

Kurosawa's *Hamlet*?

KAORI ASHIZU

In recent years it has suddenly been taken for granted that *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Warui Yatsu Hodo Yoku Nemuru*, 1960) should be included with *Kumonosujô* and *Ran* as one of the films which Akira Kurosawa, as Robert Hapgood puts it, “based on Shakespeare” (234). However, although several critics have now discussed parallels, echoes and inversions of *Hamlet*, none has offered any sufficiently coherent, detailed account of the film in its own terms, and the existing accounts contain serious errors and inconsistencies. My own intention is not to quarrel with critics to whom I am in other ways indebted, but to direct attention to a curious and critically alarming situation.

I

For example, we cannot profitably compare this film with *Hamlet*, or compare Nishi—Kurosawa’s “Hamlet,” superbly played by Toshirô Mifune—with Shakespeare’s prince, unless we understand Nishi’s attitude to his revenge in two crucial scenes. Yet here even Donald Richie is confused and contradictory. Richie first observes of the earlier scene that Nishi’s love for his wife makes him abandon his revenge: “she, too, is responsible since Mifune, in love, finally decides to give up revenge for her sake, and in token of this, brings her a

bouquet . . .” (142).¹ Three pages later, he comments on the same scene that Nishi gives up his plan to kill those responsible for his father’s death, but determines to send them to jail instead:

The same things may happen (Mori exposed, the triumph of justice) but the manner, the *how* will be different. Mifune will be acting as an efficient, uninvolved agent. He no longer wants to see them dead. He wants to see them in jail. (145)

These claims are inconsistent: if Nishi is still determined to expose these men and have them sent to jail, he has not abandoned his plan of revenge. Nor is it easy to see how Nishi’s wife would find this course of action—undertaken, Richie says, “for her sake”—much less painful, since her father’s crimes are such that he would probably spend the rest of his life in prison. Richie’s account becomes still more contradictory in discussing the final scene between Nishi and his wife:

Mifune’s father was bad, Mifune’s wife’s father is bad, Mifune himself is bad. But he, himself, will somehow put a stop to this chain of evil. He will content himself merely with exposure. He will not kill. (145)

Now Richie himself seems unable to decide whether Nishi makes this decision in the earlier scene or the later scene. But then these passages are not only internally inconsistent, they are all incorrect: Nishi never gives up revenge for his wife’s sake at any stage of the film, nor does he plan to kill anybody. He has spent five years trying to collect evidence—not to kill but to expose his enemies.

Until 1991, when Stephen Prince published *The Warrior’s Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*, Richie’s book was the only full-length study of Kurosawa written in English. Although Prince and other recent critics have tended to attack that “humanism” which

Richie so admires, Richie's study has remained the most authoritative and influential because he knows so much about Japan and its culture, is personally acquainted with Kurosawa and includes many of the director's comments. Unfortunately, other Western studies have often trusted Richie without looking more closely at the film itself. So, for example, James Goodwin's *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (1994) recycles Richie's mistaken readings of the two scenes I mentioned, while adding some new errors:

Nishi recognizes that obsessive vengeance has made him as merciless as the company bosses, and he relents. At the point where he is ready to abandon his scheme and to accept his wife with love, the momentum of events sweeps forward and Nishi [played by Mifune] is compelled to kidnap a business administrator In the end, however, he falls victim to company intrigue and to his own duplicity. (168)

As we shall see later, every sentence in this passage contains an error: but then, I do not know any Western account of these scenes which gets the relevant details right.

Richie is also mistaken in his commentary on the earlier scene in which Assistant Chief Wada is about to commit suicide to save his superiors and suddenly encounters Nishi:

We watch Fujiwara [Wada] climb to the top of a volcano, prepare to throw himself in, when out of the fog and steam (just like the ghost of Hamlet's father) steps Mifune and his first question is an uncomprehending: "But, don't you want revenge?" (144)

In fact, Nishi only asks Wada this question in a much later scene. He certainly does not ask it here, either in the export version of the film or in the longer, uncut Japanese version, or indeed in the published film script.² Nonetheless, Prince also chooses to trust Richie rather

than the film, and writes:

In his determination to embrace evil, Nishi emerges as one of the darkest of Kurosawa's heroes. The revelation of his identity as an avenger is visualized as an emergence from hell. Nishi stands on the rim of a volcano, clothed in mist and vapor, a dealer in death. Wada has come here to commit suicide. Nishi initially prevents him from jumping in by asking him if he doesn't want revenge. (183)

That too is, quite simply, wrong, and Prince's reference to the "revelation" of Nishi's "identity as an avenger" is especially misleading. At this point in the film there is no indication—let alone "revelation"—that Nishi is an "avenger."³

II

Kurosawa's film about corruption in contemporary Japan begins five years after Nishi (Hamlet) discovered that his father was murdered on the orders of Iwabuchi (Claudius), the president of a large and powerful housing corporation. But this Hamlet does not delay, and has been ruthlessly pursuing his revenge. To gain the final evidence he needs he has married Yoshiko, a lame and fragile Ophelia-figure who is here the daughter of the Claudius-figure, not of Moriyama, his Polonius-like aide. So, Nishi-Hamlet has become Claudius's son-in-law, rather than his stepson. Tatsuo, Yoshiko's brother, is a sympathetic playboy who, as the complicated plot unfolds, threatens (like Shakespeare's Laertes) to kill both "Hamlet" and "Claudius." When the film starts Nishi's revenge is almost complete, but there is no implication throughout the extraordinarily sustained first sequence that he is involved with the disaster afflicting the corporation. Unlike Shakespeare's voluble hero, Nishi is a quiet, impassive and bespectacled

