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*The Peony Pavilion:* Manifold Landscapes of *Qing*

*Love is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead live again. Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has died. And must the love that comes in dream necessarily be unreal? For there is no lack of dream lovers in this world.*

 –Tang Xianzu, 1598, in his own preface to his new play

 Spanning fifty-five scenes, traversing earthly and unearthly realms, and inhabiting the hybrid genre of tragicomedy, Tang Xianzu’s Ming *chuanqi* (“romance”) play, *The Peony Pavilion,* is an expansive meditation on love.[[1]](#endnote--1)1 (Birch, 3) Buffeted by what he perceived to be divergent, sensibility-stifling claims of monks, family elders, bureaucratic elites, and Daoist thinkers in his own lifetime, Tang sought to craft a play that animated what late-Ming thinkers called *qing*—translated as “love” or, by extension, “feeling”—in all imaginable spheres of human existence, including the spiritual and imaginary.[[2]](#endnote-0)2 (Birch, x) Passionate love of exceptionally devotional caliber, which embraces but is not limited to sexual attraction, is placed under the scrutiny of various tertiary, elder characters. Their interpretations, however, fall short. Ungovernable, the *qing* central to this story reaches across realms, like a boomeranging heat-seeker between two predestined souls. Tang’s dramaturgy enables a shifting sense of “place”: since no sets are used, the space of performance may be a garden, a boudoir, a jail cell, a mountain-top, heaven, hell—or any place imaginable, and the people on stage can change locations any time they wish by merely promenading in a circle and announcing arrival.[[3]](#endnote-1)2 (Birch, 3) *Qing* propels lovers Bridal Du and Liu Mengmei down many dangerous paths across these numerous places*,* and since performers fill and navigate the stage space, primacy is given to *their* relations rather than forces of the material world. How the lovers see the natural world inspires and inflames their desire. Desire guides their movements through space toward the object of their one and only love. This essay will map the journey from nascent sexual desire to the miraculous unions and flowering of *qing* shared by Bridal Du and Liu Mengmei and how this powerful love triumphs over the judgment of others. Secondarily, this essay will examine the sacrifices exacted by this potent *qing* and how these sacrifices are gendered.

 Dominant philosophical traditions stood in staunch suspicion of romantic love.[[4]](#endnote-2)4 In matters of sex, Confucianists and Daoists were far more rational than romantic.[[5]](#endnote-3)3 Both applied stringent cost-benefit analyses to the sexual lives of men and women, however they came to different conclusions: “The Confucianists felt that marriage was too important a social institution to confuse with love, and the Taoists felt that sex was too powerful a spiritual crucible to corrupt with romance.”[[6]](#endnote-4)3 (Wile, 12) Confucianists saw the immortality of one’s progeny as the ultimate aim while Daoists focused on the transformation of one’s own body chemistry. Patriarchal values were exemplified by the prioritized continuation of sons through Confucianist ethics and the aspired protraction of men’s corporeal existence in the Daoist ethos of bodily alchemy.[[7]](#endnote-5)4 Such goals left little room for sentiment or interpersonal intimacy beyond the regimented sexual act: “In “paired practice” sexual cultivation, over and over the man is warned to keep emotional distance from the woman, for what he is really seeking is fuel for his own journey.”[[8]](#endnote-6)3 (Wile, 13) This mention of a “journey” resonates with the counter-narrative explored in *The Peony Pavilion*, in which the lovers’ journeys are conjointly constituted toward one another, ignited by mere dreams and fueled by longing for fully fledged mortal union; the obstructions they face on these journeys are the substance of the drama.

 Following the vivid, peripatetic prologue, the first character to introduce himself is Liu Mengmei, the impoverished scholar, antsy and unfulfilled: “’My days are a daze of thoughts of love’—and about two weeks ago I had a dream, out of nowhere.”[[9]](#endnote-7)1 (Tang, 4) Time becomes a blur when sights are set on an as yet immaterial desire. His psychic space has been captured by the image of a woman “of pleasing height, and manner…inviting” whose insistence that they must meet so that she can set him on the path to love and high office inspires him to change his name to reflect the flora at the site of the fleeting meeting, a flowering apricot. In the Daoist philosophy, nature is taken to be eternal, stable, and harmonious, a paradigm to be emulated through disciplined practice.4 Liu, however, finds alluring beauty in nature that prompts him to transform himself and cultivate space in his heart to allow sentiment for another to flower, rather than individual freedom, as is the goal of one pursuing the Way of the Dao: “In my heart a hundred blooms/ not yet their time to open/ seek first the support/ of an enduring branch.”[[10]](#endnote-8)1 (Tang, 5) Rather than balancing in the present to ensure secure futurity, Liu is stirred by dreams of a more sublime nature and an ideal, particular woman. He consents to chase an alternate fate: the promise of the pairing of souls rather than the stoic cultivation of his solitary longevity. Dreamscapes of beauty and love appeal to Liu in a more immediate and spontaneous way than the prospect of endurance through an unimaginative reality. The pursuit of escape through nourishing love from one end of the vast terrain begins.

