

Editorial Foreword

Addition and Subtraction in the Trajectory of the Classics: A Case Study of the Chinese Translation of *The Merchant of Venice*

YANG Huilin

In discussing translations of the classics, Shakespeare's dialogue in Act III Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act III, Scene 1) deserves further contemplation:

O Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?
What do you see? You see an ass-head of your own, do you?
Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated.^①

In the Chinese translation, the implied meaning in the phrase "thou art translated" is all but absent, and the phrase is expressed in much the same terms as "thou art changed".^②

From "translated" to "changed into another form," what has been erased or blurred is just the hidden, or secondary, meaning of the words themselves, but if we take into consideration the text and the cultural context behind the words, a similar erasure and ambiguity here leaves a

^① William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer's Night*, Act III, Scene I, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), 288.

^② In Chinese, it was translated as "changed a form" or "changed into another form". See William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, trans. FANG Ping, in *The New Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, vol.2, ed. FANG Ping (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 2000), 65-66.

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profound “absence” or “emptiness.” In the process of the translation and the circulation of a work, different understandings, receptions, and rewriting will become manifest.

Put another way, in the face of this persistent tension between “cultural unconsciousness” and “pre-understanding,” the comparative reading of text and context is perhaps precisely the discovery of subtle “absences” and a highlighting of the “emptiness” of meaning, or the “reduction” of some “irreducible” hidden meaning. The trajectory of the classic in this way might not just add new meaning for the alien culture but may also strengthen meaning in its original context. In this, *The Merchant of Venice* provides a model case study.

Ever since Nevill Coghill published his essay “The Basis of Shakespearean Comedy,”^① it has been generally accepted that “Shylock and Antonio embody the theological conflicts and historical interrelationships of Old Law and New.”^② Yet Coghill also contends that even for later generations of western readers, a kind of “reduction” is the norm. “The age that has produced *The Faerie Queene* felt more at home in allegory than we do. Thinking in allegory is to us an unaccustomed habit of mind, but to those in a medieval tradition, second nature.... Ceasing to think of them, we lose the faculty to do so and at last deny that such a faculty can have had genuine part in a poetry which we think can be well enough understood without it.”^③

On this basis, Coghill discusses the “Trial Scene” in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The principle here mainly adumbrated in Shylock is justice, in Portia, mercy. He stands, and says he stands, for the

^① Nevill Coghill, “The Basis of Shakespearean Comedy: A Study in Medieval Affinities,” in *Essays and Studies*, no. 3 (1950): 1-28.

^② Barbara K. Lewalski, “Allegory in The Merchant of Venice,” in *Shakespeare’s Christian Dimension: an Anthology of Commentary*, ed. Roy Battenhouse (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 79.

^③ Nevill Coghill, “The Basis of Shakespearean Comedy,” in *Shakespeare’s Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary*, ed. Roy Battenhouse (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 29.

Law, for the notion that a man must be as good as his bond. It is the Old Law. ...Before Shylock's uncompromising demand for justice, mercy is in the posture of a suppliant refused. Thrice his money is offered him and rejected. He is begged to supply a surgeon at his own cost. But no, it is not in the bond. From the technical point of view the scene is constructed on a sudden reversal of situation, a traditional dramatic dodge to create surprise and denouement. The verbal trick played by Portia is not a part of her 'character,' but a device to turn the tables and show justice in the posture of a suppliant before mercy. ... Once this aspect of the Trial scene is perceived, the Fifth Act becomes an intelligible extension of the allegory; for we return to Belmont to find Lorenzo and Jessica in each other's arms. Christian and Jew, New Law and Old, are visibly united in love.^①

Roy Battenhouse also argues:

Central to this play is the test of the three caskets, a parable about the Christian paradox of losing things worldly to gain things heavenly. ...If law and grace need not be mutually exclusive, neither are justice and mercy, or the letter of the law and the spirit hidden behind the letter. It is therefore not by mere quibbling or trickery, as some critics of the play would suppose, that Portia defeats Shylock, but rather by revealing the heart of the law within its literal demands.^②

Those proposing a similar point of view also include John R. Cooper and Joan Ozark Holmer, among others.^③ And so, even though Shakespeare provided many powerful soliloquies for Shylock, the

^① Coghill, "The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy," 30-31.

^② Roy Battenhouse, "The Merchant of Venice: Comment and Bibliography," in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: an Anthology of Commentary*, ed. Roy Battenhouse (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 68.

^③ John R. Cooper, "Shylock's Humanity," *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*, 84-85.

