

A tale from the Silk Road

A philological account of *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*

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Introduction

The motif of a craftsman who falls in love with a non-human woman has long been common in literature, and this trend continues to this day in written fiction, visual arts, and film. One of the most famous literary depictions of this motif is the Pygmalion myth, familiar from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This urtext has yielded numerous re-thematizations throughout the Western European tradition, such as *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* by Honoré de Balzac, *The Birthmark* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *Der Sandmann* by E. T. A. Hoffmann, to name just a few.

In this paper, I will discuss a tale that shows remarkable similarities with the Pygmalion myth in its interpretations and that has, to my knowledge, remained unacknowledged in literary scholarship to date. This tale, *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*, circulated in the ancient Silk Road area and is found in early Buddhist texts from roughly the fourth to the ninth centuries. There are two original Indian versions of the tale (Hofinger 185-187 after Dutt *Gilgit* 3: 166-168, also in Pinault *Chrestomathie* 252-253; Degener 47-48), one Tibetan version (Schiefner 17-18, also in Davids 361-362), one Tocharian version (Lane 33-53, Sieg 8-13, Pinault *Chrestomathie* 254-267, Malzahn A5-A9), and two different Chinese versions (Chavannes 2: 12-13; Dschi 323-324).

The first part of the paper will present the philological facts about the tale and set forth the relationships between the different versions. I will examine how specific versions have been adapted to suit their particular cultural contexts. The Tocharian version, the longest and literarily the most attractive, will be compared to the two original Sanskrit versions as well as

to the older Chinese version. I will suggest some questions that arise concerning the form of the Tocharian tale and discuss related genres in the Silk Road area on the basis of the tale's formal characteristics. This analysis will, I hope, shed some light on the role of Central Asian literatures in the circulation of originally Indian tales to East Asia. Finally, the content of the tale will be analyzed in a comparative perspective by tracing the resonance of the main motifs with two literary works external to the Silk Road cultural context; Ovid's *Pygmalion* and E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Sandman*.

The frame

The tale *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* presents itself in six preserved versions and four different cultural contexts: the original Sanskrit, Tibetan, Tocharian, and Chinese. All versions belong to the Buddhist canon, and I will open my analysis by showing that the tale was likely a part of folk tradition before its sacralization. I will then examine the various texts and contexts in which the tale is incorporated and review the content of the tale. Next, I will discuss the significant distinctions among the different versions with respect to their cultural and historical context and adaptations.

It is nearly impossible to prove the folkloristic origins of the Buddhist tale.¹ Nevertheless, several aspects of the tale suggest that it was sacralized. First, the tale's anecdotal character—very concise and short form in the original version—makes it easy to remember and transmit. Certain versions (have been adapted to?) convey a Buddhist message, as I will show in the discussion below, yet the story does not lose its essence if read without the Buddhist implications; indeed, the basic plot of the tale has no significant religious features. Moreover,

¹ “L’histoire de la migration des contes, pour instructive qu’elle soit, n’embrassera cependant jamais qu’une minime partie du folklore. La masse énorme des contes ne se laisse pas classifier en arbres généalogiques et nous devons renoncer à savoir comment ils se sont transportés d’un bout du monde à l’autre” (Chavannes 1: xvii-xviii).

the characters are anecdotally plain, which would have facilitated their recasting as Buddha's disciples. Finally, in form and story, the tale is reminiscent of the jātaka tales; in fact, the Tocharian version of the tale is included in a collection of jātakas called the *Puṇyavanta Jātaka*.

In addition to the specific arguments marshaled above, some general observations also point to the conclusion that this tale was originally folkloric and later sacralized. In his famous introduction to the *Panchatantra* collection, Theodor Benfey presented his theory on the Buddhist origin and literary transmission of tales. Although there were many objections to his ideas (for more, see Chavannes 1: xvii), it is a fact that "Buddhism conserved the most ancient written redactions of tales that are common heritage" of many different cultures (Chavannes 1: xvii). Subsequent studies of Buddhist folk tales,² inspired by Benfey, have confirmed that sacralization tends to be secondary to this kind of tale. It is probable that *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* is a part of this tradition. In any case, the specific arguments pertaining to this tale's form and content suggest that it can be read as a Buddhist as well as a folkloristic tale.

The tale itself occurs in three different corpora of texts: (a) the original frame, found in the two Sanskrit corpora, as well as the Tibetan *Kanjur* and Chinese *Taishō Tripiṭaka*, (b) the frame where individual tales are isolated and decontextualized, as in the Chinese *Tripiṭaka*, and (c) the unique Tocharian frame in *Puṇyavanta Jātaka* (possibly related to the Chinese *Tripiṭaka* version). The Sanskrit sources are found in two collections, *Vinaya of the Mulasarvāstivādin*³ and

² The term labels a genre of folk tales, e.g., Yeshi Dorjee's *The three boys and other Buddhist folk tales from Tibet*, Piriya Krairoek's *Buddhist folk tales depicted at Chula Pathon Cedi*, and Pāli collection of *Tripiṭaka* tales *Buddhist birth stories, or Jātaka tales. The oldest collection of folklore extant: being the Jātakatthavannanā*.

³ The earliest and most voluminous, albeit incomplete, version of the *Vinaya of Mulasarvāstivādin* is found in the *Gilgit manuscripts* (Dutt *Gilgit* 3: 19), one of the world's earliest collections of manuscripts, believed to have been written in the fifth and sixth centuries (with more texts added in later centuries) (Dutt *Gilgit* 1: 7). *Mulasarvāstivāda* was one of the earliest Buddhist schools in India, which is why we can assume that these tales were circulating for

Kathināvadāna.⁴ In both collections, the tale is included in the introductory chapter to the 'Bhaisajyavastu' or 'Treatise about remedies' section. The episode takes place at an assembly by the mystical lake Anavapta, where Buddha speaks about his two main disciples, Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana. Śāriputra is known for his virtues of wisdom and Maudgalyāyana is famous for his supernatural powers (Dutt *Early* 29). In Buddha's story, the two disciples, presented as artisans, test each other's abilities. The tale *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* constitutes the first example of the disciples' trial. In all of the exemplary tales, Śāriputra's wisdom overcomes Maudgalyāyana's magic, thus accentuating the important religious point that wisdom is superior to supernatural powers (Hofinger 16).

