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Re-reading the Archive: A 21st Century Re-appraisal of Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well* as a Modern *Hamlet*

Abstract: Among Japanese film director Kurosawa Akira's three Shakespeare films, *Throne of Blood* (1957), *Ran* (1985), and *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), the latter has been relatively ignored in Anglophone Shakespeare criticism. This article investigates the Anglophone reception of *The Bad Sleep Well* and argues in favor of its re-appraisal as a *Hamlet*. On reception, it examines three explanations for the neglect: its modern setting, its deconstructive adaptation, and its cinematic quality. Considering the latter unconvincing, the article posits that the first two were only detrimental to the film's reception because they respectively did not conform to Western expectations of essentially pre-modern 'Oriental' Japan and of 'straight' canonical Shakespeare. Considering changed attitudes in Shakespeare studies, neither of these should still be held against the film. On re-appraisal, *The Bad Sleep Well* may be reread in the 21st century as part of our continuing memory of our global Shakespeare discourse. Centering on the film's innovative presentation of Claudius and *The Mousetrap*, the article argues for the porous border between 'straight' production and 'crooked' adaptation, and the value to the tradition of oblique approaches to familiar scenes and characters. By arguing for *The Bad Sleep Well* as a *Hamlet* worthy of study, the article furthers discussion on archival silences and new rhizomatic models of global Shakespeare that seek to move past the more reductive qualities of the 'national Shakespeares' mode of discourse that dominated in the 1990s and 2000s.

Keywords: Shakespeare reception, adaptation, Shakespeare in Japan, *Hamlet*, Kurosawa, *The Bad Sleep Well*, Shakespeare in film.

Introduction

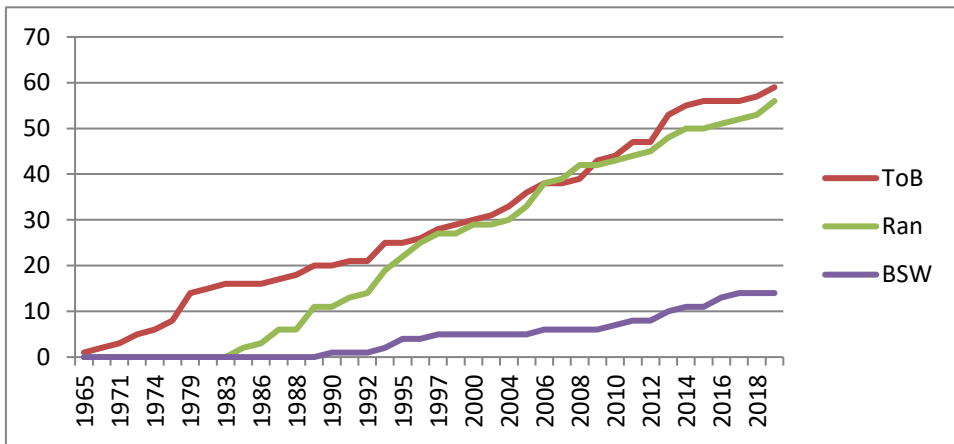
Kurosawa Akira's 1957 *Throne of Blood* is a global Shakespeare icon. Well before seminal productions such as Ninagawa Yukio's *Macbeth* and scholarly works such as Dennis Kennedy's *Foreign Shakespeare* heralded the

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phenomenon of ‘global Shakespeare’ as we know it today, Kurosawa’s cinematic *Macbeth* challenged the hegemony of European and American Shakespeare interpretation and performance. The film influenced Peter Brook’s work in the 1970s (Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare* 279) and is the only production outside of Europe and America meaningfully engaged with in the seminal 1985 scholarly volume *Political Shakespeare* (Holderness, “Radical potentiality” 215-216). As early as 1965, J. Blumenthal praised it as not only “a masterpiece in its own right” but the first proper Shakespeare film produced to date (190) and by 1988 Anthony Davies could counter arguments against its fidelity to Shakespeare by simply noting that “the film has become, for those who have seen it, a part of our thinking about Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*” (154).

More complicated is the Anglophonic reception history of Kurosawa’s other two Shakespeare films, 1960’s *The Bad Sleep Well* and 1985’s *Ran*. To quantify the divergence, I have tabulated entries in the online *World Shakespeare Bibliography* for each three films.¹ Below is a cumulative graph of the results:



Correlating to its iconic status, *Throne of Blood* shows a straight line of scholarly productivity starting with its first entry within a decade of the film’s release. In spite of being released almost three decades later, *Ran* quickly catches up to its elder sibling. However, though *The Bad Sleep Well* was released just three years after *Throne of Blood* and twenty-five years before *Ran*

¹ Search queries for the film titles in English and Japanese filtered for English language entries only. Search executed manually to remove duplicates and false positives. I also manually excised film studies works without apparent Shakespearean focus as well as dissertations (the latter because I could not verify they were representative of their genre).

this middle child of Kurosawa's Shakespeare films lags behind its cinematic siblings at a ratio of 1:4.

