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Queering Filiality, Raising the Dead

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DO WE NOT, all of us, secretly wish our reading to be a form of transportation far away? Do we not—especially those of us turned professional readers, cast out from the gardens and closets and nighttime beds of our earliest reading paradises—cast about for any writing that might fan this warm nostalgic glow into a bright flame that could illuminate our own scholarly work?

In *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Carolyn Dinshaw writes to “explode the categories of sameness, otherness, past, present, loss, pleasure” (p. 2).¹ She writes of a “desire for bodies to touch across time” (p. 3). For her, “queer histories are made of affective relations” (p. 12). I think she writes of Barthes, writing of Michelet’s longing for the body of the past because, for her, resurrection is also the name of the game—a trio of voices raising the dead. To read, to read the past through eyes possessed by the presentiment of desire, the desire of becoming something else, something more, by virtue of and through the virtues of the others one reads. She is in the business not only of translation but also of transportation.

Dinshaw also tells us that she writes using Donna Haraway’s notion of “partial connection.” Haraway draws our attention to the idea that “the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly and therefore able to join with another, to see without claiming to be another” (p. 14). Dinshaw’s modest, ventriloquized declaration of imperfection allows me to imagine myself writing out in connection to her my own reading of the seventeenth-century Chinese erotic novel *The Carnal Prayermat*, by Li Yu.² I bring him to this chorale as a gift of metaphor because he comes from a faraway domain. I ferry him across because some of his projects remind me of Dinshaw’s, especially his constant queering

¹Page references are to Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

²Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayermat*, trans. Patrick Hanan (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990). Chinese edition: Li Yu, *Roupu tuan* (Taipei: n.p., n.d.).

of the filial orthodoxy of sex as reproductive, especially his use of this maneuver to perversely preserve the contrasting orthodoxy of Buddhism.

I call his moves “queer” in the spirit of Fran Martin, who notes that in the 1995 story “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel,” by Taiwanese lesbian writer Chen Xue, “Queer is then figured as that which moves between and on the borders of discursive systems, continually interrupting each by means of the other, between and within discourses of psychoanalysis and traditional family, lesbian identity and daughterhood.”³ Her remarks resonate with Dinshaw’s own insight that “appropriation, misrecognition, disidentification: these terms that queer theory has highlighted all point to the alterity within mimesis itself, the never-perfect aspect of identification” (p. 35).

I have always been drawn to Li Yu’s work not only because it has subtlety and humor, but because Li Yu fearlessly writes his way out of so many authoritative discourses of his time, often by pitting them mercilessly against one another in his fiction and then inviting the reader to sit back and watch them take each other down the chute of sexual passion he has so liberally lubricated for us. Today I’d like to talk about some incidents in *The Carnal Prayermat* that queer the straight discourse of filial reproduction by crossing them with Buddhist expectations delivered in the flesh of women’s bodies.⁴

The Carnal Prayermat was written in 1657, in China’s early modernity, only thirteen years after the northern Manchus took Beijing by horseback, founding the dynasty that would rule China until 1911. It is, thus, a product of devastating conquest warfare, a context that never appears overtly in the text.⁵ It tells instead the story of a young scholar, the beautiful Vesperus, who loves sex so much that he sets out upon a voluptuary’s conquest of his own, a battle to bed as many women as possible, with a few boys along the way.

³Fran Martin, “Chen Xue’s Queer Tactics,” *Positions: East Asian Cultures Critique* 7 (1): 90 (spring 1999). The story is also translated in the same issue: Chen Xue, “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel,” *Positions: East Asian Cultures Critique* 7 (1): 51–70 (spring 1999).

⁴Li Yu was not the only author of his time to perform such crossings. Giovanni Vitiello concludes in his excellent discussion of feelings and desire in late Ming pornography: “Desire, as a central arena of human experience, can become a field of spiritual cultivation. As a tool of self-knowledge, desire can lead to salvation.” See Vitiello’s “The Fantastic Journey of an Ugly Boy: Homosexuality and Salvation in late Ming Pornography,” *Positions: East Asian Cultures Critique* 4 (2): 312 (fall 1996).

