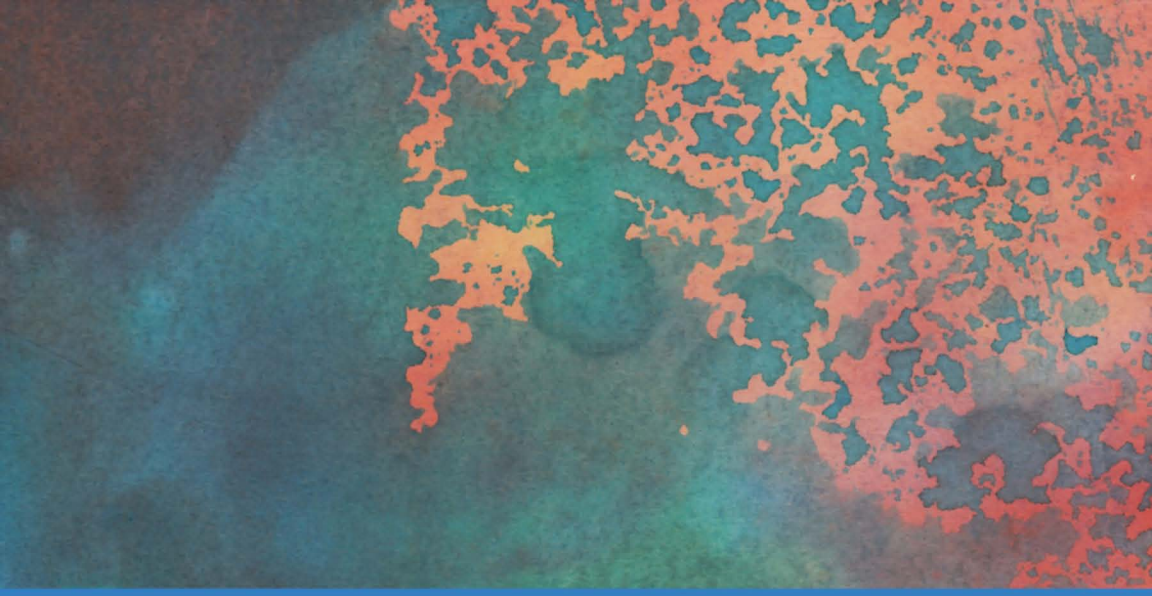

Routledge Studies in Comparative Literature

XUEQIN AND XAKESPEARE

READING *THE STORY OF THE STONE* THROUGH *HAMLET*

Judith Forsyth

Xueqin and Xakespeare

This mongraph offers a detailed consideration of the five-volume novel written by Cao Xueqin and translated into English as *The Story of the Stone*, when read through William Shakespeare's drama *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, A Tragedy in Five Acts*. The book builds on the superlative David Hawkes/John Minford English language translation, which is inspired by resonances between the English Shakespearean literary heritage and the dynasties-old Chinese literary tradition inherited by Cao Xueqin. The Introduction sets out the potential for the significant cultural exchange between these two great literary works, each an inexhaustible inspiration of artistic and scholarly re-interpretation. Two chapters bring into consideration two universal literary themes: patriarchy – filial obedience and family honour, and tragic romantic love. These chapters are structured so that a key episode in *Hamlet* provides the initial perspective, which is then carried through to an episode in *The Story of the Stone* which offers points of complementarity: in-depth interpretation draws on inter-textual, historical and contemporary contexts referenced from the immense body of scholarly research which has accumulated around these iconic works. The third chapter proposes a new reading of the problematic 'shrew' character in the novel, Wang Xi-feng, through tracing the similarities of the structure of the narration of her life and death with a Shakespearean five-act tragedy.

Judith Forsyth is a Shakespeare scholar with a long and enduring interest in Chinese literary culture. The language barrier inhibited serious critical enquiry until the advent of the 'Shakespearean' English translation of *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes and John Minford opened up the potential this book explores for detailed cultural exchange between the two great writers William Shakespeare and Cao Xueqin.

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For my two 'wonderful girls' Miranda and Juliet, and their partners Daniel and Anthony, my six beloved grandchildren Atticus, Paco, Saskia, Olivia, Isabel and Harry, and my great film buddy Roy.

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Introduction

The Story of the Stone: a 'Shakespearean' translation

In the words of the eminent Chinese scholar C.T. Hsia, it is the 'greater philosophical ambition' and the 'deeper psychological insight' which establishes the iconic greatness of *The Story of the Stone*,[1] and it is a commonplace that Cao Xueqin is frequently coupled with William Shakespeare as the greatest creative writers in their respective cultures. Both artists create around their characters such a richness of human observation and linguistic play – literary, philosophical, historical, political, social, aesthetic – as to continue to generate an immense scholarship, and can rightly be thought of, in the famous lampooning words of the old courtier in *Hamlet*, as 'the best in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited' (H 2.2.334). It is this very 'greatness', however, which places such a huge demand upon translation of these texts, one 'East', one 'West', into each other's languages, and which severely inhibits other than superficial comparison between the two writers, even when both can be 'read' in the same language – here, in English.

The title of this book – Shakespeare written as Xakespeare and Xueqin written without the proper name 'Cao' – brings East and West together and signals an ambition to unfold the Chinese literary masterpiece, translated into English as *The Story of the Stone*, from the perspective of a reader of Shakespearean drama, *Hamlet* in particular. For the English-language scholar lacking Chinese literacy, this ambition has been made both viable and encouraged by the superlative translation of the five-volume novel, the first three volumes by David Hawkes (1973, 1977, 1980) and the last two volumes – written by Gao E based on text by Cao Xueqin – by John Minford (1982, 1986). While there have been many more or less substantial previous English translations, it is a most fortunate mediation of the cultural barrier for this reading of 'Xueqin through Xakespeare' that the Hawkes/Minford translation finds in the Chinese literary text so many resonances with Shakespeare's use of words and dramatic art: the translation is itself the initial act of interpretation upon which this 'reading' relies for

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its own justification. Further, a recent scholarly study of the David Hawkes translation, tracing within it the influence of the multi-lingual translator's global literary heritage – West and East – goes so far as conclude that 'In his translation of *Stone*, Hawkes may be said to have rendered *la langue de Confucius* into *la langue de Shakespeare*'.[2] If this is an act of cultural appropriation, it is also a reverse invitation to translate the language of Shakespeare in *Hamlet* into the language of Confucius.

The title of the book is also a simple illustration of one of the lighter confusions and complexities of reading in translation: names themselves both reflect and resist the linguistic approximations involved in interpretation across cultures. The Chinese pinyin romanisation Cao Xueqin – or Cao Zhan, the literary name for Xueqin – has replaced earlier Western romanisations Ts'ao Chan and Tsao Hsueh-chin, with the unfortunate implication that for most English-speaking readers, 'Cao' would most commonly be pronounced 'Cow', verified by this reader obliged to suffer a national radio book club broadcast on *The Story of the Stone* in which the author was referred to as 'Mr Cow' throughout. This is not a trivial matter: Hawkes saw pronunciation as a 'main consideration . . . He did not want the Pao in Pao-yu or Pao-chai to be pronounced Pow', hence his insistence on 'Bao'.[3] The use of the author's personal name Xueqin rather than Cao in the title and throughout the book reflects this 'consideration', played with by the author himself in a comical moment in the narrative when the family matriarch confuses the name 'Bao' with 'Zhao' and is annoyed at being corrected: 'Well, 'Zhao' or 'Bao' or 'brown cow', how can I be expected to remember such things?' (S2.47.435)

Scholars of imaginative literature, negotiating the archaeological chasm between past and present, classical and modern, within and between cultures, are simultaneously persuaded by the imaginative power of great art to breach this chasm and 'speak' as if directly to the human heart and mind. In particular, it is the 'speaking' dramatic qualities – visual, aural, performative – of Xueqin's narrative style brought out in the Hawkes translation which invite comparison with Shakespeare's poetic drama. Hawkes himself may have been encouraged in this by an aspect of the literary origins of *The Story of the Stone* to which he draws attention in his Introduction to the novel:

> At one point, so Red Inkstone [one of Xueqin's contemporary commentators] tells us, he even thought of abandoning the traditional [prose] romance form altogether and writing a verse drama instead. Certainly he was influenced much more by the techniques of drama (which he loved) and painting (which he practised) than by any of the pre-existing works of Chinese prose fiction, which on the whole he rather despised.
>
> (S 1.43)

Again, C. T. Hsia, taking Shakespeare as an example, declares that in reading the great verse dramatists such as Tang Xianzu, 'we must attend to every detail of the dramatic structure, every nuance of poetic language, to do proper justice to the meaning of the plays'.[4] This emphasis on textual analysis has been equally applied to Cao Xueqin; 'the ideal reader of *The Story of the Stone* realises that every phrase in the text should be read as if it were a line of poetry', moreover, of poetry of the late Tang, with its 'reduced horizons of hope'.[5]

For the English-language-only reader, this places an enormous dependence on the translation, perhaps relieved a little by recalling that at the outset of the novel, Brother Stone/Xueqin specifically distances himself from conventional historical romances, 'boudoir' romances and 'the kind of romance . . . that only gets written because the author requires a framework in which to show off his love poems'; by contrast, his extended narrative is a less-rarefied, more homely read, a tale such as one may pick up

> When they are recovering from sleep or drunkenness, or when they wish to escape from business worries or a fit of the dumps, and in doing so may find not only mental refreshment but even perhaps, if they will heed its lesson and abandon their vain and frivolous pursuits, some small arrest in the deterioration of their vital forces.
>
> (1.1.50)

Brother Stone's Taoist interrogator is not satisfied with this and makes 'a careful second reading': now 'He could see that the main theme was love . . . quite simply a true record of real events . . . entirely free of any tendency to deprave or corrupt' 1.1.52. But the disingenuous tone remains – 'quite simply', 'entirely free': can 'a true record' be impeccably moral, both mimetic *and* homiletic? Such a 'reading' leaves open the whole question of just what 'kind of romance' is replacing the old-style erotic scenes and showy poetic offerings by which earlier writers sought to persuade their readers of their emotional and moral truths. Perhaps enlightenment may be found in the remark of a translator of the writings of Zhuang-zi of 'butterfly' fame that, although he and his fellow philosophers used the same Chinese word for 'the Way', they all meant something different by it.[6] How significant these differences may have been is not indicated, but an example of how profound this could be is given in an English translation of a German translation of Xueqin's text, where the 'Western point of view' of the novel is summed up as

> the case history of a highly-gifted but degenerate young aristocrat, a psychopath and a weakling, asocial, effeminate, plagued by inferiority complexes and manic depressions who, although capable of a temporary rallying of energies, founders among the demands of reality and slinks cravenly from human society.[7]

While 'Making sense of Bao-yu' is part of a chapter-heading in a current teaching compendium on the novel[8] – Bao-yu being 'strange boy' even to his doting grandmother and as much 'a case' as his beloved Dai-yu, each attracting pathological analysis by scholars – from the outset the Hawkes translation goes out of its way to garner sympathy for the hero's 'strange' temperament, his insistence on acting as he feels and thinks rather than as convention dictates. This point is now elaborated as an essential underlier to the two universal literary themes chosen here for comparative analysis: patriarchy and romantic love.

In Chapter Five, Xueqin envelops the reader in an entrancing operatic Dream foretelling in cryptic song, verse and image, the fates of twelve female characters, tragic in love for all but the one 'survivor' who narrowly escapes into a happy future scarcely begun by the novel's end. A song-cycle is performed, titled *A Dream of Golden Days*, evoking an aesthetic illusion of ethereal yet sensuous beauty but deeply ironic in its libretto eloquent of the woe that is love – and marriage. The elegiac expression of suffering throughout is uniquely personal in the First Song, *The Mistaken Marriage*:

> Let others all
> Commend the marriage rites of gold and jade;
> I still recall
> The bond of old by stone and flower made;
> And while my vacant eyes behold
> Crystalline snows of beauty pure and cold,
> From my mind
> Can not be banished
> That fairy-wood forlorn that from the world has vanished.
> How true I find
> That every good some imperfection holds!
> Even a wife so courteous and kind
> No comfort brings to my afflicted mind.
>
> (1.5.140)

While the reader understands that these words anticipate those of the hero Bao-yu, at the end of the 'Gao E' volume four 'mistakenly' married to 'gold' not to 'flower' through an 'ingenious plan of deception' (4.96.322), the Song's expression of empathy with the grieving lover has the force of the writer's own feelings on the marriage as ineradicably tragic. 'Others all' commend the marriage of 'gold and jade' and the mourner knows that rationally, he should be comforted by a wife 'so courteous and kind', but even her purity and goodness leave his senses 'vacant' and his mind remains filled with longing for the 'bond of old' and the 'vanished' beloved: the Song is a solemn and dignified lament for love 'vanished' from the world, beyond the 'comfort' offered by this world – or the next, as narrated in the terrifying punitive dream in Chapter 116. At this early stage in the novel, framed as it is by a Buddhist myth as a story of the

foolishness of romantic love – the 'great illusion of human life' – and narrated as a family saga conducted within Confucian orthodoxies driving 'others all' against romantic love – the ostensible yet perverse 'lesson' of the entire Dream experience – the hero's *cri de coeur* makes a claim on romantic love in the tradition of the great romantic opera-dramas of the past, now under disfavour by the increasing conservatism of the Qing emperors.

It is instructive, then, that the Hawkes translation has chosen the opening lines of the Song to echo the opening lines of Shakespeare's famous 'marriage' Sonnet 116, which begins with 'Let' as do three others in the collection of 152 sonnets[9] known as 'the greatest love poem in the language': it is still today read aloud at weddings:

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments; love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds;
> . . .
> Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
> But bears it out even to the end of doom.
> If this be error and upon me proved,
> I never writ, nor no man ever loved.
> (William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, p. 144)

The Shakespeare sonnet celebrates marriage as the union of 'true minds', a love which will remain steadfast through all of life's challenges, 'even to the edge of doom'. That Hawkes finds a resonance in these lines with Xueqin's Song *mourning* marriage as a union which is loveless, highlights the paradoxical way the Song makes a claim on love as an experience enduring for ever, even if, denied by the 'alteration' of the 'mistaken' marriage, it endures as an experience of eternal suffering. It seems possible that Hawkes wished not to lose this depth of feeling in the Song to the comforts of homily one of the earlier translations tries to find:

> Alas! now only have I come to find that human happiness is incomplete; and that a couple may be bound by the ties of wedlock for life, but that after all their hearts are not easy to lull into contentment.[10]

Hawkes' translation keeps open the 'the gap between experience and inherited constructs of experience' which is the defining characteristic of Shakespearean literary 'modernity',[11] activating the paradox of 'truth' and 'fiction' the novel has established as its terms of engagement with literary illusion and 'true-life' in the opening chapter:

> Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;
> Real becomes not-real when the unreal's real.
> (1.1.55)

The more 'real' and 'present' the fictional illusion of the hero's longing for lost love, the wider the gap between the truth of this love and the untruth of the marriage commended by 'others all'. 'Stay, illusion', Hamlet orders the Ghost, activating the tragedy, the fatal struggle to keep the illusion from vanishing; Bao-yu's romantic illusion 'stays' and cannot be banished, even as the sufferer vanishes from the world into silence, leaving his story 'penned with hot and bitter tears'; Xueqin as with 'Xakespeare' at the close of *Hamlet* drawing his breath 'in pain/to tell my story'.

Why drama? Why Hamlet?

A prose narrative often described as 'the epitome of the great tradition of Chinese family fiction', comparison of *The Story of the Stone* with European prose fiction tends to come first to mind. Scholars bring to bear 'Balzac's panoramic view of society, the satire of arrogance and fashion of [Thackeray's] *Vanity Fair*, the funny, meandering mischief of *Decameron*', although 'these comparisons are inadequate to a work [*The Story of the Stone*] so monumental and so vehemently itself'.[12] Another, even at the risk being 'incongruous', thinks in terms of sheer 'numbers of characters', with Proust's [*Remembrance of Things Past*] more than three hundred, and Powell [*Dance to the Music of Time*] some four hundred: 'the only work to bear artistic comparison with them, Cao Xueqin's great *Dream of the Red Chamber* approaches five hundred', exhibiting 'enormously superior . . . powers of female characterisation'.[13] Or, if the focus narrows, comparison may be made with the late eighteenth-/nineteenth-century English novel of manners, described by one literary historian as the 'amount of detail it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment'.[14]

While *The Story of the Stone* fulfils this latter description, it is the tragic dimension of Cao Xueqin's vision of his 'characters and environment' which brings the novel much closer to William Shakespeare than to Jane Austen. Ostensibly bearing out the Buddhist view of 'the great illusion of human life' and the delusion of romantic love, in the process of excavating this ancient wisdom the narrative shifts the focus from the mantra of the futility of the passions to a claim for the existentially human, 'noble' concept of love in all its forms[15] – empathy, understanding, affection, the special affinity of romantic love, familial love, friendship 'even' (S 4.98.37) – and the tragic contradictions in life as it is lived in 'the world of red dust', which distort and destroy its expression and value. The love story becomes a test of many aspects of the immensely refined, richly literary, aesthetic and deeply conflicted culture brought into vivid life in the novel, valuing personal self-cultivation but distrustful of personal emotion, espousing chastity and marital harmony but rife with marital unhappiness; loving to

children but sacrificing them to loveless marriages based on family allegiances often degraded by dubious forms of monetary exchange; espousing Confucian values of self-cultivation, familial harmony, civic virtue and social responsibility but only exposing the human cruelty this inflicts when these Confucian duties are flouted or ignored. When the love relationship ends in the death of the heroine, and the hero out of love for his mother and grandmother sits for the civil examinations to bring honour to the family and then vanishes, reportedly becoming a monk, the imaginative vitality which has sustained the novel for so long simply drains away. Xueqin has forewarned this: the ending of the love story is like the story of the deaf rocket-man told half-way through the novel: not hearing the explosion, he complained that the rocket strapped on his back had been made so badly that 'all the gun-powder had trickled away before they'd had a chance to set it off' (S, 3.54.41).

In considering which of Shakespeare's many plays offer the most potential to match the 'philosophical ambition' and 'deeper psychological truth' of *The Story of the Stone*, while readers and scholars may differ about just what this 'ambition' and 'truth' may be, at the most evident this would give prominence to 'philosophical ambition' about Confucian patriarchal order and 'psychological truth' about romantic love. On this basis, although several other Shakespeare plays also come to mind – *Othello, Romeo and Juliet, The Taming the Shrew* – *Hamlet* alone has been chosen, not to further overburden an exercise already claiming so very many literary points of primary and secondary reference and, most particularly, to allow for the detailed analysis of key scenes and speeches invited by the Hawkes/Minford translation's emphasis on visual spectacle and dramatic enactment.

The Story of the Stone projects a vision of a generations-old ancestral family in all its revered cultural magnificence now hollowed-out, not renewed, by a generation which has lost its noble ancestral vigour and worldly competence, hiding its moral degradation and no longer able to 'tell which people are better than others' (1.3.104). These are the enraged, ambiguous words of the boy-hero Bao-yu on his first appearance; words which, in the Confucian hierarchical social order of the 'five relationships', have the philosophical and psychological significance, if not the quotable elegance, of the existential questioning of Hamlet's speech beginning 'To be, or not to be' (3.1.55). This is to claim for *The Story of the Stone* not a loss of 'coherent vision' in its 'polyvalent richness'[16] but an imaginative superabundance, a complex modernity of vision similar to that which sustains the unending fascination of *Hamlet* on the stage and in the study. Nor, much though it has in common with the genre of Western allegorical literature, does the novel 'read' – at least not in the Hawkes/Minford translation – as an allegorical work achieving a vision of 'potentially dramatic or even dialectical choices . . . as complementary alternatives within a single,

intelligible ground of being'.[17] Rather, *The Story of the Stone* reads, as does *Hamlet*, as inhabiting a 'condition of interpretative uncertainty'[18] rather than complementarity; it reflects 'competing constructions of human reality and truth – competing expressions of desire'[19] referenced through an immense literary repository of received wisdom and poetic imagination and refracted through the precocious consciousness of the young hero – and heroine(s) – and the ineluctable virtue of their tragic love.

The literary convention of the tragic hero

It is an insistence on 'that within', beyond words, 'either you know what it means or you don't' – an intensely individual investment in the human spirit in the creative imagination of Cao Xueqin and Shakespeare beyond the prevailing orthodoxies – which generates a shared tragic dimension around the heroes. Scholars write of Greek tragic drama that 'Tragedy presents a conflictually constituted world defined by ambiguity, uncertainty, and unknowability . . . the experience of transcendental *opacity*'[20] and of Shakespearean tragedy as 'a collision of deeply held and irreconcilable principles, embodied in characters who are destroyed when these visions collide'.[21] The Chinese classical literary tradition of tragic romantic drama which Cao Xueqin inherits and reinterprets may be described in similar terms; 'scholar/beauty' tragic characters fatally trapped in a world which has sacrificed romantic love – 'either you know what it means or you don't' – to social order, a seemingly self-evidently 'rational' choice but at the price of its meaning at the 'deepest stratum' of human experience (a detailed examination of this tradition and its reinterpretation in *The Story of the Stone* is in preparation as a separate monograph). Further, central to the depth of feeling and thought in both *Hamlet* and *The Story of the Stone* is that the tragic heroes, in their intuitive investment in their sense of what is right, are not only victims of opposing systems of belief but also of their own human fallibility, their unwitting destructive blindness in this pursuit, such that it is in their tragic failure of themselves where each 'story' ends: it is 'the ironic perversion of purposive action that defines the essence of tragedy'.[22] In this sense, a second chance is offered by the works of art themselves, to redeem their 'wounded names'.

An intriguing comment on the heroic tradition universal in literature is that, in the history of their public reception, there is a similar underlying unease with how, in Hamlet and Bao-yu, Shakespeare and Xueqin present a hero who in significant respects offends conventional ideals of heroic masculinity; Hamlet for his 'sheathing his sword' and his misogynous attack upon Ophelia, and Bao-yu for his irresponsibility as heir-apparent, gender eccentricities and improprieties. Since the generation after Shakespeare there has been a continuous tradition of casting a female – often a famous

actor – to perform the role of Hamlet, not to give an ambiguous sexual dimension to the character but to distance the play from the underlying discomfort of Western culture with a hero who, while indubitably compelling as a dramatic expression of the struggle to live his authentic self, can be felt to be disappointingly unheroic in his role as avenger, not least in how he over-acts the antic role of being 'mad for love' with unforeseen tragic consequences. Xueqin's presentation of Bao-yu as 'a strange boy' in his empathy with female culture and his revulsion against the patriarchal male literati stereotype is often made fun of by his educated and cultivated girl cousins and subjected to his creator's gentle irony. While readers in Xueqin's own time, familiar with the literary genre of *qing* – sentiment and the authentic self – may have sympathised with the hero's alienation from the prevailing rigidities of patriarchal order, later sequels and commentaries on *The Story of the Stone* show, in the words of a modern scholar, that 'many readers felt uneasy about [Bao-yu's] more self-indulgent and decadent aspects, felt that the young man needed to be more serious, more studious, and, well, just more conventional'.[23] In the further consideration of this aspect given in the following two chapters, it is suggested that as a living presence in the novel, the visionary hero Bao-yu, like Hamlet, is at his most discomforting in his *misplaced* expression of male omniscience in love; this is when he places a blind faith in 'destiny', an act of *hubris* which sacrifices the object of his love to the real 'unreal' world of 'real events', action, inaction and consequence.

Mystifications of texts and 'words'

For neither *Hamlet* nor *The Story of the Stone* is there is an authoritative version, exponentially increasing the pitfalls of translation in comparative analysis. Two 'quarto' versions of *Hamlet* were published in Shakespeare's lifetime, and a further version posthumously in the first collected works of Shakespeare in 1623, all with significant differences. The first 80 chapters of *The Story of the Stone* circulated within the author's family and then more widely following the author's death in 1763 prior to its completion, accumulating extensive annotation and additional chapters to provide a more satisfactory ending than the original narrative popularly felt to be disappointingly inconclusive. When the 120-chapter version with an additional 40 chapters edited by Gao E and Cheng Waiyuan was printed in 1792, the editors told their readers that the author's name was unknown[24]: the 'discovery' of the author gave rise to the bias of the 'author-centred school' of interpretation.[25]

Details of how the different versions of each work have been 'cobbled together'[26] are given in notes in the editions used in this discussion – the Arden *Hamlet*, the Penguin Classics *The Story of the Stone* – and will be

glanced at only occasionally, except in relation to one striking point of similarity between novel and play: how the lack of a definitive text is linked to a major shift in each author's apparent intentions in his writing and in how he wanted to end his masterpiece. That is, while the first three acts seem to be leading to a feat of 'cunning' victorious theatricality by the 'more complicated', deeply alienated, behind-the-scenes all-controlling Hamlet, reprising its Nordic source,[27] the play makes an unexpected turn when the hero gives himself over to the mercy of Providence, the ending 'wrested' from its generic model by Shakespeare, 'the better' to expose the 'invisible rot' of contemporary historical reality – and he did so 'unflinchingly'.[28] Similarly, for many readers, the ending of *The Story of the Stone* is not where they had expected the first three volumes to be leading. Without wishing here to elaborate on all the very different circumstances, there is a moment halfway – earlier referred to – where an authorial question is hovering: how will this 'true-life' love story end, so unlike the cliché romances in its chaste observance of the proprieties but, as 'who will marry who' closes in, exposed 'unflinchingly' to 'harsh' reality? 'Our tale puts forth two tails. Which tail to wag? Wig-wag'. (S, 3.54.32)

The written word itself, the entire literary heritage, is specified as problematic by both Shakespeare and Xueqin: to read, or not to read? Which books are 'better' than others? Although the first question Bao-yu asks in the novel is, 'Do you study books yet, cousin?', when his own literary reference is queried, he professes scorn at taking books as 'true': 'There are lots of made-up things in books' – if graciously making an exception of 'the *Four Books* of course' (1.3.103); Hamlet, the Wittenberg scholar, in the first flush of his mission to 'right' the world, imagines himself wiping away all his 'books', his learning, all his 'fond' memories, no 'book' left remaining in his 'brain' except the 'word' of the Ghost – 'remember me' (1.5.110).

Each writer mystifies interpretation from the outset.

> Gentle reader,
> What, may you ask, was the origin of this book?
> Though the answer to this question may border on the absurd, reflection will show that there is a good deal more in it than meets the eye.
>
> (1.1 47)

These are the opening lines of *The Story of the Stone*. The 'absurdity' is in its origins as a story magically self-inscribed on a mythological stone block found unfit to rebuild the heavens. The stone imagines itself transformed into a 'foolish mortal man' whose youthful 'ups and downs' of fortune in the earthly realm are recorded 'exactly as they happened' (S, 1.1 50) and, duly edited, become the book here seeking the gentle reader's reflections

upon it. The magic stone's ambition to record in words the direct experience of mortal existence is an 'absurdity' in a further sense: Xueqin, himself, cannot be certain that the human heart and mind will always be receptive to what his words are saying:

> Pages full of idle words
> Penned with hot and bitter tears:
> All men call the author fool:
> None his secret message hears.
> (S, 1.1.51)

Shakespeare may share this fear. The opening lines of the *Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* demand:

> Who's there?
> Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold thyself.
> (H, 1.1.2)

'Who's there?' is a question asked of the hero throughout the play, and by the hero of himself. Later in the first Act it is demanded of a Ghost, a mysterious presence in the play and, as is the magic Stone, made visible – firstly as the warrior patriarch and later as an old man in a nightgown – about which there is also 'a good deal more than meets the eye'. At the very end, interpretation remains 'unsatisfied':

> O God, Horatio, what a wounded name
> Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind
> me!
> (H, 5.2.328–329)

The very act of unfolding the mystery of *Hamlet* is in itself on every new 'reading' always so absorbing a challenge that reading *The Story of Stone* through reading *Hamlet* seems more perhaps to vastly complicate an unfolding of the Chinese novel – even in a translation inflected with Shakespearean utterance – than to be of mutual benefit. In both these literary works it is the drama of the creative imagination reinvesting with a new naturalism the inherited models of the fictional genre they inhabit; in the event, the challenge has also found to be the reward: what began as a reading of Xueqin through Shakespeare became just as much a reading of Shakespeare through Xueqin.

In this reading, *Hamlet* and *The Story of the Stone* have in common an exploration of the 'feeling/thinking' hero, one whose intuitive self – 'that within' (1.2.85), 'I *know* it can't be any good' (1.3.104) – sets him apart from the prevailing cultural codes and power structures and, in the combat

of values which ensues, reveal in themselves and their worlds such contradictions as they cannot overcome. Both heroes, fully imagined literary protagonists if in many respects quite unlike, Jia Bao-yu and Prince Hamlet take refuge in madness to remove themselves from 'this harsh world' – in the wisdom of the *Analects* 5.21, 'playing the fool to survive bad times' – only for this, ironically, to provide justification for entrapment. There is throughout these famous literary works a deliberate obduracy of definitive meaning: the question 'Who's there?' which opens *Hamlet* echoes through to the end; the aura of mystery around his jade talisman birth legacy, through to his final disappearance, haunts the hero's identity in *The Story of the Stone*. And for all that Hamlet may finally 'let be' and place himself at the mercy of the Christian belief in 'a special providence in the fall of a sparrow' (5.2.198), and for all that Bao-yu will know soon enough, 'My time has time come!' (4.82.65) to take the Buddhist 'path to Higher Ground', in neither literary work is there any creative endeavour to give imaginative conviction to such wished-for future states; authorial ambivalence and even gentle mockery suggest that Xueqin may even have been influenced by the tradition of scepticism in Chinese philosophy.[29]

Truth and fiction

Hamlet and *The Story of the Stone*, while so groundbreaking in their mimetic truth about human nature, are simultaneously insistent upon their fictionality to indicate authorial intent to confuse the 'true picture' and to contradict rather than to confirm the moral intent. How can a story about a boy born with a magic stone in his mouth, reincarnation of a mythic stone left over from repairing the sky, dreaming the famous prophetic 'dream' in Chapter 5 in formal poetry and song as no one really dreams, possibly make a claim on similitude, but what else is the function of the true-to-life physicality of the dream's ending in sexual initiation – wet pyjamas and maidenly embarrassment – if not to make such a claim? How can a story about a young man putting his whole life in service to the command of a *ghost* – only made believable through the forensic power of the Ghost's words telling a story no ghost ever tells – sustain an intellectual exploration of the nature and purpose of human existence, but what else is the author's purpose in asking – not in the Latin words *'on cai me on'* of the scholar Dr Faustus of another 'tragical history' of the time written for the 'wiser sort',[30] but in the most beguilingly-simple vernacular 'To be, or not to be' (3.1.55)? Not even *Hamlet*'s Ghost will divulge the secrets of death's 'prison house', too terrible for 'ears of flesh and blood' (1.5.22). For Xueqin's and Shakespeare's audience alike, many forms of belief in an afterlife – life eternal – whether a state of karmic reincarnation, heavenly bliss, purgatory or eternal damnation, are integral to the moral and social

codes of the culture and permeate literary invention as a matter to be reckoned with, life or death.

In Cao Xuequin's own admission, his writing may appear only to reflect the foolishness of its 'half-wit' hero. Further, when the story proceeds metaphorically through a stone arch inscribed with the Buddhist paradox on one side:

'Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true'

and on the other

'Real becomes not-real when the unreal's real',

where is the truth of the 'hot and bitter tears' if the truth of the 'idle words' only confirms their fictionality? The paradox directs the reader to the need for pondering the author's meaning in this indeterminate – and over-determined – literary space and, as it is hoped this study shows, the author's creative dedication to making his fiction a lifelike illusion of a tragic world, metaphorically represented as a 'great house' which has come crashing down (1.5.143).

Autobiographical investment, political disfavour and censorship

A recent biography of Xueqin begins with the statement that 'A useful parallel may be drawn with the life of William Shakespeare'.[31] What sparse biographical detail is known about these writers is now readily available and well-mined for the light it might cast upon their work. Both the once-prosperous and influential Shakespeare and Cao families were crushed by political pressures when the writers were both in their early teens, and their life circumstances completely changed.[32] Xueqin's self-described 'true record of real events' draws upon memories of the 'golden days' of his own noble family glorying under imperial patronage but later, under a new Qing emperor, fallen into disfavour and the family's property requisitioned. Potentially politically subversive, contemporary reality is fictionalised as a love story, reprising in extensive realistic detail the ancient, ever-evolving literary genre of romantic love and longing alienated from contemporary social, religious and political orthodoxies, framed in the politically unexceptionable orthodox Buddhist teachings that earthly existence is an illusion and karma determines the shape of our lives: the rejected stone 'even in the world of Red Dust remains incapable of altering its destiny' – although here also the wording may hide an 'implicit voice of protest'.[33]

Shakespeare, born into a Catholic family and writing in the tinderbox years of political conspiracies over the Protestant Elizabethan succession, the Irish Wars and the threat of a Catholic restoration, together with challenges to State religious orthodoxies from the 'hotter sort of protestants . . . called

puritans'[34] with their aspirations to moral 'self-fashioning' and his own livelihood under threat through periodic closure of playhouses, explores in *Hamlet* these many conflicting beliefs and states of mind through the contemporary stage revival of Roman classical dramatic conventions of violent revenge tragedy – 'tragedies of blood'. Further framed in an ancient Nordic story of revenge to deflect contemporary political sensitivities, and instantly famous for its vivid illusioning of a *ghost* to drive the action, the play maintains a tension between reality and illusion which both permits intense questioning and subverts censorship.

Xueqin and Shakespeare lived lives at political risk: for both, to raise fundamental questions about social codes, state religion and political power was to risk censorship, imprisonment, torture, even death on the charge of sedition.[35] Writers contemporary with Shakespeare such as Thomas Kyd were tortured on the rack, Christopher Marlowe probably assassinated, Ben Jonson imprisoned, John Hayward's *History* burned, as were two anti-feminist works viewed as critical of the unmarried Elizabeth 1.[36] Similarly, the first biography of Cao Xueqin available in English recounts violent acts of censorship in the years he was writing,[37] his novel being banned several times during the later Qing and even blacklisted for a time two centuries later in the Cultural Revolution[38] before being canonised as an exposure of feudal rottenness in the PRC era.[39]

It is indicative of the shared *joie de vivre* so integral to their creative impulse that, in the legends around their deaths – Xueqin aged around 50, Shakespeare 52 – 'drinking hard' with literary friends figures memorably. Famous as a storyteller, the novelist writes as if to an audience; Shakespeare as a playwright was nothing without one. Biographical comment indicates that Xueqin and his friends were identified with the legendary *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove* who retreated from the poisonous culture of court life and lived convivially with nature, wine, poetry and music, their 'antic disposition' disguising their subversion of orthodoxy and celebrated in paintings down through the dynasties into Xueqin's time and on to the present day.[40]

Sigmund Freud, in his influential 'Oedipus complex' psychoanalysis of the 'mystery' of *Hamlet*, traces the 'deepest stratum' of the creative impulse behind this play to two particular events in Shakespeare's life around the time he wrote the play: the childhood death of his only son, whose name Hamnet is echoed in the play's title, and the death of his father.[41] So too did Cao Xueqin suffer the childhood death of his only son and although – or perhaps because – it remains uncertain which of two Cao family males was Xueqin's father, one dying before he was born and the other, said to be 'never fond of Cao Xueqin',[42] thrown into jail when Xueqin was still a child; the father-son relationship could not have been untroubled 'in the mind' of the creative author of *The Story of the Stone*.[43] Xueqin's entire

work is a complex and conflicted memorial to a lost ancestral heritage – 'those golden days when I dressed in silk and ate delicately, when we still nestled in the protecting shadow of the Ancestors and Heaven still smiled on us'.[44] 'Shakespeare's longstanding interest in . . . chivalric values' in his plays was also expressed in his 'strenuous efforts' around this time 'to secure for his family a coat of arms' – interestingly, in light of the specific reference to the appearance of the Ghost in Hamlet – 'armed from top to toe', helmeted, 'his beaver [vizor] up' ready to speak, the rebus includes a helmet, vizor down, and a raised spear,[45] attesting to the similar 'tension between past and present' in the writing of the drama of *Hamlet*.

While a writer's own suffering and painful memories may be reflected in the imaginative intensity of his literary creation, it does not necessarily follow that this would impel creation of a neurotic literary character implicit in a psychoanalytic diagnosis and, while grateful for Freudian insights into what motivates the creative imagination – noting here how the 'Oedipus complex' diagnosis has generated much 'outsider' freshness of thinking[46] – this study also takes note of what Freud himself wrote in the remarks prior to the conclusion of his diagnosis: 'every genuine poetical creation must have proceeded from more than one motive, more than one impulse in the mind of the poet, and must admit of more than one interpretation'. 'Unpractical and eccentric' is a description of Xueqin's hero also applicable to Hamlet, in their sense of being divided from others as from themselves, registering their modernity across time and culture: the mystery at the heart of these literary heroes will not be so easily plucked out (H 3.2.356).

Theme and structure of Chapters One and Two

Two particular issues have vexed interpretations of *Hamlet*: the un-heroic presentation of Hamlet's delay in his self-appointed role as revenge hero enacting obedience to his father's command to avenge his murder, and the hero's un-heroic rejection of his role as romantic lover, 'the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia' (2.2.108–9), which leads to her tragic death. The problematic aspects are central to the play's meaning and purpose, and it is the literary creativity of the playwright in raising these problems which is the point of comparison with similarly vexing issues in *The Story of the Stone*: the wilful-seeming alienation of the hero from patriarchal norms, and the un-heroic 'eccentric and unpractical' nature of his love for Lin Dai-yu, 'who's as beautiful as an angel' (1.3.104) but also a 'real' human being, less omniscient in her own mind than the hero in his 'blindness' to the worldly realities of patriarchal authority and arranged marriage and his refusal to 'change'.

Broadly stated, the first theme is to do with inherited codes of patriarchal authority – chivalric honour, filial piety – and the second and related

theme, romantic love. These two inter-related themes are notorious, even sensational, in the texts: 'Get thee to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?' (3.1.120–21) – Hamlet's 'mad' spurning of his 'soul's idol', the 'beautified' Ophelia, hoped by his mother to be his bride and queen-to-be; Bao-yu, sole hope of the once-great family dynasty, disowning his masculine exceptionalism at the very moment of his romantic epiphany, sobbing hysterically – 'None of the girls has got one! . . . I know it can't be any good!' (1.3.104) It is not so much the themes themselves – universal human concerns in literature – as the extraordinary exercise of sympathetic imagination in dramatising the 'philosophical' and 'psychological' dimensions of these truths of human existence which, it is hoped to demonstrate, is a primary aspect of the 'greatness' of the two literary icons.

Chapter 1 'reads' novel and play as having in common their writer's creative exploration of the deterioration of the cultural ideal and image of the patriarch, no longer able to sustain the demand it makes upon family honour, filial obedience and social order. The analysis places at its centre two scenes of extreme violence: one verbal – 'speak[ing] daggers' – the scene from Act Three of *Hamlet* enacting the hero's moral chastisement of his mother, Queen Gertrude; and one physical, the scene from the second volume of *The Story of the Stone* enacting the 'terrible chastisement' of Bao-yu by his father. In these scenes, the relentless attempt to impose patriarchal authority builds to a climax and then collapses, having exhausted itself and become reduced to futile self-justification. The two scenes enact the disintegration of moral authority and hidden cyclic generational violence to which, in the wider story of novel and play, sons and daughters – heroes and heroines – are hidden sacrifices in a world they cannot trust to save them.

The second chapter, comparing and contrasting the theme of romantic love in novel and play, takes for its central focus a text from each in which the hero, in a cerebral, trance-like state, takes ritual leave of love of the flesh in the belief that this divestment of the bodily self is integral to achievement of his destiny; Hamlet as single-minded righteous avenger 'born' to set wrong right, described, as in a dumb-show, transfixing Ophelia with a scarifying gaze as he harrows her physical self from his gaze; Bao-yu, while unquestioning of his spiritual affinity with Dai-yu, finds himself infused by a wave of 'lust of the flesh' for her romantic rival and is left 'gawping' in a state of dawning conviction that his matrimonial destiny is a choice of spirit over flesh – 'lust of the mind'. Where this leaves romantic love – the unity of body and mind – is the issue for both writers: in play and novel, the love between hero and heroine is represented at the outset as ineluctably romantic, a purity of body and soul in its literary expression, and the bodily divestment and self-division of the hero is represented as a form of temporary madness under pressure of the real world debasing love

as carnality or 'love-sickness' and demanding its sacrifice to uphold the honour of the family dynasty. This is the site of the sacrifice of the romantic heroines; each writer's answer to the 'difficult question' of the role of the hero in their suffering and suicide.

The most beguiling aspect of bringing Xueqin and Shakespeare together is to look close-up at the mysterious art of the writing itself. The first two essays are organised as side-by-side close readings of episodes selected for reflection upon how – to use Ophelia's words in the 'mousetrap' scene – they 'import the argument' of the literary work when contextualised within the unfolding narrative itself, the concepts and literary models referenced and contemporary circumstance. The two overarching themes allow for a common focus across texts to glimpse as much of the 'true picture' – Brother Stone's self-confessed ambition for his story – being revealed as the entire play and novel unfold.

A broad-brush overall scenario may be offered by way of introduction to the approach taken in each chapter on these themes. Each hero – student Prince Hamlet, son and heir of the now-dead king of Denmark, called upon through the bonds of filial love and family honour to avenge his murder, and young Master Jia Bao-yu, son and heir of the ancestral dukedom of a dynastic family in grave need of regeneration – find themselves confronted by the dawning realisation that their destined patriarchal roles belong to a past age and no longer have any meaning for them: the tragedy lies in the contradictions, conflicts and suffering this experience brings down upon themselves and those they love. The compressed intensity of this literary experience in the play is necessarily far greater than in the extended narrative, which embeds the tragic story within many other stories of female characters sacrificed to the moral contradictions in the exercise of patriarchal authority and so gives a breadth of social observation – heroes as romantic lovers in contexts where the literary ideal of romantic love is deeply compromised and degraded by political views of marriage in which love has no place and is regarded as a vulnerable female state of mental illness or moral frailty. It is in the imaginative validation of the heroines' experience of romantic love and in the tragedy of their deception, arising from conflicting ideals, that the creativity of the writers is most memorably invested; again, this is more discursive in the novel but even there, readers to the present day identify similarly with the tragic poetic beauty of the death scenes in both novel and play.

Theme and structure of Chapter 3

This third chapter 'reads Xueqin through Xakespeare' by adopting the 'Western' five-act dramatic structure of tragedy as a means of exploring a single major character in the *Story of the Stone*, Wang Xi-feng, the 'strong

woman' whose 'shrew' or 'female virago' literary prototype has a long tradition in Chinese fiction. Xi-feng remains a contradictory figure in the scholarship. While acknowledging the vigour and complexity of her characterisation, feminist critique itself has a central problem: how to identify with a woman – however valiantly refusing to be a victim – who 'kills with a borrowed knife'. Hence the negative 'shrew' prototype is the default position Xi-feng tends to occupy in the scholarship.

This is seemingly in direct contradiction to the place of Xi-feng in the novel as one of the *Twelve Beauties of Jinling*, whose lives are narrated and memorialised in poems and paintings by the author committed to preventing them from 'too soon pass[ing] into oblivion'. Hawkes in his Introduction quotes from an original introduction to the first chapter written by Xueqin's younger brother which, in turn, quotes the writer's own words dedicating his novel to the memory of 'the female companions of my youth':

> those slips of girls . . . in every way, both morally and intellectually, superior to the 'grave and mustachioed signior' I am now supposed to have become.
>
> (S. Intro, 20)

'Those wonderful girls', almost all of whom have short lives, their marriages tragic, are the *Twelve Beauties of Jinling* whose fates are foretold in the hero's prophetic dream in Chapter Five; they are brought to vivid life in the pages of the novel, tellingly never more humming with creativity than in the sequence of chapters on writing poetry in Volume 2, 'The Crabflower Club'. Notably, Wang Xi-feng is not one of the poets: she has not been given a literary education and is well aware she has been 'roped in' as a Club member to 'unlock the store-room' – to give the Club access to financial resources (S. 2.45.385). While senior women commonly assumed responsibility for management of household expenditures, the visibility of her role in the larger financial affairs of the Jia estate, failing under male incompetence, gives the character of Xi-feng a striking modernity for the Western reader: historically, a time when patriarchal leadership within the family unit was failing and the 'political significance of female virtue was at its height'.[47] The 'virtue' of the model wife was invested not so much in her faithfulness to her husband or defending her chastity – this being structurally protected in the 'inner quarters' – as in her self-image within the family structure as a strong and capable mother and manager, including oversight of concubines to ensure the continuation of the patriline. In Xueqin's creation of Xi-feng there is, in this pride as model wife, a similarity with the Greek classical concept of tragic *hubris*, of daring the gods, of the flawed hero – the model through which Shakespeare achieves the deep humanity

of his heroes, in their pride rationalising their ambitions but, in the unimagined terrible result, finding themselves spiritually and morally destroyed. Through the similar sympathetic creative imagination of Xueqin, whose insight into human nature ranges through scores of individualised characters and their own private stories, a new breadth of human understanding illuminates the inherited literary prototypes, of which the tragedy of Xifeng is a major example.

Notes

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1 'Look here upon this picture'; 'Gag his mouth. Beat him to death'

Patriarchal authority in *Hamlet* and *The Story of the Stone*

Introduction

The Story of the Stone and *Hamlet* are among the most well-known and well-loved works of literature in the Chinese and English languages. This chapter is centred on a critical episode in each work: Hamlet's moral chastisement of his mother, Queen Gertrude, in her private chamber – 'the closet scene' – and the episode in which Bao-yu receives a 'terrible chastisement' from his father – the beating scene. The episode from *Hamlet* is in the last scene of Act 3, the 'climax' in the 5-part pyramid structure of classical drama; the episode from *The Story of the Stone* is in Chapter 33, towards the centre of the 80 definitive chapters of the extended 120 of the first published version.

The episodes are selected on the basis of their pivotal thematic importance in relation to patriarchal authority, in particular, the authority of the father and the obligation of obedience by the son, set within the wider and often conflicting sources of moral authority carried in the 'words' of the vast cultural heritage of each writer. Both play and novel contextualise violence in generations of family ancestry: examining translations of *Hamlet* into Chinese, one scholar notes as of particular interest the 'careful parallels between the families of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras' in relation to cyclic revenge.[1] The tragic trajectory of the heroes Hamlet and Bao-yu may be seen to have a common starting point: each is born with the special obligation required of a princely son to uphold the honour of a noble family and, driven by 'events' and competing inner thoughts and feelings to question the received wisdom – the truth – of patriarchal authority, finds that this authority is collapsing under its own contradictions. After these episodes, each hero is left exposed to his own failings and the failure of his hopes in a world in which an appeal for 'friendship' is finally all that remains to redeem this mortal life.

The 'closet' scene in *Hamlet* – the encounter between Hamlet and his mother in her private chambers – enacts the hero's last desperate and failed

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attempt to conjure his father's commanding status as martial hero/sun-god to sustain both his filial obligation as avenger of his father's murder, and the role his individual moral outrage compels him to take – against his father's advice – as moral redeemer of his mother. The scene is the literal dis-illusioning of Hamlet's heroic image of his father and is immediately followed by his 'chance encounter with Fortinbras' – nephew of the 'ambitious Norway' famously 'combated' by Hamlet's father and now seeking revenge through a bloody battle with Poland to position himself to take Denmark – which 'may well be the darkest moment in the play'.[2] Revenge and salvation are both 'fantasy and a trick of fame', and Hamlet is now alone with his existential challenge, a hunted man attempting to survive this 'harsh world' under surveillance of his own ever-shifting 'perfect conscience'.

From the very outset of the play, it is made clear that revenge cannot be isolated from the many other cultural influences playing upon the consciousness of the scholar-hero: simple obedience to the father will not be an option. This fracture in the patriarchal code of honour is where the discussion initiates the exploration of the theme of patriarchal obedience in *The Story of the Stone* in Part Two: as the *Hamlet* analysis proceeds, it is useful to keep in mind some words from the *Analects*, 4.18, where Confucius insists that filial piety is more than dutiful sons ensuring their parents have food – after all, they do the same for their animals: 'Unless there is respect, where is the difference?' 2.7. Respect is also shown by, 'when you serve your parents, you may gently remonstrate with them – do not, however, persist and become bitter if they do not take your advice'. Respect – and when 'love' is added, as it is in the Ghost-father's command:

> 'If thou didst ever thy dear father love –
> O God! –
> Revenge his most foul and unnatural murder!'
> (1.5.23–25)

– the commandment to obey becomes a test of the son's love of the father; it also implies the question: but did Hamlet really ever love his father? Respect and love: this is the fraught area where Shakespeare and Cao Xueqin place their heroes.

The hero Jia Bao-yu in *The Story of the Stone* is born with talismanic significance as an exceptional human being, the pride and hope of the family but, in seeming contradiction, he has an inborn resistance to the gendered filial role model prescribed by patriarchal norms. In childhood he develops his 'true self' through a unique, rich and loving but also fragile alternative emotional and intellectual existence in the companionship of his beautiful and talented sisters, female cousins and maidservants. The

hero's self-created ideal feminine world is ever at risk of the violence of patriarchy scorned, ending in Bao-yu's ultimate decision to make a final demonstration of his love for the family which has deceived him, before taking his leave of a patriarchal world and a family to which he owes no further worldly allegiance.

The 'beating' scene dramatises the moment when the youthful Bao-yu, brought up against the full force of patriarchal wrath, makes explicit his inborn opposition to the patriarchal ideal of the 'good son' – 'I wouldn't change if he killed me' – a decision given a positive value by the visible degradation of patriarchal authority itself, in a family which has been introduced to the reader by an outside observer as 'seriously' troubled:

> They are not able to turn out good sons, those stately houses, for all their pomp and show. The males in the family get more degenerate from one generation to the next.
>
> (1.2.74)

Upholding the honor of the family is the over-arching patriarchal ideal, placing the boy-hero in *The Story of the Stone* under an ill-fated demand to reconcile this ideal with an alternative way of existing true to his 'heart-mind' convictions; his lapses into imbecility begin to represent an enactment of withdrawal from of the real world conspiring against his 'heart-mind' convictions but, as with Hamlet's feigned madness, this has the tragically ironic outcome of denying the destiny each hero seeks to fulfil.

While Cao Xueqin's choice of vernacular discursive prose narrative over poetic drama maintains a domestic focus on his subject by comparison to the heightened poetic concentration of Shakespearean tragedy, in each work the tragic interest is located in the intimacy – 'interiority' – of the representation of the individual conflict, referenced within an extraordinary breadth and depth of cultural context, so amply testified in the immense scholarship generated by these works. Balancing the intimacy, each writer offers an ironic perspective: Cao Xueqin typically taking down his youthful 'self-conceited'/'reflective' protagonist with touches of humour; Shakespeare often catching his histrionic older scholar protagonist in mental traps of his own devising; both writers also using juxtaposition of words, characters, scenes and stories within stories to ironic effect. Through this intimate literary engagement, audience/reader becomes likewise unsettled by the cultural contradictions at play with so many uncertainties hovering over the characters themselves. It is hoped in the following consideration of the selected episodes to capture something of these shared literary qualities and how they offer commentary on each other in the experience of the reading. Again, the complexity of each writer's approach to this theme of patriarchal authority and filial obedience obliges a largely discrete

discussion of each work to establish the basis of the comparisons made, the complexity itself being so much the essence of the comparison.

As noted in the Introduction, aspects problematic to a modern readership lend themselves to Freudian literary psychoanalysis in terms of the hero's unconscious struggle with the phallic power and potency of the 'father':[3] this study, likewise identifying those aspects resisting ready interpretation, looks rather to historical contexts likewise invisible to the present reader.

Part One: Hamlet and the ghost of patriarchy: finding 'nothing's there'

Overview

The turn of the sixteenth into the seventeenth century, the years during which Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*, was a time of crisis in political authority, evident even in fears expressed that the playhouse itself was a site of sedition and secret plots to assassinate the ageing Queen; re-imagined as an old Nordic story to deflect the risk of political censorship, the subject of regicide, patriarchal authority and filial obedience is central to the *Tragical Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The old king, Hamlet's father, is dead, not a live character in the play – but, appearing as the ghost of a murdered father/king, is the most 'alive' character in relation to the tragic hero. Hamlet's father's spirit, the ghostly martial presence, released each night from purgatorial fires, is so fully 'illusioned' in the opening act that it sets the imaginative register well into the play. *Hamlet, ye Dane, A Ghost Story* is how one performance was advertised two centuries after it was written, and scholars point to a lost play, possibly a precursor to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, remarked upon at the time for its 'ghost, which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster-wife, "Hamlet, revenge" '.[4]

Shakespeare's memorable Ghost is no whimpering oyster-wife; if there is a 'miserable' voice on stage, it is Hamlet's. Dressed in funereal 'inky cloak', from the outset the young student Hamlet, on returning from the university in Wittenberg – centre of the Protestant Reformation – to attend his father's funeral is profoundly disturbed to find that his mother, Queen Gertrude, has been wooed and won by his uncle Claudius, who now proclaims himself the new king, all so suddenly that to Hamlet it feels morally depraved: 'O God, a beast . . . Would have mourned longer' (1.2.150–51). These words extend the moral frame of reference from 'church law' and contemporary debates over incest as a crime familiar to Shakespeare's audience from the six marriages of the previous monarch, father to the reigning Elizabeth I, to Senecan revenge drama influential in his time on the theme of violence and the dilemma of moral values seemingly the reverse of the belief that human beings have an innate moral sense to guide their conduct: 'Even the wild

beasts themselves avoid incestuous love, and an intuitive sense of shame regulates every species!'[5] Hamlet's deeply emotional response, his plunge into existential crisis, revulsion against his own flesh and his intuition that the marriage 'is not, nor it cannot come to good' (1.2.158), expresses his profound spiritual disillusionment not so much at the sin of incest itself – a contentious point – as his mother's seeming carnal incontinence: Hamlet is shattered that his own mother does not have his intuitive sense of shame. At the outset, rather than being galvanised by a call to honour as in the prototype revenge hero or in the contemporary definition of nobility and honour,[6] Hamlet is plunged into existential despair: the return of his father from the dead in the form of a ghost, both dis-embodied and armour-plated, seems an answer to his 'prophetic soul'; putting aside uncertainty as to its truth', 'wicked or charitable', 'Say why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?' – its hermetic message now clear; sin, seduction, murder and call to revenge giving Hamlet the spiritual, moral certainty and emotional reason for living which he felt he had lost.

Two heroically idealised, potentially contradictory representations of his father dominate Hamlet's thoughts and actions in the first half of the play: the heroic warrior image authorising the revenge mission, and the loving husband image legitimating Hamlet's need to express a different kind of rage at what is happening around him, the collapse of his erstwhile scholarly and morally ordered world – 'Tis an unweeded garden/That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely' – finding a moral focus in the apparent hypocrisy and sexual incontinence of his mother 'post[ing] with such dexterity to incestuous sheets'. This displacement of feeling is extended to the moral condemnation of the female gender: 'Let me not think on't (Frailty, thy name is Woman)' – 'frailty' meaning sexual inconstancy, faithlessness in love.

It is Hamlet's heroicised image of his father – 'So excellent a king', 'so loving to my mother' (1.2.137–9) – which compels both the extremes of moral revulsion against his mother and the sworn 'all alone' dedication to the 'commandment' to revenge his murder, the primary ideological and emotional drivers in the play. As doubts and uncertainties, 'visceral and the cerebral',[7] accumulate around this patriarchal image and its authority, Hamlet's thoughts and actions engage and disengage not only from Roman revenge theatrical tradition and medieval literary ideals of honour but from many other cultural sources of moral authority and human idealism – classical literary heritage and Wittenberg Christian belief. The 'antic disposition', the guise of madman he has put on to deflect attention from his revenge intentions, becomes difficult to separate from his now self-alienated identity – Hamlet 'ta'en from himself'. The closet scene is where Hamlet's transformation from the Ghost's avenger to becoming himself the object and the victim of cyclical revenge is irreversible with the killing

of one 'unseen good old man' and the de-heroicising of his father into just another 'unseen good old man'. It is a transformation which signals the implosion of the patriarchal ideal embedded in the culture of revenge, and the moral vacuum which is left in its wake.

The following section traces through the progressive degradation of the patriarchal ideal, leading up to Hamlet's final desperate attempt to salvage both this image and his own moral self through the 'harrowing' – the call to repentance in pre-Reformation Christian liturgy – of his mother at the end of Act 3.

Section 1

1.i 'Looks not like the King?' *(1.1.42)*

The ambiguous representation of patriarchal authority, centred on the shape-shifting representation of the dead father, is signalled in the first two scenes of the play. It begins with the play's opening scene: at midnight, high up on the cold and misty battlements, with the 'dreaded sight[ings]' of an apparition 'In the same figure like the King that's dead'. The soldiers ask Hamlet's scholar-friend Horatio to confirm this:

> 'Looks not like the King? Mark it, Horatio'.
> **Horatio**
> 'Most like. It harrows me with fear and wonder'.
> (1.1.42–43)

At the outset, identification is shrouded, uncertain, needing 'scholarly' confirmation, and that given as a harrowing image evoking 'fear and wonder'. As the soldiers wonder at its meaning, 'usurp[ing] this time of night', the image clarifies through the fog into a fierce, combative martial figure, even such as to lead a battle on grounds as treacherous as ice – an image which adds to the vividness but also an icy slipperiness:

> Such was the very armour he had on
> When he the ambitious Norway combated.
> So frowned he once, when in angry parle
> He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
> 'Tis strange.
> (1.1.59–63)

This is the martial, vengeful presence of the father, the 'valiant Hamlet' whose conquest-killing of the 'ambitious Norway', old Fortinbras, to seize back lands is later related by Horatio as the 'main motive' for the present

threat of the 'young Fortinbras' of 'unimproved mettle, hot and full' to 'shark up a list of lawless resolutes' to recover the lands 'so by his father lost'. The convoluted history tells of cyclic revenge, motivated by patriarchal ambition and filial duty expressed in violent combat – the history which the son Hamlet now inherits, however far removed he has been as a scholar at the university of Wittenberg, famous as the centre of the Protestant Reformation and which, in the search for the truth of God's Word, split the Christian religion asunder in Shakespeare's father's generation; further splintering into the 'hotter sort of Puritan' sects, of major political as well as religious significance in the lives of the playgoers of the time.

Hamlet himself has not yet seen the 'dreadful sightings': it is a different image of the father King which is in Hamlet's 'mind's eye' when he is venting his bitterness at the 'thrift' of wedding following hard upon funeral, declaring that he would rather 'have met my dearest foe in heaven/Or ever I had seen that day', and immediately after states, 'My father, methinks I see my father'. To Horatio's 'Where, my lord', Hamlet replies, 'In my mind's eye, Horatio', as if the ambiguous image of the 'dearest foe in heaven' is his father. To Horatio's calming response, 'I saw him once – t'was a goodly king', Hamlet's equivocal response is far from the heroic martial image:

> 'A was a man, take him for all in all
> I shall not look upon his like again.'
> (1.2 186–187)

'Take him for all in all' – still today wording qualifying praise – shadows 'his like' as if his father belongs to a remote past age of ideals no longer meaningful. Hamlet's first response to Horatio's surprise answering report of having seen a 'figure like your father' is to ready himself to dare confront something terrifying, as if coming from the mouth of hell; this is by contrast to Horatio's hope of a herald of some 'good thing to be done/That may do thee ease and grace to me' (1.1.129–30). When Horatio signals 'Look, my lord, it comes', Hamlet similarly calls upon 'Angels and ministers of grace' to defend them, challenging the apparition as if suspecting evil as much as good: whether from 'airs of Heaven or blasts from hell', 'Such a questionable shape'.

First the martial image, and then the marital, the domestic: the major complicating factor of Hamlet's mother Queen Gertrude is brought into the drama in the long second scene of the play, Shakespeare immediately setting up a tension between her dignified stage presence and her son's scarcely-veiled moral condemnation, a tension which is to be replicated in Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia and remains a vexed issue for interpretation in the scholarship (see Chapter 2). As to its artistic purpose, it may be said to represent the resistance to masculine authority by female subjectivity and is a tension similarly at work in throughout *The Story of the Stone*,

most obviously in the over-representation of significant female characters in the narrative and the carriage of the role as head of the family through a female patriarch, the grandmother matriarch Lady Jia.

1.ii 'let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark' *(1.2.69)*

In the second scene of the play, with the as-yet-unidentified martial image still hovering in the audience's mind, Shakespeare then effects a total change of setting, ceremonial and domesticated, in the great hall of the castle, the newly-crowned king Claudius entering with a flourish of trumpets and ready to brief the assembled courtiers, Polonius and his son Laertes, Queen Gertrude and Hamlet, on the new political royal order. All is clear and business-like – except for the brooding presence of the scholar-prince Hamlet, sitting apart, eyelids lowered as if, in Claudius's reproof, 'looking for thy noble father in the dust'. Even before he has learnt the truth of his 'prophetic soul' – the Ghost's revelations about the murder – Hamlet's scholarly training and Wittenberg moral sensibility lay claim on literary interpretation from his first words, correcting the new King who, having delivered a formal proclamation of his marriage and kingship and measures in train to divert the threat of border invasion, turns to address him:

> 'But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son –'

to which Hamlet ripostes:

> 'A little more than kin, and less than kind'.
> (1.2 64–65)

Hamlet's rebuff is witty and sarcastic, but it has a quality of controlled and deliberate moral attack which draws attention to this unwonted assumption of a replacement father-son relationship, its dubious affinity basis – 'incestuous sheets' – and its implicit paternal claim.

Hamlet's 'distemper' is from the outset so 'tainted' by physical revulsion at the grossness of the bodily self that modern stage directors often invent vaguely suggestive stage business between his mother and Claudius to support the assumptions of his mother's carnal appetite in remarrying so soon, the imputed sin of incest itself not necessarily implying promiscuity. The implication of incest comes in his soliloquy of existential despair as more an emotive descriptor supporting his visceral outrage and despair than its locus; even his closest friend Horatio agrees only that the marriage was hasty. Hamlet does not take this private opportunity to expound upon the charge of incest which, at the time, could have been expected, the play so often shading into contemporary England: from Henry VIII's six marriages

on, incest had been the subject of many legal 'quiddities', an emotional and political issue, and also a sin under church affinity laws regulating marriage, although rarely charged.[8] Shakespeare's text – the Arden version at least – presents the Queen's stage presence as one of royal matrimonial decorum, albeit this may also be interpreted as dissembling. In her regal role, presiding as queen over the court, when her formal words on the inevitability of death for us all are dismissed as 'common' by Hamlet, she herself, having wept her tears at her husband's funeral, sharply rejects her son's imputation that her mourning has been 'common' or mere 'trappings' of woe. The public duty she expects of Hamlet implies as well her own reason for her marriage to the deceased king's brother Claudius – her duty as 'a friend to Denmark':

> Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted colour off
> And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark
> Do not forever with thy vailed lids
> Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
> Thou knowest that 'tis common all that lives must die,
> Passing through nature to eternity.
>
> (1.2.68–73)

To Shakespeare's London playgoers, living through the fraught political context of immanent martial siege similar to which the play opens so dramatically, in a nation made vulnerable by the virgin Queen Elizbeth's failure to marry and to secure the succession to the throne, the reason for the 'o'er hasty' marriage could indeed have seemed just that: over-hasty perhaps, but an act expected of a royal 'friend' to the nation state. As could be expected, the usurper king pre-empts the issue; formally addressing his 'sometime sister' as 'now our Queen', he both acknowledges and then firmly overrides any taint of incest, the transition made proper as keeping intact the reigning family. While Hamlet's intuition is revealed as 'true' that there is something rotten – the murder of a king – in the state of Denmark, his intuition that his mother is complicit in the rottenness is never substantiated – except perhaps if the Ghost's 'seeming' contradictions are ignored, and the Queen's 'seeming' admission of guilt under duress is taken as proof; as is presently revealed, one of the ultimate ironies of Hamlet's impugning his mother's rottenness is that the reason he is not killed earlier is because her love for him is greater than her love for Claudius (4.7.11–17).

The alternative to giving the Queen's words and actions the benefit of the doubt is to view all of her words and actions as those of co-conspirator to Claudius hiding under the guise of innocence – luring in Hamlet's school friends to sound him out, making Ophelia's 'good beauties' the scapegoat, always seeming vaguely surprised – 'Came this from Hamlet to her?', 'It may

be, very like', 'So he does, indeed'. This is precisely the reading Shakespeare anticipates in the 'Mousetrap scene', where the Queen is rebuffed by Hamlet when she asks him 'to come hither . . . sit by me', and her response to his 'trap' question – 'Madam, how like you this play' after the Player Queen's fulsome declaration of everlasting love and chastity when widowed, is the famous line:

> 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.'
> (3.2. 224)

These words have become proverbial as a perception that a person is lying when they overstate their innocence. Hamlet intends this to reflect back upon the Queen herself and he drives this home by saying, 'Oh, but she'll keep her word' – unlike his mother. However, the Queen – in the same 'mother-son' way she typically calls her son to order – may simply be saying that she thinks such a pledge to widow-chastity is exaggerated, she herself having remarried with royal dignity, the Arden footnote again giving her words the benefit of the doubt. In light of this keeping open to question the Queen's morality, Shakespeare's literary purpose appears as much to keep open to question Hamlet's determination to condemn her as 'woman, thy name is frailty' – this a 'trap' to the audience themselves identifying too sympathetically with the hero's angst.

The tension here is a tension between human 'frailty' in the general sense of being human 'all in all' and in the sense of not being human at all, a monster, a 'beast', as the Queen would have to be viewed if all her conduct throughout the play is judged hypocritical, or even merely 'common'; as a monster of sexual appetite, the Queen would be merely a stock character from the 'tragedies of blood' tradition which Shakespeare is challenging in his new sort of tragedy, setting a universal standard for its deeply sympathetic representation of human 'frailty' in all its forms. A similar 'humanism' is claimed for Cao Xueqin in the challenge made by *The Story of the Stone* to the stereotypes of the romantic genre, transforming the novel into a profoundly human reflection upon a culture which, in its own particular struggle with its internal contradictions, comes close to losing its capacity to 'tell which people are better than others' – in the humanist meaning of this passionate protest by the young hero (1.3.104).

1.iii 'So loving to my mother . . . must I remember?' *(1.2.140–143)*

When the royal court departs and Hamlet is left alone to express his existential despair – 'Oh that this too, too sullied flesh would melt' – Hamlet brings into focus a very different image of his father from the martial warrior:

> So excellent a king, that was to this [Claudius]
> Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
> That he might not beteem the winds of heaven

To visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember?
(1.2.139–143)

Hamlet has been away from home and his memory is like that of child whose father has been long absent in battle and whom he recalls, confusingly, not in memories of a father being loving to his son, but of a father as the loving, protective husband on whom his wife – 'my mother' – dotes with equal appetite, 'hanging' upon him as if feeding ever more greedily on his love. 'And yet': on closer reading, the image of gentle protectiveness – Hyperion, the sun-god, so loving to his wife that he would not allow the 'winds of heaven/Visit her face too roughly' – becomes disconcerting: would 'heavenly' winds ever blow 'too roughly'? was it perhaps to cool the sun-god's too-ardent rays? Hamlet's memories of his mother's lust –

Why, she should hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on –
(1.2.143–145)

while implying this 'appetite' was mutual, carry a condemnation that it is this same lust which has driven the hasty marriage and that his mother's love for her husband was lust, not love. Hamlet cannot bear the hypocrisy, that within so short a time after 'she followed my poor father's body' at his burial, 'Like Niobe [in Greek mythology associated with unending weeping], all tears', she has married 'my father's brother (but no more like my father/Than I to Hercules' (1.2 149–153). The 'poor father' deserves a lifelong sorrow like Niobe's but, confusingly, the classical reference is used against his mother to convey hypocrisy. Confusingly as well, although previously Claudius is compared with a satyr – in classical mythology a grotesque creature, half-human, half-goat, associated with drunkenness and lechery – the phrasing here implies more that Claudius is merely human like himself, neither male measuring up to the Herculean/Hyperion ideal set by the father/king. Claudius is now merely human, the stage-reality of the usurper-king's smooth, controlled political presence keeping the play grounded in a sense of deadly *real politique* while the hero's imagination runs free – spurred on by his encounter with his father's Ghost.

1.iv The truth of Ghosts: 'tis given out, that, sleeping in my orchard A serpent stung me . . . a forged process of my death' *(1.5.35–37)*

Revenge is the filial duty commanded of Hamlet by the Ghost, and heroic ambition to 'sweep to my revenge' is made so compelling as 'setting it right' in the opening scenes that Hamlet's unheroic failure to do the 'act'

becomes the unnerving emotional core of the tragedy. Imagining himself acting the part of avenger with the theatrical savagery the old Nordic story and classical Roman theatrical convention, he strives in vain even to 'remember' his father's moral and martial authority, much less if he 'didst ever [his] dear father love'. The spectacle of the noble Prince Hamlet, just returned from his Protestant studies, deeply grieving and questioning the moral and spiritual purpose of 'being', sweeping forth on his 'prophetic' mission to cleanse Denmark of its rottenness, was surely also disconcerting and counter-intuitive for an Elizabethan audience enculturated to give vengeance over to God and to condemn revenge honour as the work of the Devil – as is referenced by Hamlet himself, and many audiences since.[9]

Elizabethan revenge drama drew upon in the ancient Roman secular theatrical tradition, its province the pre-Christian world of 'blood for blood', honour, lust, ambition and cycles of extreme retributive violence, ghosts of the dead calling for revenge being a stock in trade. In medieval Christian tradition, ghosts of the dead also haunted the consciences of the living, even as suspicions always lurked that they were devils in disguise, come to tempt their victim to sin. Shakespeare's creative response to establish the truth-telling of the Ghost is to disarm any Protestant disbelief in ghosts and disbelief in purgatory (in pre-Reformation liturgy a state of torment after death to purify the soul) – by visualising the Ghost as a Christian resurrection, rising from the 'marble jaws' of a tomb, similar to well-known medieval pictorial representations of the miraculous rising of the saviour Christ from the dead. Hamlet begs the 'dead corpse' to tell 'why':

> Why thy canonized [sacred] bones hearsed in death
> Have burst their cerements [winding-cloth], why the sepulchre
> Wherein we saw thee quietly interred
> Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws
> To cast thee up again.
>
> (1.4.47–51)

Presented through this familiar sacred image, the Ghost's answer, the story it has come to tell, is already overcoming scepticism – and answering to Hamlet's 'prophetic soul' giving sanctity to his response:

> Now Hamlet, hear:
> 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
> A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
> Is by a forger process of my death
> Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
> The serpent that did sting thy father's life

Now wears his crown.
Hamlet O my prophetic soul! My uncle!
(1.5.34–41)

The Ghost now vents his rage, directed not at his brother's ambition for the crown so much as at the consensual seduction of the 'seeming-virtuous wife' which has secured it. His rage is not against regicide or even incest as much as rage against the act of adultery itself, described in words which are not merely the 'wicked' carnal facts but, more fulsomely, place the Ghost himself in the 'naturally' and morally superior position:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts –
Oh wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce – won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous Queen.
O Hamlet, what falling off was there.
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine.
(1.5.42–52)

Hamlet's present predisposition to idealise his father and castigate his mother is carried along with the Ghost's high moral tone. Not only has the Queen's lust fed upon the lust of the brother – so naturally and morally inferior except in his 'gifts' as a seducer; the very principle of Virtue, under attack from Lewdness and Lust as in a morality play, is put at stake, 'heaven' and 'radiant angels' become satiety and 'garbage' is preyed upon 'as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on' – to quote Hamlet's earlier words describing the 'love' between his father King and mother Queen. These verbal echoes in the play underscore the questioning around 'what I should think' – again, Ophelia's words (see also Chapter 2); here, as the Ghost continues telling Hamlet what he should think, truth is put to the scientific litmus test, a crucial moment in Hamlet's obedience to his Ghost-father's commandment. In the Ghost's list of 'gifts', is revenge a 'natural gift' of the father to the son?

