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Women’s Love in *Antigone* by Sophocles and *The Tale of Kiều* by Nguyễn Du

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Abstract

Comparative studies have identified “Antigone’s sisters” across the globe, excepting for Southeast Asia. Yet in Vietnam, there exists Kiều, the protagonist in Nguyễn Du’s *The Tale of Kiều*, whose cultural significance is comparable to Antigone. What insights can be gained about feminist political power by comparing Antigone to Kiều? Proposing a shift in focus on Kiều and Antigone’s love from the questions of *who* and *why* to *how*, the paper argues that their love shares three fundamental commonalities related to their *living conditions, actions, and choices*. First, they are women who live a life full of love in worlds where love is forbidden. Secondly, they are women who practice love during dark times. And third, they choose to love in unconventional ways, and in doing so, they engender possibilities, particularly in terms of contemplating the interplay between life, death, and freedom. This analysis demonstrates a multiplicity of women’s love and the experiences that possess a transcultural dimension, one that signals a type of harmony in the resistance of war through love. Therefore, Antigone and Kiều represent a different direction of a feminist world-building project—that of constructing a world through love.

Introduction

How will the future of feminist resistance and solidarity take shape? On what basis will it be grounded? Opening this discussion, Western feminist scholars often return to the classical figure of Antigone. Recognizing Antigone as a figure whose “abundant political promise” is yet to be fully prized (Honig 2013, xii–xiii), comparative studies have identified “Antigone’s sisters” across the globe, excepting for Southeast Asia.¹ Yet in Vietnam, there exists Kiều, the protagonist in Nguyễn Du’s *The Tale of Kiều*, whose cultural significance is comparable to Antigone.² If Antigone is indeed a character who can evoke “the need to remap the field of politics” when “people are thirsty for change” (Soderback 2010, 1), what insights can be gained about feminist political power by comparing Antigone to Kiều?

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Antigone is one of three Theban plays of Sophocles that revolve around Oedipus' family.³ After Antigone's two brothers—Polyneices and Eteocles—died, Creon, Antigone's uncle, became king. He declared that, because Eteocles defended the city-state, he would be honored and buried with dignity, whereas Polyneices, who brought foreign troops against the city-state, would have his body left to be eaten by birds and dogs. At the beginning of the play, Antigone meets with her sister, Ismene, to deliver the bad news and seek her help in burying Polyneices. Ismene refuses because Creon has forbidden this action. Defiant, Antigone proceeds to bury Polyneices herself and is captured while doing so. For standing up to Creon and defending her actions, Antigone subsequently receives punishment and is locked up in a dark cave. There, she commits suicide, with her death triggering other deaths, like those of Haemon and Eurydice. Haemon, who is Creon's son and Antigone's fiancé, failed to persuade his father to spare Antigone. After witnessing Antigone's death, Haemon attacked his father but was unsuccessful. He then committed suicide. After hearing that her second son had died, Eurydice, Creon's wife, also committed suicide.

The Tale of Kiều is about the life of a woman named Vương Thúy Kiều. She was born in a middle-class family, along with her sister Thúy Vân and her younger brother Vương Quan. Kiều is described as beautiful, with talents that surpass her younger sister's. During the Pure Brightness Festival, Kiều, Vân, Quan visited their ancestors' graves and happened upon Đạm Tiên's grave. On hearing the story of Đạm Tiên's life, Kiều shed tears and wrote poetry for her. That night, Đạm Tiên appeared in Kiều's dream and told Kiều that her name was in the Book of Damned—a list of names of talented people with bad luck. That same day, Kiều met Kim Trọng. The two fell in love and became engaged. After that, Kiều was sold into prostitution in order to save her father and brother. Over her life, she fell in love with several men, including Từ Hải, a hero fighting against the feudal court. Từ Hải won half of the country, brought Kiều up to the position of his First Lady and helped Kiều to repay her benefactor and take revenge on those who hurt her before. Because Kiều didn't want Từ Hải to continue the war, she advised him to surrender to the feudal court, causing Từ Hải to be killed by Hồ Tôn Hiến. Hồ Tôn Hiến forced Kiều to serve wine and play music at a public party, then married her to an ethnic mandarin. Kiều jumped into Tiền Đường river to commit suicide, but was saved by a female bonze named Giác Duyên and returned to reunite with her family.

Kiều and Antigone share similarities that underscore the living conditions, actions and choices for women in their respective environments. First, they are women living in male-dominated societies and going from the private sphere to the public sphere, engaging in social and political realms as refugees. As kin to the defeated faction, they have endured the aftermath of wars and suffered displacement (Antigone) and sexual abuse (Kiều). Secondly, at crucial junctures in their lives, they have exercised their voices, with their words having a significant impact on their own lives, their interlocutors, and the broader world around them. Thirdly, despite both reuniting with their families (while Kiều's family was alive, Antigone's family comprised the deceased), they each made individual choices that deviated from the traditional expectations imposed upon women, such as marriage and motherhood.⁴

However, a review of the history of scholarship on Kiều's illuminates not only the absence of any study that bridges the gap between Kiều and Antigone, but further reveals that the majority of the studies on this national work are written by men.⁵ One of the few interventions of women in reading Kiều comes from Trinh T. Minh-ha (1999). Believing that "it's exceptional that the national poem of

Vietnam is a *love poem rather than an epic poem*, and that the figure her people persistently choose to represent their collective self is that of a woman,” Trinh proposes a different reading as an effort to “fare precariously” in the “rarefied zone of love and resistance” (Trinh 1999, 79; my emphasis). In this paper, I argue that the connection between Antigone and Kiêu lies precisely in this “zone of love” and “resistance.” At first glance, Kiêu and Antigone appear vastly different, and their loves belong to distinct cultural traditions. At its core, Kiêu’s love seems to align with the Eastern understanding encapsulated by the term “tình,” (*qing*) as described by Santangelo, encompassing “the meaning of various affections, virtues, vices and relations, included love-passion, love-affection, love-liking, and desires” (Santangelo and Boros 2019, 7). On the other hand, Antigone’s love falls within the domain of Greek love. Scholars have extensively referenced fundamental aspects of love in her context, such as *philia* (Segal 1983, Brendese 2010), *eros* (Butler 2000), and *agape* (Michau 2005). However, perspectives on love presented by feminist scholars of color, such as bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Maria Lugones, offer a transcultural lens to bridge the divergence between these two characters. bell hooks conceives love not merely as a feeling but as an action, comprising “a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect” (hooks 2000, 7–8). Maria Lugones presents an additional perspective where love may encompass desire but lacks the violent aspect of desire as argued by male-dominant theorists like Hegel (Lugones 2003). Trinh perceives love within a framework of multiplicity (Trinh 1999). Understood in this manner, women’s love serves as both resistance against patriarchal systems and a potential avenue for constructing a new world.

