CHAPTER 3

The Male Homoerotic Wanton Woman in Late Ming Fiction

Mark Stevenson

In a recent paper examining representations of female same-sex desire in Ming and Qing literature, Laura Wu argued that unlike the literature of male same-sex desire, which has recourse to its own grammar of conventional allusions as well as those of heteroerotic romance, female same-sex desire has “no medium but the images, metaphors and allusions favoured by conventional heteroerotic romance,” the bond between husband and wife being “the only analogy available to them to describe their relation.”1 This perceptive observation raises some equally interesting questions regarding the wider translation of gendered signs across “boundaries” of gender and sexuality in homoerotic fiction, and in this essay I examine an example of translating or borrowing of gendered images in the other direction, where the patriarchal discourse of heteroerotic sexuality is imported into male same-sex narratives. In raising these questions my aim is to expand on Wu’s observation, a comment on the narrow range of figures available for the portrayal of female same-sex desire, by acknowledging cultural restrictions on the figures available for the construction of male same-sex scenarios, in this case a scenario where there would appear to have been no choice other than to turn to a heterosexual analogy as “the only analogy available to them.”

It is also important to acknowledge that the literary comparison of men against standards for women and feminine example was not unknown in China, most famously in relation to the feminised position of men in political service in relation to the ruler. Such examples are often employed to draw attention to both the fluidity of gender categories in pre-modern China and their politicisation. As Wu’s analysis of representations of female same-sex desire tells us, both fluidity and prescription applied in different ways for men and women and how they were imagined and constructed. At the same time, the question of when in a narrative, in a poem, or in history such borrowings or inversions occur has only recently become a topic of scholarly discussion,

and it is a question that must continue to be addressed if we want to clarify the role of gender ideology in Chinese literature.² Do gender borrowings and interchangeability³ in literature erode, refashion, or consolidate configurations of gender and power? As will become clear, the borrowing I will be examining is a negative comparison, a translation not from ‘heteroerotic romance’ so much as from ‘heteroerotic debauchery’ (keeping in mind that in debauchery, someone is ‘debauched’ by someone else) that is carried over into the realm of male homoerotic excess: hence the invention in fiction of the “male homoerotic wanton woman,” the portrayal of men in homoerotic scenarios whose rapturous response to penetration leads to their being metaphorically associated not simply with women, but with wanton women.

In proceeding with a reading of literary borrowing in late Ming homoerotic texts I have been made aware that there are in fact very few literary readings of the genre. Giovanni Vitiello, Sophie Volpp, and Wu Cuncun have all engaged in close readings of homoerotic texts, but the dominant tendency is to read texts, if not as the theory of the practice, at least as indices of sexual ideology and same-sex desire in late imperial Chinese cultural history.⁴ In other words,

² A number of significant works touching on the question appeared with the new millennium: see Zhou Zuyan, Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003); Song Geng, The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004); and Martin Huang, Negotiating Masculinity in Late Imperial China (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006). Focusing on representations of male same-sex desire, Giovanni Vitiello’s The Libertine’s Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) can now also be added to the list. Each of these monographs acknowledges the pioneering (and ongoing) work of Kam Louie on masculinity in Chinese culture, Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Literature provided similar possibilities in other cultural contexts, and gender crossings played an important role in the development of the English and European novel, see Heike Bauer, “Sexuality in Enlightenment Popular Culture,” in A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Enlightenment, ed. Julie Peakman (London: Berg, 2011), 159–183.

³ In his introduction to Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China, Martin Huang introduces the theme of ‘interchangeability’ around which his book is to some extent organised, and the question of “why, in trying to come to terms with their own gender identities, many late imperial Chinese literati wrote so much about the feminine, sometimes even appealing to the interchangeability between the masculine and the feminine, while never doubting the naturalness of gender inequality,” ⁹. On the new prominence of the feminine, see my reference to Keith McMahon’s work below.

⁴ Giovanni Vitiello, whose project has seen the most sustained interest in literary analysis, describes his book as concerned with “ideologies of masculinity and romantic love as they are represented in fictional works spanning roughly three hundred years,” The Libertine’s Friend,