

**Oedipal Fantasy in Disguise:
A Psychoanalytic Interpretation
of *Liaozhai Zhiyi***

Rui Yang

ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon Norman Holland's *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, in its psychoanalytic interpretation of three stories from Pu Songling's (1640-1715) *Liaozhai Zhiyi*: "Fairy Qing-E," "Fox-Girl Changting," and "The Painted Wall." It argues that each of these three stories employs various defense maneuvers (e.g., displacement, splitting, projection, regression, denial, reversal, etc.) to disguise an Oedipal fantasy which otherwise would cause the reader much anxiety. The author of this paper also tries to explore the boundaries among author, text, and reader (as co-author of the text).

KEY WORDS

Liaozhai Zhiyi
Pu Songling
Psychoanalytic approach
Norman Holland
Denise and Victor Mair

Freud
hsiao (孝)
"Fairy Qing-E"
"Fox-Girl Changting"
"The Painted Wall"

This paper attempts to open up some new possibilities in the interpretation of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* 《聊齋誌異》, an extremely well known and influential collection of nearly five hundred stories and anecdotes written and compiled by Pu Songling (蒲松齡) (1640-1715), by using a psychoanalytic approach. In the past four decades, the criticism of *Liaozhai* has been predominantly biographical and political. Critics using these approaches tend to downplay the elements of fantasy and see the stories as social critique, satire or moral lessons made by Pu Songling. The supernatural characters are often viewed as human ones in disguise.¹ In this paper my interpretation of a group of *Liaozhai* stories draws upon a theory developed by Norman N. Holland in *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. Masculine Oedipus complex, I argue, is the core fantasy which underlies the stories I have chosen to discuss. My reading of these stories emphasizes a number of defense maneuvers such as displacement, splitting, projection, regression, denial, reversal, symbolization and sublimation which are built into the texts. As a result, the expression of the oedipal fantasy in these *Liaozhai* stories in disguise allows the reading experience to be pleasurable, whereas if the defenses collapse or are inadequate, the fantasy is likely to arouse anxiety and disgust in the reader.

In traditional China, *xiao* (孝), children's filial piety to parents, was considered a supreme virtue. *Xiao* required sons and daughters to love their parents whole-heartedly, devote themselves to their welfare without reservation and obey them

absolutely. In such a society, "unfilial conduct was a serious crime under the law. It was a right of parents to put an unfilial child to death, or at least to denounce him or her to the authorities for punishment prescribed in the criminal statutes."²

The Oedipus complex, therefore, would be a very alien notion to those who lived in traditional China. How could a son be so evil as to wish to kill his father and sleep with his mother? Such an unfilial son would deserve to die a hundred times over. However, the son's oedipal wishes, as described by Sigmund Freud, I would like to argue in this paper, were not ruled out but merely repressed in traditional China. From time to time, in works of literature such as Pu Songling's stories, we see such desires surge up, giving people grounds to suspect that perhaps the Oedipus complex is a universal phenomenon. In traditional China, the family structure and the different roles the mother and father played in children's upbringing bore some crucial similarities to those in the west. That is to say, the mother was the primary caretaker, socializer and love object of the children, while the father was relatively uninvolved in child care and family life. In fact, in traditional China, people believed that "a strict father and a loving mother" (嚴父慈母) were the best combination for children. As a result, Chinese fathers tended to suppress or hide their affection for children and keep them at arm's length, for fear that "familiarity breeds contempt." Chinese mothers, on the other hand, were encouraged by such a popular belief to display their love and empathy for their children. The relationships between mothers and children were often extremely close and affectionate. This situation in the family seems to have provided fertile soil for the Oedipus complex to grow.

The basic infantile fantasy, however, has to be transformed by various ego strategies (defenses) in the literary work so that the story would be socially acceptable and the reading

of it pleasurable. On this issue, Norman N. Holland says

[T]ypically, the unconscious fantasy at the core of a work will combine elements that could, if provided full expression, give us pleasure, but also create anxiety. It is the task of the literary "work" to control the anxiety and permit at least partial gratification of the pleasurable possibilities in the fantasy. The literary work, through what we have loosely termed "form," acts out defensive maneuvers for us: splitting, isolating, undoing, displacing from, omitting (repression or denying) elements of the fantasy. Meaning, whether we find it or supply it, acts more like a sublimation: giving the fantasy material a disguised expression which is acceptable to the ego, which "makes sense."³

In light of the above discussion, we perceive a gap between the "obvious" meaning of a *Liaozhai* story such as "Fairy Qing-E" 《青娥》 which is supplied by the author as *Yishishi* (異史氏) in his final comment, and an oedipal fantasy expressed through extensive displacement, splitting and denial. According to Pu Songling, this story is about the reward of a son's filial piety:

Tunnelling into a bedroom was a bit of lover's foolishness. Drilling through a wall to curse a loved one's father was the act of a maniac. An immortal brought the two together nevertheless, so that a son's filial piety could be rewarded with everlasting life.⁴

The son's filial piety in this case, however, refers only to his devotion to his mother. His father is absent from the story. He is said to have died young (929). The father's death results in an unusually close relationship between the son named Huo Huan who is the protagonist and his mother. "His mother was

excessively protective and would not allow him to leave the house. At the age of twelve he still could not distinguish between his paternal and maternal uncles and nephews" (929).⁵

