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Romance in Peril:
A Survey of the Genre in Seventeenth Century English Literature

Mustafa Bal
International University of Sarajevo

The seventeenth century in England can be seen as the age which marked the beginning of modernity as well as the beginning of empirical thought. Rationalization of viewpoints combined with the political turmoil of the century, causing immense setbacks within the English literary traditions. One of these setbacks took place within the romance tradition which had been a major mode of writing during the earlier centuries. In this sense, this article analyses reasons of the decline and the neglect of the romance tradition throughout seventeenth century English literature as well as examining how the genre managed to survive either implicitly or explicitly in several works like *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn, pastoral poems by Andrew Marvel and Milton, and in some parts of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Elizabethan writers were lucky in inheriting from Medieval times a vast heritage of Arthurian romances on which they could model their works. Thus comes Sidney with his *Arcadia* which presents a country of "dream and enchantment, of brave exploit unblemished chastity, constant love, and undying friendship" (Cross 11). This was also the reflection of the country under the mature reign of the romance Queen Elizabeth. However, seventeenth century writers was not as lucky as Sidney since the country does not find rest throughout the century, causing both writers and readers to neglect the fabulous, false world that romances would

present. Yet, it was also true for the seventeenth century people that no century could do without romance. Therefore, especially in the first half of the century, since it was not produced in England, romance was transported from France. French writers, then, had already accorded romance for the new century by taking a shift from *the chivalric* romance to *the heroic* romance. The difference between the two modes can be seen in John Dunlop's following differentiation:

> In romance of chivalry, love though a solemn and serious passion, is subordinate to heroic achievement. A knight seems chiefly to have loved his mistress, because he obtained her by some warlike exploit; she formed an excuse for engaging in perilous adventures, and he mourned her loss, as it was attended with that of his dearer idol – honour. In the heroic romance, on the other hand, love seems the ruling passion, and military exploits are chiefly performed for the sake of a mistress: glory is the spring of one species of composition, and love of the other…(qtd. in McDermott 114).

French heroic romances had a more extensive influence than that of *Arcadia* on English romance literature (both in terms of writing and reading) in the century. The entrance of the influence into the country was accelerated as Charles I got married to a sixteen-year-old French princess, Henrietta Maria, who was enthusiastic about fine arts, and with whom came along romances as well. Coteries were founded in imitation of the French tradition, and Katherina Phillips became a coterie leader of a salon, which gave its members fictitious names from French romances with the aim of forming refined friendship ties between the sexes and encouraging them towards literary excellence. Later, after the banishment of the king and the court from England to exile, heroic romances were still at fashion; aristocrat families continued reading them despite the puritan anti-propaganda. French heroic romances were first read in England in the original language by the members of the court. This was followed by translations into English, and the last step was the

writing of heroic romances in the manner of imitation. The first of these imitations appeared in 1653 as *Cloria and Narcissus, or the Royal Romance*. This was followed by the publication of *Panthalia* in 1659 by Richard Braithwaite, in 1660 George Mackenzie's *Arethina*, in 1664 John Bulteel's *Brinthia*, and in 1665 John Crowne's *Pandion and Amphigenia*. There was even another mode being applied to romance under the name of "Chrisitian romance". These were the variations of the heroic romances. *Bentivolio and Urania* by the Reverend Nathaniel Ingelo, and Robert Boyle's *Theodora and Didymus* can be given as examples for the Christian romances. In this latter one, the happy ending is postponed to occur in the next world, not in this one. Another important romance to note is *Parthenissa* (1654) which was written by the brother of above-mentioned Robert Boyle, Roger Boyle, and published in 1676. This work is particularly important in that it is an English work which comes closer to the French archetypes in terms of length, number of characters, and complexity. (McDermott 119-122)

