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THE SHAPE OF THINGS: LOCATING THE SELF IN XU WEI'S *ZEN MASTER YU HAS A VOLUPTUOUS DREAM*

Shiamin Kwa

I am whatever you say I am,
If I wasn't, then why would I say I am,
In the paper, the news, every day I am,
I don't know—it's just the way I am.

Eminem, "The Way I Am"

Among the seven-character quatrains (*jueju* 絕句) written by Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) is a painting inscription that reads:

> The puppets before the curtain are false to begin with,
> A painting of the puppets is even more removed.
> If you think of the sky as a canopy of curtain,
> Who among us isn't an actor, too?[1]

This short text says a great deal about Xu Wei. A master calligrapher and painter, admired for his unique and influential style, he was frequently called upon to inscribe his paintings with poems.[2] The quatrain reflects his peculiar style, a mix of casual delivery and playful philosophizing; and it concerns a subject in which he was very well

[1] Xu Wei, "Wei Hangren tihua ershou (1)" 為杭人題畫二首（1） (First of Two Poems on a Painting for the Gentleman of Hangzhou), in *Xu Wei ji* 徐渭集 (The Collected Works of Xu Wei) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 384.

[2] See L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 609–612, for a short synopsis of Xu Wei's life. Greater detail is found in Jeannette Faurot, *Four Cries of a Gibbon: A Tsa-Chü Cycle by the Ming Dramatist Hsu Wei (1521–1593)* (PhD dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1972) and I-Cheng Liang, *Hsu Wei (1521–1593): His Life and Literary Works* (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1973). Exhaustive biographical detail is found in Zhang Xiaoyu 張孝裕, *Xu Wei yanjiu* 徐渭研究 (A Study of Xu Wei) (Taibei: Xuehai chubanshe, 1978). For details on the folkloric transformation of Xu Wei, see J.L. Faurot, "Hsu Wen-Ch'ang: An Archetypal Clever Rascal in Chinese Popular Culture," *Asian Folklore Studies* 36, no. 2 (1977): 65–77.

versed, i.e. drama. His collection of four southern-style *zaju* 雜劇, *Si sheng yuan* 四聲猿 (Four Cries of a Gibbon) were a popular hit when they were written, and remain remarkably relevant to drama studies today, in terms of subjectivity, gender and body theory, and theories of performance.[3] *Four Cries of a Gibbon* comprises: a play about a Three Kingdoms figure, *Kuang gushi yuyang sannong* 狂鼓史漁陽三弄 (The Mad Drummer Plays the Yuyang Triple Rolls), also called *Mi Heng*, after the protagonist who performs a key scene from his life in a "retrial" staged for an underworld audience; a play about a girl who puts on her father's clothes to take his place in battle, *Ci Mulan tifu congjun* 雌木蘭替父從軍 (The Female Mulan Goes to War in Place of Her Father); and a play about a girl who puts on her father's clothes to take the imperial examinations and wins first place, *Nü zhuangyuan cihuang defeng* 女狀元辭凰得鳳 (The Girl Top Graduate Rejects the Female Phoenix and Gains the Male Phoenix). *Yu chanshi cui xiang yi meng* 玉禪師翠鄉一夢 (Zen Master Yu Has a Voluptuous Dream) rounds out the quartet, and is the subject of this essay.[4]

Of the four plays, *Zen Master Yu* has received the least critical attention. *Mi Heng* has been singled out for its literary qualities, and *Mulan* and *Girl Graduate* for their potentially feminist undertones;[5] interpretations of all three lend themselves to foregrounding the dissatisfied literatus, giving vent to his frustrations that his talents are not recognized. *Zen Master Yu,* on the other hand, has mainly been used for dating the plays and establishing their chronology, based on Wang Jide's 王驥德 (d. 1623) claim that it is the earliest of the four.[6] Wang Zhiyong's汪志勇comparative study of the play with *Du Liu Cui* 度柳翠 (Delivering Liu Cui) and *Honglian zhai* 紅蓮債 (Red Lotus' Debt), is the only monograph on the play, and is concerned with plot and

[3] For more on the development of southern-style *zaju* and its differences from Yuan *zaju* and *nanxi* 南戲, see William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), 74, 86. In the case of *Four Cries of a Gibbon*, *Mi Heng* consists of one act, *Mulan* and *Zen Master Yu* are each two-act plays, and *Girl Graduate* is the longest and most complex, with five acts.

