Watching Li Yu’s Plays in Seventeenth-Century China

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This article attempts to explain how Li Yu 李漁 (1611–80), China’s “first professional writer,” made himself indispensable to the literati culture upon which he socially and financially depended by writing, commenting on, and performing chuanqi 傳奇, or plays in the characteristic Southern style. This article analyzes four plays based on Li’s own short stories and theorizes their appeal to seventeenth-century audiences. It proposes that Li’s plays, at once irresistibly funny and painfully knowing, poked fun at the regnant literati culture even as they diagnosed its exhaustion.

Li Yu & the Social Significance of his Chuanqi

The seventeenth-century writer Li Yu 李漁 (1611–80) was determined to play a part, “an outrageous part if need be, in literature as in life” (Hanan 1988, 6), despite living through a turbulent dynastic transition and finding his otherwise sensuous life of a “professional writer” (Chang and Chang 1992, 2) marred by financial woes. “The best-selling Chinese author of his time” (Hanan 1988, 1), he also was recognized as an architect, critic, garden designer, publisher, theater director, and theorist. His wit and punditry entertained his scholar-official patrons, while his controversial life and career generated publicity within circles of the cultural elite. Self-fashioned as Liweng 笠翁 (Old Man in the Bamboo Hat),¹ a name alluding to Daoist retreat from worldly ambitions, Li was nevertheless actively social, regularly exchanging letters, notes, and poems with officials and members of the scholar-gentry class. His writings are not solitary self-expressions but windows of social interaction and commercial activity. They provided for a household that included his wife, concubines, children, sons-in-law, maids, and servants, totaling as many as fifty people by the early 1670s (Hanan 1988, 8).

Li did not hesitate to proclaim his own literary creativity. He named the collection of his works Liweng yijiayan 笠翁一家言 (Liweng’s School of Thought, ca. 1673), for instance. Patrick Hanan (1988, 24) identifies notes by

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more than 150 different critics in Li’s works; Li solicited many of these and incorporated them into his works in the hope of promoting himself. Shan Jinheng (1990a, 131–304) tabulates more than eight hundred such contemporaries. Li solicited help from many of these and hosted parties or performed chuanqi—plays in the style of the Southern theater—as a means of cajoling their support. Constantly stretching the boundary between the gong (public) and the si (private), Li wrote personal letters with the expectation that they would be circulated, quoted his own poems when writing popular vernacular stories, used his own concubines to stage his plays, and asked a much-flattered local official-patron to write the preface of his penultimate play.

Li always had readers in mind when he wrote; playing with their expectations was one of his favorite literary games. Through texts laden with first-person narrators (oftentimes Li’s alter egos), commentary, and meta-narratives, the author also enjoyed presenting himself as literary inventor, connoisseur, and romantic lover. For example, Gu Daisou 顧呆叟, the shanren 山人 (self-proclaimed hermit) in Li Yu’s story “Wenguolou” 闻過樓 (“Mansion Dedicated to the Acceptance of Criticism”) embodies the writer’s characteristic self-mockery, but even such self-mockery is executed with deliberation—after all, the hermit’s friends present him with a mansion in gratitude for the advice they received from him. The story can thus be read as a cleverly crafted exercise in wish-fulfillment.

Li’s oeuvre totals about twenty volumes in a modern edition. In his own time, his chuanqi were his chief claim to fame. Theatrical activities—writing, annotating, performing, reading and watching chuanqi—had been increasingly integrated into the Chinese literati culture since the beginning of the Ming Chenghua 成化 reign (1465). Guo Yingde 郭英德 (2004, 4) describes the five stages by which the literati transformed chuanqi into a highly deliberate form of self-expression, situating Li’s plays between boxingqi 勃興期 (the period of efflorescence, 1587–1651) and fazhangqi 發展期 (the period of growth, 1652–1718). Writing chuanqi requires the command of a variety of literary forms—dialogue, narrative, lyric poetry (ci 詞), poetry (shi 詩), and song lyrics (qu 曲). The popularity of chuanqi in late imperial China can be attributed to the literati class’s need to affirm its cultural superiority.

Li Yu took this need into consideration as a playwright and took advantage of it to promote his plays. Li was capable of knitting plots that left his audiences marveling. He playfully twisted literary conventions and outrageously mocked established values. A master of literary parody, Li took for granted his literati audiences’ knowledge of the Chinese classics and the theater. His audiences were simultaneously flattered and ridiculed; their amusement was genuine, but it was based on their recognition of their
own worn-out culture. One of the ironies of Li’s literary creativity is that it depended on the very literati culture that it deflated and depreciated.

**Writer & Audiences Exhibit their Literary Capital**

Li took pride in his ability to provoke laughter; he did so, as his son-in-law Shen Yinbo 沈因伯 (b. 1638) put it, by saying what people “cannot, dare not, would rather not, or would disdain to say.” This was evident in Li’s earliest dramas. His first play, *Lian xiangban* 憐香伴 (*The Companion Who Loved Fragrance*), was controversial enough to force him to leave his hometown Jinhua 金華, where people interpreted its Sapphic element as an affront to Confucian propriety.

Li continued to disregard mainstream mores in later plays, and his practice of exposing his concubines to the gaze of theatergoers was considered yet another affront to public morality. But outrageousness may well have been part of the author’s strategy of self-promotion. Liang Shaoren 梁紹壬 (b. 1792) complained about Li’s “dirty personality,” but also testified to Li’s ability to make himself essential by skillfully “anticipating and meeting people’s wishes” (Shan 1990c, 315).

Even as Li explored other literary genres, his eyes were constantly on the theater. He called his collections of *huaben xiaoshuo* 話本小說 (vernacular short stories) *Wusheng xi* 無聲戲 (*Silent Operas*), for instance. His fictional works are often embedded with theatrical discourses. Hanan has observed that the prologues and narratorial comment in Li’s short stories “sometimes resemble in structure and mode of argument the kind of essay that he wrote later in *Casual Expressions*,” in which he mainly deals with dramatic theory (1988, 77). Li’s preoccupation with drama and performance may have provided a conceptual framework for his other writings, particularly fiction (Fu 2009; Guo 1999; Wang 2003; Wu 1988), but it also reflected an attempt at self-definition and self-affirmation in an era when the literati were suffering a crisis of identity and confidence.

