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Analysing narrative reliability and the representation of madness in *Hamlet* and *The Diary of a Madman*

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Abstract. This paper addresses four core research questions: How do Shakespeare and Lu Xun employ unreliable narration? Why the characters' madness are reliable? What is the relationship between madness and the society? How do the unreliable narrators revealing truth–function as social critique? To answer these questions, the research employs an integrated theoretical framework, adopting Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* for historical power analysis, Booth's unreliable narration theory for rhetorical strategy examination, and Margolin's narrative reliability model for analyzing the contest. These three theories complete each other and make a complete approach to connect readers and the contests. In fact, Shakespeare and Lu Xun both use unreliable narration to break through the traditional thoughts about literature works, everything the author mentions should be the truth, and express social truths that were hard to face directly with rational language. Hamlet's feigned madness in *Hamlet* and the Madman's delusions in *The Diary of a Madman*—though factually untrustworthy on the surface—prove profoundly credible channels for social criticism. This study illustrates how madness narratives help readers to understand social criticism and enhance the text's ideological impact. It is that the characters' words are not reliable in the surface pushes readers to think about the deeper meanings with the contests, to find the authors' social criticism by themselves.

Keywords: unreliable narration, madness, narrative strategy, *Hamlet*, *The Diary of a Madman*

1. Introduction

This paper takes William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Lu Xun's *The Diary of a Madman* as the research objects to explore how the unreliability makes value in literature works. The research will focus on a core question: Why a reliable narrator, such as the madman, his words are reliable for the readers and telling the truth?

To address this question, this paper will use adopt Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, Booth's unreliable narration theory, and Margolin's narrative reliability model.

Through this research path, this paper aims to prove that although *Hamlet* and *The Diary of a Madman* were created in different cultural and historical contexts, they both demonstrate how literature, through elaborately constructed unreliable narration, transforms the marginalized experience of madness into a profound diagnosis of the times, thereby challenging our inherent perceptions of "reason" and "madness".

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2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Defining about unreliable narrator

2.1.1. Rhetoric of Fiction

This article uses concepts of standard style of narration from Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* to analyze *Hamlet* and *The Diary of the Madman*. *Rhetoric of Fiction* opposes the traditional view that the author should retreat, and proposes a new narrator: the implied narrator. The implied narrator can be understood as a guide created by the author to tell us the story, and may hold different views from the author. At the same time, whether the narration of the implied narrator is reliable can divide the narrator into reliable narrator and unreliable narrator.

Unreliable narration, as the term suggests, means that when the narrator has cognitive deviations during narration process in the three dimensions. To be specific: 1. Event dimension—Factual errors or insufficient information; 2. Judgment dimension—Misjudgment of value or insufficient evaluation; 3. Perception dimension—Comprehension errors or incomplete interpretation.

2.2. Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

This dissertation employs Uri Margolin's conceptualization of unreliability as articulated in his seminal work "*Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*". Central to this theoretical framework are two foundational principles that significantly inform my analytical approach. First, Margolin contends that unreliability should not be construed as an inherent attribute of a textual object, but rather as a derived evaluative judgment based on its perceivable characteristics—essentially representing an assessment of inconsistencies manifest at the factual level of narration. Second, and perhaps more crucially, he challenges the conventional binary understanding of narrative reliability, proposing instead a more nuanced spectrum of narrative deviation that encompasses various forms of informational omission and deliberate deceptive guidance.

Uri Margolin's definition of unreliability framework transforms the abstract concept of "unreliability" into a vivid tool. It means that when we judge whether a narrative is reliable, we should systematically examine: the narrator's ability and intention, the normalization of the narrative process, and the internal connection of the text.

Narrative, as "purposeful communication", can have its unreliability decomposed into three interrelated yet independent dimensions, thereby forming the "Analytical Framework for Narrative Reliability": 1. Narrator; 2. Narrative Process; 3. Narrative Text.

2.3. Theoretical integration of unreliable narration theories

The theory of "unreliable narration" proposed by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* will be one of the theories used in this paper. The theory proposes that unreliability in narration arises when the narrator's Event, Judgment or Perception dimension deviates from the value of implied author. And this paper will apply Booth's unreliable narration to analyze *Hamlet* and *The Diary of a Madman*.

Building on Booth's theory, Margolin proposed a more refined analytical framework for narrative reliability. He divided the sources of unreliable narration into three dimensions: the narrator, producer; the narrative, process; and the narrative text, product. The framework suggests that unreliability in narration may stem from: The narrator's defective competence or biased intentions (e.g., the cognitive limitations of a madman or Hamlet's deliberate pretense).

3. Research review

3.1. Political and historical context on the texts

This section will explore the social and political backgrounds during the creation periods of *Hamlet* and *The Diary of a Madman* these two books, and the perceptions towards madness. We will reveal the historical context behind the depictions of "madness" in the two works.