Starting with the second half of the century, heroic romances began to lose their popularity. This was due to the anti-romances that French writers now took up to write. These anti-romances were written to ridicule the characteristics of the heroic romance. In fact, ridiculing romances roots back almost to the first quarter of the century, precisely 1628, when Charles Sorel wrote *Le Berger Extravagant*, "a new *Don Quixote*, in which he burlesqued the pastoral and the ideal treatment of love" (Cross, 17). Later on, French anti-romances like Paul Scarron's *Roman comique* or Moliere's *Precieuses Riducules* were translated into English and found many readers in England. By means of these anti-romances, a taste of dislike grew in the English public towards romance reading. One of the magazines of the time, called *Athenian Mercury* (1692), which was edited and published by John Dunton, claimed that romances softened the minds of the readers through love, that they were not

convenient to be read by the public since the public would want to practice the extravagant ideas romances gave them, and that they fooled away so many hours, days and years which could have been spent on better deeds. (McDermott 124-125) Congrew's *Incognita: or, Love and Duty Reconciled* (1692) also preached anti-romance propaganda with the emphasis put on the lying nature of romance literature in the preface to the work:

> Romances are generally composed of the constant loves and invincible courages of heroes, heroines, kings, and queens, mortals of the first rank, and so forth; where lofty language, miraculous contingencies and impossible performances, elevate and surprise the reader into a giddy delight, which leaves him flat upon the ground whenever he gives off, and vexes him to think how he has suffered himself to be pleased and transported, concerned and afflicted at the several passages which he has read…when he is forced to be very well convinced that 'tis all a lie. (qtd in Grierson 103-104)

This was the summary of the public attitude at the end of the century.

Apart from the above-summarised presence of the genre in England in the century, there were several other important works, which, although they were not purely romances, could be read as the works into which some major qualities of romance were encrypted by their writers. Related to this idea, it can be claimed that *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn, some pastoral poems by Marvel and Milton, and even some parts of Milton's *Paradise Lost* can be read as romances.

Works of Aphra Behn display the fact that she is the romancer of the English literature of the century as her works, especially *Oroonoko* (1688), harbours many romance qualities. She had stories like *The Fair Jilt, or Tarquin and Miranda*, and *Agnes de Castro, or The Force of Generous Blood*, and *The Lucky Mistake* with romance tones within. But it was with *Oroonoko* that she perfects the romance vein in her writing. The work is also important as it can be considered as a prose writing

which contributes to the literary passage from the *false* worlds of romances to the realist world of the newly emerging novel. Since it is a transitory work in the middle "*Oroonoko* cannot be classified as fact or fiction, realism or romance" (Abrams 1865). It is an archetypal work in that it is both a travel account, an autobiographical writing, and a romance. It is also significant to note that it "is the first humanitarian novel in English" (Cross 20) since it shows to what extent the pseudo-civilized Europeans of the period could be hostile to human rights when the human beings in question were black Africans. Robert Henry also emphasizes the work's value when he writes "*Oroonoko* is remarkable, for in it [Behn] anticipates the romantic movement of a future age. Oroonoko the hero, and Imoinda his mistress, have charming names. They are paragons of pastoral. Impossible creatures, magnanimous, chivalrous, constant to death" (115).

Romances find many readers in each epoch because they secretly expose human desires which are usually kept hidden. *Oroonoko* implicitly revealed and talked about these desires of the English public. These desires can be traced in the deep love feeling between Oroonoko and Imoinda, in the far away setting of Africa and Surinam (as romances avoid localizing the happenings from a known geography since its imaginary world should be kept separate from the real life), and the adventure these settings recall in minds, in the rebellious and brave spirit of the noble savage Oroonoko, and in the unfamiliar life styles and complexion of the natives. That is to say that *Oroonoko* could show what was unfamiliar but desired since human nature has a tendency to know what is unknown. John Locke, in the century, dealt with the issue of "desire", and for him desire meant "uneasiness" (Erickson 159). Robert Erickson links Locke's definition of desire to Behn's *Oroonoko* when he says "Locke's discourse on desire, ultimately an assertion of the underlying irrational ground of human motivation as he understood it, has profound relevance

to the emergence of the drama and fiction of Aphra Behn, especially the writing of *Oroonoko*" (159-160).

