

Percec, Dana, ed. *Romance: The History of a Genre*. Pp. 240. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. UK £39.99. ISBN: 978-1-4438-3734-7.

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Dana Percec's *Romance: The History of a Genre* is a collection of essays by Romanian scholars, which seek to explore the 'genre of romance' (viii). It is the second book in a proposed project exploring 'the evolution and dynamics of a number of literary genres in today's global culture' (viii). The first publication as part of this project (published in 2011 in Romanian) was *O poveste de succes. Romanul istoric astăzi*, a collection of essays examining the historical novel. The editor notes in the foreword that the current volume grew out of an enthusiasm for 'the equally popular – and even more controversial – genre of romance' expressed by a number of contributors to the earlier collection (viii). Essays in the book include examinations of various subcategories of 'romance' literature, but also of film, television and social media.

The term 'romance' is a difficult one. In everyday usage, the word can refer to patterns of sentiment, emotion and behaviour in non-Platonic relationships – and to such relationships themselves – but also to idealizations, fantasies and fictionalizations that may have little to do with personal love. A 'romantic relationship' draws on subtly different valences to a 'romantic view of the past', for instance. In literature, the word becomes perhaps even more problematic. Romance originally identified language of composition; medieval 'romance' designated texts written in vernacular languages, specifically Old French, to differentiate them from those written in Latin (this usage survives in the designation of a group of European languages as 'romance languages'). Soon after the first French 'romances' were written in the second half of the twelfth century, the term began to be used to categorize the *content*, rather than the *language* of such works of fiction. By the end of the Middle Ages, the word began to be associated with any work of fiction, but particularly those of a fanciful and fantastical nature, that was written with entertainment, rather than instruction, as its primary purpose.

Through early modern and modern writings, understandings of 'romance' began to diverge into roughly three categories (to use broad strokes): nostalgic fictionalizations of the past or of different cultures; fictional depictions of love relationships; and *all* fiction

(evident in the modern French word *roman*). These understandings are further problematized by the characterization of a late eighteenth-century/early nineteenth-century school of poetry and thought as 'Romantic' – the term now coming to identify a particular mode of representing and relating to the natural world. In the twentieth century, 'popular romance' came to be recognized as a genre of print fiction, though 'popular romance' in this context has a different meaning to 'medieval popular romance' (verse or prose fiction, usually of a chivalric or fantastical nature, written in a vernacular other than Old French).

This outline of some – though not all – of the usages and understandings of the term 'romance' is intended to highlight the challenges facing Percec's project. The book's subtitle – the 'history of a genre' – implies a focus on 'romance' as it applies to literature (and, later, visual and social media), but also a sense of the development, divergence and continuity of the term. An immediate problem is encountered: what continuity exists? Is romance a 'genre' that can be defined and delineated? And does this definition and delineation bear historical scrutiny? Surprisingly few critics have turned their attention to this challenge, and few cross-period analyses exist. The relationship between contemporary popular romance fiction and, for instance, twelfth-century Old French verse romances has been given little critical attention and, as such, a 'history' of the term (or genre) of 'romance' has rarely been attempted. A notable exception to this lack of cross-period focus is Barbara Fuchs's *Romance* (2004; **reviewed** in JPRS 3.2), which seeks to explore continuities in fiction from the classical to the modern periods.

Percec's collection is therefore both ambitious and unusual in its proposed scope. It is clear from the foreword that the editor's intention is to take a wide view, but also to begin with some assumption of continuity. She notes: 'Romance is a genre which, after ups and downs over the course of its thousand year history, now holds a leading position in the international publishing market.' (viii-ix) However, this statement, while ostensibly giving some sense of the scope of the collection (and the implicit focus on the contemporary publishing market), introduces the first of several problems with *Romance: The History of a Genre*. The seemingly throwaway reference to the genre's 'thousand year history' lacks a secure grounding in literary history – the eleventh century is rarely associated with the 'birth' of romance and, in fact, contradicts Percec's point a few lines later that 'early forms of romance' were found in 'classical antiquity' (ix).

As Percec's foreword continues, the history and definition of romance becomes more confused. She notes, for example, that the second section of the book will explore 'gothic romance', describing this as 'a subgenre which is gaining more and more popularity today' (x). Further comment reveals that 'gothic romance' is to be understood as including 'the Gothics and Charles Dickens's romance of Merrie England', as well as *Don Quixote*. Notwithstanding the lack of clarity regarding the works classed as 'the Gothics', and the somewhat unorthodox characterization of Dickensian fiction as 'Merrie England' romances (unless this is intended to evoke his Christmas tales), categorizing these texts alongside a seventeenth-century pastiche of earlier chivalric fictions results in a conflation and collapsing of categories, rather than an interrogation.

