The well-known Qing poet Yue Jun (1766—1814) writes about a “foolish woman” (chinüzi) in a passage from his 1794 collection Fodder for the Ears (Ershi lü), volume 2, published just two years after The Story of the Stone. He tells of a young woman who died from reading Story of the Stone “like all those who died from reading The Peony Pavilion.” She had obtained a copy of the novel from her older brother’s desk and could not stop reading it. She was so enthralled she neglected food and sleep. When she came to a beautiful passage, she would stop and contemplate it and then continue reading as she wept. She would read the passage over and over again, ten or a hundred times, not necessarily even finishing the chapter. Reading thus, she fell ill. Fearing that it was the book that had caused their daughter’s illness, her father and mother quickly consigned it to the flames. The young woman cried out, “How can you burn Baoyu and Daiyu!” She fell into a pathetic delusion and would talk without rhyme or reason, always calling out to Baoyu in the middle of her dreaming sleep. Shamans and doctors recommended a hundred cures, but none had any effect. One night, staring at the lamp by the side of her bed, she muttered, “Baoyu is here, Baoyu is here,” and following that drank her tears and died.

This young woman manifests the symptoms of one obsessed—for getting to eat or sleep, exhibiting passionate appreciation, and repeating actions over and over. Going beyond obsessive engagement with the novel, she becomes deluded and mistakes fiction for reality. But her story is complicated, since Yue Jun disavows the veracity of this
The story about a woman who really dies from reading fiction and mistaking it for reality is perhaps itself fictional. Yet, she suffers from a passionate empathy for the lovesick protagonist just like all of those young women who died from reading *The Peony Pavilion* (Mudan ting, 1598), a phenomenon that was so well known it also became the subject of entertainment literature. The truth of the story may be in doubt, but Yue Jun adds commentary to it that makes death by novel seem like a given:

Someone said, “*The Story of the Stone* is a book of illusion. Baoyu is made up; he does not really exist. For the girl to die for him, that would be foolish in the extreme.” Alas! Under heaven who is not made up, who really exists? The foolish die; does that mean that those who are not foolish live long? Moreover, as for the death of the girl, it was for qing, not for Baoyu.

These women were perceived to have died because they were foolish readers; they could not prevent the novel from provoking in them extreme emotion. They could not preserve a distinction between fiction and reality.

**Death by Reading**

Reading vernacular literature in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was a danger to health, and women readers were particularly at risk. Stories of women readers who so identified with the plight of beautiful and talented female protagonists that they themselves fell ill and died were common. The famously beautiful concubine, poet, and commentator Xiaoqing (1595–1612) and two of the three wives of Wu Wushan, Chen Tong (d. 1665) and Tan Ze (d. 1674), for instance, are just a few of several young women whose deaths were said to have been caused by reading *Peony Pavilion*. These women all read and commented on the play, passionately engaging with it despite becoming increasingly sick, and refusing to put it down until they died. The heroine of that play, Du Liniang, dies from lovesickness and melancholy brought on by desire conceived in a dream, and her figure sparked a rage among young women readers. *The Peony Pavilion* had repeatedly found “discerning and sympathetic readers among the fair sex, who intensely identified with Du Liniang.” Due to its length and complexity, *Peony Pavilion* was a play as often read as viewed. Viewing the play was considered dangerous, but reading it was even more so. The misreading of the play unto death follows the same
pattern of Yue Jun’s foolish young woman, and their deaths in turn further obfuscated the fictionality of the play.\textsuperscript{12} Xiaoqing’s commentary on the play was burned in a fire (caused by a jealous wife), but her life and poems were the subject of many poems by women, and the three wives’ commentary was a popular edition of the text. Their commentary was concrete evidence that they had painstakingly read these works and interacted with them.\textsuperscript{13} These women’s illnesses and deaths, now made into texts, circulated among other women readers who became as obsessed with the texts as the heroines that came before them.

Scholars have suggested that the recurrent cultural myths about the deaths of the readers and commentators who come in contact with \textit{Peony Pavilion} point to an infectious danger emanating from the play.\textsuperscript{14} They argue that it was the affective power of the play that caused a fatal response in women readers.\textsuperscript{15} While it was true that only masterworks of literature could kill, it was equally true that it was primarily beautiful and intelligent young women who were susceptible to death by reading.\textsuperscript{16} A well-known story about a young Xiaoqing says that a Buddhist nun, after testing her with the heart sutra pronounces her brilliant and says that she will live longer if she never learns to read.\textsuperscript{17} A widespread belief during this period in the Qing held that literacy and writing posed a grave danger to the health and happiness of talented young women and, in extreme cases, could even be blamed for their deaths.\textsuperscript{18}

Concern for the health of beautiful young women was not confined to stories. Medical texts from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century depicted women as the “sickly sex,” particularly vulnerable to blood loss and bodily depletion,\textsuperscript{19} symptoms that were most commonly brought on by a womanly predisposition to overemotionality, and, more precisely, oversentimentality.\textsuperscript{20} Ming physicians paid much more attention to the unrestrained emotions of unmarried women than had their predecessors.\textsuperscript{21} For example, the physician Wang Ji’s (1463–1539) medical case histories suggested that women are prone to suffering from mournful or apprehensive thoughts.\textsuperscript{22} Another sixteenth-century physician, Gong Xin, also pointed out that sexually frustrated women—in particular nuns, widows, unmarried women, and scholars’ and merchants’ wives—“easily become pensive and jealous. They are melancholic whenever encountering things against their will. Their anger is full and qi blocked; their blood depleting and qi replete. That is why they suffer from yin fighting with
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“Yang, periodic fevers, loss of appetite, a weak appearance, and other disorders.” 23 Weather and emotions were by far the most important causes of illness in premodern China. 24 These affected both sexes, but medical case histories and literati fiction tend to be more fascinated with the emotional plight of women, who were susceptible to passionate extremes, and the literature that could provoke them.