The Ghost's self-description of the 'poisoning', the 'process of the death' is given in words all too 'horrible' to playgoers suffering through epidemics of the plague of the Black Death: in London in 1592–93, there were more than 15,000 deaths. It is a masterpiece of forensic lyricism, challenging any reservation as to its credibility in the realism these words must have

carried – the suddenness of the onset of the attack, the eruption of sores on the 'smooth' body, then death. The story begins beguilingly –

> Sleeping within my orchard
> My custom always of the afternoon –
> Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole

unsuspecting, trustful, secure, the words establish a time of lost innocence, the rhythms speeding up –

> With juice of cursed hebona in a vial
> And in the porches of my ears did pour
> The leprous distilment whose effect
> Holds such an enmity with blood of man
> That swift as quicksilver it courses through
> The natural gates and alleys of the body
> And with a sudden vigour it doth possess
> And curd like eager droppings into milk
> The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine.
> And a most instant tetter barked about
> Most lazar-like with vile and loathsome crust
> All my smooth body.
> Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand
> Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched . . .
> (1.5.59–75)

As the poison invades the body, the words are resonant of the new research in the pathology of the circulation of the blood in Europe and in London, with William Harvey in the years prior pursuing his groundbreaking scientific discovery.[10] As such, the description is yet another pressure-point in *Hamlet* about how truth is authorised: the terror and randomness of the plague was typically interpreted as an act of God's wrath against sinners but now, study of 'the natural gates and alleys of the body' was about to reveal the plague's pathological origins in the rats feeding on the garbage and rottenness of London's alleyways, the 'natural' decay which infects the imagery throughout this play.

And yet, these words are the words of a 'apparition': it is here that the new emphasis in religious discourse on the power of words becomes a part of the play's 'giving up its truth' – as demanded of Ophelia, to confess to Hamlet's seeming 'unmastered importunity'. The persuasive force of words in the theatre came to be seen as rivalling the words of preachers in the church pulpit: 'words' ever threatening the closure of the playhouses. Words, deceptive or true: it is in these years that literary censorship, driven

by political imperatives – famously, Elizabeth grimly saw herself as Shakespeare's Richard II – developed its own set of principles for interpretation: timing, provocative intent, use of 'buggeswordes' (seditious words), audience sensitivity; one particular text under scrutiny was, unsurprisingly, a dedication to the Earl of Essex.[11]

How Shakespeare's language responded to this challenge may be seen most obviously in the exceptionally large number of new words in *Hamlet* earlier noted, and to this may added the exceptional prevalence of 'an odd verbal trick called hendiadys . . . "one by means of two", a single idea conveyed through a pairing of nouns linked by "and", such as to 'induce a kind of mental vertigo'[12] – 'gates and alleys', 'thin and wholesome, 'vile and loathsome'. The effect is just as much to destabilise meaning as seeming to clarify and refine it.

1.v The authority of 'remembrance' or of 'revenge': Say why is this? Wherefore? What should we do? (1.4.57)

Shakespeare has conflated the now-outlawed secular practice of honour revenge[13] with the similarly outlawed religious belief in purgatory, part of medieval Catholic liturgy, now forbidden; ghosts in this tradition may appear from time to time to remind their loving families to remember them in ritual masses and 'indulgences' – priests' prayers of intercession for their speedy transit to heaven – the concept which is reimagined in the Ghost's words, except for one confusing difference: the Ghost calls upon Hamlet to show his loving remembrance of his 'dear father' by *revenge*, not prayers – 'Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!' Moreover, as the play unfolds the challenge to remember overtakes and undermines the mission to revenge as remembrance becomes the empty search of Claudius' words 'seek[ing] for thy noble father in the dust'; remembrance yields 'nothing aught': 'The shift in emphasis from vengeance to remembrance is nothing less than the whole play'[14]; the act of remembrance dissolves the heroic image, the initial impetus to revenge, leaving only female 'frailty' as an object of Hamlet's redemptive mission.

Countering this, while the Ghost describes the queen's fall from 'Virtue' in words suggestive of an orgy of lust, Hamlet is counselled to respect the workings of his mother's moral conscience and not to take either word or action against her:

> But howsomever thou pursuest this act
> Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive
> Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
> And to those thorns that prick and sting her.
> (1.5.85–88)

These words grant 'thy mother' – however fallen and only seemingly virtuous – the workings of her own active Christian conscience. They 'sweep' away from Hamlet the right his own Christian conscience may have in the salvationary role of the son over his 'fallen' mother. As his primary role of righteous avenger based in pre-Christian codes of honour and filial piety loses its original authority, his mother's moral salvation becomes an increasing imperative. Revenge as a secular, rational act to restore honour to the throne of Denmark now becomes a matter of Christian morality:

> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain
> Unmixed with baser matter
> (1.5.102–104)

The very word 'commandment' resonates with the Christian Ten Commandments; 'Oh, my prophetic soul! My uncle!', Hamlet's initial response to the Ghost's revelation of the murder, has similarly resounded with the certainty of Biblical prophecy found in religious/political discourse of the time.

The Ghost may be leaving to Hamlet 'howsomever' he pursues the act of revenge – as if 'how' is of little concern – but the command to withhold all moral and spiritual condemnation against his mother, to leave this to her own spiritual agency – the workings of heaven and conscience – cuts directly across Hamlet's already 'tainted' disposition. Such forbearance – which may be Shakespeare's ironic call back to the pre-Christian Nordic story where the son, Amleth, having accomplished the revenge, appeals for 'pity for my poor mother' as now sufficiently shamed[15] – appears so contradictory to the Ghost's own visceral description of the seduction that any appeal to 'pity' simply does not register with Hamlet. Vowing to heaven, earth, 'what else – And shall I couple hell?' he declares his sole purpose in life is now to remember: 'Remember thee', 'Remember thee', he repeats – 'thy commandment all alone shall live': and then he reiterates his condemnation of his mother, as 'couple' to the crime:

> 'Yes, by heaven
> O most pernicious woman,
> O villain, villain, smiling damned villain'.
> (1.5.104–106)

The further difficulty raised by 'remembrance' is that Hamlet's moral judgement of his mother is very much dependent on an idealised memory of his father. 'Not two months dead' yet the father seems more a distant memory

of classically human physical and moral perfection, paternal remembrance now too painful to bear in contrast to his mother's precipitate coupling with the lecherous 'satyr' Claudius. Indeed, Hamlet seems to have wiped away all 'fond memories' of his mother even before devoting himself to exclusive remembrance of his father: she has no other identity to him than a fallen, morally 'frail' female in need of his verbal 'daggers' to prick her to repentance and salvation.

Revenge is the answer Hamlet hears to the 'why', the 'wherefore' and the 'what to do' – these words a classical rhetorical convention but also resonant of the pulpit and calls for what God wants us to do – demanded of the Ghost's presence by Hamlet at his first sighting of the 'questionable shape' and his bravado challenge 'I will call thee Hamlet/King, father, royal Dane'. The commandment answers to Hamlet's first intuition – 'that within', his pre-disposition that something is 'rotten' and that female 'frailty' is at its base. Even then, his friend Horatio, ever the rational check upon Hamlet's insistence on 'the reaches of our souls', warns of the peril to rational thought of apparitions putting 'toys of desperation' into every brain primed to fear some imminent disaster – 'the roar beneath' (1.4.75–78). As alluded to previously, the historical context of 'desperate' political acts of which Shakespeare's plays are both reflective and prescient is the 'roar beneath' Shakespeare's poetry which the audience is obliged to hear as the play unfolds, and these 'toys of desperation' – the contradiction between revenge and Christian conscience – and the subjective authority of the patriarchal command to revenge dissipates in Hamlet's 'remembrance' and is taken over by the mission of the salvation of 'a mother stained' and 'stew[ing]' in the 'rank sweat of an enseamed [royal] bed'.

1.vi God with hys own mouth

It is as if Shakespeare, not only an actor and playwright but also part owner of a playhouse, is taking on the professional tract-writers such as William Rankins (tellingly himself later a playwright), who in 1587 famously castigated the playhouse as *A Mirrour of Monsters Wherein is Plainely Described the Manifold Vices . . . that are Caused by the Infectious Sight of Playes*:

> Whatsoever is contrary to the word of God, is not agreeable to God, playes are contrary to the word of God, therefore agree that they are not with God. First God with hys own mouth hath pronounced that whatever proceedeth from the wicked nature of man, is unperfect, pollute and defiled, such then are Playes, unperfect, pollute and defiled. Why then should the nature of man be so blind with error, as to run desperately into the damnable sinke of sinne – [playhouses] –

which only increase man's 'Melancholy', whereas the Holy Scriptures and their message of 'the bitterness of that passion of Christ . . . scourged to rid us from strypes' [sins] is what 'sets us free'.[16]

The Ghost's words – as if from 'hys own mouthe', self-evidently 'hys own' truth – set Hamlet free, confirming his 'prophetic soul' and will to action but, when his friends join him, there is the sudden slippage into make-believe as he turns the ghost into a stage-ghost – 'art thou there, truepenny', 'this fellow in the cellarage', 'old mole' (1.5.150–61) – the beginning of the 'antic disposition' Hamlet now puts on to cover his plans for revenge but also implying a clear boundary between reality and illusion which the playhouse and the pulpit are dedicated to efface. This may indicate as well Hamlet's quiver of awareness as he listens to the Ghost father's further grief, that he has been

> Cut off in even in the blossoms of my sins
> denied the saving grace of last rites or confession –
> With all my imperfections on my head.
> O horrible! O horrible, most horrible!
> (1.5.76–79)

that there is a disconcerting contradiction between the martial hero ghost/father's self-description as a man 'whose love was of that dignity' that he was ever faithful in marriage, and yet also a man of 'imperfections' sending him to hell.

It is a measure of the folding of one 'alternative truth' into another in *Hamlet* that the Ghost's story rebuts a 'forged' story of the death as a serpent's sting 'put about' by the murderer king, by 'putting about' the 'real' story to an audience predisposed to identify with Hamlet's alienated state of mind and moral judgement of his mother's 'commonness'. Hamlet, so ready to lend an ear to the Ghost's outrage at the 'incestuous, adulterate beast' and the 'falling-off' of my 'most seeming-virtuous queen' that the story of carnality and murder is so convincing as to make the murderer's own admission to his guilt almost redundant. As the play develops, it is not the truth of the murder which matters so much as the truth of the heroic martial image of the father: as this image loses its moral authority in Hamlet's mind, its degradation throws into question both the imputation of the mother's fall from virtue and the mission of revenge itself.

1.vii Pyrrhus's Revenge – 'One speech in't I chiefly loved . . . especially when [Aeneas] speaks of Priam's slaughter'. *(2.2.359–477)*

Discussing 'Hamlet as poet', one recent scholar quotes a passage from the writings of a classical Roman rhetorician widely referenced in Shakespeare's time, a sentence of which reads: 'When I complain that a man has been murdered, am I not to bring before my eyes every plausible event that might have occurred as the murder took place?'[17] These words could be a model for Shakespeare's forensic realism in the Ghost's story: imagining the event, Hamlet is compelled to

action and the audience with him – but only exposing Hamlet's increasing paralysis of motivation, inexplicable to himself. Equally, however, 'every plausible event' in the visualisation may arouse unintended doubt and have the opposite result from that intended, as with the expression 'Pyrrhic victory' dating from a generation after Shakespeare: victory worse than defeat. This contextualises the artistic purpose of the first 'play within the play' in the long second scene in Act 2 in which Hamlet meets with the strolling players, welcoming them as his 'good friends'. In a convivial mood, Hamlet 'as poet' recalls from the classical Greek epic repertoire

> 'One speech in't I chiefly loved . . . especially when [Aeneus] speaks of Priam's slaughter. If it live in your memory, begin at this line – 'let me see, let me see –
> *The rugged Pyrrhus like th' Hyrcanian beast . . .*
> – 'Tis not so. It begins with Pyrrhus.
> *The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,*
> *Black as his purpose . . .*
> (2.2.383–391)

Hamlet, contradicting his avowal to 'wipe' away his own bookish memories, continues with the speech for thirteen more lines but already, the audience may be confused: Priam's 'slaughter' by Pyrrhus to avenge the murder of his father Achilles is literally a slaughter and, as the players pick up and proceed with the epic poem, is proclaimed in such terrifying visual detail –

> this dread and black complexion 'smeared'
> ... ...
> 'With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons
> Baked and impasted with the parching streets'
> (2.2.396–397)

as to arouse pity for the victim Priam, a white-haired old man, more than admiration for the young would-be heroic Greek avenger, the role which Hamlet himself has sworn 'by heaven' to act out as 'slaughterer' of Claudius. The spectacle of the 'uneven match' is as confusing as this oxymoron: Pyrrhus 'strikes wide', giving Priam the chance to slice off his ear:

> For lo, his sword
> Which was declining on the milky head
> Of reverend Priam seemed i'th air to stick.
> (2.2 415–417)

'Milky' head, 'reverend' – the sword seems to 'stick' in instinctive reverence; the avenger is now the 'tyrant Pyrrhus', standing, frozen, 'neutral

to his will and matter' – these lines, so eloquent of Hamlet's own 'stuck' condition, also imply that he is the 'tyrant', the 'hellish' Pyrrhus who, with 'eyes like carbuncles', seeks out 'old grandsire Priam', in turn beginning to resemble the 'grizzled' bearded old King, Hamlet's own father.

Nor does Shakespeare leave the confusion there, as Polonius would prefer; the 'roused vengeance' of Pyrrhus becomes alarmingly close to present circumstance. Hamlet chides him for this and, intending perhaps chiefly to rehearse shame upon his own mother-queen's conduct, calls, 'Say on, come to Hecuba' – Priam's wife, obliged to watch Pyrrhus 'make malicious sport'

> In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs

– instead finds himself brought to tears, feelings he has been unable to summon in sweeping to his revenge: the simple gesture of the aged queen snatching up a 'blanket in the alarm of fear' to cover her withered loins 'lank' with many pregnancies, and her cry 'the instant burst of clamour'

> Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven
> And passion to the gods.
>
> (2.2.455–6)

Hecuba, the grieving widowed queen, image of tragic sorrow, becomes the focus of Hamlet's emotional identification and fuel for his anger against his own widowed mother-queen. While Hamlet is inspired by the emotional power of play-acting to set *The Mousetrap* to expose Claudius' guilt to dispel doubts that the Ghost may be a 'de'il', this action is counterproductive, heeding neither the truth of his 'prophetic soul' nor the 'cunning' he knows is needed in the role. Afterwards, in reflective mode, Hamlet is still left with his angst about how acted emotion – 'what's Hecuba to him?' – has more power to move him than the 'motive' and 'passion' of his own living commitment to revenge. What emotion he has is against his 'common' mother: he is now motivated to break her down into the image of the grieving Hecuba through mirroring back to her the image of her noble husband – and give back to himself the motive and passion to kill the murderer.

1.viii 'And how his audit stands who knows, save heaven' *(3.3.82)*

Hamlet's remembrance of his father now becomes a constraint on action, revenge or even prayer. This reversal is vividly dramatised in his tortuous about-face when, coming upon Claudius praying, he rejects the apparent fortuitous opportunity: his sword raised over the usurper's head, he re-enacts Pyrrhus' hesitation –'his hesitation the play itself'[18] – and *sheaths* his

sword: his reasoning that, as his father has been murdered in a state of sin, without benefit of prayer and repentance and 'doomed . . . to fast in fires', it would be 'base and silly, not revenge' if he killed Claudius while he was praying 'and so 'a goes to heaven' while his father's 'audit' is still unsure:

> 'A [you] took my father grossly full of bread
> With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May,
> And how his audit stands who knows, save heaven
> But in our circumstance and course of thought
> 'Tis heavy with him.
>
> (3.3.80–84)

The earlier image of the 'full blossoms' becomes exaggerated into a franker 'full-blown' assessment of the almost flaunting sinfulness of the father – 'grossly full of bread . . . his crimes broad-blown, as flush as May', and the impersonal calculation of the 'heavy' state of his soul, 'who knows, save heaven', shows Hamlet disengaging from a commitment to revenge, 'base and silly' and notably, from the father's most evident need – the true spiritual purpose of 'remember me' – a son's prayers of intercession for his father's soul to save him from damnation. What is left, then, of Hamlet's moral condemnation of his mother's remarriage, if it has depended upon a now-discredited idealised image of the father whose 'audit stands who knows'?

This disintegration of the patriarchal ideal intensifies as Hamlet's self-flagellating and then self-justification over his failure to effect a revenge of 'more horrid hent' shifts to mental scarification of 'Woman' – first his erstwhile 'beautified Ophelia' and then, in total disregard of his father's counsel, his loving mother. Moreover, this moral judgement, based on a father's and a son's 'nature' against the remarriage of the woman they have loved, is shown developing into an obsession associated in the popular mind with the strident moral preachings of the puritan stage stereotype. It is telling of where Shakespeare is taking his audience in the closet scene that in his comedy *Twelfth Night*, written around the same time, Malvolio, 'a kind of puritan', is turned into a figure of ridicule, his puritanism alluded to in expressions such as 'ground of faith' and 'to be saved by believing rightly', derided by others as a 'vice' and inciting 'revenge' against him.

Hamlet's disguise of madness seems more and more to reflect the schizoid madness of the conflicting demands placed upon him by his father, to act the role of murderous avenger and agent of moral purification of the 'royal bed' while remaining, in his filial duty to his mother, the non-judgmental, loving son of the very woman living, 'stewing' and 'honeying' in the 'rank sweat' of the very bed that he must redeem. In the name of 'Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane', the son Hamlet is commanded to carry out an act

of revenge: 'howsomever' killing his uncle the king – regicide, homicide, patricide? As the Gravedigger reminds his fellow delver much later in the play, Crowner's 'quest law' forbids taking a life – even one's own life: 'Is she [Ophelia] to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?' (5.1.1–2) Hamlet is positioned precisely in the ambiguity of the Gravedigger's confusion of 'salvation' with 'damnation': by obeying his father, is he 'wilfully' seeking 'salvation' or 'damnation'; hell or heaven? The ambiguity brings back Hamlet's initial interrogation of the Ghost – 'thou, dead corpse' in martial steel,

> Making night hideous, and we fools of nature
> So horridly to shake our disposition
> With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?
> (1.4.54–56)

Church and State forbid revenge killing because of non-rational, 'wilful' belief in the sacredness of the human soul but, by this very 'wilful' belief, a murderer can seek salvation through prayer: 'howsomever', father and son are unambiguous in their imputation of gross sexual immorality corrupting the 'royal bed'. 'Words' carry a heavy responsibility, mirroring the example of Puritan preaching: 'Since salvation came through the Word, it could not be preached too much'.[19]

Section 2 Detailed examination of* Hamlet *Act 3, scene 4, 36–154

Queen: What have I done that thou dar'st wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?
Hamlet: Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths – o, such a deed
As from the body of contraction
Plucks the very soul, and sweet religion makes
Rhapsody of words. Heaven's face doth glow
O'er this solidity and compound mass
With heated visage as against the doom,
Is thought-sick at the act.
Queen: Ay me, what act
That roars so loud and thunders in the index?
Hamlet: Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers:

See what a grace was seated on this brow,
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man;
This was your husband. Look you now what follows:
Here is your husband like a mildewed ear
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain feed
And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?
. . . What devil was't
That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope. O shame, where is thy blush?
. . .**Enter Ghost**
Save me and hover o'er me with your wings
You heavenly guards! What would your gracious figure?

Queen: Alas, he's mad!

Hamlet: Do you not come your tardy son to chide

Ghost: Do not forget! . . .
But look, amazement on thy mother sits!
O step between her and her fighting soul.
. . .

Queen: Whereon do you look?

Hamlet: On him! on him! Look you how pale he glares . . .

Queen: To whom do you speak this?

Hamlet: Do you see nothing there?

Queen: Nothing at all, yet all is as I see

Hamlet: Nor did you nothing hear?

Queen: No, nothing but ourselves.

Hamlet: Why, look you there! Look how it steals away -
My father in his habit as he lived.
Look where he goes even now out at the portal!
Exit Ghost

Queen: This is the very coinage of your brain
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in . . .
Oh Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

2.*i* *Contemporary events, Essex and Elizabeth and the authority of the monarch*

When the Queen demands 'What have I done that thou dar'st wag thy tongue/In noise so rude against me?' the question of her knowledge of, much less her connivance with, Claudius' murder of the old King Hamlet becomes acute. In the Saxo Grammaticus *Legend of Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark*, the murder is known to all and the Prince's moral outrage against his mother Queen Gerutha for 'taking to thy bosom him who murdered thy kind husband' is in the form of a reproach: 'Thy deeds point out thy nature, in that thou forgettest thy first husband' – not that she is held guilty of any complicity in the murder. Her son tells her that the 'double disgrace and dishonour she has suffered, to wed the slayer and brother of her husband', will be 'washed away' if she connives with him to kill the murderer – which she does; he is killed, order restored but the cycle of revenge re-commences. Shakespeare's Hamlet is 'not thus the Hamlet of history',[20] nor is Queen Gertrude Queen Gerutha; in Shakespeare's reimagining, Hamlet becomes an embodiment of the accumulated crises of authority in the 'history' which closes in on the reign of another 'mother' Queen, Elizabeth I. Where in the *Legend* it is clear that the 'guilt' is not with the Queen, who has been forcibly dishonoured, but with the murderer, Shakespeare has turned this around to the point where the Queen herself has become the focus of Hamlet's direst vengeful thoughts – the 'toys of desperation' Horatio has warned of (1.4.75), 'the very coinage of [his] brain', in his mother's words – Hamlet 'speaking' the 'daggers' he holds back from using (3.2.386).

The extraordinary passion, the maternal/erotic tension of the closet scene – famously persuasive of Freud's 'Oedipus complex' analysis and of T.S. Eliot's conclusion that the play is an artistic failure in the 'inadequacy of the external to the emotion'[21] – makes it plausible that sitting behind this play is a real-life drama, the 'tragical history' of the young, charismatic Earl of Essex and his maternal/erotic friendship-turned-enmity with the ageing Queen of England Elizabeth I, herself representing the ultimate 'patriarchal' authority in the realm. The pressure to sustain her authoritative image as she aged is evident in her many commissioned portraits as eternally young – 'paint[ed] an inch thick' (5.1.183), to use words from the graveyard scene in the play – magnificently gowned and bejewelled, golden hued: unofficial portraits were forbidden. Essex was a close friend of Shakespeare's former patron the Earl of Southampton, friend and the subject of many of his love sonnets, and Shakespeare would have known of Essex's infamous failure when sent by the Queen to put down the bloody rebellion in Ireland, and of his infamous premature intrusion into her private chamber seeking audience to justify himself while she was not as yet

regally gowned, made-up and ornamented. An unheard-of violation 'much wondered at', it 'may well have informed the play Shakespeare was now writing, with its fraught closet scene in which a rash Prince Hamlet confronts Queen Gertrude and remonstrates with her there'.[22] Whether or not Shakespeare would also have been aware of a bitter letter Essex sent to his naval commander in which he writes that Elizabeth 'destined me to the hardest task that ever any gentleman was sent about', and that Elizabeth is 'breaking my heart' and 'only after 'my soul shall be freed from this [prison] of my body' shall 'she see her wrong to me and her wounds given to herself',[23] these words – 'hard tasks', the wish to die as moral reproach, a heart broken, wrongs to others being also wrongs 'to herself' – revealed as the 'coinage of the brain' of this disaffected, chivalric and vengeful young noble – find ample resonance in *Hamlet*.

The act most shocking for the realm and the playwright personally was the self-deluded attempt by Essex, joined by Southampton, to lead an uprising against the Queen's advisers, initiating a performance of Shakespeare's play about the deposition of King Richard II just prior to the rebellion. Although Essex had cultivated the support of the educated elite and 'some of the most extreme puritan elements',[24] the popular support he was counting on proved illusory; both judged guilty, Essex was beheaded and Southampton imprisoned.[25] Uncertainties over the precise dating of *Hamlet* make it unclear whether the play was completed before or after the attempted coup;[26] what does seem safe to conclude is that passionate recrimination against the female monarch, plots of treason and vengeance, royal portraiture and even stories of the poisoning of Essex's chair and the pommel of Elizabeth's saddle, 'political assassination . . . unleashing forces that could not be predicted or controlled',[27] was personal 'current history' being reworked in Shakespeare's imagination in this play. As Shakespeare tells it, and as it has been heard and read ever since, the story of the 'damaged', impossibly conflicted hero Prince Hamlet is almost painfully intimate, as if telling the story of the passionate and foolhardy Earl of Essex to the 'unsatisfied'.

2.ii How now! A rat! Dead for a ducat, dead! (3.4.23)

Up until the closet scene, Hamlet has been *playing* the role of would-be avenger: in a game of words, taking the guise of a free-wheeling madman to divert attention from his mission but achieving the opposite result; he subjects his 'beautified Ophelia' to an incomprehensible 'affrighting' mimed spiritual scarifying and sets the court on alert with his display of disinhibition, flouting norms of polite discourse and publicly 'catching the conscience' of the murderer king by putting on a 'play within a play' insinuating sexual and regicidal guilt.

Revenge has been a kind of game, wit against deceit, a self-justifying rejection of normal constraints to flush out the deadly political conspiracy he can feel all around him. He has been without regard for consequences other than self-laceration at his failure to act and a bitter conviction that he is being surrounded by spies, played upon like a pipe. But it is becoming more and more evident that he has been losing the image of the god-like ideal of his father on which he has based both his commitment to revenge and his moral outrage against his mother, Queen Gertrude. Hamlet's procrastination reflects the confusion, made at the outset in his father's call to revenge, of the theatrical, secular chivalric role of avenger of family honour, and the Christian liturgy of the soul, damnation and salvation, the hero immobilised by the contradiction between these patriarchal codes, honour killing and 'vengeance is mine, saith the Lord', and his frustration is now finding expression in the moral scarification of his mother. 'Words, words, words', Hamlet's dismissive response to a disingenuous query from Polonius, find their deadly purpose in his Nero-unlike resolve not to 'use' daggers but to 'speak' daggers to his mother 'to rid her of her strypes'; and as the dead father's increasingly compromised authority energises the son's determination to exercise his own moral authority against her, his own 'strypes' become more and more apparent in the 'buggeswordes' he uses against her.

In the lead-up to the closet scene, the Queen has requested Hamlet to visit her in order to reprove her offending son after the 'mousetrap' scene and the king's furious eruption. Hamlet has set out with the opposite intention – 'now I could drink hot blood' – to force a showdown between a not-so-loving son and an offending mother, channelling the infamously bloodthirsty Nero but constraining himself to 'speak daggers' but 'use none', to shame her into repentance and sexual abstinence to purify the 'royal bed'. On his way, coming upon Claudius at prayer gives Hamlet the perfect chance to do the 'act', but he substitutes an imagined hellishly compromising theatrical scenario for the deed yet to be done. The Queen's request has now been corrupted into a set-up between the king and Polonius to use the Queen's love of her son to warn both mother and son that Hamlet's madness has gone too far. The Queen is required to 'lay home to him' that 'his pranks have been too broad to bear with' and to warn him that she has been screening him from the king's 'much heat'. Polonius is to put pressure on the Queen by hiding behind the arras, ostensible protection but a veiled threat to the queen that she must discipline her son or else; the scene is to be a showdown between loving mother and suspect son, to establish the king's authority over both.

Confusion of authority is underlined in the initial exchange as Hamlet enters and takes the upper hand, assuming a right to reprove his mother which she rejects in anger: 'Have you forgot me?' Hamlet's reply invokes

the authority of religion – the 'rood' is the Christian cross – and sums up the problem:

> No, by the rood, not so.
> You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife
> And, would it were not so, you are my mother.
> (3.4.13–15)

The queen retorts that, if he feels that way, she will set others who have greater authority to speak to him, but Hamlet is not deterred: there is something so threatening in Hamlet's words –

> Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.
> You go not till I set you up a glass
> Where you may see the inmost part of you
> (3.4.17–19)

that she cries out in fear that he will murder her.

The contained aggression in Hamlet's words here is similar to his earlier wordless harrowing of Ophelia in her closet with its semblance to the medieval Christian 'dumb-shows' enacting the scarification of souls in purgatory. In its Elizabethan/Jacobean form of individualised Puritan religious practice, it is the personal holding-up of the 'mirrour' of conscience in constant self-questioning, the severe and painful 'self-wracke' of 'fallen' humanity in need of God's redemption. Hamlet's sense of 'that within' which authorises his 'inky black' attitude of mourning on his first appearance in the play references this claim to inner, intuitive access to moral guidance, which is also the site of the sin and transgression Hamlet is set upon reflecting back to his mother – her 'inmost part'.

> *Queen:* What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me –
> Help, ho!
> *Polonius*
> *[behind the arras]:* What ho! Help!
> *Hamlet:* How now! A rat! Dead for a ducat, dead!
> [Kills Polonius]
> (3.4.20–22)

Hamlet thinks he has killed the eavesdropping king – 'a rat' – but again, he has fallen short of his own high moral and the theatrical standards: not only is it the wrong person, Ophelia's and Laertes's father, but the action is impulsive and ignoble, through a curtain, as if the avenger is too cowardly to look his victim in the face. Hamlet, setting up a mirror in front of his

mother to reflect back her sinful image, has been unable himself to face his own image as 'sinful' avenger. The Ghost has left 'howsomever' up to him and Hamlet has failed again: that he himself has now committed murder in stabbing the old courtier while the murderer/seducer Claudius still lives on gives a new desperation, rising to hysteria, in carrying out his original purpose in this meeting with his mother.

2.iii 'Ay me, what act / That roars so loud and thunders in the index?' *(3.4.49–50)*

The dead body of Polonius lying there before their eyes now raises the stakes between mother and son far above what either has expected: to the Queen's horror, Hamlet now seems not only mad, but also a murderer, his sanity quite gone and his madness indeed dangerous. For Hamlet, his own horror at his act is now transformed into a heightened charge against his mother, as he throws the words at her:

> A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother,
> As kill a king and marry with his brother.
> (3.4.26–27)

She is now accused not only of incest but of murder – so conjoined in marriage as to be indivisible in guilt; and now the radius of guilt is widening to implicate this 'rash, intruding fool' – but Shakespeare's 'wording' suggests it is as much Hamlet who is 'rash' here, and it is Hamlet who is now finding 'being too busy is some danger'. Again, as stage spectacle this seems the perfect moment for the burdened son to break down and tell her what he knows, trusting that the Ghost story will convince her as it did him. Instead Hamlet, in the physical intimacy of the closet, becomes reinvested in dire sexual imaginings and his salvationary mission: the emotional imperative to force his mother to admit 'what she has done' grips Hamlet as if he is wringing her heart –

> – Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down
> And let me wring your heart.
> (3.4.32–33)

The Queen is having none of it: her son, now a killer, is calling *her* a killer?

> What have I done that thou dar'st wag thy tongue
> In noise so rude against me?
> (3.4.37–38)

Hamlet then launches into a high-flown speech on the 'act' of adultery, its overblown rhetoric – 'takes off the rose/From the fair forehead of an

innocent love/And sets a blister there' – and its mix of poetic sentiment and 'sweet religion' only leaving the Queen more mystified. Hamlet's words here recall the earlier obfuscating, flowery yet threatening sermonising of Ophelia's brother and father as they warn her to 'fear' the 'contagious blastments' (1.3.4) of youthful sexual desire, 'unmastered importunity', their words making no sense whatever to Ophelia, who has heard enough of this from 'those ungracious pastors' showing her 'the steep and thorny way to heaven' (1.3.44) to know the hypocrisy at the core of such 'good lessons' and that Hamlet's courtship, by contrast, has been 'honourable' even to 'the holy vows of heaven'. In the end, Ophelia has been left bereft of self-belief: 'I do not know, my lord, what I should think' (1.3.103). Similarly, the Queen is plunging into more and more confusion; 'Ay me', she cries, what is this 'act' so doom-laden as to 'roar and thunder' in prologue to his accusations? Again, Shakespeare seems to be drawing on the rhetoric of the Puritan zealot 'eternally in a pious fury',[28] implicitly making a covert counterattack against the anti-playhouse tract-writers claiming a superior moral authority and access to 'what I should think', in Ophelia's words (1.3.103).

Hamlet takes her resistance as evidence of how 'brazed' she has become against sexual guilt. He now switches to a different set of moral values, the classical Greek aesthetic standards he has invoked in imagining his father's Hyperion-like moral grandeur from the outset. The impact of this sudden switch from an 'act' heating 'Heaven's face', 'doom-laden', 'thought-sick', to a lecture on two 'pictures' as resounding evidence of the Queen's sinful 'act' is a masterly theatrical switch: the audience may have been going along with Hamlet's attempt to stir her conscience, her 'innermost part', but what would they have made of this – the Queen's remarriage represented as an 'act' of degraded *aesthetic c*hoice? Literary historians point out that this scene may well have resonated with the contemporary discrepancy between the ageing Queen Elizabeth's actual appearance and the 'eternally young' image of the only portraits permitted,[29] like the celebrated 'Rainbow Portrait', extraordinary in its depiction of her garment covered with eyes and ears; imagery – all-seeing, all-hearing[30] – precisely the visual and aural imagery which pervades the closet scene but its opposite, the Queen not-seeing, not-hearing – or is it Hamlet who is blind and deaf?

2.*iv* 'Hyperion's curls . . .' *(3.4.54)*

Hamlet now takes as his ammunition the whole spectrum of sculptural representations of the ancient Greek and Roman mythological gods:

> Look here upon this picture, and on this,
> The counterfeit presentment of two brothers:

> See what grace was seated on this brow,
> Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself
> An eye like Mars to threaten and command
> A station like the herald Mercury
> New-lighted on heaven-kissing hill
> A combination and a form indeed
> Where every god did seem to set his seal
> To give the world assurance of a man,
> This was your husband.
>
> (3.4.51–61)

'An eye like Mars to threaten and command': this is the God-given patriarchal authority on which Hamlet has staked his life, now turning him into a murderer himself. When Hamlet turns to the brother's portrait, 'what follows' is nothing but 'a mildewed ear'! 'Ear' carries the reminder of the Ghost's account of the murder by poison poured into the ear, as well as of a well-known Biblical prophetic dream of blighted ears of corn predicting disaster, and its reductive incongruity as a comparative image underlines the incongruous nature of Hamlet's argument: in performance, the audience would be looking at two portraits, much the same; even if staged as purely imaginary 'counterfeits', Hamlet's sudden loss of words in completing the comparison has the feel of defeat; which of the two images is the more convincing? Elizabethan playgoers, accustomed to the illusion of eternal youth in successive portraits of the Queen, may well have had a particular appreciation of Hamlet's last desperate attempt to sustain the myth of the old king's supreme manliness.

Hamlet ploughs on, trying to find further weak points in his mother's self-belief or what he assumes to be her reasoning; his own, however, so convoluted, odd and unlikely as to indeed become verbal 'daggers'. His mother has never felt the need to justify her behaviour in terms of 'love' or even of 'judgement' or 'reason', but Hamlet cannot see this as evidence of her own good conscience – the conscience on which his father has said Hamlet should rely:

> leave her to heaven
> And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
> To prick and sting her.
>
> (1.5.86–88)

This counsel has been ambiguous from the start, and never attended to by Hamlet. Shakespeare is now taking his audience into the state of mind of those who believe in possession by devils – witchcraft and burning and drowning witches familiar enough at the time – and with the same

wrought-up falsity of Hamlet's earlier fantasy of being 'cozened' by a devil; this time being used as a weapon to break her down and extract her confession, much as occurred with witches, and familiar today in terms such as 'waterboarding' or its euphemism, 'enhanced coercive interrogation technique'. Nor is it so very far from the concept of 'self-wracke' to purge away the sins of the flesh favoured by religious sects proliferating at the time. Shakespeare, as playwright and part owner of the new Globe Theatre obliged to be located outside the jurisdiction of London City authorities,[31] had a personal interest in this state of mind: in the decade he wrote *Hamlet*, the authorities were petitioning the Privy Council against 'lewd plaie[s]' and the total suppression of the playhouses as 'markets of bawdrie', places where plots against the monarch may be hatched and people may be lured from proper employment.[32] Confusingly, from another perspective, as suggested earlier, the spectacle of the young prince locked in such threatening intimacy of righteous-sounding rage against his mother and queen may well have resonated with the sensational 'current history' of the 'proud and impetuous' Earl of Essex, 'enraged by the queen's refusal to readmit him to favour'[33] – leading a rebellion – with some puritan-leaning and anti-Spanish supporters – against the embattled old virgin queen.

2.v 'O Hamlet, speak no more. Thou turn'st my very eyes into my soul' *(3.4.86–87)*

In this scene, Shakespeare out-Herods Herod, turning puritan-led censorship of the theatres against itself by placing his hero in the role of the righteous, the spiritual scarifier, the 'fervent protestants whose enemies called them puritans',[34] visualising the sinner in a grotesque transformation of the classical ideal of her husband as cozened by a devil to play 'hoodman-blind', a malformed creature whose senses are confused even as to their proper function:

> Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
> Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all
> (3.4.87–88)

'Shame' – 'O shame, where is thy blush?' – this the final 'dagger', stabbing words evocative of hellfire, insurrection and evisceration: 'rebellious hell' mutinying in 'a matron's bones', 'melt[ing] in her own fire', lack of shame as unnatural as frost burning. The coercive interrogation is effective, so effective that the question which hangs uneasily over such torture – is this confession genuine? – remains in the air: are the 'thorns pricking and stinging' at last, or has Hamlet broken her down in ferocious defiance of his father's trust, convincing her of a sin of which she has been unaware – and

may now be imagining under pressure? The Queen experiences a harrowing of her very soul:

> O Hamlet, speak no more.
> Thou turn'st my very eyes into my soul
> And there I see such black and grieved spots
> As will leave there their tinct'.
> (3.4.87–89)

Turning eyes into soul: this response evokes the sense of spiritual harrowing in Ophelia's description of Hamlet's wordless visitation as finally he 'lets [her] go' and withdraws, head turned back, with his eyes 'to the last bend[ing] their light on me' (2.1.97) (see Chapter 2). This may be a mad act, Hamlet's deliberate adoption of an 'antic disposition' to disguise his revenge, but its impact on Ophelia is devastating and a large part of what eventually destroys her: likewise, it has 'cleft' his mother's heart 'in twain'.

Shakespeare now underlines the subtext of Hamlet's scourging: it is not about saving his mother's soul so much as getting her out of Claudius's bed:

> Nay, but to live
> In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed
> Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
> Over the nasty sty –
> (3.4.89–91)

If used earlier, his mother would have rejected these words but now, forced by a veritable verbal stabbing to *feel* the guilt of which she has been unaware, the Queen is reduced to pleading for mercy:

> O speak to me no more!
> These words like daggers enter in my ears.
> No more, sweet Hamlet.
> (3.4.92–94)

Words like daggers being plunged into her ear: these are words which also echo the Ghost's description of the 'cursed hebona' poison poured into his ear to kill him, and recalling the graphic detail of its quicksilver passage, curdling the blood and raising a 'vile and loathsome crust' on his 'smooth body' (1.5.65–70), suggesting that Hamlet's words are a poison likewise, visible in the 'black and grieved spots', stains far more damning than the Ghost has envisaged in thorn-pricks and stings. Shakespeare seems here to be showing Hamlet in the grip of real delusion about his mother's sexual immorality, which he keeps ignited by references to villainy and murder, but so cryptically that his mother is only further convinced of his madness; what sense can she make of talk of the king as a 'cutpurse' stealing a 'precious diadem' from a 'shelf' and putting it in his 'pocket'?

3.5 'What would your gracious figure?' *Alas, he's mad! (3.4.102)*

Theatrically, at this moment – the Queen pleading 'No more, sweet Hamlet' – the intervention of the Ghost, no longer in martial armour but habitual dress, a 'nightgowne' in an early edition of the play – dramatises the final collapse of the god-like warrior and mighty sun-king image of the father. Even as Hamlet's conscience calls upon guardian angels to protect him – from an old man in a nightgown – and the Ghost proclaims its intention to 'whet thy most blunted purpose', it is evident that its focus is on the original contradictory message, stronger now, not counsel so much as pleading with Hamlet not to 'contrive' against his mother 'aught'. The Ghost is no longer the fearful bearer of a 'dread command', but a kindly father come to 'chide [his] tardy son' – these words themselves reflect the paternal homeliness of the visitation. Ironically, *this* Ghost, 'as he lived', is an image the queen may have accepted as a bearer of truth, but now only Hamlet can see it, and this Ghost's very human ordinariness is the awful truth confronting Hamlet as his eyes stare wildly, his hair on end. For Hamlet, the Ghost's 'piteous' looks only threaten to expose the full horror of the contradiction he is now in: what 'true colour' can revenge have, if not martial, war-like, blood for blood? It is now Hamlet's turn to plead, lest 'tears perchance for blood' overtake his life's mission, playing out the irony in his initial declamation:

> The time is out of joint; O cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> (1.5.86–87)

The image which has sustained the 'dread command' has gone, but what can bring alive the dead body lying on the stage in full sight, the loved father of Ophelia whose 'tears' will become the 'too much of water' of her own death: revenge has brought only destruction upon the innocent. The Queen's later words to the king reflect the 'madness' revenge has become as she describes Hamlet's act: 'this brainish apprehension' which has killed 'The unseen good old man' – now not only 'seen' but soon to begin to smell.

Shakespeare shows how Hamlet has in this scene lost the image of 'reality' on which he has staked his life, 'wipe[d] away' all his former self to obey, and that he is now desperate to hold onto the further 'reality' he has wilfully coupled with revenge, his mother's 'trespass' – and now, again, the new Ghost-father wants him to let go as he has earlier counselled: 'to step between her and her fighting soul', to comfort her, not to 'amaze' her. His mother pleads:

> O gentle son
> Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
> Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?
> (3.4.118–120)

Her words keep separate the 'gentle son' she loves, from the 'distemper' possessing him, and she presses him to objectify what he sees, but he turns it back on her – it is she who is blind, who cannot hear –

> To whom do you speak this?
> *Do you see nothing there?*
> Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.
> *Nor did you nothing hear?*
> No, nothing but ourselves –
> (3.4.127–131)

'Nothing there': mighty patriarchal authority has dissolved into nothingness. Hamlet has progressively replaced his loss of passion for revenge by moral passion against 'frail Woman', now so far invested in his imaginings of original sin that his mother's refusal to reflect back her sinful image in the glass he has set before her that her response that this is 'the very coinage of your brain' has only convinced him of her self-flattery:

> Mother, for love of grace
> Lay not that flattering unction to your soul
> That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
> It will but skin and film the ulcerous place
> Whiles rank corruption mining all within
> Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven
> (3.4.142–147)

'Whereon do you look?' 'To whom do you speak?' This language, so saturated in the subjective imagery of blindness and seeing – who is blind, who can see? coursing like an invisible ulcerous poison through the play, is also the language of religious zealotry – 'grace', 'soul', 'heaven', all giving Hamlet's moral scarifying a spiritual overreach which resonates with the Puritan pamphlet rantings of the time – those 'ungracious pastors' preaching the 'steep and thorny way to heaven' of Ophelia's rebuke to her sermonising brother. Shakespeare is exposing the madness of revenge, and at the same time, the madness of salvationist discourse ulcerated by sexual morality. By the conclusion of the scene, it is Hamlet who seems the one 'infected'; the image of the ape leaping out of the cage 'break[ing] its own neck down' by which he threatens his mother of her peril is an ominous reflection back upon his own foolhardy self-entrapment: the 'woodcock caught in the springe'.

It is a different Hamlet after the closet scene; the high drama and emotional extremes of his earlier investment in his father's command and his mother's moral peril have been exhausted, and now, in the full knowledge that his death is 'mandated' in the sealed letters his guards – 'adders

fanged' – will take with him to England, the more sober the reality of his mission presents. How can it be that, for all his unquestioning commitment, his 'cause and will and strength and means' to honour the 'divine ambition' of revenge – an ideal for which 'two thousand souls' are ready to die in defending 'a little patch of ground' (4.4 17–24) – he still lives 'to say this thing's to do'? 'How stand I then?' (4.4 43–55) It is Shakespeare's literary genius that the wording of his pondering also gives the answer: the image of revenge as the 'causeless' reality of the death of now 'twenty-thousand men' reduces it to 'a fantasy and trick of fame', and his own previous 'puffed' imaginings are now presented in the pedestrian terms of 'a father killed, a mother stained' (4.4 62): no more sun-gods and fallen 'Woman'; the self-glorifying mind-games and theatrics are over, and Hamlet is now alone with whatever he can do with 'perfect conscience' (5.2.66), yet a sense of '*im*perfect conscience' hovers over all his subsequent actions: his forgery of the royal seal and the alteration of the letter which sends his guards to their deaths, the histrionic declaration of his 'forty-thousand brothers' love for Ophelia, the 'bad dreams' around the duel – the ultimate travesty of the code of honour, the disclaimer of 'madness' to Laertes and the dying plea to Horatio, as a friend, to 'tell my story' to 'clear my wounded name' (5.2.327–333).

Part Two: Bao-Yu: 'people like that are worth dying for. I wouldn't change if he killed me'. (2 34.159)

Following the Overview, the discussion is set out in three sections:

Section 1 advances a reading of the novel which locates Cao Xueqin's deep interest in the theme of patriarchal authority and filial piety more in his dramatisation of the violation of these normative ideals than in their observance, taking note of documentary evidence of contemporary concerns around the instability of authority structures as they impacted the author's family. To provide a literary context for the particular example of the generational decline in the father-son relationship chosen for close analysis, the discussion draws on a range of ancient texts in which filial ideals are illustrated and interrogated through the mediating concept of remonstrance in the 'Five Relationships' structuring patriarchal society in the novel.

Section 2 traces the development of this theme in the narrative, with attention to particular incidents which offer different perspectives on violence and conflict resolution and show how the hero's empathetic sensibility inadvertently exposes others to harm in a culture on the edge of fear of reprisal against any apparent violation of prescribed order, expressed in retributive violence and in female 'chastity suicide'; the model of filial piety as 'counterfeit' – the paradox of the 'other Bao-yu': Bao-yu 'ta'en from himself' adds to the complexity of Xueqin's interrogation of the dilemmas inherent in the paradigm.

Section 3 examines the episode of the 'terrible chastisement' of the 'scapegrace' Bao-yu marking the nadir of patriarchal authority in the novel and the defining moment of Bao-yu's refusal to change his conduct. This is also a defining moment in his allegiance to his beloved Dai-yu and the tragic consequences to follow.

Overview

As stated in the Introduction, the extended scene of the hero's murderous failure to impress patriarchal moral authority upon his mother in *Hamlet*, and the episode of the near-fatal failure of the hero's father to impress patriarchal authority on his son in *The Story of the Stone*, are taken as comparable in the sense that in each, the writer is intent upon enacting the hero's experience of the disintegration of patriarchal authority, after which the struggle to sustain some ideal of morality in a world so mercilessly beyond the hero's capacity to control becomes a seemingly pointless contest of competitive madnesses: 'I'm not a half-wit. You're the half-wit' (4.97.344); Hamlet's 'madness is poor Hamlet's enemy' (5.2.217). As has been noted, it is the essence of literary tragedy that it represents human suffering disproportionate to individual culpability and that its universal cultural value is that it reflects back a truth about human existence in a way which answers to – requoting Freud's phrase in the Introduction – the 'deepest stratum' of the human mind and imagination.

In both these literary works, filial piety is shown to be far from 'simple obedience to the orders of a father' and very much a site of conflicting allegiances and moralities. The:

> good of fathering was . . . to discipline, instruct, and provide a role model for children in order to raise them to be responsible and ethical people; at the core of this was 'a reserved attitude towards the expression of emotions and an emphasis on self-control' in the exercise of this role of stern disciplinarian.[35]

This description of fathering could apply universally in the cultures represented in both literary works. How far this ideal has degraded, or how adequate a role model it ever was, in guiding sons 'to be' – to live and act according to humanist philosophy shared across classical Chinese and Western cultures – is central to the discussion here.

In this reading of *The Story of the Stone* as a fictional exposure of the degradation of the Confucian ideal of patriarchal authority and filial piety through the 'wrong' conduct of the upholders of these ideals, this discussion, while noting evidence brought forward by a recent critic that the novel is an 'outlier' and a distortion of the 'eighteenth-century sentimental

landscape' in its relative lack of 'affective and ethical values projected onto filial devotion',[36] takes the view that these values, by their very absence or violation, loom large in the novel, alternately celebrated, mourned and critiqued by the writer in the act of revealing their degraded observance and painful, even tragic, contradictions.

In this sense, Xueqin's novel reflects 'the other side of the mirror' from the performative representation of filial values in popular fiction.[37] Bao-yu's subdued 'pang of sadness' as his grandmother lies dying, by its lack of proper ritual grief, draws attention to the Confucian emphasis on sincerity as integral to proper ritual respect. This point is made explicit late in the novel in the moving scene where Bao-yu, after having ridden out early to kowtow to his grandmother's shrine (the day being her birthdate), declares that he is now consenting to sit the civil examination as a way of seeking his mother's forgiveness 'for all the trouble I have caused you', and:

> 'Even though Grandmother is not here', he said, 'I am sure she knows about it and is happy. So really it is just as if she were present. What separates us is only matter. We are together in spirit'.
>
> (5.119.333–6)

Bao-yu's affective spirituality is shown to have deepened the significance of filial piety; his earlier lack of emotional display at the deathbed may have struck readers of the time as unrealistic, but this later scene is placed in the narrative to ponder the nature of 'real' filial devotion, consistent with the accumulation of the pretences and hypocrisies underlying ritualised grief from the outset of the novel – notably in the elaborate funeral of a young woman which masks the guilt of the father-in-law who has seduced her, and whose death, like Ophelia's, is shadowed by suicide. The 'sentimental landscape' is a distortion of the reality beneath. In presenting this double perspective, Xueqin is reworking literary territory familiar to his readers through the well-worn genre of 'stories of the strange', which dissolves the boundaries between historical reality, dream and the response of the imagination to fiction;[38] in so doing, it requires readers to reset these boundaries for themselves – the artist's creative function (this overall interpretation is carried forward from different perspectives in other chapters).

From the perspective of the historical accounts of the writer's family, it is indeed remarkable that Xueqin should have conceived of his hero as a 'strange boy', a 'precious' problem for the family rather than as its inspiring saviour – or would-be saviour – to set things 'right'. Just as with Shakespeare, writing *Hamlet* at the time members of his own elite patronage circle were testing the authority of the ageing female monarch at the risk of their lives, it is useful to be aware of the illustrious family history of the novelist, himself now reduced to living 'in bucolic poverty in the western

suburbs outside Peking'.[39] A marginal commentary in Chapter 13 made by Xueqin's uncle on the foreboding words of the first of Xueqin's tragic 'Twelve Beauties' to die, draws attention to the sense of the vulnerable status of the family. As a modern historian has noted:

> Our family has lived in splendid style for nearly a century, but what if one day at the height of good fortune disaster strikes, or if the proverb that 'when the tree falls the monkeys shall be scattered' should be fulfilled? Will not all our background of culture and the age of our clan prove vain?

For the uncle, the proverb recalls these same prophetic words still ringing in his ears after thirty-five years – 'Alas, alas, how can one stop grieving to death!' The proverb is recorded as declaimed by Cao Yin, Xueqin's great-uncle and adoptive grandfather,[40] whose personal as well as service relationship with the Emperor consolidated its place as an elite family, and who intended the proverb as a reminder that the clan's bondservant status meant that 'the tree was never firmly rooted and it stood only so long as the Emperor chose. Without his support, the tree must fall and the monkeys be scattered'.[41]

There is much more that the four generations of family history can offer for a richer appreciation of the novel: let it suffice here to assist in understanding in this episode the weight of family pride, matriarchal expectation and dependence upon Imperial favour carried by the father Sir Zheng and loaded on to his unreceptive 'strange' son and heir and how imaginatively the writer works both with and against the grain of his own grief and mourning through the son's refusal to change his errant ways. Although the episode of the 'terrible chastisement' may be taken as a biographical observation showing how the power of fathers in traditional China was almost unchecked',[42] the entire scene is so fully imagined and so carefully bookended as to represent a significant 'hidden message' in the novel. A biographical 'speculation' about Xueqin as a little child discovered eavesdropping on a visiting Western businessman's stories to a male gathering of the Cao family – children and females strictly excluded – is so consistent with the irrepressible Bao-yu, forever getting into trouble for his curiosity, so taken in by an inventive old countrywoman's tale of a mysterious snow-maiden that he sends his manservant far out into the countryside to locate her shrine (2.39.271–276) – as to be a persuasive insight into Xueqin's own childhood memory of severe punishment:

> When he was discovered listening, [his father]/uncle) grew quite angry about his aberrant behaviour and continued disobedience and he had the child scolded and punished.[43]

If the incident made a deep enough impression on the Western visitor for it to be included in the story of his life as told to his grandson, how much more might it have impressed upon Xueqin's conscious memory? It seems only fitting with the writer's own mystifications throughout his story that Xueqin's later biographer has to concede that 'Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate this book'.

Xueqin takes such great care to set his 'strange' hero before us from his first year in life that it is useful to predicate the discussion of the centrality of filial ideals in the culture of the times with a few vivid glimpses into how the writer is positioning his reader's viewpoint from the outset.

From early childhood, the hero Bao-yu has disappointed his father's patriarchal hopes for the continuity of the Jia family dynasty by his son's unusual predilection for the 'inside world' of feminine company and pursuits, the start-off situation Cao Xueqin presents vividly and concisely in a leisurely conversation over sips of wine between a distant, dubious member of the Jia family and an antique dealer in Chapter 2. It is common gossip that although the extended Jia family continues to lead lives of luxury and magnificence, its wealth is declining and worse:

> they are not able to turn out good sons, those stately houses, for all their pomp and show. The males in the family get more degenerate from one generation to the next.
>
> (1.2.74)

The reader hears that the original male head of the family has 'set his mind to turning himself into an immortal' and 'spends his time fooling around with a bunch of Taoists', giving up his position to his son, but this son has 'thrown his responsibilities to the winds and given himself up to a life of leisure'. The hero's father, Sir Zheng, appears to have been the most promising of the males and, in the second chapter, the story of his second son's birth has an aura of the remarkable:

> 'Sir Zheng's lady was formerly a Miss Wang. Her first child was a boy called Jia Zhu. He was already a Licensed Scholar at the age of fourteen . . . But he died of an illness before he was twenty . . . Then after an interval of twelve years or more she suddenly had another son . . . remarkable, because at the moment of his birth he had a piece of beautiful, clear, coloured jade in his mouth with a lot of writing on it. They gave him the name 'Bao-yu' as a consequence. Now tell me if you don't think that is an extraordinary thing'.
>
> 'It certainly is', Yu-cun agreed. 'I should not be at all surprised to find that there was something very unusual in the heredity of that child'.

> 'Humph', said Zi-xing. 'A great many people have said that. That is the reason why his old grandmother thinks him such a treasure. But when they celebrated the First Twelve-month and Sir Zheng tested his disposition by putting a lot of objects in front of him and seeing which he would take hold of, he stretched out his little hand and started playing with some women's things – combs, bracelets, pots of rouge and powder and the like – completely ignoring all the other objects'.
>
> (1.2.75–76)

The 'other objects' – men's things – would likely have been 'scholarly implements, brush, inkstone, paper'.[44] If so, any baby might have chosen the glittery, colourful women's objects, but such an explanation would contradict the father's concept of inherent manliness:

> Sir Zheng was very displeased. He said he would grow up to be a rake, and ever since then he hasn't felt much affection for the child. But to the old lady, she's the apple of his eye.
>
> 'But there's more that's unusual about him than that. He's now rising ten and unusually mischievous, yet his mind is as sharp as a needle. You wouldn't find one in a hundred to match him. Some of the childish things he says are most extraordinary. He'll say "Girls are made of water and boys are made of mud. When I'm with girls I feel fresh and clean, but when I am with boys I feel stupid and nasty." Now, isn't that priceless! He'll be a lady-killer when he grows up, no question of that'.
>
> (1.2.76)

This declaration is followed by Yu-cun's 'Polonius-like' erudite rebuttal; Xueqin's tone is lightly ironic, humorously drawing attention to the issue which is to become central to the novel, the question of just what special meaning as a human being the writer *is* investing in his freshly-imagined male protagonist Bao-yu; in particular, whether Xueqin's reader keeps in mind that Jia Zheng's fear reflects the popular stories of the time that 'display men's amorous weaknesses represented in their most extreme and debilitating form'.[45] However, in Yu-cun's words, 'No-one but a widely-read person, and moreover one well-versed in moral philosophy and the subtle arcana of metaphysical science', in the 'generative process of the universe', the 'benign' and 'harmful' forces', the 'good cosmic fluid', the 'cruel, perverse humours', the processes of 'incrassation and coagulation' could possibly understand the boy's mysterious cosmic heredity; and indeed, the lecture itself seems to end up largely agreeing rather than not with the original position, concluding that such children:

> Born into a rich and noble household . . . are likely to become great lovers or the occasion of love in others; in a poor but well-educated

> household they will become literary rebels or eccentric aesthetes; even if born into the lowest stratum of society they are likely to become great actors or famous *hetaerae*.
>
> (1.2.75–79)

Hetaerae being high-class courtesans, at this time often males impersonating females, it is most unlikely Bao-yu's father would have been comforted by any of these scholarly predictions for his son: he wants a 'model' son like his first son was promising to be – 'already a Licensed Scholar at the age of fourteen'. He rejects Bao-yu emotionally, leaving him to the females to nurture and engaging with him rarely, and then punitively, to discharge his patriarchal duty to ensure that his son studies the set texts for the imperial examinations, the standard preparation for civil service in the elite administrative class to which the Jia family has belonged for generations. When Bao-yu does have an opportunity to display his poetic skills in the 'naming' of vistas in the Prospect Garden, he is alternately pleasing and displeasing to his father and the ordeal ends badly as his father's young pages take advantage of his sudden fame as a poet (1.17.348); remonstration by the son was unimaginable.

Study is an even more fraught area of patriarchal contention than Bao-yu's interest in 'women's things'. A further detail about the Jia family disclosed in the gossip is significant here: Jia Zheng has not himself been obliged to pass these examinations, his own father for his faithful services having been honoured by the emperor to allow his eldest son to inherit his ducal position and his second son, Jia Zheng, to be given an official position, pre-empting the examination process for which he was well-prepared, 'mad keen on study ever since he was a lad'. This has effectively deprived the father of the exemplary formal scholar status important in the exercise of patriarchal authority, even as he cultivates a scholarly milieu. The pressure Jia Zheng places on his son to study has this dimension of need to prove to himself that he is a scholar, shown time and again in the anger he displays when his son puts forward thoughts which question his own – in the naming tour of the Garden, the session with the Preceptor, the ballad-writing test; it is an anger which places his wife and mother, the servants and even his own scholar friends on protective stand-by whenever he returns from his official postings and makes contact with his erring son – becoming visible as a child of fragile health whose exceptionality is a deeply-ingrained belief held by the rest of the household. Although his informal reading in poetry and the classics is ongoing, Bao-yu's formal education is a fraught process met with limited evident success: the family school is a farcical shambles in the several senses of this word, and it is a characteristic Xueqin irony that soon after his 'terrible chastisement' of his son, Jia Zheng was appointed Commissioner for Education in one of the provinces (2.37, 213).

The care with which the writer establishes this emotional context for Bao-yu's response to patriarchal expectation is striking, part of the creative investment in the narrative as a mirror of 'real' human nature, refracted against the authority codes and structures which govern its expression. Far from being a model filial son born to save the failing family from its incipient decline, Bao-yu challenges these expectations and in the process exposes so many hidden contradictions and conflicts in the ideal of filial piety and its central place in patriarchal culture that in the end, while he qualifies with distinction in the imperial examinations and fathers a son to continue the family ancestral line, he finds that he himself cannot remain within it.

Section 1 Is filial piety simple obedience to the orders of a father? The Classic of Filial Piety, chinesenotes.com

1.i The Classic of Filial Piety

The episode selected for close examination in *The Story of the Stone* is the dramatic presentation of a crisis-point in the hero Jia Bao-yu's conflict with his father Sir Zheng, where he is beaten almost to death, saved only by the intervention of his mother Lady Wang and his grandmother, Lady Jia, the family matriarch (2.33,141–54). The ancient legacy of stories teaching filial piety – taken to exacting and often bizarre extremes, earning them a place in compendiums such as *The Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* – sits behind this dramatic enactment of a story about its *opposite*, filial *disobedience*, a major crime deserving of one of the *Five Punishments* set out in the five categories of light beating, heavy beating, servitude, exile and death. Modern scholars note that the two 'fountainheads of Ming thought', Wang Yang-ming and Ch'en Hsien-chang, influential in Xueqin's time, placed a high value on filial piety in moral self-cultivation, even as they regarded self-cultivation itself as 'true self-expression' with priority over the teachings of 'books and sages';[46] an attempt to hold together conservative and more radical thought for which Xueqin's novel may be seen in this episode as something of a testing-ground.

Underpinning filial piety is the Confucian orthodoxy of the five key social and familial relationships: ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger, friend-friend, underpinning social order, harmony and good government. These Confucian social codes inform the fictional representation of the fortunes of the Jia family, and the concept of filial piety hovers over this episode in Chapter 33 titled *'An envious younger brother puts in a malicious word or two', 'And a scapegrace elder brother receives a terrible chastisement'*. 'Is filial piety simple obedience to the orders of a father'? is a question raised in *Xiaojing – The Classic of Filial Piety*, a Confucian

treatise giving advice on how to behave towards a senior such as a father, an elder brother or a ruler; Bao-yu would likely have been taught its moral lessons as he was learning to read. *The Classic of Filial Piety*, said to have been written by Shen Zeng, the son of a disciple of Confucius who himself became a disciple, begins with its definition:

> Once, when . . . his disciple was sitting by in attendance on him, the Master said, 'The ancient kings had a perfect virtue and all-embracing rule of conduct, through which they were in accord with all under heaven. By the practice of it the people were brought to live in peace and harmony, and there was no ill-will between superiors and inferiors. Do you know what it was?'
>
> Zeng rose from his mat and said, 'How should I, Shen, who am so devoid of intelligence, be able to know this?'
>
> The Master said, 'It was filial piety. Now filial piety is the root of all virtue, and the stem out of which grows moral teaching. Sit down again, and I will explain the subject to you. Our bodies – to every bit of hair and skin – are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. When we have established our character by the practice of the filial course, so as to make our name famous in future ages and thereby glorify our parents, this is the end of filial piety. It commences with the service of parents; it proceeds to the service of the ruler; it is completed by the establishment of character'.[47]

In *The Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety*, fictional representation of exemplary filial obedience is given imaginative heightening to engage the desired moral approbation – the government official washing his aged mother's bedpan, the daughter-in-law breastfeeding her toothless mother-in-law (22), the son tasting his sick father's faeces to determine his ailment; in addition, some stories call upon otherworldly assistance. In the *Analects*, at 2.7, the sage stresses that filial piety is more than dutiful sons ensuring their parents have food – after all, they do the same for their animals: 'Unless there is respect, where is the difference?' and at 4.18, respect is also shown 'when you serve your parents, you may gently remonstrate with them' – with the proviso, however, that you do not persist and become bitter if they do not take your advice.

1.ii 'Which is more wrong? You tell me?'

This permission to 'gently remonstrate' opens up the fraught issue of the proper conduct of the parent, and this is addressed in a specific section relating to 'Reproof and Remonstrance' in *The Classic of Filial Piety*.

When the disciple Zeng asks the Master 'if simple obedience to the orders of a father be accounted filial piety?' the answer is a resounding 'no'. Just as emperors, princes and clan leaders need remonstrance from their advisers to correct their mistakes and ensure their right rule, so also:

> the father who had a son that would remonstrate with him would not sink into the gulf of unrighteous deeds. Therefore, when a case of unrighteous conduct is concerned, a son must by no means keep from remonstrating with his father, nor a minister from remonstrating with his ruler. Hence, since remonstrance is required in the case of unrighteous conduct, how can simple obedience to the orders of a father be accounted filial piety?

The challenge inherent in this requirement for right judgement at all levels of the power hierarchy – here, the son required to make a judgement about his father's conduct – was experienced by the disciple Zeng himself, if a striking story included ten centuries later in the huge fourteenth-century compendium, the *Shuo Yuan*, can be taken as evidence. It is the story of when Confucius reproved his disciple for mistaking 'simple obedience' as proper filial conduct and failing to remonstrate with his unrighteous father:

> When Zeng Zi . . . was working [weeding] in the fields he accidently broke the roots of a young plant. His father . . . was so angry that he picked up a big pole and hit him. Zeng Zi was knocked to the ground and was unconscious for quite a while before he came around. He jumped up, approached his father and said: 'I have offended your lordship. You beat me with such strength I am worried you might have hurt yourself'. Zeng Zi then retreated to his own room, played the *qin* and sang. [This was intended to show his father that he was happy and had no hard feelings at all.]
>
> When Confucius heard about this incident, he ordered his doorman not to let Zeng Zi in should he come. Zeng Zi thought he had not done anything wrong, so he sent someone to Confucius for an explanation. Confucius said, 'Have you not heard about the blind man who had a son named Shun . . . who served the old man . . . with such devotion that whenever he was sent for he would present himself at his father's side. However, whenever his father wanted to kill him he would not present himself. He would wait on his father when his father demanded his beating with a small stick. He would run away when his father wanted to beat him with a thick rod. Now you have submitted yourself to your angry father's beating with a huge pole. Are you trying to get your father to kill you? If you do not submit yourself to your father's beating you would not be right. But if you let your father beat you to death then you

> are not filial [because he would be leaving his father heirless]. Which is more wrong? You tell me?'[48]

The story does not give Master Zeng's reply – if he could get his mind around so difficult a question. From the story it seems there was no 'simple' filial choice available to him, except the one he chose – to acknowledge that the wrong-doing was his in causing his father to risk his health in beating him, and to retreat, playing the *qin* and singing to comfort his aggrieved father. To Master Zeng's surprise, however, Confucius condemned this response: why? The answer seems to lie in the particular circumstances of the incident: 'which is more wrong', the son's offence – unintentional and easily remedied, or the father's enraged response – picking up a 'big pole' and striking him unconscious? The father's act appears to be the greater wrong and, according to Confucius' views about the importance of remonstrance for unrighteous conduct, the only way Master Zeng could be filial was to 'gently remonstrate' with his father but, in his 'simple' understanding of filial obedience, Master Zeng had done the opposite.

In another version of this story, the issue is simplified by Zeng being beaten to death: 'Zeng submits to a beating by his father for a trivial mistake and dies of his wounds. Confucius criticizes him as unfilial, however, for allowing his father thus to become a murderer'.[49] However, Master Zeng lived for many years and this may be simply an example of how stories are often simplified to accord more readily with prevailing orthodoxies: the son is at fault, never the father; the advisers are at fault, never the emperor – the political challenge reflected in the literature of late Ming years of the collapse of the dynasty. This unsourced story is given in a modern editorial footnote to a poem by the influential radical thinker Li Zhi, imprisoned for heresy, which reflects the different outcomes: Zeng is either 'slain' or 'spared', and only an act of pity from 'on high' spares him:

> In the old story, Master Zeng
> could either be slain or spared,
> Yet if the one on high should pity him,
> would he dare to die?

He is 'spared' and thus earns the complex response from Confucius, one requiring a re-think by the young disciple – just as the poet Li Zhi hopes from his readers as he adds the further four lines:

> My only wish is that my books
> be examined with meticulous care;
> And inevitably, fully, it will be understood
> they speak the truth.

Li Zhi, the title of whose book is *A Book to Burn & a Book to Keep (Hidden)*, is an important reference point for Xueqin's creation of his heart/mind *qing* hero; his writings challenge rigid interpretations of Confucius, proposing that the *Dao* was available to all who were given the opportunity to cultivate their individual sense of self,[50] women equally with men,[51] and these words find an ambiguous echo in the famous quatrain ending the 'true account' of how *The Story of the Stone* came to be written – 'All men call the author fool/None his secret message hears' (1.1.51). The episode of the 'chastisement' of the son, which is also the 'chastisement' of the father, comes close to daring the son to die, and saved by the 'pity' of the father's mother, the sole living ancestor. 'Which is more wrong? You tell me!' is a question which Xueqin's reader must confront, if the message being carried through the 'unfilial' hero is to be understood.

1.iii Mencius said, 'When father and son come to be offended with each other, the case is evil'.

Li Zhi was himself echoing the ancient philosopher Mencius's famous saying that 'the great man is he who does not lose his child's heart' – footnoted by the translator as 'the ideal condition of humanity . . . a pure simplicity'. As is made explicit from Bao-yu's defence of his 'school-name', Frowner, for Dai-yu at their first meeting, that even if he did make it up, 'There are lots of made-up things in books – except for the *Four Books* of course' (1.3.103), the Book of Mencius is a familiar instructional reference in this elite household, and Chapter XVIII may also inform the beating episode. Here Mencius addresses the issue of paternal anger against a son who neglects his studies: 'When father and son come to be offended with each other, the case is evil'. Mencius counsels the example of

> the ancients, who exchanged sons, and one taught the son of the other. Between father and son, there should be no reproving admonitions to what is good. Such reproof leads to alienation, and than alienation, there is nothing more inauspicious.[52]

Xueqin's dramatisation of the episode of the beating of Bao-yu by his father both reflects the different points of view raised in this 'old story' and re-presents it in a 'truer-to-life' version which feels freshly imagined even today. The son's inadvertent culpability and the father's excessive violence leave both to blame but, as Mencius has warned, 'alienation' is the outcome; neither accepts this nor learns anything from each other after this 'terrible chastisement': the son is confirmed in his resistance to his father's authority, continuing to act on his personal, intuitive morality centred on personal feeling and a spiritual belief in a destiny of marriage to his beloved

childhood companion Dai-yu; however, like playing the *qin* and singing, this belief will not resolve the son's issue with patriarchal power. Filial piety as a *reciprocal* concept, such as is counselled in the Confucian story, has no place in the family culture and, as the novel continues, the father becomes more and more remote from paternal support in his son's life, or even a moral guide in the family, to the point that he puts aside his 'grave doubts' as to proposals around his own son's marriage and deputes authority on the matter to his mother (4.96.328); in the event of the son's lapse into imbecility, this leads to the moral nadir of the novel, the 'ingenious plan of deception' bringing the love story to its tragic end.

1.iv The unfilial/filial prototype

Is there even an *un*blemished filial son in the novel, much less a lustrous prototype against which the 'unfilial' Bao-yu may be measured? Of the three other young male scions, Jia Lian and Jia Rong are conventionally filial but dissolute like their fathers, and Xue Pan, father dead and already head of the family, is constantly plunging his mother and sister into despair by his 'oafish' criminality. Leaving aside 'little Lan', Bao-yu's young cousin who shows every promise but is as yet a small child and, interestingly in this contest, his father is also dead, there is planted oddly and obscurely within the novel a prototype of a filial son – or, rather, a son who is initially an invented mirror-image of the 'unfilial' young Bao-yu but suddenly, as if by magic, changes and becomes the very model of filial propriety. This literary planting starts at the very outset of the narrative; following the first hearsay description of the hero Bao-yu and his uniquely feminine predispositions, straightaway Xueqin throws into question this uniqueness by introducing Bao-yu's double – this 'other Bao-yu', a distant cousin in the Zhen family; same age, same extraordinary preference for girls, calling out 'Girls! girls! girls!' to lessen the pain when his father beats him for his 'unruliness'; same overprotective grandmother, same lack of patriarchal promise: 'A boy like that will never be able to keep up the family traditions or listen to the advice of his teachers or friends'. (1.2.81)

Many chapters later, this mirror-imaging is re-introduced. When four women of the Zhen family pay a visit to the matriarch of the Jia family, Bao-yu's Grandmother Jia, she is 'greatly diverted' to hear of 'their' Bao-yu and tries to generalise their similarities to their upbringing in 'families like ours', but the women pursue their description to its opposite conclusion: yes, 'no one who meets him can't help liking him. Often they ask us what his father should want to beat him for, not realising what a holy terror he can be inside the family' and yes, his wilfulness, extravagance and hatred of study are all normal enough in sons of well-to-do people, but 'this weird perverseness of his seems to be inbred: there seems to be no cure for it'.

