



Good Kid

AN ESSAY BY TSHIRT

GOOD KID

a *scum villain* essay zine by tshirt.

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1

WHAT THE
HELL ARE
YOU TALKING
ABOUT

Somewhat flippantly, I think mommy issues are more interesting than daddy issues because almost everyone has the latter in a boring way because we expect men to be terrible and we all know this, even if we don't admit it. For mothers, however, we have an expectation of care that's too often abrogated, to vastly varying degrees. This is unfair to mothers (and to men), of course. But it's what many of us, quite unfairly, do feel. This is part of what makes mommy issues so potent, by the way: your mother never gets a fair shot.

Binghe, to me, has very typically gay mommy issues. But tshirt, you might say. His mother was very nice until she died. That's true, but that starts the abandonment. And she gets replaced by the worst mommy of all, original Shen Qingqiu.

In a brief detour, I want to draw your attention to the section of *The Promise of Happiness* by Sara Ahmed that destroyed my brain. She quotes *Lost and Delirious*, the bit where Mouse, the main character of the film, is writing a letter to her mother. Mouse writes:

"But the truth of it is I am addicted to you like chocolate. I always want to be around you. I'm some like stupid little puppy and you keep like kicking my teeth in with your words and your tone. Sometimes, I wish you were dead."

I think that that ambivalent stance towards the mother between attachment and degradation and identification and animosity is incredible. In that heady cocktail of emotions, the mother becomes both a generative and a destructive force. The generative is more obvious, but the mother figure encapsulating a death wish in both the annihilation of self and the literal self-harm sense is rich territory. She's a scab we return to, as if by picking it, we make her permeable again.

Original Shen Qingqiu himself also has an evil mommy (Yue Qingyuan). Actually, Shen Jiu, Yue Qingyuan, Shen Yuan, and

Luo Binghe all form this awful mother quadrilateral. This is sort of the premise of this whole work of mine, that *The Scum Villain's Self Saving System's* psychosexual geometry is one of its most interesting features, and someone (me) ought to do some work to make it visible.

At any rate, each of these main four is a failed mother or has a failed mother. And Shen Jiu is both and he haunts the narrative even as (in the main story) he never actually appears on screen.

He's who Shen Yuan thinks he should be; and he's who Luo Binghe thinks he should be. He's also who they think the other ought to be. He's very vers that way. So the mommy lens is play on the ways he's made them both in his own image, and how he himself was made monstrous, and how the two fit themselves around that.

Back to the ambivalence of the mother figure—I should define my terms. I want to be clear here; I'm using “mommy” super loosely. I think I should have clarified that sooner. I use it in the Sufjan-ian sense, referring to the 2015 mommy issue ur-text “All of Me Wants All of You,” in which he elides so neatly between:

All of me wants all of you

and

All of me thinks less of you

and

All of me pressed onto you

Each of which is ambiguously addressed to a mother or lover or savior—some nurturer or icon to which hope has been abandoned.

We expect that mothers want the best for us. We hope that what she makes us into, she does for us. When we are not happy, we turn towards her to redress that. And as we move into mommy issues territory, we project our intense unreciprocated attachment and our deeply felt hurts, and our inability to reconcile the two in one figure.

Which. You know. Shen Qingqiu.

2

SHEN YUAN,
THE ABYSS
(ABJECTION)

Because this is a classy sort of production, I am not going to acknowledge the obvious thing here. Okay, well. I will get it out of the way briefly. Some minds might see moving through a hole and being, ah, reborn at the end, to have certain connotations.

That's right. Luo Binghe got childbirthed. Well, I mean of course he did. But you know what I mean. (To borrow D.A. Miller's quotation of Barbara Pym here: "*He strikes one as the kind of person who would have a mother. —Well, everybody has or had a mother. But I see just what you mean.*") I will acknowledge these connotations because I think they are funny, but I don't think they're as rich theoretical ground as other territories.

Such as, for instance, the moment that the abyss itself yawns onto the page. Abyss carries a multitude of meanings embedded in it. It means what it means, a chasm. But it also quite literally means *unfathomable*: there are depths we cannot plumb, there are bridges we cannot cross. We resign ourselves to a certain amount of incomprehension when we cite the abyss.

It is not our first encounter with irreconcilable difference, of course. There's this time, Julia Kristeva argues, from four to eight months of age, where babies begin to realize that the mother is separate from them. In that separation between mother and child, the distinction between subject and object is formed. And in that formation, we leave the prelingual state behind, and with it, we gain something new: the abject, that which cannot be named or reconciled.

Here, I refer to Karen Shimakawa's summary of Kristeva's abjection; she describes it this way. Abjection is:

the condition/position of that which is deemed loathsome and the process by which that appraisal is made... [or] the means by which the subject/the I is produced; by establishing perceptual and conceptual borders around the self and jettisoning that which is deemed objectionable, the subject

comes into (maintains) self-consciousness.

In short, abjection defines oneself by the attempt to expel that which can never truly be expelled. Abjection says I am *not*. And more strongly, I am not that, because *that* is repulsive to me.

Even further, the abject is our queasiness at the destruction of meaning, or the suggestion that meaning never existed at all. It stands in opposition to desire. Its drive is the fear that self and other are one and the same, that we really have, in fact, never left the mother. Kristeva repeatedly identifies the abject with the maternal. She describes it like this:

It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.

Some more language games: of course, Mo Xiang Tong Xiu did not call the abyss the abyss. She called it 无间深渊.

无间, wújiàn: wu, to lack; jian, to separate. Together, they mean continuous, unbroken, two things so close together, they cannot be taken apart. It means an abyss without an end, but also, potently: pure abjection. If the child and mother are one and the same, if subject and object are so troubled, if we are in fact, 无间, we have lost our very selves.

As Shen Qingqiu pushes Luo Binghe away, he has, in fact, guaranteed their unity.

深渊, shēnyuān: shen, deep, dark; yuan, a deep pool. Together: a deep cavern, an abyss. Not to be confused with 沈垣, Shěn Yuán. Although the mistake would be forgivable.

When the abyss arrives, we see Binghe's understanding of Shen Qingqiu's motivations take a sharp turn. When Luo Binghe's demonic cultivation is revealed, Shen Qingqiu asks him how

long he's been practicing it. Luo Binghe answers, for two years.

Shen Qingqiu went silent and didn't speak. To answer his question so quickly, and so honestly to boot—it seemed Luo Binghe really was scared witless.

Unbeknown to him, Luo Binghe automatically took this silence to mean, "Is that so? You wicked disciple, you managed to hide this from me for so long!"

Now here, we see silences (absences of language) identified with the horror of separation from the mother, in an idealization of the prelingual state. Desire and abjection are each other's dark reflections: to be one with some object is either one's greatest want or one's greatest fear. The difference is that abjection denotes where meaning collapses, rather than is made. Read this way, this is Luo Binghe's defining arc in *Scum Villain*. Is 无间深渊 something to fear?

These are the sorts of little games we can play. Because Shen Qingqiu is silent often.

After he contracts the Without a Cure poison protecting Luo Binghe, Luo Binghe wholeheartedly changes his opinion of Shen Qingqiu. This is troubling to Shen Qingqiu:

This child's heart at this moment, was truly..... very kind and honest!

Saved him once and all of the past verbal and physical abuse was completely forgotten?!

If this continued, would he still be able to steel himself and viciously push him into the Endless Abyss?

So, instead:

Shen Qingqiu was silent for a moment. "As long as you un-

derstand. First, why don't you get up?"

He still didn't understand this in the slightest. *Bing-ge, what exactly did you realize?*

A brief sidebar: most of the uses of "silent" in the translation refer to the original text's usage of "沉默." Despite the consistency, I'm less making an argument about the usage of the word "silent" itself, but rather, making an argument about the striking connections between the times when Shen Qingqiu chooses not to speak.

These early silences are characterized by their continual reference to the Endless Abyss, and the gulf between Luo Binghe's perception of Shen Qingqiu and Shen Qingqiu's understanding of his own perceptions.

For the abyss looms large for Shen Qingqiu as well. He fears their separation, so he binds them closer, relying on Kristeva's stifling, securing power—suffocating his child against his breast. Even as the abyss holds such sway over Luo Binghe, it is only *because* Shen Qingqiu has so strenuously invoked it.

We can see this point reiterated just a few chapters later. The next time Shen Qingqiu is silent is when he receives the invitation to the Immortal Alliance Conference, which marks the end of their time together.

More importantly, very soon, it would be time for him to personally handle the Luo Binghe who revealed his demonic heritage and cruelly strike him down into the Endless Abyss.

The wheel of fate (plot) had already started to slowly turn.....

So, at the start of the next chapter:

Shen Qingqiu was silent for a long time before throwing the metal plate to Ming Fan's chest, letting him take it.

The third silence is the abyss.

The fourth silence is after Luo Binghe leaves the abyss. Gongyi Xiao acquaints Shen Qingqiu with Luo Binghe's rise to power within Huan Hua Palace, and Shen Qingqiu,

Shen Qingqiu was silent. Gongyi Xiao thought he was sad and disappointed. His beloved disciple wasn't dead, but he preferred to wander outside rather than go back to see him.

So even when Shen Qingqiu is not summoning the abyss, others call it for him. Gongyi Xiao is the one to identify Shen Qingqiu's silence with the separation of the child. Again, Shen Qingqiu is cast as a figure of the abject, that Luo Binghe must either dissolve himself in, or wholly disavow.

The next silence comes when Luo Binghe confronts Shen Qingqiu in the Water Prison. He questions his former teacher, asking whether Shen Qingqiu really thinks he's capable of horrible deeds.

"Does Shizun really think that because of half of my bloodline... sooner or later I will be doing such things as murder, arson, massacring everyone in a captured city, and destroying countries?"

Shen Qingqiu could only remain silent.

Shen Qingqiu here can't respond. Having read *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, he knows that some version of Luo Binghe is capable of those things. Luo Binghe, not being aware that he is also a fictional character, takes this as agreement. It's interesting to note here that this is not, strictly speaking, a misunderstanding. Shen Qingqiu does actually agree with him. The problem is

more that, unbeknownst to him, Luo Binghe is asking the wrong question.

Anyway, there are actually several times in short succession when Shen Qingqiu is not able to speak. Just a couple chapters later, Luo Binghe asks him whether he regrets “it.” Shen Qingqiu notes that it’s contextually obvious what “it” is: it is the Endless Abyss. Which, for whatever reason (mommy issues), Binghe cannot speak aloud.

Shen Qingqiu is faced with multiple choices from the System.

System: [Please choose an answer from this multiple choice question:

Option A: I regret it. This teacher has long since regretted it. The last few years, I have spent every moment uselessly repenting.

Option B: (sneer) Seeing what you’ve become today, you know there’s no reason for me to regret it!

Option C: Keep silent.]

Shen Qingqiu is disgusted by his options. He chooses C because he hates A and B so much. A seems “fake,” and B seems too provocative. And in return, the System responds.

