

Gender and Sexuality in *Agamemnon* and *Liao-chai chih-yi*

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SUMMARY

In this essay the author first shows that Bakhtin's theory of carnival and Foucault's theory of the power struggle of discourses are both congruent with Moi's androgyny or "deconstructed" stage three feminism in which gender-identity is seen to be contingent, finally indeterminate. Then, against this theoretical background, Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon in Aeschylus' tragic drama is interpreted in terms of carnival as a "minimally ritualized antiritual, a festive celebration of the other," and in terms of Bataille's Dionysian "orgy of annihilation": in proclaiming the joy of rebirth through the "sacrificial" death of her husband Clytemnestra goes beyond herself, breaks through her homogeneous gender identity by liberating heterogeneous elements, her "other." Finally, the Chinese *Liao-chai chih-yi* is seen, against this same interpretive framework, as a hybrid genre, a site of contention between text and subtext or dominant discourse and counter-discourse: its dialogism of discourses reveals a heterogeneity, an alternative world--in terms of values and beliefs--to that of traditional Confucianism.

KEY WORDS

carnival
heterogeneity
dominant discourse
antiritual
gender identity

homogeneity
androgyny
counter-discourse
sacrifice
liberation



Thanks to feminist criticism, the issue of gender and sexuality in a literary text has been receiving more and more attention. In this paper, I want to suggest that as deconstruction has been appropriated by the feminists for their analysis, Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization and Foucault's discourse theory can also be very useful when gender and sexual identity are being discussed. I also want to argue that in fact the ambivalence and indeterminacy of gender identity is the basic quality shared by Bakhtin's carnival, Foucault's emphasis on the power struggle of discourses and Moi's idea of androgyny. By examining the Greek tragedy *Agamemnon* and two short stories in *Liao-chai chih-yi* 聊齋志異, I intend to show that in these texts there is no universal, essential or fixed gender identity; rather, gender identity is socially and culturally constructed, thus contingent and open to dynamic change.

In his article, "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," Wayne Booth expresses his strong skepticism about seeing Bakhtin from the feminist perspective. He argues that Bakhtin is in fact a patriarchal sexist by offering two reasons: (1) Bakhtin seems to be indifferent to women; he seldom touches upon the problem of women; (2) Bakhtin does not condemn Rabelais but praise him when Rabelais achieves his humor at the expense of women; or at least he ignores Rabelais' ridicule and debasement of women, which is not funny at all when read from a woman's point of view.¹ Booth goes on to argue that "some ideological

faults, like debasement of women, must ever be taken seriously."² Until recently, Booth has been one of the very few critics who have attempted to discuss Bakhtin from a feminist perspective. It is obvious that in his article he is very uncomfortable with the comic denigration of women and thus takes Bakhtin to task for this fault.

I will in this paper offer my view of Bakhtin in relation to feminism as a rejoinder to enter a dialogue with Booth and also bring Foucault into this discussion. Toril Moi in her book, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, singles out Julia Kristeva as the best representative of the French feminist.³ And according to Kristeva, the feminist movement can be divided historically and politically into three phases. First, there is liberal feminism--women demand equal access to the symbolic order usually dominated by men. Then there is radical feminism--femininity is extolled and women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. The biological and essential difference between the male and the female is emphasized and insisted on in order to "defend women as *women* to counteract the patriarchal oppression."⁴ Finally comes the androgynous phase--women reject the rigid dichotomy between masculine and feminine as too metaphysical.⁵ Thus the universal essentialism of identity is repudiated in favor of an ambivalent identity/non-identity.

For both Moi and Kristeva, an "undeconstructed" form of "stage two" feminism, "unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender identities, runs the risk of becoming an *inverted form of sexism* (emphasis mine)."⁶ That is to say, in the patriarchal hierarchy man is dominant and woman is subordinate; it is suspected that radical feminism tries to invert such a sexist order into another sexist order in which man becomes subordinate and woman dominant. Moi and Kristeva argue that only in phase three where the androgynous ideal appears as the deconstruction of the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity can the male and female achieve a real

equality. Most importantly, the ambiguity of gender will call into question the "repressive" conceptual link between sex and power. In this case, the appeal to a form of essentialism in which "male sexuality" is associated with violence, lust, objectification and a preoccupation with orgasm, and "female sexuality" with nurturance, reciprocity, intimacy and an emphasis on nongenital pleasure is questioned.⁷ Man is no longer the oppressor and woman the victim. In fact, woman can be both the oppressor and the victim. And sometimes, woman is the oppressor and man the victim. Therefore, according to Foucault, one's "sexual identity" is in fact a function of one's place in the social field at a particular time, not given. One's personal identity is constantly open to change and contestation.⁸ Foucault argues that one's "sexuality" is a matter of socially and historically specific practices and relationships that are contingent and dynamic, and thus a matter of political struggle.⁹ As a product of discourses which are ambiguous, fragmented and open-ended, sexuality, according to Foucault, is characterized by contingency and change.

