from rule. They then flee south and found the Wu state. Sima Qian is here giving a rational, Chinese motive to account for a barbarian custom: he attempts to make Wu seem less strange and ultimately part of the Chinese ecumene. Yet Wu Taibo’s gesture is ultimately the Confucian virtue of rang 諒, “demurring”: the refusal to serve for the good of the state. Bai Juyi, too, creates a virtue out of what was probably a tribal custom of the Three Gorges area, as Arthur Waley has suggested. If the girls of Wang’s village allow themselves to be scarred, they, too, are demurring from performing a public service so that they can live out a more virtuous private life. Ironically, the mark of the barbarian Other becomes instead a defense that allows one to withdraw from the public world and to avoid the obligation of service to an ungrateful lord.

CHAPTER SIX

From Ritual to Romance

Women become more interesting in the Tang. By asserting this, I merely mean that they begin to be represented in texts to a much greater extent and that the roles they play in those texts become more complex: literati themselves seem to find them more interesting. However, this complexity does not imply a more accurate representation of some previously ignored reality; rather, it reveals new motivations for writing on the part of a male elite.

Those motivations have their roots in the social changes confronting the literati class. Already by the early Tang, the literati had begun relating to imperial authority in a new way. They saw themselves increasingly as participating in a large bureaucratic government rather than in the circles of decentralized aristocrats and nobility; this in turn affected their attitudes toward writing. But after the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion of 755, what literati represented in texts expanded tremendously. The later Tang world seems to us more detailed than earlier periods because writers chose to describe more things, to express a more complex range of reactions to phenomena, and to find new ways to use language to convey ideas. Just as women are increasingly represented and take on a greater (simulated) autonomy within the text, men, too, seem to achieve a greater individuality and complexity. But there are still important motivations for writing that affect these representations and control the material. Most prominently, men continue to represent their own male communities in writing—communities now much larger and more diverse than Six Dynasties aristocratic culture but still very much defined by issues of alliance, competition, and prestige. Of course, great clans continued to assert their primacy and continued to make marriage alliances a key to high status. On the other hand, the examination
culture attempted to make literary talent (in poetry and prose) a vital tool for defining status, and as the dynasty progressed, networks of patronage grew up around examiners, examinees, and other prominent men who owed their position to the system. While seeing themselves as loyal servants of the emperor and the dynasty, they had their own self-interests, just as the great clans had—as well as their own hierarchies and forms of prestige. We have hints of other worlds: the warlords who controlled increasingly large parts of the empire after 755 and who often set up competing courts, bureaucracies, and hierarchies; Taoist and Buddhist clergy; the increasingly sophisticated and wealthy merchant communities; and the “underworld” of marginal men and women: braves, courtesans, outlaws, and the vast array of question-able occupations most evident in an urban environment but also seen in the countryside. It is obviously the world of the literati (particularly “examination” literati) that we know best—because they were the writers, but also because their status depended in part on literary talent. They could create their own identity by writing about it. But a man could play many roles in this society at different times, and the different worlds of power could intersect and influence one another.

As we shall see, this complexity is expressed in the Tang narrative, which speaks in all sorts of complementary and contradictory languages. One language that emerges is the discourse of sexual exchange, of special relationships that can exist between men and women. As the Tang progressed, erotic exchange began to move out of the realm of the formalized salon and entered the more complex and sophisticated world of narrative.¹ However, women were more than objects of desire. They were pawns in marriage alliances, a cement for social bonds of friendship or political faction, and prizes that allowed for competition and male display. The vast quantity of Tang informal narrative provides a rich source for social history (women’s history in particular), but it also continues to illustrate male concerns and provides no so much a mirror for Tang society as a key to male writers’ dreams and obsessions.

Rituals of Seduction

Although Taizong 太宗 (r. 627–50) saw the encouragement of literary endeavors, including literary circles and salons, as part of the responsibility of the ruler and his administration, poets no longer found their area of operations circumscribed by the insular world of the Southern Dynasties aristoc-

racy. They could roam the capital cities of Chang’an 長安 and Luoyang 洛陽, as well as the empire itself, which stretched from the borders of Korea to the Tarim basin, from the Gobi to Vietnam. The imperial court was now a microcosm of the empire itself and directed policies that shaped the world, and a literatus serving in the bureaucracy might find himself carrying our policy thousands of miles from the centers that dictated his cultural identity. The phenomenon of isolation (whether from exile or from duty) became a much greater part of poetic experience.

Of course, isolation from the center (as I suggested in Chapter 2) was also a prominent factor in the development of poetry during the Six Dynasties. Xie Lingyun wrote from his great estates while undergoing banishment (voluntary or mandatory); Xie Tao 謝朓 (464–99) composed skillful poems about his official journeys; Yu Xin did his best work, most believe, while detained by the Northern court after a failed embassy. But for most poets during the fifth and sixth centuries, poetry remained the expression of a social urbanity, whether that urbanity was incarnated in the imperial court or in the salon of an imperial prince or nobleman stationed at one of the strategic posts of the crumbling dynasty. Quite different would be the experiences of seventh-century figures who were compelled by circumstances to find forms of expression away from the really important imperial center: Lu Zhaolin 虞照 (ca. 634–ca. 684), Shen Quangi 沈佺期 (ca. 650–718), Song Zhiwen 宋之問 (d. 712). As Stephen Owen has suggested, it was the experience of exile in the seventh century that helped forge the sense of poetry as an unofficial pastime, as a form of communication between literati rather than as a competition played before the prince.²

If poets began to detach their poetic selves from the courtier self, and if poetry groped its way toward some new interpretation of the old adage that it express “what is intent in the mind,” then we might suspect that the forms of erotic representation would shift as well. We saw in Chapter 3 that the erotic vignettes of “palace poetry” were inextricably caught up in contradictory impulses: the lingering allegory of courtesian as palace lady as well as the social competition that invited the poet to evoke erotic imagery through mannered manipulation of poetic language. The palace poem was caught between the veriginous pull of these two needs and often could not resolve itself into an unambiguous text. But there was room in the Tang empire for many things: perhaps sex, too, could find a realm outside the court, where the male poet could detach the female from previous habits of representation.
and make her more identifiable "other." Women would no longer just be an emblem for certain aspects of literati self-identity; they would be presented in texts next to the literatus, helping him, hindering him, and confirming or disputing his portrayal of the self.

The earliest known erotic text in the Tang is a mysterious narrative most likely authored by Zhang Zhuo 张蒡 (660–732), the You xianju 青仙居 (Dalliance in the immortals' den; for a translation of the complete text, see the Appendix, pp. 313–54). Probably composed in the 690s, it found its way to Japan, where it circulated among literary men and exerted a considerable influence on later Japanese literature. In China it disappeared completely until nineteenth-century Chinese travelers to Japan rediscovered and published it. The plot is basic: the first-person narrator, on his way to a distant post in the far west, happens upon an isolated valley where two widows dwell. They exchange a great number of poems, most of them erotic or mildly obscene, and he sleeps with one of them; he then takes his leave the following morning. Zhang uses the game of seduction and flirtation as a plot device: although literary exchange eventually leads to sexual exchange, in the end sexual performance and desire are merely the explicit aspects of literary display and a "lure" for talent. Not only do we have dozens of poems in which the author must simulate both his own voice and those of several women, but we also have elaborate parallel-prose descriptions on topics such as banquets, gardens, home furnishings, and women's apparel. Throughout, Zhang engages in a sort of literary and sexual boasting in front of his male audience: he caps the women's poems, jokes with them, sometimes trades light-hearted insults—all with the inevitable result that the women are overcome by his literary talents and his sexual desirability. At the same time, by granting the women themselves the ability to compose poetry, to perform on musical instruments, and so forth, Zhang gives himself not only worthy sexual partners, but worthy literary ones as well.

The tale begins as the hero encounters a mysterious, isolated valley when wandering through a remote countryside (Section 1). At first, we might suspect the conventions of zhiqu 起尸 (accounts of the strange), short anecdotes of the bizarre and supernatural whose collection had been popular since the third century A.D. Such anecdotes, although not usually related in the first person, do tend to begin with a factual place-setting. There are some important differences, however. Zhang identifies his location and then proceeds to identify its importance: the ancient sage-emperor Yu 禹 engaged in flood control here. By moving west to the end of the world, Zhang travels into the primitive, to where things begin (notably, the Yellow River). It is a place of impressive landscapes, but landscapes that have been shaped by the work of the ancients. In this sense, Zhang inhabits a textual landscape. This is confirmed further when he reaches the fictional Immortals' Den: he cites elders to attest to its existence. These signs tell him that he is passing into an extraordinary world.

The move westward recalls the travels of others besides Yu. Zhang refers explicitly to Zhang Qian 张骞, the Han emissary who supposedly sought the source of the Yellow River. Less explicitly, Zhang imitates King Mu of the Zhou, whose legendary stallions brought him to distant Kunlun 喀山, Mount, where he was banquettet and romanced by the Xi Wang Mu 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West). King Mu's travels had long been a part of Chinese consciousness, and they form a part of one early text, the Mu tianzi zhuan 穆天子傳 (An account of Mu, Son of Heaven). His dalliance with the Queen Mother allowed for her portrayal as a mistress fit for emperors. Later, legends had her visit Emperor Wu of the Han. Zhang is not a ruler, however. He is a literatus—and a literatus under compulsion, engaged in a toilsome official mission. This, too, distinguishes him from typical zhiqu figures. Take, for example, the following story of Liu Chen 劉辰 and Ruan Zhao 潘肇: this and similar zhiqu were a likely influence on Zhang when he composed his own tale.

Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao had entered the Tianzhu 天台 Mountains to pick medicinal herbs. They traveled far and were unable to find their way back. After thirteen days they were in a state of starvation. From afar they saw a hill on which grew peach trees with ripe fruit. Climbing up steep places and pulling themselves up by vines they reached the spot, where they devoured several peaches and assuaged their hunger. After they are their fill, they set out down the mountain. As they took some water in their cups they saw some turnip leaves floating down the stream, fresh and lovely. Then a cup came floating down with sesame seed inside.

"There must be some people nearby," they said to one another.

Crossing over a hill, they found a large stream and by the side were two women, extraordinarily beautiful. When they saw the two holding the cup, they laughed.

"So Mr. Liu and Mr. Ruan, you have brought our cup back!"

Liu and Ruan were startled. The two women then spoke pleasantly, as if they were old acquaintances: "Why have you been so late in coming?"

They then invited them back to their home. The south and east walls were hung with crimson gauze curtains, and from the corners hung gold and silver rafter bells.
Each had several maidservants in attendance to serve her. There was sesame meal, dried mutton, and beef, all of superior quality. After they had finished eating, they started to pass around the ale. Suddenly a crowd of girls came in, peaches in their hands: “We welcome the arrival of the bridegrooms!” They grew tipy while music was performed; after nightfall, each retreated to the bed curtains for the night.

The ladies’ seductive charms were unsurpassed. After ten days the men sought to return but were earnestly entreated to stay. After half a year the weather and the plants remained as if it were spring and all the birds sang. But the men still wished even more to return to their village, and their longing grew keen. The ladies then saw them off, showing them the road back home. When they arrived, their village was in ruins. Ten generations had already passed. (Tai ping quang ji [hereafter, TPQJ] 1:310).

The Tiantai Mountains were a sacred place for Taoist believers; they were immortalized in a rhapsody by the early Taoist poet Sun Chuo 孫绰 (314–71). Liu and Ruan enter the scene engaged in a suitably Taoist enterprise—herb gathering. After they discover the goddesses’ refuge, they remain as long as they like. Nothing compels them to leave except their own homesickness. For Zhang, however, circumstances are different. He has not lost his way when he comes upon the Immortals’ Den, nor is he unaware of its magical qualities. Whereas Ruan and Liu are startled to see a mysterious cup drifting past, he recalls the words of local elders that tell of similar floating phenomena. He thus becomes a well-informed traveler interested in exploring the source of things. Perhaps as a reader of zhigui, he is aware that other worldly sexual delights await him as well. But since there are goddesses in the affing, he must first purify himself. “I then put myself in a serious frame of mind and observed three days of ritual fast”—unlike Ruan and Liu, who were starving quite unintentionally. In both cases, however, the body is purging itself of earthly food and is preparing itself for the spiritual feasts to come. The adventure is thus not forced upon Zhang. Rather, it is an intentional divert made by a bureaucrat in need of rest before resuming the task assigned him. Zhang is under compulsion yet not under it: he will enjoy the same privileges as King Mu in his own journey west, but employment in the emperor’s service will force him to leave his mistress soon enough. And perhaps this is a good thing; duty will prevent him from falling victim to the unearthly (as Ruan and Liu did) and losing his own world to eternity.

