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The Merchant of Venice: Tsubouchi's Shylock and Early Modern Japanese Dichotomy

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Shakespeare, when writing plays in the early 1600s, neither could nor did write for a future with complex socio-cultural identities. Instead he wrote to entertain an audience with a budding colonial British ethnocentric mentality. Approached through this frame of mind, Shakespeare's *Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice* becomes exactly what it claims to be, a "comical history" rife with anti-Semitic humor. Anti-Semitic humor was particularly popular in Elizabethan England after a rumored attempt on Queen Elizabeth's life at the hands of her converted Christian Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez (Maus 1111). For Elizabethan England, Shylock is a villain that represents a religious cultural "other" who, in the interest of comedic form, is converted to Christianity at the end of the play for confirmation of an expected social order, the ethnic and cultural superiority of Christian Europeans (McDonald 82).

It is no surprise that Shakespeare's association with high culture and "Englishness" became a way both to justify the conquering of foreign peoples and to indoctrinate "native" intellectuals with Shakespeare. Of the major Asian nations, only one, Japan, was not invaded and forced to interpret Shakespeare through the lens of a conquered nation (Kobayashi 64). Without the immediate military presence of a conquering state, Japanese intellectuals, like Shakespeare scholar Tsubouchi Shoyo, were able to interpret, translate and perform Shakespeare in a uniquely Japanese way. Tsubouchi, influenced by his own views of what Japanese modernity really meant in the process of Japan's early twentieth century modernization, used Shakespeare to represent an early modern Japanese cultural dichotomy between Westernization and maintaining a uniquely Japanese national identity. More specifically, Tsubouchi's translation and interpretation of Shakespeare's discrimination against and conversion of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrates a manifestation of how contrasting cultural ideals to Westernize to be modern and still be Japanese seek justification for Japanese imperialism. This justification is

found though the creation of universal cultural similarities with the West that also promotes Japanese attempts to be modern in their own way.

In the past ten years several contemporary Western scholars have taken an interest in the cultural significance of Tsubouchi's Shakespeare translations. Scholars like Daniel Gallimore, Leith Morton, and Kaori Kobayashi have written extensively on many dimensions of Tsubouchi's translations and stage performances of Shakespeare. All three scholars write on the socio-cultural, linguistic and artistic aesthetic of translation and performance that Tsubouchi provides in his translations of Shakespeare. These writers, referenced throughout my work, inspire and inform my analysis. For those interested in more historically detailed and extensive Tsubouchi translation research I would highly recommend these scholars. Thus, on the shoulders of these writers I take a closer look at how Tsubouchi's translation of *The Merchant of Venice* negotiates Shylock's character in the complex and contrasting ideologies of Asian nationalism and Western imperialism relevant to his historic moment.

For those less familiar, I will provide some historical information relevant to understanding Japanese socio-political influences that lead up to Tsubouchi's translations. The Meiji period from 1868 to about 1912 is a dramatic period of restoration in Japan that followed the Tokugawa shogunate ("Meiji Restoration"). Up until 1868, Japan was considered a feudal state ruled primarily by powerful war lords known as *daimyo* (Murphey 272-73). These *daimyo* were controlled by a central military authority known as a shogun with varying degrees of success, and frequent civil conflicts erupted. Then under the military leadership of Tokugawa Ieyasu general peace was established with a strict social hierarchy that would continue from 1600 for about 250 years during which time Tokugawa rule would isolate the Japanese mainland from foreign influence (274-75). After 1853 when American Commodore Matthew Perry demonstrated Western technological advancement with cannons and steam-powered ships the Tokugawa regime was forced to acknowledge a possible need to communicate with foreigners (282). Unfortunately "conservative elements" that believed the Tokugawa government "had failed them and that its weakness was revealed" caused civil unrest that would lead the residing shogun to return Japan to imperial, rather than feudal, rule (283). The death of Emperor Komei in 1867 allowed the shogun the perfect opportunity to relinquish power to the new young Emperor

Meiji from whom the era gains its name (283-84). Emperor Meiji would with the help of his advisors peacefully dismantle *daimyo* land control ending the feudal system and paving the way for rapid modernization and industrialization (284). Understandably Shakespeare, due to Japan's self-enforced isolation, would not become a subject of interest until Japanese scholars of the Meiji period began studying it to learn more about Western culture and history.

