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Serious Extravagance: Romance Writing in Seventeenth-Century England

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Abstract
Although little recognized as such, the 17th century was a period of great energy and experimentation in British prose fiction, particularly romance. After a brief review of the criticism that has shaped our understanding of romance in the last few decades, this article considers some of the particular problems and tensions defining prose romance in its last great heyday, the Civil War and early Restoration period. French and English romance writers attributed to romance the capacity to be a more flexible and persuasive mode of historical writing than history itself, a storehouse of ‘examples’ both fictional and historical with which readers could devise a course through uncharted political and ethical terrain. At the same time, at this historical crisis point British writers conceded and sometimes took refuge in romance’s tendency (even as roman à clef) to work against figuration, resisting closure and interpretation.

In the conventional history of British literature still reflected in student anthologies and university curricula, it was only in the 18th century that prose fiction finally became important, both to its own culture and to the
literature that succeeded it. The 16th and 17th centuries, so the narrative goes, were given to the extraordinary flowering of drama and lyric, and with the exception of a brief and stylized flare in the late years of Elizabeth’s reign, prose fiction remained on the cultural margins until the inauguration of the novel. As recent scholarship has been suggesting, however, in fact the 17th century was a period of great energy and experimentation in prose fiction, in Britain and also in the European countries whose literatures were regularly translated into English. In England, Mary Wroth’s Urania and John Barclay’s quasi-English Argenis (in Latin, but written during and after Barclay’s 10-year stay in the English court), both published in 1621, laid the groundwork for the spate of English prose narratives that began to appear in the 1640s. Particularly from the 1640s until about 1665, these prose fictions were considered by sympathetic writers and readers to be the most timely and modern of narrative forms. Occasionally their title pages call them ‘histories’, intending the word’s most general sense as ‘story’, but more commonly they were known as romances, and it is not accidental that various forms of the word ‘romance’ now obsolete—‘romancial’, ‘romancial’, ‘romancist’, ‘romancy’—appeared for the first time around 1650, at a moment when romance as a concept was felt to be especially flexible and full of potential. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, in the terms of the influential Horatian scheme, prose fiction was understood to be inherently delightful but not so reliably instructive, either morally or politically, and in the mid-17th century much of the energy devoted to prose romance focused on proving it ‘serious’, as George MacKenzie’s 1661 romance Aretina proclaims itself in its subtitle. By the Restoration these revisions had led romance readers and writers to a sophisticated understanding of the genre as a bridge between the unprecedented events of the 1640s and 1650s and existing narrative models for politics and social behavior, a storehouse of examples both fictional and historical with which to make sense of experience in bewilderingly uncharted terrain.

In referring to their narratives as romances, 17th-century writers linked them to a tradition of prose fiction, and of conversation about prose fiction, extending back to Homer. By the 16th century in England, romance was understood to have multiple antecedents not always consistent with one another: Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey and Virgil’s Aeneid; ancient Greek romance, especially Heliodorus’s (probably) third-century Aethiopika; medieval chivalric romance; and the modern European versions of romance, especially Ariosto’s vastly influential Orlando furioso (1516–1532) and the pastoral romance tradition initiated by Sannazaro’s Arcadia (1504). To make sense of this varied generic ancestry, the early modern period inherited several different ways of conceptualizing romance. Typically it was defined as the antithesis of something else, most often as the opposite of epic, in a cultural tradition dating back to Longinus’s first-century comparison of the Odyssey to the Iliad in On the Sublime. Over centuries this dichotomy accrued a large set of secondary, analogical dichotomies: epic was about war, romance about love; epic depicted a collective, public, masculine undertaking, often constitutive of nations, while romance told the story of an individual questing hero, easily traversing national boundaries in a world populated by women as well as men; epic was unified and teleological, romance episodic and often without closure; epic, in David Quint’s formulation, was the story of history’s winners, and romance of its losers, or of people who opted out of the game (Quint 9–10). In practice this set of dichotomies proved difficult to sustain. The Aeneid owes as much to the wandering, episodic mode of the Odyssey as to the nationalist ideology of the Iliad, while medieval romance considered itself in spirit and purpose fundamentally epic. In 16th-century Italy, in the famous debate over Orlando furioso, Ariosto’s critics attempted to harden the distinctions between seductively irresponsible, anti-Aristotelian romance and classically August and orderly epic, but the result at the end of the 16th century, in two of the most monumental narratives of the period, Tasso’s Gerusalemme liberata (1581) and Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (1590, 1596), was a blending of the two. In ensuing decades this tendency toward merging epic and romance was more extensive than modern critics steeped in the traditional dichotomy sometimes seemed to realize. By the mid-17th century the difference between the two genres had become so reduced that theorists struggled to
separate them, one influential account concluding that the distinction was solely between verse (epic) and prose (romance).  