A qualitative reading of Anglophonic Shakespeare scholarship substantiates this result: works predating the 1990s which discuss both *Throne of Blood* and *Ran* at length are marked by a deafening silence on *The Bad Sleep Well* (Davies; Collicks). Since then, awareness of *The Bad Sleep Well* as a *Hamlet* film has become commonplace but it is still not uncommon to see works list all three of Kurosawa's Shakespeare films before proceeding to all but ignore *The Bad Sleep Well* in favor of *Throne of Blood* and *Ran* (Dawson; Joubin). Countering this trend, Mark Thornton Burnett has argued that *The Bad Sleep Well* "is long overdue a more sustained critical treatment" (Burnett, "Re-reading Kurosawa" 404) and in *Great Shakespeareans Volume XVII* Burnett gives ample and equal time to all three films. However, at the present rate the gap in critical attention shows little sign of abating.

Explaining the Neglect

Kishi Tetsuo and Graham Bradshaw have suggested this neglect occurred "because Westerners thought of Kurosawa's Shakespeare, or Japanese Shakespeare in general, as a kind of 'samurai Shakespeare'" (136). (Unlike the 'samurai' period pieces of *Throne of Blood* and *Ran*, *The Bad Sleep Well* is set in the corporate world of contemporary 1950s Japan.) In this context, it is telling that the first *World Shakespeare Bibliography* entry on *The Bad Sleep Well* frames the film as "Samurai in Business Dress" (Perret 6). Certainly, much Anglophonic scholarship in this period exhibits a curious befuddlement at how to interpret *The Bad Sleep Well*'s contemporary setting as compared to its (over-)confidence in interpreting 'traditional' Japan. For example, Robert Hapgood's chapter on all three films in *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* covers extensively the "*Sengoku Jidai* [...] (1392-1568)" but offers no such introduction to 1950s corporate Japan (235-237). Anthony Dawson's chapter for *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen* skips *The Bad Sleep Well* entirely because "set in 1960 corporate Japan, [it] raises different questions" than *Throne of Blood* and *Ran* (158). As harsh critiques by, amongst others, Kishi Tetsuo and Ashizu Kaori have illustrated, Anglophone criticism's seeming preference for 'samurai' Shakespeare has not necessarily reflected an ability to understand classical Japanese culture any better than modern Japanese culture (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?"; Kishi, "Japanese Shakespeare and the English reviewers"). As Japanese Shakespeare director Deguchi Norio has phrased it, to foreigners it can be the images of "an agricultural society [...] of Old Japan, the 'so-called Japan'" (Takahasi et al. 190) which are most recognizable and intelligible as Japan, at the expense of works (such as Deguchi's own

Shakespeare productions) which eschew such images as part of a deliberate artistic strategy to speak to contemporary Japanese audiences (Eglinton 64-65).

Another explanation for *The Bad Sleep Well*'s relative neglect could be that any reading of *The Bad Sleep Well* as *Hamlet* must account for numerous of cuts, splits, and merges of themes, scenes, and characters. In this context, Ashizu as well as Kishi and Bradshaw argue that the film's identification with *Hamlet* distorts Shakespeareans' reception of its narrative (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 75; Kishi and Bradshaw 139). The spectator who, they suggest, watches *The Bad Sleep Well* looking for familiar characters and scenes from *Hamlet* overlooks Kurosawa's film. A similar logic leads *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* to include *The Bad Sleep Well* only as a 'cinematic offshoot' (Howard 309). Yet all three films could be considered 'offshoots' by some standard. None make any attempt to translate the received text into Japanese (unlike e.g. Ninagawa Yukio's stage productions). Similarly, all three seem 'straight' Shakespeare if compared to the kind of deconstructive Shakespeare theatre produced by Suzuki Tadashi, Ong Keng Sen, or the Wooster Group. It is not self-evident that the splitting and merging of scenes and characters – its complex relation of both adherence to and deviation from the *Hamlet* tradition both in Japan and globally – should by itself make *The Bad Sleep Well* less interesting to Shakespearean scholars than *Throne of Blood* or *Ran*.

A third explanation could be that perhaps *The Bad Sleep Well* is just not as great a film as *Throne of Blood* and *Ran*. In the comparison to *Throne of Blood*, this argument has merit. In contrast to *Throne of Blood*'s early recognition as a masterpiece, film critic Donald Richie considered *The Bad Sleep Well* a "failure" and notes that Kurosawa too found that *The Bad Sleep Well* "does not live up to its beginnings" (143). However, *Ran* has faced similar criticism since its release. Davies argued that compared to *Throne of Blood* the more recent *Ran* has "more spectacle but [...] less psychological subtlety" (153) and Kishi and Bradshaw considered *Ran* a distant third compared to Kurosawa's first two Shakespearean outings (141-144). While an individual scholar may prefer *Ran* over *The Bad Sleep Well*, the lack of a consensus among those who do treat all three films equally makes it a weak argument for *The Bad Sleep Well*'s neglect on aggregate.

