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**HAMLET, PRINCE OF JAPAN:
EXAMINING THE TRANSLATIONS AND
PERFORMANCES OF JAPANESE *HAMLET***

Ashley-Marie Maxwell

Abstract

Through the numerous translations and adaptations of *Hamlet* in Japan, this article examines the importance of this play in the Japanese cultural and historical consciousness, as well as the new life that it receives through contemporary adaptations, namely through Yukio Ninagawa's numerous productions of this play (during the 2003–2015 period) and Takarazuka Revue's 2010 rock opera musical entitled *Hamlet!!*. *Hamlet* in Japan benefits from a long history of productions that are influenced by the classical theatres of Japan, specifically Kabuki and Noh. Furthermore, the linguistic changes made to the text contribute to the reinterpretation of the play and the expansion of roles that are not possible in the original English, and Shoichiro Kawai's translation in particular acts as a bridge between Shakespeare's poetry and the Japanese understanding of his works. Finally, this article looks at Hamlet's key line of "to be or not to be" as it gains an entirely different meaning when translated into Japanese and loses its existential quality in favour of a more human idea of life and death that ties in with the themes explored in the play.

Keywords

translation, performance, adaptation, Japanese theatre, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Kabuki, Takarazuka

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HISTORICALLY, *Hamlet* has held a place of interest in Japan since the 1800s due to its portrayal of the human and deep emotional ties to kinship and clan. Kaori Ashizu writes: "Japanese responses to Shakespeare in general, and *Hamlet* in particular (the play which seemed to afford the best window into the Western mind), have, in complex ways, been bound up with larger questions of national self-identity and Japan's relationship to the West" (2014). Shakespeare became especially popular during the Meiji era because, "after the long-secluded country opened its doors to the West, [he] was among the first English literary figures to be introduced

in Japan” (Minamitani 1990, 177). Prior to the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912), the Tokugawa shogunate had gone through great lengths to expel foreigners and foreign culture, including religions, from Japan, as well as to isolate the country to protect its government from outside influences (Vaporis 2020, 87–90).¹ During this time, Shakespeare was completely unknown to the country and its people, so when he was finally introduced, there was an explosion of appreciation for the Bard and his works. Along with the wish to perform these Western plays in Japan came the need to translate them not only linguistically, but culturally too. The first translations of the plays “were heavily influenced by the way Shakespeare’s works were received in Victorian England, the cultural legacy of the Edo period, and the prevalent trend in Japan of admiring the West and combining Japanese and Western cultural elements” (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 206). Before the Meiji period, “Japan had almost no access to Shakespeare’s works of either the Renaissance or Neoclassical era” (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 206), meaning that Japan’s first encounter with the Bard was one that was already watered down and tame compared to the original Early Modern versions of the plays.

Hamlet, as is the case with *Macbeth*, is sometimes staged in a feudalistic style – with *samurai*, *daimyo*, and *hime* – of the Edo period,² yet modern directors like Yukio Ninagawa explore *Hamlet* through a different lens, one that combines the cultural values of Japan with the poetry and humanity expressed in Shakespeare. In other instances, *Hamlet* is given a contemporary overhaul, such as in the all-female Takarazuka Company’s rock opera musical *Hamlet!!* (2010) in which the emphasis is placed on the female characters, especially Ophelia, and their power and agency in the play. No matter which version, however, something remains very clear: Japanese adaptations of *Hamlet* all carry the ghosts of history, both Shakespeare’s sometime overbearing presence as well as Japan’s cultural past.

Shoichiro Kawai’s *New Translation: Hamlet* (2003) is the basis for many stage productions of *Hamlet* in Japan, including the two cited above, because of its close translation of the First Folio and its attention to the rhythm of the language that seeks to bring Shakespeare’s poetry to light in a non-Germanic context. Kawai explains that his work is one of many, as “*Hamlet* is probably the most frequently translated

¹ Contrary to the popular belief that all foreigners were forced out, the shogunate made a distinction based on the cultural impact of foreigners’ presence: “After the Portuguese were expelled from Japan . . . the only Europeans allowed to remain were the Dutch, who were not interested in converting the Japanese to Christianity . . . The Portuguese were expelled because the Tokugawa could no longer tolerate the threat to their nation building that the Catholic missionaries and their supporters represented” (Vaporis 2020, 90).

