

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discipline and Resistance: The Representation of Female Power in the Poetry of John Donne and Sylvia Plath

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the representation of female power in the poetry of John Donne and Sylvia Plath through Michel Foucault's theory of power, particularly the concepts of discipline and resistance. Although separated by several centuries and shaped by distinct historical and cultural contexts, both poets provide significant insights into the construction and transformation of female subjectivity within different systems of power. Through close textual analysis, this study examines how power relations operate through patriarchal discourse, religious ideology, social institutions, and bodily regulation. It argues that Donne's poetry reflects the disciplinary mechanisms of early modern patriarchal society, in which female subjectivity is frequently shaped and constrained through metaphorical representations, gendered discourse, and religious frameworks. In contrast, Plath's poetry reveals the oppressive forces embedded in modern social structures while demonstrating women's attempts to resist discipline through subversive language, self-expression, and the reconstruction of identity. By comparing the different manifestations of female power in the works of these two poets, this research reveals the dynamic relationship between power and resistance, suggesting that literary language functions not only as a medium of domination but also as a potential space for female empowerment and subject formation.

KEYWORDS

Female Power, Discipline and Resistance, Michel Foucault's theory of power, John Donne, Sylvia Plath

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1. Introduction

Power relations have consistently occupied a popular position in the history of literary exploration, particularly in poetic creation. John Donne and Sylvia Plath, two poets from the 17th and 20th centuries respectively, despite their vastly different historical and cultural contexts, offer compelling and distinctive portrayals of female power. Donne's poetry, characterized by intricate metaphors and rigorous logic, often reflects the disciplining of women within the frameworks of patriarchal discourse and religious ethics. Conversely, Plath's works, deeply rooted in personal experience and societal critique, illuminate the awakening and reconstruction of female subjectivity under the constraints of modern social discipline. The contrast in their depictions of female power not only encapsulates the gender ideologies of their respective eras but also provides a fertile entry point for examining the broader dynamics of power relations in literature.

French philosopher Michel Foucault's theory of power offers an innovative and robust analytical framework for this study. Foucault posits that "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And 'Power,' insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the overall effect that emerges from all these mobilities" (Foucault, 1990:93). He argues that power is not merely an external and repressive force but a pervasive and productive mechanism operating through discipline and discourse. This power shapes individuals' behaviors, thoughts, and subjectivities, embedding itself within the structures of everyday life. Crucially, Foucault emphasizes that resistance is an inherent element of power relations, often manifesting through defiance against disciplinary mechanisms.

In the context of this study, "female power" is defined as encompassing both women's agency and their subjectivity, as well as their capacity to resist patriarchal discourses and social discipline. Such resistance may occur through language, actions, or symbolic practices within the pervasive power networks. By framing female power within this dual lens of discipline and resistance, this research aims to uncover the nuanced operations of power as portrayed in the works of Donne and Plath.

Donne's poetry frequently utilizes metaphorical and paradoxical language to portray women as subordinate figures, fulfilling male emotional and spiritual needs. In many of John Donne's poems, he adopted the expression of male monologue, adding

humorous and dramatic language elements to set off the silent passivity and vague sense of existence of the heroine. (Qin Rong, 2020:78-79) This literary approach, while emphasizing male dominance, simultaneously diminishes female subjectivity, situating women in disciplined roles. The operation of power in his works is subtle yet pervasive, using language and discourse as critical mechanisms to sustain gendered hierarchies and social order.

In stark contrast, Sylvia Plath's poetry addresses the plight of women's subjectivity within modern societal structures. Her incisive reflections expose the oppressive expectations placed upon women by familial, societal, and cultural norms. Through vivid language and potent symbolism, Plath not only illustrates the ways in which women are disciplined but also deconstructs these mechanisms, offering a vision of resistance and a forceful drive to transcend prescribed boundaries.