As for Huo Huan, his devotion to his mother is indeed remarkable. When his mother is ill and wants to have fish broth, Huo, too anxious to wait for the servants who can ride to return from their other errands, walks to a place over a hundred *li* away to get fish for her. On his way back he finds himself in the middle of the mountains. His legs and feet ache too much for him to go another step. At this juncture, he meets an old mountain man who cures his feet with a magical remedy. Afterwards the old man offers to take him to a nearby village to engage him to a fine young woman. Huo turns down the offer, saying that his mother is waiting for the fish (923-933). Later, for the sake of his mother, he even gives up a chance to become an immortal by staying in the immortal's grotto. The reward for Huo's filial piety is that he is reunited with his beloved wife Qing-E and they both obtain immortality (934-937).

If this were all there is to the story, "Fairy Qing-E" would be just another didactic story about *xiao* among numerous others in traditional China. But this story is much more complex. In fact, it is so complex that even Pu Songling himself seems to be troubled by it, as is shown by the second half of his final comment:

But seeing that the immortal couple mingled their tracks with humans and lustfully gave birth to children, why not just stay on and come to a natural end? And how could they get away with abandoning their children repeatedly over a period of thirty years? Strange! (937)⁶

Parents abandoning children (especially sons), we must note, is a recurring theme in the present story. One way to make sense of this rather disturbing theme is to inquire into the

relationships among the characters. Besides the relationship between Huo and his mother which is marked by mutual devotion, there is the intriguing relationship between Huo and Qing-E. On the surface the two are husband and wife. But the way it is portrayed by Pu Songling, it also bears resemblance to that between a mother and a son.

Though in the story Huo is said to be only one year younger than Qing-E (he is twelve and she thirteen; i.e., he is still in puberty and she is an adolescent), he impresses the reader as a naive little boy and she a mature young woman who always makes her decisions independently. Huo is infatuated with Qing-E the moment he sets eyes on her:

One day Huo Huan caught sight of her outside her door. Though he was an ignorant little boy, he was sure of one thing, and that was the surge of longing he felt for her, which he could not express in words. He went straight to his mother and asked her to send gifts of betrothal to the Wus. (929)⁷

In the above description, Huo is referred to as "Tongzi" (童子), a little boy. His love for Qing-E is wordless as well as boundless, like that of a little boy for his mother. He wants to marry her, but such a marriage is out of the question. For we are told of Qing-E, that "after her father left to be a hermit, she resolved not to marry." Qing-E's father, Mr. Wu, is "a man with a penchant for Taoism, who went into the mountains and never came back" (929). This tells us that both Huo Huan and Qing-E are abandoned by their fathers. Qing-E, however, remains devoted to her father. Thus a love triangle can be perceived among Huo, Qing-E and her father early in the story.

Another piece of evidence that Huo is a small boy is his love for a toy. One day, amazed by a tiny spade which has the magic power to penetrate solid rock, "he fondled it every

which way, unwilling to let it out of his hands" until the owner, a Taoist, gives it to him as a gift (930).

In addition to this, Huo is extremely ignorant of the world. After he receives the tiny spade from the Taoist, he tunnels through several walls with it and comes into Qing-E's bedroom during the night. Seeing that Qing-E is fast asleep,

he gingerly took off his shoes and eased himself onto the bed. Fearing the inhospitable reception the young woman would surely give him if she were roused, he slid over only as far as the edge of her embroidered coverlet. Hearing the faint sound of her sweet breathing, his heart was content and his wish fulfilled. Utterly worn out from half a night of exertions, he let his eyelids droop a bit and, before he knew it, he was asleep. (930)

In this scene Huo is comparable to a baby, and the woman whom he nestles up to is the mother. The small side room in the dark in which Huo sleeps so peacefully, perhaps we can go so far as to suggest, is like a mother's womb. Here the baby is without sight, but he can hear and feel the presence of the mother. When she is there, he is safe and his heart is content; so he falls asleep.

All this while it never occurs to Huo that what he does is against the law. (Similarly, a little boy is unaware that his oedipal wishes are considered criminal by society.) So when he is awakened by the servants, "he gave little sign of being apprehensive." Only when they call him a burglar and threaten him does he start to snuffle and confess: "I am no burglar. Honestly, it was because I love the young lady and wanted to be next to her fragrance" (930).

The seemingly innocent small boy, however, is also cunning. Before he leaves Qing-E's room, he slips a phoenix hairpin into his sleeve as a binding pledge of her love for him. He wants her to marry him. This incident seems to show that

Huo is on the verge of coming out of the pre-oedipal period and his attachment to the mother (Qing-E) "becomes charged with phallic/sexual overtones." In this light, the tiny spade which Huo jokingly calls a go-between for him and Qing-E, becomes a significant symbol. It is "hardly more than a foot long" but has enormous magic power (929). Huo "wore it every day dangling from his sash like a precious pendant" (932). Quite obviously this tiny spade may stand for the boy's sexual organ, without which Huo will not be able to marry Qing-E.

