

The Tragic Comparison of “Romeo and Juliet” and “The Peony Pavilion”

Xinyao Zhang^{1,*}

¹College of Liberal Arts, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China

*Corresponding author: 2021301112058@whu.edu.cn

Abstract:

Tang Xianzu and William Shakespeare, born in the same era, penned the timeless works “The Peony Pavilion” and “Romeo and Juliet” respectively. The Chinese scholarly community has often compared these two plays’ cultural philosophies and dramatic creations. Yet, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the plot connotation at the micro level. This paper aims to address this gap in research. Through a close reading and holistic, dialectical examination of the narratives, this study focuses on how to plot design influences dramatic effects, compares the presentation of tragedy in both works and attempts to interpret the differences through the lens of dramatic concepts. It was found that, as love dramas containing both tragic and comedic elements, both plays share thematic similarities in their pursuit of love, freedom, individual liberation, and opposition to feudal ethics. However, when examining the narrative plots from a holistic perspective, both works reveal different tragic effects in the two levels of feeling and degree in their romantic plots, which carry comedic undertones, and in their conflict plot with the same central conflict, which is brought about by the differences between Chinese and Western dramatic traditions and the tragic spirit.

Keywords: „Romeo and Juliet“; „The Peony Pavilion“; Tragedy; Comparative Literature.

1. Introduction

The scholarly comparison of Tang Xianzu (1550–1616) and William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is vast, as both authors are recognized as great writers of their era in the global historical perspective, and Tang is always hailed as „the Shakespeare of China.“ Both authors were immersed in the humanist currents of their times. Tang lived during the late Ming Dynasty, marked by intense social changes and vibrant intellectual activity. Deeply influenced by the left-wing Wang school, he criticized Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and opposed the constraints on individuality. Shakespeare lived during the English Renaissance when humanism was a dominant trend of thought in society. The similar creative environments led to a coincidence in their ideas, denouncing feudal oppression and advocating for struggle and individual liberation. In particular, Tang’s masterpiece „The Peony Pavilion“ and Shakespeare’s significant work „Romeo and Juliet“ are both famous as love dramas and are often compared by critics. They share numerous similarities: thematically, both promote resistance to feudalism and the pursuit of free love; in character portrayal, the heroines are beautiful young women confined by feudal families yet yearning for freedom and love, while the heroes are both brave and

passionately romantic; in plot construction, both involve key scenes of confessing love in gardens, making lifelong vows in sacred places, and heroines dying for love only to be revived; in dramatic conflict, both reflect the contradiction between free love and feudal forces; and in dramatic structure, both contain moving tragic and comedic elements, transitioning from love comedy to love tragedy.

Current comparative research on these two works, primarily within the Chinese academic sphere, can be broadly categorized into three areas. The first involves comparing the two works’ underlying cultural, aesthetic, and dramatic concepts of the East and West. The second focuses on specific aspects of their dramatic creation, such as structure, narrative strategies, and language. The third involves comparing specific comedic or tragic elements within the plays. While there has been ample research in the broader realms of thought and creation, there is a lack of in-depth analysis at the micro-level of dramatic plots, missing a dialectical study of typical dramatic scenes and an overall perspective on the presentation of drama. This paper aims to compare the tragic effects of both works from a holistic viewpoint, addressing the current research deficiency in plot analysis.

2. Tragic Comparison in Love Plots

The love plots in “Romeo and Juliet” and “The Peony Pavilion” are quintessential to both dramas, where passionate declarations of love and sweet interactions between the couples bring joy to the audience. These are typical of comedic scenes. However, a closer reading of these sections reveals an underlying unease: tragic elements are interwoven throughout, foreshadowing the impending doom of the beautiful love stories and lending a persistent tragic undertone to otherwise joyful romantic episodes.

