Between refinement and vulgarity

Apparent contradictions in Ouyang Xiu's song lyrics

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Revered as one of the greatest Confucian scholars of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) also went down in history for his reputation as a libertine and his involvement in a series of sexual scandals. A persistent contradiction between the public orthodoxy of the great statesman and the heterodoxy of his private experiences has marked Ouyang's life and was reflected in his work. This paper aims to investigate the traces of such tensions in the song lyrics (*ci* 詞) attributed to the author. In fact, his songbook includes compositions that fully embody the ideal of "refinement" (*ya* 雅) generally appreciated by the elite alongside others that show a clear affinity with a diction and style typical of the vulgar (*su* 俗) tradition. If criticism has often been divided in the evaluation of these heterogeneous components, sometimes viewing them as expressions of separate *corpora*, I intend to explore the possibility of an organic reading of the two. Therefore, I seek to present the disparate lyrics attributed to Ouyang as potentially ascribable to a single, multifaceted literary sensibility.

Keywords: Chinese literature; Chinese poetry; *Ci* song lyric; song lyric; *Ci*; erotic songs; Ouyang Xiu; Song dynasty; Northern Song dynasty.

1. Introduction

Statesman, classicist, historian, political theorist and, above all, writer and poet, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) was one of the most versatile and relevant figures in Song dynasty (960–1279) elite culture and, indeed, the entire Chinese tradition. He was at the center of important processes of political and literary transformation that took place during the Northern Song (960–1127), making a decisive contribution to the renovation of several genres. In prose, as in classical poetry (*shi* 詩), his action was generally aimed at limiting the importance of formal aspects to give a new centrality to contents, in adherence with the Confucian revival that he and other fellow intellectuals promoted during the eleventh century. In this sense, he diverged from the trends prevailing in the early Northern Song, inherited from the Middle and Late Tang traditions, and helped shape a new literary identity that was

typical of the Song dynasty. It is therefore not an exaggeration to define Ouyang as one of the founders of Song high literature.

In light of this, it might appear surprising that, alongside his orthodox image of venerable Confucian, an alternative narrative of Ouyang Xiu exists as a dissolute libertine, fond of wine, song lyrics (*ci* 詞) and courtesans, and repeatedly tried for incest. Likewise, one might not anticipate encountering erotic songs that hinted at secret trysts with teenagers in his songbook—but this is exactly what we find in a part of his collection that many critics have long considered a forgery, in apparent attempts to preserve Ouyang's good name from embarrassing associations.[1] In fact, the existence of a contradiction between a dignified public image and the heterodoxy of some private experiences was not uncommon among Northern Song scholar-officials, who were even provided with government courtesans. Still, in Ouyang's case this chasm was seen as particularly deep. And that is especially because Ouyang Xiu was no Liu Yong 柳永 (ca. 987–1053): he wasn't a minor official who had strived all his life to have a successful career without significant results and could, thus, be excused if, as an average contemporary elite observer would probably see it, he cultivated a minor art such as the song lyric and wasted his time with courtesans. Ouyang was a "prince" of the literati class, and many refused to believe that such a pivotal figure could act the same way as a renegade like Liu Yong.

The aim of this work is precisely to mitigate the contradiction between Ouyang's solemn public image and his "immoral" private behaviors, as it appears to be, to a certain extent, the result of an unnecessary "sanctification" of the scholar proposed by some observers. I will do so by analyzing a variety of sources which provide evidence on Ouyang's libertine attitude or his widespread reputation as a viveur. I will then try to suggest a new way of reading the erotic song lyrics attributed to the author, which have often been portrayed as an alien corpus within his production. My goal is to stress the potential connections between this corpus and Ouyang's well-known image as a playboy as well as similar instances of erotic writing in the eleventh century. Ultimately, I wish to reconcile the two

[1] This is a group of seventy-three songs included in only one of the two extant versions of Ouyang's songbook, the late twelfth-century "Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard's Zither Delights" (*Zuiweng qinqu waipian* 醉翁琴趣外篇). I will return to this issue later. The authenticity of these and several other erotic lyrics attributed to Ouyang when he was still alive has been questioned by many since the eleventh century. Supporters of the "forgery theory" include Ouyang's friends or disciples, such as the Buddhist monk Wenying 文瑩 (fl. 1060), editors of song collections, namely Zeng Zao 曾慥 (?–1155 or 1164), Luo Bi 羅泌 (1131–1189), and Mao Jin 毛晉 (1599–1659), song lyric critics like Wang Zhuo 王灼 (1105–1181), and so on. On this traditional critical stance, that has been largely accepted until the nineteenth century, see Egan (1971: 163–165) and Canale (2023a: 168-174).

conflicting representations of the scholar described above and support the idea that he combined high and low styles in his songs,[2] which would contribute to redefining his overall literary identity.