Another way of construing romance during this period was in opposition to history. In this contest with history, at least before the 1640s romance was almost always the loser. Like the epic/romance distinction, the opposition between romance and history had classical roots going back to Aristotle, but in the 16th century it gained particular momentum with the growth of humanism. To educators such as Roger Ascham, tutor to Elizabeth I and author of *The Schoolmaster*, history belonged properly in the moralizing Plutarchan tradition, fundamentally didactic, in which it was designed to fit men for public life, while romance was narrative stripped of all but pleasure, the product of undisciplined imagination suitable only for women and children. The new ‘politic histories’ at the end of the 16th century grappled with innovative theories of state; romance, meanwhile, looked backward at an outmoded chivalric (and Catholic) past. Again like the dichotomy between romance and epic, the opposition between romance and history was not always sustained in practice – and indeed by the mid-17th century, as I will show, romance writers had all but identified themselves with historians – but for humanist moralists anxious to shore up the cultural privileges of men over women and of educated men in public life over the unlearned and poor, this construction of romance as the other against which epic and history defined their prestige was a powerful ideological tool, one that in some ways survives even in 21st century Anglo-American culture.

Not surprisingly, given the tendency to define romance by means of stark oppositions, writers of romance in its more serious modes have for centuries assigned the genre the predicament of being in opposition with itself. On the one hand, as its critics complain, romance in the comic tradition has traditionally been driven by wish-fulfillment, by the naïve insistence that things always work out in the end. On the other hand, as the ending of Sidney’s *Arcadia* or Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* suggests, romance is often self-conscious, even ironic, about its own artifice, prodding its audience to acknowledge to themselves, painfully or humorously, that they are suspending their disbelief.  

Like Renaissance pastoral, whose aristocratic poet-shepherds escape to the countryside to lament their erotic misfortunes in the fields, romance can be said to have a foot each in two worlds, or two epistemes. This duality in romance is readily assimilable to the conflict in romance criticism between those who see the genre as fundamentally closed and end-directed and those who see it as, in Patricia Parker’s word, ‘endless’ (69–70). It is part of the essential nature of romance, says Helen Cooper, that though its protagonists may despair, its readers always know that a happy ending is coming (47), and indeed any reader familiar with romance knows upon the first appearance of a princess fostered among shepherds that she contains within her noble nature the assurance that she will be restored to the court and that birth does, in the end, equal worth. At the same time, however, one of romance’s basic drivers from the classical period forward has been contingency, the tendency of events toward randomness and accident that correlates with romance’s episodic structure and is expressed especially by the romance trope of shipwreck. (This trope becomes so ossified by the 17th century that in the preface of *Ibrahim* [1641; English translation 1652] Madeleine de Scudéry explains that though in deference to romance’s critics she will use it sparingly, she cannot give it up because it is par excellence the ‘theater of inconstancy’, A4r). David Quint, as I have noted, traces the association of romance with characters who fail to exert their agency, and by the early modern period the absence of closure in romance can be a deliberate metaphor for a struggle that cannot be won – for instance, in Wroth’s *Urania*, where the random and irrational nature of masculine inconstancy defeats even the most persistent heroine. Quint reminds us that romance’s failure to close, or its insistence that closure is simply authorial imposition, has the power to register ethical objection – that if the wish-fulfilling closure of romance expresses a view that everything is as it should be, romance’s troubling of those endings potentially makes the counter-argument that such a view is always partial and ideological (9–10).
The characteristics of romance that I have delineated thus far, for the most part unlocated in a particular place or time, are all amenable to the understanding of romance as a ‘mode’ or ‘archetype’ rather than a genre. Northrop Frye pioneered this view of romance for an Anglo-American context in 1957, with *The Anatomy of Criticism*, and although it has been criticized for its trans- or ahistoricism, his tendency to conceive of romance as broader and less historically located than genre nevertheless persists in Cooper’s recent characterization of it as set of ‘memes’ (3), or Barbara Fuchs’s even more recent ‘strategy’ (*Romance* 6). Such a view is fundamental to the current work on romance ‘extravagance’ as a basic early modern framework for encountering strangers, whether they be Muslims or inhabitants of the so-called new world. This somewhat imprecise sense of romance as larger than genre seems unavoidable, given the extraordinary persistence of romance tropes and structures across time and culture, and it is essential to anyone trying to understand romance as the product of a specific place and period. Romance’s refusal of closure may have been inflected by royalist despair in the 1650s, for instance, but this refusal was not a royalist invention, and both royalist romance and royalist ideology look more complex when it is recognized that absence of closure is an ancient habit of romance.

