

Reading *Jin Ping Mei* As a Satire

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ABSTRACT

Classifying *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 as a realistic novel of manners, some modern critics fault its author for failing to maintain a consistently realist approach. This paper argues that the author was not careless or inadvertently "inconsistent," but instead chose to alternate the "realist" approach with satiric and ironic modes in the novel, creating rhythmic changes in tone and mood for aesthetic effect. The novel can be fruitfully analyzed as a complex satire of manners, or a satire on society of that period, but not as a personal lampoon, a strictly political satire, or a simplistic, Class-based proto-Marxist satire. It lends itself to Bakhtinian polyphonic analysis, for it is intended to be read simultaneously at several levels. I examine the novel's satiric characteristics, the semantic range of its title and the authorial pseudonym, and the problem of interpreting some of the novel's "inconsistencies." I argue that while the novel encourages multiple interpretations, these interpretations are not indeterminate, indefinite, or endless, nor do they cancel one another out. I suggest that the controversial ending of *Jin Ping Mei* be read as relatively positive because it implies forgiveness, restoration of peace, regeneration, and growth.

KEY WORDS

"Goldology" (*jinxue* 金學)

roman à clef

satiric characteristics

playfulness

self-reflexivity

Three Doctrines (*sanjiao* 三教)

pornography

irony

impermanence

inconsistencies

femme fatale

se 色

Indeterminacy

Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng 蘭陵笑笑生

qing 情

kong 空

pluralism

Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅, translated as *The Golden Lotus* or *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, is a classic of profound complexity, a great work of art, and a rich mine of information on Chinese culture; it has attracted the attention of legions of literary scholars and cultural historians.¹ Because the work itself contains so many diverse materials and is so dense with allusions and intratextual references, it has been interpreted in various ways and on several different levels.² The studies on *The Golden Lotus* are so numerous and extensive that they warrant a new coinage, “Goldology” (*jinxue* 金學),³ in the same manner as the scholarship on *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, c. 1760) is referred to as “Redology” (*hongxue* 紅學). The controversial authorship, dating, and editions of *The Golden Lotus* have also encouraged much investigation.

Jin Ping Mei was composed under the pseudonym Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng 蘭陵笑笑生, the Scoffing Scholar of Lanling, sometime between 1582 and 1596.⁴ It first circulated in manuscript form, possibly under the title *An Account of Jin Ping Mei* (*Jin Ping Mei zhuan* 金瓶梅傳), among some of the highly-educated elite.⁵ It was not published until 1617 or 1618, under the title *Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話.⁶ For several reasons, the novel has been a controversial work since its appearance almost four centuries ago. Because of its explicit descriptions of sex, it has been condemned by some as pornographic. It also appeared to make unflattering reference to various contemporary personages and events, and its author seemed to have written about what were politically sensitive issues. As a result, it has been frequently denounced by conservative scholars and repeatedly censored by the government.

Jin Ping Mei was traditionally read by many as a personal lampoon written for the purpose of revenge. Niangong 廿公 claims in his colophon ("Ba" 跋) to *Jin Ping Mei* that the novel is "a fable created by a prominent figure of the Chia-ching [Jiajing 嘉靖] reign period whose satirical shafts were directed at contemporary targets" (Roy trans. 1993, 7). Niangong's remark both suggests the novel to be a lampoon of some historical figures and gives rise to speculations about the Jiajing (1522-1566) authorship. According to a rather incredible anecdote, the sixteenth-century literatus Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590), wishing to avenge his father's wrongful death, wrote the salacious *Jin Ping Mei* in order to lure the wicked minister Yan Shifan 嚴世蕃 (1513-1565) into reading it and dying from licking the poisonous ink. In addition, the protagonist Ximen Qing 西門慶 is supposedly modeled on Yan Shifan: Ximen 西門 (West Gate) is a play upon Shifan's sobriquet Donglou 東樓 (East Tower) and Shifan's name was also Qing.⁷ This possibly apocryphal anecdote about a filial son's ingenious revenge has been discredited,⁸ yet it metaphorically expresses the belief that pornography can fatally poison its readers. While the ancients have warned that slander is "poisonous"⁹ and that *ad hominem* ridicule can harm its target severely,¹⁰ this anecdote does not present the author as using diatribe or invective to attack his enemy directly. Rather, it suggests that *Jin Ping Mei* is a lampoon that attacks Yan Shifan indirectly.

In comparison, some critics read the novel as a political allegory which pillories the Wanli 萬曆 emperor (r. 1573-1620). In this view, the novel's second set of prefatory lyrics, the "Lyrics on the Four Excesses" ("Sitan ci" 四貪詞) warning against "liquor, sex, riches, and anger" (*jiu, se, cai, qi* 酒色財氣) reminded the contemporary reader of a recent memorial submitted by Luo Yuren 雒于仁 accusing the Wanli emperor of addiction to these excesses.¹¹ Wei Ziyun 魏子雲, a modern scholar, goes so far as to speculate that the target of the lyrics' satire is none other than the Wanli emperor (Wei 86-91, 114-115). Wei argues that because Luo Yuren submitted the memorial to the emperor in 1589, *Jin Ping Mei* must have been written after 1589.¹² Some critics also speculate that one reason that *Jin Ping Mei* was not

published until the final years of the Wanli reign was perhaps fear of incurring the Imperial Court's wrath over what could be read as a "veiled attack on the reigning emperor" (Roy trans. 1993, 464, n. 4).¹³ However, Zheng Peikai 鄭培凱 has rightly refuted Wei Ziyun's "allegorist" (*suoyin* 索隱) reading. Zheng argues that the novel's prefatory lyrics were not derived from Luo Yuren's memorial, but rather from the lyrics on the four excesses found in Yuan and Ming literature. Zheng therefore concludes that the novel is not a *roman à clef* about the Wanli emperor, but is rather a work that "instructs people not to follow the same old disastrous path taken by the novel's protagonists" (Zheng 45-46, 64).

Although the novel may not specifically satirize the Wanli emperor, it can still be read, on one level, as an allegory of ubiquitous political problems. The novel subtly, though unmistakably, satirizes the emperor, officials, and eunuchs. The novel's subject—the rise to prosperity and subsequent decline of the household of a wealthy rake and his six wives—can imply criticism of the emperor and the six board ministers. Katherine Carlitz has analyzed the Ximen Qing household as a microcosm of an empire, i.e., the state in the abstract (Carlitz 1986, 40-44). The text makes connections between family and state, referring to Ximen Qing as a "benighted ruler" (*hunjun* 昏君), for example. The competition among the wives and maidservants for Ximen Qing's sexual attention recalls the perennial rivalry among palace ladies for the emperor's favor when attempting to enhance their own power and material gains. In addition, the scheming women are associated with the eunuchs, who also embody *yin* 陰 and manipulate the emperor to attain their own prestige and authority. In the Chinese literary context, the competing womenfolk can also figure as scholars and officials who vie with one another to obtain the emperor's recognition of their talents. Furthermore, sex and money are exchanged on the levels of family and state, and there are occasions when these two levels intersect. As Carlitz indicates, Ximen Qing's wives are likened to singsong girls, and by extension, they point to the analogy between ministers and prostitutes; the inconstancy of the singsong girls also signals the "disloyalty and inconstancy of the officials who patronize

them" (Carlitz 1986, 47-48). The author draws analogies between sex and economics, employing, for example, Ximen Qing's prodigal use and eventual depletion of semen as an analogy of the state's overspending and draining of resources (Carlitz 1986, 44-47; Roy 1993, xxxviii-xl).

The novel has also been read as a realistic reflection of the corrupt society during the Wanli reign. The modern scholar Wu Han 吳晗 regards the novel as an exposé of the vices of the upper classes (ranging from the emperor to upstart merchants) during the Wanli reign—their depravity and extravagance as well as their suppression and exploitation of the lower classes (31-38). Some critics read the novel as presenting the unprecedented development of a commodity economy; they see Ximen Qing as representing a new kind of merchant in the rising commercialism of sixteenth-century China.¹⁴ Some critics subject the novel to a Marxist analysis, labeling it a "realistic masterpiece" that "profoundly exposes the various evils of the feudal society through the depiction of the prosperity and decline of a wealthy, wicked local tyrant's family" and "hints at the necessary decline of the already decayed feudalistic society" (Sun Xun 1986, 143). According to this view, the novel reveals the evils in feudalistic systems (including family, marriage, inheritance, and "slavery") and exposes the hypocrisy and selfishness of the entire society (Sun Xun 1986, 146).

Scholars have had difficulty agreeing upon the most basic interpretive framework and generic classification of the novel. David T. Roy points out that the novel has been read as (in "roughly chronological order") the following: "a roman à clef, a work of pornography, a Buddhist morality play, an exercise in naturalism, or a novel of manners" (Roy 1986, 287-288).¹⁵ Although most modern critics now rightly regard it as the first Chinese novel of manners, they continue, albeit to little avail, to seek a uniform interpretation under which all elements of the novel can be subsumed. For example, some critics have regarded it as an exposition of Buddhist enlightenment, while still others have argued for its demonstration of orthodox Confucian principles.

An alternative approach would be to read *Jin Ping Mei* on several levels at once, as has come to be the practice with other sixteenth-century classics such as the *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳) and *The Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記). The novel lends itself to some measure of all the above interpretations, but none should be seen as exclusive or sufficient in itself. *Jin Ping Mei*'s complexity can be seen in, for example, its opening up a range of themes. The novel is preoccupied with money and social status (Hanan 1961, 329), and this theme of ill-gotten wealth and rank is intertwined with the theme of sex, primarily adultery and sometimes pseudo-incest. The theme of sex is woven together with the themes of the femme fatale, dangerous passions, and death. The novel also contains Confucian themes, while espousing Taoist values such as tranquility and self-restraint. At the same time, the novel contrasts the pursuit for sensual pleasure with the Buddhist view that cravings lead to suffering, wealth and glory are impermanent, and life is but a dream.

