A Comparative Study of Three Interfering Women in Western and Chinese Tales

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THREE INTERFERING WOMEN IN WESTERN AND CHINESE TALES

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation analyzes similar female characters from the medieval English Arthurian story *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the German opera *Parsifal*, and the Chinese supernatural tale “Nie Xiaoqian.” Although Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian are products of different times and cultures, each of their stories offers a glimpse into a similar type of controversial woman often at variance with the expectations of a particular culture. These fictional characters are independent and influential women who drive the development of the entire plot and profoundly affect the protagonist’s destiny. Whether in England, Germany, or China, their status as aliens implies the hidden nature of female empowerment, no matter in the social range or in domestic sphere. The divergent treatments of similar female figures reveal diverse female voices and assorted message with regards to patriarchy. Although the movie adaptations of “Nie Xiaoqian” tend to lose the central idea of the interfering woman, they illustrate shifts in the cultural interpretation of women and show how the development of gender consciousness has to struggle against a modern emphasis on traditional roles and values.
CHAPTER 1.  PREFACE

The Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Ca. 1340-1400), Richard Wagner’s last completed opera *Parsifal* (1857-1882), and Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡1 (1640-1715) supernatural tale “Nie Xiaoqian” 聶小倩 (Ca. 1679-1707), each offers a portrait of a woman who interferes with the quest of a male hero. Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian intervene in events either ambiguously or maliciously. But whether intentionally or unconsciously, each woman contributes to the self-realization of the male protagonist. This dissertation offers a comparative study of how similar pattern of interference and plot produces differences in subjectivity, motivation, agency, and gender consciousness.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “interfering” in terms of disapproval. It describes those who involve themselves in an annoying way in other people’s private lives. But interference can also produce a positive result. Although the three women, Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian, are *femmes fatales* interfering in the protagonist’s quest, they fail in their enterprises and unexpectedly produce positive outcomes for the hero. By tempting the protagonist or leading him astray, they inadvertently guide his spiritual development, either preparing the hero for his ultimate mission or stimulating revolutionary changes in his life. Although these female characters appear to be misleading and dangerous at first, they turn out to be a helpful factor in the protagonist’s ultimate journey and to be a necessary experience in his self-fulfillment. It is, to say the least, surprising to find the same pattern in middle English and nineteenth-century German and Chinese literature.

1 In this dissertation traditional characters will be used except in quotations and for publications which are printed in simplified characters.
In fact, the figure of the interfering female character is not an unusual phenomenon in world literature. Interfering women exist in Greek mythology primarily as death-demons in the disguise of an inviting woman, such as the Sirens and Sphinx. The Sirens utilize their captivating songs to enchant seamen that sail by and lead them to shipwreck and death. The Sphinx is a half woman and half animal creature that sits in front of the city Thebes. She challenges every traveler with a riddle for entering the city and would eat up any passenger that fails to answer her question.\(^2\) The Bible also includes a story of how a *femme fatale* gives rise to disastrous consequences. Salome performs a beautiful dance for Herod, who, extremely pleased, promises her anything in the world. After consulting her mother, Salome demands the head of John the Baptist.\(^3\) John Keats details a knight’s self-confession after being entranced by a captivating as well as lethal woman in his poem “La Belle Dame sans Merci.” Similar beautiful but dangerous women interfering in the protagonist’s quest exist in the Western literature throughout ages.

Although an interfering woman typically intervenes in the protagonist’s quest as a temptress, she is not always malicious and deadly; sometimes the female character only aims for the companionship and admiration of the hero, even a temporary one. Guided by T. H. Gaster’s study, Malcolm Davies suggests a universal story pattern, “a Fairy Mistress ... lures her mortal lovers into a subterranean (or submarine) palace … whence they cannot escape,” such as the Scottish legend about Thomas the Rhymer and the German legend about Tannhäuser.\(^4\) In

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\(^3\) In Mark 6:21-29, a daughter of Herodias danced before Herod, the daughter’s name is not specified, but she is often identified with Salome.

literature, Thomas the Rhymer encounters the Queen of Elfland under an Eildon tree and follows her to the fairy dominion, where he is well hospitalized as the Queen’s lover and companion but cannot leave. After seven years, Thomas is granted the ability of prophecy and sent back to the Eildon tree. In German legend, Tannhäuser is a knight who visits the Mountain of Lady Venus and sojourns for an entire year because of the beautiful women there. When Tannhäuser finally wins his conscience back and wants to depart, Lady Venus makes every attempt to stop him, including offering herself as his lover, but her temptation could not move him. However, Tannhäuser’s expected forgiveness is not granted by Pope Urban IV in Rome after his confession, which leads him to travel back to the Lady Venus’ mountain and stay there as her lover ever after.

In addition to a fairy longing for a lover, the interfering woman can also serve to be “[an] ambivalent female helper figure who actually hinders the hero at an early stage of his quest.” In a Norwegian version of the three questing brothers, an old hag interferes in the three brothers’ quest of guarding seven foals. While the two older brothers are distracted, the youngest brother resists the allurement and thus wins. The crone is an “ambivalent helper,” who offers “a test or temptation that [the protagonist] must overcome if he is to thrive.” Similarly, in the Homeric

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5 Thomas stays in the Queen of Elfland’s domain for either seven years or three years, depending on the manuscript, which seems to be three days to him.
6 Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “Der Tannhäuser,” in Deutsche Sagen (Berlin: In der Nicolaischen Buchhandlung, 1816), no. 170, 246-247.
Hymn to Apollo, Apollo encounters the nymph Telphusa on his way locating his oracular shrine, who tries to persuade the deity not to build a shrine beside her spring out of a selfish and malevolent motivation, but unexpectedly sends him on to Delphi.

Women frequently interfere in the protagonist’s journey and facilitate the realization of the protagonist’s goal in medieval romance. In Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal, the miserable protagonist encounters two damsels in the forest who lead him to his powerful lover, Tryamour. Tryamour grants Launfal several magic helpers, assists him in winning wealth, and finally helps him become the most desirable knight. Tryamor is similar to Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Kundry in Wagner’s Parsifal, who each initiate a temptation in the early stage of the protagonist’s journey, then serve to promote the protagonist’s overall self-development.

Just as in Western tales, a female figure who interferes in a protagonist’s quest with a certain purpose is very common in classical Chinese literature. It is noteworthy that these interfering women are always granted great beauty, which seems to be very necessary for them to conduct a substantial interference. This significant factor echoes the chivalric identification of beauty as the chief virtue of women. However, the great beauty is not always portrayed as a positive characteristic in traditional China. Since the first dynasty, Xia 夏 (c. 2070-1600 BCE), beautiful women have been blamed as the root reason for the political corruption and the downfall of a state. In The Discourse of the States, Discourses of Jin I 國語·卷七·晉語一, the official Su 蘇吏 cites Moxi 妹喜 and Baosi 褒姒 as intoxicating concubines that facilitate the

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10 Maureen Fries suggested the prime function of Arthurian heroines is to present themselves as a love object, and at the same time their prime virtue expected is beauty, with which they “lure and guide the hero to his destiny.” See Maureen Fries, “From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance,” Arthuriana 4, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 1-18, at 2.
overthrow of the corrupted Xia and West Zhou by keeping the king away from state affairs. In Zuozhuan 左傳, when Shuxiang 叔向 wants to marry a daughter of Wuchen, the Duke of Shen 申公巫臣氏, who is famous for her great beauty, his mother warns him the high hazard of beautiful ladies: “Where there is extreme beauty, there is sure to be extreme wickedness…Since Heaven accumulated so much beauty in her, there must [still] be great ruin to be accomplished by her…Those strange [beautiful] Beings are sufficient to move men [from their principles]; and if virtue and righteousness are not maintained, calamity is sure to come. 甚美必有甚惡…天鐘美於是，將必以是為大有敗也…夫有尤物，足以移人，苟非德義，則必有禍.”\textsuperscript{11} Confucian philosophy does not celebrate beauty as empowerment of women; instead, it considers beauty as potentially dangerous, or even destructive. The long-recorded Chinese saying 紅顏禍水 (hong yan huo shui), which literally means a blushing face is the root of all disasters, could be read as an equivalent of femme fatale.

Because of the restrictions put on the women’s social sphere, the interfering women is framed more and more as an animal spirit in human shape or as a ghost girl in Chinese literary traditions, especially with the development of early forms of Chinese fictional narratives—zhiguai 志怪 (records of the anomalies) and chuanqi 傳奇 (tales of the marvelous).\textsuperscript{12} The

\textsuperscript{11} James Legge, \textit{The Ch‘un Ts‘ew with the Tso Chuen}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. The Chinese Classics 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1893), 724-727.
representative Six Dynasty (220 or 222–589) zhiguai collection, Gan Bao’s 干寶 In Search of the Supernatural 搜神記, includes a story between a fatal fox temptress and a human male. The human hero, Wang Lingxiao 王靈孝, is enchanted by the beautiful fox girl, Azi 阿紫, so much that he not only quits his official duty, but also gradually loses his vitality as a human being and takes the shape of a fox baby. Even though his abnormality is detected and rescued, it takes a while for him to return to a normal state. Similarly, in the sixteenth-century Chinese vernacular novel The Investiture of the Gods 封神演義, by utilizing the body of the gorgeous Daji 娉己, a thousand-year-old vixen spirit, approaches the King Zhou of Shang 商紂王 and successfully hastens the downfall of his kingdom, as instructed by the goddess Nüwa 女媧.

Another well-known example of a beautiful spirit interfering in a human protagonist’s life and bringing him significant predicaments is recorded in Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 Stories to Caution the World 警世通言 (Jingshi tongyan) in the tale “Eternal Prisoner under the Thunder Peak Pagoda 白娘子永鎮雷峰塔 (Bai niangzi yongzhen Leifeita).” In the story, the human protagonist, Xüxuan 許宣, encounters a beautiful lady on his way home and happily gets married to her, but at the same time, he finds himself trapped in a series of legal problems. While the wife, who is actually a snake spirit, is the person committing all the crimes, Xüxuan is left behind by her both consciously and unconsciously to face the lawsuits and therefore humiliated and expelled again and again. The story ends with Xüxuan’s rescue by a Buddhist monk and the eternal imprison of the white lady under the Thunder Peak Pagoda.

However, the interfering female character does not always exert a destructive influence on the protagonist’s life. Sometimes they take the role of a loyal lover and a generous helper, or

they are ready to do so. Both the Six Dynasties (220 or 222–589) narratives “The Ghostly Wedding Nights 駙馬都尉 (Fuma duwei)” and “Lu Chong and His Son by a Ghost 盧充幽婚 (Luchong youhun)” record how a pretty young ghost girl encounters a hero, offers herself as his wife, and is happily accepted. Even though the romance between the human hero and the ghost wife lasts only a few days, both relationships bring the protagonist beneficial outcomes, such as social advancement, wealth, or offspring. Similarly, Shen Jiji 沈既濟 (742-805) portrays a helpful fox-spirit that fulfills every single wish of the protagonist and his friend in Tang chuanqi “Renshi zhuan 任氏傳.” Aware of her alien identity, the fox lady, Renshi 任氏, only expects a temporary union with the protagonist, Zheng 鄭; however, Zheng does not let her give up. Deeply moved by Zheng’s acceptance of her alien status, Renshi loves him wholeheartedly as a virtuous wife and unselfishly helps him achieve economic and social advancement. In “The Dragon King’s Daughter 柳毅傳,” one of the most famous stories in Taiping guangji 太平廣記 (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era), Liu Yi 柳毅 encounters the dragon king’s daughter 龍女 (longnü) on his way home and finds out she is abused terribly by her husband and in-laws. The dragon king’s daughter pleads with him to deliver a letter to her home so that her family could come to rescue her. Receiving the message, the dragon king’s uncle is so irritated that he kills the husband and saves his niece. The dragon king and his family are very grateful to Liu Yi—they offer him countless wealth and the dragon king’s daughter as wife. Later Liu Yi becomes immortal and lives with the dragon king’s daughter happily together.

It is noteworthy that Western and Eastern literature spontaneously include similar elements of the interfering woman—temptation, striking appearance, ambiguous function—but

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the interfering women differ in their ultimate motivation and in the way they achieve their agency. These interesting similarities and shifts inspire me to conduct a comparative study of the interfering women in Western and Eastern tales. In order to produce a study of manageable proportions, I have limited my study to Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian. I have selected these three female characters because of their contradictions and the complexity of the great works of art that they are part of. Neither Morgan le Fay, Kundry, nor Nie Xiaoqian is established as the most admirable and upright character in the story; however, each of them is granted a certain method to make a difference on the surrounding people and to promote the development of the entire plot. They share many qualities in common, such as their analogous temptress role, their mysterious as well as unworldly origin, their extraordinary appearance, and their ambiguous motivations.

One of the most obvious common points is that neither Morgan le Fay, Kundry, nor Nie Xiaoqian belongs to the same social group as the male protagonist of the story. Morgan le Fay sends her agents, the Green Knight and the lady of Hautdesert to test the Round Table Knights, but neither of them is directly affected by the well-being of King Arthur and his men. Even though Morgan le Fay is introduced as King Arthur’s half-sister in some literature, she never gets involved in same social affairs as that of King Arthur. In Wagner’s Parsifal, the protagonist runs into Kundry, who although responsible for revealing significant information regarding Parsifal and his family, is in the point of fact neither related to him nor to the Grail community. Contrarily, Parsifal, with the lineage of a noble chivalric family, is fated to be a part of the Grail world. More importantly, there is even lack of possibility for Kundry to join the Grail society, which is made up exclusively of males. Xiaoqian is introduced as a young and beautiful ghost, who dies at the age of eighteen and lives with other ghost girls thereafter. Ning Caichen 宁采臣,
an ordinary human male, does not know Xiaoqian before their encounter and has no experience in dealing with the supernatural world. There is no clue suggesting a possible connection between Xiaoqian and Ning Caichen before Xiaoqian interferes in Ning Caichen’s life.

If we take a close look at the speeches and behaviors of Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian throughout their respective stories, we see they are full of contradictions. Morgan le Fay is the most contentious character, compared to Xiaoqian and Kundry, yet she comes into our sight as a gentle, harmless, and respectable old lady. It is only toward the end of the poem that she is revealed as the cunning and powerful manipulator behind the whole adventure. She has the supernatural power of changing one’s appearance, but she chooses to show up as a wrinkled old lady and readily foil the fascinating beauty of Bertilak’s wife. According to the Green Knight, Morgan le Fay aims to frighten Queen Guinevere to death and humiliate the Arthurian community; nevertheless, the series of tests initiated by her actually force the Round Table Knights to face their flaws, and in turn, stimulate a revolutionary improvement in Arthur’s court. Considering her well-known fame as a healer, we can reasonably infer that Morgan’s real purpose is to heal the spiritually degenerated Round Table society. It is also interesting that as the ultimate boss and the most powerful character in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Morgan le Fay barely exists in some 35 lines out of the complete 2530 lines of the poem.

The ambiguous elements of Kundry are in no way less mysterious than those of Morgan le Fay. While sometimes she appears as a wild hag, she also participates in the plot as an appealing woman with incredible beauty. Kundry is revealed as the femme fatale who seduces Amfortas and indirectly causes his disgraceful sorrow; she is also the caring helper who sends Amfortas balsam with the hope of alleviating his pain. She provides Parsifal with information about his heritage and the death of his mother, but she also makes use of this information to
confuse and intoxicate him. On one side, Kundry “awaits the knights of the Grail [and utilizes her infernal beauty] to lure them to sinful joys and hell’s damnation;” On the other side, she suffers from a curse because of her inappropriate laugh at Christ’s distress.\(^\text{14}\) While she makes efforts to tempt the Grail Knights, she actually expects to be rejected by a morally faultless knight, who will be able to redeem both her and the Grail community. Kundry’s standpoint and function changes according to the twists of plot and the need of other characters. She joins the epic when a functional character is expected and a missing message is needed; however, it is difficult to locate her motivations and rewards in doing so. It seems that Kundry can either help, serve, or destroy; but she does not get the credits she deserves.

Xiaoqian also demonstrates considerable contradictions. She appears as a beautiful and naïve young girl, who is considered to be a perfect companion for a hard-working scholar in his leisure time; but she is, in reality, a female ghost and initially comes to the hero to suck his blood. At the same time, Xiaoqian is not constructed as a wicked villain without conscience; with the development of the plot, Xiaoqian is revealed as a pathetic victim, who is manipulated by a more powerful demon and therefore reluctantly commits crimes. The way Xiaoqian treats Ning Caichen is sharply different from the way she handles other scholars. While Xiaoqian seduced several scholars and murdered them, she respects Ning Caichen and follows him home with the hope of accompanying him as his consort. She teaches him how to save his life with a swordsman’s help and explains how to get rid of the demon. Likewise, Ning rescues her out of the demon’s control and introduces her to the human world. It is hard to tell whether Xiaoqian is

a devil or an angel, or if she is an evildoer or victim. But her contradictory character gives her complexity and charm.

Although Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian possess many parallels, they are very different interfering women. Above all, they have diverse ways of accessing power. Morgan le Fay is a mighty sorceress with a half-human and half-fairy bloodline. She possesses considerable power and does not need to turn to anybody for help. Kundry is an ordinary woman with unusual experience. But she is also a pitiable woman who suffers from a curse. She draws support from Klingsor, a black magician, to get access to omniscient knowledge and the ability of shapeshifting, but at the same time, she needs to follow his orders to scheme against the Grail knights. On the contrary, Xiaoqian is a female ghost that falls into the hands of a more powerful demon. She crosses the boundary between the living and the dead to tempt scholars as instructed. The diverse identities of Morgan, Kundry, and Xiaoqian predetermine the different ways they adopt to reach their goals. As a sorceress of great influence, Morgan le Fay is free to achieve her aims in any way she prefers. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan does not implement her plan personally, nor does she show her true colors. She hides behind the scenes and deploys a couple of agents to carry out the whole scheme for her. Therefore, there is very limited insight revealed by Morgan herself; most of the information about her comes from her agents. This also leads to an ambiguous or even paradoxical projection of her motivation and genuine purpose. Compared to the powerful Morgan le Fay, Kundry’s strength lies in her extensive knowledge of Parsifal and her shapeshifting capability. Kundry transforms to an astonishing beauty and seduces Parsifal by offering “the first kiss of love, [which is also] a last token of a mother’s blessing.” Once her temptation fails, Kundry unveils her miserable destiny and begs Parsifal to

show his sympathy in the form of love. As a female ghost controlled by a more powerful demon, Xiaoqian is quite short of resources compared to Morgan le Fay and Kundry. Xiaoqian’s most potent weapon is her innocent beauty. So, she lures her targets with her beauty and fortune. Xiaoqian never tries to confront them or defeat them by using physical power.

In addition to their various identities and origins, the incentives for Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian to interfere in the protagonist’s quest differ essentially. Morgan le Fay takes the initiative in leading Gawain through the whole adventure. The Green Knight reveals that Morgan le Fay designs a range of tests to give the Round Table Knights a lesson because their great reputation as perfect knights does not convince her. Although Morgan le Fay does not participate in the tests herself, her dominant role in the whole process cannot be denied. She stimulates everything to happen and attains her objective as expected. Kundry’s motivation is very difficult to identify. She serves Klingsor and follows his order to prevent the Grail Knights from fulfilling their quests. In the meanwhile, she anticipates the Grail Knights redeeming her and to releasing her out of her sufferings. She intervenes in Parsifal’s expedition partially out of Klingsor’s despotic power and partly out of her own will. However, it is very hard to define what she gains in engaging herself in this business, the only apparent reward—her redemption, loses its ground in the face of her death at the end. Xiaoqian is a reluctant seducer and does not commit murders to satisfy her interests. Whereas she is aware of her guilt, she has no choice except to obey the demon’s command to tempt men and suck their souls. Because she is not a wicked person by nature, she repents of her sinful deeds and changes her standpoint when her target proves to be an upright man of honor.

Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian are all involved in the motif of redemption, but they play assorted roles in the process of salvation. Rather than a pathetic female waiting to be
forgiven and saved, Morgan le Fay functions as the redeemer in the poem. She is the hidden healer who sends an ambassador to teach the Round Table Knights a lesson and motivates them to reexamine their moral condition, which in turn helps them to achieve self-improvement. She has the foresight to realize the potential dangers of the Round Table community’s moral deterioration and incites them to make it up in advance. Kundry plays a very special role in the redemption of the opera. On one hand, she expects to be redeemed by the appointed Grail knight; on the other hand, she contributes to the salvation and regeneration of the Grail society. It is noteworthy that most of Parsifal’s fundamental growth occurs during his interaction with Kundry. He learns to sympathize by kissing her and proves the purity of his mind by resisting her temptation. It is rational to say Parsifal cannot accomplish his quest without Kundry’s interference; nevertheless, Kundry’s outsider status never changes throughout the epic. Although Kundry is redeemed at the end, her redemption comes at the price of her life. Compared to Morgan le Fay and Kundry, both of whom are somewhat powerful and contribute to other’s salvation, Xiaoqian is a sinful yet helpless ghost waiting to be redeemed. Ning Caichen helps her to escape from the control of the powerful demon and assists her in integrating into human society. Compared to Kundry, Xiaoqian is a lucky one because she is forgiven and accepted by her target community. More importantly, she is allowed to regain her vitality and get married with Ning Caichen, the husband she chooses out of her free will.

Another critical reason spurring me to focus my dissertation on Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian is that they are all very charming characters with full possibilities of discussion and interpretation. Besides, although they are all interfering female characters constructed by male
authors, they convey very different female voices in the face of patriarchal ideology. As a feminist character, Morgan le Fay demonstrates strong empowerment in 1) her control of the entire plot; 2) her extensive employment of human mediums in both genders; 3) her success in step by step achieving her agency. She steps out of the patriarchal assigned domain and challenges conventional patriarchal values. Morgan le Fay confronts the dominant Round Table community as an outsider, shakes the superiority of Round Table knights and penetrates into the power structure of the patriarchy.

Kundry, the only female character in Parsifal, plays an indispensable role in guiding Parsifal through his spiritual development; however, Wagner’s patriarchal agenda deprives her of a sound motivation and consistent selfhood. As an artistic tool Wagner adopts to meet the extensive needs of plot development, Kundry incorporates the functions of several necessary roles. In addition to the assigned responsibilities of a fatal temptress and a hideous hag, Kundry also functions as the “villain” that Parsifal needs to struggle with and conquer on the early stage of his quest. She is at the same time the “donor” who enlightens Parsifal emotionally and prepares him for growth in compassion. Since she helps Parsifal several times in his quest, she is also what Propp calls the “supernatural helper.” Besides, Wagner refers to the archetype of the loathly damsel and a femme fatale and blends in a number of characters in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival to finalize his construction of Kundry. Kundry hints at Sigune—

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16 Even though the identity of pearl poet cannot be confirmed, it is widely believed that he is a male. Please see Simon Armitage, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Documentary, directed and produced by Tim Dunn (2009; London: BBC Four), Broadcast; Pu Songling, the compiler of “Nie Xiaoqian,” is believed to project his ideology in his character construction.
18 Propp, Morphology, 39.
19 Propp, Morphology, 10.
Parzival’s cousin, the Grail messenger, the beautiful Orgeluse de Logrois, Trevrizent—Parzival’s mentor, his mother, and even Condwiramurs. However, Kundry is neither bestowed the opportunity to truly participate in the narrative or allowed to undergo the necessary self-development as a major character, she is utilized as a vehicle by Wagner to meet the plot twists requirement and is abandoned when her mission is over.

Nie Xiaoqian could be labeled neither as advocate nor opponent of patriarchal ideology. The setting of her appearance and personality reflects the patriarchal definition of an ideal female, who is gentle, subordinate, beautiful, and pure. Despite her feminine side, she demonstrates a strong motivation and determination in achieving her agency. In order to gain a legitimate status in the mainstream human society, Xiaoqian fully exerts her manipulative nature by making use of Ning Caichen’s compassion and affection. Nie Xiaoqian is a revolutionary ghost character because she overthrows the doomed fate of being expelled after a short union between the human scholar and alien woman; however, her subjectivity is compromised because her ultimate goal is to become a wife, the typical role that patriarchy assigns to women. Considering the social reality in which the story is set, we cannot blame Xiaoqian for her reconciliation with the patriarchal dominance, since that is the best possible outlet for an alien girl to integrate into the human world. Besides, Xiaoqian does gain a considerable domestic power within the household sphere, which is not visible but matters significantly to any single woman in that era.

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This dissertation carries out a comparative study between Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian and make progress in the current understanding of interfering women in western and Chinese tales. Starting with the close textual analysis, this dissertation compares the analogous female figures in the light of corresponding cultures and social background. I examine the differences in the male author’s treatments of interfering women and explore the reasons behind these variations. Guided by feminist criticism, especially Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray’s theories, this dissertation analyzes various female voices expressed in respective works and interprets the message each author wants to convey by constructing their figures in that certain way. By referring to Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, I detect the functions of these interfering women in specific textual context and identify the ultimate meaning for their existence in narratives. My analysis also concentrates on the assorted manners these interfering women adopt to realize the possible empowerment and to achieve their agency in the light of different cultural but similar patriarchal domain.

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the comparative study of interfering women on which my dissertation focuses. This chapter begins with defining interfering women and tracing their places in the literary tradition of the Western and Eastern literature. A justification for selecting Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian as key figures to conduct this comparative study ensues. It then introduces the methodology and theories this dissertation adopts and concludes with a brief chapter summary.

Chapter two examines the related and representative scholarly reading on Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian. It also addresses the significant meaning of my research and dissertation.
The third chapter concentrates on Morgan le Fay’s empowerment as a female character in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*. Morgan le Fay proves her empowerment and subjectivity by employing the Green Knight/Bertilak and the lady of Hautdesert to operationalize her agency. This chapter respectively examines the motivations, behaviors, strategies, and influences of Morgan’s two agents. While the lady of Hautdesert approaches Gawain as a typical temptress, she is actually an intelligent tester, who is not only aware of her gender privilege, but also skillful at utilizing chivalric code and Gawain’s psychological weakness to achieve her goal. In the guise of a traditional gentle and innocent woman, the lady of Hautdesert overthrows the patriarchal definition of the female by taking over men’s role and responsibility, which is signaled by her initiatives in the bedroom scene and Gawain’s acceptance of her green girdle. Morgan le Fay’s involvement in the high business of Arthur’s court via the Green Knight/Bertilak demonstrates her empowerment beyond the assigned female domain. Her interference is justified by Gawain’s failure in the tests given by the Green Knight/Bertilak and his wife, which require a spiritual balance between Gawain’s natural impulse and the chivalric virtues. Through the Green Knight/Bertilak, Morgan le Fay challenges the patriarchal society’s superiority over marginalized social populations, teaches them a lesson of the genuine chivalry, and in turn stimulates radical improvements in the patriarchal community as a healer.

