

“My Eye!”: The Trope of Sight and Vision in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Literary Texts

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The sixteenth century novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* goes lengths to portray characters peeping and spying in the narration, suggesting a sense of voyeurism. Sight and vision in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* mainly stem from direct observation of characters' quotidian life. Characters see or happen to see what happens in front of their eyes. Physical sight relies on characters' physical proximity to what is being caught sight of. In later seventeenth century texts such as Li Yu's *Xiayilou* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, both texts point out an attempt to look into the distance. To mediate a geographical distance, Qu Jiren in *Xiayilou* extends restricted scope of human eyesight and observes what happens in the Zhan family through a use of the telescope. Resonating with Jiren's extended vision, *The Tempest* draws on Ariel's supernatural power to move across the space to extend Prospero's vision, thereby creating a narrative telescope through the agency of Ariel's sight. With a consideration of Zhang Dai's "Mid- September on West Lake" in *The Dream Recollections of Tao-an*, the essay further draws attention to the subject and object of sight and to the question—who sees whom, implying a paradoxical fact that a spectator is simultaneously sighted by another spectator. This overlap of the subject and object of vision complicates the scope of human sight by emphasizing the scope of the subject of vision.

An examination of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, *Xiayilou*, *The Tempest* and "Mid- September on West Lake" attempts to construct the relation among the scope of eyesight, geographical barriers and the subject of vision. With the help of a telescope, extended human vision is able to mediate geographical distance or per-existing boundaries. The character Ariel as a telescopic agency also enables the scope of a textual and political territory to expand, opening a psychological dimension associated with the notion of vision as well. Along with an extension of sight and an expansion of textural, political and psychological space, a gesture of looking into the distance also reject the singularity of spectator and complicates the spectator into a double position of observing and being observed at the same time. A web of spectators suggested by Zhang Dai's "Mid-September on West Lake" further invites readers to reexamine the trope of vision or the telescopic vision with a consideration of a concentric spectatorship and a hierarchy among spectator.

With regard to the notion of vision in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, in chapter 21 Ximen Qing stands behind the gate to steal a glance at Wu Yueniang after their previous quarrel: “于是潜身立于仪门内粉壁前，悄悄试听觑。只见小玉出来，穿廊下放桌儿。原来吴月娘，自从

西门庆与他反目不说话以来，每月吃斋三次。”¹ Ximen Qing sees what happens behind the gate or what happens in front of his eyes. He spies Xiaoyu coming out and placing a table under a covered corridor. Ximen Qing's spying on Wu Yueniang's place betrays his inner curiosity to learn about Yueniang's recent lives, and helps smoothly elicit a flashback narrative to add that Wu Yueniang decides to be on a vegetarian diet three times a month after her quarrel with Ximen Qing. As Ximen Qing furtively observes at Wu Yueniang's place, his secret glance simultaneously enables the readers to have access to spy on characters in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* across the book page, suggesting a double sense of voyeurism for both Ximen Qing and readers.

A representation of voyeurism interweaves with the motif of peeping and spying in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. For instance, in chapter 24, Song Huilian spies on Chen Jingji and Pan Jillian flirting with one another through the window—“看官听说，两个自知暗地里调情顽耍，却不知宋惠莲这老婆，又是一个儿在榻子外窗眼里。”² The pleasure of Song Huilian's peeping—“被他瞧了个不亦乐乎”³—indicates Song's immediate emotional response and further points out a parallel temporality between the spectator and those being spied on. Unlike Ximen Qing, female characters' peeping and spying constitute an essential part of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* to disclose secrets and surveil rivals. One's management to spy on others enables one to have more information about the household or to exert leverage on

¹ 兰陵笑笑生, 金瓶梅词话, pp. 235.

² 兰陵笑笑生, 金瓶梅词话, pp. 271.

