

PART IV. RHETORIC OF GENDER

CHAPTER 9

One Sight: The *Han shu* Biography of Lady Li

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The story is told in “The Biographies of the Imperial In-Laws” in Ban Gu’s (32–92 c.e.), *History of the Former Han*:

Emperor Xiaowu’s Lady Li originally entered the court as a performer. Earlier Lady Li’s brother Li Yannian had an innate understanding of music and was skilled at singing and dance. Emperor Wu [Xiaowu] was quite fond of him. Whenever he did his variations on popular songs, the audience never failed to be stirred. Once when attending on the Emperor, Li Yannian rose to dance and sang:

In the north country is a lady fair,
she stands alone beyond compare.
She glances once, a city falls;
a kingdom falls when she glances again.
Surely you know that a lady so fair,
she for whom cities and kingdoms fall,
will never be found again.

The Emperor heaved a great sigh: "Wonderful! But could there really be such a woman in this day and age?" Princess Pingyang thereupon said that Li Yannian had a younger sister; His Majesty then summoned her and saw her, and she was indeed of wondrous beauty and skilled in dancing. From that encounter she received the emperor's favors and bore him a son, who became Prince Ai of Chengyi. Lady Li died an untimely death while still in her youth. The Emperor was deeply saddened and had her likeness painted in Sweetsprings Palace. Four years after the Empress Weisi was removed, Emperor Wu himself passed on. The Grand Marshall Huo Guang then acted in accord with the Emperor's long-standing wishes and made sacrificial offerings to Lady Li jointly with those to the Emperor, giving her the title "Xiaowu's Empress."

Earlier when Lady Li's sickness had become grave, the Emperor himself had come to observe how she was. The Lady covered herself with her blanket and refused to let him see her, saying, "I have been bedridden for a long time, and my looks are ruined; I may not see the Emperor. But I wish to entrust the Prince and my brothers to your care." The Emperor replied, "My Lady, you are seriously ill, and it may be that you never get up again. Wouldn't it ease your mind to let me see you this one time and charge me with the care of the prince and your brothers?" The Lady said, "A woman does not see her lord unless her face is properly adorned; I do not dare see the Emperor as disheveled as I am now." The Emperor replied, "If My Lady will just let me have one sight, I will give you an additional thousand in gold, and give your brothers high offices." The Lady said, "High offices depend on the Emperor; they do not depend on one sight." The Emperor again said that he absolutely must see her, but the Lady turned away from him sobbing and said no more. At this the Emperor was put out of countenance and rose to leave. Then the Lady's sister reproached her, saying, "Weren't you willing to let him see you just once in order to charge him with the care of your brothers? Why did you so anger the Emperor like this?" The Lady replied, "The reason why I would not see the Emperor was actually because I wanted to commit him more deeply to the care of my brothers. From a lowly position I won the Emperor's love and favor because of the beauty of my appearance. If one serves another through physical attraction, then love slackens when those attractions fade. The reason why the Emperor pays me such regard and feels such attachment to me is because of the way I used to look. If he now were to see the ruin of my beauty, that my face is not as it was before, he would inevitably recoil from

such ugliness and reject me. Would he then still have been willing to give future thought to my brothers and show pity on them?"

When the Lady died, His Majesty had her interred with the ritual for an Empress. Afterwards the Emperor made the Lady's elder brother, Li Guangli, the Ershi General and enfeoffed him as the Duke of Haixi. Li Yannian was made Director of Imperial Music.

The Emperor could not stop longing for Lady Li. A wizard of Qi, known as the Young Old Man, said that he would be able to bring back her spirit. When it was night, he hung up lamps and candles and erected a curtained enclosure, where he set out meat and wine. Then he made the emperor take his place within another curtained enclosure. Gazing from the distance, he saw a lovely woman, whose appearance was like that of Lady Li, walking around the place set for her within the curtains. But he could not go take a closer look. The Emperor then felt longing and sadness even more strongly, and wrote this poem:

Is it her
or is it not?
I stand and gaze at her,
How she flutters there, reluctant to come.

He ordered the musicians of the Music Bureau to make a song of it, set to the accompaniment of strings. His Majesty also wrote a poetic exposition to lament Lady Li. These are its words:

Lithe and lovely, of features fair,
lifespan sundered, it did not last;
A spirit-lodge well fitted, long did I wait;
I was sad that she did not return to her home of before.
Despair wells within me, she rots with the weeds,
I stay unseen in a hidden place, I feel the pain.
I left my horse at the hill's pepper tree,
I linger the long night, no light of the sun.
Mournful air of autumn, somber and chill,
cassia boughs shed and then waste away.
My soul, all alone, yearns for one far,
the spirit roams drifting beyond all the bounds.
For a long span of time she stays sunk in shadow,

