Translating A Nô Drama
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ANY translation from one language to another has its difficulties, but when the original text is a Nô play composed and performed in the fourteenth century of feudal Japan the difficulties facing the translator are compounded. In this paper I discuss two different versions of a Nô play, Atsumori by Zeami (1363-1443). The translations are by Arthur Waley (published in 1920) and Karen Brazell (published in 1998). As we shall see, each differs strongly in its approach and technical interpretation, yet each separately succeeds in catching the mood and spirit of one of the great Nô plays of Japan.

The theme of Atsumori is based on an actual historical event. In the year 1184 two powerful clans – the Taira and the Minamoto – clashed at Ichi-no-tani on the shores of the Bay of Suma in a decisive battle for mastery of Japan. The Taira clan was defeated and forced to escape by sea. Atsumori, aged only sixteen, was a prince of the Taira. In the confusion of the escape he realized that he had left his flute behind at Ichi-no-tani, and he went back on his horse to get it. But when he returned to the Bay of Suma the Taira fleet had sailed, abandoning him. On the shores of the bay he was challenged by Kumagai, a commander of the Minamoto clan, who killed him. In Zeami’s play, Kumagai, now a priest calling himself Rensei, returns to Ichi-no-tani to atone for the death of Atsumori and to pray for the salvation of his soul. This well-known episode was first recorded in The Tale of the Heike (1240-1243).

Translation is an act of creation in its own right. The material to work on is at hand in the original text, but what is made of that material depends entirely on the translator’s sensibility. It is a truism that a precise, literal translation of a work of literature will almost certainly fail because of
differences in language usages. On the other hand, a translation which makes imaginative departures from the original can be successful if it catches the mood and spirit of the original. In English literature Edward Fitzgerald’s famous translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* is a case in point. So, while issues of syntax and grammatical structure are of great importance, the primary challenge facing the translator is to transmit the essential qualities of the work itself, to recreate the rhythms and emotions that bind the work together to express its meaning. Here Fitzgerald so obviously succeeded, and it is this central point of recreation that I want to pursue in the translations by Waley and Brazell.

*Atsumori* is a ghost-of-warrior play but essentially a play of prayer, deeply imbued with the teachings of Zen Buddhism. Thus the translator must have considerable powers of expression in being able to impart this intangible spiritual tone. A second feature the play possesses is the Japanese concept of *yūgen*, which means “what lies beneath the surface”, elegant simplicity, the subtle and the profound, implications not obviously expressed. It can also mean aesthetic perfection. In Nô plays *yūgen* is attributed to the gracefulness of women, so that apart from the text, it has a particular significance here in performance. Atsumori, being a handsome youth and an accomplished flute player, dances in an elegant manner, quite removed from the violent actions of ghost-of-warrior plays. This special feature, which audiences would appreciate, is, of course, lost in translation. So, while the cultural background and expectations of readers today are quite different from the audience in Zeami’s time, nevertheless the success of any translation must lie in its ability to make readers respond to the spiritual centre of the play and the power of its implications.

To reach this height of refinement, however, the translator must still labour hard to overcome difficulties of all kinds lying in the way, as Karen Brazell has observed:

> To translate is to interpret, especially when the target languages are temporally, spatially, and culturally so distant that even basic grammatical constructs convey very different sorts of meaning. Japanese does not make distinctions in tense, gender, or quantity in the same ways that English does. Its word order is very different, and its suffixes often indicate levels of honorifics or politeness not found in English. Complex word play

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and frequent use of onomatopoeia are characteristic of many scripts. In translating into English much has to be transformed and many choices have to be made; rarely is there a single “right” translation of any given sentence.