This development in the discourse of women’s medicine coincided with a literati fascination—even obsession—with sentimentality, desire, and emotion associated with the “cult of qing.” 25 The dangers of excessive emotion were recognized very early in the medical tradition, and remained a major concern of physicians throughout the Qing. Xu Dachun, writing in the Qing, echoed the oft-repeated notion that all of the illnesses man might suffer from are related either to the seven emotions 26 or to the six excesses. 27 Excessive emotion had from very early on been conceived as the primary internal cause of illness. Excessive emotions were dangerous because they resulted in the depletion of bodily resources. Excess and depletion were linked and discussed in many medical treatises and manuscripts under the common formulation “depletion and repletion” (xushi). Though they are paired opposites, one leads to the other: excess (emotion, sex) leads to depletion, and depletion similarly leads to excess (depleted yin, which is cool, leads to excessive heat in the body). Depletion of blood (yin), essence (yang), and qi could happen through loss (outflow from the body, particularly regarding blood and essence) or by being consumed through exertion or taxation. Depleted conditions were susceptible to invasion by wind, miasmas, demons, or other pathogenic influences. Depletion enabled exogenous forces to enter the body, and also permitted the lighter of two souls residing in every body to escape, resulting in “soul loss,” which manifested as a state of confusion, hallucination, or even insanity. 28 Excessive emotions directly consumed bodily resources, just as excessive sex resulted in their loss. 29

The medical case history narratives collected by Wang Ji, arguably the most successful and prolific physician of his time, focused on depletion and excess. Some scholars read his frequent diagnoses of male corporeal depletion as an extension of his era’s moral concern about the excesses of pleasure and consumption. 30 Wang treated depletion disorders in his male patients that were brought on by the immoral behaviors and high social aspirations of the newly emergent merchant class in his native Huizhou region. He advocated warming and replenishing drugs to boost the protective system he thought
his upwardly mobile male clients had worn down through excessive sex, food, and wine. Wang also quoted Zhu Zhenheng to more clearly draw a line between “depleted men” and “emotional women” in an essay titled “On Women’s Disorders No. 89,” which focuses on female susceptibility to emotions: “Women’s temperament is to hold on to the emotions; they are not able to release them and are more often [than men] damaged by the seven emotions.”

Stories of women dying from excessive emotion were often retold, seemingly with relish. Chinese literati of the seventeenth century displayed a morbid fascination with the death of young women, often in their teens, who read fiction and poetry and who were moved to write commentary or poetry. By the mid-Qing death from reading became entangled with an obsession with chastity, and with maladies resulting from repressed passion or love. An example from Story of the Stone illustrates this conflation. Lin Daiyu, the ailing, beautiful young heroine, reads and memorizes passages from romantic dramas, constantly demonstrates her intelligence with clever banter, writes poetry and commentaries, and in many ways shares a pathology with Xiaoqing, the three wives, and other female readers. One of the first things the reader of Story of the Stone learns about Lin Daiyu is that she is congenitally sick because of sadness, and that sadness is tied to her debt of tears from a previous incarnation. She dies of consumption resulting from yin depletion brought on by desire, a predisposition to sadness, and her obsession with risqué works of fiction and drama. She created a fervor of her own among readers, with “every languishing young lady imagining herself a Daiyu,” as seen in the case of the young woman discussed by Yue Jun. Fictional characters modeled bad reading for their own female readers. It was not reading per se that was dangerous, but the presumed inability of young women to avoid the excesses of emotion that fiction could provoke in the unsophisticated. Their youth, their naïveté, and their inexperience ultimately caused the resulting death by reading vernacular literature. One of the earliest accounts of death by reading plays concerns an unmarried girl named Miss Yu (Yu Niang), who is said to have composed a commentary on Peony Pavilion shortly before she died at the age of seventeen. Two poems by the play’s author, Tang Xianzu, lament her untimely death. The tragic and inevitable image of the dying young woman obsessively reading about dying young women reading was a popular one for male readers, the self-appointed guardians of sentimentality, true feeling and fictional practice, who by
discussing these charming, emotional women were also establishing their purview over reading fiction.

Such deaths were caused not by the affective power of the work; rather, the reader was sensitive enough to be deeply affected by the work but not sophisticated enough to withstand harm. Women who died from reading proved that they were rebellious, sensitive, and charmingly inexperienced readers. It was a mark of refined sensibilities that a woman died from reading, and a mark of refined sensibilities in both men and women to appreciate such a death.

MISREADING AND LOSS

The problem with novels was that they encouraged confusion. Readers mistook fiction for reality.38 Li Ruding, in his 1666 preface to Li Guochang’s Essentials of Self-Cultivation (Chongxiu zhiyao), complained,

Even worse than [copies of exam themes] are licentious sayings and love songs, the fictitious “histories,” romances, and novels that are published and circulated. Thus, after Outlaws of the Marsh [Shuihu zhuan] was published, villains frequently gathered in the greenwood, and after Plum in the Golden Vase came out, there were nightly elopements from the women’s quarters.39 Such works are the means of instructing thieves and licentious women. . . . They really do great harm to the manners, morals, and minds of the people.40

Novels taught, but they taught the wrong things to the wrong people.41 Those who died from reading Story of the Stone felt for the foolish romantics who populate the novel and became them through misreading fiction for reality and patterning themselves after negative models, as in this 1805 account:

Peony Pavilion’s Du Liniang died because of a dream, Jealousy-cur ing Soup’s [Liaodu geng] Xiaoqing died because of jealousy,42 but these two [deaths] are really nothing more than qing—from matters that they experienced themselves. I met Gui Yuqian in Jiangning, and he implored me to never read Story of the Stone. I asked him why. [By way of answering], he related the words of Zang Yongtang from Changzhou, [who said], “There was a scholar, who read Stone voraciously. Whenever he reached a passage full of emotion, he would close the book and contemplate it, or heave a long sigh, or shed tears and wail plaintively. He lost all interest in food and drink. In the course of one month, he read the novel seven times. It got to the point where his state of mind was completely distracted,
his heart’s blood was used up [xinxue haojin], and he died.” He also said that there was a girl, Miss Someone-or-other, who read Stone, and then coughed blood, and died. I said, “You could call these [cases of] ‘scratching your feet with boots on’; [there is nothing you can do about] those who feel anxiety on the behalf of others.”

The readers, real people, here are criticized because they died not from their own experience of qing but from reading about the qing of fictional (or fictionalized) characters who experienced emotion firsthand. Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692) might have disagreed with Gui Yuqian’s concerns: “That which one has personally experienced, that which one has personally seen, that is a gate of iron limiting us.”

After all, the “investigation of things” (gewu), one of the major intellectual trends that was rewriting the interpretation of the Confucian classics at the time, was often an intuitive and text-based pursuit. Interest in things outside oneself commonly was investigation not so much of the other as of the self in the other. Gui Yuqian seems to believe that the menace of fiction is that it obscures the boundary between self and other, and that it compels its reader to do so.

