

# 元 Tang Xian-zu, Peony Pavilion: 明 Selected Acts

While the Northern “variety play” (*za-ju*) was flourishing in the Yuan capital at Dadu in the thirteenth century, a very different kind of drama was also taking shape in the South. Although “variety plays” continued as a genre of purely literary drama through the Qing, the form had largely disappeared from the popular theater by the late fifteenth century. Throughout the Ming, Southern drama continued to grow in prominence, both as popular theater and as an elite literary form. These Southern-style plays (so named for their musical style and its provenance—they were written by northerners and southerners alike) continued to be the dominant form of literary drama through the nineteenth century.

Southern-style drama came to be known as *chuan-qi*, “accounts of remarkable things,” the same generic term applied to Tang tales (which provided many of the plots for the plays). For the sake of convenience, we will refer to *chuan-qi* plays as “dramatic romances.” Dramatic romances were often vast, sprawling works, usually with twenty to fifty scenes. Unlike the Northern variety play’s restriction to one singer per scene, dramatic romances allowed the free alternation of singing parts, including duets and choruses. The plots of dramatic romances were often intricate, with numerous subplots, usually weaving together one or more love stories with political intrigue and/or warfare.

As classical poetry and song lyric had dominated the middle period of Chinese literature through the Song, so drama was arguably the most popular literary form of the Ming and the first half century of the Qing. Plays were widely read and performed, with performances both of entire works and individual acts. By the late sixteenth century, dramatists were already writing with a strong sense of the history of earlier plays, and like modern film directors, they could assume that a significant part of their audience would enjoy echoes of earlier works. Famous arias were circulated in songbooks and became as much a part of a standard repertoire of memorized texts as classical poetry; and as in the Renaissance West, the use of theatrical metaphors to describe social and political life became common. One famous passage translates quite literally, “All the world’s a stage.”

It is difficult to draw the line between drama as theater and drama as literature. Not all great theater is good literature, and certainly not all great dramatic literature is good theater. There is, however, a significant body of plays that provides ample but different pleasures in both reading and performance. Many variety plays and dramatic romances are like the libretti of some famous Western operas: they were probably a delight as theatrical spectacle but seem vapid as literary texts. By the fifteenth century, however, plays were being published to be read—some primarily intended

to be read. Famous plays were often published in fine, illustrated editions, sometimes with elaborate literary commentary.

Although certain earlier dramatic romances were intended for reading as well as performance, the most important figure in literary *chuan-qi* was Tang Xian-zu (1550–1617). His four main plays are known as “Lin-chuan’s Four Dreams” (Lin-chuan being Tang Xian-zu’s toponym). Dream serves an essential role in each of these works, not only as a plot device but also as a thematic concern that touches both the Buddhist idea of the emptiness of experience and an illusionist notion of theater itself. The most famous of the four plays is *Peony Pavilion* (*Mu-dan ting*), written in 1598, and consisting of 55 scenes (340 pages in Cyril Birch’s complete translation).

An Aristotelian economy of plot is not characteristic of Chinese dramatic romances. As the play opens, a young scholar named Liu recounts a dream of a beautiful young woman standing beneath a plum tree and takes Meng-mei (Dreamed of Plum) as his name. Unbeknownst to Liu Meng-mei, the young woman in the dream is Du Li-niang, the daughter of the prefect of Nan-an. Forced by her father to study the *Classic of Poetry*, she reads the first poem, “Fishhawk,” celebrating the perfect marriage, and is so aroused by it that she arranges to go for a long walk in the flower garden behind the residence.

Her passions stirred by spring, she returns to her rooms, falls asleep, and is visited by Liu Meng-mei in a dream. Liu Meng-mei carries her out into the garden and they make love by the peony pavilion; when Du Li-niang wakes up, she is so overwhelmed by a sense of loss that she pines away and dies. But before expiring, she paints her own portrait, and as her dying wish the portrait is buried by the peony pavilion, while she herself is buried beneath the plum tree in the garden.

After Du Li-niang’s death, the family moves away; later, Liu Meng-mei, having become sick on his way to the capital, takes up lodging in the garden to recuperate and discovers Du Li-niang’s portrait. Meanwhile Du Li-niang has received permission in the underworld to return to Earth, and she visits Liu, instructing him to disinter her body. Liu Meng-mei digs up her corpse, which has suffered no decay. Du Li-niang revives; the couple marries and goes on to the capital, where Liu Meng-mei passes the examination with the highest honors.

In one of the other plot strands, Du Li-niang’s father is playing a major role in defending the dynasty from invasion. After numerous complications, including Liu Meng-mei’s being charged with grave-robbing, the final fourteen scenes manage to get the couple together with her parents, until at last, in a scene at court, Du Li-niang’s father accepts the marriage.

First comes Tang Xian-zu’s own “Introductory Comment” on the play.

### An Introductory Comment on *Peony Pavilion*

The young women of the world experience the feelings of love, but can any of them compare with Du Li-niang? No sooner did she dream of her man than she grew sick; the sickness became protracted; at last she reached the point of painting her likeness with her own hand in order to preserve it for others; then she died. Three years she lay dead; and then, from the dark

world below, once again she sought the man of whom she had dreamed; then she came to life. Someone like Du Li-niang may well be called a person with the feelings of love.

No one knows where love comes from, but once it comes, it goes deep. The living can die from it; the dead can be brought to life. And if the living cannot die from it or if the dead cannot be brought back to life, then it is not the ultimate love.

Why should the feelings of love experienced in dream not necessarily be genuine? Are there not quite a few people in this world who are living in a dream? When the relationship between lovers depends on bedding together or intimacy awaits the renunciation of public office, we are on the level of mere flesh.

The story of her father, Governor Du, resembles that of Li Zhong-wen, the governor of the capital of Wu in the Jin, and the love story involving Feng Xiao-jiang, the governor of Guang-zhou. I changed them a bit and elaborated them. As for Governor Du's torture of Liu Meng-mei to make him confess to grave-robbing, this resembles the Han Prince of Su-yang's interrogation of Mr. Dan.<sup>1</sup>

The things that may happen in a human life cannot all happen in a single lifetime. I am not someone of comprehensive knowledge, and I must always investigate matters to consider whether they are rational. But when we say that something cannot happen rationally, how do we know that it might not be inevitable through the feeling of love?