[4] Xu Wei, *Si sheng yuan Ge dai xiao (fu)* 四聲猿歌代嘯(附) (*Four Cries of a Gibbon*, with Appended *Singing in Place of Screaming*), ed. Zhou Zhongming 周中明 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984), 20–42. All quotes from *Zen Master Yu* are taken from this edition, abbreviated as *SSY*, unless otherwise noted.

[5] Ann-Marie Hsiung, "A Feminist Re-Vision of Xu Wei's *Ci Mulan* and *Nü zhuangyuan*," in *China in a Polycentric World: Essays in Chinese Comparative Literature*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 73–89.

[6] Translated in Faurot, *Four Cries*, 32–33.

provenance rather than literary-textual issues.[7] In fact, however, *Zen Master Yu* positively invites an investigation of literary-textual issues, as it crystallizes essential questions that are asked by all of the plays: How is a person known to others? What makes me different from another person? Can identity be stable? The play also suggests some of the answers, and manages to do all of that in the raiment of a lurid, vulgar, ridiculous, and utterly enjoyable text.

Zen Master Yu

Zen Master Yu concerns the eponymous monk, who is corrupted in the first half of the play and dies ashamed and vengeful, to return in the second half, reincarnated as a beautiful young courtesan. In the first act, we see Zen Master Yu, Yu Tong, refusing to pay his respects to an official, so as not to break his vows. The offended official, Liu Xuanjiao, determines to send a prostitute, Hong Lian or Red Lotus, to seduce the Zen Master. Red Lotus goes outside Yu's window, pretends to fall ill, and seduces him. Yu, enraged by the loss of years of self-cultivation, vows to be reborn into the official's family as a prostitute, like Red Lotus. In the second act, we find that he has achieved his goal, and has been reborn as the official's daughter, Liu Cui. Liu Cui has come of age and, with her family having fallen on hard times, has become a courtesan. Liu Cui has absolutely no recollection of her/his former incarnation. The burden falls on Yueming Heshang or Moonlight Monk to reawaken her/him to his former self. After an elaborate series of pantomimes, Moonlight Monk gives up and reads a letter written by Yu before his death; Liu Cui realizes her former incarnation, puts on monk's clothing, and leaves with Moonlight Monk. Finally Zen Master Yu has reached the spiritual level that he spent a lifetime cultivating, but the rewards are experienced in the body of a young prostitute instead.

Yes, Xu Wei states, art separates us from the real. Performances are not actual experiences of truth, and recording a performance is an even farther dislocation. But is not everything under heaven a performance? Even in a performance, there are rules and standards that govern the

[7] Wang Zhiyong 汪志勇, *Du Liu Cui Cui Xiang meng yu Honglian zhai san ju de bijiao yanjiu* 度柳翠翠鄉夢與紅蓮債三劇的比較研究 (A Comparative Study of Three Plays: *Delivering Liu Cui, Zen Master Yu*, and *Red Lotus' Debt* (Taibei: Xuesheng shuju, 1980).

world of pretense, where "true" can be distinguished from "false." Can a young woman be accepted as the same person as an old monk, even if she is played by a *dan* 旦(lead female actor) and dressed as such? Can she just as quickly shed those clothes and become her old monk self just by saying so? *Zen Master Yu* says yes. Of the four plays, each of which each employs costume, deception, and play-acting for comic and plotting purposes, *Zen Master Yu* manipulates these aspects to the most profound effect. In enacting a series of gender and costume changes, overturning expectations based on the play's structural parallels, and directly questioning the nature of true and false in play-acting, *Zen Master Yu* offers up questions of self. The comedy conceals a profound message, namely that quick changes—costume changes, sex changes, even complete body changes—do not interfere with a person's essential self. The revelations are made through play-acting, speech, and writing. *Zen Master Yu* is a fervent redemption of theater, of the wonders of transformation and, most importantly, of the stability of communicating one's self to another.

