

Approaches to Teaching
The Story of the Stone
(Dream of the Red Chamber)

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Approaches to Teaching World Literature

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(Dream of the Red Chamber)

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and
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The Capillaries of Power: Hierarchy and Servitude in *The Story of the Stone*

Christopher Lupke

A fascinating dimension of *The Story of the Stone* is the elaborate depiction of the retinue of individuals that makes up the Jia family's servant staff. Of particular note in this network of characters are several maids assigned to serve various prominent characters in the family; of these maids, three stand out for the amount of detail invested in their depiction, the sympathetic tone that the narrator employs in their portrayal, and the fact that they are present throughout the novel: Aroma, chief maid of Bao-yu; Patience, Xi-feng's chief maid; and Faithful, the only remaining close servant of Grandmother Jia. They are characters of first-order complexity occupying a place on a stage comparable to that of the characters who belong to the Jia family, a family that derives its high rank from military accomplishments of past generations but now is enmeshed, mainly through Jia Zheng, in official society and aspires to be considered a part of the literati. A number of other maids are given prominent roles, and some feature in subplots in the novel. These include Caltrop, a kidnap victim of high-class origin; other maids of Bao-yu, such as Skybright; of Bao-chai, such as Oriole; and of Dai-yu, such as Nightingale and Snowgoose. These supporting characters, as well as the tragic Er-jie, not a maid but a woman subjected to near servitude and even degradation, supplement the main narrative skein in colorful ways.

One might assume before reading *Stone* that these various servants are in effect slaves who work for the landed gentry family that the Jias collectively constitute and that this enslavement will entail ill treatment, even physical and psychological abuse. But their situation is not exactly like this. These servants were not compelled by force to serve the Jias; rather, they were purchased from their families (or were house-born). Generally they are not abused, though there was abuse of servants in the social reality of China at the time. That said, there are two fundamentally different social planes in *Stone*, that of the elite and that of those who tend to their needs. The two differ in every respect—in their life choices, education, the expectations placed on them, the way they speak, their dreams and hopes, and even the clothes on their back. This difference marks the stratification by which the servant class was denied access to the power, prestige, and wealth of the landlord class and denied the social mobility accorded to male members of the elite who could enhance their families' conditions by competing in civil service examinations. But the servants in the novel do not contest this unequal distribution of power. In fact, they sometimes support it more than do their masters. There is great empathy and much sharing of sentiments between the Jia family and their servants.

Some of this empathy may stem from the fact that the Jias are of bond-servant heritage, descendants, as Evelyn Rawski notes in this volume, of Chinese

1 prisoners of war from generations ago. Perhaps the Jia family recognize in their
 2 contractually obligated servants some of the subjugation that their ancestors
 3 previously experienced under the Manchus. There is always a slight insecur-
 4 ity in the Jia family toward their social superiors—the royals to whom Yuan-
 5 chun, their prized daughter, has been betrothed as imperial concubine. Wil-
 6 liam T. Rowe observes that by the time of *Stone* many bond-servant families
 7 had achieved elite status, become active in official life, and no longer incurred
 8 any of the debasement their ancestors experienced during and just after the
 9 Manchu conquest.¹ Slaves—or indentured servants, as many of the maids in
 10 the novel are—came from pariah families, though obtaining slaves from com-
 11 moner families did occur.²

12 Through a detailed character reading of several of the maids, I demonstrate
 13 how servants reinforce the social hierarchy, how they act to maintain the status
 14 quo. I also give examples of how relationships among family members become
 15 intertwined with those of the maids, blurring the boundary that stands between
 16 them. I provide illustrations of the realistic characterization of maids and dis-
 17 cuss how they function as structuring devices, both to communicate necessary
 18 information to the reader without the intrusion of the narrator and to serve as
 19 conduits for motif symbols, reminding the reader of events that occurred many
 20 chapters before. Maids also work as vehicles for the myriad subplots that keep
 21 the reader engaged over the course of a work of such epic proportions.