System: [Literary and philosophical depth +10.]

So true! That’s exactly what Shen Qingqiu’s silences add.

In turn, Binghe misinterprets this silence. He believes that Shen Qingqiu is trying to imply that he did not regret pushing him into the Abyss.

Shen Qingqiu summarizes Binghe’s reaction as such:

If he didn't have an omniscient perspective that gave him insight into the plot, Shen Qingqiu would have definitely suspected that... Luo Binghe probably truly was... a little sad.

Silence is golden. The more you talk, the more mistakes you make.

Let us take a minute to reflect on the obvious: Shen Qingqiu, you fucking dumbass.

Next, let's move to something more interesting. It's difficult to say how well ostensible insight into one Binghe translates into insight to another Binghe. In this particular case, not at all. But is that because Shen Qingqiu actually has any insight into that first Binghe?

We can look to the longest instance we have of them interacting, the first part of the Bing-ge vs Bing-mei extra. Shen Qingqiu does not realize that the Binghe he's interacting with is not his world's Binghe, despite some red flags. He's able to rationalize them all away. The thing that makes him realize something is wrong is that the scars he left on his Luo Binghe are healed.

WTF please, those scars on Luo Binghe's palm and chest; he was the one who created them back then!

This being incredibly macabre aside, he is able to tell the difference between the two because of his familiarity with his own Binghe, not through his knowledge of the other. This is maybe somewhat obvious. Breaking news: Shen Qingqiu is not a reliable narrator.

But it is still interesting, because of its obvious parallels to another very long book. In John 20:25, Thomas does not believe that Jesus really has risen from the dead.

So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

When Thomas finally puts his hand inside Jesus, and receives his proof, Jesus comments that "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed."

Here, the problem is that Thomas was so determined to trouble the boundary between self and other. If the skin is, in fact, our last (our only?) barrier between our inner and outer worlds, by penetrating it, Thomas draws upon the visceral horror of not only blood and flesh, but also of the disturbed relationship between "what is mine" and "what is yours." Jesus praises those who don't defile the symbolic order, even as they don't get to partake in the erotic thrill of transgression. More on that in the next essay.

I'm not actually going anywhere with this right now, by the way. I just wanted you all to know that I did go to Sunday school for like. 10 years. You know who's the *ultimate* protagonist?

Finally, I have no comment on whether silence is golden. But, I can say that this sort of silence that allows people to jump to the worst conclusions is actually anticipated by a later chapter (that takes place chronologically earlier).

When Yue Qingyuan and the original Shen Qingqiu visit the Lingxi caves together, Shen Qingqiu sees some ghastly bloodied marks on the wall. Yue Qingyuan, of course, left them ages ago, when he was qi deviating in the cave. Shen Qingqiu asks questions about the marks, curious, but Yue Qingyuan stops answering his questions. Shen Qingqiu becomes upset at this.

Shen Qingqiu said, "Then why didn't you say anything?"

Yue Qingyuan said, “Maybe because I’m afraid shidi will find it annoying if I continue speaking?”

Shen Qingqiu snorted, “ Oh, so you finally realized you are extremely annoying?”

He didn’t want to return to the silence in the dark, so he had no choice but to reluctantly continue the topic...

There are a couple points here that are interesting. First, there’s a ridiculous sort of humor in Shen Qingqiu accusing literally anyone else of being annoying. But also, it’s a fascinating inversion of their normal dynamic. Normally, the two presented a spectacle for the other disciples:

These two might not have noticed, but for many disciples, before the tournament began for real, watching a pair of head disciples – one incredibly uncharacteristically ignoring the command for silence as he quietly whispered, the other absent-mindedly staring straight ahead as he grunted vaguely in reply – was their only source of pleasure during the peak head’s long and tedious speech.

That is, Shen Qingqiu silent, and Yue Qingyuan talking incessantly, in a desperate bid for his attention. Yet here, it’s the opposite. Shen Qingqiu instinctively rejects silences, yet he requests them constantly.

Here, he is desperate for reassurance or explanations. All the while, they are physically touching. Yue Qingyuan is sending him spiritual energy. Separation would prove death. They are burdened by the things they cannot say. They are one, but they cannot speak. They’re literally just Bingqiu bad end. Chilling, no?

Anyway, Shen Qingqiu’s final silence is after Luo Binghe’s true parentage is revealed by Wu Wang. First, Luo Binghe repudiates his father.

Luo Binghe remained indifferent: “He’s not my father.”

Then, he repudiates his mother.

Luo Binghe said freezingly: “Who is Su Xiyan? My mother is just a laundry woman.”

Then, he turns to Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe tugged at his arm, as if seeking proof and validation: “Shizun, Tianlang-Jun is not my father. I don’t need a father.”

Shen Qingqiu, for his part, does not know what to say. He reflects on Luo Binghe’s parents, and comes to a single conclusion:

Luo Binghe was not a wanted child.

Luo Binghe defends himself from Wu Wang once more, saying that if Tianlang Jun is his father, why didn’t Tianlang Jun say so when they met? This is an implicit silence of Tianlang Jun’s own. At this, Shen Qingqiu finally closes the conversation:

Shen Qingqiu was silent.

Several moments here: Luo Binghe is quick to assert he does not have *parents*, he has a *parent*—more precisely, a mother. Even more precisely, a mother he chose. He, after all, is the sort of person who would have a mother.

Next, Luo Binghe looks to Shen Qingqiu for validation. Shen Qingqiu is proof he does not have a father, or need a father. Moreover, he must prove *to* Shen Qingqiu that he does not. This is incredibly odd. On one level, he’s just trying to prove to Shen Qingqiu that he’s not a demon the way everyone disparages him to be. But he also rejects Su Xiyan, who is fully human.

So, it's also a protective move. He is defending himself against any claim that people who might not want him have on him, by rejecting them first. I just have a laundry woman for a mother, he seems to be saying (and you). He doesn't have the confidence that Shen Qingqiu will choose him first, of course. But he doesn't foreclose that possibility. Instead, he's silent.

Also significant is that Shen Qingqiu identifies Luo Binghe as independent. He was born such, in that he was born separated from his mother (Su Xiyao). He was born the protagonist, if you will.

In many ways, Luo Binghe is his other half because of this. See, Shen Qingqiu uses his previous silences to repeatedly call upon the abject. And Luo Binghe had never had that fundamental encounter with abjection until him. That is, while Luo Binghe's position pre-Cang Qiong could be characterized as abject, Binghe himself never made that move towards others. He was always the one unilaterally, one-sidedly excluded, within the context of the narrative.

So, simply put, Luo Binghe was never forced to contend with the possibility that the mother might be the same as him. He chose his previous mother as his mother, of course, but to choose her inherently required that she be separate from him. And then, you know, boom. Shen Qingqiu and his whole... deal.

It's some really horrible adult breastfeeding shit.

Speaking of:

3

HORRIBLE
ADULT BREAST-
FEEDING SHIT
(TABOO)

The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars was written in the Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368) by a scholar named Guo Jujing. It's a short story collection of, well, twenty-four exemplars of filial piety, and it's been used for the past thousand-odd years to teach Confucian values.

Number ten of these stories is called 乳姑不怠, or I guess loosely, "Never Tiring of Nursing Her Mother-in-Law." As the story goes, Cui Nanshan lived during the Tang Dynasty. And he had a great grandmother called Madam Zhangsun. She was so old, she had lost her teeth. Cui Nanshan's grandmother, Madam Tang, would comb her and wash her and bring her out to the main room every day, where she'd breastfeed her. Madam Zhangsun only breastfed, never ate a grain of food. And yet she lived healthily for many years. One day, she fell ill, and gathered the old and young alike around her to say, "I have no way to pay back my daughter-in-law's kindness. I only hope that all the wives of her offspring show her that same filial respect."

And then there's a little poem at the end. What a beautiful message, I think. I guess.

Actually, they tried to put up a statue of a woman being breastfed by her daughter in law in a Huzhou park earlier in 2021 in honor of this story, but everyone got so mad they had to take it down. Apparently, the general reaction was "What the fuck? Why is this up?"

So there are two problems here. The first one is that a lot of people don't quite agree with the *Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* anymore, because they do advise things like eating your father's shit if he needs it, or killing your small child to keep your parent alive. Which understandably, many people don't particularly want to do, or advocate that anyone else should do, or think particularly highly of books that recommend it as a course of action.

The second problem, and perhaps the more relevant one to the

reaction to the statue, is that uh. The story and its images do carry a fair bit of erotic charge. This is for some obvious reasons. The first is that it contains a powerful inversion, which many people do find quite sexy because of its relationship to taboo. That is, rather than the milk flowing from old to young, it flows from young to old. The second reason is that an adult sucking on a breast is a bit. Well, you know.

But today, we're going to be talking mainly about that first reason for eroticism. This is part of the fun of Freud incidentally. Sex isn't sex; *metaphor* is sex.

Anyway, Freud had plenty to say about taboo, being one of the people that very powerfully entered it into our psychoanalytic lexicon. This actually has a quite humorous effect, because he will excruciatingly explain to you what a taboo is, and its historical origins, and then say, in all seriousness—"I think it is safe to say that in spite of all that [the readers] have now heard about taboo they still have very little idea of the meaning of the term or of what place to give it in their thoughts." We stand on the shoulders of giants and all that. It's very good for your ego.

That quote comes from his main treatment of the subject in *Totem and Taboo*. We will return to this book. But first, let's talk about where breastfeeding even appears in *Scum Villain*. Because discerning readers (everyone) will note that it doesn't literally happen.

That's fine. That's true, I suppose. But if you haven't gathered by now that I'm not interested in literal truth, then I'll say it now: I'm not! When it comes to *Scum Villain*, I'm talking about bloodfeeding. Now this is well-trodden territory for anyone who's read *Dracula*. Bram Stoker made it very explicit with that "Ohh! Mina is drinking from Jonathan's chest" moment. And if you haven't read that, maybe you got the impression from watching *Thirst* (2009), the bit where Song Kang-ho nurses from Park In-hwan.

What I'm saying is that... Yeah. I mean there are clear connections when it comes to sucking a life-giving nourishment from the chest of another. Vampirism is a perverse sort of breastfeeding, that much isn't up for debate.

The real thing we have to litigate is whether the bloodfeeding in *Scum Villain* resembles it in any way. The bloodfeeding in the novel is a way for the Heavenly Demons to take advantage of the special powers their blood holds. Every single Heavenly Demon in the novel, actually, does so. They all actually feed the same guy too, Shen Qingqiu.

This is something that really pisses him off. By the second time, he comments:

Not only did he drink it twice, he drank the ancient demon blood of two different people. Shen Qingqiu felt that he could really fucking be considered someone with neither predecessors nor successors in this world.

