

# “Singing like birds i’t’h’ cage”: The Voices of Shakespeare in Meiji Japan<sup>1</sup>

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Towards the end of *King Lear*, the old king is reconciled with his youngest daughter Cordelia, but at the price of their freedom. Lear says to Cordelia:

Come, let’s away to prison;  
We two alone will sing like birds i’t’h’ cage. (5.3.8–9)

This is one of those speeches which resonates in any culture: artistic integrity imprisoned by ideology. Japan itself was never imprisoned by Western powers but its sovereignty was severely compromised by unequal trading agreements for some forty years in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was during this period that the roots of modern Japanese culture were established and the traditional culture recentred as an ideological force in the modern world; in a famous episode, the former American president Ulysses S. Grant was impressed by performances of *nō* and *kabuki* drama on a visit to the country in 1879. It would be begging belief to compare Lear with the Meiji emperor or even the last of the Tokugawa shōguns but there is a correspondence with the role of the traditional culture, as subjectivity was relocated from the hegemony of feudalism to that of constitutional imperialism. To put it more simply, traditional roles were undermined and even — in the case of the *samurai* — abolished, but traditional culture could at least alleviate the stresses of modernisation (singing “like birds i’t’h’ cage”) and provide an ideological basis for the formation of new identities.

In the new order, traditional culture finds an unlikely ally in the volume of western literature imported and translated during the Meiji era (Miller 9–21). The most influential of these writers, which includes Dickens and

Tolstoy, is undoubtedly Shakespeare; an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* was staged as early as 1885. Shakespeare reacts with the traditional culture in two significant ways: like the traditional culture, it is usually at the periphery rather than core of the developing modern society, and at the same time offers a reflection of those values which have been resisted or ignored. Like the virtuous Edgar at the end of the *King Lear*, Shakespeare urges modern Japanese to speak “what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.323). In the second half of Meiji, the impulse toward self-revelation finds its voice in the new literary genres of naturalism and realism, above all the *watakushi shōsetsu*, the Japanese “I” novel. In another famous incident, in 1903, a Tokyo high school student called Fujimura Misao threw himself to his death at a waterfall in Nikkō leaving a note that apparently rebuts Hamlet’s advice to Horatio:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy. (1.5.168–169)

One line of Fujimura’s testament can be translated as saying “I don’t give a damn about Horatio’s philosophy.” Fujimura evidently preferred the magnanimity of Hamlet to Western rationalism.

One philosopher of Shakespearean magnanimity is Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935), who directed the first ever production of a complete and literal translation of a Shakespeare play, *Hamlet*, in 1911. Shōyō was a Shakespeare scholar who had been struggling since the 1880s to find a way of translating Shakespeare at a time when both the spoken and written languages were changing rapidly. The language of the traditional drama was stylised, archaic, and unlikely to change. Shakespeare production was an ideal channel through which to experiment with the contemporary language (as Shōyō eventually did), and it also introduced a dimension to performance that has energised modern Japanese drama ever since, namely female actors. Thus, the middle-aged Shōyō played “the old man” to Matsui Sumako, his Ophelia in the 1911 production of *Hamlet*. Sumako later caused a scandal, and was forced to leave the company which had staged the production, when she had an affair with Shōyō’s star pupil Shimamura Hōgetsu. She hanged herself after Hōgetsu’s death from pneumonia in

1919. (Shōyō was remorseful about both deaths). This *kabuki* plot is redolent of the tension between young and old, traditional and modern, that drives the development of Shakespeare in modern Japan.