The Deliverance Play

Zen Master Yu shares characteristics of the deliverance play (*dutuo ju* 度脫劇) subgenre, in which a minor Buddhist or Taoist immortal who currently resides, unknowingly, in the mortal world, is approached by another immortal who has been sent to the world of dust on a mission to "deliver" or return the lost immortal to his or her proper place. Not surprisingly, the message is received with incredulity, and the deliverer is compelled to ever more dramatic ploys to secure a conversion.[8] The philosophical underpinnings of the Buddhist and Daoist deliverance plays are not satisfied with the deliveree's choosing a different vocation. Instead, s/he is meant to relinquish the world and earthly desires and ambitions, to give up *all* roles, not just a specific one. On the

[8] Two of the best-known deliverance *zaju* are available in translation. Ma Zhiyuan's 馬致遠 *Huangliang meng* 黃粱夢 (Yellow Millet Dream) relates the Daoist deliverance of a scholar by an immortal; translated in Yuan-shu Yen, trans., "Yellow Millet Dream," *Tamkang Review* 6 (1975): 205–239. *Lan Caihe* 籃采和is a fascinating illustration of how truth is exposed by the uses of the falsehood of play-acting; translated in Wilt L. Idema and Stephen H. West, *Chinese Theater, 1100–1450: A Source Book* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982), 313–340.

topic of one of the sources[9] for *Zen Master Yu*, the deliverance play *Delivering Liu Cui*, Wilt Idema writes: "The plot . . . closely parallels the [D]aoist deliverance plays, but, in contrast to those, it does not only include allegorical episodes, but is allegorical in its basic conception."[10] *Delivering Liu Cui* is significantly different from *Zen Master Yu*, in spite of the shared characters.[11] It does, however, offer insight into why Xu Wei might have chosen the subgenre of the deliverance play, as it demonstrates the potential for anyone, even a prostitute, to assume the proper path: what could be a more persuasive argument for the malleability of roles? Idema speculates that the deliverance play originated in entertainments performed at funerals, as the kinds of rites that would assist spirits in finding their way to paradise. As the plays developed into Yuan *zaju* form, they became exclusively reserved for birthday celebrations, celebrating and enacting longevity, and ceased to be performed on other occasions.[12] One might even consider that the performance of such a play enacts a public cleansing, not just a purification of the characters on the stage, but of the viewers gathered for this ritual celebration.[13]

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[9] For more on sources of the play, see Shiamin Kwa, *Songs of Ourselves: Xu Wei's "Four Cries of a Gibbon"* (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2008), 84–95.

[10] Wilt L. Idema, *The Dramatic Oeuvre of Chu Yu-Tun (1379–1439)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 71.

[11] The full name of the play, written in the Yuan dynasty by Li Shouqing 李壽卿, is "Yueming heshang du Liu Cui" 月明和尚度柳翠 (The Moonlight Monk Delivers Liu Cui). The play is simply about Liu Cui's deliverance, with no mention of Red Lotus at all, and *Zen Master Yu* barely resembles *Delivering Liu Cui*. The Yuan play involves dream sequences, religious debates, and a boat trip. Suffice it to say that this "antecedent," beyond lending familiar names and the fact that Liu Cui is delivered by the Moonlight Monk, is not copied, or even adapted, by Xu Wei. For brief discussions of the play, see Idema, *The Dramatic Oeuvre*, 71 and Luo Qiuzhao 羅秋昭, *Xu Wei Si sheng yuan yanjiu* 徐渭四聲猿研究 (A Study of Xu Wei's *Four Cries of a Gibbon*) (Taibei: Qiye shuju youxian gongsi, 1979). For a complete study of the antecedents, see Wang Zhiyong, *Du Liu Cui*. The antecedents of *Moonlight Monk* are discussed in Chapter 3 of Kwa, *Songs of Ourselves*.

[12] Idema, *The Dramatic Oeuvre,* 67–69. See this chapter for a discussion of Zhu Youdun's improvisations on the theme of deliverance and his development of the genre as he stretches the boundaries of the traditional deliverance play beyond the simple model given.

[13] Michele Marra has discussed this phenomenon in Buddhist plays about courtesans in medieval Japan. See Michele Marra, "The Buddhist Mythmaking of Defilement: Sacred Courtesans in Medieval Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (1993): 49–65. Marra argues that these Buddhist plays incorporate existing shamanic iconography into the theatrical argument, substituting Buddhist doctrines for otherwise native rituals of purification, using the figure of the courtesan to embody the more abstract notions of pollution in their female bodies.

