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Games in Late Ming and Early Qing Erotic Literature

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Late Ming and early Qing sources frequently depict games—such as card games, drinking games, verbal games, (cross-gender) roleplay games, and so on—played in erotic encounters, often for the purpose of engineering seductions or enhancing sexual pleasure. Examples from a variety of erotic novels and tales from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show how games were used as a literary convention in erotica.

Existing scholarship has paid abundant attention to the social, legal, economic, cultural, and political factors that led to the intense interest in sensual subject matters and the explosion of erotica, in both visual and verbal forms, in the late Ming and early Qing period.[1] In comparison, characteristics of erotica as a genre and its commonly used techniques and conventions remain understudied.[2] Although these aspects do receive occasional attention, they tend to be mentioned only in passing.[3] The only scholarship specifically on features, motifs, and techniques of Ming-Qing erotica has been art historical.[4]

Games, both sexual and nonsexual, are commonly found in erotic novels and stories. In erotic narratives, games not only serve as quotidian details that facilitate the contexts in which sexual encounters take place, but are also often directly involved in these encounters, serving as crucial pleasure-generating devices or facilitators of erotic subplots and vignettes.

Roger Caillois's discussion of characteristics of play in his classic *Man, Play, and Games* lists six features: free, separate, uncertain, unproductive,

governed by rules, and make-believe.[5] He pays particular attention to the latter two, which he thinks "may be related" but are at the same time mutually exclusive: "Games are not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled *or* make-believe."[6] In other words, unlike the other four, which may coexist with other features in the same game, the last two qualities in his list are incompatible. On the other hand, both features create unreality.[7] Games that rely on make-believe "presuppose free improvisation . . . the chief attraction of which lies in the pleasure of playing a role, of acting *as if* one were someone or something else."[8] Such an operation of "as if" leads to "pretend," to fiction. Remarkably, "rules themselves [also] create fiction," which, like make-believe, temporarily shrouds players in unreality.[9]

If the qualities "governed by rules" and "make-believe" are incompatible within the same game, we can distinguish between games that depend on one or the other.[10] Drawing on Caillois's discussion of these two distinct yet related game features, in this chapter I group games commonly found in late Ming and early Qing erotic literature into two types: those with rules and those centering around role-play, which primarily relies on make-believe. Drawing distinctions between games, however, is not my purpose here. After all, no scheme of categorization can capture all types of games and play.[11] My objective is to illustrate what I see as the most important functions of games in Ming-Qing erotic literature: to generate sex content and enrich the overall variety of sexual acts and themes for the pleasure of the reader. This dichotomous categorization captures important formal features of these games and demonstrates the primary functions of games in erotica. Despite their differences, both types of games are closely linked in their shared function of generating unreality (to borrow Caillois's concept). This shared capacity to create moments of fiction makes games, regardless of type, a useful device for putting on view dynamic and even wildly nonnormative sexual acts and relations that often face moral policing, either within the fictional world or from the author. Play and playfulness prove to be useful tools in providing the aegis under which transgressive encounters and acts may be put on view and enjoyed by the reader. At the same time, the reader may also take pleasure in the interplay between moments of unreality generated through games and the plots and subplots of the larger narrative as a work of fiction.

Games with Rules

A wide variety of games with rules can be found in late imperial Chinese erotic works, for instance, drinking games (*jiuling*), card games (*paixi*), riddles (*caimi*), the game of "beat the drum, pass the flower" (*jigu chuanhua*), and pitch-pot games (*touhu*), which involves throwing arrows into a pot.[12] The late Ming author Lü Tiancheng's (1580–1618) *Xiuta yeshi* (Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch) features an episode in which the protagonist, a scholar named Dongmen, plays a drinking game with his wife, Jinshi, and mistress, Mashi.[13] Although the ostensible purpose of the game is to have fun among themselves, in actuality Dongmen is trying to get the two women drunk so that he can seduce Mashi's maid, Xiaojiao. He proposes a competition of speaking tongue twisters (*jikouling*), with the rule that whoever makes more mistakes should be punished with drinking.[14] As the women are not good at tongue twisters, Dongmen easily gets them drunk—a difficult deed under rules of social decorum but realizable within the game's unreality—and then is able to carry out his scheme of forcing himself on Xiaojiao, who cannot resist him without the protection of her mistress.

