Shared Dreams: The Story of the Three Wives’ Commentary on The Peony Pavilion

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THE RESURRECTION OF DEAD WOMEN

"Tears fill my eyes, grief fills my heart whenever I chance upon a book she left unfinished."

—The Peony Pavilion, scene 25

IN 1598, Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 completed his romantic comedy, The Peony Pavilion, subtitled The Soul’s Return (Mudan ting huanhun ji 牡丹亭還魂記). Written in an unusually dense and poetic style, this

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I have relied primarily on a photocopy of Wu Wushan sanfu heping Mudan ting huanhun ji 吳吳山三婦合評牡丹亭還魂記 in the hands of a Chinese collector who wishes to remain anonymous (hereafter Sanfu; see n. 15), which I have checked against a photocopy of an edition held in the Tôyô bunka kenkyûjo. Page numbers for the prefatory and postface materials framing the commentary are, when possible, keyed to a more convenient and easily available source, Tang Xianzu yanjiu ziliao huibian 湯顯祖研究資料彙編, comp. Mao Xiaotong 毛校同 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), vol. 2 (hereafter HB).

southern drama (*chuanqi* 崔奇) in fifty-five acts tells the story of a young maiden, Du Liniang 杜麗娘, who is ravished in a dream by a handsome young scholar. When she awakens, overcome with longing, she falls ill with a wasting disease, and after painting her self-portrait, she pines away and dies. Grief-stricken, her parents establish a shrine to consecrate her memory. But the dead woman’s desire is so strong that three years later she returns as a ghost to the land of the living. In the vicinity of her shrine, she finds the scholar of her dream and enters into a passionate union with him. After they pledge their love forever, she haltingly reveals to him that she is actually a ghost, imploring him to exhume her remains so that she may be resurrected. Once he brings her back to life, they elope, and after he passes the highest palace examination, her resurrection and their secret marriage are officially sanctioned by imperial decree.

The play was an immediate success, not only on the stage, but with the reading public. As Lin Yining 林以寧 (1655–still living 1730), a prominent literary woman from Hangzhou, remarked, “When the published edition of the play first came out, there was no man of letters or scholar without a copy on his desk” (*HB*, p. 889). The figure of Du Liniang sparked a rage that one modern Chinese critic has likened to the vogue for young Werther that seized Europe in the late eighteenth century. Like Goethe’s novel, *The Peony Pavilion* became one of the most important promoters of sentiment or love (*qing* 情). In particular, it was recognized that *The Peony Pavilion* had repeatedly found “discerning and sympathetic readers among the fair sex” (*HB*, p. 937). Female readers intensely identified with Du Liniang, the young heroine who died from a...
desire conceived in dream. Just as Du Liniang’s love eventually transcended death in the play, so her affective power helped her transcend her fictional status in the female imagination.

A sizable corpus of materials document the play’s near-cult status among seventeenth-century women. According to one legend, a famous actress specializing in the role of Du Liniang was so overcome with suppressed emotion during a climactic scene that she literally expired on stage. But the bulk of these stories revolve not around issues of performance or spectacle, but around women’s reading of the play and their written responses to it. The earliest account concerns an unmarried girl named Miss Yu (Yu niang 俞娘) who is said to have composed a commentary on the play shortly before her death at the age of seventeen. Still extant are two poems by Tang Xianzu lamenting this girl’s untimely death. A few of this girl’s remarks on the play and an account of the loss of both her original manuscript and a copy of it, are preserved in the notation book (biji 筆記) of Zhang Dafu 張大復, a friend of the playwright’s (HB, pp. 849–50). But the most extensive materials linking talented women with The Peony Pavilion concern Xiaoqing 小青, who in turn generated her own spin-off cult. Like Miss Yu, Xiaoqing was said to have composed a commentary on The Peony Pavilion that perished with her premature death, while all but a small fraction of Xiaoqing’s poetic output was allegedly consigned to flames by the jealous co-wife who goaded her to her death.

6 For accounts of women’s responses to The Peony Pavilion, especially to Du Liniang, see Xu Fuming 徐扶明, Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi 牡丹亭研究資料考釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), and his Yuan Ming Qing xiqu tansuo 元明清戏曲探索 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), pp. 104–18; Dorothy Yin-ye Ko, “Toward a Social History of Women in Seventeenth-Century China” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1989), pp. 121–39, and Ellen Widmer, “Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer,” Late Imperial China 13.1 (June 1992): 126–35.

7 The anecdotes concerning the Hangzhou actress Shang Xiaoling 商小玲, who supposedly died while performing scene 12—“Pursuing the Dream” (’Xun meng’ 尋夢)—are excerpted in Xu Fuming, Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi, pp. 217–18.


With the increased interest in women's literary culture in the seventeenth century, scholars both in China and abroad have begun to explore the unprecedented intensity of the female reaction to *The Peony Pavilion*. Some scholars have argued that Du Liniang appealed to women because she arranged her own ideal marriage and circumvented repressive social constraints to fulfill her fantasies and desires; others have pointed out that the play is unusual in making a woman and her existential dilemma its focus, that is, by placing a woman in the subject position; still others point to the frank depictions of female sexual passion and love.

The problem with explanations that stress only a positive, vicarious identification with the fulfillment of Du Liniang's desires is that in almost every story about women's response to the play, the result is untimely death. Why should a play, a romantic comedy at that, which celebrates the triumph of life over death and the triumph of love over social constraints, induce such a response? It is as though a dark, alternative ending repressed in the play were being compulsively acted out in the imagined lives of its readers. The recurrent cultural myths about the deaths of the readers, commentators, and actresses who come in contact with *The Peony Pavilion* point to an infectious danger emanating from the play—the allure of women dying young and the exquisite pleasure and pain produced in contemplating those deaths. The ultimate proof of the affective power of the play became its ability to trigger a fatal response in women, while to be moved by the pathos these deaths evoked became the true mark of a refined sensibility (male or female).

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11 Xu Fuming, *Yuan Ming Qing xiqu tansuo*, pp. 112-18; Ko, "Toward a Social History of Women," p. 121.
13 Widmer mentions the conservative view that *The Peony Pavilion*'s "provocative treatment of sexual passion" threatened women's lives. See "Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy," p. 126.
14 C. T. Hsia complains that the play's bawdiness is always ignored and that "despite its comedy, *Mu-tan t'ing* has always been read as if the only scenes that matter are those tracing the heroine's essential history." See his "Time and the Human Condition in the Plays of T'ang Hsien-tsu," in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 275-76.
These patterns of response to *The Peony Pavilion* are played out most fully in an edition called *Wu Wushan’s Three Wives’ Combined Commentary on The Peony Pavilion or The Soul’s Return* (*Wu Wushan sanfu heping Mudan ting huanhun ji*). This edition, which was first printed in 1694, almost a century after the play had exploded onto the literary scene, appears to have been rather successful with the reading public, for it was frequently reprinted throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The commentary is framed by a rich body of supplementary materials, including prefaces, colophons, assorted notes, a set of questions and answers, poems, a story, and even a woodblock illustration. Together they chronicle the composition and publication of the commentary, a process that is said to have taken thirty years. These materials, hereafter called “the framing materials,” were deemed sufficiently interesting in

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15 Copies of the Three Wives’ edition are preserved in many Chinese libraries, including the Beijing Library, the Beijing University Library, and the Academy of Sciences Library in Beijing. Five editions I have seen (including the copy in the hands of the anonymous collector and the copy housed in the Tōyō bunka) follow the same format with the same basic pagination; minor variations concern the printing quality, the presence of illustrations and a general table of contents, and the order of the framing materials. Each of the framing materials is independently paginated. The quality of the printing ranges. The two crudest editions (in the Beijing University Library and the Academy of Sciences Library) have covers that read: “Wu Wushan sanfu heping xinjuan xiuxiang Yuming tang Mudan ting” (Wu Wushan三婦合評新繡影園堂牡丹亭). Smaller characters in the corner read: “Mengyuan cangban” (夢園藏板). On “Mengyuan,” see n. 19. The announcement on these covers of “a newly printed, newly illustrated version” implies that these editions were later reprints based on Wu Wushan’s original woodblocks, rather than an edition published by Wu himself, and that the reprints added the illustrations. The illustrations are based on the 1617 Huizhou edition, but only a portion of the total illustrations to the play are included in the Three Wives’ edition. References to a Qianlong period edition with the Mengyuan imprint, and two additional Qing editions under different imprints can be found in Fu Xihua 傅惜華, *Mingdai chuanqi quanmu* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1959), p. 65.

The printing quality of *Sanfu* is good and this is the only edition I have seen without the Huizhou illustrations. This edition also has a copious, handwritten commentary by someone styled “Caoting” (草亭). At least eight men during the Qing used this sobriquet, one of whom can be eliminated as having lived too early. See *Qingren shiming biecheng zihao suoyin* (ed. Yang Yanfu 楊廷福, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), p. 402.

16 Fu Xihua, *Yuandaizaju quanmu* (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1957, pp. 58–59), lists two nineteenth-century editions of *Xixiang ji*, called *Wushan sanfu pingjian zhushi diliu caizishu* (吳山三婦評箋註釋第六才子書). The title’s imitation is clear evidence that the Three Wives’ commentary on *The Peony Pavilion* continued to have commercial appeal over a century later.
their own right to be included in Zhang Chao’s 楊潮 (1650–?) im-
portant late seventeenth-century Collectanea of this Glorious Age (Zhao-
dai congshu 昭代叢書) and to be reprinted in The Glamor Collectanea
(Xiangyan congshu 香艷叢書), a series devoted to women and sexuality
published in 1914. Indeed, taken on their own, these materials form
a complex whole, precisely because everything is not absorbed into
one overarching master narrative arranged in strict chronological
order; rather, the story of the commentary’s creation emerges as a
composite of different voices that have accumulated over time. Dist-
inct strata are identified in the text so that the reader can follow the
process by which the edition grew and accrued meaning.

The fullest single summary of events appears in the preface writ-
ten by the husband named in the commentary’s title, Wu Wushan
(1647-still living 1704), whose given name (ming 名) was Yiyi 儀一
and, alternatively, Ren 人. Wu was a man of letters and a song-lyric
(ci 詞) poet of some repute from Hangzhou, who is best known for
having written a commentary on The Palace of Everlasting Life (Chang-
sheng dian 長生殿), the famous southern drama by his close friend
Hong Sheng 洪昇 (1645–1704).17 In his preface to the Three Wives’
commentary (HB, pp. 890-92), Wu Wushan explains that he was originally betrothed to a girl named Chen Tong 陈同, who died in 1665, before he could even meet her. Depressed by this tragedy, he dreamed of her three nights in a row, an experience he immediately recounted in a long poem sequence called “Visitation from a Goddess” (“Lingfei fu” 靈妃賦). But as soon as he began to circulate drafts of the poem, the dreams abruptly ceased. The girl’s old wet nurse then came to see him, and her physical description of the dead girl matched his dream-image perfectly.

The nurse also related the circumstances surrounding the girl’s death. On her sickbed, the girl would read late into the night, and her mother, fearing for her daughter’s health, ordered all her books confiscated and burnt. Only one book, which the girl had kept hidden inside the bedclothes, survived this holocaust: volume one of The Peony Pavilion. The nurse had smuggled it out and had been hard-drinking, vulgarity-hating, unconventional “wild” scholar type.

In addition to the commentary on Changsheng dian, an annotated edition of Li Panlong’s 李攀龍 (1514-70) anthology (Pingzhu) Táng shí xuān (評註 唐詩選), attributed to Wu Wushan, was published in Shanghai in 1924.

18 The death date, given by Qian Yi, is printed in the margin of Wu’s preface in Sanfu 1:4a.

19 Wu says that he “obtained eighteen matching stanzas from the recurrent dreams; these dreamt lines then became the basis for composing ‘Lingfei fu.’” It is not clear whether he actually dreamt the lines or wrote them upon waking in response to the dream. On the phenomenon of poetic composition in dreams during this period, see Judith T. Zeitlin, Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Classical Tale (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 132-35.

A marginal comment above Wu’s preface, Sanfu 1:1a, mentions that the poem sequence was included in section forty-two of Wu’s collection, Mengyuan bielu 夢園別錄. There is no evidence that this collection is extant or whether it was ever published. Wang Zhuo cites Wu to the effect that Mengyuan bielu totaled 211 juan, 17 of which were song-lyrics. See “Wu Shufu Wushan caotang cihua” 吳舒庵吳山草堂詞話 in Wang Zhuo, Xījiū táng quán jí, wen jí 文集, 10. 20a-b.

The Three Wives’ edition is listed under the “Dream Garden imprint” (“Mengyuan ke” 夢園刻) in certain library catalogues, (e.g., Beijīng tushuguan guji shānběn shūmù 北京圖書館古籍善本書目, ji 集, p. 3059). “Mengyuan” was presumably the name of Wu Wushan’s library.