The grandmother's response is not given, but the unwelcome application of these words to her beloved grandson is all too clear. When Bao-yu, 'convinced, like many other young gentlemen, of his own uniqueness', is incredulous at 'How *could* there be another Bao-yu?' he has a dream that he is searching for the 'real' Bao-yu but finds only an 'empty shell' and wakes up calling into his mirror 'Come back, Bao-yu! Come back, Bao-yu!' (3.56.87), his grandmother re-iterates her 'strictures against young people having too many mirrors around them', fearful of the perverse possibility of immature souls being shocked into entering the wrong identity. The critical aspect of the doubling is the 'girls' issue, at this stage in the novel a major worry for the matriarch: here the writer is pivoting the issue the of filial piety to patriarchal prerogative in the matter of betrothal and marriage, and with this, 'girls' as the issue over which the 'other Bao-yu' is separated-off into the filial son and isolates this 'weird perverseness' to Jia Bao-yu, unfilial son and tragic romantic hero. When the hero does meet the 'other Bao-yu' he is deeply disillusioned to find that he is merely one of the 'career worms' he despises.

Scholars have shown how the rich literary tradition of 'real/unreal' storytelling preceding the *Stone* informed its creative investment in narrative realism, there being a sophisticated appreciation of the affective power of dream, history and 'the strange' to invite 'an intimate relationship with fictional characters and willingly take them as real'.[53] Here, the doubling has the 'double' effect of reminding the reader of the hero as a literary invention, able to be replicated at the writer's will, even as his 'affective power' insists upon his uniqueness: the reader is forced by the uncanny incidence of similarity to establish their own 'real' Bao-yu against the 'other' Bao-yu, apprehensive that the interest and affection they have invested in this extraordinary character could all be set to naught. The doubling is lightly set up, just sufficient for the uncanny effect and in the following 'Gao E' volume deflates into a predictable moralising report of the 'other' Bao-yu miraculously turning into the model filial son, cured of his 'perverse attraction' through the shock of a dream where 'he went into a room full of girls, who turned into ghosts and skeletons' (4.93.270) – perhaps a little too obviously the opposite of Bao-yu's dream-initiation into romantic love, if thematically efficient in also drawing on the moral ambivalence in the 'sign-post' story of the tragic fate of Jia Rui and the image of the skull in the mirror early in the novel. Bao-yu has now not only lost a hoped-for soul mate but is also exposed as its doubtful opposite, a precarious a-filial identity shifting in and out of reality in the recurrent loss of his wits, as given in the sub-title of a chapter late in the narrative: '*A counterfeit is deceptively like the real thing, and Bao-yu loses his wits*' (4.95.303). This sub-title also prefigures the counterfeit marriage, the ultimate pressure on Bao-yu to become similarly falsely transformed. The challenge which the

reader is left with is that Xueqin has created in the 'real' Bao-yu a wonderfully lifelike, much more recognisably human – and moral – character than the 'other Bao-yu' who has collapsed into an 'empty shell', the fictional prototype of the filial ideal against which the 'truer-to-life' Bao-yu sets up a highly ambiguous re-interpretation of true filial piety.

In this reading, the beating episode is a late imperial contemporary reprise of the ancient story of the Confucian disciple Zeng and his father, showing how the codes of filial piety have become distorted and dangerously 'unrighteous' in the 'real' world of sons and fathers – and 'girls'; degraded to 'simple' obedience' and 'fearful' sons, giving no scope for even 'gentle' mediation – that obligation for 'remonstrance' which the moral world of Confucian teaching held essential to 'right rule' in the five critical relationships in Chinese society. That Jia Zheng's 'literary gentlemen' do not themselves attempt to 'remonstrate' with their friend but have to call on the servants to get help from 'inside' – the womens' quarters – and that it is the females – mother and grandmother – who 'remonstrate', underlines a fundamental theme running through the novel: the invigilating role required of the servant class and the compensatory resourcefulness of the women in a dysfunctional male world.

Section 2 Filial piety and retributive violence in the narrative

2.i Unfilial sons and enraged fathers

Cao Xueqin has in the first volume revealed the practice of sons being severely beaten by enraged fathers in the melodramatic story of Jia Rui, grandson of the family schoolmaster, so harshly disciplined and deprived of love that he becomes mentally ill and conceives an imaginary erotic relationship with a beautiful young married female relative, from which obsession he dies. The grandfather believes the death to be caused by a necromancer who has given to the young man a mirror to cure him – on one side the image of the beautiful woman, and on the other, a grinning skull – but whom they then curse and try to burn the mirror.

> But, just at that moment a voice in the air was heard saying 'Who told him to look in the front [of the mirror]? It is you who are to blame, for confusing the real with the unreal! Why then should you burn my mirror?'
>
> (1.12.253)

The 'voice in the air' puts the young man's obsession back upon the grandparents' denial of the 'reality' of their grandson's need for love (the compounding human cruelties in this story are examined from a different

perspective in Chapter 3 of this book). 'Terrible chastisement' is also central to the melancholy fate of Bao-yu's best friend Qin Zhong; when his illicit love for a little nun is discovered, his aged father 'drive[s] her from the house, and give[s] Qin Zhong a beating' (1.16.305). The father's shock and anger bring on a chronic illness and 'within only four or five days the old gentleman had breathed his last'. In turn, Qin Zhong, already ailing and of a 'weak and nervous disposition', severely beaten and overwhelmed with 'grief and remorse attendant on the death of his father from anger which he had himself provoked', became seriously ill himself. His death scene is enacted as a very vocal struggle between the 'ministers of the underworld, armed with a warrant and chains to bind him with' and Qin Zhong, desperate to stay alive as the only one 'to look after his family's affairs' and his 'little nun'. Bao-yu, bending over his unconscious body, tries to revive him by calling out his own name, his talismanic powers causing disarray amongst the demons themselves, unwillingly allowing Qin Zhong's soul to return his body – but only for a moment:

> With the return of his soul Qin Zhong regained consciousness and opened his eyes. He could see Bao-yu standing beside him; but his throat was so choked with phlegm that he was unable to utter a word. He could only fasten his eyes on him and slowly shake his head. Then there was a rasping sound in his throat and he slid once more into the dark.
> (1.16.323)

No pity from 'on high' to spare Qin Zhong from his filial impiety: is his slow shaking of the head a warning to Bao-yu? Xueqin's powerful blending of extra-terrestrial imaginings with the awful realism of choking phlegm and 'rasping' sounds gives an artistic significance to this episode as a precursor to the similarly 'nervously-disposed' Bao-yu's own encounter with parental rage over filial impiety which follows in the second volume. All the elements of the 'old story' are in play: perceived filial transgression, paternal rage and violent punishment, the risk of the death of the father, and of the son, the issue of filial accountability, mortal illness and the judgement of those 'on high'.

2.ii Bijou and Golden

In the lead-up to the 'terrible chastisement' Xueqin shows how Bao-yu is following the direction of his spontaneous thoughts and affections, the guileless, outgoing empathy with the world which generates the affections of others but is beginning to be problematic even for them and, increasingly, in the wider world of competing codes of self-regulation and worldly ambition: from Chapters 28–33, a succession of incidents offers a range of

perspectives on this behaviour and provides both the circumstantial and the thematic context by which to interpret the violent culmination. The skill with which the writer negotiates the space between his 'scapegrace' hero's feckless innocence of criminal intent and the father's belief that his 'unnatural monster' of a son is guilty is masterly and a significant artistic investment in 'true-to-life' realism (see also Chapter 2).

To begin with: the specific charges which are the immediate provocation are, firstly, Jia Zheng's public humiliation by the Prince of Zhong-shun's chamberlain, who arrives at the mansion to demand that Bao-yu return the Prince's favourite actor, 'Bijou', on the basis of an informant that Bao-yu has been 'very thick' with him and is likely retaining him; and secondly, Jia Zheng's compounding horror on being told that a young maid has just thrown herself down a well because Bao-yu tried to rape her and then beat her when she refused: taken together, if true, such crimes would indeed warrant wording stronger than 'scapegrace' in Xueqin's chapter title: *'A scapegrace elder brother receives a terrible chastisement'*. Xueqin takes his readers through these 'crime scenes' to discover for themselves 'which' – father or son – 'is more wrong'.

In light of the intimate incident with the actor Bijou which precipitates the beating, it is useful to clarify how Xueqin presents Bao-yu's sexual behaviour. While Bao-yu rejects the male/female gender hierarchy and the codes of conduct around this, homosexuality is not an issue for himself or his father who rejects him as likely to become a 'rake', a 'ladies' man', perhaps thinking of the many notoriously dissolute senior males in the Jia clan. In the famous 'wet dream' episode of Bao-yu's sexual initiation, Xueqin makes explicit his sexual functioning as 'that act which boys and girls perform together', and from this time his trusted senior maid is permitted by his mother as informal chamber-wife and invigilator, although this is kept from his father who still thinks of him as 'too young'. Beyond some schoolboy play with boys – which Hawkes translates as familiar-enough English upper-class behaviour – Bao-yu has no casual sex, responsive to his maids' mindfulness that they will be the ones to bear the blame of any scandal: in this respect, he is distinguished from the older young males – Jia Lian and Xue Pan have indiscriminate sex with both male and female servants, sometimes with severe consequences for them. In the context of gender segregation, where it was not normal for young boys and girls to treat either the opposite sex or servants as friends, Bao-yu's grandmother had found herself worrying:

> He's a strange boy. I don't really understand him. I've certainly never known another like him. His other kinds of naughtiness I can understand: it's this passion for spending all his time with maids that I don't understand. It used at one time to worry me: I thought it must be because

> he had reached puberty and was having experiences with them; but after watching him very carefully, I came to the conclusion that it wasn't that at all. It's very, very strange. Perhaps he was a maid himself in some past life. Perhaps he ought to have been a girl.
>
> (3.78.556)

Perhaps, equally, Xueqin is showing the reader how, in a culture where being 'male' has so little meaning for being 'himself' that Bao-yu remains, for her, a 'strange' child needing her protection, seeming not to have the male need to assert his superior power over the females at his disposal. Bao-yu's occasional personal interest in males is always related to 'soul mate' affinity and is similar, rather than preferential, to his far greater interest in females and not problematic to him. And as for his true love, Dai-yu, he has consciously chosen her, against his erotic interest in her female rival, because of his self-defining existential belief in their spiritual affinity and that they are destined for each other. This is the most passionate aspect of the 'passion' that his grandmother will never understand, in her commitment to the orthodox wisdom of patriarchal marriage codes, so that his unguarded, seemingly childish and at times mentally destabilizing conviction that marriage to Dai-yu is essential to his very existence becomes regarded as an intolerable 'love-sickness' and turns the family against the marriage (this aspect of Bao-yu is discussed in more detail in the next chapter).

The episode of Bao-yu's association with the actor Bijou begins with a disconsolate Bao-yu, caught in between his rival girl-cousins' sensitivities and accusations, escaping into the boorish geniality of a party held by the 'Oaf King', his cousin Xue Pan. To bring some order to the deteriorating drunkenness he suggests everyone compose a rhyming verse between drinks, but finds himself the embarrassed object of ribald teasing when one young man attempts a line of verse he's seen written up on someone's wall. Xueqin's sly joke is that this is the very line Bao-yu has unwisely quoted to his suspicious father to give a literary origin to his maid Aroma's romantic name – 'The flower's aroma breathes of hotter days' – now public graffiti, exposing Bao-yu's precocious sexual arrangements as less private than he has thought and, typically, recognised by the old roue Xue Pan as an allusion to Bao's 'little doll'. The young man apologises for his unwitting rudeness, and Bao-yu is drawn to his courtesy and fine feeling. In the intimacy of bladders being eased, Bao-yu is delighted to discover that the young man is the famed actor of female roles, 'Bijou', and in the consequent exchange of a 'first meeting' gift – the untying of the cummerbunds each wears around the waist – stimulates the spying Xue Pan to try forcing his 'unwelcome attentions' upon them.

Xueqin's ceremonial description of the exchange of cummerbunds, as if enacted on a stage, dramatises the ever-multiplying incriminations in which

the insouciant hero is becoming enmeshed. Bao-yu has initially made do with a jade pendant torn off his fan to offer as a present:

> Bijou smiled and accepted it ceremoniously:
>
> 'I have done nothing to deserve this favour. It is too great an honour. Well, thank you. There's rather an unusual thing I am wearing – I put it on today for the first time, so it's still fairly new: I wonder if you will allow me to give it to you as a token of my warm feelings towards you?'
>
> He opened up his gown, undid the crimson cummerbund with which his trousers were fastened, and handed it to Bao-yu.
>
> 'It comes from the tribute sent by the Queen of the Madder Islands. It's for wearing in summer. It makes you smell nice and it doesn't show perspiration stains. I was given it yesterday by the Prince of Bei-jing, and today is the first day it has ever been worn. I wouldn't give a thing like this to anyone else, but I'd like you to have it. Will you take your own sash off, please, so that I can put it on instead?'
>
> Bao-yu received the crimson cummerbund with delight and quickly took off his own viridian-coloured sash to give Bijou in exchange. They had just finished fastening the sashes on again when Xue Pan jumped out from behind and seized hold of them both.
>
> 'What are you two up to, leaving the party and sneaking off like this?' he said.
>
> 'Come on, take 'em out again and let's have a look'.
>
> (2.28.62)

Xue Pan's crudeness only emphasises the graceful goodwill and innocence of the encounter, but it also marks the other kinds of self-delusion on display here: Bao-yu and Bijou are playing an elaborate game, a courtship without any purpose other than the artistic enjoyment of it, an aesthetic ritual with its own justification but one which flouts other values for which there are consequences outside the theatrical moment, encapsulated in the seemingly magical crimson cummerbund – an exotic tribute, perfumed, absorbing bodily intimacy, a twice-royal gift. But as a gift, it is immediately compromised, politically and personally, the Prince of Zhong-shun angered, and not only princes but maids: the viridian cummerbund has been given to Bao-yu by his maid Aroma, now twice betrayed in this episode. Back home, Bao-yu tries to turn around his shame – 'he ought never to have given it away' – by making the crimson cummerbund into a special gift to her, tying it around her waist while she is asleep, but she refuses the deception: Aroma lives in a reality where such 'goings-on' between males are the actions of 'disgusting creatures' (2.28.63). To Bao-yu's father, who lives in a culturally sophisticated moral world where princes may be openly intimate with famous actors – regarded as 'luxury goods' (Volp, Writing, 16) – the moral violation here is about ownership, status and power: his rage is less

to do with sexual mores than with political humiliation. The distance Bao-yu stands from these 'realities' is further on display when he is dragged out by his father to answer the Chamberlain's accusations – innocently wearing the incriminating proof, the very same crimson sash. Bao-yu then expresses scorn for the prince's spies by telling them where the actor is living, unaware that the actor has been hiding from the prince, whose prisoner he was, and so unintentionally betraying him to his captor. (2.33.144) In a Gao-E editorial tidying-up at end of the final volume, a husband is found for the grieving Aroma: when he sees her crimson cummerbund, he shows her his viridian one – he is that very same 'disgusting creature', Bijou: they now believe themselves predestined in marriage, and he proves a loving husband. The irony, however, lacks import. (5.120 367–69)

The episode of Bao-yu and Golden, his mother Lady Wang's favourite maid similarly is visually memorable, sensual and ambiguously compromising, with the same sudden correction from a different reality and unintentional dire consequences. Once again feeling out of sorts about yet another 'love tri-angle' misunderstanding, Bao-yu wanders aimlessly over to his mother's apartment; it is mid-summer and the hottest part of the day. Xueqin sets the stage:

> On entering his mother's apartment, he found several maids dozing over their embroidery. Lady Wang herself was lying on a summer-bed in the inner room, apparently fast asleep. Her maid Golden, who was sitting beside her gently pounding her legs, also seemed half-asleep, for her head was nodding and her half-closed eyes were blinking drowsily. Bao-yu tiptoed up to her and tweaked an earring. She opened her eyes wide and saw that it was Bao-yu.
>
> (2.30.100)

Already in the writing there is a sense of male intrusion into a vulnerable female space.

> He smiled at her and whispered.
>
> 'So sleepy?'
>
> Golden pursed her lips up into smile, motioned to him with her hand to go away, and then closed her eyes again.
>
> (2.30.100)

If only Bao-yu had 'thought better' of the propriety of staying – as he has a little earlier in not calling on his aunt at this siesta time – he and Golden would have been spared the tragedy which starts to unfold; the moment of transgression cannot be taken back, and is frozen in art:

> But Bao-yu lingered, fascinated. Silently craning forward to make sure that Lady Wang's eyes were closed, he took a 'Fragrant Snow' quencher

from the embroidered purse at his waist and popped it in between Golden's lips. Golden nibbled it dreamily without opening her eyes.

'Shall I ask Her Ladyship to let me have you, so that we can be together?' he whispered jokingly.

Golden made no reply.

'When she wakes, I'll talk to her about it', he said.

Golden opened her eyes wide and gave him a little push.

'What's the hurry?' she said playfully. 'Yours is yours, wherever it be, as they said to the lady when she dropped her gold comb in the well. Haven't you ever heard that saying? – I'll tell you something to do, if you want a bit of fun. Go into the little east courtyard and you will be able to catch Sunset and Huan together'.

'Who cares about *them*', said Bao-yu. 'Let's talk about us'.

At this point, Lady Wang sat bolt upright and dealt Golden a slap in the face.

'Shameless little harlot!' she cried, pointing at her wrathfully. 'It's you and your like who corrupt our innocent young boys'.

Bao-yu had slipped silently away as soon as his mother sat up. Golden, one of whose cheeks was fiery red, was left without a word to say.

(2.30.100–101)

Xueqin has intended the 'fiery-red cheek' – the unanswerable unfairness of Lady Wang's accusation – to register first; Bao-yu, the instigator, has 'slipped away', and without him there to defend her and take the blame, Golden's vulnerable servant status condemns her to silence. If Lady Wang has heard only the final part of the flirtation, she has some justification for her outrage and Golden would be obliged to explain that some of the blame rests with her in 'playing-along', but Golden cannot know this and assumes that Lady Wang is holding her responsible for initiating the entire flirtation: as a servant, she cannot defend herself because this would lay the blame where Lady Wang has clearly not – on those 'innocent young boys' Bao-yu and his half-brother Huan. When Lady Wang commands that Golden be 'taken away', Golden shows she is prepared to be punished – 'beat me and revile me as much as you like' – but she cannot bear the lifetime of shame she sees before her if she is sent away: 'I've been with Your Ladyship nigh on ten years now. How can I ever hold up my head again if you dismiss me?' 'Ten years' – surely that should have checked Lady Wang: further, Xueqin states that Lady Wang was not 'naturally unkind' – implying that many others were – but in fact an 'exceptionally lenient mistress', and in these words he also explains the self-assurance and confidence the maid has shown in her handling of Bao-yu, but also the lack of fear which usually constrains servants from the playfulness for which she is now paying such a price; Xueqin is ever drawing attention to the precarious state of power relations within the household as well as in the world outside the

mansion walls, and this situates the 'old story' in a very present and recognisable reality.

Xueqin describes Lady Wang's rage as 'the uncontrollable anger of the morally outraged' – 'shamelessness' was the one thing she most abhorred:

> and although Golden now begged and pleaded, she refused to retract her dismissal. When Golden's mother, old Mrs Bai, was eventually fetched, the wretched girl, utterly crushed by her shame and humiliation, was led away.
>
> (2.30.101)

The incipiently contradictory words Xueqin uses – 'uncontrollable' and 'morally outraged' appear intended by the writer to take meaning from the well-known Confucian ethical teachings, the 'serious' study' of which Jia Zheng commands his son to pursue, precepts such as 'rectifying the mind' and 'controlling the passions', regulation by example, self-cultivation and parental kindness – Golden is 'almost like a daughter' to Lady Wang. Xueqin is not so much exonerating Lady Wang as indicating the distance she is removed from these sacrosanct ethical teachings, such that her very *lack* of control becomes an expression of moral outrage. Moreover, it is evident that Lady Wang's state of high moral alert is an expression of her invidious position as a mother: in the family she has married into, she is caught between the over-protective matriarch Grandmother Jia and the distant, badgering father Sir Zheng; above all, she is obliged to carry responsibility for Bao-yu's well-being in the Garden mainly inhabited by young females, her uneasiness over Bao-yu's naming his servant 'Aroma' one of many examples.

Later, when news is brought that Golden has thrown herself down a well, Xueqin creates an exchange between Lady Wang and Bao-chai (the 'third' in the love triangle) – to show that Lady Wang cannot sustain this moral justification, changing the story from the moral corruption of her son to a mere matter of something broken, a few slaps, sending her home for a few days: 'I never dreamed she would be so angry with me as to drown herself' (2.32.138). 'So angry with me': now it is Golden's 'uncontrollable anger', not Lady Wang's – a shift which Bao-chai typically tactfully deflects by saying that no, most unlikely, Lady Wang needn't blame herself – Golden was playing near the well and must have just 'slipped in accidently', and goes on to suggest that, if she feels '*very* much distressed' she should 'simply give her family a little extra for the funeral. In that way you will more than fulfil any moral obligation you may have towards her as mistress' (2.32.139). There is always such a thin line drawn between Bao-chai's 'natural kindness' and her self-interest as a rival match for Bao-yu that it is only Bao-chai's enigmatic 'How strange!' when she is told

of the suicide that alerts us to her duplicity here. Golden's playful saying about the 'gold comb [dropped] in the well' comes back upon herself, as the writer has intended; she is the 'gold comb' dropped in the well' – she is gone, and who or what is to blame cannot bring her back, so with a 'little extra' the matter is closed for Lady Wang and Bao-chai.

2.*iii* 'Which is more wrong?'

The incident returns to the question raised in the *Shuo Yuan* story of Zeng Zi and 'Reproof and Remonstrance': 'Which is more wrong? You tell me' – Bao-yu's flirtation or Lady Wang's rage. As the narrative goes on to show, Bao-yu never attempts to remonstrate with his mother, nor does he blame himself for his fecklessness: instead, he seeks to share his grieving with Golden's sister; even as she repulses him in her anger, he tries to create a way to express his sorrow, finding his chance by commiserating with her when she spills some scalding soup over him – confirming his reputation 'outside' as a simpleton (2.35.189). For Bao-yu, Golden is an intimate friend whom the family has wronged, whose sister he must comfort and whose spiritual life he must now care for: Xueqin dramatises this in the secretive, mysterious, apparently directionless fast horse-ride out into the countryside on the anniversary of her death, which ends in a ceremonial offering to her soul (2.43.359). That Xueqin makes this into one of his inimitable little comedies is a measure of his refusal to sentimentalise his hero's own sentimentality; it has a sad coda with Bao-yu hoping to share this spiritual connection with Golden's weeping sister but ending 'dejected because of his inability to comfort her' (2.43.362).

Scholarly research in the legal records of 'chastity suicides' reveals that the way Xueqin represents the issue of 'who is to blame' may also be understood to reflect the contorted political and legal discourse around the proliferating cases of female suicides at the time: had the 'disgraceful matter' of Golden's suicide been brought before a magistrate – not likely in a wealthy family able to pay off the parents – Golden's family may have claimed that this was a 'chastity suicide': her desire to die caused by the shame she would have to live with at having been dismissed, even if wrongly, because of seducing these 'innocent boys'. The Jia family would most likely have denied any 'chastity' issue or any 'disgraceful matter' at all and argued – as in Lady Wang's later version of events, that the issue was reproval over a minor domestic incident and the maid's anger drove her to die – a disparaging judgement on suicide increasingly favoured by the judiciary and imperial policy alarmed at the rates of chastity suicide.[54] As presented in the narrative, there are multiple viewpoints taken on 'cause' and 'blame': there is the father's ready belief that Bao-yu has tried to seduce Golden, and the mother's ready belief that the maid has tried to seduce Bao-yu: the

result of these ill-considered judgements is that the innocent Golden takes her own life and the merely unthinking Bao-yu is beaten almost to death. Further, Golden's superior moral agency and right to chastity martyrdom is taken away from her and reduced to vengeful rage to save the reputation of the Jia family.

To return to the narrative of events contextualising the beating, the scene directly after Golden is 'led away' begins with 'Embarrassed by his mother's awakening, Bao-yu had slipped hurriedly into the Garden': in the word 'embarrassed', the writer gives Bao-yu the benefit of the doubt that he has no thought that the flirtation may have been overheard, or of the consequences if so or of how he may have saved Golden by taking the blame on himself. Lady Wang's rage is totally uncharacteristic and Bao-yu could not have anticipated, even as he checked she was asleep, that she would have exploded like this: in the progression of the narrative, his mother's unexpected rage is a precursor of the father's, and the issue of explosive anger and 'breaking things' is explicitly raised in an odd little episode to be looked at a little later.

However, leaving Bao-yu slipping into the Garden, Xueqin is clearly wishing to emphasise how Bao-yu is retreating from his distrustful family into his own protective bubble of self-absorption. Wandering among the rose trellises, Bao-yu becomes caught up in pitying contemplation of a young actress scratching the male name Qiang over and over again on the ground and is flooded with empathy – 'she must be suffering inwardly . . . looks so frail . . . too frail for suffering. I wish I could bear some of it for you, my dear!' (2.30.103–4) In the context of Golden's shaming and dismissal, Xueqin is testing his readers' empathy with his hero's sentimental overreach, and a sudden 'hissing downpour of rain' is Xueqin's metaphorical douching. Nor does the writer leave Bao-yu there: later in the narrative, Bao-yu's sentimental interest in the actress is taken up again in a chapter sub-headed *'Bao-yu visits Pear-Tree Court and learns hard facts from a performer'*. What these 'hard facts' are is discussed elsewhere; the point here is that the harsh reality of other people's lives, and his culpability in their suffering, is being forced upon 'a reflective, self-critical Bao-yu who made his way back to Green Delights, so bemused he scarcely noticed where he was going' (2.36.210). If reflection and self-criticism are rational acts which are supposed to help people to 'notice[d] where they are going', Bao-yu is very far from this; it is a constant source of vexation to his father, as he confesses here: 'I'm not surprised that father tells me I have a small capacity but a great self-conceit'.

2.iv Tearing-up fans for pleasure

Anger and violence simmer underneath the narrative: as noted earlier, by the time of the beating, Bao-yu has seen his erring school friend so severely

beaten by his father that the old man himself dies and the son follows him remorsefully to his own death; and the orphaned grandson of Bao-yu's schoolmaster, subjected to an upbringing of iron discipline, beaten with utmost savagery, starved and denied food and other cruel physical punishments, dies of erotic obsession through being starved of love. In another episode, Jia Lian's wife Xi-feng, in her new male role as manager of a household fallen into lax ways, makes an example of a woman who is late in: 'take her out and give her twenty strokes of the bamboo . . . The wretched woman was half-dragged from the room and the flogging administered in full view of the waiting throng' (1.14.278). It has earlier been suggested that Xueqin is implying everywhere in his narrative an evident disintegration of the traditional ethical standards of conduct as set down in the *Four Books* and other revered writings studied as preparation for civil service, which emphasised self-control as an ideal;[55] that the writer has a particular interest in the whole subject of violence and anger is signified in a curious little episode between Bao-yu and one of his senior maids, Skybright, in the cluster of chapters prior to the beating.

The incident begins with Skybright clumsily dropping a fan and then treading on it, for which Bao-yu, in a mood of 'black despondency' over a further love-triangle tangle, reproves her for carelessness. She accuses him of being bad-tempered lately:

> 'I shouldn't have thought treading on a fan was such a terrible thing to do. In the past, any number of glass bowls and agate cups have got broken without turning a hair. Why all this fuss about a fan then? If you're not satisfied with my service, you ought to dismiss me and get somebody better. Easy come, easy go. No need for beating about the bush'.
>
> By the time she had finished, Bao-yu was so angry he was shaking all over.
>
> 'You'll go soon enough, don't you worry', he said.
>
> (2.31.110)

Earlier, Bao-yu *had* been uncharacteristically bad-tempered and his maids are well aware that his careless kicking of Aroma has caused her to cough blood. His anger intensifies as his two maids then begin to attack each other. What is of interest here is Xueqin's dramatisation of the attempts Bao-yu makes to step back from his anger and try to defuse the resentments in a process of mediation, beginning by Bao-yu himself restoring his own equanimity. To start with, he offers a solution for Skybright's jealousy of Aroma and, when this angers Aroma, tries to mollify her by giving Skybright the chance to leave the household as, he points out, with her combative temper she seems to be 'agitating' to do. That this is more intended to send a message to Skybright that she is going too far and needs

to rectify her conduct, rather than to threaten her dismissal, is indicated by the particular way Xueqin words Bao-yu's response when Skybright fights back, weeping and accusing him of 'twisting things around to get the better of me' and threatening to 'beat her own brains out' rather than 'go out of that door'. Bao-yu responds that as Skybright won't stop quarrelling, 'I *really* have to see Her Ladyship about this and get it over with'. Now it's 'real' – his saving strategy hasn't worked – '*This* time he seemed quite determined to go'. The words 'really' and 'seemed' again show how Bao-yu is still acting a little, keeping the negotiation open, and it works; Aroma takes on her rival's cause and the scene becomes one of those lovely ceremonial moments extending the focus to the 'outside', which is Xueqin's genius to capture:

> Seeing she was unable to hold him back, Aroma went down on her knees. Emerald, Ripple Musk and the other maids, aware that a quarrel of more than usual magnitude was going on inside, were waiting together outside in breathless silence. When word reached them that Aroma was now on her knees interceding for Skybright, they came silently in to kneel down behind her. Bao-yu raised Aroma to her feet, sighed, sat down on the edge of the bed and told the other maids to get up.
>
> 'What do you want me to do'? he asked Aroma. 'My heart is destroyed inside me, but none of you knows or cares'.
>
> (2.31.113)

It is equally Xueqin's genius to cut through the affecting moment by following it with a sudden intrusion of ridicule. But the episode again draws attention to the issue of anger and insubordination and how it is managed, with the intercession of the other servants in its resolution. Xueqin can't quite let violence alone, following this with a further, memorably zany riff on the theme: the famous episode of 'tearing the fans'.

It is later on. Bao-yu has been obliged to go to a drinking-party and, 'more than a little drunk', he tries to make up with Skybright: as she is going off to have a bath, he suggests they have it together. As yet quite unaware of the tragic consequences of his flirtation with Golden, he uses this same 'trying-it-on' tone. Skybright's refusal is magnificent, just that sophisticated, playful reproof and imaginative diversion Bao-yu finds so attractive, and he accepts that well then, he'll just wash his hands and maybe Skybright might get him some fruit to eat. She teases him that she's

> 'much too clumsy to get your fruit for you. Suppose I were to break a plate. That would be terrible'.
>
> 'If you want to break it, by all means break it', said Bao-yu. 'These things are there for our use. What we use them for is a matter of

individual taste. For example, fans are made for fanning with; but if you prefer to tear them up because it gives you pleasure, there's no reason why you shouldn't. What you *mustn't* do is to use them as objects to vent your anger on. It's the same with plates and cups. Plates and cups are made to put food and drink in. But if you want to smash them on purpose, because you like the noise, it is perfectly alright to do so. As long as you don't get into a *passion* and start taking it out on *things* – that is the golden rule'.

'Alright then', said Skybright with a mischievous smile. 'Give me your fan to tear. I love the sound of a fan being torn.'

Bao-yu held it out to her. She took it eagerly and – chah! – promptly tore it in half. And again – chah! – chah! – chah! – she tore it several times more. Bayou, an appreciative onlooker, laughed and encouraged her.

Well torn! Well torn! Now again, a really loud one!

(2.31.116)

A maid appears and protests, at which Bao-yu leaps up, snatches her fan and passes it to Skybright, who 'at once tore it into several pieces'. Both laughing uproariously, Bao-yu says the maid can get herself another fan from the box, to which she retorts that they may as well tear up the whole boxful – and that Skybright can get the box down herself.

Skybright stretched back on the bed, smiling complacently.

'I'm rather tired just now. I think I shall tear some more tomorrow'.

Bao-yu laughed.

'The ancients used to say that for one smile of a beautiful woman a thousand taels are well spent. For a few old fans it's cheap at the price!'

(2.31.117)

Skybright has warded off Bao-yu's flirtation to protect herself from the charge of 'shamelessness': Bao-yu's response, which is to shift into what at first seems to be a little homily on not taking out anger by breaking plates – a twist on the more usual counsel to take anger out on plates but not on people – is given a further twist: only break plates if it gives you pleasure, never because you are angry. The extravagant absurdity of this reversal appeals to the anarchist in Skybright, as he knows it will, and licenses them to this display of mutual transgression and pleasure tearing-up a few old fans', he simulating an inventive, initiating lover and she a satisfied beautiful woman.

It is tempting to see the episode as Xueqin's invoking the famously shocking scene ending the popular verse-opera *The Peach-Blossom Fan*, set in the blood-drenched wars at the end of the Ming dynasty. The lovers, finally united by the love-token fan – peach-blossoms painted over blood

spots as a message of fidelity – are then torn apart forever by the violent intervention of a Taoist priest ripping the fan into shreds in condemnation of the frivolity of love in the war-torn world of suffering. This violent act itself feels more like a continuation of the violence of war which has caused the suffering than an act against violence; far more like the very opposite, violence against love. How far the fun-filled, creative and respectful expression of the mutual attraction of Bao-yu and Skybright is from the fearful imaginings of shameless lust prevailing in the parental attitudes; Xueqin's artistic intent is to show that it is just these fevered assumptions about Bao-yu's moral conduct which fuel his father's fury, further ignited by political humiliation through a charge which, again, his son which is never given a chance to explain.

The golden rule of *not* getting into a passion and breaking 'things' – like sons – is not a rule guiding Bao-yu's father. In Xueqin's typically indirect comment, the patriarchal contradictions being played out here are pinpointed later on, as part of the trials and tribulations of Bao-yu's education, in an episode always tipping into the comical – Bao-yu being tested by his father on progress on his Maiden Themes for the Eight-Legged Essay, the centrepiece of the national civil examinations. The First Theme from the Analects is 'The Sage bent upon Learning in his Fifteenth Year' – the Preceptor having adjusted the title to the age of his recalcitrant pupil – but Jia Zheng becomes so caught up in abstruse learned corrections that he quite misses the Preceptor's ingratiating purpose. On the Second Theme, 'Lack of Acclaim Borne with Equanimity', Bao-yu's original scanning has corrected it to read 'Equanimity is the Essence of Scholarship', but this is likewise scrutinised as faulty; Xueqin's readers, however, would be quite aware of the author's implicit indictment of the notable lack of 'equanimity' in Bao-yu's scholarly elders (4.84.100).

Section 3 The 'terrible chastisement' (2.33.148)

3.i 'A gentleman . . . should guard against rage', *Analects, 16.7.*

Xueqin gives the episode of the 'terrible chastisement' full dramatic treatment: it is brilliant theatre, beginning with a preparatory vignette. Bao-yu is in a state of shock after the news has reached him that 'Golden's disgrace had driven her to take her own life'. Head down low, sighing, he almost collides with his father: 'Stay where you are', Jia Zheng commands harshly, and commences to castigate the child for his 'hang-dog appearance . . . sullenness and secret depravity written all over your face! What are these sighings and groanings supposed to indicate', and more in this vein to the uncomprehending Bao-yu, whose frozen fearfulness angers his father still further. Jia Zheng is as yet unaware of the hideous drowning of

the maid and the accusations of sexual misdemeanour; Xueqin is indicating the extent to which the father is predisposed to violent correction of a son who frustrates his father's patriarchal duty to secure the reputation and continuity of the noble house of Jia.

As noted, the visit of the chamberlain of the Prince of Zhong-shun to the Jia Zheng mansion, lodging the charge against Bao-yu of intimacy with and harbouring of the prince's favourite actor, is politically deeply humiliating to Jia Zheng. A little later, his rage at the 'disgraceful matters' happening in his own household is compounded by Bao-yu's half-brother, who seizes the opportunity to vent his malice against his privileged elder brother by a drawn-out, cleverly acted story plausibly implicating Bao-yu in the horrible story of a drowned maid, 'her body all swollen up with water, her head all swollen'. Jia Zheng, whose glaring eyes and contorted mouth are fixed in a face 'now turned to a ghastly gold-leaf colour' – like a 'painted face' mask in an opera – interrupts him with a dreadful cry: 'Fetch Bao-yu!'

> Jia Zheng turned a pair of wild and bloodshot eyes on Bao-yu as he entered. Forgetting the 'riotous and dissipated conduct abroad leading to the unseemly bestowal of impudicities upon a theatrical performer', and the 'neglect of proper pursuits and studies at home culminating in the attempted violation of a parent's maidservant', and all the other high-sounding charges he had been preparing to hurl against him, he shouted two brief orders to the pages.
>
> 'Gag his mouth. Beat him to death'.
>
> The pages were too frightened not to comply. Two held Bao-yu face downwards on a bench while a third lifted up the flattened bamboo sweep and began to strike him with it across the hams. After about a dozen blows Jia Zheng, not satisfied that his executioner was hitting hard enough, kicked him impatiently aside, wrested the bamboo from his grasp and, gritting his teeth, brought it down with the utmost savagery on the places that had already been beaten.
>
> At this point the literary gentlemen, sensing that Bao-yu was in serious danger of life and limb, came in again to remonstrate; but Jia Zheng refused to hear them.
>
> 'Ask him what he has done and then tell me if you think I should spare him', he said. 'It is the encouragement of people like you that has corrupted him; and now, when things have come to this pass, you intercede for him. I suppose you would like me to wait until he commits parricide, or worse. Would you still intercede for him then?'
>
> They could see from this reply that he was beside himself. Wasting no further time on words, they quickly withdrew and looked for someone to take a through message through inside.

> Lady Wang did not stop to tell Grandmother Jia when she received it. She snatched up an outer garment, pulled it about her, and, supported by a single maid, rushed off, not caring what menfolk might see her, to the outer study, bursting into it with such suddenness that the literary gentlemen and other males present were unable to avoid her.
>
> Her entry provoked Jia Zheng to fresh transports of fury. Faster and harder fell the bamboo on the prostrate form of Bao-yu, which by now appeared to be unconscious, for when the boys holding it down relaxed their hold and fled from their Mistress's presence, it had long since even to twitch. Even so, Jia Zheng would have continued beating it had not Lady Wang clasped the bamboo to her bosom and prevented him.
>
> (2.33.148)

Lady Wang's intervention is like the *Shou Yuan* tale: the son is spared, the father spared from becoming a murderer and the family from losing its heir. But it is a shocking act of public transgression by the wife, only increasing Jia Zheng's bitterness at being again prevented by women who have 'conspired against me to protect him', and he is provoked to 'finish off what I have begun and put him down, like the vermin he is, before he can do any more damage'. He takes up a rope, but Lady Wang holds her arms around him to prevent it, challenging him to 'let the two of us die together' and throwing herself on Bao-yu's body, 'weeping with noisy abandon'. Melodrama is about to take over as Jia Zheng 'himself breaks down into a fit of weeping' but is checked for a moment as Lady Wang 'began to examine the body she was clasping' – Xueqin's touch of humour even here – and, at the sight of his bloody, battered body, she cries out, first for him, and then wailing for her dead firstborn – 'O Zhu! Zhu! If only you had lived, I shouldn't have minded losing a hundred other sons' – scarcely of much comfort for her near-dead second son.

In the manner of the famous verse-dramas referenced throughout, the tragicomedy develops as a cry goes up from outside – 'Her Old Ladyship!' – and the matriarch totters in, 'leaning on the shoulder of a little maid, her old head swaying from side to side with the effort of running'. The final humiliation of the father is accomplished in the Matriarch's vintage style, her disowned son reduced to tearful self-justification: 'What I did to the boy I did for the honour of the family':

> Grandmother Jia spat contemptuously.
>
> 'A single harsh word from me and you start whining that you can't bear it. How do you think Bao-yu could bear your cruel rod? And you say you have been punishing him for the honour of the family, but you just tell me this: Did your own father punish *you* in such a way? – I think not'.
>
> (2.33.151)

She proceeds to give orders for her carriage to be called and declares that 'Your Mistress and I and Bao-yu are going back to Nanking' – her ancestral home. This is the harshest cut of all, and Xueqin holds his writerly tongue in cheek as Jia Zheng's kowtows 'were by now describing the whole quarter-circle from perpendicular to ground' and, with all the weeping going on, 'began to wish that he had not beaten the boy quite so savagely'.

As this entire episode plays out, Xueqin achieves an ironic reversal whereby it is the breakdown of the *father*, of the moral order he represents, where the import of this episode resides, rather than what the father believes to be the breakdown in filial order by the son – beginning back then, when 'he stretched out his little hand and started playing with some women's things' (1.2.76). Xueqin does this through ramping up the theatricality of the visual spectacle, facial expressions – 'Jia Zheng's face . . . turned a ghastly gold-leaf colour' – exaggerated like masks in a play, so finely balanced against the violent realism of the actions and emotions as to allow Jia Zheng's breakdown to take on metaphorical significance, the collapse of patriarchal order itself, beginning with a wild declaration that he 'will give over house and property and my post in the Ministry' and look for a 'clean and decent place to end my days' to mitigate 'the charge of having disgraced my ancestors by rearing this unnatural monster as my son'. The histrionic utterance resonates with the old story of the father's picking up a 'big pole' and striking his son unconscious over the trifle of an uprooted plant, and yet the author has taken care to give substance to the importance of respecting the family ancestors and hence credit to what the father sees as at stake here; it is just that, instead of the son disgracing the ancestors, it is now the father who is on display as disgracing the ancestors in his immoderate rage. While the threat is theatrical gesture, as is the grandmother's, it also represents the failure of the Jia family patriarchy to uphold its own proud dynastic heritage, soon to be on lavish public display in the New Year's Eve sacrifices to the ancestors. It is notable that Xueqin's artistic 'equanimity' achieves this without turning the father into an 'unnatural monster' himself: the writer is not himself 'tearing fans' out of anger, however unremitting this description of the beating becomes.

That Xueqin wishes to maintain the focus on anger and violence and emphasise the brutal 'true-to-life' realism of the beating is evident in the forensic detail of the spectacle as Lady Wang examined the body:

> Bao-yu's face was ashen, his breathing was scarcely perceptible, and the trousers of the thin green silk which clothed the lower part of his body were so soaked with blood that their colour was no longer recognisable. Feverishly [his mother] unfastened his waistband and drew them back. Everywhere, from the upper parts of his buttocks down to his calves, was either raw and bloody or purplish-black with bruises. Not an inch of sound flesh was to be seen.
>
> (2.33.150)

Implicit in the detail is the real possibility that the son's reproductive organs may have been damaged. It is of interest, then, that in the famous illustrated version by Sun Wen[56] painted a century later, the depiction of the beating itself is off to one side of the painting; it shows the boy's body lying front down but the head obscured, elegantly covered in a pale-coloured gown, not a spot of blood visible, the father's face calm, bamboo upraised in a frozen pose, the maids ushering in the just-visible matriarch. By contrast, in a depiction of an act of female violence a few pages earlier – Xi-feng striking a little acolyte who has run into her – the violence is centre page, the child fallen to the ground, the force of the slap clearly visible, as are the protesting gestures of the onlookers and the matriarch: Xi-feng is the object of disapprobation in much of the commentary on *The Story of the Stone*, where Jia Zheng is not.

The ambiguous significance of the beating as a proper disciplining of the son or as exemplifying the degeneration of the Jia dynasty is drawn to the reader's attention in a later chapter: an elderly woman is holding forth on 'young people and how you have to be strict with them all the time', pointing her finger at Bao-yu and opining that

> '*your* father [is not] strict enough with *you*. Look at the way Her Old Ladyship was out in front when he gave you that beating a while ago. You should have seen the way your grandfather used to lay into *him* [Jia Zheng] when *he* was a lad' and he 'wasn't the scapegrace that you are, either'.
> (2.45.391)

This is a clear contradiction to what Her Old Ladyship – and the reader – have actually seen: 'that this had been no ordinary beating', and it contradicts Lady Jia's charge against Jia Zheng for falling below Jia patriarchal standards: 'Did your own father punish *you* in such a way? – I think not'. Xueqin does not leave the issue there, either, as the old woman goes on about Jia Zheng's older brother, who *was* mischievous and 'always getting beaten', and the other grandfather: 'O, he had a fiery temper! Once it was up – well, you'd never have thought it was his son he was beating. Looked more like he was torturing a bandit'. That son in turn – Cousin Zhen, seducer of his daughter-in-law – seems to be continuing his grandfather's tradition, she opines, but here Xueqin reveals the further contradictions arising: 'Only trouble is, he's a bit too erratic. Can't control himself, that's his trouble. I don't blame the young ones for not respecting him' (2.45.391–3).

'Moral outrage' seems to require 'uncontrolled anger': it is worth recalling here the similarities with the dilemma Shakespeare locates in *Hamlet*. Dynastic filial obligation requires Hamlet to perpetuate the violent conventions of vengeance but he, living in a new generation of intellectual, morally introspective individualism, cannot summon the required moral outrage, much less the conventional theatrics – 'o'erdoing Termagant'

(3.2.13) – and for which he loses all motivation as his father's idealised moral authority disintegrates. Instead, he deflects frustrated moral outrage onto his mother's imagined carnality, seeing himself as hypocritical in holding back his anger:

> I will speak daggers to her but use none.
> My tongue and my soul in this be hypocrites.
> (3.2.386–7)

'Which is more wrong', the son's behaviour or the father's: 'You tell me'. This dilemma is instructive for considering Bao-yu's position following the beating, which has been such a dramatic revelation of the contradictions in his father's exercise of authority: rigid upholder of educating one's mind through Confucian teachings and the way of civil virtue, and out-of-control 'torturer' like his great-uncle. Xueqin has taken care to explain the father's moral outrage in terms of exercising his patriarchal 'conscience' but also to show how it is the father's own fear of patriarchal weakness and failure which prejudices his judgement and fuels the 'uncontrollable anger' projected upon his son – no longer a son or a human being, but 'vermin' to be 'put down'. Pre-figuring the 'uncontrollable rage' in the episode with Golden and Lady Wang, Xueqin puts before the reader an operatic spectacle of patriarchy collapsing into inhumane savagery: the literary character Bao-yu, so feelingly 'human' that he is always grieving over someone, is as far from an 'unnatural son' as his father is from being a 'natural father' – or as Golden is from being a 'shameless little harlot'. It is not that the son is entirely innocent so much as that the father fails spectacularly to guard himself against one of the 'three dangers' Xueqin's readers would have been familiar with from *The Analects:* 16.7:

> Confucius said: A gentleman must guard himself against three dangers. When young, as the energy of the blood is in turmoil, he should guard against lust. In his maturity, as the energy of the blood is at its full, he should guard against rage. In old age, as the energy of the blood is on the wane, he should guard against rapacity.[57]

Guarding against rage: the father's initial rage at his humiliation by the prince, fed by Bao-yu's apparent brazenness and further spuriously ignited by the horror of rape, appears to represent just that 'case of unrighteous conduct' which Confucius teaches that a filial son 'must by no means keep from remonstrating [about] with his father'.

Xueqin draws attention to 'unrighteous conduct' through the matriarch's actions and words – 'a father ought to punish . . . but not like that!' and Bao-yu's implicit remonstrance when, seeing Dai-yu in tears, he makes light of his pain – 'This fuss I make is put on to fool the others. I'm hoping

they spread the word around outside how badly I've been hurt, so that father gets to hear of it' and is suitably shamed (2.34.159). The reader, however, has already seen Bao-yu brushing aside Aroma's question as to 'the reason he was beaten so severely: 'Oh, the usual things. Need you ask'? and knows that Bao-yu, despiser of worn-out platitudes, would have never thought in such pious Confucian terms; his statement is more to comfort Dai-yu than meant as recrimination against his father, even if there ever had been any encouragement to do so, which there was not: his father has always cut short his attempts to justify his actions. The reader also knows that Aroma need not ask; rather, she is only set upon her own remonstrance against what are, to her, his foolish indiscretions, but the painful intimate examination of his lower body to see 'if anything's broken' further underlines for the reader how close, beyond any deserved punishment, the beating has come to 'crippling' Bao-yu – risking making him impotent, the cruellest punishment that could be visited on a patriarchal family.

3.ii 'What have I undergone but a few whacks of the bamboo?' *(2.34.156)*

But if the beating was intended as chastisement, and if this is shown to be partly warranted, it has resulted in the very opposite as, far from feeling guilt or self-reproach, Bao-yu luxuriates in a sense of euphoria at the passionate depths of feeling on display at his bedside, the sight of Bao-chai's suppressed distress 'so touching . . . that his sprits soared and his pain was momentarily forgotten'. Xueqin allows his suffering hero his emotional indulgence, not the first time he has declared his readiness to die:

> What have I undergone but a few whacks of the bamboo? he thought – yet they are so sad and concerned about me! What dear, adorable, sweet, noble girls they are! Heaven knows how they would grieve for me if I were actually to die! It would be almost worth dying, just to find out. The loss of a life's ambitions would be a small price to pay, and I should be a peevish, ungrateful ghost if I did not feel proud and happy when such darling creatures were grieving for me.
>
> (2.34.156)

Bao-yu's 'adorable girls' typically chide him for such sentimental effusions, and the question of where the author is positioning his hero for the reader has now become pressing with the advent of the beating. Where will Bao-yu now take his direction, in a world which is so ready to accuse maidservants of corrupting the morals of their young masters, of half-brothers venting resentment, of princes capturing actors as their private possessions, of political interests placed before filial love, a world with so little capacity for generous understanding, affection and trust of others? A little further

in the narrative, Bao-yu as poet takes this vision of dying to new lyrical heights of romantic ecstasy:

> Now my idea of a glorious death would be to die now, while you are all around me; then your tears would combine to make a great river that my corpse could float away on, far, far away, to some remote place that no bird has ever flown to, and gently decompose there until the wind has picked my bones clean, and after that never, never to be reborn again as a human being – that would be a really *good* death.
>
> (2.36.206)

This vision is set in opposition to the orthodoxy of 'the scholar dies protesting and the soldier dies fighting', Bao-yu's claim upon love's omniscience, himself happily dying a martyr to love. After this oration, Bao-yu 'at once closed his eyes and fell fast asleep' – Xueqin's gentle comic comment.

Xueqin maintains a focus on empathetic feeling as he takes the reader through the bedside episode. If Bao-yu exalts that the girls care about him, it is also true that he cares about them, as the writer makes clear when Bao-yu, who has just had his first inkling of his half-brother's malicious involvement but is far more taken by 'apprehensi[on] that Bao-chai might feel embarrassed' about Aroma naming her brother Xue Pan as informant about 'Bijou', waves this aside: 'Old Xue would never do a thing like that', he said, 'it's silly to make these wild assertions'. Bao-chai sees immediately this 'Old Xue' friendliness is out of consideration for her, and her *unspoken* response typically carries the heavy weight of a moral lesson: such 'delicacy of feeling for her', yes, but 'If only you could apply some of that thoughtfulness to the important things of life, you would make my Uncle so happy'. Bao-chai decides the best strategy is to restrain her remonstrations, which Bao-yu's maid takes as an indirect rebuke to her, but Bao-yu 'could see . . . only the refusal of a frank and generous nature to admit deviousness in others and a sensibility capable of matching and responding to his own. As a consequence, his spirits soared even higher'. Bao-chai's strategic 'thoughtfulness' has only encouraged Bao-yu in his sentimental self-delusion about a shared 'sensibility' with Bao-chai: the question now is, how will this 'sensibility' play-out with his true love – his soul-mate – Dai-yu? Will she too refrain from chiding and support his cause – and what *is* his cause?

It is to Dai-yu that Bao-yu states what the beating has revealed to him: not a need to change, but a need *not* to change. Xueqin stages this scene carefully: the domestic care for Bao-yu's recovery is settled between Bao-chai and Aroma, and Bao-yu is left 'lying back quietly, plunged in thought'. But then the pain in his buttocks stabs at the smallest move, 'as if he were being grilled over a fire'. He dozes off and is visited by the shadowy forms of Bijou and Golden telling him of their suffering – not laying blame on him, but more like fellow-sufferers seeking his sympathy: there is a sense

here that the 'terrible chastisement' has become a way for Bao-yu to declare himself a fellow martyr, but Xueqin's identification of the powerlessness of maids and actors through the personal suffering of the privileged literati class, exceptional at the time,[58] is not without a touch of kindly irony; the reader may wonder how very different this is from the 'great deal of self-conceit' of Bao-yu's many earlier poetic 'dyings'. His 'thoughts' are inflected by this poetic pain, and it is in this state that he becomes aware of someone weeping – 'a pair of eyes swollen like peaches met his eyes . . . It was Dai-yu, all right, no doubt about that' (2.34.159). Xueqin's reference back to Dai-yu's mythic origins and the 'debt of tears' she pays for his life-giving nurture lifts the significance of their exchange here beyond the domestic, as Bao-yu, too, falls into his mythic role as the nurturer, chiding her for risking heat-stroke 'and that would be a fine how-do-you-do', and pretending, as just noted, that his injuries have been exaggerated to shame his father – in the discourse of filial piety, a remonstrance by the son against the injustice of the father. While Dai-yu is overwhelmed with the 'volumes' she wants to say to him, he waits to hear what this will be:

> Yet all she could get out, after struggling for some time with her choking sobs, was: 'I suppose you'll change now'.
>
> (2.34.159)

For Dai-yu to say this has cost her a great deal of effort. Xueqin has prepared the reader for her conflicted response through several preceding scenes: a short time before, she has overheard another girl-cousin telling Bao-yu off for being unfilial in refusing to receive official visitors, part of his duty as the 'refined' son of a noble family:

> 'I make no claim to being refined, thanks all the same', said Bao-yu. 'I'm as common as dirt. And furthermore I have no wish to mix with people of his sort'.
>
> 'You're incorrigible', said Xiang-yun, 'Now that you're older, you ought to be mixing with officials and administrators . . . even if you don't want to take the Civil Examinations yourself . . . you can learn a lot from talking to these people about the way the Empire is governed . . . that will stand you in good stead later on, when you come to manage your own affairs and take your place in society. You might even pick up one or two decent, respectable friends on the way. You'll certainly never get anywhere if you spend all your time with us girls'.
>
> Bao-yu found such talk highly displeasing.
>
> 'I think perhaps you'd better go and sit in someone else's room', he said. 'I wouldn't want a *decent, respectable* young lady like you to be contaminated'.
>
> (2.32.130)

Reprimanded by his companions for his rudeness – he has been rude recently to Miss Bao, they say, though it's a mystery, never to Miss Lin – he retorts:

> 'Have you ever heard Miss Lin talking that sort of stupid rubbish . . . I'd've long since fallen out with her if she did'.
>
> (2.32.131)

Often tormented by jealous doubt, Dai-yu takes great comfort in having overheard Bao-yu's declaration that the special understanding between them is shown by her being the *only one* who has never asked him to change. But as she thinks about this, she becomes concerned that Bao-yu's unreserved praise of her, his 'warmth and affection', are sure, sooner or later, to excite suspicion and be misunderstood: Dai-yu is far more personally aware than Bao-yu feels he need be of the rigid rules of propriety which govern marital choice in the Jia household; private feelings, anything like 'love-sickness' counting against eligibility, abhorrent in a 'decent family'. Moreover, she is afraid that her illness is likely to be fatal: 'even if I am your true-love', and for all the love he is risking scandal for, 'you can do nothing to alter my fate' (2.32.132). These thoughts so weigh upon her that when, after another jealous wrangle, Bao-yu becomes frustrated beyond limit and in a frenzy prepares to declare his love directly, Dai-yu cannot bear to have him unburden himself so recklessly and refuses to hear him. She has stalked off, leaving Bao-yu to pour out his love and grief to the empty air – except that he is overheard by his maid Aroma, which undoes all Dai-yu's proud but fatally debilitating attempts to protect their love from the charge of impropriety which does, in the end, destroy it (2.32.135).

3.iii 'I wouldn't change if he killed me'. *(2.34.159)*

Now, standing by his bedside and seeing how badly he has been beaten, all of these confused feelings of pride in their special understandings about 'stupid rubbish' and fear of its terrible cost to Bao-yu in bringing his father's wrath down upon him overwhelm Dai-yu; their closeness makes her worry that she is partly responsible for his punishment because she has not reproved him like the others, but she also wants keeps a little hope alive for their unique affinity in matters of 'change':

> 'I suppose you'll change now'.
>
> Bao-yu gave a long sigh.
>
> 'Don't worry. I won't change. People like that are worth dying for. I wouldn't change if he killed me'.
>
> (2.34.159)

Scholarly advice is that 'I wouldn't change if he killed me' is a sentence added by the translator, not in the original text.[59] The words are implicitly and defiantly unfilial, and it is notable that Dai-yu's words here, and the words Hawkes chooses for Bao-yu's response, give a significance to this exchange – and to the whole episode of the beating – which is missing from the six-volume Yangs' translation, the more commonly-available single volume Chi-chen Wang abridged translation and from the English language version of the illustrated text by Sun-Wen. In the Yangs' text, Dai-yu's words are 'Never do such things again'[60] and in the Wang text 'You must mend your ways from now on';[61] the Sun Wen wording reads 'You're supposed to change now'.[62] These wordings are impersonal and directive, whereas in Hawkes' translation the words are personal and tentative, 'I suppose'- rather than 'You're supposed' or 'Never' or 'You must' – as if Dai-yu is half-afraid of his answer: 'change' may mean Bao-yu will now submit to the 'stupid rubbish' of 'refined' sons of noble fathers and no longer value her support for himself 'as he is' – her unique advantage against her rivals in the all-important matter of marriage.

In the Wang and Sun Wen texts, Bao-yu's *response* to Dai-yu is entirely omitted. The declaration that 'people like that are worth dying for' is eloquent of the radical thought of the late Ming literati searching for 'something worth living and dying for': in an essay, the aforementioned famous literary martyr Li Zhi discusses 'the five ways to die, the best of which is to die an heroic death for a noble cause' as against merely dying at home; 'In death as in life, there is nothing more worthwhile than to register one's protest and pour forth one's indignation against the evil in the world'.[63] While Xueqin is by no means setting-up Bao-yu as a reborn Li Zhi, it is important to note that the omission of Bao-yu's response leaves the meaning of the episode at the level offered by Bao-yu's maid Aroma when, afterwards, she goes to his mother to warn her of the potential 'scandal' of her son living in such intimacy with his cousins: 'Master Bao *needed* that beating' – he needed to mend his ways – 'If the Master didn't keep an eye on him, there's no knowing what he might get up to' (2.34.163). The Wang and Sun Wen texts leave the episode as a cautionary experience, worldly reality catching up on the young dreamer living too much in his mind, too reckless with his feelings, unmindful of his duties as son and heir, risking the reputation of the family, Dai-yu like the others counselling change – as if that is where the writer is leaving the whole matter. The Yangs' text retains the sacrificial emphasis and the physical comforting for Dai-yu:

> 'Don't you worry', replied Bao-yu with a long sigh. 'Please don't talk this way. I would die happily for people like them, and I'm still alive'.
>
> (II.33. 935)

However, in light of the particular significance of the word 'change' to the commitment between Bao-yu and Dai-yu, the text given in the Hawkes

translation, to which Hawkes has added the new sentence 'I wouldn't change if he killed me' turns the meaning in the opposite direction from the Wang and the Sun Wen texts and takes it towards an affirmation of the hero's determination to continue living in his own way, ready to die for people he believes to be 'better than others' (1.3.104). Again, it is Xueqin's retention of an unforgiving realism of 'real events' that his hero is 'flawed' by his own culpability in the misfortunes of those 'better' people fallen victim to 'others'.

'Bao-yu gave a long sigh': this signals a pause for thought, a pivot to a more intimate disclosure: he has already effusively dismissed his pain to Dai-yu as 'all shamming, really', and is now focussed on what the beating means to their understanding about each other – his own confession of love made only days ago but, to his great embarrassment, to the wrong person. Bao-yu's words 'Don't worry. I won't change. People like that are worth dying for' are addressed to the personal and private 'worry' between them: Bao-yu has registered that Dai-yu's *real* worry is that he *will* change now, and his words are a reassurance to her that he will not change, and that this is not merely about refusing to mend his ways: it is about being prepared to become a sacrifice for the victims – Bijou and Golden – who are suffering with him, the sacrificial imagery of Hawkes' additional sentence –'I wouldn't change if he killed me' underlining that this is not just about the particular circumstances of the beating, but about his life-and-death commitment to his beliefs, his warm friendships with 'common as dirt' people like actors and maids and, most importantly, his love for Dai-yu. It is a challenge put back by Confucius, and to the reader: which is more wrong? Killed or still alive, an unfilial son he may be, but this is not what matters most – to him, or to his beloved.

3.iv 'Mrs Lian has come'

It is possible, of course, to read all of this as further youthful self-exculpatory theatrical martyrdom – but that the tone of the Hawkes reiteration has a bitter directness which seems to belie mere stylistic embellishment, as if Hawkes wants to ensure that the declaration Xueqin gives to Bao-yu is not lost in *his* translation – that Xueqin's' secret message' *is* 'heard' – and to give in full the defining significance of the episode for the hero in his struggle to find his true self – with his true-love – notwithstanding how close it flies in the face of filial piety. The beating, in its injustice and 'uncontrollable moral outrage', now irrevocably separates Bao-yu from any further fear of his father and the patriarchal orthodoxies he stands for, so close to their own self-destruction in threatening the end of the patrilineal line and recalling the 'old story' where if the son is unfairly beaten, the father should be reproved. It is the culmination of the narrative trajectory in which Xueqin has invested much creative energy thus far – but, in his

typical way of signalling an ironic shift in perspective, he cuts short the hero's epiphany with a sudden intrusion: someone from 'outside' calling 'Mrs Lian has come' – at which Dai-yu leaves precipitately.

'Mrs Lian' – Xi-feng – is the other gender-challenging and controversial figure in the novel, a foil for Bao-yu and likewise a sacrifice to the many gender contradictions in play beneath the narrative surface. It is not without significance that her visit cuts across Bao-yu's declaration, or that Dai-yu wishes to avoid her: Mrs Lian is the one member of the family who, in the role of a young, beautiful and worldly-wise married female, is permitted to tease the two young ones about their emotional intensity and lighten it with her typical witty banter, and she is the one family member whose influence with the family matriarch could have helped them in their hopes. The irony of this is that it is her teasing which drives Dai-yu further into her determination to repress even the least appearance of presumption against patriarchal prerogative in marital choice. As is discussed further in Chapter 2, one of the many ironies in Xueqin's tragic vision of life is that it is the physical and mental illness brought on by the protagonists' keeping secret their feelings and their dread of not having a future together that becomes the deciding factor against them; to the family, their love appears like an infection, making each other ill or mad. Such 'love-sickness', an unsound basis for any marriage, allows Bao-chai's blooming health to assert its definitive advantage, given a conscience-saving gloss of otherworldly sanction in the prevailing assumptions around gold/jade predestination. Compounding the whole issue of filial piety and who is 'more wrong', it is the filial duty which Mrs Lian exercises in taking responsibility for resolving the issue of matrimony no one else is yet willing to face – the bride-swap deception – which seals the tragic end to the outlawed love of Bao-yu and Dai-yu. And it is filial piety, in the simple form of love for his mother and grandmother, which Bao-yu exercises in fulfilling his obligation to produce an heir and to succeed in the imperial examinations before taking his leave of a world which has lost its meaning for him.

3.v 'What I told you the other night was wrong' *(2.36.210)*

Whatever Bao-yu's acknowledgement of his own 'wrong' and his father's being right, the insight he has gained into his own 'self-conceit' is not a change towards filial obedience and the role expected of a good son, or even Buddhist disillusionment, and not only a confirmation of life as the challenge to die for what you believe in, but also the challenge of what you believe in. In the end, this is a remonstrance against patriarchy: the father is 'more wrong', but only after the son attempts to exist within it, 'playing the *qin* and singing', to recall the old tale in the *Shuo Yuan*. As with Hamlet, whose illusion of his revenge/salvationary mission disappears with the disappearance of the illusion of patriarchal authority as he abandons himself

further to his often contradictory moral subjectivities, the 'sweet' cunning of self-preservation, his enemies 'hoist with their own petard'; divine intervention, 'readiness is all', and finally his admission of bad conscience and self-division, so also is Bao-yu after the beating exposed to the challenge of survival on his own terms, ready to sacrifice himself to 'people like that' even as he has inadvertently been the cause of their suffering. Bao-yu's guidance is also 'that within' the 'heart/mind', a gifted experience of personal freedom of expression made possible only within the artificial lyrical environment of the Garden, and the limitations upon which, in the real world of patriarchal orthodoxy, Bao-yu – again 'sighing heavily' – is only naively if portentously becoming aware:

> 'What I told you the other night was wrong', he said. 'I'm not surprised that Father tells me I have a "small capacity but a great self-conceit". I mean, that stuff about all of you making a river of tears for me when I die: I realize now that it's not possible. I realize now that we each have our own allotted share of tears and must be content with what we've got'. (2.36.10)

Is this cryptic insight – the last sentence sounding like a mantra – Xueqin's reference to Bao-yu's 'strange' mythic origins as caring giver of water and receiver of Dai-yu's debt of tears, and intended as a marker on Bao-yu's journey to Buddhist enlightenment? Or is it more 'romantic idiocy'?

Bao-yu's sudden and surprising shift from romantic fantasising on love's boundless generosity to an austere, monk-like view of life as an allotment of individual sadness is not a re-thinking of the lesson of the beating, but a far more meaningful correction dramatised by Xueqin in a piece of narrative theatre involving the actress Charmante, whom Bao-yu had earlier pitied as she compulsively scratched the name 'Qiang' – her beloved. Recovered from the beating but now feeling world-weary and with the quintessential romantic opera/drama *The Return of the Soul* (The Peony Pavilion) 'very much on his mind', he pays a visit to Pear Tree Court, seeking the best singer in the family opera troupe to perform some arias for him. He finds her unwell, unwelcoming, 'not in voice', and he is curtly rejected: studying her face, he sees that she is the very actress he had lavished such pity on before:

> And now here she was behaving as if his very presence was distasteful to her. Never in his life before had he experienced such instant rejection. (2.36.207)

'Reduced to mumbling incoherence', he leaves – only to have his curiosity aroused when he sees the manager of the troupe, his cousin Jia Qiang, bringing in a singing bird in a cage for Charmante.

'Look! Look what I've brought for you', said Jia Qiang, full of smiles.

'What is it?'

'I've got a little bird to keep you company, to stop you getting so depressed. You watch! I'll make him perform for you'.

He took a few grains from his pocket and coaxed the bird out on to the stage, where it picked up a diminutive mask and flag and hopped and pirouetted like an actor playing a warrior's part in a play. The [other] girls all laughed delightedly and said it was 'sweet'. All except Charmante. She merely gave a scornful 'huh' or two and lay back on the bed in disgust.

Jia Qiang smiled – almost beseechingly.

'How do you like it?'

'You and your family!' said Charmante bitterly. 'It isn't enough to take decent girls from their homes and shut them up in this prison to learn beastly opera all day. Now you have to bring a *bird* along to do it as well. I suppose it's to keep me reminded of my misery. And you have the audacity to ask me "do I like it"!'

Her words appeared to make Jia Qiang quite frantic, for he uttered a string of the most violent and passionate oaths in reply.

'I'm a stupid fool and I should have known better', he said. 'I spent all that money on the thing because I thought it might cheer you up. It never occurred to me that you might take it like this. Well, let the thing go then! It's an "act of merit" to free living creatures, so at least you'll get some good from it. Either it will help you in the next life or free you from this one'.

With that, he released the bird, which promptly flew away, and stamped on the cage until it was smashed to pieces.

(2.36.208–9)

Bao-yu is a fascinated spectator of Charmante's rejection of her would-be lover's proud display. Where the reader may have expected the Bao-yu of a few days ago to pity the singer further, empathising with her bitter self-identification as a performing bird in a cage, Bao-yu, shocked and alienated by Charmante's rejection of himself – 'you and your family' – finds solace in the culture of Buddhist acceptance of life as an allotment of tears. Upon reflection, he reasons that, like himself, the conceited Charmante has failed to understand life as an allotted share of tears; that in loving her master Ji Qiang as Bao-yu knows she does, she must be content with the love being offered in return, 'what she's got', however resentful of her captive state.

That Bao-yu, a mere inadvertent onlooker to another's distress and with his own investment in Charmante's 'charm', is expounding upon the limitations on love's omniscience and that he does this in the language of fate – 'allotment', beliefs which he has notably scorned as 'this [ridiculous] 'gold and jade business' (2.29.84–86) is cause for the reader to wonder:

is this a new self-understanding which will carry Bao-yu forward, accepting the limitations of his claims over his own beloved, resigned to his lot of suffering and the workings of fate? Or is it a further stage of romantic self-dramatisation – the poetic aloneness of suffering, the burden of one's unknown allotment of tears? His continuing reflections seek comfort from rituals of self-exculpation, all of which only compromise him further; the inadvertent comedy of the 'simple ceremony' of the clandestine expedition to find a shrine at which to burn incense to the memory of his mother's maid Golden (2.43.355–362); most extravagantly, the elaborate performance of literary ambition in composing an *Elegy and Invocation* on the death of his favourite maid Skybright (3.78.575–581), which quite loses any connection with the reality of the maid herself. Far from comprehending the limits placed on his trust in love's omniscience, the dilemmas in sustaining this ideal in the 'world of red dust' inexorably reduce him to states of imbecility and finally exact their ultimate price: the loss of his true love, his spiritual 'destiny' and reason for living. The resonance with Hamlet, in his desperate, excruciatingly pathetic attempt to reclaim a lover's omniscience – more than the love of 'forty thousand brothers' – over the dead Ophelia lying in her grave, is eloquent of the tragedy of their defeat.

Xueqin follows through very carefully with the moral issues of 'blame' and 'wrong', showing in Bao-yu's struggle with his own sense of what is 'worth dying for', the manifold unintended tragic consequences for the very people 'like that' he believes are the ones 'worth dying for'. Where *is* Bao-yu going in this narrative? Where is the writer? Where is *this* discussion going, claiming a pivotal significance for the beating, as if to imply that there is a clear line of development post-beating? The questions raised here are the questions tragedy always raises as the unintended consequences to the innocent accumulate towards disaster for innocent and guilty alike. 'Approaching Bao-yu through Hamlet' is useful in appreciating each writer's direction of thought: after the devastating failure of Hamlet's visual invocation of his father to support the salvationary mission for the soul of his mother which ends Act 3, Hamlet no longer pursues revenge or soul-saving goals: he finds himself more in need of salvation than able to save the honour or soul of others; in the end, he is seeking his own salvation rather than setting the world to rights or letting salvation come to him, in the words of 'goodman-delver' (5.1 15–20), and dies bereft of such consolation. Similarly, what can be said after the 'terrible chastisement' of Bao-yu is that patriarchal power, exercised through fear, visibly falls away with the literal absence of the father and the misfortune the father's mismanagement of his official post brings upon the family. Metaphorically, through the beating, whatever authority his father represents as a beneficial patriarchal guide to his son has self-destructed, the eventual nadir when, despite his misgivings, he leaves the fatal decision on Bao-yu's marriage to 'frail women', his wife and the family matriarch.

3.vi 'Do this for me, for friendship's sake'. *(4.98.370)*
'If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart' *(5.2.330)*

In the introduction it was observed that, in the end, each hero makes an appeal to 'friendship' as all that finally remains to redeem this mortal life. Each hero is confronted by the failure of his avowed 'destiny' and a sense of his own culpability, even as this sense is also implicit of the historical failure of his culture. As a final plea, the simple appeal to the importance of friendship is a moment of shared artistic greatness between these works.

In the final scene of *Hamlet*, the deceit of the poisoned – envenomed – rapiers has done its work and turned upon guilty and innocent alike; on the stage the bodies dying one by one outdoes Herod in its spectacle of mass murder. Retribution is exacted, forgiveness exchanged or referred to heaven, the 'wretched Queen' bid adieu (she is never 'left to heaven'), and then there comes the extraordinary shift of register where Hamlet turns to the audience and half-stammers out his desire to explain all this horror – and to disown it: his own role has been in a tragedy of moral conflict, except in his moments of lurid fantasy it was never meant to end like this, in a Nero-esque 'tragedy of blood':

Hamlet: You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time (as this fell sergeant Death
Is strict in his arrest) – O, I could tell you –
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead.
Thou livest: report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.
Horatio: Never believe it.
I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.
There's yet some liquor left.
(5.2.317–326)

Hamlet refuses to let him die nobly, 'a Roman', and they grapple with the poisoned cup:

Hamlet: O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.
(5.2.328–333)

Their friendship is his one hope of redeeming his name in history. Scholars point out the contradiction in Horatio's subsequent account of the 'story' which in generalising all the cunning and slaughter into a typical Roman bloodbath scenario – morality turned inside out – omits the issue of moral responsibility altogether; Hamlet has no role at all. The importance of this moment is that the appeal it makes to the audience is not so much to their 'wounded' judgement of him – Hamlet is held in their hearts in response to his exposure of his own – but to their sympathetic identification with his very human desire to die justified and with the simple homeliness of his call on his one loyal friend to testify to his honourable name in history; not to die like his father 'With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May/And how his audit stands who knows, save heaven' (3.3.82). In opening up the issue of morality from the general to the personal, the full impact of this address may well tap into Freud's discernment of the 'deepest stratum' of the creative impulse, Shakespeare's own immediate personal and historical position, the deaths of son and father and his purchase of a family coat of arms to leave posterity; the sensational public trial of the aristocratic Earl of Essex, proud defender of the honour duel, put on to condemn him to posterity as a common criminal. However this may be, the play ends with the question raised – as with the story of filial duty in the Confucian treatise *The Classic of Filial Piety* – 'Who is more wrong? You tell me'.