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accusations of the Jew are destined to be in vain; although the outcome of Shylock seems wretched for many modern audiences, the play is destined to be a comedy. For Coghill, Shylock's loss of his family fortune and his daughter's elopement do not affect the "surprise and denouement" at the end of the play, and the music which accompanies the dialogue remains as the "symbol of harmony." For Battenhouse, this is still to "return good for evil," and indeed to "offer brotherhood to a neighbor he formerly treated as an outsider." But for the Chinese readers who are alien to this "allegorical" context, or even for later western readers, is it still possible to understand *The Merchant of Venice* in this way?

In the early 20th century, there were several Chinese versions of *The Merchant of Venice*.^① Although the rhetoric of mercy over law and the pedagogical teaching in the test of three caskets were consistent in all translations, although Portia's wisdom has always been praised and Shylock's appeal always laughed at, meriting little sympathy, yet deeper conflicts between the Old and New, and between Judaism and Christianity, have been all but obliterated. As a result, Shylock becomes a figure like Molière's *L'Avare*, no longer representing any difference between the Old and New Laws. *The Merchant of Venice* in the West has likewise been staged in many different forms and versions, with the Shylock of some even a hero striving for ethnic rights, garnering warm applause for his eloquent speeches in Act I, Scene III and Act IV, Scene I. How can the same story elicit such different responses? And how can a Chinese audience, who might not relate to the religious conflicts in the play or understand the historic humiliation of the Jews, maintain these primary images?

In 1903, the Shanghai Dawen Bookstore published the earliest Shakespeare's work in Chinese, *Xie wai qi tan* (解外奇談), a translation

^① We have to point out that the Chinese famous translator ZHU Shenghao spent almost all his life translating Shakespeare's works (from 1935 until 1944 when he died of illness). Another famous writer and translator LIANG Shiqiu finished the translation of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* from 1936 to 1969. In 2000 FANG Ping edited the new translation of the complete works of Shakespeare, in which he himself translated *The Merchant of Venice*.

of *Tales from Shakespeare* edited by Charles and Mary Lamb, in which the *Merchant of Venice* is translated literally as “Yan Dunli [Shylock’s Chinese name] Lends Money and Makes a Bond of Flesh.” In 1904, Lin Shu and Wei Yi translated and published the same *Tales* under the title *Yin bian yan yu* (吟邊燕語), with *The Merchant of Venice* translated as “Bond of Flesh” (肉券). In 1911, Bao Tianxiao translated and edited the same play and published it in the journal *Female Students* under the title “A Female Lawyer” (女律師). In 1913 director Zheng Zhengqiu directed the play “Bond of Flesh”, probably based on Lin Shu and Wei Yi’s translation. A most interesting case is that of American missionary Laura M. White, who translated this play as “A Tale of Cutting off Flesh” (剝肉記) and serialized it in the daily newspaper *Nü Duo* (女鐸 *The Woman’s Messenger*).

From these translations of the title we can see that “cutting off flesh” or “the bond of flesh” has been the key to the understanding of this play, even in the version by Laura M. White. As a Christian missionary, Laura M. White could scarcely ignore the religious elements in the *Merchant of Venice*, nor was she likely to jettison the aim of converting and educating through the text.^① Perhaps it was precisely because she wanted to educate and convert Chinese people that she adapted to the reading habits and tastes of Chinese readers, and she had to dilute the original context and the religious ideas hidden in the text of *The Merchant of Venice* when introducing Christian ethics. In Laura White’s version it is already difficult to sense “the theological conflicts and historical interrelationships of the Old Law and New.” Perhaps this is also why Coghill thinks that the later western readers need some form of “reduction.”

The “absence” or “dilution” in Laura White’s version is generally accompanied by “addition,” in order for Chinese readers better to accept and understand the play. For instance, when Antonio enters, the translator has him greet the audience in Chinese fashion: “My family

^① Laura M. White’s translation was categorized as “novel” when it was published in *Nü Duo*. The quotation here can be found in *Nü Duo*, September 1914 to November 1915, collected by Shanghai Library.

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name is An, and my given name is Duoli (meaning ‘with many reasons’). I am an Italian.” When his two friends enter, they also engage in Chinese pleasantries. “Ha, ha, ... You two came in at the right time. We have not seen each other for quite a long time. Sit down, sit down, please.” The two guests also answer likewise, “We are sitting, we’re sitting. How are you Mr. An?” At Act I, Scene II when Shylock enters, similar accommodation to Chinese style is made.

