"ROTTING AWAY INTO A WOMAN": CASTRATION, GENDER, AND BIOLOGICAL SEX IN LATE IMPERIAL FICTION

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Ming-Qing transition, philosopher Tang Zhen 唐甄 (1630–1704) wrote of eunuchs: "If a castrated individual can become a female, then [the eunuch] is acceptable, but if they cannot do this, then they remain a male" 奄若化為女子則可, 不然, 固男也.[1] Here, Tang suggests the topical question: without sexual potency, does a castrated male become female?[2] And if not, what is to be made of an emasculated male? Due to their perceived part in the dynastic fall of the Ming, eunuchs were a subject of curiosity and unease among Qing scholars like Tang, who began to question the effects of castration upon the male body. Castration, beginning with its earliest usage as a commutation for the death sentence, signaled not only social death but an entrance into the *yin* 陰, the cosmological force associated with the feminine and counteracted by the masculine *yang* 陽.[3] Through the removal of the entire sexual organ, the castrated male was removed from Confucian society and sexually neutered in a way that was thought to render him more female than male.[4] Eunuchs, who were also often illiterate, possessed neither sexual nor social determiners of masculinity.[5]

Narratives of castration, whether of eunuchs, transformation into the female, or male-male relationships, offer a glimpse into late imperial definitions of gender, by illustrating when and how a male body was no longer considered that of a man. In this paper, I examine two short stories by Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680): "Cuiya lou" 翠雅樓 ("The House of Gathered Refinements") from his collection *Shi'er lou* 十二樓 *(The Twelve Towers)*, and "Nan mengmu jiaohe san qian" 男孟母教合三遷 ("A Male

[1] Tang Zhen 唐甄, *Qian shu: shang xia pian* 潛書:上下篇 (Jinan: Shandong quan sheng guan yin shuju chong kan, guangxu 32, 1906), section 14, *chinu* 恥奴.

[2] In this paper, I use "sexual potency" to mean the ability to penetrate.

[3] Michael Hoeckelmann, "To Rot and Not to Die: Punitive Emasculation in Early and Medieval China," *T'oung Pao* 105, no. 1–2 (2019): 1-6.

[4] Melissa S. Dale, "Unrobing the Emasculated Body," in *Inside the World of the Eunuch: A Social History of the Emperor's Servants in Qing China*, (Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 53-54.

[5] Ibid, 55.

Mencius's Mother Raises Her Son Properly By Moving House Three Times") in his *Wu shengxi* 无声戏 (*Silent Operas*). Alongside these, I also analyze Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) "Ren yao" 人妖 ("Human Demon") and a fictionalized account of a historical late Ming castration report recorded in *Xing shi yan* 型世言 (*Exemplary Words for the World*). As my analysis of these fictional castration narratives will show, the presence of literally or metaphorically castrated men threatened masculine identity. A masculinity that is defined by its opposition to a constructed femininity is necessarily a fragile existence, at all times endangered by a fall into the feminine.[6]

Male-male Relationships: The Gender of "Emasculation"

In this section, I will examine two fictional narratives of male-male relationships written by Li Yu in which the penetrated male is ultimately castrated. In one of the two stories, "Cuiya lou," Li Yu tells the story of Quan Ruxiu 權汝修, a young man who is in a relationship with two older men, both of whom alternate in their penetration of him. He is also courted by a lascivious official, whom he avoids out of virtuous loyalty to his partners. In the end, however, he succumbs to the official's plot and is castrated while unconscious and received into the court as a eunuch, setting the stage for his eventual revenge.[7]

It is generally accepted that in late imperial times only the penetrated man would be seen as a kind of "other;" the penetrator, on the other hand, was largely free from stigma, or even any permanent label associated with the act of homosexuality. Nearly all late imperial depictions of male-male relationships feature a rigid gendered dichotomy of penetrant-penetrated, in which the penetrated becomes a feminized, figuratively—or in the case of Li Yu's examples, literally—castrated individual.[8] The final commentary of Quan Ruxiu's story, sometimes attributed to Li Yu, is a pronounced expression of this fact:

[6] The portrayal of eunuchs in late imperial fiction is a topic deserving of its own critical attention. In this paper, I focus solely on the depiction of castration, or the transformation of a non-castrated man into a castrated one. While this transformation sometimes leads to the man becoming a eunuch, it is not always the case, as some narratives explore outcomes beyond the eunuch role. I acknowledge the distinctions between these categories—castrated man, eunuch, and broader transformations—but these differences do not diminish the central point of my analysis: that castration serves as a narrative tool to interrogate gender boundaries, masculinity, and the instability of these constructs in late imperial fiction.