⁵Battle metaphors do abound in the text; see Hanan tr., 50–51, 96, 122, 124, 136, 151, 180. Lest we make too much of this, we note that there was a long tradition of military metaphorization in Taoist sexual-alchemy manuals. Furthermore, part of the tissue of joking that holds the novel together is the metaphorization of sex for all sorts of domains of social life, including the examination system that literate men took to gain employment in the imperium (Li Yu, Hanan tr., 79–81, 96 passim) and even a discussion of a woman’s genitals as an ancestral altar (Li Yu, Hanan tr., 284).

The novel opens with a strange declarative chapter in which a narrative voice in the first-person plural, a male “we,” explains the delights and dangers of sex. “A woman’s loins are the entrance through which we enter this world and the exit by which we leave it.”⁶ Thus, the first mention of women’s bodies marks them as both maternal (obvious enough) and as the scene of “death” by sex because Chinese sexual common sense thought of male orgasm as the loss of vital yang essence, whether performed with women or other men. This opening sermon gives dire warning against adultery (the sin this novel makes its own), noting that men who steal other men’s wives will lose their own because the women will be mar-shaled by karmic fate into paying the husband’s debts. I will return to the importance of this conceptualization of sex and debt, contrasting it with the model of indebtedness that men, as filial sons, owe their mothers.

A further frame is inserted by the second chapter, before the promised action. Here the hero seeks out a monk, Lone Peak, who tries desperately to dissuade Vesperus from his quest. Thankfully for the plot, Vesperus refuses, heading off, and neither he nor we see the monk again until the last chapter, when Vesperus returns, repentant. Along the way, in the remaining seventeen chapters, not only does the author provide detailed and explicit description of various sexual engagements, but by inserting short critiques at the end of each chapter, he draws our attention back *out* of identification with the characters and firmly places us at the peephole of voyeurism. In other words, he alternates the voice of the didact we met in the opening chapter with that of the storyteller who, to our narrative-hungry relief, spares us nothing.

The plot: Vesperus marries a secluded virgin and awakens her to sexual desire only to abandon her (even before they have conceived the necessary son) for further amorous conquest. Along the way, he is informed by a virile Robin Hood-like thief that his cock is much, much too small to make it worth any woman’s while to risk adultery. Vesperus overcomes this crisis only when he finds a Taoist magician who grafts flesh from a dog’s penis onto Vesperus’s own modest member. Armed with this magical weapon, Vesperus seduces his first “wife,” Fragrance, cuckolding his first husband, Honest Quan.

But not even eloping with Fragrance and installing her as his concubine suffices. When she becomes pregnant, he abandons her and moves in with a pair of sisters and their cousin, a trio whose husbands are conveniently away in the capital studying for the ubiquitous imperial examinations. Let us pause a moment to discuss the sex, and its relation to filial obligation, in more detail.

Right from the moment Vesperus sets out in search of a First Wife, he courts filial failure. Instead of bringing home a woman into the patriline, he moves into this wife’s house and brings along with him a pair of pages

⁶Li Yu, Hanan tr., 4.

(named Satchel and Sheath), with whom he regularly indulges in anal intercourse. We never hear a word about his own kin-related parents or brothers; instead, he abandons them and takes the feminized position of wife himself. Encompassed in his “wife” position, he has nonetheless smuggled into the heart of marriage, an institution for the reproduction of the patriline through biological sons, a homosocial, nonfertile collective, within which he occupies the ironic position of “husband” as the “top.”

With the acquisition of the hugely expanding dog’s penis, Vesperus crosses another boundary that modifies the first heterosexual/homosexual ambiguity he has been embodying, that of human and bestial. The surgery has profound and very paradoxical consequences: he is warned he may never conceive sons, and he retorts that he could not care less. Thus, we might at first think that our author is signaling that the end of such homo/hetero shilly-shallying is sinking into bestiality. But no—homoeroticism is not criticized at that level; more sadly for Vesperus than the renunciation of his filial duty to reproduce is the fact that, as he puts it during this farewell fuck of his page, “I’m not the one saying farewell, it’s my penis that’s saying farewell to your buttocks.”⁷ But note his distance from his penis, his nonidentification of that organ with the speaking subject “I”.

