

Approaches to Teaching
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Approaches to Teaching
The Story of the Stone
(*Dream of the Red Chamber*)

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Scandal in the Garden: *The Story of the Stone* as a Licentious Novel

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From Banned Book to Chinese Classic

Since the early twentieth century, leading intellectuals have praised *The Story of the Stone* as one of a handful of classic novels from the late imperial era, and it is now enshrined as the acme of eighteenth-century Chinese cultural achievement. But for most of the century following its publication in 1791–92, the novel was banned by Qing officials (albeit in vain). “Of all licentious books, *The Story of the Stone* is by far the worst!” ranted one nineteenth-century critic (Wang Liqi 376, 378). “It should definitely be burned!” asserted another (392). The novel appears prominently on the lists of “licentious books” (*yin shu* 淫書) proscribed and consigned to destruction by government officials—along with many other literary works now considered classics, such as *The Peony Pavilion* (*The Return of the Soul*), *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Romance of the Western Chamber*), *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*The Water Margin*), and *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Golden Lotus*).¹ In other words, the modern reinvention of *Stone* as a great Chinese classic required occlusion of the fact that it had long been condemned as “licentious” and rejection of the standards by which it had been so condemned.

The purpose of this essay is to show the modern reader why, according to elite normative standards in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *The Story of the Stone* might have been considered obscene. I show how the hero’s behavior violates the standards of his day, standards that would have been taken for granted by any Qing dynasty reader—even a reader who chafed at them and savored the novel’s subversive elements.

The group of eighteenth-century commentators collectively known by the pseudonym Red Inkstone famously observed that “this book cannot escape the slander of pedantic Confucians” (W. Li, *Enchantment* 236). Red Inkstone obviously anticipated and understood the orthodox criticism of the novel, even as he rejected it. In this respect he probably typifies the nonconformist aficionados who circulated the novel’s manuscript privately for decades before it finally saw its way into print and who later continued to enjoy it in defiance of the censorship.

The author himself clearly knew that his novel would be judged obscene, and he sports with conventional expectations throughout the text. Perhaps the single most graphic scene in the novel is Jia Rui’s death from excessive semen loss in chapter 12, when a magic mirror induces him to fantasize compulsively about making love with Wang Xi-feng. The name of this mirror is Mirror for the Romantic, and it was given to Jia Rui by a mysterious Taoist monk (1.12.251–53). In Chapter 1, we have already learned that “A Mirror for the Romantic” was

an early title for *The Story of the Stone*, which was first transcribed by a Taoist monk named Vanitas (1.51). One of the arguments made by Qing critics who advocated the suppression of licentious literature was that it would provoke impressionable youths to excessive masturbation and nocturnal emission, thereby ruining their health and shortening their lives (Wang Liqi 239–40, 300, 392, 412). In other words, Jia Rui’s death is a sly parody of the danger that books like *Stone* supposedly posed to youths; it suggests the author’s sardonic anticipation of how his novel would be judged.

Bao-yu’s Sex Life: Innocence or Obscenity?

As every reader of the novel knows, its hero, Jia Bao-yu, has a sex life. Indeed, the main action of the novel is bracketed by two profoundly important carnal rites of passage: Bao-yu’s sexual initiation in chapters 5 and 6 and the rather tardy consummation of his marriage in chapter 109.

In chapter 5, Bao-yu has a dream encounter with fairies who instruct him in the art of love. The ostensible purpose of this initiation is “to shock the silliness out of him” (137), so that he will devote his mind “seriously to the teaching of Confucius and Mencius” (146). If Bao-yu’s sexual initiation actually achieved this purpose, we could skip the next 103 chapters; fortunately it has no such effect. Instead, Bao-yu awakens to discover that he has had the most famous wet dream in all of world literature. Then, at the beginning of chapter 6, he tries out what he has learned with his sympathetic chambermaid, Aroma. This episode marks the beginning of the dreamy aestheticism and sentimentality that will characterize the garden, a separate world where maturation and social responsibility are magically suspended.

In chapter 109, Bao-yu finally manages to consummate his marriage with the long-suffering Bao-chai, thereby producing a son and heir (5.109.184). This episode marks his reluctant, long overdue acceptance of the filial and social responsibilities of an adult male. He has moved out of the garden and is beginning to concentrate seriously on his studies. Soon thereafter he will pass the civil service examinations, the pinnacle of masculine achievement for the elite of his era (119.349).

What are the implications of Bao-yu’s sex life? Specifically, how would the fact of his sexual maturity and experience, made explicit at the outset of *Stone*, have framed the way a Qing dynasty audience read the novel?

Wai-yee Li calls attention to the “paradoxical conjoining of innocence and experience” in Bao-yu, a paradox that the author “tries his best to sustain”; in particular, she suggests that despite Bao-yu’s sexual initiation early in the novel, “his relationship with the girls in the Garden is blithely innocent” (*Enchantment* 204). Bao-yu never has genital contact with any of his cousins (leaving aside the postgarden consummation of his marriage), although he certainly does have such contact with Aroma and probably at least one other maidservant.

But we need to bear in mind that innocence, like obscenity, is a historically specific norm: its definition depends entirely on the standards of the society in question.

By the standards of elite society in the Qing dynasty, some of the most charming scenes in the garden are among the most obscene. Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang, and the other senior women do their utmost, despite frequent anxieties and doubts, to pretend that Bao-yu's relations with the girls are blithely innocent, but his sexual maturity renders this pretense untenable, as the author suggests repeatedly throughout the novel.

Bao-yu's androgyny and sentimental idealization of girls are legendary. Bao-yu does not want to grow up, and he acts out this reluctance in part through his ambiguous gender performance. He is an expert on cosmetics and other aspects of the toilet and wardrobe of young ladies. On several occasions, he is actually mistaken for a girl (his voice is mistaken for a girl's and his bedroom for a boudoir, and so on). He insists that boys, compared with girls, are coarse, impure things, "made of mud" (1.2.76). But he reserves his greatest contempt for adults of both sexes, who invariably seem corrupted by avarice, licentiousness, or both—and indeed none of the grown-ups in his enormous family can be considered much of a role model. For him, marriage—the key rite of passage in his society, marking the assumption of adult gender roles—is something to be mourned and resisted, because it is the ruin of every girl.

But none of this changes the fact, established at the start of chapter 6, that Bao-yu is sexually mature, aware, and experienced.

His chief peculiarity, often remarked by other characters, is his preference for young female company. To indulge this preference requires nonenforcement of the separation of sexes that was fundamental to the reigning Confucian ideology and standard practice in elite households. As Dore Levy notes, by the time Bao-yu moves into the garden, he is "already long past the age at which customary rules of sexual segregation should be in force" (33). In eighteenth-century China, any son of an elite family would begin life in the female quarters, in the company of his mother and sisters, his nannies and maids. But at about six years of age he would be expected to start on a centrifugal path out into the masculine, public world of education, examinations, and imperial service. Meanwhile his sisters would have their ears pierced and feet bound and would follow the centripetal path of safeguarding female chastity through cloistering. Maturation meant growing into distinct gender roles, which required separation of the sexes. Man and woman would be rejoined on marriage, as husband and wife.

