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New Interpretations and Adaptations of Shakespeare's Plays in Japan from 2020 to 2023

Abstract: This essay examines some notable Shakespearean productions and adaptations in Japan from 2020 to 2023. The main focus is on a *Hamlet* production by Mansai Nomura, a Kyogen performer, in March 2023; it was an amalgamation of the traditional Japanese theatres, such as Kyogen, Nô, Kabuki, and Bunraku. Mansai's aspiration to produce *Hamlet*, utilizing all the elements of traditional Japanese art forms, began twenty years ago, when he played Hamlet in Jonathan Kent's production in London and in Tokyo. He re-examined the text and offered a completely new interpretation of a scene, giving the play a fresh dimension. Moreover, this essay examines other recent Shakespeare productions and adaptations, including my two new plays based on Shakespeare, as well as Kôki Mitani's *Thirteen Vassals of Kamakura Shogun*, a serial historical TV drama, broadcast by NHK (Japan's version of the BBC).

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, Kyogen, Nô, Kabuki, Bunraku, Hamlet, Falstaff, traditional Japanese theatre, Mansai Nomura, Kôki Mitani, *Thirteen Vassals of Kamakura Shogun*.

The "Japanese" *Hamlet*

Mansai Nomura had long cherished the idea of producing a *Hamlet* utilizing various traditional Japanese theatrical techniques. Through his long career as a Kyogen performer since the age of three, he had been involved in many Shakespearean productions and was convinced of the affinity between Shakespeare and Kyogen.

At the age of seventeen, he played the blind flutist Tsuru-maru in Akira Kurosawa's film *Ran* (1985), an adaptation of *King Lear*. Five years later, he played the title role in *Hamlet*, directed by Moriaki Watanabe, at the Tokyo Globe.

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He played Ariel in Robert Rupage's *The Tempest* (1993) at the Tokyo Globe; he directed and performed in *The Kyogen of Errors*, an adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* by Yasunari Takahashi, which was performed at Shakespeare's Globe in London in 2001.

In 2003, he played Hamlet, directed by Jonathan Kent, in Tokyo and in London. For this production, Mansai asked me to create a new translation of *Hamlet*, and as the new artistic director of the Setagaya Public Theatre in 2002, he supervised, or rather co-created, my translation of *Hamlet*. He had examined every line of the play, spending tremendous time with me, voicing every single line, and exploring the meaning of the play and the proper modes of Japanese to express it.

Since then, our collaboration has commenced. In 2007, he directed and starred in *The Country Stealer*, my adaptation of *Richard III*, which was revived in 2009. In 2010, he directed and starred in my translation of *Macbeth*, which toured worldwide (New York and Seoul in 2013; Paris and Sibiu in 2014). This collaboration was motivated by our understanding of the striking similarities between Kyogen and Elizabethan theatre.[1]

Through all these years, Mansai had never lost sight of his desire to produce a "Japanese" *Hamlet*, composed of Kyogen, Nô, Kabuki, Bunraku and Nihon Buyô (traditional Japanese dance). In 2022, he terminated his artistic directorship of the Setagaya Public Theatre, which he had held for twenty years. He directed a reading of *Hamlet* in February 2022 for his last project as an artistic director. Mansai cast his twenty-three-year-old son, Yuki, as Hamlet. Yuki has been a Kyogen performer since the age of three, and this was his first challenge to perform in theatres other than Kyogen, but he admirably met his father's expectations. This reading was a stepping stone to Mansai's "Japanese" *Hamlet*, produced in March 2023.

In this production, Mansai himself played both Claudius and the Ghost, and when he played the Ghost, he put on a Nô-mask and moved and danced in the Nô fashion, accompanied by the Nô music. As Nô is a genre of drama that mainly features the spirit of the dead, Mansai's Ghost was quite effective in producing a frightening atmosphere of the wraith.