22 Early in *Stone*, the narrator makes clear that Aroma will be a major char-
 23 acter in the novel. Originally a maid of Grandmother Jia, she was handpicked
 24 by the matron of the Jia household to serve as Bao-yu's chief maid because of
 25 her "tried and conspicuous fidelity" (1.3.106) 心地純良 (1: 51). But from the
 26 outset Bao-yu asserts his own mischievous and amorous personality over her by
 27 changing her name from Pearl to Aroma. The translation of "aroma" from the
 28 Chinese *xiren* 襲人 loses some of the dimensions of the original. *Xiren* is not a
 29 generic scent but connotes the smell of flowers and literally means "to invade,"
 30 suggesting something sensual and perhaps even seductive; it is in any case as-
 31 sailing. Her character is complex and paradoxical. Although in the first volume
 32 of the translation we are led to believe that she may be receptive to Bao-yu's
 33 precocious sexual curiosity, she turns out to be a no-nonsense enforcer of the
 34 orthodoxy that would have Bao-yu adhere to proper behavior. The reader would
 35 not normally think that adherence to social norms and established hierarchies
 36 is a message inculcated from the bottom—that is, through a maid. But time
 37 and time again in the novel, and in many different ways, Aroma so instructs. In
 38 order to convince Bao-yu of the necessity to behave, she often argues that his
 39 recklessness will hurt the ones he cares for—his closest maids—rather than
 40 himself. That reminder usually works.

41 The reader gets a first real glimpse of Aroma at the beginning of chapter 6,
 42 just after Bao-yu's allegorical and erotic dream. We learn that the relationship
 S between Aroma and Bao-yu will be an unusual one, for after some questioning
 R from the young woman, Bao-yu simply transfers to her what he has learned
 L

in his dream. Thereafter, they forge an affectionate bond. This muted sexual bond is not typical of prescribed behavior in eighteenth-century China. When maids are about to return home for a visit, they are always reminded of the rules: they must use their own bedding and toiletries, avoid contact with others, and have two interior rooms to themselves (2.51.518). The novel strives to be as realistic as possible, cataloging the details of everyday life among the landed gentry—details of social relationships, issues of money, personality conflicts, and various mundane concerns—yet both fantasy and sexual innuendo supplement the realism so readers will read on. The unusual and the taboo add spice to matters that are routine. The relationship of servant with benefits that Bao-yu enjoys with Aroma is one example. In the scene where Aroma feigns sleep in order to coax Bao-yu to bed with her (1.8.198), the sexual side of their relationship is underlined. But despite her devotion to Bao-yu, or perhaps because of it, Aroma endeavors at different turns and in different ways to set him on the straight and narrow path of a young Confucian scholar—and possible civil servant.

In chapter 19, Aroma is called home by her mother to participate in a family gathering. This sort of request was common for young, female servants working in a family of great wealth. They were sold into the employ of the wealthy family for an agreed-on number of years. When the stipulated period of service was over, they returned to their own family, most likely for a marriage betrothal. Therefore both Bao-yu and Aroma know that eventually they must go their separate ways. But where particular economics and the affections that could develop from close proximity came into play, it often happened that a maid was brought into the family in a permanent fashion, through concubinage. This route was impossible for males, since daughters were traditionally married out of the family while sons took their wives into the family. In a society, like China's, that valued the perpetuation of the male line, there were additional provisions made beyond the principal marriage: male children often took one or more concubines.

Being a chamber wife, which comes up regularly in *The Story of the Stone*, was a kind of concubinage. It occurred when the personal maid of a given male (or another maid in the household) was deemed a good enough match for her status to be upgraded from servant to a second or third wife. She became his concubine, inferior to this principal wife but complementary to her and (at least in theory) not in competition with her. How these relationships played out in real life ranged from the ideal cases of complete harmony to out-and-out domestic warfare. Since we know that Bao-yu is indulged well beyond what is reasonable even for a family of such means as the Jias' and that he is closely attached to Aroma, it is reasonable to assume that she may one day become his chamber wife. But this arrangement is uncertain until a contract has been made, and Aroma uses that uncertainty as leverage. In chapter 19, she makes the veiled threat that she can leave the Jias and return home for good. She reminds Bao-yu that there are rules governing the rights of indentured servants and that

1 the Jia family has the reputation of treating its servants justly. But the narrator
 2 reveals that it is not her intention to leave the Jias or the service of Bao-yu.
 3 She simply wants Bao-yu to behave: he must reform his speech to conform to
 4 that befitting a young male; he must give the appearance of liking his studies;
 5 and he must stop playing with women's clothing, makeup, and lipstick. Her de-
 6 mands on Bao-yu reinforce orthodox forms of heterosexual, masculine Chinese
 7 behavior (1.19.385–89).

