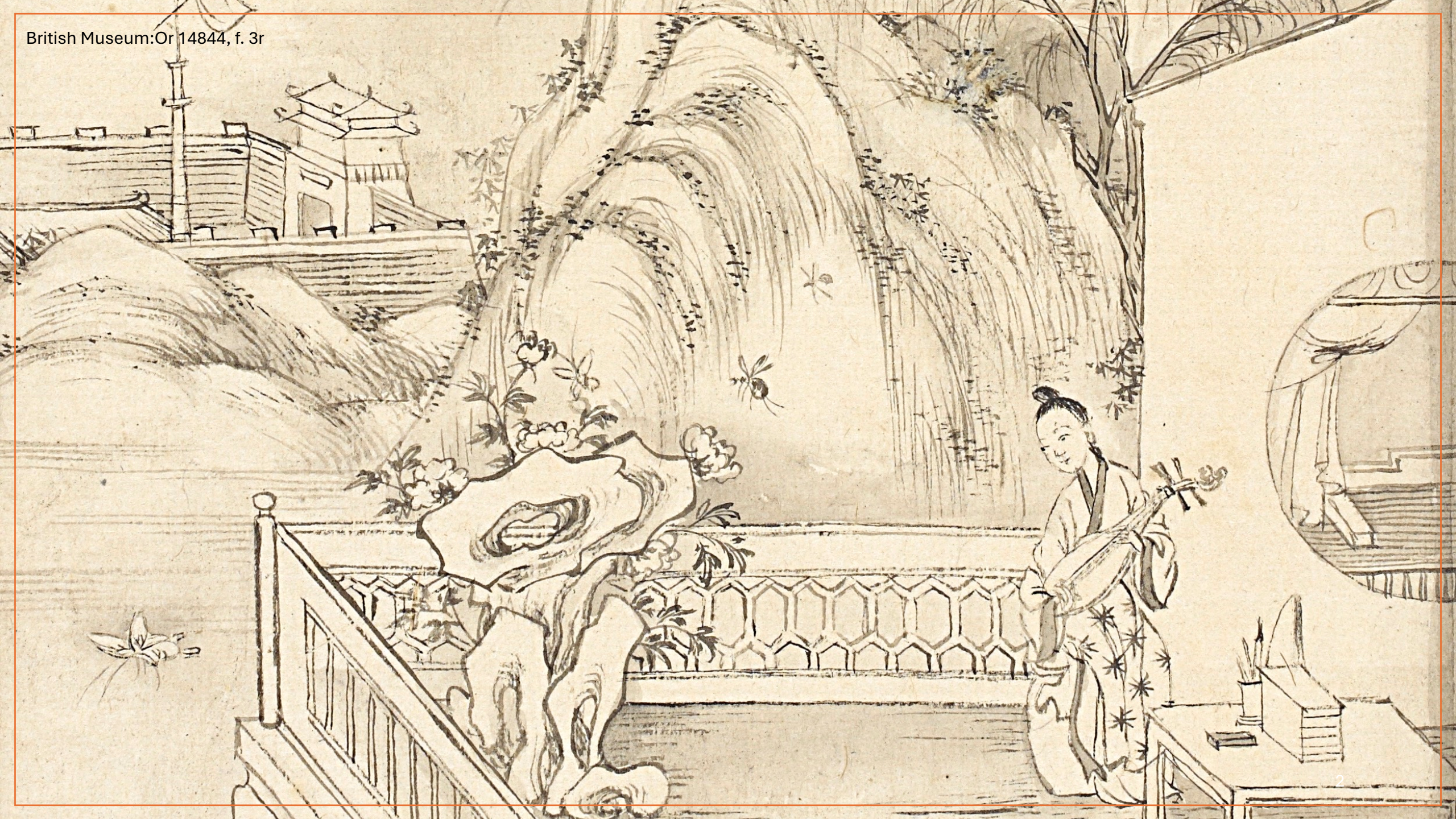


Structure & Genre in The Tale of Kiều

Asia for Educators

John D. Phan
Associate Professor of Vietnamese Humanities
Summer 2025
EALAC – Weatherhead
jp3720@columbia.edu

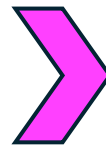




Sunlight on the melting
snow

 **A poem**

A story

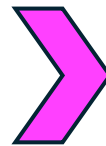


It had been a long winter. The hospital had taken most of November. There was a funeral, and afterwards, months of short days and unending snow. Then, suddenly, one morning, there was sunlight on the melting snow. It had been a long winter, but winter doesn't last forever.