The meanings of Shakespeare in Japan are to be found in the theatre more than anywhere else, for it is there that Shakespeare finds his most complete expression as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. As the French Romantic thinker Mme. de Staël declared, “If translations of poems enrich literature, translations of plays could exert an even greater influence, for the theatre is truly literature’s executive power.” Yet rather than surveying the considerable diversity of Shakespeare performance in Meiji Japan, this essay seeks to problematise some of those aspects of Shakespeare in Japan which caught the imagination of the rising generation, since their response was far from homogeneous. The differences of foreign literatures can play tricks on the mind. A foreign literature can appear so uniform in its differences that like tourists being guided from one ancient church or temple to another, we risk losing our sense of what matters. Likewise we can know so much about a foreign literature that we can forget what interested us in the first place. For this reason, it is useful to return to the immediate and unguided condition of Shakespeare’s early reception in Meiji Japan.<sup>2</sup>

One of the earliest perceptions of Shakespeare in Japan is that he was a man of the world who made a lot of money from writing plays. This was how Samuel Smiles described him in his classic *Self-Help* (1859), whose translation by Nakamura Keiu in 1871 was to become another of those influential foreign works of the Meiji era. A myth of Shakespeare emerges as a diligent but probably rather unprincipled person, whose plays threw out maxims for life. The next stage was to find out how he did it, and so Shakespeare scholarship up to the 1900s is dominated by biographical accounts.

In late Meiji, however, there is a marked shift toward the internalisation of Shakespeare’s characters and themes. Takahashi Yasunari has pointed to the similarity between Hamlet’s plight and the young men of Meiji struggling to find their way in the world against an older generation who seemed to have betrayed everything for which Japan once stood, and this painful generation gap (*jidai okure*) is explored by writers such as Shiga Naoya

(Moriya 142–147). *Hamlet* is certainly the best known of Shakespeare's plays during this early period, since (as Takahashi suggests) Hamlet's desperate search for meaning is representative of a social framework in which meanings were no longer given but had to be found. The paradigm shifts from one in which the individual strives to fulfil his given role according to an abstract, typically Confucian morality to one in which the models of success are plentiful but the morality subjective.

The play *Hamlet* leads inexorably to the destruction of one king, but what happens when you kill the patriarch at the beginning of the play, as happens in *Macbeth*? The obvious answer is that in *Macbeth* the evil runs riot, whereas in *Hamlet* the evil is concentrated almost to the point of insanity in the mind of the protagonist, meditated upon, then released in no more than an instant at the end of the play with the deaths of *Hamlet*, Gertrude and Claudius. This contrast may be significant because it relates to what Shōyō regarded as the two fundamental poles of Shakespeare translation, what he called “warmth” (*jōm*) and “rhythm” (*chōshi*).<sup>3</sup> *Hamlet* is a warm play which takes a long time to boil over. The hero's speculations — “there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.192–193) — create a world of meaning that always threatens to make time stand still. For Meiji Shakespeareans these meanings are not only inherently fascinating — answers on a plate as it were — but they also suit the broader Meiji necessity to rediscover an historical identity.

Meiji self-searching is at its height when Shōyō wrote his “Preface to a Commentary on *Macbeth*” in 1891 and then produced an overtly literal translation of Shakespeare's tragedy, published in Waseda Bungaku in 1897. *Macbeth* — in contrast to *Hamlet* — is a cold but rhythmical play in which one can hear the drumbeat of history forestalling any hope the protagonist might have of finding warmth and solace in kingship. This is to say that the dramatic and poetic rhythms of the wider drama move faster than *Macbeth*'s rhetoric.

In his 1891 essay, Shōyō argues fervently in favour of creativity as a process that transcends cultural differences. He writes that

To claim that the plays of Shakespeare resemble nature is to sug-

gest that the characters and situations he describes are really one and the same. His plays exist in the hearts of readers, which by the process of interpretation they come to resemble in a very creative way, for they treat on all that is natural about the human endeavour. From an objective point of view, human nature can be seen to incline towards both good and bad: the cantankerous stepdame or affectionate mother.<sup>5</sup> Those whose taste is disappointed by Shakespeare's plays will resent his creativity; they are the kind of people who despise nature and revile this suffering world. Talented people will oppose this attitude; they will regard Shakespeare's creativity as like the affectionate mother and this world as a garden of delights. Yet, whatever people's different feelings, it is their experience of suffering and joy that constitute the two poles of human nature. Therefore, to interpret the use that Shakespeare puts to his creativity, one must first analyse his views on destiny (or *karma*) and then his Christian beliefs.