Although Zhang recognizes the magical nature of the meeting, he also perceives it as a social encounter. When he happens upon the goddess’s habitation, he engages in an enquiry into her identity. As it turns out, the “goddess” is a certain Lady Cui 崔, from a gentry family (Section 1). Here, a maid (later identified as Guixin 桂心, “Cassia Heart”) reveals Lady Cui’s family background: she is of very high lineage (the Cuis of Boling 陽陵). Cassia Heart also compares her favorably to beauties of the past. Notably, a number of these beauties are men who combined literary talent with physical attraction: Song Yu, Cui Yan 崔琰, Pan Yue. Her appeal and talent are in some aspects independent of gender: she can participate in the same categories of appreciation and behavior as a man. Of course, these comparisons also go far to socialize the encounter. Lady Cui is not an anonymous goddess, and the deliberateness of these social courtesies (which will become even more evident as the story proceeds) confirms for us the degree to which “Immortals’ Den” is itself a sophisticated narrative within which suspense is relatively unimportant. Once we recognize the tropes with which the author plays, we are in little doubt as to the outcome. Although he must make gestures of seduction toward the woman he meets, they are merely stages in a courthip ritual: the pleasure comes in carrying out the gestures as deftly as possible.

I will not attempt a theoretical discussion of “ritual” here, although a number of scholars have begun to handle the subject with the sophistication that it deserves. The formality of exchange in “Immortals’ Den” is not ritual in any societally recognized sense; rather, it is a performance that has been ritualized. There is an implicit code governing the response speech and action should elicl. Again, as with earlier poetry composition, ritualization is here a process that channels competition: it determines what forms of behavior are sanctioned and unruly, and how sanctioned behavior should be tested and evaluated. Of course, if the composition of palace poetry was a ritual as well, then what advantages lay in transposing eroticism from ritual male composition to a fictional ritual narrative involving women as participants? The question almost answers itself: Narrative here gives the illusion of real experience; the author is simply relating what occurred. Zhang can thus create an ideal environment in which to exercise his wit and talent, unburdened by the pressures of extempore composition. Moreover, he writes for an audience of his peers. As literati, any one of them might have experienced what he experienced; any one of them might have had the opportunity to woo Lady Cui. Zhang thus presents a challenge to the male readers: Could you have performed this impressively? How long could you have kept up the poetry?
At the same time, however, 'Immortals' Den' does provide a new venue for the presentation of palace-poetry eroticism. As we have seen, palace poetry was not addressed to the object of desire. It was a poetry shared by the male community: desire was the currency exchanged in mutual male evaluation. But 'Immortals' Den' presents palace poetry as a form of exchange between the sexes. This exchange commences almost immediately: after the servant invites Zhang into Lady Cui's house, he overhears a musical performance by the mistress herself, who is more popularly known as Shiniang. There begins an elaborate series of exchanges that sets the mood of the text (Section 3); the man gives a flattering, but plaintive description of the woman and her charms, and the woman responds humorously on the exaggerations of his language. It is her ritual task to resist, even if she resists wittily.

This dynamic of invitation and resistance should hardly surprise us; it is perhaps part of the universal language of literary courtship. But Zhang resorts to the tools of the trade as he knows them: his poems are not so much a direct address to Shiniang as they are little moments of palace-poetry lubricity ('Often she pouts forth a slender hand;/Toys for a time with the slender strings'). Both the sensuality of the woman and her talent for music making are praised, as if this objectification of his addressee will produce results. Shiniang's response is to deny his flattery and to turn her attention to the facts: 'Why do you, engaged in your lord's service, come here in vain pursuit? This abrupt and seemingly rude inquiry also involves a subtle probe into his public office and possibly his social status. Her second question ('Why must you so waste your time in reasing?'), although a rhetorical rejection, invites him to explain himself further in literary terms. Zhang already knows something about her—Cassia Heart has told him. But she still knows little of him. He proceeds to rectify the matter with a love letter, one of the great set-pieces in the text (Section 3). Here, Zhang refrains from giving his family background and instead portrays himself as a wandering sexual adventurer—the sort we have already met in Master Dengtu the Lecher. However, he subtly shifts his self-portrayal from that of wandering rogue to that of government emissary: 'Now, on this second mission bid by the same Lord of Heaven, from afar I caught scent of your fragrance.' On the one hand, this answers her earlier inquiry: her fragrance has acted as a beacon to the passing traveler—that is the reason he has come. But his linking of this visit with his official duties reinforces the idea that he is taking 'time out' from compulsory tasks.

Above, I suggested that Zhang's ties to his duty serve as a defense against the dangers of a promiscuous goddess: his post is a guarantee that he will have to leave her bed eventually. But since this is Zhang's own fantasy, one might ask why he must set up this opposition between work and leisure. Quite simply, he needs it to define who he is. It is part of a new conception of the literatus to see himself as someone who has imperially appointed tasks to carry out, who has a job he must complete. Obviously, literati had long been familiar with conceptions of duty and leisure, employment and retirement. But Zhang foregrounds it in a place where he does not need to. Writing for other literati men participating in the same world, he thus redefines the sexual adventurer/goddess-romancer as a government bureaucrat. The letter does much more than this, of course: by making his plea in a form that enables him to rehearse a substantial amount of lore from the Chinese tradition, he continues to answer Shiniang's inquiries about him through his own demonstrations. Rhetorically it conveys more about himself and his abilities than about his love for Shiniang.

Shiniang still responds in the prescribed way: she rejects his advances as excessive and insulting. She also refuses to respond at this point: evidently she needs something even more extraordinary from her guest to soften her heart. He entreats her in a more persuasive tone, ending with an injunction to 'gather her rosebuds':

Do not say you'll always have
a face worth a thousand in gold—
In the end you'll become no more
than a handful of dust.
While alive and in the sun
only take your pleasure!
After death no spring season returns
to call you back again.
If only you make dalliance
your goal throughout this life,
No need to wasterfully betray
your threescore years and ten! (Section 3)

These verses are written in a language radically different from the letter, and in a diction fairly different from most Tang poetry as well. Composed in a flexible, vernacular mēr, they likely reflect a more "vulgar" level of erotic verse than the refined lines canonized in Jade Terrace. 'Immortals' Den'
is striking for the way it incorporates these different stylistic levels; once again, the informal environment of circulation likely encouraged Zhang to experiment.

Shiniang shows no interest in this second attempt at persuasion, and so Zhang goes to bed. Inevitably, he dreams of her. The powerful emotion stirred by this experience resists in a further entreaty that finally breaks down Shiniang's reserve. He writes a poem on the dream; then, after she throws his new verses in the fire, he reacts bitterly in yet another poem. Visibly moved, she goes out finally to greet him (Section 4). Why in the economy of the tale does this exchange work when the more sophisticated ones have failed? Within the formal ritual of seduction, there still must be a way of signifying sincerity and "true" passion. As the author of the letter and the earlier poems, Zhang proves himself talented enough for Shiniang's bed—but the old distrust of rhetoric plays a part here as well; there must be an allowance for the authentic. The very colloquial line "Is that wretched woman taunting me?" breaks down any remaining decorum. Zhang is "authentically" suffering from lovesickness. This draws a passionate response of rejection from Shiniang, but the emotion betrays her weakening. It requires only one more simple quatrain for Zhang to complete his conquest.

Now, as the two finally meet face to face, there is a long, elaborate passage of self-introduction and exchanged compliments (Section 4). If we do not keep the necessity of courtship ceremony in mind, this passage may seem unnecessary or even ludicrous. But there is a striking resemblance here to Western and Japanese epic conventions, in which enemies about to engage in individual combat proclaim to each other their background and acknowledge each other's worth. Although Chinese literature did not pursue the "love as combat" trope to the extent the Petrarchian tradition in the West did, the resonance of this passage is clear: in combat, one needs to recognize the foe as an equal in order to confirm one's own value. The exchange begins with rhetorically balanced compliments: Shiniang matches Zhang's speech phrase for phrase and even teases him by suggesting that his looks do not live up to the marvels of his composition. Then the two exchange family data: Shiniang's identity is confirmed from her own lips, and she explains how she comes to be living alone with her sister-in-law in this remote place. Zhang makes his background clear for the first time as well: he tells first of his family and then of his rank in the bureaucracy. Although he couches this information in decorous and self-effacing language, his self-satisfaction is quite evident.

With this exchange over, Shiniang makes the significant gesture: she invites him into her residence proper (Section 5). This is partly a recognition that he ranks highly as a guest and as a talented man; the language here echoes the famous lines of Confucius describing a disciple: "It may be that [my disciple] You has yet to enter the inner chamber, but at least he has reached the guest hall." But Shiniang is also defining the field of battle. Zhang's earlier "conquest" of her through his poems is only a partial victory: all he has won from her so far is an agreement to a formal engagement.

However, it is also clear that this contest will be decorous and, above all, playful. Unlike palace poetry, in which the concept of exchange was limited mostly to the male circulation of texts, "Immortals' Den" dramatizes dialogue and with it courteous exchange, jokes, and witty banter. Eroticism and sexual combat take on the form of leisured amusement and indulgence in the social graces. In order to facilitate this approach, the narrative requires a third person: in this case, Shiniang's sister, Wusao 五嫂 (Fifth Wife). If the male readership of "Immortals' Den" is the silent third party to the text, Wusao is its visible observer and facilitator. She socializes and makes public the private processes of seduction and resistance passing between Zhang and Shiniang. Although her sexual desirability is made clear, it never becomes possible for Zhang to bed both of them; her role as commentator is too vital. She also reinforces the importance of ritualized sex: multiple partners lead to a promiscuity in which sexuality loses its sense as a reciprocal motion of exchange. She is the guardian needed to guarantee that there will only be two. This is demonstrated superbly by their first literary game: Wusao suggests that they quote poems from the Odes to express their feelings (Section 7). As we saw in Chapter 1, apt citation from the Odes was a literati art that dates back to Zhou dynasty days. Here, the poems are reinterpreted as courtship verses (thus providing further proof that readers often saw them that way, in spite of the significance of Mao's commentaries). Yet here the game ritualizes courtship further by making Wusao's role as facilitator more evident. She opens by citing the famous first Ode, the epithalamium that exemplifies the ritual power of "proper" courtship. She thus reaffirms her role as go-between. Zhang replies with a quotation that suggests sexual longing and tension; in his poem, Shiniang continues to be unapproachable. Wusao replies with yet another poem asserting her own role and the importance of propriety; then, perhaps angthest that she is selecting too many discouraging verses, she adds another poem that suggests the joy with which Shiniang will
eventually greet her lover. Shiniang adds to this a testy quotation anticipating fickleness on Zhang's part, thus continuing her rhetorical resistance to his advances. He caps this finally with verses suggesting his undying fidelity to her. Although he has the last word, the game has finally elicited from him another ritual—an oath of loyalty.

However, there are stresses and problems caused by Wusao's role as ritual manager. Although polygamy in the traditional family structure allowed for multiple female partners, it was not so happy about multiple partners at the same time. The inevitable result of such structures is an obsession with favor or the lack of it, with jealousy and envy. This is illustrated slightly later in the tale, when Zhang shows an unwarranted interest in one of Shiniang's maidservants, Zither Heart (Section 10). When Shiniang shows jealousy, Wusao jokingly takes both lovers to task: Zhang for not knowing his proper limitations, and Shiniang for not showing enough interest in Zhang, and so forcing him to seek female company elsewhere. She then leaves open the possibility (not seriously) that Zhang may transfer his affections to her. This is expressed rhetorically through a poem that presents the lover with a choice of two blossoming trees: from which will he pick the flower? When Zhang attempts to reinterpret this image by demanding the right to pick flowers from both (and makes the imagery even more sexual: "Playful butterflies lean on red stamens; sporting bees enter their violet buds"), Wusao accuses him of being greedy and then finds a more appropriate image to deny his improper desires: "You really are too greedy; you shoot at two targets with one arrow." The male organ can only aim at one place at a time. By elevating her position as outsider within the discourse of courtship, Wusao guarantees the duality of standard heterosexual ritual.