salaryman. He doesn't talk, he acts. But then, after so cold-bloodedly marrying a woman he does not love and who very much loves him, Kurosawa's hero falls in love with his wife and for the first time begins to "waver" in his previously all-consuming determination to take revenge. However, as I have emphasized, Nishi persists and finally gains the clinching evidence he needs immediately after the very moving scene in which he takes Yoshiko into his confidence. But then Iwabuchi tricks Yoshiko into betraying Nishi's whereabouts, and has him killed. Itakura—Nishi's Horatio-like confidant—and Yoshiko are powerless to act without the evidence, and Yoshiko goes mad. The devastating final sequence shows Iwabuchi-Claudius, who is usually a bully, bowing obsequiously into the telephone as he assures a very highly placed politician that all is now well, and that he will take a discreet holiday before pursuing his new career as a minister. The phone call to Mr. Big finishes with Iwabuchi's wishing him "good night" by mistake, and correcting this to "Goodbye, sir." The title reappears; the bad *still* sleep well.

Yet this summary is misleading, precisely because it makes the film's relation to *Hamlet* seem so obvious. Actually the film is more than half over before we are in a position to make that association. For this reason any presumption that this is a "version of *Hamlet*" distorts our experience of the film. The effectiveness of Kurosawa's narrative process owes much to the detective film and "film noir"; it involves us by raising different questions—especially about Nishi, who he is, why he married, and so on—while withholding answers. Hence the extremely important contrast between the situation of an audience watching Kurosawa's film without any preconceptions and the situation of, say, those members of the 6th World Congress of Shakespeare in Los Angeles in 1996 who watched the film in a program of Shake-

spearean adaptations.

The first, unprimed audience—unprimed in that it does not know what to expect—would be enthralled by the blackly funny spectacle of a grand company wedding going wrong. Police arrive to arrest a company official; journalists follow, having been tipped off that there may be some juicy scandal; an official wedding cake is followed by a mysterious huge cake shaped like a building with a flower sticking out of a seventh floor window. Throughout the wedding sequence the audience's information comes in two comically different ways: from the formally complementary speeches in the wedding, and from the cynical but more realistic pressmen who are watching the wedding as outsiders and commenting to each other (like a surrogate audience) on what is taking place. One such comment is the rumor that Nishi has only married his boss's daughter as a "stepping-stone."

But a "primed" audience, like that in Los Angeles, would have only to know that this is a "version of *Hamlet*" and that Nishi is played by Mifune, a great actor, to discount any idea that "Hamlet" is a careerist. Instead, they would guess—long before they should—that this sabotaged wedding may be the equivalent of the "Mousetrap." Much later, Nishi explains that he had ordered the mysterious wedding cake to watch the responses of those who were guilty of his father's death; but there is no hint of this during the wedding scene. When the cake arrives Nishi seems to show no interest, whereas Hamlet, by contrast, keeps interrupting his mousetrap scene with aggressive comments. Here, too, any premature idea that Nishi is Hamlet would work against the effects Kurosawa's narrative process works to achieve.

Similarly, in the later volcano scene the narrative process works to make us ever more curious about Nishi, without resolving our curiosity. We had earlier seen Miura, one of Iwabuchi's aides, kill himself to

secure the safety of his superiors. Now we see the company's next scapegoat, Chief Assistant Wada, climbing to the volcano rim, where he suddenly finds Nishi towering over him. Nishi slaps Wada's cheek, and when the terrified Wada apologizes, "I'm sorry. I'll do it now," Nishi sneers:

They've trained you well. How pathetic! Sacrificing yourself to oblige Moriyama and Shirai. Your loyal superiors are celebrating their success at this very moment. You are in their way . . . a nuisance. So they kill you to save their skins. Even cattle and pigs are killed more humanely than that.⁴

When the confused Wada says, "I don't understand. Aren't you Nishi, the—," Nishi completes his sentence: "Yes, I'm Iwabuchi's son-in-law." Then, grabbing Wada's neck and dragging him toward the rim of the volcano, Nishi asks, "So you want to die?" After a shot of Wada's face distorted with fear, the camera pans down the volcano as if anticipating Wada's own fatal fall. Another montage of newspaper headlines follows, reporting Wada's suicide. Kurosawa's editing is ingenious, for we cannot but suppose that Nishi has thrust Wada down to death. As a result we may discard the nascent doubt raised by Wada that Nishi may not be loyal to Iwabuchi. We still cannot tell from what has happened here whether Nishi is for or against Iwabuchi, and this calculated ambiguity is given a further twist when the next scene shows Wada still alive and asking Itakura the questions we want to have answered: "What sort of man is Mr. Nishi? I mean, considering Mr. Nishi's connections with Mr. Iwabuchi, why did he save me? What is he going to do with me? Please tell me! What sort of man is he?" Once again, the effects of these narrative complications will be lost if the primed audience has already imported extraneous answers to these questions.

Nishi's mysteriousness is somewhat reduced in the tragicomic sequence when Nishi drives Wada, who is supposed to be dead, to his own grand funeral. At first, deeply impressed by the ceremony and the sight of his wife and daughter mourning, Wada cries, "You should have let me die. I can't live after this funeral." Nishi then plays a tape which he had stealthily recorded in a bar the preceding night, where Shirai and Moriyama cynically talked about the relief they felt after Wada's suicide, and the different kind of relief "a young girl" will provide. While we (and Wada) hear their recorded voices and laughter, the camera shows Moriyama and Shirai piously bowing to Wada's altar and solemnly greeting his wife and daughter. The priests' grave chanting competes with the vivacious night-club music from the tape, and completes this grotesque polyphony of sight and sounds—a clashing counterpoint of the public and private faces of Shirai and Moriyama, and the most gloomy and the most flippant music.⁵ Not surprisingly, poor Wada finds all of this shattering, and Nishi now asks him, "Do you still want to die? Can you forgive them? Don't you want revenge? Join me!"

