Body, cross-dressing, identity

Mulan "in his shoes" in Xu Wei's play

Alessandro Tosco

"Four Cries of a Gibbon" (*Si sheng yuan*) by Xu Wei (1521-1593) presents four plays with varying outcomes that are nevertheless united by the common thread of fluctuating identity. In the last two works, the playwright focuses on the ideas of gender and cross-dressing. In fact, the stories of two heroines are told who, denying their bodies and concealing their identities, don men's clothing in order to take on more masculine features and thus attempt to participate in activities normally considered purely within the realm of men: *wu* (martial arts) and *wen* (arts). Focusing on *wu*, this paper examines the work entitled "The Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father" (*Ci Mulan tifu congjun*), inspired by the famous 6th-century poem *Mulan shi*. Xu Wei builds a narrative plot on Mulan's transition from woman to man through a series of scenes highlighting her undressing, her unclad body, and the idea of disguising it with a new identity. The denouement is, however, exactly the opposite process, a reacquisition of her feminine looks and role in the family and society. This paper pays particular attention to the unbinding and rebinding of her feet and the preservation of virginity. These elements are crucial to the heroine's "Confucian" (*xiao* and *jie*) character. "In his shoes," Mulan demonstrates her talent and skills. Her story shows that it is the clothes that make the difference, not the body wearing them. Hinged on the contrast between being and appearing, between what is seen and what is not, this paper reflects on the presentation of the body on stage and the relative audience reaction.

Keywords: Mulan, Chinese theatre, Confucian's thought, cross-dressing, identity, body.

> Tragedy is a deception, where those who deceive are more just than those who do not deceive, and those who are deceived are wiser than those who do not allow themselves to be deceived.
>
> Gorgia from Lentini

1. Introduction

> 伏以貌然閨秀，描眉月鏡之嬌。突爾戎裝，掛甲天山之險，替父心堅似鐵；秉虎豹姿，羞兒女態，從軍膽大如天。換莫莢葉，歷十二年。移孝為忠，出清於濁。雙兔傍地，難迷雌雄撲朔之分；[…]

> Now, as a young lady, beautiful and talented, / A beauty of brows painted in the moon-shaped mirror. / Suddenly, dressed in martial array, / Hung with armour, in Tianshan's dangerous passes. / Substituting for your father, heart as firm as steel, / You held to the form of tiger and leopard. / Ashamed of your female appearance; / You joined the army, brave to the heavens. / With the changing of the *mingjie* leaves, / And twelve years passed. / Displaying filial piety for loyalty, / You emerged pure from the mud. / A pair of rabbits, side by side on the ground, / It is hard to tell apart male from female. [...] (Xu Wei 1986: 85; Kwa 2012: 220)

The talented Huang Chuntao 黃春桃, protagonist of the play "The Girl Graduate" (*Nü zhuangyuan* 女狀元),[1] disguises herself in men's clothes and secretly assumes the male identity of Huang Chonggu 黃崇嘏 to participate in the formidable imperial examinations and thus rise above her miserable condition ensuing from the premature loss of her parents. In a refined game of intertextual referencing, Chuntao/Chonggu composes the aforementioned lines inspired by the legendary character of Mulan who, cross-dressing as a man and donning military armour, went off to war in her father's place and ended up, defeating the enemy.

"The Girl Graduate" was composed by the eclectic scholar Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593) who, in the same collection "Four Cries of a Gibbon" (*Si sheng yuan* 四聲猿),[2] also included a short comedy dedicated to Mulan.[3] The four plays of the collection, though independent of each other, are all in the *zaju* 雜劇 style contaminated by the conventions of the Southern theatre (*chuanqi* 傳奇)[4] with one specific thread in common: identity change.[5] In particular, in the last two works the playwright focuses on gender identity via reflection on body and cross-dressing. Furthermore, these plays reject the fantastic and otherworldly aspects present in the first two, setting the story exclusively in the here and now. The implicit message is that changing one's identity does not involve transcendental actions as

[1] The complete title of the play is "The Girl Graduate Rejects the Female Phoenix and Gains the Male Phoenix" (*Nü zhuangyuan cihuang defeng* 女狀元辭凰得鳳).

[2] On the work of Xu Wei, cf. Chen 陳 (2002).

[3] It refers to the play "The Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father" (*Ci Mulan tifu congjun* 雌木蘭替父從軍), also known as "The Female Mulan" (*Ci Mulan* 雌木蘭).

[4] On the *zaju* plays of the Ming 明 dynasty (1368-1644), cf. Qi 戚 (2001) and Xu 徐 (2003).

[5] The other two works included in the collection are: "The Mad Drummer Plays the Yuyang Triple Rolls" (*Kuanggushi Yuyang sannong* 狂鼓史魚陽三弄) and "The Zen Master Yu Has a Dream of Cuixiang" (*Yu chanshi Cuixiang yimeng* 玉禪師翠鄉一夢). In the first one, the hero is a wronged man who, in a postmortem trial that takes place in the spirit underworld, challenges and triumphs over his enemy Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220), one of the most famous generals in imperial China. In the second one, the eponymous monk of the title is seduced into violating his vows of chastity and is thus reincarnated in the next act so he can get his revenge (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 152).

in changing one's body: identity can be altered by something as commonplace as the simple changing of clothes (Kwa 2012: 64).

Often in traditional Chinese literature[6] and, in particular, in Chinese theatre, female protagonists have been represented as heroines[7] who, as if to challenge traditional morality, contradict the Confucian proverb that lack of intellect is a virtue for a woman. Through the characters of Mulan and Chuntao, in fact, the stories of two heroines are staged who, denying their bodies and hiding their identities, don male attire to take on more masculine features so as to excel in activities considered to be purely virile: *wu* 武 (martial arts) and *wen* 文 (arts). On the other hand, as Ma Qian pointed out, it is the clothes that make the difference, not the body wearing them (Ma 2005: 35). Leaving aside the analysis of this last scholar, which would well deserve a separate study, this paper analyses the play inspired by the *wu* in the broader framework of the gender issue in the rewriting of Mulan's character. In particular, an attempt is made to understand how 'transgressive' this character actually is in relation to traditional Chinese morality. To conclude we shall examine the sexuality or eroticization of Mulan's body when shown on stage and consequent audience reception.