The fourth chapter examines Kundry, an interfering woman similarly from Arthurian literature but projecting a very different attitude toward the patriarchal ideology. As the only female in Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal*, Kundry challenges the patriarchal dominance by overthrowing the idea of becoming a mere wife or a love object; however, she endorses patriarchal superiority with her voluntary service to the Grail knights, her lack of subjectivity, her outsider status throughout the epic, and her unexpected death at the end. As a mixture of
several characters and archetypes, Kundry inevitably demonstrates considerable inconsistencies in her behaviors and motivations. When she appears as a wild crone, she is the most pious servant for the Grail community and she makes every endeavor to fulfill her duty. However, when she shapeshifts to a gorgeous belle, she is the *femme fatale* who leads to the destruction and humiliation of Amfortas and endangers Parsifal. Her transformation between a hideous hag and a beautiful maid could be read as a reversed version of the loathly damsel story, in which the protagonist’s rejection is expected as the single possibility for disenchantment. By taking over responsibilities of several characters and emerging at every necessary moment, Kundry functions as “the villain,” “the donor,” and “the helper” for the entire plot.\(^{21}\) However, the Grail community, which implies patriarchal society, neither appreciates her assistance nor acknowledges her contribution as the true redeemer in their regeneration. Without undergoing much physical and spiritual development, Kundry is excluded by the narrative as an outsider from the beginning to the end.

Chapter five shifts its attention to Nie Xiaoqian, a representative interfering woman in Chinese supernatural tale. Pu Songling’s “Nie Xiaoqian” presents a typical female alien who intervenes in the human protagonist’s quest with specific motivation and exerts considerable influence. While Xiaoqian appears as a typical *femme fatale* in her first encounter with the hero, her interference actually helps the protagonist prove his nobility and realize his self-fulfillment. As an artistic creation to meet the patriarchal fantasy of an ideal woman, Xiaoqian combines a concubine’s beauty and gentleness and a wife’s virtues and elegance. However, she should not be interpreted as a submissive female character that celebrates the patriarchal oppression. In the point of fact, Xiaoqian is a powerful and manipulative character who achieves her agency with

\(^{21}\) Propp, *Morphology*, 27, 39, 10.
progressive strategies. Her clear subjectivity and empowerment are exhibited in 1) the full contradictions in her characterization and identity; 2) her clear and developing motivations; 3) her successful integration into the human society as a ghost girl; 4) her realization of a free choice of husband and a happy ending in her marriage, which is extremely unusual for a union between an alien and human. 5) the positive influence she exerts on her destiny, on the hero’s life, and on the general society.

Chapter six inspects the development of women’s gender consciousness in the film adaptations of “Nie Xiaoqian.” I have this chapter particularly devoted to the film interpretation of Xiaoqian because film directors make dramatic shifts when presenting her female voice in their works, while Morgan le Fay and Kundry are read similarly in later visual adaptations. “Nie Xiaoqian” has been adapted into film respectively in 1960, 1987, 1990, 1991, and 2011. Based on the core theme of their films, directors choose different elements of the story to concentrate their narrative on, ranging from a romance between a pitiful ghost girl and an upright scholar to a general social concern toward the more and more corrupted social reality. However, all of these film adaptations miss Xiaoqian’s empowerment in the domestic sphere and oversimplify the profound meaning of her interference. By examining those films one after another, this chapter discusses how Xiaoqian’s individuality is interpreted in these films and how the women’s gender consciousness is developed via a similar textual context throughout ages.

In the last chapter, the conclusion, I compare the different arrangement of Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian as similar interfering characters and present my analysis. While they all interfere in the protagonist’s quest as a disturbing power, they aim for different social areas behind their initial temptation. Morgan le Fay challenges Round Table Knights’ patriarchal superiority and spurs them to make a moral improvement. Kundry, on the one hand, provides the
Grail knights with necessary help; on the other hand, she hinders them from their heavenly goal, the Grail. Both Morgan le Fay and Kundry aims to exert an influence in the protagonist’s social activities, but Xiaoqian is not interested in the hero’s high business—Ning Caichen, the main character, is already an intelligent and morally upright character at the beginning of the story; therefore, much self-improvement is not necessary. Xiaoqian’s majority attention goes to the domestic sphere. Compared to Morgan le Fay and Kundry, who engage themselves in affecting the hero with their interference, Xiaoqian achieves her goal in a cooperative manner. She invites Ning Caichen to join her personal affair and makes him a contributing factor in gaining her a legitimate status in his family. Xiaoqian’s interference introduces a new factor—women’s domestic power—which is not much addressed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Parsifal*. Even though Xiaoqian’s domestic influence is often overlooked in criticism, it deserves a careful examination, because it renders women a hidden power in addition to the conventional public empowerment, which is accessible to both genders.
CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE REVIEW

Although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Parsifal*, and “Nie Xiaoqian” are from different times and composed in different languages, they enjoy a similar enduring popularity among readers and scholars. Literary critics start from multiple perspectives, employ different theories and methodologies, and consult various social and economic information to interpret these works. Among all scholarships, many studies are devoted to Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian. In order to provide a clear foundation for my dissertation, I will examine related and essential readings of Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian in this chapter.

Because of her long history and widespread fame in Celtic myths and Arthurian legends, Morgan le Fay is not unfamiliar to readers and critics. However, not all scholars acknowledge and appreciate the unconventional way the pearl poet presents Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Edith Whitehurst Williams remarks that only barely 35 lines out of the complete 2530 lines of the poem are devoted to her, but she is supposed to be the factual designer and instigator—the most important and influential figure of the whole adventure. More importantly, Williams adds, more than half of those 35 lines occur after the Green Knight confesses and reveals Morgan’s true identity. While some scholars believe that the poet elaborately and cleverly designs this arrangement, other academic researchers take it as a flaw, which should not exist in such a brilliant work.

Many literary critics, represented by George Lyman Kittredge and James R. Hulbert, are suspicious about the poet’s unprepared arrangement of Morgan le Fay as an explanation for

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They point out that Morgan’s motivation “for to assay þe surquidrê, / ȝif hit [þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table] soth were… / For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe [for the purpose of putting [the Round Table’s richly famed knights] pride to the test … And to goad Guinevere to a grievous death]” is too ambiguous and unconvincing for such an intricate adventure.24 “Every reader,” says Kittredge, “finds [the object assigned for Bercilak’s visit to court] unsatisfactory. It is a weak spot in the superb English romance.”25 Kittredge indicates that Morgan is very likely just an “intrusion,” which is artificially added to make this poem involved more closely into the Arthurian legends.26 Albert B. Friedman deciphers Morgan le Fay as the numen of a dea ex machina, who provides a convenient justification for the whole story.27 According to Friedman, “the old woman [Morgan le Fay] functions solely as a foil to enhance the beauty of Gawain’s temptress.”28

Denver E. Baughan holds a very different viewpoint. Friedman summarizes Baughan’s position where he argues that “Morgan’s presence in the poem […] is actually an ingenious device for giving thematic integrity to the poem.”29 According to him, although the immediate


26 Kittredge, A Study of Gawain, 131.

27 Numen of a dea ex machina originated as ‘deus ex machina’ from a Latin translation, which refers to a literary/artistic device used to solve apparently irresolvable situations, most of the time by divine intervention. For Morgan le Fay is adopted as the numen of a dea ex machina in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, see Friedman, “Morgan le Fay,” 260-274.

28 Friedman, “Morgan le Fay,” 274.

outcome of the Green Knight’s visit to Arthur’s court does not appear to be completely satisfying, “a high purpose of [Morgan le Fay] has been realized in Gawain’s lapse from strict virtue.” Considering Morgan’s traditional role and her considerable reputation as a healer, Baughan advocates Morgan’s genuine identity as a healer or even redeemer of the Round Table community: “except for her enmity toward Guinevere … Morgan would send Bercilak to purge and heal the court of its moral corruptness.”

After tracing back into the possible presentations of Morgan le Fay in primitive Celtic myths as well as Irish and Welsh folklore, Edith Whitehurst Williams concludes that Morgan le Fay is an archetypal “trickster” figure according to the definition provided by Carl Gustav Jung. Morgan embraces essential conflicting characteristics of a typical trickster: “violence opposed to healing; beauty against ugliness; sexual wantonness against fidelity; a goddess with human passions.” However, the destructive side, which Morgan shows in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, seems not match her ultimate aim of healing the morally corrupted Arthurian Knights. With regard to this inconsistency, Laura Hibbard Loomis suggests the poet divides Morgan into two figures in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:

… The splitting of Morgain’s personality into two selves in the Vulgate Lancelot. The author of GGK, apparently familiar with this older dichotomy, has effectively contrasted the goddess, grown

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30 Friedman, “Morgan le Fay,” 260.
31 Baughan, “The Role of Morgan le Fay,” 251.
32 Williams, “Morgan la Fée,” 38.
33 Williams, “Morgan la Fée,” 40.
old and wrinkled, with the young beauty who is at once Morgain’s
other self and agent, but who has also a personality of her own.\textsuperscript{34}

Loomis remarks the high possibility that the poet presents Morgan le Fay in two figures:
the ugly hag Morgan herself and the young and beautiful temptress who is introduced as
Bertilak’s wife. In this sense, the two female figures altogether play the role of Morgan le Fay,
which is supposed to be performed solely by Morgan in the first place.

As the only female character in Richard Wagner’s \textit{Parsifal}, Kundry attracts considerable
attention from scholars and commentators. Derrick Everett suggests Kundry’s switch between
two appearances could be read as a reverse loathly damsel story, “Instead of the loathly damsel
becoming a beautiful Goddess, the beautiful girl becomes an ugly creature who pours scorn on
the Quester for his failure.”\textsuperscript{35} Everett observes \textit{Parsifal} comprises many essential elements of a
typical loathly damsel story: a symbolic kiss from the heroine, the hero’s traveling to the edge of
the other world, and the preparation for being a king by the heroine.\textsuperscript{36} As a character with
comprehensive characteristics, Kundry appears at every critical moment and provides the Grail
community with information as well as assistance and stimulates its redemption and perfection.

According to Williams, Kundry is constructed to meet the extensive needs of plot
development; therefore she “serves as a mirror for all who encounter her.”\textsuperscript{37} As an outsider,
Kundry “suffers throughout the drama.”\textsuperscript{38} Although Kundry’s salvation finally comes, she dies

\textsuperscript{34} Laura Hibbard Loomis, “Gawain and the Green Knight,” in \textit{Arthurian Literature in the Middle
535.
\textsuperscript{35} Derrick Everett, “An Introduction to Richard Wagner’s Kundry” last modified April 17, 2018.
\textsuperscript{36} Everett, “An Introduction.”
\textsuperscript{37} Williams, “Morgan la Fée,” 23.
\textsuperscript{38} Williams, “Morgan la Fée,” 23.
unexpectedly right after. Richard Drake Mohr interprets Kundry’s death as “a representation of a
closure and completion of a valuable masculine world, in which, like a gay marriage, women are
excluded but not thereby degraded or used.”39 Barry Emslie points out that there is no male
sacrifice in Parsifal, “the female figure liberates the male hero [and dies at the end]...[While]
Amfortas can forgo his menstrual torment and recover his virginity, [this] option ... is not open
to the woman.”40 Emslie argues the Wagner’s “real—though hidden—agenda is a rationale for
masculine sexual and social freedom without loss of the dominant male’s high moral and social
status.”41 Robert W. Gutman and Paul Lawrence Rose read Kundry’s appearance as Semitic or
even Jewish.42 Gutman suggests Wagner’s unfair treatment of Kundry implies his anti-Semitic
religious view.43 According to Gutman, “the Grail Knights represent a society of Aryan elite;
Amfortas is mankind fallen through the pollution of blood; Kundry and Klingsor symbolize
elements of racial degeneration.”44 Barry Millington observes Wagner does not limit the
religious factor in the realm of Christianity by including the Holy Grail and the bleeding Spear;
he also incorporates Schopenhauerian-Buddhist concepts of the renunciation in *Parsifal*.45

41 Emslie, “Woman as Image,” 112.
It is not the first time for Wagner to embrace the redemption motif in his works. Robert Raphael remarks Wagner has already presented the idea—redemption through love—in his Der Fliegende Holländer and Tristan und Isolde.\footnote{Robert Raphael, “The Redemption from Love in Wagner’s ‘Tristan und Isolde’,” Monatshefte 55, no. 3 (March 1963): 113-121, at 113.} Scholars employ theories of Nietzsche, Jung, and Lacan to analyze the genuine meaning Wagner tries to imply behind Kundry’s salvation. Slavoj Žižek suggests two possible ways of understanding Kundry: the conventional one refers to Lacan’s thesis that “woman is a symptom of man.”\footnote{Slavoj Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 185.} Among a variety of interpretations, Weininger’s explanation that woman is the materialization of man's sin represents the opinions of the majority.\footnote{Slavoj Žižek, “Rossellini: Woman as Symptom of Man,” October 54, (Autumn 1990): 18-44, at 21.} According to him, as an embodiment of man’s sin, the woman is the root for all sufferings and moral degeneration of men. Therefore, the only possibility for a man to stay away from distress is to keep his mind honorable and resist his carnal desires. Elisabeth Bronfen suggests Kundry functions as “a disturbing female power” in Parsifal’s quest to the Grail by echoing Catherine Clément’s argument.\footnote{Elisabeth Bronfen, “Kundry’s Laughter,” New German Critique, no. 69 Richard Wagner (Autumn 1996): 147-161, at 151; see also Catherine Clément, L’Opéra ou la défaite de la femme (Paris: Grasset, 1979), 69.} Parsifal has to prove his qualification for the sacred mission of regenerating the Grail community by successfully resisting Kundry’s temptation. Another reading reverses the first one by referring to the saying that “Man exists only through woman qua his symptom.”\footnote{Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative, 185.} This point of view suggests the subject will lose its ground at the same time the symptom dissolves. Barry Emslie and other scholars interpret Kundry as the true and disguised redeemer in Wagner’s Parsifal.\footnote{Emslie, “Woman as Image,” 121.} According to them, Kundry redeems Parsifal by

rendering him knowledge as well as potency to renouncing his sexual enjoyment and in turn helps him to achieve his goal.

“Nie Xiaoqian” is a particularly beloved story in Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異, which has been adapted into movies and TV dramas for multiple times in last half of century.\(^{52}\) As a typical love story compiled by a male author in Qing dynasty 清朝 (1644-1912), “Nie Xiaoqian” projects Chinese literati’s world version, their ideal lifestyle, and their expectation for a promising future in the traditional society. Chinese scholars are convinced that even though not physically strong and powerful, they are capable of making a difference by using their knowledge, intelligence, and personal charisma. The educated class look forward to being rewarded for their hard work and virtuous personality by a young and beautiful spouse along with glorifying social advancement. As Zhang Renrang 張稔穰 and Li Yongchang 李永昶 suggest, this theme is fully represented in “Nie Xiaoqian.”\(^ {53}\)

The love story between a scholar and a ghost or fox girl is far from uncommon in classical Chinese literature, but most of these unions between a human being and a supernatural creature cannot avoid the destiny of separation at the end.\(^ {54}\) “Nie Xiaoqian” enjoys continuing popularity because it is not only a love story between a guilty ghost and a human scholar with an unusual happy ending, it also shows a possibility for an alien woman to “progressive

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\(^ {54}\) Please see “Renshi zhuan 任氏傳” and “Xin shisi niang 辛十四娘” for love stories between a human male and a supernatural female, who live together happily for a short period but are forced to separate at the end.
[reintegrate] into the human community” and be completely accepted. Sheng Ruiyu notices that there is a noticeable change in Xiaoqian’s eating habits, which implies her gradual transformation from a ghost into a human being. When she just arrives at Ning’s home, Xiaoqian “never ate nor drank.” After six months, she “began to sip a bit of congee.” She behaves herself more and more like an ordinary woman. This progress stimulates her acceptance into the human world. Sheng Ruiyu points out that Nie Xiaoqian also plays an active role in her redemption by overcoming her disgraceful past and proving her kind-hearted nature. Allan Barr remarks Xiaoqian makes herself indispensable to Ning’s family by demonstrating satisfactory household ability, which is “the requisite qualification for membership in society.” Besides, Xiaoqian convinces Ning’s mother that the marriage between Ning and her will not hurt Ning’s well-being and the continuation of his family bloodline. The tolerance and love of Ning as well as his mother along with all Xiaoqian’s efforts finally “establish her as a legitimate member of the household and justify her final release.”

Based on Sigmund Freud’s and Jung’s theory, Fan Lipei concluded the traditional Chinese love story between a human and a ghost reveals four kinds of agenda: 1) “pursuit of

61 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 429.
perpetual love; 2) punishment of the lewd man; 3) awakening of feminist consciousness; 4) man’s aesthetical standard towards female.’’ 62 While both Fan and Anthony Yu read Xiaoqian’s brave pursuit of love and her “active and successful developing relation with her benefactor and his mother” as a celebration of women’s accomplishment, Yu remarks, “the author’s achievement is hardly revolutionary.” 63 Yu points out that Xiaoqian’s subordinate status remains unchanged throughout the story, he states: “Nieh Hsiao-ch’ien’s restoration to life coincides with her re-introduction into a society in which all values and hierarchies remain intact. She left the clutches of the demon only to become the model subservient wife and daughter-in-law.” 64 In this sense, Xiaoqian’s existence mainly serves to demonstrate the nobility and heroism of Ning Caichen.

The criticism on Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Nie Xiaoqian has already gained fruitful results. However, studies on Sir Gawain and The Green Knight and Parsifal concentrate more on the plot’s analog analysis and tracing the origin of the characters within the Arthurian tradition; scholarship on “Nie Xiaoqian” primarily revolves around textual interpretation from feminist and psychological perspectives. Literary critics seldom reach out for literature from a faraway culture to do comparative research. Since Richard Wagner borrows ideas from Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival and Chrétien de Troyes’ Perceval, the story of the Grail, both of which fall within the scope of the Arthurian literature (so does Sir Gawain and the Green Knight), some scholars examine these two works in their studies and even observe parallels between Morgan le

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64 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’”, 429.
Fay and Kundry. Nonetheless, there are rarely, if ever, literary scholars who include classical Chinese strange tales when examining *Parsifal* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Therefore, by incorporating an alien woman in traditional Chinese tale, a temptress from German opera, and a sorceress of medieval romance, my study will bring in new blood for the present interpretations of interfering women and provide future research with new possibilities.
CHAPTER 3. WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT: MORGAN LE FAY

As a gem of chivalric romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has won countless popularity throughout centuries. Among all criticism of this story, the position of Morgan le Fay has been one of the central concerns. Morgan le Fay appears to be a nameless insignificant foil character until line 2350 of this 2530-line poem. Although her humble appearance serves to highlight the lady of Hautdesert’s beauty, she otherwise accompanies the main characters silently.

Despite her low profile, however, the Green Knight introduces her as the initiator of the whole plot and the designer of all tests toward the end of this poem. The result is that the Green Knight’s explanation and Morgan le Fay’s empowerment are not convincing according to many critics.\(^6^5\) For these critics, despite her importance, she does not truly participate in the story. Kittredge represents the scholars who hold a negative opinion toward the legitimation of Morgan’s empowerment: “Every reader finds [Morgan as the one instigates the whole story (the object assigned for the Green Knight’s visit to court)] unsatisfactory.”\(^6^6\) Hulbert considers the Green Knight’s explanation as “one element of feebleness and inconsistency” in this well-constructed tale.\(^6^7\) The explanation is one that seems to be sensible superficially but is inherently unreasonable. It was almost certainly added by some late redactor familiar with Morgain’s horn and mantle tests.”\(^6^8\) Albert Friedman indicated that Morgan le Fay’s “effective life in the poem is

\(^6^5\) Many critics, including Kittredge, Hulbert, Friedman, etc., have expressed their disapproval of Morgan le Fay’s role as the one behind everything in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For details, please see Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain*, Hulbert, “Syr Gawayn,” Friedman, “Morgan le Fay.”


\(^6^7\) Hulbert, “Syr Gawayn,” 454.

\(^6^8\) Hulbert, “Syr Gawayn,” 454.
local, restricted to Bertilak’s account...[and the poet] fails to convince us Morgan is organic to the poem.”

Friedman deciphered Morgan le Fay as the *numen of a dea ex machina*, who provides a convenient justification for the whole story. All the foregoing critics negate Morgan le Fay’s empowerment. They see her as a later addition to the story which was added to function as an outlet for the inconsistency and unreasonableness of this story.

Contrary to Kittredge and Hulbert, I am convinced of Morgan le Fay’s legitimate existence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and I echo Baughan’s justification of Morgan le Fay as the healer of the Grail community. Although her role in the story and her purpose are not revealed until the very end of this poem, Morgan le Fay always works in the shadows of earlier Arthurian romances such as the Prose Lancelot (and Malory, for that matter). She is heard of but not seen. Her activities, often to thwart Arthurian knights, give her agency, and her successes establish her as an essential and powerful female character.

By introducing Morgan le Fay at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the trigger for all happenings, and reiterating everything from an insider’s perspective, as the narrator does, confirms Morgan le Fay’s secret power, which is not recognized and even denied by the patriarchy, but actually exists and matters significantly. Morgan le Fay’s empowerment is not only exhibited by her deployment of various agents—both female and male—but also proved by the fact that she steps out of the patriarchal assigned domain and breaks the gender stereotype of the passive mother or daughter. Without losing her femininity, Morgan le Fay interferes with the dominant Round Table community. Although traditionally Arthur’s half-sister, by the time

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70 See Baughan, “The Role of Morgan Le Fay,” 241-251.
the *Gawain* poet wrote, she had a long tradition as an outsider. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, she challenges conventional patriarchal values, shakes the gender superiority of men, and penetrates into the power structure of the patriarchy.

Even though Morgan le Fay does not participate in the series of happenings in person, she achieves agency by employing and deploying other agents, including the green knight/Bertilak and the lady of Hautdesert. Laura Hibbard Loomis suggests the poet divides Morgan le Fay into two figures: “The splitting of Morgain’s personality into two selves [occurs] in the Vulgate Lancelot. The author of GGK, apparently familiar with this older dichotomy, has effectively contrasted the goddess, grown old and wrinkled, with the young beauty who is at once Morgain’s other self and agent, but who has also a personality of her own.”

In order to understand Morgan le Fay’s motivation and role in this romance, we need to examine the behaviors, motivations, and influences of her envoys. Morgan le Fay employs characters of both genders to fulfill her goal in the story. While the green knight/Bertilak interacts with the protagonist, Gawain, mainly within the social circumstance, the lady of Hautdesert approaches Gawain as an interfering woman and attempts to instigate a romantic relationship with him. The lady of Haudestert’s progress toward Gawain echoes the typical strategy adopted by a seducer in a medieval romance: to charm with beauty, to invite with innocence, and to please with admiration. Different from other single as well as influential love baits in the chivalric story, who could offer power, honor, and themselves, the lady of Hautdesert is already married. But her married status seems not undermine her attractiveness—she

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71 Loomis, “*Gawain and the Green Knight,*” 535.
72 Maureen Fries pointed out that few Arthurian female heroes are married, she continued: “marriage is either absent from or (at most) incidental to the literary career of the career of the female counter-hero as well.” See Fries, “From the Lady to the Tramp,” 1-18.
successfully presents herself as an honorable and elegant lady who deserves admiration and
deserve to be treated with chivalry. In Gawain’s eyes, the lady is innocent, beautiful, and even
more adorable than Queen Guinevere, the ideal beauty in the Arthurian world: “[h]o watz þe
fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre, / [a]nd of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer. / And
wener þen Wenore, as þe wyȝe þoȝt.” [in her face far the fairest and finest of all, in her body and
bearing the best on the earth. She was goodlier than Guinevere, Gawain believed].

The following detailed description of the lady not only justifies Gawain’s preference toward her, but
also opens up a window to Gawain’s inner voice and feeling.

Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere, …
Kerchofes of þat on, wyth mony cler perlez;
Hir brest and hir bryȝt þrote bare displayed,
Schon schyrer þen snaue þat schedez on hillez;

[The young beauty seemed blushing and bath in pink light, …
The one had a headdress hung with fine pearls,
And her beauteous breast and bare neck were exposed,
Where they shone like the snow as it shimmers on hills.]

Gawain neglects the potential danger of allowing the Lady of Hautdesert near him. He
does not suspect he is stepping into a web of intrigue in the name of love. As a widely
recognized knight, the adolescent Gawain is reaching maturity both physically and spiritually.

73 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, trans. Casey Finch (Berkeley: University of California
74 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 252-253.
75 Simon Armitage suggested that Gawain is at his teenage years and does not have much
experience with women yet when the story happens; for more details, see Simon Armitage, Sir
He inevitably perceives the other gender from a typical male perspective and focuses his attention on evaluating her as a love object. He lets his patriarchal arrogance lead his actions and fails to identify the lady of Hautdesert as an equal individual who thinks independently and holds a specific motivation and purpose for all her behaviors.

Her incomparable beauty makes the lady of Hautdesert privileged in her interaction with Gawain, and she uses her physical advantage to attack his human nature. She adopts the classical way that a charming woman approaches an inexperienced man—manifesting her beauty and interest with the purpose of provoking similar feeling and affection in return. She pretends to be an innocent and proper court lady who is amazed by Gawain’s heroic adventure stories and wants to learn more about this reputed knight. Her confession invites Gawain to come closer and encourage him to please her as what a knight typically does to his lady:

   Bot þe burde hym blessed, and ßi þis skyl’ sayde:
   ‘So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
   And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
   Couth not lyȝtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
   Bot he had craued a cosse bi his courtaysye.’

   [But she bountifully blessed that bold man and said
   ‘Such a good knight as Gawain is granted to be–
   For his courtesy called in all courts the best man–
   Could not linger so long with a lady nearby,

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_Gawain and the Green Knight_, Documentary, directed and produced by Tim Dunn (2009; London: BBC Four), Broadcast.
Without claiming a kiss, as is courteous and right.’]76

The lady of Hautdesert emphasizes her admiration for Gawain and repeats how honorable and mighty she hears about Gawain. Her words glorify Gawain’s sense of patriarchal superiority, which not only puts down his guards, but also secures his confidence in his control over their encounters. By pretending to be an admirer and flattering Gawain’s ego, the lady of Hautdesert carries out several tests on Gawain without invoking his suspicion.