3.1.1. Political context of Hamlet

The political upheavals in Elizabethan England provided a realistic reference for the creation of *Hamlet*. Studies have pointed out that the plot of regicide and usurpation in *Hamlet* implicitly alludes to the crisis of legitimacy regarding the succession to the throne during the Elizabethan era [1]. The plot in the play where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as the king's spies, monitor Hamlet reflects the interest-dependent relationship between the royal power and officials at that time, highlighting the hypocrisy and danger of the court [2]. Hamlet's questioning of the legitimacy of the throne is precisely a reflection of the political anxiety of the times [1].

3.1.2. Political context The Diary of a Madman

The Diary of a Madman was created during a critical period of social transformation in China. And feudal ethics still constrained human nature. The plots in *The Diary of a Madman*, "villagers eating people" and "the elder brother eating the younger sister", reflects the social issues [3]. Meanwhile, the plot where "the younger sister was eaten" but remained unnamed implicitly metaphorizes the fate of women as "sacrifices" under the feudal system [4].

The New Culture Movement advocated the "White Language Revolution" and "Democracy and Science". The article mentioned that Lu Xun adopted the form of "classical Chinese preface + vernacular diary", which is a rebellion against feudal classical Chinese literature [3]. Women had low social status in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China and were regarded as "appendages". This corresponds to the plot in *The Diary of a Madman*, the madman mentions that "the younger sister is eaten" but the sister has no name or even right to speak, metaphorically implying the fate of women as "sacrifices" under the feudal system [4].

3.1.3. Tracing the history of how humanity perceived madness

In this section, we will look at how Michel Foucault traces madness as perceived by humanity in his book, *Madness and Civilization* [5].

According to Michel Foucault's research in *Madness and Civilization*, during the Middle Ages, the mentally ill were often exiled on "ships of fools", a symbol of society's rejection and purification of irrationality. Until the 17th and 18th centuries, with the advent of the Age of Great Confinement, madness began to be regarded as a moral flaw that required isolation and management. During 18th and 19th centuries, the birth of modern psychiatry was not a purely progressive development on the surface; instead, it replaced brutal physical confinement with a more subtle and "scientific" form of moral discipline. Since then, the voices of the insane have been systematically listened to, categorized, interpreted, and negated by "experts", and the insane themselves have been deprived of their right to speak. The structural changes in asylums from the late 18th to the early 19th century—where the insane were incarcerated together with the poor and vagrants and subjected to endless labor—reveal how society, through "gaze", "judgment", and "humiliation", compelled patients to discipline themselves, acknowledge their own "sins" and "abnormalities", and thus become "normal".

Their "madness" isn't just seen as a sign of illness; rather, it exposes and challenges the dominant rationality of their worlds—the deceptive rationality of the Danish court or the destructive logic of China's

feudal ethics.

3.2. What is madness in *Hamlet*

After examining the Political and historical context of the texts, this section will further explore the essence of "madness" in *Hamlet*. Existing studies mainly interpret Hamlet's madness from two dimensions: as survival strategy to cope with political crises [6], and the medical concepts represented by the "humoral theory" in the Elizabethan era [5].

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet's madness is direct. He hides his rational part in his inner world and uses illogical words to avoid reality and protect himself. From the play-within-a-play to using Ophelia to complete his revenge, his seemingly crazy behaviors and words imply wisdom [6]. Also, during the Elizabethan era, people used "humeral theory" to explain madness. For instance, an excess of black bile led to melancholy. Therefore, Hamlet's madness arises from both physical effects and psychological factors, becoming a reflection of the medical cognition of that era [5]. What is worth in-depth discussion is that the academic research on the narrative function of Hamlet's madness is still insufficient, especially how it achieves the purpose of social criticism through "unreliable narration". This research gap is exactly the focus that this section attempts to fill.

3.3. A review of madness in *The Diary of a Madman*

Following the previous discussion on the narrative of madness in *Hamlet*, we will turn to the writing of madness with stronger social criticism in *The Diary of a Madman*. Existing studies mainly unfold from three dimensions: the interpretation of madness from multiple perspectives [5, 7], the differentiated symbolic system [8, 9], and the in-depth connotation of violent discourse [10]. These studies collectively reveal how the madness of the madman is elevated from an individual illness to a social diagnosis, yet the exploration of its narrative reliability mechanism remains insufficient—and this also constitutes an important entry point of this paper.