The accounts of death by novel differ somewhat along gender lines. In these accounts, the two young women, Miss Yu and Miss Someone-or-other, become Lin Daiyu, one in love with Baoyu, and one coughing blood unto death. The scholar, by contrast, read Story of the Stone seven times in one month and died shortly afterwards from melancholy. All die from obsessive reading, yet, according to their sex, the women die from a wasting consumption, and the scholar from protracted and extreme melancholy. It is expected that young women have a hard time preventing damage to their health from excessive emotionality, just as young men have trouble guarding their physical resources. Reading Story of the Stone seven times in one month is a picture of excess, taxing not only emotional resources but also physical ones. The man who dies from reading Stone, like the two women, unwittingly models one of its characters. In the novel, Jia Rui’s misreading costs him his life. He is obsessed with the beautiful Wang Xifeng, who considers him so far below her station as to be insulted by his affections. She teases and torments him, his health deteriorates, and he becomes bedridden. Doctors are unable to help. Jia Rui remains infatuated and engages in constant masturbation, which brings his health to a crisis. At this point, a Daoist shows up saying that he can cure “retributory illnesses” (yuannie zhi zheng). The monk says that medicine cannot cure Jia Rui. Instead, he lends
him the Mirror for the Romantic (Fengyue Baojian), which was created by the fairy Disenchantment herself. It is meant to serve as an antidote to the ill effects of impure thinking and rash actions, and it works through sympathetic correlation. Contemplating its truth will cure the illness brought on by lustful thoughts. Jia Rui is supposed to look only at the back of the mirror, which portrays a skeleton, but he violates the Daoist’s command and looks into the front of the mirror, in the reflections of which he sees Xifeng beckoning to him. He enters the mirror, where he has intercourse with her, after which she sees him out. He finds himself back in bed, having had a wet dream and sweating profusely. The mirror has turned itself around in his hand, showing him once more the skeleton. He repeats this process three or four times, after which demons prevent him from leaving the mirror.49

They drag him away screaming, “Let me take the mirror with me!” He is found dead, in a puddle of icy semen on the bed. He dies from lovesickness, but the mechanism is really obsession and taxation, the overspending of bodily resources, a particularly male problem.50

Magic mirrors have a long tradition in Chinese literature, going back at least to the Tang dynasty (618–907). They represent truth and falsehood, love and death, self-knowledge and self-deception, and so on. Jia Rui is given an instrument to cure an illness of desire, of mental and emotional attachment, but he uses it incorrectly, not according to instructions. Looking into the mirror, for Jia Rui, is a kind of reading that parallels reading a novel, and Mirror for the Romantic was one of the alternate titles of The Story of the Stone.51 Seduction by what one encounters there is unhealthy. The reader may sympathize with a negative role model or may become too attached to a character. Savvy readers will understand that with all fiction a detached and objective reading allows enjoyment of the literary construction without literally or figuratively getting sucked in.52 Readers who died from reading Story of the Stone lacked this understanding. It was a charming but tragic naiveté in young women that led to their demise; in men, it was an unenlightened philistinism, an inability to do the most fundamental thing that educated men did—read.53 In each of the stories of women who died from reading Story of the Stone, the family immediately burns the book that caused the death. Jia Rui’s family similarly tries to burn the mirror, but the Daoist rescues it and then accuses the family of confusing the real with the unreal.54 That is, the family has mistaken the proximal cause of death, the book, for the ultimate one: the excessive repression or expression of desire caused by
the improper reading of fiction as truth. That Jia Rui actually, physically, dies from uncontrolled seminal emission, one of the most feared maladies of men, oft-discussed and oft-prescribed in medical literature high and low in the Qing, shows just how dangerous this kind of misreading is. It also links Jia Rui’s misreading to that of Baoyu in chapter 5 who, while dreaming, mistakes the disillusionment that his dream sexual encounter was supposed to provide for an introduction to pleasures of the flesh. The result was involuntary emission. The Jia Rui episode is a warning about literati obsession and misreading: foolishly overspending his essence through an attachment to fiction, Jia Rui, like the obsessed young man reading him, ends up being a spendthrift of his own corporeal reserves.

In contemporary medical texts, particularly recipe books, there are many formulas specifically for scholars who read too much, though what they read was presumably not fiction. One example is the widely renowned “celestial king’s elixir to supplement the heart/mind” (tianwang buxin dan). Wang Ang (1615–ca. 1699) described the pathogenesis of the symptoms associated with this formula thus: “Both the essence and will of humans are stored in the kidneys. When the essence is insufficient, the will and qi become weak and are unable to communicate above with the heart. This leads to erratic emotions and forgetfulness.” Wang recommended that those who read or study a lot take the pill regularly. In other words, dying from reading was not simply a metaphor—it had a very clear pathology.

**PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE: POISON AND ANTIDOTE**

The ability to engender unenlightened and obsessive reading in those who consumed them marked novels as dangerous texts almost from the beginning. The story behind the creation of one of the first novels in China to focus on domestic life illustrates this danger. *Plum in the Golden Vase* describes, in great detail, the downfall of the Ximen household. The story centers on Ximen Qing, a corrupt social climber and lustful merchant with six wives who vie with one another for power and control of Ximen. The most lascivious of these, Pan Jinlian, ultimately gives him an overdose of an aphrodisiac while he is exhausted and drunk, leading to his gruesome death by sexual intercourse, in which he unceasingly ejaculates semen and then blood and then qi. *Plum in the Golden Vase* itself acts like this aphrodisiac.
In the novel *Plum in the Golden Vase*, Ximen Qing dies from an overdose of aphrodisiac and excessive intercourse. Note the mortar and pestle in foreground. Xiaoxiaosheng, Jinping mei cihua.
Those who viewed fiction as dangerous emphasized the need to read objectively. In the preface to his Sequel to Plum in the Golden Vase (Xu Jinping mei, 1660), Ding Yaokang (1599–1669) writes, “There are people who do not know how to read Plum correctly. The book intends to abstain from the obsession with desire, yet it turns them toward such an obsession. The book intends to abstain from licentiousness, yet it turns them toward licentiousness.”\(^{58}\) Ding wrote his sequel to teach people how to read the novel correctly, to force them to identify the proper themes, and to resist being led into immoral ways by misreading social criticism and “turning it into a guidebook for debauchery.”\(^{59}\) The preface by Xihu Diaoshi claims, “Only those who do not know how to read will label [Plum in the Golden Vase] as being weirdly supernatural, violent, or licentious and think they have violated the way of the sages. It is beyond their comprehension that novels are powerful enough to enhance the influence of the teachings of the sages and the classics.”\(^{60}\) The language of apology for these early novels describes their danger as a potent medicine—when used correctly, it is as powerfully fortifying as the Confucian classics, but for those who use it carelessly, it can do a great deal of harm.