I regret her full flowering reached not its zenith.
 My brooding reaches the limit and I do not return;
 I fade into faintness rambling free.
 Enclosed stamens unfurl, awaiting the wind,
 then fragrances mingled and grew ever more apparent.
 Brightly relaxing, hovering, tossing,
 wind-whirled swirling, she grew sturdier.
 Languidly wanton, brushing the columns,
 her gaze swept around, she lifted her brows.
 Stirred and aroused, my heart did pursue her,
 she hid her flushed face, it does not appear.
 With pleasure we joined in intimacy, now we are parted;
 I wake up from dreams, I am lost in a daze.
 All at once she was changed and does not turn back,
 her soul was set free, it flies away.
 Such a baffling blur are the hallowed spirits,
 I linger lamenting, I falter in distress.
 Her course carries her each day further from me,
 and I was bewildered as she took her leave.
 Going beyond in a journey westward,
 moving swiftly, now unseen.
 More and more in a blur
 in a stillness without sound.
 My longing is like the rolling waves,
 and sorrow is here in my heart.

The closing piece:

From splendid beauty full of light,
 the crimson petals fall.
 How can those paltry and envious women
 weigh in the balance with you?
 In the very height of your season
 you were stricken before your years.
 Your child and brothers sob,
 tears bubble in their despair.
 Overcome with sorrow
 wailing cannot be stopped.

Echoes left unanswered—
 it is all over now!
 Gaunt from grief I moan
 and sigh for your young son.
 So wretched I cannot speak—
 trust him on whom you relied.
 Kind hearts need make no vows,
 still less are pacts made with kin.
 Since you have gone and will not come,
 I add to this my troth.
 You have gone from the world of light,
 you have entered into dark.
 You did descend to the spirit-lodge
 but will not come back to you former grounds.
 O the sadness of it!
 I envision your soul.

Afterwards Li Yannian's younger brother Li Ji was implicated in licentious acts in the imperial harem. Li Guangli surrendered to the Xiongnu. The entire family was exterminated.

In the biography of Lady Li, included in the collective biographies of the Imperial In-Laws in the *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the Former Han), moments of deferred visibility are woven together with performances of many kinds. Words promise and forestall seeing, and elusive moments of vision at last become words. In this text, old and new traditions converge: we see the legacy of the *Chu ci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu), with its alluring goddess who can never be grasped and held; we have the world of the professional singer, who makes a living selling images of desire; we have the narrative of the “great man,” bursting into song in a moment of strong feeling; and behind the scenes, weaving together his sources, we have the moralist-historian, who aspires to the “subtle words” (*weiyan* 微言), of Confucius in composing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. As a biography it is a most peculiar work, taken up almost entirely by anticipations, endings, and layers of aftermath. The substantial story of Lady Li takes up only a few short predicates: a command appearance, an appraisal, sexual intercourse, the birth of a son, and death.

The historian, Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), is often contrasted with his famous precursor Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? B.C.E.), the author of the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the historian). In recent centuries the comparison is usually to Ban Gu's disadvantage. Sima Qian is very much the storyteller who weeps because he is so deeply moved by his own stories. Ban Gu offers a far more self-conscious historical prose, shaped by the conviction that in writing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Confucius passed effective judgments by subtle phrasing and choice of words. Ban Gu thus carefully crafts his own words to control how readers will understand and respond—which is precisely what he implicitly accuses Lady Li of doing in the deathbed scene. Ban Gu pretends to let us see through illusions, which is a particular mode of persuasion that produces verisimilitude by exposing falseness. Perhaps this is why the biography is such a problematic one: there is little of note beneath all the illusions, yet those illusions can have substantial consequences in the exercise of imperial power.

Ban Gu, the persuasive historian, is the alter ego of the persuasive minister, who uses words to guide the emperor to the right course of action. Artful words are sometimes persuasive; but “direct words” (*zhiyan* 直言), are sometimes the most persuasive of all in pretending not to persuade. In the same way, Lady Li, trying to persuade the emperor to take care of her relatives, at last achieves her ends by seeming to give them up. She apparently braves imperial displeasure with a bluntness that might, in another context, be admirable—but which Ban Gu is careful to expose as dissimulation. It is no accident that the courtier and minister were often figured as a woman, either an artfully seductive woman or a virtuous one, spited by other contenders for imperial favor. “Thus a woman, no matter whether ugly or beautiful, is spited when she enters the palace; and a gentleman, no matter whether despicable or virtuous, earns jealousy when he enters the court,” (Zou Yang, “Letter from Prison,” mid second century B.C.E.).¹

If there is such a strong sense of categorical equivalence between the woman favorite and the courtier-minister, then there may also be crossing. The woman entering the palace and winning imperial favor may be spited by the courtier-minister—or by the historian, who also sees his role as moral advisor.

