

The house in which I live lies at the end of a wooded street that slopes down to the river that flows slowly through this prairie town. Crows move among the high branches of the oak trees until sundown. Then they fly west out of town to their roosting places. At night I read a Buddhist poem. There is nothing that has to be reported. I have come to find meaning in the simple things of each day and night.

After several years of being without a place I might call home, living in a house of unrest, in the homes of friends, in the rooms of landlords, I now live in this Cape Cod style house. It has been a year since I moved here, just before the winter holidays. Now, in January, I have lived a full cycle of seasons at home.

Sixty miles to the north is the family farm. It has been nearly a decade since I returned to be near the place of my birth. My mother still lives on the farm. When growing up, I remember my father often saying that someday he would leave the farm and move to a house in town. He died one cold fall day walking from the tractor to the machine shed.

I continue to teach at the university, on the other side of the river, within view of the house. Both my daughters are grown and have left home. The time has come for a life of some retreat. The clouds and the trees and the fence lines will guide my way.

Snow has fallen during the night, leaving a soft cover that glistens in the morning light. Three squirrels play in the tall white pine in the backyard. The day begins quietly, in meditation. I open *The Upanishads* at this early hour and read: "Those who realize that all life is one are at home everywhere and see themselves in all beings." The passage is a reminder of my own quest of the last few years. With care, I am now beginning to look back at—and reflect upon—the years that have brought me to where I am at this moment, in this house in town, on a winter's day.

Tonight I will read again a poem by the eighteenth-century Zen monk and hermit Ryōkan.

My life may appear melancholy,
 But traveling through this world
 I have entrusted myself to Heaven.
 In my sack, three shō of rice;
 By the hearth, a bundle of firewood.
 If someone asks what is the mark of enlightenment or
 illusion,
 I cannot say—wealth and honor are nothing but dust.
 As the evening rain falls I sit in my hermitage
 And stretch out both feet in answer.

Ryōkan had reached the stage of an enlightened life depicted in the last of the ten Zen pictures on the search for the missing ox. He goes "to town with helping hands," renouncing worldly goods and personal cares, his only thought being how he can serve others. I will wander downtown along the snowy streets, reminding myself of the paths that others have taken.



There came the time, shortly after returning from Ireland five years ago, when matters of spirit and form of life pressed with great urgency. I was in my early fifties, and changes were about to take place. Beginning a new journal, I gave it the title "A Spiritual Journey," noting on the front page: "Toward a life lived fully in the spiritual world—for an everyday life filled with the holy." I will never have a full understanding of the years that followed, nor is one needed, but the experience was one of deep personal crisis—a dark night of the soul. The results were, at least, threefold, altering my spiritual life as lived daily, changing the way of my life and teaching at the university, and dissolving a marriage of thirty years. I am now in need of giving some attention to those years that have brought me to this house. Then, I might live completely—with awareness—the days and nights that remain.

By the time I reached the gates of New Melleray Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Iowa, on a February evening of 1987, and was greeted at the door by Father Samuel, the Guestmaster, I had spent several months in preparation. I had thought of the possibility of a contemplative life, in a monastery, where there might be a safe and caring community, with life devoted entirely to the sacred. All of my reading during these months was given to spiritual works. I was trying to find some peace within, a constant and steady peace, in the midst of daily turmoil. I was informed by Swami Rama in the *Himalayan News*: "We are constantly identifying ourselves with the objects of the world and forgetting our real Self within. To attain peace it is not necessary that we obtain anything new—we simply need to cease identifying ourselves with that which is not ours." Perhaps this peace might be found in one of the places created for spiritual awakening and practice—in an ashram, a mountain retreat, or a monastery.

There was the search for a peaceful environment—related to the natural world, in a loving community—where there could be a balance and harmony in life. Then, as Father Bede Griffiths, living in an ashram in India, suggests, "you are open to the divine and you can experience it day by day, hour by hour in your life."

On a December day, a Saturday with the glow of a mellow light, two months before my monastic retreat, my friend Bruce Von Zellen and I drove to New Melleray Abbey for a day's visit. Driving over the Mississippi and into Iowa, we listened to the tape that our friend Mason Myers had recorded for me several months earlier. The sounds of the Celtic harp, on one side, and Jack Teagarden, on the other, filled the car as we talked about Mason and about his death only the day before. A philosopher who taught at the university up to the time of his death, in his seventies, Mason dwelt not only in words but in the wonder beyond words. One of his favorite lines was from the *Tao Te Ching*: "Existence is beyond the power of words to define." On Sunday, I would read the passage at Mason's memorial service. And from his notebook, I read the last lines he had written, a passage from Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*:

The light died in the low clouds. Falling snow drank in the dusk. Shrouded in silence the branches wrapped me in their peace. When the boundaries were erased, once again the wonder: that I exist.

