

Where Is Mercy Bred:

A reading of *As You Like It* from the Perspective of the Philosophy of *Ren*

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I. Introduction

In the plot of *As You Like It* the thread of hostility turning into reconciliation interwinds with the thread of romance in the Forest of Arden. In the first four acts, brothers guard against each other as enemies in both generations, but in the last act, lovers are rewarded, family reunited and enemies forgiven. Duke Fredrick even forsakes violence and returns the crown to his brother on the persuasion of an old religious man. The turning point where the play moves from confrontation to harmony is the burgeoning of compassion that has urged Orland to save his villainous brother at the risk of his own life.

However, the play doesn't have a detailed account of how Orlando saves Oliver, though the brave deed changes the relation between the brothers and the development of the plot. What is even more curiously understated is why and how Orlando makes up his mind to return good for evil.

If *As You Like It* is a play about the triumph of compassion and mercy, *The Merchant of Venice* may be said to be a comedy about the failure of mercy, for although the play contains a brilliant speech on the power of mercy, it fails to generate any feeling of compassion. A comparison of Orlando's deed with Shylock's response to Portia's persuasion in the light of the definition of divine love in Christianity and the theory of *ren* (humanness, 仁) in Confucian philosophy may lead to some insights into the quality of mercy. The cross-cultural readers may also be reminded of a well-known hypothetical example in Mencius philosophy that is analogous to the dangerous situation in *As You Like It*. Read against the Confucian theory of *ren*, the omission of Orlando's innermost thoughts at the critical moment may be an expression of how and why the feeling of mercy originates in his mind.

II. "The quality of mercy is not strained"

The plot of Orlando fighting the lioness is probably from Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*. But Shakespeare handled it with his own techniques. In the source story, Rosader (the counterpart of Orlando), on seeing his brother Saladyne in danger, "debated with himself." Narrated from both the omniscient point of view and the first-person point of view, Lodge's romance contains a rather detailed account of Rosader's inner conflicts—

Now, Rosader, fortune that long hath whipped thee with nettles, means to salve thee with roses, and having crossed thee with many frowns, now she presents thee with the brightness of her favors. ... Thou seest Saladyne thine enemy, the worker of thy misfortunes, and the efficient cause of thine exile, subject to the cruelty of a merciless lion, brought into

this misery by the gods, that they might seem just in revenging his rigor, and thy injuries. ... Now Rosader, shalt thou return unto Bordeaux and enjoy thy possessions by birth, and his revenues by inheritance: now mayest thou triumph in love, and hang fortune's altars with garlands. For when Rosalynde hears of thy wealth, it will make her love thee the more willingly.

After thinking of wealth and love, Rosader walks away, but a new passion drives him to the opposite direction—

Ah, Rosader, wert thou the son of Sir John of Bordeaux, whose virtues exceeded his valour, and yet the most hardiest knight in all Europe? Should the honour of the father shine in the actions of the son, and wilt thou dishonor thy parentage, in forgetting the nature of a gentleman? Did not thy father at his last gasp breathe out this golden principle: Brothers' amity is like the drops of balsamum, that saveth the most dangerous sores? Did he make a large exhort unto concord, and wilt thou show thyself careless? O Rosader, what though Saladyne hath wronged thee, and made thee live an exile in the forest, shall thy nature be so cruel, or thy nurture so crooked, or thy thoughts so savage, as to suffer so dismal a revenge?

Before Rosader is ready to fight the lion, he argues with himself on honour, virtue, parentage, his father's teaching and what he gains by reconciling an enemy—motivations Lodge sought out for Orlando's behavior.

But in Shakespeare's version, how Orlando decides to fight the lioness is told by Oliver retrospectively, and three elements hinder the narrative from giving a careful recount of the motivations Orlando has for saving his brother: the reticent and alien style of the narrative, the third-person

limited point of view and instant questions from the two girls whom Oliver is talking to.

Oliver’s relation of the incident is reticent. He thus describes the situation—

A lioness, with udders all drawn dry,
Lay couching head on ground, with cat-like watch
When that the sleeping man should stir—for ‘tis
The royal disposition of that beast
To prey on nothing that doth seem as dead.
This seen, Orlando did approach the man
And found it was his brother, his elder brother.

