

The Underside of "Talent and Beauty" : The Representation of Women in *The Peony Pavilion* and "An Encounter with an Immortal"

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of women in Yuan Zhen's "An Encounter with an Immortal" ("Huizhen ji") and Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*) as two exemplary works of "talented scholars and beautiful women" (*caizi jiaren*). Drawing upon several Lacanian concepts about the representation of sexual differences, I explore the complicated power relations between the talent and the beauty while querying into the underside of the stories' portrayal of women's passion (*qing*). First, taking Du Li-niang as an example, I investigate the beauty's "negative entry" into the symbolic. Secondly, in light of the Lacanian idea of "courtly love" and "object *a*," I analyze both Du and Cui Ying-ying's "masquerade" to be the (phallic) object of male desire. Finally, I investigate how the beauty ascends from being an object of male desire to achieving a subject status in the symbolic economy through her marital relation with a man. My thesis is that fundamental to the Chinese pre-modern stories of "talent and beauty" is women's endeavor to be integrated into the symbolic. Instead of revealing women's "real" desire, the stories of "talent and beauty" dramatize symbolic order's operation in and through women.

Keywords : "An Encounter with an Immortal" ("Huizhen ji") Lacan *The Peony Pavilion*
representation of women stories of "talent and beauty"



This paper explores the representation of women in two pre-modern Chinese literary texts: Yuan Zhen's "An Encounter with an Immortal" ("Huizhen ji") (ca. 800) and Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*) (1598). While "An Encounter with an Immortal" belongs to the genre of Tang *chuanqi* (tales of the marvelous of Tang period) and *The Peony Pavilion* to *chuanqi* (southern drama), both are important in that they feature two of the most memorable stories of "talented scholars and beautiful women" (*caizi jiaren*) in Chinese literary history.¹ Framed as love romances, the stories of "talent and beauty" hold my interest because they represent at least three layers of subject relations in pre-modern Chinese society: the relation between the scholar and the beauty, a relation defined by amorous passion; the relation between the scholar and imperial society, a relation regulated by the civil service examination system; and the relation between

the beauty and imperial society: a problematic relation because Chinese women have no direct access to the imperial power system. It is through their relations with their fathers and husbands, namely, with men, that their social symbolic status is determined.²

Given the questionable symbolic position of Chinese women, central to my concern is how Chinese women are related to, or represented by, the symbolic order and by what means, or on what condition(s), can a woman achieve presence in the symbolic. Several Lacanian concepts about the representation of sexual differences are drawn upon to support my thesis. First, I explore how a woman develops from a biological woman — a woman unbounded by symbolic regulations — to a symbolized "The woman" through the process of her "negative entry" into the symbolic.³ Secondly, in light of the idea of "courtly love"⁴ and "object *a*,"⁵ I analyze a woman's "masquerade" of

1 The importance of "An Encounter with an Immortal" lies in that it is a prototypical story of "talent and beauty." As Lorraine Dong points out, the story of its female protagonist Ying-ying has been re-written into "as many as seventy" different stories since its production. See Dong 75. The importance of *The Peony Pavilion* can be proved not only through its apparent artistic success but also through the wide reading public it has enjoyed. Judith T. Zeitlin, for example, claims it to be "one of the most important promoters of sentiment of love." See Zeitlin, "Shared Dreams" 128.

2 The social status of traditional Chinese women is best demonstrated in a famous excerpt from *The Book of Rites* (*Liji*): "The woman follows (and obeys) the man: 'in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son'; qtd. in Dorothy Ko 6.

3 The term "negative entry" is taken from R. Coward, S. Lipshitz, and E. Cowie, "Psychoanalysis and Patriarchal Structures," *Papers on Patriarchy*, qtd. in Parveen Adams 235. Closely associated with the idea of "negative entry" are Lacan's famous thesis: "The woman" (the essential woman, the woman beyond the symbolic implications) does not exist and Michèle Montrelay's tenet: Femininity is "unrepresentable." Briefly, "The woman" refers to the woman with the unrepresentable femininity. Yet, it is a notion only retroactively imagined for "The woman" always exists as "The woman" in symbolic representations. See Lacan, "God and Jouissance of The Woman" and Montrelay.

4 About the idea of "courtly love," see Lacan, "Courtly Love as Anamorphosis" and Slavoj Žižek, "Courtly Love" 89-112.

5 The "object petit *a*" or "object *a*," is an illusive object imagined by a human subject to fill out the (signifying) gap of symbolic reality. As an object-cause of desire, it serves as a nodal object in fantasy and is responsible for regulating one's desire as well as setting the symbolic economy into movement. See Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" 312-324 and "Anamorphosis" 82-85. For an elaboration of Lacan's idea, see also Žižek, *Looking Awry* 3-6 and his discussion of the three objects in Lacan's theory in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 182-187.



herself to be the (phallic) object of male desire.⁶ Finally, I investigate how a woman ascends from being an object of male desire to achieving a subject status in the symbolic economy through her marital relation with a man. In Lacanian terminology, this is a woman's ascendancy from "being-the-phallus" to "having-the-phallus."⁷ My thesis is that fundamental to the Chinese pre-modern stories of "talent and beauty" is women's endeavor to be integrated into the symbolic. Instead of featuring "The woman," stories of "talent and beauty" delineate the women who identify themselves with the symbolic desire. Here, the remarkable "passions" (*qing*) of the female protagonists in these stories manifest their desire and efforts to possess masculinity or symbolic power. Indeed, it is through "masquerade" that a woman is able to fulfill her desire through an initially amorous and eventually marital relation with a man.

1

In addressing the question of the representation of feminine sexuality, Parveen Adams clarifies the psychoanalytic notion of little girls' "negative entry" into the symbolic (233-238). Indebted to the Freudian thesis that woman is "made" instead of "born," she explores the problematic relations between women and the symbolic dialectics.⁸ Given that the symbolic world is constructed around "castration fantasy," the little boys in Freudian theory are assimilated into the

phallic symbolic more smoothly than little girls because little boys are more directly affected by the castration complex. For the girls, since they have nothing to be castrated from the very beginning, their relation with the castration fantasy is problematic or even "negative." In a sense, little girls have to deny whatever they probably have/want in the origin and identify themselves with the male desire for the phallus in order to enter into the symbolic.