In my own daily existence, I had the overwhelming sense of being separated and abandoned—at home, in my marriage. Love no longer being known in my deepest personal relationship, I turned to a larger world. Bede Griffiths quoted the words of a prior in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and in them I found comfort and relief: "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf and every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything you will perceive the divine mystery in things." I was being directed to a sacramental life, a sense of oneness with the whole world, an all-embracing love. In suffering, there is an opening of the heart.

Ultimately, it was beyond words and speech, and beyond the self, that a communion with the all of creation was experienced. The original unity was being recovered. Using words to express his own realization of the wordless unity of all, Thomas Merton wrote in his journal, "What we have to be is what we are." Beyond words and concepts, much of life is to be lived in silence and wonder. In my own journal, I write that I will dwell henceforth in the love of the mystery—the nameless. On New Year's day, I resolve that my life—and my work—will be a reflection of that which is greater than myself. May I be a servant, a witness, an example of a life lived daily in the transcendent. May I love completely. I add: Go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly. Travel lightly.



This morning the fog rises from the snow on the plowed fields at the edge of town. I have just returned from photographing along the country roads. The war in the Persian Gulf goes on, this being the twenty-first day since it began last month. In DeKalb we protest and mourn. Four years ago today I was staying at

New Melleray Abbey as a monastic associate. I have found all the mystery I now need in the living of this winter day.

Having stopped in Dubuque for a last supper at a Greek restaurant, before entering the monastery for a week, I sat alone with a cup of tea at New Melleray as the monks ate their supper in silence. Brother Dennis gave me a brief tour of the monastery, and provided me with a choir tunic for evening Compline. The clock in my assigned room was slow, so that I missed the last Office of the day. At eight, with assurance of no dogs to bark into the night, and the feeling of being in a safe domestic haven, I fell asleep.

Sleeping soundly, I missed the Office of Vigils at 3:15 A.M., and that of Lauds at 6:30. I awoke with an immediate sense of wonder, and shortly Father Samuel knocked on the door, greeted me, and took me to Terce for the reading of scripture and the singing of psalms. I was given a copy of the *Primer on Monastic Spirituality*, prepared by the monks at the abbey, and I returned to my room. The *Primer* informs me that the solitary dwellings of the early desert monks were called by a word that means "one-alone." I am then advised: "If you are to really share in our life as monks, you too must be 'one-alone.' You too must seek God in the solitude of your cell." It is in this room that I might know the contemplative moment of *lectio divina*, a heightened awareness of God, a period of loving attention, "a wordless response to God evoked by His Word." Beyond thought and speech, in contemplation, one "just knows and loves God."

Later in the morning, Father Samuel returns to my cell for a spiritual conference. We talk of separation—from one another, from God—as "sin." "Hell," he says, "is living without love." In losing ourselves in Christ, we find that love. Together, as we talk on, we miss the Office of Sect. After lunch, I walk out into the bright day and photograph patches of snow, the brown fields, a grove of Norway spruce, the limestone buildings of the abbey. A jet trails across the blue sky, and black-capped chickadees search for seeds in the long stubble beside the road.

Browsing in the library, I find a book commemorating the life and death of Thomas Merton. A poem by Ernesto Cardenal catches my attention:

Love, love above all, as it were a foretaste
of death.
Kisses had the savour of death in them
being
involves being
in some other being.
We only are when we love

But in this life we love only by fits and starts and weakly. We love and we die throughout life; there are the times when we are in a darkness devoid of love. At Vespers we sing Psalms 103, ending: "Let sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked exist no more. Bless the Lord, my soul."

Next morning, the monk in blue and white running shoes helps me locate the pages of scripture as we stand in the choir. This day we will do manual work after the noon meal and the Office of None. I am prepared, having read from the *Primer* that "we work because the work we do is the most effective way we can love and serve our brothers here and now." It is work—in the fields, in the kitchen, in the laundry—that "creates the material substratum and the physical conditions which make the prayer-life possible for our brothers individually and as a community." Under the direction of Brother Hilary, we four monastic associates scrape up wood chips from the cemented barnyard, the wood chips remaining from the monastery's winter fuel supply. After supper—taken individually in silence—the courtyard bell rings, and I put on my hooded tan choir tunic and go down the stone-walled stairway to Compline. Stars shine through the high windows of the darkened church. The tall monk strums a guitar, and we chant "place your trust in the Lord."