The steamy, perfervid, and sometimes precious poetry of "Waking Suddenly from Dream" (below) made it one of the most popular scenes in the play and a standard piece in the performing repertoire of *Kun-qu*, the most influential performance tradition of dramatic romance (though the scene was bowdlerized and revised for singing). In the late seventeenth-century-play *Peach Blossom Fan*, the heroine Xiang-jun is shown learning to sing one of the suites from this scene as part of her training as a courtesan. As Du Li-niang learns of passion from reading the *Classic of Poetry*, so Xiang-jun learns to be the romantic heroine who gives all for love from reading *Peony Pavilion*. In both cases, the lessons learned were not at all what was intended by those in charge of the girls' education.

WAKING SUDDENLY FROM DREAM (X)

Enter Du Li-niang and her maid, Spring Scent.

Du Li-niang [sings]:

Back from dreams in orioles' warbling,  
a tumult of bright spring weather  
everywhere, and here I stand  
in the heart of this small garden.

<sup>1</sup>These are all earlier tales whose plot elements served as sources for *Peony Pavilion*.

Spring Scent [sings]:

The stick of aloes burns away, its smoke is gone,  
thrown down,  
the last embroidery threads—  
why does this spring touch my feelings  
so much more than springtime past?

Du Li-niang [recites]:

I gazed down toward Plum Pass  
at dawn,  
last night's make-up traces fading.

Spring Scent [continuing]:

Hair done in tumbling coils  
with swallow cut-outs to welcome spring  
as you lean upon the railing.

Du Li-niang:

"Cut but never severed,  
put in order,  
then tangled again—"  
a melancholy without cause.

Spring Scent:

I have issued instructions to orioles  
and have given direction to swallows  
that hurry along the flowers,  
to take advantage of the spring  
and come see, come see.

Du Li-niang: Did you have someone sweep up the path through the flowers?

Spring Scent: I did.

Du Li-niang: Then get out my clothes and vanity mirror and bring them to me.

Spring Scent leaves and returns with clothes and vanity mirror.

Spring Scent [recites]:

Done combing her cloudlike tresses,  
she looks into the mirror,  
ready to change her lacy gown  
she adds another sacker.

Here's what you asked for.

Du Li-niang [sings]:

Sunlit floss comes windborne coiling  
into my quiet yard,  
swaying and bobbing, spring is like thread.  
I stop a moment to straighten  
the flowered pins in my hair  
to suddenly find that the mirror plunders

half my face, prodding  
my sparkling tresses to one side. [*Walks away*]  
Though I pace my chambers, do I dare  
let my body be seen entire?

SPRING SCENT:

You're nicely dressed up today.

Du LI-NIANG [*sings*]:

Note the skirt's madder red,  
set off by vivid azure,  
the opulent glitter of flowered pins  
richly inlaid with gems—  
you can tell

my lifelong love of such,  
comes from my nature—  
spring's finest touch

is seen by no man ever.

No matter if, at the sight,  
the fish dive deep

or wild geese come down

or birds squawk out in alarm,  
I only fear to shame the flowers,

to make the moon hide away,  
and blossoms will quiver from sorrow.

SPRING SCENT: It's time for breakfast. Let's go. [*They walk*] Just look!

[*Recites*]

Gold dust on painted walkways,  
half is scattering of stars,  
the moss at the lodge by the pool,  
a single swathe of green.

Walking through grass, afraid to strain  
new stockings of brocade,

feeling sorry that flowers ache  
from the tiny golden bells?<sup>2</sup>

Du LI-NIANG: If I hadn't come to the garden, how could I have ever known  
how beautiful spring was. [*Sings*]

Coy lavender, fetching reds  
bloom everywhere, here  
all left to this broken well  
and tumbled wall. Fair season,  
fine scene—overwhelming  
weather. Where

and in whose garden shall we find  
pleasure and the heart's delight?

My father and mother have never mentioned such scenery.

TOGETHER:

Drifting in at dawn, at twilight  
roll away

clouds and colored wisps  
through azure balustrades,  
streaming rain, petals in wind,  
a painted boat in misty waves,  
the girl behind her brocade screen  
has long ignored

such splendor of spring.

SPRING SCENT: All the flowers have bloomed, but it's still early for the peony.

Du LI-NIANG:

Throughout green hills the nightjar cries  
red tears of blood; and out beyond  
the blackberry, the threads  
of mist coil drunkenly.

Oh, Spring Scent!

And though the peony be fair,  
how can it maintain its sway  
when spring is leaving?

SPRING SCENT: The orioles and swallows are mating!

TOGETHER:

Idly I stare  
where twittering swallows crisply speak  
words cut clear,  
and from the warbling orioles comes  
a bright and liquid melody.

Du LI-NIANG: Let's go.

SPRING SCENT: I really can't get enough of this garden.

Du LI-NIANG: Let it go! [*They walk on; she sings*]

When you cannot get enough, you are ensnared,  
then to enjoy each  
of the twelve pavilions is wasted.  
When the first impulse wears away,  
it is better by far  
to turn back home and idly pass the day.

*They arrive.*

SPRING SCENT [*recites*]:

Open the gate to my western parlor,  
in the eastern parlor make my bed.  
The vase has purples-that-shine-in-hills,

<sup>2</sup>A reference to a story about the Tang Prince of Ning early in the 740s. He had bells hung by red threads from flowers' branches, to scare away birds that might harm the blooms. Here, hyperbolically, even the smallest bells might themselves hurt the flowers when rung.

to the brazier aloeswood incense add.

You rest here a bit while I go check with your mother. [Exit]

Du LI-NIANG [sighs and recites]:

In silence back from a springtime stroll,  
I'll do my face in the fashion of spring.

