

IX

The Romance: I

To most people today the word *romance*¹ suggests a love story, and because some medieval romances involve famous love stories—such as those of Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Iseult, Floris and Blanchefleur—they assume that a love interest is a necessary ingredient in the romance of the Middle Ages. This is not strictly true. One has only to think of the romances of Alexander, Richard the Lion-Hearted, and many lesser figures to realize that medieval romance could get along very well with little or no love element. The basic material is knightly activity and adventure, and we may best put the emphasis in the right place if we define the medieval romances as a story of adventure—fictitious and frequently marvelous or supernatural—in verse or prose. Except for the few romances in which a love story is the main feature,² love, if it enters into the narrative at all, is either subordinated to the adventure (*Erec, Yvain*), or is incidental, as when a Saracen princess conceives a desperate passion for the hero (*Bevis of Hampton*), or is used as a motivating force, an excuse for the adventures of the hero (*Guy of Warwick*). It may be added that the earlier romances are in verse; those in prose are generally late. The former ordinarily range in length from one thousand to six thousand lines, with occasional productions running to nearly double this limit. The commonest metres are the eight-syllable couplet and a variety of tail-rime stanzas (*aabccb, aaabcccb, and twelve-line stanzas of more elaborate pattern*).

Definition

The romance in verse, in so far as it tends to be a narrative of heroic adventure, has some things in common with the epic.³ But it has less unity of action and the characters are not so well defined. Although occasional romances have a simple and skilfully managed plot, many are little more than

Characteristics

¹ The word *romance* comes from a Latin adverb *romanice*, meaning "in the Roman manner" (*loqui romanice*, to speak in the Roman manner, i.e., speak colloquial Latin). In time, with the change of Vulgar Latin into the various Romance languages, it came to mean more particularly French, and then something written in French, especially something translated from Latin. Samson de Nanteuil calls his metrical translation of the *Proverbs of Solomon* a romance. As was natural, however, the word came gradually to designate the most popular type of French poem and hence a poem of this type in any language. See Reinald Hoops, *Der Begriff 'Romance' in der mitttelenglischen und frühneuenglischen Literatur* (Heidelberg, 1929; *Anglistische Forschungen*, No. 68).

² The type is better represented in France, where courtly love enjoyed greater vogue. For a treatment of these see Sarah F. Barrow, *The Medieval Society Romances* (1924; *Columbia Univ. Studies in English and Compar. Lit.*, No. 34).

³ For an interesting paper suggesting that romance is transplanted epic, which has undergone a kind of sea-change in the passage, see N. E. Griffin, "The Definition of Romance," *PMLA*, xxxviii (1923), 50-70. For a stimulating discussion of the whole subject see W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (2ed., 1908).

a loose succession of incidents strung on a biographical thread. The characters of medieval romance are poorly differentiated. They are types rather than individuals. The hero conforms to a pattern, that of the ideal knight, and within the pattern there is little room for individual variation. Lancelot, Tristan, Gawain—they are hardly distinguishable, although we can occasionally recognize Lancelot by catching a glimpse of Guinevere in the background, or Tristan if he is contriving a secret meeting with Iseult. Since the romance deals for the most part with types and the hero is himself an idealized type, the action likewise does not admit of great variety. There is only one way in which a knight may prove himself worthy to be the hero of the story and that is by showing himself superior to other knights. Now the ways in which one may dispose of an opponent in tournament or battle are limited, and it is therefore not surprising that the poet occasionally foists in a giant or a dragon to lend variety to his hero's adventures. Yet in spite of the obvious weaknesses of the genre—weakness in plot, faintness of characterization, sameness of incident—it is surprising how interesting the individual romance, taken by itself, contrives to be.⁴

An
Aristocratic
Genre

The romance in its beginning was an aristocratic type appealing to the tastes of the upper class. As long as French remained the normal language of the English ruling classes the romances that circulated in England were French and those written in England were written in French. This means that romances in English are not to be expected until English begins to displace French as the language of polite society, that is, until the middle of the thirteenth century. There is only one English romance that can be dated with certainty earlier than 1250. Unfortunately by this time the romance in France, and indeed in Europe generally, had passed its prime. The great creative period of medieval romance was the twelfth century,⁵ and the beginning of the thirteenth. By the end of the latter century the type begins to deteriorate. Poets, chewing over the old straw, are driven to desperate measures to make it seem more palatable. Overstraining after effect replaces the easy confidence of a Chrétien de Troyes or Gottfried von Strassburg. Most of our English romances belong to the fourteenth century and nearly all of them are translations or adaptations from French originals. Yet while they seldom come up to the level of medieval romance at its best, it must not be thought that they are quite what readers of Chaucer might infer from *Sir Thopas*:

English
Romances
Late

The
"Matters"
of
Medieval
Romance

While medieval romance was at the height of its popularity a Continental poet, Jean Bodel, wrote in his *Chanson des Saisnes*:

N'en sont que trois materes a nul home entendant
De France, et de Breitaigne, et de Rome la grant

⁴ Years from now any one curious about our current mystery stories will probably find in them a similar tendency to run to type, yet the individual story manages to be interesting.