This subtle canalization of desire toward its proper culmination is played against an elaborate rehearsal of all the various forms of human aesthetic pleasure: one by one, the lovers and Wusao discuss and write poems about singing, dancing, musical instruments, archery board-games, food and drink, and the beauties of the landscape. This is in part to reinforce the "testing" aspects of the text: in a simulation of examination, Shiniang and Wusao give Zhang an opportunity to test himself in a further display of male literati ornament. As Confucius said, "If you remove the hair, the pelt of a tiger or leopard is just the same as a dog's or sheep's." In courtship, presentation matters. Earlier in the text, we have a small drama on talent and recognition, when one of the maids performs on a lute (Section 6). First Wusao com-

ments on the extraordinary appearance of their guest; then Zhang composes a poem on the maid's performance, which results in a humorous poetic response from Shiniang. This allows Zhang and Shiniang to engage in a round of complimentary exchanges. This is a mutual admiration society. Nonetheless, within a very short space the author has managed to engage in several forms of cultural display. Wusao's recognition of the hero's superior qualities plays on conventions of character evaluation or pin 品, of the sort we have already noted in the Worldly Tales anecdotes. The hero replies by citing two famous examples of talented women who were able to intuit quickly the value of the men they spied upon (thus nearly complimenting both them and himself), not to mention introducing the associations of sexual passion suggested by the mention of Zhuo Wenjun (who eloped with the talented poet Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 after hearing him play the zither). This display of cultural literacy leads to yet a further display of poetic talent, on the subject of the lute. He claims for himself the talent a sensitive listener possesses of discerning the emotional state of the player. Shiniang then shows her wit in another characteristic gesture of resistance: she teases him for making a claim for deep understanding before the music has been performed—and thus for having the audacity of praising her sexual talents before he has had the opportunity to observe them. The hero in turn diverts this attack by praising Shiniang's poetic abilities extravagantly—which results in an exchange of carefully balanced compliments. Again, cultural abilities are tested.

And so the exchanges continue; there are far too many such gestures to deal with here, especially because their structure and purpose are generally the same: the sisters provide Zhang an opportunity to shine, and his response provokes witty responses on their part, combined with continuing admiration, teasing (usually on Wusao's part), and decorous resistance on Shiniang's. When Shiniang finally concedes to his wishes (mostly through Wusao's urging), we have a more explicit drama of assault and resistance: the scene is Shiniang's bedroom, to which all three have repaired (Section 16). Now, as Confucius might have said, Zhang has earned his way into the "inner chamber." As he attempts to bring Shiniang forcibly to the bed, he continues to compose poems of persuasion. She replies with resistance poems, and Wusao continues with mocking poems addressed at both. As long as Wusao, the third element, is in the room, sex continues to be a public performance, even while it borders into the realm of assault. However, we
are moving into an area where ritual no longer governs courtship and sex: nothing but the act can bring the narrative to a satisfactory conclusion. Here Shiniang's resistance in words turns into a physical resistance: the very long passage here is meant to cater to more basic instincts among the male readership. That this passage provides the inevitable climax to the narrative suggests connections once more to the purposes of pornography, whose narrative structure tends to mimic the male experience of sex. However, this moment is relatively brief; Zhang's one explicit descriptive passage is awkward and somewhat ludicrous in comparison to the more elegant parallel prose passages that run through the rest of the text. This is, I suspect, because writers had not yet developed a sophisticated pornographic vocabulary (and perhaps would not do so until the late Ming); Zhang is much happier sublimating sexuality through ritual and game.

As if to compensate for this coarse moment, the narrative explodes into a flurry of parting poems as dawn breaks and Zhang must go on his way. Shiniang and he exchange verses several times; he and Wusao exchange verses; and he and the maids exchange verses. We then have the departure and the closing of the piece (Section 19). Inevitably, sex is followed by melancholia and pain over parting. But this passage also resumes the ritual dance. Although earlier poetry exchanges had played on images of marriage as a way of concealing the casualness of the liaison, here Zhang must situate himself within a new conventional situation. Returning to the original frame for the story (the encounter with goddesses), he composes a few short verses in the meter characteristic of the shaman songs of the Songs of Chu.

My reading of "Immortals' Den" is not intended to be comprehensive; nor perhaps is such a discussion of the text possible, granted its anomalous position within the Chinese tradition. No other texts remotely like it have survived. Nonetheless, we do have a hint of some interesting developments in the literati portrayal of women and of erotic relationships. Zhang is obviously avoiding the pressures of spontaneous performance and competition by narrating a situation in which he can take control of all the competing voices and write for them. This act of narrative control is reinforced by its repetition of an old palace-poetry dynamic: the controlled representation of the sexually arousing scene produced for other male readers. He thus becomes a provider of sexual pleasure and can control the pace and intensity of that experience. At the same time, the narrative couches itself in terms comprehensible to the seventh-century literatus: the hero is portrayed as a bureaucrat on a mission who stumbles on the goddess's lair, rather than as a ruler visiting the deity or as a Taoist herb-picker who has lost his way. His sexual adventure then becomes compartmentalized within literati experience: it is a moment of leisure stolen from the pressures of official duty. Although this creates a figure who acts under compulsion—who must leave the bed the following day rather than continue the dalliance—it also gives him purpose and a public life that properly opposes private desires and lusts: it gives him the strength to leave that bed in the end and to resume the tasks that create his own identity. Perhaps most interestingly, it partially separates sex from the political life of the literatus; the self-image of the literatus as the sexual subordinate of his ruler is replaced by the conception of sex as something that takes place away from the tensions and desires of an official career.

That compartmentalization is also part of the ritualization of the sexual encounter; it makes a space for sexuality but also gives it boundaries. Within that ritual space, courtship is played out as a series of exchanges, at times serious, at times playful. Women are visualized as playing an active part in this game playing, even if they end by surrendering their bodies to a literal sexual congress. The sexual act itself may matter little, since it is really only a figure for the more significant textual exchange that had preceded it. Women become the testers and judges of men—although in a text controlled by a male author, their primary role is to confirm male aspirations. Zhang's authorship here may suggest another act of controlling: an assurance that male performance with the woman will be satisfactory and that there will be no loss of literary or physical power during the courtship. Yet a door is opened up here that will be exploited in texts to come: that men might fail not only in relations with other men but also in their relations with women.

This competition is further ritualized through the sanctions of a third presence who acts as mistress of ceremonies, as go-between, and as procurer. Wusao is the "inside outsider" who guarantees that the courtship proceeds in a comprehensible ritual manner and that the laws of monogamous heterosexual alliance are (at least for this time) obeyed. Even if Zhang has attempted to escape from the pressures of court competition by narrating the sexual encounter, he still ends by ritualizing it in a formal manner. With this movement back to ritualization and courtly exchange, he simply overwrites a heterosexual encounter onto the template of male-male competition. As the character Zhang seeks to impress Shiniang in order to gain
access to her bedroom, the author Zhang seeks to impress his readers and gain their approbation and admiration. As long as textual exchange continues to act as a figure for sexual exchange, then literary competition produces corresponding consequences of desire and jealousy. This makes “Immortal’s Den” quite different from our modern conception of pornography as fundamentally autoerotic. Rather, it is a social text in which men share their own desires within channels prescribed by a formal and mandated art of seduction.

Romancing Talent

Although later Tang narratives were no longer quite so ritualized, they continued to be social texts for the literati. We turn to a disarmingly simple story, “Liu shi zhuan” 邱氏傳 (The story of Miss Liu; TPGJ 4: 541-42). Although we now read it as a love story, it deals just as prominently with distinctively male concerns. The ways in which it parts from our own conventional conception of a love story gives important clues as to what mattered to the male reader.

In the Tianbao 天寶 reign, Han Hong 韓鴻 had a reputation as a poet. He was rather reckless in nature, and he was very poor and relied on others for support.

A certain Mr. Li 玉 was a close friend of Han’s. Li’s household was the wealthiest of a thousand in gold; he was independent-minded and fond of talent. His favorite concubine, Miss Liu, was an outstanding beauty of the age; she enjoyed conversation and joking and was good at chanting poetry. Mr. Li established her in a secondary household and held banquets with Han there, housing Han next to her.

Han had always enjoyed a wide reputation, and those who paid calls on him were all accomplished men of the time. Miss Liu would spy on them from the doorway and would say to her servants, “How could a man like Master Han always be poor and obscure?” From that time she took a fancy to him. Li had always valued Han, and he refused him nothing. Afterward he learned of Han’s inclinations and held a banquet for him. After they were in his cups, Mr. Li said, “Madame Liu’s beauty is extraordinary, and Master Han’s literary abilities are exceptional. I wish to present Madame Liu to you to serve as your bedmate. What do you think?”

Han was astonished and withdrew from his seat. “You have already graced me with your own food and the clothes from your back. How would it be proper for me to take what you cherish?”

But Li resolutely insisted. Miss Liu knew that he was sincere, and so she bowed twice to him, pulled him over to her by her robes, and joined their mats together. Li sat Han in the guest’s position, and they emptied their cups with great pleasure. Li also supplied thirty thousand cash to contribute to Han’s expenses. Han looked up to Liu’s beauty, and she in turn admired his talent; thus having attained each other’s affections their delight might well be guessed at. (541)

The poor but talented literatus is the focus of many Tang narratives, and the attraction for Tang male readers of tracing such a figure’s success hardly needs to be explained. In the Tang world, however, one does not pull oneself up through sheer talent; friends are needed. This does not mean that the Tang author here is cynical or believes that one gets everything done through “connections”; rather, it is Han’s talent that attracts male admirers to him and makes them willing to help him. Mr. Li assists him first financially and then with a place to live. This pied-à-terre allows Han to make connections and establish friendships with important men. Then, in a classic homoerotic maneuver, Mr. Li cements his affection with Han by giving him Miss Liu, his own most cherished concubine. Mr. Li here very likely acknowledges the sexual needs of his client. But the text goes beyond this motive by making Miss Liu participate in her own presentation. We have already seen talented women in earlier texts portrayed as competent judges of character—most famously, the wife of Shan Tao, who spied upon Ruan ji from behind a screen, and the poet Xie Daoyun, who was so skeptical of the abilities of the great Wang family. However, in those cases female judgment was divested of desire and keyed instead to codes of male self-evaluation and snobism; the women were to some extent placing a value on themselves by evaluating the worth of their husbands and brothers. Miss Liu takes pleasure in Han in the same way that Mr. Li does—they are both attracted to his aura of brilliance and so wish to assist him. Unlike Mr. Li, however, she can express this attraction through a different, more intimate relation. Whereas Mr. Li consummates his relation with Han by proxy, Miss Liu comes to transcend her role of proxy by actively and explicitly linking appreciation for talent with sexual desire. Moreover, by possessing great beauty herself, she externalizes and enacts the hermaphroditic metaphor of the talented man as “beauty” (meiren 美人), the representation of internal male talent as external female desirability. They now become an idealized couple, the caiyi 資才 (talented artist) and the caiyi 資才 (talented scholar and lovely lady) so characteristic of later romantic literature in China. Miss Liu is a constant reminder to Han of his cultural worth (a mirror for the self) as well as a constantly accessible reward for that talent, sexual pleasure as a
foretaste of the pleasures of a successful career. She is the gift that keeps on giving.

Narrative interest develops out of the separation of this pair. At first, Han is so happy with Miss Liu that she herself must convince him that his talents require him to give her up for a time so as to obtain the greater prize. She is only a temporary symbol of what he deserves:

The following year, Yang Du 楊度, the vice minister of the Board of Rites, recommended Han for the examinations. He lived in seclusion for a year. Miss Liu said to him, "A glorious reputation extends to one's relations; this is a fact respected by the men of the past. How is it right for a 'humble washerwoman' like myself to obstruct your chance to pluck the orchid? Besides, I have enough utensils and goods to last me until your return."

Han then went off to stay with his family in Qingchi 清池. After a year, she ran out of food and had to sell her cosmetics and toiletries to meet her needs. At the end of the Tianbao era, rebels overthrew both capitals, and the populace fled in fear. Because Miss Liu stood out in her beauty, she feared she would not escape; so she shaved her head and disfigured herself and took refuge at the Faling 法靈 temple.

At this time, Hou Xi 候希 moved from Pinglu 平露 to become military governor of Ziqing 漿青. He had heard rumors of Han's reputation and so asked him to be his secretary. After Suzong 唐宗 succeeded in returning the state to right by dint of his divine martial prowess, Han sent a messenger privately to look for Miss Liu. He filled a silken bag with pieces of gold and wrote on it the following verse:

Zhang Terrace willow,  张臺柳
Oh Zhang Terrace willow!  張臺柳
So green in bygone days.  昔日青青今在否
Are you still there?  縱使長條似舊繫
Even if your tender withes  纏使長條似舊繫
sweep down as of old.  原是攀折他人手
No doubt they have been pulled and plucked  亦應攀折他人手
by another's hand.

