

A Corpus-Based Study on Female Characterization in Shakespearean Plays

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Abstract: *This paper adopts a corpus linguistic approach, utilizing the English-Chinese parallel corpus of Shakespearean plays. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the research focuses on the lines of major female characters in the selected plays. Starting from the analysis of modal verbs in these lines, the study examines three plays where female characters occupy significant roles: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *As You Like It*, and *Measure for Measure*. The original texts and the Chinese translations by Liang Shiqiu and Zhu Shenghao serve as the basis for a comparative analysis of the depictions of three female characters: Helena, Rosalind, and Isabella. The study seeks to determine whether the characterization of these women has undergone any transformation in the translations and to explore the driving forces behind such changes. The findings reveal that Zhu Shenghao's translation tends to intensify the original traits of female characters, reflecting his translation philosophy of "faithfulness" aimed at preserving the author's original intent. On the other hand, Liang Shiqiu's translation demonstrates a tendency to downplay the assertive characteristics of the female characters, which may stem from his limitations in gender consciousness.*

Keywords: Female Characterization; Translation Style; Corpus Translation Studies; Shakespearean Plays; Comparative Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the cultural turn in translation studies in the 1980s, scholars have increasingly explored the interaction between translation and ideology. Among these, the relationship between gender and translation has gained considerable attention. On one hand, researchers investigate how gender consciousness, particularly feminist ideology, influences translation. On the other hand, they examine the role of translation in constructing gender identities or representations. However, relatively few studies have focused specifically on the representation and reconstruction of female characters in drama translation.

Unlike novels, dramatic texts rarely describe characters' appearances, actions, or psychological activities from a third-person perspective. These are typical methods for character development in novels but are largely absent in drama. In drama, characters are primarily constructed through their dialogues, making it a defining feature of the medium. Against this backdrop, this paper leverages the English-Chinese parallel corpus of Shakespearean plays, selecting three works where female characters play significant roles: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *As You Like It*, and *Measure for Measure*. The study compares and examines the portrayal, representation, and reconstruction of three female characters—Helena, Rosalind, and Isabella—in the original texts and their Chinese translations by Liang Shiqiu and Zhu Shenghao.

By analyzing the usage and translation of modal verbs in these characters' dialogues, this paper seeks to address the following research questions: 1. Have the characterizations of these three female figures undergone transformation in the two Chinese translations? 2. Are there differences in how the two translations represent and reconstruct these characters? 3. If transformations and differences exist, what are their specific manifestations? 4. What are the underlying causes of these transformations and differences?

2. MODAL VERBS AND CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION

Modal verbs in English are auxiliary verbs used to express modality, including possibility and necessity. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, et al.^[1] identified *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, *would*, *must*, and *ought to* as modal auxiliaries. Later, Biber et al. categorized modal verbs into three types: core modals, marginal modals, and semi-modals.^[2] Following this, Halliday and Matthiessen^[3] proposed that "value is a variable in the modality system" and classified the values of modal verbs into three levels: high, medium, and low.

According to Palmer^[4], modal verbs can be divided into epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities. Epistemic modality reflects the speaker's judgment of the proposition's degree of truth. Deontic modality conveys the

speaker's recognition of the subject's responsibility, obligation, or commitment to an action, as well as promises about future events. Dynamic modality, on the other hand, pertains to the subject's ability and willingness. In everyday communication, modal verbs are employed to express varying degrees of certainty about a proposition or to exert varying degrees of pressure in proposals or commands directed at the listener. Thus, the use of modal verbs reflects subjectivity and reveals the speaker's attitude. When modal verbs appear in a character's lines, they play a crucial role in constructing that character's persona.