This is not an advisable state of affairs either. In one scene, all three Heavenly Demons duke it out within his body, using their own blood to try to overpower the others' blood. This causes Shen Qingqiu tremendous pain. This is because, of course, the blood was only really written for one person and for one purpose:

For example, in the original novel, Luo Binghe was able to easily manipulate his blood in a variety of ways, including using it as a poison, tracker, brainwashing and sex tool, human parasitic blood mites, and so on.

Good for him, I think! It's a girl power moment.

Anyway, that one person is the one who first feeds Shen Qingqiu blood.

Luo Binghe smiled and said, "What's done is done. Shizun must reap what he has sown. Shizun must properly compensate me for the wound that he made."

Shen Qingqiu still thought he was using symbolic metaphors to express the trauma from that wound back in the day when he felt a pain in his scalp. His head was pulled back and Luo Binghe put his hand on Shen Qingqiu's lips, pouring blood into his mouth.

Shen Qingqiu is also a scholar of Freud, I suppose. What I want to draw your attention to here is that Luo Binghe casts feeding Shen Qingqiu his blood in terms of those same sorts of inversions. Shizun has sown; now he must reap. Shizun has hurt me; now he will hurt. Once I have nursed— You get the idea.

He also, importantly, reminds Shen Qingqiu of the wound he made, the cut to his chest. So we're all thinking about Luo Binghe's tits in the scene, and only then can we make the shift to the feeding. The blood from his hand represents the blood from his chest quite neatly here.

Shen Qingqiu immediately thereafter vomits out the blood. It is not natural to him; his body resists this inversion. But Luo Binghe continues to force the blood on him.

Luo Binghe tore the wound in his hand wider, making even more hot blood flow out. This actually seemed to raise his spirits. "Shizun, don't spit it out. The blood of Heavenly Demons is dirty but it won't necessarily kill you if you drink it, right?"

It won't kill you, but death would be preferable!

Since we were fairly trivially able to prove that bloodfeeding in some way emulates the relation of warped dependency that we are concerned with, the eroticism of it is our next object of study.

Some of this process is just a simple recitation of innuendo. The wide wound, torn open to bleed, to leak its fluids out— The wound that Shen Qingqiu laps at— The spit/swallow distinction— The dirty thing that compels you nonetheless— Even, perhaps the vomit—

What's important to this litany is the way that it neatly stands astride the line between disgust and desire, violence and desire, in its viscosity. Here we look to the inheritor of Freud's preoccupation with taboo, Georges Bataille. Bataille was insistent that Freud's notion of taboo was based on his shallow knowledge of anthropology, and was thus incomplete.

He advances, instead, a striking hypothesis: as he puts it, "The taboo is there to be violated." As he goes on to explain in *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, transgressing against a taboo does not deny it but complete it. He uses the example of war: we have a taboo against murder, and yet we have war, murder on a scale like no other. And yet we have no taboo against war, we have made no serious effort to stamp it out.

Bataille argues that it is rather *because* we have a taboo against murder that we have created war. The taboo is not a prohibition on murder, but "the threshold beyond which murder is possible," and upon its crossing, when war is possible for the community.

So the taboo makes the highest culmination of its prohibition thinkable in the end. Bataille argues there (and elsewhere, see *Accursed Share*) that rather than accept Freud's belief that civilization and its taboos repress the forbidden and its sexual thrall, we ought to consider that taboo is what heightens and creates the sexual thrall in the first place.

Back to the matter at hand, however: bloodfeeding evokes disgust. (Unless you are already thoroughly Bataille-pilled. You may skip forward a bit.) Yet that disgust and its association with taboo— and thus eroticism, is what makes it so powerful within

the narrative. Bataille writes:

We use the word eroticism every time a human being behaves in a way strongly contrasted with everyday standards and behaviour. Eroticism shows the other side of a facade of unimpeachable propriety.

And it is propriety which so powerfully preoccupies Shen Qingqiu. It is the master-disciple relationship, it is the way things *ought* to be that generates the wealth of eroticism within the bloodfeeding. It is also, of course, the pain.

For Freud, sadism and masochism were the most common perversions. He takes them on in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in which he explains that sadism is rooted in the male sexual instinct and its aggressivity. Sadism is simply an exaggeration of the desire to subjugate. On the other hand, masochism, which for him was any passivity in sexual life, became simply sadism against one's own self. In this view, Binghe becomes the ultimate sadist, if only for his immense ability and desire to bring pain against himself. It's alright if Shen Qingqiu is entirely vanilla—Binghe is capable of bringing the sadomasochism all on his own.

This Freudian view is most strongly supported not by example of Binghe, but actually through Shen Qingqiu himself. At his most masochistic—during sex, of course—Shen Qingqiu accepts pain not because it brings him pleasure, but as a way of subjugating his own body in favor of Binghe's. He turns himself into the sexual object. For both, causing the other pain is entirely incidental. Or is it? We'll return to this later.

Freud remained undecided on the ultimate appeal of sadomasochism, in that essay. Luckily for us, we can either use common sense, or we can return to Bataille. Bataille was clear on one thing in particular:

there is no kind of repugnance whose affinity with desire I do not discern.

Horror, danger, death, and annihilation grip us with a queasy fascination in the existential threat they pose to us. Bataille firmly believed that the abject we thought we left behind in the past section is the root of all ecstasy. When we experience “the sight of blood, the stink of vomit”—the horror of death is evoked in us. We are determined to resist it at all costs, and this desperate, heedless resistance is what insensate transcendent ecstasy requires—ecstasy which bears no small resemblance to death itself, as he argues elsewhere in *Erotism*.

Bloodfeeding, therefore, is the taboo which moving beyond allows Binghe to easily surmount the other taboos that characterize their relationship. I do not want to suggest that vampirism itself is *not* taboo here. But if we argue that vampirism is a perverse form of breastfeeding, then still bloodfeeding in Scum Villain is to vampirism as our story about Madams Zhangsun and Tang is to regular breastfeeding. Like, this is a sick twisted take (read: an inverted one) on a sick and twisted take.

When I said that I was commissioning a cover for my Freud Villain zine that I wanted to evoke bloodfeeding/breastfeeding, my friends immediately all started linking me Bingqiu breastfeeding fanfiction. As a diligent scholar, of course I read all of them.

Something I found that people struggle with is that Shen Qingqiu is the mother, naturally. But it's Luo Binghe that breastfeeds (bloodfeeds). No one knew how to reconcile this. How are you supposed to write a PWP about that?? So I think this essay has real practical value, because I have just explained how and why it works. I have liberated you from the fiction of having to pretend that Shen Qingqiu could breastfeed anyone. He's barren, to be quite honest.

Back to vampires and their relation to our little bloodfeeding scene. I think it's important to note that the figure of the vampire, while known in modern day China, is not as inescapable as it might have been in historical Europe. Jiangshi bear superficial resemblance, but they are not the object of my study here. And they, like vampires, are certainly not in *Scum Villain*.

However, *Scum Villain* does have demons. I argue that *Scum Villain's* demons and real world vampires serve similar functions in our cultural imaginaries. While the demons that Freud describes are not the demons of *Scum Villain*, they make as good a place to start as any.

Freud argues that the importance of demons is derived from their significance in narrativizing the living's relationship to the dead:

The ambivalence inherent in that relation was expressed in the subsequent course of human development by the fact that, from the same root, it gave rise to two completely opposed psychic structures: on the one hand fear of demons and ghosts and on the other hand veneration of ancestors.

Demons in *Scum Villain* stand in opposition to righteous cultivators. They offer conflicting models on right relations with the dead—and by extension, the continuity of all human beings stretching back in history eternally. Righteous cultivators uphold this order, whereas demons seem to resist it. Look to vampires here: their very existence suggests a permeability between the living and the dead. They are aggressive. They want to bite. They want to feed upon the living. They suggest something parasitic about the relationship with the dead and with us.

We return briefly to our breastfeeding story: in that story as well, the old feed upon the young. After all, the toothless mother-in-law's survival was dependent on her daughter-in-law.

Sidebar: is this why true Chinese vampires never emerged? It wouldn't be scary. They would just tell you to feed them. Nowadays, people wouldn't just suck it up. That's maybe why vampire fiction is making inroads today—all that repression finally exploding.

Anyway, that's why bloodfeeding is the unholy lovechild of vampirism and adult breastfeeding, like I mentioned earlier. It's about what "feels" against the order of things. The old feed on the young, but more importantly, they are degraded in doing so.

So if bloodfeeding is about the perversion of the veneration of ancestors, we should also discuss how the fear of demons and ghosts functions in *Scum Villain*. What is quite funny is that it is not what you might assume at first. It has little to do with how Shen Qingqiu feels about Binghe, or even demons in general. Rather, Freud performs a little bit of Bingqiu demon inversion.

The fact that demons are always regarded as the spirits of those who have died *recently* shows better than anything the influence of mourning on the origin of the belief in demons. Mourning has a quite specific psychical task to perform: its function is to detach the survivors' memories and hopes from the dead.

In *Scum Villain's* meditation on the right relation with the dead, the ostensibly righteous cultivator Shen Qingqiu is actually the one who must be mourned, and by a literal demon. And because of this, he is the dead weighing about you. He becomes the demon who is mourned. But first, we should explain in greater depth how the dead become demons, if we are to make that leap.

Freud argues that demons emerge out of ambivalence:

we have explained them as projections of the hostile feelings harboured by the survivors against the dead.

Affectionate feelings towards the deceased coexist with hostile feelings. Yet while the affectionate feelings are mostly known to the mourners (I loved him, I am sad to see him go), the hostile feelings are mostly unconscious (I hated him, I am happy he is dead). This produces an ambivalence that is hard to be aware of, or admit to oneself, and that you certainly can't talk about to others. Via Freud's mechanism of projection, this ambivalence is therefore ejected from one's internal world to the external world. How can you hate the dead? Because he has become a demon.

You do not hate the dead; the dead hate you first.

This sort of projection is actually also at play from Shen Qingqiu towards Luo Binghe as well. If you wish him dead? He has become a demon. Luo Binghe is also a demon more literally, but demonic identity in general serves as an acceptable target for hatred. Even as Luo Binghe has become more powerful than ever when he finally unlocks his heritage, paradoxically he has become a safer person to hate.

This is also greatly magnified by his experience as a child. When under the care of the original Shen Qingqiu, the man displaced his ambivalence towards himself and his lack of cultivation prowess onto Binghe via violence. Luo Binghe then, was a safe person to hurt. This, I think, is a crucial part of the psychology at play. We have no explanation for how Binghe made sense of Shen Qingqiu hurting him for what could have been the last time as a child. We are left with our own speculations, the easy answers. Perhaps a spontaneous spiritual change overcame his teacher one night; perhaps Binghe finally got things right; perhaps Binghe was finally, finally too large to harm safely.

The fact of the matter is that in this calculation, Binghe himself can be nothing other than an object that these negative feelings were acceptable to disengage onto. This is, of course, the definition of a demon. Before he was born a demon, he was made a demon.