With the spreading of the Buddhist religion, the Sanskrit version of *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* was further introduced to Tibetans, Chinese, and Tocharians. According to Tibetan historians, it began to be translated to Tibetan from the Indian sacred texts in the early seventh century upon the order of King Song-tsän Gampo [Songtsen Gampo] (Davids ix). The *Vinaya of the Mulasarvāstivādin* was translated into Tibetan in the ninth century by "a translation team" and is "the most complete and accurate form of this Vinaya" (Prebish 84). Due to its completeness and accuracy, the Tibetan version of *Vinaya of the Mulasarvāstivādin* serves as a main source for modern translations. In the Tibetan language, it is a part of the *Kanjur*,⁵ "the great compilation of the Tibetan Sacred Books, in one hundred volumes" (Csoma

a long time before they were finally written down. The *Gilgit manuscripts* are likely to have played a major role in the spread of Buddhism, since Gilgit was an important city on the Silk Road, along which Buddhism spread to South Asia and further.

⁴ Not much is known about the time or place of origin of *Kathināvadāna*: "Für die zeitliche Einordnung des KA [Kathināvadāna] und die Umstände seiner Entstehung lassen sich nur wenige Anhaltspunkte finden" (*Kathināvadāna* 16).

⁵ *Kanjur* means "'translation of commandment' on account of their being translated from the Sanscrit, or from the ancient *Indian language*, (*rgyagar 'kad'*), by which may be understood the *Pracrita* or dialect of *Magadha*, the

175). The tale is found in the part of the *Kanjur* called *Dulva*, which is composed entirely of *vinayas* and focuses “on the religious Discipline or Education of religious persons” (Csoma 178).

There are also two Chinese translations of *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*, both found in versions of the Chinese *Tripitaka*.⁶ The newer version was translated from the *Vinaya of the Mulasarvāstivādin* in the first decade of the eighth century by “Yi-Tsing” [義淨]⁷ (Prebish 84) and can be found in *Taishō* 1448 (Vol. 24, section 19). In comparison to the Tibetan translation, this corpus of translated texts is much smaller, and the translations are “mediocre and incomplete” [trans. N. B.] (Lamotte 187). The context into which the tale is incorporated is the same as in the Sanskrit original and the Tibetan translation, i.e. the *Vinaya of the Mulasarvāstivādin* (frame (a)). However, the other, lesser-known Chinese translation from *Tripitaka* version is three centuries older; this variant was found among tales about Buddha without a major frame or context (frame (b)). The older Chinese version is also from the *Tripitaka* and is found in the section “Tsa P’i Yü King” [雜譬喻經] or “Book of various apologues” (Chavannes 2: i), and can be found in *Taishō Tripitaka* 207 (section 8). This section was compiled by bhikṣu “Tao-Lio 道暉” and translated by the Kuchean monk Kumārajīva in the year 401 (Chavannes 1: i). The fact that Kumārajīva translated the tale supports my thesis that the older Chinese and Tocharian versions are related, because Kumārajīva (344-412 or 415) was a famous Buddhist monk who lived and worked in Kucha. Kucha was an ancient Buddhist kingdom in today’s Xinjiang Uyghur

principal seat of the Buddhist faith in India at the period” (Csoma 175).

⁶ I would like to thank my colleagues Guangchen Chen and Dr. Shenghai Li for their help with navigating through scholarly literature and websites on Chinese sources.

⁷ In the cases of old pinyin transliteration, I have added characters in order to avoid confusion.

Autonomous Region in northwest China “from which missionaries traveled to China proper” (Foltz 50) and where many Tocharian documents in the Tocharian B language were found.⁸

The Tocharian version of the tale belongs to the Tocharian *Puṇyavanta Jātaka*. This jāataka is known as a part of the *Mahavastu* from Indian literature;⁹ however, the Tocharian version is clearly a unique reinterpretation of the original *Puṇyavanta Jātaka*.¹⁰ The Tocharian version has its own original plot and different structure from the Indian source and, in comparison to the Sanskrit version, also includes new jātakas, among which is found *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*. Another famous jāataka that is new to the Tocharian *Puṇyavanta Jātaka* is *The Foolish Lionmakers*, also found in the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* collection. A narrative about five friends,¹¹ the princes, is used as a frame for these embedded tales in the Tocharian *Puṇyavanta Jātaka*.¹² Each of the five friends embodies a virtue and illustrates this virtue’s superiority by giving an

⁸ Tocharians were the easternmost Indo-European tribe that settled in oases of the Taklamakan desert at the northern and southern edge of the Tarim Basin. Their most important cities were Kucha and Turfan, located at one of the Silk Road branches that led through the Tarim Basin to China. We do not know when they arrived to the area, since “the historical testimony is totally silent” before the second century B.C. According to linguistic research, Tocharians were not in touch with Indic or Iranian neighbors until Buddhist missionaries established the contact. Tocharian manuscripts, comprising mostly Buddhist works and translations from Sanskrit as well as some tracts on magic and medicine and rare business transactions, date from the fifth to eighth centuries and attest two Tocharian languages, Tocharian A and Tocharian B. These languages both used the Tocharian alphabet, a version of the Brahmi script. The tribe, especially the Kucheans, thrived in the first millennium C.E. until about the eighth century (Mallory and Adams 590-594, Mallory 55-65, Pinault ‘Buddhist’ 89, Yu 2).

⁹ *Mahavastu* was written in Pāli sometime between the second century CE and the fourth century CE

¹⁰ There are additional versions of *Puṇyavanta Jātaka* that also don’t follow the original Sanskrit version. Besides the Tocharic version, there is one Arabic version, three Buddhist versions (one in Sanskritized Prākṛit, one Chinese and one Tibetan), and three Jinistic versions (again one in Prākṛit, one in Sanskrit, and one in old Gujarātī) (Dschi 284).