Shakespeare's play interrogates the Roman revenge genre, *The Story of the Stone* interrogates the humbler genre of romantic fiction, and it is suggested that a large part of what draws the works together is their underlying appeal to the moral imagination – how things are and how they might be – made in the act of emotional identification invited between the fictional characters and the reader/audience. The following chapter explores the dominant theme of love, Xueqin's re-imagining of a new 'real-life' love story challenging the clichés of romantic fiction comes up against the resistance to 'true life' romantic love in the 'real' world which refuses its reality, even to the barest 'touching-up'. Instead, the new love story grinds down to Bao-yu's most ancient of pleas, even this denied, for his and Dai-yu's bodies 'to be laid out together when we die. Do this for me, for friendship's sake' – the 'mandarin lovers' 'laid out together in the high marble tomb' of tragic romantic drama, Meng Chengshun's *Mistress and Maid*, Scene 48. The spare and moving scene effectively ending the love story of Bao-yu and Dai-yu in which these words are uttered is taken here to capture how Xueqin's reinterpretation of the genre, with a bitter irony, opens out from a personal appeal to what is 'right' to a wider appeal; the writer asking the reader 'who is more wrong? You tell me', in the tragic drama of the suffering of the hero and heroine which tests the morality of patriarchal codes governing marriage.

In the narrative, the family has taken the decision to marry Bao-yu to Bao-chai, overriding Bao-yu's love of Dai-yu – Cousin Lin – whom they

regard as infecting him with 'love-sickness'; Bao-chai will be a stabilising influence and an ideal wife and prospective mother. An 'ingenious plan of deception' is agreed to carry out the marriage in secret, taking place at the same time as Dai-yu, heartbroken, wills herself to die. After the trick marriage and his collapse into imbecility, Bao-yu recovers sufficiently to become aware that a substitute bride is at his bedside:

> 'Please tell me how Cousin Chai came to be here? I remember Father marrying me to Cousin Lin. Why has she been made to go? Why has Cousin Chai taken her place? She has no right to be here! I'd like to tell her so, but I don't want to offend her. How has Cousin Lin taken it? Is she very upset?'
>
> Aroma did not dare to tell him the truth, but merely said:
>
> 'Miss Lin is ill'.
>
> 'I must go and see her', insisted Bao-yu. He wanted to get up, but days of going without food and drink had so sapped his strength that he could no longer move, but could only weep bitterly and say:
>
> 'I know I'm going to die! There's something on my mind, something very important, that I want you to tell Grannie for me. Cousin Lin and I are both ill. We are both dying. It will be too late to help us when we are dead: but if they prepare a room for us now and if we are taken there before it is too late, we can at least be cared for together while we are still alive, and be laid out together when we die. Do this for me, for friendship's sake'.
>
> (4.98.370)

This scene has a stark and simple nobility of thought and feeling, in direct contrast to the deceits and falsifications surrounding it. Although he does not yet know the truth – that Dai-yu is dead and it is too late to die together – it is shocking in its revelation of the hero's spiritual isolation: he cannot now call on familial love, but is even *friendship* left? The words are not sentimental, but cut through to the most basic humanity: Bao-yu's request 'Do this for me, for friendship's sake' in the Minford translation has echoes of the Biblical sacrament of the Eucharist: 'do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19). In the simplest wording, they point to the humane and 'friendship' alternative which the family could have taken to achieve the desired outcome for all: even if neither Bao-yu nor Dai-yu had long to live, 'at least' to allow them to marry and to take care of them together, with the implication of 'at least' enabling the birth of a son. In the *Analects*, 5.26, the Master is asked what his private wishes are, and his reply is: 'I wish the old may enjoy peace, friends may enjoy trust, and the young may enjoy affection'. As it is, the trick marriage undermined the peace of the matriarch, trust within the family and the affection of the young. Xueqin was not a writer given to Confucian pronouncements: he did not have to be, as

Confucian wisdom infused the moral ethos of the age; what he did do was to dramatise its perversion in 'real life'; here, the contradictions in its selective interpretation of patriarchal authority, asking 'Who is more wrong'? as does Shakespeare of the conflicting repositories of wisdom informing his art.

Notes

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2 'Such a perusal of my face'; 'The snow-white arm'

Romantic love and tragic heroines in *Hamlet* and *The Story of the Stone*

Introduction

'For what's a play without a woman in it?'[1] asks one of Shakespeare's fellow dramatists – a condescension both Shakespeare and Cao Xueqin take on as a challenge. A love story is at the centre, but the vulnerability of this centre, in both *Hamlet* and *The Story of the Stone*, tends to fracture these works in their readers' minds. While marriage was by far the most important contractual relationship in Chinese society',[2] the day-to-day domesticity of the love-triangle plot as the novel manoeuvres its way around the issue of 'who will be united with whom in marriage' leads some to set aside its importance, as subservient to 'problems of much greater import'[3]; similarly, *Hamlet*, summed up by Laurence Olivier in his signature film as 'the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind', puts aside that, for the unfortunate 'woman' in the play, it is the tragedy of a man who made up his mind in the wrong way. Both literary works are famous for their tragic heroines, Ophelia and Dai-yu: each die heartbroken, the love which has sustained them now gone forever. While tragic love – and female representation – is a far more central theme in *The Story of the Stone*, a tragic love story is also inseparable from *Hamlet*, acknowledged by the 2006 Arden third edition which placed an exquisite but troubling image of Ophelia on its front cover, showing the prone body as if in bridal death, strewn with the Queen's flowers – but the face not visible. On the front covers of Volumes One and Two of the first Penguin editions of *The Story of the Stone*, it is the tragic heroine as elegant young female 'scholar/beauty', rather than the unenlightened romantic hero, who is represented. In both novel and play, it is the lonely, 'witting' death of the psychically-destroyed heroine – 'Argal, she drowned herself wittingly' (5.1.13); 'Of course', exclaimed Dai-yu. 'It's time!' (4.96.338) – around whom a depth of tragic power and pathos accumulates, rather than around the hero with whom at the end the tragic feeling dissipates.

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Famously, the poetic beauty of Ophelia's death is captured visually in the haunting nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite painting of Ophelia drowning, its power to invite identification so strong that when shown in an art exhibition in Tokyo in 2008 there was a fear that it would incite young women to suicide; twentieth-century Surrealist painters were likewise fascinated by the terrifying power of the 'beautified' drowning Ophelia. Female exercise of power through dramatic acts of suicide reverberate throughout *The Story of the Stone*, and the scenes of Dai-yu's dying days are likewise charged with both pathos and an ambiguous positive energy, as if imaginatively striking back: a report in 1794 describes a young woman so obsessed by Dai-yu that she stopped eating and died, sitting at her desk crying, 'Bao-yu is here, Bao-yu is here';[4] this is in contrast to the lack of identification with Bao-yu; while 'Bao-yu exemplifies an aesthetic and emotional refinement . . . Sequels and commentaries to the novel . . . show that many readers felt uneasy about his more self-indulgent and decadent aspects'.[5]

In each work, the enduring literary impact of these female characters raises one particular aspect of the love relationship which remains vexed in the scholarship: the ambiguous representation of each hero's romantic love for these tragic heroines and, in particular, how this is related to their tragic deaths. The love relationship in *Hamlet* is uniquely problematic in Shakespeare's writings. Even the most sympathetic reading of *Hamlet*, by the eminent late-nineteenth-century Shakespearean critic A.C. Bradley, had to acknowledge that how far Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia was due to 'the design . . . of lunacy, how far for other causes, is a difficult question', and 'in regard to Hamlet's love for Ophelia, I am unable to arrive at a conviction as to the meaning of some of his words and deeds'.[6] Later critics echo his response, even sidelining the problem: '*Hamlet* is not a love story';[7] 'Hamlet never loved her'.[8] Attempting to resolve the issue, for two centuries Charles and Mary Lamb's lovingly-told story of *Hamlet* in *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) – interestingly, this was the first translated version of *Hamlet* in China, in classical Chinese, followed by a vernacular translation of the play sponsored by Hu Shi, famous for his *Stone* scholarship[9] – was read to children with the love story amended; Hamlet's profound melancholy and the priority he gives to the sacred mission of revenge over 'so idle a passion as love' is given as the explanation for his 'unreasonably harsh' treatment of Ophelia, omitting altogether the command of her father Polonius that she give up Hamlet and cutting out Ophelia's description of Hamlet's 'dumb-show' attack in her private chamber. A love letter, as in the play, is retained, but put to different service; it is written *after* the 'Get thee to a nunnery' scene, by a 'loving and gentle Hamlet' who has reflected upon his 'harshness' towards 'the celestial and his soul's idol', the extravagant words part of his mad disguise but with 'some gentle touches of affection' to reassure her 'to never doubt my love'.[10]

Another way readers – and filmmakers – have interpreted the issue is to assume that Ophelia has lost her virginity and is suffering guilt,[11] or to regard Dai-yu as passive-aggressive and self-pitying, whingeing and manipulative, or a cautionary medical case: '*Stone* presents cases of illnesses that can be avoided by the reader and warns of the danger of repressed desire'.[12] One recent scholar, arguing that Shakespeare intended the character of Hamlet to represent the end of humanism, garners a rare touch of sympathy for the *hero* as the harshly done-by lover: Ophelia's conduct in the nunnery scene is seen as calculated, a 'gambit', 'frostily disingenuous', 'spectacularly inappropriate sanctimoniousness', 'meretricious', 'toying with him', and Hamlet's 'disarray when Ophelia drops him' is asserted as 'real'.[13] In the order of the scenes in the play, that Hamlet's 'disarray when Ophelia drops him is real' is by no means clear; Ophelia's 'affrighted' description of Hamlet's 'antic disposition' in his sudden appearance in her locked private chamber expresses her own 'disarray' at a madness which is not the romantic madness of the spurned lover so much as the madness of Hamlet 'loosed out of hell/to speak of horrors' (2.1 80–81). And does Ophelia really '*drop*' him? As this critic also notes, Hamlet's comparison of Ophelia's father Polonius to Jephthah, the Old Testament ruler who, to save his people and honour his vow to God, sacrifices his daughter (2.2.347) – the subject of a well-known short play in Latin Shakespeare is likely to have studied at school[14] – indicates that Hamlet is well-aware that obedience to her father's will is the cause of Ophelia's rejection of him rather than a withdrawal of love.[15] In the way Shakespeare has presented them, both she and Hamlet are bound in filial obedience to their fathers' commands: Hamlet dedicating himself to revenge has 'wip[ed] away all trivial fond records' and sacrificed Ophelia to this 'mad' mission. Shakespeare leaves no doubt that *Ophelia's* 'disarray' is 'real'; the cruelty this sacrifice inflicts upon her remains raw and inexplicable in the play, never more utterly sad than when 'I, the Dane' rants over her body lying in the grave, his desperation at having loved Ophelia but having done nothing for her only seeming like another act of madness; as also when Hamlet attempts to explain his actions as those of a man blindfolded, the lover whose love Ophelia should 'never doubt' has been 'from himself . . . ta'en away' (5.2.212). Thus, Bradley's vexation around the issue continues.

Similarly, there is an unresolved issue around the nature of Bao-yu's love for Dai-yu which troubles the surface of the narrative from the outset: its mythic framing. In the myth, the love relationship is represented as 'a strange affair' in which the stone's loving watering gives life to the flower, but for the flower, this love becomes a debt which can only be repaid – in their human incarnation as 'amorous young souls' – through 'the tears shed during the whole of a mortal lifetime' (1.1.53). That the mortal love is 'true' and is of supreme value to the lovers, the novel allows to be

confirmed, but all else – how it is experienced, why it brings suffering, why the heroine wills her own death, why its hope is ultimately destroyed and what this destruction signifies in relation to the narrative of the decline and fall of the Jia family dynasty, as well as its significance in the framing myth of Buddhist disillusionment and enlightenment, is open to radical question by Cao Xueqin. As with the Lambs' prose version of *Hamlet*, the many sequels to *The Story of the Stone* attempt to make the love story more reconcilable with sympathy for the hero and heroine and more reconcilable with the prevailing fictional norms, both chaste and erotic: in almost all sequels, as for *Two Fair Cousins*, a popular novel of the time,[16] the hero Bao-yu marries both the heroine Dai yu *and* her rival Bao-chai; there is no tragic death to trouble the reader and polygamy is an acceptable solution to all.[17] How differently modern scholars may interpret the love story may be seen in the contrasting conclusions about the death of the heroine by the critics C. T. Hsia and Anthony Yu:

> The death . . . is described in sheer agonising human terms, but this scene of unrelieved suffering may have been intended to place the heroine philosophically as a victim of passion who remains to the end untouched by Taoist grace. Her last words 'Pao-yu, Pao-yu, how could you . . .' betray a spirit of total unforgiveness, although her equally helpless lover should be the last person in the world to deserve her hatred.[18]

'A victim of passion', 'hatred', 'unforgiveness': Hsia's words carry a strong moral judgement of the 'still deluded' Dai-yu, which is the very opposite of the way the later scholar Anthony Yu leaves the heroine in his final comment:

> if delusion could create so captivating a life as Lin Dai-yu's, and madness so memorable a love, who would want for *her* enlightenment?[19]

As will be attempted, it may be possible to reinterpret the scenes of Dai-yu's preparations for death and the death scene itself in the ceremonial terms of Dai-yu's 'seeing-through everything': in the clarity of her final suffering, reaching the state of renunciation of betrayed love as no longer *there* – the heart is gone, there is nothing to forgive or to hate, only loss to grieve. In this reading, any words of 'Taoist grace' – 'Bao-yu, Bao-yu, I forgive you' – would be incongruous as they would devalue the very essence of their love, its affinity of soul and mind and its mysterious dependence of one upon the other, as represented in the story of their mythic origins. As many of Xueqin's readers know, in the way the writer has imagined this love story, the love was and still is *there*; there was not, and could never have been, a betrayal of the heart by either one requiring Taoist grace.

From the outset, *The Story of the Stone* aspires to present a fictional version of a new love story as a 'true record of real events . . . entirely free from any tendency to deprave or corrupt' – the complaint raised early in the novel against the 'boudoir' scenes in the romantic dramas of old. In so doing, Xueqin found that while he could create scenes evoking a 'true life' sense of romantic love between hero and heroine, he could not, without violating the realism of his 'true record', sustain this towards a new future for romantic love; the new story becomes one of romantic suffering rather than romantic fulfilment and can only confirm the old story, ending in tragedy. This perspective on the novel takes it beyond the limits set for this book and will be the subject of a forthcoming separate study.

The two texts chosen for analysis in *Hamlet* and *The Story of the Stone* have in common a fracture in the ideal of romantic love; universally artistically celebrated as a commitment of body and soul, flesh and spirit, heart and mind and imagined persuasively in famous 'boudoir' scenes, East and West, the ideal becomes split apart. In romantic fiction this ideal is always potentially in tension. Platonic love is the spiritual, cerebral dimension of romantic love deprived of its fleshly expression and carnal love the reverse, with romantic love the ideal balance that is ever fraught in the literary imagination; it may take love to the edge of madness – mind, body, soul – seeking self-destruction: 'she drowned herself wittingly' (H 5.1.12); salvation or damnation? Shakespeare's poetry and drama testify to his inexhaustible interest in this mind/body tension, so eloquent in Hamlet's existential cry of despair at 'this too, too solid flesh', the flesh a corrupting and depraving entity from which the mind and soul must be kept free, and it is this fracture between body and soul which, it is suggested in this chapter, gives an explanatory context for the 'difficult questions' of Hamlet's ruthless harrowing of Ophelia. Romantic love as a subject of primary interest has a more ambiguous status in *The Story of the Stone;* at the outset, the framing Buddhist myth seems to invite a Buddhist reading of the novel as an exposition of the foolishness of romantic love – these 'amorous young souls' sent 'down into the world to take part in the to the great illusion of human life' – only for the 'dream' chapter, Chapter Five, to pre-empt this pious orthodox simplicity with a highly operatic, imaginatively enchanting representation of romantic love, engaging in the enigmatic contradictions and complexities of 'lust of the flesh' and 'lust of the mind' with a clear artistic intention to make romantic love of central interest in the novel – not least in the challenge to the reader that 'either you know what it means or you don't' (1.5.146).

The texts selected for close reading are scenes which capture this chasm opening up in the romantic ideal – Ophelia's description of Hamlet's 'affrighting' silent act of rendition in her private chamber (Act 2, scene 1, lines 1–116), and Bao-yu's 'speculation' over the 'snow-white arm'

in *The Story of the Stone* in Volume 2, chapter 28, pages 66–68: both are trance-like ambiguous evocations of disembodiment and fracture, of sensibilities under pressure, of sudden revelations and changes of focus, of insight and blindness leaving the actors in the drama in confused postures of action and reaction, tragic inevitability gaining from this point onwards, to the self-willed deaths of the heroines. In novel and play, this moment of crisis is carefully contextualised in the larger detail of the text as a whole, and the following discussion draws on selected scenes and points of reference to clarify its significance in the overall concerns of each work.

Part One *Hamlet:* 'Find[ing]' his way without his eyes' (2.1.72–97)

Polonius: How now, Ophelia, what's the matter?
Ophelia: O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted.
Polonius: With what, I' the name of God
Ophelia: My lord, as I was sewing in my closet
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me.
Polonius: Mad for thy love?
Ophelia: My lord, I do not know,
But truly, I do fear it.
Polonius: What said he?
Ophelia: He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
Then goes he to the length of all his arm
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
He falls to such a perusal of my face
As 's would draw it. Long stayed he so;
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. That done, he lets me go
And with his head over his shoulder turned
He seemed to find his way without his eyes
(For out o' doors he went without their helps)
And to the last bended their light on me.
(2.1.72–97)

Section 1 Setting the context for interpretation

1.i 'how strange or odd some'er I bear myself' *(1.5.168)*

Through the mysterious and terrifying encounter with his father's spirit, a ghostly figure risen from the 'sulphurous and tormenting flames' of purgatory to tell the story of his murder and his queen's seduction, Prince Hamlet's worst fears about the sudden marriage of his mother to his uncle, the new king Claudius, are seemingly confirmed. Commanded by his father's ghost to 'revenge his foul and most unnatural murder', Hamlet calls upon all the forces of Heaven, earth – and even Hell? – in obedience to this command. It is a commitment so absolute that it demands devotion of all of his being; it has given him a reason to exist in answer to his own question 'To be, or not to be' at the outset of the play. Romantic love – 'baser matter' – has no place: this is where 'the chasm has opened up between the Hamlet who loved Ophelia and the one we now see', to reposition one critic's comment on Hamlet's love letters as confirming doubt that Hamlet ever did:[20]

> Yes, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records
> All saws of book, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain
> Unmixed with baser matter.
> (1.5.98–104)

Not only has Hamlet 'wiped away' Ophelia; as his speech continues, he has also been re-ignited in his black despair over the 'frailty' of women generally, earlier brought on by his mother's seeming faithlessness to her loving husband so recently buried, her seeming hypocrisy in weeping like Niobe – a classical exemplar of extreme mourning; 'woman' is now not merely 'frail, but 'pernicious' – harmful, destructive, mother and uncle now stage villains:

> Yes, by heaven,
> O most pernicious woman,
> O villain, villain, smiling villain –
> (1.5. 105–106)

and Hamlet takes out his notebook and writes this down: 'So, uncle, there you are': 'at least' in Denmark, there is 'smiling' hiding villainy. His shift into jocularity is a release into a new identity, that of the stage madman hiding his own 'villainy', his intent on revenge 'howsomever' this is accomplished.

Whatever Hamlet has earlier written down in his notebook – or in letters vowing love to Ophelia – is disowned and discredited by the precipitate nature of their extinction. The Hamlet who breaks into Ophelia's closet is a Hamlet intent upon divesting himself of the 'baser matter' of fleshly love; the exercise of love for his 'dear father' is now his only mission.

As has been discussed in an earlier chapter, the play has already raised some questions around the salvationary political role Hamlet takes on here, the phrasing itself ambivalent – 'The time is out of joint/O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right' – in that the Ghost, rising up out of purgatory, the intermediate stage of cleansing of sin between death and judgement in the now-forbidden Catholic liturgy, does not ask Hamlet to remember him through prayerful intercession for his soul, the expected liturgical request – but through *revenge*, a secular classical literary concept and in many ways contradictory to purging and heavenly access.[21] Furthermore, although Hamlet's initial existential anguish arises most directly out of his presumption of his mother's state of carnal sin, the Ghost expressly requests that Hamlet not condemn or punish his mother, but 'leave her to heaven' and her individual conscience (1.5.88). Purgatory, vengeance and conscience belong to different value systems: as the play unfolds, Hamlet's 'antic disposition' takes on these contradictions in a new, anarchic identity, 'affrighting' to the two women he has loved, his mother and his 'soul's idol' Ophelia, now reduced to embodiments of 'frailty'.

1.ii 'What is between you? Give me up the truth' *(1.3.97)*
'I do not know, my lord, what I should think' *(1.3.103)*

Prior to Ophelia's 'affright', what is known of Hamlet's former identity as romantic lover has been dramatised in the two scenes of Ophelia's subjection to lengthy interrogations, firstly by her brother Laertes and next by her father Polonius, both seeking to sound out the state of affairs between her and Hamlet: 'What is between you? Give me up the truth'. Their interest is thinly disguised as concern for her virginity; it soon becomes apparent, from Laertes' lofty precepts about 'great [ones]' being 'circumscribed' by the voice of the state in choice of marital partner and Polonius' all-too plain fear that she 'tender [him] a fool', that it is their own political positions which are the real motivation for their caution. If the audience was not already aware, by the end of these scenes the vulnerability of Hamlet and the motherless Ophelia under the rule of the new king Claudius would have become clear, its unconscionable pressures evident upon the old courtier and his son of similar age to Hamlet. For years in service to the previous monarch, they are now obliged to be mindful that the new king may wish to establish full control over the brooding young man he addresses as 'my cousin Hamlet, and my son', an ownership which Hamlet has already shown he does not welcome. Neither takes any account of how their fabrication of the courtship as a deceit by Hamlet upon a morally weak Ophelia, designed to frighten her back under their control, is also an attack upon

her own sense of herself and her will to live. It is how Ophelia responds to the imputations upon 'what is between [them]' which gives the love story its initial interest and complexity: doubts – 'Do you doubt that'? are Ophelia's first words – are accumulated so relentlessly and with such authority of 'words, words, words' that Ophelia's few words of 'truth' about what she knows about the courtship are discounted as childish and naïve: what she *should* know – and think – takes precedence. It is left to the audience to decide what they think or should think, a decision which becomes more doubtful as Hamlet exercises his misogynistic 'antic disposition'.

The irony of the cumulative effect of the interrogatories served upon Ophelia is that the picture created of a hot-blooded Hamlet wooing with poetic eloquence –

> When the blood burns how prodigal the soul
> Lends the tongue vows –
> (1.3.112–113)

and a Hamlet 'trifling' with Ophelia, his courting merely youthful play –

> Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
> A violet in the youth of primy nature
> Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting
> The perfume and suppliance of a minute
> No more –
> (1.3.6–8)

lend a romantic lightness to Hamlet which is quite foreign to the 'inky black' brooding Hamlet overwhelmed by existential despair of the previous opening scenes, more the stock stage figure of a Puritan, typically dressed in black and representing moral revulsion against romantic love. And yet 'sweet' and 'perfumed' captures the truth of Ophelia's experience; to these words she responds in agreement:

> No more but so.
> (1.3.9)

Ophelia's simple 'truth' about Hamlet is in contrast to the profuse sordid imaginings of her interrogators; it is allowed expression only sparingly and even then promptly refused credit: her brother commands her: 'Think it no more'. As he himself is off to Paris to learn fencing (and, it is later hinted, other less innocent skills), he feels incumbent to launch into dire warnings of Hamlet's 'unmastered importunity' and regale her with voyeuristic disasters befalling her honour:

> If with too credent ear you list his songs
> Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open

To his unmastered importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
And keep you in the rear of your affections
Out of the shot and danger of desire.
(1.3.29–34)

He further expounds upon virtue's vulnerability to defamatory speech, unaware that his own speech is an example of just such defamation as he warns against youth's 'contagious blastments', the 'canker' in the' bud' (which some read as syphilis):

Be wary then: best safely lies in fear,
Youth to itself rebels, though none else near.
(1.3.42–43)

Ophelia listens throughout all of this and obediently assents:

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart –
(1.3.44–45)

offering in turn a sisterly riposte to her brother to heed his own advice:

Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven
Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And recks not his own rede.
(1.3.48–52)

Here, Ophelia shows her perception of the latent hypocrisy of her brother's sermon and, in putting this back on him, affirms her sense of her own moral strength, added to by the lightly satirical attitude towards puritan discourse – 'ungracious pastor', 'steep and thorny way to heaven' – found in plays of the time such as Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* – 'Oh, what a clog unto the soul is sin!' At which the seducer scoffs 'Fie, fie! You talk too like a puritan' (111, iv, 105–110). Ophelia herself does not identify with such an unforgiving view of the life of the flesh even though, as a young unmarried female, she is mindful of her virginal purity. And here the irony is that, through her once-romantic lover's mad antics defiling her as 'a breeder of sinners', Ophelia loses any sense of love as other than carnal sin.

The further moral barrage by her father, Polonius, does its best to wear down her romantic self-belief.

What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?

Ophelia attempts to forestall another sermon by replying that it was just 'something touching the Lord Hamlet', but her father is not to be disarmed:

> Marry, well bethought:
> 'Tis told me he hath very oft of late
> Given private time to you, and you yourself
> Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.
> If it be so – as so 'tis put on me
> And that in way of caution – I must tell you
> You do not understand yourself so clearly
> As it behoves my daughter and your honour.
> (1.3.87–96)

When he then demands 'What is between you? Give me up the truth', he is not receptive to her simple response:

> He hath, my lord, made many tenders
> Of his affection to me.
> (1.3.98–99)

Polonius is derisive:

> Affection? Pooh, you speak like a green girl
> Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
> Do you believe his 'tenders', as you call them?
> (1.3.100–102)

Coming on top of Laertes' attack, his scorn leaves Ophelia only able to venture a feeble reply:

> I do not know, my lord, what I should think.
> (1.3.103)

It could be said the entire play revolves around these words: knowing 'what I should think' and the self-deception in 'thinking you know'. Her father then proceeds to teach her in 'plain terms' what she should think – that she is being babyish in believing Hamlet's courting is honourable, and making her 'maiden presence' so readily available to him is risking her own reputation and making him – her father – look a fool. Polonius has no patience with her dignified reply:

> My lord, he hath importuned me with love
> In honourable fashion.
> (1.3.109–110)

He grumbles sceptically – 'Go to, go to' and Ophelia tries again:

> And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,
> With almost all the holy vows of heaven.
> (1.3.112–113)

Ophelia is now trying to persuade her father by responding with the elaborate 'tutored' phrases which he has taught her, proud of his own fine speeches: the irony is that he refuses to believe either her speech or Hamlet's supposed romantic eloquence, suspected as 'springes to catch woodcocks' – with no basis except gossip, as Polonius has not yet asked to see any love letters, the written evidence. Ophelia is indeed caught – she has no way else to establish her integrity, her father turning her 'truth' against her at every opportunity: 'Do not believe his vows', they are merely solicitations, 'unholy suits . . . the better to beguile'. Polonius resorts here to legalistic jargon, its 'quiddities' implicitly undermining his own moral status.

The literary 'effect' of these 'good lessons' is the opposite of their minatory intent; there is a cumulative sense of Ophelia's purity and innocence, the purity and innocence of the love – 'what is between' she and Hamlet: if there is something to 'fear' it is that youthful romance, honourable and 'holy' is being desecrated by disbelief that love is ever pure and innocent as Ophelia testifies, that romantic love itself cannot survive in a world which has no use or respect for it. When in his far from 'plain terms' Polonius forbids Ophelia further 'words or talk with the Lord Hamlet', by which Ophelia understands she is to 'repel his letters' and also to deny 'his access to me' – later embellished as that 'she should lock herself from his resort' – the further irony is that Hamlet's 'unmastered' breaking into her closet has the impact upon her of a further – and devastating – violation of her moral integrity and of her power to exercise it.

Section 2 Interpreting the selected text

2.i 'O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted'. *(2.1.72)*

> My lord, as I was sewing in my closet
> Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
> No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
> Ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle
> Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
> And with a look so piteous in purport
> As if he had been loosed out of hell
> To speak of horrors, he comes before me.
> (2.1.74–81)

From Ophelia's 'affrighted' response to Hamlet's invasion of her closet, it is clear that Hamlet's disarray is quite out of character, even as the disappointed 'love-shak'd' or spurned lover of Elizabethan romantic comedy. While his state of dress is straight out of romantic stage conventions, as Shakespeare has made gentle fun of in *As You Like It*, one of his early

comedies: 'your hose should be ungartered, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbuttoned, your shoe untied' – here in Ophelia's graphic description, instead of 'everything about you demonstrating a [lover's] careless desolation' (3.2.102–4), Hamlet's disarray is flagrant disrespect – 'no hat upon his head'- and verges on indecency: his hose not just ungartered but dirty and down to the ankles, and not only his sleeve but his whole jacket/pantaloon is open. The words 'with a look so piteous in purport/As if he had been loosed out of hell' echo the apparition of Hamlet's father's ghost. Now Hamlet himself seems transformed into a ghost-like figure, like his dead father come back to 'speak of horrors', so shocking in his controlled and concentrated mute examination of Ophelia that he has rendered her silent and immobile in turn. Secular romantic comedy is here confronted by the otherworldly belief in suffering in purgatory, sin and damnation, but where is the mortal sin here? In taking on his mission to 'set things right', Hamlet has made a conscious sacrifice of his love for Ophelia and, in this way, becomes the Jephthah he later taunts Polonius for being in a further exercise of exposing hypocrisy.

The Hamlet 'speaking of horrors' is wordless, unlike the stage's tragic hero role or the comedy clown role sardonically witty and crudely suggestive, such as is acted-out in Hamlet's subsequent free-wheeling, obscene, cruel and clever wordplay. It is a curiously static set-piece, with Hamlet's wordlessness reflecting back upon Ophelia her father's injunction not 'to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet' (1.3.130_; his wordless harrowing has the effect of the Ghost's description of the 'secrets of my prison-house' such as 'would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood' – a realm far from the 'celestial' world of 'my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia' of Hamlet's love letters. As it is, these letters, evidence of Hamlet's love which the audience might have expected Polonius to have demanded first thing to find out 'what is between them', have not yet been sighted by the audience, held over in the play until they ironically become evidence to the murderer king that Hamlet is *not* 'mad in love' but is instead mad in vengeance.

2.i 'He falls to such a perusal of my face/As 'a would draw it' *(2.1.87–88)*

He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
Then goes he to the length of all his arm
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
He falls to such a perusal of my face
As 'a would draw it. Long stayed he so;
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound

> As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
> And end his being. That done, he lets me go
> And with his head over his shoulder turned
> He seemed to find his way without his eyes
> (For out o' doors he went without their helps)
> And to the last bended their light on me.
> (2.1.84–97)

It is in this confrontation in the closet that Ophelia first experiences the deadly force of Hamlet's new identity as 'Hamlet the mad' and questions begin to arise as to what other meanings Shakespeare is intending through this mad identity. In her 'affrighted' description to her father, Hamlet has begun the 'action' by taking her by the wrist and holding her 'hard', as if to establish possession and force upon her his physical and moral authority. In doing so, Hamlet is shocking not only in his undress and abrupt intrusion but also in this forcible grasp upon her wrist. He is de-personalising her, treating her as an 'object' on which he is free to impose himself, while drawing back 'to the length of all his arm' to view her – the limits of personal space. 'Arm's end' is a metaphor Shakespeare has used in *As You Like It* to signify keeping at a distance (2.6.10) and recalls the distance Ophelia's father and brother have warned *her* to keep from *Hamlet*. Still holding her wrist, stepping back, Hamlet raises his other hand over his brow as if now having difficulty seeing her properly, and falls into a trance gazing at her face as if he is imprinting it on his memory – the 'memory' he has wiped away. The meaning is unclear: is Hamlet convincing himself that she is what he had thought she was, his object of spiritual devotion which he is relinquishing, or the reverse: that, to Hamlet stepping back, she has become something else, a 'frail woman' like his mother? His 'little shak[ing]' of her arm, his nodding his head three times up and down, retain an ambiguity; not movements of rejection as would be with letting go of the arm or shaking the head from side to side, but seeming more to be gestures of affirmation of his thoughts, concluded by

> rais[ing] a sigh so piteous and profound
> As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
> And end his being. That done, he lets me go –
> (2.1.91–93)

'Shatter[ing] all his bulk' and 'end[ing] his being': in divesting himself of Ophelia, body and soul, Hamlet is himself disembodied, existing only in 'the book and volume of his brain', no longer a body, only a 'mind', not even a 'soul'? Hamlet's response here is far from the 'antic' madness he displays afterwards: it has the feel of the existential despair he has earlier

expressed about his father's death and his mother's precipitous remarriage in his famous first soliloquy, where he wishes his body would 'resolve itself into a dew', and in the fourth, asking 'To be, or not to be. That is the question'. Ophelia's words confirm that some significant purpose has been concluded – 'That done, he lets me go' – but why and what is he letting go? Is his 'sigh so piteous and profound' an expression of a lover's grief at Ophelia's return of the love letters; is it the sacrificial grief of having to give her up in his pursuit of revenge; is it the Puritan's 'selfe-wracke' – a self-flagellating despair at human weakness, female faithlessness as with his feelings about his mother, or is it none or all of this, a ritual preparation for a higher purpose, his hubristic vow to set things right (1.5.171–8)?

Whatever it is, Ophelia has been sacrificed to his vow and is herself effectively disembodied; it is as if she no longer exists as a thinking/feeling human body – shattered 'all her bulk', as Hamlet himself seems to her to be. The objectification is completed in the odd, disorienting way Hamlet withdraws:

> That done, he lets me go
> And with his head over his shoulder turned
> He seemed to find his way without his eyes
> (For out o' doors he went without their helps)
> And to the last bended their light on me.
> (2.1.93–97)

His bodiless-body goes out o' doors as ghosts do – was it locked? – with only his head turned back, over his shoulder, keeping his gaze upon her, 'seem[ing] to find his way without his eyes', the phrasing emphasising the physical distortion almost requiring his head – his eyes – to become disembodied. The strange wording transforms Hamlet's bodily presence into an abstraction, the eyes becoming a spiritual beam 'bended' upon Ophelia as if to penetrate into her soul, similar to the way angels were typically depicted in medieval religious paintings, shooting beams of celestial light upon benighted mortals. But also in these lines is a suggestion of 'real-life' blindness, Hamlet without the 'helps' of the eyes, blind to the fleshly reality of the body standing 'affrighted' in front of him, Ophelia now transformed from a body of flesh and blood into an image in his 'mind's eye' as his dead father has appeared to him (1.2.184).

The significance of this act of Hamlet himself becoming bodiless, although registered by Ophelia as the end of love, is only fully understood by the reader in the next scene when Hamlet's love letter, once tucked away in the 'excellent white bosom' of his 'beautified Ophelia', is read aloud – another invasion of mind and soul; it is painfully clear now that one sweetly romantic young soul baring his very soul to his beloved has

become a site of madness, mute, irreparable fracture, both Ophelia and Hamlet 'quite, quite down'.

2.iv 'But never doubt I love'. *(2.2.114–111)*

When Polonius, anxious to prove of service to his king, seizes on Hamlet's love letters to prove to the king 'your noble son is mad' – for love – Shakespeare makes the scene into a little comedy on madnesses:

> I will be brief: your noble son is mad.
> Mad call I it, for to define true madness
> What is't but to be nothing else but mad?
> But let that go.
>
> (2.2.91–94)

Polonius intends to declare true madness as self-evident, but he is also saying that to try to define it is madness, as he presently finds: his 'try' only exposes his own madness in interfering between the lovers. The Queen asks him to get to the matter 'with less art', but Polonius has the stage and his lines riff learnedly on truth and pity, pity and truth, cause and effect, effect defective, plunging the 'matter' further into confusion and absurdity by prefacing the 'matter 'of his daughter with a nod and wink, a nod at her 'duty and obedience', a wink at her as perhaps – in Polonius' hopes – soon to be the king's daughter. The 'effect' of all this, as he begins to read the love letter, is of its wording by contrast as so youthfully innocent, respectful, reverent and sincere that the madness seems to be rather with Polonius' words than Hamlet's. Polonius falls back upon ridiculing the phrasing as his strategy begins to unwind against him:

> [Reads] '*To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia* – that's an ill phrase. A vile phrase . . . *thus in her excellent white bosom, these, etc.*'.
>
> (2.2.113)

Putting aside the 'vile phrase' being Shakespeare's joke against himself as the untutored poet,[22] the words 'in her excellent white bosom' have such a youthful 'untutored' romantic intimacy that Hamlet's mother involuntarily forestalls the reading: her words 'Came these from Hamlet to her?' express both her wonder that her scholarly son could have written these school-boyish words and her wish to protect him from this so indelicate an exposure. Polonius is not to be stopped:

> Doubt that the stars are fire,
> Doubt that the sun doth move,

Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.
(2.2.114–117)

This seemingly simple phrasing plays, Polonius-like, upon the issue of the truth or the lie, of the ancient Ptolemaic belief that the sun moves around the earth, then still held true in religious and some scholarly circles; Buchanan, the learned author of the Jephthah play to be referenced presently, wrote an essay in support of Ptolemy.[23] Hamlet allows that Ophelia can doubt Ptolemy – a doubt which was proving more and more to be right – but not that she can doubt he loves her, and yet such doubt is at this point in the play proving seemingly more true from Hamlet's own unloving behaviour, a Polonius-like convolution. The contradiction makes 'doubt' itself the issue; is there a similar doubt over whether Hamlet ever loved her, if his revenge mission has taken such precedence? The concluding paragraph of the love letter reverts to schoolboy courtship mode, the lover bereft of even any pretence at 'art' to express his feelings, resorting to basic prose:

O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu. Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him. Hamlet.
(2.2.118–121)

Romantic love can seem like an illness; the literary stereotype of the lovesick swain and his 'groans' betraying his suffering – 'groans' in this context not having the lewd meaning it has accrued later in Hamlet's use of the word, and many similar words no longer innocent, to insult Ophelia. The tone of the letter is of romantic sadness rather than madness: Polonius, intent upon proving 'hot love on the wing' but now having exposed his own actions as precipitating Hamlet's madness, takes his cue and embellishes the prince's decline with diagnostic literary flourishes:

And, he, repelled, a short tale to make,
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to lightness, and by this declension
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And all we mourn for.
(2.2.1143–48)

The King asks Hamlet's mother, 'Do you think this?' and she replies, 'It may be, very like'. Where *is* the doubt – in the truth of the love, or the truth of the madness? The reader is plunged further into a Polonius-like circularity, defining madness is madness itself; defining love is loving itself. Ironies

fold into ironies: Hamlet as the fledgling romantic lover rings true to the loving mother (4.7.12–13), but alerts the usurper-king to the madness as a more calculated performance than the transparent naivety the love letter displays: the naive schoolboy Hamlet who wrote that love letter is no more. After his dedication to the Ghost's command, this 'machine' – 'infinite in faculties, in form and moving . . . how like an angel . . . how like a god' (2.2.270–273) – is nothing to Hamlet, who from now lives metaphorically disembodied

> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmixed with baser matter.
>
> (1.5.103–4)

2.5 'nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise'. *(3.2.10)*

Later in the play, in his advice to the players on how to perform their parts, Hamlet cautions against 'tearing a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of groundlings who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise' (3.2.10). It is possible to view Ophelia's account of Hamlet's behaviour in her closet as just such an 'inexplicable dumb-show', a dramatic genre long familiar to playgoers and harking back to early Christian liturgical enactments, religious mystery or miracle and morality plays, by Elizabethan times retained more as an 'entre-act', a silent enactment to 'import the argument of the play' – Ophelia's words describing the dumb-show at the beginning of the play put on by Hamlet to trap the guilty king. Within Early Christian liturgy there is an apocryphal story of 'The Harrowing of Hell', still familiar in Shakespeare's time, in which Christ descends into hell to 'harrow' away the sins of the dead; He is often visually depicted as holding out His arm towards the cowering sinners. There is an 'Adam harrowing Eve' logic to Hamlet's confrontation here with Ophelia – his 'harrowing' of her in this scene: Shakespeare has already shown Hamlet's existential despair to be located in feelings of bodily revulsion at what he 'sees' as his mother's moral 'frailty': his oft-quoted words 'Frailty, thy name is Woman' have this liturgical resonance.

The dumb-show in Ophelia's closet is Ophelia's *description* of the dumb-show: it is an 'inexplicable' dumb-show like no other in that it not only mimes a harrowing but, ironically, is made even less 'explicable' by being described after the event by the 'frail woman' herself, Ophelia's words expressing her frozen fear as the subject/object of this act – an act of the physical restraint, silenced, stripped of her own subjectivity and condemned to the 'blind', 'piteous' surveillance of the wordless estranged lover, now her 'judge'. Balancing this dumb-show, there is also within the play itself another 'closet' confrontation, the very opposite of 'dumb', 'words

speaking daggers' equally distressing to the other female victim, Hamlet's mother; this brings a then-contemporary, Puritan religious perspective to bear in Hamlet's call to repentance and 'selfe-wracke', underlining Shakespeare's interest in the vestiges of older liturgy and older revenge traditions into the present age; this is discussed more fully in Chapter 1.

Confusion over interpretation is also a context in which *not* using words – the dumb-show'- could claim to aspire to a higher truth; 'preaching in silence' was the solution by some Puritan sects to the problem of 'truth' and 'words'. The Lutheran shift of emphasis from Roman priestly mediation of God's Word to a new focus on God's Word as speaking truth direct to mankind raised the issue of interpretation to an entirely new level. Shakespeare goes on to show in *Othello* how mere 'words' can create an entire false reality to destroy the noble and innocent, prefiguring the new political role of 'words' – pamphlets, public debates, 'flying, fiery rolls' of rant in the following seventeenth-century decades of the Puritan Revolution and civil war.

2.6 'O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou?' *(2.2.340)*

A.C. Bradley's 'difficult question' over whether Shakespeare intends Hamlet's 'difficult' behaviour towards Ophelia to be understood as due to the 'design of lunacy' or also has 'other causes' – the all-consuming vow of revenge, the misogyny lurking in the phrase 'Frailty, thy name is woman', the return of the love letters – raises the question of the artistic purpose of this uncertainty. That creating 'doubt' is deliberate on the playwright's part is emphasised by the play's delayed confirmation in the love letters – 'never doubt I love' – that Hamlet did once truly love Ophelia.

By delaying this clarification, Shakespeare encourages his audience to view Hamlet's conduct as both genuinely 'mad in love' and 'designed' madness, retaining some sympathy for the 'jilted' hero – but which is then thrown into doubt in the very next scene, when Hamlet taunts Polonius, this 'tedious old fool', with a cryptic quotation:

Hamlet: *O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou?*
Polonius: What a treasure had he, my lord?
Hamlet: Why,
One fair daughter and no more,
The which he loved passing well.

(2.2.340–344)

As noted in the introduction, the Buchanan story of Jephthah was a staple schoolroom text for Latin translation: these lines, from a popular ballad,[24] indicate that Hamlet is very well aware that Ophelia's father Polonius, like Jephthah, has sacrificed his daughter for his own ends in commanding

his daughter to return the letters. The story remains today as a reference point on the 'difficult' themes of human sacrifice and female subjection to patriarchal authority: was Jephthah right in sacrificing his daughter on the altar of a vow to God which has saved his people; was his daughter right in sacrificing herself on the altar of a daughter's duty to obey her father and God? As such, it has infinite capacity for dramatising different points of view – the title of one episode in today's popular "Father Brown" TV series is 'The Folly of Jephthah'. The Buchanan play has many thematic subtleties and ironies – in a schoolroom text! – which find echoes in *Hamlet*: it is both critical of and sympathetic to the father Jephthah as a prisoner of his own principles – 'a vow may be well-intentioned but have evil results' – and to the heroic tragic role given to the daughter, named Iphis after the classical Greek Iphigenia who was killed by her father as a sacrifice. As an exemplar of filial obedience in Iphis enabling her father's vow to be honoured by sacrificing herself to expiate the sins of her people, the play has resonance with how Ophelia becomes hostage not only to her father's political interests but also to Hamlet's 'well intentioned' vow to set the times to right. There are also textual echoes in *Hamlet*: Iphis's mother, mourning her impending sacrifice, has words similar to Hamlet's mother's spoken over Ophelia's grave: 'Alas . . . I was preparing a wedding celebration for you, my daughter'; Iphis's final words to her parents, commanding her mother 'do not on my account be angry with my father', resonate with the Ghost's 'let not thy soul contrive/against thy mother aught'. The ending of Buchanan's play, with the mother's refusal of the sacrifice as consolation – 'it renews constantly the recollection of bitter grief . . . forces the wound . . . to break open afresh',[25] has the tragic inconclusiveness of where *Hamlet* ends: Hamlet's bitter outcry, competing with Laertes –

> I loved Ophelia – forty thousand brothers
> Could not with all their quantity of love
> Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?
> (5.1.258–260)

– but what 'wilt' Hamlet do for her?

In the end, Horatio's retelling can only reopen the 'wounded name' (5.2.329). While it is Hamlet who has forsworn Ophelia in obedience to his father, it is Ophelia who is forced to undergo his silent peering into her very soul while he plays his 'mad' role. The suggestion that Ophelia's description is of Hamlet taking 'a last farewell',[26] even if acted as 'mad for love', is difficult to reconcile with Ophelia's description of it as 'affrighting', a very deliberate exercise in mind-power over her which, far from the comfort of farewell or even the anger of spurned love, has left her profoundly disturbed, further shattering her own sense of herself, already troubled by the lack of trust in her moral strength shown by both brother and father.

2.7 O what a noble mind is here o'er thrown! (3.1.149)

How to 'explicate' this 'dumb-show'? Does it 'import the argument of the play'? What is the meaning and significance for the heroine of the play, of the silent, disembodying male scrutiny? Just as Shakespeare leaves ambiguous Hamlet's obsessional, threatening 'harrowing' of his mother – even his Father's Ghost instructs Hamlet to 'Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught' – so also does Hamlet's feigned mad act in Ophelia's closet begin to take on a quality of actual delusion, as if enacting the 'prick and sting' of the 'thorns' he sees lodging in Ophelia's 'excellent white bosom'. Ophelia is being judged as 'fallen', a projection of Hamlet's moral judgement of 'woman'. Some interpretations of the play suggest that Shakespeare wishes here to raise doubt as to the innocence of the love relationship, and, together with her bawdy songs later in the play, is imputing to Ophelia carnal knowledge, possible even pregnancy: *Cliffs-Notes*, widely available on the internet, state, 'There is strong evidence that she has even had sexual relations with him . . . a wilful act that would ruin her family . . . Ophelia is left guilty and alone[27]; 'tantalised' students of the play wonder 'Did they or didn't they?'[28]; 'no-one would marry a cast-off mistress of the Prince'.[29] However, this may be to find a modern-day explanation for Ophelia's madness and suicide, rather than to attend to the argument of the play, conducted as it is through concepts familiar to Shakespeare's audience if not today's. Ophelia's innocence is critical to this; it is the power of *words* to impute sexual guilt by conjuring up lurid and fearful sexual imaginings which Shakespeare seeks to demonstrate: the language in which brother and father warn Ophelia against Hamlet is so laced with lubricious suggestion – as is Hamlet's about his mother – as if to trap and confuse Ophelia's mind, seeming to represent her as already complicit in this seduction, a strumpet, merely a body to be 'tumbled' as in the popular dirty ditty she later sings in her own mad grief. Similarly unlike what has been seen, the version of Hamlet that these chastising speeches present – importunate, reckless seducer of vulnerable maidens – bears so little resemblance to the morally burdened, brooding Hamlet of the previous scenes that the warnings seem rather to reflect a prevailing ethos – a 'rottenness' of sexual fear and distrust.

The innocent trust of the courtship between Hamlet and Ophelia is set against these speeches showing how distrust of male sexual predation, fear of female 'frailty' to resist, fear of being shamed by a bastard child – religious, class-motivated and gendered hypocrisy – are all activated against any romantic view of love. As noted, the 'sweet' and 'perfumed' poetic nature of their love is ironically confirmed in the love letters and then, following Hamlet's antic show of scurrilous contempt – 'Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?' (3.1. 120) – in Ophelia's gracious attempt to redeem him by an elegiac tribute to his former self: 'O

what a noble mind is here o'er thrown!' She ends the speech with 'O woe is me/T' have seen what I have seen'. But what has she 'seen'? Her mind is searching in vain: 'Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark'? (4.5.21) Has she been deluded all along? Her words raise a similar question over what, exactly, Hamlet – 'th' observed of all observers' – has 'seen' in looking at Ophelia in her closet, with or without the 'helps of his eyes'.

Ophelia no longer knows – in this sense, the 'dumb-show' imports the meaning of the play: does anyone know 'what they should think'? Unlike Hamlet, she is not granted her own thoughts: the encounter in the closet is wholly one-sided. Hamlet does a great deal of thinking about what he should think, self-deluding, blinding himself to external reality – 'find[ing] his way without his eyes' – while Ophelia is denied having her own mind at all. Forbidden to write or speak to Hamlet, she is deprived of a way of 'being' her own self; similarly, in obedience to the Ghost's demand for revenge, Hamlet has assumed a new identity: he is no longer Hamlet the aspiring, self-conscious romantic lover, but a 'machine' for killing (however the Ghost might prevaricate, killing Claudius is not optional). Under the guise of madness to hide his motives, he takes aggressive control, projecting onto her the moral frailty he has censured in his mother and effectively condemning her from the depths of his being; brother, father, now lover – Ophelia is deprived of all agency. She has stated 'the truth' but her testimony is scorned; bewildered, she has lost confidence in her own knowledge of the world. But in giving over to her father, she has denied not so much Hamlet as her own self; what is left of herself, confronted in her closet, is an innocent, mute, defenceless object of Hamlet's mad act as moral scourge. When later in the play, even her father falls victim to this mad act, 'dead and gone', Ophelia has only one way to strike back: her own decline into madness, expressed in sad songs from old ballads and ditties telling of maidens betrayed and left bereft in love and death, their simple, sometimes bawdy language not only pitifully incongruous with Ophelia's high birth and protected innocence but a pitiful enactment of the version of female reality – 'frailty', wantonness, moral weakness – so relentlessly set before her.

Part Two: *The Story of the Stone*: The 'snow-white arm' 2.28.66–68

> She happened to be wearing one of the little chaplets on her left wrist and began to pull it off now in obedience to his request. But Bai-chai was inclined to plumpness and perspired easily, and for a moment it would not come off. While she was struggling with it, Bao-yu had ample opportunity to observe her snow-white arm, and a feeling rather warmer than admiration was kindled inside him.
>
> 'If that arm were growing on Cousin Lin's body', he speculated, 'I might hope one day to touch it. What a pity it's hers! Now I shall never have that good fortune'.

Suddenly he thought of the curious coincidence of the gold and jade talismans and their matching inscriptions, which Dai-yu's remark had reminded him of. He looked again at Bao-chai –

a face like the full moon's argent bowl;
those eyes like sloes;
those lips whose carmine hue no art contrived;
and brow's by Nature's pencil lined.

This was beauty of quite a different order from Dai-yu's. Fascinated by it, he continued to stare at her with a somewhat dazed expression, so that when she handed him the chaplet, which he had now succeeded in getting off her wrist, he failed to take it from her.

Seeing that he had gone off into one of his trances, Bao-chai threw down the chaplet in embarrassment and turned to go. But Dai-yu was standing on the threshold, biting a corner of her handkerchief, convulsed with silent laughter.

'I thought you were so delicate', said Bao-chai. 'What are you standing there in the draught for?'

'I've been in the room all the time', said Dai-yu, 'I just this moment went to look outside because I heard the sound of something in the sky. It was a gawping goose'.

'Where?' said Bao-chai. 'Let me have a look'.

'Oh', said Dai-yu, 'as soon as I went outside he flew away with a whir-r-r- '. She flicked her long handkerchief as she said this in the direction of Bao-yu's face.

'Ow!' he exclaimed – She had flicked him in the eye.

The extent of the damage will be examined in the following chapter.

Section 1 Setting the context for interpretation – Bao-yu

1.i 'I have seen this cousin before'. *(1.3.103)*

Xueqin has established the mysterious, intuitive sense of a predestined romantic love bond between Bao-yu and Dai-yu from the outset; firstly in the story told by the 'scabby-headed monk' to the Taoist of the mythic origins, a 'strange affair' between a magical wandering stone and a 'beautiful Crimson Pearl Flower', who enter mortal existence bound together by his gift of keeping her watered and hers of obligation to repay the gift by her tears – he born with a jade stone in his mouth, she born with a flower-like delicacy; and secondly, upon their highly literary, operatic first meeting in the mortal world of the aristocratic Jia family in Chapter 3. The reader has already heard of the oddness of this late-born scion of the clan, with his infant predilection for feminine things and his saying that 'Girls are made of water and boys are made of mud' (1.2.76). His cousin from the South, Dai-yu, has been cautioned about his excitable ways, but this is his first actual appearance in the novel and Xueqin stages this as a dramatic spectacle; his clothing looks as if in an opera, a painting or romantic poem; surreal even by the sumptuous standards of the costuming, decoration and

furnishings of the elite household he inhabits. Successive paragraphs elaborate on his 'small jewel-encrusted gold coronet', his 'narrow-sleeved, full-skirted robe' in red 'with a pattern of flowers in two shades of gold' – two, not just one – his 'jacket of slate-blue Japanese' – foreign, not just local – 'silk damask' edged with medallions and tassels, his white-soled boots, as worn by scholars, and then the description moves 'As to his person' –

> a face like the moon in mid-Autumn,
> a complexion like flowers at dawn,
> a hair-line straight as a knife-cut,
> eyebrows that might have been painted by an artist's brush,
> a shapely nose, and
> eyes clear as limpid pools,
> that even in anger seem to smile,
> and, as they glared, beamed tenderness the while.
>
> (1.3.100)

Is this a 'person' – or an idea of a person? He is described, moreover, in style more commonly used for beautiful romantic heroines than their male counterparts (other perspectives on costuming are discussed in the chapter on Xi-feng). The formulaic words depersonalise Bao-yu and make his gender and his age uncertain; even as his neck jewellery resembles a coiled dragon in an emblem of maleness and power, it is also worn by females to signify the power carried by a married status (as with Xi-feng):

> Around his neck he wore a golden torque in the likeness of a dragon and a woven cord of coloured silks to which the famous jade was attached.
>
> (1.3.101)

This description is not confined to historical veracity: its heightened tone, adding layer upon layer of extravagant detail, particularly the exaggerated poetic language 'as to his person', seems to be directing the reader both back into Bao-yu's mythical past, and forward, as if into a literary fantasy world of his own imaginings. It is Dai-yu's response which locates its significance in the tragic love story to unfold:

> Dai-yu looked at him with astonishment. How strange! How very strange! It was as though she had seen him somewhere before, he was so extraordinarily familiar.
>
> (1.3.100–101)

'Familiar' in this fantastical representation Xueqin is not finished with yet; 'Bao-yu went straight past her, and saluted his grandmother, who told him to come back after he had seen his mother, whereupon he turned around

and walked straight out again'. He returns, this time in a completely different outfit and hairstyle, just as gorgeous if a little more informal as he wears slippers now, and Dai-yu particularly observes that 'the collection of objects around his neck had been further augmented by a padlock-shaped amulet and a lucky charm'. His 'person' too has been brightened; 'his glance soulful but his lips often laughing, his brow a world of charm, his eyes a world of feeling'. The writer then in his typically humorous fashion cuts this fantastical creature down to size in some 'perceptive' verses set to a popular tune, summing up the 'idiot' Bao-yu, the disgrace to his patriarchal inheritance, sometimes seeming even mad, scorning study and duty, useless and graceless:

> His acts outlandish and his nature queer,
> Yet not cared he a whit how folks might jeer!
> (1.3. 102)

Xueqin's creative intention here seems to be to put two contrary, shape-shifting images of Bao-yu before the reader in vivid literary form, to garner curiosity around this fantastical person inhabiting a mortal life which demands he conform to patriarchal exigencies which resist such fantasy – and how this relates to his 'strange affair' with Dai-yu, whom he now meets for the first time:

> Bao-yu had already caught sight-of a slender, delicate girl whom he surmised to be his Aunt Lin's daughter and quickly went over to greet her. Then, returning to his place and taking a seat, he studied her attentively. How different she seemed from the other girls he knew!
>
> Her mist-wreathed brows at first seemed to frown, yet were not frowning;
>
> Her passionate eyes at first seemed to smile, yet were not merry.
>
> Habit had given a melancholy cast to her tender face;
>
> Nature had bestowed a sickly constitution on her delicate frame.
>
> Often the eyes swam with glistening tears.
>
> Often the breath came in gentle gasps.
>
> In stillness she made one think of a graceful flower reflected in the water.
>
> In motion she called to mind tender willow-shoots caressed by the wind.
>
> She had more chambers in her heart than the martyred Bi Gan;
>
> And suffered a tithe more pain in it than the beautiful Xi Shi.
>
> (1.3.103)

Here, there is no description of Dai-yu's objective presence in costuming, jewellery or hair-style; the tone is elegiac, the poeticising Bao-yu's subjective imposition of a unique quality of romantic sensibility 'different from the other girls' – but the exaggeration of literary reference also depersonalises

Dai-yu: she is even more compassionate than the famous literary exemplars such as legendary official/sage Bi Gan, who stood against the cruelty of his ruler and was martyred when his heart was cut out to see if it had the seven chambers claimed for sages at the time; even more long-suffering than Xi Shi, one of the four great beauties of classical Chinese literature, often ailing and famous for being beautiful even when frowning in pain, so that a frown came to be seen as beautiful[30] but also, ambiguously, as a femme fatale or possessed by a ghost spirit and causing dynasties to fall.

> Having completed his survey, Bao-yu gave a laugh.
> 'I have seen this cousin before'.
>
> (1.3.103)

Bao-yu has indeed seen her before – she is a projection of his secret literary fantasies. In the prevailing culture of arranged marriage, antagonistic to romantic 'carryings on', Bao-yu is already emerging as a challenge: the romantic culture of the past, even if limited to clandestine reading by the young people (3.54.28–31), is clearly still very much alive in the consciousness of his young audience – evident as he deftly deflects this reference to an approved authority. It is not until he has conducted a further silent scrutiny that Bao-yu actually speaks to her and invites a response. Notably, Dai-yu resists this appropriation; she will not satisfy him that she is well-read – 'I can barely read and write' – and when asked what her 'school-name' is, replies truthfully but perhaps unhelpfully, whereupon Bao-yu, laughing, promptly produces a name for her.

> 'I'll give you one, cousin. I think "Frowner" would suit you perfectly'.
> 'Where's your reference?' said Tan-chun [his older half-sister]
>
> (1.3.103)

Xueqin has already given the reader the obvious reference – Xi-Shi – but Bao-yu offers a quite different source:

> 'In the *Encyclopaedia of Men and Objects Ancient and Modern*' it says somewhere in the West there is a mineral called 'dai' which can be used instead of eye-black for painting the eyebrows with. She has this 'dai' in her name and she knits her brows together in a little frown. I think it's a splendid name for her'.
>
> 'I expect you made it up', said Tan-chun scornfully.
>
> 'What if I did?' said Bao-yu. 'There are lots of made-up things in books – apart from the *Four Books* of course'.
>
> (1.3.103)

If Tan-chun's question was challenging Bao-yu to say 'Xi-Shi' – perhaps as a warning that he is embarrassing the new arrival – Bao-yu takes the hint. His 'made-up' reference is sufficiently far-fetched to depersonalise it but, through this, Xueqin makes a further point: not only about the culturally pervasive

appropriation and misappropriation of literary sources – the author himself here reprising the 'lamp-black' eyebrow painting scene from the famous verse-opera *Mistress and Maid* in Scene 9, but also that Dai-yu herself is being appropriated as one of the 'Objects' from Bao-yu's *Encyclopedia of Men and Objects* and, more intimately for himself, a real-life romantic heroine.

1.ii 'Have you got a jade?'

Bao-yu himself has from birth been identified with an 'object': the jade stone found in his mouth, an auspicious sign of exceptionality which is coming to represent the burden of patriarchal masculine superiority which Bao-yu resists as 'made-up'; while dutifully respecting the codification of the ancient sayings of the sages in the *Four Books*, he rejects the subsequent interpretations down through the ages brought into the service of hierarchical social norms. His next question to Dai-yu carries this significance: if this special person, a girl, also has a jade, it would remove this burden and instead signify their shared special personal destiny:

> 'Have you got a jade?'
>
> The rest of the company was puzzled, but Dai-yu at once divined that he was asking her if she too had a jade like the one he was born with.
>
> 'No', said Dai-yu. 'That jade of yours is a very rare object. You can't expect everybody to have one'.
>
> (1.3.104)

The oft-quoted mad fit follows:

> This sent Bao-yu off instantly into one of his mad fits. Snatching the jade from his neck he hurled it violently on the floor as if to smash it and began abusing it passionately.
>
> 'Rare object! Rare Object! What's so lucky about a stone that can't even tell which people are better than others? I don't want it!'
>
> (1.3.104)

The maids all seemed terrified and rushed to pick it up, while Grandmother Jia clung to Bao-yu in alarm.

> 'Naughty, naughty boy! Shout at someone or strike them if you like when you're in a nasty temper, but why go smashing that precious thing that your very life depends on?'
>
> 'None of the girls has got one', said Bao-yu, his face streaming with tears and sobbing hysterically. 'Only I have got one. It always upsets me. And now this new cousin comes here, who is as beautiful as an angel and *she* hasn't got one either, so I know it can't be any good'.
>
> (1.3.104)

His action is a shocking transgression on a number of levels. In Bao-yu's Confucian/Buddhist world, the 'rare object' confers on Bao-yu an exceptionality – that he is 'better than others', beyond birth and gender, as if he has been endowed from above; the realm of the numinous – to use John Minford's wording for the heading of a late chapter, '*Bao-yu loses his Magic Jade: a strange disappearance of the numinous*' (4.94.280) – with a special destiny, chosen as a moral force for 'good', precisely the power he feels in Dai-yu and craves to share as an equal. That 'none of the girls' has 'got one' has always distressed him, but that not even Dai-yu has 'got one' – who, 'as beautiful as an angel' he recognises as a like soul – is a lightning bolt of revelation that the rare object itself 'cannot be any good' and must be destroyed. The episode is a dramatic enactment of the implosion of the beliefs, social codes and structures into which Ba-yu has been born. Its significance goes beyond the Freudian psychological implications noted by Hawkes (1.1.32) and others of rejection of his masculine gender, to a rejection of the patriarchal ideal itself: in Chinese culture, a piece of purified, 'uncovered' jade was mystified as an organic expression of the Confucian virtues of the ideal man.[31] This projects the writer's wider challenge as to 'which people are better than others' in this mundane world and why.

While being so clearly unique to the characterisation of the hero – no one else has 'got one' – it is part of, not a departure from, the author's declared aspiration to keep the novel answerable to the demands of realism: the paradox Xueqin keeps coming back to of the real unreal and the unreal real. Bao-yu is never so *believably* exceptional as in the instantaneous affinity he feels with Dai-yu, but also in the violence with which he rejects this exceptionality. The artistry here is not unlike the imaginative sleight-of-hand by which Shakespeare achieves ours and his hero's belief, and then his doubt, in the truth of the report of the murder and the command for revenge from a *ghost*. The creative commitment of both writers in the fictional realism of their protagonists is so overwhelming that it obliges assent to the 'unreal' event; the birth talisman and the ghost-patriarch become imaginative reference points for the writer's exploration of the meaning and value of their heroes' understanding of themselves and their cultural inheritance. Conflicting ideals about what values are 'better', worth living – and dying – for: to be, or not be; why and how 'to be', are questions raised throughout the two great literary works. Hamlet interprets the Ghost's command in salvationary terms which are deeply ambiguous, a curse he is born under to set things right, requiring him to divest himself of his former self in order to fulfil a role that, far from fulfilling its noble aim, has overshot its mark, dehumanised him, destroyed the 'heavenly' romance with Ophelia and ultimately costs four innocent lives – Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes lives and his own. Bao-yu, at birth vested by the jade stone with a mysterious exceptionality, finds it troubles him – what can it be worth if the

girls, superior beings to boys, don't also have this status conferred upon them? The transcendent appearance of Dai-yu without this 'rare object' is the ultimate test of its failure to mean anything 'good' at all. And yet it is a halo of the numinous which illuminates the love match between Bao-yu and Dai-yu, even as it has its beginnings in this scene of violence against it; it is its 'strange disappearance' which forebodes 'their earthly meeting all in vain' (Second Song, 1.5.140), 'the 'meeting' unfulfilled, the loveless 'mistaken marriage' and the death of Dai-yu.

The complication for the reader is that the hero appears to be rejecting his gender identity, even his life-force, at the very time of his romantic epiphany, his transcendent sense of spiritual affinity and romantic destiny with the heroine. From this first meeting, the hero's romantic identification of Dai-yu is at odds with his impulse to resist belief in supernatural forces, to appeal to an encyclopaedic over a poetic ideal. The romantic love ideal is the unity of flesh and spirit, carnality and poetic fantasy; the patriarchal ideal is the unity of fleshly ambition – patrilineal continuity – with the fantasy of masculine power. Xueqin's hero, the hope of this once-great family, is placed at the centre of these two ideals and, as with Hamlet 'ta'en from himself', it splits him into two selves: the 'real' Bao-yu and the 'counterfeit' Bao-yu.

1.iii 'the Land of Illusion' and qing – 'lust of the mind' (1.5.146)

Two chapters after their first meeting, Bao-yu and Dai-yu have established a sibling closeness 'so intense that it was almost as if they had grown into a single person' (1.5.124). This fusion of identities is then challenged by the intrusion of another 'beautiful and talented' female cousin, Bao-chai, in a classic 'love triangle', leading to the carnal awakening of the hero and setting up the multiplying conflicts and contradictions in the hero's symbolic roles as patriarchal saviour and romantic lover. The entire chapter, an extended dream sequence, is an extraordinary feat of literary illusioning and to fully analyse it, as many scholars have shown, is a book in itself; this discussion will focus on the distinction made here between *yu* –'lust of the flesh' and *qing* – 'lust of the mind' – which identifies Bao-yu's love for Dai-yu and brings the literary concept of *qing* into play in interpreting Xueqin's ambitions in writing his novel.

The two most famous romantic erotic dream sequences in classical Chinese literature are Bridal Du's orgasmic dream in *The Peony Pavilion*, written at the end of the Ming dynasty and now discredited by the Qing rulers for its licentiousness, and Xueqin's reprisal of this dream in *The Story of the Stone* – but it is the hero whose dream this is, not the heroine traditionally given the role of romantic agency epitomised in Bridal Du. The hero as romantic lover elevates the status of the subject of romantic love and places

it directly at odds with the political conservatism of the time, however disarmingly framed by a Buddhist myth of romantic delusion. As with the subject of love and honour revenge in *Hamlet*, its fraught political status is the very inspiration for a writer to explore its continued significance in the imagination of his audience.

The dream in Xueqin's re-presentation is inherently contradictory, both a prophetic dream of the fates in marriage – almost all deeply tragic – of twelve female characters in the novel, presented in poems and pictures, and an invocation of the centuries' old culture of romantic love in all its exquisite visual, sensual, mysteriously perfumed aesthetic seduction. It is performed with 'feasting, drinking, music and dancing' and presided over by the Fairy Disenchantment under instructions by the hero's noble family ancestors:

> 'In the hundred years since the foundation of the present dynasty', they said, 'several generations of our house have distinguished themselves by their services to the Throne and have covered themselves with riches and honours; but now the stock of good fortune has run out, and nothing can be done to replenish it. And although our descendants are many, not one of them is worthy to carry on the line. The only possible exception, our great-grandson Bao-yu, has inherited a perverse, intractable nature and is eccentric and emotionally unstable; and although his natural brightness and intelligence augur well, we fear . . . there will be no one at hand to give the lad proper guidance and start him off along the right lines'.
>
> (1.5.137)

This sets out a view of the family situation to be followed through in the narrative extending into five volumes. Having failed to alert the bemused hero to the tragic outcome of young love through pictures and lines of verse in historical records – Supplementary Registers Nos. 1 and 2 – and through performing the entire tragic libretto of 'A Dream of Golden Days', the Fairy resorts to the ancestors' suggestion that she disenchant the 'lad' about love's illusory pleasure by subjecting him to them:

> could you perhaps initiate him in the pleasures of the flesh and all that sort of thing in such a way as to knock the silliness out of him. In that way he might stand a chance of escaping some of the traps that people fall into and to devote himself single-mindedly to the serious things of life.
>
> (1.5.137)

This has a counter-intuitive moral ambiguity akin to the title of the libretto, Xueqin's alert to the ambiguity hidden within romantic love itself. Firstly Bao-yu is conducted to a 'dainty bedroom' where, sitting in the middle of

a beautiful bed is an apparition of a fairy girl reminding him of both Bao-chai and Dai-yu; these musings are interrupted by a lecture from the Fairy Disenchant on the self-deceit of those 'worthless philanderers' who protest their love is 'unsullied by any taint of lust'. All love between the sexes, she insists, is 'kindled' by the lust aroused by female beauty, and Bao-yu is shocked into attention by hearing her declare:

> The reason I like you so much is because you are full of lust. You are the most lustful person I have ever known in the whole world.
>
> (1.5.145)

Xueqin's readers may themselves feel shocked: how could being 'full of lust' be said about a boy 'still too young to know what they do, the people they use that word about'? And why would this make the Fairy like him so much? Xueqin is challenging the reader to make sense of this, and the Fairy Disenchantment hastens to explain:

> 'Ah, but you are lustful!' said Disenchantment. 'In principle, of course, all lust is the same. But the word has many different meanings. For example, the typically lustful man in the common sense of the word is a man who likes a pretty face, who is fond of singing and dancing, who is inordinately given to flirtation; one who makes love in and out of season, and who, if he could, would like to have every pretty girl in the world at his disposal, to gratify his desires whenever he felt like it. Such a person is a mere brute. His is a shallow, promiscuous kind of lust'.
>
> (1.5.146)

These words describe the 'rake' Bao-yu's father has feared his son would become ever since at the 'first birthday test' the one-year-old chose to play with 'women's things' rather than all the other objects not described – traditionally, writing brushes, books, a bow and arrows. But what young child would not be firstly drawn to 'combs, bracelets, pots of rouge, powder and the like'? (1.3.76) The question is implicitly raised: these objects, like the words here, have a lighthearted, playful sensuality which belies the label 'a mere brute' and introduces an unsettling ambiguity into the disquisition of the difference between the 'lusts'. The romantic lover of literary tradition seems to have become degraded as a mere 'ladies' man': it is instructive that the ancient accounts of the 'first birthday test' are tests 'to see if the child is moderate or greedy, smart or stupid',[32] not about gender, seemingly a more modern development. The 'typically lustful man' in a family such as Bao-yu's, where lust is pervasive, hides his lust under male prerogative: these are the 'disgraceful matters' which are kept out of the courtroom through family influence. Xueqin has set this issue up in the staging of the dream itself:

Bao-yu is dreaming in the *qing*-infused bedroom of his cousin's lovely wife Qin-shi, soon to be secretly seduced by her father-in-law, to fall ill and die; her burial, personally superintended by her father-in-law, is the first of the elaborate ceremonial occasions by which the Jia family expresses its elite status in the narrative – but, it is intimated, as a cover-up for his crime, shouted out in the street by a drunk: 'up to their dirty little tricks every day. *I* know. Father-in-law pokes in the ashes' (1.7.183). Lustfulness in this family is predatory and covert; far from merely 'shallow and promiscuous', it is serious and dangerous: Qin-shi's death, whether by starvation or hanging, is left unclear in the novel and is a hidden 'chastity suicide' reflecting its real-life contemporary prevalence as seen in the legal records of the time.[33]

Where, then, is Xueqin positioning his hero on this issue, which is clearly of great interest to him? If there are many kinds of yu, some merely 'shallow', others harmful, what kind of lust is *qing*?:

> 'But your kind of lust is different. That blind, defenceless love with which nature has filled your being is what we call "lust of the mind". Lust of the mind cannot be explained in words, nor, if it could, would you be able to grasp their meaning. Either you know what it means or you don't. Because of this "lust of the mind", women will find you a kind and understanding friend; but in the eyes of the world I am afraid it's going to make you seem unpractical and eccentric. It is going to earn you the jeers of many and the angry looks of many more'.
>
> (1.5.146)

The words describing Bao-yu's kind of lust return him to the child with the 'perverse, intractable nature . . . eccentric and emotionally unstable' the ancestors are seeking Disenchantment to redeem. This 'lust' does have one redeeming quality, but not the quality of strong family leadership being sought; Bao-yu's lust of the mind' is felt by women to be 'kind and understanding' as a friend's would be, but such friendship would be looked upon with suspicion as promiscuous and draw public outrage. Later in the novel, Bao-yu's grandmother's assessment of his conduct reflects this judgement:

> He's a strange boy. I don't really understand him . . . it's his passion for spending all his time with his maids that I find so hard to make out. It used at one time to worry me: I thought it must be because he had reached puberty and was having experiences with them; but after watching him very carefully, I came to the conclusion it wasn't that at all. It's very, very strange. Perhaps he was a maid himself in some past life. Perhaps he ought to have been a girl.
>
> (3.78.556)

'Either you know what it means or you don't': *qing* is integral to Bao-yu's affinity with Dai-yu and to telling 'which people are better than others' – girls, before marriage changes them for the worse. In the hero's preference for girls, there is more than an echo of Xueqin's dedication of his novel to 'those slips of girls', those 'female companions of his youth, 'in every way, both morally and intellectually superior to the "grave and moustachioed signor" I am now supposed to have become'; his friendship with whom he did not want to hide but instead, to make his novel a tribute to his memory of them, otherwise now having passed 'into oblivion'[34] – as would have the writer himself, who also perhaps 'ought to have been a girl' in his 'strange' fascination with the numerous girls kept alive in his novel.