Ripe for Re-appraisal

In stark contrast to the lack of interest in *The Bad Sleep Well* sits the broad movement within Shakespeare studies since at least the 1990s to expand the field's definition of Shakespeare far beyond traditional notions of 'fidelity' and embrace a 'post-modern' or 'rhizomatic' conception of Shakespeare and the

production of Shakespearean meaning.² Christy Desmet, Natalie Loper, and Jim Casey have argued that the 'Shakespearean' quality of (for example) a film can be "a matter of perception rather than authorial intention (audiences may detect Shakespeare where the author disclaims him or may have difficulty finding him where he is named) [or] be a product of intertextual and intermedial relations [...] apart from more overt processes of influence and reception" (Introduction 2-3). In relation to this, it is only the historically (and as shown above not easily defensible) lackluster reception of *The Bad Sleep Well* among Shakespeareans that deters its perception as a classic *Hamlet*. Those scholars who have tried have found that the film can be productively read as a *Hamlet*. These scholars include Ashizu and Kishi and Bradshaw, who in spite of their critique of overly *Hamlet*-centric readings still find that the film has much to say to and about *Hamlet* (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 93; Kishi and Bradshaw 140). It therefore seems to me Burnett is correct in arguing that *The Bad Sleep Well* is overdue for a re-appraisal and renewed attention (Burnett, "Re-reading Kurosawa" 404). However, it is crucial that any renewed scholarly attention (especially in Anglophonic scholarship) takes into account the problems of the past and current reception of Kurosawa's Shakespeare films.

One problematic mode of scholarship common in the 20th century and exemplified by Blumenthal's 1965 article on *Throne of Blood* can be summed up as follows: the scholar starts from the assumption that they essentially understand the Shakespeare play; they proceed to explain how the film does or does not reflect this notion of what the Shakespeare play essentially means; finally, they conclude by either praising or dismissing the film in so far as it has succeeded in cinematically capturing that Shakespearean essence. In this manner, Blumenthal lauds *Throne of Blood* for essentially being Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in cinematic form. Similarly, Davies criticizes *Throne of Blood* for the ways in which it essentially is not Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Both are representatives of what Kishi and Bradshaw have criticized as:

[...] the perennial tendency of Anglo-centric critics to regard their view of Shakespeare (whatever that happens to be at the time) as the *real* Shakespeare, and foreign views as more or less exotic 'versions' of Shakespeare. [...] even though the later, admiring Western responses to *Throne of Blood* were more perceptive, they continued to assimilate their sense of what Kurosawa was doing to their changed but still Western sense of what Shakespeare was doing. (127-128)

² E.g. but not limited to: Hawkes; Kennedy, *Foreign Shakespeare*; Worthen; Cartelli; Desmet and Sawyer; Burt and Boose; Orkin; Massai; Huang and Rivlin; Desmet, Loper and Casey, *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare*.

At the same time, an over-correction of these 20th century problems can lead to a mode of scholarship which is problematic in the opposite direction. Rey Chow has critiqued how:

[...] there remains in the West, against the current facade of welcoming non-Western others into putatively interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exchanges, a continual tendency to stigmatize and ghettoize non-Western cultures precisely by way of ethnic, national labels. (4)

In recent years, Joubin has taken up this argument in the context of Shakespeare studies, arguing that:

National profiling is often allowed to overtake more nuanced appreciation of individual artistic talents and concerns. In other words, the journalistic obsession with, say, ‘Japanese Shakespeare’ as a general category may obscure Ninagawa’s unique artistic achievements. (Huang 431)

The appreciation of non-Western national contexts has been an important development in global Shakespeare scholarship, but there is, as Joubin argues, a danger in any approach which “isolates performances in their perceived cultural origins” (Joubin 8). Such approaches may reveal much about a specific production or performance, but may also serve to unduly constraint its interpretative frame and simultaneously marginalize it in relation to the implicit ‘standard’ of Anglocentric performances. Such an approach would insist that Kurosawa’s *The Bad Sleep Well* must be understood as a *Japanese Shakespeare* as opposed to, e.g., Olivier’s or Almereyda’s *Hamlet* films which are allowed to be ‘just’ Shakespeare.

In this context, this article argues that 21st century re-appraising of *The Bad Sleep Well* should understand it not only as a Japanese *Hamlet* but also as just a *Hamlet*. Such analyses should not strive to find in *The Bad Sleep Well* the presence or absence of an essential Shakespearean *Hamlet*, but rather to explore how the film can be and has been productively read in relation to the global *Hamlet* tradition. Poonam Trivedi has argued that translation “expands, not narrows, the range of reference for Shakespeare” (15). Understood in this manner, reading *The Bad Sleep Well* as a modern *Hamlet* is not about restricting Kurosawa’s film to a preconceived notion of what *Hamlet* is, but rather about allowing *The Bad Sleep Well* to stand alongside other modern performances so that it may enrich the global tradition of *Hamlet* performance in which we, as Shakespearians and as a global society, continue to reproduce and reinvent what *Hamlet* is and means to us.