Tsubouchi Shoyo was born in 1859 at the cusp of the end of the Tokugawa shogunate and was coming of age right at the beginning of the Meiji restoration and cultural revolution ("Tsubouchi, Shoyo"). Leith Morton with the help of J. Scott Miller's biography on Tsubouchi shows that Tsubouchi received elite cultural education often attending the extravagant Kabuki theater as a young man and then going on to attend Tokyo University to study both literature and law (14). He would later go on to teach at the Tokyo Senmon Gakko, now Waseda University, and is well known to be the first scholar to finish a translation of the complete works of Shakespeare in 1928 (Kobayashi 59). Tsubouchi educated on the developing state of his country translates Shakespeare with nationalistic motives of the time looking for a means of reforming Japanese culture (Gallimore, "Tsubouchi's Shakespeares" 5). One means by which Japanese culture is reformed over the course of the early twentieth century was *kokugo* or "national language" that begins to develop in the 1890s "as a conscious response to the hegemony of English" (5).

The term *kokugo* is weighed down with complex historical and ideological baggage but in short, it was an effort by the Meiji government to officially standardize the Japanese language (Hubbard xi). The Japanese language up until then was made up of several different styles of writing and speaking, and through standardization the Meiji government hoped to foster the national identity that language could represent by connecting "language scholarship and politics" (x-xii). Tsubouchi's translations that attempt to use an early conception of standardized Japanese are credited with contributing to the development of *kokugo* (Gallimore, "Tsubouchi's Shakespeares" 5). Gallimore points out it is possible that because of this Tsubouchi's translations of Shakespeare assist in creating a "literary and communicative norm...inseparable from the existence of the [Japanese] nation state" ("Tsubouchi's Shakespeare" 6).

Tsubouchi's position as a nationalistic minded Japanese translator and cultural reformer creating work at an important period of transition, in which the Japanese nation state is struggling to negotiate a place of influence or power in a world dominated by the West, makes him an important subject of interest when discussing Japanese cultural dichotomy. The Japanese cultural dichotomy is the inherent contrast between westernizing for the sake of modernization and imperialism while conversely still maintaining a uniquely Japanese East Asian cultural identity. Tsubouchi in many ways sat at the forefront of redefining what it meant to be Japanese in a world that espoused proof of Western technological superiority. To this end, Tsubouchi's work would have to negotiate Shakespeare as a Western cultural institution that in other parts of the world was imposed rather than interpreted and, if that were not complicated enough, his work would also emphasize Japan's delicate position as the only Asian imperialist power.

That said, while Tsubouchi began his first translations, British Imperialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used *The Merchant of Venice* and Shylock to justify the superiority of Western Christian culture. This is demonstrated in the text by Shakespeare's frequent reliance on English ethnocentrism to create comedy through "ironic pleasure and confirmation of the social order" (McDonald 82). In the simplest form this is demonstrated in "pork jokes" that emphasize cultural difference between Jews and Christians for comedic effect. For instance, when Bassanio visits Shylock to borrow money with the weight of Antonio's name, he suggests that Shylock should eat with them to confirm Antonio's willingness to co-sign the transaction. Shylock responds as the ethnocentric Elizabethan would expect, saying, "Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet Nazarite conjured the devil into" (1.3.28-29). The "ironic pleasure" in this exchange derives from the irony of Bassanio's mocking offer. He knows full well Shylock is Jewish and will not eat the pork they would likely dine on, but offers anyway in a show of superiority that indicates that Jewish religious prohibition against the eating of pork is backward and in some way lesser. It is possible to imagine these jokes would continue to affirm a sense of British cultural superiority much later through British imperialist performances of *The Merchant of Venice* in India. Kobayashi confirms this possibility writing "In India...insertion of the Shakespeare master text...paralleled the insertion

of the political power of the master race” (63). Being thus marked as the cultural “other,” Shylock, in this example the butt of the joke, could easily be equated to the native culture British imperialists viewed as backward and in some way lesser to symbolically affirm Western hegemony.