The paratexts attached to printed novels disagree about the mechanisms by which they provided moral instruction or harm. One of the prefatory pieces to Zhang Zhupo’s (1670–1698) commentary edition of Plum in the Golden Vase (1695) suggested that fiction was a vector for literal and metaphorical poison. In “The Bitterness of Filial Piety” (Kuxiao shuo), the author claims that it was none other than Wang Shizhen (1526–1590), the leading poet and essayist of his time, who wrote Plum in the Golden Vase, and that he did so to avenge his father’s death.\(^{61}\) The story goes that Wang’s father was executed by the diabolical minister Yan Song (1481–1568) for selling him what he was told was an original version of a famous painting but that turned out to be a copy. Yan Song died in 1568, so Wang set his sights on Yan’s son, Yan Shifan (1513–1565), who had risen in rank and was a model of corruption. While Yan was cunning and managed to escape many of the assassination plots directed against him by Wang, Yan’s fatal weakness was his penchant for licentious literature. Wang thus wrote a novel that would be of interest to Yan. When he finished, he soaked the pages in poison and hired a merchant to sell the book to Yan. Yan, falling prey to his base inclinations, bought the book, and as he licked his fingers to turn pages over the course of the long novel, he eventually ingested enough of the poison to fall ill and die. More
remarkable than this most assuredly apocryphal account is the fact that it circulated until to the modern period.\textsuperscript{62} Taking the poison as a metaphor for toxic topics or words, the author participates in the tradition of “selling the sickness” (maibing), whereby an ill person writes the name of his sickness on a piece of paper and leaves it out for someone else to find. He who reads the name of the illness then falls ill with it, and the author is thereby cured. Often the contagious words had to be left in a basket with food or money to entice passersby into reading them—a gesture not unlike hiding poison in the pages of a licentious book.\textsuperscript{63} In this case, reading transmits disease.

Even more precisely, Wang engages in a literary version of gu poisoning. Gu 蠱, emblematized visually by the component parts of the character three “worms” over a vessel, was a poison believed to be created by filling a container with various poisonous insects, worms, or snakes, which after a period of time (usually one hundred days) destroy or devour each other until only one remains. This last worm was believed to have absorbed all of the concentrated poison of the others. This creature is the gu, a manifestation of the gu demon, which requires a human host to reproduce.\textsuperscript{64} The gu is slipped into food, and as soon as someone consumes this poison, the seeds develop into worms resembling their parents, which gnaw on the viscera of the victim, producing pain, a swollen abdomen, progressive emaciation, and ultimately, death. The proof of gu poisoning was visible after death, when worms crawled out from orifices in the corpse. As a reward for providing the gu with a host in which the seeds can mature, the gu demon presents the human agent with all of the possessions of the deceased victim. If the person who initiates this process is unable to find a host for the gu in a timely fashion, he is killed by the gu demon. For this reason he may even find himself forced to select a relative from his own household as the victim. The actor’s obligation to the gu demon could be transferred to another by enticing a stranger to take home the gu worm by hiding it in a basket of treasure, such as silk, silver, or gold, left at a crossroads or other public place.\textsuperscript{65} Poisoning by gu was explicitly forbidden in Ming and Qing legal codes, and was a topic of great interest to authors of medical texts.\textsuperscript{66}

Wang, in an effort to relieve himself of the debt of vengeance, pours the accumulated poison into a novel in the form of detailed descriptions of the sex act, jealous wives, and all manner of debauchery, knowing that it will entice Yan to take it home, where he will be poisoned with it and will not only die, but in doing so, will relieve Wang
of his burden. Wang was not motivated by greed, though, as agents of gu were, and thus prefatory essays argue that his novel was an instrument of filial revenge. The novel is also like gu in that it appealed to the highbrow and lowbrow alike in its incorporation of all registers of knowledge. Gu did so by comingling the universal encounter with parasite infection and demonological concepts. The result was a convincing explanatory model for both disease transmission and retributory illness that fascinated and terrified the educated and uneducated alike for centuries, up until the early twentieth century. The endurance of Plum in the Golden Vase’s creation myth as an instrument of Wang’s revenge drew on the same mix of high- and lowbrow logic as gu poison and selling the sickness.

It may have been this story of poison and filial revenge that spurred readers to discuss Plum in the Golden Vase with medically minded language borrowed from commentary on the classics. Not only was Plum in the Golden Vase one of the first (if not the first) novels in China to focus on domestic matters, it was also the work of a single author who did not retell or piece together known stories. Perhaps this formal cohesion (the novel was intricately structured like a body), or the novel’s concern with daily life (diseases and doctors were a prominent fact of life), or the seeming contradiction between its content and form (poison and antidote) warranted or demanded use of medical language by commentators. The Xinxinzi preface to the earliest existing text of Plum in the Golden Vase alludes to the function of the novel as a bodily system and makes the connection between moral and medical effects:

From its beginning to its end the strands of the plot are as intricately articulated as the conduits of the circulatory system. . . . It is scarcely to be denied that in this work the language encroaches on the vulgar and the atmosphere is redolent of rouge and powder. But I would assert that such allegations miss the point. The first song in The Book of Songs [Shijing] has been characterized by Confucius as expressing “pleasure that does not extend to wantonness and sorrow that does not lead to injury.” Sorrow and resentment are sentiments that man dislikes, but few are able to experience them without injury to themselves.

The phrase “the threads of the plot are as intricately articulated as the conduits and arteries” (mailuo guantong) comes from Zhu Xi’s preface to his commentary on the Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong, 1189). This preface would have been familiar to every educated reader of the
sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, since the *Doctrine of the Mean* is one of the Four Books that formed the core of Confucian education during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and Zhu Xi’s commentary editions were the standard texts. Xinxinzi was not the first to take these medical terms out of classical commentary and apply them to fiction, but he goes further in drawing a parallel between the bodily structure of the novel and its emotional effects on the reader’s body. Prefatory pieces to the Zhang Zhupo edition of *Plum in the Golden Vase* employ the phrase “threaded together like qi and channels” (guantong qimai) to describe the intricacies of the plot, and Zhang bolsters that image with his phrase “channels that connect widely separated [plot] elements” (qianli fumai), saying that the marvelous quality of *Plum in the Golden Vase* is the way in which it conceals them.