Xu Wei's comedy is inspired by the famous "Poem of Mulan" (*Mulan shi* 木蘭詩) by an anonymous author of the sixth century AD. It focusses, however, on those aspects only vaguely hinted at the poem, all aimed at exalting the Confucian precepts of filial devotion (*xiao* 孝) and loyalty (*zhong* 忠).[8] Before proposing the analysis of "The Female Mulan," however, it is necessary to present some general considerations regarding Xu Wei's plays. First of all, as critics have pointed out (Kwa 2012: 9), the works were composed to be recited, not just read; this can be deduced from the numerous and detailed stage directions. This aspect has far-reaching repercussions on both audience reception concerning body as shown on stage and the assumption of a new identity through cross-dressing. It should also be noted that the audience is "omniscient," that is, they know the real identity of the female lead (*dan* 旦) assuming the male identity. The comic aspect of the plays also stem from this, where some lines base the dramatic action on a veritable "comedy of errors."[9] In addition, fiction mixes with reality: in the plays it is, generally, a male actor playing the *dan* roles, especially from the Ming dynasty onwards. Therefore, there is a male actor playing the role of a woman disguised, however, as a man.

[6] On the narrative dedicated to cross-dressing and gender identity, cf. Zeitlin (1997: 98-131).

[7] On the concept of 'hero' (*yingxiong* 英雄) declined in the feminine and applied to the context of Mulan, cf. Lauwaert (2020: 105-107).

[8] On Confucius and Confucianism, cf. Yao (2013). On Confucius and the gender issue, cf. Li (2000).

[9] This aspect is emphasised more in the play "The Girl Graduate."

In "The Female Mulan" the reflection on body, cross-dressing and identity unfolds through three fundamental issues: the undoing of footbinding, virginity preserved and the relationship with fellow soldiers. Before proceeding with the analysis of these issues, however, it is necessary to present a brief description of the play in order to better frame the discourse proposed later, as well as a comparison with the "Poem" and the other sources available to Xu Wei from which he drew inspiration and suggestions.

2. The Female Mulan: content of the work

The play has a rather thin plot; the cornerstone of the comedy is, in fact, the transition from female to male appearance and vice versa. Audience enjoyment in watching this play stems from the tension between what is hidden and what is not, therefore becoming the subject of the play itself. In the last aria, Mulan sings:

> 我做女兒則十七歲，做男兒倒十二年。經過了萬千瞧，那一個解雌雄辨?方信道辨雌雄的不靠眼。
>
> I was a woman till I was seventeen, / Was a man another twelve years. / I passed under thousands of glances, / Who among them could tell cock from hen? / Only now do I believe that to tell cock from hen, you can't rely on eyes.[10]

Alluding to the zoological allegory of the two hares running together in the fields, taken from the "Poem," the girl reflects on how she passed under thousands of glances without her true identity being discovered. Considering that the physical differences between a man and a woman can be difficult to distinguish in the figure of a soldier in uniform, the play demonstrates that these differences, after all, are not so important. However, if Mulan's gender did not matter, then the plot would not exist. Not surprisingly, therefore, before leaving the scene, the girl recites this last couplet:

> 世間事多少糊塗，院本打雌雄不辨。
>
> The affairs of the world are all such a mess, / Muddling boy and girl is what this play did best.

[10] The analysis of the play was conducted on the text contained in: Xu Wei (1986: 44-59). The English translation is taken from: Kwa (2012: 169-187). All the following quotes from the original Chinese text and the related translation are taken from these sources. In this context, in the English translation the use of the terms "cock" and "hen" is a free interpretation of Shiamin Kwa, while the Chinese text uses the terms *ci* 雌 and *xiong* 雄, which, in the zoological lexicon, respectively indicate "female, feminine" and "male, masculine."

The play, set during the Northern Wei 北魏 (386-534) dynasties among the Xianbei 鮮卑 tribe, is divided into only two acts. The first one begins with the female lead (*dan*) introducing herself as Hua Mulan 花木蘭.[11] The girl is aware that all adult men are called to arms to tame the rebellion led by Leopard Skin (Baozi Pi 豹子皮), the bandit leader. Worried that her father is too old and weak to fight, Mulan decides to take his place, citing two model female figures who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their fathers.[12] The resolute decision is followed by a series of arias in which at first the girl presents the military equipment she has just acquired, and then shows off her technical skills in martial arts, in particular with the sword, the lance and the bow, described through the songs. Here the expressive power of the actor/actress is manifested through his/her mimicry. The climax is reached, however, in the third aria (the object of analysis *infra*), when Mulan sheds her female clothes to don a military uniform, that is, ostensibly male garments, and, with a gesture of great visual impact, though perhaps somewhat anachronistically, she unwraps the bandages from her feet. She assumes the male identity of Hua Hu 花弧 (*hu* 弧, lit. "bow"), leaves her parents and, in the company of two comrades, sets off towards the hiding place of the bandit leader.

The second act begins with Commander-in-Chief Xin Ping 辛平 who, having tested Hua Hu's military skills, hires him to lead the punitive expedition against Leopard Skin. Though not the main character, Xin Ping is afforded the possibility of singing and joins in a choir of soldiers telling the story of the capture of Leopard Skin thanks to a decisive action by Hua Hu. The latter is publicly praised before the sovereign and receives the imperial cap and girdle (*guandai* 冠带), symbols of "his" promotion to a position in the Imperial Secretariat (*shulang* 書郎).[13] Thus Mulan is sent home, still wearing Hua Hu's clothes, in the company of two soldiers. On the way back, the aria Mulan sings reveals the fact that it was not actually she who had captured Leopard Skin but someone else. She, therefore, cannot take credit for the victory:

萬千般想来都是幻，誇什麽吾成算。我殺賊把王擒，是女將男換。這功勞得將来不費星兒汗。

[11] This is the first source mentioning Mulan's presumed surname. On this topic, cf. Chen (2005: 23-43).