² For examples of Edo-inspired adaptations and performances of Shakespeare, see Graham Holderness’ book *Samurai Shakespeare: Early Modern Tragedy in Feudal Japan* (2021).

literary work in Japan with more than forty Japanese translations . . . in the last hundred years” (2006, 39). Translation work of Shakespeare into Japanese is no easy feat – the socio-cultural ghosts of ancestral Japan are present in the language to this day, and their influences can be felt through the performances of Shakespeare on stage. Historically, “the language used by Shakespeare was often wrongly interpreted or translated,” but “Shakespeare was revered as a great Western personality, representing the wisdom of England” (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 208). Kawai’s translation in particular tries to be as accurate to the Early Modern English as possible, despite the obvious linguistic differences, which allows for the Bard’s wisdom, so highly praised during the Meiji period (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 208–209), to continue to flourish in modern-day Japan. Furthermore, in terms of the performability of the translated work,

[w]hile no comprehensive theoretical frame can be envisaged in theatre and literary criticism, and . . . in translation studies as well . . . the performative turn at least has had the lasting merit of favouring the centrality of translation in the theatrical event as both a literary and a performative act to be looked at as a specific activity for the theatre in performance. (Bigliuzzi, Ambrosi and Kofler 2013, 3)

While many scholars situate works as either performances or adaptations of the original text, translated works can be seen as being their own mode of adaptation, in the same sense as a setting change can constitute an adaptation. Even though “no convincingly comprehensive method has been elaborated or even roughed out” (Bigliuzzi, Ambrosi and Kofler 2013, 3) with respect to examining translation in the context of performance and adaptation, translation work has become an important part of the discussion when examining plays from a transnational perspective. If translation is a form of adaptation, then the latter “implies a process rather than a beginning or an end, and as ongoing objects of adaptation all Shakespeare’s plays remain in process” (Fischlin and Fortier 2014, 3). To label these types of works is difficult and, to an extent, unnecessary and at times reductive. The point of interest in examining translated Shakespeare is found in the process and transformation of the text and how it simultaneously reflects Shakespeare’s messages and the socio-cultural reality of the country where the play is presented. Fischlin and Fortier (2014) explain that “there are only labels [such as adaptation, addition, recontextualization, etc.] with more or less currency, connection to history, and connotations both helpful and misleading” (2–3). These labels can be restrictive, which is why there may be a need to focus more purely on the text and its output rather than its place in modern theory.

The linguistic spectres or, in Derridean terms, the Shakespearean “legacy” echo in the Japanese translations of *Hamlet* despite the grammatical and syntactic differences. For these reasons, this article examines the effects of the Japanese language on the meaning or reshaping of the English text, especially the existential nature of Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy, outside of the divisive labels of performance and adaptation, and how these effects are reflected or presented onto the stage through Ninagawa and Takarazuka’s productions of *Hamlet* based on the same translation by Kawai.³

1. Translating Shakespeare into Japanese

Unlike English, Japanese has a hierarchical and gendered structure embedded in the language. This is especially apparent in the pronouns and verb conjugations that can change drastically depending on who the speakers and the listeners are. Tetsuo Kishi notes that

. . . the [pronoun] selection becomes far more complicated because one may have as many as twenty different forms of the second-person pronoun to choose from. Some are extremely formal and polite, some archaic, while others are very intimate, or clearly derogatory. Some are used only by men and some only by women. Moreover, there are also as many or, perhaps, even more forms of the first-person pronoun, and so the combination of a first-person pronoun and a second-person pronoun can be varied almost infinitely. (Kishi 2012, 70)

This naturally creates problems of translation when adapting Shakespeare into Japanese. Some aspects of Shakespeare are, understandably, lost in the changes, most specifically the intimacy between the characters because it is “almost mandatory for strangers to speak to each other in a formal style with polite verb suffixes” (Kishi 2012, 73). Once the characters form more intimate relationships, this may change, but, for the most part, politeness between characters of different sexes and social classes is maintained. What is more, the ambiguous genders expressed in Shakespeare are often muddled or toned down when translated into Japanese because of the nature of the language.⁴ Furthermore, “at least two different forms of verb suffixes are

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are my own.

⁴ By “ambiguous genders,” I refer to the plays in which the characters cross-dress into the opposite sex for plot purposes. These moments create confusion in the plays as well as tension between the characters. For example, Rosalind’s disguise as Ganymede in *As You Like It* allows for homoerotic

used in spoken Japanese: the polite and the familiar . . . [and] [s]ome postpositional words are used primarily by women, some primarily by men, and if a member of one group uses a word that is supposed to belong to the other group, his or her sexual identity is likely to be seriously doubted by the listener” (Kishi 2012, 70), which can then affect the translation work as one must be very careful with their choice of pronouns and verbs. To further complicate the matter, the characters (*kanji*) in the written language add nuance to the words that the spoken language can lose. The reading of the *kanji* can vary depending on whether the word is read by its sound (*on yomi*) or by meaning (*kun yomi*),⁵ which invariably changes the interpretation of the word. This is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s own early modern English language, the meaning of which has changed over time. Some of these words used to have meanings that are no longer ascribed to them or that have become obsolete in common usage. In this way, the linguistic difficulties encountered when translating from English to Japanese can be likened to the work of transcribing from early modern English to today’s language.