The dumb show is often played by different actors from those in the play-within-the-play, as in Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film, in which the dumb show is presented by mimers while the Play King and the Player Queen are

[1] For the similarities between the Nô stage and the Elizabethan thrust stage both in their structure and theatrical usage, see my Chapter 20 "Shakespeare through the Bare Thrust Stage Interface" in Paul Budra and Clifford Werier, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Interface*, and also my section, "Part XX: Changing Technologies of Stage Performance" in *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, ed. Bruce R. Smith, 2016, 1417-1482.

performed by Charlton Heston and Rosemary Harris respectively. Similarly, Mansai made the dumb show into a puppet play, a droll version of Bunraku, to stress Hamlet's point that "they do but jest, poison in jest" (*Hamlet* 3.2.234),[2] and in the play-within-the-play, Kunitaro Kawarasaki, a Kabuki female impersonator, played both the Player King and Player Queen simultaneously, transforming himself from the King in men's kimono to the Queen in women's kimono instantaneously and dexterously, and back again, changing his voice and body between the male and female accordingly. Another Kabuki actor played Lucianus, nephew to the Player King, in a Kabuki fashion to emphasize the theatricality of the play-within-the-play.

Kabuki is composed of acting and dancing, and when the dancing element is extracted from Kabuki, it is called Nihon Buyô (literary meaning: "Japanese dance"). Ophelia was performed by Sawako Fujima, a young Grand Master of a Fujima school of Nihon Buyô. Thus, Ophelia's madness and death were depicted by her gracious and exquisite movements, characteristic of Kabuki dancing.

As the director, Mansai gave a fresh look at the text and asked me why Hamlet did not inherit the throne when his father died. I explained to him that in the play Denmark does not adopt primogeniture, but that as Claudius' reference to Gertrude as "our sometime sister, now our queen, / Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state" (1.2.8-9) indicates, Gertrude possesses a legal jointure. In other words, the right to reign the country rests with her, and Claudius, who becomes her partner, shares that right.

Mansai then decided that the play should revolve around Gertrude, who he understood as the centre of the play, that is, the centre of politics and of love. She stands just between Claudius and Hamlet, who both love her affectionately, and she should be authoritative and dignified as the one who holds the legal right to govern.

Because she loves both her son and her new husband, she functions as a pivot in balancing the equilibrium. Her presence is as crucial to Hamlet as to Claudius, who says that "She is so conjunctive to [his] life and soul, / That, as the star moves not but in his sphere, / [he] could not but by her" (4.7.14-16). Mansai asked Mayumi Wakamura, who played Gertrude, to stand occasionally above the stage as an image conceived by Claudius, so that the audience could visually perceive her significant presence.

The play is curiously reticent about the cognisance of her own circumstances. She is obviously ignorant of Claudius murdering her previous husband. Moreover, it seems that she does not know of Claudius' intention to kill Hamlet in the last act. However, the play allows for different interpretations; for example, in Laurence Olivier's film *Hamlet*, Gertrude gazes at the poisoned

[2] Quotations from Shakespeare refer to the Riverside 2nd edition.

cup for some time before she drinks from it, as if to suggest that she deliberately does so to save her son's life. The play does not indicate how much she knows about Claudius' intentions, and Gertrude in the last act is usually performed as an innocent loving mother without a glimpse of understanding of political complications that the play depicts. Nevertheless, Gertrude is not simply a mother—this is not a family play—but the imperial jointress with supreme political power. Her death signifies "Treachery" (5.2.312) to the throne, as Hamlet puts it. It is imperative to characterize Gertrude as a reigning queen who knows what is going on between Hamlet and Claudius. However, does the play offer a hint for her to perceive that?

Mansai solved this problem, when he found a clue while rehearsing Act 4 Scene 7, in which Claudius explains to Laertes that all the grievances were caused by Hamlet. Then, the messenger enters and the scene continues as follows:

> KING How now? What news?
> MESSENGER Letters, my lord, from Hamlet:
> These to your Majesty, this to the Queen.
> KING From Hamlet? Who brought them?
> MESSENGER Sailors, my lord, they say. I saw them not.
> They were given me by Claudio. He receiv'd them
> Of him that brought them.
> KING Laertes, you shall hear them.
> —Leave us. [*Exit Messenger.*]
> [*Reads.*] "High and mighty, You shall know I am set naked on your kingdom. To-morrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes, when I shall, first asking your pardon thereunto, recount the occasion of my sudden and more strange return.
> Hamlet."
> What should this mean? Are all the rest come back?
> Or is it some abuse, and no such thing? (4.7.36-50)