This paper continues the discussion of feminist love studies (Jónasdóttir and Ferguson 2014; García Andrade et al. 2018), which was extensively examined in *Hypatia* during the years 2002 and 2017; the discussion of Antigone’s love (Segal 1983; Porter 1987; Michau 2005; Brendese 2010); and feminist interpretations of Antigone; as well as a conversation about the future of feminism through the figure of Antigone, as presented by Honig (2013) in *Antigone, Interrupted*. Placing these burgeoning conversations alongside the discussions of Kiêu (Phan 2005; Trương 2006; Trần 2018), and viewing them through the conceptualization of love by feminists of color such as bell hooks, Maria Lugones, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, this paper proposes a shift in focus on Kiêu and Antigone’s love from the question of *who* and *why* to *how*. On this very question, I will demonstrate that Antigone and Kiêu represent a different direction of a feminist world-building project—that of constructing a world through love. Specifically, their love shares three fundamental commonalities related to their *living conditions, actions, and choices*. First, they are women who live a life full of love in worlds where their love is forbidden. Secondly, they are women who practice love during dark times. And third, they choose to love in unconventional ways, and in doing so, they engender possibilities, particularly in terms of contemplating the interplay between life, death, and freedom. Their living conditions reveal the space of love, their actions show love in time, and their choices transcend time, space, and gender.

Living a life full of love in worlds where love is forbidden

Studies on *Antigone* center the conflicts between Antigone and Creon as related to law (divine or human law), power (family/kinship or state), and issues of incest. Placing Kiêu alongside Antigone, however, reveals another perspective of conflict in relation to love. In this section, I will argue that both live in worlds where love is forbidden. However, not only do they dare to live a life full of love and are simultaneously glorified

and condemned because of that, but they also arouse love from those around them. For Antigone and Kiếu, love becomes a source of resistance that challenges the very authority of the world in which they live, thereby demonstrating love as a mechanism of feminist political power.

In *Antigone*, Creon rules over the new world after the devastating fratricidal war which saw Polyneices and Eteocles tear each other apart. Creon is determined to establish a completely new order, demonstrating “his soul, intelligence, and judgment” through “his skill in rule and law” (174–75).⁶ This order includes regulating who is allowed to love whom and how they may love. Analysts of *Antigone* frequently cite this following dialogue (523–26) but ignore the gendered ways in which worlds are created and ruled:

Creon: My enemy is still my enemy, even in death.

Antigone: My nature is to join in love, not hate.

Creon: Go then to the world below, yourself, if you must love. Love them. When I am alive no woman shall rule.

At the beginning of this dialogue, Antigone and Creon are arguing about how to treat the dead body of Polyneices. Creon asserts that Polyneices, whether alive or dead, is his enemy. On the contrary, Antigone affirms that she joins in “love” rather than “hate.” Creon then tells Antigone that if she wants to love, she should go down to the underworld. Creon’s statement creates a boundary between “this world” and “the world below,” in which two points are noteworthy. First, in this world, only Creon has the right to speak, while Antigone is not allowed to. Secondly, in this world, one that Creon rules, there is no love, and Antigone is not allowed to love someone that Creon prohibits her from loving. If Antigone wants to stand for love and assert her right to love, she cannot live in that world, as there is no place for her, and she has no other option but to go “to the world below”. However, Creon’s following statement seems to shift the emphasis from “love” and “hate”, “this world” and “the world below,” to man and woman, in which “I”/Creon represents man: “When I am alive no woman shall rule.” This marks a shift from the topic of how to treat the dead to the topic of who has the right to “rule,” to issue rules, and at this point, “I”/man connects with “this world,” becoming “I am a man who rules this world,” and “In my man-ruled-world, there is no love.” However, the presupposition of the clause “no woman shall rule” assumes that Creon recognizes that Antigone is demanding the right to rule, and that she is arguing for power with Creon. Antigone rules by a contrary rule that Creon cannot accept, which is the rule of love. In this case, Antigone opposes Creon with the principle of love, which challenges the world that Creon is trying to create.⁷

The figure of Antigone not only represents love and claims the right to love someone she is forbidden to love, she further ignites love in other characters, thereby rendering Creon’s efforts to prevent people from loving her futile. The Chorus, after witnessing Haemon’s departure, speaks about the unbeatable power of love: “Love undefeated in the fight, / Love that makes havoc of possessions, / Love who lives at night in a young girl’s soft cheeks, / Who travels over sea, or in huts in the countryside— / there is no god able to escape you / nor anyone of men, whose life is a day only, / and whom you possess is mad” (781–90). These lines of poetry are used as a lever to emphasize the intense emotions that the image of Antigone evokes in them.⁸ In other words, she is someone with the ability to stir up a love that cannot be resisted: “Here I too am borne out of the course of lawfulness / when I see these things, and

I cannot control / the springs of my tears / when I see Antigone making her way/ to her bed—but the bed / that is rest for everyone” (801–06). Perhaps this is why Lacan spoke of Antigone as someone who “reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire,” and “it is Antigone herself who fascinates us, Antigone in her unbearable splendor” (Lacan 1992, 247).

From this perspective, the world of conflict in the play *Antigone* is a world in which Creon tries to prohibit and resist Antigone’s love, as well as the love that others have for her, and to resist the rule that her love demands. In that world, Creon is in conflict with everyone because they stand on Antigone’s side instead of his. Viewing their affection for Antigone as wrong, Creon scolds Haemon, “Your nature is vile, in yielding to a woman” (471), mocks Ismene by saying she “suddenly lost her wits” (684), and ridicules Teiresias, “You are a wise prophet, but what you love is wrong” (1059). This begs the question: why is the play titled *Antigone*, who appears briefly and dies before the play ends even though Creon is the opening and closing character? Perhaps, an answer is that Antigone, while alive, created the power of love which, despite her death, still exists and exerts its strength in the patriarchal world that Creon ruled.

According to Judith Butler, in the conflict between Creon and Antigone, what offends Creon the most is that Antigone has appropriated his masculinity (Butler 2000). For Bonnie Honig, what drives Creon so insane that he forces people to put her in a dark cave immediately is that she has contradicted what he had previously said about the replicability of a woman.⁹ However, examining the conflict from the perspective of the right to issue a worldview or designate ideal worlds, Creon’s inability to accept Antigone and subsequent need to destroy her is rooted in her claims to rule by love. This stands in opposition to Creon’s approach to ruling. Specifically, the world in which he rules does not have love. If it does, that love must be issued by him and him alone.