In “Romeo and Juliet,” the tragedy within the love plot primarily manifests as a sense of fate. The young lovers, struck by love at first sight, are from feuding families, yet this does not extinguish their fiery love. After the ball, Romeo risks death to climb into his enemy’s garden to confess his love to the pure and beautiful Juliet, who, in turn, sheds her noble maiden’s shyness and reserve to accept the son of her family’s foe. Confronting the harsh reality of their feuding families, they exchange sincere vows of love and secretly marry under the guidance of Friar Laurence, planning to elope from Verona. Their love is intense and daring: from the moment they meet, they fall deeply in love, considering each other as their whole world and deciding to abandon everything else to be together for life. However, even as they indulge in the sweetness of their love and dream of a beautiful future, the shadow of tragedy never fades. The drama repeatedly emphasizes the deep-seated hostility between their families through various characters, casting the destiny of their feud over them like a sword hanging overhead as Romeo laments after falling in love, “O dear account! My life is my foe’s debt” [1], and Juliet exclaims, “My only love sprung from my only hate! Too early seen unknown, and known too late! Prodigious birth of love it is to me, that I must love a loathed enemy” [1]. Despite the intoxication of their love, the cloud of family hatred envelops them, subtly hinting at the tragic undertones.

However, because Romeo and Juliet’s love faces a clear obstacle, namely the hatred between their families, they have a very clear solution to achieve perfect love: sever ties with their families, abandon everything, and elope with their beloved. They actively strive for their love and happiness, courageously resisting external obstructions. No matter how difficult their love situation becomes, they never give up on each other. This spirit and action of steadfast love in adversity and jointly overcoming obstacles inspire hope and encouragement. However, the tragic aspect intensifies when, even just as they are about to succeed, their circumstances inexplicably turn for the worse. Every step they take, ideally leading to a positive development, paradoxically ends in tragic consequences

contrary to their initial intentions. For instance, right after their secret marriage and as they prepare to elope from Verona, Romeo gets entangled in a duel initiated by Tybalt, killing the unreasonable Tybalt to avenge his friend. Consequently, he is banished by the prince, forcing him to separate from Juliet. Moreover, when Juliet drinks the friar’s potion to feign death and escape her family’s control, intending to elope with Romeo, Friar John’s failure to deliver the message due to the plague leads to a tragic misunderstanding, where Romeo’s servant misinforms him of Juliet’s death, resulting in an irreversible tragedy that destroys their beautiful future. An invisible hand of fate seems to be guiding everything, with the family feud destroying one young life after another. As reflected in Romeo’s dreams in the first and fifth acts: “I fear too early; for my mind misgives some consequence yet hanging in the stars shall bitterly begin his fearful date with this night’s revels, and expire the term of a despised life closed in my breast by some vile forfeit of untimely death” [1], and “I dreamt my lady came and found me dead—strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think!—and breathed such life with kisses in my lips, that I revived and was an emperor” [1]. Dreams filled with sorrow and death seem to foreshadow tragedy, with a force beyond human control dictating their fate, making it impossible to prevent the young couple’s beautiful love from becoming a predetermined tragedy, ultimately serving as a sacred sacrifice to mend the hatred between their families.

In “The Peony Pavilion,” the tragic nature of the love plot is primarily characterized by a sense of illusion and disparity. Du Liniang, raised in the seclusion of a feudal household and subjected to orthodox feudal education, is expected by her parents to become a “literate and polite” virtuous woman. The imposing walls of the governor’s mansion where she lives cut off any possibility of her interacting with young men. However, the natural desires of a young woman make her yearn for a life of freedom and beautiful love. A secret visit to the garden awakens her youthful spirit and the accompanying inescapable sorrows. The beauty of spring before her eyes and her prime youth are destined to wither in helplessness. The harsh reality forces her to seek ideal love only in her dreams. Even though readers later learn that the Liu Mengmei of her dreams is real, for Du Liniang at the time, he is merely a phantom carrying her imagined love, existing only in the spiritual realm and unattainable in real life. No matter how sweet or intense their love in the dream, upon waking, she remains the lonely girl confined by a rigid feudal ethical code, unable to decide even her rest and sleep, forbidden from freely roaming even her garden. Du Liniang’s death for love differs from that of Romeo and Juliet. She does not die to follow her lover into another world for eternal

companionship, especially since she knows nothing about the real Liu Mengmei, his identity, or his whereabouts, and she is not even sure if the man she loves in her dream exists. She dies suffocated by the oppressive feudal ethics, having tasted the beautiful love and free life in her dreams; the cold, loneliness, and repression of reality become even more painful. Du Liniang's sorrow is youthful loneliness, suppressed love, and the merciless extinguishing of individual life by powerful feudal ethics. Her young life drowns in the illusory beauty of dreams, withering in the immense disparity.

