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"THE WILLOW PATTERN THAT WE KNEW": THE VICTORIAN LITERATURE OF BLUE WILLOW

So of course when I heard of your great Exhibition,
I was speedily found in a state of transition,
On my dragon I came—but conceive my surprise!
Round a public house kitchen when casting my eyes,
I saw upon table, stand, dresser, & shelf,
In Earthenware, China, stone-hardware, and delf [sic],
Drawn longways & shortways, drawn outside and in,
On plate, cup and saucer, dish, basin, tureen,
A picture, which is but a full illustration
Of an olden love story well-known in my nation.
But still more my surprise, on eclipsing my pleasure
At finding the English so ready to treasure
The legends of China, to find that unknown
Was the story from which all the picture had grown:
And when I told the story they said "You be blowed!
That's the old Willow Pattern of Copeland & Spode."
The Mandarin's Daughter, 1851

THE BLUE WILLOW PATTERN OF CHINA ENJOYED AN UNPRECEDENTED POPULARITY IN NINE-teenth-century Britain, and while most of us recognize blue willow on sight (fig. 1), fewer of us are aware of the legend of the star-crossed lovers that the willow pattern was said to illustrate and the extent to which that legend circulated in Victorian mass culture. The domestic production of blue willow dates from the late eighteenth century when potters like Spode and Wedgwood pieced together traditional motifs from imported Chinese designs to create the blue willow pattern, which, though varied in detail, is characterized by the bridge with three figures, the willow tree in the center, the boat, the birds, the blossoming orange tree behind the teahouse, and the fence running across the foreground (Copeland, *Spode's Blue Willow Pattern* 33, 39). By the mid-nineteenth century, blue willow was firmly installed in Victorian households, and by the end of the century, this pattern we now regard as quintessentially Victorian was being manufactured and marketed by over fifty British firms whose willow ware ranged from the affordable to the costly.

Figure 1. The Blue Willow Pattern

Facilitated by improved techniques of porcelain and cobalt dye manufacture and by Spode's development of the process of transfer-printing (which replaced the more labor-intensive procedure of hand-painting),[1] domestically-produced blue willow ware offered to consumers an imitation of the handpainted Chinese porcelainware so greatly in demand throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The willow pattern legend of the mandarin's daughter's unwilling betrothal to an older duke, her elopement with her father's secretary and the lovers' capture, their deaths and metamorphosis into doves—"emblems of the constancy which had rendered them beautiful in life, and in death undivided" ("Story" 154)—was retold throughout the century in articles in the popular press, theatrical entertainments, nursery rhymes, children's books, advertisements, fiction, and poetry. In the first series of *Notes & Queries* a reader's inquiry—"What is the legend illustrated by the willow pattern; and what the date of its first use?"—initiated a dialogue that would continue into the 1920s in over twenty-five queries and replies about origins and versions of the willow

pattern legend. The submissions to *N & Q*, many of which include nursery rhymes and tales recalled from childhood, attest to the vitality of the legend quite early in the century. Although some contributors suspected that the legend was a British invention—which it clearly was[2]—others insisted it was an ancient and authentic Chinese legend, a story "told by Chinese mothers and grandmothers from generation to generation [and that is] to the Chinese what 'Jack the Giant Killer' or 'Robinson Crusoe' is to us" ("Story" 124). The uncertainty surrounding the origin of the legend that was as familiar as *Romeo and Juliet* and as exotic as teahouses and orange blossoms made it highly adaptable to a wide variety of literary renditions: examples include an "informative" middle-class periodical essay, "The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate" (1849); theatrical entertainments like Francis Talfourd and W. P. Hale's *The Mandarin's Daughter* and F. C. Burnand's *A Tale of Old China* (1874); George Meredith's satiric novel, *The Egoist* (1879); and Andrew Lang's nostalgic, Aesthetic ballade, "Ballade of Blue China" (1880). The legend supported a range of interpretations, and understanding the degree of its pervasiveness and the uses to which it was put will illuminate the ambivalent, anxious, and contradictory ways that the Victorians appropriated materials from other cultures, invented traditions, and meditated on the relationships between past and present, and self and other.

Joshua Danforth Young's observation that the willow pattern itself "is not oriental art, but rather one of the best known artistic expressions of the western world's first mass encounter with oriental culture. . . . 18th century Europe's naive artistic expressions of its view of the mysterious East" applies as well to the legend in which the traditional Chinese motifs of bridges, trees, boats, and birds are reconstituted as props in a distinctly western narrative (qtd. in Berndt, "Blue Willowware"). Attesting to the passion for the possession of cultural legends, the willow pattern places the familiar characters of romance—the eloping tragic lovers and the cruel father—in a Chinese setting and, in doing so, draws on British commercial prejudices and developing ethnographic narratives of the relationship between a European culture imagined as civilized and progressive, and an alien culture seen as primitive and static.