Because of *Jin Ping Mei*'s classification as a realistic novel of manners, its satiric aspect has generally been overlooked. While Lu Xun 魯迅 notes that some parts of the novel are satirical (189, 192), C. T. Hsia faults the author for failing to maintain the novel's realism. For example, Hsia complains about the author's inconsistency in portraying Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 and failure in reconciling the "discordant images of aggressive repulsiveness and poetic delicacy," because of his "fondness for satiric jocularities" (Hsia 178). Sun Shuyu 孫述宇 and Zhang Yemin 張業敏, two modern scholars who discuss *Jin Ping Mei* as a realistic novel, are exceptional in also examining its satiric aspects (Sun Shuyu 1978; Zhang Yemin 1992).

In my view, the author was not careless or inadvertently "inconsistent," but instead chose to alternate the "realist" approach with satiric and ironic modes in the novel, creating rhythmic changes in tone and mood for aesthetic effect. Along with the novel's strengths in the realistic, erotic, moral, political, and religious spheres, one can find in it an abundance of satire of social ills and human foibles. Thus, the novel can be fruitfully analyzed as a satire, and its satiric aspects can be appreciated on their own terms. In fact, if *Jin Ping Mei* were

examined purely as a satire, its realism could even be discounted as a pretense made by the author.¹⁶ While I do not take that position in this paper, I will read the novel as a satire of manners, or a satire on society of that period, but not as a personal lampoon and less as a strictly political satire, as it has sometimes been portrayed. I read it as a complex satire, not as a simplistic, Class-based proto-Marxist satire merely exposing social evils as some of the mainland critics read it. Furthermore, even though Sun Shuyu makes a good point in comparing *Jin Ping Mei* to the Western allegory *Everyman* (105), I would suggest that *Jin Ping Mei* lends itself to Bakhtinian polyphonic analysis, for it is intended to be read simultaneously at several levels, not in a linear fashion as with the medieval allegory of *Everyman* or a topical political satire by John Dryden (1631-1700).

I. Satiric Characteristics

Satirical elements are salient not only in the author's pseudonym, the title of the novel, and the prefatory lyrics, but also within and throughout *Jin Ping Mei* itself. Satire needs "wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd" as well as "an object of attack" (Frye 224). When rendered as the Scoffing Scholar,¹⁷ the pseudonym Xiaoxiao Sheng clearly indicates that the author is scoffing at some object(s) of scorn. Xiaoxiao Sheng can alternatively be rendered as the Laughing or the Smiling Scholar, which would suggest gentle humor and Horatian, rather than Juvenalian, satire. In this sense, the name evokes the image of the Laughing Buddha, who is often depicted as having a big belly—suggesting his great tolerance and lack of ascetic harshness. The name also can be understood as "the scholar who laughs at laughs." Since *xiao* can indicate either pleasure or ridicule, this rendering can suggest self-praise, self-mockery, or meta-satire, depending upon whether the author is smiling (with complacency) or scoffing at his own jokes and comic-satiric representations, or ridiculing others' attitudes and calling attention to the foolishness of their laughing. This pseudonym hints at an ironic as well as tolerant and humorous view of life.¹⁸

In addition, since *xiao* 笑 (laugh) is homophonous with *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), Xiaoxiao Sheng can then also be understood as “The Filial Scholar” or “Laughing at the Filial Scholar.” As “The Filial Scholar,” the name supports the conjecture that the author was a filial son attempting to avenge his father. The critic Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 (1670-1698) also argues that the author wrote the novel to vent his grievances (Zhang Zhupo, p. 34, item 36, and p. 46, item 108). Zhang suggests in his essay, “On Bitter Filial Piety” (“Ku xiao shuo” 苦孝說), that the author is a filial son who is full of bitterness over the death of his father.¹⁹ The name is further related to the complex meanings evoked by Ximen Qing’s posthumous son Xiaoge 孝哥 (“filial boy”), whose leaving home to become a monk instead of continuing Ximen’s family line can be regarded as “unfilial” in a Confucian context. The pseudonym can thus be associated with the author’s contemplation and treatment of filial piety.

Multiplicity marks a characteristic of this novel. It is displayed in the semantic range of the authorial pseudonym and in the many sources and allusions which appear throughout the novel. As a genre, satire is “a literary kind which borrows its form from other sorts of writing,” according to the succinct working definition formulated by Stephanie Hammer; it is “characterized by an attack or censure of vice and evil in society which fuses the aesthetic and the ethical,” and “by its use of rhetorical and dramatic irony to effect its critique” (Hammer 12). *Jin Ping Mei* is noted for its borrowing from a wide variety of sources (Hanan 1963, 23-67). Scholars have pointed out how its allusions and borrowings are used ironically and contribute to the irony of the novel (Carlitz 1978, 30-35; 1986, 95-113). Sun Shuyu notes the author’s fascination with irony, especially with representing the divergence between surface and reality (*biaoli zhi bie* 表裏之別, 49-56). Although Carlitz, Roy, and Andrew H. Plaks have all read *Jin Ping Mei* ironically to a certain extent, the irony they have noted is only that which supports reading from a Confucian perspective. In fact, the author has employed different kinds of irony for various purposes: to enhance his critique of excesses and deviations from the norm, to expose the snobbish and wicked nature of many people, and to reveal the unpredictable twist of fate.

By classifying *Jin Ping Mei* as satire, I mean that the author to some extent intends to “correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm” (Cuddon 585). Traditionally, satire’s “moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (Frye 223). *Jin Ping Mei* does espouse basic human values (such as moderation and pragmatism) and it also supports some specifically Confucian norms and virtues. It is against these standards—both the general moral standards and the specific cultural ones—that aberrations are measured and criticized.

Significantly, all three preface-writers of *Jin Ping Mei cihua* point to its satiric and admonitory functions. The most important preface-writer, Xinxin Zi 欣欣子 (The Master of Delight), obviously regards the author as having clear moral standards and being serious about them. Xinxin Zi emphasizes that the novel was composed with specific ethical intentions and contributes to the world through the focus on moral transformation, the condemnation of self-indulgent excesses, and the celebration of virtue.²⁰ Xinxin Zi’s standards for evaluating *Jin Ping Mei* reflects the Chinese concern with the moralistic function of satire. It also parallels John Dryden’s (1693) description of satire to some extent: Dryden remarks that the essential elements of Roman satire are “the scourging of vice, and exhortation to virtue” (75), and that satire instructs us to be “happy, while we possess our minds with a good conscience, are free from the slavery of vices, and conform our actions and conversations to the rules of right reason” (76).

Furthermore, the preface-writer Dongwu Nongzhuke 東吳弄珠客 (Pearl-juggler of Eastern Wu), while conceding that *Jin Ping Mei* may be an “obscene book” (*huishu* 穢書), argues that the author’s “intentions are admonitory (*jie* 戒) rather than hortatory (*quan* 勸)” (Roy trans. 1993, 6). In other words, the author intends to caution his readers against, rather than persuade them into, sexual indulgence. A third writer, Niangong, also contends that the novel is satirical. Of course, it is possible to dismiss these three writers’ assertions as

merely excuses for the novel's "pornographic" content. Yet because the novel's manner of representation does encourage a satirical reading, I would suggest that the three writers' interpretations not be taken lightly.

Some critics, understandably enough, have found the author's moral messages conveyed in an inconsistent and ambiguous manner. The primary reason for this is the author's emphasis on aesthetic qualities, which appears to outweigh his interest in the ethical. But a contributing factor is that his philosophy goes beyond Confucianism, or conventional morality, to encompass the still larger wisdom of life. Nevertheless, the author clearly strives to "fuse the aesthetic and the ethical," avoiding, in particular, a pedantic presentation of merely moral messages. As Dongwu Nongzhuke notes, the author employs dramatic art to present his characters in an aesthetic manner and to engage his readers:

The author has availed himself of Hsi-men Ch'ing [Ximen Qing] to depict the great villains of the world. He has availed himself of Ying Po-chüeh [Ying Bojue 應伯爵] to depict the petty clowns of the world. He has availed himself of all these wanton women to depict the female clowns and villains of the world. So effective is his delineation that we cannot but break into a sweat as we read" (Roy trans. 1993, 6).

Thus, in Nongzhuke's view, because the author has captured the essence of the villains and clowns of the world and then represented this essence in artistic forms through the various characters he created, he is able to shock his readers into an awareness of truth. Indeed, because the author embeds the moral messages in dramatic presentations in many parts of the novel, his messages may not be immediately apparent. Yet his indirect and subtle way of fusing ethics and aesthetics can affect and transform the sophisticated readers more effectively than a dull and dry moralistic tract.

Alvin B. Kernan's descriptions of satire in terms of scene, character, and plot are also helpful in our appreciation of *Jin Ping Mei*. The satiric scene is crowded with "deformed faces of depravity, stupidity, greed, venality, ignorance, and maliciousness," and stresses "the qualities of density, multiplicity, and disorder" (Kernan 1959, 7, 9). According to Juvenal's formula, satire "has an interest in anything men do" (Frye 229). The author of *Jin Ping Mei* is interested in various types of people, and the novel is famous for its crowded scenes of snobs, social climbers, fools, and villains competing for money and social status. Its targets of satire are many, ranging from high-ranking officials to lowly matchmakers and mirror-polishers.

Reading *Jin Ping Mei* as a satire may change the critics' evaluation of the work. When reading it as a novel of manners, some of the critics judge that it has serious ideological and artistic defects. In the judgment of Sun Xun 孫遜, for example, the novel has no ideal, no positive characters, and no "hope and pursuit for a wonderful life"; all the characters of the lower-classes are described as "snobbish lackeys and accomplices"; the insulted women are depicted as "numb or willing to be playthings," lacking awareness and resistance. Sun Xun belittles the novel's "nihilistic" theme (in Sun's term) and concepts of karmic retribution and fatalism. Furthermore, he argues that while reflecting the practices of contemporary society, the erotic depictions also reveal the vulgar character of the author. Because these depictions are in great quantity and "naked," they significantly diminish the novel's ideological and artistic value. Therefore, the novel is inappropriate reading for the masses (Sun Xun 1986, 148).