Here, as a Lacanian theorist, Adams insists that the phallus be distinguished from the real organ, the penis, which at most serves as one of the many possible signifiers of the phallus (235). Instead of being the real organ, phallus is a privileged object imagined to fill out the lack of human subject and may have assumed in different historical periods and societies different forms ranging from "God," "communism," "democracy," "individualism," and "Americanness," to name only a few.⁹ In pre-modern Chinese society, a society constructed around the civil service examination system, the achievement of an official rank (*gongming*) is most closely associated with the Lacanian phallus. Indeed, accessible only to men, this civil service examination does operate on account of sexual differences. It is responsible for the "negative entry" of Chinese women into their society. On the one hand, as in the case of castration fantasy, Chinese

6 For Lacan's use of the word "masquerade," see "The Signification of the Phallus" 290. Since Lacan takes his idea of "masquerade" from Joan Riviere, see also Riviere. Riviere reads "masquerade" as a woman's camouflage of her desire to possess masculinity. Lacan goes further to emphasize the fetishistic value of the feminine "masquerade": masquerading herself to be a phallus — the signifier of the desire of the Other, a woman becomes a love object of a man to whom she addresses her demand for love for she finds in his body that signifier of her desire. It can be put that "masquerade" accords a woman an access to "having-the-phallus" through "being-the-phallus."

7 As Adams points out, "[i]t is the step that differentiates between being-the-phallus and having-the-phallus that [...] differentiates femininity from masculinity" ("Representation and Sexuality" 235).

8 About Freud's discussion of female sexuality, see "Female Sexuality" and "Femininity."

9 See Žižek's discussion of the master-signifier in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 101-102.



women are not directly bounded by the requirement to pass the civil service examinations. On the other hand, this freedom denies women an appropriate access to the symbolic power. As a result, only through marrying a man who has achieved success in the examinations can a woman be admitted into the social symbolic representation of power and status.

Given the importance of marriage and civil service examinations in traditional Chinese sexual representation, no wonder they play prominent roles in the two texts to be analyzed in this paper. Here, whereas the seemingly subversive nature of amorous passions vis-à-vis the symbolic institutions of marriage and examination has been a focus of analysis in the critical history of "talent and beauty" stories,¹⁰ I would suggest that a woman's amorous desire for a man, not much different from her other desires such as a desire for worldly fame and social status, emerges when she enters into the world of the symbolic. Lacan separates need, demand, and desire. He defines need as a biological need for material objects and demand as a psychic demand for imaginary totality and safety; desire then emerges when one's demand can no longer be satisfied in the symbolic — that is, when one's sense of imaginary totality can no longer be restored through the operation of language.¹¹ Desire is a de-

sire derived from a lack. It pre-exists the object of desire. Indeed, desire is directed toward an (illusory) object (the object of desire, "object petite *a*") retroactively created through the operation of a fantasy.¹² In the "castration fantasy," for example, desire is retroactively tied to the desire for phallus. In the fantasy centered on the Chinese civil service exam, the desire is characterized as the desire for winning an official rank. In the case of pre-modern Chinese women, it is their sexual relationship with men who achieve "gongming" that secures their access to the "object *a*" recognized by the general public. Thus, instead of being subversive vis-à-vis the symbolic order, the passionate love of the heroines in the stories of "talent and beauty" can be understood as an effect of their identification with their social symbolic roles of lack and desire. Driven by their passions for men, they are no longer "The women" out of the control of the dominant symbolic.

The emergence of a woman's desire for men and its effect are dramatized in the first twenty scenes of *The Peony Pavilion*. Seeing their daughter leading a carefree life, the parents of the female protagonist Du Li-niang decide to engage a tutor for her education. However, after studying the first stanza of the opening poem in *The Book of Songs*,¹³ a reading material

10 Such an emphasis on the binary opposition of passion and social regulation can be found, for example, in C. T. Hsia's reading of Du Li-niang's "conventional turn." See Wai-ye Li 54. The argument that Cui Ying-ying in "An Encounter with an Immortal" struggles between her "instinctive desire" and her "culture mold" offers another example. On this, see Yu-hwa Lee 43.

11 About the distinction between need, demand, and desire, see Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus" 286-287.

12 Basically, fantasy is an imaginary scenario filling out the opening of the Other's desire. It teaches us what/how to desire by translating the demand of the symbolic Other into positive terms. See Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power" 272-273 and Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 44-47 and 114-115.

13 As Cyril Birch notes, the opening poem of *The Book of Songs* is "actually a folk love lyric" despite its being traditionally read for moral meaning and didactic purpose. See Birch 24n1.



chosen because it is devoted "to the virtue of the consort,"¹⁴ Li-niang becomes very affected by her desire for sexual love. She then visits the deserted and forbidden garden, dreams of a young scholar Liu Meng-mei, and has sex with him in the dream. Waking from her dream, she becomes so love-sick that she finally dies from pining for the scholar in her dream. *Here, the first question is why a reading of The Book of Songs leads to all this seemingly unexpected tragedy.* Since *The Book of Songs* is one of the Confucian classics, it is possible to read this episode as sarcastic towards Confucianism. But another, perhaps more interesting, reading is to say that by creating in Li-niang's mind the desire for men, the opening poem of *The Book of Songs* precisely fulfills its responsibility in Li-niang's education. Designed to prepare Li-niang to be a good consort in marriage, the poem successfully has Li-niang identify herself with the symbolic desire for heterosexual love and marriage. It transforms Li-niang from "The woman" to "The woman."