8 This austere side of Aroma's personality, which increases with each pass-
 9 ing chapter, balances the amorous side. Aroma demonstrates through various
 10 machinations and psychological manipulations her desire to see Bao-yu con-
 11 form to the patriarchal and patrilineal values of traditional China, even though
 12 in this conventional framework people like her were far down on the hierarchi-
 13 cal chain. Continually reminding Bao-yu what the proper path should be, she
 14 becomes his superego. Although she has responsibilities for and power over
 15 other, lesser maids, she is beneath members of the Jia family and their peers.
 16 Yet she is able by her wits and proximity to exert power over Bao-yu. She uses
 17 that power to fortify the social hierarchy. She may hope someday to become an
 18 official concubine of Bao-yu, which would elevate her in class, but she cannot
 19 hope to become his principal wife, as Dai-yu and Bao-chai do. The scene in
 20 which Nanny Li, Bao-yu's former wet nurse, bullies Aroma shows that Aroma's
 21 power is limited. Bao-yu's relationships with women exist on completely dif-
 22 ferent social planes that seldom interfere with one another. Immediately after
 23 Aroma's threat and his anxious discussion with her, Bao-yu seamlessly moves
 24 to playful banter with Dai-yu, a woman who is on a par with him socially and
 25 might become his principal wife; all thoughts of Aroma for the moment have
 26 been left behind (1.19.393). The possibility that Bao-yu and Dai-yu (or Bao-yu
 27 and Bao-chai) could become engaged is completely compatible in eighteenth-
 28 century China with his simultaneous relationship with Aroma. In any case, by
 29 the end of the chapter Bao-yu has already forgotten Aroma's entreaty to act like
 30 a man (397–99).

31 As the novel progresses, the depiction of Aroma's character becomes more
 32 embroidered and nuanced, and the paradox that Aroma is seductive and emo-
 33 tionally tied to Bao-yu yet at the same time the dispassionate critic of his social
 34 behavior continues. The two roles coexist and are not in conflict with each other.
 35 A change in her professional status in the Jia household enhances the custo-
 36 dial aspect of her persona. Aroma was originally part of Grandmother Jia's vast
 37 phalanx of servants, but we learn that Lady Wang, Bao-yu's mother, has taken a
 38 proprietary interest in the young woman. Meanwhile Aroma becomes increas-
 39 ingly impatient with Bao-yu's incorrigible ways. She threatens to return to the
 40 service of Her Old Ladyship, then expresses displeasure at Bao-yu's cavorting
 41 (1.21.418, 422). She again threatens to leave him when he is caught wheedling
 42 lipstick from Grandmother Jia's chief maid, Faithful (1.24.469). But Aroma's
 S position is never in question, for near the end of the first volume of the transla-
 R tion a visitor judges his importance in Bao-yu's eyes by the fact that it is Aroma
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who serves him (26.513). Yet she uses comfort and cajolery to soothe Bao-yu rather than direct confrontation (2.29.87–92). When she remonstrates with him about his excesses, be they amorous, humorous, or furious, she points out that the ones who will be blamed for his intemperance are the servants:

Her Old Ladyship will be really angry if the two of you are still at daggers drawn on the day of the festival, and that will make life difficult for *all* of us. Why not put your pride in your pocket and go and say you are sorry, so that we can all get back to normal again? (2.29.92)

你們兩個再這們仇人似的，老太太越發要生氣，一定弄的大家不安生。依我勸，你正經下個氣，陪個不是，大家還是照常一樣，這麼也好，那麼也好？ (1: 405)

Aroma, at all times loyal to Bao-yu, manipulates him not for the sake of control but rather to protect him from himself. That she is a stabilizing force in his life does not go unnoticed by Lady Wang. The young woman exhibits surprising wisdom for her age and social station. After Bao-yu is nearly beaten to death by his father, Aroma tells Lady Wang that the whipping did Bao-yu some good, and Lady Wang agrees (2.34.136). At this point in the novel, Lady Wang assumes that one day Aroma will become Bao-yu's chamber wife but feels it would be premature to make that arrangement formal now. She promotes the young maid in position and pay and moves her employment to her own account and out of the jurisdiction of Grandmother Jia, all without the matron's knowledge (2.36.204). Aroma now answers directly to Lady Wang and not to Her Old Ladyship. Through Aroma, Lady Wang can better control, or at least curb, Bao-yu's behavior. Aroma proves loyal in this new role and thereafter appears more detached emotionally from Bao-yu. She no longer permits herself the "affectionate intimacies" she once did with Bao-yu (3.77.548). She increasingly furnishes reports to Lady Wang on his behavior (4.96.331). In one instance there is the suspicion that she relays to Lady Wang his exact conversations with other maids (3.77.538). But Aroma is never explicitly depicted by the narrator as a spy; she is always seen in a sympathetic light.