Arthur Waley makes a similar point on the necessity for judgement by the translator when, in this case, dealing with a text in Japanese:

*No kind of English corresponds to this language, whose honorific grammatical forms in themselves build up an impressive weight of sound. Any attempt to translate these honorific words, tatamatsuru, tamau, uke-tamawaru, obosimesu and the like, would be ludicrous. Uke-tamawaru, for example, means “receive as a reward”, but it is used simply as a polite substitute for kiku, “to hear”. To translate it literally would be as absurd as to translate the Spanish usted by “Your Grace” instead of simply “you”.*

The first signs of Nô can be found in ancient Shinto rituals and in spiritual ceremonies performed in Buddhist temples which included masks, dancing and mime accompanied by flutes and hand drums. Gradually, entertainment known as saraguku, combining song, dance, recitation and mime, became popular in the countryside. In turn, these mediaeval performances began to incorporate tales and legends, so that by the fourteenth century, when Zeami lived, his father, Kan’ami, was already composing Nô plays, which found great favour at the court of the Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358-1491). Nô plays were also performed publicly. Of interest is that an ancient Nô stage, hundreds of years old, still exists in northern Japan deep in the mountains of Kurokawa in Yamagata prefecture and local Nô performances are held there every year.

In all of Nô drama certain fundamental characteristics can be discerned. Underpinning the plays are precepts from Zen Buddhism, particularly the transience of the external world. Thus time and space are in constant dissolution, one moment or happening replacing another in a continuum controlled by the progression of the narrative, the past as vivid as the present. Abstraction is emphasized by the austerity of the stage, with fluid interaction taking place between dialogue and recitation (in prose or poetry), singing and dancing, incantation, masks and costumes and music played by a flute and hand drums. Tradition established long ago governs patterns of movements and chanting in different tones by the
chorus, and fragments from the past are inserted into the text, creating a double effect and heightening the emotional impact on the audience. As Donald Keene has observed: “Suggestion as an artistic technique is given one of its most perfect forms of expression in Nô theatre”.

The first point to note is that Zeami’s play is itself an interpretation from passages in two separate texts (The Tale of Genji and The Tale of the Heike) as well as some allusions to classical poems, so that the translator in turn faces similar problems of selection and structure. The original text by Zeami was composed according to a rigid structure which he had devised. Zeami wrote about ninety plays, each of which conformed to his aesthetics. He set down his principles of Nô in essays dated 1423:

Composition. –The writing of Nô consists of three stages: choice of “seed” (subject), construction and composition. The “seed” is the story on which the play is based. This story must be well considered and divided into Introduction, Development and Climax. Then the words must be put together and the music joined to them.

The Introduction, Development and Climax should be distributed as follows: one part Introduction, three parts Development, and one part Climax.

The first part includes the entrance of the waki and everything up to the shite’s first chant. The development commences with the shite’s entrance. The second part consists of the dialogue between the shite and waki, and the first unison. The third part of the development consists of the dance or simple chant which takes its place. The climax consists of the dance, action, quick-dance, or cut-beat (finale) which follows.

I should mention here the shite is the technical term for the principal figure (in this case, Atsumori) and waki for the secondary character (in this case, Rensei). The play consists of two acts, with an interlude dividing them. In Act 1 the priest Rensei hears the sound of a flute and the singing of reapers as they come home from their day’s work. One of them reveals to him that he belongs to the family of Atsumori. In the interlude a local man recounts the story of the rise and downfall of the Taira clan and Atsumori’s death. In Act 2 the ghost of Atsumori, dressed as a young
warrior, confronts Rensei. The act rises to a climax leading to the salvation of both their souls.

Now, if we take the two translations and look at the beginning of the play, we can see a marked difference in the approach being adopted. These differences establish at once the tone and direction that each version will take. It was customary in Nô plays to open with an expression of Buddhist thought. Waley’s version commences with a couplet spoken by the priest, Rensei:

“Life is a lying dream, he only wakes
Who casts the world aside.”

The effect here is immediate, setting the tone of spirituality which will dominate the play. Brazell’s version is much more detailed, and far more than simply the inclusion of stage directions. We are taken, as it were, into the theatre itself. All the details bring the reader closer to the actual performance. This version requires a slow, measured reading. We can imagine the entrance music, the entrance of the priest along the walkway and on to the stage. We notice that the priest (called technically waki) is facing a pine tree as he makes his opening speech. The pine tree is a symbol of the enduring spirit in Japan, and thus an added significance is given to the words.

Shidai entrance music   To the music of the hand drums and the flute, the waki, dressed as a priest, enters the bridgeway and moves slowly to the shite spot.
Shidai   Congruent song in the melodic mode with sparse drum accompaniment; the waki faces the pine tree on the back of the stage.