[7] Li Yu 李漁, "Cuiya lou" 翠雅樓, in *Shi'er lou* 十二樓, annotated by Tao Xunruo 陶恂若 (Taibei shi: Sanmin shuju, 2019), 109–128.

[8] Martin W. Huang, "Male-Male Sexual Bonding and Male Friendship in Late Imperial China," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 2 (2013): 312–13; 329.

> Since anyone who acts a *longyang* is using their body as a concubine or wife, then their remaining penis is like a superfluous tumor; cutting it off is really a suitable thing. But it is only that the boy must be willing of his own accord, like You Ruilang from an earlier work, for this to be appropriate.
> 凡作龍陽者, 既以身為妾婦, 則所存之人道原屬贅瘤, 割而去之, 誠為便事。但須此童自發其心, 如初集之尤瑞郎則可. [9]

There is a tremendous amount of significance in this statement. I will analyze the first half in this section and return to the second half in a later discussion. First, the usage of *longyang,* a term used to denote male-male relationships and individuals engaging in such relationships, reflects conclusions about late imperial attitudes towards male-male sexual relationships. In Li Yu's commentary, *longyang* refers only to the penetrated.[10] The accompanying verb *zuo*, meaning to do or assume the part of [a *longyang*], is also telling, as its usage precludes a concept of biological inclination or even the assignment of a fixed identity. Next, the phrase "using their body as a concubine or wife" (*yi shen wei qiefu*) is noteworthy in its interpretation of gender identity. The commentator draws an equivalence between being penetrated and the female gender, thus defining femininity through a phallocentric notion of what can be done to them by male genitalia. In this worldview, a male who submits to penetration is temporarily discarding his masculinity (defined by the ability to penetrate) for femininity (defined by receiving of penetration and the incapability to penetrate). I have used the word "temporarily" to indicate that the transformation is not permanent, because as long as he remains in possession of male genitalia—however "superfluous" it may be deemed—he is still able to penetrate. However, if the ability to penetrate is the only important separation between a man and "a concubine or wife," then it is interesting that the commentator actually recommends castration for the penetrated male. It appears that, in order to reconcile the question of why a sexually potent man would relinquish his masculinity by assuming the role of the penetrated in a male-male relationship, the simplest resolution seems to be stripping him of his ability to penetrate entirely, thereby "rectifying" the identity of the penetrated male and his concomitant threat to phallocentric definitions of gender.

We see an example of this "rectification" in Li Yu's "Nan mengmu jiaohe san qian," in which the fourteen *sui* You Ruilang 尤瑞郎 becomes the "bride" of the

[9] Li Yu, "Cuiya lou," 128.

[10] For further discussion, see Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 25–27.

older Xu Jifang 許季芳.[11] After You castrates himself, he lives the rest of his life as a female. Unsurprisingly, from the beginning of the story, You conforms nicely with heteroerotic ideas of hierarchical male-female relationships. He is explicitly female-coded, from his submissive loyalty to the bride price that Xu pays for him. As a prepubescent child, his only possible role is that of the penetrated:

> When he first married [using the verb for females] Jifang, he was only fourteen *sui*, and his penis was the size of a pinkie finger. When Jifang slept with him, it was docile and didn't get in the way, just like a woman.
> 他出嫁季芳之時, 才四十歲, 腰下的人道, 大如小指, 季芳同睡之時, 帖然無礙, 及像婦女一般.[12]

