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Cherishing the Fragrant Companion (Lian xiangban 憐香伴)

Li Yu 李漁 (1610-1680 CE)

Translated by Jessica Moyer

Translator's note: This *chuanqi* opera, a dramatic genre that flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in China, contains a mixture of prose dialogue (in smaller type) and arias sung to well-known tunes (in larger type). The plot is the first known love story in China to involve a same-sex romance between women; its status, power, and gender dynamics are intricately entwined. The play depicts two young women who meet while burning incense in a Buddhist temple and are instantly attracted to one another's beauty, fragrance, and poetic talent. They swear sisterhood, perform an unofficial marriage ceremony, and finally contrive to marry the same man in order to spend their lives together. This scene, which occurs about a third of the way into the opera, describes their second meeting and marriage vows. The setting in a Buddhist nunnery is not randomly chosen: in late Imperial Chinese literature, monasteries and nunneries are characterized as often by heterosexual and homosexual licentiousness as by austere self-cultivation. The nunnery is thus the perfect setting for a transgressive exchange of romantic vows between women.¹ I chose this scene to translate not only because it is a high point of the plot, but because it shows the complexity of the women's desires and blurs the lines between reality and performance.

Characters:

TRANQUILITY: a Buddhist nun, abbess of the nunnery in whose temple the scene takes place
CUI JIANYUN: a young woman, recently married to Fan Jiefu
FLOWERBELL: CUI JIANYUN's maid
CAO YUHUA: a young unmarried woman
LINGERING SPRING: CAO YUHUA's maid

SCENE TEN: PLAYFUL VOWS

TRANQUILITY (enters)

[TUNE: 'FROST AT DAWN']

The *Surangama Sutra*'s recital ends;
The gong for repentance begins to sound.
I've boldly invited that pair of carts to collide again;
Now I lay out incense and tea.

Today is the first of October, and our nunnery is holding a memorial service for the souls of our donors. Novices, strike up the music at the altar. After I receive Madam Cui and Miss

¹ Thanks go to Sujane Wu and the two anonymous reviewers for many helpful corrections. Any remaining errors are my responsibility.

Cao, I'll come and lead the service (Voices answer within, acting out bustling around the altar).

MADAM CUI (enters, followed by FLOWERBELL, her maid)

[TUNE: 'WIND ON THE RIVER']

Gazing on the fasting ground
Banners fluttering, curling like dragons and serpents
The sound of chanted sutras sonorous and clear.

FLOWERBELL: Madam, you've arrived, but what if Miss Cao couldn't get away?

MADAM CUI:

May the Lord of Emptiness
Grant she may
Slip out of her fragrant chambers,
Come soon to the altar of poetry!
I
Feel the breeze, recall perfume in the gloom,
Recall perfume in the gloom,
Faint from beneath the distant eaves.
Why does
Faithful Wei Sheng
Not already
Await his lover beside the bridge?²

(TRANQUILITY acts out seeing someone)

MISS CAO (enters, followed by LINGERING SPRING, her maid)

[SAME TUNE]

Coming to the fasting grounds,
Not bringing sacrifice to ward off evil,
Nor yet to repay favor and protection.
I slip into the high hall,
Continuing my poetic destiny,
Attempting in vain to hoodwink the immortals.

² The legendary Wei Sheng and his lover had arranged to meet beside a bridge; Wei Sheng arrived first. While he waited, a flash flood arrived. Wei Sheng refused to break tryst and flee. Instead, he held onto the pillar of the bridge to keep from being swept away and was drowned. The story comes from the *Zhuangzi* (ca. 3rd century BCE).

LINGERING SPRING: Miss, we got here so early! Madam Cui's a newly wedded lovebird. She won't even be out of bed yet.

MISS CAO: You say her
 Dream of clouds still goes on,
 Dream of clouds still goes on.³
 Tiny feet too languorous to step out of bed.
I expect she's
 Sated with pleasure,
can't wait for
 Dawn's eastern light!

(Madam Cui and Miss Cao see each other with delight)

TRANQUILITY: Madam, Miss, please, sit down and chat! I must go lead the service, but I'll come back to sit with you again as soon as I have a moment.

MADAM CUI and MISS CAO: Take your time, Abbess! (Exit Tranquility).