I

This essay presents a chapter of the "cultural biography"[3] of the willow pattern legend in the nineteenth century, and I am taking the 1849 article in the *Family Friend*, "The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate," as my point of entry into the life of the legend. A wildly farcical version of the willow legend by Mark Lemon had appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* (under

Dickens's editorship) in 1838. Lemon's "A True History of the Celebrated Wedgewood [sic] Hieroglyph, Commonly Called the Willow Pattern" (the earliest written version identified to date) broadly burlesques the Chinese, who have pigtails "pointed toward the skies" (61) and names like "Nic-quic" the lawyer and "Ting-a-Ting" the minstrel. Its plot is similar to that of the *Family Friend* piece, and it may have served as a source for the later essay, although it is likely that other printed and oral versions were in circulation. The *Family Friend* essay, however, marks an important moment in the life of the legend because here we find the legend formalized into a kind of academic discourse that purports to present factual information about Chinese customs and laws, and includes explanatory footnotes and even an attribution assigned to Sir William Jones' *Asiatic Transactions*. A vastly condensed verbatim passage from the *Family Friend* version of the legend follows:

> On the right hand side is seen a Chinese house, of unusual extent and magnificence. . . . This house belonged to a mandarin of great power and influence, who had amassed considerable wealth in serving the emperor in a department corresponding to our excise. The work . . . was performed by an active secretary, named Chang, while the business of the master consisted in receiving bribes from the merchants . . . . When the faithful Chang completed his duties he was discharged. Too late, however!—The youth had seen and loved the mandarin's daughter [Koong-See]. . . . And on many an evening afterwards, when Chang was supposed to be miles away, lovers' voices in that place might have been heard amongst the orange trees. . . . By some means, at last, the knowledge of one of their interviews came to the old man, who from that time, forbade his daughter to go beyond the walls of the house. . . . He also built a suite of apartments adjoining the banquet-room [with] no exit but through the banquet hall. . . . To the disappointment of the lovers, he went still further—he betrothed his daughter to a wealthy friend, a Ta-jin, or duke of high degree, whom she had never seen. . . . Like the netted bird, she saw the snare drawing closer and closer, but possessed no power to escape the foils. . . . Chang . . . besought her to fly with him [and taking the Ta-jin's jewels they] stole behind the screen—passed the door—descended the steps, and gained the foot of the bridge, beside the willow tree. . . . To represent this part of the story, are the three figures on the bridge. . . . [They escape by boat.] The jewels were sold . . . . With the money thus procured, the persevering Chang was enabled to . . . purchase a free right to the little island (see fig. 1, upper left) . . . [The Ta-Jin] obtained an escort of soldiers to arrest Chang—and with these the Ta-jin attacked the island [killing Chang]. . . . Koong-see, in despair, rushed to her apartments, which she set on fire, and perished in the flames. . . . In pity to Koong-see and her lover, they were transformed into two immortal doves, emblems of the constancy which had rendered them beautiful in life, and in death undivided.

The *Family Friend* rendition of the willow pattern legend became, and remains to this day, "authoritative" in so far as it is the most frequently summarized version of the apocryphal tale: it was reprinted verbatim and without attribution in the American periodical, *Littel's Living Age* (1850) and in C. A. S. Williams' 1932 volume, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives* (423–35). A pamphlet that the Wedgwood Museum currently dis-

tributes, "The Story of the Wedgwood Willow Pattern Plate," closely paraphrases the *Family Friend* article, right down to the closing lines, "emblems of constancy—beautiful in life and in death unparted" (Barnard 7). Relevant to the *Family Friend*'s version of the legend are Arjun Appadurai's observations about commodities and their distributions of knowledge. Appadurai points out that "commodities represent very complex social forms of knowledge and distributions of knowledge" and "if we regard some commodities as having 'life histories' or 'careers' in a meaningful sense, then it becomes useful to look at the distribution of knowledge at various points in their careers" (41). Styled as an informative essay and embroidered with miscellaneous details about Chinese culture, "The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate" offers a valuable source for identifying the popular knowledge and common perceptions of the Chinese that circulated among the British public in the politically troubled years before and after the Sino-British military confrontation, the first Opium War.

In 1842, seven years before the publication of "The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate," the British signed the Treaty of Nanking, bringing to an end the first Opium War but not the hostility, military skirmishes, and Chinese resistance to foreign trade and diplomatic presence. The period from 1835 to 1850, which the historian James M. Polachek has labeled the "Opium War Interlude," was marked by frustration, provocation, and military action on both sides.[4] British sentiments and perceptions of events and of Chinese culture are recorded in the period's newspapers, in Parliamentary papers (see Steeds and Nish), and in a body of writing by British merchants and traders that attempted to explain the "perversity of the Chinese 'character' . . . in terms of jejeune generalizations about oriental psychology" (Greenberg 42). Some of those perceptions are also recorded in the *Family Friend*'s orientalized western romance which foregrounds the political corruption of the tyrannical mandarin patriarch. The wealthy mandarin is identified specifically as a government official, a man of "great power and influence, who had amassed considerable wealth in serving the emperor in a department corresponding to our excise" (124). This customshouse agent's business "consisted in receiving bribes from the merchants, at whose business and illegal traffic he winked in proportion as he was paid for it" (124–25). Upon the death of his wife, the mandarin "requested the emperor to allow him to retire from his arduous duties, and was particularly urgent in his suit, because the merchants had begun to talk loudly of the unfairness and dishonesty of the Chinese manager of the customs" (125). In Lemon's earlier nonsensical piece, the father—"a wealthy dealer in areca nuts and betel" (62)—is similarly involved in commerce. The *Family Friend* version, however, links him directly to corruption in the administering of foreign trade and to the network of native smugglers and middlemen who facilitated the flow of opium

into China and who were "beyond the reach of efficient prosecution" by Chinese government officials (Polachek 105). This characterization of the father suggests that corruption was perceived as existing at high governmental levels, not merely among pirates and smugglers.