3.3.1. Madness from different perspectives

Xinran [7], through the theory of narrative focalization, reveals that the madness of the madman is not only an expression of individual psychopathology but also a metaphor for the collective social malaise; Foucault [5], from the perspective of discourse of power, explains the in-depth mechanism behind his social marginalization. *The Diary of a Madman* uses the transition of sights to reflect the madman's madness. The madman leads readers to examine the society from different perspectives from both experiential and observational angles. In the opening sentence of the diaries, "The moon is bright tonight", the narrator and character madman brings the reader in situ by using the deictic words 'the', 'is' and 'tonight'. It enables readers to experience from the first perspective of the madman. Readers can directly feel the trauma and unease implied in the madman's fragmented language. "When he was teaching me history as a boy, he once told me people could "exchange sons to eat" in times of scarcity" switches from the first-person experience to memory.

The Diary of a Madman is a first-person narrative work, but it gives readers a new experience to watch what happened in the past from a bystander's perspective. The madman separates himself from the characters in the story, denies his past self, thinking that the teenager who was instilled with the concept of cannibalism by his elder brother when he was a child is a different person from himself. This reflects his persecutory delusion, a core symptom of paranoid schizophrenia [7].

3.3.2. Different symbols of madness

This section explores the rich symbolic meanings contained in the madness of the madman. The "opposition model between the patient and the masses" proposed by Brian and San [8] reveals the madman's symbolic status as a social diagnostician; Odinaka [9], on the other hand, conducts an in-depth analysis of the multiple

connotations of the "cannibalism" symbol in the dimension of cultural criticism. The madman is not truly crazy; he is a sober thinker. He observes the surrounding things and people's behaviors and seeks answers in historical books with his own doubts. In a numb society, it is precisely his act of daring to question traditions that labels him as crazy. Because he is different, people exclude him and marginalize him [9].

The madman's lunacy is a form of protection for himself. In his criticism of the Confucian feudal "cannibalistic" ethics, his lunacy is rather a kind of sobriety in a chaotic world. However, because no one understands him, he is defined as a madman and excluded. The madman realizes that his life has been shrouded in the fear of "cannibalism", or rather, the entire society has. From the younger sister being eaten to the history books filled with accounts of cannibalism, feudal ethics have eroded the thoughts of everyone in society, from the family to women and beyond [8]. Brian and San put forward a profound dialectical viewpoint, arguing that the madness of the "madman" is both a form of "self-protection" and "a state of sobriety in a chaotic world". They further point out that feudal ethics have eroded the minds of every individual in society. This systematic critique is fully evidenced in the text: when the madman's elder brother and the doctor examine him in a seemingly normal manner, he can perceive from their eyes that "every word is poisoned, every smile hides a knife" [11] (core textual quotation). This perception materializes the intangible moral oppression in daily life (analysis). This is clear proof that the "cannibalism" of feudal ethics lies not in physical harm but in spiritual destruction—it makes the victims regard oppression as care and the perpetrators unaware of their own atrocities. Therefore, Brian and San's argument strongly demonstrates that the madman's delusions construct a unique discourse system, which relentlessly tears off the mask of societal warmth.

3.3.3. Meanings behind the bloody words

On the surface, *The Diary of a Madman* tells the story of a madman with persecutory delusions who believes that everyone around him is "eating people" and wants to eat him. The use of the bloody and extreme word "eating people" reveals his fear. His seemingly crazy language, however, shows the numbness and oppression of society: everyone uses and deceives each other for their own interests to the extent of "eating people", yet people numb themselves with the excuse of "It has always been like this". Ironically, people have internally been assimilated by this "cannibalistic" society and have lost their ability to think [10].

3.4. The unreliable narration

The author Nünning V demonstrates Margolin's theoretical framework of unreliable narration in two parts: Theoretical dimensions focus on: "semantic consistency of narrative products" and "cognitive ability of narrative producers".

3.5. Women representations or lack of representation in the texts

As Olivas mentions that "Tragic ending of Ophelia in *Hamlet* to two factors: the objectification of women in a patriarchal society and their subjectivity in madness"[12]. Under patriarchal control, Ophelia is merely a tool and property of men: the expectations and restrictions imposed by her brother Laertes, Hamlet's erratic attitude toward her. For Hamlet, Ophelia is merely an outlet for his emotions. He channels his anger toward his mother's remarriage into verbal barbs against Ophelia, ignores his former lover's greetings, and even pushes her away. Hamlet initially symbolized Ophelia as the representation of love but later uses her as a tool in his revenge against Claudius, exploiting her to confirm his own madness and divert Claudius's attention. Ultimately, Ophelia is nothing but a victim of the court struggles. In the face of Hamlet's violent words: "Marry a fool" and her father's surveillance, Ophelia is powerless. She can only pretend to meet people's expectations. Ophelia's madness results from her father's murder, her abandonment by Hamlet, and her

hopelessness. Her madness is more about the sorrow of being helpless, and even her confusion about herself [6].