Miss Liu sobbingly accepted the gold, and while those around her grew sad, she responded:

Willow branch  柳枝
In the season of fragrance  芳菲節
Resents that, year upon year,  所恨年年離別
she is given to those who part.

Once one leaf goes with the wind  一片隨風忽報秋
in answer to the autumn.  綴使君來豈堪折
Even if her lord should come,  綴使君來豈堪折
what would be left to pluck?  綴使君來豈堪折

Shortly afterward, the border general Shazha Li 沙吒利, who had recently achieved merit, learned secretly of Miss Liu's beauty and stole her away to his mansion, where she occupied all his favor. (541–543)

Miss Liu's act of unselfishness here occurs in other tales as well and will become a stock motif in later fiction and drama—left behind by the ambitious lover/husband, she maintains her chastity and must sell her possessions to do so. In other tales, such abandonment suggests selfishness or disloyalty on the part of the man, 19 here, it merely introduces the more serious intervention of outside circumstances: before Han can return to her, his career and her chastity are derailed for a time by war and rebellion. She attempts to defend herself by becoming (at least temporarily) a Buddhist nun and thus signifies to others her unavailability. But in time of war this makes little difference, and she falls victim to raw force. Before this happens, however, Han attempts to make contact with her: once he is established in a semi-official position (note that here it is not a true "bureaucratic" post but, rather, a place on the staff of a general), he sends her money and a poem inquiring whether she has remained loyal to him. A true love story becomes possible: this passage makes clear that Han in fact does not see Miss Liu as a momentary substitution for success but as an essential element in his own conception of happiness. Of course, his gesture here is literary and passive, but the exchange of poems reasserts the ties of mutual admiration and sexual desire that had defined their relationship earlier. At the same time there is a disquieting note: the act of composition is a way of demonstrating literary talent and mutual understanding, but the language in which the poems are couched alludes to the world of sexual anxiety and competition. Miss Liu's surname means "willow," and Zhang Terrace was a place-name associated with brothels or at least places of sexual pleasure. Just as willow withes were broken off and presented to departing friends in the hopes that they might be "detained" (liu 留), the woman/tree is used by men who inevitably abandon her, leaving her diminished by the encounters. A famous Dunhuang 敦煌 song makes the connection explicit:

Don't break me off!  莫攀我
If you break me, my heart will incline too far.  攀我太心偏
When Hou Xiyi was appointed vice-director of the left, he came to the capital for
an imperial audience, and Han was able to accompany him. When he arrived in the
capital, he had already lost track of where Miss Liu had gone; he sighed and thought
of her unceasingly. By chance at Dragonhead Hill he encountered a gray-haired man
driving a bridled ox that pulled a carriage with two maidservants accompanying.
Han was following along behind them when he heard from within the carriage,
"Aren't you Supernumerary Han? I'm Miss Liu!" She sent a maidservant to inform
him secretly that she had been given to the General Shazha Li. Since they were pre-
vented by other travelers in the carriage, she could only ask him to wait for her the
next day at the gate to Dousheng Ward (of the capital). When he went to this
appointment, she had tied a jade box with a piece of light silk and, filling it with
scented oil, gave it to him from the carriage. "Although we are now parted forever, let
me show you my sincere affection." She then had the carriage turn, but she waved to
him. Her light sleeves fluttered as her scented carriage rumbled away. Soon his sight
of her ended, and he was lost in thought as she vanished in a cloud of dust.

Han could not overcome his passion for her. It so happened that Hou's subordi-
nates were meeting at a house for a drinking bout and sent someone to invite Han.
Han forced himself to go, but his expression was depressed, and his voice was
choked with sobs. There was a certain military inspector, Xu Jun 許俊, a self-
assured and independent man. Grabbing his sword, he said, "You must have cause.
I beg to be of use." Han had no choice but to tell him. Xu Jun said, "Write a short note.
I will fetch her straightaway." He then donned his armor and strapped two quivers at
his waist. Taking along a horseman, he chose a side road to Shazha Li's mansion.
He waited until the general had gone out for a half-mile or so; then, pulling his robe
close around him and grasping his bridle, he shoved his way through the gates. He
rushed in, shouting "The general has fallen ill! He has sent me to bring his wife!" The
servants all fell back in fright, and none dared raise his head. After he ascended the
main hall, he showed Miss Liu the letter from Han, tucked her underneath his
arm, and leapt astride his horse. He rode hell-bent for leather, returning immedi-
ately to the party. He pulled her forward by the folds of her robe. "Fortunately I
have not failed in my mission," All the guests sighed in surprise and admiration.
Han and Miss Liu grasped hands and wept. All gave up their drinking. (45c)

Han's failure to take immediate action does not reflect cowardice or indifference
to his mistress. Rather, the literati author accurately reflects the difficulties of the
situation: it is only by chance that Han meets Miss Liu again, amid the chaos of rebellion. Once he has found her, however, their bonds are reasserted. Although Miss Liu is to some extent a pawn that is circulated
among men, she shows enough initiative and emotion to make her own
preferences evident. Not surprisingly, she demonstrates this through the bestowing of a gift—thus repaying in a minor way her gift of the gold earlier.

However, desire on both sides goes for naught until Han earns the attention of a violent military bravo-figure, the impertussive Xu Jun. We are not told why in particular Xu decides to help Han; respect for his talent? loyalty to a colleague? pity for an unhappy lover? rage over Shazha Li’s injustice? In any event, the narrative’s attention now adopts Xu as its central figure. We are told with obvious enthusiasm the ruse Xu employs to gain access to Miss Liu; we experience amusement and admiration as we see him present Miss Liu a letter with one hand and tuck her under his arm with the other. However, the story still does not end here; impertussive actions by braves can have their consequences and must be defended by more socially sanctioned elements.

At this time Shazha Li was enjoying exceptional favor, and Han and Xu Jun both feared repercussions. They went to visit Hou Xiyi about it. Xiyi was surprised. “So Xu himself has managed to carry out the sort of action which I have done all my life!” He then presented a memorial:

The censor Han Hong, presently acting as a secretary and supernumerary of the Board of Revenue, has long been ranked among my assistants. He has repeatedly displayed his achievements, and he has recently sat for the examinations. He had a concubine, a Miss Liu. She was separated from him by the recent rebellions and was compelled to remain where she was, where she took refuge with an eminent nun. Now Your Majesty’s civilizing influence has been restored to its governance, and those far and wide have been transformed. But General Shazha Li has flouted the law at will, and relying on his insignificant merit, he has abducted a woman set on defending her virtue and has thus violated your sacred governance. Since my subordinate commander Xu Jun, a palace aide to the censor-in-chief, bails from [the rough border territories of] Youzhou 北州 and Jiashou 焦州, he possesses a valiant heart of considerable courage. He took Miss Liu back and has returned her to Han Hong. He harbored a sense of justice and has manifested the sincerity of his feelings but since I had not heard of the affair beforehand, I have certainly been remiss in obeying your commands.

The emperor responded immediately: Miss Liu should indeed return to Han Hong, and Shazha Li should pay them two million cash in reparation. After Miss Liu returned to Han, Han held several offices in turn, culminating with [the position of] document drafter in the Secretariat. (542)

This is the section of the story that would puzzle a Western reader most: why the seemingly anticlimactic intervention of Hou Xiyi at this point? The image of Han and Xu thinking somewhat better of their impetuousity and seeking help of a more mundane kind seems to take away from the nobility of the action. Even more so, why include the text of Hou’s memorial, written as it is in a highly ornamental style? There are two possible practical reasons that immediately suggest themselves: the author includes the memorial either as a sign of authenticity (this story really occurred, and here is official proof) or as a demonstration of his ability to draft government documents. However, there are good intrinsic reasons for this passage: although Han had the help of a strong-arming man at first (a man who exemplifies the positive qualities of wu 胤, or the martial), he cannot hope to get away with what he has done without the assistance of a representative of the civil order (文). That Hou is a general is not as important as the fact that he holds a position in the imperial bureaucracy and has the ear of the emperor. Thus Han has won assistance from “men of respect” in every realm—just as he had received assistance from Mr. Li earlier. This is the reward of talent and sincerity; it is an act of wish-fulfillment for the literati reader: raw talent will win one a career and an ideal lover, as well as enough assistance from the powerful to keep both.

However, a very odd development occurs here. Although Hou no doubt had respect for Han, the factor that affects him directly is the spontaneous sincerity and heroism of Xu Jun. The focus of the narrative continues to follow Xu. It is as if his abduction of Miss Liu has given him some figurative right to her, as if some new system was being worked out in determining narrative balance. This is only suggested by the juxtapositions of structure and not by narrated events, of course: Han gets Miss Liu back, and we have the obligatory mention of his later official career. However, the story closes with a “judgment” that is addressed to Miss Liu and Xu Jun alone, as if they were the main characters:

Miss Liu was a woman whose will was set on preserving her chastity, and yet she could not; Xu Jun was a man who admired the ideal of righteousness but was unable to carry it out fully. If before this Miss Liu had been selected for imperial service because of her beauty, then she could have continued the tradition of forebears typical of previous court ladies like Lady Feng (傅 [who defended her lord from a bear]) or Lady Ban (班 [who declined a seat in the imperial carriage]). If Xu Jun for his part had been promoted in imperial service because of talent, he would have established the same merit as Cao Mo 曹茂, who heroically defended the interests of the King of Qi 趙 at Min (Min City), or Lin Xiangru 林皇后, who prevented the humiliation of the King of Zhao 趙 at Min Lake 湖. Such famous occasions as these
become known only if they are written down; on the other hand, great merit must depend on such occasions in order to establish itself. If those who possess talent remain obscure and do not meet with occasions for success, then courage and a sense of justice will expend themselves in vain and will not enter into the sphere of the proper. Their behavior could hardly be seen as acting properly in accordance with changing circumstances. But this was due to what they themselves happened to encounter. (548)

Han has dropped out of the picture entirely—or rather, his ghost is present as a phantom replacement of the emperor, who has failed to employ two such capable people as Miss Liu and Xu Jun. In any event, Liu and Xu are now introduced as two classic examples of "gentlemen who do not meet with their times" (junzi bu yu 君子不遇). What was originally a romance is now refigured as a narrative of talent frivolously expended: a virtuous woman whose vows of chastity came to naught when her powerless lover was separated from her, and a brave hero whose strength was employed to abduct a concubine. Although such ethical endings should not be taken as the last word of the author, they do represent the complexities of Tang narrative in general, the refusal to commit to the lessons or expectations of any one genre or story type. It also reflects the complex ways that literati readers can figure themselves within such narratives: at first, the reader could identify with Han, who lived the romance of having talent, the perfect woman, and powerful friends; then he could identify with those powerful friends, who could gain fame and prestige by helping others; finally, he can make an identification with noble figures whose talents are wasted. As we have seen, literati identification with virtuous court ladies was already an old tradition by the eighth century. Oddly enough, a story that had begun with asserting the relative autonomy of the female to bestow love on a literatus of genius ends with reasserting the old trope of woman as a version of the subordinate male.

Reasons for Romancing (and for Not Romancing)

Perhaps the main reason for the shifts of attention and interest in even so short a narrative as "Miss Liu" lies with the compositional attitudes of the literati author. It is not so much a coherent tale as a series of interlocking exercises in composition. There are three coherent "scenes" in the story: the banquet at Mr. Li's, Han's two brief encounters with Miss Liu in the capital, and Xu Jun's pledge of rescue and its commission. In brief anecdote form, the story of Miss Liu could have dispensed with all of them; they obviously represent an author working out ways of telling a narrative effectively and with interesting details. However, even more unnecessary to the story are the two poems exchanged, the memorial of Hui Xiyi, and the "judgment" at the end. The author's approach to narrative here is quite different from the conception of fiction writing in the West: here, storytelling is an excuse to engage in a wide variety of styles and forms; there is no need to aim for unity of effect. We do not even know how many hands contributed to this narrative: although it is attributed to a single author (Xu Yaozuo 許耀宗), it may have passed through numerous elaborations. How true was the kernel of the tale? Was the memorial real, and if not, who composed it? Were the poems imported from some other place because they fit in well here? Or if they were composed for this narrative, who wrote them? To call this sort of approach to storytelling "dialogic" in the Bakhtinian sense would be to make overly subtle a process that is explicit and cheerfully exercised. We do not have an author through whom different discourses speak; we have an author or authors who indifferently employ any discourse they feel like using. These narratives are evidently forms of literati vaudeville.

