



Burial at Sea

Trans Gothic and
Tian Guan Ci Fu

an essay by roland

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Cover art: *Mother* (1888), Michał Elwiro Andriolli

Page 38: *The House of Usher*, illustration by Daniel Wapler for *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 1922

With thanks to bell, pin, tshirt (my collection of household objects), verity, eliot, and many others for feedback, encouragement, and zine help.

2025

Introduction

- > be me, 2020
- > covid unemployed
- > everyone on twitter is watching the untamed
- > watch the untamed
- > exposed to broader mxtx fandom
- > see fanart of a yuri couple from one of her other books
- > they're called beefleaf for some reason¹ and also they're transbians (???)
- > informed that beefleaf are neither lesbians nor trans
- > disappointed
- > read tgcf
- > become detached from the social dogma

Like any gothic tale, this story is about obsession. Mine, in particular. But He Xuan's, too.

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's *Tian Guan Ci Fu*, or *Heaven Official's Blessing*, is a BL² xianxia³ webnovel about the goings-on of the heavenly, mortal, and ghostly realms. It is a long story containing several sub-arcs, many of which span hundreds of pages (the complete work is eight volumes in its English release.) One of these is known in fandom as the Black Water arc. It is about loss, family, loyalty, and gender. In short, it is a gothic novel nested within a broader story. And it obsesses me.

I've cultivated a dense and somewhat idiosyncratic reading of the story—from this point on I'll use “story” to refer to the Black Water arc and “novel” to refer to the work as a whole—which has taken up a lot of space in my brain and in turn influenced my own fiction projects considerably over the past few years. I am absolutely fandom-brained about it, so this is less an attempt to

dignify my efforts with pseudo-academic dressing as to articulate why I've spent four years fascinated by a subplot in a goofy and deeply flawed webnovel.

I'm not the first person to observe that this story is quite gothic, but I started paying particular attention to that aspect after reading the following excerpt from an interview with Mo Xiang Tong Xiu:

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* greatly influences me. When I read it during elementary school, I was shaking from excitement. Perhaps because of the influence of *Wuthering Heights*, [whenever] I see complex, intertwining love-hate situations, I feel such joy and nostalgia in my heart.⁴

Of the conventions of the gothic novel as exemplified by texts such as *Wuthering Heights*, the most relevant to my purpose include:

- disjointed narratives that jump between narrators and points in time, contain stories-within-stories, or are fragmented around crucial pieces of information;
- atmospheres of gloom and apprehension;
- emphasis on doubling, doppelgängers, mimesis, etc;
- fractured selves, characters who are not who they say they are, and true identities that have been concealed, either willingly or unwillingly, perhaps even from themselves;
- fraught familial dynamics, including curses and secrets, especially around bloodline, inheritance, or incest;
- structures and estates that are vast, ancient, anachronistic, labyrinthine, haunted, etc, and which often contain subterranean or hidden areas;
- imprisonment, enclosure, live burial;
- sexual violence that manifests as genuine danger for the characters but a source of titillating horror-pleasure for the reader.

Yet I've not encountered analysis (in English) of what the gothic imaginative topography actually does for the story beyond aesthetics. So now you're here, and you're in for it.

Behold, in complete detail, my reading of the Black Water arc of *TGCF* as a work of trans gothic.

What am I on about?

When I say “trans”, I mean it not strictly in the sense of transgender identity, and instead as a “*movement* away from an imposed starting point to an undisclosed (non)destination [...] or, more precisely, [a] generative warping of gender toward something else.”⁵ This essay is concerned with ideas of freedom, (un)boundedness, and gender, and I rely on the term “trans” to do work for me in succinctly expressing these concepts. However, to deny a relationship between my attachment to this trans gothic reading and lived experience as a transgender person would be very silly, so that's also a thing. It's not so much a quest for representation as a desperate urge to play ball with stories in the court of fictional gender horror and gender ecstasy, and intense giddiness when a narrative is up to the challenge.

In most cases, I will be using “they” to refer to Shi Qingxuan or He Xuan as characters, though this is never used in the novel. This is not an assertion of either character as having a fixed/static non-binary identity, but a nod to the continuity between the word “they” as both a gender-neutral singular and a plural third-person pronoun. There's considerable debate within fandom over the “correct” interpretations of the characters' genders, and within the story, each character's gender accrues out of the plurality of selves they inhabit over time. This is true of people in general, of course, but it's made increasingly obvious here, as the characters traverse the bounds of mortal/immortal, living/dead, and male/female. Trans gothic is concerned with the gaps, the losses, the unresolved and fleeting and exile and

stray; the excess, abject, and escaped survivors of gender|genre. This is to say that I use gendered pronouns and familial terms inconsistently, often informed by clarity and impact.⁶

Any close reading of a text in translation has a “foundation built on sand” quality. One of the reasons this zine, which I’ve been working on for two years, took me so long to finish is that I kept writing and then getting rid of various disclaimers and caveats about this project which boil down to: I’m white, not personally affected by transmisogyny, and I have negligible grasp of Chinese language. Contained within these pages is an exegetical house of cards. I’ve considered whether I’m the “right person” to write this, but I think it’s rather moot as no one else has written it instead.

What follows is one part essay, one part scrapbook, one part shipping manifesto, but mostly a love letter to a silly thing. The idea of scrapbook or collage, in particular, appeals to me for its resonances with the gothic convention of fragmented narratives, as well as the way it frames this work as piecemeal and forever incomplete.

I. Forced to Swallow

[Family] is, at root, the name we use for the fact that care is privatized in our society.⁷

SOPHIE LEWIS

All eating is force-feeding: and it is through the wound of feeding that the other is instated at the very center of the self..⁸

MAUD ELLMANN

There's a tableau I come to again and again when I think about this story. A beautiful youth, fragile and vulnerable, has discovered a terrible secret, the nature of which is yet unknown to the reader. An apparent descent into madness ensues, until the youth is apprehended by his brother and hidden away before he can spill the truth.

At last, a concerned friend finds the youth tied to his bed within a sumptuous palace. The friend can only watch in horror through the window as the brother pours a sedative tonic down the struggling youth's throat. *It's for your own good*, the brother says. *You need to stop this hysteria. Wouldn't I know what's best for you? Who else would take care of you but me?*

The brother leaves and a new threat emerges: a dark figure emerges from the space beneath the bed. The youth and his friend can hardly respond before the figure unmask itself to reveal a familiar, welcome sight: the youth's closest friend has tunnelled into the palace to free him.

Later, we learn that the misapprehension of the best friend as a dangerous intruder was correct. All along, he has been a malicious spirit in disguise, lingering on this earth for the purpose of taking vengeance on the brother as recompense for a sin committed on behalf of the youth, the revelation of which sparked the youth's crisis.

Though there are more iconic moments involving these characters, this feels to me like the clearest picture of the situation, in which the various players are the most themselves. Everything hinges upon this choice to stay or go, to trust your family or the outsider, to decide whether it's preferable to be caged by someone who believes they have your best interests in mind or to be freed by someone with ulterior motives.

What people mean when they say “Black Water arc” is the story arc within which Shi Qingxuan, the aforementioned youth, becomes *TGCF*'s protagonist. The novel's main protagonist, Xie Lian, remains the nominal point of view character, but the degree to which Shi Qingxuan is the “true” protagonist—specifically, the gothic heroine—of this arc is demonstrated by the points at which Xie Lian soul-shifts into Shi Qingxuan's body as a mostly-passive observer in order for the reader to be privy to the goings-on of the plot.

Early in the novel, the reader meets Shi Qingxuan, the member of the heavenly court holding dominion over the wind. Shi Qingxuan is the younger sibling of Shi Wudu, the Water Master, a tyrannical figure who is second only to the Heavenly Martial Emperor in power among the gods. The bulk of the material I'm concerned with takes place between the arrival of the Wind and Earth Masters at Puqi Shrine and the climactic events at Nether Water Manor. Its focus is trained on the interpersonal triangle consisting of Shi Qingxuan (师青玄), Shi Wudu (师无渡) and He Xuan (贺玄)—listed in the order in which they appear in the above vignette.

The arc kicks off when Shi Qingxuan shares the siblings' tragic backstory, in which we learn that Shi Wudu's rising and grinding towards divine ascension was motivated not only by personal ambition but a desire to protect Shi Qingxuan from a terrible curse. At birth, Shi Qingxuan was chosen as a victim by the Reverend of Empty Words, an evil spirit that preys on people with fortunate fates and hounds them with proclamations of doom over the span of decades, devouring their fear of loss.

Many hundreds of years ago, when the Wind and Water Masters were still mortal, they were born and raised in an affluent, prosperous merchant household.

Shi Qingxuan was the second son, and when he was born, the entire family rejoiced. They gave him the baby name "Xuan." [...]

[The Reverend of Empty Words] had finally awoken after a century's rest and had decided it was time to stretch its legs... and when it next opened its mouth to feed, it was eager to take a large bite.

Shi Qingxuan had just been born and was incidentally exactly to its taste. [...]

They sent Shi Qingxuan away and pretended he'd been given to another family, then dressed their son to look like a female baby before bringing him back. The family then claimed that the female babe was an adopted daughter and raised the little young master as a little young mistress instead. [...]

Over those ten years, the once-wealthy merchant household gradually declined. The parents of the two elemental masters passed away, and internal conflicts over inheritance raged. Shi Wudu tired of it all, so the year he turned sixteen, he left home and brought with him the little Shi Qingxuan, who was younger by many years. The brothers depended on each other to survive. Shi Wudu was the first to enter the mountains to cultivate under

a master, and he settled his little brother in a town at the foot of the mountain. Every day, he cultivated and trained until late, not returning home until it was deep into the night.⁹

On its surface, this is a picture of brotherly devotion in the face of adversity. This image of two young siblings going it alone together in a hostile world is a tableau of what Sophie Lewis calls the “romance of isolated intensity” saturating the mythos of the family.¹⁰

The Reverend of Empty Words eventually tricks Shi Qingxuan into revealing the little girl’s disguise to be false, and the siblings are stalked by the spirit until Shi Wudu succeeds at ascending to godhood. After Shi Wudu becomes the Water Master, he appoints Shi Qingxuan as a deputy official within his own heavenly palace. This position allows Shi Qingxuan to reside with their brother in the heavenly realm: immortal, capable of wielding spiritual power, and “forever sweet sixteen.”¹¹ However, Shi Wudu is not sufficiently assured that immortality alone will permanently protect Shi Qingxuan from so tenacious a monster, so he executes a dastardly scheme...