Binghe basically says so explicitly, after Shen Qingqiu's death at Huayue City. He says quite poignantly, "I couldn't get over my anger, that whenever you see me it's like you're seeing a ghost." Put in this way, his identity as a demon was primarily constituted by his rejection at Shen Qingqiu's hands.

At any rate, we can return to the progenitor demon now. It is little wonder with such a complex as that that Luo Binghe might have had some ambivalence towards Shen Qingqiu. But we can also see another origin of the sure knowledge that the dead might wish us harm. Per Freud:

When a wife has lost her husband or a daughter her mother, it not infrequently happens that the survivor is overwhelmed by tormenting doubts (to which we give the name of 'obsessive self-reproaches') as to whether she may not herself have been responsible for the death of this cherished being through some act of carelessness or neglect.

He continues on that whether or not this state of affairs was actually true, the existence of an unconscious wish "which would not have been dissatisfied by the occurrence of death" reinforces this pathological mourning. Now, imagine what a field day Freud would have had if he'd been given the example of someone who literally killed himself for you and said so, and it actually benefited you immensely. Luckily, however, he is dead and I am the one who gets to have the field day.

Onward: what caused Shen Qingqiu's (first) death? He was fighting Luo Binghe at Huayue City. The confrontation was forced because of extenuating circumstances:

If Luo Binghe was actually counterattacked by the Heart Devil Sword right now, then the people here in Huayue City and within a hundred kilometers all wouldn't need to live anymore!

Shen Qingqiu is aware that leaving Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe to fight would be dangerous. So, in a rare moment of initiative, he directly intervenes. The two speak. Shen Qingqiu states that he has little to say to defend himself; he cannot disobey destiny. Luo Binghe retorts that he is opposed to the idea of destiny, rejecting the idea that the suffering in his life was inevitable. But as he speaks more and more, Luo Binghe begins to struggle with the Xin Mo (literally, “Heart Devil,” also acceptable: “Inner Demon”) sword.

It was even more difficult for Luo Binghe to control himself. It felt as if there was a sharp knife churning his mind, and the black flames surrounding the Heart Devil Sword abruptly surged out.

Shen Qingqiu regrets that his actions to protect Luo Binghe in fact deepened the wounds on his heart, and self-destructs his spiritual energy to counterbalance the demonic energy that the Xin Mo Sword had agitated.

What is interesting here is how Mo Xiang Tong Xiu literalizes basically everything we have just discussed via the Xin Mo sword. Luo Binghe’s ambivalence towards Shen Qingqiu is represented by the conflict of spiritual energy within him, in which the demonic energy is suppressed (repressed) via Shen Qingqiu’s death. Luo Binghe is able to voice his ambivalence at all through the existence and the influence of the demonic—which directly affects his mind. So, the hostility is displaced onto the sword, despite the fact that it is manifestly obvious that Luo Binghe has legitimate grievances with Shen Qingqiu. As he asks under the sword’s influence:

Or is [destiny] allowing the person who I wholeheartedly, genuinely admired to deceive me, abandon me, betray me, and personally push me down into a place worse than purgatory?!

That, uh, sure would cause some ambivalence. Anyway, the existence of Xin Mo makes his grieving pathological. He must return to this wound because he wished Shen Qingqiu dead; he must not resolve the wound, because he cannot admit he was right to wish Shen Qingqiu dead.

In my opinion.

He has no choice not to bleed out.

Freud, concerned as he ever was with origins, also examined where he believed this set of taboos around the dead (that produce mourning, that produce demons in the first place) emerged from. Both Bataille and Freud were concerned with a question so basic we have not even touched on it yet: why is there a prohibition against murder? We know, via Bataille, the function it serves. But we do not know why—beyond what ad hoc justification we have mentally constructed during the course of the last two sentences—it might fill us with such horror.

We cannot take the horror on its own merits as proof of our own intrinsic good natures. If we had such intrinsic good natures, we would not need a taboo—we would not need the horror. So we should take it, in fact, as proof of the contrary. We want very badly to kill, and yet we know we must not. Mourning hides the desire that we had wished someone dead. Our sterile burials betray our desire to touch the dead.

I find Freud's eventual explanation of what truly ultimately caused that desire to kill and the horror of it incredibly stupid, so we will stop this discussion here. Instead we will turn our attention to what these complementary pairs of desire and repulsion remind us of. Perhaps a few trains of thought too late, we can bring in the Marquis de Sade:

There is no better way to know death than to link it with

some licentious image.

de Sade, maybe unsurprisingly, overstates the sexual content. But he does have a point, which Bataille seizes upon. Bataille was preoccupied by how foreign the desires that might have been associated with death were:

At first sight sexual objects excite alternate attraction and repulsion, hence the taboo and its suspension. Freud based his interpretation of the taboo on the primal necessity of erecting a protective barrier against excessive desires bearing upon objects of obvious frailty. If he goes on to discuss the taboo on touching a corpse he must imply that the taboo protected the corpse from other people's desire to eat it.

He goes on to discuss how cannibalism historically often served a religious purpose, and how reserving it for religious ceremony created the desire to eat it in the first place. Bataille argues that the desire to touch and even eat dead human flesh is alien to us today. To which I say yes... And no.

Because, again, we are so heavily embroiled in metaphor, it is no real stretch to return to bloodfeeding. The vampire presents an inversion of traditional cannibalism: it is the dead feasting upon the living, rather than the opposite. Its fantasy clearly speaks upon some repressed desire there. But that is only one sort of demon.

Moving to another kind, we ought to consider Luo Binghe's interactions with Shen Qingqiu. First, we can look to an example that Shen Qingqiu witnessed. Basically immediately after Shen Qingqiu realizes, in Luo Binghe's dreamscape, that Luo Binghe is both gay and attracted to him specifically, Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe fight over Shen Qingqiu's corpse, while Shen Qingqiu watches from his plant body.

Shen Qingqiu eventually joins in, and fights on Liu Qingge's side from the shadows. But upon beginning to subdue Luo Binghe, he feels guilty and experiences a change of heart. So he enters the fray in his own right, and captures his own corpse. There are two important things that follow. First, when Shen Qingqiu grabs the corpse, he notices something:

He looked up to see Luo Binghe's gaze completely fixed on him, his expression savage and ferocious. Only then did Shen Qingqiu discover that the corpse's clothes had slipped down from its upper body, bones and flesh exposed as he held it in his arms. Added to how he was touching and looking at it.... It was overall an extremely unhealthy and rather provocative sight.

And second, upon noticing this, Shen Qingqiu tosses his own corpse at Liu Qingge to catch.

Luo Binghe wanted to seize it, but he was caught up in Shen Qingqiu's entanglement. Shen Qingqiu was originally worried that Luo Binghe would activate the Heavenly Demon blood parasite, but whether because he had been overwhelmed by killing intent or been struck silly by his anxiety, Luo Binghe actually did not think to use this trump card.

On the first point, the corpse seems to be attractive, even titillating. I don't really have that much to say about this, but it feels disingenuous to not mention this paragraph. What I really want to draw your attention to is this second point. As they toss Shen Qingqiu's corpse around, Shen Qingqiu is afraid that Luo Binghe will control the blood still present within the body. But Binghe—and it is deliberately ambiguous why—does not. But the most obvious reason is that he is abiding by the proscriptions surrounding right conduct by the dead.

Despite his desire for the corpse, he refuses to touch it in that way. In the Deep Dream extra, that much is made clear.

Luo Binghe took off his outer robe. Like hugging a large doll, he held the corpse in an embrace. If someone else saw this, they would inevitably be frightened into shock, or associate it with ugly words and unbearable disgust. But he was in fact only holding the body, and did not make any abnormal actions.

The text is clear that it is strange, it is repulsive, it is disgusting (abject). But his actions themselves are not abnormal. What is abnormal is that he desires to be close to the corpse, but not to violate any boundaries. Put simply, he breaks the taboo *but does not fulfill it*.

The extra also seems to contain the reason why Luo Binghe does not fulfill the taboo: he does not want Shen Qingqiu to be dead, and so will not treat him as the dead.

Luo Binghe's chin pressed against the top of Shen Qingqiu's pitch-black hair. One hand followed the curve of his back, stroking placatingly while delivering large amounts of spiritual power. The green and purple spots of livor mortis gradually receded, and the skin became pale and smooth once again.

He keeps the corpse as healthy as a corpse can be, in defiance of what Mu Qingfang thinks of the matter. Mu Qingfang argues that he has no solution for Binghe, that Binghe's efforts will have no effect. And Luo Binghe just chases him away.

He continues to feed his mother-in-law, long past her death. He makes Shen Qingqiu into his own vampire, his own demon, in a sort of revenge for how Shen Qingqiu made him a demon as well. He unifies the two structures of ancestor worship and fear of ghosts, into one coherent theory: you must venerate the ones who have harmed you, lest they do it again. It's this sexy demon death cult thing.

It's bleak!! It's really bleak!! And yet extremely compelling.

Now, some of you may be surprised, or even disappointed, that I have made it this far into an ostensibly Freud-inspired (Freud-affiliated?) analysis of Scum Villain without saying phallus once.

It has taken admirable restraint. But don't worry, here's the phallus section.

4

THE PHALLUS SECTION (PHALLUS I)

Somewhat surprisingly, I am not devoting this section (entirely) to Binghe. Again, it has taken admirable restraint, but I think you will see why shortly.

First, what is the phallus? Well, I mean. It's a dick. But for Freud, and hopefully for us, it's a little bit more than that. Like everything else Freudian, it's purely symbolic. So actually, the eternal problem of the phallus is that no one really has it.

Freud narrativizes early encounters with the phallus like this: a boy assumes his mother has the same anatomy as himself. At some point, he realizes this is not the case. And—this is the key part—he assumes this has happened through some act of castration. This has various effects.

The traditional narrative following forth from this is that men want to *have* the phallus, and women want to *be* the phallus. The traditional narrative is not that useful to us, though, because we live in a post-James Franco world, in which we want to be all things at once.

We can complicate it. For instance, Samuel Delany summarizes in “Neither the First Word nor the Last”:

The image/concept of the penis-that-is-not-there, this perceived absence, this difference-from-the-self, which organizes his fixation on the female genital region and eventually helps sexualize it, is the phallus—that is, the all-important “maternal phallus” in Freud’s theoretical elaboration.

So the absence of a phallus is a phallus too then. Lots of things can be phalluses (phalli?). Actually, it isn't really important that the phallus is, well, a phallus. It's slippery. It defies our attempts to define it. Judith Butler writes, in their “Lesbian Phallus,” something characteristically pessimistic:

To offer a definition of the phallus—indeed, to attempt denotatively to fix its meaning—is to posture as if one has the phallus and, hence, to presume and enact precisely what remains to be explained.

So, well. Sorry. I didn't mean it. My bad if you thought I had it. I did warn you, though: no one does.

