

A Comparison of Dying for Love Between Oriental and Occidental Drama: Taking Du Liniang and Juliet as Examples

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Supported by the Shanxi Normal University Educational Reform Fund (SD2011YBKT-43).

Received 12 September 2014; accepted 15 November 2014
Published online 26 December 2014

Abstract

Both *The Peony Pavilion* and *Romeo and Juliet* concern similar theme of eulogizing the beautiful and passionate love of a young couple, exploring the relationship between love and death, the value and significance of lovers' dying for love. Both heroines, Du Liniang and Juliet, dare to pursue genuine love relentlessly even sacrifice their lives for love. Liniang's death is not the final destination, and her resurrection meets the readers' expectation in the view of Chinese culture. Juliet's death not only sublimates love but redeems the sin of family feud, aiming to arouse audience's pity and fear to achieve tragic catharsis in Occidental dramas. This paper attempts to compare the two heroines' dying for love by tracing the different stages in their love process so as to reveal the similarities of seemingly-coincident scheme and explore the reasons which cause the differences. And this may facilitate the understanding of historical and cultural background in the orient and occident.

Key words: Du Liniang; Juliet; Dying for love

Kong, R. (2014). A Comparison of Dying for Love Between Oriental and Occidental Drama: Taking Du Liniang and Juliet as Examples. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(6), 131-134. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/5662>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5662>

INTRODUCTION

The Peony Pavilion (1598) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1594) are two extraordinarily significant dramas about feverish

love on the Oriental and Occidental drama stages. The two great contemporary dramatists, Tang Xianzu (1550-1616) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616), living in totally different cultures, presented their respective masterpieces nearly at the same time so coincidentally (*The Peony Pavilion* in 1598, and *Romeo and Juliet* in 1594). Both dramas concern similar theme of eulogizing the beautiful love and burning passion of a young couple, exploring the relationship between love and death, the value and significance of by lovers' dying for love. Both heroines, Du Liniang and Juliet, dare to pursue genuine love relentlessly even sacrifice their lives for love. This paper attempts to compare the two heroines' dying for love by tracing the different stages in their love process so as to reveal the similarities of seemingly-coincident scheme and explore the reasons which cause the differences. And this may facilitate the understanding of historical and cultural background in the orient and occident.

1. THE CREATING BACKGROUND OF THE TWO DRAMAS

The Peony Pavilion was created in a period when Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) was going through a stringent and repressive philosophy of Neo-Confucianism named Daoxue, which praised appropriate displays of behavior and rituals and distained passion and desire of human being. It also became the standard curriculum for the imperial civil service examination system. Tang Xianzu, a young and learned scholar at that time, failed three times in the civil service examinations system because of refusing to pander to the contemporary powerful minister. Feeling greatly dismayed and suffocated with the society, he resigned from the court official and then devoted to creating literary works. Most of his works eulogize the power of love, deep emotions, desire and passion, which are regarded as a great challenge and sharp criticism to Daoxue in his time. The touching love story named *The*

Peony Pavilion is a typical example dealing with love, death and resurrection.

Almost in the same period, European countries including England were going through the Renaissance, a revolutionary movement of advocacy of humanism, national growth, commercial expansion and political concern etc.. William Shakespeare, a dramatist in London at that time, undoubtedly was encouraged by the thoughts in the cultural movement. He expressed his support and acceptance in his own drama-writing. He favored the freedom of love, the stability of society, showed his hatred for the feudal aristocracy, because it was a constant threat to the stability of society. As a typical humanist of his time, *Romeo and Juliet* celebrate the charm and power of love in conquering ossified social conventions. The final death in the tragic ending seems to be the only escape to end the feud between the two families in that society.

Both Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare became influential in their venerable years. They took their own ways to celebrate the beautiful love and expose the crime committed by the feudal society boldly. They produced similar love stories in the dramas based on their respective social backgrounds and creating beliefs. Though historical and cultural background are different, there are many similar qualities concerning love pursuing, personality liberation and the opposition of the feudal ethic both in *The Peony Pavilion* in Ming Dynasty of China and *Romeo and Juliet* in the West. Given the historical and cultural background of the orient and occident, Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion* and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* might be both regarded as independent and even rebellious characters, because the two beautiful adolescents from rich and powerful feudal familial system are courageous in pursuing love even if their emotions and behaviors might be regarded improper or prohibitive at that time.

2. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN DU LINIANG'S AND JULIET'S LOVE PROCESS

2.1 The Origin of Love

In *The Peony Pavilion*, the sixteen-year-old Du Liniang's aching for love, the natural emotion between opposite sexes, is aroused firstly by an ancient poem from an officially banned book—the *Book of Odes*, which echoes her inner voice. She cannot bear those feudal ethics which limit activities very rigidly, so she steals out of her boudoir and into the family garden for a visit. And her lovesickness is originated from her dream where she encounters the poor, handsome young scholar—Liu Mengmei, who also gets magic dream simultaneously in which he is foretold, “Mr. Liu, only when you meet me will you obtain love and rank” by a lady (Tang, 1994, p. 4). The circumstance of this encounter actually blurs the division between memory

and dream, it also conveys the message that love and fate is often predestined, which may be common in the literary works of later Ming and Qing Dynasty and could be supported by another love story of Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu's first meeting in *Dream of Red Mansion* by Cao Xueqin.