This is the first time in the film that we hear the word "revenge." Since Nishi's "Join me" shows that he too wants revenge, we can now guess that he is responsible for the mysterious events afflicting the corporation; but we are still kept in the dark about Nishi's motive for revenge. This only becomes clear after Nishi and Wada, his new ally, contrive the next assault—in another superbly sustained set piece which shows the hitherto repellent Shirai being framed, and falling apart. Nishi shows Shirai a photograph of a smashed corpse and explains that he is the illegitimate son of Furuya, the dead man in the photograph, who committed suicide by jumping from the window of the room of the building they are in; Nishi has spent the last five years

preparing to avenge his father's death, and has married Yoshiko to gain access to the information he needs. It is only at this moment—about 68 minutes into the film, not earlier—that we can make the connection with *Hamlet*.

Once we do make that connection, earlier ambiguities and puzzles quickly fall into place. So, for example, the link between the wedding debacle and Hamlet's "Mousetrap" becomes clear when Nishi tells Shirai how he had betrayed his own guilt: "I was the one who had that wedding cake brought in. You were panic-stricken. . . ." Indeed, this process of making retrospective sense is aided by the next scene, in which Moriyama-Polonius offers Iwabuchi his own shrewd interpretation of past events: "When you come to think of it, there is a link in everything that's happened. First that wedding cake, then the postcard in the deposit box. The room Shirai was locked up in when he went mad. They are all linked to Furuya. It must have been planted by someone close to Furuya. It's revenge." And of course this same scene quickens our sense of suspense, since the "bad" are beginning to make their own retrospective sense of past events at the very time when the tormented Nishi begins to "waver."

From this moment on we are also alert to all the rapidly multiplying parallels and contrasts with Shakespeare's play. So, for example, when Nishi forces Shirai to drink "poisoned whisky," the echo of the final scene of *Hamlet* is obvious enough. In fact the whisky is not poisoned, but this is still Nishi's lowest point in terms of brutality since the effect of his calculated psychological torture is to send Shirai insane.⁶ Part of that torture involved having Wada appear as a rather unwilling "ghost" and here, as elsewhere, the effect of these *Hamlet* echoes or variations is often exuberantly or mordantly witty, as when Iwabuchi-Claudius reproaches Nishi-Hamlet for showing excessive

grief by still wearing a mourning band for the (supposedly) dead Wada. In Shakespeare's play *Laertes* worries that Hamlet may make love to Ophelia; Tatsuo, Kurosawa's *Laertes*, worries that Nishi and Yoshiko are sleeping apart and not making love. Some echoes are more unequivocally serious, but still wittily unexpected, variations, like the eavesdropping scenes or Yoshiko's final collapse into madness when (in another reversal or inversion of Shakespeare's play) her father kills "Hamlet." Other echoes and contrasts challenge the prevailing Japanese view of Hamlet himself, as we shall see when comparing Nishi with Shakespeare's prince and Kurosawa's Japan with Shakespeare's Denmark.

III

"I wanted to make a movie of some social significance," Kurosawa said of this film (Richie, 140). He also recalled, more regretfully:

But even while we were making it, I knew it wasn't working out as I had planned and that this was because I was simply not telling and showing enough. Like the final scene with Mori on the telephone. This is the last of several calls, all apparently to the same person, someone very high in the Japanese government. That suggests, but it is not explicit enough. An even worse man is at the other end of that telephone line but in Japan if you go any further than that you are bound to run into serious trouble. This came as a big surprise to me, and maybe the picture would have been better if I had been braver. At any rate, it was too bad I didn't go further. Maybe I could have in a big country like America. Japan, however, cannot be this free and this makes me sad. (Richie, 143)

What Kurosawa is concerned with here is the fact that Japanese censorship prevented him from naming or doing more than implying the

identity of Mr. Big, that person on the phone. And yet—quite apart from the likelihood that many of Kurosawa's contemporaries would have guessed that his target was Prime Minister Kishi and his government—this constraint may have strengthened the film. As Hisashi Inoue, an experienced writer and dramatist, observed in an interview with Kurosawa, it is the “system itself” that Iwabuchi is talking to on the phone (Kurosawa, *Zenshû*, Vol. 6, 353). If Kishi, rather than the “system,” had appeared to be the film's target, it would now seem more of a period piece. Although Kurosawa wanted to be more explicit and topical, those constraints that enraged him actually helped to insure that the film has not lost its relevance decades later, in a Japan where the bribes and graft that are reported in the newspaper and on TV almost every day show that the “system” is no thing of the past.⁷

Richie quotes Kurosawa's comments to support his own view that, so far as its “social significance” is concerned, *The Bad Sleep Well* is a “failure.” This is critically improper and misleading, since Richie's own sense of dissatisfaction is quite different: in his view, “Kurosawa moves away from the social to the individual and this changes the focus of the film” (143). This damaging view is recycled by Prince when he complains about the way the film “tends to psychologize the social issue” and center “on personalities and character” :

As Richie points out, however, when the wedding cake arrives in the reception hall, the focus of the film begins to shift away from the institutional and structural coordinates defined by the opening sequence. (180)

It is interesting to note the contrast between Richie and Prince's ways of entering the complaint about the film's alleged deviation from the “social” to the “individual.” Because Richie so admires Kurosawa's