The Film is the Thing

A brief synopsis of the film is in order. *The Bad Sleep Well* starts with the wedding reception of Iwabuchi Yoshiko, the daughter of the vice-president of a public corporation. As the reception is crashed first by journalists and then by the police it becomes clear this public corporation is under investigation for corruption and *The Bad Sleep Well* is set in a world of kickbacks, graft, and embezzlement of public funds. As the story unfolds we discover that the groom, Nishi, is our Hamlet-figure. Five years prior, his father was induced to commit suicide to take the fall for another kickback scheme. Now, Nishi is trying to avenge his father by exposing the corruption of the people responsible so that they may be brought to justice in the dual courts of the law and public opinion. In the end, however, Nishi fails, is killed, and despite multiple murders to his name vice-president Iwabuchi remains alive and well and hoping to launch a political career.

Those scholars who have tried to map *The Bad Sleep Well*'s characters to those found in the *Hamlet* tradition have generally agreed that Nishi corresponds to Hamlet, his wife Yoshiko to Ophelia, her brother Tatsuo to Laertes, and Nishi's friend and confidant Itakura to Horatio. Less consensus is found regarding the three main antagonists to Nishi: Iwabuchi, Moriyama, and Shirai. Sometimes, Iwabuchi is taken to be the Claudius figure and Moriyama and Shirai to be Kurosawa's inventions (e.g. Burnett in *Great Shakespeareans*). However, Ashizu suggests that Moriyama is the "Polonius-like aide" (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 74) whereas Shirai can be compared to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 96). On another end of the interpretive spectrum, Tony Howard suggests that there is no Claudius at all in *The Bad Sleep Well* but that the film presents "the world according to Polonius" (Howard 301). The character of Wada, who at times functions as a (fake) ghost or Nishi's conscience, also lacks an unequivocal parallel.

The Bad Sleep Well was produced at a time when Japanese theatres were still dominated by a deferential mode of *Shingeki* production which has been criticized for its lack of "originality" (Gallimore and Ryuta 487) and failure to find a "culturally relevant idiom" beyond the imitation of Western models (Mulryne 4). However, since the early 20th century numerous Japanese novel writers had creatively engaged with *Hamlet* in ways that "disprove the stereotypical view that Japan has generally taken a highly respectful, imitative attitude to Western culture" (Ashizu, "*Hamlet* through your legs" 86) and in particular to *Hamlet*. These novel adaptations—in particular Shiga Naoya's *Claudius' Diary* (1912), Kobayashi Hideo's *Ophelia's Will* (1931), Dazai Osamu's *New Hamlet* (1941), Ōoka Shōhei's *Hamlet's Diary* (1955)—

have received extensive scholarly attention.³ However, their connection to Kurosawa's film is rarely mentioned (an exception is, for example, Kishi and Bradshaw 141). Irrespective of whether Kurosawa read any of these novels, some of the parallels are striking. Izubuchi Hiroshi's argument that Dazai's Claudius is "so like Polonius that we have the impression of being confronted with two versions of the same person" (192) parallels the merging of the two characters in *The Bad Sleep Well* and scholar's resulting disagreement regarding the main Claudius or Polonius figure in the film. Similarly, if Izubuchi was correct in suggesting that Ōoka was breaking new ground by presenting "Hamlet as a deep schemer, a Machiavellian Hamlet" (196) then *The Bad Sleep Well*'s master schemer Nishi is clearly another instance of that type. Like the Japanese novelists which, as Ashizu argues, followed Natsume Sōseki's advice to 'look at *Hamlet* through their legs' (Ashizu, "*Hamlet* through your legs" 85-86), so Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well* approaches *Hamlet* from oblique and broken angles.

For example, Ophelia and Laertes' relationship is one point of indeterminacy in the *Hamlet* tradition, in particular Laertes' deep concern for his sister's (potential) sexual activities. This is exemplified in performance by how the production frames the phrase "chaste treasures" (1:3:31) as uttered by Laertes in the received text. In Gielgud's 1964 production John Cullum says the line with a kind but unembarrassed sincerity, suggesting the topic is wholly appropriate for a brother and sister to discuss. In contrast, in the 2016 RSC production Marcus Griffiths adds an awkward pause between "chaste" and "treasure" and Ophelia groans in response, clearly establishing the topic to be embarrassing to both siblings. *The Bad Sleep Well* offers no equivalent to or translation of the line, but it does present a Laertes figure (Tatsuo) equally concerned about his sister's sex life, only for different reasons. As Nishi and Yoshiko are married right before the film's opening scene, this Laertes is not concerned that this Hamlet might be sleeping with his sister, but rather that this Hamlet might *not* be sleeping with his sister; i.e. that his brother-in-law might be neglecting his spousal duties. The relationship between Nishi, Yoshiko, and Laertes is no less central to *Bad Sleep Well* than any Hamlet, Ophelia, and Laertes, but familiar expectations are turned upside down, and familiar themes, characters, and relationships are approached from new or even opposite angles.