(4.3.109–115)

Oliver narrates “in the alien style of an allegorical dream romance” (Montrose 43), which is not a style to show the inner world of the hero. As he reveals the identity of the sleeping man, Celia and Rosalind cannot help asking questions, thus diverting the discourse from any possible further description of Orlando’s instant thoughts on the discovery of his brother—

Celia:
O I have heard him speak of that same brother,
And he did render him the most unnatural
That lived amongst men.
Oliver: And well he might so do,
For well I know he was unnatural.
Rosalind:
But to Orlando –did he leave him there,
Food to the sucked and hungry lioness? (4.3.116–121)

So Oliver goes on to describe how Orlando stays to fight the lioness—

Twice did he turn his back, and purposed so.
But kindness, nobler ever than revenge,
And nature, stronger than his just occasion,
Made him give battle to the lioness,
Who quickly fell before him: (4.3.122–126)

Description of the critical moment is made of an observation from the external point of view and the praise Oliver gives Orlando in retrospection. It involves no treatment of Orlando's inner response to the situation. When Orlando appears on stage again, he and Oliver have already been discussing the romantic relation between Oliver and Celia.

The scene of Orlando saving his enemy at the risk of his own life is reminiscent of the teaching in the Bible: "But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).¹⁾ However, Oliver's narration does not show any religious calling, but instead points out "kindness" and "nature" as the cause of Orlando's heroic behavior. With "kindness" and "nature" as subjects in the lines "kindness...and nature...made him give battle to the lioness", the structure of the sentence indicates that Orlando reacts to the situation without much thinking, and cannot help doing a good deed because of his good nature.

The omission of Orlando's innermost thoughts in Shakespeare's version leaves the hint that Orlando's feeling of compassion for his brother is a spontaneous response rather than a motivated decision made with reasoning and debating as in Lodge's romance. The other two characters' transformations seem to echo the spontaneous sprout of compassion in

1) *The Holy Bible*, the Emerald Text Edition, for the Trinitarian Bible Society, Cambridge UP, p. 951.

Orlando: Oliver repents of the unjust treatments he has given his brother as soon as he is saved from the lioness; Duke Fredrick's conscience is awakened as he has a conversation with "an old religious man" (5.4.144) and he makes a clean break with his past. People turn to goodness as quickly and unpredictably as they fall in love in a romantic comedy. In the directness of Orlando's action and the speed of Oliver and Duke Fredrick's repentance, readers may be touched by how quick and natural it is for them to turn to goodness, as is said by Portia in the court scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, "The quality of mercy is not strained" (4.1.180).

Although the feeling of compassion and mercy grows spontaneously in Orlando's mind, it is not easy to have mercy on others even in the world of Shakespeare's comedies. *The Merchant of Venice*, in particular, shows how hard it is to generate compassion and mercy even by the teaching of a most eloquent and persuasive speech. An overall comparison between why it is possible for Orlando and hardly possible for Shylock to return good for evil would involve a vast range of factors. With the financial competition and racial grudge in *The Merchant of Venice*, and memories of the persecution and murderous intent in *As You Like It*, it is hard to tell if it is easier for Shylock or Orlando to forgive their antagonists. But a comparison of the omission of Orlando's inner feelings and the eloquence of the persuasion to exhort Shylock to show mercy would throw some new light on the quality of compassion and mercy that is valued in the Forest of Arden as a sign of natural tendency to goodness.

When Antonio has confessed the bond, Portia says, "Then must the Jew be merciful" (4.1.178). By "must," Portia means a "moral imperative", but Shylock replies, "On what compulsion must I? Tell me that" (179), obviously taking mercy for an "external coercion."²⁾ Portia tries to move Shylock with sacred religious principles in a grand speech. But Shylock

2) See note 4.1.178-9, *The Merchant of Venice*, New Cambridge Shakespeare, M. M. Mahood ed., Cambridge UP, 2003.

responds with “I crave the law, / The penalty and forfeit of my bond” (4.1.202–3), and the solemn speech on mercy fails to work on him. The failure would remind the readers of Portia’s philosophical saying in Act I—“If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men’s cottages princes’ palaces”(1.2.11–12). Her sentence follows the pattern of a proverb and alludes to the Socratic view on the relation between knowledge and virtue. Though Portia delivers an eloquent speech on mercy, it fails to raise compassion in the court scene, and Portia defeats Shylock later by wit. On the one hand, Shylock is not talked into knowing mercy, let alone doing what is merciful. On the other hand, the Christians are not at all merciful to Shylock, confiscating his fortune and converting him into a Christian. Therefore it is hard for mercy to originate under external persuasion, and to rise by knowing and reasoning.