20 It is a commonplace in stories about a visitation from an unearthly woman that, once one makes the experience public, the goddess will cease to appear. Cf. Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) Liaozhai zhìyi 聊齋誌異, in which non-human beauties—foxes, ghosts, goddesses, immortals—routinely enjoin their human lovers not to reveal their existence to the world, and often forsake them if their instructions are disobeyed.
using it in the meantime to store embroidery patterns. Wu arranges to buy the book from the nurse and discovers that it is densely covered with the girl’s annotations. Many places are crossed out and blotched, and the paper seems to glisten in places “as though there were still traces of tears on it” (HB, p. 891). Impressed by the quality and originality of the commentary, he is plunged into melancholy at the irrevocable loss of the second volume.21

Some time later, Wu marries Tan Ze 諧则 (d. 1674), a poet who “keeps a box of books alongside her mirror-stand” (HB, p. 891).22 When this “second” wife discovers her predecessor’s annotated volume of *The Peony Pavilion*, she is unable to put it down and commits it to memory.23 She, too, mourns the absence of the second volume and grieves that she cannot purchase an exact replica of the entire edition that the dead Chen Tong had used for her annotations. In a note following her husband’s preface, Tan Ze relates that he had arrived home one day from a journey to Shaoxi 藁溪 with a gift for her: a complete copy of such an edition. Overjoyed, she wrote: “I’ve never been able to drink much, but on that day I was so elated that I drank eight or nine cups of wine in a row. Without meaning to, I got very drunk and fell asleep in the late afternoon. When the sun struck the hooks of the bed curtains the next morning, I had not yet awakened. Whenever we would play drinking games with tea and flowers, my husband would always bring this up to tease me” (HB, p. 893).

Wu Wushan’s preface tells us that Tan Ze, emulating Chen Tong’s style, then writes a commentary for the second volume, which her husband judges a perfect twin of the commentary to volume one. With his encouragement, Tan Ze then transcribes both her commentary and Chen Tong’s into the edition procured in Shaoxi (which they call the “Shaoxi edition”) to produce a complete annotated version of the play, and passes it off to her niece as

21 Wu mentions that the wet nurse also gave him a pair of slippers, which his fiancée had sewn as a gift for her future mother-in-law, but these non-literary relics do not arouse his interest.
22 The death date, given by Qian Yi, is printed in the margin of Wu’s preface in *Sanfu* 1:4a.
23 The wording here recalls Chen Tong’s remark that upon obtaining a good edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, she was so taken with it that she “could not bear to let it out of her hands” (HB, p. 892).
her husband’s work on the grounds that “women should not have their names bandied abroad” (HB, p. 891). The hoax inadvertently reaches a much wider audience. Xu Shijun 徐士俊 (1602-81), another Hangzhou connoisseur of The Peony Pavilion, educator of women, and the author of a play about Xiaoqing, accidently discovers the manuscript at the niece’s place; believing the commentary to be by Wu Wushan, he writes a preface for it and publicizes it.

Wu Wushan’s second wife, too, dies young. After more than ten years, Wu remarries a much younger woman named Qian Yi 錢宜 (1671-?), whose literary education he entrusts to a female cousin of his, a skilled poet and painter named Li Shu 李淑. When Qian Yi has been educated to his satisfaction, she in turn becomes acquainted with her two predecessors’ joint commentary on The Peony Pavilion. She falls in love with it, exactly as the second wife had upon discovering the first wife’s commentary. But this third wife is less demure. She objects to Wu’s appropriation of the commentary, pleading with him to allow the edition to be published under the women’s rightful names. She urges him to avoid replicating the famous tragedy of Xiaoqing, whose commentary on The Peony Pavilion had vanished forever after her death. Invoking the spirits of her sister-wives in the underworld, Qian Yi offers to sell her jewelry to pay for the publication. “She was so in earnest,” her husband writes, “that I could not refuse her” (HB, p. 892). Qian Yi then

24 Tan Ze’s note and Wu Wushan’s preface give similar accounts of how Tan Ze wrote the sequel, but only Wu’s preface describes how the complete commentary came to circulate under his name. On the conservative view that women should not seek literary recognition by showing their writing beyond the household, see Dorothy Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue: Education and Women’s Culture,” in Late Imperial China 13.1 (June 1992): 18-22.

25 For Xu’s remarks on Tang Xianzu’s plays, see HB, pp. 666-69; for a song-lyric mourning Du Liniang, “He Tang Ruoshi yun diao Du Liniang” 和湯若士韻弔杜麗娘, see HB, p. 863. On Xu as an advocate of women’s learning, see Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue,” pp. 21-22; as the author of the first play on Xiaoqing (Chunbo ying 春波影), see Widmer, “Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy,” pp. 116, 123-25. Xu was also a supporter of Feng Xian’s 馮嫈 work, one of the Hangzhou women to contribute a colophon to the Three Wives’ edition. For Xu’s inscription on Feng Xian’s poetry collection, see Zhong xiang ci 衆香詞 (1690), comp. Xu Shumin 徐樹敏 and Qian Yue 錢岳 (Shanghai: Dadong shuju, 1934), sheji 射集, 36a.

26 Outside the Three Wives’ edition, the only work I have found by Li Shu is the poem “Ti huamei wei Yao mu shou” 題畫梅為姚母壽 in an anthology of women’s poetry, Xiefang ji 行香集 (1773; Beijing Library) 33.10b-11a. I have calculated Qian Yi’s birth date from a note that mentions she was seven lìng 齡 in 1677 (HB, p. 892).
tentatively adds her own commentary to both volumes, and with her husband’s final approval the Three Wives’ edition is completed.

The commentary’s most impressive accomplishment is to identify the original author of each line in the pastiches (jiuju 集句) of Tang verse that end each scene and are occasionally recited within a scene as well. The name of each Tang poet appears beside the line it identifies; otherwise all comments are printed in the upper margins of the edition. This work stands in metonymic relation to the Three Wives’ collaborative project as a whole: Tan Ze apparently filled in the attributions for three lines Chen Tong had left blank in volume one, just as Qian Yi supplied the author for one line Tan Ze had missed in volume two (HB, p. 896).27

Besides identifying the Tang pastiches, the commentary undertakes little work of a scholarly, technical, or informational nature.28 It rarely glosses allusions, explains specialized terms, or even draws comparisons to other literary works, although of the three wives, Qian Yi is the most prone to address such concerns. The framing materials take pains to establish the superiority of the edition the three wives used, and the commentary often corrects errors or omissions found in “commercial” or “hack” editions (fangke 坊刻 or suben 俗本) of the play. The commentary treats the play exclusively as a text to be read, and does not comment on music, prosody, or performance. In this regard it differs from Wu Wushan’s commentary on Hong Sheng’s Palace of Everlasting Regret. Wu frequently discusses how Palace of Everlasting Regret should be performed on stage and admonishes actors to follow the stage directions in the text exactly as written.29 Wu’s interest in staging is surely related to his creation of an abridged version of the play specifically designed for performance rather than reading.30

27 Chen Tong discusses adding attributions for the pastiches to her copy of the play (HB, p. 892).
28 Most technical discussion occurs in Wu Wushan’s “Questions and Answers” and in other parts of the framing materials, rather than in the commentary per se.
29 See, for example, his comments in Changsheng dian (facsimile of Baiqi caotang cangben 碑銘草堂藏本, the original Kangxi edition published by Hong Sheng; Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1954), scene 37, 2:44b–45b; scene 39, 2:56a.
30 Hong Sheng mentions Wu’s abridgment in the foreword to Changsheng dian. See “Liyan”
In treating the play as a text to be read rather than performed, the Three Wives’ commentary must be at least indirectly indebted to the most widely-read drama commentary of the period, Jin Shengtan’s 金聖嘆 (1608–61) commentary, published in 1658, on the thirteenth-century play, The Story of the Western Wing (Xixiang ji 西廂記). The Three Wives’ commentary shares a basic critical vocabulary not only with Jin’s work on drama, but with his earlier commentary on the vernacular novel The Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan 水滸傳) and the other seventeenth-century commentaries on fiction Jin inspired.31 Like these commentaries, the Three Wives’ commentary treats the text as possessing an overall structural and semantic coherence and devotes much effort to pointing out the individual artistic effects that link smaller units into a meaningful whole. Thus the Three Wives’ commentary repeatedly calls attention to pivotal or key moments in the play, to linking devices, and to instances of foreshadowing, echoing, cross-reflection, and parallel recurrence. Like Jin’s commentary on The Western Wing, the Three Wives’ commentary attempts to show how understanding such compositional features illuminates the play’s artistic development of theme, character, and plot. In contrast to Jin’s commentary, however, the Three Wives’ commentary displays little interest in moral problems raised by the play.32 The main exception occurs in scene 28, when Du Liniang’s ghost first makes love with Liu Mengmei. Qian Yi defends Du Liniang’s “chaste nature” by explaining why Liniang displays melancholy as she approaches her lover. This melancholy, argues Qian Yi, arises from the same sense of morality as the modest bashfulness Liniang exhibits after her resurrection in scene 36, when she says, “An insubstantial ghost may yield to passion;
a woman must pay full attention to the rites.\textsuperscript{33} Qian Yi distinguishes Du Liniang from Cui Yingying, the wanton heroine of \textit{The Western Wing}, and concludes that the playwright of \textit{The Peony Pavilion} invariably talks of love (qing) to discuss ethics (xue).\textsuperscript{34}

The Three Wives’ commentary is most interested in exploring the psychological motivation of the characters and the symbolic resonance of the text’s imagery and language, particularly in the service of such key themes in the play as sentiment (qing), foolishness (chi), and dream.\textsuperscript{35} The commentary is often insightful, but when compared to other seventeenth-century commentaries, it is unexceptional and far less remarkable than the story of its creation.

The Three Wives’ materials pay unusual attention to the history of the physical texts involved in the project. Of course, a standard function of such materials in seventeenth-century publications was to identify the authors, to describe the provenance of the editions and their mode of transmission, and to outline the editorial policies for collecting and printing them. But the Three Wives’ edition takes this to an extreme. What most strongly emerges in these framing materials is that the physical texts of women’s writings are seen as vulnerable and fragile, repeatedly menaced by the disasters of fire, loss, decay, or theft, and prone to a condition of incompleteness and fragmentariness. As the historian Charlotte Furth has shown in her work on the medical image of women in China during the period from 1600 to 1850, females were characterized as the “sickly sex,” particularly vulnerable to blood loss and bodily depletion.\textsuperscript{36} The texts written by women seem to have been afflicted with the same

\textsuperscript{33} Birch, trans., \textit{The Peony Pavilion}, p. 207, modified; Chinese text in \textit{Tang Xianzu xiqu ji}, 1:395.

\textsuperscript{34} Sanfu 1:93b. Lin Yining’s preface to the Three Wives’ edition also censors the immoral conduct of the lovers in \textit{Xixiang ji} (HB, p. 889). Jin’s edition of the play is largely concerned with defending Yingying against the charge of lewdness. The Three Wives’ edition was not influenced by Jin’s interpretation of \textit{Xixiang ji}, however much it may have been influenced by his critical practice.

\textsuperscript{35} Such comments are the main focus of Wang Yongjian, “Lun Wu Wushan sanfu he- pingben,” and Ye Changhai 葉長海, \textit{Zhongguo xiqu xue shigao} 中國戲曲學史稿 (Banqiao, Taiwan: Luotuo chubanshe, 1987), 2:386–89.

feminine propensity towards "wasting" diseases and premature death found in the medical literature, as though the texts met the same fate as the women who wrote them.

In the Three Wives' materials, much of the work of mourning for the dead women is projected or transferred onto the texts. This transference comes out most clearly in the description of the first wife's commentary, which is closely associated with her body: she is said to have kept the commentary with her in the intimate confines of her deathbed, and Wu Wushan finds in it not only the signs of her writing, but the traces of her tears. Almost miraculously, this single volume survives the maternal fire that consumed all the girl's other books, including we are led to believe, the missing volume two. The loss of volume two is significant because it is only there that the play turns from Du Liniang's death towards her resurrection and marriage.37 Structurally, southern drama was divided into two major sections, which here, at least, corresponded to the division into volumes.38 By its very presence, volume one encodes the absence of volume two and so becomes the most poignant representation of its reader's death. It is thus that both Wu Wushan and his second wife Tan Ze grieve so keenly over the incomplete commentary, which becomes doubly precious to them because it is both a talisman of the dead woman and "an index of her absence."39 And it is thus that Tan Ze is so overjoyed when she finally finds a matching edition enabling her to complete the commentary as an act of devotion to the memory of the first wife.