While it is true that these phrases were a part of the standard lexicon for literary critics, and therefore do not merit undue emphasis, they were oft-repeated comments about *Plum in the Golden Vase* and the novels that followed it. Zhang Zhupo writes, “Only if you take several days and read *Plum* all the way through will you perceive the connecting nerves and arteries that act like a single thread upon which the author has strung together his succession of rising and falling actions.” He says “From the prologue in the first chapter one can see how the arteries and veins [xuemai jingluo] of the entire book are finely interconnected [guan tong qi mo].” The careful reader must uncover the literary and rhetorical devices, as a skilled doctor would carefully detect the meaning of palpitations in the pulse.

Circulation was a concept and pulse taking a practice central to elite medicine. The relation of medicine to the circulatory system (mailuo) or pulse taking (qiemai) lies in the belief that most diseases stem from the improper flow of blood and qi through the body. Applied to literature, the concept of circulation highlights not only the complexity of the work but also its harmony and its health. But the critics did not limit themselves to the language of elite medicine. Just as often, for instance, Zhang Zhupo refers to acupuncture, a practice that was usually relegated to nonelite healers, itinerant physicians, or women, claiming that “the author’s acupuncture [zhenbian] uses satiric barbs instead of regular needles.” The Woxian Caotang commentator on *Unofficial History of the Scholars* writes, “Here the author’s acupuncture is aimed at curing just such people.” Novelists were representing complex worlds, and commentators drew on the language of medical practice high and low to discuss it.
EMOTIONAL MEDICINE

The saying that “one does not need to pay with his life if he angers a person to death” (qisiren bu changming) may derive from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms story of Zhuge Liang, minister of the state of Shu, tricking General Zhou Yu of Wu three times until he finally died of anger.78 The Unofficial History of the Scholars features a similarly well-known story of Fan Jin, who, hearing that he had passed the provincial imperial examinations after many years of disappointment, became so overjoyed that he went crazy.79 Traditionally, medical texts located maladies due to emotional excess under the rubric “wind disorders” (feng), a broad grouping based on one of the six external causes of disease. An innovation in the late imperial era was a more specific category found in medical texts, usually termed simply “emotions” (qingzhi).

Examination of Medical Prescriptions (Yifang kao) by Wu Kun, written in 1584, is one of the earliest texts with this grouping, and it features many cases assembled to illustrate the use of emotions to treat disorders caused by emotion.80 From the Yellow Emperor’s Basic Questions of the Inner Canon (Huang Di neijing suwen) to this period, most illnesses with emotion at the root were believed to result from blockages in the flow of qi caused by those emotions and were to be dispersed with pills or medicinal broths. The late imperial period put forth a new kind of treatment: emotional counter-therapy. As Wu writes,

When emotion is overwhelmingly excessive, no drug can cure [the resulting disorder]; it must be overcome by emotion. Thus it is said that “anger damages the hepatic system, but sorrow overcomes anger; joy damages the cardiac system, but apprehension overcomes joy; worry damages the splenetic system, but anger overcomes worry; sorrow damages the pulmonary system, but joy overcomes sorrow; apprehension damages the renal system, but worry overcomes apprehension.”81

The renowned Yuan doctor Zhu Zhenheng was once sent to see a married woman. For half a year, she had been ill with a loss of appetite, frequently lying in bed, facing the north. Her husband had been away for five years, traveling on business. Zhu asserted that her qi was stagnated in the spleen. Her ailments, he claimed, all came from her “wanting a man but not being able to get one” (si nanzi bu de).82 Zhu suggested that the only way to treat the woman’s qi blockage
was to drive her to the point of rage. Zhu gave the patient three slaps on the face and accused her of having affairs with other men, causing her to cry out in righteous indignation. Afterward, she felt hungry and asked to eat some food. Zhu told her father secretly that despite her improved condition, the best treatment would be to bring her joy. They deceitfully told her that her husband had informed them by a letter that he would return soon. Three months later, her husband finally came back, and she completely recovered.

Novels could lead readers to injure themselves with excessive sentiment, but they could also serve as counter-therapy to the illnesses caused by real-world vexations. Excessive sorrow and resentment could cause people to act as if drunk or stupid, speak in absurdities, and suffer hallucinations. These are also the emotions that the preface to *Plum in the Golden Vase* claims are present in the novel, and because of which many readers cause themselves injury. Of course, sympathetic illness brought on by reading *Story of the Stone* also plays into a motif of Cao Xueqin’s novel: that fiction becomes real when it is true. When it resonates with the reader, stirs emotions, and causes the reader to believe, then it is not fiction. In this regard, readers’ deaths make the fiction real. Moreover, these stories of death from reading the novel, which draw so clearly on the medical theory and trends of the day, not only imitate the repeating cycle of paired opposites, repletion and depletion (*xushi*), but draw on that bodily image to establish and perpetuate the motif of realistic fiction and fictive truth (*xushi*).

There was an appreciation for the aesthetics of illness in late imperial China. The famous poet and critic Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610) wrote, “There is nothing more melancholic than illness. . . . There are times when [the songs of] grieving men and lovelorn women are superior to [the poetry of] scholars and literati, and oftentimes that which comes from groaning is more pleasing than everyday [sounds].” At least in the popular imaginary, men tended to suffer from melancholy and resentment. The preface to *Plum in the Golden Vase* defines melancholy as a particular literati illness:

Of the seven feelings natural to mankind, melancholy [*youyu*] is the most intractable. For such men of superior wisdom as may occasionally appear in the natural course of evolution, the fogs and ice that melancholy engenders disperse and splinter of their own accord, so there is no need to speak of such as these. Even those of lesser endowment know how to dispel melancholy with the aid of reason so that it
may be prevented from encumbering them. Among the many who fall short of this, however, who have been unable to achieve enlightenment in their hearts, and who do not have access to the riches of the classic tradition to alleviate their melancholy, those who do not fall ill are few. . . . It is in consideration of this fact that my friend, the Scoffing Scholar, has poured the accumulated wisdom of a lifetime into the composition of this work, consisting of one hundred chapters in all. So enticingly are the effects accomplished that the reader may, perhaps, be beguiled into forgetting his melancholy with a smile.85

It was a given that literati suffer from melancholy. Yet the novel is capable of engendering joy, which dispels melancholy according to counter-therapy, and therefore is an antidote to the literati illness. This class of literati so disposed to melancholy is evoked in the anecdote about Wang Yan (256–311), a reference to which occurs on the first page of the first chapter of Plum in the Golden Vase, when a friend comes to offer condolences after the death of Wang’s infant son. His friend asks why Wang is so filled with grief, since the child was only an infant. Wang replies, “Sages may be able to forget their feelings, and the lower order of men may lack feeling altogether. It is people just like ourselves who are most affected by emotion (qing).”86 The novel is intended for the average best reader, or the class of literati that is most sensitive and least able to effectively deal with the melancholy that so commonly afflicts them.