In *The Story of the Stone*, the girls are indeed cloistered: their garden is a walled compound patrolled within and without by guards (the guards within are matrons), and great vigilance is maintained over who may enter or leave. Bao-yu is the only male who enters freely—let alone lives there. For him to move into the garden (a centripetal movement counter to the properly masculine trajectory) and there to idle day and night with female cousins of different surnames

(any one of whom is a potential bride, as confirmed by his eventual marriage to Bao-chai) requires that the women who have de facto responsibility for him make a very self-conscious exception to the rules. Indulging Bao-yu requires a suspension of the social maturation that would inevitably exclude him from the casual company of his cousins. But physical maturation cannot be suspended, necessitating a collective conspiracy to pretend that he is just a little boy who can still play with the girls, that he's too young to get up to mischief.

More than any other factor, this systematic, willful denial of Bao-yu's sexual maturity is what makes the novel obscene.

Bao-yu's Wet Dream

The denial begins, significantly, with the notorious wet dream episode. Qin-shi takes Bao-yu into her chambers for a nap: "Leave him to me, Grannie dear! He will be quite safe in my hands." . . . Grandmother Jia had always had a high opinion of Qin-shi's trustworthiness . . . and was quite content to leave the arrangements to her" (1.5.125) 老祖宗放心, 只管交與我就是了 . . . 賈母素知秦氏是個極妥當的人 . . . 見他去安置寶玉, 自是安穩的 (1: 69). (This ironic comment by the author is an early clue to just how clueless the Jia matriarch is.) Qin-shi asks Bao-yu:

"[W]here *are* we going to put you?—unless you would like to have your rest in my bedroom."

A little smile played over Bao-yu's face and he nodded. The nurses were shocked.

"An uncle sleep in the bedroom of his nephew's wife! Who ever heard of such a thing!"

Qin-shi laughed again.

"He won't misbehave. Good gracious, he's only a little boy! We don't have to worry about that sort of thing yet!" (126)

"可往那裡去呢? 不然往我屋裡去吧。" 寶玉點頭微笑。有一個嬾嬾說道: "那裡有個叔叔往侄兒房裡睡覺的理?" 秦氏笑道: "愛啲啲, 不怕他惱。他能多大呢, 就忌諱這些個!" (70)

This dialogue introduces what we may call the Bao-yu exception to the principle of separation of the sexes. For him to sleep in Qin-shi's bed is doubly taboo: she is the wife of his nephew Jia Rong, so in addition to violating female space his choice of bed carries a strong odor of incest (note that at this time the "trustworthy" Qin-shi is apparently carrying on an affair with her father-in-law—see Hawkes's discussion [1.42]). The voice of reason speaks through the nurses, only to be dismissed with the excuse that will become familiar over the next hundred chapters: "He's only a little boy."

Bao-yu himself repeats this excuse just a few pages later, in his dream. When the fairy Disenchantment accuses him of being “the most lustful person I have ever known in the whole world” 乃天下古今第一淫人也, he protests: “Madam Fairy, you are wrong! Because I am lazy over my lessons, Mother and Father still have to scold me quite often; but surely that doesn’t make me *lustful*? I’m still too young to know what they do, the people they use that word about” (145). 仙姑差了。我因懶於讀書，家父母尚每垂訓飭，豈敢再冒“淫”字。況且年紀尚小，不知“淫”字為何物 (87).

The claim of juvenile innocence is immediately refuted on multiple levels. In the dream, Qin-shi’s fairy counterpart initiates Bao-yu sexually; their dream intercourse is given corporeal effect by Bao-yu’s seminal emission in Qin-shi’s bed. Finally Bao-yu tells Aroma what he learned in the dream, and they begin a real sexual relationship. Elsewhere in the novel, the author is coy to the point of ambiguity about Bao-yu’s sexual behavior; here, his ejaculation is as explicit as can be. Lest there be any misunderstanding, we have a witness in Aroma:

As she was doing up his trousers, her hand, chancing to stray over his thigh, came into contact with something cold and sticky which caused her to draw it back in alarm and ask him if he was all right. Instead of answering, he merely reddened and gave the hand a squeeze. (1.6.149)

襲人伸手與他系褲帶時，不覺伸手至大腿處，只覺冰涼一片沾濕，唬的忙退出手來，問是怎麼了。寶玉紅漲了臉，把他的手一捻。 (90)

This unique moment of graphic explicitness serves an important purpose: despite the author’s later coyness, we can have no doubt whatsoever that Bao-yu has reached sexual maturity at the beginning of the book, well before the garden was constructed.²

Note that when the fairy Disenchantment expatiates on the definition and varieties of lust and accuses Bao-yu of being uniquely lustful, she is talking about the concept of yin (淫), which can also be translated as “licentious” or “obscene” (145–46). It was precisely books of this category that were prohibited by the Qing authorities. In legal texts, yin constituted a category of criminal motivation; it was the “licentious heart” that motivated rape or adultery. It is against this background that we should read Disenchantment’s disquisition on lust, her warning that Bao-yu’s lust of the mind is bound to be misunderstood in the real world, and her novel effort to cure him of lust through the shock of actual lovemaking. In this passage, the author is purposely toying with social and legal convention, provoking the following reaction from the Qing commentator Zhang Xinzhi: “Here the author himself frankly admits that this is a ‘licentious book.’” 紅樓夢面子是淫書，作者已直認不諱 (SJPB 1: 84).

How old is this little boy, and what does his age signify? Bao-yu’s age is a matter of considerable ambiguity, and it’s not clear just how old Bao-yu is at the time of his wet dream. But when he moves into the garden, he is a “thirteen-

year-old” (1.23.461), though “thirteen sui” in the original Chinese text is probably equivalent to twelve years by our reckoning. (An age calculated in the traditional unit of sui 歲 is on average one more than that calculated in years.) This is one of the few moments in the novel when he is given a precise age.

Thirteen sui was generally understood in late imperial China to be the threshold of sexual maturity. Thus, for example, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722) married Empress Xiaocheng when he was eleven (i.e., twelve or thirteen sui), and two years later a concubine gave birth to the emperor’s first son (Spence, *Emperor* 119). In Qing dynasty law, people became liable for criminal acts at the age of thirteen sui, which the Qing code also specifically defined as the age of criminal liability for consenting to illicit sexual intercourse. A girl under this age was incapable of meaningful consent and could not be punished for it. The reason, according to a commentary on the Qing code, was that “in young girls of twelve sui and under, sexual awareness has not yet bloomed, so they still have no capacity for licentiousness.” Therefore intercourse with a girl of twelve sui or under was punishable as rape, regardless of whether she had consented; but a girl of thirteen sui would be criminally liable unless she could prove coercion. In the 1720s, this standard was extended to sodomy law, so that boys too became criminally liable for consent at thirteen sui (Sommer, *Sex* 85, 125).