Similar to *Antigone*, whereby the principle of prohibiting woman’s love is present in the figure of Creon, this principle manifests in *The Tale of Kiều* within the moral tenets of “The Three Teachings” of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This amalgamation of the “three teachings” is epitomized in the discourse of Tam Hợp Đạo Cô. This figure encapsulates the roles of a Buddhist monk, a practitioner of Daoism, and a spokesperson for the “Heaven’s Mandate” (*tianming*) of Confucianism, symbolizing an era in Vietnam where “the coexistence and mutual influence of three religions are termed the harmonious coexistence of three teachings” (Thích 2016, 129). Explaining the destiny of Kiều and answering Giác Duyên’s¹⁰ question “True daughter, faithful lover—she’s proved both: why has she known but sorrow and distress,” Tam Hợp Đạo Cô said:

Thúy Kiều is endowed with gifts and wisdom
 By chance, she was born a woman
 Furthermore, she embraces love
 Entrapping herself within its twisting tides
 Thus, amidst serene and joyful environs
 her peace is a fleeting wisp, found no enduring lease
 Phantoms guided, demons paved; she persistently seeks out
 thorny path and arduous way to traverse.
 (2659–66; my translation)

These words serve to contribute to our comprehension of the intellectual and moral themes that form the foundation of *The Tale of Kiều*, which is akin to those spoken by the Chorus in Sophocles’ play *Antigone*.

In the phrase “Furthermore, she embraces love” (*Lại mang lấy một chữ tình*), the term *chữ tình* (love) encapsulates not only the connotations of *qing* in East Asian culture as described by Santangelo and Boros (2019) but also encompasses the amalgamated perspectives of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism regarding Kiều’s love. First, in Tam Hợp Đạo Cô’s utterance, the notion emerges that “gifts and wisdom” are traits that women ought not to possess; if they do, they should conceal these attributes to preserve peace and naivety. This viewpoint aligns with the Confucian doctrine that for women, “ignorance is virtue.”¹¹ Here, “gifts and wisdom” might be advantageous for men but pose a disadvantage to women. Furthermore, within Confucianism, women’s inclination towards love is equated with licentiousness. Specifically, Confucianism rejects woman’s self-determination in love and marriage, emphasizing parental authority in selecting suitable matches. Violating this norm can result in the dissolution of love, the degradation and sorrow of women, even leading to tragic consequences, as exemplified by Kiều’s reference to the tale of Thôi Oanh Oanh and Trương Quân Thụy (511–20). Secondly, in this context, we observe the Buddhist belief concerning the root cause of Kiều’s suffering, attributing it to attachment, specifically to her entanglement in love. Scholars interpreting Buddhist notions within *The Tale of Kiều* (Chơn Hạnh [1970] 2007; Sheldon 2008) suggest that Kiều’s life mirrors the ideal life delineated in the Four Noble Truths as expounded by the Buddha in the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma (Sheldon 2008, 2). Accordingly, Kiều’s love is perceived as stemming from “bad karma,” leading inevitably to heartbreak. Thirdly, within the realm of Daoism, the concept of the “way” (or the “path”) is evident. Kiều, in her emotional turmoil, embarks upon a misguided path, one paved by demons and guided by phantoms, impeding her vision of truth.

These ideologies depicted within the world of *The Tale of Kiều* posit that Kiều might have found greater happiness had she not “embraced love.” However, it’s noteworthy that, while initially internalizing these teachings, Kiều’s subsequent actions challenge these precepts. Kiều is betrothed to Kim Trọng without her parents’ consent and later reunites with him after a 15-year separation, thereby defying Confucian doctrines. Despite her inclination towards monastic life on two occasions, aspiring to “quench lust’s fire, wash earthly filth away” (1932) or to “make a home of that small cloud-locked church, living on salt and greens in carefree days” (2053–54), she deviates from the Buddhist path, reverting to the life of a courtesan, and marries another man, thus becoming entangled in subsequent love relationships. Despite her persistent pursuit of a “thorny path and arduous way to traverse,” ultimately, she returns to her family, living among those who love her and whom she loves, in the manner she desires.

While all three ideological systems propagate the belief that “love” is the root of suffering, particularly in Tam Hợp Đạo Cô’s view, Kiều’s miserable existence primarily arises from her persistent embrace of “love.” However, upon close examination in *The Tale of Kiều*, Kiều not only “never regrets her loves” (Hoàng [1967] 2007, 835), but her love isn’t synonymous with suffering and sorrow, but rather with joy and contentment (Phan 2005).

Similar to Antigone, Kiều not only loves but also inspires love from others. What is noteworthy is that this love does not solely come from those who hold favorable opinions of her but also from her adversaries. The court official, instead of condemning her, uses the principle “inside the rules of justice mercy dwells” to persuade Thúc Ông not to continue his lawsuit against her, allowing her to escape the life of a courtesan and become Thúc Sinh’s wife. Hoạn Thư, who should have despised her and sought to inflict suffering upon her, has a change of heart and lets her go with compassion.

Hồ Tôn Hiến, a cunning and treacherous official, agrees to let her bury Từ Hải, his enemy, without jeopardizing her life. Thus, if we accept that Kiều's struggle in *The Tale of Kiều* is the struggle against fate, and if Trương's statement that the real philosophy of *The Tale of Kiều* is that "only we ourselves can create our destiny" (Trương 2006, 183) is true, then Kiều's story is not so much the "talent and destiny incongruence" as the struggle against the belief that a woman should not embrace love.¹² In a society where woman's love is forbidden and regarded as the root of all misfortunes, Kiều defies these norms and demonstrates that love is a powerful force capable of resolving and reconciling conflicts between individuals within the realms of law, social hierarchy, and principles of dealing with enemies in times of war.

In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh writes, "This is the world in which I move uninvited, profane on a sacred land, neither me nor mine, but me nonetheless" (Trinh 1989, 1). These poetic lines provide a broad overview of the condition of women while also expressing women's experience of living in this world. The world which they are brought into is not constructed according to their principles, but rather by "a group of mighty men [which] attributed to itself a central, dominating position vis-à-vis other groups" (1), leaving them without a sense of belonging. In this living condition, women are merely uninvited guests, lost and wandering; they are part of the world and yet are marginalized by it. Antigone and Kiều, in their respective worlds, provide ample material for reflection on the relationship between women and the world. Both of these women live in worlds where their love is prohibited. In these two texts, patriarchal systems operate through the restriction or control of love, with predetermined scenarios about whom and how humans, particularly women, should love. However, this system appears to have failed to control Antigone and Kiều. Despite the teachings that warn against indulging in love, Kiều survives and returns as a person with the power to choose the life she desires. By comparison, although Antigone dies in the end, Creon has to admit that he made a mistake. Here, the voices of Kiều and Antigone offer successful interventions in the Patriarchal Universe of Discourse (PUD), as described by Marilyn Frye (Frye 1992, 8). Through their unwavering perseverance and courage to love in worlds where love is prohibited and tightly regulated, Kiều and Antigone demonstrate that they are practitioners of love.

