# "Fair Needs Foul": Moral Ambiguity in *Chin P'ing Mei*

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Of all the major Classical Chinese novels, *Chin P'ing Mei* 金瓶梅 (or (or *Golden Lotus*) has received probably the least serious critical attention. In spite of, and because of, its notoriety as pornography, only a small number of readers have read it to discover for themselves its literary merits. Most people who read it do it clandestinely and condescendingly, focusing their attention only on the erotic or salacious passages.[1] Thus they see the trees but miss the woods; or more likely they notice the undergrowth but fail to see the tree at all. As in the case of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* the erotic content is the golden apple, for which we lose the race, so to speak. Other than this, it has to be admitted that *Chin P'ing Mei* is certainly a difficult book to read. The text remains corrupt; it is full of slang, obsolete expressions, and irrelevant adaptations of songs and poems. Together they form a formidable distraction for the reader.

With a large-scale reissuing of its so-called "Wan-li" *tz'u-hua* edition,[2] scholarly interest in this novel was revived in Japan and Mainland China; yet, many important problems concerning this novel remain unexplored and its reputation is still very uncertain. Except for the almost unanimous praise of its thorough-going realism, and the recognition of its important role in the development of Chinese fiction, the critical spectrum of the novel remains as variegated as it was with such Ming literati as Tung Ch'i-ch'ang 董其昌, Yuan Hung-tao 袁宏道, Shen Teh-fu 沈德符, and Li Jih-hua 李日華.[3] Most critiques of the novel, moreover, are curiously dualistic. Their failure in presenting a unified view of the novel indicates that they have touched its essence only tangentially.

A few examples of scholarly opinions may illustrate this point. To Cheng Chen-tuo 鄭振鐸 the literary achievements of the novel are truly greater than those of *Shui-hu-chuan* 水滸傳 (*The Water Margin*), *Hsi-yu-chi*

西遊記 (*Journey to the West*), and *Feng-shen-chuan* 封神傳. It is a "marvelously great realistic novel . . . full of modern significance." He has a very high praise for the "absolute" realism, saying that it is perhaps the only classic Chinese novel which is stripped clean of romance, and which deals with the daily life of men and women of the bourgeois class. He regrets, however, that the book has been besmeared by its description of obscence behavior and abnormal mentality.[4] Lin Wen-keng 林文庚 praises its satirical import and tragic plot, but he avows that he cannot stand the stifling world of this novel. Evidently a stern moralist, he asserts that "some people may be willing to thumb through certain passages to get sexual titilation, but definitely nobody would care to read the book over more than once."[5] Hsieh Wu-liang 謝无量 denies any literary merit to the novel, which in his opinion consists in nothing but vulgar representation of "bestial desires."[6] To the best of my knowledge, C. T. Hsia and Sun Su-yü 孫述宇 have given the most noteworthy commentaries on the literary achievements of the book. Notwithstanding its apparent stylistic blemishes and structural faults, both of them praised it highly; in C. T. Hsia's words, it is "a milestone in the development of Chinese fiction."[7]

The question whether the book is literature or (merely) pornography is old and yet very new. It is closely related with the *raison d'être* of this unique novel, and is one that cannot be bypassed by any serious consideration of the novel. Without answering the problems as to why the author had to depict sexual acts so persistently and how these salacious passages function in the novel, we will not be able to come to grips with the essence of the novel. There should be no doubt that the passages describing sexual acts are in themselves obscene, but the book judged as a whole is quite another matter. As in the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1957, the final and most important test would be whether these erotic passages are the organic parts of the novel, and whether the whole novel has achieved any moral purpose.[8] It is no easy task to solve such a problem, especially where there is no commonly accepted standard for the test. But it is useful to consider the sources and nature of its moral ambiguity, to show how this is related to his method of writing, and to come up with a few suggestions as to how this novel may be fruitfully read.