However, the relationship between the use of modal verbs and character construction, as well as the transformations caused by translators in rendering modal verbs in dramatic dialogue, has been scarcely studied domestically. This gap is even more pronounced in dramatic works. Liu Shuying^[5] analyzed the construction of female characters Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet, and Jane in *Pride and Prejudice* through the lens of deontic modality. Huang Xun^[6] examined the stylistic features of the transitivity and modality systems in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* to analyze character construction. However, neither study explored how these modal verbs changed during translation, such as through addition or omission.^[7]

To address this gap, this paper adopts Biber's classification of modal verbs, focusing on core modals. It incorporates Halliday's concepts of "value," "modalization," and "modulation" to analyze the usage of modal verbs in the lines of Helena, Rosalind, and Isabella in *All's Well That Ends Well*, *As You Like It*, and *Measure for Measure*.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The corpus analyzed in this study comprises three Shakespearean plays: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *As You Like It*, and *Measure for Measure*, along with their two Chinese translations by Liang Shiqiu and Zhu Shenghao. The study is based on the English-Chinese parallel corpus of Shakespearean plays and adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses, with modal verbs selected as the primary focus.

The research follows these specific steps: First, AntConc software was used to search the corpus, with "Helena," "Ros," and "Isab" as the keywords. The sentences containing these keywords were further examined for occurrences of core modal verbs, categorized by Biber as can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would. A total of 112 instances of core modal verbs were identified in the lines of the selected female characters. Among them, high-value modals such as must appeared 10 times; medium-value modals, including *will*, *would*, *shall*, and *should*, occurred 29, 20, 20, and 6 times respectively; and low-value modals, such as *may*, *might*, *can*, and *could*, were found 5, 6, 9, and 7 times respectively.

Subsequently, the concordance lines retrieved from the search were compared between the original text and the two Chinese translations to analyze differences in the translation of these modal verbs. Finally, drawing on critical discourse analysis and theories of gender roles, the study investigates the underlying reasons behind these observed differences.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

After excluding all instances where the modality of the original text and its translation remain unchanged, in Liang Shiqiu's translation, there are 14 cases where a high modality verb is translated into a lower modality, and 14 cases where a low modality verb is translated into a higher modality. In Zhu Shenghao's translation, there are 14 cases of high modality verbs translated into lower modality, and 18 cases of low modality verbs translated into higher modality. Clearly, this data alone cannot provide a comprehensive indication of the overall translation tendencies of the two translators.^[8] To gain a more accurate analysis of the statistical results, one must examine the context and the reasons behind the changes in modality.

4.1 Comparison of Modality Changes in Helena's Dialogue in *All's Well That Ends Well*

First, let's examine the changes in modality verbs when translating Helena's dialogue. In Liang Shiqiu's translation, modality changes occur only with *shall* and *will*, with 3 instances of *shall* and 2 instances of *will* undergoing changes. In Zhu Shenghao's translation, changes occur with *must*, *would*, *shall*, and *should*. Both *must* and *would* show only one instance of change, while *shall* and *will* each undergo three changes.^[9]

Example 1:

The wars have so kept you under that you must needs be born under Mars.

Liang: Multiple wars have oppressed you to the point that you must have been born under Mars.

Zhu: Whenever war breaks out, you are bound to be at a disadvantage, isn't that being born under the martial star?

In this case, must clearly expresses epistemic modality, indicating the speaker's judgment on the truth of the proposition. At first glance, Zhu Shenghao's translation seems to soften the force of must, transforming the absolute statement "you must" into a more indirect rhetorical question. However, considering the context, it is evident that Helena is mocking Bertram's follower, Palomo, by comparing him unfavorably to Bertram, the "true martial star." The indirectness in Zhu's translation actually intensifies the sarcasm, reflecting Helena's sharp and decisive character.

Example 2:

Nor would I wish you.

Liang: I would not wish for you to do it.

Zhu: If it is dishonorable, I would never wish for you to do it.

Here, would represents dynamic modality, expressing the speaker's willingness or intention.^[10] This example contrasts with Example 1: Liang Shiqiu uses a more indirect tone to translate would, aligning with traditional Chinese feminine traits of deference and humility, implying that the speaker is meek. On the other hand, Zhu Shenghao's translation uses a stronger and more direct expression, showcasing Helena's brave and assertive side. This difference in tone highlights the contrasting interpretations of Helena's character by the two translators.

Example 3:

And you shall find yourself to be well thank'd, Whate'er falls more.

Liang: Whatever happens, you will definitely receive proper thanks.

Zhu: No matter what happens, your kindness will definitely be repaid.