Xu Wei's *Zen Master Yu* can hardly be taken seriously as a religious document warning of the dangers of worldliness, nor is it a condemnation of play-acting, although it uses the vocabulary of the deliverance play. The innovation here is the way the same characters in the same plot become opposite versions of themselves from the first act to the second, and the context of their situation changes how they are perceived. The malignant and cunning vixen from the first act is mirrored by the courtesan forced into the profession by her family's poverty and a predestination caused by her father's sins, not her own; the daft monk of the first act, who follows all directions literally, is unwittingly reborn as the courtesan, and contrasted with Moonlight Monk, who comes to redeem him with metaphors and sleight of hand. *Zen Master Yu*, although it has the conventional cast and concluding abjurement typical of the deliverance subgenre, is less about ritual purification or Buddhist doctrine than about entertainment. The entertainment is effected not through the realization of Liu Cui's renunciation; this is a foregone conclusion. What matters here is *how* that conclusion is reached; and that conclusion says more about language and how we speak and dress ourselves into existence than about religious epiphany, political hypocrisy, or public purification.

The impact of the deliverance is enhanced by the symmetry of the two acts of *Zen Master Yu*.[14] The structural symmetry draws attention to the quick changes between the acts that take advantage of conventional dramatic role types. Luo Qiuzhao notes the way that the structure causes the audience to contemplate the complexity of character: by setting up a situation where one courtesan in the second act is directly affected by the act of the courtesan in the first act, Xu Wei demonstrates the way that a "type" can contain polar opposite subtypes, even though both are courtesans.[15] While the character type of the courtesan is the same, role type trumps character type by having the Red Lotus version of the courtesan sung by a *tie* 貼 (extra female) and the Liu Cui version sung by the *dan*.

More significantly, both the deception of the first act and the salvation of the second act are produced using the same methods:

[14] Liang I-Cheng, for example, argues that the first act involves a monk overcome by a courtesan and that the second involves a courtesan converted by a monk, suggesting that Xu Wei uses the repetition to intimate that no good deed goes unpunished, and that the play satirizes hypocrites and affirms Buddhist salvation.

[15] Luo, *Xu Wei Si sheng yuan yanjiu*, 64.

play-acting. To understand this play as simply a depiction of the battle between good and evil, or heaven and hell, is precisely the kind of mistake that the play warns against: after all, the prostitute Liu Cui turns out in the end to be the old boddhisatva Yutong! Faurot, in her discussion of the structural parallels of the play, sees manifestations of Buddhist doctrines of repetition and recurrence in action within the play. Noting the nearly identical song sets from the first act in to the second, Faurot argues that this structural duplication is a significant Buddhist move.[16] She suggests that it would be even more dramatic if the same actor played both the role of the *sheng* (生 male lead) in the first act and that of the *dan* in the second.[17] In the case of Chinese drama, difference in actors would not be as significant as difference in role type: where once the audience saw a *sheng*, they now see a *dan*. Still, the conventions of drama apply, and this duplication of song sets creates a sense of déjà-vu, and certainly creates drama. One can argue that it is even more dramatic for the very fact that the same song tunes are first performed by the *sheng* in the first act and then the *dan* in the second, echoing a reverse application of onstage gender change seen in *Mulan* and *Girl Graduate*, and serving as a constant reminder throughout the second act of what has occurred in the previous one.

A crucial factor is that of the audience's complicity The first step of their acceptance is basic to drama: the character (in this case the *dan*) comes out and introduces herself as Liu Cui, and the audience accepts that announcement, and the *dan* as that character. However, having watched the first act and Yutong's announcement, they must now accept that in fact Liu Cui, who is played by a *dan* in this act, is somehow also the *sheng* from the first act who was Yutong, and consequently also his previous incarnation as a bodhisattva. Whereas in the first act Yutong used the songs predominantly to express his rage, Red Lotus uses the same song tunes to express her confusion about what Moonlight Monk is trying to tell her about herself.

[16] Faurot, *Four Cries*, 73. The first act contains this song sequence.

[17] This is impossible to determine from our vantage point, and it would perhaps have varied during Xu Wei's time as well, depending on which troupe was performing the play, if it was performed to begin with.

Must We Be What We Say? Structure and Repetition

The central problem is precisely the structure that stresses the disparity between merely similar and completely identical, and this is enacted throughout the repetitions of speech and action. The self-identifications in *Zen Master Yu* thus move beyond the simple conventions of drama. Characters are called upon to announce and present themselves to each other. When Red Lotus first comes to the temple, she is asked three times by Yutong's servant who she is before she is allowed entrance; when Liu Cui first comes to the temple in the second act, she has to ask Moonlight Monk who he is three times before she receives a response. While the play as a contained performance bears the implication that we can read significance into repetition, assuming that it is placed there with a knowing hand, how different is it from how we read meaning into lived experience? Even if we choose to be less philosophical, we are still faced with the repeated message. The question is repeated because the answer is uncertain, and the uncertainty is in response to the basic question: "Who are you?"