¹¹ They are brothers in the Chinese and Tibetan versions (Dschi 284).

¹² In *Mahavastu* “actual feats of the five companions [...] make up the content of the Jātaka,” (Lane 33). However, in the Tocharian *Puṇyavanta Jātaka*, the adventure stories of the five companions are limited to a few lines.

example in a tale. This is the third, (c), context in which *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* is preserved.

The story and comparisons of the versions

A brief outline of the story of *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*, common to all versions, goes as follows (based on English, French and German translations in Dutt *Gilgit* 166-168, Schiefner 17-18, Lane 33-53, Malzahn A5-A9, Pinault *Chrestomathie* 254-267, Sieg 8-13, Chavannes 2: 12-13, Davids 361-362, Dschi 323-324, Hofinger 185-187, Degener 47-48):¹³

A foreigner, a painter by profession, comes to a distant land where he is hosted by a mechanic. In order to serve his guest at his best, the mechanic puts a wooden mechanical maiden on the painter's bed. The painter falls madly in love with her and tries to communicate with her, but she doesn't respond. He knows he should not touch her, because she belongs to his wonderful host. However, he cannot help himself and reaches for her, and as soon as he holds her hand, she falls to pieces. The painter is ashamed when he realizes that he was tricked by the mechanic, and he decides to trick his host in turn. He paints himself on the door/the wall as if he has been hanged, and hides himself. When the mechanic sees that his guest has killed himself because of his prank, he starts crying over such a tragic denouement. The royal servants come/are called to confirm the suicide and they all cry, not being able to see that the painter in the painting is not flesh and blood. Just as they suggest cutting the rope with an axe, the painter comes out of his hiding place and victoriously announces his trick.

¹³ For readers that are familiar with French or German, I enclose translations of the two Sanskrit sources in the Appendix. These two translations were produced from the original versions of the tale.

Three topics were apparently of principle importance for the audiences of the time: the virtue of wisdom (as the moral of the story), and the twin problems of illusion and disgrace. The virtue of wisdom¹⁴ is highly relevant to the problem of illusion in the tale because, despite succumbing to illusion and blind passion for the mechanical maiden, the painter ultimately defeats the mechanic by giving him a taste of his own medicine. Although it is unclear whether the mechanic intended to trick his guest into believing that the mechanical maiden was real, the painter's intent to produce a believable illusion (a human-like artwork in place of an actual human being) is certain. The painter's triumph therefore comes from his ultimate success in returning the trick. In addition to demonstrating the superiority of his illusion, he manages to embarrass the mechanic in front of other people and even royal representatives. Although both artisans lose wisdom during the story by succumbing to artistic illusion, all versions of the tale conclude that the magical skill¹⁵ of bringing inanimate objects to seeming life will never overcome the wisdom of a sage.

The main point of difference among the versions of this tale lies in how they convey the concluding message. The Sanskrit versions are identical in their endings, emphasizing the superiority of Śāriputra's power of wisdom over Maudgalyāyana's power of magic.¹⁶ The older

¹⁴ The wisdom (Skt. *prajñā*) in Buddhism implies knowledge, understanding, consciousness, and intuition (*jñā*), which is a supreme, spontaneous knowing (*pra-*) (Monier-Williams 425, 652, Foltz 40).

¹⁵ The phrase "magical skill" here corresponds to the Sanskrit term *ṛddhi*, which means accomplishment, perfection, supernatural power, and magic (Monier-Williams 226).

¹⁶ "Celui qui, en ce temps, en cette circonstance, était le maître mécanicien, c'est le bhikṣu Maudgalyāyana ; celui qui, en ce temps, en cette circonstance, était le maître peintre, c'est le bhikṣu Śāriputra. En ce temps déjà, celui-là fut surpassé en habileté par celui-ci ; maintenant aussi, il vient de l'être en pouvoir magique" (Hofinger 187); "Derjenige, der jener Malermeister war, ist jener Mönch Śāriputra. Derjenige, der jener Mechanikermeister war, ist eben jener Mahāmaudgalyāyana. Auch da wurde er von diesem durch Kunstfertigkeit besiegt. Auch jetzt wurde er durch diesen besiegt" (Degener 48).

Chinese version, much like the original Sanskrit versions, addresses questions of magic and wisdom.¹⁷ The newer Chinese version emphasizes the negative outcomes for both artisans, moralizing that, “in this world men deceive each other” and that “truth is nothing but deception” [trans. N. B.] (Chavannes 2: 13) and, ultimately, overtly appealing to readers to join Buddhism.¹⁸ The Tibetan version, on the other hand, refrains from further comment after the painter reveals his trick.¹⁹ The Tocharian version emphasizes human wisdom and its absence in non-human entities, but never turns to Buddhist ideas.²⁰ Thus, we can see that some versions appeal directly to Buddhism (Sanskrit and Chinese) while others allude to it only implicitly (Tocharian) or not at all (Tibetan). Despite the same themes being addressed in all versions, the ending of the original two Sanskrit versions has clearly been adjusted in Tibetan, Tocharian, and newer Chinese translations. In the three adjusted versions, the ending becomes a sort of cadenza in which the translators (or rather, in this case, writers) emphasize the point that will affect their audience most powerfully. In the newer Chinese version, the same sort of embellishment also occurs in other segments of the story, while the Tocharian version

¹⁷ “Der Buddha sprach zu den Mönchen: ‘Was denkt ihr darüber? Damals war der Malermeister Śāriputra, und der, welcher das mechanische hölzerne Mädchen machte, war Mahāmaudgalyāyana. Weil er zu jener Zeit Geschicklichkeit besaß und jenen zu besiegen vermochte, wird er jetzt durch übernatürliche Kraft (*rddhi*) wiederum den Sieg erlangen” (Dschi 324).