⁵ The romance is a product of the twelfth century, along with the troubadour lyric, the great cathedrals, scholastic philosophy, and other evidences of the creative mind at work in this renaissance period. See Haskins, as above.

It has been customary ever since to speak of medieval romance under these headings—the Matter of Rome, by which is meant romances based on classical history and legend, the Matter of France, meaning stories of Charlemagne and his peers, and the Matter of Britain or the Arthurian cycle. This is a fairly adequate statement of aristocratic taste on the Continent, but it needs to be supplemented in one direction for England. It leaves out of account a group of romances of great interest. These are the romances concerned with native English heroes or with a figure like Havelok the Dane, whose fortunes are tied up with England and whose principal adventures take place in the island. Later it would have been necessary for a comprehensive classification to take cognizance of many romances of Eastern and other exotic themes.

i. *The Matter of England*

It is possible to suppose that when the English language spread to the upper class it was adopted first by those whose interests were less closely bound up with the Continent and who were more ready to identify themselves with the people among whom they lived. And it may equally well be that having come to look upon England as their country of first allegiance they were interested in stories about English worthies. At all events, we cannot help noticing that most of the romances, and certainly the most popular, written in English before 1300 were concerned with English subjects and that only after 1300 do we find stories of the Charlemagne and Arthurian cycles or of classical legend being adapted for a public that now preferred its entertainment in English rather than in French.⁶

The two earliest of these romances, it would seem, are *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane*. The former has often been placed as far back as 1225, but the basis for so early a date is very questionable. We must distinguish here, as in the case of *Havelok*, between the underlying legend and the romance in its English form. A more conservative date about 1250 for the English versions of both stories seems safer. *King Horn*⁷ relates the adventures of a prince who is driven out of his country by pagan invaders, but in the end wins back his possessions and throne—the so-called exile and return motif. During the hero's youth his father's kingdom of Suddene (in southwestern Scotland) is invaded by people called Saracens in the poem, but apparently Scandinavians. With a dozen companions he is set adrift in a boat which carries him to the Mull of Galloway.⁸ Here he is loved by

King
Horn

⁶ The only exceptions to this generalization are *Floris and Blancheflower*, of the first half of the thirteenth century, and *Arthur and Merlin* and *King Alisaunder*, which may have been written shortly before 1300.

⁷ Editions by J. Hall (Oxford, 1901), G. H. McKnight (1901; *EETS*, 14), and T. Wissmann (Strassburg, 1881; *Quellen u. Forschungen*, xlv). The text of this and a number of other romances discussed in the present chapter can be read conveniently in W. H. French and C. B. Hale, *Middle English Metrical Romances* (1930). For an excellent discussion of the date, versions, etc., of *King Horn* see Laura Hibbard, *Medieval Romance in England* (1924), pp. 83-102. See also W. H. French, *Essays on King Horn* (Ithaca, 1940).

⁸ The most convincing attempt to explain the hitherto baffling geography of the romance is that of Walter Oliver, "*King Horn* and Suddene," *PMLA*, xlvI (1931), 102-114. In this con-

the king's daughter Rimenhild, but he is forced through the treachery of a companion to leave the country. After the lovers have sworn to remain faithful for the usual seven years he goes to Ireland. He fights valiantly for the Irish king and remains in his service until recalled by a message from Rimenhild. With the help of Irish soldiers he returns in time to prevent her marriage to an unwelcome suitor. The same warriors help him to regain his own kingdom, whereupon he comes back and marries the much harassed but faithful and romantically patient lady. This simple action is built up with enough good fighting, dangers, narrow escapes for Rimenhild, and conduct worthy of both hero and heroine to make it a lively and satisfying tale.⁹

