

The Song of the P'i-p'a

By Po Chü-i (A.D. 772-846)

Translated by John D. Coleman

PREFACE

In the tenth year of Yuan-ho, I was sent in exile to be prefect of Chiang-chou. In the autumn of the following year, I was seeing off a guest at the mouth of the River P'en at night, when we heard someone playing the *p'i-p'a* out in a boat. As we listened, those tones, so resonant and clear, recalled the music of the capital. Upon inquiring, we learned that the player had originally been a singing girl in Ch'ang-an and had studied the *p'i-p'a* with the two masters, Mu and Ts'ao. When she had grown older and her beauty had faded, she had given herself in marriage to a merchant. Now, after listening to her story, we ordered wine so that she might quickly play a few more songs for us. But when her song was finished, she seemed downcast. Her youth, she told us, had been happy, but now, floundering and haggard, she moved perpetually among the lakes and rivers. In the two years since I left my earlier office, I had felt contented and at peace, but listening to her words, that night I first realized what exile means. Therefore I wrote a long poem, 612 characters in all, to present to her. It is called "The Song of the P'i-p'a".

潯陽江頭夜送客
楓葉荻花秋瑟瑟
主人下馬客在船
舉酒欲飲無管絃
醉不成歡慘將別
別時茫茫江浸月
忽聞水上琵琶聲
主人忘歸客不發

On the Hsün-Yang River bank, one evening, I was seeing
off a guest,
When, in autumn, maple leaves and bullrush blossoms
soughed and sighed.

I, the host, dismounted. My guest was seated in his boat.
We raised our cups and wished to drink, but had no
music.

Intoxication brought us no joy and, dispirited, we were
about to part
But as we parted, the river vast and shoreless seemed to
inundate the moon,

And suddenly—upon the water—the sound of a
p'i-p'a.

Host forgot about returning, and guest did not embark.

Stanzaic divisions in this translation of Po Chü-i's p'i-p'a hsing have been made wherever there is a change of rhyme in the original. Although it was not traditional in China to print poems with stanzaic divisions, thematic groupings were, nevertheless, accomplished by altering the rhyme. Each of the two long speeches in the poem has only one rhyme throughout, and can be viewed therefore as an extended stanza. This device, it is hoped, will enable the reader who is unfamiliar with Chinese to better grasp the formal structure of the original. I wish to thank Gerald Powers for his editorial help and for suggesting that the stanzaic arrangement be based on rhyme.—TRANSLATOR

尋聲聞問彈者誰
 琵琶聲停欲語遲
 移船相近邀相見
 添酒回燈重開宴
 千呼萬喚始出來
 猶抱琵琶半遮面
 轉軸撥絃三兩聲
 未成曲調先有情
 絃絃掩抑聲聲思
 似訴平生不得志
 低眉信手續續彈
 說盡心中無限事
 輕攏慢撚抹復挑
 初爲霓裳後六么
 大絃嘈嘈如急雨
 小絃切切如私語
 嘈嘈切切錯雜彈
 大珠小珠落玉盤
 間關鶯語花底滑

In the dark we traced the notes and asked the player's name.

The *p'i-p'a* notes ceased. The lady wished to speak, but faltered.

We drew our boat alongside hers, and invited her to join us,

Then restocked our wine, brought back the lamps, and recommenced our feasting.

A thousand times we cajoled and coaxed before she finally did appear,
 Still clutching her *p'i-p'a*, which half concealed her face.

She turned the tuning pegs, essayed the strings. Just several notes,

Not yet a tune. But already there was feeling.

String after string was low and muffled. Note after note was grieved,

As though her whole life long she'd never found contentment.

She knit her brow and set her hand in motion,
 stroking time and time again,
 Exhausting her heart's infinite cares.

She lightly damped, stroked slowly, then swept and plucked the strings,

Playing first "The Rainbow Skirt" and then "The Little Six."¹

The large strings pattered like a sudden shower,
 The small strings murmured like a whispered secret—

Pattering, murmuring, they then were intermingled:
 Pearls both big and little dropped into a plate of jade,
 An oriole's mellifluous tremolo which wafts beneath the flowers,

¹"The Rainbow Skirt" and "The Little Six" are the names of two popular T'ang dynasty tunes.

幽咽流泉冰下難
 水泉冷澀絃凝絕
 凝絕不通聲漸歇
 別有幽愁闇恨生
 此時無聲勝有聲
 銀瓶乍破水漿迸
 鐵騎突出刀槍鳴
 曲終收撥當心畫
 四絃一聲如裂帛
 東船西舫悄無言
 惟見江心秋月白
 沉吟放撥插絃中
 整頓衣裳起斂容
 自言本是京城女
 家在蝦蟆陵下住
 十三學得琵琶成
 名屬教坊第一部
 曲罷常教善才服
 妝成每被秋娘妒

A rivulet's lugubrious gurgling as it struggles under ice.²

Then the stream turned chilled and sluggish; the sound
 of strings congealed, broke off—
 Congealed, broke off. Soon the tune subsided and was
 heard no more.

When it had ceased, a song of brooding sorrow and
 somber grief arose,
 And this time, silence spoke more than sounds.

