Renditions
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The Translator, the Mirror and the Dream
—Some Observations on a New Theory

by David Hawkes

There are roughly two ways in which a translator can deal with a text. Either he can choose what he believes to be the best edition and stick to it, or else he can make an eclectic edition of his own, skipping from version to version and choosing what he thinks will make the best story. The first is, I suppose, the more scholarly way of proceeding; the second is the one I at first adopted in translating Hong lou meng 紅樓夢.

As everyone knows, the manuscripts mostly end at chapter 80 and have somewhat different texts from the one we find in the complete 120-chapter version first published by Gao E 高鹗 and Cheng Wei-yuan 程偉元 in 1792. To begin with I used a convenient modern edition of the 120-chapter version but from time to time diverged from it when one of the Red Inkstone 紅樓齋 manuscript versions offered a more tempting alternative. My eventual abandonment of this frivolous and highly unscholarly attitude towards textual variation was due not to any sudden access of virtue but to the realization that, in the case of this particular novel, almost any choice between different versions of the text may involve the translator in decisions about a number of quite fundamental questions — questions concerning the authorship of the novel, its evolution, the identity of the commentators, the credibility of the early editors, the nature of their editing, and so forth.

A good example of this would be the passages concerning Liu Wu-er 柳五兒, or 'Fivey' as I call her in my translation, the consumptive daughter of a minor character called Cook Liu. She is a beautiful and intelligent girl whose mother has ambitions to get her a place in the apartment of Bao-yu 賈玉, the pampered adolescent who is the central character of the novel. She thinks that work there would not be too arduous for a person of Fivey's delicate constitution and that the company of the other maids would be congenial to her. Poor Fivey's eagerness to get the job is her undoing. She is caught loitering one evening in the garden near Bao-yu's residence while trying to deliver a small present to one of her 'contacts' in his apartment, and the women of the watch, who suspect her of being a thief, give her so rough a handling that her illness takes a grave turn for the worse. In manuscript
versions of chapter 77 we learn, from a remark made by Bao-yu's mother, that
Fivey is now dead. Later in the same chapter, when Bao-yu steals out of the garden
to visit his former maid Skybright who has been dismissed by his mother and
is lying ill in bed in the squalid lodgings where her cousin lives, he is nearly raped
by the cousin's wife. In the manuscript versions of this chapter the young wife
abandons her attempt at seducing him when its failure has become apparent; but in
the Gao E version she does so because she is interrupted by the arrival of Fivey and
her mother bringing things for the sick girl. Fivey turns up once more, alive and well,
in chapter 109 where, for a brief moment, she plays quite an important part in the
story.

Obviously the choice of version in chapter 77 must be determined by our
attitude to the 120-chapter version of Gao E. If, like some Chinese scholars, we
reject it out of hand as being the fraudulent invention of Gao E, we must follow
the manuscript version and allow Fivey to die. If we accept the 120-chapter version
as the best version we have got, then even though we may take exception to some
of Gao E's alterations in the first 80 chapters and from time to time find occasion
to improve on them, I think we have to follow him in substantial matters, like
the case of Fivey which I have just cited, since his Supplement is a supplement not
of the first 80 chapters in their Red Inkstone version but of the first 80 chapters
as they appear in his own edition. I do not quite understand the logic which
ordained that the Peking translators should translate all 120 chapters but un-
deviatingly follow a manuscript-based version in their first two volumes; nor do I
entirely understand the stance of those American critics who have based their criti-
cal observations about the novel on the whole 120-chapter version while professing
themselves uncertain or undecided or agnostic about the status of Gao E's supple-
ment. You cannot, it seems to me, have it both ways.

Or can you? The question of exactly what it is that constitutes a work of art
is partly a metaphysical one and one which I certainly have no intention of embarking
on here. Let me instead attempt to enter a little more deeply into this question
of versions. It occurs most acutely in that part of the novel—almost a novel in
itself—concerning the fortunes, or rather misfortunes, of the two You sisters, You
Er-jie and You San-jie: roughly speaking the half-dozen chapters ending in chapter 69. The following is a rough outline of the story.

It begins some time in the late spring or early summer of the years following
the Imperial Concubine's visitation with the death of an old lady who had been
the favourite concubine of the previous emperor. Prompted by feelings of filial
piety for his late father, the reigning emperor decided to bury her with great pomp
and ceremony. A period of national mourning is declared; for three months no
one is allowed to get married; and for a whole year an interdict is placed on all
kinds of musical and theatrical entertainment. In view of their high rank and prince-
ly connections, nearly all the senior members of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo
households are required to join the funeral cortège to the Imperial Mausoleum,
some ten days' journey from the capital, where the Dowager Consort is to be in-
ferred. After hurried consultations, the family decide to pretend that Cousin Zhen
's wife, You-shi, is pregnant, so that at least one person can be left in
charge at Ning-guo House.
Some time after the departure of the grown-ups for the Imperial Mausoleum, while You-shi and the young people are in the midst of birthday celebrations in the garden, word reaches them that Cousin Zhen’s father, old Jia Jing 賈敬, has died at the Taoist monastery outside the city where he lives in retirement. This means that You-shi has to go off to supervise funeral arrangements outside; and so, in order that Ning-guo House should not be left without a responsible person in charge, she installs her step-mother, old Mrs. You, with her two unmarried step-sisters, You Er-jie and You San-jie, to keep an eye on things while she is away. Shortly afterwards Cousin Zhen and his son Jia Rong 賈蓉 are given permission to return early from the Imperial Mausoleum and join You-shi at the Jia family temple outside the city to which Jia Jing’s body has been taken. Wang Xi-feng 王熙鳳’s husband Jia Lian 賈蓮, followed by the matriarch Grandmother Jia and the other Jia ladies, returns from the Mausoleum a little later.

