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Shakespeare's History Plays in Japan

Soseki Natsume (1867–1916) is a celebrated novelist. He studied English literature in London at government expense during the period from 1900 to 1902. Professor William James Craig taught him English poems unsystematically at a weekly tuition fee of 5 or 7 shillings. His lecture was the so-called table talk on literature. Natsume was a student coming from a backward country, so that he held the ambivalent feelings of admiration and anger towards an advanced country while living in London. He suffered from racial prejudice and a sort of inferiority complex. Soon a morbid melancholy seized him. Walking around the Tower of London, he imagined the scenes of *Richard III* in which the two young princes were murdered. After coming back home, he warned the Japanese public of the erosion of the Japanese character caused by the hasty and guided modernization. In Tokyo University, he lectured on Shakespeare's plays, but he did not translate them into Japanese. He published *Commentary on Literature* and wrote many novels which were more or less influenced by English literature, especially by Shakespeare, George Meredith, and the eighteenth-century writers. He also wrote a short essay, *Professor Craig*, and a short novel, *The Tower of London*. He was an intellectual elite who experienced the direct impact of Western civilization and seriously considered how to cope with it.

Shakespeare was introduced into Japan during the period of Japan's rapid modernization after her long seclusion which lasted more than two hundred years. Since then, Shakespeare has been not only the symbol of Western culture but also the target of scholarship and criticism. His works

have been translated into Japanese, read and performed, and sometimes adapted for the stage and film. Lovingly called “Sao,” Shakespeare has been a general favorite among Japanese people.

In 1875 Robun Kanagaki published a story of *Hamlet* whose title was *Seiyo Kabuki Hamuretto* (A Western *Kabuki Hamlet*) for a newspaper. In 1877 *The Merchant of Venice* was translated and entitled *Kyoniku no Kisho* (A Strange Litigation about Flesh of the Chest), but this was a prose tale rather than a play. In 1879 Kenzo Wadagaki wrote the plot of *King Lear* in classical Chinese. In 1883 Tsutomu Inoue translated *The Merchant of Venice* into Japanese and gave it a Japanese title, *Seiyo Chinsetsu Jin-niku Shichiire Saiban* (A Western Strange Story of the Trial of Pawned Flesh), in which the translator laid stress on the trial scene. In 1885 Bunkai Udagawa, a journalist, adapted *The Merchant of Venice* for a newspaper, and Genzo Katsu dramatized it for the Nakamura Sojuro *Kabuki* company. The title of this adaptation was *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka* (The Season of Cherry Blossoms; the World of Money), and this adaptation, which was set in the Osaka of the Tokugawa period, was the first performance of Shakespeare in Japan. Since then *The Merchant of Venice* has been very frequently produced, and sometimes the trial scene alone was performed as an independent production.

These “translations” in the early days were mostly free adaptations based on the Shakespearean plot or on Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare*. The early translators of Shakespeare composed effectively a new play in *Kabuki* style, using the Japanese native metric form of alternating lines of five and seven syllables. Strictly speaking, these were not translations of Shakespeare though they helped to increase his popularity in Japan. In 1883, however, Keizo Kawashima made a close translation of *Julius Caesar* and planned to translate all of the plays by Shakespeare though he could not fulfill that plan. In 1884 Shoyo Tsubouchi (1859–1935) translated *Julius Caesar* into Japanese. This was a free and loose translation in *Joruri* (ballad drama) style, in which he used seven-and – five-meter. He gave it a Japanese title, *Shizaru Kidan: Jiyu no Tachi Nagori no Kireaji* (A Strange Story about Caesar: The Remnant Sharpness of the Sword of Liberty).

Tsubouchi was not only a translator but also a dramatist. His *Kiri Hitoha* (A Falling Leaf from a Paulownia) and *Maki no Kata* (Lady Maki) were probably suggested by *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. He was very familiar with *Kabuki* and *Joruri*, and he compared Shakespeare with Monzaemon Chikamatsu (1653–1724), a representative playwright of *Kabuki* and *Joruri*. As a scholar, Tsubouchi thought Shakespearean studies seemed to be helpful to the improvement of Japanese drama, and wrote “Sheikusupia Kenkvukan” (A Study Guide to Shakespeare), in which he advised beginners to read *Joruri* books first and to read the history plays of Shakespeare last (1–277).