Despite her allegiance to Lady Wang, Aroma can be deceptive if she feels the deception serves the higher goal of harmony in the family and the emotional stability of Bao-yu. In one incident, for example, Sunset, a minor maid, steals a bottle of perfume from Grandmother Jia to give to Jia Huan, Bao-yu's ne'er-do-well half brother. Bao-yu offers to take the blame for Sunset. Patience, Xi-feng's chief maid, supports this suggestion, because if Sunset and Jia Huan are involved, Huan's sister, Tan-chun, could get into trouble. Aroma agrees to go along with the plan even though she first warns that Lady Wang will be upset when she hears about the theft (3.61.178–79).

While appreciating the fact that *Stone* reveals much about the world of rigid hierarchy in China of the eighteenth century, we must not forget that we are

1 reading a literary work that must be faithful to certain formal expectations—con-
 2 tinuity, trajectory, closure—in order to succeed aesthetically. Aroma plays an
 3 important structural role in this regard. As the narrative progresses, she worries
 4 more and more about her future. She imagines what it would be like to live as
 5 a chamber wife to Bao-yu with Dai-yu as his principal wife. She worries that
 6 Dai-yu's temperamental behavior may lead to her suffering a tragic fate similar
 7 to that of Er-jie or Caltrop (4.82.58–61). She has gradually come to respect Bao-
 8 chai, Bao-yu's other potential intended, and feels that Bao-chai's equanimity is
 9 more conducive to her and Bao-yu's well-being in such a triangular relationship
 10 (96.329). For her part, Bao-chai has long held Aroma in high esteem although
 11 the maid is "uneducated" (1.21.417). This concern over destiny sheds light on
 12 the character of Aroma and provides a road map to her hopes and desires. Ulti-
 13 mately, however, her worries have no material bearing on what happens to her
 14 in the novel: Aroma is eventually betrothed by her parents to a local business-
 15 man. Bao-yu's disappearance from the novel circumvents the problem of his
 16 formal relationship with Aroma, and although the maid is reluctant to accept
 17 the marriage proposal out of loyalty to Bao-yu, she acquiesces out of respect
 18 for her parents. When she meets the businessman in the final chapter of the
 19 novel (5.120.368–69), it is revealed that he is the stranger to whom Bao-yu gave
 20 her sash in so cavalier a manner earlier in the novel (2.28.62). This coincidence
 21 allows the narrator to intervene and remind the reader that all is predestined.
 22 Aroma's fate was presaged in the register of female characters in the novel that
 23 Bao-yu read in chapter 5 (133). Beyond the cultural issue of predestination, so
 24 dominant in Chinese thought (both philosophical and popular), is the textual
 25 fact that the resolution of this maid's fate gives the novel a palpable sense of
 26 continuity and the feeling that the novel can now conclude because all loose
 27 ends have been tied together.

28 Aroma is not the only important maid in the work. Another is Patience, the
 29 chief servant of Xi-feng, who is already in a triangular marriage with Xi-feng and
 30 Jia Lian. Patience illustrates that the latitude that may be afforded to maids in
 31 service to their masters and mistresses is not unique to Aroma. Patience too is a
 32 person of power and acumen. To get an idea of her influence, consider Xi-feng,
 33 niece of Lady Wang and principal wife of Jia Lian. Xi-feng is one of the most
 34 powerful women in the Jia domestic array. She comes from a wealthy family, is
 35 married to the oldest grandson of Grandmother Jia, and is niece to the wife of
 36 Jia Zheng, who as a government official of high rank commands a prestige even
 37 greater than that of his older brother and mother, the matriarch. But Xi-feng is
 38 more than the sum of her familial relations; she is intelligent, assertive, and at
 39 times ruthless. She is given the task of running the domestic finances early in
 40 the novel, and she does so with dispatch. That she finally fails has less to do with
 41 her than with larger issues of family income from various properties, issues that
 42 are beyond the scope of the narrative. For Patience to contend with Xi-feng,
 S as she does on many occasions, is something no other servant in the household

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dares to do. Only her elders in the family will confront her. Even her husband, Jia Lian, an indolent and licentious lout, chooses indirect means of dealing with her. But Patience, because she is so capable and loyal, can speak her mind to Xi-feng.

The scene in which Patience discovers that Jia Lian has been having an affair behind Xi-feng's back reveals much about this maid's personality as well as about the curious relationship between these three characters (1.21.427–30). Although disgusted, Patience agrees to maintain the charade of Jia Lian's innocence but uses the information to keep Jia Lian in line. When Xi-feng comes on the scene, she makes a snide remark regarding Patience's sexual propriety vis-à-vis Jia Lian. Patience, angered, slams down the door blind in Xi-feng's face as Xi-feng enters the room. This retaliation shows that Patience is not afraid to face Xi-feng, confident that it will not be held against her, because her bond with her mistress is on built trust and the appreciation of her abilities. Patience at times defends Xi-feng to others in the family who insinuate that Xi-feng is not handling the finances well. Patience has confidence in Xi-feng, for her mistress is intelligent, sharp-witted, and good with numbers, even if she can be judgmental, harsh toward the staff, and extremely jealous.