Li Yu, playwright, novelist and publisher, writes in Causal Expressions of Idle Feeling (Xianqing ouji) that this kind of bibliotherapy (and the diseases it cures) is exclusively a literati endeavor:

That which was never before seen in one’s life can be taken as medicine. To want what one has never possessed is a desire all men have. This is like [the feeling of] men of letters toward marvelous and strange books . . . To allow these persons to see these objects, to find these especially under difficult conditions, this is the technique whereby to manage and control the patient . . . What I mean by “literati” does not necessarily refer only to those with talent [but] rather all who are literate, who can read, who can use books as medicine. Stories and Unofficial Histories (chuanqi yeshi) are the best for expelling illness and demons.87

What is unspoken in Li Yu’s piece about strange books and medicine is the malady that they treat. The patient here, like Jia Baoyu in Story of the Stone after he moves into the utopian realm of Prospect Garden, is overcome with melancholy. In the midst of his placid, agreeable existence, Baoyu becomes discontented:
The garden’s female population were mostly still in that age of innocence when freedom from inhibition is the fruit of ignorance. Waking and sleeping they surrounded him, and their mindless giggling was constantly in his ears. How could they understand the restless feelings that now consumed him? In his present mood of discontent he was bored with the garden and its inmates; yet his attempts to find distraction outside it ended in the same emptiness and ennui.88

This malady is relieved when Baoyu’s servant smuggles in to him a stack of prohibited drama and fiction—among them The Story of the Western Wing (Xixiang ji, 1498). Part of this relief stems from the fact that what Baoyu read amounted to new experiences. His reading of these works borders on the obsessive, and Story of the Western Wing becomes a guidebook for lovers—its language a code for his communication with Lin Daiyu. Obsession was equal to happiness and also to refinement, which made it both a marker of the gentleman, and the therapeutic counterpart to the literati illness, melancholy.89

Cao Xueqin claims it is not the subject but the representation itself that makes the novel useful as medicine. The Stone defends its story to Vanitas (Kongkong daoren):

Surely my “number of females,” whom I spent half a lifetime studying with my own eyes and ears, are preferable to [unofficial histories, erotic novels and talented-scholar-beautiful-maiden stories]. I do not claim that they are better people than the ones who appear in books written before my time; I am only saying that the contemplation of their actions and motives may relieve worry and disperse melancholy [xiao chou po men].90

If depressed and disenfranchised men contemplate the talented and frail woman, it will cure him. Yet if the sensitive woman reader contemplates her, she will sicken and die. The resolution of this gender paradox lies in the mediating effects of representation, which moderates extremes of emotion and puts at a remove from the reader those characters that fall ill from harmful excesses of melancholy. The appreciation of the representation, the acknowledgement of the fictionality of the novel, enables its use as medicine.

Many of the claims that the novel can cure melancholy are rhetorical, even frivolous proclamations, not meant to be taken literally. When the Woxian Caotang commentator says of The Unofficial History of the Scholars that “if read when one’s head gets heavy in the middle of a long summer’s day it will wake one to clarity or even cure an illness! [keyi shuixing keyi yubing],” it may have been the simple
use of rhyme to add weight to praise. The phrase has a lyrical flourish to it, but it belies hyperbole. Melancholy in particular was linked to other, particularly male concerns. According to the *Systematic Materia Medica*, when excessive melancholy damages the heart, nocturnal emission occurs. In medical texts, melancholy is often paired with anxiety (fanmen), worry, taxation, and pent-up frustration (silu taiguo, silu yujie). When these conditions are extreme, they can damage the heart and spleen, resulting in amnesia, trance, restlessness, and insomnia. If they damage the heart and kidneys, the likely outcome will be debilitated primordial yang vital energy with white and turbid urine and nocturnal emission with dreams of sex. Melancholy is also frequently mentioned in the *Systematic Materia Medica*, along with overstrain and excessive sexual intercourse, as resulting in uncontrolled seminal emission. This was considered a terrible affliction, and writers of fiction and medicine virtually obsessed over this issue throughout the Qing. Although loss of semen in novels is more frequently a result of too much intercourse, novel prefaces that claimed to distract the reader from his melancholy and anxiety were not only saying that they would cheer him up but that they could prevent the most dire kind of depletion.

Reading was not unlike the practice of “bedchamber arts” (fangzhongshu), the purpose of which was to achieve “arousal without emission” (donger buxie) to bolster health. These were practices much written about in the late Ming medical texts that focused on absorbing the bodily resources of one’s sexual partner to benefit oneself. These practices made one partner healthier while depleting the other. Many of the medical texts and handbooks that discuss this medicalized view of sex refer to it as a “battle of stealing and strengthening” (caibu zhi zhan). For one partner to benefit from the other, usually the other partner needed to have less training, less experience. If it was the aestheticization of illness that enabled experienced readers to derive joy and benefit from the novel, did their use of the novel as medicine also depend on others being unable to distinguish between truth and fiction? Was it essential for some to die from reading novels, so that others could use it as medicine? Either way, the novel was an instrument of male self-help and female destruction. Daiyu’s tears are a symbol of her depletion, and as they turn to blood, the male reader, sympathizing but not empathizing with her fate, feels the warmth of truth, the bitter sweet smile, and the nodding appreciation of a true artist dispelling his own melancholy.
 Aphrodisiacs and Recipe Books

Warnings about the dangers or health benefits of novels in early chapters or prefatory materials resemble similar claims in many prefaces to medical texts, particularly those recipe books that were intended to be used by the lay person for self-medicating. An 1873 preface by Chen Qirong, the nineteenth-century literatus, to *Secret Formulas for Women, from the Bamboo Grove Monastery* (Zhulinsi niike mifang, 1852), criticizes quacks (yongyi) who mechanically apply ancient formulas without understanding the different manifestations that a disease might take in different people. But he also describes the text as a guide to home treatment by medical amateurs. Why did preface writers encourage lay people to rely on prescription books but consider it unacceptable for medical practitioners to do so? The answer lies in confidence in good readers, and in setting up an opposition between disenfranchised literati who read widely and practiced medicine either as a hobby or as an imperative as head of house, and those less skilled readers: professionals, hacks, and women.