How Xueqin's readers may have understood this cryptic word is explained in Xueqin scholarship through its historical origins in the literary cult of *qing*, 'variously rendered as sentiment, love, passion, feeling or sensibility',[35] or analysed in Bao-yu as 'a state of primary narcissism'.[36] The terms *yu* and *qing* tend to become either/or binaries in moral codes, with scholars again noting how 'the line between love and lust seems both necessary and yet impossible to draw'[37] And how 'difficult it is to invent a *qing* that can transcend *yu* without implicitly excluding the latter'.[38] This challenge to interpretation is crudely apparent in the famous 36-episode television series *The Dream of Red Mansions* (1987) which – in the basic English subtitles at least – explicitly excludes *yu* from *qing:* Bao-yu is told 'You regard the beauties as good friends, you love them at first sight, but without any desire to fuck them' – 'we call it lust of the mind'.[39] A view of the hero as platonic in love with an exclusively aesthetic love of women seems inconsistent with Xueqin's lush, elaborate operatic staging of the entire dream sequence initiation, the aesthetic so infused with the erotic as to make amply clear that Bao-yu is certainly not without carnal desire for 'beauties', that *yu* is not excluded – that is, not until his epiphany, the spectacle of the 'snow-white arm', presents him with 'true-love' as a choice against *yu*; but how far this is a denial of *yu* in his love for Dai-yu is only interpretable through the understanding of *qing* as 'flesh' *and* 'mind'. As a literary concept *qing* may have survived as elite entertainment in the Jia family, as in the Lantern Festival soiree in Chapter Fifty-Four – but inherently, the exercise of the mind and personal choice in love is a direct challenge to parental authority in marriage, as has been discussed in relation to *Hamlet*: when Polonius scoffs at Ophelia's protest that Hamlet has 'importuned me with love/In honourable fashion', he ridicules this love as nothing but youthful lust – only to contradict himself when he declares Hamlet's madness to be an affliction of the *mind*.

The late Ming romantic drama *The Peony Pavilion* is the very epitome of *qing*. The famous episode in which the heroine, Bridal Du, experiences

a dream-orgasm with a lover as yet unknown to her is infused with such intensity that she becomes lovesick and dies; immortal powers then determine that the dream lovers are predestined to marry, and she is brought back to life and marriage by the exhaustive agency of her dream-lover – the play thus legitimating her intense dream-seduction and inviting romantic identification with a wide female readership ever since. Bao-yu's dream of romantic ecstasy, however, ends in terror with devils dragging the lovers down into the abyss. While a warning to the hero may be intended in this, it is ineffectual: upon waking, Bao-yu begins his 'chamber-wife' arrangement with his senior maid, permitted by his mother as rational and practical. The hero also sees the arrangements in these terms, his feelings for Dai-yu so far removed from the merely fleshly as to be beyond comparison; where Bao-yu is notably lacking is in the strategic worldly wisdom – *li* – required to win parental approval for marriage to his chosen beloved, as is practised by Bridal Du's dream lover put through 'stern tests to prove himself a man of true feeling'.[40] If in *The Peony Pavilion*, *qing* stands 'for the spontaneous affect of the heart and *li* for the powers of reason and the conventions of the coldly rational' and achieving a balance results in a happy ending, *The Story of the Stone* reflects a later age when writers such as Cao Xueqin, with a commitment to recording the 'truth' about real life, could no longer indulge in such beguiling fantasies.

It is in the flouting of *li* that *qing* as a cult became political. The champions of *qing* of past generations, such as the novelist, poet and historian Feng Menglong, in his preface to *A Classified Outline of the History of Love*, declared against the 'sham prescriptions of the Confucian ethical role', asserting 'I would rather be a ghost with *qing* than among the living without *qing*'.[41] A political activist to the end, Feng became a 'ghost of *qing*' on the battlefield with the victory of the new conservative dynasty. More influential again was the (in)famous literary radical Li Zhi, whose martyrdom greatly promoted the cult of *qing:* his insistence on the capacity of the 'child-like heart/mind' to access true virtue and his notorious egalitarian views on women[42] are visible in Xueqin's representation of Bao-yu as 'strange', a child/man, a female/male, a wise fool, guarding his own mystery as to what he is and knowing what he is not – not just another 'career-worm spouting-on about literary' composition and public affairs and 'loyalty and filial piety'. (5.115.277) It is not only the winning precocity of the hero over which the martyr Li Zhi is hovering; it is also the hero's fate. In the 'eyes of the world', Bao-yu's 'kind of love' is love-sickness – ethical and moral contamination: for Li Zhi, it was the lurid drummed-up reports of promiscuous relations with women which led to his arrest and suicide.[43] It may be noted here that Zhou Ruchang's biography states that Xueqin, for a short time a private tutor to a rich family, was 'soon fired and defamed . . . the list of charges against his reputation included immorality,

deviant behavior, and the writing of an unethical novel'.[44] While Hawkes in his biographical notes makes mention only of his possible employment and implies that such other possibilities are 'all conjectures', the fact that these conjectures were even made is indicative of the judgemental context in which writing romantic fiction was taking place at the time. The irony of Bao-yu's moral rejection of 'lust of the flesh' was that this kind of lust was not an issue in a parent's choice of a marriage partner for their child; the critical issue was 'lust of the mind', and the exercise of filial obedience given priority over romantic affinity.

Bao-yu's dream is also a prophetic dream: the Fairy Disenchantment entertains him with enigmatic poems and paintings prophesying the sad fates in love of the young women in Bao-yu's life, as recorded in the *Registers of the Twelve Beauties of Jingling*. These brief and tragic marriages foreseen bring to the novel a tragic perspective early on, a foreboding which recalls other famous romantic dramas which – unlike *Peony* and the *Romance of the Western Chamber*, another iconic operatic drama referenced throughout the novel – end tragically. In the final scene of *Mistress and Maid*, the now-immortal lovers are assigned royal duties to adjudicate the *Register of Marital Affinities for the Mortal World* 'to estimate the worth of persons of beauty and talent to ensure fulfilment of their desires and safeguard against mismatches'. 'Worth' is described in words which, while acknowledging '*yu*' – 'lustfulness and succumbing to passion' as 'deviations from the correct path', assert that in love, 'steadfastness and the guarding of integrity [the lovers die to remain together in their afterlife] are of the ultimate import to the immortals'.[45] While in *The Story of the Stone* the Fairy Disenchantment's Supplementary Registers 1 and 2 are registers of the tragic 'mismatches', the immortal adjudicators of the Register of Marital Affinities are assigned to ensure mismatches do not happen. If there is a political message in this, it is the sad observation that in the mortal world, those lovers with 'steadfastness' and 'integrity' – more important than being chaste – require divine intervention on their behalf to avoid the sad fate of the patriarchal arranged marriages recorded on the Twelve Beauties' register. Xueqin would have certainly been familiar with this drama and its perspective on romantic love, weaving it into his own 'true record of real events' which offers no such redemption.

If Bao-yu's *qing* is, in one scholar's words his 'primary narcissism' and in another's superficial transient 'fancy',[46] what is left for the romantic lovers to represent in the novel except the 'incurable malady of love', culturally construed as a negative, self-destructive force and yet in direct conflict with how many of Xueqin's readers identify in thought and emotion with the romantic theme? As in *Hamlet* where, through the audience's heart/mind engagement with the hero's dilemmas, the patriarchal imperative to take revenge and set things right becomes itself the ethical issue, so in *The Story*

of the Stone: through the readers' heart/mind engagement with the frustration and suffering of the lovers and their 'romantic longings and 'lyrical self-containment',[47] the imperatives of patriarchal order come to seem excessive and life-denying, themselves the proper object of moral questioning. Xueqin's approach to the challenge of *qing* accords with the wisdom of Feng Menglong:

> An ordinary intellectual only knows that reason restrains *ch'ing* but does not know that *ch'ing* maintains reason.[48]

The challenge Feng posed to future writers was to give romantic fiction a contemporary realism to persuade the reader that romantic love and reason are part of being truly human, rather than in opposition. When Xueqin took on the task of contributing to 'the literary history of love' in his own time, aspiring to write on the theme of love as 'quite simply a true record of real events' (1.1.51), he was living in a post-*qing* world where rational principles of socio-political order sought to make *qing* an unwanted ghost of the past, to be museumed as a cultural artefact; extracted from subversive context, arias and scenes are performed as part of elite entertainment or to cheer up old dowagers (3.54.31). The challenge Feng's wisdom poses to Xueqin is to bring the subjective consciousness of his romantic hero into harmony with the rational prescripts of arranged marriage but, from this perspective, the love story begins in contradiction: the special affinity he feels with Dai-yu is inseparable from the male *yu* agency endowed by the magic jade, it binds him to her and yet he rejects it as unwanted, the 'counterfeit' Bao-yu. This separates him from the worldly agency Bridal Du's lover exercises; it is a state of blindness to external reality, to others as to himself, a paradoxical blindness to his own blindness, a Chinese *Qing* dynasty aristocratic version of the hubristic hero of Western classical tragedy, as *Hamlet* is an aristocratic Elizabethan version.

Section 2 Setting the context for interpretation – Dai-yu

2.i 'Why, yes!' he cried delightedly. 'The two inscriptions are a perfect match!' *(1.8.190)*

Dai-yu comes into the household as a child after her mother dies; she has lived in a childhood 'brother and sister' closeness with Bao-yu. The author describes the initial sleeping arrangements in great detail to draw particular attention (1.3.105). While at first Grandmother Jia orders that Bao-yu should move to the closet-bed in her own bedroom so that Dai-yu can have his room with the green muslin summer-bed, Bao-yu pleads that he will be perfectly all right next to the summer-bed, and if in Grannie's

room, he would only keep her awake. This comic display of consideration is effective, followed by instructions about one nurse and one maid each to sleep with them, and after much more detail about the vast retinue of supplementary servants, including four chaperones each, Dai-yu and Bao-yu with nurses and maids settle down on each side of the summer-bed canopy. Xueqin is indicating here that all this chaperoning has the contradictory effect of implicitly sexualising the arrangements, undermining the very assumptions of childhood innocence the grandmother has taken upon herself to protect. For a sensitive, recently-orphaned female cousin newly brought up from 'the South' into the unimaginably luxurious and sophisticated environment in which the young scion Bao-yu is doted upon by all, the imperatives upon Dai-yu to repress her emotions – her mourning for her mother – and to repress her sexuality, at this early age a subconscious process, are evident in how fully Dai-yu develops her finely-tuned interior emotional life and how sharply she rebuffs Bao-yu's brotherly familiarity when they are in company.

The process of the psychic identification between Bao-yu and Dai-yu has been promoted throughout their childhood by Grandmother Jia's extreme solicitude, by which as 'objects of her partiality' they

> themselves began to feel an affection for each other which far exceeded what they felt for any of the rest. Sharing each other's company every minute of the day, and sleeping in the same room at night, they developed an understanding so intense that it was almost as if they had grown into a single person.
>
> (1.5.124)

Numinous affinity is given fictional reality as Xueqin sets up the many 'real events' that puberty is about to bring into their relationship, forcing upon Dai-yu a consciousness of their separate worldly identities. The first event is the introduction of a second female cousin, Bao-chai, into the narrative – equally beautiful, educated and accomplished and immediately winning everybody's affection. The narrative comments off-handedly that Dai-yu was understandably 'put-out' by this, but not Bao-yu – 'still only a child – a child, moreover, whom nature had endowed with the eccentric obtuseness of a simpleton. Brothers, sisters, cousins were all one to him', and 'if his relationship with Dai-yu was exceptional, it was because of greater proximity'; their tiffs and Dai-yu's tears and his remorse and comforting were just part of their intimacy together (1.5.124). The second 'real event' is the sexual initiation of Bao-yu through his elaborate, prophetic and seductive dream, mentioned earlier. This dream is a literary dream, much as Shakespeare's Ghost is a literary ghost, a creative intervention hovering in the space between illusion and reality and, for the reader, imaginatively marking the youthful hero's rite of passage into the literary labyrinth of romantic

love: from now on, 'brothers, sisters, cousins' will be differentiated – in relation to partners in marriage, at the very least.

The particular way Xueqin introduces the 'third character' into the love story – not the prototype 'third character, a servant or the like' but with the same dramatic role 'to make mischief between [the lovers] like the *chou* in a comedy' (1.1.50) – a character of equal status to the heroine Dai-yu, is an innovation on the older model of the love story. This sets up the love triangle as not merely a dramatic device in the stereotypical struggle of true love against arranged marriage, but a challenge to the true-lovers Bao-yu and Dai-yu themselves, far more significant than the minor casual mistress-maid rivalries typical of the old romantic dramas. It is the self-styled *unr*omantic rival in the marriage stakes, Bao-chai, who represents the opposition to romantic love implicit in patriarchal codes of arranged marriage, and it is essential to Xueqin's artistic purpose that neither Dai-yu nor Bao-chai has two parents; parental authority is effectively given over to the family matriarch upon whose aged shoulders fell the full weight of preserving the patrilineal line and saving the 'great house' from its 'tottering crash' (1.5.143).

Unlike Dai-yu's first appearance, Bao-chai's entry into the narrative at the end of Chapter Four is so casual as to be easily missed: a biographical detail in an account of her 'naturally extravagant', barely educated, insolent brother Xue Pan and his ambitions to move the family to the nation's capital to 'see the sights', with the justification among others of presenting his sister to the imperial Ministry for selection as a study-companion Maid of Honour or Lady-in-Waiting in the imperial family. Bao-chai's mother, Lady Xue, is the now-widowed younger sister of Bao-yu's mother, Lady Wang:

> Besides Xue Pan she had a daughter two years his junior called Bao-chai, a girl of flawless looks and great natural refinement. While her father was still alive she was his favourite and had been taught to read and write and construe – all of which she did ten times better than her oafish brother; but when he died and her brother proved incapable of offering her any comfort, she laid aside her books and devoted herself to needlework and housewifely duties in order to take some of the burden off her mother's shoulders.
>
> (1.4.118)

From the outset, then, Bao-chai is cast as the ideal prospective wife for the Jia family's 'eccentric and impractical' son and heir, one who has no mysterious affinity with him, never making him angry, so unlike the pairing of Dai-yu with Bao-yu; their constants tiffs – 'such obstinate, addle-headed little geese!'- are enough to drive their grandmother to an early grave (2.29.91). 'Naturally' nurturing, Bao-chai herself prefers to

downplay her position of advantage, which leaves Dai-yu in the unenviable role of the jealous rival – immeasurably heightened by Xueqin's intrusion of an auspicious bond between Bao-yu and Bao-chai, based not on intuitive emotional and spiritual affinity but on the coincidence of similar inscriptions on their lucky charms – his the piece of jade, hers 'a locket of shining solid gold, bordered with sparkling gems'. For the reader, this predestination is promptly fulfilled in the prophetic quatrains and songs in the 'dream' chapter following the arrival of Bao-chai: the first Song, *The Mistaken Marriage*, prophesies the 'marriage rites of jade and gold' over the 'bond of old by stone and flower made' – to an as-yet-uncomprehending Bao-yu.

It is in the first one-on-one meeting between Bao-yu and Bai-chai that they make the discovery of the same inscriptions: whereas Dai-yu hasn't 'got a jade', Bao-chai does have a gold locket that's similarly inscribed. By contrast to the first meeting between Bao-yu and Dai-yu, the scene is notable for Bao-yu's prosaic impressions of this cousin, devoid of any poetic fantasising, and for his casual readiness to display his jade, even to the intimate gesture of putting it into her hand, and for Bao-chai's curious reluctance to exhibit her locket, having half-realised the similarity before being obliged to do so by Bao-yu's boyish entreaty: 'Cousin, cousin . . . you've had a look at *mine*. Be fair' (1.8.190). Bao-yu's request to see the locket is a precedent for his subsequent request to look at Bao-chai's medicine beads: the casual intimacy becomes infused not with a sense of spiritual affinity, but with a subtle sexual allure. The description of Bao-chai undoing the top buttons of both her jacket and gown and 'extracting the necklace' she was wearing under yet another garment of dark red, conveys both extreme modesty and hidden sensuality; her words try to demystify the locket's significance – 'there's a motto on it which someone gave us once for luck and which we had engraved on it'; 'someone', 'gave us', 'we' – as if wearing it is a family duty, not something deeply personal or spiritual. This scene is also the first time the words engraved on the magic jade are made known, those on the front side having resonated with Bao-chai as she looked at the stone and repeated them to herself out loud:

> Mislay me not, forget me not
> And hale old age shall be your lot.
> (1.8. 189)

Far from resonating with the numinous qualities assigned to the jade in previous scenes by Grandmother Jia and thence to mothers and servants, these words are merely hackneyed good-luck mottoes. It is only because her maid, acting as both the 'chou' and the go-between, is also struck by the similarity and declares these words the 'perfect match to the ones on

your necklace' that Bao-yu's curiosity is aroused and he requests to see the locket. The words – a line on each side – read:

> Ne'er leave me, ne'er abandon me:
> And years of health shall be your fee.
> (1.8.189)

Bao-yu is delighted to see the match, even if it's not so very unusual, and it is again only because the maid expatiates on details – 'a scabby-headed old monk gave Miss Bao-chai the words . . . He said they must be engraved on something made of gold' – that the further crucial auspicious 'Taoist' link between jade and gold is revealed: Bao-chai herself cuts the maid short.

Bao-chai's very reluctance and resistance invest the jade/gold link with this auspicious power – operating with effect as gossip spreads the story – throughout the narrative; if Bao-chai herself discounted such superstition, the literary impact of her resistance is to intensify the power of the link as ineluctable, a force of fate. In the logic of the fiction, predestined affinity is all the additional agency in the love triangle that Bao-chai needs (4.84.111): she is able to accommodate Dai-yu's jealousy with graciousness and goodwill and to support her in her emotional vulnerability and poor health; an exemplary friend, to the end obedient to the 'trick marriage' as 'what must be, must be'. This in turn intensifies Dai-yu's struggle: it is not only against her orphan status, delicate health and unspoken rivalry for betrothal to Bao-yu; it is, she also intuits, against the prevailing ethos around predestination and fate ever either confirming or undermining the Confucian rationality of the educated elite.

2.ii the 'Cold-Fragrance Pill' (1.8.191)

A further challenge completes the encounter: Bao-yu, by now sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Bao-chai, becomes aware of a 'delicious perfume' – and Bao-chai is obliged to explain its origins to the ever-curious connoisseur. She herself, noted for simple clothes, hairstyle and make-up, never wears perfume and guesses it must be the 'Cold-Fragrance Pill' she takes to treat a recurrent ailment, diagnosed as a last resort by a monk as 'a congenital tendency to overheatedness' (1.7.168), a condition which is suggestive of female hormonal activity – *yu*, or 'lust of the flesh'. Self-medication is part of Bao-chai's regime of self-control and conformity with patriarchal virtues, and it adds to her exemplary perfection in the narrative undercurrent of parental fears of romantic attractions. Ironically, while cooling her libido, the fragrance is 'heating' to those like Bao-yu who are finely-tuned to organic medicines and perfumes – and yet another provocation for Dai-yu to deal with. If 'lust of the flesh' can be 'cured' by a drug, where does

this leave 'lust of the mind'? For Bao-chai, romantic love must also be 'cured': in arranged marriage, both 'flesh' and 'mind 'must be controlled. This in turn raises the question of Dai-yu's *yu*, her sense of her 'lust of the flesh'. Physical delicacy from childhood has early required a self-protective effort of mind and feeling and the cultivation of an ethereal presence, the appetites of the body muted by this mental discipline and other feelings sharpened: her libido has no other object than Bao-yu and her problem is that that Bao-yu's libido seems wayward, causing more 'tears' than the comfort brought by his continual reassurances.

2.iii 'Do you mean to tell me', *Bao-yu asks, in turn indignant and incredulous,* 'That you know your own feelings about me but still don't know what my feelings are about you'? *(1.20.412)*

Dai-yu's jealousy is a strain on Bao-yu's affections – as it is for some readers who find her 'whingeing' – even as jealousy is integral to the genre and to the author's commitment to write his story 'exactly as [it] happened . . . without the tiniest bit of touching-up' (1.5.50) – however disingenuous on the part of the author this may be understood to be. One incident gives the flavour:

> 'Where have *you* been'? she asked Bao-yu.
>
> 'Bao-chai's'.
>
> 'I see' (very frostily). 'I thought *something* must have been detaining you. Otherwise you would have come flying here long since'.
>
> 'Is one only allowed to play with *you*', said Bao-yu, 'and keep *you* amused? I just happened to be visiting her. Why should you start making remarks like that?'
>
> 'How thoroughly disagreeable you are!' said Dai-yu. 'What do I care whether you go to see her or not. And I'm sure *I* never asked to be kept amused. From now on you can ignore me completely, as far as I am concerned'.
>
> With that she went back to her own room in a temper.
>
> (1.20.410)

Bao-yu runs out after her, and they start another quarrel, each threatening to die, a 'relief from all this quarrelling' and then, to Dai-yu's mortification, Bao-chai comes hurrying in with the news that another girl cousin has just arrived and is waiting for him, and she pulls him away. Dai-yu is left sobbing in 'pure rage', but Bao-yu soon comes back, careful to be patient even when rebuffed by such words as 'you've got a new playmate now, one who can read and write and compose and laugh and talk to you much better than I can'; sitting beside her, he very quietly attempts to explain to her that

the beautiful Bao-chai is no competition, merely a new arrival, remoter in kinship and hence no rival in 'closeness' – only for Dai-yu to throw back at him that it's not about being 'close' but 'how I *feel*'. 'Do you mean to tell me', Bao-yu asks, in turn indignant and incredulous, 'that you know your own feelings about me but still don't know what my feelings are about you'? (1.20.412) Dai-yu does know, but constant needling seems her only way to keep him focussed on the issue of the uncertainty of the outcome. Bao-yu, however, remains locked in his self-belief, oblivious to the problem of Bao-chai's clear position of advantage in the patriarchal marriage stakes.

It is through the seemingly contradictory realism of Bao-yu's 'unpractical and eccentric' exceptionality that Xueqin creates the feelings of frustration at the plight of Dai-yu and Bao-yu in his readers: by contrast to the hero of *The Peony Pavilion* or the hero of *Mistress and Maid* or of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, Bao-yu is both far more compellingly 'real' and yet far less worldly and un-heroic as a romantic hero. In the novel, the comparison established between the 'effeminate' Bao-yu and 'mannish' Xi-feng makes explicit the issue of gender issues destructive of romantic love; this is discussed further in Chapter 3. Here, keeping the focus on the heroine, the main point to be made is the romantic hope Xueqin has sown in his readers: unlike what the 'ordinary intellectual . . . knows', that 'reason restrains *ch'ing*', his new love story aspires to show that '*ch'ing* maintains reason', and without *ch'ing*, reason cannot tell true from false, or love from sickness: – it is the fragility of this balance which is the tragedy of the love story.

2.*iv* *Well, I know you now for what you are:* 'Of silver spear, the leaden counterfeit'. *(1.23.465)*

One of the most romantic, best-known and frequently painted episodes in *The Story of the Stone* is the burial of the flowers, where Bao-yu, on his way to Drenched Blossoms weir to read some of his 'chaster' forbidden books in secret, catches sight of Dai-yu:

> She was carrying a garden hoe with a muslin bag hanging from the end of it on her shoulder and a garden broom in her hand.
>
> 'You've come just at the right moment', said Bao-yu, smiling at her. 'Here, sweep these petals up and tip them in the water for me! I've just tipped one lot in myself'.
>
> 'It isn't a good idea to tip them in the water', said Dai-yu. 'The water you see here is clean, but farther on, beyond the weir, where it flows past people's houses, there are all sorts of mud and impurity, and in the end they get spoiled just the same. In that corner over there I've got a grave for the flowers, and what I'm doing now is sweeping them up and putting them in this silk bag to bury them there, so that they can

gradually turn back into the earth. Isn't that a cleaner way of disposing of them?'

Bao-yu was full of admiration for this idea.

(1.23.463)

At this moment, the scene has the delicate beauty of falling peach blossoms, capturing the shared poetic sensibility of these two 'true-loves', and Dai-yu's rapt response to her first reading of one of the forbidden novels – *The Romance of the Western Chamber* – is all that Bao-yu has hoped for:

She felt the power of the words and their hidden fragrance. Long after she had finished reading, when she had laid down the book and was sitting there, rapt and silent, the lines continued to ring on in her head.

(1.23.464)

But then Bao-yu spoils her silent rapture – her identification with the heroine Ying-ying – with a teasing quotation:

'How can I, full of sickness and woe
Withstand the face which kingdoms could o'erthrow'?

Dai-yu reddened to the tips of her ears. The eyebrows that seemed to frown but somehow didn't were raised now in anger and the lovely eyes flashed. There was rage in her crimson cheeks and resentment in all her looks.

'You're hateful!' She pointed a finger at him in angry accusal, 'deliberately using that horrid play to take advantage of me. I'm going straight off to tell Uncle and Aunt!'

(1.23.464)

Bao-yu manages to defuse her anger with one of his ridiculous declamations about becoming a stone turtle 'to spend the rest of eternity carrying your tombstone on my back as a punishment', 1.23.464–5, provoking 'a sudden explosion of mirth' and Dai-yu's further protest:

'Look at you – the same as ever. Scared as anything, but you still have to go talking nonsense. Well, I know you now for what you are:

'Of silver spear, the leaden counterfeit'.

'Well, *you* can talk!' said Bao-yu, laughing. 'Listen to *you*. Now *I'm* going off to tell on *you!*'

(1.23.465)

Dai-yu haughtily responds that he's not the only one who can remember lines. The line she has remembered, as he sees, is far more immodest than

his mere teasing. In *Western Chamber* it is a line expressing the go-between maid's scorn at the timidity of the young hero when the secret assignation has been found out; in another translation that's more literal in its deflating innuendo, the two lines run:

> You are really as useless as a stalk of grain that bears no ears
> And as a spear head that looks like silver but is really wax.[49]

Dai-yu may not have been conscious of the innuendo, but it speaks volumes about her fears – like Ying-ying's – that Bao-yu will fail to exercise the male agency, the *yu* and *yang* her situation requires and, unlike for Ying-ying, there is no go-between maid to help the couple get together; Dai-yu is too proud to allow her maid such a role, and Bao-yu's maid/chamber-wife, disapproving of Dai-yu, is more of an invigilator for his mother. The pair end up laughing together as they finish the burial: it is Xueqin's subtle shading that Dai-yu's literary sensitivity also responds to Bao-yu's comic inventiveness. The scene sweetly carries forward the love story, but it also signals the resistance of Dai-yu to Bao-yu's casual appropriation of her inner being and language sacred to her, making it 'horrid', soiling it like the mud the petals with his male vulgarity, and spoiling her romantic fantasising, these fragile feelings in the silk bag of their hopes.

Bao-yu's disavowal of 'stupid and nasty' masculinity becomes a barrier to their love: ironically, while Dai-yu is uniquely in sympathy with his resistance to becoming the despised male 'career worm', she needs some assertion of manly possessiveness to make her feel he loves her as he says he does. This is acted out in a scene where, Dai-yu's sensitivities having been aroused yet again, Bao-yu's attempts to defuse them worsen the situation and he seeks solace in Taoist paradoxes, only for his claim to Zen enlightenment to be made further fun of by the girls:

> 'Bao-yu', said Dai-yu, addressing him in a heavily mock-serious manner, 'I wish to propound a question to you: "Bao" is that which is of all things the most precious and "yu" is that which of all things is most hard. Wherein lies your preciousness and wherein lies your hardness?'
>
> Bao-yu was unable to think of an answer. The girls all laughed and clapped their hands.
>
> (1.22.442)

They do not enlighten him or the reader but gaily move on: the answer is obviously his jade talisman – that symbol of his 'difference' from Dai-yu which he so sensationally tried to destroy very early in the novel – but perhaps suggestive to the girls, and to the reader, that Dai-yu is challenging Bao-yu's manliness – his *yu*. But is Bao-yu also covertly challenging Dai-yu's feminine libido – her *yu*? This is one conclusion to be drawn from a scene a

little later where Bao-yu shows off his knowledge of pharmacopoeia, claiming he can make up some pills for Dai-yu which will completely cure her, and he lists some of the ingredients, including 'a ginseng root shaped like a man, with the leaves still on it' (2.28, 46). That the prescription – so farfetched as to question Bao-yu's truthfulness and create an issue between Dai-yu and Bao-chai – is a carnal stimulant is clear from the interest taken in it by the infamous roue Xue Pan; the scene leaves Dai-yu publicly humiliated.

As in traditional romantic drama, Xueqin uses the earthy realism of comedy to re-balance poetic romantic intensity prior to pivoting to the little scene of the 'snow-white arm' and Dai-yu's flick back. Bao-yu has overheard someone sobbing behind a rock and, assuming it is a maid who has been ill-treated, stops sympathetically to listen as she begins to recite a long and mournful poem, so full of grief that Bao-yu, finding the lines echoing his deepest fears of the irrevocable departure of Dai-yu 'and all the others, too' to marry within other families, flings himself weeping on the ground. The comedy of the moment when the 'maid' Dai-yu hears another 'maid', Bao-yu, crying on a rock above is risible and makes clear the authorial intent to keep a gentle ironic distance between his reader and the highly sensitised feelings of his hero and heroine (1.23.466–24). Even as Xueqin holds close to the subjective truth of these feelings to the 'true-loves', he also allows them to feel 'foolish', 'a case'; this keeps the novel anchored in the realism of their evolving sense of themselves rather than their romantic sensibility becoming either cloying or an object of literary satire. The unadorned outburst of despair from Bao-yu after another violent rebuff from Dai-yu – 'in the *beginning* there was always something special as we grew up, but now Dai-yu *has* grown up it has all gone' – and Dai-yu's return of sympathy and regret for her 'touchiness', re-ground the story towards 'the marriage of true minds'.

2.v *Two lovely boys*
Are both in love with me
. . .
To give up either one would be unkind. (2.28.53)

The forces Xueqin now has in play offer a formidable range of real/unreal/non-real perspectives on the love story: the originating mythic link between Bao-yu and Dai-yu, given mundane expression in their common intuition of a 'strange' relationship; their childhood bonding 'almost as if they had grown into a single person' and their shared secret identification with romantic literature; the talismanic link between Bao-yu and Bao-chai, further linked by an ambiguous fragrance – 'lust of the flesh' – and Dai-yu's cerebral expression of her vulnerability to impropriety through jealous verbal attack, aesthetic self-fashioning and – later – willed physical wasting.

Xueqin's aesthetic structuring of his novel, with his heroines as familiar contrasting cultural stereotypes of female beauty, the lyrical literary ideal and the socio-political marital ideal, is pervasive in the novel and well-examined in the scholarship.[50] It is the tension created between these stereotypes and the illusion of realism, the naturalism, of Xueqin's presentation of his heroines which is central to the author's ambitions for his novel as a new love story and played out vividly in this chapter beginning Volume Two. Dai-yu's beauty is an ethereal, otherworldly and literary beauty, her health and appetite conspicuously delicate, notably different from Bao-chai's plump vitality; awed observers outside the Jia mansion walls marvel at the opposite types of beauty they catch a glimpse of through the sedan chair windows – one so fragile she could be blown away in the wind, the other so snow-white she could melt in the sun. The whole of Chapter 28, ending with the 'snow-white arm episode', offers multiple perspectives on the inexhaustible subject of romantic love – another view given here in the crude drinking songs at an all-male party with female entertainers, one of whom plays the lute to a ditty about a 'threesome' beginning –

> Two lovely boys
> Are both in love with me
> I can't get either from my mind
> Both are so beautiful
> So wonderful
> So marvellous
> To give up either one would be unkind.
> (2.28.53)

(It is useful to recall here that a popular later version of the novel had Bao-yu marrying both 'lovely' girls.) The ditty is also a reminder of the vulgar view of Bao-yu's sanctioned 'bed-chamber' relationship with his senior maid, herself covertly jealous and in this same chapter about to be offended by Bao-yu's carelessness with her feelings in his vulgar dalliance with male actors, 'disgusting creatures'.

Section 3 Interpreting the 'snow-white arm' episode

3.i 'The trouble is that as soon as Cousin Chai comes along, Cousin Dai gets forgotten'. *(2.28.65)*

The 'jade/gold' issue has resurfaced with Bao-chai – not Dai-yu – being singled out among the cousins as receiving the same gifts as Bao-yu. Knowing Dai-yu will be hurt, Bao-yu attempts to reassure her:

> 'It's hard to make you *see* what is in my heart', said Bao-yu'. One day perhaps you will know. But I can tell you this. My heart has room for

four people only. Grannie and my parents are three of them and Cousin Dai is the fourth. I swear to you there isn't a fifth'.

'There's no need for you to swear', said Dai-yu. 'I know very well that Cousin Dai has a place in your heart. The trouble is that as soon as Cousin Chai comes along, Cousin Dai gets forgotten'.

'You imagine these things', said Bao-yu. 'It really isn't as you say'.

(2.28.65)

Dai-yu has confronted him with her need for him to declare his exclusive devotion to her – not just in 'fourth' place or fifth place, but first; and not just heart, but body and soul. Bao-chai, unaware of the slight to Dai-yu and always a little embarrassed by the 'gold-jade business', has tended to stay aloof from Bao-yu and, coming upon the two of them together, is 'relieved to think that Bao-yu [was] so wrapped up in Dai-yu that his thoughts were only of her':

But now here was Bao-yu smiling at her with sudden interest.

'Cousin Bao, may I have a look at your medicine – beads?'

She happened to be wearing one of the little chaplets on her left wrist and began to pull it off now in obedience to his request. But Bai-chai was inclined to plumpness and perspired easily, and for a moment it would not come off. While she was struggling with it, Bao-yu had ample opportunity to observe her snow-white arm, and a feeling rather warmer than admiration was kindled inside him.

'If that arm were growing on Cousin Lin's body, he speculated, 'I might hope one day to touch it. What a pity it's hers! Now I shall never have that good fortune'.

(2.28.66)

Bao-chai's family name Xue means 'snow'. The 'little chaplet' is the string of 'Cold Fragrance' medicine beads earlier intriguing Bao-yu, by which Bao-chai controls her 'overheatedness' – now in embarrassing full view. As she is struggling to remove the chaplet, Bao-yu mentally detaches her entire arm in a surge of physical desire, the 'snow-white arm' transformed into a vivid image of carnal objectification. The initial effect is surreal: there is an immediate contradiction between the snow-cold whiteness of the surface appearance and the warm, perspiring – 'overheating' – flesh beneath; it is a cold whiteness which arouses 'warm' feelings in the onlooker, however much Bao-chai wishes to deny these feelings in herself. Dismembered in Bao-yu's imagination and grafted onto Dai-yu's body, the image becomes grotesque, and there is a shock in the freedom with which Bao-yu can 'speculate' on a rearrangement of the bodily parts of 'the girls', driving him to reassure himself of his certainty of being destined to marry Dai-yu; not just 'one day' but 'I shall never . . . touch it'.

In the wording of this declaration there is a quiver of ambivalence about exactly what *is* 'a pity', the 'pity' seeming as much a regret about Dai-yu's body not being sensuous as a regret that it is Bao-chai's body which is; this ambiguity quivers again in the phrasing of his speculation that, in marrying Dai-yu, 'Now I shall never have that good fortune' to touch Bao-chai's arm. Xueqin's wording here is doubly ironic: in the end, it *is* Ba-yu's 'good fortune' to touch Bao-chai's arm, but this is simultaneously his 'bad fortune' never to touch Dai-yu's.

While Bao-chai and Dai-yu represent 'complementary aspects of a single ideal woman' in the novel,[51] it is a moment such as this by which Xueqin dramatises the extreme artifice of such a concept, the grotesque unnaturalness of the ideal, even as it resolves the imbalance in nature itself to achieve the ideal balance so central to classical Chinese thought. In choosing against Bao-chai, Bao-yu is detaching himself from his own fleshly *yu* self and becoming all 'mind'; as the narrative unfolds he drifts further and further away from the reality around him, notwithstanding the attempts by his cousins and maids, and Dai-yu herself, to 'flick' him back into the here and now and their all-too-present uncertainties about what will be their fates – but about which Bao-yu declares himself to be quite certain.

Just as the Lambs' retelling of *Hamlet* removes the complexities around interpreting Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia, so also previous translations of this scene remove some of the aspects which complicate the episode in the Hawkes translation. In the Yangs' translation of this passage, Bao-yu asks Bao-chai if he can look at the red bracelet:

> She had no alternative but to take it off. She was so plump, however, that this was by no means easy. And while he stood admiring her soft white arm it occurred to him: If she were Dai-yu, I might have a chance to stroke her arm. Too bad for me that it's hers!
>
> (Yang, *Dream*, 2.28.101)

The fleshly reality of 'perspiring' – 'overheating' – and feelings 'rather warmer' has been reduced to the simple pleasure of stroking the arm and a fleeting sense of bad luck that it is Bao-chai's arm, not Dai-yu's. The Chi-chen Wang translation omits the carnal connotations altogether and simplifies the regret to a merely aesthetic response:

> As she tried to take off the armlet of beads, Pao-yu noticed her white arms. He admired them secretly and thought to himself, 'What beautiful arms! What a pity they were not on Lin Mei-Mei's shoulders!'
>
> (Wang, *Dream*, 2.24.224)

Neither translation projects into the future – 'the good fortune' – and the tragic ironic ending to this moment of regret, nor do they carry the sense

of a dawning, confused awareness about the choice this represents between 'lust of the flesh' and 'lust of the mind', the equally confusing terms in Chapter 5 in which Xueqin has invited the reader to interpret the love story. There, what 'lust of the flesh' means is clear enough: what was never made clear was what 'lust of the mind' means; 'either you know what it means or you don't': not platonic love – those who protest this 'lie in their teeth!' – this kind of lust it is a blinding, all-consuming feeling expressed in behaviours which 'in the eyes of world' verge on insanity.

Foretelling the tragedy, the wording draws attention to the ethereal perception Bao-yu has of Dai-yu, as if she is lacking a bodily presence and as if their marriage is made certain by the sheer power of his belief. It is also here, as if Bao-yu has to deny his own body, his *yu*, to keep faith with this belief. This brings him closer to the controversial *qing* exemplar Li Zhi, living in his own zone of righteousness without regard to the 'eyes of the world', and raises the 'difficult question' somewhat similar to that posed for Hamlet: how far Bao-yu's elevation of Dai-yu as a 'celestial' ideal rather than a real person and his lapses into madness – lovesickness – when this ideal is challenged, is the reason for the tragedy of their love, or 'how far for other causes' – the patriarchal codes governing marriage and family honour.

3.ii 'brows by none but Nature's pencil lined'.

Bao-yu's certainty about the future – marriage to Dai-yu – is momentarily challenged as he speculates on 'the pity' that her body is not sensuous like Bao-chai's and his thoughts push further. Time is momentarily suspended: the bond between Bao-yu and Dai-yu is frequently exemplified in the novel through their shared romantic poetic sensibility, but this can be perilous territory in a love triangle, as now in the lines of poetry which come into Bao-yu's mind:

> Suddenly he thought of the curious coincidence of the gold and jade talismans and their matching inscriptions, which Dai-yu's remark had reminded him of. He looked again at Bao-chai –
>
> that face like the full moon's argent bowl;
> those eyes like sloes;
> those lips whose carmine hue no Art contrived;
> and brows by none but Nature's pencil lined.
>
> This was beauty of quite a different order from Dai-yu's. Fascinated by it, he continued to stare at her with a somewhat dazed expression, so that when she handed him the chaplet, which she had now succeeded in getting off her wrist, he failed to take it from her.
>
> (2.28.67)

The overblown poetic rhetoric – 'the full moon's argent bowl' – comically contradicts the 'no Art/Nature's pencil' disclaimer, underlining the

transformation of carnal arousal into literary fantasy – and, more significantly, represents an implicit rejection of Dai-yu, whose exquisite make-up, especially her finely-pencilled eyebrows, has been the subject of his earlier farfetched *Encyclopedia* reference for the nickname 'Frowner'. Bao-yu's reverie echoes the extravagantly embellished literary dramatisation of his very first encounter with Dai-yu, also played-out through a long, silent gaze: 'how different [Dai yu] seemed from the other girls he knew!' where this difference is also poetically referenced but 'of quite a different order' from Bao-chai's, not a full-cheeked, red-lipped, physical presence but as if transfigured into a non-physical being from the ancient literary realm of Bi Gan and Xi Shi.

Just how is the writer positioning Dai-yu in the love triangle – as the opposite of Bao-chai not only in her ethereal beauty but also as an exclusively psychic and cerebral creation in Bao-yu's mind, more a fixed idea than a fleshly being? The story of their mythic origins – their 'strange affair' – may seem to encourage a reading of a mysterious, otherworldly relationship, Dai-yu the recipient of an intense devotion only able to equal this intensity with her obsessive weeping but, as a story of 'amorous young souls' sent 'down into the world to take part in the great illusion of human life' (1.1.53) it is the this-worldly relationship which is their literary creator's ambition to make 'real' – a 'flesh and blood' Dai-yu, however fragile, is a fully-realised, living presence in the novel, more often rebuffing Bao-yu's attentions than reassured by them. As has been noted, she refuses to conform to Bao-yu's idealisations, wanting his reassurance of bodily as well as cerebral love; the irony being that she does not have the sensual allure which Bai-chai has but does not want – or need, as a marriage prospect.

3.iii '"Ow!" he exclaimed – She had flicked him in the eye'. *(2.28.67)*

In the final part of the 'snow-white arm' episode, Bao-yu is flicked in the eye by Dai-yu's handkerchief. His trance is broken. His eye is now 'really' temporarily blinded – 'Who did that?' Which girl is attacking him? The sly humour with which Xueqin dramatises this incident shifts the love triangle conflict from Bao-yu's dazed 'speculations' to the 'real event' in front of him:

> Seeing that he had gone off into one of his trances, Bao-chai threw down the chaplet in embarrassment and turned to go. But Dai-yu was standing on the threshold, biting a corner of her handkerchief, convulsed with silent laughter.
>
> 'I thought you were so delicate', said Bao-chai. 'What are you standing there in the draught for?'
>
> 'I've been in the room all the time', said Dai-yu, 'I just this moment went to look outside because I heard the sound of something in the sky. It was a gawping goose'.

'Where?' said Bao-chai. 'Let me have a look'.

'Oh', said Dai-yu, 'as soon as I went outside he flew away with a whir-r-r- '. She flicked her long handkerchief as she said this in the direction of Bao-yu's face.

'Ow!' he exclaimed – She had flicked him in the eye.

The extent of the damage will be examined in the following chapter.

(2.28.67)

With this shift in focus to the aggressive rejection by the 'young ladies' to Bao-yu's 'speculation', Xueqin's authorial 'mind's eye' reveals them as their own agents, unique selves, resentful of the 'bachelor's' mental appropriation – Bao-chai throwing off the chaplet, Dai-yu flicking the handkerchief. Bao-yu has embarrassed them, absorbed in his fantasy of dismembering and re-membering their bodies into a single ideal whole – the ideal which some readers assume is where Xueqing is leading them in interpreting the love story, but which here is represented as grotesque and, once again, arousing Dai-yu's sense of the vulnerability in competition with Bao-chai. When 'the damage' is examined, in just a few lines beginning the next chapter, the writer underlines that it is Bao-yu who has caused the 'damage'.

'Who did that'? he asked.

Dai-yu laughingly shook her head.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. Bao-chai wanted to look at a *gawping goose*, and I accidently flicked you while I was showing her how it went'.

Baoyu rubbed his eye. He appeared to be about to say something, but then thought better of it.

And so the matter passed.

(2.29.68)

Dai-yu's wittily ridiculous denial of intent reveals both the depth of her jealous hurt and the strength of her mind in hiding this and transforming it into laughter. Her impulse in flicking at his eye is not to make Bao-chai see the goose – it is *Bao-yu* who is the 'gawping goose' – but to make Bao-yu 'see' – to see that in 'gawping' at Bao-chai he is compromising them both. 'Bao-yu rubbed his eye', but whether this is a silent protest or an implicit apology for his 'gawping' is left to the reader to ponder.

Dai-yu is no passive victim of patriarchy: her 'flick-back' is Xueqin's – his entire novel is a testament to strong women and an implicit protest that they have such limited scope to exercise this strength. The 'flick-back' conveys all the frustration of today's reader at seeing such an intelligent, finely-tuned young woman – a gifted poet, composer and musician, a superb teacher of the finest points of literary craft, such as to inspire one pupil to begin composing poetry in her sleep (2.48.465) – held so hostage to a single destiny denied: arranged marriage and the harsh reality of patriarchy

and its utilitarian justifications doom the 'bond of old by stone and flower made' between Bao-yu and Dai-yu to fulfil the endless sadness of the framing myth. Shakespeare and Xueqin have in common as artists the value their writings place on love, even as some forms of love may be beyond art to represent except as unrepresentable: unable 'to be explained in words, nor, if it could, would you be able to grasp their meaning'.

Perhaps this problem of 'words', ironic in a culture so rich in romantic literary reference, is why it can be so challenging to interpret the meaning of the love relationship in *The Story of the Stone* – and in *Hamlet*, where the lack of words in the 'affrighted' scene makes it seem so unloving; more profoundly so than the 'antic' words in the 'get thee to a nunnery' scene and unrelieved by the 'forty thousand brothers' histrionics over Ophelia's body in the open grave. The issue of love and marriage means life or death to Dai-yu and to Ophelia, their creators keenly attuned to their lack of agency in the very matter which gives meaning to their lives; while in the novel, other female characters resolve to be nuns as the one escape from the woe that is marriage, Dai-yu's love is of 'utmost integrity', romantic love body and mind and, as in *Hamlet*, it is difficult not to conclude that the deaths of Dai-yu and Ophelia mark the ultimate disintegration of both heroes' belief in life's meaning. For Xueqin, writing his memorial to all those 'slips of girls, in every way, both morally and intellectually, superior to the "grave and moustachioed signior" that I am now supposed to have become', arranged marriage is a site of tragedy, leaving *The Story of the Stone* as much an extended elegy and a disguised cry of protest as it is the great novel of manners of eighteenth-century Chinese literature. And perhaps it is because Xueqin himself became oppressed by this insight that he did not bring the novel to completion. Halfway through the novel, Xifeng puts the question: how can 'one mouth tell a double tale'?

> 'Ah, how indeed! Our tale puts forth two tails. Which tail to wag? Wig-wag. But for the time being we do not inquire which tale is false, which true'.
>
> (3.54.32)

The titles of the final four chapters of the third volume are not promising: 'escap[ing} matrimony in the cloister', finding 'that he is married to a termagant', 'parents betroth[ing] her to a Zhong-shan wolf', 'batter[ing] by a philandering husband', 'prescrib[ing] for an insufferable wife'.

3.iv 'the full curve of her shoulders . . . Her whole appearance had the simple elegance of a white lily, wet with pendant dew' *(4.97.363)*

The ambiguities of 'lust of the flesh' and 'lust of the mind' inherent in the romantic ideal as captured in the 'snow-white arm' episode are finally

played out when the 'hoped-for day' of marriage eventually comes and Bao-yu's rejected fantasy of the 'good fortune' to touch this beautiful arm comes true. The unveiling is masterly; Xueqin mirrors the earlier 'gaze' upon the 'snow white arm' as if a slow-motion return of the image of repressed desire:

> Bao-yu stared at his bride. Surely this was Bao-chai? Incredulous, with one hand holding the lantern, he rubbed his eyes with the other and looked again. It *was* Bao-chai. How pretty she looked in her wedding-gown. He gazed at her soft skin, the full curve of her shoulders, and her hair done up in tresses that hung from her temples! Her eyes were moist, her lips quivered slightly. Her whole appearance had the simple elegance of a white lily, wet with pendant dew: the maidenly blush on her cheeks resembled apricot-blossom wreathed in mist. A feeling of helpless bewilderment seized him, and thinking he must be dreaming, he stood there in a motionless daze.
>
> (4.97.363)

The 'soft skin', the 'full curve of the shoulders' – Xueqin could hardly have made a stronger statement about the significance of Bao-chai's victory over Dai-yu in the marriage stakes: the contrast between this vision of fertile maiden loveliness and the wraithlike, dying Dai-yu is stark and unsettling in the way it contradicts the idealised romantic logic of the narrative as driven by Bao-yu to this point. Married to Bao-chai, Bao-yu now has 'ownership' of the 'snow-white arm' and with this, the 'good fortune' he has earlier thought to be unthinkable in his certainty of destined marriage to Dai-yu. In the dream sequence in Chapter 5, the words of the first song 'The Mistaken Marriage' in the cycle 'The Dream of Golden Days', have foretold this day, but it is not the 'hoped-for day' of marriage to Dai-yu that Bao-yu has 'speculated':

> Let others all
> Commend the marriage rites of gold and jade;
> I still recall
> The bond of old by stone and flower made:
> And while my vacant eyes behold
> Crystalline snows of beauty pure and cold:
> From my mind cannot be banished
> That fairy wood forlorn that from the world has vanished.
>
> (1.5.140)

The eyes once dazzled by a rounded arm white as 'crystalline snows' are now 'vacant', the 'warmth' of 'lust of the flesh' now chilled, 'pure and cold', and it is in his *mind's* eye that Dai-yu as the 'fairy' vision remains; his 'lust of the mind' now an 'affliction' his marriage to Bao-chai, 'so courteous

and so kind', cannot comfort. The second song, 'Hope Betrayed', questions the contradiction of fate made in this 'mistaken marriage':

> One was a flower from paradise
> One a pure jade without spot or stain.
> If each for the other was not intended,
> The why in this life did they meet again?
> And yet if fate had meant them for each other,
> Why was their earthly meeting all in vain?
> (1.5.140)

The song continues in the conventional Buddhist wisdom of earthly life as an illusion, as insubstantial as flowers reflected in a mirror, 'doomed to pass', her 'sighs and tears' and his 'anxious fears' all part of the relentless cycle of mortal suffering. And yet while both songs question the purpose of the lovers' suffering, they do not offer solace in the answer which many readers assume, that their suffering is a pathway to a higher order of being central to Buddhist belief, the state of enlightenment: if anything, the wording questions the implied answer in that it questions belief in fate itself. Bao-yu has believed in fate, his otherworldly destiny to marry Dai-yu, a belief both romantic and made in good faith that his family will 'at least' support them, as discussed in Chapter 1.

On one reading, Bao-yu is shown to be self-deluded in his romantic belief and to have brought his sufferings upon himself, as did Dai-yu; young people are not permitted to entertain expectations about whom they will marry and certainly not to express any emotional attachment pre-empting marriage. Where this leaves romance, or even spiritual belief codified in Buddhism, is far from clear in the writing on the *Stone*, 'penned' with so much of the writer's own earthly suffering – 'hot and bitter tears', seemingly the work of a fool. While to those who read his pages as a Buddhist text there is nothing secret or foolish about his message, what then *is* secret and foolish? On a 'second reading' – as for the Taoist monk in the opening chapter of the novel – the 'theme of love', dramatised in the intuitive certainty of Bao-yu's heart-mind, his 'blind, defenceless love' that he will marry Dai-yu, while shown to be 'impractical and eccentric', yet remains a romantic reality more compelling to him and to many of Xueqin's readers than the 'vacant' illusion of the secular pieties of arranged marriage, or exemplary of human error requiring Buddhist enlightenment.

Part Three: Death and the maiden: Ophelia and Dai-Yu

Hamlet: 'I did love you once'/'I loved you not' *(3.1.114/118)*

If it has been put forward that the literary heroes Bao-yu and Hamlet have in common an omniscient belief in their destiny which draws down upon

themselves its very opposite, the challenge now is to show how this is demonstrated in their creators' representation of each heroine's tragic death. Broken-hearted, Dai-yu and Ophelia choose to die, and the interest each writer has in exploring this tragic expression of romantic love and the desire 'not to be' is one of the strong links across these literary masterpieces.

To begin with, the distancing of the hero: it is striking that both heroines die in isolation from and without the knowledge of the heroes who, when they do know, do not react by taking their own lives, as is more typical in romantic literary tradition. This role is left solely to the heroine, the ritual of the death itself allowing her to become less a victim of love denied and more her own statement of self-belief – 'knowing what she should think'. A tension is set up between the absence of the heroine through the 'blindness' of the hero and the continued visibility of the heroine to the reader in the writer's memorable staging of her letting go of life.

The 'doubtful' nature of the deaths, the question and significance of suicide, is similarly negotiated; would Dai-yu have died of consumption anyway; was the sudden and obscure death and burial of Ophelia's father more significant in Ophelia's madness and death than her moral scarification by Hamlet and did she drown by 'the water coming to her, or she coming to the water', to paraphrase the learned gravedigger – or are the distinctions mere equivocations, 'quiddities', made irrelevant by the ceremonious spiritual conviction of the literary enactment of their deaths?

Hamlet: 'Or if thou must needs marry, marry a fool' *(3.1.137)*

For Ophelia, her experience of Hamlet in the 'nunnery' scene tells her that the 'old days' with Hamlet are not only in the past, but even denied. The Hamlet she takes leave of is no longer recognisable: in a parallel to her own 'disappearance' in the closet scene, Hamlet in turn becomes transformed into a 'noble mind . . . o'erthrown'. The scene has been set up by her father to prove Hamlet is 'mad for love'. From disconcerting equivocations – 'I did love you once'/'I loved you not' – Hamlet delivers his ultimate insult to her virtue: 'Get thee to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners'? And continuing in like vein:

> If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery. Farewell. Or if thou must needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery go, and quickly too. Farewell.
>
> (3.1.134–139)

Ophelia offers a gracious aside – 'Heavenly powers restore him' – but Hamlet is not finished with her yet, ranting on and on – 'You jig and you

amble and you lisp' until Ophelia cannot but now accept that the Hamlet of their courtship days, when his speech then seemed to have been given 'countenance . . . With almost all the holy vows of heaven', has indeed gone mad, 'blasted with ecstasy', 'quite, quite down'.

And yet in this very speech where Ophelia implicitly relinquishes her claims upon his love, she brings forward a new vision of Hamlet, one not before seen, re-creating this man, who has just cast her off as a whore in the crudest of speech, in an encomium as a Renaissance prince:

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword
> The expectation and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form
> (3.1.149–153)

'Scholar's eye': the words here echo the lines from an earlier narrative poem by Shakespeare in which Lucrece is pleading with King Tarquin not to rape her, and she invokes the royal ideal he is violating: 'For princes are the glass, the school, the book,/Where subject's eyes do learn, do read, do look'.[52] Tarquin is blind to her pleas and, after she is raped, Lucrece commits suicide. For the murderer Claudius, claiming his kingly status against the usurped prince Hamlet who is, in the peoples' eyes, precisely this princely perfection, Ophelia's words have a threatening resonance – but by these words, Ophelia is confirming her own purity. In this stately phrasing she is striving to confirm that it is the fallen 'quite, quite down' Hamlet 'without his eyes' who has turned into his opposite; not she, the fallen woman of his mad imaginings as signalled earlier, in the speechless 'blind' mental violation in her closet. Even as Ophelia acknowledges Hamlet's madness as a mental affliction, the cost of this, compounded by the strange, sudden death of her father – whether or not she is aware of how this has happened – is a grief too hard for her mind to bear; soon she herself is brought 'quite, quite down'. Hamlet's culpability in her decline into madness is mitigated by her imaginative insistence upon his former real self, her 'rose of the fair state'; for her, the mad Hamlet – as he later exculpates himself to Laertes – is truly 'Hamlet from himself be ta'en away'. But what this 'himself' *is* is a story left to Horatio to 'tell the unsatisfied' – A.C. Bradley among them – after all else are dead and the play is ended.

> 'the old days with Bao-yu'
> (4.87.166)

In Dai-yu's reading of romances she has become aware of the special significance of

> some trinket or small object of clothing or jewellery – a pair of lovebirds, a male and female phoenix, a jade ring, a gold buckle, a silken handkerchief, an embroidered belt or what not – that brought the heroes and heroines together.
>
> (2.32.131)

The immediate context of this observation, the incident of Bao-yu's gift of the gold kylin to another girl-cousin, shows this is fertile ground for jealousy and misunderstanding, and the ambiguous language of a 'silken handkerchief' becomes an important extended metaphor for the eventual tragedy of the lovers.

Dia-yu craves for Bao-yu to *act* like the exclusive lover he holds in his mind but is ever distracted by impulsive female friendships, so it is immensely gratifying when, from his sick-bed and recovering after being badly beaten by his father, he sends her a few of his old handkerchiefs to let her know he's all right.

> 'That's an odd sort of present'! said Skybright, 'What's she going to do with a pair of your old handkerchiefs? Most likely she'll think you're making fun of her and get upset again'.
>
> 'No, she won't', said Bao-yu. 'She'll understand'.
>
> (2.34.166–168)

At first puzzled, Dai-yu suddenly recognises the handkerchiefs are a love token, a gesture like secret lovers make in the romantic stories they both savour:

> . . . message that had eluded Skybright had thrown Dai-yu into a turmoil of conflicting emotions.
>
> 'I feel so happy', she thought, 'that in the midst of his own affliction he has been able to grasp the cause of all *my* trouble'.
>
> (2.34.167)

Dai-yu is ashamed that while she has been 'crying and quarrelling' in her fears for her vulnerability, 'all that time he has understood'.

> 'And her thoughts carried her this way and that, until the ferment of excitement within her cried out to be expressed. Careless of what the maids might think, she called for a lamp, sat herself down at her desk,

> and proceeded to compose the following quatrains, using the handkerchiefs themselves to write on.
>
> (2.34.168)

She is about to start on her second quatrain when she finds her

> whole body was burning hot all over and her cheeks were afire. 'Hmn!' 'Brighter than the peach-flower's hue'
>
> (2.34.167–168)

she quotes, looking in the mirror, poeticising her radiant face even as, unbeknownst to her, the 'peach-flower hue' is the first sign of her serious illness. Xueqin's sympathetic presentation of the finely-tuned aesthetic nature of the relationship is at the same time a warning against its illusory message; just as she is mistaken in taking poetic pleasure from her flower-hued cheeks, so also in the end does she have to confront the apparent truth that she has been fatally deceived by Bao-yu's 'language' of the handkerchiefs. The fact that she is mistaken in this – mistaken in her belief he has *chosen* to marry Bao-chai – but also mistaken in her hope that he 'has been able to grasp the cause of all *my* trouble', is very much at the core of Xueqin's tragic vision. For a moment she has shared in his belief in his own omniscience – that marriage is their destiny – so that the shattering of this belief represents Xueqin's confrontation between patriarchal reality and love's illusion at its starkest and cruellest; in the words of one scholar, the 'author's unease' with the romantic ideal[53] – here, for the heroine, its destruction. The intensity of romantic feeling raises the question: is the author's 'unease' more with the ideals *opposing* romantic love than with romantic love itself?

As the love story unfolds, Dai-yu takes on more and more the original tragic role of Ying-ying in the famous story, written in the late Tang, where Ying-ying becomes haunted by a sense that romantic love has been betrayed – she has given herself to her lover and now feels that she is 'living in a daze, as though I had lost something I could not find',[54] and she martyrs herself to the loss of this ideal, keeping her lover at a distance and so, ironically, is eventually forsaken.

Dai-yu seeks escape in daydreams of lost possibilities, but these make her even more aware of her present powerlessness, the perfume of cassia blossom bringing remembrances of the warm South of her childhood, of a life 'where she could do and speak as she pleased':

> If her parents were still alive . . . If she still lived in the South, the gentle land of spring flowers an autumn moonlight . . . What wrong had she done in a previous incarnation to deserve this lonely existence? Those words written in captivity by the last emperor of Southern Tang –
>
> Here, all day long, I bathe my face in tears –

> How well they expressed her own feelings! Her soul seemed transported to some distant region.
>
> (4.87.162)

In this melancholy frame of mind, she asks her maid to look out for 'something warm to put over my shoulders', this intimacy of gesture bringing the reader up close, and when the bundle of fur-lined clothes is unwrapped:

> Dai-yu noticed . . . another smaller bundle wrapped in silk. She reached out a hand to pick it up, and untied the wrapper. Inside she found a pair of silk handkerchiefs. She recognised them at once as the ones Bao-yu had secretly sent her during his convalescence. There were the verses she had written on them! Even the tear-stains could be seen! And next to them in the little bundle were the perfumed sachet she had embroidered for him (and half-demolished in a fit of pique), the torn fan case, and the snipped remains of the silken cord she had made for his Magic Jade . . . . She stood with the handkerchiefs in her hands and stared at them as though entranced.
>
> (4.87.165)

This is all also now in a lost past – 'the old days with Bao-yu'.

> 'I'm sick because of Miss Lin'.
>
> (4.96.338)

Xueqin's staging of the final act in the tragedy is masterly and repays a brief overview. Dai-yu, now led to think that Bao-yu has been affianced to a wealthy prefect's daughter, begins to starve herself, in a cruel irony only confirming the family's judgement of her poor prospects as a wife and mother – but then is dramatically revived by hearsay that she *is* after all Bao-yu's intended, again ironically only to further convince the family of her 'peculiar temperament' infecting the unstable Bao-yu. Unaware of the truth – that Bao-yu is to marry Bao-chai – Dai-yu and Bao-yu resume their relationship, but it is increasingly fraught by the secrecy binding the household, so that, when the little maid Simple lets out the truth, saying 'they want the wedding to turn his luck', Dai-yu, white-faced, is impelled to confront Bao-yu, ignoring her maid's alarm:

> Undeterred, Dai-yu walked on in to Bao-yu's room. He was sitting up in bed, and when she came in made no move to get up or welcome her, but remained where he was, staring at her and giving a series of silly laughs. Dai-yu sat down uninvited, and she too began to smile and stare back at Bao-yu. There were no greetings exchanged, no courtesies, in fact no words of any kind. . . .

Suddenly Dai-yu said:
'Bao-yu, why are you sick?'
Bao-yu laughed.
'I'm sick because of Miss Lin'.
(4.96.338)

This final exchange between Dai-yu and Bao-yu, staring back at each other, 'no words of any kind', has a pared-back and staged quality, as if they are now truly beyond the mundane reality of greetings, courtesies, even words: the words they do say make no sense, neither knowing the truth about the other: a dumb-show, and incriminating, in a striking parallel with the Shakespeare scene of wordless confrontation. Dai-yu can only assume either that he is lying or so far into madness as to be lost to her, and she prepares herself to die, 'her final settlement of her debt with fate'. Xue-qin, however, does not leave the matter here for Bao-yu but underscores, in his return to sanity at the later 'good news' that he is to marry Miss Lin, the profound truth of his statement. The simple economy of the dialogue in these episodes elevates the mood to the tragic, in particular by contrast to the incomprehension of those around:

'Uncle Zheng says, you are to marry Miss Lin, if you get better. But not if you carry on behaving like a half-wit'.
Bao-yu's expression suddenly changed to one of utter seriousness, as he said:
'I'm not a half-wit. You're the half-wit'.
He stood up.
'I'm going to see Cousin Lin, to set her mind to rest'.
(4.97.344)

Bao-yu is at last ready to take the care of Dai-yu she needs: he has assumed the agency which Dai-yu had hoped of a lover, but his imbecilic state discredits his authority, his fixation on Dai-yu seemingly part of his madness. He is prevented, but makes a further statement which is important in intensifying the sense of the numinous in this impending tragedy:

'If you behave, she will see you. But not if you continue to act like an imbecile'.
To which Bao-yu replied:
'I have given my heart to Cousin Lin. If she marries me, she will bring it with her and put it back in its proper place'.
(4.97.344)

These words refer the reader back to Dai-yu's remarkable prescient and terrifying dream early in Volume 4, when she is still sure that Bao-yu loves her 'more than anyone else' but worries that Grannie and her aunt haven't

mentioned anything, and is then relieved that her parents hadn't married her to someone else – 'At least I've still some hope' – and, 'with a sigh and a few tears, she lay down in her clothes, weary and depressed'. The dream takes her through all these hopes and fears and culminates in her desperate plea to Bao-yu to confirm if she should go or stay. In the dream, he has appeared before her, congratulating her on her marriage – to someone else:

> 'My warmest congratulations, Coz!'
>
> This was too much for Dai-yu. Her last vestige of maidenly reserve vanished. She clutched hold of him and cried out:
>
> 'Now I know how heartless and cruel you really are, Bao-yu!'
>
> 'No, you are wrong', he replied. 'But if you have a husband to go to, then we must go our separate ways'.
>
> Dai-yu listened in despair as this, her very last hope, was taken away from her.
>
> 'Oh Bao! I've no separate way to go! How could you say such a thing'?
>
> 'If you don't want to go, then stay here', he replied calmly. 'You were originally engaged to me. That's why you came to live here. Has it never occurred to you how specially I have always treated you? Haven't you noticed?'
>
> (4.82.64–65)

Momentarily believing she really is engaged to Bao-yu, she cries out to him:

> 'My mind is made up, once and forever! But you must give me the word. Am I to go? Or am I to stay?'
>
> 'I've told you, stay here with me. If you still don't trust me, look at my heart'.
>
> With these words he took out a small knife and brought it down across his chest. Blood came spurting out. Terrified out of her wits, Dai-yu tried to staunch the flow with her hand, crying out:
>
> 'How could you! You should have killed me first!'
>
> 'Don't worry', said Bao-yu. 'I'm going to show you my heart'.
>
> He fumbled about inside the gaping flesh, while Dai-yu, shaking convulsively, afraid that someone might burst in on them at any moment, pressed him to her tightly and wept bitterly.
>
> 'Oh no!' said Bao-yu. 'It's not there any more! My time has come'.
>
> His eyes flickered and he fell with a dull thud to the floor.
>
> (4.82.65)

In Dai-yu's dream, Bao-yu's heart is not there: it is not his to give. If this is a reference, as one scholar suggests, to the Daoist teaching 'to be free

from the fetters of consciousness and attachment of heart',[55] the dream seems to reflect a premonition that Bao-yu has already left her and he too – like Grannie and Aunt – can no longer be trusted to fulfil his claim to be her future betrothed. The dream is a masterly transition in Xueqin's narrative of these 'romantic idiots' playing out their love story in the this-worldly reality of human hearts still very much alive, now moving towards its prophetic denouement: the difficulty for the reader is that the 'idiocy', as the hero states – his reference back to Feng Menglong – is not with the romantic lovers so much as with the worldly idiocy extinguishing their earthly hearts.

Bao-yu's lack of agency tragically exposed is Dai-yu's fear of their being discovered – he half-naked, covered in blood – a premonition that she will be blamed for his 'love-sickness', in their grandmother's eyes. She has thought that *she* might die, but not that he might, so shockingly, killing himself trying to give her a heart that is gone. Directly after the dream, Dai-yu has her first bout of tubercular coughing – 'a thick wriggling strand of dark red blood' in the phlegm: the image may be suggesting that the dream blood represents Dai-yu's own blood and, together with the intense physical intimacy, the dream registers prescience of being killed by the violence of love 'not there any more'. Its significance in Xueqin's representation of the love relationship is further confirmed by an episode in the next chapter in which the maids talk of Bao-yu's delirium, waking up screaming about a 'pain in his heart and then being stabbed by a knife' (4.83.76). However, Dai-yu's dream is powerful enough in its own right to establish the mutuality and this follow-up seems gratuitous, perhaps evidence of the supplementary authoring in the last two volumes.

Taken together, these episodes represent a vivid dramatisation of the interlocking forces of belief in love and belief in fate, family politics and tragic irony predicating the death of Dai-yu. Bao-yu's declaration that 'I have given my heart to Cousin Lin. If she marries me, she will bring it with her and put it back in its proper place' has the unexpected emotional impact of maintaining Dai-yu as a presence of strength in the narrative, even as the intuitive, illusory world of Bao-yu's certainties is painfully exposed. Ironically, as these points of exposure accrue, the 'illusory' world of the lovers is becoming more and more the locus of the truth of the relationship and the measure of their spiritual worth: as the family's later guilty response to Bao-yu's grief reveals, it is the family that is now the 'half-wit' in its inane sacrificing of their 'real' love to 'illusory' political exigency: a son is indeed born, but the narrative no longer carries any conviction of the future continuity of the Cao dynasty. Perhaps there is a biographical quiver here: David Hawkes notes that, 'Having become 'unpersons' with the death of

the author's only son and the political purge of the Cao clan, the Caos now disappear almost completely from the records'. (1.31)

'Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?'
(4.5.21)

This creative re-positioning of hero and heroine is paralleled in *Hamlet* with Ophelia, now starkly convinced of Hamlet's madness, in her next appearance onstage, 'importunate – indeed, distract', transformed into a state of madness herself that is real, not 'antic'. 'Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark'? she asks the queen, and responds to the queen's 'How now, Ophelia?' with a song, lines from a popular ballad about being forsaken in love which gives her answer: her Hamlet, the 'beauteous majesty', is no longer to be found. Songs of love betrayed alternate with songs of burial alluding to her father's death, the circumstances of which she may not even know as his burial has been 'hugger mugger', kept secret for fear of public questioning; her madness, the king discerns, 'the poison of deep grief . . . all from her father's death' but clearly also from love betrayed. What is of particular interest is how Shakespeare throws Ophelia's purity and innocence into sharp relief by reference to its opposite, the casual bawdiness of the ditties – 'Young men will do't if they come to't/By Cock they are to blame' and how the simple spiritual tribute in the burial verse – 'At his head a grass-green turf,/At his heels a stone' and 'White his shroud as the mountain snow' – exposes the desecration of Hamlet's disposal of the old courtier's body. That the court understands very clearly that Ophelia's madness is speaking the truth about power gone wrong is evident: 'Give her good watch' is not about looking after her well-being but silencing her. Whereas Hamlet's assumed madness seems now to be a violent compounding of the 'cursed spite/That ever I was born to set [the time] right' and the lives of others indiscriminately, Ophelia's madness has a quality of spiritual escape, as if reality has no more meaning – there is nothing now to 'think' at all.