Despite these difficulties, Shōyō Tsubouchi, Japan’s first major Shakespearean translator, decided to work on the canon “to promote a truly national drama and literature that might appeal to all classes of society” (Gallimore 2019, 275). The need to translate Shakespeare was because “Shōyō . . . believed that it was only through theatrical realization in their own language that Japanese people could fully understand Shakespeare” (Gallimore 2019, 277), and this need to understand the Bard came from “the new Meiji government[’s] . . . [pursuit of] an ambitious and vigorous policy of modernization, essentially understood as a need for ‘Westernization’” (Ashizu 2014). Despite his best efforts, Tsubouchi “published fragments of a translation [of *Hamlet*] in 1885 . . . but did not get beyond the first act. His translation employed a formal, old-fashioned style and language” (Ashizu 2014) but, by then, *Hamlet* had already entered the national consciousness and encouraged translation and adaptation work, which continues to this day. Though the initial aim of the Meiji government was to “Westernize” Japan, the resulting effects of having imported

undertones to take place between Rosalind/Ganymede and Orlando. The crossdressing women of Shakespeare are androgynous, a trait that is common with Japanese theatre, especially in the all-male Kabuki and the all-female Takarazuka.

⁵ To illustrate the difference, let us look at the character for “dance.” The *on yomi* reading is “*bu*” (such as in the words *kabuki* or *butai* – stage) whereas the *kun yomi* reading is “*ma*” (as in the word *mimai* – visiting someone who is sick). Both pronunciations refer to the word “dance,” but they are used differently based on the context or the combination with other characters, and the meaning of the character shifts from one usage to the next. In the spoken language, this nuance can be lost, which is why Kawai discourages the use of unclear or less obvious *kanji* readings in translations (2006).

and translated Shakespeare was one of assimilation, appropriation, and carving of a national identity rather than a move to occidentalize the East.⁶ Japan quickly adopted Shakespeare as one of its own, creating what is known as “Japanese Shakespeare” – a hybrid concoction of European/English values and Japanese culture. “Japanese Shakespeare” truly belongs to the Japanese consciousness as the Bard’s plays take on new shapes on stage that are typically a blend of Western ideas and Eastern culture and stage techniques. Shakespeare’s plays are used as a vehicle through which Japan can understand its own cultural past.

In terms of his work on *Hamlet*, Kawai declares that “it is no longer sufficient to translate the mere meanings of the words as previous translators have done. [His] new translation seeks to reconstruct the original sound structure. Replacing the blank verse with a rhythmical Japanese of a somewhat archaic nature” (2006, 39). This position argues against the traditional modes of translation that, up until now, concerned themselves with the perfect transposition of meaning rather than the poetry of Shakespeare. However, the “archaic” Japanese rhythm reflects Tsubouchi’s work that was rooted in Meiji-era language. During that time, “*Hamlet* became popular in Japan as literature rather than as a work for the stage” (Ashizu 2014), which can be interpreted as the loss of the experience of Shakespeare’s most emotionally and psychologically complex play. Naturally, plays can be read and enjoyed, but they are better suited for the stage as their purpose is to visually and auditorily entertain. To this effect, Kawai received help from Mansai Nomura, a Kyogen⁷ actor and director, who “read [the translation] aloud from beginning to end” (2006, 40), thereby giving life to the words in the way they were intended. A play is, first and foremost, meant to be spoken and performed, which is why Mansai’s contribution helped with ensuring the quality of the work in terms of its playability. While translated works are concerned with the written understanding, the nature of a play demands that the work be translated in a way that makes sense rhythmically when spoken. This

⁶ In terms of appropriation, Fischlin and Fortier (2014) write: “This word suggests a hostile takeover, a seizure of authority over the original in a way that appeals to contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized understanding of culture;” however, “appropriation can take place without altering the original in itself” (3). I use the word here in a more positive light, one that encourages a sharing and understanding of one another’s cultures rather than a seizure of a foreign cultural legacy. To appropriate Shakespeare in the Japanese context is to accept him as a method through which to explore Japan’s ancient theatre culture.