The above discussion shows the oedipal fantasy which underlies "Fairy Qing-E." This fantasy, linked to people's infantile wishes which are repressed as they grow up but never rooted out, is likely to yield pleasure when it is experienced in reading. Yet the fantasy, because it is taboo, may also generate anxiety and disgust in the reader. Thus, according to Holland, it is the task of the literary work to control the anxiety by acting out various defensive maneuvers for us, such as splitting, displacing from, regressing, denying and undoing.

All the above-mentioned defensive maneuvers may be perceived in the present story. Splitting, for example, is extensive. In "Fairy Qing-E" we see three fathers, three mothers and three sons. Among the three father figures, Huo's own father is dead before the story begins. This is most reassuring, for the protagonist cannot be guilty of patricide. His father has been dead a long time.

Qing-E's father, who later becomes Huo's father-in-law, takes all the blame and bears Huo's hatred. He is the bad father. First, he abandons his child. Later he takes Qing-E away from Huo who is her legitimate husband. In traditional China, no father-in-law had the right to do such a thing. When Huo finally finds them living together in an immortal's grotto, this unreasonable father-in-law forbids Huo to sleep with Qing-E. He even resorts to cheating: When Huo says that he'll leave the grotto if Qing-E goes with him, the old man "instructed his daughter to go along, then opened the back door to see them

out. When he had fooled the young man into walking out first, father and daughter slammed the door behind them" (935).

Such a terrible father-in-law, of course, deserves Huo's hatred. Besides, this old man does not belong to the human world. So if Huo does not treat him with as much respect as he should for a father-in-law in traditional China, it is all right.

The third father figure for Huo is the Taoist who gives him the magic tiny spade. He is a good father, who is kind and generous. The tiny spade he gives Huo makes it possible for him to marry Qing-E. The magic power it possesses is virility and masculinity. The tiny spade is aggressive, that goes without saying; but it is not a knife. It can penetrate into the mother's womb, win her over and bury the bad father alive in a mountain; but it will never open up a wound and draw blood.

In fact, to balance out the bad father whom Huo has a right to hate, in "Fairy Qing-E" there are three old men who may all be considered father figures good and helpful: the Taoist is one, who corresponds to Qing-E's father (both are Taoists, and both are immortals). The district magistrate is another, who breaks the deadlock between Huo and Qing-E's families and arranges the marriage for Huo and Qing-E. This magistrate, it is interesting to note, matches Huo's father, who was an official when he was alive. The third good father is the mysterious old mountain man, who first cures Huo's feet and later guides him to the immortal's grotto. His identity is again analogous to that of Qing-E's father, for both are old mountain men.

From the above discussion, we see that in "Fairy Qing-E" good fathers outnumber the bad father three to one, which shows the deep-rooted indebtedness Chinese men felt towards their fathers. Nonetheless, this does not cancel out the intense sexual rivalry between father and son for the mother. In Pu Songling's stories, we witness such conflicts. But they are in disguise. The oedipal father wears the mask of a supernatural father-in-law and the mother that of a supernatural wife.

In addition to the multitude of father figures in "Fairy Qing-E," there are three mothers: Huo's mother, Qing-E's mother, and Qing-E herself. Together they seem to embody an ambiguous attitude toward the marriage between Qing-E and Huo. Sometimes they seem to favor the marriage; sometimes they are against it. When one is willing to say yes to it, another suddenly changes her mind and says no. Among them, Qing-E's attitude is the most ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems that she is devoted to her father. On the other, she seems to like the idea of marrying Huo. After she marries Huo, she deserts him and joins her father once again. (In this incident, she is no longer the abandoned child but a deserting parent.) Later it seems that she even collaborates with her father; the two of them trick Huo into leaving the immortal's grotto and then shut the door. Despite such betrayal, Huo loves her all the same.

As for the three sons, they are Huo Huan and the two sons he and Qing-E have. In the story it is said that after Qing-E "gave birth to a son named Mengxian, whom she entrusted completely to the care of a nursemaid, she seemed to give few signs of fondness for the child" (似亦不甚顧惜) (932). This seems to go against human nature. How can a mother not love her own son? Yet in this sentence, the key word is *si* (似) (seemed), which gives us at least two possibilities to interpret this. On the one hand, we may assume that she is not attached to her son which amounts to a denial of the oedipal conflict. If the mother is not close to her son, it annihilates the sexual rivalry between the father and the son. (The same is also true when the sons are abandoned: the oedipal situation is cancelled out and the crime is denied.) On the other hand, we are never sure of the mother's real feelings towards her son. Perhaps she does love him but is unwilling to display it (so it only "seems" that she does not care for him), for fear of the father's retaliation? In this light, the same ambiguity in Qing-E's attitude is witnessed once again, typical of an oedipal

mother. We never know if she is on the side of the father or the son.

Despite the splitting, displacement and denial, from time to time guilt breaks out, and guilt demands punishment. Therefore in the middle of the story a life-threatening situation arises, when Huo comes near the grotto inhabited by Qing-E and her father. Huo loses his way in a wild mountain and the night begins to fall.