At the same time, however, the word ‘romance’ can also function to designate a specific literary artifact, and in the early modern period the narratives given that name not as an attribute but as a primary referent included a huge range of texts, from the ancient through the medieval to the contemporary period and from all over the western world. From within this group, an educated mid-17th-century British reader would have registered as part of his or her own cultural moment Sidney’s *Arcadia*; pastoral romances such as the French *L’Astrée*; the very up-to-date French historical romances by (among others) Gomberville, Pierre d’Hortigues, and Madeleine de Scudéry, along with Italian and Spanish versions of the same; and, from the late 1640s on, the substantial collection of British prose romances that is the primary subject of this essay. Because this last sub-group is so rarely read or (at least till quite recently) discussed, I include here as complete a list as I have: the anonymous *Theophania* (written about 1645, published 1655), *Thomas Bayly’s Herba Parietis* (1650), *Robert Boyle’s The Martyrdom of Theodora, and Didymus* (written in the late 1640s, published in part 1687), *Roger Boyle’s Parthenissa* (published in parts from 1651 to 1669 and in whole 1676), *Percy Herbert’s The Princess Cloria* (also published in parts starting in 1653 and in whole 1661), *Richard Braithwaite’s Panthalia* (1659), *Nathaniel Ingelo’s Bentivolio and Urania* (1660, 1664), *George MacKenzie’s Aretina* (1660), the anonymous *Eliana* (1661), *John Bulteel’s Birinthea* (1664), and *John Crowne’s Pandion and Amphigenia* (1665); and in manuscript, doubtless among several others, *Hester Pultor’s The Unfortunate Florinda* (transcribed 1661) and *Rivall Friendship*, by a member of the Manningham family. I have left out continuations and epitomes, which were produced especially for *Arcadia* and *Argenis*. In what follows I will give a brief overview of the critical approaches in the last few decades that have shaped our impression of romance at the middle of the 17th century, and then turn to some of the genre’s specific experiments and innovations in that period.

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Seventeenth-century English prose romances are usually long, and with few exceptions have not been edited or reprinted since they first appeared. They tend to be episodic, rather than following the bell-curve structure later borrowed from drama by the novel; their various episodes are often recounted retrospectively, in the first person, by many different narrators; they intersperse myriad ‘discourses’ among their plot elements; and they feature a bewildering number of characters rarely differentiated from one another by appearance or disposition. Their political affiliations seem uncomplicatedly royalist at least at first glance, and in the past they were usually assumed to have been contributing little to political or philosophical debate. In the 18th century, novelists such as Henry Fielding explicitly defined their own new, modish fictions against romance even as they drew on the older genre’s conventions and pleasures; and Anglo-American novel criticism, beginning with Ian Watt’s magisterial 1957 *Rise of the Novel*, followed suit, reading 17th-century romance as the last gasp of a dying
aristocratic court culture, out of touch with the new middle-class commercial energies that brought the novel into being. For all these reasons mid-century romances have been rarely and only sporadically read, even by scholars, until recently, when a new apprehension of royalist ideology as varied and complex has spurred interest in them. This recent scholarship has drawn attention to romance’s sympathy for reason of state theory, its pragmatic deployment of sentimentality, and the ambivalence with which it often approaches the events of the 1650s and early 1660s. Such work affords a much clearer sense not only of romance’s role in its political culture, but also of the complexity of the texts themselves, which have been shown to be rewardingly dense and layered even in small chunks.

Welcome as this new scholarship is, however, it addresses only one aspect of a group of narratives that is not only varied but (even if measured simply by its total number of pages) vast. In his or her preface the anonymous author of Eliana warns the old-style skeptical reader that contemporary romance takes as its subject not only ‘Love-stories’ but ‘things Oeconomical, Ethethical [sic], Physical, Metaphysical, Philosophical, Political, and Theological’, so that the reader must work like the industrious ‘Bee, or chimick’ to to gather all its honey (A3v–4v). In addition, if we consider again the list of materials that fell under the label ‘romance’ in 17th-century England, one of its most striking characteristics is how international it is. As the heroes of romance moved between countries and cultures, so romance writers of the mid-17th century translated, imitated, and revised one another across national and linguistic boundaries, and recently scholars have been emphasizing again how implicated romance is (like its sometime-twin epic) in discourses of empire.

New scholarship in English points out the insularity of the Anglo-American ‘rise of the novel’ narrative, and suggests that in a broader context novel and romance may not really be distinct. English-speaking students of ancient Greek and of 17th-century French romance have always called these narratives ‘novels’, while early modern Spanish had no generic word for romance (chivalric romance was ‘libros de cavallerias’), and the French ‘roman’ used to designate various kinds of 17th-century fiction (as well as the novel) meant not ‘romance’ but something closer to ‘sometimes fictional narrative in the vernacular’. Margaret Doody suggests that we dispense entirely with the word ‘romance’ to describe prose fiction and use only ‘novel’ (xvii, 1); French readers and perhaps others might counter that ‘novel’ is the upstart, imposing the illusion of qualitative distinction where none really exists. From the comparatist viewpoint called for by 17th-century English fiction, at any rate, romance looks neither exhausted nor minor, and recognition of the complex and wide-ranging nature of its context helps bring its own range and complexity into view.