Spontaneity and expressions of the "natural" would not qualify as such without the orchestrations that allow them to occur: this play resides in a paradox that challenges our ways of making sense. *Zen Master Yu* depicts characters unaware of the true identities of others, even of their own true identities, and words, play-acting, and obscure riddles prevent them from reaching clarity. And yet, in *Zen Master Yu*, we also have characters discovering their true identities, and reaching this clarity through language. The same things that undo the characters return them to stability. Here, I use "language" broadly, to extend beyond words and include the language of signs, such as gesture and dress. Xu Wei's *Zen Master Yu* explores not simply the limits of drama, but the limits of human understanding through communication.

The subject of *Zen Master Yu* is particularly revealing, as the themes of conversion and reincarnation are in fact structurally similar to drama itself. Whereas conversion entails the "enlightened self" replacing the "ignorant self" in the same body, and reincarnation entails the same "self" leaving one body for another, drama offers itself up as the most flexible structure by allowing for both. One actor can play multiple roles, letting different selves inhabit the same body, and one role can be played by multiple actors, letting the same "self" enter different bodies. Drama is more real than life, as it allows for the authentic

experience of another, accepting the possibility that one person can become another. While this seems an entirely impossible feat, Xu Wei's play suggests that these transformations are actually quite simple. The characters literally identify themselves by using language: they transmit themselves to and into others through their words.

In the first act of *Zen Master Yu*, Yutong dismisses the Bodhidharma's teaching of Chan Buddhism only through oral transmission rather than with written texts and boring meditation.[18] His remarks are made in passing, and marked by the same lightness as the rest of his rambling speech, but they contain an essential tension in this play about the transmission of knowledge through words. Words are particularly compromised in this play, which carries with it the burden of being a text in a tradition apt to *read* a play of this quality as much as watch it in performance. In this play, both aspects of words are taken into consideration, regardless of whether the play is read or watched; there are moments in which a reader would be forced to consider the sounds of the words, as there are moments in which the audience member would be forced to consider their shapes. This complication is a subtle form of the recurring wordplay that occurs in all the interactions between characters, culminating in the riddling scene but also present in several cases of mistaken identity. The structure of concealment and revelation extends beyond words and their physical shapes in the form of literal disguise, too, with the various props and costumes that "identify" a character as someone s/he may not in truth be. Language is figured as a costume, bearing outside traces that may be read incorrectly, or misread correctly.

To explore the power of the written word as bearing witness to an event, one need not look farther than Yutong's letters, which travel from the first act to the second. Yutong, determined to avenge himself in the next life, sets down a response written in anticipation of a note to come from Liu, and leaves a note for his servant telling him where to find the reply. The use of a letter as proof and evidence is curious in a drama context, as it is a concrete example on stage of the written, rather than spoken, word. Yutong writes a note because he expects that Liu Xuanjiao will expect to hear his response to the affront. The *words* that Yutong means to send will not be what Liu expects. Yutong describes

[18] Xu, *SSY*, 20.

his intent to be reborn as a scandalous woman who will destroy the reputation of Liu's household, and anticipates this turn of Liu's fate:

> It's just that this impudent Liu is bound to receive word of this. He will certainly send someone to inquire about me, and I must prepare a few sentences in response. I shall write a few words to Lazybones to instruct him to prepare this and that. Then I shall sit upright and send off my spirit, where it will speed off to bring its harm to the Liu house.
>
> (*Acts out writing a note, then acts out reading it*)
> Since I entered these *Chan* gates, I was without a care.
> For fifty-three years, my mind was centered.
> Because of this tiny bit of desire,
> I broke the Buddha's precept against lasciviousness.
> You sent Red Lotus to destroy my chastity,
> I now owe Red Lotus an old debt.
> My body's morality was ruined by you,
> your household's reputation shall bear my destruction.
>
> (*Again acts out writing a letter for his monk and acts out reading it*)
> Left for my serving man, Lazybones: "If there should be a messenger to the temple from Liu's establishment, you can tell him that there is a letter of response at the foot of the incense burner."
>
> (*Recites*) Red Lotus made a monkey out of me,
> So I shall hide for a while in springtime in the skin of a green willow.
> When waves strike the floating duckweed, there's sure to be a collision; but my only fear is that when I return you will not recognize my self of old.[19]

This monologue contains the problem of the transition from Act One to Act Two. We know from Yutong's introductory statements that he believes words interfere with truth. Yutong also knows that in order to find his own self in the future, he will need to send some evidence. As we will see when his disciple finds his body, Yutong has acted within reason; if not for the letter, there would be nothing tying him to the events of the next act.