When she wakes up from dream, Liniang gets lovesickness and gradually becomes sick and restless for the unattainable love in reality, for “he [Liu Mengmei] had come without a sign and disappeared without a trace” in her dream (Tang, 1994, p.75). She pleads with Heaven and later laments, “I looked up at the sky, pity and sorrow stained my eyes. Who knows what sentiments a heart can hold? Who knows what tears could have stealthily flowed?” (p.76) suffered from the lovesickness, Liniang feels weary and melancholy over the falling flowers in the garden. This image associating her life with perishing petals also symbolizes that her life is drifting away for her unattainable love. This plot may be inconceivable for readers of different cultures and ages to accept Liniang's ailment of the heart, which finally leads to her death resulted from such imagining reasons. Yet what Tang Xianzu said in his preface to *The Peony Pavilion* reveals love and passion between the lovers are somewhat unexplainable.

Love is of course unnn, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead live again. Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives it is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has so died. And must the love that comes in a dream necessarily be unreal? For there is no lack of dream lovers in this world. Only for those whose love must be fulfilled on the pillow and for whom affection deepens only after retirement from office, is it entirely a corporeal matter....

There exists the god or goddess of love both in Oriental and Occidental legends. In Chinese mythology, there are stories about “the old-man-under-the-moon” who ties newborn boys and girls destined to be married with a red silk thread. In Roman mythology, Cupid uses an arrow to shoot the hearts of lovers, and love between Romeo and Juliet is regarded as something like a sudden magic spell, for it strikes both simultaneously. It seems that Romeo gets shocked, stunned and bewildered at the first sight of Juliet. Similarly Juliet is overwhelmingly attracted by Romeo as if by a seemingly magnetic power. Their immense affection for each other immediately pours out like a torrent of water in passionate expressions. Love in *Romeo and Juliet* is a divine madness, both a wound and a blessing in which no human act of choice was involved. Romeo and Juliet fall in love involuntarily as though a magic power draws them together. In the well-known balcony scene where the couple confess to each other, Juliet expresses her concern, struggle and pain, “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name. Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a Capulet.” (Shakespeare, 1953, p.60) because of the feud between the two families, love

might be unattainable for them, Juliet also experiences lovesickness. Shakespeare mentions that the process of Romeo and Juliet's love will encounter tribulations, pains, sufferings and disasters, even be a "death-mark'd love" in the prologue. (p.31), partly because of the moment when they meet at the masquerade ball for the first time is extremely magical and inexplicably powerful.

2.2 Devoting to Love

In *The Peony Pavilion* the predestined love and marriage between Liniang and Mengmei's are so overwhelming and powerful that Liniang would rather die for it, yet love is not only the reason for her death, but also for her resurrection. After her death, Liniang goes into the ghost world and was guided to the nether Judge Hu. Attracted by her beauty, Judge wants to make Liniang as his concubine. She refuses him firmly and bravely even though Judge has the power to burn, slice, grind, or turn her into the lowest life form in this ghost world. She reveals the fact that she has been longing for a young scholar Mengmei's love. The Judge also regards her affection for Mengmei is a "flagrant disregard of maidenly virtues" (Tang, 1994, p.160), and confronts her with the fact that her parents don't know him and probably won't accept him as their son-in-law. Obviously Liniang's pursuing for love does not conform to the accepted social norms of that age, in which a girl's marriage should be arranged by following parents' order or the match-maker's words. The feudal ethics and chastity strangle women physically and spiritually and women are supposed to be submissive in such circumstance. Living in such a feudal society, the heroine, Liniang is doomed to suffer the oppression of the feudal ethics. Yet she presents herself as a strong, brave and rebellious woman who actively pursues the man she loves. Impressed by Liniang's devoted love, the Judge finally allows her spirit or ghost to return to the earth and keeps her fresh body in the grave for one year. She can resume her life "without suffering the pain of birth" (p.162). Liniang is courageous to die for love, and then is permitted to resurrect so as to consummate her love. Thus, her final triumph over death is dependent on her previous having died for love.