Havelok

The romance of *Havelok*¹⁰ has a somewhat more artfully constructed plot. The heroine is an English princess named Goldborough, left an orphan at the tender age of two. While she is growing up, the country is ruled by a regent named Godrich, who has promised her father not only to preserve the kingdom for her but to marry her to the best, fairest, and strongest man living. Instead he shuts her up in Dover Castle. This constitutes the first part of the story. In part two we make the acquaintance of Havelok, who is in somewhat like fashion the victim of treachery. When his father, the King of Denmark, dies the boy is given over to a trusted councilor named Godard, who rewards the confidence placed in him by arranging with a fisherman named Grim to have Havelok drowned. A luminous mark on the boy's shoulder and a bright light which issues from his mouth, however, tell Grim as plainly as words that he is the royal heir. So the fisherman flees with his family and Havelok to England and settles near the mouth of the Humber at a place afterwards called Grimsby. There with his sons he pursues his occupation of fishing, and Havelok sells his basket of fish like the rest. In time the lad grows big and very strong. When a famine occurs he is unwilling to be a burden on Grim and seeks employment in Lincoln, the nearest large city. He gets a job with the Earl of Lincoln's cook and is a great favorite with everyone.

It is necessary now for the poet to find some way of bringing the hero and

nection cf. the resemblances to the legend of St. Cuthbert pointed out by Irene P. McKeehan, "The Book of the Nativity of St. Cuthbert," *PMLA*, XLVIII (1933), 981-999.

⁹ The story is treated in a later English version, *Horn Childe and Maiden Rinnild*, found in the Auchinleck MS (printed in an appendix in Hall and by Caro, below), and in ballads telling the episode of Horn's return to save Rimenhild (*Hind Horn*, Child, No. 17). It was adapted in French by Geoffrey de la Tour Landri and in this form was turned into English prose in the fifteenth-century *King Ponthus and the Fair Sidone* (ed. F. J. Mather, Jr., *PMLA*, XII (1897), 1-150). The origin of the legend and the relation of the versions, English and French, are much disputed questions. In addition to the references given in a previous note see especially T. Wissmann, *King Horn: Untersuchungen . . .* (Strassburg, 1876; *Quellen u. Forschungen*, xvi); J. Caro, "Kleine Publikationen aus der Auchinleck-Hs: Horn Childe and Maiden Rinnild," *Est*, XII (1889), 323-366 (text and study); O. Hartenstein, *Studien zur Hornsage* (Heidelberg, 1902; *Kieler Studien*, IV); W. H. Schofield, "The Story of Horn and Rimenhild," *PMLA*, XVIII (1903), 1-83; Paul Leidig, *Studien zu King Horn* (Borna-Leipzig, 1927); Leslie G. Burgevin, "The Origin and Development of the Saga of King Horn," *Harvard Univ. . . . Summaries of Theses*, 1931, pp. 212-215.

¹⁰ Edited by W. W. Skeat (revised by K. Sisam, Oxford, 1915), and by F. Holthausen 3ed., Heidelberg, 1928); earlier ed. by Skeat in *EETSSES*, 4 (1868).

heroine together. A parliament which Earl Godrich convenes at Lincoln offers a convenient excuse. In the festivities called forth by the occasion Havelok wins a prize and much local fame by putting the stone twelve feet farther than any other man. When Godrich hears of this record-breaking achievement he has an idea. He has sworn to marry Goldborough to the best, fairest, and strongest man in England. He will marry her to Havelok, the kitchen knave! Goldborough is forced to submit to the marriage, outrageous as it seems to her. However, one night as she lies beside Havelok, bewildered and somewhat resentful, she sees the luminous mark on his shoulder and is told by an angel that she is married to a king's son. Filled with joy, she kisses him. This unexpected attention wakes him up from a dream in which he has seen all Denmark and England subject to him. With the help of Grim's three sons he invades Denmark and wins the support of a Danish noble named Ubbe, especially when Ubbe discovers the great light that issues from Havelok's mouth as he sleeps. It is of 107 candlepower. Havelok regains his kingdom, conquers England, and rewards all who have been good to him, especially the Earl of Lincoln's cook. He and Goldborough live a hundred years and have many children. As a final word the poet begs his hearers "to say a paternoster for him that hath made the rime and therefore sat up many nights."

It has seemed well to tell the story of *Havelok* at some length to show that English romances are not all formless and that authors of medieval romance could occasionally construct a good plot. Notwithstanding its naïve elements suggestive of the fairy tale *Havelok the Dane* is a well-planned story. As in *King Horn*, the emphasis is on the adventure. Neither romance has much of the glamour or sophistication of courtly society. In fact *Havelok* is almost democratic in tone. There is respect for honest labor, the hero is associated most of the time with common people, and such people and their activities play a large part in the story. His great triumph is not in knightly competition but in putting the stone. The charm of his character is not revealed in courtly graces, but in homely and natural virtues—a cheerful, sunny disposition which makes the children and the cook like him, a readiness to accept without question his humble lot as a fisher boy and scullery knave. Though both *King Horn* and *Havelok* are based on earlier French narratives,¹¹ they seem to reflect the spirit of the English middle class, or to be the work of minstrels little acquainted with the ways of the court.¹² It is among such that we might well look for the authors of romances at a time when the upper class was just beginning to adopt English in numbers. While dating these two romances c. 1250, we must allow for minor revisions at least in *Havelok* shortly after 1300.¹³

*Bourgeois
Elements*

¹¹ For the French versions see above, pp. 138, 141.