'words of so sweet breath composed/As made these things more rich'
(3.1 96–7)

Ophelia's madness and death is the price she pays for Hamlet's play-acting the madman and becoming the 'idiot' like those around him. In watching Ophelia and listening to her, what is so striking is Ophelia's resistance to being contaminated by unvirtuous insinuation, made into the thing she is not: she has lightly batted back her brother's warnings about her female weakness against Hamlet's 'unmastered importunity'; while obeying her

father, she does not concede any truth to his carnal imaginings; and when 'loosed' upon Hamlet when he spurns her vilely, she reminds him of the 'words of so sweet breath' of his love letters and assures him of her belief that he has loved her. Her moral purity is never so evident as when, her 'wits' collapsing under the weight of innuendo and calumny and the secrecy over her father's death and burial – 'They say 'a made a good end' (4.5.418) – she is onstage, singing the sad and bawdy ditties of death and betrayal in love, carrying a posy of herbs and flowers and handing them round – to Laertes, 'there's rosemary for remembrance' – all present are hushed in sheer pity and disbelief. Ironically, Ophelia's very innocence is a shield against Hamlet's guilt: her mind may have failed her, but her strength 'within' is impervious to his 'antic disposition' and, in the reading, has the salvationary effect of absolving him from blame. Her real madness, as a psychic response to this trauma, indemnifies Hamlet's assumed madness as a similar intuitive removal from himself: 'Remember me', intones the Ghost, and Laertes' words watching Ophelia – 'A document in madness – thoughts and remembrance fitted' – is Shakespeare's reminder of the parallel. Ophelia has withdrawn from this 'harsh world', from Hamlet and love, and the language of flowers and herbs becomes her source of what meaning is left – not much: 'I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died'.

The elegiac, otherworldly feeling developing around Ophelia in this scene prior to her death has resonance with the sense in which Dai-yu, in her drifting in and out of daydreams and snatches of elegiac poetry, becomes spiritually ready for death – returning to the natural world, to burial in the warm South, some time before the betrayal death blow; it has the same effect of distancing the heroine's deaths from the hero's 'mind's eye' – consciousness and conscience. And yet the death scenes themselves are described with an unrelenting realism, as of nature re-claiming its own.

> 'And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up'
> (H 4.7.173)

For Ophelia, what is left for her to 'think', with Hamlet gone mad and rejecting her, and then her father dead, his 'obscure funeral', the lie put out -'they say he made a good end'? The staging of Hamlet 'lug[ging] the guts into the neighbour room' is in stark contradiction to his earlier condemnation of the absence of proper respect around his own father's funeral. The poetry describing her death by drowning is deeply moving in its visual earthiness: weaving 'fantastic' garlands and clambering to hang them onto a willow tree overlooking the 'weeping brook', she falls into the water as an 'envious sliver' breaks, still singing, her skirts spreading wide:

> And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
> Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,

As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.
(4.7.173–80)

The poetry has inspired exquisite paintings and stagings; the famous Millais painting is a timeless image of beauty and innocence with an uncanny power: Ophelia floating, suspended, in death-defying death, choosing death over life as an act of her own will – of which she was formerly considered 'incapable' – chanting old hymns, giving 'almost all the holy vows of heaven' to the act, from the reality of which the lines describing the drowning do not flinch but, like the sudden broken string of Dai-yu's *qin* (4.87.173) register the 'wretched' end of the melody of her life.

In the following 'Graveyard' scene, Shakespeare pursues the question of Ophelia's meaning in the play: over and above accident or suicide, or the 'churlish priest' denying her 'the service of the dead' and the requiem reserved for 'peace-departed souls' – this only serves, in its repellent irrelevance to the real Ophelia, to elevate her to another order of being, that inexpressible realm of 'more things in heaven and earth . . . Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (1.5.165–166); the existence of which Hamlet alternately intuits, craves, disputes and hopes for throughout the play. This higher realm her brother Laertes, of less troubled belief, envisages as in a painting of heaven and hell, placing Ophelia floating as a 'ministering angel' in the air, high above where the priest 'liest howling'. Aside from the bitter anti-clericalism, Shakespeare's words here suggest he may be invoking the medieval concept, still current in detailed illustrations in the sixteenth century, of the Great Chain of Being: Ophelia almost at the top, just under God and at the level of the angels – while her mortal life has ended at the very lowest level with the minerals, gravel, sand, soil – the 'muddy depths'.

'Light the lamp,' . . . 'Make up the fire in the brazier'.
(4.97.352)

In the parallel episodes of the 'trick' marriage and Dai-yu's death, as she has finally lost hope and approaches the ethereal status of her spiritual origins through self-willed starvation, Dai-yu summons up all her psychic strength and makes a last defiant 'flick' at Bao-yu's blindness. The episode is visualised in painful detail, starkly realistic, unsentimental, underlining the thematic importance of 'light' and 'seeing'. As with Ophelia, she is alone 'on stage' except for her maids, who act as props as she struggles to enact her

farewell to life, to self, to poetry and love. Largely miming her instructions, the tone becomes ceremonial as Dai-yu, scarcely strong enough to direct her maids, has them find Bao-yu's old silk handkerchiefs inscribed with her own love poems and then struggles to tear them apart. Failing that, 'she slipped the handkerchiefs into her sleeve', that intimate site in literary convention. 'Light the lamp', she ordered, recalling the earlier handkerchief scene where she calls for the lamp to be lit so that she can write her poems:

> Snowgoose promptly obeyed. Dai-yu looked into the lamp, then closed her eyes and sat in silence. Another fit of breathlessness. Then:
> 'Make up the fire in the brazier'.
>
> (4.97.352)

The maids think she needs warmth and try to persuade her to lie down under extra covers:

> Dai-yu shook her head, and Snowgoose reluctantly made up the brazier . . . Dai-yu made a motion with her hand, indicating that she wanted it moved up onto the kang . . . . Dai-yu, far from resting back in the warmth, now inclined her body slightly forward – Nightingale has to support her with both hands as she did so. Dai-yu took the handkerchiefs in one hand. Staring into the flames and nodding thoughtfully to herself, she dropped them into the brazier. Nightingale was horrified, but much as she wanted to snatch them from the flames, she did not dare move her hands and leave Dai-yu unsupported. Snowgoose was out of the room, fetching the brazier-stand, and by now the handkerchiefs were all ablaze.
>
> 'Miss!' cried Nightingale. 'What are you doing?'
>
> As if she had not heard, Daiyu reached over for her manuscripts [verses she has been revising] glanced at them, and let them fall again on to the kang. Nightingale, anxious lest she burn these, too, leaned up against Dai-yu and, freeing one hand, reached out with it to take hold of them. But before she could do so, Dai-yu had picked them up again and dropped them into the flames.
>
> (4.97.352–353)

In her gesture of flicking the handkerchief in Bao-yu's eye to punish him for his hypnotic transfixion upon Bao-chai, progressing through to Bao-yu's sending his old silk handkerchiefs in confirmation of his love and Dai-yu inscribing them with poems in the hope of marriage but never sending them (propriety allowing only married couples or courtesans to exchange love poems),[56] the handkerchief metaphor ends in Dai-yu taking final control against her apparent betrayal. The episode resonates

with Dai-yu's assertion of creative strength; she is burning the handkerchiefs stained with her own poetic words and her tears in a ritual of self-sacrifice, a deliberate repudiation of the illusory realm of poetry and love in which she has lived with Bao-yu – and where Xueqin, in the realm of romantic fiction, of 'memorials' to his lost youth, 'those golden days, when I dressed in silk and ate delicately' (1.1.21) – is taking on the task Hamlet asks of Horatio:

> Thou livest: report me and my cause aright
> To the unsatisfied.
>
> (5.2.323–4)

The death scene of Dai-yu is upstaged in the novel by the wedding of Bao-yu to Bao-chai. Described after the marriage but as happening at the same time, this simultaneity is ambiguous, giving romantic poignancy to the death scene even as it is severely undercut by the immediately preceding conclusion to the wedding-scene which describes Bao-yu's adjustment to her death as, gradually, 'he found that a small part of his love for Dai-yu began to transfer itself to Bao-chai' (4.98.375). The romantic intensity of dying for love – Dai-yu's choice of death over a life without Bao-yu – is checked by the pragmatic realities of mundane survival. And yet, to recall from the Introduction the words of C.T. Hsia, 'The death . . . is described in sheer agonising human terms': does this philosophically place Dai-yu as a 'victim of passion . . . untouched by Taoist grace' or, as Anthony Yu suggests, does the 'captivating' literary presence of Dai-yu and the 'memorable' representation of love transcend any imperatives 'for *her* enlightenment'?

The scene is notably absent of family members – all are at the wedding – but busy with maids performing nursing tasks and weeping and waiting around for 'the end'; the most poignant moment is between Dai-yu and her loyal maid and friend Nightingale –

> Dai-yu opened her eyes again. Seeing no-one in the room but Nightingale and her old wet-nurse and a few junior maids, she clutched Nightingale's hand and said with a great effort:
>
> 'I am finished! After the years spent seeing to my every need, I had hoped the two of us would always be together. But now . . .'
>
> She broke off, panting for breath, closed her eyes and lay still, gripping Nightingale's hand tightly. . . . After a long pause, Dai-yu spoke again:
>
> 'Sister Nightingale! I have no family of my own here. My body is pure: promise me you'll ask them to bury me at home!'
>
> (4.98.376)

In these spare words, Dai-yu, like Bao-yu's bitter reproach to the family later on, has faced her aloneness in the family, and her words 'My body is pure' are a most painful deathbed refutation of how she has been judged – not only 'obstinate and foolish' but tainted with an unchaste contagion bringing Bao-yu close to death and, in a reverse irony, reprising Bao-yu's maid Skybright's bitter dying thought that she 'may as well' have become Bao-yu's lover (3.77.544).

It is Lin Dai-yu's last words which test interpretation; there is again, in Bao-yu's insistence on asking Nightingale what Dai-yu's last words had been, a reference back to his anxiety over his maid Skybright's last words, implicitly seeking reassurance that he has nothing to blame himself for and hoping for an affirmation of their love. This unease continues to haunt Bao-yu for the duration, and it is a further point of similarity with Hamlet's desperate attempt to lay claim to Ophelia and their love, which is more a bitter cry of recognition that this love was not 'there' when it was needed.

The ambiguity of Shakespeare's depiction of Ophelia's death by drowning – 'seeking her own salvation', the 'too much of water' taking her to muddy death – and yet the scene leaving for posterity an unforgettable 'living' image of lyrical beauty has similarities with the ambiguity of Xueqin's representation of Dai-yu's death, both 'agonizingly human' and mythical transformation, in each literary work conveyed by the universal unstable symbolism of water. In *Hamlet*, 'Niobe's tears' imply hypocrisy, and the deliquescence of the body 'resolv[ing] itself into a dew', while a poetical invocation of a pure state of being has also the self-dramatising unreality of the as-yet-untested student Hamlet, similar to the wished-for death of Bao-yu being washed away in a great river of his girl-cousins' tears (2.36.206). Associations around water – purity and pollution – are intertwined in *The Story of the Stone*, the framing myth of the life-giving 'sweet dew', the 'muck and impurity' of the water from which the fallen petals are saved (1.23.463), the sacred cup of tea made from vintaged 'melted snow . . . collected from the branches of winter-flowering plum blossoms' (3.41.315) and here, water brought to cleanse as tears are shed:

> 'Miss! Come and look at Miss Lin'. As she spoke her tears fell like drops of rain. Tan-chun came over and felt Dai-yu's hand. It was already cold, and her eyes were glazed and lifeless. Tan-chun and Nightingale wept as they gave orders for water to be brought and for Dai-yu to be washed. Now Li Wan came hurrying in. She, Tan-chun and Nightingale looked at each other, but were too shocked to say a word. They began wiping Dai-yu's face with a flannel, when suddenly she cried out in a loud voice:
>
> 'Bao-yu, Bao-yu, how could you. . . . '
>
> Her whole body broke into a cold sweat and she could say no more. They tried to calm her down and support her. She sweated more and

more profusely and her body became colder by degrees. Tan-chu and Li Wan told the maids to put up her hair and dress her in her grave-clothes, and to be quick about it. Her eyes rolled upwards. Alas!

Her fragrant soul disperses, wafted on the breeze:
Her sorrow now a dream, drifting into the night.
(4.98.376–77)

The striking physical detail of the deliquescent body goes beyond the 'human terms' of 'sweat' and to the mythic origins of the lovers, she the flower brought to life by his daily watering and paying for his kindness in the 'tears of a lifetime' (1.1 53). This 'strange affair' of the myth hovers over the grim, pragmatic realism – 'be quick about it' as the body is already decomposing – and the elegiac lines of verse which follow: 'her fragrant soul disperses', 'her sorrows now a dream' lyrically return her to the higher realms, even as this poetic tribute in its brevity and simplicity makes a painful comment against the fulsome elegy Bao-yu composes for his favourite maid. In the context Xueqin gives here – Dai-yu having already ceremoniously renounced the illusory realm of poetry and love – her last words complete her flick back, a loud and very 'human' cry of protest, of disbelief, that her true love has betrayed her, the question 'how could you ' unfinished, to leave open the hope that he had not; her words a cry of hope against the deceit practised upon them. Xueqin leaves the reader with a real-life Dai-yu as a sacrifice to lost love, lost not through the deceit of the lover but through the self-deceiving actions of the family; she remains, like Ophelia, an image of beauty and purity which is lost to the world.

There is a momentary shock in reading immediately after:

The moment Dai-yu breathed her last was the very moment that Bao-yu took Bao-chai to be his wife.
(4.98.377)

The statement is grating in its complacent balance: the poignancy of the simultaneity of the wedding and the dying has already been established and is an unseemly jolt back into all the deceitful convenience of the 'ingenious plan'. It is a blatant misrepresentation of the truth; when 'Bao-yu took Bao-chai to be his wife', it was in the belief that he was taking *Dai-yu* to be his wife: this is Xueqin's reminder not to be too soon content to say 'Alas! t'was fated thus'. Again, there is a resonance with the ambiguity in the words of Hamlet's mother strewing flowers on Ophelia's grave, mourning that it is not her 'bride-bed' – poignant but also a reminder of the bride-to-be alone and unsupported, bereft of any value given to romantic love

in Hamlet's blighted fictional world, except in the 'groans' of the blighted lovers.

Coda: **'Tell me, where is fancy bred?'** *Merchant of Venice* **(3.2.63–5)**
'Tell me, how did love begin?' *Stone,* **Prelude (1.5.139)**

In the song-and-dance suite *A Dream of Golden Days* which prophesies the fate in love of the twelve main female characters in *The Story of the Stone*, the Fairy Disenchantment gives Bao-yu her manuscript of the libretto. It begins with a *Prelude*:

When first the world from chaos rose
Tell me, where did love begin?
The wind and moonlight first did love compose.
Now woebegone
And quite cast down
In low estate
I would my foolish heart expose,
And so perform this *Dream of Golden Days*
And all my grief for my lost loves disclose.
(1.5.139–140)

The opening lines of this *Prelude* may resonate for Shakespeare readers with the well-known song from one of his earlier 'problem' comedies, beginning:

Tell me, where is fancy bred
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourish-ed?
(*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.63–65)

Tragic love always asks 'Why?' Where and how did love begin? And why did it end in grief? In the *Prelude*, love's beginnings are imagined to be as mysterious as the movement of air and the reflection of light from the moon, a poetic evocation of love pervasive in Chinese romantic poetry and painting and a universal romantic trope. Love's beginnings are in the evanescent beauty of nature: this is the essence of its romance, as basic to life as air, visible as the wind in the trees, fragile and fleeting as moonlight. It is a natural – and beautiful – human emotion and those grieving for its loss, as is the poet who composed *The Dream of Golden Days*, are 'foolish' of heart. The song *Hope Betrayed* mourns the tragedy of the love story of Bao-yu and Dai-yu as the sad transience of natural beauty:

All insubstantial, doomed to pass
As moonlight reflected in the water
Or flowers reflected in a glass.
(1.5.140)

If the sentiment rested there, the song would offer a simple answer to 'Why' the poet is disclosing his grief for his lost loves: to share the 'insubstantial' beauty of their lives, making the entire novel a romantic elegy. Or perhaps the six-line question opening the song suggests an answer given by the Buddhist belief in fate: however the question is asked, the answers are contradictory; there is no answer except the inherent self-delusion of the mortal world of red dust. Translator David Hawkes' comment on the song, that it is 'self-explanatory', is perhaps made on the basis that the title *Hope Betrayed* refers not to any romantic literary trope or Buddhist belief, but to the ending of the love story in the family's political decision to marry Bao-yu to Bai-chai. The song's title unsettles the elegiac response, directing the question to the novel's 'disclosure' of the 'true record' of these lives, far from elegiac in its unromantic realism. The final lines of the song question the elegiac response further, asking how can mourning lost love ever be an answer to the relentless barrage of attacks upon it:

> How many tears from those poor eyes could flow
> Which every season rained upon her woe?
> (1.5.140)

Is then the tale of 'lost loves' 'disclosed' in *The Story of the Stone* explained as the 'doomed', delusional, short-lived nature of romantic love itself, or does it rather disclose the destruction of romantic love by the failure of the culture to nurture it, the 'ding, dong, bell' ringing 'fancy's knell' in the Shakespeare song: 'Reply, reply', 'fancy' – love at first sight, romantic love – beginning neither in the feelings or the thoughts:

> It is engender'd in the eyes,
> With gazing fed; and fancy dies
> In the cradle where it lies.
> Let us all ring fancy's knell
> I'll begin it – *ding, dong, bell.*
> (*Merchant of Venice* 3.2.67–71)

– the sound of the bell rung at a funeral? It is the genius of the Hawkes translation that the tragic imagination of Xueqin resonates across cultures with such delicate ambiguity.

Notes

1 Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, IV.1.96.
2 Susan Nanquin and Evelyn Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 38.
3 Wai-Yee Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature,* p. 243.
4 Andrew Schonebaum and Tina Lu, *Approaches to Teaching the Story of the Stone*, p. 179.

5 Maram Epstein, 'Making Sense of Bao-yu: Staging Ideology and Aesthetics', in Andrew Schonebaum and Tina Lu, eds., *Approaches to Teaching the Story of the Stone,* p. 317.
6 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy,* p. 123.
7 Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, p. 148.
8 James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of Shakespeare*, p. 334.
9 Xiaonong Wang, 'Shakespeare Starts a New Century of Travel in China: An Analysis of the Two New Chinese Re-translations of *Hamlet*', p. 12.
10 Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, *Hamlet*.
11 Katherine Bootle Attie, 'Passion Turned to Prettiness: Rhyme or Reason', pp. 414–415; screen adaptations of the play, such as Kenneth Branagh's, compensate for Shakespeare's 'mystery' on this issue by giving glimpses of intertwined bodies.
12 Andrew Schonebaum, *ibid*, p. 179.
13 Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*, p. 178.
14 George Buchanan, translation from the Latin, *George Buchanan Tragedies, Jepthah,* eds. P. Sharrat and P.G. Walsh, pp. 64–94.
15 Rhodri Lewis, *ibid*, p. 124.
16 Iu-Kiao-Li, *Two Fair Cousins, A Chinese Novel from the French Version of M. Abel-Remusat*.
17 Keith McMahon, 'Sequels to Stone: Polygamous Harmony and the Theme of Female Talent', p. 382.
18 C.T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction,* p. 292.
19 Anthony C. Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber,* p. 255.
20 James Shapiro, *ibid*, p. 334.
21 Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory,* p. 151.
22 *Hamlet,* Arden edition, p. 277.
23 George Buchanan, *ibid*.
24 *Hamlet,* Arden, p. 293.
25 George Buchanan, *ibid*, quotes pp. 87, 94.
26 Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, p. 148.
27 July 2022.
28 Rhodri Lewis, *ibid*, p. 125.
29 Tina Packer, *Women of Will: Following the Feminine in Shakespeare's Plays,* p. 193.
30 Han Jianghua, 'Conceptual Blending; Analysis of *diangu* (Classical Allusions) as Metaphor in *A Dream of Red Mansions*', p. 58.
31 Jing Wang, *Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Love, and the Stone Symbolism of Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin and The Journey to the West,* p. 109.
32 You Zhitui, *Family Instructions for the You Clan and Other Works*, p. 93.
33 Documented and analyzed in Janet M. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China*.
34 David Hawkes, trans., *The Story of the Stone,* Vol. 1, Introduction, p. 21.
35 Haiyan Lee, 'Love or Lust? The Sentimental Self in Honglou-meng', p. 85.
36 Halvor Eifring, 'The Psychology of Love in *The Story of the Stone*', in Halvor Eifring, ed., *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature,* p. 288.
37 Wai-yee Li, 'Languages of love and Parameters of Culture', in Halvor Eifring, ed., *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, p. 262.
38 Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China,* p. 314.

39 DVD *A Dream of Red Mansions* Vol. 1, A, Chinese/English, Beauty Media Inc, China, 1988–1989.
40 Cyril Birch, trans., *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu, Preface, p. x.
41 Richard C. Wang, 'The Cult of Romanticism in the Late Qing and in the Novel Jiao Hong Ji Ming', p. 25.
42 Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn or a Book to Keep (Hidden),'* A Letter in Response to the Claim that Women are too Shortsighted to Understand the *Dao*', p. 29.
43 Li Zhi, *ibid*, p. 336.
44 Zhou Ruchang, *Between Noble and Humble: Cao Xueqin and the Dream of the Red Chamber,* trans. Liangmei Bao and Kyongsook Park, eds. Ronald R. Gray and Mark S. Ferrara p. 153.
45 Meng Chengshun, *Mistress and Maid,* scene 50.
46 Yiu Chun Lam, 'The Concept of Qing or Love – A study of Honglou meng', in Willard J. Peterson, Andrew Plaks, and Ying-shih Yu, eds., *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chinese Cultural History*, *a Compilation to Honour Retiring Scholars,* p. 77.
47 Wai-Yee Li, 'Languages', *ibid*, p. 267.
48 Feng Menglong, *Chinese Love Stories from Ch'ing-shih,* trans. Hua-yuan Li, Vol. 1, p. 138.
49 Wang Shifu, *Romance of the Western Chamber*, trans. S.I. Hsiung.
50 Xinjun Zhang and Qizhi Liu, 'Aestheticization of Illness in A Dream of Red Mansions', pp. 57–70.
51 David Hawkes, *ibid*, Vol. 1, Appendix, p. 528.
52 William Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece,* pp. 615–616.
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3 *'But long before you died your heart was slain' (1.5.143) The Story of the Stone* and the challenge of the shrew

Wang Xi-feng as tragic heroine

Introduction: reading Wang Xi-feng through *Hamlet*

Ninth Song: *Caught By Her Own Cunning*

> Two shrewd by half, with such finesse you wrought
> That your own life in your own toils was caught;
> But long before you died your heart was slain,
> And when you died your spirit walked in vain.
> Fall'n the great house once so secure in wealth,
> Each scattered member shifting for himself;
> And half a lifetime's anxious schemes
> Proved no more than the stuff of dreams.
> Like a great building's tottering crash,
> Like flickering lamplight burned to ash,
> Your scene of happiness concludes in grief,
> For worldly bliss is always insecure and brief.
>
> (1.5.143)

Xi-feng is the subject of the *'Ninth Song: Caught by Her Own Cunning'*, one of the twelve songs memorialising the sad fates in love of the (unnamed) *Twelve Beauties of Jinling*, those 'wonderful girls' from the author's childhood:

> those slips of girls – which is all they were then – were in every way, both morally and intellectually, superior to the 'grave and moustachioed signior' I am now supposed to have become.
>
> (1.20)

The wording of the *Ninth Song* is deeply ambiguous: while the title identifies Xi-feng as the well-worn generic 'cunning' shrew prototype with its long literary history, the tone is elegiac – as with all the other songs, written under the author's resolve 'not to allow those wonderful girls to pass

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into oblivion without a memorial'. The poem mourns the death of Xi-feng as the tragedy of a woman broken-hearted in love, whose 'finesse', 'toils' and 'anxious schemes' to save the 'tottering' house of Jia bring her own self crashing down, along with the 'great building' and all its dreams and illusions. As such, the *Ninth Song* is as much an elegy to a great family dynasty's final decline as it is to the sad fate of this beautiful young woman: this tragic identification of character and 'great house' is unique in the song cycle, giving Xi-feng a unique significance in the narrative. Xi-feng enters the novel as an operatic spectacle eloquent of her proud self-image as senior First Wife: she is an actor in her own drama with an artist's creative imagination to assume all the roles required and the drive to test its limits; in this sense, Xi-feng reflects the creative processes of the author himself. In many ways the most interesting female character – the rival heroines in the love triangle, while finely drawn, are constrained by their role as 'represent[ing] two complementary aspects of a single ideal woman'[1] – and, in particular, Xi-feng's vivid challenge to the degradation of patriarchal authority gives her an immediate relevance to the present-day reader. This is far more so than does the hero Bao-yu, whose preference for 'women's things' resonates more with the literary celebration of *qing* developed in the previous dynasty[2] and the cultural accommodation of the feminised male[3] – less threatening to patriarchal hierarchy than the subversion condemned in the literary genre of the shrew. Further, many of the memorable tragi-comic scenes in the novel have the operatic Xi-feng as their inspiration, a reminder of David Hawkes' view quoted in the Introduction to this monograph, that 'Certainly [Cao Xueqin] was influenced much more by the techniques of drama (which he loved) and painting (which he practised) than any of the pre-existing works of Chinese prose fiction, which on the whole he rather despised' (1.43).

Xi-feng is fourth in the list of main characters; of these, she comes closest to the Western classical tragic tradition of the flawed hero: proud, intelligent, beautiful, witty, exceptional in her drive and a strong sense of her own capacities and her moral leadership within the family power hierarchy. But when, in a fateful context of male degeneracy and dereliction of responsibility, undermined and demoralised by an accumulating humiliation, she challenges the displacement of her rights as First Wife in the marriage and takes retributive action with horrific consequences, she overreaches her own moral boundaries and descends into paranoia; her physical deterioration and miscarriage of a male child is both cause and effect of the erosion of her self-belief and, like 'flickering lamplight', her progressive disappearance as the once most vital energising force in the Jia family – with the Jia family matriarch: 'It will be a very dull sort of world when all the rest are dead and only we two old harpies are left alive', said Grandmother Jia (2.52.533).

In view of Xi-feng's status as one of the *Twelve Beauties* and a major character in *The Story of the Stone*, it is striking, even anomalous, that the

'dominant perspective' taken in *Stone* scholarship is summed up as that of Xi-feng as 'a termagant power-hungry, greedy, and lascivious woman whose lack of restraint propels the Jia family further and more rapidly into decline'[4]: Xi-feng as yet another literary enactment of the traditional generic role of the shrew or female virago. While the artistic function of Xi-feng as shrew is described as amplifying 'the social contradictions manifested in her transgression of rigid prescriptions of power, gender and social order',[5] in the end it is the *transgression* which is seen as condemned by the writer, rather than the 'rigid prescriptions'; her story is seen to be confirming the wisdom of Confucian philosophy: 'she is the unrestrained female phoenix – who should have a dragon to tame her excessive *yang*'; the women who aspire to increase their *yang* are doomed to failure in an aggressive or amusing effort to rise above themselves and their female bodies. Wang Xi-feng's *yang* nature is not sustainable – it ultimately marks the decline of the family and the decline of her personal health. She tries too hard to be *yang* – refusing to take medication, denying her illness and weakness and ultimately becoming out of balance. Her miscarriage and failure to produce a son make a mockery of her jewelled hair ornament displaying 'a dragon playing with a pearl decoration'.[6] Another scholar sees the novel as 'betraying its phallocentric bias' in its Confucian condemnation of 'Xi-feng's transgression of gender norms'.[7] The view that Xueqin is intent on condemning Xi-feng as a shrewish transgressor remains the predominant reading, as the preferred solution to her contradictory role in the novel as both 'the soul of the whole great household', one earlier translator's summing-up of Dai-yu's 'immediate impression' of her first appearance in the novel,[8] and the later 'cunning and malice' of the 'hypocritical' role she plays as destroyer of the rival wife, which is where the interest in her ends in this abridged version.

In analysing Shakespeare's major tragedies, one critic describes the interaction between a past literary prototype and the 'truer to life' representation of the character as the creative process which gives these plays their 'modernity' – their lasting contemporary appeal.[9] This is a far from simple process: it is the moral ambiguity and disillusioned questioning troubling the tragic identity of Hamlet which is the essence of this 'modernity'. How and why *is* Hamlet a 'tragic hero': intensely motivated to honour his murdered father's commandment to 'set things right' through exacting swift revenge but whose cunning to save the 'rotten' state of Denmark is counterintuitive – the guise of madness, the 'mousetrap' – and worse, de-humanising: 'affrighting' and insulting Ophelia, mistakenly stabbing her old father Polonius but then treating the dead body with sacrilegious contempt, all of this leading to her madness and drowning; shifting his death sentence onto his guards and, perhaps most troubling of all, overriding his ghost/father's counsel and venting his moral outrage and frustration by scarifying his loving mother for sins of

which she is unaware, breaking her heart: 'O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain' (3.4.154) (discussed in detail in earlier chapters). Hamlet, in striving to honour the traditional revenge code, becomes an actor playing a part, separated from himself, scheming, heartless, self-justifying, the kind of madness for which he is 'shamed' by the 'immanent death of twenty thousand men' in an act of revenge to reclaim a 'little patch of ground' (4.4.17–59), a 'madness' which he tries to disown as Hamlet 'from himself be ta'en away' (5.2.12).

Reading Xi-feng through *Hamlet*, a similar sense of moral ambiguity and cultural questioning troubles the narrative: Xi-feng, in striving to retain her identity as model wife and to honour the orthodox marital code, undermined in body and mind by the family culture of covert female rivalry and male financial incompetence and dubious morality – 'The only clean things about the Ning-guo House are the stone lions that stand outside the gates. The very cats and dogs are corrupted' (3.66.303) – finds herself acting the revenge role of the shrew in all its clever traps and de-humanising refusal to foresee the consequences of these actions; most damningly the miscarriage and suicide of the 'other' wife. Like Hamlet, swept along by ambition to restore propriety and good order, she becomes the opposite of her own ideal. Hence the challenge raised by reading Xi-feng through *Hamlet* is to test whether it is possible that Xueqin is presenting Xi-feng in similarly paradoxical terms: at once the unredeemable shrew and the 'true-to-life' tragic heroine whose existential struggle is imagined with an intensity raising it to the heroic.

While the shrew genre is as universal in literature as gender hierarchy and while several of Shakespeare's comedies, particularly *The Taming of the Shrew*, may appear to offer a more obvious point of comparison than *Hamlet*, shrewishness in *Taming* is more a youthful assertion of female independence than the defence of a marital ideal which is central to Xi-feng's struggle. *Taming* exposes patriarchal dominance through comedic contests of wit, where Xi-feng's battle – while it is highly inventive and also excruciatingly comic in some key scenes – is a fight to the death; in its expression of a culture falling apart, 'out of joint', it is closer to the tragic mode of *Hamlet*. Indeed, the Renaissance concept of 'self-fashioning' is discerned by an eminent Shakespearean scholar to apply to literary figures in Late Imperial China who 'seem to drive themselves towards the most sensitive regions of their culture, to express and even, by design, to embody its dominant satisfactions and anxieties':[10] a most apt description of the character of Wang Xi-feng.

Then again, Shakespeare's tragedy of *Othello:*

> Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
> Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
> Perplex'd in the extreme
>
> (5.2.394)

– one whose noble sense of self, tested to the limits, fails him – would perhaps be the most interesting comparison, particularly if these words are interpreted as ironic, as Othello denying jealousy and 'trying to cheer himself up',[11] as it would highlight, by contrast, how jealousy is so much more female-specific in the pre-modern Chinese literary tradition. However, this would bring in a great many other issues falling too far outside the scope of this study.

Shakespeare takes up the issue of gender roles in many of his plays, and it is relevant to this discussion to note how, in the *Taming of the Shrew*, the play is threaded throughout with the implicit irony that the husband's 'taming' is destroying not only the wife's 'shrewishness' but also the very qualities of wit, pride and independent spirit which, putting each on their mettle, is the perverse basis of their courtship and marriage: in this play, the 'taming' represents more of a fight between equals, however much the 'shrew' may declare herself 'tamed' at the end. The heroine's final speech of submission is so lengthy, fulsome and sermon-like as to become comical, culminating in counsel to 'headstrong women' to 'place your hands below your husband's foot' as she makes the humble gesture herself; ironically, this is far more eloquent of male oppression than female obedience, and the final line of the play leaves the whole 'taming' amusingly undermined: 'Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so' (*Taming* 5.2.190). Gender inequality and romance in *Hamlet* is viewed from a vastly different perspective, much closer to *The Story of the Stone* as Shakespeare dramatises the tragic impact of the patriarchal codes of revenge and family honour on the two main female characters. These aspects are explored more fully in other chapters but are brought forward here to underline how reading *Hamlet* sensitises reading *The Story of the Stone* to the complexities of female representation in creative fiction – and vice-versa, as reading the novel and coming back to *Hamlet* sharpens a focus on this issue which remains vexed in the scholarship.

But does the proposition that Xueqin is presenting Xi-feng in paradoxical terms similar to the tragic heroes of Shakespearean tragedy imply, from the 'dominant perspective' taken of Xi-feng, that Xueqin has not succeeded in this more complex artistic purpose: his 'flawed heroine' is 'flawed' but not 'heroic'? Unlike Shakespeare inviting audience identification with Hamlet's existential struggles through his soliloquies – an unusually large number – Xueqin has given scant direct access to Xi-feng's inner thoughts and feelings – her interiority. Xueqin has been quite deliberate in this: Xi-feng is the 'little general', illiterate, worldly-wise, strategic rather than self-reflective, and it is largely on the meticulous detail of his attention to the external world of 'real events' in the narration that the novel depends in garnering sympathy

for her transformation into a shrew – even as this risks placing the reader in the invidious position of taking a sympathetic view of '*A scheming woman who kills with a borrowed knife*', the title of Chapter 69 – and even if this wording is provocative, as it is for many chapter headings in the novel.

Xueqin draws attention to this artistic decision in a rare authorial intervention in Chapter 29. Here the author interrupts the narrative to reveal, through describing their 'inner thoughts', the seemingly inexplicable 'situation' of why the hero and heroine, although 'already of one mind' keep on quarrelling and driving each other apart. The revelation seems deliberately gratuitous: the 'percipient reader' has already been made well aware of the 'inner thoughts' of his hero and heroine through the narrative of 'real events' and does not need a 'morbid streak' to explain the youthful perverse pride and self-protective propriety at play in their interactions. Xueqin is here exposing the fallacy of the omnipotent author pre-empting his characters – revealing 'the secret, innermost thoughts of those young persons, which neither of them had so far been able to express' – when it is through the narration of their 'outward' expression that he has chosen to reveal these inner thoughts: the more passionate the hero in trying to destroy his the jade amulet to 'put an end to [the gold-and-jade reference] once and for all', the more it attests to the depth of his love for the heroine. The intervention concludes with the author slyly withdrawing from his revelation:

> Let us now return from the contemplation of inner thoughts to the recording of outward appearances.
>
> (2.29.86–87)

It is the argument of this present discussion that it is largely through the tension set up between Xueqin's 'recording of outward appearances' and her 'inner thoughts' which gives Xi-feng her 'true-to-life modernity': by 'acting' the model wife she reminds the reader of its violation by the family and in so doing justifies her own violations. The originality of this approach may be demonstrated by reference to a scholarly overview of the shrew/female virago genre, in which an historical novel by a writer contemporary with Xueqin about the fabled Imperial shrew Empress Xi, is brought forward as an example of a more sympathetic approach to the subject than previous versions: 'The abundant use of interior monologue affords the reader access to her inner thoughts, especially her sense of insecurity and frustration. [The writer] understands her transformation into a virago'.[12] However, for all the novelist's sympathetic revelations of Empress Xi's inner thoughts, his story is equally if not more intent upon outdoing Empress

Xi's own lurid shrew prototype, the Empress Li, in the violent excesses of 'poetic' justice wrought upon her husband's favourite concubine:

> Empress Xi hurls abuse at Consort Miao, strips her naked, and ties her up to a column. Then she has someone shoot arrows at Miao's mouth, hands, feet, breasts and private parts. When Miao curses her and threatens to turn into an avenging ghost, the empress orders a eunuch to cut out her tongue and hack open her chest, until she is nothing but a mangled corpse.[13]

It is eloquent of the paradoxical nature of Xueqin's creation of Xi-feng that this scholar's examination of Xueqin's treatment of the shrew finds that the greater realism, far from humanising the characterisation of Xi-feng as female virago, has only raised the bar on shrewishness; she is seen as the 'tyrant' shrew, employing all her cleverness and 'ability to dramatize herself' to manipulate her victims, putting on 'tour-de-force performances' to shift blame onto others 'while cloaking herself in the mantle of law-abiding and honourable pillar of the clan'; 'her excesses are such that she suffers retribution on a grand scale'.[14] Further, Xueqin's purpose in bracketing Xi-feng with another shrew character in the novel, Xia Jingui, 'tak[ing] a leaf from Xi-feng's book'- is seen as Xueqin's confirmation of the grotesque mental illness of the prototype. This is notwithstanding that most readers find the Jingui story is a melodramatic implant: Jingui, along with several other characters and episodes, is Xueqin's reminder of 'this sort of stuff', more a foil against which the realism of his reimagined prototype Xi-feng may be evaluated, rather than its perpetuation. To be discussed in more detail presently, it is this 'sort of stuff' which Xueqin reworks for the emotional truths the genre invariably distorts into the horrifying stories in the traditional literature of 'Admonitions' against harbouring jealousy, promoting, as with the cult of chastity, the tightening of patriarchal marital codes 'designed to expand the state's regulation of society'.[15]

'O'erdoing Termagant – it out-Herod's Herod', to borrow Hamlet's description of actors who overplay their parts and 'tear a passion to tatters' (3.2.9–13); the Empress's horrific actions strip her of any sympathetic 'true-to-life' pretences and return her to the stereotype. This stark contradiction between a seemingly realistic character and the melodrama of her actions is not where Xueqin's literary ambitions lie: from the outset, in writing *The Story of the Stone*, Xueqin – speaking through Brother Stone – has refused 'to make use of . . . stale old convention' and has aspired to tell his story 'exactly as it happened', no 'scabrous attacks on the reputations of long-dead gentlewomen' – Empress Xi and Empress Li – no 'dreary stereotypes', 'quite simply a 'true record of real events':

> All that my story narrates, the meetings and partings, the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs of fortune, are recorded exactly as they

> happened. I have not dared to add even the tiniest bit of touching-up, for fear of losing the true picture.
>
> (1.1.50–51)

These words are disingenuous overstatement, drawing attention to Xueqin's aspiration to a new fictional realism while keenly alive to its inherent paradox. Hawkes' biographical notes on Xueqin indicate that the writer scraped out a living by rock-painting, a genre which, as the few paintings presently attributed to him in the 'Cao Zhan Painting Album of the Celery Cultivator' show,[16] attempted to capture the 'true picture' or inner spirit of vegetable nature through the energy contained in the free brushwork of ink on paper. As a rock-painter he would be keenly aware of the paradox of representational art: that the more literally true-to-life it is – denying the separation between the literal world and the *illusion* of reality created by the artistic imagination – the less it is a work of art *unless* it is a post-modern representation of the paradox itself. For Xueqin, reading narrative fiction is to enter 'The Land of Illusion':

> Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;
> Real becomes not real when the unreal's real.
>
> (*Stone* 1.1.55)

Brother Stone/Xueqin's claim for the truth of his story in its claims on scrupulous realism, uncontaminated by any 'touching up', can never be more than an *illusion* of untouched real life as refracted through the writer's imagination.

The negative shrew interpretation of Xi-feng is now so pervasive in *Stone* scholarship that it obscures any invitation the writer may be making to read her story ironically, as inhabiting a gap between reality and illusion: to see Xi-feng as an *actor*, playing a part – trying to play a part obedient to the cultural ideals of womanhood expected of her but undermined by 'reality' – the 'true record of real events'. Scholars note how 'theatrical performance tapped into a highly elaborated discourse in Chinese culture . . . an abiding concern with the fulfilment of one's social roles'[17]; these roles were the language by which literary characters and actions were understood, and the challenge for the creative artist is to open up a gap, to dramatise the transformation from one role into another through exposing the very 'real' dilemmas and contradictions driving this process. Such role-assignment implicitly heightened the inherent contradiction in the female marital role as upholder of the dignity of marriage and yet passive bearer of her husband's transgressions – the character You-shi in *The Story of the Stone*. Xueqin's creative use of theatrical role-playing in his characterisation of Xi-feng, her ability to dramatise herself with the wit and imagination to assume the often contradictory roles required by the family in a context of male dereliction of Confucian norms, is employed not to self-condemn

Xi-feng so much as to expose, through the role-playing itself, the mockery of 'social roles' in the degenerating Jia household; all the self-deceptions, falseness and hypocrisy undermining the marital codes and patriarchal responsibilities for financial security which Xi-feng attempts to uphold, only to be 'caught in her own toils'. The pivotal scene in the novel, the ceremonial visit of Xi-feng to the 'other Mrs Lian' – quintessential soap-opera – is a dramatic performance of Xi-feng playing the 'first wife' role in the gracious way she has been denied being able to live; while the gap between the ideal and the default shrew role is often read as revealing the 'real' depths of her jealousy, the episode is equally Xueqin's exquisitely painful dramatisation of the 'real' depths of the demoralising impact of her displacement.

It is this 'acting a role' aspect of Xueqin's literary art to which a lifetime of reading *Hamlet* sensitises this reading of *The Story of the Stone*. 'Acting' the ideal wife places this ideal in front of the reader, not so much to reveal Xi-feng's cunning as to reveal the wrong which has been done to her in denying her rightful privilege in being the gracious First Wife – the role she has prepared for herself and her husband already made explicit earlier in the narrative. Misplaced assertion of self-belief is indeed there in the novel, just as in *Hamlet*, where Hamlet's failure to 'sweep to his revenge' makes a mockery of his self-image as one 'born to set [a rotten Denmark] right' and his 'unbalanced' dedication to this task above all else in his life is only destructive to those he loves and himself. 'Doomed to failure' as Hamlet may also be, but this response never feels adequate to comprehending Shakespeare's artistic purpose in creating this unforgettable character and, as it is hoped to show, a similar challenge may be discerned in Xueqin's sustained imaginative investment (in the first three volumes in particular) in the unforgettable character of Xi-feng. Far from the novel condemning Xi-feng's transgression of gender norms, the story of Xi-feng dramatises their tragic contradictions. The challenge here is to place the story of Xi-feng within the shrew genre to illuminate Xueqin's artistic re-imagining of the stereotype in his wider exploration of the 'main theme' of the novel – 'love' (1.1.51).

Finally, while the narration of the story of Xi-feng's final days in the last two Gao E -edited chapters becomes more identified with the high drama of the downfall of the family, it is hoped to show – reading Xi-feng through Hamlet who, in his final days is oppressed by a sense of having transgressed his own moral boundaries, 'That I have shot my arrow o'er the house/And hurt my brother' (5.2.220–21) – in the attention to Xi-feng's thoughts and dreams there is an expression of remorse and a depth of conscience which seeks, as with Hamlet, to find some restorative *action* to 'leave behind' to set their 'wounded name' to right. Each character has lived through the destructive folly of their literary prototype and paid for this with their own

lives, and their creators do not leave them there to perpetuate the shrew/revenge prototype but to expose its tragic 'illusion' of 'reality'.

This is the alternative reading tested in Section 2 of this chapter, which finds within the discursive narrative of the story of Xi-feng an inner five-act structure akin to the dramatic structure of tragic drama followed in *Hamlet*. Section 1 grounds this reading by reference to the ancient tradition of shrew stories in Chinese literature, and to the contemporary historical context of mid-Qing imperial policy which placed a 'new emphasis' on the marital bond as the primary family relationship and the family as the cornerstone of social stability.[18] Above all perhaps – and again linking back to reading Shakespearean drama – it is dependent upon Xueqin's own dramatic, visual narrative style indebted to the tradition of poetic/operatic romantic drama referenced throughout *The Story of the Stone* and in which the writer was steeped (the subject of a further study of the novel, on the challenge of writing romantic fiction in an age threatened by the 'illusion' of its truth.)

Section 1: The shrew literary prototype and the contemporary social and political context

1 Tales of the shrew, AD 500–1800

Scholarly studies such as Yenna Wu's translations and analysis of shrew fiction in *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme* and in *The Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China*, and Daria Berg's essay on the fifth-century *Record of Jealous Women*,[19] among others, provide a history of the shrew genre in all its multifaceted complexity. The jealous female represents 'a violation of the Confucian ideal of matrimony' codified, in the female historian Ban Zhao's ancient classic text *Admonitions for Women* (29 BC),[20] in terms of female humility and submissiveness in marriage, stressing that men should be strong like *yang* and women yielding like *yin*. The Tang dynasty's *Book of Filial Piety for Women* places jealousy foremost among its seven grounds for divorce.[21] However, just as filial piety is not a simple matter of obedience to the father but requires remonstrance where the father is unrighteous (see Chapter 1), so also Ban Zhao reminds her reader that marital piety is not a simple matter of obedience to the husband but requires both the husband and the wife not to be 'unworthy': 'If a man is unworthy, he will not be able to control his wife; if a woman is unworthy, she will not be able to serve her husband'. A worthy woman may well have an unworthy husband, but a worthy man by definition cannot have an unworthy wife: his own position as superior in the social hierarchy is at stake in keeping his wife worthy. In another translation, this

conclusion is spelled out: 'As a matter of fact, in practice these two [the controlling of women by men and the serving of men by women] work out in the same way'; it is the master-servant hierarchy which is the basis of the reciprocity; a good servant is still obliged to serve a bad master.

This is the potentially contentious space in which the shrew genre – tales of the 'unworthy woman' – had developed, where the Confucian mediating ideal of harmony, negotiation and remonstration collides with the hierarchical ideal of marital relations – 'control' and 'serve', and where female jealousy is incubated in the context of patriarchal structures of concubinage and supplementary wives, ideally to secure the patriline but also interpreted as male privilege to conduct extramarital affairs and casual promiscuity, as is evident throughout *The Story of the Stone*. While some shrew stories exposed the unfairness to the wife and garnered sympathy for her suffering, the potential of the subject for sensational storytelling was endless, reinforcing cultural stereotypes and patriarchy's vested interest in the husband controlling his erring wife in highly elaborate scenarios, often bordering on slapstick comedy. They delight in the inventiveness of the 'Jealousy Tamer' and the 'Vinegar Queen' in their strategies to outwit each other, and in the descriptions of violence – slicing of flesh a favourite; another more effective response put forward to a wife's 'shrewish' threat of suicide is to accept her word and appear to facilitate the act while reciting, outside her door, the *Rebirth Sutra*: 'lest your soul not be redeemed because of your unnatural death'.[22] One famous tale about two henpecked husbands, *Marriage as Retribution*, by the storyteller Pu Songling writing in the generation prior to Xueqin, concludes that 'there is no relief from the sufferings of married life except that of tolerance and the chanting of Buddha's names for deliverance'[23]: the theme is also in other tales by this writer.

Most scholars agree as to the complexity and controversial characterisation of Xi-feng, the vivid dramatic counterpoint she presents to Bao-yu and the double exposure of gender issues this affords, but are troubled, as with readers of *Hamlet*, by seemingly unconscionable actions – 'driving' Jia Rui and then Er-Jie to death; a merciless managerial style; dubious financial dealings (one resulting in a lovers' suicide); attempting to 'procure' a death; and, while she is a sympathetic if teasing observer of the intense romantic bond between the young would-be lovers Bao-yu and Dai-yu and a potential 'go-between', it is Xi-feng who devises the fateful deception practiced upon Bao-yu in the 'trick' marriage. The shrew genre, with its age-old history, offers an obvious reference point: the first collection of stories, *Accounts of Female Jealousy*, appeared in the fifth century AD, followed by the sixth-century *Compilation of Belles-Lettres*; some shrew stories are included in the tenth-century compendium *Taiping Miscellany*; many examples of jealous and ferocious empresses and imperial

concubines can be found in the Qing dynasty *Compendium of Books Ancient and Modern*, and in the late Ming and Qing dynasties – the time of Xueqin's writing – this theme was developed in dozens of novels, plays and short stories.[24] As her story unfolds, Xi-feng appears to fit so obviously into this literary genre, the shrew – or 'female virago' – described as 'multi-faceted' but having its most persistent formulation as 'the jealous and belligerent principal wife who dominates her husband and abuses his concubine(s)' that, as a character, she tends to be sidelined in *Stone* scholarship. Although a candidate as the sadly failed 'hero among woman' – the traditional term used for the hyper-feminine shrew, admirable in her attempts to transcend her conventional constraints and in her attempts to 'accomplish a goal that itself embodies the highest social ideals'[25] – in the end scholars tend to find her more of a pathetic victim than a challenge to change or, worse, a betrayal of the feminist cause in her cruelty and avarice.

As mentioned in the introduction, Xi-feng is one of the 'Twelve Beauties of Jinling' – an early prospective title for *Stone* – and as such, one of those 'female companions of my youth' whom the writer acknowledges as inspiration for his novel, one of those 'wonderful girls' he could not bear 'to allow to pass into oblivion without a memorial' (1.1.20–21). For a writer so alive to the superior 'worthiness' of these female companions elsewhere in the novel, the pejorative connotations of the shrew genre could hardly have escaped him, and he had ample literary prototypes for his creative genius to reflect upon. While the shrew genre is shot through with ambiguity, often a condemnation of the shameful violence or weakness of the male as much as of the violent, scheming female and a reflection of a crisis in male identity in the cowed and beaten husband not attempting to fight back, this implicitly confirms the inferior status of the female rather than its elevation. Xueqin's creative response to this fraught genre is focussed on the experience of the female first and foremost, his objective to give the reader some sense of the tragic reality for women behind the persistence of this literary phenomenon, a part of his overarching ambition to write a new story on the 'theme of love' grounded in his own observations:

> Surely my 'number of females', whom I spent half a lifetime studying with my own eyes and ears, are preferable to this kind of stuff?
>
> (1.1.50)

The 'stuff' Xueqin is referring to here is the 'stale old convention[s]' of past romantic fiction, the 'erotic' romance with its 'filthy obscenities', the boudoir romance with its idealised heroes and heroines 'all pitched in the same note' and the historical romances with their 'artificial period setting – Han or Tang for

the most part, their 'scandalous anecdotes about statesmen and emperors . . . and long-dead gentlewomen', their 'wickedness and immorality':

> In refusing to make use of that stale old convention and telling my *Story of the Stone* exactly as it occurred, it seems to me that, far from *depriving* it of anything, I have given it a freshness these other books don't have.
> (1.1.49)

2 *The shrew prototype planted in the novel*

Xueqin provides just such a 'prototype' in the aforementioned drama of Xia Jingui, the jealous wife of Xue Pan, 'unworthy' son and sole male support of his widowed mother Aunt Xue and sister Bao-chai, who are aunt and cousin to the main protagonists in the novel. Like the story to be looked at presently of the erotic infatuation of Jia Rui, which raises the gendered issue of chastity, it is given a melodramatic quality, drawing attention to how debased and farcical the shrew concept has become in reflecting the nature of marital disharmony. The story comes well after the main narrative of Xi-feng's ill-fated creative attempt to restore her wifely status, risking consignment to the judgement of history as an exemplar of the prototype jealous woman herself. How Xueqin then negotiates this risk by placing the characterisation of Xi-feng against the melodramatic fictional presentation typical of the short story 'shrew' genre is evident in the deliberate comparison he sets up in the introductory details, including an invidious, provocative reference to Xi-feng. As soon as the story begins, its tongue-in-cheek parody throws the entire tale into question:

> The young lady Xue Pan was marrying was said to be not only beautiful but educated . . . still only seventeen. It is true that she was not at all bad-looking; she could even read quite a number of words; and if subtle deviousness of character had been an examinable qualification, she might have come out a good second to Xi-feng . . . the discovery that there was a beautiful and intelligent young concubine in this household she was entering aroused feelings in her akin to those expressed by the founder of the Song dynasty when he likened the world to a bedroom and declared none but he should snore in it.
> (3.79.593)

Xueqin is enjoying the storytelling, so wonderfully simple and clear as to where it is going and so unlike his main narrative style. He equals if not outdoes the lurid inventiveness of the professional storytellers, capturing

the naked human truths these stories reveal in unforgettable images such as that of Jin-gui in a hospitable mood, gnawing on bones:

> Sometimes in the interval between quarrelling, if she was feeling cheerful, Jin-gui would gather a few people together to play at dice or cards. She was inordinately fond of gnawing bones, especially the bones of fowls. To satisfy this craving she had ducks and chickens killed every day. The meat she gave to other people; it was only the bones, crisp-fried in boiling fat, that she kept for herself, to nibble with her wine. Sometimes, if the bone she was gnawing was giving her trouble and she grew impatient, she would swear like a trooper.
>
> 'That ponce and his poxy strumpet seem to enjoy themselves', she would say self-pityingly. 'Why can't I get any enjoyment?'
>
> (3.80.606)

This is parody, but it is also a compelling image of a termagant, a terrible mental condition of extreme egotism – an indulgence only allowed to the founders of the Song dynasty in Xueqin's little touch of comic irony. Its causes are explained in terms of the girl's upbringing, but this placing of blame on a widowed mother feels more like the moralising typical of 'admonitions for women' than 'true-to-life' characterisation. Such a surreal story cannot develop with any further complexity of character; even the sad story of the 'poxy strumpet', a character in whom the writer has invested a good deal of care from the outset, fits only awkwardly in the narrative, notwithstanding how neatly her beginning and her end tie together the first and last chapters of the saga (5.120.373). The whole Jin-gui affair loses its initial interest and even its parodic punch as it disappears for many chapters then reappears, dragged out through all its sordid intrigues until well into the last volume, ending in the chapter titled *'Jin-gui dies by her own hand, caught in a web of her own weaving'*. This is a similar pronouncement of poetic justice as for Xi-feng in the prophetic song-cycle, but only serves to show how the literary grotesquerie of marriage is merging into the grotesque nature of marriage in real life signalled at the outset when, directly after the introduction to Jin-gui, the young hero Bao-yu pays her a visit and leaves mystified: 'How can so beautiful a girl come to have so appalling a character?' When he visits the family temple, he takes the opportunity to put a question to a roguish old Taoist monk 'One Plaster Wang':

> 'The one thing I want to know about is jealousy', said Bao-yu.
> 'Could one of your plasters cure a woman of being jealous?'

> One Plaster Wang clapped his hands and laughed.
> 'Now there you have me! Neither of my plasters nor anyone else's could do that!'
>
> (3.80.609)

Bao-yu's question goes back many centuries and, with his interest in the healing properties of plants, he could have been directed to ancient works such as the *Book of Mountains and Seas* which listed certain plants and animals as efficacious cures for jealousy.[26] A famous story in Xueqin's time is prefaced with an ironic lyric, beginning with the claim:

> There are cures for jealous wives
> But no medicine for cowardly husbands.[27]

Composed for hen-pecked husbands, it demonstrates how extreme and sustained male strategic manipulation can succeed in curing the shrewish wife of an 'unworthy' cowardly man: it is the woman who must be cured in order for the man to be cured and the power hierarchy restored, the primary concern. Bao-yu knows enough of Xue Pan to have understood that at least some of the jealousy was brought about by the husband's own 'appalling' character; Bao-yu's question reflects more his own situation and the problem of jealousy with his own 'woman', Dai-yu, and among his maids – the most beautiful and shrewish of whom is now dead, Bao-yu just before having conducted an elaborate invocation to her flower spirit, inadvertently again stirring Dai-yu's jealousy. Xueqin has, however, much earlier answered Bao-yu's question in the striking revelation that Dai-yu's rival, Bao-chai, uses a 'cold-fragrance pill' to control her 'overheatedness' (1.17.7), an 'illness' which is made the subject of some curiosity and although passed off as just a 'cough and wheeze', is suggestive of a more intimate condition – unwelcome libido. Bao-chai notably refuses to be jealous, demonstrating the Confucian injunction to regulate intimate relationships by moral discipline – even if this requires resorting to a flower-based drug, upstaging One Plaster Wang! The old fraudster's cryptic answer refers to Taoist alchemy to purify the spirit and transform human beings towards immortality:

> Even my plasters are tomfoolery. Do you think if I really had a magic formula I'd be sitting here talking to you now? I'd have taken it myself long ago and gone off to join the immortals.
>
> (3.80.610)

This takes the cure for jealousy beyond the merely physical, towards a cure for being mortal in 'the great illusion that is human life' itself, but for which the only cure the Old Taoist yet knows is to become a monk or die – just his little joke for a youngster with 'woman' troubles.

It is of further significance that Xueqin follows this spiritual advice with a reminder of the great 'dis-illusion' of human life, the story of the heart-breaking and brutal marriage of one of the '*Twelve Beauties*', the gentle Ying-chun, much loved by her young cousins, who has been 'sold' for 'five thousand taels' by her father Sir Jia She, Xi-feng's depraved father-in-law; he has borrowed the money in exchange for Ying-chun minus her dowry. The husband now calls her 'a jealous little bitch' and she is treated 'no better than a bought slave'. In the Supplementary Registers attached to the file '*Jingling*, *Twelve Beauties of*', in the great operatic dream sequence early in the novel, Ying-chun is depicted as a beautiful girl being seized by a savage wolf, with the inscription:

> Paired with a brute . . .
> To cruelty not used, your gentle heart
> Shall, in a twelvemonth only, break apart.
> (1.5.134)

And in the Seventh Song, *Husband and Enemy*, tone and words savagely condemn the husband as an 'inhuman sot': 'For riot or for whoring always hot', his 'delicate young wife . . . no more than a lifeless block'. Bao-yu's mother has tried to comfort her:

> 'He's obviously an unreasonable man', she said, 'but now that you're married to him, nothing can be done . . . My poor child! I'm afraid it must be your fate'.
> (3.80.611)

Xueqin's narrative makes it clear that 'something' could have been done if Ying-chun had at least been returned her dowry when Jia She had paid the loan back, but he has refused to do so. His wife Lady Xing, Xi-feng's mother-in-law, who has long since chosen to ignore her husband's roving eye, has also remained passive: Ying-chun is not her birth child but only a concubine's. Ying-chun with her 'sweet soul' is the opposite of Jin-gui, and she dies of her husband's abuse within a year. (Late in the novel when the Jias' finances collapse, this family sends a janitor to call in the debts: 5.106.130.)

By placing the story here, Xueqin is underlining that while centuries of literary culture have produced an entire genre of tales of the jealous, shrewish, 'unworthy' woman – continuing the tradition of Zhao's classic text *Admonitions for Women* – there is no genre of tales of the brutish 'unworthy' male and no women asking how to cure male shrewishness; similarly, it may be noted here that in Western literary usage, the word 'termagant', originally denoting a male shrew, was transferred to the female during the seventeenth century, with no word to replace it for males. There

is no literary genre in which Xi-feng's own story of marital suffering can be played out except the shrew prototype, which designates the wife's remonstration against her husband as 'jealousy, 'hen-pecking', 'trouble-making' or worse; Xi-feng is inhabiting this genre and, in Xueqin's creative re-imagining, both engages and alienates the reader in a complex ambiguity akin to Hamlet's, a modernity of perspectives which turns her tragedy into its own critique.

3 Marriage in the mid-Qing era

The following quotation of a quotation provides a very useful context for interpreting Xi-feng's story:

> 'Marriage . . . was by far the most important contractual relationship in Chinese society'. . . . People of higher social position . . . found their marriage partners from among a more exclusive set of families . . . the 'major' form of marriage, in which the wife came as an adult to join her husband's household. . . . Naturally the bride, protected by prominent parents and brothers, was able to hold a position of considerable authority and respect in her husband's household. As a first wife (she would never have been given as a second wife) she would eventually become the matriarch of the *jia*, with control of the household. She would receive ritual homage from any secondary wife chosen by her husband and be ritually acknowledged as mother by all offspring, not just her own. She brought in a considerable dowry if she came from a well-to-do family, and at least a portion of that dowry was her own, to dispose of as she pleased. Occasionally, the sums over which women exercised control were extremely large: it was not just in novels that women lent out money at high rates of interest or invested in commercial ventures.[28]

Directly related to this, scholarly research in this late Qing period shows that female chastity – with the main emphasis on the virtuous married or widowed woman – was enshrined in state policy and legislation to an unprecedented extent, as a major instrument of social stability and civilising agency. Suicide had long been a redemptive recourse for violated females and the state transformed this into a cult of chastity martyrdom, honouring female 'chastity martyrs' with shrines and tablets inscribed with their names. A proliferating array of statutes and sub-statutes brought down the full force of the state on the male offender: however, patriarchal family and wider social structures had a competing interest in keeping these 'disgraceful matters' out of the courts. Furthermore, the judicial discourse reveals that the patriarchal family structures themselves were

not reliable: 'officials were often far more deeply and frequently disturbed by the weakness, corruption, and compromised authority of fathers, husbands, lineage leaders, community elders, and even local magistrates'.[29] 'To insult a woman's chastity was to deny her humanity': women who had internalised the imperial chastity ideal felt deprived of their feminine pride, self-belief and moral integrity, the effect described in the records as *wuru* – 'humiliation' and 'mortification'.[30] Female chastity martyrdom increased in a context of inadequate application of the law – so much so that the Qianglong Emperor, ruling in Xueqin's time, brought forward a 'benevolent' statute applying qualifying conditions for martyrdom by distinguishing the 'sincere' from the 'insincere'[31] – to protect 'women who take life lightly' from their own 'fickleness, irrationality and emotional fragility'.[32] This effectively put the blame for chastity violation back upon the 'frailty' of woman. Women were thus placed in a contradictory position: on the one hand, invested with personal power as a superior moral authority in the family and wider community; on the other, subjected to the 'humiliation' and 'mortification' of not being trusted with the moral agency to make their own judgements about what is, and what isn't, 'taking life lightly'.

Xueqin's engagement with his historical context is eloquently expressed in Xi-feng who, from her first appearance, represents the inherent contradiction in the passive domestic role implicit in the marital relationship and the active political role expected of women as defenders of wifely virtue. The corruption of patriarchal family structures and the incidence of female suicide is so emphatically reflected throughout *The Story of the Stone* that it must be concluded that Xi-feng, as a strong woman, has a particular role in this scenario, but interestingly, not as a 'chastity martyr'. Xi-feng's martyrdom is as a 'First Wife' and is related more to the financial collapse of the family; tellingly, Cao Xueqin was likewise a martyr to financial collapse, the writer ineffectually 'shifting for himself'; once so secure in wealth, his once-great Cao family now 'no more than the stuff of dreams' (1.20–21). In this wider context, the tragedy of Xi-feng is the tragedy of the great family acting out the dilemmas in the Confucian ideal of the *li* where the participants in each level of the social hierarchy are required to 'continually re-affirm and reproduce the cosmic, the political and the civilized social order':[33] the failure beginning at the top; the next level called upon to compensate.

Section 2: The tragedy of Wang Xi-feng in five acts

The following discussion explores the potential for a 'reading' of the story of Wang Xi-feng loosely in accordance with the Western classical five-act structure of tragic drama: exposition, rising movement, climax, falling action and catastrophe or resolution. It attempts to give full value to the dramatic character of Xueqin's narrative style even as it is continually

drawing upon the far wider narrative of the Jia family fortunes which complicate and confound 'outward appearances' so that no one 'story of Xi-feng' can satisfy all reflections in the mirror 'held up to Nature', to quote from *Hamlet* (3.2.22) keeping in mind that *Hamlet* is itself notably sprawling, only loosely structured on the classical model. The climax of the play's 'action' is typically seen as Act 3 Scene (iv), where Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius in the belief that it is his father's murderer Claudius spying ignominiously behind a curtain in his mother's chamber. In seizing the perfect opportunity to enact revenge in the 'horrid' circumstances proper to it, he finds that he has mistakenly killed the father of his 'soul's idol', Ophelia, further accumulating catastrophes towards the tragic resolution of the revenge cycle.

The climax of the story of Xi-feng may be taken to be the enactment of her 'plan' to reassert her proper status as First Wife over the 'other Mrs Lian' – the 'strong woman' revenge action to restore marital honour, which unravels and resolves itself downwards into catastrophe. The five acts, and the chapters sourced for each, are proposed loosely as follows:

Act One, Introduction and Exposition (chapters 3, 7, 31, 52, 49, 36, 16)
Act Two, Rising Action (chapters 11, 12, 13, 61, 14, 15)
Act Three, Climax (chapters 21, 44, 45, 54, 55)
Act Four, Falling Action (chapters 44, 65, 67)
Act Five, Catastrophe and Resolution (chapters 68, 69).

Act 1: Introduction and exposition

Theatricality of self-presentation, the sense in which each character so often seems to be acting a part in a drama of their own devising, is a striking feature common to Hamlet and Xi-feng: even in their first appearance 'on stage' their visual presence makes a vivid statement about the roles each will play. This comparison with *Hamlet* will be taken no further than a reminder of the image of the young man, rightful successor to the throne, seated apart from the others gathering at the post-funeral royal court reception to confirm the succession – a brooding figure, funereal and Puritan in 'inky cloak', 'nighted black', 'veiled [eye]lids seek[ing] his noble father in the dust'; the alienated prince, soon to be called upon to 'set things right' by killing the new king, murderer and usurper of 'crown and queen', playing the combative roles of 'antic' madman and moral scourge even to the death. Xi-feng's first appearance likewise presages her fatal role, so soon to be displaced from her rightful position as 'first wife' in her marriage in a noble family even while she has taken on a self-appointed role as its financial saviour, in a virtuoso performance played out equally grimly and again to the death.

The following two scenes give insight into the early years of the marriage of Xi-feng and Jia Lian, discussed considering alternative interpretations and relevant contextual concepts provided in the wider narrative.

Act 1 Scene (i) 'pin embellished with flying phoenixes, . . .
Her necklet . . . of red gold in the form of a coiling dragon'.
(1.3.91)

The setting for Xi-feng's first 'stage' appearance is the arrival from the south of the six-year-old orphan Lin Dai-yu into the Jia mansion and her brief and solemn meeting with other members of the Jia family, which gives no warning of what now follows, and it is all the more dramatic registered through Dai-yu's awestruck gaze:

> Grandmother Jia had scarcely finished speaking when someone could be heard talking in a very loud voice in the inner courtyard behind them.
>
> 'Oh dear! I'm late', said the voice. "I've missed the arrival of our guest'.
>
> "Everyone else around here seems to go about with bated breath', thought Dai-yu. 'Who can this new arrival be who is so brash and unmannerly?'
>
> Even as she wondered, a beautiful young woman entered from the room behind the one they were sitting in, surrounded by a bevy of serving women and maids. She was dressed quite differently from the others present, gleaming like some fairy princess with sparkling jewels and gay embroideries. Her chignon was enclosed in a circlet of gold filigree and clustered pearls. It was fastened with a pin embellished with flying phoenixes, from whose beaks pearls were suspended on tiny chains.
>
> Her necklet was of red gold in the form of a coiling dragon.
>
> Her dress had a fitted bodice and was made of dark red silk damask with a pattern of flowers and butterflies in raised gold thread.
>
> Her jacket was lined with ermine. It was of a slate-blue stuff with woven insets in coloured silks.
>
> Her under-skirt was of a turquoise-coloured imported silk crepe embroidered with flowers.
>
> She had, moreover,
>
> Eyes like a painted phoenix,
> Eyebrows like willow-leaves
> A slender form
> seductive grace;
> an ever-smiling summer face

> of hidden thunders showed no trace;
> an ever-bubbling laughter started
> almost before the lips were parted.
>
> 'You don't know her', said Grandmother Jia merrily. 'She's a holy terror this one. What we used to call in Nanking a 'peppercorn'. You just call her 'Peppercorn Feng'. She'll know who you mean'.
>
> (1.3.91)

The 'feng' in Xi-feng's name means 'phoenix', but not the Western generalised symbol of regeneration; in Chinese tradition, Xi-feng's hair fastening – the 'pin embellished with flying phoenixes' – together with her 'necklet of red-gold in the form of a coiling dragon' carried the symbolic meaning of the 'yin-and-yang' ideal harmonious union of wife and husband and signified Xi-feng's high status as a married woman. However, the striking confidence of Xi-feng's self-presentation – clothes, jewellery and demeanour, the 'very loud voice' – is taken by scholars to signify that 'in the complementary forces of yin (dark, passive, female) and yang (bright, assertive, male)[34] Xi-feng has an imbalance of yang'. Is it then Xueqin's artistic purpose in describing Xi-feng as 'gleaming like some fairy-princess' to make a negative judgement of her from the outset as the threat to marital and family harmony, rather than its 'gleaming' support?

The importance of Hawkes' translation of Xueqin's theatrical introduction as a starting-point to 'exposition' can perhaps be most clearly appreciated by contrasting it with the Chi-Chen Wang abridged version:

> Suddenly Black Jade heard the sound of laughter in the rear courtyard and the rather loud voice of a young woman saying, 'I am late in greeting the guest from the south'. Who could this be, Black Jade wondered. Everyone else was quiet and demure. This loud laughter was unsuitable to the general atmosphere of dignity and reserve. As Black Jade was thinking thus to herself, a pretty young woman came in. She was tall and slender and carried herself with grace and self-assurance. She was dressed in brighter colours than the granddaughters of the Matriarch and wore an astounding amount of jewellery: somehow it seemed to suit her well, but there was a certain hardness about her that did not escape the careful observer. 'You wouldn't know who she is, of course', the Matriarch said to Black Jade as the latter rose to greet the new arrival, 'but she has the sharpest and cleverest tongue in this family. She is what they call a 'hot pepper' in Nanking, so you can just call her that'.[35]

It is surprising in a Chinese-authored translation that it omits the *yin* (phoenix) and the *yang* (dragon) specification of the 'astounding amount

of jewellery', particularly if this is as important in interpreting Xi-feng as scholars have indicated. As noted earlier about Bao-yu and Xi-feng:

> Cao's particular attention to the beauty of their dress serves to emphasize their masculinity in their interplay of yin and yang . . . [Cao's] ornament of their bodies is a feature of their active yang energy rather than their femininity . . . during the mid-Ching the aestheticizing of the human form was a feature of the yang or masculine aspects of humanity, regardless of physical sex.[36]

Perhaps the translators assumed that the symbolism would escape the non-Chinese reader and pre-empted the meaning with 'but there was a certain hardness about her that did not escape the careful observer'. In the Hawkes translation the 'careful observer' Dai-yu is fascinated and intrigued, not judgemental, whereas these words foreclose judgement on Xi-feng, implying her beguiling femininity hides her real 'hard' self. This view, compounding fox-spirit with shrew, is followed up throughout the Chi-Chen Wang version.

Whatever the cosmological complementarity of the ancient concept of 'yin and yang' in marriage, Xueqin reminds the reader of its reductive 'master-and-servant' interpretation in a characteristically unobtrusive, lightly humorous incident in the second volume of *The Story of the Stone*, in which a girl-cousin instructs an inquisitive maid on this lofty, universe-embracing concept: it ends with the maid declaring that anyway, for all this 'yining' and 'yanging', she already knows about *people* having Yin and Yang – 'you're Yang and I'm Yin' . . . 'That's what they always say', 'the master is Yang and the servant is Yin. Even I can understand that principle' (2.31.123–4).

The aestheticising of *yang* energy is also apparent in the notable development of the Beijing opera at this time and the fascination with male actors transforming themselves into a homoerotic aesthetic ideal of a 'wife and lover' to achieve a position of commercial privilege by displacing female prostitutes in the market of elite patronage.[37] Is this a theatrical appropriation and transformation of feminine beauty into a statement of 'yang' strength? The striking costuming of Bao-yu and Xi-feng suggests that Xueqin may also be wishing to identify a unique capacity for theatrical self-presentation, to re-imagine themselves as other than the gender role in the narrative they seem obliged to take – Bao-yu destined to be the age-old soberly-gowned scholar-official, a model exposed as outmoded in contemporary governance,[38] demonstrated in his own father's failure as an official, or dissolute 'rake' like his uncles and cousins; Xi-feng destined by a promiscuous husband to the fate of devious submissive wife like her mother-in-law. It is this capacity for imagining themselves differently – a

striking *yang* energy, even linking them to supernatural powers in the mind of Bao-yu's witchcrafting Aunt Zhou – which sets Bao-yu and Xi-feng apart in the novel and creates a sense of other projected and new human possibilities, a fantasy fascinating and fragile as their fictional lives play out. It is consistent with this, that of the two other major characters, Bao-chai is notable for her lack of ornamentation in clothing, jewellery and make-up; even Bao-chai's own mother remarks that 'she's funny about these things. She has never liked ornaments or make-up or anything of that sort' (1.7.171) and she hides her *yang* impulses, even medicating to control her 'overheatedness' – a perverse anti-theatricality; and that Dai-yu's self-presentation cultivates a visual presence reminiscent of the tragic beauties of long past, willowy and fragile, her *yin* 'Xi Shi' image masking that *yang* 'divine intellect' which she memorably expresses in her poetry, music and her love for Bao-yu – even as he is far from either the model *yang* son or the model *yang* lover.

