

Female Characters' Images in the Play *The Orphan of Zhao* by James Fenton

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Abstract: The play *The Orphan of Zhao*, adapted from one of the four major tragedies of the Yuan Dynasty (originally known as *The Great Revenge of The Orphan of Zhao*, written by Ji Junxiang), was written by James Fenton, a British poet, art critic, and theater reviewer. Similar to Shakespeare's drama *Hamlet*, *The Orphan of Zhao* has its storyline illustrating the topic of revenge. Having its theatrical release from 2012 to 2013 in the Swan theater, this traditional Chinese revenge story of the Zhao's orphan has made its way onto the British cultural stage.[1] The fate of the three main female characters in the play is tightly linked to the growth of the orphan. They come from different social classes and have different status, but they all reflect the injustice faced by women during the ancient feudal period and the burdens and grievances they carry. The source of their tragedy is mainly attributed to the harsh constraints imposed by the imperial court on the noble women and the oppression of the commoners by the social classes and abuse of authority.

1. Introduction

In *The Orphan of Zhao*, the first half of the play takes political intrigue as the starting point and the "rescue of the orphan" as the main clue to show the spirits of loyalty and altruism, with Cheng Ying, a doctor, as the main character. The second half of the play sublimates the revenge and conflicts in the play through moral values such as filiality, with the main character being Cheng Bo, the orphan of Zhao.[2] The three important female characters show their maternal strength and the courage to carry out personal sacrifice with relatively few scenes.

2. The Princess of Jin

As a princess of a country, she was distinguished, and dignified, and her marriage to Zhao Dun gave her some political support. However, even with such a noble status, the princess could not escape from the treacherous political struggle and became one of the victims of the treacherous minister Tu'an Gu's ambition for power. The emperor of Jin was provoked by Tu'an Gu, successfully lobbied by feudal superstition, and ordered the beheading of the Zhao clan. Before the massacre began, the princess, pregnant, clung to her husband and pleaded with him not to commit suicide. The following is one of her lines in her conversation with her husband:

We shall die and we shall die unburied.

It is clear that the princess was well acknowledged of the consequences brought by such a political struggle. Even in the situation where her entire clan was beheaded, the princess was able to escape with her life due to her prestigious pedigree and connection with the emperor, but at the cost of being imprisoned in the forbidden palace for the rest of her life. The birth of her son, the Zhao's orphan, further brought a heavy and dangerous burden to her fragile defenses: Tu'an Gu ordered the execution of Zhao's orphan when he learned that the baby was still alive. The imprisoned princess had no right to voice out, and as a woman who had lost her support, she was powerless to resist the control of the man in power. Since the princess who had lost her husband and the power of the court was no longer able to bear the pain of losing her own son, she entrusted Zhao's orphan to Cheng Ying, the doctor of the Zhao family, leaving her son's chance of survival to a trustworthy and loyal man, and sending her own child's life down a path with an uncertain future.

After the tragedy of the Zhao family's extermination, the dignified princess was transformed from a nobleman wrapped in fancy clothes to a forbidden soul full of hatred and grief, wandering day and night in the forbidden palace crying for her son.

2.1 Gender Role and Patriarchal Ideals for Traditional Aristocracy

In a patriarchal society, the male is the root and controller of all rights. These rights come from the family, religion, politics, the court, and almost all other social components. In such a power structure, women, as a group that lacks equal education and whose virtue is to “raise their children well”, are always in a position of dependence and live under dominance.[3] The princess may seem fortunate to the audience that while all the female servants of the Zhao family are killed, the princess escapes death because of her noble status and her blood ties to the Emperor of Jin. But how was her imprisonment and deprivation of freedom not a punishment and contempt for her as a vulnerable woman? According to Confucian ideals, when the princess becomes the wife of Zhao Dun, her status as a princess is diluted and she becomes a part of the Zhao family instead, attaching to her husband. Although the bloodline from the imperial family preserves her life, the cruel and insidious political intrigue kills her husband, on whom she relies for survival, leaving her without support and forcing her to be separated from her own child, depriving her of the meaning of life that she should fulfill as a woman and mother, making her to live in a humiliating manner. This is a helpless tragedy of the feudal era. This is a desperate move. There is no mother under heaven who loves her son so much can be cruel enough to separate from her newborn child. The zigzag fate drives the mother and son who are linked by blood to drift apart, possibly turning the goodbye into a forever farewell. Nevertheless, a heartbroken mother must cut her emotions for the sake of righteousness. Her noble consciousness is evident.