Though the book's foreword is somewhat disappointing, the introduction that follows presents a clearer attempt to engage with the vexing questions of 'genre' and 'history'. Nevertheless, the same issues begin to arise. Percec begins with a quote from Valerie Parv's *The Art of Romance Writing* (2004) noting some of the judgements and

condemnations heaped on (here unspecified) romance fiction and its readers (2); this is followed by a brief outline of some statistics testifying to the popularity of romance fiction in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Drawing on the work of Jayne Ann Krentz and the 'Smart Bitches, Trashy Books' website, Percec gives an overview of some of the ways in which contemporary popular romance fiction is dismissed and classified a 'lowbrow genre' and a 'mass cultural product' (2).

The initial paragraphs of the introduction imply a focus on a subgenre of contemporary fiction publishing and its readership, affirmed later with a lengthy quote from Janice Radway's 1991 study. However, this is immediately belied by a return to '[e]arly romance', here described as beginning with 'Plato's influence' (2). Percec makes reference to the Old French word *romanz* – using Helen Cooper's work on medieval and early-modern romance (2004) to define this term – but misunderstands the context in which Old French began to supersede Latin as a language of poetry. Obscuring the nuances of secular and aristocratic culture in the high and late Middle Ages, Percec suggests that the use of languages other than Latin meant that fiction was 'accessible to both male and female, lay and clerical, upper and lower classes', before asserting a common misconception that medieval romances were 'circulated in oral form' and were thus accessible to 'both the literate and the illiterate' (2). Due to a slight – but significant – misunderstanding of Cooper's use of the word 'vernacular' (in Cooper's work, as is usual in medieval studies, 'vernacular' is used to distinguish between authoritative and non-authoritative written languages, not to imply oral or colloquial forms of communication), Percec associates 'early romance' with 'the stories everybody grew up with' (2), creating an image of medieval romance as a far more democratic and populist genre than is strictly accurate.

This focus on the (perhaps) minor misapprehensions of literary history in the opening pages of the collection are not intended to be an exercise in scholarly point-scoring. Rather, I wish to address the apparent impossibility of the task with which the book concerns itself. Considering medieval romance, Kevin Sean Whetter (2008) argues that 'modern criticism has consistently failed to agree on romance's essential generic features' (47); he further points to Ad Putter's assertion that critical vagueness about the genre is 'a natural reflection of the vagueness of the term in the Middle Ages' (48). Reflecting on contemporary popular romance, Pamela Regis characterizes the genre as 'ill defined' (7). Given the lack of definition and the 'vagueness' of romance as a 'genre' – as well as the sustained inconsistencies in how the term is employed and understood throughout history – a cross-period, cross-cultural 'history' of romance seems an almost insurmountable challenge.

And this problem of 'vagueness' permeates throughout *Romance: The History of a Genre*. Percec's introduction goes on to refer to romance as an early-modern 'narrative form' distinct from poetry and drama (4); early-modern 'popular retellings of English medieval heroic tales' (4); an escapist 'mode' of writing favoured by historical novelists (5); an 'umbrella term' employed 'to include subgenres such as Gothic' at the end of the nineteenth century (5); periodicals and cheap novels of the 1890s (6); a type of 'Victorian adventure' fiction, exemplified by Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stephenson (5); 'the modern, consumerist equivalent of the fairy tale' (6); and a general term for a 'romantic story' (6). These shifting usages are employed uncritically, with an assumption of continuity and common ground.

More dramatic, perhaps, are the inconsistent – and, on occasion, incompatible – understandings of ‘romance’ in the essays collected in the volume. The first chapter is Codruța Goșa’s ‘Sex and the Genre: The Role of Sex in Popular Romance’, which begins with an unequivocal definition of what constitutes a piece of ‘romance’ fiction; this definition is cited directly from the Romance Writers of America website and from the personal website of Jennifer Crusie (15). Goșa’s chapter thus considers ‘romance’ to be a contemporary classification of fiction based on publishing categories; it goes on to consider the representations of sexual behaviour in a very small subset of such fiction – three US novels (published in 1989, 1993 and 1999), chosen due to their availability in Romanian translation, which is taken as an indication of their international popularity (17). Based on this selection, the author suggests that she can ‘safely argue’ for the construction of a conservative reader who ‘does not like to work hard in order to grasp what is going on’ (27). The complex issues raised by the use of works in translation – as well as consideration of the respective conservatism or creativity of the translations used in the study – are not addressed in the chapter.