Nevertheless, with any claim to rehabilitate romance as if newly, modern readers only join in a rhetorical strategy that romance has been performing seemingly forever. As a product of fancy or imagination rather than reason, romance and indeed all fiction has had to defend its moral and cultural legitimacy at least since Heliodorus, and 18th-century novelists are hardly alone in looking askance at ‘other’ fiction in order to confer status on their own. What is distinctive about mid-17th century romance in this light, however, is the sincerity of its claims to seriousness and the extraordinary vigor, across a large body of texts, of its efforts at innovation. The most far-reaching of these was probably its attempt to dissociate itself from magic and the supernatural. This gained steam partly because of the controversy over Orlando furioso, and as early as 1547 Jacques Amyot, translator of both Heliodorus and Plutarch, was arguing that serious romance must avoid marvels and improbabilities. The dissociation could never quite be accomplished, however, because of both the stigma against fiction and the persistence of magic in more popular romance, and the prefaces to mid-17th century romances still regularly protest their distaste for the marvelous – John Bulteel assuring the reader in the preface to Birinthea, for example, that unlike other romance writers he will confine himself to ‘just Resemblances of truth’ (A6r). In fact most new 17th-century romances did avoid magical and supernatural elements (the Spenserian Urania is an exception), and in 1670 Pierre-Daniel Huet could confidently distinguish romance from epic in his Treatise of Romances on the basis that romances manifestly ‘deal more with the probable’ (5).
As romance hewed more closely to verisimilitude, it became less clear to romance’s defenders what separated it from history – or, more precisely, what separated history from romance. The modern distinction on the basis of the difference between verisimilitude and factual truth was certainly available at mid-century: Hobbes, who began his publishing career with his translation of *Thucydides*, assumes in his defense of Davenant’s *Gondibert* that his audience will find it obvious that ‘Truth is the bound of the Historicall’ and ‘the Resemblance of Truth...the utmost limit of Poeticall Liberty’. But as is well known, faithfulness to fact was not always considered as fundamental to history’s essential nature as it became later. As almost every early modern historiographer agreed, history was valuable especially for its didactic potential, and sometimes facts had to be revised or supplemented to demonstrate that capacity most convincingly – history having the inconvenient habit, as Philip Sidney famously noted in his *Defense of Poesie*, of sometimes rewarding vice and punishing virtue. This practice was legitimated, for many historians, by classical precedent, most famously the speeches that classical historians from Thucydides forward put in the mouths of historical figures.

Though elite historians tried to argue otherwise, the cultural functions filled by fiction and history were also not that different from one another. D. R. Woolf shows that although history had gained great scholarly prestige in England among 16th-century humanists, it remained popular especially for its ability to tell a story: ‘the factual past’, he claims, ‘as much as fictions and romances’, ‘transport[ed] the reader of Foxe, Livy, or Froissart into an imaginative landscape where his or her imagination could perambulate freely’ (113). Despite attacks on fiction by moralists and the defensive apologies of romance writers themselves, Woolf’s work indicates, early modern romance was not confined to a reading ghetto; on the contrary, the pleasures it offered were common to other, ostensibly more prestigious genres as well. It is not surprising in this light that the mechanisms by which history was supposed to persuade and delight were understood to be very close to those of fiction. If fiction strove for immediacy and readerly implication, so did history: in Hobbes’s oft-quoted argument, the best history ‘maketh [the] Auditor a Spectator’, by putting historical events ‘so evidently set before our eyes, that the mind of the Reader [is] no less affected therewith then if hee had been present in the actions’. Romance writers were thus not going out on much of a limb when they concluded that, in the words of the 1661 preface to Percy Herbert’s *Cloria*, ‘Stories of former Ages are not other, then certain kindes of Romances to succeeding posterity’ (A2v–A3r) – or, even more categorically, from the 1655 preface to Roger Boyle’s *Parthenissa*, ‘Histories are for the most part but mixed Romances’ (*Boyle 1655: B1r*). For writers such as Boyle and Herbert history’s claim to fact was never more than imperfect, and once this was acknowledged it became impossible to distinguish it from romance properly construed, as similarly serious and didactic.

Like the *Aeneid*, early modern romances such as *Orlando furioso* and *The Faerie Queene* were commissioned by or offered to patrons with agendas, usually the glorification of a ruling family. Very often writers met the demand by constructing elaborate family histories, and partly for that reason the association of romance with historical allegory was also a commonplace by the time Wroth and Barclay published their elaborate romans à clef. Following the model of *Urania* and *Argenis*, mid-century romances such as Richard Braithwaite’s *Panthalia*, the anonymous *Theophania*, and *Cloria* used thin fictional screens to narrate contemporary political events, presumably in part so they could convey their royalist politics freely, though prefaces interestingly make few references to censorship or anxiety about offering offense. A few decades ago critics interpreted the roman à clef strategy of mid-century romance as a sign of a royalist emphasis on secrecy and sentiment, but as Nigel Smith has pointed out (following 17th-century commentators), the codes used by romance at this time are so obvious that they barely require interpretation. It seems clear, as *Cloria*’s preface says, that roman à clef romance writers considered themselves to be doing contemporary history and that they expected their readers to see this at once.