Agitation burned like a fire within him. He began thrashing about, and blindly fell over the edge of a sheer cliff. Luckily, the merest sliver of a ledge covered with thick weeds broke his fall a few feet below. The ledge was only wide enough to hold his body; below was bottomless blackness. The student was so frightened of another fall that he dared not stir. (933)

At this juncture regression sets in, which is another defense maneuver explained by Norman Holland. Here is what happens next:

After a time he discovered, to his heartfelt joy, the mouth of a small cave next to his feet. Keeping his back pressed against the rock, he shifted position and wormed his way in.... Peering into the cave, he soon made out sparks of light in its depths. He proceeded three or four *li* inward, gradually approaching them. Suddenly he saw covered walkways and buildings before him. There were no lamps or candles, yet the place was bright as day. A beautiful woman came out of one of the houses: one look told him it was Qing-E. (934)

The description in this part is interesting. When Huo feels that his life is in great danger (the angry father is near him), he crawls back into the mother's womb for safety and protection.

But it is there that he encounters the angry father. consequently the blissful womb is changed into a cold tomb. Love and sex are forbidden by the father. Living in this immortal's grotto in the belly of a stony mountain is living death for Huo. This fate is later given to the father (Huo's father-in-law) after Huo takes Qing-E away. Presumably he continues to live in the mountain. He is buried alive. In this sense, a murder is committed, but the crime is covered up. There is no killing on the stage. This amounts to another denial, that is, "not seeing something in reality we don't want to see."¹⁰

Since sons are so murderously dangerous, which Huo knows only too well, it is not surprising that he wants to abandon them. But more can be made out of the immortal couple's abandonment of their sons. For instance, we may see this as a reversal, which is another defense maneuver. Firstly, although Huo and Qing-E appear somewhat guilty at the end of the story, they are accused of a minor crime (abandoning their sons) instead of the major ones (patricide and incest). Secondly, while the parents (Huo and Qing-E) are guilty, their sons are punished. This reaffirms that the sons are innocent victims. Thus, the situation is reversed, reminding us of the beginning of "Fairy Qing-E," where Huo and Qing-E are abandoned by their fathers. The story comes almost full circle and yet no compromise solution of the Oedipus complex has been worked out. Huo (as the son) refuses to give up his claim to Qing-E (as the mother) and surrender himself to the father. Instead he kills the father (the bad one, of course), marries the mother and gets rid of the sons. This lack of compromise solution, in my opinion, is the cause of Pu Songling's discomfort which he expresses in his final comment. Yet seen from a Freudian point of view, the ending makes perfect sense.

As for Pu Songling's comment about a filial son's reward, we may very well see it as sublimation and undoing. The former is "the chnging of a forbidden impulse or idea into

something socially or morally acceptable, or even more important, acceptable and pleasurable to the individual's ego."¹¹ The latter is another defense "akin to reversal or reaction-formation; ... Often, pointing a moral at the end of a story, as in Aesop or Ovid, is a way of wrapping it up, tying it down, and cancelling it out."¹² Many final comments made by Pu Songling in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, in my opinion, may be seen in this light. The one under discussion is a typical example. It indeed cancels out all the unfilial oedipal wishes of the son and leaves no room for any doubts about Huo's filial piety. An immortal, with his superior knowledge, has concluded that Huo is a filial son. How can we human beings doubt his innocence?

Similar to "Fairy Qing-E," in "Fox-Girl Changting" (《長亭》) a love triangle exists among three major characters: a young man named Shi Taipu who is the protagonist; the young man's supernatural father-in-law Weng (which means an old man or father-in-law in classical Chinese) and Changting, a beautiful fox-girl.

Throughout the story, Shi and his father-in-law are rivals who hate each other fervently and resolutely. In order to control the anxiety created by such an oedipal fantasy, the same defense maneuvers are utilized; but the forms they assume in this story are different from those in "Fairy Qing-E".

Splitting, for example, in "Fairy Qing-E" results in three fathers, three mothers and three sons, while in "Fox-Girl Changting" we witness only two fathers, two mothers and two sons, plus two daughters and two son-in-law. The tripling reminds people of a triangle, which is an oedipal situation. The doubling, on the other hand, suggests a pair which, in my opinion, provides a more stable and symmetrical structure that can contain more tension.

More tension is indeed what we see in "Fox-Girl Changting." In this story the hatred between the father and

the son breaks out and explodes. As a result, murder is attempted, deaths occur and injuries of various kinds are inflicted upon the characters. Because of the intense hatred, there is no good father figure in the present story. Shi's own father is said to have "long been sick and debilitated" (病廢已久); he is always a heavy burden on the protagonist (1336). (The Chinese word *fei*, "debilitated", implies impotence. The father is castrated in the oedipal son's imagination.)

The father-in-law Weng, the other father figure, is even worse. He is vengeful, ungrateful, unreasonable, deceitful and murderous. When he promises to marry Changting to Shi, he never intends to carry out his promise. Instead, he plots to kill the young man in the middle of the night. The incident may, once again, be seen in two different lights. On the one hand, we may view it as projection: the son's oedipal wish to kill the father is projected upon the father, so now the father wishes to kill the son. On the other hand, we may see it as the oedipal son's fear of the father's retaliation.

Later though the promised marriage is arranged by Changting's mother,¹³ Weng continues to hate Shi and each time Changting comes to visit, he refuses to let her return to her husband and baby son. For years he keeps her in his own house. This behavior would be highly inappropriate in traditional China. Thus Shi's intense hatred for Weng is justified. Moreover, the old man is not Shi's real father; he is only the father-in-law. Besides, he is not even a human being; he is merely an evil fox. Thanks to these displacements, Shi is free to hate Weng. Human beings do not have to show filial piety to a vicious animal.