There are other “absences” and “additions” in the translation, which are also related to the translator’s understanding of Chinese cultural characteristics. For example, in the opening scene describing the grandeur of Antonio’s merchant vessel, Fang Ping, a modern translator faithfully translates Shakespeare’s words,^① interpreting “signiors and rich burghers” as “wealthy and powerful landlords and rich men.” Laura White meanwhile replaced “landlords and rich men” with “high-ranking officials”, and “petty traffickers” with “low-ranking officials” in her version: “Look at the merchant ships on the sea, ... just like a majestic high-ranking official, whose power drives the other small boats, like the low-ranking officials, to retreat most respectfully to the side ways.” In similar manner Portia, who has inherited a great fortune, is detached from the fortune in Laura White’s version, and becomes a “girl from high official family” with “good talents and virtue.” Bassanio’s courting of Portia is originally “to get clear of all the debts I owe,”^② made very clear in Shakespeare’s work and Fang Ping’s translation,^③ but Laura White’s version skates over this so rapidly as to turn the play into a pure love story with nothing to do with earthly fortune or money.

^① Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene I. The original words are: “Your mind is tossing on the ocean, / There where your argosies with portly sail, / Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood, / Or, as it were, the pageants of the sea, / Do overpeer the petty traffickers, / That curtsy to them, do them reverence, / As they fly by them with their woven wings.”

^② William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 389.

^③ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant Of Venice*, trans. FANG Ping, in *The New Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, vol.2, ed. FANG Ping (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 2000), 156.

In order to adapt to the Chinese readers' reading context, White made many simplifications and popularizations in her translation. For instance, in Act II, Scene I, the Prince of Morocco speaks about his skin color in lyrical terms: "The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun, / Bring me the fairest creature northward born, / Where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles, / And let us make incision for your love, / To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine. ...this aspect of mine / Hath fear'd the valiant ...The best regarded virgins of our clime."^① Laura White's translation simply states: "My face is black because we Africans spend a lot of time basking in the sun. Although my face is black, my blood is the reddest, even the white people cannot be compared with me, and this is the proof of my courage and bravery."

In Act I, Scene I, Antonio's friend utters the witticism, "you are sad, / Because you are not merry .../ you are merry, / Because you are not sad."^② Laura White's amendment here seems a little strange: "I fear your worries are merely a matter of common cold, and that is why you are not happy." We do not know where this "cold" comes from. But given that the Chinese readers might not understand Shakespeare's inverted chiasmus, it seems that at least we should appreciate the effort of Laura White to put it in an easier way.

Various other complicated western allusions are erased or abandoned by Laura White, such as the reference to Portia as "Cato's daughter and Brutus' Portia," to Portia's tresses as "a golden fleece" in Act I, Scene I,^③ or a note to the Greek mythical hero Alcides and a howling Troy in Act III, Scene II,^④ all of which disappear in White's translation. Many biblical allusions are also excised by the translator, who presumably thought they would not aid in transmitting church doctrine, such as Shylock's use of the story of Jacob grazing for his uncle Laban in Act I, Scene III,^⑤ or the following in Act IV, Scene I, which is hard for Chinese to understand without a footnote: "In christening thou

^① William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 393.

^② *Ibid.*, 388.

^③ Act I, Scene I. *Ibid.*, 389.

^④ Act III, Scene II. *Ibid.*, 402.

^⑤ *Ibid.*, 392.

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shalt have two godfathers; / Had I been judged, thou shouldst have had ten more, / To bring thee to the gallows, not the font.”^①

In Laura White’s version there are some quite profound erasures and additions which merit closer attention. In Act I, Scene II, for example, Portia says “It is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching.”^② White’s “a good divine” becomes a “pastor”, and “Pastors seldom practice what they preach” is not an unreasonable translation either, but the following section changes the meaning entirely: “For instance, if I teach twenty people to do what they should do, I can say whatever I like; but if I want to make one of the twenty really follow my teaching, I am not confident I can succeed.” Who is the one who finds it difficult to put into practice what has been learnt or said? In Shakespeare’s version it is “I,” but in Laura White’s version it is the “other” whom “I” have taught. Perhaps White would rather avoid altogether confusing her new Chinese converts with Portia’s words. Replacing the self-critical “It is hard for me to follow my own teaching” with “It is hard to make any of my converts really follow my teaching” will do little harm to pastors’ teachings, but may precisely alarm or caution believers.

