EROTICISM IN LATE MING, EARLY QING FICTION: 
THE BEAUTEOUS REALM AND 
THE SEXUAL BATTLEFIELD

BY
KEITH MCMAHON

CONTENTS

Introduction ....................................................... 217
Fiction and the Ars Erotica ........................................ 219
Censorship and the Xiaoshuo ..................................... 221
A List of Erotic Fiction ........................................... 223
Harmonious Love ................................................... 227
The Beauteous Realm ............................................. 227
Sex Between Men .................................................. 229
Antagonistic Love .................................................. 235
Golden Lotus and Prayer Mat of Flesh ......................... 237
Er pai .......................................................... 244
Temporal and Formal Patterns of the Erotic Story ........... 246
Framing the Sexual Act: the Sexual Act Made Public ........ 255
Concluding Remarks ............................................... 261

Introduction

Why did Chinese fiction have so much explicit eroticism in the late Ming but then by and large purge itself of this element soon into the early Qing? To be sure, such explicitness had a long tradition in China, but mainly in the form of sex manuals, not narrative literature. Nor did contents of this sort entirely disappear in the Qing, though they did tend to be confined to xiaoshuo with little more than erotic entertainment as goal.1

1 A few explanatory notes: The Ming dynasty is succeeded by the Qing in 1644. Xiaoshuo 小說 is a substitute-word for fiction, novels and stories. Abbreviations used below are: GJ for Gujin xiaoshuo 古今小說, TY for Jingshi tongyan 警世通言, HY for Xingshi hengyan 醒世恒言, SDT for Shi dian tou 石點頭, PA for Pai-an jingqi 拍案驚奇, EK for Erke pai-an jingqi 二刻, and Huan for Huanxi yuanjia 歡喜冤家. The editions of these works will usually be cited in the text and are as follows: Feng Menglong 滅夢龍, Gujin xiaoshuo, (Taipei, Shijie shuju, 1958); Jingshi tongyan, (Taipei, Shijie shuju, 1958); and Xingshi hengyan, (Taipei, Shijie shuju, 1959). Ling Mengchu 楓묭初, Pai-an jingqi, (Hong Kong, Zhengzhong shuju, 1966); and Erke pai-an jingqi, (Taipei, Zhengzhong shuju, 1960). Lang Xian 浪仙, putative author, Shi dian tou, (Taipei, Guangwen shuju, 1980). Others will be identified below.
But entertainment and sensation are only a part of what the seventeenth-century works offer. Though people decide for themselves such levels of appeal, let me naively assume that when they read an account of sexual intercourse they hope, in some vicarious but also assured way, to feel the pleasure that the characters are presumably enjoying. What is a reader to do, then, when a session that is proceeding nicely suddenly goes awry because the man takes an overdose of aphrodisiac, brings on a case of priapism, and dies because he cannot ejaculate? The point is that successful and harmonious love is rarely portrayed in detail in these works. When it comes to details — such as those of male endurance — sexuality is presented as fundamentally problematic. The problems are not the superficial ones of erotic tales with token moralistic frameworks. The general theme is that sexuality can and must be enjoyed, but only provisionally or even accidentally; excess is dangerous and unhealthy.

In defiance of problems and limitations is the sexual self that appears in these works, which is essentially the imperial self who is free to act at will. The Chinese ars erotica provides a distant model for this self and is always an underlying model for these xiaoshuo. The selves in the sex manuals are the emperor (or his microcosmic likenesses) and his beloved consorts, who are the natural receivers of his earthly-divine act of love. He suffers no restraints except his own innate capacities, which the manuals teach how to nurture and enhance; the women suffer no restraints because they have naturally superior capacities and because they are his teachers (in mythic times, the Pure Girl, Su Nü 素女, teaches the Yellow Emperor the art of sex), his counselors, and bearers of offspring, i.e., links with the future. Such an arrangement illustrates an ideal form of traditional patriarchy, where the center is occupied by the benign patriarch who is the source of all virtue and energy. Women are presumed to encompass him from all sides, to ground and overarch his very existence. In such a cosmic context the question of equality is nonexistent, as is the one of sexual rivalry.

In the xiaoshuo, of course, questions of compatibility are open; and the sexual battle is not necessarily easygoing. It is often as if partners vie for the possession of pleasure and power. The way their struggle is enacted tells us something about the history of sexual attitudes in late traditional China, in particular, about how men and women play their roles in sexual and other social interactions. As a major part of the critical function of these xiaoshuo, erotic detail not only undresses the characters in the story but also the society outside. Undressing is a word for describing the way these ab-