³ 兰陵笑笑生, 金瓶梅词话, pp. 271.

those being peeped at, suggesting a triumphant narrative through the trope of vision. An action of sighting is essentially a physical action that records what one beholds in front of him and transfers that moment into his mind. Yet as an action of sighting is placed under a larger motif of peeping and spying, a female character often takes advantage of her physical proximity to acquire information through what she beholds, transforms visual information into bargaining chip in the household, and hence overpower other female characters. The notion of sight becomes associated with power dynamics with the Ximen household. A disclosure of secretive moments points to a principal representation of voyeurism in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Following characters' peeping and spying, readers are able to unveil secrets behind visible covers such as door and window and experience the pleasure of preying on other characters by peeping through book pages—不亦乐乎。

Since this sort of vision greatly relies on physical proximity to the situation, human eyesight fails in later seventeenth century literary texts when confronting an attempt to look into the distance, as evident in *Xiayilou*, *The Tempest*, and "Mid-September on West Lake." Sight and vision gradually break away from a dependance on physical proximity, but borrow the agency such as a telescope or a telescope-like character to fulfill an attempt to look far afield in the narration. In *Xiayilou* for instance, physical human eyesight subjects to geographical distance or pre-established barriers. Or in other words, Zhan Gong intentionally establishes several geographical boundaries in the Zhan household to prevent Xianxian from being caught sight of by outsiders. 夏宜楼

Given a conventional and serious attitude towards the relationship between men and women, Zhan Gong sets up a gender division in his household and demands that “家人所生之子，自十岁以上者就屏出二门之外。即有呼唤，也不许擅入中堂，只立在阶沿之下听候使令。”⁴ This strict regulation prevents Xianxian from getting in touch with males and inhibits males from physically getting close to females in the household. With a strict gender demarcation inside the Zhan family, it becomes even more difficult for an outsider like Qu Jiren to approach Xianxian or other females inside the Zhan family. In addition to the gender division, the architectural structure of Zhan family also produces geographical barriers. Given that *Xiayi Tower* is surrounded by water on three sides—“独有高楼一所，甚是空旷，三面皆水，”⁵ water creates a natural boundary of where Xianxian resides and excludes outsiders from entering in it. Since the tower is especially suitable for residing during the summer, if Xianxian spends most of her time inside the tower, it is quite improbable for even people inside the family to approach Xianxian. The limited accessibility produced by the architectural design of *Xiayi Tower* on the other hand serves as a foil to the necessity and intelligence of Jiren's use of a telescope. Moreover, with regard to the architectural design of the Zhan family, according to Jiren's speculation—“料想大户人家的房屋决不是瓦上开窗，墙角之中立门户的，定有雕栏曲榭，虚户明窗。近处虽有遮拦，远观料无障碍，”⁶ a wealthy family like the Zhan family must be surrounded by blocks such as doors, windows and railings in the vicinity. Geographical barriers produced by those blocks in the vicinity of the family suggest a self-protective style that rejects peeping and spying from the outside. Yet Jiren identifies the flaw of multi-layer boundaries surrounding Xianxian that there is no obstruction in his view from the distance.

These gender demarcations and geographical barriers manifest the father's protection for his daughter and indicates multi-layer boundaries surrounding Xianxian and the Zhan family. Multi-layer barriers reject the accessibility to physically approach the Zhan family and Xianxian or to observe what happens inside the Zhan household. It becomes quite improbable for Jiren to peep at Xianxian behind a door or a window as characters do in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. One cannot necessarily see what happens in front of him or one cannot see what he desires to see. *Xiayilou* shows the limitation of human eyesight and yet provides a use of a telescope as a solution to extend the scope of vision. A use of a telescope gives Jiren's eyes a pair of wings —“能使瞳人生翅”⁷ —to fly across the space and to observe things far afield as clearly as those right in front of the eyes—“至于十数里之中，千百步之外，取以观人鉴物，不但不觉其远，叫对面视着更觉分明。”⁸

⁴ 李渔, “夏宜楼,” 十二楼, pp. 76.

⁵ 李渔, “夏宜楼,” 十二楼, pp. 76.

⁶ 李渔, “夏宜楼,” 十二楼, pp. 85-86.

⁷ 李渔, “夏宜楼,” 十二楼, pp. 82.

⁸ 李渔, “夏宜楼,” 十二楼, pp. 83.