¹⁸ “L’hôte et le maître de la maison étant parvenus à leurs fins, aucun d’eux n’avait été humilié par l’autre; ils se dirent l’un à l’autre : ‘En ce monde, les hommes se trompent mutuellement; en quoi cela est-il différent de ce qui vient de se passer?’ Alors ces deux homes reconnurent en vérité ce qu’est la tromperie; chacun renonce à tout ce qu’il aimait pour sortir du monde et entrer en religion (Chavannes 2: 13).

¹⁹ “Da kam der Maler aus dem Versteck hervor und sagte: ‘O Hausgenosse, du hast mich allein zum Besten gehalten, ich aber habe dick inmitten des königlichen Gefolfes zum Besten gehalten.’” (Schieffner 16-17).

²⁰ “Thus a figure of wood and painting, too, (calls forth) the love [and] affection of the living beings, (calls forth), but by no means can it create superiority either for itself or for others in [case of] a lack of wisdom. Strength, too, will be to the damage of the beings in [case of] a lack of wisdom” (Malzahn A9 b6 to A10 a1).

contains so many additions that it should not be labeled a translation, but rather an adaptation.

Based on this relatively free approach to translation, it appears that the translator's role in these communities was not only to transmit cultural knowledge through language, but also to influence the reception of that knowledge in a way they found most appropriate, knowing the ethnographic background of their specific audiences. As a result, translations are not only adjusted to the new cultural environment, but are sometimes produced in multiple versions in order to reflect the needs of different specific audiences. For example, Édouard Chavannes reports that there are two versions of Kumārajīva's translations—proving, in his opinion, that the translator “remained open to additions and deletions that editors made of their own will” [trans. N. B.] (1: i).

Complete faithfulness to the original version was thus clearly not a priority for translators of *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*, as might be expected for a text used for religious purposes. There is also the additional complication that there were at least two original Sanskrit tales, which differed a bit in their elaboration of the story's details. This is particularly true of the version from the *Kathināvadāna*, which features a longer description of the courting process. Overall, most of the translations are quite faithful to the original Sanskrit stories, and follow the storyline as described above without major modifications. Two versions, the older Chinese version and Tocharian version, however, both add a significant amount of detail to the otherwise short and relatively unembellished story. Indeed, as mentioned above, the Tocharian version has been expanded significantly (it is by far the longest text) and should be considered an adaptation rather than a translation of the tale. In what follows, I will first make a comparison between the older Chinese and Tocharian tales and then proceed to discuss the Tocharian version in relation to the original Sanskrit tale.

The older Chinese and Tocharian versions show a number of similarities in their alternations to the original Sanskrit versions that merit a direct comparison. It is difficult to prove specifically any direct influence here, but it is not unlikely that one of the versions influenced the other. Moreover, the geographical nature of the Silk Road trade route yields a high probability that it was the Tocharian variant that influenced the Chinese one: Buddhist monks regularly traveled from India to China via Tocharian territory in the Taklamakan desert. Kumārajīva himself, the above-mentioned Buddhist monk who translated the Buddhist texts to Chinese, is a good example of such practice.²¹ Contacts of Tocharian monks and Chinese monks are a confirmed fact, but we don't know a lot about the circulation and translation of the Buddhist texts during that time.

Another clue that links the Tocharian and older Chinese versions of the tale appears in the introduction to the newer Chinese version, which Hiän Lin Dschi remarks “mostly matches with the Tocharian version” (Dschi 323). Although Dschi notices the similarities between these two versions, he was not familiar with the older Chinese version, which is, in fact, even more similar to the Tocharian. It is necessary to note, however, that translations into modern Western languages often relied on “Chinese parallels [that] cleared up several difficult spots” in the Tocharian version (Lane 35), meaning that modern translations are sometimes a mixture

²¹ A monk like Kumārajīva (or even he himself) was likely the translator of the discussed tale. “[N]é d'un père venu de l'Inde et d'une princesse de Koutcha, Kumārajīva fut la lumière de Koutcha [龜茲], avant d'étonner de son savoir Lu Kouang [呂曠] qui régnait à Leang tcheou [涼州], puis Yao Hing [堯皇], de la dynastie des Ts'in [清朝] postérieurs, qui avait sa capitale à Tch'ang-ngan [長安]” (Chavannes 1: i). Some sources say he died in Chang-an while others claim he left for Luo-yang [洛陽] in 402 and stayed there until his death (Foltz 51). He was the “first major translator of Mahayana texts into Chinese,” but the Mahayana school did not develop its own *vinaya* and thus Chinese monks “follow[ed] either the *vinaya* of the Sarvastivada or the Dharmaguptaka schools, precisely those that were first to dominate the Silk Road” (Foltz 50). As Pinault remarks, it is “very likely that the *Vinaya* of Sarvāstivādin included analogous texts to the *Gilgit manuscripts* of the *Vinaya* of Mulasarvāstivādin” [trans. N. B.] (Pinault *Chrestomatie* 262), the later being the manuscript that includes *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*.

of the two sources. In order to overcome this problem, of course, one should work with original texts and not translations—but such a practice still cannot overcome the significant problem of lacunae in the original texts. Most versions of *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* have a few lacunae, including the original Sanskrit ones (Pinault *Chrestomathie* 252).²² Additionally, it is likely that there once existed more versions of the tale than those we can access today. For now, we can only speculate about possible connections between the two versions with the following textual evidence.

The first resemblance between the Tocharian and older Chinese version is that, unlike the other versions, these two accounts do not identify the painter and the mechanic as two of the Buddha’s disciples. Second, these two versions omit certain significant details, or show changes in their meaning. The most significant omission is that of a particular ‘policy of the land,’ which dictates that the king must verify every suicide. Failing to mention this policy loosens the story’s connection to any particular kingdom and thus diffuses its “ethnographical background” [trans. N. B.] (Pinault *Chrestomatie* 263). In other versions, the inclusion of this detail augments the mechanic’s shame by making that shame not only publicly, but royally witnessed.

