Comparing the Concept of Life and Death of Kiyotsune and Hamlet

清経とハムレットに見る死生観

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Abstract: 筆者は『融合文化研究』第５号の “A Study of Life and Death in Noh Play *Kiyotsune*”[1] の中で、能作家世阿弥元清(1363-1443?) によって描かれた若き平家公達、清経の悲劇的な死を考察した。世阿弥が能『清経』を創作した約２００年後、イギリスの劇作家ウィリアム・シェイクスピア(1564-1616) は、世界で最も有名な悲劇『ハムレット』の中に、同様に繊細で悩み多きデンマークの王子ハムレットを登場させている。この二作品の主人公にはいくつかの類似が見られる。本稿は、清経とハムレットが最終的な死生観に至るまでの道程を比較検討するものである。

Keywords: Zeami, Shakespeare, Noh Play *Kiyotsune*, *Hamlet,* life and death

Hamlet's largest concern is shown in this soliloquy:

> To be, or not to be, that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them.[2]　(III, i, 56-60)

In the meantime, Kiyotsune on the boat ponders:

> As though it could endure.
> Rather than trust to any boat
> Floating like seaweed to and fro,
> A prey to endless sorrow,

Like to a water-fowl
I'll dive into the sea,
And so end my life.[3]

Kiyotsune's distress resembles Hamlet's, in the way he ponders upon on life and death. The two men are both characters drawn from famous tragedies; the Noh play *Kiyotsune* written in Japan by Zeami Motokiyo and *Hamlet* written in England by William Shakespeare. It is worth examining the aspects of their backgrounds, their troubles and their ideas of life and death, since there seem to be some interesting similarities between the characters from the east and the west.

Their Backgrounds

"A serious play with a sad ending, especially one in which the main character dies"[4] is called a tragedy. The Noh play *Kiyotsune* and *Hamlet* can both be regarded as first-rate tragedies. Let us examine their similarities in terms of the backgrounds which led them to such tragic deaths.

Kiyotsune is one of the sons of a very famous aristocrat in the Muromachi period, Taira no Shigemori, while Hamlet is well known as a Prince of Denmark. Hamlet is said by a grave digger to be at the age of 30, though by some critics he is said to be in his 20's.[5] Kiyotsune is also said to be around 30 years old.

Both of the plays had literary sources which bring us some common ideas about the characters. Hamlet is a Prince of Denmark: the son of the former and nephew to the present King, and son to the Queen who married quickly after his father's death. His life seems quite complicated and his personality is often described as "melancholic", or "pessimistic"—words which are also used to describe Kiyotsune's personality.

The original source of *Hamlet* is the story of Amleth in Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae*, which was a simple revenge play printed in 1514.[6] People in Elizabethan times would have had some common ideas about the northern people and it must have helped in some way to imagine the "cold and moist" traits of Hamlet.[7]

Barnardo says in the opening scene, "'Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart." (I. i. 8-9) His speech gives us a foreboding that something will happen in Denmark where the gray sky spreads over the castle of Elsinore.

The same sorts of observations can be made about Kiyotsune. Although Kiyotsune's background is not referred to very much on the stage, the audience in the Muromachi period had general knowledge about Kiyotsune from *Heike Monogatari* [8] and *Genpei Seisuiki*:[9] the image of a young, sensitive, aristocrat of the Heike who threw himself into the sea must have come to their minds immediately.

It seems reasonably safe to state that Shakespeare and Zeami took advantage in picking their original sources to depict Kiyotsune and Hamlet effectively in their plays, and that the audience must have had similar images of Kiyotsune and Hamlet as melancholy and pessimistic characters.