2. Ouyang Xiu's reputation as a libertine

Since the early years of his career in Luoyang, Ouyang gained a reputation as a libertine. The close relationships he entertained with courtesans are attested to in several poems and anecdotes that have circulated since the eleventh century (Liu 1967, 29). The poet Mei Yaochen **梅堯臣** (1002–1060), who became friends with Ouyang Xiu in Luoyang, wrote about the latter's household courtesans in a poem of which I quote some lines here:

The eight or nine maidens of your house,	公家八九姝
hair as black as ravens.	鬒發如盤鴉
Scarlet lips, white jade skin;	朱唇白玉膚
only with the new year will they lose their virginity.	參年始破瓜
(...)	(...)
You girls, you don't have to play!	群姝莫要劇
For Ouyang do sing out loud![3]	為公歌啞啞

Su Shi **蘇軾** (1037–1101), a disciple of Ouyang's, also reported on his senior colleague's ties with courtesans. In 1071, nineteen years after Ouyang's death, on a visit to the West Lake in Yingzhou, a place that Ouyang had been fond of, Su was amazed at how local singers still performed a song to the tune "Mulan hua ling" **木蘭花令** that the "Old Drunkard" (Ouyang's sobriquet) had composed decades earlier. He noted these circumstances in the following lines written to the same tune:

The beautiful girls still sing the songs of the Old Drunkard.	佳人猶唱醉翁詞
Forty-three years went by like lightning.	四十三年如電抹
(...)	(...)
Besides me, the only one who knows the Old Drunkard	與余同是識翁人

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[2] This hypothesis has long been dismissed by traditional critics, who have generally described songs in a low style as "forgeries" meant to slander Ouyang.

[3] Mei Yaochen, "In Response to a Poem by Yongshu, on the Same Rhyme" (*Ciyun hechou Yongshu* 次韻和酬永叔). Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (2003, vol. 1099: 146).

is the moon on the waves of the West Lake.[4] 惟有西湖波底月

Su Shi refers to the fact that Ouyang had held a post in Yingzhou forty-three years before him, having arrived in that city in 1048.

Chen Shidao 陳師道 (1053–1101), a member of Su Shi's literary circle, left us another account of the close relationships between Ouyang Xiu and courtesans:

> Mr. Jia Wenyuan was the prefect of Zhending, and Ouyang Yongshu [Ouyang Xiu] was returning from a mission in the north. Mr. Jia announced to the government courtesans that he wanted to organize a banquet with song lyrics and wine; the courtesans were thrilled. (...)
> During the feast, courtesans offered the goblets and sang, wishing long life. [Ouyang] Yongshu listened carefully, holding the cup in his hand and filling it to the brim every time. Mr. Jia found it strange; upon inquiring, he found out that all the songs that had been performed were Ouyang's lyrics.[5]
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> 文元賈公居守北都，歐陽永叔使北還，公預戒官妓辦詞以勸酒，妓唯唯。(...) 既燕，妓奉觴歌以為壽，永叔把琖側聽，每為引滿。公復怪之，召問，所歌皆其詞也。

Similar stories on the ties between Ouyang and courtesans circulated widely during the Northern Song. Apart from Ouyang's friends and contemporary scholars, those who most contributed to his reputation as a libertine were the authors of anecdotes, a genre that showed a significant vitality during the Song dynasty. Some of these anecdotes were intended to provide context for the composition of a song lyric, which discredits somewhat their reliability. Still, their very existence reveals how deeply rooted the author's reputation as a romantic was as early as the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For instance, "Mr. Qian's Private Notes" (*Qian shi si zhi* 錢氏私誌), a Northern Song collection of anecdotes of uncertain attribution,[6] reported a story on the origin of an apparently conventional song that points to a tryst between Ouyang and a courtesan that allegedly took place while guests were waiting for the two latecomers before they could start a party. The anecdote would be later retold by other sources.