Li was not alone in this exercise of self-definition. *Chuanqi* provided a means for the well-educated to use their training in the classics and to show off their literary talents. Such opportunity was particularly important in an era when population growth and political turmoil made the civil service examination, a Chinese scholar’s conventional “ladder of social success” (He, 1962), unavailable, unattainable, or undesirable. Li himself failed the provincial examination twice despite his reputation as a child prodigy.

Failing to become a scholar-official, presumably too independent of mind to be a low-level government functionary, and unwilling to become a doctor/merchant like his father, Li had to create a new role for himself, a role almost necessarily unconventional and controversial but at the same time tending to show off his training in the classics. The ability to write and appreciate *chuanqi*, a genre that requires the command of a variety of
literary forms, functioned as an alternative badge of cultural superiority, both for the playwright and his audience.

Sophie Volpp (2011) argues that fluid social roles during this period forced cultural elites to resort to stage to grapple with social changes and culturally distinguish themselves. Specifically, Volpp reads Li’s *Naihetian* 奈何天 (*You Can’t Do Anything about Fate*, ca. 1659) as a “spectacle of status performance,” in which the writer “exploits the role system of the Chinese theater to parody the acquisition of the emblems of gentry status by the *nouveaux riches*” (2011, 28–32). Volpp further argues that Li sought to distinguish the sophisticated spectator from the mundane viewer by emphasizing that only the genuinely cultivated possess perceptive ability to recognize social imposture and inauthenticity and apprehend the illusory nature of all forms (36). Theater thus played an unprecedented role in literati cultural production in seventeenth-century China.

Li wrote *chuanqi* for the stage rather than for literary digestion. Throughout his career, his discussion and theorization focused on *wutai ju* 舞台劇 (plays to be staged) rather than *antou ju* 案頭劇 (plays to be read). When he composed *chuanqi*, he always had the stage, and himself as part of the performance, in mind. In his collection of essays *Xianqing ouji* 閒情偶寄 (*Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling*, 1671), Li shared with novice playwrights and prospective managers of private troupes his own ideas about dramatic training and performance. According to Hanan (1988, 199), Li introduced the revolutionary idea that *binbai* 賓白 (speech) is, if not more than, at least as important as *qu* 曲 (song). Li’s critics acknowledged Li’s ability to use lucid and clear language despite disagreeing about the value of his plays. The length of Li’s ten extant *chuanqi* ranges from thirty to thirty-six acts. They are much shorter than earlier plays, which often exceeded fifty acts. Li particularly kept musical interludes to a minimum, obviously aiming to facilitate stage enactment.

According to Grant Shen, there were three types of opera theaters in late imperial China: the court theater, the private theater, and the public theater (1998, 65). They differed in troupe sizes, social status of the audience, and acting method. Shen defined private theater as an individually owned troupe performing for invited guests. These troupes performed in halls of residential mansions and stages in private gardens, among other venues. Volpp (2011, 186–87) points out that “the practice of owning acting troupes and sponsoring performance at one’s home became fashionable among members of the gentry” during the late Jiajing 嘉靖 (reign 1522–66) and the Wanli 萬歴 (reign 1573–1620) periods. Lu Eting (1980, 116–33) listed about thirty-two owners of private troupes from the mid-Ming to the early Qing that can be identified by name, with Li among them. Li’s contemporary writers such as Hou Xun 候徇 (1589–1659), Ruan Dacheng 阮大鋮 (1587–1646), Wu Kun 吳坤 (1551–1620), and Zhang Dai
張岱 (1597–1679) also owned private theaters. At Li’s estate, called Jieziyuan (芥子園, Mustard Seed Garden), Li’s family theatrical troupe performed plays for audiences that included Du Chuang (杜漸, 1622–85), a Shandong poet; Fang Wen (方文, 1612–69), Li’s itinerant friend; You Tong (尤侗, 1618–1704), a well-known playwright; and Zhou Lianggong (周亮工, 1612–72), a writer and calligrapher. Alternately, Li’s troupe might travel to perform for his literary friends. In 1671, for example, it played for You Tong, the writer Yu Huai (余懷, 1616–95), and others in a rented facility in Suzhou. In 1672, Li and four of his concubines staged a play in Hanyang (漢陽).

Volpp argues that the circulation of actors in seventeenth-century China “served to create and maintain networks of social exchange, in much the same manner as did gifts of fine ceramic ware, calligraphic scrolls, and ancient bronzes” (2002, 949). She quotes poems by Gong Dingzi (龔定孳, 1616–73), Wang Shilu (王士祿, 1626–73) and others on Mao Xiang’s servant-actor Xu Ziyun (徐紫雲, ca. 1644–75) to demonstrate how the circulation of actors as well as poems in tribute to them created and maintained social networks among members of the literary community. Notably, Li’s favorite concubine-actresses were also gifts from patrons-friends of the literati class. During his trip to Shanxi and a few other places in 1666, Li received thirteen-year-old Miss Qiao (喬姬, d. 1672) from Cheng Zhifu (程質夫, a local official in Pingyang 平陽) (Shan 1990b, 53). When Li arrived at Lanzhou in 1667, a certain Master of Lanzhou (蘭州主人) presented him with thirteen-year-old Miss Wang (王姬, d. 1673) (Shan 1990b, 55). Li trained Qiao to play dan (旦, female) roles and Wang to play sheng (生, male) roles. Li composed twenty duanchangshi (斷腸詩) (poems of heartbreak) after Qiao died in 1672 and ten hou duanchangshi (后斷腸詩) (more poems of heartbreak) after Wang died a year later (Li 1990a, 2:203–11, 216-21). Li wrote, “People may ask me whether writing as many as twenty mourning poems is excessive, but I am still afraid that these lyrics are too few to express my everlasting attachment” (1990a, 2:204). Soon after the poems, he wrote “Qiao Fusheng Wang Zailai erji hezhuany” (喬復生王再來二姬合傳, “Combined Biography of My Concubines Qiao Reborn and Wang Returned”) (1990a, 1:95–101). By renaming the girls, Li fashioned himself as an infatuated lover foolishly wishing his love could bring them back to life. These sentiments of loss and longing were never meant to be enjoyed by Li alone. Published in Liweng yijiayan around 1673, they included seventeen marginal remarks made by nine different commentators. Li must have circulated his poems among his inner circle of readers soon after he wrote them. The self-dramatizing moments of mourning in his works were meant to have empathic resonance. In these works, Li actively engaged with the romantic discourse of the seventeenth
century that centered on *qing* 情 (passion), which, as Wai-yee Li puts it, “is best expressed through unfulfillment, the representation of how the desires of the self find no places in the scheme of things” (1993, 54).