⁷ According to MIT Global Shakespeare: “Kyogen is a form of traditional Japanese theater that developed as a sort of intermission and comic relief between the solemn noh acts . . . There are usually only two or three roles, always played by male actors” (“Kyogen (Japanese theater form)” 2022). Furthermore, Kawai states that “‘Kyogenizing’ Shakespeare is a good way of furthering our understanding of his plays, for Shakespeare is arguably more akin to Kyogen than to modern Western theatre” (2009, 264–65).

is what Kawai wanted to achieve with his *Hamlet* and, evidently, the Japanese Shakespeare directors would seem to agree, favouring his translation over that of several other readily available versions.⁸

The process of modifying Shakespeare and his plays to fit the Japanese cultural context is one that takes place in two-fold. For one, “Shakespeare is often ‘japanified’ or ‘japanized,’” by having “Japanese names being given to the various characters” (Robertson 1998, 131). The other method is by incorporating typically Japanese elements into the staging, usually perceivable through the stage techniques and costumes. Translation work adds to this japanization through the linguistic choices made, such as the archaic language that Kawai hints at. Consequently, Kabuki (and Noh) traditions are further exemplified through the choice of casting in Japan. Kawai explains that “[p]resumably, one reason why there are so few mothers in Shakespeare’s plays is that the Elizabethan players lacked any equivalent of the Japanese tradition of female impersonators (especially in Kabuki) and male impersonators in Takarazuka. In Japan, given these traditions, there is nothing awkward about transgender casting” (Kawai 2009, 269). While the Elizabethans used young boys to portray women on stage, Japan regularly mixes genders between the actors and the characters they play – and this, without a second thought, as it is culturally and traditionally accepted on stage.

Seeing as how the language itself is gendered, it is interesting to see how it is then wielded by actors and actresses who specialize in portraying the opposite sex on stage. In Yoshihiro Kurita’s 2002 *Hamlet*, for example, the lead actress who played the eponymous character, Mira Anju, was a retired Takarazuka male performer, while Ophelia was played by a Kabuki-trained, female-performing actor, Jun Uemoto (Kawai 2009, 270–71). Both actors were specialists in their respective roles, which explains why they were chosen for these cross-gendered portrayals. In a way, Japan’s history of cross-gender casting has led to some male actors being very good at performing stylized women on stage, and vice versa.⁹ These actors can then use the strict conventions of the language and subvert them by attributing the gendered-pronouns to themselves without fear of social judgement because, on stage, it is an expected – and accepted – process.

⁸ Although the exact number of translations is unclear, Kawai compiled 42 different versions of the line “to be or not to be,” indicating that there are at least as many full translations of *Hamlet* in Japan.

⁹ This is not to say that actresses do not make good women on stage, for example. On the contrary, there are excellent actors and actresses who can perform either sex convincingly based on the theatre traditions of Kabuki, Noh, and Takarazuka. Actors and actresses who perform the opposite sex on stage are trained artists who have devoted their careers to perfecting these crossdressing and crossgendering techniques.

2. Female Hamlets and their Ghosts

When discussing female Hamlets in the Japanese context, the first thing that comes to mind is the musical revue company, Takarazuka. The company opened its doors in 1913, following the end of the Meiji period, and has employed women exclusively for its productions since then. Meiji translators highly regarded Shakespeare's women and, "regardless [of] their shrewdness, stubbornness, and other qualities as rather strong women, the Japanese translators projected Shakespeare's female characters . . . as paragons of virtue and fidelity" (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 209). Takarazuka Company followed this idea in their practices, which also resonated with the Meiji government's motto of "good wife, wise mother" (Robertson 1998, 61–63). Takarazuka actresses are widely famous in Japan and, sometimes, some of them also find fame in the West. Takarazuka Company is known for pushing gender boundaries through its performances and focusing on androgyny on stage. In fact,

[i]n Giles Block's 1995 Japanese production (Shochiku Theatre, Tokyo) Hamlet was Rei Asami, from the all-female Takorasaka [sic] company who were reversing the centuries-old *onnagata* tradition of all-male casting. Takorasaka [sic] implicitly critiqued a society that had clung to conventions of gender representation from a distant age; yet a group of actresses had staged *Hamlet* in Japan as early as 1907 and the kabuki-trained actress Yaeko Mizutani played Hamlet successfully in 1933 and 1935. (Howard 2007, 5)

Asami Rei played a feminized Hamlet in her post-Takarazuka years during which time she had been an *otokoyaku* Top Star.¹⁰ The link between Takarazuka and Kabuki traditions run deep; the *otokoyaku* (a female actor playing as a man) is the exact opposite of the Kabuki *onnagata* (a male actor playing as a woman), and the elements found in Kabuki are often transposed to the modern Takarazuka stage. As per Howard's comment, Kabuki-trained actresses played *Hamlet* much earlier than Takarazuka, but today's conservative Kabuki theatres do not typically employ actresses, leaving the space open for Takarazuka actresses to take on these roles. Moreover, Takarazuka productions not only feature talented women, but also create glitzy, French cabaret-style shows that incorporate music, sequined-costumes, and heavy makeup.