During the Southern Song (1127-1279), another episode on Ouyang's fondness of courtesans was related by Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202):

[4] Su Shi, "To the tune 'Mulan hua ling'" 木蘭花令. Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Tang (1965, vol. 1: 283).

[5] Chen Shidao, "Houshan Collection of Conversations" (*Houshan tan cong* 後山談叢). See Yan (1993: 194).

[6] The collection is attributed by some sources to Qian Mian 錢愐 (fl. Northern Song) and by others to his nephew Qian Shizhao 錢世昭 (fl. Northern Song). See the chapter dedicated to "Mr. Qian's Private Notes" in Chen (2019).

> When Ouyang Yongshu [Ouyang Xiu], Xie Xishen, Tian Yuanjun, and Yi Shilu [Yi Zhu] were in Henan, they took government courtesans on a trip to Longmen and didn't return for a fortnight. The official who remained, Qian Si [Qian Weiyan], wrote a letter to call them back, but they did not reply (Hong 1994: 57).
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> 歐陽永叔、謝希深、田元均、尹師魯在河南，攜官妓游遊門，半月不返，留守錢思公作簡招之，亦不答。

Such stories suggest that, among certain circles, an image of Ouyang had formed as a libertine who came to neglect his official duties in order to enjoy the company of courtesans. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that Ouyang's fame as a playboy was used as a weapon against him during the multiple sexual scandals in which he was implicated. Now, not only were particularly close ties with courtesans perceived as problematic; being associated with song lyrics was itself a bad thing for an eleventh-century scholar-official. Before Su Shi greatly enhanced the process of legitimization and elite appropriation of *ci* during the last quarter of the eleventh century, the form was still commonly seen as a disreputable, minor art, often compared to the "lascivious" songs of Zheng (*Zheng sheng* 鄭聲) for its focus on romance and the world of female entertainers.[7] That is why lyricists of Ouyang's generation never included song lyrics in their literary collections, and were generally wary of associating their names publicly with the form. It is understandable, then, that erotic songs were circulated under Ouyang's name during trials to support the charges of sexually improper behaviors brought against him.

Ouyang was first accused and tried of incest with a young niece in 1045, at a time when the reformist faction led by Fan Zhongyan 範仲淹 (989–1052) that he supported was being ousted from power by political opponents; this is known as the niece Zhang scandal. As the context suggests, political motivations could be hidden behind the rumors and the trials that followed. Though acquitted, Ouyang left the court along with other fellow reformists who had lost imperial favor, and held minor positions far away from the capital until 1054. In 1057, when he was responsible for administering the imperial examinations, Ouyang favored participants who wrote in the ancient style of prose (*guwen* 古文) and was apparently slandered by unsuccessful candidates who leveraged on the 1045 scandal and his fame as a libertine and circulated erotic songs under his name, if later accounts on the matter are to be believed. This time, though, Ouyang didn't have to go into exile. In 1067, upon Emperor Yingzong's

[7] On the disrepute of *ci* during the Song dynasty and the different strategies adopted to tackle it, see Egan (1994), Lam (2002), and Canale (2023b).

(r. 1063–1067) death, Ouyang's power was jeopardized anew, and he was accused at court of incest with a daughter-in-law. Once again, rumors of his sexual behavior—whether true or false—were used to attack him politically. Despite the fact that the new emperor, Shenzong (r. 1067–1085), finally cleared him of the charges, Ouyang decided to leave the capital and gradually retire from public life, right at the time when Wang Anshi's 王安石 (1021–1086) reformist faction, to which Ouyang opposed, was to begin its long hold on power.[8] As can be seen from these events, being known as a libertine could prove to be quite dangerous for a prominent scholar-official.

