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Translating the Rhythm of *Hamlet*

Hamlet is probably the most frequently translated literary work in Japan with more than forty Japanese translations, published and unpublished, in the last hundred years. My translation, published by Kadokawa Shoten in May 2003, was prepared for Jonathan Kent's all-Japanese-male production with Japan's leading young Kyogen performer Mansai Nomura in the title role, performed, to great acclaim, at Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo in June and July 2003, at Ryutopia Theatre in Niigata Prefecture in July 2003, and at Sadler's Wells in London in August and September in the same year, winning a five-stars appraisal from *What's On*, and four stars from *The Guardian and Daily Mail*.

The same translation was subsequently used by Japan's most distinguished director Yukio Ninagawa in his production of *Hamlet* at Theatre Cocoon in Tokyo in November and December 2003, for which the 21-year-old Tatsuya Fujiwara in the title role won as many as three major theatre prizes and Keiko Takahashi as Gertrude won the Asahi Theatre Prize. A young director, Tomo Sugao, also used this translation in his small production in Tokyo in May 2004.

The significant feature of my translation is the great care it has taken in transplanting the original rhythm into Japanese, on the assumption that how the lines sound on stage is as important as what they mean. It is no longer sufficient to translate the mere meanings of the words as previous translators have done. My new translation seeks to reconstruct the original sound structure, replacing blank verse with rhythmical Japanese of a somewhat archaic nature, transforming heroic couplets into a Kabuki-like formalistic style, and expressing prose in natural modern Japanese. Another feature is

that it is the first translation of *Hamlet* in Japan to be based on the Folio. My intention was to make the most of the theory that Shakespeare revised the text.

It is noteworthy that Ninagawa, after directing *Hamlet* four times with such celebrated actors as Mikijiro Hira in 1978, Ken Watanabe in 1988, Hiroyuki Sanada in 1995, and Masachika Ichimura in 2001, was not fully satisfied with any of them, but is pleased with the 2004 production and says that he now understands *Hamlet*. I hope that it is partly because of my Folio-based translation. I heard that Ninagawa will stick to the Folio text when he creates a new production of *Hamlet* with Michael Maloney, which opens at Plymouth at the end of October, touring around Norwich and ending at London in December 2004.

Any merit of my new translation is largely due to the ingenious Mansai Nomura, who not only commissioned it but also supervised it. As the artistic director of Setagaya Public Theatre, Mansai felt a keen responsibility for the quality of Japanese in his production, and closely examined my translation as he read it aloud from beginning to end, while we discussed the interpretation of the play.

This was exactly the period when the celebrated Mansai was quite busy shooting the movie *Onmyoji II*, in which he starred; however, he spent a great deal of time with me exploring the dramatic effects that Shakespeare intended. Our task was to seek the most effective Japanese words to express them.

Mansai was hardworking and thorough in this task. He pointed out that many lines in my draft were too long, and in fact my translation at that early stage was not much shorter than other translations, for it attempted to express, or rather explain, all the meanings of the text using as many syllables as necessary. In other words, I had given priority to the interpretation of the text over the sound of it. Mansai instinctively discerned that there was a serious problem in terms of rhythm. We also had to take into consideration the fact that Japanese tends to take longer than English to express the same thing. He also pointed out that some Chinese characters are difficult to understand when heard although they may be easily understood when read. (There are two ways of reading Chinese characters: one is *kun-yomi*, a reading based on the meaning of the character, and the other is *on-yomi*, based merely on its sound. It is often difficult to recognize Chinese characters by hearing them when *on-yomi* is adopted; therefore *on-yomi* should be avoided as much as possible in any translation of a play.)

The text I had submitted to Mansai required sweeping revision. He examined the text very closely, confirming the interpretation of each scene and line, voicing the lines as if to taste them on his tongue. Just as in

wine tasting, every syllable was checked to confirm that there are no dregs and that they worked smoothly on the tongue.