The relationship Patience has developed with Xi-feng is an unusual one by Chinese standards. Can a maid ingratiate herself so much as to adopt a “scornful” tone toward her mistress, as Patience does when she sees that Xi-feng does not realize when others are trying to manipulate her (2.36.196)? More surprising is that Xi-feng does not even notice this behavior so audacious for a maid. Patience and Xi-feng have grown so close that they form a team. In light moments, such as when Xi-feng and Faithful banter and get into a food fight, Patience is eager to join the fray. Xi-feng, for all her harshness to underlings when she feels they deserve it, can be indulgent, open, and even intimate with senior maids whose capability, she feels, is beyond question.

The rapport between Xi-feng and Patience carries over into discussions about the family finances. Xi-feng, put in charge of the household budget, enlists Patience's help. In this task, Patience has no compunction about scolding Xi-feng, and when Xi-feng points out that Patience uses the familiar “you” to address her instead of the more formal “madam,” Patience retorts that Xi-feng can slap her face if she wishes. She's done it before (3.55.65). This sort of exchange would be more characteristic of blood sisters in traditional Chinese culture. We really see the power of Patience on display when it comes to the ways in which money is allocated by Xi-feng. The first inkling of trouble comes when Aroma confronts Patience about the household finances (2.39.262–63). Patience downplays a delay in the disbursement of monthly allowances among the maids by explaining that Xi-feng has lent the money out for the purpose of gaining some interest on it. We learn from this explanation that Patience is privy to Xi-feng's usurious methods. But doubt is also cast in our minds about the wisdom, ethics, and security of such dealing, and this doubt is sustained as the narrative proceeds. We

1 are led to suspect that Xi-feng is putting the maids' allowances at risk and that
 2 Patience is implicated (2.43.352). But Patience never breaks with Xi-feng over
 3 finances, remaining steadfast to the end. When Xi-feng dies, she pawns her own
 4 belongings to ensure that her mistress has a proper funeral (5.114.261).

5 Despite the easy relationship that Patience enjoys with Xi-feng, she is intel-
 6 ligent enough to know when to hold her tongue. When Jia Lian is caught cheat-
 7 ing on Xi-feng and Patience is defamed and struck by her mistress and even
 8 her master, she flees and promises to commit suicide. Subsequently comforted
 9 by others in the family, she regains her composure, but the episode provides this
 10 insight into her character: in an emotional calamity such as this, she does not
 11 persist in her assertive but ever loyal rapport with Xi-feng; she withdraws as any
 12 maid would. When Jia Lian establishes Er-jie in a separate house outside the
 13 family compound as a wife on a par with Xi-feng and this scheme is revealed to
 14 Xi-feng, Patience knows enough to maintain absolute silence. Joker confesses
 15 that he helped his master, Jia Lian, find a place for Er-jie. While interrogating
 16 Joker, Xi-feng turns to Patience at times to make comments. The narrator ob-
 17 serves that Patience "dared not reply" (3.67.327). Later, when Er-jie is living
 18 in virtual incarceration in the Jia compound, Patience extends her some sym-
 19 pathy by feeding her on the sly. When Xi-feng catches wind of this assistance
 20 and scolds Patience, Patience again dares not reply (3.69.362). The power of
 21 Patience has been accumulated only through years of dutiful service and saga-
 22 cious behavior; she has earned Xi-feng's trust and respect. But when Xi-feng is
 23 pushed to extremes, Patience minds her place, neither retorting nor making
 24 light of Xi-feng's fury. She remains quiet and waits for it to subside.