Because the initial beauty exists only in illusion, with reality always being cold and oppressive, even the subsequent miraculous resurrection cannot dispel the despair this illusion brings. The transformation of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's love from tragedy to comedy relies on fantastical forces, not within the power of ordinary people in reality. Du Liniang's resurrection is made possible with the help of underworld officials and the Flower God, allowing her soul to reunite with Liu Mengmei and fulfill their union. Thus, the fulfillment of their love is inherently based on illusory power. Without Du Liniang's magical experience, they would merely be lovers in a dream, and their story would end in complete tragedy. Furthermore, even when Du Liniang returns to the mortal world, she faces the same cold and unchanged feudal world. Love and freedom are attainable only in dreams, and as wandering souls unbound by worldly norms, while in the real world, Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's love remains constrained by societal norms and status. Du Bao's rigid adherence to tradition refuses to acknowledge his daughter. He disregards her happiness and only condemns her for not following "the parents' orders and the matchmaker's words," not maintaining women's virtue, and disgracing the Du family by secretly wedding. Had Liu Mengmei not achieved the status of the Number One Scholar, making him a match for the Du family in terms of social status, their love would never have been accepted by the Du family. The reality remains cold, not permitting free love to exist, and the completion of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's love, in reality, is actually due to their obedience to these societal norms.

The tragic nature of the love plots in "Romeo and Juliet" and "The Peony Pavilion" ultimately reflects a sense of powerlessness, where the protagonists' fates are beyond their control. Just as Romeo and Juliet's struggles are always short of success, Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's fulfillment is built on illusory power, with the protagonists invariably becoming playthings under the control of greater forces.

3. Tragic Comparison in Conflict Plots

„Romeo and Juliet“ and „The Peony Pavilion“ share the same dramatic core of conflict: the contradiction between free love and feudal forces. However, the differing conflict environments, forms, and outcomes result in distinct tragic effects.

3.1 Comparison of Tragic Effect in Conflict Environment and Conflict Form

From the perspective of the conflict environment, Romeo and Juliet live in an era where the dark Middle Ages are about to collapse, and the dawn of new capitalism has arrived. At this time, the humanistic cultural movement is in its prime, and the calls for individual liberation, personal freedom, and the pursuit of „worldly happiness“ inspire people to bravely fight against the degraded feudal rule. Influenced and inspired by the spirit of the times, Romeo and Juliet boldly break through the feudal barriers to pursue their happy marital life, defending human dignity and freedom at all costs and directing their struggle against the selfish, stubborn, and hypocritical feudal patriarchs. Their form of conflict is an active, uncompromising struggle filled with blood and death, which is undoubtedly tragic. However, it is precisely because of their never-surrendering bravery and optimism in this cruel struggle that the tragic sense of the conflict plot is largely mitigated, giving people hope and courage.

While Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei live in a backward, conservative Chinese feudal society, feudal traditional marriage morals, such as „equal in social status,“ are significant restrictions and obstacles to the free love and happy marriage of young men and women. Particularly, the so-called „Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues,“ „Three Obediences and Four Virtues,“ and other doctrines that oppress women bind women's life values to their fathers, husbands, children, and families, depriving them of self and freedom. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, who have the specific object of resistance, the feudal patriarch Du and Liu face the intangible enemy of feudal ritual teachings, which are omnipresent, symbolizing absolute authority and enslaving both people's bodies and minds. More tragically, Du and Liu themselves are deeply poisoned by feudal thought. Even Du Liniang, who pursues the freedom of love, still considers „the orders of parents and the words of matchmakers,“ and once she is resurrected and returns to the human world, she wants her parents to recognize their marriage, asserting, „I was a ghost then, and I am a maiden now. A ghost can ignore the ethic codes, but a maiden can't“ [2]. Moreover, Du Liniang has not escaped the traditional thought that „the wife's adornment lies in her husband.“ Before meeting Liu Mengmei