More interesting is the new phenomenon, evident in both English and French romance, of incorporating classical history within a fictional frame. In Boyle’s *Parthenissa*, for example, the main protagonist Artabanes, whom
readers must assume is fictional, turns out to be none other than the historical Spartacus – or rather, the historical Spartacus, agent of one of history’s most inexplicable stories, turns out to be Boyle’s protagonist, on the Italian peninsula for a few months as he laments the failure of his affair with Parthenissa. Artabanes-as-Spartacus goes on, anachronistically, to meet Hannibal, introduced by a fictional couple whose love story is the frame for the historical heroes’ actions and discourses. Spartacus and Hannibal (and other historical figures who populate the romance, including Pompey and Scipio) do not simply show up to add some historical weight and then vanish; on the contrary, Artabanes-as-Spartacus narrates as the story of his life virtually everything in the historical record, making explicit references to historical inconsistencies and sometimes quoting directly from Plutarch’s account of Spartacus in his Life of Marcus Crassus. John Bulteel’s Birinthea is closer to the model Madeleine de Scudéry develops in her numerous historical romances, organizing its narrative around the life of a single historical figure (Birinthea is a lover Bulteel invents for Cyrus the Great), but it too moves in and out of the historical record, in this case as provided mainly by Xenophon’s Cyropaedia, adding to and sometimes altering its source. Early modern fictions, of course, have a long tradition of borrowing from earlier texts and narratives, and drama often quotes its source texts directly. But these romances are different in that their writers do not mean to supplant their sources but to bring them to the foreground, so that readers can recognize what is borrowed (in Parthenissa or Birinthea, passages from texts most schoolboys would know) and appreciate what has been added or changed. 14

If romance’s quotations and lengthy allusions invoke its sources directly, romance writers also add a great deal of material, and in this way too they seek not to depart from history but to make history even more historical. In the dedication to his English translation of Scudéry’s Clelia, George Havers complains that classical histories give ‘scarce more then Pourtraits halfe drawn’: they tell the reader of a hero’s behavior on the field or in the senate, but

afford us very little knowledge, how generous his deportment was in conversation; and amongst his Friends, how nobly he loved or hated; and how tender a relation, or faithfull friend, he shewed himself in all the diversities of adventures. (A2r-v)

Such matters are important because only they can show us why and how romance’s heroes are heroic, and thus make heroic action plausible rather than simply marvelous. They bring the story, that is, into the realm of verisimilitude, without which there is no persuasion to virtue. Early modern verisimilitude walks a thin line: the representation of heroic actions is the most effective spur literature has to virtue, but ‘incredible actions...degenerate into ridiculous fables’, as Scudéry says in her preface to Ibrahim, ‘and never move the mind’ (A4r). Heroic romance therefore has no choice, in Huet’s formulation, but to turn to the actions of historical heroes, because those actions, being true, are the only ones readers are therefore sure to believe probable (8) – but readers also need to know about heroes’ passions, inclinations, and dispositions, because these motivate action, making it accessible and thereby imitable. The ordinary reader will never ascend to the height of a Cyrus or a Hannibal, but what romance writers call Hannibal’s ‘discourses’, the endless retrospective narrations and conversations that constitute the bulk of every romance text, open a window on his generosity or fortitude that makes it available for use. And Hannibal’s or Cyrus’s love affairs are not mere ornamentation; on the contrary, they offer a positive motivation for their heroes’ famous ambitions and a pattern of virtuous thought. By comparison, though it may have begun with the kind of stirring funeral oration Pericles delivers in Thucydides, history now threatens to seem a mere collection of ‘Precepts and Definitions’, often neglecting to tell us, in its bare narration of events, whether noble actions proceeded from noble motives or from weakness or despair. 15 Some writers, says Scudéry in frustration, note that their heroes thought ‘very galiant things’, but never tell us what they are –‘and this is that alone which I desire to know!’ (Ibrahim A4r).

The other major advantage romance claims to offer over history is its scope. In the popular 1648 An Easy and Compendious Introduction for Reading All Sorts of Histories, printed five times before 1665, Mathias Prideaux
divides all romances without ‘ridiculous Chimerahs’ or Catholic propaganda (these are to be dismissed as ‘the Bastard sort of Histories’) into three categories, moral, political, and satirical. Moral romances, ‘being nothing but Poeticall Ethicks’, teach us how to behave virtuously (examples are *The Faerie Queene* and *Arcadia*); romances that ‘poynt at Policie’ (here he includes *Argenis* and the *Cyropaedia*) show us how a state should be governed; and satirical romances expose hypocrisy and lies (343–5). The preface to *Eliana*, as I noted earlier, praises romance for its range, and indeed romances of the 1650s and 1660s often seem deliberately to draw on all three of Prideaux’s categories at once. *Eliana* itself, for instance, includes discourses on the value of undirected associative thinking, Stoic philosophy, polytheism, and (several times) the nature of love and its relation to sexual passion, as well as an inset story about the misrule of the Roman emperor Caligula, drawing especially on Suetonius’s *De vita Caesarum*, in which the romance’s hero narrowly escapes homosexual rape. John Crowne’s *Pandion and Amphigenia* contains several broadly satirical episodes in which its aristocratic heroes are shown up as ridiculous (in one, the prince Pandion contrives an elaborate masque in his beloved’s bedroom in which he suspends himself from wires so that he will seem to fly), but the characters also have several substantive discussions of political philosophy, in one of which they directly quote *Leviathan* 14.27, on the force of covenants in the face of ‘a new and just cause of fear’.16 Prideaux is not clear in his section on romance about whether he views it as a kind of specialized, limited history or as history with an extra dimension, but romance writers at mid-century seemed to understand the genre as a sort of umbrella discourse, a vehicle for discussion of many different subjects, sometimes in several styles. Part of the pleasure for relatively elite readers must have been the variety, and the way that high styles and subjects were both tempered and shown off to advantage by low.