While in my room the next day, during the long periods reserved for prayer and contemplation, I give much attention to the heart prayer. "Unceasing prayer is a state of being, a perma-

nent quality of life, an habitual disposition of heart," the *Primer* informs. The Orthodox prayer is offered: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." I create my own heart prayer, "O Lord God, lost in Thy Love," and I repeat it unceasingly, with the in breath and the out breath, during the periods of silent retreat. Leaving the mind with its endless thoughts, feelings, and memories, I know what it is to follow the heart.

On the desk in my monastic room is a framed photograph that Father Samuel has lent to me. It shows Father Samuel drinking beer with Thomas Merton in 1968, in Merton's hermitage on the grounds of the Trappist monastery in Kentucky. In our own refrigerator, Father Samuel has supplied us with bottles of Löwenbräu.

The days go by, and my week's stay at the monastery is coming to an end. I wonder how Thomas Merton would be living his life if he were alive today. Would he still be a Trappist monk, or a Buddhist monk, perhaps, or would he leave the monastic life? I wonder what I should do now: Continue as a professor and teacher? Choose another vocation, in a religious calling? And what about my marriage, and the sources of our separation from one another and of my separation from the divine? What is clear after my week here is that my life is to be given to what Thomas Merton calls, in *The Waters of Siloe*, "the one activity which is the beatitude of heaven." He writes: "That activity is love: The clean, unselfish love that does not live on what it gets but on what is given; a love that increases by pouring itself out for others, that grows by self-sacrifice and becomes mighty by throwing itself away." In this love, "we resemble God, because God himself is love."

It is also becoming clear, given my own particular history of integrating all experiences, that I must live a loving life in active worldly participation. Certainly I do not need the symbolism and the liturgy of the Church; I find the sacred mystery in the simple things of everyday life. Buddhism draws me into the sacred as no other form does. And someday even it may vanish from my practice. As long as there is mystery and as long as there is love, I know unceasingly that which is called God.

The night before my departure from the monastery, I come down with the flu. I am sick all the night, as Father Samuel tends to my needs. In the morning, he comes with fresh linens and offers me a light breakfast. He says that like other monks in the monastery, I am suffering from "the scourge." My getting sick is a bad ending, he observes, but adds, "The Lord moves in strange ways, everything that happens is for a purpose."

Carrying my bags to the car, I think to myself, I will start the ride home, but I know that the way home is somewhere within, and I am still traveling. My journey will be firmly in the mundane world, the everyday life lived in the sacrament of each moment. Thankful I am, as I told Father Samuel, to have experienced the contemplative spirit of monastic life. I drink bottles of cold water as I drive east to DeKalb.



That I might love—as a manifestation of being lost in Thy Love—becomes my daily meditation. The monastery has pointed me to the way of the bodhisattva, the mindful living of daily life in the service of others. Now my path will be in the world of everyday life, in the practice of *metta*, loving-kindness. The spiritual, the holy, as I can know and practice it, will be in the simplest of actions—in eating and walking, in working and resting, and in the helping of others. Everything is to be part of the sacramental mystery of existence. In all of my work, as teacher and professor, and in my personal relationships, I will try to bear witness to the holy oneness of all. In a book on Zen, *The Way of Everyday Life*, I am reminded: "This world, this everyday life, is reality, the total, absolute reality. This is where we must look, and this is where we must learn to live the only life we will have."

My own mystical journey, the search for union with the divine mystery in everyday life, continues unceasingly over the following months. Much is experienced in the cloud of unknowing, beyond reason and speculation. The night of darkness has its own illumination within the heart and soul. I am instructed

by William Johnston's words in his book *The Inner Eye of Love*: "Love is the motivation and driving force behind the mystical journey—it is precisely love that leads one beyond thoughts and images and concepts into the world of silence. The inner eye is now the eye of love."

Love becomes my guide and points the way during these months. "A time will come," says St. John of the Cross, "when the inner flame will tell you what to do in your daily life." The need for union, the desire for peace in everyday life, the sorrow of this human heart, all these lead to the decision to end my marriage. Although the daily struggle will continue for months, until a final break is completed, a new life course is beginning.