In the course of the protracted mourning rituals for Jia Jing which follow it becomes apparent to Jia Rong that his uncle Jia Lian has taken a great fancy to the elder of the two You sisters. Jia Lian’s wife Xi-feng has been ailing for some months following a miscarriage and Jia Rong suggests that his uncle should marry You Er-jie secretly and set her up in a separate establishment in the city. He can break the news of the marriage to his family and take her into the mansion as soon as she has provided him with a son. Jia Lian follows this advice. With Cousin Zhen’s help he installs Er-jie in a house in Little Flower Lane, with her mother and younger sister for company, a married couple to act as housekeepers, and a couple of young maids to wait on her. After their secret marriage he is able to spend a good deal of time in her company without exciting the suspicions of his jealous wife by pretending that he is helping Cousin Zhen at the family temple outside the city.

Er-jie, we are given to understand, is a fallen woman. She had already had sexual relations with Cousin Zhen before her marriage to Jia Lian. Jia Lian knows about her past, but because she is so gentle and dutiful as a wife, is unconcerned about it. He is more concerned about the somewhat eccentric behaviour of her younger sister San-jie, and it is agreed between them that he should endeavour to find a husband for her as soon as possible.

Two months after their secret marriage, Jia Lian is ordered by his father to go on a mission to Ping-an-zhou 平安州 which is expected to take him away from home for about half a month. In the event he is away for much longer because of unforeseen delays. While he is away, Wang Xi-feng finds out about his marriage to Er-jie and decays the latter into moving into the mansion. She also finds out that Er-jie had been betrothed since infancy to the son of a man who is now a pauper and that Cousin Zhen had had to bribe this man in order to induce him to break off the engagement. During Jia Lian’s absence she utilizes this knowledge in order to make things hot for Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong, whom she holds responsible for her husband’s backsliding, by inciting the ex-fiancé to bring a lawsuit against them.

Jia Lian gets back from Ping-an-zhou to find the establishment in Little Flower Lane closed down and is surprised to find Er-jie installed in a room of her own at the mansion. He is even more surprised to see how calmly Xi-feng appears to have taken her discovery of his deception and how well-disposed she appears to be towards her rival. Jia Lian’s father gives him a concubine called Autumn 秋桐 as a
reward for the successful conclusion of his mission. His preoccupation with this new bed-fellow distracts his attention from Er-jie who, at Xi-feng’s secret instigation, is being systematically maltreated, with the result that her health becomes seriously impaired. Too late in the day for his concern to be of any use to her, Jia Lian discovers that she is pregnant. An incompetent doctor causes her to miscarry the male child that Jia Lian had been hoping for, and finally, ill, wretched, persecuted and with nothing left to live for, she takes her own life. Her persecution and death make one of the most poignant and harrowing passages in the novel.

I have deliberately left San-jie’s story out of this simplified account so as not to make it too confusing. Let me now go over it again filling in the missing parts that affect her.

I mentioned that, after their clandestine marriage, Jia Lian and Er-jie were both concerned about the behaviour of Er-jie’s wayward younger sister, and that it was agreed between them that an attempt should be made to set her up with a husband. When tackled about this herself, San-jie says that there is only one man she will ever marry, but she will not tell them who it is. They are still speculating about it when Jia Lian is called away to answer a summons from his father. The young women learn from a manservant called Joker 裕兒, whom he sends to look after them in his absence, that the summons was to tell him about a mission to Ping-an-zhou he is to undertake on his father’s behalf. Jia Lian himself looks in again next day to find out who it is that San-jie wants to marry. Er-jie, who had been working on her sister during the night, tells him that it is a young man called Liu Xiang-lian 柳湘蓮 whom she saw five years previously when he was appearing in some amateur dramatics and to whom she had instantly given her heart. If she can have him, she will remain faithful to him for life; if not, she will remain single and, when her mother dies, become a nun.

We, too, have met Liu Xiang-lian before. He appears in a lively passage in chapter 47 in which he lures Bao-chai 賓妓’s oafish brother Xue Pan 薛蟠, who had been pestering him, to a lonely place outside the city and beats him up. We learn that he is a great friend of Bao-yu, whose advice he sometimes seeks. (The somewhat puzzling circumstance that Bao-yu, who at this stage of the novel is supposed to be about fourteen years old, should be represented as a companion and equal of young men in their twenties, and even at one point considered as a suitable husband for San-jie, may be noted here in passing because it has an important bearing on the theory which I shall be discussing later.)

Jia Lian sets off on his journey to Ping-an-zhou. On the third day out, to his very great surprise (and ours), he runs into Liu Xiang-lian and Xue Pan travelling in the opposite direction. It appears that Xue Pan and his employees, returning, laden with merchandise, from their business travels, had been set upon by a band of robbers, and that Liu Xiang-lian had suddenly turned up and rescued them. He and Xue Pan, from being bitter enemies, had thereupon decided to become blood-brothers and were now travelling together in company. Xiang-lian had presently to go off and visit an aunt, but later they would meet again in the capital and Xue Pan would help Xiang-lian to find a wife and settle down.

Jia Lian pricks up his ears. Is Liu Xiang-lian looking for a wife? He knows of just the person. And he proceeds to tell him about his marriage to Er-jie and about
Erjie's beautiful younger sister—though not of course mentioning that San-jie had set her heart on having him, because Chinese ladies were supposed to be chosen, not to do the choosing for themselves. Xiang-lian is talked into a betrothal. Pressed to give a pledge of some kind, he produces a pair of swords in a single scabbard, a family heirloom which he carries around with him in his luggage.

In the middle of the eighth month Xiang-lian returns to the capital. He visits first Xue Pan, who is ill in bed, and then his old friend Bao-yu, to whom he confesses that he has begun to have misgivings about his hasty betrothal to San-jie. Ning-guo House has a very unsavoury reputation, he blurts out with somewhat brutal frankness: however beautiful this San-jie may be, he has doubts about her morals. Bao-yu is shocked by his rudeness and the meeting ends inconclusively.

