Some Mysteries and Mootings About the Yuan Variety Play

William Dolby

It may help to put our knowledge of China’s earliest large body of mature drama in proper perspective if, turning from the painstaking amassing of facts and suppositions, we instead take a survey of what seems saliently missing from what we would like to know. This exercise is unlikely to produce the material to fill such gaps, but it may at least direct our attentions to what we should be hunting and allow us to test how far we can nowadays envisage the genre as a fully rounded form of literature and entertainment.

The Yuan variety play (Yuan zaju) first flourished during the years of the Mongol period (1234–1279) and early Yuan dynasty (1280–1368). We know a great deal about its antecedents, the chantefables, the ballads, the slapstick and other short playlets, and many other contributory entertainments and skills. What we do not know is the exact date or circumstances of its birth, or indeed why it was born. Despite certain creeds of historiography, the prior availability of the components does not necessarily mean that the components will inevitably at a certain point in time align to create a new composite art. What sparked the conception of the variety play? Marco Polo (ca. 1254–1324) seems to think that the vast entertainment area on the outskirts of the Yuan capital Dadu was for the diversion of foreign ambassadors and the like. The north of China in the early Yuan must indeed have been a busy cosmopolitan thoroughfare, and when we recall how in later ages emperors made drama such a central feature of their welcome to Western embassies, the importance of such a function should not be overlooked. One of drama’s great advantages over

William Dolby teaches at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. His article “Actors’ Miseries and the Subversive Stage” appears elsewhere in this issue of ATJ.

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other entertainments is the immediacy of its impact; indeed, it is generally more accessible and less demanding on the audience’s imagination than, for instance, one-person narrative ballad performances. Ballads require the audience to recreate the dramatis personae, the costumes, and, to a large extent, the gestures and actions from its own conceptualization of these things. Thus drama would have been one of the readiest forms of access to Chinese cultural traditions for the Mongols and other foreigners abounding in northern China at that time.

More often it is stressed that the Yuan variety play arose as a Chinese protest against the foreign conquerors: the Mongols and their Central Asian and other non-Chinese allies. Although this may have been a forceful motivation in the later Yuan, it seems unlikely for the earliest phase, when indeed some of the playwrights were non-Chinese and some had powerful connections with the imperial court itself. The Jurchens were great enthusiasts for all kinds of popular entertainments and seem to have played a large part in fostering early theatre. We probably need to divest ourselves of modern ideological and simplistically patriotic wishful thinking and examine the demography of thirteenth-century northern China in more dispassionate detail. Such studies might bring a more convincing picture to light for the origins of the Yuan variety play.

We have nowadays the texts of a hundred or so plays regarded as Yuan variety plays, but only thirty editions definitely survive from the Yuan period itself. The rest have mostly, at the least, undergone often heavy Ming dynasty (1368–1644) editings. We get a strong glimpse of the late Ming attitude from a preface written on March 31, 1615, by the most celebrated of all Yuan drama editors, Zang Maoxun (d. A.D. 1621):

I’ve got a lot of rare editions of variety plays in my private collection, and when recently I passed through Huang-chou I borrowed two hundred from Liu Yanbo, who said they’d been copied from editions in the Imperial Play Academy, being different from the editions at present obtainable from the bookshops. So I mixed and collated them and have selected a number of the most excellent among them and organized them into ten groups numbered in sequence, which if—like Ssu-ma Ch’ien [ca. 145–85 B.C.] with his Historical Records—I “store in famous libraries and spread to thriving regions and great cities,” are bound to find some “connoisseur of their music” such as He Liangjun [fl. ca. A.D. 1566]. And if it be said that I’ve wantonly added and erased, attaching myself to the noble dramatists of the Yuan as one of their number, then I shall be grateful indeed for the compliment! [Zang 1958, 3]

Yan Dunyi’s famous book Consideration of Doubts in Yuan Dramas, published in 1960, does much to sort out the problems of editions and to promote a healthy tentativeness toward the authenticity of the extant
texts. The first and most obvious difference that strikes one about the play texts is that most of the Yuan printed editions consist of little more than the core song framework of the genre of song known as qu and provide hardly any of the interspersed spoken or recited dialogue that the Ming editions supply so copiously. In the case of one Yuan-edition play, there is neither dialogue nor stage directions, nothing but the songs. I myself have often parroted the view that the Ming editors must have retained the original Yuan songs largely intact, as the songs’ semantic and prosodic complexity makes them hard to tamper with without major recomposition, an alteration of one line often crying out for alteration elsewhere in a song, in a kind of domino effect. Yet recently, looking at the matter afresh, suspicions have dawned that the Ming-edited songs may have been more considerably altered, in shape and in function, than previous, even painstaking, research had revealed.

