The Acting of Shakespeare by Japanese Students:

Some Linguistic and Cultural Difficulties

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Among the many values which the Japanese have gained in their study of English is their closer appreciation of the art of one of the greatest of English writers, William Shakespeare. This is no small achievement by the Japanese, for Shakespeare's English, because it is dramatic poetry and also somewhat archaic in diction and style, presents special difficulties to today's students. Moreover, certain qualities in the Japanese nature, such as restraint in emotional and physical expression, tend to increase the difficulty for a select but admirable minority who would experience Shakespeare to the fullest: those who perform his plays in English. I would like to suggest, on the basis of my experience in teaching, in acting in, and in helping to direct Shakespearean plays, how these linguistic and cultural difficulties might be overcome by Japanese amateur actors.

If I may digress for a minute first: I am aware of the continuing success and sometimes popularity of Shakespeare on the stage in Japan. I have seen well-acclaimed British productions of *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice* and Japanese-language productions of *Macbeth* and *Henry IV, Part I*. The performed-in-English *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice* seemed to me to receive a response from the audience that was more courteously appreciative than really understanding. It was a sincere response, I'm sure, but a response, I think, much like that of my own when I saw a performance of Chikamatsu's *Sonezaki Shinju*, the response of one who knows the story well but not really

the dialogue, the response of one who appreciates just his own memory of the story and not the present interpretation by the skilled actors in front of him. On the other hand, while viewing the Japanese version of *Henry IV*, the general absence of laughter in the Falstaff scenes led me to believe that the actors were portraying something quite different from what Shakespeare intended. My point is that in the case of the two English-language performances the audience lost a measure of enjoyment by not understanding the dialogue sufficiently, while in the case of *Henry IV* the actors and audience both lost because of the perhaps-insuperable difficulty of effectively translating Shakespearean verse and prose. Doubtless translation of Shakespearean drama into the vernacular is good, but much better, I believe, is the awareness of Shakespeare as he is, in his own tongue. This awareness grows as the Japanese continue to develop their proficiency in English, and as actors and their audiences become more understanding. Japanese amateur actors of Shakespeare are in a position to take the lead in fostering this understanding.

Perhaps foremost of the difficulties for Japanese in performing Shakespeare is that involving intonation and accent in the verse. It is a commonplace to say that Japanese speech and verse are even-toned in quality and subdued in emphasis compared with English speech and verse. It may be misguided to accept this belief too simply. The following well-known lines by Chikamatsu may be heard in the *jōruri* (puppet theatre) delivered by the chanters with surprising range in intonation, but in general, I believe, the effect of these lines when heard is one of their balanced and measured sound and movement.

Kono yo no nagori Yo mo nagori Shini ni yuku mi wo
Tatōreba Adashi ga hara no Michi no shimo
Hitoashi zutsu ni Kiete yuku Yume no yume koso
Aware nare.

The syllable count of this passage is familiar to the Japanese as the five-seven-five pattern of the traditional and popular poetry, the *haiku* and *tanka*. Thus its basic "music," rhythm and sound, may be said to be part of the consciousness of the Japanese. Let us take now a well-known passage in Shakespeare, one also reflecting a character's feeling of life's futility and personal despair. Macbeth speaks, shortly before his end.

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (V, v, 19-28)

These lines are of Shakespeare's maturity and hence freer in style than is his earlier verse, but yet they have the predominating ten-syllable, five-foot, weak-strong rhythm that any actor does well to keep in mind in mastering them. Because the lines convey a certain boredom or weariness, the tendency for the Japanese actor to speak them in too much of a monotone would be particularly strong, given such actor's conditioning in his native verse rhythms. He could avoid such a tendency by practicing reading the lines several times with exaggerated attention to points of stress, intonation, and underlying rhythm, even though such attention may result in his speaking unusually slowly and perhaps too loudly. Let me give the first five lines again in the way that I think the student actor of Shakespeare might begin to prepare

them. (demonstrate) Such a reading of course sounds shocking or silly, but the learning actor is aware of what he is doing, of what he is working away from and working toward. By so practicing, I think he will soon break a reading of Shakespeare that is too low and flat and hurried. (demonstrate) I do not know how good will be the student-actor's final effort, but I am sure it will be far better than that.

The lines of Macbeth quoted, as you see, are relatively simple in syntax. Likewise many inversions in Shakespeare present slight or no difficulty for the Japanese actor: "Natures of such deep trust we shall much need. / You we first seize on."; "But true it is, from France there comes a power. . . ." (*King Lear*, II, i, 117-8; III, i, 30) But a good many other examples, like the following, require more attention. In *King Lear*, Goneril learns that her brother-in-law, Cornwall, has been killed; in one way this news pleases her, for it will now be easier for Edmund ("Gloucester"), whom she loves, to gain more power. At the same time she fears that her now-widowed sister, Regan, will have an advantage in gaining Edmund as husband, for Goneril remains married to Albany in what she considers a "hateful life." Goneril speaks: "One way I like this well, / But being widow, and my Gloucester with her, / May all the building in my fancy pluck / Upon my hateful life." (IV, ii, 84-7) The student may well ponder here before realizing that "being widow" together with "my Gloucester with her" will function as the subject of the split verb "May . . . pluck." And the student will then form the thought: "Regan's being a widow and being near my Gloucester may bring down ("pluck") all my high hopes ("the building in my fancy") upon my hateful life."