“humanistic” preoccupation with individual action, he eventually qualifies his own criticism of this film’s alleged “social failure”: “Yet, in this film more than in any of the others, his richly detailed and rigorously ambiguous presentation of the individual caught up in social action is so pregnant with philosophical meaning that the picture is by no means ruined by this social failure” (143). In sharp contrast, Prince’s position is so determinedly anti-humanistic that he thinks the “failure” in this film illustrates the more comprehensive failure of “humanism.” As Prince declares in his first chapter, the “central question” of his book is what “happens to a political cinema that is not always explicit about its intentions and roles and that refuses to look closely at its own ideological nature” (31). Prince’s own preferences appear in his admiring references to Ôshima, Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard, but to expect Kurosawa to be explicitly political in their ways seems arbitrarily prescriptive. As Marc Schilling observed in a perceptive review: “Prince shows us only the Kurosawa who fits his thesis, the Kurosawa he would squeeze into his ideological mold” (489).

As is probably clear already, my own sympathies would incline towards Richie’s “humanism” in this political or ideological opposition. But I am still more inclined to oppose the terms of this kind of coercive opposition. This general argument about “humanism” and “anti-humanism” may have its own importance and has been especially conspicuous in recent criticism of Kurosawa.⁸ But my immediate critical concern is to take issue with what both Richie and Prince agree on, in claiming that the film loses its grip on the “social” and “political” concerns once it starts concentrating on the “individual” and “psychological” drama. I do not think it does. On the contrary, in all the scenes involving “individuals” the film goes on exploring, or dissecting, the nature of the corrupt “system”—showing how it works,

and why it has a continuing hold in Japanese society. Far from being some kind of distraction or deflection, these scenes are deeply and intricately concerned with what empowers this kind of “system.”

This inward, vivisectionist probing is all the more necessary because there is a familiar paradox in the public-private opposition. It is or should be obvious that no institution or “system” or society can exist without the individuals who compose it; we might even say that Nishi’s problems, and inner conflict, begin when he is no longer able to think of the “system” in Prince’s abstractly academic and theoretical way, and has to confront those individuals who—like his own father, or Wada and even, more indirectly, his wife—help the “system” to function. No less obviously, the “system” could never function, let alone survive, if the individuals all behaved like individuals, following their own inclinations and emotions, or their personal sense of justice and those principles that really make people individual. The functioning of the system requires that “private” individuals not only obey, but internalize, “public” behavioral codes prescribing how they must speak, act, and feel.

The most extreme instance of this in Kurosawa’s film may seem unimaginable in Western contexts, but is all too familiar in Japan: Wada, Miura, and Nishi’s father were all prepared to commit suicide, making themselves “scapegoats” to protect their “superiors.” In such cases group loyalty supplants not only the individual’s basic wish to survive but also any more “individual” sense of what is right or wrong; such loyalty is thought of as “good”—the right way to behave—even when, as in this case, the corporate and political superiors are corrupt and evil. Hence that brief but very telling scene in which Miura is released, rearrested, and immediately throws himself in front of a car when the company lawyer tells him that the president has

complete trust in Miura's sense of what is required ("right")—"yoroshiku" in Japanese. Every Japanese would know what this means in such a context, and in the film a journalist points out, referring to the word "yoroshiku," "Wasn't that as good as pointing a gun at him? It was murder, wasn't it?"

Sharing the same systemic code, the corrupt and corrupted can instantly guess what this use of "yoroshiku" requires. The same word is used when the president of Dairyû company, also involved with the corruption, asks Iwabuchi to do whatever should be done with the rebellious and threatening Shirai. Another powerful instance occurs at the very end of the film, where Iwabuchi is talking to Mr. Big on the phone: as he speaks of his immediate resignation and hints at his ministerial ambitions, Iwabuchi bows and uses the word "yoroshiku" in the most deferential form. The etymology of this word derives from the adjective "yoroshi," meaning what is *subjectively* regarded as "good." However, the social or systemic sense of "yoroshiku" works to pervert such a private sense of what is "good." A character like Wada has internalized these systemic codes and institutional expectations to the point where—as Itakura says in a significant speech which the English subtitled version no less significantly ignores—Wada is not a "man" but "a peculiar creature called an official, which is molded into an institutional frame." Here Kurosawa is significantly extending, and deepening, the diagnostic insights in his earlier film, *Ikiru* (1952): the psychology of the bureaucrat overlaps alarmingly with that of the "innocently" reluctant but obedient concentration camp guard.

We see Nishi himself moving from righteous anger to a more reflective, disturbed sympathy when Wada begs him to spare Shirai, who "has a family, too":

Don't be soft! Anyway, who are you to spare him? You were one of them! [Pause . . .] And so was my father. You got a tiny share of the dirty money. So you were made the scapegoats. You were forced to die. So that Iwabuchi and his lot would sleep peacefully. I can't forgive them. I can't hate them enough!

This speech shows Nishi recognizing one way the system works: when an Iwabuchi tames his aides, like Shirai and Wada or Nishi's own father, with relatively small financial rewards, he is also making them "scapegoats" to be exploited in an emergency. But venality is not a sufficient explanation; ultimately, this systemic strategy can only work if the individual has internalized the systemic behavioral codes. Hence Wada's pathetic outcry: "I'm suffering, too. Sometimes I don't know who I am, whether I'm alive or dead. You have a purpose in life, but I" When Nishi asks him if he has none, Wada replies, "I don't know. I'd like to see my wife and daughter again." Wada's "individual" identity, which should be articulated through his sense of what is right or wrong, has been supplanted by the institutional codes; he no longer knows who or what he is, outside the system. But then, do we think better or worse of Shirai when he refuses to sacrifice himself, once the system is hurting rather than rewarding him? And how do we respond on seeing Moriyama's initial horror turn to acquiescence, when Iwabuchi concludes that Shirai must be murdered?