From this it is clear that You's prepubescent impotence and vulnerability is conflated with the heteroerotic role of a female. When Xu notices that You's genitalia is maturing, he sighs that, "Once the kidney water starts to circulate, feelings of lust arise and one starts thinking of women. As soon as one thinks of women, then men become one's rival" 及至腎水一通, 色心便起, 就要想起婦人來了;一想到婦人身上, 就要與男子為仇.[13] From Xu's perspective, it would be difficult to imagine that an adult man would submit to penetration, trading his masculinity for figurative castration. It is undoubtedly from a similar understanding of masculinity that Ming-Qing fascination around eunuchs was especially concerned with those castrated after sexual maturity.[14]

Instead, as You Ruilang never truly enters into sexual maturation, his gender as a feminized object of penetration remains unchanged throughout, and thus his character reinforces a gender binary of penetrant-penetrated central to heteroerotic identities. After You's castration, Li Yu writes that the scar "looked exactly like a woman's vulva" 就像婦人的牝戶一般, and that "the difference between him and woman was originally not much at all; now that even [what made him different] is gone, how can you tell them apart?" 所異者幾希之間耳;如今連幾希之間都是了, 還有什麼分辨?[15] This underscores that the change from the male into the female is a process of contrastive reduction, in which it is not only the relative identity of the

[11] *Sui* does not exactly correspond to "years of age." Each child begins from one *sui* at birth, and another *sui* is added for every lunar New Year. Thus, You may have been twelve or thirteen years of age.

[12] Li Yu 李漁, "Nan mengmu jiaohe san qian" 男孟母教合三遷, in *Wu shengxi* 無聲戲 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2018), 94.

[13] Li Yu, "Nan mengmu jiaohe san qian," 95.

[14] Keith McMahon, "The Potent Eunuch: The Story of Wei Zhongxian," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 1 (2014): 3.

[15] Li Yu, "Nan mengmu jiaohe san qian," 96.

penetrated, but also the absence of the phallus, and not the presence of female sexuality, that defines the feminine. In fact, Li Yu's depiction of You suggests that a castrated male could become a better "female" than an actual woman. By relinquishing his literal and symbolic manhood, he commits the ultimate self-sacrifice, embodying the peak of Neo-Confucian feminine virtues—a feat which is paradoxically impossible for a woman to achieve.[16]

You's "feminization" represents an adoption of social gender, or the attire of the female impersonator, Neo-Confucian female virtues, and playing the "submissive" role. However, the biology of a woman could not have been less important in such male-male dynamics: instead, the symbols of female gender reflect a sexual desire for power discrepancy, associating female gender not with the biology of a female body but with the social products of female gender, a point which Li Yu suggests through an explicit irony in his narrative. Xu states that women have "seven disgusting attributes" 七可厭, which are a mix of biological traits, such as breasts and menstruation, and products of gender, such as reliance on men and using cosmetics. However, after his castration, You assumes all of the attributes of female gender that Xu initially claimed to hate.[17] Ironically, this elicits no disgust from Xu, showing that it is not the products of gender which he despises, but rather biological traits.

In contrast to You, Xu offers a case of a man who transcends the "submissive" role.[18] Xu was explicitly a catamite in his youth: when as an adult he consummates his relationship with the prepubescent You, the accompanying verse reads, "Why is the groom so conscious of his pain? Ten years ago he was once a bride" 何事新郎偏識苦, 十年前是一新娘.[19] In the beginning of the story, Li Yu also details how Xu reaches puberty, succeeds in the civil service exams, and takes a wife, in clear terms reclaiming his masculinity both sexually and socially. Even his son, whom You raises, is the target of sexual advances in his childhood, before ultimately succeeding in the civil exams, the main social marker of masculinity in Ming-Qing times.[20] Through these depictions, Li Yu's image of sexual and social potency are fused into a single definition of masculinity, one that emerges with sexual maturation.

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[16] For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Wu, Cuncun, *Homoerotic sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (Routledge Curzon, 2004).

[17] Li Yu, "Nan mengmu jiaohe san qian," 87; 96-97.