When after writing his letter, Yutong chants aloud: "my only fear is that when I return you will not recognize my self of old," the word for self (*shen* 身) he uses is the same word that would be used to refer to his body, conflating identity with the physical. It is not his former body that he will encounter, but his former "self," whatever that might be.

[19] Xu, *SSY,* 25.

Yutong is clearly aware as he writes his will and testament that there is the risk that his jumping into another body, seeking vengeance in the future, as Mi Heng sought retribution in the underworld, might not offer the same satisfaction it would in this world. His "self" will not quite be what it was, certainly not the same physical self, perhaps even a self that won't have a memory of the past. The only way he can attempt to guarantee this remembrance is by leaving a record behind. He leaves one for Liu Xuanjiao, who may well regretfully recall the letter when future misfortune comes. As an added precaution, he leaves another copy at his home temple.

Both letters prove crucial, as they are the only "witness" or concrete objects that travel from the first act to the next, as a record of what has happened. When the servant returns to the temple, Red Lotus is gone, and Yutong is already a corpse. If not for the letters, the servant would continue to believe that Guanyin has come to take his master's soul back with her. The repeated reading of letters onstage emphasizes the importance of the written document. First, Yutong's disciple discovers the two letters under the incense burner and acts out reading them. Then, when Liu Xuanjiao's messenger arrives with his own letter inquiring about what has transpired, the monk reads Liu's letter aloud. Convinced of the truthfulness of Yutong's letter from the contents of Liu's letter, the monk then gives Yutong's letter to the messenger. All of these exchanges remind the viewer of the surrogates we accept for direct communication; if we cannot be *there*, we have to accept substitutions as presence.

The letter becomes the only evidence that matters in the second act, as evinced by the Moonlight Monk's frustrated shouting out Yutong's letter after his complex of pantomimes:

> All of it useless! A waste of energy! A waste of energy! (*Reads in a loud voice*) "Red Lotus made me act like an ape, now I plan to be reborn in the spring into a Liu family skin. When waves strike the floating duckweed, there's sure to be a collision; my only fear is that I will not recognize my self of old." Bah![20]

It is the first time that he has spoken aloud to Liu Cui, and it is only through the information contained in this letter, or perhaps hearing the words spoken aloud, that Liu Cui comprehends the content of his ultimately futile pantomimes. In fact, so effective are these words that

[20] Xu, *SSY*, 35.

she is converted almost instantly, and casts off her clothes in exchange for a monk's habit.

Sound and Meaning

Why does Moonlight Monk commit himself to a dramatic wordless performance instead of simply reading the letter to Red Lotus first? For one thing, the latter would deprive the audience of an extended scene of physical comedy, in which Moonlight Monk acts ridiculously and Liu Cui guesses incorrectly the answer to a riddle to which the audience already knows the answer. The relationship between sound and meaning is odd; Moonlight Monk says of explaining Liu Cui's origins to her that this is "not something that language can do."[21] This assertion is questioned when he gives up and simply reads Yutong's words to Liu Cui, and it highlights the unreliability of language while emphasizing the fact that language cannot be avoided.

Sound and meaning are drawn into an even deeper tangle with Moonlight Monk's earlier pantomimes during the second act. When Liu Cui asks him how he could have come from the Western Heaven, the following exchange occurs:

> *Liu*: One hand points west, one hand points to the sky; this must mean that you're from the Western Heaven? Nonsense! Well, if it's as you say, what business do you have here from Western Heaven?
>
> (*Moonlight Monk hits his head once, and with his hands mimes a three-cornered* si [厶] *character, then a four-cornered* kou [口] *character, then a circle for the disc of the moon*)
>
> *Liu*: That three-cornered one is a *si*, the four-cornered one is a *kou* and if you put them together they make a *tai* [台] Now the round one makes the *yue* [月]character. If you put that together with his fist hitting his head [*tou*頭] once, that makes it "reincarnation" [*toutai* 投胎].[22]

The scene is comic, and plays upon basic conventions that also apply to Chinese riddles. Verbal puns (homophones with different meanings) can be complemented by visual puns when the character's shape

[21] Xu, *SSY*, 33.
[22] *Ibid.*

plays a part in the depiction of meaning.[23] It takes on especially comic value because the shapes of the characters are mediated by one more degree: they are depicted by Moonlight Monk's physical contortions rather than seen in writing. The construction of the term *toutai* 投胎 (reincarnation) is quite complex, relying on Liu Cui's ability to navigate different aspects of language and demanding her literacy in order to decipher this puzzle. To solve riddles of this register, one must not only hear the words, but be able to visualize them.