Kurosawa's concern with the inward or psychological dynamics of the "system" is no less apparent in the "romantic" scenes, which are few and brief but very telling. This is most effectively illustrated by the way Kurosawa organizes the scene where Wada brings Yoshiko to Nishi's air-raid shelter hideout. As the lovers withdraw to talk frankly, for the first and last time, Itakura angrily accuses Wada of bringing Yoshiko to work on Nishi and "soften him up"; Wada insists that he

just felt “so sorry for Mr. and Mrs. Nishi.” At this point, the audience must choose which to believe, and those who find Wada decent and sympathetic are likely to believe him; after all, Wada could just have run away. The scene then cuts back to the lovers, as Yoshiko says, “I’ve heard everything from Mr. Wada. I’m so happy.” The lovers embrace and—at last—kiss. But then, even though she now knows her father killed Nishi’s father, Yoshiko still cannot but ask, “Would you forgive him if I asked you to?” In this conventionally melodramatic situation the avenging hero would often say “yes,” forgetting his hatred and choosing happiness with the woman he loves. Here Kurosawa’s film might be compared with Marlon Brando’s interesting Western, *One-eyed Jacks*, made in the same year. Brando (as director and protagonist) offers his audience the satisfaction of having their cake and eating it too: after falling in love with the villain’s daughter Brando renounces revenge but then, as things gratifyingly turn out, has to kill the villain anyway. Kurosawa’s film is more abrasive and challenging: at first Nishi does not reply but begins to move away from Yoshiko, whereupon she withdraws her request, “No. Mr. Wada told me to ask you that.” This is very shocking since it forces us to realize how Wada is, as Itakura suspected, “the peculiar creature called an official.” But Kurosawa then challenges his audience with yet another twist.

Yoshiko goes on to say, “When I think of your father, I can’t blame you for hating mine. But I can’t hate my father. Tell me what to do.” Before we hear Nishi’s answer to this deeply troubled question, Kurosawa interrupts their conversation—and departs from his published script—by cutting to Wada, whose look of anguish and agonizing self-disgust suggests that he has heard Yoshiko tell Nishi what he had told her to say. Moriyama (who has been locked up by Nishi until he

confesses) then whispers to Wada through the locked door, “Wada, go back again and tell Mr. Iwabuchi where I am . . . I’ll give you five, no, ten million. I’ll recommend you for Shirai’s position. I’ll make you chief!” At last the worm turns, when Wada—who was earlier ready to die to protect the very man who will soon have him murdered, and was, after all, still wanting Yoshiko to “soften up” Nishi—shows that he is something more than an “official.” Too disgusted to speak, and with an extraordinary expression of mortification and rage, Wada hurls a big stone at the door—or at the “system.” In the original script this brief scene had been placed before the encounter of Nishi and Yoshiko; Kurosawa’s decision that the one scene should interrupt the other appears to have been made at a late stage of editing. Only now do we return to the lovers’ crucial conversation, and hear Nishi tell Yoshiko that exposure is the only way of making her father “pay.” Yoshiko silently acquiesces, bowing her head. One effect of Kurosawa’s last-minute editing decision is to bring closer together Wada’s final repudiation of the “system” to which he had been so loyal and Yoshiko’s own silent but intensely loving, and courageously loyal, submission to her husband’s sense of what must be done. Although it involves submission, her courage, love, and loyalty are also emphasized by the contrast with Shakespeare’s Ophelia, who chose to be loyal to her father and brother rather than the man she loves; in this respect Yoshiko is closer to Desdemona.

Kurosawa is demonstrably not wanting to separate social and individual issues. In the first place, he is pressing the audience to think about Wada, and to examine its own responses. To sympathize with Wada as a good and decent man is in many ways easy, but sentimental and even corrupting—a measure of the extent to which the audience itself is internalizing the systemic sense of “good” if it takes an indul-

gent view of Wada's loyalty to a thoroughly evil "system," and respects Shirai all the less when he refuses to sacrifice himself. Moreover, the film's urgent logic requires that we see how, when Richie says that "Nishi is bad" and Prince makes the same point even more strongly, saying that Nishi embraces "evil," it is as though these Western critics are also allowing conventional public codes to override any more authentic moral concern. For what would Nishi have to do, to seem "good" and avoid these damagingly conventional verdicts? The short answer is, he would have to do what Wada thinks he should do, and stop opposing an evil system in which corrupt concepts of loyalty and duty have appropriated any more defensible notion of "good." Before giving credence to Richie and Prince's charge of "social failure," we might ponder that moment when Yoshiko bows her head, silently submitting to Nishi's no less anguished but implacable insistence that there really is no alternative to exposing her father and the system he represents; or we might remember that look of indescribable shame and self-disgust on Wada's face when he hears Yoshiko telling Nishi, "Mr. Wada told me to say that." Such moments show how the "system" invades the most private and intimate, as well as public and external, relationships; indeed, they show how the film's most challenging exploration of what empowers the "system" is pursued through the audience's own responses, if the audience finds itself ready to countenance the idea that Wada is, somehow, "good," and Nishi "bad." Prince quotes the Japanese critic Tadao Satô's observation that when an individual tries to fight evils alone, "he inevitably invites self-annihilation," and comments approvingly that Kurosawa's film is "a formal study of that process of self-annihilation" (Prince, 317). A Nazi or Japanese concentration camp guard might reason in this way, but—significantly—Kurosawa doesn't. Rather, his film

shows how the truly self-destructive perversion occurs when a Wada—who seems basically decent, and far more sympathetic than a Shirai, Miura or Moriyama—can describe Nishi as “wrong,” “wicked” and “unnatural,” without ever realizing (until it is too late) that the “system” to which he is loyal is what is truly wicked and unnatural.