During a series of interaction, the lady of Hautdesert never put aside her role as a civilized court lady. She claims she comes to Gawain for a lesson of courtly love. What she suggests by courtly love here revolves around erotic desire.77 But it is hard to argue that she reduces love to sex. Even though her presence as a married woman suggests an adulterous affair, she is portrayed as an alluring and attractive medieval heroine, who has her beauty as her primary virtue.78 She does not seem to be a threatening creature associated with a moral breakdown. This feature differentiates the lady of Hautdesert from a typical evil seducer in the Arthurian legend—she conducts her seduction without being lecherous. Her progress toward Gawain in the point of fact help to ensure her charm and power as a woman; in other words, the poem maximizes her feminine features. By utilizing her beauty as a weapon to attack Gawain’s human nature, the lady of Hautdesert confirms women’s confidence in themselves and reinforces women’s awakening of their natural empowerment over men. All this works because Bertilak’s

76 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 266-267.
77 In the preface to The Meaning of Courtly Love, Francis X. Newman argues that courtly love is an experience between erotic desire and spiritual attainment, “a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent.” See page vii.
78 Maureen Fries suggested the prime function of Arthurian heroines is to present themselves as a love object, and at the same time their prime virtue expected is beauty, with which they “lure and guide the hero to his destiny.” See Fries, “From the Lady to the Tramp,” 2.
confession of his supervisory role on every encounter between his wife and Gawain explains the complicated reason for the lady’s seducing behavior. In addition, it justifies the lady of Hautdesert’s seductive behavior, and in turn avoids Morgan le Fay, the one behind everything, from being accused of wickedness in nature.

The lady of Hautdesert is not an oversimplified character employed by the poet to prove Gawain’s worthiness; instead, she is a well-developed character with the ability of rational thinking and with abundant knowledge of social rules. Her secret visits to Gawain’s bedroom in three consecutive mornings show her insightfulness in reading others’ mind and her cleverness in sensing others’ feelings. She starts her tests by making use of the essential sexual attractiveness of a beautiful woman to a man, which targets Gawain’s worldly desire. When that fails, she adopts the chivalric code to shape Gawain’s behaviors. And at the very end, she requests for Gawain’s sympathy for a sincere lady in love, and she takes advantage of the biggest weakness in Gawain’s heart. She is fully aware of the power of her beauty, the social expectation for her role, and the chivalry code that guides knights. She makes use of the social expectations and rules to drive the behaviors of other characters, which serves her purpose without leaking her active participation and manipulative nature in the whole scheme. The tactics she employed to hint a more intimate relationship between Gawain and herself proves that she is adept at rational thinking, information collecting, and strength and weakness analysis, which are always associated with males according to patriarchal ideology.

As a seductive enchantress, the lady of Hautdesert fulfills a woman’s traditional prime function as a love object in the Arthurian tradition. But she also challenges the patriarchy by discouraging men’s vigor and taking over the typical responsibility of the male gender. Different from a typical heroine, who arouses the hero’s valor, invites him to fight for her, and guides him
to glory; the lady of Hautdesert provokes the most profound fear in Gawain’s heart when she offers him a magic green girdle which is supposed to protect Gawain from any harm:

‘For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
Þer is no haþel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt,
For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe.’

[‘For if girdled, if graced with this green sash’s length,
While it’s tightly attached to his torso,
A man can’t be hewn under heaven by heroes, though fierce;
No, he cannot be killed, not by cunning on earth.’]^{79}

The green girdle reminds Gawain of his upcoming deadly meeting with the Green Knight and offers him an escape from what he dreads at most, the possible decapitation in the near future. The lady of Hautdesert proposes a convenient cheating possibility without hurt his image as the most honorable knight to Gawain. The introduction of green girdle leads Gawain to a lapse form chivalry not only in the fact that it makes him detour from integrity and truth, but also in the fact that it provides Gawain with a great excuse to be secret coward while still under the guise of a noble knight.^{80}

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^{79} *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, 290-293.
^{80} Albert B. Friedman argues that Gawain does not surrender the green girdle to Bertilak “not only out of fear but also in order to spare his host unnecessary hurt and to protect the lady’s reputation, which as her knight and a man of honor he had promised to do,” because the girdle is “a sexual trophy.” However, if Gawain really wants to stick to the chivalric code, he could simply reject the girdle, this will protect the lady even better. I do think Gawain accepts the girdle because of his fear and he never thought of surrender it for his own sake. “To protect the lady’s reputation” is a secondary reason for him to keep the girdle, or even a convenient excuse
By causing Gawain to question the chivalric code, the lady of Hautdesert, as well as Morgan le Fay, gain their agency. Gawain’s acceptance of the green girdle also signals a switch of roles and responsibilities between the lady and him and implies his surrender to female potential and power. When in a serious worry and a great fear, Gawain finds a sense of security on the lady of Hautdesert.

Þen kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his hert
Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym iugged were:
When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,
Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sleȝt were noble.
Þenne he þulged with hir þrepe and þoled hir to speke.

[Then that lord there thought long and allowed that it was
For his great, grueling task a godsend indeed.
Could he value his vow and survive nonetheless,
Take his thrust and yet thrive, it would thoroughly please!]81

Gawain, the reputed Round Table Knight, gives up the patriarchal role of the ladies’ escort and guard—he seeks protection from a lady. By providing Gawain with the magic girdle, the lady proves she is much more powerful than Gawain, and even a girdle from her can relieve his long-lasting concern. The lady of Hautdesert shows the weakness of the moral law that creates a boundary between men and women when she takes over the responsibility of a typical chivalric hero. Since the lady of Hautdesert exerts her influence in obedience to Morgan le Fay’s

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81 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 292-293.
instructions and she serves to present Morgan’s will and power, the lady’s overshining Gawain in terms of power verifies Morgan’s empowerment and her manipulation in the whole plot. It also confirms Morgan’s role as a revolutionary female who does not restrain her activities within the female domain, but rather penetrates into the patriarchal community and call their reputation into question.

The way the lady of Hautdesert and Gawain interact with each other further contributes to the lady of Hautdesert and Morgan le Fay’s power over males. Though the temptation scenes look very similar to the typical test of male prowess and worthiness in chivalric romances, temptation in Gawain is actually a competition of power between male and female in disguise: “In our temptation,” says Kittredge, “the wife loves her husband alone, and it is in obedience to his instructions that she tempts the hero … [and in this sense] there is no temptation [at all].”

The interwoven setting of the hunting scenes and the temptation scenes hints a parallel between what happens in the hunting field and that in Gawain’s bedroom. Same as her husband, the lady plays the role of a hunter who is preying on Gawain. Their words exchange further approves their interrelationship.

‘God moroun, Sir Gawayn,’ sayde þat gay lady,

‘Ye ar a sleper vnslyȝe, þat mon may slyde hider;
Now ar ðe tan as-tyt! Bot true vus may schape,
I schal bynde yow in your bedde, þat be ȝe trayst.’

…quoþ Gawayn þe blyþe

‘…Me schal worþe at your wille, and þat me wel lykez,

82 Kittredge, A Study of Gawain, 78-79.
For I ȝelde me ȝederly, and ȝeȝe after grace,
And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me byhouez need.’

[‘Dear Sir Gawain, good morning,’ she graciously said,
‘You must sleep quite unsafely; I’ve slipped in with ease.
In a trice you are taken! A truce you should make,
Or I’ll bind you in bed here, yes, be sure of that!’

…Said Gawain,

‘… I will work what you will; I am well content
To surrender myself and to sue for your mercy.
What behooves me I’ll heed; I’m behold to you.’]83

The lady teases Gawain by using the words of a hunting game and implies she is hunting him down. Gawain enjoys their conversations and her companionship with an assumption that she is flirting with him. Just as he is ignorant about how his whole quest is a test, Gawain also fails to grasp the lady’s true color. He addresses her as his captor.84 And he admits his fall in the hand of the lady: “Bot wolde ȝe, lady louely, þen leue me grante, / [a]nd deprece your prysoun, and pray hym to ryse” [By your grace … if you gave me your leave, if you pleased to permit your poor prisoner to rise].85 Gawain admits the lady’s power and her control over him without realizing that. And the lady of Hautdesert here, again, take the role of a typical powerful male character, initiates an attack, and hunts down the prey.

83 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 262-263.
85 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 262-163.
Through the lady of Hautdesert, Morgan le Fay breaks the stereotype of chivalric women and exhibits her considerable power over men. She and her agent show many traditionally patriarchal virtues, such as rational analysis, extensive knowledge, and influence over the other gender, all of which are typically associated with men. Through her female agent, Morgan le Fay already undermines the Gawain’s masculinity, but her influence is not limited in the female domain. The effect Morgan le Fay exerts through her male agent, the Green Knight/Bertilak, legitimately extends her impact on the patriarchal society and challenge the traditional division of male and female authority and territory. Toward the very end of the story, the Green Knight reveals his true identity and the reason for him to visit Arthur’s court. He confesses his obedience to Morgan’s teaching and points out Morgan le Fay is the person behind everything.

‘Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in þis londe.
Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,
And koynytse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned,
Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony hatz taken,
For ho hatz dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme
With þat conable clerk, þat knowes alle your knyȝtez

at hame;
Morgne þe goddes
Þerfore hit is hir name:
Weldez non so hyȝe hawtesse
Þat ho ne con make ful tame
‘Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle
For to assay þe surquidré, þif hit soth were
Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;
Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,
For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe.”

[I am called in this countryside Betrilak de Hautdesert.
Through the might in my manor of Morgan le Fay.
My demesne by the might of her magic is held;
For the magic of Merlin she mastered herself
When she lingered in love a long time ago
With the sage. Now their story has spread; they enjoy wide fame.
The goddess Morgan thus
Became her well-known name.
The proud and prosperous
She’ll dominate and tame.
In this shape Morgan sent me to seek out your hall,
For the purpose of putting its pride to the test,
And arraigning the Round Table’s richly famed knights.
She bewitched me this way to bewilder you all,
And to goad Guinevere to a grievous death.]

According to Bertilak, the motivation of Morgan le Fay to initiate the whole happening is to test the renowned Round Table Knights and to frighten Queen Guinevere to death. That is, Morgan le Fay aims for two things by sending the Green Knight to Arthur’s court: to test the

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86 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 318-319.
Round Table Knights and to settle her conflict with Queen Guinevere. Many scholars, represented by Kittredge and Hulbert have suggested Morgan le Fays fails to deconstruct the chivalric tests because she fails to humiliate Arthur’s knights.\textsuperscript{87} But I disagree with their interpretation of Morgan le Fay’s ultimate goal, at least as presented in \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}. Although the Green Knight’s challenge to Arthur’s court is indeed not meant to glorify the Round Table Knights, his confession, nonetheless, does not reveal any specific personal enmity that Morgan le Fay holds toward Arthur’s knights: “For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were / Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table [she aims to putting its pride to the test, and arraigning the Round Table’s richly famed knights].\textsuperscript{88} The issue is existential rather than personal. The fundamental reason for Morgan le Fay to initiate everything is that she doubts the worldwide famous reputation of the Round Table Knights. She is not completely convinced of their virtue and perfection, and as a result, she wants to send out an envoy to test Arthur’s knights on behalf of herself. Through the Green Knight/Bertilak, Morgan le Fay successfully put the Round Table Knights to a series of tests, including an examination of bravery, a test of their deference to the chivalry, and a test of their inner world, and her interference into the Round Table Community results in a positive reform in the knights.

As reputable knights in the medieval time, Arthur’s knights should be very familiar with challenges from other knights. The only factor standing out in the Green Knight’s challenge is that it is somewhat astonishing. Under Morgan le Fay’s instruction, the Green Knight Arthur’s

\textsuperscript{87} For details, please see Kittredge, \textit{A Study of Gawain}, 136; Hulbert, “Syr Gawayn,” 454, 462.  
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet}, 318. Burton Raffel translated these lines as “Morgana sent me to your king’s castle, to test your pride, to determine the truth of the round table’s fame, ant the tales that tell it.” See Raffel, \textit{Sir Gawain and The Green Knight}, 131.
court on the New Year’s Day and challenges the Round Table Knights for a beheading game. He makes his purpose very clear on his arrival.

I craue in þis court a Crystemas gomen,
For hit is Ȝol and Nwe ʿer, and here ar ȝep mony:
If any so hardy in þis hous holdeþ hymselfen,
Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
Þat dar stifly strike a strok for an Ŝer.

[I come to this court for a Christmastide game.
It is Yule, the New Year, and your young men are brave.
Is there here one who holds himself haughty enough
One so bold in his blood, in his brain so unsound
That he’ll stoutly exchange now one stroke for another?] 89

On the surface, the Green Knight comes to test the bravery of the Round Table Knights, Gawain, believing in his adherence to chivalry and his worthiness as a reputed knight, takes over this challenge from King Arthur. He shows confidence in his courage and wisdom, and he is ready to conquer all difficulties and to prove the nobility of the Round Table Community; he has never been aware, however, of what the Green Knight and Morgan le Fay test him for on the earth. This Green Knight’s tests in point of fact not only requires Gawain’s physical quest to The Green Chapel to keep his pact, but also requires a spiritual quest into his inner world. He can only fulfill his quest and protect his honor by establishing a balance between the struggle of his

89 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 222-223.
natural impulse and the chivalric virtues. Though Gawain successfully resists the temptation, he surrenders to his rage and fear, so that fails in the ultimate test.

As the best Round Table Knight, Gawain makes every effort to defend the Round Table’s reputation and his honor. He takes over the Green Knight’s beheading challenge, leaves Arthur’s court at the right time for the Green Chapel, and tries hard to resist his fear and to stand still while receiving the return stroke from the Green Knight. Unfortunately, without seeing through the true nature of those tests, he concentrates all his endeavors on maintaining the reputation of the Round Table Knights and his own fame, and he misses the core idea of being an honorable knight. He therefore fails the most important test, that of his moral behavior. Having agreed to exchange axe strokes with the Green Knight, Gawain gives a strong stroke onto his neck and completely cuts his head off. His hard cutting, which demonstrates his lack of mercifulness when he is severely offended, is also endorsed by King Arthur and the rest of Round Table Knights. Considering the Green Knight as a hostile visitor, King Arthur aims for his death and advises Gawain to “‘þat þou on kyrf sette, / And if þou redez hym ryȝt, redly I trowe / Þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after’.” [‘give one stroke dealt strongly; for certainly then you’l endure the dread blow he will deal in turn.’]90 The rest of Arthurian knights act even more disrespectful and arrogant toward the Green Knight when his head falls to the ground: “Þe fayre hede fro þe halce hit to þe erþe, / Þat fele hit foyned wyth her fete, Þere hit forth roled. [the fair head falls to the floor, tumbling down, where it’s bounced back and forth by the boots of the guests.]”91 Because of Gawain and the Green Knight’s agreement in the beheading game, Gawain may find himself completely justified for intending to kill his opponent. However,

90 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 226.
91 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 228-229.
compared to the Green Knight’s return stroke in a year—the Green Knight stops when his axe reaches Gawain’s neck and only leaves him a slight cut—Gawain fails to show the mercifulness and courtesy, which are significant for an honorable knight. And the other Round Table Knights even fail in showing the basic respect for their opponent. Ironically, the core idea of chivalry, which is lacking in the so-called best knight, Gawain and the elite Round Table community, is demonstrated on the monster-like intruder, the Green Knight. By sparing Gawain’s life and modeling the genuinely honorable knight, the Green Knight breaks the perfect image of the Round Table Knights and justifies Morgan le Fay’s doubts about their reputation.

The Green Knight’s and Morgan le Fay’s tests continue in the castle of Hautdesert, where the Green Knight transforms into a hospitable host and accommodates Gawain with the name of Bertilak. By making friends with Gawain, the Green Knight/Bertilak starts his further tests. He suggests an exchange game, in which they will give-and-take whatever they receive during his hunting days. Bertilak proposes that as games, but he actually aims to test Gawain’s mercy, faithfulness, and nobility. Bertilak sends his wife to sneak into Gawain’s bedroom and to conduct a temptation. While Gawain succeeds in keeping his words with Bertilak without offending the lady, he fails in being faithful to his host when she offers him an opportunity to save his life from the imminent danger: Gawain accepts the magic girdle and keeps it secretly. Friedman tried to defend Gawain’s nobility by emphasizing that Gawain chooses to stay silent also because he cares about his host’s feeling and wants to protect the hostess’ decency. “Gawain failed to carry out his pledge not only out of fear but also in order to spare his host unnecessary hurt and to protect the lady’s reputation, which as her knight and a man of honor he had promised to do,” because the green girdle could be seen as “a sexual trophy.”

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92 Friedman, “Morgan le Fay,” 266.
secondary reason—to guard the lady’s reputation, to distract our attention from the fundamental reason for Gawain to retain the green girdle—his fear. If it is not out of his own benefits, Gawain could choose to reject the hostess’s gift, which serves better to protect the lady’s honor and to comfort the host’s feeling.

I have argued that Gawain’s acceptance of the green girdle from the hostess already suggests a switch of power between the lady of Hautdesert and him and signals his lapse from chivalric truth and integrity. Hiding what he is supposed to provide Bertilak according to the game rules makes him go astray even further. By choosing to be faithful to his hostess, Gawain has betrayed his host. Besides, keeping the green girdle secretly for his future survival, “Gawain has broken faith not only with his knightly brother Bertilak and Arthur, but also with God… He has compromised his faith by choosing magic over reliance on God as it is clear that Gawain took the girdle to try to ensure that he would not die.”93 Without realizing that, Gawain fails his second test.

Though Gawain attempts very hard to maintain the perfect image of the Round Table Knights, he lacks mercy facing the Green Knight’s challenge and betrays his vow with Bertilek and his reliance on God. All his lapses from the chivalric virtue suggest Gawain loses the battle of his inner word and gives control to his natural impulses.

The moral-battle field of the poem is located exclusively in

Gawain’s mind... Within Gawain’s mind there is a relationship between, on one side, his natural lust, his natural fear, … and his natural anger, and on the other his obligations to his own chastity,

Gawain finds himself in a conflict between his “natural impulses” and “self-control.” A real noble knight should be able to find a balance between his “righteous anger” and his “mercy and grace on others.” But as what I have argued, Gawain loses his mercy under a great rage. It is understandable that even the best knight cannot completely avoid negative feelings, what chivalry promotes is to keep fighting and being honorable even in fear. However, Gawain gives himself away to emotions. In such an “honor-driven society,” to keep a respectable, brave and upright image means everything for a knight. Being aware of this code, Gawain chooses to be a secret coward while pretending to be heroic, honest, and loyal. However, he loses parts of his honor at the moment of his lapse from chivalry in his inner world.

While the immediate outcome of the Green Knight’s visit to Arthur’s court seems to be inexplicit, Morgan le Fay’s real purpose is realized when Gawain fails to uphold the chivalric virtues of mercy, loyalty, and truth. Through the Green Knight, Morgan le Fay forces the Round Table Knights to face their arrogance and imperfection, help them recognize their problems, which they have ignored for a long time. She teaches Gawain that to be a genuine knight is more about being faithful and adhering to the spirit of chivalry rather than maintaining an honorable chivalric image, and in turn, provokes several changes in the Round Table community upon Gawain’s return.

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95 Brewer, Introduction, 16.
96 Brewer, Introduction, 16.
97 Brewer, Introduction, 15.
Far from being a missing character in the story, Morgan le Fay plays the role of a teacher, who exhibits the intelligence to target a problem, the power to influence others, and the inspiration to facilitate a solution. By teaching a lesson to Gawain and Arthur’s knights, Morgan le Fey shakes the essential belief of the dominant patriarchal society in their superiority over the other gender and other social communities and proves her authority over the Round Table Knights.

And despite her small presence, Morgan le Fay represents existential challenges to the patriarchal definition of territory and makes a difference in a broader social range by urging Gawain to travel through nature in the search for the Green Chapel. She not only interferes in the dominant social sphere but also shapes the way the patriarchal group perceives and interacts with the rest of world. Morgan le Fay forces Arthur’s knights, which represent the dominant patriarchal ideology, to step out of their comfort zone and to scrutinize the part of the world they used to ignore. The far-off nature turns out to be very rough and sturdy for Gawain. The pearl poet uses a considerable long passage to describe the difficulties Gawain encounters in his journey to the Green Chapel. All the hardships symbol the long way one needs to go through in order to cross the boundary of conventional social division and to break the customary patriarchy ideology. Gawain’s unfamiliarity and unpreparedness of the outside nature parallel the arrogance of the patriarchy community and its ignorance of other oppressed social groups. Having dwelled on its own authority and power for a long time, the Round Table Community for the first time

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98 Note that in order to meet his compact with the Green Knight on the New Year’s Day, Gawain has to travel through England to north Wales in winter. On his way trying to find the Green Chapel, Gawain fights against serpents, boars, wolves, giants, and many other dangerous creatures. On page 243 it states, “Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte” [he’d have died many deaths, without doubt, in that land], had he not been strong and bold and one who served God. See *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, 239-243.
turns its attention on other unities. By compelling Arthur’s community to broaden its view and to take a challenge from a marginalized entity seriously, Morgan le Fay breaks the boundary between typical patriarchal society and secondary social community and shakes the absolute superiority of the patriarchal community.

By driving Gawain through a series of real world and inner world quests and teaching a lesson of genuine chivalry, the Green Knight and Morgan le Fay actually help the Round Table Knights to realize their flaws and stimulate changes in this patriarchal community. Although the Green Knight seems to be haughty and not indeed beneficial on his first visit to Arthur’s court, he essentially serves to heal the corrupt Round Table Community and promotes moral progress, which reaffirms the dual role that his mistress, Morgan le Fay, so often plays. The whole story begins with Morgan le Fay’s enchantment on the Green Knight. But in addition to a famous enchantress, Morgan le Fay is also a healer in Arthurian legends.

In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*, Taliesin introduces Morgan le Fay as a positive and helpful character, who acquaints with herbal properties as well as the healing arts and excels in shapeshifting, flying and mathematics. She cures Arthur after the battle of Camlan with her healing art. The traditional role Morgan le Fay plays suggests that her ultimate intention for sending the Green Knight to Arthur’s court is not as simple as what her agent, the Green Knight/Bertilak, reveals at the end of this poem—to test the pride of Round Table Knights and to

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99 The original text is on page 85 of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini*: “There nine sisters rule by a pleasing set of laws whose who come to them from our country. She who is first of them is more skilled in the healing art, and excels her sisters in the beauty of her person. Morgen[sic] is her name, and she has learned what useful properties all the herbs contains, so that she can cure sick bodies. She also knows an art by which to change her shape, and to cleave the air on new wings like Daedalus…and when she wills she slips down from the air to your shores. And men say that she has taught mathematics to her sisters.” For details, please see Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini*, ed. & trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 85.
frighten Queen Guinevere to death. Morgan le Fay targets the core nature of the Round Table community and hopes to improve it. “Except for her (Morgan le Fay) enmity toward Guinevere, her plan and her fame as a healer are in the best traditions of the theurgic art as opposed to the goetic practices of that time…Morgan could send [Bertilak] to purge and heal the court of its moral corruptness.”

Following Morgan’s instruction, the Green Knight guides Gawain to realize his fears, pride, and unfaithfulness that he has previously ignored. More importantly, Gawain’s experience stimulates the Round Table Knights to face their flaws, weakness, and corruption. With all these means, Morgan le Fay confirms her role as a healer and demonstrates her capability and influence as an empowered female character.

Some critics, including Friedman, argued that Morgan is not qualified enough to be the moral teacher or healer of Arthur’s court, because her morality is under questions and her exact attitude toward the Round Table Knights is suspicious. It is true that Morgan le Fay is a controversial character and her genuine intention for instigating everything is still somewhat in doubt, but the ambiguity over her nature in this poem actually attests her empowerment in another perspective. Morgan le Fay is not a stereotyped female figure, which could be simply grouped into either a good girl or bad girl cluster, like the majority of female characters in the Arthurian tradition. Morgan le Fay embraces many conflicting characteristics, “violence

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100 Baughan, “The Role of Morgan Le Fay,” 251.
101 In post-Galfridian and post- Chrétienian romance Morgan le Fay was more and more adopted as an immoral character, who holds hostile attitude towards King Arthur and Queen Guinevere and manipulated knights out of her own pleasure. The later constructions of Morgan le Fay were very different from her positive image in early years, for details see Friedman, “Morgan le Fay.” 268.
102 Lois Tyson suggested: “the main female characters are stereotyped as either “good girls” (gentle, submissive, virginal, angelic) or “bad girls” (violent, aggressive, worldly, monstrous). These characterizations imply that if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left for her is that of a monster. For more details see Lois Tyson, “Feminist
opposed to healing; beauty against ugliness; sexual wantonness against fidelity; a goddess with human passions,” all of which attribute to her complexity and empowerment. One needs to learn the backstory and her coming-of-age experience in order to truly understand her behavior, and in turn to make a fair judgment of her role. This intricacy distinguishes Morgan le Fay from a typical female foil or a female counter hero and enriches her agency. Morgan le Fay functions very similarly to an established hero, who leads the story and decides the plots twists. Her empowerment helps Morgan le Fay step out of the typical female role and present herself as the most influential and likable character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—who does not compromise with the patriarchal cliché, but adheres to her own value and determination.

The second major point made by Bertilak when he explains what is going on, besides testing the pride of the Round Table Knights, is that Morgan le Fay’s enmity toward Queen Guinevere indicates her nature as a typical emotional female character, who focuses on petty and trivial things. Nonetheless, it is hard to argue that Morgan’s personal hatred toward another female character undermines her role as a powerful individual. Instead, her emotional side fulfills her as a vivid character and her multi-layer personality further destabilizes the patriarch ideology, which labels women as emotional and refers to men as rational.

Women in romance are, in fact not presented as incapable individuals so obsessed with their feelings and unable to realize their self-fulfillment in romantic relationships, marriage, and nurturing. Literary works and other cultural products restlessly output the idea that women are not good at the political, economic, and social activities, and even when they get access to those fields sometimes, they fall short of the general expectations; so, women need to, and will

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103 Williams, “Morgan la Fée,” 40.
ultimately return to the family. Morgan le Fay, contrarily, shatters the over-generalized image of women in the literary field. She demonstrates both the sensitive side of female and the strong willpower and rationality of masculinity. Morgan le Fay’s sensitivity not only do no harm to her potentiality and capacity, but also legitimize the empowerment of a female character.

Morgan le Fay’s enmity hatred toward Queen Guinevere and her control of other figures as well as over the development of the whole happening verifies that emotions and rationality are not in conflict. Though her dislike of Queen Guinevere partially accounts for her sending the Green Knight to mount a challenge, Morgan le Fay keeps her sensation under control and never let the emotions affect her principal business. If we take a look at the interaction between other figures, we can find out that Morgan le Fay is not the single figure who is disturbed by sentiments—the emotion drive is also exhibited on Arthur’s knights, and on the top of all, on Gawain.104 Upon hearing Bertilak’s explanations of everything happened on the surface and beneath, Gawain is enraged and blames his lapse from chivalry entirely on Bertilak’s wife and Morgan le Fay. He claims that he is entrapped by women, such as Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David and suggests that he made a mistake that no man can avoid.105 He attempts to legitimatize his lapse from the chivalric virtue and to justify his fame of the most honorable knight by implying that if Morgan le Fay and Bertilak’s wife did not intrude into his quest, he would still be the perfect model of the knighthood. Gawain’s accusation shows a distinctive patriarchal way of thinking: men contribute all successes to their own capability and efforts, but put the blame on others, typically the woman by their sides for their misjudgment and moral collapse. Gawain

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104 The Round Table Knight fell into silence on the shock of the Green Knight’s beheading challenge and kick the Green Knight’s head around when they saw Gawain strike his head off.  
105 The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, 316-317.
blurs the fact that at every critical moment, he had the opportunity to make a choice and all his decisions collaboratively result in his current dilemma.