Apparently mid-century romance’s claims to seriousness were convincing: Woolf offers evidence not only that aristocratic men were reading romance, but that they didn’t seem to distinguish it in kind from history or theology (97–8). Although *Cloria*’s preface makes the usual Jonsonian argument that ‘the more vulgar sort’ among its readers will have to take *Cloria* simply as a ‘bare Romance of Love and Chivalry’ (A1v–A2r), there is some indication that readers who had not traditionally enjoyed the privileges of education also found pleasure in its more up-to-date content. Samuel Pepys, for instance, recorded in his *Diary* in the spring of 1666 that his wife was still angry at him for ‘my checking her last night in the coach’ when she was trying to talk with him about Scudéry’s *The Grand Cyrus* (7: 122); and John Davies’s translation of Charles Sorel’s *The Extravagant Shepherd* complains that ‘there is not a Cockney in Paris, nor a waiting-gentlewoman elsewhere, but will have them [romances], and having read three or four pages, thinks her self able to read lectures to us’ (68). Complaints like this, from people who had traditionally enjoyed the privileges of education, suggest that to their relatively uneducated fellows romance reading was not escapist nor shameful, as moralists had argued it should be, but educational and even authorizing.

And indeed, perhaps one explanation besides royalist nostalgia for the sudden burst of romances at mid-century was the growth of a reading public, male and female, with a new appetite for news and a need to put the unprecedented events of their time into some context. A fascinating comment in the 1661 preface to *Cloria* indicates that the satisfaction of this need may have been understood by romance writers as the most fundamental part of their purpose. Herbert ‘mixt’ his ‘Style and manner of Contrivance’, says the preface writer, ‘between Modern and Antick [antique]’, because the contemporary events he wished to convey ‘went beyond every example in the doing’ (A1v). ‘Antick’ is likely a reference to Boyle’s *Parthenissa*, which had begun appearing in 1651, and to similar historical romances; the implication is that while Boyle and others had relied almost entirely upon classical history as a vehicle for thinking about contemporary events, Herbert could not find enough ‘example’ there, and used primarily a ‘Modern’ story, a fictional ‘manner of Contrivance’, instead. What is really interesting about this comment is not only that it does not distinguish on the basis of factual truth between ‘Antick’ history and ‘Modern’ fiction, but that it assumes both kinds of contrivance have the same goal, to consider the events of the present. I want to make a distinction here between the kind of interpretive activity
I think romance calls for and that required by roman à clef. As critics both early modern and current agree, mid-17th-century romance’s version of roman à clef offers the reader little to do; in fact Cloria’s preface writer dismisses the need for a key on the basis that ‘the Story is in no way difficult to be understood by any, who have been but indifferently versed in the Affairs of Europe’ (A2r). Probably scholars have been mistaken in assuming that the simple roman à clef mode of political allegory was at the front of mid-century romance writers’ minds. Rather, in their discourses and conversations, their multiplication of events and perspectives, and most fundamentally in their episodic rather than dramatic structure, both historical and more purely fictional romances provided their readers ‘examples’, something quite close to what Kenneth Burke calls ‘representative anecdotes’. In Burke’s well-known formulation, a representative anecdote is a kind of synecdoche, a substitution rather than a metaphor, which does not sum up a larger reality or system so much as act as a test case for it, a mode of deliberating and evaluating its most salient features (Burke, esp. 59–61, 507–17). Examples in romance, similarly, whether historical or fictional, offer terms and structures with which to conceptualize experience; what matters is not that they precisely and completely capture contemporary events but that they frame them in such a way as to make them comprehensible, available for thought. To put the matter in slightly different terms, history as romance construes it, as the kind of narrative to which romance most closely affiliates itself, finds its nature and meaning not in its accuracy to fact or even its confirmation of the utility of virtue, but in the stories and discourses that enable readers to locate and reflect upon themselves and their time.

‘Extravagance’ is a quality often assumed to belong to early modern romance, both in the 17th century, when the word first gained wide usage in English, and today. Literally it means to wander outside or beyond, and applied to romance it refers to the genre’s narrative structure, to its use of marvels and magic, and (in the 17th century) to its characters’ intense passions. Seventeenth-century romance writers, I have been arguing, worked hard to dissociate themselves from romance’s negative reputation for extravagance, by replacing marvels with long philosophical discourses, sometimes on passion itself – in one such discourse in Parthenissa, a virtuously vehement lover provokes the wonderful compromise ‘rational extravagancies’ (1676: 261). But at the end of this essay I want to consider one way in which mid-century English romance deliberately sustains its generic extravagance, against French practice and apparently in contradiction to its new seriousness: by refusing thematic and formal closure. Earlier I rehearsed the argument that the absence of closure in some strains of romance is a convention, and sometimes functions as a gesture of protest. More often than not, Helen Cooper is right that romance’s central love story comes to fruition (218–68), and in the French romances of the 1650s and 1660s, which are all end-stopped, the main heroes almost always unite with their beloveds. But the series of women whose names serve as the titles of mid-century English romance, by contrast, are almost without exception unattained by the end of their narratives, and the consistent failure of love in this large body of work reminds us of romance’s capacity for protest and suggests that even erotic love is a more vexed problem in romance than Cooper might want to concede.