Practicing love in dark times

In this section, I shift the focus of how Kiều and Antigone love from the dimension of space, i.e., their living condition, to their practice of love with respect to the temporal dimension. The feminist readings of Antigone's love that center the questions of *who* Antigone loves and *why* she loves them often lead to a circular debate. Luce Irigaray suggests that Antigone's love is for her mother, who represents the blood that patriarchal societies have overshadowed and marginalized (Irigaray 2010). Separately, Judith Butler argues that Antigone loves her brother Polyneices and her father Oedipus (as her father is also her brother), so much so that her love for them becomes a case of catachresis because she cannot not find a referent (Butler 2000). Bonnie Honig quotes Herodotus' story of Intaphrenes' wife and Darius to argue that the person whom Antigone loves and protects is Ismene. For Honig, Antigone fights to protect her sister's choice to live (Honig 2013). Such analyses seek alternative factors that motivate Antigone but have the effect of pigeonholing Antigone's love into a single object of affection. They fail to see love in its temporal dimension and multiplicity. Indeed, as women who practice love, Kiều and Antigone offer the possibility of examining the

process and multiplicity of love. By analyzing these practitioners of love in the context of war, I argue that their love is an effort to resist division, and in doing so, they reject living according to predetermined script of gender norms that are imposed on women within patriarchal settings.

Pursuing questions of *how* instead of *who* and *why* can reveal the multiplicity of Kiều's and Antigone's love in time. Antigone loves her father, mother, brother, and her sister, each with a different kind of love that is situational and does not exclude one from the other. Antigone loves her father by supporting and guiding him when he is exiled from Thebes to Athens (*Oedipus at Colonus*). She loves her brother (and also her mother, referring to Polyneices as "my mother's son") by burying him and demanding justice for the dead. Antigone buries Polyneices because he needs to be treated justly, above all else. Moreover, she loves Ismene by allowing her sister to choose her own path, regardless of adversity. According to Michael R. Michau, "Antigone's task in her love for Ismene is to allow [her] to personally and morally mature, to take responsibility for her own actions, and to ultimately become an autonomous moral subject" (Michau 2005, 63).

Like Antigone, Kiều always lives in a state of being in love, and this makes her ecstatic. Sometimes she makes mistakes in her choices, but it creates a rich color in her life experiences. Kiều loves her father and younger brother, and she chooses to sell herself and sacrifice her own happiness to save them. During her wandering days, she gives her affection to more than one man. Her love contradicts the doctrine of Confucianism which states that "good men remain faithful to one lord, good women remain faithful to one husband." Her love for Kim Trọng remains the love of a beauty and a scholar, associated with literature, and for refined hobbies such as chess, poetry, art and music. Her love for Thúc Sinh is the enjoyment of the desires of the merchant class where "What had begun as lust soon turn to love" (1290). Her love for Từ Hải is the affection between confidants. In practicing love, Kiều and Antigone reveal the multiplicity of love.

Kiều and Antigone's love can assume many different forms and shades, with various aspects and nuances, but at its deepest level, it is a love that resists war. In this section, I analyze Kiều and Antigone as women who practice love during a particular period of human existence—the time of war. They are women who act according to the principle of "make love, not war," but who also suffer the dire consequences of living and acting by this principle. They are not ideal actors, but their actions give us much to ponder.

"Make love, not war" was the political slogan of the cultural resistance movement in the 1960s by those in the US who opposed the Vietnam War. However, few people know that, years before this, fictional women in both Greece and Vietnam openly practiced this principle. As previously stated, Antigone and Kiều live in a world where love is prohibited, and this world is created and established by patriarchal rules. As a result, they are drawn into wars caused by men. However, in these wars, they are not only victims, but also play a partial role and voice their opinions on the conflicts. Here, I am concerned with Antigone and Kiều as women who oppose war in different ways. To elucidate this point, I will analyze the scene where Kiều convinces Từ Hải to end the war in *The Tale of Kiều* and the scene where Antigone declares the right to bury Polyneices in *Antigone*.

Living with Từ Hải is considered the happiest and brightest period in Kiều's life, but it is also a fleeting moment before the arrival of turmoil and storms. All misfortunes stem from Kiều's agreeing with Hồ Tôn Hiến to advise Từ Hải to give up his power to the feudal court, which leads to Từ's tragic death in the battle. Afterwards, Hồ

Tôn Hiến compels Kiều to perform music to serve his celebratory feast, which Kiều accepts. This action is later interpreted as Kiều's surrendering to the enemy and is compared to the Vietnamese who worked for the French in the early twentieth century and those who collaborated with the Americans in South Vietnam.

Regarding the events that lead to these different interpretations, a couple of questions need to be considered. First, why did Kiều convince Từ Hải to end the war with the feudal court? Secondly, why did Kiều agree to serve Hồ Tôn Hiến at his feast after her husband's death? I propose a rereading of *The Tale of Kiều* to address the two aforementioned questions from Kiều's perspective. For the first question, I argue that Kiều represents a typical image of a person who protests and opposes war, desiring to remove boundaries and divides so that she may return to her family in peace. I then position Kiều in relation to Antigone to illustrate that Kiều's actions were not cowardly, but rather incredibly brave. In her own unique way, Kiều buried the fallen soldier Từ Hải and publicly honored the defeated hero in front of the victorious enemy, a deed that few dared to do.

From this perspective, Kiều is persistently and resolutely anti-war. However, Kiều also makes a mistake and causes Từ's death. She becomes a trophy of Hồ Tôn Hiến, performing at his victory banquet. On the surface, she appears to surrender to the one who has killed her husband. Many criticized her severely. However, these critics fail to understand the situation of war victims, those who are relatives of the losing side and who fall into the hands of the winning side. Upon witnessing Từ Hải's death, Kiều regrets her actions and attempts a failed suicide. If she cannot die, she has to live. But how can she continue to live? First of all, she needs to bury Từ Hải. It should be noted that she requests a burial for Từ Hải and then asks for help to return to her homeland. Her music at the victory banquet turns out to be a mourning for the deceased.

