneering and laughing often disguised itself as what was usually called judgement of literary merit, or aesthetic valuation, in those days. It involved belonging to a sect of self-appointed high panjandrums who dispensed killing judgements with easy confidence, comparing all literary works against a few accepted classics, and assigning them to classes and leagues, like university degrees or football teams. Thus C. S. Lewis, the model for many of us budding ‘new critics’, speaking of Gower:

‘That first line is business-like, but it is poetry.’ And again, ‘The art of Gower is always on the same level of achievement – always somewhere beneath the highest, but very high.’⁶

The judgements that were pronounced in this confident manner were often quite arbitrary and, in the absence of evidence, incapable of being examined.

The fashion for value-judgement of this kind died out in the 1970s with the dissolution of the consensus of white male middle-class would-be Inklings that had sustained it, along with the increasing domination of the field by women and the general professionalisation of the field. What replaced it, as the volume of writing on Middle English popular romance stepped up, was a greater concentration on definitions of the genre of romance, on manuscript study and reception history, on historical, social and cultural contexts, on narratology and the analysis of narratological motifs. There was too an

⁴ Pearsall, ‘The Development of Middle English Romance’, pp. 95, 99, 100, 104, 110, 112.