Claudius is bewildered because, according to his plan, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (here referred as "all the rest") should have carried his secret command to England, according to which Hamlet should have been beheaded there. However, Claudius is quite agile in responding to this new situation and quickly conceives of a second plan to kill Hamlet. He proposes that Laertes engage in a match of swords with Hamlet, in which Laertes can kill him by pretending that it is an accident. Laertes proposes the use of a poisoned sword, and Claudius further suggests preparing a poisoned cup. During this secret conversation, Gertrude enters to report that Ophelia has drowned. The scene ends as follows.

LAERTES Alas, then she is drown'd?
QUEEN Drown'd, drown'd.
LAERTES Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears; but yet
It is our trick. Nature her custom holds,
Let shame say what it will; when these are gone,
The woman will be out. Adieu, my lord,
I have a speech a' fire that fain would blaze,
But that this folly drowns it. *Exit.*
KING Let's follow, Gertrude.
How much I had to do to calm his rage!
Now fear I this will give it start again.
Therefore let's follow. *Exeunt.* (4.7.183-194)

Act 4 ends here. Here we pose the question of what became of a letter addressed to the Queen. The messenger carries several letters and says, "These to your Majesty, this to the Queen." In some productions, the messenger keeps "the letter to the Queen" to himself and exits with it, but will the sly Claudius let him do that?

Mansai's Claudius grabs all the letters and begins reading the one addressed to him, while casually placing the other letter on the bench on which he sits. At the end of the scene, Claudius exits, urging Gertrude to follow. In the rehearsal, it so happened that Mansai's gown touched the letter on the bench as he went out and let it drop, and Wakamura/Gertrude noted the dropped letter, picked it up, and read it silently. The audience is not told what is written in it, but one may rightly imagine that Hamlet informs his mother of the fact that Claudius has contrived to kill him.

This was a breakthrough in the field. Mansai added a small sequence at the end of Act 4, where Gertrude picks up the letter addressed to her and reads it silently. This enables the new interpretation that Gertrude, in the last Act, knows Claudius' intention to kill her son.

Nevertheless, one may not accept Olivier's interpretation that she drinks the poisoned cup deliberately. Even though she may be aware of Claudius's malice, she does not know what has been actually planned against Hamlet. Drinking the poisoned cup should be an accident; however, due to Mansai's direction, Wakamura/Gertrude became quite an intelligent, dignified, and gracious queen. Gertrude dies not simply as an innocent mother but as a dignified queen, betrayed by a treachery, for which Claudius must be punished.

Supported by this new interpretation, Mansai's *Hamlet* production was an enormous success. Mansai's understanding of human being's existence as nothingness may have derived from Japan's oldest treatise on drama, *Fushi-kaden* (*The Book of Transmission of the Flower*), written in the early fifteenth

century by Zeami, a performer and critic of Nô, whose important concept is *Mu* (nothingness, or non-being), and it is not dissimilar to Shakespearean *Memento Mori*. That is why the ending was spectacular, in which the dead Hamlet ascends to heaven and becomes one of the brilliant stars in the sky.

Kawai Project

Apart from writing Shakespearean adaptations for Kyogen (*The Country Stealer*, 2007, 2009) and Bunraku (*Falstaff*, 2014), and offering my translations of Shakespeare's plays to directors such as Yukio Ninagawa, Gregory Doran, and Simon Godwin, I started the "Kawai Project" in 2014 to produce and direct Shakespearean plays using my translations. I have produced and directed *Much Ado About Nothing* (2014), *The Comedy of Errors* (2016), *As You Like It* (2018), and *King Lear* (2020).