There are a number of issues common to Western and Eastern philosophy, such as old age, kingship, praise and punishment, which are worthy of our attention but not necessarily very relevant to the question of creativity. For creativity is something greater than all its countless critical perspectives, truly something without boundaries. Buddha tells us that the sound of a gong from a paper summer house resounds with the echoes of *nirvana* but that in the twilight hours the lovers hear nothing. The pessimist is unable to distinguish between the colours of the flower of the sala tree,<sup>6</sup> nor therefore between the changing forms of this transitory life. The young maiden who has never known sadness has never seen anything. If no human being can know the goal of creativity, we can at least greet the pathos of autumn with a melancholic heart and the birds and flowers of spring with a glad one.

Creativity fulfils itself in an empty heart, and the plays of Shakespeare are extremely close to this meaning of creativity. (163–164)<sup>4</sup>

Later in this essay (168), Shōyō quotes a *haiku* by the Edo poet Uejima Onitsura: “Autumn has come. My unfeeling heart.” Shōyō describes Shakespeare as a writer who catches us unawares, not out of any feelings of mutual animosity but simply for the reason that nature abhors a vacuum. He argues that Shakespeare does not unite but creates: that creativity can just as well reveal diversity as bring people together. This argument is conditioned by Shōyō's role as a pedagogue, since unlike many of his

contemporary Shakespeareans, he was also an academic who spent much of his career teaching Shakespeare at Waseda University. Shōyō never expected to create a unified popular movement out of Shakespeare.

Shōyō prefaces his comments to this highly religious play, *Macbeth*, with a theory of Shakespeare that is tinged with Buddhist philosophy. Shōyō was not a religious man, and it is perhaps credit to Shakespeare's creativity that the play should have induced religious comparisons from him. It was while he was serving as the first principal of Waseda Middle School that he wrote a religiously literal translation of *Macbeth*, but was dissatisfied with that style as he realised that the pace of the original was completely lost in Japanese. His 1897 translation is in that sense a cold translation of a cold play, and so it is only through his efforts as an original playwright at this time and then, in the new century, by experimenting with the format of stage translation that he was able to discover a Shakespearean dramaturgy that was closer to native expectations.

One observer who remained dissatisfied with Shōyō was the novelist Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), who had studied Shakespeare at London University under the founding editor of the Arden Shakespeare, W. J. Craig, and who wrote in reference to Shōyō's 1911 production of *Hamlet* that

To compare Shakespeare's works with a mirror reflecting the works of nature, unconditionally accepting the judgement of Westerners, is to relegate our own tastes and is thus a disgrace and mutual loss. I feel, indeed I would insist, that to put it around that Shakespeare is some kind of authority on reality is a considerable lie. There might be some impartial purpose in the linking of paragraphs to reveal the causes and effects of joy and anger but for such expression to be cloaked in expressions of joy and anger is repulsive, unnatural, outrageous. Such an idea has never been used as a vehicle of mutual understanding by either the Japanese of today or the English people of today or of Shakespeare's time. (291)<sup>7</sup>

Sōseki was suggesting that Shōyō had succumbed to the rhetoric of the western scholarship and critical theories Shōyō had been steadily absorbing since the 1880s.<sup>9</sup> Yet Sōseki's critique is rooted in his sense of discomfort in the Imperial Theatre that evening and forestalls any attempt that Shōyō

and his followers might have made to make Shakespeare's reality their own: to master Shakespeare as well as be mastered by him. Sōseki's complaint is a familiar one:

If one were to ask the several thousand people who saw the production whether they had enjoyed it so much that they had lost all thought of themselves and become completely absorbed in the action, then there probably would not be even one who could say that they had. I have no doubt in my mind that there was such a difference in interest between the play and the audiences. (289)

Sōseki successfully rebukes the audacity of Shōyō's *Hamlet* but cannot deny the relevance of Shakespeare's creativity as a catalyst for reform in the Japanese theatre. In the Taishō era, Shakespeare production becomes a regular occurrence under the successors to the Bungai Kyōkai (which was dissolved in 1913), critical interest shifts from the life of Shakespeare to comparative studies, and Shōyō continues his translation of the Complete Works.