With a consideration of Jiren's family 瞿, the character consists of two eyes 目 as if implying that the telescope gives Jiren double eyesight or an extra vision—"都亏了一件东西替他做了眼目."⁹

Collapsible lenses of a telescope also enable Jiren to control the geographical distance in his hand. Following Jiren's telescopic vision, readers are able to actively experience a zoom-in or zoom-out representation of the story. A coexistence of a collapsible vision and a collapsible narrative gives the text of *Xiayilou* an elasticity to grow beyond the given scope. In addition to the elasticity of the text or a telescopic narrative, it is also worth noticing that besides Xianxian, Jiren draws on the telescope to look at various forms of writings, such as Xianxian's unfinished poem and the father's 疏文. These writings serve as evidence in the story either to prove Jiren's tele-inference or to convince Xianxian and her father the credibility of Jiren's words. Therefore, as a telescopic vision unveils various forms of writings, it also directs to a textural space behind writings that help fabricate a web of testimony in the story.

Just as a telescope gives Jiren an extra vision to look across geographical distance and pre-setup barriers, so in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a spirit of air Ariel gives Prospero an extra vision to look into the distance. The trope of vision draws on Ariel's supernatural potency to create a magical vision that extends Prospero's vision and expands his political tele-control. Ariel serves as Prospero's visual surrogate to observe everything far afield for him, and as a representative for Prospero to conduct well-round political surveillance for Caliban, Ferdinand, Sebastian, Gonzalo, Alonso and Miranda across a geographical gap. Prospero's extension of vision enables him to see what he is supposedly unable to see, and helps fulfill his intention of political expansion. Or in other words, Prospero's telescopic vision fulfilled by Ariel can be transformed into a foresight that helps govern his political decisions. Ariel's movability back and forth from Prospero resembles the collapsible lenses of a telescope to mediate geographical shifts within the play and to invite readers' participation into Ariel's movements. Although there is no direct use of a telescope in *The Tempest* as Qu Jiren's use in *Xiayilou*, the spirit Ariel serves as a telescope-like character to help Prospero perform a similar attempt to look into the distance, opening a political and psychological dimension behind the trope of vision.

In Act II of *The Tempest*, Ariel first enters the scene playing "solemn music" to hypnotize everyone except Sebastian and Gonzalo. When Alonso and Sebastian take out their sword to engage in a duel, Ariel enters the scene in an invisible form again "with music and song"¹⁰ and speaks to Gonzalo:

My master through his art foresees the danger
That you, his friend, are in, and sends me forth
(For else his project dies) to keep them living.¹¹

Although Prospero does not show up in person in this scene, Ariel's opening line—"My master through his art foresees the danger"—immediately reminds readers of Prospero's existence, magic power and ability to see things that will happen in the future. His foresight enables him to identify potential danger beforehand and prepares himself for a more comprehensive political revenge afterwards. This association between a political power and a sense of vision resonates with an involvement of power dynamics in female characters' peeping and spying in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Ariel catches sight of the situation for its master as if their eyesight is interchangeable and synchronized. Ariel as a visual surrogate transfers its vision to Prospero in spite of geographical distance as if Prospero is able to look at far afield through his telescope—Ariel. Obeying Prospero's instructions to "keep them alive," Ariel enters the scene to implement Prospero's command and to prevent Gonzalo from getting injured in the duel. The phrases "sends me forth" suggest that Ariel serves as an agent for Prospero to conduct his political surveillance. Ariel's movement across the space extends the scope of Prospero's eyesight, expands his political territory and expands the geographical scope of a theatrical narrative. Therefore, in *The Tempest*, in addition to the extended scope of human eyesight, the magic vision fulfilled through the invention of a visual surrogate Ariel is closely associated with political power and an inclination to foresee what will happen in the future.

Although Prospero's association with supernatural potency and political powers is manifested through the trope of vision, it is yet also noticeable that he forgoes his magical potency at the end of the play by stating "But this rough magic I here abjure."¹² Setting Ariel free, Prospero also loses the agency of his telescopic vision and his political tele-control. How should we understand Prospero's loss/renunciation of a telescopic vision?

