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JAPANESE TRANSLATIONS OF “HAMLET”

What is Hamlet?

The topic of our presentation is about the translation of Hamlet. As you probably know, Hamlet is a play by English playwright William Shakespeare, completed around 1601, and is famous for being one of Shakespeare’s four tragedies. The general outline of the play is the story of the protagonist Hamlet’s revenge against his own uncle, who poisoned his father, the King of Denmark, and took his mother as his second wife. Through the famous lines of the play and the conflicts and feelings of the characters, it can be said that the play teaches readers the importance of reexamining their own lives and deeds.

About the Japanese translation

From its completion to the present day, Hamlet has been translated into many languages in many countries around the world. This is, of course, also true in Japan, where many Japanese translations of Hamlet exist. The oldest Japanese translation is Charles Wagman’s 1874 translation, and the most recent is the 2003 translation by Shoichiro Kawai.

The two translations we will use in our presentation are the 1949 translation of Hamlet by Sanki Ichikawa and Kaichi Matsuura, and the 2003 translation by Shoichiro Kawai, and we will compare the differences between these Japanese translations.

About translators

Briefly, let us describe the translators. Sanki Ichikawa, born in 1886 and died in 1970, was an English scholar and essayist. He was the first president of the Shakespeare Society of Japan in 1930.

Matsuura Kaiichi, an English literature scholar born in 1891 and died in 1967, worked with Ichikawa on the translation of Hamlet during his career as a university professor and translator of other literature.

Shoichiro Kawai, born in 1960, is an English literature scholar and translator. He specializes in Shakespeare, and his grandmother’s great-uncle, Shoyo Tsubouchi, was the first person to translate all of Shakespeare’s plays. So now we will begin comparing the translations.

Comparison of the translations

「生きるべきか〜 *To be or not to be. that is the question*」

This is one of Hamlet’s most famous lines, so well-known that even people who have never

read Hamlet know it. It is as if Hamlet had seen through everything his uncle and Polonius were thinking and was playing the role of a character in the play, which implies to the reader that Hamlet's suspicions are even greater than those of his uncle and Polonius.

The major difference between Ichikawa's and Kawai's translations here is precisely brevity. Ichikawa's translation uses Japanese from about 80 years ago, so there are particles and auxiliary verbs scattered throughout the translation that are not used in modern written and spoken Japanese. Therefore, in this line, which the reader knows from the beginning, and in Hamlet's words that follow, the impression is quite strong that it is a line from the stage. Therefore, the lines give the impression that Hamlet is deliberately acting this way in order to show off to his uncle and Polonius.

Conversely, in Kawai's case, the translation is the one most familiar to modern Japanese, so the reader is first given the impression that "this is Hamlet." Furthermore, compared to Ichikawa's translation, the position of the translation of "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind" is different. Ichikawa places this translation at the end of the sentence following "~the question," whereas Kawai places it immediately after "~the question. This adds more tempo and speed to the dialogue than Ichikawa's translation, making this famous passage stand out even more.

「尼寺へ行け *get thee to a nunnery*」

This, directed from Hamlet to the vizier's daughter Ophelia, is probably the most famous line in Hamlet, along with "To be or not to be. That is the question. This line can be interpreted as the words of Hamlet, who, sensing Ophelia's treachery, cruelly hurts and hates Ophelia, in her words, is about to take her revenge and wants to sever her ugly relationship with herself and the world and let her remain beautiful. The other interpretation is that they are words of hatred directed at Ophelia, who is about to take her revenge on the world and wants Ophelia to break off her ugly relationship with the world and remain beautiful.

In Ichikawa's translation, the use of honorific language gives the reader the impression that he is only showing his dignity as a prince of Denmark and his courtesy to women, but at the same time he is calmly pushing Ophelia away. On the other hand, in Kawai's translation, the lines are in full imperative form, and the text that follows is full of "Huh?" which is used in Japanese to urge the other person to go to the nunnery.

In addition, Hamlet's first person is "Boku" in Ichikawa's translation and "Ore" in Kawai's translation, and Ophelia's father is called "Otosan" in Ichikawa's translation and "Oyaji" in Kawai's translation. This is a very distinct Japanese difference in expression, and it is difficult to explain this difference in impression, since in English-speaking countries these are translated simply as 'I' and 'Father.' Simply put, "Boku" in Japanese gives the other person the impression of being a little more serious, calm, and a little younger than "Ore." On the contrary, "Ore" is more masculine than "Boku," but at the same time more effective in giving the impression of being a bit rough around the edges.

Otosan" and "Oyaji" are both Japanese words that refer to fathers, but they give a similar impression to "Boku" and "Ore," with "Otosan" being normal and polite and "Oyaji" being rough and manly.

O, throw away the worser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half.

Good night: but go not to mine uncle's bed;
Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery,
That aptly is put on.

These are the words that Hamlet utters to the queen in Act III, Scene 4, after stabbing Polonius to death in the queen's chamber and conversing with the ghost of his father. Hamlet accuses Queen Gertrude of being crazy about her son, but she does not care about it, even right after he stabbed Polonius to death, and accuses him of being a madman.

Ichikawa's translation is fairly faithful to the original English text. Here, two contrasting motifs, the devil and the angel, are used as metaphors. Hamlet's admonition that habits, which form the basis of a person's life and control his or her thoughts and actions, can have both positive and negative effects on some people, is a little different from his harsh words to the queen immediately before. In addition, the motif of angels and demons is often used in Japanese manga, anime, novels, etc., to express conflicts more easily. For example, when the protagonist picks up someone's wallet on the street and wonders whether he should deliver it to the police station or keep it for himself. Therefore, even though the story was translated about 80 years ago, it is still easily understood by us today.

On the other hand, Kawai's translation is very concise and does not use the contrast between demons and angels as in the original text and Ichikawa's book translation. Also, Hamlet's admonition to "look back on your habits" is not mentioned in an easy-to-understand manner. Therefore, to the reader's eye, Hamlet seems calm and distant in his admonition to his mother. Also, the fact that she remarried her uncle, who killed her father, shows that she despises even her own mother.

References:

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