in her dream, she lamented, „I have turned sixteen but have not met a successful husband. Stirred by the spring passion, where can I come across one who will win the laurels in civil examinations?“ [2], indicating her inner hope for a successful and talented future husband. After her resurrection, she actively encourages her husband to participate in the imperial examinations to gain fame and success, saying, „A ghost expects to gain a second life; A wretched scholar hopes to gain fame. An honored husband makes a glorious wife; I hope he achieves his name“ [2]. This shows Du Liniang’s emphasis on her husband’s fame and position, and her longing for „the wife’s honor with her husband’s glory,“ which is indispensable to the love she expects. Thus, Du Liniang’s natural inclination for human liberation and the pursuit of freedom falls back into traditional feudal ethics. As a scholar, Liu Mengmei is also deeply influenced by feudal thoughts of fame and family status; passing the imperial examinations is as significant to him as love. Both dreamed the same dream, with Du Liniang cherishing the love from the dream, even dying due to the despair of being unable to stay with the one she loved. At the same time, Liu Mengmei only looked forward to the „time of success“ predicted in the dream, focusing on „setting the perfect time in anticipation of winning the laurels in civil examinations“ [2], never thinking of looking for the lover of his dream. Even when he moved into Du’s Plum Blossom Lodge, it was not in pursuit of love, but rather, he was coincidentally saved there on his journey to achieve imperial examination success. Achieving scholarly honor remains Liu Mengmei’s constant obsession; his life revolves around secular success, with love being just a bonus. This also reflects the feudal ritual to the discipline of people, making women’s life pursuits revolve around men, hoping for a perfect husband to save themselves, and making men’s life pursuits revolve around fame, hoping for recognition from the emperor and the court.

Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, who pin their future happiness on „achieving success in the imperial examinations“ and „well-matched social statuses,“ have not truly escaped the shackles feudal ethics impose on love. As a result, the form of conflict they exhibit is gentle and passive, a defense of all they have that represents a compromise and concession to feudal forces. This sense of being trapped and powerless permeates the narrative throughout. Their great love, which transcends life and death, ultimately falls back into the constraints of feudal ethics, adding a layer of tragedy to the drama that champions the themes of love and freedom.

3.2 Comparison of Tragic Effect on Conflict

Outcome

Looking at the endings, the dual deaths of the protagonists in „Romeo and Juliet“ represent a classic tragic ending, whereas in „The Peony Pavilion,“ Liu Mengmei’s success in the imperial examination and his marriage with Du Liniang signify a quintessential happy ending with a grand reunion, which is indisputable. However, the situation is different from the perspective of the dramatic conflict, that is, the clash between free love and feudal forces.

When discussing the contradictions and conflicts in tragedy, Hegel stated that tragic characters with their individual particularity (one-sidedness) disrupt the ethical substance and the tranquil state of unity[3]. Thus, what is negated in the tragic conclusion is only the one-sided particular factors because these one-sided particularities cannot harmonize with those above, and in the tragic process of their action, they cannot detach from themselves and their intentions, resulting only in two outcomes: either destruction or, at least, a forced retreat in the process of achieving their goals (if achievable)[3]. The outcomes of these two works perfectly illustrate Hegel’s points. In the conflict between free love and feudal forces, free love seeks to disrupt the feudal equilibrium, destroying Romeo and Juliet. At the same time, Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei make concessions and compromises.

In this sense, although „Romeo and Juliet“ ends with the tragic death of both protagonists, their deaths are highly meaningful. Through death, they break free from the shackles of feudal forces, achieving the freedom of love and dissolving the ancient feud between their families. Their deaths boldly critique the cruel darkness of the feudal system and its confinement of human nature, strongly reflecting the emerging bourgeoisie’s demand for new social relationships and ethical ideas. To some extent, this means that free love’s challenge to the powerful feudal forces has initially succeeded, offering hope and inspiration, thereby mitigating the tragic essence of the drama.