In this reading, the 'gleaming' Xi-feng presented to the reader in the Hawkes translation is the writer's own beguiling, lyrical and disarming theatrical challenge to Confucian/Taoist yin/yang philosophy on marital harmony which underpins the shrew genre still pervasive in prose literature of the time and which troubles the novel throughout: passive, submissive wife and active, dominating husband. This would place the artistic function of Xi-feng's 'three-dimensionality' as a searing critique of the abuse of the yin/yang concept of nature's harmony, evident and mourned in her own and all but one of the marriages of the twelve 'wondrous women' for whom Xueqin's novel is a memorial.

The Jia family matriarch's merriment over her daughter-in-law – from the South, as she is, and the 'peppercorn' the grandmother was once very likely herself – is another positive signal in Xueqin's representation of Xi-feng. In the novel's context of male generational decline in the Jia dynasty, the widowed Grandmother Jia is shown to be the strongest member of the older generation: in this hour of need she asserts control over her sons, even dictating her primary surviving grandson's protective upbringing – and she has a particular affection for Xi-feng, who is also Bao-yu's older cousin. If Xi-feng has an imbalance of *yang*, this clearly does not trouble the matriarch; it is 'the males in the family [who] get more degenerate from one generation to the next' (1.2.74) who are challenged by Xi-feng's 'yang' brilliance.

It is worth persevering with the *yang* issue, even if it takes us ahead of the five-act structure for a moment, as it is so important in the 'exposition' – the background information for the reader – as the drama unfolds. When, late in volume two, Grandmother Jia takes the opportunity 'to sing Xi-feng's praises', she singles out her 'thoughtfulness', a cardinal female virtue:

> 'I wouldn't say this as a rule because I don't want to make her conceited, and in any case the younger ones might not agree with me: but tell me

now – as older married women you all have had a good deal to do with her – have you ever met anyone quite as thoughtful as Feng?'

Aunt Xue, Mrs Li and You-shi agreed that people with Xi-feng's virtues were indeed extremely rare.

'Other young married women put on a show of liking their husband's relations for form's sake', they observed, 'but she really does seem to care for the young people; and she is plainly devoted to *you*'.

Grandmother Jia nodded and sighed.

'*I'm* very fond of *her*, but I'm afraid she's a bit too sharp. It doesn't do to be too sharp'.

Xi-feng laughed.

'Now there you are quite wrong, Grannie. The saying is that sharp-witted people don't live long. Everyone says that and everyone believes it, but you should be the last person to agree with them. Look how long-lived and lucky *you* are, and yet you are ten times more sharp-witted than me. By rights I should live twice as long as you, if there is any truth in the saying. I expect to live until I am at least a thousand. At all events I shan't die until I have seen you go to heaven!'

'It will be a very dull sort of world when all the rest are dead and only we two old harpies are left alive', said Grandmother Jia.

The others laughed.

(2.52.533)

This is vintage Xi-feng wit, deflecting praise for herself on to a compliment to her grandmother which also reflects back well on herself. It evokes a response from the matriarch which also reverses the logic of what is stated – it will indeed be 'a very dull world' when everyone else is alive and these 'two old harpies' are no longer living. However, Xueqin signals an issue in the ambiguous response of the other women – 'extremely rare' carries a negative sting, followed by the matriarch's qualifying comment on Xi-feng's 'sharpness'. 'Thoughtfulness' as a feminine *yin* virtue infers an inborn goodness, disinterested, unselfish, an innate lovingkindness – to all of this a 'sharp' Xi-feng hardly corresponds. Xi-feng *is* notably 'thoughtful'; there are multiple examples of her tact, consideration, timely intervention in a tense or disagreeable situation, but 'thoughtfulness' may also imply criticism of those less so and garner their dislike:

To Xi-feng's dispassionate eye it soon became apparent that in both temperament and behaviour Xiu-yan was quite unlike Lady Xing and her parents – that she was in fact an extremely sweet and lovable person. Sorry that so gentle a soul should be so poor and unfortunate, Xi-feng treated her with a tact and considerateness that she did not always show the others. Lady Xing, on the other hand, seemed scarcely aware of her niece's existence.

(2.49.473)

'Dispassionate' may be a touch of Xueqin irony – Xi-feng is never dispassionate, and there is more than a suggestion that Xi-feng's pity for Xiu-yan, while genuine, is also a covert reproach for her mother-in-law's neglect. In *yang* mode, Xi-feng is visually captured as gorgeously dressed, leaning against a doorframe, elegantly picking her teeth or again, 'stand[ing] in the doorway in a very unladylike attitude, one foot on the threshold, rolling her sleeves back' and cooling herself in 'a nice little draught' before venting upon her mother-in law: 'Who the Holy Name does she think she is'? (2.36.200).

It is just this 'thinking' aspect of her 'thoughtfulness' which re-labels it as 'calculation' and 'manipulation' in the minds of many others, labels never applicable to 'innate' feminine thoughtfulness. Notably, 'thoughtfulness' expressed as 'thinking about the feelings of others' is a key value in Bao-yu's transgressive espousal of the feminine *yin*. Xueqin describes his at times comic attempts to protect others from hurt feelings, often only to result in the opposite; this kind of *yin* 'thoughtfulness', valued even if it is not always strategic, is also not always nourished in the female world of marital politics in which Xi-feng operates. As Xueqin takes Xi-feng's narrative trajectory on its tragic way, it becomes evident that Xi-feng is treated as if she has no 'good' feminine strengths, or at least none that have wider agency: all her 'thoughtful' actions are interpreted as self-serving. When her maternal power is tested to the limit in relation to the fate of her daughter, Qiou-jie, she summons up her old creative energy to fight back and saves her, but Xi-feng herself is now dying.

Xueqin makes clear at the outset that sexual orientation is not the gender issue for Xi-feng or for Bao-yu: the issue is their inner desire to express themselves more fully as human beings than is permitted by the gender roles prescribed by the prevailing culture. Xi-feng clearly enjoys being a woman and wishes to be treated as a woman, able to serve the family as the competent woman she – and the Jia family – knows herself to be. While scholarly research has shown that it was partly the great increase in numbers of literary, educated women – the 'teachers of the inner chambers'[39] who, if they wished, were capable of many 'outside' functions and duties – which was putting pressure on the traditional gender boundaries, it is of interest that Xi-feng, uniquely among the *Twelve Beauties*, is *not* educated and uses a scribe in her public duties – but, because of her 'little general' capabilities, she is given the opportunity to exercise 'masculine' roles. Similarly, Bao-yu, while famously introduced in the novel as a one-year-old baby playing with 'women's things' (1.1.76) and, having from 'early youth grown up amongst girls', been confirmed in his feelings of being 'fresh and clean' with girls but 'stupid and nasty' with boys, never indicates that he feels or wants to be a girl himself.

Bao-yu's character is looked at in more detail in another chapter – it is just noted here that in his first appearance, also in this scene, he has not only one but *two* sets of costumes to intrigue the viewer. The shifting perspectives Xi-feng and Bao-yu present towards 'masculine' and 'feminine' 'nature' is important in the overall creative endeavour of the novel and is often invoked with a touch of humour, as when Xueqin describes how 'as part of her nature' Xi-feng would 'take pains, even when she was at her busiest, to appear outwardly as idle and unoccupied as the rest' – appearing to be busy is a 'male' prerogative, and would be an implicit criticism of the other wives; the writer follows this with a paragraph beginning: 'Of those idle and unoccupied "rest", the idlest and most unoccupied was Bao-yu' (1.19.375). Bao-yu's insistent appropriation of the 'female' prerogative of idleness is often criticised by the girls and enraging to his father.

Act 1 Scene (ii) 'Zhou Rui's wife delivers palace flowers and finds Jia Lian pursuing night sports by day' *(1.7.167)*

Xi-feng's initial self-presentation, befitting her married status, is distinguished from the younger cousins as being that of a sexually and socially confident young woman in the prime of her beauty, enjoying her role in domestic management and the power it gives her to entertain the family with her social graces and her sly, dry, clever wit: '"You've got the gift, Mrs Lian", the ballad-singers said. "It's what we call a 'hard mouth'" (3.54.32). Her 'brash and unmannerly' entrance is part of her social sophistication: to compensate for her having missed out on a literary education, she cultivates a deliberate and witty forthrightness which adds authority to her presence (1.3.91). Xi-feng's pride as a woman, wife and mother, fully in accord with the gender norms of the time, is confirmed in many early details of domestic life, pleasure in conjugal intimacy, loving care for her sick baby, getting together warm clothing for her husband's travels: early in the novel, confident in her position as First Wife, she is worldly-wise about her husband's roving eye. Two short scenes capture this domestic ideal with great economy. In the first, it is a late afternoon in summer: twelve artificial flowers, handmade, a gift from the Imperial Palace, are being distributed to the young women of the household, and the servant woman makes her way to Xi-feng's quarters:

> To get there she had to go down a passage-way between two walls. Under the windows of Li Wan's apartments, along the foot of an ornamental wall, and through a gateway in the western corner of the compound. (1.7.172)

These details remind the reader of the privileged privacy of the inner chambers which interest the writer so greatly, and the mention of Li Wan is

another contextual detail, a reminder of those loyal widows who, having produced an heir for their adoptive family, refrain from remarriage even though still youthful; exemplary conduct in patriarchal cultures intent upon keeping family finances and lineage stable.

> When [the servant woman] entered Xi-feng's reception-room, a maid sitting on the threshold of the inner room hurriedly waved her away and told her to go across to the other side of the house. Taking the hint, Zhou Rui's wife tiptoed quietly into the room opposite, where she found the baby's nurse patting her rhythmically to make her sleep.
>
> 'Is the mistress taking her afternoon nap?' she asked the nurse in a low whisper. 'I think you'll have to wake her, even if she is'.
>
> The nurse smiled, grimaced and shook her head. Zhou Rui's wife was about to ask her what she meant when she heard a low laugh in what was unmistakably Jia Lian's voice from the room opposite. It was followed almost immediately by the sound of the door opening, and Patience came out carrying a large copper basin which she asked one of the maids to fetch water in.
>
> (1.7.172)

The young parents have been making love, the vignette an insight into the early days of Xi-feng's marriage when the couple did enjoy marital pleasure and harmony. Xi-feng here is not 'the cold fish' of spiteful prejudice, and she is already a mother – the baby's gender not yet an issue important enough to be specified – secure in a well-established shared domesticity, but it also hints at Jia Lian's playboy ways, made clear in the title of the chapter '*Zhou Rui's wife delivers palace flowers and finds Jia Lian pursuing night sports by day*'. In this episode, the politics around the distribution of the flowers is the larger matter – who gets what when – with one detail relevant here: Xi-feng sends two of her four flowers to a wife whose abuse by her father-in-law and premature death is to become important in the story of Xi-feng's rise and fall.

Act 1 Scene (iii) 'We all know what Master is like where money is concerned: he'd spend the fat in the frying pan if he could get it out!' *(1.16.310)*

The second, longer episode placed here, although not in the chronological order of the novel, offers a convenient further 'exposition' of the marital relationship in its earlier years, still harmonious but signalling fracture. It begins with Jia Lian just back from travels and Xi-feng, having been left to 'look after things', is acting the gracious wife welcom[ing] back her wandering lord:

> 'Congratulations, Imperial Kinsman!' she said with a smile when, except for the servants, they were alone together. 'You have had a tiring journey, Imperial Kinsman! Yesterday, when the courier gave notice of your arrival, I prepared a humble entertainment to celebrate your

homecoming. Will the Imperial Kinsman graciously condescend to take a cup of wine with his handmaid?'

Jia Lian replied in the same vein.

'Madam, you are too kind! I am your most *oble-e-eged* and humble servant, ma'am'.

(1.16.307)

Initiating the 'Imperial Kinsman' play-acting, Xi-feng is in control and gives herself a stage on which to make her very long report, a disingenuous mix of self-criticism and complaints at being taken advantage of – she's 'too young and inexperienced' – and warnings to her husband that his Cousin Zhen is grumbling about her, with hints as to how to 'make it up', which would put the blame back on him. While she is seemingly upset, she is also alert to the sound of talking in the next room:

'Who is it?' said Xi-feng.

Patience came in to reply.

'Mrs Xue sent Caltrop over to ask me about something. I've already given her an answer and sent her back'.

(1.16.308)

Jia Lia takes the opportunity to change the subject as he waxes lyrical about 'such a pretty young woman' he has just run into: 'Cal – something. Caltrop', who it turns out has been 'given' to 'that idiot Xue'. Xi-feng calls his bluff: 'Well, if you want her, there's nothing simpler: I'll exchange our Patience for her. You know what Cousin Xue is like: always "one eye on the dish and the other on the saucepan" '.

Not that she means this: what is revealed in the detail of the further conversation is Xi-feng's sophisticated understanding about how a concubine is formally installed; a mother or wife may not be able to 'stop him having her', but at least she can 'make sure that the thing was done properly, with a party and invitations and all the rest of it'. Her mock offer of her maid, and her witty punning on his 'little *male misses*' – 'You treat the *misses* as your *missus* and give me the *miss*'- establish Xi-feng as worldly-wise about male bisexual philandering, even as she makes it abundantly clear to her husband that she expects to be in control of any formal concubinage arrangements, under her authority as first wife. As such, initially, Xi-feng is exemplary of the model elite married woman in this period as described by modern scholars.

However, there is more to Patience's reply than the mention of Caltrop. The reply doesn't make sense to Xi-feng, but she attends to Lian's response first and waits until he has left before she questions her maid about it: this tiny detail tells volumes about the way mistress and maid communicate in this marriage, with Xi-feng sensing that the reply is a message of some kind which needs to be kept secret from her husband. 'Who is it?' turns out to be the house manager's wife delivering the interest payments on loans Xi-feng

has made privately to raise money needed for running the household. The maid explains her action as prudential: 'We all know what Master is like where money is concerned: he'd spend the fat in the frying pan if he could get it out!' Xi-feng teases her – 'up to your tricks, you 'little monkey' – and the full significance of this financial secrecy is only apparent in the proper chronological order of the narrative; the important point here is its 'exposition' of the complications and contradictions in this marriage where the wife and maid feel a need to collude against the improvidence of the husband. The scene continues with further play on the way everyone – from old wet-nurses to Emperors, uncles, cousins – is using 'tricks' and 'tugs' to their advantage in getting on in the world.

Act 2: Rising action

Act 2 Scene (i) Jia Rui conceives an illicit passion for his attractive cousin, Wang Xi-feng sets a trap for her admirer (1.11.236–1.12.253)

In this Second Act, Xi-feng, far from embracing the sanctified role of 'chastity martyr', takes the insult to her chastity as an opportunity to punish the offender and confirm her married status, but with far worse consequences than intended. It is in this sense a prelude to the far worse insult perpetrated on her marriage ideal by her own husband, Jia Lian, the punishment of which has even more melodramatic unforeseen consequences, decisive in her own downfall. In the novel, Jia Lian exhibits all the multigenerational degradation of the Jia males: the author is careful to contextualise his conduct within an upbringing of paternal violence, financial extravagance and intemperate womanising, which his mother Lady Xing ignores while siphoning off into her personal account as much of the family finances as may come her way. Such a context shows that, for all the state-sanctified female role to uphold moral values, and for all Xi-feng's pride in her marriage, her dowry funds and even legal access to divorce, she has no 'rights' acknowledged by the family culture other than to 'take lightly' the 'humiliations' and 'mortifications' brought down upon her by her husband's very public sexual licentiousness and secret 'second marriage'.

After the initial exposition of Xi-feng as domestic ideal, Xueqin tests the ideal by placing Xi-feng as the 'illicitly desired female' in a version of 'disgraceful matters' about threats to female chastity which, as earlier noted, elite families kept out of the courts to protect their reputations. The episode, like a number of others in *The Story of the Stone*, has elements of melodrama and supernatural intervention belonging to a genre of tales of illicit passion known as 'Precious Mirror' – the Buddhist theme of love/passion as illusion – noting also David Hawkes' comment that that [the story] 'shows signs of tailoring' (1.1.45) and may have been incorporated

from an earlier version of the *Stone*, titled *A Mirror for the Romantic*. It tells of a young man, an orphaned grandson of the elderly scholar in charge of the Jia family school and one of the 'spineless, unprincipled' Jia males in Xue Pan's degenerate circle, who preys on Xi-feng and rebuffed, dies of frustrated sexual desire. While Xi-feng's role would be immediately recognizable to Xueqin's readers as that of a vulnerable married female, object of illicit sexual desire and prey to chastity violation, the way the story plays out garners more sympathy for the perpetrator of the attempted violation than for its victim: the roles become reversed in a classic tragic contradiction. The 'rising action' of Xi-feng's moral victory over the insult to her chastity is short-lived, undermined by the unprincipled conduct of the males responsible for her protection, a 'no win' situation the opposite of the shining example intended by the Imperial chastity laws.

There are three parts to the melodrama, indicated in the chapter headings: '*Jia Rui conceives an illicit passion for his attractive cousin*', '*Wang Xi-feng sets a trap for her admirer*'; '*Jia Rui looks into the wrong side of the mirror*'. In the first, Xi-feng has just left the bedside of her dying cousin-in-law Qin-shi and is walking sorrowfully back in the late afternoon through the autumnal garden – described in moving lines of poetry – when she is accosted by Jia Rui who, as he spoke, 'fixed her with a meaningful stare'. Xi-feng disguises her offence with polite banter to get rid of him but Jia Rui in his 'goatish eagerness' takes this as encouragement and, 'now scarcely in command of his own person':

> Slowly, very slowly, he walked away, frequently turning back to gaze at Xi-feng as he did so. Xi-feng mischievously provoked him by deliberately slowing down the pace of her own progress through the garden.
>
> 'What an odious creature', she thought to herself . . . 'Appearances certainly are deceptive! Who would have guessed he was that sort of person. Well, if he is, he had better look out! One of these days I'll settle his hash for him: then perhaps he will realise what sort of person he is up against'.
>
> (1.11.237)

Xi-feng is not only disgusted to find that he is 'that sort of person', she is primed to show him what 'sort of person' *she* is: as Jia Rui continues to stalk her, even visiting her at home, he is also driving her to set a trap; the author makes a little comedy of how she tests him out: 'At this last remark Jia Rui positively scratched his ears with pleasure'; 'Jia Rui received these words like someone being presented with a rare and costly jewel'.

At this point, the sympathies of some readers shift from the victim of predation onto the victim of Xi-feng's strategy to 'settle his hash', which prompted an early translator of the novel to interpret Xi-feng's conduct

as motivated by 'secret, malicious pleasure'.[40] As the trap is set and Jia Rui's suffering begins, comedy begins to feel misplaced. Xueqin has given the reader details of Jia Rui's orphaned childhood and strict upbringing, verging on the brutal, under the sole guardianship of the Jia family schoolmaster; when, after the humiliation of a failed assignation with Xi-feng he returns home late to his angry grandparents almost freezing to death, he is given a severe thrashing, forbidden to eat and 'forced to kneel in the open courtyard with a book in his hand until he prepared the equivalent of ten days' homework' (1.11.246). The melodrama continues as the 'infatuation remained unaltered' and he remains oblivious that he has been made 'a fool of': Xi-feng, having failed to shame him into respecting 'who she is' – elite first wife, indubitably chaste, immersed in domestic duties and motherhood – resorts to the help of her husband Jia Lian and cousin Jia Rong. This dissolute pair, rather than performing the patriarchal role of males as moral protectors by a blunt assertion of authority, take the matter as an opportunity for a bit of fun; the scene is straight out of an itinerant storyteller's repertoire. In the darkness of the alleyway, they humiliate Jia Rui sexually and threaten to drag him off to Lady Wang, then demand a bribe – a written IOU – to release him. Crouching there in the dark and cold, he is trying to comply, when:

> a sudden slosh! signalled the discharge of a slop-pail's stinking contents immediately above his head, drenching him from top to toe with liquid filth and causing him to cry out in dismay – but only momentarily, for the excrement covered his face and head and caused him to close his mouth in a hurry and crouch, silent and shivering in the icy cold.
>
> (1.12.248)

The disgusting visceral image is Xueqin's comment on the execrable conduct of the husband and cousin: their victim becomes more a figure of pity from then on as he descends further into his masochistic fantasy –

> The thought of her trickery provoked a surge of hatred in his soul: yet even as he hated her, the vision of her loveliness made him long to clasp her to his breast.
>
> (1.12.249)

Xi-feng's reliance on 'her boys' to help her has made matters worse, and the final segment of this drama takes it even further beyond Xi-feng's control, into mystical realms: a 'lame Taoist' asking for alms offers relief to Jia Rui's grandparents, claiming to cure 'retributory illnesses' with his 'Mirror for a Romantic': on the front is an image of a beautiful woman and on the back, a grinning skull. The cure is to keep focussed on the punitive image

of the skull and so resist looking into the seductive front, the image as if of Xi-feng beckoning. Jia Riu cannot resist and dies soon after of excessive masturbation: the realistic detail of bodily fluids proclaims the mirror's deadly power but also recalls the contradictions of romantic bliss and punitive terror in the extended narrative of Bao-yu's dreamed sexual initiation early in the novel. What began as an opportunity for Xi-feng to show 'what sort of person she is' by shaming Jia Rui for 'what sort of person he is' is turned into its opposite, reflecting back an image of herself Xi-feng would prefer to disown. She distances herself from the whole affair: when Jia Rui is dying, Lady Wang who, like the rest of the family knows nothing of the causes, directs her to her find some ginseng to help 'save a man's life' and thus 'perform a work of merit', she does little to do so, refusing any responsibility for what becomes a pitiful and expensive death, his grandparents hypocritically 'abandoning themselves to paroxysms of grief' and the Jia clan obliged to fund a funeral in 'considerable style'. Much later in the novel, karmic retribution is exacted when Xi-feng is seriously ill and needs ginseng but none of any value can be found until eventually the Xue family offers to help (3.77.530).

How to interpret the episode in terms of Xi-feng's culpability is problematic. It does not seem adequate to Xueqin's naturalistic reprisal of the 'precious mirror' genre to sum it up either as a moral lesson about desire and destruction[41] or as a 'shrew narrative': 'When Jia Rui makes an advance on Xi-feng, she lures him to his death',[42] or to see Jia Rui 'as guilty as she is, if not more so'.[43] While retaining the generic mirror metaphor, Xueqin complicates and humanises the episode. Jia Rui having died, the grandparents:

> cursed the Taoist for a necromancer and ordered the servants to heap up a fire and cast the mirror upon the flames. But just at that moment, a voice was heard in the air saying, 'Who told him to look in the front? It is you who are to blame, for confusing the real with the unreal. Why then should you burn my mirror?'
>
> (1.12.253)

'Who told him to look in the front?' What answer is expected? Is the monk placing implicit 'blame' on the wretched lovelessness of Jia Rui's upbringing by the schoolmaster grandfather? Or is he blaming the wider moral context of the self-deceiving, degenerate family environment, so evident in the failure of the Jia males to support Xi-feng in a manner appropriate to the dignity of her position? Where is the individual culpability in this story? Xueqin naturalises the 'precious mirror' morality of desire and death into an interrogation of individual culpability which extends the 'blame' far wider. As one outsider later exclaims: 'The only clean things about that

Ning-Guo House are the stone lions that stand outside the gate. The very cats and dogs there are corrupted!' (3.66.303) Perhaps even the stone lions were unclean if there is an oblique reference here to two large gold-plated lions found in the Cao Family temple, which 'caused a stir during the confiscation of the Cao family property' in the author's childhood,[44] the basis for the fictional account of the confiscation in the final volume of the novel.

A parallel situation of retribution for unwanted lustful advances by another clan male – this time homosexual – is dramatised in the second volume, where the victim is able to trap his aggressor and immerses him in filthy water: here, between males, the 'hash' is 'settled' just as planned – the perpetrator is forced to acknowledge he was 'egregiously mistaken in his man' (2.47.445). No such restoration of pride in 'who she is' is afforded Xi-feng: the roles have become reversed; Jia Rui the victim, she the aggressor – the 'cruel', 'manipulative' female, the incident seeming more a prefiguring of the later, more realistic, morally ambiguous and similarly overreaching episode in the Fourth Act, in which Xi-feng matches her wits against her husband's lecherous deceit at the expense of a weak young woman's life. Throughout, Xueqin's 'voice in the air' keeps echoing – 'it is you who are to blame': but who is 'you'? The question of blame, and of fate, also haunts *Hamlet* and classical tragedy, myths of fate, 'divinity that shapes our ends', karmic retribution – all universal ways of imagining and apportioning 'blame'.

If the Jia Rui episode dramatises a world unsympathetic to Xi-feng's success in exercising agency in the 'disgraceful matter' of protecting her chastity, in the chapter immediately following, Xueqin subjects Xi-feng – on first appearances – to a fairer test. Rather than undermining, it gives abundant substance to her pride and self-belief. The whole episode is a strikingly 'modern' example of a young woman's experience of a unique opportunity to prove herself in a male world: Xi-feng's 'task analysis' could come out of one of today's management consultant's reports. It is also 'modern' in that, as she takes up the challenge, it begins to resemble what today might be seen as the 'female poisoned chalice' syndrome.

Act 2 Scene (ii) 'Qin-shi posthumously acquires the status of a Noble Dame; and Xi-feng takes on the management of a neighbouring establishment'. *(1.13.255)*

In this scene, Xi-feng establishes herself as the model female inscribed in Imperial policy promoting women in the role of supporters of family order and social stability. The chapter heading reads innocuously: 'the status of 'Noble Dame' is, of course, a status to which Xi-feng would expect to aspire and which her display of managerial skills would assist; the irony here is that Qin-shi 'acquires' this status 'posthumously' through the efforts of her father-in law, Cousin Zhen, with whom she has been having

a secret adulterous relationship which she ends in a mysterious fatal illness. That this is suicide is indicated in her memorial Song in Chapter Five, and by the prophetic picture ascribed to her of a 'beautiful girl hanging by her neck', an inconsistency about which Xueqin's commentators had serious reservations, as discussed by David Hawkes in his Introduction to the novel. The unusually – and conspicuously, even suspiciously – elaborate funeral ceremony paying tribute to this 'Noble Dame' requires the full-time attention of Cousin Zhen, who is the head of the house of Ning-guo, the 'neighbouring establishment' to the House of Rong-guo, to which Xi-feng belongs and in which she has been burdened with much of the management. Now she has been co-opted by Cousin Zhen into 'running things for us during the coming month', a request which flatters her pride but turns into the deadly trap of her own ambitions foreseen in the Ninth Song: 'your own life in your own toils was caught'.

The funeral of Qin-shi is both a family ceremony and a highly visible public function with the wealth and status of the noble Jia family on full display. We are informed early in the novel of the 'outside' view of the Jia household, that

> 'masters and servants all lead lives of luxury and magnificence . . . they can't bring themselves to economise', and that more seriously, 'they are not able to turn out good sons, these stately houses, for all their pomp and show. The males in the family get more degenerate from one generation to the next'.
>
> (1.2.74)

This gives us the context in which Xi-feng is to operate: more particularly, the mysterious decline and death of the young wife whose elaborate funeral requirements precipitate the need for her unusual promotion to household manager. From the outset, Xi-feng is working in a murky moral environment of hidden sexual transgression, dubious purchase of honorific titles and highly visible financial extravagance – including lavish public displays of religious piety.

Xueqin takes great care to set up this episode, and we follow the fortunes of Xi-feng in more varied detail than for any other young female character, a reflection of the importance the novel gives to marriage and issues of female agency. Here, Xi-feng is ushered into her new role as manager, with her elder Cousin Zhen's blithe words brushing aside concerns that she is too young and inexperienced:

> I assure you there is no question of her not being a good enough manager. Even in her childhood games, Cousin Feng had the decisiveness of

> a little general, and since she's married and had some experience of running things next door, she is a thoroughly seasoned campaigner.
>
> (1.13.267)

But it is doubtful this elder cousin could have anticipated how clinically the 'little general' views her job: the tallies for the entire Ning-guo household now being ceremoniously handed over.

> Alone at last, Xi-feng wandered into a sort of penthouse where she sat down and tried to formulate the task that lay ahead. Five major abuses, long habitual in the Ning-guo establishment, presented themselves to her mind as being specially in need of attention, viz:
>
> 1. Because it was so large and so motley an establishment, things were always getting lost;
> 2. Because there was no rational division of labour, it always seemed to be someone else's responsibility whenever a job needed to be done;
> 3. Because the household's expenditure was so lavish, money was always getting misappropriated or misspent;
> 4. Because no distinctions were made between one job and another, the rewards and hardships were unfairly distributed;
> 5. Because the servants were so arrogant and undisciplined, those with 'face' could brook no restraint and those without could win no advancement.
>
> (1.13.270)

This list could serve as an exemplar in a management training course today. Interestingly, in the phrasing there is an echo of 'Rifling Trunks', the famous counterintuitive advice on good governance from the writings of the classical Chinese philosopher and sceptic Zhuang-zi, which puts 'cause and effect' together in a very different way. To prevent 'rifling' – theft – trunks, boxes and bags are bound with rope and fastened with locks: 'this the world calls wisdom', but, Zhuang-zi says, this only makes it easier for the 'great thief' to 'come along . . . shoulder the boxes, hoist up the trunks, sling the bags over his head, and dash off, only worrying that the cords and ropes, the locks and hasps are not fastened tightly enough'.[45]

Zhuang-zi slyly lists further examples of cause and effect:

> 'Away then with saints and wise men, and big thieves will cease from despoiling; break the jade, crush the pearls, and petty thieves will no longer rise up; 'burn the tallies, shatter the seals, and the people will be simple and guileless'.

Xueqin was certainly familiar with this passage: Bao-yu, overcome with gloom at all the misunderstandings arising in his female relationships,

composes his own comforting version. 'Away with Musk and Aroma, and the female tongue will cease from nagging, discard Bao-chai's heavenly beauty, destroy Dai-yu's divine intelligence, utterly abolish all tender feelings, and the female heart will cease from envy' (1.21.421), and this same mix of scepticism and humour is evident in much of Xueqin's own writing. Xi-feng's 'to do' list of abuses and corrections is 'what the world calls wisdom' but, in the way it echoes the ancient wisdom of Taoist paradox, it signals its own 'un-wisdom'– not least that, in such a morally-compromised household, it draws down its own defeat.

In Xi-feng's daring to defy the existential message carried in 'Rifling Trunks' – that human existence *itself* is a 'retributive illness', as Bao-yu is reminded much later by One Plaster Wang – Xueqin invests a complexity of 'being' which gives Xi-feng a dimension of the Shakespearean tragic hero; as with Hamlet, the scholar who questions the purpose of his own existence but then takes on the salvationary role of one 'born to set it right', it is the overreaching ambition itself which sets Xi-feng apart, an intoxicating experience of exercising control over a 'rotten' world which only contributes to its ultimate disintegration. Like Hamlet taking on the guise of the madman, she becomes an actor in a role of her own making and treats the world around her as a stage to display her power, in the process losing her own moral bearings and, but for her creator's insight into her 'slain' heart, seeming to many just another of the morally degraded Jia clan disappearing from history. That it also denies her the power she may have retained merely by virtue of her reproductive agency is understood by her own maid, Patience, who echoes Zuang-zi's wisdom when she counsels Xi-feng against pursuing yet another incident of petty thievery and cover-up:

> Look at all the trouble you give yourself . . . And where does it all get you, at the end of the day? All you do is build up a lot of resentment against yourself and turn a lot of nasty, spiteful people into your enemies. Think of all the time you took to conceive a man-child – and then to lose it after carrying it inside you for six or seven months! How do we know that it wasn't brought about by too much worrying about this sort of thing?
>
> (3.61.183)

Xueqin, typically, layers this wisdom of ironic consequence by describing the sorry outcome of the thievery: it is Bao-yu who has covered up for the thief, Lady Wang's maid Sunset, one of the many minor characters brought to life in a single incident. When her lover throws back at her the goods she has stolen for him, she sweeps them up into a bundle and, when no one is looking, gets rid of them in the lake: still angry, 'she cried all night long under the bed-clothes'. (3.62.186) (Who could not love this writer, for this line alone?)

However much Xueqin invokes a philosophical reference, he grounds his narrative in the earthy detail of vernacular fiction. Even at the outset, the seeds of Xi-feng's demise are made evident – as would be to any aspiring female manager in today's business world who happened to overhear the Chief Steward's blokey briefing to his cronies:

> Well lads, it seems they've called in Mrs Lian (Xi feng's married name) from the other house to run things here for a bit: so, if she should happen to come around asking for anything, be sure to do what she says, won't you? During this coming month, we shall all have to start work a bit earlier and knock off a bit later than usual. If you'll put up with a little extra hardship for just this month, we can make up for it by taking things easy when it's over. Anyway, I'm relying on you not to let me down.
>
> (1.14.271)

And then out comes the misogynist knife:

> She's well known for a sour-faced, hard-hearted bitch is this one, and once she's got her back up, she'll give you no quarter, no matter who you are. So be careful!
>
> (1.14.271)

The odds are stacked against her: in this toxic environment, although Xi-feng has the executive temperament to act on her judgement of the harsh measures – twenty strokes of the bamboo and a month's pay docked for being late, doubling with any further offence – necessary to ensure success, and for all her provision for fairness in her 'action' list, her actions risk garnering hatred and opposition rather than cooperation. Xueqin describes every detail of her tactics to maximise her authority – a minor but telling one being her decision to remain resident in her own compound, the better to impress as she arrives by carriage early each morning to conduct affairs at the adjoining household. In a vividly imagined 'day in the life' of Wang Xi-feng, CEO, Xueqin follows her from dawn till dusk in her duties, bordering on the comical in the accumulation of detail, both admiring of her industry and underlining its reduction of management to 'things':

> Xi-feng now proceeded to supervise the distribution of supplies of tea, oil, candles, feather-dusters and brooms to some of her work-parties, and to issue others with table-cloths, chair-covers, cushions, mats, spittoons, footstools, and other furnishings, an entry of the amount supplied being made in the book as each assignment was handed over.
>
> (1.14.274)

With these measures all the

> old idling and pilfering appeared to have been eradicated completely. Secure in her authority, respected and obeyed by all, Xi-feng might be forgiven for contemplating her achievement with a certain amount of satisfaction.
> (1.14.274)

Zhuang-zi's tying-up of boxes and making of tallies and stamping of seals hangs over this in ironic comment. Xueqin's insight into the CEO mentality is so detailed as to compel an identification with its personal rewards: readers can enjoy the perks of office Xi-feng secures by pampering her boss and, in return:

> Cousin Zhen reciprocated by instructing his own cooks to prepare dishes of the very highest quality exclusively for Xi-feng and having them carried around to her in her little penthouse office.
> (1.14.274)

And in the best tradition of this position –

> a passion to succeed and a dread of being criticized enabled her to summon up reserves of energy, and she managed to plan everything with such exemplary thoroughness that every member of the clan was loud in her praises.
> (1.14.283)

'A passion to succeed, and a dread of being criticized' which she hides by *being* everywhere, smiling, and *doing* everything with apparent ease: as a prototype of the modern 'superwoman' executive, Xi-feng is a reflection of both its strength and its vulnerability, as familiar today as is the corrupt financial world into which she steps, driven by ambition to save the fortunes of the family.

Xueqin invites the reader into her moment of bliss, the 'Noble Dame' she seemed surely to become, while gently indicating its delusory impact:

> Wake night arrived – the night when no one in the family may go to bed – and the Ning-guo House was crowded with friends and relations. Since You-shi [Qin-shi's mother-in-law, wife of Cousin Zhen] was still confined to her room, it was left entirely to Xi feng to do the honours. There were, to be sure, a number of other young married women in the clan, but all were either tongue-tied or giddy, or they were petrified by bashfulness or timidity that the presence of strangers or persons of higher rank threw them into a state of panic. Xi feng's vivacious charm and social assurance stood out in striking contrast – 'a touch of scarlet in a field of green' – and if she took any notice of her humbler sisters it was only to throw out an occasional order or to bend them in some other way to her imperious will.
> (1.14.283)

In this episode, Xueqin has presented Xi-feng as all her introductory self-presentation has claimed for her, providing some restorative balance to the disastrous end of her assertion of power in 'cure[ing [Jia Rui] of his folly'. He brings alive a rare glimpse of a woman equal to performing the role of a man in a public arena, deconstructing the prevailing gender description. The question this asks today's reader is what is Cao's purpose in so doing? Does he want to expose this as a prideful, arrogant transgression of the proper boundaries, and Xi-feng's subsequent fall from grace, illness and death, inevitable retribution for exceeding her female lot, or does he want to expose the inauthenticity of these boundaries, and Xi-feng's ignominious end the failure of the culture to embrace or sustain a more authentic gender description? Or is it rather simply reprising ancient wisdom – where the young males have become so dissolute and incompetent the females have to step in, just as the female warriors of old came forward to fight when the armed forces were driven back in the famous Ming dynasty Ballad of the 'Winsome Colonel' Fourth Sister Lin – which, however, ends with 'not a single one of them left alive' (3.78.567)? The difficulty in being clear about Xueqin's artistic purpose reflects the complex detail of the story of Xi-feng as it unfolds, which accumulates not so much to clarify as to raise new questions.

To give one example from the aforementioned episode: the enjoyment the reader might share in Xi-feng's emotional reward for all her hard work as chief executive – her fantasy of female power, the sheer exultancy of her success, an intoxicating sense of personal transformation separating her from her 'humbler sisters', now, in her mind, bashful, timid creatures to be ordered about – is found to be Xi-feng's self-delusion, subtly questioned by the novel's ample evidence elsewhere that these Jia clan 'sisters' are not at all the timid, bashful creatures as her 'imperious will' distorts them. Earlier on, Xueqin has taken care to remind the reader through Lady Wang's vague protests about the management role, that Xi-feng is still very young, 'only a child yet' with no 'experience . . . of *this* kind of thing' and that Lady Xing, Xi-feng's mother-in-law, busily stashing away family money into her private hoard, far from offering useful advice would be happy enough to see her fail. Xi-feng has proved herself equal to the task, but it is coming at a cost to her moral and physical well-being.

Act 2 Scene (iii) At Water-moon Priory Xi-feng finds how much profit may be procured by the abuse of power. (1.15.296–298)

The binary trajectory of personal self-fashioning, self-delusion and moral rationalisation which Xueqin now charts in Xi-feng's thoughts and actions

is brought into a further, problematic focus at the end of the funeral proceedings – the shady beginning of Xi-feng's financial overreach. The corrupt world of male business practice is an undercurrent throughout *The Story of the Stone* but is perhaps nowhere more troubling than in its expression as part of Xi-feng's appropriation of male gender identity – even in a literal sense, when she uses her husband's name in a fake letter. A fake letter is a common enough literary device but, reading Cao Xueqin through Shakespeare, it may be noted that Shakespeare raises similar issues around Hamlet's act in tampering with the letter carried by his guards instructing that he be killed, justifying it as 'indiscretion' but an opportunity divinely sent – 'There is a divinity that shapes our ends/Rough hew them how we will' – by which alteration his guards now carry their own death sentence. Hamlet enjoys his cleverness in altering the letter – at last he is in full 'revenge' mode – but this does not quite obscure the moral issue: 'They are not near my conscience', Hamlet says; they brought it on themselves – but the question of whether the guards actually knew what the letter originally said, or even if they did, that Hamlet's action is morally 'right' hangs ever in the air.

Water-moon Priory, one of the Jia family religious establishments, is the setting of Xi-feng's entry into the male world of shady business dealings; the proximity of religious piety and opportunism is an undercurrent throughout the *Stone*. The old Prioress, Euergesia, flatters Xi-feng's pride by seeking her opinion on a request for a favour she pretends she will be making to Lady Wang. It involves writing a letter to a certain family named Zhang, using the Jia family prestige to put pressure on the contending party in a threatened breach-of-promise lawsuit. She is at first rebuffed by Xi-feng – 'Lady Wang doesn't touch this kind of thing anymore'. But the old Prioress knows which nerve to touch in Xi-feng; she slyly insinuates that refusal will be taken as a sign that Xi-feng is not capable of seeing it through. Xueqin's phrasing of Xi-feng's response is interesting in its implicit acknowledgement that the request is immoral: disclaiming 'all that talk about hell and damnation', she's never believed it:

> If I decide I want to do something I will do it, no matter what it is. Tell them if they are prepared to pay out three thousand taels of silver, I will undertake to relieve them of their trouble.
>
> (1.15.298)

Xi-feng goes on to deny any personal gain as mediator, declaring that 'every bit of this money will go into the pockets of my boys or towards their expenses' – expenses historians describe as an elite family's collective action for 'shared graveyards, and rituals, ancestral tablets and halls, and

corporate income producing property used to support education, charity, and rites'.[46]

> *I* shan't touch a penny of it. If it was money I wanted I could lay my hands on *thirty* thousand taels at this very moment.
>
> (1.15.298)

Through these words, Xueqin refers back to an earlier prophetic dream in which the dying Qin-shi appears to Xi-feng, warning that 'our present prosperity' may not last and advising ways of investing money to secure both spiritual and mundane needs – buying up the 'land, farms and houses' around the ancestral burial grounds, funding a school and the season offerings from the profits, which as a charitable investment will be exempt from state requisition in the event of misfortune (1.13.257). Qin-shi's words here echo ancient wisdom such as in the *Book of Rites*, where marriage carries the responsibility of firstly, 'service to the ancestral temple' and secondly, provision for 'the continuation of descendants'.[47] Qin-shi leaves Xi-feng these words

> as my parting gift. Be sure that you remember them well!
> When the Three Springs have gone, the flowering time will end,
> And each one for himself as best he may must fend.
>
> (1.13.257)

The message of the dream is contradictory in that it reveals to Xi-feng the need for the family – 'my boys' – to take very specific measures to protect its future prosperity but also warns that, in the end, Xi-feng will have to fend for herself. Instead of heeding the warning to prepare to fend for herself as best she can, Xi-feng now fantasises about her own powers – the braggadocio of 'thirty thousand taels' are the words of 'only a child yet' – to shoulder this salvationary burden, rationalising away the dubious morality of the Prioress's proposal.

Xueqin keeps the tone light in his short account of the eventual tragic outcome of the scheme, the thwarted lovers' suicides – first one hanging herself and then the other drowning – the sad story rattled off in such a perfunctory manner as to reflect badly not so much upon Xi-feng as on the

> mercenary parents . . . thus left in a very unenviable situation: 'the maid and eke the money gone' in the words of the poet. The only gainer was Xi-feng, who now had three thousand taels of silver to sit back and enjoy at her leisure. Not a word of this affair reached the ears of Lady Wang.
>
> (1.16.303)

The almost flippant tone of the episode's conclusion leaves Xi-feng now part of Xueqin's opportunistic male business world based on family influence; her actions reflect that world and her success likewise – and, if she

can justify it in terms of investing it back in the family and moreover, on her terms, why not continue:

> Emboldened by this taste of success, Xi-feng from now on undertook many more ventures of the same kind – far more than we could give an account of in this history.
>
> (1.16.303)

It is notable here that Xueqin's generosity of understanding of Xi-feng is quite lost in the Yangs' abridged translation: 'Emboldened by this success, Phoenix perpetrated many similar evil deeds';[48] the word 'evil' condemns the character through the deed which, when placed in the interpretative context provided by the writer, is shown to be misguided and cloaked in filial duty but not 'evil': if the 'evil' is with anyone it is with the 'mercenary parents' and the spiritual mentor, the Prioress.

In Xueqin's meticulous creative patterning of his fiction, two volumes later the very same issue of 'breach of promise' is trumped-up by Xi-feng as part of her weaponry against her husband's ill-fated mistress, Er-jie: underlining, even to the same name (Zhang) how, through continued exposure to a series of marital abuses and other family humiliations, Xi-feng has now become like the 'mercenary' world around her, a seasoned perpetrator of bribery and corruption (3, 69, 359). What sets Xi-feng's financial dealings apart from others is the context in which she is placed in the narrative: a young woman with no experience of 'outside' reality and unmindful that keeping records of loans charging exorbitant rates of interest in her private quarters could expose the family to imperial sanction, as does happen. The males in the Jia family are not making prudent investments – quite the reverse, as shown in the heinous incident over the immoral acquisition of some expensive antique fans; Xi-feng takes pride in assuming responsibility for keeping up the monthly allowances for the household (2.39.263), but this only invites resentment and is an unconscionable pressure on one woman in a grand patriarchal family; it is more an indictment on the Jia males than on Xi-feng as, 'Too shrewd by half', her financial 'toils' in the end rebound upon her and the family's fortunes. Xi-feng struggles to express a greater agency for a female in a world structured more to exploit these attempts than to embrace them: like Hamlet in his increasingly undermined mission as avenger, the more creatively she takes on the role, the more resistant become those structures and the more destructive the outcomes.

Act 3: Climax

Act 3 Scene (i)

> *One of these days I'm going to lay into that jealous bitch and break every bone in her body.*
>
> (1.21.429)

Am I really such a hell-cat? Are you really so terribly hen-pecked? You've made it seem as if I'm worse even than that worthless whore; How can I have the face to go on living now?

(2.44.364–380)

I've seen many wicked and many peculiar things during the fifty-four years since I first came here, but this sort of thing is simply outside my experience.

(2.47.435)

Act Three begins with bringing together some of the more egregious episodes of marital humiliation inflicted upon Xi-feng preceding Jia Lian's secret marriage to Er-jie and Xi-feng's fatal 'plan' to restore her lost status.

The first episode occurs when baby Qaio-jie is diagnosed with smallpox and elaborate measures have to be taken, including moving Jia Lian's 'bedding to a room outside'; Xueqin makes a damning statement on the husband's casual carnality:

After a couple of nights sleeping on his own he began to find abstinence extremely irksome and was reduced to slaking his thirst on the more presentable of his pages. But other relief was at hand – the wife of a drunken cook, called 'the Mattress' for her 'pneumatic charms and omnivorous promiscuity'.

(1.21.425)

Xi-feng is protected from knowing about it by Patience, her maid, whom Lian also tries to seduce; when she resists, saying this would make her mistress hate her, Lian's response, shocking in its sullen violence, draws attention to the issue of jealousy as *his* right to feel. This is a rare example of male jealousy in the novel – shown more to reflect his resentment of her self-confidence and status in the family:

'You needn't worry about her', said Jia Lian. 'One of these days when I get my temper up, I'm going to lay into that jealous bitch and break every bone in her body. Then perhaps she'll know who's master round here. She watches me like a bloody thief. She can talk to men when she likes, but I'm not supposed to talk to women, oh no! If I'm talking to a woman and just happens to get a bit close, she immediately starts suspecting something. But if she wants to go chattering or larking around with Bao or Rong or any other male on the premises, that's supposed to be alright. You wait! One of these days I'll stop her seeing anyone at all!'

'She's every right to watch you', said Patience, 'and you've no right to be jealous of her. She's always been perfectly straight and above board where men are concerned; but you – whatever you do you've got something nasty in mind. You make even me worried, never mind about her!'

> 'Oh, shut up!' said Jia Lian. 'You're all perfect, aren't you? It's just me that's always up to something nasty. One of these days I'll make a clean sweep of the lot of you!'
>
> (1.21.429)

'One of these days' – the evasive phrase reveals the weakness of character, so different from Xi-feng's style of speech, direct and noted for its wit: the collision course; the maid caught in the middle is being set up, as Patience's odd, protective behaviour draws her mistress's ire: 'I do believe she is trying to displace me'. The very next scene shows Xi-feng consulting her husband about special expenditures; while she is expected to ensure that all special occasions are properly observed, she is also the first to be accused of exceeding her initiative. Demoralisation over the lack of respect for her wifely status combined with the resentment accumulating against her strict management of the household begin to take their toll on Xi-feng's mental and physical well-being. Xueqin's alternation of the episodes where in public Xi-feng continues her confident, witty act, and others where she is punitively defensive, underlines a process of psychological disconnection and disintegration, the 'hidden thunder' rumbling under the 'ever smiling summer face'.

One episode brings these two 'acts' together and provides further insight into how the novel is engaging with what is here specifically acknowledged as not a matter of Xi-feng's 'jealousy' so much as a crisis in her feminine identity: Xi-feng is forced to see how others see her, as a 'hell-cat'. It is Xi-feng's birthday: 'Grandmother Jia was determined this should be a day like no other and Xi-feng should derive the greatest possible enjoyment from it'. There is great merriment, Xi-feng in her entertainer's element and taking many wine tributes – too many, and when she takes the opportunity to 'pop outside' she sees suspicious signs and then:

> a laugh and a woman's voice. 'The best thing that could happen to you', it was saying, 'would be if that hell-cat of yours was to die'.
>
> (2.44.369)

She is devastated to catch her husband 'in flagrante' with the wife of Bao-er, his senior manservant; everything descends into a most undignified rumpus, Xi-feng even striking her loyal maid Patience over a misinterpreted accusation:

> Xi-feng's reaction when Patience dashed off threatening suicide was to ram her head into Jia Lian's chest and shout hysterically.
>
> 'You're all in league against me, and now you're trying to frighten me because I overheard you. I don't care. Kill me! Strangle me!'
>
> Jia Lian, in a fury, snatched a sword down from the wall and drew it from its scabbard.
>
> (2.44.371)

Drawn by the noise, a crowd arrives. Xi-feng 'dropped her shrewishness' and rushed off to the matriarch, bursting in and flinging 'herself trembling upon her bosom' -

> 'Save me, Grannie, save me! Mr Lian is going to kill me!' -
>
> (2.44.371)

Xi-feng is embellishing the story for greater sympathy, but eventually calm is restored:

> Grandmother Jia did what she could to comfort her by dismissing the incident as unimportant.
>
> 'Young men of his age are like hungry pussy-cats, my dear. There's simply no way of holding them. This sort of thing has always happened in big families like ours – certainly ever since I can remember. It's all my fault, anyway. I shouldn't have made you drink so much wine. It's all turned to vinegar inside you'.
>
> This made everyone laugh.
>
> (2.44.373)

However, the matriarch does undertake to have her husband make an apology, and for Xi-feng to apologise to her maid. But the next day Xi-feng continues to fret, questioning her sense of her moral self:

> Am I really such a hell-cat? Are you really so terribly hen-pecked? . . . You've made it seem as if I'm worse even than that worthless whore. How can I have the face to go on living now?
>
> (2.44.380)

The scene ends with news that Bao-er's wife – the 'whore' – has 'hanged herself, that her family was talking of taking it to court' – as a 'chastity martyr', it is to be inferred from the scholarly research noted earlier. This fires Xi-feng up again; she retorts that she will bring a charge of ex-morte blackmail, and forbids Lian – who is always cadging money from her – from buying off the husband as the servants advise. Here, Xueqin shows Xi-feng now a desperate player in the same kind of sorry family scandal into which the old prioress Euergesia had inveigled her 'help' in the first volume of the *Stone*.

Where is Cao Xueqin taking his readers with Xi-feng here? Is her 'act' of shrewishness now taking over her real self? Should she accept the matriarch's comfort, that her husband is a 'pussy-cat' and that 'this sort of thing has always happened in big families like ours'? Should she resign herself to the reality that marriage is the death sentence that Bao-yu often mourns and girls choose against by becoming nuns or killing themselves? Xueqin provides us with a revised perspective on her plight a little later, in his typical lightly comic tone when it bears upon the 'secret message' of

his 'pages full of idle words'. Grandmother Jia and some others, including Xi-feng's mother-in-law, Sir She's wife, are playing cards; Xi-feng is acting the clown and making her grandmother 'laugh so much she scattered the cards she was playing all over the table'. The grandmother has earlier been very deeply upset to hear of secret plans by her son Sir She – Lian's father – to take her much-loved and devoted maid Faithfull as a concubine, and when she sees Jia Lian lurking outside looking for Xi-feng she explodes, demanding what he wants, why the sudden urgency, the sneaking about:

> 'Disgusting creature! Your wife will be with me a long time yet playing cards. Better get back to that Zhao-woman while you have the chance and carry on where you left off with your plans for poisoning her'. [the grandmother has not been told of the suicide.]
>
> The others all laughed.
>
> 'It was *Bao*-er's wife, my old love, not *Zhao*-er's', said Faithfull, laughing.
>
> 'That's what I said, didn't I?' Grandmother Jia snapped. 'Well, "Zhao" or "Bao" or brown cow, how can I be expected to remember such things? The very mention of them makes me feel angry. There were three generations of the family above me when I came to this household as a young bride, and now there are three generations below me, and I've seen many shocking and many wicked and many peculiar things during the fifty-four years since I first came here, but *this sort of thing* is simply outside my experience. Now be off with you!'
>
> Jia Lian bolted.
>
> (2.47.435)

Here, the matriarch's historical perspective is a damning critique of the contemporary early Qing society in which the novel is set, noting historical evidence of the 'abuses of women legitimated by late Ming-Qing Neo-Confucianism' in this period.[49] Her outburst places her earlier advice to Xi-feng in a new light: in a context where the 'sort of thing' the males are getting up to is unprecedented, where is the moral condemnation coming from to combat this? Jia Lian's father does vent his anger on Lian, but it is hypocritical: he is utterly compromised by his attempt to take away Faithfull without her consent and against his mother's wishes, an act which is certainly part of Grandmother Jia's 'this sort of thing' as well. Faithfull has declared in response that 'I shall either take my own life or I shall cut my hair off and become a nun' – and had dramatically taken out a knife hidden in her sleeve, undone her hair and begun hacking away (2.46.424). Here, Grandmother Jia herself has been placed in a similar situation to Xi-feng: patriarchal hierarchy forbids her from interfering – but she does. In reply, she brings the full force of the moral respect owed to her as matriarch down upon Jia She's wife, ending with a scathing counteroffer: 'If he would care to *buy* himself a girl, he'd be very welcome to do it with my money'.

When Jia She's wife reports back to Jia She the clear message sent, he has to accept it, but that is not the end: as the contempt of the matriarch had all too accurately reflected, he sends out his agents 'to scour the market for likely girls' (2.47.436). Xueqin is not yet finished with Jia She's pernicious patriarchal influence: one of these 'likely girls' is Autumn, whom Jia She later gifts to his son in reward for hounding a man to death to secure the purchase of some antique fans. Autumn's attractions woo Jia Lian away from his now less-interesting second wife and her jealousy of the 'other Mrs Lian', Er-ji, presents her as a 'borrowed knife' to Xi-feng.

This attempt to summarise the drama of Xi-feng as tragic heroine is obliged to omit many scenes offering the full range of perspectives on Xueqin's characterisation; in particular, the episode opening Volume 3:

Lady Jia ridicules the clichés of romantic fiction; And Wang Xi-feng emulates the filial antics of Lao Lai-zi (3.54). It is the First Moon Festival and Grandmother Jia, with the young ladies (and one eligible bachelor) sitting around her in a large festive gathering of the female members of the Jia clan, warns against the ridiculous fantasies purveyed by romantic fiction, where young people supposedly from well-to-do households secretly 'make plans for the future' regardless of their 'book-learning and the duty they owe their parents' – such 'carryings-on' all lies, undermining the good name of the great families 'like ours'. Her ridicule inadvertently exposes the less-than-unblushing reputation of the family where, by her own previous admission, 'this sort of thing' is rife, and it is only the quick-witted and disarming intervention by Xi-feng, imitating 'Lao Lai-zi in the *Twenty-Four Patterns of Filial Piety*, dressing up at the age of seventy and playing at "dicky-bird" in front of his aged parents to keep them amused', which averts acute embarrassment and turns the situation into light comedy. It is a memorable episode as a self-critique by the writer himself, halfway through the novel, and one in which prose narrative more than equals the capacity of poetic opera drama of the time – where it is left out as a 'scene' for the same reason as *The Story of the Stone* is a novel rather than a play.

All of the foregoing comments, quotations and descriptions are necessary for a full appreciation of the story of Xi-feng and Er-jie, and Xi-feng's fatal 'act' to 'keep her womanly virtue untarnished' (3.68.351). It is structured as the third act in a tragedy, where the hero has to act out his ambitions in the face of opposition, where the interest is not so much in the final outcome – death – but in the fatal logic of the struggle itself, and the heroism lies in the tragic perverse creativity of the attempt to defy the odds.

Act 3 Scene (ii) Arrival of the You sisters, Xi-feng's miscarriage and the secret marriage

The climax of the tragic story of Xi-feng is Xueqin's dramatisation of her final desperate effort to retain a respected position in her marriage and in

the Jia family, brought on by her husband's secret setting-up of a second household for a 'second wife', You Er-jie. The narrative brings together the role of 'little general' Xi-feng has inhabited as manager of the household, and Xi-feng's marital role as the first wife to continue the patriline by bearing a male child or, failing that, organising for her husband to bring a second wife or concubine into the marriage to fulfil this need. The Xi-feng/Er-jie story begins in Chapter 63, some way into Volume 3 of the novel subtitled 'The Warning Voice'. The story is carefully structured, although it extends intermittently over six chapters with the interleaving narrative itself thickening the texture; dialogue and visual detail like scenes from a play, slapstick humour alternating with duplicitous solicitation, a 'Precious Mirror' reflecting one agreeable side and then its ugly opposite giving a theatrical quality to the whole. It is truly a play within a play, Xi-feng staging an elaborate deception to combat the deceit wrought upon her, acting the dutiful wife who allows her husband to take a second wife and, after that, a concubine in order to gain control over the second wife and – what then? As for Hamlet, each move towards confirming self-belief has the opposite effect; as Xi-feng resorts to increasingly creative measures to affirm her reputation as the virtuous wife, the more alienated from this sense of herself she becomes; 'acting' the role is now her only access to it.

The prelude to the Xi-feng/Er-jie story is the sudden death – following ingestion of mercuric elixirs – of the oldest senior Jia male and father of Cousin Zhen, long retired to a Taoist temple and looking for the secret of immortality. This occasions much emergency household rearrangement by Cousin Zhen's wife You-shi, including the temporary installation of her stepmother and her two unmarried stepsisters, renowned beauties Er-jie and San-jie. Xueqin gives ample forewarning to the reader: when Jia Rong heard of this arrangement, his face 'was observed to break into a grin' (3.63.243). Secondly, after six or seven months of pregnancy, Xi-feng miscarries a male child. As is described in the preceding volumes of the novel, Xi-feng has become an accomplished manager, but at the cost of opposition from the household unwilling to change its ways – as she explains to Patience -

> Because of all the economies I've introduced during these last few years there's hardly anyone in this household who doesn't secretly hate me. But it's like riding a tiger: I daren't relax my grip for a single moment for fear of being eaten.
>
> (3.55.62)

– and whose dignity has become vulnerable in a marriage where her husband 'humiliates' her by his casual affairs and dismisses her 'mortification' as jealousy. The stress takes a toll on her health, and the significance of this to her capacity to bear a son is the new factor brought in at the beginning

of the third volume. The First Moon festivities over, 'suddenly . . . an event occurred which filled the whole household with dismay. Xi-feng had a miscarriage' (3.54.44). Xi-feng may be feeling 'everybody hates me', but this would have been redeemed by producing a male child. The narrative provides further ominous details:

> The miscarriage was in fact only a symptom of her body's exhaustion. A month later it was followed by the beginning of a chronic small discharge of blood from the womb.
>
> (3.55.45)

This observation about the causes of the miscarriage has been taken to imply the writer's negative views about Xi-feng's lack of mindfulness about her main duty in life, but the question of 'who's to blame?' is always hovering: the older wives have themselves been overtaxing her with responsibilities, rather than nurturing the younger woman. Xueqin is forthright as ever with medical observations, and he leaves Xi-feng's inner thoughts and feelings about this to the reader's conjecture; his interest here is to alert the reader to how Xi-feng's identity is ultimately hostage to her patriarchal duty to produce a male heir. This role has been achieved by her prematurely widowed cousin-in-law, Li Wan, whose identity is wholly invested in her son; she is Xueqin's cipher ideal mother-and-widow character. Xueqin memorialises Li Wan in the prophetic Eleventh Song *Splendour Come Late*, which sings of 'true blessedness' as 'a clutch of young heirs at the knee', of the 'awesome sight' of a son exalted in office – 'upon his breast a gold insignia shone', and the poem mourns that this glory is short-lived in closing lines which refer to history's 'empty names' left behind to venerate, seeming to imply that Li Wan's veneration of the male heir has also 'emptied' her own name. If this is the reading intended, reflected in the lack of any vitality in her characterisation in the novel, it suggests that Xueqin mourns her memory more as a sacrifice to history's dedication to the ideal of the male heir than as a celebration of it – and is a reminder of the interest the writer has invested in this issue from the outset, with the hero's symbolic rejection of his superior male 'son and heir' status over his female cousin and his intuitive preference for girly things. It is also instructive that in this Song, the son blessed by the mortal world becomes one of history's 'empty names', whereas in the Song prior to this, Xi-feng's daughter Qiaojie is given the status of blessing from on high, 'One' 'far above the constellations', watching all and making 'just calculations'; this is perhaps a reference to the salvationary end to the famous opera-drama *Mistress and Maid*, where the immortal lovers are assigned royal duties to adjudicate the 'Register of Marital Affinities for the Mortal World . . . to estimate the

worth of persons of beauty and talent to ensure fulfilment of their desires and safeguard against mismatches'.[50]

The culture of the time provided authority for a first wife in the event of failing to produce a male heir, to oversee provision of a concubine to carry a child. Xueqin indicates this through Lady Wang's thoughts which, given later in the story, are strikingly revelatory about the impact on Xi-feng when she hears of her husband's secret marriage:

> Xi-feng's failure to take adequate steps for procuring her husband an heir had for some time now been a source of anxiety for Lady Wang, for she knew that her niece's reputation must be suffering.
>
> (3.69.355)

Jia Lian's pre-emption of Xi-feng's authority to 'procure her husband an heir' has taken away her last chance to establish and confirm her reputation – to live up to the exceptional 'Noble Woman' she and her grandmother Jia each discern in the other. That the secret marriage, initiated by Jia Rong with an eye to his own carnal advantage, is from the outset described as an 'idiotic plan' only underlines its casual cruelty, leaving aside the 'facts' listed:

> the fact that Jia Lian was in mourning, the fact that a secret marriage of the kind he was contemplating was bigamous and illegal, the fact that he had an extremely strict father and an exceptionally jealous wife – [are] lightly brushed aside.
>
> (3.64 266)

Er-jie, herself a half-sister of Jia Rong's mother You-shi, is easily persuaded:

> Already, in the past, she had compromised herself with her sister's husband [Cousin Zhen]. And she has always resented the arbitrary betrothal to Zhang Hua . . . which seemed to condemn her to a life of poverty. If Jia Lian loved her, and her brother-in-law [Cousin Zhen] was prepared to give her away, what possible objection could she have to the marriage?
>
> (3.64.271)

'Lust of the flesh', the 'shallow, promiscuous kind of love' warned against early in the first volume of the Dream, is on full display, even to consigning Xi-feng to history:

> Besides paying Er-jie the allowance, Jia Lian handed over all his private savings to her to look after for him. He told her everything about Xi-feng, down to the most intimate bedroom particulars, and promised her that

> as soon as Xi-feng died, she should move into the mansion and live there openly as his wife. It cannot be said that Er-jie found any of this displeasing. (3.65.275)

The paragraph ends with a reference to 'the little household managing very comfortably' – on Xi-feng's money, very likely – and there is a further unconscionable 'fact': their housekeeper is none other than the 'Mattress', the notorious loose woman Xi-feng had found in bed with her husband, now married to her second husband, Jia Lian's servant Bao Er.

In setting the situation up in this way, is Xueqin risking the credibility of his story of Xi-feng and Er-jie? Such an 'idiotic plan' seems so extraordinary a violation of this 'rather strait-laced household' that Xi-feng goes on to warn Er-jie they are entering – except, of course, that by the third volume, no such 'strait-laced household' exists, already disappearing under its layers of corruption and contradiction, so that a 'secret marriage' is 'merely' a further expression (3.65.337). But does this leach away the force of Xi-feng's fight back – is it already a lost cause? At the heart of Shakespearean tragedy is the vulnerability of the hero in achieving – or retaining – a sense of the significance of his own existence and, 'reading the *The Story of the Stone* through *Hamlet*', it can be seen that it is Xi-feng's fight back itself – in all its contradictions, ambiguities, hypocrisies and deceits, fatal idealism and moral overreachings – which now becomes the focus of Xueqin's creative energy. The dramatisation of Xi-feng's extraordinary initiative in assuming control, at however dreadful a cost, over a situation which has effectively deprived her of her life, is a superlative exercise of literary imagination. There are other readings possible – that Xi-feng's plot against the 'other Mrs Lian' is just another, more engaging version of the prototypical melodramatic plotting by the jealous wife in the 'shrew story' tradition. This hardly seems adequate, however, to Xueqin's detailed depiction of Xi-feng's character and his meticulous contextualisation of her plan of 'what to do'; while recognisably riffing off this prototype, he is re-presenting it with his own 'secret message' about where the truth of the tradition is to be found. In particular, as with the distinction made in the old Confucian story between filial and unfilial obedience and its dependence on 'righteous' and 'unrighteous' conduct and 'who is more wrong' discussed in an earlier chapter, Xueqin is showing that it is the 'unrighteous' act of the husband in causing the 'slain heart' of the first wife which is the greater wrong; in turn, it is also the ultimate cause of the suicide of the second wife.

Act 3 Scene (iii) 'You heard that? You and I are both dead, Patience,
We don't exist any more!' *(3.67.327)*

In *Hamlet*, in the ghost scene, the simple words 'crown' and 'queen' – 'Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched' – describe the murder of the old king; 'the serpent that did sting thy father's life/Now wears his crown'; the usurper king's kingly status, political and marital, is summed up in the

words 'my crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen' (3.3.55). As has been noted, Xueqin likewise signifies Xi-feng's elevated sense of identity in her chignon 'circled with gold filigree', fastened with a pin 'embellished with flying phoenixes' and, around her neck 'a coiling dragon in red gold'. The disintegration of this identity becomes annihilation in the event of the 'secret marriage': she is 'at once despatched' as all the torrid details of the secret marriage and the 'other Mrs Lian' are extracted from Jia Lian's stammering manservant, Joker. Joker, who has slandered Xi-feng freely to Er-jie, finds himself caught in the middle between husband and wife:

> 'After that Master Rong found the master a house'.
>
> 'Oh?' said Xi-feng sharply. 'Where is it?'
>
> 'A few streets behind our place', said Joker. 'Not very far'.
>
> 'So!' Xi-feng turned and looked hard at Patience. 'You heard that? You and I are both dead, Patience, we don't exist any more!'
>
> Patience dared not reply.
>
> (3.67.327)

The 'coiling dragon' is now Er-jie – the serpent who now wears Xi-feng's 'crown'. Xi-feng's plot against Er-jie now takes on the significance of a defence of her very life – and her subsequent play-acting a creative response, like Hamlet 'be-netted round with villains' as she feels herself to be.

Tragedy – or comedy? Xueqin requires his reader to stand back as a spectator not quite knowing how to respond, the kind of discomfort aroused in the tragi-comedy of the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*. The 'discovery' episode reads like a scene in a modern soap opera – *The Other Mrs Lian* – giving the revelations a slightly hysterical quality as if reflecting conflicting responses: how serious can all this be, when even Xi-feng has to laugh?

> Joker, gathering from this that the whole story was out, became quite desperate. Plucking his hat off his head, he began bumping his head on the floor in a frenzy of self-abasement.
>
> 'Only spare my life, madam! I swear that every word I tell you shall be the truth'.
>
> 'Get on with it, then!'
>
> Joker knelt stiffly upright in order to do so.
>
> (3.67.326)

Even the exaggerated abasement tells of how artificial the rituals of respect have become, but at least Xi-feng now gets the 'full story':

> 'I didn't know about this business at the beginning, madam. I think it started during the time when Sir Jing's body was still lying in the temple . . . when Master Rong came back into the city to see about it, the master came with him. On their way they got talking about Mrs Zhen's two

sisters, and the master said how much he admired the new mistress – er, the other Mrs Lian, and Master Rong, ' he said, joking-like –

Xi-feng spat.

Turtle's egg! What 'other Mrs Lian'?'

'Beg pardon, m'am!' said Joker hurriedly, and kotowed again.

Joker can hardly go on, but has no choice and opens up about finding the house, continuing:

'Mr Zhen gave a lot of money to the Zhangs so that they wouldn't object to the wedding'.

'Now we have a Zhang family in the story', said Xi-feng. 'This is getting rather complicated'.

'Ah yes, you see, the other Mrs Lian – '

Joker suddenly realised what he had said and dealt himself a slap across the mouth. Xi-feng laughed in spite of herself and the maids to right and left of her puckered up their faces and giggled. Joker thought for a bit.

'The elder of Mrs Zhen's two sisters – '

'Yes, yes', said Xi-feng. 'Get on with it! What about her?'

(3.67.327)

Joker continues to fill out the sordid details of Zhang Hua and the broken-off engagement to Er-jie: the secret wedding, Mrs Zhen's visit with presents a few days later – all further blows, all soon to be deflected by Xi-feng into a course of action: 'I've thought of what to do'.

Xueqin's lightly humorous handling of this episode allows him to keep Xi-feng's sense of identity-annihilation in a state of dramatic tension with the evident lack of any respect for, or even comprehension of, such a feeling on the part of master and servants: simply through the comic repetition of 'the problem of nomenclature', it is made very clear that 'the other Mrs Lian' is very well entrenched as the new wife; clear that, with equal status to Xi-feng and the advantage of likely fertility, she will presently take a position of superiority in the mansion. Xi-feng appears to have been well and truly cornered and she is not in a position to vent her outrage; as she has already learned through bitter experience, this will be seen as 'mere' female jealousy. Does she have to accept that this 'idiotic plan' is a fait accompli? 'What sort of person is she?' is the existential question at stake for her, however much it is 'brushed lightly aside' by others. What she has learned from the Jia Rui disaster should give her pause: her 'boys' are now the enemy, and she is now all alone in this battle for her very existence.

Act 3 Scene (iv) 'The three of us will live in perfect harmony together.
And all of this I shall owe to you'. *(3.68.332–337)*

The dramatic immediacy of Xueqin's description of Xi-feng's visit to Er-jie in the house 'not far' offers a way of understanding her state of mind: 'I have

thought of what to do'. The plan enables her to take direct control, a chance to 'act' the role of the gracious and thoughtful 'First Wife' she had envisaged for herself in the noble Jia family, but which has now been taken away from her by her own husband and other senior males in this very family. She will now act the role of moral agent, concerned only with protecting the marriage, Er-jie, Jia Lian and the entire Jia clan from this illegal, bigamous, unwarranted violation of ritual and respectability. The plan has all the elements of a classic tragic trajectory: Hamlet, in his disguise as madman, assumes the role of superior moral agent, only to find that he has 'shot the arrow o'er the house' and, far from 'perfect conscience', dies fearing history will discredit his name.

