

*Faithful Heart+
2233 535 253

This piece treats the lonely-wife theme more conventionally. The form is notable for treating the 2-syllable line not as an uncounted incipit, but as a line; it mixes on terms of equality with the also short 3-syllable lines. The twisting and turning of the rhyme finally cadences on a single rhymesound, and the poem, in parallel, winds past different scenes: first an outdoor scene, then a boudoir scene, finally an emotional scene. In the last, the lady is first saddened by parting reminders (willows) and conjugal symbols (butterflies), and then she is solaced as, in the last line, her dream reaches its distant goal: a meeting with her lover. It is remarkable that it does reach its goal. In the constructed verse world, unlike the real one with which Lǐ Shāng-yǎn (p310) in his mysterious way was contending, artistry, for just an instant, is efficacious.

Orioles play,
Flowers sway,
 On a springtime day,
 Misting rain comes clear.
 The golden pillow made of fine brocade,
 The phoenix curtain sheer –
 Willows droop, and butterflies appear.
Constant fear,
 For nothing from the desert does she hear,
 But in her dream, he's near.

Wǎn Tíng-yǎn (c812-870)

*The Clepsydra+
2(336335)

The clepsydra, a dripping-water clock, with its doleful intensification of the passage of time, had figured in boudoir poetry since the Six Dynasties; it here gives its name to one of the most delicate of the new verse-patterns. Each of its two stanzas is built on resolving a pair of breathless 3-syllable lines into a longer line: first into the open, not endstopped 6, and then into the more final 5. The sense of hope reaching out but being denied is thus, as it were, built into the pattern itself.

Here, the lover is again gone (“border geese”) to the northern frontier. She may dream of him, amid her urban surroundings (“city crows”), she may try to recapture earlier intimacies (“golden partridge”), but the dream is still a dream; and no real meeting has taken place. Her lover does not really feel her feelings.

Long the fronds of willow,
Soft the rains of spring,
 Far away beyond the flowers pattering;
Border geese start up,
City crows arise,
 On the screen, a golden partridge flies
Plumes of incense wind,
Drifting through the blind,
 A poolside room, a pleasure-house, a fate unkind –
Behind the crimson lamp
The brodered screen hangs low,
 Long I lie dreaming, but you do not know

*The Clepsydra+
2(336335)

Here we have a woman who hopes for her lover's visit, a hope seen as denied, not by any explicit statement in the poem itself, but by the implications of the phrase "empty stair" (for another, but differently poignant, use of it, see p357). Her hope of meeting, and its denial, are registered not in any words or thoughts of the lady: there are none. There is only a concluding sound, the drip of raindrops from the leaves of the dryandra trees, which dominates the last half of the poem. The dripping of the water-clock which gave this tune its title, and which figured as an object in the example at left, is also present, but in different form, in this poem. It is not some device, whose dripping shows the passage of time, but nature itself. The poet again shows himself a master of how poems (and human affections) end.

There was a further word to be said, for which see p324

Incense burner smokes,
Crimson candles weep,
 On autumn thoughts in painted chamber both do peep;
Feather eyebrows faint,
Clouds of hair all wrong,
 The coverlets are cold, the night is long.
Dryandra trees are tall,
Midnight showers fall,
 Of separation's grief she speaks no word at all.
Leaf by single leaf,
Sound by single sound,
 The empty stairs are wet, as down comes round

Yw Sywǎn-jī (843-868)

On the Theme “River Willows”

Yw Sywǎn-jī, like Sywē Táu (p268), showed an early talent for literature. This piece is a practice exercise on an assigned theme: a row of willows growing along a riverbank. To one skilled in the poet’s craft, this sets up a series of associations: their conventional appearance (1st couplet), their context of water and fishermen (2nd couplet), a lonely traveler (3rd couplet), the traveler’s sorrows (4th couplet). Willows, if less so than dryandras (p291), continue to drip after rain has ceased, and thus prolong the melancholy of the rain.

A challenge here, as earlier for Shǎn Mǎn-ywǎn (p142), is to illustrate the theme in each line of the poem. but without ever naming the theme of the poem. Only the title gives the riddle away.