He suggested that beginners should read *Titus Andronicus* first, and after this they should read comedies, romances, tragedies, and history plays (48). He also wrote that *Henry VI, 1, 2 & 3* were not so good as *Richard III* and *King John*, but he admitted that *Henry VI, 1, 2 & 3* were much better than *Joruri* or *Kyogen* because they had the essence of history plays. He was very interested in the scene of the Wars of the Roses and the characterizations of Jeanne d'Arc and Queen Margaret. He wrote, "If we think thus, we should re-examine Shakespeare's history plays" (304–05).

Tsubouchi thought drama should not be read alone in a room but be seen enjoyably by the public in the theatre. He made efforts to reconcile theory and practice, and in 1906 he established the Bungei Kyokai (The Association of Literature and Arts) and threw his energy into the training of actors and the improvement of drama. He was the first Japanese to give serious consideration to what Japanese people should learn from Shakespeare and how Japanese drama should be improved by a study of Shakespeare's dramaturgy.

It is noteworthy that there were neither translations nor adaptations of Shakespeare's history plays in the Meiji Era. Many translators rendered tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* and a comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, into Japanese. Why? Because Hamlet's philosophical dilemma appealed to Japanese people; *Julius Caesar* conveyed the real meaning of liberty to Japanese people who thought liberty was nothing but selfishness; and *The Merchant of Venice* gave them a chance to consider about religious and racial questions as well as economic problems. In this way Shakespearean translations and adaptations were useful to teach Japanese people European culture.

Shakespeare's history plays, however, were neglected for a long time because Japanese people were unfamiliar with the historical subjects of England. It was in 1911 that Sohei Morita wrote an essay, "*Hamlet* and *Richard II*," which was the first mention of Shakespeare's history plays in Japan. In 1933 Koto Nakajima wrote an essay, "*King John* and *Pericles*," in which he gave a brief outline of each play and pondered Shakespeare's intention in writing history plays. Nakajima posed the question, "Why didn't Shakespeare write about the Magna Carta which was the most important historical event in King John's age?" Nakajima also wrote that the patriotism of English people accelerated the rise of histories and that Shakespeare wrote *King John*, *Richard III*, and *Richard II* in his own style for the advocacy of patriotism and the enchantment of national prestige (*Sao Fukko* 3, 18–28). In 1934 Nakajima wrote an essay about *Henry IV, 1 & 2*, in which he admired the character of Falstaff, the best figure Shakespeare made. In addition, Nakajima was impressed by Shakespeare's method of combining a history play and a comedy in *Henry IV, 1 & 2* (*Sao Fukko*, 6, 40–46).

Sao Fukko 7, a special issue of Shakespeare's history plays, contains the following sentences in the introduction:

There are two different purposes of writing history plays: one is to write about the historical facts and another is to criticize from a dramatist's point of view the people who made history and to consider the cultural meaning of history. Shakespeare's history plays are exemplary because they convey faithfully both the historical facts and human feelings to the audiences. Japanese history plays compare unfavorably with Shakespeare's. Japanese dramatists should reconsider the spirit of Shakespeare, a great dramatist. (1)

To the same volume of *Sao Fukko*, Tadaichi Hidaka contributed an essay entitled, "The Characteristics and the Importance of Shakespeare's History Plays." Hidaka directed his attention to Shakespeare's method of using past affairs to clarify the present situation. Shakespeare wrote history plays in the Elizabethan age when England developed economically and politically. The plays offered an opportunity for the people to think about prosperous England. *Henry IV*, 1 & 2 were the best plays because the adolescence of Henry V, the subject of national admiration, was described vividly in them. Hidaka emphasized the importance for Japanese people to know the reality of rushing into war. He thought Shakespeare's history plays were valuable to Japanese people who loved their country deeply (16–19). Izumi Yanagida wrote about why Shakespeare's history plays were so interesting. Japanese people were inclined to avoid reading them because they weren't familiar with English history, but Yanagida was very interested in the description of the Wars of the Roses between the Lancasters and the Yorks as well as the love scenes in the intervals between wars (24–28).