While expressing a traditional moralistic view of literature, Sun Xun is obviously biased and even naive in assuming that the historical author was vulgar because the novel has obscene passages. The seventeenth-century writer Jin Shengtian 金聖嘆 (1608-1661) had much more enlightened views on this issue and was much more capable of distinguishing the historical author from his text and the "implied author," to borrow a twentieth-century term from Wayne Booth (71-76). Commenting on the scene of the lovers' rendezvous in *The Western Chamber* (Xixiang ji 西廂記), Jin Shengtian argues that this scene

is not “the most obscene,” as some ultra-conservative pedants claim. In Jin’s opinion, sex is, after all, a commonplace event in life, and the writing about sex is not obscene when the author’s purpose is not to exploit a sensational subject:

The event [*shi* 事] occurs in every single household, while the words [*wen* 文, or “writing”] are composed by one individual. When I borrow a commonplace event to write my words, my intention [*yi* 意] lies in the words, not in the event. Because my intention does not lie in the event, I do not avoid the obscene part. Because my intention lies in the words, I truly do not see the obscenity in them.²¹

Following Jin Shengtan’s views, we can conclude that explicit sexual descriptions do not necessarily indicate that the author is obscene. Rather, it is necessary to look for the author’s intention, to examine how the events are treated, and to interpret them in the aesthetic context of the entire work.

Not only the author’s depiction of sexual activity but also his representation of the lower classes comes under fire by Sun Xun, whose ideological bias is common to many Chinese critics trained in the Marxist tradition. He faults the author for failing to depict the servants—the “oppressed” class—positively, or to indicate their resistance and revolt. In fact, the author does depict some servants positively, or show how they exchange places with their masters, but not necessarily in a way that Marxists might approve of. In addition, Sun’s views convey his genre expectation for the novel of manners; he clearly feels that instead of focusing on the negative aspects, the novel should also reflect the positive side of the society, have positive characters, and present an Ideal.

Some of *Jin Ping Mei*’s presumed artistic “defects” will disappear when it is appropriately classified by genre(s) and examined, not primarily as a novel of manners, but as largely a satire. Generally speaking, although there is always a hint of “some kind of humane ideal” in satire, it is never stressed; instead, the author “always por-

trays the grotesque and distorted, and concentrates to an obsessive degree on the flesh" (Kernan 1959, 11). In the most obvious example of English satire, Jonathan Swift's (1667-1745) "Modest Proposal," the positive values or ideals are hardly even presented by the mad, unreliable narrator; rather, Swift relies upon the audience's responses and ability to judge the narrator's motives and sanity and test his proposal against basic human values. Thus, what is positive resides outside the text itself, since it is the values which Swift assumed his audience, or presumed audience, would bring to their reading. At the very most, the Ideal is only implied, or hinted at, within the text.

Jin Ping Mei has some kind of ideal, though it is not clearly emphasized. The novel also has a few positive characters, though they are not placed in the limelight. The novel is notorious for its emphasis on the flesh as well as such repulsive sexual scenes as Jinlian's sucking Ximen Qing's penis and swallowing the urine he passes in her mouth (chapter 72). The novel's grotesque scenes include Jinlian's murder of her first husband Wu Da 武大 (chapter 5), Ximen Qing's death from swollen glands and sexual depletion (chapter 79), and Wu Song's ghastly killing of Jinlian (chapter 87). When the author distorts reality, he does not do so merely for the purposes of sensationalism or for gratifying his or the reader's voyeuristic interest. Rather, the author "is out to persuade us that vice is both ugly and rampant, and in order to do so he deliberately distorts, excludes, and slants" (Kernan 1959, 23). These grotesque scenes are employed for the satiric purposes of stirring up repulsion, moral indignation, or fear and apprehension in the reader. The author thus uses such exaggerations to evoke the audience's awareness of human evil and folly, eliciting their judgment on excesses and vices.

The plot of *Jin Ping Mei*, like the satiric plot generally, is characterized by a near stasis despite its constant movement. As Kernan puts it, "Whenever satire does have a plot which eventuates in a change, it is not a true change but simply intensification of the original condition" (Kernan 1959, 31). The plot of *Jin Ping Mei* demonstrates such patterns as the reversal of fortune, the impermanence of glory and prosperity, and the snobbishness of society. After Ximen Qing's

death, his son-in-law, Chen Jingji 陳經濟, replaces him, having sexual relationships with Jinlian and Chunmei 春梅. Chen similarly experiences cycles of prosperity and decline: driven out of the Ximen household, he is reduced to beggary; entering Commander Zhou's 周守備 household, he is "promoted" and enjoys a good life as a false cousin of Chunmei while having a secret affair with her; but he is finally murdered by one of Zhou's retainers. The wealthy Zhang Erguan 張二官 (Zhang the Second) similarly continues the roles played by Ximen Qing: he takes over Ximen's official post and marries Ximen's second wife. He also becomes the focus of Ximen's former sponging friends; they now ingratiate themselves with him, offering him service in order to profit from him.

Yet *Jin Ping Mei* is not a pure satire, but rather a mixed satire. As Kernan points out, the "satiric stasis" of a mixed satire can be broken and the satire can bring about a comic or a tragic change (Kernan 1959, 34). *Jin Ping Mei* presents a miraculous change at the end. The controversial conclusion and the debate over whether it ends comically or tragically will be discussed in Section III.

The four essential elements of satire—aggression, judgment, play, and laughter (Test 15-31)—abound in *Jin Ping Mei*. Xiaoxiao Sheng voices his judgment and expresses his anger both directly and indirectly. In a style somewhat similar to that of Western formal verse satire, he attacks his targets directly when speaking to the audience through the comments of the narrator—one of his personae—and in verses that begin and close a chapter. In a passage headed by "Dear Reader" (*kanguan tingshuo* 看官聽說) in chapter 30, for example, he expresses his aggression through the narrator, launching a direct attack against corrupt government: he complains about the four wicked ministers and many corrupt officials, the sale of official positions, bribery and venality in bureaucracy, and heavy taxation; and he claims that all of these lead to social depravity and unrest, the impoverishment of the commoners, the rise of bandits, and general chaos and suffering (30.5a).

More often, however, Xiaoxiao Sheng attacks indirectly and artfully through the creation of plots and characters. He uses some rela-

tively positive characters, such as Censor Zeng 曾御史 (chapter 48) and Wu Yueniang 吳月娘 (Ximen Qing's principal wife), to express judgment of Ximen Qing's misconduct. Society is criticized through the authors' dramatic technique: characters are shown to behave in depraved, ludicrous, and even repulsive ways, and are associated with animals to accentuate their beastly characteristics and conduct.

The author adopts the comic tradition of drama performance for satiric purposes. For example, at their first appearance, some of the stereotypical characters—matchmakers, midwives, and physicians—recite lines which expose their own chicanery. They reveal their base motives and incompetence without being aware that they are inditing themselves, while the audience perceive dramatic irony, because they have at the time, or will soon have, other knowledge. The sponger Ying Bojue plays the role of a fool, laughing at Ximen Qing often without Ximen's being aware of it, while at the same time exposing his own shamelessness to the reader. The author satirizes human foibles and evils in a playful manner, frequently adopting puns, jokes, burlesque, and irony, provoking much laughter. Wen Bigu 溫必古 (a pun on *wen pigu* 溫屁股, "warming the buttocks"), a scholar highly recommended to Ximen Qing and hired by Ximen as personal secretary, is later exposed to be a pederast and to have revealed Ximen's secrets to others (76.23a-26a). And when Han Daoguo 韓道國, the manager of a silk store owned by Ximen Qing, is bragging to his friend about how capable he is and how much Ximen trusts him, someone rushes in to report that Han Daoguo's wife has been caught in *flagrante delicto* with Han's brother (33.10a-12b). This ironic and playful exposure of human weaknesses is the most striking characteristic of Xiaoxiao Sheng's satiric style.

II. The Paradox of the Title

Jin Ping Mei, the most often used title of the novel, "lends itself to a series of highly varied interpretations," as André Lévy points out (1985, 112).²² The title allows for literal, associative, figural, and parodic readings, thereby signaling the author's interest in satire, irony,

and the playfulness which will permeate the entire novel. Literally, the title consists of one character each from the names of three female protagonists in the novel. Jin, "gold," is derived from Pan Jinlian, or Golden Lotus, the fifth wife of the male protagonist Ximen Qing. Ping, "vase," is taken from Li Ping'er 李瓶兒, Ximen Qing's sixth wife. And Mei, "plum," or more precisely, "flowering apricot,"²³ comes from Pang Chunmei 龐春梅, who is Jinlian's maidservant and ally.²⁴ These three women are crucial characters in that they represent an excess of lust, a vice which, directly or indirectly, causes their deaths. The three names also announce the important theme of the reversal of fortunes: Chunmei rises in social status and enjoys prosperity and glory after Ping'er is dead, Jinlian is driven out of the Ximen household, and Yueniang has lost much of her former social prestige.

In addition, the title reinforces the theme of the impermanence of life, youth, and beauty—in particular, the brevity of women's beauty and youth. The plum tree or blossoming plum has been conceived as a metaphor for a beautiful woman since antiquity (Hsü 25; Frankel 5). In the *Classic of Poetry* (Shijing 詩經), the blossoming plum symbolizes a woman's youth, while the falling plum indicates the "transience of beauty and youth" (Hsü 25). In the Six Dynasties, the blossoming plum came to represent a palace lady associated with transience and melancholy (Frankel 1-3; Hsü 25). It should be noted that *mei* (plum blossoms) is homophonous with *mei* 美 (beauty) and can indirectly suggest both beautiful women and things. A number of beautiful women in *Jin Ping Mei* are figuratively plum blossoms in a golden vase, and they are depicted as aware of the transience of their youth and beauty and also as yearning for men's attention. The author is acutely conscious of the fragility of the body and the beauty as he laments through the narrator's comments on Li Ping'er's premature death: "All the good things in life are far from firm" (*shijian haowu bu jianlao* 世間好物不堅牢, 71.10a).²⁵ As represented by the sensitive author, the beauty of these women can be easily destroyed by men as well as by women's fierce rivalry with one another.