The biography of Lady Li shows Ban Gu at his sharpest and to his best advantage as an effective moralist. Indeed, the story may bring the best out

in Ban Gu because he and Lady Li are so close. Both are concerned with power and the capacity of a subordinate to direct (or, put in pejorative terms, to manipulate) imperial power. Because they have this in common, Ban Gu regards Lady Li with a particular horror, though one never directly expressed; she represents a group that competes with Confucian intellectuals for control of the emperor, the “imperial in-laws” (*waiqi* 外戚). In contrast to the Confucian intellectual, however, imperial in-laws derive power and change status through their ability to provoke and sustain desire (Ban Gu’s own great-aunt reputedly gained favor through an emperor’s respect for womanly virtues, but lost that favor because of a woman—Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕—who understood how to control imperial desire).²

In the biography Ban Gu sets himself up as the anatomist of imperial desire, stirred and sustained. In the case of Lady Li there is a surplus of imperial desire that outlasts the desired woman and whose effects are posthumous—remarkably so, because it outlives not only Lady Li but also Emperor Wu himself. It is only after Emperor Wu’s death that she was “retroactively given the title of honor as ‘Xiaowu’s Empress.’”

The most basic obligation of the Confucian historian is “to get the names right” (*zhengming* 正名), and nowhere is this obligation more pressing than in those titles which define status and position in the world of men and spirits. When we come to the posthumous title of honor, “Xiaowu’s Empress,” we may recall the opening of the biography, where she is simply “Xiaowu’s Lady Li” 孝武李夫人. Ban Gu the historian begins by revoking her title of honor for posterity and demotes her back to the status of mere favorite. The biography that follows the favorite’s name is the historian’s justification of his judgment.

Confucian moralists may be pleased with how the historian so effectively puts the upstart favorite back in her proper position. From another point of view, however, what Ban Gu has done is just another example of the spite that falls on a woman who enjoys the emperor’s favor. Others seek to damage the favorite by spreading malicious stories and baseless slanders until at last she loses her place.

Let us act as the advocate for Lady Li’s wronged soul: from this vantage point Ban Gu is indeed a jealous slanderer. Ban Gu’s account of the deathbed scene, and especially of Lady Li’s subsequent conversation with her sister, is unlikely to have any more credible basis than palace gossip. In order to

expose and discredit Lady Li, our pious historian is at best spreading rumors to posterity; at worst he is inventing stories. It is only fair to keep this in mind about our historian as he brilliantly dissects the power of illusion.

“Emperor Xiaowu’s Lady Li originally entered court as a performer” (or “was recommended to court as a performer”) 孝武李夫人本以倡進. In this period *chang* 倡, translated as “performer,” had not yet acquired the later sense of “courtesan” or “prostitute,” as in the famous Tang imitation of this opening in *Li Wa zhuan* 李娃傳 (Story of Li Wa): “The Lady of Qian, Missy Li, was a prostitute in Chang’an” 汧國夫人李娃長安之倡女也.³ Little in that tale concerned Missy Li’s performance skills. But even in Ban Gu’s time, *chang* was morally suspect and suggested humble family origins. The cultural distance between a *chang* and “Xiaowu’s Lady Li” (and even more, “Xiaowu’s Empress”) announces the problem of the text and the moral tension between the person and the institutional role in which she had been placed.

In addition to bearing the emperor male children, the proper duty of a favored court lady was to remind the emperor of his public responsibility and to gracefully deflect the headlong propensity to passion that emperors sometimes displayed. Ban Gu’s own great-aunt, raised to the harem rank of *jièyù* 婕妤 (lady of handsome fairness), was exemplary in this. Considering it improper, Lady Ban supposedly refused Emperor Cheng’s invitation to ride with him in the same carriage. Lady Ban enjoyed imperial favor for a term, but was eventually displaced by Zhao Feiyan and her sister, who actively nurtured imperial passion and played the game of court politics with incomparable ruthlessness.

Zhao Feiyan and her sister were easy to condemn as evil women, just as Lady Ban was easy to praise as exemplary. Lady Li presents the more difficult case, having done nothing to win the emperor’s love or secure her position; on her deathbed she does hope that the emperor will take care of her son, the Prince of Changyi, and her brothers. There is, however, nothing to suggest that she plots against other women, who are her superiors, or tries to get her son made heir. She does neither good nor evil. The emperor’s passion for her begins before he sees her, instigated by a song; and once that passion is stirred, it has a life of its own. Her greatest contrivance is simply to hide her face from his sight, so that the memory of her beauty will outlive her. Thus the historian must here address not moral depravity but the autonomous

power of illusion, in which the woman herself is no more than a passive vessel.

After announcing the two roles that define her rise to favorite, “Xiaowu’s Lady Li” and “performer,” the biography begins with a flashback (formally marked by *chu* 初 [at first, earlier]) to her brother, Li Yannian 李延年, and how she was introduced to court.

Earlier Lady Li’s brother Li Yannian had an innate understanding of music and was skilled at singing and dance. Emperor Wu [Xiaowu] was quite fond of him. Whenever he did his variations on popular songs, the audience never failed to be stirred.

Li Yannian is a professional musician, who wins imperial favor by his musical skill. His music, however, is not the “classical” music that instills moral sentiments and norms of emotion without excess. He does “variations on popular songs” (*xinsheng bianqu* 新聲變曲), the “new sounds” that arouse the suspicions of the Confucian moralist.