Its rhetorical use, however, is sufficiently valuable to make us put up with this whole problem. Jacques Lacan (big phallus guy) argues that it's unique because it signifies things, but is not itself signified by anything else. It's what we choose as our origin of meaning, even though we choose it because everything else seems to mean it. Horrible, no?

So we are skeptical of this explanation, and instead tend to prefer the one that says we can treat it as any other structure of meaning, even if this symbol is particularly useful because it has been vested with so much meaning by others.

Anyway, what is useful about the phallus is that it doesn't really have to mean anything, except that it can be castrated.

Delany actually explains the delinkage between the penis and the phallus in this way; he argues that the feminist disavowal that the penis has anything to do with patriarchal power is a castration of that original theory as well. He goes as far as to state that the phallus is "not a theory of strength but rather a theory of strength subverted, contained, tamed, symbolized (for the phallus *only* functions through castration), i.e. a theory of power."

Secondly, what does any of that have to do with *Scum Villain*?

Attentive readers already know... Shen Yuan wants it very badly.

While reading, Shen Qingqiu had thought it a little strange that Luo Binghe hadn't tried to castrate the creep. His

failure to do so absolutely didn't jive with Bing-ge's dark charm! So, he'd gone to the comment section and joined the mob in flooding it with posts to the tune of, "Please castrate Shen Qingqiu! No castration, we unsubscribe!"

Upon reflection and closer consideration, Shen Qingqiu was profoundly terrified. If the appeal had succeeded then, he'd absolutely have had to chop off the hand with which he had made these posts!

I just included the last couple lines because I thought that it was very funny that Shen Qingqiu's proposed punishment for calling for castration was... more symbolic castration. What I think is more important is that from the earliest chapters of the novel, the character Shen Qingqiu is heavily associated with castration. He brings it up again and again, in the chapters to come. And it's actually the first thing that Airplane Shooting Towards The Sky associates with him.

"I vaguely remember you. Weren't you especially vicious in one of those threads that was demanding I castrate the villain?"

This is foreshadowing, I guess. Because later in the book, Shen Qingqiu even threatens to castrate Shang Qinghua.

If not for the fact that Xiu Ya had only just returned to his hands and he couldn't bear to use it for filthy things, Shen Qingqiu really had a mind to slice off a chunk of that place between his legs.

I am trying to build a case here that Shen Yuan really, really can't stop bringing up castration. And that therefore, it might be important in the novel.

Now, I am going to say something and not provide any proof, but I think you will agree with me anyway. The sword functions

as a phallus. That feels uncontroversial, right? It's a sign of power, it's long, and you can grip it... Come on. Don't make me come up with more innuendo.

Anyway, so what about Yue Qingyuan? He's got a sword. An incredibly powerful one. But he doesn't—actually, he can't—use it. Shen Yuan comments on its notable absence:

After all, he had never seen the Xuan Su sword in any scene, whether from the original book or over on this side of things.

Yue Qingyuan tends to fight with the sword still sheathed in its scabbard. It emerges inches at a time, as a threat (he just needs the tip). And he repeatedly plays with it, brushing its hilt to remind people of his power. It's suggestive.

And part of the major misunderstanding between the original Shen Qingqiu and Yue Qingyuan is that this is because of Yue Qingyuan's strength as a cultivator.

It kind of is. Like, if he was weaker, he would probably just die. But his strength came at a major cost. And, unfortunately for him, Shen Jiu states:

He would rather see the cold remains of Yue Qi in some obscure corner with no one to collect them than see this refined, powerful, and promising Yue Qingyuan.

Now, I should note that this is somewhat untrue. Shen Jiu does despair when learning that Yue Qingyuan did die in some obscure corner fighting on Shen Jiu's behalf, rather than simply fleeing with his life. But I think this passage shows something interesting about Shen Jiu's psychology, as it relates to the phallus.

Simply put, Shen Jiu longs for a castrated mother. That is, I

guess, a “normal” mother. The problem with Shen Jiu (one of the problems, actually) is that within the construct of the sword-phallus, he never experiences the realization that the other is, in fact, castrated. But he longs for it nonetheless.

Freud would probably say this is penis envy. However, I’m making a slightly different argument. Shen Jiu’s frustration is that this person *cannot* be the mother, if they are not castrated. So he produces the phallus so he can wish to castrate it. If you don’t have your own mother, homemade is fine, basically.

A clear complication to Freud’s penis envy argument is that we would need to first arbitrate whether Shen Jiu possesses the phallus. And, well. Ugh. He’d probably say no. But I think as distasteful as the Oedipal complex is (which is why it’s only now making its first appearance in this essay), we can use it to answer this question.

For Freud, the male child sees himself in competition with his father for his mother’s affection. This culminates in the famous formulation that he desires his mother and seeks to kill his father. Freud considered this a normal stage of psychosexual development by the way, that all children go through. But I’m going to treat it as sort of a general triangle here.

So, who do we cast as each? Well, clearly Luo Binghe is the child. We have options for the parents. For instance, we can try to fit Yue Qingyuan in there. We can bandy about different pseudo-fathers, passing around the phallus like a party game. But we prefer Shen Jiu as the father, because he is the one that lays down the prohibitions towards Binghe. He is also the, uh, one that Binghe definitely wants to kill. We can work backward on that one. So, he is the one who possesses the phallus (that is, the power) in this equation.

He also is jealous over Binghe’s mother. It’s one of the things makes him so envious of Binghe, that Binghe had a “mother

who was best to me in the world.” But she’s not the most fruitful choice for mother in this triangle, having so little screen time.

Rather, the most compelling option is Shen Jiu as the father, and Ning Yingying as the mother. Now, I’m not really interested in litigating whether Shen Jiu is a feminist, or MasterCard is my friend, or whatever. Whether or not he was romantically or sexually interested in Ning Yingying is totally irrelevant here. What’s more important is that Binghe and Shen Jiu were in competition for her attention. Which, yes, does sound very embarrassing for Shen Jiu, but that’s what happens when you abuse children. It’s not a very... dignified thing to do.

Anyway, the point is that my original theory was right. I’ve debunked the others. Shen Jiu is not a Freudian #girl. Moving on: castration is very scary! And if the phallus is constituted through its capacity to be castrated, how do we cope with this?

Freud argues in his essay “Fetishism,” that we basically have three reactions to the problem of the castrated mother. 1) We become gay, because the absence of the phallus scares us so much. 2) We get over it (he’s not really clear on how this happens). 3) We develop a fetish, because we do not want to give up the belief in the mother’s phallus.

The fetish is what we sexualize instead of hole, incidentally. We memorialize the horror we feel at castration by doing so. Freud was a firm believer that we *must* sexualize something, otherwise it becomes a neurotic character trait. It was easier back then to be a doctor, I think. Please do not take anything in this zine as medical advice.

It’s a displacement, then. The question is which of the three responses Shen Jiu chose. I can say confidently that he did not choose to become normal. And he certainly did not begin to choose men over women. So the question now is whether or not we can apply this to him at all, whether he has any such castra-

tion fear in the first place. He has the *desire* that Yue Qingyuan be castrated, but because he has no knowledge of its truth, does it fill him with horror?

I mean, yes. In that he mobilizes castration against Yue Qingyuan because he is cognizant of its horror. And more importantly, Freud is clear that fetishism is a fairly contradictory experience.

He believes that his mother has lost her penis, and therefore fears the loss of his own, at the same time that he assuages this fear by psychically replacing her penis with a fetishistic object of desire. *In the child's mind, the mother simultaneously does and does not have a penis.* (emphasis mine)

So, whatever. Yue Qingyuan has Schrodinger's penis. It doesn't really matter. The final question we must answer is what fetish Shen Jiu chooses. Where does he choose to displace this fear? Where has he memorialized the horror of castration?

We don't know much about his sexual proclivities. But since our castration is metaphorical (well, even more metaphorical than normal), the fetish can be as well. Rephrased, then, where he has displaced his desire for others to be helpless to? In this light, it's self-evidently his abuse of Binghe.

The classic phrasing of the fetishist, towards the object of his phantasy, is "I know very well, but nevertheless." I know very well this is nothing but fantasy, but its power still remains. It is because of this that Shen Jiu's lack of knowledge about Yue Qingyuan takes an interesting turn. Because of it, we can flip it: "Because of this... *I cannot know.*" Shen Jiu cannot in earnest ever reckon with his past with Yue Qingyuan without condemning his current behavior. This is part of the reason that Shen Jiu's treatment of Binghe is so bleak: he is determined to punish Yue Qingyuan, but he is effectively punishing himself. He must pursue psychic stability by relying on this phantasy—it's this epic

wire mother that he cannot wean himself from moment. Horrible adult breastfeeding shit, no?

This may feel a bit one-note to some readers: why do we keep returning to this abuse in every single section? Well, 1) because it's interesting, 2) it's where the mommy issues even stem from in the first place, and 3) because this abuse shadows the narrative in every aspect. I think it is easy to try to look away from it: the start of the novel marks its ostensible end. We want to believe that the nightmare is over, a real clown is here, and that Binghe will be treated well. We are defensive of Binghe; we are defensive of the person who tries to defend him. Also, it casts the central romance of the novel in a, uh, rather dark light. Which, yeah.

But I don't want to avert my eyes to it. This is why I like the Freudian lens.

The thing is, wrapped up in all the salacious language of sex and genitalia and fathers, we can give a compelling account of psychological drama that is about power, who has it, and who can take it away. This is a fairly standard analysis I have just performed, the type that I think most of you expected to see when you first heard of this zine.

It may be disappointing for that reason. This sort of analysis has inevitable cissexism to it. So, we can deconstruct it. If we remove the assumptions about who ought to have what anatomy, what do we see next? We will do this by first referencing Chinese stories instead. This is not because transphobia is exclusively endemic to French people, but rather because it is also a central limitation of this analysis that it relies on, well, Oedipus, who was Greek, I'm pretty sure. We are going to avoid the Freudian temptation to say that Greek psychological hangups are universal, or even that all cultures react the same way to castration.

To be clear, this is also not to say that Chinese people unproblematically enjoyed castration, either. This was actually a

common association with China in the late nineteenth century. Howard Chiang writes in *After Eunuchs*, my main source here, that China, having taken up the Ottoman Empire's nickname of the "Sick Man," was viewed as a "castrated civilization." Eunuchs—as well as the ostensibly corresponding practice of footbinding—came to "[represent a powerful symbol of backwardness, oppression, and national shame."

First, the connection between castration and footbinding is actually present in Freud as well. Freud comments that a parallel to fetishism

might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated. It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman for having submitted to being castrated.

We can take away a couple things from this. China became *the* castrated civilization during this time period. Not only the men, but the women as well, were castrated to intellectuals like Freud. We can actually deploy this to argue that the ensuing Yellow Peril serves as a fetish for Euro-American intellectual thought, but that's far outside the scope of this particular essay.