At the same time, *The Bad Sleep Well* echoes *Hamlet* beyond mere reflection or distortion. It is illustrative that in a discussion which completely ignores the film's relation to *Hamlet*, film critic Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro finds that "the film's real structural flaw lies in Nishi's weak motivation" (283). It hardly needs noting that the issue of Hamlet's 'weak motivation' has enthralled

³ E.g. but not limited to: Izubuchi; Kishi and Bradshaw 98-125; Kawachi; Nakatani; Ashizu, "*Hamlet* through your legs".

Shakespearean critics from Coleridge to Bradley. There are many ways to read *The Bad Sleep Well* as a modern *Hamlet*, but for the remainder of this essay I wish to focus on *The Bad Sleep Well*'s unique and complicated place within the *Hamlet* tradition's understanding of *The Mousetrap*.

To Catch the Conscience of the King?

Within the Anglophonic tradition, doubts regarding whether and how much guilt Claudius actually reveals during the play-within-a-play have existed since 1917 and W.W. Greg's article "Hamlet's Hallucination". Whereas a decade earlier A.C. Bradley had considered it self-evident that "Hamlet's device proves a triumph far more complete than he had dared to expect" (97) to Greg such "orthodox" (396-397) views did not hold. Greg emphasized that Claudius "gives not the smallest sign of disturbance during or after the all-important dumb-show" (401) and from this concluded that his "breaking up the court has nothing directly to do with either the plot or the words of the play" (400). Rather, Claudius is reacting to the increasingly frustrated Hamlet behaving "like a madman" (405). Based upon the failure of *The Mousetrap*, Greg further concluded that "Claudius did not murder his brother by pouring poison into his ears" (401) and that the ghost was Hamlet's hallucination. The prince rightly intuited that his uncle had murdered his father but in lieu of actual proof subconsciously fabricated it instead, imagining the murder to have transpired as in the fictional *Murder of Gonzago*, inverting the traditionally assumed direction of influence between the ghost's story and the play's murder (416).

Greg's argument was a radical departure from the then current orthodoxy in Anglophonic Shakespeare interpretation, but in Japan a remarkably similar interpretation had been articulated five years earlier by Shiga Naoya in his *Claudius's Diary*. Impetus for this work was Shiga's experience of the 1911 *Hamlet* directed by Tsubouchi Shōyō. Shiga was annoyed by this production's Hamlet but sympathetic towards its Claudius (Ashizu, "Naoya Shiga's *Claudius' Diary*" 165-166). Going a step beyond W.W. Greg, Shiga's Claudius is actually innocent, but he buckles under the force of Hamlet's continual insinuations and "is nearly hypnotized by Hamlet's spite into believing he is what Hamlet wants him to be" (Izubuchi 189).

Both Greg's and Shiga's works are landmarks in that they prefigured what Ashizu has termed "a broader desire to move beyond 'Hamlet-centric' or 'Hamlet-friendly' views of the play" ("Naoya Shiga's *Claudius' Diary*" 169). The first and perhaps greatest influence of Greg's article was to inspire John Dover Wilson to rebut it, leading to 1935's seminal *What Happens in Hamlet* (Wilson 1-24). However, at the time of its publication G. Wilson Knight had already challenged orthodoxy from a different angle. In 1930's no less seminal

The Wheel of Fire, Knight posits that “Hamlet’s play before the King is provisionally successful” (355) but also argues that “Claudius is a good king” (48) whereas “Hamlet is living death in the midst of life” (45). Knight’s argument in particular served as an inspiration to John Updike’s novel prequel to the play, *Gertrude and Claudius* (213-214), published in 2000, which paints a nuanced but sympathetic portrait of its titular leads.

The influence of these interpretations is not confined to act 3 scene 2. As Terence Hawkes has argued:

[Greg’s interpretation’s] effect is to ‘promote’ Claudius: to make him more intriguing, his actions and his motives more complex: [...] no simple mustache-twirling criminal, but Hamlet’s ‘mighty opposite’. (317)

Kishi and Bradshaw have noted that Claudius’ reaction during this scene also reflects on the court and their complicity throughout the play (103). Charles Edelman has similarly argued that a public display of guilt on Claudius’ part implies “a totality of corruption at the Danish court which strains credibility” (21).

Though Greg’s argument that the ghost is Hamlet’s hallucination and Shiga’s argument that Claudius is wholly innocent remain fringe interpretations, rejection of Hamlet-centric readings and understanding of Claudius as more than a ‘simple mustache-twirling criminal’ and the state of Denmark as more nuanced than a ‘totality of corruption’ are now commonplace (Ashizu, “Naoya Shiga’s *Claudius’ Diary*” 169; Kishi and Bradshaw 99). This history illustrates the porous borders between supposedly ‘straight’ production and ‘crooked’ adaptation and translation. Interpretations first suggested in ‘crooked’ adaptation may end up becoming an accepted enrichment and expansion of ‘straight’ productions. The relationship is neither one of competition or parasitism, but of shared membership of a living tradition encompassing both forms and more in which all forms may potentially enrich and expand what *Hamlet* does and can mean.

