

# Meiji Japanese Shakespeare as a Source of Wisdom

Ayami Oki-Siekierczak

Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan  
\*Corresponding Author: [amioki@icloud.com](mailto:amioki@icloud.com)

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**Abstract** Japan absorbed Shakespeare into its culture when there was a sudden influx of western culture into the country after Japan emerged from its period of isolation. Even after the closure of the country came to the end, the legacy of feudal Edo (1603-1868), Japan remained in its culture. Westernisation was equal to modernisation to Japanese at that time, and Shakespeare's works were thought to be books to teach people. The Victorian Shakespeare (modified according to the taste of its readers and audience in addition to the morality of the time) imported to Japan was suitable for the social trend, and the bard himself was treated as a source of wisdom. This paper explores the context of adapting Shakespeare into Japanese culture at the early stage since 1880s, and examines how Shakespeare and his works were treated. The very early Japanese translations were heavily influenced by the way Shakespeare's works were received in Victorian England, the cultural legacy of the Edo period, and the prevalent trend in Japan of admiring the West and combining Japanese and Western cultural elements. In other words, the 'proper' Shakespeare by Victorian norms was presented to Japan, where he was idolized as an embodiment of Western wisdom. Definitions of the Bard in Japanese stories of heroes, books on drama history, and dictionaries of biography are analysed in this paper. Through the exploration, the paper concludes that Shakespeare was regarded as a source of wisdom in the early Shakespeare reception in Japan.

**Keywords** Shakespeare, Meiji Japan, Adaptation

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## 1. Introduction

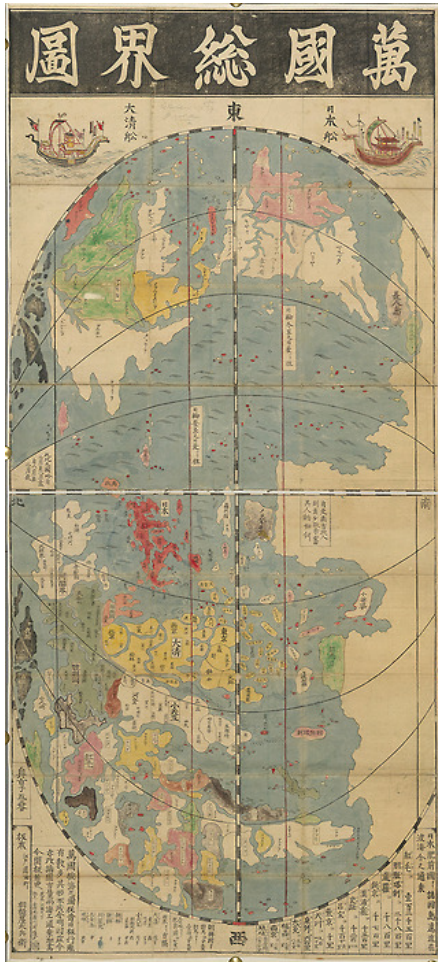
The Japanese reception of Shakespeare was caught between the legacy of the Edo period and the novelty of the West: some aspects particular to Victorian Shakespeare which heavily influenced Meiji (1868-1912) Shakespeare. In Victorian England, the structure of certain plays had been changed, with the 'improved' versions of Shakespeare's works since the Restoration; consequently, the characterisation of some persona in the plays was also affected. With such misrepresentations in reforming the

characters and settings, and adding moralities of Shakespeare's works, an analysis of these plays in the Japanese context should be considered together with the following factors: the Japanese enthusiasm about emulating the West, and the Meiji trend to eulogise Shakespeare and his works as a source of wisdom. These two factors contributed to establish Shakespearean culture to treat him as a source of wisdom in the early Japanese reception of the bard. This paper will explore the background of Japanese reception of Shakespeare and how Shakespeare was eulogised.

Before going into the detail, Meiji Japan opening up to the foreign culture is explained. With a number of events including the famous visits of a Commodore of US Navy, Matthew Perry with his *Kurofune* (or black ships, later the term started to be utilised for expressing the threat of Western modernised technology) in 1853 and the following year, Japan with samurai culture was gradually moving on to the new stage. The Tokugawa Shogunate and its feudal system were abolished with the retirement of the last shogun, and their era, Edo (estuary) was ended: the sovereignty was regained by the royal family who were not directly ruling the society in the Edo period, and their move to the present Tokyo (To=east, kyo=capital) from Kyoto located in the western part of Japan symbolised the alteration of the social structure. The Meiji (enlightened rule) period started in 1868 and it made dramatical changes to social structure, politics, morality, social rules, and the like, and the eagerness to modernisation was rose amongst people when westernisation was regarded to equal to modernisation.