In the late Ming anonymous novel *Langshi* (History of a Libertine), the protagonist Langzi (literally, "libertine") is invited by his lover Suqiu to play a drinking game.[15] Again, the purpose of the game is not so much to have fun as to trick other game players—in this case, Langzi. In an earlier encounter, Langzi turned out to be no match for the sexually sophisticated and insatiable Suqiu. Determined to win the upper hand this time, he takes an aphrodisiac before their rendezvous. However, foreseeing Langzi's plan, the shrewd Suqiu engages Langzi in a game of riddles, having made him agree that if he loses, he would drink a big cup of cold wine. The clueless Langzi soon is defeated by Suqiu in the game and has to drink what turns out to be cold water, which is said to be an antidote to the aphrodisiac he took. Without the power of the drug, Langzi again loses to Suqiu in the "battle of sex."[16]

Drinking games involving tongue twisters and riddles are not necessarily erotic; indeed, they can be played on any social occasion. However, in these two cases, they are used to help create moments of unreality necessary for the realization of sex schemes; in this way they contribute to enriching the

variety of sexual scenarios in the narratives. In the case of *Xiuta yeshi*, the drinking game is deployed to create a violent "master-maid encounter"—a rape scene. In the case of *Langshi*, the drinking game helps move forward the subplot of sexual competition between two experienced lovers. It is worth noting that both games have a competitive component, which is key to their real function: schemers use games to get other people drunk so that they can carry out their secret plans. It is important that these games—tongue twisters in *Xiuta yeshi* and riddles in *Langshi*—not be games of chance, for the success of the schemes depends on their executioners' ability to take control. Given the critical role of these games in engineering sex schemes as part of the plot, the kind of pleasure the reader derives from reading about them does not depend on whether they are erotic games. Rather, they serve as a kind of foreplay, which to the reader is enticing not because they directly involve sex but because they titillate and arouse, foretelling that the climax—both sexual and narrative—that the reader is after is in sight.[17]

Explicitly erotic games are still of concern to the present study, though. Li Yu's (1610?–1680) *Rou putuan* (Carnal prayer mat) features a lengthy, elaborate description of a game involving a unique set of erotic playing cards, each of which has a picture that depicts a sexual position. In chapter 17, the novel's protagonist, Vesperus (Weiyangsheng), plays a card game with four women, all of whom are his lovers: Cloud (Xiangyun), Cloud's cousins Lucky Pearl (Ruizhu) and Lucky Jade (Ruiyu), and the three young women's aunt Flora (Huacheng), a knowledgeable but arrogant sex guru who owns a set of "spring-feeling drinking cards" (*chunyi jiupai*).[18] According to Flora, these cards are "for looking at while drinking or having sex (*jiu se*)."[19] However, for Vesperus, between drinking (*jiu*) and sex (*se*), the latter is more important. As he points out, the right way to use the cards is for him to have sex with the women by imitating the positions printed on the cards after drinking: "Normally these things are just for amusement, . . . but we do have a use for them in our contest today. Let's not look at them now, but wait until the wine takes effect. Then each of you must pick a card and act out with me whatever it shows."[20] By throwing dice, the women soon work out an order in which they take turns having sex with Vesperus by imitating the position on the card they each draw.

As an expert, Flora assumes the role of game master (*lingguan*). None-

theless, irritated by the arrogant air she puts on, her nieces contrive to teach her a lesson. After they have had sex with Vesperus by imitating the positions shown on the cards they each drew, the three younger women trick Flora into drawing a card that shows a man and a woman having anal sex (*Longyang de taoshu*).[21] As Flora has never had anal sex before, she is reluctant. Citing the "rules" of the game and at the same time emphasizing her role as game master, who supposedly should set the model for strictly abiding by rules, her nieces refuse to allow her to switch cards. Flora must obey and is said to have suffered greatly.