**From Text to Stage**

Li’s *chuanqi* were created with the expectations of an elite circle of aesthetes in mind. While it is impossible to reconstruct the reaction of contemporary audiences—an important question concerning the social function of his plays—it is useful to examine what Li’s plays offered audiences of scholar-officials such as Gong Dingzi, You Tong, and Yu Huai in the attempt to gain fame and support. Li may not have totally rejected the idea of selling printed copies of his plays, but he never intended them to be merely read. These plays were to be seen and, like the playwright’s witty remarks and brazen letters, served an important social function.

Reading Li’s plays as scripts for stage performance in social settings, this article focuses specifically on four of the ten plays that he wrote between the years of 1651 to 1668. These four plays are all based on original vernacular short stories by Li himself. Placing his own works in *chuanqi* form may also indicate Li’s status as a professional writer (i.e., a writer who produces as quickly as possible by recycling his own works), his self-invention as a literary genius (being able to write the same story twice, in different genres), or his experiments that contributed to the dramatic theories expressed in *Xianqing ouji*.

Redeployment of the same stories in different media allows us to observe the changes a self-conscious playwright like Li made with his theatrical audiences in mind. Undoubtedly many of these changes illustrate the generic differences between fiction and drama, but that alone cannot explain away the distinctive characteristics of Li’s plays, which were often achieved through Li’s disregard, subversion, or parody of literary conventions. Reading fiction is generally an individual activity, while staging and watching a play is a social activity. I am interested in how Li’s attunement to his elite audiences influenced his dramatic texts, as indicated by some of the differences between the fiction and the drama.

A complete understanding of the social function of Li’s *chuanqi* must take into consideration all ten of his plays, his dramatic theories, and his commentaries on other writers’ plays. The six plays not based on his own stories are also indispensable in their own ways; however, this essay focuses only on the four plays that evolved from stories. A close look at these four plays may, of course, shed light on the other six plays.

The four plays adapted from Li’s fiction are *Naihe tian*, *Bimuyu 比目魚* (Sole Mates, 1661), *Huang qiu feng 凤求凰* (Woman in Pursuit of Man, 1665), and *Qiao tuanyuan 巧团圆* (The Ingenious Reunion, 1668). Three of the
original stories are from his collections of short vernacular fiction *Wusheng xi* and the fourth one from *Shi’er lou* 十二樓 (*Twelve Towers*, 1658). Li must have also planned to write plays based on two additional stories, because the titles of two stories in *Wusheng xi*—“Mei nanzi bihuo fan shengyi” 美男子避惑反生疑 (“A Handsome Lad Raises Doubts by Trying to Avoid Suspicion”) and “Qiqie bao pipa meixiang shoujie” 妻妾抱琵琶梅香守節 (“The Wife and the Concubine Remarry while the Maid Preserves Her Chastity”)—were accompanied by the note “cihui you chuanqi si chu” 此回有傳奇嗣出 (“forthcoming as plays”). Plays based on these stories cannot be found in any extant edition of Li’s complete works, so we may assume that Li did not write them despite his original plan.

A quick comparison of the stories and the plays reveals some of the most obvious changes that occur when a story is recast as a *chuanqi* play. The length of *chuanqi* allows significant character and plot development. Li’s plays added new roles, most significantly *xiaosheng* 小生 (the second male lead), *xiaodan* 小旦 (the second female lead), and *jing* 淨 (face-painted warriors). Supernatural and military elements featuring *jing* roles become central to the narratives of the plays, providing context and contrast to the more conventional narratives about romantic relationships in the original fiction. The omnipresent first-person narrators of Li’s fiction often become *fumo* 副末 (elderly man) roles. Following *chuanqi* convention, a *fumo* speaks in the first-person to summarize the plot and moral lessons at the beginning and end of a play. Sometimes the first-person narrators in Li’s fiction also split into several characters whose limited perspectives combine to reveal full knowledge of the plot. These limited perspectives provide opportunities for the characters to reveal their own personalities and emotions and for the playwright to create drama through conventional narrative devices such as intrigue and identity confusion.

Other changes reflect the specificities of stage performance. Certain types of outrageous humor cannot be enacted on the stage. In the story “Shengwo lou” 生我樓 (“Nativity Room”), for example, a father asks his long-lost and now-reclaimed adult son to pull down his pants and show his single testicle as a proof of his unquestionable status as the official heir of the family. Enacting such a scene on the stage would have been obviously offensive. In *Qiao tuanyuan*, the dramatic version, the single testicle becomes an extra toe. The change suggests the playwright may have been unconventional, but his unconventionality was never divorced from calculation of practical outcomes.
Past Time as Pastime: Demonstrating Relevance to Contemporary Existence

Around 1658, fourteen years after the fall of the Ming dynasty, Li wrote a novella called “Shengwo lou,” which is set at the end of the Song dynasty (the dynasty ended in 1271). Ten years later, Li transformed the story into a chuanqi play called Qiao tuanyuan, shifting the setting to the end of the Ming dynasty (1644), the only dynastic fall that occupied the memory of his own generation. Song and Ming were the only two dynasties in which non-Han “barbarians” (Mongolians and Manchurians, respectively) assumed the rule of the country. Given that the analogy between the dynasties would have been obvious to Li’s contemporaries, why did he bother to make the change? The only explanation is that Li wanted to make his plays unmistakably relevant to contemporary experiences. The play includes additional scenes that describe the ferociousness and moral decadence of Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606–45) and his rebels, who overthrew the Ming dynasty. The playwright is obviously interested in the particular evils of the recent past.

Li also changed the social status of the protagonist. In the novella, Yao Ji 姚继 is a cloth vendor, while in the play he is a scholar (courtesy name Kecheng 克承) involuntarily set to business by his prospective father-in-law. In both versions, the well-intended Yao unknowingly buys his biological father and mother, from whom he has been abducted as a child, and his betrothed, who was abducted by rebels. The novella emphasizes Yao’s father, who laments not having a legitimate heir to whom he can pass his family name and property. He undertakes a journey, passing himself off as a destitute old man willing to sell himself to whoever wants a father. By contrast, the play focuses on Yao, whose psychological depth as a literatus is conveyed to audiences as early as in Act Two. The young man daily dreams of a room, which the end of the play reveals to be his childhood room in his biological parents’ home. Lamenting the early death of his parents—whom he only later discovers are his adoptive parents—he wishes he could paint their portraits to keep him company when he is lonely. He sleeps with the intention of embracing his dream of the room again, but when he wakes he remains confused about his identity and fate.