Though shall is a mid-range modality verb, it can convey certainty, obligation, or command. In this example, both translators convey the sense of certainty, but Zhu Shenghao uses a double negation construction, "will definitely not fail," which makes the tone firmer, expressing a more determined sense of gratitude. This stronger tone reflects Helena's resolve to repay kindness, whereas Liang's translation is softer and less assertive.

Example 4:

I will tell truth; by grace itself I swear.

Liang: I will tell the truth; I swear by grace itself.

Zhu: I would never lie to you, my lady.

Example 5:

My duty then shall pay me for my pains: I will no more enforce mine office on you. Humbly entreating from your royal thoughts A modest one, to bear me back again.

Liang: Thus, I have done my best, and my efforts have not been in vain. I will no longer force you to accept my treatment; I only have one small request, may your Majesty offer me a bit of comfort, and I will leave in peace.

Zhu: Since you have said so, I dare not force you to accept my humble service. I have done my duty, and though I have traveled far, I have done my best for Your Majesty. I ask for nothing more, only to be allowed to return.

In both examples, Zhu Shenghao intentionally weakens the female character's tone, emphasizing her lower social status. In these instances, Zhu's translation softens the assertiveness of Helena's speech, which is likely in consideration of the social context of women's roles in the Shakespearean era. While Liang Shiqiu's translations may seem more abrupt and forceful in tone, they align more closely with the original modalities of must, would, shall, and will, which maintain their corresponding modality levels. Zhu Shenghao's translations exhibit greater modulation of modality, which serves to align with contemporary sensibilities regarding the positioning of female characters in a historical context.

Thus, it is clear that while Liang Shiqiu aimed for a more direct translation to reflect the original's tone, Zhu Shenghao adjusted the characters' expressions to better align with the social dynamics and female representation in his own time.

4.2 Comparison of Modality Changes in Rosalind's Dialogue in As You Like It

Next, we analyze the changes in modality verbs in the translation of Rosalind's dialogue. In Liang Shiqiu's

translation, *must* undergoes 3 modality changes, *shall* changes 2 times, and *will* changes 9 times. In Zhu Shenghao's translation, *must* also undergoes 3 changes, *would* changes 3 times, *shall* changes 2 times, and *will* changes 9 times. Below, we analyze several representative examples.

Example 6:

Nay, you must call me Rosalind.

Liang: No, you must call me Rosalind.

Zhu: No, you must definitely call me Rosalind.

Example 7:

You must begin.

Liang: You must say this first.

Zhu: You should begin this way.

Example 8:

Then you must say, 'I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.'

Liang: Then you should say, "Rosalind, I take you as my wife."

Zhu: Then you must say, "Rosalind, I take you as my wife."

From these three examples, we can see that while both Liang Shiqiu and Zhu Shenghao translate *must* similarly, there are subtle differences. Compared to Liang, Zhu Shenghao clearly intensifies the force of *must*. For example, Liang translates it as "must," while Zhu uses "must definitely," which adds more emphasis. In Example 7, Liang's translation, "you must say this first," has a guiding and somewhat gentle tone, not seeming like an order. In contrast, Zhu's translation, "you should begin this way," has a stronger command tone. Similarly, in Example 8, the contrast between "you should" and "you must" shows the difference in strength. It is important to note that these three sentences are all spoken by Rosalind to her lover Orlando, and the latter two occur during a wedding initiated by Rosalind, where she directs Orlando to repeat her words. These instances highlight Rosalind's dominant position in their relationship. While Liang Shiqiu's translation appears more neutral, it unintentionally softens Rosalind's assertive attitude, making her tone slightly more indirect. In contrast, Zhu Shenghao consciously strengthens Rosalind's assertiveness in his translation.^[11]

Example 9:

Now tell me how long you would have her after you have possessed her?

Liang: Now tell me, how long would you want her after you've gotten her?

Zhu: Now tell me, after you've possessed her, how long do you intend to keep her?

Example 10:

I would try, if I could cry 'hem,' and have him.

Liang: If I could cough, I would try and catch him.

Zhu: If I cough, he will respond, and I would try it.

Example 11:

I would I were at home.

Liang: I wish I were at home.

Zhu: I want to go home.