25 The third most important maid in the novel is Grandmother Jia's servant
 26 Faithful. Like Aroma and Patience, Faithful possesses sterling qualities: she
 27 adheres to propriety and tact, is generous and good-natured, and, true to her
 28 name, is dedicated to a fault. Grandmother Jia states that Faithful "is better
 29 than all you grandchildren" (2.39.261). Bao-chai observes in the same passage
 30 that Faithful epitomizes all the attributes that a maid should. Faithful is protec-
 31 tive of Grandmother Jia and able to keep track of the matron's myriad belong-
 32 ings. Without Faithful, Grandmother Jia would be taken advantage of. As a
 33 result, Faithful is the only one who can talk back to Her Old Ladyship. Not
 34 even her own sons, Lady Wang, or any of the other senior residents of the Jia
 35 mansion can do that. Grandmother Jia will actually listen to what Faithful has to
 36 say. In Chinese, Faithful's name, *Yuanyang* 鴛鴦, connotes a mutually faithful
 37 married couple, but Faithful is willing to sacrifice any conjugal life for Grand-
 38 mother Jia. Thus if Grandmother Jia will permit things from Faithful that she
 39 will not from others, Faithful never abuses that privilege. But we cannot forget
 40 that she is a servant. Her needs, even when it comes to momentous occasions
 41 such as the death of her mother, often go unmet. Grandmother Jia quips, at this
 42 difficult time for her beloved maid, that she simply cannot let Faithful return
 S home (3.54.23–24).

Jia She, a dissolute son of Grandmother Jia, takes a fancy to the young maid, hoping to take her as a concubine (2.46.406). Jia She has a reputation of preying on young, attractive members of the servant class; having conquered them, he loses interest in them. Because he is the oldest son in the clan, it is assumed that he will prevail with Faithful, and he dispatches his wife, Lady Xing, to set up the match. Their only concern is that the close bond between servant and the old mistress might present an obstacle. Lady Xing therefore goes to her daughter-in-law, Xi-feng, first, to figure out a way to persuade the maid to agree to the match. Lady Xing, certain that Faithful will prefer being a chamber wife to a maid, eventually broaches the subject directly with Faithful. Here it should be noted that in the text Lady Xing and Xi-feng refer to maids as essentially no more than “slaves” (2.46.412).³ The term *indentured servants* is more accurate. But was it really possible for a maid, whether slave or indentured servant, to exercise free will? In *Stone*, the answer is both yes and no. In some cases, servants, particularly certain trusted maids, had considerable autonomy and power. But often they had none and were subjected to abuse. They usually had little control over their own destiny—for example, when it came to the selection of a marriage partner. But in traditional Chinese society, people, whether servants or not, whether male or female, normally could not choose whom to marry. *Stone* makes this issue a central conflict—consider the betrothal of Dai-yu or Bao-chai to Bao-yu. Characters above them, such as the imperial concubine, cannot choose, nor below them, such as several servants. That being said, some characters, if they put up resistance and have the support of a powerful master or mistress, can thwart an unwelcome advance. Faithful is the best example of this success in the novel.

She confides in her childhood peers, Patience and Aroma, and each suggests ways to foil Jia She’s desire. Faithful, however, decides to use no stratagem; she will simply profess her loyalty to Grandmother Jia in the following manner, which becomes a defining moment for her in the narrative:

As long as Her Old Ladyship lives, I shall stay with Her Old Ladyship. And when all’s said and done, even when the old dear goes to her rest, there are still the years of mourning. There would be no question of his taking a concubine with his mother just dead. And by the time the period of mourning is over—well, anything might have happened. I’ll just have to wait and see. If I get really desperate, I can always shave my hair off and become a nun; or failing that, there’s always suicide. I don’t mind going through life without a man. Glad to keep myself clean. (2.46.416)

老太太在一日,我一日不離這裡,若是老太太歸西去了,他橫豎還有三年的孝呢,沒個娘才死了他先納小老婆的!等過三年,知道又是怎麼個光景,那時再說。縱到了至急為難,我剪了頭髮作姑子去,不然,還有一死。一輩子不嫁男人,又怎麼樣?樂得乾淨呢! (1: 620)

1 Fortunately for Faithful, when Grandmother Jia learns of the plan, it sends her
 2 into a fury. Jia She has attempted all sorts of ways to win over Faithful, includ-
 3 ing enlisting the help of several of her relatives. But she is adamant and eventu-
 4 ally, and publicly, brings her case before Grandmother Jia. Of course, the old
 5 woman is livid and vents her wrath on her son and daughter-in-law. Remember
 6 that at the start of the novel Her Old Ladyship parceled out all her trusted
 7 maids to her adored grandchildren, reserving only Faithful for herself. Most of
 8 the prominent maids in the novel came from Grandmother Jia's stable of ser-
 9 vants. She therefore feels that although her family members maintained the ap-
 10 pearance of propriety, underneath they were plotting against her. Grandmother
 11 Jia, the most venerated person in the household, summarily rejects Faithful's
 12 proposed betrothal to Jia She as a concubine. There is nothing for Jia She to do
 13 but accept the decision, although he does so grudgingly. Faithful's loyalty to Her
 14 Old Ladyship has been rewarded.