## II

The moral ambiguity of the novel should first be traced to the author's ambivalent attitude towards pleasure. The identity behind the pseudonym Hsiao-hsiao-sheng 笑笑生 (literally, "Laughter-Laughter Scholar") has not yet been established. Based on the researches made recently, we may take him to be one who lived south of the Yang-tze River and flourished at the turn of the sixteenth century. The book was written mostly in the first decade of the seventeenth century, and first published probably in the beginning years of T'ien-ch'i 天啓 (1621–27).[9] The age, coming after a period of foreign rule, was characterized by a refusal to adhere blindly to traditional authorities, and by an affirmation of man's instinctive self. Yet, the leaders of Ming thought did not affirm irrational humanity for its own sake. To Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 (1472–1529), one's own nature was the means to sagehood.[10] Li Tsuo-wu 李卓吾 (1527–1602) stated that "wine, women, wealth, and passion do not block the road to enlightenment."[11] It was still enlightenment that he had in mind. To the Neo-Confucians in general, it was in connection with their own method of cultivating self-transcendence that they affirmed humanity. De Bary put it this way:

> For the Neo-Confucian, . . . self-transcendence should be attained not by denying one's humanity but by affirming it, by overcoming selfishness in one's daily life, identifying with others, and coming to an awareness of man's ethical and cultural activity as participating in the creative process of Heaven-and-earth . . . . Thus, in most Neo-Confucian methods of cultivation, . . . the object was to root out not desire itself but only selfish desires–desires which set one apart from others, from things, from the world, from Heaven.[12]

At a time after the value systems of the ruling class were giving way to those of the mercantile bourgeois who tended to savor earthly pleasure, Hsiao-hsiao-sheng could have written the novel in reaction against the rigid code of morality imposed by Confucianism and Buddhism, just as D. H. Lawrence wrote his *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in revolt against the Christian cult of the spirit and Victorian prudery, but one would be jumping to the conclusion to say that the author of *Chin P'ing Mei* affirmed unabashed carnal sensuality. James Joyce makes Leopold Bloom say, "Instinct rules the world. In life. In death." Joyce the artist, however, is like Stephen Dedalus who "remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."[13] Taken as a whole, *Chin P'ing Mei* only shows us slices of life as they are. Occasionally he comments on their meanings, but it is the reader's business to take them or leave them.

This remark about the self-effacing author is appropriate here because, in the light of Trilling's conception of cultural classes, the author of *Chin P'ing Mei* can hardly be said to belong to any of the antithetical groups. In Trilling's opinion, "the dominant, majority, and potentially fascistic class still believes in pleasure and in the arts that affirm the pursuit of pleasure; the minority, a morally stauncher group, denies pleasure and affirms the arts that attack it."[14] Our author seems to belong to the former group in Trilling's conception because he appears to take delight in describing the salacious acts and to show sympathy, more or less, to Hsi-me Ch'ing and almost all of his six wives and mistresses. But, in spite of all this, it can be asserted that he does not belong to this group, because he draws these lascivious men and women in their shocking ugliness and makes them meet poetic justice. More likely he belongs to the latter because, for one thing, he makes Wu Sung repel the advances of Golden Lotus and become the cause of her destruction.

As we have seen, it has been frequently maintained that the apparent affirming, even glorifying, attitude toward instinctive sexual behavior in *Chin P'ing Mei* is quite in keeping with the intellectual trends of the sixteenth-century China.[15] But does the author really sanction fleshly pleasure indiscriminately? Are the miserable endings of the pleasure seekers in the novel merely melodramatic, or are they signs of his conformity with Confucian morality? Does the book present structural anarchy, or is there still an overall artistic unity? We are constantly troubled by such difficult questions which are all tired up in one way or another to the central meaning of the novel. Commenting on the structural flaws and their relation with the author's world views, C. T. Hsia states his opinions in this way:

> One gets the impression that, faced with the task of supplying melodramatic endings for all his characters, the author is merely spinning yarn after borrowed yarn to entertain and astound the reader, caring little if each episode fits into the larger narrative pattern. With the exception of those scenes dramatizing the continued animosity between the Golden Lotus faction (Plum Blossom and Ching-chi) and its enemies, the novel has degenerated into an implausible omnibus of flimsily related stories.