In addition to accusing women of their inferences and the negative consequence they have caused in his quest. Gawain tries to downplay, or even deny women’s power over men: “[b]ot hit is no ferly þaȝ a folc madde, / [a]nd þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe.” [it’s no feat when a fool’s great folly’s exposed [b]y the wiles of women, and woe thus ensues].

Gawain refuses to consider Morgan le Fay and the lady of Hautdesert as equally significant individuals, who engage themselves in something serious and meaningful. He perceives them as mischievous as well as irresponsible inferiors, who act out of their whims and do not care about what others would undergo because of their tricks. Gawain’s accusation against women and his blindness to the difference they have made not only contribute nothing to restore his dignity, but also support the empowerment of Bertilak’s wife and Morgan le Fay in a certain sense. By blaming everything on women, Gawain confirms that women are more powerful than what is believed conventionally. He admits women are able to extend considerable influence within and beyond their assigned social sphere, and sometimes, they can even drive the development of the whole incident. In the facing their empowerment, Gawain, the representative of the patriarchal community feels his authority is threatened and could not reconfirm his masculine supremacy except for being furious. Gawain’s own experience and many famous stories about a man affected by a woman and fails together function as a warning for the patriarchal ideology and suggests that men should not underestimate women’s power. When women violate the patriarchal assignments of social roles and demonstrate their true nature and potentials, men very likely would find themselves not as powerful as what they take for granted. The growing

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popularity of misogynist literature in the later Middle Ages also approves that the masculine attempt to retaliate is so futile that they could not vent their frustration except for being furious and defaming women.¹⁰⁷

Morgan le Fay’s deployment of the Green Knight/Bertilak and Bertilak’s wife hints on the multiple ways she adopts to exert their impact. Morgan le Fay does not restrain herself according to men’s will. She penetrates into the patriarchal society from different perspectives and conducts a series of tests. She successfully shakes the patriarchal superiority of the Round Table Knights and helps them to improve by playing the role of a healer. Although critics have not agreed on her nature and motives, Morgan le Fay’s interference defines her, rather than her connection with the protagonist.

¹⁰⁷ Maureen Fries stated: “the decline in [Morgan le Fay] in her moral nature, her magic power and even her beauty coincides with the virulent growth of woman-hatred in both religious and lay society and in all kinds of literature documented by historians as feature of the later Middle Ages.” See Fries, “From the Lady to the Tramp,” 4.
CHAPTER 4. KUNDRY’S CONTRADICTORY CHARACTER

Following the tradition that begins with Chrétien de Troyes’ *Percival*, Richard Wagner in his last opera, *Parsifal*, tells a story of a valiant but ignorant knight who grows to become a qualified redeemer for the Holy Grail community. The opera starts with a morning scene that Gurnemanz wakes two sleeping Grail guardians in the forest of Monsalvat. While they are waiting for the wounded king, Amfortas, to come to have his routine morning bath, Kundry rushes in as a wild crone, bringing a foreign balsam to relieve the king’s pain. Although Amfortas appreciates Kundry for her devotion, his squires suspect her motivations, and thereupon Gurnemanz introduces Kundry’s background. Kundry, who is reincarnated, tries to make atonement for her unforgiven sins from an earlier life. Gurnemanz also explains how Amfortas is bewitched by “a woman of fearsome beauty,” and therefore gives Klingsor an opportunity to steal the Holy Spear and inflict on him a wound that never heals. 108 Klingsor, who was rejected by the Grail community for his black magic, has held an intense hostility toward them for a long time. At this point, Parsifal breaks into the stage and gives the Gurnemanz hope by failing to answer any single question about his origin—the definite sign of a fool. Kundry reveals the heritage of Parsifal and announces his mother’s death. Gurnemanz arranges a Grail ritual be held, but Parsifal fails to ask the key question needed to heal the wounded king and is thrown out from the Grail castle. On his new quest, Parsifal enters Klingsor’s magic castle, where he meets many beautiful and flirtatious flower maidens and a gorgeous woman, who is actually the transformed Kundry under Klingsor’s spell. Kundry lures the passing-by Grail knight into Hell with her temptation. Kundry attempts to intoxicate Parsifal by arousing his

remorse for forgetting his mother and by pleading for his comfort over her cursed and restless destiny. Echoing the sorrow of Amfortas, Parsifal resists Kundry’s seduction and learns compassion, the very characteristic required to redeem the Grail King. After many years of wandering caused by Kundry’s curse, Parsifal once again enters the domain of the Grail, where Kundry transforms back to the old hag and serves the Grail community wholeheartedly. Enlightened through compassion, Parsifal grants Kundry the redemption and cures Amfortas wound. The opera ends with Parsifal’s ascendance to the next Grail King and the death of Kundry.

The climax of Wagner’s opera lies in the two sharply contrasted encounters between Parsifal and the Grail community before and after his holy quest. In his first opportunity, Parsifal fails to demonstrate the compassion for the Grail king and therefore misses his chance to redeem him. But during his second visit, he has already developed into an experienced, merciful, and qualified knight and successfully proves his nobility by disenchanting the Grail community and ascending to the Grail throne. What happens between his two visits to the Grail castle is critical for Parsifal, who needs to escape from his mother and sexual temptation to grow into a responsible and qualified Grail King.

Kundry, the only female character represented on stage, plays a significant and indispensable role in guiding Parsifal through his spiritual development and in turn to reach his heavenly goal, the Grail. Although she eventually guides and assists Parsifal in fulfilling his self-realization, she does so by first interfering and misleading him. Wagner inexplicably presents her first as a hag, then as a beautiful woman, and creates Kundry to interfere in Parsifal’s quest at various points with different functions. Kundry is the “villain” that Parsifal needs to struggle
with and conquer on the early stage of his quest.\textsuperscript{109} But She is also the “donor” who enlightens Parsifal emotionally and prepares him for growth in compassion.\textsuperscript{110} Since she helps Parsifal several times in his quest, she is also what Propp calls the “supernatural helper.”\textsuperscript{111} However, Kundry's motivation for interfering in the protagonist’s quest is very vague, or even missing throughout the story. Wagner deliberately hides the reasons for Kundry’s interference, because 1) he uses Kundry as an artistic tool to meet the extensive needs of tense plot development, 2) Wagner’s patriarchal agenda suggests that, to him, women are equal and independent entities with consistent selfhood, so neither does his female character, Kundry.

Compared to a concrete female figure of romance tradition, who either serves as a love object and spurs the protagonist’s vigor in his quest or attempts to lead the hero to go astray and descend to damnation as a wicked temptress, Kundry, as Wagner constructs her, is a complicated and all-inclusive character. She 1) embraces deliberate discrepancies and inconsistencies, 2) follows the pattern of the loathly damsel and \textit{femme fatale} archetype, 3) blends in elements of many other characters of the Perceval tradition. Wagner’s conception of Kundry contains two appearances, two sets of personalities, multiple identities, and very ambiguous motivations. Loosely based on Wolfram von Eschenbach’s \textit{Parzival}, Wagner presents Kundry as a mixture of several characters in the Perceval tradition as had already been mentioned. By demonstrating wide-ranging characteristics and combining the functions of many different figures, Kundry is flexible enough to play several roles at various points and in turn, realize multiple artistic results as one single character.

\textsuperscript{109} Propp, \textit{Morphology}, 27.
\textsuperscript{110} Propp, \textit{Morphology}, 39.
\textsuperscript{111} Propp, \textit{Morphology}, 10.
Wagner’s patriarchal agenda could be read in his creation of Kundry, who 1) is short of subjectivity and evident motivation, 2) never be able to change her outsider status in the narrative she contributes to significantly; in another word, she is constantly an outsider, 3) rarely undergoes any character development throughout the story, 4) loses her life unexpectedly when all other male characters are fulfilled at the end. Kundry is a “contingent being” who lacks individualism and could only realize her self-fulfillment by establishing connections with the dominant male characters.\footnote{Lois Tyson, “Feminist Criticism,” 92.} As the only female figure, Kundry’s existence and meaning revolve around the Grail knight. The Grail community, which represents the patriarchal circle because of its exclusive male components and its centering around the Grail King, excludes Kundry from their high business from the beginning to the very end. As a medium employed by Wagner to serve his patriarchal characters, Kundry mainly serves to display and realize men’s relations to other men, but hardly achieves anything herself as an independent and solid character.

As a highly flexible character with compound functions, Kundry’s appearance switches between a hideous hag and an attractive beauty. Kundry makes her debut as a wild hag. Her appearance suggests that she is an outsider of the patriarchal society. When she is first seen by a squire, Kundry is “flying” and “crawling over the ground” like an animal.\footnote{Wagner, \textit{Parsifal}, 67-68.} She resembles a wild beast in her look, her facial expression, and in her manners. Kundry dresses “in wild garb; her skirts tucked up by a snake-skin girdle with long hanging cords; her black hair is loose and disheveled, her complexion deep ruddy brown, her eyes are dark and piercing, sometimes flashing wildly, more often lifeless and staring.”\footnote{Wagner, \textit{Parsifal}, 67-68.} Kundry’s untended appearance, coarse clothes, as well as her beast-like behaviors not only imply that she is from a marginalized
community, but also lead to certain repulsion in the dominant Grail community. Although aware of Kundry’s name, Amfortas’ squires negate her identity. They employ random terms to indicate her, such as “wild rider,” “mare,” “heathen,” and “sorceress” and they refuse to show any consideration for her apparently miserable situation and sufferings. The Grail guardians do not give Kundry any credit even though she voluntarily searches for a solution to relieve the wounded king’s suffering and she “rushes and flies there and back, bearing the message faithfully and successfully.” And Parsifal, who receives the news of his mother’s death from Kundry, unfairly displaces his pain and anger upon her—“Parsifal springs furiously at Kundry and seizes her by the throat.” As a representation of patriarchal society, the Grail community, which consists exclusively of males, has secret holy rituals, and revolves around the Grail King, fails to show a fair treatment and the basic respect toward Kundry.

After her entrance as a wild woman, Kundry next appears as a young woman with amazing beauty. After being swept away from Monsalvat like rubbish, Parsifal steps in Klingsor’s domain and encounters Kundry who greets him as if they had never met before.

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117 Wagner, Parsifal, 71.

118 Wagner, Parsifal, 82.

119 When Klingsor summons Kundry to serve him, Kundry also appears as a wild crone, which happens between Kundry’s debut at Monsalvat and her meeting with Parsifal at Klingsor’s castle as an extremely beautiful woman. For more details, see Wagner, Parsifal, 93-98.
Kundry summons Parsifal from his bustling with the flower maidens and immediately outshines them in terms of beauty and power. Kundry, who has “completely transformed … [rests] on a couch of flowers, wear[s] a light, fantastic, veil-like robe of Arabian style.”\textsuperscript{120} She is not a wild crone anymore; instead, she is elegant, stylish, and exotic. The illusory beauty, which Kundry gets from Klingsor’s black magic, provides her with sexual power and easy access to the Grail knights. No longer disliked and repellent, Kundry approaches Amfortas and Parsifal effortlessly and endangers their honor and life. By making use of her beauty, Kundry intoxicates Amfortas and gives Klingsor an opportunity to wound him when Amfortas fought with Klingsor long time ago. With her new appearance, Kundry interferes in Parsifal’s quest as an appealing temptress. She pretends to be a comforting lover and persuades Parsifal to accept “the first kiss of love as a last token of a mother’s blessing.”\textsuperscript{121} The two completely different appearances enable Kundry to play two distinctive or even adversarial roles in the entire plots and render her more complexity and possibilities. The transferable as well as remarkable appearance also evidences Kundry’s empowerment and her supernatural component.\textsuperscript{122}

Kundry’s dichotomy not only lies in her appearance but also in her role and functions throughout the drama. The two sharply contrasted appearances signal two diverse personalities of Kundry. When Kundry comes to the stage as an old hag, she is a tamed, caring and penitent helper, who tries to provide as much assistance as possible regardless of her own circumstance. Kundry serves the Grail community wholeheartedly as if she were a born maid: she does not talk

\textsuperscript{120} Wagner, \textit{Parsifal}, 109-110.
\textsuperscript{121} Wagner, \textit{Parsifal}, 112.
much and she works voluntarily without expecting for any appreciation and reward. When
gurnemanz and the squires confront her, “why did you not help us [when our master falls in
Klingsor’s trap and lost the Spear]?” Kundry negates her contribution, “I never help.”
However, she remains attentive to the needs of the Grail community and offers what is required
in due course of time. She reveals Parsifal’s identity when he is asked this information by
Gurnemanz and fails to provide an answer. She brings Amfortas exotic balsam for his pain and
fetches water for Parsifal when he falls in a faint upon hearing of his mother’s death. She is
indifferent to the suspicions and hostility of the Grail community and merely cares about serving.
After failing to tempt Parsifal as a beauty, Kundry, who transforms back to her old hag
appearance, is wakened by Gurnemanz for the last time on the stage. Kundry “gazes long at
Gurnemanz. Then she rises, arranges her clothing and hair and at once sets to work like a
serving-maid…[Kundry] slowly bows her head: then hoarsely and brokenly brings out the
words, ‘let me serve…serve!’” The failure of communication between Kundry and Grail
community and the one-way devotion suggest that when staged as a wild hag, Kundry does not
consider herself as the equal to Amfortas’ men and therefore a meaningful conversation between
them cannot happen. Echoing Gurnemanz’s comment that “[Kundry] has nothing in common
with [the people in the Grail castle],” Kundry accepts her inferiority to the Grail community, and
she is willing to surrender all power and authority to Amfortas and his followers, who altogether
represent the patriarchal society.

123 Wagner, Parsifal, 73.
124 Wagner, Parsifal, 73.
125 Wagner, Parsifal, 120.
126 Wagner, Parsifal, 71.
Contrarily, when Kundry transforms into a gorgeous lady with overwhelming beauty, she successfully plays the role of a fatal temptress who aims to hold the Grail knights away from their quests. At this time, Kundry is manipulative, insightful, and aggressive and she makes every possible endeavor to achieve her goal. After Parsifal leaves Monsalvat and sets off on a new journey, he encounters Kundry in her beautiful appearance at Klingsor’s magic castle. There Kundry takes the initiative to hypnotize and mislead Parsifal, and in turn “lures [the Grail knights] to sinful joys and hell’s damnation,” which is her task assigned by Klingsor.127 Kundry first of all uses her inviting beauty to seduce Parsifal and promises him combined love of his mother and a woman. She reminds Parsifal of his mother’s affection, “a version of what Freud has called the family romance,” with the purpose of disarming him and making him vulnerable.128 After Parsifal echoes the great sorrow of Amfortas and thrusts her aside, Kundry pleads for his sympathy by emphasizing her great need for his comfort. Kundry states that she is under an endless curse because she ridiculed Christ, “I laugh—laugh—I cannot weep, can only shout, rage, storm, rave in an ever-renewed nightmare.”129 Kundry asks Parsifal to grant her love for an hour, which claimed to be able to cleanse her sin and realize her redemption. Although she pretends to be miserable and caring, Kundry is the “villain” in Parsifal’s quest, during which she “assumes a disguise” and “uses persuasion… [and] other means of deception” to deceive [her] victim in order to take possession of him.”130 Her aggressive and manipulating nature is also exhibited in her outrage when Parsifal rejects to redeem her by uniting with her. Kundry is so severely offended that she casts a severe spell on Parsifal, cursing him “bar his path! Bar his

128 Elisabeth Bronfen, “Kundry’s Laughter,” 158.
passage! And though you flee from here and find all the roads in the world, that road you seek, that path you shall not find, for any path and passage that leads you away from me I curse for you.”131 Kundry’s curse causes Parsifal to wander around for years before finding his way to the Grail. By successfully carrying out a series of typical actions of “the villain,” such as “casting a spell upon [Parsifal] … [and] detaining him from the path to the Grail,” Kundry demonstrates strong selfhood.132 However, she is still a “dependent being controlled by circumstance” considering the fact that she can “have meaning only in relation to men.”133

Although the two sides of Kundry’s personality do not legitimately make her a self-contradictory character—the border between the Kundry, the helper, and Kundry, the seducer, is very evident; the inconsistency in Kundry’s appearance and behaviors inevitably leads to questions about the reasons and meanings for Wagner to construct Kundry in this particular way. If we make a close examination of Kundry, we note that she is a highly flexible and all-inclusive figure. Kundry exhibits features of a human being, a beast, and a sorceress at different points in the same opera. With the ability of shapeshifting, she switches between a tempting damsel and a repulsive hag. But Kundry’s transformation is a mysterious one, none of her shapeshifting happens in the audience’s sight. Rather than presenting an on-stage transformation, which typically prepares the audience for an upcoming climax of plots, such as the final fighting scene between the hero and the villain, Wagner implies a change in Kundry’s function and the start of a new plot whenever her invisible transformation happens. The dual nature of Kundry’s character reminds us of the “loathly damsel” archetype, which can be found in many previous medieval

131 Wagner, Parsifal, 117.
132 Propp, Morphology, 27, 33-34.
133 Tyson, “Feminist Criticism,” 92.
romances. Both *the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale” include the motif that an enchanted hideous crone transforms back to the most desirable lady when she is appreciated by the hero and is offered the sovereignty over her destiny—the unique possibility of lifting the curse on the beauty.

Although *the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and “Wife of Bath’s Tale” are significantly influential literary works, they are not the original versions of the “loathly damsel” stories. Loomis traces back to Greek goddess Demeter and Hecate for the origin of the shapeshifting loathly damsel motif. Bugge echoes Loomis’s identification of fertility myth, which “involve[s] the union of sun-god and earth-goddess to ensure the fruitfulness of the land,” as the very foundation for later loathly damsel stories. More importantly, by referring to Irish tales *The Fitness of Names, Dindsenchas of Carn Mail and the Exploits of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon*, Loomis suggests the loathly damsel is a personification of kinship and land, who legitimise the king by lying with him as an attractive beauty after being disenchanted from an ugly hag. While the Irish stories influenced Arthurian romance considerably in term of expanding the loathly damsel motif, the central idea that “the hag’s declaration that she was the Sovereignty had faded completely … And in all English stories, though the details of the preparation differ, the climax is always the same: the hero yields the sovereignty to the loathly hag, and thus brings about her transformation.”

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The earlier loathly damsel tales give us a new angle to interpret the shapeshifting Kundry. Derrick Everett suggests *Parsifal* could be read as a reverse loathly damsel story: “Instead of the loathly damsel becoming a beautiful Goddess, the beautiful girl becomes an ugly creature who pours scorn on the Quester for his failure.” Everet observes *Parsifal* comprises many essential elements of a typical loathly damsel story: a symbolic kiss from the heroine, the hero’s traveling to the edge of the other world, and the preparation for being a king by the heroine. Kundry’s transformation from a beautiful young girl back to a shabby crone after being rejected by Parsifal justifies the parallels between *Parsifal* and earlier loathly damsel stories—whether being able to resist a seduction is adopted as a criterion for evaluating the Grail King and men’s specific reaction to female’s advances is expected as a way of disenchantment. While Everett’s argument helps to validate the necessity of Kundry’s dual nature of characters, it fails in terms of providing Kundry with an endorsed and consistent motivation.

In all Irish and Arthurian loathly damsel stories, the heroine has an evident and eloquent motivation, which brings beneficial fruits for both the hero and the heroine. A typical heroine hopes to legitimize the destined king, to be disenchanted and restore her original beauty, and to win a noble husband at the same time. However, in *Parsifal* Kundry’s motivation for interfering in the protagonist’s quest is vague, or even missing. Bronfen argues that Kundry is “a body without will, speaking the desires of those who animate her.” Kundry participates in the plots at a very early stage—she provides Parsifal with his heritage and engages herself in finding remedies for Amfortas; however, Wagner does not include any solid reasons for her endeavors. It

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140 Everett, “An Introduction.”
141 Bronfen, “Kundry’s Laughter,” 157.”
seems that Kundry does everything out of whims. Kundry mentions that “[she] long[s] only for rest,” but she also claims she dreams of a “release [from Klingsor’s control]” and insists “let me serve…serve.”142 Kundry names several longings for herself as well as for other characters, and she carries out conductions to serve and to help the Grail community, but she does nothing to free herself from Klingsor’s spell and to improve her inferior status to the patriarchy. It looks like Kundry’s life revolves around other characters and Kundry’s meaning lies in her function of meeting others’ needs rather than serving her own benefits.

Although Kundry shows substantial sincerity and great willingness to help the Grail kingdom, her nature as the boat-shaker of the patriarchal community should not be neglected. Under Klingsor’s spell, Kundry seduced Amfortas and intends to destroy Parsifal in a similar way. Wagner also implies Kundry is the root reason for all the sufferings and humiliations of the Grail community. As a femme fatale, Kundry achieves her agency in her destructive influence on the patriarchal group. However, we failed in identifying a personal incentive for Kundry’s ado here again—there is no reason for Kundry to initiate malevolent schemes toward Amfortas and Parsifal except for following Klingsor’s order and threat. Kundry does not expect for any advantageous fruit or particular gain for herself from these temptations. Rather than building up a connection with the Grail knight, a sexual embrace of the protagonist places Kundry and the hero in two opposite positions, which even lack any possibility of reconciling their relationship in future.

In addition to being short of motivation in her personal level, Kundry demonstrates no interest in checking the result of her interference, either. Kundry appears to be short of memory and has no idea of what has occurred. She comes to the audience’s sight as a brand-new

character with an entirely different purpose at any single time. When she is an obedient hag, she makes uses of all sources to fulfill her duty; when Kundry turns into the deadly temptress, she is fully engaged in her mission, even her emotions fluctuate according to her progress in the temptation. However, Kundry never takes a second to look back at her previous engagement and to enjoy the fruit of her achievement. Without any clues about Kundry’s fundamental motivation and pursuit, it is hard for readers to celebrate Kundry as an independent and rounded character.

Kundry’s dual temperaments and ambiguous motivation lead to her complicated connections with the protagonist, Parsifal. Her unpredictable and complicated behaviors establish her simultaneously as “the supernatural helper,” “the villain, and “the donor” on the protagonist’s quest. As “the supernatural helper,” Kundry communicates momentous information to Parsifal: she is the one revealing his name, his background, and what happened to his mother. Kundry takes care of Parsifal when he is in need—she “at once hastens to a spring in the wood and now brings water in a horn, sprinkles Parsifal with it and then gives it to him to drink.” Kundry is also “the donor” that stimulates Parsifal’s spiritual growth, helping him to progress from a “dullard,” who “knows nothing of anything” to a qualified knight and “the appointed one.” In a certain perspective, Kundry achieves her role of “the donor” by being “the villain” in Parsifal’s quest. Kundry interferes as a dangerous temptress aiming to intoxicate Parsifal and leading him astray, and Parsifal, in point of fact regains his consciousness and refuses Kundry’s seduction soon after being captivated for a moment. Kundry’s interference as a deadly temptress serves to be the test Parsifal needs to pass in order to obtain the upcoming

143 Propp, Morphology, 10, 27, 39.
144 Propp, Morphology, 10.
145 Wagner, Parsifal, 82.
147 Propp, Morphology, 39, 27.
spiritual enlightenment, which is the necessary “agent … eventually [liquidating] misfortune.” Propp observes that typically “the hero is tested, interrogated at, tacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving a magic agent” soon after he leaves home. Parsifal proves his qualification for the Grail by withstanding Kundry’s temptation; and more importantly, Parsifal identifies Amfortas’ suffering in Kundry’s arms, which literally inspires his sense of obligation and cultivates him of mercy and compassion. However, Parsifal’s harsh rejection irritates Kundry, who as “the villain” casts a curse on him that results in his long-time wondering before accomplishing his quest. The many years wandering is time-consuming and frustrating, but it is at the same time necessary to prepare Parsifal for his second encounter with the Grail, especially after his failure the first time. Even though she interferes with Parsifal’s quest with malicious motivation at first, Kundry in the point of fact serves to help Parsifal accomplish his mission and fulfill his self-realization.

It is noticeable that as a character, Kundry’s significance depends on her relations with others, and on top of all on her connection with Parsifal. Although Kundry engages herself with other characters’ missions throughout the story, she rarely enjoys any recognition except for her redemption toward the end. However, her death without explanation at the end minimizes the meaningfulness of her redemption and makes her the only sacrifice in this story. Wagner’s unfair treatment of Kundry give rise to a couple of questions: what is the ultimate meaning of

\[151\] Mohr argues, “[Kundry] does not die for the sake of males… Rather, her death is a representation of a closure and completion of a valuable masculine world, in which, like a gay marriage, women are excluded but not thereby degraded or used.” Mohr, “‘Knights, Young Men, Boys’, 202.
Kundry’s redemption? Who is on the earth the redeemer in Parsifal? What Wagner tries to show us beyond the salvation story? If we look into the earlier masterpieces of Wagner, we can recognize that it was not the first time that Wagner embraced the redemption motif in his opera. Wagner was interested in this theme for a long time and he had already treated the idea—redemption through love—in his *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tristan und Isolde*.152 Raphael remarks, In *Parsifal* “redemption form is not into death, not into art, but rather in its transformation into compassion and empathy (Mitleid/Mitgefühl), which means the assertion, not disavowal of another’s identity.”153 This makes Kundry an indispensable element for the redemption theme in *Parsifal*, because she is the figure introducing Parsifal to the emotional life and teaching him compassion and empathy.

Scholars employed theories of Nietzsche, Jung, and Lacan to analyze the genuine meaning Wagner tries to deliver behind Kundry’s salvation. Slavoj Žižek suggests two possible ways of understanding Kundry. The conventional interpretation adopts Lacan’s thesis that “woman is a symptom of man.”154 Among a variety of interpretations, Weininger’s explanation that woman is the materialization of man’s sin represents the opinions of the majority critics.155 According to him, as an embodiment of man’s sin, the woman is the root for all sufferings and moral degeneration of men. Therefore, the only possibility for a man to stay away from distress and humiliation is to keep his mind honorable and resist the carnal desires. According to Catherine Clement, Kundry, as the core issue for the Grail community, plays the role of a disturbing female in Parsifal’s quest to the Grail.156 Parsifal has to prove his qualification for the

153 Raphael, “The Redemption from Love,” 120.
154 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 185.
156 Bronfen, “Kundry’s Laughter,” 151.
sacred mission of regenerating the Grail community by refusing to give in to Kundry’s seduction.

