

Reality and Fiction: Li Qingzhao and Emily Dickinson's Love Poems

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In a poetic tradition where the male poet takes the female as the aesthetic object, Li Qingzhao has made remarkable achievements by employing delicate style in her poems, esp. her love poems to present her life experience and boldly express a woman's own desire. Emily Dickinson makes up a world of love in her poems to experience love and gain emotional satisfaction from it, which induces more and more passionate yearning for love in her poems. As a result, many of Dickinson's poems display a self-denial that is close to violence and hence opens up a way for Dickinson to express herself as a woman poet. The two poets' love poems demonstrate that unique life experience and the desire of self-expression are the fundamental reasons that they become great women poets.

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The theme of love takes up a large percentage of the poems written by Li Qingzhao (known also as Li Ch'ing-Chao) (1084-1155), a poet of the Song Dynasty in ancient China, and nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1866). Many famous verses and lines from their love poems have been widely read and quoted by later generations. In many people's view, the language in Li Qingzhao's love poems is implicit and oblique but touching with genuine sentiment while the expressions in Emily Dickinson's love poems are boldly straightforward and passionate, which reveals the difference between the Eastern and the Western cultures. However, regarding their love poems, it is obvious that more research needs to be done based on the two women poets' life, writing and the awakening of female identity manifested in their poems.

Li Qingzhao: Life Experience and Transcendence

In the history of China before Li Qingzhao, there were some few women poets, but there were more male poets who described woman in poems, writing from woman's point of view or even adopting woman as the first-person speaker in poems. Using poetry to represent woman grew into a tradition in ancient Chinese literature. Under such circumstances, when Li Qingzhao started to write poetry, it was natural for her to cast her eye upon her own life and to present her personal experience in poetry.

Li Qingzhao was born into a family of officials that loved literature and arts. Her father Li Gefei was a student of Su Shi (also popularly known as Su Dongpo) who was a great poet of the Song Dynasty. There was a large collection of books in the house. Li Qingzhao received good education since she was very young. She had

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her happy girlhood. Some of her poems give delicate delineation of her feelings as a young girl. The poem "Rouged Lips"¹ (点绛唇) depicts a pretty young girl who, in a morning with dew and budding flowers, has just got off the swing and lazily released her hands. Her lovely hands and her slightly sweat-soaked clothes make her look more attractive. The girl went away shyly for just at that moment a visitor came in, yet she could not help but look back when reaching the door and pretended to sniff the fragrance of the plum blossom. The beauty of the person, the environment and the story in this poem vividly delivers the image of a young innocent noble girl. What follows is the young girl falls in love. The poem "The Magnolia Flower" (减字木兰花) describes a happy love life. The young girl has bought a flower and demands in a charming manner that her lover tell her which looks prettier, she or the flower. The young girl in love looks very lively. She is a happy, confident and active girl who has her own feelings. Li's poem expresses what she wants as a female.

At the age of eighteen, Li Qingzhao got married with Zhao Mingcheng. At first, it was a happy marriage. Li even grew fond of studying antiquities under the influence of her husband. The two shared many common interests. Together they studied antiquities, wrote and sang poems, and chatted over tea, living an enviable life for a time. The poem "Picking Mulberries" (丑奴儿) describes a splendid moment of her marriage life: playing music, putting on makeup; admiring her snow-white skin that smells fragrant, she (the speaker) says to her love that the bed would be comfortable for the air is cool and refreshing after the rain... This poem contains very strong implications of sex. Even for many people today, a woman poet writing like this may be considered radical. In the Song Dynasty, it is a revolutionary act for a woman poet to express her own desire boldly. This is more obvious in the poem "Nostalgia of the Flute on the Phoenix Terrace" (凤凰台上忆吹箫):

The incense is cold in the gold lion.
 My quilts are tumbled like red waves.
 I get up lazily.
 Not yet myself, I comb my hair.
 My toilet table is unopened.
 I leave the curtains down until
 The sun shines over the curtain rings.
 I am afraid of this idleness
 Which permits dark sorrow to overcome me.
 There are so many things I would like to write
 But I let them go.
 I have become thinner this year
 Not due to sickness, not to wine,
 Not to the sorrows of Autumn.
 Finished. Finished.
 This time he is gone for good.
 If I sang *The Sunlight in the Pass*
 Ten thousand times
 I could not hold him.
 I think of him far-off at Wu-ling Springs.
 Alone in my Ch'in pavilion,
 Locked in by fog,
 Only the green flowing water

¹ All the English titles of Li Qingzhao's poems are borrowed from *Li Ch'ing-Chao: Complete Poems*, translated and edited by Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung (New York: A New Directions, 1979).