The *Family Friend*'s politically resonant version of the legend represents the Chinese legal code of justice and honor as unyielding and unnaturally cruel and rigid. If we read the legend as political allegory, the Ta-Jin—a local authority—embodies British perceptions of the structure of power in China, and the providential apotheosis of the lovers signals the defeat of that order, and, allegorically, of the British intrusion into the Celestial Empire. The pursuit of the lovers is taken up by the Ta-Jin who "fell into an impotent rage upon hearing [that the lovers had stolen his jewels and eloped], and so great was his fury, that he frothed at the mouth and well-nigh was smothered in his drunken passion" (151). The stolen jewels subsidize the lovers' purchase of a "free-right to the little island" and Chang's return to "literary pursuits" (153). However, "by his power as magistrate of the district" the Ta-Jin vowed he would "exercise his plenary authority, and put [Chang] to death for the theft of his jewels. The lady, too, he said should die, unless she fulfilled the wishes of her parent, not for his own gratification, but for the sake of public justice" (151). A footnote here explains the legal grounds for the Ta-Jin's actions: "disobedience to parents is a capital offence in China: parents have power to put their children to death summarily" (151). Upon the deaths of the lovers, "The gods—(so the tale runs)—cursed the duke for his cruelty with a foul disease" (154). The Ta-Jin's curse leaves him childless: the old order is left without successor, while Chang's and Koong-see's children—"one of whom became a great sage"—are left under the patronage of the "wealthy literary men of the neighborhood" (153). In this telling of the willow pattern legend, the conventional conflicts of the western romance (youth vs. age, romantic love vs. filial duty) are adapted to the features of Chinese culture as they were perceived by mid-century Victorians, and the conventional resolution of the conflicts expresses the assumption that what Europe understands to be Chinese culture should yield to the powers (youth, love, literature) of the romance. The tale is at once "timeless" in its narrative repetitions and historically-marked in its particularized characterizations.

Information about Chinese laws and customs is embedded in the narrative of the tale in the form of explanatory digressions and footnotes that "educate" the reader about Chinese culture. The tale's most curious approximation of scholarly apparatus is its citation of the *Asiatic Transactions* and Sir William Jones as the translator of the verses exchanged by the lovers and written in the "peculiar metaphorical style of Oriental poetry" (126). The subsequent reprint in *The Living Age* picks up the citation as *Asiatic Transla-*

tions, a reference to Jones's volume, *Poems, consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages* (often shortened to *Asiatic[k] Translations*), first published in 1772 and "one of [Jones's] most famous books" (Cannon 17). The verses presented in the legend,[5] however, do not appear in either the *Asiatic Transactions* or the *Asiatic Translations*. While these verses may have appeared in a source that I have not been able to locate, Jones, who died in 1794, certainly never commented on the willow legend.[6] Whatever the source of the verses included in the *Family Friend* version and its reprints, the lines have clearly been excised from their original poetic context and inserted into the legend in order to document its antiquity. Jones's reputation as an Orientalist suffered vicissitudes,[7] yet however equivocal Jones's status as an authority may have been, the footnoted attribution of him as the translator of the verses serves as a device to authenticate the spurious Chinese origin of the verses and the legend.

After 1849, the life history of the legend moved into the theater, when two years after the publication of "The Story" audiences would witness the legend come to life on the stage of the Strand Theatre in a Christmas extravaganza, *The Mandarin's Daughter, Or The Willow Pattern Plate*.[8] T. R. (Tom) Robertson, who later authored popular theatrical entertainments like *Caste* and *Half-Caste*, acted the part of "the Enchanter Chim-Pan-See," a narrator-figure who summarized the story on the plate. Standing before a drop curtain on which was depicted the willow pattern, Chim-Pan-See introduced the audience to the legend by pointing to images on the plate while singing a narrative, "This is the house of the Mandarin He[y]-Sing," to the tune of the air, "The House that Jack built" (604).[9] As he waved his wand the curtain rose upon the scene of Koong-see in her "boudoir" with her attendants, and the action of the legend unfolded. The performance of *The Mandarin's Daughter* as a Christmas extravaganza illustrates the ubiquity of the pattern and suggests that the legend was sufficiently recognizable to serve as the subject of an extravaganza, a popular theatrical entertainment that typically reenacted, in comic or burlesque fashion, myths, tragedies, legends, folk and fairy tales, and exotic tales (Booth "Introduction"). The play burlesques Chinese culture and customs, although far more genially than a later *Punch* blue willow cartoon (fig. 2) and its accompanying poem, "A Chanson for Canton," in which "John Chinaman" is scorned for "little pigeyes and large pigtail,/And their diet of rats, dogs, slugs, and snails" (qtd. in Dawson 133). It also exhibits—in that year of the greatest of all exhibitions—the curiously exotic yet largely domesticated Chinese people. While *The Mandarin's Daughter* draws heavily for its plot on the version of the legend circulated in the *Family Friend*, the presentation of the material in the extravaganza is, as we might expect, vastly different from that in the entertaining but "educational" mid-

Figure 2. "A Chanson for Canton," *Punch*, 34 (10 Apr 1858): 151.

dle-class periodical essay. *The Mandarin's Daughter* presents a spectacle of incongruities, with its Chinese characters who speak British slang and refer to contemporary Britain, especially the Great Exhibition. The conventions enabled *The Mandarin's Daughter* both to burlesque the Chinese customs represented by the legend and to suggest that the legend of "the old willow pattern of Copeland & Spode" was a British fabrication. With its "Tar-Gin," whose jewels win a prize medal at the Great Exhibition (613) and its nurse-maid, "So-Sli," who complains of the price of postage (616), *The Mandarin's Daughter* is as much about the British "us" as it is about the Chinese "them."