The story of Kiều advising Từ Hải to end the war appears to fall within the "beauty causes disaster" and "hens scramble for crowing in the morning" motifs, but Kiều's subsequent explanations "for the sake of our country's great cause, I betrayed my Từ" (2630; my translation) and Tam Hợp Đạo Cô's teachings "She caused one death, but saved ten thousand lives" create alternative interpretations. She saved countless others by advising Từ Hải to end the war, but had to endure personal tragedy.

Like Kiều, Antigone is a person who opposes war. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone tries everything to prevent the war between the men she loves, first Oedipus and Polyneices, and then Polyneices and Eteocles, though she always fails. If Antigone has inherited any tragedy from Oedipus, it is the tragedy of division caused by wars, power struggles, or the fear of losing power, first among the members of her royal family. Laius divides his son, Oedipus, from the family because he is afraid his son will kill him and marry his mother, which is realized when his son kills him without realizing he is his father. Similarly, Oedipus is divided from his sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, and they, in turn, are also divided from each other. Even after Polyneices and Eteocles kill each other and die, Creon continues to divide Antigone's family by issuing a law that separates the burial of her two brothers, which is unbearable to her. Therefore, what Antigone opposes in Creon is primarily the separation of relatives and the separation of herself from them. Antigone tells Ismene, her sister, "It is not for him to keep me from my own" (47), emphasizing her bond to Polyneices, just like she emphasized their common bond before. Although David H. Porter (1987) argues that Antigone's love for Polyneices separates her from Ismene, in fact, Antigone wants to connect and unite their family with this love, and in the end, she leaves to join her loved

ones who have already passed. Before her death, she says she buried her brother and her father with her own hands. She is the one who connected them, even though they were enemies when they were alive. Love connects people and replaces hatred. That is why Antigone tells Creon, “My nature is to join in love, not hate.” In the end, Antigone returns to unite with her family. She understands that she has no way to connect with Ismene, who chooses to continue living, so she says, “I am the last of them,” which means, “I am the last one who was separated from my loves and will reunite with them.” The tragedy of Oedipus’s family is primarily the tragedy of division caused by war, and Antigone is the one who, through her love, connects people and opposes this division.

Similarly, Kiều wished to end the war, which also meant ending the divisions between herself and her loved ones that have been caused by war. Ultimately, however, both Kiều and Antigone fail. Like Antigone, Kiều mourns the war dead during a celebration of a new era, which aims to erase them from history. Kiều and Antigone are clear examples of the fate of women in war and its aftermath. Although they choose different paths of action, they are not passive victims or conformers. They decline to participate in the wars instigated by patriarchal men, and upon the cessation of hostilities, in front of the victors, they themselves refuse to allow the escalation of enmity by burying the deceased and honoring those who died in battle.

The very practice of love renders these women as rule violators and breakers. In *All about love*, bell hooks talks about how men are portrayed as being able to become men by violating rules (hooks 2000). Breaking rules is an area traditionally reserved for men, but in these two works, Kiều and Antigone are seen as characters who go beyond the limits set for them.

As practitioners of love, however, do Antigone and Kiều return us to the conventional dualistic model in which women are associated with emotions and passion while men are associated with reason and war? In the following part of the paper, I will demonstrate that what distinguishes these two female characters is not only their courage to love in a way that goes against the scripts that has been written for them within a male-dominated world, but also their choices’ contributions to reflections on life, death and freedom.

Love in vita contemplativa: between life, death and freedom

By focusing on the question of *how*, we can see that Kiều and Antigone also expand the definitions and boundaries of love scenarios for women in societies dominated by men. Their love practices in spaces where love is forbidden and dark times provoke several questions: what happens when women dare to live a life full of love in a world where they are not allowed to do so? What happens when they love someone they should not and cannot love? Can they love the dead? Can their seemingly impossible love offer any potential for contemplation about life, death and freedom? In this section, I will analyze their choices of love to demonstrate the two dimensions of contemplation they bring: the relationship between life and death and the aspect of agency. Additionally, I will explore the possibility of those choices leading these women to freedom. Their choices, as materials for reflection on life, death, and freedom, surpass the normal conception of living time and space.

First of all, by choosing to be in love with the impossible, Kiều and Antigone challenge the concept of living space and boundaries of life and death. In particular, both of them differ from their sisters in their intense emotions towards the dead. During the

Pure Brightness Festival, when the three sisters go to tend to their ancestors' graves and encounter Đạm Tiên's grave, Kiếu's heart overflows with pity, and tears streams down her face upon hearing Đạm's story. Kiếu mourns in front of Đạm Tiên's grave, composing poems to honor and console her soul. Similarly, Antigone claims the right to bury her brother and refuses to forget him.

Kiếu and Antigone also both encounter resistance from their sisters, who cannot not comprehend their actions. Thúy Vân tells Kiếu, "My sister, you should be laughed at, / lavishing tears on one long dead and gone!" (105–06). Similarly, Ismene tells Antigone, "But you are in love with the impossible" (90). The attitudes of Thúy Vân towards Kiếu and Ismene towards Antigone reveal that the love of these two sisters deviated not only from the dominant ideology and power structure of men but also from the common sense of the women around them. It emphasizes their "in love with the impossible" status, their love and mourning for the dead, and their refusal to let them fall into oblivion. From P. J. Brendese's perspective, Antigone's "in love with the impossible" actually "opens the possibility of looking to the past in a manner that makes resisting both the tyranny of forgetting and the forgetting of tyranny possible for the present and the future" (Brendese 2010, 121). From bell hooks' perspective, it can be argued that Kiếu's attachment to the dead is a choice for life rather than death: "Embracing the spirit that lives beyond the body is one way to choose life. We embrace that spirit through rituals of remembering, through ceremonies wherein we invoke the spirit presence of our dead" (hooks 2000, 202). Indeed, in response to Thúy Vân, Kiếu affirms the existence of the dead "When one who shines in talent dies, / the body passes on, the soul remains" (115–16), and Antigone says to Ismene, "The time in which I must please those that are dead / is longer than I must please those of this world." (75–76). Choosing the dead is not necessarily choosing death then. Moreover, if we understand loving as synonymous with living, then it is living without love that is synonymous with death.

By shifting the questions, again, from *who* and *why* to *how*, and placing Antigone's love for her brother alongside Kiếu's love for Đạm Tiên, we can move Antigone beyond the debate of kinship and incestual love. This love is considered to be the most faithful love as it cannot be reciprocated by the dead.¹³ Maria Lugones claims that we fail to view others with a loving eye because we cannot travel to their world. Only when we see a part of ourselves in them, are we receptive to world-traveling. When we identify with them, we look at them with love. This is how Antigone looks at Polyneices, and how Kiếu looks at Đạm Tiên.