Sunlight on the melting
snow

 **A poem**

A story

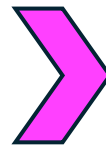


It had been a long winter. The hospital had taken most of November. There was a funeral, and afterwards, months of short days and unending snow. Then, suddenly, one morning, there was **sunlight on the melting snow**. It had been a long winter, but winter doesn't last forever.

Timeless, momentary, an expression of a sensibility. (Lyricism). **Verse?**

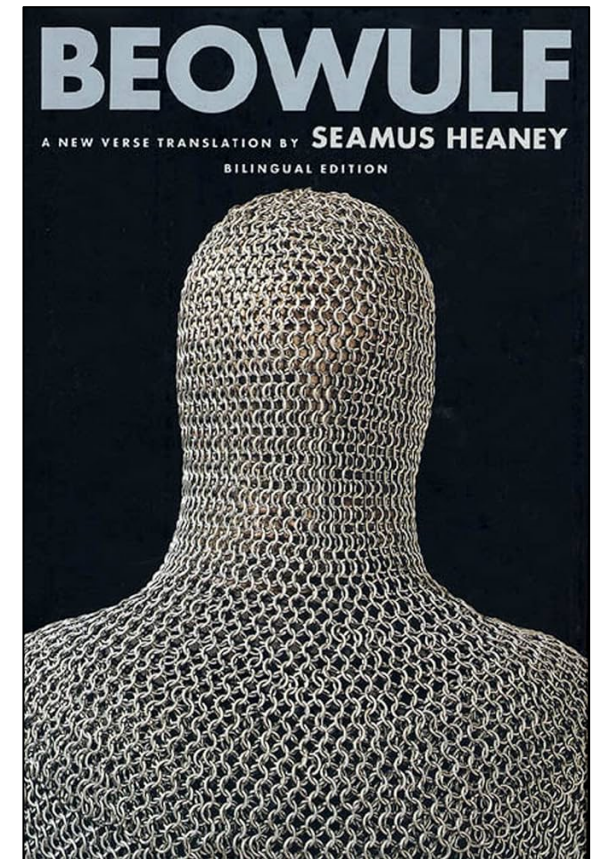
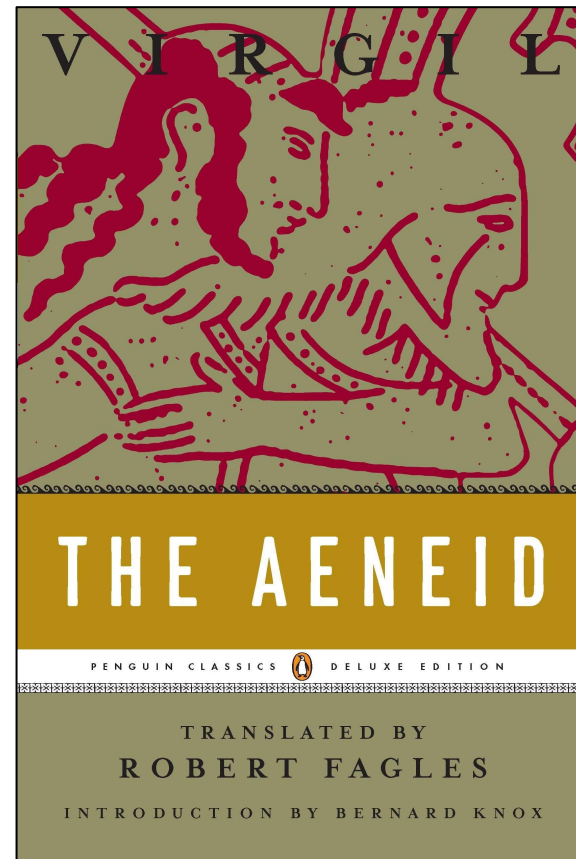
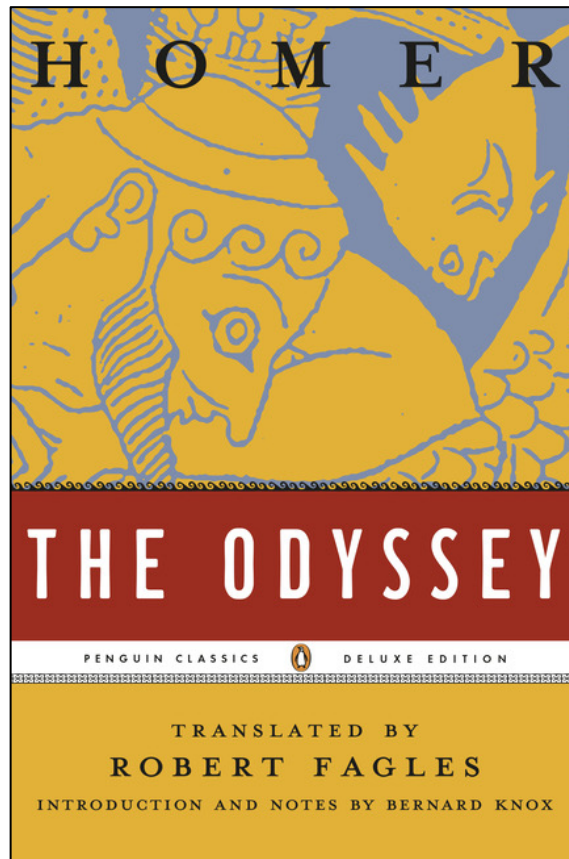
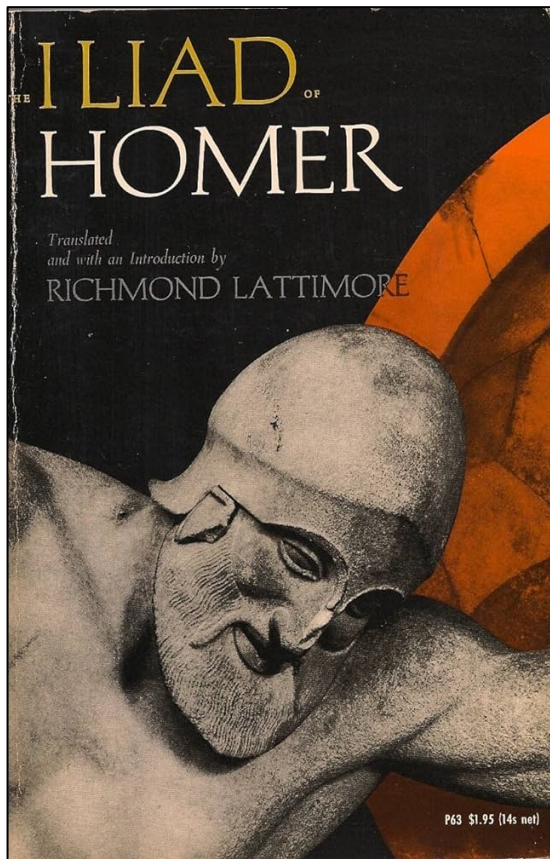
 **A poem**