The feeling, as yet little more than such, has developed that the Yuan-edition songs were more stage-oriented, carried much more of the action, and must have been far more integrated with whatever dialogue there originally was. In other words, it would seem that Ming editing intensified the contrast between dialogue and songs and in this way tended to isolate the songs further as a separate poetic mode, smoothing out roughnesses and awkwardnesses that arose from the earlier closer relation of the songs to stage action. The other question—whether the dialogue was originally written down at all—is a familiar subject of discussion. Zang Maoxun’s seventeenth-century highly speculative view demands our attention but should be treated with much caution:

Some have said that in the Yuan’s selection of scholars for employment as government mandarins, one category of examination was “composing qu,” just as there’s a “mnemonic song” essay category in the Civil Service exams nowadays, and that because this examination took place “neath windy eaves and to an inch of the sundial”—in the confines of the examination halls and within a very limited space of time—all the famous scholar-playwrights of the Yuan, even such as Ma Zhiyuan and Qiao Jifu, would by the time they reached the fourth and final act of their plays frequently have come to “the last feeble push of their mighty bow shot”—hence the third-act climaxes.

It’s also claimed that the examiners would, apart from the topic, stipulate no more than the tunes and rhyme categories required in the examinations, and that’s why the dialogue of the plays was made up not by the scholar-playwrights but by the actors themselves, as the plays were being performed, that being the reason why the spoken dialogue in Yuan variety plays contains such a lot of vulgarisms and plagiarisms.

It’s further asserted that West Wing, actually five variety plays in its length and form, was, in contrast, entirely tailored—dialogue and all
—by the scholar song composers themselves, which is why not a single syllable may be added to it or deducted from it to improve it, and why it’s the most outstanding of all Yuan variety plays.

Generally speaking, the excellence of Yuan qu and plays lay in their being skilled without making a show of striving for ingenious effects—where polished, culling from the “music treasury” songs of the Han [206 B.C.–A.D. 220], Three Kingdoms [220–265], and Six Dynasties [220–589] periods; where rougher, mixing in some contemporary local dialect. It’s only since Chen Juoyong’s [fl. ca. A.D. 1535] play Jade Waist Pendants that thesauri have been used to write plays! And Zhang Fengyi [1527–1613] and his followers have turned to him as their venerable mentor and fount of wisdom, producing such plays as Red Flywhisk as the extreme flood from that minute source! The speech dialogue part of variety plays shouldn’t in fact take up much of a play, but in making his variety play Red Flywhisk—and from a brief Tang dynasty short story at that!—Zhang Fengyi has given it some thousand lines of dialogue! Whereas in West Wing, although it has no less than twenty-one acts, there’s little dialogue to be seen.

Even less desirable is a large amount of euphuistic parallel prose, for which strictures have already been applied to “Palace Secretary” and other sections of Lute. And Tu Long’s [fl. ca. A.D. 1592] Canna Lily, which has such speech for a whole act, without one single song, and Liang Chenyu’s [ca. 1520–ca. 1593] Washing Silk and Mei Dingzuo’s [1553–1619] Jade Box, which even go so far as to lack a single phrase of ordinary prose speech, are yet deeper in error! [Zang 1958, 3]

Perhaps we should make more attempts at least to ascertain when the habit of full-scale authoring of dialogue, as opposed to stage improvisation or actors’ workups, first developed. The earliest surviving fully dialogued drama text is, perhaps surprisingly, not a variety play at all but the southern play-text (xiwen) drama Top Graduate Zhang Xie, probably from the mid-Yuan. But this does not necessarily simplify our problems, since, in probable contrast to the northern plays, this dialogue is largely versified and has such intense and intricate versification as would almost inevitably require an author’s creation as opposed to stage improvisation. It is quite clear that by the mid or late Yuan, the habit of northern playwrights’ writing in their dialogue as well as the songs was in full flow, and in later ages most drama texts were more or less complete reflections of what would be performed on stage, apart from a few stock interlude sketches which are merely signaled in the stage directions. In modern times there is a strong worldwide tendency among critics to proclaim the primacy of actors over playwrights. Indeed, in one form of twentieth-century innovation along the road to a Western-style drama, the Outside-the-Curtain Plays, actor improvisation was all and the use of set drama texts seems to have been consciously eschewed.
Relatively little is known about the milieux of Chinese drama performance through the ages. We have some pictures, some old stages, and some incomplete literary descriptions, and it is generally assumed from what we can glean of traditional stages and theatre buildings in general that Yuan dynasty theatre conditions were more or less identical to those of later ages. Yet in one fundamental way, they may have been very different from one aspect of those of Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and early republican times. It is possible to surmise this from the different nature of the plays themselves. The Yuan variety plays were integral stories, tightly plotted, and clearly designed to be listened to attentively from beginning to end, whereas in the Qing and later the performance of excerpt plays—one or two shortish scenes taken from longer plays or from a longer story or cycles of stories—became the norm for Beijing opera and certain other genres. The excerpt plays, although performed under other conditions as well, were suited to convivially inattentive audiences in noisy teahouse theatres, with only the true connoisseurs concentrating wholly while others chatted, ate, and drank loudly, often side-on to the stage. The Yuan variety plays may have been more wholly theatrical occasions and, concomitantly, less background or connoisseur entertainment. That would constitute a radically different atmosphere, as well as implying different economic setups.