The second aspect worth discussing is the possibility of agency in the final choices that Kiếu and Antigone made. They both reject the ideal man of their time, reject the roles of wife and mother, and ultimately speak of their state of virginity/chastity¹⁴ in various ways.

One of the most peculiar and controversial themes in *The Tale of Kiếu* is the concept of virginity (*chữ trinh*). In a Confucian context, this concept has long been interpreted in two ways. Physically, virginity is associated to the hymen, which serves as proof that a woman is still pure and has not engaged in sexual intercourse.¹⁵ The second interpretation of virginity is metaphorical, referring to the loyalty of a woman to her lover or husband. "Virginity" or *tiết hạnh*, which is synonymous to chastity in this case, is one of the "four virtues" expected of women that requires their faithfulness and sacrifice for their husbands.

In *The Tale of Kiếu*, the term "virginity" (*chữ trinh*) undergoes multiple transformations and is used in various senses.¹⁶ The most noteworthy mention virginity lies in two

conversations between Kim Trọng and Kiều during their first date and their reunion later in the poem. On their first meeting, when Kim Trọng's "wooing turns to wanton liberties" (500), Kiều reminds him to keep in mind the importance of her virginity and asks him to abstain until the night of their wedding: "But you've named me your bride—to serve her man, / she must place chastity above all else" (505–06). This is the moment when Kiều internalizes the values of feudal society, where her body does not belong to herself but to her parents and family. It is not until she loses her virginity to Mã Giám Sinh that she regrets not giving it to the man she loved. When they reunite in the latter part of the work, Kim Trọng tries to persuade Kiều to become his wife by saying, "True daughter, you upheld a women's role: / what dust or dirt could ever sully you?" (3119–20) (meaning: "Because you have given up your virginity for your filial piety / Your body is unstained, you still have your chastity"). Although she agrees to marry him, Kiều refuses to have sex with him on their wedding night, explaining, "There is little virginity left / I am supposed to keep it tightly, not to throw it away" (3161–62; my translation). What does Kiều mean when she says that she still has "little virginity" (*chữ trinh còn một chút này*)? If the term "virginity" is understood physically, it is obviously illogical because Kiều has worked as a prostitute for 15 years and has had seven husbands, so she cannot still be a virgin. If it is understood as loyalty and faithfulness, then Kiều's love life is not solely focused on Kim Trọng. As analyzed earlier, Kiều loves many different men, and her love for each person has different facets. So, in which sense does she consider herself having virginity? And how can her words be so proud, so self-respecting, and so decisive?

In fact, the conversation about *chữ trinh* in *The Tale of Kiều* is a dialogue in which Kiều asserts her autonomy over her own body from the beginning to the end of the poem. When Kim Trọng says "you have given up your virginity for your filial piety," on the surface, it appears to be a compliment to Kiều, to assure and appease her, but in reality, it is a discourse that attempts to bring Kiều back into the hierarchical system of patriarchy. Within this system, women are expected to uphold virginity, not for the preservation of their own physical or spiritual integrity, nor for the value of virginity itself, but rather because the patriarchal regime demands it. Their virginity, therefore, belongs to their father and husband. This means that if they exchange virginity for a value deemed higher within this system (in this case, "filial piety"), they may lose their virginity without facing condemnation or scorn.¹⁷ Both the woman and her virginity are possessions of the male figures in her life. But in the end, Kiều rejects Kim Trọng's interpretation and refuses to engage in sexual relations with him. Her refusal is a rejection of the patriarchal universe of discourse. By preserving her virginity, Kiều asserts her right to self-determination and freedom. The discussion of virginity thus represents the highest expression of a love that is linked to knowledge, which is true self-affection as expressed by Luce Irigaray (2021). Therefore, Kiều's assertion of her autonomy over her body through the concept of virginity represents a significant act of self-affection and empowerment.

In *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism*, Marilyn Frye argues that, "The word 'virgin' did not originally mean a woman whose vagina was untouched by any penis, but a free woman, one not betrothed, not married, not bound to, not possessed by any man. It meant a female who is sexually and hence socially her own person." (Frye 1992, 133). If we understand "virgin" in this sense, then Kiều's use of the term *chữ trinh* in *The Tale of Kiều* aligns with this original and revolutionary meaning. Frye also asserts that "In any universe of patriarchy, there are no Virgins in this sense."

However, in the fictional world of *The Tale of Kiều*, there exists a virgin whereby Kiều affirms her virginity in the end, electing to preserve her sexual independence and integrity rejecting any man who would possess her.

Similarly, Antigone in Sophocles' tragic play ultimately rejects the traditional roles of women as wives and mothers, despite her lamentation over her lack of family and friends. This choice does not align precisely with Judith Butler's concept of Antigone's "promiscuous obedience" to her father's curse, but rather can be interpreted as Antigone's defiance of the curse. Before he dies, her father Oedipus declares that she will live without love, but Antigone chooses instead not to live without love. She cannot exist in a world that does not allow her love to flourish or only allows love in the context of a tyrant, instead, she decides to love whomever she chooses and to live for herself rather than fulfilling the expectations placed on her as a woman, which makes Antigone a "willful virgin" in Marilyn Frye's frame, though her choice remains a subject of controversy.

When discussing "the mystery of Mary" as articulated by Luce Irigaray (2021), an intriguing and unique interpretation of "the virginity of Mary" emerges. Irigaray posits that acknowledging not only "the physiological hymen of Mary" but also avoiding a separation between the body and spirit necessitates recognition of "her spiritual participation" in both "the conception of Jesus and the redemption of humanity," which she terms as her "spiritual virginity" (100). Irigaray redefines the concept of woman's virginity as "Being capable of a virgin ... breath and energy must help us to reach a stage of our individuation that we have not succeeded in incarnating, each one and between us" (Irigaray 2021, 75). This perspective provides valuable insight into the characters of Kiều and Antigone. Within this framework, Kiều reclaims and redefines her virgin body through the assertion of her "virgin soul," while Antigone maintains both physiological hymen and spiritual virginity "available for the advent of a not yet come to pass future" (Irigaray 2021, 100) in "that other world" (521) where, according to her, authoritarian figures like Creon hold no sway.

By being "in love with the impossible" and through their deviant choices, Kiều and Antigone expand the boundaries. They have transformed love into not just a "battlefield" of actions but an opening space for contemplation on the relationship between love and death. To some extent, this entails initiating a discussion about women's freedom. Kiều and Antigone's love for the impossible and the act of burial, which seeks to honor the deceased, prompt us to reconsider what it means to live, to die, and to experience a "living death." If we concur with the philosophy that "Love makes us feel more alive. Living in a state of lovelessness we feel we might as well be dead" (hooks 2000, 191), we can better understand Antigone's statement to Ismene that "[her] life died long ago" (560). Ultimately, both Antigone and Kiều assert contentment with themselves and provide valid justifications for their love, and in the process, assert their autonomy over their own bodies. They transition from bestowing love upon others to loving themselves, and thus achieving freedom for themselves. These two works demonstrate the contribution of female empowerment to a world-building project through love.