> One cannot expect a work to possess ideological or philosophical coherence when it manifests such obvious structural anarchy. Yet, before one can properly appreciate the finer aspects of *Chin P'ing Mei*, one must attend to its often mutually contradictory moral and religious assumptions. On the whole the novelist shares those ambivalent attitudes commonly seen in the colloquial tales of the Ming period: 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 power versus merciless snobbery toward the lowborn and unfortunate. These remain attitudes rather than components of a consistent world view because, like the professional storytellers, the author seems incapable of resolving the contradictions in his own thinking.[16]

All these "impression" and observations about the lack of ideological or philosophical coherence, the ambivalent attitudes, and some of the resultant structural flaws, however, may take on a new look if we consider, in addition to the value changes of the time,-the type of the novel. The book is written in the form of the traditional *chang-hui* 章回 novel, or the novel form of usually about 100 chapter-installments. Patterned after Sung dynasty colloquial tales delivered in sequence to entertain the audience in the marketplaces or squares, the form became full-fledged in the late Ming dynasty. When such novels are read from the viewpoint of modern Western well-made novels, they frequently give the impression of many structural flaws. In this aspect, *Chin P'ing Mei* is similar to a loosely structured epistolary novel by Richardson, or a picaresque novel such as Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. Bearing in mind that this type of novels was originally meant primarily to entertain and to be read in many sittings rather than hastily for its ideological content, we should probably be more indulgent toward the minor shortcomings of the novel.[17]

## III

Another factor of the moral ambiguity of *Chin P'ing Mei* lies in the author's refusal to romanticize human nature and his employment of the panoramic view. His dual commitment–to irrational passionate self and to the Confucian codes or Buddhist beliefs that try to repress it–is in fact but another way of expressing his refusal to commit himself entirely to either side. Thus, he is entirely in the tradition of classical Chinese storytellers and novelists whose way of depicting reality, as Professor Hsia aptly put it, is characterized by "their total acceptance of life in all its glory and squalor and their strong sympathy for the individual's demand for self-fulfillment not unmingled with a sense of horror over his penchant for self-destruction. This dual affirmation of life and the self reflects the coarse vitality of the market place where storytelling first flourished."[18]

After all, different novelists in different cultures are entitled to their peculiar ways of looking at life and make their own assertions about human nature. It is perhaps one of the characteristics of a non-Christian culture that the Chinese held little illusion about the sacredness of the human soul. Man, in other words, has never been conceived, except figuratively for the monarchs, as "the son of Heaven." It follows, therefore, that in Chinese literature there could not have been a Tennyson with his *In Memoriam*, or a Lawrence with his *Lady Chatterley's Lover.* Love, one of the most important human expressions and a distinguished word in Western culture, is not very well distinguished from its antithesis—lust. A supreme paradox lies in that *Chih P'ing Mei* can be seen by one reader as a ruthless debunking of human nature and depreciation of carnal hedonism, and can also be seen by another as a forthright affirmation of the sanctity of irrational humanity or cover appreciation of sexual impulse.

Be that as it may, a comparison with *Lady Chatterley's Lover* may contribute to the solution of this problem. Lawrence was very serious about sex, and felt that he had a very important message—to him much more important than Freud's or any of his followers'—to give to his readers. He wrote, much to his detriment as an artist, with a strong doctrinaire purpose. He is out there in *Lady Chatterley,* as elsewhere in almost all of his books, to preach the superiority of what he calls "phallic consciousness" over and against "sex consciousness." In Graham Hough's words, this means "to assert the primacy of the deepest instinctual forces over the more superficial and personal kinds of attraction more commonly recognized in the civilized world."[19] He extols this deeper kind of sex-relation and almost deifies this Dioysian instinct. To him this sex-relation is the only weapon for his fight against the encroaching mechanical forces—the forces that mechanize humanity in an industrial society. Moreover, in his *A Propose of Lady Chatterley,* Lawrence named marriage as "the greatest contribution that

Christianity made to the social life of man." Then he adds in his usual sweeping style:

> But . . . marriage is no marriage that is not basically and permanently phallic, and that is not linked up with the sun and the earth, the moon and the fixed stars and the planets, in the rhythm of days, in the rhythm of months, in the rhythm of quarters, of years, of decades, and of centuries.[20]

No wonder that when his much-discussed novel was brought to trial in England, a great number of eminent persons in social, educational professions–including such well-known scholars or writers as Graham Hough, E. M. Forster, Rebecca West, Day Lewis, and Walter Allen–swarmed to the defense of the novel. If the unexpurgated *Chin P'ing Mei* should undergo the same prosecution now, we may be sure that the defenders of the novel will be much smaller in number. The author of *Chin P'ing Mei* does not adopt a moral stance as clear as Lawrence's. Whatever sympathy he may have for those miserable men and women in their struggle for self-fulfillment, he does not champion the beauty and sacredness of sexual libido against money and all evils that it can bring. Perhaps he was too much aware of its destructiveness to take such a step.