In 2020-2021 Japanese theatres suffered immensely due to the influence of the pandemic; theatres were closed, and many productions had to shift their venue of performances from theatres to online platforms. Later, when the restrictions were somewhat alleviated, they performed without an audience and distributed them over the Internet. However, earlier in the period, actors were not allowed to get together. They were able to be connected to each other only on the Internet; therefore, each actor, remaining in one's own space, joined other actors on the screen to create a drama. This was called "Remote Theatre" in Japanese, a new genre of theatre, which the Kawai Project experimented with. *King Lear* in 2020 and *Parts 1 and 2 of Henry IV* in 2021 were produced in this form. Nevertheless, it lacked the direct contact between actors, and the presence of the audience, which is vital to theatre. Five months after our online performance of *King Lear*, we received the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's "Cheers for Art" Subsidies and recreated *King Lear* in a playhouse and admitted a limited audience of fifteen per performance. Regardless of the audience size, we found that their presence was essential.

In 2016, in response to a special request from the famous actor Daijiro Harada, I translated and directed Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (2016) to cast him as Vladimir. Takahide Tashiro, a Shakespearean actor, saw it and was so intrigued by it that he suggested that two actors waiting for William Shakespeare while quoting his famous lines would make an interesting spin-off. As suggested by him, I wrote a new play, *Waiting for Will*, and produced it in 2018 and 2021. The play is composed of famous lines from all the forty plays of Shakespeare and explores the essence of Shakespearean drama in a Beckettian manner. It was written specifically for Takahide Tashiro and Haruo Takayama, two older Japanese Shakespearean actors, and the scene where they recalled their performances in various Shakespearean plays on stage is written based on

their private facts. Thus, it merges real life and fiction, based on a Shakespearean motif, *theatrum mundi*, or "life is a play."

In this play, the two older actors continue rehearsing a scene from *King Lear* (Act 4 Scene 6), in which Edgar makes his father, Gloucester, imagine that he is jumping from a cliff. As Gloucester simulates his death, Tashiro who plays Gloucester simulates many deaths. The actor Tashiro dies in this play, but he resurrects in Takayama's memory, and they resume playing the Edgar-Gloucester scene which they have played so many times. It dramatizes the Shakespearean concept of *memento mori* as well. The play ends with the two actors reciting Prospero's lines, referring to the transience of the world, that everything must fade, vanish, and dissolve, just as the two older actors would disappear and remain only in the audience's memories. The play was well received and it was mentioned as one of the significant theatre performances in the year 2018 by *The Nikkei Newspaper*, one of the major Japanese newspapers.[3] It was summoned to the Sibiu International Theatre Festival; however, owing to the outbreak of the COVID-19, our participation in the festival was delayed until 2022, when the performance received a standing ovation.

In July 2023, I wrote and directed *Villainous Company*,[4] an adaptation based on *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, motivated by the disastrous state of Ukrainian civilians. As a Shakespearean scholar and director, I believed I should act against warfare by utilizing Shakespeare's plays. In *Henry V* there is a brilliant scene (Act 4 Scene 1) in which three private soldiers and the disguised Henry V debate whether the king is responsible for the war. The topic is resonant to us, as the Japanese have long discussed whether the emperor was responsible for the last war which devastated Japan. The question has never been answered, but it is worth asking again, since the current Japanese government is planning the largest military budget ever.

In response to the current English tendency to cast female actors in the male roles in Shakespeare's plays to challenge gender inequity, I changed the gender of two soldiers, turning Private Michael Williams into Private Michelle Williams and Private Alexander Court into Private Alexandra Court. I distributed Falstaff's famous lines against fighting (*1 Henry IV* 5.1.131-40) among the three soldiers as follows:

> WILLIAMS What do we fight for? For honor? Can honor set to a leg?
> COURT No.

[3] Youichi Uchida, "Theatre Retrospective 2018," *The Nikkei Newspaper*, 24 December 2018.

[4] The title derives from Falstaff's line, "Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me" (*1 Henry IV* 3.3.10-11). There is a play of the same title by Amlin Gray, published in 1981. Tashiro, who once performed it in Japanese with Kôtarou Yoshida and Tetsu Watanabe, suggested it to me, but I decided to create a totally new adaptation.

