Plum and Portrait: Feng Meng-lung’s Revision of The Peony Pavilion

Feng Meng-lung 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) is remembered today as an author and editor of vernacular fiction, but in his lifetime he was better known for his activities as an aficionado of the southern drama, particularly the K'un ch'ü 戲曲 form, which was popular in his native Su-chou. Sixteen plays either written or edited by him are extant, and portions of a manual of prosody are preserved in Nan-t'ie hsin-p'ao 南詞新譜, an early-Ch'ing compilation that promoted the Su-chou style.1

Feng’s method of writing plays was similar to his short story method. He collected existing texts, edited them, and published the revised works either singly or in sets. Judging by the quality of the editions, his play-texts were intended for connoisseurs and were produced for reading enjoyment. But in addition, they were intended as models of K'un ch'ü written for performance.2

Feng took pride in his technical expertise at fitting text to song. Furthermore, in the published editions of his K'un ch'ü play-texts he consistently described his editorial contribution using the word ting 定 (“to set,” “to fix”).3 Although his descriptions do not explain what it was in the original libretto that needed “fixing,” we can determine it by comparing his versions with the original ones. Such comparison is only rarely achievable in studies of his fiction, and it shows that Feng’s editorial intervention in most cases was substantial. He

2 See the preface to his first play, Shang-hsing ch’ü 隨筆記, where Feng announces that he has "gathered together several dozen [plays] and plan[s] to issue them one by one, to instruct the specialist." Both play and preface can be found in MHCC, vol. 5, trans. Hanan, The Chinese Vernacular Story, p. 91.
3 In increasing order of severity of adaptation: ting 定, kung 彎, zhiang 調, ting 定, and tran 定 (according to a personal observation made by Lu Shu-lun).
4 His revisions of vernacular stories largely supplanted the earlier versions. He collected those in three volumes: Chu-hsien ming-yen 除隕明言, Chu-hsien yu-chien 除隕余言, and Hsing-shih heng-yen 止世恒言. Two vernacular novels that he revised, Ping-yue chiao 平妖傳 and Hsin Li-hua chih 新列國志, also supplanted earlier versions, which survive only in rare editions. See Hanan, The Chinese Vernacular Story, pp. 98–119.
rewrote lyrics, sometimes whole arias, and made plot changes, even combining different dramatic treatments of a story. An example is his revision sometime after 1623 of Mu-tan t'ing (The Peony Pavilion) by T'ang Hsien-tsu (1550–1616), which he titled Feng-liu meng (A Dream of Love). T'ang's play began circulating in 1598. It was immediately acclaimed for the beauty of its language but criticized for musical failings (some critics pronounced it unsingable). By the time Feng revised Mu-tan t'ing, its text had already been adapted for performance at least twice—in one case by his mentor Shen Ching (1553–1610), which suggests that the play touched a nerve and engaged his critics beyond questions of performability per se.

Feng's is the most extensive of the extant Ming revisions of Mu-tan t'ing. He not only cut T'ang's libretto drastically (Feng-liu meng contains 274 arias in contrast to 403 in Mu-tan t'ing), but also rewrote freely (only 74 of the 274 arias are retained as T'ang Hsien-ts'u wrote them). Thus it is remarkable to read Feng's preface to Feng-liu meng, where he describes his editorial role in modest terms. Comparing Mu-tan t'ing to a woman whose beauty is hidden under a layer of dirt, Feng announces his intention "to give her a bath in order to make her beauty complete." The conceit suggests a desire on his part to preserve the integrity and beauty of the original work, much as a restorer of paintings removes the grime of centuries in an effort to preserve a masterpiece.

Herein lies my interest in Feng-liu meng: it claims our attention partly because of its umbilical relationship to one of the masterpieces of Ming drama. By itself, Feng-liu meng is a pedestrian work. But read alongside Mu-tan t'ing, it can be used as a body of commentary, suggesting how the play was received by T'ang's contemporaries and what it was about that unsettled some of its readers. In his study of Renaissance art, Leo Steinberg has argued the usefulness for the critic of copies, even bad copies:

Where they depart from their models—provided these departures are patently willful and not due to incompetence—they constitute a body of criticism more telling than anything dreamt of in contemporaneous writing. The man who copies a painting looks harder, observes by the inch, and where he refuses to follow his model, follows an alternative, usually critical impulse. Few writers on art have the patience or the vocabulary to match the involvement of a recalcitrant copyist. His alterations reveal how a closely engaged contemporary regarded his model, what he admired or censured, or chose to omit.

Steinberg goes on to point out that "in a strong design the detail is so integrated that it is hard to unthink," and that the "deviant renderings" of a copy can help us to see the decisions that went into the original design. When we see what a copyist misses (or leaves out), it helps us to notice what we otherwise might not.

This kind of critical technique is relevant to a reading of Mu-tan t'ing in the light of Feng-liu meng. T'ang Hsien-tsu's language is visual, marked by an intricate and conceptually bold use of imagery. Through Feng-liu meng we see clearly that Feng was at pains to simplify and contain the effects of this language. Feng's efforts may not have been "patently willful" in Steinberg's sense—more likely his own ideas took hold in the process of rewriting—but he wrote with a different paradigm of romantic drama in mind. It is this aspect of Feng's response to Mu-tan t'ing that I wish to examine. I believe it that was more a matter of aesthetic expression than reputedly careless probity that divided T'ang from his critics.

All four of T'ang's plays explore the place of ch'i (emotion, passion) in human life, although not all of them present it in a positive light. In Mu-tan t'ing, T'ang treats the experience of youthful love in all of its intensity, and without the pessimism found in his two later plays. I find that in Mu-tan t'ing romantic passion (especially sensual attraction) is treated at times with humor and irre-
ence, but it is essentially a force for good, associated with creativity and the life force. It is what invests its hero, Liu Meng-mei 柳梦梅, with whatever importance he has (his public exploits make him appear rather ridiculous), and it is crucial to the experience of the heroine, Tu Li-niang 杜麗娘.

The play divides into three segments. The first culminates in Li-niang's death and burial in scene 20. It describes events that take place largely in a natural setting (a garden), apart from the outside world. The focus of the second segment of Mu-tan t'ing (scenes 21–35) remains fixed on this private world (essentially Li-niang's world, although her lover is drawn into it). Here Liu Meng-mei comes to the place where Li-niang is buried, she is resurrected, and they elope together. Then, beginning with scene 36, the action shifts to the public sphere, as the lovers flee Nan-an 南安 (Li-niang's home), and rebels invade from the north. Scenes 37–35 are unified structurally and thematically, whereas scenes 36–55 mark a shift of direction and emphasis.

I examine in some detail two motifs from Li-niang's garden world. Both involve the use of figures that metaphorically represent one (or in some cases both) of the play's central characters. The first of these is a plum tree, which makes its appearance in scene 12, "Pursuing the Dream." From the moment it suddenly appears before Li-niang it is clear that this is no ordinary tree. The amount of attention devoted to it, at the end of one of the play's longest scenes, alerts us to this fact. In some sense it represents Li-niang's mysterious dream lover, but its attributes furnish few reliable clues.

Chinese poetry often celebrated the plum blossom. Blooming early in the year, in the cold of winter, plum trees were admired for their fortitude and endurance, and their blossoms for their fragile beauty. The latter qualities were the plum's feminized attributes, while the tree's ruggedness and vitality were masculine. The sensual elegance of plum blossoms was depicted in art, and in times its white flowers and subtle fragrance were especially admired. As C. T. Hsiia discusses four of Tang's plays in "Time and the Human Condition in the Plays of Tang Hsien-chu," Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., _Self and Society in Ming Thought_ (New York: Columbia U.P., 1970), pp. 249–50. Li Wai-yee discusses Tang's complex treatment of eliding in _Mu-tan t'ing_, a "double perspective" of intense attachment (in the dreamworld) and detachment (affected through comedy). _Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature_ (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1981), pp. 50–64, esp. 54, 58, and 63.