3.6. Key ideas from the literature review

As a reflection of power struggles, the Danish court reflects the rigidity of royal succession in the late Renaissance. Hamlet's "madness" reveals the moral collapse beneath the superficial order of the court. The metaphor of "cannibalism" in Lu Xun's works directly points to the difference of feudal ethics and the old system. The madman's persecution mania is not merely a pathological symptom, but a weapon to criticize the feudal thoughts.

Hamlet's madness is a mask of silence. His madness serves as a disguised political tool, used to protect himself in the corrupt court and expose the truth. Meanwhile, this also reflects his profound spiritual crisis as a humanist after the disillusionment of his ideals. The madman's madness is irony in an apathetic society. On the surface, his madness appears to be persecutor delusion; in reality, the madman's language, though seemingly illogical and extreme, is precisely the sharpest accusation against the collective apathy and hypocrisy of society. Because of the limited scholarship on unreliable narration in the present texts, my finding and discussion section will advance this line of inquiry.

4. Discussion

4.1. Madness in *Hamlet*

4.1.1. Hamlet's madness: strategy, philosophy, and internal division

According to Foucault's interpretation of melancholia in *Madness and Civilization*, Hamlet's madness exhibits typical symptoms of melancholia. The sudden death of his father, Claudius' usurpation of the throne, and his mother's hasty remarriage—this series of blows filled his heart with grief and indignation, leading to "stagnation of vital energy and blood" (confusion of thought). This physiological tendency toward melancholy directly affected his subsequent actions—when he witnessed Claudius praying in front of his father's tomb, he hesitated due to melancholy and missed the opportunity to take revenge [5].

Hamlet's madness possesses a dual nature: it is both a self-protective strategy under the oppression of power and an outlet for him to express his inner confusion and loneliness. As the Prince of Denmark, he was under surveillance and constrained by religious beliefs, unable to commit suicide. When his beautiful inner world collapsed, madness became the only way for him to vent his confusion and loneliness.

In terms of narrative reliability, Hamlet exhibits a complex state of fragmentation.

Hamlet:"As I perchance hereafter shall think meet.

To put an antic disposition on" (Act 1, Scene 5).

These words mark his conscious adoption of the identity of an unreliable narrator. However, his "feigned madness" soon transcends the mere scope of a strategy: after the ghost appears, he forces Horatio and others to take oaths in constantly changing locations, and uses frivolous addresses such as "old mole" when calling out to the ghost underground. These neurotic and compulsive behaviors indicate that his psyche has fallen into a borderline state between reality and performance.It shows the huge shock his inner self has suffered, making him unable to calm down and leading to his loss of control over his actions.

Hamlet's address to the Ghost beneath the ground suddenly changes from the solemn "perturbèd spirit" to the extremely casual "old mole". This unreliability reaches its peak in his treatment of Ophelia: he first denies his love, saying:

"I did love you once" (Act 3, Scene 1)

and later proclaims in the graveyard:

"I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers.

Could not, with all their quantity of love.

Make up my sum." (Act 5, Scene 1)

This extreme contradiction reveals the fundamental fragmentation in *Hamlet*'s narration: his soliloquies reliably convey philosophical thoughts to the audience, while his external words and deeds exhibit a highly unreliable consistency break.

4.1.2. Ophelia's madness: repression, trauma, and silent accusation

The cause of Ophelia's drowning was her broken fantasy world, as fragile as bubbles in water, which made her indifferent to her surroundings. She might also have had a melancholic tendency. Under the long-term oppression of patriarchy from her father, she had become filled with fear and sorrow, yet she never showed it. Until the death of her father, Polonius, the fear and despair in her heart were ignited, leaving her feeling cold and heavy as if isolated from the world. However, it was precisely madness that endowed her with the freedom to speak. Her act of distributing flowers—rosemary (for remembrance), pansies (for thought), rue (for remorse)—constituted a sophisticated system of symbolic accusation. Her ballads and eventual drowning thus became a dual metaphor: they were both the demise of the body and the final emergence of the suppressed truth. Through the transformation from being forced into silence to speaking through madness, Ophelia accomplished the most powerful accusation of the patriarchal society by an individual.

4.2. Madness in *The Diary of a Madman*

In sharp contrast to Hamlet's melancholia, the madman in *The Diary of a Madman* exhibits typical symptoms of mania. His mind is overly active, leading to "boiling" emotions and excessive speculation about things (believing that everyone around him wants to harm him), and this high degree of mental tension eventually develops into persecutory delusions. This loss of control makes his behavior bold and restless. For instance, when his elder brother invites a doctor to treat him, he bursts into loud laughter; his overly active mind even interprets the fear of his elder brother and the doctor as evidence of their malicious intentions [4].

In terms of narrative reliability, the madman's insanity renders him completely unreliable as a narrator on the factual dimension. He firmly believes:

"Why did that Zhao family's dog look at me twice?" (From The Diary of a Madman the third diary.)