In *Sao Fukko* 8, Shigetoshi Kawatake wrote on *Henry V*. Reading the translation by Tsubouchi, he thought the characterization of Henry V was vivid and that his advances to Katharine at the end of the play were especially interesting. He also wrote that the plot and the characterization of the hero must appeal to Japanese people, and that *Henry V* would teach them many things as well as artistic significance (28–29). Yoshio Nakano thought *Henry V* was written by a patriotic dramatist, Shakespeare, and that this play was a good national epic rather than a dramatic masterpiece (*Sao Fukko* 9, 6–9).

Kensho Honda asked why *Henry VI*, 1, 2 & 3 were not so often performed as *Richard III*. He suggested two reasons: the hero was not so great a person, and Shakespeare made a mistake in selecting materials. Shakespeare wrote about the first-hand experience of English people fighting a civil war. In addition, he knew the way to write people's feelings freely (*Sao Fukko* 9, 28–31). Honda also wrote about the characterization of Richard III. In this essay, Honda said that Richard III was not a villain but a devil, that he was cold and strong, and that he had an ambition to

become a king. How patiently Japanese people could bear the cruelty of Richard III was interesting to Honda (*Sao Fukko* 12, 16–19).

Kiboku Hirata regarded *Richard III* as young Shakespeare's masterpiece. After writing the story of *Richard III* in detail, Hirata said that this play should be performed in Elizabethan style. He also suggested that the ghost scene at the end of the play should be performed in *Noh* style. This is a very interesting idea because Hirata found parallels between English drama and Japanese drama (*Sao Fukko* 13, 8–11).

In 1935 Kichizo Nakamura wrote on *Henry VIII*. He appreciated the authenticity of this play conveying the King's marriage, divorce, remarriage to Anne and the birth of Princess Elizabeth. Nakamura pointed out, however, that *Henry VIII* lacked imagination and the touch of art seen in *Henry IV*, 1 & 2 or *Richard III*. However, it pleased the audience with such spectacles as the masque, coronation, and pageant (*Sao Fukko* 17, 50–53).

Studies in Shakespeare's history plays increased greatly after World War II. For example, Toshiko Oyama wrote on *Richard III* in her book, *A Study of Shakespearean Imagery* (1951). Rintaro Fukuhara wrote on *Henry V* in his book, *Art Is Long* (1956). Toshikazu Oyama discussed *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, 1 & 2, and *Henry V* in his book, *Shakespeare's View of Human Nature* (1957). Yoshio Nakano wrote on Falstaff in 1958, and Manri Yano wrote about *Henry V*, *Henry IV*, 1 & 2 and *Richard II* in 1968.

In 1972 Seizo Mononobe published *An Introduction to Shakespearean Histories*, in which he wrote about the First Tetralogy and the Second Tetralogy. In 1977 Makio Abe published *A Note for Shakespeare: History Plays*. In 1978 Kenji Nakamura discussed the poetic language in history plays in his book, *A Study on Shakespearean Poetic Language*. In 1979 Takeshi Sekiya published *A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays*. In 1980 Kiyoe Kobayashi published *An Essay on Shakespeare's Histories* in which he discussed *Henry VI*, 1, 2, & 3 and *Richard III*. In 1981 Kenji Abe published *Shakespeare's History Plays*. In 1982 Ken-ichi Takeda published *Shakespearean Tragedies and Histories* in which he discussed *Richard II* and *Henry IV*. In 1984 Kazuo Irie published *Shakespearean Histories*, and in 1989 Kinnosuke Omuro discussed history plays in his book, *Shakespeare as a Lawyer*.

In 1990 Masakazu Kurikoma published *The Topography of Shakespeare's English Histories*. In the same year Shunzo Kashiwakura published *Historic Battlefields in Shakespeare's History Plays*. In 1994 the Shakespeare Society of Japan published *Shakespeare's History Plays*, in which several scholars discussed histories from viewpoints of royal powers, gender, politics, and so on. In this way Shakespeare's histories have been studied, and it is true that they have given rise to markedly diverse interpretations among scholars.