In a discussion of the vraisemblance, or verisimilitude, of human action that relies particularly on 17th-century literary theory for its examples, Gerard Genette notes that the truth to which verisimilar representations are supposed to be faithful is always a social norm, a ‘body of maxims and presuppositions’ that constitutes our perception of the world. When we object that the act of a character is not verisimilar, says Genette, we mean to say that her action is inconsistent with our sense of what most people would do in such a situation (239–41). Structurally plot is thus a mimesis of a norm, a figure for an ideological sentence – a point that becomes obvious when we consider, say, the romance plot of the princess-shepherdess, unaware of her real parentage, whose natural nobility ultimately returns her to the throne and thus confirms the aristocratic ideology that birth does equal worth. In the middle of the 17th century, romance has an oddly conflicted relation to literary figuration: on the one hand its tendency toward roman à clef and its faith in the example as its ‘method of contrivance’, to
quote again the preface to *Cloria*, would seem to make it very friendly to metaphor or at least to substitutive representation, but on the other there is a strain of 17th-century thought in which romance’s episodic structure and its strong tendency toward prose signal a refusal of figuration, perhaps even a devotion to narrative only for narrative’s sake. Huet, in his *Treatise of Romances*, distinguishes prose romance from verse epic on the basis not only that romance is more probable, but that it has more ‘Events and Episodes’ (5), and argues that romances have this capacity because, ‘being not so elevate and full of Figures, they do not so much stretch the wit, and so suffer it to be furnished with a greater number of Ideas’ (6). Huet’s translator uses ‘idea’ here not in our sense, but as synonymous with ‘Events and Episodes’. ‘Idea’ is the standard early modern translation, to cite another example, of ‘rerum’, ‘of things’, or ‘of matter’, in the full title of Erasmus’s *De Utraque Verborum ac Rerum Copia*, ‘On Copia of Words and Ideas’. Epic, for Huet, asks for strenuous interpretation of its significance, but romance readers are under no such burden, and can instead furnish their minds with literal event after literal event.

Elsewhere I have described *Urania*’s explicit collapse of metaphoric significance into literal representation, as if it were warning its readers off interpretation (2007: 41–3), and *Parthenissa*’s elevation of metonymy over metaphor as a narrative strategy (2011); here I want to suggest that the pattern of refused endings in mid-century romance marks a similar turn from signification. In *Pandion and Amphigenia*, usefully for my purposes, Crowne makes his lack of closure an explicit issue, and the last few pages of his romance offer a window onto the thinking behind romance practice. At the beginning of the narrative the usurper Hiarbas takes the throne from its rightful holder, who was ineffective as a ruler, and for years the rightful heir Pandion, disguised as Danpion, has battled with an impostor who has taken his name and is plotting to overthrow Hiarbas. At the end the fake Pandion is dramatically exposed and the real Pandion revealed by the forester who fostered him, but Hiarbas continues to exude ‘Beams of Majesty’ indicating his ‘true Princely mind’, and Pandion decides that he will share the throne, rather than selfishly taking it for himself (298). Hiarbas’s daughter Amphigenia, who has been the object of Pandion’s intense (and often comic) desire throughout the romance, stays true to form by refusing to countenance his suit. This means both that Hiarbas, who was hoping to find legitimacy for his line by marrying into true royalty, and Pandion, who was hoping to secure practical power and mark his own political maturity by marrying the daughter of the de facto ruler, are disappointed of their ends. And Crowne, for his part, interjects that not only is he not concerned with love stories, though he has been writing them all along, but he refuses to rescue the heroine of the other main narrative line, a survivor of rape whom the narrator has treated with surprising sympathy but for whom he now professes no regard (306). In the last lines Crowne repudiates the entire genre of romance, noting that the patness of its storylines has ‘quite jaded’ his pen (307), and indeed in his long career as a dramatist he never publishes another prose narrative.