If one can understand as well as Professor Hsia does that "the Chinese storytellers' and novelists' indiscriminate fascination with life can be seen as a form of unself-conscious attentiveness to the whole truth,"[21] one surely would understand with sympathy why they should adhere to the panoramic point of view, and why they strove "to reproduce the social macrocosm rather than to explore the human microcosm."[22] The author of *Chin P'ing Mei* uses the panoramic view, whereas Lawrence uses the omniscent, and the results are vastly different. For one thing, *Ching P'ing Mei* is much more subtle and a great deal more in touch with workaday reality than the Lawrencean canon. Let us see how the latter operates with an intrusive lyricism:

> For he knew by experience what it meant. It was not woman's fault, nor even love's fault, nor the fault of sex. The fault lay there, out there, in those evil electric lights and diabolical rattlings of engines. There, the world of the mechanical greedy, greedy mechanism and mechanized greed, sparkling with lights and gushing hot metal and roaring with traffic, there lay the vast evil thing, ready to destroy whatever did not conform. Soon it would destroy the wood, and the bluebells would spring no more. All

> vulnerable things must perish under the rolling and running of iron. . . .
>
> And now she touched him, and it was the sons of god with the daughters of men. How beautiful he felt, how pure in tissue! How lovely, how lovely, strong, and yet pure and delicate, such stillness of the sensitive body! Such utter stillness of potency and delicate flesh! How beautiful! . . . Beauty! what beauty! a sudden little flame of new awareness went through her. How was it possible this beauty here, where she had previously been repelled?[23]

In contrast the author of *Chin P'ing Mei* does not resort to such lyrical repetitions. He does not pretend to know all that goes through his creatures' consciousness. He forfeits himself the privilege to know. He wrote with a dispassionate economy, a style that Egerton calls "a sort of telegraphese."[24] He observes rather than contemplates. He does not delineate scenes with picturesque language. Yet through carefully chosen details and artful manipulation of the dialogues, he achieves a no less searching character analysis. Through a total presentation of accretive details, he not only gives a tremendous impact on the reader, but also succeeds in showing ruthlessly both appearance and reality and the discrepancy between them. This is particularly obvious, for instance, in chapter 82 in which Golden Lotus makes love with Ch'en Ching-chi. Illicit no doubt, the nature of the relation between the two may still confuse the reader because the narration is interspersed with enticing poems.[25] If the reader claims that he can tell whether it is love or lust, he will be finally confronted with apparently pathetic scenes in chapters 99 and 100 where, after Ching-chi has been murdered in his extramarital relation with Plum Blossom, Wild Rose (Ai-chieh), another mistress of his, bewails his death. She is seen there near the grave, "dressed in mourning, lying on the ground, and a man and woman of middle age trying to revive her. But when she got up, she collapsed again in faint."[26] One may think this is only a momentary, foolish infatuation, but who ever "loves" and is wise at the same time? Then Wild Rose says to Plum Blossom and Humming Bird quite determinedly: "I wish to live with you. Then I can see his tablet every day. We were lovers and I should like people to say that I had been his wife . . . . Fo his sake, I would cut out my eyes and break my nose."[27] And she does cut off her hair, destroy her eyes, go to a temple, and become a nun.[28] One becomes confused, wondering whether this is love or lust, and in his bewilderment one may put the blame on the author's philosophical incoherence. But the author's double vision asserts itself in the ending chapter with a clinching finality. In a dream vision revealed to the Moon Lady, the Buddhist theme manifests itself that no matter whether it is love or lust, it is vanity—all is vanity.[29]

In this double vision, it seems to me, lies the profound artistry of the *Chin P'ing Mei.* The reader is enjoined to watch as dispassionately as the author the gross facts of life without being pulled too far one way or another. His sympathy is not really to be drawn to any of the enactors of this pathetic drama, but rather on humanity itself. In contrast again, Lawrence never resorts to this sort of double vision, except where Lady Chatterley sometimes thinks man's sexual behavior "a little ridiculous."[30] His commitment to one way of living, or one philosophy of life, makes it impossible for him to do so.

