

The Failure of Friar Lawrence's Plot in *Romeo and Juliet*

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Introduction

Romeo and Juliet is based on Bandell's *The Tragical Histrye of Romeus and Juliet* translated by Arthur Brooke in 1562. However, Shakespeare changed some of the original composition: for example, he shortened the passage of the story from nine months to five days and changed Juliet's age from sixteen to fourteen years old. Moreover, it is very famous that he created the Nurse's and Mercutio's new characteristics. Their lines were increased in the Nurse's explanation of Juliet's childhood in Act I Scene iii, and in Mercutio's story of the Queen Mab in Act I Scene iv. Therefore, their personalities became clearer, more stressed and more entertaining than the original ones and even the supporting roles could take important parts of the story. Owing to these effects, the human relations around Romeo and Juliet became more interesting and the story itself became much more complicated and thrilling.

In addition, there is another role which Shakespeare changed. That is the character of Friar Lawrence. In Arthur Brooke's story, there are many sentences that refer to Lawrence, but Shakespeare emphasized and enlarged his way of thinking. Shakespeare also gave him long lines to dramatize his personality, behavior and relationship with other people. For example, some of his lines show his dichotomous way of thinking, and others show his feelings, abilities, knowledge and plot.

They say that the story of *Romeo and Juliet* is influenced by the irony of fate, and that Romeo and Juliet were destined to die from their impossible love caused by their "star-crossed" birth, but, viewed from a different point of view, they are controlled by Friar Lawrence's plot. Though his plot is definitely concerned with the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, not so many people discuss this point. Therefore, I will try to observe in detail what influence Lawrence has on this story, though his plot fails in the end of the story. Let us think about defects of his power, authority, and assistance from the viewpoint of his dichotomous thoughts and contradictory attitudes at the same time.

Furthermore, I think the most interesting part which Shakespeare added to the description of Friar Lawrence is that he grows herbs. I presume the herb is one of the keys to the story because both Romeo and Juliet are going to drink medicine which is supposed to be made from herbs as a remedy to get over their difficulty.

In the following chapters I will examine Friar Lawrence's role from the

viewpoint of dichotomy in his speech and the remedy given to Romeo and Juliet.

Chapter I. Dichotomy in Friar Lawrence's Speech

Friar Lawrence's lines contain a lot of dichotomous expressions, and they tell us of his character and personality. Furthermore, we can know from his lines how he thinks, how he understands and how he solves problems.

The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;
What is her burying grave, that is her womb.
And from her womb children of diver's kind
We sucking on her natural bosom find.

(II. iii. 5-8)¹

According to Shinichi Takaku, in this scene, the word 'earth' has double meanings which are 'the earth that is equal to a tomb' and 'the earth which man is made of,' and thus, it puns effectively. Since the word 'earth' is arranged to show the opposite concepts, life and death, placed so near, the word 'earth' can be considered a kind of oxymoron in the aspects of meanings.²

He thinks the image of the earth which Friar Lawrence has in mind is a kind of oxymoron, but I think his use of oxymoron is different from Romeo's and Juliet's. In the scene in which he tells the opposite kind of words like this, different from the case of Romeo and Juliet, his feelings have neither welled up immediately, nor does he grieve deeply. So that his use of oxymoron is not to reveal his intense feelings. For example, in Act I Scene v, Juliet says, "My only love sprung from my only hate!" to express her misery and helpless condition of love. On the other hand, Lawrence's lines have so many words that show opposite meanings that I think he habitually uses this sort of rhetoric. He seems to quote opposite words intentionally to explain and announce one thing. Or in his philosophy, there are many opposed things in the world (virtue/ vice, life/ death), so that this world keeps a good balance and harmony. In other words, he thinks to see the whole image of the world and universe. Moreover, we can judge his character and personality from his simple-minded thoughts in which he divides everything into two parts and ambiguities.