[18] See Matthew H. Sommer, "The Penetrated Male in Late Imperial China: Judicial Constructions and Social Stigma," *Modern China* 23, no. 2 (1997): 161.

[19] Li Yu, "Nan mengmu jiaohe san qian," 94.

[20] Dale, "Unrobing the Emasculated Body," 54.

Prior to castration, adult eunuchs had often been "deficient men"—not necessarily sexually impotent, but socially impotent.[21] Becoming a eunuch would allow an individual to bypass civil exams, creating a potential route to political power that set aside both physical and social masculinity.[22] It is interesting to note that in both these fictional narratives of castration and the recorded lives of many real eunuchs, all had failed to succeed in avenues of traditional masculinity prior to castration, whether through sexual or social definitions. The story of You Ruilang reflects this fact, but introduces a complication with his male-female transformation. Through castration, a man can choose the "submissive," but he cannot become the "submissive" insofar as the non-choice of female gender construction is tied to a female body.[23] Even after castration, a loss of the sexual potency that characterizes the masculine, a man can still theoretically rebuild his masculinity by relying on social potency, as I will explore later in the aforementioned story of Quan Ruxiu. Even a female-coded man is awarded a masculine agency in his ability to negotiate identity.

Deficient Males and the Story of Li Liangyu

In prominent Ming physician Li Shizhen's 李時珍 (1518–1593) classifications of sex, several conditions are given for an individual to fall under the categories of the five *feinan* 非男 ("false male") and five *feinü* 非女 ("false female"). The last of the five *feinan* is defined as follows: "The changeling has a body that is both male and female, called colloquially the 'two-forms'" 變者, 體兼男女, 俗名二形.[24] It is extremely notable that the hermaphrodite is characterized under *feinan*, a male role, rather than *feinü,* as it reveals that male genitalia and the theoretical ability to penetrate take priority over the presence of female genitalia. A woman's ability to conceive and birth appear of lesser importance in the assignment of sex: four out of five of the "false females" are impenetrable.[25] Indeed, infertility also provided no barrier for You Ruilang to receive acceptance under a female identity, which was instead defined primarily by penetrability and the inability to penetrate others. In the following story of Li Liangyu 李良雨, these themes are again introduced through a fantastical interpretation of a male-female sex change.

In the second year of the Longqing reign of the Ming dynasty (1568), a report was submitted to the emperor of a man named Li Liangyu who had

[21] Robert B. Crawford, "Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty," *T'oung Pao* 49*,* no. 3 (1961): 124.

[22] Dale, "Unrobing the Emasculated Body," 54.

[23] That is, unless—as in some stories—a woman is able to miraculously produce male sexual organs, her biology has confined her to a "submissive" gender identity.

[24] Li Shizhen 李時珍, *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目, Qing printing (repr. Beijing: Beijing ai ru sheng shuzi hua jishu yanjiu zhongxin, 2009), 52.7785.

[25] Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu*, 52.7785.

mysteriously transformed into a woman.[26] Such inexplicable sex swaps were often interpreted as omens of dynastic insecurity sent down from the heavens.[27] Here, I will focus on a fictionalized narrative of the event, recorded in Lu Renlong's 陸人龍 (1587–1644) *Xingshi yan* 型世言. The strange event is retold and re-summarized several times throughout the text, which helpfully illuminates the most salient points of Li's transformation in the mind of its author. The first step in his transformation is that "[he] developed open sores because he slept with prostitutes, and was sick for several months" 因闕(嫖)生了便毒廣瘡, 病了幾個月.[28] The subversion of masculinity, through its literal or figurative castration, thus becomes unequivocally associated with sexual excess. This connection exists elsewhere as well: as the initial purpose of eunuchs was to serve the emperor's concubines, their existence and number rested upon the emperor's continued, or growing, indulgence in women. Coupled with ardent vilification by the scholar class, this association turned eunuchs into a marker of the debauchery of the late Ming and dynastic fall.[29] Even the author of this story situates Li's transformation as an omen that the eunuchs, men who were "not male and not female," were causing havoc within the government.[30] Notably, Li's story of castration is also remarkably similar to the fictionalized narrative of the infamous Ming eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627) featured in *Jingshi yinyang meng* 警世陰陽夢 (*Yin and yang dreams to awaken the world*), in which Wei loses his genitalia after being exposed to miasma at a brothel.[31]