A story

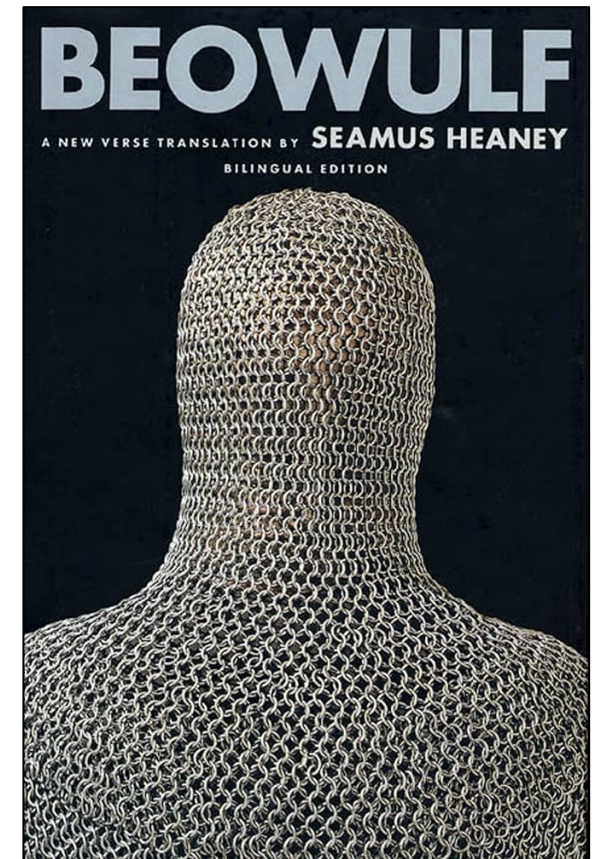
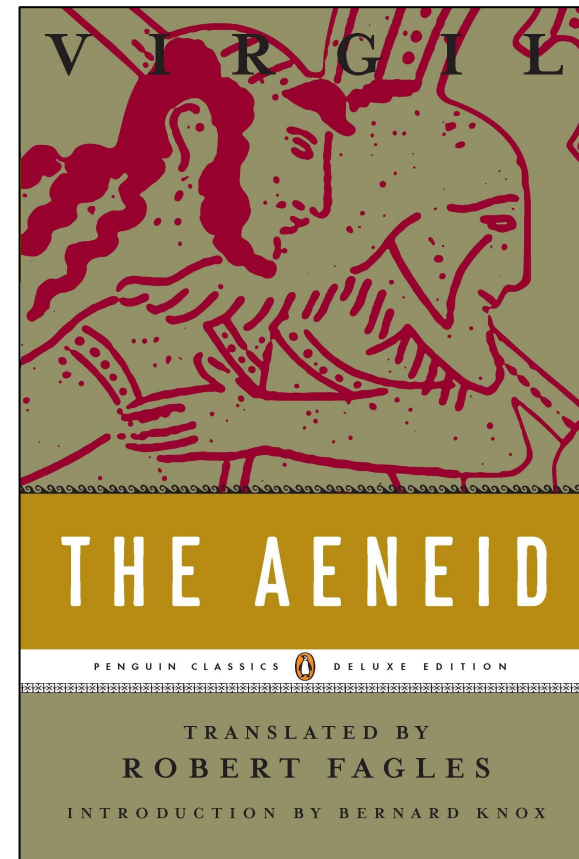
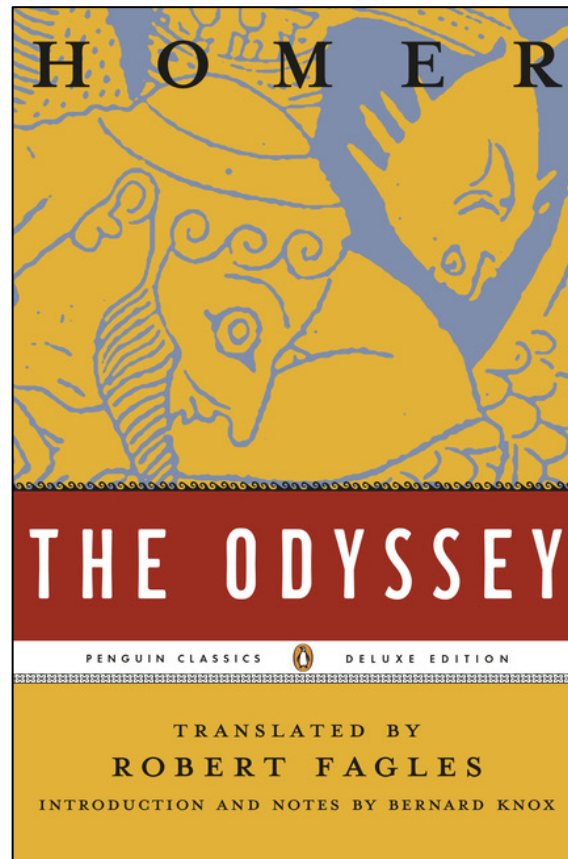
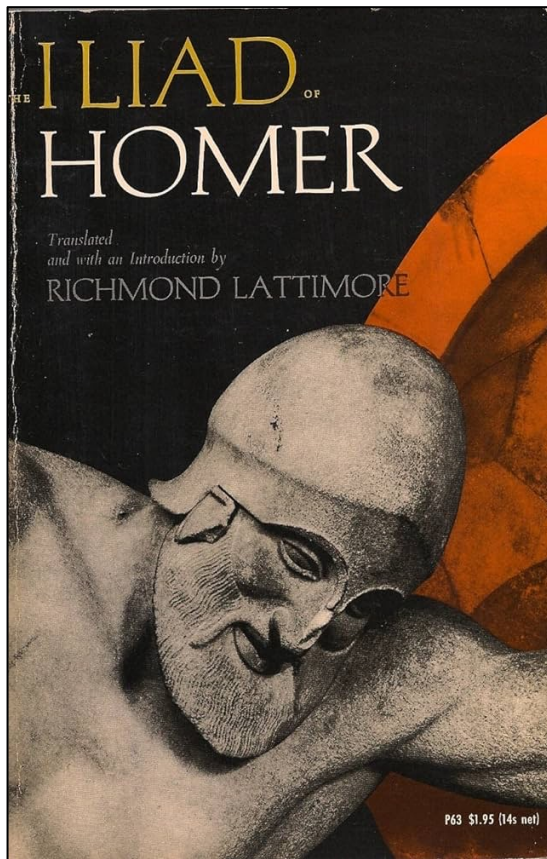


Plot, or series of events that elapse over time. Meaning is built and discharged as those events unfold over a timeline. You only understand the full meaning when you get to the end. **Prose?**

Stories cast into verse...