Not that the lines were adjusted to make it easier for an actor to speak. What we did was to simulate Shakespeare's writerly technique: iambic pentameter should be expressed in a certain rhythm, rhyming couplets should sound theatrical, and a prosaic tirade as in the Nunnery Scene should be rapid. The script was checked to see if these dramatic effects intended by Shakespeare were reproduced in Japanese. For all this, a talented Kyogen performer, whose knowledge and mastery of Japanese language is impeccable, was a great help.

It was a kind of pre-rehearsal, a process of examining the rich texture of *Hamlet*. The procedure was, unsurprisingly, time-consuming. At each reading, I had to admit some faults and promise to rework them by our next meeting. At first, as we repeated this slow procedure several times, it seemed almost hopeless to finish the job. However, I gradually began to understand his method of inspection, and tried scrutinizing the text by myself prior to the next session. This enabled us to make better progress.

The task was both challenging and rewarding and the script got better and better. The last session was conducted one day when the busy Mansai managed to take a day off. In order to make the most of it, we two sat tête-à-tête for eight hours on end without a break. It was almost a battle of concentration.

As the work progressed, Mansai's requests got harder, suggesting that we adopt Kabuki style for the heroic couplets of the play-within-the-play, or that we simulate the classical novelist Atsushi Nakajima's narrative style in the blank verse of the First Player's speech. In many of the previous translations, both the First Player's speech and the play-within-the-play are rendered indifferently in archaic Japanese, but it is important to distinguish between the two, for the former is in blank verse and should sound dramatic enough to impress Hamlet while the latter is in theatrical heroic couplets, a mode constantly signalling that it is a play. Mansai's suggestion was based on this understanding.

Because the play-within-the-play should indeed sound like an old-fashioned play, I rendered it in Kabuki-style as Mansai suggested. As for the First Player's speech, I arranged it in the traditional seven-five syllabic pattern to simulate the rhythm of the blank verse. The seven-five or five-seven pattern is the most popular Japanese rhythm, found also in *haiku*, which goes five-seven-five. For example, Basho's famous *haiku*, "An old pond. A frog jumps in. The sound of the ripple" reads "Furuike ya (5 syllables) Kawazu tobikomu (7 syllables) Mizu no oto (5 syllables)." The First Player's speech goes like this:

Fudouno Pyrrhus [7] hatto shite [5]
Wareni kaereba [7] futsu futsuto [5]
Wakiagaritari [7] fukushu shin [5]

The First Player's speech thus signals its theatricality. As for the other, less theatrical scenes where blank verse is also employed, I used the seven-five syllabic pattern more loosely, mixing in six or eight syllables occasionally for the sake of variation.

Thus a new translation, transformed by Mansai's insight and talent, has come into being. Jonathan Kent's gifted assistant director Yuko Matsumoto, who belongs to the theatre company Bungaku-za and is now widely active outside the company, also gave me a number of precious comments on the translation, and they certainly improved it greatly. To this script, I added those parts which were cut by Jonathan Kent for the production, and the whole text was published by Kadokawa shoten.

I would like to provide some more examples to indicate how the sound structure of *Hamlet* can be crucial in its interpretation. Here is a case in which a dramatic moment is highlighted by a change of style. The sequence of blank verse which contains the "To be, or not to be" speech at the beginning of Act 3 abruptly ends at the beginning of the Nunnery Scene, when Ophelia tries to return Hamlet's gifts to him with the following lines:

... their perfume lost,
Take these again, for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor, when givers prove unkind.

The eloquent flow of the blank verse is stopped here, followed by Hamlet's "Ha, ha, are you honest?" and then the scene collapses into the rapid rhythm of prose. Kazuko Matsuoka (1999) points out that it is odd that Ophelia should refer to herself as "the noble mind"; and she suggests, as does J. Q. Adams (1929: 254–5), that Ophelia is speaking lines provided by her father. The interrupting rhyming couplet with "mind" and "unkind" has been construed by Edward Dowden (1933: xxvi) to be a sign of Polonius' influence.