Their Troubles

Kiyotsune and Hamlet were both brought up with no worries, but suddenly their lives turned into troublesome ones. They start to wonder whether they can live through their troubles. They both brood over troubles in this world and wish to sever relations with those calamities. Hamlet says:

> To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause—there's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life.　(III, i, 64-69)

"Mortal coil" is said to be a metaphorical saying for "troublesome affair"[10] or "it includes all the appurtenances, occupations, and experiences of mortal life"[11]. Harold Jenkins suggests the possibility to interpret "long life" itself being regarded as a "calamity".[12] On the other hand, Kiyotsune says, appearing on the stage as a ghost:

> 'Tis said: "The sage is dream-free,"
> Yet for whom is life reality?
> "A mote within the eye
> May cause a man to feel
> The threefold world too small;

But when his mind is free from care,
His couch seems vaster than the world."
Past griefs are truly but illusion
And present sadness but a dream;
Which, like drifting cloud or running water,
Do pass away, leaving no trace.
O poor frail self that clings unto this world![13]

To Kiyotsune, who now flees from the Genji and is surrounded by enemies in the middle of the sea, his life is "calamity" and full of "mortal coil" as well.

Another extract from *Hamlet* should be noted for comparison with Kiyotsune's lines above. Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Ham: O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count
myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I
have bad dreams.
Guild: Which dreams indeed are ambition; for the very substance
of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.
Ham: A dream itself is but a shadow.
Ros: Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a
quality that it is but a shadow's shadow. (II,ii,254-262)

Hamlet's view of the world and the dream appears to be parallel with Kiyotsune's. Both are eager to break off the mortal coils in their lives. However, they still hesitate over complete separation from this world.

The problem that Shakespeare undertook to answer in *Hamlet* is the way a man accepts death when it comes to him. Hamlet says:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn away
And lose the name of action. (III, i, 83-88)

In regard to these lines, Philip Edwards explains that: "Thinking too much about the rights and wrongs of suicide stultifies the impulse to do away with oneself: thinking too much about the rights and wrongs stultifies *all* action including the one he's supposed to be engaged in."[14] Through studying Hamlet's self-reproach, it becomes apparent that Hamlet procrastinates not only because he is a coward, but because he has started looking for the meaning of life and death profoundly. "The habitual turn of his mind is to profound meditation. He reflects upon life, upon death, upon the nature of man, upon the physical composition of the universe."[15]

This makes a relevant contrast with Kiyotsune's entry in his wife's dream as a ghost; he appears on the stage with a flute in his hand. The tune of his flute reverberates plaintively through the theatre; the flute emphasizes Kiyotsune as a profound person who doesn't utter his opinions frankly but speculates upon the matters in silence.

They have different deeds to make a resolution: on the one hand, Kiyotsune faces the situation spiritually; on the other, Hamlet faces it philosophically. By now it should be clear that their attitudes toward the troubles are quite different. But at the very least, it can be said that they have similar wishes to get out from their "mortal coils" and brood over their troubles.

Their Ideas of Life and Death

In my previous paper, "A Study of Life and Death in Noh Play *Kiyotsune*"[16], we saw that it was Kiyotsune's faith in Buddhism which led him to his ideas of life and death. Now we shall examine Hamlet's journey to his ideas of life and death.

In the Queen's closet, Hamlet is very emphatic how godlike the King had been.[17] In his "mind's eye"[18] the deceased King isn't dead but alive just as before. His father King is still and forever a man 'for all in all'.[19] Jenkins summed up these lines by saying that; "it is the accumulation of perfections that assures 'a man'. Hamlet's father, then, may be taken as a man complete in every particular, and so as the sum and pattern of excellence".[20] The outward appearance of the ghost is described by Horatio;

A figure like your father
Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pie,

Appears before them, and with solemn march
Goes slow and stately by them;　(I, ii, 199-202)

Soon after this, Hamlet asks Horatio again if the ghost is clad in full armor:

Ham: Arm'd, say you?
All:　Arm'd, my lord.
Ham: From top to toe?
All:　My Lord, from head to foot.
(I, ii, 226-227)

Hearing how the ghost is dressed, Hamlet realizes that his father is not content with his afterlife. The ghost's majestic armor-clad appearance gives him uneasy feeling that dead men may still be bonded to this mortal world. Do they still have to strive against the calamities of life in the next world? Moreover, the ghost gives Hamlet a detailed depiction of what afterlife looks like.[21] It seems as dreadful as this world that is "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable".[22] His father being such a man of nobility both in life and the afterlife, Hamlet might have got the impression that his father has not yet died. He must have asked himself: the dead body won't let the soul be free? This confuses him because the ghost attests to its suffering after death which has been "the rub"[23] to him.