WAKI:
Awake to awareness, the world’s but a dream,
Awake to awareness, the world’s but a dream,
One may cast it aside – is this what is Real?

Jitori   Chanted quietly and pitched low, in noncongruent rhythm.

CHORUS:
Awake to awareness, the world’s but a dream,
one may cast it aside – is this what is Real?

Nanori   Intoned speech with no accompaniment; the waki faces front.

WAKI: I am Kumagae no Jirô Naozane, a resident of Musashi, who
has renounced the world and taken the priestly name of Renshô. I did this because of the deep remorse I felt at having killed Atsumori. Now I am going to Ichinotani to pray for the repose of his soul.

**Ageuta** He continues to face front, to melodic song congruent with drum accompaniment.

**WAKI:**

Departing the capital as clouds part

Brief instrumental interlude (uchikiri)

departing the capital as clouds part,

the moon too travels southward,

a small wheel rolling toward

Yodo; Yamazaki soon passed;

Brief instrumental interlude.

then the ponds of Koya, Ikuta River,

Takes a few steps to indicate travel

Suma Bay, where “waves surge beside us”;

At Ichinotani I have arrived,

Takes a few steps to indicate his arrival

I have arrived at Ichinotani.

**Tsukizerifu** Intoned speech without accompaniment, the waki still facing front.

**WAKI:** How quickly I have reached Ichinotani in the province of Tsu. Scenes from the past come to mind as if present. (Hands together in prayer gesture) Hail, Amida Buddha. (Turns slightly to the right) What’s that? I hear the sound of a flute coming from that high meadow. (Faces front) I think I’ll wait for the flutist and ask him to tell me something about this place.

This translation reveals the subtlety and intricacy of Zeami’s text. The reader becomes involved in an actual Nô performance. Every descriptive detail relating to movements by the waki, the precise pitch and tone of song, speech and chanting by the chorus, the interlacing of sound and movement, where every detail has its place and contributes to the whole - all are included in Zeami’s text and have not been added by the
translator to aid the reader’s understanding, particularly of technical terms, which Zeami himself explains (such as shidai or jitori). In its variety and its implications the text has the exactness of a piece of music, where every note is of importance, establishing in this case the solemnity of a ritual. This slow, measured tone proceeds through the entire play, heightened by alternating rhythms and rising to its inevitable climax (the confrontation between Rensei and the ghost of Atsumori). By means of the translation we can also see that Zeami followed exactly the dramatic principles which he had set down in his aesthetics. The introduction, for example, should “include the entrance of the waki and everything up to the shite’s first chant” \(^{12}\). Although when read, the play appears to be seamless, the controlled structure is there. Immediately following the close of Rensei’s speech Atsumori appears, starting the first of the three stages of development. Brazell’s meticulous translation shows to the full the strict principles of Zeami’s artistry underpinning the play, with its multiple effects on either audience or reader of spirituality, ritual and other-worldliness, all characteristics of Nô.

Now to an interesting point which illustrates the dilemma facing all translators and the need for choice. At the beginning of the play we find the lines:

\[ \text{Awake to awareness, the world’s but a dream,} \\
\text{one may cast it aside – is this what is Real?} \]\(^{13}\)

In Japanese the original words are “Yume no yo nareba odorokite, yume no yo nareba odorokite, sutsuruya utsutsu naruran”, a literal translation of which is “I am aware that the world is a dream. Renunciation would be the only reality.” \(^{14}\) The difficulty for any translator lies in the interpretation of the word naruran, which in the old script is ambivalent and can mean either “is” or “would be”, which in turn have slightly different shadings of meaning in English. Karen Brazell, in her interpretation, has decided on “is this what is Real?” which can mean “so this is what is Real” or “can this be Real?” – one a definite statement, the other including the possibility of doubt. In the old Japanese of Zeami no provision for making a question exists, but Brazell has decided on this option commenting in a footnote that “the waki questions whether taking religious vows is enough to attain
enlightenment.” Commentary in Japanese accompanying the original text offers an alternative explanation: “I realized that this world is as fleeting as a dream, so I abandoned it as a monk. This act of renunciation is the only reality I know in this world that is like a dream.” Here nuances lead us in two directions. In Brazell’s interpretation the priest questions renunciation is the only reality, whereas the Japanese commentary affirms it. The ambiguities in this small example exemplify the difficulties facing the translator.