A vase of silver swiftly shattered, its liquid spilling
 out.

Armored cavalries charged quickly, their swords and
 sabers clashing.

At the song's conclusion, one stroke swept across the
 center:

Four strings resounded with a single voice, like rending
 silk.

In the boats both east and west, we all fell silent
 And gazed into the river's heart where the autumn
 moon shone white.

Sunk deep in thought, she placed the pick among the
 strings

Then rearranged her garments, arose with a collected
 mien—

And said: "I spent my childhood in the capital,
 Where, beneath the Mount of Toads, we made our
 home.

At thirteen, I had already mastered the *p'i-p'a*;
 My name was first among the Music Bureau's ranks.
 When my song was over, even experts bowed before me,
 And each time I dressed in finery, the Autumn Maid³
 was envious.

²I have chosen to follow the alternate reading of this line, which substitutes 冰下難 for 水下難. This substitution results in greater clarity of meaning and in more perfect parallelism between this and the line above. In his authoritative edition of Po Chü-i's works, Hiraoka Takeo also makes this emendation. See Hiraoka Takeo, et al, *Haku shi monju*, chüan 12, pp. 276-81.

³Ch'iu-niang, a singsong girl of T'ang times famous for her beauty.

五陵少年爭纏頭
 一曲紅綃不知數
 鈿頭銀篦擊節碎
 血色羅裙翻酒污
 今年歡笑復明年
 秋月春風等閒度
 弟走從軍阿姨死
 暮去朝來顏色故
 門前冷落車馬稀
 老大嫁作商人婦
 商人重利輕別離
 前月浮梁買茶去
 去來江口守空船
 繞船明月江水寒
 夜深忽夢少年事
 夢啼妝淚紅闌干
 我聞琵琶已嘆息
 又聞此語重唧唧
 同是天涯淪落人
 相逢何必曾相識

The Wu-ling⁴ youths contended with each other to
 provide my turban silk:
 One song, and there were countless bolts of scarlet
 taffeta.
 Inlaid hairpieces and combs of silver, in beating time,
 were smashed,
 And skirts of blood-red silk, with overturned wine, were
 stained.
 That year I laughed and was contented. And the next
 year too.
 Autumn moons and winds of spring, unheeded, passed
 me by.
 My younger brother joined the army. My mother's sister
 died.
 The evenings went, the mornings came. My beauty
 faded.
 By then our door was lonely and deserted. Horses and
 carriages were few.
 Grown old, I gave myself to be a merchant's wife,
 A merchant who thinks much of profit, but of
 separation, little.
 This month he has gone to Fu-liang to purchase tea.
 "Back and forth I travel to the river's mouth to wait
 within my lonely boat.
 The moonlight which surrounds my boat is clear, and
 the riverwater cold.
 Late at night, abruptly I will dream about my
 youth,
 And dreaming still, I weep. Red tear streaks mar my
 make-up."
 Hearing her *p'i-p'a*, I had already sighed,
 But when I heard her words, my bosom heaved still
 more.
 Both of us are exiles at the horizon's end.
 We meet. What need is there of past acquaintance?

⁴Wu-ling refers to some of the environs of the capital where well-to-do families lived.

我從去年辭帝京
 謫居卧病潯陽城
 潯陽地僻無音樂
 終歲不聞絲竹聲
 住近湓城地低濕
 黃蘆苦竹繞宅生
 其間旦暮聞何物
 杜鵑啼血猿哀鳴
 春江花朝秋月夜
 往往取酒還獨傾
 豈無山歌與村笛
 嘔啞嘲哳難爲聽
 今夜聞君琵琶語
 如聽仙樂耳暫明
 莫辭更坐彈一曲
 爲君翻作琵琶行
 感我此言良久立
 卻坐促絃絃轉急
 淒淒不似向前聲
 滿座重聞皆掩泣
 座中泣下誰最多
 江州司馬青衫濕

Then I replied: "Last year I took my leave of the
 imperial city,
 And, disgraced, since then in Hsün-Yang, I've lain ill.
 Hsün-Yang is an isolated place where there's no music.
 For one whole year I've never heard the sound of strings
 and pipes.
 I'm living near the River P'en, where the terrain is low
 and damp.
 Yellow rushes and bamboo grow up around my hut,
 And, from dusk 'til dawn what creatures do I hear
 among them?
 The cuckoos' crying tears of blood, and gibbons' mourn-
 ful wailing.
 In spring on flowery mornings by the river or on moon-
 lit autumn nights,
 Often I will take some wine and drink alone.
 Of course, there are the mountain songs and village
 flutes,
 But cacophonous and strident, they are a burden to the
 ear.
 Tonight, when I heard the sound of your *p'i-p'a*,
 It was as though from hearing fairy music, my ears were
 suddenly enlightened.
 Please do not refuse. Sit down and play another song,
 And I, in turn, will write for you, 'The Song of the
p'i-p'a.'"

Moved by these words of mine, she remained a long
 time standing,
 Then sat and smote the strings which in distress sang
 out.

The sound, more mournful still, was different from
 before.

Listening to her play again, we each concealed our tears.
 But who among us wept the most of all?
 This prefect of Chiang-chou, whose blue gown was wet.

白居易琵琶行