Where the *mise en scene* of *The Mandarin's Daughter* is the Great Exhibition, F. C. Burnand's *A Tale of Old China* (1874) takes as its milieu the "chinamania" and the rage for collecting old and expensive oriental blue and white porcelain in the 1860s and 1870s. The "cult for blue and white" (Hillier 211) included such members as D. G. Rossetti, William Morris, and James MacNeil Whistler, and the commodity that was so highly valued in Aesthetic

Figure 3. George Du Maurier, "Six-Mark Tea-Pot," *Punch*, 79 (30 Oct 1880): 194.

circles came to be associated with Oscar Wilde's reputed lament (1874)—"How often I feel how hard it is to live up to my blue china" (qtd. in Ellmann 45). In the public mind, the mania for fine blue and white symbolized the hyper-refinement and effeminacy of Aesthetic sensibilities: Du Maurier's 1880 *Punch* cartoon (fig. 3), with its wilting bride and bridegroom, and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (1881), whose Bunthorne advertises himself as "such a judge of Blue-and-white and other kinds of pottery" (209), each expresses similar sentiments about such impassioned collecting. Furthermore, the demand for oriental china made the forgery of such pieces an especially lucrative occupation, and the period saw a good deal of publicity about collectors who were duped into paying high prices for fraudulent items. It is the acquisitive "chinamania," the inflated value of oriental objects, and the conning of the connoisseurs that Burnand satirizes in *A Tale of Old China*, whose comedy turns upon a greedy china dealer's mistaking a teapot in blue willow, the "poor man's 'blue and white'" (Hillier 214), for a rare specimen produced in "the Week Te Period of the Song Dynasty."

The willow pattern legend was enacted in the china dealer's dream and in the plot of two pairs of contemporary young lovers that frames the dream. In Burnand's play, the china dealer forbids his daughter to marry a writer, to whom she had given an old teapot that inspired him to write *A Romance of Old China*, a tattered copy of which has made its way into the library of "Papa," who has come to suspect that the "rubbish heap" teapot may have been a valuable object. Reading the copy of *A Romance of Old China*, he drifts into an opium-induced dream, which presents a recognizable but mostly nonsensical version of the legend. He awakens, convinced of the value of the teapot, and offers the suitor both his daughter and £30,000 in exchange for the teapot, which is lost but finally recovered. The old man announces its value, waving about the copy of *A Romance of Old China*, which he claims "must have been written by a learned man" like "Chaffers [or] Marryat" (47 verso), whereupon the suitor rubs off the mark he had applied to the bottom of the teapot and reveals himself as the author of *A Romance*. The father's mistaking the suitor's romance for Chaffers or Marryat is a piece of comic irony: W. Chaffers was the author of a much-reprinted volume, *Marks and Monograms*, and the second edition of Joseph Marryat's *History of Pottery and Porcelain* (1868) had dramatically exposed some spectacular frauds (Hillier 298–318). In *A Tale of Old China*, as in *The Mandarin's Daughter*, blue willow ware functions as a kind of comic metonomy for the Victorian public's conspicuous consumption and exhibition of decorative material objects. And without ever naming the pattern or the legend, *A Tale of Old China* tells its audience that, like so much else, the well-known willow pattern legend is "all imagination" (47 recto), a mere "*Dream of Old China*" (48 recto).

II

The racism of nineteenth-century ethnology and anthropology, which has been detailed in a number of recent studies,[10] was fostered by prevailing imperialist attitudes toward the lower, or inferior races, and in turn ethnology and anthropology confirmed the racism that authorized imperialist domination. In the 1860s and 1870s, social evolutionary theory codified and structured the hierarchy that bridged but distanced lower primitive culture and higher civilized culture, while providing for a number of both progressive and regressive gradations between the two. In Andrew Lang's *XXXII Ballades in Blue China* and George Meredith's *The Egoist*, we find two quite different textual displays of the willow pattern legend that reveal the impact of social evolutionary theory on British formulations of self and other. In Lang's volume, blue willow and its legend are exhibited as exquisite artifacts of a poetic but epistemologically naive age of man. *The Egoist*, however, critiques civilized egoism by allusively displaying the blue willow legend as a mirror in which Victorian society is meant to find its own reflection: the collective British "we" are unmasked as being just as barbaric as the collective oriental "them." About the time that Burnand's *A Tale of Old China* was performed, his close friend George Meredith started composing *The Egoist*, a novel saturated with willow pattern allusions that figure significantly in the novel's withering satire of aristocratic privilege and self-entitlement. In *The Egoist*, references to the willow pattern legend are one element of the novel's densely allusive meditation upon the connections between past and present, connections made particularly unstable by social evolutionary theory. I have elsewhere discussed how allusions to classical mythology, to the willow pattern legend, and to the discourse of social evolutionary theory serve to expose as tenuous the nineteenth century's claims to moral and intellectual superiority over savage or primitive culture.[11] In plotting the progress of civilization, social evolutionary theorists created narratives that constructed an equivocal relationship between past and present, and between primitive and civilized cultures. Where earlier ethnographies largely confirmed the distance and divergence between civilized and primitive cultures,[12] Victorian social evolutionary theory established a relationship in which the civilized was represented as both cognate with and discrete from the primitive. While the hierarchical model of successive cultural levels of social evolution tended to confirm differences between civilized and primitive cultures, the hypothesis of a universal (though uneven) evolution from the primitive toward the civilized insisted upon the consanguinity and contiguity of the primitive and the civilized. *The Egoist* seizes upon the contradiction and allusively divests the "civilized"

of its egotistically aggrandized status by designating as "primitive" and mythically recurrent the possessiveness that motivates civilized man.