[12] The female figures mentioned by Mulan in the text are Qin Xiu 秦休 of the Three Kingdoms 三國 period (220-280) and Ti Ying 緹縈 of the Western Han 西漢 dynasty (202 BC-9 AD). Qin Xiu was sentenced to death, a penalty later pardoned, when she avenged her father by killing his assassin. Ti Ying begged to become a slave in Emperor Han Wendi's 漢文帝 (202-157 BC) court as a substitute for her father, who had been sentenced to death (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 153).

[13] Same position assigned to Mulan in the "Poem."

> Everything is —when I think of it— an illusion, after all; / Why should I boast that I succeeded in this scheme? / The "I" who killed bandits, and captured their king, / Was a female officer who switched to a man. / After all, these successes did not cost me a drop of sweat.

As Shiamin Kwa notes, this is the most personal, indeed the most self-reflective, of the arias. At the same time, however, it is also the most impersonal, inasmuch as Mulan categorically denies having had anything to do with the person who carried out acts of valour. In fact, the girl dissociates herself from the "I" who went to war, retreating into vague Buddhist talk about everything being illusory (Kwa 2012: 82). The surprising statement will find justification in the attitude maintained by the protagonist in the end of the work. As she travels with the soldiers, they comment on how strange it is that they have never seen Hua Hu relieving himself. Mulan, on the other hand, tells them about a mysterious statue of a guardian deity (*jingang* 金剛), with male features, in her village, whose face has changed into that of the moon goddess Chang'E 嫦娥:[14] thus anticipating the epilogue of the story.

When she returns home, she first of all regains her female identity by putting on both her old clothes and her face. Only later does she rejoin her parents. Mulan shares with them her successes, showing them the imperial cap and girdle that she had been given only then to confirm that she had returned to them still a virgin, a topic to which we shall return later. The two soldiers, stunned to discover that Hua Hu is actually a girl, leave the scene. At the same time, an actor enters in the role of the male lead (*sheng* 生) also wearing the official cap and girdle: he is Mr. Wang (Wang lang 王郎), the neighbour who recently passed the highest level in the imperial examinations. Mulan and Mr. Wang had previously been promised in marriage to each other by their respective parents and thus marry,[15] celebrating the family happy reunion (*datuanyuan* 大團圓). In this way, since Mulan is a woman who is not allowed to wear the imperial cap and girdle, she can at least marry someone who is. In this manner she can keep the honours that she had won on the battlefield.

[14] The term *jingang,* used to translate the Sanskrit word "vajra," a thunderbolt or mythical weapon, represents, in Buddhist iconography, a guardian deity. Chang'E, on the contrary, is the name of the legendary goddess of the moon.

[15] The marriage is another of Xu Wei's innovations in Mulan's story. Luo Qiuzhao 羅秋昭 suggests that this reflects the influence of the *chuanqi* representations of the Ming dynasty, which conventionally end with a meeting scene or a wedding. Cf. Luo (1979: 76). Another breach of the conventions of Yuan 元 (1279-1368) dynasty *zaju* plays is the possibility for a supporting actor to sing arias, as noted earlier with the character of Commander Xin Ping.

3. The sources

There are two main sources from which Xu Wei drew inspiration to compose the play. The first one is the famous "Poem of Mulan" (*Mulan shi*), by an anonymous author. This work is believed to have been composed during the Northern Wei period, between the 5th and 6th centuries. The playwright expands the information about her protagonist based on the dating of the work, making her a member of the Xianbei tribe, which ruled during that period. The second source, deeply inspired by the first one, is another poem, also known as "Song of Mulan" (*Mulan ge* 木蘭歌),[16] composed by the high official Wei Yuanfu 韋元甫 (Mid-8th century) of the Tang 唐 (618-907) dynasty.[17] The "Poem," considered the main source, had an important legacy in subsequent dynasties in the construction of the legend of Mulan as a female warrior.

The "Poem of Mulan," composed of 62 irregular lines, presents a circular structure unfolding on two reading planes: one internal (*nei* 內) and feminine and one external (*wai* 外) and masculine. The work begins on the internal reading plane, then moves on to the external one and finally closes again on the internal reading plane.[18] The poem opens with Mulan intent on carrying out the typically female activity of weaving,[19] while she sighs for the impossibility of finding a solution to a problem that grieves her: the khan (*kehan* 可汗)[20] has called all the men in the area to arms to defeat the barbarian leader who rages on their lands. Reasoning that she has no older brothers, Mulan makes a firm decision to go to war in her father's place. This decision is expressed in the sole desire to buy a saddle and a horse (*Yuan wei shi anma, congci ti ye zheng* 願為市鞍馬, 從此替爺征 "I want to buy a saddle and a horse, / To

[16] To distinguish the two works, in this paper we will refer to the first source as "Poem of Mulan" or "Poem," the second source instead as "Song of Mulan" or "Song."

[17] Both works are contained in the "Collected Works of the Music Bureau" (*Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集), the Song 宋 (960-1279) anthology compiled by Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩 (att. 1264-1269). He states that "Poem of Mulan" is taken from the "Musical Records, Old and New" (*Gujin yuelü* 古今樂録), a text that has not come down to us and dating back to around the sixth century AD. On the gestation of this work, cf. Wang 王 (1962: 119-120).

[18] Joseph Allen, taking up the narrative theories of Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017), analyses the structure of the "Poem of Mulan" as a series of events starting from a state of "equilibrium" and then moving on to one of "disequilibrium" and finally returning to a state of "equilibrium" (Allen 1996: 346).

[19] Several scholars have shown how the opening lines of the "Poem" take up similar expressions found in various *yuefu* 樂府 compositions, where female figures are described intent on loom work; among others, cf. Allen (1996: 347-349) and Lan (2003: 232).