Despite some issues with evidence and methodology, Goșa’s chapter at least seeks to offer some framework for understanding its subject matter as ‘romance’. However, the chapter that follows – ‘In a Facebook Romance, but it’s Complicated’ by Andreea Verteș-Olteanu – depends on a somewhat different interpretation of the r-word. In this essay, ‘romance’ is employed to mean a non-Platonic, love relationship. Examining some of the means through which relationships are developed, presented and mediated by social networks – specifically Facebook – Verteș-Olteanu considers ‘romantic love’ and its communication as a sociological and interpersonal phenomenon, which seems to be at odds with the book’s claim that it is exploring a ‘genre’ (presumably of fiction or art). Again, there are problems with methodology with this chapter, and the author makes numerous conversational asides assuming a reader complicit with the particular characterization of social media presented: ‘Above all, everybody shares pictures from their holiday!’ (33)

The section of the book devoted to ‘Gothic Romance’ begins with Ana-Karina Schneider’s essay ‘“Time to Call an End to Romance”: Anti-Romance in the Contemporary British Novel’. The author here attempts to draw a distinction between ‘romance’ and ‘the novel’, arguing that ‘[n]ovels deploy a varied repertoire of strategies that distinguish them from romance’ (69). It is clear in a reference to Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* that late eighteenth-century Gothic fictions are to be understood as ‘romances’ rather than ‘novels’, and that the former category is fundamentally associated with the sensational and the sentimental. This distinction is complicated by references to ‘comedy’ as a separate mode of writing – drawing both on older delineations of modes of fiction, and on the work of Frederic Jameson – and the chapter ultimately fails to give any concrete sense of either generic categorization or characterization. This is further compounded by a subsequent essay – Daniela Rogobete’s ‘The *Twilight* Saga: Teen Gothic Romance Between the Dissolution of the Gothic and the Revival of Romance’ – in which ‘the sensational novel’ and the ‘Romance’ are figured as both opposing modes of writing and ‘unexpected allies’ (112).

There are some strong essays in the collection. One highlight is Irina Diana Mădroane’s ‘Watching Celebrity Selves on Reality TV: Class Transformation and Viewer (Dis)Empowerment in a Romanian Reality Show’. Here, Mădroane examines reality TV shows documenting the life and fortunes of Romanian celebrity Monica Columbeanu, as well as giving some attention to the critical and popular response to the show. In a

relatively short essay, Mădroane considers the class and gender implications of Columbeanu's constructed celebrity, as well as the anxieties revealed in various commentaries. Undoubtedly a thorough and careful study, I question the inclusion of this essay in a collection on the genre of romance. Aside from a couple of brief references to Columbeanu's relationship with her partner, their marriage and subsequent divorce, there is little in this chapter that relates to any of the (albeit conflicting) definitions of 'romance' presented elsewhere in the collection.

Perhaps more clearly situated within the scope of the project is Reghina Dascăl's 'Raj Matriarchs: Women Authors of Anglo-Indian Romance', which contrasts the novels of Maud Diver and Flora Annie Steel within the context of 'Victorian imperial authority' in 'post-mutiny India' (179). Drawing on contemporaneous anxieties of race, gender and class, the author examines the divergent ways in which Anglo-Indian romance fiction negotiates identity politics, Victorian and post-Victorian social mores and responses to colonization and colonialism. In its careful attention to both content and context, Dascăl's chapter potentially comes closest to addressing the book's proposed concerns regarding 'the versatility of the literary genre of romance' and 'its potential for controversy' (11).

Overall, *Romance: The History of a Genre* does not offer a strong intervention in the field of literary romance studies. While the intention behind the project is a bold one, the essays assembled in the collection (as well as the introductory material) ultimately fail to address the underlying challenge of such an endeavour. Without a secure and consistent 'history', a definition of a 'genre' or generic continuity will always raise more questions than it answers. These questions are valuable and, as yet, have received little critical attention. What is 'romance'? Is there a coherent history and development of the term and its employment? What is the relationship between medieval romance, early novels, the Gothic, historical novels and contemporary romance fictions? Percec's collection promises an examination of these questions, but they remain, sadly, unanswered.

Works Cited

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