

孫述宇：金瓶梅的藝術：佈局與成就

The Structure and Achievements of *Jin Ping Mei*

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MOST READERS are aware of the fact that *Jin Ping Mei* begins with an episode drawn from the novel *Shuihu zhuan*. Some scholars have traced the sources of other parts of the plot to a wide variety of literary works. The question arises, then: what are the sources for the novel's structure?

Although it can be said that *Jin Ping Mei* grew directly out of *Shuihu zhuan*, there are no similarities between the structure of the two novels. Rather, the structure of *Jin Ping Mei* can be likened to what is known as a "spring dream", an important theme in Chinese literature. As early as the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-221 B.C.), the idea of dream versus awakening and illusion versus reality appeared in the writings of the philosopher Zhuangzi. Particularly well-known is the story (which had such a powerful influence on later thinkers and writers) wherein Zhuangzi dreams that he is a butterfly. Upon awakening, he asks himself whether he was dreaming of himself as a butterfly, or whether he is a butterfly dreaming that he is Zhuangzi. The *Records of Light and Shadow* 幽明記, written in the Six Dynasties period (4-6th cents.) by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶, contains a tale called "The Cypress Pillow of the Jiaohu Monastery" 焦湖柏枕, in which a merchant named Yang Lin stops at the Jiaohu Monastery for the night and falls asleep with his head resting on a pillow made out of cypress wood. In his dream, Yang Lin marries the daughter of a powerful official and enjoys a life of luxury for the next several decades. Upon awakening, he experiences a deep sense of disappointment. By the time of the Tang dynasty (618-907), this story, a mere one hundred Chinese characters in length, had been a source of consolation for generations of scholars whose failure to pass the

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official examinations left them floundering in a sea of insecurity, cut off from the power and wealth which success in the examinations would have conferred upon them. It is impossible to calculate how many Chinese scholars through the ages wrote popular tales in the classical style (*chuanqi*) on similar subjects when they were not otherwise preoccupied with preparing for their examinations or writing poetry. Three masterpieces which treat this specific theme have come down to us: "The Millet Dream" 枕中記, "The Servant and the Cherries" 櫻桃青衣, "The Prefect of Nanke" 南柯太守. In each of these stories, the protagonist has a dream in which he attains great riches and influence by marrying the daughter of a wealthy family, but unlike Yang Lin, he is eventually fated to swallow the bitter pill of disgrace and humiliation. Beginning from Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream", each subsequent retelling of the story further developed the irony of the theme. In Zhuangzi's dream, the focus is on illusion and reality; in "The Cypress Pillow of Jiaohu Monastery", the notion of poverty and wealth is introduced; "The Millet Dream" focuses on time—after experiencing glory and disgrace in turn over the course of several decades, the protagonist suddenly wakes up to discover that the millet that was put on the fire before he fell asleep is still not fully cooked; finally, "The Prefect of Nanke" adds the spatial dimension: the stage on which the protagonist strutted in his glory turns out to be nothing more than an ant colony at the base of a tree.

The author of *Jin Ping Mei*, with his highly developed sense of irony, must have been strongly drawn to these stories. Yet a more direct source for the novel can perhaps be found in the famous Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) drama *The Yellow Millet Dream*, written by Ma Zhiyuan 馬致遠. This title is obviously borrowed from the earlier story "The Millet Dream", but its contents have undergone some alterations. The substance of the drama is the story of the Eight Immortals who ferry souls across the sea of suffering. It tells how Zhong Liquan sends Lü Dongbin off into a dream in order to help him attain salvation, and how in this dream he experiences a life of prosperity and "wine, women, wealth and emotions; personal encounters with questions of right and wrong; as well as greed, anger, stupidity and infatuation". Later Lü is caught accepting bribes and is sent to jail, whereupon his wife abandons him. Banished into exile, he is no longer able to take care of his children. After waking from this dream, Lü attains enlightenment. The plot of *Jin Ping Mei* resembles the contents of this story in many ways. Ximen Qing spends several years living in high style as the result of judicious marital choices and questionable alliances with local officials. But this prosperity is as evanescent as a spring dream. As the novel draws to a close, Ximen Qing dies after a bout of sexual indulgence, whereupon all of his dependents and concubines flee the household. One son dies young, while the other becomes a monk. The Ming Wanli (1573-1620) edition of the *chihua* version of the novel is prefaced by four "Poems of Greed" entitled "Wine", "Women", "Wealth" and "Emotions", themes taken from a line in the drama *The Yellow Millet Dream*. As demonstrated above, the main themes of *Jin Ping Mei* are greed, anger, stupidity and infatuation.

