Reading Romance: Reading the Oppositional in Narrative[32]

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Abstract

Since its first extant preface signed in 1592 to the present day of the *Journey to the West* studies in the United States, this fantastic quest-romance has been interpreted as the Daoist manual for cultivating the internal alchemy, the Confucian allegory of controlling the mind, and above all, a masterwork in literature that is teeming with cynicism, irony, and social critique— a thorough dismissal of the theological/moral/philosophical allegoresis. These two opposing modes in reading this 1592 Chinese fiction, I argue, recall the two ways of reading the Western romance such as the *Divine Comedy*, the *Faerie Queene*, and the *Pilgrim's Progress*. While Singleton and Frye, for example, endorse the theology/ideology-oriented interpretation, critics as Bloom, Berger, Parker, Goldberg, Teskey, and Fish, have highlighted the exceptional and idiosyncratic: it is the anti-progress aspect of the text that stands out and constitutes the genre of romance.

Keywords

Romance, Early Modern Vernacular Fiction, and Interpretation

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[32] This essay was written for the seminar, "Toward New Theories and Histories of Romance," in the 2019 American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA). Its title is indebted to the writings of Ross Chambers and Harry Berger Jr, see footnote 8, below.

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In her brief overview of the *Journey to the West* for Oxford's "Very Short Introduction" to Chinese literature, Sabina Knight mentions in the conclusion the scholarly debate over the meaning of this 1592 vernacular prose fiction—the "most retold East Asian classic" (88). "Scholars debate the degree of irony in the novel's presentation of spiritual quest," Knight writes, pondering on the genre of the book. Is it "an epic or a mock-epic" (89)?[34]

From 1592 to 1892, when the last commentary edition was published, the *Journey to the West* had been interpreted as an allegory that elucidates the Mencian principle of "retrieving the lost mind," a Daoist manual that teaches ways of cultivating the internal alchemy, and a line-by-line gloss of the Confucian classic the *Great Learning*. In the 19th century, four commentary editions of the *Journey* appeared, and they were invariably read as a coded scripture that was passed down by a Daoist sage. While the first 300 years of the *Journey*'s afterlife are largely associated with the Daoist and the Confucian teachings, the new edition issued in 1921 by the Shanghai Oriental Press, with modern punctuation and paragraphing inserted, and all the previous commentaries removed, was prefaced by Hu Shih's categorical dismissal of religious interpretation. "The *Journey to the West,*" as Hu states:

> has been ruined by numerous Daoist priests, Buddhist monks, and Confucian scholars in the past 300 years. The Daoists say that this book is a set of doctrines for cultivating the Golden Elixir. The Buddhists say that this book is about the law of Buddhism. The Confucians say that this book talks about the principles of "making the intentions true and setting the minds right." These interpretations are the great enemies against the *Journey to the West*. Now having deleted all the "True Interpretation" and "Original Intent" discovered by that so-called "Master who is Awakened to the Origin" and the "Master who is Awakened to the One," we restore its earliest appearance.[35] (22-3)

Regarding the theological interpretations as the "great enemies," Hu Shih argues that the *Journey* is a novel whose literary value lies in the ideology of "playing with the world." The portrayals of the defiant monkey, the incompetent authorities, the lazy disciples, and the fawning courtiers are all showcases of the author's playful irreverence toward the world. "The author must have been a man full of complaints," Hu writes, "[…] but as the

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[34] In her overview of the *Journey* that is included in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (2001), Wai-yee Li also discusses the incongruity between the "allegorical meaning" of the *Journey* and the book's comic narrative.