In comparison, Juliet is also rebellious and courageous in pursuing for loving Romeo. From an obedient daughter to see mother's "content gives strength to make it fly" at the very beginning (Shakespeare, 1953, p.46), to a passionate lover who holds secret marriage with Romeo from her feuding family, Juliet is becoming mature and determined in pursuing love. Like Liniang, she also dares to sacrifice her life for it. Different from Liniang, Juliet's love journey is not in dream but in reality, and her lovesickness is so feverish that it even becomes impatience when waiting for news from her nurse about Romeo's intention for marriage plans, and when longing for caresses of the wedding night after marriage as whispering "Come, civil night,...Come, night; come,

Romeo; come, thou day in night" (Shakespeare, 1953, p.87). However, this rashness and recklessness result in her inconsiderate decision in taking the vial to pretend "death", yet her courage and devotion to love render her die for love. At the thought of having to marry Paris arranged by her family, Juliet turns to Friar Lawrence for a possible solution. In his designed plan, she may pretend to die in order to escape from the arranged marriage and then get free to pursue her banished fervent love. She accepts the proposal and agrees to drink the vial and await the coming of the Friar and Romeo. The moment she wakes up from her faked death, her first concern is "Where is my Romeo?" (p.132) when she finds that Romeo has been dead, she decides to join him abruptly, willingly, and bravely. "Yea, noise? Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger. This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die" (p.133). The young couple pursues love persistently and longs for being together banned by their families, sacrifice their lives, both die for love.

2.3 The Result of Love

The two love stories in the orient and occident do share similar starting but totally different ending. One leads to a happy reunion but the other results in heart-broken death.

The Peony Pavilion actually proves to be a comedy of reunion and remarriage after dying for love. This final happy reunion could be explained by the destined marriage affinity which is somewhat magical to create confidence among the audience that the lovers will be brought together and the divine universe power favors their love. What's more, concerning the *chuanqi* genre in Chinese drama to which *The Peony Pavilion* belongs to, lovers are always brought together or have a happy ending in the end, even though the process is intricate and the pain of love is severe before the final resolution. Eventually the obstacles could be overcome and the living-happily-ever-since end usually meets the satisfaction of the oppressed people who wish to achieve an ideal life in the fictional world. This scheme is also greatly influenced by the Oriental philosophy, as Professor Lam points out,

The Peony Pavilion is so much more than a love story, and it's also a scathing indictment of the limitations of the super-rationalist.....In launching his critique of society, Tang Xianzu also borrowed freely from Buddhist and Daoist philosophical concepts..... Liniang's love is so strong that it has the power to last three lifetimes and karmic rebirth was a notion drawn from the Buddhist tradition. (2006)

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the destined fate also plays a very important role all the way in their love. It is fated that they happen to fall in love with the one from the rival family. They were called star-crossed lovers, and maybe it is the star fortune that makes them meet and love also prevents them from staying together. But still there are misfortune and accident, misunderstandings and bad timing; all of these always hinder the smooth

pursuit of love. Influenced by the theory of earlier Greek play, Shakespeare makes the play one step beyond comedy and becomes tragic. Moreover, *Romeo and Juliet* is one more example to prove the factor of fate and destiny in Shakespeare's tragedies of fate, just as Macbeth's destiny has been predicted by the witches at the outset in the tragedy *Macbeth*.

CONCLUSION

Thus dying for love in the two nearly contemporary dramas is presented through different approaches in the Oriental and Occidental imaginative world. The views of death between Oriental and Occidental world are expressed in Liniang and Juliet's love story. Liniang dies of disillusionment when her love, desire and dream couldn't be achieved in reality. The death is not only a revolt against feudal ethics but a release from that loveless, meaningless world. But death is not the final destination; resurrection actually meets the readers' expectation in the view of Chinese culture. This also explains the statement: There is no tragedy in Chinese dramas because they always expect that lovers get reunion, villains get punished and virtues get rewarded, concealed truth let out etc. While in the Occidental world, deeply influenced by the renaissance, Shakespeare also followed Aristotle's view that tragedy aim to arouse pity and fear to achieve tragic catharsis ("purgation", "purification of emotion"), (Aristotle, 2001, p.95). Juliet dies of despair when her love is prohibited by the family feud. Her death may not only sublimates love but also redeems the sin of family feud. This also explains the reason that *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Peony Pavilion* belong to distinctly-different genres.

Liu (1993) pointed out that "the start of Chinese and Western comparative literature is to seek their intercommunity, but the real purpose of it is to discover the value of their difference" (qtd. Cao, 2007). The intercommunity between *Romeo and Juliet* and *The*

Peony Pavilion lie in the illustration of the universal subject in the similar historical background. But different literary theories between Oriental and Occidental drama lead to different plot-designing and form-performing. In the Occidental dramas, Plato's theory that art is the imitation of truth has a tremendous influence on both early literary theorists and writers in the Renaissance period, so the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* tends to be real, natural and objective. Juliet's declaring love in the balcony, devoting to love and dying for love vividly mimic a girl fallen in ferment love in the real life. On the contrary, following the literary theory of art being subjective expression in the Orient, Chinese dramatists hold art is based-on-life creation, not merely passive imitation. Thus in *The Peony Pavilion* the overflow of emotion is spontaneous and powerful; the mood is lyrical; the structure is ritualistic, performed with choral intoning, dancing, and stylized action. The plot-designing is allowed to be unrealistic but the performance is fabulous and glamorous.

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