And he misinterprets the doctor's advice "Hurry and eat it" as "Hurry and eat me", further drawing the delusional conclusion that "The one who is in cahoots to eat me is my elder brother". This kind of narration based on delusional association is completely unreliable on the factual level, presenting the image of a narrator with severely impaired cognitive ability. However, it is precisely this unreliability on the factual dimension that conversely achieves profound reliability on the value dimension. When the madman opens the pages of history and *"sees words between the lines—every page is filled with two characters: 'cannibalism'" (From The Diary of a Madman the eighth diary)*, his delusion has been elevated to a prophetic diagnosis of the essence of society. By creating a thoroughly unreliable narrator, Lu Xun realizes the most reliable and ultimate accusation against feudal ethics. The more frantically the madman clings to his delusion of "cannibalism", the more clearly he reflects the cruel essence of the society governed by ethical codes.

This "reliability within unreliability" constitutes the most profound narrative paradox in *The Diary of a Madman*. The madman's persecutory delusions make him a madman in the medical sense, yet at the same time make him have a clear mind in the social sense. Through this extreme narrative strategy, Lu Xun enables a madman defined as "unreliable" by society to speak the most reliable and terrifying truth about that era.

4.3. The paradox of madness: illusion and truth

By playing the role of an unreliable narrator, Hamlet is able to use mad words as a cover to reveal the false truth of the court. Similarly, Ophelia's act of distributing flowers after descending into madness seems like a meaningless crazy behaves on the surface, but in reality, it completes a sophisticated symbolic accusation: she uses rosemary (for remembrance) and violets (for loyalty) to imply that the old king has been forgotten and loyalty has long since vanished. Her madness breaks the restrictions on women's speech imposed by social norms, allowing her to pierce through the false decency that everyone deliberately maintains with "childlike candor".

In *The Diary of a Madman*, Lu xun pushes this paradox to the extreme. He firmly believes that *"My younger sister was eaten by my elder brother"*—this is undoubtedly a delusion on the factual level, but on the value level, it accurately diagnoses the essence of "cannibalism" in feudal ethics. When all the villagers regard his words as madness, it precisely proves that this society has normalized the atrocity of "cannibalism". His final cry *"Save the children..."* seems to be the ravings of a madman on the surface, but in reality, it is a prophetic warning that completes the ultimate criticism of the decayed society [4].

The way society treats madness in both works perfectly confirms the power operation mechanism described by Foucault. As Foucault mentioned that *"In the late Middle Ages, people, relying on what they considered reason, expelled those whose behaviors violated common sense in order to purify their living space"* [5]. In *Hamlet*, Claudius sees Hamlet as a "dangerous person" and finally decides to send him to England to have him killed by others; in *The Diary of a Madman*, the villagers regard the Madman as an outsider, and his family locks him up at home for isolation. Therefore, the madness of Hamlet and the Madman constitutes a profound narrative paradox: their unreliability on the factual level precisely achieves ultimate reliability on the value level; they are defined as madmen by society, yet they thus gain a unique perspective to expose the crazy essence of society. Through this strategy, Shakespeare and Lu Xun make the "madmen" in their works become sober socialize: they used words to express the unwillingness and clarity in their hearts.

4.4. Societal action and discipline of madness

Foucault pointed out that *"The change in the structure of asylums from the late 18th century to the early 19th century was only intended to make patients discipline themselves through 'gaze,' 'trial,' and 'humiliation,' admit their 'sins' and 'abnormality,' and thus become 'normal'"* [5].

This was also the case in *The Diary of a Madman*: society forced the madman to stop his "insane behaviors". The madman was the only sober person, yet he was lonely. He tried to change his elder brother's mind and make him stop "eating people", but under the long-term influence of feudal ethics, people's minds had already become numb. Therefore, they regarded the madman as insane and unethical, isolated him (including his elder brother finding a doctor to treat him), and all of them, starting from their own sense of rationality, simply tried to correct the madman's abnormality, make him admit his "mistakes", and finally "recover" and be assimilated.

4.5. Analysis of narrative (un)reliability

4.5.1. The Diary of a Madman

In Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric Of Fiction*, he suggests: *"Unreliable narration, as the term suggests, means that when the narrator has cognitive deviations during narration process in the three dimensions: Event dimension, Judgment dimension and Perception dimension.* During Lu Xun's *The Diary of a Madman*, the narrations follows time order and logic, for example, the event of "the madman's elder brother inviting a

doctor for him". The elder brother brings the doctor back home, the doctor enters to take his pulse, and prescribes medicine, while the madman laughs out. Therefore, the event chain is complete. However, the madman thinks that the elder brother brings the doctor to eat his meat together with the doctor. The doctor takes his pulse to check whether he is fat enough for eating, and the prescription is full of references to eating people. As a result, the madman's perspective is fundamentally flawed due to his paranoid delusions, he believes that everyone is plotting against him, so he misunderstands his elder brother and doctor's kindness as malice [4]. This demonstrates errors in the judgment dimension [4]. Although the view about 'eat people' comes from delusion, it exposes the essence of Confucian rituals. What's more, the madman uses allusions like "Yi ya steaming his son" to support his view. His perception dimension is accurate [4].