A second worthy point in Brazell’s translation is that the phrase ‘waves surge beside us’ is shown in quotation marks. Brazell comments: “This is the first of many phrases in this play taken from the Suma chapter in The Tale of Genji”. We have already noted this feature of Nô, where a present instance is intensified by being expressed in the form of a quotation or reference to the past.

Now let us turn to Waley’s version of Zeami’s introductory section. While conforming all the way through to the structure and “seeds” of the text, Waley departs altogether from an exact rendering, condensing the play and interpreting it from the beginning in imaginative rhythms in English as suited to a different culture while concentrating all the time on the essence of the play.

PERSONS
THE PRIEST RENSEI (formerly the warrior Kumagai).
A TOUNG REAPER, who turns out to be the ghost of Atsumori.
HIS COMPANION.
CHORUS.

PRIEST.
Life is a lying dream, he only wakes
Who casts the world aside.
I am Kumagai no Naozane, a man of the country of Musashi. I have left my home and call myself the priest Rensei; this I have done because of my grief at the death of Atsumori, who fell in battle by my hand. Hence it comes that I am dressed in priestly guise.
And now I am going down to Ichi-no-Tani to pray for the salvation of Atsumori’s soul.

(He walks slowly across the stage, singing a song descriptive of his journey).

I have come so fast that here I am already at Ichi-no Tani, in the country of Tsu.

Truly the past returns to my mind as though it were a thing of today.

But listen! I hear the sound of a flute coming from a knoll of rising ground. I will wait here till the flute-player passes, and ask him to tell the story of this place."

Even in this fragment covering the introductory section of the play we can see the difference in pace and the path which each translation will take. Waley’s approach will allow him to have a very sharp focus engaging directly with the reader’s emotions and imagination. To do this he has cut away all subsidiary directions relating to the theatre as well as – in this fragment - the response by the chorus, so that as the play progresses a uniform tone and built-up rhythms will develop in the reader’s mind, as if responding to a piece of music. Waley can afford to do this because of his expressive power in English and his poetic compression which takes the reader into the very heart of the play. Brazell’s more detailed, ritualistic approach achieves the same effect as the play goes on. For the remainder of the play the style and tone established by each of the translators in the introduction does not alter. Neither version is better than the other; they are simply different.

Waley, of course, does not remove the chorus from his translation. On the contrary, the chorus has an essential place as it does in Greek plays. Waley’s technique consists of a process of refinement and compression, never leaving the thrust and authenticity of the original, but making selective judgements so that when his translation is experienced as a whole it will have emotive force and cohesion. From the beginning to the end Waley maintains consistency of tone in a tightened structure departing from the strict text. Such is Waley’s concern to have no interruption to the
progressive rhythms of the play that he cuts away altogether the quite substantial interlude between Act 1 and Act 2. Here, in a stylized speech, an ordinary villager recounts the battle, the defeat of the Taira by the Minamoto clan, and the subsequent death of Atsumori. Waley comments: “These interludes are subject to variation and are not considered part of the literary text of the play”. Backing up Waley’s comment, we can note, is that an interlude is not included in Zeami’s strict poetics on the structure of a Nô play. Brazell, on the other hand, includes the interlude in her translation, following precisely how a performance might have been enacted in Zeami’s time. Her source is impeccable and clearly noted in her introduction of Atsumori from what sources she translated: “This translation and many of the notes are based on Yokomichi and Omote 1960 [Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei], and the stage directions reflect Kita school practices. The aikyôgen text is from Sanari 1931.” Waley, having published the first edition in 1920, must have gone to a copy of Zeami’s own writing, now housed in the Research Centre of Nôgaku in Tokyo. In the preface and introduction to the plays he translated he refers to the discovery in 1908 of the lost works of Zeami, but unfortunately he does not mention which text of Atsumori he used. Further investigation is required here. So the different approaches by the two translators to the interlude are not in conflict but are entirely consistent with the perspectives they have adopted to the translation as a whole. I might add here that in an actual performance the interlude would have provided a necessary transition before the great scene of Act 2 where the ghost of Atsumori confronts Rensei and they are reconciled. These interludes were narrated in colloquial language distinct from the formal classical style of the play proper.