In a study of death, femininity, and aesthetics in European culture, Elisabeth Bronfen analyzes a series of recurrent plots in which a bereaved husband or lover attempts to recover his lost beloved in

37 In scene 32, the first act of volume two, Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei swear eternal vows, and he promises to exhume her body and resurrect her.
38 According to Stephen West, "The drama continued to be divided into major sections and the denouement of part one . . . was usually the point of highest action." See The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 19. Not all editions of The Peony Pavilion were divided into two volumes (juan), however. The 1620 edition in Guben xiqu congkan 古本戲曲叢刊, first series, is divided into three juan, and a number of other late Ming editions were divided into four juan. See Fu Xihua, Mingdai chuanshi quanmu, p. 63.
the person of a second woman who physically resembles the first. He falls in love with the second woman because he sees her as a copy of a vanished and unattainable original. "Because she is used as the object at which the lost woman is refound or resurrected," Bronfen writes, "the second woman's body also functions as the site for a dialogue with the dead, for a preservation and calling forth of the first woman's ghost, and for the articulation of necrophiliac desire."  

Although Bronfen is writing about a different cultural context, her findings offer striking parallels to the Three Wives' edition. In Wu Wushan's case, however, the desired resemblance is discovered not in the physical body of another woman, but in her commentary, which is an imitation in the style of the original rather than a perfect duplication. Thus it is through his second wife's sequel that Wu Wushan finally possesses the longed-for lost volume of his dead fiancée. As he declares: "In their subtle understanding, the comments all seemed to come from a single hand; one could no longer tell which were Chen's and which Tan's" (HB, p. 891). The continuation has perfectly merged with the original. Tan Ze is not a passive dupe of her husband's desire, but an avid and sympathetic accomplice. Nonetheless, as in Bronfen's narratives, the elimination of "all space of difference between model and copy" proves fatal to the second woman, and Tan Ze dies not long thereafter of unspecified causes.

Unlike the husbands in Bronfen's model, however, Wu Wushan marries a third time. His detailed account of Qian Yi's education suggests that he has groomed her so as to remake her into a copy of two now-absent originals and resurrect in her both women he has lost. But in fighting to publish the commentary and take on its

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40 Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 326. Bronfen argues that "the copy [the second woman] may be the first presence of her model." This is especially true in the Three Wives' edition, where Wu Wushan had never even met his fiancée, but had only imagined her in dream after her death.

41 In a marginal note above Wu's preface, Qian Yi reveals that Tong ("the same," "to share") was not the dead fiancée's real name, but was used because Tong shared the same name as her future mother-in-law (Sanfu 1:1a). Like all the women involved with the Three Wives' edition, Tong also had a style name.

42 Bronfen further states: "A repetition which succeeds perfectly may become fatal because the space of difference between model and copy has been eliminated, collapsing both terms into one entity, abolishing the singularity of each separate term"; Over Her Dead Body, p. 325.
editorship, Qian Yi breaks the mold and creates an independent voice. The commentary she eventually writes does not seek to imitate or repeat that of her predecessors and, unlike her predecessors, she clearly differentiates each of her remarks with her name. Although she, too, enters into a dialogue with the dead, she attempts to summon the vanished souls instead of joining them—and she survives.

The first volume of the commentary is not the only text that remains of the shadowy first wife. In the margins of the postface materials, Qian Yi writes that Wu Wushan had obtained some quatrains Chen Tong had dictated on her deathbed to her younger sister. Wu had obtained the poems from the sister’s husband, nine years after Chen Tong’s death and two years after the sister’s death, but he had long since lost track of them. ‘‘One summer’s day in the sixth month of 1694, when I was airing our books,’’ Qian Yi relates, ‘‘I picked up an old sheet of bamboo paper [that had fallen out]. The paper was brittle and cracked, and only the final part was left. Even here there were lacunae, so much was really missing.’’ The disintegration of this text intimates the decay of the dead body of the woman who wrote it so long ago. But like the first volume of the commentary, the fragments are invested with intensity and value, not only because of their miraculous survival but because of the absence they preserve.

The poems are melancholy descriptions of a young girl contemplating her own death. Typical of their morbid sensibility is this quatrain:

Mother and Father, don’t grieve for your daughter.
Mourn the grass on my grave when Sister marries off.
What about your daughter never now to be wed?
Cold rain on her lone coffin beside ancestral tombs.

\((HB, p. 901)\)

Qian Yi explains that she has included these quatrains in the Three Wives’ edition because one of them mentions discussing The Peony Pavilion. She also transcribes one of the damaged poems, indicates
which lines and characters are missing, and then adds two reconstructions filling in the blanks of the original, one reconstruction taken from Tan Ze’s poetry collection and one she composed herself. This attempt to preserve the fragments of a dead woman’s writings and to reconstruct the originals encapsulates in miniature the entire Three Wives’ project. The pertinent trope is bu 補—to supplement rather than to substitute—with the three sequential wives meeting within the compressed time and space of the text.

We find another miraculous recovery of “lost” female texts in the Three Wives’ materials strangely reminiscent of the case just described. Wu Wushan relates that before Tan Ze showed the commentary to her niece, Tan Ze had removed two pages containing her notes and her transcriptions of Chen Tong’s notes, which together documented the “true” joint authorship of the commentary. She had placed these notes in a book for safekeeping. After her death, he tried hard to locate them, but in vain. Three years later, on the seventh day of the seventh month (the lover’s festival celebrating the annual reunion of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden), when airing his books in the summer sun, he unexpectedly came across the missing pages. His joy at the discovery quickly turns to grief, as he contemplates the ink traces, which look still fresh, even though the woman who penned them is long dead. Then thinking also of his first wife’s “lonely grave mound and buried fragrance” (HB, p. 893), he rereads the notes and weeps.

In the case of Chen Tong’s recovered poems, the crumbling fragments mirror the physical decomposition of her corpse and record the passage of time since her death. Here, instead, Tan Ze’s perfectly preserved missing pages cruelly refuse to register their author’s death. This, indeed, is a more common mode in Chinese commemorative literature, especially in the subgenre of poems mourning...
ing a spouse’s death. Although any intimate possession of the dead beloved can trigger the painful onset of memory, posthumous handwriting most keenly evokes the living presence of the dead. The vividness of ink traces that “look still fresh” collapses time and belies their writer’s death, while the animated configuration of brushstrokes preserves the distinctive hand and mind effaced by death.

Most indicative of the extreme danger posed by and to female texts is their frequent destruction by fire. Behind this topos is the belief widespread during this period that literacy and writing posed a grave danger to the health and happiness of talented young women and, in extreme cases, could even be blamed for their deaths. Qian Yi is the only female commentator on The Peony Pavilion who does not, as far as we know, die young. Yet, even she is described by her husband as “thin and sickly and frequently confined to her bed” (HB, p. 900). In this context we can better understand Chen Tong’s mother’s decision to burn her daughter’s books (rather than giving them away or selling them) as an attempt to exorcise the curse of literacy. Indeed, inauspicious texts were sometimes burned to ward off potential evil spirits. Following this logic, the first volume of the commentary survives only because the girl’s wet nurse used it as a temporary repository for embroidery patterns, that is, for an entirely non-literary and quintessentially feminine purpose. Indeed, after its literary value is restored, this volume too succumbs to incineration.

45 Xiaoqing’s collection was given the title, Manuscripts Saved From Burning (Fenyu cao 禁餘草). As Widmer contends, the title “evolved into a conceit, which enabled, rather than deterred, the publication of writings by women.” According to Widmer, thirty-two collections of women’s poetry listed in Hu Wenkai 胡文楷, Lidai junfu zhuzuo kao 歷代婦女著作考 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985) use this title or some variation of it; all postdate Xiaoqing’s. See “Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy,” pp. 132–33.
47 See, for instance, the tale, “Zhang gongshi” in Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi [hu/iao huizhu huiping ben] 聊齋誌異會校會註會評本, ed. Zhang Youhe 張友鶴 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe), 9.1189, in which a daughter-in-law burns the text of an autobiographical opera dreamt and transcribed by her father-in-law because it is “inauspicious.”
48 This parallels the transmission of Xiaoqing’s writings, which, according to one account,
In the “Questions and Answers” section in the framing materials, an interlocutor—who claims to have seen the so-called “Shaoxi” edition with the joint commentary of the first two wives—asks Wu Wushan whether it would be possible to see the original volume of Chen Tong’s commentary. “No,” Wu responds sadly. “In the autumn of 1673, when I was staying with a Mr. Huang, a neighboring fire went unchecked, and the book was completely consumed in the blaze. The volume Chen annotated was reduced to ashes long ago” (HB, p. 899). Then, in a startling confession Wu Wushan reveals that, twenty years later, the “Shaoxi” edition had also perished in a fire:

One winter’s day in 1693, my wife Qian had just finished transcribing a copy of the edition as part of her plan to have woodblocks carved for publication. As evening approached, a light sleet began falling. She lit a candle and warmed some wine to encourage me in collating [the copy with the original]. Late at night, a cold mist pierced our skin and we could faintly hear the sound of bamboo snapping. Qian said it must be snowing heavily now, so we both got up and pushed open the window. The branches in the courtyard were heaped with powder and sparkling like jade. The copy still in my hand, I ran into the wind, shouting like a madman, completely forgetting that sparks from the candle we had left burning in the room would fly onto the [original] manuscript and ignite it. When I turned around, smoke was already billowing out from the eaves; I couldn’t get near it. I ran back and grabbed the wine jar, pouring out its contents and dousing the flames. Then I refilled the brazier and relit the lamp. Wine was flowing in every direction onto the floor. The lacquered desk was badly charred, and the lead from the candlestick had melted, solidifying onto the remaining fragments of paper and ashes and becoming impossible to get off. I then sighed because Chen’s volume had already perished in one disaster and now Tan’s volume had also met with this catastrophe. Could it be that these two ladies did not wish their posthumous writing (shouze) to remain in the human world? Did their spirits bring this about themselves? Or were some survive only because she wrapped her jewelry in them and entrusted the packet to the housekeeper’s daughter. See Widmer, “Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy,” p. 154.

49 HB has miscopied “er chen” 二塵. The correct reading is “hui chen” 灰塵. See Sanfu, “Huanhun ji huowen” 還魂記或問, 2:7a.
50 “Louxia sishi ke” 樣下四十刻. It is not clear exactly what time is meant because the text does not specify which temporal system it is using.
52 The set phrase shouze derives from an injunction from Liji 禮記: “A son cannot read his late father’s writings because they still bear ‘the moisture of his hand’ (shouze); a son cannot
demonic creatures jealous of it? The candle stump was about to burn out, and the snow’s brilliance turned to dawn. My wife and I faced one another in misery for a long time. Then I ordered our servant to dig a hole beside the flowering plum tree at the north-facing (yin 隱) wall, wrap the burnt fragments and ashes in raw silk damask, and bury them there. I still keep the charred desk as a reminder of my transgression. (HB, p. 899)

The fragments of the Shaoxi edition, as relics, are now doubly precious to the survivors because they are all that remain of both the dead wives’ original manuscripts. They are therefore wrapped in a shroud of raw silk damask, and buried in atonement as though a living thing had died.\(^\text{53}\) The location of the “north-facing wall” associates the burial site with femininity and death, both aspects of yin.\(^\text{54}\)

Just as volumes one and two have become literally indistinguishable after cremation, so at last have the identities of the two dead wives completely merged. In the ritual of this joint “second burial,” text symbolically replaces body once and for all.\(^\text{55}\)

Following Wu Wushan’s account of recovering Tan Ze’s missing pages is a lament Qian Yi had written the year before the destruction of the Shaoxi edition. Reading this, we realize that the flowering plum tree is already linked with the two dead wives and is the most important feature of their symbolic burial site:

drink from his late mother’s cups and bowls because they still bear ‘the breath of her mouth’ (kouqi 口氣). See “Yuzao” 玉藻, Liji zhengyi 禮記正義, in Shisanjing zhushu 十三經註疏, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980) 2:1484.

\(^{53}\) Raw silk damask (“sheng juan” 生綢), which was often used as a painting canvas, was undyed and thus presumably white, the traditional color of mourning. However, mourning clothes were customarily made of hemp or sackcloth, not silk.

\(^{54}\) In scene 55, the finale of the play, Du Liniang refers to herself as a “northern bloom” (beizhihua 北枝花): “My bridegroom, sun-warmed “southern branch” / whereon I, northern bloom, may rest” (Birch, trans., p. 339; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu xiquji, 1:500).

\(^{55}\) In yet another report, a young girl with a passion for The Peony Pavilion insisted on her deathbed that her copy of the play be buried along with her. Reprinted in Xu Fuming, Mudan ting ziliao, pp. 215–16.

