

Body, Desire and Metaphor

-- A Male Narrative Analysis of Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion: The Dream Interrupted*

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Abstract: *The Peony Pavilion: The Dream Interrupted*, tells the story of Du Liniang's visit to the garden in spring and then her dream of meeting intellectual Liu Mengmei, which embodies the awakening of women's life consciousness. However, by rereading the *The Dream Interrupted* from three dimensions: body narrative, desire narrative and metaphorical narrative, we can find that Tang Xianzu's creation still has a gaze and is at the center of male narrative.

Keywords: *The Peony Pavilion, The Dream Interrupted*, Male narration, Body, Desire, Metaphor.

1. Introduction

The Peony Pavilion is a legend created by Tang Xianzu, a playwright in the Ming Dynasty. It tells a story that Du Liniang, the daughter of a government official, died of affection after meeting an intellectual Liu Mengmei in the dream, and then she came back to life because of her feelings and married to Liu Mengmei. This work has a typical romantic style, which shows the author's theory of "utmost affection". And its tenth chapter, *The Dream Interrupted*, is particularly representative in this respect. It narrates the story of Du Liniang's enjoying the scenery when she visited garden in spring and her meeting intellectual Liu Mengmei after returning to the room, which is permeated with the nature pursuit of romanticism and the beauty of love desire, and reveals women's life consciousness.

However, just as Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua argue, literature, a symbolic system with specificity, is also primarily a male world. [1] Although Tang Xianzu was not the holder of the "indoctrination theory" of drama, he was still confronted with the long-continued, closed and frozen traditional thought when he practiced the theory of "utmost affection", and it was difficult to get rid of the burden of history and tradition, [2] therefore, the literary writing still inevitably reflected the implication of male gaze. As a result, the character of Duliniang, despite her affection, is still a silent person trapped in the shackles of society. Through the tattered but still strong cage of *The Dream Interrupted*, readers can better perceive the limitations in creation and social concepts in the context of the time.

This paper will analyze the masculine overtones in *The Dream Interrupted* from three perspectives: body narrative, desire narrative and metaphorical narrative, and explore how Dulignang, as a representative of awakened women, was bound to the masculine society without being aware of it, and consider the question of "how women exist" from a contemporary perspective.

2. Body Narrative: The Captivity and Gaze of the "Spring Tour" Women

Du Liniang was moved by the *Guan Ju*, and stepped out of the study for a spring garden tour. She realized that

although she was beautiful, there was no one to admire her because she was locked in her boudoir, so she was Deeply regrettable. On the one hand, it indicates that women's activities are confined to a corner of the home. On the other hand, it also reveals the social reality that women's appearance is subject to the gaze of others and serves for men.

2.1. The pace confined by the courtyard wall

Liniang was moved by the spring Scenery of her own backyard, and dreamed because of the feeling. It can be seen that the outside environment was extremely unfamiliar to her, which also shows the narrow scope of action of Liniang. As is generally written in novels about story between intellectual and beauty, the backyard became a forbidden place for Liniang, at most the farthest physical distance she could reach before she got married. Her pace was confined within the small garden, which blocked her view of the outside world and circled her imagination of youth, life, and desire.

This state of confinement leads to female diaspora. Beauvoir pointed out that women's passive position stems in part from their failure to form a common sense of responsibility for the female community, to form themselves into a group that can confront the relevant whole, and thus to live in diaspora among men. [3] This results in women lacking contact with the outside world and only being able to socialize within an extremely limited scope. An analysis of the character mapping of *The Peony Pavilion* reveals that the relationship between Liniang and the characters she came into contact with showed a strong sense of passivity and contingency. On the one hand, having Scattered in a male-dominated society since childhood, she had been framed in the interpersonal relationship between her parents, herself and Chunxiang, and had very limited access to people. This kind of relationship which was born in the family, was innate and not optional. On the other hand, even though Liniang interacted with more characters as events unfolded, these relationships were not attained by her initiative, but by the actions of others or by the development of events. For example, Liniang's contact with Chen Miliang was the result of Du Bao's decision to teach his daughter, and her acquaintance with Liu Mengmei was the result of the dream and the destiny. The individual's need for social intercourse is suppressed in *The Peony Pavilion* because of the confinement

of the body, and the active search for alienation becomes a passive acceptance.

And once this state of confinement is perceived, it deepens from the body to the psyche. Beauvoir believed that one deems one's body as the actual expression of one's self, and that women's awareness of their fragile but slightly-functioning physical features can cause psychological aberrations. [4] In fact, it is not only the physical characteristics that bring embarrassment, but also the state of physical captivity that makes women realize that they are different from and inferior to men. Once Liniang discovered that captivity only happened to women, even if she didn't want to admit it, she subconsciously developed a sense of inferiority and distrust of her female identity - thus the state of captivity was internalized from the physical level to the psychological shackles of women.