Therefore, when Bao-yu moves into the garden, he is at the cusp of mature sexual responsibility by contemporary social and legal standards. By chapter 49, less than halfway through the novel, he is at least fifteen sui: after listing Crab-Flower Club members, including Bao-yu, the narrator comments that “[a]part from the two young married women, the rest were all fifteen, sixteen or seventeen years old” (2.49.473) 除李紈年紀最長，他十二個人皆不過十五六七歲 (1: 657)—“sui” in the Chinese original. The adolescent (or teenager), as an intermediate category of diminished responsibility between child and adult, is a fairly recent invention and should not be projected back to eighteenth-century China. For a son or daughter of an elite family, fifteen sui was a prime age for betrothal and even marriage; the Analects of Confucius define fifteen sui as the age when a young man should focus seriously on preparing for his career. In the classical tradition, the “capping” ceremony that formally marked the end of childhood for a young man took place after he reached the age of fifteen sui. In other words, the pretense that Bao-yu is a little boy is absurd.

Bao-yu Moves into the Garden

A corollary to the excuse that Bao-yu is too young for sexual awareness is that he is different from other boys. In chapter 23, when the imperial concubine Yuan-chun decides that her brother Bao-yu should live in the garden along with the girls, this is her reasoning:

Assuredly, the girls must be allowed into the garden. It should become their home. And if the girls, why not Bao-yu? He had grown up in their

midst. He was different from other boys. If he were not allowed into the garden as well, he would consider himself left out in the cold, and his distress would cause Lady Wang and Grandmother Jia to feel unhappy too. Unquestionably she should ask for him to be admitted along with the girls. (455)

何不命他們進去居住，也不使佳人落魄，花柳無顏。卻又想到寶玉自幼在姊妹叢中長大，不比別的兄弟，若不命他進去，只怕他冷清了，一時不大暢快，未免賈母王夫人愁慮，須得也命他進園居住方妙。(1: 309)

Because of her rank, Yuan-chun has the power to order her father to permit Bao-yu to live in the garden, thereby violating the separation of sexes, and Jia Zheng obeys without complaint. Levy rightly emphasizes this subversion of patriarchal authority as a key moment in the breakdown of Confucian moral order in the Jia household (83). What is Yuan-chun's excuse? That Bao-yu, having grown up with girls, is "different from other boys"—an extremely vague formulation that seems to imply that he would not be a threat to female chastity because he is not subject to the same coarse impulses as other boys.

There is tremendous irony here: it is Yuan-chun who orders this violation of ritual order, yet the most extreme example in the novel of the separation of sexes is that imposed during her visit to her natal home, when she is guarded by an army of eunuchs in chapter 18. During her visit, no male family member, not even her own father, is admitted to her presence, and she must speak with the men from behind a curtain. ("Now that she was the Emperor's woman, this was the nearest to her [Jia Zheng] could ever hope to get" [362; Hawkes's amplification of the text].) But an exception is made for Bao-yu, whom she summons, embraces, and caresses. This breach of taboo rehearses her authorization of his move into the garden.

Much later in the novel (chapter 78), during a conversation with Lady Wang, Grandmother Jia reflects on Bao-yu's peculiar affinity for young female company. She rules out licentiousness as a motive:

He's a strange boy. . . . His other kinds of naughtiness I can understand; it's this passion for spending all his time with maids that I find so hard to make out. It used at one time to worry me: I thought it must be because he had reached puberty and was having experiences with them; but after watching him very carefully, I came to the conclusion that it wasn't that at all. It's very, very strange. Perhaps he was a maid himself in some past life. Perhaps he ought to have been a girl. (3.78.556)

別的淘氣都是應該的，只他這種和丫頭們好卻是難懂。我為此也耽心，每每的冷眼查看他。只和丫頭們鬧，必是人大心大，知道男女的事了，所以愛親近他們。既細細查試，究竟不是為此。豈不奇怪。想必原是個丫頭錯投了胎不成。(2: 1094)

Grandmother Jia assumes that the normal reason a boy of Bao-yu's age would be interested in female company is for sex; she is surprised that sex did not turn out to be his motive. And yet, although she worried that when he reached puberty, he would have the same licentious impulses toward girls that other boys feel, she never restricts his access to his cousins in any way.

Bao-yu's Unofficial Concubine

Grandmother Jia's comments are especially strange since Grandmother Jia herself gave Aroma to Bao-yu to be his chambermaid, and it is with Aroma that his sexual experience begins. Aroma, well aware that her status makes her fair game for her master, accepts his advances with equanimity:

Aroma knew that when Grandmother Jia gave her to Bao-yu she had intended her to belong to him in the fullest possible sense, and so, having no good reason for refusing him, she allowed him, after a certain amount of coy resistance, to have his way with her.

From then on Bao-yu treated Aroma with even greater consideration than before, whilst Aroma for her part redoubled the devotion with which she served him. (1.6.150)

寶玉亦素喜襲人柔媚嬌俏，遂強襲人同領警幻所訓雲雨之事。襲人素知賈母已將自己與了寶玉的，今便如此，亦不為越禮，遂和寶玉偷試一番，幸得無人撞見。自此寶玉視襲人更比別個不同，襲人待寶玉更為盡心。(1: 90)

Like the other maidservants in the Jia household, Aroma is a slave girl, having been sold into servitude by her parents. By tradition, a domestic female slave's master enjoyed the sexual use of her if he chose, a privilege made explicit by the legal codes of several dynasties.³ During the Qing dynasty, the legal status of such slaves changed somewhat: by the mid-eighteenth century, a series of new laws and judicial rulings required that masters of both male and female slaves arrange timely marriages for them once the slaves reached maturity and prohibited any master from having sexual intercourse with "a married woman subordinate to his household" (Sommer, *Sex* 48). Unmarried female slaves remained sexually available, but a master who wanted to sleep with one was expected to promote her to the status of concubine (Hawkes uses the term "chamber-wife")—that is, to make her his legal secondary wife (see Sommer, *Sex* 45–54).

After Bao-yu's initiation with Aroma in chapter 6, the narrator becomes reticent about their sexual relationship, to the point that readers may wonder whether they still have one (even though Aroma typically sleeps in Bao-yu's room, to be on hand if Bao-yu wants anything during the night). But occasional clues suggest that they do continue to have sex. For example, in chapter 31, the maidservant Skybright, who is jealous of Aroma's special status, accuses her of

putting on airs even though Aroma is not officially Bao-yu's concubine, only a maidservant like the rest of them:

[Y]ou needn't think you deceive *me*. I know what goes on between you when you think no one is looking. But when all's said and done, in actual fact, when you come down to it, you're not even a "Miss" by *rights*. By *rights* you're no better than any of the rest of us.

我倒不知道你們是誰，別教我替你們害臊了！便是你們鬼鬼祟祟干的那事兒，也瞞不過我去，那裡就稱起“我們”來了。明公正道，連個姑娘還沒掙上去呢，也不過和我似的。

In response, "Aroma blushed and blushed with shame," provoking Bao-yu to retort that he will formalize their relationship by promoting Aroma: "I'll make her a 'Miss' then; I'll make her my chamber-wife tomorrow, if that's all that's worrying you. You can spare your jealousy on *that* account" (2.31.111) 你們氣不忿，我明兒偏抬舉他 (1: 419).