Aphrodisiacs (*chunyao*) were one of the most commonly discussed prescriptions in recipe books and in medical manuscripts copied by practicing doctors for their own use. These were also of particular interest as contested objects in fiction, given widespread concerns about excessive sex. Rural healers, for instance, copy these prescriptions less frequently than their urban counterparts, presumably because there were fewer brothels in the country, and therefore less need for such aphrodisiacs, and pointing to their use for recreation as often as for procreation. Aphrodisiacs and tonifying medicines are often found in the recipe books of urban healers, and they are frequently described as having the same or similar effects. These aphrodisiacs have detailed names elaborating on their effects: recipes for “preventing the golden spear from falling down” (*jinqiang budao*), “to make an immortal [woman] take her clothes off” (*xianren zi tuoyi*), for “myriad screams of happiness” (*wanshengjiao*), for an “erotic drug welcoming joy” (*se yaofang huanle*), for a drug to “make a woman want to give money to her lover” (*daotiejin*), and one to cause “long-lasting thoughts” (*chang sixiang*), but others point to a more generic kind of enhancement, such as an “elixir to strengthen the yang” (*zhuangyang dan*) and a “priceless treasure” (*wujia bao*).

In printed medical texts, obscene elements were often edited out of narrative explanations, but folk recipes included in manuscripts were
quite explicit, and in this regard they read like licentious fiction. Stories of sexual transgression, whether in fiction or medical texts, tend to preach a similar morality in which transgression leads to a corresponding retribution. One such story designed to prove the efficacy of an aphrodisiac formula is attached to prescriptions that have been copied into multiple, disparate practitioners’ manuscripts. In one manuscript the story is attached to the “elixir to strengthen yang,” and in another to “priceless pills” (wujia wan). The story concerns a provincial governor who was impotent and weak, and had searched all over for a cure. Eventually, he obtained a formula but died after taking the drugs. The wife of the governor heard about Ge Yu, a man of seventy-two years who suffered from the same ailment as her late husband. Not wanting to waste the formula, she gave it to Ge Yu. After Ge Yu took it, his sexual potency increased dramatically. Every night he demanded to have intercourse with his own wife more than six times. His wife concluded that this formula was too strong, so she did not let her husband take it any longer, and she told the widow of the governor what had happened. The widow could not believe it and had illicit sexual intercourse with Ge Yu, whereupon she discovered that the effects of the formula were indeed extraordinary. Subsequently, they had three sons. The relatives of the governor’s widow considered this transgression intolerable, and they killed Ge Yu. As they broke Ge Yu’s bones, they discovered that they were filled with marrow. Since old men were believed to suffer from kidney depletion, and as the kidneys rule the bones, their marrow was expected to be depleted too. They thus realized that this formula indeed produced miraculous effects.

This story, inasmuch as it features aphrodisiacs, sexual transgression, and retribution, sounds much like Plum in the Golden Vase and its descendants in speaking of fornication between a man and woman separated by age and position, excessive sex, extramarital sex, and so on. But the transgressive, like the extraordinary, in the context of practical medical texts serves to prove the efficacy of the prescription. The story stayed with the pill it described and was written out, in slightly different form, in a variety of manuscripts. Why would copyists, presumably assembling medicines for their own practice, record the story in addition to the prescription? Clearly the story somehow proved the efficacy of the aphrodisiac or tonic, and the popularity of the drug perpetuated the story. The copyist must have either presumed that he would need the story to convince future patients to take the cure, or he simply viewed the story as part of the prescription. Prescriptions that lacked the authority of being in a printed text, like the many aphrodisiacs and fertility drugs found
in these medical manuscripts, were often accompanied by stories. Stories like these, which read so similarly to popular, ribald fiction in both form and content, may also have convinced readers of a drug’s efficacy because it was a familiar story, a well-worn exemplary tale, and through repetition, the story created reality.

Aphrodisiacs straddled a line between health (fertility drugs that tonified the body and enhanced procreative abilities) and death (enabling excessive expenditure of bodily resources). Presumably for this reason,

Figure 2.2. The story of Ge Yu from a medical manuscript. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, East Asia Department Slg. Unschuld 8429.
aphrodisiacs are frequently listed next to abortifacients in recipe literature, which also hints at their semi-illicit status. The Ge Yu story drew on the logic of transgression and retribution, which may have made the story seem true, both as proof of the medicine and as a warning against its abuse. That the transgressor is punished added a ring of truth for readers who believed in an orderly and just world. The functioning of retribution is borne out in fiction, since characters such as Ximen Qing who abuse aphrodisiacs fall ill and die, while those who ingest them by mistake usually recover. The Ge Yu story warns, as does the Ximen story, that excess and transgression will be met, eventually, with retribution. But the story of Ge Yu also contains the same message as *Plum in the Golden Vase*—that this medicine can strengthen and fortify if used correctly, but if one gives free reign to their desires, it becomes an instrument of depletion. It is the same as when bad readers turn the novel, with its ability to dispel melancholy, into a guide for debauchery.

That novels and medical texts for daily use reflected the concerns of the city and the marketplace is not terribly strange, but that novels portray themselves as a kind of aphrodisiac is. Few of the instances
of aphrodisiacs found in works of drama or fiction or the stories transmitted along with recipes for aphrodisiacs in medical texts have healthy outcomes. Characters in fictional literature who make reference to this kind of medicine, such as Crimson (Hongniang) in *Story of the Western Wing*, are usually lowbrow, foreign, or suspicious in some other way. The common representation of aphrodisiacs in literary fiction concerned the recurrent theme of retribution and was usually attendant upon heavy-handed moralizing. In *Plum in the Golden Vase*, Ximen Qing obtains an aphrodisiac (which itself is contained in a box shaped like a phallus) from an itinerant foreign monk who also looks like a penis. The aphrodisiac, a symbol of lasciviousness and excess, and of “misreading” the sex act—taking procreation for pleasure—is contrasted with a fertility charm obtained by his dutiful, tradition-bound wife, Wu Yueniang, in another episode in *Plum in the Golden Vase* that leads, ultimately to the birth of a son.