Another reading of Kundry by Slavoj Žižek reverses the first one by referring to the notion that “Man exists only through woman qua his symptom.” From this point of view, the subject will lose its ground at the same time the symptom dissolves. Barry Emslie and other scholars interpret Kundry as the true and disguised redeemer in Wagner’s Parsifal. According to them, Kundry redeems Parsifal by rendering him knowledge as well as potency to renounce his sexual enjoyment, and in turn, helps him to achieve his goal. In this sense, Parsifal could not realize his self-fulfillment without Kundry’s interference. And Kundry, who longs for the salvation throughout the entire plot, carries the only possibility of redemption by intruding into Parsifal’s quest and conducting temptation. However, with her death at the end, Kundry exists merely to satisfy the needs of other characters.

Kundry serves to be the messenger, the lover, the maid, the helper, the hindrance, the redeemed one, and the redeemer at the same time. Her varied roles result in confusions in her function and her ultimate identity in the opera. As a pious maid for the people of Monsalvat, Kundry tries her best to comfort them, while she does not stop her hazardous conspiracy against them. She nears Grail knights as a seducer and utilizes all her potential and knowledge to beguile them, but she secretly hopes for denial of her advances, since it signals the possibility of her redemption in the near future. Although Kundry supplies Parsifal with the essential message to facilitate his quest, her curse makes him wonder for many years lost. Kundry wants to be relieved and is granted salvation at the end, however, she dies immediately after the redemption. Kundry enlightens Parsifal to achieve his self-realization and functions to redeem him and other

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157 Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative, 185.
characters, but her role of redeemer is under disguise or even denied by the Grail community. Kundry carries out positive and negative deeds, but she is neither despised because of her mistakes nor appreciated for her contributions.

Even though Kundry plays several roles in the story and exerts a determining influence on developments of the plots, she does not truly participate in the narrative. Kundry is created as a symbolic figure with multiple functional significance. It is no wonder that Kundry’s characteristics and behaviors are sometimes at odds. Actually, Kundry is not the single character trapped at this dilemma. Emslie observes,

> In much nineteenth-century European art, ‘The Woman’ appears as an essentially symbolic figure saturated with ‘higher’ significant… [T]he female figure was used by male artist in an almost de-personalised manner that invariably emphasised abstract characteristic… ‘She’ is, in aesthetic production, frequently a normative and seldom a narrative figure. Indeed her status as the former helps preclude her from active participation in the latter, so that even in narratives she often appears merely to observe the stories in which she is nominally involved.\(^{158}\)

Emslie suggests instead of considering Kundry as an unsatisfactory figure with an inconsistent storyline and contradictory functions, we should view her as an ingenious design that “realis[e] creative and performing standards of unprecedented homogeneity.”\(^{159}\) In order to attain “[an] apparently harmonious fusion of the opera’s narrative course with its ideological


\(^{159}\) Emslie, “Woman as Image,” 110.
promulgations” Wagner renders Kundry features of many other characters, which not only legitimizes her inconsistency and contradictions but also enrich the symbolic meanings she presents.

Kundry’s experience in her earlier life is added to the current story by Gurnemanz’s introduction: “[Kundry] may be under a curse. She lives here now—perhaps reincarnated, to expiate some sin from an earlier life not yet forgiven there. Now she makes atonement by such deeds as benefit our knightly order; she has done good, beyond all doubt, serving us and thereby helping herself.”\textsuperscript{160} Kundry’s multi-identity is endorsed by other characters as well. She is a nameless figure with manifold names at the same time. She is addressed with assorted terms in different circumstances: Amfortas and Gurnemanz call her Kundry, the Guardians of the Grail label her as “mare” and “heathen,” and Klingsor indicates her as the “primeval witch, rose of hell” and names her Herodias and Gundryggia.\textsuperscript{161} Klingsor’s reference of Kundry to Herodias parallels Gurnemanz’s explanation of Kundry’s penitent behaviors. Kundry is another version of Herodias, who is presented in Eugène Sue’s novel \textit{Le juif errant} (1844) as the female equivalent of Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew.\textsuperscript{162} Similar to the wandering Jew, Kundry, who taunts Christ’s suffering, is punished to wander around forever and be deprived of the ability to lie and to weep.\textsuperscript{163} Kundry’s unpredictable transformation between two appearances and individuals is a materialization of her inner struggles and confusion. Kundry dreams of relief and salvation from

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{160} Wagner, \textit{Parsifal}, 72.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{161} Wagner, \textit{Parsifal}, 72, 93.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{162} Derrick Everett, “Glossary of Names” last modified May 17, 2018. http://www.monsalvat.no/names.htm#Herodias.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{163} Derrick Everett remarks that “In the 1865 Prose Draft Wagner writes of an ancient curse without stating why Kundry had been cursed. Only in the second Prose Draft of 1877, after Wagner had been reading books about early Christianity, did he introduce the idea that Kundry had mocked Jesus and that he had cursed her; so that she now seeks Christ from world to world, endless durch das Dasein quält.” See Derrick Everett, “An Introduction.”}
\end{footnotes}
“the appointed one,” and she is in a transition from the sinned old “heathen” to a penitent server, during which she has no clue to contribute except for providing the Grail community with possible help.\textsuperscript{164}

Dieter Borchmeyer suggests Heinrich Heine also exerted considerable influence on Wagner with regards to his creation of Kundry.\textsuperscript{165} In Heine’s poem \textit{Atta Troll}, Herodias is a beautiful Jewish rider, who must ride and laugh until the judgment day. Herodias is introduced as a “liebliche Gespenst” (lovely ghost), since she impresses Atta at most among the three beautiful riders. Wagner’s Kundry inherits the element of laughing all the time and riding endlessly. The transformed Kundry also reminds us of Herodias’ impressive beauty and attractiveness in \textit{Atta Troll}. In addition to absorbing influences from Eugène Sue and Heinrich Heine, Wagner’s Kundry also embraces elements and archetypes of many other characters in the Grail legend. In \textit{Parsifal}, Kundry can be identified as the messenger, the fatal lover, the absent mother, and the beast-like intruder, all of which are played by an independent character in earlier Percevalian literature.

As Lucy Beckett, Simon Williams and other critics argued, Wagner’s Kundry is “an amalgam of several figures.”\textsuperscript{166} Tracing back to an earlier series of Holy Grail legends, we can find that Kundry embraces features of Sigune—Parzival’s cousin, the Grail messenger, the beautiful Orgeluse de Logrois, Trevrizent—Parzival’s mentor, his mother, and even Condwiramurs. As a mixture of many characters, Kundry takes over the responsibility of several

\textsuperscript{164} Wagner, \textit{Parsifal}, 72.
\textsuperscript{166} Williams, “From Wolfram to Wagner,” 18.
female and male figures. She jumps into the plot in every crucial and necessary moment to exert the functions that are needed and to facilitate the flow of plots.

Kundry is an upgraded version of Cundrie la Suziere, the Grail messenger, in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*. Cundrie rides into the audience’s sight and strikes our mind with her astonishing appearance. Wolfram gives a detailed description of Cundrie’s debut.

Along came she of whom I would speak, a maiden well praised on account of her loyalty, except that her courtesy was crazed by rage. Her tidings brought grief to many people… She was not ladylike of appearance… The maiden’s learning vouchsafed that she spoke all languages well: Latin, heathen, French… [she wore] a bridal cloth from Ghent, bluer even than lapis lazuli, that downpour on joy had donned. It was a well-cut cape, all in the French style… She was nosed like a dog. Two boar’s teeth stuck out from her mouth, a good span in length. Each eyebrow thrust, plaited, past her hair-band… Cundrie had ears like a bear’s no match for a suitor’s love’s desire. Her countenance was hairy, as all acknowledged… This comely sweetheart had hands the colour of an ape’s skin. Her nails were none too bright, for the adventure tells me they stuck out like a lion’s claws.\(^{167}\)

Kundry not only borrows Cundrie’s name, but also resembles her in terms of appearance, countenance, manners, and function. They are similarly wild, and lack of cultivation in their

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looks and demeanors. Both Cundrie and Kundry suggest an involvement of the other world, nor
matter in their beast-like exterior or in the alien elements in their dressing. Cundire’s “bridal
cloth from Ghent,” Kundry’s “wild garb” and their dark complexion suggest their close
connection with the outside domain, which enables them to function as a medium to bridge “the
known” and “unknown,” and to bring news from the other world. Similar to Cundrie, who “to
Arthur’s company she brought sorrow,” Kundry “rushes and flies there and back bringing the
message faithfully and successfully.” Kundry plays the role of the Grail messenger in Parsifal:
she communicates the momentous information of Parsifal’s names, origins, and experiences, she
also announces the death of Parsifal’s mother. While Cundrie’s function as a bridge with the
other world is reinforced by her proficiency in foreign languages, Kundry is quite lame in the art
of speaking. Kundry does not entirely inherit Cundrie’s art of words—her communication skill is
only adequate for her to deliver outside news, beyond that, she almost loses the ability to
communicate in words. However, by bringing in a balsam “from farther away than [Gurnemanz]
can imagine.” Kundry confirms her role as a medium between the Grail community and the
outside world. Kundry preserves Cundrie’s essential function of “[bringing] sorrow” both with
her actions and in her message. In addition, Kundry also communicates emotions by teaching
Parsifal love and compassion.

In the earlier Percevalian romance, Sigune is another essential female character besides
Cundrie that enlightens Parzival by providing relevant information along with the development
of the story. In Chrétien de Troyes’s Perceval, the Story of the Grail, Perceval’s cousin is a
nameless figure purely serving to reveal the decease of his mother. Wolfram renders her the

168 Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival, 132; Wagner, Parsifal, 68.
169 Wagner, Parsifal, 56.
170 Wagner, Parsifal, 68.
name Sigune and compound her importance by creating several encounters between her and Parzival. Though Sigune does not disclose the mother’s passing in Wolfram’s *Parzival*, she takes the responsibility of informing the protagonist of his name as well as heritage and revealing the significance of asking the question to the Grail company: “in truth, you are called Parzival. That name means: ‘straight down the middle.’”

Sigune also lends Kundry the functions of misleading the protagonist and reencountering him. In Wolfram’s account, when Parzival seeks for the direction to Arthur’s court, Sigune intentionally misdirects him and causes a meandering in his journey, while Kundry curses Parsifal never to locate his path to the Grail. Sigune and Kundry respectively encounter the protagonist “several times during the story at what appear to be milestones in his spiritual development.”

Sigune informs Parzival of his background at the beginning of her adventure, chastises his failure of asking the disenchancing question after his visit to Munsalvaesche, and prepares him for his rejoining God under Trevrizent’s guidance. Likewise, Kundry informs Parsifal of his name and ancestry at his first visit at Monsalvat, attempts to mislead him on his quest, and witnesses his ascending to the Grail King. Just as Sigune, Kundry witnesses every single critical moment of the protagonist’s self-development and gears up his growth.

Kundry’s incredible but dangerous beauty and the strategies she employs as a temptress causing moral degradation of the Grail knights remind us of Wolfram’s Orgeluse de Logroys, Condwiramurs, and Parsifal’s mother. Orgeluse de Logroys is referred to as “a bait of love’s desire” in Wolfram’s *Parzival*, because she brings suffering and death for many knights, and

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more importantly, she is revealed as the root reason for Anfortas’s sorrow and embarrassment.\textsuperscript{173} Similar to Orgeluse, Kundry’s captivating appearance establishes her as \textit{a femme fatale}—falling in love with her is alluring but only brings compromise, dangers, and possibly even death. While Anfortas is cited as the primary victim of Orgeluse, both Amfortas and Parsifal are under threat as Kundry’s prey in \textit{Parsifal}. The strategies Kundry adopts to conduct temptation show hints of Condwiramurs, Parzival’s wife, and suggest an implication on his absent mother. Kundry pretends to offer the love of “a devoted wife” and of “the missed while absent mother” to seduce Parsifal. By arousing Parsifal’s fantasy of romantic as well as family love, Kundry tries to substitute for his mother and beloved one and expects to meet Parsifal’s spiritual demands. Kundry’s attempt at ensnaring the protagonist leads to spiritual enlightenment in Parsifal, which not only shatters the illusion of maternal and marital affection, but also teaches him compassion and benevolence. Compared to his reluctant withdrawal from Condwiramurs in \textit{Parzival}, Parsifal purposely refusal of Kundry demonstrates a positive outcome of Kundry’s initial malicious interference, and in turn, reinforces the essential function of Wagner’s creating Kundry as a mixture of several characters. By playing the role of a temptress, a wife, and the absent mother, Kundry provides Parsifal with an opportunity of experiencing various sensations, which gives rise to a spiritual transcendence in the protagonist as a result of his withstanding of the temptation.

Parsifal’s encounter with Kundry facilitates his spiritual enlightenment about sorrow, compassion, and responsibility, and in turn, prepares him well for the final success of his Grail quest. Such a relationship parallels Parzival’s fruitful stay with Trevrizent in \textit{Parzival}, who helps him to find the hidden meaning of life and motivates him to step forward in a spiritual search for

\textsuperscript{173} Wolfram von Eschenbach, \textit{Parzival}, 214.
the true meaning of knighthood. Although the manner and length of their involving with the protagonist differ, Condwiramurs, Cundrie, the mother, Sigune, and Trevrizent’s encounters with Parzival all serve as a psychic inspiration that spurs his evolution both in his self-development and in his quest in Parzival. Parzival’s mother bestows him life and the prefatory knowledge of knighthood, Cundrie and Sigune function to be the information provider, while Condwiramurs and Trevrizent teach him to love and to be noble. Wagner lets Kundry take over the responsibility and functions of Condwiramurs, Cundrie, the mother, Sigune, and Trevrizent and exert her influence as the only true helper and instigator in Parsifal. Unfortunately, Kundry’s contributing participation is not appreciated. Compared to the male member of the Grail community, who await salvation throughout the story and are happily granted that, Kundry’s redemption comes at the price of her life—very similar to the destiny of her archetypes, who are all left behind by the protagonist and not be visited again. Emslie suggested Wagner’s utilization of female character as a medium for the males to achieve their goal, he remarks, there is no male sacrifice in Parsifal, “the female figure liberates the male hero” and goes to die at the end. “Amfortas can forego his menstrual torment and recover his virginity, an option [that is] not open to woman.”

As a mixture of many characters, Kundry encompasses motivations and desires of all characters with which she has a parallel. She is the “villain,” the “donor,” and the “supernatural helper” at the same time. Kundry is present at every critical moment, carries out desired actions, and in turn, guarantees the progress of the story. As a messenger, she provides Parsifal with his identity, which is essential for the self-exploration of “an innocent dullard.”

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175 Propp, Morphology, 27, 39, 10.
176 Wagner, Parsifal, 79.
constitutes the test Parsifal has to pass in his quest by interfering as a temptress. She also plays the role of a teacher, who leads Parsifal into the spiritual world and fosters his understanding of compassion and love. However, Kundry never indeed participates in the narrative to which she contributes significantly. Kundry’s conscious and unconscious actions are either a consequence of her past life or a result of Klingsor’s manipulation; she does not do any single thing out of her present needs or benefits. Kundry does what is needed, but not what she wants to. Without independent rationality and soul, Kundry is used merely as a container of several functional characters and serves to meet the requirements of plot development. That explains why Kundry lacks independent pursuit and goal, neither does she have self-spontaneous motivations and desires. Even Kundry’s so-claimed redemption at the end is not a valid one. Wagner never considered including Kundry in his plots: The final salvation is a desired happy happening for the protagonist and other male figures, but it is an indifferent abandonment of Kundry in disguise of redemption at the point that she is no longer needed.

As a functional character, Kundry “function[s] to display men’s relations to other men.”

Wagner’s patriarchal oppression of Kundry is further proved by his inattentive dispensation of her: Kundry is not only a figure with particularly low self-esteem and very little character development, but also a female without “her own subjectivity, her own selfhood,” which is specifically demonstrated in her extremely vague identity and forever outsider status throughout the story. Kundry does not give herself any acknowledgment for her efforts in compensating the past errors. In her eyes, “[she] never help[s]. [She] never do[es] good; [she] long[s] only for rest.” Kundry’s low self-esteem leads to her vulnerable situation—she easily

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177 Tyson, “Feminist Criticism,” 97.
178 Tyson, “Feminist Criticism,” 90.
loses control of herself and gives in to a more powerful entity. When Klingsor summons her to set off for another wicked mission, Kundry is reluctant to surrender and expresses extensive woe for her destiny, but she is “in vain to resist, [when] the time has come.” Klingsor’s spell on her prevails over her consciousness, and Kundry’s willpower as well as self-control are not strong enough to fight against her male master’s power, so that Kundry has to undermine the authority of the dominant patriarchal group on behalf of a marginalized male figure. As a medium of different patriarchal communities, Kundry in the point of fact “imitate[s] patriarchy’s representation of herself as it wants to see her (that is to play the inferior role given her by patriarchy’s definition of sexual difference, which foreground’s men’s superiority).” Kundry’s series of vain struggles with patriarchal oppression as well as her reluctant representation of one masculine unit to confront another establishes her as a pathetic figure in Parsifal and reconfirms her inferiority to other male characters.

Being aware of her role as an intermediary between the present and absent characters and as a medium between diverse patriarchal entities, it is not surprising for us to identify Kundry hardly undergoes any character development in Parsifal. In contrast with a well-developed character, who aims for an ultimate triumph and is willing to accommodate to the ever-changing situations, Kundry only focuses on her on-going activities but ignores the possible fluctuations in the future and the wins and losses in the long term. Without a clear subjectivity, Kundry continues to be the aimless errand-runner throughout the story and never extricates herself from the destiny of a vainly pursuing entity. In her shabby appearance, Kundry maintains a submissive attitude toward the protagonist and the Grail community, no matter what happens to her and her

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180 Wagner, Parsifal, 83.
surroundings; and as an evil temptress, she never makes any breakthrough in her relations with the protagonist and other male characters, either.

I have argued that Kundry’s salvation, which comes at the price of her life, does not lead up to a desirable improvement in her circumstances and standing. More importantly, as an alien woman interfering with Parsifal’s quest, Kundry’s status as a complete outsider never changes from the beginning to the end of the story.¹⁸² Gurnemanz addresses Kundry as “the wild woman” and the squires refer to her as “heathen,” and “sorceress.”¹⁸³ None of them considers Kundry as a member of their community or someone that deserves respect and equality. These male characters express their exclusion of Kundry from the mainstream circle straightforwardly in their first encounter. They despise Kundry for her uncivilized and indecent demeanors and even question Kundry for her presence in their domain: “why you lie there like a wild beast?”¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, Kundry acknowledges her difference from the members of the Grail society: “[I] have nothing in common with you,” and she calmly accepts her inferior status to the patriarchy by announcing she wants to “serve” them.¹⁸⁵ Kundry appears to be content with her identity as an outsider—she never tried to challenge the authority of patriarchal society and never envisioned an acceptance into the Grail community. Compared to the male characters, who are either essential participants of the patriarchal society or an opponent, Kundry is constantly somebody else, who is deprived of the opportunity of becoming an insider. In The Second Sex,

¹⁸² Williams argues that even though Kundry has various functions and assorted values as a character, she does have “some consistency. Throughout the drama she suffers, she is an outsider.” See Williams, “From Wolfram to Wagner,” 23.
¹⁸³ Wagner, Parsifal, 72.
¹⁸⁴ Wagner, Parsifal, 71.
¹⁸⁵ Wagner, Parsifal, 71, 120.
Simone de Beauvoir suggested a conventional patriarchal underestimation of women as man’s other. With respect to this Tyson observes:

Men are considered essential subjects (independent selves with free will), while women are considered contingent beings (dependent beings controlled by circumstances). Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men. Thus, women are defined not just in terms of their difference from men, but in terms of their inadequacy in comparison to men. The word woman, therefore, has the same implication as the word other. A woman is not a person in her own right. She is man’s Other: she is less than a man; she is a kind of alien in a man’s world; she is not a fully developed human being the way a man is.\(^{186}\)

As a functional character, Kundry is not constructed as adequately as other male characters in Parsifal. Being void of subjectivity and free will, Kundry could only achieve meaning by building relations with men. Once males lose the intention of maintaining a connection with her, Kundry is deprived of the very foundation of her existence—which explains Kundry’s unexpected death at the end. Compared to other motivated interfering women, who aim to build a legitimate connection with the protagonist in the form of a romantic relationship or a marriage, Kundry never wanted to be a mere lover or wife. However, Kundry’s disinterest in becoming a love object could not be justifiably interpreted as a protest to the dominant patriarchal ideology; instead, it is a more severe sexual oppression, which completely excludes

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\(^{186}\) Tyson, “Feminist Criticism,” 92.
her from men’s society. Kundry’s lack of subjectivity is not only demonstrated in the fact that she has to behave herself according to the patriarchal requirements and she can achieve her meaning by establishing relations with male characters, but also revealed in the sadness that she never has a chance to participate in the plot.

Even though Kundry is actively involved in the transformation of the Grail community and takes over the obligations of several characters to meet the needs of plots development, she never truly participates in the narrative. In Wagner’s patriarchal drama, Kundry can only serve, support, and obey male characters, but she cannot achieve her agency as an independent woman with subjectivity. As the single female figure and the only sacrifice, Kundry engages herself wholeheartedly in confirming the patriarchal superiority and in realizing men’s connections with other male characters. With very limited self-development and unexpected death at the end, Kundry remains to be an outsider throughout the epic, which is not only because the Grail community does not welcome her, but also a result of her indifference to joining the patriarchal society as a woman. Although merely a vehicle constructed to meet the dramatic changes of tense plots, nonetheless Kundry fascinates us by blending elements and archetypes of the Perceval legend.
“Nie Xiaoqian 聶小倩,” one of the most beloved and influential stories in Pu Songling’s (1640-1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 presents a romantic love story after an accidental encounter between a human character and an alien creature from the netherworld. Nie Xiaoqian, the young ghost heroine, dies at the age of eighteen and has fallen in control of a powerful demon ever since. She is forced to approach scholars lodging in a deserted monastery and tempt them with her beauty and wealth. The story presents her as an innocent and beautiful young girl, which enables her to arouse men’s love and sympathy without much effort. Although she does not match the image of a typically elegant and virtuous woman, which is valued more by the ancient Chinese society and accepted more widely as a good wife, she is regarded as an excellent companion and an appealing concubine by ancient Chinese scholars because of her appealing appearance and considerate personality. However, Xiaoqian’s case is more complicated; the hidden motivations of Xiaoqian’s interference overthrow the traditional definition of her as a naïve and manipulated victim. My analysis reveals that she is actually strongly motivated and considerably powerful. The powerfulness of Xiaoqian as a complicated and purposeful individual is not only exhibited in her sophisticated personality and her hidden motivation (which progresses with the change of her situation), but also lies in the fact that she successfully extricates herself from the universal destiny of death after the fulfillment of unrealized dreams as an alien woman. More importantly, Xiaoqian plans and carries out a series of strategies in order to integrate into Ning Caichen’s family and successfully wins a legitimate status in the human society.

In this story, Xiaoqian makes use of her attractive appearance to approach scholars with the purpose of sucking their blood for the demon. She seduces every scholar who comes to her
way without compassion until she encounters Ning Caichen 宁采臣, who resists her temptation. Different from all the scholars Xiaoqian has met, who readily surrender to their desires, Ning Caichen insists on being upright and honest and sticks to his principle that “there is no woman for me but my wife 生平无二色.” Xiaoqian is moved by Ning Caichen’s integrity and warns him the upcoming danger. She advises him to stay together with the swordsman, Yan Chixia 燕赤霞, who “is one of those rare people, whom [the demons] don’t dare approach],” so that the supernatural creatures dare not go near him 奇人也，不敢近. Xiaoqian also confesses to him her evil deeds and discloses her willingness to leave this kind of sinful lifestyle. She asks Ning to do her a favor to relocate her bones, so that he can help her to start a new life. Ning feels sympathy toward her and follows her instructions to rescue her from the demon’s hands. Xiaoqian claims to be so grateful for Ning Caichen’s help that she offers to serve him and his family as a concubine or as a servant. Even though Ning Caichen’s mother hesitates and worries about Xiaoqian’s ghost identity at the beginning, Xiaoqian takes care of Ning and his mother in the name of his younger sister. Because Ning Caichen’s wife is seriously sick, Xiaoqian takes over her responsibilities and manages the household as the female master of the family, and in turn progressively gains the favor of Ning Caichen’s mother. Finally, she wins understanding and acceptance of the surrounding people and gets married to Ning Caichen after his wife dies. Later she gives birth to two sons, and they live together as wife and husband ever after.

The love story between a human character and an alien creature such as “Nie Xiaoqian” is far from uncommon in classical Chinese literature. This literary trope is primarily well-known

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187 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 160; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 223.
188 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 162; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 226.
as *zhiguai* (志怪, records of the anomalies) in the Six dynasties period (220–589 CE).\(^{189}\) It is further developed during Tang dynasty (618–907), “when authors began to exploit the full literary potential of the strange in longer and more artfully narrated *chuanqi* (tales of the marvelous).”\(^{190}\) Actually, this literary tradition started much earlier, “Stories of marvels and encounters with supernatural beings had been popular in China at least since the Han dynasty, but the favorite compendium of all such stories was *Liao-zhai’s Record of Wonders* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*), by Pu Song-ling,” which is a collection of near 500 tales in *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* style.”\(^{191}\) Pu Songling’s main subjects are “ghost, fox-spirit, and abnormal human experiences—things he considered ‘strange’.”\(^{192}\) After a close reading of *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Zeitlin identifies three themes it addresses—“obsession (subject/object), dislocation in gender (male/female), and the dream (illusion/reality)—all of which involving the crossing of fundamental boundaries in human experience.”\(^{193}\)

Sing-Chen Lydia Chiang points out Pu Songling’s stories of ghosts and fox-spirits, which are probably “based on literary antecedents or existing folk and urban lore,” serve as a vehicle of “self-expression, gender and class identity construction, meaning creation, value generation,


\(^{193}\) Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 12.
individual empowerment, and societal transformation.”¹⁹⁴ The distinctive literary style that Pu Songling adopts to “represent his material…reflects the author’s multiple identities as member of a certain gender and class, as scholar and philosopher, and as emotion being and literary talent.”¹⁹⁵ At the time of Qing dynasty 清朝 (1644-1912), the number of the educated individuals participating in the imperial examination far outnumbered the availability of state official positions, which resulted in many scholars’ long journey of taking exams and compromises in life and career.¹⁹⁶ Pu Songling was one of those scholars. Frustrated by his failure in the provincial examination, Pu Songling spent the majority of his life as a private tutor and projected his worldview and fantasy in his strange stories.¹⁹⁷

Sarah Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen write “The most obvious thing about death is that it is always only represented.”¹⁹⁸ The mystery of afterlife makes the ghost an ideal subject for Pu Songling to “inhabit [his] subjective viewpoint of the dead and [the living].”¹⁹⁹ His love stories between an alien creature and a human character reveal his worldview, his vision of ideal life, and his understanding of the relationship between men and women. As has already been mentioned, Fan Lipei 樊利配, drawing upon the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl G. Jung, concluded the love story between a human and ghost demonstrate the four kinds of very basic

¹⁹⁴ Sing-Chen Lydia Chiang, Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China, Sinica Leidensia 67 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 7.
¹⁹⁵ Chiang, Collecting the Self, 7.
¹⁹⁶ Owen, “Pu Song-ling,” 1103.
¹⁷ For more details, please see Owen, “Pu Song-ling,” 1103.
human desires: “pursuit of perpetual love, punishment on the lewd man, awakening of feminist consciousness and man’s aesthetical standard towards females.”