Aroma may not be the only chambermaid who is having sex with Bao-yu, although the author is coy on this point. Just a few pages later, Bao-yu, learning that Skybright plans to take a bath, proposes to join her in the bathtub (apparently intending to assuage her jealousy with some personal attention). She demurs:

Oh no! I daren't start you off on that caper. I still remember that time you got Emerald to help you [bathe]. You must have been two or three hours in there, so that we began to get quite worried. We didn't like to go in while you were there, but when we did go in to have a look afterwards, we found water all over the floor, pools of water round the legs of the bed, and even the mat on the bed had water splashed all over it. Heaven only knows what you'd been up to. We laughed about it for days afterwards. (115)

罷，罷，我不敢惹爺。還記得碧痕打發你洗澡，足有兩三個時辰，也不知道作什麼呢。我們也不好進去的。後來洗完了，進去瞧瞧，地下的水淹著床腿，連席子上都汪著水，也不知是怎麼洗了，笑了幾天。 (422)

Through such teasing testimony, the author suggests that a great deal goes on behind the scenes.

Bao-yu's sexual relationship with Aroma should surprise no one, nor should the fact that Bao-yu considers making her his concubine. The strange thing about his relationship with her is what his mother, Lady Wang, does with it. She decides to promote Aroma to be Bao-yu's concubine but keeps the promotion unofficial and secret. It is accomplished through a sleight of hand: Lady Wang arranges to have Aroma's allowance paid out of her own income (in-

stead of Grandmother Jia's) and raises it to the same level as those paid to Jia Zheng's concubines. But this maneuver is kept secret. At first, Wang Xi-feng and Aroma are the only ones who know; later, some of the other women in the household become indirectly aware of the promotion; but the news is never broken to Bao-yu's father, Jia Zheng. The only reason Bao-yu finds out about Aroma's "unofficial promotion to his bed" is that Aroma tells him (2.36.204).

When Lady Wang first concocts this plan, Wang Xi-feng asks the reasonable question, "Why not have her plucked and painted and make her his chamber-wife openly?" Lady Wang replies:

First of all he is too young; secondly Sir Zheng would never agree to it; and in the third place, even if we allow a certain amount of freedom between them, as long as he still thinks of her as his maid, there is some chance that he will listen to what she says, but once we make her his chamber-wife, she will feel less free to tell him what she thinks of him when he is being silly. No, I think for the moment at any rate we should leave it a little vague. We can make a more definite arrangement in two or three years' time. (199)

那就不好了，一則都年輕，二則老爺也不許，三則那寶玉見襲人是個丫頭，縱有放縱的事，倒能聽他的勸，如今作了跟前人，那襲人該勸的也不敢十分勸了。如今且渾著，等再過二三年再說。 (1: 477)

In response to this argument, the Qing critic Zhang Xinzhi comments, "See how these illicit relations, carried on in secret, are entirely the result of his mother's orders!" 見陰行苟合，悉出母命 (SJPB 2: 566)

Much later in the novel (ch. 78), Lady Wang finally tells Grandmother Jia what she has done and explains her reasons once again:

I deliberately kept it from everyone else, partly because if Sir Zheng had got to hear about it he would almost certainly have said that Bao-yu was too young for a chamber-wife and that having one would distract him from his studies, and partly because if Bao-yu himself thought of her as a chamber-wife, he would be less inclined to listen to her good advice and would become more ungovernable than ever. (3.78.555-56)

且不明說者，一則寶玉年紀尚小，老爺知道了又恐說耽誤了書，二則寶玉再自為已是跟前的人不敢勸他說他，反倒縱性起來。 (2: 1094)

Lady Wang's reasons for secrecy are at best absurd, at worst perverse. First, what does Lady Wang mean by claiming that Bao-yu is "too young"? Readers know that he is sexually mature, and on some level she must realize it too, since she fears he might be corrupted by one of the other maids. (This is why, for example, she immediately dismisses the maid Golden when Bao-yu makes a pass

at Golden.) Lady Wang's position is paradoxical. If she means that Bao-yu is too socially immature and that a concubine would distract him from his studies, then why permit him to be surrounded by beautiful slave girls? Wouldn't they be a distraction?

It is not clear whether Lady Wang realizes that Bao-yu is already sleeping with Aroma. Does she intend that Aroma will begin sleeping with Bao-yu once Aroma is promoted? Probably not, since Lady Wang does not even plan to inform Bao-yu of the promotion. (She wants a babysitter, not a concubine!) Either way, keeping Aroma's promotion unofficial and secret will help maintain the collective denial of Bao-yu's sexual maturity—and this, I suspect, is the main reason for Lady Wang's ruse.

Second, Lady Wang's maneuver subverts her husband's authority. In the Confucian scheme, perhaps the most fundamental aspect of a father's authority is the power to arrange his children's marriages. If Jia Zheng disapproves of Aroma's promotion, then by law and custom his word should be final. Indeed, from a strictly orthodox perspective, a father's disapproval would define any sexual act as the crime of illicit intercourse, since even conjugal relations were subordinate to the imperatives of filial piety, the chief purpose of marriage being to continue the family line (Sommer, *Sex* 36–38).

Third, it may be true that Bao-yu would pay more heed to a slave girl than to a legal concubine or wife. But from a Confucian standpoint, that is a reflection of his flawed character rather than a reason to indulge him.

Because Aroma's promotion is never formalized, Aroma receives shabby treatment after Bao-yu's disappearance at the end of the novel. In chapter 120, Aunt Xue and Lady Wang discuss how to dispose of her. Aunt Xue opines:

It's right and proper for a wife to exhibit loyalty to her husband, even when he is a true husband to her no longer. And a chamber-wife may do the same if she wishes. But Aroma was never formally declared to be Bao-yu's chamber-wife, even though in fact we know that she was. . . .

I hardly think Sir Zheng would want her to remain single and make a show of faithfulness to Bao-yu. . . . He doesn't even know that she was Bao-yu's chamber-wife. He has always thought of her as just an ordinary maid, so it would seem rather absurd to him to want to keep her on. (5.120.364)

但是正配呢理應守的，屋裡人願守也是有的。惟有這襲人，雖說是算個屋裡人，到底他和寶哥兒並沒有過明路兒的。我看姨老爺是再不肯叫守著的。再者姨老爺並不知道襲人的事，想來不過是個丫頭，那有留的理呢？ (2: 1598)

Lady Wang agrees, so they force Aroma to return to her natal family and marry another man.

But by law and custom, a widowed concubine had the right to remain unmarried and to enjoy the support of her dead husband's estate. To force a chaste widow to remarry was a serious crime, and if she committed suicide in protest, those responsible could even be sentenced to death (in this respect, Qing law did not distinguish between a main wife and a concubine [Sommer, *Sex*, ch. 5]). By keeping Aroma's promotion secret and unofficial, Lady Wang wiggles out of any such risk. Aroma does in fact consider suicide: it is only her eminently practical nature and the happy chance that her husband turns out to be a decent man that dissuade her from self-destruction.