This dual view of aphrodisiacs may reflect what was happening in the medical world at the time. Some doctors became known for prescribing aphrodisiacs and sexual techniques to attain longevity. Gong Juzhong (fl. 1630), for instance, a renowned physician at the end of the Ming dynasty, was called by some a “physician of licentiousness” (*yinyi*). Gong lived during the Wanli (*1573–1620*) reign period, when “warming and supplementing” (*wenbu*) approaches were very popular, and it became fashionable to consume medications believed to strengthen one’s yang. His *Immortals’ Book on Longevity* (*Wanshou xianshu*, ca. 1560) advised readers on sexual techniques, prescribed sixteen recipes for aphrodisiacs, discoursed on the medicinal benefits of saliva, and introduced a section on “[bed] curtain combat” (*weizhan*). Claims in the prefatory materials published in novels that despite the novel’s depiction of the above acts that, for instance, “*Plum in the Golden Vase* is not a licentious novel” (*Diyi qishu fei yinshu lun*), draws on the properties of aphrodisiacs, emphasizing the possible tonifying benefit of reading novels with the correct purpose and in moderation.

**THE CURATIVE PROPERTIES OF CHINESE FICTION**

The novel could be abused in two ways—by using the novel as a guidebook to sex, or by becoming obsessed with the novel’s story and characters in lieu of its artistic and intellectual qualities that stimulate a more refined kind of reader. A 1695 piece by Zhang Chao (1659–1707), titled “*Biblio Materia Medica*” (*Shu bencao*), classifies books as medicinal
drugs in the manner of traditional *bencao* literature. It is a playful piece, but it resonates with claims found elsewhere about the novel. It begins with the healing effects of the classics: “Four Books: There are four kinds [of this drug], one called ‘great learning’ one called ‘doctrine of the mean’ one called ‘analects’ and one called ‘Mencius.’ All are mild in nature, sweet in flavor, and nontoxic. Taking them clears the mind [heart] and increases wisdom. Nonaddictive / reduces desires. Long-term usage causes people to have a mind that is broad and a body that is ample [*xinguang tipang*].” Naturally the classics are beneficial to all and have no bad side effects. The author of this piece advises against reading philosophies or works from the Buddhist and Daoist canon because of their side effects. Historical literature, he claims, can be used only by particular types of readers under certain circumstances. There are a variety of these “medicines,” and “taking them broadens one’s knowledge and experience. Sometimes they make people feel great anger or cause them to weep without being able to stop . . . the price of this medicine is high. . . . It is not fit for use by uncultured people.” Emotion marked literati refinement, but so did being able to control that emotion. According to Zhang Chao, this ability was lacking in unrefined people. In his hierarchy, fiction constitutes the most dangerous of the textual, medical drugs:

> Fiction [*xiaoshuo chuanqi*]: The flavor of novels is sweet and their nature/effect is arid and highly toxic. This drug should be avoided because it induces insanity. It should be taken only during the summer months when suffering from overeating or melancholy [*baomen*], when bad weather makes one feel awful. It also can help those suffering from diseases caused by external factors [wind and rain]. Taking the drug can relieve anxiety and dispel stagnation [*jie fanxiaoyu*]. It can dissipate sluggishness and open up the chest. However, it ought not be taken on a prolonged basis.

“Biblio Materia Medica” humorously appropriates the structure of materia medica to play a game with major genres of literature, but it also employs the same emotional counter-therapy logic as medical works. The conclusion adopts the same argument to defend the novel as novel prefaces do, namely that reading them is tantamount to the skillful use of poison as medicine:

> Fei Cidu says: It depends how you use medicine—if you use it correctly, even if [the medicine is from] is a snake or a scorpion, it still can be effective. Han Xin’s [unconventional] battle with his back to the water, and Yue Fei’s ignoring the classics on martial arts, are
examples of this. If you use medicine incorrectly, even poria [fuling] can kill you. Zhao Gua’s reading his father’s books in vain and Wang Anshi’s following the Zhou Li are examples of this.\textsuperscript{111} This is something that all people who use medicine should know.\textsuperscript{112}

Books are strong medicine. If one is not a skilled reader, even histories and philosophies are dangerous, but if one is a man of talent (or, presumably a woman of advanced years and experience), one can put fiction to use. Han Xin’s and Yue Fei’s lack of formal training did not hinder their ability to win battles. This sort of unorthodox learning and roguish thinking is like using poison as medicine. Contrastingly, Zhao Gua’s and (here) Wang Anshi’s inability to understand the classics that they were reading, and their subsequent failures at practical application of knowledge, are compared to causing damage with a widely employed and gentle medicine.

The novel was pitched as preventative medicine, palliative, and cure for literati maladies. A variety of texts added reading fiction to the list of such practices as seated meditation and sexual intercourse in regard to its effects on the body. If done correctly, with the correct training, focus, and spirit, it can bring harmony to the body, but if done without the correct intention or without the proper praxis, it will do the opposite, and bring illness and harm. The novel was also an aphrodisiac, a drug that worked on the body to tonify or deplete, according to the refinement or baseness of its user. Some readers were able to perceive the meridians and the flow of qi; others caused irreparable harm by not heeding its warnings or by overdosing. In the case of both the novel and the medical handbook, literati readers appropriated the role of legitimate practitioner by claiming status as superior readers. Novels “formally enacted a sequential illness-cure regimen that simultaneously established a select circle of readers able to invoke the appropriate modal of reading. Just as illness and melancholy are functions (and discursive forms) of social and literary distinction, so too were regimens of cure and hygienic self-preservation.”\textsuperscript{113} Discussing novels in terms of medicine was a way to raise the status of the novel and of those who were able to read it well. Yet in fiction and in the marketplace for fiction, literati were also redefining an aesthetic. They savored the inability of beautiful, frail, young women to benefit from reading the novel, just as they celebrated the downfall of lechers who were unable to save themselves by reading properly. Their efforts were charming and tragic, and their inability to use novels ultimately validated a subset of literati as legitimate and talented practitioners of popular literature, be it fictional, practical, or otherwise.