
Irony and Death in the Writings of Liu Zhen *

Nicholas Morrow WILLIAMS

Mr. Simon Suen and Mrs. Mary Suen Sino-Humanitas Institute, Hong Kong Baptist University

The poetry of the Jian'an 建安 (196–220) era is often praised for its authentic depiction of individual character. But the danger of offending the patrons of the court, the Cao family, must have limited the ability of these writers to express their thoughts and emotions directly. Thus it seems likely that Jian'an poets might often have chosen to be reticent about their actual opinions, conveying their intentions instead through understatement or even irony. This essay is an experiment in identifying an ironic element in the works of one of the finest poets of Jian'an, Liu Zhen 劉楨 (?–217). One clue to Liu's ironical distance from the court around him is in an anecdote preserved in the *Shishuo xinyu*. Two of Liu's best poems also contain internal conflicts that seem to demand interpretation, not as lyrical self-expression, but something more complex and indeterminate. The traditional critical concept of "wind and bone," frequently applied retrospectively to Jian'an poets, contains an inherent tension that supports this approach. The sword of Damocles hanging over the writers of Jian'an means that their writings were produced in consciousness of the possible death sentence they might incur for impropriety. Another suggestive source for the interpretation of Liu Zhen is a stele inscription he wrote for a friend who had remained independent of politics. The political context of Jian'an and its reflection in literary irony is well represented by the figure of the "empty vessel," which occurs in a number of historical and literary contexts during this period.

Keywords: Jian'an literature, Liu Zhen, irony, *fenggu*, pentasyllabic verse

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Introduction

The Seven Masters of Jian'an 建安七子—Kong Rong 孔融 (153–208), Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), Liu Zhen 劉楨 (?–217), Ruan Yu 阮瑀 (?–212), Ying Yang 應瑒 (?–217), Chen Lin 陳琳 (?–217), and Xu Gan 徐幹 (171 – 218)—are well known for their role in establishing the models of expression for pentasyllabic verse.¹ They composed poems and essays alongside Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) and his sons at the court at Ye 鄴 (located to the southwest of modern Linzhang 臨漳 County, Hebei) during the Jian'an 建安 (196–220) era at the close of the Han Dynasty. But they were not all present simultaneously at Ye, since it was while Wang Can was still serving Liu Biao 劉表 (142–208) that Kong Rong was put to death by Cao Cao in 208.

The execution of Kong Rong is a fact of considerable importance for the interpretation of Jian'an poetry. The poems of the Jian'an masters are full of wine and song, aspirations to glory and outpourings of sorrow, all tied to their own specific characters and situations in a way that earlier verse had not always been. But these poems were written in a context when certain forms of expression were liable to incur a death sentence. Kong Rong was executed for improper behavior and lack of deference, in part because “he expressed himself in phrases that were excessive and unbalanced, often incurring offense and subversion” 發辭偏宕，多致乖忤。² In such a context it cannot have proffered very much consolation to his literary friends that Cao Cao's heir Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226) remained a passionate admirer of Kong's writing after the author's death.³

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- 1 An alternate enumeration substitutes Cao Zhi for Kong Rong, but for the purposes of this essay the inclusion of Kong Rong is preferable. Modern studies in Chinese include Jiang Jianjun 江建俊, *Jian'an qizi xueshu* 建安七子學述 (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1982), Li Wenlu 李文祿, *Jian'an qizi pingzhu* 建安七子評傳 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe 2004), and Wang Pengting 王鵬廷, *Jian'an qizi yanjiu* 建安七子研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004). Collections of their works include Yu Shaochu 俞紹初, ed., *Jian'an qizi ji* 建安七子集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989); Han Geping 韓格平, ed., *Jian'an qizi shiwen ji jiaozhu yixi* 建安七子詩文集校注譯析 (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1991); and Wu Yun 吳雲 et al., *Jian'an qizi ji jiaozhu* 建安七子集校注 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 2005).
 - 2 *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 70.2272.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, 70.2280.