Scandal in the Garden

Every effort is made to secure the walled garden from invasion by corrupt influences from outside—especially from threats to the chastity of its young female denizens. But the garden's defenses are remarkably permeable. Security breaks down repeatedly, provoking a constant undercurrent of anxiety: gates are left open, boyfriends sneak in, pornography is smuggled in, burglars climb over the walls, and so on. Whenever the senior members of the household are away from home, for a funeral or other event, the garden becomes especially vulnerable. But all this anxiety seems strangely misplaced, since the biggest security breach of all is the presence of Bao-yu, who, in the absence of parental supervision, is “free to play and idle in the Garden to his heart's content without the least fear of restraint or reprisal” (2.37.213) 單表寶玉每日在園中任意縱性的遊蕩 (1: 486).

Note that just a few pages after Bao-yu moves into the garden, his page Tealeaf gives him a supply of licentious novels and plays in hope of lifting his spirits. Tealeaf warns Bao-yu against showing these materials to anyone else and specifically against taking them into the garden; but Bao-yu promptly smuggles them in and shares them with Dai-yu (1.23.462–64). The first work he shows her is the celebrated *Romance of the Western Chamber* 西廂記 (*Story of the Western Wing*), which, like *The Story of the Stone*, was officially banned. This episode suggests one danger of allowing Bao-yu to live in the garden: as a male he has unfettered access to the outside world and can smuggle forbidden books right into his cousin's bedchamber. He is exactly what the girls are being protected against: a sexually mature male of different lineage.

This smuggling of salacious literature foreshadows the discovery in the garden (in chapter 74) of a purse decorated with pornographic images. The women in charge of the household simultaneously hush up this incident and launch a witch hunt to find out who is responsible (they assume it to be one of the maids). Their campaign gives free rein to Lady Wang's hysterical fear that one of the maids might corrupt Bao-yu. As a result, the love affair of the maid Chess is exposed, and she is dismissed; Chess later commits suicide, as does her lover.

Skybright is also rudely dismissed, and she later dies in poverty, of an illness contracted while in Bao-yu's service.

Some of the most charming scenes in the garden are among the most obscene. In chapter 19, Bao-yu visits Dai-yu in her quarters one drowsy afternoon, walks right into her bedroom while she is taking a nap, and lies down beside her. Together, they playfully argue about whether to share a single pillow.⁴ She touches his cheek, he praises the fragrance of her body, she allows him to smell her sleeve, he threatens to tickle her. The scene climaxes when Dai-yu, provoked by Bao-yu's teasing, "[gets] up on her knees and, crawling over, [plants] herself on top of Bao-yu" (398) 黛玉聽了, 翻身爬起來, 按著寶玉 (267) in order to pinch his lips—only to be interrupted by none other than Bao-yu's future wife, Bao-chai.

This episode may not seem obscene to a modern reader. But in eighteenth-century China, female chastity was a deadly serious matter, especially among the elite. The whole point of separating the sexes and cloistering women was to preserve their purity. Elite females were held to a standard of chastity so strict that a woman who committed suicide to protest being touched (or even verbally propositioned) by a man not her husband would be canonized by imperial edict. A public memorial arch would be erected in her honor at state expense. Any man who provoked such suicide by touching a woman, joking with her, or making a lewd suggestion could be sentenced to death. Archives and gazetteers preserve the records of thousands of such canonizations and death sentences from the era in which *The Story of the Stone* was written (Elvin; Sommer, *Sex*, ch. 5; Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters*).

To an eighteenth-century Chinese reader, Bao-yu's wrestling match with Dai-yu would have carried an intensely transgressive and erotic charge. The couple's bedroom play goes no further than tickling and wrestling, but by the standards of the day that was already too far. We know that by this episode, our hero has been sexually active for some time, as the author reminds him (and us): earlier in the same chapter, Bao-yu observed his page Tealeaf "pressed upon the body of a girl and evidently engaged in those exercises in which Bao-yu had once been instructed by the fairy Disenchantment" (377) 卻是茗煙按著一個女孩子, 也幹那警幻所訓之事 (254). The image of Tealeaf's having sex with the maidservant is therefore fresh in our mind when Bao-yu visits Dai-yu's bedroom. In a sense, Tealeaf's scene with the maid, observed by Bao-yu, rehearses and sets up Bao-yu's scene with Dai-yu.

The author has Bao-chai walk in just as the reader begins to wonder where the tickling and wrestling will lead. Bao-chai's interruption itself may provoke a certain thrill, given Bao-yu's parallel interruption of Tealeaf and the maid earlier in the chapter: "He made a tiny hole in the paper window with his tongue and peeped through. . . . 'Good lord!' He cried out involuntarily, and kicking open the door, strode into the study, so startling the two inside that they shook in their clothes" (377) 乃乍著膽子, 舔破窗紙, 向內一看. . . 寶玉禁不住大叫: "了不得!" 一腳端進門去, 將那兩個唬開了, 抖衣而顫 (254). Both interruptions il-

lustrate the trope of voyeurism common in Chinese fiction of the sixteenth to eighteenth century: the most famous novels of that era include scenes in which some characters interrupt or spy on others who are engaged in sexual activity.⁵

The author may have intended the scene of Bao-yu in Dai-yu's boudoir to be innocent—that is, to contrast with rather than parallel Tealeaf's high jinks (just as, according to Disenchantment's taxonomy, Bao-yu's "lust of the mind" contrasts with the coarser impulses of someone like Tealeaf). Even so, the scene, constituting a radical challenge to accepted standards of propriety, would have required a redefinition of innocence. Even a reader sympathetic to such a redefinition would have felt the shock value of the scene.

Such fun and games can have consequences. In chapter 30, Bao-yu makes a pass at his mother's maid Golden while his mother is taking a nap: "Shall I ask Her Ladyship to let me have you, so that we can be together?" . . . "What's the hurry?" [Golden] said playfully. "Yours is yours, wherever it may be" . . . —and she suggests that if Bao-yu wants "a bit of fun," he should go spy on his half brother Jia Huan, who is just then dallying with the maidservant Sunset (again, the trope of voyeurism). Suddenly Lady Wang wakes up, slaps the girl, and curses her: "'Shameless little harlot!' she cried, pointing at her wrathfully. 'It's you and your like who corrupt our innocent young boys'" (2.30.100–01). She dismisses Golden on the spot, after ten years' service, driving the girl to suicide.

Lady Wang fears Bao-yu's vulnerability to corruption by the maids:

This was, in fact, the first time in her life that she had ever struck a maid. But the kind of "shamelessness" of which—in her view—Golden had just been guilty was the one thing she had always most abhorred. It was the uncontrollable anger of the morally outraged that had caused her to strike Golden and call her names. . . . (101)

王夫人固然是個寬仁慈厚的人, 從來不曾打過丫頭們一個, 今忽見金釧兒行此無恥之事, 此乃平生最恨者, 故氣忿不過, 打了一下, 罵了幾句. (412)

But she has it backward: it was Bao-yu who initiated the flirtation. She never allows herself to admit that the corrupting influence might be the innocent young boy. (How many girls would die as a result of Lady Wang's capricious prudery?) This episode contradicts Bao-yu's tenderness toward all around him: Bao-yu fails to speak up for Golden or to help her in any way—instead, the instant he realizes his mother is awake, he runs away and hides in the garden, ever his refuge from real-world responsibility.