Here Li Yu brilliantly exposes the male member as a mere tool for sex, as he puts the sacred patriarchal use of it for bio-reproduction on par with its use in anal intercourse. Both can be given up cheerfully by a man intent upon his pleasures. Vesperus has seized control of his “Heavenly endowment” and remade it. Those pleasures are going to be found, now, solely with women, but in contexts completely outside those prescribed by marriage, in fact, in adulterous contexts proscribed by marriage. At the very moment he rejects filiality, he reclaims heterosexual sex practices with a true vengeance, solely for pleasure, and the pleasure of the “I” who speaks. After all, having one’s pages on the side is something that a married man can easily get away with, and thus, sex with men, per se, is not envisioned by our author as endangering the hallowed institution of marriage. Endangering the hallowed institution is exactly what Li Yu and his Vesperus are now poised to accomplish. In fact, his penis has now so enlarged that it would “kill any virgin,” so we are given to understand that he is firmly aimed at already sexually initiated (that is) married women.

Alas, I cannot regale you with the intricacies of how Li Yu thoroughly trashes the institution of marriage in scene after scene of decadent pleasure. I am instead going to turn now to the consequences envisioned by our author of this daring reclamation of bodies solely for orgasmic pleasures.

We recall that the Monk warned Vesperus early on, “Not only will your wife and daughters have to repay your debts of seduction and adultery, but the thought of seduction and adultery will no sooner have entered your

⁷Li Yu, Hanan tr., 121.

mind than your wife and daughters will automatically start thinking licentious thoughts themselves.”⁸ How does the guilty Li Yu wreak Heavenly vengeance upon Vesperus for daring to escape the strictures of patriarchy?

The first husband cuckolded strikes out to find Vesperus’s abandoned First Wife, insinuates himself into the house as a servant, and then seduces her, making her pregnant, and thus necessitating their flight. After her miscarriage, he sells her into prostitution. She becomes a courtesan renowned for her special Taoist sex techniques. So Vesperus seduces only one wife, but his own wife pays the debt a thousandfold, seducing literally thousands of men.

Among the clients who then visit Jade Scent, the First Wife, are—of course—the traveling husbands of the three women with whom Vesperus has been living in flagrant sin for months on end. In addition to this, Vesperus’s first conquest, his concubine, Fragrance, has meanwhile given birth, ominously to twin daughters.⁹ Then she too abandons Vesperus and runs off with a lover. She is, however, later killed by an avenging friend of our hero. Thus, she repays Vesperus and then pays with her life.

The most horrifying fate awaits the First Wife: most internal to patriarchal expectation, she is marked as the character who will pay the heaviest price. Hearing of the famous courtesan, Vesperus sets off for the capital to engage her and learn her secrets. Jade Scent, his wife, recognizes him and, fearing that he has come to turn her into the police, hangs herself. Only after her irate clients have nearly beaten him to death for causing her loss does he realize who she was.

What about this system of indebtedness, and how does it match Buddhist expectations? In fact, the debts owed between men and women in orthodox Buddhism exist between men and their own mothers, not wives and husbands. Long before Li Yu’s seventeenth century, the Buddhist monastic *sangha* had mobilized the filial bond of mother-son in its service.¹⁰ Imagine China around 100 C.E., a land where the most basic religious activity centered on the patrilineal ancestral veneration of filiality. Buddhism first laid out why sins in this life were a sign of incomplete karmic resolution and markers of further karmic debt. One’s own ancestors were quite likely languishing in some Buddhist version of hell, working off their time. Then, having theorized the ancestors into a newly precarious position, monks offered themselves as possessors of the best technology for saving them. Gifts to the Buddhist community for rituals

⁸Li Yu, Hanan tr., 29.

⁹Note that Vesperus does manage to father children, but not a son. Instead, the double calamity of twin daughters occurs because Fate seems to have decreed that more women must stand in the wings ready to sacrifice themselves for Vesperus’s crimes. When he repents, they disappear, spared being pressed into sexual slavery or worse on his karmic behalf.