In contrast to the old man, the old woman who is Shi's fox mother-in-law is extremely kind and helpful. She and Changting are the two mother figures in the story, while Shi's own mother is absent. (No explanation has ever been given for this.) In my interpretation, Shi's mother is not really absent; she is split into two: the old fox lady who is always kind and

helpful to Shi is the pre-oedipal mother, while Changting who constantly wavers between Shi and Weng is the oedipal mother.

As for the two sons, Shi and the baby boy, they stay together all the time and share their weal and woe. When Changting fails to come back as expected, the baby is distressed and cries endlessly. Shi seems equally miserable. At one point, he is said to be on the brink of death:

The passing of two more years brought an end to Shi's wishing and hoping, and the child's nightlong wailing pierced his helpless heart. Then his father weakened and died, which multiplied his misery. He was exhausted and became very ill. He was unable to receive the condolences of guests and friends. (1337)

Then at the sight of Changting, who comes back to mourn for her father-in-law, Shi "was overwhelmed by a great surge of grief and passed out" (石大悲，慟遂絕) (1337). Here we must note that in the original text, the word *jue* (絕) not only means "pass out"; it also means "pass away" in classical Chinese. With this ambiguity, the incident becomes intriguing. The discussion by Sigmund Freud of Dostoevsky's sudden death-like seizures in early childhood gives us a clue to Shi's "death" or death-like seizure. In "Dostoevsky and Parricide" Freud says:

We know the meaning and intention of such death-like seizures. They signify an identification with a dead person, either with someone who is really dead or with someone who is still alive and whom the subject wishes dead. The latter case is the more significant. The attack then has the value of a punishment. One has wished another person dead, and now one is this other person and is dead oneself. At this point psychoanalytical

theory brings in the assertion that for a boy this other person is usually his father and that the attack (which is termed hysterical) is thus a self-punishment for a death-wish against a hated father.¹⁴

This throws much light on Shi's death spell. On the one hand, it is his identification with the father. The words used by Pu Songling to describe the two men's conditions are quite identical in sound and meaning: *bingfei* (病廢 "sick and debilitated") and *bingbei* (病憊 "sick and exhausted"). On the other hand, it is his punishment for wishing to kill the father. In addition to Freud's interpretation, in this case I would also like to suggest that Shi's death betrays the intensity of the son's jealousy of the father. After all, it is the father's death rather than the son's longing and distress which brings Changting back. This means that she loves the father better than she does the son(s). Nevertheless, the father's death brings the son and mother together once again. But the guilt would be overwhelming and Shi's death alone, which after all is not as real as his father's, cannot set the score right. The guilt has to be denied.

Therefore in the second half of the story we see Shi's guilt denied in several steps. After Shi recovers from his illness, he "gave his approval" for Changting to visit her parents, even though he knows that once she is there, Weng will not allow her to come back (1337). This turns out to be true. "Once gone, she did not return for years. Shi and his son slowly forgot about her" (1337). This, in my reading, is the first step in the denial of Shi's guilt. By letting Changting go back to Weng and afterwards forgetting her, Shi, like an oedipal boy, finds a compromise solution to his Oedipus complex. He gives up his claim for the mother and surrenders himself to the father. The oedipal wishes are repressed, as Changting is forgotten.

For the next step, Shi's guilt is displaced by that of Mr. Zhao, who is the other son-in-law of Weng's. When Weng

refuses to let Zhao's wife return to her husband, the young man is furious. He hires a Taoist (who turns out to be Shi's teacher) to catch Weng and kill him (1338). Now it is not Shi but someone else who attempts to murder the father. The father is so terrible that all his sons-in-law hate him.

After this, Shi makes a trip to Bian to see his teacher in order to save Weng's life. "The Taoist would not lightly let the fox go, claiming that it was cunning and devious, but he finally gave in to Shi's insistent pleas" (1339). In this incident, Shi returns good for evil. After this, no one can doubt his innocence. He has never intended to kill the father. He actually saves his life! Holland says "the child by rescuing his father proves his innocence of any wish to kill him and at the same time by paying a life back, as it were, he owns his own life free and clear of any father."¹⁶ This seems to suit Shi's case.

Finally, after Weng is released by the Taoist, Shi once again allows Changting to visit him. This time, he says:

My son came into this world with no mother to care for him: yet his life was not cut short. Now I've grown used to the life of a widower. Instead of behaving like Young Master Zhao, I repaid spite with kindness. I've done everything I could for you. If you don't come back, you will do me wrong. Though our homes are not far from each other, I will not inquire for you. (1339-1340)

This speech starts with a compromise solution of the son's Oedipus complex and ends (as the story does) in his moral victory over the oedipal mother (Changting) and father (Weng). By the end of "Fox-Girl Changting," Shi and Weng continue to hate each other as passionately as before; but the shift in Changting's attitude, which has remained ambiguous up to this point, proclaims that Shi is the winner: she no longer wants to listen to Weng's endless complaint about Shi,

and returns to the young man before the three-day-period they have agreed upon is over (1340).