Therefore, we can see that Booth seems to be arguing from a perspective in which sexual essentialism is never called into question. Fixed, stereotyped sexuality causes him to argue against Bakhtin as a patriarchal sexist. In fact, objecting to both the Platonist idealizing of women and to the Christian tradition of representing women as 'the incarnation of sin', Bakhtin says that

the popular comic tradition was in no way simply hostile to women, though it provides plenty of material that may look sexist when viewed out of context through modern eyes. It viewed women as representing 'the material bodily lower stratum'; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously; she is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to

earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. Such is woman's image in the popular comic tradition.¹⁰

Bakhtin's ambivalence of the woman parallels the contingency of sexuality argued by Foucault and the non-identity endorsed by Moi's androgynous ideal. Here, I want to argue that actually the emphasis on woman as "ambivalent" is intrinsic to Bakhtin's concept of carnival. According to Bakhtin, carnival aims to plunge certainty into ambivalence, unity into hybridization, and absoluteness into contradiction by opening a dialogical interaction between an official voice and the "other" voice—a mocking and subversive parodic double. Here, the other is often the marginal woman. Therefore, subverting absolute hierarchy or power, carnival will bring about "joyful relativity" of canon and authority and the repressed "oppositional voice" of the otherness can thus be revealed.

Here the "ambivalent" or "double voiced" aspect or function of Bakhtin's carnival should be emphasized in that it not only lays bare the cracks in the unified, fixed, completed, and dominant ideology, but it at the same time through a process of reversal and parody reveals and recognizes a marginalized "otherness." As Bakhtin says:

Carnival is a minimally ritualized antiritual, a festive celebration of the other, the gaps and holes in all the mappings of the world laid out in systematic theologies, legal codes, normative poetics, and class hierarchies.¹¹

And the carnival laughter produced by the parodic double of a carnivalesque text possesses just this ambivalent function of reversal and renewal. And it is this spirit of ambivalence and recurrent reversal that I find congruent with the concept of non-identity emphasized by Moi and Kristeva's androgynous

ideal. It also shares affinities with the contingency and dynamic change claimed by Foucault for his idea of sexuality.

In fact, some critics have noticed the close connection between carnival and matriarchal traditions. For instance, Robbin defines carnival as deriving from the later rites of Dionysus.¹² Jonathan Hall indicates that "carnival brings about the reversals of sexual, social, and religious norms."¹³ Maroussia Ahmed points out correctly that in carnivalized novels women are often the central characters. She goes on to explain that "carnavalesque writing continues with the postmodernists, especially in feminist texts, which in order to exist must transgress the Law (the unique, the cultural made into the eternal) and the language of the Father to celebrate the multiple, the natural, the everchanging life represented by the Mother."¹⁴ We can see that this view of "Dionysus" as "multiple" and "everchanging" comes very close to the androgyny advocated by Moi. Frann Michel, in a recent article, makes an explicit allusion to the close connection between the feminine writing which questions the binary order masculine / feminine by stressing sexual ambiguity (in a homosexual or androgynous sense) and Bakhtinian writing which is "multiple, undefinable, parodic," claiming that both are overlapping categories.¹⁵

In the following, I would like to offer my own analysis to suggest parallels between Bakhtinian carnivalesque and Moi's concept of androgyny as a possible link for a theoretical framework. The affinities which call for further study and more precise analysis are presented below:

(1) Hybridization: just as dialogism opposes monologism, so Dionysus is the best symbol of androgyny: he is both man-in-woman and woman-in-man, as Heilbrun sees him / her.¹⁶ Bakhtin's carnival is characterized by a parodic double, a double-voiced parody, which also hints at a split in the unity of gender and sexual identity. To replace unification, absoluteness and fixedness, ambivalence and flux and beco-

ming are emphasized by Bakhtin's carnival.