In contrast to the two drinking games mentioned earlier, this card game has sex-related rules. Strictly enforced, these rules directly give rise to a suspension of reality, which allows for the presentation of sexual violence and punishment (of an older, more authoritative woman, at the hands of three younger, less powerful women, for the pleasure of the male protagonist and, arguably, the male author and male reader), a scenario that would not make sense without the unreality created through the game rules.[22] Moreover, with its strictly enforced rules, this game creates an opportunity for the narrative to include jealousy, female competition, rivalry, intrigue, and revenge in its offer of sex themes and vignettes.[23]

Importantly, this game of "spring-feeling cards" should be seen as a variation of the "erotica-in-erotica" convention frequently featured in late imperial erotic works, which often feature scenes in which sexual partners use erotica—literary works or pictures—together for sexual stimulation and pleasure. In such scenes, the couple often imitates the sexual positions in the verbal or visual erotica they look at together. The ubiquity of this convention mirrors the influence of sex manuals, which often catalogue a variety of sexual positions.[24] As James Cahill aptly notes, "Erotic fiction up to late Ming has the same quasi-taxonomic character: they did it *this* way, and then *that* way, and then *this* way."[25]

In the erotic card-game episode in *Rou putuan*, the focus of the narrative is not so much the game itself as how each of the four women has sex with Vesperus by mimicking the lovemaking position shown on each card. This is not the only scene in the novel where Vesperus and his partners imitate different positions in erotic pictures. Chapter 3, for instance, features Vesperus using erotic pictures to enlighten his sexually frigid bride to the joy of sex. That imitation episode, however, emphasizes seduction, which

is itself an important motif in Ming-Qing erotica. The card game here, with its emphatically enforced rules, is geared to put on view for the reader more intercourse positions, including anal sex between a man and a woman.

In contrast to the two above-mentioned drinking games, this "card game" is explicitly erotic: the sexual function of Flora's playing cards is self-evident. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, rather than being a conventional game, this card game should be seen as illustrating Li Yu's inventiveness.[26] In other words, unlike the drinking games, which are not different from real-life games, the erotic card game should be seen as a context-specific invention the author devises for the scene and for the larger purpose of creating another sex scenario. This has two implications. First, despite its status as an idiosyncratic invention, its soundness as a playable game with rules in the context of the novel points to Li Yu's ingenious appropriation of both regular card games involving dice-throwing and the erotica-in-erotica convention. Second, despite its soundness as a game of rules, this card game is still categorically different from *real* games—those that exist in reality—in the sense that it is, after all, an invention.

Inventiveness is key to our understanding of erotic games in Ming-Qing representations. Compared with other conventions in late imperial erotica such as voyeurism, eavesdropping, and erotica-in-erotica, games put to erotic uses are often marked by idiosyncrasy and inventiveness. Take, for instance, chapter 27 of the sixteenth-century novel *Jin Ping Mei*. Titled "Li Ping'er Communicates a Secret in the Kingfisher Pavilion; Pan Jinlian Engages in a Drunken Orgy under the Grape Arbor," this chapter features Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian reinventing the pitch-pot game *touhu* into a sex game as part of their garden orgy.[27] *Touhu* normally involves players competing with one another by throwing arrows into a pot from an agreed-upon distance. In this episode, Ximen turns it into what he calls *rouhu* (fleshy pot).[28] Under the grape arbor in the family garden, Ximen ties Jinlian's feet to the trellis to suspend her legs in the air. Claiming to the maid Chunmei that he is going to "play a game of 'pitching into the fleshly pot,'" he then uses plums as he would arrows in the pitch-pot game, striking Jinlian's genitalia three times.[29] For each successful shot, he drinks wine. As a typical example of characters using games for sexual enjoyment and amusement, this *touhu* scene points to the playfulness that is often an important aspect of pleasure, both for the characters and for the reader.

(It is also worth noting that the wordplay between *touhu* and *rouhu*, for instance, is meant to amuse not only the characters but also the reader.)[30] Moreover, although *Jin Ping Mei* by no means resembles a sex manual, it nonetheless also exhibits the tendency, which is seen in late imperial erotica in general, to catalog an assortment of sex scenes, methods, and acts. The inventiveness of Ximen and Jinlian no doubt contributes to enriching the variety of lovemaking for the enjoyment of the reader.