In other words, instead of claiming that The Book of Songs produces something beyond expectation, my point is that it has done exactly what it is anticipated to. Through the process of studying the poem, Li-niang has transformed from a desire-free woman to a female of lack/desire. Her change marks her entrance into the "castration fantasy." Moreover, Li-niang's desire to marry a scholar matches well with her parents' desire for her (and for themselves). There are two reasons for Li-niang's parents to find a tutor for her: first, they are not satisfied with Li-niang's care-free, self-indulgent, and symbolically unproductive life;

secondly, they consider education necessary to prepare Li-niang to be a fitting bride for a scholar. Her father says, "[i]t is evident that a virtuous and eligible young lady has always needed an understanding of letters, so that when the time comes for her to marry a learned husband she will not be deficient in conversation" (7). Her mother nourishes a similar desire: "[i]f we can only find a good husband for our daughter, won't that be the same thing as a son of our own" (8)? In contrast to her parents, Li-niang cares nothing about her symbolic position before her education. She indulges herself in "idle pastimes," enjoys her sleep in the daytime, and arrives late for class with her tutor. Totally unaffected by the coming spring, she is even indifferent to the existence of the garden outside her chamber.

However, after her education, Li-niang is no longer self-sufficient. Now a creature of her passions, she feels provoked by every scene in front of her. For the first time, she finds echoes of her passions in the passions of women described in poems and ballads:

[...] now I begin to realize how disturbing the spring's splendor can truly be. They were all telling the truth, those poems and ballads I read that spoke of girls of ancient times "in spring-time moved to passion, in autumn to regret."

(46)

Although Li-niang attributes her sense of lack first to her want of a spouse and then metonymically to the disturbing spring splendor, it is more accurate to say that her lack/desire preexists either her craving for a lover or her vision of the spring. The Chinese saying

¹⁴ Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting* 247. Translation is from Birch 17; henceforth all references are to Birch's translation and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.



"*yuanqing shengwu*" (the object of desire arises from passions) holds here.¹⁵ In terms of Lacan's theory of fantasy, an object of desire is created or imagined retroactively to shield a person from the demanding force of his/her lack/desire. The human subject of lack/desire comes first; then, he/she creates a fantasy scenario to account for an object cause for this lack/desire.

Another example illustrating this retroactive relation of fantasy vis-à-vis one's lack/desire could be found in Scene Twelve when Li-niang visits the garden for the second time intent on recovering her dream. While the garden scenery resembles the place of her love-making in the dream, the scholar Liu Meng-mei is no longer available. In her despair, a plum tree suddenly appears in front of her to fill in the empty spot where the scholar is supposed to occupy:

Why! In a place where no one comes, suddenly
I find a great flowering [plum tree],¹⁶ beautiful
with its thick clusters of fruit. (60)

This plum tree then focuses her wandering vision and in a sense completes her futile search for Liu Meng-mei:

My heart is strangely

drawn to this plum tree's side.

[.]

Let me commit my fragrant spirit,
though rains be dank and drear,
to keep company with this plum tree's roots.

(61)

As the absence of Liu Meng-mei renders an opening in Li-niang's fantasy, the appearance of the plum tree is necessary to fill in this opening and thereby reactivates Li-niang's sexual fantasy.¹⁷ The completion of Li-niang's vision with a plum tree enables her to be—at least temporarily—screened away from her sense of lack.¹⁸ She finds (or creates) an object to which she can commit her originally aimless passions.

Certainly, the outer objects are neutral in origin. They are conceived to be passion-arousing only when their images are appropriated by an individual's fantasy. The passion-free world can easily be distinguished from the world invested by passion and fantasy as the passages on Li-niang's ardor of love alternate with comic elements. One of the most obvious examples is in Scene Ten. The description of the wish-fulfilled joy of Li-niang and Liu's loving-making comes along with the

15 Wai-yee Li holds the same opinion: "desire preexists, and is in some ways independent of, the object of desire" (51). She also points out that the notion that an illusory world is created through desire and passion (namely, "*yuanqing shengwu*") becomes prevalent in late-Ming. See Li 50.

16 Birch's translation is "apricot." However, according to the original Chinese, it is "mei-shu," the plum tree. See Tang Xianzu 281.

17 In reading this passage, Catherine Swatek suggests that this plum tree embodies Liu Meng-mei: "[i]ts sudden appearance as her dream fades suggests that it embodies the dream lover" (132). I nevertheless feel it is better to read the plum tree as a substitute, rather than an embodiment, of the lover. The plum tree is an image drawn to fill in the gap caused by Liu's absence. It should be understood not in terms of its representation of Liu but in terms of its operational function in Du Li-niang's fantasy. This also accounts for why the meaning of the recurrent image, "plum tree," varies throughout *The Peony Pavilion*. Instead of representing some specific person or feeling, the "plum tree" is a neutral image invested by different feelings in different fantasy plots. For a reading of the various meanings of the "plum tree" in *The Peony Pavilion*, see Swatek 131-138.

18 This echoes Lacan's discussion of the arrestment of one's scopophilic drive with a "picture"—a specular field of image that closes upon itself and thus conceals the demanding force of the symbolic Other. See Lacan, "What is a Picture?" 105-119.



cold comments from the flower fairy:¹⁹

Ah, how the male force surges and leaps
as in the way of wanton bee he stirs
the gale of her desire
while her soul trembles
at the dewy brink of a sweet, shaded vale.
A mating of shadows, this,
consummation within the mind,
no fruitful Effect
but an apparition within the Cause. (49)

According to Birch, the notion of "Cause" and "Effect" is a Buddhist concept that describes how the marriage of Li-niang and Liu is pre-determined in their previous life cycle (49n). Placed in the context of my interpretation, however, the sexual consummation is indeed nothing but an "apparition" derived from the operation of Li-niang's fantasy that serves as the "Cause" of her love encounter. The "gale" of love-making here is to "no fruitful effect" because Liu is only a "shadow"—an illusive object generated from Li-niang's lack in order to fulfill her fantasy plot. Taking place "within the mind," the love relation between Li-niang and Liu is imaginary by nature when seen from the detached eyes of the flower fairy.

Li-niang's entry into the symbolic is therefore marked by the transformation of her relations with the object world. This is a "negative entry" because through her identification with the prevailing desire of the symbolic, what she originally has as an un-

bounded woman is left outside of symbolization and representation. She ends up desiring what a man desires: the achievement of social recognition through a success in the civil service examinations. And here, marriage is the only proper way through which she is allowed to accomplish this desire. In this sense, the death of Li-niang and later her re-birth through the help of Liu well dramatizes the process of a woman's "negative entry." To be more precise, what dies is the self she gives away when she starts to identify herself with the symbolic. She then becomes a ghost, an alien object, a woman in feminine "masquerade" in the middle part of the play.²⁰ Only through her marriage with Liu can she be "reborn" into the symbolic and achieve integration with it.