Actually Friar Lawrence's way of thinking is related to his job as a priest. Let us examine his attitude, point of view and personality from his lines and status. First of all, priests have a duty to be a master of marriage and funeral. They stand between God and human beings, and they witness a marriage and death. Friar Lawrence held Romeo and Juliet's wedding at his cell. He was probably involved in Tybalt and Mercutio's funerals. Due to his status, he is naturally and freely accepted by both opposed families, the Capulets and the Montagues.

Secondly, everyone must have great reverence for priests. They are most trustworthy and dependable people. In the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo relies upon Friar Lawrence the most. Probably Juliet and all the people of the Capulets and the Montagues also have respect for him. There is no doubt that both families hate each other, but in church (at Friar Lawrence's cell), of course, the conflict is strictly forbidden, and it is the only neutral and safe space in this play. Generally speaking, priests listen to our confession or give us a sermon. They are respected from all the people, and they always have calm, peaceful and neutral mind. From this point of view, it is not too much to say that they are much closer to God than ordinary people.

Besides, Friar Lawrence's lines contain a great number of images that foreshadow the end of the story. According to his lines in Act II Scene iii, we can immediately foresee that Juliet is going to be unconscious and the place where she will wake up is a grave. In other words, Juliet is buried in the grave, but she revives, that is, wakes up. When Friar Lawrence enters for the first time, he unwittingly comments on the ending of the story. In his speech, the image of life and death emerges. The Prologue at the beginning says that Romeo and Juliet were born in the families which had opposed each other for a long time, that they are lovers who are separated by the stars which lay their destiny down —“A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life” (Prol. 6)— and that this story is going to end with their pitiful death. So the Prologue implants the image of death in the audience. Then Friar Lawrence's words in Act II Scene iii takes up this image. “Womb” and “tomb” are obviously an image of life and death, “children of divers kind” meaning Romeo and Juliet and “Two such opposed kings” referring to the Capulets and the Montagues.

Furthermore, there is an interesting relationship between Friar Lawrence and the herb. And the story and the herb also have a similar relationship. The friar's comment on the herb reflects his medical knowledge and intelligence.

ENTER ROMEO

Within the infant rind of this weak flower
Poison hath residence, and medicine power.

(II. iii. 19-20)

The Arden edition comments on the stage as follows: “S.D.] Sampson notes Shakespeare's art in making the victim of poison enter when poison is the subject of discourse.”³ This shows that Romeo is going to die from poison, and at the same time, it foreshadows Juliet's situation of drinking medicine to be unconscious.

For this being smelt, with that part cheers each part;
Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart.

Two such opposed kings encamp them still
In man as well as herbs—grace and rude will;
(II. iii. 21–24)

This speech of Friar Lawrence might be a lesson of love for Romeo and Juliet, and it tells us about the ending of their love, too. If your love is unrequited love as in the relationship between Romeo and Rosaline, it can give you not a bad effect but an energy to be active and alive to bear your love, just like the effect gained by smelling the herb. But once you eat it, in other words, if you fall in love with someone, and he or she loves you back, as is the situation of Romeo and Juliet, you will know the sweet honey taste of love. The moment you taste it, it stops your heart by its poison. It will kill both of you. So I think this reference to the herb is a metaphor of the destiny of Romeo and Juliet.

Talking about herbs, there is another interesting point that Friar Lawrence treats herbs as the same thing as a man: “In man as well as herbs.” One kind of herbs has a function of both poison and medicine. Similarly, we certainly possess both the good and the bad in our mind. But “the worser is predominant” because both families’ strong opposition remains. Even if there is Romeo and Juliet’s passion and love, that will never disappear. Even if some people die from this hatred as in case of Tybalt and Mercutio who are the victims, it will not end forever.

We can see this kind of dichotomous expressions in Friar Lawrence not only when he speaks about his philosophical thoughts but also whenever he speaks. For example, in Act III Scene iii, just after Romeo killed Tybalt, he bursts into the friar’s cell. When the friar sees how he grieves, he starts to comfort, encourage and cheer him up with these sentences: “Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art: Thy tears are womanish” (112–113). Lawrence emphasizes woman or womanhood to get Romeo’s manhood back.