These essays and articles indicate that Japanese intellectuals understood the value of Shakespeare's history plays well but they didn't introduce them to the public willingly. Generally speaking, history is interesting but historical affairs in foreign countries are not easy for Japanese people to keep up with.

During the Meiji Era, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Winter's Tale* were translated or adapted. Tsubouchi rendered *Richard III* in 1918; *Henry IV, 1 & 2* in 1919; *Richard II* in 1926; *Henry V* and *King John* in 1927; and *Henry VIII* and *Henry VI, 1, 2 & 3* in 1928 into Japanese. In addition, Sanki Ichikawa translated *Henry VI* into Japanese in 1929.

Shakespeare's history plays were frequently translated into Japanese and published before 1993. *King John*, which was translated by Tsubouchi, Teiji Kitagawa, Yushi Odashima, and Yasuo Tanaka, was published thirteen times. *Henry IV, 1 & 2* translated by Tsubouchi, Nakano, Tsuneari Fukuda, and Odashima were printed twenty-four times. However, *Henry V* rendered by Tsubouchi, Toshikazu Oyama, Isao Mikami and Odashima was published fourteen times. *Henry VI, 1, 2 & 3* translated by Tsubouchi, Odashima, Jiro Ozu and Tanaka were printed seventeen times. But *Richard III* translated by Tsubouchi, Fukuhara, Toshikazu Oyama, Mikami, Odashima and Tanaka was published twenty-three times. *Richard II* rendered by Tsubouchi, Yasuo Suga, Odashima, Junji Kinoshita, Fukuda and Tanaka was printed sixteen times, while *Henry VIII* translated by Tsubouchi, Koshi Nakanori, and Odashima was published twelve times.

Judging from the frequency of publications, we can surmise that *Henry IV, 1 & 2* and *Richard III* were the most popular plays in Japan. Why? I think the reason is that both plays are more dramatic than other history plays and that dramatic characters such as Falstaff and Richard III had additional charm for Japanese people who were familiar with *Kyogen* (Noh comedy) and *Kabuki* in which a villain sometimes appears.

Then, how about the frequency of the performances of Shakespeare's history plays in Japan? The first performance of a history play in Japan was *Henry IV, 1 & 2* in 1931. Choji Kato directed them, using Tsubouchi's translation. Fukuda directed his own translation of *Richard III* in 1964, and that of *Henry IV, 1 & 2* in 1967. The interval between the performances of Shakespeare's plays tells us that Shakespeare was read rather than staged for a while because European modern dramas written by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, etc. were performed more frequently than those by Shakespeare. After World War II, however, Shakespeare was revived on the Japanese stage. Fukuda, a critic, dramatist and translator of Shakespeare, rendered

more than seventeen Shakespearean plays into Japanese, producing some of them on the stage. His language was poetic and rhythmical.

In 1973 Toshikiyo Masumi directed *Richard III*, using Mikami's translation. Although Mikami was a scholar, he was very familiar with the stage. His language was easily adaptable for delivery by actors and easily understandable by the audience. In 1976 and 1977 Norio Deguchi directed *Richard III* rendered by Odashima. Deguchi, a director of the Shakespeare Theatre Company, performed all of Odashima's translations at a small underground playhouse, because Odashima translated the complete works of Shakespeare into a colloquial style. The younger generation of theatre-goers especially liked to see those productions with added elements of rock music and present-day costumes. In 1979 Deguchi directed *Henry IV, 1 & 2* and *Richard II* and in 1981 *Henry VIII*, using Odashima's translations. In 1981 and 1982 Deguchi directed Odashima's translations of *Henry VI, 1, 2 & 3*, and in 1982 Fukuda directed his translation of *Henry IV*. In 1983 Deguchi directed Odashima's translation of *Henry IV*.