...EPIC narrative poems.



The background is a traditional Chinese ink wash illustration. It depicts a scholar in a long robe sitting on a stone platform, playing a guqin (zither). Behind him is a large, gnarled tree. In the distance, there are traditional Chinese buildings with tiled roofs and a bridge. The style is minimalist and elegant.

The Tale of Kiều:

Both a story and a poem

- Tells a story with a plot, that occurs over time
- But language is in verse, and lyrical expressivity.
- An epic?

暮輔齔揆得些
孖才孖命窖罗悒悒

Introducing The Tale of Kiều Asia for Educators

John D. Phan
Associate Professor of Vietnamese Humanities
Spring 2025
EALAC – Weatherhead
jp3720@columbia.edu



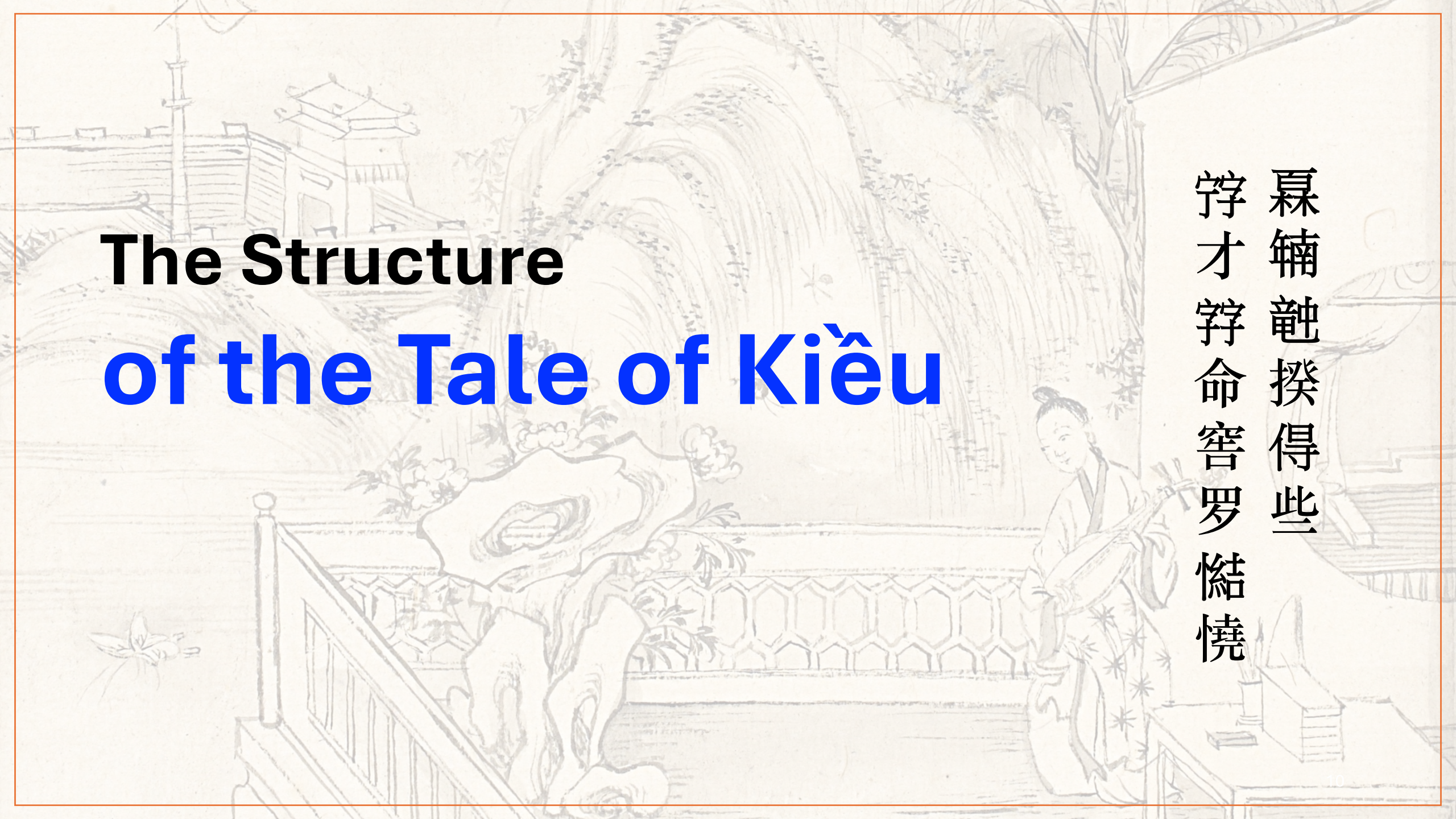
**Check it
out!**

Based on a Chinese novel

This song, “*Yue’er gao*,”⁴³ makes plain the fragile destiny of a beauty—a rarity among the fairer sex born with matchless talent and allure. She did not encounter the prosperity of a golden house,⁴⁴ but instead met with the bitterness of ravage and ruin. If we look from ancient times to the present, how many of these extraordinary beauties were able to escape a crushing downfall? (my translation)

這一曲《月兒高》，單道佳人命薄，紅粉時乖，生了絕代的才色，不能遇金屋之榮，反遭那摧殘之苦。試看從古及今，不世出的佳人，能有幾個得無破敗？

(Transformed into a Narrative Poem)

The background is a traditional Chinese ink wash illustration. It depicts a scholar in a long robe standing on a balcony or terrace, playing a guqin (zither). The balcony has a decorative railing. In the background, there are stylized mountains, a waterfall, and a traditional Chinese building with a tiled roof. The overall style is minimalist and elegant.

The Structure of the Tale of Kiêu

