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A Comparative Analysis of Du Liniang and Ophelia through the Lens of Power Discourse

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ABSTRACT
Foucault's theory of discourse power can be used to explain the experiences of the two female characters in *Hamlet* and *The Peony Pavilion*—Ophelia and Du Liniang—in striving for discourse power and the awakening of their self-consciousness. This also reveals the similarities and differences in the portrayal of female images in the works of Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu, while the different methods and outcomes of the two women's struggles for discourse power reflect the varying degrees of female self-awareness awakening under different cultural backgrounds. Ophelia's madness and suicide are, to a large extent, a way for her to passively escape the control of male discourse; whereas Du Liniang's rebirth after death and union with true love represent the completion of her self-sublimation and the deconstruction of discourse control.

KEYWORDS
Power of discourse; Du Liniang; Ophelia; Madness; Narrative perspective

The two great playwrights, William Shakespeare of England and Tang Xianzu of China's Ming Dynasty, never met during their lifetimes, yet both passed away in 1616. Their works stand as insurmountable peaks in the history of British and Chinese drama. *Hamlet* and *The Peony Pavilion* are their most influential works, respectively, and both works portray women suffering from "aphasia" under patriarchal suppression. Based on the French philosopher Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse, this paper discusses the aphasia of these two female characters and their struggle for discourse power. It seeks to explore the different viewpoints and wills conveyed by the two authors through the shaping of these female characters, to examine the destiny and awakening of Chinese and Western women at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, and to reflect on the life experiences of two women from different nations.

1 Aphasia under Patriarchal Suppression

Ophelia and Du Liniang both live in a highly oppressive patriarchal society, have few opportunities to express their emotions, and are mostly in a state of aphasia. According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, there are various discourse communities in society. The production and exchange of discourse within these communities are relatively closed, and people use specific languages and behavioral patterns to express their thoughts and opinions. If a person cannot master these specific expressive skills, they will be excluded from the community.

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is absolutely obedient to her father, Polonius. When her father commands, "From this time forth, I will not have you exchange a single word with Lord Hamlet", her response is: "I shall obey, my lord." Later, she complies with her father's command to reject Hamlet's letters and submissively agrees to her father's plan to use her to test Hamlet; from beginning to end, she is in a subordinate position. Ophelia suffers from aphasia because she has communication barriers with the people in her discourse community and is marginalized to the edge of the circle. In the society at that time, men enjoyed absolute control in all aspects. Polonius is the core of that discourse community—a loyal courtier well-versed in political maneuvering who has fully mastered the expressive methods of that group. Ophelia remains a vassal of patriarchy and a marginalized, silent "Other."

Du Liniang's father, Du Bao, in Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*, is also a representative of patriarchy. He restricts Liniang with strict family rules—forbidding sleep during the day and private visits to the garden. When Du Liniang dies for love and eventually resurrects, Du Bao insists that Liniang is a "flower demon and fox spirit." Even under the emperor's mediation, he still demands that his daughter "divorce Liu Mengmei" before he will "recognize you again." The etiquette and moral education that Du Bao defends are precisely the causes of Liniang's aphasia. Foucault pointed out: "Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry." Female virtue education played a role in guiding values in society at that time; "privately pledging one's life to another" was marginalized and even deemed evil. However, Du Bao's strict family rules and female virtue education did not completely stifle Du Liniang's nature. Even when the private tutor Chen Zuiliang interpreted Guanju (The Ospreys) as representing "the virtue of the queen and concubines", she still felt the germination of primitive desires from it.

The two playwrights' portrayals of such "totalitarian" fathers actually contain irony. Polonius often says to Ophelia, "I

will teach you", but this ultimately leads to his daughter's madness and death. Du Bao consistently disciplines Liniang with the requirements of a noble lady but completely ignores her emotional world, which also leads to Du Liniang's illness and death. In order to resist the situation of "aphasia", both women make their own attempts at struggle.

2 Attempts to Gain Discourse Power

Although both Ophelia and Du Liniang experienced aphasia, their coping mechanisms and destinies were different. Ophelia almost completely lost her subjective consciousness in the early stages, and only released her desires through irrational madness in the later stages, though she paid the price with her life. Meanwhile, Du Liniang, although having repressed her emotions and desires under the influence of her cultural atmosphere for a long time, still fostered primitive emotions amidst the spring scenery and after a profound dream, and fought for them, eventually achieving a relatively satisfactory ending.