The protagonist in Li’s play is more artistically sophisticated than his fictional counterpart, who shows his mercantile nature when he is forced to buy the old woman: “I put up ten taels for a father the other day and obtained all kinds of blessings. Now I’ve paid a few taels for this precious commodity, and perhaps some blessings will flow from her, too” (Li 1998, 241). He calls the woman who would later be revealed to be his mother baohuo 宝货 (“precious commodity”) and cares most about balancing his investment and profit. The novella makes him appear to be a virtuous son.
only to parody filial piety, because here filial piety becomes the vehicle of profit. By contrast, the protagonist in the play has beautiful sentiments and refined artistic taste. His reference to portrait painting and dream encounters immediately activates audiences’ recollection of Tang Xianzu’s famous *Mudan ting* (The Peony Pavilion, 1598), in which an adolescent girl from a royal family falls asleep in a garden and has a dream encounter with her doomed lover. She later has a portrait of herself done and dies of lovesickness, only to be brought back to life by the lover, who has fallen in love with her portrait.

But on the other hand, it seems fitting that the protagonist is a merchant because a merchant’s job is to trade things—in this case, human beings. Li adds a character to make it credible that a retiring scholar should wind up buying his family members. In the play, Yao’s neighbor and prospective father-in-law bestows a sum of money upon him and lectures that the best career in a troubled time is to be a merchant. Ironically Yao’s effort to unmake himself (i.e., abandon his role as a scholar and become a merchant) becomes a journey of self-discovery (i.e., he re-establishes social relations that define who he is). The play ends with him passing the examination and embracing his original identity as a scholar-official, a very comforting resolution to Li’s intellectual audiences who must have identified with Yao in a time when social and cultural forces threatened the literatus identity.

Overall, Li’s dramatic characters have a higher social and cultural status than his fictional characters, which include prostitutes, maids, courthouse bailiffs, and beggars. As in *Qiao tuanyuan* he contrives the social “upgrading” of fictional characters when he adapts novellas into plays. In the play *Bimuyu*, for example, the fisherman in the original story becomes a retired high official who saves the lives of the protagonists and inspires them. In the play *Naihetian*, the ugly rich man who has the luck to marry three beauties is bestowed an official rank by the emperor in recognition of his military contributions. The play ends in a grand finale in which the three beauties also receive official titles. Eight of Li’s ten plays feature scholars who are later made officials, with the ninth, *Yizhong yuan* (Ideal Love-Matches), centering on famous literati of his time, Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru, and the tenth, *Yu saotou* (The Jade Clasp), on the emperor himself. One explanation is that Li, himself a member of the culture elite, is most comfortable and confident when speaking through characters like himself. Moreover, since Li was socially and financially dependent upon cultural elites, his plays had to reflect their tastes, concerns, and aesthetics, which literati-type characters can best convey. 19

*Qiao tuanyuan* is noteworthy because it presents a “perfect” family bonded not by Confucian values and *qing*, two key concepts that early Qing
literati attempted to associate with each other and vindicate, but by commercial exchanges. Li inverts the process of family making: the son buys his father and then his mother, connects them as a couple, and then learns he was born to them; the father sells himself to his son, who restores the father’s lost wife; the mother arranges the son’s marriage without yet knowing that she has a son. The very existence of the family becomes an outcome of coincidences. Ironically, patriarchal pride relies on a bodily defect—the extra toe—rather than the Confucian virtue of filial piety.

As one commentator (Li 1990a, 5:415) points out, Li is outrageous in making the family, the basic unit of the Confucian state, an object of dramatic appropriation. Act 11 ends with a poem:

Do not blame treacherous hearts,
If a courtier sells his master,
Or a son buys his father.
All is due to chaotic times. (Li 352, my translation)

莫怪人心詫異，
臣子合當賣君。
兒子既可買父，
只因世局紛紛。

The poem extends the family relationship, the dramatic center of the play, to courtier-emperor obligations. Without an official rank and thus no obligation to the Ming dynasty, Li is certainly not criticizing erchen 贳臣 (those who have served the Ming and now serve the Qing); rather, he is pointing out the ambiguity and fluidity of identities, both familial and political, in a troubled historical time.

Yao’s melancholic nostalgia for a “home” that exists only in his dream certainly had the potential to pull the heartstrings of Li’s audiences. These audiences may have been gratified by the family reunion that culminates the play, but Li insisted on a complementary dose of irony. Yao’s journey is a fictional reconstruction of a family; Li makes sure that the construction of this family is clearly visible to his audiences. Yao has to buy back each family member in order to have a normal family, which itself is abnormal and unlikely. The play simultaneously creates a fantasy (as if everything that is lost can be found and reclaimed) and deflates that fantasy (as the original ideal of the Confucian family provides no point of reference). Yao does not know who he is until he has reconstructed his family in a fantastic fashion. In this light, the play makes Yao a ready vehicle for the confusion and anxiety felt by Li’s literati audiences. The fashioning of Yao as a scholar rather than a cloth vendor makes the play less about the spectacle of the good fortune of “the other” (the socially and culturally dubious
merchant class) than about the nostalgia, anxiety, and self-mockery felt by members of one’s own class.

A Play about Plays: Flattering the Audience’s Connoisseurship

“Tan Chuyu xili chuanqing, Liu Miaogu quzhong sijie” 譚楚玉戲裡傳情，劉藐姑曲終死節 (“Contemptuous of Riches and Rank, an Actress Preserves Her Honor”) is a short vernacular story that is impregnated with theatrical vocabulary (for the story, see Li 1990a, 8:251–80). When Li adapted it into a chuanqi play called Bimuyu in 1661, it became a play embedded with plays. This play may be read as a critical discourse on drama. Li’s essays of 1671 expressed his philosophy of drama, but this play had already introduced a full theory. Of course Bimuyu offers the type of intricately knit love story that epitomizes the chuanqi play. The actress’s suicide and reincarnation are immediately reminiscent of Mudan ting in which true love overcomes death. But a major part of the pleasure of watching this play stems from Li’s flattery of his audiences, who are allowed to construct themselves as connoisseurs rather than consumers of the art of theater.