暮輔鵲揆得些
孖才孖命窖罗悒悒

Six Eight Meter lục bát

The Meter (syllables and stress)

Tonal Prosody

Rhyming Scheme

Six Eight Meter

6 Syllables →

<i>Trăm</i>	<i>năm</i>	<i>trong</i>	<i>cõi</i>	<i>người</i>	<i>ta</i>
-------------	------------	--------------	------------	--------------	-----------

8 Syllables →

<i>Chữ</i>	<i>tài</i>	<i>chữ</i>	<i>mệnh</i>	<i>khéo</i>	<i>là</i>	<i>ghét</i>	<i>nhau</i>
------------	------------	------------	-------------	-------------	-----------	-------------	-------------

Six Eight Meter

Iamb: 2 syllables; stress on
2nd syllable

	
Syllable 1	Syllable 2

<i>Trăm</i>	<i>năm</i>
-------------	------------

<i>trong</i>	<i>cõi</i>
--------------	------------

<i>người</i>	<i>ta</i>
--------------	-----------

<i>Chữ</i>	<i>tài</i>
------------	------------

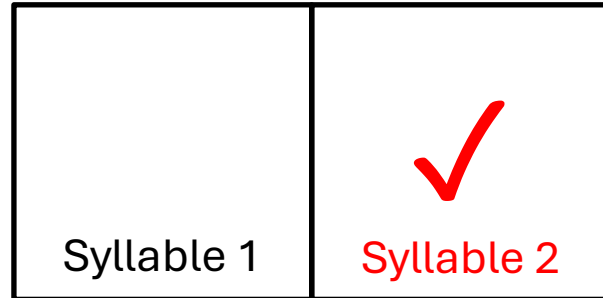
<i>chữ</i>	<i>mệnh</i>
------------	-------------

<i>khéo</i>	<i>là</i>
-------------	-----------

<i>ghét</i>	<i>nhau</i>
-------------	-------------

Six Eight Meter

Iamb: 2 syllables; stress on
2nd syllable



✓

Trăm	<i>năm</i>
------	------------

✓

trong	<i>cõi</i>
-------	------------

✓

người	<i>ta</i>
-------	-----------

✓

Chữ	<i>tài</i>
-----	------------

✓

chữ	<i>mệnh</i>
-----	-------------

✓

khéo	<i>là</i>
------	-----------

✓

ghét	<i>nhau</i>
------	-------------

Six Eight Meter

<i>Mai</i>	<i>cốt</i>	<i>cách</i>
------------	------------	-------------

<i>tuyệt</i>	<i>trình</i>	<i>thần</i>
--------------	--------------	-------------

Six Eight Meter

<i>Mai</i>	<i>cốt</i>	<i>cách</i>
------------	------------	-------------

<i>tuyệt</i>	<i>trình</i>	<i>thần</i>
--------------	--------------	-------------