The pun on *tou* 投, which Moonlight Monk demonstrates by striking his head, *tou* 頭, is a basic one, relying on the homophone. Another pure pun occurs when Moonlight Monk urges Liu Cui to guess again by pulling on her earring *(er) huan* (耳)環 and miming a finger-guessing game *cai(quan)* 猜(拳) to act out the two characters for *huan cai* 還猜 (guess again).[24] In contrast, the construction of the *tai*胎 involves much more navigation, and knowledge of the shape of characters. First, Liu Cui has to recognize the component parts of the character by "reading" Moonlight Monk's gestures. The first two marks, of the three-cornered *si*厶 and the four-cornered *kou*口, are not related to the word by sound, only by shape. The circle provides an even more complex challenge, as the clue is in neither shape nor sound. Instead, the gesture is meant to signify a circle that *suggests* the shape of a full moon, which then is understood as the (non-circular) left *yue* (月 moon) radical of the character *tai* 胎. This explanation may seem rather elaborate for such a short moment in the play, but it serves to demonstrate the difficult processes that must be overcome with language, and points to the connection between the shape of things and their meaning. So, what exactly is the relation of visual exteriors to the meaning they contain? The riddle and the scene of interpretation clearly suggest that there are occasions where the visual exterior is the absolute key to understanding, when at other times only sound will suffice.

Language, which engages the audience both visually and acoustically, has the quality of a costume in that it is constituted by exterior

[23] Judith Zeitlin has discussed the reading of characters in dream interpretations in *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 140–154. Andrew Plaks gives insight into the Chinese tradition of riddles in "Riddles and Enigma in Chinese Civilization," *Untying the Knot. On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes,* ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 227–236. Xu Wei himself used the courtesy name (*zi* 字) Tianshuiyue田水月, which are the component parts of his name Wei 渭.

[24] Xu, *SSY,* 35.

signs requiring interpretation. Even when it is concealing the truth, it can, like costume, provide a key to understanding what resides within, the truth beneath the surface, to the careful observer. This is a troubling thought, and it certainly troubles the plot of this play, in which disguises run rampant and are at times used in wicked ploys to deceive, and at other times in well-meant attempts to bring enlightenment. Red Lotus arrives on the scene in Act One dressed as a virtuous widow, and this disguise gains her entrance into the monastery for the night. Her calculated cries of agony from a mysterious stomach ailment, and the story about how it can be soothed, are lies told to seduce Yutong into ruin. Yet costume, disguise, and assumed identities cannot be discarded wholesale as amoral and villainous. Just as Red Lotus "acted" pained to ensnare Yutong, Moonlight Monk "acted" out the revelation of Yutong's old self to her/him. The word for "acting" (*zhuang* 妝) connotes what actors do on stage, i.e. perform and dress up; but it also connotes the deceit that can occur as a consequence of these actions. One is acting, too, when one does or says something that one does not mean. All of these vectors, while making it something threatening, also prevent it from being something completely vile: acting and clothing can also provide a window into enlightenment.

The play's climax follows a series of quick changes by Moonlight Monk, all executed in silence. With a few hats and a mask, he plays Yutong, Liu Xuanjiao, and Red Lotus, acting out all of the crucial moments that the audience had already witnessed firsthand in the previous act. This, then, is a return to these events, understood by the audience as the same already-seen essential information, yet completely different. Now, one person plays all of the roles, and that player, Moonlight Monk, was not party to the original events when they occurred. He is an actor, revealing the truths about something that he did not see himself, with a script penned by the bilious Yutong many years before. Moonlight Monk relies on his onstage audience of one, Liu Cui, as well the external reading or viewing audience, to accept the conventions of drama that would prepare them to accept his various roles. The scene is initially confusing to Liu Cui, but she does get the basic information. She recognizes similarities to her father when Moonlight Monk dons an official's hat, and comprehends that he has commanded an action that has angered a monk, when Moonlight Monk furrows his brow in anger. This time the play-acting is only partially effective. To be sure, Red Lotus herself suggested that her acting

was not the only cause of Yutong's fall: if he had not been already weak, her acting would have been in vain. This is to say, the audience must in some way be a party to what it is watching. In this act, Moonlight Monk's performance also offers only a partially satisfying message, but it requires the existence of the written documents and his spoken words to clarify the meaning.

