

Fleeting Character: Shakespeare v. Classical Japanese Poems

Shakespeare's verse is different from other poets in a number of ways, but one of the foremost is how he crafts his dramatic verse with such emphasis on cognition, not only cognition and awareness, (other poets like Wordsworth and Donne and Whitman and many more reveal interiority), but on the movements of Reason in the mind. By Reason I mean that mode which pinpoints dilemmas, analyses them, and furnishes potential responses, by giving reasons for various thought positions. Shakespeare's characters are full of meandering soliloquies, often backtracking and rejecting the positions they have recently arrived at. His writing is chock full of cognition, and strong emotional and dramatic motivation at the same time. And the two powers are completely entangled one with another. These reasons captured in verse are not like the pedagogies of the Proverbs of the Bible, nor the couplets of Pope. When a character's thoughts suddenly ripen and put forth fruit of universal value for meditation or medication, it is like a happy accident. The spoken meditations are normally too subjective to be universal. After all, who goes through those same trials which Hamlet, Othello, and Iago, do? The plays are almost a laboratory of very finely drawn characters in situations which test them unpredictably, so that we do not know what consequences fall from Lear, or the romance of Romeo and Juliet, for instance.

This subjectivity is very modern because Shakespeare creates the opportunity to identify with his characters instead of managing a teaching situation. His lessons lie in interpretation. Often the danger, the dramatic catalyst, of his plays arises from problems in cogitation in the first place. Both nobility and foolishness, virtue and vice, are consequences of the use and misuse of the mind in his plays. In this way, Shakespeare creates a vision of the mind as a skein which catches the glory and wretchedness of life itself, that dreamlike creative force; that which a worthy man tends to be upheld by, can also easily be a net catching up his flames. It does seem as though Shakespeare believes in a larger world of Truth which his characters are part of.

These qualities are on display in the Sonnets. The first 17 sonnets hammer away with insistence at one thesis: that the beloved youth must procreate. This idea, and the distorted reason, amounting to an obsession, which pursues it, are so subjective and odd, that they pose a significant challenge for a poet. How are 17 sonnets in a row meant to appear which only care for,

fairest creatures...increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,

Shakespeare makes the youth almost a savior, or chosen one, of the world in lines like:

Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

a couplet in which he calls the non-procreating youth a glutton. And,

Ah, if thou issueless shalt hap to die,
The world will wail thee like a makeless wife;
The world will be thy widow, and still weep
That thou no form of thee hast left behind,

and,

[the world has] carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby
Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.

All these arguments, chiding and complaining, urging and praising, are ways that Shakespeare manifests his love for the youth. While he desires his beloved to have some form of eternity through making children, there is a parallel endeavor through the act of writing. Shakespeare recreates a seal of his own beauty, beginning by sowing his seed in love of the youth, 154 times over through this series of sonnets. The repetition of this first argument solidifies his voice and being, and makes a stable basis for the series. This is not to say that the Shakespeare is entirely stable. This voice may be sometimes desperate and pleading, hyperbolic, ridiculous, lonely, tormented, and one-sided in his love pursuit. But it is the author, and he will fill his book with reiterations and rhetorical devices and all manner of play, to his heart's content.

The form of the sonnet enables the solidity – which is a manner of permanence – of the book. The poems are a regular sequence; the rhythm and rhyme is regular; and there is not very much enjambment meaning most lines are end-stopped in addition to their rhyming cap. This solidity of form is in harmony with rational solidity, however flawed it may be. Traditionally, the sonnet form is a manner of talking and coming to conclusions. And in hundreds of asseverative lines, maintained to be true, rational thoughts, a bulky solidity accrues inviting knowledge of the mental character of the author. This asseveration happens in a highly cognitive poem, or a book of philosophy or legal judgment, not in a long narrative poem or poetic song.

As Shakespeare hammers away at the same point in his first 17 sonnets to create an enduring impression, classical Japanese poetry recycles themes to maximum effect. Short Japanese poems can employ common expressions, essentially epithets, that occupy even about half the poem. Quotation in the West, as in Pound's Cantos or Marianne Moore, even treated very democratically, is incorporated as part of the artist's own statement; we can't easily surrender to a universal poem. But in Japan there were narrow themes, very fixed treatments of those themes, and the epithets for common objects mentioned above. (An example of epithet given by Kenneth Rexroth, is “tiring to the feet” instead of “mountain”.) In addition to universal epithets, haiku poetry relied on dictionaries of objects appropriate for a haiku as necessary clues of its seasonal environment. A great poet could flourish in these constraints, his or her work often times serving as a commentary on previous versions, as a virtuoso might take up a jazz standard.

This Japanese regularity was different than what we find in the Sonnets in two senses. First, Shakespeare was passionately subjective to an extreme not found in the Japanese verse I have read, in which a poet's highest mourning and romantic longing would be subjugated almost entirely to a universal form. This is not to say that one art has more emotion than the other, but that Shakespeare is more subjective in the emotion he does display. In Japanese poetry, the creative note can be crystal clear; one can still perceive that there is a soul creating, but there is much more mist and mystery around the individual, even when we learn about them. Part of this I suppose is due to brevity. But the larger part is the anonymity of the emotions remains wonderfully elusive. Their poets do not extemporize like a Romeo but instead coo like doves. So Japanese poetry is both less subjective, and less rooted in Reason than the poetry of Shakespeare. Therefore, the thought, spirit, being, of the poetry, rooted in genre and culture, is more ephemeral and makes fewer claims. Shakespeare both invites and rewards rational investigation, and is a comrade of the mind to many. Classical Japanese poems must be encountered wordlessly, and will fly away; unless perchance one becomes one in being with some part of them finding the eternity of their own.