[20] On the use in the "Poem" of the term *kehan* to indicate the Chinese ruler, cf. Chen (2002: 289-326).

take my father's place and join the army").[21] With no mention whatsoever of the gender issue and the assumption of a male identity, her transformation into a man takes place by simply donning a soldier's uniform. The lines, which will be analysed later, imply that the assumption of a male identity consists mainly in wearing the right clothes and taking up arms.

After assuming the identity of a soldier, the central section of the work moves from the internal reading plane to the external one, sanctioned by this couplet: *Chao ci ye niang qu, mu su Huanghe bian* **朝辭爺孃去, 暮宿黃河邊** "At dawn she said good-bye to her dear parents, / At night she rested by the Yellow River." This section details Mulan's departure from home and her new life as a soldier, without, however, getting to the heart of the war story. The battles, in fact, are not told, and the narration is only based on descriptions expressed mainly through auditory perceptions, often in onomatopoeic forms. The story proceeds with Mulan presenting herself in the presence of the khan, where she receives titles and emoluments, and then ends with the return to her native village as a victorious hero, still in men's clothes.

As soon as Mulan arrives home, the structure of the work returns to the internal reading plane. First, the girl is wearing her old female clothes again. Here the "Poem" lingers on the steps that she takes to return to her previous "self." In the lines, to which we shall return in detail later, she takes off her armour, then puts on her old skirt again, adorns her hair and puts on makeup: all fundamental actions to regain female identity. Returned to her true "self," Mulan goes out and shows herself to her comrades in arms; they are amazed to discover that their valiant companion is actually a girl:

> **出門看伙伴，伙伴皆驚惶：同行十二年，/ 不知木蘭是女郎。**
>
> She went outside and saw her army buddies / Her army buddies were all flabbergasted: / "We marched together for these twelve long years / And absolutely had no clue that Mulan was a girl!"

The work ends with the analogy of the aforementioned hares, added as a sort of moral to the story, demonstrating how appearances can indeed be deceiving:

> **雄兔腳撲朔，雌兔眼迷離。/ 兩兔傍地走，安能辨我是雄雌？**
>
> The male hare wildly kicks its feet; / The female hare has shifty eyes, / But when a pair of hares runs side by side, / Who can distinguish whether I am in fact male or female?

[21] The analysis of the" Poem" was conducted on the text contained in *Yuefu shiji* **樂府詩集** (1979: 373-374). The English translation is taken from: Kwa and Idema (2010: 1-3). All the following quotes from the original Chinese text and the related English translation are taken from these sources.

There are concrete ways to distinguish the male from the female. Hares have specific gender characteristics, however these can be obscured by their natural activities: when they are in motion, for example, these characteristics are difficult to discern. Men and women have no overtly distinctive characteristics determined by gender, like hares' legs or eyes. Consequentially, the curious analogy proposes that men and women, in addition to natural physical differences, like (hidden) reproductive organs, also have culturally imposed differences, such as, in the case of "The Female Mulan," footbinding. But even these can be blurred. In the human analogy, in fact, the evasive effect of the hares running side by side is given by the clothing. When the hares run, their physical differences are blurred; similarly, when people wear certain clothing, their bodily differences are blurred (Kwa 2012: 69-70). By the time Mulan dressed as a man, her statements and her actions were accepted as unhesitatingly as a man's.

Wei Yuanfu's "Song of Mulan" consists of 44 lines closely based on the content of the "Poem." It also opens once again with the girl intent on weaving and sighing. When asked why she is so worried, she replies that her father has been called to arms, but he is so old and weak: how will he ever be able to bear the harsh conditions of the northern lands?—Her daughter wonders. Furthermore, the elderly parent has no older children. Mulan thus makes the firm decision to leave in her father's stead. In the "Song," the disguise as a man and the assumption of a masculine identity passes not only through the dressing of a soldier, but also through the removal of female clothing and make-up; the lines will be analysed in detail later. Mulan thus goes to war. The narrative does not enter the heart of the story of the battles, but only mentions them. According to the historical circumstances of his time,[22] the author introduces in the work the theme of the Tibetan invasions in the legend of Mulan: *Geng xie yu tian Qiang* 更攜于闐羌 "[And she] also captures the Tibetans from Khotan."[23] Without mentioning the visit in the presence of the sovereign and the reception of positions and honours, the girl, in the role of the

[22] Wei Yuanfu was prime minister during the period of the Tang dynasty that followed the rebellion of An Lushan 安祿山 (703-757) and Shi Siming 史思明 (703-761), which went down in history precisely as the "An-Shi Rebellion" (*An Shi zhi luan* 安史之亂; 755-763). This caused a strong weakening of the Tang power. The adjacent territories, such as the Mongolian or Tibetan ones, took advantage of the opportunity: in the year 763 the capital Chang'an 長安 was occupied by Tibetan troops. Wei Yuanfu, who probably had the opportunity to witness these events, decided to include them in his "Song." On this topic, cf. Roberts (2011: 68-70).

[23] The analysis of the "Song" was conducted on the text contained in *Yuefu shiji* (1979: 374-375). The English translation is taken from: Kwa and Idema (2010: 5-7). All the following quotes from the original Chinese text and the related English translation are taken from these sources. In this line, the term Qiang 羌 refers to the Tibetan ethnic group, settled in the region now known by the modern name of Khotan/Hotan.

victorious general, returns home. Feng Lan argues that Wei Yuanfu decided to omit this detail because, presumably, he deemed it inappropriate to offer a woman a share in political power (Lan 2003: 233). Unlike the "Poem," in the "Song" Mulan, still wearing military clothes, presents herself to her parents who have sorrow painted on their faces. The daughter immediately understands their concerns:

> 父母見木蘭，/ 喜極成悲傷。/ 木蘭能承父母顏，/ 卻卸巾幗理絲黃。
>
> When her father and mother see Mulan, / Extreme joy turns into sadness and worry. / Mulan can understand the expressions on their face, / So she discards turban and gauntlet and then tunes the strings.