I will note only a few of the many references to the legend in the novel's formal and figurative structures.[13] The novel's allusions to the willow pattern legend serve as an analogy between the British and the Chinese, which is contained in the larger analogy between the civilized and the primitive. Allusively, Willoughby Patterne is both the wealthy mandarin lord of the enclosed estate and the Ta-Jin with the jewels for Clara Middleton, "the dainty rogue in porcelain" (75).[14] In bringing to life the gentlemen of China, dressed as the gentlemen of Great Britain, *The Egoist* frames its action by establishing in the "Prelude" a larger evolutionary backdrop against which to read the comedy of Sir Willoughby Patterne as he acts out the legend that is his destiny. In the obscure "Prelude" we are introduced to the imps, who "wherever they catch sight of Egoism they pitch their camps, they circle and squat" (37). The "tribes of imps" (588) "grow restless on their haunches" (37) whenever the civilized act in such a way as to betray "a reversion to the gross original, beneath a mask of fineness" (37). Perched between primate and human forms, the imps act as a kind of evolutionary missing link between primitive and civilized, and between eastern and western: "we drove in a body to Science the other day for an antidote [for our modern malady]; and Science introduced us to our o'er-hoary ancestry—them in the oriental posture" (34).

Throughout *The Egoist*, the oriental is associated with the primitive, and the novel's argument—that in their treatment of women, the most "highly civilized" of men revert to an "original savage . . . our ancestral satyr"—is reinforced by the parallels between British characters in the novel and Chinese figures in the legend (151). When Willoughby displays Clara and her "bloom" for the approval of the older women of the neighborhood, the narrator observes that "women of the world never think of attacking the sensual stipulation for perfect bloom, silver purity, which is redolent of the oriental origin of the love-passions of their lords. Mrs. Mountstuart congratulated Sir Willoughby on the prize he had won in the fair western-eastern" (74). Of Willoughby's desire to combine the faded but adoring Laetitia and the beautiful but rebellious Clara into one "essence"—his desire to possess both of them as wives—the narrator comments that such a task would be "fruitless" unless the women could be "scientifically concocted in a harem for a sufficient length of time by a sultan anything but obtuse" (178). With its parallels to the widely-circulated willow pattern legend, *The Egoist* recapitulates the tale of the figures on the plate, and both the novel and the legend recapitulate the history of sexual relations and marital negotiations. In the process, the novel reproduces what we now regard as problematic configurations of the primitive and the oriental; Meredith's depiction of our simian

ancestors squatting "in the oriental posture" differs only perhaps in subtlety from the *The Mandarin's Daughter*'s Chinese sorcerer, "Chim-Pan-See." At the same time the novel challenges the progressivist paradigm of social evolution by asserting the uniformity of women's social status across time and cultures. The willow pattern legend is an allusive mirror held up to catch the Victorian reader's reflection: trapped on the estate of Willoughby Patterne, Clara Middleton is a blood relative of Koong-see, imprisoned in the mandarin's mansion.

Andrew Lang's allusion to the willow pattern and legend, though slight in comparison to Meredith's, equally bears the impress of social evolutionary theory of the 1870s. However, where Meredith used the willow pattern legend to underscore the persistence of the mythical, primitive, and misogynist cultural past in contemporary social and sexual arrangements, Lang's use of the legend betrays an ambivalent longing to recapture an imaginative vitality attributed to the primitive, myth-making stage of man's evolutionary history. Although he was an essayist, historian, poet, biographer, and translator, Lang most valued his work as mythographer and anthropologist. A protégé of E. B. Tylor, Lang maintained that the mythographer's "purpose is to employ the anthropological method—the study of the evolution of ideas, from the savage to the barbarian, and then to the civilized stage—in the province of myth, ritual, and religion" (Lang, *Myth* 31). In the hierarchical developmental paradigm of social evolutionary theory, myth is understood as characteristic of a "lower" intellectual stage: "the savage and senseless element in mythology is, for the most part, a legacy from ancestors of the civilized race who were in an intellectual state not higher than that of Australians, Bushmen, Red Indians, the lower races . . . " ("Mythology" 143). Yet Lang, like many others, felt ambivalently about the rationalist, positivist demystification of mythology.[15] Indeed Tylor himself expressed that ambivalence in *Primitive Culture* (1871) where he represents the ancient mythmakers as both savages and visionaries with access to a "reality" that is "but fancy to us" (297):

> The growth of myth has been checked by science, it is dying of weights and measures, of proportions and specimens—it is not only dying, but half dead, and students are anatomising it. In this world one must do what one can, and if the moderns cannot feel myth as their forefathers did, at least they can analyse it [by studying the] millions [of] savages and barbarians whose minds still produce, in rude archaic forms, man's early mythic representations of nature. (317)

Writers like Tylor, Lang, and Edward Clodd tended to discredit myth as an outmoded epistemology while endowing the mythic imagination with primary powers of apprehension that modern man, with his "blunted mythologic sense" (Tylor 303), could not hope to recuperate.