And it is in this context that we can briefly discuss the question of the seventy-three "contested" erotic songs attributed to the author. These songs are generally called "contested" because only one of the two collections of Ouyang's song lyrics that appeared during the late twelfth century included them.[9] This is the "Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard's Zither Delights" (*Zuiweng qinqu waipian* 醉翁琴趣外篇, hereafter "Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard"), part of a cycle of eight *ci* collections published in Fujian during the Southern Song. If the "Unofficial Sections," as the title suggests, represent extensively the unorthodox production attributed to Ouyang, the other collection of his lyrics that appeared during roughly the same period, "The Modern Style Ballad" (*Jinti yuefu* 近體樂府), was based on a radically different conception. Compiled by Luo Bi 羅泌 (1131–1189), "The Modern Style Ballad" was included in the complete work of Ouyang produced between 1191 and 1196 by Zhou Bida 周必大 (1126–1204) and other inhabitants of Luling, the place of origin of the distinguished scholar. Similar enterprises that local intellectuals made in honor of a famous ancestor were necessarily inspired, to some extent, by a celebratory intent. As might be expected, the editors did take care to provide a representation of Ouyang as much as possible in keeping with the more conservative ethical models that were prevalent at the end of the twelfth century. Luo Bi himself admitted that he had deliberately left out from his collection the more vulgar songs circulating under Ouyang's name:

> Those songs that are particularly shallow and unrefined were considered by most people in the past as forgeries done by Liu Hui [an unsuccessful candidate at the 1057 exams]. Therefore, I will exclude them.[10]

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[8] For more detailed accounts of these scandals and how they were linked to Ouyang's political career, see Egan (1971: 5–10) and Liu (1967; 65–67, 70; 79–82).

[9] These are the two earliest collections of Ouyang's song lyrics that have been transmitted.

[10] Luo Bi, Postscript to "The Modern Style Ballad" (*Jinti yuefu* ba 近體樂府跋). Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Huang (1998: 431). Another translation of this passage is available in Egan (1971: 164).

其甚淺近者，前輩多謂劉輝偽作，故削之。

The existence of these two divergent versions of Ouyang's *ci* production sparked a long philological controversy on the attribution to the author of the seventy-three lyrics excluded from "The Modern Style Ballad." Many critics have tried for centuries to deny Ouyang Xiu's authorship of these erotic songs, described as too 'vulgar' (*su* 俗) to have been written by a refined scholar-official, regardless of the fact that other eleventh-century literati were also known to have composed rather explicit lyrics. 'Vulgar' is one of several terms used by Song dynasty critics to refer to those song lyrics that were not written in the high or refined style (*ya* 雅) which was more commonly associated with elite lyricists. Now, it is true that most of the songs in Ouyang's corpus that deal with sex with a more direct rhetoric or appear closer to a popular style are to be found within the group of seventy-three lyrics transmitted to us only by the "Unofficial Sections of the Old Drunkard." However, not all of the contested songs treat the subject of love explicitly. On the other hand, even among the lyrics collected in "The Modern Style Ballad"—whose attribution has not been, in general, questioned—it is possible to occasionally identify some expressions that could be considered vulgar according to the standards of the time.

This is just one of many possible arguments that may be used to show how the critical tradition on Ouyang's contested erotic songs was often deeply influenced by ethical-political rather than purely literary considerations. Supporters of the "forgery theory" were probably motivated by a moralistic intent to preserve Ouyang's reputation as a great master of the literati culture rather than by a genuinely philological analysis. This is especially true in light of the new intellectual regime in which most critics operated from the twelfth century onwards, when the importance of moral conduct progressively grew alongside the affirmation of Neo-Confucianism. According to Peter Bol's (1994: 341) analysis, during the Southern Song a new "ethical culture" replaced the literary culture that had characterized the eleventh century. In this new intellectual climate, actions, and no longer literary works, became the most important parameter by which a scholar was judged by society. Therefore, it was essential to maintain high standards of behavior even in private life.

In addition to these philosophical factors, some internal dynamics in the evolution of the song lyric during the late eleventh century were also beginning to discourage certain types of erotic representations. Stephen Owen (2019: 171) noted that in the second half of the eleventh century the biographical aspect, which had long been a central feature of classical poetry, took on increasing

importance for the song lyric as well. In Owen's words, in this renewed context, "the lyricist is identified with and held responsible for what he writes—or, in the case of Ouyang Xiu, what circulated under his name. A song can no longer be 'just a song'" (Owen 2019: 171). In the eyes of many moralists, lyricists whose work appeared too uninhibited were consequently judged as immoral people in their turn. If *ci* had long been interpreted as a largely impersonal form, allowing authors to conceal their own personal expression behind the mask of convention, during the second half of the eleventh century a new correspondence started to be established between the poet and their songs.