In the “Record of Rites” (*Yue ji* 樂記), in the *Book of Rites*, there is a full discussion of the proper relation between music and rites. Through the roles or positions assumed in ritual, rites enforce distinctions, and primarily distinctions of hierarchy and authority that seemed both proper and natural in the Confucian social order. The function of rites carries its own potential danger of excess, which is estrangement. “Music unifies” (*yue tong* 樂同), bringing together all the participants in the ritual and counterbalancing the danger of estrangement. Without the countervailing force of rites, however, the danger of music is the dissolution of distinction and the breakdown of the proper boundaries between the sexes, or between the ruler and the ruled.

Li Yannian is a purveyor of music without rites, the Han counterpart of the ancient music of Zheng and Wei that was both symptom and cause of social collapse. It is precisely such a breach of social distance that occurs here: the emperor is stirred, but this emotion does not include the emperor’s sense of his proper role; rather his is a feeling shared in common by all those who hear the music. And when imperial power is put at the service of common human feeling, we have the beginnings of a polity gone awry.

Li Yannian's song is one of the earliest reliable examples of verse in the five-syllable line (even if we attribute its composition as having been closer to the time of Ban Gu than Emperor Wu). It is a remarkably simple piece, declaring the existence of a mythic "fair lady," so beautiful that she can cause the downfall of kingdoms. I believe that it is safe to assume that the response of most Han listeners to such a song would have been a simple "Ah!"—that is, they would be content that this woman evoked in song simply be a woman in song. Emperor Wu, however, does not hear art but advertising—his response is that he wants one. His desire, however, must be mediated by an interesting question: "But could there really such a woman in this day and age?" 世豈有此人乎. Emperor Wu is looking for a referent for the image in song. The qualification *shi* 世, "in the world," can suggest several things. The most likely implication is that such a beauty existed in the past, which would invite us to take *shi* as "in this day and age." Another possibility is that such a beauty would belong to another realm, that of the immortals and goddesses. And finally, it might be a simple doubt of the historical existence of such a person: "How could there *really* be . . .?" If the answer to the implied doubt that makes the question almost rhetorical is "Yes, there is such a person," then the Emperor will want to "verify" or "see with his own eyes." Evidently Li Yannian and his court supporters already understand what kind of reader-listener Emperor Wu is, because no sooner does he pose the question than Li Yannian's sister is recommended.

In the question we see only the first example of Emperor Wu's peculiar passion to confirm images of desire with his senses. While there may be historical basis for such a characterization of Emperor Wu, this recurrent motif in Ban Gu's biography of Lady Li may be associated with the legends that were growing up around the emperor, his fascination with the immortals and his meeting with the goddess, Queen Mother of the West.⁴ The Emperor Wu of legend also wants to witness the wonders of legend that he hears about. By frustrating such a passion on her deathbed, by denying the Emperor his "one sight" (*jian* 見) Lady Li effectively perpetuates his desire.

Two terms embedded in Li Yannian's song, *qingcheng* 傾城 ("she who brings down cities") and *qingguo* 傾國 ("she who brings down kingdoms"), were to become clichés for beautiful women. There is, however, no evidence that these terms were so used prior to this song. As every reader of Ban Gu's time knew, this usage plays transparently on a misogynous couplet in the

Classic of Poetry (Mao 264), where it is not, in itself, a figure of beguiling beauty:

The smart man builds a city,
The smart woman brings the city down.

哲夫成城
哲婦傾城

This allusion invites a reasonable suspicion that Li Yannian's song was the creation of Ban Gu himself or of the writer of the source Ban Gu used, done in imitation of the style of professional singers, but loaded with an allusion to the *Classic of Poetry*, the significance of which would be apparent to any educated reader. Equally important is the implication that Emperor Wu was blind to the allusion and the warning it carried. Emperor Wu does not hear the meaning of the words and the depth of historical precedent that warns against attraction to such women; he hears the song as Li Yannian ostensibly intended it to be understood, as the representation of a remarkably beautiful woman. No doubt to the horror of Ban Gu's virtuous soul, readers for the next two millennia would understand the terms as Emperor Wu did.⁵

When Li Yannian's sister is recommended as the living embodiment of the woman in the song, "His Majesty then summoned her and saw her, and she was indeed of wondrous beauty and skilled in dancing." This is the first "seeing" (*jian* 見, also the term for a court audience). The phrasing is significant: "indeed" (*shi* 實 [in actuality]), tells us that he is not simply seeing a beautiful woman, but measuring the immediate experience of the senses against the anticipated image of desire—and finding that they correspond.

After this moment the narrative moves with indifferent rapidity over their sexual union, her birth of a child, and her subsequent death. The emperor's indelible passion to "see" her is shown in having her portrait posthumously painted in Sweet Springs Palace. Finally, after Emperor Wu's death, his abiding desire for her permanent presence is honored in a peculiar way: her spirit receives food offerings with his and she is given the title of "Xiaowu's Empress."