The blue willow pattern and legend appear in "Ballade of Blue China," in *XXXII Ballades in Blue China*, a volume that defends the respectability of collecting old china as an appreciative preservation of the material and imaginative cultures of the ancient past. Literally and visually encasing the ballades in blue china, the first edition was printed with an elaborately patterned blue cover, alluded to in the prefatory ballade: "Wrapped in this cover's china blue/These ballades fresh and delicate/This dainty troop of thirty-two." Furthermore, the title page of the 1888 edition was printed with a blue line drawing of an oriental woman engraved on a vase. This visual presentation asks the reader to view the volume itself as an elegant artifact, and several of the poems—written in the medieval French form of the ballade—pay homage to the past: examples include the ballades of "Theocritus," "Cleopatra's Needle," "Primitive Man," and "Queen Anne."

Opening with the lines, "There's a joy without canker or cark,/There's a pleasure eternally new,/'Tis to gloat on the glaze and the mark,/ Of china that's ancient and blue" (55), "Ballade of Blue China" invites us to contemplate the extraordinary survival of the fragile objects that have "pass'd" "unchipp'd all the centuries through." The second stanza moves to material objects' mythical representation of nature: "These dragons (their tails, you remark,/Into bunches of gillyflowers grew),—/When Noah came out of the ark,/Did these lie in wait for his crew?" (55). In the "reign of the Emperor Hwang," it continues, the "Celestials" drew "portraits" of the creatures that civilized man (addressed parenthetically) prosaically perceives as stylized fancy. Having set up a distinction between primitive mythopoesis and civilized rationality, Lang presents the willow pattern and legend in the third stanza:

> Here's a pot with a cot in a park
> In a park where the peach-blossom blew,
> Where the lovers eloped in the dark,
> Lived, died, and were changed into two
> Bright birds that eternally flew
> Through the boughs of the may, as they sang;
> 'Tis a tale was undoubtedly true
> In the reign of the Emperor Hwang. (56)

A full appreciation of blue china, be it an ancient vase or a willow pattern plate, requires comprehending its visual and narrative representations—the dragons with tails of "gillyflowers" and the lovers' metamorphosis into birds—as representative of an earlier mental stage, a time when dragons' and lovers' metamorphoses were, in the minds of the people, real, or "undoubtedly true." For both Lang and Meredith, the willow pattern and legend serve as allusive referents to the past, and both weave those referents into their critiques of the modern condition, a condition that recent social evolutionary theory was

helping to define. Lang's paternalistic romanticizing of primitive man's pristine imagination is, in its own way, as problematic as Meredith's formulation of ancient man's rapacious misogyny.

In his fin-de-siècle essay, "A Reverie at Christie's," Lang writes with emotion about a past irretrievably lost and a present irrevocably diminished, and with ambivalence about the anthropological enterprise, in which he had so much at stake:

> Here are pieces made by dead artists, whose very art . . . is dead too, and can never be revived. . . . Here are . . . Aztec relics which almost make one shudder; they are so marked with the hideous mark of a fiendish people. . . . We can make none of [those beautiful things]; we have not the ideas, the cultivation, the skill nor the time to bestow. We can make telephones . . . we can litter continents with jam pots and sardines tins, but we cannot create the beautiful, we cannot make life splendid and gracious. We can only collect all the spoils of all the past, and store it in glass cases, and be learned, or sentimental, over the loot of dead ages and the rubbish heaps of fallen empires. (474, 478)

With its longing for the "splendid and gracious" and its constructions of history, and culture, and anarchy, the essay records some of the nineteenth century's intellectual and moral contradictions. It is this compelling ambivalence—compounded of wonder and horror at a savage past, and despair and complacency at an impoverished present—that marks all manner of the Victorians' appropriation of the past and their invention of traditions, even popular traditions like the willow pattern legend.

III

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
  To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
  And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
  Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
    Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
  Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
    Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.
          John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," 1819

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
Are carved on lapis lazuli,
Over them flies a long-legged bird,
A symbol of longevity;
The third, doubtless a serving-man,
Carries a musical instrument.
. . . doubtless plum or cherry-branch

Sweetens the little half-way house
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
Delight to imagine them seated there;
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare. . . .
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.
W. B. Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli," 1938

What's life but full of care and doubt,
With all its fine humanities,
With parasols we walk about,
Long pigtails and such vanities . . .
Walking about their groves of trees,
Blue bridges and blue rivers,
How little thought them two Chinese,
They'd both be smash't to shivers.
Thomas Hood, "The Broken Dish," 1839

Objects appropriated from one culture to another and the domestic reproductions of such objects become symptoms of the appropriating culture's own historical anxieties, aesthetic values, and private longings. Keats gazed on urns, many of them Wedgwood classical reproductions (see Robinson), and felt the ache of human mutability. With the echoes of zeppelins and billy-bombs still ringing in his ears, Yeats found in the Chinamen on the mountaintop a fit emblem of the sublime aesthetic detachment he sought in his journeys to the East. With the lighter touch of the comic pen, Hood's willow plate lies scattered about, a shivered analogue of life's transience and fragility.