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《西游记》被这三四百年来的无数道士和尚秀才弄坏了。道士说，这部书是一部金丹妙诀。和尚说，这部书是禅门心法。秀才说，这部书是一部正心诚意的理学书。这些解说都是《西游记》的大仇敌。现在我们把那些什么悟一子和什么悟元子等等的"真诠"、"原旨"一概删去了，还他一个本来面目。

author criticizes, he criticizes without a stiff face" (13).[36] Different from the stance of an idealist who aspires to change the world in the most earnest way, the ideology of "playing with the world" probably implies a profound recognition that we are better off laughing at and playing with, than sincerely participating in this unsalvageable world. In his introduction to Arthur Waley's 1943 abridged translation of the *Journey*, Hu Shih reiterates this set of readings. "Freed from all kinds of allegorical interpretations by Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist commentators," he concludes, "*Monkey* is simply a book of good humor, profound nonsense, good-natured satire and delightful entertainment" (5). Rather than confusing this 1592 vernacular novel with philosophical or religious doctrines, Hu Shih finds its meaning in social critique. And of course, the *Journey*'s use of vernacular language—an asset regarded by Hu—had lent support to his proposal of abandoning the classical language in writing, the Chinese language reform that was initiated by him in the late 1910s.

When C. T. Hsia, in his 1968 monograph *The Classic Chinese Novel,* introduced the *Journey* to American academics, he more or less followed Hu Shih's interpretation and categorized the novel as "a work of comic fantasy" (115), a major milestone in the history of fiction that he compared to *Don Quixote*, *Everyman*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *The Faerie Queene* (116-164). Using then current academic vocabulary and scholarly approach, Hsia also expresses his interest in the book's "archetypes."[37] The *Journey*'s overarching plot of a quest, along with the motifs of battle between the good and the bad, duplication of the monsters, seduction of temptress, and the ultimate triumph, could easily qualify the book for the "mode of romance," the literary mode that according to Northrop Frye, stands at the "center of gravity for archetypal criticism" (116).[38] Yet if Hsia finds his interest in the archetypes that are shared between the *Journey*

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[36] 著者一定是一个满肚牢骚的人，……虽是骂人，却不是板着面孔骂人。

[37] Hsia, 139-49. This approach to the *Journey* is further pursued in Karl Kao's "An Archetypal Approach to *Hsi-yu chi*." *Tamkang Review* 5, no. 2 (1974): 63-98. See also James Fu, who explores the themes that constitute the structure of a quest.

[38] Frye's "archetypal criticism," that is, his interest in the recurring images and motifs in literature that are not conditioned by time and place, is an attempt to overcome the "futile" allegorical readings that is determined by history, institution, and idiosyncratic preference. In the "Tentative Conclusion" in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye writes: "One element in our cultural tradition which is usually regarded as fantastic nonsense is the allegorical explanations of myths which bulk so large in medieval and Renaissance criticism and continue sporadically to our own time. The allegorization of myth is hampered by the assumption that the explanation 'is' what the myth 'means.' A myth being a centripetal structure of meaning, it can be made to mean an indefinite number of things, and it is more fruitful to study what in fact myths have been made to mean. … Commentary which has no sense of the archetypal shape of literature as a whole, then, continues the tradition of allegorized myth, and inherits its characteristics of brilliance, ingenuity, and futility. The only cure for this situation is the supplementing of allegorical with archetypal criticism." See *Anatomy*, 341-2.

According to Frye, while the mode of romance-myth is at the center of gravity of "archetypal criticism," it is at the same time the "structural core of all fiction," which includes the secular writing of the chivalric knight and the religious writing of the legend of the saint. See *The Secular Scripture,* 15, and *Anatomy,* 34.

and the Western romances, Anthony Yu's comparison between the *Divine Comedy* and the *Journey to the West*, which appeared a generation later in 1983, when the four volumes of his full translation of the *Journey* had been published, finds the two works parallel in their meaning in the "religious pilgrimage of approaching to God" (216). Citing the theological interpretations of the *Commdia* by Auerbach, Abrams, Singleton, and Charles Williams, Yu argues that the *Journey*, similar to how Dante appropriates Augustine and Aquinas, and demonstrates Christian redemption in return, is indebted to the Daoist tradition and in return illustrates the Daoist redemption in pilgrimage. Hu Shih's "critique of the interpretive agents allegedly ruining the novel," as Yu notes in a later essay, "also begets eventually its own irony, because one can argue today that a great deal of scholarship spanning Japan, the U.S., Europe, and finally again in East Asia in both China and diaspora communities may be summarized as a serial refutation of Hu's—and Lu Xun's as well—observations" ("Formation," 34). In the United States at least, the two dominant trajectories in interpreting the *Journey* prior to the 20th century have been revived with a vengeance. If Anthony Yu's introductions, both in the initial 1977 edition of the translation of the *Journey* and the 2012 revised edition, nudge toward a reading that takes the *Journey* as illuminating practices in the Daoist internal alchemy, Andrew Plaks' article in his 1987 monograph, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, reads the novel as a Neo-Confucian allegory elucidating ways to cultivate the mind.