While plum blossoms are already a metaphor cautioning about the transience of life, youth, and beauty, the image of plum blossoms

in a golden vase intensifies this message. As Peter Rushton mentions, the implications of the title of the novel further admonish the reader. In their natural state, the plum blossoms have a long life expectancy, but in an artificial environment they will die young. Jin, Ping, Mei, the “three women (flowers) who enter Ximen Qing’s household (the golden vase),” die prematurely (Rushton 1986, 79). Viewed from this perspective, the title suggests that nature can be harmed by (corrupt) culture, and the natural lifespan of a person, man or woman, can be shortened by an artificial, extravagant, and depraved mode of living. For example, Ximen Qing’s constant use of artificial sexual aids, including aphrodisiacs, leads to his premature death. Because Ping’er is artificially placed with Jinlian, having no other choice but to live with her in the same household, Ping’er suffers from Jinlian’s intense jealousy and hatred.

The title also gives rise to erotic interpretations, hinting at the sexual indulgence depicted in the novel itself. In a Song anecdote, an official at Luofu 羅浮 in a dream encounters a beautiful woman who actually is the transformation of a blossoming plum (Frankel 5; Hsü 31). Thus, the blossoming plum acquires the epithet, “the fairy of Luofu” (*Luofu xianzi* 羅浮仙子), especially when it is associated with lovemaking.²⁶ In addition, *mei* can be understood as “plums.” When rendered as “the plum in the golden vase,” the title has sexual connotations. André Lévy notes that *ping*, the “flask,” is metaphorically feminine genitalia, and the title can be rendered as “plums in a golden vagina” (Lévy 1985, 112). The novel’s title, Carlitz has indicated, is a solution to a puzzle posed by the end of chapter 27. In that chapter, Ximen Qing throws plums into Pan Jinlian’s vagina for fun. Jinlian “acts as a vase (*p’ing*) for the plums (*mei*) in Hsi-men Ch’ing’s final game” (Carlitz 1981, 237). Significantly, the title also puns with the vulgar phrase *jin pin mei* 進牝美, which is translated by David T. Roy as *The Glamour of Entering the Vagina* (xvii). In an even more fanciful interpretation by André Lévy, the word *hua* 話 (speech) “designates both the story itself and the penis, so that *Jin Ping Mei cihua* could be interpreted as *The Memoirs of a Penis*, its feats, its failures and its death” (Lévy 1985, 125).

Aside from referring to universal truths about youth and beauty and to the three female protagonists literally, the title metaphorically suggests their fate. Jinlian, Ping'er, and Chunmei are plum blossoms in a golden vase, destined to die young, and associated with sexual indulgence. The *jīn* (gold) in Jinlian's name is also "metal", associated with autumn and death (Lévy 1985, 111). Jinlian is associated with death, for she is directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of the following: her husband Wu Da, the maidservant Huilian 惠蓮, Ximen Qing, Ping'er's baby Guange 官哥, Ping'er, and herself. Ping'er, just as her name "vase" signifies, is associated with both lust and generosity; she is also self-contained and restrained, often "bottling up" her anger. It is when autumn (Jinlian) ends and winter begins that the plum tree (Chunmei) starts to bloom. The three women are closely related to one another through associations, and are sometimes metaphorically interchangeable. The term for plum in chapter 27 is *lizi* 李子. Carlitz points out that the pun between *li* (plum) and Li (Ping'er) suggests that Pan Jinlian is tormented by a plum in this scene just as she is tormented by her jealousy of Li Ping'er, and Li Ping'er's "otherwise inexplicable appearance" in the episode is to remind the reader of the function of the three women (Carlitz 1981, 237-238). In this episode, Jinlian plays the role of the "vase," while Li Ping'er takes over the metaphor of the "plum."

"Plum blossoms in a golden vase" ostensibly presents an aesthetic, elegant image suggesting riches and leisure. It seems a pertinent image for a story about a wealthy household and its master's many beautiful women. Despite the conspicuous elegance and lustre of this description, the juxtaposition of these images can also have less positive implications. As Roy points out, an anonymous Song dynasty poem on plum blossoms reads, "When displayed in a golden vase I fear they are vulgar" (Roy trans. 1993, xvii). The poet of this line obviously finds a golden vase excessive and inappropriate for plum blossoms—flowers that connote simplicity and asceticism. In reading about Ximen Qing's life—his house, furniture, women, and activities, for example—we also find not genuine refinement but much vulgarity beneath the surface of riches and glamour.

Turning from considering the title as an ironic comment on the content of the novel, we can consider the possibility that the author was self-reflexively (and in a self-congratulatory fashion) describing his own artistic achievement. In any case, admiring critics such as Zhang Zhupo read the title as “a metaphor for the author’s accomplishment” (*zuozhe zi yu* 作者自喻):

. . . this book embodies so many of the beauties of spring . . . these beauties should be placed in a golden vase where they can diffuse their fragrance in a cultivated environment and adorn the desks of men of literary talent for all time. They must never be allowed to become the playthings of the rustic or the vulgar. Indeed, plum blossoms in a golden vase depend for their effect on the ability of human effort to enhance [*bu* 補] the handiwork of Heaven.²⁷

Understood on this level, the title is a metaphor for the author’s artifice, implicitly praising the author’s art—the blossoms representing the beauties in life, and the golden vase as the author’s writing that holds and captures the beauties. Taken as a whole, the blossoms and the vase symbolize the artistic novel that should be cherished by competent readers. The artificiality of the work is necessary because it supplements (*bu*) the “handiwork of Heaven.” Thus, the author’s art is the kind of artifice that does not harm nature, but rather supplements nature and enriches life. While the beauty and fragrance of the “handiwork of Heaven” are bound to disappear soon as dictated by the laws of nature, the writer distills and retains their essence by inscribing them artistically, thereby preserving the beauty for a much longer period of time.

However, the title also inspires different interpretations because the blossoming plum has even more varied connotations than those discussed so far. In addition to female beauty, transience of youth, and eroticism, the image suggests purity and virtue. The plum tree, bamboo, and pine tree are the famous “three friends in winter” (*suihan san*

you 歲寒三友), symbolizing the unbending integrity of a superior person in adversity. In the Song dynasty, the blossoming plum began to represent a lonely recluse whose talent was unrecognized and unappreciated (Bickford et al. 18-26; Hsü 25, 36). Among the frustrated literati, the Song and Ming loyalists, in particular, the blossoming plum was thought to allude to their own disfranchised state, and its blossoming and withering were used to allude to the prosperity and fall of the dynasty.²⁸ The title can thus be understood as a metaphor of the author in a different way: the author, the blossoming plum in a golden vase, has both purity and talents ("golden vase"), yet his talents are unappreciated.

The blossoming plum has also become an image of asceticism beloved by recluse-poets. At least since the twelfth century, when occurring together in poetry plum blossoms (*meihua* 梅花) and the paper canopy (*zhizhang* 紙帳) suggested asceticism. The recluse Lin Hong 林洪 (fl. 13th-century) explains in a lyric about the essential spirit behind the making of a paper canopy decorated with plum blossoms:

"The Daoist having paid his connubial debt,
Deeply dreams among plum blossoms in his paper tent."
The ancients said:
"A thousand mornings of taking [Daoist] drugs
Are not worth a single night of sleeping alone."²⁹

Lin Hong explains in the lyric that such a canopied bed is purely for sitting, incense burning, and reading; anyone incapable of sleeping alone on such a bed would be defiling the plum blossoms (Hsü 32).

Lin Hong's lyric reveals the association of plum blossoms with asceticism, tranquility, and the Taoist way of nourishing life. Interestingly, this association is also emphasized in *Jin Ping Mei*. In the "Lyrics on the Four Excesses," the poet urges the reader: ". . . abandon all thought of casual amours; /within paper curtains decorated with plum blossoms (*zhizhang meihua* 紙帳梅花) sleep by yourself"

(Roy trans. 1993, 10). Furthermore, the first set of prefatory lyrics, the four lyrics to the tune "Burning Incense," celebrate the joys of a recluse's life and clearly espouse the Taoist ideal. Similar to Lin Hong's lyric, this set of lyrics recommends such activities as incense burning, reading, and sleeping alone. Mentioning the plum tree together with bamboo and pine tree, these four lyrics extol rustic pleasure, a simple life, and the Taoist belief in restraining sexual desire in order to lengthen one's life span. These lyrics also urge the reader to adopt a Taoist outlook on life and to abide by his lot, instead of striving for riches and rank.³⁰ The ideal of simplicity and self-restraint, which appears in the novel proper only rarely, is in sharp contrast to the actions of most characters who abandon themselves to pursuits of lust, riches, and rank. Thus, in various contexts and from different perspectives, the title assumes a range of multiple, even paradoxical, meanings.

III. The Problem of Interpretation

Like its title, the novel's rich text encourages different, sometimes contradictory, readings. Some scholars, assessing *Jin Ping Mei* by the standard of realistic fiction, find its realistic credibility affected by inconsistencies (Hsia 173-74). Some critics attribute the novel's inconsistencies to its borrowing of many diverse sources, and the revisions of the text by several editors. The possibility of different "authors/editors" having written, edited, or tampered with the text appears to have paradoxical effect. Lévy observes, perhaps somewhat ironically, "These different layers of authorship may explain some inconsistencies, but at the same time they bring 'roundness,' distance and objectivity" (Lévy 1981, 183). Chaoyang Liao also feels that the apparent plurality of the text may be caused by the borrowing of sources and the various versions, rather than the author's intention. Liao argues, "the text is . . . multiplied indefinitely by the sheer profusion of adaptations and variant versions, while at the same time it also tends to be dissolved in a vast network of intertextuality where all texts become one" (83). Although Liao makes a good point in cautioning about the novel's plurality, his assertion that the text is "multi-

plied indefinitely” and “dissolved in a vast network of intertextuality” is exaggerated.

A number of critics, however, believe that the inconsistencies are intended by the author. Noting problems in the novel’s chronology, Zhang Zhupo explains that the author “has deliberately introduced incongruities into the chronology” so that his novel would not be merely “a daily record of the events” in Ximen’s household; incidents would not be represented mechanically, but vividly (Zhang Zhupo, p. 34, item 37; Roy trans., 1990, 223-224). While Zhang regards the inconsistencies in chronology as necessary for aesthetic effect, some modern critics interpret other kinds of inconsistencies as serving ironical purposes for a Confucian author. These ironical readings can be rather narrow, however, because they take Confucianism as the exclusive ideology espoused by the author.