## 2. The Context of Early Shakespeare Reception in Japan

The English texts (predominantly of Victorian England) which were made available to the adaptors and translators were probably modified, removing the fundamentally problematic issues from them. Owing to *Sakoku* (the 200-year-long 'Closed Country Policy' which had begun in 1639), Japan had almost no access to Shakespeare's works of either the Renaissance or Neoclassical era and was almost suddenly exposed to a Romantic Shakespeare of Victorian England. In Japan, Shakespeare's works were thus re-created for children and ladies, according to the needs of the time.



**Figure 1.** A map of the world made by Tomonobu Ishikawa under *sakoku* (1708)

In 1868, Japan decided to propel itself into a powerful position by bringing about a cultural reformation, which heralded the Meiji period. The country commenced on a programme of absorbing Western culture enthusiastically and rapidly. Westernisation was thought to be almost equal to modernisation. The rigid Japanese feudal system was abolished, and etiquette was modified as per Western norms. However, despite new perspectives and morality from the West, the Edo culture continued to influence the Japanese mentality in this period. The mixture of Japanese tradition and Euro-American elements were evident in various cultural aspects. For instance, since a topknot was considered to be a legacy of the barbaric past, trimming of hair after the Euro-American fashion was encouraged. Nonetheless, people were generally sceptical of such changes and adapted to Euro-American trends with reservation. Thus, it was not rare to see a person with a Western-style hair cut in kimono.

The abrupt exposure to the Western world must have been overwhelming for the Japanese, leading to confusion and misunderstandings. The extent to which Western mores should be amalgamated with Japanese culture and also how Shakespeare should be absorbed within Japan's cultural

identity were debatable. One faction considered Western culture to be indubitably the superior to the Japanese one, while another acknowledged the worth of Japanese literature and believed that Western and Japanese literary devices could be successfully combined. The latter point of view was

exemplified by *Sakuradoki Zeninoyononaka*, or *The Time when Cherry Blossoms Bloom, the World where Everything Is Based on Money* (1885), a translation of *The Merchant of Venice*, which was an eclectic mix of elements from two distinctive cultures [1].

According to 'Hamuretto Yamatonishikie' or 'Hamlet: Japanese Illustrations' (1886), the European version of *Hamlet* was published in 1876 as a serial story in *Chuhonsha*

*Eiri Shinbun* or *Chuhonsha Illustrated Newspaper* [2]. At the beginning, the series stated that because of the unpopularity of the European version (owing to its unfamiliar Western feel), the author of this series decided to create an adaptation with illustrations which showed figures akin to Japanese actors. In the same year (1886), the first ad verbum translation of the entire play of *Romeo and Juliet*, in the format of a drama, was locally published with the title

*Shunjō Ukiyo no Yume: Romyō Jyurī Gikyoku* or *Sentiment of Spring, Dream of the Earthly World: The Play of Romeo and Juliet* [3]. In the following year, this play was published on a national scale. The title page itself indicates how much Shakespeare was altered and misinterpreted because of the Japanese trend of revering him excessively. The publisher of this version requested the translator to render the play in the *Inpon* style, namely, the language used in traditional theatre, such as *Jōruri*, which values narration), because Tsubouchi's

1884 translation of *Julius Caesar*, *Shiizarukidan*: *Jiyūnotachi Nagorinokireaji*, which also followed the *Inpon* style, had been very well received [4].

Charlotte Eubanks defines the Meiji period as 'caught between a desire on the one hand to look back to some mythicized pure age of identity and cultural essence of the Edo period, and a desire on the other to move forward into an age of enlightenment' [5, p.15]. How the bard and his works were adapted in Meiji Japan lay midway between the two trends, and adaptors at this time attempted to blend both Japanese and Western culture; nevertheless, their attempts often ended up as mere farragoes. It must be remembered that for the Meiji Japanese, Westernisation equalled modernisation and enlightenment. For instance, the employment records, which contain details about the *oyatoi gaikokujin* (people hired for their specialised knowledge to assist in the modernisation of the country at the time), include the names of those who were hired for teaching European languages although they were not necessarily educators; even sailors were hired as teachers. The respect given to a generalised group called 'Europeans' caused excessive confusion.