4.5.1.1. Madman

From Margolin's definition of unreliable narration from three parts and NünningV's supporting evidences, I think the unreliable narration in *The Diary of a Madman* could be divided from the following parts:

(1) Unreliability of the Narrator:

The madman himself suffers from persecutory delusion, and his starting point for perceiving the world is inherently distorted. The intent behind his diary-writing is also ambiguous: is what he writes merely deceptive and misleading words, or an expression of grief, indignation and helplessness toward reality?

(2) Unreliability of the Narrative Process

The diary is mainly filled with the recorder's subjective thoughts, and the madman's idiosyncratic thinking directly renders his diary obscure and hard to understand. Meanwhile, the author states in the introduction that the madman has long since recovered, which conflicts with the madman's inner struggle depicted in the main text.

(3) Unreliability of the Narrative Text:

Examples include records such as *"My elder brother and the doctor are plotting to eat me"* and *"The Zhao family's dog stared at me twice".* These records, which contradict the facts, clearly incorporate the madman's own overinterpretations.

The madman's analytical ability is flawed: he holds paranoid thoughts.

"However, I must be extremely careful. Otherwise, why did the Zhao family's dog look at me twice? I have good reason to be afraid" (From The Diary of a Madman the first diary).

Yet precisely because of his madness, he satirizes the seemingly "normal" society. From the numerous stories of cannibalism the madman finds in history books, it is revealed that people, driven by their notions of "righteousness" and "loyalty" and influenced by the social ideology of hierarchy, numbly comply with a cannibalistic society.

The madman is insane—he cannot distinguish the kindness of those around him and lives in paranoid fear; yet the madman is also sober—he dares to use words to expose the problems of old moral codes.

4.5.1.2. Madman's sister

I remember when I was four or five years old, sitting in the main hall to enjoy the cool air. My elder brother said that if parents were ill, a son must cut off a piece of his flesh, boil it, and offer it to them to eat—only then could he be considered a good person; mother didn't say it was not allowed either. If a piece could be eaten, naturally the whole person could be eaten too. But when I think of how she cried that day, it still makes my heart ache. It's truly an extraordinary thing!

My younger sister was eaten by my elder brother. Whether mother knew about it or not, I can't tell.

I think mother must have known; but when she cried, she didn't explain. Probably she also thought it was the right thing to do (From The Diary of a Madman the eleventh diary).

Unreliability in the Factual Dimension (Competence Deficit): The madman leaps directly from the ancient custom of "cutting flesh to cure a parent" to the specific accusation that "my younger sister was eaten by my elder brother". Phrases like "mother didn't say it was not allowed either" and "I think mother must have known... Probably she also thought it was the right thing to do" are entirely his personal speculations and delusional associations, with no factual evidence whatsoever. This reveals his cognitively distorted ability due to mental illness, making the narration highly unreliable in this dimension.

Reliability in the Value Dimension (Profound Insight): Nevertheless, this passage profoundly exposes the operational mechanism of feudal ethics. "Mother didn't say it was not allowed either" symbolizes the silent complicity and connivance of old ethics. "Probably she also thought it was the right thing to do" further reveals how ethics were internalized as an individual's moral code, making the victim believe that sacrifice was "reasonable". Here, "cannibalism" has transcended the physical level and risen to the level of conceptual and institutional erosion, and its criticism is extraordinarily reliable.

4.5.2. Unreliable narration in Hamlet

Hamlet is a play, and its narrative does not stem from a traditional first-person novel narrator, but is collectively constructed through the perspectives and words of multiple characters. Therefore, its "unreliable narration" is reflected in the information and perspectives provided by individual characters, rather than a unified narrative voice. It is precisely this unique multi-character narration that forms a kind of retelling of the story and events. For example, in the segment of Ophelia's death, her death is recounted by the Queen. During the description, the Queen may have made some excessive speculations (Ophelia might not have committed suicide), and the romanticize of her drowning also contains the Queen's subjective descriptive thoughts. This kind of description is different from the objective omniscient perspective of a secondary author; although it seems to retell events in chronological and logical order, it leads to the ambiguity of key events. Therefore, in *Hamlet*, the reliability of the event dimension still requires in-depth consideration, as it lacks objective direct narration.