Oh, spring, now that I have become attached to you, what am I going to do with myself when you go? Ah! Weather like this really wears a person out. Where is Spring Scent? [She looks around, then lays her head down, mumbling] My goodness! Is it really true that spring's beauty can upset a person so? I've always read poems and lyrics, and in olden days young women's passions were stirred by spring, then when autumn came that passion turned to pain. That was really no lie. Now is my sixteenth year and I have not yet encountered a man who has "snapped the cassia twig."<sup>3</sup> Now that I feel this sudden yearning for springtime passion, how will I get a visitor to my lunar palace?<sup>4</sup> Once upon a time Lady Han got to meet young Yu You, and Zhang chanced on Cui Ying-ying, and lovers got together in *The Account of the Poem on a Red Leaf* and "Cui Hui's Story."<sup>5</sup> These fair ladies and talented young men first got together in secret, and they all formed marriage alliances later. [Sighs] I was born into a family of officials and I have grown up in an illustrious household. Yet I have already reached fifteen, the age to have one's hair pinned up, without having found a worthy mate. I'm wasting the spring of my life, whose years flash past me. [Weeps] What a pity that this complexion so like a flower is destined to end up like a leaf. [Sings]

I cannot purge this riot of passion,  
I am suddenly plunged into secret despair.

Young and winsome, for me must be chosen  
a match from a house of equal station,  
equal station, kin to the very gods.

Yet what blessed union would squander  
the green spring of my youthful years?  
Who sees my slumbering passion?

So must I remain retiring and demure.  
But secret dreams will lead me where?—

rolled on unseen with the light of spring.

<sup>3</sup>ie., had success in the examinations.

<sup>4</sup>Du Li-niang is comparing her loneliness to that of the moon goddess Chang E.

<sup>5</sup>Lady Han, in the Tang palace, once composed a poem of her loneliness and longing on a red leaf; she let it float out on the palace moat, where it was found by Yu You. His consequent passion for her and their love story was elaborated in a play by Tang Xian-zu's contemporary Wang Ji-de, *The Account of the Poem on a Red Leaf*. The love story of Zhang and Cui Ying-ying given in "Ying-ying's Story" (see p. 540) was elaborated and given a happy ending in the Yuan play *The Account of the Western Parlor*, which is the version Du Li-niang has in mind. The story of the courtesan Cui Hui and her lover Pei Jing-zhong involves Cui sending Pei a painting of herself, as Du Li-niang will leave a painting for Liu Meng-mei.

As I waver here  
to whom can I tell heart's secret care?  
I burn away,  
my life is cursed, unless  
I demand that Heaven tell me why.

I'm completely worn out. I'll put my head down and sleep a while.

*She goes to sleep and a dream comes. Enter Liu MENG-MEI, holding a willow (lin) branch.*

Liu MENG-MEI [recites]:

As orioles meet the sunlight's warmth  
their singing voices mellow,  
so when a man finds love and passion,  
he laughs out loud from joy.  
A whole pathful of fallen flowers

go off down to the waters,  
this is the morning young Ruan Zhao  
reaches Mount Tian-tai.<sup>6</sup>

I followed Du Li-niang back along the path, but where has she gone now? [Turns and looks at her] Ah, there you are! [Du LI-NIANG startles awake and they see one another] Here you are—I was looking for you everywhere. [Du LI-NIANG gives him a sidelong glance but says nothing] I just snapped off half a branch of a weeping willow in the flower garden. Since you are so well versed in literature, would you write a poem for this willow branch? [Du LI-NIANG is at first delighted and is about to speak but stops]

Du LI-NIANG [Aside]: I've never met this man—how did he get in here?

Liu MENG-MEI [laughing]: I'm madly in love with you.

[Sings]

Because of your flowerlike beauty,  
and your youth flowing past like water,  
I've looked for you everywhere.

And you were here,  
self-pitying in your lonely chamber.

Let's go somewhere and talk.

Du LI-NIANG smiles but won't go. Liu MENG-MEI pulls her by her clothes.

Du LI-NIANG [softly]: Where are we going?

Liu MENG-MEI [sings]:

Pass round by the railing  
where peonies stand,

<sup>6</sup>This alludes to a story of Ruan Zhao and a companion who encountered two goddesses in the Tiantai Mountains and stayed with them half a year. It became a standard figure for a love affair.

close by the great Tai-hu rock.  
 DU LI-NIANG [*softly*]: But what are we going there for?  
 LIU MENG-MEI [*sings*]:

To unfasten your collar's buttons  
 and loosen the sash of your gown,  
 You will hold your sleeves pressed  
 tight against teeth,  
 then after you bear  
 my tender attentions,  
 enjoy a moment's sleep.

DU LI-NIANG is embarrassed. LIU MENG-MEI puts his arms around her and she pushes him away.

TOGETHER [*sings*]:

Where have we met before  
 that we look at each other unsure?  
 How at a wonderful moment like this  
 could we come together without a word?

LIU MENG-MEI forces his arms around DU LI-NIANG and exerts. Enter FLOWER GOD, with cap under bound-up hair, a red gown, and flowers stuck in cap and gown.

FLOWER GOD [*recites*]:

As supervisor who expedites flowers  
 I cherish the flower-days,  
 inspecting spring's endeavors  
 another year goes its way.  
 The visitor suffers heartbreak, drenched  
 under a rain of reds,  
 and mortals are lured to be hung in dream  
 beside these colored clouds.

I am the flower god who manages the rear flower garden of the Nan-an district residence. Du Li-niang and Liu Meng-mei are fated to marry in the future. Since Miss Du was so upset after her little spring excursion, she had Mr. Liu come into her dream. We flower gods have a special tender spot for fair young maidens, so I came to watch over her, wanting her to enjoy perfect bliss in her lovemaking. [*Sings*]  
 Now the turbid Yang force simmers up

transforming,  
 and see how he, squirming like worm,  
 fans her passion.  
 Likewise her soul quivers at the crack  
 in charming azure foliage.  
 This is but shadows' conjunction,  
 fancies brought to fullness within,

things appearing inside Karmic Cause.  
 But, ah, these lewd doings have stained  
 my galleries of flowers.