Purple tint along the empty shore,
 Misty shapes as far as the distant towers:
 Across the autumn water spreads their shade,
 Upon the fisherman descend their flowers;
 The fishes dwell among their ancient roots,
 The traveler moors amid their leafy bowers –
 Bleak and chill, the night of wind and rain:
 He wakes the sadder from his dreaming hours

Visiting The South Tower of Ch́ng-jvn Temple
Seeing Where the Names of the Successful Candidates Are Written

Any young person of literary ability thinks of the government examinations, which included the writing of poetry, and which alone led to a government career. Here is her sense of being literarily all dressed up but with no career place to go. She watches as the names of the successful exam candidates are posted. Eager to display her literary skill, for us if not for the government examiner, she refers to the list obliquely, mentioning only its elegant calligraphy. "Silver hooks" is from a rhapsody on calligraphy by Bwó Jyŵ-yi; "fall from the writer's wrist" is from another writer's poem on the same subject. Whatever counsel she might have or not have for the Emperor (essays as well as poems were required of the aspirants), she undoubtedly has the thesaurus at her fingers' ends.

Cloudy summits in the sun
 are decked with springtime mist,
One by one, the silver hooks
 fall from the writer's wrist;
I hate the way a gossamer gown
 muffles poetry –
I raise my head and vainly wish
 my name were on the list

Yǔ Sywǎn-jī (843-868)

On a Winter's Night
Sent to Wǎn Fēi-chǐng

She became the concubine of Lǐ Dǔ-ān, but was driven from the house by his angry wife. She next took up with the poet Wǎn Tíng-yǎn, then thirty years older. After a brief but scandalous affair, which took them all over China, he abandoned her. Here, addressing him, she laments her sleeplessness with characteristically sharp observation and lack of illusion. She shows herself not only to her lover, but to us, in the act of making poetry out of it. All her work is in the traditional shī form; not for her the polymeter verse which was the rage of the time, and at which Wǎn Tíng-yǎn was the master. But she knows his work; who better? In her poem, she echoes his “Clepsydra” verse on p321, but in the eight-line form.

Like him, she begins with a lamp, and a lady whose sadness the lamp reveals. She omits a self-description in the second couplet, and instead introduces his dryandra theme there. True to the conventions of the eight-line form, she devotes the third couplet to a contradiction, here, between desire and destiny. And like him, she ends the poem with a sound. How to improve on the sadness of the dryandra rain in his poem? She moves up a level. Her final sound is not the agonizing sound of the rain on the leaves, but the even more agonizing sound of little cheerful birds, with their little conjugal noises. She sorrows, but they do not care.

Beneath the lamp I chant the songs
I cull from misery,
I do not sleep all night, for fear
how cold the bed will be:
Among the garden's fallen leaves
the rising wind I hear,
Through the curtain's gauzy silk
the setting moon I see;
It is not true that hopes denied
are granted in the end,
And vain to think that will alone
determines destiny –
For solitude, avoid a place
where dryandras are,
And evening sparrows, twittering,
circle endlessly

To the Neighbor Girl

The “neighbor girl” is the one who had peeped amorously over the wall at the handsome but unreliable Sìng Yw (p135). Here, she is taken to task for passing up Wáng Chāng (the Táng version of the nice steady guy every girl says she wants, but few girls will actually go out with) in favor of a fickle, fast-track lover. It might have been written by the poetess for herself, thinking of her own ill-fated affairs.

She did not always respond to life’s disappointments in such a literary way. In 868, in a fit of rage during a period in residence at a Dàuist temple, she whipped her maidservant, one Green Feather, so severely that the maid died of it. The poet was executed for it that autumn, at the still young age of 25.

Her poetry reflects her personal intensity, but its more bookish diction and conventional metrics (the exam poem of a not quite bygone day) rank it, in the end, below the innovative work of Wñ Tíng-ywñ. We must go to Lǐ Chīng-jàu (p389) to find her strong spirit combined with an equally strong formal originality.

You raise your sleeve – the sun has made you shy,
 You’re slow to rise – the spring has made you sad;
 Easy to seek a priceless hidden treasure,
 Hard to find a faithful-hearted lad;
 With falling tears the pillow is bedewed,
 To the heartbreak, flowers only add –
 Your idea, to peep at the rogue you wanted:
 Why lament the guy you might have had?