The Tocharian version of the story also takes pains to accentuate the mechanic’s disgrace but does so in a different manner. In all versions of the tale, there is a crowd of busybodies come to see the dead body and act as “a sort of choir,” reacting as “a mirror image to the supposed audience of the story” [trans. N. B.] (Pinault *Chrestomatie* 263). These observers all believe the painting to be the actual painter, and are naïve enough to suggest cutting the rope

²² On a positive note, the Tocharian tale is “the longest continuous text preserved” in the Tocharian B language (Winter 29).

with an axe. In the Tocharian version alone, however, this role is transferred to the mechanic himself (Pinault *Chrestomathie* 263)—a point that is emphasized twice (Malzahn A9 b1 and b2).

Aside from identical omissions, the Tocharian and older Chinese version also share certain common embellishments. For instance, both tales include a description of the mechanical maiden and her irresistible beauty and a detailed description of the hanged body, neither of which is found in the original or any other versions. In this regard, the older Chinese version is especially picturesque, despite its overall short and concise form. Georges-Jean Pinault remarks that the description of the hanged body is very Villonesque, a reference to François Villon's *Ballade des pendus*, also known as *Építaphe* or *Frères humains* (*Chrestomathie* 263). The following excerpt from the older Chinese version illuminates this analogy quite well:

Sur la muraille il peignit sa propre image, revêtue d'habits identiques à ceux de son propre corps, une corde lui serrant le cou, et ayant tout l'air d'un homme mort par strangulation; il représentera par la peinture des mouches posées sur la bouche et des oiseaux la becquetant.

(Chavannes 2: 13).²³

The Tocharian description is no less illustrative:

The head tilted a little—

the eyes set, with the protruding lips (lit. stretched towards the front) the [last] sighs going out of the throat, hands and feet hanging down,

²³ “He painted his own image on the wall, covered with clothes identical to the ones on his body, a rope squeezing his neck, and having the air of a man who died of strangulation; he also added on the painting some flies on the lips and some birds pecking them” [trans. N. B.] (Chavannes 2: 13).

with the lascivious lower abdomen, a rope around his neck, hanging on a nail
(like one) killed,

the golden skin of this body having become pale

thus he painted himself as if real.

(Malzahn A8 a4-b1)

As these short excerpts show, the two versions are artistically refined and make use of rich descriptions and direct speech in order to make the story vivid and literarily attractive. Most of the other versions use direct speech, but the Tocharian version is notably more elaborated, using versification for direct speech and tense shifts for dramatizing effect. In his paper on ‘Tocharian drama,’ Werner Winter argues that the Tocharian version was *performed as drama*, although not in the Western sense of drama as a staged production. Indeed, although the Tocharian tale lacks main criteria for drama—the “designation,” “stage directions,” “mention of a typical stage character,” and “fast change of the action” (Winter 27)—Winter nevertheless argues that it could be considered performable due to the interchange of prose and verse (so-called *prosimetrum*, a combination of prose and metrum) and the tense shifts (28). On the latter point, Winter notes that all verbs in the present tense in the tale “denote an action that can easily be enacted on stage,” for example, speaking, laughing, yawning, etc. (30), although certain other verbs that could also be acted out (painting, weeping, shouting, etc.) remain in the past tense. Winter explains this contrast by positing that events which could not readily be performed on a stage were, instead, narrated in the past tense. He concludes that “Tocharian dramatic performance is done on two levels—that of action proper, and that of narration. The range of enacting is very small; no stage implements are used” (33). Moreover, he cautiously

suggests that the performance element of the drama might even have been danced, based on “terms used to label the tunes” (33).

The type of performance postulated by Winter strongly resonates with the Chinese genre of *chu-kung-tiao* [諸宮調], “a ramification of story-telling, set to musical tunes” that started in the early eleventh century and flourished in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Shanxi province (Nienhauser 332, Chen 124). The similarities between *chu-kung-tiao* and the Tocharian tale are strongest in the prosimetric pattern: the melodies in *chu-kung-tiao* that belong “to the same mode are arranged in suites [and] the different suites are connected by prose passages. As a rule, each suite belongs to a mode different from those of the suites preceding and following it” (Nienhauser 332). This description exactly parallels what is found in the Tocharian tale, where the main ideas are versified in various types of meters. Additionally, the “suites” are similarly as “short and concise” as the Tocharian verses (Nienhauser 332).

Another Chinese genre from that same time, called *pien-wen* [變文] (literally, transformation texts), also shares some characteristics with the Tocharian tale—the most obvious again being the prosimetric form (Mair 90). It is generally accepted that the *pien-wen* genre was brought into China with Buddhist narratives from India (Mair 90-93, see also Pinault ‘Buddhist’ 100-101).²⁴ According to Victor H. Mair, Chinese “transformation texts were a form of Buddhist-influenced prosimetric storytelling (normally associated with pictures) that enjoyed broad currency, particularly among the lower strata of society, from the middle of the T’ang period to its end” (170). Mair defined the following characteristics of the genre: 1) *pien-wen* are narrative texts, 2) in vernacular language, 3) with prosimetric structure, 4) related

²⁴ The Buddhist influence is certain, however, Victor H. Mair writes that some scholars believe there also must have been a “native source” in China (95).

explicitly or implicitly with images, 5) using specific pre-verse formulas in front of versified parts (15, 27, 73-105, see also Pinault ‘Une version’ 210).

Noting that the characteristics and time frame of the *pien-wen* genre align with the Tocharian Buddhist materials, Pinault concludes that Tocharian narratives “provide the missing link between the Indic prosimetric genre and the Chinese *pien-wen*” (‘Buddhist’ 101, ‘Une version’ 212). The pre-verse formula in *pien-wen*, according to Mair (6, 27-28, also in Pinault ‘Une version’ 210), goes as follows: “(Please look for a moment at the) place [where] X [occurs]. How [should I] present [it]? Or: How does it go?” This formula is also found in the Tocharian tale. For example: “She, that with his [the mechanic’s] reverence held in her hand, as it were, beauty and reverence, attended to him. But how so? || in the S.-tune:|| Like one ashamed casting her glance to the ground a little, she looked lovely” (A4 b1-b3). “He painted himself opposite(?) the door. But how so? || in the Ş.-tune:|| The head tilted a little—the eyes set” (A7 a4-a5).