Every character in the play belongs to the theater and relates to other characters through theatrical performance, which immediately forces the audience to consider the issue of performance. The hero, a scholar named Tan Chuyu 譚楚玉, joins an acting troupe to gain the love of a beautiful young actress, Liu Miaogu 劉藐姑. Because of the troupe’s strict prohibition against sexual relations between actors and actresses, Tan and Liu can only express their love onstage in their romantic roles. Their performances, ignited by passion, are profoundly moving. A wealthy spectator is so taken with Liu’s beauty that he wants her to become his concubine. Despite Liu’s fierce objections, her mother—herself a capable actress—approves the rich man’s suit when he offers her a magnificent sum.

Two “symmetrically placed” dramatic moments (Hanan 1988: 88) ensue; both embed other plays, creating a complex situation in which Li’s audiences watch audiences represented by onstage performers. The first moment is during Liu’s final performance. She chooses a play that represents her own situation and adapts it as she sings. At the close of the great aria in the suicide scene, she flings herself off the stage and into the river below, with the intent of actually committing suicide. Her lover soon joins her. Clinging to one another, they are swept downstream and caught in a fisherman’s net—hence the title of the play. They then marry. Liu supports the family by sewing and Tan studies diligently for his degree, which he obtains, along with an official appointment. They then have the opportunity to revisit the stage on which they last performed, where they discover Liu’s mother playing the leading role. They anonymously request
that the mother perform the very role that Liu played before her flight. This initiates the second dramatic moment: overwhelmed by the sorrow of having lost her daughter, the mother breaks down onstage while acting the very same suicide scene. Satisfied with the mother’s repentance, Tan and Liu reveal their identity and extend their forgiveness on the stage.

This “big finale” is marked by theatricality—Tan and Liu reveal their identity in front of not only the audience in the theater within the play, but also the audience of Li’s play, with the latter knowing more than the former. Without having to figure out who Tan is and why he is there, as the audience within the play do, Li’s audience may see this scene as purely performative and be amused by Tan’s ability to play onstage (Tan proved himself to be a capable actor earlier on, though he was never committed to the stage). Tan’s dramatic passion (such as his expression of his love through romantic roles onstage) and simultaneously dispassion (such as his disclaiming his actor’s role not elsewhere but onstage) define theater as a useful yet unreliable form of representation as well as a liminal space where a scholar like Tan vents his authentic feelings without allowing himself to be defined as an actor. Tan’s embodiment of qing, his mastery of the art of theater, his ability to obtain worldly fame, and his apprehension of the illusory nature of all these, reflect the tastes, concerns, and aesthetics of the cultural elite whom Li’s plays served.

Throughout, Li plays with his audiences’ knowledge of chuanqi. The female lead (dan), Liu, invariably replicates her own identity by performing romantic roles onstage. In one sense, she plays the role of a passionate lover, a role that she cannot play in life. At the same time, however, her stage role is a rehearsal of her role in life: as she explains to her mother, tens of thousands of their audiences can attest that Tan should be the husband and she be the wife. Li particularly highlights Liu’s manipulation of her theatrical role in the last performance. She hijacks her role to voice her own anger and sorrow, just as she has expressed her passion earlier with Tan onstage. Noticeably, the rich man in the audience is involuntarily made part of the performance when Liu points at him and calls him a “wuchi de wugui” (無恥的烏龜, “shameless turtle”), casting on him a curse of marital separation (Li 1990a, 5:157). Without realizing that Liu has changed the verses to curse him, the self-deluded rich man nods and acclaims, “excellent, excellent!” as if to demonstrate exemplary connoisseurship but only betraying his ignorance and vulgarity. As fanchai ji (Romance of the Hairpin), the play that Liu chooses to perform, was well known to “real” connoisseurs of Li’s time, Li’s audience naturally recognized the rich man’s foolishness before it dawned on himself. The highly staged folly of this man serves to confirm the cultural superiority of Li’s audiences: the rich man may be able to pay for Liu’s service and even claim ownership of her, but he is not one who can truly appreciate the art of theater.
Li also exploits his audiences’ familiarity with theatrical role types. Tan first appears on stage in a sheng role, but he has to play jing roles in the troupe. Because of their knowledge of chuanqi conventions, the audiences would expect him to vindicate himself but are not sure how exactly. In order to be closer to Liu—if only onstage—Tan needs to perform in a sheng role, which in the play is assigned to a chou (clown) in a further comedic twist. To secure the lead role, he threatens to quit the troupe and abandon his career as an actor:

I assumed that, as principle jing, I would be playing either Guan Yunchang or the Hegemon of Chu, and that although I would have to apply some greasepaint, at least in the more stirring scenes I could be true to my nobler self. It never occurred to me that, in nine cases out of ten, I would be playing petty rogues, and that I would hardly ever have a chance to play a superior man. No true gentleman would put up with such a dishonorable role, and I am unwilling to do so any more. (Li 1990b, 171–72)

When offered the opportunity to choose another role type, Tan continues to comment on the limitations of all other dramatic roles:

As for the secondary female roles, I’m afraid a man would be sacrificing his manhood if he stooped to play them. And in the case of the secondary male roles, I’m afraid a young man would be losing his youthful vigor if he played an old fellow. The only possibility would be the junior male lead, but he so often works through others, helping them make their names, that he fails to establish an identity of his own and present us with a nobler self, and that is why I wouldn’t consider the role. (Li 1990b, 172)

Tan’s lengthy remarks on role types can be considered meta-theatrical elements because, on the one hand, they contribute to the drama of the story, and, on the other hand, convey the author’s ideas on the relation of theater and life. Li’s audiences may well have been entertained by the performative and manipulative nature of Tan’s excessive rhetoric, but they may also have enjoyed the nuances of the playwright Li using his character to voice his own comments on play.

Li goes so far as to point out the deceptive relationship between actors and their audience, a provocation intended to challenge his own audiences. On the one hand, he emphasizes that a performance most touches the audience when actors invest genuine feeling in their stage roles. On the other hand, he stresses the role of manipulation in the relationship between actors and audience. As in the case of Liu’s mother, a performer does not have to believe what she performs in order to stir the hearts of her audience. Li forces his audiences to reflect upon the paradoxes of drama as an artistic form: the performance of drama provides a “simulated” context
for the eruption of the audience’s “authentic” feelings, while the performer is not necessarily involved emotionally. At the same time, he also mocks a Chinese cultural trope, which dramatizes the moment when a male spectator is moved by a female performer’s artistic self-expression. Even Liu, who has invested so much of her own “authentic feelings” in her performance, engages in deceptive stage performance.