I am indebted to Elisabeth Bronfen’s adaptation of the concept of “second burial” from cultural anthropology to European images of dead women. As Bronfen writes: “The fully decomposed body is buried a second time, or the decomposing body is laid to rest, clearly severed from the living and firmly replaced by a stable image / sign of that body in the form of funerary sculpture, portraits or gravestones” (Over Her Dead Body, p. 46). In the case of the Three Wives’ edition, the cremated text fragments substitute for the decomposed bodies, and the flowering plum tree becomes the stable image or sign of this equation between text and body.
Thinking back, at that time I was only seven years old. Now fifteen years have passed, and the trees on the graves of my two older sister-wives can be spanned. I wonder what time is like for those on the road to the Yellow Springs [in the underworld] who long for us. . . . This morning the wind and rain sounded so mournfully. Yesterday the green-calyxed plum tree by a corner of the wall came into bloom and I couldn’t help feeling tender towards it, so I poured a libation before the blossoms and called out to the souls of Sister Chen and Sister Tan, asking whether they knew that, standing beside this plum tree, I, too, was broken-hearted like them? (HB, p. 893).

The morning wind and rain have ravaged the delicate plum blossoms, evoking Qian Yi’s involuntary grief for herself and her dead predecessors. In the Chinese poetic code, the flowering plum, which blooms first amid the snow, is associated with the transience of feminine beauty and youth and conjures up images of coldness, loss, and solitude. It was early on personified as a beautiful, refined young woman. When pushed to its furthest extent, “this juxtaposition of idealized feminine beauty with coldness” could not only suggest purity and chastity, as Maureen Robertson observes, but death itself. Pushed even further, the plum blossom could be associated with the ghost or corpse of a beautiful young woman. An extraordinary example is the anonymous Song dynasty “Tale of the Plum-Blossom Consort” (“Mei fei zhuan” 梅妃傳), which was rewritten as a southern drama during the Ming. The Plum-Blossom Consort, the allegorized spirit of the plum tree, loses the emperor’s favor to her rival, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (the “Willow” Consort). After the An Lushan rebellion, the Plum-Blossom Consort’s weeping ghost appears to the emperor in dream. “Covering her tears with her sleeve, like a flower veiled in mist and dew,” she reveals that she met a violent death and laments that her bones are buried beneath a flowering plum tree.

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57 Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine,” pp. 82-83.
58 The tale served as a source for Wu Shimei 吳世美 (fl. ca. 1583), Jinghongji 振鴻記. See Zhuang Yifu 莊一拂, Gudian xiqu cunmu huikao 古典戲曲存目彙考 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), 2:910-11. The Plum-Blossom Consort is also mentioned in Hong Sheng’s Palace of Everlasting Regret.
59 Gudai wenyan duanpian xiaoshuo xuanzhu 古代文言短篇小說選註, ed. Cheng Boquan 成柏
Qian Yi’s libation is particularly meaningful because the flowering plum is a central image in *The Peony Pavilion*, and as Catherine Swatek has suggested, a frequent symbol of Du Liniang herself. A marginal comment in the Three Wives’ commentary ascribed to Chen Tong, singles out the structural importance of this image in the play: “From beginning to end, the linking device (*lianzhui*) in this book is the flowering tree.” In the play, Du Liniang’s body is actually buried beneath the flowering plum tree in accordance with her last wishes. Thus, in burying the charred fragments of the manuscript at the site where she made the libation, Qian Yi links the three wives with Du Liniang exactly as does their combined commentary.

The entire saga of the Three Wives’ edition may be interpreted as symbolically repeating the original drama of *The Peony Pavilion*. If the early deaths of Chen Tong and Tan Ze mirror the first part of the drama, Qian Yi, the third wife, breaks the chain of death and incompleteness surrounding women’s writings on the play: she composes a commentary that spans both volumes, making it whole, and she is responsible for publishing it under the three wives’ rightful names. Each fragment or lost portion of text that is recovered is

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Although Swatek argues that the plum is a shifting signifier and has “more than one frame of reference” in the play, she believes that “in its flowering aspect,” it is “more readily identified with Liniang.” See “Feng Menglong’s *Romantic Dream,*” pp. 154–55. Throughout this essay, I have changed Birch’s and Swatek’s “apricot” back to “flowering plum,” the more conventional rendering for *mei* 梅 (*Prunus mume*).
itself like a ghost—a revenant, something that returns after it is assumed to have perished forever. Qian Yi reclaims these ghostly women’s writings from silence, from oblivion, from literary “death.” She not only preserves the writings of her “sister-wives” in the underworld, but, by extension, she fixes in final published form, as her teacher Li Shu put it, “the many commentaries by women [on *The Peony Pavilion*] . . . that, like flowers in the wind or ripples in the moonlight, have drifted off with the current and vanished without a trace” (*HB*, p. 905). In so doing, she restores what had long been suppressed in the tragic accounts of the female response to the play: the original happy ending sanctioning the resurrection of the dead woman and the public acceptance of this miraculous event.

This public acceptance is voiced in the additional preface and colophons accompanying the Three Wives’ edition, which explicitly lament the loss of earlier women’s commentaries on the play and praise Qian Yi’s rectification of this loss. Gu Si’s 顧似 colophon is representative: “Many readers in the women’s quarters such as Miss Yu and Xiaoqing have had true insight into this book. . . . I regret that none of their commentaries has been transmitted to the world. Now we have the combined commentary of the three wives from the Wu household. . . . Isn’t that this book’s great fortune?” (*HB*, p. 906). Although laudatory prefaces and colophons were customary for any work with literary pretensions during this period, this case is noteworthy because all the supporting inscriptions were written by women who were active in Hangzhou literary circles and connected to the Wu family through kinship, friendship, or neighborhood ties. Three of the five (Lin Yining, Gu Si, and Feng

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63 Although the publication of the Three Wives’ edition provided a definitive female commentary on *The Peony Pavilion*, and thus seems to have “frozen” the myths about women’s responses to the play, a few examples postdate the publication of the Three Wives’ edition. Yang Fuji mentions in a 1776 colophon that he has seen a handwritten commentary on the play by a woman in his village (*HB*, p. 937); Shi Zhenlin 史震林 (1737 jinshi) mentions in *Xi-qing sanji* 西青散記 two girls who have recently succumbed to illness and died after reading *The Peony Pavilion* (*HB*, p. 912).

64 For evidence of women writing prefaces, colophons, and comments for each other’s works, see Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao*. For discussions of women’s literary culture in the Jiangnan region during the seventeenth century, see Ellen Widmer, “The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China” *Late Imperial China* 10.2 (Dec. 1989):
Xian 馮嫈) were members of the prestigious all-female Banana Garden Poetry Club (Jiaoyuan shishe 蕉園詩社), and three (Lin Yining, Feng Xian, Li Shu) mention kinship ties to the Wu family in their inscriptions. A fourth, Hong Zhize 洪之則, Hong Sheng’s widowed daughter, mentions the longstanding intimate friendship between their adjoining households. She recalls having heard as a child Wu Wushan and her father discuss the first two wives’ commentary and regretting that she had been born too late to have met them (HB, p. 906). These inscriptions create a women’s community that bears witness to the history of the edition and affirms its significance. The solitary woman, who reading The Peony Pavilion on her deathbed, sought in the book the soulmate denied her in life, is thereby posthumously integrated into that community.

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1-43; Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue”; and Maureen Robertson, “Changing the Subject: Gender, Representation, and Self-Inscription in Author’s Prefaces and Shi Poetry by Women in Ming-Qing China” (Paper delivered at the Conference on “Women and Literature in Ming-Qing China,” Yale University, June 22-26, 1993). On the importance of kinship in women’s literary culture, see Ko, “Toward a Social History,” pp. 45–69.

65 An editorial note above Lin Yining’s preface (Sanfu 1:2b), most likely by Qian Yi, introduces the five members of the Banana Garden Poetry Club and mentions a group publication of their poetry, Heke jiaoyuan wuzi ji 合刻蕉園五子集. (No work of this title appears in Hu Wenkai, Lidaifunu zhuzuo kao.) This club was sometimes said to have seven members. See Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧, Zhongguo niuxing wenxue shi (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1984), pp. 350–52. The three members of the club who contributed to the Three Wives’ edition are well represented in anthologies of Ming and Qing women’s writings such as Xiefang ji, Qingdaiguixiu shichao, Zhongxiang ci, and Qingdaiguige shiren zhenglue 琴瑟簪花 清代闺閣詩人徵略, comp. Shi Shuyi 施淑儀 (1922; facsimile reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1987), and all appear in Hu Wenkai, Zhongguo gudai funü zhuzuo kao. Lin Yining, who was married to Hong Sheng’s cousin, Qian Zhaoxiu 錢肇修 (b. 1652, jinshi 1696; see Zhang Peiheng, Hong Sheng nianpu, p. 33), says her family was related to the Wu’s by marriage (HB, p. 890). Lin’s literary collection Mozhuang shichao, wenchao, ciyu 墨莊詩鈔, 文鈔, 詞餘 in the Beijing Library has inscriptions and comments by Feng Xian and Chai Jingyi 柒靜, another member of the Banana Garden Poetry Club. The prose section includes a preface to a southern drama Lin wrote on behalf of her husband (1.12), but not her preface to the Three Wives’ edition. Lin is also credited as the playwright of a southern drama, Furong xia 芙蓉峡, of which seven scenes are extant. See Xu Fuming, Yuan Ming Qing xiqu tansuo, pp. 270–71.

66 “Adjoining households” (tongmen 通門) probably also implies a history of intermarriage between the two families. According to one report, Hong Zhize is credited with editing her father’s play; see Zhang Peiheng, Hong Sheng nianpu, p. 19. Hong Zhize’s mother, Huang Hui 黃蕙 (b. 1645, zi Linci 蘭次), was also a poet from Hangzhou and was her husband Hong Sheng’s maternal cousin. For a specimen of her poetry, see Xiefang ji, jiaoyuan wuzi ji. Hong Sheng also wrote a northern drama entitled Si chanjuan 四鍊娟 about four famous female talents, including the poet Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-ca. 1151) and the painter Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262–1319).
This community also bears witness to another important rectification accomplished by the Three Wives’ edition. The story of its publication can be read not only as a restoration of the happy ending of *The Peony Pavilion*, but as a rewriting of the Xiaoqing legend. Unlike Xiaoqing’s husband, who failed to recognize his mate’s talent, Wu Wushan is no boorish dolt. Instead he proudly portrays himself as an educator of his wives and as a nurturer of female talent. The successive wives are not jealous of their predecessor’s talent and do not vent their hostility on her writing; on the contrary, they prize her work, and even struggle to complete and publish it. They express their longing for the woman who died and their regret at not having known her. In this idealistic climate of perfect conjugal harmony, each successive wife becomes the self-styled true reader (*zhiyin 知音*) of the others.

**READERSHIP, PORTRAITS, AND THE GAME OF FICTIONALITY**

From this we realize that a ghost is merely a dream and that a dream is nothing but a ghost.

—Qian Yi, marginal comment to *The Peony Pavilion*, scene 54.67

Thus far, we have taken the saga of the Three Wives’ edition at face value—as a rhetorically rich sequence of texts, but at face value nonetheless. A long postscript appended to the edition complicates our earlier reading of the Three Wives’ materials. Written in the first-person by Qian Yi and entitled ‘‘*The Soul’s Return: A Record*’’ (‘‘*Huanhun ji jishi*’’ 還魂記事), the narrative recounts an experience said to have taken place on the eve of the lunar New Year, 1694, after the Three Wives’ edition has finally been printed. Upon a small offering table in the courtyard, Qian Yi places a bound volume of the new edition and a vase with a sprig of flowering red plum. She then sets up a spirit tablet for the play’s heroine Du Liniang and makes a New Year’s sacrifice to her. That night she has a dream: she and her husband find themselves at a shrine where they come upon a small pavilion surrounded by peonies in bloom. A young woman of dazzling beauty emerges, whom they guess to be Du

67 Scene 54, *Sanfu* 2:84b.
Liniang. But, though Qian Yi presses her to reveal her name, the apparition merely smiles, toying instead with a green plum she has picked. A great wind comes up, the scene is suddenly obscured by a shower of peony petals, and Qian Yi awakens, only to learn that her husband has just had the identical dream (HB, pp. 902–3).

On one level, the conceit of a shared dream epitomizes the couple’s appropriation of general cultural symbols to construct a private family myth; on another level, the shared dream represents the reading experience and the collaborative and creative nature of commentary itself. Finally, the dream narrative poses most cogently the impossibility of distinguishing between fiction and reality, imagination and memory, copy and original—themes that underlie the entire story of the commentary’s creation.

Conditioned by Western notions of mimesis, we are accustomed to think of literature as an imitation of life. The corresponding ancient Chinese view would be rather that literature originates in the human heart as a response to external things. But in the highly literary, oversaturated elite culture of the seventeenth century, literature increasingly imitates or responds primarily to other literary works and represents life as a self-conscious imitation of, or response to, literature. The paradoxical figure of dream, as an experience that is perceived simultaneously as real and not-real, becomes one of the main avenues for exploring the breakdown of the boundary between life and literature apparent in many types of late Ming and early Qing writings. Indeed, such self-conscious play with boundaries may suggest an attempt in this period to develop a new understanding of fiction and drama as a special discourse with its own rules and properties.

