In the sixteenth century, romance seemed dangerously Catholic. For Roger Ascham, notoriously, the genre belonged to a time “whan Papistrie, as a standing poole, couered and ouerflowed all England.”¹ By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, on the other hand, it seems to have become eastern, exotic, even Islamic. “That peculiar and arbitrary species of Fiction which we commonly call Romantic,” Thomas Warton wrote, “appears to have been imported into Europe by a people, whose modes of thinking, and habits of invention, are not natural to that country”; that is, “It is generally supposed to have been borrowed from the Arabians.”² From an idolatrous literary form, romance became the product of a racially alien mentality, something like Shaftesbury’s “mysterious race of black enchanters.”³ For Warton, this othering of romance secures a certain confidence about Europe as a unitary cultural space capable of absorbing and civilizing the “extravagant” and “capricious” imagination of the Arabs: Warton associates both the Arabs and romance with an imaginatively fertile but archaic and unruly past from which he and his readers can feel themselves comfortably enough removed to see it as a source of aesthetic pleasure and a wellspring of the sublime (ii, lxxiii). When Ascham thinks of romance, he associates it with something alien in the very recent past, an abyss separating sixteenth-century England from its authentic cultural and spiritual origins and still dividing it in his own moment; when Warton imagines the Arab origins of romance, all of Europe becomes in his words “that country,” as if the specter of Arab difference had the power to make a nation out of a continent and to bring Europe into being as a coherent cultural entity.
One might ask how this shift in the cultural associations of a literary genre helped to prepare the way for Romantic orientalism. In this inquiry the texts of the seventeenth century would hold an important place: it was over a page from Samuel Purchas’s collection of travel narratives that Coleridge famously claimed to have drifted into the opium dream that inspired “Kubla Khan”; less famously, it was to his childhood reading of Richard Knolles’s history of the Turks that Byron attributed the “oriental colouring” of his poetry. When Europe reclaimed romance, it reclaimed it as an eastern and archaic form, doubly removed in both space and time, and it reclaimed it in part through a rereading of its own texts about Islam. But before such a reclamation could take place, before Europeans could rediscover in the east a reserve of intense feeling from which they felt themselves cut off, “Europe” and “the east” had to be constituted as such, the difference of Christianity from Islam reimagined in terms of a series of other differences, of politics, race, culture, “modes of thinking and habits of invention,” in Warton’s words. The change in the understanding of romance marked by the passage from Ascham to Warton signals a shift in the representation of Islam and a shift in the way Europe imagined itself: that is, it signals the consolidation of a new sense of European identity.

A crucial moment of this history takes place in the mid-seventeenth century, in the charged politics of romance during and after the English Revolution. The central figure in this chapter will be John Milton, but the chapter’s trajectory will lead beyond Milton toward a reconfiguration of religion, politics, and identity in the wake of the English Revolution. Milton’s late poetry reveals a double relationship to romance, at once diagnosing the religious and political errors embodied in the genre and outlining a program for its reform. Milton uses romance to critique a courtly aesthetics with its investment in exotic pleasures; but his late poems also reveal a perhaps surprising investment in chivalric romance, which becomes a sign of both Satanic error and a continued hope for the reconciliation of human political action and divine purposes. The chapter will conclude by tracing the emergence of a counterrevolutionary discourse that defines this sacred politics as fundamentally irrational and Islamic, as the work of “enthusiasm,” a term that is in many ways a direct progenitor of the modern discourse of “terrorism.” From the 1640s on, the royalists imagined parliamentarians and defenders of regicide like Milton as fanatical revolutionaries on the model of Muhammad, zealots who claimed divine inspiration and believed themselves soldiers of God—and who could therefore be derided as new Quixotes, disrupting the world with