The impetuous Xiang-lian now decides that he definitely does not want to go through with the betrothal and stalks off to Jia Lian's place in Little Flower Lane to reclaim the swords. Jia Lian protests. While the two men are arguing, San-jie, who has overheard everything from her room, rushes in with the swords. No need to argue, she says: here are your swords. But she has concealed one of them behind her back, and as Xiang-lian takes the scabbard with the single sword in it from her hand, she whips the other sword out from behind her, cuts her own throat with it and falls dead at his feet. Jia Lian wants to have Xiang-lian arrested, but Erjie dissuades him. The damage has already been done, she says, and publicity could do none of them any good. Realizing too late what a paragon among women he has rejected, Xiang-lian is overwhelmed with grief and remorse. Staggering, blinded by his tears, out of the house, he finds himself, after a brief encounter with San-jie's ghost, in a dilapidated temple in the company of an old, lame Taoist. A few words spoken by the Taoist bring about his instant conversion. Impetuous as ever, he snatches the remaining sword from its scabbard, slashes off his hair (presumably dressed à la mandchouse) and follows the Taoist on his travels.

The limping Taoist given to sudden appearances and disappearances at moments of crisis is a figure we have encountered more than once before in this novel. He appears in chapter 12 when Jia Rui 冬瑞, dying of the effects of his infatuation with the heartless Wang Xi-feng, is given a magic mirror by him—the 'Mirror for the Romantic' it is called fengyue baojian (風月寶鏡). It was made by the Fairy Disenchantment in the Land of Illusion, he says, and has been specially designed to help young men like Jia Rui who are too susceptible to female charms. All they have to do is look into the back of the mirror (never the front) and they will be cured. In three days' time he will come back in order to reclaim it. Jia Rui looks into the back of the mirror and sees a grinning skull. Angrily he turns the mirror over and looks into the forbidden side. He sees Wang Xi-feng, the object of his infatuation, beckoning to him. He rushes in to embrace her, then sinks back, exhausted by the excitement, to find that the mirror has turned of itself in his hand and that he is staring once more at the skull. He repeats this three or four times, but the last time he does so demons come and bind his soul with chains before it can get back again into his body and the family watching beside his sick-bed observe that he is dead.

'A Mirror for the Romantic' was, according to the novel's Prologue, one of the titles that had at one time or another been suggested for the novel itself. The ur-text of the novel, we are told, was an immense inscription on a stone situated
in some never-never-land beyond this mortal world. The stone was a heavenly stone which had conceived a hankering to see the world and been taken down into it by a passing monk so that it could be born there as a human being. After its life was over, it went back to the never-never-land in which the monk had found it and became a stone again; but this time it was a stone with a story—a story which, in very great detail, was inscribed upon it.

The stone's story was seen and read by a passing Taoist called 玉空道人 who agrees, after some discussion, to copy out the inscription and take it down into the world for publication:

Vanitas... changed his name to Brother Amor and the title of the story to 'The Tale of Brother Amor' or 'The Passionate Monk's Story'. In Wu Yufeng's hands it became 'A Dream of Red Mansions'; but Kong Meixi of Eastern Lu called it 'A Mirror for the Romantic'. Cao Xueqin 高雲芹 worked on it in his Nostalgia Studio, rewriting it no less than five times in the course of ten years, dividing it into chapters and composing suitable headings for the chapters. He changed its title to 'Twelve Young Ladies of Nanking' (金陵十二钗). Red Inkstone restored the original title, 'The Story of the Stone', when he recopied the book and added his second set of annotations to it in the year 甲戌 (1754).

The 甲戌 MS from which this passage is taken has an unsigned and undated marginal comment at this point, probably written by Red Inkstone. Its meaning, which has been much disputed, is something like this:

'A Mirror for the Romantic' was the name of a book that Cao Xueqin once had. It had a preface by his brother Tangcuan 唐軻. Now that Tangcuan is dead, I am reminded of the old when I look at the new. That is why I have continued to use it.

References to a book called 'A Mirror for the Romantic' also appear in the writings of Yuruí 禹瑞, the aristocratic Manchu whose wife was related to the Cao family and who wrote extensively on the various sequels to Hong lou meng that were current in his day. Yuruí was not born until several years after Cao Xueqin's death. He died in 1838. He was sent to Mukden in disgrace in 1813 and from 1814 onwards spent his life in perpetual confinement there. It is thought that his writings on Hong lou meng must date from some time before his disgrace, probably some time in the early years of the 19th century. The fact that he was a Bannerman related by marriage to the Caos is thought to lend more weight to what he tells us than is accorded to other hearsay of the same period. Yuruí's first reference comes in his review of a bogu sequel to the novel called Hou hong lou meng 後紅樓夢.

I have heard that there was an old book of unknown authorship entitled 'A Mirror for the Romantic'. Its alternative title was 'The Story of the Stone'. Cao Xueqin obtained a copy of this book and was struck by the similarity of its contents to his own family history. He borrowed its theme; therefore, as the basis for this novel, which he rewrote no less than five times, each new version more wonderful than the last.
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The stone's story was seen and read by a passing Taoist called Vanitas 空空道人 who agreed, after some discussion, to copy out the inscription and take it down into the world for publication:

Vanitas... changed his name to Brother Amor and the title of the story to 'The Tale of Brother Amor' or 'The Passionate Monk's Story'. In Wu Yufeng's hands it became 'A Dream of Red Mansions'; but Kong Meixi of Eastern Lu called it 'A Mirror for the Romantic'. Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 worked on it in his Nostalgia Studio, rewriting it no less than five times in the course of ten years, dividing it into chapters and composing suitable headings for the chapters. He changed its title to 'Twelve Young Ladies of Nanking' (金陵十二钗), Red Inkstone restored the original title, 'The Story of the Stone', when he recopied the book and added his second set of annotations to it in the year fuxu 甲戌 (1754).