(2) Subversion: it is obvious that the basic function of carnival is to subvert and transgress the official ideology. Carnival aims to cause an inversion of the official hierarchy, which is usually monological and patriarchal, so very often a reversal of sex role is effected as well. In the process of reversal and subversion, the repressed "otherness" is revealed and recognized. The major function of androgyny like that of the carnival is also subversive, a de-centering of official normal sexual identity.

(3) Indeterminacy or open-endedness: this quality is perhaps the most important philosophical basis shared by Bakhtin's carnival, Moi's androgyny, deconstruction and Foucault's idea of sexual identity. It is worthy of special notice that carnival laughter is also called ambivalent laughter by Bakhtin: it serves as a loophole to breach the official ideology, which tends to be fixed, finished, complete, certain and absolute. Bakhtin emphasizes that carnival laughter brings about a joyful relativity of the official culture. Carnival in a sense is *pharmakon*, a "medicine" which is both death and renewal to the official ideology in the temporal suspension or reversal of hierarchy, a double-voiced parody which subverts and yet installs at the same time; opening the loophole by means of laughter, carnival is always a site of incompleteness, becoming and ambiguity.

Androgyny, as Moi and Kristeva see it, is also a refusal of a unified gender identity, a deconstruction of the binary opposition between male and female, a nonidentity.¹⁷ Therefore, during the pre-Oedipal phase, where the opposition between masculine and feminine does not exist, is emphasized by Moi as androgynous. So like carnival, androgyny also possesses ambivalence—the positive pole sees the possibility of reunion with the negative pole in a continual process of self-actualization which is, finally, sexually ambiguous.¹⁸

The ambiguity and fluidity of sexual identity is also

shared by Foucault when he views personal identity as "constituted by the myriad of social relationships and practices in which the individual is engaged. Because these relationships are sometimes contradictory and often unstable, the identity that emerges is fragmented and dynamic."¹⁹ As a product of social relations and conflicts, one's sexuality is constantly open to change and contingency. For Foucault, one's identity is more a matter of political struggle than that of a stable, static and individualistic model.²⁰ As one's sexual identity is often shaped by the discourse which is ambiguous, Foucault rejects the totalizing theories of the essentialism and universalism of sexual identity.²¹ Therefore, according to Foucault, if we recognize that identities are historically constituted, then we can understand their contingency.²² The emphasis on the ambiguity and contingency with the rejection of the essentialism of sexual identity, I believe, is the most important affinity shared by Bakhtin's carnival, Moi's androgyny and Foucault's personal identity.

Bakhtin's reticence about the gender issue in his writing echoes Foucault's emphasis on the so-called "de-sexualization" in which Foucault argues that we should shift our attention away from gender-based identity politics to probe the problems concerned with culture, discourse or language which shape our understanding of gender and sexuality. Therefore, Foucault is skeptical about identity politics which is based on the very discourses which he attempts to debunk.²³ Bidy Martin in her "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault" writes that

The search for a more perfect self, for a truer, more natural sexuality, a more authentic "I" too often represents a refusal to account for the position from which we speak, to ground ourselves materially and historically, to acknowledge and be vigilant of our own limitations and our own differences. Foucault's deconstructive methodology provides an immanent critique of

such a search for *the* authentic female voice or *the* sexuality.²⁴

Jana Sawicki also warns that according to Foucault, "essentialist humanisms obscure the irreducible plurality of habits, practices, experiences, and desires within the many different sexual subcultures."²⁵ Therefore, Bakhtin's emphasis on the dialogic relationship of dominant and counter-discourses in the carnival parallels Foucault's concern with discourses and power struggle. And the anti-essentialism as far as gender identity is concerned provides the basic common ground for a possible connection among Moi's androgyny, Bakhtin's carnival and Foucault's de-sexualization.

In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's murder of her husband Agamemnon basically fits the definition of Bakhtin's carnival as a "minimally ritualized antiritual, a festive celebration of the other." In fact, the assassination of the king Agamemnon can be seen as a duplicate of the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia at the port of Aulis. In the festive atmosphere of the celebration of the victory over Troy, Agamemnon walks on the purple tapestries prepared by his wife, a ceremony or ritual to honor gods. Symbolically, Agamemnon will be bathed, cleansed like a goat to be sacrificed at the altar. Of course, it is an unholy ritual as Cassandra proclaims, an antiritual. After the killing of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra gives a religious or ritualized dimension to the murder by announcing to the chorus: "I deal him the third blow to the God beneath the earth, / To the safe keeper of the dead a votive gift."²⁶ The ritualized assassination parallels the sacrifice of Iphigenia when she is lifted "like a goat, above the altar / With her robes falling about her" (lines 215-6).