Building on Foucault's insights, this study posits that power is not a unidirectional or static force of domination but a complex, interactive process. In Donne's poetry, female subjectivity is deeply embedded within and shaped by patriarchal discourse, representing a more thorough operation of disciplinary power. Conversely, in Plath's works, female subjectivity emerges as a site of resistance, marked by attempts at reconstruction through reflection and defiance. This comparison sheds light on the evolving dynamics of power and resistance, illustrating how literary portrayals of female power reflect and interrogate shifting gender relations across historical contexts. By applying Foucault's theory, this research conducts close readings of both poets' works to examine the dual dimensions of discipline and resistance, thereby contributing new perspectives to the study of gender and power in literature.

2. Literature review

As one of the most influential and controversial poets in the history of British literature, John Donne's poetry has been a significant focus of scholarly attention and research for centuries. Research on John Donne has continually expanded both domestically and internationally. Internationally, studies began earlier, featuring diverse theoretical perspectives and a trend toward interdisciplinary integration. Domestically, although research started relatively late, it has developed rapidly, achieving significant results in areas such as translation, theoretical applications, and comparative studies between Chinese and Western literature. Studies overseas began earlier and have explored Donne from various perspectives.

Edmund Gosse's *The Life and Letters of John Donne* is a key resource for studying this prominent figure of British literature. It provides a comprehensive account of Donne's life and literary works from multiple dimensions, offering a rich and detailed foundation for future in-depth exploration. Some scholars tend to focus more on the content of Donne's *Satires*. Edward Dowden, in his article *The Poetry of John Donne*, offers a concise analysis of *Satires* I-V, with a focus on the specific themes and content of each piece. Late 19th-century scholars have extensively compared Donne's *satires* with those of his contemporaries, including John Marston and Joseph Hall. As noted by Smith, Donne's *satires* exhibit a distinctive "stern and tumultuous cast of thought," while Hall's *satires* are described as more conventional, Wither's as lacking depth, and Marston's as powerful yet marred by excessive affectation (54). J.B. Leishman analyzed Donne's poetry by focusing on its "wit." Arthur F. Marotti (1986) systematically analyzed Donne's various life stages and the works produced during each phase in their historical contexts.

Lu Yuming (2007) conducted a multifaceted study of Donne's love poetry, addressing religious schisms, contradictions and integration, imagery interpretation, poetic artistry, and translation. He highlighted the diversity and complexity of thoughts, emotions, and artistry in Donne's love poetry, pointing out that while Chinese translations have made progress, further research is needed to avoid misinterpretations and faithfully reflect Donne's unique aesthetics and artistic characteristics in translations. This study underscored the rich connotations and value of Donne's love poetry in academic research. Additionally, Lu Yuming (2011) argued that the recurring themes of fidelity and betrayal, depictions of saints and martyrs, and numerous terms reflecting human cruelty in Donne's love poetry reveal the psychological scars left by his apostasy, an illusory desire for the salvation of the soul, and emotional wounds from his religious experiences. As a representative of the Metaphysical poets, many scholars have explored the characteristics of this school through their studies of Donne. Lu Chunyan and Luan Ying (2007) examined the influence of Renaissance Metaphysical poets on the development of English poetry. They discussed Donne's personal experiences and distinctive poetic style as a key representative of the Metaphysical poets, analyzing his love poem *The Flea* to illustrate the stylistic features of the Metaphysical school in terms of themes, imagery, and language. Zhu Lihang pointed out that John Donne's collection of religious meditations, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, holds multifaceted value in theology, psychology, and literature. Utilizing symbolism and metaphor as primary creative techniques, the collection reflects its intellectual content and formal structure. The publication of the Chinese translation has significant implications for the reception and further study of Donne's prose in China. Nan Jianchong (2010) argued that in Donne's poem *The Sun Rising*, he employed defamiliarization techniques, including unconventional emotional expressions, striking imagery, irony, ambiguity, paradox, and dramatic poetic techniques. These elements showcased a rebellious individualistic consciousness and presentation, stimulating readers to reassess their perceptions of the world and constructing a "refined poetic urn," brimming with vibrant artistic vitality. Liu Lihui (2015) suggested that while scholars have acknowledged the contradictions, complexity, and Baroque characteristics of Donne's poetry, they have seldom theorized these features. Using Deleuze's concept of the "fold" to interpret Leibniz's Baroque philosophical ideas, Donne's poetry exhibits distinct Baroque fold attributes in its soul-body relationship,