¹² Defects in one of the MSS show that both romances were copied from an original with only twenty lines to a page. Such a book, if $3\frac{1}{2} \times 4$ inches in size and composed of 120 leaves, would have held *Horn* and *Havelok* and been very convenient for a minstrel.

¹³ England is twice described as extending from Roxburgh to Dover, which could hardly be said until Roxburgh became a border fortress in 1296 (J. W. Hales, *Folia Litteraria*, pp.

Guy of
Warwick

Enjoying the widest popularity and longest life accorded to any English romances were two stories written about 1300, *Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton*. The former has been preserved in four versions ranging in length from seven to twelve thousand lines.¹⁴ It is very typical of romances in which everything is subordinated to adventure. It consists of the individual encounters of the hero with an endless succession of adversaries. The excuse is love. Felice, daughter of the Earl of Warwick, will not consider marriage with the hero, who is only the son of her father's steward, until he proves his worth in the field. After many victories Guy returns hopefully, only to be told by his sweetheart that she will marry a mere knight only if he is the best knight in the world. Guy's mingled disappointment and unquenchable hope are the incentive for a wide variety of additional combats and adventures, after which the rather difficult mistress is satisfied and the marriage takes place. Here the romance would have had to end and perhaps originally did end. But an excuse was found for continuing it. After a few months of married life Guy's conscience hurts. All his achievements have been for a selfish end, to win the love of Felice. He feels that he should do something for God, fight against the infidel in the cause of the true faith. Accordingly with Felice's consent he sets out on a third series of adventures, and when he returns he has little more than time to withdraw from the world and compose his soul for death. This part of the romance is reminiscent of the crusades, and the spirit of renunciation and humility in which he spends his last days in his lonely cell almost suggests the possibility of a monkish hand in this part of the story.

Its
Popularity

By the year 1410 the fame of *Guy of Warwick* had spread even to the Holy Land where the Sultan's lieutenant remarked that they had the story in books in their own language. In England it was published by the earliest English printers and in the Elizabethan period was made into ballads and plays. In the seventeenth century it was told in poems of epic proportions and was also adapted to the tastes and purses of the plebeian citizenry in the form of chapbooks that lasted on into the eighteenth century, when it became the object of antiquarian interest.¹⁵ Such popularity was no doubt due in part to the belief that the romance had an historical foundation. The story is laid in the reign of Athelstan (925-940), the grandson of King Alfred. In the romance Guy returns to England in time to take a leading part in Athelstan's fight with the Danes. Guy's fight in single combat with Colbrand, the Danish champion, was accepted as fact for a long time and was told in a number of chronicles as sober truth—so well did the storyteller

30-39). The only Parliament held at Lincoln was in 1300. Such details suggest that the story was brought up to date shortly after the turn of the century.

¹⁴ A French romance of *Gui de Warewic*, earlier than the English, exists in thirteen MSS (ed. Alfred Ewert, 2v, Paris, 1932-33; *CFMA*, 74-75). The English romance, in various versions, is edited by J. Zupitza (1875-91; *EETSES*, 25, 26, 42, 49, 59).

¹⁵ See Ronald S. Crane, "The Vogue of *Guy of Warwick* from the Close of the Middle Ages to the Romantic Revival," *PMLA*, xxx (1915), 125-194. The larger aspects of the survival of medieval romance are studied in the same author's dissertation (Univ. of Pennsylvania), on which the above article is in part based.

do his work. Patriotism thus combined with interest in the story to keep the romance alive long after better romances were forgotten.