Toward a feminist world-building project through love

In summary, this article uses the lens of love to build a bridge between two influential female figures in both Eastern and Western cultures. Specifically, I shift the focus of the question regarding Antigone's love from *who* and *why* to *how*, positioning this character alongside Kiều in *The Tale of Kiều*. This reading approach draws inspiration from the

conceptualization of love by feminist scholars of color such as bell hooks, Maria Lugones, and notably, Trinh T. Minh-ha. In *All about love*, bell hooks discusses the current state of a world where young people no longer believe in the presence of love: “Youth culture today is cynical about love. And that cynicism has come from their pervasive feeling that love cannot be found” (hooks, 2000, xviii). Maria Lugones addresses the failures of women to love one another, including “failure to love my mother and white/Anglo women’s failure to love women across racial and cultural boundaries in the United States” (Lugones 2003, 79). Trinh T. Minh-ha not only speaks about the absence of love in love stories in general but also describes a world where love is killed, which she named as “lovecidal” (Trinh 2016). It seems that the lack of love between individuals is the underlying cause of all conflicts, the issue at the core of the tragedies in our worlds. The issues such feminists raise in the contemporary world can find echoes in both *Antigone* and *The Tale of Kiều*, prompting us to consider the role and voice of women in this matter. Living in a world where their love is prohibited, Kiều and Antigone participate in a feminist world-building project by love. Exercising their voices against male-dominated societies as refugees,¹⁸ they opted for lives that deviated from the traditional expectations imposed upon women, such as marriage and motherhood. In doing so, they present an alternative love in contrast to the patriarchal script often dictated to women: their loves are not confined to one person or solely reserved for a husband or a man. This paper demonstrates that women’s love, rather than a fixed essence directed towards a singular object, exists within its multiplicity in a process that transcends the boundaries of time and space, and gender.

In *Antigone, Interrupted*, Bonnie Honig critiques Judith Butler’s mourning model and introduces a new model of agonism. Honig’s analysis expands the discourse on Antigone in particular and feminism in general. However, if Antigone can truly be seen as a new hope for feminism, as Bonnie Honig suggests, then extending the comparison of Antigone to a representative of women in Southeast Asia would not only broaden the scope of the analysis but also expand the perspective of feminism. The uniqueness of Kiều lies in the fact that the portrayal of her love and life journey as a woman has come to be a narrative emblematic of a nation.¹⁹ Similar to Antigone, Kiều is a character that sparks considerable debate. However, unlike Antigone and differing from the predominant female protagonists in Western classical literature such as Juliet, Ophelia in Shakespeare’s works, Gretchen in Goethe’s, Luise in F. Schiller’s, and even characters like Flaubert’s Madame Bovary or Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, Kiều’s distinction lies in her survival. While the aforementioned Western literary heroines meet tragic ends, which Butler and Honig find regrettable when discussing Antigone, Kiều does not succumb to death; instead, she lives on to love and to prove the endurance of her love. This facet sets Kiều apart. Therefore, an examination of Kiều and Antigone in tandem presents an alternative entry point wherein it is not so much mourning or antagonism as it is love itself that can be a new direction for a feminism based on transcultural framework. I use the term “transcultural” in the sense of Maria Lugones’ “world-travelling” and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s concept of multiplicity. The transcultural framework employs love as its foundational element. Comparative literature utilizes this framework to traverse cultural boundaries, viewing different cultural substrates through a “loving eye” rather than an “arrogant eye,” countering the imperialistic gaze critiqued by Spivak (2003). Women like Kiều or Antigone are interconnected as transcultural subjects. They are a “race of lovers”²⁰ who do not stand solely as individuals or citizens but strive to foster harmony, healing, connection, and peace within their communities while seeking freedom and autonomy for themselves. Moreover, it allows for

the simultaneous amplification of multiple voices. This aligns with Spivak's notion of an alternative form of comparative literature: the planetary one, and enables us to consider a transcultural harmony of resisting war by love.

When the war between Russia and Ukraine broke out in 2022, raising alarms about the possibility of a third world war, it became apparent that the events depicted in *The Tale of Kiều* and *Antigone* are not mere stories of the past. As the concern for constructing a world that avoids self-destruction through bloody conflicts between people becomes increasingly crucial, the questions posed by *Antigone* and *Kiều* resurface. Should this world be built on love or on war and animosity? If the world is to be built on love, what kind of love should it be? Who has the authority to determine who loves whom, and what forms should love take? The answers provided by *Kiều* and *Antigone* appear to contradict Machiavelli's response: it is better to be loved than feared. Studies on *Antigone* have consistently raised new questions, such as: "What would happen if psychoanalysis were to have taken *Antigone* rather than *Oedipus* at its point of departure?" (Steiner 1996, 18; Butler 2000, 57); "What would happen if Western ethics had chosen *Antigone* rather than Plato's Republic?" (Michau 2005, 65). This paper poses an additional question: what would happen if *Antigone* and *The Tale of Kiều* were to replace Machiavelli's *The Prince* as the principle of political thought?

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Notes

1 Regarding comparative studies between *Antigone* and female characters from England, India, and other regions, see, e.g., Hirai (1998) and Skof (2021). In Vietnam, *Oedipus the King* has been known for a long time, but *Antigone* has been relatively obscure until recently with the translation of *Antigone's Claim* and the call to stage a Vietnamese version of *Antigone* were introduced. The emergence of *Antigone* has sparked a lively debate in a country belonging to the Global South and has opened up discussions on women's rights in this region. Information about the discussions on *Antigone* can be found on the website of the Goethe Institute (<https://www.goethe.de/ins/vn/en/kul/bue/ant/22470867.html>) or through links on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IitaAcIvy78>) and Facebook pages of the Việt Nam Women's Publishing House (<https://fb.watch/KEzgYPnSWm/>).

2 Originally based on the novel *The Tale of Kim Vân Kiều* by Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân from China, Du's *The Tale of Kiều* gained such immense fame and distinction that it was eventually translated back into Chinese. So far, most Asian countries, including China, Japan, and Korea, possess their own versions of *Kiều*. *Kiều* has emerged as an exemplary character in the genre of "scholar-beauty novels." Further, *The Tale of Kiều* encapsulates the core values of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism that cannot be overlooked if one wants to truly comprehend the lives of individuals in general, and the experiences of women in Southeast Asian countries in particular.