"The original beautiful purple and sweet red bloom everywhere, like this are paid to the broken wall. The beautiful scenery of a good day, who's yard to enjoy." The lyrics of this song are as beautiful and sad as the youth of Liniang and many other young girls. They are like the garden which is full of spring but empty and closed, no one can knock on the door to enter the garden to enjoy. They can only mourn alone in the courtyard wall, singing a song of sorrow about time does not wait for people.

2.2. The makeup of being gazed at by others

"Still looking in the mirror after combing the cloud-like bun, and wanting to change robe to add more fragrance." [5] The opera lyrics before Du Liniang's spring excursion portray a lively and beauty-loving young girl. The radiant mirror image in the mirror made Liniang realize her youthfulness as a young girl and her existence as a living "I". However, as Lacan pointed out, "the complete form of the body in the illusion of the subject's maturity beyond its capacity is acquired in a Gestalt manner. That is to say it is acquired in a kind of externality." [6] The mirror stage can be understood as the process of self-identification of the subject with the given complete meaning, while the second stage of this process is accomplished in the process of mutual identification with others. Although the mirror image of the self revived Dulignang's sense of life and individuality, the next moment these senses were alienated-"no one can appreciate the beauty of the spring".

Although Liniang had said that "My love of beauty is natural", and her behavior of dressing up came from the love of beauty, with the element of self-appreciation. But after a few glances, she revealed the regret of "not being afraid of the birds' noise, but of the flowers' sorrowful trembling", which implied the desire to be watched by others - especially men. When Chunxiang said, "The peonies are still budding, even though all the flowers are in bloom" Liniang's response was, "Although the peonies are beautiful, how can they take the lead when spring returns?" The beauty of spring is intoxicating, but it is based on the fact that it is easy to pass away. Women often see their own destiny in the blossoming flowers and vibrant spring, and feel sad that their appearances are easily aged. "It is a pity that my appearance looks as beautiful as a flower, but I do not expect my fate is as fleeting as a leaf!" Li Niang compared herself to a spring flower, which is intriguing. The flower itself is attached to the branch and is also an object to be picked because of its ornamental nature. Women use flowers to describe themselves, symbolizing their subconscious acknowledgement of their fate of being

chosen by their appearances.

In ancient times, women were objectified by the statute of feudal rituals, and their external shape and appearance were important means to attract men and maintain their status and value. The image of women has always served men in their sexual and political pursuits. "The value of women in the minds of men is not achieved by enhancing their own importance as human beings, but rather by shaping themselves according to the dreams of men." [7] In the process of mutual identification with social culture and others, the "I" is objectified and heterogeneous and is no longer the primary form. The prevalence of sexual empowerment affected Liniang's self-perception and aesthetic psychology. Although she believed herself to be beautiful, this beauty would be diminished if it was not seen by more people, especially her future husband. In other words, the Li Niang we see is largely a product of the male gaze.

3. Desire Narrative: Obedience, Resistance and Re-obedience of the "Dream Spring" Women

Through the recognition of female desire, *The Peony Pavilion* expresses the theme of women's rebellion against bondage and liberation of individuality. Although the story of Liniang's death from life and life from death is a sad one, it is undeniable that it is still caught in the quagmire of "deem breaking through the confines of asceticism as the only possibility for women's writing"; in addition, the boldly rebellious Liniang was still unable to overcome the pressure of the male-dominated society and returned to the domain of "real rites". This also reflects another limitation of women's writing.

3.1. Misunderstanding and Narrowing of "Women's Awakening"

Tang Xianzu advocated the utmost affection, and Du Liniang, who lived and died for love, has become one of the most well-known classic characters in the history of Chinese drama, while the episode in which she made love with Liu Sheng by the peony pavilion in *The Dream Interrupted* is regarded as a manifestation of women's bold pursuit of desire, breaking through feudal constraints. But in fact, the one-dimensional writing of the pursuit of desire is a misunderstanding and narrowing of the awakening of women's consciousness.

British critic Rosalind Coward specialized in the problem of defining "feminist" literature. In *Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels*, which argued that simply placing women's sexuality at the center of a literary work is not the same as feminist novels. [8] She rejected voices that argue that "sexual experience is the most crucial part of women's all experiences", and considered that talking about sexuality and focusing on it does not represent progress. Admittedly, in the context of the author's society, writing about Du Liniang's desire could be astonishing and required a great deal of boldness and courage on the part of the creator. Contemporary feminism, however, asked: How did the pursuit of sexuality override other factors in literary works such as *The Peony Pavilion* to represent the awakening and progress of women?