2.2 Differences between Chinese and Fenton's Version of the Princess' Fate

Interestingly, James Fenton makes changes to the ultimate fate of the Princess of Jin in his version of the play. This adaptation of the plot reflects the difference in perception between the West and China.

In the original script written by Ji Junxiang, the princess can hardly bear the pain of losing her son and eventually commits suicide, dying a painful death with resentment. Fenton's princess is obviously much more fortunate than the princess in the original play, and she is reunited with the orphans at the end of the story, adding a more happy ending to her lonely life that should have ended in tragedy. The Zhuang Ji portrayed by Ji Junxiang is quite the image of a martyr woman. In her view, it is her mission as a wife and mother to protect the orphan, to continue the Zhao lineage, to avenge the Zhao family, and to die a noble death for such a moral and ideal. It is only by dying that Zhuang Ji's personal dignity and beliefs can be upheld, rather than living a life that is not tolerated by society. Therefore, from the comparison of different versions of Zhao's orphan between China and the West, we can find that there are certain cultural differences between the Chinese and the West in their understanding of the moral concept for women. Chinese morality is influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes bloodline, inheritance, and rituals as core values, and strictly requires women to maintain their purity in various social aspects, for example, “remarriage” is an act that is scorned, and people think that a woman who has remarried is unethical, lacks good character, and degrades her husband.[4] On the other hand, influenced by bible and other theological ideas, Western culture is based on humanity and freedom, and is tolerant of ideas such as “incest” that are contrary to traditional Chinese thought, and plays such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* rely on these ethics to highlight the conflicts and drama of the plays.

Fenton's version of the play also fulfills this point: the princess survives on the love and longing for her child and is eventually reunited with him.

3. The Maid

In his play *The Orphan of Zhao*, James Fenton wrote with the intention of portraying a group of heroic warriors who would sacrifice their lives to protect the orphan. Cheng Ying, Gong Sun,

General Han , and many characters show their determination to defy the darkness. Among them, the princess' maid in the process of saving the orphan showed amazing courage and pluck. The maid made her debut in a scene where Cheng Ying came to treat the princess, appearing to lead him to the princess, and triggered the beginning of the events that led to Cheng Ying's rescue of the orphan. Up to this point, The performance of the maid as a whole presents a normal servant who kept to her duty and was loyal to her master. However, under the severe torture of Tu'an Gu, the maid showed her unprecedented tenacity and unyielding sense of justice against the thugs, sacrificing herself in exchange for the continuation of the loyal bloodline for her master.

You knew that I would be pleased to be told the child was dead. Why did you not show it to me?[5] Tu'an Gu asks in scene thirteen.

The rescue of the orphan happens too hasty, and does not leave the princess' side enough time to deal with the attack from the enemy. Besides, Tu'an Gu's interrogation is very logical, and it is clear that he has pounced on a logical loophole in the maid's statement, and has determined the existence of Zhao's orphan in turn. He can't do anything to the princess due to his identity, so he can only force her maid to confess the whereabouts of the orphan. At this point in time, the princess has already lost her substantive rights and is completely incapable of defending her servant, so the maid is destined to die. The maid understands that she has no shelter and could have given up the whereabouts of Zhao's orphan in order to stay alive. But she didn't: she cautiously confronts with Tu'an Gu the whole time, and even when Cheng Ying appears, she tries everything to deny the existence of the orphan. She may have known that Tu had already seen through her clumsy lies, but despite this, she maintains her duty as a servant to her master until the end of her life, showing her consciousness of dedication and unparalleled spirit of sacrifice.

However, the maid's loyal spirit also brought some minor trouble for the operation to save the orphan. Cheng Ying, in order to complete the rescue plan with Gong Sun and others, reveals the hiding place of the orphan to Tu'an Gu, and justifies his confession by saying that he would rather protect his own son instead of receiving the reward money. The maid, seeing that she would soon succeed in obstructing Tu's search and not knowing Cheng Ying's plan, immediately mistook Cheng Ying for a mutiny. Her last hope annihilates, and she breaks down and shouts out: *What's the safety of your child to that of the Orphan of Zhao?* This one sentence immediately makes Tu'an Gu to be further certain that the orphans had indeed been rescued, and in addition, convinces by Cheng Ying's almost impeccable reasoning. The maid's words might be unethical in modern times: the lives of all children should be equal, and no one is more noble than another. But her act is understandable because she is too eager to protect her master.