As a representative love story between a mortal man and a ghost girl, “Nie Xiaoqian” serves all of the four above mentioned functions. Zhang Renrang and Li Yongchang suggest, the male Chinese scholars’ fantasy for a happy life with a perfect lover and a widely acknowledged success is adequately represented in Xiaoqian. Pu Songling projects his aesthetic standard toward women in his story by giving his heroines the qualities of a virtuous wife and an attractive concubine. Mainstream Chinese culture emphasized different features that a wife and a concubine should embody. In ancient Chinese society, parents took full responsibility for arranging marriages for their sons and daughters; all the information they collect about their future son-in-law or daughter-in-law depends on a matchmaker’s introduction. Therefore, a man generally does not anticipate marrying a wife with a charming personality and fascinating appearance. Instead, he pays more attention to whether his future wife is virtuous and capable enough to manage a whole household. In addition to a wife, a man could bring in several concubines, whom he had the freedom to choose according to personal preference. The Confucian virtues are not always expected in a concubine; a man cares more about whether his concubine can please him by meeting his emotional needs and carnal desires. It is a common belief that a man should choose a virtuous girl as his wife and pick up young, beautiful, gentle, and nice-looking girls for concubines.

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While a traditional virtuous heroine perfectly fits in the role of a good wife, the unconventional female character, such as a courtesan or a fox-spirit, is typically included as an ideal concubine in Chinese literature. But a female character is rarely constructed to possess a wife’s virtues and a concubine’s charms and sensitivity. As a product of male author’s fantasy, however, Xiaoqian demonstrates her potential for being a wife and a concubine at the same time. In addition to showing virtue, her excellent appearance and her personality make her a perfect concubine. Like the majority of ghost women presented in Chinese tales, Xiaoqian’s “visual appearance of the face and figure [are] manifested as superlative beauty.”

In Ning Caichen’s eyes, Xiaoqian is “a seventeen-year-old girl … a peerless beauty 一十七八女子 … 仿佛艷絕” and “her skin [is] like a mirror of rosy clouds drifting overhead 肌映流霞.” The surrounding people are astonished at her beauty and “thought she might be a goddess 疑[其]為仙.”

The old woman who oversees Xiaoqian’s behavior on behalf of the demon praises her: “You are like a beauty from a painting and if I were a young man, you’d have attracted and stolen my very soul 小娘子端好是畫中人，遮莫老身是男子，也被攝魂去.” Xiaoqiao’s young and appealing appearance predetermine her influence over men. Moreover, as a successful temptress, Xiaoqian is familiar with men’s carnal desires and knows how to please a man. Owen remarks: “[The Chinese] strangeness often took the form of an abrupt intrusion of a sexual relationship into ordinary life.” Even though Xiaoqian’s temptation fails, her inviting posture justifies her being considered as a concubine rather than a wife, who is supposed to be more morally upright and honorable. In addition to her inborn activeness, her naïve and gentle personality presents her as a

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206 Owen, “Pu Song-ling,” 1103.
more adorable female. Xiaoqian’s admiration for Ning Caichen satisfies his emotional needs, which not only proves their value and but also gratifies their vanity. In this sense, Xiaoqian’s image and her personality qualify her as an ideal concubine for the protagonist.

Not only does Xiaoqian have a concubine’s beauty, she also demonstrates considerable household skills and remains subservient to Ning Caichen and his mother. That is, in addition to the high sensitivity and fantastic beauty of a preferred concubine, Xiaoqian also possesses necessary virtues of a good wife. She expresses her willingness of taking care of Ning Caichen and his mother and behaves herself as a responsible human daughter-in-law:

Each dawn, Xiaoqian appeared to Ning’s mother, bringing a basin for her to wash in, then turned to managing other activities in the household, never failing to carry out the mother’s will. … Before all this, when Ning’s wife first fell ill, Ning’s mother became fatigued, unable to handle the load; the arrival of Xiaoqian was a great relief to her and in her heart she esteemed the girl.

女朝旦朝母，捧匜沃盥，下堂操作，無不曲承母志 … 先是，甯妻病廢，母劬不可堪；自得女，逸甚，心德之。207

By exhibiting her sincerity and proving her worthiness in a household, Xiaoqian is finally accepted as Ning Caichen’s wife. She then fulfills his most crucial filial duty when she gives birth to Ning Caichen’s first son. Such filial piety, advocated by Confucius 孔子, Mencius 孟子, and Li Yuxiu 李毓秀, is at the core of traditional Chinese ethics.208 To produce offspring is the

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207 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 166; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 231.
most significant filial virtue. Mencius writes, “There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them.”\(^ {209} \) Xiaoqian’s “surprisingly physical, tactile, and fertile qualities” enable her to complete the most important obligation of a qualified human wife.\(^ {210} \)

As a rare combinatory figure, Xiaoqian displays comprehensive virtues of a gentle concubine and a virtuous wife at different stages of the story. From this point of view, Pu Songling created a perfect female to reward his main character’s integrity and nobility. That is one reason Liu Yanping 刘燕萍 considers that the central agenda of “Nie Xiaoqian” is that good will be rewarded with good and evil with evil.\(^ {211} \) She suggests the scholar from Lanxi 蘭溪 and his servant die because they succumb to Xiaoqian’s temptation; on the contrary, Ning Caichen reveals his noble character by rejecting the lure of beauty and gold and rescuing the heroine from out of the clutches of the demon; therefore, he is rewarded with Xiaoqian’s love and a success in the imperial examination.\(^ {212} \)

Pu Songling’s treatment of his hero and heroine reveal a widespread belief of Chinese literati, who are convinced that although not physically strong, they are capable of making a difference with their knowledge, intelligence, and personal charisma. Scholars anticipate being

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\(^ {209} \) The original text reads: “不孝有三, 無後為大” (Buxiao you san, wuhou weida). The Eastern Han 東漢 (25-220) scholar Zhao Qi 趙岐 offered an interpretation of this saying in *Mengzi zhushu 孟子注疏*: “不娶無子, 絕先祖祀, 三不孝也” [Not to marry, not to have a son, not at all to offer libations to the ancestors, are three ways of being unfilial]. For details, please see Zhao Qi 趙岐 and Song Shuang 宋爽, *Mengzi zhushu 孟子注疏* (Changchun: Jilin chubanshe, 2005), “Lilou shang 離婁上, Chapter 26.”

\(^ {210} \) Bronfen and Goodwin, Introduction to *Death and Representation*, 4.

\(^ {211} \) Liu Yanping 刘燕萍, *Guaidan yu fengci: mingqing tongsu xiaoshuo quanshi 怪诞与讽刺: 明清通俗小说诠释* (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2003), 58. The original text is “《聂小倩》一则传达了善有善报，恶有恶报的讯息.”

\(^ {212} \) Liu, *Guaidan yu fengci*, 58.
rewarded for their hard work and nobleness with a promising future along with the admiration of beautiful girls. Pu Songling rewards his protagonist with everything he expected but was unable to realize in real life. He rewards Ning Caichen with a flawless lover, “the perpetual love,” and a successful career.²¹³

Current academic research on “Nie Xiaoqian” is comparatively comprehensive and quite fruitful. However, most scholarship concentrates on analyzing Xiaoqian in the light of her husband Ning Caichen or in the context of their interrelationship. Critics tend to downplay the individuality and complicacy of Xiaoqian as an independent and tough-minded female. Though Xiaoqian is an artistic product created by the male author to meet men’s aesthetic standard and life fantasy, her story does not end with a conventional happy union after Xiaoqian’s rescue. Instead, Pu Songling details the difficulties Xiaoqian encounters when she endeavors to integrate into the Ning’s family. He highlights the trivia of daily life, the initial repulsion of Ning’s mother, and the hunting of the demon.²¹⁴ There is a long process of integration, since Xiaoqian interferes in Ning Caichen’s life until she is finally permitted to join human society. As this process progresses, she is propelled forward by strong personal motivations at every single stage. In order to really comprehend Xiaoqian, we need to examine the inner drives impelling her progressive intrusion into the protagonist’s life. By exploring Xiaoqian’s ultimate intentions and hidden desires we can get a glimpse into her independent and powerful nature, and in turn understand the influence of her interference on herself, on the protagonist, and on the community.

Pu Songling bestows Xiaoqian an alien identity, which permits her to approach young scholars without public condemnation, justifies her flirtatious behavior, and helps her to win forgiveness and acceptance. When Xiaoqian tries to merge into the human community as an alien creature, her nature is complicated in dimension and scope. The discrepancy between her identity and her goal determines she is a figure full of contradictions. First of all, the contradictions exhibit themselves in the divergence between her innocent appearance and her true identity. Xiaoqian’s delicate and beautiful appearance creates an image of a naive and fragile young girl who appears to be a perfect companion for a hard-working scholar. Readers would not attribute to her with any villainous nature; however, in point of fact, Xiaoqian intrudes into the protagonist’s life with the malevolent intention of sucking his blood to fulfill her task and “her beauty and sex [are] used as bait” to destroy her targets. Owen notes: “The constant play on appearance and a truth that lies behind appearance is worked out through the social roles and obligations that shape human relationships, especially between men and women.”

Secondly, Xiaoqian does not project a single identity, the transformations in her mind and behavior make it difficult to determine her role in the story. As a female ghost controlled by others, Xiaoqian lures her targets with her body and the promise of fortune. “Prior to her verification,” write Anthony Yu, “Nieh had already taken on traits of the succubus and the vampire.” However, Xiaoqian is in the meanwhile a pitiable victim manipulated by a powerful demon. She is “an unwilling seductress, compelled by a demon stronger than herself to be an accessory to murder.” She has no control over her destiny and does not commit murders to

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215 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 427.
216 Owen, “Pu Song-ling,” 1103.
217 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 427.
218 Allan Barr, “Disarming Intruders,” 516.
serve her own interests. Thirdly, Xiaoqian struggles with her conscience before obeying the
demon’s evil orders. Xiaoqian is aware of her guilt and feels a pang of conscience, “I’m
constantly coerced by demons to carry out their foul demands. It’s actually not my own will to
turn to people and seduce them 輒被妖物威脅，歷役賤務；靦顔向人，實非所樂.”219 However,
she is not powerful enough to extricate herself from the demon’s control. Because she is
kindhearted by nature, she repents of her sinful deeds and offers helpful information when her
target proves to be an upright man of honor. She warns Ning Caichen of the imminent danger:
“Now there’s no one left in the monastery to be killed, I’m afraid the evil spirits will come to
destroy you 今寺中無可殺者，恐當以夜叉來.”220 Xiaoqian also teaches him the way to ensure his
safety “If you stay in Yan’s room, you can escape them 與燕生同室可免.”221 It is hard to tell
whether Xiaoqian is devil or an angel and whether she is a helper or victim, but the inconsistency
in her characterhood renders her more complicated and charming.

Xiaoqian’s subjectivity and empowerment potential lie not only in her complicated
selfhood and identity, but also in her shifting and hidden motivations. Lin Chen 林辰 divides
“Nie Xiaoqian” into three phases: the encounter of Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian, Xiaoqian’s
repentance, and the union of Xiaoqian and Ning Caichen.222 It is noteworthy that Xiaoqian’s
interference happen throughout the three stages, during which she grows more and more solid
and sophisticated with the development of the plot. At the beginning, Xiaoqian is under the
control of demons. She obeys their instruction to initiate temptation. Her personal motivation for

219 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 162; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 226.
220 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 162; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 226.
221 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 162; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 226.
222 Lin Chen 林辰, Shenguai xiaoshuoshi: Zhongguo xiaoshuoshi congshu 神怪小說史：中國小說
史叢書 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1998), 358. The original text reads: “《聂小倩》结
构严谨，层次分明。全篇可分为：宁采臣遇鬼（聂小倩）、女鬼聂小倩悔悟、情鬼聂小倩和宁采臣
结好三个段落。”
doing so is quite obscure at this point. It seems that her interference with Ning’s life is a random accident. The second stage starts at the time that Xiaoqian recognizes Ning Caichen’s lofty moral character and she confesses her sins to him.

“I’ve encountered many men, but none of them as uncompromising as you. You’re truly a sage, so I don’t dare deceive you… while [a man] makes love to men, I secretly drill a hole in the sole of his foot and then when he loses consciousness, I extract his blood for the demons to drink; sometimes I use gold—which isn’t really gold, but the bones of a luosha demon—and anyone who kept it would have his heart and liver cut out: these two tactics ordinarily work on everyone.”

“妾閱人多矣, 未有剛腸如君者。君誠聖賢, 妾不敢欺…狎昵我者, 隱以錐刺其足, 彼即茫若迷, 因攝血以供妖飲; 又或以金, 非金也, 乃羅剎鬼骨, 留之能截取人心肝。二者凡以投時好耳。”

In her confession, Xiaoqian emphasizes her unwillingness in participating in the crimes and indicates she is a miserable victim: “I died when I was only eighteen and was buried beside the monastery, where I’m constantly coerced by demons to carry out their foul demands. It’s actually not my own will to turn to people and seduce them十八夭殂, 葬寺側, 輒被妖物威脅,歷役賤務; 觀顏向人, 實非所樂。”


puppet temptress, who is waiting to be saved by a “superhero.” Upon meeting Ning Caichen, who shows incredible integrity and nobility, Xiaoqian’s personal motivation starts to exert an influence on the plots. The idea of escaping from the demon’s control grows in Xiaoqian’s heart, and she counts on Ning Caichen for the opportunity of a new life. Therefore, Xiaoqian comes to Ning Caichen and instructs him how to avoid the impending threat from the demons. When Ning Caichen expresses his gratitude, Xiaoqian makes a plea for rescue with tears in her eyes:

“I am sinking into a bottomless sea, grasping for land where there isn’t any. Your righteous spirit towers above the clouds, so surely you can find a way to rescue me from my torment. If you’re willing to do this, collect my bones and then bury them in a quiet place—you’d be giving me more than a second life.”

“妾墮玄海，求岸不得。郎君義氣幹雲，必能拔生救苦。倘肯囊妾朽骨，歸葬安宅，不啻再造。”

Zhang Renrang observes that Xiaoqian’s confession and her seeking help from Ning Caichen mark the turning point of both her destiny and her disposition. From this point on, she develops into a complicated rounded character who is good at concealing her real feelings. Even though Xiaoqian’s first encounter happens by accident, the possibility of breaking away from the demon’s control and winning a new life is the primary reason that stimulates her to keep her connection with the protagonist and to offer him information and help. Xiaoqian not only sees in Ning Caichen an opportunity to change her miserable situation, but also envisions a

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225 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 163; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 227.
bright future with him, but she keeps her ultimate purpose hidden when she asks Ning Caichen for help.

Pu Songling downplays Xiaoqian’s motivation and her hidden longings. However, readers cannot help but question what she actually wants when Xiaoqian refuses to leave Ning Caichen after he relocates her remains. Xiaoqian not only intends to rid herself of the demon’s manipulation as she claims, but she also aims to become Ning Caichen’s legitimate consort, and in turn to integrate herself back into the human world. Nevertheless, Xiaoqian keeps her goal secret throughout the entire plot. Xiaoqian follows Ning Caichen home and insists on repaying her debt of gratitude in the form of taking care him and his family, “You’re true to your word and if I were to die for you ten times it wouldn’t enough to repay you. Please let me accompany you home so I can pay my respects to your mother and father; even if you make me your servant, I won’t regret it. 君信義，十死不足以報。請從歸，拜識姑嫜，媵禦無悔.” Xiaoqian emphasizes her deep gratitude toward Ning Caichen once more when meeting his mother:

“I was drifting all alone, far from parents and brothers. Young master Ning rescued me when I was exposed to horrible influences and to express my gratitude even superficially for the aid he’s given me, I’d be glad to serve him with dishpan and broom to repay his great kindness.”

“兒飄然一身，遠父母兄弟。蒙公子露覆，澤被發膚，願執箕帚，以報高義。”

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228 Zhang, Liaozhai zhiyi, 307.
229 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 164; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 229.
230 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 165; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 229-230.
Xiaoqian is aware it is challenging for an ordinary human family to accept a ghost girl. Therefore, she lays great stress on her gratitude and her willingness to repay her debt, which not only justifies her unexpected interference in the Ning Caichen’s family, but also establishes her as grateful and undemanding girl.

However, Xiaoqian’s series of actions at Ning Caichen’s home reveals that she anticipates that her behavior will do more than just expressing her thankfulness—her ultimate purpose is to become Ning Caichen’s mate. When arriving at Ning Caichen’s home, Xiaoqian takes the initiative to visit Ning Caichen’ mother, the most senior woman at home, and then she asks to visit Ning Caichen’s wife. The series of visits she proposes is a typical procedure that a concubine goes through when she is brought in a family for the first time. Although Xiaoqian does not mention “wife,” “concubine,” or “spouse,” her implication is quite evident. Therefore, Ning’s mother replies to her: “Young lady, I appreciate your offer to look after my son… But he’s my only son and I need him to carry on the family line, so I dare not let him take a ghost wife 小娘子惠顧吾兒，老身喜不可已。但生平止此兒，用承祧緒，不敢令有鬼偶.”

The strategies Xiaoqian adopts to progressively achieve her agency in the face of rejection verifies her empowerment and her strong willpower. According to Yu, Xiaoqian’s most impressive accomplishment is “her developing relation with her benefactor and his mother, … re-introducing herself to the ways of the living, [and] winning gradually for herself their admiration, trust, gratitude, and finally, love.” When her straightforward offer to serve Ning Caichen is turned down by his mother, Xiaoqian on the one hand promises her loyalty, and on the other hand makes an immediate compromise. Xiaoqian offers to look after the family as

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231 Pu Songling, Liaozaizhiyi, 1: 165; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 230.
232 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 428.
Ning’s younger sister: “Truly, I could never be disloyal to [Ning Caichen]. Though you’re worried about the honesty of a person from the underworld, please let me stay with you, his mother, and consider him my elder brother, treating you like my own parents, serving you from dawn till dusk. 兒實無二心。泉下人既不見信於老母，請以兄事，依高堂，奉晨昏.”233 By this means, Xiaoqian is kept in the family and granted opportunities to establish friendly relations with Ning and his mother. Since Ning Caichen’s wife is seriously sick, Xiaoqian takes over all the household chores and plays the role of his wife. Allan Barr indicates: “By untiring service, [Xiaoqian] makes herself indispensable to Ning Caichen’s mother, finally dispelling the fears of the older woman and convincing her that she is an ideal match for her son.”234

If Xiaoqian’s first encounter with Ning Caichen in the deserted monastery is a pure coincidence, her insistence of going home with Ning Caichen is an intentional interference in his life and in the human world. Because of her ghost identity, Xiaoqian does not have any connection, which could help her to assimilate into human society. After breaking away from the demon, Xiaoqian is eager to find a safe domestic sphere in which to start a new life. Ning Caichen’s home is undoubtedly the best choice: on the one hand, Ning Caichen has the willingness and ability to protect her from any potential threat from the demon; on the other hand, she admires Ning Caichen and visualizes him as the most promising candidate for her future husband.

Fan Lipei and Liu Yanping argue that the love story between Nie Xiaoqian and Ning Caichen can be read as awareness of women’s gender consciousness.235 However, some critics

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233 Pu Songling, Liaozaizhiyi, 1: 165; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 230.
including Anthony Yu and Wang Xiaoxia 王曉霞 disagree with this opinion and indicate that Xiaoqian’s subordinate status remains unchanged throughout the entire plot. Yu points out: “She left the clutches of the demon only to become the model subservient wife and daughter-in-law.” Scholars holding this view argue that even though Xiaoqian escapes from the demon’s control with Ning Caichen’s help, she does not welcome any genuine freedom, but rather she volunteers to choose a master for herself. If her previous duty had been to please the demon and meet his demands, her present obligation is to obtain Ning Caichen’s affection and win out as the most competent virtuous wife candidate. Wang Xiaoxia suggests Xiaoqian’s pursuit of love revolves around Ning Caichen. She needs him to fulfill her happiness. Without him, she cannot find the meaning of her life or prove her value as a female.

By devoting herself to taking care of Ning and his family, Xiaoqian volunteers “to imitate patriarchy’s representation of herself as it wants to see her.” Although this text reinforces patriarchal ideology through its apparent approval of Xiaoqian’s submissive personality and her dedication to becoming a wife, it does not mean Xiaoqian is not a powerful and determined character. Instead, Xiaoqian is a literary representation of the Chinese philosophical idea “soft and weak overcome hard and strong.”

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Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 429; Wang Xiaoxia, 王曉霞, “Discuss the Male Consciousness of Nie Xiaoqian 浅谈《聂小倩》中的男权意识,” Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Philosophy & Social Science) 内蒙古师范大学学报（哲学社会科学版）42, no. 1 (January 2013): 52-55.
Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 429.
Wang, “Discuss the Male Consciousness,” 52.
temperament and circuitous skill are the sources of … the mastering powers.”

Although Xiaoqian appears to be very obedient and compromises easily in the face of disapproval, she never makes a concession in her ultimate goal. When her intention is opposed by others, she turns to an indirect way in the disguise of compromise to move toward her goal. In order to stay in Ning’s home, she suggests serving him as his concubine or maid. When her initial proposal is turned down by Ning’s mother, she makes a compromise on her role and offers to take care of the family as his younger sister. Since Xiaoqian is denied lodging in at night, she begs Ning to help her with the Surangama sutra and uses this as an excuse to linger in Ning’s studio until late. When she is urged to leave, she expresses her fears and loneliness: “It’s a strange land that a lonely spirit inhabits—a desolate grave is awfully frightening.”

Although Ning dares not to disobey his mother: “[He] privately pitied her and wished he could let her stay the night.”

Aware of the concerns of Ning’s mothers, Xiaoqian voluntarily taking over all the housework responsibilities. Lan Huiru writes: “Xiaoqian attends upon Ning’s mother as her daughter-in-law and finally wins her acceptance.” Xiaoqian’s gentleness is a vehicle she utilizes to achieve her agency rather than a manifestation of her lack of selfhood. Xiaoqian’s powerful and manipulative nature is “hidden, not competitive, and even beneficial to others.”

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242 An influential text in esoteric Buddhism.

243 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 166; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 231.

244 Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 166; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 231.

245 Lan Huiru, 藍慧茹, Cong Liaozhai zhiyi lun Pu Songling de nüxingguan 從《聊齋誌異》論蒲松齡的女性觀 (Taipei: Xiwei zixun keji gufen youxian gongsi, 2005), 56; the original text reads: “聶小倩以媳婦的姿態侍奉甯母，終於贏得甯母的接納。”

246 Huang, “Woman’s Power,” 195.
One of Xiaoqian’s impressive achievements as an independent and influential female figure is that she fulfills the dream of an unmarried ghost girl and selects her husband out of free will. “Again and Again,” writes Daniel Hsieh, “Ghost stories suggest that for women love and desire are a more important, a more inherently essential part of their being.” Different from men, who can expect prosperity in their career, the only way for a woman to realize herself and achieve happiness is through marriage. Hsieh observes in the ghost stories, typically “the young girl who dies prematurely … is allowed to return … to experience love.”

As a virgin ghost that dies before getting married, Xiaoqian interferes with Ning Caichen’s lifespan with the longing of experiencing love and marriage, and she successfully fulfills her incomplete lifetime and realizes her long-time dream.

It is noteworthy that Xiaoqian enjoys a complete autonomy in her marriage and the selection of her husband. There are a few scholars lodged at the deserted monastery around the same time as the protagonist, but they all died at Xiaoqian’s hands. Ning Caichen is the only one being treated with respect and admiration among those scholars. Xiaoqian’s different attitudes towards these scholars suggest she does not turn to a man for help at random. “Even when she was a seductive spirit subservient to the demonic powers,” advises Yu, “[Xiaoqian] already showed remarkable perception [in her] acknowledging the fine qualities of the man she tried to tempt.” Ning Caichen’s integrity convinces Xiaoqian of his potential to become a good husband and a thriving social being; therefore, Xiaoqian targets him as the agent for her rescue and plots to insert herself into his life gradually. Compared to the typical women in the ancient

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249 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 428.
society, who had no voice over their choice husband and or whether or not they got married, Xiaoqian’s relationship and marriage are based on love and free choice; therefore, she actually has substantial control of her destiny.

More importantly, Xiaoqian as an alien intruder achieves an unusual happy ending. Although the romance between a human being and an alien creature is far from uncommon, a happy ending happens extremely rarely.250 Most stories involving a union across borders cannot avoid the destiny of separation at the end.251 Sometimes the alien woman is virtuous and helpful, but she is merely allowed to accompany her mortal partner in his disappointment and frustration.252 When the human protagonist achieves success or reaches a superior life stage, the alien lover is forced to leave or die. By avoiding the conventional separation and winning a legitimate status in the human community, Xiaoqian shows a possibility for an alien woman to “progressive [reintegrate] into the human community.”253 Sheng notices that there is an apparent change in Xiaoqian’s eating habits, which implies her gradual transformation from a ghost into a

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250 A happy ending does happen in some love stories between a human and an alien, such as “The Dragon King’s Daughter 柳毅傳,” and “Qingfeng 青鳳.” The ghost female’s reintegrating into the human world or even returning to a human body is also recorded, but in those recording, the ghost is typically an innocent girl who dies at a very young age. With the attentive care and help of the protagonist and her own efforts, the young girl gradually recovers her vitality, which resembles the way a young baby human girl gradually grows up to a mature adult. For an example of such a story, please see “The Daughter of Xu Xuanfang 徐玄方女,” which is included in Taiping guangji 太平廣記. Please see Li Fang 李昉, Taiping guangji huijiao: Fu suoyin 太平廣記會校(附索引), ed. Zhang Guofeng 張國風, 1st ed., 20 vols. (Beijing Shi: Beijing Yanshan Chubanshe, 2011), 15: 6423-6426.