## IV

Other factors that may contribute to the moral ambiguity of the novel are the relative lack of characters who may serve as steady moral centers, and the reader's distrust in the theme of moral retribution in the novel. For example, in comparison with Ben Jonson's *Volpone, Chin P'ing* Mei does have a Volpone (a magnifico) in the person of Hsi-men Ch'ing, his parasites (Mosca, etc.) in Ying Po-chüeh, Hsieh Hsi-ta, and Hua Tzu-hsü, and his willing victim (Corvino) in cuckolded Pen Ti-ch'uan and Han Tao-kuo; but we do not have a Bonario (a staunch champion of chastity), or a Celia (faultlessly chaste woman). As a matter of fact, there are no thoroughly good men or women in the novel.

Critics have pointed out that *Chin P'ing Mei,* which enlarges the incident that revolves on Wu Sung and P'an Chin-lien, is fundamentally a parody of the heroic mode of that novel.[31] In the first place, the author of this Ming novel took over Wu Sung from *Shui-hu-chuan* as an anti-pleasure hero who pits himself against the pleasure-seeking bourgeois society of Hsi-men, but shows this hero to be a rather inhuman fury of revenge at the latter part of the novel. This reminds us of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* in which the paragon among the legendary Arthurian heroes is shown to be a fallible human being. Likewise, Wu Sung is a hero of fabulous strength and upright character. He wins our admiration not only by single-handedly defeating a tiger, but also by his generosity toward neighbors and affection toward his brother Wu Ta, and his stern rejection of P'an Chin-lien's advances.[32] He has our sympathy when he takes the law in his own hands to avenge his brother's death on Hsi-men and suffers exile after his fist mislights on a wrong person. But when he comes back again in chapter 87 to exact his revenge on Chin-lien or Golden Lotus, he does it in such a Machiavellian ruse and horrifying manner so that his hero-image is considerably damaged.[33]

If Wu Sung is a moral center manque, so are Moon Lady (Wu Yueh-niang) and Wistaria (Sung Hui-lien). Comparatively speaking, Moon Lady is more good-natured, generous, and compassionate than the ordinary run of people in the playboy-merchant's household. She is more capable of self-control and morally courageous. Yet, on the other hand, she is self-righteous and dull-witted, which explains much of her goodness. Moreover, because of her position as the first wife of Hsi-men, it is easier and more beneficial for her to remain chaste. A good case can be made for Wistaria. But deserting her humble husband Lai-wang to become a mistress of Hsi-men, she is also much given to carnal appetite. Her moral awakening comes only shortly before she commits suicide at the realization that she is to be responsible for her ex-husband's agony and death (chapter 26). There are some good officials, but their integrity is either untried, or one that is easily compromised.[34] We search the novel in vain to find a saintly figure or a morally integral person who is clearly dedicated to moral principles. Even the monks sometimes make a mockery of their calling, for instance, by getting bewitched by Golden Lotus and smirking behind a wooden partition across which Golden Lotus is carrying on with Hsi-men.[35] The fact that there are not a single upright figure to look up to in *Chin P'in Mei* indicates that the author has no illusion about human nature. As he places himself in nooks and corners and behind the doors, he sees human beings for what they are—depraved and sinful, though not entirely without some redeeming or even potentially great features.

The final, and perhaps the most important, recourse that the reader has for the moral significance of the novel is the theme of moral retribution. Prejudiced by the erotic passages, some readers tend to brush this theme away as one merely superimposed, or mere melodramatic ending or lip to Confucian orthodoxy.[36] It has to be admitted, however, that the author has made his moral position in the fictional world as unequivocally clear as he possibly can. Exception can be made about the atmosphere of seductive luxury in which the author chose to present erotic incidents. But it may be argued that if the author had observed reticence about this matter, he might have failed to bring his retribution to a clinching, shocking finality. Some of the incidents show how Hsi-men labors to satisfy his insatiable ego, as in his liaison with Lady Lin in chapter 69; some others are hilariously funny, as in chapter 12 where Ch’in-t’ung and Golden Lotus for their illicit affair, and then in the next chapter kneels down to Golden Lotus for having been found out with Lady of the Vase. Still others involve a dramatic irony, as in chapter 10 when Golden Lotus and Hsi-men congratulate themselves at the ill-fate of Wu Sung as they embrace each other, not knowing that they betray others only to be betrayed in return, and that fate has in store for them a horrible death quite in keeping with the life of violent passion they now live. Through all this the author leads the reader to understand the cosmic irony that frustration and emptiness await blind pursuit of selfish physical satisfaction. The salacious passages, instead of merely pleasing the palate of the smutty-minded, serve to shock the reader into an awareness of the religious theme.