These versified segments present “oral ‘performance,’” as opposed to the prose segments that are visualized by the reader (Pinault ‘Une version’ 210). *Pien-wen* is always labeled as a narrative and not performative genre, but this explanation by Pinault seems to suggest—judging from the Tocharian sources—that there might have been a performance. If the two genres, Chinese *pien-wen* and the Tocharian tale, are indeed related, then Winter’s theory on Tocharian “drama” should be tested on *pien-wen* texts as well; such an exploration would hopefully shed some light on these narratives and the way they were shared among and within the communities. Even if it turns out that *pien-wen* genre had absolutely no performative aspects, this doesn’t necessarily mean that Winter’s idea on “drama” in Tocharian prosimetric texts wouldn’t work.

Comparative study of these literatures is thus an important undertaking, and should first be preceded by detailed study of the transmission of Indian materials to Tocharian areas. For instance, classical Indian drama needs to be taken into account before making any conclusions on dramatic elements in Tocharian texts, because “the classical drama of India has a peculiar construction, the prose being continually interrupted by stanzas in various metres” (Mair 97). The Tocharian tale was composed sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries, and literary influence from India is a fact. Winter, furthermore, suggests that an additional parallel be drawn with the Tibetan drama, which “shows striking affinities to the type of performance described [in the Tocharian tale]” (35).

Despite the fact that *pien-wen* genre was very likely influenced by the south-western cultures through Buddhism—as confirmed by Mair’s “Indian hypothesis” (106-09) and substantiated by evidence from the Tocharian text discussed here and, foremost, in Pinault (‘Une version’ 209-213)—these genres were not necessarily alike in all their characteristics and have evolved in specific ways in the respective languages. From the perspective of typical content, for instance, the differences between the two genres are rather large: *pien-wen* recounts “heroic, epic” events while *chu-kung-tiao* narrates “domestic, realistic-comic” events (Chen 132); Tocharian material typically corresponds to neither type. Pinault proposes that it is perfectly possible to imagine that the Tocharian tale was composed entirely in the Tocharian milieu from numerous Indo-Buddhist sources that the author had at his disposal (*Chrestomathie* 268). He also reports that the precise sources of the additions in the Tocharian tale have not yet been located in Buddhist literature (*Chrestomathie* 263), except for the list of prohibited women, which is found in Buddhist sources (such as *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* or *The Treatise of the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna*, translated by Kumārajīva) as well as Hindu sources (such as *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* or *The Laws of Manu*). As I demonstrated at the opening of this paper,

the folkloristic influence of these additions is significant and very likely. Since the Tocharian tale is labeled as *jātaka*, we can assume that the circulation was similar if not identical to standard *jātaka* tales, which circulated orally in the form of folk tales: as a result of this orality, the versified parts of the tales tended to be better preserved than the prose (Gokuldas De in Mair 97). The missing link between the Indian and Chinese tales (cf. Chavannes 1: xviii) is therefore found in the connection of folkloristic materials to the spreading of Buddhist religion—*The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* is a perfect example of such a practice.

Further support for a connection between the discussed genres and the Tocharian version of the tale comes from the fact that all of them used more or less the same content, with Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana, Buddha’s main disciples, as common protagonists. These texts, however, were not necessarily or completely Buddhist. Pinault, for instance, believes that the additional passages in the Tocharian tale “appeal to the stereotypes and citations from normative Indian literature—in a nutshell, on a ground that is not unique to Buddhism” [trans. N. B.] (*Chrestomathie* 264). He adds that, since Buddhist sources for these additional materials have not yet been identified, the sources were most likely non-Buddhist (*Chrestomatie* 263). A non-Buddhist source seems particularly likely because the ideas discussed in these additional passages can also be found in juridical tradition and gnomic literature, such as the *Laws of Manu* (*Chrestomatie* 265). In the following paragraphs, I’ll discuss the additions to the Tocharian tale (if compared to the two original Sanskrit versions of the tale) and their connections with the non-Buddhist sources.

As mentioned in the comparison with the older Chinese version, there are two additions that the Tocharian and older Chinese versions share: a description of the wooden maiden

(Malzahn A5 b3, A6 a1-a2) and a realistic description of the hanged painter (A7 a4-b1).²⁵ Other Tocharian additions to the story include a description of the mechanic's hospitality (A6 a3-a5); a description of painter's courtship with the mechanical maiden (A6 a5-b3); a list of prohibited women (A6 b4 to A7 a2); and the painter's lecture on his trick with illusion (A7 b2-b4) (Pinault *Chrestomathie* 263). All these segments are dramatized and half are also versified,²⁶ thus greatly contributing to the literary elaboration of the Tocharian version. From the perspective of content, they also add significant information to the basic story.

The list of prohibited women particularly stands out among these additions, because it is not an elaborated description of a feature already present in other versions, but rather—like the painter's lecture on illusion—an emphasized point in the story. The list is inserted into the part of the story where the painter ponders on why the maiden was given to him and whether he should hold back or pursue her. I quote the entire list here:

Again he thinks: Seeing the great danger, the wise ones are not allowed here to profess love to ten kinds of women. Thus it is said: to the royal spouse, to the father's spouse, to the spouse of a general, to that of a relative, to that of the teacher, to an exceedingly adulatory woman, to a woman thinking of profit, to a woman available to many, and mainly (to a beautiful) (to a beauty)ful woman he who loves his life shall not go. Therefore this one as [she is] affiliated to my relative and mainly in her being beautiful to look at must not be made aware of the love.

²⁵ All further citations, ranging from A5 a1 to A9 a1, are from the webpage *A Comprehensive Edition of Tocharian Manuscripts*, edited by Melanie Malzahn and her team.

²⁶ The versified parts are the descriptions: of the wooden maiden, of the hanged painter, and of their courtship.