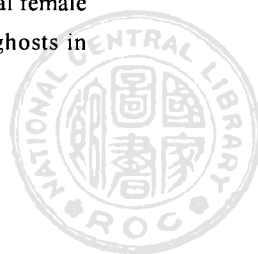
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I mention at the beginning of this paper that the passions of the female protagonists in "talent and beauty" stories are not necessarily as subversive as have been expected. On the contrary, the emergence of their passions may be the result of their inability to achieve what is valued in society by themselves. Usually, the final object of their quest is what their society values and their passionate love for men provides them with a legal access to this object. Instead of pining for an outlaw sexual relation, Li-niang craves for marriage, particularly a marriage with a successful candidate in civil service examinations:

My young passions stir to the young spring

19 Li reads the alternation of the ardent love and comic elements as a strategy of "comic reconciliation" that is consistent in Tang's dramatic works (50-64). See also 57-58 for her reading of the dual perspectives in this love-making scene.

20 It is noticeable that femininity is closely associated with ghostliness, alienness, delicateness, intangibility, and ephemerality. Marlon K. Hom reads in the supernatural women from *The Strange Stories of Liao-zhai* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*) (1766) the ideal female images created by male fantasy. See Hom 270-275. Besides, Zeitlin discusses the "hyperfemininity" of female ghosts in "Embodying the Disembodied" 8.



season, but where shall I find an "entrant of the moon's toad palace"? Long ago the Lady Han found a way to a meeting with Yu You, and the scholar Zhang met with Miss Cui by chance . . .]how these "fair maids and gifted youths" after clandestine meetings made marital unions [. . .] . (46)

The "entrant of the moon's toad palace" (changong zhi ke) refers to a scholar who succeeds in the examinations. The two famous "talent and beauty" stories Li-niang refers to all end in happy marriages when the scholars successfully pass the examinations and ensure not only their worldly fame but also the social status of their wives.²¹ Li-niang's concern with marriage and the social status of her prospective husband makes evident that her desire corresponds with the desire prescribed by the social symbolic.

In "An Encounter with an Immortal," the female protagonist Cui Ying-ying's passions are also underscored by her wish for a marriage with young Zhang, a talented scholar expected to pass the examinations. Although we may read Ying-ying as a woman who finally yields to her passions after a long struggle between her knowledge of social constraint and her love

for the scholar Zhang,²² the binary opposition between the social regulations and individual passions suggested here is questionable. I would suggest that Ying-ying craves for a marriage with Zhang from the start of their illicit affair. Indeed, since Zhang and Ying-ying are relatives and Zhang has saved the family Cui from a mutiny of rebel troops as indicated at the opening of the story, Zhang could have married Ying-ying if he were willing to do so. As Ying-ying's maid says to him, " [. . .] you know very well who Miss Cui's relatives are; why don't you ask for her hand in marriage, as you are entitled to do because of the favor you did them."²³ Later, when Zhang and Ying-ying have met each other regularly at night for some time, Zhang asks Ying-ying about Madame Cui's opinion about their affair. Ying-ying responds: "[s] he knows there is nothing she can do about, and so she hopes you will regularize things" (141). Apparently, Madame Cui does not oppose their marriage. To "regularize things" implies to transform their illicit relations into a legitimate marriage.²⁴ Perhaps the most revealing confession of Ying-ying regarding her desire is in her letter to Zhang:

Our first meeting was at the banquet, [. . . y]ou

21 The two stories named in the original Tang's text are *The Poem on the Red Leaf* (*Tihong ji*) and *The Story of Cui Hui* (*Cui hui zhuang*). Since *The Story of Cui Hui* tells the story between a Miss Cui and Pei Jing-zhong rather than Miss Cui and Zhang, the story in Li-niang's mind might be *The West Chamber* (*Xixiang ji*), a Yuan version of Ying-ying and young Zhang's story with a happy ending, rather than *The Story of Cui Hui*. For more discussion of *The West Chamber*, see note 28.

22 Dong, for example, asserts that Ying-ying "is confronted with a conflict between propriety and passion" after meeting Zhang (81). Lee also suggests that the characterization of Ying-ying "reveals the conflicts between her instinctive desire and her cultural mold" (43).

23 Yuan Zhen, "Huizhen ji" (An encounter with an immortal), appendix in Wang Shi-fu, *Xixiang ji* (The west chamber). The translation is from J. R. Hightower, "The Story of Ying-ying" 140; henceforth all references are to Hightower's translation and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

24 In his study of the Chinese stories of illicit affairs (*touqing*), Zheng-guo Kang points out that marriage is commonly resorted to in solving the problems of illicit affairs. Illicit love affairs between young unmarried couples may not only escape social castigation but turn out to be wish-fulfilling romantic comedies so long as the secret love ends in marriage. See Kang.



made advances, like that other poet, Sima Xiang-ru.²⁵ [. . .w]hen I offered myself in your bed, you treated me with the greatest kindness, and I supposed, in my innocence, that I could always depend on you. How could I have foreseen that our encounter could not possibly lead to something definite[. . .] . (143)

Ying-ying associates her love affair with the love story of Sima Xiang-ru and Zhuo Wen-jun in Han times, an illicit love affair ending happily because Sima becomes a "laureate of literature" and receives imperial patronage.²⁶ Since Ying-ying also falls in love with Zhang because of his literary talent, her comparison of Zhang with Sima exposes her expectation of Zhang's future official success and, of course, his marrying her. In effect, she begs Zhang to marry her in the letter:

If you, out of kindness, would condescend to fulfill my selfish wish, though it came on my dying day it would seem to be a new lease on life. (143)

The idea of having a "new lease on life" through marriage reminds one of Li-niang's "rebirth" through the help of Liu Meng-mei's male life-giving power (*jingqi*). Like Li-niang in her death, Ying-ying lives in the margin, the darkness, of the symbolic unless she could be granted a promising marriage.