cognitive orientation, and rhetorical strategies, driven by the early modern anxieties of the Baroque era. Wang Duohai (2008) conducted a feminist analysis of Donne's poetry, arguing that it frequently exhibits male-dominated hegemonic attitudes and contempt toward women, portraying them as passive and subordinate objects lacking autonomy. This reflects the societal factors during the reigns of James I and Charles I that caused Donne to question and distrust female fidelity, as well as the influence of the patriarchal premise of the Bible, relegating women to subordinate roles.

Research on Plath abroad began in the early 1970s. Elaine Showalter, who established feminist criticism, lauded Plath's poetry, with particular emphasis on her later work *Ariel*. Showalter regarded Plath not only for her outstanding poetic skills but also for giving a voice to femininity in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, thus deeming her "an iconic figure of twentieth-century America, a female poet." The significance of Plath studies can be traced back to the emergence of feminist criticism in the 1970s. Adam Kirsch, who is regarded as the pioneer in the psychoanalysis of Plath's poetry, put forward a distinct perspective in his work *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*. He asserted that Plath's poem "Daddy" does not simply fall into the category of strict confession; instead, it represents a profound dissection of the Electra complex within a teenage girl. The year 1976 witnessed Edward Butscher's creation of the first comprehensive biography of Sylvia Plath, titled *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. Within this work, Butscher endeavored to draw a correlation between Sylvia's psychological state and her aesthetic expressions. This connection was founded on the accounts provided by those acquainted with her and the evidence embedded within Sylvia's own written works.

Domestic research on Sylvia Plath began relatively late. Liu Fengshan analyzed Plath's feminist novel *The Bell Jar*, written against the backdrop of mid-20th-century American social rebellion. By exploring the female narrator's madness and the narrative of madness, Liu demonstrated the painful journey of American women constructing independent identities under patriarchal domination, viewing female madness as a contradictory strategy of resistance against patriarchal oppression, with significant implications for social rebellion. Wang Liyun also noted that this book aims to depict "a woman who refuses to live merely for another person" (73). Yang Guojing pointed out that Plath's literary writing was deeply influenced by Hitchcock's cinematic art, particularly his innovative use of the cinematic gaze. The gaze themes in her works reflect the gender politics of 1950s and 1960s American society and the political surveillance of McCarthyism, while also showcasing the poetics of "anti-gaze" as resistance against dual forms of violence, emphasizing her strong gender consciousness and empathy for the fate of others. Zhu Xinfu argued that "Plath's poetry was greatly influenced by Rachel Carson and her work *Silent Spring*. These poems contain clear ecological awareness and reflect certain ecofeminist ideologies" (p.108). In addition to analyzing the female identity within her works, Lin Yupeng addressed the phenomenon of critics often interpreting Plath's poetry from a "death" perspective. By delving beneath the surface of the pervasive death motif in her poems, Lin unearthed the underlying flow of life, providing new dimensions and approaches for studying Plath's poetry. Yang Guojing and Zhang Jian, drawing on Levinas's ethical philosophy and the "said/saying" dichotomy theory, sought to break down the barriers between personal and public discourse, revealing the connection between linguistic anxiety in Plath's works and the ethical dilemmas in the context of contemporary society.

However, studies on the female power in the works of the two poets from the perspective of Foucault's power theory are relatively rare both domestically and internationally, thus making this research innovative to a certain extent. This paper applies Foucault's power theory, using "discipline" and "resistance" as the central analytical lenses for examining the poetic texts. This dual perspective not only elucidates how power structures shape female subjectivity but also analyzes the ways in which women resist power through language and textual practices, thereby offering a new methodological approach to understanding the writing of female power.