¹⁰ In Takarazuka, actresses are divided into two types of roles: *musumeyaku* (female performers) and *otokoyaku* (male performers). The *otokoyaku* are central to the Takarazuka aesthetic and are more often glorified over their female counterparts. The emphasis is always placed on these cross-dressing actresses and their performances.

At first glance, a rock opera of *Hamlet* seems atypical of Shakespeare adaptations; however, the link to music is not as strenuous as what it may seem. Ambroise Thomas, a nineteenth-century French composer, turned *Hamlet* into a five-act opera that was very successful and is still performed today.¹¹ In this respect, Takarazuka's *Hamlet* is not the first of its kind, but it is one of the few all-female performances of the melancholic play. In Takarazuka's hands, the play takes on a new, lighter feeling than in the heavy French opera. Ophelia's role in this version is significantly changed compared to other stagings of the play. After her death, Ophelia returns to the stage as a ghost-like figure who follows Hamlet's adventure, until his own death, after which they are reunited. In typical Takarazuka fashion, the play closes on a joyous reunion of the lovers, clothed in white, and dancing and singing happily in their afterlife.

For Takarazuka, Ophelia is given a new role beyond the mad and suicidal princess in the original *Hamlet*. This addition is unique to Takarazuka, and these extra lines and scenes do not exist in Kawai's translation. *Hamlet!!*'s director, Fujī Daisuke, added this ghostly Ophelia to give her a voice beyond the bounds of the Shakespearean text. According to Abraham and Torok, "phantoms are not the spirits of the dead, but 'les lacunes laissées en nous par les secrets des autres' [the shortcomings left in us by the secrets of others]" (quoted in Davis 2005, 374). This idea resonates well with Ophelia's extended role in the play as she haunts the stage as a reminder and reflection of Hamlet's psyche. Seeing as how this psychoanalytical idea is, first and foremost, targeted at "transgenerational trauma and family secrets" and that it is a "mediation in fiction of the encrypted, unspeakable secrets of past generations" (Davis 2005, 374), Ophelia's physical haunting is a clear representation of the family feud that persists even after her death.

As with Hamlet, Ophelia descends into madness after the death of her father, making her a foil for the prince – and a foreshadowing of what will happen to him later in the play. Ophelia's ghost therefore reflects the secrets between the previous and the current generation. Naturally, when speaking of ancestral hauntings, King Hamlet's ghost comes to the forefront of the discussion, but it is Ophelia who is at the heart of the story in Takarazuka's rock opera musical. In terms of Japanese theatre, Ophelia's ghost is a common stage mechanism often seen in Kabuki and Noh theatres whereby the supernatural world spills onto the stage to both haunt and remind

¹¹ The latest of which was at the Opéra Comique, Paris, in 2018.

the other characters of their existence. In fact, “[i]n the world of Noh, the return of the dead to the world of the living is a familiar motif and one may even argue that Noh masks themselves represent inscrutable psychic entities filled with deep-seated grudges” (Kawai 2009, 267), the latter of which become a major preoccupation for the plots of Noh plays. What is more, Japan’s native religion, Shintoism, contributes to this understanding of ghosts and hauntings.¹² When combined with Shakespeare, the hauntings take on a philosophical aspect due to the characters’ soliloquies that offer a look into their minds. Furthermore, “Shakespeare’s plays are similar to the Noh stage, a vestige of an old culture, filled with passionate thoughts, and one has only to pick up a mask lying there to revitalize its hidden power” (Kawai 2009, 267), which makes Shakespeare’s work all the more powerful for its ability to bridge two seemingly very different worlds.

