

Use Heart in Your (Re)Search: The Invitations of Popular Romance

Eric Murphy Selinger

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The title of my talk this morning, “Use Heart in Your (Re)Search,” plays on a phrase from one of my favorite novels: Sherry Thomas’s neo-Victorian historical romance *My Beautiful Enemy*. Late in this novel, our hero, Leighton Atwood, and our heroine, Ying-Ying (AKA Bai Ying-Hua, AKA Catherine Blade) tease out the cipher inscribed on three jade tablets that Ying-Ying has tracked down and assembled. Translated, it gives the location of a Tang Dynasty treasure hidden by monks a thousand years before, along with the enigmatic instruction to “Use heart in your search!” The steps that these characters take in their quest offer us a guide to the heartfelt thinking and learning to which many romance novels—not all, perhaps, but many--invite us as scholars, as students, and as teachers of the genre, at least in a literary studies context. I’m currently teaching a ten-week senior seminar for English majors about this novel, in which the students are responsible for deciding on their research and reading agendas. Although they don’t know it yet, these four steps are what we are currently doing.

Step One: Believe the Legend

In *My Beautiful Enemy*, both Leighton and Ying-Ying have grown up hearing the legend of a “tremendous treasure, hidden by Buddhist monks during a time when their monasteries were destroyed all throughout China” (128). Fascinated, both have invested time and effort in projects based on the tale. Before the novel begins, Leighton has visited Buddhist caves in India, Afghanistan, and Western China, and he’s learned both Sanskrit and Pali. We meet Ying-Ying on a secret mission to London to search for the lost jade tablets that her father-figure, Da-Ren, believes will lead him to the cache of legendary gold. (Da-Ren wants to modernize China’s military to resist Western colonial predation, and this treasure will help fund his efforts.)

In the context of popular romance studies, **believing the legend** entails believing that romance novels offer something worth learning, treasures worth finding. Readers often say this, but scholars have sometimes found this faith a little hard to swallow. Some are more interested in *why* romance readers insist that they learn from these novels than they are in *what* gets learned (thus Janice Radway); others, too many to name, reduce the *what* of romance to ideological precepts and / or

sexual practices. Yet when scholars like Hsu-Ming Teo, Laura Vivanco, Jayashree Kamblé, or Catherine Roach begin with the assumption that romance novels might contain something of value, they find it, whether that “it” is a matter of revisionist historiography, theological nuance, socio-political intuition, or metafictional self-consciousness. As Stanley Fish argued back in the ‘80s—roughly the same time that popular romance scholarship was getting started—our critical methods *create*, or at least co-create, the evidence we find. When it’s axiomatic that a romance novel can be a Novel of Ideas or Aesthetic Object as well as an Improving Tale or work of Erotic Fiction (four categories I’ve derived from Rose Lerner’s Regency romance *Sweet Disorder*, which I often use to start my classes), we seek, we find, and the novels rise to the challenge.

In *My Beautiful Enemy*, believing the legend not only inspires our protagonists to pursue the treasure, but also equips them to take the next step, which I call “assembling the tablets.”

Step Two: Assemble the Tablets

A little less than halfway through *My Beautiful Enemy*, Ying-Ying finds the jade tablet that inspired her mission to London. “At its center,” Thomas writes,

was a goddess, her eyes half closed in joy, her pliant back arched, and the ribbons on her flowing robe dancing all about her, as if lifted by a gentle breath. To her left and right were the famous words of the *Heart Sutra*. *Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness; emptiness is exactly form.*

(107)

None of this description matters much in terms of the novel's overall plot. From that perspective, the crucial facts about the tablet are that it was stolen by the British, that it has been missing, and that it has been found. Yet if we want to use this tablet as a figure for the clues we might find in romance novels—hints of the author's research and instigations for our own—we need to note the excess here, the curious details. Which goddess is that, dancing in joy? Why the *Heart Sutra*, and from that text, why these “famous words” and not, for example, the mantra from the close? (Spotify gives me a dozen recordings of “*gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi svaha*,” in everything from American folksong to electronica chillout stylings, but nothing for those form and emptiness lines.) What passages, scenes, and motifs will twitch when we tug on this one, so that the structural logic that weaves this text together grows visible? As an

interpretive community we might well decide that asking such questions is part of what it means to read romance—certainly my students do!

In my interpretive allegory, then, Thomas's tablets are the clues we need to notice, assemble, and follow. Sometimes these are spelled out by the author in their paratext: I'm thinking not just the bibliographies offered by Beverly Jenkins and the novelists who follow her example, but those moments of excess and oddly specific detail. Why did that carriage ride stop for a moment, in *Flowers from the Storm*, outside the cottage where John Milton dictated *Paradise Lost*? Why does the historical tableau in Piper Huguley's "Sweet Way of Freedom" speak, in a striking paradox, of slave masters "striking the chains of liberty from a slave," declaring a moment later that "once the chains of liberty were provided to the people, we were free"? Once you're in the habit of looking, even a word or phrase will be enough to catch your attention: the final line of Alexis Hall's *Glitterland*, "I decide to call it joy," will send you off to read C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien (*Surprised by Joy* and "On Faery-Stories," respectively), and if a hero's eyes are as "infinitely blue as the promise of high windows" you'll look up the Philip Larkin poem to puzzle over why.