Unseemly woman in a seeming man:
And ill-beseeming beast in seeming both!
(III. iii. 112–113)

In addition, in these two lines, he directly says ‘there is a woman in a man.’ He is ashamed of Romeo’s miserable appearance, but on the other hand, he tries to make him get over his unfortunate circumstance somehow. This strained condition gives Lawrence’s lines an impact similar to the oxymoronic expression announced by Romeo and Juliet. However, Friar Lawrence repeats the same word in the urgent scenes like this. Repetition is usually used for emphasis, but from this scene, we can catch his irritated and disturbed feelings because he has to give good

advice to Romeo who is now a criminal and has nowhere to go.

After the marriage ceremony of Romeo and Juliet, the story develops extremely fast. On the way back from Friar Lawrence's cell, Romeo unfortunately got involved in a quarrel on the street. What is worse, he accidentally killed Tybalt who is Juliet's cousin. He had no choice but to go back to the cell again, because the Prince ordered him to get out of Verona before dawn. If he was banished, Romeo and Juliet could not make their consummation. Without the consummation, their marriage would never be completed. In addition to this terrible situation, Romeo became desperate at his murder of Tybalt, and according to the Nurse, Juliet's behavior was just like Romeo's. They believe that they would rather choose death than stay in miserable situation at the moment. Lawrence must stop him as a priest lest he commit suicide. And he has to take some measures for Romeo in a hurry as a reliable adviser. It is natural that he is not able to hide his uneasiness and confusion in this urgent circumstance.

Chapter II. Friar Lawrence's Romyedy

i. Lawrence's First Advice to Romeo

In Act II Scene iii, we notice that Romeo trusts Friar Lawrence with all of his heart from the conversation between the two. As soon as Friar Lawrence saw Romeo who ran into his cell with a lively face, he guessed Romeo's act of the previous night correctly. He says, "Our Romeo hath not been in bed to-night" (II. iii. 38), and he immediately imagined that the partner of Romeo was Rosaline. It gives us an idea that Romeo often came to the friar's cell and talked over his one-sided love to Rosaline. Moreover, he seems to be a father or teacher to Romeo. On the other hand, Juliet has her Nurse as an adviser, and the Nurse helps her to contact Romeo. Her parents recommend her to get married with Paris. They have been taking a cooperative attitude toward her. From the beginning of the story, there are a lot of descriptions about Juliet's family members, home environment and her ancient family grave as well, but Romeo has none. There is no scene in which Romeo stays with his parents, and he has never confided his real intention to his friends, Mercutio or Benvolio. Friar Lawrence is the only supporter to undertake Romeo's issues. When something happens to Romeo, he comes to his cell directly, confesses everything and asks for some advice.

Judging from their conversation, Friar Lawrence has a good character. He is very kind and friendly. He has a good sense of humour, too. Besides that, he looks like a busybody. It seems that he likes to take notice of all affairs. Here, Romeo thinks that he needs to ask Friar Lawrence to marry Romeo and Juliet.

That's by me wounded; both our remedies
Within thy help and holy phisics lies,

I bear no hatred, blessed man, for, lo,
My intercession likewise steady my foe.

(II. iii. 47-50)

Romeo believes that holy marriage is the only way to smooth up both Romeo's and Juliet's hearts which were shot by Cupid's arrows. What is more, because the girl who Romeo has fallen in love with is the daughter of his enemy, he says all his hatred is gone at once. Therefore, this marriage remedy might be the mitigation of opposition between the two families.

For this alliance may so happy prove
To turn your household's rancour to pure love.

(II. iii. 87-88)

These two lines appear to be a plot of Friar Lawrence. He no sooner announces these words than he decides to hold their wedding secretly. In this scene, however, he looks as if he said these lines to himself. Because Romeo has been full of happiness since he met Juliet, he has very little to think of except Juliet. In fact, he hardly listens to what the friar says. On the other hand, the friar perhaps has regarded Romeo as his own son, and therefore, he wishes this marriage would be a chance to solve the conflict. He thinks that will bring them both happiness in marriage and peace between the two families.