3. Ninagawa’s *Hamlet*

Kabuki, being one of the three classical theatre forms of Japan,¹³ influences theatre productions to this day, including Yukio Ninagawa’s world-renown Shakespeare adaptations. Ninagawa’s admiration for Western plays and playwrights is reflected throughout his career, from his beginnings with the Greek tragedies, to his lifelong love of Shakespeare and repeated productions of specific tragedies. Ninagawa staged *Hamlet* eight times, both at home in Japan and abroad in England, between 1978 and 2015, and each production was japanized in varying degrees. In Ninagawa’s 2015 version of *Hamlet*, for example, “the scene of the play-within-the play is revealed through the Kabuki technique of *furi-otoshi* (the dropping of a huge curtain)” (Kawai 2016, 25). When Ninagawa began producing Shakespeare’s canon, “his aim was not to revere a sophisticated higher foreign culture but to show how relevant Shakespeare could be to our modern life” (Kawai 2008, 270). This aligns with Tsubouchi who believed that Kabuki “*furigoto* [was] a genre with a potential ‘to unite the nation’ as Shakespeare and opera had done in nineteenth-century

¹² Not only were “noh theatre and kabuki theatre . . . derived from early court entertainments and religious rituals,” but “Shinto, ‘the way of the gods,’ revered the processes of nature. Similar to early Chinese Daoism, Shinto had neither dogma nor creed, just actions to unite gods, ancestral spirits, and people in one divine way of life” (Kuritz 1988, 97). In this respect, Japanese classical theatre is engrained in the religious tradition of ancient Japan. Furthermore, modern theatre, being an extension and often revitalization of classical drama, continues to rely on this cultural legacy.

¹³ The two others being *Bunraku* (puppet theatre) and *Noh* (mask plays).

Europe” (Gallimore 2019, 275).¹⁴ For both the translator and the director, Kabuki is a similar point of interest when discussing Shakespeare in Japan. Kabuki and Shakespeare, therefore, go hand in hand in Japanese translations, adaptations, and performances. During the eighth edition of Ninagawa’s *Hamlet*, actor Mikijiro Hira stated that “being Japanese is the foundation of his works. Once elements of Japanese culture are integrated, how can he stage the works with a touch of Japan in such cultural collision; this has been his concern” (“The World’s Ninagawa” 2015, 00:30–00:50). Even though Ninagawa references traditional Japanese culture and traditions in his work and integrates Kabuki elements into his productions, “[his] spectacular approach is no different from . . . Western directors in that they both believed that as directors they had to do something to Shakespeare – modernise or japanize – to make him accessible to the modern audience” (Kawai 2008, 274). It is through this idea that Shakespeare maintains his relevance in Japan as the combination of his works with culturally recognizable modes of acting make him an easy choice for directors like Ninagawa.

Ninagawa’s productions differ from Takarazuka’s inasmuch as the focus of the play is more on the emotions evoked by the text rather than gender dynamics between the characters. Takarazuka’s actresses allow for a sensuous, feminized filter to be placed over *Hamlet*, while Ninagawa’s work fully appropriates and modifies Shakespeare to fit the Japanese cultural context. Ninagawa’s frequent signposting via costumes, stage decor, and music firmly places *Hamlet* in Japan, and nowhere else. For both, though, Kawai’s translation contributes to this appropriation and assimilation of Shakespeare’s themes as the linguistic choices automatically divert the meaning from the original English.

Ninagawa’s work blends the two contrasting views of East and West by exporting his japanized Shakespeare back into the English-speaking world. This ability to bridge the two is perhaps not unique to Ninagawa, but he is certainly someone who perfected it and made it internationally popular. The re-introduction of a Japanese Shakespeare into his own English society makes for an interesting dialogue around the power of translations and transnational adaptations. It is not all that common for Japanese productions of Shakespeare to gain fame outside of Japan, so Ninagawa’s success at doing this allows him to have his brand of Shakespeare be recognized all

¹⁴ Gallimore explains that “*Furigoto* (literally “shaking piece”) was in fact one of a number of popular dance forms, but it was Shōyō’s idea that as a set solo piece performed to musical accompaniment, usually at a climactic moment of a *kabuki* play, it resembled an operatic aria or Shakespearean soliloquy in its expressive individuality” (2019, 275).

around the world as well as for international audiences to be exposed to an unusual Shakespeare – and an unusual *Hamlet*.

4. *Ikiru beki ka, shinu beki ka, sore ga mondai da*¹⁵

Seeing as how Kawai’s translation is based on the First Folio of 1623, it is perhaps interesting to point out the fact that the same line in the First Quarto was originally written differently. In 1603, the line read as: “To be, or not to be, I there’s the point” (“Hamlet (Quarto 1, 1603)” 2019) but only one year later, the line was changed to what we recognize today as the “official” version: “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” The difference between the first and second version lies in the word choice from “point” to “question,” which creates a different kind of nuance to the existential first half of the line. Furthermore, the semantic journey of the verb “to be” is interesting in itself: the verb that we use today was originally two separate verbs in Old English, with “be” meaning “exist, come to be, become, happen” and “was/were” meaning “remain, abide, live, dwell” (Harper 2022). The second verb, that we now recognize as a past tense conjugation, surprisingly ties in with the Japanese language’s interpretation of the concept of being and existence.