2.1 The Passive Resistance of MadnessInitially

Ophelia was a pure angel with a dignified appearance and character. However, she lost her reason after the double blow of Hamlet's verbal profanity and her father's murder, wandering around singing bawdy folk songs ever since. Her madness is a manifestation of competing for discourse power, giving her an independent personality and aesthetic value. In Act IV, Scene V, she sings a total of four songs, featuring themes of death and burial, love and temptation, as well as elegies. She sings lyrics like, "To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day, All in the morning betime, And I a maid at your window, To be your Valentine. Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes, And dupp'd the chamber-door; Let in the maid, that out a maid Never departed more", which reveal the suppressed sexual desire deep within her heart. When repressed desires reach a certain level, they cause bodily tension and seek ways to release energy. After her breakdown, Ophelia uses the lyrics of her mad state to release the emotions that had been long pent up in her heart.

Her mad state, however, is another marginalized state, unrecognized and unheard. Although Ophelia tries hard to break free from patriarchal constraints, her final voice is merely labeled as "meaningless" and buried underground. After Ophelia's death, her passing becomes a topic of conversation for the gravediggers (Clown One and Two), who chat about whether Ophelia's drowning was a suicide. In the Western imagination, water has always been a symbol of irrationality. Foucault points out in Madness and Civilization that "Water adds to this practice its own dark value." Clown One asks: "Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" Because suicide is a major sin in Christianity, they question it, but they still receive orders to bury Ophelia with Christian rites. When Hamlet asks him whose grave he is digging, their conversation is deeply meaningful.

"For no man... For none, neither", Clown One believes that after the soul rests in peace, there is no gender or discrimination; the self and the other become one, and there are no boundaries between madness and civilization. As Jane Eyre said, we are all equal standing at God's feet. When Ophelia was alive, she was almost entirely treated as a tool and property of the three men surrounding her, constantly being disciplined, controlled, and utilized. She was not allowed to pursue her own love; everything was placed under the discourse power of her father, brother, and lover, until the double blow of losing her father and lover allowed her to break the silence and speak her mind freely under the guise of madness. Her madness seemingly allowed her to regain her discourse power, but the image of a mad person remained excluded from rationality. The words spoken by a mad person are deemed meaningless, so the mad Ophelia was pushed to another marginalized area; she could only use so-called mad ravings to express societal suppression. Her life was tragic: as a woman, she was the "Other" relative to men; as madness, she was the "Other" relative to rationality. Only after her death, through the mouth of Clown One, did her soul truly find peace and equal treatment.

2.2 Dream Narrative and Discourse Power

The scene *Awaking* from a Dream (Jingmeng) is an important turning point in Du Liniang's life, and her narrative perspective on the dream is highly noteworthy. This is a reconstruction of her discourse expression and a manifestation of the awakening of female consciousness. When Liniang wakes up from a rather erotic dream, she lingers on the tenderness of the dream and says: "Today, Du Liniang has some good fortune." This sentence directly uses her own name, appearing as a third-person narrative on the surface, but she is narrating her own dream. Then she recalls the scholar in the dream "smiling at me (nujia)", which switches back to the first person, yet it functions like a self-designation used when narrating to others, even though there is no one else around at the time; it is Du Liniang talking to herself. Following this, in her retrospection, she inserts a comment: "Our feelings were in harmony, truly a thousand kinds of affection, ten thousand types of tenderness." Comments are usually issued in the third person. After the comment, she adds, "When our joy was complete, he sent me back to sleep", switching back to first-person narrative, transforming the beautiful dream into a

sweet secret related to "me".

During the process of narrating the dream, the leaps between the first person and the third person illustrate Du Liniang moving from hesitant lingering to final confirmation of the beautiful dream. In this process, this pursuit of the dream after waking up serves the function of confirming reality and fixing meaning. Du Liniang establishes the relationship between the "dream" and "herself"; her struggle for discourse power is positive and full of hope, which from then on also becomes Du Liniang's driving force in life.