Shi Wudu locates a mortal born on the same day as Shi Qingxuan who also bears the baby name “Xuan” (玄). Fortuitously, He Xuan is also destined to ascend to godhood in the near future. Shi Wudu then commits the sin that pushes this story into fully heightened gothic mode: unbeknownst to Shi Qingxuan, he performs a ritual to switch He Xuan and Shi Qingxuan’s fates. He Xuan’s divine destiny is given to Shi Qingxuan, who ascends as a fully-fledged god in their own right. The He family, meanwhile, are driven to ruin by the Reverend of Empty Words.

This truth is, of course, the terrible secret Shi Qingxuan learns in the scene I recounted earlier. We’ll talk about He Xuan’s part later; this chapter is about the Shi siblings, and in particular whether there’s ever a good excuse for marrying your sister.

Shi Qingxuan is nicknamed Lady Wind Master, and in the mortal world, the Water and Wind Masters are worshipped as husband and wife by mortals who are unaware they are in fact blood siblings. Though Shi Qingxuan and Shi Wudu respond with apparent revulsion when reminded of this fact, much is made of Shi Wudu's near-omnipotent abilities to get his worshippers to do what he wants—he is known as the Water Tyrant in heaven as well as on earth—and at least one other divine character (Mu Qing) is said to intervene in his followers' dreams if the artistic likenesses in their temples don't meet with his approval. Despite Shi Wudu's reservations about Shi Qingxuan's gender queerness—a topic which we will return to in depth—he is content to have public perception of Shi Qingxuan's divinity cast them as his wife.

In the gothic, familial relations are ties that really do bind, and incest is always present as a latent possibility even when not explicit on the page. The gothic preoccupation with incest is in part due to the brevity with which it allows authors to surface concerns of property relations, transgression, and sexual exploitation within and without the family. Gothic literature emerges during a pivotal moment in the development of Western European capitalist society. Shi Wudu is so powerful because his domain over the waters enables him to demand tithes from all merchants carrying goods by boat. He is the god of wealth, and he treats his sibling as a possession.

Marina Warner parses the connection between incest and cannibalism taboos as an incapacity to recognize that a given person is like you in a way that precludes them from consumption or sexual contact.¹² As archetypal metaphors of transgressive intimacy, both acts are violations of the bounds of kinship. As kinship forms the fundamental unit of social being, these acts exile the transgressors from membership in society, even social intelligibility itself.

But how does one square these myths of foundational taboo with the reality that vulnerability to abuse, including sexual abuse, is not an exceptional circumstance within the family but one of the defining features of the family form as we know it under capitalism? Family is a form of belonging that one does not choose but cannot leave without risking scarcity, lack of access to care, and social non-being; is it any wonder that sexual abuse within such a coercive and hierarchical structure is not in fact rare, merely clandestine? It is not the act of incest itself that excludes one from social being but the public acknowledgement of incestuous realities, for the threat it poses to the understanding of the family form as immutable natural law.

To be sure, the existence of such a structure is a result of the reality of scarcity. The theme of scarcity in *TGCF* is most obviously brought forth by Mei Nianqing's zero-sum-game equation of existence in the infamous "cup of water" scene:

"All fortunes in the world, good or bad, are limited. Just like this cup of water, there's only so much. Once you've drunk your fill, there'll be no more left for others. If one receives more, another will receive less."¹³

Though Mei Nianqing's subsequent ethical conclusions are contested by the novel, undisputed is the fact that resources—fate, luck, money, water—are distributed unevenly and without correlation to the worthiness of those receiving them. Shi Wudu is set on securing safety and abundance for his dependent kin member, and is willing to deprive another person and family in order to provide that care to his desired standard. The shocking thing about Shi Wudu's crimes is their audacity, rather than any unique moral depravity. We're supposed to value our family more than other people; Shi Wudu just does it in a manner simply more overt and self-aware than most. regardless of Shi Qingxuan's friendliness and good social standing, no one else in the heavenly realm can be relied upon. Even He Xuan admits,

“He’s generous to everyone. But when there’s real trouble, most people don’t return the favour.”¹⁴ Shi Qingxuan articulates the scarcity/codependence dynamic plainly:

“Haven’t you [Shi Wudu] always told me that everyone only cares for themselves, and that there’s no reason anyone would look out for us? Haven’t we always taken care of ourselves?”¹⁵

And Shi Wudu does provide. From the beginning of Shi Qingxuan’s tenure in heaven, he is showered in riches of all kinds, wanting for nothing. If scarcity is the threat for those who stray outside the bounds of kinship, the rewards of remaining are being fed whether you like it or not.

Let’s return to the tableau with which we began. In time, He Xuan’s schemes cause Shi Qingxuan to learn the truth about their ascension. Shi Qingxuan is poised to lose Shi Wudu face in the heavens by renouncing their own divinity and voluntarily returning to a mortal life. Shi Wudu responds in a level-headed manner by claiming that Shi Qingxuan is hysterical, incapacitating and abducting them, bribing Shi Qingxuan’s friend Xie Lian not to speak of what’s happened, keeping Shi Qingxuan forcibly confined within the Palace of Wind and Water (tied down to Shi Qingxuan’s own bed, to be specific), and force-feeding Shi Qingxuan anaesthetic to keep them docile.

“Go ahead! Keep breaking them!” [Shi Wudu] yelled. “There’s plenty of medicine where that came from. Break one bowl and I’ll bring twenty more! I’ll keep forcing it down your throat until you drink it all! [...] I’m your brother! [...] If I don’t take care of you, who will?”¹⁶

This is not the only moment wherein Shi Wudu is figured as forcing substances down Shi Qingxuan’s throat. During the final confrontation, the narrator poses the question, “What right did [Shi Qingxuan] have to suck another’s blood [...] while maintaining his peace of mind?”¹⁷ It’s not for nothing that I brought up the

connections between incest and cannibalism. The triangulation between Shi Wudu, Shi Qingxuan, and He Xuan is that of Shi Wudu coercing Shi Qingxuan into metaphorical vampirism, and the language used to describe Shi Wudu's acts of physical violence towards Qingxuan are an example of the predatory, nervous, "shuddering" sexual consciousness which Ruth Perry considers the essence of the gothic.¹⁸

Shi Qingxuan was tightly trussed up, tied to his own bed with ropes that bound his hands and legs. Even so, he still struggled non-stop. Meanwhile, Shi Wudu was pacing back and forth [...] He paused for a moment before suddenly walking over to the head of the bed. And then he forced the bowl's contents down Shi Qingxuan's throat.¹⁹

Perry reads the conventional locales of gothic fiction—full of locked and hidden doors, and narrow, winding passages—as standing “metonymically for the body of the heroine, a body under siege in which she is hopelessly and desperately trapped.”²⁰ Shi Qingxuan's imprisonment within the Palace of Wind and Water positions them similarly, and the violation they experience is physicalized as an act of familial care. Rather than the subject consuming an object, the object invades the subject, forcing them to swallow.²¹

II. A Figure Cloaked in Shadow

...the conventional props and trappings of the gothic novel [...] all exist to create a particular apprehensive fear in the reader. This atmosphere of foreboding and fear, with its intimation of sexual threat, is the essence of the gothic novel. That is, the point of the gothic novel was never to portray everyday life realistically, but to offer a set of objective correlatives that added up to eroticized danger.²²

RUTH PERRY

此兩者同出而異名
同謂之玄
玄之又玄
眾妙之門

*These two, they arise from the same source but have different names;
This sameness is called their deep mystery.*

*Deep mysteries, and again deep mysteries –
The gateway of many subtle mysteries.²³*

LAOZI (tr. BRUCE R. LINNELL)

As noted earlier, the result of Shi Wudu's fate-swapping ritual is the ruin of the family He. Following years of starvation in jail following bogus sex crime allegations, the deaths of their parents, and the kidnapping, rapes, and deaths of his sister and fiancée, He Xuan dies. :((((

But He Xuan is no ordinary man! After death, they track down

and devour the Reverend of Empty Words, absorbing its essence and power. He Xuan is able to connect the Water Master to the scene of the initial crime, though the details of the situation are still unclear, so He Xuan washes the Reverend down with the spirits of thousands of water ghosts. After grinding for XP for some time, He Xuan becomes a supreme water ghoulish being known as Black Water Sinking Ships.

The next stage of He Xuan's strategy is to gain clarity about what happened and Shi Wudu's role in bringing it about, so He Xuan captures and imprisons the Earth Master, a god named Ming Yi. Having assumed the identity of "Ming Yi," He Xuan infiltrates the heavens, and... becomes Shi Qingxuan's best friend.

The switching of fates by which Shi Qingxuan and He Xuan's lives are entangled is enabled by their shared name, 玄. The most obviously relevant meaning of 玄 is "dark" or "black," but another is "deep," as in profundity, abstruseness, or mysteriousness of interpretation. There is an abyssal quality to the word, which evokes both cavernous depths and impermeability: that which is without bottom, both endlessly penetrable and not penetrable at all. It's only a bit of a stretch, then, to twist the ship name Shuangxuan 雙玄 (usually rendered as "twin Xuans" or "pair of Xuans") as a gloss for "gothic double."

It's notable that Shi Qingxuan repeatedly and insistently defines their relationship to "Ming Yi" as a friendship. To quote Norman Kutcher,

Of the "five relationships" in Confucianism, the five bonds that men in Chinese society were to observe and promote, it was the fifth, friendship, that was unique. The others, those that bound father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, older and younger brother [...] denoted hierarchical, obligatory bonds of mutual devotion that together formed the web of Confucian social relationships that was to provide the source of

parallel devotions to family and state. [...] Friendship was different. It was neither a family bond nor a state bond, and therefore lay outside the web of parallel devotions that bound these together. Moreover, it was voluntary.²⁴

The contrast of this voluntary bond against the dense web of obligation and trauma which marks kin and state bonds is obvious. Though Shi Wudu and Shi Qingxuan are older and younger brother, their relationship is structured along each of these other hierarchical lines. Shi Wudu removed Shi Qingxuan from the broader extended family unit to raise him alone in the pseudo-parental manner common to orphans in gothic fiction. Prior to his staged ascension, Shi Qingxuan was a Middle Court deputy official in service to Shi Wudu's Upper Court godhood. And, as the text repeatedly reminds us, they are worshipped in the mortal realm as husband and wife.²⁵

Let us return once more to Shi Qingxuan's boudoir-prison. Rescue from Shi Wudu's clutches comes at He Xuan's hands, as He Xuan, in the guise of Ming Yi, digs through the foundations of Heaven in order to spirit Shi Qingxuan to safety.