More than a *deus ex machina* or melodramatic ending, therefore, the Buddhist karma, the so-called “religious machinery,” carries the author’s moral judgment. Though the tone of the novel is quite mundane, it just so happens with the art of *Chin P’ing Mei* that the conventional formula fits the pious purpose of the novel. If we compare this novel with Eliot’s *Waste Land,* we may note that those out-spoken vulgar passages of sex are just as functional in the novel as the passages in which the typist with her automatic hand smoothing her hair after her folly, and the housewives gabbling about questionable pills before their husbands’ return are functional. By the same token, the structure of moral retribution is no more superimposed than “What the Thunder Said” is superimposed. Incidentally, if we are Tiresias the seer, we may never mind what the Thunder says. He sees everything and knows everything, and we do the same. In the case of *Chin P’ing Mei,* those authorial intrusions in the verse form or otherwise may constitute what the Thunder says in *The Waste Land,* but we are asked to be Tiresias–to see everything–inside and out.

Thus seen, *Chin P’ing Mei* should be the work of an artist from what Trilling calls “the morally stauncher group.” Its theme lies in the exposure of the vanity of pleasure–selfish pleasure–through descriptions of what Lawrence calls in his *Fantasia of the Unconscious,* “the bottomless pit of sex”–a calamity that one descends into when one indulges in destructive sex. That Hsiao-ko (literally, “pious son”) goes into the monastery after the collapse of Hsi-men's house is in keeping with the moral purpose of the novel. It has sobering effect of tearing the reader away from the madding crowd that is "Caught in theat sensual music" and neglects "Monuments of unaging intellect."[37] But the lesson the reader has to learn is not only a negative one. This "pious son," who is born at the same moment as his father's death in chapter 79, also functions to point out that sexual energy is to be used for the propagation of life–life in its larger, cosmic sense. This has to be emphasized here because in comparison Lawrence's emphasis lies in the restorative use of sex–life in its individual sense.

Our Ming novelist shows us that in reality moral awakening or sudden enlightenment does not occur easily to the sinful mortals. In chapter 39, for example, two nuns come to Hsi-men's household to recite the story of Master Chang (Chang Yuan-wai), supposedly the former life round of the Fifth Sage (Wu-tzu) of the Zen Sect, a life which bears close resemblance to Hsi-men Ch'ing's present affluence. Hsi-men should be enlightened if he listened; but, as usual, he avoids nuns. As for his wives, they pay little attention, or have professional singers sing sensual songs in the intervals to relieve their boredom, or slip away to their bed for sleep.[38]

When we are careful enough, we should be able to catch the satiric import from such ironic passages or obtain other moral clues to reach a reasonable degree of understanding.[39]

## V

Critical confusion often ensues from fictional works that systematically debunks human nature. With its ruthless realism, *Chin P'ing Mei* delineates men and women in their hideous depravity of voracious appetite, inordinate pride, and absurd infatuation. To a reader who entertains a romantic faith in man's spiritual nature, it is a bitter morsel, for it administers a severe blow to human pride. To the vulgar ignoramus, it is merely something to please his prurient mind or to be laughed away nonchalantly. We may cite *Gulliver's Travels,* especially its episode in Houyhnhnmland, as a parallel example of how critical performance can be hampered by man's sense of superiority as a rational animal. In that episode Gulliver sees his own image in the filthy Yahoos and turns in disgust and horror to the Houyhnhnms for moral examples. Swift sought to drive home his thesis that man is merely an animal capable of reason (*animal rationis capax*) and not really a rational animal, and he has succeeded admirably. The episode has been widely acclaimed as a supreme satire and a classic measured by any yardstick, yet it has been considered by many as an absurd libel against human nature. W. M. Thackeray, for instance, called it "filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene," and numerous critics in his wake argued incessantly over the supposed thematic obscurity, dividing themselves into "hard" and "soft" schools.[40]

Similarly, the author of *Chin P'ing Mei* deprives us of our sense of superiority by giving us real picture of a world in which very ordinary people have their being. We see prostitutes: they are no better, but nor any worse than other people. We see most of the men and women consistently drawn. We see Hsi-men use his money and his wives and mistresses their sex, pursuing the phantom image of happiness in physical pleasure and social status. And, because most of the characters are very likable people, we feel that they are not all that bad. Even Hsi-men and Lotus exhibit redeeming qualities at times.[41] And then we begin to understand that they are not much different from us; given the circumstances, we may do the same things. This understanding paves the way for our compassion and convinces us that, after all, *Chin P'ing Mei* is a moral book.