 From the outset, Bridal Du suffers derision and seclusion at the hands of her sternly Confucian father and her pedantic tutor. The elder men’s sternness becomes a powerful but comic force in the play, as they confront the behavior of the young and the sensitivity of the women with furious incredulity. Characters within a *play* are bound to appear narrow-minded and ridiculous if they condemn all art and feeling as they stand on a *stage*. This archetypal rapport of generational misunderstanding illustrates the challenge of the *qing*-possessing young people to be recognized by elders who have not experienced *qing* in their own lifetimes, which have been meticulously paved by monotonous discipline. Condemned as a pariah, Bridal turns inward to longing and daydreaming. Prefect Du bemoans his lack of a son and frustration with his daughter’s idle embroidery and painting. He believes that such activities serve no rational purpose. Averted from her generative pleasures, Bridal is impelled to turn to books: “Then at some future date when you enter your husband’s family, your understanding of learning and of the rites will reflect credit on your own.”[[11]](#endnote-9)1 (Tang, 9) Prefect Du’s focus on lineage and status neglects the interpersonal and imaginative facets of life. His understanding of marriage as an exchange of “credit” is direct and rational from his perspective, but the exchange of knowledge is more conceptual than real. As the story unfolds, the lovers and consequently the audience gradually but vividly discern in countless instances that real love may be just as abstract and immaterial as “credit”, however, it is infinitely more powerful and rewarding.

 The aged and solitary Tutor Chen begrudges his new assignment: “A girl pupil is always a problem. It won’t do to be either too lenient or too strict, and, if one runs into a problem of face now and then, one can neither laugh nor weep. Some old fellow like myself would be best: No other cure for heart sore vexed:/ just let me bury my head in a text.”[[12]](#endnote-10)1 (Tang, 12) Tutor Chen has a stigmatized prejudice against young women, which one could read as a cause for his companionless life and “heart sore vexed”. Frigidly opposed to reading beyond the literal and exploring figurative language, he disregards all traces of romance and natural beauty when he teaches Bridal and the attending maid Spring Fragrance, about *The Book of Songs*. He instead provides reductive and censorial interpretations, missing overt authorial signs and symbols in love poems. When Spring Fragrance shares a delightful anecdote about encountering a real osprey, Tutor Chen silences her: “Rubbish. This is a ‘detached image.’”[[13]](#endnote-11)1 (Tang, 25) Tutor Chen’s blindness to the natural world seems directly linked to his lack of sentiment, and he struggles to put blinders on Bridal Du. Tutor Chen fails to appreciate the beauty of the very spring which is setting Bridal’s heart aflame. This creates a pointed dramatic irony because, concomitantly, Spring Fragrance—who lacks the lived experience necessary to provide proven insights—more accurately traces the subtextual motivating desires of men and women in the literary stories and more instinctually appreciates the lure of the garden. The uneducated maid comes closer to fathoming the forces at work than the wizened, white-haired scholar.