These issues cause problems only if we are exercised over the development of "fiction" in the Tang. Most of the texts examined in this chapter are ones that modern scholars conventionally label chuanqi 傳奇 (transmissions of the marvelous), but that does not imply that they share the qualities of a coherent, well-defined genre. The conception of chuanqi as something analyzable in stylistic or literary historical terms derives from the work of the Ming scholar Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602); he distinguished the more well-developed "tales" of the Tang from the zhiguai characteristic of the pre-Tang era. Critics earlier in this century (particularly Lu Xun) employed this division to create a history of the development of fiction; they argued that Tang chuanqi authors were increasingly aware of fictional narrative as an independent form and that they attempted to create stories with plot, characterization, and suspense. However, more recent discussions of short narrative in the pre-Tang and Tang eras (notably, studies by Robert Campany and Glen Dudbridge) have tended to emphasize the "reportage" aspects of these narratives and their ties to religious and cosmological thinking. I am interested here not in the debate over what constitutes "fiction" in the Chinese tradition, but rather in the way in which narrative gets elaborated in the hands of literati authors. In this sense, many of these pieces do constitute a category of sorts, not because of their self-conscious "fictionality" but
precisely because they are literati performances—written or compiled not for religious or philosophical reasons but for circulation within literati circles.

When literati narratives became more widespread in the decades after the An Lushan rebellion, there was audience enough for these performances. This period coincided with the rise of a more extensive and self-conscious examination culture: articulate writers of this period are increasingly men who hope to launch an official career by going to the capital, finding a prominent and powerful patron, and passing the examinations as a prelude to a lucrative or prestigious government post. Modern scholars, particularly Chen Yinke, have explicitly linked the writing of narratives to this phenomenon by suggesting that chuang were sometimes included in the scrolls that a young ambitious scholar would circulate among potential patrons in the capital to demonstrate his literary abilities. Although we do not need to accept this hypothesis completely, it would not be unreasonable to assume that literati narratives were composed for circulation among the members of the male literati community and that (like poetry itself) they were ways of demonstrating the author’s skill with language. Granted the social circulation of such texts—laboriously copied and passed from hand to hand or read aloud at gatherings—the social lives of the literati become reinscribed in them in various ways. Shared experiences lead to emphasis on certain plot elements, particularly those involving literati failure or success in the official world and the competitions (formal or informal) to which they are subject through interactions within the various male social communities of the Tang.

As we have seen with "Miss Liu," it is this world of social exchange, of mutual reading and criticism, that affects the way women emerge in the texts. In one obvious sense, it creates a unique Chinese example of the "romance," as Stephen Owen has recently hypothesized. Owen defines "romance" broadly, and I take him to mean quite simply stories in which a young man and woman meet, fall in love, overcome obstacles thrown in their way, and then are either happily reunited or parted forever. From this rather flexible point of view, romance can constitute the main element of a story or enter in as a theme or as a subsidiary plot. For Owen, romance is another manifestation of a development he sees as characteristic of the early ninth century in general—an interest in personal self-expression and self-fulfillment, the creation of "private" spaces independent of the public sphere, and an accompanying conflict between the demands of the public and the private. The lovers in the romance attempt to create a small space independent of society within which they can indulge their personal desires for happiness: "I hope it will not seem too strange to suggest that not only is the culture of romance another version of the private sphere, but it is also an even more perfect counterpart of reclusion. In the public world, things change; the world of the recluse and the bliss of lovers are unchanging states of being and require commitment." From Owen’s point of view, this uncompromising need for changelessness puts often insurmountable pressures on the lovers. He constantly evokes the ways in which these romances go wrong—the collision of economic necessity and "true love," the barely concealed power relations that exist between courteous and client, and the continuing requirements of the world of family and officialdom. But, by and large, he sees at least the attempt to construct an idealized romantic relationship between a man and a woman as the backbone of many of these tales.

This reading notwithstanding, I believe that many of these sexual encounters can be put in a broader context that speaks to additional factors beyond the creation of a private space and the elevation of the erotic paradigm. Their private world is also public in a different sense—it is open to the informal male communities of readers. Although Owen grants the power of the male community to evaluate the behavior of its own, he emphasizes its power to pass judgment over those who would deny the claims of the private. In creating and interpreting sexual relations in these narratives, however, the male community often does more than create the dynamic that Owen describes: it also redefines the way women and men deal with each other in terms of existing codes of requital, competition, and prestige seeking. Affection and romance between literati and their women are interpreted through structures of literati experience, and new codes of public behavior are created. This is borne out by the role of "romance" within Tang narratives in general. Although its existence is indisputable and it emerges constantly, in few stories is it the most important or significant plot element. This is quite different from other cultures, in which the emergence of the idea of romance has usually been accompanied by the development of a well-defined genre that repeats the same plot over and over with minor variants.

An examination of how some narratives work through issues of love and romance will clarify this point. In one famous story, "Wushuang zhuan" 無雙傳 (The story of Wushuang; TPG 4: 546–48), the hero, Wang Xianke 王仙客, knows his beloved from childhood. Left fatherless at a young age,
Wang goes to live with his maternal uncle Liu (a powerful official). Liu has a beautiful daughter named Wushuang (Peerless). On her deathbed, Wang's mother tries to make her brother swear that he will wed Wushuang to Wang, but he vaguely avoids committing himself. When Wang grows up, he becomes increasingly infatuated with his cousin and even bribes the servants of the family to ensure his access to her. But even though his aunt seems to be on his side, his uncle refuses to agree to the marriage. Then a military uprising changes things—as so often happens in literati narratives composed in the post-An Lushan world:

One day, Liu hurried to dawn court but returned again by morning. He abruptly galloped into his mansion, dripping sweat and out of breath. "Lock the main gate! Lock the main gate!" he commanded. The entire household was thrown into a panic and could not guess what his reasons were. After some time he said, "The troops in Jing and Yuan have revolted, and Yao Lingyan has brought troops into the Hanyuan Palace. The emperor has departed by way of the north gate of the garden, and all the government officials are hurrying to accompany him. But I took thought of my wife and daughter, and so I've returned to manage things. Quickly summon Wang Xianke to take charge of the family's goods, and I will marry Wushuang to him."

When Wang heard his command, he was surprised and delighted. He bowed to Liu and thanked him. Liu then loaded up twenty animals with gold, silver, silks, and brocades. He said to Wang, "Change your clothes and take our goods out by the Kaiyuan Gate. Find a secluded inn somewhere for refuge. I will bring your aunt and Wushuang out by way of Qixia Gate and will come around the city walls to meet you." (546–47)

Wang thus has an opportunity to prove himself and win the girl of his dreams. His potential intervention here is reminiscent of that of Scholar Zhang in the "Tale of Yingying", who relies on a friend in the military to repress a rebellion threatening the monastery where he and Yingying are staying. But the uncle's motives here are worth noticing. As a maternal cousin, Wang has a certain obligation to assist the family. By marrying him into the family, however, Liu attempts to guarantee his loyalty and his goodwill in protecting the family goods (of which Wushuang will eventually be a part). He becomes the Liu family heir and responsible for the family's preservation. Wushuang in turn becomes a token of this. Yet ironically Wang is left helpless and ineffectual—perhaps because he is not a military man himself:

Wang did as Liu directed. By sundown, he had waited some time at the inn, but no one had arrived. The gates of the city had been locked since noon, and he had spent the time gazing to the south without seeing anyone. Taking a torch he rode a donkey around the city walls to Qixia Gate. The gate was already bolted. There were quite a few gatekeepers there grasping clubs, some standing, some sitting.

Wang got off his horse. "What's happened in the city?" he asked hurriedly. "Has anybody come out this gate?" Marshal Zhu has made himself emperor," they replied. "Some time after noon a man in a black traveling hat tried to get through the gate with a group of four or five women, but people in the street recognized him as the Special Supply Commissioner, a certain Minister Liu. So the gate guards didn't dare let him through. Toward nightfall a group of cavalry came in pursuit and took him back north into the city." Wang broke into muffled sobs and returned to the inn.

Toward midnight the city gates burst open and torches made things as bright as day. Troops rushed out grasping weapons, and guards were summoned out to search for court officials who had fled the city. Wang fled in terror, abandoning all his baggage. He returned to Xiangyang and lived at his country estate for three years. Only after he heard that the revolt had been put down and the capital and the empire were at peace did he return. (547)

Again, there seems to be no expectation that the male lead will engage in flamboyant heroics, and we cannot help but wonder if he wouldn't be as ineffectual looking after Wushuang as he is in looking after the Liu family's baggage. He does not give up, however. When he returns to the capital, he learns that Liu has been executed for collaborating with the rebels and that Wushuang has been forcibly enrolled as a concubine in the imperial establishment. This does not prevent Wang from trying to acquire her once again. His desires are romantic, but she is also the last salvageable remnant of the Liu family, and by rescuing and marrying her, he redeems his failure to look after the Liu family goods. Of course, the difficulties of his courtship have been increased tenfold. Earlier he had been forced to bribe the servants of the Liu household in order to get word of Wushuang. Now he has an even more difficult household to infiltrate.

However, Wang does not immediately have an opportunity to seek Wushuang's rescue. In fact, he shows no sign of even attempting it. Rather, he finds a minor post as magistrate of Fuping country near the capital; as a subsidiary duty, he takes charge of the Changle post station. At this point, he fortuitously meets Wushuang again, when an entourage of thirty court ladies stop at his station on a ceremonial visit to the imperial
tombs. He manages a brief meeting with his beloved on the road the following day, and Wushuang contrives to pass a letter to him:

It was five pages on flowered notepaper, all in her own hand. In clear but agrieved language, it related her story in detail. As Wang read, it hit tears fell at the thought that they were parted forever. But at the end she said, "I often heard my father, the late censor, mention an officer named Gu in Fuping County who is a man of true feeling. Perhaps he can help us." (548)

The similarities between this scene and Han’s re-encounter of Miss Liu suggest that this is a common motif in tales of separated lovers. Wushuang’s letter to Wang serves the same purpose as the exchange of poems and the gift of the box in "Miss Liu," with one important difference: Wushuang has a suggestion to make concerning her own rescue. This is the only episode in the story that shows Wushuang participating in events. But as with Miss Liu, help must come not from Wang himself but from some third party. The next passage is a particularly significant one in relation to the dynamics of literati narrative:

Wang then notified the prefecture, requesting that he be allowed to resign the post station but retain his position as magistrate of Fuping. He then sought out Officer Gu.

It turned out he was living on a village farm. Wang went to visit him. He then did his utmost to fulfill Gu’s every wish, giving him presents of silk, gems, and jade without number. Yet for an entire year he did not mention his business once.

After his term of office was over, he went to live in retirement in the district. One day Gu came to him and said, "I am merely a soldier and am growing old and useless. You, Sir, expended all your energies seeking to please me. You must have something you want from me. I am a man of true feeling and am moved by the great kindness you have shown me. I wish to sacrifice my own life to help you." Wang bowed to him, weeping, and related the situation to him. Gu stared up at the sky and tapped his head a few times. "This affair certainly won’t be easy, but I’ll give it a try for your sake." (548)

Unlike Xu Jun, who helped Han out of pure impulse and goodwill, Gu must be courted. Wang sets up a relationship of patron and client with Gu, creating ties of obligation and repayment. Gu very likely knows that Wang’s presents are not given merely out of goodwill but entail a request for services: this is part of the code of master/retainer relations. There is no disingenuousness on Wang’s part. He merely demonstrates his ability to find and employ the best men to get a task done. In this way, he redeems himself from his failure to look after the Liu family goods. He may have failed in his own commission, but he is successful in commissioning someone else.

However, the elaboration of this episode and the length of time Wang needs to win Gu over suggests another type of relation as well. Wang “courts” Gu for over a year through kind treatment and presents. Their alliance acts as a substitution for Wang’s courtship of Wushuang. She will be abruptly abducted through the machinations of Gu, a violent matchmaker who violates decorum. The courtesies required in proper wedding rituals are here expressed in a relation once removed from the parties involved. Wang symbolically maintains a certain propriety in his seeking of Wushuang through his show of patience and goodwill and thus earns his right to her. Perhaps this is why the story remains centered on Wang and Wushuang to the end of the tale, rather than shifting its attention to Gu, the way "Miss Liu" shifted its attention to Xu Jun.