The plot of Friar Lawrence which is shown in only the two lines above has a great deal of influence on the story of Romeo and Juliet. First of all, this idea is to reverse the ending which was announced beforehand by the Prologue, "And the continuance of their parents' rage, Which, but their children's end, nought to remove" (Prol. 9-10). At the same time, to tell the truth, the audience hopes for this kind of happy ending. Romeo and Juliet's pure and passionate love must excite the audience's sympathy. Friar Lawrence shares the same viewpoint as the audience and only he will never betray them. But, in fact, it is Lawrence's plot for a happy ending that leads Romeo and Juliet to death.

ii. Lawrence's Second Advice to Romeo

In Act III Scene iii, as mentioned earlier, after Romeo killed Tybalt, he was completely at a loss for he had no place to go and came back to Friar Lawrence's cell to ask for his advice. The friar kindly gives him shelter, but looking at the miserable condition and pitiful behavior of Romeo, he finds it difficult to hide his disturbance.

Even if Friar Lawrence was a reliable priest, he could not overthrow the Prince's proclamation of Romeo's banishment. Therefore, he seems to understand

Romeo's miserable feeling. Or he seems to regret that he tried to work out his plot, that is, to marry Romeo and Juliet and aim for the reconciliation of their families. Then he notices that his plan failed and it was his fault that caused this bad situation. I think this sense of failure is evident in his words, so I can see no self-confidence in his lines.

Go, get thee to thy love as was decreed,
Ascend her chamber-hence, and comfort her.
But look thou stay not till the Watch be set,
For then thou canst not pass to Mantua,
(III. iii. 145-148)

He dared to decide to make Romeo go to Juliet's house to achieve their consummation. Moreover, he gave him advice to get away from this town to follow the Prince's order. Then he promised Romeo to accomplish these three requirements in order to calm him down, "To blaze your marriage, reconcile your friends, Beg pardon of the Prince" (III. iii. 150-151), Romeo is going to act just as he is told, but on the other hand, Lawrence will never have accomplished these promises in the end.

Though Friar Lawrence does not have enough power to carry out the promises, he still strives for Romeo and Juliet's marriage. I think he partly deceives Romeo into believing that his plan will work successfully. But he is not necessarily wrong because he surely loves Romeo and tries to help him. But for a severe shock from Mercutio's death, Romeo would have never killed Tybalt impulsively. Now that he is physically and mentally tired out, he has no idea as to how to get over this hardship. He may well believe Friar Lawrence's words that have some good sign and possibility for the future.

iii. Lawrence's Advice to Juliet

Just after Juliet married Romeo at Friar Lawrence's cell, she lost her dear cousin, Tybalt, and her parents mercilessly forced her to marry Paris, and finally the kind Nurse betrayed her cruelly. Juliet, who does not know what to do, also goes to the Friar's place to ask for his advice. And it is important to see that she uses the word 'remedy' like Romeo.

Be not so long to speak; I long to die,
If what thou speak'st speak not of remedy.
(IV. i. 66-67)

In these lines, I think the word 'remedy' which was said by Juliet definitely foreshadows that she is going to be unconscious by the medicine given by Friar

Lawrence. "And, If thou dar'st, I'll give thee remedy" (IV. i. 76). He has given up in case of Juliet for the first time and says, "It strains me past the compass of my wits." Because she suffered from various kinds of misfortune, now that she would never be able to avoid marrying Paris, and that Romeo, her husband, was banished—she is completely at a loss. But due to Lawrence's meddling personality, when he saw poor Juliet, he could not but offer help to save her from the miserable situation as best he could. Now the word 'remedy' which was said by him has double meanings for medicine and a plan to help her, so that the use of medicine is the final means for both himself and Juliet.