WILLIAMS Or an arm?
BATES No.
WILLIAMS Or take away the grief of a wound?
COURT No.
WILLIAMS What is honor?
Nobody answers.
WILLIAMS Doth he feel it?
BATES No.
WILLIAMS Doth he hear it?
COURT No.
WILLIAMS 'Tis insensible, then. Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living?
COURT No.
WILLIAMS Why?
Nobody answers.
WILLIAMS Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it.

Then Michelle Williams casually voices her opinion that if the King suddenly dies, the war will stop, and everyone can go home. The disguised Hal, who is still the Prince of Wales in my play, hearing this, is enraged and challenges her, and they agree to fight after the battle the next day. In the original text, they exchange their gloves, but I changed it to make the Prince of Wales say that he will wear leeks, the national symbol of Wales, on his hat for the identification. This merges one fighting scene with another in *Henry V*, as there is also a scene in which Captain Fluellen fights with Ancient Pistol and forces him to eat his leeks. In my play, Hal asks Fluellen to wear not his glove but leeks to act as his replacement. After that, Michelle Williams notices the leeks in Fluellen's hat, and they start fighting using martial arts, *Karate* and *Shôrinji Kempô*. Ultimately, Williams surrenders and bites the leeks. Hal enters and reveals the fact that he was the one who had accepted his challenge. Williams performs the same protest as in the original and Hal orders Fluellen to give her money. In the original, Williams exits as he cries "I will none of your money" (*Henry V* 4.8.67), but in my play she cries "That will not efface the bitterness of the leeks!" which causes laughter in the audience.

I was greatly influenced by Max Weber's *Henry V*, streamed by National Theatre Live 2022, with Kit Harington in the title role. It was produced in modern costumes with all the actors trained by a modern military trainer; therefore, the fighting scenes became modern and reminiscent of Russia's war on Ukraine. The production had many elements of adaptation from the original. It incorporated scenes from *Henry IV*; French scenes were performed in French while ignoring Shakespeare's English, and the text was tampered with. Fluellen cries, "Kill the poys [i.e. boys] and the luggage! 'Tis expressly against the law of arms" (4.7.1-2), to indicate the French atrocity; however, Max Weber

relocated this line to make it mean Henry V's atrocity. I quite understand that from a modern perspective, the former hero, Henry V, should be depicted as a warmonger; nevertheless, if one tampers with the text, one should admit that it is an adaptation.

The heroic Henry V, as Laurence Olivier portrayed in his 1944 film or as Kenneth Branagh did in his 1989 film, now seems to be outdated. I believe that an increasing number of people now tend to perceive danger in Henry V's rhetorical eloquence in encouraging his soldiers to fight. His speeches are eloquent and moving. However, if examined carefully, we can see a crucial discrepancy between them. In the St. Crispin's Day speech, he says:

> He that shall see this day, and live old age,
> Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors,
> And say, "To-morrow is Saint Crispian."
> Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
> [And say, "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."]
> Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
> But he'll remember with advantages
> What feats he did that day.
> [. . . . . .]
> And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
> From this day to the ending of the world,
> But we in it shall be remembered—
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
> For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother. (4.3.44-62)

This speech apparently encourages his soldiers to think that they are "a few" who can boast of their old scars and their feats that they did that day. However, after the battle is won, he prohibits such boasting as follows:

> Come, go we in procession to the village,
> And be it death proclaimed through our host
> To boast of this, or take that praise from God
> Which is His only. (4.8.113-116)

This is a negation of the St. Crispin's Day speech. Henry V's glorious success blurs what he says and does. In the Harfleur speech in Act 3 Scene 3, he threatens the city with monstrous violence, rape, and slaughter. This is unacceptable to modern ears. It is significant to notice that Shakespeare portrays Henry's ambivalence or his equivocality, and it is up to the audience to understand its meaning.

In my adaptation, I attempt to resonate with the current international situation. I added an outer frame in which an older corpulent francophone soldier

is on guard, juxtaposed with a young Korean guard across the border, to avoid any specific reference to a current situation in the real world, but at the same time to indicate that a conflict may happen unexpectedly in unexpected regions. In the next scene the former turns to be Falstaff and the latter Prince Hal. This is to suggest that any two enemies who are staring at each other across the border could have lived in another world, sharing the same Shakespearean fantasy.