4. Cheng Ying's Wife

The Orphan of Zhao has a total of two mothers: one is the Princess of Jin, the other is Cheng Ying's wife. Cheng Ying's wife is more heartbreaking and miserable than the princess who eventually reunites with her son. Because the princess's role is so heavy and prominent in the second half of the play, the audience slightly forgets that there is another poor mother who is forced to sacrifice her own child in the first half of the play. Like all poor peasants, Cheng Ying's wife was just an ordinary rural woman. She had neither powerful identity nor high influence, and her daily job was merely to take care of her newborn son. Despite the dullness of life and the poverty and hunger brought about by the mediocre rule, she remained strong and optimistic, and looked forward with joy to her beloved child growing up. In the play, Cheng Ying's wife had a simple but beautiful solo piece, a lullaby she sings to her son, the child who was killed after being taken away by Cheng Ying and swapped with the orphan of Zhao.

Tu'an Gu ordered to find and kill the orphan of Zhao, and if the child could not be found, all the baby boys of the country would be executed to ensure the death of the orphan. Cheng Ying's wife never expected that this cruel order, which caused extreme fear and panic among the people of the country, was actually caused by her husband. What horrified her even more was that Cheng Ying even took the orphan back with him. This move is obviously bold and dangerous, and can even be said to be a blatant provocation and disobedience to the court, the consequences of which are even

more unthinkable. The Cheng family had no ability to fight against the imperial power, which meant that whole the family would be killed without a burial place if they were exposed. Cheng Ying's wife had no deep ties to the Zhao family, and she could not understand why the princess would be so selfish as to impose such a horrible and difficult task on an ordinary peasant with no ability and responsibility to complete it. In scene ten, the lines of Cheng Ying's wife are given a strong dramatic character. She uses phrases such as “vengeful son,” “curse,” and “massacre” to describe the orphan of Zhao, which contain resentment and anger. Her own child is apparently more weighted than her husband's insistence on justice. It is also undoubtedly her duty as a mother to protect her own child first.

Unfortunately, Cheng Ying clearly did not think this way. Despite the pain in his heart, he ruthlessly decided to trade his own son for the live of Zhao's orphan. Cheng Ying's discussion with his wife about offering his son to save the orphan was only a formality, for his mind was already made up and he did not intend to take his wife's position and opinion into consideration. His heart was full of loyalty, revenge, and saving the nation's babies, but all these have no difference than a murder to his wife.

A wife without a voice is highly praised in traditional society.[6] Compared to Ji Junxiang's version, Cheng Ying's wife in Fenton's play is added more resistance against Cheng Ying's plan, and her position and love for her son are somewhat understood.

5. Motherhood

In front of Cheng Ying's persuasion, Cheng's wife stands more sold in reason than Cheng Ying. There is an old Chinese saying that a brutal tiger does not eat its own son. Giving up one's own child is a more vicious act than the most tyrannical beast, while protecting one's own child and refusing to trade his life for the lives of others should be more important than anything. With the same struggle and torment in their hearts, Cheng Ying places kinship behind benevolence and justice, while Cheng Ying's wife chooses to not back down from the perspectives of motherhood and humanity. However, Cheng Ying's wife finally compromises when seeing Gongsun kneeling down to her. She makes the greatest sacrifice a mother can make—pushing her child to death with her own hands. Cheng Ying's wife died of grief a few years later because of the loss of her child. Unlike the princess of Jin, who was reunited with her child (the orphan) after a long wait, Cheng Ying's wife would not meet her son again no matter how many years she waited. Her death is briefly mentioned in one of Cheng Ying's monologues, but after a closer look it shows depth and extreme pain.

Cheng Ying's wife tries her best to protect her child, but the so-called “righteousness” does not give her any tolerance. As she herself lamented: *I am a woman, and there is nothing in the end that I can do*. Righteousness drove the righteous men who could not tolerate tyranny to sacrifice their lives, but it could not tolerate the life of a commoner child. The great righteousness was eventually exchanged for nothing but justice and a suffering mother. Was the act of saving the orphan really so noble? It may seem cruel and shameless to Cheng Ying's wife.

6. Conclusion

While interpreting loyalty, filial piety and revenge, *The Orphan of Zhao* reflects to a certain extent the general state of women in traditional feudal society: women are always forced to be sacrificed in political struggles.[7] From the superior and noble princess, to the dependent maid, and then to the inferior peasant woman, none of them escapes of control and persecution from a patriarchal society and system. Fenton's adaptation of the play adds a western morality and gender consciousness to the original, allowing the female characters to awaken to their own will and show their strong spirit.

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