When Tsubouchi Shoyo first saw *The Merchant of Venice* performed by the European Miln company in 1891, Miln’s “old style” with “low artistic standards” and a focus on oratory, no doubt emphasized these verbal interactions for comedic effect, while laying the groundwork for Japan to imitate Western superiority in its own way (61). Tsubouchi’s appreciation for Miln’s production leads him to support the purpose of Shakespearian performance as expressing the author’s “true” or natural message (66). Just as Elizabethan Europeans found anti-Semitic “pork jokes” to be “natural,” Tsubouchi too, in translating Shylock’s character, found these jokes which support ideals of ethnocentrism “natural.” In Tsubouchi’s translation of *The Merchant of Venice* he explains, “there are many instances when the wordplay and other witticisms can be translated as they are without any feeling of strangeness at all” (Gallimore, “Tsubouchi’s Shakespeares” 14). The only knowledge Japanese intellectuals needed to understand the anti-Semitic humor was Judaism’s rule against the eating of pork. Since Catholic missionaries arrived as early as 1543, bringing with them knowledge of the West and basic distinctions between different Western religions, there is little doubt this information was readily available to Japanese intellectuals focused on learning about the West (Murphy 277).

Not only is the information to inform the joke available at this time, but the complexity of the Japanese language lends itself to the purpose of punning. For instance, even in Tsubouchi’s earliest translation of *The Merchant of Venice* trial scene in 1906 he creates possibilities for pun making. Gallimore explains when analyzing Portia’s line, “[t]he quality of mercy is not strained” that Tsubouchi’s use of “the verb *shūru* (‘to coerce’) may in its inflected form pun on ‘Jew’ in its Sinicized Meiji reading (*Yujin*)” (“Tsubouchi and the Beauty” 77). As the Meiji era was only beginning to standardize the language, “there were 10,000 *kanji* (or Sino-Japanese characters) in regular use”(Gallimore, “Shoyo at Sea” 441). Each *kanji* character can have multiple phonetic readings while also providing subtle visual effects. Tsubouchi was already punning on Shylock’s “Jewish-ness” in his earliest translation and the Japanese language has multiple phonetic

and visual opportunities to create puns within several language spheres. This coupled with pre-existing understanding of Western religions brought over hundreds of years prior all lend to pork jokes being a natural aspect to translate.

Tsubouchi, a Japanese nationalist at heart, could thus easily translate the sense of cultural superiority Western Christians had over Jewish Shylock into something Japanese intellectuals could use in support of their Meiji-period ideology: “Japanese spirit with Western talent” (Gallimore, “Tsubouchi’s Shakespeares” 7-8). The slogan “Japanese spirit with Western talent” was used frequently by intellectuals and nationalists alike as a means of justifying the cultural dichotomy of the often conflicting adoption of Western ideas to serve a Japanese cause. In the pork joke example then, British use of Shakespeare to further cultural imperialism and ideas of western superiority become a “Western talent” that Tsubouchi hopes to imbue with “Japanese spirit.” In Tsubouchi’s case, his translation work was meant not simply to imitate Western Shakespeare but surpass it to create a Shakespeare with an expressly Japanese national purpose. To this end, he urged his students to study Shakespeare not simply to appreciate it, but to know the “enemy” first to surpass them (Kobayashi 65). By saying so, he is advocating the imitation of Western superiority in a specifically Japanese way. Unfortunately, the same “natural-ness” of translating ideals of cultural superiority that appeal to Tsubouchi’s nationalism makes Shylock’s character relatable and even sympathetic to the Japanese position as representatives of the Eastern “other.” If not handled, properly Shylock’s eventual forced conversion to Christianity could be seen as an anti-imperialist message by Tsubouchi’s Japanese audience. Such a message would undermine Tsubouchi’s nationalist goals that ideally include adapting the “Western talent” of expansion and imperialism in Asia with Japanese purpose.