I'll pinch off a blossom and let it fall to wake her. [*He goes toward the stage entrance dropping flowers*]  
 How can she linger in her dream,  
 woozy with spring?—  
 in red flecks of tattered flowers falling.

Young man, your dream is now half-done. When the dream is over, be so good as to escort Miss Du back to her chambers. I go now. [*Exit*]

Enter DU LI-NIANG and LIU MENG-MEI, holding hands.

LIU MENG-MEI [*sings*]:

For this one moment  
 Heaven gives ease,  
 sprawled in grass,  
 asleep on flowers.

How are you? [*Du Li-niang lowers her head*]  
 She nods her cloudlike coils of hair,  
 with tousled red and azure skewed.

Don't forget this!  
 how I clasped you tight  
 and languidly lingered—  
 I wish only our flesh  
 could fuse in a ball,  
 we drew forth red droplets  
 that shimmered in the sun.

DU LI-NIANG: You had better go now.

TOGETHER [*sings*]:

Where have we met before  
 that we look at each other unsure?  
 How at a wonderful moment like this  
 could we come together without a word?

LIU MENG-MEI: Your body is worn out. Take care of yourself. [*He goes with her back to where she was and she resumes her position asleep; he pats her lightly*] I'm going now. [*He starts off, then turns back*] You've got to take care of yourself now. I'll be back to see you.

[*Recites*]

She brought along a third of the rain  
 that comes with springtime's glory,  
 she slept away a whole cloudburst  
 on Wu Mountain. [*Exit*]  
 DU LI-NIANG [*suddenly waking and softly calling out*]: You've gone, you've gone! [*She sinks back into sleep*]

Enter Mrs. Du.

Mrs. Du [*recites*]:

My husband sits in a yellow hall,  
my sweet daughter strands by her window.  
Even on her embroidered dress  
the birds and flowers are all in pairs.

Daughter, how come you have dozed off here?

Du LI-NIANG [*waking and opening her mouth as if calling Liu*]: Aiyai!

Mrs. Du: Child, what's going on?

Du LI-NIANG [*getting up, startled*]: Momma, you're here!

Mrs. Du: Child, why don't you do some needlework or read something for pleasure to ease your mind? Why are you sleeping here in broad daylight?

Du LI-NIANG: I happened to go out to enjoy myself in the flower garden, but I suddenly felt upset by the excitement of springtime and returned to my rooms.

There was nothing else to do, and without knowing it, I was worn out and took a little nap. I hope you'll excuse me for not being awake to greet you.

Mrs. Du: The flower garden is too isolated—don't go there to take walks.

Du LI-NIANG: Yes, Mother.

Mrs. Du: Now go off to your classroom and study.

Du LI-NIANG: The teacher's not here so we have a little time off.

Mrs. Du [*sighing*]: When a daughter grows up, it's natural that she gets moody, so I'll just let her be for a while. As they say,

[*Recites*]

She's pulled one way and another by her children,  
a mother's lot is hard toil. [*Exit!*]

Du LI-NIANG [*giving a long sigh as she watches her mother leave*]: Heavens! Today was certainly full of pleasant surprises for me! I chanced to go into the flower garden, and with all the flowers blossoming around me, the scene stirred me. My spirits sagged and I went back and took a nap in my room. Suddenly I saw a young man, about twenty years old, handsome and so very attractive. He had broken a strand of willow branch in the garden, and laughing, he said to me, "Since you are so well versed in literature, would you write a poem for this willow branch?" At that moment I was going to give him an answer, but I thought it over, and since I'd never met him before and didn't know his name, how could I casually hold a conversation with him just like that?

As I was thinking about this, he came out with some lines about how heartsick he was, then he threw his arms around me and we went off to beside the peony pavilion, right by the railing, and we made love together. Both of our hearts were in perfect accord, with a thousand shows of love and a million tendernesses. When our pleasure was finished, he escorted me back to where I was sleeping and said "Take care of yourself" a few times. I was just about to see him out the door when my mother suddenly came in and woke me up.

My whole body is in a cold sweat. This was really one of those "life-times lived in a dream." I was all flustered when I greeted my mother, and she rambled on at me. I had nothing to say back to her because my mind was still on what happened in the dream and I hadn't calmed down. I feel a constant restlessness, as if I had lost something. Oh Mother, you told me to go to the classroom and study—I don't know any book I can read that will get rid of this depression. [*Wipes away tears and sings*]

Rain's sweet scent, a puff of cloud  
just came to my side in dream.

But, alas, the lady of the house  
called me awake from my fitful sleep

by the gauze-screened window.

A burst of fresh cold sweat  
sticks to me and stings.

It drives my heart to distraction,

my footsteps freeze,

my thoughts waver,

my hair hangs askew.

All spirit is almost spent,

and since neither sitting nor standing pleases me,  
let me go off back to sleep!

Enter Spring Scent.

SPRING SCENT [*recites*]:

Her evening toilette melts powder's streaks,  
spring dampness makes scented clothes a waste.

The covers have been scented, so let's go to sleep.

Du LI-NIANG [*sings*]:

This spring-troubled heart is weary

from roaming; it seeks

no scented broidered quilts to sleep.

Heaven!—if you care,

let not that dream be gone too far.

[*Recites*]

To idly roam and gaze on spring

I left the painted hall, [Zhang Yue]

screening willows and open plums

give overpowering scent. [Luo Ye]

I wonder where young Liu and Ruan

met the two fairy maids?— [Xu Hun]

with a turn of the head spring's east wind

breaks the heart for good. [Wei Zhuang]

In many cultures, one of the most durable and revealing conventions in early traditions of romantic love is falling in love upon seeing a portrait of the beloved or hear-

ing a description of him or her, and in the Chinese tradition, sometimes upon reading a person's writings. Liu Meng-mei, strolling in the garden where, unknown to him, Du Li-niang lies buried, finds the self-portrait Du Li-niang made before she died. The portrait shows her holding a plum branch, and the poem he discovers makes reference to willows and plums. He finds this portentous, in that his surname Liu means "willow," and the name he has taken, Meng-mei, means "Dreamed of Plum."