But there is one major difference between *Jin Ping Mei* and the tales and dramas mentioned above, in which the recurring plot revolves around a fleeting dream: the story in the novel is *not* a dream. And though in the tales and drama, the dreams are more highly detailed and life-like than normal dreams, like all dreams

they eventually come to an end. Only when the dreamer awakens does he realize that he had been dreaming.

Though the brief period in Ximen Qing's life described in the novel cannot be called a dream, it has all the fleeting impermanence of a spring dream. What is the significance of this difference? Is the long novel perhaps an inappropriate form for the retelling of a dream? From personal experience we know that our dreams are vaguer than, and certainly lack the orderliness we customarily experience in, everyday life. In this context, Yang Lin's dream may claim some resemblance to a real dream, while that of the Prefect of Nanke stretches our credibility. However, readers can be persuaded to participate in such literary excursions, and in fact often do so quite willingly. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is a dream plain and simple. In fact, any novel with a prologue heavily infused with Buddhist and Taoist jargon can easily pass for a dream.

That the author of *Jin Ping Mei* does not intend his work to be a dream is readily apparent from his philosophy of art and life. The authors of the tales and drama mentioned above believed in instant enlightenment, and that salvation in this world can be achieved at no great personal cost. Since these authors viewed life as fraught with pain and trouble, the protagonists of their literary creations naturally experienced frustration and disappointment; but they also believed that Reason was more powerful than Emotion, and could aid in removing the veil of ignorance and liberating suffering humanity from the sea of sorrows. The author of *Jin Ping Mei* puts little store in what are commonly regarded as the truths of Taoism or Zen Buddhism. Life to him is filled with distress and woe, and he believes that the "Three Poisons" of concupiscence, anger and stupidity are so deeply rooted in the human psyche that deliverance from them is extremely difficult, if not impossible. One may attain intellectual enlightenment in regard to these matters, but it is another thing altogether to shed habits or desires once and for all, since Reason may not be powerful enough to overcome the "Three Poisons". Attaining salvation requires proper moral conduct, as in the case of Moon Lady. Ximen Qing can be considered fortunate in this respect, for he suffered little during his lifetime; but he died in his prime with all of his hopes for his family and his business dashed, having failed also to achieve personal salvation.

The author's purpose in writing *Jin Ping Mei* was to use the form of the novel to expound the truth of human life. The "Three Poisons" were not his own invention; Buddhist monks had been preaching on this subject to the Chinese populace for centuries. But their religious exhortations were based on abstract principles and lacked the power to stir people to action. The author of *Jin Ping Mei* set out to endow these concepts with flesh and blood in the form of realistic people and events. He was attempting to write a novel which was different from the sort of fiction which had come before it. This old style of fiction attempted to provoke pleasurable feelings and moods and aesthetic sensations, describing incidents which would satisfy the reader's sense of right and wrong (such as the punishment of an evil-doer), evoking complex sentiments which would stir the reader's deepest passions, and peppering its narratives with sentimental poems that were at best suited to inducing heartfelt sighs. The author of *Jin Ping Mei* sought rather to appeal to the reader's Reason and sense of right and wrong, and to engage his entire being

rather than be satisfied with his audience's tears of sympathy.

The author of *Jin Ping Mei* took as his starting point the criticism of other literary works. This is probably the only example of parody in the history of Chinese fiction. But because Chinese readers are unaccustomed to one work of literature ridiculing another by means of imitation, few have been able to appreciate the author's intentions. The most obvious object of ridicule in *Jin Ping Mei* is *Shuihu zhuan*. In the past, many readers held the opinion that the author lifted the episode of "Wu Song Kills His Sister-in-Law" from *Shuihu zhuan* out of sheer laziness. But by examining how the author of *Jin Ping Mei* alters *Shuihu zhuan*, the target of his ridicule becomes evident. First of all, the author finds the story of "Wu Song Kills His Sister-in-Law" lacking in veracity. A rich and powerful scoundrel (Ximen Qing) plots with a lascivious wife (Pan Jinlian) to kill her husband (Wu Dalang), and yet the two are exposed and murdered by a righteous hero (Wu Song, the husband's brother). This may fully satisfy the reader's sense of justice, but it is a poor reflection of reality, since such events rarely take place in real life. So the author revised the story, letting the rake go free, while the vengeful brother is arrested! Here we are reminded of the relationship between Fielding's *Shamela* and Richardson's *Pamela*. But even this is no more than a superficial reading of the novel: on a deeper level, the author of *Jin Ping Mei* believes that such stereotypical figures as hero, scoundrel, dissipated wife and blackguard are both superficial and hypocritical, and that readers who immerse themselves in literature of this type will lose contact with real life and fail to obtain salvation.