The fuxu MS from which this passage is taken has an unsigned and undated marginal comment at this point, probably written by Red Inkstone. Its meaning, which has been much disputed, is something like this:

'A Mirror for the Romantic' was the name of a book that Cao Xueqin once had. It had a preface by his brother Tangcun 杨桂. Now that Tangcun is dead, I am reminded of the old when I look at the new. That is why I have continued to use it.

References to a book called 'A Mirror for the Romantic' also appear in the writings of Yu Rui 裕瑞, the aristocratic Manchu whose wife was related to the Cao family and who wrote extensively on the various sequels to Hong lou meng that were current in his day. Yu Rui was not born until several years after Cao Xueqin's death. He died in 1838. He was sent to Mukden in disgrace in 1813 and from 1814 onwards spent his life in perpetual confinement there. It is thought that his writings on Hong lou meng must date from some time before his disgrace, probably some time in the early years of the 19th century. The fact that he was a Bannerman related by marriage to the Cao's is thought to lend more weight to what he tells us than is accorded to other hearsay of the same period. Yu Rui's first reference comes in his review of a bogus sequel to the novel called Hou hong lou meng 后红楼梦.

I have heard that there was an old book of unknown authorship entitled 'A Mirror for the Romantic'. Its alternative title was 'The Story of the Stone'. Cao Xueqin obtained a copy of this book and was struck by the similarity of its contents to his own family history. He borrowed its theme, therefore, as the basis for this novel, which he rewrote no less than five times, each new version more wonderful than the last.
He introduced the conversation and manners of his own day as a means of enlivening it and relating it to his own story. I have seen manuscripts of the novel in which every volume was annotated with marginal comments by his uncle Red Inkstone containing authentic references to past events.²

His second reference comes in a review of the Cheng Weiyuan-Gao E supplement:

The 80-chapter manuscript versions of the novel found in private collections and the lists of chapter-headings following them are nearly all different. This is because Cao Xueqin rewrote 'A Mirror for the Romantic' several times before producing this book and the copyists' versions differ according to whether they were made at an earlier or later stage in the revision...

Yunjui seems to imply that 'A Mirror for the Romantic' was a book by someone else which Cao Xueqin used as the basis for his own novel; Red Inkstone (or whoever is responsible for the marginal comment in the jiuxu MS is much more non-committal about its authorship: he merely says that Cao Xueqin 'had' such a book; he doesn't say whether it was written by him or by somebody else and doesn't even say anything about 'A Mirror for the Romantic' being the basis of Cao Xueqin's revisions—though on that heading the meaning of the comment is so obscure that I think I had better defer discussion of it until later.

Both episodes in which the lame Taoist is mentioned—the account of Jia Rui's illness and death in chapter 12 and the story of San-jie's suicide in chapter 66—are connected in some way with the fairy Disenchantment 警幻仙子 whose tribunal for love-sick souls we first hear of in chapter 1 and whom Bao-yu meets in his dream in chapter 5. In the Jia Rui episode in chapter 12 the lame Taoist tells Jia Rui that the magic mirror he is lending him was made by the fairy Disenchantment:

'This object comes from the Hall of Emptiness in the Land of Illusion. It was fashioned by the fairy Disenchantment as an antidote to the ill effects of impure mental activity. It has life-giving and restorative properties and has been brought to the world for the contemplation of intelligent and handsome young gentlemen whose hearts are too susceptible to the charms of beauty...'

(Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良's contention in a recent article³ that the fairy Disenchantment had nothing to do with the Mirror for the Romantic version of the story seems to overlook the fact that it was Disenchantment herself who made the mirror.)

In chapter 66, when You San-jie's ghost appears to the tear-blinded Liu Xianglian who had rejected her, she is carrying a sword in one hand and 'some sort of

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¹ See extracts from Yan's Zaochuang xinbi 蘇霊聞筆 in Hong lou meng jian 紅樓夢卷, Vol. 1 (Gudian wenxue yanjiu shibao tushu bian 古典文學研究資料叢編).
album or ledger' in the other. The sword is, of course, the sword with which she had cut her throat. The 'album or ledger' is Disenchantment's Roster of Lovers, as is evident from what she proceeds to say to Xiang-lian:

'I am ordered to go now to the fairy Disenchantment's tribunal in the Land of Illusion to keep the records of the other lovers who are under her jurisdiction.'

Her ghost makes one more appearance in the novel in chapter 69 when she shows herself in a dream to her sister Er-jie, already ill from the effects of Xi-feng's diabolical scheming. Once again she appears holding a sword.

'Sister, you must do as I tell you. Take this sword, cut off that jealous woman's head, and come with me to the tribunal of Disenchantment to await her judgement. You will die in any case, but if you do not as I say, you will have died for nothing and no one will feel sorry for you.'

Both episodes, the story of Jia Rui's infatuation and death and the story of San-jie's betrothal to Liu Xiang-lian and subsequent suicide, fit rather awkwardly into the surrounding narrative. The Jia Rui episode begins 'in the eleventh month' and covers a period of nearly a whole year. After Jia Rui's death at the end of chapter 12 we simply move back to 'the end of the year' and carry on as if Jia Rui had never existed. The graft is a somewhat clumsy one, but at least has no harmful effect—indeed no effect at all—on the surrounding tissue. But the insertion of the San-jie episode into the story of Jia Lian's secret marriage and its tragic outcome produced complications and led to a whole series of difficulties which no amount of editing could overcome.

Consider once more the plot as it might have been before the story of San-jie and Xiang-lian was inserted.