In 1984 Ryo Abe directed *The World of Pigs – Henry IV*, and in 1985 he directed his own text entitled *Kings – Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V*. In 1984 Yu Osugi directed Odashima's translation of *King Richard III*. In 1987 Deguchi directed Odashima's translation of *Richard III*, and in the same year Masaya Takahashi directed his own text of *Richard III*. In 1989 Hayaru Fukuda, Tsuneari Fukuda's son, directed his father's translation of *Richard III*. In the same year Yoshiyuki Fukuda directed Odashima's text entitled *Hal and Falstaff*. In 1990 Hideki Noda wrote *The Third Richard* and directed it. In 1993 Yoshiyuki Fukuda directed Odashima's translation of *Richard III*. In 1993 Deguchi directed *Richard III* rendered by Odashima, and Tomoe Ryu directed the same play translated by Mikami.

In addition, a comic opera, *Falstaff* composed by Salieri, was directed by Masayoshi Kamiyama, and an opera, *Falstaff* composed by Verdi, was directed by Peter Stein in 1990. In 1991 and 1992 *Kyogen Horazamurai* or *The Braggart Samurai* (*Kyogen* Version "Falstaff") written by Yasunari Takahashi was directed by Mansaku Nomura, a *Kyogen* actor. But this was based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

English dramatic companies have also played Shakespeare's history plays in Japan. In 1973 John Barton directed *Henry V* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1988 Michael Bogdanov directed *Richard II, Henry IV, 1 & 2, Henry V, Henry VI*, and *Richard III* for the English Shakespeare Company. In 1990 Richard Eyer directed *Richard III* for the Royal National Theatre, and in 1993 Sam Mendes directed *Richard III* for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

In 1993 Magosaburo Yuki directed a puppet-play of *Richard III* for the Yukiza troupe established by the First Magosaburo in 1634. The Twelfth

Magosaburo played the leading role and manipulated the strings attached to the puppet of the hero. This troupe had already performed the puppet-plays of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. In 1989 Magosaburo had played the role of Hal in *Hal and Falstaff*. For the performance based on a puppet-play, *Joruri*, a singer seated on the stage and recited the story. In this production, Queen Margaret looked like a mad woman at first and a witch later. Magosaburo succeeded in expressing Richard III as an ugly monster.

In 1994 *Akkan Richard* (A Villain Richard) was directed by Sho Ryuzanji. He used a script written by Seita Yamamoto. Ryuzanji directed *Macbeth* in 1988, in which Macbeth in a leather jacket appeared with a machine gun. He regarded *Macbeth* as an action drama. Again he performed *Akkan Richard* as an action drama at a small underground playhouse. It was a very active and radical performance. In the same year the Teatro Echo troupe performed *Richard III – Rose, Fool, Crown*. This was also an adaptation by Masaki Domoto and directed by Haruyasu Mizuta. In the same year the Tokyo Ballet Group performed *Richard III*. This troupe had performed other Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They tried to express the dramatic power of Shakespeare's speeches through their bodies.

In 1995 Edward Hall directed *Richard III* for the Globe in Tokyo, using Odashima's translation. In this performance Mikijiro Hira, who had already played *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, played the leading role. He gave a wonderful performance in *Richard III*, too. In 1995 Giles Brock directed *Richard III* translated by Odashima for the Ginza Saison Theatre. Ken Ogata, who played the leading role, portrayed Richard as a tyrant, devil with women, betrayer, and conspirator. In the same year the Royal Shakespeare Company visited Japan and produced *Henry IV – The Battle for the Throne*. Katie Mitchell directed this play, describing power, ambition, desire, revenge, betrayal, corruption, and jealousy. In 1996 Hisashi Inoue wrote *Tempo Junen no Sheikusupia* (Shakespeare in 1839) in which Macbeth and Richard appeared. Ken-ichi Kato was director of this play set in feudal Japan. In 1998 *Henry IV* was staged for children at the Globe in Tokyo in order to let them understand what a history play was.