On the other hand, there is a clear contrast between the King and Polonius. Since Polonius is a sycophantic person, Hamlet doesn't account him to be noble. Hamlet says:

This counselor
Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,
Who was in life a foolish prating knave.
Come, sir, to draw toward and end with you.　(III, iv, 214-218)

Here, Hamlet admits that Polonius's life ended with his death. He is no more than a dead body. Hamlet realizes that the body is only a body, and it immediately loses what it has possessed in this world. Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Ham:　The King is a thing—

Guild: A thing, my lord?
Ham: Of nothing.　Bring me to him.　(IV, ii, 27-29)

Hamlet suggests that "the essential king is no material thing".[24]　Even though his father is a man of noble valor and a model of human perfection, once he left his body, it was the same as Polonius's.　Inferring what Hamlet realizes at this juncture, the body is with us when we are alive, but no matter how we appear or what we have possessed in life, it cannot remain with the dead body.　To summarize, his death means much less than the King's so that in contrast, Hamlet could have an insight into the truth of life and death.

Eleanor Prosser seems convinced that the Graveyard Scene represents the turning point in Hamlet himself.[25]　At the graveyard Hamlet has got some idea, holding a skull of Yorick, the king's jester, in his hand.

Alexander
died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth
to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and
why of that loam whereto he was converted might
they not stop a beer-barrel?
Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw.　(V. i. 201-209)

At this moment he has found the truth of men.　Of course Hamlet's life is not an exception. "Born on the day that the grave-digger began his occupation, Hamlet has lived all his life under death's shadow," Jenkins says "and in the skulls the grave-digger throws up he sees quite simply the common destiny of men.　It is a destiny he appears now to accept."[26]

Notably the same point can be made with Kiyotsune's words:

Once fallen in the pit
The selfsame grievous lot
Awaits all men.[27]

He says that all men are the same when they die, which also Hamlet has discovered at last. An examination of these two extracts from the plays reveals that their ideas are getting closer. Hamlet says:

> There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.
> If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come,
> it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. (V ii, 215-218)

He has reached the answer through his own steps, with the help of reason. Alfred Harbage writes: "Shakespeare obviously had elected to write not for all time but for the moment."[28] All he wanted to trust was his own voice of reason. This was during the Renaissance Period, when there was a transition between medieval times and modern times. [29] He wanted to believe neither former order, nor morality, nor justice, but to set off on a journey to find the truth of men by himself.

Kiyotsune, on the other hand, did not hang around searching for the answer but only had a long meditation on the boat and played the flute and read a poem before throwing himself into the sea. This attitude has a bearing on the society of the Muromachi period in which people relied on the teaching of Buddha in order to relieve their paradox.[30]

Conclusion

It should have become apparent by now that Kiyotsune and Hamlet reach a close consensus on the matter, which is that "we are all the same when we die". Their ideas of life and death reach to the analogy, although their attitudes toward it are quite different. Both of them brood over life and death but Kiyotsune relies on prayers and meditation while Hamlet searches for the truth by experiencing it himself. These differences are not only the matter of their personalities but also have been influenced by the stream of the times; Kiyotsune's distress was social distress in medieval times in Japan, when people had to concede to inconsequent deaths and partings dictated by wars. His restrained passion embraced the *Jodo* sect[31] in Buddhism.

Meanwhile Hamlet's quest for the truth has much bearing on social development in the Renaissance when people started asking themselves, "What is man"? [32] Consequently, Hamlet finally realizes that "the readiness is all"[33] while Kiyotsune

gains an insight into the truth: "Once fallen in the pit, the selfsame grievous lot awaits all men".

Great playwrights in the east and the west, Zeami and Shakespeare, happened to depict similar characters in their tragedies, Kiyotsune and Hamlet. Their approach to Death is different; however, we may conclude that this accord must lead us into a universal answer to the existence of human beings. This will also inspire the possibilities of our mutual understanding, which must transcend differences between the east and the west.