Here I also want to argue that the assassination can be seen as a vivid instance of an "orgy of annihilation" as Bataille describes the Dionysian festival of the ancient

Greeks.²⁷ In such a ritual, "the violation of taboos designed to control *eros* is indistinguishable from the violation of taboos surrounding *thanatos*."²⁸ Likewise, in the spirit of ambivalence between death and renewal as defined by Bakhtin in the carnival, Clytemnestra proclaims the joy of rebirth with the death of Agamemnon: "And smartly spouting blood he sprays me with / The sombre drizzle of bloody dew and I / Rejoice no less than in God's gift of rain / The crops are glad when the ear of corn gives birth" (lines 1348-51). In the saturnalia in which Dionysus is honored, the prohibitions against death and sex are transgressed. According to Bataille, "transgression is enacted at the *altar* of sacrifice and the *altar* of eroticism."²⁹ In the orgy of annihilation of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Clytemnestra also announces boldly the element of *eros* in her ritual of sacrifice: "the sight contributes / An appetiser to my own bed's pleasure" (lines 1406-7).

Worthy of our special notice is that Bataille indicates the radical *alteration* of the person who participates in ritual sacrifices.³⁰ "Such an action," argues Bataille, "would be characterized by the fact that it would have the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the person."³¹ The person who participates in the sacrifice would "throw himself suddenly *outside of himself*."³² In the *Agamemnon*, we can see that after Clytemnestra completes her ritual of sacrifice, the *animus*, the other side of herself, her masculinity is released. Standing above the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra, she announces that it is she herself who has committed the murder: "Here lies Agamemnon, / My husband, dead, the work of this right hand, / An honest workman. There you have the facts" (lines 1363-65). As in Bakhtin's carnival, the alterity is liberated. The other is recognized. The repressed oppositional voice is revealed.

According to Bakhtin, the movement to reveal the other is usually valorized in the crowning / de-crowning ritual of

carnival.³³ The creative power of shift-and-renewal, the replaceability, the joyful relativity of all structure, order and authority are celebrated in this ritual of crowning / decrowning process of carnival.³⁴ We can also see the crowning / decrowning process enacted in *Agamemnon*. When Agamemnon accepts proudly Clytemnestra's proposal to dismount from his chariot and walk up the purple tapestries to the palace, he is in a sense crowned as a carnival king. But as the carnival is never finalized or absolute, the crowning already contains the element of immanent decrowning. Therefore, before long he is slaughtered like a goat at the altar by Clytemnestra in the process of decrowning.³⁵ When he is decrowned, Clytemnestra is crowned immediately in her triumphant proclamation of her killing of Agamemnon and Cassandra. The relativity of structure and authority is here carried out in this process of crowning / decrowning. The patriarchal hierarchy is transgressed and subverted. In the reversal of hierarchical order, the marginal other represented by the woman is here to be recognized and re-evaluated.

In fact, the main purpose of the carnival is to see the liberation of heterogeneity in the homogeneous system. Through the process of reversal and renewal, we can also see the deconstruction of the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity, a characteristic intrinsic to the androgynous concept advocated by Moi. Here, in the ritual of carnival, the other, gap or hole of the absolute sexual identity will emerge. As Bataille argues, in ritual, a person is free to throw himself outside of himself. In the recurrent process of shift and replacement, the dualistic opposition between the male and female becomes unstable and problematic. Therefore, in *Agamemnon*, when the king returns home in glory and victory amid the celebration of the city, he is welcomed by Clytemnestra and is offered a great honor to walk on the purple tapestries. At first, he refuses such an honor, arguing that "do not by women's methods make me / Effeminate" (lines

881-2). But finally he yields to Clytemnestra's persuasion and becomes effeminate. In this carnival ritual, Clytemnestra tells Agamemnon to "give way. Consent to let me have the mastery" (line 907). Finally Clytemnestra gains mastery over Agamemnon and becomes masculine. So, we can see that in the process of shift and reversal, the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is transgressed and subverted. According to Carl Jung, each person is in fact bisexual, containing both *anima* and *animus*. And often in the carnival, the other side of a person is revealed and recognized. The intertextuality of both one and the other in identity politics will call into question the natural, universal essentialism of gender identity. Actually the artificiality of gender identity, or non-identity as Moi argues in her concept of androgyny can usually be seen in the shift and reversal of carnival.