In chapter 63, towards the end of the fourth month, Jia Jing's death is announced. Mrs. You and her daughters move into Ning-guo House. Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian return from the Imperial Mausoleum. After about a month in the city, they accompany the coffin to the family temple outside the city. On a brief visit home, Jia Rong suggests to Jia Lian that he should marry Er-jie, and on the third of the sixth month Jia Lian does so secretly and installs her in a little house in the city (chapter 65). Some time towards the end of the seventh month Jia Lian is ordered by his father to go on a secret mission to Ping-an-zhou which is expected (chapter 66) to take 'fifteen or sixteen days'. Owing to delays when he gets there, it takes much longer, so that altogether he is away for about two months. While he is away, Xi-feng finds out from Joker, who has been left behind to look after Er-jie, that her husband has taken another wife. She visits Er-jie and inveigles her into accompanying her home. Jia Lian returns to find Er-jie installed in the mansion. He is given the concubine Autumn by his father as a reward for the successful accomplishment of his mission. Er-jie, who is now three or four months pregnant, is maltreated without his knowledge, has a miscarriage, and, after much illness and wretchedness, takes her own life. Her funeral (chapter 70) takes place 'near the
end of the year. According to this timetable Jia Lian would have returned about the end of the tenth month and Xi-feng and Autumn would have had about six or seven weeks in which to drive Er-jie to her death.

Now see what happens when the San-jie story is inserted into this narrative.

First of all Jia Lian has to meet Xue Pan and Liu Xiang-lian on the way to Ping-an-zhou and then return from Ping-an-zhou almost as soon as he gets there, though with an undertaking to make another trip there 'in the tenth month'. The reason why he dashes back so precipitately after his first visit when on the second occasion he is prepared to wait around for weeks on end is never explained. It is, of course, the exigency of the plot, which requires him to come back and tell San-jie about the betrothal.

The exigency of the plot has already required that he should unaccountably dash back to Little Flower Lane again after he had been called away by his father (Er-jie herself finds his visit a trifle exceptionable) in order to be informed who it is that San-jie wants to marry. He is around when Liu Xiang-lian returns to the capital (chapter 66) asking to have the swords back, and is present at San-jie's suicide, and at her burial, which takes place, apparently, on the same day (a world record, surely, in speedy funerals). Two days later (chapter 67) Xue Pan tells someone at a party that Jia Lian has left for Ping-an-zhou again. However, when Xi-feng learns from Joker on that same day about Jia Lian's secret marriage, she warns him not to tell his master that she knows. True, she tells Patience a moment later that 'it will not be necessary to wait until Mr. Lian returns' before putting her counter-measures into effect; but in the next chapter (chapter 68) we are told, after some irrelevancy about Jia Lian's mission to Ping-an-zhou taking two months because of delays, that she waited until he had set out before planning to visit Er-jie, which she did on the fifteenth of the tenth month. She found Er-jie alone, old Mrs. You having apparently vanished or died (without anyone noticing) some time between San-jie's funeral and the occasion of this visit. Jia Lian returns in the middle of the twelfth month (having spent two months away) and is praised and rewarded by his father (who had signaly failed to react to the successful conclusion of the first visit). The slow erosion of Er-jie's health and spirits and her miscarriage and suicide all have to take place in a week.

The manifest absurdities of plot in this section of the novel are nowhere more apparent than in the puppet-like appearances and disappearances of Jia Lian in chapter 67: now you see him, now you don't. Chapters 64 and 67 were, of course, missing from the early manuscripts and chapter 67 was still missing from some manuscripts seen by Gao E. (Gao E's text of chapter 67 is, as a matter of fact, far and away the best of the various extant versions.) It used to be assumed that these chapters were missing from early copies because Cao Xueqin's drafts were lost. This is known to have happened in the case of certain later portions of the novel. In chapter 20 a marginal comment dated 'Summer 1767' by the commentator Odd

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4 The two-month delay in Ping-an-zhou is made an irrelevancy by the change of plot. Its original function was to give Xi-feng time in which to find out about Er-jie and lure her into the mansion while her husband was away on his mission. With the change of plot it becomes a mere embarrassment and in fact requires the use of the future perfect tense in the English translation.
Tablet mentions five or six chapters that were lost by someone who had borrowed them to read at the time when Red Inkstone was making the fair copy. Personally I suspect that chapters 64 and 67 were not lost but deliberately withdrawn for rewriting precisely because of the kind of anomalies I have been describing—
o anomalies brought about by the insertion of extraneous material into the plot. Whether any extant version of these chapters owes its present form to Cao Xueqin himself seems to me highly questionable. The versions we have look more like the product of skillful editing. Cao Xueqin himself would, in his own mind, have been much more ruthless about throwing out material that had been made redundant by changes in the plot; it is more characteristic of an editor to try to preserve everything and make the best use of it he can.

It must be said that in all of the You Er-jie/You San-jie chapters, not only in chapters 64 and 67, Gao E’s version differs somewhat from the manuscript versions. Gao E has a tendency to bowdlerize, particularly in the case of San-jie, who is so altered in his version that she becomes almost a different character. But even with Gao E’s bowdlerizations, material like this seems somehow more suited to a novel like Jin ping mei 金瓶梅. It seems not unreasonable to suppose that the original Mirror for the Romantic—whether its author was Cao Xueqin or someone else—
was a collection of episodes in which the salacious and the supernatural were combined, loosely strung together by the appearances of the lame, eccentric Taoist with his magic mirror, and that the book was later dismembered and its more successful episodes fed into an earlier version of the Stone, which may even at one stage have been named after it.

This is not, of course, an original view. Something like it was advocated by Yu Pingbo in a short study of the Jiaxu MS published in Zhong-hua wen-shi hui cong 中華文史論叡 in 1962.

‘A Mirror for the Romantic was an early preliminary draft of Hong lou meng. This is the book referred to in the marginal comment.’

The Mirror for the Romantic was, he goes on to suggest, of quite a different character from the novel as it came to be later, even in its literary style. He cites a curious passage in the Gengchen 姑蔑 version of chapter 68 in which Xi-feng uncharacteristically addresses You Erjie in wenyan 文言 and suggests that this may be an unaltered section of the original text of A Mirror for the Romantic.

A more radical theory about A Mirror for the Romantic and its relation to the novel as we know it today has recently been propounded by the scholar Dai Bufan 戴不凡, who has written an unpublished book, one section of which appeared earlier this year in the first and third issue of the new Hong lou meng Xuekan 紅樓夢學刊.