Hamlet's perception of Ophelia is fatally intertwined with his perception of his mother's betrayal. He projects his anger and disgust towards Gertrude (the Queen) for her "frailty" onto Ophelia. When he tells her, "Wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them", he does not truly see Ophelia; instead, he sees a symbol of what he deems the universal deceit of women. His perception is unreliable because it is a form of projection, a paranoid judgment, and this also results in the unreliability of his perceptual dimension (with a certain degree of bias).

4.5.2.1. Hamlet

From Margolin's work's definetion about unreliable narration from three parts and NünningV's supporting evidences, I think the unreliable narration in *Hamlet* could be divided from the following parts:

(1) Unreliability of the Narrator:

Is Hamlet's insane behavior a defect in his ability? After pretending to be insane, he still collaborates with his close friend Horatio to formulate a revenge plan: he uses Ophelia and the acting troupe to test King Claudius, and remains calm and composed when testing his former friends. In terms of intent, Hamlet clearly tells Horatio, "I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on"—his madness is premeditated and voluntary. He does this to protect himself under Claudius' surveillance and seek the truth behind his father's death.

Hamlet's madness might also be an outlet for the grief and indignation in his heart: as the Prince of Denmark, every move he makes affects the country's future development, so he has no choice but to make certain decisions. Before the old king's death, Hamlet had always believed the world was full of kindness and beauty. However, upon hearing of his father's death, his uncle's ascension to the throne, and a series of events

that occurred after his return—especially his mother's sudden remarriage—his original worldview collapsed overnight. Unsure how to cope, his pretense of madness seems like a delaying tactic, but in reality, it is also a way to vent his inner anxiety and helplessness through insane behavior. For example, after his mother persuades him to stay in the country, his soliloquy is filled with pain and struggle:

He does not know where to go, nor can he find relief in death.

He is shocked and angry at his mother's almost incestuous behavior, yet can only suppress the emotions in his heart. "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!" This line also foreshadows his subsequent "pretense of madness"—unable to openly express his inner dissatisfaction with the king, the queen, the courtiers, and even the world, he can only use madness as a mask to protect himself and criticize them (From Hamlet Act 1, Scene 2).

(2)The unreliability of the narrative process:

Hamlet directly points out in his conversation with Horatio that he would act a bit crazy later: "I may sometimes pretend to be crazy in the future..." (From Hamlet Act 1, Scene 5).

Hamlet's language is confused and fragmented:

Hamlet: "Ha ha! Are you chaste?" "Beauty can make chastity become lewd, but chastity may not be able to make beauty be influenced by itself; this sentence seemed like a bizarre talk before, but now time has proved it. I once loved you".

Ophelia: "Really, my lord, you once made me believe that you loved me".

Hamlet: "You shouldn't have believed me in the first place, because virtue can't edify our evil nature, and I never loved you" (From Hamlet Act 3, Scene 1).

Hamlet seems to be angry at Ophelia's alienation and also helpless about the collapse of his mother's abnormal image. This jumping association makes his words contradictory and obscure in content, and also reflects his inner struggle.

(3) The unreliability of the narrative text:

Internally, Hamlet directly uses his inner monologue to reveal his thoughts and pain to the audience. For example, when thinking about the issue of revenge, he connects it with the survival and destruction of death:

"To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them?" (From Hamlet Act 3, Scene 1).

Hamlet directly and sincerely reveals his inner pain, doubts, and philosophical thinking. His inner monologue is reliable.

Externally, Hamlet's actions contradict his determination.

For example, when he saw Claudius confessing in front of his father's tomb, and there were only the two of them at that time, he could directly kill Claudius. But he kept procrastinating: afraid that he would misunderstand his uncle. The contradiction between his vow of revenge and his actions forms a kind of unreliability. Hamlet's unreliability comes from his purposeful revenge and the flow between the two states of "sober" and "crazy", which makes readers think to understand the satire in his words. For example, saying that Polonius is a fishmonger is actually criticizing his greed and sycophancy. Hamlet's crazy words also reflect the degradation of society at that time, and he pours out the pain and struggle of the individual with his seemingly unreliable words.

4.5.2.2. Ophelia

(1) Unreliability of the Narrator:

As a pursuer of sincere and innocent romantic love, Ophelia has a certain ability of independent thinking:

Hamlet:... I never loved you.

Ophelia: Then I have been deceived indeed.

Heavenly gods, make him come to his senses!

My lord, how did you become like this? (From Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1).

In the face of Hamlet's frenzied questioning and even insults, Ophelia is not completely passive. It can be seen that Ophelia's own language ability is not defective.