Obviously, one of the mysteries in "An Encounter with an Immortal" lies in Zhang's reluctance to marry Ying-ying. A question worth asking is that while Ying-ying considers her marriage with Zhang a necessary step for her to enter the symbolic economy, what is Ying-ying's position in Zhang's fantasy? As

the title of the story indicates, Ying-ying is compared to an "immortal" by Zhang. She is depicted as having an unworldly, immortal-like beauty. From her first appearance, Ying-ying is marked by her fragility, ephemerality, coyness, and silence — all the qualities of an enigmatic, dreamy, and unattainable woman of striking femininity. In the banquet where Ying-ying is asked to meet with Zhang for the first time, she is slow to appear. It first occurs to Zhang that she must be beautiful because her younger brother is beautiful. She claims that she is sick and would like to be excused from the banquet. Although she finally comes out, she sits without uttering a word throughout the banquet despite Zhang's attempts "to make a conversation with her" (140). From this time on, nonetheless, Zhang is "infatuated" with her (140).

In a sense, Zhang is bewitched by Ying-ying exactly because of her elusiveness. And if this is the case, it is reasonable that his love for Ying-ying cannot be sustained when Ying-ying becomes realistic and responds to his love, not to mention when she requests marriage from him. The relationship between Zhang and Ying-ying could be understood in terms of the Lacanian model of "courtly love." The Lady in courtly love serves as an "object *a*" in the fantasy plot of the knight. As an object of attraction, she is nevertheless more an imaginary object supporting the knight's fantasy and desire than a realistic object to be possessed by the knight. To be more exact, the Lady as the object-cause of desire is not supposed to be accessible because once she is accessible, she loses her position as a privileged object—that is, the phallus, the Thing, or a woman in "masquerade." Thus, while elevating

25 For the sake of consistency in this essay, the romantization in the original translation is here changed to pin-yin romantization.

26 For the details of the story of Sima and Zhuo, see Lee 48.



the Lady to be his object of desire, a knight also has to construct all kinds of obstacles that prevent him from reaching his Lady. Slavoj Žižek elaborates on the logic of courtly love:

[. . .] some common, everyday object or act becomes inaccessible or impossible to accomplish once it finds itself in the position of the Thing — although the thing should be easily within reach, the entire universe has somehow been adjusted to produce, again and again, an unfathomable contingency blocking access to the object. ("Courtly Love" 95)

In "An Encounter with an Immortal," it seems that Zhang elevates Ying-ying to the position of the Lady *qua* Thing. She is an object created by Zhang's lack/desire. To be more precise, as a scholar who has not passed civil service examinations, Zhang's symbolic position is unstable at the moment he encounters Ying-ying. This sense of instability exacerbates his sense of lack as a human subject. Since an object is necessary to fill in one's lack/desire (that is, "*yuanqing shengwu*"), the sense of instability leads Zhang to create the apparition of a love object, or the "object *a*," to fill in his sense of lack. It is no wonder that a story of "talent and beauty" usually begins with a frustrated scholar's encounter with a woman of supernatural beauty.²⁷ In *The Peony Pavilion*, Liu Meng-mei discovers Li-niang's portrait and worships her figure in the portrait as his immortal love also when he is in the hardships of travel to the capital to take exams. Be it in Zhang's or Liu's case, the infatuation with an immortal-like beauty distracts the young scholar from his sense of instability and frustration. It seems that at

the moment when a scholar's success in imperial examinations seems remote, he displaces his fantasy for a success in the exams with another fantasy, that is, a fantasy centered on a sublimated woman of supernatural beauty.

Actually, the emphasis on Ying-ying's unworldly beauty, the description of her night visit to Zhang as an immortal, and Zhang's composition of a poem of sixty lines entitled "An Encounter with an Immortal" ("Huizhen shi") all associate Zhang's fantasy with the plot of courtly love. This courtly love relation also accounts for Zhang's decision to leave for the capital when his relation with Ying-ying becomes more steady. Obviously, Zhang is creating obstacles to their marriage to maintain Ying-ying's "object *a*" position. After his short stay in the capital, Zhang returns to meet with Ying-ying. This time, Ying-ying's successful "masquerade" through her extreme elusiveness makes Zhang "more infatuated with her":

She was a very good calligrapher and wrote poetry, but for all that he kept begging to see her work, she would never show it. Zhang wrote poems for her, challenging her to match them, but she paid them little attention. The thing that made her unusual was that, while she excelled in the arts, she always acted as though she were ignorant, and although she was quick and clever in speaking, she would seldom indulge in repartee. She loved Zhang very much but would never say so in words. (142)

To remain mysterious and inaccessible is what Zhang hopes for Ying-ying. However, since the final goal of a feminine masquerade is not simply to make one an

27 Other examples can be found in *The Strange Stories of Liaozhai*, a collection of stories remarkable for their delineation of supernatural women. The elusive and transient female figures usually appear in front of scholars of relatively low status or in the process of travel—hence their status of instability—and start an affair with them.



object of male fantasy but to achieve her subject position in the social symbolic, Ying-ying's problem lies in her inability to transform herself from her position of the Lady *qua* Thing to a marriageable woman in the symbolic.²⁸

Indeed, Ying-ying as the Lady *qua* Thing in Zhang's fantasy provides grounds for Zhang's eventual desertion of Ying-ying. As an "object *a*," Ying-ying has to remain veiled. That is, she has to remain inaccessible in order to be attractive. The confession of her feelings in front of Zhang disrupts her imaginary position as the Thing. Ying-ying's confession marks the moment when "the loved one" changes into "the loving one" (Žižek, "Courtly Love" 103). As the object of Zhang's fantasy, Ying-ying suddenly reveals her lack/desire underlying her feminine masquerade by "stretching [her] hand out towards the supplicant" and calls for love (Žižek, "Courtly Love" 104). But this is not what Zhang wishes for. It is obvious that he

never loves Ying-ying as an individual in her lack and desire. Rather, he loves her because of the "something in her more than her,"²⁹ namely, her imaginary status as a super-human partner of sublimation. Zhang thus takes leave after Ying-ying's confession and only writes her a letter when he fails the exams the second year. It is at this moment that Ying-ying writes him the letter formally declaring her desire for marriage. As expected from the logic of courtly love, Zhang "determine[s] on his own course of action" (144) and does not want to have any further connection with Ying-ying after receiving her letter.³⁰