Sōseki's critique can be said to represent a nationalism of which Shōyō was also part. In Shōyō's case, this nationalism expresses itself as an impulse to Japanese Shakespeare; in Sōseki's case, to value Japanese culture. During the 1900s Sōseki lectured on English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo before establishing himself as the novelist as which he is now remembered. Indeed, Sōseki is regarded by many Japanese as "an authority on reality", at least modern Japanese reality. His own significant contribution to Shakespeare scholarship comes in an essay written in 1904 on the witches in *Macbeth*. The supernatural is another critical nexus of Shakespeare and Japanese culture, touching as it does on a transcendental fear of the unknown. Shōyō himself felt that the *kappa* goblins of Japanese folklore could pass as plausible equivalents to Shakespeare's Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (21) because although *kappa* are more malevolent than Puck (just as the Japanese *mamushi* is more malign than Britain's indigenous venomous snake, the adder) they do share a tendency to deception. Sōseki asks himself what on earth we are to make of the ghosts in *Macbeth* in an age when such phenomena were widely ridiculed and the trust in science essential to Japanese modernisation. He insists that litera-

ture is not like science (106): that the literary imagination can be transformed by the supernatural in *Macbeth* in a way that differs fundamentally from scientific change. Comparing this argument with his review of the Shōyō *Hamlet*, one might conclude that Sōseki does regard Shakespeare as having the potential to transform Japanese culture but that Japanese Shakespeareans have to work extremely hard to make such transformation possible.

Sōseki may have managed to keep science and literature apart but one can only guess at the effect of Shakespeare on sexual mores in Meiji Japan. It is difficult to separate sexuality from generic contexts. On the one hand, a tragedy such as *King Lear*, where sexuality is oppressed and perverted, offers an outcome that is crueller and more tragic than anything in Japanese drama. On the other hand, sexual love is often associated with death in *kabuki*, where in plays such as *Shinjū ten no Amijima* (1720) the forbidden love of Jihei and Koharu leads to double suicide. There are, of course, comic genres in Japan such as *kyōgen*, and although *kabuki* is usually tragic in mode, it does, like Shakespearean tragedy, contain comic potential. Just as *Lear* is at last able to make a mockery of his tragedy (trapped with Cordelia “like birds i’t’h cage”), there are comic scenes in *kabuki* which play on intransigent differences within the social hierarchy, while *kyōgen* typically features the relationship between a gullible master and his cunning servant. Even now, a typical ingredient of Japanese sitcoms is this discrepancy between high and low. Moreover, what saves a figure such as Shōyō from superfluity is a comic sense of the enormity of his task of translating Shakespeare. In modern Japan, the social hierarchy becomes more fluid but no less relevant, and the emergence of an externally influenced drama opens up various opportunities for comedy to challenge those on top. A prominent example is the playwright Inoue Hisashi whose dramas in the dialect of the impoverished Tōhoku region of northern Japan are both comic and proletarian.