Equally famous were the adventures of Bevis of Southampton. We have romances, often in several versions, from France, Italy, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands, to say nothing of two in Celtic and several in Slavonic. The story begins with a variant of the Hamlet theme. Bevis's mother plots her husband's death and afterwards marries the murderer. Bevis is sold to foreign merchants, and in time is taken into the service of Ermin, King of the Saracens. Ermin's daughter Josian falls in love with him and most of his adventures grow out of his efforts to maintain his reputation as a Christian knight amidst pagan envy and treachery, or else to defend Josian against her Saracen suitor. In the end marriage and the recovery of his inheritance give him twenty years of happiness before he dies. *Bevis of Hampton* is not a remarkable example of medieval romance. It is made up of stock motifs and episodes—the January and May marriage of Bevis's parents, the child ordered to be put to death but spared through the pity of the servant, the hero sold to heathen merchants, the ubiquitous Saracen princess, fights with giants, wild boars, dragons, the wicked steward who tries to steal the credit for the hero's exploit, as in *Tristan and Iseult*, etc. The articulation of the episodes is loose and inexpert. What gives the romance its chief distinction is its exuberance, its racy, buoyant style, and the spirit of broad humor in which it is written. A thirty-foot giant whom Bevis fights was among his own people so small that everybody picked on him. They called him the dwarf and he was forced to run away. When Bevis fells him and is on the point of cutting off his head, Josian suggests sparing him that he may be her page. When Josian is baptized they decide to baptize the giant too. A special font is constructed, but when the bishop attempts to push him in he leaps out and cries, "Priest, wilt thou drown me? . . . I am too big to be Christian." The author wrote with evident gusto, which has not always been appreciated. His learned German editor says, "The strain in which this work is written is serious, even severe."¹⁶

*Richard Cœur de Lion*¹⁷ is one instance in which history really furnished a hero and a series of adventures adequate and ready to the poet's hand for the purposes of romance. Richard I as a ruler would not have inspired much enthusiasm among the English. He looked upon his office as a means to an end, and spent only six months of his ten-year reign in England. But his adventurous nature, his daring exploits and personal triumphs as the leader of the Third Crusade, his captivity in Germany, the picturesque circumstances of his death, and the magnanimity with which he treated the fanatical warrior whose bolt had struck him were a source of patriotic pride and popular admiration which increased as reality passed into legend. The author of the romance has a general idea of the facts in Richard's life, but

¹⁶ Ed. E. Kölbing (1885-94; *EETSES*, 46, 48, 65). For the Anglo-Norman version see above, p. 142.

¹⁷ Edited from all the MSS by Karl Brunner, *Der mittlenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz* (Vienna, 1913; *Wiener Beiträge*, XLII).

he does not hesitate to alter history to suit his purpose. He has Richard's captivity precede the crusade and in order to explain it, has Richard journey as a pilgrim to the Holy Land first. It would seem that his knowledge of history was somewhat sketchy and confused, but he was a storyteller and not a historian, and did not feel called upon to aim at scholarly accuracy. Moreover he introduced legendary elements freely and these are at times the most interesting part of his narrative. Such an element is the episode during Richard's captivity in which his captors try to bring about his death by admitting a lion to his cell. He meets the lion with a tremendous kick and as the animal opens its jaws wide in a howl of pain Richard thrusts his arm down the lion's throat, tearing out its heart and various other organs, in fact "all that he found," says the storyteller. Then taking the heart still warm, he goes into the hall, dips it into the salt and eats it before the astonished court. Thus the poet accounts for his nickname, Lion-Hearted. It is a romance of adventure, historical and pseudo-historical. The author refers to his source as French, but the strong English bias and open scorn expressed for the French king put its English origin beyond any doubt. It dates from about 1300.

Athelston

What *Richard Cœur de Lion* does on a large scale the romance of *Athelston*¹⁸ does on a small. In some 800 lines a poet of about 1350 has constructed a purely fictitious story about a king who bore a name famous in Old English history.¹⁹ He has used scraps of history, legend, folklore, and commonplaces of romance. How he has woven together this heterogeneous assortment of ideas will be seen from the footnote below.²⁰ It will suffice here to remark that by a shameless disregard for historical truth he has devised a well-knit and highly effective plot. The romance has many qualities of the ballad—tags, and repetitions, and commonplaces, to say nothing of the opening in which the four messengers meet on the edge of a wood and with-

¹⁸ Ed. A. M. Trowce, *Athelston: A Middle English Romance* (1933; also 1951; *EETS*, 224).

¹⁹ See the account of the *Battle of Brunanburh*, above, p. 56.