3. Manifestations of power discipline: representation of female subjectivity

3.1. The discipline metaphors in John Donne's works

3.1.1. The passivity of female subjectivity

In John Donne's works, the disciplining of female power is reflected in the passivization of subjectivity. In *Batter my heart, three-person'd God*, Donne feminizes the soul, constructing a unique metaphorical relationship. The speaker in the poem prays to the Trinitarian God, comparing their soul to a besieged castle or a female inhabitant of a town, awaiting God's salvation and conquest. The image of God here exhibits distinctly masculine traits, endowed with active and powerful attributes. Expressions like "Batter my heart" and "Your force" highlight God as the controlling and action-taking entity, embodying a typical figure of male authority. In contrast, the soul, likened to a besieged castle or a female inhabitant, is depicted as the passive entity awaiting action. Expressions like "seek to mend" and "make me new" suggest that the soul is an object of transformation, displaying feminine weakness and passivity, clearly subordinate. Here, God is portrayed as a powerful male figure, while the soul is represented as a weak, feminized entity needing transformation. This metaphor implies that, within the religious context, women (the soul) are positioned to passively accept the discipline of God (a symbol of male authority).

Meanwhile, in *Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star*,

"And swear No where Lives a woman true, and faire."

The line generalizes "true" (faithfulness) and "faire" (beauty) as universal attributes of women. This diminishes the individuality

and inner world of women, emphasizing instead a male perspective that evaluates and expects external qualities and virtues, treating women as objects with predefined traits. The "woman" here is symbolized as an unattainable ideal, required to possess both beauty and fidelity. She becomes a symbolic vehicle for the poet's exploration of and doubt about the pursuit of an ideal love object, reflecting the generalized perception and expectation of women in the socio-cultural context of the time, neglecting their individual subjectivity.

3.1.2. The symbolization and objectification of the body

In *Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed*, the poet compares his mistress to "O my America! my new-found-land, My kingdom," portraying her as a newly discovered land and exclusive kingdom. This metaphor emphasizes a strong sense of possessiveness, signifying his desire to be the sole owner and master of her body and emotions. It reflects male dominance in emotional and sexual aspects, as well as the demand for exclusive rights over women. The female body is objectified as an object of male desire, illustrating how male discourse encroaches upon female agency.

Similarly, in *The Flea*, Donne uses the metaphor of a flea to transform a woman's body and chastity into a logical tool for male argumentation. The poem states,

"Mark but this flea, and mark in this, / How little that which thou deniest me is."

As the male subject, Donne uses the flea as a metaphor to persuade the woman that her attitude and denial are insignificant. This rhetorical strategy undermines the legitimacy of the woman's decisions, redefining her body and desires as subservient to male desires. Furthermore, the poet writes, "And this, alas, is more than we would do," using the flea's act of sucking blood as an analogy for sexual union. This metaphor strips the emotional and ethical significance of sexual acts, reducing them to trivial biological behavior. This process of objectification diminishes the woman's sovereignty over her own body, thereby suppressing her agency and placing her in a passive position.

3.2. Sylvia Plath's revelation of disciplinary power

Plath's poetry vividly exposes the violence of modern society's discipline of women through expectations of marriage, career, and appearance. These disciplinary mechanisms not only restrict women's physical freedom but also control their thoughts and emotions, molding them into tools that align with societal expectations. As Foucault noted in *Discipline and Punish*, power is omnipresent, existing in every relationship, and these seemingly invisible mechanisms of power actually infiltrate every aspect of women's lives in institutionalized forms. In *The Applicant*, Plath adopts a satirical tone to portray marriage as a tool of societal discipline. The poem begins with an interview-style question:

"Are you our sort of a person?"