It is worth noting that at this time, Du Liniang's narration of the dream remains within her private space. However, in *Xiezhen*, Du Liniang tells Chunxiang about the event: "Chunxiang, I won't hide it from you. When wandering in the garden, I also had someone." The phrase "I also had someone" is a first-person narrative, serving as both a shared secret and an exclusive enjoyment. Although Du Liniang verbally says it is "just a dream", she has already confirmed the stability of the dream. Thus, "Chunxiang, I remember now. That scholar in the dream once broke off a willow branch and gave it to me" becomes an unquestioning and confident narrative. The significance of narrating the dream this time is equally monumental because Du Liniang's private affairs transcend the personal scope and begin to unfold in a broader field; afterwards, Chunxiang also participates in the narration of the dream.

Finally, in The *Yuanjia*, the Emperor hears the whole story and issues a decree: "I have carefully listened to Du Liniang's memorial; there is no doubt about her rebirth. Let the palace gate official escort them outside the Meridian Gate, so father, daughter, husband, and wife can acknowledge each other, and return home to complete the marriage." By this point, Du Liniang's love has withstood the test of life and death, gradually becoming the "love" acknowledged by the "whole world", just as she boldly stated, "Who in the whole world among ghostly lovers is like me?" Through the most authoritative Emperor, she achieves control over her own discourse power.

3 The Authors' Different Purposes in Character Portrayal

Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's different portrayals of the destinies of Ophelia and Du Liniang reveal the authors' varying understandings and focuses regarding human nature and social issues, thereby conveying different viewpoints and wills, which also exposes the authors' different values.

In *Hamlet*, male characters occupy a dominant position, and Ophelia is long entrapped under the male gaze, finding it difficult to escape the fate of being controlled and utilized. The gaze often carries power dynamics; the gazer occupies the subject position, while the gazed upon is in a passive position. In literary works, female images viewed through the male gaze are usually divided into two types: the "fairy type" and the "witch type." The former is characterized by innocence, kindness, gentleness, and beauty, while the latter is fierce, venomous, evil, and promiscuous. Elaine Showalter calls this phenomenon "misogyny in literary practice." Shakespeare portrays the early image of Ophelia as well-behaved and submissive; whether she is talking to her father, brother, or lover, she is exceedingly obedient, innocent, and lovely, aligning with the "fairy type." But later, after encountering misfortune, she seems like a different person, transforming into the "witch type", acting frivolously and madly. According to Showalter, this act by Shakespeare qualifies as "literary abuse." The portrayal of Ophelia is flat and stereotypical, far inferior to the richly characterized male roles crafted by his pen. This creative method reflects the patriarchal consciousness hidden deep within Shakespeare's heart.

Ophelia essentially serves as Hamlet's mirror image. She displays the feminine side of Hamlet. The two individuals share similarities in many aspects, but their circumstances form a sharp contrast: the fathers of both Ophelia and Hamlet died of unknown causes; both were caught in a dilemma due to their fathers' warnings; they are both confused, lonely, in pain, and have experienced betrayal. The most prominent shared feature is that both are defined as "mad." However, Hamlet merely feigns madness with pretense and purposefulness, while Ophelia's madness is a true reflection forced upon her by reality. Although both possess similar experiences, the author Shakespeare still maintains the heroic image of the male, endowing Hamlet with the courage and wisdom to break through his shackles and rise in resistance, while Ophelia remains permanently confined by her cage. The portrayal of the character Ophelia exists to add tragedy to Hamlet's life.

In contrast, Tang Xianzu created the character of Du Liniang with the hope of using this figure to convey his understanding of the word "Qing" (love/emotion). The death of Ophelia signifies her own end, but the death of Du Liniang is not her end in the drama; rather, it is a kind of self-salvation and precisely a manifestation of a new life.

In fact, a careful reading of the original text reveals that Du Liniang did not die for a specific, fixed person at all. The reason she dies of melancholy is that after failing to find her dream again, she finally realizes that such beautiful and free moments only exist in dreams. Her passing is not due to unrequited love, nor because of oppression by others, but because she recognized the inescapable resistance in this muddled world, which left her feeling powerless and suffocated. Du Liniang did not die from the imperfection of love, but from her own vain longing for love.