In 1999 Yukio Ninagawa directed *Richard III* for the first time. Ninagawa is world-famous for directing *NINAGAWA Macbeth* in 1985 and *The Tempest* in 1988 in Edinburgh. Both productions earned high praise and gave Japanese people a sense of pride for the rendering of Shakespeare in a Japanese context. Recently Ninagawa tried to perform all of the plays by Shakespeare in Saitama Prefecture. *Richard III* was the third production by the Sainokuni Shakespeare Company. Masachika Ichikawa played the leading role who did evil like a game. The opening scene was very dramatic. Musicians beat a drum loudly, while stage lights were shining in through the ceiling of

the Gothic cathedral. When a horse without a rider came and fell, carcasses dropped from overhead. Stepping over them, Richard III in a red cloak appeared and said, "Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this son of York" (1.1.1-2). The framework set of latticework represented the Tower of London, a street, a castle, and a camping ground with the help of a mirror. What stirred Richard to evil? He was crippled, and he suffered from an inferiority complex to other people. He was ugly, but he was appealing to women. Ninagawa restaged this play in Tokyo in December 2003.

In July 2003 *Richard III* was presented by the En troupe. In November 2003 the same play was staged by the Bungaku-za troupe. This performance was impressive, because the leading actor, Toru Emori, looked like a dictator in the Far East of today. When the curtain rose, a gong was sounded, and dancers in Asian costumes appeared on the stage. The screen which was set up at the back of the stage showed battle scenes. Emori had a cold arrogant look in his face, but there was comical touch in his words. His subtle flattery and black humour attracted public attention.

The general number of Japanese performances of Shakespeare's history plays leads me to think that *Richard III* was the most popular on the recent stage. The reason is that the dramatic power of the Wars of the Roses and the strong personality of Richard III appealed greatly to the audience. *Henry IV*, 1 & 2 also attracted their attention. Other history plays such as *Henry V*, *Richard II*, and *Henry VI*, 1, 2 & 3 began to be staged in the 1980s. The patriotism expressed by Shakespeare in *Henry V* is particularly powerful and passionate. There is an episode that Winston Churchill quoted a line from this play to encourage English people during World War II. Japanese people also know the universal misery that World War II caused. A reminder of the misery of war is evoked while looking at the battle scenes of history plays.

The modern world full of crimes, murders, and stresses is somewhat similar to the dramatic world of *Richard III*. In a sense, Richard III looks like Hitler, Stalin, or Hussein. Nowadays Japanese people want to see *Macbeth* produced like *Richard III*. In *Macbeth* performed in 1989, Emori's Macbeth looked like Richard, and the battle reflected the Vietnam War. This proves how much Japanese people like radical and aggressive actions recently.

In this way Shakespeare's history plays, which were not adapted in the Meiji Era, are adapted today to radical plays with added elements of rock music or fused with Japanese traditional drama by the directors who want to make experiments. *Kabuki* and *Noh* take their subjects from history, myth, and daily life. The dramatic places and the characters' names are quite different between Shakespeare's history plays and Japanese traditional drama, but the themes and the stories are to some extent similar because both express murder, royal succession, intrigue, betrayal, and so on.

Shakespeare represented his extended treatment of material derived from English history. Derek Traversi, the author of *Shakespeare from "Richard II" to "Henry V"*, explains as follows:

The true artist, when circumstances induce him to approach political conceptions, gives them a new human value in the light of his own experience; and it is this combination of old and new, the inherited theme and its individual re-creation, that confers upon Shakespeare's historical plays their distinctive and transforming interest. (1)

Recently the Japanese directors want to delight the audiences with the fusion of Shakespeare with *Kabuki*. If they wish to perform his history plays effectively, they should think how to adapt them for the Japanese stage. Therefore, they should consider the dramaturgy of Shakespeare and that of *Kabuki*. Moreover, they should know about Shakespeare's attitude toward history, and interpret for the audience what history is and how history is related to human life. Shakespeare's history plays must give Japanese people an opportunity to think about the real meaning of history.

History repeats itself. In the Meiji Era, Natsume imagined the tragic scenes of *Richard III* while strolling around the Tower of London. But now the world is shocked by the tragic events which occurred in the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. Shakespeare is a universal hero. In the twenty-first century, it is necessary for the people all over the world to get his strong and serious message delivered via his history plays.

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