All four games examined above are governed by rules. They may be divided into two distinct subcategories: "regular," nonsexual games drawn directly from life and those that are drawn from reality but through reinvention have turned into explicitly erotic games. Despite their difference, both kinds are meant to facilitate the production of sexual content.

Erotic Roleplay

Some games or play rely on make-believe, on "becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving."[31] In such instances, the pleasure the player derives is that "of playing a role, of acting *as if* one were someone or something else."[32]

In Ming-Qing erotica, cross-gender role-playing is often used as a plot device in staging seduction scenes. In *Langshi*, it is through role-playing that the maid Hongye manages to help the page boy Lushu seduce Langzi's innocent young cousin Junqin. Initially, Hongye uses erotic pictures to awaken "spring feelings" (*chunqing*, meaning "desire") in the young woman. As anticipated by the shrewd maid, Junqin is instantly enthralled and even proposes that Hongye play the role of a man so that the two of them can try out what is depicted in the pictures.[33] Hongye obeys by undressing herself and then making love to her mistress "as if [she] were a man" (*ru nanzi yiban*).[34] She then describes to Junqing her encounters with Lushu in graphic detail. The young woman is said to become so aroused that she soon starts an affair with the page boy.[35] Here, it is the seeming playfulness of the mock sex "game," which in this particular case involves both cross-gender and cross-class transgression, that emboldens the shy mistress to explore sex and its pleasure.

The late Ming author Feng Menglong's (1574–1646) "Jiang Xingge chonghui zhenzhushan" (Jiang Xingge's Reunion with His Pearl Shirt; hereafter

"Jiang Xingge") has a similar episode, in which a man replaces one of the two female players in a mock sex game comparable to the one in *Langshi*. In this story, a young wife named Sanqiao'er stays home alone when her husband, Jiang Xingge, embarks on a long business trip. Attracted by her beauty, Chen Dalang, a merchant sojourning in town, schemes to seduce her by enlisting the help of a Granny Xue (Xue *po*), who, as a hawker, has easy access to the inner chambers of the households in town. After winning Sanqiao'er's trust, Granny Xue begins to titillate the young woman—as well as the reader—with graphic stories.[36] Eventually, she tricks Sanqiao'er into sharing a bed with her so that she can teach Sanqiao'er "a way of having fun by oneself to meet one's urgent needs" (*ziquqile jiuji de fa'er*).[37] In the darkness, however, the granny switches with Chen, who has been hiding in the room. Initially mistaking Chen for Granny Xue, Sanqiao'er ends up being sexually taken advantage of (*ren ta qingbo*) and it is only after they are finished that Sanqiao'er asks about his identity.[38]

Is this play or rape? The wording of the text here, *ren ta qingbo*, suggests both are possible. As the verb *ren* can mean "to permit, let, allow" or "to concede," *ren ta qingbo* can be translated as "[Sanqiao'er] let him [i.e., Chen] take advantage of [her]" or as "[Sanqiao'er] yielded to his hanky panky." While the first translation implies willingness on the part of Sanqiao'er, the second puts the emphasis on her lack of volition. In Caillois's definition, "play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement"; that is to say, it should be free.[39] In the role-playing game in *Langzi*, Junqing and Hongye both participate in the make-believe game knowingly and willingly. In contrast, Sanqiao'er only signs up for the game with Granny Xue and is kept in the dark about the third player, Chen. In this sense, she has no choice but to yield to Chen's hanky panky (*ren ta qingbo*). On the other hand, that Sanqiao'er quickly acquiesces to Chen's replacement of Granny Xue and takes pleasure in having sex with him also means that she (eventually) chooses to allow Chen to take advantage of her (*ren ta qingbo*)—chooses to stay in the play, in the make-believe, in the unreality that, paradoxically, allows her to *realize* her desire for sex. For the player Chen, who is in the know the entire time, the unreality of the proposed play that he secretly joins is necessary for realizing his sexual pursuit. In both cases, the boundary between unreality and reality collapses.