 The longing brought on by true *qing* is misunderstood by outsiders in a variety of ways. To begin with, Tutor Chen cannot anticipate its germination taking place internally through a dream, let alone one of Bridal’s. When he hears of Bridal’s intended stroll, he cautions: “She should not do this./ When woman walks abroad/ lest eyes should light upon her/ at every step she should be screened from view.”[[14]](#endnote-12)1 (Tang, 40) Unable to conceptualize Bridal herself as desiring subject, Chen overlooks the fact that gaze is a sense that all human’s possess. Tutor Chen also fails to estimate the influences of the spring foliage on Bridal’s musings. When Bridal succumbs to lovesickness, she is wary of being paired off to anyone other than the love in her dreams, and so her senses rebel: “daily my thoughts grow idler,/ my will more feeble…no peace of mind/ until the choking weeds that breed distress/ are rooted out, and the shoots of joy an grow./ Whom to please if I mask my sorrow with smiles?”[[15]](#endnote-13)1 (Tang, 67) Exposure to the best of all possible feeling recasts daily life in a much more tortuous light for Bridal. Prefect Du, in an effort to manage and address the issue, declares: “I have already sent for Tutor Chen to come examine her pulse.” (Tang, 78) His wife comes closer to diagnosing the source: “Examine her pulse! If only we had found a marriage partner for her in good time, then no such sickness would have occurred.” (Tang, 78) While this conjecture comes closer to Bridal’s condition, it leave the audience to wonder what would have happened if Bridal had been already married but still dreamed of a different man. Such additionally conflicting circumstance could have induced an even more rapid decline. Prefect Du defends against his wife’s suggestion: “What! Among the ancients, “man takes wife at thirty, at twenty woman goes as bride.””[[16]](#endnote-14)1 Characteristically, Prefect Du defends himself with the strictures underlying the decorum of Confucianism. (Tang, 78) Bridal comes closest to diagnosing herself: “Tutor,/ where love attacks the marrow,/ how can needle enter?/ When sickness springs from mist-laden flowers,/ what herbs can have effect?”[[17]](#endnote-15)1 (Tang, 92) Bridal appreciates that love lives deeper within her body than medicine and herbology can reach. Her knowledge is exclusive to her because it arises out of her own private, sensory perception of *qing*’s ineradicable influence.

The simple image of the woman’s brow evolves and accrues meaning throughout the play. The painted brow—at first brush read simply as a superficial beauty marker and trivial factor of sex appeal—transforms from a conventional physical ornament to an expressive feature that communicates *qing*. Prefect Du huffs in frustration in scene three, entitled “Admonishing the Daughter”. His constant anxiety about living up to and surpassing the status of his ancestors leads to a lingering on the past that dismisses the present and insults the very family members that constitute the microcosm so central to the Confucian doctrine: “He [Du Fu] at least had/ a son who could “recite his father’s verses”/ when all I have is/ a daughter who “models her eyebrows on her mother’s”.” (Tang, 8) This hyperbolic insult reduces the women to their external features. By the end of the play, Bridal returns to her father, schooling him on his misapprehension of appearances and consequent failure to recognize that her experience of sentiment connects her to a poetic ancestry: “You are grown so used to browbeating your daughter/ you fail to recognize the eminence/ of a scion of Liu Zongyuan!” Liu Zongyuan was a celebrated poet and essayist who authored a brief allegory in which a hunchbacked gardener lays down rules for the cultivation of trees which are unexpectedly discovered to be the perfect prescription for wise government.[[18]](#endnote-16)1 (Tang, 336) Bridal harkens back to the way she has been hastily “browbeaten” or chastised for her desirous female proclivities. She shakes off her father’s past admonitions, which added insult to the injuries she had bravely endured as she suffered from devotional longing. Her knit-brow serves, on other occasions, as a facial manifestation of transcendent *qing*. The knit-brow in her portrait speaks directly to Liu. Bridal’s delicate hand, versed in lighthearted hobbies of painting her own eyebrows, serves her in the critical moments before her premature death: “Who shall mount this portrait, so as to enhance/ the happy capture of the living model?”[[19]](#endnote-17)1 (Tang, 71) Bridal personifies the portrait as having sexual readiness, as hinted by the double meaning of “mount”. Bridal believes that her visual missive will be received, and surely it is. Liu is not only mesmerized by corporeal beauty; by gazing, he finds intuitive access to the personal emotions of the woman represented: “She gazes back at me!/…love’s longing’s locked between her brows,/…We meet each other’s eyes.”[[20]](#endnote-18)1 (Tang, 145) The portrait has the emotional import of a partially fulfilled vow from which Liu cannot turn away: “Ah my young lady,/ image without form,/ your gaze destroys me!”[[21]](#endnote-19)1 (Tang, 147) Enamored of the image, Liu sees it as the promise of the whole, loving person that he longs for all the more.