Which directly likening marriage to a commodified transaction. Women in the poem are objectified as "products" for male selection, required not only to be attractive but also to fulfill the expectations of a housewife. Plath writes:

"It can sew, it can cook / It can talk, talk, talk"

This explicitly illustrates how women are disciplined into multi-functional domestic laborers rather than individuals with independent identities. She depicts marriage as an institution shown to reduce women into robot-like, fake beings imprisoned in the traditional role of a servant and comforter for men. This discipline embodies a form of violence, forcibly defining women as appendages to male needs through social and cultural discourse. This method of discipline is not merely externally imposed but is internalized through societal norms and institutional pressures, leading individuals to accept and perpetuate these unequal gender roles.

In *Lady Lazarus*, Plath further explores the invasion and control of women's bodies through disciplinary mechanisms. Using the metaphor of Lazarus's resurrection, the poem narrates the process of resistance and rebirth in the face of societal oppression. However, it also reveals the suffering inflicted by discipline and the deprivation of female subjectivity: "Peel off the napkin / O my enemy." These lines not only expose women's vulnerability and helplessness but also demonstrate how societal discipline employs systematic violence to control women's bodies and images. According to Foucault, modern power exerts influence on individuals through knowledge and discourse. Plath, through this poem, reflects on how such power structures operate on women. For instance, the line "The big strip tease" directly satirizes society's commodification of women's appearance and bodies. This violent discipline, perpetuated through cultural expectations and media propaganda, compels women to conform to male-gaze-driven aesthetic standards, leading to the loss of their self-identity.

4. Micro-power in discipline: the representation of gender power relations

4.1. Power mechanisms within family and marriage

4.1.1. Marital metaphors in Donne's poetry

John Donne extensively employs marital metaphors in his religious and love poetry, portraying marital relationships as a symbolic microcosm of gender power structures. His poetry not only conveys the traditional perceptions of marriage and family of his era but also reflects society's prescriptive expectations of women's roles. From Foucault's perspective of micro-power

theory, the family can be seen as a micro-arena where power operates. Its internal relationships not only exemplify the implicit reproduction of societal power but also reinforce gender inequality through normative discourse.

In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, Donne uses marital metaphors to emphasize women's passive roles in marriage and their functional positioning as supporters of men. The famous "compass metaphor" in the poem is particularly illustrative. The poet describes the man as the moving foot and the woman as the fixed foot:

"Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun."

This metaphor, though seemingly lyrical, reveals a clear gender power dynamic: the man is the agent determining the direction and dynamics of the marriage, while the woman remains passive and stationary, supporting the man's actions. Through this metaphor, marriage is depicted as a power structure in which women ensure the order of family and marriage through their "stability" and "compliance."

From Foucault's micro-power perspective, the family, as the smallest unit of power in society, assumes the function of disciplining individuals. In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, such discipline is naturalized and rationalized through emotional language and metaphorical expression. Women's "stillness" does not stem from their voluntary choices but from the societal disciplinary expectations imposed upon them. This form of discipline is not enforced through overt violence but permeates individuals' consciousness through cultural, religious, and marital institutions, encouraging women to unconsciously accept their roles as stabilizers of the family and unequal power structures.

Donne's marital metaphors not only underscore the dominance of male power but also reveal how women are disciplined into subordination within familial relationships. Similar marital metaphors are found in *Holy Sonnets*, particularly in depictions of divine marriage. For example, in verses that explore religious union, he often likens the soul to a "bride," using a feminized image to metaphorize the soul's submissiveness and fragility. Such metaphors reinforce women's subordinate status in family and society, associating qualities like submission and virtue with the female role. Foucault argues that the efficiency of power lies in its ability to discipline individuals through subtle and routine methods, and Donne's marital metaphors serve as linguistic manifestations of this disciplinary process.

4.1.2. Sylvia Plath's critique of family power structures

In sharp contrast to Donne's idealization of marriage and implicit discipline in his poetry, Sylvia Plath, through her incisive critiques, reveals the inequality of power in family and marital institutions and their oppressive impact on women.