The persuasion in *The Merchant of Venice* results in nothing, but the feeling of compassion and mercy sprout out in *As You Like It* without having been taught or persuaded. The contrast between the two cases can be interpreted by the distinction between the nature of the Christian idea of divine love and other forms of love. Agape, the divine love, is characterized by being “spontaneous” and “unmotivated”, i.e., there is not an explanation of God’s love in the character of the man who is the object of His love (Nygren 75); and love between one human being and another “springs from the same root as love for God—that is, from fellowship with God and experience of God’s Agape (96). Martin Luther pointed out that God is pleased only by acts of spontaneous love, and “if you want to practice mercy, its water must rise from the spring and fountainhead” (qtd. Frye 210). Portia calls for love and mercy that are spontaneous—“The quality of mercy is not strained” (4.1.180), but there is an intrinsic self-contradiction in her act of calling for mercy. She tries to exhort

Shylock to feel “spontaneous” mercy by giving guidance that is external to him. As is hinted by the omission of Orlando’s inner mind in the dangerous situation, Orlando’s response may impress the readers as uncalculated and prompt, as water rising from the spring, and it is a reflection of the divine love. The contrast between Shylock and Orlando demonstrates the different results of external guidance and unmotivated response.

III. “All ten thousand things are complete in me”

If Orlando’s brave deed is a demonstration of the spontaneous compassion and mercy, where does the feeling of mercy grow from? Christian readers would identify it as a “reflection of God’s love” (Nygren 97). For some cross-cultural readers, the hint of the sprout of mercy may lie in the omission of the text. Asian readers especially would recognize the moment of danger in the Forest of Arden as a typical circumstance hypothesized in Confucian philosophy. A cross-cultural reading may explain the origin of the feeling of mercy in a different light.

Twice did he turn his back, and purposed so.

But kindness, nobler ever than revenge,
And nature, stronger than his just occasion,
Made him give battle to the lioness, (4.3.122–127)

The importance of the dangerous lioness in this scene is that it brings out Orlando’s goodness that has always been there in him. Why does mercy rise in such a situation? Because Orlando cannot bear to think of his brother being hurt and torn by the lioness. Easy as it sounds, the sensibility to other people’s suffering is just the origin of *ren* (humanness

/ benevolence, 仁) in Confucian philosophy. After Confucius, the philosophy of *ren* was best explicated by Mencius.

Mencius said, “All human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others.” After that statement, *Mencius* gives an example of the rise of the feeling of *ren*—

Here is why I say that all human beings have a mind that commiserate with others. Now, if anyone were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion.³⁾ (*Mencius* 35)

The connection between the example of a child falling into a well and the circumstance of a man lying by a lioness is the imminent danger and suffering. In both cases, there is no time for reasoning and judging. When Orlando sees Oliver in danger, he is probably “filled with alarm, distress, pity”. Twice he turns his back, but cannot bear to imagine what Oliver is going to suffer, which is exactly the situation the Confucian philosophy describes as the rise of *ren*. As *ren* is rising, he cannot help devoting himself to what is in accordance with *ren*. According to Mencius, “one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human”. In the same section, *Mencius* discusses the sprout of *ren*, which later became the motif of Confucian philosophy and its application: “The mind’s feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humaneness[*ren* 仁]”⁴⁾ (*Mencius* 35).

The Confucian theory on the sprout of *ren* confirms that mercy is not to be imposed from without, nor to be generated by thinking or reasoning, as one is not hoping to “ingratiate himself with the child’s parents” or “seek commendation from neighbors and friends” when he feels alarm and pity to see a child about to fall into a well (*Mencius* 35). Therefore *ren* is

3) *Mencius* 2A:6.

4) 惻隱之心，仁之端也。 *Mencius* 2A:6.

inherent in every human being.