Xi-feng has commenced the plan in Jia Lian's absence by the construction of 'a small replica' of her and Lian's married quarters on the east side of their courtyard. This is to be seen as visible proof of her 'thoughtfulness' and readiness for a second wife; she is not at all, as she explains to Er-jie in the visit that follows, 'the sort of jealous woman who cannot tolerate a rival' that Jia Lian has 'fixed firmly in his mind':

> And so he has to go off and do this without telling me. It's so unfair. Who am I to explain myself to? Only Heaven above knows what a great injustice he has done me.
>
> (3.68.333-334)

The entire episode is a masterly display of Xueqin's creative genius, so imaginatively engaged with his subject that it is as if Xi-feng is persuading not only Er-jie and the reader but also herself to see herself as *really* the role model First Wife. Xi-feng becomes the person she is acting, just as in Xueqin's framing paradox 'Real becomes not-real when the real's unreal' (1.1.55). The touches of humour at the outset are disarming, mirroring Xi-feng's charm offensive itself. The entire entourage of servants and carriage arriving at Er-jie's door have the trappings of mourning, Xi-feng having just discovered that Er-jie's stepmother has 'only two or three weeks previous . . . taken a nap, which proved to be her last' – adding another obligation, sexual abstinence, to Xi-feng's armoury. On arrival:

> The Mattress came to the door. Joker had by this time resolved the problem of nomenclature to his own satisfaction.
>
> 'Tell Mrs Er', he said blandly, 'that Mrs Lian is here'.
>
> The immortal parts of the late Droopy's relict [the remains of the Mattress's late husband's] leaped through her cranium and described several somersaults in the air.
>
> (3.68.332)

Xueqin's humourous exaggeration here is a 'spoiler alert' for the extreme artifice of what is to follow. Xi-feng's descent from the carriage, supported by senior maids, her dress, half-mourning, restrained and elegant,

is described as if observed by Er-jie; she is particularly struck by her visitor's eyes. The two couplets by which Xueqin describes Xi-feng's face are eloquent of the binary opposites being played out:

> 'Brows a branched twig with two high-pendant leaves,
> And trigon phoenix-eyes, slant, hard and bright'.
> And she was very beautiful:
> 'Pretty as a peach-tree in the spring,
> Even in austere autumn's dress'.
>
> (3.68.332)

Xi-feng graciously accepts Er-jie's 'inferior wife' courtesies and then 'took Er-jie impulsively by the hand and the two young women walked hand-in-hand into the house'. Xi-feng's performance begins, a head-spinning mix of truth and duplicity: Jia Lian so mistaken in 'my being jealous', the entreaty to

> 'come back with me to the mansion, let us live together, side by side, like sisters. Let us join forces in looking after him: seeing that he performs his duties properly and takes good care of his health'.
>
> (3.68.334)

Then there is "reputation" – mine, yours, too, for that matter and Mr Lian's – a 'far more serious matter'; we know the 'nasty things' the servants are saying behind their backs:

> Many wives hearing that their husband had married another woman and was living with her in secret would be unwilling even to set eyes on her. Heaven knows I've tried to accommodate Mr Lian. I've even offered him Patience as a chamber-wife. I think Heaven and Earth and the Lord Buddha must have taken pity on me in letting me know about this marriage. They didn't want me to be destroyed by a pack of scandal-mongering servants. That's why I am asking you to come and live with me. I promise that your treatment will be exactly the same as mine in every respect: accommodation, service, clothing-allowance, everything. There is so much an intelligent person like you could do to help me if you had a mind to. Working side by side together, we shall not only give the lie to this malicious tittle-tattle of the servants which I find so wounding: we shall be able to show Mr Lian when he gets back how wrong he has been making me out to be jealous. All three of us will live in perfect harmony together. And all of this I shall owe to you!'.
>
> (3.68.334-335)

And now comes the 'coup de grace', after which Xi-feng breaks down in 'noisy weeping':

> But if you won't come with me, I am perfectly prepared to move in here with you. Provided that you put in an occasional word for me with Mr Lian so that I am still left some ground to stand on, I should even be willing to hold your basin and comb your hair for you and wait on you like a servant.
>
> (3.68.335)

The two weep together, sitting down as first and second wife, Er-jie corrected for not allowing Patience to kowtow to her – 'she's only a maid'. Over tea, Er-jie readily hands over management of the move out and, when she is safely in the carriage, Xi-feng confides that there is still a little problem:

> This is rather a strait-laced household we are going into . . . Neither the old lady nor Lady Wang knows a word yet about your marriage. They would probably kill Mr Lian if they found out he had married you while he was still in mourning.
>
> (3.68.337)

The 'little general' has it all worked out: Er-jie will stay for a 'few days' in the Garden with Lady Wang's daughter-in-law, a paragon of widowed virtue, while Xi-feng 'thinks of some way of explaining' Er-jie to 'their Ladyships'. For Chinese readers familiar with classical historical warrior fiction such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*, the whole exercise would have the overtones of a Wu Song military strategy.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is ever an actor in his own drama, even to aspiring to the role of stage avenger running his sword through Claudius 'in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed' (3.4.90) to send his soul 'black and damned' to hell. From the outset, Xueqin's presentation of Xi-feng gives her a theatrical dimension: she typically commands an audience, whether hosting the mealtime ceremony, receiving the old countrywoman Grannie Liu, instructing servants or doing stand-up comedy at a family party. She plays the role as she thinks it ought to be played, the heartless disciplinarian or the sympathetic friend, but the one role she aspires to is the premium role given to women in the Qianglong era: that of the 'Noble Dame'. But could she really have seen it through? Become the all-forbearing First Wife, like her mother-in-law Lady Xing married to the depraved Jia She, or like her cousin-in-law, You-shi, half-sister of Er-jie, You-shi, a wife who who always turns a blind eye to her husband's philandering, married to Cousin Zhen, previous seducer of both the You half-sisters, and his now dead daughter-in-law Qin-shi? This is where Xueqin's dramatisation of the second part of Xi-feng's plan becomes

vastly more complex. What he lays out before the reader is the spectacle of a young woman who has to *act* the role of moral scourge/defender of the family reputation in a family which has so far lost its moral bearings that *acting* is her only resort: if her 'exceptional jealousy' is to blame for keeping the second marriage secret, then she will show them who is *really* to blame for dragging the family's name through the courts – by scourging Jia Rong and You-shi with their own reprehensible conduct and then offering them salvation by her own sacrifice to the truth: 'All lies, of course'.

Act 4: Falling action

In this act, Xi-feng acts the prototype shrew, becoming close to a 'real' shrew. When considering the following scene, it is instructive of the challenge Xueqin faces in reinterpreting the shrew stereotype through Xi-feng to note how in the illustrations to an edition of the novel printed in 1832, woodblock portraits of the main characters are paired with flowers:

> the plant or flower often carries rich symbolic meaning acquired through a long tradition of lyric poetry and folklore. . . . Wang-Xi-feng is matched with a flower called 'flower of jealousy' otherwise known as skullcap [an orchid], while You-shi . . . is paired with a 'smiling-flower' . . . to reveal their respective personalities and dispositions.[51]

This pairing is sympathetic to You-shi, and yet You-shi – Jia Rong's mother – is not included in any of Xueqin's commemorative verses or songs and his characterisation of her is by no means uncritical, whereas Xueqin's verses and songs about Xi-feng do not identify her with jealousy at all, but with her 'great ability' and her broken heart, and make a clear link between her 'cunning' and her 'anxious schemes' to keep alive the Jia family 'dreams', not to destroy them.

Act 4 (i) . . . Xi-feng makes a disturbance in Ning-guo House (3.68.343–353)

This scene is another acting tour de force, this time with Xi-feng playing the role of the prototype shrew; a sustained performance of moral scourging, half comic, half tragic, punctuated throughout by physical outrage, beginning with this beautifully presented young woman heralded by the cry going up 'Mrs Lian of the Rong-Guo House has arrived' as the menfolk try to get away:

> You-shi came out of the inner room to greet her.
> 'What is it, Feng?' She asked observing Xi-feng's ugly expression.
> 'Something has upset you'.
> Xi-feng spat in her face.
>
> (3.68.343)

This has the significance of a ritual insult, the beginning of a verbal spitting, as if Xi-feng is getting rid of a build-up of righteous resentment – but it is also a vast pretence, a displacement of her own personal feelings onto outrage centred on the risk to the family reputation, the sheer criminal ineptitude, the multiple violations of law and ritual in how the second marriage has been handled, such as to land the family in the courts; she has to pretend that if she can be held to blame she is willing to be given a 'bill of divorce' if that is what they 'want' and 'go back to my own people'; to pretend that, far from the 'jealous shrew' on whom the family would lay the blame in the event of a court hearing into why the marriage was kept secret, she is 'in fact' the only one prepared to openly support the marriage; to pretend to be ready to go with You-shi to 'explain all about this to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang'; to pretend that it is in order to salvage the family reputation that she has taken the step of bringing Er-jie into the mansion, to pretend that 'she wasn't going to get them out of this fix, but I am such a weak, soft-hearted creature' that she is prepared to make up a story – 'All lies, of course, but I am sufficiently brazen to get away with them'.

In amongst this tirade of righteousness, many blows are struck, literal and metaphorical, emphasising the aggression of the attack but at the same time undercutting the seriousness with slapstick comedy, as with the earlier scene of Joker's revelations, and with the same effect of imminent reduction of the whole affair to triviality – is this just Auntie out of control again?

> She began to cry noisily, tugging at You-shi's arm and insisting that she should go with her to the court. Jia Rong, in a desperate attempt to dissuade her, threw himself down on his knees and knocked his head repeatedly on the floor, entreating his aunt to 'control her rage'. Xi-feng let go of You-shi and rounded savagely on Jia Rong.
>
> 'Black-hearted villain! May God's lightning strike you and the devils tear your carcase! You're as stupid as mud, and yet you're forever meddling and interfering in what doesn't concern you. . . . Don't you *dare* tell me what to do!'
>
> And she began beating him. Jia Rong redoubled the frequency of his kowtows.
>
> 'Please, auntie, please! Don't give way to anger. Don't think only of what has just happened: try to remember the good things as well as the bad. . . . there is no need to punish me yourself. I will gladly do it for you if it will help you to overcome your anger'.
>
> He spread his arms out to left and right of him and began to deal himself hefty slaps on both cheeks, prefacing each blow with an interrogation, thus:
>
> 'Are you going to go on doing these stupid, meddlesome things in future?' (*slap!*)
>
> are you going to go on listening to Uncle instead of doing what Auntie tells you? (*slap!*)

> "how can you bear to be so cruel and unnatural to Auntie, when Auntie has been so good and kind to you?" (*slap!*)
>
> (3.68.345)

Jia Rong is out-acting Xi-feng – 'the others felt like laughing, but did not dare to' as Xi-feng redoubles her assault:

> She threw herself upon You-shi's bosom, weeping and wailing in a fine display of histrionic grief:
>
> 'I don't mind your finding him another wife, but why was it necessary to make him break the law? Why did you let him do it without his father knowing? And why did you have to destroy my reputation while you were about it?'
>
> (3.68.345)

These are verbal blows going to the substance of the 'idiocy' and Xi-feng continues in like vein, through 'fits of weeping': 'I knew that even if I appeared in court to answer the charge myself, it would be the Jia family that would be disgraced'.

> In her final outburst the weeping turned almost to a scream as she began invoking her parents and her ancestors and threatening to hang or drown herself or batter her brains out against a wall.
>
> (3.68.346)

Histrionics – or Xueqin's 'secret' message? In the context of the narrative, where there are women hanging themselves and drowning, and women whose 'brains' may just as well be mush for all their intelligence is worth to them, Xueqin's words are telling of the harsh reality which Xi-feng's plight represents. Indeed, one of the women who has taken her own life (although this is disguised as a fatal illness) was Jia Rong's own wife, Qin-shi, with whom Xi-feng had a close friendship and whose death affected her deeply, even to appearing to her in a dream – the impression it made upon her was alluded to earlier. The mystery around this death and the implication that it is suicide caused by an adulterous relationship with Jia Rong's father is important to understanding Xi-feng's attack on You-shi. Is her rage all an act here, or is it fuelled by a feeling that You-shi, had she been a stronger wife, could have done something to prevent or stop the affair? The spectacle Xi-feng is now making of herself expresses a frustration which, as with the interrogation of Joker earlier on, tilts into farce; particularly telling is the physical effect on You-shi:

> You-shi, whom all this time she had not let go of, was so mauled and crumpled that she was beginning to take on some of the aspects of a piece of well-kneaded dough and various parts of her clothing had

become damp and discoloured with the moisture from Xi-feng's eyes and nose.

(3.68.346)

'A piece of well-kneaded dough' – Xueqin sums up Xi-feng's view of You-shi, whose pose as the virtuous bearer of her husband's philandering she despises: as You-shi shouts at Jia Rong – 'Stupid little fool' – Xi-feng turns the blame most emphatically back on her as the 'stupid' one, beginning by taking You-shi's head in her hands, drawing her own face close and 'pretend[ing] to inspect the inside of her mouth' – the humiliation of this invasion a deflection of Xi-feng's own humiliation:

Who's stupid? There isn't an aubergine in here. I see no sign of a gag. Why couldn't you have come and told me?

(3.68.346)

In raising this question, Xueqin is speaking volumes: the women of the household are so habituated to keeping their own counsel, to 'overcoming their anger', so defensive of their fragile status that they have little capacity to think or feel for other women in distress, passing off distress as 'jealousy'. Xi-feng does not think for one moment that You-shi '*could* have come and told me' – her words go on to spell out the age-old patriarchal ideal of female moral strength:

'There's a very old saying: 'A good lining gives a garment strength and a husband with a good wife has few calamities'. If you'd been a good wife to Zhen, he and the others would not have got up to this mischief. You haven't the wit to *do* anything useful: and as for *saying* – for all the good sense that comes out of your mouth you might as well be a bottle! You seem to think that you have only got to sit tight and do nothing and people will praise you for your virtue!'

She spat two or three times in quick succession.

(3.68.347)

Spitting out the bile – Xueqin's 'secret message' again. 'Sitting tight' and 'saying nothing' is so exactly what is expected of Xi-feng that the words resonate very much as a justification for her own 'doing 'and 'saying' against the witless You-shi. You-shi's response is only to confirm herself as patient sufferer:

'I did try', said You-shi tearfully. 'The others here will tell you, if you don't believe me. I tried very hard to dissuade them. It's not my fault they wouldn't listen. What was I supposed to do? But I don't blame you for being angry. It's just one more thing I shall have to bear'.

(3.68.347)

Xi-feng can hardly 'bear' this reiteration of the very 'stupidity' she is trying so forcefully to challenge. In a striking change of perspective, Xueqin now pans out – from the close-up of the inspection of the mouth – to the larger context:

> All the Ning-guo concubines, maids and women servants were by now silently entreating for their mistress, so that the room seemed suddenly to have filled with row upon row of kneeling figures.
>
> (3.68.347)

This is such a sudden vision of female solidarity in submission, even to the most senior of her servants standing forward and pleading that 'you and our mistress have always been such good friends. Leave her a bit of face now, please!' and handing Xi-feng a cup of tea, that Xi-feng's response is doubly shocking: 'Xi-feng dashed it to the floor'. Xueqin has opened up a glimpse of the much wider social structure of female submission – 'rows upon rows of kneeling figures' – which exists in silent resistance to change; the smashed cup eloquent only of Xi-feng's futility.

4 Scene (ii) 'Mr Zhen gave a lot of money to the Zhangs so that they wouldn't object to the wedding'. *(3.67.327);*
'No, I think we must keep her, even if it means giving him more money'. *(3.68.351)*

This is the end of her histrionics: now she humbly consents, quoting her nephew – 'As Rong says, "One hides a broken arm within one's sleeve" ' – to offer a reasoned discourse on her own measures already taken to save the family reputation, suitably humble – 'What could I do? Lian was away. There was no-one on hand to advise me'. Because Xueqin emphasises that Xi-feng's plan is premeditated from start to finish, it raises the question of why Xi-feng did not *start* with the enquiries into Er-jie's background, the broken engagement alluded to by Joker – 'now we have a Zhang family in the story'– and utilise the legal loophole, which would have seemed the most straightforward way to get rid of Er-jie *and* punish her husband. What she has hoped to gain is coming to fruition in this confrontation with the conspirators, where she presents herself as the saviour of the family's reputation, but her strategy is still open to challenge, as Jia Rong states:

> 'I should be the one to clear up this mess . . . since I am the one who got us into it. I shall ask Zhang Hua straight out what his intentions are. Is it definitely Aunt Er he wants, or is he willing to make do with someone else if we give him the money? If it is definitely Aunt Er and no one else will do, I shall simply have to break it to her that she must go and join him'.
>
> 'That's all very well, but I don't want to part with your Aunt Er', said Xi-feng hurriedly. 'In fact, I refuse to hear of it. Even suppose she

were willing, what would people think of us if we allowed her to go. No, I think we must keep her, even if it means giving him more money'.

Jia Rong knew perfectly well that although Xi-feng said this, she was secretly longing to get rid of Er-jie and was merely anxious that if she did so it should be with her reputation for womanly virtue kept untarnished. He deemed it safest not to dispute with her, however, but merely to agree to everything she said.

(3.68.351)

Xi-feng responds 'hurriedly': is she beginning to lose control? Making friends with Er-jie and bringing her into the mansion has made it virtually impossible for her to adopt this solution without tarnishing her reputation: she would now be accused of deceiving an innocent woman into thinking she was safe from being taken back by the 'down-and-out' Zhang Hua, 'merely' in order to humiliate her and satisfy her own paranoid jealousy, the very opposite of her intentions. Jia Rong is right: Xi-feng is longing to get rid of Er-jie, but it must be a positive statement about her own status and control in the marriage, precisely as she has imaginatively conceived and put into practice in her visit to Er-jie. Whether Rong could argue that this may be done without harm to Xi-feng, he refrains – this would only invite her rage at the implication that it is her reputation she is thinking about, when she has just surely made it utterly clear that it is everyone else's reputation that is at risk, not her own – 'What have I done wrong since I came to this place that you should want to treat me like this?' As it becomes apparent later, Xi-feng *does* intend to use the legal weapon, but not until she has presented herself before Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang as the exemplary wife performing her duties, innocent of whatever unsavoury matters may eventuate.

Resuming her composure, Xi-feng initiates her final move, but the legal option has been raised again and now hovers as a question mark over her strategy.

'This outside part of the business should not be too hard to settle', said Xi-feng. 'In the long run it's here at home that we are going to have the difficulty. Hadn't you better come with me to explain all about this to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang?'

This threw You-shi into another panic. She seized Xi-feng by the hand and earnestly entreated her to think of some lie which would obviate this necessity.

'If you are not capable of dealing with the consequences, you ought not to do these things in the first place', said Xi-feng coldly. 'Really, it quite disgusts me to hear you bleat like this. Oh well. I wasn't going to get them out of this fix, but I am such a weak, soft-hearted creature I suppose I shall have to'.

(3.68. 351)

Xi-feng has by now turned the entire situation around so that it is Rong and You-shi who are 'to blame' and she who is the saviour of the family and the exemplary virtuous wife:

> 'You'd better stay out of this then. I'll take your sister on my own to make her kowtow to Grandmother Jia and the ladies. I shall say this is your sister and that I have taken a great fancy to her. I shall tell them because I haven't so far managed to give Lian a son, I have been thinking of buying two girls to serve him as chamber-wives, but that since seeing your sister I had thought how much nicer it would be to have her instead as his Number Two and keep it all inside the family. . . . All lies, of course, but I am sufficiently brazen to get away with them'.
>
> (3.68.351–352)

4 (iii) 'another thorn in her bosom, even before the first one had been extracted!' *(3.69.360)*

What she does not tell them is that the 'lies' extend further, that far from welcoming Er-jie, she will make her life as miserable as possible while still protecting her own reputation. It is important to note how carefully Xueqin charts her moral disintegration. There is never any doubt that Xi-feng wants to 'get rid of Er-jie', but the way she is blocked, and then assisted, by the male elders and Jia Lian himself, is so appalling in its gratuitous disregard – 'You and I are both dead, Patience. We don't exist anymore!' – that her own loss of moral conscience has become a consequential expression of the entire family's loss of integrity and descent into ruin. Xueqin dramatises how even the smallest incident can demoralise, as when Xi-feng, bringing her plan to perfection, introduces Er-jie to Grandmother Jia, and the old lady fumbles in her mind to think who she is:

> 'Never mind about that, Grandma', said Xi-feng laughing. 'Just tell me what you think of her. Is she prettier than me?'
>
> (3.69.355)

Xi-feng could have expected this to have passed off in the same spirit of the 'joking and laughter' greeting their entry, but instead:

> Grandmother Jia put on a pair of spectacles.
>
> 'Bring the child a little closer', she told Faithful and Amber. 'Let me have a look at her skin'.
>
> Amid suppressed titters from the others present, Er-jie was hustled forward. Grandmother Jia looked her up and down very carefully.
>
> 'Hold her hand out', she said to Amber. 'Let me look at her hand'.
>
> When the hand had been inspected, Grandmother Jia took off her spectacles and laughed.

> 'Flawless. Yes, she's prettier than you'.
>
> (3.69.355)

'Xi-feng laughed, too': in acting mode, she hides the humiliation she would certainly have felt. The metaphorical import is evident: the magnification of scrutiny revealing the truth, not of Er-jie's tainted hand, but Xi-feng's. This rebuff signals an end to the succession of play-like visualisations and dialogue-driven writing bringing alive the story of Xi-feng and Er-jie; it is as if Xueqin, in acknowledgement of Xi-feng's descent into paranoia, even to yet another plan – for her manservant to hunt down Zhang, the man to whom Er-jie was originally betrothed, and 'procure his death' – no longer wishes to fully invest his creative imagination in the final downward turns and twists of the saga. These become a cascade of disasters: Cousin Zhen has already blocked her legal charge, and the jealous concubine, Autumn, Jia She gifts to Jia Lian – 'another thorn in her bosom, even before the first one had been extracted!' – totally usurps Lian's interest in Er-jie and hands to Xi-feng a 'borrowed knife':

> or rather she would watch the killing from a safe distance, like a traveller reclining on a mountainside who watches two tigers tearing each other to pieces in the valley below.
>
> (3.69.363)

Jia Lian, besotted with Autumn, 'quite failed to notice' that Er-jie's health was declining as she is served inedible food and abused by the servants under Xi-feng's orders – until these strategies are almost brought to nought by the advent of Er-jie's pregnancy: had she borne a male child, it would have been Xi-feng, not Er-jie, who would have been destroyed.

In the tragedy of Xi-feng, Xueqin places the gamble with the essential patriarchal female function – bearing a male child – at its apex, and with this, the glaring contradiction of male cynicism, promiscuity and neglect of husbandly care and proper medical provision in its real-life playing out. The arrangements for Er-jie to first become Jia Lian's mistress and then his second wife are cooked up by his similar-aged nephew, Jia Rong, who also fancies Er-jie and sees 'there would be unlimited opportunities for larks with her whenever Jia Lian was away' (3.64.266). Rong tells Lian that his father will come around to the situation – 'you can tell him that you did it for the family, because Aunt Feng is unable to have a son'. Jia Lian later cautions another cousin not to say anything about the marriage just yet: 'I'm waiting until we have a son'. His cousin's response underlines Xi-feng's sense of failure: 'High time, too! . . . Cousin Feng is to blame for not giving you one'. Jia Lian laughs and reproves him, not wishing to be found out before he can produce this justification (3.66.299).

Xueqin summons up his creative energy to dramatise the crucial development of Er-jie's pregnancy for both women, and the farcical diagnosis of Er-jie's condition lends a telling sympathy to each. The only doctor available is a quack of dubious reputation in the narrative; his initial diagnosis of 'irregularity of the menses brought on by anaemia' is questioned by Jia Lian, and a second examination to 'look at the lady's face' to test for pregnancy is acceded to:

> The request was an unusual one, but Jia Lian felt he had no choice but to grant it. The bed-curtains were drawn back a few inches and Er-jie thrust her head out through the slit. The vision thus presented to him seemed to deprive the doctor temporarily of his senses, so that it is doubtful whether he was able to make any observations of diagnostic value while he was goggling at it. After a moment or two the curtains were drawn to again and Jia Lian accompanied the doctor outside and once more asked him for his opinion.
>
> (3.69.366)

'Goggling'– the doctor sees nothing but a vision of beauty, nothing of her half-starved condition, her enduring the onset of miscarriage: the dissociation of the aesthetic ideal of the female body from the reproductive function which defines its purpose is both shocking and comical in its overstatement. Parody is hovering, Xueqin making clear his artistic intention to expose the hypocrisy of not only Xi-feng but all involved as the scene unfolds – even Er-jie, who has with such moral complacency assumed her role as replacement fertile woman for the failed First Wife. All are playing a role in the tragic farce of female identity held hostage to patrilineal continuation.

The writer has established – and reiterates later – that it is as much Jia Lian's unconscionable conduct as Xi-feng's, moreover without any of her justification, which has allowed the situation to result in the initial diagnosis of anaemia: had it been treated by nourishing food, Er-jie would have been more likely to carry to term; as it was, the second opinion that it was a blood clot, not pregnancy, to be treated by blood dispersants, results in 'continuous abdominal pain, and after what seemed hours of agony, produces a foetus already sufficiently developed to be recognizable as a male child'. 'Jia Lian was beside himself . . . but Jia Lian's distress was as nothing compared with the transports of grief displayed by Xi-feng'.

4 (iv) 'Let me be ill instead of her', she prayed. 'Only let You-shi's sister get well again and bear us a man-child, and I vow to spend all my remaining days in prayer and fasting'. *(3.69.367)*

This is possibly the moment where the complexity of Xueqin's comprehension of the spiritually ruinous experience of late imperial patriarchy for young women is most painfully evident: the shocking spectacle of one wife

feigning grief over a rival wife's miscarriage of a male child. But is Xueqin solely intent upon exposing Xi-feng as now transformed into a monster of hypocrisy, a woman secretly hoping that 'You-shi's sister' Er-Jie, that 'precious sister of yours' thrown at You-shi's face in contempt, will die, all the while looking and sounding the virtuous wife?

> 'It is beginning to look as if we are fated not to have a son', she lamented. 'To think that a doctor's incompetence should ruin everything, just when we were so near to having one!'
>
> (3.69.367)

Her acting has an edge of hysteria which goes beyond dissembling:

> She had a little 'altar to Heaven and Earth' set up on which she burned incense and in front of which she knelt down and prayed with the utmost fervency for Er-jie's recovery.
>
> 'Let me be ill instead of her', she prayed. 'Only let You-shi's sister get well again and bear us a man-child, and I vow to spend all my remaining days in prayer and fasting'.
>
> Jia Lian and all the others who saw her and heard her pray were filled with admiration.
>
> (3.69.367)

Is it possible that Xueqin is staging this scene to suggest that 'in truth' Xi-feng, in the fiction of acting this prayerful role, is grieving for her *own* miscarriage and her *own* subsequent infertility – the grief which she has always hidden from others, which she has never been able the share with her husband and which has taken the form of chronic ill health? That perhaps this is not the gross hypocrisy of the literary shrew prototype but an expression of grief and deeply felt shame at her own bodily failure to give birth to an heir, the same kind of 'passion to succeed and . . . dread of being criticized' which has driven her exceptional managerial performance, her 'toils', her entire life? It cannot be unintentional that this scene is closely followed by another in direct contrast, displaying jealousy in all its melodramatic conventionality: the concubine Autumn – that 'other thorn', 'the borrowed knife' – is outed as the astral influence harming Er-jie, and her resentment at all the attention being given to Er-jie is at fever-pitch:

> 'Who pays any attention to what those beggarly swindlers tell you anyway? . . . Precious little darling! She saw plenty of all sorts when she was living outside. . . . Anyway, there's something I'd like to ask her. I'd like to ask her where she got that child from. She may fool that cotton-eared master of ours. As long as she gave him a child, it would be all one to him if it was a Zhang or a Wang. But do you really care about

> that whore's brat, Mrs Lian? I'm damned if I do! What's so special about having a baby? Give me a year or ten months and I'll have one myself – and it won't have half the city for its father, either!'
>
> The servants hearing her were at some pains not to laugh.
>
> (3.69.368)

The servants are admiring Xi-feng's piety, laughing at Autumn's jealousy – but the jealousy does go to the larger issue: 'What's so special about having a baby?' If this is what marriage is all about, how can the wife who fails 'to bear a man-child' ever have self-respect? This is true for Er-jie as for Xi-feng, and Er-jie, now replaced by Autumn in Jia Lian's affections and half-starved, chooses to 'just die and get it over with'. Er-jie's suicide is not in Xi-feng's plan of 'what to do' – as it is also not with Hamlet's stabbing the old courtier and 'lugging his guts into the neighbour room' (3.4 210). It is an unforeseen tragic consequence which both writers also present as an indictment: it severely questions Xi-feng's would-be 'perfect conscience' and finally becomes the tragic burden of guilt similar to Hamlet's when he makes the plea to Horatio to 'tell my story' to clear his 'wounded name' (5.328–333). Xueqin achieves this in the simple dignity of the description of Er-jie's death:

> 'now that I've lost the baby, there's nothing much left for me to live for. I don't *have* to put up with all this hatred and malice. Why don't I just die and get it over with? They say you can die by swallowing gold, It would be a better way of dying than hanging oneself [Qin-shi] or cutting one's throat' [her sister San-jie].
>
> She struggled out of bed, opened one of her boxes, and hunted out a nugget of raw gold. Then she wept a little. It was four o-clock in the morning. Summoning up all the will-power she could muster, she forced herself to swallow it. She had to hold her head back and swallow many times before it would go down; but in the end it did. Then she dressed herself hurriedly in her best clothes, put on her jewellery and ornaments, laid herself down upon the kang, and sank at once into unconsciousness.
>
> (3.69.370)

The question of the superior worth of the 'man-child' is at the heart of this novel – the femininised 'strangeness' of the hero Bao-yu as surviving scion of the Jia family alienating him from his father, and in his tragic love relationship with Dai-yu, their hope of marriage is destroyed by the family in favour of a more promisingly fertile match. The novel shows throughout the many problems for women and children around the tradition of concubinage, how young women turn away from marriage, become nuns, suffer cruel marriages, take their own lives or become cruel and malicious in a frustrated power-play among themselves. Set within this context, Xi-feng's

choice, to 'get rid of' Er-jie by using her wits, rather than becoming a 'Youshi' wife, or taking her own life, at the very least has the strength of her original promise – 'Peppercorn Feng', 'the little General'.

4 (v) 'You are very thoughtful' *he said eventually. (3.72.427)*

But has the battle finally turned Xi-feng into a monster of hypocrisy? Her final act, gaining Grandmother Jia's support to forbid Jia Lian's plan to have Er-jie buried in the ancestral family graveyard, has a painful indignity in Xueqin's visualisation. Xi-feng uses her own illness as an excuse to ban herself from the mourning rituals:

> The ban, however, did not prevent her from slipping out into the Garden when everyone else had gone, making her way round it between the rocks and the perimeter wall to the foot of the wall which separated it from Pear-tree Court and eavesdropping on what was going on inside. She could not hear very much, but enough to send her scurrying back to Grandmother Jia to report on what Jia Lian was up to. Grandmother Jia was indignant.
>
> (3.69.372)

The spectacle of this once-proud young woman – who has commanded an entire army of servants, has been the life and soul of family gatherings, always highly visible as she moves about with her entourage, never hurrying – now reduced to skulking furtively around the back, 'eavesdropping', 'scurrying back', makes her 'victory' more one of a fall from grace, a descent into 'getting her own back' which, however justified, is beneath the standards she has set herself, behaviour she has despised in other wives in the family.

It is a measure of Xueqin's imaginative investment in Xi-feng that he pursues her beyond this low point of demoralisation, garnering some sympathy for the attacks upon her by her mother-in-law, whose 'hatred of Xi-feng had now reached a degree of intensity that went beyond all reason'. Lady Xing uses a domestic incident to humiliate Xi-feng on the matriarch's eightieth birthday celebrations, in front of their aristocratic visitors. Faithfull is concerned to find from Patience that, late that evening, Xi-feng is still crying, and she speaks to Grandmother Jia about it:

> 'It's because she was shamed in front of everyone by Lady Xing'. 'Oh', said Grandmother Jia. 'Why was that?'
>
> Faithfull told her.
>
> 'I think Feng acted quite correctly . . . I expect this was Lady Xing's way of getting her own back for some grudge or other'.
>
> (3.71.411)

At least Xi-feng still has the matriarch's support, but the stress of the shaming takes a further toll on her body and her fertility; however, she is in denial: 'the blood-gates burst' in the vernacular phrase Xueqin chooses to use, in his characteristic attention to the visceral in both its meanings of bodily organs and buried feelings (3.72.420).

Xueqin then recaptures some of Xi-feng's complexity and a little of her fighting spirit in a short scene which takes place a year after the death of Er-jie. The Jia family finances have further deteriorated, and Ji Lian is reduced to asking Grandmother Jia's maid to 'commit a very tiny little crime' and 'look out a few gold and silver things' to pawn 'to tide us over for the next week or two'. Xi-feng overhears this and is concerned that it risks destroying her grandmother's confidence in her – Grandmother Jia remains the one family member on whose love and respect she can depend. Jia Lian pleads – he'll give her anything, at which Xi-feng's maid reminds her that she'd mentioned she'd be needing money – why not ask for some of the pawn money for herself? Jia Lian accuses his wife of meanness – she has plenty of money, and now she's 'charging' him for her support. Xi-feng flares up, angry that he treats her dowry finances as if it is family money – one more put-down – and he laughs it off:

> 'Bless my soul, what a passion you are in!'
>
> Xi-feng laughed.
>
> 'No, I'm not really. But I found what you said just now very wounding. The day after tomorrow is the anniversary of Er-jie's death. Since we were sisters for a little while, I thought the least I could do was to visit her grave and make her a few offerings. She didn't give us a son, it's true, but we "mustn't let the dust of those who have gone before get into the eyes of those who follow". That's what I wanted the money for'.
>
> Jia Lian said nothing for some moments. Xi-feng had effectively shut him up.
>
> 'You are very thoughtful', he said eventually.
>
> (3.72.427)

Really thoughtful, or faking thoughtful? Xi-feng has shamed her husband by inferring that he has forgotten Er-jie because of her failure to 'give us a son': she, however, the dutiful wife, will not let this get in the way of honouring her memory. Xi-feng's 'act' has turned the situation completely around, extracting the tribute to her wifely virtue given by Grandmother Jia but so often denied by others. Is this a continuation of Xi-feng's desire to punish her husband? Or is it an expression of her desire to 'really be' the good and kind woman who saved Er-jie from shame by bringing her into the family? Has she been able to reclaim her initial sense of entitlement to the role of the virtuous wife which now, with time, has brought a

mitigating relief from responsibility for Er-jie's death? The irony is that in having re-established her position as First Wife, Xi-feng progressively fades from view, illness takes over and her old vitality becomes a thing of the past: the Mid-Autumn family gathering is sadly depleted, and Grandmother Jia particularly misses Xi-feng – 'But what a pity that Feng should have chosen this time to be ill! She is always such a tonic – as good as ten other people at a party! It goes to show. You can't have everything' (3.76.507). The old lady tries to keep the party going herself, but 'the combination of the flute's melancholy with the effects of nocturnal stillness and ghostly moonlight induced a feeling of such overwhelming sadness' that even she cannot revive the jollity. Xi-feng's fortunes are part of this encroaching fate and Xueqin adds a reminder of the Jia Rui episode and 'retributory illness' when the family seems unable to supply the good-quality ginseng to treat Xi-feng's illness, only saved by the Xue family (3.77.529).

Xueqin also clarifies the issue of Xi-feng's culpability for the Jia clan's financial collapse, in a long speech following her decision to call in the existing loans and to cease lending, as it is creating resentment against her. She points out the necessity for the loans:

> 'a means of supplementing the housekeeping, because without it our expenditure was so much greater than our income. Mr Lian's and my allowance for the month, including the allowances for four maids, is less than twenty taels: barely enough to keep us going for four or five days. If I hadn't scraped together a bit of extra on the side, I don't know what sort of a hovel we would have been living in by now. And so now I've got myself a bad name. I'm a usurer. Very well, I'll call it all in again and stop lending money altogether'.
>
> (3.72.428)

Xi-feng goes on to give some examples of the extreme measures she has to take to raise funds – for the matriarch's birthday, pawning four or five boxes of big bronzes and even her own rare chiming clock.

> 'And now it seems the menfolk are running short and someone has the bright idea of getting something out of Her Old Ladyship. Another year like this and we shall be pawning our jewellery and our clothes!'
>
> (3.72.428)

Even allowing for Xi-feng's self-justification, her assessment of the poor state of the family's finances is accurate in light of all the other evidence given and is fundamentally due to the extravagance and negligence of the senior males: Xi-feng is placed in an invidious position in this ostensibly male area of moral accountability.

4 (vi) 'Xi-feng conceives an ingenious plan of deception' *(4.96.340)*

Xi-feng's descent into an acted version of a self which she has lost, a state of debased self-deception mirroring the decline of the Jia clan, reaches its nadir in the 'trick wedding', her solution to the problem of how to get the mentally deranged Bao-yu, who has lost his jade talisman, his male agency, to go through the wedding ritual with the substitute bride, Bao-chai. It is ironic that in earlier times, Xi-feng has been the sole normative influence around the 'woes and lo'es' between Bao-yu and Dai-yu; her teasing, while making Dai-yu fearful of charges of impropriety, at least bringing the 'young love' reality of the relationship out into the open, rather than acceding to all the superstition, self-interest and fear of impropriety which compounds to obscure and disavow what even the servants can see is a special commitment between them. Back then, Xi-feng was the one family member with the imagination, worldly wisdom and influence with the Matriarch to have supported Bao-yu and Dai-yu through the difficulties of protocol and propriety which so cripple their chances. But by the time *'Xi-feng conceives an ingenious plan of deception'* – the chapter title of the episode – she herself has been the victim of marital deception and a demoralising end to her fight back and is now only half-living, no longer light-hearted or to be trusted about young love and often being spitefully undermined in the role of 'making things right' that she has forged for herself in the family.

'Deception' is now rife: the chapter title of the preceding episode is *'A counterfeit is deceptively like the real thing, and Bao-yu loses his wits'*: an 'imposter' claims to have found the missing jade, but it is rejected by Bao-yu as not the 'real thing'. This is the immediate context in which Xueqin places Xi-feng's 'solution' and prefigures its result. Xi-feng's 'plan' is as predictable as is the imposter coming forward with the fake jade after the family has posted a reward for its recovery, as is its 'idiotic nature', to use the words describing the 'trick marriage' of Jia Lian and Er-jie. The marital choice has earlier been determined by the family when Grandmother Jia, as foretold in Dai-yu's prophetic dream, puts forward her view:

> 'I know that Miss Lin's peculiar temperament is in some ways attractive. But I don't think we could possibly have her as a wife for Bao-yu. Besides, I'm afraid that with such a delicate constitution, she is unlikely to live to any age. I'm sure Bao-chai is in every respect the more suitable choice'.
> (4.90.218)

The matriarch is following patriarchal orthodoxy in seeing Bao-chai, in temperament and health, as a more 'suitable' marital choice than Dai-yu, but it is her interpretation of their special bond as 'love-sickness', a contagious illness – seemingly evident in their shared 'peculiarity' and 'delicacy'– which is the irrational fear turning her against their betrothal. When Bao-yu's jade mysteriously disappears – in the context of the decision to

marry him to Bao-chai – and he becomes seriously ill, Dai-yu, initially reviving upon indications that she had been chosen, hearing of this decision, also falls ill with shock; the report of their mutual state of imbecility only confirms the matriarch's diagnosis:

> 'And yet, when I saw her just now', said Grandmother Jia, 'she still seemed able to talk sense. I simply cannot understand it. Ours is a decent family. We do not tolerate unseemly goings-on. And that applies to foolish romantic attachments. If her illness is of a respectable nature, I do not mind how much we have to spend to get her better. But if she is suffering from some sort of love-sickness, no amount of medicine will cure it and she can expect no further sympathy from me either'.
>
> (4.97.343)

The pervasive fear of mother and grandmother of 'foolish romantic attachments' in the Garden has already resulted in the deaths of two innocent personal maids, and it is a fear which has been behind the matriarch's extraordinary attack on romantic fiction – the very genre in which Xueqin himself is writing – in an earlier and pivotal episode in the novel, halfway through, at the beginning of Volume Three. Xueqin's tragic irony here is that the 'children's' shared physical and mental decline is more a product of their constant anxieties over their future together than symptomatic of any impropriety or 'indecency' in their conduct towards each other, a 'correct understanding of their situation' Xueqin has been at great pains to reveal through the realistic detail of his narrative. It is the matriarch whose family position and years of loving protection – of her grandson, early on denied his father's affection, and of her orphaned granddaughter whom in a loving act she has taken from her home in the south to bring her up in her maternal family – should dispose her to support them in their betrothal, but it is her accumulating anxieties over the Jia household's moral and financial disintegration which drives her to oppose the union, a grievous choice for her, as is made evident in her subsequent lamenting self-justifications.

Xi-feng, however, is the one who is given the poisoned chalice, the responsibility for carrying out the decision for Bao-yu to marry Bao-chai, not Dia-yu. When Grandmother Jia turns to 'Xi-feng dear' and chides her for not paying sufficient attention to 'what goes on', Xi-feng is effectively being put on notice; she must, as has the matriarch, put her personal views and affections aside, respect the patriarchal code of securing posterity and action the matriarch's wishes. It is hard to see this as an act of 'intrigue engineered through personal ill-will', 'mastermind[ing] a conspiracy',[52] when Xueqin is so careful to locate it in her pride in being the one who knows what to do and how to get things done: when Grandmother Jia finds they have 'run into an insoluble problem', it is Xi-feng's pride which is cued in to her response: 'Not insoluble. I think I can see a solution' (4.96.332).

Contextualised in this way, Xueqin is showing Xi-feng's 'ingenious plan' to effect the marriage of Bao-yu to Bao-chai is not so much another shocking act of Xi-feng's cruelty masked by deceit – as some would see the her 'rendition' of Er-jie – but a final pitiful spectacle of this great family's internal decay, its 'tottering crash', to quote the words from the Ninth Song: filial piety distorted into the demoralising spectacle of a marriage ceremony reduced to a counterfeit enactment hiding its own abuse. Herself a sacrifice in marriage, Xi-feng as stage manager of her own elaborate deception to salvage 'the real thing' is perfectly placed to stage the trick marriage and carry it off with her trademark theatrical conviction. In order to get Bao-yu, in his 'substitute' role as half-wit, through the marriage ceremony, he must be deceived into believing that he is marrying Dai-yu, with the further 'substitution' – Bao-chai hidden under the veil, in her place: Xi-feng's 'ingenious plan' expressing the profound and compounding moral duplicity practised by the family on all three 'children' involved.

It falls to Xi-feng – in her role as the well-practised deceiver – to sound out Bao-yu with the 'news' he is to marry Miss Lin; when his response is to laugh, she tries again, to be sure he understands:

> 'Uncle Zheng says, you are to marry Miss Lin, *if* you get better. But not if you carry on behaving like a half-wit'.
>
> Bao-yu's expression suddenly changed to one of utter seriousness, as he said:
>
> 'I'm not the half-wit. You are the half-wit'.
>
> He stood up.
>
> 'I am going to see Miss Lin, to set her mind at rest'.
>
> Xi-feng quickly put out a hand to stop him.
>
> 'She knows already. And, as your bride-to-be, she would be much too embarrassed to receive you now'.
>
> 'But what about when we're married? Will she see me then?'
>
> (4.97.344)

Xi-feng senses the perverse rationality in this and tries again:

> 'If you behave, she will see you. But not if you continue to act like an imbecile'.
>
> To which Bao-yu replied:
>
> 'I have given my heart to Cousin Lin. If she marries me, she will bring it back and put it in its proper place'.
>
> Now this was madman's talk, if ever, thought Xi-feng.
>
> (4.97.344)

Xueqin could hardly make plainer, through the stark directness of the feeling in Bao-yu's words, how the family's decision against the marriage of Bao-yu

and Dai-yu is a refusal to accept the value of love – the 'heart' – expressed in its purest and simplest form by Bao-yu. Bao-yu, as a literary creation, symbolised by his birthstone as the family's most precious possession, has now lost his symbolic value and his worth is calculated in prosaic terms – the very opposite of the values he represents throughout the narrative: a being whose heart and mind are interdependent and must be kept united to be fully human, the ultimate imperative for the marriage of Dai-yu and Bao-yu. But in the end, the family substitutes the 'counterfeit' for 'the real thing' – a complicated perverse morality Cao Xueqin expresses in a more transparent form in the admission, justification and rationalisation of guilt by the 'imposter' responsible for the counterfeit jade in the preceding episode:

> 'Your Honour! Spare me! it was poverty that forced me into it. I know it was a shameful thing to do. I had to borrow money to have it made, but please keep it and give it to the young master, with my humble compliments, to play with!'
>
> (4.96.322)

The 'precious jade' as a plaything for a child; the 'shameful' degradation of substitution is captured in Xueqin's play on the 'two Bao-yus' in his concluding observation:

> This episode became known in the locality as 'the case of Master Jia Bao-yu and the Counterfeit (jia) Precious Jade (Bao-yu)'.
>
> (4.96.322–3)

One further comment by Xueqin on the deception practised on the lovers occurs in the episode in which Xi-feng, 'finding Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue somewhat cast down by the mention of Dai-yu's death, attempts 'to raise their spirits with a humorous anecdote' about the antics of the 'newly-married couple' with Bao-yu still being 'a silly boy'. They do laugh but chide Xi-feng for making them forget Dai-yu, and warn her that Dai-yu's spirit may come back to take her revenge against Xi-feng's 'ingenious plan'.

> 'But she never bore a grudge against me', countered Xi-feng with a smile. 'It was Bao-yu she cursed with her dying breath'.
>
> Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue took this to be another of her witticisms, and ignored it.
>
> (5.99.20)

Xi-feng's words, far from a 'witticism', are a 'false truth' – false in that they describe Dai-yu's dying words as a 'curse', but true in that they locate the deception experienced by Dai-yu as being her betrayal by Bao-yu: she cannot know that he too was deceived. This is the doubly painful deception

the family would prefer to forget and to allow spiritual vengeance to fall on Xi-feng: truth in the form of a 'witticism' is the only way Xi-feng can remind them of the hypocrisy of their implicit accusation. The episode sums up how Xueqin places Xi-feng so often as a victim of her own 'great ability' and the vulnerability of this positioning in her adoptive family, captured in the image of the hen phoenix perched on an iceberg in the prophetic Registers in Chapter 5.

Act 5: Resolution or catastrophe

In *Hamlet*, Act Five, Hamlet is confronted by the inescapable truth that all his attempts to set things right have rebounded upon him, that he has destroyed those he loved and that history will judge him badly, as it has judged great heroes of the past – tracing the 'noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole' (5.1.193–4). All his noble intentions have resolved into the catastrophe of the bodies of the royal house of Denmark lying strewn across the stage: 'the sight is dismal'; with only the hope of his steadfast friend Horatio left to 'draw his breath in pain/To tell my story'.

The tragedy of Xi-feng is not classical heroic drama: it is a domestic story written in the vernacular, at once referencing the shrew genre and lightened with parody and yet, at its heart, a memorial to one of the 'number of females' – 'those wonderful girls' – Xueqin has spent 'half a lifetime studying with my own eyes and ears'. In the catastrophe and final resolution of the fifth act, Xueqin allows an infusion of Confucian 'sincerity' to re-balance believability: Xi-feng is confronted by the catastrophe of her failure to live – even as an act – as the Noble Dame, her ideal throughout a 'lifetime of striving'; dying, she is left with one hope: that she can call upon the kindness of an old countrywoman to save her little daughter from being sold off by her own next-of-kin.

5 (i) 'All my plans and schemes have come to nothing. My lifetime of striving has been in vain. I'm broken, I'm the lowest of the low'. *(5.106.132)*

The scene begins in Grandmother Jia's apartments where the 'ladies . . . were holding a party of their own', with Bao-yu 'helping us here', as Xi-feng explains – herself only able to speak 'croakily'.

> Grandmother Jia laughed.
>
> 'Fengie may be ill, but she still has a tongue in her head'.
>
> The party was warming up and the conversation becoming quite merry, when suddenly one of Lady Xing's maidservants came rushing in, screeching:
>
> 'Your Old Ladyship! Your Ladyships! The most terr . . . terrible thing has happened! Hundreds of bandits in big boots and hats have broken

into the house, turned all the trunks and boxes upside down and started stealing our things!'

(5.105.117–8)

The bandits 'rifling trunks' are the 'Embroidered Jackets, the Imperial police'; one of these trunks contains the 'promissory notes – all bearing illegal rates of interest' by which Xi-feng has been keeping the household financially afloat: Xi-feng's ending is here referred back to her beginning moment of 'little general' triumph and is now identified with the fall of the 'great house' as prophesied; the pages-long inventories of 'things' confiscated are a further echo of Xi-feng's former industry, not without Xueqin irony – the first two called out are 'One longevity Buddha in aloeswood, One Goddess of Mercy, ditto'.

The ladies stared at [the maid] dumbfounded. Next, Patience hurried into the room, her hair dishevelled, dragging Qiao-jie by the hand and sobbing hysterically . . .

Lady Xing and Lady Wang were utterly flabbergasted; Xi-feng listened wide-eyed as Patience told her tale and then slumped onto the floor with her head thrown back; Grandmother Jia burst into a flood of tears . . . too distraught to utter a word . . . the servants were falling over each other in panic, when suddenly more cries were heard from outside:

'Ladies to withdraw! His Highness the Prince is approaching!'

Bao-yu and Bao-chai stood watching helplessly . . . the next they knew, Jia Lian came running in, panting:

'All is well! The Prince has saved the day!'

(5.105.118)

(It is instructive to note here that in the first television series, 1987's *The Dream of Red Mansions*, 're-telling' Xueqin's novel to wide acclaim, the Prince 'saving the day' was not where the camera took its audience; from this point on much of the action takes place looking through the bamboo bars of the huge Imperial Military Prison, also the setting for Xi-feng's death scene; the theme of retributive justice dominates from thereon, exacting a vicious final image of Xi-feng, to be further noted'.[53] Jia Lian's good news fails to revive Xi-feng, 'lying unconscious of the floor', and Patience and the maids help their mistress and the matriarch to sufficiently recover to take in the details of the raid, Lian holding back on the arrest of Jia She and Cousin Zhen to lessen the shock.

The narrative accumulates so many instances of financial abuse, neglect and mismanagement that it is difficult for the reader to judge how significant Xi-feng's moneylending is in bringing down the force of law down

upon the family. As Jia Zheng, ineffectual as ever in such matters and a target of exploitation in his position as government official, sits in his apartment 'silently brooding', it is of interest that he assumes Jia Lian as well as Xi-feng to be guilty of 'reckless behaviour' – 'Their usury, now that it had come to light, would damage the whole family' – presumably because he has no insight into the reasons Xi-feng may have for taking this initiative secretly; namely, that she cannot rely on anyone, much less her feckless husband, to ensure adequate funds to hand. The judgement of 'recklessness', and the wording 'now that [the usury] had come to light' implies less a moral judgement than a criticism of the couple's lack of managerial finesse and it is only because senior male members of the Rong-guo side of the family are arrested on more serious charges that the entire household is ransacked and the usury brought 'to light'. Jia Zheng's ambiguous reflections also recall the reader to Xi-feng's initial youthful insouciance in discovering and pursuing her 'prioress-sent' opportunity for raising money: not only has she never been instructed to observe 'outside' financial ethics, but she has also had to bear with her own mother-in-law's unconscionable withholding of household funds: the Jia household environment, servants and masters alike, encourages a strategic rather than a moral way of life; 'cunning' is rife.

The setting is now Xi-feng's bedside:

> When Jia Lian came close to Xi-feng and saw how feeble she was, he could not bring himself to vent his resentment on her. Patience said to him with tears in her eyes:
>
> 'Everything's gone! We'll never get anything of it back. And look at Mrs Lian, sir. You must send for a doctor'.
>
> 'Psh!' spat Lian bitterly. '*I'm* only alive by the skin of my teeth, do you expect me to bother on her behalf?'
>
> These words did not escape Xi-feng, and she opened her eyes and looked at Jia Lian in silence. Tears began to trickle down her cheeks. Jia Lian walked out of the room, and Xi-feng said to Patience:
>
> 'You must be more realistic! Now things have come to this, you must put me out of your mind. I only wish I could die today and have done with it! If I still mean anything to you, then the one thing I beg of you is to look after little Qiao-jie when I'm gone. Do that for me, and my soul will thank yours in the next world'.
>
> (5.106.131–132)

In the context of such sudden extreme calamity, Xi-feng's words are not histrionic even if they are uncharacteristic, as Xi-feng was never much for 'all that talk about hell and damnation' (1.15.298). Patience is the only person Xi-feng confides in, but not to seek sympathy, her sense of failure

too raw; the rougher, less-nuanced dialogue in the last volume drives this home as she is letting go of her acted self:

> Patience burst into tears.
>
> 'Come on', said Xi-feng, 'you're no fool! They may not have come here and said so to my face, but I know they blame me for what's happened. It's not true. It was others outside who started it. But I admit I was foolish to lend money and create trouble for myself. All my plans and schemes have come to nothing. My lifetime of striving has been in vain. I'm broken, I'm the lowest of the low'.
>
> (5.106.131–132)

Where once she could brazen it out, Xi-feng is becoming vulnerable to feelings of guilt and to her bodily weaknesses which Xueqin – ever attuned to mind/body interconnection – dramatises in the scenes on the death and funeral ceremonies for Grandmother Jia; the novel's successive funeral charades completing their cycle.

5 (ii) 'Poor Feng! After all these years, who would have thought she would come to grief over Grandmother's funeral!' *(5.110.202)*

This scene represents 'the lowest of the low' in Jia family politics and morality: the money allocated for Grandmother Jia's funeral by the matriarch herself is withheld, in particular by Lady Xing, so that 'even Xi-feng knew, to her great mortification, that the funeral reception was a shambles'. When the hired mourners cannot be reliably provided with their expected lunch and Xi feng is reduced to going begging to the servants so as not to shame the family, she meets with rude indifference:

> 'She would have liked to discipline the maids, but was afraid of arousing Lady Xing's resentment; she would have liked to confide in Lady Wang but Lady Xing had already set Lady Wang against her. The maids, seeing Their Ladyships were not supporting Xi-feng, started to make life harder for her than ever. The only exception was Patience, who stood loyally by Xi-feng.
>
> (5.110.201–2)

The contrast between her first great success as manager and her last pitiful failure is relentlessly evoked. Only one family member, Li Wan, feels sorry for her: 'Poor Feng! After all these years, who would have thought she would come to grief over Grandmother's funeral!' (5.110.202) The other senior women transfer the blame onto Xi-feng:

> she had reached breaking-point and was searching in desperation for a second wind when a young maid came running in:

> 'Here you are, ma'am! No wonder Lady Xing is so cross! So many guests', she said. 'I can't possibly take care of them. Where's Mrs Lian? Hiding somewhere with her feet up, I'll be bound!'
>
> (5.110.206)

'This unmerited rebuke' – delivered by a young maid, an added insult – provokes Xi-feng's old fighting spirit, but her body gives way, 'all went black' and 'she crouched there, blood gushing from her mouth in an unquenchable stream'. All Xueqin's comic distancing has gone; here Xi-feng's tireless energy and theatrical self-presentation is reduced to this pitiful physical wreck.

5 (iii) 'Dear sister! It is so kind of you to visit me like this, and to put past grievances behind you!' *(5.113.243)*

'fighting poison with poison and fire with fire' . . . . What at first looks like bad luck will turn out to be good luck in the end' *(2.42.325)*

My life is in your hands, Grannie, she said. 'My little girl also is pursued by countless ailments and afflictions. I entrust her to you as well.'. *(5.113.249)*

The greater intrusion of demonic spirits, evil possession and resort to 'illumination from *The Book of Changes*' in the final volume of the novel has the effect of pivoting the novel away from the interest in characterisation and the real-life causes of the suffering of young women, and on to exacting retribution upon the wrong-doers, with the contradictory effect of undermining the need for memorialisation; it is as if the mortal world which has inflicted their suffering has become self-regulating – duty is done, evil deeds punished, the proud humiliated, earthly existence an illusion to be renounced, not memorialised. Whether this drift is part of Xueqin's overall artistic intention or an aspect of his unfinished authorship of the final volumes is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Xueqin's creative investment in the complex characterisation of Xi-feng does continue to support a gracious not-quite-death scene – there is no proper one – but even here, the scene is upstaged at the beginning of the chapter by the sensational death of the concubine wife who had used black magic against Bao-yu and Xi-feng in earlier years and was now possessed by demons:

> 'Oh Great Lord Red Beard! You're killing me! I'll never be so wicked again!'
>
> She wrung her hands and howled in agony. Her eyes bulged out of their sockets, blood gushed from her mouth, her hair was wildly dishevelled. She was a terrifying sight, and no one now dared go near her.
>
> (5.113.241)

The purpose of this melodramatic spectacle may be to make an instructive contrast with Xi-feng's far more subtle and conflicted experience of guilt when, also becoming prey to all manner of evil spirits, she sees the

apparition of Er-jie 'slowly approaching her bed from the end of the room'. Surprisingly, Er-jie appears to be unaware of Xi-feng's scheming and has only sympathy for her:

> 'Lian is too much of a fool to appreciate what you've done for him, and instead he complains how mean you are, and says you are ruining his career and making him feel thoroughly ashamed. I can't bear to see you treated so!'
>
> 'I myself have come to regret my own small-mindedness', mumbled Xi-feng in reply. 'Dear sister! It is so kind of you to visit me like this, and to put past grievances behind you!'
>
> (5.113.242)

Er-jie's forthright words are quite out of character with her passivity in life. On waking, Xi-feng fears 'This must be [Er-jie's] spirit seeking the life of her tormenter in vengeance' but, as 'vengeance' is the opposite of Er-jie's words, they seem more intended to remind the reader of the wrongs done to Xi-feng, even as she makes an admission of her own guilt and implies a wish for exculpation. What follows in the visit of Grannie Liu to the dying Xi-feng represents Xueqin's offer of one last chance to fulfil this wish – a salvationary intervention of the real world to counter the otherworld attack of vengeful spirits.

The visit scene gains substance and significance by making a creative link back with memorable episodes in Volumes One and Two showing Xi-feng at her hospitable 'Noble Lady' best: the visits of the distant relative, the sturdy countrywoman Grannie Liu –'the friend in need', 'the poor and meek' of the Tenth Song from *A Dream of Golden Days*, the song for Xi-feng's little daughter Qiao-jie titled *The Survivor* – beginning with the repeating couplet:

> Some good remained,
> Some good remained;
> The daughter found a friend in need,
> Through her mother's one good deed.
> So let all men the poor and meek sustain,
> And from the example of her cruel kin refrain,
> Who kinship scorned and only thought of gain.
> For far above the constellations,
> One watches all and makes just calculations
>
> (1.5.143)

Grannie Liu is a memorable literary creation, a repository of homespun wisdom in contrast to the extreme artifice of the Jia way of life: neither sentimentalised nor idealised (except in socialist adaptations of the novel,

such as the first 1977–8 TV series, in which she functions as a foil to these tendencies in the main protagonists). On her first visit, when Xi-feng asks her if she'd like to name her baby girl 'to help balance her luck':

> Grannie Liu thought for a bit.
>
> 'When was she born?'
>
> 'Ah, that's just the trouble', said Xi-feng. 'She was born on Qiao-jie – the Seventh of the Seventh – a very unlucky date'.
>
> 'No matter', said Grannie Liu. 'Call her 'Qiao-jie' then. That's what the doctors mean when they talk about fighting poison with poison and fire with fire'. . . . What at first looks like bad luck will turn out to be good luck in the end'.
>
> (2.42.325)

Grannie Liu's folk wisdom matches so sagely with Xi-feng's 'fighting' spirit that these 'auspicious words' are accepted with delight. These earlier scenes display Xueqin's comic genius, Xi-feng taking advantage of the old woman's country ways to raise a laugh – the slapstick humour of the egg-and-chopsticks trick (2.41.42) – with the author giving Grannie Liu the last laugh as she good-naturedly plays along; the entire episode is a vignette of affectionate respect for a life lived close to the natural goodness of the basket of vegetables she brings with her. The old lady is as canny as Xi-feng; her visits have not only been to pay respects but also in hope of support for her grandchildren – which Xi-feng has met with tactful generosity. Whatever her hard country life, she has been able to retain a capacity for genuine, caring feeling, a 'goodness' to which Xi-feng is responsive and now as she is dying, she asks for her prayers, in which she places her hope for her daughter's future:

> After her bad spell, Xi-feng's mind seemed to grow clearer. She saw Grannie Liu in the room once more, and began to feel a growing faith in the efficacy of the old dame's prayers. She told Felicity and the others to leave them alone and, calling Grannie Liu over to the side of her bed, confided to her that she felt troubled at heart and was constantly seeing spirits. Grannie Liu replied that in her home village there was a certain miraculous Bodhisattva, and a certain temple where prayers were always answered.
>
> 'I beseech you to pray for me', said Xi-feng. 'If you need money for offerings, I can provide it for you'.
>
> She slipped a golden bracelet off her wrist and gave it to Grannie Liu.
>
> (5.113.249)

The significance of this gesture is only appreciated in the immediate context of Jia Lian's neglect of his wife in his ignominious raging over money; the coincidence of the exposure of the bankruptcy of the family and Xi-feng's demise is also an exposure of his own incompetence: 'I never asked to do this. I shall just have to pawn the things Grandmother gave me' (5.113.248). Xi-feng is not yet dead but all her husband can think about is how he will disburse the family's debts and, on top of this, pay for her funeral (in the next chapter, the reader learns that Qiao-jie 'could not bring herself to admit that her father had already 'taken her share [of Lady Jia's things] and sold it' (5.114.260).

Grannie Liu's response to the offer of the golden bracelet underlines the contrast in values:

> 'There's no need of that', said Grannie Liu. 'If we country folk make a vow, we give a few hundred cash when we get better – no need for anything as grand as this. If I go and pray for you, that will be your vow, ma'am, and when you are better you can go yourself and give what you want'.
>
> Xi-feng knew that Grannie Liu was sincere, and did not try to press the bracelet on her.
>
> 'My life is in your hands, Grannie', she said. 'My little girl also is pursued by countless ailments and afflictions. I entrust her to you as well'. (5.113.249)

It is not only vengeful spirits which threaten Xi-feng; what makes this scene so 'auspicious' in retrospect is that Xi-feng is under threat by her own birth family to which she has formerly felt she could always resort: unknown to her, they have been conniving with the Jias in a joint contriving of 'kin' seeking 'gain' to sell Qiao-jie to a wealthy Mongol prince; it is only Grannie Liu's quick-thinking action which saves her. This plot is so morally debased as to be barely credible; as such, it is reflective of the degeneration of both the Jia-Wang families and of the depleted authorial creativity by the end of the novel. As the Tenth Song foresees, the all-seeing 'one' – through Grannie Liu's chaperoning – ensures Qiao-jie's salvation and her marriage to the handsome, cultivated only son of a well-off country family in the village (5.119.352).

5 (iv) 'off to Jinling to be entered on the Register' *(5.114.256)*

Xi-feng's life comes to an end in Chapter 114, in which she is not present but is merely the subject of messages about her 'odd' state:

> One minute she was demanding a boat, the next a sedan chair; then she was 'off to Jinling to be entered on the Register' . . . No one could

> understand a word and she just kept on crying and wailing. There was nothing for it but for Mr Lian to go and get a paper boat and a sedan made for her. He hasn't come back with them yet and Mrs Lian is waiting for him, gasping for breath. Her Ladyship wants you both to wait and to come after Mrs Lian has finally passed away.
>
> 'How extraordinary!' exclaimed Bao-yu. 'What does she want in Jinling?'
>
> 'Didn't you see some registers in a dream once?' whispered Aroma. 'Perhaps that's where Mrs Lian is going?'
>
> Bao-yu nodded. 'Yes, if only I hadn't forgotten what was written in them. Our lives are clearly pre-ordained by destiny. I wonder where destiny has taken Cousin Lin'.
>
> (5.114.256)

Bao-yu's uncharacteristic trite mouthing of Taoist wisdom seems an attempt to bring the novel towards an end confirming the novel's opening message of spiritual enlightenment – *The Story of the Stone* as the story of 'the life of a man before finally attaining nirvana and returning to the other shore' (1.1 49). While the dialogue refers the reader back to early in the novel, Bao-yu's prophetic dream and the foretelling of Xi-feng's fate as one of the *Twelve Beauties of Jinling*, it drains away any vitality left in the fictional characterisation of Xi-feng. 'There she is dying and you're *discussing* her!' Bao-chai exclaims; the only interest Xi-feng and Cousin Lin now summon is as a statement on the mysteries of predestination.

When the young people do get to Xi-feng's room, 'her body was already laid out'. The scene shifts between pitiful weeping and Jia Lian 'rustl[ing] up money for the funeral', little Qiao-jie caught in the middle and about to be pawned herself. It is in this demoralised context that a final, dignified tribute is paid to Xi-feng: a financial sacrifice made with quiet love by her maidservant Patience:

> 'There's really no need to work yourself into such a state, sir', said Patience. 'If you've no money, I've a few things that were not taken in the raid. Use them if you like'.
>
> (5.114.261)

Jia Lian's response pays no attention to the moral fineness of this offer but grasps at it as a 'wonderful piece of luck!' Patience explains that she 'just wants the funeral to be done properly, that's all' – for her, an expression of her devotion and respect for Xi-feng; for Lian, his 'sincere gratitude' is for her help in 'all these complications' of bad debts which Xi-feng's 'toils' could not prevent, and for which he seeks the advice of Patience thereafter, drawing the jealousy of his concubine who then becomes the object of his 'bad humour'; these details are important in the overall depiction of the

unworthiness of the male members of the Jia clan pronounced at the very outset of the novel:

> they are not able to turn out good sons, these stately houses, for all their pomp and show. The males in the family get more degenerate from one generation to the next.
>
> (1.2.74)

Xi-feng and Bao-yu, as challengers to this degeneration, in the end remove themselves from this cycle of mundane existence. Like the tragic hero Hamlet, their literary glory is in how their self-belief and ambitions, strengths and weaknesses, contradictions and ambiguities represent the struggle to live according to a vision of greater possibilities for being human in the wider culture which their stories reference so abundantly, challenging reader and audience with a sense of loss to the world with their passing.

In the final chapter of the novel, Xi-feng's final 'destination', Jinling – the old name for Nanking – fulfils her dying wish: her story ends with Sir Zheng's ritual journey to Nanking 'with Grandmother Jia's coffin . . . and the coffins of Qin-shi, Xi-feng, Dai-yu and Faithful . . . Jia Zheng saw to the construction of the tombs' (5.120.359). This ending, for all its 'golden days' dream-reference is as flatly matter-of-fact as the ending of *Hamlet* – 'take up the bodies'; and it has a similar resonance of a return to the 'very dull sort of world' of those left alive, to reverse the words of the witty exchange between those 'two old harpies', Xi-feng and Grandmother Jia, in happier days:

> 'It will be a very dull sort of world when all the rest are dead and only we two old harpies are left alive', said Grandmother Jia.
>
> The others laughed.
>
> (2.52.533)

This ending is also a world away from the adaptation of Xi-feng's story made in the renowned first television series of the novel, which injects gratuitous drama into Xi-feng's final journey in a harrowing image of her body trussed onto a straw mat, deathly pale face exposed, long black hair straggling behind as she is dragged through the snow to some obscure burial place – the English translation, surely mistaken, gives as her dying wish '*not* to be sent back to Jinling', an end fitting indeed for a feudal 'shrew'; the television adaptation makes real Xueqin's fear that his lifetime work of 'words' will *not* be heard 'aright'. The series hears the novel as a socialist message, turning the end of the novel into a triumph of good-hearted simple folk over the once high and mighty family now reduced to the 'cathouse' – the desolate nothingness of a darkening snow-swept landscape and a monk's droning chant on the futility of earthly existence.[54]

Redemption, retribution and reparation are fraught aspects of classical tragedy. For Xi-feng, as for Hamlet, the hero's tragic end is in some sense or other related to a flaw of character – of being *human* – which is irredeemable in the sense that it causes the innocent irreparable suffering, even death. This is the ultimate existential truth of tragic drama, and the rarity of the genre reflects its intolerable reality.

Notes

1 David Hawkes, trans., Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone, also known as The Dream of the Red Chamber,* Vol. 1, Appendix, p. 528.
2 Wai-yee Li, 'Languages of Love and Parameters of Culture', in Halvor Eifring, ed., *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, pp. 237–270.
3 Maram Epstein, 'Making Sense of Bao-yu: Staging Ideology and Aesthetics', in Andrew Schonebaum, ed., *Approaches to Teaching The Story of the Stone (Dream of the Red Chamber)*, p. 325; Wu Cancun, 'The Plebification of Male-to-male Love in the Late Ming', in Kam Louie, ed., *Changing Chinese Masculinities: from Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men,* p. 64.
4 Louise P. Edwards, 'Aestheticizing Masculinity in Honglou Meng: Clothing, Dress and Decoration', in Kam Louie, ed., *Changing Chinese Masculinities; from Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men*, p. 103.
5 Louise P. Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in the red Chamber Dream*, p. 86.
6 Louise P. Edwards, *ibid*, pp. 105–106.
7 Haiyan Lee, 'Love or Lust? The Sentimental Self in Honglou-meng', p. 18.
8 *The Dream of the Red Chamber*: *A Chinese Novel from the Early Ching Period*, translated from the German version of Dr Franz Kuhn by Florence and Isabel McHugh, p. 26.
9 Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy*, p. 9.
10 Stephen Greenblatt, quoted in Daria Berg, ed., *Reading China: Fiction, History and the Dynamics of Discourse. Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge,* p. 199.
11 T.S. Eliot, *Elizabethan Essays*, p. 39.
12 Yenna Wu, *The Chinese Virago, A Literary Theme*, p. 106.
13 Yenna Wu, *ibid,* p. 105.
14 Yenna Wu, *ibid,* pp. 120–123.
15 Janet M. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China,* p. 7.
16 Accessed via Wikipedia.
17 Patricia Seiber, 'Comic Virtue and Commendable Vice: Guan Hangqing's Jiu Fengchen and Wang Jiang Ting', pp. 32, 43.
18 Janet M. Theiss, *ibid*, p. 99.
19 Daria Berg, ed., *Reading China: Fiction, History and the Dynamics of Discourse. Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge,* Chapter Eight: 'Female Self-fashioning in Late Imperial China: How the Gentlewoman and Courtesan Edited Her Story and Rewrote History', pp. 238–290.
20 Ban Zhao, *Admonitions for Women* (29 BC), Excerpts, afe.easia.columbia.edu
21 Daria Berg, *ibid*, p. 121.
22 Yenna Wu, *Chinese,* p. 16.
23 Lui Ts'un-yan and John Minford, eds. *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction – From Ch'ing and Early Republic Era*, p. 11.

24 Yenna Wu, *The Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China*, pp. 1–2.
25 Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*, p. 130.
26 Daria Berg, ed., *Reading,* p. 171.
27 Yenna Wu, *Lioness,* pp. 1–55.
28 Susan Nanquin and Evelyn Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 38.
29 Janet M. Theiss, *ibid,* p. 10.
30 Janet M. Thiess, *ibid,* p. 203.
31 Janet M. Thiess, *ibid*, p. 182.
32 Janet M. Thiess, *ibid*, p. 70.
33 Patricia Seiber, quoting William T. Rowe, in 'Comic Virtue and Commendable Vice: Guan Hangqing's Jiu Fengchen and Wang Jiang Ting', p. 43.
34 Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Women in the Sung Period,* p. 27.
35 Chi-chen Wang, *Dream of the Red Chamber,* pp. 33–34.
36 Louise P. Edwards, 'Aestheticizing . . .', p. 91ff.
37 Wu Cancun, *ibid,* p. 4.
38 Susan Nanquin and Evelyn Rawski, *ibid*, p. 13.
39 Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture on Seventeenth-Century China,* p. 4.
40 See note 8: p. 86.
41 Wai-Yee Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature*, p. 236.
42 Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Fiction*, p. 173.
43 Erin L.A. Brightwell, 'Analysing Gender: Wang Xi-feng and the Shrew', p. 76.
44 Ronald R. Gray, *Wandering Between Two Worlds: The Formative Years of Cao Xueqin 1715–1745*, p. 69.
45 Burton Watson, ed., *The Complete Works of Zhuang-zi,* section 10.
46 Susan Nanquin and Evelyn Rawski, *ibid*, p. 36.
47 Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *ibid*, p. 45.
48 Yang Yiangyi and Gladys Yang, trans., *A Dream of Red Mansions,* Cao Xueqin and Gao E, 6 vols, p. 131.
49 Robyn R. Wang, ed., *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period through the Song Dynasty*, p. xi.
50 Meng Chengshun, *Mistress and Maid (Jiao Hong ji),* scene 50.
51 Shang Wei, 'The Story of the Stone and its Visual Representations', in Andrew Schonebaum, ed., *Approaches*, pp. 350–351.
52 Wai-Yee Li, *ibid*, p. 243.
53 Collector's Edition, D9, disc 7, episodes 33–36
54 Collector's Edition, D9, disc 7, episode 36.

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