### LOOKING OVER THE PORTRAIT (XXVI) 玩真

Enter Liu MENG-MEI.

LIU MENG-MEI [*recites*]:

On leaves of the platan tree  
raindrops do not stay,  
on branches of the peony  
soon the breeze will draw away.  
Unclear, the portrait's meaning,  
let eyes focus there  
where barely to announce itself  
spring light makes its way.

Feeling lonely and somewhat downhearted during my travels, I took a stroll in the garden at the rear of the compound. At the foot of the Great Lake rock, I picked up a small painting on a scroll. I think it must be of the Bodhisattva Guan-yin. It was well protected in a precious case. The past ten days have been stormy, so I couldn't unroll it and take a close look; but happily the weather today is pleasant and bright, so I can examine it and offer my devotions. [*Opens the box and unrolls scroll*]

[*Sings*]

As in the Silver River of stars  
the autumn moonlight hangs,  
her body divine unrolls,  
free from attachments, self-contained.  
Here confirmed

are all her sacred signs.  
She is really in holy Potala, yet  
we chance to meet  
here by the southern sea.  
But [*reflectively*]  
why is her radiant majesty  
not set upon her Lotus seat?  
And wait a moment more!—  
why, beneath her Xiang silk skirt,  
is there a pair  
Of wave-traversing, dainty feet?

If this is Guan-yin, why does she have bound feet? I'd better look this over more closely.

I'll think a little bit about  
the image in the picture.

That's it!  
I'll bet

it's probably a small Chang E  
that hung in someone's studio,  
painted with such charm and grace.

Well, if this is Chang E, I really ought to make some gesture of my respect.

Tell me true, Chang E, will I  
snap the spray of cassia.<sup>7</sup>

But wait!—how come this Chang E  
beside her image has no trace  
of lucky cloud?

And this cracked bark  
does not seem like  
the tiny blooms of her cassia grove.

It may not be Guan-yin and it may not be Chang E, but there couldn't possibly be a mortal girl like this.

Amazed am I  
and overwhelmed:

I think I've met her once before,  
and I grope for it in memory.

Let me have a good look. What this drawn by a professional painter or by the beauty's own hand?

I wonder from where  
came this painting's maiden fair,  
beams of moon glow  
that appear

beneath the brush.

Someone like her  
would have made all the flower-kind bow low.

Her grace entirely innate,  
a hard thing to delineate;  
pale tresses, springtime wisps,  
who could even approximate?

When I think about it, no professional painter could have done this.  
Most likely only she herself  
could have made this likeness.

<sup>7</sup>That is, pass the examination, playing on the image of the cassia tree that grows in the moon.

Just a minute—if you look very closely at the top of the scroll, there are a few lines of tiny characters. [Looks] Hmm. It's a quatrain. [Reads it out loud]

Viewed up close it's obvious,  
and very much like me,  
seen afar, immortal flying  
self-contained and free.  
If someday I could join the man  
in the palace of the moon,  
it will be by the flowering plum,  
or by the willow tree.

So this really is a picture of a mortal girl amusing herself. But what did she mean by: "It will be by the flowering plum, /or by the willow tree"? This is very strange!

[Sings]

Mountain passes and Plum Ridge,  
a single swathe of sky—  
I look and wonder how she knew  
that I,

Liu Meng-mei  
would be coming through.  
I wonder what she meant to say  
by "join the palace of the moon"?  
I'll be glad—but take it slow,  
think it over carefully:  
for I am Liu, the "Willow,"  
and Meng-mei, "Dreamed of Plum"—  
why should Chang E bother  
here to fix my name?  
Lost in thought, I ponder:  
could my dream be true?

But O how she turns her gaze on me!  
From light in empty air descends  
beauty's slender grace,  
stirring spring plangent,  
billowing silk and lace.  
Springtime passions there remain  
confined between her brows  
that trace  
two azure hills of spring,  
and balmy tresses of spring haze.  
Who could lightly disregard  
two pairs of eyes  
meeting in such mutual gaze?

And I am awash in the flash  
of the turning glance  
and the unflinching sidelong stare.

But why she is holding a piece of a leafy plum sprig in her hand, just as if she were holding me?

A leafy plum sprig in her hand,  
a whispered poem, entice  
heart's passions to a fall.  
For me, a painted feast  
sates hunger; and for her,  
plum-gazing to slake thirst.<sup>8</sup>  
You, my dear,  
never open mouth's lotus-bud  
even a bit,

but smiles suppressed,  
behind the pale brushstroke  
of her crimson lips,  
give strong intimation of her passion.  
It seems she want to sadly speak—  
all she needs is a puff of breath.

Her painting is like that of Cui Hui; her poem is like Su Hui; and her calligraphy is exactly like that of Lady Wei. I may have some classical dignity in my own work, but I'll never be this girl's match. Having met her unexpectedly like this, I'll write a poem to match hers.

Her painting's excellence is due  
to nature and not art—  
if not an immortal of Heaven,  
then an immortal of Earth.  
Is he near or far—that man  
she'd join in the moon?—  
still there is some springtime here  
by plum and willow tree.

[Sings]

Plying the brush she shows her skill,  
good at writing poems,  
their splendor enters stream and hill,  
and others sing along.

I'm going to call out to her as loud as I can. My beauty! My love!  
Do you know

<sup>8</sup>That is, the painting is all he has to satisfy his desire, while the woman in the painting has the plum in her hand to take the place of him. This alludes to a story in which Cao Cao's soldiers were suffering from thirst, and Cao Cao told them there was a grove of plum trees up ahead where they could satisfy their thirst.



I am shouting my throat raw,  
 crying to my Zhen-zhen,  
 the painting that came alive.  
 I call to you to sneeze  
     a spray of heavenly petals.<sup>9</sup>  
 The feet that skim the waves  
 would splendidly descend—  
 I do not see her image stir.