Seen as part of the development of a global *Hamlet* tradition, the re-interpretation of what happens in act 3 scene 2 can best be described as having unfixed a seemingly determined aspect of the narrative and thus opened for the scene and the characters new interpretive possibilities. Schematized, it can be understood as offering three possibilities for the scene’s performance: A) The traditional reading where Claudius is publicly caught and exposed. B) The counter-reading where the mousetrap fails entirely to reveal anything. C) A compromise reading where Claudius displays guilt but in some subtle manner only noticeable to those looking for it (e.g. Hamlet and/or Horatio). Examples of the first are Svend Gade and Heinz Schall’s 1920 silent film *Hamlet: The Drama of Vengeance* or, archotypically, Laurence Olivier’s film *Hamlet* (1948). The latter shows all eyes in the court turning to the sweating king before the scene descends into utter chaos. The second is perhaps best

exemplified by the 1980 *BBC Television Shakespeare* production of *Hamlet* directed by Rodney Bennett. Patrick Stewart's Claudius can be heard laughing during the dumb show, and calls for lights only so as to look Derek Jacobi's Hamlet sternly in the eyes (to which this Hamlet laughs nervously and covers his face with his hands). A clear example of the third is Ninagawa Yukio's 2015 stage *Hamlet*. Close-ups of Claudius and Hamlet (in the performance recording for DVD release) show an attentive Hamlet noticing Claudius being taken aback by the dumb show, but background laughter by courtiers suggests no one else notices anything amiss. When this Claudius does rise, the rest of the court likely presumes it a reaction to the outrageously phallic costume of the Lucianus figure more than any display of guilt. Naturally, the choice need not always be so clear, and productions may leave the events up to interpretation. The 2018 Shakespeare's Globe production directed by Federay Holmes and Elle While leaves it to the spectator to decide if James Garnon's Claudius stomping off the stage reflects a guilty conscience. Michelle Terry's Hamlet is convinced, but talks over an annoyed Catrin Aaron's Horatio who is thus unable offer her interpretation of events. Similarly, in Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 *Haider* the intense stare between Shahid Kappor's Haider and Kay Kay Menon's Khurram after the film's equivalence of *The Mousetrap* is open to either interpretation.

The Mousetrap in Bad Sleep Well and Bad Sleep Well as The Mousetrap

Where in this schema is *The Bad Sleep Well* located? I argue Kurosawa's film does something unique: it has its wedding cake and eats it too. Instead of determining itself to reflect any one of the three possibilities, it presents all three by having not one but three Claudius figures: Iwabuchi, Moriyama, and Shirai. Not all commentators have sought to parallel *The Bad Sleep Well*'s characters to those of the *Hamlet* tradition, but the attempts to do so have tended to look for 1:1 equivalents as if trying to ascertain which 'actor' was cast into which 'role' from the received text. In the case of Claudius in particular, this has obfuscated one of the inventive and complex ways in which *The Bad Sleep Well* splits and merges familiar figures. The film itself repeatedly articulates Iwabuchi, Moriyama, and Shirai as a trio. During the wedding reception which opens the film, a member of the journalistic chorus calls them the "clean-up trio". Later when Nishi is trying to convince Wada to reject suicide and instead turn on his superiors, Nishi again speaks of "Iwabuchi, Moriyama, and Shirai" as if one entity. In a Kurosawa film, such details are never trivial. However, the equation of the 'clean-up trio' to Claudius is clearest and most masterful during the opening segment which audiences later come to understand as having been *The Bad Sleep Well*'s equivalent to act 3 scene 2.

Donald Richie has called *The Bad Sleep Well*'s opening sequence "twenty minutes of brilliance unparalleled even in Kurosawa" (141) and words cannot do it justice. We see what should be a perfectly orchestrated wedding reception in high society face one breach of protocol after another: journalists barge into the lobby, the bride stumbles and almost falls, and the police arrest the master of ceremonies. The sequence's climax occurs at the moment when the bride and groom are to cut the wedding cake. Without warning, a second wedding cake is rolled in. The second cake is shaped in the form of the building where (whom we later learn to be) Nishi's father committed suicide to cover-up Iwabuchi, Moriyama, and Shirai's crimes. A rose has been stuck in the exact window from which Nishi's father leapt to his death. This is *The Bad Sleep Well*'s equivalent of the dumb show, and the camera shows each of the trio's distinct reactions in turn. Shirai, representative of the first kind of Claudius, makes a spectacle by loudly dropping to the floor the wedding cake knife he was presenting to the newlyweds. A close-up of Moriyama's face shows distress, but without suggesting anyone else in the room has noticed. And as the cake is wielded into position right behind Iwabuchi, the vice-president's stone cold demeanor reveals nothing, even with all eyes on him. Rather than disambiguating the possible interpretations into a single performance, *The Bad Sleep Well* presents the indeterminacy of the Claudius figure by offering all three potential reactions to the mousetrap in order.