In contrast, „The Peony Pavilion“ always seeks to secure the freedom of will and action for its characters within the bounds of feudal morality. Once these bounds are crossed, it resorts to dreams and ghosts, unconstrained by worldly rules. However, once the characters return to the mortal world, they must adhere to societal norms and ethical codes. Consequently, the ending of the conflict is evident—the success of the love between the two protagonists is made possible by several feudal factors: Du Liniang’s noble status in the human world, which wins her help in the underworld; Liu Mengmei’s achievement as the Number One Scholar, which elevates his social status to match Du Liniang’s; the acceptance by feudal patriarchs; and the grace of marriage from the emperor.

Thus, a love tragedy caused by feudal oppression resolves through the same feudal forces.

The fulfillment of their love ultimately cannot escape the influence of feudal forces. Both protagonists place their happiness within the framework of feudal ethics, pursuing a well-matched marriage and shared social glory as the ultimate goal of their love. Du Liniang forgets the destruction that feudal ethics once brought upon her, forgetting that the one she loved was the gentle and passionate scholar Liu Mengmei, and focuses solely on owning a husband of high status. She yearns for recognizing their union by the embodiments of feudal power—the feudal patriarchs and the emperor. Du Liniang's free love is assimilated by feudal thought—she is no longer the brave girl pursuing love and freedom. Still, she becomes a symbol of feudal womanhood under a patriarchal society. The freedom of love vanishes when she awakens from her dream. Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei return to a reality confined by feudal boundaries, where their free love ultimately fails, and the conflict between free love and ethical codes dissolves. As Du and Liu increasingly conform to feudal norms, pursuing fame and social standing, and ultimately getting lost in gratitude for the emperor's favor, they regard the highest representative of feudal power—the feudal ruler—as the enabler of their love's fruition, completely forgetting that feudal ethics were the greatest obstacle to their free love. Beneath the seemingly happy and harmonious comedic ending lies endless sorrow.

4. Comparison of Dramatic Traditions and Tragic Spirits in Western and Chinese

Regarding the two renowned love dramas, „Romeo and Juliet“ and „The Peony Pavilion,“ there has been considerable debate among scholars as to whether they are tragedies, comedies, or tragicomedies, with no consensus reached. However, both works contain elements of tragedy and comedy. Viewing them holistically and conducting a dialectical analysis of the love and conflict plots, it is evident that „Romeo and Juliet“ contains more tragic elements. Yet, the spirited struggle within it continuously mitigates the story's tragic nature. In contrast, „The Peony Pavilion,“ with its predominant comedic elements, deepens its tragic aspect through continuous compromise and submission to the feudal forces, the objects of its struggle. This reflects tragedy's distinct dramatic traditions and spirits in the West and China.

Western dramatic tradition places significant emphasis on tragic endings. Stemming from the ancient Greek dramatic tradition, Western tragedy, caused by tragic characters suffering undeserved misfortune, sharply and profoundly

reveals the tragic nature of life[4]. As articulated by A.C. Bradley in 1904 in „Shakespearean Tragedy,“ in Shakespeare's tragic world, regardless of how great an individual may be or how decisive their actions appear, they are not the ultimate power[5]. Western tragedy highlights human insignificance: humans are not masters of the world, let alone their destinies. However, the purpose of tragedy is not to induce despair but to foster enlightenment and growth through disaster. The tragedy of fate in ancient Greece shows the spirit of individual struggle under the dominion of fate. Despite their insignificance, humans do not yield to fate; they persist in their struggle even in the face of certain failures; this is precisely the tragic spirit, as Aristotle mentioned in „Aristotle's Poetics,“ tragedy, through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions[4]. Thus, Western tragedy presents fearful, painful, or meaningless aspects, setting the protagonists against them to highlight their dire fates and destruction. This stimulates a sense of sublimity in the audience, leading to the purification and elevation of the soul and ultimately fostering a rational and resilient attitude toward life.