On the other hand, in American academia, the theological readings of Dante, Spenser, and Milton, though prevalent in the 1950s and 60s, have since the 70s faced increasing opposition and resistance. The presence of this theological approach, to some extent, only becomes more visible in hindsight in the next generations' critiques and reflections. In his survey of the commentary history of the *Divine Comedy*, Hollander, for example, when describing this postwar phenomenon in American Dante studies, deplores Auerbach's (as well as Singleton's) success in directing scholarly attention to the theological borrowings, which in his eyes is "the single most negative force hindering the development of Dante Studies."[39] If Mazzotta still argues equivocally that "Dante writes in the mode of theological allegory and also recoils from it" (237), Bloom, while highlighting Dante's bold

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[39] To cite Hollander's recapitulation of this trend of theological interpretation in full: "A phenomenon that has been of great interest (and it is not only Americans who think so) in the postwar period is the emergence of American Dante studies. To be fair, the first movement came from Germany, or at least from the exiled German Jew, Erich Auerbach. It was he who successfully reshaped the argument about Dante's allegory. The misprision of that argument has been, in my opinion, the single most negative force hindering the development of Dante studies. What Auerbach proposed was that Dante's allegory should be thought of along the lines of theological allegory, namely as being figural rather than figurative, historical rather than metaphoric" (278).

invention of Beatrice as the key element in the Christian hierarchy of salvation, and his unprecedented rewriting of a Ulysses who refuses to settle down but chooses to journey on, becomes sarcastically severe in his rather amusing critique of Dante's theological readers:

> Almost inevitably, it is misread until it blends with the normative, and at last we are confronted by a success Dante could not have welcomed. The theological Dante of modern American scholarship is a blend of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and their companions. This is a doctrinal Dante, so abstrusely learned and so amazingly pious that he can be fully apprehended only by his American professors. [...] My own Dante deviates increasingly from what has become the eminently orthodox Dante of modern American criticism and scholarship, as represented by T. S. Eliot, Francis Fergusson, Erich Auerbach, Charles Singleton, and John Freccero. [...] If it is all in Augustine or in Thomas Aquinas, then let us read Augustine and Aquinas. But Dante wanted us to read Dante. He did not compose his poem to illuminate inherited truths. The *Comedy* purports to be the truth, and I would think that detheologizing Dante would be as irrelevant as theologizing him. (80-3)

In Bloom's reading, the *Comedy* is marked by Dante's pride in creating his own theological truth rather than his religious humility, his literary originality rather than his supposed theological borrowings. While the theological approach intends to explain away the strangeness of Beatrice's position by associating her with Mary, Bloom puts a spotlight on this oddity, taking it as the very proof of the triumph of literary imagination that refuses to be subordinated to the authority of Christian doctrine.

To go against the theological/ideological allegoresis, if Bloom's strategy lies in pinpointing the dominance of the author's creativity over his indebtedness to the inherited sources, Spenser readers such as Berger, Parker, and Goldberg focus specifically on the author's innovation of the overarching plot of the quest. Against the commonly-held understanding of the first Book of the *Faerie Queene*, where the journey of the dragon-slaying Red Cross Knight is taken to be the quest of Christian identity,[40] Berger, for example, in his close reading of its narrative details, (a reading mode that he theorizes as texualization as opposed to countertextualization,[41]) underlines the hero's evasive self-correction of his