²⁰ Athelston meets three other messengers and swears blood-brotherhood with them. On this motif see G. H. Gerould, "Social and Historical Reminiscences in the Middle English *Athelston*," *ESL*, xxxvi (1906), 193-208. Upon becoming king he makes his companions respectively, Archbishop of Canterbury, the Earl of Dover, and the Earl of Stane, giving also to the last named his sister in marriage. Believing the jealous representations of Dover, he sends for the Earl of Stane and his family, ostensibly to confer knighthood on the two sons. Instead he throws them into prison, and when the Queen begs him on her knees to give them a hearing he becomes enraged and kicks her, killing his unborn heir. On the kicked Queen see A. C. Baugh, "A Source for the Middle English Romance, *Athelston*," *PMLA*, xlv (1929), 377-382. The Queen appeals to the Archbishop, who similarly incurs Athelston's anger. But the Archbishop excommunicates the King and puts all England under an interdict. This incident recalls the story of Thomas Becket; see Gerould, as above, and Paul Brown, *The Development of the Legend of Thomas Becket* (Philadelphia, 1930). The King agrees to permit the accused noble and his family to have a trial by ordeal. They must walk over nine red-hot stones. This is the story of Queen Emma and the plow-shares; see L. A. Hibbard, "*Athelston*, a Westminster Legend," *PMLA*, xxxvi (1921), 223-244. As the countess successfully completes her part of the ordeal, she is seized with the pains of childbirth and is delivered of a son. The King, now fully convinced and penitent, adopts the child in place of the heir which his wicked rage had destroyed. The child is said to be Saint Edmund, king and martyr. This last touch is a perversion of history amounting to genius. Athelston, the hero of Brunanburh, was succeeded by Edmund. Edmund was a younger brother, however, not a nephew, and Edmund Martyr lived a century before!

out explanation proceed to swear blood-brotherhood with one another. It is probably the work of a minstrel, but the humiliation of the king by the power of the Church and the prominence given to moral issues has been cited as evidence that the story was written under ecclesiastical influence.²¹

All these romances, it will be seen, capitalize upon the interest in native figures, real or imaginary. By the time most of them were written the habit of writing romances in English was thoroughly established, and poets were ready to go outside the English circle for their themes.

ii. *The Matter of Rome*

Medieval romances based on classical stories generally had to do with one of four subjects: Alexander the Great, the Trojan war, the siege of Thebes, and the adventures of Æneas. All four were made into long French romances in the twelfth century, and all four had English offspring, but only two enjoyed genuine popularity in England. These were the stories of Alexander and of Troy, with Alexander well out in front.

All popular medieval treatments of Alexander²² go back ultimately to a romantic biography in Greek prose, written at Alexandria some time before 200 A.D.²³ The author, who is known to modern scholarship as pseudo-Callisthenes, doubtless embodied in his account current legends concerning Alexander's birth designed to make the founder of his native city an Egyptian. This amazing story is one of the two features that insured the popularity of the work in later times. The other is the extended treatment of Alexander's travels, especially in India, with its multitude of strange sights, marvels of nature, and wonderful experiences.²⁴ Pseudo-Callisthenes was translated into Latin c. 300 A.D. by Julius Valerius,²⁵ and in an abridgement of the ninth century circulated widely.²⁶ Finally, about 950, the Greek was again translated into Latin by one Leo, Archpresbyter of Naples. This version, generally known as the *Historia de Preliis*²⁷ (i.e., the wars of Alexander), enjoyed still greater popularity. From one or another of these Latin derivatives of pseudo-Callisthenes a great number of accounts in the vernaculars of western Europe was composed. The oldest is a Provençal poem of the eleventh century by Alberic of Pisançon, of which only a fragment is preserved. It was, however, adapted in French about 1160 in lines of ten syllables, and altered and continued toward the end of the century in twelve-

*The
Legend of
Alexander*

²¹ Wells, p. 25.

²² The most extended treatment of the Alexander legend, Paul Meyer, *Alexandre le Grand dans la littérature française du moyen âge* (Paris, 1886), is now somewhat antiquated. For an excellent brief discussion see the introduction to F. P. Magoun, Jr., *The Gest of King Alexander of Macedon* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929).

²³ Edited (one recension) by W. Kroll, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Berlin, 1926).

²⁴ This feature of the story was already known in England in Old English times. See above, p. 104 for a mention of the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and the *Wonders of the East*.

²⁵ *Res Gestae Alexandri Macedonis*, ed. B. Kübler (Leipzig, 1888).

²⁶ It is often called the *Zacher Epitome* because it was edited by J. Zacher (Halle, 1867). It was incorporated in condensed form by Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum Historiale* (c. 1250).