...an odd movement came from under Shi Qingxuan's bed, and a hand stretched out from below. Xie Lian was startled, and his heart raced in alarm. "Lord Wind Master, watch out! Someone's hiding underneath your bed!"

Shi Qingxuan's expression also changed. "What?"

Just as he spoke, a black figure swiftly crawled from under the bed. Staring down commandingly at him from above was a man dressed in black and wearing a ghost mask. It was hard to tell how long he'd been hiding there or what he was about to do.²⁶

Before revealing himself to be Shi Qingxuan's beloved friend, He Xuan's emergence is framed as that of a monster under the bed. This passage recalls previous descriptions of the Reverend

of Empty Words:

Shi Qingxuan was still a child at the time and didn't know how to hike the dark, rugged paths at night. [...] Just then, a figure cloaked in shadow approached from the far end of the mountain road.²⁷

[Xie Lian] couldn't make out the black shadow's face. It was as if there was a cloud of evil black mist swirling around its figure.²⁸

Of course, by the time we arrive at the tableau of Shi Qingxuan locked inside their bedchamber and tied down to the mattress, He Xuan is the Reverend of Empty Words; they have swallowed the original monster and assumed its power. They have become the invader tearing up the floorboards in order to insinuate itself into the family's most tender bastion. We may recall also how Shi Qingxuan's vulnerability to the Reverend of Empty Words has always been cast in terms of sexualized predation: as a child, they were described as "exactly to its taste."

Recall, also, some 50-ish pages prior to the bedroom jailbreak, when the mystery of the swapped fates is just beginning to unfold, Shi Qingxuan and company discover statues of the Water and Wind Masters in their husband-and-wife forms, desecrated inside one of their joint temples. The icons have been damaged "like someone had used something sharp to smash them, as if they were venting immeasurable hatred onto the statues."²⁹ This moment, in retrospect, is one of the more overt expressions of He Xuan's rage towards the Shis containing elements of sexual jealousy.

"So where is this all going?" you might say. "If He Xuan is a creepy weirdo engaged in a power struggle with Shi Wudu over which one of them gets to take possession of Shi Qingxuan's body and fate, doesn't that validate Shi Wudu's overprotective guardianship in the first place? And why were you going on about how sweet and girl power it is that Shi Qingxuan and He Xuan are besties, when the relationship is entirely fake on He

Xuan's end?"

It's true that He Xuan's existence as the darkness on the edge of town—the imposter waiting to seize upon and devour Shi Qingxuan the moment they stray beyond the reach of Shi Wudu's protective eye—seemingly confirms the necessity of the family form and the domination it prescribes. Gothic fiction is full of tragic, tormented interlopers who use their dark charisma to sow doom in their wake; look no further than Heathcliff.

Like Heathcliff to the Earnshaws, He Xuan is at once outside of the Shi family and bound within it. Heathcliff is the foundling and potentially half-brother (depending on how skeptically one reads the description of Mr. Earnshaw happening across and bringing home a random child) who is marginalized within and cast out of the Earnshaw family until he comes back, years later, to enact an elaborate debt-and-inheritance scheme in order to usurp the Heights and the remains of the family fortune and get revenge. He Xuan is the star-crossed cosmic twin whose shared name and birthday allow him to be offered up as a sacrifice in Shi Qingxuan's place, until he comes back, years later, to enact an elaborate identity-theft-and-manipulation scheme in order to see Shi Wudu ruined and get revenge. Etc.

In the simplest terms, this story can be read as a gothic triangle of struggle, attachment, and desire between the ingenue Shi Qingxuan (a prototypical gothic heroine), the predatory guardian Shi Wudu (reminiscent of Roderick Usher, among others), and the outsider He Xuan (a Byronic hero by anyone's measure.) A patriarch exerts control over the sexuality of a lesser status kin member, until this control is challenged by a dark stranger. This stranger represents the possibility of external threat, but in fact provides the possibility of a liberatory escape from the constraints of The Family, until being revealed in the end to be the violent realization of that potential danger.

Meaty enough, but pretty straightforward, and not the kind of

thing that would motivate me to write a little book about it. There are some wrinkles here. Wrinkles..... of GENDER.

On the most obvious level, Shi Qingxuan is a heroine but also a man, at least in theory. They have been feminized by their fictional positioning in relation to the gothic conventions at work, as well as their childhood and adult experiences of taking on female social roles For Reasons. However, “boy heroine” is not exactly new, especially in BL. In yaoi, male damsels are cheap.

It’s for this reason that it’s always amused me that most of the litigation of the “are Beefleaf trans?????” question within fandom revolves around Shi Qingxuan. Shi Qingxuan’s situation is pretty simple: regardless of anything else, they were assigned male at birth but voluntarily present as a woman at least some of the time for the purpose of personal fulfillment.³⁰ This is textual, regardless of the specific identity labels people wish to apply or which of the “F/F, F/M, M/M, Other” boxes they check on AO3.

These debates often take it as a given that He Xuan is just a guy who goes along with Shi Qingxuan’s drag nonsense for evil reasons, or at best for indulgent reasons. This take is seemingly corroborated by He Xuan Heathcliff Theory. But even Heathcliff has a little wiggle room in him, in this regard—at least if we take Cathy’s proclamation, “I am Heathcliff,”³¹ as running in both directions, as suggested by Heathcliff’s proclamation that living while Cathy is dead equates to living with his soul in the grave.³²

Enough beating around the bush. Rather than occupying one gothic archetype, He Xuan flows between several. Along with being a Byronic hero, they also resemble the lesbian vampire (a la Carmilla). As a ghost, they are the curse of the sinful past given form. But let’s set those facets aside for a moment in favour of considering them as absence, or rather the enclosure around which absence achieves legibility. The abyss. The yawning void.

Hole.

III. The Dark Vagina

Gothic fantasia of mansions, walls, crypts, and dungeons suggest that the very notion of enclosure derives from the dynamics of incorporation.³³

MAUD ELLMANN

Although the ‘mother’ as a figure does not appear in these sequences—nor indeed in the entire film—her presence forms a vast backdrop for the enactment of all the events. She is there in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, the womb-like imagery, the long winding tunnels leading to inner chambers...³⁴

BARBARA CREED

In our discourse about penetration, we map its “meaning” largely in terms of violence. [...] Penetration conjures up forceful, conquest-related images—swords and sheaths, drills and holes, rods and sockets and suchlike. Mind you, circloding isn’t necessarily less violent...³⁵

BINI ADAMCZAK (tr. SOPHIE LEWIS)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines the traditional interpretive framework for the gothic as concerned with disjunction or dislocation.³⁶ There is a self, who is blocked off from something of grave importance to which it ought to have access. This important thing could be a person, a suppressed truth, or even the freedom to move or engage with the wider world.

“X within and X without” or “an X within an X” are the guiding structures of these [gothic] conventions: a story within a story, a secret held by one character and the same secret held by another, a prison from which there is escape into another prison, a dream from which one awakens to find it true.³⁷

Activity carries on simultaneously within the enclosure as well as outside its barrier, but the world inside of the enclosure is a waking dream of sorts; the self's lack of access to the important thing renders everything they experience in some way unreal. Cathy is stuck at Thrushcross Grange in her marriage to Edgar Linton, and cannot return to her state of childhood codependent love with Heathcliff at Wuthering Heights. Madeline Usher is interred by her brother while she yet lives. Shi Qingxuan's godhood and continued existence are the result of a terrible secret their brother has taken great pains to keep concealed.

The parallel states of being—within and without the enclosure—have an inherent connection, and their occupants ought to belong to one united world, but the selves within may or may not even be aware that such a wall exists. Even if they are aware, they are unable to realize such a connection until something happens to shatter the barrier between worlds. It isn't that the doubled worlds can never become one, but that the lengths necessary to reverse the unnatural separation are terrifying: “only violence or magic, and both of a singularly threatening kind, can ever succeed in joining them again.”³⁸

The climax of Edgar Allan Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher” is a classic example of a volatile reunification of the worlds:

“Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!—I dared not—I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses

were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I dared not speak! [...] Oh! whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!”— here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—“Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!”

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame.³⁹

All this talk of rupture and shattering of barriers lends itself to penetrative symbolism, and at first glance, the image one might take away from the tableau of He Xuan tunnelling into the Palace of Wind and Water is that of forced entry. However, the overarching logic of the moment, and of He Xuan’s character, is of circlusion. Rather than focus on He Xuan as an outside object burrowing inside the family’s safe cocoon, it would be more apt to examine the image that immediately follows: He Xuan carrying Shi Qingxuan back down into the subterranean channel.

Circlusion is a coinage of Bini Adamczak, intended to offer an alternative framework to active penetrator/passive receptor. Circlusion is the act of taking-in, with regards to genital sex or more mundane contexts. Aptly for my purpose, Adamczak’s

examples of choice are “how a net catches fish, [or] a throat envelops food.”⁴⁰

He Xuan is all mouth. They are not just any ghost, but a hungry ghost who has devoured thousands of other water ghouls, as well as voluminous quantities of food, and the image of engulfment becomes inescapable during the final phase of the story.

Despite He Xuan’s efforts to take Shi Qingxuan off the board as the Revenge Scheme kicks into high gear, Shi Qingxuan eventually capitulates to their brother’s demands and accompanies him to the South Sea, where Shi Wudu, who is occupied by a heavenly tribulation, wants to be able to keep an eye on Shi Qingxuan. When “Ming Yi”’s many warnings and protestations go ignored, the figurative chips have been set down, and the final act of He Xuan’s revenge begins. The ship bearing the Shi siblings is drawn into the haunted waters of He Xuan’s lair and engulfed in a maelstrom.