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[40] Frye, *Anatomy*, 194. See also Harry Berger, Jr., "Displacing Autophobia in *Faerie Queene I*: Ethics, Gender, and Oppositional Reading in the Spenserian Text," *English Literary Renaissance* 28 (1998): 178.
My article's general thesis has been inspired by and is indebted to Berger's reading of the first book of the *Faerie Queene*. The subtitle of this essay is directly borrowed from the title of the book: *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*. See Ross Chambers, who, inspired by Michel de Certeau's study of the oppositional behavior of everyday life, discusses the oppositional reading/narrative in the text of La Fontaine. This book also serves as the theoretical foundation of Berger's reading of the first book of the *Faerie Queene*, see his footnote 38 in "Archimago: Between Text and Countertext," *The English Renaissance* 43 (2003): 60.
In his study of Milton, Teskey also mentions the two incompatible features of Milton: one theoretical, the other poetic. Teskey argues that these two incompatible features have rendered Milton's writing "delirious." At the same time, Teskey also contends that the study of the poetic/creative side of Milton has been left on the margin nowadays. See Gordon Teskey, *Delirious Milton*, 7.
[41] Berger, "Archimago," 32.

susceptibility to seduction, despair, pride, and his complicity with the enemy.[42] Responding to Frye and Greenblatt, both of whom have read the book as championing the religious/political ideology propagated in Elizabethan England, Berger's resistance is determined:

> Northrop Frye argues that Spenser kidnapped erotic and chivalric formulas, and made them serve an apocalyptic discourse expressing the religious and social ideals of the Reformation state, while Stephen Greenblatt argues that the kidnapper placed those formulas in the service of the queen's colonialist discourse in order to guarantee that "reality as given by [Tudor] ideology" would remain unchallenged within the poem. These characterizations are not wrong: each describes a message the poem communicates. It is the message that is "wrong," that is, offered to the reader as a countertextual target of textual critique. Frye and Greenblatt don't sufficiently attend to textual effects that embed the kidnapped formulas in a climate of reflexive parody typical of romance. ("Archimago" 29)[43]

For Berger, in other words, it is not the *Faerie Queene* who kidnaps the chivalric formulas in the service of an ideological program, but it is Frye and Greenblatt, at the expense of the richness of the text—its "reflexive parody typical of romance"—that have "kidnapped" the *Faerie Queene* for their own interpretive agendas. Textual details such as the hero's persistent flaws, his lack of progress, and the repeated deferrals of the promised, ultimate success, betray the narrative's deviation from the ideological agenda in which progress and fulfillment are expected.[44]

By accentuating the pilgrim Christian's repeated mistakes in being "caught up in the familiar crisis and paralysis" (233), to use another example, Fish suggests that this "antiprogressive nature" of *Pilgrim's Progress* reminds its reader of the illusion of progress, and subsequently the limits of human agency that can only imagine a salvation in terms of growth and progress. "In this way he (Bunyan) makes the subversion of the 'dynamics of the narrative' the subversion of the reader's understanding […]" (237), Fish broods over the intention of the author. Not taking the quest story as a religious allegory of the pilgrimage to God, if both Bloom and Fish emphasize the narrative's innovation—its subversion of the traditional plotline, Berger argues explicitly that this subversion entails criticism of the traditional narrative of religious pilgrimage: "The way the poem establishes its credentials," he writes, "is to question, criticize, and parody—to try, in a word, to disestablish—the tradition of its predecessors in a particular respect" ("Archimago" 48). In Hu Shih's rather anachronistic preface to the 1921 edition of the *Journey to the West*, while contending that the

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[42] See Berger, "Displacing," 170-7; "Archimago," 50-5.

[43] Berger also discusses these two opposing readings with the framework of William Nelson's interpretation in "Displacing," see 178.