 Images of nature observed by the lovers reflect their psychological states. Whereas the Daoist philosophy posits nature as neutral and meant for human emulation, *The Peony Pavilion* playfully inverts this connection, and nature is seen to be emulating humans instead.4 Bridal returns to her shrine and re-discovers the landscape of her dream distinctly: “For I recall/ such a pavilion by flowered pool/ witnesses to our innocent play/ of breeze and moonlight.”[[22]](#endnote-20)1 (Tang, 152) She personifies the flowered pool as a witness, a cohort in the secretive, lush union. The environment is a true match to the dream, suggesting that the human imagination can create a meeting place for yin and yang just as much as the natural world itself. The vocabulary of human expression and the language of the natural world lyrically blend when Liu’s eyes meet those of his spectral love: “Hand of celestial being/ more true, more loving than mortal woman./ Gentle is she, smiles flowering in her eyes.”[[23]](#endnote-21)1 (Tang, 182) The forces of nature serve as allies to the heroic lovers: “Fair breezes blow on purpose/ to escort the nuptial pair/ no onlooker understands the mystery of this barge”[[24]](#endnote-22)1 (Tang, 214) This vivid image is presented at the end of scene thirty-six, “Elopement”. A sly assertion, that the relationship between the lover’s mutual *qing* and the movement of the winds is unknowable to anyone else, flies in the face of the Daoist belief that those schooled in the ultimate truth, or The Way, can understand human existence by simply looking at the forces of nature as they plainly appear and interpreting those observations in relation to the Dao.4 This exceptional scene of teamwork between nature and lovers ennobles their place in the world as beyond the grasp of most. The aforementioned miraculous boat journey is the site of a second sexual encounter, and the cooperation of the winds seems to fuel the lovers desire, as they perceive it as a divine sign of their predestined love. Nature’s characteristic softness, as found in petals and rivers throughout the play, is celebrated and figuratively linked to the erotic experience and consequently the human capacity for maturing sentiment. Therefore, hardness as a characterizing attribute implies insensitivity and ignorance in the realm of *qing*. Liu, falsely accused of grave robbery and kneeling at the threshold of an unjust death sentence, cries out: “How hard this father’s heart!/ The very pattern of stern fatherhood/ with his Five Thunders he would obliterate/ my wife’s fair name and history.”[[25]](#endnote-23)1 (Tang, 329) In a figurative tour-de-force of language, Liu decries Prefect Du’s ignorant impulse to prescribe a wholly unnecessary Daoist exorcism; even in her ghostly form, Bridal, an exceptional creature in all realms, was never demonic.

 Initial mentions of bird behavior in the play’s verses poke fun at the way that a bird’s song could stir anyone’s desire, or more basely, lust. In scene nine, “Sweeping the Garden”, Spring Fragrance sneakily prepares the garden for her mistress’s forbidden furlough, a desperate respite of amusement for a beleaguered student. Spring Fragrance calls upon the Gardener’s lad, who only knows how to match wits with the maid by making sexual innuendo, which Spring Fragrance recognizes as base and insincere. She dismisses him for being selfish. The envoi that concludes the scene reads: “Send not young boys/ to the realm of rouge and powder/ lest the chattering of orioles/ take on a lascivious tone”[[26]](#endnote-24)1 (Tang, 42) The connection between birds and sexual misconduct becomes much clearer in scene twenty-three, “Infernal Judgment”. Zhao the Eldest, Qian Fifteen, Sun Xin, and Monkey Li are found guilty of singing, paneling walls with fragrant wood, spending money on “powdered blossoms” (prostitutes), and practicing sodomy, respectively. Though the activities appear to range from the benignly superfluous to the explicitly sexual, all four are sentenced in Hell to be reincarnated as birds. Their karmic fate is to “bear the stirring burden of spring” and fill out the landscape of motion that inspires desire in others. This Judge seems relatively lenient, dubbing the singer an oriole, for example, to permit him to continue his creative pastime. Implicit here is the belief that the temptation of spring is part of a larger innate human impulse, perpetuated by desiring creatures who return to provoke and continue the excitement of spring after moving through the cycle of samsara. At the end of “Infernal Judgment”, the judge decides: “Four Friends of the Flowers are yours to command,/ oriole and swallow, butterfly and bee/ to help you seek, to aid your wooing,/ till the predicted star, the Coffin Breaker/ comes to fulfill your dream.”[[27]](#endnote-25)1 (Tang, 134) It seems, in this episode, that the judge is filtering out the selfishly sexual and transferring their energies to airborne creatures so that those uncorrupted youths who retreat to the garden are more likely to be the rarefied individuals capable of being possessed by *qing.* By the end of the play, when the lovers have heroically arrived to reunite with Bridal Du’s parents, their love has strengthened and been mutually sworn; the two lovers have achieved warrior-like courage. However, Spring Fragrance still reminisces about the light beginnings of their love and the romantic garden tryst. She announces a return to peace and stability by returning to lighter, casual metaphors: “The lovebirds can build a new nest!” (Tang, 319) The reincarnated birds were set on a mission to inspire love. The literary birds in *The Book of Songs* raised the young ladies’ curiosities. By the end of the play, Fragrance delights in the couple safely arriving at their new home; she likens the youthful, legend-worthy *qing* to the image of two birds*.*

