

**A Dream or A Nightmare?
A Semiotic Feminist Reading of *Mu-dan Ting*
(*The Peony Pavilion*)**

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ABSTRACT

Tang Xian-zu (湯顯祖), a Shakespeare of the Orient, is famous by his *Yu-ming Tang Si-Meng* (玉茗堂四夢, *The Four Dreams of Yu-ming Hall*). Among them, *Mu-dan Ting* (牡丹亭, *The Peony Pavilion*) has been considered as the best to represent the playwright's unique philosophy of *qing-zhi* (情至) which is translated as "a philosophy of love or feelings" according to most scholars. They basically treat the female protagonist Du Li-niang (杜麗娘) as the embodiment of Tang's philosophy.

However, few have ever read the play from a feminist perspective. Therefore, I will read the play from a semiotic feminist perspective and argue that the play actually conveys a tragic sense about the misery of women during the Ming dynasty in China. My paper concentrates on reading the female protagonist as a sign for cultural associations. Such a reading will reveal that although projecting the playwright's psyche, the defiant female protagonist is an idealized fiction rather than a reliable representative of women in the patriarchal Ming society. Evidence from historical female reader's responses to the play and authentic tragedies of women because of Neo-Confucian patriarchal ideology in the culture will be incorporated to support my argument.

KEY WORDS

Chinese drama
Mu-dan Ting (The Peony Pavilion)
a semiotic feminist approach.

Tang Xian-zu
qing-zhi philosophy

Mu-dan Ting (牡丹亭, *The Peony Pavilion*) was written by a famous Chinese playwright Tang Xian-zu (湯顯祖) (1550-1616) in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). It is the second play of Tang's *Yu-ming Tang Si-meng* (玉茗堂四夢, *Four Dreams of Yu-ming Hall*) which have been considered as the masterpieces of *Chuan-qi* (傳奇, the southern drama in the Ming dynasty). Many critics, Eastern and Western, recognize that this classical southern drama is the most successful play in representing Tang's unconventional philosophy of "qing-zhi" (情至) to challenge the dominant Neo-Confucian doctrine of propriety and rationality. In their exhaustive criticism, Du Li-niang (杜麗娘, Bridal Du in Cyril Birch's translation of the play) represents the playwright's philosophy of *qing-zhi*, although their interpretations of the philosophy differ. Like most traditional Chinese scholars, C. T. Hsia translates it as a philosophy of love and interprets this play as a longing for immortality (249-50). Yet, Huang Wen-xi (黃文錫) maintains that Tang's notion of love should not be limited to personal love but be viewed as a universal love (43). Likewise, John Y. H. Hu believes that Tang's philosophy concerns "a compassionate philosophy cry for humanity" (593). Wai-yee Li also comments: "The celebration of love is the celebration of life with its multifarious aspects, sublime as well as mundane" (56).

The Peony Pavilion indeed represents Tang's sublime vision of true love and his dream to exalt feelings over rationality for a better way of life. However, Tang's four dreams should be treated as a whole and his *qing-zhi* philosophy actually undergoes a progressive transformation from the first play to the last. His final concern is the transcendence of love.¹ In this paper, I would like to explore the sym-

bolic figure of Du Li-niang from a semiotic feminist perspective and argue that although as an embodiment of the playwright's dream, the defiant heroine cannot represent the general women in the culture. The fictional heroine on stage somehow reveals the cultural associations of women as a miserable subordinate gender to men. Thus, the playwright's dream turns out as a nightmare for those female readers who believe in freedom and equality of both sexes. Some female reader-responses from the culture will be incorporated to support my argument.

According to Sue-Ellen Case, a semiotic feminist perspective is a combined theory of feminist and semiotic approaches. This combined theory aims at interpreting "woman as sign" in a given male-produced text to explore its cultural associations of women. As Case illuminates:

From this perspective, a live woman standing on the stage is not a biological or natural reality, but 'a fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures'. In other words, the conventions of the stage produce a meaning for the sign 'woman', which is based on their cultural associations with the female gender. Feminist semiotic theory has attempted to describe and deconstruct this sign for 'woman', in order to distinguish biology from culture and experience from ideology. (118)

In other words, if we explore the fictional female protagonist as a sign or a metaphor, the artistic presentation may reveal the playwright's ideology, the audience's expectation, and the conventional code of women in the culture. Such a perspective recognizes that the social or political concerns are important in decoding the cultural association of women's issues of its time.