IV

This may seem to have wandered from *Hamlet*. That is precisely what I intended to do, since attending to this underrated film in its own morally challenging terms seems to me the precondition for any assessment of its relationship with *Hamlet*. So, for example, seeing the force and suggestiveness of Wada's characterization in the film should make us all the more impatient with commentary of this kind:

In *The Bad Sleep Well* a character named Wada can be seen as a tissue of *Hamlet* displacements. A would-be suicide, he observes his own maimed funeral rites (watching the public piety of his treacherous colleagues while listening to a tape-recording of them crowing over his downfall); later he impersonates his own ghost. The film also develops a range of themes involving elaborate deception and concealment, spying and checking-up, betrayal. These are no doubt to be expected in any revenge tragedy, yet they are notably like the particular complex to be found in *Hamlet*. (Hagood, 242)

This illustrates the distortion that is all too likely to occur when the film is being discussed by “Shakespeareans” whose primary interest is not in what Kurosawa does, but in what he does with Shakespeare: they zoom in on any kind of connection, real or fancied. In this case, we can see the critic himself growing uneasy when he observes, “These are no doubt to be expected in any revenge tragedy.” Indeed they

are—and not only in Western revenge tragedy. Here we must “wander” still further from *Hamlet*, before we are in a position to assess what Kurosawa is doing with Shakespeare’s play. For it is evident that in making this film Kurosawa is thinking about Japanese attitudes to revenge, and loyalty, as well as thinking about Shakespeare’s play in the context of Japanese revenge tradition.

There are interesting differences as well as similarities between the notions about revenge in Japan and in the Western, Christian world. In the West, revenge has had no religious or official support, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries.⁹ In sharp contrast, the Edo shogunate (1603–1867) of Japan not only granted revenge legal and religious respectability, but also treated it as a sacred duty until the Meiji government announced a total ban; in Edo the warrior ethic (*bushidō*) was based on Chinese Confucianism, which saw revenge as a proof of loyal devotion and filial piety. However, this seemingly sharp contrast is complicated in two ways. First, there was much popular sympathy with the revenger, in the West as in Japan. Secondly, both the Edo shogunate which supported revenge and the Tudor and Stuart monarchs who opposed it were arguably trying to achieve the same end, though by different means: both wanted to centralize authority and power. Revenge drama—as exemplified by *Chūshingura*—has been, and still is, enormously popular in Japan; moreover, feudalism is for the Japanese a relatively recent—and not, as for Westerners, a distant—historical memory, and is still embedded in the Japanese language itself. Despite the new, more Western and democratic codes of behavior and thinking which have become a feature of Japanese life, especially since the second World War and the American occupation, the Japanese have still retained an almost instinctive admiration for the revenger. Here some comments by the novelist Sōseki Natsume on

Hamlet's "Now might I do it pat" speech are still instructive:

Dr. Johnson thinks this speech is "too horrible" and mars the character of Hamlet. Hazlitt takes it as an excuse for Hamlet's hesitation. . . . However, we Japanese don't find the speech so horrible, either because (1) we don't have a strong sense of "damnation," or because (2) we have a strong passion for revenge, or for both these reasons.¹⁰

Katakiuchi, or blood revenge, is of course forbidden in modern Japan, but some of the attitudes and patterns of feudal behavior which sustained it still survive, as we saw in considering the concept of "yoro-shiku" and the remarkably non-Western readiness of Iwabuchi's aides to commit suicide if this is necessary to protect a superior. This is a modern equivalent for the kinds of feudal loyalty demonstrated in so much traditional drama, for example when a devoted samurai sacrifices his wife or child to protect his feudal lord. Such a situation may well seem unthinkable, or downright horrifying, to Westerners. But Japanese would explain it in terms of the conflict between *giri* (social obligation) and *ninjō* (personal inclination): *giri* is always regarded as more important and honorable than *ninjō*. We can clearly see this working in Wada; for him being loyal to his superiors, no matter how evil they are, is the sacred duty. Nishi does not feel in this way, and knows that the only thing these so-called superiors deserve is punishment. In this respect, as was noted earlier, he never relents. And yet he cannot feel good in opposing "evil." He feels a repugnance for his task; he says "It's hard to be evil. I must try to hate and grow more evil myself." There is no sustaining sense that in opposing "evil" he himself is "good." Why?

We can probably best answer this difficult but crucial question by seeing how Nishi's inner conflict shows a painful confusion between

the traditional and new attitudes. His sense of obligation is both feudal and modern. The feudal code is very much alive when Nishi comes to see his revenge as an appalling, rather than satisfying, duty; when he speaks of his “wavering” since the wedding night, he is not relenting but expressing that thoroughly traditional Japanese conflict between *giri* and *ninjō*. “Unfortunately,” he says, he has fallen in love with his wife. A modern attitude comes in, when he talks about his motive for revenge, “It wasn’t just to avenge my father. I wanted to punish them all. All those men who prey on the people who are unable to fight back.” Neither the traditional nor the modern attitudes will give him the assurance or the comfort of feeling “good” in opposing “evil.” He regards his mission with distaste, while feeling he must go on.