Throughout the Three Wives’ framing materials, we find a simulation of certain key moments in The Peony Pavilion. The couple’s shared dream incorporates obvious allusions and recurrent symbols from the original drama: Du Liniang’s initial dream of her lover

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68 See, for instance, Han Yu 韓愈, “Song Meng Dongye xu” 送孟東野序, in Guo Shaoyu 郭紹虞, Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan 中國歷代文論選 (Hong Kong: Zhonghuashuju, 1979), 1:443–44.

69 For a fuller discussion of fictionality in the seventeenth-century, see Zeitlin, Historian of the Strange, pp. 164–81.
also ends abruptly with a shower of flower petals (scene 10), and she is later reunited as a ghost with him at Red Plum Shrine (scene 28).

Most important, Qian Yi’s sacrifice to Du Liniang, which invokes the dream, is no innocent gesture. It is, as any reader of *The Peony Pavilion* would grasp immediately, a deliberate restaging of a crucial scene in the play. In scene 27, Sister Stone (Shi gu 石姑), the nun-custodian of Red Plum Shrine where Du Liniang’s remains are buried, places a sprig of flowering plum in a vase to appease her spirit. When asked by her disciples, ‘‘What is represented by the consecrated vase, and what by the sprig of flowering plum?’’ the nun replies: ‘‘Within the hollow of this vase is held the mortal world, while her poor self just like this fading plum, watered but rootless, still brings a fragrance to our senses.’’ The ritual offering thus explicitly symbolizes Du Liniang’s plight. Returning as a ghost, Du Liniang is indeed moved by the symbolism of the offering and says: ‘‘Unless I leave some trace of my presence, how can I show my appreciation for the devotions of these pious sisters? Let me scatter petals of the plum here on the altar.’’

A woodblock illustration of this scene from an early seventeenth-century edition of the play may have provided visual inspiration for Qian Yi’s sacrifice. (There are no sets on the Chinese stage and the usage of stage properties is limited; hence illustrations would have provided the least schematic and most detailed visual image of the scene.) In this well-known illustration from Zang Maoxun’s 藏懋循 (1550–1620) revised edition of the play, *Linchuan’s Four Dreams* (*Linchuan simeng 臨川四夢*), Du Liniang’s burial shrine frames the scene (fig. 1). In the background sits a statue of a goddess. In the fore-

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72 Yao Dajuin, ‘‘The Pleasure of Reading Drama’’ in Stephen H. West and Wilt Idema, trans. and ed., *The Moon and the Zither: The Story of the Western Wing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 455, reminds us that drama illustrations ‘‘were not intended as representations of stage performance,’’ but had their own conventions.  
73 *Yuming xinci 玉茗新詞* (Wanli edition). See [Guoli Beiping tushuguan] Shanben shumu (國立北平圖書館 善本書目) (Taipei: Guoli zhongyang tushuguan, 1969), p. 293. The Harvard-Yenching Library and the Library of Congress have microfilms of the books listed in this catalogue. This set of editions is reprinted in *Tang Xianzu xiqu ji*. An editorial gloss, most likely by Qian Yi, printed above Chen Tong’s list of editions of the play includes the Zang edition as one of four revisions of the play (*Sanfu* 1:3a). We can probably assume that as a *Peony Pavilion* connoisseur, Qian Yi was familiar with the illustrations in this edition.
Fig. 1: Du Liniang’s ghost scattering sacrificial plum blossoms. Anonymous late-Ming illustration from Zang Maoxun, *Linchuan simeng*, reprinted in *Tang Xianzu xiqu ji*, ed. Qian Nanyang.
ground, Du Liniang, leaning over a small offering table set with various ritual implements, is about to pluck a plum blossom from the branch in the vase. A few blossoms are already strewn on the table, echoing the pattern on her gown, as though the artist were trying to express visually the symbolic association between Du Liniang and the flowering plum in the scene. A bound volume is at the leftmost corner of the table, and on the large altar to the right is another volume, which presumably represents the devotional scriptures Sister Stone mentions in her opening aria, the only books specifically mentioned in this scene. The presence of these books is curious because the text does not mention any book as part of the offering to Du Liniang. Indeed, no book figures in the other famous early seventeenth-century illustration of this scene (fig. 2). If, as I suggest, the Zang illustration provided a visual model for Qian Yi’s restaging of the offering scene, then she has changed the book in the illustration of the play into a representation of the play as a book—her new edition of the play. A seemingly meaningless detail in the illustration thereby acquires a new, personal significance for Qian Yi.

The inspiration for Qian Yi’s recreation of the offering scene may also have come from another source, with which she and her husband were definitely familiar: Hong Sheng’s Palace of Everlasting Regret (completed by 1688), for which Wu Wushan wrote the commentary, pays explicit homage to the offering scene in The Peony Pavilion. In scene 39, “Private Sacrifice” (“Si ji” 私祭), two nuns, formerly palace maids, make a sacrificial offering of peonies to the spirit tablet of their former mistress, the dead imperial consort Yang Guifei. Wu Wushan comments on the allusion to Tang Xianzu’s play: “[The arias here] employ the same tune as the sacrifice to Du

74 These 1617 illustrations were by the famous Huang X universars of Huizhou. See Zhou Wu 周巍, Huipai banhua shi lun ji 繡派版畫史論集 (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1984), p. 69. A complete set of these illustrations appears in Mudan ting huanhun ji (preface 1617). See [Guoli Beiping tushuguan] Shanben shumu, p. 293. The ‘newly printed, newly illustrated’ versions of the ‘Three Wives’ commentary reprint a number of these illustrations, but do not include the illustration for scene 17; see n. 15.

75 According to Xu Shuofang, the play was begun prior to 1679 and completed by 1688. See his edition of Changsheng dian, p. 4. According to Mao Xiaotong, Wu Wushan wrote a commentary for the play when it first came out (HB, p. 886). If so, Wu would have completed his commentary on Changsheng dian before the publication of the Three Wives’ edition.
Fig. 2: Du Liniang’s ghost scattering sacrificial plum blossoms. In the Nuanhong shi暖紅室 edition of Yuming tang huanhun ji玉茗堂還魂記, based on a 1617 illustration carved by the Huangs of Anhui.
Liniang in The Peony Pavilion, but the offering of fading plum blossoms has been changed to an offering of peonies. Thus, although this scene duplicates (xiangfan 相犯) that scene, not one word or meaning is exactly alike (leitong 雷同)". This last remark could just as easily apply to Qian Yi’s sacrifice to Du Liniang and the ensuing shared dream, which “duplicate” scenes from the original play, but whose new ritual context insures that “not one word or meaning is exactly alike.”

In late Imperial China, dramas were frequently performed to celebrate ritual festivities, which could be communal, such as a religious holiday, or private, such as a birthday celebration. On such occasions, a single scene from a play (zhezi xi 折子戲) often thematically related to the occasion, might be performed at the patron’s request. By Kangxi times, private performances of single scene excerpts from Tang Xianzu’s dramatic corpus were an established fashion. The Peony Pavilion was adapted to the refined musical style of kunqu 崑曲, which would have helped further to blur the boundary between the household ceremony Qian Yi performed and the dramatic scene she re-enacted. According to William Dolby, “kunqu drama was particularly suited to the small-scale, intimate performances” that private troupes customarily held in the court.

76 Changsheng dian, scene 39, 2:56a. The Peony Pavilion gives the tune title “Suonan ge” 鑲南歌, whereas The Palace of Everlasting Regret gives “Suonan zhi” 鑲南枝, but from the meter, these are clearly the same tune pattern.


yard or hall of a household.\textsuperscript{80} Performed in such a setting, a scene from \textit{The Peony Pavilion} would have been seamlessly integrated into domestic life—just as Qian Yi’s New Year’s offering would have a stagy quality.

In her courtyard performance of the sacrifice, Qian Yi is thus employing the sprig of flowering plum as both a ritual and a theatrical prop.\textsuperscript{81} The flowering plum also functions as a prop in something akin to the philosopher Kendall Walton’s more specialized sense, as a stimulus to and coordinator of the imagination in collective games of make-believe. According to Walton, props are often “prompters”—things that cause us to imagine things—and “objects of imagining”—things that are themselves imagined.\textsuperscript{82} Designated objects play an important role, through repetition, in setting up such games, and because the game proceeds according to rules invented or accepted by the participants, it is fundamentally a social activity involving the imagination.

Throughout the framing materials, the two dead wives and their commentaries are linked with Du Liniang through the recurrent iconography of the flowering plum. In 1692 Qian Yi made a libation to her dead “sister-wives” beside a flowering plum tree in their courtyard, and in the following year, the ashes of the original joint commentary were buried beneath a plum tree (possibly the same tree). These sentimental gestures play off the cultural meanings associating the plum blossom with the tragic brevity of feminine youth and beauty and, by extension, with the death of beautiful young women. This association was in part what must have prompted Du Liniang’s request to be buried beneath the flowering plum in the first place.\textsuperscript{83} In imitation of Du Liniang, Qian Yi and Wu Wushan

\textsuperscript{80} William Dolby, \textit{History of Chinese Drama} (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p. 103. A red carpet was customarily used to transform such ordinary settings into a theatrical space. Although Dolby is specifically discussing Ming performance technique here, his observations also apply to early Qing performances of kunqu. See also Wang Anqi 王安祈, \textit{Mingdai chuanqi zhi juchang ji qi yishu} 明代傳奇之劇場及其藝術 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1986), pp. 157–75.

\textsuperscript{81} Although stage properties were used sparingly in the Chinese theater, many objects were still used or carried in performances of \textit{chuanqi} drama. See Dolby, \textit{A History of Chinese Drama}, p. 103, and Wang Anqi, \textit{Mingdai chuanqi}, pp. 341–57.


\textsuperscript{83} In the vernacular story that supplied Tang Xianzu with the plot for \textit{The Peony Pavilion}, (“Du Liniang muse huanhun” 杜麗娘慕色還魂), Du Lintang instantly thinks of her death
use the flowering plum to mark the imaginary site of the two wives’
common grave, an interpretation Sister Stone suggests in scene 33:
"I’d say the plum tree before the tomb / was an uninscribed tablet
to her." Qian Yi’s offering in 1694 signals the last stage in a series
of actions that cumulatively appropriate and recontextualize the
flowering plum, transforming it into a prop with a private history
and meaning.

The southern drama frequently introduces “some physical object
which in the course of the action assumes an emblematic character
and significance.” Catherine Swatek identifies two such objects in
The Peony Pavilion: the flowering plum and the portrait. The portrait
also turns out to play an important role in Qian Yi’s narrative.
Upon corroborating their shared dream, Wu Wushan persuades his
wife to paint a likeness of Du Liniang as she appeared to them, “for
by manifesting herself like this, don’t you suppose she wanted her
appearance to be transmitted to the human world?” (HB, p. 902).
A wood-block rendition of Qian Yi’s portrait of Du Liniang finger-
ing a green plum appears accordingly in the Three Wives’ edition
(fig. 3). This sequence of events is also based on a famous moment
in The Peony Pavilion (scene 14), in which Du Liniang, before she
dies, paints a portrait of herself holding a sprig of green plum as a
legacy to the world. As Richard Vinograd has reminded us, in this
scene Du Liniang means her self-portrait to preserve her likeness
not as it appears in the mirror, but as it appeared in her dream (fig.
4).

When Qian Yi has completed the portrait, she composes a hepta-
syllabic quatrain to commemorate the occasion, and her husband,
in turn, matches the quatrain with a poem of his own, using the
identical meter and rhyme. This, too, is a re-enactment of a famous

when she sees the flowering plum tree in the garden and requests to be buried beneath it on
For one redaction of the story, see Xu Fuming, Mudan ting yanjiu kaoshi, pp. 12–19.
84 Birch, trans., The Peony Pavilion, p. 195; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu xiqu ji 1:385.
86 HB does not reproduce this portrait. The portrait is also missing from my photocopy of
the Tōyō Bunka edition.
87 Richard Vinograd, Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600–1900 (Cambridge: Cam-
Fig. 3: Qian Yi’s dream portrait of Du Liniang. In *Sanfu*.
Fig. 4: Du Liniang painting her self-portrait. In the Nuanhong shi edition of Yu- ming tang huanhun ji, based on a 1617 illustration carved by the Huangs of Anhui.
episode in the play: after completing her dream-portrait, Du Liniang inscribes the painting with a quatrain (scene 14); and when her lover discovers the portrait after her death, he responds with a matching quatrain (scene 26). Not surprisingly, the poems composed by Qian Yi and her husband faithfully match the rhymes and meter of this original pair of quatrains. If fiction is a collective game of make-believe, the matching of poems in the original text, like the restaging of scenes in the play, or the composition of a commentary, enables readers to participate in that game on their own terms. In fact, Qian Yi concludes by inviting all like-minded parties to join in the game by trying their own hand at matching the verse. In immediate response, a matching quatrain by Qian Yi’s teacher, Li Shu, appears in the margin (HB, p. 905).  