¹⁰See Alan Cole, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

to the ancestors were infinitely better than old-fashioned ritual at home. And the ancestor in the most danger was a son's mother, because the very act of giving birth was (and is) considered so polluting and as continuing the evasion of enlightenment.

Li Yu has inverted and transported this well-known structure of karmic debt. Instead of a son repaying on behalf of the sins of the mother, the wife repays on behalf of the sins of the husband. We are transported out of reproductive bondage and into sexual connection. The gender roles are reversed in the process, feminizing the male and giving the agency of male sacrificer to the female.¹¹ Every son his own mother, as it were, in Li Yu's book.

Overall, I would characterize the novel as a machine for the removal of males from the patriarchal disciplining of their sexuality. Any sort of role is better, in Li Yu's eyes, than that of the dutiful son. Any mode of sociality better than that of the straight family.

Indeed, the novel closes with Vesperus refinding the monk Lone Peak and throwing himself into Buddhist practice to atone for his sins. Fearing, I suppose, that the deaths of two wives were not yet enough, he castrates himself of the dog penis as the price to pay for enlightenment among like-minded, family-fleeing men. Among them he finds Honest Quan, the first cuckolded husband, the one who seduced and sold Vesperus's wife. The two settle in to gain enlightenment together, over the dead bodies of both their wives.¹² The moments of sex among men pass, as it were, nearly without notice in an economy geared for the production of bio-sons as fodder for the patriline. The only way to escape the terrible fate of having one's sexuality reduced to the heterosexual normativity of reproduction is renouncing it altogether. But that is only the fate of the excessive, the degraded, the stupidly greedy. The remaining men, Li Yu implies, can read his novels and conspire together to beat the karmic odds.

¹¹I use the term "sacrificer" with reference to the theory of sacrifice put forward by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss: the *sacrifier* is the person on whose behalf a sacrifice is performed. But it is the sacrificer who is the actual agent of its performance. In orthodox rituals of ancestral veneration, that role falls to sons. In the novel, it falls to wives who sacrifice themselves in expiation for husbands. See Hubert and Mauss's *Sacrifice*, trans. W. D. Hall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

¹²The novel presents the homosocial bonds of Vesperus as central to his sexual pilgrim's progress: his relationship to both his "teachers," the monk and the thief, and especially his finding ultimate companionship in the friendship of other cuckolded husbands all point to male-male bonding as important to character development for men (all puns intended vis-à-vis Li Yu as writer.)

The neglected problem of historical masculinities in China has been recently discussed in a special AHR forum; see *American Historical Review* 105 (5): (December 2000), especially the introductory essay by Susan Mann, titled "The Male Bond in Chinese History and Culture."

In conclusion, critics, both Chinese and Euro-American, have consistently said that this novel brings a sense of closure to the confusion of pleasures, reinstating a fine sense of the Confucian discipline through punishment. Fair enough—but such an emphasis ignores the ironies of Li Yu's method. Vesperus first renounces his family in favor of his own sexual desires. He then renounces those in favor of enlightenment—hardly the hoped-for patriarchal Confucian orthodox outcome. All the major male characters are joined together in the homosocial community of monks, united in their (new) desire for enlightenment. Li Yu presents their choice as the ineluctable outcome of their karmic fates, using against the patriarchal norm, even queering, a Buddhism that, in complex ways, shored up patriarchal familial arrangements in this time.

The Carnal Prayermat is still banned in the People's Republic of China. One wonders if they don't quite believe the critical fathers and mothers who blandly pronounce Li Yu's characters to be sufficiently punished. One wonders if the state—alarmed by religious revivals (Taoist, Buddhist, and Falun Gong) and arming itself with campaigns to repress and ignore HIV as nonexistent because Chinese have no extra-familial sexual networks¹³—does not instead grow increasingly anxious about Li Yu's sort of queering of the crossing of sex and religion, which raises issues thought safely dead under socialism.

¹³See Elizabeth Rosenthal, "Chinese Media Suddenly Focus on Growing AIDS Problem," *New York Times*, 17 December 2000.