This is the complete biography, taking Lady Li from performer to Empress. At this point, however, we move to another flashback (marked by *chu* 初) to events before and soon after Lady Li's death, a series of anecdotes

and texts that complicate the smooth progression from performer to Empress and lead to a second, very different end of the story.

First we have the scene of Lady Li on her deathbed. It is not unlikely that eunuchs and other court ladies would have been in attendance to witness such a scene, but how it entered the written record available to Ban Gu is another matter. It is, however, a fine parable of how desire is sustained by concealment. Emperor Wu has an image of beauty in the mind; and although that image may be realized in a person, it can outlast the person and exist independent of visual confirmation. The image can survive without confirmation, but it can be destroyed by a failure of confirmation—if Lady Li pulls away the cover and shows her face unadorned and ravaged by sickness.

According to Ban Gu, Lady Li wants the emperor to do something for her, and she attains her ends by perpetuating imperial desire. Three times he asks to see her face, and three times he is refused, nor does he seem to have the power to compel her assent (this, in contrast with their first meeting when, literally, “he summoned and saw her”). Here we begin to see the consequences and significance of music without rites. In the “proper” music of ritual, the emperor is always conscious of being emperor. Through Li Yannian’s music he was stirred to a common desire, which any man could share. In that dissolution of distinction and hierarchy—the emperor as human lover—his will is no more than hers. Should he use his imperial power to compel her assent, he would be giving up the common human love that he clings to. He can use his imperial status to bargain with her, but the fiction of her free assent is even more precious than the “one sight.” Lady Li, for her part, preserves the emperor’s image by hiding. Nor should we forget that the image, first given in Li Yannian’s song, involves her “one glance,” *yigu* 一顧, which he seeks with his one sight.

The pressure of the emperor’s desire to see is met by Lady Li’s brilliant staging of her concealment. As the Emperor cannot see the ugliness of her face as it truly is, we too are later shown that her words are fine appearances that conceal very different motives. Like the most honorable of Confucian ministers, she persuades with direct words, by telling the truth. Even though she hides the physical face, she begins by telling the emperor what he would see: “I have been bedridden for a long time, and my looks are ruined; I may not see the Emperor” 妾久寢病，形貌毀壞，不可以見帝。 To this, however,

she adds the request that gives the emperor the opportunity to strike a bargain with her: “I wish to entrust the Prince and my brothers to your care” 願以王及兄弟爲託. The emperor in response suggests that the request in mere words, coming from behind the covers, would be less efficacious than words coming from a face he could see; if she made her request in that way, it should “ease her mind” or “make her feel good” (*kuai* 快). This time Lady Li counters with a rule of propriety, given force not because of personal vanity but because of the respect for the emperor shown by proper adornment: “A woman does not see her lord unless her face is properly adorned; I do not dare see the Emperor as disheveled as I am now.” This drives the Emperor to offer a more crass kind of bargain, one that involves the abuse of his imperial authority for personal motives: “If My Lady will just let me have one sight, I will give you an additional thousand in gold, and give your brothers high offices.” To this Lady Li responds: “High offices depend on the Emperor; they do not depend on one sight” 尊官在帝, 不在一見.

We might pause for a moment here. Although the veracity of the anecdote as a whole is suspect, this exchange between Emperor Wu and Lady Li could have occurred in the presence of others, so it has some possibility of having been historically true. Read without the follow-up, in which Lady Li confesses her motives to her sister, it could easily be taken as exemplary of a court lady behaving with the utmost propriety. When the emperor fails to understand why she will not look on him, she responds by stating the general rule for women that would make it improper for her to show herself. When the emperor tries to bargain with her by promising high offices for her brother, she reminds him of his imperial responsibility and that he should not be trading high offices just to see her. When the emperor keeps pressing her, “she turned away from him sobbing and said no more.” This, of course, is all that one can do when virtuous words of reproof are not heeded by the ruler.

From this perspective we see the full force of Ban Gu’s supplement to the anecdote, recounting a conversation in private, a conversation which, had it actually occurred, no one in Lady Li’s household would have ever divulged in Emperor Wu’s lifetime. The anecdote “exposes” Lady Li’s virtuous response, making it a calculated manipulation of the emperor’s affections to achieve her purposes. Lady Li hides; Ban Gu unmasks. And the very structure of the account betrays the historian’s conviction that the fairest faces in the

harem mask dark purposes. “The reason why I would not see the Emperor was actually because I wanted to commit him more deeply to the care of my brothers” 所以不遇見帝者，乃欲以深託兄弟也。The *nai* 乃 (actually), promises to give us the real reason, a reason other than what we might have supposed (a sense of propriety). This secret version of Lady Li is well aware of how to use the emperor’s illusions and she knows that only by hiding can she preserve the image of “the way she used to look” 平生容貌。And the only reason she cares about preserving the emperor’s attraction to her is for the sake of her brothers—exactly opposite from the implications of her final words to the emperor. This manipulation of imperial power for personal ends is shown to be successful in the historian’s account: “When the Lady died, His Majesty had her interred with the ritual for an Empress” 及夫人卒，上以后禮葬焉。Her brothers, moreover, are given posts.