Due to the fact that “there is no ‘to be’ verb in Japanese” (Dabbs 2021),¹⁶ the translation of Hamlet’s most famous “to be or not to be” line transforms into “to live or to die,” giving this opening line a new meaning and interpretation that is wholly dependent on the language of reception. The second half of the line, *sore ga mondai da*, indicates two nuances within its operative word, *mondai*. Kawai’s choice of the word *mondai* can be understood as either “problem” or “question,” further changing the Japanese understanding of the Shakespearean line. While the original is existential, the translation indicates a choice, or a problematic, between life and death, something that resonates well with the main theme of the play. The 1603 version of the line in English does away with the existential question posed in 1623 and leaves little room for philosophical questioning like in the Japanese translation.

¹⁵ The line is sourced from Shoichiro Kawai’s *Shinyaku Hamuretto [Hamlet: A New Translation]* (2003) and translates directly as: “To live or to die, that is the problem.” This is Kawai’s interpretation of the “to be” soliloquy’s opening line.

¹⁶ However, even though there is no verb equivalent for the English “to be” in Japanese, there are other ways of expressing the sentiment, such as with the copula *desu*. For example, *watashi wa Hamuretto desu* (I am Hamlet) indicates a state of being, but it would be difficult to use *desu* in the way that the “to be” line demands it. Another similar word in Japanese is the intransitive verb *iru* (to be (animate things)) or *aru* (to be (inanimate objects)) but, once again, these verbs cannot be used in the same context as the English “to be” as their meaning is closer to “presence” rather than “existence.” Throughout Kawai’s compilation of 42 translated “to be” lines, most translators used *ikiru/shinu* (live/die) or variations of it to express the state of being (Takai 2016).

Hamlet is driven throughout the story by his desire for vengeance, and many characters suffer the consequences of this path that he forges for himself, which leads them to their deaths. Hamlet's first encounter with the realities of death is when he comes across Yorick's skull, which signifies the end of all things and the decay after life. Meanwhile, the innocent Ophelia becomes a collateral victim of Hamlet's revenge when she tragically ends her life in Act IV. Polonius's death reminds us of King Hamlet's demise, and Hamlet's father visits (or haunts) him and spurs him on his quest for vengeance, thereby placing life and death as antitheses of one another. Claudius's life can be seen as "the problem" mentioned in the translated line because his life is linked to King Hamlet's death. Because of his greed and lust for power, Claudius commits fratricide and usurps the throne, leading to the foregone conclusion that if Claudius were dead, then King Hamlet would be alive, and vice versa. Neither of them can exist whilst the other is alive because they both want the same thing: to rule Denmark.¹⁷ These elements are already present in the English text, but they come to life in the Japanese translation as the struggle for life and death is felt through Hamlet's most famous philosophical musing.

This subtle but observable change in the language allows for a more understandable meaning to be breathed into *Hamlet* in the twenty-first century than if the existential thematic were to remain. Ninagawa himself said that "after directing *Hamlet* four times with such celebrated actors as Mikijiro Hira in 1978, Ken Watanabe in 1988, Hiroyuki Sanada in 1995, and Masachika Ichimura in 2001, [he] was not fully satisfied with any of them [the productions], but [was] pleased with the 2004 production and [said] that he now understands *Hamlet*" (Kawai 2006, 40). Evidently, this specific translation of the play added clarity while maintaining the poetic rhythm that is so important to both Shakespeare and Kawai. The translated "to be" line follows the seven-five-seven pattern that is reminiscent of a *haiku*, thereby further japanizing Shakespeare to fit with the culturally recognizable sign as "[this pattern] is the most popular Japanese rhythm" (Kawai 2006, 41). When Takarazuka's Hamlet (Ryuu Masaki) sings this line in the opening scene of the production, she adds to it the English equivalent which shows the close relationship between Shakespeare's legacy and Japan's appropriation:

¹⁷ Claudius's role in the play, even though underdeveloped compared to Hamlet's, serves to create a clear distinction between the old and the new, the living and the dead, and the strong and the weak. In fact, "although Claudius is referred to throughout as 'the king,' there is the feeling that the 'real' king is the elder Hamlet, of whom we see in Claudius a grotesque and inferior copy . . . More than one characteristic of Claudius is a reminder of Antichrist, the man of sin who was to rule in place of Christ for a short period of war and terror before the final trumpet sounded . . . [Claudius's] rule begins when the true king disappears" (Guilfoyle 1981, 125).