Translations of _Mu-tan t'ing_ are based on Cyril Birch, trans., _The Peony Pavilion_ (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1980; hereafter _MTP!_ Birch). I have modified in some places to reflect the syntax of the original verse, and in other places to bring out aspects of Tang's language that serve my argument. Translations from Feng-hsiang-meng (hereafter _PLM_, my own) are my own. I am grateful to Chou Wan-yao of the University of British Columbia for commenting on my translations.


early as the Southern Dynasties these qualities came to be identified with Confucian virtues of chaste isolation and plain elegance in women and moral rectitude in men." The plum's austere beauty was contrasted with the showy (and some felt vulgar) splendor of the peony. In _Mu-tan t'ing_ the plum rather than the peony of the title is a vehicle for the depiction of love's longing and fulfillment. When we examine Tang's use of it, we discover that he enhanced its sensual qualities while remaining faithful to its primary significance, as a symbol of the vigorous and restorative powers of nature.

The second motif is the self-portrait that Li-niang paints in scene 14, "The Portrait." It is an emblem of the heroine, and is readily seen as a conventional element of the southern drama. Thus its use by Tang as a symbolic device is less remarkable than his introduction of the plum tree two scenes earlier. However, the symbolic use is original, and warrants an examination. Ultimately, Feng altered the two motifs. My conclusion considers how Feng's simplification distorted Tang's ideas and discusses the differences between the two playwrights in the context of the late-Ming reception of _Mu-tan t'ing_.

**The Plum Tree**

In scene 10 of _Mu-tan t'ing_, "The Interrupted Dream," Tu Li-niang takes a springtime stroll with her maid, Ch'\u$n\-hsiang 香香, in the large, yet mysteriously empty, garden outside her bedchamber. Her ennui is disturbed by the burgeoning, half-wild beauty of the place, and after returning to her room she falls asleep. She dreams of a young man with a willow branch in his hand. He declares his love in an ardent song before carrying her to a mound of weathered T'ai-hu rocks. Their lovemaking, which takes place offstage, is witnessed by a Flower God, who describes it in the scene's climactic aria. The lovers recite, and the young man takes her leave. To conclude the scene, Li-niang is soon awakened by her mother, who chides her for napping in midday.

Two scenes later Li-niang returns to the garden, drawn by the memory of her dream. She comes to a place very like the one in her dream: a T'ai-hu rockery with an enclosed bed of peonies. She struggles with the power of her emotions, and the apparent unreality of the experience that has stirred them. Who, after all, was her lover, and what is the nature of their bond? Is her experience of him to remain a dream? When, if ever, will he come to her? In this scene's climactic sequence Li-niang struggles to reconcile the expectations

* Frankel, "Plum Tree," pp. 102 and 113; Bickford, _Flowering Plum_, pp. 19–22, 44–45.

* Ibid., pp. 20, 32–33, and 40.

aroused by her dream with the reality of her sheltered life. Highly susceptible to her dream's remembered pleasures, she soon surrenders to them, this time through the power of her imagination.

The rockery and enclosure of peonies, which figure prominently in both scenes, are a natural setting that reappears at key moments of the play. They are also a symbolic landscape, a *topos* associated with Li-niang's initiation into love, her death, and her revival at Liu Meng-mei's hands. In scene to the rockery is part of Li-niang's dream — the place to which her mysterious lover carries her, while in scene 12 it is an actual place, a deserted corner of the garden to which she is drawn, and where she recalls her experience of love.

It is at this moment, as her reverie ends, that Li-niang suddenly notices a large tree, which appears as if out of nowhere. The tree is remarkable both for the suddenness of its appearance and for Li-niang's description of it:

> Li-niang: Why! In a place where no one comes, suddenly I find a great plum tree, with lovely thick clusters of fruit (戛) crying. Without its presence, there is only a梅子酸酸可吃。

>偏則他暗香遠達
>蛇兒枝葉的周全
>他贗他
>他理這雨熱天
>葉兒青
>偏進著苦仁兒裡
>繼
>愛煞這春陰
>便再得到羅浮夢邊

> How can its hidden fragrance spread so clear, its shade like a parasol reach full round? Thriving, Thriving in this third month of spring "when rich rains split the red buds open," Its leaves shine green, Yet bursting within its round fruit is a bitter heart. Cherishing this daytime shade, Let me find again a dream of Lu-fu.

Isolated in a desolate corner of the garden, the tree elicits a complicated response from Li-niang. Its sudden appearance as her dream fades suggests that it embodies the dream lover. Its verdant foliage and ripening fruit, which contrast sharply in Li-niang's mind with the cold loneliness of the garden setting, suggest vital and procreative forces of nature with which her lover has become identified, and the tree's deep shade associates it with the world of her dream. But the tree's imagery has more than one frame of reference. It evokes the male lover (real or imagined) and also reveals Li-niang's state of mind about herself. In particular, the female associations of the plum are conveyed in the image of the bitter seed bursting from within the fruit. The fruit is Li-niang's sexual ripeness, and its "bitter heart" (*k'ua-je* 苦仁) is her sadness at the passing of time and of her youth.9

Subsequent references to the plum, and recurrences of language first used in this scene, contribute to the duality. In the song immediately following the one just quoted, Li-niang commits herself to keep company with the plum tree, which has become identified in her mind with her absent lover:

> 偶然間心似織
> 梅樹邊
> 這般花花草草由人戀
> My heart is drawn by chance, To this plum tree's side.
> 生生死死隨人願
> 便酸酸楚楚無人怨
> 誰將阿誰香癆一片
> Thus could we love which flower or herb we please, Live and die according to our wishes, Then none would moan for bitter pain. I will marshall my fragrant spirit, Through the dark rains of summer, And keep company with this plum's roots.10

Li-niang's desire to remain beside the tree anticipates her later wish to be buried beneath it. In death she will "keep company with" the tree as she kept company with her lover, briefly, in her dream. The echoing of language from scene to scene establishes the link with him (in Li-niang's mind, at least). The effect is to personalize the tree; it is as if in death Li-niang will leave her parents and go to her husband.15 The tree's arching branches are several times associated with shelter and protection, suggestive of the roles of lover and husband.16

---

9 In *Shih-ch'ing* 詩經 20 ("Plant Fall the Plum"), ripening plums are an image of a girl's approaching maturity, and as they fall they express the passing of time and the transience of beauty. See Hans Frankel's note to his translation of this poem in Bickford, *Flowering Plum*, p. 153. This poem heads a section of her book devoted to poems about the flowering plum, together with Frankel's translations, pp. 159-161. *MTT* 12, pp. 280-281; *MTT/Bk* 6, p. 61. The allusion is to the story of a man who encountered a beauty on Mount Lu-fu and drank wine with her. He fell asleep, and awoke to find himself beneath a flowering plum tree. See Frankel, "Plum Tree," pp. 109-110.

10 *MTT* 12, pp. 280-281; *MTT/Bk* 6, p. 61.

15 In *Ch'un-hsien-ting* 春情詩, Li-niang "standing beneath the trailing branches of the flowering plum" in scene 21; in scene 25, Liu Meng-mei is directed to seek shelter at Li-niang's Plum Blossom Shrine, "where snow-laden branches smile a welcome."
In Mu-tan t'ing references to the plum's blossoms are rare. When Li-niang first glimpses the tree, it is at the height of spring, the season of "rich rains," when red (not plum) buds split and bloom. The plum participates in the colorful fecundity of the garden, hence its green foliage and fruit are its outstanding attributes. When its blossoms are mentioned they are red and are identified with the dead Li-niang. The contexts are suggestive ones that deserve a close look.