But Li also takes aim at the audience by underlining the ways in which audiences manipulate actors by asking them to perform specific plays and observing their responses. Tan and Liu anonymously request that the mother perform the last play that Liu appeared in as a test of the mother’s feelings for her daughter. The drama here is that the two former performers—now spectators—expect the actress to break down. Just as Liu engineered her own leap into the water during her suicide scene, she and Tan now hope to provoke another onstage breakdown. Paradoxically, the theater is a privileged means for all the characters in this story to express “authentic” feelings that are otherwise hidden or repressed, but this means of expression is only considered authentic when it causes the performance to break down.

Along more conventional lines, Li uses stage performance as a metaphor for life, a metaphor familiar to his elite audiences. However magnificent, a stage performance must eventually end, just as one’s worldly ambitions will eventually prove subject to random vicissitudes. Inspired by a hermit-mentor who was originally a high official, Tan realizes that his official post is but a different kind of theatrical performance, from which he needs to withdraw in order to embrace his true self. Ironically, the theatrical version of the story dramatizes the difficulty of hermitic renunciation. One of the rebels impersonates Tan’s hermit-mentor, creating a misunderstanding between him and Tan. On another occasion, the mentor has to impersonate the god in order to offer advice to Tan. Could the mentor’s false counterpart be an externalization of the incomplete quenching of his own worldly ambition, as indicated in his eagerness to give Tan advice? After all, the presumably enlightened hermit-mentor does not differ from the rebels in their shared use of social imposture.

**Gendered Gaze**

Li acknowledged the spread of female literacy by inviting women to preface his works. Huang Yuanjie (ca. 1620–69) and Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621–ca.1706), prominent female writer-artists, prefaced Li’s plays *Yizhong yuan* and *Bimuyu*, respectively (Li 1990a, 4:318; 5:107). Li’s plays also featured contemporary female artists. In her preface to *Yizhong yuan*, Huang points out that the two heroines in the play, Lin Tiansu 林天素 and Yang
Yunyou 楊雲友, were actually women painters famous in the late Ming (Li 1990a, 4:318). Huang, a painter herself, had drawn inspiration from Lin and Yang. Li’s play portrays Lin and Yang as capable forgers who reproduce paintings by their male contemporaries. In the play’s conclusion, Li pairs the four painters in ideal fictional marriages.

The fact that Li involved women writers and artists in his works does not necessarily mean that he intended to reach a female readership (for his fiction) or audience (for his plays). It is more likely that he invoked the images and voices of women writers and artists to make his works more appealing to male audiences. Huang’s works, particularly her paintings, were well known among the Jiangnan 江南 cultural elite; renowned male literati Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664) and Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609–71) both held her work in high regard. Wang Duanshu, daughter of the writer Wang Siren 王思任 (1574–1646) and a well-respected poet and painter, was particularly known for her declining a royal invitation to teach Emperor Shunzhi’s 順治 (re. 1644–61) palace ladies. By asking Huang and Wang to comment on two of his most romantic plays, Li not only publicized his own works but also deliberately incorporated these two women in the literati discourse of romance. Thus the version of *Yizhong yuan* published with Huang’s preface showcased women in two ways: first, the story features two contemporary women painters who use the reputations of their male peers to vindicate their own artistic works; second, the preface is written by a well-known contemporary woman painter-writer who not only lends authority to Li’s romantic presentation of the women painters but also becomes an object of romantic imagination for the male audience. Huang’s preface, written in first person, connects her with the two female artists in the play by pointing out that all take Xihu 西湖 (West Lake) as both their home and their artistic inspiration. Huang further indicates that not all female artists are as fortunate as the two female painters in the play, making her preface an expression of her own resentment that her work had not been more widely recognized. Li’s male readers could readily interpret this call for recognition romantically, as it was through romantic involvement with their better-known male contemporaries that the two female painters in the play vindicated their talents.

Li probably never intended women to read his novellas that include outrageous and even vulgar literary play with female bodies—an indispensable part of male homosocial communication. “Shijinlou” 十卺樓 (“The House of Ten Weddings”), for instance, dramatizes the impenetrability of a beauty’s hymen. It depicts her circulation among numerous men and her eventual penetration by the first man she married. It turns out, however, that their marital bliss is made possible by an open sore on her bottom. In Li’s play *Naihetian*, a rebel leader rounds up abducted women and portions them out, one to every two of his
commanders, advising them to “attack from front and back simultaneously” as a way to stay warm on cold nights. Li certainly meant this to be humorous—but only for male readers.

The same can be said of the sexual conquests of Que Lihou 閭里候, Naihetian’s unintelligent and ugly anti-hero, who has bad breath, body odor, and foot rot. Que turns off the light so that his first wife cannot see him during their nuptial night. He literally rapes his second wife, who, deceived by a handsome actor (another reference to theatrical roles) hired to stand in for Que during an earlier meeting, is distraught to find herself married to Que. His third wife is clever enough to protect herself from Que, if only temporarily, by threatening to kill herself. The delayed “consumption” of this third wife—who happens to be the prettiest and most talented among the three—only prolongs expectations and intensifies the audiences’ pleasure when Que finally claims her. Skillfully making the unlikely happen in largely convincing ways, the playwright challenges his audiences to imagine what is beyond imagination. The play’s polygamous fantasy—a God eventually transforms Que into a handsome and refined gentleman, the emperor bestows upon him a royal rank, and all three wives vie for his favor—clearly represents male desire and fantasy.

The pleasure of watching Li’s plays are sensual, but also conceptual and aesthetic. Parodies confirm audiences’ sense of cultural superiority by helping them recognize certain literary or cultural conventions and at the same time allowing them to laugh at these conventions. Naihe tian and Huang qiu feng both parody the caizi jiaren 才子佳人 (scholar-beauty) trope of Chinese romantic discourse. In a typical caizi jiaren story, a brilliant scholar eventually marries a virtuous and talented beauty after some dramatic trials. Naihetian insists on the universality of misalliances and casts Que, a chou (clown), as the romantic hero. The play recalls familiar scenes from a typical romance but prevents them from reaching their conventional end. For example, Que’s first wife is startled and thinks that she is “dreaming of a ghost” when she first takes a look at her husband. This is a playful twist on the romantic legacy of “encountering immortals.” While the latter implies the emotional intensity of male post-coital fantasy, the wife’s momentary confusion signals the emotional intensity of her falling into reality: she attempts to negate the factuality of her misalliance. Que meets his second wife during an arranged temple visitation, another standard formula of the romantic tradition, but she has been tricked into thinking that she is marrying a handsome man. Que himself eventually decides that he’s had enough of beauty, but he coincidentally finds himself married to a third beauty, who thinks that she is arranged to marry an exceptionally handsome and well-known poet whose work she admires. When the reality of the situation becomes clear, both are startled out of their wits. Likewise, in Huang qiu feng, “instead of male suitors pursuing
the female beauty, here female suitors contend, by foul means rather than fair, for the most handsome and brilliant man of his time” (Hanan 1988, 19).