Time may have blunted the popularity of the pattern and the tale, but they have continued in the twentieth century to fascinate British and American observers and to generate new meanings. In its early days, the Edison Company produced a willow pattern motion picture in which scenes from the legend appeared on the screen framed by the image of the pattern's border (Altman 33). Mary Lina Berndt,[16] who edits the quarterly publication, *The Willow Word: The Newspaper for People Addicted to Willow-Pattern China*, brought to my attention what is perhaps the most remarkable political display of the pattern: the *New Yorker* cover of 14 November 1942 (see cover) which featured Charles Addams' wartime rendition of the blue willow pattern. With its birds now dog-fighters, its figures now soldiers on the bridge surrounded by the gunboat on the river and cannons in the trees and fence, Addams transforms the pattern into a theater of a catastrophic war. As Berndt notes: "The [Japanese] Zero (left) has the emblem of the rising sun painted on the undersides of its wings . . . the insignia on the underside of the American P47 is NOT the stars and stripes, but rather the emblem of nationalist China. . . .

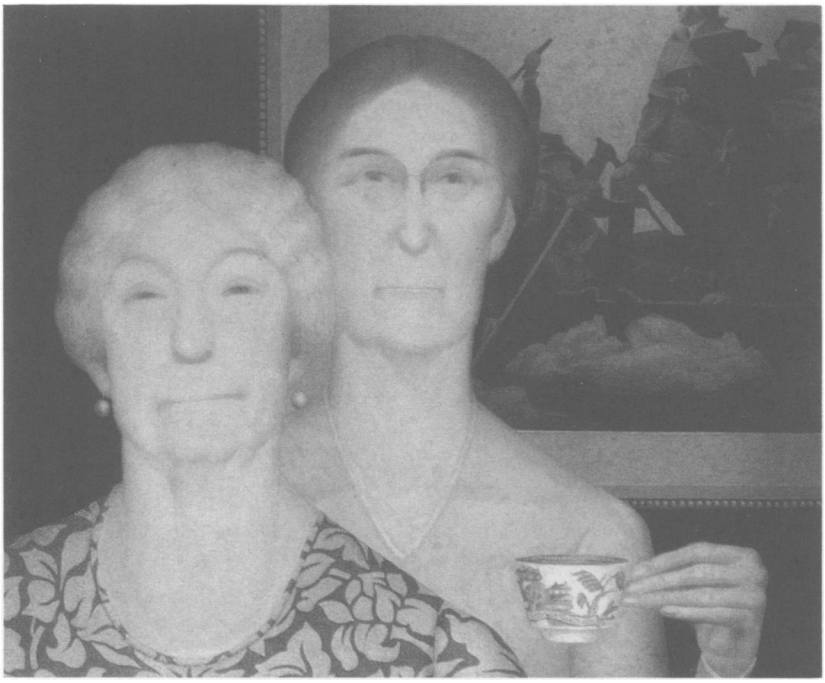

Figure 4. Grant Wood, Daughters of the Revolution (1932), detail.

Three of the major producers of Willow—America, China and Japan—are represented here" ("The War in the Willow Pattern"). The cover's startling effect is achieved by imposing the horrific images of the wartime present upon the quaint Victorian pattern of the dishes once treasured by grandmotherly women like Grant Wood's "Daughters of Revolution" (fig. 4).

We all suffer moments of longing for the childhoods of our personal and cultural pasts, perhaps more acutely so when we know those childhoods to be imaginary and illusory. If any theme emerges as recurrent in literature of blue willow, it is that of disillusionment and longing. In an 1823 essay, "Old China," Charles Lamb wistfully recalled having gazed on the blue willow pattern as a child: "I am not conscious of a time when china jars and saucers were introduced into my imagination. I had no repugnance then—why should I now have?—to those little, lawless, azure-tinctured grotesques, that under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspective—a china tea-cup" (281). The American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, expressed a similar nostalgia for blue willow in "Keromos": "The willow pattern that we knew/In childhood, with its bridge of blue . . . And wild perspective of the view" (371). Even a popular Victorian willow pattern

nursery rhyme speaks to a desire to escape from the present into a simpler, more congenial world:

> Two birds flying high,
> A little ship sailing by.
> Wooden bridge they cross over,
> Three little men going to Dover.
> Iron bridge sun shines on,
> Apple tree with apples on;
> Chinese mansion, willow tree,
> And a little cottage by the sea.
> (Willow pattern nursery rhyme)

The three little Chinese figures retreat from the big house, heading toward Dover and a common object of desire—that little cottage by the sea. So while each of the literatures of blue willow is marked by its historical context, its generic conventions and its author's sensibilities, in their recitations and dramatizations of the supposedly ancient, oriental tale of a corrupt patriarch, an imprisoned daughter, and the murder of poetry by greed, they collectively constitute a meditation upon a domestic civilization chipping at the edges and threatening to break into shards.

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Notes

I would like to thank George Levine and Joseph Voelker for their most helpful responses to an earlier draft of this essay. I am especially grateful to Peter Drewniany for his commentary, his good sense and our many conversations about blue willow. Franklin & Marshall College provided me with a grant that helped support my research. The British Library provided me with microfilms of the blue willow plays. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the anonymous *VS* readers for their valuable suggestions.

[1] The most helpful volume on the history of the manufacture of the blue willow pattern is Robert Copeland's *Spode's Willow Pattern*. Other important sources on the willow pattern's history are: Copeland, "Josiah Spode"; Coysh and Henrywood; Forbes; and Macintosh. The date and location of the first willow pattern produced in England vary in attribution among these authors; all, however, date original production in the eighteenth-century (from 1760–1780) and all identify the original potter as either Thomas Minton of Caughley or Josiah Spode I. Geoffrey Godden's argument for a later date has not been adopted.