Another thing worth mentioning is that after Zhang breaks with Ying-ying, he circulates Ying-ying's letter among his friends.³¹ They then compose poems to commemorate this love affair. There are two poems quoted in the story. One is a four-line poem composed by Yang Ju-yuan; another is a long verse said to be a continuation of Zhang's poem and claimed to be writ-

28 In later versions of the story of Zhang and Ying-ying, among which the most famous is Wang Shi-fu's *Xixiang ji* (The west chamber), Ying-ying becomes marriageable precisely because she is characterized as more well-founded in the symbolic than in "An Encounter with an Immortal." Most noticeable changes undertaken by these later versions include *Xixiang ji*'s portrayal of Ying-ying as the "late Premier Cui's daughter," which ensures her privileged symbolic position. Besides, the obstacle of Zhang and Ying-ying's marriage here is no longer Zhang's reluctance but primarily Madame Cui's objection to this marriage as well as Ying-ying's earlier betrothal to her cousin. Most importantly, Ying-ying in *Xixiang ji* is much better than her predecessor in manipulating the symbolic to her favor. She insists on social regulations and Zhang's marital responsibility for her, reiterating that as the "late premier's daughter" she must be treated with respect. For a detailed comparison of the different versions of Ying-ying's story, see Qing-huang Chen 2-16.

29 This is taken from the Lacanian motto: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the *objet petit a*—I mutilate you" ("In You More Than You" 263).

30 In her reading of "Ge-jin," a story from *The Strange Stories of Liao-zhai*, Wai-ye Li also notes in the relationship between the fairy goddess Ge-jin and her human lover scholar Chang something similar to the logic of courtly love. As she points out, "[t]he illusion of bliss can be maintained only in uncertainty (that is, so long as Chang regards himself as the passive recipient of some inexplicable divine beneficence), hence the importance of the motif of the well-kept secret. The revelation of cause and effect [. . .] results in loss of the object of desire" (107-108).

31 It is noticeable that Zhang circulates Ying-ying's letter only in a closed circle. The complicity among scholars is established as they share a similar fantasy. Besides, the division between a scholar's public symbolic world and his private imaginary space is clear as we observe that the love poems appearing in "An Encounter with an Immortal" as well as other love poems written by Yuan Zhen are not included in his collected works. For details, see Hightower, "Yuan Zhen and the 'Story of Ying-ying'" 118 and Lee xii.



ten by Yuan Zhen, who appears in the story as a friend "especially close" to Zhang (144).³² Interesting here is the reason for all the poetry-writing and circulation. What is the purpose of including in the story the poem by Yuan Zhen, which is "disproportionally long" and marked by a "flowery erotic passage" (Hightower, "Yuan Zhen and 'The Story of Ying-ying'" 103)? To some extent, it reminds one of the poetry-writing tradition in courtly love. Dwelling on the episode of the mysterious, immortal-like visit of Ying-ying to Zhang at night that ends with her leaving and his craving for her return, this poem again fosters Ying-ying's supernatural image. Poetry provides a space to prolong Zhang's imaginary love with Ying-ying. It offers him a detour to approach, but not reach, his object of desire.

Zhang finally justifies his desertion of Ying-ying by blaming her for being a temptress. As Žižek remarks, "the Lady *qua* Thing can also be designated as the embodiment of radical Evil" ("Courtly Love" 98). Just as the phallus is both the signifier of plenitude and the signifier of loss, the Lady *qua* Thing is the benefice-giver and the *femme fatale* in one. Not only does she offer the image of wish-fulfillment but her existence discloses the knight's innate lack and desire. She is both the object of desire and the object of trauma. Chinese literary tradition provides similar dual images of beautiful women. Women are conceived either as the positive immortal and goddesses (*xian* or *zhen*) or as the negative "beautiful but threatening creatures" (*youwu*) and "the alien and predatory

monsters" (*yaonie*).³³ The shift of Ying-ying's position from one to the other is accountable and even necessary for providing Zhang with an excuse to safeguard himself from the availability of Ying-ying. It makes a lot of sense that Zhang, as related at the end of the story, does not try to meet with Ying-ying again from the time he receives her letter until both of them marry other people and Ying-ying is unavailable again.

3

Be she an immortal beauty or a threatening creature, Ying-ying is an other, an alien object vis-à-vis the symbolic order. Related to the symbolic world only in terms of her masquerade as an "object *a*," the object *qua* Thing, Ying-ying functions in the symbolic as a phallus crossed through (*phallus*), namely, a privileged signifier of radical loss. Her failure to marry Zhang further manifests her position as an object of fantasy but not a subject of symbolic power. In comparison with her, Du Li-niang in *The Peony Pavilion* achieves more. Falling from her position as an unbounded biological woman, Li-niang also becomes a woman in "masquerade"—an alien other, a supernatural woman, a ghost of hyperfemininity—in the middle part of the play. But unlike Ying-ying, she accomplishes a "rebirth" into symbolic through her marriage with Liu Meng-mei and finally takes part in his quest for the official rank by encouraging Liu to take the civil service examinations. Instead of remaining an object of the symbolic fantasy, she ends up being a participant in the symbolic quest for the object.

Li-niang's masquerade is vividly seen through her

32 For a discussion of the autobiographical nature of "An Encounter with an Immortal," see Hightower, "Yuan Zhen and 'The Story of Ying-ying'" and Lee 8-13.