Behn's characterisation also contributes to the romance world created throughout her work. Oroonoko and Imoinda form a perfect couple for a romance. As Herbert Grierson claims "[t]hey are in all essentials the faultless hero and peerless heroine of romantic tradition" (92). Oroonoko, the protagonist of the work, fits in this idea. For one thing, his name is quite romantic; he takes his name from Nature. "Oroonoko is frequently linked with flowers, and the author gives her African hero the name of the great river of Caribbean South America…She will testify at length to Oroonoko's superhuman but also finite powers as a vulnerable hero of waters and the earth, Nature's own heroic god" (Erickson 166). Moreover, Oroonoko is depicted as a brave gallant: "…to give his accomplishments a juster name, where 'twas he got that real greatness of soul, those refined notions of true honor, that absolute generosity, and that softness that was capable of the highest passions of love and gallantry" (*Oroonoko* 5). These are the qualities and virtues that a noble knight of a romance should have characteristically. On the other hand, Imoinda is drawn as a beautiful lady who "is famous throughout the colony as the beautiful slave, as chaste as she is beautiful" (Grierson 92). Furthermore, Oroonoko and Imoinda are presented as Adam and Eve due to their outlooks in their native village:

> The beads they weave into aprons about a quarter of an ell long, and of the same breadth; working them very prettily in flowers of several colors; which apron they wear just before 'em, as Adam and Eve did the fig-leaves…And though they are all thus naked, if one lives forever among 'em there is not to be seen an undecent action, or glance: and being continually used to see one another so unadorned, so like our first parents before the Fall… (*Oroonoko* 2-3)

This presentation gives a mythic atmosphere to the characters and the work, taking them from the reality of life to the fabulous world of the romance one step forward. In this Edenic atmosphere and later throughout the rest of the places is found the true love between Oroonoko and Imoinda. The flow of the words that the narrator uses to describe Imoinda's beauty in her lover's eyes when he recognizes her, whom he thought was dead, is the exposition of the strength of love between the characters: "There needed no long gazing, or consideration, to examine who this fair creature was; he soon saw Imoinda all over her; in a minute he saw her face, her shape, her air, her modesty, and all that called forth his soul with joy at his eyes, and left his body destitute of almost life…" (*Oroonoko* 32). The oath that Oroonoko takes when they get married to remain married only with Imoinda also strengthens his love towards her.

Oroonoko is betrayed by the English captain and is sold to the slave traders, which reflects the romance world of intrigues. Now the quest for Oroonko to accomplish his bravery against the deceiving world is set. "Caesar" is given as a new name by his master Trefry, and the name adds to the nobility of the hero due to its classical Roman background.

Oroonoko and Imoinda are enslaved in *Oroonoko* like romance was enslaved in the seventeenth century; Oroonoko is executed at the end of *Oroonoko* and his body is dismembered into many parts like romance, generally speaking, who was executed in the century, and whose dismembered pieces were inserted in some works. Some of these pieces can also be found in Milton's *Paradise Lost* which was a work of many genres like pastoral, romance, and especially epic. "If we ask why Milton incorporated so complete a spectrum of literary forms and genres in *Paradise Lost*, a partial answer must be that much Renaissance critical theory supports the

notion of epic as a heterocosm or compendium of subjects, forms, and styles" (Lewalski 81).