There are quite a few categories of women included in this list: those prohibited through kinship (“to the father’s spouse,” “to that of a relative”), those prohibited through social status (“to the royal spouse,” “the spouse of a general,” “to an exceedingly adulatory woman,” “to that of the teacher”), and those prohibited through the likelihood of adultery (“to a woman thinking of profit, to a woman available to many, and mainly (to a beautiful) (to a beauty)ful woman”). Adultery is, according to many mentions in *The Laws of Manu*, one of the worst crimes: “A man formerly accused of (such) offences, who secretly converses with another man's wife, shall pay the first (or lowest) amercement” (VII 354).

We learn here that the mechanic is the painter’s relative and the wooden maiden is his affiliate: thus, respect towards one’s kin makes her prohibited to the painter. Furthermore, she is too beautiful to be courted—a prohibition that comes off as a sort of warning against the *femme fatale*. Pinault explains that women on such lists of prohibition tend to have a protector, usually a relative, and that otherwise they fall under the protection of the king (*Chrestomatie* 265).²⁷ Thus, the prohibition arises through the fear of incest, as the identity of a woman could be lost without a protector: “But a prudent man should not marry (a maiden) who has no brother, nor one whose father is not known, through fear lest (in the former case she be made) an appointed daughter (and in the latter) lest (he should commit) sin” (*Laws of Manu* III 11). The protector therefore—in this case, the mechanic—plays the role of the woman’s father, thus creating further resonance with the Pygmalion myth and *The Sandman*’s story, as we shall see below.

²⁷ “The king shall protect the inherited (and other) property of a minor, until he has returned (from his teacher's house) or until he has passed his minority. In like manner care must be taken of barren women, of those who have no sons, of those whose family is extinct, of wives and widows faithful to their lords, and of women afflicted with diseases” (*Laws of Manu* VIII 27 and 28).

By courting the mechanical maiden, the painter is clearly breaking at least two of the laws. Besides that, *The Laws of Manu* also say that “offering presents (to a woman), romping (with her), touching her ornaments and dress, sitting with her on a bed, all (these acts) are considered adulterous acts (samgrahana)” (VII 257). While, in the original story, the mechanic’s offer of the maiden to the painter as a servant (Degener 48, Hofinger 187) might be interpreted as either a trap of temptation for the painter or simply a hospitable gesture, the addition of the list of prohibited women makes it clear that the painter is not allowed to court the inanimate woman.

Analysis of the content and further resonances

In the following literary analysis of the tale, I will discuss the notions of illusion and imitation from the Western point of view, with the help of Greco-Roman philosophy and examples from Western mythology and literature. I will also compare the Silk Road tale to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Sandman* and illustrate the considerable resonance between these texts with no cultural or geographical connection.

First, let us consider why the painter is universally believed to be the winner of the involuntary contest between the two artisans who manage to deceive each other. Clear answers to this question are in fact few. One possibility is Buddhist convention: in all other literature sources, Śāriputra (equivalent to the painter in this tale) always goes second in the contest between two artisans, and he and his virtue are always considered superior despite this subsidiary position.²⁸ A second reason, emphasized in most versions of the tale, is the fact that the painter’s shame is revealed in private, while the mechanic’s shame is extremely public

²⁸ Many of texts in which the tale is embedded contain additional examples of contests between the two painters, called Maudgalyāyana and Śāriputra; Śāriputra’s wisdom always prevails over other virtues.

and therefore more disgraceful. A third possible explanation might be that the painter's skill is two-dimensional while the mechanic's is three dimensional, making the latter more responsible for his *trompe-l'œil*.

Despite these contrasts, there doesn't seem to be much practical difference between the two artisans and their reactions. The older Chinese version is the only one that openly addresses this issue; the end of this version acknowledges that both artisans equally failed to recognize the truth: "L'hôte et le maître de la maison étant parvenus à leurs fins, aucun d'eux n'avait été humilié par l'autre; ils se dirent l'un à l'autre : 'En ce monde, les hommes se trompent mutuellement; en quoi cela est-il différent de ce qui vient de se passer?'" (Chavannes 2: 13).²⁹ What is more, the painter's (or Śāriputra's, respectively) supreme virtue of wisdom is completely defeated when faced with the mechanic's work, but the mechanic's (or Maudgalyāyana's) great virtue of magic is, in fact, not defeated. It is also odd for the mechanic to have lost this contest, given that it took place on his own terrain.

Both artisans play with optical illusions that make them appear to have supernatural powers. Their power of illusion is so convincing that they both believe the other's artifice to be real without hesitation; neither notices that the object they look at is a visual representation rather than reality. The painter even mentions that the mechanical maiden's breasts lift a little, implying that she is breathing (Malzahn A6 a1-a2), and he himself paints his own image on the door "as if real" (Malzahn A7 a6). Both artisans fail to comprehend this twice-removed reality.

²⁹ "The guest and the host of the house achieved their respective purposes, none of them has been humiliated by the other; they said to each other: 'In this world, men deceive each other; how is this different from what has just happened?'" [trans. N. B.] (Chavannes 2: 13).

Looking at the contest from a Platonic perspective, I suggest that in fact the painter—and not the mechanic—is the one who truly loses the battle in his own field: the painter should know better than anyone—and certainly better than the mechanic—how illusion works. According to Plato’s *Republic*, the painter is “not a craftsman of some kind,” like a mechanic would be, but “an imitator of that of which these others are craftsmen” (597d), meaning that he doesn’t imitate the idea itself but “the works of craftsmen” (598a). In other words, painters are able to imitate without knowledge of the truth (598e-599a) and are thus twice removed from the truth. “Craftsmen” and mechanics, on the other hand, are only once removed from the truth, as they imitate the form itself (597e-598c).