Minor changes of words in White’s version may also be related to her need to explain Christianity to her Chinese believers. When Bassanio picks up a note in the lead casket, in the original this reads: “Since this fortune falls to you, / Be content and seek no new. / If you be well pleased with this / And hold your fortune for your bliss, / Turn you where your lady is / And claim her with a loving kiss.”^③ Fang Ping’s translation is a direct rendition of the original, but White changes “a loving kiss” into “a loving heart,” and deliberately adds a further explanation to “be content”: “As a human being you should be content.” Not only does this add a layer of pastoral teaching, but a close reading also suggests a similar diction and style to the 1919 Chinese Union

^① William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 411.

^② *Ibid.*, 390.

^③ *Ibid.*, 402-403.

Version Bible passage “Now you have such a wife, do not think of any woman in other men’s homes. You should be content as a human being. Now this girl is your wife; you should treat her with a loving heart.” In Act III, Scene II, Antonio writes a letter to Bassanio, hoping to “see you at my death” but at the same time claiming that “if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.” Fang Ping translates this as, “if your love does not approve your presence here, please ignore this letter.”^① Laura White seems to feel that “your love” is not strong enough so she translates it in a more biblical manner: “If you come, do not come only for my letter, but for your loving heart.”

Without close scrutiny, we might barely notice the above substractions and additions where White erases or blurs the “theological conflict and historical entanglement” between Judaism and Christianity.^② In the translation she published in *Nü Duo bao*, the story of Jessica and Lorenzo has been deleted completely, and so expressions such as Jessica’s “I shall be saved by my husband; he hath made me a Christian”^③ are lost. Nor do we see Shylock’s curses, such as “I have a daughter / Would any of the stock of Barabbas / Had been her husband rather than a Christian!”^④ or his complaint, “I’ll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool, / To shake the head, relent, and sign and yield / To Christian intercessors.”^⑤

More critical is the scene in Act IV, Scene I when Portia declares judgment on “cutting off the flesh.” In Shakespeare’s text, the statement is clear: “But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed / One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods / Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate / Unto the state of Venice.”^⑥ There “one drop of Christian blood” stands out. Laura White’s erasure is most thought-provoking here: she deletes the word “Christian” and translates the phrase as, “You had better be careful not to drop any blood. If one drop of blood be seen, all your

^① Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, trans. FANG Ping, 239.

^② Barbara K. Lewalski, “Allegory on The Merchant of Venice,” 78.

^③ William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 406.

^④ Act IV, Scene I. Ibid., 410.

^⑤ Act III, Scene III. Ibid., 405.

^⑥ Ibid., 410.

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belongings will be confiscated to the state of Venice according to the laws of Venice.”

For a Christian missionary and a newspaper aimed at evangelism, the difference between “one drop of Christian blood” and “one drop of blood” is clear. On the other hand, it is even clearer that the spread and evangelizing of Christianity in China should operate in a non-Christian language sphere and context for the commoners where moral teaching is far more effective than denominational implications. And so it is better to reinforce the contrast between good and evil, lessen any conflicts between old and new or between different Christian traditions, and bypass the doctrinal differences between the Old and New Testament, a strategy which suits the basic aims of *yu jiao yu le* (寓教於樂, to educate through pleasurable activities) or *wen yi zai dao* (文以載道, to illustrate truth through writing). Occurrences of contemptuous terms like “Jew” in the original have been erased by White. When Shylock, for example, realizes that “cutting off the flesh” is not workable, he says:

Shylock: I take this offer then: pay the bond thrice,
And let the Christian go.

Bassanio: Here is the money.

Portia: Soft!

The Jew shall have all justice; soft! no haste.

He shall have nothing but the penalty.^①

White erases “the Christian” and “the Jew” here. Later, when Portia suggested that Shylock beg the mercy of the Duke of Venice, the Duke says, “That shou shalt see that difference of our spirits, / I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.” Where modern translation may deliberately translate the “spirit” here as “Christian spirit”^② in order to highlight the difference between Judaism and Christianity, Laura White’s translation, however, is: “Now you shall know the difference between you and me. I have forgiven you before you ask for it.” Here the attention is the

^① William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 410.

^② Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, trans. FANG Ping, 271-272.

difference between two human beings, having nothing to do with any kind of religious difference.