MADAM CUI: Miss, the other day when I went home, I showed your poem to my husband. He composed another two poems to the same rhyme scheme. (She gives her the poems, and Miss Cao reads them)

MISS CAO: Full of romantic style – a match for your talent! (She gives the poems back).
Madam, you and I met by chance and soon became kindred spirits. I would love to swear sisterhood with you; I don't know if you'd agree to that?

MADAM CUI: I was just thinking the same thing! But our oath should be different than the usual. Normal sworn siblings only swear to be sisters for the rest of their lives, but we should swear for this life and all our future incarnations too.

MISS CAO: In that case, why don't we swear to be sisters of different surnames in this life, and flesh and blood sisters in our future lives?

MADAM CUI: No, that's no good. Do we really want to be stuck as women in all our future incarnations?

MISS CAO: Well then, sisters in this life and brothers in the next life – how about that?

MADAM CUI: No, that's no good either. There are so many brothers who don't get along. And even brothers who do get along aren't as close as a husband and wife who don't get along. Let's swear to be husband and wife in our future lives! (Miss Cao laughs)

[MEDLEY, 1ST TUNE: 'GOLDEN PARASOL TREE']

³ "Clouds" or "clouds and rain" is one of the most common ways to refer to sexual intercourse in Chinese poetry.

Brothers and sisters are well enough,
Yet even those born of one womb,
Sharing the same innate relationship –
Their sentiments are no weighty matter.
Lord and minister are separated by the expanse of the royal hall.

[MEDLEY, 2ND TUNE: 'OLD ZHEJIANG PROVINCE']

Even with one's father and mother -
This is nothing like husband and wife, with deepest parts united,
Rejoicing to share pillow and couch,
Only then are hearts at ease.

[MEDLEY, 3RD TUNE: 'EMBROIDERY CASE']

In life not divided, in death still a pair.

[MEDLEY, 4TH TUNE: 'EASING THREE PAINS']

These words are not spoken in vain!

[MEDLEY, 5TH TUNE: 'LISTLESSLY PAINTING MY BROWS']

Haven't you read of the
Butterfly Lovers, who shared a room of old?

[MEDLEY, 6TH TUNE: 'ENTRUSTING THE SON']

Then shall we not, in the life to come,
Imitate the phoenix and her mate,
Make a pair of
Butterflies, fluttering and circling,
Pay this lifetime's account in full?

MISS CAO (aside): It's no joking matter to swear oaths in front of the Buddha! Swearing
sisterhood and brotherhood is fine, but swearing to be husband and wife?

[MEDLEY, SAME TUNES]

The presence of the gods is no place for games.
Weigh thoughts and words at leisure!
Before future selves have taken body or form,

Whoever heard of
Tying the vermilion cord?

But after all, in that future life, we don't know who will be male or female. Maybe I'll be the husband and she'll be the wife – you never know. This

Cock and hen are mysterious and unknowable.
Brood not over a future as female phoenix.
She may not be the Liang Hong to my Meng Guang.⁴

And even if she is the man – if she's as smart and gorgeous as she is in this life, well, I'd be happy to be her wife! I only hope

In a future life, may she not change her romantic air.
Then I'd willingly let her rule the roost.

(Turning back to Madam Cui) Madam, with you I'll be
Bold and unrestrained...

Look at
The Maitreya Buddha in his niche, laughing at human folly!

There's just one thing that worries me.

MADAM CUI: What one thing?

MISS CAO: I only fear
This skein of heart's passion,
Once begun, impossible to forget,
May lead to lovesick sorrow in another life!

MADAM CUI: Flowerbell, light the incense and candles for us to bow and say our vows.

FLOWERBELL: Everyone says the costume makes the actor – dress like a dragon, look like a dragon; dress like a phoenix, look like a phoenix. Since you two want to be husband and wife, you should dress the part to make your bows.

MISS CAO and MADAM CUI: How should we do that - dress the part?

FLOWERBELL: There's a study on your left, with a scholar's robes and headgear all there inside. Get a set and put it on, and make your bows to the altar as husband and wife. Then, with the Bodhisattva as witness, you won't repent this marriage!

⁴ Liang Hong and Meng Guang: a perfect match. Meng Guang, (fl. 58-75 CE) was a plain woman who remained unmarried until the advanced age of thirty; when asked why, she stated that she was waiting for a man as learned and virtuous as Liang Hong, a poor scholar in her district. Liang Hong heard of her words and proposed marriage; the two lived in harmony thereafter. (The story comes from the *Latter Han History*).