In *Daddy*, Plath not only critiques patriarchal control over familial relationships but also delves deeply into how the family, as a primary site of power networks, influences women's subjectivity. The "father" in the poem is not merely an individual figure but a symbolic representation of patriarchal domination within the family. According to Foucault's theory of "power networks," power does not reside in a singular entity but operates through distributed relational networks. The familial relationships in *Daddy* exemplify this network, where power oppresses women through implicit mechanisms such as language, culture, and traditional family structures. This power is exerted not only through the specific figure of the father but also through societal narratives idealizing the "good father" or "good husband," creating psychological discipline for women.

More profoundly, Plath incisively critiques the pervasive infiltration of power networks within the institution of marriage, highlighting its role as a mechanism for reproducing patriarchal dominance, making it difficult for women to escape the control of familial power structures. Foucault argues that discipline, through its intricate mechanisms of power, renders individuals not only victims of power but also participants in its reproduction. In *Daddy*, marriage becomes the site of this process, where women, though seemingly equal to men, are still disciplined into subordinate roles.

Plath's critique of the institution of marriage is also reflected in her exaggerated depictions of patriarchal violence. The poem is laden with strong imagery of war and violence, such as comparing the father to a "Nazi" and a "fascist" while likening herself to a "Jew." While these extreme metaphors transcend the scope of ordinary familial relationships, they expose the oppressive essence of the family as a site of power. Through exaggerated language and imagery, Plath expresses the invisible violence women endure within familial power structures and reflects on the erosion of female subjectivity by the family. In Foucault's view, power in modern society does not primarily rely on direct coercion but achieves deeper control through the disciplining and regulation of individual behavior. *Daddy* exemplifies this: seemingly affectionate familial relationships conceal deeper inequalities, with women disciplined into being passive acceptors of these power dynamics.

4.2. The discipline of the body

4.2.1. Female body and power symbolism in Donne's poetry

Foucault argues that the operation of power is not limited to direct violence or coercion but is achieved through the discipline and regulation of the body. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault states, "The classical age discovered the body as an object and target of power" (1995: 154). The operation of social power is essentially the operation of power on controlled bodies.

In Donne's poetry, the female body is constructed in discourse as a specific symbol—submissive, beautiful, and possessable. This metaphor subtly reflects the logic of male power: by controlling the female body, power is symbolically manifested and further

consolidates gender inequality within societal power structures. In Elegy XIX, the male speaker not only dominates the discourse surrounding the female body but also uses metaphors to make the female body a dual symbol of power and desire.

Furthermore, Donne's nuanced language captures another dimension of bodily discipline—the tension between desire and religion. In his poetry, desire is not merely physical longing but interwoven with the male subject's spiritual aspirations. This complex interaction reinforces the disciplined position of the female body. The female body is not only an object of desire but also a medium through which the male subject achieves self-transcendence. For instance, the line "Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee" explicitly links the exposure of the female body to male pleasure, reducing the woman's value and meaning to the realm of male sensory experience. From Foucault's perspective, such bodily discipline results from the permeation of power discourse—women's identity and body are estranged, and their existence is reduced to a symbolic representation of power and a vessel for male desire.

4.2.2. Plath's rebellious writing against bodily discipline

Compared to Donne, Plath directly portrays the suffocating effects of bodily discipline. Foucault states, "The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." (25) He argues that the body becomes a useful force only when it is both productive and subjugated. In her works, Plath demonstrates how the body, as a site of power, is disciplined, shaped, and even oppressed. The "direct hold of power relations on the body," as emphasized by Foucault, is vividly illustrated in Plath's writing.

In Daddy,

"black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo."

Plath compares the father to a "black shoe," while she is likened to a "foot" that has "lived in it for thirty years." This metaphor vividly depicts the father's confinement and oppression, symbolizing the bodily and mental constraints imposed under patriarchal authority.

In *The Applicant*, Plath employs a satirical tone to critique society's utilitarian expectations of the female body. The repeated interview scenes in the poem liken marriage and gender roles to a commodified transaction. The female body is described as "a living doll," valued for its functionality: "Will you marry it, marry it, marry it." This objectified portrayal highlights how the female body, within the institution of marriage and patriarchal discourse, is disciplined into a tool, with its significance and function reduced to serving male needs.

