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Shakespeare in an American Movie: An American Way of Interpreting British Classics

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I used to dread having to read Shakespeare: for most Japanese students Shakespeare is like a high wall that requires serious efforts to climb over. There is always a huge cultural barrier, to say nothing of a linguistic one, awaiting us when reading Shakespeare. His plays were, after all, written many centuries ago in a different culture in a very different language. But how is it with Americans? They speak the same language, but does it make it any easier for Americans? You just have to watch Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* to know the answer to that question.

It never occurred to me that Americans might have difficulties understanding Shakespeare, but considering that there is a big difference between American and British culture, it may be only natural that many Americans find Shakespeare as foreign as we Japanese do.

In this paper I will try to point out some cultural patterns of Americans in adopting other cultures seen in an American movie in which Shakespeare's works play a crucial role.

Renaissance Man, The Movie

The movie, *Renaissance Man*, is an American movie made in 1994, directed by Penny Marshall and starring Danny Devito. The story begins with a middle aged man named Bill Rago losing his job as an advertising agent. Consequently he has to find a new job, but all he can find is a teaching job at an army base, for which he feels no particular enthusiasm. He has no teaching experience and dreads having to teach eight young soldiers everyone thinks hopelessly dumb.

His students are half African Americans while the other half are Caucasians. All of them are from poor families and have had very little education to

speak of. Bill has a hard time as they not only lack knowledge but also motivation to learn.

By chance, however, they start reading Hamlet and, to Bill's surprise, they somehow become interested in this colossal masterpiece they knew nothing about. Their path is rocky, but thanks to Bill's unorthodox way of teaching, they soon find themselves enjoying learning for the first time in their life. Their self-confidence grows as they keep learning. The most moving scene comes when Donnie Benidez, whom everyone thinks superficial and stupid, recites the famous Agincourt speech from Henry V in front of an Army instructor who thinks learning Shakespeare is a sheer waste of time for soldiers. The end of the movie sees all eight students more mature and self-assured.

Cultural Climate

In the 1980's the weight of discussion on American culture shifted from the traditional European/Anglo-Saxon male-oriented culture to diverse multi-cultural perspective. In the 1990's, the time when this movie was made, more attention was drawn to minorities and ethnocultures, but this was also a tough time for so-called underclass people. As Motohashi (2002, p. 6) points out, the poor, many of whom were African Americans and Latinos, were considered socially undesirable, and under the so-called social purification policy, were driven from public places in big cities. It may not be a coincidence that all the students in this movie are from a socially disadvantaged background.

Shakespeare a la Americana

None of the students have heard of Shakespeare before and have no idea who he is. How do the young soldiers with so little knowledge on Shakespeare and his works relate themselves to this unknown culture? How do they react to their first encounter with Shakespeare?

When Bill explains that Hamlet is a prince of Denmark,

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Who is Hamlet?

Montgomery dismisses Hamlet as ‘a rich kid’. It is likely he has no idea where Denmark is, nor does he care what being a prince means. When they hear Hamlet say, ‘Denmark is a prison’, Haywood insists Denmark is a much better place than the trailer park in Georgia where his family lived. It is extraordinary that they are quite unaffected by Hamlet’s woes and that none of them show any interest in Hamlet as a person. They seem unconcerned that the play takes place in a different time and in a different place from their own.

It is widely accepted that Hamlet deals with the problem of one’s identity (Who am I?) and existence (How should I live?). Hamlet philosophizes about every imaginable subject throughout the play, trying to make sense about the world and the circumstances he is in. When reading Hamlet, therefore, the center of interest usually lies with the man himself; what kind of man Hamlet is, why he is troubled so much, why he can’t decide what to do. We are drawn to his complex personality and psychology. As we read or watch the drama, we try to follow his thoughts and to understand this difficult character. Bill’s students, however, seem to take little interest in those things.

Sex, Incest, and Murder

Bill introduces Hamlet as a story about sex, incest and murder, which immediately draws the attention of the students. When Bill explains that Hamlet’s mother marries his uncle soon after his father’s death, they are intrigued. Miranda Meyers, whose mother ran off with a man, showers Hamlet’s mother with severe criticism. Mel Melvin, who was beaten by his step father, says he has a similar situation at home because his step father married his mother’s sister after leaving his mother. From their remarks the viewers are made aware of the harsh and often ugly reality to which those young Americans are subjected.

It is clear that they are more interested in the plot of the play rather than Hamlet himself. This is an interesting point as it clearly goes against how most people react to the play. Cynthia Greenwood (2008) says the following about Hamlet:

[...] the plot of Hamlet seems to pale next to Hamlet himself, the titan of all Western protagonists. (p. 227)

Unlike Shakespeare’s later tragedies, Hamlet takes us into the mind of one man [...] Hamlet is considered the world’s greatest modern literary masterwork because the central character thinks, questions and ponders his existence in a philosophical fashion. (p. 240)

If the students feel any sympathy for Hamlet, they show little of it in the movie. They are more interested in the plot and feel excited about how ‘sex, incest and murder’ appear in the story, because they are no stranger to those problems.