Some of the inconsistencies pointed out by the critics are so minor that they do not constitute problems in interpretation.³¹ By contrast, other inconsistencies have prompted critical debate and are thus worth further examination. In this section I propose to reconsider some of the inconsistencies, especially the controversial issues in chapters 1 and 100. I suggest that a satirical reading can help in understanding the novel’s “inconsistencies.”

Hsia finds the novel ideologically incoherent, arguing that the author has “ambivalent attitudes”:

. . . outward conformity with Confucian morality versus a covert sympathy for lovers and seekers after individual autonomy; belief in the Buddhist doctrine of karma and retribution versus an undisguised contempt for monks and nuns; envious disapproval of the rich and powerful versus merciless snobbery toward the lowborn and unfortunate . . . the author seems incapable of resolving the contradictions in his own thinking. (181)

However, these “ambivalent attitudes” are perhaps not so ambivalent after all. And since some of them are inherent within Chinese

culture during the author's time, the author's representation of such "ambivalences" can hardly indicate that he is "incapable of resolving the contradictions in his own thinking."

The conflict between strict Confucian morality and individual autonomy, for example, was a long-standing controversy in Chinese philosophy. While early Confucians such as Mencius regard emotion and feelings (*qing* 情) as good (Tu 529), the Song Neo-Confucians such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) stress the separation between heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理) and human desire (*renyu* 人欲), arguing that passion can cause danger to human nature. Yet some Ming Neo-Confucians such as Luo Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465-1547) reject the idea that physical desires are evil (de Bary 201). During the late Ming and early Qing, the arguments for human feelings and desires became even more forceful. Opposing the dichotomy between principle and desire, Chen Que 陳確 (1604-1677) contends, "the heavenly reason is just to be seen in human desires; where the desires exactly fit is where the reason of Heaven is."³² Yan Yuan 顏元 (1635-1704) also argues that *qing* is "the manifestation of the inherent moral propensity of man" (Tu 531). The novel's presentation of Confucian morality and human passion thus in part reflects such philosophical discourse and debate. The author basically affirms human desire, though he demonstrates its danger when it is carried to an extreme.

Hsia's argument about the author's two seemingly contradictory attitudes towards Buddhism is also discussed by Chün-fang Yü. Yü suggests that "Buddhist beliefs and practices are treated as deep-rooted and pervasive social realities," yet "it is against monks' supposed immorality" that the author of *Jin Ping Mei* directs his satire. Yü points out that both the descriptions of the importance of Buddhism in Chinese society and the depictions of immoral monks and nuns reflect the historical reality, noting how the eminent late-Ming monk Zhuhong 株宏 (1535-1615) had a low estimation of his fellow monks (Yü 140-143). Zhuhong criticized his fellow monks for their "arrogance and indolence," lack of discipline, "pursuit of non-Buddhist interests and avocations," "greed for donations," and "love of material comforts" (Yü 174-191). Yet Zhuhong's criticism of the

monks did not distract him from worshipping Buddha. Xiaoxiao Sheng's satiric portraits of the monks and nuns are partly a reflection of his contemporaries' generally unfavorable impression of the Buddhist and Taoist priesthood, though he does portray a few saintly monks as ideals. Similar to Zhuhong's position, Xiaoxiao Sheng's satire of the priesthood does not conflict with his acceptance, to some extent, of Buddhist and Taoist truth.

As for Hsia's point about the author's attitudes toward characters of different classes, toward the rich and the lowborn, we find that it is not inconsistent, either. Hsia at one point suggests that *Jin Ping Mei* may be "a book consciously designed for the middle class" because of "its merciless ridicule of all people of humble status" (183), and Sun Xun, as we discussed previously, complains about the author's negative portrayal of the lower classes. In fact, the author ridicules characters from a wide range of classes and professions. By no means are his attacks focused on the lower classes alone. As a highly educated member of the male elite, he identifies himself neither with the rich merchants nor their lackeys. While depicting Ximen Qing as depraved, the author also freely satirizes his servants. Han Daoguo, the manager of Ximen Qing's silk store, for example, is shown to be shameless and disloyal: Han earns additional profit by letting Ximen sleep with his wife, Wang Liu'er 王六兒; when Ximen dies, Han runs away with one thousand taels of Ximen's silver; and Han later earns a living by prostituting his wife and daughter. Although the few relatively positive characters are of the middle to higher classes, the author does not refrain from ridiculing his own occupation and social stratum; he satirizes scholar-officials as well as scholars who are unemployed or who serve as personal secretaries in wealthy households. It is also worth pointing out that the author's representation of the lower classes is not particularly biased. He allows some members of the "oppressed class" to enjoy a happier ending than most of their masters and mistresses at the end of the novel when warfare and chaos dominate the scene: Ximen Qing's servant Dai'an 玳安 marries the maidservant Xiaoyu 小玉 and is adopted by Yueniang as heir; and Wang Liu'er, after her

husband's death, marries Han Er 韓二, her husband's brother and one of her former paramours, and they lead a good life together.

Moving from a general to a more specific discussion of the "inconsistencies," we will begin with the first part of chapter 1. Chaoyang Liao, in a close reading, detects "a double point of view." He notes that in the section in which the narrator discusses *qing* 情 (love or passion) and *se* 色 (sexual attraction or beauty), Yuji 虞姬 (the favorite of Xiang Yu 項羽, Hegemon-King of Western Chu) and Lady Qi 戚夫人 (the consort of Liu Bang 劉邦, Emperor Gaozu of the Han 漢高祖) are first depicted in the role of femme fatale, then suddenly as pitiful women (86). Liao states that some might see this as an "inconsistency" and attribute it to "a confused author trying to fuse his own voice into borrowed materials," while others might prefer "taking either of the two voices as ironic and then proceeding to elaborate on the other, 'real' side of the narrator," in order to argue for authorial intention (Liao, 86-87). Liao attempts to understand and explain how the two voices "may point to other traces of the disjunction" (87).

The *qing-se* section is followed by the famous episode of Wu Song's slaying of the tiger—an episode the author borrows from *Shui-hu zhuan* 水滸傳. This episode is a necessary and dramatic connection to Wu Song's brother Wu Da as well as Wu Da's wife Pan Jinlian. The author of *Jin Ping Mei* further connects this episode with the theme of love and beauty, claiming that the novel depicts "an instance of a beautiful woman who is embodied in a tiger and engenders a tale of the passions" (1.3a; Roy trans. 1993, 16), thereby shifting the focus from the hero to the beauty. He makes the tiger a metaphor of Jinlian and uses Wu Song's killing of the tiger to foreshadow Wu's future slaying of Jinlian.

Examining the *qing-se* section and the subsequent tiger episode together, Liao suggests, "Our reading . . . can further be divided in two: the imposition of meaning and the revelation of non-meaning. This is the final point of undecidability; one cannot choose any direction without imposing one's own preferences and desires" (88). However, I would argue that the "double point of view" in the first part of chap-

ter 1 is not contradictory and does not lead to the “indeterminacy” of the text; the text does yield meaning, and the meaning is not necessarily “imposed” on it by the critic. The *qing-se* section is a prologue to the main stories in chapter 1. It is by nature introductory and evocative; rather than offering a comprehensive disquisition to persuade the reader, it serves the purpose of *xing* 興 (“to stir, arouse”), pointing to the themes and motifs in a manner that would interest the reader.

The narrator retells the stories of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang, using details to suggest the themes and motifs in the novel. While acknowledging that both *qing* and *se* are common to humans, he argues that even great heroes can be ruined by love and lust for women. Xiang Yu and Liu Bang have to compromise their ambitions because of infatuation with their favorite women. The main theme is the danger of the excess of *qing* and *se*:

Gentlemen who presume on their talents are lacking in virtue, and women who flaunt their beauty [*se* 色] are dissolute [*qing fang* 情放, “abandon passions”]. If only they were able to maintain the fullness of their gifts while taking care to avoid the overflow of excess, they could be upright men and virtuous women. What need would they have then to fear the calamity of unnatural death? (1.3a; Roy trans. 1993, 15-16).

While the narrator, in this passage, appears to criticize primarily women for excess in *se* and *qing* in this passage, he is in fact urging moderation in general and for all people. Warning against the flaunting of one’s talents, he also cautions that both a dissipated person and that person’s partner(s) will encounter “the calamity of unnatural death.” The reader is reminded of the prefatory “Lyrics on the Four Excesses” and aware that the author wishes to focus on the excess of *se*.

Along with this major theme, this section offers a number of minor themes through lyrics, the representations in the stories, and the narrator’s comments: the themes of the femme fatale, of female jeal-

ousy and rivalry, of the benighted ruler or hero, and of sympathy for women, for example. As Hanan has pointed out, in this section the author borrows a lyric from an early story “Wenjing yuanyang hui” 勿頸鴛鴦會 which tells about a licentious woman’s adulteries and final death by murder; the author thus regards his novel as also dealing with a “*femme fatale* of inordinate sexual appetite who ruins physically or financially all the men she captivates” (Hanan 1963, 33). While conceding that the author uses this to draw a moral, cautioning his reader against “being misled by such women,” Hanan notes that in fact “the conception of the *femme fatale* rôle has little place in the novel” (Hanan 1963, 34). Pointing out the author’s borrowing of some other sources that treat women more sympathetically, Hanan suggests that the author conceived the character of Jinlian with sympathy: “for despite the narrator’s explicit moral, the girl of the story remains a somewhat pathetic creature, betrayed by old man and young hero alike” (Hanan 1963, 33).