Because of the overwhelming dominance of Beijing opera in the realm of traditional Chinese drama in recent and modern times, the pattern of its performance is often retrospectively assumed to be typical of all earlier Chinese drama forms. They too are widely considered to have been heavily stylized and symbolic, involving elaborate and expensive costuming and brilliantly diversified and intricate painted face patterns. As far as the Yuan variety play is concerned, there is no convincing evidence for this supposition. No doubt the troupes cut their suits according to their cloth, economically speaking, the palace performers wearing more expensive garb and the poorer street performers more rudimentary apparel. In the absence of detailed Yuan historical analyses or records of costume in earlier ages, there would of course have been no great historical precision in the costuming for much earlier eras, any more than there is in Beijing opera, but on the other hand, nor do we have any strong grounds for supposing that costume had developed anything like Beijing opera’s sumptuous exaggerations, or that it even had any tendency to do so. In fact, the likelihood is that costuming was fairly unassuming and performance fairly naturalistic and direct.

This supposition seems supported by the probable nature of the Yuan variety play’s music and singing. It is similarly a widespread assumption that these were akin to the music and singing of Beijing opera, but early Ming statements by Zhu Youdun (1379-1439) and oth-
ers flatly contradict such a supposition. The whole tenor of such evidence as there is makes it virtually certain that the songs were sung to be immediately understood by the audience with great clarity, being dominated more by semantic meaning rather than music, and one-syllable or polysyllabic to the note rather than melismatic and extending one syllable over many notes. As Wang Jide (d. 1613/1614) says:

In the north, the syllables are many and the tune compressed, this compression giving prominence to qualities of energy. In the south, the syllables are few and the tune is slow and extended, this extendedness giving prominence to the rhythmic cadences. In the north, the semantic import of the words is greater than the musical import, while in the south it is the other way round. [Wang 1959, 57]

This is a world of difference, an opposite extreme, and, since songs were the structural and spiritual heart of the dramas, must have made for an immensely different kind of overall performance. The very length of some of the lines of the songs speaks against extenuation of syllables, as does the mixture of colloquial and literary language with its quite evident striving for prompt comprehension. Indeed, many aspects of the qu genre of song used for Yuan drama proclaim them as a medium supremely suited to direct and rapid appreciation of word sense.

It may be a bias of our historical records, or an artifact of their survival, that gives such a strong impression of women having been predominant in the performance of Yuan plays. But from our accounts of the versatility and rich character of many of the actresses it is hard to believe that such dominance was not actually the case. Xia Tingzhi (ca. 1300–after 1368) records many vital and superb actresses, the following two among them:

**Naturally Beautiful**

Her surname was Gao, and as she was the second child in her family, people called her Young Second Miss. Her mother, surnamed Liu, once attended upon Vizier Shi [Tianze: 1202–1275]. Naturally Beautiful was serene and elegant of looks and air, with very much an attractive appearance of the quiet country woods, and her ability and artistry, furthermore, surpassed those of her contemporary fellow actresses. She was the best performer in her times of boudoir-repining variety plays and also attained the heights in flowery female roles and monarch roles.

Her first marriage was to the actor Wang Yuanqiao, and when he died, she married Jiao Taisu [Jiao Zhizhong]. When Jiao died, she fell back under the Board of Music's jurisdiction; everybody very much hankered after relationships with her because of her orchid-like beauty, but she remained loftily pure and nobly serious and was especially cher-
ished and appreciated by Bai Pu [1226–after 1306] and Li Jiong [1274–1332]. [Xia 1959, 23]

Kuo Jade Residence

She was the wife of the assistant commissioner of the Imperial Academy of Entertainments, Tong Guan’gao. She excelled in greenwood-bandit variety plays and was particularly skilled at repartee and banter, achieving celebrity in the capital. [Xia 1959, 24]