After his engagement with prostitutes, Li's transformation progresses with the rotting of his penis, which quickly spreads to the rest of his genitalia. Even his beard falls off, eliciting a comment from his business partner and future husband that he looks like "a beautiful eunuch" 標致一個好內官.[32] It is significant that the very first effect of Li's transformative illness rids him of his ability to penetrate, the primary identifier of masculinity. At the height of his pain, he is then literally transported to the underworld, where he dies and wakes up as a biological female. He is confused and ashamed, but "joyful that he had become a woman, as all the

[26] Cited in Charlotte Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 9, no. 2, 1988: 9.

[27] Ibid, 9–10.

[28] Lu Renlong 陸人龍, "Xi'an fu fu bie qi, heyang xian nan hua nü" 西安府夫別妻郃陽縣男化女, in Xing shi yan 型世言, Ming printing, (repr. Beijing: Beijing ai ru sheng shuzi hua jishu yanjiu zhongxin, 2011) 37.1611–1612.

[29] Crawford, "Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty," 115; Norman A. Kutcher, "'A Time of Pure Yin': Forging the Seventeenth-Century Consensus on the Nature of Ming Eunuch Power," in *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule,* (University of California Press, 2018), 27-29; 38; 124.

[30] Lu Renlong, "Xi'an fu fu bie qi, heyang xian nan hua nü," 37.1599.

[31] Guo Qing 國清, Jingshi yinyang meng 警世陰陽夢, Ming printing (repr. Beijing: Beijing ai ru sheng shuzi hua jishu yanjiu zhongxin, 2011), 6.132.

[32] Lu Renlong, "Xi'an fu fu bie qi, heyang xian nan hua nü," 37.1599.

pain had vanished" 喜得已變成女, 這些病痛都沒了.[33] As the rest of the story shows, death thus marks not only his physical transformation, but a social transformation: While in Li's case the pain of manhood was literal, it is not hard to imagine that escaping into a femininity defined by phallocentric gender roles might be tempting for some men who felt themselves "deficient" by standards of masculinity at the time.

Unlike You Ruilang, whose biological change ends with castration, Li becomes a biological woman. However, though he becomes reproductively capable as a woman, the vocabulary used to describe his transformation make little mention of that fact: instead, he has "rotted away into a woman" 潰爛成女.[34] He is defined, in particularly degrading terms, by what he has lost instead of what he has gained. The reactions of Li's family and the townspeople are also noteworthy, as they insist on a gender binary seemingly at odds with theoretical concepts of *yin* and *yang*. His brother says, "Men are men, women are women, if you are castrated then you can be a eunuch at most; there's never been a man who can become a woman" 男自男, 女自女, 閹割了也只做得太監, 並不曾有了做女人的事. Though, as Charlotte Furth notes in her study on biology and gender boundaries in sixteenth and seventeenth century China, there seemed to be a noticeable split between the implications of traditional cosmology and popular understanding of gender, which were perhaps less swayed by theoretical explanations.[35]

But despite the incredulity of the townspeople, Li's entrance into femininity is fact within the story, and begins through a literal castration-death. Upon discovering that Li's crotch is now flat, his former business partner becomes determined to penetrate him "regardless of whether he is now male or female" 不管他是男是女, further reinforcing the identification of masculinity as a component of penetrant-penetrated dynamics.[36] Initially without a wife or family of his own, no education and a money-losing business, Li Liangyu fails as a male, and so the narrative transforms him into a man without masculinity: a female. Through a denial of "deficient males," his story presents a dualistic interpretation of gender, reinforcing traditional masculinity as a union of phallocentric social and sexual potency.