Indeed, while the familiar *femme fatale* theme is present, the author is also interested in exploring the *qing se* issue from a balanced perspective. Acknowledging the potential destructiveness of women, the author nevertheless points out that it is men (even superior ones and heroes) who fail to control their emotion and allow themselves to be inordinately infatuated with women. In retelling the famous story of Xiang Yu and Yuji, the author re-presents it in a way which reveals that Xiang Yu is at fault. The author directly indicates that Xiang Yu makes the wrong choices because of his infatuation with Yuji: “Although Hsiang Yü was defeated, he might have sought help from the area east of the Yangtze River, but he could not bear to part with Yü-chi” (1.1b; Roy trans. 1993, 13). Thus, Xiang Yu is shown to be responsible for his own defeat and death, since Yuji does not interfere with his decision-making. Xiang Yu is also responsible for Yuji’s death: it is after Xiang Yu has revealed his worries about the potential of Liu Bang’s seizing her for pleasure that Yuji feels, in order to demonstrate her loyalty to Xiang Yu, she must commit suicide.

Similarly, in retelling the story surrounding the historical figure of Lady Qi, the author’s dramatic technique suggests male responsi-

bility. He states that, although Emperor Gaozu is infatuated with Lady Qi, she still feels uneasy because of the jealousy of Empress Lü 呂后, the emperor's principal wife. The author describes in detail how, when the ailing Emperor Gaozu "lay with his head in Lady Qi's lap," she begins weeping, saying that she worries her son will have no one to depend upon once the emperor dies. Emperor Gaozu then promises her that he will depose the heir apparent and set up Lady Qi's son in his stead. When Empress Lü hears about this plan, she intervenes so that the emperor cannot keep his promise to Lady Qi. After Emperor Gaozu's death, Empress Lü mutilates Lady Qi and kills her son. Thus the author dramatizes how Lady Qi uses her wiles—through showing tenderness to the emperor when he is sick and psychologically vulnerable—to gain special favor; how the emperor is deluded by love into making inappropriate decisions; and how the emperor's favoritism causes jealousy, leading to Empress Lü's cruel treatment of Lady Qi and the murder of one of the emperor's heirs. In her attempt to influence the emperor, Lady Qi reveals some potential for becoming a "femme fatale." Empress Lü appears indeed to be a jealous and cruel "femme fatale." Yet the author implies that the dire consequences follow from Emperor Gaozu's excessive infatuation with Lady Qi; and if Emperor Gaozu had not attempted to depose the heir apparent, Empress Lü might not have treated Lady Qi and her son so cruelly after the emperor's death.

With the understanding of the author's attempt at a balanced view, we do not find two contradictory and disjunctive voices in this section. The author complicates the stereotype and forces the reader to "reevaluate" the clichéd view of the femme fatale. The author not only shifts most of the responsibility for the heroes' destruction to the heroes themselves, but also suggests that the heroes are partially responsible for the deaths of their beloved women. In the author's depiction, neither Yuji nor Lady Qi quite reaches the level of a femme fatale. Despite Lady Qi's attempt to sway the emperor by her beauty and tenderness, she is shown to be pitiable—motivated by her fear of the empress' jealousy, her desire for survival, and most of all, her love for her son. The author elaborates on how, because of the circumstances,

the emperor is unable to keep his promise, and how sad Lady Qi feels. Thus the author's transition to the theme of the pitiful woman is coherent because in his retelling of the historical events he has prepared the reader to anticipate this theme.

This section is also a mild but many-barbed satire. It debunks both the heroes and the beauties to a certain extent, exposing their weaknesses and blind spots. The heroes are shown failing to control their own emotions or protect their beloved ladies: "The favorites of Liu Pang and Hsiang Yü are much to be pitied;/These heroes proved powerless to protect their beauties" (1.3a; Roy trans. 1993, 15). Instead of thinking up stratagems to win a battle and reclaim lost territory, Xiang Yu worries about losing his favorite to his adversary; instead of finding ways to protect Yuji, Xiang Yu indulges in self-pity and jealousy. Similarly, Liu Bang fails to exercise self-restraint in emotional matters. He does not realize that even when occupying the exalted status as emperor, he is still not in control of everything as he assumes himself to be. Nor is he wise enough to make appropriate arrangements in advance to insure the safety and well-being of his beloved consort and son. The beauties also have their own weaknesses. As women, they are powerless and have to depend upon men for status and power. Yuji may possess "the kind of beauty that can topple kingdoms" (1.1b; Roy trans. 1993, 13), yet her beauty cannot win her long-term security and prosperity. Unable to choose her own course of life and follow a lord of her own choice, she further comes to a pitiable end because she chooses to perish along with her lord—however imperfect he is. Lady Qi may have thought that she could depend upon Emperor Gaozu's favor, and that she has won his promise in setting her son up as heir apparent. Yet her hopes are dashed when the emperor reneges on his promise because of political pressure. She fails to recognize the limits of her master or to calculate possible consequences correctly.

As a prologue, this section also foreshadows future events in the main story. The author expresses regret that Lady Qi, as a concubine suffering because of the jealousy of the principal wife, suffers even more than Yuji, who monopolizes Xiang Yu's favor; Lady Qi even

dies without a tomb (1.3a). In the main story, Ximen Qing can gratify his women sexually and provide well for his favorites, but he is eventually powerless to protect his beauties.³³ Ximen Qing's favoritism of Ping'er causes intense rivalry among his womenfolk. Like Lady Qi, Ping'er suffers much from Jinlian's jealousy and is unable to protect her son from "murder" by Jinlian. Ping'er dies of an illness which is brought about by her bottled-up anger with Jinlian as well as by Ximen Qing's insisting on having sex with her during her periods. Ximen Qing's favoritism thus ironically leads to Ping'er's suffering from others' jealousy and to her physical debilitation. Nor can Ximen Qing protect his other favorite, Jinlian. Similar to Lady Qi, Jinlian is gruesomely murdered, mutilated, and almost ends up dying without a tomb. Jinlian's body is not buried until Chunmei finds out about her death and sends servants to give her a proper burial.

While the beginning of *Jin Ping Mei* displays relatively minor internal "inconsistencies," its conclusion presents major difficulties for critics. In chapter 100, Yueniang is fleeing from invading barbarians together with her brother, her son Xiaoge, and her servants Dai'an and Xiaoyu. She plans to take refuge with Yun Lishou 雲離守—Xiaoge's prospective father-in-law—and to have Xiaoge marry Yun's daughter. Along the way, Yueniang encounters the monk Pujing 普靜, who asks Yueniang to fulfill a former promise and let him take Xiaoge away. Yueniang refuses. That night, while they are staying at a temple, Yueniang's maidservant Xiaoyu peeps into a room and sees the following: the monk Pujing recites a Buddhist sutra for a long time to dissolve the grievances and hatred of the ghosts of those who have died violent deaths; the souls of some deceased major characters (including Ximen Qing) subsequently appear and announce to the monk that they are to be reborn into another life. At the same time, Yueniang is having a frightful dream in which her son Xiaoge is murdered. When she wakes up, she finds out from the monk that Xiaoge is in fact the reincarnation of Ximen Qing, and if she keeps him, he will squander the family property and die a gruesome death. As a result, Yueniang agrees to let Pujing take her son away to be a monk.

This conclusion obviously does not strike the seventeenth-century critic Zhang Zhupo as inconsistent with earlier parts of the narrative. In discussing the conclusion, Zhang is merely interested in pointing out the main theme and the author's marvelous writing technique. According to Zhang, the conclusion is a demonstration of "emptiness" (*kong* 空), which is driven home only when Xiaoge becomes a monk. And the author makes Ximen Qing himself—in the reincarnation of Xiaoge—take vows in order to demonstrate Buddhist doctrine. Zhang praises the author's compassion in hoping that "even those who die unrepentant may be able to correct their faults in the life to come." Zhang regards the scene in which the major characters "reappear in a phantasmagoria only to fade finally from sight, one after the other," as the "grand finale," and he marvels at the author's ability to lay down narrative threads in advance and to resolve all of them into the "great void" (Zhang Zhupo, 31-32, item 26; Roy trans., 1990, 217-218).

However, the modern critic Hsia finds the conclusion a "glaring example of inconsistency" (173) and wonders how Ximen Qing can be reborn at the time of his death while his soul wanders for another fifteen years waiting to be reborn. Yet Hsia attempts to suggest two possibilities: Ximen Qing "is able to cancel out his sins by assuming the holy life of his own son" or "he is going to work out his salvation through a series of reincarnations while Hsiao-ko merely stores merit in his behalf by living a life of purity and renunciation" (174). The second possibility suggested by Hsia is closer to the author's conception of the redemption process for Ximen Qing. Although it may seem unusual for Ximen Qing to be reborn twice and in two different incarnations, it is not inconsistent with the rest of the novel and is in fact necessary from the author's point of view, as we will discuss below. Hsia rightly proposes that "the novel ends hopefully on a note of Buddhist redemption" (173), but he argues that the author is primarily a "Confucianist regretting the religious necessity for renunciation," and the author's "Confucian sympathies therefore place the Buddhist scheme of redemption in the perspective of tragedy" (182-183). Yet, while the author represents Xiaoge's renunciation as regrettable from

the Confucian perspective, he shows that it is by no means a tragedy from the Buddhist perspective.

Paul V. Martinson argues against Hsia's "literal" reading. Martinson asserts that the conclusion is "a scene of multiple deceptions" conjured up by Pujing. These deceptions include Xiaoyu's "vision of the phantom appearance and reincarnations," Yueniang's "unreal dream of coming disaster," the "transmogrification" of Xiaoge, and "the spiriting away of the boy." Martinson contends that in Buddhist categories "compassion requires deception for its fulfillment." Suggesting that compassion "opens up this reality once again to indeterminacy," and the reader, "now wiser, will be able to make a richer and more satisfying effort of his own," Martinson concludes that *Jin Ping Mei* belongs to the genre of wisdom literature (54).

While Martinson's reading of *Jin Ping Mei* as wisdom literature is plausible, his assertion of the conclusion as "a scene of multiple deceptions" is less persuasive. A reader can still obtain wisdom through reading some of these scenes literally from a Buddhist perspective, instead of seeing all of them as "deceptions." An examination of the context and the representation of these "deceptions" suggests that while the "transmogrification" of Xiaoge is presented as a vision conjured up by Pujing, the scene witnessed by Xiaoyu and "the spiriting away of the boy" are presented as literal. In comparison, Yueniang's dream is shown to be partially psychological (caused by her anxiety) and partially conjured forth by Pujing in order to enlighten her.