We may be inclined to believe the historian’s suspicions. Suppose, however, that in between the semipublic deathbed scene and the public funeral, instead of the conversation between Lady Li and her sister, we had a statement that the emperor was touched by the sincerity of Lady Li’s words and reminded by them of his imperial duty. Then the burial with rites for an empress and the posts given to her brothers would have a very different meaning. The historian controls such meanings and denies us that reading of Lady Li.

The second anecdote is given to confirm the historian’s interpretation and to further develop the theme of the biography, which is representation, illusion, desire, and their dangerous intersection with public power. This scene, in which the wizard seems to bring back Lady Li’s spirit, is a strange transformation of the deathbed scene, with the emperor still longing for his “one sight.” Desire, first stirred by Li Yannian’s song and perpetuated by concealment, has achieved the purposes of Lady Li and her family—at least according to the historian’s interpretation. But the emperor’s desire overflows those purposes and continues. Now we have another master of illusion, the Young Old Man, who promises to conjure for the Emperor the “one sight” he wants. Fabric is again essential, in this case not for full concealment, but to provide a stage for an apparition on the margins of perception. We have two curtained enclosures, one for the Emperor and one illuminated by lamps and provided with spirit offerings. The historian is precise in his phrasing here: the Young Old Man “*said* that he would be able to bring her spirit” 言

能致其神, and of the emperor, that “gazing from a distance, he saw a lovely woman whose appearance was *like that of Lady Li*” 遙望見好女如李夫人之貌 (*italics mine*). The remarkable thing about the emperor’s desire is that it is not to touch or hold, but a desire to see: “But he could not go take a closer look” 又不得就視.

Of course he could! He was the Emperor of the Han. He could stand up and walk right over to that other enclosure. If it were Lady Li’s ghost, it would flee; but it would vanish anyway. If it were an imposter, she would be caught and the Young Old Man’s fraud would be exposed. But just as he cannot bring himself physically to force Lady Li to remove the blanket and show her face, he cannot break through the rules of the staged apparition. As much as he wants the “one sight,” that act of beholding and verifying, he cannot move. He is held in stasis before the uncertain image; and the consequence, of course, is an even great intensity of longing 上愈益相思悲感.

At this moment of intensity Emperor Wu bursts into song. The first short lines express that precious stasis of uncertainty, gazing but not getting to see and verify. The last line, however, belongs to the *Chu ci* and *fu* tradition, not only in meter, but in the quality of the poetic image. “How she flutters there, reluctant to come” 偏何姍姍其來遲.⁶ The possibility of her approaching him was not part of the script in the staged apparition with its curtained enclosures. Lady Li, in death, is being transformed into the elusive goddess of the *Chu ci* tradition. In a passage from “The Goddess” (Shennü fu 神女賦) the speaker Song Yu offers the following description:

She looked toward my curtains, there let gaze linger,
like rolling of ripples rising to waves.
She lifted long sleeves, adjusted gown’s folds,
and stood there wavering, not at her ease.
Then rapt and still, familiar and gentle,
her mind’s state serene, untroubled utterly.
Sometimes free and easy, then she barely moved—
one could never reach the bottom of what she had in mind.
Her mood seemed intimate, but then was remote;
it seemed she was coming, but then she turned round.
She lifted my bedcurtain, entreated to serve me,
she wished to show fullness of heart’s steadfast love.

What she felt was bright and pure, clear and unsullied,
but then in the end she found fault with me.⁷

Song Yu's goddess appears, flirts, sometimes seems to come forward, then withdraws: "it seemed she was coming, but then she turned round" 若將來而復懸. Moreover, the "fluttering" of Emperor Wu's apparition suggests the airborne motions of the goddess.

When Liu Bang, later Han Gaozu (r. 202–195 B.C.E.), returned to his native Pei, he deeply moved and burst into song, the lyrics of "The Great Wind" 大風歌. Next he had a large troupe of boys learn the song and sing it for him. "Then Gaozu, overcome with feeling, rose to dance, and lines of tears fell from his eyes."⁸ What deserves particular note is not bursting into song from strong feeling, but the subsequent staged re-performance of the song, in which the emperor takes lachrymose pleasure in hearing his own words sung back to him. In the same way, Emperor Wu hands his extempore lines over to the professional musicians of the Music Bureau. He wants this delicious moment of uncertainty to be restaged for him.

Although we cannot know the venue imagined for such performance, it is likely that it is "public" within a limited court context—not for his civil and military officers, but perhaps in the presence of his private entourage, those we might best call "courtiers." Personal grief for a dead consort is one thing, but this act goes well beyond that. This is "self-representation": creating an image of himself for his own pleasure and perhaps that of others. He feels nothing demeaning in being represented in longing and misery, helpless before the capricious spirit of a dead woman.⁹ And we can be sure that he did not expect any others who might hear the song to think it beneath the imperial dignity. Had Ban Gu been present, he would have surely felt otherwise and perhaps would have protested vigorously—though offending Emperor Wu was not at all a prudent thing to do. In the century and a half that separated Emperor Wu and Ban Gu the imperial role—what was and was not within the imperial dignity—had clearly changed. From Ban Gu's perspective we have a fraudulent wizard putting on an ersatz apparition for a credulous and grief-stricken Emperor, who from private feeling has forgotten the bearing proper to his position. We are forced to see events through Ban Gu's purposeful handling of his sources; however, in the detail of ordering the court Music Bureau to perform his verse, we begin to

sense that these events may have had a very different significance in Emperor Wu's own time.