Next we have a detailed description of Gu’s rescue of Wushuang; the author enjoys relating the details, partly because the exciting and dangerous abduction of an imperial court lady would thrill readers. One main element of the abduction is Gu’s ruthless execution of any minor participants in it (including Wang’s loyal manservant Sai Hong), to prevent anyone from divulging it; the mayhem culminates in Gu’s own suicide. This last gesture is necessary for a number of reasons. First, it is a stock gesture of loyalty on the part of a retainer. Second, it pays for the deaths that he himself has inflicted on others—he holds his own life as cheaply as those he took to ensure the success of the stratagem. Third, Gu’s removal from the narrative at this point removes the necessity for his participation later in the lives of Wushuang and Wang; he remains a tool and hence less a focus of attention. The author makes this clear in his own "judgment," which keeps Gu in an important but ultimately subsidiary role: "Wushuang met with times of disorder and so was taken into the ranks of palace women. And yet Wang would not give up his determination even when facing death. In the end he met up with Officer Gu and adopted his extraordinary plan—and more than a dozen innocents lost their lives" (549). The author speaks of loss of life here more in awe than in disapproval—but he also separates Gu and his plot (necessary as it is) from the true virtue demonstrated in Wang’s dedication and persistence.

Without a doubt, "The Tale of Wushuang" warrants consideration as a romance: ultimately, it is Wang’s love that compels him to go to such ex-
tremes. However, this should not misdirect us from much of the interest of the tale. In spite of the heroine’s brief contribution to her own rescue, she is mostly the idealized and abstract goal in the tale: Wang’s failure to obtain her puts the narrative in motion, and his gaining of her brings it to an end. She is a motivation for desire, for machinations, for killing, and ultimately for celebration. Her very name, which means “without peer,” turns her into a prize worth possessing (the term is often applied to rare and valuable objects). This is figured most dramatically in the story by having her enter the service of the emperor himself; the hero must thus infiltrate the most difficult interior space of all, the eroticized sanctum sanctorum of the political body. Ultimately, Wushuang may be a figure for the ambitions of the young literatus seeking a career.

As a woman-to-be-obtained, Wushuang is connected to Wang through a number of comprehensible social ties: primarily through kinship, betrothal, and childhood friendship; secondarily, through the ties of “romance” that are becoming increasingly important in the Tang, as well as through the intervention of the “bravo-retainer” figure of Gu. In other tales, however, even those of a supernatural nature, the object of affection is still subject to male-defined social codes. In one of the longest Tang narratives, the “Liu Yi zhuan” (Tale of Liu Yi; TPG 4: 144–50), Liu’s romance with the daughter of the dragon-king of Dongting洞庭 takes a backseat to the author’s fascination with the underwater dragon’s court and the political functioning of the supernatural order. Within this context, romance is filtered through a series of social relationships humorously or surprisingly reinterpreted on the supernatural level.

As the story commences, Liu Yi has an encounter with the daughter of the dragon of Dongting Lake. She begs him to take a message to her father: she is married to the second son of the dragon of the Jing River, who is mistreating her. However, this meeting with her is not quite as accidental as it first appears. The tale begins:

During the Yifeng 儀鳳 reign period (675–79) of the Tang, a certain scholar by the name of Liu Yi was about to return to his home by the Xiang湘 River after failing the examinations in the capital. He recalled that a fellow countryman was living at the time in Jingyang 濟陽; so he went there first to take his leave of him. After he had gone two miles or so, a bird flew up and startled his horse. The beast galloped out of control off to the left, and he only managed to stop it after he had gone another two miles. Then he saw a woman herding sheep by the side of the road. Liu Yi found this strange. Upon looking more closely, he discovered her to be of extraordinary beauty, although her lovely face looked worried and her clothes were untidy. She stood there, listening intently, as though she were waiting for someone. (144)

An attentive reading suggests that the dragon-daughter has deliberately arranged for this meeting. Having a horse bolt and get his rider lost is an established motif in folk stories; it represents a mortal’s movement from the known world into the world of the supernatural or unearthly. And she looks as if she is expecting someone. It may be of equal importance, however, that he has failed the examinations; with the entrance to one realm blocked, Liu finds himself entering another. This is fully realized by the end of the tale, when he obtains Taoist immortality and thus removes himself from the ordinary literati world altogether. This beginning is also a defining moment of Liu’s character: as the tale progresses, it becomes clear that Liu Yi will not gain renown as a scholar or as an official; he is more a “man of justice” (yi jian 賢夫) concerned with helping those in need. He is more Xu Jun than Han Hong. Of course, this is not to say that literati cannot be bravos, or vice versa; it merely puts the defining spin on Liu Yi’s personality.

The description of the dragon-daughter is also important: “He discovered her to be of extraordinary beauty, although her lovely face looked worried and her clothes were untidy.” This is not an occasion for “love at first sight.” Rather, beauty here is more a mark of social distinction and of worthiness to be rescued; she is a figure demanding Liu Yi’s chivalrous attention. The shabbiness of her clothes cannot conceal her value: they are signs that she has unjustly come down in the world.

Indeed, it is Liu Yi’s chivalrous instincts that make him willing to help her, in spite of the difficulties he faces in crossing the realm between human and dragon. “I am a man of justice. After hearing your story both my spirit and my blood are stirred. I resent only that I do not have wings to fly” (144). Nonetheless, he proceeds on his mission after receiving instructions from the dragon-daughter. When he arrives at the dragon-king’s palace, the king extends full courtesies to him and makes plans to rescue his daughter. However, the woman’s uncle, the hot-tempered and violent dragon of Qiantang錢塘, discovers what has happened to his niece. He breaks the chains that have been restraining him (a precaution undertaken by his older brother to prevent his future excesses), terrifying Liu Yi in the process. Flying to the Jing River, he carries off his niece while inflicting widespread carnage. When he returns to Dongting, he reports on his indiscretion:
In the morning I left Numinous Void Palace and soon arrived at Jingyang. At noon I did battle with them. Before I returned here, I hurried up to the Ninth Sky to inform the Emperor of Heaven what I had done. He knew the reasons behind our grudge and so pardoned my trespass—and pardoned what I had done earlier as well. But since I was stiff-necked and stirred up by things and did not pause a moment to take my leave of you, I shook up your palace and frightened our guests. I am ashamed and sorry that I did not realize my own fault. He then stepped back and bowed twice.

The dragon lord asked, "How many did you kill?"
"Sixty thousand."
"And you destroyed crops?"
"For about three hundred miles."
"And where is the ungrateful husband?"
"I ate him."

The dragon lord was perturbed. "It was really unbearable for that naughty boy to behave in that way. But you were surely too hasty. We have relied on the sage wisdom of the Emperor of Heaven, who has forgiven us due to the severity of our grudge. But if he had not done so, what could I have said in apology? From now on you cannot act in this manner." (146)

This is the great comic moment of the story, but it is also significant in the way it exaggerates the impulsive, if justifiable, violence of the Qiantang dragon. It also anticipates the Qiantang dragon's display of impropriety later on. Dongting has kept his brother under control in order to maintain public peace and to fulfill the promise of his good behavior that he has personally made to the Emperor of Heaven. Although Qiantang may act out of a sense of family loyalty and of justice, he in fact endangers the various contracts that maintain and preserve human relations.

Liu Yi has done the family an immense service by bearing the dragon-daughter's message from one world into another; he now becomes an honored guest and friend of the two brothers—a fact reinforced by their later exchange of poems at the banquet held in his honor (note that he does not exchange poems with the dragon-daughter). However, this special relation with the two male dragons is put at risk by the overbearing nature of Qiantang, who tries to browbeat Liu into a marriage with his niece.

The following day they feasted Liu once more in Clear Brilliance Hall.

The Prince of Qiantang grew drunk and began to put on airs. Sprawling out arrogantly, he said to Liu, "Haven't you heard that 'a hard stone can be split but it cannot be rolled, and a man of justice can be killed but he cannot be harmed'? I have a proposition that I wish to tell you. If it meets with your assent, then we will both fly to the cloud-filled sky above. If it doesn't, then we will sink into the Fifth and muck. Tell me what you think."

Liu replied, "Let me hear."

Qiantang said, "Jingyang's widow is a beloved daughter of the Lord of Dongting. She is virtuous and attractive and valued by all her kin. Unfortunately she was shamed by a scoundrel, but now her connections with him are at an end. Now I would like to entrust her to your lofty sense of right and have us become kin for generations. She who has received your favor will have a home to go to, and those who love her will know to whom she has been given. Would this not be first and last the way of a gentleman?" (147)

This speech in turn inspires the guest to make an eloquent defense of propriety:

Liu grew solemn, then broke into a laugh. "I really did not know that my lord of Qiantang could be so troublesome. Earlier I heard how you spanned the entire land and embraced the Five Sacred Mountains just to release your anger and rage. Then I saw you break your fersers and uproot the jade post in order to rush to the assistance of another. I thought that no one was as firm or decisive, as enlightened or upright as yourself. You did not avoid death in punishing the wrongdoer, nor did you cherish your own life in aiding those you cared about. This is truly the aim of a real man. Now, amid the harmonies of flutes and pipes and the friendliness of guest and host, how can you disregard the way of the true man in order to intimidate others? How could I have expected this?

"If I had encountered you amid the great waves, or on a gloomy mountainside, with scales and whiskers bristling, covered in rain clouds, driving me to my death—then I would have seen you as merely some beast and would not have resented your actions. But now your body is clothed in cap and gown, and you sit here, discussing propriety and justice with me. You have a nature that fully fathoms the Five Principles and comprehends the subtle precepts of all human conduct. Evenworthy and outstanding men in the human world do not come up to you—how much less so the spirits of the rivers? And yet with this doltish manner and harsh disposition you put on airs, under cover of your drunkenness you oppress others. How is this in keeping with the right? My own physical form is too small to fill up the space under one of your scales, and yet I dare to withstand your improper manner with my unwielding heart. I wish for you to think about this." (147)

Later, Liu Yi tells the dragon-daughter his main reason for refusing an alliance: marriage to a widow whose husband's death he caused even indirectly would be dishonorable. Yet here he chooses only to criticize the manner in
which Qiantang presents the offer. There are unwritten codes on how favors should be repaid; Qiantang violates that code by concealing compulsion under the illusion of a pact that would cement their friendship. Why he does so is not altogether clear: perhaps the sense of obligation he feels to Liu Yi, a mere mortal, makes him try to force a repayment on him so as to clear the books as quickly as possible. Note, however, that Qiantang phrases this invitation in the language of the bravos: compliance becomes an issue that will decide eternal friendship or eternal enmity. Liu Yi is quick to distance himself from this bluster masquerading as the hero's code; although the dragon terms both of them "gentlemen of justice" (yi shi 貞士), Liu complains that a truly just man does not intimidate others into a course of action, particularly when they are observing the rites of the banquet ("amid the harmonies of flutes and pipes and the friendliness of guest and host"). Liu Yi goes on to take Qiantang to task for not living up to his human form: beasts may be violent by nature, but once caps and clothes are donned, there are rules that must be followed. A true code of the hero is being formulated here, one in which the gentlemanly Liu Yi participates, but one that excludes bullying and violence. Perhaps the author attempts a defense of "heroic" behavior by contrasting Liu with the coarse dragon-bravo.