The overall effect and meaning of the ending are also debated. Rejecting Hsia's reading of the conclusion as possibly positive, Carlitz argues that the ending is pessimistic and we "cannot take the religious language of the final chapters at face value" (Carlitz 1986, 142). Interpreting the novel as expounding Confucian morality and self-cultivation, Carlitz reads the author's retributive scheme as ironic (Carlitz 1986, 85-86). Carlitz argues that Buddhism and the Buddhist monks and nuns are discredited, that Xiaoge's fate should be read as "retribution" instead of as "regeneration," and that the adoption of Dai'an as son and heir is ironic and makes "the cynical comment that

the evils of the book can be expected to recur" (Carlitz 1986, 138-142).

Similarly arguing that the conclusion is far from sanguine, Roy champions a Xunzian, Confucian interpretation for three reasons: First, Xiaoge ("Filial Son") in fact "violates the cardinal duty of a filial son" by entering "the celibate life of the Buddhist clergy." Second, the survival of Xiaoge as a monk—"half a man"—coincides with Emperor Gaozong's 高宗 founding of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), which is only "half a dynasty," because it governs only one part of China. And finally, "just as it is a Buddhist monk who spirits Hsiao-ko away into a celibate life, so it is Buddhism that emasculates Hsüntzu's hard-headed brand of orthodox Confucianism" (Roy 1993, xxxiv). The interpretations of Carlitz and Roy are only partially successful, however, because the author, while espousing Confucianism, in fact does not totally reject Buddhism.

Similarly interesting is Plaks' Confucian reading—he reads *Jin Ping Mei* ironically on many levels and also as a parody of "the ideal of self-cultivation" (Plaks 1987, 123-137, 157). In addition, Plaks argues that the "obtrusive didactic framework of Buddhist retribution" is unconvincing, and that by the time *Jin Ping Mei* was composed the use of "Buddhist didactics" had been incorporated into the genre of novel "to provide fixed structural outlines even where the doctrinal message does not really apply" (Plaks 1987, 135, 137). While Plaks' assertion about Buddhist retribution serving merely as a superficial structural device in *Jin Ping Mei* is dubious, he at least acknowledges that the Buddhist notions of karmic retribution, *se* (appearance, illusion), and *kong* (emptiness) do have significance, and he follows Zhang Zhupo in suggesting that we understand "the dual relation of illusory reality and emptiness . . . worked out in the novel as two sides of the same coin" (Plaks 1987, 180).

Some critics have argued against the ironic readings suggested by Carlitz, Roy, and Plaks. Liao argues that the critic's "insistence on continuity and coherence" leads to "justifying one's interpretation by explaining contradictory elements in the text as ironic" (78). While Liao is right in pointing out the problems of an ironic reading based

on Confucian interpretation, his solution is not very convincing. According to Liao, "The difficulty of the work is indicative that it has close affinities with a 'negative hermeneutics,' with principles of indeterminacy and the open text." Liao goes on to suggest that the critics "turn from reading as the unexamined procedure of discovering a fiction of the intending subject to reading as the process of both deconstruction of theme and voice . . ." (81). Similar to Liao, Peter Rushton also criticizes ironic readings in a Confucian framework. He argues that Roy's "Xunzian interpretation" and Carlitz's "revalorized reading" are "Confucian reductionist interpretations," and Plaks' "ironic readings based on a Neo-Confucian interpretation" are also too single-minded and univocal (Rushton 1994, 6, 60).

While the novel encourages multiple interpretations just as its title does, these interpretations are not indefinite and endless as Liao claims, nor do they cancel one another out. The novel is open to interpretation to a certain extent, but the meaning is not entirely "indeterminate." Thus, Liao goes too far in his claims for an infinity of interpretations. Rushton is right in contending that *Jin Ping Mei* is "fundamentally a novel with a pluralistic vision" (Rushton 1994, 4). However, it is not indefinitely pluralistic; it is pluralistic to the extent that it incorporates the ideas and perspectives of the Three Doctrines (*san-jiao* 三教) as well as some other indigenous Chinese beliefs such as fortune-telling. In this "pluralistic" vision, Confucianism is the most prominent, while Buddhist and Taoist thoughts are also conspicuous.

Viewed in the context of the author's contemporary society which witnessed the synthesis of the Three Doctrines, the conclusion is perhaps not inconsistent. The author continues his satire in the conclusion, while tempering it with pragmatism and compassion. He satirizes and punishes major protagonists such as Ximen Qing, Pan Jinlian, and Li Ping'er, yet, as Zhang Zhupo argues, he also has compassion for them. Ximen Qing is given a series of punishments: both his beloved concubine Li Ping'er and son Guange die, he dies, his concubines are purchased and enjoyed by other men, his servants and friends steal from his household, his daughter is tortured by his son-in-law and commits suicide, and his family is falling apart. From a Chi-

nese point of view, depriving Ximen Qing of his posthumous heir—his last hope—is the *coup de grace*. One need only recall Ximen's deathbed wish to see the author's deliberate satire: besides asking his wife and concubines to be chaste and harmonious after his death, Ximen is keenly intent upon instructing Yueniang to bring up her baby properly, so that the child would "preserve" Ximen's family estate (79.20b).

As a mixed satire, *Jin Ping Mei* has some change in its conclusion, despite the "near stasis" of its plot. The author suggests that some characters' compassion and pragmatism can change life a little for the better. While the author deprives Ximen of his son Xiaoge to achieve poetic justice, the manner of deprivation is significant. Xiaoge does not die prematurely like Guange, but becomes a monk. The author also has the monk Pujing quote the following saying to persuade Yueniang to yield her son: "When one son leaves the family to become a monk, nine ancestors will ascend to heaven" (*yizi chujia jiuzu shengtian* 一子出家·九祖升天, 100.15b). Seen from a Buddhist viewpoint, becoming a monk is not necessarily unfilial, but can in fact be the most filial act. Pragmatically speaking, since Ximen's family line is doomed to be terminated one way or the other, it is far better for Ximen's household to have Xiaoge become a monk than to have Xiaoge fulfill Pujing's prophecy—stay at home, dissipate all the family property, and die a violent death (100.15b). Although it is extremely painful for Yueniang, the mother, to part with her son, she makes a pragmatic choice which is better for all concerned.

Xiaoyu's vision of Pujing's recitation of incantation and the appearance of ghosts also serves a variety of functions. By having Xiaoyu witness the scene, the author stresses its credibility and invites the reader to participate in it. Pujing is one of the author's personae, attempting to intercede with Buddha for the characters and to resolve their grievances, wrongs, and hatred. Through Pujing, the author proposes that forgiveness is the only way to stop the vicious cycle of hatred and revenge. The gory appearances of the ghosts remind the reader of the punishment of characters such as Ximen, Ping'er, and Jinlian: they have suffered premature and gruesome deaths and have

been wandering for quite some time after death, unable to be reborn. Because of the mediating effort of the compassionate Pujing, these characters are redeemed and reincarnated.

Reading that the deceased protagonists are reincarnated in the same gender and class as in their previous lives, a more cynical critic may see a potential for repetition of the same pattern. Yet even if there is a chance of the reborn characters repeating the misconduct that marred their previous lives, the rebirth itself still affords them new opportunities to redeem themselves. It therefore signals a new beginning of life, however small the possibility of change might be. In addition, the rebirth implies the protagonist's own assumption of human responsibility. Ximen Qing's sins are so great that he cannot be redeemed merely by being reborn as Xiaoge. While Xiaoge will become a monk to help in Ximen's redemption, Ximen will have to be reborn once more to take personal responsibility for his past misdeeds, to repent his sins, and accumulate moral credit as well.

Turning to Yueniang's dream, I agree with Rushton that it should be taken "at face value." But I do not read it as literally as Rushton does, who sees the dream as revealing what will happen in the future—Yun Lishou will murder Yueniang's brother, Xiaoge, and Dai'an, and will attempt to rape Yueniang (Rushton 1994, 62). Rather, I regard this dream as possibly conjured up by Pujing to enlighten Yueniang. Revealing potential dangers—not necessarily what will actually happen—its purpose is to frighten Yueniang into awareness. I see it as being influenced by the dreams in Buddhist literature that are intended to awaken the dreamer. For example, in the tale "Suoluona biqu wei Eshengwang suo kunao yuan" 娑羅那比丘爲惡生王所苦惱緣, a Buddhist master is unable to dissuade the prince from fighting with a neighboring king. Then he causes the prince to have a terrifying dream. When the prince wakes up, he decides against fighting.³⁴ The scenario in *Jin Ping Mei* is similar: when Yueniang refuses to give Xiaoge to Pujing, Pujing asks her to stay overnight at the temple (100.10a-b); Yueniang has this frightful dream during the night, and when she wakes up, she tells Pujing that she has "become enlightened" (*xingwu le* 省悟了, "to have understood," 100.15a). In order to

convince Yueniang that her decision to give up Xiaoge is sound, Pujing further conjures up the “transmogrification” of Xiaoge: Pujing touches the head of the sleeping Xiaoge with his staff, and when Xiaoge turns around, Yueniang sees that he is Ximen Qing “with a heavy cangue on his neck and chains around his waist” (100.15b). Pujing then gives Xiaoge a new name: Mingwu 明悟, or “Clear Enlightenment” (100.16a). These scenes are thus designed to enlighten Yueniang, as well as the reader, about illusion and emptiness.

In one of the author’s last satiric twists of the plot, Ximen Qing is replaced by his favorite servant Dai’an, who is adopted by Yueniang, renamed Ximen An 西門安, and made heir to Ximen’s property. The denouement serves as more retribution for Ximen: contrary to Ximen’s deathbed wishes, Yueniang can neither have Ximen’s son as heir nor keep the household intact along with Ximen’s concubines; instead, as a widow without a son, she has to adopt her servant in her attempt to survive, keep chaste, and preserve the property. Since Dai’an has been an accomplice to many of Ximen’s misdeeds and has been depicted as quite a scoundrel earlier in the novel, this new arrangement may suggest Dai’an’s repetition of Ximen’s excesses and wickedness.