MADAM CUI (laughing): That girl! She's joking, but it makes sense. We'll do as you say – go bring the things.

LINGERING SPRING: In that case, we're still missing a master of ceremonies.

FLOWERBELL: No problem. My father's family have been ritual experts for generations. I've known the part by heart since I was young. The ceremonial robes and headgear are all ready to go in the study – I'll put on a set and that'll be that. (She brings the robes).

LINGERING SPRING: My young miss will be the groom.

FLOWERBELL: My lady will be the groom! (They fight.) All right, all right...we'll have both of them try the robe and headgear on, and whoever fits them will be the groom. (Miss Cao puts on the robe.) The cap's falling over her eyebrows, and the robe drags on the ground. That won't work! (Madam Cui puts on the robe.) Look at that! The cap's neither loose nor tight, the robe neither short nor long. That's the way it should look! Now, make your bows.

(Flowerbell, attired as the ritual expert, officiates. Lingering Spring supports Miss Cao as she and Madam Cui perform the wedding bows. Abbess Tranquility comes onstage, sees what's going on, bursts into laughter, and hurries back offstage. When Madam Cui and Miss Cao have finished bowing, they begin to laugh.)

MADAM CUI:

[TUNE: 'THREE VARIATIONS']

Looking at you, I clap my hands
How marvelously made, this marriage fate!
A seeming hero, a real heroine –
What a novel performance!

Miss Cao, I just happen to be a year older, so I should be the husband.

The senior in years should be the groom
In this matter, blame me not
Nor take offense, as though I used romance to get the upper hand.

I'm not a real man, but getting dressed up like this, and then seeing your pretty face...it's making me crazy!

This love is killing me!
In vain my heart itches.

And it's not just me going wild. Miss Cao, your spring desires are stirring too...

Like

Red apricot flowers atop the wall,

A drop of spring passion, hard to keep oneself on guard.

MISS CAO (aside): Look at her, dressed up like that – a Pan An on a chariot, a Song Yu beside the wall.⁵ Where in the world could you find a man as handsome as that? If I could marry a husband like her, I'd die happy!

[SAME TUNE]

As considerate as Zhang Chang, actually painting his wife's eyebrows,
Even Pan An and Wei Jie lose out to her stunning looks.⁶

(Turns back to Madam Cui) Madam, it is not only that
As the older, you should be the groom:
I yield place too, now, to your air of surpassing romance!
People will laugh themselves to death
And romantic young men will drive themselves mad.
Here we are
On the mountaintop of dreams;
We'll become as legendary as the King of Chu.⁷

As I see it, you can make a game out of everything in the world except one thing – the relationship of husband and wife cannot be a game. A woman of heroic virtue does not take a second husband. Now that I have bowed before the altar with you, if I ever again perform this ceremony with another, though it might not be a loss of chastity, still, I would never rid myself of the stain. Besides, our love runs so deep – how could we ever be torn apart? We need to come up with a plan to be together forever.

MADAM CUI (nodding): Well, there is one plan. But I can't bring myself to mention it.

MISS CAO: We know each other so well, what could be that awkward?

MADAM CUI: Even if I do say it, you might not be willing to go along with it.

MISS CAO: As the old saying goes, "a gentleman dies for his true friend." If even death is possible, why wouldn't I go along with your plan?

MADAM CUI: Well, I'm married now to Mr. Fan. If you married him too, you and I would treat each other like an older and a younger sister, not like a wife and a concubine. Every day we

⁵ Pan An and Song Yu were famously handsome men of antiquity.

⁶ Zhang Chang was a famously doting husband who would help his wife put on makeup; Wei Jie was renowned for his handsome looks.

⁷ The "mountaintop of dreams" refers to Gaotang Peak, where an ancient King of Chu is said to have had a dream sexual encounter with the goddess of mist and clouds. The story was immortalized in the well-known prose-poem "Rhapsody on Gaotang Peak" collected in the 6th century literary anthology *Selections of Refined Literature*, and becomes one of the most common metaphors for sexual bliss in later Chinese literature.

could live in harmony, not leaving each other's side, closer and more intimate than husband and wife. But I do not know what your opinion might be?

[TUNE: 'OLD ZHEJIANG PROVINCE']

Dreaming together by night
Dressing together by day
Flowered countenances side by side in the mirror, two fragrant buds on a stem.
Deep in the inner chambers, harmonizing our song, step by step,
Just like a husband and wife.