This relates to the social function of women in the continuation of the family. As the basic unit of Chinese ancient society, the family used intermarriage as an important means of its own continuation. Women who necessarily

married into other families, as permanent strangers and wanderers in feudal society and the Confucian system, became sacrifices for the development of the family and were required to be absolutely subservient to the needs of the family [9] -this is especially evident in the choice of marriage, where they do not have the opportunity to choose marriage on their own. Female chastity, which was one of the leverage for the female family to be able to compete evenly with the male family, was crucial, so women did not have the right to release their sexual instincts until they were married. The suppression of female eroticism is a characteristic of patriarchal society. However, in *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang made love with Liu Mengmei in her dream, which was a bold challenge to authority, so it was seen as a female rebellion against rituals.

The literary phenomenon that equates the pursuit of desire with the awakening of women exposes the fact that the solidification of the image of women in society, thus has allowed “the events that lead to marriage or destroy love take the place of meaningful events”. [10] Ehrman proposed the habit of thinking by “gender analogy”, that is, people are accustomed to classifying human behavior and social phenomena by male or female characteristics. [11] This habit has resulted in an unrealistic representation of the female image. Since society generally believes that the image of women needs to be shaped in the family sphere and in a sense of abstinence, Du Liniang could only lament the absence of love. Her ultimate quest in life was to “become a good match at an early age”, and her deviation from the norm was to enter into a private life with Liu Mengmei -This was all about “marriage” and “lust”. Literary writings of the past generations have reinforced women’s domestic attributes and confined women’s activities to the family. As a result, “family” and its associated “marriage” and “procreation” have become the entirety of women’s lives under social scrutiny, in which women have been trapped and forced to cut themselves off from other possibilities.

3.2. Departure from and return to the principle of “actual rites”

The reason why Meng said that he classified “the work of the mad boy and the adulterous girl” as chastity is because “both of them were faithful to each other, and they did not regret it until death”. [12] The development of the story “if the beginning is not right, the end will be right” is still in accordance with moral and ethical rules. In this regard, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua argued that “entering into order” is the most indispensable ending in ancient romance novels, a narrative and ideological completeness and integrity that must be achieved in the end: “Of course, ‘love’ can escape from the natural order of life and death, but not without the recognition of order as a promise of completeness or perfection, and the entire narrative process as the fulfillment of this promise.” [13]

The Dream Interrupted is indeed a hymn to the youth of Liniang and a brave attempt to break the shackles of feudal rituals. The aesthetic intoxication of self-appreciation in the mirror, the sudden outburst of sadness in spring, and the illusory dream of following one’s desires can all be regarded as manifestations of the awakening of female consciousness in the context of that era. But then the author made Liniang, who was born from death for love, say, “Ghosts can have false feelings, but people must have real rituals”, which brought the latter back to the main axis of rituals and human decency. The reason why the “rebellious” Liniang is still recognized and passed down as a good story is that there are prerequisites:

one is that the love in the dream is not considered unchaste, the second is that Liniang and Liu Mengmei have a destined marriage, and the third is that Liniang’s life expectancy has not yet expired. In other words, the formality of the final union and the approval from the ruler are the important reasons why this love can be accepted by the world.

Just as Zhang Sheng in *The Romance of the West Chamber* finally “earned a scholarship” and Jia Baoyu in *The Story of the Stone* was favored by his grandmother for his behavior of great manners, so did Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion* have to have an ending that conformed to social norms in order to complete the “transformation from rotten wood to incense” of her previous rude behavior. This ending is an autonomous choice of Liniang, a subconscious action instilled in her by social culture. Thus, the narrative of *The Peony Pavilion* accomplishes an important cultural task - the task of gender integration, hiding the compulsory nature of women’s entry into the order seamlessly, as if women were willingly set into it - Du Liniang is able to return from her isolation back into the traditional orbit of ritualistic society.

4. Metaphorical Narrative: Ritual Discipline and Value Expectation of the “Wounded Spring” Women

Upon her return from the garden tour, Liniang was in deep sorrow. Her desire for a good match is the voice of most women in Chinese history, which is a metaphor for the success of traditional female religion in value discipline as well as the unveiling of the mentality that women need men to obtain a complete life experience.

4.1. Value Discipline of Traditional Women's Religion

Liniang’s father, Du Bao, was known as the later generation of Du Fu, and was a typical Confucian figure; her mother, Zhen, was a direct descendant of Queen Zhen of the Wei Dynasty. Such a poetic and ritualistic upbringing provided Liniang with many traditional ritual values. In chapter “Yan Shi”, Du Bao listed the books that Liniang had read: “Male and female *Four Books*, she could recite. *The Book of Songs* begins with the virtue of the queen consort, four words are smooth, and is her family tradition, so study *The Book of Songs*. Other books are available, but unfortunately she is a girl.” Women are castrated by the *Female Four Books* preaching softness and modesty, and become “female eunuchs” who are “beautiful on the outside and polite on the inside”, just like Liniang.