The time was one of waiting. "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31). Of letting things happen in their own time, of letting go. I was informed by the Buddha: "The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, not to worry about the future, and not to anticipate troubles, but to live wisely and earnestly for the present."

I walk with Solveig along the trails of Shabbona State Park on hot summer days, wandering, traveling far—here at home. My daughter Laura is married in Cambridge, in the lounge of Eliot House at Harvard University, taking vows for "a life of truth and kindness." My mother sits in front of the fireplace on Christmas eve. Anne, my younger daughter, prepares to leave home and join her sister. Ambiguity and sorrow. "The darkness and the light are both alike to thee" (Psalms 139:12). I read from T.S. Eliot's "East Coker," a passage beginning "I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope/For hope would be hope for the wrong thing," and ending "So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing."

My heart prayer, as another year begins, continues to be on the mystical union, on the divine and human as one. Trying to

keep from grasping, knowing that nothing in this world is secure, I watch all things as they rise and pass away. There is a caring for each moment, beyond the craving thought of the self, a compassionate awareness of all suffering. Fear of an unknown future vanishes when I experience the ceaseless flow of life. One day, I ask for the last time, "What is the meaning of life?" An answer: "Life is in the living of it."

There is, still, a grieving for what is passing. A kind of death. In the living and the changing is the dying. "Our spiritual life," we are reminded in *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, "brings us to acknowledge the temporality of life, to accept aging, death, and the temporary nature of even the most beloved people and experiences around us." I am coming to terms with this, in the grieving.



A Hindu chant: "The truth is one, we call it by many names." I have known this for many years, yet there is the need for spiritual advice. Father Kaley, at the Newman Center, becomes a guide and counselor. He says that we live according to what we pray to, that our image of God affects how we live. I observe that I had lived for years without the image of a personified God, there being no way we humans can know the existence of such a God. Then the realization, reaffirmed: that which is called God, for me, is the unknowable, the mystery, the oneness of all. I do not know its human name: I call it Love.

My faith is in the unity, the oneness, the interconnectedness of all that exists, the life that is beyond birth and death. I am in the depths of the spiritual when I am in the mystery of things, when I am without knowledge or belief. The spiritual is evident in suffering and in joy, in peace and in justice, when we are without ego, when we are compassionate in our everyday lives. It is the spiritual that unifies a life. Thomas Merton writes, in *Thoughts on Solitude*, and this I copy into my journal, "Your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire." No need to try to answer the

unanswerable questions. It is enough to attend to the wonder of our daily lives.

There is little striving left in my life. The search is not what directs my life any longer. Practicing the wonder of existence is what I attend to daily. I realize, with Alan Watts, "that the unknown and the inconceivable is our own original nature." Being aware of my inner workings, and my relationship to all that is, I realize that there is nothing I can do to improve myself. I am as I am. Watts concludes his essay "Suspension of Judgment": "Getting out of your own way comes about only when doing so ceases to be a matter of choice, because you see that there is nothing else for you to do. In other words, it happens when you see that doing something about your situation is not going to help you, and that trying *not* to do anything about it is equally not going to help you. Then where do you stand? You are non-plussed. You are simply reduced to watching, and letting it be."

I watch, and action comes out of my awareness in the here and now. In the words of Zen Master Linji, of an earlier century, "If you attain real, true perception and understanding, birth and death don't affect you—you are free to go or stay." The future takes care of itself. Letting go, lost in Thy Love.



East Lagoon, DeKalb, Illinois



New Melleray Abbey, Peosta, Iowa



West From New Melleray Abbey



University Road, South of DeKalb

CHAPTER ONE

Women As Agents of Virtue and Destruction

The instruction of kings proceeds from inner to outer.
—*Han shu* 36

In this chapter I propose an alternative to the theme of the universal oppression of women in traditional China: the topos of women as agents of virtue and chaos. I begin with the broadly political realm from which women—by conventional reckoning—were excluded. Warring States texts represented women as the competitors or correlates of men in statecraft, admonition, instruction, and matters of oaths and honor. Some equated the “bonds” between ruler and subject with the sexual bonds between men and women; this linkage of political and sexual ties gave rise to both positive and negative representations of women. Accounts of “woman heroes” portray illustrious women as the female equivalents of loyal retainers who are willing to die for virtue or for the lords who employ their talents. The “inner court and outer court” paradigm that pervades Chinese and Western accounts of imperial history also can be traced to this equivalence of sexual and political ties; it depicts women and ministers or appointed officials as competing, and mutually exclusive, political influences.