Liu Cui, confused by the miming, completely misinterprets the action. She has gleaned that both an official and a monk have been enraged, and that a woman is involved in this mess. She bemoans her own life as a courtesan, and recalls that in past years she did indeed swindle a monk as well as a scholar. Making this connection with Moonlight Monk's continuous mentions of reincarnation, she concludes that she is being punished for the misdeeds that she recalls. She eventually comes to the conclusion that she will bear the child of the aggrieved who seeks reincarnation, and muses aloud about how she had better make arrangements to abort. This is finally too much for Moonlight Monk, who cries out his message, as discussed above.

Liu Cui's conclusion is perfectly plausible, especially given the circumstances of her limited understanding and the complicated way Moonlight Monk has chosen to explain things to her. At this point, Moonlight Monk has to admit defeat; his methods of teaching retribution without words are useless, and he finally gives in. The moment he reads the letter Yutong has written, Liu Cui cries out that she understands, and shortly afterwards takes off her women's clothes.[25] It is a scene of stripping, but it is only to put on a new costume, a new identity that represents the old one that she had nearly lost. In a neat reversal of the next two plays in *Four Cries of a Gibbon*, both of which feature women played by female role types who are essentially women although they wear men's clothes, *Zen Master Yu* is a play in which a female played by a female role type *is* a man, despite all outward appearances. She has become a man not through changing bodies, nor even through changing clothes, but because she has changed her state of mind: Moonlight Monk has told her that she is Yutong, and she ultimately comes to accept that claim.

[25] Xu, *SSY*, 36.

Conclusion

In *Zhaoshi gu'er* 趙氏孤兒 (The Orphan of Zhao), Ji Junxiang's 紀君祥 (dates unknown) famous *zaju* from the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368), the orphan was raised and tutored by the man who kept his identity a secret, Cheng Ying 程嬰. When Cheng Ying decides that it is time for the orphan to realize his past and to seek vengeance for his family's murder, he silently leaves a scroll on a table in the orphan's study. The scroll depicts the various events that led up to the murders. The orphan is puzzled by these vivid drawings and describes them aloud, presumably for the benefit of the audience, though they are already familiar with the details from earlier acts. He asks Cheng Ying to explain what he sees in these pictures, and Cheng Ying does so, but without telling him that the story is about him. Gradually, the orphan grasps the truth; only then can he begin his quest for justice. The similarity in strategy to *Zen Master Yu* is striking: both plays are about a return to self that is not a physically attainable journey. The orphan and Liu Cui / Yutong have been the same all along; each was just not aware of this true self until confronted with a depiction of biography that is first transmitted by other means than words. Both plays ask how selves are constructed and question the limits of our self-knowledge, not to mention our knowledge of others.

We have seen many lies and acts of obfuscation in this play, but perhaps the most interesting is one made unwittingly. When the *dan* makes her stage entrance as Liu Cui, she makes the conventional self-introduction. In the world of the audience, a *dan* who is an actress with a different name, but who introduces herself as Liu Cui, is not thought of as a liar; this is merely a convention of drama, we agree, and not a deception. If it is a deception, it is one that we expect and have become accustomed to accepting without the slightest hesitation. But we have seen the first act, where Yutong has already announced that he will be reborn into the Liu family. We have also seen Moonlight Monk's prologue, in which he tells us that Yutong's wish has been fulfilled and that he has come here with the express purpose of meeting and converting this girl. When Liu Cui enters the stage, then, we know who she is even though *she* does not. In all fairness she is, of course, also Liu Cui, daughter of Liu Xuanjiao, but we all know that this is not her true identity. She has been the same Buddha from the

Western Heaven for much longer. Still, Liu Cui introduces herself: "I am Liu Cui" (安身柳翠的便是).[26]

This moment of disjunction, in which truth is inseparable from lie, and in which seeing may not be believing, points out the curious ways in which truth is situational. Bearing witness may provide proof, but its intent is not always necessarily transmissible. Communication labors to make the right distinctions, but perhaps in the final moment the truth of a statement, like the truth of identity, comes from guessing again.

[26] Xu, *SSY,* 33.