In scene 20, "Keening," Li-niang, nearing death, asks her parents to bury her beneath the plum tree in the garden, and when they ask her why, she sings:

做不的病嬌娯桂花裡
長生
則分的粉骷髏向梅花
古洞
I can become no ailing Ch'ang O,
immortal in the moon's cassia groves,
But am fated to be a pretty skeleton in
plum blossom's ancient cave.\(^\text{v}\)

"Mei-hua ku-t'ang" 梅花古洞 is the first of many references to tomb-like cavities, which multiply in various guises through mid-play.\(^\text{vi}\) CAVITIES also suggest wombs, and in this way a bizarre image of Li-niang dead in her tomb hints at her rebirth. The second line contains two unusual juxtapositions: of beauty with death and of flowers with caves. Both images confute categories usually kept distinct, and one effect is to dissolve (or weaken) the sense of indissoluble boundaries.\(^\text{vii}\)

In scene 27, "Spirit Roaming," the plum is used in a deliberately figurative manner, and here its blossoms are again identified with the dead Li-niang. The season is spring; three years have passed since Li-niang’s death, and the time has come for rituals to insure that her spirit will be reborn in the Jade Realm. For this occasion Sister Stone 石道姑, the priestess entrusted with the care of her grave, has put a flowering branch from the plum tree in a vase and placed it on the altar of Li-niang’s Plum Blossom Shrine.\(^\text{viii}\) In the eyes of the celebrants, the flowering branch represents Li-niang herself, who was fated to die a premature death.

Celebrants: Tell us teacher, what is represented by the consecrated vase,

in scene 27 prayers are offered in the hope that Li-niang might return to life and dwell beneath the canopy of the plum's flowering branches 梅花帳. MTT, pp. 277, 326, and 350; MTT/Br ṇp. 57, 139, and 150.


\(^{\text{vii}}\) In the case of flowers and subterranean spaces, the idea is taken up on a grand scale in scene 23 ("Infernal Judgement"), when Judge Hsia makes erotic puns on a long list of flower names recited by the Flower God. For caves as wombs, see Rolof Stein, The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1990), pp. 71, 111, 291 (n. 118), and 305 (n. 196).

\(^{\text{viii}}\) Mei-hua an-kuan 梅花庵觀, also referred to in scenes 23 and 29 as "Red Plum Shrine" ("Huangmei kuan" 紅梅龕).

and what by the sprig of plum? (菜) 老師兄, 你說淨瓶像甚麼, 殘梅像甚麼?  
Sister Stone (淨):

道瓶兒空像
世界包藏
身似殘梅様
有水無根
南作餘香想
Within the hollow of this vase
A world is concealed,
While her body is like this faded spray of plum.
Watered but rootless,
It still brings a fragrance to our senses.\(^*\)

The celebrants identify the plum branch with the dead girl in her tomb, an identification that Li-niang herself makes when her wandering ghost visits the shrine after the ritual has been completed and the celebrants have withdrawn. Drawn by the sweetness of the incense, she reads the prayers and notices the fading blossoms in the vase:

Li-niang: Ha, a faded plum branch from atop my tomb. Plum blossoms, like Tu Li-niang you faded in mid-bloom, how sad! Yet, at this tomb site,梅花阿, 似俺杜麗娘牛命而開, 好傷情也!

則為三斷詫零錐金
字經
叩動俺黃梁境
呪向這地折梅花
透幾程
透出些兇影
These broken drumbeats, random striking
of bells, intoning of gold-lettered scriptures
Have broken in upon my yellow millet dream.
Thrusting its way past plum's roots in fissured earth
My shade emerges forth.

(She weeps): Unless I leave some trace of my presence, how can I show my appreciation for the devotion of these pious sisters? Then let me scatter petals of the plum here on the altar. (She does so.)\(^{\text{ix}}\) （泣） 招鬼們這甚乏誠, 若不留些蹤跡, 怎顯的俺靈知他? 就將梅花散在經臺之上。（散花介）

Li-niang's song confirms the association of the plum with herself in some respects: its fading red blooms (mentioned by Sister Stone earlier in this aria), its rootlessness, cut off from the sources of life. In the immediate context the rootless stem symbolizes Li-niang's morbid state, but emerging from the watery cavity of the vase, scattered red blossoms take on other connotations.

Some commentators find a resonance between Li-niang's scattering of the plum blossoms on her shrine and the Flower God's scattering of red blossoms on the lovers during the dream sequence in scene 10.\(^{\text{xi}}\) In scene 27, Li-niang's
scattering of the blossoms evokes grief over her lost beauty and her wasted youth. If there is a resonance with the Flower God’s gesture, as I feel there is, might not a different association of the image — linking the red blossoms to Li-niang’s sexuality — also be possible? Ostensibly, the God scatters the flowers to wake Li-niang from her dream, but the rain of red petals 紅雨 that spatters 蘭 the lovers at the moment of consummation has erotic overtones, despite the fact that the consummation is only imagined, “fulfilled in the thought” 想成 and not yet in reality. In scene 12 Li-niang recalls the falling petals in her dream as “red shadows, petals torn from heart of flower” 一片撕花心的紅影 兒弔將來半天. Here, too, the image has sexual overtones.

If such extended readings of T’ang’s imagery are permitted, then the faded blossoms scattered on Li-niang’s shrine are more than a pathetic image of wasted maidenhood; they have some power as images of sexuality. So too does Li-niang’s description of her ghost bursting from its root-encased tomb.

These aspects of T’ang’s imagery, which suggest the procreative forces of nature, are further adumbrated in scene 28, “Union with a Ghost.” Liu Meng-mei is gazing at Li-niang’s portrait, which he has found in its red sandalwood box among the rocks beside her tomb. Wondering who could have produced such a painting, and the poem written on it, he expresses his wonderment through fanciful allusion:

他春心迸出湖山縷
 His spring longings burst from crevice in rock mound,

飛上煙銷萼縹緲
 A Green Calyx soaring aloft to light on this painted silk.

Repetition of the word 漏进 (to burst, or gush forth), a strong word occurring in several important passages, provides a link. Liu’s lines echo Li-niang’s of the scene before (“My shade emerges forth”); both passages imply a regeneration in which Liu Meng-mei has an important role to play but of which he is still unaware. Li-niang is aware, and she intimates her knowledge on the occasion of her first encounter with Liu, after having emerged from her tomb to wander as a ghost. Without revealing who it is that she is, she offers herself to him and he joyfully accepts. In her grateful response Li-niang cryptically refers to her return from death, with recourse again to the imagery of the plant world:

Li-niang: Then my hopes in you are fulfilled 這等真個盼望了你了.

幽谷寒綵 In cold secluded vale
你為俺催花遲夜發 You urge a flower to bloom through the night.

The resonance of these verses with other ones is conceptual rather than verbal. The “cold secluded vale” may be other cavities that remind us of Li-niang in her tomb: the watery hollow of the consecrated vase, the cavern beneath the tree, the crevice in the rock mound where her portrait lies hidden. The night-blooming flower requires no explanation, but Liu’s part in urging it to bloom does.

I believe that the sexual nature of this urging is implicit in T’ang Hsientzu’s elaboration of the plum as an image from nature. Virtually every one of its attributes, as described in this play, is suggestive of human sexuality, both masculine and feminine. The fact that human sexuality is so depicted underscores the fact that it is part of nature and the natural process of death and rebirth. For the most part, however, the sexual act is only obliquely suggested in contexts devoted to the plum. A similar obliqueness obtains in other passages devoted to Li-niang in her tomb. Read alone, for example, a reference to a flower being urged to bloom in “cold secluded vale” would not seem a likely sexual metaphor, but when it is linked to other passages the case for a metaphorical meaning becomes stronger. In scene 32, “Spectral Vows,” Li-niang finally tells Liu Meng-mei that he has been making love to a ghost, and when her lover appears hesitant, she uses vivid language to tell him what he must do to revive her:

Liu: So cold you must have been 好不冷!

T’ang Miao-hsian and from the “Three Wives” edn. of the play first published in 1619 (Wu Wei-shan san hou la ping Ma-shu-tang Hsia-hou hua 喬吳山三婿合評牡丹亭還魂記).

These were well-established associations. Franke, “Plum Tree,” pp. 95-96. As scene 12 opens, Li-niang is saddened by the spectacle of fallen petals. Commentary cited in MTTTL, p. 126, supports this reading.

MTT 19, p. 273; MTT / Birch, p. 49.