The interlude is called ai-kyôgen, which often included comic elements meant to ease the sombre tension of Nô drama. In recounting the story of Atsumori’s death, the villager comments to the priest Rensei:

Kumagai is said to have retired from the world to pray for Atsumori’s enlightenment. Since he didn’t spare Atsumori when he might have, this seems like a pack of lies to me. If that Kumagai should come here, we would kill him to prove our loyalty to Atsumori.

By cutting this section unashamedly Waley achieves the highest
degree of tragedy with no interruption, while Brazell, on the other hand, achieves a dimension which was meant to be there in performance. As well, the common language of the interlude acts as a counterpoise to the formal chanting and rhythms of the play itself. The theme of Atsumori is Buddhists’ teaching of the union of opposites into a single harmony, that is “opposites are equivalents and enemies indeed friends” in the mercy of Buddha.

Here is a brief example of Arthur Waley’s poetic power which runs through the whole of his translation. Immediately after Rensei has announced that he has come to Ichi-no-tani he hears the sound of a flute. Waley’s text follows this announcement.

REAPERS (together)
To the music of the reaper’s flute
No song is sung
But the sighing of wind in the fields.

YOUNG REAPER
They that were reaping,
Reaping on that hill,
Walk now through the fields
Homeward, for it is dusk."

Karen Brazell’s version, on the other hand, is scholarly in its precision as it follows the lines of the text exactly:

SHITE and TSURE
The grass-cutter’s flute adds its voice,
The grass-cutter’s flute adds its voice,
To the wind blowing over the meadows.

SHITE
The “man who cuts grass on that hill” makes his way through the fields
In the gathering dusk; it’s time to go home."

The quotation marks here have significance. Brazell notes that it is a line taken from poem 567 of the Shûishû by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, a poet
of the 8th century. Hence the inclusion of this line verbatim by Zeami has its own echoing resonance. As we have seen, each of the translators has a different methodology, so that each translation is done with a different purpose and readership in mind. Brazell’s is a text for the specialist scholar, Waley’s makes the play accessible to a wider readership while losing nothing in authenticity. Waley is famous for the depth of his scholarship and his imaginative renderings into English. In *Atsumori*, as one example, his emotive use of language is highly effective in transforming a play from feudal Japan into a modern culture, so that while it reads like a play from the past it still takes its place as a play in modern English. In a technical sense, we see here again that Waley does not employ repetition or chanting but favours modern idioms.

The climax of *Atsumori*, is a masterpiece of Nô drama, combining ritualised speech, the precise symbolic movements of the actors, the chanting of the chorus, and the beating of drum rhythms. Brazell’s translation is meticulous as it transcribes each moment and accompanying action in the text, but Waley’s translation reaches an almost Shakespearean level in its simplicity and power. In only three speeches Waley is able to compress the abandonment of Atsumori on that fateful day, the fight to the death between Atsumori and Kumagai, and the reconciliation of the two “in Buddha’s name” when they meet again.

CHORUS
The whole clan has put its boats to sea.
He will not be left behind;
He runs to the shore.
But the Royal Boat and the soldiers’ boats
Have sailed far away.

ATSUMORI
What can he do?
He spurs his horse into the waves.
He is full of perplexity.
And then

CHORUS
He looks behind him and sees

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That Kumagai pursues him;
He cannot escape.
Then Atsumori turns his horse
Knee-deep in the lashing waves,
And draws his sword.
Twice, three times he strikes; then, still saddled,
In close fight they twine; roll headlong together
Among the surf of the shore.
So Atsumori fell and was slain, but now the Wheel of Fate
Has turned and brought him back.

(Atsumori rises from the ground and advances towards the Priest with uplifted sword.)