These elements help explain why a longstanding critical tradition strived to dissociate Ouyang's name from the most controversial lyrics that were attributed to him. But was Ouyang really incapable of writing erotic songs? Was his fame as a libertine just an invention? The authorship of song lyrics that mainly circulated orally through informal channels one thousand years ago is difficult to ascertain,[11] but some comments by Ouyang's friends, like those by Mei Yaochen and Su Shi quoted above, indicate that we should not outright dismiss this alternative representation of him. What is more, not only contested song lyrics, but even some uncontested classical poems (*shi*) by Ouyang contribute to strengthening the credibility of this narrative. Let us see, as an example, the following lines from a classical poem that Ouyang wrote to his friend Liu Chang 劉敞 (1019-1068):

I remember that time when you were sent on a mission in the north	憶昨君當使北時
and I came to say goodbye to you and drink in your house.	我往別君飲君家
I loved the little concubine that you had just bought,	愛君小鬟初買得
like a newly blossomed flower still untouched by men's hand.[12]	如手未觸新開花

In the last line quoted here, Ouyang compares his friends' young concubine to an untouched blossom. Beverly Bossler noted that this line "not only expresses his appreciation for the physical charms of Liu's new playmate, it frankly acknowledges the erotic nature of those charms by emphasizing the girl's virginal appearance" (Bossler 2013: 88). While clarifying that similar *shi* poems are not as sexually explicit as some song lyrics of the period, Bossler pointed out that they still have a significant erotic

[11] For an essential outline of some of the main issues related to the circulation of the song lyric during the Northern Song, see Owen (2019: 5–8).

[12] Ouyang Xiu, "To Liu Yuanfu" (Chong zeng Liu Yuanfu 重贈劉原父). Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see *Wen yuan ge Siku quanshu* (2003, vol. 1102: 59).

charge, especially in view of the fact that, unlike most of the lyrics, such classical poems are not directed to courtesans but, usually, to concubines, "women who at least theoretically might someday become mothers of other literati" (Bossler 2013: 88–89). Therefore, a rather explicit erotic rhetoric was not limited to some of Ouyang's song lyrics, many of which were believed by premodern critics to be forgeries, but it could also be found in some of his classical poems—whose authenticity nobody appears to have questioned. Therefore, it seems safe to say that Ouyang's image as a libertine was not an invention and that the author did deal with eroticism quite explicitly in his writing, though with a more refined register than that found in some of the contested songs. Although most of these songs are not particularly explicit compared to the uncontested songs, a minority of them featured colloquialisms that significantly contributed to increase their sense of scandal. And this is the issue that we are going to address now: what should we make of the tension between the ideal of refinement expressed by some songs in Ouyang's corpus and the vulgar style that emerges in other songs? Are these two elements incompatible as many premodern critics have tried to show, or might they instead be subsumed into a single, complex literary sensibility?

3. Refinement and vulgarity in Ouyang Xiu's song lyrics

We should first acknowledge that the coexistence of refined and vulgar songs was by no means a feature unique to Ouyang Xiu's collection. The refined style of song lyrics came to be considered as the only legitimate one by many compilers of *ci* collections during the twelfth century, for a series of reasons that include the two we have already mentioned—the more austere moral regime of the Southern Song and the growing habit of reading song lyrics autobiographically. Moreover, this was also related to the fact that the process of appropriation of the song lyric by the elite, which was still largely in progress during the eleventh century, had already reached a mature phase by the twelfth. The situation was much more complex before that. It is worth bearing in mind that only in the tenth century did the elite tradition of refined *ci* writing receive its first significant recognition in Ouyang Jiong's 歐陽炯 (896–971) preface to the "Collection From Among the Flowers" (*Huajian ji* 花間集), where the author defended the high style of the song lyric and asserted its superiority over the popular style by expressing a wish that Southern singers "stopped singing songs on the lotus boats" (休唱蓮舟

之引).[13] The absolute predominance of the high style in literati *ci* was attained gradually, and during the eleventh century the influence of the popular style might have had a much wider reach than we could expect by looking at currently available collections.