This part of the story is littered with circulative gothic imagery: oceanic abysses, underground tunnels, and haunted mansions containing passages that lead the entrant to places other than where they wish to go. While Perry identifies a similar “X within and X without” formula as Sedgwick, linking it specifically to the way that the environments of gothic stories express their undercurrents of incestuous abuse—“these elements are part of an elaborate code representing family curses and repressed secrets, tyrannies played out in the seclusion of isolated mansions, deeds shadowed in time but rising to the surface at last—often through supernatural means—horrible truths bursting their bonds and coming to light”—the association of circulative imagery with He Xuan in particular suggests more multifaceted signification than merely representing the oppressive weight of the Family pressing in on Shi Qingxuan.⁴¹ Circclusion here is ambivalent, rather than flatly oppressive, and takes on a distinctly gendered flavour.

The passage through Black Water's domain is comprised of a series of engulfments. (Even association with the colour black, as in the title *Black Water Sinking Ships* [黑水沉舟], is circulative, as black is the shade containing all other colours.) After the initial swallowing and washing up on the shore of Black Water Island, the group begins a journey through the jungle, a descent "toward the unfathomably deep heart of the lonely island."⁴² Before long, the characters' progress is stymied by a mysterious black lake.

...a lake on Black Water Island shouldn't be entered carelessly, lest one never come up again. The surface of the lake was calm and unrippled. It looked like a giant mirror, reflecting the blanched moon that hung high in the starless, cloudless night sky.⁴³

Investigation reveals that the lake's surface shows a different reflection than the environment around them. The lake is a portal; one cannot reach Nether Water Manor without submerging and resurfacing. He Xuan's lair can only be accessed through diving into a dark womb within which one will be swallowed, digested, and expelled.

As already noted, the character 玄 (xuan) signifies both darkness and depth. The *Dao De Jing* features repeated reference to 玄 牝, which Bruce R. Linnell renders as "the deep and mysterious feminine."⁴⁴ Proper exegesis of the *Dao De Jing* is well beyond my abilities or the scope of this essay, but it's worth recognizing existing conceptual associations with femininity surrounding 玄.

Shi Wudu does us the courtesy of literalizing the subtext when he, upon finally suspecting the deception, attacks He Xuan: "Ming Yi' abruptly collapsed next to [Shi Qingxuan]. His chest now had a hole in it the size of a fist, and his blood spilled upon the ground."⁴⁵

He Xuan may have been a man once, but now they're dead, and they've had a gaping, dripping, bloody hole punctured into their flesh.

Assigned female at death, or whatever.



charlotta Follow

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Call me Yonic the Headhog because I



charlotta Follow



cryptotheism 5m

Because of the themes and imagery

Because of the themes and imagery.

IV. Manic Pixie Dream Girl 4 Big Titty Goth GF

...to devour [her] in order to identify with her but also to destroy her...⁴⁶

MAUD ELLMANN

Desire makes things, it makes something else, it invents.⁴⁷

MARQUIS BEY

I hate her, Eleanor thought, she sickens me; she is all washed and clean and wearing my red sweater.⁴⁸

SHIRLEY JACKSON

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is a gothic horror tale about a shy and lonely woman named Eleanor (also known as Nell.) She answers an advert asking for participants to stay in a supposedly haunted house and conduct an experiment about the supernatural. Upon arrival, it doesn't take long for the guests' states of mind to deteriorate, with Eleanor the most affected by the house's influence.

Eleanor is reserved, timid, terminally alone. She spent her life caring for her abusive mother, and since her mother's death, her only other human connections are a loveless enmeshment with her sister's family. In contrast, her relationship with the other woman of the Hill House group—the bold, androgynous, charismatic Theodora—begins as a friendship that rapidly accelerates in intimacy.

“I love decorating myself,” Theodora said, regarding her hand affectionately. “I’d like to paint myself all over [...] by the time I’m through with you, you will be a different person; I dislike being with women of no color.”⁴⁹

Their differences in disposition fuel an intoxicating personal bond, but Nell’s disposition towards Theo curdles as the days go by. This souring is a result of jealousy, insecurity, and revulsion at Theo’s comparatively shocking habits and traits, as well as backlash to the intensity of their emotional and sensual connection.

“Share a room and share our clothes,” Theodora said. “We’re going to be practically twins.” [...] I would like to hit her with a stick, Eleanor thought, looking down on Theodora’s head beside her chair; I would like to batter her with rocks.⁵⁰

Tricia Lootens reads the novel’s conclusion thus:

In the final haunting, the sexual tension between Eleanor and Theodora becomes an inexorable and torturous battle over the nature of identity and morality. Eleanor’s reactions to Theodora crystallize not only her longing for a sister who loves her, and for a lover, but her hopeless attempt to assert a new sexuality and sense of self without questioning the family structure and morality that have governed her life before Hill House.⁵¹

To paraphrase, the thing that Eleanor cannot bear is the irreconcilable nature of her desires—for an emancipated self, and for intimacy, sexual-emotional-familial, with Theodora—with the constricting and repressive nature of the principles that have governed her life. The distinctions between the forms of intimacy between the two of them are moot; Eleanor’s love for and attraction to Theo is queer, but, as love for her double, it is also love for herself: love and compassion that would destroy her,

as the “self” she has built is nothing without suffering and self-denial. She has been denied pleasure and joy, and in turn denied herself anything else.

I’m talking about He Xuan. This is the crux of what I call **HE XUAN GENDER TRAGEDY**.

I wanted to end the last section all punchy and whatnot; perhaps it would be more prudent to have said that He Xuan is the embodiment of the mysterious feminine on a symbolic level, or that they can be read as possessing a latent transfemininity, etc. But I said what I said. “He Xuan gets turned into a lesbian after death and it’s Themes” is kind of the thesis of this thing.

Something that may not have come through yet if you’re unfamiliar with the source text is why “Beefleaf is lesbians?” is a question in the first place. It’s really quite simple. The reader first meets these characters when they’re walking around as mysterious baddies and it takes several hundred pages for this belief to be challenged.

Let’s revisit the way that Shi Qingxuan and “Ming Yi” are described in their debut scene.

The woman was dressed in a pale white robe with a whisk tucked in her arm, the garb of a Daoist priestess. She roamed along the street, peering here and there. Her eyes were bright and observant, as if she were in her own backyard garden and not the Banyue ruins. Strolling right behind her was another woman clad in black, her hands clasped behind her back.

The black-clad woman was beautiful yet cold. Her eyes were piercing, her raven hair long and free, and it was like she radiated chill from her very person. Although she was walking behind [Shi Qingxuan], no one would mistake her for a subordinate. [...]

[Shi Qingxuan] swished her whisk leisurely and spoke, “Now where did they go? We were careless for one moment and they all disappeared. Do I have to dig them out and kill them one by one?” [...]

The lady in black approached and stoically said, “You can call your friends to help you kill them.” [...]

“Ha! I don’t like calling other people. I like calling you. Aren’t you glad?”

The lady in black ignored her completely and said coolly, “There’s nothing agreeable about being called out by the likes of you for something like this. Just go.”

[Shi Qingxuan] arched her brows but still sped away. Listening to them, it sounded as if they were close.⁵²

By all appearances, this is a classic big titty goth GF/manic pixie dream girl couple.⁵³ Heartwarming!

However, my angel’s second appearance goes differently.⁵⁴ When we learn that the woman Xie Lian saw is in fact the Wind Master Qingxuan, we are told that Shi Qingxuan’s true form is male, but they frequently assume a female form. This form is more powerful due to being the form in which Shi Qingxuan’s worshippers revere them, but Shi Qingxuan also prefers it. “Ming Yi,” on the other hand...

Xie Lian spoke up. “Are you perhaps the Lord Earth Master?”

“It’s him. You’ve met before,” Shi Qingxuan replied.

Xie Lian looked Ming Yi over and wondered, “Have we?” [...]

“Yes, you have!” Shi Qingxuan said exasperatedly. “Before, at Banyue Pass! You guys didn’t forget that fast, did you?”

“ ”

Seeing Ming Yi's face go from ghastly pale to ashen grim, Xie Lian finally remembered! When they first met at Banyue Pass, wasn't there a black-clad lady with Shi Qingxuan? [...] As expected, Shi Qingxuan was not only passionate about transforming into his own female form, he was also passionate about dragging others into doing the same. No wonder the black-clad lady looked extremely pissed off at the time, like she was disgusted.⁵⁵

TGCF is wildly inconsistent in its overt attitude towards transness and gender transgression, and the reader of this essay may already be taking steps toward a rehabilitative approach to such a passage. One could read this narration as a projection of Xie Lian's own reaction to feminized embodiment, rather than an accurate interpretation of "Ming Yi"'s own feelings. With the knowledge of plot developments to come, a variety of additional interpretations can be made as to what "Ming Yi"'s expression really means: annoyance over being reminded of prior run-ins with Hua Cheng, for example, or displeasure at hearing himself verbally associated with Shi Qingxuan at all. Perhaps it's simple resting bitch face.

But for the sake of my argument, I suggest reading this passage at face value. It indicates that He Xuan, as Ming Yi, feels palpable shame over having taken on a woman's form with Shi Qingxuan. For a somewhat softer take, perhaps the dominant emotion is specifically regret over having been "caught in the act" by another person. Either way, the shame is the point.

Approaching the text from this angle connects He Xuan's indulgence in Shi Qingxuan's gender adventures to the overall tragedy in motion, because this is not the last time the reader will encounter "Ming Yi" in female form.

"I've never seen such pretty ladies, not in my whole life! And

there's two of them!" [...]

Outside the door stood two tall, slender women. One was a white-robed Daoist priestess with a whisk in hand, her lips rosy, her eyes bright, her form sensually graceful. The other was a woman clad in black, her skin snow white and her face beautifully sharp.⁵⁶

If you hate it so much, then WHY KEEP DOING IT???????
LITERALLY WHY????????????????????????????????