As described by the author of *Jin Ping Mei*, Wu Song is a wicked, if not entirely despicable, person. He is cruel and vain, entirely devoid of human love and sympathy. Pan Jinlian's cravings and passion are described in such a way that readers are forced to confront the hatred and lust lurking in the human soul. As for Ximen Qing, regarded by most readers of *Shuihu zhuan* as a villain, a careful examination of his portrayal in *Jin Ping Mei* will reveal great similarities between this man and ourselves—to such an extent that Mainland critics such as Li Xifan heap abuse on the author of the novel for idealizing him. The question arises: Did the author of *Jin Ping Mei* actually praise Ximen Qing, or did he merely show us that everything this 'scoundrel' did was perfectly normal? Was he not suggesting here that if we had similar opportunities and the requisite courage, we too would behave in a similar manner? People are born with base desires, but without a set of moral principles to govern them. By emphasizing the idea that Ximen Qing is a thoroughly normal person who loves and respects his children, wives, concubines and friends, the author discourages us from developing a sense of superiority, while reminding us that natural instincts and feelings are insufficient to save people from sin.

Jin Ping Mei also makes use of parody to ridicule works of literature which share the theme of *The Yellow Millet Dream*, and though the structure of *Jin Ping Mei* is based on the spring dream form, the story is not a dream at all. Perhaps the author was asking: could a dream possibly be so well organized? Moreover, given the dominance of Emotion and the impotence of Reason, if all the efforts of the Taoists and Buddhists to expunge the "Three Poisons" fail to liberate the suffering masses, what good can the ballads in Ma Zhiyuan's drama accomplish? The author of *Jin Ping Mei* transforms *The Yellow Millet Dream* into a realistic story and

permits Ximen Qing to evade the fatal thrust of Wu Song's dagger, thus giving him several more years on earth, and providing him with additional opportunities to understand what life is all about. Thanks to this, Ximen Qing is subjected to much admonishment and hears many moral tales, experiences several serious shocks, and witnesses the death of many people, some of whom are close and dear to him. Finally, the author tells his readers that Ximen Qing fails to recognize his errors or feel repentance.

Though the author of *Jin Ping Mei* has drawn many elements of his plot and several of his main characters from *Shuihu zhuan* and *The Yellow Millet Dream*, the question remains of what methods he uses to relate his tale, and how he organizes his plot.

The author's major creative tool is his ironic vision. By focussing on the various aspects and possible meanings of a single event and paying particular attention to the differences among them, and by contrasting the conventional and superficial aspects of events and people with their elusive and invisible significance, he makes the narrative flow in a masterful way. For instance, is Wu Song's attempted murder of the evil Ximen Qing a good or bad thing? Bad, because it is unrealistic, while at the same time it shows Ximen Qing to be a victim of misfortune. Hence Wu Song fails to kill him, and in turn is sent into banishment, while Ximen Qing enjoys a life of prosperity and has no cause to complain about his fortune. Yet in the end, Ximen Qing dies an unnatural death. He has become a slave of his animal desires and is reduced by his greed and lust to the level of a beast, and though he has already accumulated a massive fortune, he has never ceased his pursuit of wealth and women, and finally expires after a last round of sexual indulgence. Should Pan Jinlian have been killed by Wu Song? This is entirely within reason. She could have endured the same fate as in *Shuihu zhuan*, although suicide is certainly a more intriguing solution. Wu Song was out to kill someone. The question is whether or not Pan Jinlian would fall prey to Wu's evil desires after she married into Ximen Qing's household. If this were a popular adventure story, Wu Song would leap over the walls of the Ximen compound and put a swift end to her, but *Jin Ping Mei* is not of this genre. Pan Jinlian is responsible for her own undoing. Despite her natural intelligence, her spite and revenge get the better of her, and she is finally rejected by Moon Lady and sold out of the household. But her story does not end there; when Wu Song appears on the scene, he feigns a desire to marry her and then lures this mistress of seduction into a sexual trap of his own making.

In *The Yellow Millet Dream*, as Lü Dongbin and his children proceed along the road to his place of exile, the children are thrown into a deep ravine by a violent passerby and die there, leaving Lü helpless to do anything but stand by and cry out pitifully. But in *Jin Ping Mei*, when young Guan'ge dies, Ximen Qing is at the height of his fortunes. Guan'ge is an only son, the much doted upon favourite of Ximen Qing, Ping'er and Moon Lady, but in this comfortable domestic environment his life is sacrificed due to the ignorance and viciousness of the adults around him, while before his death, he is subjected to a gamut of incredible but entirely plausible torments. While Lü Dongbin's wife turns her back on her husband and attempts to destroy him, Ximen Qing's wife Moon Lady Wu is a chaste and faithful woman. And though his concubines can hardly be cited as models of moral virtue, none of them