Before the tour of the garden, the struggle between traditional values and youthful awareness was most intense. Chen zuiliang taught Liniang *Guan Ju*, which was meant to teach the virtue of having morality, but instead triggered Liniang’s feelings of youthfulness. The song of the gentleman seeking a lady undoubtedly evoked the feelings of the young girl, so when she heard Chunxiang talking about a large garden with bright flowers and green willows, she couldn’t help but kept an eye out for it. After scolding Chunxiang for abusing the teacher, Liniang was still busy asking a follow-up question: “Where that garden is?” - The question makes people laugh and feel sympathy at the same time. Although the yearning for freedom and beauty that lied dormant in the heart was dying under the statute of the virtues, it was stubbornly sprouting and growing under the call of nature. After listening to Chunxiang’s description, Liniang said, “So

there is a place like this”, where the word “so” revealed her surprise and curiosity at learning about the complicated world around her, but also implied her dissatisfaction and loss at her parents’ hindrance to her search for beautiful things.

But under the influence of male-dominated thinking, Liniang was horrified when Chunxiang proposed a trip to the garden for fun: “Damn girl, how can the master hear about it?” It is clear from the foregoing that although the Du couple favored their only daughter, they were not lax in their ritualistic upbringing. In the face of their daughter’s daytime sleep, Du Bao said, “If you have spare time for embroidery, there are books on the shelf, you can read them. When you get married, your familiarity with books and manners will brighten up your parents.” It can be seen that embroidery is the basic thing, and the book of *Women’s Commandments* is the icing on the cake. These two things are compulsory for virtuous women and occupy most of their daily life, while instinctive activities such as spring sleeping and playing are excluded. Under the value of respecting relatives and abiding by rituals, Liniang, even though had strong thoughts about spring tour, would also be scrupulous in the first place. However, the nature could not be restrained, and finally broke through the ground, resulting in an interrupted dream, which passed down.

4.2. Value expectation of self-completion

After returning to her boudoir, Liniang sighed, “I am already sixteen years old, but I have not met my husband; I admire the love, but how can I get a match?” She envied Han’s and Cui’s encounter and regretted that she could not meet a good match earlier. For Liniang, a marriage between an intellectual and a beauty was the only important thing in her life. As Aristophanes understood love in *The Book of Drinking*, the man who was split in two by Zeus looked for his other half, and there was love. [14] Love is the urge to return to wholeness and the wish for wholeness. The woman, existing as a broken half, is not enough to be called complete and must find a man to rely on to make up for her lack.

Kristeva argued that in contrast to the initiative of adolescent boys, adolescent girls on the verge of adulthood present a posture of waiting. The latter do not have any tangible goals, and their youth is consumed in the consumption of time and the waiting for men. The latter has no practical goal, and their youth is depleted by the consumption of time and waiting for men. [15] Intertextually with Chen Zuiliang’s lecture *Guan Ju* in chapter “Boudoir School”, in which he said, “The fair lady has a gentleman to pursue.” Liniang was also waiting for the indispensable male in her life, and even after she realized her own beauty, she did not consider herself a complete individual - the so-called completeness requires the participation of the “other” in order to be constructed, but this “completeness” that includes the other dissolves the value of the existence of the self. The independent self and the perfect state cannot coexist.

The high expectation for men stems from the Liniang’s undervaluation of self. In *The Second Sex*, it is noted that women make finding a husband - or sometimes a “protector” - the most important task. [16] The male is the embodiment of the Other for the female, just as the latter is also this embodiment for the former. But to women, this other (male) is on top of the subject level (female). That is to say, women see themselves as subordinate to the male being. There are many dependent female figures in Chinese literature, such as “the bamboo that grows alone drops its soft branches, taking

root in Taishan” in *Nineteen Old Poems*, which can be seen as a cultural reflection of patriarchal society. Liniang was unable to break away from the barriers of the social statute, and deep down she upheld the dogma of “a wife need to obey her husband”, seeing herself as a dependency of the male, and seeing marriage as the only way to achieve a perfect state for herself.

To a certain extent, *The Peony Pavilion* broke through the cage of feudal society and gave the female community the space to breathe freely. However, in the series of opera segments represented by *The Dream interrupted*, we can still perceive the male faces hidden under the text. The cultural atmosphere of a patriarchal society influences women’s activity range and aesthetic concepts, controls women’s norm construction and value system, and solidifies women’s pursuit of life and their direction of destiny. On the whole, *The Peony Pavilion* is essentially a “myth of woman” written for the patriarchal society and full of altruism. Of course, we cannot dismiss the cultural significance of Tang Xianzu’s masterpiece, but we should use the above understanding to sound the alarm for contemporary feminist writing and women’s self-development, and to broaden women’s living space and development possibilities.

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