There has been much discussion as to why Hamlet suddenly becomes aggressive and goes on attacking Ophelia in this scene, but if he is to recognize, on hearing these lines, that she speaks as instructed by her father, there is a good reason for his outburst; and this may also be a reason why he suddenly asks where her father is. Consequently, in my translation, I tried to reproduce this crucially odd rhyming couplet, recreating a pun in *okuri-mono* (gifts) and *otoru-mono* (wax poor), with a "jo" sound echoing in *jotou* (rich) and *jo* (kind). I decided that, in this case, puns would be sufficient to produce the peculiar formality that Ophelia's rhyming couplet conveys.

Elsewhere, rhyming couplets are employed to signify the end of a speech, and they are often seen at the end of a scene. Laertes has an extraordinarily long admonition to Ophelia in Act 1 Scene 3, consisting of 35 lines, longer than Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" speech, and he finishes it off with the following rhyming couplets:

> Be wary then: best safety lies in fear.
> Youth to itself rebels, though none else near.

Translators may simulate this by making the last words sound similar, as Yushi Odashima does with 'dai ichi da' and 'dai suki da', although this is not so much a rhyme as a pun. The purpose of the rhyming couplet here is to make a formalistic flourish to indicate the end of a long speech. Therefore, I introduced a repetition of the seven-syllabic rhythm to reproduce the sense of ending:

> Wakai chishio wa [7] osae ga kikanu [7]
> Jibunni saemo [7] hamukau monoda [7]

Now, it goes without saying that I have learned a lot from previous translations especially from the excellent ones by Yushi Odashima and Kazuko Matsuoka. It is pertinent here to mention that of all the translations only Odashima's had marked where shared lines fall.

Shared lines are those short lines spoken by two or more speakers, which together form a verse line of iambic pentameter. In the following scene, where Horatio and the soldiers explain to Hamlet how they encountered the ghost, Horatio's short lines are completed by Hamlet's short lines, forming three verse lines.

> *Horatio.* Nay, very pale.
> *Hamlet.* And fix'd his eyes upon you?
> *Horatio.* Most constantly.
> *Hamlet.* I would I had been there.
> *Horatio.* It would have much amaz'd you.
> *Hamlet.* Very like. (1.2.233–5)

Jonathan Kent placed a special emphasis on the effect of these shared lines, insisting that there should be no pause between them. Jonathan's theory was that these shared lines are intended to give us a certain speed to push us towards the appearance of the ghost.

I was fortunate to have prepared my text in such a way that it meshed effectively with Kent's direction. He would surely have been perplexed if he had employed Tsuneari Fukuda's translation, which ignores not only shared lines but also all the poetic rhythm, expressing the text all in prose.

It is true that Fukuda's translation has a certain rhythm, but it is his own prosaic rhythm, nothing to do with Shakespeare's original.

Jonathan Kent has a genius for the potential dramatic energy in the text, and naturally he expected that energy in the Japanese script. There was one occasion when I had to rewrite the script according to his request. In Act 4 Scene 3, when Claudius intends that Hamlet be sent to England so as to be beheaded, he cries "Do it, England!" Kent was keen on the explosive sound of "D" in order to indicate Claudius's devastating anger and violent hostility. "Do it," however, is usually translated as "Tanomuzo" or "Yare," and "ta" or "ya" was too weak a sound for Kent. The actor Kotaro Yoshida, who played Claudius, came up with an expression "Buchi-korose" (Butcher him), and this "b" sound made Kent dance with joy so much so that I had to change the script accordingly.

The more I tried to reconstruct the original sound structure, the more I came to be aware of the difference between English and Japanese. However, this painstaking process of improvement and approximations certainly gives us a better understanding of the rich world of *Hamlet*.

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