In this story, the safe, albeit temporary and fragile, unreality established

by mimicry provides the perfect remedy for the "urgent need" of a lonely, desirous young woman. It is this willingness to improvise in the "game"—to allow "latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative"—that eventually turns unreality into reality and the woman into an adulteress.[40] Ultimately, as the story develops, it is her choice to remain a player in the game, which eventually becomes reality, that provides the moral ground for her husband's decision to divorce her. At the same time, the fact that the game is initially imposed on her without her knowledge or prior consent still makes her a victim of Chen and Granny Xue's conspiracy. It is this status as victim that morally justifies her final happy reunion with Jiang Xingge. Sanqiao'er is still punished, however, for it is as concubine instead of as wife that she reunites with her beloved husband. The author punishes Chen by making him die from fear and a sense of guilt after he learns of the exposure of the affair. In the moral world Feng Menglong presents, both Sanqiao'er and Chen have to pay for the pleasure they take in the game as players, a role they both assume willingly in the end. We may see such an ending as a warning to readers who enjoy the graphic parts of the story. On the other hand, it is unlikely in reality for such a warning to deter anyone from seeking pleasure in the sex scenes.

Both role-playing games involve the participation of sexually inexperienced players. In these texts, role-play functions to bring into the narrative vignettes of defloration (in the case of Junqing) and seduction (in both stories). In contrast, in the novel *Chundeng nao* (Festive spring lanterns), we see a different kind of cross-gender role-play, in which participants are highly experienced in sexual matters.[41] The novel centers on the handsome scholar Zhen Shuangnan, who indulges in relations with both men and women before he gives up secular life to devote himself to Daoism in pursuit of immortality. The first chapters of the novel depict the triangular relationship between Zhen and the couple Yao Zi'ang and Yao's concubine Huiniang. Although Yao is a married man, he prefers men to women and is infatuated with Zhen's beauty. Attracted by Huiniang, Zhen manages to establish a stable relationship with her after gaining Yao's consent by sleeping with him.

In chapter 3, following Yao's playful suggestion, Huiniang transforms Zhen into a woman using her own clothing, jewelry, and makeup. All three

are pleasantly surprised by how beautiful Zhen turns out to be. Zhen thus jokingly asks Huiniang:

> Since your husband loves me, do you take me to be your sister or your fellow concubine? Yet, since you and I have shared the same pillow and quilt, I am also your husband. Now what do you suggest? Do you want me to be your sister, fellow concubine, or husband?[42]

When he hears this, Yao teasingly suggests that he would take Zhen as his wife and Zhen could take Huiniang as his wife. Laughing, Zhen agrees. The three then hold two mock wedding ceremonies, first for Yao and the masquerading Zhen, and then, after Zhen changes into his own clothes, for Zhen and Huiniang. They even ask a maid to pretend to be the wedding attendant (*binxiang*) and sing a wedding song.[43] Everyone laughs so hard they cannot finish the ceremony for Zhen and Huiniang.[44] "From then on," reveals the narrator, "Zhen constantly switched between male and female roles. The three of them teased and flirted with each other, keeping themselves greatly entertained (*yu*)."[45] The playfulness of these role-playing games is unmistakable. In fact, the character *yu* (entertain, amuse) points to enjoyment and pleasure, and we may say that these role-playing games are enjoyable not only to the characters themselves but also to the reader.

However, the playfulness is not unconditional. Even though erotica as a genre has the capacity to place under its aegis a wide range of deviant practices, desires, and relations, in the patriarchal, polygynous context of late imperial Chinese society, a harmonious triangular relationship between a woman and two men is still quite unusual for the genre. It is the playfulness of the game that all three characters participate in that grants legibility to an otherwise inconceivable relationship. In this relationship, Zhen's female impersonation is crucial. Playful as it appears, his assumption of the female role in effect transforms the pseudo-polyandrous relationship into a polygynous one, the only intelligible form of polygamy in the Ming-Qing context.[46] Moreover, it is worth noting that Yao, the other man in the triangle, never takes up female impersonation, nor does Huiniang take up male impersonation. Throughout the game, the one-man-two-women structure is carefully and firmly maintained. The wedding ceremony between Zhen as husband and Huiniang as wife is never finished, as it is conveniently

interrupted by laughter. This means that, in their game, only Yao's status as husband is *performatively* confirmed—in front of an audience consisting of not only the players themselves but also the servants. On the other hand, despite palpable efforts to contain transgressive energies within the unreality created through play, this complex relationship nonetheless gains a firm position in the novel, which, as a product of the larger late imperial erotic tradition, still seeks to negotiate taboos and offer as wide a variety of scenarios, motifs, desires, and relations as possible to meet the trained taste of the readership. This approach is reminiscent of the one in Feng Menglong's "Jiang Xingge," which on the one hand upholds gender and sexual norms by severely punishing participants in erotic games, while on the other still manages to offer the reader enticing scenarios and themes (e.g., adultery).[47]