So, I'm all alone here. But I'll keep looking over her portrait and examining it, bowing to it, calling out to it, and praising it.  
 For laying hands on such as her

I deserve congratulation—  
 surely Willow and the Plum  
 have some deep connection.  
 And yet, my love, your eyes do slay me,  
 image without body.

One should not too single-mindedly  
 make the painting bear reproach, [Bo Ju-yi]  
 but can one let it always hang  
 here at the courtyard door? [Wu Qiao]  
 In despair I write a poem,  
 hidden among willows, [Si-kong Tu]  
 it adds to drunkenness of spring,  
 sobering grows still harder. [Zhang Jie]

In the scene before "Secret Union," the Daoist nun who lives in the compound holds a ceremony for Du Li-niang, who roams in ghostly form about the place. Du Li-niang eventually hears Liu Meng-mei calling out to her. As scene XXVIII, "Secret Union," opens, Liu Meng-mei continues his lover's discourse, then falls asleep, to be visited by Du Li-niang.

SECRET UNION (XXVIII) *秘密结合*

Enter LIU MENG-MEI.

LIU MENG-MEI [*sings*]:  
 Where is the goddess I glimpsed?—  
 her image blurs into empty air  
     like moonlight veiling sand.  
 Bereft, I linger here,  
 lost in a wordless reverie.

<sup>9</sup>A sneeze was supposed to be a sign that someone, especially one's beloved, was speaking of or thinking of a person.

And now already the evening sun  
 sinks down into the west.

[*Recites*]

A single puff of rose red cloud  
 came down from Heaven on high,  
 her coy smile, like a blossom,  
 jade's beguiling grace.

Who can picture forth for me  
 that sweet and living face,  
 facing me and holding back  
 a passion she cannot speak?

Ever since I encountered her features, in the passionate bloom of their spring, she has been on my mind day and night. Now as the hours of night grow late, I'll spend a little time reciting those pearls of verse and mulling over her spirit. And if, by chance, she should come to me in dream, it would be for me a spring breeze passing. [*He unrolls the painting and looks it over*] Just look at this beauty, her spirit restrained but wanting so much to speak, her eyes pouring forth gentle waves. It makes me think of those lines by Wang Bo: "Sinking wisps of rose red cloud fly level with the solitary heron; and autumn waters share the same color with broad expanse of sky."

[*Sings*]

The evening breeze blows down  
 one threadlike wisp of cloud  
 from Wu-ling stream,<sup>10</sup>  
 descending and emerging, she  
 of overwhelming grace.  
 Chaste and without flaw,  
 bright against the crimson lace  
 fresh in the window screen.  
 And once again

I take this little painting  
 and hang it in my heart.  
 Dear girl, thinking of you will be the death of me.  
 So delicate, so reticent, sweet maid,  
 tender and refined, she seems  
 of noble family.  
 I envisage her,  
 swept away by a passionate heart,  
 looking in the mirror,

<sup>10</sup>"Wu-ling stream" refers to "Peach Blossom Spring," which by the late imperial period had become, in the popular imagination, the dwelling place of immortals.

and painting springlike features here,  
her feelings locked within—  
could she envisage then the man  
who, finding this, would rouse her?

She comes in flight like moonbeams,  
leaving me to find  
a magnitude of melancholy sky.

Usually I can sleep any night facing the moon. These past few nights, though—  
Its secret beauty sends  
dazzling flashes of lunar loveliness,  
a brilliance overwhelming.

They raise a clamor in my besotted heart,  
and whether night or light of day  
my troubled yearnings fix on her.  
If I did not fear to strain  
your painting by taking it in hand,  
I would lie in bed,  
arms wrapped around your image.

I think that we are surely destined to be lovers. Let me read out those  
lines of her poem one more time.

## [Reads out poem]

She chose to speak in the poem  
for one who would understand—  
of destiny shared by “willow” and “plum.”  
Her passionate feelings gush  
from the crack

in poolside rock,  
and E-li-hua, the goddess, flew  
into this painting’s silken mesh.  
I should bow down before her.

I am in torment,  
before cheeks’ glow  
and streak of brow  
scratched into my heart,  
and the one I love  
is not off beyond the horizon.

As I stay here on my journey, how can I get her to meet me for just one  
brief moment of love?

I hate how this narrow strip resists  
our double metamorphosis—  
put us on a painted screen,  
I but a straw,  
leaning against her jade white bough.

Love, can your ears, moon crescents crossed  
by cloud-wisp tresses, hear  
anything at all I say  
from this broken heart?

I’m ridiculous—  
flirting with her as I speak.  
She is the autumn moon that hangs  
by clouds’ edge over the seas,  
or azure shadow in misty skies,  
brushed over distant hills.  
She should be my companion  
in pure, unruffled ease—  
how can one even try  
to tease her into passion?

I speak as if reciting spells  
or reading out the scriptures.  
The very stones may nod their heads,  
and flowers rain from Heaven.  
Yet why does such devotion not  
bring the immortal maiden down?  
It is that she  
will not go strolling casually.

*Wind rises within, and Liu takes the scroll.*

To make the goddess stay,  
fearing the wind’s cruel caress,  
I hold fast  
to the ivory roller  
on scroll’s brocade.

I’m afraid she’s going to be damaged. I’d better find some master to copy  
the scroll.

I waste my breath!—  
how could such glorious mastery,  
Guan-yin who views the moon in water,  
come as mortal to my bed?  
Perhaps I’ll meet her somewhere in the flesh,  
then I’ll ask her how much love she feels,  
and it will be no less  
than the sense conveyed  
by this portrait of spring’s passionate mood.  
I’ll trim the lamp wick again to look closely just one more time.  
Such presence divine  
would surely be feigned  
if found in the world of mortal men.

[From within, a wind blows the lamp's flame]

Such a gust of cold wind I feel!  
Take care lest sparks fall  
on the painting's image.  
Enough now—I'll try to sleep,  
closing the gauze window screen,  
and of her dream.