MTT 19, p. 280; MTT / Birch, p. 60. In The Western Chamber (both the chasteable and the play), red blossoms in profusion mark the season of love, Wang Shih-fu 王實甫, Ha kiau chia 賈紹之 西廂記 (Shanghai: Shang-hai ku-chi, 1978), p. 164, and ibid., The Moon and the Lotus: The Story of the Western Wing, trans. Stephen H. West and Wil L. Idema (Berkeley: U of California P., 1991), p. 368. This line perhaps refers to the shedding of Li-niang’s menstral blood ("flower’s heart" was a euphemism for the vagina), but such allusions are usually more delicate, and not spoken by the lady. See Wang, Ha kiau chia, p. 138, and trans. of Idema and West, Moon and Lotus, p. 334: “Its spring silk [Ying-ying’s handkerchief] was at first sparkling white, but now I see a red fragrance has spoiled its tender color.”

MTT 28, p. 357; MTT / Birch, p. 157. In a 4th-c. legend, Green Calyx achieves the liberation of soul from body after 900 years of discipline. There is a species of plum known as the “Green Calyx plum” (lu-o mei 綠萼梅); Rickford, Flowering Plum, p. 147.
Li-niang:

凍的筋七塊血三擔

Frozen body and soul,

僞做了三貞七烈

In coldest chastity.

Liu: What if I should cause your soul to start in terror 則怕驚了姐姐的魂, how?

Li-niang:

花根木節

Beneath roots of flowering tree

有個透人間路穴

Lies a cavern which leads to a mortal world.

俺冷香肌早似

And my cold fragrant flesh you have already

半熟

carressed half warm.

... Liu: Not knowing how deep you lie, I am afraid that we may not be

able to open a way to you soon 未知深淺, 怕一時開攏不開.

Li-niang:

咨嗟

Ha,

你為人為敵

A man shows his worth by “going through
to the end.”

俺胡遷棺負有三

Full three feet of earth are piled atop

尺疊

my coffin;

你點剛銳和俺一

Take tempered spade and dig

譁掘

your way to me,

就裡

To where

陰風鴻鴻

Cold vapors disperse,

則隔的隔世些些

Some little way apart from sunlit world.*

Li must penetrate to the cold moist world of Li-niang’s tomb and revive
her. As Li-niang implies, the process is already well under way (“And my cold
flesh you have already caressed half warm”). When the actual revival takes
place in scene 35, “Resurrection,” it is something of an anti-climax and is
described with liberal amounts of comedy. In the mid-play scenes leading up to
that moment, however, the return of Li-niang’s soul to her body is the central
drama, and in depicting it T’ang celebrates the creative force of human passion
with powerful images, unconventionally used. In order better to understand his
treatment of this idea we need to examine his elaboration of another figure
associated with his heroine—the portrait. First we should examine Feng Meng-
lung’s response to T’ang’s images of the plum.

THE PLUM IN FENG-LIU MENG

The introduction of the plum tree is differently anticipated and effected. In
Mu-tan t’ing T’ang singles out the tree for attention only at the moment when
Li-niang has returned to the garden in search of her dream. Its sudden and
remarkable appearance underscores its special nature (especially its natural vita-
tility), and this is further enhanced in the description of it in Li-niang’s song.
Feng chose to eliminate this song entirely from his revision of scene 12, and in
his replacement he muted the play of natural imagery, focusing instead on Li-
niang’s response to the tree:

Li-niang: Look at that plum tree 看這梅樣呵!

老幹 From ancient trunk

臥枝自卷 Many branches curl

圓如蓋可喜周全 To form a cover pleasingly round.

All Old plum, old plum 咳, 老梅, 老梅,

春色未舒 Before the beauty of spring has unfolded,

是他偏占先 You are the first to bloom.

Just as you steal the march on spring 似你這般偷春手段呵,

似我杜鵑娘夢兒裡 So Tu, Li-niang found good fortune

可人方便 in a dream.*

Feng opts for the conventional meaning of the plum (as hardy precursor of
spring), and Li-niang’s identification of herself with the tree (in the manner of
similar) removes the metaphoric ambiguity that characterizes Tang’s figure. As a
result there is nothing about the tree that hints at Liu’s identity or future role;
the only attribute that survives the rewriting is the reference to the tree’s canopy,
stripped of its most interesting qualities.

In other small ways Feng is not sensitive to the signs of the marvelous in
the tree’s appearance, and he appears to be intent on reducing the aura of mystery
attending its presence in the garden. When Li-niang first meets her dream lover
in scene 7 of Feng-liu meng (which revises scene to of Mu-tan t’ing), careful men-
tion is made of the plum tree as a feature of the garden topos:

Li-niang (in a low voice): Where do you mean to go? Liu: Over there, be-

neth the big plum tree, is a good place to talk (且低問道) 待那裡去? (生)

前面大梅樹之下, 好講話哩.


* FLM 9, pp. 212-22a.
Beyond the enclosed bed of peonies, Up against the T’ai-hu rocks.**

This addition prepares us for the tree’s (re)appearance in scene 9 of Feng-lu meng, “Li-niang Pursues her Dream.” Feng aims for consistency in the arrangement of details, and in doing so sacrifices an element of surprise and wonder surrounding the tree that T’ang preserved from his source.34 In scene 12 of Mu-tan t’ing the tree’s proximity to the rockery is noticed by Li-niang only after she has emerged from her reverie. When it suddenly looms before her (and us), its appearance is colored by the longings from her dream recollection. This gives the image a powerfully subjective cast. In Feng’s scene, by contrast, the tree is always part of the rockery setting, and so when Li-niang returns there it is mentioned by her as one of the familiar elements of the place, even before she has her vision:

Li-niang (walking): Coming straightway, I am already inside the garden. I see the pavilion and the enclosed bed of peonies — just as I remember them! But where is that student? (She sighs.) (行介) 一運行來, 已到園內。只見牡丹亭, 芍藥欄, 光景依然。那生安在? (數介)

那一樹可是湖山  Over there, the T’ai-hu rocks,
石邊  Over here, the old plum’s mossy green.
這一樹可有老梅  Over here, the old plum’s mossy green.
花開  藹絮  See where the willow’s branches bend low;
見柳枝低亞  I think that the jade one is about to appear**

Here the plum tree is paired with the willow. Plum is paired with willow in Mu-tan t’ing as well, but not to the same degree as in Feng-lu meng. The pairing occurs in the vernacular story upon which T’ang drew, where willow 柳 and plum 梅 hint at Liu Meng-mei’s identity before he comes to Li-niang’s burial place. They are mentioned in the story in connection with her self-portrait, but the representation is verbal rather than visual — a poem that Li-niang inscribes on the completed painting:

** FL7, p. 16a.
34 Feng’s garden is a less remarkable place than T’ang’s. Compare Liu Meng-mei’s first visit in Mu-tan t’ing (scene 24) with the comparable visit in Feng-lu meng (scene 19). In both scenes the garden is wild and deserted, but Feng omits several of T’ang’s strange embellishments (e.g., an empty swing from which dangles a girl’s saah).
35 FL7, p. 20b.
36 MTT7, p. 149; MTT14, p. 299. This follows closely an unpublished translation of C.T. Hsin, which he kindly made available to me.

** "Willow" and "plum" augur the identity of the dream lover; but this representation is different from another, which is unique to the plum: “a great plum tree with lovely thick clusters of fruit.” T’ang seems to have felt this difference in the two forms of representation in the source story, and he preserved it as two modes of representation in his play.

For example, in scene 14 of Mu-tan t’ing, “The Portrait,” Li-niang depicts herself in her self-portrait as holding a branch of green plums in her hand. 拿著梅開時。Here T’ang chose to include a metaphoric representation of Liu Meng-mei in the portrait in addition to the emblematic one of the poem. “Plum and willow” in Li-niang’s poem hint at Liu’s social identity (his family name); “plum” alone (as tree and fruit) gives us his attributes as lover.45 The two aspects are distinct.