“Why can’t they speak like us?”

Bill sells his prized trophy at a pawnshop and with that money he takes the students to a theater to see Henry V. Afterwards Benidez says he liked everything about the play but he declares that he didn’t like their ‘stupid accent’ in which the actors spoke their lines. He then asks, “Why can’t they speak like us?” Nobody takes much notice of him, but he liked the play so much that he bought the book and starts reading it all on his own, even without being told to do so. Several days later when he is told by his commander Sergeant Cass to recite some Shakespeare during the military exercise, he surprises everyone by reciting the famous St. Crispin’s speech from Henry V. He did so, however, with his usual nasal New York accent.

Linguist Lynne Murphy (2018, p. 19) points out that many Americans suffer from so-called American Verbal Inferiority Complex. She says in spite of inflated self-esteem Americans generally have in other matters, linguistically, they think people with British accent are more intelligent. British English sounds more educated and upper class to most Americans. If so, the recitation scene carries significant weight in the movie, as it clearly tries to relay the message that some people are not susceptible to this verbal inferiority complex. They may be claiming that they can stand on their own ground when facing the seemingly superior British culture like Shakespeare. After seeing the actual play, Benidez is fully aware that Shakespeare’s plays are performed in British English; still that awareness doesn’t stop him from using his own accent. He never tries to imitate the Shakespearian accent he heard on the stage, and openly says he doesn’t like British accent. Thereby he is making it clear that he has no intention to conform to other people’s rules, includ-

ing Shakespeare, to whose works he took an enormous liking. His recitation in American English might have shocked Shakespeare, but would his speech have impressed everyone around him so much if he had done so in British English?

Let's Beat to Hamlet!

Another moving incident in the movie comes when Hamlet is made into rap music by the students. All the students sing and dance to the rap music, telling the tragic story of Hamlet. It is a significant scene in that it is a good example of what happens when two completely different cultures meet. Those young soldiers successfully adopt Shakespeare and create something new out of it. If Shakespeare represents so-called high sophisticated culture of intellectuals, rap music represents so-called popular sub-culture of socially inferior youngsters. One seems to have nothing in common with the other, but unexpectedly, the 'dumb' students try something nobody would usually dream of doing.

Some Unique Features of an American Way of Adopting a Different Culture

Certain features unique to American way of adaptation of Shakespeare can be observed from various scenes in the movie.

Plot over Protagonist

Their obvious interest in the plot of the play over the famous protagonist Hamlet shows that they are always more interested in themselves and their own affairs than others. They are only interested in Hamlet so long as they can see he has something in common with themselves. They are interested in the plot because there are some elements in the story that they can identify themselves with. They are trying to understand Hamlet through their own experience in life and not by extending their imagination over things that they have never known so far. They take little interest in what they cannot imagine or what they don't know. A man like Hamlet may not be known to them, so they don't bother to stop to think why Hamlet is full of melancholy and grief or to analyze what kind of man Hamlet truly is. As Terry Eagleton (2013) says, "[T]he United States of America is a peculiarly self-involved society" (p. 147).

Innovation over Tradition

Terry Eagleton (2013) also points out the following about Americans:

[...] innovation is what Americans are supremely good at. The British instinct is to fit into an established mould, conform to a given model, whereas the American impulse to break the mould and create a fresh model. [...] Tradition, then, relieves you some of your freedom of choice, which some Americans find objectionable. [...] Americans suspect that to hand over your choice to tradition or convention is to be inauthentic. (p. 155)

In a country where innovation is valued over tradition, there is no need for Americans to look up to the traditional ways of interpreting Shakespeare. They only have to invent new ways to interpret things on their own in any way they like. In the movie Bill tries to give Roosevelt Hobbs, whom he believes to be a promising young man, a better chance to study and eventually hopes to help him climb the social ladder. His good intention ends up sending him to prison instead. The other students get upset over the incident and blame Bill for Hobbs' misfortune. When the angry students are leaving the classroom, refusing to listen to what Bill has to say, he says to them, "Remember. To thine own self be true."

This is part of the long advice Polonius gives to his son Laertes when he is about to leave for Paris. The father is quite fussy about what his son should do and not do in a foreign land and concludes his good advice by these words:

This above all: to thine own self be true
And it must follow, as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Hamlet, 1.3.78-80

It is generally understood to mean that he should be self-reliant, rather than dependent on others judgment when in doubt or in trouble; and so long as he is sincere to himself, he does no wrong to others. It can be noted that this original meaning doesn't sit well with the message Bill tries to convey to his students, who are about to desert him. What Bill wants to say is, no matter what happens, one should not forget to follow one's own heart, which, in light of what happened to Hobbs, may sound like a lame

excuse. Little importance seems to be attached to such a difference in nuance and interpretation.

In the 1970s through 1990s there was a trend also in America to try to understand a literary work in its original cultural background, not in the context of one’s own culture. However, it should be noted again that hardly anyone in the movie shows interest in Shakespeare or the English culture in Shakespeare’s time.