In Meiji Japan, Shakespearean sexuality finds its other in the burgeoning modern culture albeit in an embrace which is kept from view. In 1893, when he was only 21, the poet and novelist Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943) wrote in an essay entitled “Jinsei no fūryū wo omou” (“On taste”) that



In Shakespeare's plays, love robs so many people of their ideals, making heroes and heroines alike the friends of children. [. . .] However comical or ridiculous people appear, we cannot help feeling a degree of sympathy for them. We smile. (57)<sup>8</sup>

This "Japanese smile" may indicate feelings of fear or inadequacy, superiority or indeed sympathy, although my own preference is to leave its exact meaning to the imagination. As Moriya suggests, that may be Tōson's preference as well. In an essay published the next year ("Tsuki", "The moon"), Tōson quoted a few lines of Lorenzo's from the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. Lorenzo is talking to Jessica, Shylock's daughter, in the grounds of a moonlit Belmont. Tōson quotes the lines in English but adds the crucial word "perhaps":

Perhaps in such a night,  
Troilus, methinks, mounted the Trojan walls,  
And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents,  
Where Cressid lay that night. (163–164)

Troilus risks making a fool of himself and losing his ideals, but Lorenzo's trope is also a more explicit invitation in the context of traditional Japanese poetics than it is in Shakespeare.

Shakespeare in modern Japan is not merely "a caged bird" but one whose melodious song is mediated by a number of powerful figures. Tsubouchi Shōyō stands for a pragmatic internationalism, appropriating Shakespeare to stimulate the native culture. Natsume Sōseki is a realist who is only too aware of the invasive power of Shakespearean rhetoric. The rather quieter voice of Shimazaki Tōson is open to Shakespearean naturalism but has his own way of doing things. One name not mentioned in this paper is Mori Ōgai (1862–1922) whose lyrical translation of *Macbeth* in 1913 (much praised by Shōyō) can be said to match his German-influenced idealism against the dangers of brute ambition. The Meiji Restoration opened a lacuna in Japanese society as the spiritual exclusivity of the old order was replaced for better or for worse by the materialism of the new. Shakespeare can hardly be said to have filled this gap but he did offer a voice to those who were, for whatever reason, confused or disappointed by modernity (as

well as to those who were glad to be rid of the past). Shakespeare's England was every bit as ruthless as Meiji Japan, but for Shakespeare as for Shōyō the future lay with words not silence.

The rapidity with which Shakespeare was appropriated during the Meiji era, from a trickle of quotations in the 1870s to a spate of translations and productions in the 1900s, points not so much to the Occidental wisdom of Shakespeare as to his familiarity, since if Shakespeare's themes and characters had been inimical to Japanese culture then he would not have been translated. Moreover, the ease with which Shōyō finds cultural correspondences to Shakespeare in the essay quoted above suggests that what fascinated him most was not Shakespeare's ideas but his creativity (although Shōyō later admitted that the ideas became more interesting in his middle age). Neither too would it seem that Shakespeare was incongruous with "the Imperial Way" of Meiji ideology, especially as the plays seemed to affirm conservative institutions such as marriage and kingship, and Shakespeare knew how to be polite. What was problematic, however, was the differences in scale and structure of the rhetoric, and it was not until Shōyō's translations in the Taishō era that a way of treating that rhetoric began to be developed as well.

#### Notes

1 This essay is a revised version of a paper delivered at the inaugural conference of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies, held at Sookmyung Women's University, Seoul, from 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> August, 2004.

2 See Kawato for a recent survey of Shakespeare production and reception in Meiji Japan and Sasaki for facsimile reproductions of early Shakespeare criticism. It is arguable that both production and criticism became more homogeneous in the Taishō era as Shakespeare scholarship became professionalised in the new universities and the staging of translations rather than adaptations became the norm.

3 Shōyō's fullest statement of his approach to Shakespeare translation is set out in *Shēkusupiya kenkyūkan* (254–277).

4 I am grateful to Ashizu Kaori for her advice on my translation of this essay.

5 These may be references to the classical imagery of the moon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 1.1.4–6, Theseus likens the moon to "a stepdame" or "dowager" who deprives a young man of his rightful inheritance in the same way that Theseus must wait another four days until the next full moon until he can marry Hippolyta.

Yet for virginal women, Diana the moon goddess has a compassionate side as the goddess of chastity.

6 The Buddha is believed to have passed away under the shade of a sala tree.

7 My translation.

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