In these examples, we can see that Liang Shiqiu consistently translates *would* with little change in modality value, using "wish" or "want" in a polite, somewhat hesitant tone. His translations convey a sense of seeking permission or making a request. In contrast, Zhu Shenghao consistently strengthens Rosalind's tone. For example, "how long do you intend to keep her?" is a direct, no-nonsense question, while "If I cough, he will respond, and I would try it" displays Rosalind's bold confidence and sarcasm. Similarly, "I want to go home" sounds more like a firm declaration in Zhu's translation, as though Rosalind is stating her decision without room for negotiation. This stands in stark contrast to Liang's softer, more request-like approach.

Example 12:

Do, young sir: your reputation shall not therefore be misprised.

Liang: Certainly, sir: your reputation will not be diminished because of this.

Zhu: Yes, young sir, your reputation will not suffer from this.

Example 13:

I shall devise something.

Liang: I must think about what to say.

Zhu: I will think of something.

These two examples are somewhat special because shall in these contexts only indicates future action, without expressing determination, command, or obligation, and carries little subjective intention. However, the translations show notable differences. In Example 12, Liang's translation implies Rosalind's subjective judgment with the phrase "will not be diminished because of this," which suggests she is making a subjective prediction about the future.^[12] In contrast, Zhu's translation presents it more as a statement of fact, "will not suffer from this." In Example 13, Liang's translation suggests Rosalind "needs to think," implying she is uncertain whether she can come up with an answer, while Zhu's translation expresses more certainty, implying that she is confident she will figure something out. Despite shall not involving epistemic or deontic modality in these instances, the translations reflect a significant difference in the subjective certainty of the character. Zhu's translation creates a more self-assured image of Rosalind compared to Liang's portrayal.

Thus, while Liang Shiqiu's translations tend to retain the original modality values with some softening of tone, Zhu Shenghao's translations tend to amplify Rosalind's assertiveness and confidence, reflecting a more direct and empowered character. This difference illustrates the translators' distinct approaches to character portrayal and modality, with Liang maintaining a more restrained and traditional rendering, and Zhu enhancing the character's strength and determination.

4.3 Comparison of Modality Changes in Isabella's Dialogue in Measure for Measure

Finally, we analyze the changes in modality verbs in the translation of Isabella's dialogue. In Liang Shiqiu's translation, *would* undergoes 3 modality changes, and *might*, *should*, and *shall* each undergo 1 change. In Zhu Shenghao's translation, *would* undergoes 3 changes, and *must*, *can*, *might*, *should*, and *shall* each undergo 1 change. Below are some typical examples for analysis.

Example 14:

There is a vice that most I do abhor, And most desire should meet the blow of justice, For which I would not plead, but that I must.

Liang: There is a vice I deeply abhor, and I most desire that justice should strike it, for this vice, I would not plead, but I must.

Zhu: There is a vice I loathe deeply, hoping justice will punish it, but I cannot help but go against my own nature and plead for mercy.

In this example, both *must* and *would* undergo modality changes. Liang's translation follows a more literal approach, translating *must* as "must" and *would* as "would not wish." In contrast, Zhu removes the subjective wish implied by *would*, and instead translates *must* using a double negative structure—"cannot help but"—to soften Isabella's tone. This change reflects Isabella's forced position, as she is pleading for her brother, Claudio, who is not truly guilty of the crime he is accused of. The phrase "cannot help but" rather than "must" emphasizes her alignment with Angelo's legal view, underlining that she is compelled to plead rather than acting of her own volition. The omission of Isabella's subjective will further highlights her helplessness, creating a contrast between her strength of character and the pressure she faces. Thus, while Liang's translation retains a more direct tone, Zhu's translation amplifies the subtlety and complexity of Isabella's situation.

Example 15:

But can you, if you would?

Liang: If you wish, can you?

Zhu: But if you wish, can you forgive him?

Example 16:

But might you do't, and do the world no wrong, If so your heart were touch'd with that remorse As mine is to him?

Liang: But can you do it, and do no harm to the world, if you can feel the same compassion for him that I feel?

Zhu: But if you could feel compassion for him, as I feel sorrow for him, then perhaps you might forgive him? It would do no harm to the world.