[44] See also Patricia A. Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*, 76; and Jonathan Goldberg, *Endless Worke: Spenser and the Structures of Discourse*, 7.

doctrinal interpretations are the "greatest enemy" that had ruined the book for over 300 years, he argues that the *Journey*'s literary value lies in its "ideology of playing with the world, which is fond of critiquing"[45] (23). If Bloom, Fish, and Berger, confine their interpretations to the framework of literary history, Hu Shih, moving in a slightly different direction, finds the journey's signification in social critique. To play with the world is to criticize the world in a playful, seemingly detached way. The "world" that Hu brings up will certainly include institutions and authorities that are reflected in both the celestial and the mundane courts, the unapologetic culture of hypocrisy that prevails in the human realm; however, will this "world" also include the "literary world" where writings on the subject of religious pilgrimage have become a banal storyline? Will this "world" include the "religious world" where the Daoist or Confucian teachings are believed to be the only path to Truth and Enlightenment? Will this "world" also include the theological mode of reading romance?

Despite the divergence in their specific interpretations, the opposition to the theological reading of the early modern quest narrative, both in Chinese and in English criticism, has formed an alternative paradigm in reading romance. Prioritizing narrative details rather than intellectual principles, rhetoric rather than logos, innovation rather than the inherited sources, this mode of reading sees in the narrative stasis rather than progress, flaws rather than enlightenment, setbacks rather than success, and problems rather than solutions. Instead of a doctrine-oriented allegory that tries to follow, promote, and consolidate the established ideologies, romance now challenges, creates, and criticizes. It entails parody rather than propaganda, originality rather than traditionalism, pride rather than humility. Under this mode of "suspicious reading" (Berger, "Displacing," 181), the narrative, no longer an "orderly, wish-fulfilling dream" (Frye, *Anatomy* 186), is idiosyncratic, disturbing, unusual, and open-ended.

On the one hand, there is the deep-seated tradition of interpreting the quest-romance as a truth-seeking, authoritative, religious writing that teaches the secret path to transcendence; on the other hand, there is the surging opposition that is informed by close reading and the hermeneutics of suspicion. In his revision of Frye's definition of the genre of romance, Jameson suggests that its hero's dominant trait should be naiveté and inexperience, and his most characteristic posture is bewilderment, not the superhuman power that recalls that of a mythic god (138-9). If this characterization is one feature in romance, such naiveté and bewilderment experienced by the hero must have stemmed in part from his difficulty in

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[45] 爱骂人的玩世主义

reading and seeing—in discerning between the good and bad, in distinguishing the true from the false. It is Tripitaka's "foolish, dull eyes of flesh 肉眼愚迷,"[46] Dante the traveler's failing eyesight in the darkness of the wood, Red Cross's confusion between Una and Duessa, and the pilgrim Christian's digression from Evangelist's instruction. Perhaps this problem experienced by the hero in reading echoes the problem and challenge that every reader of romance has to encounter. Standing at the crossroad of these two oppositional approaches to the story, the reader, in their journey of reading, needs to make a decision on their own.

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[46] This motif is constantly brought up in the *Journey*, see Chapter 13, 16, 25, 40, 58, and 76, for example.

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LENDO O ROMANCE: AS LEITURAS OPOSITORAS NA NARRATIVA

Resumo:

Desde seu primeiro prefácio, escrito em 1592, até os dias atuais, como os estudos norte-americanos sobre "Viagem para o oeste – Journey to the West", este romance-de-viagem fantástico tem sido interpretado como um manual Daoísta para cultivo das alquimias internas, uma alegoria confuciana para o controle da mente e, acima de tudo, uma obra-prima na literatura repleta de cinismo, ironia e crítica social - uma completa rejeição das alegorias teológica / moral / filosófica. O argumento desse trabalho é que esses dois modos opostos de ler essa ficção chinesa de 1592 fazem paralelo com as duas maneiras de ler o romance ocidental, como exemplificam as análises de a Divina Comédia, a Fada Queene e o Progresso do Peregrino. Enquanto críticos como Singleton e Frye, por exemplo, endossam a interpretação orientada para a teologia / ideologia, outros como Bloom, Berger, Parker, Goldberg, Teskey e Fish, destacam o excepcional e idiossincrático: é o aspecto anti-progresso do texto que destaca-se e constitui o gênero do romance

Palavras-Chave

Romance, Ficções vernaculares da primeira modernidade, Interpretação.