When Liu leaves shortly, he feels a brief pang of regret at having turned down marriage to such a beautiful woman. However, this separation proves to be short-lived. After both wives die in quick succession, a further marriage with a "young widow" is suggested to him. This turns out to be the dragon-daughter, although she keeps this fact hidden at first. Are we to suspect supernatural involvement in the death of his first two wives? Perhaps; but more important is the code of honor that the dragon-daughter herself pursues in her marriage to Liu. Although he tells her after their marriage of his adventures and comments on her resemblance to the maiden of Dongting, she refuses to reveal her identity. But when they have a child together, she confesses that she has loved him all along and had deeply regretted it when he turned down her uncle's invitation. When his first two wives died, she decided to approach him as a human bride:

"I didn't speak of this earlier because I knew that you had a heart that did not value physical attractions. I mention it now because I know you have some feeling for me. A woman is a worthless thing and unworthy to warrant your eternal faith. But now because you love your son, I entrust both of us to you. I don't know what you think of this. Both grief and fear burden my heart—feelings I cannot overcome." (148-49)

The dragon-daughter's love for Liu is not in doubt here; her refusal to remarry her own kind out of loyalty to him suggests the same degree of commitment found in Miss Liu and Wushuang. But how she phrases this affection is striking: A repayment must be made. Her husband does not care much for "romantic adventures"; her son will guarantee his affections even if he feels nothing for her. Although we might dismiss this speech as courteous exaggeration, it in fact matches Liu's rhetoric. The dragon-daughter's conception of dignity and justice is just as demanding as Liu Yi's and requires just as much attention to social proprieties. In Tang terms, "love" can be conceived of precisely as the exchange of payments: the longing to repay can sometimes be indistinguishable from the longing for the loved one. This desire for exchange leads the dragon-daughter to engage in a mild deceit in order to satisfy her obligation/longing, she will marry him as a human and not tell him the truth until she has turned the tables on him and can require a new payment from him: the debt of affection she now owes to their child.

Ironically, she is compelled to this deceit through her inability to read the real motives of Liu Yi. Why precisely had he turned down Qiantang's offer? Was it out of a sense of justice or out of distaste for the woman? She is reassured by another long speech from Liu Yi, who explains his reasons for refusing her. He confesses his true affection for her and laments that propriety would not allow him to repay the debt of affection he now finds himself owing: "In the end I was restrained by [the obligations of] human affairs and could not repay you with my thanks" (149). Of course, he could have made this explanation clear the first time, when lecturing Qiantang. But it was ultimately more tactful to take Qiantang to task for his bullying ways than to confess that he could not marry the wife of the man whom his future brother-in-law had murdered.

The love story within "The Tale of Liu Yi" becomes a sort of ritual dance in which the participants are constantly maneuvering about within the space that social propriety allows them. There is little of the conventional love story here; major decisions are accompanied by long elaborate speeches on proper and improper behavior. But perhaps romance does lie in the dragon-daughter's novel interpretation of repayment, and the stratagem she adopts in order to repay. As Owen has suggested, romance tends to make claims on individuals that transcend the ordinary demands of social codes. What is interesting here is the way those very proprieties are redefined to make al-
lowance for romance: had the dragon-daughter not been innovative in her interpretation of propriety, the two would have been separated forever.

Romancing Replaced

In other stories, the role of the female is more complex, and the element of romance becomes inextricably tied to competing compulsions and conventions. Oddly enough, this shows itself most clearly when the object of the romance (the woman) stands fully outside those compulsions and conventions: that is, when she is either a prostitute or a supernatural being. For example, Shen Ji’s 沈鈞 (ca. 740–ca. 800) “Ren shi zhu” 任氏傳 (The story of Miss Ren; TPGJ 4: 140–45), the most famous fox story from the Tang, sentimentalizes a standard zhiguai plot, in which a man falls into the sexual snare of a demon who deprives him of his life force. In this version, the poor and hapless scholar Zheng 鄭 spends the night with a fox but is so drawn to her that he refuses to give her up even when he learns of her true nature. In gratitude she promises him her eternal loyalty. Once again, the erotic encounter is reshaped as a legitimate private moment independent of the ordinary demands of the social. This is not the main point of the story, however. The most important character is not Zheng (whose personal name, the narrator tells us, has not even been preserved); rather, it is his wealthy and powerful cousin, Wei Yin 魏因. When Wei learns that Zheng is keeping house with a beautiful woman, he cannot stand that his friend should have something that he himself cannot possess. He goes to visit Ren:

When he arrived, Master Zheng happened to be out. Yin entered the gate and saw a young servant boy sweeping the courtyard with a broom. There was a servant girl at the gate, but he saw no one else. When he made inquiries, the boy only smiled and said, "No one’s here."

Yin looked around inside the rooms and saw a red gown visible from under a door. He rushed in to look and saw Miss Ren hiding behind it. Yin pulled her out into the light to look at her, and she surpassed what he had heard. Yin was seized with a desire to possess her, and he embraced her, but she would not yield. He attempted to subdue her by force, and when he had pressed hard upon her, she said, "I give up. Just let up for a moment." But when he loosened his grip, she resisted as before.

This continued several times. Yin then used all his force to hold her. Her strength evaporated, and her perspiration fell like rain. Knowing she could no longer avoid him, she let her body go and no longer resisted, but her expression grew sad.

Yin asked, "Why do you look so unhappy?"
Miss Ren gave a long sigh. "Zheng indeed is to be pitied!"
Yin asked, "What do you mean?"

She replied, "Although Zheng may have the stature of an adult, he cannot shelter one lone woman. How could he be considered a man? Now you are young, noble, and wealthy, and you have many beauties to choose from. Surely you must meet many women who can compare with me. And yet Master Zheng is poor and obscure, and I am the only one that he cares for. How can you bear to indulge your heart set on excess and take something from one who has so little? I feel sorry that he is so poor and hungry and cannot support himself. He wears your clothes and eats your food, and so he is tied to you. If he could but supply himself with even modest means, we would not have come to this."

Yin was a heroic sort with a sense of justice. When he heard this, he let her go. Straightening his clothes, he apologized to her. Soon after Master Zheng returned, and the two friends greeted each other cheerfully. From this time on, Yin supplied Miss Ren with all her daily needs. (147)

From the viewpoint of romance, Miss Ren defends Zheng’s claims on her and supports his ties of affection; as with the dragon-daughter, she expresses this affection through the language of gratitude and repayment. However, if Ren’s decision to stay with Zheng establishes the purity of their “private” relations, it comes at the expense of Zheng’s character in general. Here as elsewhere he is portrayed as ineffectual—not only poor and powerless but timid. Ultimately, Zheng is incapable of having even supernatural forces help him and is doomed to remain subordinate to more daring men like his cousin. Wei Yin, however, is the “man of honor” who surrenders the brutal right of the powerful to take what they want. By doing so, he becomes the patron of Zheng even in this; he essentially grants Zheng his rights to Ren, just as Li granted Miss Liu to Han Hong. "He wears your clothes and eats your food, and so he is tied to you," says Ren, echoing the very words Han used when he attempted to refuse the gift of Miss Liu.

As Wei becomes the patron of both Zheng and Ren, a new relationship develops:

Yin went out with Ren daily and was delighted to do so. They would not stop at the most intimate associations with each other with the exception of sexual relations. For this reason Yin cherished her and valued her highly and refused her nothing. He would not forget her even for the length of a meal.

Miss Ren knew of his feelings for her, and she said to him by way of apology, "I am ashamed that you are so fond of me. But I am a base creature and don’t deserve your
deep concern. Besides, I cannot let Master Zheng down, and so I cannot fall in with your hopes. ... But if there should be some great beauty that you like but can’t obtain for yourself, let me bring her to you. In this way I could repay your favors.” (362)

The sexual tension between Wei and Ren does not disappear, but in order to disarm it (or at least keep it dormant) Ren takes up the role of the enabling mediator commonly found in many of these narratives, the mysterious outsider who obtains the woman for the hero—like Xu Jun and Officer Gu. As a fox, she escapes being abducted and thus suffering the fate of Miss Liu and Wushuang, but as a woman who would preserve her relationship with a man who cannot defend her, she takes on the role of abductor herself. The author enjoys relating the details of these schemes, which may have some bearing on Ren’s foxlike nature—in spite of her virtue, she is still a trickster figure and seems to find pleasure in taking on the greatest challenges. Meanwhile, the tawdriness of her errands weakens her position as a romantic lover. In either role, however, the narrative portrays Miss Ren more as a male fantasy—either the dubious morally but loyal woman that will not leave you, no matter how inept you are, or the procureess, the most convenient source of an inexhaustible supply of women.

The dialectic of power that exists between Wei and Zheng is a microcosm of male literati culture at large. Wei and Zheng are the best of friends, but this does not prevent Wei from taking what he wants from Zheng. Literati friendships are usually portrayed as hierarchical, with one side as patron, the other as client. This connection prevents Zheng’s relation with Ren from ever being completely private or removed from the demands of society. The only difference is that the society to which it is subject is not that of family or public service, but the complex informal relations of educated upper-class men. It may be the stresses and demands of this world that make the heroes of these tales so passive; for many literati, success in such a competitive environment must have seemed either hopeless or possible only through the intervention of more powerful and impressive patrons and colleagues. Tang literati narratives often speak to the dream of being able to achieve happiness and high office without the accompanying struggle.

Of course, the social space in which male literati interacted was the city, particularly the “underworld” of the Chang’an brothels. Bai Xingjian’s (775-866) 白行簡 《Li Wa zhuàn》李娃傳 (The story of Li Wa, TPG 4: 533–38), one of the most intricate of Tang narratives, gives a fascinating portrayal of this alternative male society. Here, an unnamed scholar sent to the capital to take the examinations falls victim to a predatory madam and her courtesan, Li Wa. After he runs out of money, the madam and Li Wa drop him by abandoning their rented house while he is away. He soon falls ill and is carried by his landlord to an undertaker’s establishment, where he recovers and earns a living as a professional mourner. He participates in a singing contest, and an old family retainer recognizes him. His father, rather than reconciling with him, beats him severely and leaves him for dead. Eventually the scholar recovers enough to become a beggar; one winter day he is discovered by Li Wa, who is ashamed of her previous treatment of him. She leaves her madam and sets herself up in an independent house, where she nurses him back to health and makes him resume his studies. He passes the examinations and then, on his way to take up an official post in the provinces, he is reconciled with his father, who insists that he marry Li and make her his principal wife. When he later carries out exemplary mourning for his parents, both he and Li are rewarded with noble titles.

Even as we summarize the plot in this way, we detect a conventionally moral direction to the story. Unlike “Huo Xiaoyu zhuàn”霍小玉傳 (The story of Huo Xiaoyu, TPG 4: 550–55), which condemns its hero Li Yi 李 益 for denying the claims of romance, “Li Wa” creates an anti-romance in which the attractions of romance almost destroy a young man. It also exemplifies a sort of family narrative of a distinctively Chinese sort: a story not of generational conflict or of feud but of reintegration and the acceptance of responsibility. The author is also intent, however, on showing the hero’s disabilities to deal with the demands of informal literati society in the capital—a society often indistinguishable from that of the demimonde. Although the text sees this courtesan world as contrary to, or threatening, the moral order that will eventually lead the hero to official success, it also portrays that courtesan world as a complex and intriguing one, guided by its own rules. In this sense, the hero is a victim largely because of his own ignorance and his failure to adapt to the pressures of the big city.

In an exhaustive study of the text, Glen Dudbridge has discussed many of these points, in particular the conflict between “good society” and the entertainment world: the scholar and his father on the one side, the courtesan Li Wa and her foster mother or madam on the other. He has also discussed at some length the themes of symbolic death and resurrection that run through the narrative. What is of interest for the present discussion is the social relations behind these themes.
The scholar begins the tale vulnerable and overconfident, as he departs his family's country estate for the capital. The countryside (or at least, the provinces) is a space within which clear hierarchical relationships are maintained and everything is as it actually appears. As he departs for the city, intent on winning a name for himself, we have a sort of Chinese Rake's Progress, the story of a naïve youth unprepared for the city. When he first encounters Li Wa on the street, he easily falls victim to her, having no defenses against wicked city women. Although a chance meeting on the street does initiate the erotic affair in many Tang narratives, this is not its purpose here; here, it emphasizes the vulnerability of the scholar, the sensitivity that will result in his fall. He is not misled by his companions in this, who make the law of the courtesan quarters quite clear to him: if he wishes to win Li Wa, he must be prepared to pay.

He investigated her by making private inquiries of those of his friends who frequented the streets of the capital. His friends told him, "That was the residence of Miss Li, a courtesan." "Is she accessible?" "She is rather expensive. Those in the past who associated with her were all from aristocratic clans and powerful families. She obtained great amounts from them. If you don't put out a million, you cannot have her will."

He replied, "I only worry that the affair won't work out. How could I begrudge even a million?" (s33)

It is easy sometimes to see "true love" as a victim to the economic necessities of courtesan culture or to believe that writers saw "true love" as transcending economic pressures, but generally in Tang narratives and anecdotes even men who are truly "in love with" their courtesans are well aware of the expenditures necessary to maintain them. The scholar is aware of this, at least at first; his crime, ultimately, is not to have enough money to be able to compete with the "big boys." He cannot live up to the financial code of the demi-monde and ends by bankrupting himself. However, as time passes, he gradually falls victim to a romantic delusion; after he runs out of money, he hangs on, hoping against hope that the end of his resources will not matter to Li. But then again, he simply has no other place to go. His life with Li Wa has not taught him to fend for himself in the urban world. Without her and money, he is as helpless as a child—and commences the process of infantilization that will mark his development later.