3 The other two are *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. *Oedipus* killed his father (Laius) and married his mother (Jocasta) and gave birth to four children: Eteocles, Polyneices, *Antigone*, and Ismene. After his death, his two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, were set to take turns holding the throne and being king of Thebes. But Eteocles, after a year as king, did not want to cede the throne to Polyneices. Polyneices was enraged, married the princess of Argos, and led the Argos army to fight for what he considered to be his. Eteocles and Polyneices fought and both died at each other's hands. These events happen before the start of the play.

4 Although they cannot be strictly classified as queer heroines, they clearly diverge from the societal norms that were intended to define them.

5 The history surrounding the creation, utilization, and interpretation of *The Tale of Kiều* can be described as predominantly male-centric, without any hint of exaggeration. Nguyễn Du, a male author, is credited with the creation of *The Tale of Kiều*, and the dominant interpretations of this literary work have been provided by male scholars. Even in the context of its translation into English, all official translations of *The Tale of Kiều* into English have been done by male translators, and subsequent commentaries on the translation also emanated from male voices. While there are indeed female scholars who have written about *The Tale of Kiều*, their perspectives often align with the male viewpoint, portraying Kiều as a victim of her circumstances. However, within the diaspora community, the narrative changes as strong female voices emerge, particularly through artistic mediums such as novels and films. These women, including Trinh T. Minh-ha (the director of *A Tale of Love*), Le Ly Hayslip (Vietnamese American author of *When Heaven and Earth Change Place*), and Ly Thu Ho (Vietnamese French writer of *Printemps inachevé*), provide an alternative and inspiring “herstory” that often proves more thought-provoking than traditional literary criticism.

6 All citations from Sophocles’ play are from David Grene’s 1991 translation. All citations from Nguyễn Du’s masterpiece are from Huỳnh Sanh Thông’s 1983 translation. All references after quotations from the two works are to line numbers.

7 The complexity of Creon lies in the fact that while he prohibits Antigone from loving her own kin and employs the principle of love to deal with the deceased, he demands love from Haemon, his own son. This creates a web of intricate relationships within the textual world. By the end of the play, Creon finds himself devoid of anyone who loves him by his side, and those whom he hoped would love him end up loving Antigone instead.

8 According to Lacan, the Chorus are not only senators or elders in the play, but also us—the audiences.

9 Creon says that, for Haemon, a woman is someone who can be replaced, and Antigone, in turn, says that for her both her husband and children are replaceable (Honig 2013).

10 Giác Duyên is a Buddhist nun in *The Tale of Kiều* who saved Kiều when she committed suicide.

11 From this perspective, it is very similar to the Western view that a woman who wants to be loved and at peace must wear a mask and transform into an object of desire.

12 According to Phan, the difference between Nguyễn Du and Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân is that Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân shifted from the theme of “love and suffering” to “talent and destiny” (Phan 2005). However, what he fails to recognize is that the inclusion of the “talent” theme does not imply the replacement of “love” as a significant element in *The Tale of Kiều*. On the contrary, “love” continues to hold a paramount role in *The Tale of Kiều*, as well as in Vietnamese literature during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this work, love is truly the principle that creates the world because Nguyễn Du always refers to a special type of people, namely, people with love, which he calls “the race of lovers” (243).

13 Michael R. Michau provides an explanation of this phenomenon from the perspective of Kierkegaard, “Third, ‘the work of love in recollecting one who is dead is a work of the most faithful love’ (355). Everyday notions of love (*Elskov*) direct themselves toward objects. One loves this particular person; the celebrity is loved by that group of fans. The beloved and the celebrity, in this instance, run the risk of changing (and deteriorating in talent and good looks) over time. Abiding love, however, loves the beloved throughout these changes. This kind of love is precisely eternal. By removing the physical presence and changeability of the beloved, in the instance of loving the dead, this kind of neighbor-love (*Kjerlighed*) is the most faithful.” (Michau 2005, 60)

14 In general, scholars distinguish between “virginity” and “chastity” as anatomical and spiritual and psychological state (Johnson 2015). However, in *The Tale of Kiều*, “virginity” and “chastity” seem to overlap. Her “chữ trinh” means both. In his translation, Huỳnh Sanh Thông translated “chữ trinh” as “chastity”. This limitation of translation has lost the sense of virginity.

15 On the wedding night, the breaking of the hymen, accompanied by some bleeding, serves as evidence of the bride’s chastity. From a biological standpoint, although there is no guarantee of the absolute integrity of the hymen (as it may rupture due to accidents or may be too thick to break during the first intercourse), in some East Asian countries such as Vietnam and China, virginity is a biological detail used to evaluate the moral conduct and ethics of women.

16 It can refer to physical virginity, as when Mã Giám Sinh devised a method to fabricate Kiều’s hymen in case he violated her virginity: “Juice from pomegranate skin and cockscomb blood/ will heal it up and lend

the virgin look” (837–38). It can also be used figuratively to represent chastity and belief as in Kiêu’s conversation with Tú Bà after being deceived by Sô Khanh, “Hereafter I’ll forget my maiden shame” (Tấm lòng trinh bạch từ sau xin chừa) (1148).

17 This line of thinking essentially ascribes meanings to a woman’s virginity/chastity in order to direct their behavior, and their actions serve the feudal patriarchal regime, their husband, and father, rather than prioritizing their own happiness and bodily autonomy.

18 For an article scrutinizing the juridical-political stance of Antigone as a refugee and elucidating the political and literary possibility of envisioning Antigone as an emblem of the strangers (foreigner, immigrant, refugee) in the twenty-first century, see Castro (2013). A notable cinematic adaptation adeptly portraying Antigone’s characterization as a contemporary refugee can be observed in the film *Antigone* (2019) directed by Sophie Deraspe, a Canadian woman filmmaker. Regarding the conceptualization of Kiêu symbolizing the Vietnamese refugee, insights may be gleaned from Huỳnh Sanh Thông in Nguyễn (1983) and Lan P. Duong (2012). Antigone and Kiêu as emblematic representations of refugee women constitute a subject matter that we intend to expound upon in a forthcoming paper.

19 Kiêu embodies an allegory for the fate of both the individual and the Vietnamese nation. Phạm Quỳnh, an influential Vietnamese intellectual of the early twentieth century, proclaimed, “As long as *The Tale of Kiêu* remains, our language remains; as long as our language remains, our country remains” (Phạm [1924] 2009, 12). Vietnamese individuals, both within the country and in the diaspora community, identify themselves with Kiêu’s destiny.

20 The phrase used by Nguyễn Du in *The Tale of Kiêu* (243).

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