Therefore, in order to appear as their devoted daughter, Mulan removes her turban (*jin* 巾) and gauntlet (*gou* 幗), the very symbols of her cross-dressing and masculine appearance as a general. The girl then pronounces these words:

> 昔爲烈士雄，今復嬌子容。
>
> Before, I was a hero among warriors, / But from now on I'll be your darling girl again!

Returning to being their "darling girl" (*jiao zi rong* 嬌子容), Mulan regains her identity and her role in the family and society. Then follows this couplet:

> 親戚持酒賀，父母始知生女與男同。
>
> Relatives bring wine in congratulations: / "Only now do we know that a daughter is as useful as a son!"

These lines are deeply meaningful. While the "Poem" emphasised the difficulties in perceiving the difference between male and female, the "Song" makes this distinction more explicit, even going so far as to affirm that parents become aware of the fact that generating a daughter is like having a son. This, however, does not imply that Wang Yuanfu affirms gender equality. The comparison is not made to emphasise the analogous qualities of women and men, but rather to demonstrate how one exceptional woman may reveal the inadequacy of many men (Kwa and Idema 2010: xvi). This is best explained in the end of the "Song" where Mulan's Confucian moral qualities of filial devotion and loyalty are more clearly emphasised than in the "Poem:"

> 世有臣子心，/ 能如木蘭節，/ 忠孝兩不渝，/ 千古之名焉可滅！

> If in this world the hearts of officials and sons / Could display the same principled virtue as Mulan's, / Their loyality and filiality would be unbroken; / Their fame would last throughout the ages – how could it be destroyed?

Before the end, however, Mulan is recognised as a woman by her fellow soldiers; teased out more fully in the "Song" than in the "Poem," this theme, after all, hints at the unfailing fraternal oath sanctioned on the battlefield:

> **門前舊軍都，/ 十年共崎嶇。/ 本結兄弟交，死戰誓不渝。/ 今者見木蘭，/ 言聲雖是顏貌殊。/ 驚愕不敢前，/ 嘆重徒嘻籲。**
>
> Her old army buddies, assembled outside, / For ten years shared in her trials. / At the outset they swore friendship as brothers, / An oath never broken even in the death of battle! / But when now on this occasion they see Mulan, / Though the voice is the same, the features are quite different! / Stunned and perplexed, they don't dare approach; / Heaving heavy sighs, in vain filled with wonder.

We will return to the topic of the relationship with fellow soldiers later to note how this aspect is developed in Xu Wei's play.

4. Cross-dressing, eroticization and identity in "The Female Mulan"

As already mentioned, in Xu Wei's drama the topic of cross-dressing, involving, as it does, both undressing and redressing, and of gender identity unfolds on three different levels: the unwrapping of footbinding, virginity preserved, and the relationship with fellow soldiers.

With regard to the first level, the undressing of Mulan and the assumption of a male identity involve the removal of the foot bandaging. Footbinding is an absolutely anachronistic element in the historical period in which the play is set, as this "fashion" spread throughout China only in the much later Song dynasty. Furthermore, it was a typical practice of Chinese women, that is, those of the Han 漢 ethnicity, and not those of the Xianbei ethnicity as Mulan is presented in this play. However, Xu Wei presumably decided to insert this strongly symbolic element to make Mulan's transition from woman to man/soldier visually significant. The erotic element of footbinding (cf. Ko 2005: 145-186) and unbinding causes the scene to oscillate between the voyeuristic (in theory, the exhibition of female feet) and the comic (in practice, if the *dan* role was played by an actor, then the exhibition was of male

feet, which had nothing disturbing about it; Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 159). Note that, in the stage directions, the playwright emphasises the physical pain felt by the girl in removing the bindings:[24]

> 要演武術，先要放掉了這雙脚，換上那雙鞋兒，纔中用哩。(換鞋作痛楚狀) (唱)
>
> 【油葫蘆】生脱下半折凌波襪一彎，好些難。幾年價纔收拾得鳳頭尖，急忙得改抹做航兒泛。怎生就凑得满幫兒楦。
>
> If I want to practice martial arts, I've got to first let out these feet and change to this pair of boots. Only then will I manage! (*As she changes footwear, she acts out pain*) [*To the tune Youhulu:*] Just-removed, the half-folded "tiny ripple socks" bindings, / How it hurts! / It took me several years to bind together these phoenix-head points. / Now I quickly turn them into floating boats. / How will I now fill up these boots?

However, Mulan is aware that, once the war is over and she has returned to her life and identity, she will still have to marry: only in this way can she truly be a devoted daughter, in the Confucian sense of the term. Thus she immediately warns the audience that the unwrapping of the footbinding is not an irreversible process, but her family knows a remedy to bring back the "big" feet (metaphorically described as "floating boats," *hanger fan* 航兒泛) to elegant feet (called in Chinese "Golden lotuses of three inches," *sancun jinlian* 三寸金蓮). From these lines it is already clear that the girl is not rebelling against the traditional value system, but simply intends to regain her female identity after returning from the war:

> 回来俺還要嫁人，却怎生？這也不愁他，俺家有個漱金蓮方子，只用一味硝，煮湯一洗，比偌咱還小些哩。(唱)把生硝提得似雪花白，可不霎時間漱癟了金蓮瓣。
>
> When I return, I'll still want to get married. So what can I do? Well, no need to mope about that! My family has a method for shrinking golden lotuses: just take a bit of saltpeter, boil it, and use it to wash the feet. In this way, we make them even smaller! (*Sings*) Take the raw saltpeter, / Boil it so it is white like snowflakes, / And in a moment, you've shrunk them back into golden lotus petals.