The undecidability of sexual identity can further be seen in Clytemnestra. At the beginning of the play, she plays the role of a victimized female with her daughter sacrificed and husband away from home. She also suffers from the mistrust and suspicion of her ability to rule the country by the patriarchal chorus. She has to humiliate herself in order to gain the trust and confidence of Agamemnon when he returns by announcing publicly her loyal subservience to her husband. When Agamemnon is persuaded to accept the honorable welcome, a reversal of the sexual hierarchy occurs in the ritual of carnival arranged by Clytemnestra with Clytemnestra becoming the oppressor and Agamemnon the victim. Clytemnestra consolidates her position as the victor and oppressor at the moment when she shows the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra to the chorus and announces her murder to the public. But she returns to her female self again in the end by using her compromising tactfulness to solve the conflict between Aegisthus and the chorus, putting further bloodshed to an end. It is obvious to us that Clytemnestra is in this play

both victim and oppressor. As Foucault indicates, one's sexual identity is constantly open to dynamic change. In fact, the sexual identity is closely connected with the power struggle as we can see clearly in the play. Therefore, I think, when we consider the problem of sexual identity, we should also bear in mind the social, ideological discourses within which the identity is shaped and constructed.

In P'u Sung-ling's 蒲松齡 *Liao-chai chih-yi*, 聊齋志異 Yü Ju-chieh 俞汝捷 writes that it is a piece of Chinese fiction that inherits the tradition of *chih-kuai* 志怪 (the supernatural or strange tales) of the Six Dynasties and *ch'uan-ch'i* 傳奇 (romance) of the T'ang Dynasty.³⁶

Hui-chuan Chang 張惠娟 argues in her article, "Chinese Fiction: A Tentative Generic Appraisal," that *ch'uan-ch'i* consisting of *chi* 記, *chuan* 傳, and *lu* 錄, parallels "Chinese historiography in that many works of history would often, after a detailed description of a historical event, attach a piece of comment at the end and thus gratify their didactic penchant."³⁷ This may explain the fact that didactic purpose or moral teaching is detected by many critics as the major aim of Chinese fiction, including the *Liao-chai*. But as part of the title *chih-yi* 志異 meaning the recording or writing of the strange, the other, the difference indicates, we should notice that the tradition of *chih-kuai* also plays an important role in this fiction. According to Yü's study, *chih-kuai* is usually regarded as outside the official literary genres and therefore is seldom, if ever, constrained by moral taboos but instead can be expressed in the form of supernatural tales serving as an imaginary or emotional outlet for the repressed desires of the Chinese people.³⁸

A hybrid genre containing a mixture of *ch'uan-ch'i* and *chih-kuai*, *Liao-chai chih-yi* can be seen as a site of contention between a text and a subtext, or between a dominant discourse and a counter-discourse. If the dominant discourse aims to fulfill the traditional didactic purpose, then a counter-

discourse can be seen to satirize, ridicule, transgress or even subvert the dominant discourse. The dialogism of discourses will reveal a heterogeneity, suggesting different values or beliefs as alternative otherness to the homogeneous world of traditional Confucianism. In fact, the concept of the otherness or alterity revealed by *chih-yi* 志異 is also implied by Ho T'ien-chien 何天傑 when he writes that many thoughts or ideas in the *Liao-chai chih-yi* are *li-ching p'an-tao* 離經叛道 (transgressive and subversive to the official ideology).³⁹ Kuo Yü-wen 郭玉雯 in her book, *Liao-chai chih-yi te huan-meng shih-chieh* 聊齋誌異的幻夢世界 (The Illusionary World of *Liao-chai chih-yi*), also argues that *Liao-chai*, a collection of Chinese mythology and supernatural tales, portrays a dream world different from the reality.⁴⁰ By defining *Liao-chai* as a revelation of *t'a chieh* 他界 (worlds of otherness), Kuo points out that following the tradition of Chinese mythology, the other worlds in *Liao-chai* can be seen in these three categories: *ming-chieh* 冥界 (the nether world), *hsien-hsiang* 仙鄉 (the world of fairies or immortals), and *yao-chieh* 妖境 (the world of ghosts or spirits or monsters).⁴¹