33 For a discussion of the dual images of Chinese women, see Dong 76. About the notion of "beautiful creatures" (*youwu*) in Chinese literary tradition, see also Glen Dudbridge 67-72.



act of making a self-portrait, especially when her physical body is substituted by her portrait at her death. Indeed, Li-niang's portrait means less to represent her self than to solicit an imagined gaze.³⁴ By making a self-portrait, Li-niang makes herself an "object *a*" addressing her lover's fantasy.³⁵ This is most obvious when her maid Fragrance comments on her portrait that "all it lacks is a husband by your side" (69) and Li-niang confesses that she does have a man in mind. She then inscribes a poem on the head of the scroll to hint her "spring yearnings" for the scholar Liu (70). Besides, she expresses her worries about whether her portrait will be received by someone before the painting fades:

[.]

pain to predict, as the years deepen
the fading of tint from eye and lip
of the Ajiao, locked up in golden chamber.

Vain labor when to no lover's eye this lovely image
unrolled will bring a tear,
when there is none to call
the living Zhenzhen from the painted scroll.

(70-71)

Made for a lover's eye, the image of Li-niang in the portrait is the Li-niang in masquerade. Rather than embodying the real person, it is an image displacing Li-niang's physical body as well as her status as a human subject.

Liu Meng-mei's encounter with the portrait and his worship of the figure in the portrait as a goddess is

not much different from the scholar Zhang's encounter with Ying-ying. Entitled "*Wanzhen*," which can be translated either as "examining the portrait" or "appreciating the immortal" since "*zhen*" refers to both a portrait and an immortal in Chinese, Scene Twenty-six in *The Peony Pavilion* delineates how Liu grows infatuated with the image of Li-niang. He elevates Li-niang to be his object of desire, his Lady *qua* Thing:

[. . .] I should spend my days before this portrait,
to admire her and present my obeisances, to call
her and sing her praises. (146)

Moreover, like the knight in courtly love who usually relates himself to the Lady in terms of masochism,³⁶ Liu subjects himself to what he imagines to be Li-niang's formless and capricious gaze/desire:

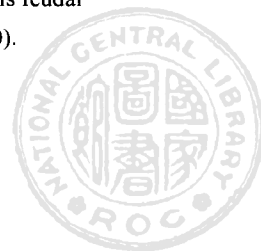
Ah my young lady,
image without form,
your gaze destroys me! (147)

One point to be made here is that although in appearance Liu is so bewitched by Li-niang's portrait, the portrait only serves as a support of Liu's own fantasy plot. In Liu's act of "examining the portrait," it is not the portrait but Liu's eyes—his desire and his fantasy, namely, his imagination of an unachievable and vanishing image of his Lady *qua* Thing—that take control. This becomes obvious when it is realized that it never occurs to Liu that the woman he dreams of earlier in the play, the immortal-like figure inside the portrait, and the mysterious woman later visiting him at night are actually the same Du Li-niang. Who

34 Certainly, there must be an imagined gaze before a portrait can be drawn. Hence Lacan's argument: "[. . .] it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which [. . .] I am *photo-graphed*." See Lacan, "What is a Picture?" 106. In the case of Li-niang, her portrait addresses the symbolic male desire she has identified herself with.

35 Lacan makes clear the subject-object relations in a picture/portrait by claiming that the "subject I" does not exist in a picture: "[n]o doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eyes. But I am not in the picture." See Lacan, "The Line and Light" 96. For the discussion that Li-niang's portrait is made for a lover, see also Swatek 146-149.

36 As Žižek points out, "[t]he knight's relationship to the Lady is [. . .] the relationship of the subject-bondman, vassal, to his feudal Master-Sovereign who subjects him to senseless, outrageous, impossible, arbitrary, capricious ordeals" ("Courtly Love" 90).



the Lady is makes no difference. The "object *a*" never needs a consistent identity. It is exchangeable so long as it is an object occupying the position of the "object *a*."

Actually, the relationship between Liu and Li-niang develops beyond the model of courtly love only when they start to inquire into each other's (familial/social) identity. In order to forward her relationship with Liu from an imaginary courtly love to a symbolic marital one, Li-niang is smart enough to arouse Liu's attention to the fact that she is not like what he imagines a fairy, an immortal, an alien woman, despite the fact that she is really a ghost during the period of their nocturnal meetings. After Sister Stone, the nun in charge of the garden after Li-niang's parents move away, bursts in on one of their secret meetings but fails to discover Li-niang, Liu is even more absorbed in his fantasy of having an immortal mistress:

How could poor student earn such bliss,
had of celestial being
more true, more loving than mortal woman.
(182)

Li-niang, on the contrary, keeps reminding Liu of her anxiety that some rumor might reach her parents' ears:

Risking [. . .]
should rumor breathe as far as my father's
house the torrent of my mother's angry words.
(183)

After this, she starts to query him about his family, carries the conversation to the topic of marriage, arouses Liu's curiosity about her social background, but refuses to reveal to him her secret of being a ghost until he makes a marriage vow.

Li-niang's ascendancy from being an alien object of male desire to becoming a subject in the symbolic is achieved with step-by-step care. After revealing that she is exactly the immortal-like figure inside the portrait, she moves forward to secure her symbolic connection by telling Liu who her father is and thus brings up her prominent family origin. The symbolic position of her father is important for Li-niang's ascendancy. As it is common for the scholar in the pre-modern China to find a patronage in a prominent family through marriage,³⁷ the knowledge that Li-niang's father is Prefect Du makes his relationship with Li-niang symbolically productive. That Liu values his symbolic connection with Prefect Du through his marriage is well revealed when Liu refers to himself not as the lover of Li-niang but as the son-in-law of Du after he promises to exhume Li-niang's body: "[u]canny ! Liu Meng-mei, son-in-law to Prefect Du: surely this was a dream?" (190). In a sense, the revelation of Li-niang's parental background bridges the gap between Liu's imaginary fantasy of unworldly passions and his symbolic quest for an official rank. With this, Li-niang is no longer just an image of masquerade generated by Liu's desire. She becomes "Miss Du" — a marriageable woman of symbolic solidity. Compared to Ying-ying, Li-niang is definitely in a much more privileged position to achieve her final goal of masquerade. Despite the fact that Ying-ying might also grow up in a gentry family, her father is dead at the moment she encounters Zhang and her mother is apparently too powerless to arrange her marriage. While Li-niang proves herself to be symbolically useful to Liu, Ying-ying has been destined

37 This is frequently seen in pre-modern Chinese literature. In addition to *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Lute* (*Piba ji*) by Gao Ming offers another example.



to be an other since the death of her father.