The relation of *Paradise Lost* to romance can be found in Milton's characterization of Satan in the work. Milton makes a hero out of a devil's profile. Grierson summarises Harold Visiak's observations on the psychological motives behind Milton's way of presenting a strong Satan figure in his *Paradise Lost*:

> Paradise Lost is a product of 'inverted power', the expression as in a dream – for poetry and dreaming are closely akin – of Milton's thwarted purpose when all his high hopes for the Commonwealth were defeated, a cry of rage, 'his genius was inverted, so that what objectively appears evil in the demonic verse of *Paradise Lost* is subjectively good'. It is in the devils that Milton expresses his deepest feelings. (257)

Since Satan is made a hero his actions are associated with the generic paradigms of heroic genres like epic of strife, quest epic, and romance in *Paradise Lost*. Satan seems to have many aspects which make him a dark hero. One of these aspects is Satan's *wandering* throughout the work. His cannot be called a *quest* but *wandering* since Satan is a false and a perverted hero. In Eden, for example, all the familiar romance roles of knights for gardens of love are perverted by Satan because he cannot love there, nor can be satisfied sensually: instead, he feels loneliness, lovelessness, and unsatisfied desire. (Lewalski 84-86)

Colin Burrow also finds features of romance in Satan's story and calls it "The Romance of Hell" in his book called *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton*. He asserts that Satan's journey from hell is a version of a romance which he parallels with the adventurous journeys of the characters of the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. He also detects Homeric overtones in the work as he observes that *Paradise Lost* uses a style of fragmenting the motive power of anger through sudden insertions of shifts of

scenes or subjects (263-265). Burrow illustrates his association of *Paradise Lost* to Homeric narrative with a comparison of Milton's work to *Iliad*:

> In Book 9, Agamemnon despairingly calls a nocturnal council (and he summons it, like Satan, with tears and sighs), in which the Greeks eventually decide to send out Ulysses and Diomedes on an ill-defined mission either to spy on the Trojans of to pick off a few stragglers. This is answered by a Trojan Council (as the diabolic consult is answered by the heavenly council in Book III) in which the scout Dolon is sent out on a similarly vague mission. This faint reminiscence holds up fascinating possibilities for the relation of *Paradise Lost* to the romance tradition. (265-266)

Burrow is not alone to detect the Homeric qualities in *Paradise Lost*. Herbert Grierson also weds these two important works of literature when he studies the double structure the work is based on: "[The first part] is full of great Homeric figures – splendid scenery, Odyssean voyages and adventures, battle and overthrow, in all of which Satan is the dominant personality, a greater figure than Achilles or Diomede, with even in one scene a touch of the generosity of Hector" (265).

The scene in which Sin – Satan's daughter and his one-time subject of his incestuous affair – prevents a breaking fight at the gate of Hell between Satan and his only son Death, saying "O Father, what intends thy hand, she cried,/Against thy only son?" is also noteworthy (*PL* 727-728). Then follows her breaking the military atmosphere of the scene by the narration of an erotic past:

> Thy self in me thy perfect image viewing
> Becamest enamoured, and such joy thou took'st,
> With me in secret, that my womb conceived
> A growing burden… (*PL* 764-767)
>
> […]
>
> …Pensive here I sat
> Alone, but long I sat not, till my womb
> Pregnant by thee, and now excessive grown

Prodigious motion felt and rueful throes. (*PL* 777-780)

Accordingly, Burrow, seeing the romance occurring in the scene, asserts that "[i]n epic romance, fights are generally prevented by pity or love;…The fight between Satan and Death is interrupted by a twisted form of this early epic predecessor of romance sentiments. Underneath the interrupted battle lies another distant trace of a Roman proto-romance sentiment, too: a family sympathy" (269-270).

Satan's journey continues and now he comes to Eden. He meets Adam and Eve there, but unlike an epic hero, and being true to his story of romance he does not assault them at once. Instead, he crawls around paradise and finally metamorphoses himself into a toad by the ear of Eve. Later on, when seen by the squad of angels as he was whispering poisoning words into Eve's ear he is not killed there but his life is spared so that he can flee since romances let the imperial victims live throughout the tale. (Burrow 272-273)