Saltpeter (*xiao* 硝) thus proves to be the solution for Mulan to regain the requisites to be a woman and a wife. Dwelling on the element of the feet, a synecdoche at it were has the function of eroticising Mulan's entire body. As Louise Edwards (2008: 6) points out, in fact, the body of the heroine has never

[24] On this topic, as Shiamin Kwa points out, "A note on an early printed edition of the play, which is not included in the later printed edition, hints at the entertainment value of such a scene: 'Let the changing of clothes and shoes be performed [for the audience] to watch for a while'" (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 159).

been celebrated in its entirety, but only for individual parts: the eyebrows during the Tang dynasty; the feet in the Ming period, presumably because of the erotic fashion of bandaging; the upper body and breasts in twentieth century rewrites. After the reference of removing the bindings, a scene of strong visual impact, Mulan proceeds to dress up as a soldier:

> 鞋兒倒七八也穩了，且換上這衣服者。(換衣，戴一軍氈帽介) (唱)【天下樂】穿起来怕不是從軍一長官，行間，正好瞞。緊縧鈎，厮趁這細褶子繫刀環。軟噥噥襯鎖子甲，煖烘烘當夾被單，[…]。
>
> In these boots, I'm pretty much steady. Now I'll put on these clothes! (*She changes clothes and puts on a man's felt military cap*) [*To the tune Tianxiale:*] Dressed up, I daresay I am a senior campaigning officer, / Among their ranks, it will be easy to hide. / Hook the belt tighdy / I shall hang my sword on the plates, / The chain mail is pliant and supple, / Its quilted lining is comfy and warm [...].

Like in the "Poem," the assumption of male identity does not presuppose undressing. This act is in fact indicated as a simple stage action (*huanyi, dai yi jun zhanmao jie* 換衣，戴一軍氈帽介 "She changes clothes and puts on a man's felt military cap") which precedes the act of donning the military trappings. The "Poem," in rhythmic lines, narrated the dressing up in this way:

> 東市買駿馬，西市買鞍韉。/ 南市買轡頭，北市買長鞭。
>
> The eastern market: there she bought a horse; / The western market: there she bought a saddle. / The southern market: there she bought a bridle; / The northern market: there she bought a whip.

The purchase of the tools sanctions Mulan's transition to a man/soldier. Xu Wei seems to be inspired by this source, placing little emphasis on the action of discarding female clothing. Instead, this is an element on which Wei Yuanfu dwells in his "Song:"

> 秣馬備戎行。/ 易卻紈綺裳，/ 洗卻鉛粉妝。
>
> Feeds his horse and takes his place in the ranks. / She changes away her white silk skirt; / She washes away her powdered, rouged face.

As can be gleaned from these lines, the assumption of male identity implies first of all the removal of the symbols of femininity: the skirt and makeup. Presumably, in the intentions of the playwright, these actions were of little significance, as this passage in his play was sublimated by the action of the foot unbinding.

In the second act, instead, the reverse process leads Mulan to regain her true identity. When she arrives home, before talking with her parents, the girl wears her old clothes again. Xu Wei does not linger on this narrative element, but only provides a simple stage direction:

> (木對鏡換女粧，拜爺娘介)
>
> (*Mulan, facing her mirror, changes back to female makeup, then bows in greeting to her parents*)

Then, Mulan immediately sings an aria concerning her heroism in battle rather than any gender issue. The redressing in female clothes was, instead, an important element in the reconstruction of Mulan's character in the "Poem:"

> 開我東閣門，坐我西閣床。/ 脫我戰時袍，著我舊時裳。/ 當窗理雲鬢，對鏡貼花黃。
>
> Open the gate to my pavilion on the east, / Let me sit down in my old western room. / I will take off the dress I wore in battle; / I will put on the skirt I used to wear. / Close to the window she did up her hair; / Facing the mirror she applied makeup.

In rhythmic lines, the sequence of images leads the girl to regain her identity and her place in the family context: to be a devoted daughter (*xiao*), Mulan must wear a skirt, comb her hair and put on makeup. Referring to the Confucian theory of the "rectification of names" (*zhengming* 正名) (*Lunyu* 論語 XII.11; cf. ed. Chin 2014: 186-187), it could be said that only in this female appearance does the girl conform to what she represents for her family and society. In the "Song" of Wei Yuanfu, however, the redressing is only hinted at.

Xu Wei does not dwell on this narrative element in this case either. The reappropriation of female identity is expressed in the marriage celebrated in the end, suggesting not only the "happy ending" (*datuanyuan*) for the story, but rather also the return to the Confucian condition of harmony (*he* 和), after the equilibrium had been disturbed.

Referring to the doctrine of the three cardinal guides (*sangang* 三綱),[25] Feng Lan argues that there are four Confucian virtues exalted in the rewritings of the legend of Mulan, starting from the first source: in addition to the aforementioned filial devotion and loyalty, there is also heroism (*lie* 烈) and chastity (*jie* 節; Lan 2003: 233). This latter virtue is particularly emphasised in Xu Wei's play—helping

[25] Three cardinal guides are: ruler guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife.

to eroticize the girl's body—indeed so much so that it becomes fundamental in the definition of gender identity, unlike the *Poem* and the "Song" which mainly exalted Mulan's heroism.[26]

Throughout the work, the playwright returns to this aspect. In the first act, as Mulan is taking leave of her parents, her mother makes these recommendations:

> (娘) […] 又一樁，便去呵，你又是個女孩兒，千鄉萬里，同行搭伴，朝飡暮宿，你保得不露出那話兒麼? 這成什麼勾當?
>
> Mother: [...] And another thing, if you go, you are still, after all, a girl. Through a thousand provinces and a million miles, you'll be marching with men and keeping their constant company – breakfasting together in the morning, lodging together at night – how can you keep your – you know what – from showing? Don't you think that this will create problems?

The mother, therefore, proves to be more concerned about virginity than for the safety of her daughter on the battlefield. The parent's worries, on the other hand, are understandable and justifiable in the value system of the traditional Confucian society: the woman's naked body could not be seen by any other man besides her husband,[27] therefore Mulan would be ruined forever, as she would not been able to find a man willing to marry her. However, the daughter immediately reassures her mother:

> (木) 娘，你儘放心，還你一個閨女兒回來。
>
> Mulan: Mom! Don't worry. I will return to you as a virgin.