Feng favors the former mode of representation over the latter. Although his commentary furnishes no evidence that he distinguished between them, his manner of revising suggests that he felt a difference.47 As we have just seen, in scenes 7 and 9 of Feng-lu meng he suppressed imagery that in T’ang’s text is unique to the plum, and he played up the association of “willow” with “plum” in his evocation of the garden setting. In the same vein, he suggested the detail of the green plums in Li-niang’s self-portrait when revising scene 14. Li-niang instead depicts herself standing against a backdrop of willow and plum. The visual representation matches the poetic one, simplifying T’ang’s more complicated representation.48

Vestiges of the plum as a motif remain in Feng-lu meng, but they survive as

45 In scene 50 (“Disrupted Joy”), when Li-niang’s ghost gives Liu green plums, he compares their sweetness to his unfulfilled desire. In the same passage (and in scene 2) sources also refer to Liu’s frustrated scholarly ambition; MTT, p. 369 (lines 4 and 8); MTT/ Bird, p. 17a. Portions of this passage are translated below.

47 In MTT, the plum is mentioned exclusively in 43 passages (19 in dialogue, 3 in poems, 25 in arias), and in scene 4 it is especially prominent. In FL there are 25 references (15 in dialogue, 7 in poetry and only 3 in arias), with prominent mention in only one scene. MTT contains 11 places that refer to willow and plum in close proximity — either the same line of verse or adjacent lines (3 in poetry, 8 in arias), while in FL there are 10 (6 in dialogue and 4 in arias). This excludes references to “willow and plum” in Li-niang’s poem, which are common to both plays.

48 Feng removes all references to the plum’s fruit, including a rare deletion of verses declaimed by Tu Li-niang in scene 18 (“Diagnosis”), in which she refers to her dream affair as “我手梅心事” (MTT, p. 303). Feng normally leaves declaimed verses unchanged.
似老梅孤幹
借你做寒柯

Like the old plum, single trunked,
Through you I will make many branches.  

In this passage, Feng has modified the last two lines of Liu's aria in T'ang's version:

拾的個人兒先凄苦
敢柳梅有段瓜葛

Having found this lady, first rejoice:
Might this willow and plum have some entanglement?

Both versions of this aria express Liu's wish for a marriage alliance (his desire for social "entanglements"), but by using "plum" here alone, as simile, Feng mingles forms that in Mu-tan t'ing are distinct. As an image associated with the garden world, the plum tree in Mu-tan t'ing embodies the vitality of nature, with which both heroine and hero become identified: Liu through the image of the tree's foliage and fruit, Li-niang through the imagery of fruit, seed, and blossoms. The drama of Li-niang's death and rebirth is portrayed mimetically by means of this natural imagery. Her physical and spiritual death and rebirth are the central action of T'ang's play. The drama of social death and rebirth—an important element of romantic plays in the southern drama with specific reference to the hero—is not absent from Mu-tan t'ing, but it is subsidiary to Li-niang's story, which dominates the first thirty-five scenes of the play.

In scene 26 of Mu-tan t'ing, Liu's pairing of plum and willow is logical, since he has just read the poem on the painting and borrows its language to express his thought. Feng's reference to the "old plum, single trunked," used in a manner so strikingly different from the form in Mu-tan t'ing, indicates his effort to direct more attention to the hero's plight as an unmarried orphan, and to the heroine's role in saving him through her love (which resurrects him from a kind of social death).  

The change is a small one, but through it Feng sought to put a different "spin" on the scene, which in his version culminates in the spectacle of Liu's making feverish appeals to the beauty in the portrait to descend and rescue him from loneliness. In Mu-tan t'ing, Li-niang's initiation into the experience of passion, death, and resurrection constitute the subject of the play's middle scenes, with Liu Meng-mei cast in the role of bearer of life, a role of which he only gradually becomes aware.

---

Feng also debases the plum as metaphor. In a rare instance, he introduces a new reference to the plum (without willow), one not found in the original text.

In his revision of T'ang's scene 26, "The Portrait Examined," Liu Meng-mei arrives in Nan-an, destitute and ill, after Li-niang has died and her father has departed for a new post. While convalescing there, he discovers Li-niang's portrait in the garden and takes it back to his study. He observes the willow and plum painted on it (so depicted in Feng-lu meng only), reads the accompanying poem, and correctly interprets these as referring to himself. The discovery excites him when he realizes that the beauty in the portrait must be his destined mate.

Liu (infatuated): Ah, young lady, come down! Beautiful lady, young lady, please (作疑切) 呀, 小娘子走下來了。美人, 請, 小娘子, 請!

動凌波
盈盈欲下
不見的身影

Her wave-tripping feet move,
Slow and supple she is about to descend,
But her image stays immobile.

Young lady, I, Liu Meng-mei, am all alone in this place 小娘子, 我柳梅孤單在此呵.

FLM 15, p. 36b.
Feng's appropriation of the figure of the plum in these scenes shows that he was determined to make Mu-lan T'ing conform more closely to his thematic expectations of romantic plays: never to allow the private play (the love story) to overwhelm the public play (the celebration of social values and harmonies). His different handling of "willow" and "plum," and of natural imagery in general, reveals his effort to bring T'ang's language into conformity with familiar usage.

A final example of Feng's intentions can be found in his revision of scene 39, "Disrupted Joy." T'ang's scene begins in the middle of the night, midway in the journey of Li-niang's ghost from death to rebirth. She has taken Liu as her lover in scene 28, but has yet to reveal to him who and what she is (this will happen in scene 32). Li-niang has made a gift of wine, green plums, and "Lovely Lady" plantain flowers to Liu, and as the couple share a loving cup the imagery of flowers and fruits is deployed in elaborate word-play to depict intimacy:

**Li-niang:**

金荷
斟香醑

Into gold-leafed lotus cup,
Pour the sweet wine.

**Liu:**

你醞釀春心玉液波

Nectar you have brewed to stir hearts to spring:

撲微酡
東風外翠香紅酸

Cheeks flush
As flowerbuds the east wind brings to reddest glow in leafy bower.

**Li-niang:**

也摘不下寄花果

Nor have I plucked a rare flower or fruit,

這一點蕉花和梅豆何

For in these plantain flowers and green plums,

君知麼
愛的人全風韻

You must know
It pleases me that the seed's charms are perfected,

花有根料

And the flower has roots.

**Liu:**

細哦

To pursue:

As for these fruits and flowers,
The one is withered like a lovelorn maid,
The other is as sour as an amorous swain,
Yet happily heart of plantain flower secretly unfolds,
And for one night plum's seed is sullied.

How comes this to be so?

Tide of wine flushes cheeks dimpled by smiles.
Soon lip drinks lip, wildly kissing,
And then,

Lids droop on loving eyes

Plantain petals stain deeper red,

Plum's fragrance fill the mouth.

A commentator remarks of this passage (and one in scene 28) that "the language of love is exceptionally subtle and obscure. From antiquity to the present, it is unique." The language takes the form of an extended conceit, borrowing imagery associated with the plum and the plantain. The "metaphoric mutability" of the plum in terms of gender is evident. As paired gifts presented to Li-niang's lover, the green plums seem to represent Liu, and the plantain flowers Li-niang, but in the final lines sung by Liu, both plum (seed and fragrance) and plantain flower refer to Li-niang. Two more songs follow, which sustain the intimate mood before it is shattered by the rude intrusion of Sister Stone.

Feng elects to cut the entire wine drinking sequence from this scene, an indication of his determination to blunt T'ang's language and achieve a different thematic emphasis in Feng-liu meng. The drinking of wine in T'ang's scene is a pivotal metaphor, which brings a number of disparate thematic contexts into relation with one another. With respect to the natural world, it imitates the pollinating of the flower (the gesture of pouring "sweet wine") into a lotus-shaped cup is metaphorically suggestive of this context, as is the moistening of the plum's bloom.

---


** MTI 30, p. 356; MTI/Brith, pp. 177-78.**

* The anonymous comment "奇妙郎以瓶盛之古今奇絕" is by the compiler of the P'ing-ssu kuan 冰絲館 (Ice Silk House) edn. presented to the throne in 1791; this became the basis for the edn. of Liu Shih-heng 劉世亨, Mu-lan chih hsia k'o Lin ch'ien hsia-zi meng 聖解元全列川學 (1919; rpt. Yang-chou: Chang-su Kuang-ting lu-chi k'o-yin, 1930).