In chapter 33, the jealous Jia Huan informs their father that Bao-yu caused Golden's suicide by trying to rape her. Huan's report, along with the embarrassing revelation of Bao-yu's intimacy with the prince of Zhong-shun's fugitive favorite, spurs Jia Zheng to beat Bao-yu to within an inch of his life. What

makes Jia Huan's accusation credible to Jia Zheng is that they live in a society that encourages women to commit suicide in order to erase insults to chastity. But there is a kernel of truth in Jia Huan's lie: Bao-yu's pass at the girl led to her suicide. The implication is that his innocent antics are not so innocent after all and that in the world outside the garden such behavior can have serious consequences.

As time goes on, Dai-yu realizes that Bao-yu reciprocates her affection, and she begins to think of herself as his future wife. As her thoughts turn toward the future and the world of adult responsibility, she grows more inhibited about physical contact and tries to avoid his touch. In chapter 30, he takes her hand, but she flings him away: "Take your hands off me! We're not children any more. You really can't go on mauling me about like this all the time. Don't you understand *anything*—?" (2.30.96) 誰同你拉拉扯扯的。一天大似一天的，還這麼涎皮賴臉的，連個道理也不知道 (408). (Note that this scene takes place just before his fatal flirtation with Golden.) In chapter 32, shortly before his beating by Jia Zheng, he tries to wipe the tears from Dai-yu's face, but she recoils several paces: "You'll get your head chopped off!" she says. "You really *must* keep your hands to yourself" (133) 林黛玉忙向後退了幾步，說道："你又要死了！作什麼這麼動手動腳的！" (434). Much later, in chapter 92, Bao-yu comments that Dai-yu has been avoiding him, that they "almost seem to have grown apart in some way." Aroma admonishes him, "I should hope so too. . . . Now that the two of you are older, of course you must learn to be more discreet" (4.92.244) 原該這麼著才是。都長了幾歲年紀了，怎麼好意思還象小孩子時候的樣子 (2: 1272).

Aroma's Warning

Aroma is the voice of reason and objectivity. She is the only character in the novel who points out that Bao-yu's presence in the garden constitutes a dangerous violation of propriety. Of course, she knows better than anyone that Bao-yu is sexually mature. She first articulates her concern in chapter 32, after hearing Bao-yu's declaration of love for Dai-yu: "She reflected with some alarm that if things between them were as his words seemed to indicate, there was every likelihood of an ugly scandal developing, and wondered how she could arrange matters to prevent it" (2.32.135) 如此看來，將來難免不才之事，令人可驚可畏 (1: 436).

Her opportunity comes after Bao-yu's beating by Jia Zheng. After much hesitation, she approaches Lady Wang and asks:

"... if Your Ladyship could advise me how later on we can somehow or other contrive to get Master Bao moved back outside the Garden."

Lady Wang looked startled and clutched Aroma's hand in some alarm.

"I hope Bao-yu hasn't been doing something dreadful with one of the girls?" (34.164)

"我只想著討太太一個示下，怎麼變個法兒，以後竟還教二爺搬出園外來住就好了。"王夫人聽了，吃一大驚，忙拉了襲人的手問道："寶玉難道和誰作怪了不成?" (455)

With this unguarded reaction, Lady Wang betrays that on some level she knows full well what Bao-yu is capable of. Aroma assures her that no such thing has happened—not yet:

It's just that—if you'll allow me to say so—by now, the young master has grown up, and so have the young ladies who live in the Garden. Moreover Miss Lin and Miss Bao are the young master's cousins of *different surname*, and even if you say they're just his cousins, there *is* after all the difference in sex between them. But despite that, they're together all the time, day and night, so the situation has become quite awkward. One can't help feeling uneasy. To an outsider, it just wouldn't seem consistent with the propriety and dignity of a great family.⁶

太太別多心，並沒有這話。這不過是我的小見識。如今二爺也大了，裡頭姑娘們也大了，況且林姑娘寶姑娘又是兩姨姑表姊妹，雖說是姊妹們，到底是男女之分，日夜一處起坐不方便，由不得叫人懸心。便是外人看著，也不像大家子的體統。 (SJPB 2: 537–38)

Aroma emphasizes the fact that Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai are not members of the Jia lineage and therefore should be barred from direct contact with Bao-yu. Both girls are potential brides for Bao-yu, as they all know, and Bao-chai does eventually marry him.

Not wanting to offend Lady Wang, Aroma does not accuse Bao-yu of any impropriety. Instead, she stresses the danger that rumors about goings-on in the garden might harm his reputation and future career:

They say "where nothing happens, imagination is busiest," and I'm sure lots of unaccountable misfortunes begin when some innocent little thing we did unthinkingly gets misconstrued in someone else's imagination and reported as something terrible. We just have to be on our guard against that sort of thing happening—especially when Master Bao has such a peculiar character, as Your Ladyship knows, and spends all his time with girls. He only has to make the tiniest slip in an unguarded moment, and whether he really did anything or not, with so many people about—and some of them no better than they should be—there is sure to be scandal. . . . Master Bao's reputation will be destroyed for life. . . . (164–65)

俗語說的"沒事常思有事"，世上多少無頭腦的人，多半因為無心中做出，有心人看見，當作有心事，反說壞了。只是預先不防著，斷然不好。二爺素日性格，太太是知道的。他又偏好在我們隊裡鬧，倘或不防，前後錯

了一點半點，不論真假，人多口雜，那起小人的嘴有什麼避諱，但後來二爺一生的聲名品行豈不完了。
(1: 455)

She fears that outsiders will misconstrue the unusual arrangements in the Jia household and assume the worst. The author uses her words to anticipate once again how orthodox opinion would view Bao-yu's presence in the garden as scandalous. The only way to solve this problem is to end the pretense that Bao-yu is just a little boy, different from other boys, and to get him out of the garden.

Aroma's monologue is a moment of commonsense clarity unique in the novel. It's left to a teenaged slave girl to speak the truth! Lady Wang's initial reaction approaches enlightenment: "What Aroma had just been saying about misconstructions and scandals so exactly fitted what had in fact happened in the case of Golden that for a moment Lady Wang was quite taken aback." But she quickly recovers. Instead of removing Bao-yu from the garden, as Aroma has recommended, Lady Wang does nothing except to cede responsibility for Bao-yu's behavior and well-being to Aroma: "I am going to place Bao-yu entirely in your hands. Be very careful with him, won't you?" (165). This transfer of responsibility to a maidservant is an abdication of responsibility.