Things changed during the Southern Song. We can see instances of the new hegemony of the refined style even in the titles of several anthologies produced in that period, such as "Refined Lyrics and Ballads" (*Yuefu yaci* 樂府雅詞) or "Song Lyrics Recovering the Refined Style" (*Fuya geci* 復雅歌詞). But this retrospective attempt at redefining the genre's history must not lead us to think that eleventh-century or early twelfth-century elite lyricists really wrote predominantly in the refined style that later compilers overwhelmingly favored in their selections. On the contrary, we have proof from the same compilers that a consistent part of eleventh-century song lyrics was excluded from Southern Song anthologies precisely because it was deemed too vulgar by the new standards of that age: several editors openly admitted their deliberate choice of censoring lyrics that didn't comply with the high style standards, as the statement from Luo Bi quoted above shows. Stephen Owen has described this process as the early twelfth-century "split between the 'high style' and vernacular or mixed-register lyrics associated with witty and playful eroticism" (Owen 2019: 385); and this process led, among other ramifications, to the vilification of authors who openly favored the vulgar style, most notably Liu Yong, in twelfth-century sources (Owen 2019: 386). To appreciate how "artificial" and retrospective this rereading of the song lyric was, we might mention the fact that during the period of transition to the supremacy of the refined style, some lyricists, such as Moqi Yong 万俟詠 (fl. 1135), even divided their collections into two sections, one devoted to refined songs (*yaci* 雅詞) and one to "voluptuous" (*ceyan* 側豔) songs; according to the critic Wang Zhuo 王灼 (1105–1181), though, Moqi Yong later removed his own voluptuous songs (Owen 2019: 395).

We should, therefore, entertain the possibility that refined and vulgar lyrics included in Ouyang's collection may have been written by the same hand, whatever Southern Song commentators thought about the issue. One of the reasons for entertaining such a possibility is that, as mentioned above, we know that this combination of refined and vulgar songs characterized other elite lyricists' songbooks as well, and nobody tried to raise attribution issues about them. Let us just see, for instance, the following song by Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) in Ronald Egan's translation:

[13] On the rise of popular song lyrics during the Tang dynasty (618–907), see Wagner (1984).

To the tune *Qian qiu sui*	千秋歲
One of life’s greatest joys,	世間好事
Being together here with you.	恰恁廝當對
Just when nights are long.	乍夜永
The air cool.	涼天氣
Light rain drips outside the curtain.	雨稀簾外滴
Incense words lie in the dish.	香篆盤中字
I often dream of you,	長入夢
But tonight it’s really you.	如今見也分明是
The pleasure over, lovely and listless	歡極嬌無力
Jade turns soft, flowers droop to fall.	玉軟花攲墜
The hairpin dangles on my sleeve,	釵罥袖
Cloudlocks pile on my arm.	雲堆臂
The lamp shines on her lovely eyes,	燈斜明媚眼
Perspiration-soaked, intoxicated.	汗浹瞢騰醉
‘Go to sleep darling,	奴奴睡
Sleep darling, go to sleep’ (Egan 1971: 175-176).	奴奴睡也奴奴睡

Some of the most controversial elements of the erotic song lyric appear in this composition, including a direct rhetoric on passion and physical intimacy between the lovers. These elements recur in some of Ouyang’s contested songs as well, as we can notice in the following one:

To the tune *Yan jiao er*	鹽角兒
If you add something to her, she becomes too long;	增之太長
if you take away something, too short:	減之太短
an out-of-the-ordinary bearing.	出群風格
If powder is applied she becomes too red,	施朱太赤
if blush too white:	施粉太白
a complexion so beautiful to make kingdoms collapse!	傾城顏色
Very intelligent,	慧多多
graceful in abundance.	嬌的的

Heaven gave her; who does it allow to love her?	天付與教誰憐惜
Apart from me who cuddles her, hugs her,	除非我偎著抱著
what other person could enjoy her?[14]	更有何人消得