5. Poetic practices of resisting power: from internalized discipline to subject awakening

5.1. Limited resistance in Donne's poetry

5.1.1. Indirect resistance in female discourse

In some of John Donne's love poems, such as *The Flea*, women are granted a certain degree of discursive space, engaging in intellectual debates with men. This indirect resistance reflects the nascent awakening of female subjectivity during the Renaissance, though its limitations are also evident.

In *The Flea*, Donne employs the metaphor of a flea sucking blood to persuade, attempting to manipulate logic to convince the woman to accept a romantic relationship. In the poem, the presence of female discourse is centered on the male perspective; though not overtly suppressed, it is incorporated within the framework of male disciplinary logic. The linguistic strategies women employ in resistance, whether questioning the validity of the flea metaphor or rejecting the male's proposition, fail to break free from the control of male power discourse.

Foucault asserts where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. He points out that power is omnipresent and interpenetrating, and resistance is a necessary condition for the existence of power. In Donne's poetry, the indirect resistance of women can be seen as a fissure within the power structure. However, this fissure does not lead to the collapse of disciplinary logic. On the contrary, within the framework of male discursive logic, women's resistance can only appear indirectly, inadvertently reinforcing the legitimacy of discipline. The flea, as the central metaphor in the poem, not only serves as a tool for male persuasion but also reflects male control over the female body and will. Although women attempt to resist this discipline through language, they fail to transcend the boundaries of male discourse.

5.1.2. Ineffective resistance to discipline

Within Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, power and resistance are not opposites but mutually constitutive forces. In John Donne's poetry, the resistance displayed by women often takes the form of "paradoxical resistance," where attempts to challenge male authority through language inadvertently reinforce the very disciplinary structures they seek to oppose. This phenomenon highlights the complexities and limitations of resistance within entrenched power networks.

For instance, in *The Flea*, Donne portrays a woman resisting male discourse and its disciplinary logic. The male speaker uses the flea as a metaphor to argue that the woman's chastity is insignificant, attempting to rationalize his desires through persuasive

reasoning. The woman's rejection and questioning of this logic reflect a subtle form of resistance.

Yet, this resistance does not transcend the boundaries of male discourse; it remains rooted within the same rhetorical framework, inadvertently reinforcing the legitimacy of patriarchal authority. This dependency on male logic illustrates how women's discursive power is confined within the parameters of the disciplinary system, preventing a genuine subversion of power relations.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this form of resistance is significant in that it reveals the dynamic interplay between power and its contestation. Foucault argues that "where there is power, there is resistance," yet this resistance often exists within the boundaries set by power itself, limiting its ability to effectuate radical change. In Donne's poetry, the paradoxical resistance of women exemplifies this principle. While their actions suggest a nascent form of autonomy, their reliance on the male-dominated discourse underscores the difficulty of achieving true emancipation within such a tightly controlled system.

5.2. Intense resistance in Plath's poetry

5.2.1. The counter-disciplinary function of language

Compared to the limitations of female resistance in Donne's poetry, Sylvia Plath's works exhibit a complete rejection of disciplinary logic, particularly through her subversive use of language. In *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*, Plath employs highly impactful language to rupture existing power structures and redefines female subjectivity through poetry.

In *Daddy*, Plath likens patriarchy and male authority to an inescapable oppressive system:

"You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe."

The language here is intensely combative, conflating the father, male authority, and historical violence, expressing the oppressiveness of disciplinary power through extreme exaggeration of these images. Foucault points out that the fissures of power exist within its operational mechanisms, and Plath creates these fissures through language, destabilizing disciplinary power.

Lady Lazarus further reinforces this counter-disciplinary function of language. The "resurrection" in the poem is not only a rebellion against bodily discipline but also a subversion of linguistic discipline. Through a wealth of figurative language like

"Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair" .