Figure 2. Famous Sights of Tokyo, Horse-drawn Tramcars Come and Go on the Brick-Building-Lined Ginza (1882)

### 3. Ennobled Shakespeare

In this context, Shakespeare is listed in both tales of heroism in the early stage of modernisation in the Meiji period and in dictionaries of European biography, juxtaposed with other historical figures in Europe. For example, in *Irohabin Sēyō Jinnē Jibiki*, or *European Biography* (1879), ‘*Shēkusupīa*’ (Shakespeare) is defined as ‘the most famous English playwright’ [6, p.214].

*Taisēmēshikagami*, or *Western Heroes* (1880) defines *Shēkusupīa* as ‘a very well-known poet, outstanding amongst others’; remarkably, it also says that ‘the light of his flair illumines all countries’ [7, p.221]. This version claims in its explanatory notes that it is a translation of ‘*Huihuchī Fēmasu Men*’ (which is most probably ‘*Fifty Famous Men*’) [7, p.1]; however, the source might be *Fifty Celebrated Men: Their Lives and Trials, and the Deeds that Made Them Famous* (1862) [8].

*Gaikoku Chimē Jinnē Jiten*, or *Dictionary of Foreign Cities and Biography* (1903) also contends that ‘Shakespeare (person) *Sheikusupia* is the arch-poet and playwright of the world’ [9, p.496]. Shakespeare is treated as an important figure in books published around that time on the history of English literature and drama. For instance,

*Kakkoku Engeki-shi*, or *History of Drama in Various Countries*, (1884) states that ‘After the famous *Sekisupia* died in 1616, there were some theatres which receded into the background’ [10, p.72]; a second-hand copy of this book seems to have been owned by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, a writer who wrote the original of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* and

other famous pieces. Similarly, *Engeki-shi*, or *Drama History*, (1887) contends that Shakespeare’s death caused the decline of theatres in London [11]. As other Meiji

descriptions do, *Engeki-shi* calls him *Shi-Sei*, that is, the *Sainted Poet* [11, p.83]. *Eikoku Bungaku-shi*, or *History of English Literature*, (1893) also evaluates Shakespeare as follows: ‘The name of an unrivalled English playwright,

*Uriamu*, *Shieikusupia* is well-known for all ages and all nations. There is no one who does not know about him’ [12, p.81]; ‘he went to London from his hometown and opened the way to shed light through English literature’ [12, p.82]; ‘[t]here are no other words to evaluate *Sheikusupia* as an actor than venerable, or *resubekutēburu*’; and ‘[h]is writing make us almost forget about him as an actor.’ An article in a

periodical, *Isekokinichiyōsōshi* vol. 17 (1880), reported a production of *Romeo and Juliet* by referring to the Bard as

‘that famous Shakespeare’ in ‘*Seiyō Kabuki Haru no Yume*’ [13]. In *Sakuradoki Zeninoyononaka*, the fictional conversation between the young men who appear in the pre-play story mentions *The Merchant of Venice* as a masterpiece created to teach morality, laws, and other crucial matters. A fictional character even describes the work as meant for the general good. *Hamuretto Yamatonishikie* also defines Shakespeare as an outstanding artist of all ages.

In England, Shakespeare was a national hero ever since the time of Garrick. When Garrick authorised the translation of his own works and also those of Shakespeare in order to popularise the latter’s works, he raised not only his but also Shakespeare’s prestige. This is evident in Henry Mercer Graves’ ‘*A Letter on Taste, Judgement, and Rhetorical Expression*’ (1826) where Shakespeare is juxtaposed with Mozart and Raffaele, in addition to Garrick [14]. In Meiji Japan, Shakespeare was revered as a great Western personality, representing the wisdom of England. This may have strongly affected his reception in Japan and the translations of his texts.