abandons him with the idea of taking up with another man. But they indulge in the "Three Poisons", and draw him deeper and deeper into dissipation. After his death, with the exception of Moon Lady, all of his concubines vanish from the scene in exactly the same way as they had appeared. A complex web of Karmic relationships permeates the novel. The theory of Karmic retribution had been disseminated by Buddhist monks for centuries in China, but no monk could have preached it in such a lively and convincing way as the author of *Jin Ping Mei*, since never before in the history of Chinese literature had there been such a trenchant observer of the complex contradictions and disparities inherent in "the boundless universe". The workings of Karma are not influenced by human will, nor is there a pantheon of anthropomorphized divinities to hand out justice and punishment. But Karma has its own logic and functions whether we are aware of it or not. The young courtesan Zheng Aiyue suffers at the hand of Ximen Qing at first when she refuses to wait on him at a drinking party in his mansion, and later it is she who leads him to his death. Is this deliberate revenge? The answer is no. As Zheng Aiyue enters the Ximen household to serve Ximen Qing, her only concern is to please this living incubus and thereby enrich herself to the extent of a few taels of silver. To this end she titillates him with descriptions of the good-looking ladies she has seen in the households where she has sung.

Another of the author's important resources is his extraordinary vitality. Every aspect of life seems to fascinate and move him, and it is his belief that every aspect of life is worth writing about. He therefore produces a highly realistic description of the life of a wealthy man in Shandong province in the late Ming dynasty, which he narrates without a break over the course of more than a thousand pages. Without the author's extraordinary sensitivity to ambiguity and his great vitality, this exhortatory novel would have soon found its place on the rubbish heap of literary history. Not a single one of the novel's more than one hundred characters is a superficial stereotype. This can be explained by the author's burning curiosity about human nature and his refusal to tolerate the conventional view of things. One special characteristic of *Jin Ping Mei* is its long and detailed descriptions of "the cardinal desires"—eating, drinking and sex—especially the first two. Thanks to the work of Sigmund Freud, it is now generally accepted that the sexual drive is the major inspiration for creativity; and the restless drive and unabated flow of ideas in great works of literature seem to attest to this theory. But *Jin Ping Mei's* attachment to the mundane world raises the possibility that the author's inspiration lies beyond the realm of sexuality.

It is said that some books can be read by people of all ages and tastes. If this is so, *Jin Ping Mei* is not among them. *Jin Ping Mei* is not a book that should be read by everyone. In particular, it should not be read by young people. First of all, for the adolescent reader, the sexual affairs described in the novel will set off a strong reaction which will prevent the book from being appreciated in a relaxed frame of mind. Secondly, the novel is filled with as much trivia and gossip as real life, and few young people can be expected to tolerate such things. More mature readers with greater patience will be able to derive true enjoyment from *Jin Ping Mei*. What will first attract their attention is the book's humour and then the realistic descriptions of characters and events. This aspect of the novel has been written

about by earlier scholars of literary history.* A closer reading, purposefully ignoring the novel's obvious shortcomings, will reveal the author's personal warmth, curiosity and depth of insight, in addition to the other admirable qualities mentioned above. In this way we can gain an appreciation of the novel's profundity and of its lively realism.

Jin Ping Mei is a novelist's novel. Though as a rule it should not be read by young people, it can serve as an important reference. Nor can serious students of the Chinese novel afford to overlook it, since it is unquestionably a milestone in the history of the Chinese novel, as well as an obvious model for *The Scholars* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The author's sensitivity and creativity, and his ability to refine the raw materials of everyday life into art are of great value for study, and can serve as a source for literary inspiration. In recent years, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* has been held up as a model for fiction writing, but the proponents of this idea overlook the fact that *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is actually composed of two major sections: the longer of the two consisting of descriptions of the numerous female inhabitants of the Prospect Garden, which borrows its form from romantic drama, and as such is a poor model for fiction; and the second shorter section consisting of descriptions of characters who reside outside of the garden, such as Wang Xifeng and Granny Liu. The latter are ideal models for fiction, but were themselves modeled on characters in *Jin Ping Mei*. In fact, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* displays greater craftsmanship than *Jin Ping Mei*, yet is written with decidedly more affectation and pretension, and suffers by comparison with *Jin Ping Mei* in terms of depth and vigour.

*In his *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun writes, "The writer shows the most profound understanding of the life of his time, his descriptions are clear yet subtle, penetrating yet highly subjective, and for the sake of contrast he sometimes portrays

two quite different aspects of life. His writing holds such a variety of human interest that no novel of that period could surpass it." (tr. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976, p. 222)