HAMLET. To be or not to be,
To be or not to be.
Ikiru beki ka, shinu beki ka,
Sore ga mondai da.
(Fuji 2010, 00:04:10–00:04:20)

Interestingly, Hamlet sings these lines many times during the production, including right after the scene of Ophelia’s burial. After Hamlet declares that he “loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up [his] sum” (Fuji 2010, 01:44:35–01:44:50), Hamlet sings the theme song: “to be or not to be, *shinu, nemuru, nemuru, nemuru, soshite osoraku wa yume o miru* [to die, to sleep, to sleep, to sleep, and most likely to dream]” (Fuji 2010, 01:46:30–1:46:44). Once again, Kawai’s choice of words for his translation is representative of the lives and deaths of the characters and, when combined with Takarazuka’s clever weaving of the words into the theme song, the key moments are highlighted by Hamlet’s famous words. Comparatively, Ninagawa’s 2003 production, which featured a stripped stage in the style of “Peter Brook’s ‘empty space’” (Kawai 2008, 280), used the “to be” line following the original chronology set by Shakespeare. Hamlet, played by Fujiwara Tatsuya, speaks the lines somberly – a stark contrast to Ryu Masaki’s upbeat singing in *Hamlet!!* – and stalks the dark stage with nothing but a small candle burning dimly in his hand (Ninagawa 2003, 2:58–3:04). Death is more easily felt in this dark and dreary atmosphere, and Fujiwara’s delivery hints at the underlying madness that is rooted in the prince’s mind.

5. A New Perspective

Through Kawai’s translation, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* gains a new interpretation while still maintaining its original qualities that make it so compelling to read and to perform. Even though *Hamlet* has been translated into every imaginable language – including imaginary ones such as in *Star Trek*’s Klingon – it is in Japanese that the tale morphs into something less philosophical and more instinctual. Life and death are at the core of this story, and while one might argue that that is always the case, no matter which language it is in, the fact that it is transposed to the Japanese cultural context puts these elements in conversation with questions of gender, as in Takarazuka, and national identity, as with Ninagawa. Death, in Takarazuka, is transcended in the shape of Ophelia, and her ghost becomes a reminder that Hamlet’s selfish revenge is the reason for everyone’s demise. In Ninagawa’s 2003 production, the bleakness of the stage and the costumes contribute to the original image we have of Shakespeare, yet,

in his 2015 production, the colourful Kabuki-style clothing and decor echo the cultural heritage of Japanese Shakespeare, from Tsubouchi's first translations and the subsequent importation and appropriation of Shakespeare's canon.

The linguistic ghosts of Shakespeare's English continue to haunt the Japanese translations despite the inevitable changes (and losses), imitating the ghosts who haunt Hamlet throughout the play. While some of these specters are maddening – the need for authenticity, for example, others reflect the psyche and the cultural consciousness of a country or of a time period. Even though Kawai refuses to allow for losses in translation and does his best to adapt *Hamlet*'s rhymes, it is impossible to accomplish a perfect, word-for-word rendition as the language's structure does not permit it. Kawai's work differs from others': "Whereas it is the academic's job to immerse themselves in their research, [he] approach[es] [his] work differently by placing priority on the staging of plays" (Takai 2016). This ethic is what created a faithful translation of the original text, while still maintaining its spoken integrity on stage. Ninagawa's productions from 2003 onwards were based on Kawai's work, as was Takarazuka's 2010 musical.

Due to Japan and its theatres' long relationship with Shakespeare, the numerous translations, adaptations, and performances of his plays have entered the cultural identity of the country. The japanification of Shakespeare began in the Meiji period, but it continues to be shaped and reshaped today because of theatre directors and companies who continue to see the value in the Bard's works and who understand the impact his works have had on the forging of a national identity. Ultimately, translations of *Hamlet* into Japanese allow for a different interpretation of some of the key scenes, as with the "to be" soliloquy. The shift from the question of existence to that of life and death reflects the themes of the play and speaks of a Japanese cultural and religious legacy embedded in the very structure of the language. With this new outlook on the famous play due to Kawai's choice of words for his translation, *Hamlet* can then become a completely different work under Ninagawa's expert blending of Japanese classical theatre and Shakespeare's aesthetics, or with Takarazuka's female-focused narrative which gives Hamlet an alternate happy ending despite his tragic life.

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