V

It should be clear by now that the subject of *The Bad Sleep Well* is the corruption in modern Japan. Shakespeare’s Denmark and Kurosawa’s Japan might seem worlds apart until we reflect on why and how Nishi is as isolated as Hamlet. As Kurosawa himself once observed, “I don’t think in any other country there is so thick a wall separating people from government officials and agencies” (Richie, 183). Moreover, Nishi’s Japan is a one-party system in which there is no opposition party to watch, check and challenge the government; instead, the cozy relation between politicians and big business is one of the topics celebrated in the wedding speeches. In Kurosawa’s film we see how supposedly “democratic” institutions and safeguards—the judicial system, and the suspicious but powerless press and police—are controlled by the mighty system. Nishi’s first setback comes when the discovery of an insane Shirai in the official building is hushed up; Nishi then learns,

as Iwabuchi's secretary, that a phone call from a prominent politician was enough. The journalists, like the police, smell corruption, but are powerless in their inability to penetrate the system.

For Kurosawa to associate the rottenness in modern Japan with that in the state of Shakespeare's Denmark is blackly witty but also accurate in an important respect: the "system" Nishi confronts is as powerful and impenetrable as any Renaissance monarchic state. This is indeed like Hamlet's royal court of Denmark, where everything depends upon a monarch's judgment, favor and interests. But then, as we have already suggested, the film is also offering specifically Japanese parallels, and, above all, showing how feudal codes of unquestioning loyalty and obedience have a curious afterlife in modern Japan—not only within the system the film depicts but even in the audience's responses.

In such cases we can see how the film's use of *Hamlet* always serves its contemporary subject. Kurosawa has often said that Shakespeare and Dostoevski are his favorite authors, and that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are his favorite Shakespeare plays, and it's not surprising that he should draw on *Hamlet* when presenting political and moral corruption. Nonetheless, he is not primarily concerned to present a "modern *Hamlet*"; indeed a Western Shakespearean who approaches the film with such an expectation is likely to miss many ways in which the film is reconsidering Japanese traditions and attitudes to revenge, or group ties and obligations. Whatever light this may throw on Shakespeare's play is, in that sense, incidental. Yet, once we allow for the film's very oblique relationship to *Hamlet*, we can see how all the oblique echoes, variations and inversions do indeed throw a fascinating light on Shakespeare's play; in particular, they imply a critical view of Prince Hamlet, which was, at that time, still unusual in Japan.

To see how this happens, we might return to the scene between Nishi, Itakura and Wada, which occurs immediately after the link with *Hamlet* has at last become apparent. We are now watching for connections with *Hamlet*, and can see how Nishi is in this scene both like and unlike Shakespeare's prince. This is the first time the reticent Nishi has poured his heart out; in this he is utterly unlike Shakespeare's prince, who dominates his play to an unprecedented degree, with his voluble speeches and soliloquies. In some other respects, their situation and their dislike of their situation are strikingly similar. If we compare Nishi's speeches with Hamlet's seventh soliloquy ("How all occasions do inform against me"), we see how both men regard revenge as a duty but in some sense recoil from it, and then find this difficult to explain even to themselves. So, where Nishi struggles to understand and explain his sense of "wavering," Hamlet too finds it difficult to account for his delay:

Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event—
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do'.
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
To do't.¹¹

Both reproach themselves for a lack of determination. Where Nishi talks of needing to "grow more evil," Hamlet finishes his soliloquy by declaring,

O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

But of course the differences between these men are no less important and suggestive. So, for example, when Nishi speaks of his motives for revenge, he insists, "It wasn't just to avenge my father. I wanted to punish them all. All those men who prey on the people who are unable to fight back." Hamlet never shows any corresponding concern for the "people" or indeed for his country, despite his being a prince.

This contrast can be extended, as we see when considering one of the film's most striking inversions. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia not only helps her father and Polonius in their plotting, but uses and in this sense betrays the man she loves. In Kurosawa's film, "Hamlet" has used and betrayed "Ophelia," marrying her, not because he loves her, but because he wants to get information; but he then falls in love with his wife. This inversion affords a perspective on what might seem unloving in Hamlet. Where Nishi suffers how much his wife would be hurt by his revenge, Hamlet never shows any interest or sympathy to the woman who loves him. Indeed, he talks of his love in her funeral scene, but then, how could he treat her so cruelly as to shout to her, "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.122), and to harass her with bawdy jokes in public in the Mousetrap scene? What is worse, even after killing Ophelia's father, Hamlet never worries about her feelings. Far from feeling pricks of conscience, Hamlet jokes about the convocation of worms that will eat the man he has just killed (4.3.18–25).

Romantic critics often explained that Hamlet treats Ophelia so cruelly because he himself is suffering; but whenever Hamlet is feeling bad he takes it out on whoever has the bad luck to be near him. This ruthless and unloving quality is no less conspicuous in his treatment of the two men whom he initially greeted as "My excellent good friends"—Guildenstern and Rosencrantz.¹² Hamlet describes, with boastful satisfaction, how he rewrote the letter to the English King so

that the “bearers” would be “put to sudden death, / Not shriving-time allowed” (5.2.46–49). In fact, the play nowhere suggests that the hapless Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew of Claudius’s plan to murder Hamlet. They intended nothing but to carry out the royal commission to bring Hamlet to England. Nevertheless, Hamlet never considers how innocent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could be in doing what the King and Queen ask. Instead of showing any compunction, he makes this haughty and nasty remark:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment.
They are not near my conscience. Their defeat
Doth by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the base nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites. (5.2.58–63)

For Hamlet, such cruelty is justified by the mere fact that his old friends were “employed” by Claudius; Hamlet never tries to imagine how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern might have seen their situation. In sharp contrast, Nishi can be stirred to imaginative sympathy for Iwabuchi’s tools. When he confronts Wada and Shirai not as a part of the “system” he hates but as “individuals,” he reflects:

You got a tiny share of the dirty money. So you were made the scapegoats. You were forced to die. So that Iwabuchi and his lot would sleep peacefully. I can’t forgive them.