 Sister Stone’s views ring more dimensional and open to dialectic than the inflexible Prefect Du or Tutor Chen. The strength of her wisdom is her willingness to concede the unknowable. She recognizes that when sex serves *qing* rather than mere isolated, personal cultivation, ambiguities and unmapped mysteries arise. Her personal experience of a marriage dissolving because of her sexual abnormality has taught her to be wary of hasty assumptions: “Driven by yin and yang,/ people rush pell-mell in pursuit of marriage,/ but Heaven denied me/ woman’s proper parts/ and so my sole recourse/ was to the Way to don the shaman’s robe/…four decades have I seen./ What is this life but a dream?”[[28]](#endnote-26)1 (Tang, 79) Sister Stone gives philosophical voice to the salience of dreams, and the human imagination’s extraordinary sway despite its lack of representation in conventional discourses. Sister Stone reflects on the ebb and flow of fortune in a subtle criticism of the Buddhist’s aversion to attachment: “We grieve that human heart can never be as stone, but we may open it and look when the good times chance by.”[[29]](#endnote-27)1 (Tang, 79) Sister Stone is amused by the sobering Buddhist belief that life on earth is suffering when elements of chance and genuine sentiment can give way to happiness as she has seen “when good times chance by”. The open-minded Sister Stone becomes a mouthpiece for the playwright’s celebration of sentiment and miracles over reason. By bearing witness and believing their stories, she reifies the miracles that transpire between the lovers, and transitively, the audience fulfills this purpose as well. Bridal balks at the way that her own emotions overflow beyond her control in the presence of Liu: “I weep without wishing to, so deeply does your devotion move my heart.”[[30]](#endnote-28)1 (Tang, 186) Lack of discipline enables honest expression to beloved other. That the lovers reach points in their journey where reason fails is a testament to their pioneering *qing*: “But how am I to secure your return? How can the moon be scooped from the water’s surface, or flowers plucked from the void?”[[31]](#endnote-29)1 (Tang, 188) Bridal boldly replies: “My heart is one/ whether mortal my being or no:/ who is to tell/ illusion from reality?”[[32]](#endnote-30)1 (Tang, 188) The human heart has the power to liberate the whole body from mortality and reason. Rarely do all the characters on stage, with their various positions of status, allegiance, and philosophy, chorus together, however upon the reunion of Madam Du, Spring Fragrance, Sister Stone, and the lovers, a jubilant cry resounds in unison: “Miraculous destiny: the wheel of karma come full circle”[[33]](#endnote-31)1 (Tang, 280) The miracle of Bridal and Liu’s death-defying love is gradually embraced, and joyfully accepted as a worthy, though exhaustive, karmic journey.

 At the time of utmost fear, when Bridal exists as ghost but has not yet found Liu, she believes that she and her lover are fated, or rather doomed, to wander alone. In this case, individual liberty is the ultimate dystopia of imprisonment; togetherness is what Bridal longs for most: “Your youth, your loving heart/ captured my slumbering soul,/ which can find rest no longer.”[[34]](#endnote-32)1 (Tang, 183) Her inability to rest during her three-year hiatus in Hell is harrowing, but with permission to tenaciously return in spirit form to seek Liu, her restlessness catalyzes their reunion. Love as secured by physical contact and trust is expressed by both lovers when Bridal returns as a ghost: “In life one room,/ in death one tomb;/ should heart prove false to word/ then death be the reward/ swift as this incense melts away.”[[35]](#endnote-33)1 (Tang, 186) Solitude for true lovers is presented as life threatening, and simple physical contact—not the calculated exchange of essences through intercourse—is the life-giving force: “Frozen body and soul in coldest chastity…My cold flesh already/ you have caressed to warmth….at sight of you my body and soul/ must reunite imperishable.”[[36]](#endnote-34)1 (Tang, 189) Their mutual attachment sets them outside the camp of Buddhism. Liu declares: “Our mutual debt of love withholds us from the Birthless Realm”[[37]](#endnote-35)1 (Tang, 213) Since their love has enabled a resurrection, which puts a mystical spin on the notion of rebirth and samsara, Liu delights in the revelation that their love bars them from the Birthless Realm, celebrating attachment, and perhaps hoping that their love, a predestined gift, or, “an apparition within the Cause”[[38]](#endnote-36)1 (Tang, 49) will continue through karma in rebirths beyond their lifetimes. The couple’s desire for contact, rather than being purely sexually motivated, comes from knowing the trials and tortures of separation from their predestined match.