Applying this perspective to the reading of *The Peony Pavilion*, we see that women in the culture never enjoyed the same freedom as most men did. A woman could not decide her own future. She could

not have a formal education, nor could she have inheritance rights for family property. Her future completely depended on her “fated” husband and her existence was meaningful only in terms of those significant male others. As a daughter of a reputable Confucian prefect, Du Li-niang might enjoy some social privileges, but she actually had to follow a more restrictive rules than most women did, verbally, spatially, and socially.

In order to maintain her social image as a lady, Du Li-niang could not speak whatever she felt, nor could she go around freely as her maid Chun-xiang (春香, Spring Fragrance in Birch’s translation) did. She was not allowed to enjoy even her own parents’ garden. And socially, her contacts were limited to her parents and her maid. The only place she could relax was in her chamber. Yet, she was supposed to learn how to do things a proper lady was expected to do in her chamber, such as embroidering in order to prepare for her future roles of a “*xian-qi liang-mu*” (賢妻良母, devoted wife to her husband and mother to her children). When she simply took a short nap during the day, she was scolded by her father and was sent to a traditional old tutor to learn good manners so that she could play her secondary roles appropriately. In fact, she did not have “a room of her own.” Literally, her maid was always there with her. Although her maid was there to serve her and to keep her company, sometimes her maid also functioned as a conscious reminder of social propriety. In short, Du Li-niang did not have an opportunity to develop her own potential or to be her own master socially and psychologically.

Even though the playwright did inject his heroine with an active and defiant spirit in pursuing her dream lover, she had to remain in a secondary role as “the other” to her father and her husband, who would be the center in many situations. According to Carol Hansen’s study of female status in Western Christian civilization, the archetypal maternal Eve has been politically twisted by those authoritative Biblists into a “weak and guilty” woman simply because she ate the seductive apple. As Hansen observes:

the many faces of Eve appear to have been transferred to

the drama of the day, so that the authority of the male figure, be it in the form of the father, husband, brother or fiancé, is dominant, and the woman is placed in the perilous position of either passively accepting the male code of supremacy, subtly circumventing it, or actively defying it. (3-4)

The situation was almost the same in the Confucian society of China. Yet, unlike those Biblists who use Eve's sin as an excuse for controlling women in Christian culture, the patriarchal Chinese culture has simply presumed woman's secondary role for thousands of years.

By comparison, Du Li-niang obviously has less freedom and fewer social contacts than Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. According to Chen Shou-zu (陳瘦竹), Du also has less freedom than the female protagonist Cui Ying-ying (崔鶯鶯) in Wang Shi-fu's (王實甫, fl. 1295-1307) *Xi-xiang ji* (西廂記, *The Western Chamber*) (230-31). Pei-kai Cheng also compares Du Li-niang and Huo Xiao-yu (霍小玉), the female protagonist in Tang Xian-zu's first play, and remarks that Du's freedom is even more restricted than Huo's simply because of their different social and family backgrounds.² While Huo Xiao-yu is a fatherless aristocrat, Du Li-niang is the only daughter of a Confucian prefect, which ironically restricted her opportunities to see the outside world.

Because of these restrictions, it is not surprising that Du Li-niang had to find an ideal husband by "dreaming." Yet, to make matters worse is that she could not communicate even with her maid and her mother about her dream. No one could console her to endure the unbearable loneliness inside her heart. No wonder she pined away so quickly. With despair, she drew a self-portrait before her imminent death and tried to confide with her maid:

春香，也有古今美女，早嫁了丈夫相愛，替他描模畫樣；
也有美人自嫁寫照，寄與情人。似我杜麗娘寄誰呵？

Fragrance, many a beautiful maiden in past or present time

has married early in her youth a loved and loving husband
 who has painted her portrait; whilst many another has taken
 up the brush herself to send her own likeness to a lover.
 But who should receive this portrait of Bridal Du!