To get at the logic behind such a moment is, my students have found, to explore not just one but many scenes in a novel; that is, we must

assemble the tablets, figuring out how the subtle design of the whole. To take the next step, however, we must learn to read our discoveries, listening both closely and doubly.

Step Three: Listen and Learn

Near the end of *My Beautiful Enemy*, Leighton and Ying-Ying decipher the inscription that was split up among the three tablets. Alas, although “individually, they are perfectly legitimate Chinese characters,” collectively they are gibberish—until, that is, Leighton asks Ying-Ying to read them aloud. Leighton *hears* something that neither has *seen*: these characters transliterate a message in Pali, the South Asian language in which many early Buddhist texts were preserved. (Leighton learned Pali, you’ll recall, because he *believed the legend*.) With the help of a Tibetan lama and a scholar of ancient Chinese, the full text emerges, but we’re still not done: it’s only when Ying-Ying spots a vine-covered rock face inscribed with characters from the Heart Sutra that she realizes what “Use Heart in Your Search” really entailed—an echo, I reckon, of the “Speak, friend, and enter” password for the Mines of Moria. What might this final stage in the process teach us about reading the romance?

The fact that neither Leighton nor Ying-Ying can interpret the tablet’s clues until they encounter them doubly (reading and listening; the two of

them together; the pair of protagonists plus another pair of scholars) suggests that we need to double our readings, with each clue at once an outward thread and as part of a novel's inner pattern, what Northrop Frye calls the novel's "design." Another lesson—remember the lama and scholar—is that we'll need to ask for help. When Laura Kinsale's Duke of Jerveaulx invents a geometry in which Euclid's fifth postulate does not apply, such that "*through a point C lying outside a line AB there can be drawn in the plane more than one line not meeting AB*" (129), we are cued to look for geometrical patterns in the novel—and we'll find them—but also to go learn about the significance of this turn in mathematical and philosophical history, which turn out to be relevant to *Flowers from the Storm*.¹ The heroine of *An Extraordinary Union*, Alyssa Cole's Civil War novel, not only has an eidetic memory, but knows vast swaths of Sir Walter Scott, in a book that names its hero and heroine, Ellen and Malcolm, after the protagonists from Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*. (I didn't figure that out—Ellen remarks on it herself!) We're invited, then, to go and learn about Scott and his reception, and think about the relationships between memory, history, and historical romance (a genre that Scott helped to found). In my current seminar, students are now also reading, per their own discoveries,

¹Richard Trudeau's *The Non-Euclidean Revolution* will fill you in on the latter, as will Douglas Hofstadter's classic *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.

Rumi and Sung dynasty poetry, the history of the Great Game, and notes from an Asian philosophy class that spent three weeks, I gather, on the concept of emptiness that showed up in that quote from the Heart Sutra.

Where, you may wonder, does all of this lead us? Let me close with the final step that I draw from Thomas's novel, "**Know a Treasure When You See One.**" In a plot twist (spoiler alert!), the "tremendous treasure" hidden by those persecuted monks wasn't the gold from their temples. It was the dharma: the Buddhist canon chiseled into stone. Yet the reader knows that the *ultimate* treasure isn't even this—it's the romance Heart Sutra we're reading, whose payoff lies in the relationships that are healed by the end of the text.

As romance scholars and teachers, then, we need to stay open to treasures our students may find that are *not* the ones we sent them off to discover. I choose novels to teach that move, delight, or fascinate me, trying to match the diversity of my students in these texts. But you never know how a book will land, and for every student who shares my delight I will usually have another who likes it for some unexpected reason, or even who bristles with political or aesthetic resistance. It helps, I've learned, to frame our task with a single question, asking it week after week: ***How do we make this novel as interesting as possible?*** (I will literally tell them,

Jeopardy-style, that they're not allowed to assert that "the novel would have been better if X were different"; they have to phrase their observations in the form of a question, like, "How can we make it interesting that the novelist does X, rather of Y?")

By offering *interest* as the payoff to our discussion, I'm inviting them to see how anything in a romance novel can guide you, potentially, into compelling emotional or intellectual terrain. By emphasizing that this is something we *do*, I'm hoping to teach them that reading, like loving, is an active process, not something that happens by chance. To know a treasure when you see one isn't always easy. Da-Ren despairs when he sees the sutras where he looked for gold. But the optimism of Thomas's novel, hard-won and bittersweet, reminds us that this recognition is, itself, an action. Listening doubly, we remember that "treasure" is also a verb.