In the discussion on imitation from the Book X of *The Republic* Socrates explains that there are three levels of existence: the form of a thing (the abstracted notion of a couch), the individual thing (a particular couch), and the imitation of the thing (a painting of a couch). In *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*, the painter’s work clearly falls into the final category (an imitation); however, the status of the mechanic’s work is less clear. Depending on one’s interpretation, the mechanical maiden may be an instance of either the second or the third category. There are two explanations for his work: either the mechanical maiden is an imitation of a human, which puts her into the third category, or she is an imitation of a doll, which categorization again depends on the interpretation. A mechanical maiden can be either seen as an object of a doll, and as such falls into the second category. It could also be seen as an object of a doll, which is in itself an imitation of a human form and therefore falls into the third category (a status of a mechanical maiden is similar to a lamp, for example, that imitates the light of the sun). It would be easier to find the right ontological status of the mechanical maiden coming from the painter’s perspective. However, reader is never told whether the

mechanic intended to trick the painter or whether the painter himself was seriously delusional in his perception of this human-like object as a fleshly human.

If the mechanic's intention was indeed to compete with the painter, then his work moves from the second category—where the work of a craftsman would normally fall—into the third category, where artisanship mingles with art. Under this interpretation, like everything that imitates human form, the mechanic's maiden imitates both the human form itself and the human-like form of a doll, and is thus twice removed from the truth. Given the other option, under which the mechanic never intended to trick his guest, we must infer that the painter's passionate desire for the mechanical maiden was so strong that it made him completely blind to reality: "Oh, such is the power of passion!" (Malzahn A7 b1); "Fie, blind passion!" (Malzahn A8 a1). In this case, the illusion that the painter experiences, in which a human-imitating object is taken for human, is caused not by the mechanic's skill but rather by the painter's delusional mind.

There is another twist to the Platonic analysis of *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*. In *The Republic*, Socrates claims that the painter's knowledge is inferior to that of the maker of other products and, furthermore, that the maker's knowledge is inferior to that of the user's (601c-602b). In the Silk Road tale, however, the user is always less knowledgeable than the maker. This implies that both the painter's and mechanic's imitations were so perfectly made that they superseded the category of imitation and entered the category of individual things. In other words, they moved from works of art to the reality that particular works of art represent.

There is plenty of commentary to be found on the problem of illusion throughout Western philosophy and fiction. For example, a contest between two artisans is a standard theme in the Greco-Roman tradition; a famous example comes from Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* in which he

recounts the contest of two renowned painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, who also trick each other with illusions. Likewise, statues treated like living women and statues undergoing an actual metamorphosis are common in many mythologies. A well-known example of the first type comes from a story in which Zeus wants to make Hera jealous, so he dresses up a new bride—a wooden doll. Angry Hera undresses the doll, realizes it is an artificial object, and requires it to be destroyed. A great example of the second type is the story of Pygmalion, famously depicted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Pygmalion sculpts a perfect ivory woman³⁰ and asks Aphrodite to give him a woman like his ivory statue. The statue truly becomes a woman of flesh and blood, and they get married and have a son. In other texts, the statue may be replaced by some other work of art, like a painting depicting a human, or by a scientifically modeled human-like creature, like an automaton. E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Olympia, from his short story *The Sandman*, is a particularly powerful example of the latter.

When we consider all these renowned examples alongside the Tocharian tale, we can see how a cluster of similar motifs occurs across the non-metamorphic variants of the story. In the final pages of this paper, I will compare the Silk Road tale with two texts, one from the Antiquity, the other from Romanticism, each of which have been influential in the Western literary tradition and beyond—E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Sandman* and Ovid’s *Pygmalion*. The cluster of motifs identified in the Silk Road tale and *The Sandman* will be examined and contrasted with those found in Pygmalion’s story.

All three stories are related through a main motif of a man falling in love with an artificial woman—a motif that grew into a major theme in the Western literary tradition. The most

³⁰ There are two common misconceptions about the Pygmalion’s story. First, Pygmalion’s profession is not a sculptor but a king of Cyprus. Second, he never names the statue Galatea but this name is attributed to her in later accounts.

important difference among the three stories is that, in *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* and *The Sandman*, the inanimate woman's creator is a different character from her naïve suitor. In Pygmalion's story, by contrast, the suitor and the creator are one and a single character: the Pygmalion himself. Most other major differences between the three stories stem from this central fact. For instance, since Pygmalion is the statue's creator and is therefore aware of her artificiality, he cannot be deluded to the extent that the painter and Nathanael are in *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* and *The Sandman*. What is more, Pygmalion's ivory girl undergoes an actual metamorphosis as her "flesh / grew soft, its ivory hardness vanishing" (Ovid 233), following which his relationship ends in a happy marriage and offspring—quite a different scenario from the disappointing experience of the other two suitors.

Setting Ovid's story aside for the moment, the cluster of motifs that connects the Silk Road tale with Hoffmann's tale is rather rich. Besides the main motif, three other motifs are surprisingly identical (although they lead to very different endings in the two stories). First is the motif of blind passion, which causes the two suitors to lose their minds and their judgment by falling into the trick of illusion. Their minds (and their eyes, which play a very important role in *The Sandman*) completely fail them and let their hearts prevail. Passion leads Nathanael into failure, increases his delusion, and ends ultimately in fatal heartbreak. The painter, on the other hand, is saved from his delusion and, disgraced, seeks revenge. Despite significant differences in the unraveling of the two stories, the same motifs appear consistently across the tales: the madness of blind passion, the loss of one's rational judgment, and finally, the motif of suicide as a plot twist. Pygmalion doesn't deal with any of these issues: his animated woman only breaks in the sense of relinquishing her human-like ivory armor in favor of actual, human flesh, rendering her ready to be his wife forever after.

A more detailed analysis of these tales is warranted, but outside the scope of the present paper. The discussion here has focused on two facets of the Silk Road tale *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*: its philology, and its various parallels with Western reflections of the same motif. In the first section of this paper, I provided a necessary overview of the context of the tale and contributed new insights to its interpretation. The second part identified and expanded on a basis for the inclusion of the Silk Road tale within the Pygmalion paradigm. I hope the kind of scholarship pursued here will help to broaden the scope of our study of animated human-like figures from the predominant Western literary tradition to Eastern literary sources. Beyond this effort, further studies of the Silk Road tales could explore the circulation of tales from the trade routes in the East (such as jātakas and *Panchatantra* collection) to their Western counterparts (Aesop's *Fables* via, for example, the *Thousand-and-One-Nights*).

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