...even as I ask, isn't the most interesting reading the one where He Xuan is unable to admit to wanting something like this, even to himself, but expresses their desires the only way they can—by pretending they've been coerced into actualizing them? Shi Qingxuan is overbearing about it, or at least their transvangelism is presented as such by the novel:

As for Shi Qingxuan, from Xie Lian's own observations, he didn't appear to mind [being worshipped as a woman] at all. Not only that, he was even passionate about dragging others into it, making Xie Lian wonder about the real gender of the lady in black who was with the Wind Master before.⁵⁷

Shi Qingxuan is pushy, but He Xuan needs to be pushed.

New thematic strands can be discerned if you equip your trans goggles. On the one hand, Shi Qingxuan and Shi Wudu play house for eternity—with Shi Qingxuan forever sweet sixteen, perpetually nubile and chaste and there for big brother to tie down in bed whenever he pleases, and Shi Wudu seemingly on top of the world—even as the foundations of their prosperity rot beneath them. On the other, Shi Qingxuan takes He Xuan somewhere only she can bring them: into the promised land of forced feminization utopia, where He Xuan can be someone else for a time, the kind of person that tries things out for kicks and looks beautiful and experiences the intimacy of homoerotic friendship with someone who was meant to be their enemy.

Gothic conventions contextualize this interweaving of coercion and desire. Shi Qingxuan's agency, despite being in most cases illusory, is real enough to matter when it comes to their impact on He Xuan. He Xuan's remaining existence is predicated upon avenging themselves and their family; their quest involves proving themselves to be a good son beyond the grave, even if they will damn themselves to bloody toil in order to do it. They are fuelled, in the literalized way that genre fiction allows, by the cultivation of resentment and commitment to their filial obligations. He Xuan cannot accept either loving Shi Qingxuan or loving being a woman without endangering the core of their being. They must be forced into the things they want. In order to actualize, even temporarily, those desires that sit outside social legitimacy and require pushing against the gravitational pull of the Family, He Xuan needs Shi Qingxuan to not just ask nicely.



In an essay on tumblr, (a piece which also takes *Hill House* as a touchstone), wifelinkmtg writes of forcefem erotica:

...you are so wrapped in society's web, in your socially-dictated identity, that you cannot even acknowledge your

desires on the level of conscious thought. When these things are enacted on your body, you will find yourself changed by the experience. You will love what has been done to you, and you remain blameless, since it's not as though you sought this out. These are liberatory fantasies. The lack of consent is precisely what allows you to move beyond what is permitted you into something new.⁵⁸

Doubling is a common expression of homoeroticism within gothic fiction, but *TGCF* presents a specifically transfeminine homoeroticism wherein the fulcrum of the erotic horror/fantasy is that of being made into something other than what you once were. Though Shi Qingxuan and Shi Wudu are siblings, Shi Qingxuan and He Xuan are as twins: born on the same day, sharing a name, and engaged in a delicate interplay of bodily mirroring. One becomes a woman; the other follows. Not only is He Xuan unmade and remade, but it is done so at the behest and in the image of the happier, more innocent version of herself, like the person He Xuan could have been if Shi Qingxuan never happened to her.

As Shirley Jackson's notes from the Hill House papers read,

Theo against Nell, of course; to each of us—if we are fortunate—is given one other person, the true doppelganger, the other half of the self, and the union here is sometimes star-crossed, sometimes illicit, always deadly; it is the moment of perception when the victim sees his murderer, the brother discovers his sister, beauty destroys (embraces) the beast.⁵⁹

Sedgwick identifies that despite the consistency of tropes, conventions, and structures across gothic literature, the ultimate outcome of its implosion—the moment of reunification-rupture—is not predetermined. Joy, tragedy, and everything in between are possible for those who undergo the trials necessary

to inhabit a free world. This is what I term the trans gothic: the glory and horror suggested by the prospect of exchanging “the terror that has long gripped us for the terror of what a life without being suffocated might be like,”⁶⁰ regardless of the certainty of the outcome.



V. A Body Under Siege, or, the Fall of the House of Shi

...it is by ingesting the external world that the subject establishes his body as his own, distinguishing its inside from its outside. If the subject is founded in gustation, though, this also means that his identity is constantly in jeopardy, because his need to incorporate the outside world exposes his fundamental incompleteness.⁶¹

MAUD ELLMANN

To the extent that the incest taboo contains its infraction within itself, it does not simply prohibit incest but rather sustains and cultivates incest as a necessary specter of social dissolution, a specter without which social bonds cannot emerge.⁶²

JUDITH BUTLER

It would be an oversight to frame Shi Qingxuan as having an uncomplicated relationship to gendered embodiment. Shi Wudu's warnings to Shi Qingxuan are clear. They are avoid appearing disgraceful and to live in fear of the sexualized danger from outside the family unit:

Shi Wudu's sharp gaze swept over. "Qingxuan, mind your manners!"

The moment he reprimanded her, Shi Qingxuan lowered her head, shamefaced. [...] Shi Wudu opened his fan and continued to lecture his younger sibling. "Did you hear what General Pei said?"

And how many times do I have to tell you not to walk around in that form all the time? What a disgrace. I don't care what appearance you prefer; you must use your true form while you're out!"

Although Shi Qingxuan loved her lady form passionately and wouldn't stand for such outrageous demands, she still didn't dare offend her brother. Xie Lian thought, The Wind Master says she's not afraid of her older brother, but that doesn't seem to be entirely true. [...]

Shi Wudu ended the lecture with: "What if you encounter someone with wicked intent who's strong in spiritual power, like General Pei?!"⁶³

Making a rape joke about your sibling at the expense of your friend while both of them are sitting at the same table... you're sooo cool dude...

Anyway. I hope it is amply clear why reading Shi Qingxuan as a gothic heroine goes beyond superficial aesthetics. Their whole life has been one long live burial within the suffocating confines of their brother's will.

To expand that metaphor outward once again: the truth is buried at great effort. The restless past strains, with bulging force, against the falsity of the present. The layers of secrecy and shame keep the characters "buried individually in themselves, as unavailable to one another as the common sky is to them all."⁶⁴ However, these forces of entombment are not limited to the more salacious details of this ornate confection of convoluted melodrama. The most robust of these coffins—the only one He Xuan fails to break through when it matters—is the web of obligation and social belonging that makes up the Family, or normativity itself. To borrow Marquis Bey's definition:

...the normative is necessarily coercive and

nonconsensual—the normative only permits you to “be” on its terms, negating your ability to determine your inhabitation of sociality before you even show up precisely because you can only show up if you adhere to its systematicity.⁶⁵

Despite its seeming inescapability, kinship as we know it is not a biological fact. In the words of Judith Butler, kinship relations “are reinstated in time precisely through the practice of their repetition”; kinship is not a natural occurrence but something we do.⁶⁶ In other words, kinship is an inheritance. It doesn’t spring into being, but is a pattern of affects and behaviours passed down the generations (along with material inheritance, the property relation that undergirds the family form.)

The source of the previous quote is *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Butler’s close reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which in turn is a later work in the sequence of plays beginning with *Oedipus Rex*. *Antigone* is Oedipus’ daughter with his mother Jocasta, and her play revolves around the impossibility of doing right by her family and also by the state, of obeying divine law and human law when the two are at odds, of how to exist when the reality of your being is in violation of the natural order.

If you’ll permit me to do a little blackout poetry/mad libs:

This equivocation at the site of the kinship term signals a decidedly postoeidipal dilemma, one in which kin positions tend to slide into one another, in which [Shi Qingxuan] is the [sister], the brother is the father [is the husband], and in which psychically, linguistically, this is true regardless of whether they are dead or alive; for anyone living in this slide of identifications, their fate will be an uncertain one, living within death, dying within life.⁶⁷

Perry links the theme of incest within gothic literature to a genealogical logic that is apt for parsing this narrative:

The gothic suggests that no one can create himself *sui generis* [...] No one can pervert the rightful succession, usurping another man's place or another generation's place. The meaning of the present can only be made out in terms of the past; the crimes of the past will be solved, will see the light of day, will be acknowledged. ⁶⁸



This passage recalls one of Shi Wudu's final proclamations:

"...me and my brother, we've lived for ages, we've been heavenly officials for centuries. [...] I will fight for what I don't have. I will change my fortune if fate denies me! My fate is up to me and not the heavens!"⁶⁹

As Perry suggests, the paradigm of gothic incest renders total the recursivity of kinship-inheritance cycles. Shi Wudu has created his own fate; his brother is his wife; he has violated the principles of rightful inheritance, both in terms of his own relations and

the usurpation of He Xuan's divine destiny, and trapped Shi Qingxuan within the resulting closed loop.

The kin bond that keeps Shi Qingxuan cared for is the same one that persistently violates Shi Qingxuan's autonomy in the most tangible and literal ways. If He Xuan is the monster under Shi Qingxuan's bed, Shi Wudu is the house within which they are sequestered, and like the Usher estate, it will collapse and be eaten by the "deep and dark" water closing "sullenly and silently" over its fragments.⁷⁰

And as in the case of Madeline Usher, by the time Shi Qingxuan begins to assert her own will, it's already too late.

VI. Shattering the Barrier (?)

Let me tell you a secret: people get really angry when you suggest to them that they deserved better than what they got growing up.⁷¹

SOPHIE LEWIS

One of these times, she thought, one of us is going to put her head back and really howl, and I hope it won't be me, because I'm trying to guard against it; it will be Theodora who... [Eleanor] heard Theodora's wild laugh, and thought, Maybe it will be me, after all, and I can't afford to.⁷²

SHIRLEY JACKSON

To recap: at the beginning of this arc, Shi Qingxuan is a gothic heroine trapped within a gilded cage of their brother's making. Withheld from them is the truth about their fate, the agency to make informed decisions about their own life, and sovereignty over their own body. They have been trapped within this waking dream ostensibly to protect them from the looming threat represented by the Reverend of Empty Words, but also to control them and maintain their status as dependent on Shi Wudu.

At the outset of the story, they are poised to begin uncovering these truths, but only as a result of the machinations of another. The interloper in fear of whom these dubious protections have been put into place will make an effort to either have Shi Qingxuan “break the world's shell,” in *Revolutionary Girl Utena* parlance, or to break it for them. But that interloper is also their mirror, their twin, and doesn't seek to merely rupture the barrier

between worlds; they want to win the love triangle.