²⁷ Ed. F. Pfister, *Der Alexanderroman des Archipresbyters Leo* (Heidelberg, 1913). It is translated in English (omitting Book II) in Margaret Schlauch, *Medieval Narrative* (1928).

syllable verses. This later *Roman d'Alexandre*²⁸ was the standard form in which the story circulated in French. There was, however, another French poem written in England (c. 1280) by Thomas of Kent. It was based on the *Zacher Epitome* and is known as the *Roman de Toute Chevalerie*.²⁹ From it is derived the best known English romance on the subject, *King Alisaunder*.³⁰

King
Alisaunder

King Alisaunder runs to 8000 lines (in four-stress couplets). Since it is found in a manuscript of 1330-40 it cannot be later than this and is probably to be dated c. 1300. It is divided by the author into two parts. The first tells the story of Nectanebus, the Egyptian king who exercises his magic on Olympias, the wife of Philip of Macedon, and becomes the father of her child, Alexander. It also relates at length Alexander's military exploits, treating with especial fullness his triumph over Darius. The second part deals with Alexander's conquest of India and the multitude of fabulous creatures and terrifying experiences which he met with in the course of his extensive travels. While the romance is clearly intended for oral delivery, as numerous remarks indicate, it is the work of a bookish man. He frequently appeals for authority to his sources. On one occasion, he declines to relate an incident which he finds in his French "geste" because it is contradicted by the scholarship (*lettrure*) on the subject.³¹ In another place he supplies a gap in his French source from another work in Latin,³² and once he speaks of the strange people in Egypt "in *oure* bokes as we findith," where he seems to identify himself with those who have and use books—clerks. Alexander romances in general descend by a literary rather than a popular tradition, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in the English *King Alisaunder*.

Alexander
A and B

The same thing is true of the two fragments of a romance in alliterative verse known as *Alexander A* and *Alexander B*.³³ In the former the author is clearly not dependent upon any previous romance in French. He tells of the ancestry and conquests of Philip of Macedon through 450 lines taken from the Latin of Orosius because, as he remarks, he could not find any book when he began to write that told of Alexander's birth. But apparently he later got hold of a copy of the *Historia de Preliis* and so he plunges at once into the story of Nectanebus. He has hardly described the youthful feats of Alexander when the fragment breaks off. Practically the whole of *Alexander B* (1139 lines) is given over to the exchange of letters between Alexander and Dindimus discussing the Brahmin way of life. The author

²⁸ Ed. H. Michelant (Stuttgart, 1846) and E. C. Armstrong, *et. al.* (Princeton, 1937; *Elliott Monographs*, Vols. 36 and 37). The popularity of this version is responsible for our still calling the twelve-syllable line an Alexandrine.

²⁹ Still unpublished. See above, p. 141.

³⁰ In H. Weber, *Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1810), Vol. 1, superseded by ed. of G. V. Smithers (2v, 1952-7; *EETS*, 227, 237).

³¹ Cf. lines 3511-21.

³² This *batail* destuted [lacking] is,
In the French, wel y-wis,
Therefore Y have, it to colour,
Borrowed of the Latyn outour. (lines 2199-2202.)

³³ The best edition is that of F. P. Magoun, Jr., *The Gestis of King Alexander of Macedon* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), who believes that *B* is a continuation rather than a part of *A*.

handles the alliterative line with apparent ease, drops into dialogue when necessary, and tells his story fluently. He wrote in the West Midlands and, as nearly as we can judge, in the middle third of the fourteenth century.³⁴

Next to the story of Alexander the most popular subject for romances of classical theme was the fall of Troy, and this in spite of the fact that Homer was completely unknown to western Europe in the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages derived their knowledge of the Troy story from two short prose accounts translated from late Greek. These went under the names of Dares and Dictys respectively.³⁵ The two accounts are usually found together in medieval manuscripts and although involving some duplication each includes matter not found in the other. The combination gave a fairly complete, if wholly prosaic, account of events from the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece through the particulars of the siege to the return of the Greeks and the death of Ulysses at the hands of his son Telegonus. The first vernacular treatment of this material was the work of a Norman-French poet, Benoît de Sainte-More, whose *Roman de Troie*³⁶ runs to 30,000 verses. It is a spirited and effective narrative, but not a little of its fame today is due to the elaborate treatment of an episode that here makes its first appearance in literature—the Troilus and Briseida (Cressida) story.³⁷ A century later Benoît's verse was turned into Latin prose by a Sicilian judge, Guido della Colonna, as the *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (1287).³⁸ In these two forms the story had a wide circulation and passed into later vernacular versions.

The
Roman de
Troie

The earliest Troy romance in English is the *Seege of Troye*, a poem of about two thousand lines.³⁹ There is frequent appeal to the "lordings" to listen and it is obviously intended for minstrel production. It was designed to be recited or read in two installments, for the minstrel pauses just half

Seege of
Troye

³⁴ Other Alexander romances survive. One in alliterative verse of the early fifteenth century is known as *Alexander C.* It runs to nearly 5700 lines and lacks a few leaves at the end. Another preserved in a Cambridge MS is in stanzas of alternate rime (ed. Roskopf, Erlangen, 1911). A prose romance running to about 100 pages is in the Thornton MS, 1430-40. Two long Scottish poems, written in the fifteenth century are mentioned below (p. 300).