In Japan, the term "the war" has long signified World War II, and the Japanese strongly wish that there will be no more wars and are convinced that Japan will never be involved in wars. However, as the Ukraine war suggests, no one is free from the threats of wars. Countries are now living with wars, regardless of whether they are physically threatened. Even in seemingly peaceful Japan, there is a threat of warfare without the citizens being aware of it. To prove this point, I started the play with the Korean soldier singing a popular song "J'ai perdu le do de ma clarinette (I have lost the A in my clarinet)," which all the Japanese children learn in elementary schools. The song is sung in Japanese as follows:

> I have a clarinet that I love.
> The clarinet that Papa gave me.
> Though I cherished it so much,
> There is a note it has lost.
> What shall I do? What shall I do?
> Au pas camarade, au pas camarade, au pas, au pas, au pas!
> Au pas camarade, au pas camarade, au pas, au pas, au pas!

Almost all the Japanese take the last two lines to be a joyous set of nonsensical syllables for humming a refrain, like "hey nonny nonny," signifying nothing. Nevertheless, the refrain comes from "La Chanson de l'Oignon (The Song of the Onion)," a military marching song, which, according to a legend, originated among the Old Guard Grenadiers of Napoleon's Imperial Guard. In the final scene, the older corpulent soldier (who has the memory that he once lived as Falstaff) shoots the young Korean soldier (whom the older soldier takes for Hal). Then the older soldier takes out his transceiver and reports that the mission is complete. As he exits, the Song of the Onion is played loudly, whose lyrics and their translations are projected onto the back wall of the stage as follows:

> J'aime l'oignon frit à l'huile, (I like fried onions,)
> J'aime l'oignon car il est bon. (I like them 'cause they are good.)
> J'aime l'oignon frit à l'huile, (I like fried onions,)
> J'aime l'oignon, J'aime l'oignon. (I like onions, I like onions,)
>
> Au pas camarade, au pas camarade, (March on, comrades, march on, comrades)
> Au pas, au pas, au pas! (March on, on, on!)

Au pas camarade, au pas camarade, (March on, comrades, march on, comrades)
Au pas, au pas, au pas! (March on, on, on!)

It is astonishing that a refrain in a children's song comes from a military marching song, but this is a good indication of how unawares we are immersed in things related to warfare. After every performance, I spoke with the audience, and they were all frightened to know that this seemingly innocent song was partly composed of a military song.

The play was well received with several reviews in newspapers, and Yukihiro Takahashi, a theatre critic, chose it as one of the best three plays in July 2023.[5]

Appropriated and metamorphosed Shakespeare

After Yukio Ninagawa, the director, died in 2016, the directorship of the Sainokuni Shakespeare Series was succeeded by Kôtarou Yoshida the actor/director, who successfully directed *Timon of Athens* in 2017 and *Henry V* in 2019. However, his *Henry VIII*, which opened on 14 February 2020, was suspended on 28 February, owing to the governmental regulations to contain COVID-19. His *King John*, scheduled for June 2020, was cancelled. The theatre reopened in May 2021 with his *All's Well That Ends Well*, which concluded the series. The suspended *Henry VIII* was reproduced in September 2022 and the skipped *King John* was produced in December 2022, with Shun Oguri as Philip the bastard. Oguri had completed his magnificent and overwhelming performance of the lead role in NHK's serial historical TV drama, *Thirteen Vassals of Kamakura Shogun*, which as I shall later explain is full of Shakespearean elements.

After theatres reopened in 2021, we had many more Shakespearean productions. I will give further examples, one for each year. In October 2021, Parco produced an all-female *Julius Caesar*, directed by Shintaro Mori. It was a tense and taut stage, every actor assuming masculinity. Yô Yoshida as Brutus was awarded a Kinokuniya Theatre Award, and the director was awarded a Kikuta Theatre Award.

In 2022, Shochiku produced *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, using my translation. Kabuki actor Shikan Nakamura, as Oberon and Theseus, added grandeur to the production. It was directed by Takaaki Inoue, who follows Ninagawa's footsteps.