(Sc. 14, *TXXJ*, 290, Birch, 70)

Many critics have also recognized Du Li-niang's dilemma. However, they mainly attribute her misery to the system of feudal marriage. Some of them even maintain that her misery is not owing to the system but to the negligence of her "busy" father, who did not find a right husband for her in due course. As they see it, had her father found an ideal husband for her in time, everything would be find for her, as it was supposed to have been for more than a thousand years. Many traditional moralists even accuse the play of being a "decadent" tale of "marvelous" romance which should be banned. Although some modern critics appreciate Tang's progressive insights and symbolic excellence, few explore the heroine from a feminist perspective. Dong Mei-kan (董每戡), for instance, does not see the feminist critique as valid for interpreting the play although he extols Tang's bold challenge against the double standard of virginity imposed on women for social control (298-301). The existent criticisms precisely echo what Teresa de Lauretis has observed of the current critical trend: "The horizon of the present work is the question, scarcely broached as yet within feminist theory, of the politics of self-representation" (7). The question whether or not Tang himself has transcended his own cultural ideology the woman's secondary role and the patriarchal perception of female virtue demands further investigation.

Jiang Tsui-fen has demonstrated that the ideal women in several selected *Yuan Za-jus* actually project the restrictions of patriarchal encodings in the Yuan dynasty. As she writes:

When a male playwright treats his heroine as a projection or a double of himself, he simultaneously bolsters and subverts the patriarchal status quo. No matter how he applauds

her for her tough, resilient fiber, he conceives her as the inferior sex from the perspective of conventional patriarchal ideology. (229)

Similarly, Du Li-niang also projects the playwright's idea of the social norm of propriety and patriarchal ideology. In a sense, the presentation of Du was meant to serve as a model for the audience, since Tang Xian-zu's view of drama is quite similar to Schiller's romantic idea of drama as a moral reflection (440). For instance, Du Li-niang's sudden conformation to the social norm in the second half of the play undoubtedly reflects Tang's moral attitude.

C. T. Hsia feels this sudden conformation is "illogical" in that it contradicts Du Li-niang's defiant character in the first half of the play (277-79). As Hsia observes, the heroine's daring deeds occur only in her dream or in those scenes in which she acts as a ghost. Once she is resurrected, she becomes "a coy young lady very much aware of the importance of decorum and propriety" (279). In the second half of the play, not only is Du's unconventional spirit diminished but also her original supreme view of love above everything is re-oriented toward social recognition of her husband's official accomplishments. From the following dialogues in the scene of "*hun-zou*" (婚走, Elopement), such a sudden change in her attitude is indeed observable:

(旦)：秀才，可記的古書云：必待父母之命，媒妁之言。

(生)：日前雖不是鑽穴相親，早則鑽墳而入了，小姐今日又會起書來了。

(旦)：秀才，比前不同，前夕鬼也，今日人也。鬼可虛情，人須實禮。

(BRIDAL): Sir, I must remind you of the words of *Mencius*, that a young couple must "await the orders of the parent and the arrangements of the go-betweens."

(LIU): Although a few days ago I did not "bore a hole to

steal a glimpse of you,"³ still I did bore into the grave to reach you. I see that you have recovered your ability to quote the classics.

(BRIDAL): Sir scholar, our condition has changed. The other night I was a wandering spirit; now I am a living woman. A ghost may be deluded by passion; a woman must pay full attention to the rites.

(Sc. 36, *TXXJ*, 395, Birch, 207)

As the male protagonist keeps imploring her mercy to satisfy his sexual desire, she bashfully expresses her concern about social propriety:

(旦嘆介)：幽姿暗懷，被元陽鼓的這陰無賴。柳郎，奴家依然還是女身。

(生)：已經數度幽期，玉體豈能無損？

(旦)：那是魂，這才是正身陪奉。伴情郎則是遊魂，女兒身依舊含胎。

(BRIDAL sighs): Hidden longings possessed my ghostly form too feeble to resist/the surge of the male force. Master Liu, I am still a virgin.

(LIU): We spent nights of love together: how could your precious body have remained intact?

(BRIDAL): That was my ghostly form: only now do I bring you my real self. It was my wandering soul visited my lover, my body remains virgin as before.

(Sc.36, *TXXJ*, 398, Birch, 211-12)

After he reassures her of his sincerity and his promise of an eternal love, she finally drops her arguments against sleeping with him.