Conclusion: Games and Ming-Qing Erotica

These examples of late Ming and early Qing literary visualizations of erotic games illustrate how these functions are shaped by the generic requirements of erotica on the one hand and the social norms of Ming-Qing society on the other. Based on my reading, I draw a number of preliminary conclusions.

First, games are commonly found in erotic novels and stories, as in other types of Ming-Qing fiction. Along with other quotidian details, games constitute part of the realism that serves as the backdrop for sexual relations and escapades, which do not take place in an asocial vacuum but are constantly policed by social norms. At the same time, the unrealities arising from games and play provide venues for exploring and displaying sexual acts, desires, relations, experiments, and imaginations.

Second, despite the ubiquity of games in Ming-Qing erotic fiction, games by themselves are not necessarily the focus of the narrative, nor are they necessarily explicitly sexual. Rather, their function is often auxiliary: they can be used to push forward sexual subplots or bring in themes of rivalry, seduction, adultery, defloration, or rape. This is particularly the case with nonsexual games drawn from the repertoire of real games (e.g., the drinking games in *Xiuta yeshi* and *Langshi*), which often serve to generate sex scenes and may be manipulated by seducers. Game scholars such as

Roger Caillois and Greg Costikyan take uncertainty to be an essential aspect of game. In *Uncertainty in Games*, for instance, Costikyan argues that uncertainty "is a primary characteristic of all sorts of games" and that "games require uncertainty to hold our interest, and that the struggle to master uncertainty is central to the appeal of games."[48] However, in instances where games are manipulated, uncertainty is weakened, if not done away with altogether, at least on the part of the scheming player, whose job it is to produce for the narrative desired game outcomes that lead to sex scenes. This does not mean that these games are no longer games. Nonetheless, it does shed light on the main function of these not-explicitly-sexual games in erotica: they are means to produce erotic content. On the other hand, even though these games may not be explicitly erotic, when used as a sort of foreplay for the sex acts they lead to, they can be tinged with sexual energies that may appeal to the reader. Moreover, even if these games remain totally unsexual, as devices deployed to push forward plots and create fiction, they may still appeal to the reader, who may take pleasure not only in erotic games but also in (fiction) reading itself.

In contrast with games with rules, the role-playing games examined above are marked by greater uncertainty, which indeed is a crucial part of these games' appeal, to both the players and the reader. While nonsexual games with rules often function to lead to "real" sex scenes, "make-believe" games—sexual games with rules, too, for that matter—are erotically appealing in themselves. In all the cases examined above—a shrewd maid's role-play as a man in an "educational" game with her innocent mistress (*Langshi*), a "pretend" game a lonely newlywed "signs up" for with an older woman, who is secretly replaced by a new player ("Jiang Xingge"), and a triangular relationship in which one of the players constantly switches between male and female roles (*Chundeng nao*), role-playing constitutes the sex content these narratives present to the reader. These role-playing games all bear the characteristics of uncertainty Caillois describes: "the course . . . cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative."[49] Even for schemers, such as Chen in "Jiang Xingge," the situation is uncertain. As there are no manipulatable rules, there seems to be greater uncertainty than in games governed by rules, as how the play will go depends on how the victims will react and if or how these victims will turn themselves into

players. (This points back to the discussion of Sanqiao'er's ambiguous status as victim and adulteress.) One could argue that such uncertainty spices up the narrative and even titillates the reader.

Even though improvised games such as the "spring feeling" card game in *Rou putuan* are derived from nonsexual games with rules, in terms of appeal, they share more affinity with role-playing games, as they are also sexually appealing in themselves. They do not have to lead to sex scenes in order to function; they constitute sex scenes themselves. Ultimately, despite differences in the concrete ways in which all these kinds of games contribute to the narrative, boundaries between them will collapse if we recognize that they share the same main function: with the unrealities they generate, they facilitate the narrative's overall supply of erotic titillation and enhance the variety of sexual vignettes, motifs, and themes.