251 For love stories between a human male and a supernatural female, who live together happily for a period of time but are forced to separate at the end, please see Shen Jiji 沈既济’s “Renshi zhuang 任氏傳,” “Eternal Prisoner under The Thunder Peak Pagoda 白娘子永鎮雷峰塔,” “The Ghostly Wedding Nights 驃馬都尉,” and “Lu Chong and His Son by a Ghost 盧充幽婚,” “Xin shishi niang 辛十四娘,” etc.

252 The alien creature is typically gendered female; however, a male alien does exist in zhiguai and chuanqi, stories such as “Sixth Brother Wang 王六郎,” “Scholar Chu 褚生,” and “The Shuimang Herb 水莽草.”

253 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 428.
human being. When Xiaoqian just arrived at Ning Caichen’s home, she “never ate or drank 未嘗食飲.” After six months, she “began to sip a bit of congee 漸啜稀酏.” She begins to behave more and more like an ordinary woman. This positive change stimulates her acceptance into the human world. Sheng and Barr indicate Xiaoqian plays an active role in her redemption by overcoming her disgraceful past and proving her kind-hearted nature as well as demonstrating her satisfactory household abilities. Successfully demonstrating her sincerity and harmlessness, Xiaoqian is permitted to get married to Ning Caichen after the death of his first wife. Later she gives birth to two sons; who guarantee her position and authority in her family and the community. The tolerance and love of Ning Caichen and his mother along with all Xiaoqian’s efforts altogether “establish her as a legitimate member of the household and justify her final release.”

In addition to fulfilling her unsatisfied longings as a ghost girl, Xiaoqian’s inference exerts remarkable influence on herself, on Ning Caichen, and on the netherworld. Xiaoqian’s series of interference significantly improve her standing as a female and as a community member. First of all, she gains a legitimate status and broad acceptance in society. At the beginning of the text, Xiaoqian appears as a pitiful ghost girl under the control of demons. As an outsider to human society, she sneaks into a deserted monastery at night and lures passing-by scholars into hell. Because of her alien identity, Ning’s mother refuses to accept her as a potential wife for Ning and dares not let her spend the night in her home. After a series of

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254 Sheng, Huayaohumei hua Liaozi, 71.
255 Pu Songling, Liaozi zhiyi, 1: 166; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 231.
256 Pu Songling, Liaozi zhiyi, 1: 166; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 231. Congee is a kind of rice gruel.
257 Sheng, Huayaohumei hua Liaozi, 69; Barr, Disarming Intruders,” 509.
258 Barr, Disarming Intruders,” 510.
259 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 429.
interferences, Xiaoqian end up by becoming a wife who has a successful husband, educated children, and a happy family life. Not only Ning and his mother are fond of her, but all their relatives and friends also find her likable when she is introduced at their wedding feast. Xiaoqian’s return to the human world is acknowledged by society and surrounding people. Secondly, Xiaoqian wins the freedom to make her own decisions. When manipulated by the demons, she must follow their commands and has no control over her life. After extricating herself from the demons, she adapts the lifestyle she favors and selects a husband of her own preference. Thirdly, although Ning Caichen makes important decision as master of the household, Xiaoqian obtains considerable power in the family business as his wife. In ancient Chinese society, the husband was responsible for pursuing a career and earning income for the whole family, while the wife’s mission was to manage the household, take care of family members, and take charge of domestic affairs. In other words, the husband was in charge of public affairs, and the wife made decisions about domestic matters and took over the economic control of a family. By becoming Ning Caichen’s wife, Xiaoqian acquires substantial hidden power in the family sphere, and thus, grows from an oppressed follower of orders to a decision maker.

Xiaoqian’s interference in Ning Caichen’s trip with an initially malicious intention actually leads to a salutary influence. In Morphology of the Folktale, Vladimir Propp suggests the protagonist typically encounters “the donor” or “provider” at an early stage of his quest. “The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc. which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper.” Intruding on Ning Caichen’s journey as a temptress, Xiaoqian

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260 Sheng, Huayaohumei hua Liaozhai, 71.
261 Propp, Morphology, 39.
262 Propp. Morphology, 39.
functions as “the donor” who tests Ning Caichen with the lure of beauty and gold. Ning Caichen “must overcome …[the] test or temptation … if he is to thrive.” Ning Caichen’s rejection of Xiaoqian’s temptation proves his nobility and integrity. However, Xiaoqian’s test is more than a temptation, she also “approaches the hero with a request for mercy.” By passing the two tests provided by Xiaoqian, Ning Caichen confirms his worth and is rewarded with a beautiful and virtuous wife. His choice also reveals his potential as a dependable and respectable scholar, which guarantees him a promising career.

Xiaoqian’s interference into Ning Caichen’s life also has positive effects both on the human community and on the underworld. Although Xiaoqian interferes in Ning Caichen’s peaceful life out of private considerations, she contributes to improving the life of Ning’s family. She lessens the burden of Ning’s mother by taking care of their daily life. She maintains an organized household and continues his bloodline. All her deeds create a happy family atmosphere for Ning and his mother, and in turn, help him succeed in other social spheres. Xiaoqian’s conversion from an evil seducer to a model wife suggest the triumph of righteousness over the wickedness. It implies that, even though an evil power may be strong and misleading, morality is the thing that really matters. Moreover, Xiaoqian’s experience demonstrates the possibility of escaping from a demon’s power and starting a new life, which undermines demonic authority. By killing the demon that hunts her down, Xiaoqian overthrows the reign of the powerful demon.

Among a great many ghost female characters in Liaozhai zhiyi, Nie Xiaoqian never fails to impress the readers because of her contradictory personality. She shows up as an evil

264 Propp, Morphology, 41.
temptress, but she is also a victim that is manipulated by the demon. She is introduced as an innocent, naïve, and simple girl; nevertheless, as the story develops, she is more and more revealed as a strong-willed girl with a definite purpose and clear motivation in life. She intrudes into the protagonist’s trip with a malevolent intention; however, her interference makes a salutary influence on the protagonist, herself, and the society. While her temptress identity and her redemption by Ning Caichen are the first things that come to our notice, the hidden motivation for her continuous interference in Ning’s life attracts more and more attention as the text is revisited. More importantly, although she appears to be an innocent ghost and a subordinate girl who counts on Ning Caichen for a happy and secure life, in point of fact, she is an independent individual whose self-consciousness grows, changes, and develops with the progress of the plot. We witness her growing from a simple and pitiful victim to a strongly motivated and sophisticated woman. Xiaoqian’s interfering behavior matters because it is the starting point from where we gradually identify her hidden motivation and reveal her role as an independent and powerful character. Also, it is Xiaoqian’s interfering behavior that links her to the protagonist, and this in turn exerts a considerable influence on herself, the protagonist, and human society.
CHAPTER 6. PROGRESSIVE GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS IN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF “NIE XIAOQIAN”

This chapter sequentially examines the different presentations and interpretations of Xiaoqian in the five movie versions. By analyzing the various portrayal of the same character, this chapter explores the development of women’s gender consciousness in contemporary Chinese cinema, and in turn, helps readers understand the shifting social expectation toward the female gender in China.

Because of its widespread popularity, the Chinese classical tale “Nie Xiaoqian 聶小倩” has been filmed five times, respectively in 1960, 1987, 1990, 1991, and 2011. In order to make Xiaoqian 小倩 a likable character and present the movie as a touching story, film directors start from various perspectives to expand their narration, ranging from Xiaoqian’s miserable and helpless situation to her submissive personality and sincere longing for love. They selectively highlight some characteristics of the heroine while leaving out the others. Each film adaptation makes its selection based on relevant aesthetic standards toward women in the corresponding era. Therefore, though all adaptations based on the literary work “Nie Xiaoqian,” the main female character of these films varies significantly from one to another. These differences in how the Xiaoqian’s character is portrayed offer us a hint of the transformation of the mainstream culture’s attitude toward this kind of interfering woman as well as the female gender in general.

The unifying consistency of the film versions lies in that fact that all directors obscure the heroine’s genuine nature by focusing on the predicament she is trapped in. The directors tend to portray the heroine as an innocent, naïve, and young beauty who is temporarily led astray. She is waiting for a hero to rescue her out of that situation and provide a new life for her. Although these movies successfully blend in modern elements to build up their heroines and adapt an
ancient story for the contemporary audience, they coincidentally underestimate or even ignore Xiaoqian’s agency as a strong-motivated interfering woman.

None of these movie directors present Xiaoqian as an independent female who exerts considerable influence over other characters and her surrounding or a manipulative woman possessing great empowerment within the domestic sphere. They underline Ning Caichen’s impact on Xiaoqian, but ignore the determinant role she plays to steer their relationship. Therefore, although directors name their films after Nie Xiaoqian, the stories they present are actually modern editions of interfering women that incorporate contemporary social elements and project current values and aesthetics.

In 1960, Li Han-hsiang 李翰祥 (1926-1996) adapted “Nie Xiaoqian” into movie for the first time. In his film *The Enchanting Shadow* 倩女幽魂 (lit. Pretty Female Ghost), Li Han-hsiang keeps the most important motif of the original text—the beautiful but helpless ghost girl, Xiaoqian, under the influence of the upright and kind-hearted scholar Ning Caichen, converts from an evil temptress to a benign girl with positive attitude towards life. Focusing on the series of legendary happenings between Ning Caichen and Nie Xiaoqian, Li Han-hsiang spends a lot of the film presenting a romance between an honorable scholar and a naive ghost girl. He succeeds in maintaining the most representative features of Ning Caichen and Nie Xiaoqian’s personalities and characteristics in the original text. Nevertheless, by minimizing the substantial influence of Xiaoqian’s interferences in Ning Caichen’s life and omitting the tremendous endeavor Xiaoqian makes to reintegrate into the human world, Li Han-hsiang fails to identify Xiaoqian’s manipulative and powerful nature.

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265 The film starred Zhao Lei (趙雷, 1928-1996) as Ning Caichen, and Betty Lo Ti 樂蒂 (Le Di, 1937-1968) as Xiaoqian.
Interpreting Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 “Nie Xiaoqian” as a love story between the honorable scholar, Ning Caichen, and the beautiful ghost, Nie Xiaoqian, Li Han-hsiang’s The Enchanting Shadow revolves around how the two main characters fall in love with each other and how they conquer the demonic powers to reach a happy ending. The movie inherits the original setting to construct Xiaoqian as a pitiful young ghost who is reluctantly conscripted into performing the foul deeds demanded by the demons. She uses her beauty and gold to lure the passing-by scholars into sin and damnation. Ning Caichen, resists Xiaoqian’s temptations, is nevertheless endangered by the approach of the more powerful demons. Moved by Ning Caichen’s integrity, Xiaoqian teaches him how to escape from the impending danger. In return, Ning Caichen helps Xiaoqian extricate herself from the demons’ hands. With the help of the swordsman, Yan Chixia 燕赤霞, Xiaoqian and Ning Caichen kill the demon hunting them down and together head for a new life.

In order to emphasize the romantic aspect of Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian’s relationship, Li Han-hsiang designs their first encounter as one modeled on the unexpected meeting between a caizi 才子 (intelligent young men) and jiaren 佳人 (beautiful young girl). While staying in the Jinhua temple on his way to collect taxes, Ning Caichen is attracted by the melodious sound of a stringed instrument one night. Led by the music, he enters a nearby courtyard where he sees the beautiful Xiaoqian for the first time. Lacking any specific indication of her identity, Xiaoqian is vaguely presented as a decent and educated young girl. Without noticing Ning Caichen’s

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267 The Chinese idiom, caizi jiaren 才子佳人 which literally means intelligent men and beautiful women, is used to indicate talented and good-looking young men and women in general. This term is typically adopted to describe a classic pattern of romantic relationship between a talented young man and a beautiful girl from an upper-class family in ancient China.
approach, Xiaoqian plays music, sings, and composes poems as if there is no one present. Ning Caichen is attracted by Xiaoqian’s talent and beauty at first glance. Soon after, while Xiaoqian is away to attend her grandmother, Ning Caichen takes the opportunity to step into her room and appreciate her poem. Catching Ning Caichen within the room upon her return, Xiaoqian’s first reaction is anger. However, as they communicate, they find more and more interests in common, so they passionately talk about poems and paintings and spend some time together. At this point, Xiaoqian grandmother suddenly shows up, criticizes Ning Caichen for trespassing on a girl’s room at night, and furiously drives him away. Xiaoqian, although sympathizing with Ning’s embarrassment and dilemma, dares not to speak for him.

At this present, despite some unusual details implying Xiaoqian’s problematic identity, there is no evidence indicating she is someone other than an ordinary beautiful woman. Xiaoqian’s image exactly matches the typical talented girl from families of state officials—she is timid, gentle, well-educated, and curious about men and love. Both the grandmother and Xiaoqian’s immediate reactions to Ning Caichen’s trespass on the girl’s room are so natural that no one would suspect the series of happenings are not a coincidence.

In addition to obscuring Xiaoqian’s true identity, Li Han-hsiang romanticizes the encounter between Xiaoqian and Ning Caichen by including the literary and artistic factors—the scenes of music playing, poem writing, and painting discussion—to the movie. The three factors not only serve to confirm Xiaoqian’s upper-class origin, but also play an important role to facilitate the development of the entire plot.

By introducing Xiaoqian first with the sound of her musical instrument followed with a scene in which she plays music, Li Han-hsiang fundamentally changes the interaction between Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian. In the original text as well as many other tales, Campany argues:
“The most important vehicle of contact with the dead is vision; the protagonist first and foremost sees the dead person or the realm of the dead, whatever other interactions may occur.” With the “acoustic manifestation” of Xiaoqian—the sound of a stringed instrument, Xiaoqian is first heard by Ning Caichen before being glimpsed. This reverse happening, which is referred to as “a new esthetic of presentation” by Karl Kao, maximizes the mystery of Xiaoqian; more importantly, it blurs her identity as an interfering woman.

It is difficult to define who is the person that intrudes on the other’s life in *The Enchanting Shadow*. At first sight, Ning Caichen seems to take the initiative in his first encounter with Xiaoqian, because his inadvertent trespass into Xiaoqian’s home directly results in their acquaintanceship. However, Ning Caichen is guided there by Xiaoqian’s music, which is very likely to be played intentionally to attract men nearby, considering the nature of Xiaoqian and the grandmother. Therefore, both Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian are interfering characters. While Ning Caichen physically intrudes into Xiaoqian’s courtyard, Xiaoqian interferes in Ning Caichen’s quest with her “acoustic manifestation.”

Li Han-hsiang’s interpretation of Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian’s first encounter not only glorifies their romance, but also does nothing to make Ning Caichen and the audience suspicious of Xiaoqian’s true identity as a ghost girl. According to Ning Caichen, their initial encounter is entirely accidental, which has nothing to do with the supernatural, ghosts, or any conspiracy.

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Instead, Li Han-hsiang uses another tradition to blur Xiaoqian’s alien identity. Zeitlin suggests that in the strange tales in Liaozhai: “The boundary between the strange and the normal is never fixed but is constantly altered, blurred, erased, multiplied, or redefined.” The film therefore only gradually reveals Xiaoqian’s ghostly identity. It lets Ning Caichen slowly find it out for himself.

Even after Ning Caichen realizes Xiaoqian’s ghost identity, the movie continues avoiding clues to the fact she is a wicked female. This delay results in the maximization of Xiaoqian’s charms as a talented young girl and a minimization of her potential threats and dangers. By shifting the audience’s concentration from Xiaoqian’s malevolent temptation to a mutual attachment between a man and a woman, the film meets the audience’s expectation for a pure and romantic love story.

The film elements of poem writing and painting discussion help The Enchanting Shadow meet another essential factor in the romance between caizi and jiaren—intellectual communication. In a traditional caizi jiaren story, the opinions exchanged between an intelligent scholar and a talented and witty lady regarding literature, music, and arts serve as an important catalyst to engender their mutual affection. Li Han-hsiang embraces this idea by employing a painting with an inscribed poem as a vital visual thread throughout his film. This painting portrays a pair of mandarin ducks swimming in a lotus pond. The accompanying poem, composed and inscribed by Ning Caichen, describes the picture. Since a pair of mandarin ducks symbolizes a couple of sweet lovers in the traditional Chinese culture, Xiaoqian’s painting of mandarin ducks in pairs implies her longing for a harmonious romantic relationship. Ning Caichen’s inscription of a love poem on Xiaoqian’s painting functions as an affirmative answer.

Zeitlin, Historian of the Strange, 7.
to her implication; their correspondence in the form of poems suggests their mutual attraction, which is fundamentally different from Xiaoqian’s one-sided interferences and advances in the original text.

In addition to being a token of their mutual affection that has been added to the original story, the poem and painting together play an indispensable role in maintaining the relationship between Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian and in stimulating the development of the plot that the film-maker develops. In the film version, Xiaoqian makes use of this painting as an excuse to resume her role as an interfering woman. Soon after their first encounter, Xiaoqian visits Ning Caichen at his lodging in the late night, bringing the painting with an unfinished poem. Xiaoqian dresses herself as an elegant girl from the upper class and pleads with Ning Caichen to finish that poem. Taking this opportunity, Xiaoqian tempts Ning Caichen with her beauty, but her seduction is not successful. Then she comes back in the following evening and lures him with gold, but she fails again. In the meanwhile, this painting functions as a symbol of Xiaoqian’s existence and leads to the revelation of her true identity. Ning Caichen identifies the same painting that incorporates his improvised poem in a painting store. Based on the information he collects about the painter along with other clues he discovers at the place where Xiaoqian and he first meet, Ning Caichen realizes Xiaoqian is an educated young girl who died more than ten years ago.

Besides bringing in a painting and a poem, around which the entire plot revolves, Li Han-hsiang details a morally corrupted scholar, Sun, as a foil to Ning Caichen’s high moral character. By contrasting their sharply different attitude women and temptation, the film director justifies Xiaoqian’s preference for Ning Caichen over other scholars and offers the audience a moral lesson. More importantly, Li reminds the contemporary audience of the classic love story
pattern—caizi jiaren, in which he incorporates the fascinating features of both the supernatural tales and modern aesthetics.

In 1987, the film director Ching Siu-tung 程小東 (Mandarin Cheng Xiaodong, also known as Tony Ching, born 1953) shot A Chinese Ghost Story 倩女幽魂 (lit. Pretty Female Ghost) loosely based on Pu Songling’s “Nie Xiaoqian” and Li Han-hsiang’s The Enchanting Shadow. Ching Siu-tung aimed more than Li Han-hsiang did to provide a touching love story between a lost but kind-hearted ghost girl and a righteous human man. In order to best convey the core idea that true love rescues and transforms the pitiful ghost temptress Xiaoqian, Ching Siu-tung placed considerable emphases on Xiaoqian’s innocent personality and her strong willingness for redemption, yet he did not downplay Xiaoqian’s role as a temptress. By highlighting her reluctance to commit the crimes she perpetrates, the director successfully draws the audience’s attention to Xiaoqian’s pathetic fate, her victim status, and her innocent beauty. In this film version, Xiaoqian’s interfering and tempting characteristics establish her as an adorable and appealing girl rather than an aggressive and wicked intruder. Unfortunately, although Ching Siu-tung did not miss the interfering influence Xiaoqian exerts, he limits it to the scope of completing his agenda in the praise of true love, but overlooks its fundamental meaning in fulfilling Xiaoqian’s identity as a motivated and powerful individual.

As in the original text, Xiaoqian comes across to the audience, if not to the characters in the movie, as a seducer who arouses men’s carnal desires and drinks their blood. Different from a typical temptress in the film adaptations of Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋誌異, who dresses herself in a sexually attractive way, Xiaoqian appears as a fragile young girl in a white gown. This fairy-like

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273 The film starred Leslie Cheung (張國榮 Zhang Guorong, 1956-2003) as the tax collector, Ning Caichen 窺采臣, Cantonese Ning Choi-san, while the Xiaoqian character (Cantonese Nip Siu Sin) was played by Joey Wang (王祖賢, born 1967).
image blurs Xiaqian’s temptress role and engenders an illusion that Xiaqian is naïve and harmless. With her innocent facial expressions and elegant gestures, Joey Wong successfully portrays a witty and naughty ghost girl who thirsts for freedom. Enslaved by the grandmother, the most powerful demon in their community; Xiaqian grudgingly tempts passing-by men to meet the grandmother’s greediness for blood. However, she behaves according to her values and conscience outside of the grandmother’s sight. She teases her targets and treats them differently based on their moral qualities. When Xiaqian runs into Ning Caichen—who is hapless and dull tax-collector, but kindhearted and righteous by nature—she gives up taking advantage of him and leaves. Xiaqian’s timely halt of her purposeful trespass on the protagonist’s quest justifies her role in the movie as a victim of evil forces who longing for rescue.

In addition to selecting a favorable perspective from which to present Xiaqian, Ching Siu-tung downplays her initial evil intentions and her problematic past by highlighting the mutual attachment between Ning Caichen and Xiaqian. In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, though Xiaqian firstly interferes in Ning’s journey as a temptress, Ning Caichen is responsible for the continuous significant advances in their relationship. It is Ning Caichen who feels extremely attracted to the other and makes an effort to maintain a connection between them. Xiaqian’s questionable past is utilized by the film director to emphasize as her vulnerability and the misery that invites Ning Caichen to reach out his helpful hands. Xiaqian’s purposeful interference gradually develops into a mutual love between her and Ning Caichen, which stimulates Ning Caichen to fight against the grandmother and save his lover.

A critical change Ching Siu-tung made in *A Chinese Ghost Story* is that neither Xiaqian nor Ning Caichen is motivated by anything other than the pure love of their relationship. Ching Siu-tung’s heroine is an oversimplified ghost girl who merely expects to break away from the
demon’s control and reincarnate. She does not aim to integrate into the human society or to make a difference as a powerful woman. Similarly, Ning Caichen does not receive any benefits and rewards for his brave deeds in helping Xiaoqian and changing her life condition. The director reinforces the pure love theme by depriving the two lovers of a happy ending. After being liberated from the demons’ control by Ning Caichen and the devil-hunter, Yan Chixia 燕赤霞, Xiaoqian returns to the underworld for reincarnation. Ning Caichen is left behind and misses the happy days that Xiaoqian and he spent together. This ending makes their love story more touching and wins more sympathy than the original story.

Another change in the plot of A Chinese Ghost Story lies in the fact that both Xiaoqian and Ning Caichen undergo an essential development in their interactions and a series of adventures, unlike Xiaoqian’s exclusive transformation in the original text. At the beginning of the film, Ning Caichen appears as a compassionate but feeble tax collector. With the help of the capable devil-hunter, Yan Chixia, Ning Caichen overthrows the mighty reign of the evil grandmother, rescues Xiaoqian, and renders her an opportunity to start a new life. By redeeming Xiaoqian and fighting against the evil spirits, Ning Caichen grows to be a mature man and a real hero. Likewise, Xiaoqian exhibits courage and determination under Ning Caichen’s influence to extricate herself from the demons. By participating in and significantly contributing to the struggle against the grandmother, Xiaoqian completely breaks away from her sinful past and grows to be a strong-minded woman with a clear conscience. Xiaoqian’s interference in Ning Caichen’s peaceful life marks the turning point of their growth and plays a determinant role on his self-realization and her transformation.

Ching Siu-tung’s A Chinese Ghost Story not only inherits the classic Chinese love story pattern between an honorable man and a beautiful as well as kind-hearted young woman, but it
also reveals the social understanding of the female gender in the late 1980’s Hong Kong. In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Xiaoqian is actually the more powerful one compared to the weak and impoverished Ning Caichen. However, Xiaoqian is presented as a pathetic, fragile, and subordinate figure, who needs Ning Caichen’s help to escape from her misery. As a “dependent being[.] controlled by circumstances,” Xiaoqian can achieve her desired existence only by building connections with the male characters.  

Ching Siu-tung’s treatment of his main characters reveals the widespread patriarchal attitude toward women in Hong Kong at that time. Tyson reminds us of the observations made by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* regarding the conventional patriarchal underestimation of women, “men are considered essential subjects, while women are considered contingent beings. Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only by building relations to men.”  

Although women had become more independent and professionally proficient, they were still primarily expected to play the traditional role assigned by patriarchy. In the 1980’s, a pleasant appearance and gentle as well as caring personality were the top priorities men desired in women; and offering their partner an opportunity to prove his potentials was considered to be women’s obligation. The female was not expected and even allowed to take control of her own destiny and demonstrate too much value to outshine her partner, characteristics which is defined as aggressive and threatening in the patriarchal ideology.

The 1990 film adaptation of “Nie Xiaoqian,” *A Chinese Ghost Story II* 俏女幽魂 II: 人间道 (lit. Pretty Female Ghost II: The Path in The Human World), was also directed by Ching Siu-

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As a sequel to the film version of 1987, *A Chinese Ghost Story II* continues the story that Ching Siu-tung told in *A Chinese Ghost Story* and focuses on what happens to Ning Caichen several years after Xiaoqian leaves. Ching Siu-tung clarifies this fundamental setting in the prologue with the caption “the story continues.” In *A Chinese Ghost Story II*, Xiaoqian has already left for her reincarnation and therefore cannot participate in the narration as a solid character. In order to justify its connection with the previous film, Ching Siu-tung employs the same actress who played Xiaoqian in 1987 to star as the heroine, Qingfen 青風 (Spring Breeze). However, while the 1990 film builds on the plot framework of the previous one and employs the same principal actors, Ching Sui-ting just used the widely popular story as a pretext for his new story and the plot of *A Chinese Ghost Story II* has nothing to do with Pu Songling’s original narrative.

Although Ching Siu-tung maintained the love story theme between an interfering woman and an honorable man in *A Chinese Ghost Story II*, he took out the supernatural factor of the original text. Qingfen, the heroine, is a beautiful human girl and she has a loyal and upright father who works as a high state official. Like many other significant and honorable officials struggling against the degenerating social circumstances, Qingfen’s father is set up by crafty sycophants and is sentenced to death. Qingfen and her sister organize a group of followers and set off for their father’s rescue. To stay safe in the political turmoil, Qingfen and her followers pretend to be ghosts to frighten away anybody who approaches their lodgings. Qingfen and Ning Caichen run into each other in this situation, and both of them misunderstand each other’s identity. Since Qingfen looks the same as Xiaoqian and she happens to play a female ghost,

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276 As in the 1987 version, the starring roles were played by Leslie Cheung and Joey Wang.  
277 *A Chinese Ghost Story II* 倩女幽魂 II: 人間道, directed by Ching Siu-tung 程小東 (1990; Hong Kong: Diskino Media, 2016), Blu-ray.
Ning Caichen takes Qingfeng to be Xiaoqian and rejoices in her presence. In the meanwhile, Qingfeng mistakes Ning Caichen for a wise man who is capable of assisting in her father’s rescue because of the book that Ning carries everywhere with him—he and the wise man had been in jail together, and Ning was given the book on his escape. Ning Caichen joins the rebel group and participates in their enterprise. With the help of an upright swordsman, Ning Caichen, Qingfeng, and their followers overcome all obstacles, kill the influential but treacherous officials, and finally prove the innocence of Qingfeng’s father.