** Bickford, Flowering Plum, pp. 22-26.**
reach someone who will understand it. The scene begins and concludes with allusions to the Goddess of Wu-shan, who made love to Prince Huai of Ch'u (Ch'u Huai waang 廬侯王) in a dream. Li-niang's mention of the prince's dream indicates her awareness of what happened in her own dream, even as that dream fades. In the scene's concluding coda, her thoughts return to the Wu-shan goddess, this time in connection with the portrait she has just painted:

Li-niang:

稽香閣處玩無人到

None will come to the fragrant boudoir to enjoy its beauty,

Ch'un-hsiang:

這像似則合掛巫山廟

This likeness is fit to hang in the temple on Wu-shan.

Li-niang, Ch'un-hsiang:

又怕風雨華飛過了

Or might it take flight on account of clouds and rain?²⁶

Here Li-niang expresses, with some ambivalence, the desire to expose her beauty to a lover. Of equal interest for the subsequent treatment of the portrait is T'ang's manner of insinuating her act of self-portraiture. There is, first of all, Li-niang's awareness of her ebbing vitality and life:

意妝成素花獨坐無聊

My toilet made at last, I burn incense and sit alone, listless.

逍遥

Before I can find ease,

怎翻盆有此芳草

How to root out the choking weeds that breed distress?

甚法兒點活心音

By what means to bring to life the heart's tender shoots?

真情強笑關係飲

Whom to please if I mask my true feelings with smiles?

淚花兒打縊著夢魂飄

Tears gush forth as my dreaming soul drifts.²³

The drifting of the soul foreshadows the moment of death, when the body is deprived of the spirit that animates it, yet Li-niang clings to the hope that a way might be found to revive her spirits, and restore her vitality. By paint-

---


²⁷ E.g., the story of Chen-chen 馨真, discussed below. In a Yuan play, "A Marital Affinity Across Two Lifetimes" ("Ts'ang-shih yin-yuan" 元曲選, see Ts'ang Mao-hsin, ed. and comp., Ts'ang ch'ü-pan chuan-shu 趙家 瓶花 賴銜 (1958; rpt. Peking: Chung-chua, 1979), pp. 971-86), the courtesan Yu-hsiou paints a self-portrait, which after her death functions as a surrogate for the living Yu-hsiou; see Charles Stone, "Self, Spirit, and Body in Two Chinese Plays: Self-Portraits of Dying Beauties" (unpub. paper).
ing her self-portrait she seeks to preserve her beauty against the ravages of illness, and once it is finished she identifies with it strongly, treating it as an extension of her person, especially her body. Fearing that it will fade with time, she orders that it be mounted:

From burning of sun and buffetting of breeze, mount and line it well, for fear that "finest things are least enduring." My portrait's pretty hues must not be sullied.

On their surface, these lines simply express Li-niang's fear that her portrait will fade with exposure to the elements, but the use of the word "zao 露" to describe the destruction of "pretty hues" accomplishes far more. The same word refers to Liu Meng-mei's semen at the beginning of scene 24, and in scene 28, after he has discovered Li-niang's portrait, he fears, in a context of sexual desire, that he may "soil the portrait's hues." In this light, the above lines also suggest that Li-niang is fearful that her beauty may arouse "impure" thoughts in the beholder.

Li-niang's desire to preserve her beauty inviolate, expressed through her efforts to mount and bury her portrait, is belied by other language suggesting that in her mind the portrait stands for her body, which awaits the coming of a lover who will reanimate it. At the moment of its creation, the act of self-portraiture is described by her as the conveying of her person into the portrait:

Now let me daub cherry mouth, sketch willow brow;
Touch up the hair with wash of drifting mist, Blue of eyebrows tapers off at the tip,
My person complete in the charm of her eyes.

The eyes, the spiritual seat of a portrait, seem to contain Li-niang's person. Elsewhere, she suggests that the portrait houses her spirit. At the moment of her death in scene 20 she speaks of it as the repository of her soul.

Li-niang: One thing I have to tell you. That portrait on which I inscribed the poem. I do not care to expose it to the general view. When I am buried, put it in a red sandalwood box and hide it beneath the T'ai-hu rocks. Ch'un-hsiang: What is your purpose in this? (Of) 春香, I recall an event. I then came to this, speaking incoherently. But the plum's 玉靈 comes from out of the portrait, may it be conveyed into a good home's keeping?
revision of two lines sung by Ch'un-hsia towards the end of scene 20, just after Li-niang's death. In the midst of her keening she recalls the portrait:

Ch'un-Hsia: But that reminds me of the self-portrait she made. When it was seen by the master he ordered me to bury it with the corpse for fear that the sight of it would distress Madam Tu. I think of my mistress' dying words, "You're too young, she's been taken."

Feng makes a revealing change, substituting mai-tsang (埋葬, to bury) for k'ao (靠, to lean on) in the first line, so that Ch'un-Hsia sings:

... As before she will lean against the T'ai-hu rocks, waiting for the garden-strolling youth...

... She is once again buried beneath the T'ai-hu rocks, waiting for the garden-strolling youth...

In Mu-tan t'ing, Ch'un-Hsia's wish to have her mistress "lean as before" by the rock mound recalls the moment in scene 10 when Li-niang's dream lover leads her there to make love. The repetition of k'ao has the effect of animating the portrait and underscoring its close identity with Li-niang's person. Feng's mai-tsang obliterates this effect (awkwardly, since he retains the phrase "as before"), and identifies the portrait with Li-niang's corpse. He may have wished to avoid a blantly physical identification and removed the sexual dimension of its discovery and exposure.

Exposure occurs again in scene 26 of Mu-tan t'ing, "The Portrait Examined," as Liu Meng-mei gazes at Li-niang's portrait and is impassioned. The first couplet of Liu's entrance poem refers to "wind and rain" (suggestive of lovemaking); in the second, he resorts to imagery of shadow and light in describing the portrait he has found in the garden (in scene 24):

... Hard for rain to linger on the peony's leaves, the wind subsides.

... Light silk, Polished inkstone.

This likeness of Tu Li-niang I draw my face and mirror. I fear the mirror does not reflect how great is my sorrow, Lightly daubing.

*MTT 26, p. 345; MTT/Brink, p. 143. *MTT 26, p. 345; MTT/Brink, p. 144.
Later, when revising scene 26, Feng returns to the eyes as the spiritual seat of a portrait, when Liu Meng-mei’s attention is captured by them:

Liu: To speak of nothing else, these eyes alone are unearthly. The story is not finished, the author is not yet finished.

十分魅力
精神只在秋波
Perfect demeanor,
Her soul conveyed in the eye’s clear gaze.

In a marginal comment, Feng wrote: “The line about ‘eye’s clear gaze’ recalls the earlier verse ‘dotting the eyes is most difficult,’ sung at the time of transmitting her soul into the painting.”

Feng’s emphasis on the eye-dotted gesture comes at the expense of the original formulations. Mu-tan t’ing had crouched the actions surrounding the creation of the portrait in provocative if somewhat obscure language. In Feng-Liu mng the moment of artistic creation is reduced to a conventional formula—a strategy typical of Feng.

Mu-tan t’ing uses the portrait further. The reanimation of Li-niang’s corpse in scene 35, “Resurrection,” is anticipated through allusions to a well-known story about a beauty in a portrait. T’ang borrows two actions in order to bring the portrait to life: the calling out of the beauty’s name, and the inspiring of her portrait with wine. By scene 35 inspiring assumes rich significance, because two constellations of language have converged, one associated with the plum, the other with the portrait. The exhumation and revival of Li-niang’s body are a light-hearted affair, but note the elaborate introduction to it in previous scenes.

As Liu contemplates Li-niang’s portrait in scene 26, he becomes excited by the green plums:

Liu: Why is she holding a branch of green plums in her hand, just as if she were holding me? How can a beauty in a portrait, live like a beauty in life?

Green plums in hand, she softly intones her verse,

* FLM 11, p. 256.
* FLM 19, p. 36.