We should also make a correction: it was Chinese women (mothers, specifically) who actually put the most effort into binding their daughter's feet, not the men. (And through the late imperial period, it was actually men that castrated their aspiring eunuch sons.) So, we can also reiterate the familial initiatory aspect of castration here. But it is not you who has castrated the mother, it is the mother who has castrated you. And you are grateful to her for it; you resent her for it; her mother did it to her as well.

But the final comment that we should make on the "castrated civilization," is that it is a modern view. While the typical Chinese focus on having children and continuing the family

line remains intact, we ought not to import modern notions of masculine anxiety surrounding the dick and balls to our discussion here. While eunuchs were often disparaged as corrupt or denigrated for their inability to reproduce, this is 1) recency bias via our greater access to Ming and Qing historical accounts of eunuchs, which were colored by temporally specific imperial fears surrounding eunuch power; and 2) factually untrue, considering that many eunuchs were castrated as adult men who had already married and had children, and still others chose to adopt and raise children after their castration.

What is fundamentally interesting about eunuchs is that, in imperial China, they *gained* the phallus by being castrated. That is, they gained inner access to the imperial court, power that had been unprecedented in their lives, as well as stable administrative work. Eunuchs were selected for their intelligence, charisma, and trustworthiness. Men would go into debt to be castrated; boys would do it against their parents' wishes.

I do not want to go as far as to suggest that there was a castration craze sweeping China at any point (despite what the ban on self-castration in the Qing dynasty suggests), or that it was considered unproblematically desirable and good, but rather that being a eunuch was another way to be a man, rather than a corrupted form of it. If castration does not inherently suggest weakness or absence of power, but a different form of it, we must wholly rethink our analysis.

Note that this portrayal of eunuchhood I have just conveyed is perhaps anachronistically rosy. This is deliberate. I want to counter not only the Euro-American appropriation of it, but also the modern Chinese repudiation of it. Chiang points out that the lens of "what is wrong or absent with eunuchs' bodies" quickly stood in for "what is wrong or absent with China." Post-May Fourth intellectuals rejected castration and footbinding as the sort of archaic, backwards project that had been holding China back. They advocated instead for the sort of scientific knowledge

that could be imported from Europe and Japan: “biological sex,” “male,” “female,” and so on. These concepts did not exist stably in China before the last hundred years or so. Here, I want to highlight the deliberate rupture between the “castrated past” and the present, which possesses the epistemic phallus. Note that the chronology moves backward here: the past became castrated, because of the perceived necessity of European intellectual modernity.

We can consider my reversal of it here a castration too.

At any rate, if castration seems changed by the cultural context, then it seems even more obvious that Oedipus with Chinese eyes would look quite different. What is striking about China is its absence of Oedipal themes in the great myths and stories. Men rarely want to kill their fathers, and they are even more rarely possessive of their mothers.

Freud is still present, of course, and modern authors are and were influenced by his work. The great literature of the 20th century has some Freud, but only because its authors were often educated abroad, and you know. Read Sophocles there. Moreover, the field of sexology was imported self-consciously in the post-May Fourth days, for the reasons I explained above. This is heightened further in the present day, because of the Freud fad of the ‘70s and ‘80s that popularized his work.

Now, to a true Freudian, his comparative lack of stature is not an obstacle. Gu Ming-Dong cites Andre Green on the matter being trivial:

“To say that the Oedipus complex is universal,” notes one eminent analyst [Green], “is to say that every human being is born of two progenitors, one of a sex identical to his own, the other of a different sex.”

Gu takes this as unproblematic, and argues that the Oedipus

complex therefore exists in China, but due to the morally repressive nature of Confucianism and its extremely strong incest taboo, it could find no expression in popular literature.

I mean, yeah, I guess? I'm not going to dispute that, like, most Chinese people throughout human history have had two parents. But Green and Gu both make the same mistake: assuming that we can say that these parents can be thought of as possessing an "identical" sex and a "different" sex. Because, again, the use of the existing word *xing* (性) to represent the new concept of "biological sex" is an innovation which occurred in the last century. At most, we can say that children had a parent that they considered they might do a similar thing to, one day. And suddenly, Green's argument seems less intuitively obvious.

So, let's work with this weaker version of the theory, which permits some degree of identification with parents, but not on a biological basis. Gu presents a survey of Chinese literature and myth to persuade us that whether or not it is Oedipus, Chinese writers seemed to be preoccupied with the same themes, albeit in a repressed way.

So we need to attend to this question first: who is the Chinese Oedipus?

Meir Shahar argues, in the line of Fan Sheng and Steven Sangren, that Nezha is the Chinese Oedipus. He quotes Sangren, who wrote:

The story's obvious oedipal overtones—the son's patricidal hatred, the father's murderous intentions towards his son, and the rivalry between them for the affection of the wife/mother—are particularly remarkable in China, where expression of such sentiments was largely inexpressible in other contexts.

Shahar concedes that the erotic aspect of the mother-son leg is

largely concealed. Psychoanalytic work could be done to make it visible, but its content is largely muted, due to the factors Gu describes above. In this view, the Chinese Oedipus exists, although he is not omnipresent. Rather, all that can be said is that Nezha's popularity may be due in some way to its expression of a hidden Oedipal drive within Chinese people at large throughout history. And so it indicates that 1) it could exist, and 2) it may actually exist.

Gu instead presents a modification of the Oedipal complex, rather than a one-to-one mapping, turning it into what he calls a "filial piety complex." While fathers fear patricide and mothers are jealous, he argues that the son is always filial in Chinese stories. He cites the example of Shun, in Sima Qian's (a eunuch, incidentally) great history *Shiji*. Shun's story is kind of like a masc Cinderella. He's the dutiful son of a blind man, who remarries, and the new wife and half-brother hate Shun and want him dead. Everyone keeps trying to kill him, but he just keeps becoming nicer and more dutiful. In the end, he marries and has his own kids. There's no real catharsis, incidentally, or revenge fantasy. Shun just represses and moves on eventually, and that's the end.

Gu argues that what's interesting here is the murderous antipathy from father to son. He argues that because of the immense power that Chinese fathers held over their sons, the father had to constantly fear retaliation. So in this story, the father exercises it, in a sort of preemptive strike. And the son is taught, despite its exercise, not to return it.

Gu cites various other examples—on the father, he also refers to the classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*. For the mother, he uses "The Peacock Southeast Flew," a third-century poem, allegedly based on a real life tragedy, about a mother who forced her son to divorce his wife, leading to both their deaths.

This filial piety complex simply provides an account for why the

Oedipal complex, if it exists in Chinese myth and narrative, is so fragmentary and asymmetrical. In my view, using it doesn't provide us with anything more radical than the ability to anachronistically cast bits and pieces of various situations in terms of family dynamics, with filial piety as the motivation. Which is kind of what I did earlier, anyway. Congratulations to me! I was already doing a Chinese Freudian analysis.

This revised complex allows us to contrast the two proposed figures against each other: we ought to compare Binghe as Oedipus, and Binghe as Shun. Binghe as Oedipus kills the father (Shen Jiu) and weds the mother (Ning Yingying). Discerning readers will note that this is literally what happened in *Proud Immortal Demon Way*. Binghe as Shun perfectly accepts his punishment, until he finally marries happily. And well, that's *Scum Villain*. So, maybe, no matter which model you prefer, it seems like the Chinese Oedipus really was Luo Binghe the whole time.

Scum Villain, the novel, seems to actually valorize the "Shun" model by preferring it to the "Oedipus" model. This is interesting. We could probably develop this into some argument about wish fulfillment in danmei versus wish fulfillment in YY novels. But I do feel like this has limited utility as a theoretical model through which to analyze *Scum Villain*, though.

And in case you can't tell, I don't find this modified complex sufficiently novel. If we are to argue that other principles dominated Chinese culture at such a historical moment that the complex did not manifest in the same way, and each party involved actually had different motivations... We seem to be actually talking about a completely different psychic structure, and clumsily mapping it onto the one we expect to see. We're trying to fit a square hermeneutic into a round hole.

What the filial piety model does offer compellingly, though, is justify the ability to work in terms of a post-familial, post-genital theory of a castrated mother. That's right: words don't have

meanings anymore. We did it.

So what we can take away is this: these Freudian terms are evocative, and we can draw parallels between them and what we see. But we ought to work first in terms that emerge more organically.

Let's return to castration, then, with this modified approach. Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* is a collection of supernatural or, well, strange short stories, collected in the early Qing dynasty. One of its stories, "Ren Yao" (人妖), is a story which (spoiler) includes castration. I'll summarize Judith Zeitlin's translation of it here:

Ma Wanbao is a guy who has a wife. (They're described as, like, kind of kinky? She says "unrestrained," but they're nonetheless devoted to each other.) They have a neighbor, who's this old woman. And she takes in this runaway girl. The girl claims to be talented at various tasks, like sewing. And massages, which can cure feminine ailments.

Ma spies on her, and likes her look. He gets his wife to request a massage, and switches with her—despite the girl's explicit request that her husband be gone that night. He gropes the girl, and is surprised to learn that the girl is a female impersonator named Wang Erxi. Wang is a member of this... cross-dressing girl gang, I guess. They're led by Sang Chong, and they commit robberies and assault women, and take advantage of their ability to disguise themselves to gain access.

Anyway, Ma castrates Wang, and takes him as his second wife. When the rest of the gang members are caught and killed, Wang escapes. (Due to being castrated, upon patdown, they think he's a cis woman.) He is extremely grateful, and the three live happily ever after.

If you don't really know what to make of this story... Yeah, most

people don't either. It's left out of most anthologies and translations because of its, um, content.

Zeitlin comments that the function of castration in the story seems to be to normalize the gender transgressions in the story. That is, it stabilizes Wang Erxi into an acceptable concubine, from a criminal. Yet what's kind of odd about this, is that Ma himself also dresses as a woman (in order to assault Wang in the first place)! He literally commits the same crime as Sang Chong and his gang! But he emerges uncastrated!

Ma aside, this sort of... stable transgender life as an antidote to gender transgression is actually typical within *Strange Tales*. In "Becoming a Boy," a daughter is struck in the head by a meteor and becomes a boy. Everyone is jazzed because they didn't have a son before. To be precise, Zeitlin writes "Her family did not consider her a prodigy, but secretly rejoiced at their abrupt acquisition of a son."

As a brief sort of aside here, stories like "Becoming a Boy," in which FTM transformation is portrayed as fundamentally filial are common, as are stories like "Ren Yao" in which MTF transformation is portrayed as more criminal. Charlotte Furth, on this topic, notes that FTM transformations basically subordinated the sexual in favor of the social (that is, their subjects move from fulfilling a reproductive role, to a more chaste career-minded one). This was less exciting to the imagination, she argues. Because it was obvious why a woman would want to become a man in old timey China. The opposite was far less so.