Li deliberately engages his audiences with a romantic discourse, but only for the purposes of deflating their expectations. By forcing his audiences to be self-conscious about their own expectations, Li exploited his audiences’ familiarity with the literary conventions of the day and simultaneously parodied them. On the one hand, Li’s familiarity with literati culture made it possible for him to earn a living by writing for the literati. On the other hand, he manipulated that culture’s worn out nature, highlighting its increasing inability to invest the lives of literati with meaning. Li flatters his literati audiences by playing to their profound knowledge of literary conventions; but he also deflates these conventions, amusingly but also tellingly. His satire is pitched for an age of disillusionment.

Notes

1. According to Hanan (1988, 12), Li adopted this pseudonym sometime during the 1650s when he lived in Hangzhou.

2. When Li solicited the poet Fang Shaocun’s comments on his essay “Kui ci guanjian” (“Theory of Lyric”), he remarked, “the critical comments are rather numerous in my inept writings” (Li 1990a, 1:212). Li’s Chidu chuzheng 尺牘初征 (A First Collection of Letters, ca. 1660) carried a preface by the famous poet Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609–71). Li solicited Wu’s work in 1668 for a follow-up anthology that never appeared (Li 1990a, 1:182). Wu’s critical comments can also be found in Li’s Lun gu 讀古 (Discussion of the Past, 1664), a collection of historical anecdotes compiled by Li’s own interpretations. According to Hanan (1988, 26), at least forty-three of Li’s friends and acquaintances, many established literary figures, contributed critical comments to this collection. Yu Huai 余懷 (1616–96), author of the famous Banqiao zaji 板橋雜記 (Miscellaneous Records of Banqiao), wrote a preface for Li’s Xianqing ouji 閒情偶寄 (Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling, 1671). See Li 1990a, 3:1–3. Du Jun 杜濬 (1611–87), one of Li’s main literary critics and an important literary figure in his own right, wrote prefaces to all of Li’s collections of short stories as well as Li’s play Huang qiu feng 凤求凰 (Woman in Pursuit of Man, 1665). See Li 1990a, 8:1–2, 247–48; 9:7–8; 4:421–22. Du also wrote commentaries to Li’s plays Yu saotou 玉搔頭 (The Jade Clasp, 1655) and Qiao tuanyuan 巧團圓 (The Ingenious Reunion, 1668). See Li 1990a, 5:213–415.

3. Shan Jinheng (1990a, 133) noted that half of these acquaintances were officials, of which only one tenth were retired. Those in office could pledge more support than the retired; this choice reveals Li’s enterprising navigation of his social interaction. Based on a study of more than four hundred names mentioned in Li’s own works, 171 of whom can be biographically identified, Chang and Chang (1992, 78) noted that Li socialized with an increasing number of government officials in his later years, when he lived in Nanjing. This was most likely due to a desperate need to solicit funds.
In 1673, Li wrote a letter to Ke Anchu (jinshi 1649), a veteran “metropolitan censor” and one of his Beijing patrons. He said that he would cut short his stay in Beijing in order not to burden his donors, who might be financially struggling themselves. Li concluded, “There are many gentlemen in the capital besides your honorable self who have urged me to stay, and I have not been able to contact them all. May I trouble you to circulate this letter among them as an official notification of farewell?” (Li 1990a, 1:204–5; English translation by Hanan). According to Hanan (1988, 5), Ke and Chen Xueshan (jinshi 1655), vice president of the Board of Civil Office to whom Li had also written, urged the Manchu statesman Songgotu 索額圖 (1636–1703), grand secretary, grand tutor to the heir apparent, and the most powerful court figure of the time, to persuade Li to stay. Li was also bestowed with gifts and money. See Li 1990a, 1:163–66, 201, 207. Li wrote couplets to be hung in the pavilions in Songgotu’s garden and presented Songgotu some of his famous Jieziyuan 芥子園 (Mustard Seed Garden) notepaper. See Li 1990a, 1:252, 260.

Among the twelve stories in Shi’er lou 十二樓 (Twelve Towers), at least five have prologues incorporating poetry that Li originally wrote for other purposes; just as importantly, Li’s narrators generally acknowledge these borrowings. These five stories are “Duojinlou” 奪錦樓 (“The Tower of Examination Triumph”), “Sanyulou” 三與樓 (“The Studio of Three Teachers”), “Xiayilou” 夏宜樓 (“The Summer Pavilion”), Cuiyalou” 翠雅樓 (“The House of Gathered Refinements”), and “Wenguo lou” 閻過樓 (“Mansion Dedicated to the Acceptance of Criticism”). See Li 1990a, 9:36–50, 51–72, 73–98, 128–50, 271–92. For a brief discussion of Li’s use of his own poetry in prologues of his stories, see Zhang 2005, 70–83.


In 1667, Li asked Guo Chuanfang 郭傳芳 (d. ca. 1680), a local official in Shaanxi, to preface his play Shen luanjiao 慎鸞交 (Be Careful about Love). For Guo’s preface, see Li 1990a, 5:419–20.

Hanan (1988, 7) provides two examples. In 1666, Li met Grand Secretary Wei Yijie 魏裔介 (1616–86) in the company of Gong Dingzi 龔鼎孳 (1616–73), who was the president of the Board of Rites, a distinguished poet, and Li’s major benefactor. Wei suggested that Li write a new Southern-drama version of the famous play Xixiang ji 西廂記 (Story of the Western Wing). For the second example, see note 7. Shan (1990b, 307–10) compiles comments on Li’s works by contemporary readers, including leading literary figures of Jiangnan. Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664) and Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597–1679) praised Li’s creativity as a playwright; Zhang Chao 張潮 (b. 1650) mentioned Li’s
dramatic theory and dubbed him an influential playwright; Huang Zhouxing 黃周星 (1611–80) criticized Li’s departure from strict rhyme schemes but implicitly acknowledged the popularity of his plays.