But precisely because of her innocence and childishness, she has always obeyed her father and brother. Or rather, due to the discipline of patriarchy and long-term oppression on her, she cannot express her true thoughts leads to her unreliability. As T.A. Olivas profoundly reveals in "Who is Ophelia?", the tragedy of Ophelia lies in her systematic "objectification", which means that Ophelia is more regarded as a piece of property to be managed rather than a complete person in the patriarchal structure. And from the objectification comes direct and tough oppression from her father Polonius; her space for independent expression is completely deprived, and she could only respond with agreement. This long-term oppression leads to her inability to express her true self at critical moments or even in daily lives, thus constituting her unreliability as a communicator. Therefore, Ophelia's words are not the outpouring of her true feelings, but a performative output of patriarchal will.

Laertes (Ophelia's brother): Regarding Hamlet and his obsequious attentions, you should only regard it as a momentary emotional impulse of a young man...

Please regard it only as a fashionable trifle... It will be fleeting.

Ophelia: I will keep it in mind. But, my good brother, do not, like some bad priests, show me the steep and thorny path to heaven, while you yourself, like a dissolute and frivolous prodigal, stay on the path of pleasure to frolic, forgetting your own maxims.

Laertes: Ah! Don't worry about me...

Polonius: (After learning that Hamlet is pursuing Ophelia)

From today on, you behave yourself properly for me! You are not allowed to waste another moment chatting with Prince Hamlet! You remember that, do you hear? Obey me obediently!

Later, after her father was mistakenly killed by Hamlet, her language became fragmented and seemed illogical, contradicting the facts. However, the various different flowers she gave to corresponding people were full of connotations, or rather, Ophelia's true thoughts:

Ophelia:(To King Claudius) There's fennel for you, and columbines: (To Queen Gertrude) there's rue for you; and here's some for me: we may call it herb-grace o' Sundays: O you must wear your rue with a difference.

So the unreliability of Ophelia herself stems more from the contradiction between the contraction between her mind and her action.

(2) The unreliability of the narrative text:

For the audience, Ophelia's scattered songs and the way she hands out flowers are filled with meaning. He admits her father's death is part of what caused her breakdown, but then he quickly links her grief to Laertes' absence. By doing this, he downplays his own guilt and presents her suffering as a personal, family issue rather than something tied to political violence.

4.6. Differences in madness narratives from a cross-cultural perspective

Under Margolin's framework of narrative reliability, the narrative construction of madness in Chinese and Western literature presents essential differences. The madness in *Hamlet* reflects an individual's struggling—*Hamlet* shows his reliable inner thought (for the audience), but through strategic unreliable narration (to others). In contrast, "*The Diary of a Madman*" demonstrates a public unreliable social cognition—the

madman's personal delusions reveal the sick of the social collective, and his unreliable narration at the factual dimension precisely achieves the ultimate reliability at the value level, reflecting the Chinese cultural focus on collective consciousness.

5. Conclusion

The research finds that madness in both works is a meticulously constructed discursive practice, achieving profound social criticism through complex narrative strategies.

5.1. Madness as discursive practice and narrative strategy

This study reveals that madness presents a triple dialectical relationship in the two works: In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's madness is both a power game as Foucault describes—securing discursive space through the strategic retreat of "feigning madness"; and a rhetorical choice in Booth's sense—creating cognitive distance through unreliable narration to guide readers toward perceiving the truth. The rupture between his soliloquies and actions precisely reflects the reliability tension between the narrator and the narrative text as discussed by Margolin.

In *The Diary of a Madman*, Lu Xun achieves the most thorough "denaturalization" of feudal ethics through the madman's delusional narration. The madman's unreliability in the factual dimension (e.g., "Zhao's dog stared at me twice") precisely strengthens his reliability in the value dimension—his mad words become "rebellious knowledge" as Foucault calls it, ruthlessly tearing off the hypocritical mask of the ethical society.

Hamlet achieves the exposure of court truths while protecting himself through strategic unreliable narration. The madman accidentally gains the deepest insight into the essence of society through pathological unreliable narration. Both authors skilfully use unreliable narrators to transform madness into a privileged space for speaking truth.

5.2. Gender politics and the deprivation of narrative rights

Through a comparative analysis of Ophelia and the madman's younger sister, this study further finds that: In the patriarchal discursive system, women's madness is often doubly deprived—they are not only deprived of the speaker's status as Booth argues but also defined as "the other" by the power mechanism revealed by Foucault. Ophelia's transformation from being forced to play the role of a reliable narrator to finally reconstructing her right to speak through madness, together with the fate of the unnamed younger sister who was completely silenced, jointly confirms the close connection between the narrator's rights and the social power structure in Margolin's framework.

5.3. The dialectical relationship between social discipline and literary resistance

The study further finds that society isolate the person who thinks difference from the public or themselves and diagnose them as madman. In *Hamlet* and *The Diary of a Madman*, the attitude from people around them, like the madman's family and the king Claudius, they always push the character away to protect themselves. Thus, madness narratives become a literary practice that resists disciplinary power as the disciplined.

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