

## Medieval Romance, English

[Aisling Byrne](#)

### Introduction

Romance is probably the mode of writing that modern audiences most readily associate with the Middle Ages, yet it is a notoriously difficult term to define. Etymologically the term derives from the French *romanz*, which initially designated the narrative works composed in that vernacular that first appeared in 12th-century France. Texts usually described as “romance” typically concern chivalry, questing, romantic love, and magic. There are also various subgenres that fall under the heading of medieval romance such as the Breton lay and Arthurian romance. Romance arrives in England definitively with the Norman settlers, though a single romance in Old English, *Apollonius of Tyre*, survives from the years immediately prior to the Norman Conquest. Many of the earliest romances are written in the Anglo-Norman dialect of French, and some of these are translated into Middle English at a later point. Romances in Middle English begin to appear regularly in the mid-14th century, and some of the most famous English romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the romances included in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, for example, are composed at the end of the 1300s. Defining what exactly constitutes “English” romance presents its problems: does it mean romances written in English, or romances written in England? The definition cannot be limited to romance in the English language because so many of the early texts from England are Anglo-Norman productions. Some texts that could readily be characterized as romance were also written in Latin. Furthermore, Continental French texts were often translated and adapted into English (though there was little or no movement of texts in the other direction), so the category of “English romance” is not necessarily limited to narratives that originate in England itself. However, English romance also presents certain features or emphases that could be described as distinctive. The interest in romantic love is generally less pronounced than in French texts. Political concerns are to the forefront, and Arthurian material has a particular tendency to explore disputes and tensions over political boundaries and territories. English romance is usually written in verse (not in prose) with over eighty verse romances surviving in Middle English. Vernacular prose romance arrives late in England, only flourishing in the second half of the 15th century. The corpus of surviving prose romances is relatively small but includes one of the most celebrated of all Middle English texts, Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. This bibliography focuses on medieval romances in various languages written in England or translated into English. It takes the year 1500 as its chronological terminus, but it is worth noting that many of these texts were still being printed, copied, and performed well after this date.

Adapted from <<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846719/obo-9780199846719-0115.xml>>