Us Over Them

Motohashi (2002) says culture is not free from power games and awareness of one’s own culture is made by the existence of another which has been excluded by the social/cultural systems of one’s own. To be aware of one’s own culture one has to be aware of cultures different from one’s own, and vice versa. There is always ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and when two different cultures meet, there will be power games, which end up one culture having more impact over the other.

The contrasting cultures in the movie may be described as shown in Table 1. Bill and the students belong to different cultural groups as well as social classes. The students’ initial dislike and distrust of Bill comes from these differences and one theme of the movie is about how these two different cultures overcome their differences and learn to understand each other.

On the surface, it may appear that Bill exercises more influence on his students by teaching them Shakespeare, but actually the students never leave their familiar ground to learn something new. As I said before, they understand Shakespeare only in the framework of their knowledge and experience. Therefore, it is Bill who is unexpectedly influenced by the culture of his students. He gradually moves to their side and in the end fully approves their ways. At the end of the movie there is no apparent cultural gap between Bill and his students that was felt so strongly at the beginning.

Yoshimi (2000, p. 9) compares culture to a battlefield; when different cultures clash, it is more like a battle. When they are finally adapted, it is rarely done so on an equal basis or to an equal extent. And, in this case, it seems that the students have won the final battle.

To quote Eagleton’s words again, “Americans are trained to admire achievement” (2013, p. 133). Thus, they like to win and like success stories, which is perhaps why the authentic European culture represented by Shakespeare and Bill cannot prevail over the less well-known American youth culture.

Optimism over Pessimism

Eagleton (2013) also points out the affirmative spirit that prevails in the US, and says Americans have “the belief that you can change the world by positive thinking” (p. 141). There is overwhelming optimism in this movie, in contrast with the gloomy nature of Hamlet. They are not affected by the sad ending of Hamlet and Ophelia, but they are rather overcome with the sense of achievement that they studied something as difficult as Shakespeare. You can feel there is a strong affirmative feeling that anything is possible if you try.

Success over Failure

Lastly, it should be stressed that this movie is, like so many other American movies, about success. In spite of the initial reluctance Bill teaches successfully and wins the students’ trust and respect. The students also prove themselves to be capable of learning as well as overcoming difficulties.

Hirota Mitsui (2005, p. 51) lists as one of the characteristics of American culture the importance of gaining successful achievements, saying that the self-enhancement American people seek is made possible through successfully accomplishing tasks that lead to positive results. Similarly, L. Monique Pittman (2011) points out by citing Hochschild’s

Table 1. Contrasting Cultures in *Renaissance Man*

The culture Bill represents		The culture his students represent
English culture of the 16 th century	vs.	American culture of the 20 th century
Shakespeare	vs.	Rap
Classical high culture	vs.	Popular sub culture
Elite intellectualism	vs.	Anti-intellectualism

study that in America there is little sympathy for those unable to achieve: “Because success is so central to Americans’ self-image, and they expect as well as hope to achieve, Americans are not gracious about failure” (p. 87).

It is, therefore, imperative for the characters in the movie to enjoy success to keep up their self-esteem, and the success becomes all the more glorious if the task they have to challenge is not easy. In this sense, it can be said the movie uses Shakespeare’s authority to legitimate their hard-earned success.

Conclusion: So Who’s Afraid of Shakespeare?

From the movie *Renaissance Man*, a certain American attitude toward different cultures and values becomes clear. The eight soldiers in the movie are self-oriented people and they think they are the center of the world. A close observation of how events turn in the movie makes it clear that Americans strongly approve of self-oriented people like Bill’s students. While the eight soldiers in the movie may represent just a particular class and their behavior and reaction may not be considered in any way typical of all Americans, their presence in the movie clearly suggests there is a strong undercurrent of admiration in American values for keeping one’s ground when facing a different culture. People who consider themselves the center of the world are inclined to think they are ultimate criterion to measure the world. This self-confidence produces an attitude whereby they follow their own rules when adapting other cultures to their own. To them it does not matter how the particular culture they are going to adapt originated or what other people think about it. What is important is how they can associate themselves with it and how they digest it.

Such an attitude results in a considerable lack of interest in the original culture, but at the same time it gives them freedom to adapt the culture in any way they like, which can be a great asset when adapting aspects of other cultures. However, it can be a problem when trying to understand other people and cultures, as they don’t often see things from the same viewpoint.

As the Shakespearean scholar Yasunari Takada (1998) and many others have pointed out, Shakespeare deals with fundamentally universal human problems, so that it has relevance to our problems today and allows a wide range of interpretation. I am quite sure Shakespeare would approve of any

form of interpretation or adaptation no matter how unexpected it may be, and there is no need to be afraid of Shakespeare.

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Appendix

Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man
Hamlet, 1.3.75-80

This day is call’d the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam’d,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,

Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian',
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispian's day'.
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words-
Harry, the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester-
Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered-
We, few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that shed his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

Henry V, 4.3.40-67

About the author: Sho Kubota is a graduate student at Waseda University, studying Shakespeare. His main interest in literature lies in so-called 'outsiders', and he is particularly interested in the roles foreigners play in Shakespeare and how they are represented in his plays.