A Man Among Women: The Fear of Hidden Potency

The short tale "Ren yao" centers around the fear of a sexually potent "man in woman's clothing." Written by Pu Songling in his celebrated Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋誌

[33] Lu Renlong, "Xi'an fu fu bie qi, heyang xian nan hua nü," 37.1601.
[34] Ibid, 37.1625.
[35] Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females," 11.
[36] Lu Renlong, "Xi'an fu fu bie qi, heyang xian nan hua nü," 37.1604.

異 (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*), it tells the story of Ma Wanbao and a young woman who moves into the home of Ma's neighbor.[37] After Ma develops a sexual interest in the woman, he hatches a plot with his wife to trick the woman into their home so that he can rape her. His wife pretends to be sick, and they ask the woman to treat her; she agrees, but insists that there be no men in the home. Unbeknownst to the woman, Ma switches places with his wife before the treatment starts. Quickly, an unexpected scene breaks out:

> The woman brushed the man's abdomen, gradually moving down towards the navel. Halting her hand without massaging, she suddenly reached for his private area, encountering something firm. Startled and frightened, she behaved as if she had accidentally caught a snake or scorpion, quickly attempting to escape. The man restrained her, his hand moving between her thighs, where he felt something hanging and full, certainly a formidable organ.
> 女即撫生腹, 漸至臍下。停手不摩, 遽探其私, 觸腕崩騰。女驚怖之狀, 不啻誤捉蛇蠍, 急起欲遁。生沮之, 以手入其股際, 則擂垂盈掬, 亦偉器也.[38]

The woman is actually a man named Wang Erxi, who travels around the country disguised as a woman in order to rape women, which he has reportedly committed sixteen times. Ironically, both male characters are attempting to rape the other, under the mistaken impression that the other man is actually female. Instead of reporting Wang to the magistrate, Ma then chooses to castrate him on account of his retained sexual interest in the other man. Later, Wang's new identity as a female is socially accepted when the suspicious townspeople order the neighbor to feel his crotch through his clothes, and the neighbor concludes that he is indeed a woman. The implication once again is that a female can be defined by an absence of male genitalia.[39]

With this, a new question emerges: why is Ma absolved from his act of attempted rape, when for the same crime Wang is presented as rightfully castrated? The principal difference between Ma and Wang rests in the outward contrast between dominance and submissiveness. Wang had assumed the social identity of a female, but without the absolute inability to penetrate which renders a person both

[37] As I discuss later, the word renyao has many connotations in Chinese, and is difficult to translate faithfully into English. For more analysis of the title, see Judith Zeitlin, Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale (Redwood City: Stanford University Press 1993), 102–104.
[38] Pu Songling 蒲松齡, "Ren yao" 人妖, in *Quanben xinzhu liaozhai zhiyi* 全本新注聊齋誌異, edited by Zhu Qikai 朱其鎧. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2007.
[39] Wang is called a stone-woman 石女, explaining his reproductive inability.

sexually and socially impotent. Thus, his crime is greater, as it destabilizes the expectation of male dominance that the gender binary ensures. Castration "rectifies" Wang's crime of confusing the gender binary, an interpretation to which Pu Songling attests in his final commentary:

> The Historian of the Strange says: "Ma Wanbao can be called someone who is good at making use of others. Children like to play with crabs, but fear their pincers, so they break their pincers and raise the crabs. If a person can understand this, then they can rule the world with it."
> 異史氏曰:「馬萬寶可謂善於用人者矣。兒童喜蟹可把玩，而又畏其鉗，因斷其鉗而蓄之。嗚呼，苟得此意，以治天下可也。」[40]

This comment is also reminiscent of the warning central to "A Chivalrous Woman" 俠女, another story from Pu's Strange Tales, in which the male protagonist has a fleeting relationship with a male fox spirit. The fox spirit ultimately subverts his identity as the penetrated when he attempts to penetrate the protagonist's female lover, a transgression for which the fox spirit is ultimately killed.[41]

In comparing the characters of Wang and the fox spirit, it is relevant to return to Tang Zhen's discourse on eunuchs. Addressing the potential for a eunuch's sexual and political power, Tang writes:

> As for things that act as a demon, people are aware of its demonic nature, and therefore its harm is little; but if a man acts as a demon, people are not aware of its demonic nature, therefore his harm is great […] A fox spirit is one matter, but a renyao will destroy us.
> 凡物為妖，人知其妖，其害小;若人為妖，人不知其妖，其害大。[…] 狐妖猶可，人妖殺我. [42]

This is a play on the word *renyao*, also the title of Pu Songling's story, which denotes a "dangerous man who appears as a woman." In this case, however, Tang is using *renyao* as an analogy to describe the danger of eunuchs, who like the *renyao* assume a submissive identity in society, but, as Tang maintains, are in fact both sexually and socially potent.[43] Thus, their potential threat is magnified, as opposed to the catamite whose transgression is perceivable and correctable.

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[40] Pu Songling, "Ren yao" 人妖, 2007.
[41] Pu Songling 蒲松齡, "Xia nü" 俠女, in *Quanben xinzhu liaozhai zhiyi* 全本新注聊齋誌異, edited by Zhu Qikai 朱其鎧. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2007.
[42] Tang Zhen, *Qian shu*, section 14, *chinu* 恥奴.
[43] Ibid.

The fear or invention of a hidden sexual potency is a common narrative, notably present in the infamous story of Lao Ai 嫪毐 (259–238), a eunuch whose genitalia was allegedly intact, and his illicit relationship with the Qin emperor's mother.[44] During the Qing, the fear that eunuchs might regrow their genitalia was so pronounced that biannual inspections were performed.[45] By isolating sexual potency—regardless of whether it was factual or fictitious—as the precondition for social power, fears of destabilized masculinity could be channeled into controlling the physicality of sexual potency as a way to protect the social dominance of male individuals.

Transcending Castration: A Paradox of Power

Although a castrated male body was cut off from sexual potency, he could rebuild himself through the cultural extension of phallocentric sexual potency: social potency. Even the famous historian Sima Qian (145–86), who was castrated as a commutation of the death sentence, appeared to rely on the completion his *Records of the Grand Historian* (史記) as a continuation of his Confucian-defined masculinity.[46] For male bodies, sexual power and social power could be commutable. On the other hand, a socially powerful man without the ability to penetrate was fundamentally destabilizing to notions of masculinity, which delineates the primary difference between male and female by the roles of penetrant/penetrator. Thus, it is unsurprising that popular public opinion sought to resolve this paradox by attaching impossible narratives of sexual potency, through miraculous penis regrowth or magical regenerating potions, to eunuchs with considerable social power, such as Wei Zhongxian.[47] These fictitious narratives of sexual dominance recentered masculinity around penetrative power by inserting corrective elements of sexual potency.

An example of this is seen through the portrayal of castration and reconstruction in Li Yu's "Cuiya lou." After Quan Ruxiu is wrongfully castrated through the scheme of a lecherous official, he sets upon a plot of revenge. Here I would like to first return to the ending commentary on his story, which compares his castration with that of You Ruilang, with the conclusion that Quan's castration was inappropriate due to his lack of consent.[48] Apparently, even a penetrated man must make the choice to remove his sexual potency. It is also quite relevant that Quan is implied to be older than You, and presumably sexually mature at the time of

[44] McMahon, "The Potent Eunuch: The Story of Wei Zhongxian," 6.
[45] Dale, "Unrobing the Emasculated Body," 57.
[46] For further discussion, see Stephen Owen (Yuwen Suo'an 宇文所安), "'Huozhe weile zhushu, zhushu weile huozhe': Sima Qian de gongcheng" 活著為了著書, 著書為了活著: 司馬遷的工程, in *Ta shan de shitou ji* 他山的石頭記, (Beijing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2002), 98–104.
[47] McMahon, "The Potent Eunuch: The Story of Wei Zhongxian," 6–7.
[48] Li Yu, "Cuiya lou," 128.

castration. Even the palace servants ask, "Why would a perfectly good man not take a wife and have kids, instead castrating himself?" 為甚麼好好一個男人不去娶妻生子, 倒反閹割起來?[49] This turns his narrative from a simple "rectification" of the penetrated male into a potentially destabilizing dynamic of shifting masculinities, in which a male can be feminized without a sufficient rationalization for its occurrence.