Li-niang's insistence on a formal marriage between her and Liu also exemplifies her concern about her symbolic position. She reminds Liu that "betrothal makes wife, elopement only concubine" even when she is still a ghost (186). After the ritual of exhumation—a ritual important because it dramatizes the process of a woman's ascendancy into the symbolic through the inspiriting power of masculine vitality (Swatek 155), Li-niang reiterates the importance of "the order of the parents and the arrangements of the go-betweens" for her marriage (207). Moreover, she draws a clear distinction between the code in the world of spirits and that in the world of human symbolic:

The other night I was a wandering spirit; now I am a living woman. A ghost may be deluded by passion; a woman must pay full attention to the rites. (207)

Li-niang's argument finds supports from *The Strange Stories of Liao-zhai* in which the mortal women are required to follow closely the traditional code of womanhood, whereas the female spirits, the objects of male fantasy, are unbounded by society since they are only imaginary projections of men's desire.³⁸ Judging from this, the failure of Ying-ying to be integrated into the symbolic is at least partly due to her violation of the reality principle. Her act of offering herself to the scholar Zhang at night blurs the boundary between her symbolic subject position and her masquerade as an "object *a*." Whereas Li-niang carefully guides Liu from his courtly love fantasy to an acceptance of her as a woman of reality, Ying-ying remains an object in Zhang's fantasy. This difference makes *The Peony Pavilion* a romantic comedy and "An Encounter with

an Immortal" a love tragedy.

The Peony Pavilion closes at the reunion of the world of daughter, which is marked by the love romance between Li-niang and Liu, and the larger social background of father, in which Prefect Du successfully suppresses the rebellious troops and achieves one more feat in his civil service career. The bridge between the two worlds is Liu Meng-mei, who finally passes the civil service examinations. In Scene Fifty-five, appealing to the eminent position now achieved by Liu, Li-niang asks her father to acknowledge her symbolic presence:

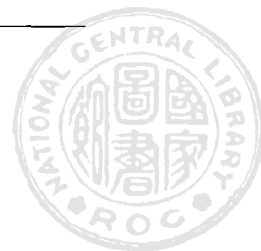
[. . .] there are people who build high towers decked out with colored silks, yet even in broad daylight can't succeed in attracting a son-in-law of official rank. And here I, your daughter, from ghostly caverns of my dreams have made the conquest of no less than the Prize Candidate . [. . .] Father, please acknowledge me as your daughter.

(335-336)

As the wife of the Prize Candidate (*zhuangyuan*) in the imperial examinations, Li-niang is well admitted into the world of the symbolic. Appointed Mistress of Yanghe County by the emperor, she formally shifts her position from "being-an-object" to "having-an-object."

In conclusion, whereas Ying-ying fails to attain integration with the symbolic in "An Encounter with an Immortal," *The Peony Pavilion* features a successful Li-niang, who is generally considered "a model and inspiration for countless women" seeking for the compatibility of their pursuits of "love, talent, and virtue" (Ko 112). However, while celebrating Li-

38 See the comparison of mortal women and female spirits in Hom 259-275.



niang's success, we have to remember that Li-niang only fulfills whatever her masculinity complex has demanded from her: she identifies with the desire of the symbolic Other at first and then achieves an official rank — a signifier of the object of the symbolic desire. As revealed in both "An Encounter with an Immortal" and *The Peony Pavilion*, what is innate in a biological woman is always already lost. The amorous passion of either Ying-ying or Li-niang is actually an effect of their "negative entry" into the symbolic. Instead of featuring a subversive power in opposition to the social symbolic structure, the passions of Li-niang and Ying-ying manifest their desire to win a ticket through marriage to what seems available only to men.

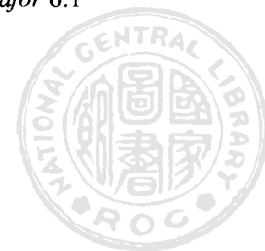
Thus, be it in the case of Ying-ying's failure or in the case of Li-niang's success, "*The woman*" is left out

of the symbolic representation in the stories of "talent and beauty." Ying-ying as a woman never living beyond her masquerade is certainly an imaginary other in relation to the symbolic. Even Li-niang, the woman achieving integration with the symbolic, is not "*The woman*" but a woman constituted and assimilated by the symbolic male desire. The representation of women in the stories of "talent and beauty" is thus a representation of *The* women "with 'The' crossed through"—namely, "Thé woman" (Lacan, "God and the Jouissance of Thé Woman" 144). More about symbolic desire than about women, it does not teach us what *The* woman's desire really is. Instead of learning about *The* woman, we learn from the stories of "talent and beauty" how social symbolic order operates in and through women.



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「才子佳人」底蘊：《牡丹亭》與〈會真記〉中的女性再現

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本論文以湯顯祖《牡丹亭》和元稹〈會真記〉為文本，探討中國傳統才子佳人故事中女人再現的議題。援引拉崗派心理分析中攸關性／別的論述，我觀察科舉社會裡女人和象徵建置的關係，試圖挖掘才子佳人故事頌揚男女情愛表象之下的性別糾葛。首先，以《牡丹亭》的女主角杜麗娘為例，我說明傳統女人融入象徵建置體系時的自我否定。其次，揭櫫拉崗「騎士愛情」("courtly love")和「戀慕她者」("object *a*")的理論，我分析杜麗娘及〈會真記〉中的崔鶯鶯如何透過「扮裝」以成為心儀才子之「戀慕她者」，進而析論才子與佳人之間複雜的愛戀與權力關係。最後，透過對兩部文本一喜一悲結局的閱讀，我指出女人必得透過婚姻以在象徵建置中攻佔一席之地。簡言之，才子佳人故事表面書寫女人情慾，實則以收納女人於男性中心象徵建置為敘述主軸。與其說才子佳人故事歌頌女人真「情」("passion")，還不如說象徵建置透過故事中佳人的穿針引線滋長茁壯。

關鍵詞：女人再現 才子佳人故事 《牡丹亭》 拉崗 〈會真記〉