However, Pei-kai Cheng thinks that her conformations is understandable in terms of the faithfulness to her culture (265-66). Wai-ye Li also argues that, although she protests her virginity "convention-

ally,” Du Li-niang does not really insist on her position for long after “coily delaying gratification for her eager love”(54). My position is that Du Li-niang’s “conventional” reaction may be understandable in consideration of her cultural environment. Yet, the apparent contradiction should be considered as evidence that the playwright did not actually transcend the cultural ideology of propriety and patriarchy as some critics would like to think.⁴ Du Li-niang simply functions as a projection of Tang’s “enlarged or ideal self.” She cannot be a reliable representation of the women of his time.

Furthermore, although the comic reconciliation may have effected some sort of “quasi-Aristotelian catharsis” in the audience of Tang’s day, as Jiang suggests in her discussion of the audience’s psychology, the play also had its negative impact, such as that of which moralists have been strongly disapproving.⁵ Normally, the play is a play; most of the audience would not really believe in the power of love which would make a woman die for it and, even resurrect her to unite with her dream lover as it did to Du. Yet, quite a few female readers shockingly believed in the story. In the moralists’ eyes, they became the so called “victims” of the decadent play. According to Xu Fu-ming’s (徐扶明) research, a number of women fit into this victim category because they foolishly identified themselves with Du Li-niang and could not tell the real from the imaginary.

A talented but fragile lady named *Yu Er-niang Xiu-hui* (俞二娘秀慧) loved the play so much that she could not stop reading it. She died with the book open at her side at the age of seventeen(213-14).⁶ When Tang was informed about Yu’s tragic death, he wrote a poem in memory of this sensitive girl. The last quatrain of the poem goes like this:

何自為情死？悲傷必有神。一時文字業，天下有心人。

Why do you die simply for love? Your sorrow must be divinely spirited. Although just a literary work, it touches those who have feelings. (72)

Another beautiful woman named *Jin Feng-dian* (金鳳釧) in *Yang-zhou* (楊州) was so deeply moved by the play that she thought Tang Xian-zu was the only man who knew how a woman felt. Thus, she boldly proposed marriage to him. Unfortunately, Tang somehow did not receive the proposal; nor did he write her back, and she thought that she had been “politely” rejected. Thereafter, she pined away and died before Tang finally received her proposal and came to visit her. A similar anecdote concerned an actress, Shang Xiao-ling (商小玲) in Hang-zhou (杭州), who died “literally and dramatically” while performing the climactic scene of “*Xun-meng*” (尋夢, Pursuing the Dream).⁷ According to Xu, although the reliability of these anecdotes remains problematic, they reveal at least one thing: the powerful effect of the play on those who witnessed it or read it.

Following Elaine Showalter’s “gynocriticism,” Judith T. Zeitlin picks up the issue and attempts to investigate “real firsthand responses” of the play from historical women. According to Zeitlin’s research, there was another talented woman, who was known as Xiao-qing (小青). This Xiao-qing was someone’s concubine, but was always tortured by the jealous “*zheng-qi*” (正妻, principle wife).⁸ When she could no longer bear the ceaseless torture, she committed suicide. It was reported that the only thing she kept beside her body was *The Peony Pavilion* and her own personal commentary on the play. Unfortunately, her commentary was burned immediately after her death by the jealous wife. Only one of her poems, collected in Jiang Reizao’s (蔣瑞藻) *Xiao-shuo Kao-zheng* (小說考證, *Hermeneutics of Novels*), survives:

冷雨幽窗不可聽，挑燈閒看牡丹亭，
人間亦有痴如我，豈獨傷心是小青？

It’s unbearable to her the cold rain by lonely window. So I light a candle to amuse myself in reading *The Peony Pavilion*. In this world, there is also some “romantic fool” like me. Who says that Xiao-qing is the only one who feels so sorrowful?⁹

However, Zeitlin's research concentrates on *Wu Wu-shan San-fu He-ping Mu-dan Ting Huan Hun Ji* (吳吳山三婦合評牡丹亭還魂記, *The Three Wives' Commentary on The Peony Pavilion*). This material mainly involves three wives' "spiritual communication" through their follow-up commentaries on the play. These three wives were married to the same scholar (named Wu Wu-shan), one after another, when the previous wife died at a young age. As soon as they were introduced to the play and to the previous wife's commentary, they were all moved by the affective power radiating from the play and by a tacit understanding that bound them together.