This contrast is all the more striking when we remember that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet’s friends and Wada and Shirai are Nishi’s enemies.

I submit that the impressiveness of what may be regarded as Kurosawa’s creative critique of *Hamlet* actually depends on the impres-

siveness of his film, which has been sadly underrated in the West as well as Japan. Whether the critique was conscious or unconscious does not matter, or matters less than the ways in which the critique needs to be understood in a Japanese context and is far more interesting within that context. Because Shakespeare's play was so quickly assimilated to the Japanese *katakiuchi* tradition of blood-revenge, this kind of critical perspective on *Hamlet* and Hamlet was far less familiar in Japan than in the West.¹³ But the force of Kurosawa's creative critique has nothing to do, primarily, with any (conscious or unconscious) interest in offering a new, or Japanesque, "version" of Shakespeare's play. Rather, it follows from Kurosawa's concern with contemporary Japan, and the ways in which an extraordinary mixing of feudal and modern attitudes empowers corruption. In this sense his critique of *Hamlet* starts from his sense of a Japan which is, and at the end still remains, as infected as Shakespeare's Denmark.

NOTES

1. Richie's idea that Nishi gives up affects, and I think distorts, his own comparison with Hamlet: "Mifune—like Hamlet—fights to keep revenge glowing in his breast but he is, after all, only human. The spark of vengeance is never very strong. The flame wavers, dies, goes out. Mifune decides to give it up. It is as though Hamlet has decided not to send Ophelia to the nunnery after all. . ." (141).

2. In *Zenshū Kurosawa Akira* Vol. 5, the volcano scene (18–19) does not include Nishi's question, which actually occurs on 23.

3. On 186, Prince makes another mistake by saying Nishi appears "initially from the vapors of a volcano." This is simply wrong, too, for we see him in the opening scene of his wedding.

4. Unless otherwise specified, quotations are from the Western subtitled version.

5. This scene is the best example of how, for Kurosawa, "film is a multiplication of image and sound"; see Kurosawa's autobiography, *Gama no Abura*, 202–3. Yûichirô Nishimura gives a thorough analysis of the diverse styles and usage of music through Kurosawa's oeuvre, including many interviews with the musicians who collaborated with Kurosawa. However, for Nishimura the counterpoint of the solemn

funeral with the gay music here is Kurosawa's "miscalculation," for, he argues, the scene itself appears to be "comic" to the audience who knows Wada is not dead, and therefore the flippant music merely accompanies an already comical scene (174–77). I disagree, since the "comedy" is decidedly tragicomic—amusing for Nishi but extremely painful for Wada.

6. Earlier, I said that Nishi never expressed any intention to kill Iwabuchi or any his underlings; the very fact he has been collecting evidence for five years shows the consistent intention to expose them, not to kill them. When Nishi wishes he had killed Shirai, this is an expression of his bitter anger at the power of the system he is opposing and the way that the newspapers had been forced to hush up Shirai's insanity. Pouring "poisoned whisky" down Shirai's throat looks like another *Hamlet* variation, which is then given a further twist when Nishi himself drinks it: the drink is not actually poisoned and, although Nishi clearly wants to torture Shirai, he doesn't intend to kill him.

7. As I write this, the newspapers are reporting the somewhat similar "Hattori" scandal, involving immense bribes to secure contracts at the new Kansai airport.

8. See, for example, John Collick's *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society*.

9. For the notion of revenge in Japan, see Fumio Inagaki, 28–34. In *Revenge Tragedy*, John Kerrigan warns that it is too simple to say that Christianity forbids revenge, since some parts of the Christian tradition encourage it; even the famous text "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord; I will repay" can be, and indeed has often been, taken the other way, as a reminder that God himself is vengeful and that the godly may imitate him; see Kerrigan, Chapter 5 (111–41).

10. Sōseki Natsume, 17; my translation.

11. The seventh soliloquy appears in Q2, but not in F, which the Oxford edition is based on. *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford UP, 1990), Appendix A (xiii) 363–65.

12. Theodore Redpath discusses this issue very well in "Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."

13. For more details on this point, see Graham Bradshaw and Kaori Ashizu.

WORKS CITED

- Bradshaw, Graham and Kaori Ashizu. "Reading *Hamlet* in Japan." *Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century: The Proceedings of the Sixth Shakespeare World Congress*. Newark: U of Delaware P, forthcoming.
- Collick, John. *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989.
- Goodwin, James. *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.
- Happgood, Robert. "Kurosawa's Shakespeare films: *Throne of Blood*, *The Bad Sleep*

- Well, and Ran." *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: the plays on film and television*. Ed. Anthony Davis and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. 234–50.
- Inagaki, Fumio. *Edo no Taihen*. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1995.
- Kerrigan, John. *Revenge Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Kurosawa, Akira. *Gama no Abura*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990.
- . *Zenshū Kurosawa Akira*. 6 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988.
- Natsume, Sōseki. *Sōseki Zenshū*, Vol.16. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1967.
- Nishimura, Yūichirō. *Kurosawa Akira: Sound and Image*. Tokyo: Rippu Shobo, 1990.
- Prince, Stephen. *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Redpath, Theodore. "Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern." *Surprised by Scenes: Essays in honour of Professor Yasunari Takahashi*. Ed. Yasunari Takada. Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1994. 105–13.
- Richie, Donald. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- Schilling, Mark. "The Political Incorrectness of Kurosawa Akira." *Japan Quarterly* 38 (1991): 484–89.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. G. R. Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.