Late 343

Fýng Yén-sz (903-960)

*Plucking Mulberry+ 2(7447)

Fýng had a prominent career under the Southern Táng splinter state, being alternately the Chief Minister and the Subtutor to the Heir Apparent, of whom more below. The military disasters of Southern Táng are charged in part to his questionable leadership, and he is also claimed to have been devious politically, none of which has helped his literary reputation. His verses were famous in his lifetime and influential afterward, but due to the disapproval of succeeding generations, they were not collected until 1058, by which time some of them had drifted into other collections; his dates, and even his name, are now disputed.

The first stanza of this intense little piece shows her journeying in a dream to her absent lover (like $W\bar{v}n$ Tíng-yŵn's lady on p319); the second exposes her to the light of day, and the realization that her dream-meeting (like the one on p320) was an illusion. The last line echoes Wéi Jwāng's brilliancy (p340): the red of her robe is darker red where it is moistened by her tears.

The cold cicada soon will tell
of threefold autumn time:
Her lonely room is still and bare,
The leaves drift down upon the stair,
The moonlight filters through the blind;
in her dream she's there

The anguish of a former time
continues as before:
To speak of bygones do not dare:
The jade flute notes no sooner blare
Than on her sleeves the drops of blood
are spattered everywhere

344 Táng

Fýng Yén-sz (903-960)

*Magpie on the Bough+ 2(7977)

This piece gives us yet another garden, in which yet another lady, too sad to amuse herself with the currently fashionable swing in the last line, grieves at the absence of her lover, whose horse is now tied at another door, invisible beyond the willow fronds. In the second stanza, she muses on the impermanence of spring; which is to say, of youth and love

There are two famous lines in this poem. One, line 9, is from Yén Ywn (p306). The other, line 1, is by Fvng himself; it was borrowed by Lǐ Chīng-jàu (p390). What it means is not entirely clear, but the point may be just that lack of clarity: the post-Táng loss of all the usual fixed coordinates.

Garden courtyard deep as deep,

as deep as well it may;

Willow trees are piled with mist,

numberless, their drapes and curtains sway.

Jeweled bridle, figured saddle,

pleasure quarter gay;

From tower's height I cannot see

the Painted Terrace Way

Rain in sheets and wind in bursts,

the end of springtime's day;

The gate is bolted in the dusk,

but nothing serves to make the springtime stay.

With tear-filled eyes I ask the flowers,

the flowers do not say:

In swirls of red, they flutter past

the swing, and far away

Late 345

Lǐ Yŵ (937-978)

*Song of Midnight+ 7755 5555

It was Lǐ Yw, the third and last ruler of Southern Táng, to whom Fýng Yén-sż had been Subtutor. A poet could scarcely have an apter pupil. Nor could a pupil ask for more misfortunes as subjects for sad verse. Yw came to the throne in 961, and for a time there was some pleasure in it. This piece (the pattern is also called *Bodhisattva Barbarian+; see p339) is on the theme of the slightly too-early spring outing accompanied by ladies (For an almost humorous version, see p259). This one begins with an excuse for pushing the season (couplet 1), and continues with ladies of jadelike skin pouring out yellow wine (couplet 2). A certain conviviality grows (couplet 3). Then comes a resource available only to an emperor.

Once long ago, when Táng emperor Míng-hwáng and Yáng Gwèi-fēi were viewing unopened flowers, Míng-hwáng had played a piece on the wether-drum, on which he was an expert performer, and at the end, the flowers had obediently bloomed. This allusion then gets mixed up with another famous Míng-hwáng story, in which Lǐ Bwó extemporizes a poem to celebrate another spring party (p217). On this rather rowdy occasion, the drum seems to have elicited poems, not flowers. Lǐ Yw's retinue must have been composing them to keep the occasion going.

It is all no doubt harmless enough, in its day. But for readers in a later age, it is thick with unintended predictions of doom.

To seek for spring you need to be
earlier than spring,
To look at flowers, don't wait until
the bough's done blossoming:
A yellow hue the soft jade hands lift up,
The stream of wine comes clear within the cup
What matter if the party noisy grow?
To palace garden, spring's return is slow –
Tipsy all; to chatter all succumb,
And a poem concludes to the beat of the wether-drum

346 Táng

Lǐ Yŵ (937-978)

*The Fisherman+

There were also more private moments, away from the buzz and clangor of palace pleasures. In this artfully simple piece (with the palace inner garden flowers replaced by just outdoor flowers, and the wine poured by beautiful women replaced by just a jug of wine) he seeks respite in nature. What he finds there is not the higher truth evoked by Wáng Wé1 (p206), but more exactly, himself. The last rhyme-word, dż-yóu, is the key. The adverb dż "of itself, on its own" can describe the motions of animals (p204, "of themselves"), or boats (p237, "where it will"). With yóu "follow," in this poem, it means following one's own inner promptings. A thousand years later, in the languages of China, dż-yóu still means "liberty."

An oar of springtime wind propels

my leaf-boat easily,

At the end of a length of plaited line

my slender hook trails free,

The flowers fill the islands,

The wine-jug brims for me:

Amid the wide expanse of waves,

I get my liberty

Late 347

*Gazing Toward the South+ 35775 (c976)

Yw's next loss was that of everything else he had. The Sung armies conquered Southern Táng in 975. Lǐ Yw was taken north to a leisurely if humiliating captivity, where he eventually died. Of many poems in which he returns to his former state in a dream, this one is by far the most celebrated. In only five lines, he announces his anguish, and then expresses it by experiencing again the pleasures he has lost.

The shorter last line (the 5 following the two 7's) is an elliptical conclusion. Most of the poem is taken up with the journey to the palace park, with its carriages and horses. It is left for the last line to imply all that is beautiful about the spring. From that beauty, in turn, we may perhaps imagine the grief of the poet, at its loss.

So much agony!

Last night in dream my soul went wandering:
Once again, as long ago,

I sought the palace park,

Carriages like a flowing stream,

horses capering —

The flowers, the moon, the very height of spring

348 Táng

Lǐ Yŵ (937-978)

*Waves Wash the Sands+ 2(54774) (c977)

And here is the agony itself. Another dream like the one preceding has come and gone, the poet is still a captive, and we see him in the hard historical present, acknowledging his loss. This poem thus makes a fitting companion to Lǐ Shrì-mín's Táng inaugural poem (p177): loss of empire balancing gain of empire. As in the preceding piece, the poignantly shorter last line of the form is used to step back from the poem in a last summative general phrase. The conventional lonely garden is now the world. The question Yén Ywn (p306) had asked a century earlier, and Fvng Yén-sz (p344), without giving a solution, had repeated twenty years earlier, seems at last to have been definitively answered.

Outside the screen, the rain is sad and slow,
Spring is but a faded glow.
The silken covers do not screen
the morning winds that blow;
In my dream, I cannot tell
that I have traveled far –
A moment's happiness I know.
To lean alone on railings, do not go,
Hills and streams in endless show:
I left them once without a pang,
I see them now with woe.
Flowing river, fallen blossom:
spring has gone away –
In heaven above and here below.