By shifting the emphasis from a touching love story to a story about the importance of a firm moral belief, Ching Siu-tung conveys the positive agenda: Good conquers evil. The film glorifies characters who stick to their principles in turbulent social circumstances. It seems natural to argue that the situation in Hong Kong during the 1990s, as the end of British rule approached, was something that influenced Ching Siu-tung revision of the story.278 The Chinese film subtitle, renjian dao 人間道 [the path in the human world], offers evidence that Ching Siu-tung intended to highlight social concerns in his film. In the face of the transfer of the sovereignty over Hong Kong to China in 1997, the city was overwhelmed by doubts, anxieties, worries, nervousness, and all kinds of emotions. Although A Chinese Ghost Story II expresses the growing worries about changes in politics and society at the time, it also implies confidence in a bright future, which is different from the golden days in the past but similarly promising.

The director’s inclusion of a positive social message leads to the frustrating fact that neither the Xiaoqian character nor her interferences play an essential role in this film adaptation.

Xiaoqian merely serves as a medium to connect Ning Caichen and Qingfeng and justifies their inevitable mutual attraction.\textsuperscript{279} However, \textit{A Chinese Ghost Story II} is worth mentioning for its groundbreaking portrayal of the heroine and the breakthrough in social attitudes toward the female gender it presents. In this version, Qingfeng demonstrates a strong subjectivity and independence, which is lacked in the Xiaoqian figure both in the original text and in the 1987’s film. As the leader of her team, Qingfeng motivates her followers and insists on their goals at a point when the majority of team members, including many men, have given up. Even though Ching Siu-tung confirms the traditional role of women by using Qingfeng to reward the brave deeds of the protagonist, the ending of this film suggests he goes beyond the traditional patriarchal ideas.

Ching Siu-tung endorsed women’s rebellion against social dogma and encouraged them to prioritize their personal needs when making decisions. To illustrate the need for change, Chen Siu-tung constructed Qingfeng as a human girl, but at the same time made her someone who was already arranged to be married. According to traditional social norms, Qingfeng should follow the arrangement and marry her fiancé, but she falls in love with Ning Caichen and wants to spend her life with him. After a bitter struggle, Qingfeng decides to follow her heart and elope with Ning Caichen.

\textsuperscript{279} Because Qingfeng looks the same as Xiaoqian, Ning Caichen cannot take his eyes off Qingfeng at their first confrontation. Even after confirming Qingfeng is not Xiaoqian, Ning still cannot help but to dream of continuing his unrealized love with Qingfeng. Ning Caichen’s feeling towards Qingfeng is very complicated. On the one hand, Ning is thrilled at the possibility of embracing a girl who closely resembles Xiaoqian; on the other hand, he suffers whenever thinking Xiaoqian is already gone, and no matter how much they look like each other, Qingfeng is not his ghost lover. For more details, please watch \textit{A Chinese Ghost Story II} \textit{倩女幽魂 II: 人间道}, directed by Ching Siu-tung 程小東 (1990; Hong Kong: Diskino Media, 2016), Blu-ray.
Ching Siu-tung therefore included the overall contemptible conduct—elopement—in his movie and rewarded his main characters a happy ending, because he held a positive attitude toward the challenges facing women bound by traditional values. At the same time, he made Qingfeng’s behavior more reasonable and acceptable by excluding her fiancé from the film. The fiancé’s absence in Qingfeng’s hard time undermines his credibility and justifies Qingfeng’s preference for Ning Caichen. In the point of fact, as a human character, Qingfeng’s decision needs more courage and determination compared to that of Xiaoqian in the original text, because Qingfeng cannot escape from public criticism. Qingfeng’s bold choice makes her a rounded character with mixed emotions and independent thoughts. More importantly, Qingfeng’s decision to prioritize her personal needs signals a break with the patriarchal expectations and traditions and indicates a breakthrough in women’s gender consciousness.

One year later, in 1991, Ching Siu-tung made another sequel to *A Chinese Ghost Story* and named it *A Chinese Ghost Story III* (倩女幽魂 III). The subtitle, dao dao dao (lit. Pretty Female Ghost III: Way, Way, Way), perhaps implies that Ching Siu-tung wanted to find a new context for the old story. The film presents a similar story to that of the first film, but one that happens one hundred years later in the same place as Xiaoqian’s story. Rather than Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian, who have vanished a century before, Ching Siu-

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280 It is very likely that Ching Siu-tung drew inspiration from Lao Tsu’s *Tao Te Ching* 道德經. *Tao Te Ching* begins with a very similar sentence—“道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名” (Dao ke dao, feichang dao; ming ke ming, feichang ming), which means “The Tao [way] that can be told is not the eternal Tao [way]; The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” Please see Lao Tsu 老子, *Tao Te Ching* 道德經, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), chapter one.
tung introduced a couple of new main characters in his movie—a young monk named Shifang 十方 and a beautiful female ghost, Xiaozhuo 小卓 (lit. Little Brilliant).  

Although the hero and heroine are different; this movie reprises the original “Nie Xiaoqian” story by revolving around the temptation and resumption themes. It maximizes the interfering role the heroine, Xiaozhuo, plays and her function as an agent who tests the protagonist. Shifang is a young and kind-hearted monk who accompanies his master to carry a small golden statue of Buddha to a famous temple far away. On their quest, they find accommodation in a deserted temple, near to which lives the female ghost, Xiaozhuo. When Xiaozhuo was alive, she was an orphan and was sold from one place to another. Finally, an old man with many concubines bought her, but she was beaten to death that very night by his wife. After her death, Xiaozhuo surrenders to the control of a powerful demon, whom they call grandmother, and she obeys her command to seduce men and suck their blood. Compared to her miserable and helpless human life, Xiaozhuo is willing to live this way, which she finds free and enjoyable.

Ching Siu-tung makes Xiaozhuo more nefarious and sinful than the original Xiaoqian primarily from two perspectives.  

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281 Shifang is played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai (梁朝偉, Liang Chao-wei, born 1962) and the main female lead is again Joey Wang who plays Xiaozhuo.

282 In the original text, Xiaoqian emphasizes she is an unwilling temptress: “I died when I was only eighteen and was buried beside the monastery, where I’m constantly coerced by demons to carry out their foul demands. It’s actually not my own will to turn to people and seduce them 十八夭殂, 葬寺側, 輒被妖物威脅, 历役賤務; 穷顏向人, 實非所樂.” She also seeks for a change in her lifestyle: “I am sinking into a bottomless sea, grasping for land where there isn’t any. Your righteous spirit towers above the clouds, so surely you can find a way to rescue me from my torment. If you’re willing to do this, collect my bones and then bury them in a quiet place—you’d be giving me more than a second life 妾墮玄海, 求岸不得。郎君義氣幹雲, 必能拔生救苦。倘肯囊妾朽骨, 归葬安宅, 不啻再造.” For more information, please see Pu Songling, Liaozhai zhiyi, 1: 162-163; Pu Songling, Strange Tales, 1: 226-227.
playing men around; second, she is completely aware of the fatal consequences of her deeds, yet she is not ashamed. She confesses several times in the movie; “I am not a good girl. I am a bad one.”

Compared to his first adaptation of “Nie Xiaoqian” in 1987, when he endeavored to make Xiaoqian an innocent and forgivable victim, in this version Ching Siu-tung does not mind making Xiaozhuo a lost, charming, and cunning temptress.

In *A Chinese Ghost Story III*, Shifang is not a random target Xiaozhuo intrudes upon; instead, she takes the grandmother’s order to seduce him in order to humiliate his master, the very cultivated monk, Bai Yun 白云 (white clouds). She approaches Shifang by pretending to be a girl who tries to escape from being hunted by ghosts and turns to him for protection. Xiaozhuo makes every effort to tempt Shifang while she stays with him. Xiaozhuo’s temptation is very bold and straightforward: She takes off her clothes and leaps upon Shifang’s body. She also takes advantage of Shifang’s sympathy by claiming that she suffers from pain and fears and requests consolation from him. Shifang is a very pious monk and shows his compassion. In the face of Xiaozhuo’s flirtations and temptations, however, Shifang refuses her. This film version does not highlight how Xiaozhuo uses gold to tempt the protagonist. Instead, Ching Siu-tung emphasizes Xiaozhuo’s appealing and tempting appearance. Different from the two previous version of this series, both of which call attention to the heroine’s innocent personality by creating an unpretentious image of her, Ching Siu-tung made Xiaozhuo dress colorfully, wearing alluring, and sexy clothes in the movie. *A Chinese Ghost Story III* does not downplay the role of the Xiaozhuo character as a seductress, but openly exhibits all her evil thoughts and deeds to the

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audience. By this way, the director establishes Xiaozhuo as a sharp contrast to the honorable protagonist, Shifang, who ultimately redeems her.

Ching Siu-tung also provides some very interesting details in his portrayal of the interaction between Shifang and Xiaozhuo. After Shifang sees through to Xiaozhuo’s ghost identity as a result of her reactions to some Buddhist spells, Xiaozhuo still attempts to seduce him; therefore, Shifang uses his power as a monk to punish her. Nonetheless, when he witnesses Xiaozhuo’s suffering, he becomes sympathetic and lets her leave. Moreover, Shifang steps forward and saves Xiaozhuo’s life when she is later endangered by a rival ghost. Different from the previous versions, in which the heroines are moved by the kindness and integrity of the male protagonists and in turn give up their schemings, in this film it is the male protagonist who first makes a concession. By making Shifang forgive Xiaozhuo’s evil deeds and spare her life, Ching Siu-tung rationalizes Xiaozhuo’s later decision to give up the sinful life she enjoys. Because Shifang saves her life, she owes him a profound debt of gratitude, so much that her gratitude stimulates Xiaozhuo to re-evaluate her understanding of the other gender and her way of living. This change finally causes Xiaozhuo to betray her grandmother and stand by Shifang when he confronts the powerful demon.

Although Ching Siu-tung hints that Shifang has a certain fondness for Xiaozhuo and enjoys her companionship, Ching Siu-tung omits any mutual attraction between Shifang and Xiaozhuo and instead defines their relationship as a friendship. Shifang’s identity as a Buddhist monk predetermines that a romantic relationship between Xiaozhuo and him is not likely to happen. Therefore, Ching Siu-tung filtered out the episodes in the original story where the heroine makes the effort to justify her membership in society and to become the legitimate
partner of the hero. On the contrary, he put considerable emphases on Xiaozhuo’s redemption and the sharp contrast between her behavior before and after her encounter with Shifang.

Also differing from the original text, in which Xiaoqian relies on marrying a good husband to allow the possibility of a new life, Ching Siu-tung presents Xiaozhuo as a much more independent character. She holds her own views about love, husbands, and family, and uses her judgment to evaluate good and evil. Although Xiaozhuo interferes in Shifang’s quest as a temptress, she never intends to be a mere wife. She gives up her previous sinful lifestyle because Shifang’s benevolent deeds alter her worldview. As an independent woman with a conscience, Xiaozhuo generously offers Shifang the help he needs in return to his kindness. Xiaozhuo’s starting point is much more honorable and selfless compared to that of Xiaoqian in the original version.

In 2011, “Nie Xiaoqian” was rearranged for the screen once again by Wilson Yip 葉偉信 (Mandarin Ye Weixin, Cantonese Yip Wai-Shun, born 1963), Naming his film in English A Chinese Fairy Tale, the Chinese title 倩女幽魂 (Pretty Female Ghost) does not change. Wilson Yip made remarkable modifications regarding plot, characters, and the interrelationships among characters.284 This movie adaptation does not portray a love story between a human scholar and a ghost girl as the previous versions did. By rewriting “Nie Xiaoqian” into a triangular love story between the fox-spirit—Xiaoqian, the human character—Ning Caichen, and the demon hunter—Yan Chixia 燕赤霞, the director presents a complicated and vivid heroine who has considerable power in both life and relationships.285 Although Xiaoqian cannot be exempted from the cultural

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285 Xiaoqian is played by Liu Yifei 劉亦菲 (born 1987), Ning Caichen by Yu Shaoqun (余少群, born 1983), and Yan Chixia by Louis Koo Tin-lok 古天樂, Gu Tianle, born 1970).
expectations and limitation of being a woman, her gender consciousness and her longing for
gender equality have advanced substantially in the latest version of the story.

As a hulijing (fox-spirit), Xiaqian surrenders herself to a more powerful devil, the grandmother, but she feels content with her self-sufficient life and does not need a man to make her fulfilled. She challenges the social conventions by asking why the public cannot tolerate a relationship between a fox and a man. In Wilson Yip’s film, Xiaqian falls in love with Ning Caichen mainly because he offers her selfless care and gives her candy, which has a special meaning in her heart even she does not remember why. Her yearning for Ning Caichen indicates her pursuit of a joyful and harmonious relationship rather than a desperate need to escape from the demons. In point of fact, Xiaqian enjoys a relatively superior status compared to Ning Caichen and Yan Chixia, because she is courted by the other two male characters in the triangular relationship.

The fox-spirit, Xiaqian, in A Chinese Fairy Tale is independent and powerful, but she needs to face the same dilemmas as men do, such as the struggle between sense and desires and

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286 *Hulijing* (fox-spirit) is a supernatural creature in Chinese mythologies. *Hulijing* has the ability of shapeshifting and typically appear in human form. *Hulijing* could be either male or female, and either good or evil. In “*Xuanzhong ji* 玄中記,” Guo Pu 郭璞 summarizes: “When a fox is fifty years old, it can transform itself into a woman; when a hundred years old, it becomes a beautiful female, or a spirit medium, or an adult male who has sexual intercourse with women. Such beings are able to know things at more than a thousand miles’ distance; they can poison men by sorcery, or possess and bewilder them, so that they lose their memory and knowledge; and when a fox is a thousand years old, it ascends to heaven and becomes a celestial fox. "Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, 447. 312, “*Shuo hu 說狐 (Xuanzhong ji 玄中記)*.” J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China: Its Ancient Forms, Evolution, History and Present Aspect, Manners, Custom and Social Institutions Connected Therewith* V (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1907), 586. For more information about *hulijing*, please see Xiaofei Kang, “Foxes in Early Chinese Tradition,” in *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperil and Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2005, 14-43.
the gap between dreams and reality. Wilson Yip included an innovative plot to highlight
Xiaojian’s personality and nature. The film framework stipulates that a romance between a
human and an alien is forbidden and even life-threatening. Therefore, if Xiaojian and Ning
Caichen’s relationship continues, Ning will die. In the face of this quandary, Xiaojian
proactively parts from Ning Caichen, while Ning is reluctant to give up on their relationship.

Even though the 2011 version is not as popular and as highly valued as the 1987 one, the
interrelationship between its male and female characters provides us with a hint of the overall
attitude toward women and their social status in contemporary China. The director’s plot
arrangements suggest significant progress in women’s gender consciousness. Women do not
need to depend on men and marriage to possess a sense of belonging today; instead, women are
free to live in whatever way they prefer, and they have considerable control over their lives.
Xiaojian’s choice reveals that women do not consider relationships as indispensable as they did
in traditional society. Ironically, while women attach less importance to the emotional and
economic support a romantic relationship may bring, men still take women and relationships as
irreplaceable rewards and the primary pursuits of their lives.

By constructing Xiaojian as a physically competent and spiritually independent
character, Wilson Yip undermines patriarchy’s belief in female weakness and men’s superiority
over women. Nevertheless, his unfair treatment of female figures other than Xiaojian reveals the
fact that discrimination against women and gender inequality are still widespread phenomena in
our society. It is noteworthy that except for Xiaojian, all other female characters in A Chinese
Fairy Tale are uglified to some degree. Compared to Xiaojian who looks natural, pure, and
beautiful, the other alien women are stereotyped as wicked and dangerous with exaggerated
makeup and coquettish smiles. The human females are either forgettable or deliberately
downplayed with minimum feminine features and virtues. Wilson Yip’s arrangement more or less sends the patriarchal message that the only possibility for a woman to become powerful is to give up her female identity and adopt male characteristics. More importantly, the alien’s world, which is almost an exclusive feminine one, is ruled by a half-man-half-woman creature. In this sense, the masculine consciousness still affects the society as a dominant and authoritative ideology; the liberation of women and gender equality are quite limited phenomena and deserve more attention.

Sing-Chen Lydia Chiang remarks: “Each author’s fantastic figurations of the human [and alien] body [reflect] collected embodiments of shifting cultural identities and conflicting emotions.”287 The preceding discussion about the film representation of Xiaoqian and interfering women in different decades illustrates the shifting public understanding and expectations of the female gender, and in turn, provides the modern audience with a picture of how women’s gender consciousness and social standing has progressed throughout the centuries. The evolvement of Xiaoqian’s agency and dynamism from the original text to the screen suggests the enduring significance of the issues raised by interfering women. It is not a static picture, as each film finds something slightly different but also relevant to modern concerns in each individual depiction of this interfering woman from classical Chinese literature.

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287 Chiang, Collecting the Self, 7.
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

As products of different times and cultures, Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian exhibit different cultural tendencies, character personalities, and tactics to achieve agency. Above all, they exert their interfering influence in diverse social spheres. Morgan le Fay engages herself in the high business of the patriarchal society. She monitors the moral well-being of the Round Table knights and urges them to enhance their moral status when there is a lapse. By contrast, since Kundry anticipates a redemption from the future Grail King, her personal interests coincide with the expectations of the Grail society, which predestines Kundry’s helper role in their quest. Kundry also follows Klingsor’s instruction to hinder the Grail knights’ quest as a temptress. No matter whether she assists or impedes, she bustles around the core sense of the patriarchal society. The attention she pays to her personal life is quite limited. Except for redemption, Kundry does not mention anything about herself.

Compared to Morgan le Fay and Kundry, Xiaoqian projects a model interference revolving around her own personal benefits. Instead of participating in the protagonist’s high business and exerting a contributing or destructive impact, Xiaoqian shows more interest in changing her life condition and realizing her unfulfilled desires. Her temptations function as a test to select the best husband, one whose morality and intelligence can predict a promising future and a harmonious marriage. Primarily concerned about how to integrate into human society and gain legitimate status, Xiaoqian devotes all her time and energy to achieving her goal. She does not care about the enterprise of the protagonist or general social welfare.

Although the heroines in later film adaptations of “Nie Xiaoqian” show an increasing concern over the social benefits, they are primarily motivated by personal reasons. Compared to
Morgan le Fay and Kundry, the interfering women in the Chinese cultural sphere are more emotion-oriented and family-centered.

The various manners Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian adopt to reach their goal also suggest a very different embodiment of women’s personality. As a powerful sorceress who does not depend on anybody for her prosperity, Morgan le Fay confronts her targets with a challenging test. Because she does not expect or need Arthur’s knights to acknowledge her empowerment, she utilizes a straightforward way to realize her aim and never reconciles with the patriarchal members throughout the entire plot.

Kundry’s way to operationalize her agency is, by contrast, direct but secret. Awaiting salvation from the future Grail king, Kundry cannot afford a complete break with the Grail community; therefore, she transforms to an unrecognizable appearance whenever scheming against them. Her shapeshifting capability enables her to undermine the enterprise of the Grail knights while maintaining a friendly relationship with them.

Xiaoqian’s strategies to accomplish her objective are more diversified. She interferes in the protagonist’s quest by attempting to trick him with beauty and wealth. However, when she identifies desired qualities in her target, she adjusts her goal and standpoint. More importantly, Xiaoqian invites the protagonist to participate in her pursuit. By incorporating the protagonist and later his mother in her plan, Xiaoqian successfully makes her own business their common aim and achieves it in a cooperative manner.

It is noteworthy that none of Morgan le Fay, Kundry, and Xiaoqian’s interferences are void of difficulties, but they react very differently to rejections. Following Morgan le Fay’s instruction, the lady of Hautdesert tempts Gawain in three consecutive mornings, during which Gawain avoids her advances. In the face of Gawain’s mild rejection, she changes her strategy.
By utilizing a magic girdle to attack Gawain’s inner weakness, the lady of Hautdesert successfully lures him to deviate from the chivalric ideal. Compared to Morgan le Fay’s reactions, Kundry’s response to refusal is very vehement and emotional. After Kundry’s initial temptation fails, she pleads with Parsifal to rescue her through love. When Parsifal turns her plea down, she feels so enraged and humiliated that she casts a curse on Parsifal. By contrast, Xiaoqian handles rejection in a more temperate way. When Ning Caichen rejects Xiaoqian’s temptation, she reveals her miserable situation and pleads with the hero to rescue her from the hands of the demon. In order to win the protagonist’s trust, Xiaoqian confesses how she murders other men and offers Ning Caichen a solution to avoid becoming the demon’s upcoming prey.

Sympathizing with Xiaoqian’s misery, Ning Caichen grants her what she requests. However, this is just the beginning of Xiaoqian’s interference. Xiaoqian encounters more refusals and repulsion on the way to achieving her goal to become a legitimate member of human society.

In the name of repaying her gratitude, Xiaoqian offers to serve Ning Caichen as his consort, or even as a concubine or maid, but Ning’s mother is afraid of her ghostly identity and is not willing to keep her in the home. In the face of this dilemma, Xiaoqian pretends not to recognize her rejection and makes a symbolic compromise, “‘Truly, I could never be disloyal to [Ning Caichen]. Though you’re worried about the honesty of a person from the underworld, please let me stay with you, his mother, and consider him my elder brother, treating you like my own parents, serving you from dawn till dusk 兒實無二心。泉下人既不見信於老母，請以兄事，依高堂，奉晨昏’.”

Xiaoqian’s earnestness moves Ning’s mother so much that she consents to her request. Based on this small advancement, Xiaoqian makes another proposal to meet Ning’s

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sick wife, which is not approved by Ning’s mother. While not able to visit Ning’s wife, Xiaoqian voluntarily takes on the wife’s work as if she is a member of Ning’s family.

Xiaoqian then went into the kitchen where she took the mother’s place and prepared a meal. She entered rooms and locates beds like she was familiar with all of them…

Each dawn, Xiaoqian appeared to Ning’s mother, bringing a basin for her to wash in, then turned to managing other activities in the household, never failing to carry out the mother’s will. At dusk, she’d announce her intention to retire, then walk over to Ning’s study where by candlelight she’d cite from the sutra. Once she could tell that Ning was ready to go to bed, she would leave, miserable once again.

Before all this, when Ning’s wife first fell ill, Ning’s mother became fatigued, unable to handle the load; the arrival of Xiaoqian was a great relief to her and in her heart she esteemed the girl. As she became more familiar with her day by day, she came to love Xiaoqian like she was her own child, forgetting meanwhile that she was a ghost; she couldn’t bear to send her away at night any longer, so she invited her to stay and sleep in her room.

女既入厨下，代母尸饔。入房穿榻，似熟居者…

女朝旦朝母，捧匜沃盥，下堂操作，无不曲承母志。黄昏告退，辄过齋頭，就燭誦經。覺甯將寢，始惨然去。先是，甯妻病廢，母劬
Xiaoqian’s strategy to integrate herself into Ning’s family is well-planned and progressive. As a resident alien, Xiaoqian first of all “demonstrates that [she] possesses all the requisite qualification for membership in society.” Then she cultivates close relationships with all family members. By fully engaging herself in the household chores and pleasing Ning’s mother with everyday caring and assistance, Xiaoqian “[wins] gradually for herself [Ning and his mother’s] admiration, trust, gratitude, and finally love.”

Xiaoqian and Kundry’s different reactions to rejection reveal a divergence in the feminine tactics in continuing to pursue their goals when their initial attempt fails. Compared to Xiaoqian who makes a symbolic concession but actually persists toward her aim, Kundry is much more direct and does not concern herself about the negative consequence her vehement reaction may cause. On the contrary, Xiaoqian never gives up the idea of maintaining a harmonious relationship with her targets in the face of refusals. The different in attitudes lines up with the diverse values of Eastern and Western cultures. While arguments are not avoided as something problematic in German culture, a harmonious atmosphere is more emphasized in Chinese culture. More importantly, Chinese philosophy believes in the power of softness, just as what Lao Tsu said in *Tao Te Ching*, “The softest thing in the universe overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.”

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291 Yu, “‘Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!’,” 428.
Besides interfering women, another important female figure in *Parsifal* and “Nie Xiaoqian” is the mother; however, the protagonist’s attitudes toward the mother figure sharply contrast with each other. Parsifal’s mother never appears to the reader’s sight. As a character existing in Kundry and Parsifal’s conversations, Parsifal’s mother mainly serves as a metaphoric hindrance that Parsifal tries to overcome in order to pursue his chivalric career. Compared to her, Ning’s mother is much more influential. The way Ning’s mother is treated by him and Xiaoqian suggests she is the person making major decisions in their household. Although Xiaoqian repeatedly expresses her fear and hope for companionship during night, Ning dares not override his mother’s decision to keep her home, “Ning privately pitied her and wished he could let her stay the night on another bed, but he feared this would anger his mother 甯竊憐之，欲留宿別榻，又懼母嗔.”

In Xiaoqian’s interaction with Ning’s family, she makes a deliberate effort to please Ning’s mother. She comes to serve the mother every morning, does the house chores “in the mother’s stead 代母,” and “never [failed] to carry out the mother’s will 無不曲承母志.” Even for Ning’s marriage, Xiaoqian first comes to the mother in order to win her consent. The respect and particular attention Ning Caichen and Xiaoqian demonstrate when dealing with Ning’s mother signal her significance and influence in the household.

The mother figure brings in a new concept, which is not essentially addressed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Parsifal*—domestic power. In a traditional Chinese family, the female master has considerable power in money management, the arrangement of house affairs, raising children, and the marriage of next generation. Likewise, the female master enjoys considerable respect and authority within and outside the family. In the traditional society, where

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women were not allowed to leave the household to pursue a career, to be a female master in a promising family is the best opportunity for a girl to achieve self-realization. To become a female master of a household is also Xiaoqian’s high purpose in following Ning Caichen home and the ultimate realization of her goal of becoming integrated into human society. Although not many critics cover this perspective of the narrative when discussing Xiaoqian’s agency and empowerment, the lure of domestic power plays a significant role in justifying her decisions and helps understand her nature. By gaining access to domestic power, which is another possibility allowing women to thrive in addition to social power, Xiaoqian accomplishes her agency as a powerful interfering woman.

Finally, in what may be the key cultural difference between Chinese and early modern Western culture, where European heroes are often unlettered, although sometimes spiritually aware knights, the interfering women in Chinese stories prefer scholars. Both sets of men are social elites, however, and the prime targets for interfering women, who exert their agency to establish power in their respective social spheres.
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