Goes to sleep. Enter the soul of DU LI-NIANG.

DU LI-NIANG [recites]:

Long lying in the world below,  
but no dream ever comes,  
from my life there still remain  
so many passions.

My moonlit soul goes following  
the painting's pull,  
I find him in the sound of sighs  
borne upon the wind.

I am the soul of Du Li-niang, who had a dream of a garden in full flower and then died of longing. It was then that I painted my own features in the bloom of youth and buried it beneath the Great Lake rock. On it I wrote:

If someday I could join the man  
in palace of the moon,  
it will be by the flowering plum,  
or by the willow tree.

After wandering here several evenings, little did I expect to hear from inside the eastern chambers a student cry out with a restrained voice, "My beloved, my beauty!" There was misery in the sound of his voice, and it stirred my very soul. I softly fitted into his chambers, where I saw a small painting hung high on the wall. When I examined it more carefully, it was the painting of my own youthful features that I had left behind. On the back there was a companion piece to my poem. When I looked at the signature, it was by Liu Meng-mei of Ling-nan. "By the flowering plum—*mei*—or by the willow tree—*liu*"—there must be some destiny at work here! And now with the leave of the authorities in the dark world below, I have taken this fine night to finish out that dream begun before. And I feel such bitter pain when I think of it.

[Sings]

I fear  
how fragrance fades and powder chills  
from tears

shed on the sheer vermilion gauze,  
to Gao-tang's lodge again I come  
to enjoy the glow of the moon.

Then all at once I turn and gasp in shame  
at these disheveled coils of hair,  
I pat them straight.

Ah, and here is his room right before me!

I fear being duped by the too straight way  
that leads to Peach Blossom Spring,  
let me swiftly be sure that it is him.

LIU MENG-MEI [reciting her poem in his sleep]:  
If someday I could join the man  
in palace of the moon,  
it will be by the flowering plum,  
or by the willow tree.

Dearest!

DU LI-NIANG [listening with emotion]:  
His cries break  
the heart and make  
tears flow—

these lines from my lost poem  
he has without mistake.

I wonder if he's already asleep. [Peeks]

LIU MENG-MEI cries out again.

From within the screen where he sleeps  
he recites with fierce sighs.

Keeping the noise low  
I'll rap at his window frame of azure bamboo.

LIU MENG-MEI [waking up suddenly]: Dearest!

DU LI-NIANG (moved):  
I'll send the sweet soul off  
to draw near.

LIU MENG-MEI: Hmmm. That sound of tapping on the bamboo outside my door—was it the wind or a person?

DU LI-NIANG: A person.

LIU MENG-MEI: At this time of night you must be the Sister bringing tea? You really shouldn't have.

DU LI-NIANG: No, not her.

LIU MENG-MEI: Then are you the itinerant nun staying here?

DU LI-NIANG: No.

LIU MENG-MEI: Now that's really strange. And it's not the good Sister either.

<sup>27</sup>The Sister is the Daoist nun, "Sister Stone," who had established a small convent of the grounds of Governor Du's former residence.

I wonder who it could be. Let me open the door and take a look. [*Opens the door and looks around*]

[Sings]

Out of nowhere a lovely maid,  
whose charms bedazzle  
with uncommon wonder.

Du LI-NIANG *smiles and slips inside*. LIU MENG-MEI *quickly closes the door*.

Du LI-NIANG: Hello, young gentleman.

LIU MENG-MEI: May I ask you, miss, where you come from and why have you come here so deep in the night?

Du LI-NIANG: Guess.

LIU MENG-MEI [sings]:

I'll bet it's because of that lout  
Zhang Qian, whose raft  
has invaded your River of Stars,<sup>3</sup>  
or it must be little Liang Yu-qing  
fleeing the punishment by night  
of Heaven's officers?<sup>4</sup>

Du LI-NIANG: Those are both immortals of Heaven. How could they be here?

LIU MENG-MEI:

Are you the phoenix of bright colors  
wrongly mated to a crow?

Du LI-NIANG *shakes her head*.

LIU MENG-MEI:

Did I somewhere for your sake  
to the green poplar tie my horse?  
Du LI-NIANG: We never met.

LIU MENG-MEI:

It must be your vision is blurred,  
mistaking me for Tao Qian,<sup>5</sup>  
if not, then perhaps you strayed,

<sup>3</sup>This is a common mixing of two allusions: first, of the Han explorer Zhang Qian, sent to find the source of the Yellow River, and second, of the old man who rode a raft up into the River of Stars, where he saw the Weaver Star. Liu Meng-mei is here comparing himself to the intruder on the raft and Du Li-niang to the Weaver Star.

<sup>4</sup>Liang Yu-qing was supposed to have been the immortal handmaiden of the Weaver. She ran off with the star Tai-ho to Earth.

<sup>5</sup>Tao Qian's "Peach Blossom Spring," the refuge in the mountain cut off from history, became mixed up with another story about peach blossoms, in which two young men, Liu Zhen and Ruan Zhao, met two goddesses. In this confusion Tao Qian sometimes became, incongruously, the figure of the handsome young man that caught the goddess's roving eye. Liu Meng-mei suggests that Du Li-niang is such a goddess, but a dim-sighted one.

eloping down the Lin-qiong Road.<sup>6</sup>

Du LI-NIANG: There is no mistake.

LIU MENG-MEI: Are you looking for a lamp?

And yet you go about by night  
without a lamp?<sup>7</sup>

And thus you wish to share my lamp,  
red sleeves by my window of sapphire gauze.

Du LI-NIANG [sings]:

I am not that heavenly maid  
who scattered the blossoms of sacred scent  
in vain,<sup>8</sup>  
nor am I the scholar's lamp  
idly moist with waxen tears.

I am not like Zhao Swallow-in-Flight,  
who came with reputation stained;<sup>9</sup>  
yet neither am I Zhuo Wen-jun  
who would hold fast  
to newly widowed chastity.

You, young sir, once strayed in flowers,  
the dreaming butterfly.

LIU MENG-MEI [thinking]: Yes, I did have such a dream before.