I present an alternative to prevailing descriptions of the inner court: namely the argument that the moral influence of women made their countries (or families) flourish or perish. This argument, which for convenience I call the female virtue argument, appears in historical texts as early as the fourth century B.C.E. and variations appear in a wide variety of Warring States and Han texts, including the *Lienü zhuan*. Finally, I discuss the structure, format, and interpretation of *Lienü zhuan* narratives, then focus on a subset of those narratives that I define as intellectual virtue stories.

WOMEN AND MINISTERS: TIES THAT BIND

A variety of Warring States motifs linked political “bonds” (*yue* 約) with sexual ones. Lyrics in the *Shi jing*, as well as passages in the *Liesxian zhuan* and the “Demonography” in the manuscripts found at Shuihudi, suggest that various kinds of “binding” (*jie* 結) of firewood, reeds, and certain plants were used in magical practices to secure sexual liaisons.¹ More particularly, a variety of Warring States literary texts, commentaries, and sayings routinely identified the bond between ruler and minister with the bonds of sexual liaisons. Warring States and Han commentaries read *Shi jing* love poems as political allegories of ministers’ desire for a ruler to serve, or rulers’ desire for a minister whose talents he could recognize and use.² Similarly, Han commentaries conventionally interpreted the *Li sao* as a political allegory. In this reading, the first part of the poem allegorizes a rejected (female) lover whose (male) beloved’s attention has been distracted by concubines as an official whose talents go unrecognized. In the second part, the male lover seeking his beloved represents an official seeking his lord.³ This thread of interpretation links the role of minister and wife (or female lover), for example, the saying attributed to Yu Rang in the *Shi ji*: “A noble man (*shi* 士) will die for someone who recognizes him; a woman will adorn herself for someone who pleases her.”⁴ (The problematical status of these readings as allegoresis is discussed in chapter 8.)

A wide range of examples point to this equivalence. Confucius is said to have resigned from his position in his home state of Lu when its ruler accepted dancing girls from the state of Qi; Han Fei considered the presentation of women to be a way of attacking a state.⁵ The assumption that women undermine a state by distracting rulers from government toward pleasure is implicit in both views. A variety of stories in the *Shi ji* highlight the correlative, often conflicting, roles of wives and officials. Some describe rulers who neglect the advice of loyal ministers and attend to the whims of dissolute consorts (these are discussed in chapter 3). Others contrast the treatment of women and (male) retainers.⁶

1. Mark Edward Lewis’s discussion of the development of the shift from covenant to bonds during the Warring States provides a valuable discussion of the origins of the ruler–minister husband–wife allegory (Lewis 1989:72–78). For the *Shuihudi* demonography, see Harper 1985:470–79.

2. For the motif of recognizing hidden talent (*zhi ren* 知人), “seeking a lord” (*qiu zhu* 求主), and “using talent” (*yong cai* 用才), see Henry 1987 and Raphals 1992:158–59.

3. Recent scholarship on the *Li sao* increasingly rejects this interpretation. See Sukhu 1993.

4. SJ 86:2519. Similarly: “If a family is poor it longs for a good wife; if a state is disordered it longs for a good minister” (SJ 44:1840).

5. LY 37/18/4 (tr. Lau 18.4, p. 149); HF 3:186–7 (tr. Liao 1:85–8).

6. For example, in the biographies of Lord Mengchang (SJ 75:2353) and Lord Ping Yuan (SJ 76:2365–66).

According to Mark Edward Lewis, “The identification of political ties with sexual ones both highlights one of the fundamental tensions of the Chinese empire and reveals a basic feature of its formation.”⁷ The tension he refers to is the tension between inner and outer court: a conflict for power between the appointed male officials of the official court and the influence of the women of the inner quarters (and their families). The basic feature is the central role of personal ties based on reciprocal obligations of loyalty and service and their recognition. According to Lewis, “This constitution of the political realm through the exchange of service for recognition, office, and material rewards led to the development of a new elite ethic in which men were celebrated for their devotion unto death to whoever ‘recognized them.’”⁸

Loyalty and Recognition: Male and Female Heroes (*Lieshi* and *Lienü*)

A series of Warring States and Han formulations define the distinctive behavior of worthy individuals that include gentlemen (*shi* 士), the benevolent, loyal subjects (*zhong chen* 忠臣), “heroes” or “men of honor” (*lie shi* 烈士), and female heroes or women of honor (*lienü* 烈女). According to the *Analects*,