However, while the adoption of Dai’an may not seem to signify a decidedly new departure at first, it turns out to be the source of a new situation and suggests the author’s relatively optimistic outlook on life. Dai’an is, after all, not as unfaithful and wicked as some other servants of Ximen Qing, such as Ping’an 平安 (chapter 95). If Dai’an has committed misdeeds in the past while under Ximen Qing’s bad influence, the ending suggests that he has reformed himself. Although the author does not go into detail, he hints that Dai’an, Yueniang and Xiaoyu, may well have been chastened by wartime hardships and cautioned by Xiaoyu’s vision, Yueniang’s dream, the “transmogrification” of Xiaoge, and “the spiriting away of the boy”: Yueniang and Xiaoyu report their dream and vision to each other (100.15a), and Dai’an, along with them, is “deeply sad” when Monk Pujing takes Xiaoge away (100.16a). Dai’an may also have been transformed due to Yueniang’s relatively benevolent influence and her kindness to him.

The author makes a point of mentioning that Dai'an "provided for Yueniang until her old age" (100.16b), thereby noting that he repays Yueniang's favor. The character An 安, "peace," in Dai'an's (a.k.a. Ximen An) name hints at a change from chaos to peace. Besides the adoption of new names and pragmatic arrangements, the combination of Dai'an's reversal of fortune and his reform will contribute to a better future. Dai'an's replacement of Ximen Qing is not completely a matter of retribution. It should also be understood as redemption and renewal.

In connection with Dai'an's change, one may also mention the fates of Wang Liu'er and Han Er, who till the land and live in peace, and later inherit the land and property of a rich silk merchant (100.9a). While formerly Han Er was a good-for-nothing gambler, and Wang Liu'er shamelessly prostituted herself to many men, they appear to have reformed in the end. The author's mention of their "tilling the land" is comparable to *Candide's* pragmatic suggestion—"but let us cultivate our garden" (*mais il faut cultiver notre jardin*)—at the end of Voltaire's famous satire (Voltaire 184). The author thus presents the continuation of life through such ordinary and minor characters and through a return to maintaining everyday, normal existence and pragmatism.

Moving from family to state, we find that the author also sounds a hopeful note, however muted that hope may be. He mentions the establishment of the Southern Song and the return to order: "The empire was at peace and people returned to their occupations" (100.16b). It is true that the Southern Song is only "half a dynasty," and is also destined to undergo the cycle of prosperity and decline. Yet this does not obliterate the most important fact that peace is restored and people can begin to be properly employed and lead honest, decent lives. Insofar as the ending implies forgiveness, restoration of peace, regeneration, and growth, it is relatively positive.

NOTES

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¹ See, for example, *The Golden Lotus*, translated by Clement Egerton (1939; 1972), and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, translated by David T. Roy (1993). It has also been translated by Bernard Miall under the title of *Chin P'ing Mei: The Adventurous History of Hsi Men and His Six Wives*. Most existing translations in Western languages are based on either the Chongzhen (1628-1644) edition or the edition with a commentary by Zhang Zhupo (1670-98) and a preface dated 1695. By contrast, André Lévy's French translation *Fleur en Fiole d'Or (Jin Ping Mei cihua)* (1985) and Roy's translation follow the fuller Wanli (1573-1620) edition of the novel. Of all translations, Roy's is the most complete and accurate; it does not delete passages and song suites, and it includes copious informative notes, even identifying the material borrowed and quoted by the author.

² Roy suggests some of the reasons for critics to fail to understand *Jin Ping Mei*: "its labyrinthine deployment of a bewildering variety of earlier material" and "its frequent and notorious resort to explicit descriptions of sexual activity" (Roy 1993, xviii).

³ *Jinxue* is mentioned in Wei 6.

⁴ Wu Han 吳晗 suggests that *Jin Ping Mei* was composed sometime between 1582-1602. See Wu Han 31. Patrick Hanan also concurs that it was most likely written after 1582. See Hanan 1962, 39, n. 45. Ye Guitong 葉桂桐 discovers more pieces of internal evidence and concludes that the novel must have been written between 1578 and 1596, most likely between 1581-1592. See Ye Guitong 46. About the controversy of *Jin Ping Mei*'s authorship, so far there have been more than a dozen propositions. See, for example, Wang Rumei 王汝梅, *Jin Ping Mei tansuo* 金瓶梅探索, 30-42.

⁵ Both Xinxin Zi and Niangong refer to the novel as *Jin Ping Mei zhuan* in their prefaces. See *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, vol. 1. Page references are to this edition.

⁶ According to Plaks, the date of Dongwu Nongzhuke's preface is in fact not 1617, as commonly accepted, but rather January 1618. See Plaks, 1987, 65-66.

⁷ See Wu Han 1-7, esp., 2-4, for a discussion of this anecdote as well as another similar anecdote in which Tang Shunzhi 唐順之 (1507-1560) replaces Yan Shifan as the one dying from poisonous ink. Following Wu Han (4), Wei Ziyun argues that Shen Defu's 沈德符 (1578-1642) *Wanli yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編 provides the earliest suggestion of Wang Shizhen's authorship. See Wei 19-21.

⁸ Wu Han, for example, argues persuasively that Wang Shizhen is not the author (Wu Han 15-19).

⁹ See Wang Chong 王充, "Yan du" 言毒, in *Lun heng* 論衡, p. 224

¹⁰ Yan Zhitui 顏之推, "Wenzhang" 文章, *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 顏氏家訓集解, 237-38.

¹¹ See the mention of this event in Wu Han 23 and Roy 1993, 464. See also discussions in Wei Ziyun, chapter 2 in Carlitz 1986, and Plaks 1987, 59-60.

¹² See Wei Ziyun 138-39. See also the discussion in Zheng Peikai 44-45. Wei suggests that the manuscript of *Jin Ping Mei* could not have appeared before 1596.

¹³ Wei Ziyun contends that *Jin Ping Mei*'s publication was delayed because it was politically sensitive, not because it was salacious. See Wei 64-76.

¹⁴ See Wang Rumei 8. Wang also mentions the debate on whether Ximen Qing is a "feudalistic merchant" or a "newly-risen merchant."

¹⁵ Note that some of these readings are concurrent. Some people still read it as a work of pornography, and some Chinese critics still argue for its being a *roman à clef*.

¹⁶ Alvin Kernan observes that “of all the major literary genres satire has traditionally made most pretense of being realistic.” See Kernan 1959, 2-3.

¹⁷ I follow Roy’s translation of the author’s pseudonym, though I am not entirely convinced by Roy’s argument that the name is “intended to allude to Hsün-tzu [荀子], the great Confucian philosopher of the third century B.C.” (Roy 1993, xxiii).

¹⁸ Xiaoxiao Sheng can also be construed as an abbreviation of *xiaoxiao rensheng* 笑笑人生, “laughing at life” or “a life of laughs.”

¹⁹ See Zhang Zhupo, “Ku xiao shuo,” in Hou and Wang 18.

²⁰ See Xinxin Zi’s preface in *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, vol. 1, 1a-2a, 3b.

²¹ See Jin Shengtan’s comments on the scene entitled “Chou jian” 酬簡 in *Guanhuatang diliu caizi shu Xixiang ji* 貫華堂第六才子書西廂記, 163.

²² All citations for Lévy 1985 are from Lévy’s “Introduction to the French Translation of *Jin Ping Mei cihua*” (1985), not from his translation *Fleur en Fiore d’Or (Jin Ping Mei cihua)* (1985).

²³ According to my colleague E. N. Anderson, *mei* refers to “flowering apricot,” though it is consistently mistranslated as “plum.” See the discussion in Anderson 27-28. However, I will use the translation “plum blossom” in this paper for the convenience of discussion.

²⁴ Some scholars mistakenly take the title of this novel as an “abbreviation of the names of Ximen Qing’s three concubines.” See, for example, Zhang Huiying 89. However, Chunmei is a maidservant, not a concubine, and her status in Ximen Qing’s household is much lower than that of Pan Jinlian and Li Ping’er. While Pan Jinlian and Li Ping’er may be regarded as concubines, they are in fact more like secondary wives in terms of their status and power. The author deliberately makes it clear that Chunmei is a maidservant for the purpose of showing how her fate is dramatically reversed later.

²⁵ This phrase also appears on *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, 26.16a, when the narrator comments on the death of Huilian 惠蓮, a beautiful maidservant.

²⁶ See, for example, the Yuan writer Yang Weizhen's 楊維禎 (1296-1370) poem "The Red Blossoming Plum" ("Hongmei" 紅梅) in his *Yang Weizhen shiji* 楊維禎詩集, p. 411.

²⁷ Zhang Zhupo 46, item 106; David T. Roy, trans., "How to Read the *Chin P'ing Mei*," 242.

²⁸ For example, Chen Weisong's 陳維崧 (1625-1682) lyric on the blossoming plum to the tune of "The Spring that Permeates the Garden" ("Qin yuan chun" 沁園春) uses the blossoming and withering of the plum to allude to the prosperity and fall of the Ming. See Chen Weisong 147-48.

²⁹ Lin Hong, *Shanjia qingshi* 山家清事, in Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀, *Shuofu* 說郛 (rpt. Taipei: Xinxing, 1963), juan 22, 28-30. Translated in Maggie Bickford, et al., 32. Quoted and discussed in Ginger Cheng-chi Hsü, 31-32.

³⁰ *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, vol. 1, 2a; see also the translation in Roy, trans., 1993, 8-9.

³¹ Hsia points out that in chapter 4 Ximen Qing finds Jinlian's *mons Veneris* hairless, but this description is followed by a poem referring to her pubic hair (173). In fact, read in its entirety, the poem's line about "thin grass" beside the "old garden" (4.6a) is highly metaphorical and allusive, and at most refers indirectly to women's genitalia in general, not specifically to Jinlian's.

³² Cited in Chung-ying Cheng, 499

³³ By the same token, in *Honglou meng* Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 is full of love and tenderness for the beautiful and talented girls in his household. While able to give them his love and make them happy temporarily, he is ultimately powerless to protect them from devastations in life.

³⁴ "Suoluona biqiu wei Eshengwang suo kunao yuan," in *Za baozang jing* 雜寶藏經. Cited in Sun Changwu 孫昌武 265.

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