The Chinese dramatic tradition emphasizes comedic endings. As Zhu Guangqian stated, drama in China is almost synonymous with comedy[6]. Chinese playwrights always favor endings where the virtuous are rewarded and the wicked punished, with a grand reunion[6]. This grand reunion dominates the traditional notion of tragedy, with its aesthetic pleasure derived from the protagonist enduring setbacks and hardships yet persevering and struggling valiantly to achieve a satisfactory resolution[7]. In the tradition of „writing is for conveying truth,“ Chinese operas and novels' didactic elements of ethics and morality are very pronounced. All conflicts in an ethical society are between good and evil, and the outcome of such conflicts is invariably that good is rewarded and evil is punished[8]. This is the truth about life as perceived by the ancient Chinese[8]. Tragic art must culminate in a grand reunion with Karma, a necessity dictated by ethical rules. The starting point of Chinese tragedy is often not the conflict between the individual and fate, but rather the contradictions among people and between individuals and the ethical morals of society. For the ancients, the value of life was not in personal self-fulfillment but in one's ethical responsibilities to the family and obligations to the state[9]. Hence, an individual's struggle and even failure or death in this struggle do not constitute a complete ethical meaning[9]. Only when evil is punished and good prevails when Karma is fulfilled is the ethical theme concluded[9]. Thus, the spirit of classical Chinese tragedy is not a commendation of the individual's struggle for autonomy but shifts towards moral expectations or even illusions of

„good“ and „justice“ within a societal context[10].

These differences in dramatic traditions and spirits of tragedy between the East and the West result in different tragic effects in the two renowned love dramas. The solemn and stirring tragedy of the struggle and destruction of Romeo and Juliet gives people spirited encouragement, contrasting with the thought-provoking tragedy in *The Peony Pavilion*, where Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's compromises and concessions to the feudal forces are the cost of their eventual reunion.

5. Conclusion

„Romeo and Juliet“ and „The Peony Pavilion,“ two renowned love dramas advocating for the liberation of human nature and critiquing feudal forces, have been widely celebrated. Viewing them holistically and through a dialectical analysis of their core plots—love and conflict—it becomes evident that both contain a mixture of elements of comedy and tragedy, yet they present entirely different dramatic effects. „Romeo and Juliet“ ends in tragedy, but the spirit of struggle mitigates its tragic nature. „The Peony Pavilion,“ despite its comedic ending, maintains an indelible tragic effect due to its compromising nature—a distinction shaped by the different dramatic traditions of the West and China. The tragic effects expressed in the love plots of both plays, though both showcase the powerlessness of individuals against greater forces, differ due to the distinct tragic spirits of the West and China. The tragedy in „Romeo and Juliet“ reflects the Western portrayal of human insignificance, manifesting as a fatalism where individuals cannot control their destinies. In contrast, the tragedy in „The Peony Pavilion“ is shaped by China's moral expectations of goodness and justice, resulting in a sense of illusion based on illusory fulfillment and the disparity between reality and the ideal.

This paper complements current academic research on the micro-level plots of the two plays, emphasizing a holistic and dialectical approach to plot analysis. It involves analyzing individual plots within the context of the entire story, highlighting commonalities and connections among them. Furthermore, it transcends the structural ending of dramas to consider the results of dramatic conflicts as the true ending, contrasting these with the plays' themes to

analyze the presentation of dramatic effects. This holistic and dialectical approach to plot analysis aids in breaking away from the stereotypical notion that tragic elements must lead to sadness and comedic elements to joy, thereby allowing for a deeper exploration of the plays' connotations. However, due to limitations in this expertise, analyzing the tragic effects in both plays was somewhat isolated, focusing solely on comparing and analyzing the dramatic texts and the concepts of drama creation in the West and China. This approach somewhat overlooks the impact of the creative environment and the authors' ideologies on the expression of the dramas. Future research on the tragedy of these two plays could benefit from moving beyond textual interpretation to place the works within their historical or the authors' creative contexts for a more comprehensive and systematic study.

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