[2] See Copeland, *Spode's Willow Pattern* 33; Coysh and Henrywood 402; Macintosh 144; Mudge 162, all of whom acknowledge the legend as a British invention.

[3] Categorizing the scope and method of this analysis of the willow pattern legend as "cultural biography" acknowledges the work of the economic anthropologists, Arjun Appadurai and particularly Igor Kopytoff, whose essay, "The Cultural Biography of Things," has influenced this reading. Kopytoff formulates the perspective that governs a cultural biography of things as follows: "A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into

culturally constituted categories" (68). Adapting the "anthropology of things," or commodities that "move through different hands, contexts, and uses, thus accumulating a specific biography, or set of biographies" (Appadurai 34), to the willow pattern legend extends a model for the analysis of the circulation of material commodities to an analysis of the circulation of writing in a historically-marked sphere of exchange. The introductory chapters of Briggs, Forty and Stocking, offered helpful models for reading the popularity and circulation of the blue willow legend, as did portions of Barthes, and Douglas and Isherwood. All of these works would, however, have a more direct bearing on an analysis of the willow pattern as material object—as commodified sign—than on an analysis, like my own, that focuses primarily on the circulation of the willow pattern legend.

Although Kopytoff assures us that any biography of things in a complex society can yield but a partial "drama of uncertainty of valuation and of identity" (90), I readily admit that this essay is a "chapter" on the blue willow pattern, an object whose fuller biography would include an analysis of the production, sales and marketing of the pattern and the demographics of its consumption, and of causal links between the appearances of literatures of blue willow and the popularity and sales of the dinnerware. And although it lies beyond the scope of this essay, the history of the reception and circulation of the British blue willow pattern in America strikes me as potentially rich in highly nuanced cross-cultural significations. Relevant studies include Mudge and Altman.

[4] For an account of British-Chinese trade relations, see Greenberg, especially Chapters III and IV. Although not an academic volume, Beeching's account of the Opium Wars offers a lively account of popular attitudes toward them during this period.

[5] The verses read as follows:

> The nest yon winged artist builds,
> Some robber bird shall tear away;
> So yields her hopes the affianced bride,
> The wealthy lord's reluctant prey.
>
> The fluttering bird prepares a home,
> In which the spoiler soon shall dwell.
> Forth goes the weeping bride, constrain'd;
> A hundred cars the triumph swell.
>
> Mourn for the tiny architect,
> A stronger bird hath ta'en its nest;
> Mourn for the hapless stolen bride,
> How vain the hope to sooth her breast. (126)

[6] In a recent conversation, Professor Cannon most helpfully suggested possible sources, but to no avail. An authority on Jones, Professor Cannon noted that the verses "sound like Jones" but accurately predicted that if they had been printed, their source would be obscure.

[7] Garland Cannon's *Sir William Jones* provides a listing of reviews and articles about Jones as well as reprints of his works. In the nineteenth century, most of this material appeared before 1850. This distribution of writings on Jones illustrates a vigorous interest in his work in the first half of the nineteenth century.

[8] A later and far more famous musical oriental romance, Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885), similarly animates figures from oriental objects on the stage: that play opens with "Japanese nobles discovered standing and sitting in attitudes suggested by native drawings"—figures who the come to life and musically announce, "If you want to know who we are,/We are gentlemen of Japan;/On many a vase and jar—/On many a screen and fan" (345).

[9] The mandarin's name appears as "Hey-Sing" in the British Library manuscript of the play. It appears as "He-Sing" in a playbill of *The Mandarin's Daughter* that the Garrick Club (London) photocopied for me. The first verse of the song reads as follows:

> This is the house of the Mandarin Hey-Sing,
> And this is the garden & there are the trees
> That wibble-dee wobble-dee go in the breeze,
> Whose verdure & shade quite a Paradise made
> Of the house of the mandarin Hey-Sing. (604)

[10] See Brantlinger, Burrow, Fee, Lorimer, Owen, Rainger, Stocking *Victorian*, Torgovnick.

[11] "Primitive Marriage, Civilized Marriage: Anthropology, Mythology and *The Egoist*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 20 (forthcoming).

[12] See Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, especially Chapter 3. In his impressive book, *Culture and Anomie*, Christopher Herbert offers an analysis (fuller than Stocking's) of the complex ambivalence of the missionary ethnographers. See Chapter 3.

[13] Rather than rehearse these parallels at length, I refer the reader to Mayo, who has discussed some of the details. I would obviously disagree with Mayo's conclusion that "the Willow 'theme' seems a superfluous piece of ingenuity. It cannot be said to illuminate in any essential way the relationship of Clara to her father or her two lovers. . . . This use of the Willow story certainly is—an exercise in adroitness, an elaborate conceit which adds to the effect of quaintness and artificiality in the novel, but advances nowhere" (78). Mayo's essay was published in 1942, and his exasperation with the novel's "ingenuity" is typical of the critical response to Meredith's fiction before the 1970s. Nonetheless, this article was one helpful source of information about the willow pattern in nineteenth-century England.

[14] In *Fictional Truth* Michael Riffaterre provides an interesting discussion of china as subtext in *The Egoist* to illustrate how "fictional truth" is produced by "subtexts that mirror the whole of the text in which they are embedded" (21). See pages 21–28.

[15] See Burstein for a useful discussion of the ambivalence of Victorian mythographers.

[16] I wish to express my gratitude to Ms. Berndt, who has graciously provided me with conversation and with back issues of *The Willow Word*.

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