Du LI-NIANG:

Thus did I, to oriole fives,  
go to the willow array.

And if you wonder where my rooms are—  
not so far—

just some doors down from Song Yu's neighbor.<sup>1</sup>

LIU MENG-MEI [thinking]: Yes! Turning west from the flower garden at sun-  
down I saw a young woman walking.

Du LI-NIANG: That was I.

LIU MENG-MEI: Who is your family?

Du LI-NIANG [sings]:

Off beyond the setting sun,

<sup>6</sup>This refers to the story of Zhuo Wen-jun, who, after hearing the Han writer Si-na Xiang-ru play his harp, ran off with him to Lin-qiong. Again, Liu Meng-mei suggests that Du Li-niang has the wrong man.

<sup>7</sup>Liu Meng-mei is alluding to the "Domestic Regulations" of the *Classic of Rites*, in which it says that a woman must have a lamp when she travels by night, and when she has no lamp, she should stay put.

<sup>8</sup>This refers to a story in the *Vimalakirti sutra*, in which a heavenly maiden scattered divine blossoms on the body of the sick Vimalakirti—blossoms that did not cling to his body because of his spiritual attainments.

<sup>9</sup>The Han consort Zhao Swallow-in-Flight was said to have had an affair before entering the imperial harem.

<sup>10</sup>Song Yu's neighbor" is a literary allusion to a poetic exposition that became proverbial for the beautiful "girl next door."

on the horizon  
of fragrant prairies,  
mother and father are all alone,  
none other there.  
My age is sixteen years, a bloom  
sheltered by leaves from wind,  
chaste beyond reproach.  
Spring left,  
I was stirred to sighs,  
when suddenly I glimpsed  
your manly grace.  
For no other purpose have I come  
but to trim the lamp wick in the breeze  
and chat at ease  
by the western window.

LIU MENG-MEI [*aside*]: Remarkable that such sensual beauty exists in this  
mortal world! Out of nowhere in the middle of the night I have met a  
bright-moon pearl. What can I say?

[Sings to DU LI-NIANG]

Wonder-struck by beauty,  
her loveliness beyond compare,  
a smile flashes, passion's  
silver taper.  
The full moon seems to retire,  
and I wonder  
what night this could be  
for the raft drifting through stars.  
A woman with hairpins of gold  
comes in night's cold,  
a spirit of the upper air  
to the bed of mortal man.

[*Aside*]

Yet I wonder of what sort of household  
is she the child,  
to welcome me in this fashion?

I'll ask more about her. [*Turning back to DU LI-NIANG*] Is this perhaps  
a dream that you come to visit me so deep in the night?  
DU LI-NIANG [*smiling*]: It is no dream; it is real. But I'm afraid you won't  
have me.

LIU MENG-MEI: And I'm afraid it's not real. But if I am really beloved by such  
a beauty, then I am happy beyond all expectation. How could I dare  
refuse?

DU LI-NIANG: Don't worry—I have truly set my hopes on you.

[Sings]  
On cold slopes of a secret valley,  
you make me blossom flowers by night.<sup>2</sup>  
In no way was I ever wed,  
as here you will discover  
one by good family closely kept.  
At the peony pavilion  
loving heart's affection;  
by the lake rock's side,  
shy and blushing bride;  
window of the scholar's room,  
in rattling of wind.  
Let this fine night not be lost,  
the cool breeze, bright moon  
costs us nothing.<sup>3</sup>

LIU MENG-MEI:

In amazement melts the soul  
and wakes from sleep in moonlit chill.  
A burst of sudden splendor,  
and I wonder  
if this might be  
Wu Mountain in a dream.<sup>4</sup>  
I am humbled by the way you tread  
in flowers' shade  
without the least dread,  
by the way you touch green moss  
not sliding on its slipperiness,  
by the way you ignore  
a daughter's obligation,  
feeling no intimidation,  
and, certain that there is no error,  
in the way you've chosen me.  
Look how the Dipper's slanting low,  
and how the flowers droop—  
this late at night the flowers sleep.  
Laugh merrily,  
chant in bliss,  
no breeze and moon will better this.

<sup>2</sup>This refers to a verse by Empress Wu, in which she commanded the flowers to blossom in the night and not wait until dawn.

<sup>3</sup>"Cool breeze, bright moon" was a phrase that had become, in contexts like the present one, a standard figure for a sexual encounter.

<sup>4</sup>Wu Mountain's goddess meeting the King of Chu was a standard figure for a sexual encounter, either illusory or a reality so bewildering that it seems like illusion.

Lend me of your own free will  
your lovely softness,  
and sweet charms,  
and bear as I humble it,  
humble it for but a moment.

DU LI-NIANG: Please forgive me, but let me first say one thing to you in all earnest.

LIU MENG-MEI: Don't hold back—say whatever you want.

DU LI-NIANG: In this moment I give this precious body of mine to you. Do not betray this love I feel. My lifelong wish would be fulfilled if every night I could share pillow and mat with you.

LIU MENG-MEI [*laughing*]: Since you love me, how could I ever put you out of my mind?

DU LI-NIANG: One more thing. Let me go back before the rooster crows. Don't try to see me off—so that you will stay out of the early morning wind.

LIU MENG-MEI: As you say. But let me ask your name.

DU LI-NIANG [*sighs and sings*]:

Flower must have its root,  
the jade, its sprout,  
but were I to tell, it would call forth  
too great a sound of gale.

LIU MENG-MEI:

I look forward to your coming nightly from now on.

DU LI-NIANG:

And now with me  
let us annotate and compare  
this very first flower  
in the spring breeze.

LIU MENG-MEI:

Surging manner, wild scent,  
never encountered before, [Han Yu]

DU LI-NIANG:

the moon slants past the high chamber,  
the bell before the dawn. [Li Shang-yin]

LIU MENG-MEI:

Dawn clouds go in by night,  
no trace of their passage. [Li Bo]

DU LI-NIANG:

I wonder from which of the peaks  
the goddess came. [Zhang Zi-rong]