Hunger and thirst refer here to sexual desire, and mark the culmination of erotic tensions, which have built through the scene. In the aria immediately preceding, the word ch’an (spring) occurs four times, indicative of Liu’s mounting excitement. Given this tension, the mention of the beauty’s closed lips, which “lack breath” is suggestive, especially in the light of what is to follow.

Liu in fact will breathe life into those lips, and the literal means by which he does this is to pour wine mixed with a life-giving potion down the throat of Li-niang’s corpse. Prior to this, he has shared a loving cup of wine with Li-niang’s ghost (in scene 30). Both moments are memorable, the latter because of the erotic boldness of the language, the former because it is part of an unusually graphic enactment of the exhumation and revival of Li-niang’s corpse. Read beyond their literal meaning, the two actions involving wine drinking can, I feel, both be understood as inspiring and inseminating gestures.

In the popular story of Chen-chen, wine is the means by which a beauty who is lodged in a portrait is brought to life: by a young scholar. He calls to her for a hundred nights, and when she responds he pours wine on the portrait, whereupon she descends and becomes his wife. Li-niang alludes to this after completing her portrait in scene 14, and so does Liu Meng-mei when he calls to the portrait in scene 26.

The connection between the revival of Li-niang’s inert body in the play and the story of Chen-chen’s portrait is clear, not only because in both cases wine is the instrument of revival, but also because T’ang seems to borrow playfully from the story when he describes the life-giving potion as wine mixed with the ashes of the burnt crotch section of a virile man’s trousers. In the story, the infusion is described as a preparation of wine mixed with ashes.
obtained from burning some kind of cloth, but the intimate nature of the garment in the play is T'ang's invention.

My association of this moment with the wine-drinking sequence in scene 30 is speculation, but links are established through shared language. Wine is poured into a lotus-shaped cup 荷, a gesture that calls to mind Li-niang's tightly closed mouth "like a lotus bud" 荷, which "lacks breath." The "sullying" 淫 of the plum's seed calls to mind Li-niang's fears that her portrait might be sullied — an association with sexual intimacy (and with Liu's role as Li-niang's lover). Even the unfolding of the "heart of flower" in the release of passion may find a counterpart in the references to the heart-soul contained within Li-niang's portrait, waiting to be touched to life.

Wine disappears from Feng's revision. In scene 30 he confines Liu's and Li-niang's intimacy to a brief duet notable for its decorum:

Liu:

我坐黃昏時伊早過
在 twilight gloom I hoped for your early coming.

爲甚隻消停住般延延
Why did you stop and dawdle so?

Li-niang:

非是我嫌嫌
It isn't that I kept my darling waiting.

倖雙親相望
I waited 'til my parents were fast asleep.

又收拾起縫床花朵
Then gathered up my flower-embroidered quilt.

Liu, Li-niang:

四目相接
Two pairs of eyes gazing,

兩情正和
Our feelings one.

偏則是幽期話多
Why at this hour of bliss this urge to words?

Moreover, in Feng's version of the exhumation scene, Li-niang is revived with ginger tea, and mention of the trouser patch potion is eliminated, including scene 34, "Consultation," devoted to its concoction.

Feng retains one aspect of the inspiring motif, which provides a clue to his use of the portrait in Feng-liu meng. In scene 33 of Mu-tan t'ing, "Confidential Plans," Liu Meng-mei presents himself at Li-niang's shrine as her husband, and offers to prove his claim to a dubious Sister Stone by performing the ritual of inscribing her spirit tablet with a dot, a ritual normally performed by a person of distinction. We are told that Li-niang's father, Tu Pao 杜寳, neglected to perform it in his haste to depart for a new post. When Liu inscribes the dot the tablet moves. This convinces Sister Stone of his claim, and she decides to assist him in the exhumation and revival of Li-niang's corpse.

The significance of this ritual appears to be primarily social, marking a moment when authority passes from Tu Pao (as father) to Liu Meng-mei (as husband). In Mu-tan t'ing the dotting gesture, which anticipates Liu's role in Li-niang's exhumation, also has an inspiring quality. This dimension, together with its implication about the sources of Liu Meng-mei's power, is lost in Feng's revision, but the social meaning is retained.

Feng passes over his revisions of erotic language in silence, but he does comment several times about the portrait, which is indicative of the importance he attributed to it. That importance can be summed up in the word recognition. The portrait doesn't simply represent Li-niang; it also represents Liu and holds the clue to his future relationship with her. It contains an encoded message that he must decipher. In scene 26 of Mu-tan t'ing, Liu reads the poem on the portrait and recognizes that he has some connection to the lady depicted there, but he subsequently fails to act on this knowledge. He fails to link the beauty in the portrait to the "lovely girl" in his dream (scene 2, "Declaring Ambition"); he fails to see that the maiden with whom he has formed a liaison (Li-niang's ghost) is the beauty depicted in the portrait. After making love to Li-niang's ghost, he appears to forget the portrait altogether. In Feng's view, this makes him appear fickle 薄倖, and his infatuation with beauty reveals a lack of good faith and a weakness of character unbecoming a hero.

Feng is at pains to point out these defects in T'ang's hero and to indicate how he has rectified them in Feng-liu meng. In revising scene 26 of Mu-tan t'ing, in which Liu first examines the portrait, he depicts Liu as instantly recognizing the lady of his dream. In the light of this recognition, his growing infatuation with the portrait is firmly rooted in a conviction that this lady (he does not yet

84 As Liu performs the gesture, he sings: "See how my brush turns stone to living person 黃衣點石為人. As husband furnishes house 餐飯為女." MITT 33, p. 385; MITT/ Birch, p. 135. Feng supplies a subject for the second line, underscoring the fact that Li-niang relies on Liu as husband to perform the gesture. "See how my brush turns stone to living person. / As she relies on husband 依靠夫 來扶樹 the host. " FLM 24, pp. 264-265.
85 Li-niang's aria (trans. above) mentions "touching to life 視活." When Liu dots (點) the tablet it moves, as if animated.
86 FLM 14, p. 272; 16, pp. 382, 404; 19, pp. 2b, 3a, and 22, p. 13b. Most of these comments are reprinted in MITTTL, pp. 54-65.
87 Feng makes this observation twice: in a marginal comment to scene 22 and in his general remarks, where he describes how he has "made good Liu's flaws." MITTTL, pp. 63 and 65.
know her name) is his destined mate. In other words, desire is grounded in loyalty: to the lady, and to the alliance with her that the portrait represents.  

By contrast, Mu-tan t'ing has Li-niang point out the connection between herself and the portrait, after she and Liu exchange vows in scene 32. Liu's forgetfulness is puzzling, and Feng was among the first to call it a defect in character. One clear aim of his revision of Mu-tan t'ing is the rehabilitation of its hero. When we examine his treatment of the motifs discussed in this essay, we can see that it is part of a deliberate effort to change the thematic emphasis of the play, to portray the love affair between Li-niang and Liu Meng-mei in a different light, and especially to redefine Liu's character in the process.

**CONCLUSION**

This comparison of Mu-tan t'ing and Feng-liu meng has explained aspects of revision that Feng Meng-lung did not discuss. I have made some use of Feng's commentary, but have based my interpretation of his methods and intentions largely on the evidence furnished by a close reading of both texts. This enables us to go beyond Feng's own account of what he was doing. Reading Mu-tan t'ing in the light of Feng-liu meng shows that T'ang Hsien-ts'ao's unconventional language, as well as his idiosyncratic prosody, made Feng's engagement with it "recalcitrant."

Written before the K'un-ch'ü musical style became preeminent in the southern drama, Mu-tan t'ing was created not in ignorance of prosodic requirements, as T'ang's critics alleged, but according to a less rigid idea of how linguistic and musical text should be accommodated to each other. T'ang was comfortable with varying the song-forms to fit his text. His critics were not, and once they began to rewrite his plays according to the forms prescribed in their treatises, a struggle to define his play-texts ensued, lasting several decades.  

In the end, T'ang's original libretto emerged intact, and revisions such as Feng's, in which the language was varied to fit the prescribed song forms, passed largely into oblivion. Once the forms of K'un ch'i melodies were set, T'ang's libretti posed difficulties, but no insurmountable obstacles, to adaptation for singing in that style. After the necessary musical accommodations were made, three of his plays became staples of the K'un-ch'ü repertoire.  