Gentlemen of purpose and people of benevolence (*zhi shi ren ren* 志士仁人) have no desire to live by harming benevolence, but they [are prepared to accept] death to complete benevolence.⁹

Zhuangzi 17 describes different types of courage, including the courage of the *lieshi*: “To view death and life equally in the face of crossed swords is the courage of the *lieshi*.”¹⁰ The *Zhuangzi* also questions the usefulness of that courage: “The *lieshi* is viewed by all under heaven as efficacious, but it does not suffice for the survival of his own body.”¹¹ The assassin-retainer Yu Rang, who equated the behavior of a loyal retainer and a woman, also states that, “A loyal subject will die for the honor of his [lord’s] name.”¹² The *Shi ji* makes it clear that this standard of honorable

7. Lewis 1989:75.

8. *zhi ji* 知己. Lewis 1989:77.

9. LY 31/15/9.

10. Zz 44/17/63–4. In another account of the *lie shi*, the *Shi ji* biography of Boya ends with a quotation from Jia Yi’s “Owl” *fu*: “The greedy seek wealth, the *lieshi* seek a fine name, the proud die for the balance of power, and the people want only to live” (SJ 61:2127).

11. Zz 46/18/6–7.

12. 忠臣有死名之義. SJ 86:2521.

behavior and loyalty is not unique to men. When the assassin-retainer Nie Zheng dies in the service of his lord, his sister Nie Ying 聶榮 explains his death (and self-mutilation to protect her) by saying that “a gentleman will die for someone who recognizes him”;¹³ Sima Qian in turn recognizes her as a *woman* of honor, or *lienü*.¹⁴ These accounts of the benevolent, the *shi*, and the *lieshi* merge in a line from a poem by Cao Zhi in the *Wen xuan*: “A *lieshi* will freely endanger his body in order to complete his benevolence.”¹⁵

Two Views of Female Influence: Loyal Wives or the Inner Court?

This early analogy between marriage (or sex) and politics gave rise to two distinct appropriations of women in political life. One was the positive analogy between the loyalty of a devoted wife to her husband and the loyalty of a devoted official to his ruler. This allegory assigned a woman no political role, but rather used one aspect of female virtue—wifely loyalty—as an analogy for male honor. In Warring States formulations, male honor meant a willingness to die for a ruler or lord: In late imperial China, honor or loyalty meant not changing dynastic allegiance. In the words of a commentator to Sima Guang’s Song dynasty, *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* or *Zizhi tongjian*,

In the inner sphere there are husband and wife; in the outer sphere there are ruler and subject. . . . A woman does not follow two husbands and a loyal minister does not serve two lords.¹⁶

The other was the negative formulation of “inner and outer court,” in which the political influence of ministers and of women were mutually incommensurable: the former was benign and the latter vicious. To quote Lewis’s concise summation, “Women and ministers were mutually exclusive because they stood in identical relation to the ruler; if one occupied the slot, then the other had to be removed.”¹⁷

13. 士固為知己者死。SJ 86:2525. This story is discussed in detail in chapter 2.

14. 烈女 (as distinct from 列女)。SJ 86:2526.

15. *Lieshi gan wei qu yi cheng ren*. 烈士甘危軀以成仁。WX 34:1586 (*Qi qi*).

16. ZZTJ 292:2026a. Chen Guang’s commentary refers to the man who became the preeminent negative example, the minister Feng Dao 馮道 (882–954), who served as chief minister to ten emperors and five imperial houses. For a discussion of the problems of this view of Feng Dao, see Wang Gungwu 1962. For other discussions of the importance of loyalty in the Ming and Qing, see Franke 1988:762–63 and Chow 1994:3.

17. Lewis 1989:74.

FEMALE VIRTUE AND THE DYNASTIC CYCLE

It is noteworthy that “inner court–outer court” descriptions of the ethical and political roles of women and ministers typically portray ministers and officials as upright, loyal, and benign and women as degenerate and selfish, or at the very least, devoted to the interests of their own families at the expense of their husbands and their states.