In the author's final comment, though Shi is blamed by Pu Songling for maneuvering the old fox into allowing the marriage and toying with him when he is in a plight, these shortcomings are insignificant when compared to the "deceitfulness" and "dishonesty" of the old fox (1340). Therefore on the whole the defenses in this story are, in my opinion, much more effective than those in "Fairy Qing-E." Here Shi's guilt is completely denied, while in the other story the immortal couple are guilty of abandoning their sons. The crime would be considered less severe than patricide and incest in traditional China; nonetheless, it violates the sacred bond between child and parent just the same. As Hans W. Loewald puts it, "it is the bringing forth, nourishing, providing for, and protecting of the child by the parents that constitute their parenthood, authority, and render sacred the child's ties with the parents. Parricide is a crime against the sanctity of such a bond" (378). So is the abandonment of one's own children. The displacement of crimes does not wipe out the immortal couple's guilt.

The third story to be discussed is "The Painted Wall" 《畫壁》.¹⁶ It is fascinating not only because of the oedipal fantasy which is embedded in it, but also because it may be read as an allegory of the reader's response to the *Liaozhai* stories in general. First, the enactment of the oedipal fantasy gives the reader considerable pleasure. Then all of a sudden, the defenses begin to collapse and the anxiety becomes so overwhelming that he has to beat a hasty retreat from the enchanted world of literature back to the real world. In this process, the transcendence and reaffirmation of boundaries are of special significance.

The notion of boundary is witnessed even in the title itself as "the wall." As soon as the story begins, it is visualized: in a Buddhist temple Mr. Zhu and Mr. Meng stand in front of a

wall, appreciating a painting on it. In the painting, beautiful heavenly maidens are scattering flowers. Here a boundary exists between the work of art which is on the wall and the viewers who stand in front of it. The wall is an important symbol showing the boundary between the enchanted world (of art and literature) and the real world, in which initially the two men are situated.

The boundaries in this story, however, are established only to be transcended. Zhu, fascinated by a young girl with flowing hair in the painting, "gazed at her intently for a long time, until his self-possession began to waver and his thoughts grew so abstracted that he fell into a trance. His body went adrift as if floating on mist; suddenly he was inside the painting" (14). This experience of being absorbed into a work of art must be familiar to many readers and viewers. What is especially interesting here is the contrast between Zhu and Meng. While Zhu transcends the boundaries and is playing in the divine world of the painting, Meng remains in the real world throughout the story and temporarily loses sight of his companion. Here I would like to suggest that Zhu and Meng represent two types of reading (viewing) experiences.

In support of this, Zhu and Meng are not individualized characters. The story gives only minimal information about them, such as Meng's name, Zhu's surname (without which it would be difficult to tell the story) and the fact that Zhu is a scholar. (Thus Zhu's viewing experience here may also stand for a reading experience.) Beyond these, we know nothing specific about the two men; whether they are old or young, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, their personalities.... Their identities are thus left open; any reader or viewer who is willing to give up conscious control to some extent while he (she) reads and allow himself (herself) to daydream, to play, i.e. to enact his (her) fantasy in the enchanted world rather than be a spectator of it, is Zhu, while those who hold themselves aloof in reading are Meng.

For the second group of readers, their positions are largely outside the work of art. Their attitude is critical and their reading more objective. In "The Painted Wall," though Meng remains outside the painting, he is not blind to the beauty of it. For him (as well as for Zhu before he crosses the boundary), the figures in the paintings are "lifelike" and one girl is especially charming. "Her cherry lips were on the verge of moving, and the liquid pools of her eyes seemed to stir with wave-like glances" (櫻唇欲動, 眼波將流) (14). Here Pu Songling has used two adverbs *yu* (欲) (on the verge of) and *jiang* (將) (about to) which in my opinion are of great significance. They have created an effect that the girl is almost alive, yet she is frozen in that state. Almost alive is nonetheless never really alive. In this sense these adverbs themselves seem to stand as a boundary line between life and death, motion and stillness. Outside the work of art, almost alive is the most a viewer (reader) can get. Only inside is she really alive.

Once Zhu is inside the enchanted world (here the painting may also stand for the *Liaozhai* stories), the girl he admires becomes alive. His adventure here is like a dream marked by wish-fulfillment. Originally, Zhu is fascinated by the immortal girl; now, his desire is projected onto the girl. She seems to take a fancy to him. She "tugged furtively at his sleeve" and "gave him a dazzling smile" (14). She leads him to "a small chamber" in the inner quarters of the celestial palace. "Once there, Zhu hesitated to approach any farther. When she turned her head and raised the flower with beckoning motion, he went across to her in the quiet, deserted chamber" (14).

Symbolically the girl's small chamber, in front of which Zhu hesitates before he enters, is her womb and this symbolic intercourse is soon followed by a real one which brings Zhu immeasurable gratification. Making love to the immortal girl, however, also evokes a great deal of anxiety in Zhu, which seems to characterize Zhu's experience in the divine world henceforth.