Dai’s thesis could be expressed, at its briefest, as a development of Yurui’s statement that Hong lou meng is a greatly expanded and altered version of a book called A Mirror for the Romantic written not by Cao Xueqin but by an earlier author: but whereas Yurui expresses no opinion about the authorship of the earlier book, Dai decides that it was by the second of Cao Quan 姜巖’s four sons. Cao Quan was Cao Yin 姜昱’s brother who died in 1705. His fourth son, Cao Fu 姜煥, is the one who was adopted by Cao Yin’s widow and who became Textile Commissioner
at Nanking when Cao Yin's only son Cao Yong 賈炯 died prematurely after holding the office for only three years. Most Chinese scholars nowadays think Cao Xueqin was the son of Cao Fu, but Dai Bufan will have none of this. In fact, he has no theory at all about Cao Xueqin's parentage: he would agree that he is a member of the Cao family in the second generation after Cao Yin, but beyond that he will go no further than to say that he is not any of the people with whom scholars have identified him in the past. He does think that Cao Fu is Odd Tablet 石兄 however.

According to Dai this 'Brother Stone' (石兄) spent most of his life in the South and much of the internal 'evidence' he adduces in support of his theory is aimed at demonstrating that the novel contains elements which could only have been produced by a Southerner. For example, he insists that in addition to the flawless Pekingese for which the novel is famous, there are random traces of Soochow dialect in it which belong to the earlier version. The question of dialect is, I think, best left to native Chinese scholars to argue amongst themselves. I will content myself here with citing just one of the many other instances of southernisms that he adduces.

In Chapter 61 the woman who does the cooking for Bao-yu and the young ladies living in the garden mentions that two of the young ladies recently decided that they would like a dish of lycium tips (枸杞) and sent her 500 cash to buy some with. The woman thought this very funny because lycium is so cheap that 500 cash would buy enough to feed an army with, so she sent the money back to them. Actually lycium tips isn't known as a vegetable in Peking and Gao E changed the text to 'bean-sprouts', which he thought his readers would understand a bit better. This is what Dai Bufan says about this passage:


A Pekingese, unless he had studied Chinese medicine, would be unlikely to know what lycium is, and even if he had, would be unlikely to know that lycium tips can be fried with salt and eaten as a vegetable. It's hardly surprising that Gao E should have substituted the more familiar 'bean-sprouts' for the incomprehensible 'lycium tips' of the original text. But this is late spring/early summer, a season of the year when, in the Jiangnan area, the wild herbs lycium, shepherd's purse and aster-tops are eaten as a cheap sort of vegetable. In the area around my native city of Yangzhou in Chekiang province there was a local tradition that when Qianlong 賈侖 had grown tired of the delicacies of the palace in Peking, he would long for the lycium tips, shepherd's purse and aster-tops of the South and that that was why he made so many southern tours. This seems to suggest that lycium was an exclusively southern dish that even emperors could not easily obtain in Peking. Even in this age of trains and aeroplanes I have never heard of lycium tips being obtainable in Peking, even in the most exclusive vegetable markets. If you'd wanted to eat lycium tips in Peking as they appear to do in the novel, you couldn't have done so even for 500 cash. It's clear that what Cook Liu said makes sense only if the Jia mansion was situated not in Peking but in Nanking. Surely a writer brought up in Peking would have been incapable of conceiving, let alone of writing such a detail?

5For precisely the same reason I have followed Gao E in my English translation of this passage.
Another piece of evidence that Dai Bufan points to is the strange discrepancies in the ages of the characters. He points out that Bao-yu is represented sometimes as a young man (like most of his friends: I have drawn attention to this already) and sometimes as a little boy. But to me the most impressive and convincing part of his demonstration is that section of the Běifēng hùncōng article in which he explains how anomalies in the novel’s treatment of time have come about as a result of the rearrangement of preexisting material. This does not necessarily point to a different authorship for the pre-existing material, though with all the other evidence he addsuces the case for this has to be seriously considered.

The fact is that whether we accept Dai’s thesis or not, there is unquestionably something gravely wrong with the sequence of events in the early chapters of the novel. In all existing texts, manuscript and printed alike, Dai-yu cannot be much more than six years old in chapter 2 when her mother dies and Jia Yu-cun 賈雨村 takes her up to the capital to live with her grandmother, yet by the time she reaches her grandmother, she has more than doubled her age. And in all existing versions of the novel Bao-chai and her family arrive at the Rong-guo mansion in chapter 4 only a few days or at most weeks after Dai-yu, yet later in the novel both Bao-yu and other characters make frequent references to the fact that he and Dai-yu had lived together since they were little children, whereas Bao-chai was a late-comer.

I find Dai Bufan’s reconstruction of the Ur-Stone as it was before Cao Xueqin rearranged the chapters extremely convincing. He says that the section in chapter 8 when Bao-yu calls on Bao-chai not long after her arrival, sits with her on the kǎng (炕), shows her his jade talisman, compares it with her golden locket and become aware of the fragrance emanating from her person (caused by the Cold Fragrance Pills she has been taking) originally came immediately before his visit to Dai-yu in chapter 19 when he lies on the bed with her and tells her the story of the magic mouse, notices that she, too, gives off a perfume (a natural one) and is teased by her about Bao-chai’s Cold Fragrance Pills. Immediately after this, he says, would have come what is now chapter 5 with its account of the dream which marks Bao-yu’s entry into puberty. Its culmination is a lesson by the fairy Disenchantment in the facts of life, followed by his physical union with Disenchantment’s little sister Two-in-one, who combines the features of both Bao-chai and Dai-yu. The New Year celebrations of chapters 53 and 54 would have followed, then the New Year visit of Bao-yu’s maid Aroma 奴人 to her family, which comes in chapter 19. (It is in chapter 19 that Bao-yu catches his page Tealeaf 茶葉 practising Disenchantment’s lesson with a maid). Aroma’s nagging and temperamental behaviour in chapters 19 and 21 seem much more natural if one thinks of them as occurring shortly after the dream, which was followed, it should be remembered, by his having sexual relations with Aroma.