I now turn to a very different representation of the “inner court”: a double representation of women as agents of both virtue and chaos in Warring States historical narratives. I argue that this double-edged representation of women places female virtue at the heart of the dynastic cycle. Positive representations of the “inner court” appear in two distinct contexts: persuasions concerning royal marriages and accounts of the influence of mothers, consorts, and concubines on sage kings and the founders and losers of dynasties. It appears as a persuasion in the *Zuo zhuan* and *Guo yu*. More abstract accounts of women as agents of virtue appear in the *Shi ji*, *Lienü zhuan*, and *Han shu*.¹⁸

In a *Zuo zhuan* passage that presents women as agents of chaos, Fu Chen counsels King Xiang against marrying into the Di tribe.¹⁹ He ascribes serious failings to women in general: “Virtue in a woman is to be without preeminent talent; women’s resentments are without end.”²⁰ Another account of the same incident appears in the *Guo yu*.²¹ Here, however, Fu Chen’s arguments change substantially. Whereas the

18. The *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 or *Zuo Annal* is a commentary on the *Chunqiu* or *Spring and Autumn Annal*, a historical chronicle of the reigns of twelve rulers of the state of Lu from 722 to 481 B.C.E. The *Zuo* commentary, ascribed to Master Zuo (*Zuo Shi* 左氏), provides extensive commentary and historical anecdote over a longer period (722–453 B.C.E.). There is considerable controversy regarding its date and authorship, including the theory that it was forged by Liu Xin from the *Guo yu*. The *Guo yu* 國語 or *Tales of the States* (GY) is a compendium of historical discourses from the Spring and Autumn period from the states of Zhou, Lu, Qi, Jin, Zheng, Chu, Wu, and Yue. Its contents overlap those of the *Zuo zhuan*. See Loewe 1994.

The *Shi ji* (S) or *Historical Records*, begun by Sima Tan (d. 110 B.C.E.) and completed by his son Sima Qian (?145–?86 B.C.E.), is a history of China from quasimythological times to the time of its authors. It differs from the chronological arrangement of earlier historical works and introduces important innovations in historiography. The *Han shu* or *Standard History of the [Former] Han* was begun by Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54 C.E.) and completed by his son and daughter Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 C.E.) and Ban Zhao 班昭 (48?–116? C.E.).

19. Citations from the *Zuo zhuan* are by ruler, reign year, and section and page number according to the Yang Bojun edition (Zuo). Quotations from the *Collected Commentaries on the Zuo zhuan* (ZuoZS) are from the *Commentaries to the Thirteen Classics* or *Shisan jing zhushu* (SSJZS).

20. *Nü de wu ji* 女德無極 (Xi 24.2, p. 425).

21. GY 2.1 (Zhou 2), pp. 45–53. Citations from the *Guo yu* are by *juan* and subsection (i.e. GY 2.1), followed in parenthesis by the number of the *juan* in the records of that state (i.e. Zhou 2), and page number in the edition cited.

Zuo zhuan version presents women as causes of discord and disadvantage, the *Guo yu* version presents women as important agents of good fortune, to the extent that the life and death of states hinge upon them. Here is the *Guo yu* version of the persuasion:

It will not do. For marriage leads sometimes to misfortune, sometimes to prosperity.... In ancient times [the states of] Zhi and Chou rose because of Ren the Elder, Qi and Zeng from Si the Elder, Qi, Xu Shen and Lü from Jiang the Elder, and Chen from Ji the elder.²² These women were all able to benefit their [husbands'] families and retain close relations with their [parents'] families. In antiquity, Yan was ruined by Ren the younger, Mixu by Ji the elder, Kuai by Yun the Third, Dan by the fault of Ji of Zheng, Xi by Gui of Chen, Deng by Man of Chu, Luo by Ji the Younger, and Lu by Gui of Jing. These all benefited strangers and were estranged from their own parents.²³

The context of this persuasion is the argument that it is not auspicious for Xian to abandon his relatives and join the Di. Rather he should emulate the sage kings of the ancient past, who retained their virtues, shed light on the world, kept the people at peace, and had enduring reputations.

22. Zhi 摯 and Chou 畴 were small states located in present-day Henan. Ren the Elder 大任 was the wife of Wang Ji 王季 and mother of the future King Wen 文王 of Zhou. Qi 杞 was in present-day Henan, Zeng 烝 in Shandong. Si the Elder 大姒 was the first wife of King Wen and mother of King Wu 武王 of Zhou. The royal houses of Qi 齊, Xu 許, Shen 申, and Lü 呂 all bore the name Jiang 姜. Jiang the Elder 大姜 was the wife of Tai Wang 太王 and the mother of Wang Ji (the father of King Wen). The state of Chen 陳 was also in Henan. Its princes bore the name Gui 媯 and were descendants of Shun. Ji the Elder 大姬 was the eldest daughter of King Wu and the elder sister of King Cheng 成王.