In the early stages of their relationship, the scholar is well aware of the money he must spend to win Li Wa. He hopes to use that money to recreate a family for himself with Li and her foster mother. The scholar himself requests that he rent a vacant court in the madam's establishment, thus acting as the husband (or wife) moving into the family dwelling (it was a convention of the brothel quarters to call steady customers "wives" and madams "mothers"). He seems to take these conventions seriously (which were perhaps meant ironically), reading as sincere the cynical undermining of Confucian family structures that the courtesan quarters provided. But he only rents his dwelling, and like most of the inhabitants of Chang'an, he is a transient, not a property owner. This transience creates a vagueness in social relations typical of the big city, and this in turn creates a moral vagueness.

The "vagueness" of social relations is also suggested by the failure of the scholar to create a space for his relations with Li that would allow him to continue with his own studies. Most obviously, he surrenders his role as the son of his father; the madam hints at this when she says, "Great desires exist between man and woman. If by chance their feelings find each other, then even the commands of their parents cannot control them." In reply the scholar abases himself by inverting "proper" social relations: "I am quite willing to make myself your servant" (this he says to the madam, not to Li herself). In addition, however, and perhaps more seriously, he breaks off contact with his fellow literati and so dooms himself to isolation within his new pseudo-family. "From this point the scholar hid himself away and did not associate with kin or friends. Daily he would meet with singers and entertainers and the like, carrying on with them in excursions and banquets. Soon his purse was empty" (s34). Oddly enough, this attempt to create a private family for himself and Li defeats the whole literati motivation behind the courtesan quarters: the courtesan quarters were, first and foremost, a place for men to meet each other, to form friendships, to show off to each other, and to make solid social connections. The scholar is unaware of this purpose, because he has bought into the belief that his relation with Li Wa is all that matters. He does not realize that one goes to the courtesan quarters to meet men, not women.

By leaving himself vulnerable through this isolation, he makes himself a non-person, undefined through any social ties; later we learn that his father assumes that he has been killed by bandits. The significant decline does not
really begin until the scholar's first illness, brought on by the sorrow and rage he feels over being abandoned. After the employees of the funeral parlor nurse him back to health,

the establishment then employed him on a daily basis to hold the muslin drapes at funerals. He supported himself with his earnings. After several months he gradually regained his health. But whenever he heard the songs of mourning, he would sigh to himself that he was not as fortunate as the departed, and he would invariably break into tears and sobs and could not control himself. When he returned from the funerals, he would imitate their songs. He was clever and quick-witted, and before long he had mastered the mysteries of this music. In all of Chang'an no one could equal him. (535)

This is a curious passage that speaks much about the central themes of the entire piece. "The Story of Li Wa" is fascinated by the details of urban living, and nothing illustrates this more than its excursion into the world of funeral parlors and mourning singers. This is also the first environment that the helpless scholar manages to master to some extent and thus learns to earn his own keep within the intricacies of capital life. There is much to ponder in this. Two explanations are given for the scholar's skill as a mourner: first, his emotional sensitivity and life experience, his ability to identify emotionally with the bereaved; and second, his intelligence, which allows him to imitate, practice, and master the songs. There are ironic undertones here: the direct expression of emotion supposedly makes for successful poetry, and perhaps the scholar's newfound suffering gives him a skill he had previously lacked. More obviously, however, the learning of mourning songs mimics the studies he has abandoned; the intelligence that should have been applied toward passing the examinations is diverted into another art that is far below him socially. Yet this skill does earn him a reputation of sorts. The contest in which he participates with the competing funeral parlor is a cruel mockery of the government examinations. It is a 'Tang literatus' worst nightmare.

Not that he is ineffective in the contest, of course. His own emotions—which come from real experience, so to speak—move the audience as good singing should, and this results in his rediscovery by his estranged father. But this display of emotions and skill does not end with the reconciliation we might expect. A Western reader anticipating a prodigal son parable is shocked when the enraged father leads his son to a spot near the Apricot Garden and beats him almost to death. Yet another irony occurs here: the Apricot Garden was a site for literati parties and a haunt for courtesans and

their customers, as well as a common place to hold banquets for those who had successfully passed the exams. The beating is the scholar's reward for winning the singing contest.

This shocking development unmasks the scholar's regeneration as a wrong path; he has tried to integrate himself into an inappropriate community. But he requires a more drastic regeneration, one closer to a genuine resurrection, in order to put him on the true path to rebirth. When the funeral employees find him nearly beaten to death, they carry him back to the parlor and nourish him by feeding him liquids with a reed pipe. Although he survives, he cannot use his arms or legs for a month. Earlier, his vulnerability once he left the protection of Li Wa's household suggested an infantilization. This continues here; in coming back from death, he must pass through a second childhood. (536)

As we have seen, however, it is not the task of the undertakers to save him. He soon breaks out into infected sores so severe his former friends can no longer tolerate him and decide to abandon him. He can no longer be left to die even in an undertaker's parlor. At this point, he does recover enough to take up begging; again, his ability to convey his emotions aids him in his career: "His voice as he begged for food was very painful, and all who heard him were sorely aggrieved." (536).

Li Wa now rediscovers him as he goes begging in the middle of a blizzard:

He cried out repeatedly in a sharp tone, in the very excess of his hunger and cold. The sound was piercing and unbearable to hear. Li Wa heard him within his house. She said to her servant, "That must be him! I recognize his voice!" She hurriedly went out and found him, stiff and starving and covered in sores. He looked barely human. She was moved by his plight. (536)

Li is in this case the warm, contented householder hearing the noise of the abandoned foundling, crying out in "the very excess of his hunger and cold." And yet this adoption scene is played against a recognition scene as well—Li is not only moved by his voice, as others have been, but recognizes the specific human being behind it. Although this act of recognition brings remorse, it also reveals her role as the scholar's own peculiar zhiji 知己, or intimate friend. She thus in one action becomes both the scholar's mother and patron.

Li Wa has counted for very little in the story up to this point. She has had no independence of her own and simply obeyed the wishes of her
madam. One enigmatic comment immediately after we learn that the scholar has squandered all his money does point to Li Wa's true feelings: "Lately the madam's treatment of him was increasingly indifferent, while Li Wa's affection (qing) grew more and more earnest" (534). Of course, this only hints that Li has a mind of her own; it does not prevent her from assisting in the scheme to abandon the scholar. When Li discovers the scholar begging in the streets, however, the situation goes beyond simple affection. In a speech to her foster mother, Li pinpoints the source of her guilt and worries about the practical repercussions of their actions:

"This is the son of a good family. Once he drove a high carriage and held a purse filled with gold. Then he came to our house, and before a year had passed he spent everything he had. Together we concocted a scheme and then threw him out and drove him away. This was hardly humane conduct! We forced him to abandon his intentions and to lose his place in human society. The way of father and son is in-born, and yet we destroyed the sentiments of a father and drove him to abandon and nearly kill his own son! And now his misery has come to this!

"Everyone in the world knows this was my fault. His relations fill the court. One day those in power will thoroughly investigate the matter, and then disaster will fall upon us. Moreover, if we cheat heaven and betray others, the spirit world will not come to our aid. Let us not bring misfortune upon ourselves" (536–37).

There is little love (qing) for the scholar in this, only dread over violations of the social order and an awareness that their actions have become known to possible avengers. She recognizes her own role in a web of urban deceit and chicanery, and she fears the scholar's true family and what they might do. She also acknowledges the ultimate crime: she has destabilized the moral hierarchy of the literati clan. Her moral horror here compels her to leave her role as daughter (although she does promise to continue to provide for her old madam) and to set up a new household with the scholar. Although this action mimics the daughter's leaving home to go and live with her husband, Li is actually taking up the role of mother. For example, her nourishment of him succeeds where that of the funeral employees had failed; the scholar is now in the right hands.

Li now convinces him to return to his books. Soon he is successful in the examinations, and his reputation has been recovered. At this point, Li offers to leave him so that he can marry a girl from a distinguished family; her role as foster mother is now over. However, the scholar refuses to be parted from her. She finally agrees to accompany him as far as his first post; it is on this trip that he encounters his father and is reconciled with him. The father insists that the scholar marry Li, and she is now reintegrated fully into the proper family system. The moment Li leaves her role as foster mother, she, too, like the scholar is born again into a new role: the properly accepted daughter-in-law in a ritually observant family. Immediately after this, the story tells us that the son's mourning for his parents was so exemplary that auspicious mushrooms sprang up at the mourning hut. Of course, this is meant in part to reverse as completely as possible the earlier developments in the story: from the ultimate in unfilial sons, the scholar has become the most filial. But the story suggests that this ritual observance grows out of his following the example of his model wife.

Bai Xingjian's narrative may be constructed at first glance as a certain stereotyped romantic encounter between young literati and morally ambiguous woman. But as in the case of Miss Ren, this is a relatively minor element in the story. The narrative is much more focused on the tribulations of the scholar, and Li tends to hold a series of fluctuating and shifting female "roles" in relation to him that spell out aspects of his fate: mistress, mother, wife. Arguably, one way of defining male identity is to examine carefully the behavior or prescribed duties of the women who are closest to him; they create, so to speak, the space that he occupies. Li Wa does this for the scholar, and more: she introduces him into the incomprehensible wilderness of urban society and becomes his harsh teacher.

My discussion of six texts here is not a conclusive overview of the representation of women in Tang narrative, but it has touched on certain recurring ways women and romance are deployed in these stories. There are, quite obviously, developments in Tang society and in narrative itself that allow for the description of more complex relationships between men and women; how far this might reflect a change in women's position in society is another matter. However, we can say that the introduction of romance into Tang narrative allowed writers a new way of exploring their own self-identity in the more complex Tang world. Whereas earlier society had prescribed literary expression within a fairly narrow scope of conventional themes and genres, the Tang literatus was subject to wider and more various social, cultural, and political claims. Aristocratic circles had been replaced for the most part by a larger and more heterogeneous bureaucracy. The educated male could also move beyond these bureaucratic concerns and find himself writ-
ing about new social worlds that had previously gone unrecorded: he could stroll the new urban centers; he could dabble in Buddhist or Taoist religious practices; he could roam as a "man of justice," eager to make friends with noble men like himself; or he could experience the regional differences of the empire through travel. Women were an equally novel experience: although always part of literati life as mothers or wives, the possibilities of dangerous liaisons or of mysterious romantic encounters enabled the literatus to make expanded claims for his own spontaneity, sensitivity, and individuality. However, even these relations tended to be circumscribed by social codes as well: the demands of family, codes of free male heroism, or the competitive pressures of the literati community as a whole. Nonetheless, if eroticism had previously been ritualized, either within the palace poem of the Six Dynasties or in the sort of elaborate gaming portrayed in the You xianka, it now broke free of these choreographed moves and expanded into the more aleatory environment of Tang narrative itself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Honor Among the Roués

When an older classmate of mine, Zheng Hejing 鄭合敬, passed the examination, he spent the night in the brothels, where he composed the following:

When spring comes, every place is suitable for a stroll;  春來無處不聞行
When I gaze now upon the lovely Churun, 楚腰相看別有情
I am seized by a novel feeling; 好是五更酒醒
How fine it is to wake at dawn, 時時聞喚狀元聲
recovering still from the ale,
And hear the sound of her words to me: "Mr. Valedictorian?"

The examination of Li Wei zhuàn in the preceding chapter introduced one of the most visible erotic phenomena in the Tang: the relationship between literati and courtesans. But what do we really know of such courtesans and their lives? Our only information comes almost exclusively from one laconic source: around the year 884, the minor literatus Sun Qi 孫棐 committed to paper his memories of the Pingkang 平康 Ward (the government-sanctioned brothel neighborhood in Chang'an). After having accompanied comrades and patrons there for many years in the period before the disastrous Huang Chao 黃巢 rebellion (which largely destroyed the capital in 880), he desired (or so he claimed) "to record these matters to provide a topic of conversation for later ages" (as). The result is the brief miscellany, the Belli zhi 北里誌 or "Account of the Northern Wards" (Northern Ward or Northern Village had been a euphemistic term for a red light district since at least the Han). Sun's short, apologetic preface is followed by a