It is even possible to think of additional evidence, other than what has been adduced by Dai Bufan himself, in support of this reconstruction. In the Prefatory Remarks (緒論) on chapter 2—what Wu Shichang 吳世昌 would call ‘Tangcun’s second preface’—we are told:

Because the Rong-guo household was such a large one, it would have taken the author several chapters of extremely boring narrative to
introduce it in all its ramifications at a single go. Instead he uses the
caracter Leng Zixing 冷子興 as a means of implanting a rather vague
and sketchy impression of the family in the mind of the reader which
can later on be filled in and reinforced by further accounts of it seen
through the eyes first of Dai-yu and then of Bao-chai. This is the ‘layering-
technique used by painters when they build up a picture by laying
down several successive washes of colour.

Now it is a fact that we are given a fairly detailed description of the Rong-guo house-
hold as seen through the eyes of Dai-yu in chapter 3, but nowhere is there a com-
parable passage of description in which Bao-chai is the observer. On the other hand
there is a descriptive section elsewhere in the novel where the observer used is
another character. In chapter 53 the description of the Jia family’s ancestral temple
and of the New Year ceremonies that take place in it are prefaced by the words
‘because Bao-qin 薏芩 was seeing inside the ancestral temple for the first time, she
took very careful note of all she saw . . . ’. What follows therefore, is, as it were,
seen by us through Bao-qin’s eyes.

There is, however, something rather unsatisfactory about the use made of
Bao-qin in this context. In the first place she is not, at this point in the novel, a
particularly recent arrival; she is a somewhat minor character to be selected for this
sort of treatment; and even granted that this is her first New Year in the Jia house-
hold, she was only one of a number of relations who arrived in it simultaneou-
ously. There seems, indeed, some reason to suspect that Bao-qin, her brother, Xing Xiu-yan
邢岫烟, and the two Li sisters were not introduced into the novel until a fairly late
stage in its development. If one accepts Dai Bufan’s reconstruction of an earlier
version as valid, i.e. if Bao-chai arrived in the winter; and the New Year celebrations
of chapters 53 and 54 originally followed shortly after the dream in chapter 5, we
can easily imagine that in the earlier version it was not Bao-qin who observed the
ceremonies taking place in the ancestral temple but Bao-chai.

No one nowadays could, I think, reasonably object to the view that Hong lou
men is a heavily-edited, somewhat imperfect amalgam of several different versions.
We can hardly refuse to believe what the author himself tells us about the novel in
his opening chapter. Where Dai Bufan differs radically from most contemporary
scholars is in his insistence that the foundation on which the novel was constructed
was not Cao Xueqin’s own First Version but a completely different book by some-
body else. This was of course, the view of Yurui and cannot be dismissed on the
merely emotional grounds that Cao Xueqin’s greatness as an author would be in
some way diminished by admitting it. Dai Bufan’s contention that the commenta-
tors’ frequent references to ‘the author’ (著者) and ‘Brother Stone’ refer not to Cao
Xueqin but to this much older author of A Mirror for the Romantic certainly make
sense of one or two hitherto very puzzling commentaries, most notably, perhaps,
the one on the passage in chapter 2 where the ‘real’ Bao-yu 郎寶玉 is said to have
shouted ‘Sisters! Sisters!’ when he was being beaten, in order to ease the pain.

With such wonderfully original ideas, no wonder the writing is so
original! Herein lies the playful secret of this book. All this story of
maids and maidens—it was all really prompted by feelings of brotherly
sympathy.
What on earth does this mean? Well, says Dai, Brother Stone was the brother of Cao Fu, who fell foul of the Emperor Yongzheng and who was head of the family when the Cao estate was confiscated. The story of the Cao family’s fall is essentially the story of the novel. And two of Brother Stone’s elder sisters were consorts of Manchu princesses. Another puzzle that Dai Bufan’s theory appears to explain is the fact that the novel sometimes taboos Cao Yin’s name and sometimes doesn’t.

Dai Bufan does not of course question that the major part of Hong lou meng is Cao Xueqin’s original work. Cao Xueqin’s great creation, in his view, is the delightful, poetical world of the garden, inhabited by the young and innocent. His Bao-yu is the young Bao-yu, the thirteen- or fourteen-year-old with whom we are most familiar. Brother Stone’s Bao-yu is much more the young gentleman, a patron of actors, the friend of elegant young rakes like Feng Zi-yi and Liu Xianglian. The two separate Bao-yu’s are already to be found in the opening chapter.

Chapter 1 begins with the rejected stone lying on the mountainside. The stone goes down into the world and becomes a man. After its life is over, it appears once more on the mountainside, but now it is covered all over with the immense inscription in which is told the story of its life. It is this which Vanitas copies out and takes into the world for publication; and it is this which Cao Xueqin worked on for ten years until finally he had produced the Hong lou meng we read today. Dai would say that Brother Stone is Cao Fu’s brother, who, he suggests, may have ended his days in a monastery. His inscription, The Story of the Stone, was also called A Mirror for the Romantic. The story of the stone is his story.

Later in this opening chapter Zhen Shi-yin has a dream in which he hears a monk telling a Taoist the history of a fairy page-boy called shen ying shizhe who watered a fairy plant which eventually turned into a fairy maiden. The two of them, the fairy page and the fairy maiden, wish to become mortals, he out of a desire to see the world, she in order to repay the debt of watering with her mortal tears. This shen ying shizhe, says Dai Bufan, is the younger Bao-yu and represents Cao Xueqin’s original contribution.

It is a fact that the explicit identification of the rejected stone with the fairy page is something that we find only in Gao E’s edition—one of the many examples one could cite of the unacknowledged excellence of his editing. In the manuscripts, therefore, these two sections of chapter 1 do look very much like the beginnings of two quite separate stories or of two quite different versions of the same story not very successfully cobbled together. However, even if we acknowledge the existence of an early Stone/Mirror version with an older Bao-yu as its hero and an elderly Soochow roué ‘Brother Stone’ as its narrator, it still does not follow that the author of this early version is not Cao Xueqin himself. The fictive narrator is a commonplace in European fiction and it would not be in the least surprising that Cao Xueqin, who invented so many things, should have invented this device as well. It seems to me that there are some indications that he did.