Bao-yu's Homoerotic Flirtations

In addition to his relations with maidservants and girl cousins, Bao-yu engages in homoerotic flirtation—and probably more than flirtation—with several characters in the novel, the most important being Qin Zhong and the female impersonator Bijou (whose real name is Jiang Yu-han).⁷ With typical evasiveness, the author offers no information about actual homosexual acts, only teasing innuendo. Bao-yu's homoerotic interest may confuse the modern reader, who is likely to conflate it with our hero's androgyny and interpret it according to sexual categories current in our society today. This confusion may be exacerbated by David Hawkes's occasional use of anachronistic terms like "queer" and "straight" in his otherwise superb translation.⁸

It is vital to understand that in eighteenth-century China, as in many other premodern societies, male same-sex acts and relationships were understood not in terms of the modern egalitarian polarity of sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. homosexual, defined by the sex of one's object of desire) but rather in terms of a hierarchy of stereotypical sexual roles (penetrator vs. penetrated) seen as naturally corresponding to other hierarchies (such as gender, social status, and age). To penetrate was a definitively masculine act, and to be penetrated was to be subordinated and feminized. Typically, in same-sex relations between males, an older, dominant partner would penetrate a younger, feminized partner—at least that was the conventional expectation of how such acts and relationships should be structured. From this point of view, to pursue a young male as an object of possessive desire was considered a perfectly natural part of mature male

licentiousness, although it does not necessarily follow that polite society approved of such desire. In the eighteenth century, Qing law punished consensual homosexual intercourse in exactly the same manner as consensual heterosexual intercourse outside marriage, with a beating and a term spent wearing a heavy wooden frame (known as the cangue) around the neck. This parallel in penalties suggests equal disapproval of both acts (Sommer, *Sex*, ch. 4).

Famous libertines in Ming-Qing fiction, such as Ximen Qing (of *Plum in the Golden Vase*) and Vesperus (of *The Carnal Prayer Mat* 肉蒲團 *Rou pu tuan*) sodomize their youthful pages as part of an omnivorous, insatiable sexual predation directed primarily at women. In *The Story of the Stone*, Xue Pan and Jia Lian follow this libertine pattern: both men are incorrigible lechers who pursue male as well as female sex objects. Bao-yu's homoerotic liaisons are an aestheticized, sentimentalized version of what appears gross and buffoonish in a figure like Xue Pan, whose interests are purely carnal. Such characters highlight how different Bao-yu is from the stereotypical libertine. Nevertheless, his range of erotic interest corresponds closely to Xue Pan's.

Bao-yu is clearly the dominant figure in his relationships with Qin Zhong and Bijou, in terms of social status, wealth, and age. The conventional expectation in that society would be that if Bao-yu had sex with these subordinate males, he would play the dominant sexual role as well. Sexual dominance is made almost explicit in chapter 15, when he surprises Qin Zhong having intercourse with the young Buddhist nun Sapientia: Bao-yu jumps on top of Qin Zhong, who is on top of Sapientia, and threatens to expose their affair by shouting; in exchange for secrecy, Qin Zhong promises Bao-yu "to do anything [he says]" 你要怎樣我都依你, and Bao-yu tells him to "[w]ait until we are both in bed and I'll settle accounts with you then" (299–300) 等一會睡下，再細細的算帳。Bao-yu's proposal implies that he will extract compensation in the form of sexual service, but the author refuses to confirm or deny this obvious implication:

As for the "settling of accounts" that Bao-yu had proposed to Qin Zhong, we have been unable to ascertain exactly what form this took; and as we would not for the world be guilty of a fabrication, we must allow the matter to remain a mystery.
(1.15.300)

寶玉不知與秦鐘算何帳目，未見真切，未曾記得，此是疑案，不敢纂創。
(1: 200)

Such teasing evasiveness is typical of how the author treats Bao-yu's sex life in general, but especially his homoerotic interests. It helps sustain the illusion of Bao-yu's innocence that he is not a libertine.

Bao-yu's attraction to Bijou is more aesthetic and sentimental than his relationship with Qin Zhong. Yet a coarser dimension is implied and at one point intrudes to deflate Bao-yu's pretentiousness. Bao-yu first encounters Bijou at a party at Feng Zi-yang's house in chapter 28. They are attracted to each other;

after a while Bao-yu excuses himself "to ease his bladder," and Bijou follows him to the toilet. It is no accident that the author arranges for them to rendezvous at the toilet, even though no sexual act is portrayed. America is by no means the only society in which men sometimes meet at public toilets for sex, and I have seen many Qing legal cases that recount acts of sodomy in such settings. (We are reminded of chapter 9, when Qin Zhong and his classmate Darling agree to meet privately in the "rear courtyard," which is a sly euphemism for the anus [1.9.208].) Bao-yu and Bijou proceed to undo their pants and exchange cummerbunds as tokens of affection; but just as they are closing up their pants, Xue Pan, who has been spying on them, jumps out and grabs them. Xue Pan assumes that he has caught them in a sexual act:

"What are you two up to, leaving the party and sneaking off like this?" he said. "Come on, take 'em out again and let's have a look!"

It was useless for them to protest that the situation was not what he imagined. Xue Pan continued to force his unwelcome attentions upon them until Feng Zi-ying came out and rescued them. (2.28.62)

兩個人逃席出來幹什麼? 快拿出來我瞧瞧... 薛蟠那裡肯依, 還是馮紫英出來才解開了。 (1: 387)

Both the setting of this conversation and exchange at a toilet and its interruption by the unabashed Xue Pan cast ironic light on the scene and undercut the lofty tone of Bao-yu and Bijou. The author implies a rhetorical question: What does all this highbrow sentiment (Disenchantment's "lust of the mind") really boil down to, anyway?

In Bao-yu's society, as in many other premodern societies, the theater was closely associated with commercial sex work; the acting profession was considered morally and to some extent legally debased because of the stigma of licentiousness. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Beijing, a basic part of the commercial theater was high-end homosexual prostitution. All female roles were played by cross-dressing teenaged boys like Bijou, who were the objects of intense homoerotic fascination on the part of elite patrons, and many of these boys moonlighted as prostitutes and escorts. Some opera troupe managers made more money from renting out these boys for escort service than they did from ticket sales (Mackerras, *Rise*; Wu Cuncun).

Bijou comes from this homoerotic milieu. When his powerful admirer, the prince of Zhong-shun, installs Bijou in his palace, the boy's virtuosity on stage is presumably not the main reason he is singled out for such attention. The prince's chamberlain explains:

His Highness says that though he could view the loss of a hundred ordinary actors with equanimity, this Bijou is so skilled in anticipating his wishes and so essential to his peace of mind that it would be utterly impossible for him to dispense with his services. (2.33.143)

王爺亦云: "若是別的戲子呢, 一百個也罷了, 只是這琪官隨機應答, 謹慎老誠, 甚合我老人家的, 竟斷斷少不得此人。" (1: 441)

The sexual dimension of this patronage is never spelled out, but an eighteenth-century reader would have taken it for granted that Bijou is the infatuated prince's catamite—hence the prince's jealousy and obsessive pursuit when Bijou runs away.⁹

The magnificent crimson cummerbund that Bijou presents to Bao-yu during their toilet rendezvous is a gift Bijou received the previous day from another noble admirer, the prince of Bei-jing. Later, after Bijou has fled the palace, the prince of Zhong-shun's chamberlain comes to the Jia compound to interrogate Bao-yu as to the actor's whereabouts. At first, Bao-yu denies knowing Bijou, but when the chamberlain accuses him of wearing Bijou's cummerbund, Bao-yu thinks, "I'd better get rid of [the chamberlain] as quickly as possible, before he can say any more" (2.33.144) 不如打發他去了, 免的再說出別的事來 (442). It's not entirely clear what this "any more" stands for, but it appears to be another of those points of reticence in the novel that would speak volumes if it could. There is a great deal more to Bao-yu's relationship with Bijou than is narrated. A comment by Xue Bao-chai, who gets her information from her libertine brother, provides confirmation: "Cousin Bao *has* been going around with that actor" (34.157) 到底寶兄弟素日不正, 肯和那些人來往 (450).