The search of the girl's small chamber by her female companions is the turning point. After they find Zhu there, they tease the girl by saying, "A little gentleman is already growing in your belly, but still you wear those flowing tresses, pretending to be a maiden?" (15). This remark changes the relation between Zhu and the girl. Before this, Zhu is the girl's lover; now, he is both her lover and the little gentleman in her belly that is her son. The girl accordingly becomes his mother-wife, and making love to her borders upon incest, so later when Zhu is about to make love to her again, he has to look all around to make sure that no one is in sight. Then just as the two are having an orgasm, the heavy tread of leather boots, clanking chains and angry voices are heard outside the room (15). By making love to the mother-wife, Zhu crosses a boundary which is taboo. He has gone too far. Now a god appears on the scene who is "clad in golden armor, his face as black as lacquer, with chains in one hand and a mace in the other. Standing around him were all the maidens" (15).

This god in my interpretation is an angry father figure who embodies the oedipal boy's fear of retaliation. The god's anger is represented by the weapon and chains he holds and his menacing black face; he is a father figure because he has authority and divine power. All the girls seem to belong to him and he is the one who has a right to the girl's small chamber. When he wants to enter it, he doesn't need to ask anyone's permission; he walks right into it (15). He is the girl's match, because he is a god and she a goddess. They both are immortals, while Zhu is a powerless mortal man who does not belong to the divine world. (The feelings of an oedipal boy towards his parents are similar to these.)

Zhu's dread of the angry god's retaliation drives him to hide under a bed in the girl's chamber. This may be seen as regression. Now Zhu is reduced to a mere foetus who is buried in the girl's dark womb, while the angry god is coming ever nearer and nearer. In this most frightening scene, when other

defenses have collapsed one after another, the existence of boundaries becomes a last defense which will hold out: the angry god may have chains and a mace, he may come into the girl's chamber in search of Zhu, but between him and Zhu there is always either a wall or a plank of wood. He will never lay his hand on the scholar.

This seems to be a hint telling the reader if he reads the *Liaozhai* stories as Zhu does (that is, allows himself to daydream, to actively play in the stories) and in the process too much anxiety is aroused by the enactment of infantile fantasies, he need only remember that a boundary always exists between the work of art and the real world. No harm can ever reach him physically. If the reading ceases to be pleasurable, he can always close the book and return to the real world. This is precisely what Zhu does in the present story (with the help of the old monk). No angry god will jump out of the wall to snatch him back. At this juncture, the awareness of the boundaries' existence becomes most reassuring. Our sanity and well-being depend on it.

The wall, symbolizing a boundary, toward the end of the story is momentarily visualized as a magic door. When the old monk taps his fingers on it and calls for Zhu to come out, Zhu's image emerges.

Presently there appeared on the wall an image of Zhu standing motionless with his head cocked to one side as if listening to something. "You have kept your travelling companion waiting a long time," called the monk again. Thereupon he drifted out of the wall and down to the floor. (16)

When Zhu enters the wall, we do not see in such slow motion this transitional moment. Perhaps at that time the main concern is to transcend the boundary and enter the enchanted world. Later when the anxiety becomes too overwhelming, the

wall allows Zhu to come out of it safely while it contains the terrifying god. After that, the door which leads to the enchanted world is closed. All we see is a wall once again.

Zhu's escape from the painted wall may seem to be a failure, yet later it is balanced by the miraculous change in the divine girl. Instead of flowing hair, she now has a high coiled chignon on her head (16). The girl becomes even more beautiful, thanks to Zhu's involvement. As an imaginative reader, Zhu has impregnated the text with new meaning. For people who come after him, the work will never be the same again.

Finally, I would like to speculate a little about the mysterious old monk, who seems to know all about what is going on in the painted wall. Throughout the story, if Zhu is like an actor who plays in the spotlight, the old monk seems to be a director who controls the play from the backstage. Most of the time we don't even remember his existence, because he does not interfere with the play. It is only when the anxiety becomes too great for Zhu to handle that he comes to his rescue. Who is this old monk then, sitting alone in a small temple surrounded by exquisite works of art? A passage in Pu Songling's preface to *Liaozhai Zhiyi* may give us a clue:

At the time of my birth, my father dreamed of a lean and sickly-looking Buddhist monk, who came into our house with one arm uncovered by clothes. On his left breast was a round plaster the size of a coin. My father woke up with a start and found that I was born, with a similar birthmark on my left breast. As a child, I was lean and often sick; having grown up, I have not been as fortunate and successful as others. My house is indeed as desolate as a monastery. Working for my livelihood with my pen, I am as poor as a Buddhist monk with his alms-bowl. From time to time I have scratched my head and asked myself: Is it true that I was that monk who

sat with his face against the wall in my previous life? (2-3)

This quotation reveals that Pu Songling was quite conscious of the link between himself and an old Buddhist monk. If we assume that the old monk in "The Painted Wall" is connected to the author of *Liaozhai*, it seems that Pu Songling is telling his readers that they needn't fear. They should enter the enchanted world of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* by allowing themselves to daydream, for only then will the stories become really alive for them. In this process the pleasure they experience will be immeasurable and the anxiety can be contained. No harm will come to them; everything they experience is an illusion. And, as the old monk says, "Illusion is born in the mind" (16). When it is necessary, the readers will be disillusioned by the author as Zhu is rescued by the old monk. Yet at the same time, not everything is an illusion. The girl in the painting is changed. The reader who dares to play in the stories is the co-author of them. No wonder Pu Songling put this story near the very beginning of his entire collection. In a sense, it is a guide for the reader.