Perhaps it is possible to read the end of *Pandion and Amphigenia* as an allegory for the Restoration’s incompleteness or ineffectiveness, but this would be to disobey Crowne’s own narratorial instructions at the romance’s close. Crowne is more explicitly self-conscious about his failure to close up his plot than other romances of the period, but *Aretina* or *Parthenissa* or *Eliana* or *Birinthea* gives no more of a warrant for reading its lack of closure allegorically. On the one hand the abrupt endings seem almost accidental, as if their authors had simply forgotten to finish; on the other, when they are considered together their lack of closure cannot but constitute a pattern – though not of meaning so much as lack of meaning. In fact, such pointlessness is the main risk romance is seen to run throughout the early modern period, as critics complain over and over. In unlettered English readers, romance threatens to invoke Quixote-like delusions of grandeur leading nowhere; educated readers romance insidiously persuades to waste their time, convincing them, as Crowne says at the end of *Pandion*, to ‘throw away as many idle hours as I have done’ (307). At the beginning of this essay I cited the common perception that romance is a genre in tension with itself, asking its reader at once to believe and to recognize that such belief has been achieved by artifice. Mid-17th-century romance finds no rest in this irony, as Crowne makes clear. Perhaps the mid-17th-century version of this tension is between the drive to legitimate
romance as a serious intellectual genre and the sense that as story romance does not signify, that stories, like the time that is their medium, simply are. Perhaps too, as Quint says, the refusal of closure is a mark of a disbelief in human agency. Scudéry (whose romances, again, all come to closure) insists that readers recognize the agency of her characters; as she says in the preface to *Ibrahim*, it is not valor, in itself ‘brutish’, but the deliberate choice of valor by her characters that she must convey above all (A4v). In *Birinthea*, a sort of companion piece to Scudéry's *The Grand Cyrus*, one character counsels another who is railing against fate, ‘Nor should we think ourselves so harshly dealt with, did we but well consider, how lamely we go about most, if not all our designs’—to which the friend replies, ‘a rational discourse’ (60–1). From the *Odyssey* to *Birinthea*, Bulteel reminds us, romance’s characters struggle not only against fate and contingency but against their own weakness and misjudgment, and this condition may be irremediable—a possibility that leads neither to despair nor the surrendering of one’s will to the divine, but simply to the next episode in the story. Given the religious context of the time, a belief in interpretive significance and in the value of agentive striving are sometimes taken to be default early modern literary positions, sustained except in disaster or profound disillusion. For all of its vigor and range, its tireless development of example, romance also tells a different story, and in this capacity it may be the most secular genre of its age.

Footnotes
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1 For the Italian debate over romance see Weinberg 2: 954–1073.
2 See Salzman, Welch for verse/prose, see Huet 2–5.
3 For one summary of this common observation, see La Farge.
4 For extravagance and the other, see Fuchs, *Mimesis*; Mulready, ‘Asia’, ‘Romance’; Robinson.
5 See especially Kahn, ‘The Passions’, ‘Reinventing Romance’, *Wayward Contracts*; see also de Groot, Major, Salzman, Smith, Zurcher (‘Royalist Romance’).
7 For Spanish usage and its relation to English, see de Armas Wilson 48–9.
8 For Amyot and other 16th-century arguments against marvels in romance, see Hardee 28–9.
9 Thomas Hobbes, from the Reply to Davenant printed as part of the prefatory material to Davenant, *Gondibert*, 81.
10 For history’s close relation to oratory and the concomitant necessity for historians to invent words for their characters, see Woolf 82.
11 Hobbes, from Thucydides, ‘To the Reader’ (no page sigs.) and ‘Of the Life and History of Thucydides’ (no page sigs.), both prefatory to the translation.
12 An exception is the Stationer’s preface to the English translation of Scudéry’s *Artamenes, or the Grand Cyrus*: ‘Designs of War and Peace are better hinted and cut open by a Romance, than by downright Histories; which, being bare-fac’d, are often forc’d to be often too modest and sparing; when these Disguiz’d Discourses, freely personating every man and no man, have liberty to speak out’ (no page sigs).
13 For the influential argument on royalist secrecy, see Potter and also Patterson. Smith 242; for an early modern example, see Sorel, ‘when we have learned all these explications’ from romance keys, ‘we have learned but very trivial and ordinary things’ (65).
14 Hester Pulter’s *The Unfortunate Florinda* also draws on sources from Plutarch to Thomas Lodge while basing itself primarily on one historical source (*The Life and Death of Mahoment, The Conquest of Spaine, Together with the Ryssing and Ruine of the Sarazen*, 1637), about the Muslim conquest of Christian Spain. It differs from *Parthenissa* and *Birinthea* in that this source is relatively obscure, rather than one every schoolboy would have known. Like William Rowley’s play *All’s Lost for Lust*, about the same events, it seems more interested in using its source for a captivating story than in bringing to the fore the relationship between romance and history. For discussion of *The Unfortunate Florinda*, see Herman.
‘Precepts and Definitions’, Vaumorière, translator’s preface (no page sigs.); noble motives vs. weakness or despair, Hall 37.
Crowne 267–72; ‘new and just cause of fear’ is discussed 270–1.

Short Biography
Amelia Zurcher is an Associate Professor of English and Director of Women’s and Gender Studies at Marquette University in Milwaukee. Her research focuses on early modern British literature, particularly on gender, political and ethical theory, and the ways that these both shape and are manifested through genre and narrative form. Her book, *Seventeenth-Century English Romance: Allegory, Ethics, and Politics* (Palgrave 2007), traces the development of political and social conceptions of self-interest in 17th-century prose romance; she has also published articles on romance and on Shakespeare in *English Literary History*, *English Literary Renaissance*, and *Studies in English Literature*, and has edited Judith Man’s *Epitome of Argenis and Poliarchus* for Ashgate’s Early Modern Englishwoman series. Her current research focuses on the theory and practice of readerly identification, with both character and plot, in early modern literature. She has held fellowships from the Marshall Foundation, the Whiting Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation at the Newberry Library in Chicago, and has a BA in English from Yale, an MSt in English Studies from Oxford, and a PhD in English literature from Princeton.

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