Very interestingly, I find the emphasis upon the otherness, the alterity fits into Bakhtin's definition of novelness or carnivalization. That is to say, underneath the official discourse sanctifying the homogeneous, hierarchical order, there emerges a subversive discourse serving an ambivalent purpose to parody, satirize and reverse such an order and at the same time secularize and revitalize it. And I would like to suggest here that actually *Liao-chai chih-yi* can be examined with the criteria of Menippean satire, which as Kristeva suggests carries the carnivalesque tradition.⁴² I find that *Liao-chai* shares with Menippean satire the following affinities: 1) A satirical or comical viewpoint or a mockery of official ideology, namely Confucianism, can be seen; 2) the monologism of the official discourse is often brought into a dialogical relationship with an alien discourse; 3) Opposed to

official thought founded on logic and reality, the fantastic is freely invented and used, particularly with fox spirits and ghosts; 4) An alternative world opposed to the official discourse, i.e., Confucianism in the case of *Liao-chai* is revealed in the dreams or journeys to an unknown world or to hell; 5) Slum naturalism--depravity, baseness, and vulgarity--is combined with the fantastic adventure; 6) all sorts of violations of the established norms of behavior, including scandal scenes, eccentric behaviour, and inappropriate speeches and performances are characteristic of the Menippean satire.⁴³ Therefore, I would argue that *Liao-chai* to some degree portrays Bakhtin's carnival world.

In the carnivalesque description, an alternative otherness of the scandal scenes in contrast to the official ideology often contains a mockery or reversal of the patriarchal hierarchy; that is to say a deconstruction of the gender polarity can often be seen in such a scandalous or carnivalesque world. In *Liao-chai*, P'u provides several interesting examples of the transgression of patriarchal order and reversal of gender role,⁴⁴ of which I will examine two for discussion here.

In the story of "Yen shin" 顏氏,⁴⁵ a woman surnamed Yen is married to a husband who is not as clever and intelligent as she is. Seeing that the compositions written by her husband are not good, she persuades her husband to study every day from morning till night acting like his strict teacher. Every evening, she will light a lamp, sit at the table and study hard to set a good example for her husband to follow. And she will not stop her study until very late at night. Yet in spite of forcing her husband to study with her for more than one year, her husband fails again and again in the examinations reducing them finally to become beggars. Faced with such a miserable situation, her husband cannot help but burst out crying.

Outraged at his cowardice, the woman scolds her husband bitterly:

君非丈夫，負此弁耳！使我易髻而冠，青紫直芥視之！

You are not a man; but you are wasting your masculine form! If I were allowed to change clothes and dress as a man, I don't think I would have any difficulty in passing the examination and becoming an official.

Hoping his wife may experience the misery and defeat of an examination, the husband grants her request to change clothes to take his place in taking the examination. The woman is therefore disguised as a man and pretends to be the "younger brother" of her husband. To avoid suspicion of the neighborhood, they have to return to their hometown.

In their native county, they are kindly entertained by the husband's cousin who never suspects that they are not real brothers because he has been separated from the husband since childhood. During this period, the husband takes care of all the daily matters so that his wife can concentrate on her study. When the examination comes, both of them enter. But it turns out that the husband fails again and the woman passes. After consecutive successes in examination, the woman becomes a high-ranking official. Finally, with the permission of the emperor, the woman leaves the court to return home prosperous and wealthy.

At last, revealing her true identity to the wife of the cousin, she tells her that

以男子闖茸，不能自立，負氣自爲之。

Because my man is weak and cowardly, unable to be successful, I was forced to act in my own way.

The wife of the cousin is too startled to believe at hearing this. Therefore the woman takes off her boots to show her tiny feet. Although inheriting the title and position of his wife's post, the husband is obedient to his wife behind closed doors 於是使

生承其銜，仍閉門而雌伏矣。 Since no children were born in their marriage, the woman feels obliged to buy concubines for her husband but jokes with him, telling him that

凡人置身通顯，則買姬媵以自奉；我宦跡十年，猶一身耳。君何福澤，坐享佳麗？

If a man is famous and successful, then he can buy concubines to entertain himself; I have been an official for ten years but I've kept my chastity. How can you have the good fortune to enjoy beautiful ladies?

Then the husband answers:

而首三十人，請卿自置耳。

You can buy thirty gigolos for yourself.

Then P'u writes that the joke has spread out through the whole neighbourhood 相傳爲笑.

In this short story, we can see that with the woman changing clothes to become a man like a masquerade in the ritual of carnival, then the woman is crowned and her husband decrowned fulfilling the carnivalesque process of reversal and subversion in the world turned upside down. The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is transgressed and deconstructed. The woman can be seen as an androgynous hero containing both masculinity and femininity; or she can be seen as containing nonidentity, an eternal flux between masculinity and femininity with no determinate identity, an ambivalence as suggested by Bakhtin.