“There is my enemy,” he cries, and would strike,
But the other is grown gentle
And calling on Buddha’s name
Has obtained salvation for his foe;
So that they shall be re-born together
On one lotus-seat.
“No, Rensei is not my enemy.
Pray for me again, oh pray for me again.”

All translators face the problem of cultural differences, particularly in ways of expression. Atsumori, for example, was written by Zeami partly in prose, called *kotoba*, and partly in verse, called *utai*, and each verb in the text is accompanied by an honorific auxiliary, called *sōrō*, or other auxiliaries. The effect here in Japanese is to impart greater gravity, particularly to the portions of the text that are in descriptive prose. In his introduction to his book of translations, *The No Plays of Japan*, Waley has emphasized the “impressive weight of sound” that occurs in a performance of Nô drama, and he goes on to say that where a prose passage gradually heightens into verse, the verse tends to be in alternating lines of five and seven syllables. Waley found blank verse in English would be “a bad equivalent” used on its own, and so translated these passages alternating blank verse with shorter iambic lines to represent the rhythm of such passages. We can see these rhythms in the closing passage of his translation, where the text is
broken at intervals by shorter sentences or phrases. The result of Waley’s technique is that he is able to represent to the reader several levels of significance, starting with the plot, then beauty of language, and leading in turn to an understanding and appreciation of the spiritual meaning of the play.

Nô performances are often regarded as elitist, and indeed in Zeami’s time performances were often given in the Shôgun’s castle, in temples, centres of worship, and the homes of the wealthy. But these plays were also performed in the country where everyone might attend. Again, this is one of the great virtues of Arthur Waley’s translation, that any one reading it will respond to its underlying qualities of serenity and salvation, or yûgen, which I mentioned previously.

In his instructions to the actors of Nô, Zeami gave advice which could equally apply to translators. Zeami wrote: “If you look deeply into the ultimate essentials of this art, you will find that what is called ‘the flower’ has no separate existence. Were it not for the spectator who reads into the performance a thousand excellences, there would be no flower at all.” To discern good from bad we can only take what suits the need of the moment and call it good.” Waley was well aware of the value of “taking what suits the need of the moment” to enhance reader response, and produced a translation that reaches our deeper feelings, so deep that we are hardly aware of them.

Walter Benjamin has well observed that the primary task of the translator consists in being able to produce “the echo of the original.” In Zeami’s text the combination of speech, song, chanting, recitation, and ritualised movements, all contribute to an atmosphere of Buddhist spirituality and of a succession of rhythms which create an emotional impact on the reader. Undoubtedly, each of the two translations contains “echoes of the original”. Brazell does this in depth, with all the details Zeami included in his text creating a spiritual impact of salvation and reconciliation in Buddha’s name. This translation is meant to be read and enjoyed as a work of precise scholarship. It demands to be read slowly so that its impact builds up. It becomes an intonation in the reader’s mind. Waley’s, on the other hand, is an imaginative rendering in which the focus
on the theme never wavers, with ancillary material stripped away, so that it can be read as a poetic play in English of a high order where, as with Zeami, every word has a necessary place. Waley’s translation is a work of art, expressing with elegance, force and beauty “what lies beneath the surface.”

NOTES
2 Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1444) was the son of Kanami Kiyotsugu (1333-1384) who was a priest of the Kasuga Temple near Nara. The genius of the two men established Nô in its present form.
5 Brazell, p. xii.
6 Waley, p. 33.
8 Waley, p. 36.
9 Ibid, p. 64.
10 At this stage I should mention that romanization of Japanese words differs due to the conventions of the time between Waley’s and Brazell’s translations, e.g. ‘Rensei’ and ‘Renshō’. I have copied exactly their romanization.
11 Brazell, pp. 128-129.
12 Waley, p. 36.
13 Brazell, p. 128.
14 This is my own translation.
15 Waley, p. 128.
16 Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei, p. 234.
17 Brazell, footnote 3, p. 129.
18 Waley, p. 64.
19 Ibid, p. 68.
20 Brazell, p. 127.
21 Waley, p. 5 and p. 21.
22 Brazell, p. 134.
23 Waley, pp. 64-65.
24 Brazell, p. 130.
25 Waley, pp. 72-73.
26 Waley, p. 22.
28 Waley, p. 21.