The reason Tang Xianzu created such a beautiful image was to illustrate the sorrow of a generation of women through Du Liniang's perspective. He let out a lament for all persecuted people, defended a world governed by feeling, and firmly

believed that emotion is the most precious element in human society—capable of making people die for it, and even come back to life for it. There is nothing else in this world that possesses the power to contend with it; this represents Tang Xianzu's "Theory of Supreme Emotion" (Zhiqing lun).

Of course, what he wanted to express in *The Peony Pavilion* goes beyond this. *The Peony Pavilion* consists of three sections detailing Du Liniang's three lives: before death, after death, and rebirth. Among these three lives, Du Liniang's life as a ghost is actually the happiest and most liberated. It presents what Tang Xianzu considers to be the absolute ideal state of love: Du Liniang can be with the person she loves day and night without facing any social constraints. However, once resurrected, such a beautiful state of love will inevitably vanish. Therefore, there is a segment in the original work where, after Du Liniang's rebirth, Liu Mengmei still wants to stay with her as they did in the past, but is outright rejected by Du Liniang. She states: "Scholar, things are different from before. The other night I was a ghost, today I am a human; a ghost can have illusory love, but a human must adhere to actual etiquette." When I was a ghost, I could freely do whatever I wanted, but now that I have become human, I must act according to reason and etiquette. Since they cannot freely and easily be together after her resurrection, why did Tang Xianzu arrange for Du Liniang to resurrect at all? Or why not just conclude the manuscript right at the resurrection, instead of chronicling the various hardships the two face afterwards? It is exactly because of the plot following Du Liniang's resurrection in the latter half that we can feel not only the purity and beauty of love, but also the real collision between love and reality. After rebirth, Du Liniang first faces three crises: first, fleeing the Plum Blossom Shrine after resurrecting (Fleeing the Marriage); second, finding her separated family members (Urgent Difficulties); and third, persuading everyone led by her father Du Bao to acknowledge the fact of her rebirth and her love (The Reunion). It is precisely amidst these immense difficulties that Du Liniang achieves her personal ideals. If initially Du Liniang was constrained, and the "ghost" Du Liniang was completely unconstrained, then the resurrected Du Liniang is a "social person" in the truest sense. She possesses vibrant life and an independent will, and more importantly, she does not just do whatever she pleases, but rationally fights for her rights according to the social system. Only this kind of freedom is true freedom. Therefore, the plot after Du Liniang's rebirth is an indispensable part of the complete *The Peony Pavilion*; the thought Tang Xianzu poured into this section is incredibly profound and complex.

Although *The Peony Pavilion* is a love story, we can entirely break through the limitations of male-female romance when interpreting it. This is because Tang Xianzu merely borrowed love as a vehicle for expression; what the play truly praises is the human nature expressed by Du Liniang—that "a lifelong love of beauty is natural"—and it stands as a glorification of the awakening of self-consciousness.

4 Conclusion

Ophelia and Du Liniang are female figures from two entirely different cultural backgrounds, yet both were heavily restricted by the patriarchal systems of their respective societies at the time. In terms of character image, they both hail from prominent families, are physically attractive, and have gentle personalities, perfectly fitting the ideal female image in the minds of men during those eras. However, at the beginning of the stories, they both suffered from "aphasia", obeyed family and social constraints, and appeared silent and reticent. Ophelia lived in the shadow of court power struggles, surviving strictly on the edge of the discourse community of those who held power; whereas Du Liniang was more heavily influenced by the strict etiquette education for women dictated by Ming Dynasty Neo-Confucianism.

However, their avenues and outcomes in striving for discourse power were starkly different, reflecting the varying degrees of the awakening of their self-consciousness and also demonstrating the differing values of their authors. Ophelia drowned in a state of madness, passively defending against the control of male discourse over her through ultimate self-destruction. In contrast, Du Liniang was reborn after death and united with her true love, completing a self-sublimation while simultaneously deconstructing discourse control. Therefore, compared to Shakespeare, the female image created by Tang Xianzu is significantly more independent and three-dimensional.

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