Mulan promises that she will be faithful to the Confucian female precept of chastity (*jie*). Xu Wei here uses the term *gui* 閨, which refers to a lady's chambers and, by extension, women. In a lady's chambers, in fact, women are far from the male libido and can, therefore, preserve their chastity. The concept of *nei* (internal; cf. Goldin in Li Chengyang 2000: 146-149), mentioned earlier, and the clear separation from *wai* (external) returns here.

[26] This aspect of Mulan's character will be developed in "The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts" by the Sino-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston (1940), also introducing the aspects of the menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth; cf. Kingston (1976: 30-31; 39-40) and Allen (1996: 372-373).

[27] Compare the statement of Zhongzi 仲姿, protagonist of a story by an anonymous author reported in the "Collection of Inlaid Jades" (*Diaoyu ji* 琱玉集): "The body of a woman cannot be seen by another man, so please do not refuse me" (*nüren zhi ti, bu dei zai jian zhangfu, jun wu ci ye* 女人之體, 不得再見丈夫, 君勿辭也); cf. Huang 黃 (2003: 51).

In the second act, after having returned victorious from the war and from the encounter with the sovereign who rewarded her with positions and emoluments, Mulan appears before her parents. The first question her mother asks her is the following:

> (娘) 你這官是什麼官?
>
> Mother: What is your position?

The first parents' worries are to understand what honours the daughter has brought to the family. Here, another typical aspect of traditional Chinese culture is revealed: the idea of "face" (*mian* 面), that is, reputation, to be exhibited in the social context. Mulan responds to her parents in this way:

> (木) 是倘書郎，奶奶，我緊牢拴，幾年夜雨梨花館，交還你依舊春風荳蔻函。怎肯辱爺娘面?
>
> Mulan: It is "Secretarial Gentleman." Mother! / I have been bound up tightly so many years in a hall with the nighty rain of pear-blossom petals, / But I return to you / As before, a little box of dogwood bud in spring winds. / How could I shame my parents?

After declaring the position obtained in the imperial bureaucratic apparatus, Mulan, in poetic lines, informs her mother that, although she has shared several nights in the company of many men (*ye yu lihua guan* 夜雨梨花館 "the nighty rain of pear-blossom petals"), yet she came home as "a little box of dogwood bud in spring winds" (*chunfeng doukou han* 春風荳蔻函), and not as a blossomed flower: she is still untainted. It would have been unthinkable for the girl to dishonour her parents (*ru ye niang mian* 辱爺娘面), therefore "to make them lose face" (*diumian* 丟面), that is, to lose their reputation.

One last interesting aspect emphasised in Xu Wei's play is the relationship between Mulan and her fellow soldiers. Both in the "Poem" and in the "Song" reference is made, as we have seen, to the amazement of the comrades in arms in discovering the true identity of the victorious soldier. In this work, the playwright jokes about this aspect, creating a sort of comedy of errors. In the first act, when fellow soldiers first meet Mulan as Hua Hu, they secretly comment on "his" intriguing aspect:

> (二军私云) 這花弧倒生得好個模樣兒，倒不像個長官，倒是個秋秋，明日倒好拿來應應急。
>
> Soldiers: This Hua Hu doesn't look bad at all. He doesn't look like a senior officer, but he'd be a nice morsel. Tomorrow we can take him to meet our needs.

In the original Chinese text, the final statement of this line is not exactly clear, so it is not easy to establish precisely what is meant by the sentence *mingri daohao nalai yingyingji* 明日倒好拿來應應急.

Shiamin Kwa, interpreting the line in the light of the general context of the relationship between Mulan/Hua Hu and his comrades in arms, translates it as "Tomorrow we can take him to meet our needs," thus directing the text towards that aforementioned comedy of errors (Kwa 2012: 176).[28] On the other hand, the reference to attraction between two men during the Ming dynasty is not surprising, as there was a strong development of homoerotic literature during this period.[29] Ma Qian, instead, perhaps more faithful to the original text but losing the ironic tone inherent in the line, translates "Later we can use him for emergency" (Ma 2005: 139).

In the second act, however, on the way back to the heroine's hometown, the fellow soldiers comment on Hua Hu's attitudes as follows:

> (二军唱) […] 想起花大哥眞希罕，拉溺也不教人見。
>
> Soldiers: [...] When you think of it, Big Brother Hua is really queer! / Whether he's pissing or shitting, he won't allow anyone to watch.

Comrades in arms consider the behavior of Hua Hu as *xihan* 希罕, that is, *xishao* 希少 and *xiqi* 希奇 or "rare" and "uncommon" (cf. *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 1994, 3: 696). Shiamin Kwa translates the term as "queer," in the original etymology of "strange" or "peculiar," fully capturing the perplexity of the character's ambiguity raised by the soldiers (Kwa 2012: 182). Ma Qian, instead, translates the term with the more generic "weird," glossing over once again the comic side of the relationship between Mulan/Hua Hu and her/his comrades in arms (Ma 2005: 144). The soldiers, in fact, in realising that their "big brother" (dage 大哥) Hua has never relieved himself in their presence, do not consider his *xihan* behavior in terms of ambiguity, but rather as a distinctive trait of refinement (Kwa in Sieber and Llamas 2022: 164).

5. Conclusions

The analysis of Xu Wei's play shows that, in the character of Mulan, transgressions from traditional morality are not so transgressive after all: the girl uses the means she deems appropriate to complete a task and, after having succeeded, not only returns to her initial condition, but also rejects the actions

[28] This aspect is particularly emphasised in the 1939 film "Mulan Joins the Army" (*Mulan congjun* 木蘭從軍) written by Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889-1962), Chinese playwright, Peking opera actor and writer, film screenwriter and director, and drama educator. Cf. Kwa and Idema (2010: 53-102).