Tsubouchi believed Shakespeare’s writing in general to be fifty percent idealist and the other half realist (Gallimore, “Tsubouchi’s Shakespeares” 8). This realism is perhaps best captured in Shylock’s human defense of his right not to be discriminated against, famously proclaiming the humanity of the Jewish people by saying, “If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? ... And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?” (3.1.54-56). Japan, already existent as the eastern “other” in the eyes of the West while also attempting to mold Western

ideals to suit the needs of modernizing, complicates how Tsubouchi should address Shakespeare's realism when translating Shylock's claim to humanity. In short, with these lines, Tsubouchi is confronted with translating Shylock as either a comedic "other" to be conquered in support of imperialism or as a sympathetic character oppressed by Western imperialism that Japan and Tsubouchi's nationalist beliefs are attempting to emulate.

It is likely that many of Shakespeare's time could have interpreted this as part of a disturbing "ironic pleasure," implying that it is funny that Jewish people think they are as equally human as the Christian protagonists. If Solanio and Salerio's lack of comment on Shylock's digression into his justification for hating and exacting revenge on Antonio was not enough to support this idea, the immediate continuation of demonizing the Jewish people works to accomplish this end. Specifically, as Tubal, a Jewish man of Shylock's tribe arrives only five lines from Shylock's defense, Solanio mocks, "Here comes another of the tribe. A third cannot be matched unless the devil himself turn Jew" (3.1.65-66). Thus, the Jewish people represented by Shylock and Tubal become extensions of false imperialist ideals that emphasize the barbaric nature of native peoples that must be conquered. In other words, Shylock must be "made the fool," and converted just as was popular in the early European colonial conquest and again later in nineteenth century British imperial conquest.

Tsubouchi could have easily interpreted Shylock's character as a representative of the injustices committed by Western imperialism in Asia to fuel anti-imperialist protests but chooses instead to support Elizabethan and subsequent British imperialist sentiments of superiority. While an anti-imperialist interpretation that emphasizes Shylock's humanity would be useful for native intellectuals in already conquered colonized states like India, for Japan it would make its imperialist war efforts to make inroads in Northern China and Korea just as bad as the Westerners they were trying to surpass. Recognizing this problem, Japanese scholars explored the application of universality and homogenization to growing Japanese nationalist ideologies (Kobayashi 64). In exploring these two concepts, Japanese scholars could simultaneously adapt Shakespeare for early nationalist ideals and effectively justify Japan's appropriation of Western culture in their own imperialist state, both an extension of and in antithesis with the West.

To this end, Tsubouchi argues for the “transcultural intimacy” Japan has with Shakespeare’s characters. This means that Tsubouchi, in accord with Japanese nationalism, ignores Shylock’s plea of humanity as a reason for conquered nations to feel wronged, but embraces the idea that he feels what it means to be human, through his desires for revenge. In doing so he emphasizes how the “other” is not so different from the imperialist. This implies that Shakespeare can be used by any “superior” culture, Asian or otherwise, if successfully adapted to their existing culture, as Tsubouchi does through combining his ideals of the traditionalist oratorical style of Miln’s productions with the strictly Japanese aesthetic of Kabuki Theater. This conception of “homogenization of the world based on Eurocentric values and practices,” as seen in the discrimination against Shylock, his feelings for revenge, and his eventual conversion, “was the policy of the new nation-state of Japan” (Kobayashi 64). While this policy primarily stemmed from a fear that if Japan were not considered “civilized” by the West then it could possibly be colonized, like China years prior, Tsubouchi and other scholars of his day understood they had not only to imitate the West, but “unite and counterfeit a ‘Japaneseness’ in order to keep political independence” (64-70). Westernization and Meiji Japan’s ideals of “Japanese spirit with Western talent” allowed Tsubouchi to adapt Eurocentric values of superiority and human desire for revenge as a means of supporting nationalist beliefs in homogenization to fend off foreign colonization. Conversely, it is Japan’s status as a conqueror and Shylock’s conversion that push Tsubouchi’s interpretation into establishing Japan’s unique modern identity.