When Shi Qingxuan is initially kidnapped by Shi Wudu after learning the truth about the fate-swap, He Xuan is the only onlooker to speak to Shi Qingxuan's personal agency:

[Shi Qingxuan] reached out to them with both arms, grabbing on to one with each hand. Xie Lian and Ming Yi both held on to the hands he extended, but Shi Wudu ruthlessly yanked him away again.

“Let's go. Everything's alright. Gege is here.”

Shi Qingxuan was still screaming, and Pei Ming and Ling Wen went over to help Shi Wudu hold him down.

“Your brother doesn't want to go back with you!” Ming Yi shouted.⁷³

Lest I give them too much credit, He Xuan liberates Shi Qingxuan from imprisonment at least in part in an attempt to index Shi Qingxuan's guilt or innocence, which requires Shi Qingxuan to be able to exercise free will. When He Xuan, during the final confrontation, declares, “I gave you so many chances!”⁷⁴, it's clear they mean opportunities for Shi Qingxuan to forsake their filial bonds to Shi Wudu and choose He Xuan—an opportunity that Shi Qingxuan was never presented with outright until the last possible moment, due to He Xuan's choice to obfuscate their own identity.

Though most of He Xuan's ire is directed at Shi Wudu, the times when He Xuan is really out of pocket toward Shi Qingxuan during the big confrontation are when He Xuan is forced to engage with Shi Qingxuan's innocence and naivete (“That's precisely why he's so detestable! [...] Why was he allowed to know nothing?”).⁷⁵ Like Antigone, Shi Qingxuan's nearly blameless crime is that of “carrying her love for her brother too far.”⁷⁶

OK, we have to talk about the prisoners now. During the revenge plot antics on Black Water Island, Shi Qingxuan has multiple run-ins with... I'll just let the novel speak for itself, actually.

[Shi Qingxuan] was surrounded by a group of filthy wretches. Some had festering sores covering their entire bodies. Some were snorting like pigs, and some were pecking for grain like chickens. Some were hugging Shi Qingxuan, wailing and declaring him their baby.⁷⁷

...he was being nuzzled by several foul-smelling, hairy heads. A mob of madmen surrounded him, giggling and looking shy as they felt him all over.⁷⁸

That group of madmen [surrounded] Shi Qingxuan once more, hugging his arms and thighs and refusing to let go. Some tugged at his hair, some draped themselves around his neck. Each of them had a ravenous glint in his eyes, like he wanted to eat him alive.⁷⁹

Questionable depictions of madness aside (which, TBF, is gothic-typical)... I bring up the whole "He Xuan has a bunch of poor unfortunate souls locked up on their island" thing because it's an element of the debacle that people in fandom rarely dwell on, for reasons of "it's uncomfortable" (fair) and "it makes He Xuan look like a sick fuck" (if you can't handle He Xuan at their supervillain shit you don't deserve them at their doomed gay yearning etc.)

There is an ostensible reason these characters are introduced. They factor into the Saw trap scenario He Xuan puts the Shi siblings into. Shi Qingxuan is offered a choice: either pick one of the prisoners, whom He Xuan describes as possessing "Rotten fates. Contemptuous fortunes. Lives lower than an animal's. Fates that can drive a man mad,"⁸⁰ to switch fates with, or kill Shi Wudu with a

rusty knife.

Neither of these things happen in the end, as Shi Wudu goads He Xuan into dismembering and decapitating him (precipitated by Shi Wudu attempting to strangle Shi Qingxuan to death; jury's out as to whether that was a calculated decision made knowing He Xuan would kill Shi Wudu before he succeeded in killing Shi Qingxuan, or whether it was an earnest murder-suicide attempt), and the prisoners end up disappearing from the narrative. It does kind of feel like MXTX had an image in her brain like, "wouldn't it be a neat visual and kinda hot if, during this bit where Shi Qingxuan is chained up and watching He Xuan torment Shi Wudu before murdering him, there was some softcore groping going on"? The sexualized peril is obviously pertinent to what we've been talking about up to this point—*TGCF* is all about sexual violence, it's a core theme of the book—but I want to focus on something, like, 2% more subtle.

By the time the characters reach the island, the die has been cast; Shi Qingxuan has failed to take He Xuan up on any of the "chances" he had to off-ramp from the situation. He Xuan has chosen the Bad Ending, but his plentiful conflicted feelings about Shi Qingxuan remain, so they get sublimated into the figures of the mad prisoners, who act alternately erratically, lovingly, and lasciviously towards Shi Qingxuan in particular (they seemingly DGAF about anyone else) in all the ways He Xuan can't.

Yet this decision is not without internal conflict. The various moments when He Xuan inconveniences himself to show Shi Qingxuan care bring to mind a passage from Sue Grand in which she describes the survivor of extreme trauma as existing in "an area of deadness strangely infused with a yearning for life. [...] Death has possessed her in its impenetrable solitude. But life makes her desire to be known in that solitude."⁸¹

To invoke another seminal work of lesbianism, identity theft,

and the eros of betrayal, He Xuan was poised to be the “saviour who came to ruin [Shi Qingxuan’s] life,”⁸² but fails to do anything but ruin their life. He Xuan is unable to tell Shi Qingxuan the truth about their motives until it’s too late. They cannot part with their commitment to delivering just returns or risk identity collapse.

HE XUAN GENDER TRAGEDY is the choice, both inevitable and painfully preventable, He Xuan makes to turn away from their illegitimate desires for connection and joy, along with the world of terrifying possibility those desires threaten to unleash. Fair enough, as their identity might indeed collapse, but the **TRAGEDY** emerges from He Xuan’s inability to believe that the collapse could herald something better: that there is the potential for happiness, not by forsaking others in a move toward individualism, but by holding the present kith closer than the departed kin.

Even as He Xuan spurns Shi Qingxuan for being unable to abandon their brother to his well-deserved fate, He Xuan has laboured at the altar of the family past the point of sanity. And for what? The “true form” that He Xuan reveals in the final confrontation is nothing more than the corpse of a filial son:

The man standing there wore a cruel, sinister expression, and his hands were clasped behind him. His skin was so pale it sent shivers down one’s spine. This was Black Water Demon Xuan—or rather, He Xuan.

There was an altar behind him. Four smooth, obsidian-black urns sat serenely upon it. [...] Father, mother, sister, fiancée.⁸³

This is reiterated a few pages later:

Shi Qingxuan looked up. His voice trembled. “Ming-xiong, I...”

“Shut up!” He Xuan shouted.

When Shi Qingxuan saw his near-savage expression, he shuddered and went silent. He Xuan whirled around and started pacing the hall of the Nether Water Manor, growling as he walked. [...]

Shi Wudu laughed. [...] “I see you right now—so filled with rage, so filled with suffering, so filled with hate. You’re grinding your teeth so hard you’re crushing them. And yet you’re still powerless to bring your family back! You’re still nothing more than a ghost of the gutters. Be as angry as you want, they’re long gone! [...]”⁸⁴

Curses exist in an “uncertain temporality,” as the flow of time between the curse and its realization seems to flow backward.⁸⁵ The future events predicted by the curse are, in effect, “action that has been happening all along.”⁸⁶ This formulation recalls the opening narration from Guillermo del Toro’s *The Devil’s Backbone*, which describes a ghost as “a moment of pain [...] suspended in time.” The vengeful, hungry ghost can be conceived of as a personified curse. Such a character allows for exploration of what it might mean to dislocate from the temporal bonds, genealogical logic, reproductive futurity, etc that render people legible within kinship and, by extension, society, keeping them ensnared and engendered...

Well, the potential is there, at any rate, but He Xuan is a ghost in the truest sense. They reject the reprieve of a relationship that offers the potential for pleasure, trust, and togetherness, because they are a prisoner within an enclosure of their own. They are a dead person who has decided to spend eternity burying themselves alive.

Interlude: Beefleaf market research survey

This anonymous market research survey was inspired by the one at the back of *The Lizard Club* by Steve Abbott. Shoutout to my friend Sam for the rec. <3

The pool of respondents was drawn from my friends and associates who also like TGCF. Responses have been randomized in order per question.

do you identify more closely with beef [He Xuan] or leaf [Shi Qingxuan]? (15 responses)

beef - 20% - 3 responses
leaf - 47% - 7 responses
neither - 33% - 5 responses

describe your feelings about beefleaf in three words. (15 responses)

jesus fucking christ

Bittersweet doomed love

visceral fear longing

tragic. interesting. inevitable.

horrifying blood romance

sad clown music

Deranged, obsessive, delicious

Mirror/mere, halcyon, anchialine

i love them

1. BEEFLEAAAF!!! 2. ;_ ; 3. kljdsllkjfsdjflkds

i love tragedy

melancholy mesmerised metamorphosing

so much grief..

they should scissor

Zero sum game :(

what aspect of the beefleaf story/black water arc gives you the most feels? (14 responses)

everything shi wudu did to protect his sibling, the way it took he xuan centuries to actually carry out his revenge, probably because of sqx being sqx. and hx not being able to actually kill sqx or disperse after he acted out his revenge. makes one wonder what that could possibly mean, yknow?

when he xuan puts the shi siblings in a saw trap

everything that happens in black water lair

BETRAYAL!!!!!!

How close it feels like he xuan came to changing their mind and giving in to shi qingxuan's pleas

the bits where SQX is like "wow, love being friends with my pal!" and HX is doing a "I have no feelings about this"

im a huge fan of when a character's most tragic flaw is

also something noble (loving their brother)

honest to god it's hx giving sqx their fan back in book 5.
sorry that's not black water arc

The fact that HX was trying to give SQX ways to side with him against SWD up until the end

how long shi qingxuan manages to live in ignorance about the true motivations of their brother and their best friend, and how it's due to a combination of he xuan and shi wudu actively lying to them, shi qingxuan being wilfully... if not ignorant, then optimistic, and the fact that all three of them, to some degree, had feelings they weren't open about even to themselves. you can't pick any one thing that could have gone the other way to solve the whole situation. i just think about shi qingxuan walking on thin ice over a gaping void, like a loony tunes character but tragic!

swd as a character and as a concept tbh. what if intense amounts of structural violence and domestic abuse could be embodied in one semi relatable and extremely beheadable man?

oh man. I guess it's, like, the inevitability of misery of it? bc of the characters being who they are, they can't make any other choices than the ones they make, even though those aren't the choices that are most likely to lead to happiness for them. he xuan IS going to get revenge no matter what, because it's what he's decided he has to value the most. shi qingxuan IS going to prioritize their brother over everything, because they can't free themselves from the mental hold of their brother's manipulative codependency. they love each other but they wouldn't be them if they decided to chuck all their baggage to make things work happily with each other instead.

the TRAGEDY. how impossible it is this ended well and how easily it could have ended well.