The other periods were shengzhangqi 生長期 (period of birth, 1465–1586), yushiqi 餘勢期 (period of residual potential, 1719–1820), and tuibanqi 蜕變期 (period of decay, 1821–1911).

For Shen’s comments on Li’s poem “Guo Yanling diaotai” 過嚴陵釣台 (“Passing by the Fishing Port of Yan Ziling”), see Li 1990a, 2:494–95. Shen married Li’s oldest daughter around 1661 and subsequently compiled and commented on his works, as well as managed his bookstore. Shen also composed poetry and accompanied Li on his trips. Shen was the publisher of one of China’s most widely used handbooks of painting, Jieziyuan huazhuan 芥子園畫傳 (The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, Pt. 1, 1679; Pt. 2, 1701), which was named after Li’s small property and house near the South Gate in Nanjing. Li wrote the foreword to Part 1 of the handbook and died a year later.

Hanan (1988, 15–16) titles the play Women in Love. He argues that the play caused a scandal not because it was presumably a portrayal of the love between Li’s wife and concubine, as Li’s friend Yu Wei 虞巍 remarked in his preface (ca. 1651) to the play, but because it seemed to satirize a specific family.

In 1675, forty years after he had taken the tongzishi 童子試 (Youth Examination), Li escorted his sons, the sixteen-year-old Jiangshu 將舒 and the fifteen-year-old Jiangkai 將開 to Tonglu 桐廬 to sit the same examination. They afterwards travelled widely around Hangzhou and greatly enjoyed themselves thanks to Li’s patron-friends. That Li encouraged his sons to take the examination adds an ironic note to his life and career. The writer Li Yu might have indulged his satirical bent, but the father knew too well the boundary between fiction and reality and the need to be practical. Two years later, Li accompanied Jiangshu to Wucheng 婺城, where the son sat the tongzishi again. Shortly before the trip, Li was injured seriously by a fall down a flight of stairs. During the trip he suffered heatstroke, which resulted in diarrhea and fever. The father and the son had to return earlier than planned. Soon after their return, Li celebrated his sixty-sixth birthday. In “Chudu ri he zhangnü Shuzhao” 初度日和長女淑昭 (“On my birthday, Borrowing the Rhyme Scheme from My Eldest Daughter Shuzhao’s Poem”), he wrote, “Wasting another year without any fulfillment, / I teach my children in vain to cherish their young lives” 浪擲韶光又一年, 空教兒女惜華顛 (Li 1990a, 2:229).

Liang Tingnan 梁廷楠 (1796–1861) comments that “the lyrics and speech of Li’s plays are almost straightforward.” Yang Enshou 楊恩壽 (1835–91) comments that Li’s ten plays are “unrefined and accessible” (culi 粗俚) and their themes and language are “intended to be clear and approachable.” Qiu Weiyuan 丘煒萲 (1873–1941) defends Li for writing plays that are “easy to watch and listen to.” See Li 1990a, 19:323, 325, 327.

The commentators included Fan Wenbai 範文白 (d. 1676), Fang Lougang 方樓岡 (jinshi 1628), Huang Xianshang 黃仙裳 (1621–1702), Jiang Ximing 姜西溟 (1628–99), Ni Angong 倪聞公 (1626–87), Song Lishang 宋荔裳 (1614–73), Wang Shantu 汪山圖 (born in Shexian, Anhui), Wu Guanwu 吳冠五 (watched a play in Jieziyuan in 1672), and Yu Hongke 余鴻客 (1665–1722). See Li 1990a, 2:203–11, 216–21.
For an investigation of the inter-connectedness of pre-modern Chinese vernacular fiction and drama, see Liu 2007, 165.

A similar note accompanied the story “Chou langjun pajiao pian deyan” 丑郎君怕娇偏得艳 (“An Ugly Husband Fears Marriage to a Pretty Wife but Gets Three Beautiful Ones”) in Wusheng xi. See Li 1990a, 8:3. That Li transformed this story into the play Nathetian 奈何天 (You Can’t Do Anything about Fate) indicates that he planned to write plays based on the other two stories featuring a similar note.

On new year’s day, 1668, Li’s troupe gave a performance, most likely of his new play Qiao tuanyuan 桥团圆 in honor of the birthday of a Pengcheng 彭城 official’s wife. The official, Li Shenyu 李申玉 (n.d.), had invited Li Yu to spend the new year’s day in Pengcheng on his way home following a trip to the northwest. See “Zhou ci Pengcheng bingxue jiaozu Ji Zixiang sima Li Shenyu guangwen xiangliu dusui” 舟次彭城,冰雪交阻, 纪子湘司马, 李申玉文章相留度岁 (“My Boat Was Stuck at Pengcheng by Snow, Ji Zixiang and Li Shenyu Invited Me to Stay and Celebrate the New Year’s Day”), in Li 1990a, 2:171. Also see “Li Shenyu kunjun shoulian” 李申玉閫君壽聯 (“Couplet for the Birthday of Li Shenyu’s Wife”), in Li 1990a, 1:236.

One may wonder why Li originally chose to write about lower status characters in his fiction. I believe that this choice is based on the conventions of Chinese vernacular fiction. Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) and Ling Mengchu 凌蒙初 (1580–1644) stories are mostly about lower status characters. When writing in daiyanti 代言體 (the narrative mode of speaking through personae), which is integral to the chuanqi 传奇 genre, the playwright must have perceived a need to speak through personae that were closer to his own background.

One earlier example is Bai Juyi’s 白居易 (772–846) “Pipa xing” 琵琶行 (“Song of the Lute”). The first-person poetic persona is traveling in a boat at night when he hears a woman singing a very sad lyric. The woman, a former courtesan, laments her loneliness as a traveling merchant’s wife. The first-person narrator immediately identifies with her helpless situation and sheds tears that wet his sleeves. Li’s contemporary writer Wu Weiye also wrote a poem about his encounter with Bian Yujing 卞玉京 (ca. 1624–63), the former palace performer who became a Daoist nun after the fall of the Ming.

Huang also commented on Yizhong yuan 用中园 using the name Hezhong 女史 (Woman Historian of Hezhong). See Li 1990a, 4:321–418.

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