Why would a Christian missionary deliberately erase in her translation of *The Merchant of Venice* such words as “Christian,” “Jew,” “Christian blood,” or “Christian spirit”? This can only be due to the needs of contextualization as White understood them. In her translation, the various additions and erasures seem to have greatly simplified Shakespeare’s works, but even more, they have preserved and highlighted basic moral teachings exhorting people to do good. If White believes these to be fundamental to educating and converting believers, why would she bother with complex threads of religious or western conflicts, or allow excessively straightforward evangelical teachings to confuse or divert her audience? It is worth noticing that White’s efforts at “contextualization” may have complemented the real experience of the acceptance of *Merchant of Venice* in China. Although the later translations have all tried to present in full the original content, unlike those earlier translators who reduced and deleted the text freely, however, these erasures or additions might have reflected in a more extreme manner the real reading patterns of the common readers, giving specific form to the collective unconsciousness of different language spheres.

For researchers, *Merchant of Venice* is indeed different from Molière’s *L’Avare*. Hegel, in light of Greek drama and Shakespeare’s plays, criticized the characters in Roman comedies and Molière’s “comedies of intrigue” as “actually repulsive when downright evil.”^① From another perspective, the “Praise and Satire”(美刺) of ancient Chinese critical theory might have represented the oriental views on tragedy and comedy in an understanding quite different to that of Sir Edmund Chambers’ definition of “medieval” comedy: “Comedy is a poem changing a sad beginning into a happy ending.”^② If “satire” is regarded as the function of comedy, Shylock has no way to laugh with us but could be only a

^① Georg Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol.3, trans. ZHU Guangqian (Beijing: Commercial Press, 1979), 331-334.

^② Nevill Coghill, “The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy,” 27-29.

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character to be laughed at. In this respect, Shylock is more or less similar to *L'Avare* in its acceptance in China. Accordingly, the researcher's differentiation between Shakespeare and Molière, like the analysis of the theological conflict in *Merchant of Venice* by Coghill and others, actually have not influenced the understanding of common readers. On the contrary, the journey of *Merchant of Venice* in this alien land of China may have identified Laura White's policy of translation.

The original intention and the "problem consciousness" of the translators when Shakespeare was first introduced to China may remain beyond our understanding today. For instance, when Lin Shu wrote the "Preface" for *Yin bian yan yu* in May 1904 (still in the late Qing dynasty), he said explicitly that he wanted to use Shakespeare as an example to verify the controversial question whether China's "decline and weakness" was the result of "too much effort in imitating the ancient times and too much fear in facing the current challenges" (擬古駭今). Lin Shu's conclusion was that "Politics and morality had nothing to do with literature." Lin Shu writes:

The radical and ambitious young men in our country have been trying their best to renovate and renew the world. They look down upon their ancestors and give up their history. They only want to accept new things. ...In comparison, the Westerners pay a lot of attention to politics and morality, making their country rich and strengthening their armies so that foreign forces will not have any chance to bully them. Then they start to use their spare time in literature to afford people pleasure. ...Shakespeare's ideas are old-fashioned given the ghosts and gods in the plays. However, the civilized English men do not think his plays crazy or irrational. Rather, they accept his plays with pleasure. ...The British are pursuing the new political system, and they did not abolish Shakespeare's

works. Today I am translating Shakespeare. I hope this will not be rejected by the new scholars in our country.^①

Lin Shu's comment, "using their spare time in literature to afford people pleasure," seems to be similar to Dryden's defense of the "incomparable" Shakespeare and "English dramatic poetry" when these were criticized as "irregular" by French critics. Dryden says, "we, who are a more sullen people, come to be diverted at our Plays; they who are of an airy and gay temper come thither to make themselves more serious."^② It may be true that any varied understanding of a text may "afford people pleasure," whereas comparative studies should go further to understand the contexts of the varied understandings.

In this case, turning to Lin Shu's "Preface," we should recognize that "the unanimous consent of an audience is so powerful," in Dryden's phrase. And Laura White's delicate and deliberate efforts in translation furnish the exact proof that "politics and morality" have much to do with "literature" because only in a given context could we have genuine contact with a text. Therefore, the translated "donkey head" in Laura White's translation is precisely the entrance for us to understand a transformed text as well as the context that has transformed it.

譯者簡介

司馬懿，耶魯大學副教授

Introduction to the translator

Chloë STARR, Associate Professor, Yale University

Email: cfstarr@gmail.com

^① LIN Shu, "Preface to *Yin bian yan yu*," in Charles Lamb & Mary Lamb, *Yin bian xu yu* (Tales from Shakespeare), trans. LIN Shu and WEI Yi (Beijing: Commercial Press, 1981).

^② John Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, ed. Allan H. Gilbert (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), 639.