“i gave you so many chances”

do you associate the ship with any particular imagery? (15 responses)

fans and fish

Girls.

Ming-jie’s cleavage

Apart from the usual noodles and wine and Heavenly social events, and chains and broken statues... The tiny birds eye view we got of he xuan disguised as hua cheng slapping shi qingxuan to transfer spiritual energy. Also the first time we saw them as two mysterious women in the desert. The first and last time we saw them together!

beef, leaves

drowning

I’m a very literal person so... stormy sea with oily water, floating weeds dancing in the wind, seemingly harmless but can be fatal if something gets stuck in them

diaphanous material. the way silk loses its strength when wet.

specific scenes from cw-type teen-oriented television featuring complicated friendship moments (positive)

perhaps it’s because I associate beefleaf with you, noted

he xuan enjoyer, but I associate beefleaf the most with
he xuan imagery: dark deep waters, unearthly skeleton
dragons, and the like

well the water motifs are very strong. whirlpools,
shipwrecks, big scary fish

just the usual (fan, water, skeleton fish, decapitated
heads)

FISH obsvs. very. natural water imagery. Dragonflies.
Kingfishers. Fan+etc. Bindings/restraints.

the beef and the leaf, tbh! i learned the ship name far
before i read tgcf, and i think i even read the name
originator's explanation for it before then as well (but
didn't remember the character names because i didn't
know who they even were at that point). when i decided
to read tgcf i blocked every variation of beefleaf on
twitter so i could go in unspoiled and learn who was who
at the natural time that mxtx intended!

B&w generally, but also more specifically kind of
botticelli venus meets hieronymus bosch

do you find the place they end up in canon to be satisfying?
(15 responses)

yes! both in terms of the canon "ending" and the fanfic
potential that stems from it

satisfying is not the word.

it's satisfying enough

yes!

yes i think it was a good idea to leave it ambiguous and not set anything in stone. that's the sweet spot where the fanfic magic happens

yes but also I want more

yes!

tbh yes! I love tragedy. I would love to see more exploration of sqx's disability post-canon.

i don't think that, when canon ends, they've really ended up anywhere. it definitely feels like there is more to their story after that.

No. Thanks to he xuan's tiny appearances after the end of black water arc, it doesn't feel like an ending, it feels like there is potential for more to happen between them

Ye-ees? Tbh I don't remember all that clearly where their relationship ends up in canon

very

I find it to be the most True to where their story must lead. I think the dissatisfaction is Narratively Best and wouldn't be able to change it without feeling I lost something fundamental to them

yes but this does not stop me from inhaling every fic about their reunion on a03

Yes!

what beefleaf AUs or canon divergences most interest you, if any? (12 responses)

I always love a modern au

ough so many options, so three atm: sqx finding out early, hx killing sqx before really knowing her and then Finding Shit Out, hx as sqx's pet fish.

role swaps, post-canon reconciliation, modern AUs where the murder/revenge theoretically shouldn't happen but does

i would like to think about them being vloggers and podcasters in los angeles.

sci fi aus. i prefer when canon divergences don't sanitize them.

i'm partial to ones where he xuan learns more about what's going on with the shi siblings earlier in canon, but it doesn't change any outcomes. (but then, "X find out sooner and all it changes is to make them feel terrible" is a beloved AU genre of mine. shi qingxuan finding out about he xuan earlier and just getting in more trouble with their brother would also be good!) i also really like AUs where they are significant secondary characters and we see enough of them, or hear enough dropped snippets, that it's clear *some* big events have gone down/are going down, but never enough to get the full picture.

none tbh! like I'd read canon divergence AUs but for my own purposes I find canon and post-canon possibilities more interesting

honestly, this is a ship where I'm less interested in AUs

and canon divergences! like a good author can make me buy into any of them but I am most interested in like. during-canon fics that play with the looming threat of what's inevitably going to happen, or post-canon fics that move forward from the fallout

i think it's great when he xuan and shi qingxuan get married and shi wudu is still alive to have to see this like mspaint tails meme dot jpg

I haven't read enough bflf fanworks to comment on this

in a modern/no powers au i want swd to still get killed and for beefleaf to be bound by that anyway. the monstrosity of the whole thing has to be preserved in whatever au it ends up being

I do kind of want to see them individually dealing with their shit to some tiny extent

if you could change one thing about beefleaf canon, what would it be? (14 responses)

MORE SCREEN TIME.

Delaying the sqx release from black water island to closer to the finale. we coulda stewed in that lack of knowledge 4 longer.

Mxtx is the boss

making gender stuff more textual for hx

i'd have more of it

i would have liked the revenge parts expanded upon a little more I guess. hx could have psychologically

tormented shi wudu more and driven him a little insane and a little more overprotective towards sqx before the killing parts happened. but this might have come at the expense of the main story so understandable why it wasn't written that way

they shouldn't have crossed paths again after black water arc

i'd just like more of them. :)

i love hualian but also i get severe whiplash when shi wudu gets his head pulled off and shi qingxuan gets his life destroyed and then two pages later hualian is making out on the altar

give sqx more gender

For hx to have tortured swd more before killing him

I don't know how you could make it worse. but worse.

hmmmm. I haven't done a close reading of beefleaf canon recently so it's not fresh in my mind, but I honestly can't think of anything! I like canon the way it is :)

i think the whump could have been more gratuitous

VII. Life Un/gendered

Of all the Gothic conventions dealing with the sudden, mysterious, seemingly arbitrary, but massive inaccessibility of those things that should normally be most accessible, the difficulty the story has in getting itself told is of the most obvious structural significance.⁸⁷

EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

Indeed, we are various shades of brokenness and lack, and I wish not to venerate this plight. We need to be healed and do not wish to remain writhing in our broken pieces. We need, in other words, to be held. But what I wish for [...] is the reconfiguration of how we hold each other without stopping, without withholding, all while we are on the run.⁸⁸

MARQUIS BEY

Xie Lian mentally noted, [*Shi Qingxuan*]'s speaking as though he isn't afraid of being punched. They are good friends indeed.⁸⁹

As alluded to in the survey responses, the ultimate conclusion of this story is not much of a conclusion at all. Inside Nether Water Manor, Shi Wudu's goading and Shi Qingxuan's ineffectual pleading eventually drive He Xuan to tear off Shi Wudu's head in front of Shi Qingxuan, leaving Shi Qingxuan soaked in their brother's blood. The story quickly adjourns, returning protagonist status to the novel's actual main character, and many, many hundreds of pages pass before we learn what has become of either Shi Qingxuan or He Xuan. There's a real "if

there were two guys on the moon and one of them killed the other with a rock would that be fucked up or what” energy, and I sort of expected it to end there. Like, damn, yeah, it sure would!

But it is not the end. The capstone Beefleaf scene, when it arrives, feels as though it can’t decide whether it’s an ending or a beginning.

Near the novel’s climax, we learn that Shi Qingxuan has been living under an assumed name in a beggar colony in the imperial capital. They have two broken limbs, acquired after He Xuan dropped them off in the city seemingly (physically) unharmed. We learn that He Xuan did not, in fact, swap Shi Qingxuan’s fate with those of the prisoners, and Shi Qingxuan appears content to be living amidst the beggars in an old temple.

Due to the ~600 pages of novel between their last appearance and this one, a lot of plot happened that it would be pointless to recap here, but there’s a crisis in which Shi Qingxuan has an opportunity to save the world by wrangling the extended beggar crew into helping maintain a big magical array. During this, Hua Cheng (the novel’s main love interest) shows up to apparently lend Shi Qingxuan some spiritual energy (Shi Qingxuan now being mortal.) In doing so, he also returns the formerly broken, since mended, Wind Master fan that had last been seen at Nether Water Manor. Shi Qingxuan and the reader have the simultaneous realization that this is not in fact Hua Cheng, but He Xuan in disguise. He Xuan fucks off before anyone can react to this. And we never see them (He Xuan) again. Hooray?! !?! ?!?!?!?

It all feels very random and ridiculous in context (though something that may not have come through in my self-serious literary analysis is that the novel is very farcical, so it feels relatively consistent in tone with the work as a whole), despite teasing at emotional resolution via the implication that He Xuan regrets what happened, or at least still bears Shi Qingxuan some

positive regard. The responses to the survey demonstrate that readers (or, at least, Beefleaf cultists) are divided on whether they find this a satisfying end point for the characters, and if they are dissatisfied, whether they wish the novel gave us more or less than it does.

My initial reaction while reading was, “so it just... ends there?” I’ve since come around to it, which may be a sort of self-imposed Stockholm syndrome of the mind, but bear with me.

A lot of the stuff that comes to mind here is corny. Like, “the ambiguity is actually good because it invites the reader to imagine liberatory queer futures” etc. I do believe that (kinda) (more or less), but it’s such a trite third-rate-theorist move that I’d find it unsatisfying to leave things there. Chat-GPT-ass literary analysis, go girl give us nothing.

Instead, I’ll take a turn for the even more corny: the reveal that this zine has all been a personal essay in disguise! (In fairness, I foreshadowed this in the introduction, if that is anything more than a distant memory at this point.)