23. GY 2.1 (Zhou 2), p. 48. The states of Yan 鄆, Kuai 郟, Xi 息, and Deng 鄧 were in present-day Henan. Mixu 密須 was in present-day Gansu, Dan 聃, and Luo 羅 in Hubei, and Lu 盧 in Shandong. Zheng 鄭 attacked Yan and Dan, King Wen conquered Mixu. Kuai was destroyed in the aftermath of an adulterous liaison by Ji of Zheng 鄭姬, who was to have been given in marriage to the king of Kuai. Nothing is known of Ren the Younger 仲任, Ji the Elder 伯姑, or Yun the Third 叔妘. Gui of Chen 陳媯 was the wife of the Duke of Xi. Her beauty caused hostilities between Xi, Cai, and Chu. Man of Chu 楚曼 was the wife of Wu of Chu and mother of King Wen of Chu. King Wen passed through Deng and took the opportunity to conquer it, but no responsibility seems to attach to Man, who appears in more positive terms in the *Zuo zhuan* (Huan 12 and Zhuang 4). Ji the Younger 季姬 is said to have caused the ruin of the state of Luo, but no details are known of it. Gui of Jing 荊媯 (Chu) was the daughter of the prince of Lu and the principal wife of the prince of Chu; the details of her responsibility for the downfall of Lu are unknown. For translation and annotation of this passage, see d'Hormon 198–208.

In the *Shi ji*, women appear even more strongly as agents of political virtue, where this topos introduces the collected biographies of the wives of emperors.

Since antiquity, [as to both] those who received the mandate as emperors and kings and rulers who maintained the rites and guarded correct principles, it was not only their inner virtue that flowered, they were also helped by their wives. The Xia came to power because of the Tu Shan girl; Xie was deposed because of Moxi. The Yin [the Shang] came to power because of You [Shen of] Song; Zhou was put to death because of Danji. The Zhou attained power because of Jiang Yuan and Ren the Elder; You was made prisoner because of debauchery with Bao Si. This is why the *Changes* takes *Qian* and *Kun* as its foundation; the *Odes* begins with *Guanju*, the *Documents* praises women who were sent off only after all was well ordered, and the *Zuo Annal* criticizes not coming in person to meet a bride-to-be.²⁴

The *Guo yu* passage described the rise and fall of a series of small states because of the influence of good and evil women; Sima Qian shortens the *Guo yu* account and applies the same topos to the rise and fall of the three imperial dynasties before the Han. In his version of the argument, the virtuous rulers who inaugurated new dynasties or successfully maintained existing ones did so by virtue of the influence and aid of their wives and consorts. Thus the Xia and Shang dynasties rose because of the influences of the wives of their founders Yu and Tang (the Tu Shan girl and You Shen). They fell because the debauched influences of the consorts of Xie and Zhou (Moxi and Danji) caused these last rules of the Xia and Shang to lose their thrones, their lives, and their dynasties to Shang and Zhou conquerors. Like the *Guo yu*, Sima Qian attributes the rise of the Zhou to maternal influences and its loss of hegemony to the influence of its queen, Bao Si. (Unlike the Xia and Shang, the Zhou was not conquered by another dynasty.)

24. SJ 49:1967, indebted to Chavannes 6:27–28. The rise of Yu of the Xia dynasty is described in the *Bamboo Book Annals* (Legge, prolegomena 117), but without reference to the Tu Shan girl. Moxi was the concubine of the last Xia king; she appears in LNZ 7.1 and GY 7.1 (Jin 1). Jian Di of the Song clan was the mother of the Shang dynasty minister Xie (SJ 1:173, LNZ 1.3). Danji was the wife of Zhou, last king of the Shang (SJ 1:199n2, 207, and 228n1; LNZ 7.2) Jiang Yuan was the mother of Hou Qi (LNZ 1.2). For Da Ren, see Mao 236 and 240. For Bao Si (LNZ 7.3), the consort of King Yu of Zhou, see SJ 1:280–9. *Qian* and *kun* are the first two hexagrams of the *Yi jing* or *Book of Changes*. The *Shi jing* or *Book of Odes* begins with the ode *Guanju* (Mao 1), which praises a virtuous woman. The reference from the *Shu jing* or *Book of Documents* is to Shun's giving his two daughters in marriage to Yu (LNZ 1.1). The *Zuo zhuan* reference is to the marquess of Ji (Yin 2).