We can also observe traces of the romance tradition in seventeenth century pastoral poems. These two genres have several characteristics in common that make it possible to find features of one in the other. The first of these characteristics is related to the attitude towards love. Love is a central source of motivation both in the romance tradition and the pastoral tradition. Works in both traditions portray an idealistic, unconditional love that has little chance of ending in consummation, yet that is worth experiencing. The male lover (the knight or hero of romance, or the shepherd of pastoral) pays services to and wishes to please the unattainable female (the lady or heroine of romance, or the shepherdess of pastoral). Because of its inability to end in consummation, this love turns into a kind of illness that makes the male lover become pale, lose his appetite and feel melancholic. This attitude towards love can be seen in several seventeenth century pastoral poems. In

Marvell's "Definition of Love", the love of the persona and his beloved is described as an ideal one*:

> As lines, so loves oblique may well
> Themselves in every angle greet;
> But ours so truly parallel,
> Though infinite, can never meet.
> (25-28)

Yet, this love has little chance of turning into a union, because "Fate" is jealous of it and therefore keeps the lovers apart, as the persona explains:

> For Fate with jealous eye does see
> Two perfect loves, nor lets them close;
> Their union would her ruin be,
> And her tyrannic pow'r depose.
> (13-16)

Therefore, the poem defines love as something pure, perfect, ideal and divine, yet hopeless:

> Magnanimous Despair alone
> Could show me so divine a thing
> Where feeble Hope could ne'er have flown,
> But vainly flapp'd its tinsel wing.
> (5-8)

"Damon the Mower", another pastoral poem by Marvell, treats love as the central force influencing the Damon, even more than nature herself. Throughout the poem Damon complains of how his happiness and harmony in the natural world has been ruined by his love for Juliana. Thus, this poem is an example of how love can be portrayed as a condition that leads to unhappiness and illness in seventeenth century pastoral, just as is the case in romances:

> I am the mower Damon, known
> Through all the meadows I have mown.

* All following references to the poems are cited from Abram's *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Sixth Edition, Volume 1.*

On me the morn her dew distills
Before her darling daffodils,
And if at noon my toil me heat,
The sun himself licks off my sweat;
While, going home, the evening sweet
In cowslip-water bathes my feet.
(41-48)

…

How happy might I still have mowed,
Had not Love here his thistles sowed!
But now I all the day complain,
Joining my labor to my pain;
(65-68)

Finally, the love becomes even more than an illness when the mower's despair causes him to cut himself with the scythe:

The edged steel, by careless chance,
Did into his own ankle glance,
And there among the grass fell down
By his own scythe the mower mown.
(77-80)

A second common characteristic of the general romance features and pastoral in the century is that both genres make use of stock characters, and these characters in some ways are similar. While romance deals with noble characters of the upper-class, with knights and ladies, pastoral deals with humble, rural characters; both the knight of the former and the shepherd of the latter are idealistic characters who are in love but are unable to support a wife. The knights of romances were usually the second or third sons of a family who inherited no land from their fathers; the shepherds of pastorals live very simple lives and have barely enough resources to survive. The only thing both of these stock characters can offer their beloved is their pure love, their willing service and small gifts. We can see these similarities between the pastoral lover and the knight of romance in "Damon the Mower". Even though the persona of this poem is a simple mower, he is an idealized character whom the sun and the evening, and dew and daffodils serve.

Moreover, he serves his “lady” by giving her gifts from nature such as chameleons and oak leaves tipped with honeydew (lines 37-38). Juliana, Damon’s beloved, is also similar to the unattainable lady of romance. There are also ladies who the persona wished to serve in Milton’s twin pastoral poems, “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso”, even though they are personifications of states of being. L’Allegro promises to serve the Goddess Mirth who he wishes to attain, and Il Penseroso promises to serve the Goddess Melancholy who he wishes to attain.