In this scene, Friar Lawrence explains in long lines how to drink the sleeping potion and how to take action after she wakes up in her grave. Juliet has to be alone in her room when she takes the medicine. Then her unconsciousness will continue for forty-two hours. In order to make her act according to his plan, he promises her that he is going to write a letter to Romeo in Mantua to let him know about this urgent business. Indeed, it is the second step of his plot.

I think this special sleeping medicine must have been made by Friar Lawrence. In Act II Scene iii, he was picking herbs with the basket in his hand when Romeo entered. And he was talking to himself about the use of the herbs. We can see that he praises the blessing and the wonders of nature from his lines.

O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.
For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor aught so good, but strain'd by from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.

(II. iii. 11-16)

These lines give us an image of the friar as a doctor, because he seems to have great knowledge of certain herbs for medicine. And he perhaps knows how to compound these herbs into a cure for some disease or treatment for people. I think that this attitude can be a comparison to an apothecary in Mantua who sells Romeo poison illegally. On the other hand, Peter Milward thinks he is a kind of philosopher. He says that Friar Lawrence is not a poet. He does not pay attention to the beautiful appearance of flowers and trees, or the practical use for medicine, but he would rather give careful consideration to their metaphysical and philosophical meanings.⁴ Judging from the lines above, Friar Lawrence seems to know all good and bad effects of herbs very well. But in spite of this, it is an inconsistency that he could not work out his plans and promises.

However, Friar Lawrence repeats the word 'death' in this scene. I think it

foreshadows not only Juliet's death-like unconsciousness but also Romeo's going to believe she is truly dead. Furthermore, it tells us the ending of the story will be their death.

Conclusion

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Lawrence is the only person who knows everything that occurred to Romeo and Juliet. For example, he knows that the passionate meeting changed their lives, that they got married secretly, that the murder of Tybalt and Mercutio took place right after the marriage of Romeo and Juliet, and that Juliet is being forced to marry Paris. Finally, he, of course, knows that Juliet is going to be unconscious for a while to prevent the arranged marriage. He is aware of almost all occurrences, which even Romeo and Juliet do not recognize. Nevertheless, why did he fail to carry out his plot? Or when did he notice his plot was in vain?

Knowing most of the occurrences that happened to the main characters of the play, Friar Lawrence stands at the same position as the audience. In the audience's view, even if they know the ending of the story is tragic, they cannot but have small hope for happiness of the young couple just like the friar. He cannot fail to win the sympathy of the audience, because he is the only man who tries to help Romeo and Juliet. There is no substitute for him that strives to make the audience's wishes come true.

There are only a few things that Friar Lawrence never knows. One is that the letter which he entrusted to Friar John did not reach Romeo. Lawrence never dreamed that Romeo did not get his letter. And the other is that Romeo's servant named Balthasar went to tell Romeo the news of Juliet's death instead. What is worse, Romeo believed in his words, and he thought he would rather die than accept his wife's death. This news shocked him greatly so that he desperately bought a deadly poison from the apothecary. On the other hand, Lawrence intended to help both Romeo and Juliet. When he knows his letter was not received, it is too late because Romeo has already decided to choose death.

I think there is another reason that Friar Lawrence did not accomplish his plot. That is a matter of time. After Romeo and Juliet's marriage, so many problems rush the friar in a short while. Every time he gets involved in trouble, as soon as he understands what the problem is, he has to think the last resort haphazardly because too much is expected of him.

Finally, Friar Lawrence tried to handle the other people's fate. He uses his special position as a priest which is closer to God than common people, and he tries to control Romeo's and Juliet's fate. Even if the friar had the same point of view as God, he could never be God. Therefore, I think it is a big mistake that he tries to step into the territory of God. Although he advances the last part of the

story, his lack of ability and knowledge for accomplishing his duty leads Romeo and Juliet to their miserable death.

Notes

1. All subsequent references to *Romeo and Juliet* are to the Taishukan edition based on the Alexander edition.
2. See Shinichi Takaku, *Oxymora in Romeo and Juliet*, 4.
3. The Arden Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*, 138.
4. See Peter Milward, *Shakespeare's Idea of Life*, 95.

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