Notes

1. In scholarship on the obsession with sensual subject matters in the late imperial China, historians and literature scholars approach the phenomenon from various angles. Focusing on intertwined discourses of *qing* (desire or passion) and *zhen* (authenticity), some treat the explosion of Ming-Qing literary depictions of desire and love as a reaction to the repressive tenets of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. See, for example, Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Sophie Volpp, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), 117–26. Some situate the period's fascination with desire, passion, and sexuality in the context of literati culture and social networking. See Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Volpp, *Worldly Stage*, particularly the chapter "The Literary Consumptions of Actors in Seventeenth-Century China." As youthful female sexuality is highly visible in Ming-Qing fiction, some scholars pay particular attention to women's culture. See, for example, Ellen Widmer, "Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 13, no. 1 (1992), 111–55, which studies Feng Xiaoqing, a late Ming woman known for her literary talent, unfortunate life, and obsession with Tang Xianzu's (1550–1616) *Mudan ting* (Peony Pavilion). Some scholars examine Ming-Qing sexual arrangements by examining the institution of marriage, with focus on polygamy and polygyny (see Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and*

Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995], while others turn to late imperial juridical system and actual legal cases (see Matthew Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000], and Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005]. A recent study of late Ming flourishing of pornographic works emphasizes the close ties between "pornographic expression" and "urban commoners and their habits of literary consumption." See Wu Cuncun, "Pornographic Modes of Expression and Nascent Chinese Modernity in Late Imperial China," *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus* 1, no. 3 (2016).

2. Richard Wang's *Ming Erotic Novellas: Genre, Consumption, and Religiosity in Cultural Practice* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011) includes a chapter (chapter 1, "The Ming Novella as a New Genre") on characteristics of the Ming novella, even though these characteristics—direct speech, for instance—are not specific to erotic novellas.

3. Some of the most helpful remarks on characteristics of the Ming-Qing erotic appear in Patrick Hanan's short introduction to his English translation of *Rou putuan*. See Patrick Hanan, trans., *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988), v–xiv.

4. James Cahill's online manuscript *Chinese Erotic Painting* includes a chapter entitled "Three Recurring Themes in the Part-Erotic Albums," which studies the recurring themes of "voyeurism," "deceiving the wife," and "love in the garden." See https://jamescahill.info.

5. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1961), 9–10.

6. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 8–9.

7. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 8–9.

8. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 8.

9. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 8.

10. Caillois classifies games into four main categories: *agôn*, which relies on competition; *alea*, which relies on chance or destiny; *mimicry*, which relies on "make-believe," and, finally, *ilinx*, which relies on shock. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 14–26.

11. Caillois, 12–13, offers the same warning.

12. Here I examine drinking games as only one type of games with rules commonly featured in late imperial erotica. For a fuller discussion of late imperial representation of drinking games and their role in gendered and sexually charged spaces, see Li Guo's chapter on the Qing author Yu Da's *The Dream in the Green Bower* in this volume.

13. For a useful discussion of the author Lü Tiancheng and the elite cultural environment in which Lü wrote the novel, see Wilt Idema, "'Blasé Literati': Lü T'ien-ch'eng and the Lifestyle of the Chiang-nan Elite in the Final Decades of the Wan-Li Period," in *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: With an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206–A.D. 1644*, ed. Robert Hans van Gulik (Leiden: Brill, 2004), xxxi–lix.

14. Lü Tiancheng, *Xiuta yeshi*, vol. 2 of *Siwuxie huibao*, edited by Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui (Taipei: Taiwan Daying Baike, 1995), 296. Although *jikouling* is not an explicitly erotic game, the strong physical orality it involves points to a subtle link between the verbal and the sexual. I thank the anonymous reader of this essay for suggesting this interesting point.