Again, this prominence of women, if such it was, must have been significant in creating a theatre radically opposed in style and manner to the Beijing opera in which male actors played all the parts, including the female roles. The multiplicity of vivid female lead roles in itself probably indicates the actresses’ salience, although conceivably it constitutes a chicken-and-egg dilemma. Why would women have been so predominant? Arguments sometimes fleetingly put forward hold that this prominence is entirely explained by the disruptions of the Mongol conquests that threw many women of superior education and refined upbringings into lives of hardship and otherwise demeaning lowly professions. Again, we should perhaps view matters more complexly, returning to the point mentioned earlier concerning the entertainment of foreigners. The foreigners, no doubt mostly males, might be expected to have a greater preference for naturalistic, directly comprehensible performance and to have had a penchant for female performers, including the performance of female roles by actresses. (The actresses also had an auxiliary profession to rely on, that of courtesan or harlot, which must have given them extra strength in their livelihoods, as well attested by Xia Tingzhi.) Beijing opera is often thought by foreigners to be impenetrably esoteric, and it is much more likely that Yuan dynasty foreigners would have been presented with something more readily appreciable by the uninitiated.

In view of the considerable uncertainty about the authenticity of surviving full texts of Yuan variety plays, it is unwise to accept their contents as certainly representative of a Yuan dynasty theatrical literature; but even viewed as Ming-edited versions they have their own significant literary value. A common charge against them, and indeed against other traditional Chinese drama, is that they are conventional and shallow in their ideas, rarely involving such radical rethinking and soul-searching as Hamlet’s speeches, for instance. This criticism generally ignores the fact that the Chinese or Sinicized audiences had a certain amount of knowledge of profound and mature philosophies such as Confucianism and Taoism, which knowledge may to some extent have obviated the compulsion to rehash philosophical matters from their conceptual roots upward. At least we should be looking more closely into the relative audience satis-
faction or reader satisfaction, as well as the contrast between spectators or readers coming largely new to the subject matter and treatment versus those already extensively acquainted with much of the story.

Many of these theories of the essential distinction between Yuan variety drama and Beijing opera might conceivably be demonstrated were the former to be performed more often nowadays. In fact Yuan variety dramas have rarely been presented on stage in recent times. This is something of a mystery in itself, and some of the explanations can only be tentatively suggested. Clearly, as modernistic ideologies rapidly gained ground, it was increasingly felt by many that the old plays, embodying "feudal" or "outmoded" ideas and attitudes, were contrary to the new thinking. It was expediently ignored that people can enjoy performances that run totally contrary to their own moral and intellectual judgments and that one does not have to agree with something in order to be entertained or edified. Times have changed, however, and social and political attitudes in China are steadily growing broader and more complex in many respects, so that there may be increasingly less resistance from this direction.

Another kind of discomfort might conceivably arise from the very similarities of the plays’ colloquial language to modern Mandarin Chinese. This language is sometimes termed the “uncle” of modern Mandarin, and it shares much in vocabulary and syntax with the racy colorful modern Beijing version of Mandarin. Yet this very closeness may be the cause of some modern discomfort, since it is also combined with important differences that, after the first onset of a feeling of familiarity, must surely be puzzling and disturbing to native Mandarin speakers. The Yuan pronunciations of vowels and consonants often differed from the modern ones, for instance, as apparently did the tonal shape of the four pitch tones. This, for the modern speaker, makes the rhyming, and perhaps the tone-metrical prosodic patterns of the Yuan songs, seem confusingly incorrect in many cases. Moreover, could it be that the Yuan colorfulness—in, for instance, the plays’ exuberant densities of onomatopoeic terms—presents a challenge to the modern language’s relative sobriety that it is not yet ready to face?

The texts became widely available early in this century, along with a considerable amount of secondary writings of drama analysis and criticism, so that difficulty of access to the written plays cannot be a reason for nonperformance. Most, however, are printed in anthologies; perhaps more extensively explained and annotated books on single plays might foster stage productions.

Clearly some adaptation of Yuan variety plays will be necessary before they can widely be performed nowadays, but the enterprise would assuredly be most rewarding, as these are without doubt eminently per-
formable as theatre, cinema, television, or radio pieces. One can envisage a three-pronged development in this area: attempts to return to what might have been the pristine Yuan manner of performance and original form; adaptations that seek to retain the immediate comprehensibility of the ancient texts; and new compositions on traditional, folk, or modern themes in Yuan variety play style and format. These experiments should surely encourage rather than compete with each other. The revival of such an essentially four-act, compact, integral, tightly plotted, song-based, multiskilled drama type capable of dealing with any topic would be a welcome filling of a notable gap in the rich tapestry of surviving Chinese national theatre.

NOTES

a 元雜劇 f 張協狀元
b 緊懋循 g 幕表戲
c 嚴敦易 h 朱有燾
d 曲 i 王翼德
e 戲文 j 夏庭芝

REFERENCES