Anapaest: 3 syllables, with major stress on
3rd syllable (+ sometimes secondary stress on 1st syllable)

Syllable 1	Syllable 2	Syllable 3

Six Eight Meter

<i>Mai</i>	<i>cốt</i>	<i>cách</i>
------------	------------	-------------

<i>tuyệt</i>	<i>trình</i>	<i>thần</i>
--------------	--------------	-------------

Anapaest: 3 syllables, with major stress on
3rd syllable (+ sometimes secondary stress on 1st syllable)

(✓) Syllable 1	Syllable 2	✓ Syllable 3
-------------------	------------	-----------------

Six Eight Meter

✓		✓
<i>Mai</i>	<i>cốt</i>	<i>cách</i>

✓		✓
<i>tuyệt</i>	<i>trình</i>	<i>thần</i>

Anapaest: 3 syllables, with major stress on
3rd syllable (+ sometimes secondary stress on 1st syllable)

(✓)		✓
Syllable 1	Syllable 2	Syllable 3

Six Eight Meter

Anapaest: 3 syllables,
with major stress on 3rd syllable (and
sometimes secondary stress on 1st
syllable)

✓		✓
<i>Mai</i>	<i>cốt</i>	<i>cách</i>

✓		✓
<i>tuyệt</i>	<i>trình</i>	<i>thần</i>

Six Eight Meter

Anapaest: 3 syllables,
with major stress on 3rd syllable (and
sometimes secondary stress on 1st
syllable)

✓ ✓

<i>Mai</i>	<i>cốt</i>	<i>cách</i>
------------	------------	-------------

✓ ✓

<i>tuyệt</i>	<i>ting</i>	<i>thần</i>
--------------	-------------	-------------

Iamb: 2 syllables; stress on
2nd syllable

✓

<i>Mỗi</i>	<i>người</i>
------------	--------------

✓

<i>một</i>	<i>vẻ</i>
------------	-----------

✓

<i>mười</i>	<i>phân</i>
-------------	-------------

✓

<i>vẹn</i>	<i>mười</i>
------------	-------------

More typical

Six Eight Meter *tonal prosody*

Vietnamese language has six tones, and all of these tones are classified into one of two categories:

Level tones

thanh bình 平聲

Oblique tones

thanh trắc 仄聲

Six Eight Meter *tonal prosody*

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

Trăm năm trong cõi người ta

Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu

Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng

Six Eight Meter *tonal prosody*

Level tone
Thanh bằng

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

Trăm *năm* trong cõi người *ta*

Chữ *tài* chữ mệnh khéo *là* ghét *nhau*

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải *qua* một cuộc bể *dâu*

Những *điều* trông thấy mà *đau* đớn *lòng*

Six Eight Meter *tonal prosody*

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

*Trăm năm trong **cõi** người ta*

*Chữ tài chữ **mệnh** khéo là ghét nhau*

Oblique tone

Thanh trắc

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

*Trải qua một **cuộc** bể dâu*

*Những điều trông **thấy** mà đau đớn lòng*

Six Eight Meter *tonal prosody*

Level tone

Thanh bằng

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

Trăm *năm* trong *cõi* người *ta*

Chữ *tài* chữ *mệnh* khéo *là* ghét *nhau*

Oblique tone

Thanh trắc

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải *qua* một *cuộc* bể *dâu*

Những *điều* trông *thấy* mà *đau* đớn *lòng*

Six Eight Meter *rhyming*

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

Trăm năm trong cõi người ta

Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu

Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng

Six Eight Meter *rhyming*

Rhyme 1 (-a)

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

*Trăm năm trong cõi người **ta***

*Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo **là** ghét nhau*

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu

Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng

Six Eight Meter *rhyming*

Rhyme 1
(-a)

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

Trăm năm trong cõi người ta

Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau

Rhyme 2
(-au/-âu)

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu

Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng

Six Eight Meter *rhyming*

Rhyme 1
(-a)

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

Trăm năm trong cõi người *ta*

Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo *là* ghét *nhau*

Rhyme 2
(-au/-âu)

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải qua một cuộc bể *dâu*

Những điều trông thấy mà *đau* đớn *lòng*



Six Eight Meter lục bát

-	y	-	x	-	yR1		
-	y	-	x	-	yR1	-	yR2

Trăm năm trong cõi người ta

Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau

-	y	-	x	-	yR2		
-	y	-	x	-	yR2	-	yR3

Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu

Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng

Six Eight Meter lục bát

The Meter (mostly iambic)