In Example 15, Liang adopts a direct translation approach, rendering *can* as "can" and *would* as "wish." Zhu, on the other hand, weakens Isabella's tone slightly, using "can" instead of the more direct "can you?" This softens Isabella's request, emphasizing her vulnerable pleading. In Example 16, Liang's translation keeps *might* as "can," while Zhu uses "perhaps you might" to introduce a sense of uncertainty. Zhu's translation, with its use of "perhaps" and the softer phrasing, highlights the uncertainty and delicate nature of Isabella's request, reinforcing her position

of powerlessness, as the final decision rests with Angelo.

From these examples, we can observe that Liang's translation tends to maintain a more straightforward, authoritative tone, whereas Zhu's translation amplifies the nuance and uncertainty of Isabella's position. Zhu's translation reflects Isabella's lack of agency, as she is caught between her own moral compass and the oppressive authority of Angelo, positioning her as more helpless in the face of power.

Contextual Analysis: In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella occupies a more passive, subordinate role compared to the more proactive and assertive female characters like Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* or Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Isabella is caught in a system of oppression, where the turning point in the plot depends largely on Duke Vincentio's plan, and she has little power to resist Angelo's decisions. In this context, Zhu Shenghao's translation better aligns with the original play's portrayal of Isabella as a woman constrained by her circumstances, whose attempts to seek justice are hindered by a higher power. Zhu's emphasis on uncertainty and forced action captures Isabella's vulnerability and helplessness. In contrast, Liang Shiqiu's more direct approach, while still rendering Isabella as a strong character, unintentionally exaggerates her agency by not fully capturing the nuanced weakness and the constrained nature of her actions.^[13]

Thus, Zhu Shenghao's translation seems more faithful to the original tone of oppression and helplessness in Isabella's character, while Liang Shiqiu's translation, though it reflects a strong portrayal of Isabella, does so in a way that might misrepresent the depth of her predicament. This difference arises largely from the translators' approaches: Liang's more literal and somewhat "foreignizing" translation strategy contrasts with Zhu's more adaptive approach, which aligns Isabella's emotional state with the power dynamics of the play.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper applies a corpus-based approach to analyze the typical modal verbs found in the dialogues of the female characters Helena (*All's Well that Ends Well*), Rosalind (*As You Like It*), and Isabella (*Measure for Measure*) in Shakespeare's plays. By combining Halliday's modality system theory, the paper draws the following conclusions. In both Chinese translations, the characters' portrayals undergo changes. In Zhu Shenghao's translation, the modality of typical verbs is adjusted to either intensify or soften the speech tone of these female characters, further reinforcing the original characterization. The direction of this reinforcement—whether highlighting strength or weakness—remains consistent with the female characterizations in the original text. When translating Helena and Rosalind, who are central characters driving the plot forward, Zhu's translation strengthens their brave, independent, strong, and intelligent qualities. On the other hand, when translating Isabella, who occupies a weaker, oppressed role in the original, Zhu's translation similarly emphasizes her vulnerability, evoking sympathy from the reader.

The motivation behind this rewriting is primarily influenced by Zhu's own translation philosophy, rather than the socio-cultural context or the cultural differences between the source and target languages. Zhu's goal is to restore the female images presented by Shakespeare, which leads him to intentionally or unintentionally amplify certain characteristics in alignment with Shakespeare's original intentions.

In contrast, the rewriting in Liang Shiqiu's translation is influenced by two primary factors: first, his translation philosophy, which follows a foreignizing strategy and literal translation approach. This often creates a contradiction with the cultural context of the target language, resulting in a distortion of the characters' portrayals. A prime example of this is the portrayal of Isabella, where the construction of her character in Liang's translation differs significantly from the original. Second, Liang's own ideological stance on gender, as revealed through his personal experiences, suggests that he was not a strong advocate for gender equality. In translating the dialogues of Helena and Rosalind, Liang's literal translation approach unintentionally softens their speech tones, weakening their character traits and overall portrayals in subtle ways.

In summary, Zhu Shenghao's translation is more faithful to the original characterization of the female figures in Shakespeare's plays, while Liang Shiqiu's translation, shaped by his translation methods and gender views, often distorts these characters, particularly Isabella. This difference reflects not only the translators' personal ideologies but also their approaches to translation, with Zhu's being more adaptive and in line with the original's intent, and Liang's being more literal and influenced by his cultural and ideological stances.

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