What divided T'ang and his critics at least as sharply as their differences over musical form were their differences over appropriate language. T'ang favored an unconstrained literary style that made no concessions to the reader or viewer (or performer), while revisers such as Ts'ang Mao-hsin and Feng Meng-lung favored familiar and accessible language. The act of translating Mu-tan t'ing into simpler language inevitably changed its ideas, and I have suggested that the pattern of Feng's choices contains an underlying thematic critique of the play that may not have been fully conscious. The criticisms directed at T'ang's prosody appear to have reflected a largely unacknowledged discomfort with his elaborate, and at times obscure, depiction of romantic passion in a text destined for the stage.

Feng's discomfort is evident in his treatment of the plum and the portrait. In the case of the plum, he eschewed the openness of T'ang's language and reverted to simile. The tree is identified primarily with Liu Meng-mei, his plight as orphan, and his search for social connections. In one passage where Li-niang compares herself with the tree (scene 9), it reminds her of her desire to find a mate and blossom, a canonically familiar association for a young girl to make. The plum's other attributes — its red blossoms, green fruit, and lush foliage — go unremarked; the attributes that Feng singles out are roots and branches, suggestive of Liu's desire and need for social ties.

T'ang's figure emerges in striking contrast to the one in Feng-liu meng. In depicting Li-niang and Liu Meng-mei, he exploited the plum's "metaphoric mutability" and its wealth of associations. As tree, the plum is identified with Liu as lover and eventual savior of Li-niang. In this respect T'ang may have wished to underscore his role as "Lord of Spring" and restorer of Li-niang's soul; this was one dimension of the plum's meaning in poetry. The plum tree's powers of renewal, even into old age, made it a symbol of vitality and vigor, and although references to sexual vigor by way of this image were muted in poetry and painting, in Mu-tan t'ing this dimension is vividly in evidence, with reference


T'ang's improvisational methods are discussed in Chang Hsiu-lin, "T'ang Shen chih cheng wa-lun" (T'ang's Literary Career), in *T'ang Hsien-ts'ao yen-chi t'ouli* (Chang's study of T'ang). For the use of the plum, see also Su, "Chang's Study of the Plum," chap. 1.

---

* I am grateful to Professor Oki Yasushi of Tokyo University for bringing this article to my attention.
to both Liu Meng-mei and Li-niang. In the case of the plum’s red blossoms, T’ang did more than exploit the well-established association of “fallen blossoms” with lost maidenhood, and I have suggested that the plum’s blossom also refers to Li-niang’s emerging sexuality, hence the preference for red blossoms over the white ones favored by poets. Even the fruit, the most “canonical” image of the plum by virtue of its mention in the ancient Shi-hsing, is transmuted in Mu-tan t’ing from an image suggestive of the desire to marry and procreate into something more complex, partaking of both bitterness and desire.

It is tempting to find in T’ang’s elaborate use of the plum a deliberate subversion of its “orthodox” symbolism, in particular its close identification with such Confucian values as chastity and moral rectitude, which, in their extreme form, are caricatured in the important males: Ch’ien Tsui-hiang 陳最良 (Li-niang’s tutor), Tu Pao (as parent), and Liu Meng-mei (as ambitious scholar-to-be). But one cannot carry this reading too far. What can be said is that the plum as figure pertains to the garden, and thus to the world of ch’ing, not the world of li. Once Li-niang and Liu Meng-mei flee the garden and depart from Nan-an (in scene 35, “Lopment”) the plum ceases to be an important figure.

Feng likewise reduced the complexity of T’ang’s figurative use of the portrait. In Mu-tan t’ing it embodies beauty for both Li-niang and Liu Meng-mei, and their responses to it reveal more about their own subjectivity than anything else. Liu’s infatuation with it is based solely on sensual attraction, which causes him to forget all else. In this respect his experience matches that of Li-niang with her dream: each becomes obsessed with passions aroused by the imagined presence of the sought-for loved one, so much so that the illusion is confused with the real. In Feng-liu meng, the portrait is the device that brings Liu to Li-niang. Its messages furnish him with necessary clues to his destiny, and in his treatment of it he is shown to be an attentive and devoted lover. Quite unlike

the situation in Mu-tan t’ing, in Feng-liu meng Liu’s steadfast devotion to Li-niang’s portrait demonstrates how his sensual impulses are domesticated and his infatuation is governed by his reason. The distoration of T’ang’s idea is particularly striking in this case. Feng’s rational bias is evident not only in these efforts to redefine Liu Meng-mei’s character, but also in his concern for a logically consistent plot and a harmonious prose free of jarring improvisations.

T’ang Hsien-tsu, on the other hand, espoused a style unconstrained by conventional notions of form and plausibility, and he followed the preface to a friend’s collection of marvels that reveals his contempt for the excessively literal imagination:

In this world, the only persons with whom one cannot discuss literary art are narrow-minded pedants and fussy scholars. There is much that they have not heard and more that they have not seen, and yet they make a show of their superficial and limited knowledge. Looking over writing in the world today, one wonders, will there ever be writing again after this? I think that what is miraculous in writing does not consist in a slavish adherence to appearances. Spiritual inspiration comes naturally in a flash, in the absence of conscious thought 自然靈氣，恍然而來，不思而至。Uncanny and amazing, this is a state to which none can give a name, not anything with which one ordinarily can manage to identify. When Su Tzu-chan [Su Shih 蘇軾, 1037–1101] painted withered trunks, bamboos, and rocks, he broke completely with painters of both the past and his present, and the style of his paintings became all the more marvelous. If one were to assess his paintings in terms of painting style, it is almost as if they do not have one.

T’ang was fond of invoking the example of great painters in his own defense, and his disdain for models is well illustrated in Mu-tan t’ing, at both the musical and the linguistic level. His aesthetic and Feng’s agenda were diametrical.

Feng was careful to link together the disparate dream segments, so that Li-niang and Liu Meng-mei share one dream rather than experiencing separate ones. See his general comments in MTTT, p. 63.


As when he attacked an earlier revision of MTT in a letter to Ling Meng-ch’iu 凌濛初 (1580–1644), citing a painting in which Wang Wei 王維 (701–765) depicted a plantation as part of a winter scene. This unseasonal representation bothered innumerable critics, but T’ang praised Wang’s style for being “expansive and unrestrained” 無際涯 and implied that MTT was under attack for the same petty reasons, T’ang Hsien-tsu shih-wen chu, p. 136.
cally opposed, and we can assume that had T’ang been able to read Feng’s adaptation he would have been outraged. Although both men are identified with the late-Ming cult of ch’üng, and both men shared a love of vernacular literature, when it came to the writing of plays the differences between them were very great.

T’ang Hsien-tsu refused to respect the stylistic and ideological boundaries separating genres, addressing personal concerns in his plays in a distinctive and linguistically challenging idiom. But such use of the drama was the issue, and by rewriting his plays Feng and others were reappropriating them for the public domain, asserting control over the ideas expressed in them in the name of performability. Although Feng-liu meng was also intended for reading (as we can infer from the quality of the printed edition), one does not obtain fresh insights from the reading experience. There are no privileged readings, no subtexts, and the perusal of them was meant to recreate the experience of a performance. In Feng-liu meng, and in Feng Meng-lung’s drama in general, we glimpse the stern Confucian and strict moralist that was Feng the public man, and are left to consider the contrast between this persona and the bohemian romantic of his other writings.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLM</td>
<td>Feng Meng-lung 風流夢, Feng liu meng 風流夢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHCCC</td>
<td>Mo-han ch’ü hsi-ch’üan ch’i 墨憨齋宦本傳奇</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTT</td>
<td>T’ang Hsien-tsu 潘東野, Mu-ian t‘ing 牡丹亭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTTL/Birth</td>
<td>The Peony Pavilion, trans. Cyril Birch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTTTL</td>
<td>Mu-ian t‘ing yen-chiu tze-tao k‘ao shih 牡丹亭研究資料考陳</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>