⁹ 李渔, "夏宜楼," 十二楼, pp. 81.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. (Signet Classics, 1998), pp. 39.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. (Signet Classics, 1998), pp. 39.

¹² William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. (Signet Classics, 1998), pp. 76.

Continuing his pursuit for a political expansion, Prospero does not feel accomplished and satisfied after achieving everything as he has plotted. After Miranda marries Ferdinand, Prospero sets Ariel free and forgives Alonso, Antonin and Sebastian. When proclaiming that “I have lost my daughter”¹³ after Miranda’s marriage, he betrays his sorrow of the irretrievable loss and a belated regret for his daughter. Although a telescopic vision brings him supernatural potency, politic power and information for plotting, Prospero sees through the magic dimension of the world and points out the vanity of over-plotting and of a desire for power, aspiring for an eventual state of self-realization. As in the Epilogue, he proclaims that:

Now my charms are o’erthrown,
And what strength I have’s mine own.
Which is most faint.¹⁴

Prospero’s obsession with supernatural potency—a magic vision—manifests his indulgence in political plotting and psychological manipulation, which turns out to be of no great significance —“most faint” for Prospero in the end. His gesture of abandoning his magic vision and returning back to the original physical eyesight reveals the counteractive effect of over-powerful vision and a psychological process of self-reflection. A degradation of Prospero’s magic vision to human eyesight corresponds essentially corresponds with his gesture of foregoing supernatural potency and political ambition, suggesting an inclination to return to the original/simple state. A loss of a telescopic vision becomes part of Prospero’s psychological self-reflection to break away from a material agency.

In both *Xiayilou* and *The Tempest*, we encounter Qu Jiren’s and Prospero’s attempts to look into the distance. A telescopic vision is fulfilled either by a use of a telescope or by a telescope-like character. Not only can a telescopic vision go across pre-established barriers and geographical distance, but also opens extra visual space, textual space and political space in the texts. Prospero’s abandonment of a telescopic vision in the ending of *The Tempest* draws attention to a psychological change and a self-reflection behind a visual degradation. Yet not only with regards to gender, geographical and architectural boundaries, the essential boundary that distinguishes a spectator also matters in a gesture of looking into the distance. As evident in Zhang Dai’s “Mid-September on West Lake” in *The Dream Recollections of Tao-an*, a spectator is able to perform double identities as a spectator and a person being observed at the same time. This double/liminal identity rejects the singularity of the subject of sight and vision and suggests that a telescopic vision is also able to break the limitation of the subject of sight.

Centering on a group of people appreciating the moon, Zhang Dai categorizes and summarizes these spectators into “five kinds of looking.”¹⁵ in “Mid-September on West Lake.” In particular, he describes the third kind of looking as following:

They are also right under the moon, and they do look at the moon, but want others to look at them look at the moon 亦在月下，亦看月，而欲人看其看月者，看之。¹⁶

This sort of spectators on one hand appreciates the moon by observing it, but on the other hand aspires a gaze from others. They look into the distance to enjoy the scenery and become part of the scenery of those who look at them from the distance. A simultaneous state of being the subject and object of sight—both as a spectator and as part of a scene that belongs to outer-layer spectators—produces a multi-layer looking as well as a concentric spectatorship with one external loop containing another inner one. This concentric spectatorship extends aforementioned telescopic vision from a one-way sight into a web of sight, rejecting a singular categorization of each spectator. That being said, in the case of Ximen Qing, Song Huilian and Qu Jiren, not only can they peep at others, but also they might, unwittingly or not, be peeped by other people or by us readers. Prospero draws on Ariel to keep watch on others from the distance, but he might also be part of other’s political surveillance. This invisible/imagined other reinforces a sense of voyeurism in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and *Xiayilou*, and opens another political time and space in *The Tempest*.

Besides a reflection on who can be the subject of vision, “Mid-September on West Lake” offers insights for readers to reconsider the notion of vision and sight in previous texts. The vision of the fourth kind of spectators includes the moon, those not looking at the moon and those not looking at the moon, incorporating

¹³ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. (Signet Classics, 1998), pp. 80.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. (Signet Classics, 1998), pp. 87.