15 Later in the novel, Faithful organizes an eighty first birthday for her mis-
 16 tress, doing so in austere Buddhist fashion, which includes copying a sutra. She
 17 contends that her loyalty to Grandmother Jia and place in her servitude are a
 18 matter of karma (4.88.178–79). In chapter 110, when Grandmother Jia passes
 19 away, Faithful wishes that her funeral be one befitting such a grand lady. By this
 20 time, however, funds are depleted and the funeral is not up to the standard that
 21 Faithful hoped. Her loyalty remains steadfast, and, true to her word in earlier
 22 chapters, she hangs herself so that she can leave the corporeal world with her
 23 mistress. She is viewed by the other characters and by the narrator as a paragon
 24 of virtue. In fact, she is the epitome of uprightness, and her upholding of ortho-
 25 dox morality would gain her the accolades bestowed on the most upstanding of
 26 women in traditional China.

27 These three maids are notable for their model behavior and the considerable
 28 power they wield behind the scenes. They are no threat to the established moral
 29 order, because they have been inducted into it themselves. They reinforce that
 30 order from the bottom up, functioning as the mortar between the bricks, as it
 31 were. One of the most interesting paradoxes of *The Story of the Stone* is that
 32 much of the work of achieving the exalted traditional ideal of social harmony in
 33 the novel is engendered by these and other maids in the household. Although
 34 Aroma, Patience, and Faithful are the most prominent, other maids in *Stone* are
 35 significant as well. Dai-yu's Nightingale and Snowgoose assist in preserving or
 36 restoring harmony among those they serve. Skybright has a sparkling personality
 37 and sharp tongue. Several maids embellish the narrative by leavening the text
 38 with intricate subplots. The plight of Skybright offers a cautionary tale to maids
 39 who, despite being decent and responsible, might be a little too acerbic. Bao-
 40 yu's "youngest and least sensible" page Tealeaf (1.9.211) is a bad influence on
 41 the main characters yet advances the narrative. It is Tealeaf who introduces
 42 Bao-yu to the *Story of the Western Wing* (*Western Chamber*) and other books
 S banned from the garden (1.23.462–63). Tealeaf thus plays a vital role in the
 R link among Bao-yu, Dai-yu, the exposure or contamination of Dai-yu to these
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corrupting romances, and the deep melancholy she feels as a result. The maids Crimson and Scribe inadvertently start rumors about Bao-yu's engagement that are damaging to Dai-yu (4.89.207–09). Oriole, Bao-chai's trusted maid, plays an important role in the cohesiveness of the narrative, adding to the notion that Bao-yu and Bao-chai's marriage is predestined. She is the first to recognize that the inscription on Bao-yu's jade talisman mysteriously corresponds to that on Bao-chai's locket (1.8.189). Later she knots tassels for Bao-yu and takes the opportunity to enumerate the lofty qualities of her mistress (2.35.189–93). The verb *to knot* 結 in Chinese is the same as the verb *to marry*, a connection captured by the English phrase “tie the knot.” Near the end of the novel, when the marriage between Bao-yu and Bao-chai has taken place, Oriole reminds Bao-yu of that episode, to suggest that she foretold their union (5.118.334). By this time, she has been put in charge of Bao-yu's day-to-day needs. In sum, as players who reveal information, convey knowledge to others, maintain or restore harmony, act out on occasion and add flair to the story, expose family members to things they might otherwise not encounter, and serve as devices for making the novel cohere, the maids in this long narrative cannot be underestimated.

The power of maids is a noteworthy element of *Stone*, but it has its limits too. Maids suffer evil because of their lower station in life. When Caltrop, a woman of scholar-gentry origin, is kidnapped early in the novel, knowledge of her origin is lost. She is given to Xue Pan as a chamber wife (1.16.308), which many in the family lament as a waste of a genteel young lady. Caltrop always presents herself well in company and exhibits breeding, though she is now regarded as of the servant class. It is difficult to say whether the author saw her breeding as a result of early nurture or of innate nature. Her high-class origin shows in her ability to compose elegant and sophisticated poetry (2.48.452). Caltrop is an example of how someone of the servant class can be mistreated, brutalized, and even put in mortal danger, as she is by Xue Pan's depraved wife Jin-gui (see 3.79.593–606). Her fate is telegraphed in the cryptic poem Bao-yu finds in the second register of women found in chapter 5—between the leading ladies, as it were, and the maids (1.5.133). That she is placed in this intermediate register reflects the ambiguity of her position in the novel as a noblewoman whose social status has been lost. Her demise at the hands of Jin-gui (whose name means “cassia”) is predicted, but fortunately she is rescued by Bao-chai, who takes her in as a maid. Caltrop has something of a reconciliation with Xue Pan after he repents his dissolute ways (5.120.362). But she dies in childbirth (373).