This lil chapbook thang took me a long time to write. Part of that was its constantly expanding scope; it was overwhelming in its ambitions for someone who hasn’t written a research paper in many years. I’d never made a zine before, and I get embarrassed even making publicly visible blog posts most of the time. I also veered between feverish certainty in my watertight analysis and creeping anxiety that I was making a goof of myself by taking self-indulgent fandom brainrot way too seriously. I dusted the the draft back off after reading the roundtable discussion “What Sickness You Can Live With,” in which the participants spoke to, among other things, the forces that have drawn them into (and away from) online fandom culture:

I think what keeps me in fandom is its tendencies towards excess. Excess feeling, excess content, excess

consumption, fandom itself as a kind of excess. When I meet people from fandom in real life, what we bond over is rarely a common source material, but rather the state of being singularly obsessed with something that the “productive” world considers arbitrary. I don’t think that’s inherently subversive, but I do think those who live in fandom understand that obsession is a pretty common mode of being, labelled as such only when the thing being fixated on is seen as perverse for whatever reason.⁹⁰

So I’ll approach this essay’s conclusion first and foremost as a fan. As much as this essay has dabbled in the pseudo-academic, it’s closer to fandom meta than a journal article, if for no other reason than its ethos of excess (that’s right, the gratuitous blockquotes were on purpose...) Back at the start, I quoted MXTX saying that the complicated love/hate relationships in *Wuthering Heights* made her “shake with excitement,” an acknowledgement of the continuity between the gothic affect of tremulous terror and the fannish affect of uncontrollable physical squee.

When I first read this story—which, I’ll remind you, is the non-canonical doomed pseudo-B-pairing subplot in a romance novel about other characters—I thought it was the most romantic thing I’d ever read. I still think that. The years of fascination since have been an attempt to untangle the knot of attachment in order to discern what spoke, and still speaks, to me so strongly in a story that is very compelling and also kind of a mess. The prior sections of this essay are the result of that rumination as applied to the text on its own terms, and I stand by my reading. It also contains common threads with other works I’ve found arresting over the years. All this to say, my unrolling of scrolls to explain my passions is not *just* cope, okay?

But there’s some cope, for sure. My love affair with Beefleaf has overlapped with a series of years when overt transantagonism in my part of the world has swelled considerably and Western

liberal democracies are engaged in a race to the fascist bottom. I've craved trans and translike art and narratives that are fraught with danger, but where the flavour of the danger is sumptuous, thrilling, and indulgent.

I also find it inspiring and galvanizing with regards to my own fiction work. It feels a bit like it gave me permission to write heightened, dark, meaty gothic romance about trans people, though I feel like I'm going to be judged for saying that because MXTX is not trans (to my knowledge) and *TGCF* has a couple explicitly transphobic "man in a dress" jokes (involving, for the most part, other characters than these.) Even so—it's not as if trans dark romance, trans horror, trans gothic, etc don't exist elsewhere, but I've yet to have anything else scratch this itch with such precision. It's all about gender but also not about gender. It's about being forcefemmed by circumstance and the shared world between you and the person who did it to you being so compelling that you procrastinate on revenge for centuries until you lose your gender euphoria in the divorce.

The Black Water saga evokes a similar cozy dread to *Revenge of the Sith*; I know Anakin is going to become Darth Vader, but every time I rewatch the prequels I'm like, "but maybe this is the time it all works out." Except if there was a weird epilogue wherein Darth Vader came back to give Obi-Wan back a precious object Obi-Wan had thought lost, which Darth Vader seemingly repaired by hand. And there was no original trilogy, so there was nothing stopping you from fantasizing about their ensuing angsty-yet-tender reconciliation in the form of 100k words of slow burn hurt/comfort fic. And also they were both tgirls.

Ahem: I will clarify for the last time that though the limitations of the English language (and the inventiveness of my use of it) have caused me to use words like "woman," this project has never been about trying to litigate a specific gender identity on behalf of fictional characters in a xianxia setting. Rather, it's been an insistence on the transness of this narrative as a whole, if we

take transness as that which overflows social boundedness—the “accursed share,” in the words of a tumblr post to which I’ve long since lost the link, spilling into the world beyond—or makes an attempt, even if it fails.

For all my talk of the warm and fuzzy feelings I get about Beefleaf, I find the place this story ends up very sad (in a good and satisfying way!) if I only look at what’s on the page. Thankfully, the well-honed self-indulgence muscle called my brain has been trained in the way of reparative-reading-by-way-of-fujo-goggles. This is all making me sound more uncritically positive about fandom and fannish practices than I am, when my point is more like, look: things are shit, in their universe and ours. Busted maybe irreparably. But there are glimpses round the edges of what life beyond all this could offer.

Standing in front of their families, neither Shi Qingxuan nor He Xuan could shake the shackles of familial love and obligation, but we’re on the other side of the horizon now. Shi Qingxuan is a beggar with an assumed name, bearing out Butler’s description of those who transgress normative kinship structures—an uncertain fate, living within death, dying within life. He Xuan is dead and purposeless, yet persisting in existence for reasons.

To provide in full a quotation I referenced many pages ago:

...we may be terrified. But we have known terror, have been bred in part by it. And we know how to live amid it, in spite of it. But if we trade in the terror that has long gripped us for the terror of what a life without being suffocated might be like, we then fear only the wild possibilities of life as it can be for us: life un/gendered.⁹¹

I dream of life after the page’s end; life within death; life after life.

And fix-it fic.

Endnotes

- 1 From Fanlore: “A Twitter user called cucumberbros drew NSFW He Xuan/Shi Qingxuan fanart and posted it to the website Privatter. The Privatter post was locked with the password *shuangxuan*, a romanization of 雙玄, the Chinese-speaking fandom’s ship name for He Xuan/Shi Qingxuan. (*Shuangxuan* was at that time the commonly accepted ship name for the pairing in the English-speaking fandom.) Cucumberbros decided to use emojis for the password hint, and landed on “Hint: 🍖 x 🍃 name”: 🍖 (meat on bone) in reference to the fact that He Xuan eats a lot, and 🍃 (leaf fluttering in wind) because Shi Qingxuan’s title is Wind Master. According to cucumberbros, this confused their friends, who ultimately translated 🍖 🍃 to “beefleaf” and began circulating the term. “Beefleaf” caught on, in part because it solved the problem of the extant ship name *shuangxuan* containing a spoiler about He Xuan’s identity, and the ship is now almost exclusively referred to as beefleaf by English-speaking fans.”
- 2 Boys’ love (BL) is a genre of fictional media that depicts homoerotic relationships between men, marketed primarily to women.
- 3 To crib Wikipedia: *Xianxia* (仙侠; lit. ‘immortal heroes’) is a genre of Chinese fantasy heavily inspired by Chinese mythology and influenced by philosophies of Taoism, Chan Buddhism, Chinese martial arts, traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese folk religion, Chinese alchemy, other traditional elements of Chinese culture, and the *wuxia* genre. It typically focuses on characters (“cultivators”) who meditate and train (practice spiritual cultivation) with the goal of becoming transcendental beings.
- 4 Mo Xiang Tong Xiu quoted in *Subaru*.
- 5 Bey, 44.
- 6 Lu Lam’s concept of aniccagender comes to mind, invoking *anicca*, the Buddhist concept of impermanence: “each time a gender may arise is true. [It] can be expressed to liberate, fulfill cultural roles, be of service, and/or stay safe” (“Yellow Poppy and an Aniccagender Heart,” 112.)
- 7 Lewis, 4.
- 8 Ellmann, 36.
- 9 *TGCF* 3: 399-401.
- 10 Lewis, 6.
- 11 *TGCF* 4: 17.

- 12 Warner, 89.
13 *TGCF* 2: 385.
14 *TGCF* 4: 112.
15 *TGCF* 4: 246.
16 *TGCF* 4: 107.
17 *TGCF* 4: 241.
18 Perry, 272.
19 *TGCF* 4: 105.
20 Perry, 268.
21 Ellmann, 34.
22 Perry, 265-6.
23 *Dao De Jing: A Minimalist Translation*, Chapter 1.
24 Kutcher, 1615.
25 *TGCF* 2: 46.
26 *TGCF* 4: 110.
27 *TGCF* 3: 402.
28 *TGCF* 4: 61.
29 *TGCF* 4: 15.
30 *TGCF* 2: 47.
31 Brontë, 70.
32 Brontë, 138.
33 Ellmann, 41.
34 Creed, 58.
35 Adamczak.
36 Sedgwick, 12.
37 Sedgwick, 34.
38 Sedgwick, 13.
39 Poe.
40 Adamczak.
41 Perry, 267.
42 *TGCF* 4: 191.
43 *TGCF* 4: 194.

- 44 The title of this section was taken from Robert Eno's translation of the same passage, which gives 玄牝 as "the dark vagina." I cannot speak for the relative accuracy of the translation but was compelled to include it somehow.
- 45 *TGCF* 4: 233.
- 46 Ellmann, 50.
- 47 Bey, 5.
- 48 Jackson, 148.
- 49 Jackson, 108.
- 50 Jackson, 148.
- 51 Lootens, 162.
- 52 *TGCF* 1: 267-8.
- 53 Though the novel doesn't specify the size of Ming Yi's breasts, the official art in both manhua and donghua is not coy. I rest my case.
- 54 This isn't an academic paper so I don't need to pretend He Xuan isn't blorbo from my webnovels.
- 55 *TGCF* 2: 146.
- 56 *TGCF* 3: 379-80.
- 57 *TGCF* 2: 48.
- 58 wifelinkmtg.
- 59 Jackson quoted in Lootens, 163.
- 60 Bey, 56.
- 61 Ellmann, 30.
- 62 Butler, 66-67.
- 63 *TGCF* 3: 269.
- 64 Sedgwick, 18.
- 65 Bey, 39.
- 66 Butler, 58.
- 67 Butler, 67.
- 68 Perry, 269.
- 69 *TGCF* 4: 248-9.
- 70 Poe.
- 71 Lewis, 4-5.

- 72 Jackson, 143.
73 *TGCF* 4: 85.
74 *TGCF* 4: 242.
75 *TGCF* 4: 241.
76 Butler, 53.
77 *TGCF* 4: 201.
78 *TGCF* 4: 238.
79 *TGCF* 4: 243.
80 *TGCF* 4: 243.
81 Grand, 4.
82 *The Handmaiden*.
83 *TGCF* 4: 239.
84 *TGCF* 4: 248.
85 Butler, 65.
86 Butler, 61.
87 Sedgwick, 13.
88 Bey, 5.
89 *TGCF* 2: 147.
90 Hay quoted in Chu, *Asia Art Archive*.
91 Bey, 56.

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fanshrine... but it doesn't exist yet.