 As a ghost, Bridal empowers Liu to bring her into the light of mortal life. First, however, they must together pass through the dangers and delights of darkness. Liu pledges his faithful protection: “I would roam candle in hand/ by your side in depth of night/ while the spring breezes bring us/ torment without cease.”[[39]](#endnote-37)1 (Tang, 176) Along with darkness comes the threat of storm, both in literal surprises and natural phenomena: “But those nuns the other night,/ a senseless storm cut short our spring/ and you, my dearest,/ your tortuous night visit wasted/ your timid spirit jangled by these alarms—yet instead of showing anger you came to retrace the path of our joy.”[[40]](#endnote-38)1 (Tang, 182) Bridal’s courage to preserve their *qing* strengthens Liu’s devotion. The private secrecy of dark shades is where their love is first born. Bridal reflects: “First a dream in a springtime garden,/ then in the shades love grew/ for in dream our shadows/ so briefly joined were parted/ but in the shades love twined us close together.”[[41]](#endnote-39)1 (Tang, 318) Love is the bridge between the nascent dark regions and the legible world of the light. Unaware of the power of love to usher deliverance, Prefect Du remains largely mystified: “By laws of yin and yang, of light and dark/ how could she live again?”[[42]](#endnote-40)1 (Tang, 329) Shadows, coded by others as dangerously secretive, and blossoming spring trees, condemned by elders for their potential to arouse yearnings, end up serving a paradoxically rational and conclusive purpose at the end of the play. A voice proclaims: “Let our Chamberlain…report whether her form casts a shadow or her feet leave footprints when she walks by the blossoming trees.”[[43]](#endnote-41)1 (Tang, 329) The taboo shadows become the barometer for reality and mortality, and the trees, still rich with inspiration for desire, are the physical tool for testing Bridal’s corporeal existence. The tumultuous narrative journey through dark and light concludes with a simple rational test that lyrically blends the merits of both light *and* dark. Finally welcomed back to life by all, Bridal educates her parents about the darker territories of sentiment: “Ah my parents, there are people who build high towers decked out with colored silks, yet even in broad daylight can’t succeed in attracting a son-in-law of official rank. And here I, your daughter, from ghostly caverns of my dreams have made the conquest of no less than the Prize Candidate—what is this talk now of “family, rank, and status”?”[[44]](#endnote-42)1 (Tang, 335) Bridal pointedly destabilizes their insistence on public, day lit gestures dictated by Confucianist procedural steps of decorum. *Qing* can even beat rationalism at its own game.

 Simply put, at the heart of Tang’s play is the heart. More specifically, *qing,* and one that transcends Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian definitions and restrictions; one in which the woman is also a desiring subject, creating a mutual bond of sentiment that surpasses purely sexual desire. In all of the aforementioned instances and in the imagistic poetry of the play as a whole, *The Peony Pavilion* challenges and lyrically blends the natural, spiritual, and rational boundaries of life, revealing a larger more inclusive realm, which knows no limits and defies total understanding. This overall positive, supernatural, superhuman view of love is confirmed by the resolution of the story and the hard-won affirmation of the couple’s love by Bridal Du’s parents. However, to say that love triumphs and liberates in absolute terms is an unbalanced conclusion and neglects the suspense, tumult, and costs of the play’s events. The partner who runs the most myriad gauntlet of sacrifices is Bridal, and the obstacles she faces are heightened when set against her assumed female fragility, a trope that tacitly reinforces the sway of gendered assumptions of the era: that women’s emotions are uncontrollable and therefore problematic. This assumed fragility is a view that is rooted in the various discourses that Tang undermines in other places of the story. However, the quiet birth of *qing* in the imagination of a young woman suggests that Tang was conceding the mystery and concentrated potency of desire, both male and female, and the sublime goodness of human feeling, *especially* if it thrives beyond disciplined control.

Works Cited

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