[29] On this topic, cf. Vitiello (2011).

performed as if she had nothing to do with them. So the heroine distances herself from the merits won on the battlefield. Mulan, therefore, cannot be considered a "rebel," at least in the meaning of the term in Western culture. In fact, the Chinese audience not only appreciated her for the heroism (*lie*) shown on the battlefield dressed as a male soldier, but also for her filial devotion to her family (*xiao*), for the loyalty she shows the sovereign and empire (*zhong*), and for her chastity (*jie*), in the utmost respect for the Confucian tradition.

All in the norm, then. However, something special happens in this play. It is not mere gender fluidity, but the total denial of the fact that this is rare or uncommon: herein lies the *xihan* component of the work. The play, in fact, despite its apparent lightness and superficiality, raises some important issues about the performance of self. Such issues, even if only hinted at, were already presented in the "Poem" and in the "Song." In "The female Mulan," on the other hand, the spectacularisation of the transition from feminine to masculine and then back to feminine is used to mock the idea that one can only rely on sight to discern gender categories. Cross-dressing and 'floating' gender, so to speak, via eroticization of the body, are, therefore, the real protagonists of Xu Wei's comedy. The audience, going along with the general suspension of judgment, knowingly lets itself be deceived and observes with pleasure the changing of clothes and identity. If this isn't theatre, then what is?

References

AA.VV. 1979. *Yuefu shiji* **樂府詩集** [Collected Works of the Music Bureau]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Allen, Joseph R. 1996. "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Warrior." *Positions* 4/2: 343-379.

Chen, Fang 陳方. 2002. *Xu Wei ji qi "Sisheng yuan" yanjiu* **徐渭及其四聲猿研究** [A Study on Xu Wei and his *Four Cries of a Gibbon*]. Hong Kong: Hongda Chubanshe.

Chen, Sanping. 2005. "From Mulan to Unicorn." *Journal of Asian History* 39/1: 23-43.

Chen, Sanping. 2002. "Son of Heaven and Son of God: Interactions among Ancient Asiatic Cultures regarding Sacral Kingship and Theophoric Names." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3/12: 289-326.

Confucius. 2014. *Analects*. Edited by Chin Annping. London and New York: Penguin Books.

Edwards, Louise. 2008. "Re-Fashioning the Warrior Hua Mulan: Changing Norms of Sexuality in China." *Internation Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 48: 6-7.

Goldin, Paul R. 2000. "The View of Women in Early Confucianism." In: *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, edited by Li Chenyang, 133-161. Chicago, IL and LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company.

Huang, Ruiqi 黃瑞旗. 2003. *Meng Jiangnü gushi yanjiu* 孟姜女故事研究 [Research on Meng Jiangnü's Story]. Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe.

Ke, Qianting 柯倩婷. 2012. "*Xingbie, jiaguo, zhanzheng: Mulan chuanshuo de xiandaihua yu shijuehua* **性别、家国、战争：木兰传说的现代化和视觉化**" [Gender, Family/State, and War: The Modernization and Visualization of Mulan Legends]. *Huadong Shifan Daxue Xuebao* 3/3: 12–18.

Kingston, Maxime Hong. 1976. *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Ko, Dorothy. 2005. *Cindarella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kwa, Shiamin. 2012. *Strange Eventful Histories: Identity, Performance, and Xu Wei's* Four Cries of a Gibbon. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center.

Kwa, Shiamin. 2022. "*The Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father*. Gender and Performance." In: *How to Read Chinese Drama. A Guided Anthology*, edited by Patricia Sieber and Regina Llamas, 151-167. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Kwa, Shiamin and Idema, Wilt L. 2010. *Mulan. Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend, with related Texts*. Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Lan, Feng. 2003. "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior." *Comparative Literature* 55/33: 229-245.

Lauwaert, Françoise. 2020. *"Quel dommage que tu ne sois pas un garçon!" Rencontres avec des femmes remarquables de la Chine impériale*. Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique.

Li, Chenyang, edited by. 2000. *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*. Chicago, IL and LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company.

Luo, Qiuzhao 羅秋昭. 1979. *Xu Wei "Sishengyuan" yanjiu* **徐渭四聲猿研究** [A Study on *Four Cries of a Gibbon* by Xu Wei]. Taipei: Qiye Shuju Youxian Gongsi.

Luo, Zhufeng 羅竹風, edited by. 1994. *Hanyu dacidian* **漢語大詞典** [Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Chinese Language]. Shanghai: Hanyu Dacidian Chubanshe, 12 vols.

Ma, Qian. 2005. *Women in Traditional Chinese Theater. The Heroine's Play*. Lanham, Boulder, CO – New York, NY – Toronto – Oxford: University Press of America, Inc.

Qi, Shijun 戚世隽. 2001. *Mingdai zaju yanjiu* **明代雜劇研究** [A Study of Ming Dynasty Zaju Plays]. Guangzhou: Guangdong Gaoji Jiaoyu Chubanshe.

Roberts, John A.G. 2011. *A History of China*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Vitiello, Giovanni. 2011. *The Libertine's Friend. Homosexuality & Masculinity in Late Imperial China*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Wang, Yunxi 王運熙. 1962. *Yuefu shi luncong* **樂府詩論叢** [Collected Essays on *Yuefu* Poems]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Xu, Wei 徐渭. 1986. *Sisheng yuan* **四聲猿** [Four Cries of a Gibbon]. Edited by Zhou Zhongming 周中明. Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe.

Xu, Zifang 徐子方. 2003. *Ming zaju shi* **明雜劇史** [A History of Ming Zaju Plays]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Yao, Xinzhong. 2013. *The Encyclopedia of Confucianism*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2 vols.

Zeitlin, Judith T. 1997. *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Alessandro Tosco holds a PhD in Euro-Asian Studies from the University of Turin. He studied at East China Normal University in Shanghai in 2014 as the recipient of a scholarship granted by Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters under the "New Sinologists" project (*Xin Hanxuejia jihua*). He is currently Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Kore University of Enna, Italy. His research focuses on imperial Chinese literature, particularly theatrical works, and he also studies the reception of Chinese thought and literature in European culture during the 17th to 19th centuries.
Alessandro can be contacted at: alessandro.tosco@unikore.it