Keats realized that a poet has no identity, that only through sympathetic identification with things, a poet achieves true greatness. Shakespeare is great because he invests humanity to a despicable Jew whom Christians would kick as a cur (*Merchant of Venice*) and suggests that even Brutus (*Julius Caesar*) is not as upright as he thinks himself to be. But, for reasons stated above, understanding will not come to us easily unless we are prepared to heed the clues. One may foresee that in the years to come, a huge amount of time and energy will be spent by critics in arguing the question whether the book presents filth or a moral ideal, a pornography of no literary merit recommend itself, or a great novel containing pornographic passages, or an excellent realistic novel to which outspoken descriptions of erotic acts form a coherent and necessary part.[42] Whatever our answer to such a question may be, we must take care not to let our moral instinct or personal faith in human nature obscure our understanding of the achievements of the book.

If we have settled to a considerable degree the problem of apparent moral ambiguity in the novel, we may realize that we have in our literary heritage another great classic novel which is not merely a chronicle of social manners in the Chinese Ming dynasty, but is also a profound criticism of life. What C. T. Hsia says of the love stories in the *San-yen* 三言 collections may be equally ture of *Chin P'ing Mei.* Noting that some of them are merely "pornography disguised in the form of a homily," he says paradoxically that "one should not forget that the so-called pornography may represent a commitment to life far more serious than the moral view that condemns it."[43]

Like Yeats' Crazy Jane perhaps, we have to learn the wisdom of life from bodily lowliness; we have to learn to love life dearly though it be an impure ditch or a fecund ditch full of frog-spawns.[44] Hsiao-hsiao-sheng was not a Tennyson who had to climb back slowly and painfully from the pit of his despair, nor was he a Lawrence who fought desperately to create a phallic god, or a modern Dionysus, to replace the fallen God. He smiled perhaps at the poetic reality he had created. For what is true love of life but to accept both its "glory and squalor"?

## Notes

1. *Chung-kuo shih-pao* 中國時報 , May 8, 1982, p. 12; Sun Shu-yü 孫述宇 , *Chin P'ing Mei ti i-shu* 金瓶梅的藝術 (The Art of *Chin P'ing Mei*), "3rd ed." (Taipei: Shih-pao Wen-hua, 1979) p. 1. *Chin P'ing Mei* will be cited hereafter as *CPM*.
2. *CPM* tz'u-hua 金瓶梅詞話 (1617?; rpt. Tokyo: Daian Shoten, 1963), in five volumes (hereafter cited as *TH*), is the best text available. It was rediscovered in 1932 and reissued in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan. *Hsiu-hsiang CPM tz'u-hua* 繡像金瓶梅詞話 3 vols. (Taipei: Tseng-ni-chih, 1981) is a more readable edition with modern punctuations, Hou Chien's prefactory essay, and Wei Tzu-yun's useful, detailed chronology. The same effort toward making the novel more understandable has borne fruit in Wei Tzu-yun's monumental *CPM tz'u-hua chu-shih* 金瓶梅詞話註釋 (Annotations for CPM) 3 vols. (Taipei: Tseng-ni-chih, 1980–81). The best Japanese translation is *Kin Pei Bai*, trans. Ono Shinobu 小野忍 and Chida Ku'ichi 千田九一 , 3 vols. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1967–69) (hereafter cited as *OC*). The English version, *Golden Lotus,* 4 vols. by Clement Egerton (London: Routledge, 1939; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1954) (hereafter cited as *CE*) is based on a later revised version, *Ti-i ch'i-shu pen* 第一本奇書本 , rather than this 1617 (?) edition.