If we compare that feeling with Portia's persuasion in the court scene again, we would know what is missing in the dialogue between Shylock and Portia is the spontaneous feeling of "alarm, distress, pity, and compassion". Portia's grand speech is replete with abstract and aloof images: "rain from heaven", "the mightiest in the mightiest," "monarch," "crown," "sceptre," "power," "majesty," "kings" (4.1. 184-9). The alien diction embodies a set of principles external and foreign to Shylock, and consequently can hardly fill him with the feeling of pity and compassion. By contrast, Shylock's protest in the previous act starting with "Has not a Jew eyes" (3.1.46) would more easily arouse the feeling of pity for the use of such familiar images as "hands," "organs," "senses," etc. (3.1.47)

If spontaneity is the most important quality of mercy in the light of Christian Agape, the nearness of *ren* in the speechless action of Orlando is perhaps the most touching plot in *As You Like It* from the perspective of the Confucian philosophy. We don't need to think afar and beyond; just in the sensibility to other people's sufferings will *ren* sprout, as is in Mencius' grand statement, "All ten thousand things are complete in me"⁵⁾ (Mencius 144).

Seen from the perspective of the Confucian philosophy of *ren*, Orlando's compassion for Oliver is both a feeling for anyone in distress and a certain kind of love for one's siblings. "There are no young children who do not know enough to love their parents, and there are none who, as they grow older, do not know enough to respect their older brothers" (Mencius 147). Mencius calls the love and respect for parents and older brothers the "original, good ability" and "original, good knowledge" that people are able to do and know without learning. That goes back to the theme of the relation between nature and nurture proposed at the beginning of the play

5) 萬物皆備於我. *Mencius* 7A:4.

when Orlando complains that his elder brother hasn't given him a good education—

For my part, he keeps me rustically at home or, to speak more properly, stays me here at home unkept—for call you that “keeping” for a gentleman of my birth, that differs not from the stalling of an ox? (1.1.5–8)

He states with emphasis that their father asked Oliver to give him a good education. Orlando's lack of education is repeatedly hinted at in the development of the plot. The Renaissance idea of education emphasized the learning of knowledge and the cultivation of virtue. John Locke wrote about seventy years after the death of Shakespeare in his “Some Thoughts Concerning Education” that the most important goal of education, after physical health and belief, is kindness to others (Locke 131).⁶⁾ The lack of schooling does not prevent Orlando from doing “what were good to do”. He is able to show mercy without having learned much.

IV. “My conversion so sweetly tastes”

If it is so easy for the feeling of mercy to be generated, why have Oliver and Duke Fredrick kept persecuting their brothers? And why cannot Shylock be taught to be merciful?

Mencius has made comparison between human mind and water—

The goodness of human nature is like the downward course of water. There is no human being lacking in the tendency to

6) See Simon S. Laur, *Studies in the History of Education Opinion from the Renaissance* (Cambridge UP, 1903), p. 206.

do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward. Now, by striking water and splashing it, you may cause it to go over your head, and by damming and channeling it, you can force it to flow uphill. But is this the nature of water? It is force that makes this happen. While people can be made to do what is not good, what happens to their nature is like this.⁷⁾ (Mencius 121)

As flowing up is not the nature of water, but the work of certain force, Oliver and Duke Fredrick are forced by the temptation of wealth and power and Shylock is forced by bitter hostility to do what is not in accordance with their nature. Therefore when they do what is not good, “it is not the fault of one’s native capacities” (Mencius 124), but because their minds are stopped by “wild grasses”⁸⁾ (Mencius 160).

Oliver and Duke Fredrick turn to goodness quickly. The conversion of the villains is a comic pattern and the seemingly impossible turn is an element of the theatricality of the play (Muir 88), however, it also reinforces the theme of the original goodness. Oliver is regretful and feels ashamed as soon as he is saved by his younger brother. When Rosalind and Celia ask if he is the same villainous brother who has persecuted Orlando, Oliver replies—

’Twas I, but ’tis not I. I do not shame
To tell you what I was, since my conversion
So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am. (4.3.130–2)

He counts himself a converted man, and the conversion is a very happy experience for him. “To turn within to examine oneself and find that one is

7) *Mencius* 6A:2.

8) *Mencius* 7B:21.

sincere—there is no greater joy than this”⁹⁾ (Mencius 144).

Readers paying attention to the details may have noticed that both Oliver and Shylock are converted (*The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.383), but while Oliver’s conversion is a restoration of his own “native capacities”, Shylock is bitterly converted to a religion with legal force, which cannot turn him to goodness though he says, ironically, “I’m content” (4.1.391) and leaves the court.