¹⁵ Zhang Dai, *The Dream Recollections of Tao-an* (selections), in Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 816.

¹⁶ Zhang Dai, *The Dream Recollections of Tao-an* (selections), in Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 816-817.

the first three kinds of spectators as well as the scene they are looking at. Since spectators of the outer layer catch sight of more scenes, including the spectators of inner layers, than inner spectators, there is a hierarchy within the concentric spectatorship that is measured by who beholds more things than others. This hierarchy of spectators echoes with scenes of peeping and spying in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. As Pan Jinlian supposes that she avoids others' sight to flirt with Chen Jingji, Song Huilian spies on her and enjoys spying on her behind the window. Song Huilian, a spectator of the outer layer, prevails over Pan Jinlian at the advantage of Pan Jinlian's unawareness and discovers secrets that can become her bargaining chips. Also with a consideration of Qu Jiren and Prospero, those spectators of the outer layer, or at a higher position in the web of spectators, often share a sense of pleasure that betrays their inner triumph at taking advantage of others' unwittingness, suggesting an unequal psychological state between different hierarchical spectators.

The last kind of spectator turns out to be Zhang Dai, the author of "Mid-September on West Lake." To comment on other spectators, Zhang Dai intentionally hides himself to look at the moon and aforementioned four sorts of spectators. In the beginning of the essay, he writes that:

There is nothing at all to look at on West Lake in mid-September but people looking at the mid-September moon 西湖七月半，一无可看，止可看七月半之人。¹⁷

Zhang Dai positions himself at the highest level of the hierarchy as he watches the scenery of West Lake and documents all people looking at the mid-September moon in the short essay. His gesture of observing a microcosm in his essay also transforms into a reader at the same time. His simultaneous state of being a reader and a spectator intertwines a practice of reading with a practice of looking.

From *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, to *Xiayilou*, to *The Tempest*, and to "Mid-September on West Lake," we trace various representations of sight and vision in literary texts. A principal motif of peeping and spying in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* centers on normal human eyesight and physical proximity to portray a sense of voyeurism. As geographical distance intrudes in literary texts, human eyesight fails to behold what happens beyond the visual scope. Later seventeenth century texts mainly focus on a depiction of an attempt to look into the distance and explore extra spatial, political and psychological implications behind a trope of vision or behind an extra vision given by the telescope. Physical proximity subjects to an adoption of agencies such as a telescope or a narrative telescope to mediate geographical barriers.

In *Xiayilou*, Qu Jiren makes use of a telescope to go across geographical distance and pre-established barriers to observe Xianxian from the distance. In *The Tempest*, Prospero relies on the movability of Ariel to conduct political surveillance in the distance. Ariel as a visual surrogate enables its master Prospero to see what he supposedly cannot see and gives him a political foresight for future decision. Besides a visual independence from physical proximity, Zhang Dai's "Mid-September on West Lake" even draws on geographical distance to distinguish each sort of spectators and to prevent communication between each category. With a consideration Zhang Dai's simultaneous position as a spectator and a reader, "Mid-September on West Lake" inspires readers to actively incorporate a gesture of peeping at the texts into the reading practice. A coexistence of readers' sight and characters' sight produces a double sense of voyeurism.

A use of a telescope or a telescope-like character enables Qu Jiren and Prospero to look into the distance. This telescopic vision extends the scope of human eyesight, of political control and of psychological manifestation. A spectator's double identity suggested by "Mid-September on West Lake" also extends the scope of the subject of vision. These adjustable scopes produced by the extension of vision points to an elasticity of the literary text to grow beyond the given scope. Or in other words, the elasticity of the literary texts performs as the collapsible lenses of a telescope to render a zoom-in or zoom-out representation of the literal microcosm within the textual space. The collapsible narrative becomes a narrative telescope to change the distance between readers and texts, and further enables readers to across the boundary—book pages—in front of their eyes to enter the textual space.

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¹⁷ Zhang Dai, *The Dream Recollections of Tao-an (selections)*, in Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 816.