The fate of Er-jie also shows the inhumanity that exists in the Jia household, an element of the character of Xi-feng that cannot go ignored despite the broader, sympathetic depiction of her. Er-jie is not a servant, but the subplot that details her plight demonstrates that even people who are not servants can be badly abused by a wealthy family. Er-jie is duped into being installed as a parallel primary wife by the licentious Jia Lian, husband of Xi-feng. The contrast between the way the Er-jie episode unfolds and how a man like Jia She takes a chamber wife illustrates the difference between a triangular relationship of

1 husband, principal wife, and chamber wife, which is socially acceptable, and
 2 that between a husband and two principal wives, which is not acceptable and
 3 not common in Qing society. The second principal wife is a challenge to the
 4 authority of the first and a humiliation as well. When Xi-feng learns about Er-jie,
 5 therefore, the reader knows that the arrangement will not stand. The episode
 6 also shows the complexity of Xi-feng's character: This ambiguous figure in the
 7 novel can be charming and charismatic, sensitive and understanding, humorous
 8 and witty but also bitter, jealous, vicious, and vindictive. She is a study in con-
 9 trasts, a character who is different things to different people and never dull.

10 Er-jie is treated sympathetically throughout the affair, and there is an almost
 11 prurient fascination with her slow torture and ruin. Her story, beginning with
 12 Jia Lian's seduction of Er-jie, developing through her installation in the home
 13 outside the family compound, continuing with the clearly iniquitous arrange-
 14 ment of her taking residence in the garden, and ending with her gruesome
 15 demise after a bloody miscarriage, presents the Jia mansion at its worst. Xi-feng,
 16 humiliated by the public revelation of Jia Lian's chicanery, chooses methodi-
 17 cal revenge over instant rage as a way to settle scores. The servant staff react
 18 either with petrified silence in the face of Er-jie's engineered annihilation or,
 19 as Autumn does, play a facilitating role in it. The only exception is Patience,
 20 who attempts to give aid to Er-jie but is caught in the act and duly punished.
 21 Afterward, Patience does not dare interfere. The author uses Er-jie's tragic story
 22 to expose the underside of life in an elite family with great wealth, prestige, and
 23 the desire to be considered scholar-gentry despite their military background.

24 The relations between servant and master in *The Story of the Stone* are com-
 25 plex and intriguing. The lives of servants and members of the landlord family
 26 become entangled. A superb example of this class commingling is that of Aunt
 27 Zhao and her children. Aunt Zhao, once a mere maid, is taken as a chamber
 28 wife by Jia Zheng, the father of, among others, Bao-yu, Jia Huan, and Tan-chun.
 29 Although only the half brother and sister of Bao-yu, Jia Huan and Tan-chun
 30 are, by virtue of the patrilineal structure, legitimate members of the Jia clan.
 31 That their mother is a former maid casts a lingering shadow on the children,
 32 particularly Jia Huan. He is one of the least sympathetic characters in the book,
 33 a fact attributed to his feelings of inferiority as a concubine's son (1.20.406–08).
 34 Tan-chun, by contrast, is beloved and accepted as an equal both to Bao-yu and
 35 to her sisters and cousins. (The names of females of her generation all contain
 36 the character *chun* 春, which marks them as same-generation relatives.) She
 37 becomes an indispensable assistant to Xi-feng in managing the household ac-
 38 counts, approaching her job with the utmost efficiency and exactitude. She even
 39 takes her biological mother to task for expecting favoritism (3.55.50–52). In the
 40 same passage Tan-chun admits that she views her mother as a servant in the
 41 household and considers Lady Wang, Jia Zheng's principal wife, her true mother.
 42 Although Tan-chun is cold to her mother, others wonder whether she will be
 S treated as a peer of her sisters, immediate cousins, and Bao-chai and Dai-yu
 R (61). She is the embodiment of how difficult it can become to separate servant
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and master, given the intimacy of human interaction, the passage of time, and the natural bonds that can form between the two. What in one generation began as a clear distinction, a second generation may be unable to discern.

NOTES

¹ See Rowe’s discussion of debasement and servitude in “Social Stability.”

² I am indebted to Susan Mann for explaining this distinction and for many insights on the issue of gender made in her work *Precious Records* (esp. pp. 37–44). Mann uses some examples from *Stone* to illustrate what was occurring in Qing society.

³ For more on status of slaves, see Rawski in this volume.

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