Plath dramatizes a self-reinvention that challenges society's predetermined definitions of female subjectivity. Here, language is not only a tool of resistance but also a means to shape a new subjectivity. Through the reconstruction of language, Plath deconstructs traditional power relations and proposes new possibilities for subjectivity.

5.2.2. Self-writing as the reconstruction of subjectivity

In *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath employs images of flight and ascent to symbolize a woman's liberation from disciplinary constraints, moving towards freedom and autonomy. The poem brims with dynamic energy, as its narrator breaks away from societal discourse and redefines her subjectivity through self-writing.

Foucault argues that individuals can transcend disciplinary mechanisms through self-practice, and *Ariel* serves as a poetic embodiment of this idea. In the poem, Plath writes:

"And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas."

This imagery depicts a transition from physical existence to spiritual ascension, symbolizing a new awareness of female subjectivity. Here, flight represents not only physical liberation but also spiritual awakening, signaling the possibility of transcending the network of discipline.

Unlike the confrontational language of *Daddy*, the writing in *Ariel* is more introspective and rich in symbolism. The imagery of soaring and brilliance conveys a redefinition of life's meaning, and this very process is a complete negation of disciplinary logic. Through this self-writing, Plath offers new possibilities for female subjectivity: individuals can transcend external power through the awakening of inner strength.

6. Conclusion

The poetry of John Donne and Sylvia Plath not only unveils the intricate dynamics of female power across distinct historical and cultural contexts but also offers profound insights into the evolving relationship between discipline and resistance. Donne's works, situated within the patriarchal and religious frameworks of the 17th century, encapsulate the paradox of power, where resistance is often subsumed and repurposed to reinforce the very structures it opposes. His metaphors and intricate rhetorical strategies reflect a world where discipline shapes and confines female subjectivity, rendering resistance subtle and often implicit. In stark contrast, Plath's poetry, born from the turbulence of 20th-century modernity, transcends this paradox. Her fierce and unflinching language deconstructs disciplinary norms, revealing the transformative possibilities of self-reclamation and the reconstruction of female identity through poetic expression.

This comparative exploration underscores a critical truth: discipline, though pervasive and insidious, is not an immutable force.

Resistance is not merely the counterpart to power but a dynamic force that can fracture and reconfigure power structures. Through creative practices, individuals carve out spaces for autonomy and reimagine subjectivity. In this process, language emerges as both a site of subjugation and a powerful tool for liberation. For Donne, language often reinforces hierarchical binaries, positioning women as objects within a male-centric discourse. Conversely, Plath harnesses the subversive potential of language, transforming it into a vehicle for defiance, self-definition, and the articulation of new possibilities for female existence.

This study also invites broader reflections on the intersection of gender, power, and literature. The differing portrayals of female subjectivity in Donne and Plath's works mirror the shifting cultural and social landscapes of their respective eras. While Donne's poetry illuminates the subtle operations of power within early modern patriarchal structures, Plath's writings foreground the psychological and existential toll of modernity's oppressive norms, offering a visceral critique of societal expectations. Together, their works chart the evolution of female power in literature—from implicit struggles within disciplinary boundaries to explicit confrontations that transcend them.

As Virginia Woolf (1929) eloquently noted, "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." This sentiment encapsulates the enduring power of literary resistance. The struggles and triumphs of women portrayed in Donne and Plath's poetry resonate beyond their historical confines, shedding light on the universal and ongoing quest for agency within networks of power. By examining the interplay of discipline and resistance in their works, we not only gain a deeper appreciation for their literary artistry but also recognize the broader implications of their struggles—implications that continue to inspire and challenge contemporary understandings of gender and power.

Ultimately, this journey from disciplined passivity to transformative defiance highlights the resilience of the human spirit in the face of systemic constraints. It reflects a truth central to literature and life alike: that through language, imagination, and narrative, individuals possess the ability to not only resist oppression but also reimagine themselves and the world they inhabit. As such, the works of Donne and Plath remain vital texts for understanding the complexities of power, resistance, and the indomitable pursuit of freedom.

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