If you were willing to go along with it, not only would I not dare to make you the concubine, I'd willingly let you be the formal wife!

Cheerfully would I yield my place to worth and virtue,
Not monopolize my husband's bedchamber.

MISS CAO (aside): Well, that's what she says. But I'm...hesitant.

[SAME TUNE]

Let's not be hasty.
Let's talk it over again.
Let's not marry the wrong man.

As I see it, young Fan's talent really is a fitting match for the two of ours. But I don't know whether he's handsome or not. Well, I expect when the match between the two of them was being made in the first place, they weren't careless. (Sighs). Heavens! I've met a true friend at last...I can't just look out for number one any more. (Turning back to Madam Cui)

Madam, I know that you
Are not one to stand on status.
My
True friend's heart is clear as day.
I only hope our stars may not be divided forever, like Scorpius and Orion.⁸
Even being a concubine – what matter?

MADAM CUI: Even if you agree, I'm sure your father won't be willing.

⁸ Antares (Chinese 商星, the brightest star in Scorpius), and Orion (Chinese 参星) never appear in the sky together. Chinese literature uses the two stars/constellations as a metaphor for either separation of lovers or friends, or for disharmony – a double meaning I have tried to capture with “divided.” Compare the Greek myth in which the mighty hunter Orion stepped on a scorpion, which stung and slew him; the gods immortalized both by making them constellations, but due to their everlasting enmity made one a summer constellation and the other a winter constellation, so that they would never meet.

MISS CAO: If the matchmaker proposes a concubine marriage straight away, my father will naturally not be willing. He must say that you, madam, are willing to be the concubine, and young Fan wants to marry me as his main wife. After I've entered the household, then I will withdraw to the side chamber.

MADAM CUI: In that case, let us swear an oath here before Buddha's altar.

MISS CAO: Three Jewels above!⁹ I, Cao Yuhua, declare that voice and essence are in harmony with Cui Jianyun, and I am willing to marry into the Fan lineage. If I betray this oath, may sorrow overtake my sixteen years.

MADAM CUI: If Cao Yuhua marries my husband, and if I, Cui Jianyu, treat her as a concubine, may sorrow overtake my eighteen years.

MADAM CUI and MISS CAO:
[TUNE: 'SHABBY-HAT LIU']

The gods, solemn and majestic, cannot be deceived.
A faithless heart will draw strange calamity on itself.
Our only wish:
Henceforth, to live side by side in every incarnation,
Taking turns as phoenix and his mate,
Tumbling amid the mandarin-duck bed curtains.

(A voice within): Madam, miss, please enter the hall to light incense.

MISS CAO:
As twining vines embrace to draw their neighbors close,
Like that playful grant of parasol leaves, our play becomes reality.¹⁰

MADAM CUI:
Exceptional love of talent belongs to our fair sex;
Extreme jealousy has always been for men.

(Exeunt Miss Cao and Madam Cui; Lingering Spring and Flowerbell remain onstage)

⁹ The Three Jewels of Buddhism are the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings, law), and the Sangha (monastic community).

¹⁰ An allusion to King Cheng, who once played a joke on his minister Shu Yu by giving him leaves from a parasol tree (which resembled the green jade tablets used in ceremonial land grants) and saying, "I enfeoff you with these!" When the recording historian asked the king to name an official date for the enfeoffment, the king replied "I was playing with him." The historian replied, "The Son of Heaven has no playful words. When he speaks a word, histories record it, rites fulfill it, songs hymn it." Thereupon the king enfeoffed Shu Yu with Tang. (From Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, the "Hereditary Houses" section on the state of Jin).

FLOWERBELL: Hey, if they're going to be husband and wife, you and I can't help being involved. The props are all still here. Why don't we make our bows, too?

LINGERING SPRING: You want to get married? I'll be the husband.

FLOWERBELL: Everyone says "a pretty wife sleeps beside a stupid husband!" You're good-looking and I'm ugly – the good-looking one should be the wife, and the ugly one should be the husband.

LINGERING SPRING: Fine. People say, "Children should be three parts ugly; pretty ones always get the worst of things." [They bow before the altar].

LINGERING SPRING and FLOWERBELL:

[SAME TUNE]

Even romantic heroes have to practice romance.
Undoing our trousers, two wafts of plum perfume.
Alas, why is there not an inch of plum-flower rod?
Forking limbs, bared in vain,
Rub till the plum hollow itches!

[Exeunt]