Tonal Prosody (alternating)

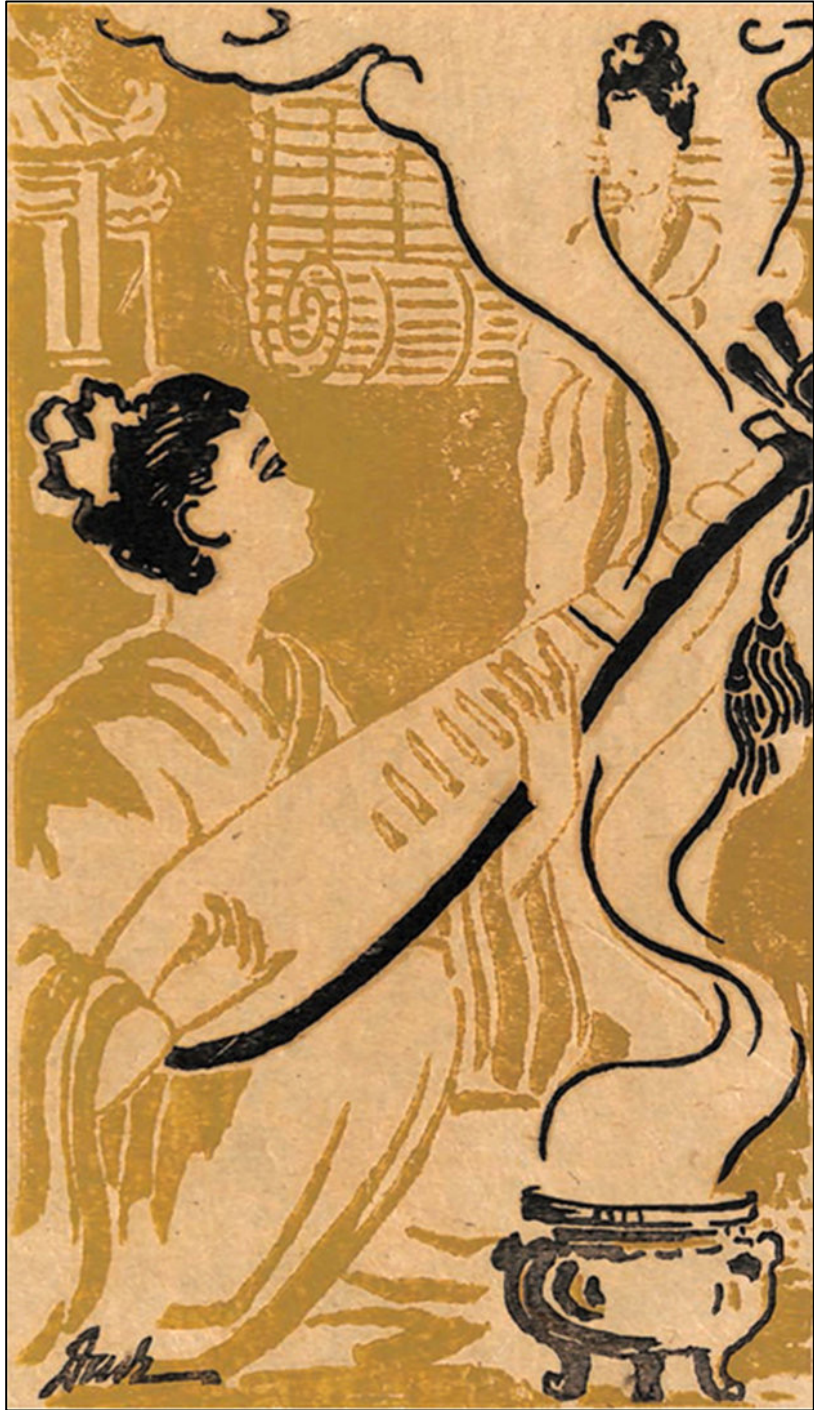
Rhyming Scheme (interlinear)

A NARRATIVE POEM

1. Story and plot adapted from a Chinese vernacular novel
2. Cast into a Vietnamese longform poetic meter
3. Uses six-eight meter and all of its qualities to clarify & accentuate the emotional pulses of the story
4. Emerges as a string of lyrical jewels, retelling this story through moments of expressive clarity
 - ...a series of arias...
5. A poem, a story, and something more.

傳
翹

Truyện Kiều



Art by Tôn Thất Đào