In front of the pavilion
 Knows my eyes that stare and stare,
 Where new layers of sorrows pile up. (Li, 1979, p. 30)

It is a poem about missing the husband. A few years after marriage Li Qingzhao suffered many twists and hardships due to political struggle, her husband Zhao Mingcheng's keeping a concubine, and the chaos caused by war. Li and her husband spent more time apart than together. The poem "Nostalgia of the Flute on the Phoenix Terrace" is a reflection of this period of life and the expression of personal longing and sorrow. It uses many allusions from predecessors. Its language is exquisite and elegant. What is more precious about the poem is that it displays the poet's own unique life experience and expresses a woman's desire boldly. The line "My quilts are tumbled like red waves" can be understood as the trace of a wild night's love-making left on the bed, showing the poet's strong desire for sex at the moment of parting from her husband. The poem also contains other images related to sex. Poems describing woman and sex had existed from very early time, but Li's addition of her own needs and desire makes the female become the aesthetic subject for the first time in Chinese history. Since the earliest Chinese collection of poetry *The Book of Songs*, quite a number of poems describe lonely or abandoned women. Most of them show compassion for women's pain and complain about the husband or the parents-in-law's ruthlessness. Although the poem "Nostalgia of the Flute on the Phoenix Terrace" contains both, its complaining is not purely a complaint, a rebuke and an expectation of the husband, but also the bold expression of the woman's own inner desire. It was attacked by some people in Li's time and is still considered by some readers today to be an erotic poem directly expressing woman's desire.

Its compassion is mainly embodied in the two words "sorrow" (*chou*) and "thin" (*shou*), which have become the signature words of Li Qingzhao's poems, summing up the various feelings in daily life about love and marriage, particularly about the life of the couple. "Sorrow" and "thin" appear many times in Li's poems. Even without the two words some of her poems are still full of sorrowful feelings. The sentiments of "sorrow" and "thin" are best expressed in her love poems. "Cutting a Flowering Plum Branch" (一剪梅) is a farewell poem written for her husband in which Li presents the feelings about the parting as sorrow. Each line of the poem is beautiful and well worth savoring. "Cutting a Flowering Plum Branch" might be the best poem of lovesickness written in ancient China. Lovesickness exists in every corner of life, in the letters and clothes, in the house, the flowers, the sun and the moon. That gentle lovesickness appears to be intangible, but exists genuinely in brows and hearts, and in real life experience.

Poetry has sublimated Li Qingzhao's daily life.

Emily Dickinson: Love in the Fictional World

Different from Li Qingzhao, Emily Dickinson remained single all her life. She might have had admiration for several unidentified persons and contacted briefly with them, but in general she lacks the experience of love and marriage in the real world. For Dickinson, love exists more in literary works and imagination.

Dickinson's first poem is a love poem written in 1850 as a Valentine poem that describes love as a general state of being among all the things in the universe. The lovers listed in the poem contain damsel and swain, bride and groom, Adam and Eve, the moon and the sun, the high and the lowly, the bee and the flower, the wind and the branches, the storm and the seashore, the wave and the moon, the worm and the mortal, death and the living bride,

night and day, morn and eventide, earth and heaven. On the list are also the speaker's close confidantes and herself, "six true, and comely maidens sitting upon the tree," waiting for the boys to choose their most beloved. Dickinson expresses deep yearning for love in the poem. Of Dickinson's nearly 1,800 poems, there are at least 300 love poems. Her love poems concern many details of love and marriage, describing her feelings about all aspects of human's love life ranging from first love to marriage, from lovesickness to meeting and embracing, from joy to pain. The essential characteristic of her love poems is the demonstration of pursuit and desire bordering on greed.

In Dickinson's poems the female lover's attachment to her companion is complete, such as the woman in Poem 725², for whom home is where her lover is and disaster is where her lover is not. Her loyalty to love is absolute and unswerving, as in Poem 1005: "Slay - and my Soul shall rise / Chanting to Paradise - / Still thine -". Even the deprivation of life will not change her love to him: she is still his. The ecstasy over the happy reunion with the lover is so great that she disregards all possible dangers. In that famous Poem 269 "Wild nights—Wild nights!", Dickinson describes such kind of crazy love for which the woman speaker would revel in the joy and pleasure of love and banish all life-threatening things from her mind. A small ship rocking in the stormy sea at night is a disaster to the sailors and so would cause panic and fear. But as long as one is with the lover, then violent wind and driving rain are paradise. On the other hand, in Dickinson's passionate world, love itself, man's crazy possession and the imaginary sex are at the same time a kind of deadly cruelty, a torture to woman's innermost soul:

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on –
He stuns you by degrees –
Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers – further heard –
Then nearer – Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble Cool –
Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
That scalps your naked Soul –

When Winds take Forests in the Paws -
The Universe – is still – (author, year, p. 490)

Adrienne Rich (1979/2003) thought the poem (Poem 477) "has intimations both of seduction and rape" (p. 93), expressing woman's erotic desire that is almost equal to evil. On the other hand, Dickinson sets such a cruel and torturing process of love in order to achieve a more powerful expression and to recount her greed for love. In fact, words such as "the Ethereal Blow," "One—imperial—Thunderbolt," "scalps" and "naked Soul" convey two messages to the reader. One message is that the feelings about love are so profound that no

² All texts for Dickinson's poems are from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R.W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998). The numbers refer to the chronological numbering of poems in this edition.

ordinary words can be found to express them. The other one is the asymmetrical state between the lovers. The value of the female speaker's independent existence has been completely denied in the poem.