More interesting to see in the story is that as Foucault points out, there is no natural, universal or fixed gender or sexual identity, but it is constantly open to contingency and change. In fact gender identity is culturally or socially constructed; it is determined and shaped by different discourses or ideologies. In this story, the social or cultural

products or discourses like the dress and especially the examination seem to shape and construct sexual identity. For example, the woman reproaches her husband sarcastically, saying that you are not a man (君非丈夫 *chün fei chang-fu*) simply because her husband has failed again and again in the examinations. When she is disguised as a man and prepares for examinations, because she writes good articles with bright prospect of future successes, she is offered many choices for marriage. And because of her successes in examinations and becoming a famous official, even though she passes on the post to her husband and returns to her female identity, she is still the master of the family with an obedient husband behind closed doors (仍閉門而雌伏矣 *jen pi-men erh tz'u-fu yü*). In the power struggle of mastery and control, with her successes in examinations, she can dominate and control her husband becoming the man who can enjoy the special privileges reserved for the masculine in the patriarchal order: her husband tells her that she can buy thirty gigolos to entertain herself.

The power struggle of mastery and control is more obvious in the next story of "Ma Chieh-fu"⁴⁶ 馬介甫 in which Yang Wan-shih 楊萬石 is a miserable hen-pecked husband who often suffers from defeat in the power struggle with his wife who is peculiarly ferocious and shrewish (*ch'i-han* 奇悍). Whenever she is slightly offended, she will beat and whip her husband severely. Yang's elderly father is mistreated and his younger brother is forced to commit suicide by this wicked woman. Taking pity on Yang's misery and sufferings, Ma, a fox immortal (狐仙 *fu-hsien*), who is a close friend of Yang's, often has to contrive different ways to help him. For example, he uses his magic to transform himself into a giant to teach Yang's wife a lesson. Afterwards, Yang's wife treats him tenderly. But when Yang reveals the secret to her, she rushes into the kitchen angrily and grabs a knife to kill Yang. Finally, Ma has to give Yang the magical medicine called 丈夫

再造散 (*chang-fu tsai-tsau shan*, medicine which can revitalize masculinity), hoping to solve his problem once and for all. Here, the most interesting part of this story is this magical medicine, which, I want to argue, can be regarded as a magical power to essentialize the sexual identity by naturalizing or establishing eternally the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity because Ma hopes that his friend can regain masculinity and become the master of the family again and forever.

At first, the medicine works and every morning Yang's wife rises to wait on her husband affectionately for more than one month 月餘，婦起，賓事良人。But gradually the effect disappears, and the author writes that “久覺黔驢無技，漸狎，漸嘲，漸罵；居無何，舊態全作矣。With the elapse of time, Yang runs out of any counter tactics; gradually he is treated contemptuously by his wife, suffering from her sneers and scoldings again. At his wit's end, Yang returns to his miserable situation again.

It is obvious in this story that there is in fact no universal, essential or unproblematic sexual identity; but it is open to constant change. The failure of the magical medicine indicates the problematic and unstability of the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity, a denial of the essentialism of gender politics. The emphasis upon the 技 (*chi*, skill or tactics) reveals that gender and sexual identity should be considered with the examination of different ideological discourses, language and rhetoric. We can see that whoever has skill, which means whoever can control the ideological discourses skillfully, can usually win in the power struggle of mastery and control. Therefore, the power struggle, in which Yang and his wife constantly shift between being the oppressor and the victim, shows that it is not determined by essential gender or sexual identity but by contingent and ever changing discourses or skills.

Another interesting point to notice in this story is that we

can also see a reversal of gender role in which Yang is dethroned into a female while his wife is crowned as a male, an important characteristic of Bakhtin's ritual of carnival. When Yang's wife learns that his concubine has been pregnant for five months, she rips off her clothes and beats her cruelly. Then, she calls in Yang and makes him kneel down and put on the hood and headdress of a woman (跪受巾幘 *kuei shou chin-kuo*), and then whips him out of the house. The transgression and subversion of patriarchal order and deconstruction of binary opposition in gender and sexual identity reveal the otherness and the difference (變異 *pian-yi*) in contrast to the dominant or official ideology or discourse. This is the most important function of Bakhtin's carnival.