Consider, first of all, how Red Inkstone reacts to the appearance of Cao Xueqin’s name in the text. This occurs in the well-known passage in chapter 1 purporting to explain the genesis of the novel and the various transformations it underwent in the process of evolution.
For a long time Vanitas stood lost in thought... Then he copied the whole story out from beginning to end and took it down into the world for publication... He changed his own name to Brother Amor and the title of the story to 'The Tale of Brother Amor' or 'The Passionate Monk's Story'. In Wu Yufeng 吳玉峯's hands it became 'A Dream of Red Mansions'; but Kong Meixi 孔梅溪 of Eastern Lu 叡東浪 called it 'A Mirror for the Romantic'. Cao Xueqin 賽興 work on it in his Nostalgia Studio, rewriting it no less than five times in the course of ten years, dividing it into chapters and composing suitable headings for the chapters. He changed its title to 'Twelve Young Ladies of Nanking'. Red Inkstone restored the original title, 'The Story of the Stone', when he recopied the book and added his second set of annotations to it in the year jiaxiu. 6

Now here is Red Inkstone's comment on that passage:

It says that Xueqin worked on this book and revised it many times. In that case, who wrote all this preliminary section up to here? Evidently this is just the author playing a trick on us. He resorts to this sort of device in many other places besides this one. It's what painters call the 'mist and cloud' technique. The reader, if he is wise, will be very careful not to be taken in by it.

In this comment, at any rate, 'the author' and 'Xueqin' are evidently meant to be understood as the same person. It is hard to see how any sense can be made of it if they are not. Is it not at least possible that Dai Bufan 大步凡 has allowed himself to be taken in?

The other evidence concerns the introductory part of chapter 1 which the jiaxiu and jiachen 甲辰 MSS treat as Prefatory Remarks and which Wu Shichang 吳世昌 believes to be Tangcun's preface to the chapter. To Dai Bufan the earthenware stove, string bed and other features occurring in that section—not to mention the language it is written in—confirm his view that the author of the proto-Stone (al. 'Mirror for the Romantic') was a Southerner belonging to a generation earlier than Cao Xueqin's. To me it is evidence of a very different sort.

In the first place, I do not accept that this opening part of the book is a Tangcun preface. Consider once more the somewhat puzzling comment by Red Inkstone on which Tangcun's authorship of the opening section is based:

'A Mirror for the Romantic' was the name of a book that Xueqin once had. It had a preface by his brother Tangcun. Now that Tangcun is dead, I am reminded of the old when I look at the new. That is why I have continued to use it.

What is 'it'? Wu Shichang believes that it refers to Tangcun's prefaces. To my way of

6 This is the text of the passage as it appears in the jiaxiu MS. It is, of course, the jiaxiu of this passage that gives the manuscript its name. The date of the original manuscript, as Wu Shichang and many others have pointed out, have been very much later than 1754.
thinking it seems to make better sense of the context if we take ‘it’ to refer to the original title: ‘The Story of the Stone’ al. ‘A Mirror for the Romantic’. The text has just stated that the title given to the novel by Cao Xueqin himself when he had finished revising it was ‘Twelve Young Ladies of Nanking’. Very well, then why does ‘Twelve Young Ladies of Nanking’ not appear on the title-page? a reader might well inquire. ‘Because,’ says Red Inkstone’s comment, anticipating the objection, ‘I feel that Tangcun, who was associated with this book in its earlier stages, ought, now that he is dead, to be somehow or other commemorated in it."

The words ‘Red Inkstone restored the original title when he recopied the book and added his second set of annotations to it in the year jiaxu’ which are found only in the jiaxu MS are, I believe, a later comment by Odd Tablet which accidentally got incorporated into the text. If ‘A Mirror for the Romantic’ was in fact Tangcun’s preferred title, why did he not use it in his preface?

This is the book’s opening chapter. The author himself says: I wrote this ‘Story of the Stone’ after passing through the illusion of a dream.

Why not ‘I wrote this “Mirror for the Romantic” after passing through the illusion of a dream’? And why does his ‘preface’ consist almost entirely of reported speech: ‘The author says this’ ‘The author says that’ ‘The author also says’, etc., etc.? This is not Tangcun speaking; this is Cao Xueqin presenting the persona of his fictive narrator, the old Southern routé reminiscing, with a mixture of nostalgia and repentance, about his gay-and sinful youth. The string bed and earthenware stove and crabbed, semi-literate style belong neither to Cao Xueqin nor to some member of the Cao family in his father’s generation nor to any living person, but to the fictitious character whom Cao Xueqin invented to be the narrator or imaginary author of his novel. The fiction is not sustained throughout the novel for the simple reason that the version to which it belonged was discarded in favour of another—and that one in favour of another, and so on.

The twentieth century rediscovery of the 80-chapter Red Inkstone manuscripts of Hong lou meng has engendered a myth: the myth that all that is wrong with Hong lou meng can be ascribed to Gao E’s editing and to the fact that the last forty chapters are not ‘authentic’; but the incompleteness of Hong lou meng goes very much deeper than that. What in fact we have in these earlier chapters are the disjecta membra of several different novels which no amount of editing can ever quite successfully reconcile one with another. To admit this is not in any way to derogate from Cao Xueqin’s greatness as a writer. On the contrary, it is surely a proof of his greatness that even in its unfinished and imperfect state his novel has had the power to entrance generations of readers and hold them in lifelong thrall. Perhaps it was his very creativeness which prevented this remarkable man from completing his masterpiece; but in spite of its incompleteness his book will always remain one of the dozen or so greatest works of imaginative writing in the literature of the world.