I was originally hesitant to apply the concept of transmisogyny here. But I don't think we lose anything from acknowledging that the oppression of people we now identify as transfemmes is a linchpin of patriarchy in general. And we certainly do have a patriarchy on our hands here. So this is one way that transmisogyny functioned, by its association of trans women with criminality. (That said, like. A greater range of what we might

now call gender non-conforming behavior was tolerated then in people whom we call men now such that like you *can* read less salacious transfeminine life and desire as existing in Chinese stories and histories— Okay, look. That is a different essay. You get the point I'm trying to make here.)

Anyway, the point of me recounting all these stories is to go, look: actually, rather than being purely about transgression, they tend to be about recasting people into acceptable social roles. You didn't have a son, now you do! You used to have a criminal, now you have a wife! (Ma gets away with it, I guess. Basically, you just have to pick your targets carefully.)

The second point of all these stories is that you may have noticed a recurring word: *renyao*. That was the title of the first story, and embedded as “prodigy” in “Becoming a Boy.” And this title, *Ren-yao*, is notable for a couple reasons. It means “human prodigy,” as Howard Chiang translates it, or more literally, “human monster.” (Non-Chinese speakers might still recognize this *yao* as the same *yao* you read about in cultivation novels.) And *renyao* was historically used to refer to any physical abnormality or boundary crossing—whether between humans and animals, or between genders. For instance, a child who was born with two heads, and the body of a dog, Chiang writes, was also *renyao*.

Anyway. Where did all of this come from? As it turns out, Zeitlin describes Pu's inspiration: the real life case of Sang Chong, during the Chinghua reign (1465-1488). It was a sensational case—one which captivated the public imagination and vernacular stories for hundreds of years, but which we have no direct records of the court case for. The records we do have say this, Zeitlin writes:

the case was brought against a female impersonator named Sang Chong, the leader of a gang of vagabond men who dressed as women with bound feet, made their living plying female trades such as sewing, and abused their disguise

to gain unlawful sexual access to women of good families. The willing they seduced; the unwilling they drugged and raped. For fear of damaging their reputation, however, none of the women informed on their seducers. Sang Chong was finally apprehended when a man, smitten by Sang Chong's feminine charms, stole into his room to seduce him. When he was unable to repel the man's advances, Sang Chong's secret was uncovered and reported.

The records recommended that Sang Chong be put to death, and that his fellow gang members be caught and killed as well. Sang was called a yao ren, or a human [male] monster. And hence... The unity was born in Pu's mind. This is context his audience would have had built in, and they would not have missed how interesting it was that he sought to subsume it into a normative social context via the character of Wang Erxi.

But at any rate. With regards to that summary, you can see why I did relay it with some skepticism. Because it does seem to um. Perhaps too perfectly capture the sorts of stereotypes that still circulate even today.

This is why I think it will not surprise you that ren-yao has actually shifted to become a derogatory word for trans people in the Sinophone world in more recent years.

In the strange afterlife of the word, one of the people who uses it as a slur is actually Shen Yuan. Yeah, the Shen Yuan in *Scum Villain*. In the "A Memory: Fighting Succubi with Master Liu" extra, when wondering about his soulmate, Shen Yuan comments:

不要绝色美女，不是个人妖就行！

Or, loosely: She didn't have to be a stunning beauty, as long as she wasn't a ren-yao, that's fine!

So, yeah. Shen Yuan cannot stop bringing up castration. He cannot stop bringing up renyao. Basically, what I'm saying is that, in a Freudian analysis, it would be remiss not to talk about, uh, projection. I'm going to say it: through Shen Yuan's repressed anxieties, the figure of the modern day trans woman haunts the novel.

It's really striking.

5

GIRL TALK (PHALLUS II)

We can review the book in broad chronological strokes to build the outline of this theory. And as we do so, two striking patterns will emerge. First, Shen Yuan consistently desires cis women and their experiences; and second, Shen Yuan consistently invents trans women to be antagonistic towards. Taken as a whole, he is preoccupied with role-playing: what *ought* people do? What are they supposed to do? What happens when you're given a new role?

Part of the trans identification we see in *Scum Villain* emerges from Shen Yuan becoming the romantic lead, in the context of the *Proud Immortal Demon Way* universe. But even before Luo Binghe becomes romantically interested in Shen Qingqiu, he does begin to function as a woman.

In the Skinner arc, Shen Qingqiu comments that "The Skinner Demon's chosen victims were all young, beautiful women." But before long, he himself is chosen as one of the demon's victims. This is remarked on by the demon himself. The demon, in Die-er's body, explains:

"I never said I *only* pick young, beautiful women. As long as they're good-looking and their skin is fine and smooth, I'll take anyone. It's just that most of the time, a man's skin isn't as good as a woman's, and the skin of the elderly is never as good as that of the youthful."

The Skinner Demon, who for convenience's sake, we'll call Die-er from now on, reveals that their first body was a man. Shen Qingqiu is part "disgusted" and part "sympathetic."

Honestly, this demon was quite pitiful. It sounded like Die-er had originally been a man, but they had to keep using the skins of women due to their condition. After such a long time, of course that would make you a little twisted...

So these are the terms that Shen Qingqiu casts Die-er's experi-

ence in. She's twisted, she's forcibly ejected into a new body, and of course, she's transfeminine. This is... um... typically transphobic for him. But rather than read it as him simply evoking some Chinese Buffalo Bill, it does appear strikingly similar to the way he describes himself.

We can actually compare Shen Qingqiu's perspective on his own trans/migration to this. When Meng Mo, Luo Binghe's demonic mentor and dream demon extraordinaire, is introduced, Shen Qingqiu takes the role that Ning Yingying had had in the original book during that scene. Upon realizing he is inside the dreamscape instead of her, he comments:

There's been a bug, right? In this section. Luo Binghe should be cozying up with a maiden, and the maiden is responsible for unraveling his complexes and using love to help him defeat his inner demons? How come I've been thrust into this role?!

He begins by noting that, narratively speaking, he has begun to function as a woman—as a damsel for Luo Binghe to save. The System says in response to his protest:

Our self-inspection failed to find a bug. The System is running normally.

So, first he asserts his own aberrance, as he asserted Die-er's. And yet the narrative seems to repudiate this viewpoint. So Shen Qingqiu rejects that in turn. There's no way the author could have wanted this, right?

[Airplane] was a stallion novel author, and he definitely wouldn't have wanted something like this to happen in his work—a healthy maiden being replaced by a scum villain?

And yet that is the plight that befell the original Die-er. So through these two characters, two contrasting pairs emerge: the

original Die-er and Ning Yingying versus the Skinner Demon and Shen Qingqiu. That is, the maiden and the scum villain who comes to inhabit her place.

This is who inhabits the two patterns we saw at the start: the maiden, who is envied, and the scum villain, whose villainy is predicated on coveting her position in the first place.

It's funny that the actual body Shen Qingqiu steals [the original Shen Qingqiu's] has nothing to do with this dynamic at all. That is to say, the original Shen Qingqiu is not his maiden. Shen Yuan is able to compartmentalize any guilt because the original Shen Qingqiu is *also* a scum villain (instead with regard to the maiden Luo Binghe).

At any rate, we can take a brief inventory of various feminine roles that Shen Qingqiu fills over the course of the novel.

First, Luo Binghe offers to cook for Shen Qingqiu. He comments that Luo Binghe's cooking skills were notable within the novel.

Wasn't that what Luo Binghe had used to coax several spoiled young ladies into willingly and ecstatically entering his harem?

Next, Luo Binghe is inspired to become stronger by Shen Qingqiu. Shen Qingqiu notes that this motivation is changed from the original novel.

Fuck. Originally this conviction to "become stronger to protect my important person," should have been inspired by the protagonist seeing the female lead's frail, lovely, and delicately panting form after she sustained an injury while helping him.

This actually leads him to speculate as to what's happening.

Was the System... laying all the emotional labor associated with the female lead's role... on Shen Qingqiu?

Because the possibility of gay life does not even occur to Shen Qingqiu, he instead immediately is determined to fit himself inside a heterosexual paradigm, and as the woman. This is a source of comedy within the early arcs of the novel. But it also implies a perspective about the world: the female lead is whoever Binghe loves. And as Shen Qingqiu puts it, later on:

If [Luo Binghe] wanted to force himself on someone, who wouldn't obediently spread their legs?!

Scum Villain, through Shen Qingqiu's eyes, seems to be about the inevitability of trans desire.

But let's keep going. Another feminine role Shen Qingqiu fulfills is shortly after the events of the Immortal Alliance Conference.

He was scaring his disciples, putting on the act of a grieving widow whose husband had just died.

Next, imprisoned in Huan Hua Palace's Water Prison, Shen Qingqiu is taken aback by the Xiao Gongzhu's assault:

What fit even less was, in the original work, wasn't the Little Palace Mistress's refined iron whip used for hitting love rivals!!! A tool for fighting over men and tearing [beep--]! It was only ever used to hit pretty women Luo Binghe stared at for too long, so why is it being used to hit a man!!! It's crying can't you hear!

I've had enough, can you stop giving me this kind of script!!!

The readers are also hit with a double-whammy. After Luo Binghe rescues him, and Shen Qingqiu's clothing is ripped, Shen Qingqiu is given Binghe's outer robe.

He couldn't help but get reminded of that classic bad trope where "after the young maiden who'd been violated was rescued, the boyfriend drapes a warm coat over her"...

Mentions of Shen Qingqiu being the female lead basically had disappeared until the end of the novel, when he comments that his story has been reclassified as a "woman-oriented genre."

Yeah, no shit!!!!!!

Beyond simply fulfilling female roles, Shen Qingqiu also consistently attributes his own feelings to women.

Upon seeing the three Tianyi Sect nuns, he notes that they're following up on information related to Luo Binghe. In his view, there could only be one reason that this is the case.

Shen Qingqiu automatically explained the excitement on their face as the blossoming affection of a young woman. Luo Binghe's stallion power was still very powerful!

We can also see this idea reiterated in the aforementioned quote "who wouldn't obediently spread their legs?" *Anyone* would be a woman for the protagonist. Binghe deserves it.

He also possesses a certain ambivalent biology.

After being fed blood by Luo Binghe, he comments:

Fuck, his stomach hurt so much, is this what it feels like when girls get their periods?!

And he continues to call that pain his period afterward. This may be why in the donghua, he's able to offer Ning Yingying sanitary pads during a non-canonical commercial interlude. Who fucking cares anymore.

When reviewing the achievements the revised novel received at

the very end of the story, he exclaims outragedly:

And why did the women-oriented genre have the “Good Enough to Jerk Off To” achievement. What are they going to hold to jerk off to?!

Here again, evoking an uncastrated women.

And finally, in the Return to Innocence extra, when Luo Binghe is forced back into the form of a child, Ming Fan assumes that the young Binghe is the two’s biological child. With Shen Qingqiu as the one who bore it.