Likewise, the notion of the couple’s sharing a dream reworks the original play. For it is not only Du Liniang who dreams of her lover, but her lover who first dreams of her under a flowering plum tree (scene 2)—hence his adoption of the personal name Liu Mengmei (Liu Dreaming-of-Plum 柳夢梅). Indeed, in recognition of this theme’s importance, the late Ming dramatist Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553–1610) gave his revision of The Peony Pavilion the title, The Shared Dream Story (Tongmeng ji 同夢記). And when Zhang Chao excerpted Qian Yi’s dream narrative and published it in his anthology The Magician’s New Records (Yu Chu xinzhi 娵初新志), it appeared under the title “A Story of a Shared Dream” (“Ji tongmeng” 記同夢). A marginal note, most likely by Qian Yi, mentions Shen Jing’s

88 Li Shu’s poem is placed after her colophon in HB, but in the margin of the original dream narrative in Sanfu 2:2a. Other readers also contributed quatrains, suggesting the game’s appeal up through the twentieth century. These include Caoting, the unidentified commentator on Sanfu, Zou Qiangyao 鄭強邀, the wife of the drama critic Wu Mei 吳梅 (1884–1939; see his copy of the Three Wives’ edition in the Beijing Library); and an example in Xu Fuming, Mudan ting yanju ziliao kaoshi, p. 221. Other writers before Qian Yi to match Du Liniang’s quatrain include Wu Qi 吳淇, a mid-seventeenth-century woman poet from Suzhou. See Widmer, “Xiaoqing’s Legacy,” p. 135.

89 Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei dream of one another, but do not have the same dream.


91 Since the narrative is titled “Huanhunjijishi” in the Three Wives’ edition, I assume that it was Zhang Chao, in his editorial capacity, who gave it the new title. See Yu Chu xinzhi (author’s 1700 colophon to expanded edition; Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1985), 15.271.
revision of the play, but under an alternative title, *Matching Dreams* (*Hemeng* 合夢). In fact, Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) revision of *The Peony Pavilion*, also mentioned in Qian Yi’s note, adds a scene following Du Linliang’s resurrection actually entitled “Husband and Wife Match Dreams” (“Fuqi hemeng” 夫妻合夢). The term *hemeng* is especially apt for Qian Yi’s dream narrative, in which husband and wife not only share a dream with one another, but “match” their dream to the original play.

The multiplication of copies and coincidences helps account for our increasing uncertainty about the commentary’s “real” origin. Marjorie Garber has linked the uncanniness aroused by a ghostly apparition to “its manifestation as a sign of potential proliferation or plurality and to its acknowledgment of the loss of the original—indeed, to the loss of the certainty of the concept of origin.” Given the reciprocity between body and text in the Three Wives’ materials, Garber’s idea of a ghost as “a copy, somehow both nominally identical to and numinously different from a vanished or unavailable original” applies equally to the dead wives and their writings. The ghostly nature of a copy is also apparent in the image of a portrait, particularly a posthumous one.

Anxiety about multiple copies and the loss of the original is raised in conjunction with portraits and ghosts within *The Peony Pavilion* itself. In scene 14, Du Linliang paints her self-portrait so that a copy of her beauty (“her likeness”) would survive on earth after her death; it thus becomes her effigy, her negative, her “ghost.” Liu Mengmei falls in love with the portrait. Imploring it to come to life in scene 28, he speaks of making a copy of it in case the original is

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92 San fu 1:3a. The note is glossing Chen Tong’s list of revisions of the play.
93 Feng Menglong’s revision is entitled *Fengliu meng* 墨流夢. See Mohan zhai dingben chuanqi 墨憨齋定本傳奇 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1960) vol. 3, scene 26a, 2.29a. The scene is a reworking of scene 36 in the original play. On Feng’s revision, see Swatek, “Feng Menglong’s Romantic Dream.”
95 Ibid., p. 16.
96 Vinograd notes “the element of the uncanny” attached to Chinese posthumous images of the dead, which were used as effigies for ritual or personal remembrance. These functions “may lie behind one standard designation of portraiture as *chuan shen*, that which ‘transmits the spirit’ of the portrayed, with the implication that the portrait is a stand-in or vehicle for harboring the spirit of the subject”; see *Boundaries of the Self*, pp. 10–11.
damaged: "But lest the wind tear her portrait, I should seek out some eminent painter to make a copy." Indeed, the illustration accompanying this scene from the Zang edition of the play depicts him gazing intently at the portrait, brush in hand (fig. 5). In the finale of the play (scene 55), when Du Liniang’s skeptical father is confronted with the apparition of his dead daughter, now restored to flesh and blood, he refuses to believe in her miraculous resurrection. Arguing that she is a "a ghost," "a duplicate," "a likeness," he accuses her of being "a false impersonation" or "imposter." Only after Du Liniang passes a series of tests (casting a shadow and showing her reflection in a mirror) and is decreed to be the "original" by no less an authority than the emperor himself, is her father forced to acknowledge her as real.

The tests that Du Liniang must undergo suggest strong parallels between the notion of a ghost as a false copy that is merely shadow or reflection (ying 影) and other important types of illusion in the play. A comment attributed to Chen Tong defines painting as "form without shadow or reflection" just as dream is "shadow or reflection without form," but asserts that painting is even more an illusion than dream.

When Qian Yi painted Du Liniang’s portrait as it appeared in her dream, she was copying Du Liniang’s act of painting her own portrait in the play. It turns out that Qian Yi’s dream portrait of Du Liniang is an almost identical copy of a portrait of Yingying, the heroine of The Western Wing, in Mao Qiling’s edition of that play (fig. 6). Mao’s edition was certainly well known to Qian Yi and her husband: Wu Wushan mentions in his "Questions and Answers" that the drama criticism he most admired was Mao’s commentary on The Western Wing (HB, p. 895).  

97 Birch, trans., p. 158; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu xiqu ji 1:357.
98 Birch, trans., p. 328; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu xiqu ji 1:493.
99 Scene 26, Sanfu 1:83a-b.
100 For Mao Qiling’s biography and his support for women writers and painters, see Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1644–1912), ed. Arthur Hummel (1943, 1944; reprint, Taipei: Literature House, 1964), pp. 563–65. Mao’s annotated edition is entitled Mao Xihe lunding Xixiang ji 毛西河論定西廂記 (Kangxi edition in the Beijing Library). Wu Wushan was probably personally acquainted with Mao, who wrote a preface for The Palace of Everlasting Regret after seeing Hong Sheng during a 1695 sojourn in Hangzhou. For Mao’s preface to Changsheng dian, see Changsheng dian, ed. Xu Shuofang, pp. 264–65.
Fig. 5: Liu Mengmei inscribing Du Liniang’s self-portrait. Anonymous late-Ming illustration from Zang Maoxun, *Linchuan simeng*, reprinted in *Teng Xianzu xiqu ji*, ed. Qian Nanyang.
Fig. 6: Mao Qiling's portrait of Yingying from the Xie hua xi xiang ji (1676 edition in the Beijing Library).
The only visual difference between the two portraits involves the choice of prop. In keeping with the dream plot, Du Liniang is shown fingering a green plum in her raised hand; in the Mao edition, Yingying makes the same gesture, but is toying with her sash instead.\textsuperscript{101} Although Qian Yi’s portrait is entitled “an informal likeness” (“Du Liniang xiaozhao” 杜麗娘小照) rather than “a posthumous likeness” (“Cui niang yizhao” 崔娘遺照), the seal-script style calligraphy of the four-character titles and the presence of two authenticating seals is the same.\textsuperscript{102} However, Yingying’s likeness bears an additional inscription that reads: “A copy (mōben 墓本) [of a painting] by Chen Juzhong 陳居中, Painter-in-Attendance at the Song Imperial Painting Academy, recopied (chōnglín 重臨) by Xihe 西河, the monk Kai 開 [i.e., Mao Qiling].”\textsuperscript{103} Thus Qian Yi’s “informal likeness” of Du Liniang is really a copy of Mao’s copy of a portrait of Yingying supposedly copied by the Song painter Chen Juzhong.

As the heroines of the two most celebrated romantic comedies, Yingying and Du Liniang were frequently paired in Chinese critical discourse. As each other’s exact counterpart, each became defined in terms of the other.\textsuperscript{104} Yao Dajuin demonstrates that late Ming editions of The Western Wing commonly printed wood-block portraits of Yingying, a practice that Mao Qiling evidently carried into the

\textsuperscript{101} According to Yao Dajuin, the sashes on Yingying’s robe “are always seen as if they were blown by the wind, a standard convention in drawings of Chinese beauties”; see “The Pleasure of Reading Drama,” p. 457. Of the four portraits of Yingying (ranging from 1610 to 1676) included in Yao’s essay, three show her playing with her sash and one shows her holding a flowering sprig.

\textsuperscript{102} The top seal on Du Liniang’s likeness reads “Qian Yi”；the bottom one reads “Wife of the Wu family, style name Zaizhong.” The top seal on Yingying’s likeness reads: “Seal of Mao Sheng”; the bottom one reads: “Qiling.” On Mao’s having changed his name at one time to Sheng, see Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period, p. 563. Mao’s edition of Xixiang ji is listed under the name Mao Sheng in both Fu Xihua, Yuandai zajiu quanmu, p. 57 and Beijing tushuguan guji shanben shumu, ji, pp. 3017–18.

\textsuperscript{103} A colophon by Mao following the portrait accepts the attribution to Chen Juzhong and describes how the portrait came to be copied and printed; see Mao Xihe lunding Xixiangji, juan 1 (unpaginated). My interpretation of “Kai” as Mao Qiling’s religious name is tentative. On Mao’s stint as a monk, see Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period, p. 563.

\textsuperscript{104} Thus Lin Yining’s preface to the Three Wives’ edition deflects criticism of The Peony Pavilion by attacking The Western Wing (HB, p. 889). For further comparisons of the two plays, see Xu Fuming, Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi, pp. 105–8.
Qing. Late Ming editions of The Peony Pavilion likewise included portraits of that play's heroine, probably following The Western Wing's example. An untitled full-page portrait of Du Liniang appears at the beginning of Mao Ying’s 茉英 annotated edition of the play, whose preface is dated 1620. Poem sequences on portraits of both dramatic heroines are juxtaposed in the posthumous poetry collection of Ye Xiaoluan 葉小鸞 (1617–32), yet another talented female reader of The Peony Pavilion to die on the eve of her marriage. The poet’s father, Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁 (1589–1648), explains that “her editions of The Western Wing and The Peony Pavilion had portraits of Yingying and Du Liniang respectively as frontpieces. These six quatrains were inscribed in her books” (HB, pp. 864–65). Thus there were clear precedents for Qian Yi’s including a portrait of Du Liniang in her edition of the play.

Feng Xian’s colophon and inscription on the Three Wives’ portrait of Du Liniang call into question Qian Yi’s account of the dream portrait’s genesis. Feng enjoyed a reputation both as painter and poet, and was cousin-in-law to the three wives. She clearly knew that Qian Yi had copied the Mao edition portrait of Yingying, although she acknowledges the copying in a roundabout way and never refers explicitly to Mao Qiling by name. Her colophon (HB, p. 903), dated 1695, a year after the initial publication of the edition, dwells upon the main difference between the two likenesses: Du Liniang’s fingering of the plum, the detail that attests to the image’s origin in Qian Yi’s dream and identifies the figure as Du

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106 A facsimile of Mao Ying pidian Mudan ting 茉映批點牡丹亭, the so-called “red ink” (zhuomò 朱墨) edition, is reprinted in Guben xiqu congkan 古本戲曲叢刊 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, first series, 1954). The portrait is the last in the series of illustrations. See also Xu Fuming, Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi, p. 337, which describes the illustrations, and Fu Xihua, Zhongguo gudian wenxue banhua xuanji 中國古典文學版畫選集 2:614, no. 426, which describes and reproduces a few of them.
107 Originally printed in Wumeng tang quanji 午夢堂全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai zazhi gongsi, 1936) 1:12–13. The first poem on Yingying is called “You ti meiren yizhao” 又題美人遺照; the second on Du Liniang is entitled “You ji qian yun” 又題前韻. On Ye Shaoluan and her resemblance to Xiaoqing and others, see Ko, “Toward a Social History,” pp. 134–39. Xu Fuming speculates that the portrait of Du Liniang in the “red-ink” edition might have been the one in Ye Xiaoluan’s edition; see Mudan ting yanjiu ziliao kaoshi, p. 221.
Liniang, not Yingying. According to Feng, this detail was copied from a set of paintings in the Wu family’s possession that depicted the late Tang master of boudoir poetry, Han Wo 韓偓. She claims these paintings are superior to ‘‘what the world has passed down as a copy of a painting of Cui the Beautiful [i.e., Yingying] by Chen Juzhong of the Song Imperial Painting Academy.’’ In Feng’s estimation, Qian Yi ‘‘got Du Liniang’s bearing and expression from the dream encounter, but the sideways pose, sober demeanor, and brushstroke style share [Chen] Juzhong’s methods; as for fingering the plum, she derived that from the first of the Han Wo scrolls.’’ But Feng lauds this derivativeness as a virtue, since it follows the widespread precept that ‘‘every brushstroke have its origin.’’