Setting is another important feature in which romance and pastoral have similar qualities. Both of these genres use remote, idyllic settings in which to set the characters and action. Romances use imaginary, ideal courts and castles, such as Camelot, and pastorals are set in an ideal countryside where the season is always spring and shepherds live in happiness and harmony with little work and much leisure. In this sense, it can be argued that both genres are escapist, since both seek to turn away from reality to ideal worlds in which qualities such as love, loyalty, purity and innocence make life meaningful and worth living. Tied to this is the quest theme that is found in most romances and that provides a concrete and worthy aim in life for the knight. Similar psychological or mental quests can be found in pastoral literature as well. In the seventeenth century, Marvell’s pastoral poems have idyllic settings with green meadows, flowers, honeydew, fountains and trees, where nature acts to serve the humans living in harmony with it, such as the mower. Likewise, “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” describe a beautiful, idyllic nature which suits the needs and wishes of such contrary characters as L’Allegro and Il Penseroso and can manage to make both of them happy. There is sunlight, larks, cocks, elms and green hillocks for the one (lines 40-60) and moonlight, nightingales, a “smooth-shaven green”, and a distant roaring shore for the other (55-75). Moreover, in the

twin poems there is a psychological quest to find and attain the mood which each character desires, mirth for L'Allegro and melancholy for Il Penseroso.

Finally, a significant similarity between romance and pastoral is that both genres make use of remote settings, allegorization and symbolism in order to safely dramatise serious moral and political issues or to portray psychological and theological complexities and conflicts. In romance, allegorical plots and characters can point to important moral and political issues without openly discussing them. Also, the quests of knights and the adventures that they go through can sometimes be symbolic of psychological or theological exploration. Similarly, dialogues between shepherds in pastoral are frequently used to implicitly satirize moral and political issues concerning city life. Moreover, descriptions of nature can often be implicit explorations of complex psychological or theological issues and states. Marvell's poems have redolent of these. In "Mower to the Glowworms", Marvell explores and reveals the psychology of his persona, his sense of displacement and loneliness through the use of the natural phenomena of glowworms. Even though glowworms show lost mowers their way and remind them to mow the grass, they are not enough to help the persona find his way:

> Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame
> To wand'ring mowers shows the way,
> That in the night have lost their aim,
> And after foolish fires do stray;
>
> Your courteous lights in vain you waste,
> Since Juliana here is come,
> For she my mind hath so displac'd
> That I shall never find my home.
> (9-16)

Similarly, in "The Mower's Song", the persona projects the feelings of frustration and helplessness caused by his lover to the grass:

> But what you in compassion ought,
> Shall now by my revenge be wrought;
> And flow'rs, and grass, and I and all,
> Will in one common ruin fall.
> For Juliana comes, and she
> What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.
> (19-24)

Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" also contain important allegorizations that are used for the exploration of the psychological states of mirth and melancholy. For example, these two states are personified as goddesses whom the characters wish to unite with. A great deal of symbolism is also used throughout the poems, especially conventional symbols related to the moods of mirth and melancholy, such as the sun, the morning, lark song, and joyful music for the former and the moon, the evening, the sad song of the nightingale, and dark, quiet places for the latter.

To conclude with, it can be claimed that seventeenth century literature, as the age marked the beginning of literary modernity, did not give as equal significance to the romance as the previous centuries had done. There were many factors behind this: serious political problems which troubled the minds of both readers and writers, a split nation due to the Civil War, religious matters causing spiritual intensity in the public, puritan anti-propaganda against literature, scientific novelties which were introduced and surprised most of the people, economic changes marking the beginning of the emergence of a middle class with its values, literary taste of this new class towards a more realist prose fiction which paves the way for the emergence of "the novel" – a term applied by the publishers to mean a short romance -, the outside influence of the French through the anti-romances to ridicule the genre (which had earlier been done by Cervantes's *Don Quixote*). However, the spirit of romance is so strong in all ages that it could still find some places to survive like in pastoral poetry, or in the works of Aphra Behn, especially in

Oroonoko, or in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Romance, since it is an *escapist* genre, hid itself in these works to *escape* from the chaotic atmosphere of the century until it felt safe to return to the garden of literature in the nineteenth century.

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