We cannot know for certain if either of the two sections of the *fu* were by Emperor Wu or by one or two other poets writing in his persona; Ban Gu certainly believed that Emperor Wu was the author.¹⁰ The greater part of the first section belongs securely within the *Chu ci* tradition and is one of our best examples of how the conventions of *Chu ci* could be deployed to respond to a particular occasion. The consequence is that the imperial romance, with all the political and ethical questions surrounding it—the questions in which Ban Gu is interested—is transformed into an otherworldly spirit journey in which the soul moves through indeterminate spaces to have a fleeting encounter with Lady Li's spirit, now in the role of the elusive goddess.

The narrative of the *Chu ci* segment, as best we can reconstruct it against *Chu ci* convention, does not correspond to the anecdote of the Young Old Man's séance. It speaks of a "spirit-lodge" (*xingong* 新宮, literally a "new chamber") where the speaker waits for the soul, but the soul does not return. Next the speaker is grieving in darkness, then unties his horse for a heavenly journey like that of Qu Yuan (although Qu Yuan tied up his horses on the hill with pepper trees to rest in the course of the heavenly journey). Of the horse we hear no more: next it is the "essence" (*jing* 精), and "spirit" (*shen* 神), that become active and travel. Roaming around in spirit space, the speaker encounters a flower fragrance, after which she appears and gazes at him (at last he has the "one sight," the glance that destroys cities and kingdoms). At this point his heart pursues her and she hides her face from him. Next he wakes in a daze, and again seems to see her flying off in a host of spirits, taking her leave. The segment here closes with longing and lament.

Let us return to Ban Gu. We do not know the reason for including this *fu* in the biography. It may be a commitment to preserve samples of writing (under the assumption that this is indeed Emperor Wu's own work), or it may be to further demonstrate the emperor's foolish passion. Certainly motifs from the *Chu ci* had survived into Ban Gu's time, but they had been increasingly subject to ethical interpretation and judgment (Ban Gu himself criticized what he saw as Qu Yuan's moral failings).¹¹ Ban Gu would surely not have known what to make of this piece, except as an expression of lingering desire for Lady Li.

The *Chu ci* poems were popular with Emperor Wu and received a degree of dissemination in the Chang'an court; but even though they were already associated with Qu Yuan, there is no indication that they had yet received the layers of allegorical interpretation that appear fully developed in the commentary of Wang Yi 王逸 around the middle of the second century (indeed such commentary may have been given a special impetus by the criticisms of Qu Yuan leveled by intellectuals such as Ban Gu). Confucianism did not dominate Emperor's Wu's court as it would the courts of the Eastern Han emperors of Ban Gu's day. Emperor Wu sought to unify the empire religiously not just by Confucian ideology, but by bringing shamans and religious figures from various regions to perform in Chang'an. His interest in gods and immortals, which later became a component of the legends of imperial folly, was, in another context, a religious responsibility. And it is in this context that the *Chu ci* were introduced from the court in Huainan.

Qu Yuan may have been the maligned minister of Chu, but there is no question that in the course of the "Li sao" he comes to himself occupy the role of a king, lord of thousands of chariots, summoning and dispatching his outriders in his quest for "the woman." It was King Xiang of Chu (r. 298–263 B.C.E.) that dreamed of the goddess at Gaotang; and in Sima Xiangru's (179–117 B.C.E.) "The Great Man," it is Emperor Wu as adept who flies with his cavalcade around the full circuit of the universe, and then up to transcendence, after snatching the jade maidens from Heaven.¹²

Lady Li may have begun as a mere consort, but here she is the reluctant goddess of the "Nine Songs" and "The Goddess." She appears, she flirts, she seems to come close, then she flits away. In pursuing her with helpless longing, Emperor Wu is fulfilling a royal function.¹³ The lost Lady Li is here the occasion to assume that immensely resonant role.

The second section of the *fu* is given as a coda (*luan* 亂). Not only is it in a different meter and diction, the role of the speaker is completely different. In place of the royal adept narrating a fleeting encounter with the goddess in spirit-space, here we have an address to the dead, much as in later offerings (*jiwen* 祭文). Lady Li as goddess finally "flies up" to the heavens; here Lady Li leaves the world of light and goes into the darkness. Lady Li as goddess did not come to the "spirit-lodge"; she must be pursued; this Lady Li, we learn did indeed come down, though she did not stay. Of particular interest is how the Emperor assumes the position of not simply giving an account of his

own grief, but that of her son and kin as well. It is a very familial piece and appeals to the bonds of kinship: “Kind hearts need make no vows, / still less are pacts made with kin.”