15. This novel is attributed to a Fengyuexuan Youxuanzi.

16. Late Ming and early Qing erotica often describes sex in military or competitive terms. Examples can be found in works such as Wuzhe Daoren, *Hailing yishi*, vol. 1 of *Siwuxie huibao*, ed. Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui (Taipei: Taiwan Daying Baike, 1995), and *Jin Ping Mei*.

17. I am indebted to the anonymous reader for the idea of games as "foreplay" in erotic fiction.

18. I use Patrick Hanan's English translations of the characters' names. Quotations are also from Hanan's translation.

19. Li Yu, *Rou putuan*, vol. 15 of Siwuxie huibao, ed. Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui (Taipei: Taiwan Daying Baike, 1995), 441; Patrick Hanan, trans., *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, 264.

20. Li Yu, *Rou putuan*, 441.

21. Li Yu, *Rou putuan*, 450.

22. I thank the anonymous reader for the point on the role of the male protagonist, the male author, and the male reader.

23. All these are commonly found themes in Ming-Qing erotic fiction, particularly in full-length works, for instance, the late Ming novel *Jin Ping Mei*.

24. Examples of the erotica-in-erotica convention can be found in numerous late imperial works, including *Rouputuan*, *Hailing yishi*, *Langshi*, and *Xiuta yeshi*, to name just a few. For a detailed discussion of the convention, see Jie Guo, "Erotica in Erotica: Adaptation and Somatic Translation in Late Imperial Chinese Erotic Culture," in *Erotic Literature in Translation and Adaptation*, ed. Johannes Kaminski (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018), 110–124.

25. James Cahill, "Introduction," in Robert Hans van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: With an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206–A.D. 1644* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), xxiii.

26. To my knowledge, this is the only mention of such erotic playing cards in

Ming-Qing literature. For Li Yu's inventiveness in literary creation as well as his "self-invention," see Patrick Hanan, *Invention of Li Yu* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

27. For all quotations from the novel, I use David Roy's translation. In his translation, Roy adopts the Wade-Giles romanization system. To avoid confusion, I convert all names using the pinyin system.

28. David Roy, trans. *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei*, vol. 1–5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993–2013), 145; Mei Jie, ed., *Jin Ping Mei cihua* (Taipei: Liren Shuju, 2007), 392.

29. Mei, *Jin Ping Mei cihua*, 392.

30. I thank my anonymous reader for pointing out the relevance of wordplay to the idea of playfulness.

31. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 19.

32. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 8.

33. Fengyue xuan youxuanzi, *Langshi*, in vol. 4 of *Siwuxie huibao*, edited by Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui (Taipei: Taiwan Daying Baike, 1995), 97.

34. Fengyue xuan youxuanzi, *Langshi,* 98.

35. See Fengyue xuan youxuanzi, *Langshi*, chapter 15.

36. It is interesting to note that Granny Xue's storytelling is nested within the narrator's; this "nested structure" echoes the convention of "erotica in erotica," which is commonly found in Ming-Qing erotic fiction. I thank the anonymous reader for calling my attention to the doubling of storytelling here.

37. Feng Menglong, "Jiang Xingge chonghui zhenzhushan," in *Yushi mingyan* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1995), 22.

38. Feng, "Jiang Xingge," 23.

39. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 6, 9.

40. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 6, 9.

41. This novel is attributed to a Zuili yanshui sanren, who, according to Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui, lived in the late Ming and early Qing period—see "Publications Notes" in Zuili yanshui sanren, *Chundeng nao*, in vol. 18 of Siwuxie huibao, edited by Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui (Taipei: Taiwan Daying Baike, 1995), 229.

42. Zuili yanshui sanren, *Chundeng nao*, 274–75.

43. Zuili yanshui sanren, *Chundeng nao*, 275.

44. Zuili yanshui sanren, *Chundeng nao*, 276.

45. Zuili yanshui sanren, *Chundeng nao*, 277.

46. See Keith McMahon, *Polygamy and Sublime Passion: Sexuality in China on the Verge of Modernity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

47. The other two chapters in this section of the volume, by Patricia Sieber and

Li Guo respectively, also explore gendered representations of games in imperial China. Their discussion resonates with the idea that games are never played or represented in ideological, discursive, or cultural vacuum.

48. Greg Costikyan, *Uncertainty in Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 9, 2.

49. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 9.