Duke Fredrick is also converted—“meeting with an old religious man, / After some question with him, was converted” (5.4.144–5). As is the presentation of how Orlando saves Oliver, this critical turn in the last minute of the play is also narrated from the third–person limited point of view. When Jacques de Boys reports news about Fredrick’s invasion and conversion, he doesn’t give a detailed account, nor is there any description of how Fredrick changes his mind. However, Jacques, the one who has been melancholically contemplative and speaks of life as a stage (2.7.139–166), is absorbed by the story of conversion and decides to join Fredrick, for he believes “out of these convertites / There is much matter to be heard and learned” (5.4.168–9).

Interestingly, Fredrick has been converted by words, i.e., the old religious man talks him into knowing “what were good to do”. The knowing leads to doing instantly. In Duke Fredrick’s conversion, “to do” is really “as easy as to know what were good to do,” though the old religious man’s words of teaching are curiously missing from the play. Once converted, Fredrick is free from his addiction to the crown and embraces his own version of “how sweet my conversion tastes.”

The goodness in Orlando and the conversion of Oliver and Fredrick have the same origin. As is explained by Zhu Zi (Zhu Xi/Chu Hsi 朱子,朱熹) whose interpretation of classical Confucian thoughts has been the

9) 反身而誠，樂莫大焉。 *Mencius* 7A:4.

mainstream of Confucian philosophy since the Song Dynasty, “the feeling of pity and compassion is the selfsame as the feeling of shame when one feels guilty, and the same as the sense of right and wrong when one needs to make judgment” [translation mine] (Zhu 2416). The mind’s feeling of pity and compassion is identified as the “sprout of humanness” (*ren* 仁), one of the four sprout that are as important as the four limbs on the body.¹⁰⁾ If people “know how to enlarge and bring into fulfillment” the four sprouts, it will be like a fire beginning to burn or a spring finding an outlet” (Mencius 35).

In the world of Shakespeare’s comedies, Portia’s eloquence fails to arouse the feeling of mercy, but Orlando’s lack of education hasn’t been an obstacle to his spontaneous good deed. Mencius has talked of the merits of Shun, the ancient saint in Chinese culture, saying that “humaneness and rightness were the source of his actions: he did not just perform acts of humaneness and rightness”¹¹⁾ (Mencius 89). The saint did not do good for external goals but acted naturally and his actions were in accordance with *ren*; therefore the sprout of mercy and the practice of *ren* is both easy and lofty.

Like the other Shakespearean comedies, *As You Like It* has a thread that turns from tragic conflicts and the threat of death to harmony and happiness. Though the reality is in disorder and distress, there is always the ideal of harmony and order behind the chaos, which is the thought-idiom of Shakespeare’s age (Tillyard 426). The ending of *As You Like It* has been thought to be not skillful enough, but compared to the cloud hanging over *The Merchant of Venice* with Shylock’s exit, the resentful ending with Malvolio’s exit in *Twelfth Night* and the doubts modern readers may have about Claudio’s attitude toward Hero in *Much*

10) The other three are the sprouts of rightness (yi, 義), propriety (li, 禮) and wisdom (zhi, 智).

11) 由仁義行，非行仁義也。 *Mencius* 4B:19.

Ado About Nothing, the solution to problems in *As You Like It* is the most romantic and joyful. What could be more delightful than the hero doing good and the villains converted into harmless people? The key point in the solution is that change comes from within instead of by external force.

By the ending of *As You Like It*, forgiveness and reunion have been triggered by spontaneous rise of compassionate feelings. After reading the delightful ending, we would appreciate the speechless power in the omission and reticence of Shakespeare's treatment of Orlando's reaction to the dangerous situation.

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Abstract

**Where Is Mercy Bred:
A reading of *As You Like It* from the Perspective of the
Philosophy of *ren***

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The turning point in the plot of *As You Like It* is the rise of compassion that has urged Orlando to save his villainous brother at the risk of his own life. Since then the play moves from confrontation to harmony. However, the play doesn't have a detailed account of how Orlando makes up his mind to return good for evil. This paper proposes a cross-cultural reading of the reticence and omission in the treatment of the critical moment. Orlando's deed may be read as a reflection of the spontaneous love of Christianity. In the light of the Confucian theory of *ren*, the omission of Orlando's innermost thoughts at the critical moment may be an expression of how and why the feeling of mercy originates in his mind.

Key Words: *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, compassion, Shakespeare, *ren*

『중으실 대로, 『베니스의 상인, 동정, 인, 셰익스피어

논문접수일: 2015.11.06

심사완료일: 2015.12.21

게재확정일: 2015.12.22

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