Coming to terms with the dead is an important matter, and it is easy in this piece to see another ritual function. We do not know what boundary there was between ordinary palace ladies and those whose souls were the souls of “wives.” Since Lady Li was buried with the rites of an empress, there is no question that Emperor Wu was placed in the role of “husband”; and it is as a husband that he speaks here. “No one in the harem was your equal; I feel sad; your brothers and son feel sad; you can trust me to carry out my obligations to kin”—this was the information that the soul of the departed needed to know.

Ban Gu inserts the questionable dialogue between Lady Li and her sister, so that we interpret Emperor Wu’s affirmation of kinship bonds despite the absence of a vow as manipulation—Lady Li has had her way. But suppose we drop that dubious anecdote: on her deathbed Lady Li first asks the Emperor to take care of her son and brothers. The Emperor tries to bargain with that request, to offer a promise in exchange for “one sight.” Lady Li refuses to bargain, reminding the Emperor of his proper role. If we take that reading, the Emperor’s closing affirmation of kinship bonds over promises suggests that he accepted her “lesson,” and that he will “do the right thing.”

Ban Gu, of course, cannot permit that. In the terse, closing lines of the biography—naming the crimes of Lady Li’s kin and the consequent extinction of the whole family—Ban Gu justifies his own reading of Lady Li. In the following biography of Consort Gou we learn that Lady Li’s son, Prince Ai of Changyi, also dies young. All this passion was for nothing. The Emperor’s pious promise to the soul of the dead consort is just another example of imperial besottedness. We cannot entirely blame the historian: in the century and a half between Emperor Wu and Ban Gu there had been some very hard lessons in the dangers of the unchecked power of imperial favorites and their kin.

This short biography containing a *fu* itself functions like some court *fu* in the Western Han: there is a description of excess, followed by a sudden reversal at the end, offering a critique of excess. Far more perfectly than many *fu* writer Ban Gu shows a mastery of this technique of sudden reversal, using its very abruptness to lend force to the critique. It is not that Lady

Li is truly wicked, but that imperial passion leads to the misdirection of imperial power. And imperial passion is everywhere linked to the arts of representation, powerful illusions that lead the Emperor on.

NOTES

1. *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1970), 51.2346.

2. Originally a musician and dancer of humble background like Lady Li, Zhao Feiyan became the favorite of Han Chengdi. Zhao Feiyan was a master of harem politics, getting rid of all rivals; and in 16 B.C.E. she was made empress.

3. Li Shiren 李時人, ed., *Quan Tang Wudai xiaoshuo* 全唐五代小說 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1998), 623.

4. David Knechtges argues for the link between the Lady Li biography and the legends growing up around Emperor Wu in “Han Wudi de fu” 漢武帝的賦, *Disanjie guoji cifuxue xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 第三屆國際辭賦學學術研討會論文集 (Taipei: Guoli Zhengzhi daxue wenxueyuan, 1996), 1:1–14.

5. Indeed the phrases have become such clichés that it is difficult to read the poem now with anything like the tension that must originally have existed between Li Yannian’s intention and the allusive significance.

6. In his “Poetic Exposition on the Feather Fan” (Yu shan fu 羽扇賦), Lu Ji (261–303) has the line “It flutters slowly, lightly moving” 翩跹以微振 describing the fan’s fluttering motion. This strongly suggests that the *pian* 偏 of Emperor Wu’s verse should be *pian* 翩.

7. *Wen xuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 19.888–89. The passage is from “The Goddess,” (Shennü fu 神女賦), attributed to the late Warring States rhetorician Song Yu, but considered by many scholars to be of unknown authorship from the Western Han. In this passage Song Yu, the main interlocutor, is describing the goddess.

8. *Han shu*, 1B.74.

9. We are presuming here that this song is authentic, preserved with its occasion in the repertoire of court song. It does not matter whether Emperor Wu actually wrote it or not, only that Emperor Wu could be portrayed this way in a court performance of his time. While the song and occasion were possibly part of the posthumous lore that grew up around Emperor Wu, the

detail of the lyrics being given to the musicians of the Music Bureau suggests an official source.

10. On the authenticity of the *fu*, see Knechtges, “Han Wudi de fu,” and “The Emperor and Literature: Emperor Wu of the Han,” in *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, ed. Frederick Brandauer and Chieh-hue Huang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 51–56.

11. Ban Gu, “Preface to the ‘Li sao’” 離騷序. Cited in Wang Yi’s *Chuci zhangju*. Yang Jinding 楊金鼎, *Chuci pinglun ziliao xuan* 楚辭評論資料選 (Hubei: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1985), 233–34.

12. *Han shu* 57B.2592–98.

13. We might here think of brave soldiers of the European Renaissance who claimed perpetual agony at the indifference of their mistresses, real or fictive. Their weeping helplessness in sonnets in no way detracted from their manliness.