The parallels between these three and Claudius do not stop coming after the opening sequence ends. In a pivotal scene much later, Nishi forces Shirai to drink poison only to reveal it was a fake out and the poison was just alcohol. What at first seems to have tried to reenact act 5 scene 2 soon turns out to parallel act 3 scene 3: Nishi's hesitance and decision not to murder Shirai proves his undoing as the now mad Shirai is discovered and carted off to an asylum before the press can get wind of what has transpired.

After the wedding cake has been rolled in, the opening sequence ends with a revealing commentary by two of the spectating journalists. "Best one-act play [*hitomakumono*] I've ever seen" says one; to which another replies: "One-act? This is just the prelude." These lines are full of meaning, but one is most relevant here: if what we have just seen is *The Mousetrap*, the film suggests that in *The Bad Sleep Well* it is not cancelled after one act. In fact, reading the entirety of *The Bad Sleep Well* as one long parallel to *The Mousetrap* offers a productive perspective on more than one aspect of the film and its place within the *Hamlet* tradition.

For one, it would have prevented some critics and scholars from making an interpretative mistake noted by Ashizu: that unlike traditional Hamlets, Nishi's goal is "not to kill but to expose his enemies" (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 72). Moreover, it shines a spotlight on another aspect of Nishi's character. Ashizu and Kishi and Bradshaw have added much needed cultural

context to the discourse on *The Bad Sleep Well* when emphasizing the importance of the Japanese concepts of *giri* (social obligation) and *ninjō* (personal inclination) to culturally situating both the willingness of *The Bad Sleep Well*'s corporate lackeys to commit suicide on command and Nishi's style of Hamlet-like doubt and inner turmoil (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 91; Kishi and Bradshaw 141). However, they have also noted how *The Bad Sleep Well* complicates this dichotomy. As Ashizu has argued, a "modern attitude comes in, when [Nishi] talks about his motive for revenge" (Ashizu, "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 92). Kishi and Bradshaw have drawn attention to a moment in the film when Nishi admits that:

[...] It wasn't just to avenge my father. I wanted to punish them all, all those who prey on the people who are unable to fight back.' [...] Shakespeare's Hamlet never worries about others in this way, and is never concerned about the situation of the helpless, anonymous Danes. (141)

At least one scholar, Shimizu Toyoko, would dissent from Kishi and Bradshaw's final point. Shimizu has argued that in his final lines Hamlet shows himself "still anxious for the well-being of the state after his death" and that in supporting the peaceful transfer of power to Fortinbras he has "accomplished not only his personal duty as an avenger but also the social duties" to the state (60-61). The distinction between "public [and] private revenge" (Shimizu 63), however latent in traditional *Hamlet* interpretation, are brought to the forefront of *The Bad Sleep Well* due to the particular position of its Machiavellian Hamlet figure. If Nishi's objective was a private revenge similar to that of Yuranosuke in the 18th century puppet play *Kanadehon Chūshingura*,⁴ then the film could've ended long before it starts and the story should have centered on Nishi's wooing of Yoshiko to get close to Iwabuchi rather than his married life right under the vice-president's nose.

The film's juxtaposition of different kinds of duty, revenge, and justice is not contained only to Nishi's internal struggle. In an oft overlooked scene soon after the opening sequence, the arrested and imprisoned Wada is being interrogated by the police prosecutor. Wada maintains an impenetrable demeanor throughout, with one exception. This is the point when the prosecutor tells Wada: "You owe it to the public to reveal everything you know."⁵ For

⁴ This play has often been compared to *Hamlet*, perhaps most famously in the 1992 play *Kanadehon Hamlet* by Tsutsumi Harue (Bowers et al.; Holderness "Hamlet and the 47 Ronin").

⁵ The corresponding word in Japanese the prosecutor uses is not *giri* but *gimu*. The two have similar but subtly different connotations. E.g. *Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* suggests both can translate as duty, but connotes *gimu ga aru* with working hard and paying taxes (708) as opposed to *giri ga aru* with debts or favors to friends (755).

just a moment, Wada reacts and seems poised to talk. The stenographer readies a pen, but Wada hesitates and returns to his previous posture and silence.

It is Nishi's desire to reconcile private revenge with public justice that necessitates his Machiavellian plot, a plot which ultimately fails and undoes him. As the public investigation flounders, the journalists and the police (who are the audience's initial entry point into the film's corporate world) steadily disappear from view. However, as the ultimate intended audience of Nishi's entire 'play', they remain a background presence throughout.