Ming Fan also abashedly chimed in: “This disciple thought, if it’s a demon, then wanting a man to give birth to a baby wouldn’t be totally impossible, you know.”

Cool. I’m really just trying to blitz through the wealth of references in the novel to this. It’s really, really overwhelming.

Note that I have presented these references in a basically chronological way. That is because something interesting takes place. Shen Qingqiu actually sort of stops referring to himself as the female lead partway through the book, and begins referring to women and himself in a different sort of way. And the turning point is when he realizes Binghe is in love with him. Once this happens, he basically entirely switches to comparing *Binghe* to a woman.

One brief caveat: we do see this implicitly anticipated earlier in the novel, in the aforementioned Die-er bit. First, when Shen Qingqiu argues that the Skinner Demon should prey on Binghe instead of him, he also casts Binghe as the sort of beautiful young maidenly body that the Demon might want to possess. And secondly, as I noted above, Binghe is the maiden in the maiden-scum villain pair that he and the original Shen Qingqiu form.

So Binghe as a woman is not wholly unexpected. But what I want to highlight is that explicit, textual references to Binghe as a woman only emerge after this realization.

I am going to present them now in basically the same sort of fast-paced way.

In the scene in Luo Binghe's dream (in which Shen Qingqiu realizes that Binghe is in love with him), we see the first. Binghe tearfully admits he was wrong to terrorize Shen Qingqiu, as he hugs Shen Qingqiu tightly to him. Shen Qingqiu explains why he allows Binghe to hold him.

To push him away during this kind of moment, was like giving a young maiden—one who'd finally worked up the courage to call and broken-heartedly weep to a big sister for comfort and encouragement—a face-turning slap; it was really a bit cruel.

Next, Shen Qingqiu mentally reprimands Luo Binghe for turning the Xin Mo sword over to Tianlang Jun by calling him a girl.

"I don't remember teaching you to be such a....." Such a naive little girl!

Unfortunately, Luo Binghe learned by watching you.

Next, when Binghe and Shen Qingqiu discuss whether or not Shen Qingqiu smiles in his heart too much at people who aren't Binghe, Shen Qingqiu mentally rolls his eyes.

Lying on someone's body and acting like a spoiled child while playing with a strand of their hair, are you a little schoolgirl!

Just a couple chapters after that, in the confrontation on Maigu

Ridge, Luo Binghe seems particularly menacing. Shen Qingqiu mentally undermines this image.

Who would know that behind the scenes, he was like a young girl who loved to lean on others while crying and acting like a pampered child.....

Finally, after the two have sex on Maigu Ridge, Binghe begins to cry when the demonic energy is dispelled and he regains consciousness. Shen Qingqiu tries to comfort him. He states:

Before, Shen Qingqiu had been most afraid of women crying. Now he was most afraid of Luo Binghe crying. Who cared if his ass hurt a little.

Unlike these other examples, he doesn't directly call Luo Binghe a girl. But similarly to the way he once referred to himself as fulfilling female roles, now he does the same to Binghe. It's very beautiful and full circle I suppose.

At any rate, why does he make this move? Like. Is there any explanation for why he begins to call Luo Binghe a girl that doesn't involve lesbianism?!?!?

It's crucial that Binghe becomes a woman the moment that his desire for Shen Qingqiu becomes explicit and conscious to Shen Qingqiu. So are women the people who love, just as women are the people Binghe loves? Or is that, subconsciously, Shen Qingqiu begins to see him as a romantic possibility, and therefore that women are also the people Shen Qingqiu loves? By this theory, womanhood could be a gender constituted by being desired, at least according to Shen Qingqiu.

But let's shelve this train of thought for a moment. Because there's one more interesting gender transformation that takes place.

Ning Yingying, as the erstwhile female lead from Qing Jing Peak, has basically escaped further comparison in the latter half of the novel. Instead, we are presented with a new foil for Shen Qingqiu. And it's Su Xiyao, Luo Binghe's biological mother.

I'm sorry!!! I'm sorry!!! I'm not trying to do this!!! It's literally just the text!!!!

Binghe is Su Xiyao's unloved, unwanted child. After the two have sex, Binghe cries because he worries that Shen Qingqiu has sacrificed himself for Binghe again. He doesn't want people to sacrifice themselves for him. He wants them to stay. He resents that Shen Qingqiu might sacrifice himself for other people as well. He sobs into Shen Qingqiu's arms.

"I should have known that you'd never choose me, everyone always eventually abandons me..."

In response to this—and you cannot make this shit up—Shen Qingqiu unprovoked brings up that actually Su Xiyao loved Binghe and also sacrificed herself for him. In a long monologue, he even says that he'd do the same thing. (And, in truth, he already has.)

"If I was her, no matter how strong the poison is, I would not hesitate to drink it, escape from the water prison, and then drink all the medicine. No matter how painful the journey was. No matter how dangerous, no matter whether the cost was, no matter how dangerous it was, no matter how tiring, even at the cost of my own life, I would never let this child suffer even a hint of damage."

He comforts Binghe as a child. Basically, now that he can't cast their relationship into a heterosexual schema, he refers to them, as uh. Mother and child. Normal world.

Now, this isn't limited to that climatic scene. This interpretation

is well-supported by virtually everything that's preceded it.

Wu Wang compares them explicitly, when Shen Qingqiu protects Luo Binghe in the confrontation at the gathering of the sects.

“Shen Qingqiu, don't be like Su Xiyan—losing her mind to the demon race in a moment of carelessness and regretting it for life.”

Like. Okay! Alright!

In the chapters preceding that one, when we learn the sad tale of Tianlang Jun and Su Xiyan, Shen Qingqiu comments that his expectations of cruel demon lords and white flower humans were reversed.

Instead, it was a story of an innocent king who didn't know that human hearts were filled with evil intentions that met with a tyrannic flower with a heart that was both cold and dark.

Shen Qingqiu finally understood the meaning behind the smile-yet-not-quite-a-smile that gave off the impression of being “cold and ruthless,” along with the odd tone of voice that Tianlang-Jun had when Shen Qingqiu mentioned Su Xiyan.

This sets up the parallel between Su Xiyan and Shen Qingqiu (and Tianlang Jun and Luo Binghe) quite cleanly. Echoing the conversation Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe had early on in the novel as to whether demons are inherently evil, they both conclude that humans and demons both have the capacity for goodness and evil in them. And in both situations, it was the treachery of the human that doomed the demon.

And finally, Luo Binghe makes the implication of the “proving you don't have parents” scene I referenced earlier quite obvious.

When the two of them talk before heading off to Maigu Ridge, Shen Qingqiu tries to bring up Tianlang Jun.

He thought for a bit, then said deliberately, “Your father...”

Luo Binghe buried his head in his shoulder, saying stuffily, “I don’t have a father. Only Shizun.”

Why do I feel like I’m your dad?

Now, I wouldn’t say father. But at least Luo Binghe agrees with me on that one.

Anyway, Shen Qingqiu as Su Xiyan aside, he does refer to Luo Binghe as his daughter or child quite often in the extras for no reason at all.

In the Honeymoon extra, he says the following:

Seeing cool, wildly tyrannical, swaggering lord of the demon realm Luo Binghe acting as patient as a loving daughter, Shen Qingqiu inevitably felt light as air, in a wonderfully good mood, and the gaze with which he watched him couldn’t help being ever-more loving.

And the Return to Innocence extra, Shen Qingqiu takes great joy in treating him as his child. Binghe is frustrated to hear

Shen Qingqiu ridicule him by calling him things like “good boy” and “good baby”, making him increasingly...resent his inability to meet expectations!

Shen Qingqiu, on his part, is overwhelmed by the “mini version he could hug to his bosom, one which was willing to cling to his leg and throw tantrums in hopes of comfort.”

Now, you may have noticed that my commentary and analysis has virtually disappeared in this section. That’s because I’m gen-

uinely flabbergasted by how textually this novel is about entering a MDLG relationship. I am being somewhat facetious right now. But in many ways, I do feel these examples stand alone.

Anyway, this is all to say, that this could be another explanation for the shift in Binghe's gendered addresses, Shen Qingqiu awakening to this dynamic. Or this dynamic could be completely unrelated to it. But either way, it's fascinating to see the shift from Shen Qingqiu initially characterizing their girl-on-girl relationship as a "big sister" thing, to finally arriving at it being a "surrogate mother" thing.

Let's set aside in-universe explanations for a second though. Because briefly I do want to return to the analysis of last section: that we can view gender transformation as fundamentally filial, and that filiality serves to normalize repressed resentment. We can synthesize these insights by arguing that Binghe becomes a girl (Shen Qingqiu makes her a girl) because she *has* to be one, if they're to have a happy ending.

That is, rather than Oedipus or Shun, what if Binghe is just Wang Erxi? Shen Qingqiu castrates Binghe (quite literally. Or rather, quite metaphorically. He explodes Xin Mo sword.) so that he can be Shen Qingqiu's spouse. Shen Qingqiu, of course, remains uncastrated, much like Ma Wanbao. And as a half-demon, half-human, Binghe inherently troubles the same sort of boundaries that renyao as a term has historically implied.

For the two of them to have their happy ending, Binghe needs to be castrated. The absence of Xin Mo is what guarantees their safety. Binghe needs to be his wife because he needs to be grateful for having been saved. (He needs to be his child, because children must be grateful.) And in the final similarity to Wang Erxi, they both serve as counterbalance to the initial repudiation of gender transformation. That is, Sang Chong the criminal is displaced by Wang Erxi the wife. And Shen Qingqiu gets the exact opposite of what he initially requested—his stunning beau-

ty renyao girlfriend.

So in the end, this is our trans theory of a Chinese Oedipus, your mother and father are the same person. You hate her, you love her, you take anything from her. You kill her, you bring her back to life, she deserves it, you deserve it, you live happily ever after.

The Chinese Oedipus is aberrant, sure, a human prodigy—exceptional beyond all others. But even she can be good if she tries.

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For the *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System*, I used the official translation for the first volume. I used an archived version of Faelicy and Lily's translation through chapter 52. For all other chapters, I used an archived version of BC Novels' translation. For the extras, I used Keslations' translation.

So here we are, well over 17,000 words later, and we have finally justified why I personally feel that “mommy issues” is the most appropriate lens to analyze Bingqiu through. I do want to thank everyone who, back in January 2021, was willing to hop on board with me when the sum total of my analysis was simply the introduction to this zine (and sources being “trust me”). I have valued that trust immensely. I am sorry for what I’ve done with it. I also think I definitely made some great points.

In particular, I want to thank Verity for their incredible help and their patience with me as I worked on this project. Their knowledge about basically every aspect of making a little book to mail to your friends saved my ass so many times. ilyyyy <3

The art for the cover of this zine is by Bee, who is @B0K1B33K1 on twitter and bokibeeki on tumblr.

And you can find me generally on twitter @tshirt3000 and my other (shorter) essays on tumblr at bao3bei4.