The next passage is notable not so much for complexity of syntax as for its use of a long suspension of the thought. It challenges the young actor, I think, to so appreciate the overall rhythm and unity of thought as to render each phrase gracefully.

So oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth—wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens
The form of plausive manners, that these men—
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being Nature's livery, or Fortune's star—
Their virtues else—be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo—
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. (*Hamlet*, I. iv, 23-36)

The core subject in Hamlet's speech here is found to be "these men" and "Their virutes" and the verb is "Shall . . . take." The real difficulty for the actor, once he has learned the vocabulary, is to grasp and convey the entirety of this speech as a movement not of fourteen steps, most of them strongly end-stopped, but of seven steps (the lines in pairs), the steps being of about equal length but some taken more slowly than others. The final step is slow and solemn. It is not the mere length of the sentence that should bother the young Japanese actor—Professor Donald Keene has pointed out that Japanese poetry sometimes runs to sentences that never really end—but with Shakespearean verse the actor should beware taking too deep a breath, and, particularly in a speech like Hamlet's, he should avoid alternately rushing and creeping through related lines. I shall append a paraphrase of the speech by Hamlet. I believe the young actor who has trouble with more than its vocabulary will be readily helped by the various translations and annotated

editions of the play *Hamlet* available here. But I would urge the actor, for his fuller understanding and appreciation of a difficult text, to as far as possible write out his own paraphrase of it in English, so that he may have all the ideas of the text clear in his mind. Only through such clarity can he avoid the dangers of expressing complex Shakespearean ideas with false emphasis, misleading pauses, and incorrect tones. Positively, by such efforts as I have mentioned, he will gradually find himself speaking Shakespearean verse, not with the finesse perhaps of a native professional, but yet with an assurance and sensitivity that will enrich both himself and his audience with the rare form of entertainment which is Shakespeare in the theater.

On the second part of my topic—dealing with the restrained emotionalism and subdued physical expressiveness of the young Japanese actor as handicaps to be overcome—I can speak more briefly. I am aware that while it may be true that the Japanese are more restrained emotionally and physically than other peoples, at least those of some Western countries, it by no means follows that they cannot be fully demonstrative in feelings and actions on the stage. We know that stage drama is not what we call "real life," but rather imitation of Life, that is, of life that never quite was but may be; it shows us, to borrow a phrase from John Milton's definition of a good book, "a life beyond life." The world today knows Japan's greatness in emulous imitation, which is not to say the Japanese are not also highly creative in their own right, especially in the arts. There is admiration in many countries for Japanese directors and actors in the cinema.

However, my concern here is with the young, neophyte actor of Shakespeare, not the professional. In my experience, the novice Japanese actor does have a reticence in expressiveness which he should strive to overcome. He (and even more so, *she*) requires particular direction and urging in expressing such feelings as anger and hatred, grief, romantic love, even high joy, together with the gestures, violent and tender, that accompany them. To some extent

of course the difficulty is that the young actor and actress have had yet no occasion to personally experience these feelings. The remedy they should seek at every chance is to deepen their sympathetic understanding of these feelings by listening to various recordings of Shakespeare's plays by some of the great modern actors and actresses, and whenever possible should see them on film or stage. Such means of developing a feelingful awareness of Shakespeare's characters are available to Japanese students through their school libraries.

Finally I would suggest for the young actor of Shakespeare the value of occasional meditation or reflection on some brief passages in the plays that he has been moved to remember. This practice, leading to deeper understanding of truths or feelings, may appeal to Japanese, who in my experience tend to learn poetry by heart far more readily than do American students. As I say, the student should memorize at inclination for this purpose, and shorter passages are probably better. It might be Gertrude's words to her son, Hamlet, who grieves for his dead father: "All that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity." Or Cassius' complaint to Brutus: "A friend should bear his friend's infirmities." Or Othello rejoicing in his marriage to Desdemona: "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy." Or Kent, alone in the stocks: "Nothing almost sees miracles / But misery."

I would not like to end on a note of misery. Let us hear from William Hazlitt, who reminds us that acting can be fun. He wrote in 1816, ". . . an actor, to be a good one, must have a great spirit of enjoyment in himself—strong impulses, strong passions, and a strong sense of pleasure: for it is his business to imitate the passions, and communicate pleasure to others. . . ." No better words of encouragement, I think, for the strong young actors of Shakespeare in Japan.

A paraphrase of Hamlet's speech follows. No paraphrase of a complex Shakespearean passage can be considered quite accurate, and in fact may be regarded as somewhat misleading. It is offered only as a suggestion of how a paraphrase might help a young student's awareness of Shakespeare's meaning:

> It often happens in certain men that, because of some harmful blemish in their nature—perhaps by birth (in which case they are not guilty, not having chosen their origin), or by some developing trait that gradually weakens their reason, or by some habit that too much mixes with their better manners—that these men, I say, who bear one such defect which is inherited or the result of mischance, shall together with their most outstanding virtues be ruined in the public judgement because of that one fault.