³⁵ Dares Phrygius, *De Excidio Trojae Historia* (sixth century), and Dictys Cretensis, *Ephemeris de Historia Belli Trojani* (fourth century). Dares and Dictys represent themselves as having fought in their respective armies, Dares on the side of the Trojans and Dictys on the side of the Greeks. Both claims, of course, are fraudulent. They were made to give the authority of eye-witnesses to works written centuries later. See N. E. Griffin, *Dares and Dictys: An Introduction to the Study of Medieval Versions of the Story of Troy* (Baltimore, 1907).

³⁶ It was written in the second half of the twelfth century, possibly about 1155-60, and dedicated to the English queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. This is the date arrived at by its modern editor, L. Constans, *Le Roman de Troie, par Benoît de Sainte-Maure* (6v, Paris, 1904-12; SATF). For a slightly later date (after 1184) see the argument of F. E. Guyer, "The Chronology of the Earliest French Romances," *MP*, xxvi (1929), 257-277.

³⁷ The love story begins at line 13, 261 and accompanies the main narrative at intervals to the death of Troilus (lines 21, 397 ff). It serves to fill in the uneventful periods of truce and adds an important element of variety to the narrative. It is not thought that Benoît invented this love story, but if he followed an expanded Dares, as some believe, his source has disappeared.

³⁸ Ed. N. E. Griffin, *Guido de Columnis: Historia Destructionis Troiae* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936).

³⁹ Mary E. Barnicle, *The Seege or Batayle of Troye* (London, 1927; EETS, 172). See the valuable study by G. Hofstrand, *The Seege of Troye* (Lund, 1936), and C. H. A. Wager, *The Seege of Troy* (1899), which is still important.

Other
Treatments

way through for an intermission—"Rest we now a litel pece"—and suggests that the company "fyl þe cuppe and mak ous glad." The original poem from which the existing manuscripts descend was written in the north-east Midlands at the beginning of the fourteenth century and follows the plan of Dares with additions from Benoît and commonplaces of classical tradition. But in order to cover the ground from the adventures of Jason and the Golden Fleece to the destruction of Troy and the triumphant return of the Greeks, it is necessary for the poet to hurry from episode to episode without time to pause for those particulars and details that lend interest to a story. Very different is the *Laud Troy Book*,⁴⁰ which covers the same ground but was written to be read. Apparently the work of a cleric, it fills more than 18,000 verses of considerable fluency. It is somewhat older than the existing MS and dates from about 1400. To the latter half of the fourteenth century belongs also the *Gest Historiale of the Destruction of Troy*, a poem in 14,000 alliterative verses.⁴¹ It is a product of the Alliterative Revival in the north. The Troy story seems to have enjoyed considerable popularity in Scotland. Extensive fragments of a version attributed to the Scottish poet Barbour have been preserved, imbedded in MSS of Lydgate's *Troy Book*.⁴²

Thebes
and
Æneas

Classical times and the Middle Ages took a strange interest in the unnatural story of Œdipus and his marriage to his own mother. When his sons quarreled over the right to rule Thebes and the party of Polynices laid siege to the city, the opportunity existed for an epic narrative, comparable to that which described the siege of Troy. The Virgilian epic, the *Thebaid*, by Statius, a Roman poet of the Silver Age, gave western Europe such a treatment. Either the *Thebaid* or an epitome of it was made into a French poem in the twelfth century called the *Roman de Thèbes*, and this in turn became the basis of other romances. The only English poem on the subject was Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, discussed below.⁴³ The story of Æneas is practically unrepresented in English⁴⁴ until Caxton translated a French prose romance in his *Eneydos* (1490), although it was available to the English upper classes in the French *Roman d'Æneas*. It is apparent, therefore, that the stories of Alexander and of Troy were the only themes in the Matter of Rome that showed any real vitality in medieval England.

⁴⁰ So called because the unique MS in which it is preserved was once in the possession of Archbishop Laud. Edited by J. E. Wülfing (1902-3; *EETS*, 121-122).

⁴¹ *EETS*, 39 and 56 (1869-74).

⁴² For Lydgate, see below, p. 296. For treatments in prose see p. 301.

⁴³ Chaucer's *Knighi's Tale* treats an episode loosely attached to the Thebes story. So too are the Anglo-Norman romances *Ipomedon* and *Prothesilaus* mentioned on p. 141.

⁴⁴ Chaucer tells the story of Dido in the *House of Fame* and more briefly in the *Legend of Good Women*.