Feng’s inscription acknowledges the influence of Yingying’s portrait, but declares that the resemblance is due to Du Liniang’s really having resembled Yingying when she appeared in Qian Yi’s dream: ‘‘Du Liniang painted her own springtime visage when her looks had already declined. That is why when she manifested herself in dream, she resembled Yingying grown haggard on account of her lover.’’

In this light, the passage in which Wu Wushan urged his wife to paint Du Liniang’s portrait becomes ambiguous: ‘‘You have studied You Qiu’s 尤求 line-drawing technique from Li Shu; why not paint her based on your memory and imagination (xiangxiang 想像)?’’ (HB, p. 902). From the context, a reader would assume that he means her memory of their dream or her imagination as inspired by their dream. The reference to You Qiu hints that he means otherwise, but only becomes intelligible after Feng Xian’s colophon reveals that You Qiu is the obscure painter of the Han Wo painting in the family’s possession. Wu Wushan is thus obliquely instructing his wife to model Du Liniang on You Qiu’s painting, rather than on any spontaneous memory or imaginative reconstruction of their dream.

Wu Wushan does not mention the Mao edition portrait of Ying-

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109 To provide a female genealogy for Qian Yi’s painting, Feng cites Guan Daosheng, the wife of Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫, as an exemplar of this precept.

110 Sanfu 1, unpaginated. HB omits the inscription. Feng here calls Yingying “Cui niang,” the appellation used in the Mao portrait.
ying at all, however, even though it must have been far more influential than You Qiu’s painting as a visual model. Even if we agree with Yao Dajuin, who argues that props and gestures were more important than facial individuality in establishing a figure’s identity in such portraits, Wu Wushan and Feng Xian’s emphasis on You Qiu’s painting as a model seems excessive. It is possible that the resemblance to the Mao edition portrait of Yingying would have been so obvious to a wide audience as to need no mention, or that, if the image were less familiar, sly references to it were designed to amuse a small circle of readers in the know. Whatever the case, the provenance of the dream portrait becomes the basis for yet another game. The viewer’s realization that Du Liniang’s image is actually a copy of the likeness of another theatrical heroine intensifies the dream portrait’s status as illusion. Conversely, Yingying’s “posthumous likeness”—the result of her conversion over the centuries from a fictional character into a historical figure who had lived and died—may have anticipated Du Liniang’s would-be transformation in the eyes of her female readers.

The problematic status of fictional characters is raised by Wu Wushan, who challenges his wife when she makes the offering to Du Liniang and sets the game into motion. “What a great ‘fool’ (chi 瘡) you are!” he says with a snort of laughter. “According to Tang Xianzu’s own writ, Du Liniang is a fictitious name. If there’s no such person, on what grounds are you making an offering to her?” “Even so,” she retorts, “what the ‘breath of the Great Clod’ lodges in becomes powerful—so spirits may possess a mere rock,

111 Yao Dajuin argues that the identity or individuality of these portraits is established not by “facial distinction,” but by “clothing, gestures, and setting,” which “act as props to inform the viewer of the sitter’s social status and personality. The inscription or caption is perhaps the most potent prop” (“The Pleasures of Reading Drama,” p. 454).

112 From the Song dynasty on, Yuan Zhen’s 元稹 Yingying zhuàn 鶯鶯傳, the Tang tale upon which Xixiang ji was based, was commonly accepted as Yuan’s autobiography. Yingying was therefore treated in many sources as an actual historical figure, rather than a fictional heroine. Lin Yining’s preface to the Three Wives’ edition is representative of this view: “In the past Yuan Zhen wished to have illicit relations with his cousin but was unsuccessful, and so he wrote ‘Meeting with an Immortal’ [the alternative title of ‘Yingying zhuàn’] to cover up the affair” (HB, p. 889). For a dissenting view, see Mao Qiling’s vehement defense of Yingying’s fictionality in his Mao Xihe lunding Xixiang ji 1.6b.
and divinities inhabit a mere tree. The goddess in Qu Yuan’s song and the nymph in Song Yu’s rhapsody might well have been fictitious at first, but afterwards many shrines were dedicated to them all the same. How can you and I determine whether Du Liniang exists or not?” (HB, p. 902).

Qian Yi is advancing two related arguments here. First, she maintains that, if even inanimate objects can be suffused with divine power, the same should be true of fictional characters. Second, she argues that once a fictional character has been created by an author, it may actually take on an independent existence in the lives of his readers.\(^\text{113}\) By extension, an author retains no exclusive rights over his characters after they have entered the public domain, for readers have the freedom to appropriate his work and interpret it as they please, regardless of the author’s intentions.

Despite Wu Wushan’s show of objection to Qian Yi’s assertion of the reader’s freedom, he had actually intimated a similar view in his initial praise of his dead fiancée’s commentary: that “given its marvelous understanding, the commentary could stand as a book in its own right and did not necessarily express what the author himself had in mind” (HB, p. 891).\(^\text{114}\) It is this scope for imaginative appropriation that make reading and composing a commentary such potentially creative experiences. And it is thus that Jin Shengtan can claim in his commentary on *The Western Wing* that the play “is not the creation of a single author by the name of Wang Shifu 王實父. As long as I read it with a tranquil mind and concentrated energies, then it is I who have just now created it. I observe with my own eyes that each word and each line are exactly what I in my own mind would have wished to write, and so *The Western Wing* was written to order.”\(^\text{115}\)

In his second preface to *The Western Wing*, Jin Shengtan character-

\(^{\text{113}}\) Qian Yi and Wu Wushan were probably unaware that Tang Xianzu had borrowed the character Du Liniang from the vernacular story “Du Liniang muse huanhun.” See n. 83.

\(^{\text{114}}\) In contrast, Hong Sheng praises Wu Wushan’s commentary to *Changsheng dian* for intuiting the playwright’s real, hidden meaning. See “Liyan,” in *Changsheng dian*, ed. Xu Shuofang, p. 2.

izes the commentator’s role as that of friend and instructor to later readers, and commentary as a posthumous gift the critic bestows upon future generations in lieu of his bodily presence.\(^{116}\) With his usual brilliance and bravado, Jin underscores the fundamentally social conception of reading behind the Chinese practice of commentary. As he describes it:

> When you come across something delightful while reading, you make someone listen to it. Or, if while reading, you find something doubtful, someone will read it and make you listen. And so you both read together and listen to one another. Perhaps if you are sitting together without reading, then you are laughing together about what you have read. I would like to be able to be a friend to sit, read, listen, and laugh together with you.\(^{117}\)

Like the theater, which demands an audience of fellow spectators, so do books require the companionship of fellow readers. This may be one reason why the image of a solitary woman reading *The Peony Pavilion* in isolation invokes such pathos. Commentary simulates the social experience of reading by compensating for a missing companion or audience. The figure of the shared dream embodies this notion of reading as a collective endeavor, with commentary represented as both the fruit of that reading and as a substitute for it.

Gu Si’s colophon to the Three Wives’ edition offers competing characterizations of the author’s role—or lack thereof—in the subsequent interpretation of and control over his literary creations. Like Lin Yining, who, in a preface praising the commentary, speaks of resurrecting Tang Xianzu from the dead, Gu Si, too, chooses to employ a ghostly rhetoric.\(^{118}\) Attempting to reconcile the opposing views in Qian Yi and her husband’s debate, she suggests that Du Liniang as she appeared in the couple’s dream must have been “a later incarnation of the author” (*HB*, p. 906). But this solution to

\(^{116}\) He imagines transforming his dead body into oil or wax to serve as light for future readers. Throughout this preface, the commentator portrayed by Jin sounds suspiciously like a ghost.

\(^{117}\) *Guanhua tang diliu caizishu Xixiang ji*, p. 6.

\(^{118}\) Lin Yining writes: “Even if Master Yuming [Tang Xianzu] were raised from the underworld, he would be incapable of writing something that reaches this level [of understanding].” A marginal comment above Lin’s preface (*Sanfu* 1:2a) praises her wording here for being appropriately uncanny.
the ontological conundrum of fictional characters raises more problems than it solves. After his death, Tang Xianzu was quickly appropriated as a figure of the dramatic imagination. By 1629 he had been resurrected alongside the leading characters from *The Peony Pavilion* in a southern drama about Xiaoqing.¹¹⁹ Xiaoqing, as Ellen Widmer has argued, exemplifies a figure whose ontological status—real or fictional—could not be adjudicated even in her own time.¹²⁰ Mingling together the historical playwright, his fictional creations, and an indeterminate reader of his work as dramatis personae in a single play must have had the effect of blurring the ontological distinctions among them. In some sense, death levels the distinctions between fictional and historical characters because, after they die, all real figures become imaginary to those who will never know them. Elsewhere in her colophon, Gu Si jettisons the author’s role altogether, attributing instead a numinous presence directly to a work, with commentary the result of the reader’s sympathetic response to the ghostly power of a text: “If a literary text possesses a spirit sufficient to be passed down to posterity, then those who come afterwards will have a spiritual meeting with it” (*HB*, p. 906).

In omitting the author from this last formulation, Gu Si comes close to articulating Qian Yi’s desire for a relationship between readers and fictional characters unmediated by the author. Wu Wushan calls Qian Yi a “fool” for making an offering to Du Liniang as though she could exist independently of the play. But his derision is double-edged. The late Ming ideal of *chi* or “foolishness” is one of the most important attributes of the lovers in *The Peony Pavilion* and the prerequisite for love that defies death.¹²¹ As a comment attri-

¹¹⁹ See Widmer, “*Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy,*” p. 118. The play is Zhu Jingfan’s *Fengliu yuan*, in which Xiaoqing, immortalized after her death, meets Tang Xianzu, her fellow reader Miss Yu, and the two leading characters from *The Peony Pavilion* in the heavenly “garden of romance.” See also Ko, “Toward a Social History,” pp. 138–39. This tendency to rewrite Tang Xianzu into the hero of a play culminates in Jiang Shiquan’s *Linchuan meng*, which dramatizes Tang Xianzu’s composition of his plays.


¹²¹ On the idea of *chi* in the late Ming and early Qing, see Yagi Akiyoshi, “*Ryōsai shii no ‘chi’ ni tsuite*” 談賢詠異之痴について, in *Geibun kenkyū* 藝文研究 48 (1986): 81–98.
buted to Chen Tong explains: “Du Liniang sought pleasure in a dream; Liu Mengmei sought a mate in a painting. What a pair of fools, unparalleled since ancient times! But if you don’t consider such things illusion, then illusion will become real.’” Qian Yi’s willful refusal to distinguish illusion from reality is a profound example of simulating the play.

Wu Wushan interprets the uncanny coincidence of the shared dream as a direct rejoinder to his debate with Qian Yi over the status of fictional characters. Alluding to the Six Dynasties collection, Seeking the Spirits (Soushen ji) he renounces his former skepticism: “In the past, when Ruan Zhan argued that ghosts do not exist, a ghost appeared to him, so such a person as Du Liniang must indeed exist” (HB, p. 902). In the rhetoric of Chinese dreams, if a dream is shared by more than one dreamer, then the dream is proved to be real. Once a dream ceases to be a private, solitary experience, it acquires a new ontological status, just as fictional characters can be said to become real once they leave the author’s private imagination and enter the public domain. But the ambiguous nature of this proof is again evident in the couple’s dream scene: Du Liniang steadfastly refused to admit her identity outright, but merely smiled and turned away, for as both dreamers well knew, the problem of her fictionality could not be so easily resolved.

Wu Wushan’s analogy to ghosts—or to what Anthony C. Yu has called “the ghostly apologue”—is particularly appropriate because in the scene from the play being re-enacted, Du Liniang has, of course, returned as a ghost. But more important, Wu Wushan’s choice of analogy forcibly reminds us of the most important ghosts hovering over the edition—those of the two dead wives. His preface opens by recounting his recurrent dream of his dead fiancée’s ghost, whose veracity was likewise confirmed by an uncanny correspondence—the perfect “match” between his dream vision and the wet nurse’s description. On the basis of the dream, he composed a long

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122 Scene 26, Sanfu 1:83a–b.