According to Zeitlin, one impressive accomplishment of these wives lies in their accurate documentation of the sources for all the "ji-ju" (集句, pastiches) that Tang Xian-zu appropriated in the play(136). Their commentaries differed from their shared husband's professional comments on the play in three ways. First, unlike their husband, who stressed theatrical theories and techniques, the three wives basically dealt with the play as a literary text for pleasure since they had few opportunity to watch the play by themselves in public. Second, although the wives did not know much about theories, their commentaries surprisingly reveal a collective criterion of unity in their close examination of the coherence between each scene. Third, the three wives' literary style was somewhat influenced by Jin Sheng-tan (金聖嘆) (1608-61), whose commentary on *The Western Chamber* was widely circulated among domestic readers following its publication in 1658. However, according to Wang Yǒng-jian's study, one major difference existed between these wives' commentaries and Jin's moral criticism—the three wives' lack of interest in didacticism.¹⁰ Their concern was for "the psychological motivation of the characters and the symbolic resonance of the text's imaginary and languages, particularly in the service of such key themes in the play as sentiment (*qing*, 情), foolishness (*chi*, 痴), and dream (*meng*, 夢)" (389).

Put another way, Du Li-niang meant different thing to these three wives. While the playwright created the heroine to project his

own “dream” of *qing-zhi* philosophy, the female readers received the message differently. Yes, they were deeply moved by Du’s admirable courage in pursuing her dream lover, but they looked upon her as “a dreamer of romance.” Unlike those victims who could not distinguish themselves from Du Li-niang, these three wives seemed aware of the illusory nature of the play. They knew they were not she. Nevertheless, they believed in the existence of true love embodied by Du. They also recognized the limitations which caused Du’s untimely death. It is such a shared sympathy of her situation that tied the three wives together, although they did not have any physical contacts. As the third wife Qian Yi (錢宜) comments on scene LIV “*wen-xi*” (聞喜, Gald News): “From this we realize that a ghost is merely a dream and that a dream is nothing but a ghost.”¹¹ On the other hand, the difference between these three wives and the “rational” audience is that they nevertheless chose to live with the dream and to amuse themselves within their imaginary territory. They had their own dream in their own way.

In some sense, Qian Yi represented the three wives and crystallized their dream in the symbolic icon of Du Li-niang as the goddess of romantic love. Their dream was to glorify the icon and to continue the romantic idealization. It is said that one night Qian Yi and her husband simultaneously dreamed of Du-Li-niang descending and manifesting herself like a goddess. After they woke up and found out that they had the same dream, Qian was encouraged by her husband to draw a picture of the lady in the dream. She did and framed it as a sacred divinity to worship despite her husband’s teasing her for her foolishness (*chi*, 痴). Surprisingly, Qian’s portrait of Du Li-niang came out as a likeness of an existent picture of the romantic Cui Ying-ying in *The Western Chamber*, instead of the defiant Du Li-niang in Tang’s play. This phenomenon shows that the playwright’s picture of the ideal woman filtered through his male perspective was somewhat blurred for female readers. In other words, Qian could not draw a picture of Du Li-niang according to Tang Xian-zu’s presentation of her as a defiant heroine with his own image as the blueprint. Instead, Qian drew the picture according to her memory of Cui Ying-

ying's portrait in the masterpiece of romance *The Western Chamber*, since the portrait represented the romantic love that she could identify with. Qian probably never identified herself with the playwright's ideal of Du Li-niang as a savior of the world but felt strongly sympathetic to the heroine's limitations as a woman in the patriarchal feudal society!

