

“Storytellers, Fishermen, and Maids: Rewriting Marginal Characters in  
Seventeenth-Century Drama and Fiction”

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This paper seeks to explore the dynamics between center and margins by looking at the writing and rewriting of marginal characters in early Qing drama and short fiction. In Kong Shangren’s celebrated play *Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan*, 1699), the storyteller Liu Jingting, which is played by the *chou* or “clown” role-type, is cast as a colorful helper, whose characterization betrays a complex amalgam of historical data and literati’s fantasy of popular culture—Liu’s extraordinary storytelling art is at once celebrated as an autonomous form of expression and profoundly gentrified. In a similar perspective, Fisherman Mo in Li Yu’s vernacular story “An Actress Scorns Wealth and Honor to Preserve Her Chastity” (*Qing fugui nüdan quanzhen*, ca. 1656) is depicted as the quintessential benefactor-friend and as a suspiciously world savvy fisherman who becomes the main architect of the story dénouement. In Li Yu’s own dramatic adaptation of the story, Fisherman Mo is then recast as a powerful and upright official who goes into reclusion, thus laying bare the deep interconnections between political center and the margins. Lastly, the maid Nenghong in the story “The Cloud-Scraper” (*Fuyun lou*, ca. 1658), also written by Li Yu, can be seen as a parodic revisitation of the stock character of the maid, the paradigmatic ancillary role in romantic comedies. In a bold stroke, Nenghong is rewritten as the central heroine of the story and as an all-too-perfect embodiment of virtue and cunning at once.

In these texts, I will argue, marginality—be it social, cultural, spatial, or just literary—often functions as a trope in which traditional and elite values shift their locus, rather than being radically subverted.