123 See, for example, Bo Xingjian 白行簡 (d. 827), “San meng ji” in Wang Pijiang 王辟疆, Tangren xiaoshuo 唐人小說 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), pp. 108–12.

poem sequence as a response to this "divine" visitation. The poem was both an act of commemoration, through which he immortalized her spirit, and an act of literary virtuosity through which he proved himself a proper man of sentiment.\textsuperscript{125}

In Wu Wushan's preface, the appearance of the ghostly (or divine) woman is the inspiration or pretext for writing. A large repertoire of stories in the Chinese tradition do credit dreams, often of divine women, with the inspiration for literary or artistic creation.\textsuperscript{126} Certainly, Qian Yi's portrait of Du Liniang and the couple's matched poems could be interpreted in this light as well. But in the dream narrative, Du Liniang does far more than inspire writing. When Qian Yi acts out the opening of scene 27 and "incubates" her dream of Du Liniang, she is doing so to consecrate her own book. And when Du Liniang manifests herself in dream and scatters flower petals, she is in turn bestowing her blessing and appreciation on the Three Wives' edition.\textsuperscript{127} In this guise, she is one who affirms another's book that has already been written and published. She is transformed from a character who is read into a reader herself. For it is not only Du Liniang's approval that Qian Yi receives in dream but the approval of two other ghostly readers—her two dead "sister-wives." Once again, the figure of Du Liniang is superimposed upon the two dead wives. Here the shared dream represents a project that not only crosses the divide between fiction and reality, but also spans the grave, a project of both collaborating with and com-

\textsuperscript{125} The apotheosis of a beloved dead woman into an immortal divinity is a longstanding cliché in the Chinese literary tradition. However, some seventeenth century figures did take the cliché literally; for example, Ye Shaoluan's father seems to have believed that his daughter really became an immortal after her death. See Ko, "Toward a Social History," p. 137 n. 53. In his "Questions and Answers," Wu espouses the reality of dreams and the possibility of resurrection from the dead (HB, pp. 897-98), but his posture is clearly a response to the rhetoric of qing in The Peony Pavilion. At the same time, Wu's strong interest in Daoism and Buddhism suggests that his belief in these matters was more than rhetorical. See Wang Zhuo's letter to Wu in Xiaju tang quanji, chidu ji 尺讀集 3.6b-7a and Wu's letter to Zhang Chao in Yousheng xinji 友聲新集, 4.27b-28a in Chidu yousheng sanji 尺讀友聲三集.) On Zhang Chao's letter collection, see n. 133.


\textsuperscript{127} A comment on the original scene attributed to Chen Tong emphasizes the extraordinary sentiment this gesture implies: "Most of those who grieve over spring are especially moved by blossoms falling. Liniang's scattering the flowers conveys more emotion than would weeping over the flowers or burying them" (Sanfu 1:90a).
memorating the dead. As we have seen throughout the Three Wives’ materials, the line separating a dead woman from a fictional one is faint indeed.

POSTSCRIPT: THE AUTHORSHIP CONTROVERSY

The profusion of copies and confusion over where the original lies inevitably leads to the question, who really wrote the commentary? The ghost hovering over the project is not only the ghost of Du Liniang and the ghosts of the two dead wives, but the ghost of Wu Wushan. Was he the “ghostwriter” of the commentary or not?

Wu Wushan deliberately arouses our suspicions about his role in the composition of the commentary, for did he himself not confess that the first two wives’ joint commentary had originally circulated under his name (HB, p. 891)? Qian Yi mentions that she added the words “Wu remarks” to set off comments of his that Tan Ze had previously incorporated into her completed manuscript (HB, p. 893), but no label marking a comment as Wu’s appears anywhere in present editions of the commentary. In his “Questions and Answers,” Wu once again raises the problem of his authorship, declaring, “Let those who believe, believe; let those who doubt, doubt” (HB, p. 900), and then he evasively refers the reader back to his preface for the “real” answer. A number of later male readers (though by no means all of them) did argue that the whole thing was a fabrication by Wu Wushan, but because men were often skeptical of the possibility of female authorship, attempts to discredit the commentary on such grounds need not be taken that seriously.

128 Wang Zhuo relates an anecdote about Wu’s attempt to pass off a batch of song-lyrics as the work of someone else, possibly a woman. Wu apparently signed the lyrics Li Xiaoshan 李小山 (which resembles Li Shu’s style name Yushan 玉山) and sent them as a joke to an admirer of his work, who saw through the ruse. See “Wu Shufu Wushan caotang cihua,” in Xiaju tang quanji, wenji, 10. 19b. On the admirer, Chen Weisong, see Eminent Chinese of the Ch‘ing Period, p. 103, and Zhang Peiheng, Hong Sheng nianpu, p. 190–92.

129 One such skeptic from the Qianlong period argues that Wu must have only pretended that his wives had authored the commentary, and that the whole story was as much a fantasy as Tang Xianzu’s play. See Qingliang daoren 清涼道人, Tingyu xuan zhuiji 聽雨軒箋記, excerpted in Yuan Ming Qing sandai jinhui xiaoshuo xiqu shiliang 元明清三代禁毁小說戲曲史料, comp. Wang Liqi 王利器 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe), p. 221. For examples of male skepticism towards works by women writers and painters, see Widmer, “The Epistolary World of Female Talent,” pp. 25–26.
Wushan himself appeals to such prejudices, for he points out errors in his wives’ identification of the pastiche poems and asks readers not to expect too high a standard of scholarship (HB, p. 897).

At the same time, we should not assume that because skepticism was a standard male reaction to female authorship, the commentary is unquestionably by the three wives. Wu Wushan was an accomplished drama critic who was extremely well versed in The Peony Pavilion and fascinated with the cultural myths of dead women readers associated with it. Unease with the large increase in female publication during this period may partly account for Qian Yi and Tan Ze’s show of deference to their husband’s literary authority and his assertion of control in the framing materials, but Wu was clearly the director behind the scenes, the orchestrator and facilitator of the whole commentary enterprise. Whether ghostwriter of all, part, or none, he was certainly a powerful medium of some sort.

External evidence supports the authenticity of the edition as a whole. No information has turned up to contradict any of the dates mentioned in the framing materials or to cast doubt on the identities of the other participants or contributors. In this respect, the testimony of the Hangzhou literary ladies, as relatives, neighbors, and friends of the Wu family is invaluable.130 The Three Wives’ edition clearly differs from fraudulent editions of popular works put out by commercial publishing houses, which fabricated commentaries attributed to famous literary figures in order to boost sales. The title of the Three Wives’ edition may well have been suggested by just such a spurious late Ming publication, The Three Masters’ Combined Commentary to The Western Wing (San xiansheng heping Yuan ben Bei xi-xiang 三先生合評元本北西廂), with commentaries attributed to three of the literary lights of the age, Tang Xianzu, Xu Wei 徐渭, and Li Zhi 李贽. But the Three Wives’ edition is altogether different.131 If it is a

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130 Lin Yining claims to have been the first to see the commentary throughout the process (HB, p. 890); Li Shu describes reading the first two wives’ joint commentary after Tan Ze’s death and secretly longing to publish it herself on their behalf (HB, p. 904). Hong Zhize recalls having heard Wu Wushan and her father discuss the joint commentary of the first two wives when she was a child (HB, p. 906).

hoax, it was one perpetrated not out of commercial motives, but out of a collective desire for its creation to be true.  

Two newly discovered letters suggest that a sympathetic contemporary reader such as Zhang Chao was unconcerned with the possibility that the edition was a fraud. Correspondence between Wu Wushan and Zhang Chao discussing the Three Wives’ edition is preserved in an edition of Zhang’s letters, *Three Collections of Letters Between Friends* (*Chidu yousheng sanji* 尺牀友聲三集). Zhang Chao, it will be remembered, republished all the framing materials to the Three Wives’ edition in his *Collectanea for this Glorious Age* and anthologized Qian Yi’s dream narrative in *The Magician’s New Records*, all within a few years of the publication of the Three Wives’ edition. He also published two of Wu Wushan’s works in his *Collectanea for this Glorious Age* and in the *Sandalwood Desk Collectanea* (*Tanji congshu* 檀几叢書), an earlier project he co-edited with his friend Wang Zhuo 王晫 (b. 1636–after 1696). The letters reveal that it was Wang Zhuo who had first showed the commentary to Zhang Chao and put him in touch with his good friend Wu Wushan. Zhang Chao’s note following Qian Yi’s dream narrative in *The Magician’s New Records* mentions that Wu Wushan had “sent his three wives’ combined commentary on *The Peony Pavilion*” to him, and warmly praises the work. Zhang’s letter to Wu thanks him for sending the commentary; it additionally acknowledges Qian Yi’s participation in their literary exchange: “[Learning] that my own humble publications have received the kindness of having been perused by you, sir, and your honorable wife, suffices to add luster to my commonplace works. How fortunate I am!”

132 Wu Wushan was also involved in other sorts of publishing projects and mentions in his letter to Zhang Chao (see n. 125) plans to publish a number of medical books.

133 I am indebted to Ellen Widmer for discovering these letters and obtaining photocopies for me from a Qianlong (1780) reprint of a Kangxi edition of *Chidu yousheng sanji* in the Library of Congress. I am also grateful to Widmer for bringing to my attention several other letters by Wu Wushan anthologized in Wang Qi’s 南京 seventeenth-century collection *Chidu xinyu* 尺牀新語. On this collection, see Widmer, “The Epistolary World of Female Talent.”

134 On Wu Wushan’s close, thirty-year friendship with Wang Zhuo, who was also from Hangzhou, see nn. 17, 19. Comments by Wu on Wang Zhuo’s work, and letters and poems from Wang to Wu are featured in Wang’s collections *Qiangdong zachao* and *Xiaju tang quanji*.

135 *Yu chu xinzi*, 15.271.

136 “Ji Wu Shufu,” in *Chidu oucun* 尺牀偶存, 9.27b, bound in with *Chidu yousheng* 尺牀友聲.
An equally polite letter from Wu Wushan, which appears to be a response to Zhang Chao’s earlier letter, also brings in Qian Yi: “Our household publication of Tang Xianzu’s play is simply trivia from the women’s quarters, and not worth looking at in the first place. Still, because of Wang Zhuo’s false praise, it has defiled your imposing volumes. Later, I received your gracious letter from afar mistakenly praising it. Reading your letter aloud face to face with my wife has increased our embarrassment all the more.”

The formal tone of the letters suggests that Wu Wushan and Zhang Chao were poorly acquainted and had probably never met. Zhang Chao’s letter expresses no suspicion or amusement about the commentary’s attribution, although his note in The Magician’s New Records explains that, in keeping with the anthology’s theme, he has included the shared dream narrative as an account of the strange. Zhang Chao’s mention of Qian Yi as a co-reader of Wu’s work implies that Wu’s friends accepted Qian Yi’s participation in his rich literary life and would not dismiss as implausible her composition and editing of the commentary. Wu Wushan’s remark that he had shared Zhang Chao’s letter with his wife contributes to the same impression. The embarrassment that the couple felt on reading Zhang Chao’s praise is completely consonant with the decorum of the rest of the letter and need not imply any hidden or double meaning.

It is difficult to doubt Qian Yi’s involvement with the Three Wives’ commentary. She was living when the commentary was published and, of the wives in the framing materials, her voice emerges most persuasively. The other two wives speak less often in their own voices, with the shadowy dead fiancée most thoroughly embodying the cultural stereotype of the doomed young woman of talent. The generic nature of the fiancée’s poems and their belated discovery particularly strain credibility. Nonetheless, it would be a fallacy to argue that because something closely approximates a fictional paradigm, it could never have happened. The creation of the commentary shows the degree to which literature constructs life, and fic-

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137 Yousheng xinji, 4.27b–28a in Chidu yousheng. Wu Wushan thanks Zhang Chao for sending his recent work and deprecates the inclusion of his own work in Zhang Chao’s collectanea.

138 Wu Wushan’s letter opens with the kind of self-introduction that implies he did not know Zhang Chao well.
tional characters fashion ideas about the self. Conceivably, Wu Wushan could have “ventriloquized” the voices of his wives, just as male writers tended to adopt a feminine persona in drama and certain poetic subgenres, but commentary, which was traditionally an “ungendered” or masculine discourse, would not have easily lent itself to such impersonation.

What raises our suspicions about the authenticity of the Three Wives’ commentary is not merely Wu Wushan’s extensive involvement in the edition. There are too many coincidences, too many perfect matches. The multiple instances of restaging and recopying, and the recurrence of highly symbolic motifs and props in the framing materials give rise to literary patterns that seem to contradict any claim that these writings represent the randomness of a lived reality. As Garber has noted for a very different cultural context, “This compulsion to repeat, this perpetual recurrence of the same thing . . . strikes us as uncanniness in life and as structure in art.” Chinese writers tended to stress the permeable boundary between the text and the world. But the writings associated with the Three Wives’ commentary seem to hinge on and exaggerate the indeterminacy of this boundary, to delight in confounding the division between fiction and life, imagination and memory, copy and original. Situated in the illusory territory of ghosts, dreams, portraits, and theater, these writings deliberately thwart any certainty about their origin. Instead, the freedom of interpretation is thrown back to the reader, who is invited to take up the challenge and join in the game: “Let those who believe, believe; let those who doubt, doubt.”

141 See Owen, Remembrances, p. 67.