At the very end of the novel, Aroma finds herself married to none other than Jiang Yu-han—the former actor Bijou—who by this time has outgrown female impersonation and become a modestly prosperous businessman. They discover their mutual connection with Bao-yu when Yu-han finds in Aroma's trousseau the red cummerbund he gave Bao-yu as a token of love. This discovery cements the marriage: when Yu-han shows Aroma the viridian sash that Bao-yu gave him in exchange for the cummerbund, she is convinced that their marriage is predestined (5.120.368–69). There are important parallels between the spouses: for one thing, both have served Bao-yu sexually or at least as an object of erotic fascination. Also, Yu-han is a debased double for Bao-yu, just as Aroma is one for Bao-chai—debased in terms of social and legal status, Yu-han having been an actor, Aroma a slave and informal concubine. In Bijou's professional femininity, we see a crude reification of Bao-yu's androgyny. The name "Yu-han" literally means "box for the jade" (*yu* 玉 = jade, *han* 函 = box), and "*han*" rhymes with a homonym meaning "to hold in the mouth" (含). One senses a homoerotic suggestion here of the nature of Yu-han's former role vis-à-vis Bao-yu (the jade in question being Bao-yu, "precious jade"). The name also may refer to the fact that Bao-yu was born with the eponymous precious jade in his own mouth.

Bao-yu's homoerotic flirtations underscore the fact of his sexual maturity and experience, even as the author's coy ambiguity allows the pretense of his innocence. Jia Zheng is convinced by the confrontation with the prince's chamberlain that Bao-yu has been "philandering with actors," a phrase that in Qing legal jargon refers to the criminal patronage of male prostitutes for sodomy ("actor"

優 being synonymous with “homosexual prostitute” in legal texts).¹⁰ This accusation is one of the two that make Jiá Zheng beat Bao-yu. The other, based on Jia Huan’s distortion of events, is that Bao-yu caused Golden to commit suicide by trying to rape her. Jia Zheng believes both charges, which fulfill his worst fear since Bao-yu’s infancy—namely, that this son would turn out to be a libertine (1.2.76).

To Jia Zheng, Bao-yu is a libertine who pursues both female and male sex objects, both inside and outside the household. Surely, Jia Zheng will now remove Bao-yu from the garden. What does he do instead? Aside from the beating, nothing: he abdicates responsibility for the matter, and Bao-yu continues to live in the garden with the girls for dozens of chapters more. Jia Zheng is a failure as a Confucian patriarch: he spouts high-minded morality but is incapable of translating words into effective action, either in government service or in his household. In traditional terms, his most conspicuous failure is his inability to educate and discipline his son.

It is easy for modern readers to be so captivated by *The Story of the Stone*’s beauty that they miss its obscenity. But by the normative standards of elite society in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China, this novel was unquestionably obscene. In my view, a full appreciation of *Stone* both as historical document and as pathbreaking masterpiece requires a clear understanding of why it deserved its prominent place in the lists of banned licentious books.

That *Stone* cannot compete with the notorious *Plum in the Golden Vase* in the graphic depiction of sexual acts is beside the point. The entire magnificent and complex edifice of *Stone* depends on the collective abdication of responsibility by the novel’s men and on the collective conspiracy of the novel’s women to pretend that a sexually mature young man is an innocent little boy. Thus the separation of sexes is waived and Bao-yu moves into the garden. Everything that follows constitutes a gross violation of Confucian moral order, prefiguring the household’s ultimate crisis.

Yet this violation of moral order makes possible the main achievement of the novel: the Neverland that Bao-yu and his young female companions create for themselves in their garden refuge from the tiresome demands of social responsibility. In this way, the novel seduces readers into savoring, even celebrating, the violation of boundaries and hierarchies that frame Confucian order. The effect is far more seductive than any of the grotesque couplings detailed in *Plum in the Golden Vase*—and that is why *Stone* struck some Qing critics as an especially insidious example of the licentious novel.

Ming and Qing dynasties. *The Story of the Stone* was listed by name starting in the first half of the nineteenth century.

²This depiction of seminal emission anticipates Jia Rui’s death, the only other scene in the novel where semen is described (1.12.250–52).

³See Francesca Bray’s analysis of the politics of reproduction in the elite household and especially her useful distinction between “social motherhood” and “biological motherhood” (351–68). Also see Susan Mann’s discussion of domestic slavery in the High Qing (*Precious Records*).

⁴To share a pillow (or sleeping mat) was a euphemism for sexual congress, comparable to the English “to go to bed with.”

⁵Note Keith McMahon’s analysis of “the gap in the wall” trope in Ming-Qing fiction (*Causality*). Bao-yu’s penetration of the garden may itself be considered an example of this trope.

⁶This is my own translation of the passage, relying on SJPB. Hawkes translates somewhat differently: “It’s just that—if you’ll allow me to say so—Master Bao and the young ladies are beginning to grow up now, and though they are all cousins, there is the difference of sex between them, which makes it very awkward sometimes when they are all living together, especially in the case of Miss Lin and Miss Bao, who aren’t even of the same clan. One can’t help feeling uneasy. Even to outsiders it looks like a very strange sort of family” (164). In the HLM version, the last sentence in this passage is slightly different than in SJPB (see HLM 455).

⁷See also the episode at the Jia clan school in chapter 9, in which Bao-yu and Qin Zhong become infatuated with two other boys. The portrayal of a Confucian school as a hotbed of homoerotic cruising would not have endeared this novel to Qing authorities.

⁸The Chinese term that Hawkes translates as “straight”—*zhengjing ren* 正經人—in fact means “an upright, respectable person” and carries no connotation of sexual orientation whatsoever (2.47.444). See Hinsch 147–50, 196–97 (nn 32 and 35).

⁹For a nonfiction account of how a Manchu nobleman in Beijing caused a scandal by installing a catamite in his household, see Sommer, *Sex* 156–58.

¹⁰The phrase I translate as “philandering with actors”—*liudang youling* 流蕩優伶—is part of a passage translated by Hawkes as “riotous and dissipated conduct abroad leading to the unseemly bestowal of impudicities on a theatrical performer” (2.33.148).

NOTES

¹For denunciation and prohibition of *The Story of the Stone*, see Wang Liqi 122, 135, 143, 162–64, 196–97, 199, 224, 375–78, 391–92, 404–05, and 424–25. Prohibitions of licentious books, plays, and songs remained in force and were reiterated throughout the