Finally, I would like to draw the following conclusions from our discussion above: 1) I think that Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization is very useful for feminist analysis, because with the decentering of patriarchal order in the carnival, the other as the woman often shifts from the marginal to the center. The interesting process of crowning/decrowning will then bring about a joyful relativity of hierarchy, revealing the problematic of sexual binary opposition. The emphasis on the ambivalence and deconstruction of the binary opposition between the male and female bears similarity with Moi's concept of androgyny which argues for a recurrent shift of sexual identity or nonidentity; 2) The instability of gender and sexual identity shows that Foucault's concept of desexualization should be considered when we discuss the gender issue. Foucault suggests that we should shift our attention from the essentialism of sexual identity to the careful examination of culture, ideology, discourse or language, because sexual identity is culturally or socially constructed and shaped by discourses. Therefore, Clytemnestra uses her skills in rhetoric to subvert her husband's authority and gains the upper hand in the power struggle of mastery and control. In the story of "Yen Shih" in the *Liao-chai chih-yi*, we can see that the

success or failure in an examination seems to determinate the gender role in the power struggle of sexual politics. And the failure of the magical medicine in the story of "Ma Chieh-fu" indicates once again that the essentialism of sexual identity should not be overemphasized but that the skill (*chi* 技) in controlling discourses in the power struggle should be taken into consideration whenever gender identity is concerned.

Notes

¹ Wayne C. Booth, "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (Sept. 1982): 62-76.

² *Ibid.*, 75.

³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 11-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ Jana Sawicki, "Identity Politics and Sexual Freedom: Foucault and Feminism" *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed., Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) 179.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 240.

¹¹ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984) 299-300.

¹² Carol Pearson and Katherine Pople, *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* (N.Y.: Bowker, 1981) 95.

¹³ Jonathan Hall, "Falstaff, Sancho Panza and Azdak: carnival and history," *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, ed., Elinor Shaffer (London: Cambridge UP, 1985) 127.

¹⁴ Maroussia Ahmed, "The Relevance of the Carnavalesque in the Quebec Novel," *Studies in the Twentieth-Century Literature* 9 (Fall

1984): 130.

¹⁶ Frann Michel, "Displacing Castration: *Nightwood Ladies Almanack*, and Feminine Writing," *Contemporary Literature* 30.1 (Spring 1989): 35-37.

¹⁶ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) xi.

¹⁷ Michel, 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹ Sawicki, 184.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

²² *Ibid.*, 188.

²³ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980) 219-20; quoted in Sawicki, 183.

²⁵ Sawicki, 185.

²⁶ *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* ed. Maynard Mack et al 4th ed. Vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 334. All the quotations from this play discussed in this paper are from this edition.

²⁷ Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 140.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Alan Singer, "The Voice of History / The Subject of the Novel," *Novel* 21. 2-3 (Winter / Spring 1988): 176.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), 124.

³⁶ Yü Ju-chieh 俞汝捷, *Huan-hsiang ho chi-t'o te kuo-tu: chih-kwai ch'uan-ch'i hsin-lun* 幻想和寄託的國度——志怪傳奇新論 (Taipei: Shu-

hsin 淑馨, 1991) 194.

³⁷ Hui-chuan Chang 張惠娟, "Chinese Fiction: A Tentative Generic Appraisal," *Tamkang Review* 18.4 (Summer 1983): 340.

³⁸ Yü, 52.

³⁹ Ho T'ien-chieh 何天傑, *Liao chai te huan-huan chen-chen* 聊齋的幻幻真真 (Taipei: Yüan-liu 遠流, 1990) 5.

⁴⁰ Kuo Yü-wen 郭玉雯, *Liao-chai chih-yi te huan-meng shih-chieh* 聊齋誌異的幻夢世界 (Taipei: hsüeh sheng 學生, 1985) 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴² Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 48.

⁴³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 114-9.

⁴⁴ According to Ho T'ien-chien 何天傑, P'u Sung-ling portrays several vicious and shrewish wives in such stories as "Chiang cheng" 江城, "Chin she" 錦瑟, "Tuan shih" 段氏, "Tu Hsiao-lei" 杜小雷, "Ts'ui meng," 崔猛, "Yün-lo kung-chu" 雲蘿公主, etc., *Liao-chai te huan-huan chen-chen* 聊齋的幻幻真真, 107-110.

⁴⁵ P'u Sung-ling 蒲松齡, *Liao-chai chih-yi* 聊齋志異 Vol. 1 (Taipei: Han-ching 漢京, 1978) 766-9. All the English Translations are mine.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 721-36. All the English Translations quoted in this story are mine.