In conclusion, I hope the above discussion has demonstrated that the psychoanalytic approach may help to open up new possibilities in the interpretation of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* by revealing symbols, recurring themes, unconscious fantasies and shedding light on otherwise puzzling relationships among characters (for example, the multitudes of father, mother and son figures, the triangles within families, the intense hatred between human protagonists and their supernatural fathers-in-law, the vacillation of the supernatural woman between fathers and sons, in the above discussed stories). In addition to this, the psychoanalytic interpretation has the following features. First it requires the critic to take each story as an organic whole instead of fragmenting it, which has been a problem in the criticism of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* in the past,

regarding it as a process in which every character has significance in its own way. Second, it is based upon close reading of the texts. Special attention is given to details of the language and sometimes the personal history of the author to describe a convergence of themes.¹⁷ Third, the meaning developed thereby is often fluid rather than fixed, as I have demonstrated above. This often results from certain ambiguities in the language, which the critic needs to recognize and speculate about. In this paper, my discussion highlights the oedipal fantasy embedded in some *Liaozhai* stories, but it is not limited to it. It goes beyond the fantasy to explore the fluid boundaries among author, text and reader (as co-author of the text). I would like to argue that the creation of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* allows Pu Songling the freedom to explore and portray what was repressed socially and personally. In this sense the stories may be perceived as dreamwork to illustrate and resolve problems of the self.

Notes

¹ There are numerous examples of this. The most influential books and articles include Jaroslav Prusek's discussion of Pu Songling and *Liaozhai Zhiyi* in *Chinese History and Literature*, Xu Shinian's "Shi Tan *Liaozhai Zhiyi* de Sixiang," Wang Wenchen's "*Liaozhai Zhiyi* Ji Qi Zuoze Pu Songling," and Zhu Qikai's "Preface" to *Liaozhai Zhiyi Xuan*.

² Thompson, Laurence G. *Chinese Religion*. 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), p. 42.

³ Holland, Norman N. *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. (New York: Oxford, 1968), p. 189.

⁴ Pu, Songling "Fairy Qing-E" in *Liaozhai Zhiyi Huizhu Huijiao Huiping Ben* (聊齋誌異會注會校會評本). Ed. Zhang, Youhe (張友鶴). (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986. Reprint of 1978 ed.), p. 937. (Subsequent quotations from *Liaozhai Zhiyi* in this paper are from the same edition and are marked by page number only. The

English translation is based upon that made by Denise C. and Victor H. Mair of 1989. In a few places the translation is not accurate enough and minor corrections are needed, or else the language Pu Songling used is ambiguous. These I will point out in my notes.

⁶ In the Chinese text Huo Huan is said to be thirteen. But in traditional China, a person's age was counted in a different way. A baby was considered one year old at birth. When the Chinese New Year came, everybody was a year older. Thus when Pu Songling says Huo Huan is thirteen and later Qing-E fourteen, it really means that he is at most twelve and she thirteen. Denise C. and Victor H. Mair's translation has not taken this into consideration.

⁶ In the original text, this sentence does not have a subject, which is not unusual in classical Chinese. When it is translated, however, the translator must supply a subject. In the story translated by Denise C. and Victor H. Mair, Qing-E is the one who is blamed. But if we take into consideration that the first part of the comment is made about Huo Huan, then it is more likely that he is also to blame. The ambiguity of the language here gives us more than one possibility to interpret this comment.

⁷ Denise C. and Victor H. Mair translate "Tongzi" as an adolescent. This is a rather than an accurate translation of the word which means "a little boy."

⁸ The word "Wen" (聞) can mean either "to smell" or to "hear." In classical Chinese it more often means "to hear." Thus my translation of the sentence "Lue wen xiangxi, xinyuan qie wei" (略聞香息, 心願竊慰) differs from that by Denise C. and Victor H. Mair "Faint inhalations of her aroma were enough to soothe the pangs in his heart" (*Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* p. 247).

⁹ Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 93.

¹⁰ Holland *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹³ The English translators Denise C. and Victor H. Mair made a

mistake in this part by saying that both Weng and his wife come to Shi's home to wed Changting to him. The mistake results from the word *weng'ao* 翁媪 which could mean either "the old man and his wife" or "Weng's wife." Judging from the fact that, two sedan chairs come to Shi's home, carrying Changting and her mother; and that Weng's presence is never mentioned in this scene; and, moreover, the old woman says to Shi, "My old man is stupid and senile" (我家老子昏髦) (1336), which she is not likely to say if Weng is present, it is quite obvious that Weng never comes to wed Changting to Shi. Otherwise, the relation between Shi and Weng would be quite different. (Refer to "Fox-Girl Changing" in *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*, p. 336.)

¹⁴ Freud, Sigmund. *Character and Culture*. ed. Phillip Rieff. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 281.

¹⁵ Holland *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, p. 49.

¹⁶ Though on the whole Denise C. and Victor H. Mair's translation of *Liaozhai* stories is more accurate than that made by Herbert Giles, they translated the title of the present story as "The Mural" which is not as good as Giles's translation "The Painted Wall." Thus, in this paper I will use the title as translated by Giles, and the quotations as translated by Denise C. and Victor H. Mair.

¹⁷ Schwartz, Murray M., and David Willbern, "Literature and Psychology," in *Interrelations of Literature*, eds. Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1982), p. 209.