In one of the early translations of the plays, even the characters belonging to the lower class were entrusted with the task of imparting wisdom to the audience. However, the language used by Shakespeare was often wrongly interpreted or translated. In the translation of *Romeo and Juliet* that was published in 1886, the gesture of Sampson (one of the servants ready to fight) of biting his finger was described as ‘the manner of fighting’ [3, pp. 6-7].

**Table 1.** Definitions of Shakespeare in Meiji Japan

Title	Year	Size of the Book	Pages of Shakespeare	Description
European Biography	1879	252,2p ; 22cm	214—215	the most famous English playwright
Western Heroes	1880	254p ; 19cm	221—237	a very well-known poet, outstanding amongst others / the light of his flair illumines all countries
History of Drama in Various Countries	1884	89p ; 18cm	67-75	Because famous Shakespeare died, there were some theatres which receded into the background
Drama History	1887	102p ; 18cm	67-69	Shakespeare is the Sainted Poet
History of English Literature	1893	264p ; 19cm	Chapter 2 & 4	There is no one who does not know about him.
Dictionary of Foreign Cities and Biography	1903	634,134p ; 20cm	496-497	Shakespeare is the arch-poet and playwright of the world

This section compares some of the translations with the Bard's original composition to reveal how the original lines were misrepresented in the process of translation and how the actual meaning was changed. For instance, in Act I, Scene 2, of *Romeo and Juliet*, the servant talks to himself when he cannot read the list of names, saying, 'I am sent to find those persons whose names are here writ, and can never find what names the writing person hath here writ. I must to the learned....' In Meiji Japan, this passage was translated as follows: 'After all, this [I am a] ignorant and illiterate low-ranked fellow, a troublesome person [. . .] even though I am in a low position, I must endeavour to be able to read at least the names of people' [3, pp.26-27/50-51]. This translation indicates the extent to which the Meiji Japanese people admired the West. As mentioned previously, any 'Westerner', regardless of his or her education and background, could be employed as a teacher in Japan: even barbaric acts in the plays were construed as Western manners.

Regardless their shrewdness, stubbornness, and other qualities as rather strong women, the Japanese translators projected Shakespeare's female characters (e.g. *Herena*, *Poruchia*, *Poruchiwo*, *Berumonto*, *Baiwora*, *Isaberura*, *Woheria*, *Koruderia*, *Miranda*, *Herumiwon*, *Perudzita*, *Desudemonia*, *Imoozen*, *Kazarin*, and *Dziurietto*) as paragons of virtue and fidelity, as in *Jogakuzaasshi* (1887), the first periodical magazine for women in Japan [15]. Since its first issue in 1885, *Jogakuzaasshi* tended to deal with matters concerning enlightenment, until its policy changed in 1889. Instead of publishing such articles, it became more literature-oriented. Around the time when the article was published, *Jogakuzaasshi's* readership was not limited to women; men who were interested in modernisation also read it.

The villain in Shakespeare's plays appears to be extremely evil in the Japanese translations. For instance, in *Kaigwajōhu* (1887), the translation of *Much Ado about Nothing*, Borachio misappropriates Margaret's hard-earned salary in order to carouse, play billiards and card games, and gamble. He always lacks money and therefore starts to snatch strangers' belongings on streets. As it is said that 'bad

news travels fast', the government realises his crimes and he is caught when he begins to quarrel with Margaret [16]. In Shakespeare's work, Borachio is originally a character who is loyal to his master, Don John. That is the motivation which drives him to be involved in the plot to trap the heroine, and he repents later claiming that it was thoroughly his fault and Margaret who was there was not aware of the plot at all. Surely, Borachio's deeds destroyed the heroine and the reputation of her family. However, he is not the total villain as Japanese adaptations displayed. Villain figures were made so evil that their deeds and punishments to them may have taught people who read the bard's works.

## 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, Shakespeare was a figure to be respected and his works were considered to be textbooks to teach people the way to live in appropriate manner. Servants in the early Japanese adaptations and translations are embarrassed that they are so ignorant, and villains are so evil and then punishments seem justified. Shakespeare was imported into Japan together with other European giants when Japan was eager to be enlightened and modernise its society following Western manners. The modified Victorian Shakespeare was so suitable for the context, and the early Shakespeare reception in Japan produced phenomena peculiar enough to treat the bard as a source of wisdom.

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