3. See Ono Shinobu on the mutation of *CPM* criticism, in "Kaizetsu" (Explanatory Notes), *OC*, I, 441–43.
4. *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh-shih* 中國文學史 (History of Chinese Literature) (1957; rpt. Taipei: Ming-lun, 1969), pp. 919–20.
5. *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh-shih* (Taipei: Ch'ing-liu, 1973), pp. 381–82.
6. "Ming Ch'ing hsiao-shuo-lun" 明清小說論, *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh yen-chiu* 中國文學研究 (rept. Taipei: Ming-lun, 1970), p. 613.
7. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1968), p. 166; Sun, op. cit., pp. 2–5, 121; see also P. D. Hanan, "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel," *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly*, 30, No. 3 (1961), 325–35.
8. See C. H. Rolph, ed. *The Trial of Lady Chatterley: Regina v. Penguin Books Limited* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961).
9. Wei Tzu-yün 魏子雲, *CPM t'an-yuan* 金瓶梅探原 (An Inquiry into the Origins of *CPM*) (Taipei: Chü-liu, 1979), pp. 9–14, 17–49); see also *OC*, p. 431. However, Wei propounds the theory that the publication of *CPM* was delayed until the beginning years of T'ien Ch'i because of its containing a dangerous political satire. Thus Wei asserts that there must have been an "Ur-*Chin P'in Mei*," and the so-called "Wan-li edition" as we see it today was shorn of its heavy dose of political satire in the process of its being rewritten by a group of writers. See Wei, *CPM ti wen-shih yü yen-pien* 金瓶梅的問世與演變 (Taipei, Shih-pao Wen-hua, 1981), pp. 24, 164, 63–64, 200–01, and his *CPM shen-t'an* 金瓶梅審探 (Taipei: T'ai-wan Shang-wu, 1982), pp. 72–74, 114–15.
10. Wm. Theodore de Bary and the Conference on Ming Thought, *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1970), p. 13.
11. de Bary, p. 2 and Gotō Motomi 後藤基巳, "*Kin Pei Bai* no jidai haikei," (The Historical Background of *CPM), Chūgoku no hachidai shōsetsu* (Eight Great Chinese Novels) (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1965), p. 241.
12. de Bary, pp. 15–17.
13. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 215.
14. See Introduction to the section of "The Sociocultural Critic," and Lionel Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure," *Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism: A Collection of Recent Essays by American, English, and European Literary Critics*, ed. Sheldon Norman Grebstein (Binghamton, N. Y.: State Univ. of New York, 1968), pp. 166, 171–87.
15. Goto Motomi, pp. 240–41, and Shimura Ryōji 志村良治 in *Chūgoku shōsetsu no sekai* (The World of Chinese Fiction), ed. Uchida Michio (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1970), pp. 124–25.
16. Hsia, pp. 180–81.
17. Fuji Masaharu 富士正晴, *Chugoku koten bungaku taikei getsuhō* 中國古典文學大系月報 3 (Dec. 1967), p. 3. In this appreciative essay on *CPM*, the writer-critic opines that *CPM* is best read in 100 days, one chapter at a time.
18. Hsia, p. 21.

19. *The Dark Sun: A Study of D. H. Lawrence* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 176.
20. D. H. Lawrence, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: Twayne, 1959), pp. 107, 100.
21. Hsia, p. 22.
22. John L. Bishop, "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction," *Far Eastern Quarterly*, 15 (1956), p. 243.
23. D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (New York: Grove, 1959), pp. 140, 208.
24. *CE*, p. viii.
25. *CE*, IV, 127 ff.; *TH*, V, 21 ff.
26. *CE*, IV, 354; *TH*, V, 464–65.
27. *CE*, IV, 355; *TH*, V, 467.
28. *CE*, IV, 365; *TH*, V, 485.
29. *CE*, IV, 373; *TH*, V, 497.
30. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* p. 148.
31. *OC*, pp. 437–39; Sun, pp. 116 ff., 608.
32. *CE*, I, 29–31; *TH*, I, 35–40.
33. Sun, pp. 63–67.
34. *CE*, I, 138; *TH*, I, 218.
35. *CE*, I, 120–21; *TH*, I, 184, 189).
36. Hsia, 166, 180; Hanan, 325.
37. W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium."
38. *CE*, II, 179–81; *TH*, II, 506–15; Sun, 49–51.
39. Wayne Booth has reported how a great satire like Huxley's *Brave New World* has been misread by an intelligent young friend as "a steady source of pornography." See The Rhetoric of Fiction (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1961), p. 389.
40. See my essay, "*Rationale* vs. *Rationis capax*: Gulliver's Voyage to Houyhnhnmland and Some Recent Critics," *Tamkang Journal*, 9 (1970), 239–46.
41. Hsia, pp. 184, 178; Sun, p. 76.
42. James R. Hightower most clearly supports this view; see his *Topics in Chinese Literature*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1953), p. 105.
43. Hsia, p. 308.
44. Yeats, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 254, 230–32.