Further studies of Dickinson's love poems reveal that she employs constantly this kind of denial. In poems about marriage, such as Poem 280, marriage proves to be a kind of restraint even to a gentle and virtuous wife. In love poems, Dickinson puts on the disguise of nobody by assuming the personas of modest wives, women in absolutely weak position, and tiny natural creatures to make exploration and meditation on love and marriage and seek satisfaction of love in the fictional narrative space. Women's self-denial in Dickinson's love poems, often with images of violence, intensifies her experience of love and becomes a feature of her love poems.

Women Poets' Own Writing

Most researchers and readers tend to believe or hope that Dickinson had real love experience. Dickinson's brother also mentioned that she was once enamored of the opposite sex and had fallen in love several times (Warren, 1963, p. 110). But it is evident that Dickinson's poems and even letters are, to a greater degree, written for herself. Although there may be a particular object to talk to in her letters as well as in some of her poems including those poems considered to be written for the object of her love Reverend Wadsworth, this object is in fact more like a fictitious person, a lover who is far away at the uttermost ends of the earth and never to be met. Alfred Habegger (2001) talked of the importance of these fictitious persons to Dickinson's writing in his biography of Dickinson: "Like the fantasied lover oceans away, the fantasied intimate in the house next door stimulated Dickinson to convert her kind of isolation into productive creativity" (p. 488). The real object of talk is Dickinson herself. Thus it can be seen that the fictional world made up of love poems can bring more satisfaction to Dickinson.

In order to satisfy her greed for love in this fictional space just like achieving greater satisfaction through masochism, Dickinson finds the self-denial that is close to violence. This kind of self-denial is the important reason Dickinson becomes a prominent woman poet. There is this contradiction Dickinson has to face as a woman poet. The role set for woman in her time requires that she should be modest. However, the nature of lyric poetry demands self-assertion (Gilbert & Guba, 1984, p. 564), which is typically exemplified by the self-assertion of her contemporary male poet Walt Whitman. As a strategy to solve the contradiction, Dickinson disguises her speaker as nobody and assumes the posture of self-denial in her poems so that she can make her voice heard by employing the language system in that male-dominated society.

Seen from the surface, the form and content of Li Qingzhao's poems already existed before her: many male poets had adopted the style of "delicate restraint" (*wanyue*) to describe woman in poetry. Li's contribution lies in the fact that she brings her desire and personal experience into this style of poetry. In some sense Li Qingzhao is stronger than Emily Dickinson. In the latter half of her life Li experienced the loss of husband, war and exile, but she still kept doing her job well as a poet and an antiquarian. Her courage is exhibited in "getting her feeling as a woman to be nakedly exposed in poetry" (Zheng, 2011, p. 63). In the poetry circle of the Song dynasty there were two styles of poetry, the style of "delicate restraint" (*wanyue*) and the style of "heroic abandon" (*haofang*). Probably Li is compelled to choose the style of "delicate restraint" (*wanyue*) because the "heroic abandon" (*haofang*) style of composition is not in keeping with feminine temperament. Similarly, she cannot write about sex because it is not suited to her female identity.

In this case, Li puts her own experience into poetry, boldly expressing woman's own desire in poems, esp. love poems while keeping poetic elegance. The female images presented in her poems are no longer just objects of the male's aesthetic fantasy. In her writing, women have their own thoughts, feelings and desires. Since the Song dynasty, there have often been men of letters who express their great admiration for the numerous well-turned lines that are new, unusual and beautiful in Li's poems and rank Li as the best poet of the "delicate restraint" style in the Song dynasty. The fundamental reason for Li Qingzhao to make such great achievements is that she, like Emily Dickinson, goes beyond her time and initiates women's own writing.

Conclusion

Although Li Qingzhao and Emily Dickinson were born of different nationalities and lived in different age, both of their literary writings have distinct innovation in succession to tradition. They have different life experience, but they both integrate daily life with poetry writing, putting their life experience and their desire into poetry. Michael Ryan makes such a comment on Dickinson in "My Favorite Poet": "Writing poems for her was life-sustaining, even life-creating. It created the place in which she fully experienced her experience. What she made in her poems she used in her life. The process of writing and all it involved grew her soul. It was a spiritual discipline, the lifelong practice of a craft, and an entertainment" (p. 39). This comment is also appropriate for Li Qingzhao, esp. in her later years. Poetry constitutes their lives themselves, serving as the medium through which they express themselves and meet their spiritual needs. Their life and desire are the source of their artistic innovation and the internal reasons why they are able to start women's writing. Their love poem achievements demonstrate that life has real power for tradition and art.

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