One of *The Bad Sleep Well's* major deviations from the traditional *Hamlet* narrative is that it ends with Nishi's defeat and Iwabuchi's victory. As Yoshimoto has noted, *The Bad Sleep Well* was produced at a time when Japan was headed by a prime-minister who had been "imprisoned as a class A war criminal during the Occupation" (274) and there was considerable public anxiety that "postwar democracy might be killed by the return of authoritarian militarism" (247). Kurosawa had wanted to include a direct reference indicating that the government official whom Iwabuchi answers to in multiple phone calls is in fact the prime minister himself, but feared the "serious trouble" that would result from this and later lamented his lack of freedom and bravery (Richie 143; Ashizu "Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?" 80-81). Instead, the most direct reference to contemporary politics that did make it in was Itakura's lament near the film's end that "All Japan will be fooled again" (Yoshimoto 286). Yoshimoto has interpreted this as articulating a fear of a return to authoritarianism:

The desolate landscape cannot but suggest that the first time all Japan was fooled was either during or after the war: the wartime Japanese government's propaganda that continued to hide the disastrous results of Japanese military campaigns in euphemistic language, or the Occupation's reversal of the initial democratization process as a result of the U.S. government's Cold War policy. (286)

The desolate landscape Yoshimoto refers to here are the ruins of a bombed out munitions factory in which Nishi and Itakura reside during the film's final act. Though on one level it parallels the famous graveyard of act 5 scene 1, by its invocation of the war it resonates on many more. As Yoshimoto has argued, there is an understated but unmistakable ironic revenge occurring when Nishi and Itakura, members of the generation who were drafted and starved during the war, imprison and starve Moriyama, a member of the generation who did the drafting (287). Moreover, if as Kishi and Bradshaw have argued the "peculiar bleakness" of *Throne of Blood* must be understood through "the Buddhist concept of *mu*, or nothingness, which is [...] a starting point" (128), then I suggest the desolate landscape at the end of that film can be seen as leading into the post-desolation of *The Bad Sleep Well*. Nishi and Itakura reminisce full

of nostalgia about their “bicycle cart with one tire left” which they used to sell scavenged from the ruined factory they had been drafted to work in. It is clear that to them the hellish bombings which destroyed the factory were also a starting point for a new life with new opportunities. Their retreat to the factory after Nishi's identity has been exposed to Iwabuchi can thus be understood as their return to that hope of new beginnings, which the justice Nishi seeks might bring about. At the same time, the same ruins illustrate the failure of said hope. As Burnett has noted, earlier in the film the undeveloped wasteland where Wada attempts to commit suicide ironically insinuates the corporation's “failure to execute its mandate productively” (Burnett, “Re-reading Kurosawa” 406). The public corporation at the center of the narrative is, after all, called the “Japan Unused Land Development Public Corporation” (Yoshimoto 276). In these scenes the factory's ruins stand as another example of the corrupt company's failure to execute its mandate.

On one level, then, Nishi's defeat in *The Bad Sleep Well* symbolically represents, as Yoshimoto has argued, the suppression of “the legacy of postwar democratization [...] by those who most profited from militarism” (287). In this, Kurosawa's Machiavellian Hamlet again echoes that of Ōoka. At the end of *Hamlet's Diary*, “Fortinbras succeeds to the throne and Denmark becomes a military state” (Izubuchi 194). Some of Ninagawa's early Hamlet productions (in 1988 and 1995) similarly portrayed Fortinbras as a military figure, ending the play with “the surviving Danish courtiers clambering up the steps towards Fortinbras, grovelling towards their new ruler” (Hanratty 107). In the Anglophonic tradition, Fortinbras was often cut (as in Olivier's 1948 film), but under the influence of amongst others Jan Kott's *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* it has become common to both preserve Fortinbras and use the figure to question how ameliorative the play's ending truly is. As Kott argued:

The silvery Fortinbras has triumphed. But will Denmark cease to be a prison? Hamlet's body has been carried out by soldiers. No one will question the sense of feudal history and the purpose of human life any more. Fortinbras does not ask himself such questions. (272)

Nishi's death too removes the one who would question the system of corruption *The Bad Sleep Well* presents. The lack of any Fortinbras figure who could at least suggest a new beginning strengthens the film's suggestion of the victory of the cycle of corruption and the crushing of postwar hopes. As a *Hamlet*, *The Bad Sleep Well* likely belongs to the most pessimistic of renditions. In the context of reading *The Bad Sleep Well* as *The Mousetrap*, the end is prefigured by the beginning. Out of the film's three Claudii, Iwabuchi figures as the Claudius who gives nothing away and shows no guilt. It is this Claudius, the true ‘mighty opposite’ and immaculate Machiavel, who proves too strong to overcome.

Conclusion

It bears repeating that none of the above is intended to reduce a complex and multifaceted film to just another iteration of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The extent to which *The Bad Sleep Well* is or is not a modern *Hamlet* must ultimately lie in the eye of the beholder. What I have endeavored to do in this article is allow the film its place in the global *Hamlet* tradition, letting it speak to and reflect upon other productions and adaptations both near and far to its original context. In this manner, I have sought to reveal how reading *The Bad Sleep Well* as a modern *Hamlet* does not reduce the film to a Shakespearean template but enriches the whole *Hamlet* tradition by offering new possibilities and new ways for *Hamlet* to mean in the 21st century.

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