As Japan finished its first decade in the twentieth century, it transitioned from the status of a developing modern nation state to the most powerful and only Asian imperialist power. Winning a war against Russia in 1905, Japan became the first Eastern country to defeat a “modern” Western nation, and Russia and would go on to turn Korea into a colony by 1910 (Murphy 335). This victory and step toward global colonization mark a major turning point in Japanese cultural identity. Japan’s prior ideal of expressing a homogenized culture that differentiated Japan from the rest of conquered Asia for the West, was quickly repurposed. In order to seek international approval Japan’s typically closed conceptions of ethnicity were changed to support the “ethnic heterogeneity” of the Japanese people (Kobayashi 65). This sudden change

advocated “the idea that the Japanese are a ‘mixed’ people” to better justify the assimilation of Korea into the Japanese nation state and their imperial presence in Asia as a whole (65). So as Shylock is discriminated against and made to be the “other,” Japan applies this same ideology in dealing with other Asian nations. Japan, not just content with taking reparations and resources from conquered nations, as Antonio is not content with simply taking half Shylock’s money, began advocating for the same violent conversion of existing “lesser” cultures they themselves had feared not more than ten years prior (4.1.375-385).

Shakespeare’s and specifically *The Merchant of Venice*’s significance in carrying and supporting this message is demonstrated when Japan performed a Japanese version of *The Merchant of Venice* in Korea for Japanese residents living there, to celebrate the recent victory in the Russo-Japanese war, as Britain did with India (Lee *Shakespeare in Korea*). As Japan continued its colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945, Japan was the primary avenue for promoting and bringing Shakespeare to the people of Korea, as Britain was responsible for introducing Shakespeare as imperialist culture in India (Lee). Tsubouchi, in line with popular sentiments of the time suggests even more strongly the importance of Japanese interpretation and performance of Shakespeare. He goes so far as to suggest that due to Japan’s recent emergence from a feudal system Japan was “quite similar to the Elizabethan England” and “therefore, he suggested, the Japanese might produce better Shakespeares” (Kobayashi 68).

Tsubouchi’s belief in the original author’s “true intention” as the best representation for Shakespeare translation could easily allow him to believe that the Japanese socio-political similarities to Elizabethan England inherently enabled Japan to create better Shakespeares. Though this appears to be flawed in terms of major cultural and language differences, Tsubouchi’s likely conclusion is forgivable as a direct result of modern Japanese nationalist fervor that strove to establish itself as a culture not only similar to the West but distinctly different in a way that made it better.

In Leith Morton’s chapter “Translating the Alien” he concludes that Tsubouchi through his translations expressed a “new mode of...humanity that was alien to Japanese tradition...and had important political implications” (42). This is true: Tsubouchi as a leading intellectual of his

day was very aware of the militaristic imperialism promoted by the Japanese government to motivate the people not only to be more Westernized, but through studying and adaptation, to be better than the West. Furthermore, as modern Western imperialism strove to conquer and indoctrinate other countries with "superior" Western culture, embodied by Shakespeare, as the British did with India, Japan too adapted Shakespeare and strove to use him as their own way of indoctrinating conquered nations. For this purpose Tsubouchi contributes by creating a Shylock that can exist in early Japan's modern dichotomy between Westernization to modernize and holding onto a uniquely Japanese identity, through simultaneously promoting universal application of Shakespeare to any culture, especially Japan's, while also supporting its attempt at imperialism.

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