Notes

[1] Mika Hatae, "A Study of Life and Death in Noh Play *Kiyotsune*", *The Bulletin of the International Society for Harmony & Combination of Cultures Vol.5,* International Society for Harmony & Combination of Cultures, 2005, pp.66-79

[2] William Shakespeare, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* Thomson Learning, 1982

[3] Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, "Kiyotsune", *Japanese Noh Drama: Ten Plays Selected and Translated from the Japanese*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1955, p.71「なほ置き顔に浮草の。波に誘はれ船に漂ひて何時までか。憂き目を水鳥の沈み果てんと思ひ切り」(Kanze Sakon, "Kiyotsune", *Kanzeryu Yokyoku Hyakuban-shu,* Hinoki Shoten, 2001, p.1100)

[4] *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 6th edition,* Oxford University Press, 2000, p.1379

[5] Yasunari Takahashi and Shoichiro Kawai, ed., The Taishukan Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Taishukan-shoten, 2001, p.347

[6] William Shakespeare, Ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,* The University of Cambridge, 1985, p.1

[7] Lily Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Cambridge University Press, 1961, p.111 "He is a young prince of Denmark, and that Shakespeare accepted the traditional characteristics of the northern peoples and of the Danes especially seems to be indicated in Hamlet's speech concerning the drunkenness of his people. In the northern nations the cold and moist humours must prevail, either phlegm or blood."

[8] *Heike Monogatari*: "(The Tale of Heike) The most important of the Kamakura(1185-1333) and Muromachi(1333-1568)period prose tales known as GUNKI MONOGATARI, or 'war tales'." (*Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan, vol,3*, Kodansha, 1983, p.124)

[9] *GenpeiSeisui-ki*: "(The Rise and Fall of the Genji and Heike). A military chronicle of unknown authorship dating from the Kamakura period" (*Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan,*

vol,3, p.16)

[10] William Shakespeare, ed. Peter Alexander, *Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* Harper Collins Publishers, 1994, p.1407

[11] ibid., Jenkins, p.279

[12] ibid., Jenkins, p.279

[13] ibid., Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, p.66

「聖人に夢なし。誰あつて現と見る。眼裏に塵あつて三界窄く。心頭無事にして一床寛し。げにや憂しと見し世も夢。つらしと思ふも幻乃。何れ跡ある雲水の。行くも歸るも閻浮の故郷に。辿る心の。はかなさよ」（Kanze Sakon, pp.1094-1095）

[14] ibid., Edwards, p.147

[15] ibid., Hackett, p.195 (Correspondence of John Quincy Adams)

[16] ibid., Hatae, pp.72-77

[17] ibid., Jenkins, (III, iv, 55-62)

[18] ibid., Jenkins, (I, ii, 185)

[19] ibid., Jenkins, (I, ii, 187)

[20] ibid., Jenkins, p.439

[21] ibid., Jenkins, (I, v, 9-20)

[22] ibid., Jenkins, (I, ii, 133)

[23] ibid., Jenkins, (III, i, 65)

[24] ibid., Jenkins, pp.338-339

[25] Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet & Revenge,* Stanford University Press, 1967, p.219

[26] ibid., Jenkins, p.157

[27] ibid., Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, p.72

「言ふならく。奈落も同じ泡沫の。あはれは誰も。變らざりけり」（Kanze Sakon, p.1102）

[28] Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience,* Columbia University Press, 1961, p.11

[29] William Shakespeare, ed. Yasunari Takahashi, Shoichiro Kawai, The Taishukan Shakespeare: *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Taishukan, 2001, pp.30-38

[30] ibid., Hatae, pp.74-75

[31] *Jodo* sect: "The school of Pure Land Buddhism founded by Honen(1133-1212), known for its advocacy of Nembutsu, the practiceofchanting the phrase *Namu Amida Butsu*(I take my refuge in Amida Buddha), for the purpose of *ojo,* rebirth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land in the West." (*Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, *vol.4*, p67)　ibid., Hatae, see p.74

[32] ibid., Campbell, p.70 "The fundamental difference in the treatment of the passions in the Renaissance was a difference inherited from the conflicting attitudes of Stoics and Peripatetics in regard to the passions.　The Stoics considered all passions as evil in themselves. The Peripatetics taught that passions were evil if they were not governed by reason."

[33] ibid., Jenkins, (V, ii, 218)