This contested song attributed to Ouyang doesn't seem more overtly sexual than the previous one by Huang Tingjian, whose attribution has not been contested. One is then left to wonder why an eleventh-century scholar-official like Huang Tingjian could have written explicit erotic songs while another eleventh-century scholar-official like Ouyang Xiu couldn't. Was Ouyang a stern moralist who would have never indulged in or written about sensual pleasures? It wouldn't seem so, judging from the evidence I have examined above. And Huang Tingjian was by no means the only scholar-official to have apparently composed erotic songs. We can find the following song in the collection of another elite author of that time, Yan Jidao 晏幾道 (1038?–1110?):

To the tune *Mulan hua*	木蘭花
Young shoot of fourteen, beautiful hips;	阿茸十五腰肢好
Heaven prematurely gave her the erotic taste of spring.	天與懷春風味早
She paints her eyebrows, powders her face, not knowing about melancholy.	畫眉匀臉不知愁
For the malaise of intoxication, for the narcotic effect of incense, she is still young.	殢酒熏香偏稱小
Willows from the eastern quarter, herbs from the western quarter;	東城楊柳西城草
rendezvous under the moon, dates in the midst of flowers: few follow her expectations.	月會花期如意少
She thinks of heart affairs, of men as fickle as clouds;	思量心事薄輕雲
but in the mirror in front of the dressing table, she smiles to herself. [15]	綠鏡台前還自笑

The lyric we have just seen adds one more controversial motif to those mentioned so far: implicit male desire for a very young girl, represented as still sexually immature. Again, it should be noted that this

[14] Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Qiu (2001: 322) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 155-156).

[15] Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Wang (2007: 132) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 234).

song is included in the collection of Yan Jidao, a scholar-official—though holding minor positions—and the son of Yan Shu 晏殊 (991–1055), a prominent politician and, by the way, a mentor of Ouyang's. Thus, Yan Jidao was not a popular lyricist, but a member of the elite. Now, while this song sexualizes a fourteen-year-old girl, critics never seem to have raised issues on its attribution. We should then wonder why they did so when it comes, for instance, to the following contested lyric by Ouyang Xiu:

To the tune *Wang Jiangnan*	望江南
Southern willow,	江南柳
leaves are small and do not cast shadow.	葉小未成陰
Its fronds like light silk... Who could ever break them?	人為絲輕那忍折
The oriole regrets that the delicate branches do not support his singing	鶯嫌枝嫩不勝吟
and leaves them, waiting for late spring.	留著待春深
Thirteen or fourteen years old,	十四五
she walks idly with a lute in her hand.	閑抱琵琶尋
On the steps, we were playing with coins; then she ran down.	階上簸錢階下走
That time I saw her, and immediately she attracted me.	恁時相見早留心
Even more so today![16]	何況到如今

The two songs appear quite easily comparable, as they both represent a young teenager who is still not concerned about sex and voice male sexual fantasies about her. Though the fantasies are stated explicitly in Ouyang's song while kept more implicit in Yan's, it seems undeniable that both lyrics share a similar erotic purpose. Why could Yan Jidao have written such a song, while Ouyang Xiu couldn't? The reasons for being suspicious about such unequal critical receptions are many. We could thus suggest that critics tried to dissociate Ouyang Xiu from the erotic songs attributed to him but didn't do the same for the likes of Huang Tingjian or Yan Jidao because Ouyang played a much more crucial role

[16] Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Qiu (2001: 349) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 158). Other translations of this lyric are available in Egan (1971: 171) and Egan (2006: 277).

in the elite tradition than the latter.[17] This hypothesis would strengthen the idea that Ouyang might have potentially written most or all of the erotic songs attributed to him, despite the prevalent stance among premodern critics that he hadn't. During the Qing (1644-1911), though, some observers finally admitted the possibility that Ouyang did write erotic songs,[18] paving the way for the common opinion on the matter held by scholars today that most of the contested songs might really be authentic.[19] Can we then read Ouyang's refined and vulgar lyrics organically, as if they represented different aspects of a single literary persona? I believe so. To support such an approach, which has recently attracted attention from scholarship,[20] we could emphasize that motifs such as the impulse to satisfy sexual desire can also be found among Ouyang's refined songs, as the following example shows:

To the tune *Jian zi Mulan hua*	減字木蘭花
I would like to hold back spring, but it does not stay.	留春不住
The swallows get old, the orioles get tired... there is no place to look for them.	燕老鶯慵無覓處
It seems like spring is gone...	說似殘春
Once you get older, you can't be young again.	一老應無卻少人
The wind and the moon, magnificent.	風和月好
If you have money, you have to go buy smiles!	辦得黃金須買笑
Love and cherish the fragrant time;	愛惜芳時
do not wait to break a branch without flowers.[21]	莫待無花空折枝

[17] This includes the fact that Ouyang, as a more prominent official, was more exposed to attacks by rival political factions. Therefore, the later critics' attempts at questioning Ouyang's authorship of controversial songs while ignoring issues of attribution for other poets could also be explained by their willingness to protect Ouyang from a perceived political use of erotic songs against him, as in the sexual scandals in which he was involved.

[18] Xie Zhangting 謝章鋌 (1820–1903) and Chen Tingzhuo 陳廷焯 (1853–1892) were among the first supporters of this new stance during the late Qing. See Canale (2023a: 174) and Tang (1986, vol. 4: 3465, 3721).

[19] Scholars holding such a view include Tanaka Kenji, Xia Chengtao, James T. C. Liu, and Tang Guizhang, whose position on the matter is mentioned in Egan (1971, 165). More recently, Ronald Egan (1971: 169–172), Li Qi (1982), Huang Wenji (1996), Tao Erfu (2014: 48–54), and Stephen Owen (2019: 149) have also adopted a similar stance.

[20] See, for instance, He (2014: 34–38).

[21] Translated by the author; for the Chinese text, see Qiu (2001: 31) and Tang (1965, vol. 1: 124).

If the first stanza expresses typical concerns of the literati song lyric, such as the melancholy caused by the passing of spring and the awareness of impermanence, the second stanza introduces an interesting element: the conventional exhortation to enjoy present pleasures is not limited to the more common motifs of wine and banquets but is made explicitly erotic by an urge to "buy smiles" (*mai xiao* 買笑), i.e., visiting courtesans.[22] The style and the diction of this song are clearly refined and its models can be easily identified in a long tradition of banquet poetry and, more generally, *carpe diem* poetry on the vanity of pursuing wealth and honor. Nevertheless, the author has transformed some of its more immediate models, in particular the Tang poem "The Robe of Golden Thread" (*Jin lü yi* 金縷衣) attributed to Du Qiuniang 杜秋娘 (?-825?), which already had a sexual connotation, by adding an overt reference to courtesans and brothels—the world of sensual pleasures that characterizes many of the erotic songs attributed to Ouyang. Though written in different modes, it wouldn't be difficult to imagine that an uncontested lyric like this one may have been composed by the same author of the contested songs in the vulgar style.

4. Conclusions

It is undeniable that some of the more controversial contested songs in Ouyang Xiu's collection show a decidedly colloquial diction and other popular elements such as dialogues between lovers that contrast starkly with what is generally found in the refined lyrics. Indeed, several modern scholars such as Ronald Egan (1971: 169–172) concede that some of the more explicit colloquial songs attributed to Ouyang could be forgeries, given their high slanderous potential when associated with a man who has been tried multiple times for sexual scandals. Still, we may ask again: why could some literati like Liu Yong have written particularly scandalous vernacular songs while Ouyang couldn't? We do know that some of Liu Yong's songs are at least as colloquial and sexually explicit as the most controversial songs by Ouyang Xiu. Is there an ontological difference between the two authors that prevents the latter from having occasionally cultivated the same style as the former? I do not believe so.[23] While it is important to stress once more that we cannot be sure about the real authorship of eleventh-century songs for a variety of reasons related to their precarious ways of circulation, I think that it is fair to conclude, in light of the analysis carried out above, that Ouyang Xiu's songbook could have plausably included markedly different modes, from the refined style of the venerable Confucian master to the

[22] Qiu Shaohua has noticed that the expression had already been used in classical poetry. See Qiu (2001: 32).

[23] For a comparison between Liu Yong's and Ouyang Xiu's erotic songs, see Canale (2023c).

"sordid" language of the defiant libertine. These two "souls" of his production should not be seen as incompatible but rather as complementary as we know that Ouyang was both things at the same time—and unlike several other fellow literati, he doesn't seem to have made too much effort to conceal it.

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