Li Yu resolves this by allowing Quan to reconstruct his masculinity. Quan begins by building social power, to the point where he can finally report all the crimes of the corrupt official to the emperor Shizong 世宗 (r. 1521–1567).[50] The official is sentenced to death, and from then on Quan uses his head as a chamber pot, which Li Yu compares to the experience of male-male sex. Quan also writes a poem to commemorate the occasion, including the lines "you teased my buttocks; I pee in your mouth" 汝戲我臀, 我溺汝口.[51] This comparison is especially interesting when considering the earliest *Da Ming lü* 大明律 legal statute on anal penetration, which recommended that the punishment be akin to that of "pouring foul material into the mouth of another person" 穢物灌入人口.[52] Though Quan's reconstruction features none of the strikingly fantastic elements of sexual rejuvenation featured in some works of eunuch fiction, Li Yu's depiction of Quan's revenge is recognizably sexual in its metaphors, and comforting in its karmic retribution of unfounded emasculation.

Conclusion

Tang Zhen's inquiry about the nature of castrated males—whether they can truly become female by an absence of sexual potency—serves as an initial investigation for unraveling complex perceptions of gender during the late imperial era. Through an analysis of fictional castration narratives, we reach a definition of masculinity consisting of a fragile yet complex interplay of gender, sexuality, and power. Li Yu's stories illuminate how masculinity is intricately linked to penetration, portraying the figuratively castrated male as temporarily shedding masculinity for femininity. In You Ruilang's tale, we see that the presence of male genitalia is the most important signifier of masculinity, and that its absence above else signals a deviation into the feminine. You's tale displays a view of gender in which masculinity (*yang*) is at all times threatened by a slip into the feminine (*yin*), delineating a dualism in which a male without his genitalia becomes female-coded. As much as this holds consequences for masculinity, it also reveals a definition of femininity written erroneously in the language of male anatomy. To this point, Li Liangyu's story

[49] Li Yu, "Cuiya lou," 126.
[50] Ibid, 126–127.
[51] Ibid, 128.
[52] Cited in Sommer, "The Penetrated Male in Late Imperial China," 144.

introduces a fantastical yet thought-provoking narrative of a male's transformation into a female, attributing significance to his loss rather than the gain, while simultaneously providing a justification for the feminization of "deficient males."

The tale of "Ren yao" by Pu Songling delves into the fear of transgressive sexual potency, emphasizing the perceived threat posed by a sexually potent individual assuming a submissive identity. The act of castration serves as a corrective measure to reestablish the disrupted gender binary, reinforcing the traditional dualism of dominance-submissiveness and sexual potency as a determinant of social power. However, this depiction also highlights a complicating paradox: eunuchs, sexually impotent men, could wield immense power. In turn, however, this social power became sexualized in a masculine way, such as in the case of Wei Zhongxian or the fictitious Quan Ruxiu. Even leading Qing scholars had become increasingly certain that eunuchs were capable of sexual activity.[53] Further reinforcing this, the tale of Quan Ruxiu offers a stabilizing narrative in which a man who has been wrongfully emasculated reclaims his social potency in a clearly sexualized manner. It is clear that while male genitalia was central to maintaining male identity, even a castrated male body was capable of transcending a lack of sexual potency through both fact and fiction.

An examination of these late imperial castration narratives illuminates the intricate and fragile nature of masculinity, the societal emphasis on penetrant-penetrated dynamics, and the persistent efforts to reestablish traditional gender binaries through "rectifying" acts of castration, gender transformations, and reclaimed sexual potency. A masculinity defined through a constructed other is a precarious one, and its preservation is managed in part through these fictional negotiations of phallocentric dualism.

[53] See Kutcher, "'A Time of Pure Yin': Forging the Seventeenth-Century Consensus on the Nature of Ming Eunuch Power," in *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule,* (University of California Press, 2018), 27-42.

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