In 2023, the New National Theatre produced *Measure for Measure*, directed by Hitoshi Uyama. This production was epoch-making, largely because

[5] Yukihiro Takahashi, "The best three in this month," *Teatro* 10 (2023): 5-7.

of Sonim's performance as Isabella. This has been a difficult play to perform in modern times, as Isabella's sense of values, which puts her virginity high above life, is now difficult to appreciate. Yet Sonim's Isabella so sincerely took it for granted that her brother Claudio (Kenji Urai) understands that "were it [her] life, / [she]'d throw it down for [his] deliverance / As frankly as a pin" (*Measure for Measure* 3.1.103-105), but *NEVER HER VIRGINITY*, so much so that when Urai's Claudio, desperate for life, hung on to her for his life, it was so hilariously comical and serious at the same time that she kicked him away, crying "Die, perish" (3.1.143). The audience laughed a lot in this production; I have seen many productions of *Measure for Measure*, but this was the most enjoyable and most convincing.

As for adaptations, the Theatre Company Shinkansen's *A Pure Heart at Seaport: Othello*, written by Go Aoi and premiered in 2011, was recreated in 2023. It reset *Othello* in the world of *Yakuza* (Japanese gangsters). The original 2011 version featured three men as in the original: Iago expects his boss, Othello, to make him a sub-leader, but Othello chooses another, who is handsome but incompetent. The recreated 2023 version was very different: Iago is now a woman. It is the story of Aiko (Shoko Takada), the widow of the late gang-leader. She expects young Othello (Ken Miyake) to be the next gang-leader, but he marries a young girl and decides to leave the gang. Betrayed, Aiko suspects that Othello did not protect the late gang-leader when he was killed, and she decides to ruin Othello's life through various tricks. It is a quite well-written female version of Iago, and her resentment and grudge are expressively delineated, shedding light on Iago's psychology in Shakespeare's original work.

Singing Shylock, written and directed by Wishing Chong, a Korean Japanese, premiered in 2014 and revived in 2017 and 2023, is set in the Kansai district of Japan in the post-war period. Although the actors speak in Kansai dialect, the characters' European names are all preserved. Songs and dances have been added, but the story remains true to the original. I contributed an article to the production brochure and stated that Japanese racial prejudice against Koreans in that period was quite similar to the Elizabethan prejudice against the Jews.[6]

The film *Shylock's Children*, directed by Katsuhide Motoki, was released in 2023. It was based on Jun Ikeido's mystery book of the same title. The book sold 680,000 copies, and it was televised in 2022. It features avarice in the banking business: a loss of a million yen in a bank branch leads to the revelation of a billion-yen fraud. It depicts many men obsessed with money, and one of the key phrases, "Returning the money doesn't make everything square," is what Shylock might have said against Antonio the merchant. However, this is not an adaptation, as the story itself has nothing to do with *The Merchant of*

[6] Shoichiro Kawai, "From where comes that hatred?", *Singing Shylock* (the brochure), (Shochiku, 2023), no pages given.

Venice; it merely utilizes the motif of obsessed avarice. One may take the title, *Shylock's Children*, to mean "the descendants of Shylock" or "the likes of Shylock," but the word "children" suggests otherwise. I contributed an article[7] to the brochure for this film and made the following points: Shylock's child, Jessica, runs away from his money-obsessed father. One cannot deny the importance of money, but she does not want a life swayed by money. The film depicts many people trying to evade the curse of money. After seeing the film, the viewer realizes that the title actually signifies those who try to respect their own life as Jessica does rather than those who are obsessed with money.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that Kôki Mitani, the celebrated playwright, wrote *Thirteen Vassals of Kamakura Shogun*, as NHK's serial historical TV drama featuring the Kamakura Shogun family, with surprisingly numerous resemblances to Shakespearean plays. The most remarkable one is in Episode 25: the first Shogun Yoritomo and his father-in-law, Regent Tokimasa Hôjo, are happily exchanging sake cups with no ambition to fight against the imperial court at Kyoto. Then, enters Maki-no-Kata, Tokimasa's second wife, who scolds them for their lack of courage and instigates them to be bold, à la Lady Macbeth. She says, "you are as timid as a dog which would chase deer in hills but would not soil its legs." This is resonant with the following lines of Lady Macbeth, who encourages her husband to be a king:

> Wouldst thou have that
> Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life
> And live a coward in thine own esteem,
> Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would,"
> Like the poor cat i' th' adage? (*Macbeth* 1.7.41-45)

The poor cat in the adage (proverb) means the cat which wants to eat fish but would not wet its legs. Mitani admits that he portrayed Maki-no-Kata as a Lady Macbeth, but says that the correspondence between a timid dog and a timid cat is no more than a coincidence.[8]

There are many other Shakespearean references in the drama. The first Shogun's daughter Ôhime is betrothed to Yoshitaka, the eldest son of Yoshinaka, who later turns out to be the Shogun's enemy. Ôhime and Yoshitaka loved each other so passionately like Romeo and Juliet, and when Ôhime comes to know that her father is planning to assassin her fiancé, she secretly lets him run away. In the end, he is murdered, and the deplored Ôhime cries herself to death.

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[7] Shoichiro Kawai, "On Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, and Shylock the Jewish money-monger," *Shylock's Children* (the brochure), Shochiku, 2023, no pages given.

[8] A conversation in a Zoom meeting between Mr. Kouki Mitani and myself, 3 December 2023.

After the first Shogun passes away, Yoriie, his eldest son, becomes the second Shogun. However, he familiarizes himself too much with the powerful Hiki clan, a rival to the Hôjo clan, so much so that the Hôjo clan deposes the Shogun and sends him to a temple, and make his younger brother Sanetomo the third Shogun. This young Shogun places much confidence in the good-humoured, huge warrior Yoshimori Wada, much like Falstaff. Mitani admits that he portrayed their relationship based on the one between Prince Hal and Falstaff.

The deposed Yoriie's affliction in custody is portrayed in the fashion of Richard II; both were ultimately assassinated. In this drama, when Yoriie's son, Kôgyo, grows up, he is pricked on by Iago-like Yoshimura Miura, the cunning samurai. Miura protests that he cannot reveal the truth of Yoriie's death, and thus deliberately stimulates Kôgyo's curiosity and instigates him to be vengeful against the third Shogun, who is as innocent as Desdemona. Kôgyo is agonized like Othello, and eventually, like Hamlet, avenges his father. In the heavy snow of 27 January 1219, Kôgyo assassinates the third Shogun.

At the centre of this historical drama is Yoshitoki Hôjo (the first Shogun's brother-in-law, performed by Oguri), who conquered the Imperial Court and unified Japan in 1221. At the end of the drama, after completing his task, he is poisoned to death like Hamlet.

In a conversation with me, Mitani said that, in creating this drama, he was greatly influenced by Shakespeare's historical plays, and especially by *The Hollow Crown*, the British television film adaptation of Shakespeare's historical plays. He said that he wanted to use a crown that is handed down from Shogun to Shogun, but the Shoguns were not kings and had nothing to do with crowns. Therefore, he introduced the legendary (fictional) skull of the first Shogun's father, which was passed down by Shoguns from generation to generation. I told him that in Elizabethan period, the word "crown" also signified "the top part of the skull" (*OED* III.19.a.) and that therefore his choice of "skull" is most apposite.

We find so many similarities to Shakespeare's motifs in *Thirteen Vassals of Kamakura Shogun*, which is true to the history of Japan. The talent of Mitani, who so wisely holds a Shakespearean mirror up to the history, is deserving of praise.

Conclusion

In the 2010s, Japanese Shakespearean productions increased in number and flourished in various Japanese styles; this trend continues, but the early 2020s also marked a tendency to treat Shakespeare's plays as if they belonged to the Japan culture. An assumption that Shakespeare no longer belongs to the western culture, accelerated by post-colonialism and cultural relativism, makes it easy

for us to assimilate Shakespeare more directly into the Japanese culture. Mitani's depiction of Japanese history, utilizing various motifs of Shakespeare's plays, is one example, and Mansai's amalgamation of *Hamlet* and traditional Japanese theatres is another.

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