If we take it that the playwright actually is the "speaking subject (as in Kristeva's sense)" and the heroine is his "ideal double (as in Fetterley's sense)," then we can see that the play indeed is about Tang's adventure of "interiority" in seeking his own essence.¹² The play is not about women or woman's right but a revelation of women's misery in the Ming dynasty. Some may argue that the female readers' responses and feminist criticism are idiosyncratic, and not necessarily reflective of the real situation of the women during the period. Before we jump to a hasty conclusion, let us look at some historical facts. In re-examining the history of China, several scholars have pointed out that Ming society enforced strictest moral censorship concerning women's virginity and virtue, values which were prescribed by orthodox Neo-Confucian interpretations of Confucian propriety.¹³ In order for women to behave in accordance with these precepts, the Ming emperor Cheng-zu (成祖) also promulgated two official pamphlets containing the biographies of those "jie-fu lie-nus" (節婦烈女, virtuous widows and martyr virgins). These virtuous women either "volunteered" to be buried alive with their dead husbands or swore to remain as widows for the rest of their lives even though they were still young.

Taking marriage as an instance for investigating the actual situation of women in this culture, we find that "*da ming-ling*" (大明令, the Ming law) clearly stated that marriage should be arranged by a matchmaker with the permission of the parents or the eldest. This law, according to Dong Mei-kan (董每戡), was to reinforce the feudal hierarchy. However, as the socioeconomic structure gradually changed, the possibility for a couple to meet and to fall in love with each other without a matchmaker's introduction increased. Consequently, the external conflict between the parents' practical consid-

erations and the couple's affective preference for marriage or the internal conflict between one's family duty and personal passion also became serious. It is said that the suicide rate of women was very high at the time. In Tang Xian-zu's home town of Lin-chuan (臨川), one out of every eight women was a "virtuous widow" or "martyr virgin."¹⁴

The sacrifices of these women's lives and happiness could have been avoided had people recognized that the issue of woman's virginity or absolute submission to her husband was simply a Confucian patriarchal imposition of power for social and political control. Considering the instructional function of drama as a means to create a better future, we need to affirm that modern feminist concerns, although not available at the time, should be considered as valid to prevent similar tragedies from recurring. A reading of the play should not simply involve philosophical contemplation or literary appreciation. It should also include social and political reflection and reformation if necessary, especially when patriarchal ideology is still firmly held and executed at the expense of women's lives and happiness in some contemporary societies.

Viewing the play in this way, we can see that although conveying his unconventional philosophy through the presentation of a courageous heroine, Tang Xian-zu is nonetheless subject to the patriarchal culture of Neo-Confucian feudal society. The presentation of Du Liniang as an unconventional heroine is simply a fiction. To a certain extent, the play actually reveals a tragic dimension of human life, particularly that of women in corrupt Neo-Confucian feudal society. The play will evoke a poignant tragic sense as long as the audience is sensitive enough and feels sympathetic for those who were, are, or will be in the same miserable situation, be it that of an oppressed social class or of an oppressed prejudiced gender.

NOTES

¹ For details, see my dissertation, "Reading Tang Xian-zu in the Late Twentieth Century: *Yu-ming Tang Si-men?*" (玉茗堂四夢, *The*

Four Dreams of Yu-ming Hall), on process.

² For details, see Cheng 262-63.

³ An allusion to a song of courtship in the classic *Book of Songs* according to Cyril Brich's footnote of *The Peony Pavilion* (Bloomington: Indian UP, 1980) 207.

⁴ At most, Tang can only be considered as a "proto-feminist." For the notion, see Wu 61-3.

⁵ For Jiang's discussion of the audience psychology, see her dissertation 123-25.

⁶ Also, according to Xu's research, Jiang Shi-quan (蔣士銓) (1725-1785) was inspired by this legend of Yu's admiration for Tang Xian-zu that Jiang wrote a new play *Lin-chuan Meng* (臨川夢, *The Dream of Lin-chuan*) about this woman and Tang.

⁷ For details, see Xu 217-18.

⁸ For any other related stories of this figure, see Widmer 126-35 and Ko 121-39.

⁹ See Xu 216-7.

¹⁰ See Zeitlin 137-51. Also see Wang and Ye 2:386-89.

¹¹ Translation is Zeitlin's in her article, 154-61.

¹² For the notion of "the speaking subject," see Kristeva 180-85. As for the notion of "the female character as the male writer's double," see Fetterley and for the notion of interiority as a self-disclosure, see Lukacs 89.

¹³ For details about the historical record of the law in the Ming dynasty, see Dong 298.

¹⁴ For details, see Xu 29-32.

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