THE PAIN OF SEPARATION

Poetic writings by Imperial Consort Zuo Fen 左芬 (ca. 253–300)

A Jin imperial consort recounts her life and her longing for her family in verse.

For early periods, a disproportionate share of the surviving writings attributed to women were done by women in the palace, such as Lady Ban, discussed in the introduction. These women were brought to the palace in their teens and might have few opportunities to see their own relatives in later years. If they gained the favor of the ruler, that could lead to loss of friendship with other women in the palace, who saw themselves as rivals, and the ruler might in time lose interest in them, leaving them isolated. Although only a tiny proportion of women ever entered the palace, people saw in their circumstances something more universal: the pain of separation from loved ones, the plight of women who lose the love of the men they are mated with, and feelings of isolation. Men who perceived that their ruler had lost confidence in them would sometimes express their unhappiness through the voice of a neglected woman.

Discord in the imperial household and related noble families was at a high point during the brief Western Jin period (265–317), when princes
and consort families sometimes took up arms against each other. It was in just this period that Zuo Fen (ca. 253–300) entered the palace. Born to a well-known family, both she and her elder brother, Zuo Si (ca. 255–ca. 306), were ranked among the most accomplished poets of the day. Zuo Fen’s epitaph, excavated in 1930, referred to her as Emperor Wu’s (r. 266–290) “Noble Lady” (Guiren), one of the three highest ranked consorts. Like her brother, Zuo Fen excelled in both rhapsody (fu), a verse form with lines of unequal lengths, and shi poetry, with lines of equal length. Rhapsodies first appeared during the Spring and Autumn period and by the third century had become a literary form considered especially appropriate for narratives rich in description.

With her position in the imperial palace and her literary reputation, it came as a surprise to archaeologists that Zuo Fen was buried very simply. Her epitaph recorded only her title, date of death, place of burial, and natal family members. Scholars surmise that by the time she passed away, the Jin was in the midst of political turmoil and the epitaph was hastily arranged by her brother’s family instead of the imperial court. Fuller information is given in her brief biograph in The History of the Jin (Jinshu), compiled in the Tang dynasty, which claims that it was Zuo Fen’s literary reputation that led to her selection as an imperial consort. During her years as Emperor Wu’s consort, she was often summoned to compose poetry to commemorate special occasions, and the “Rhapsody of Thoughts on Separation” was reportedly written at the emperor’s command. Nevertheless, from her poem written for her brother, “Heartfelt Feelings on Separation,” it is clear that the raw emotion expressed in the rhapsody reflected her deepest feelings. Emperor Wu died in 290, and Zuo Fen lived in the palace as a “widow” for another ten years. She had no children.

In the poem and rhapsody translated below, Zuo Fen both recounts her experience in the palace and reflects on mundane problems and frustrations of women in imperial China.

HEARTFELT FEELINGS ON SEPARATION

From the time I left our parents,
Suddenly two years have passed.
The distance separating us has become gradually greater;
When shall I pay my respect to them again?
I have perused what you kindly told me in your letter,
And I savor the words of your sorrowful song of separation.
I can almost imagine your face before me,
And I sigh and sob out of control.
When will we meet again
To amuse ourselves with prose and verse?
How can I recount my misery?
I’ll express my feelings in writing.

**Rhapsody of Thoughts on Separation**

I
Born in the humble seclusion of a thatched hut,
I knew nothing of state documents.
I never saw the splendid portraits painted on palace walls,
Or heard the canons and counsels of the ancient sages.
Despite my foolish vulgarity and meager learning,
I was mistakenly given a place in the purple chamber.
This is not a place for a rustic,
And I constantly tremble with worry and fear.
My breast is filled with the sadness of longing,
Redoubled by ten thousand unremitting cares.
Alas, heavy sorrows accumulate deep within me!
Alone in my torment, I have no way to vent them.
My mind is vexed and troubled, joyless;
My thoughts are tied in a tangle, and my longing increases.
At night I lie awake unable to sleep;
My soul is restless, fretful till dawn.
Wind, soughing and sighing, rises all around;
Frost, pure white, covers the courtyard.
The sun, dim and dark, casts no light;
The air is sad and gloomy, bitterly cold.
I hear many sorrowful feelings
And am afflicted by tears that fall of themselves.
II
Of old, Boyu, handsome and fair,
Always dressed in colored clothes to cheer his parents.
I grieve at the separation of today;
Like Antares and Orion, long have family and I been parted.
It is not that the distance is far—
It does not even exceed several rods.
How cold and confining the forbidden palace!
I wish to gaze into the distance but lack the means.
I look up at the moving clouds and sob;
Flowing tears soak my gown.
Qu Yuan was beset with sorrow;
Oh, how he grieved at separation!
He who wrote a song at the wall tower
Compared one day to three months.
How much more painful for parents and children who love each other,
Cut off so long and so far.
Long have I been laden with sorrow, afflicted with grief;
I look up the blue sky and weep tears of blood.

THE CODA SAYS:
Parents and children, the dearest of kin,
Have been transformed into strangers.
We bid a final farewell,
And I was sorrowful and sad.
I dream that my soul returns home,
And I see my loved ones.
I wake with a start and cry out:
My heart cannot comfort itself.
Copious tears pour down my face;
I pick up a brush and express my feelings.
Tear upon tear falls
As I make my plaint in this poem.

Translated by David R. Knechtges

Further Reading

