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Were Shakespeare and Kurosawa Marxists?: Examining Structural Critiques in Hamlet and The Bad Sleep Well

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Examining Structural Critiques in *Hamlet* and *The Bad Sleep Well*

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Abstract

Most film adaptations of Hamlet focus on the emotional distress of the titular character. One notable to exception to this is Akira Kurosawa's film, *The Bad Sleep Well*. In this adaptation of Hamlet, Kurosawa amplifies the hints of a Marxist viewpoint in Shakespeare's original play into a film with a systemic anti-capitalist worldview. This version of the story replaces the state government of Denmark with the corporate business sector of Japan. This change of setting allows Kurosawa to examine not only the corruption that stems from hegemonic incompetence that Shakespeare comments on, but also, a more finely-tuned critique of the imbalances that are imposed on society through the perpetuation of the capitalist marketplace. While Shakespeare displays an empathy for the working class in Hamlet, he ultimately upholds the hierarchies that oppress them. Kurosawa is able to transpose Shakespeare's empathy into a broader structural critique that seeks to abolish the unequal hierarchies imposed by capitalism and imbue the working class with a revolutionary potential.

Keywords: Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Marxism, Kurosawa, *The Bad Sleep Well*, Adaptation Studies

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Essay

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been adapted to film more than any other Shakespeare play (Follows). Most of these film adaptations (Laurence Olivier, Kenneth Branagh and Franco Zeffereli) maintain the

original setting of the play and use cinematic techniques to highlight the story's emotional content. Even adaptations that replace the original setting, like *The Lion King* and the Michael Almereyda version, still focus primarily on the distress of the titular character. One *Hamlet* adaptation that stands out from these is Akira Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well*. In this version, the state government of Denmark is replaced with the corporate business sector of Japan. The film's primary concern is with the dealings of the "Public Corporation" and how Koichi Nishi, the film's Prince, reacts to them. After his father is forced to commit suicide by a corrupt bureaucratic structure, Koichi climbs the ladder of the company's hierarchy in an attempt to disrupt it from the inside. This setting change and emphasis on the practices of Japan's corporate world are ideal for reading both the film and play through a Marxist lens. Although Shakespeare's work is not generally seen in Marxist terms, most likely because of its historical precedence, Kurosawa's film forces the relationship between Shakespeare and Marxism to become unavoidable and encourages us to re-approach *Hamlet* this way. Through the characterization of Claudius and the Prince, Shakespeare displays an empathy for the working class and aversion to corruption in the original play. This characterization is then amplified in *The Bad Sleep Well* through the portrayal of Koichi, Iwabuchi and the President, turning Shakespeare's power analysis into a structural critique of the capitalist system.

Most of the dialogue connecting Shakespeare and Marx leans towards critical theory, rather than the close textual reading of literary studies. In "'Well grubbed, old mole': Marx, *Hamlet*, and the (un)fixing of representation," Peter Stallybrass's analysis traces Marx's ideas to their origins in the French Revolution. He notes that "Shakespeare was Marx's favorite author" and what "Marx admired in him" was "the very *im*purities of Shakespearean drama, its resistances to a classical theory of representation." These impurities of Shakespearean drama are relayed through the portrayal of the binary between "the base and the farcical." He argues the binary of Shakespearean impurities can be seen in Marx's revolutionary theory: "history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy... the second time as

farce." His focus on the historical lineage of Marx's ideas and sussing out of the impure binary of Shakespearean drama in Marx's theory is fascinating. However, his focus misses the critiques of power relations both authors share. Marx's predictions of how revolutionary action will occur says nothing of his broader class analysis and critique of the capitalist system. A close literary reading of *Hamlet* shows that this power analysis is echoed in Shakespeare's play. What Stallybrass's historical analysis illuminates is that Shakespeare's critique of power, embodied in the drama of *Hamlet*, may have been a direct influence on Marx's theory. Noting Marx's admiration of Shakespeare in relation to a power analysis shows that if Marx adopted the impurities of the Shakespearean binary into his perspective, there's reason to believe he adopted the critique of power imbalance as well. However, I think it is worth noting that even if Shakespeare's portrayal of power relations did not have a direct influence on Marx (although it is highly unlikely after a survey of Stallybrass's work), the parallels of this critique still exist in the work of both authors.

Gabriel Egan follows the tendency towards critical theory and historical lineage laid out by Stallybrass in *Shakespeare and Marx.* While Egan notes "that Marx's ideas have pervaded all aspects of Shakepeare criticism," his survey of "ideology, dialectics, exchange, alienation, commodity fetishism, and reification" is intentionally broad "to suggest the range of things a Marxist approach can attend to" (98). While looking at how Marxist theory has subconsciously invaded the realm of Shakespeare studies in its relation to the topics mentioned above, this broad analysis again misses the finer points of specific power critique that is present in both *Hamlet* and Marx's theory. Egan is primarily interested in how Marxist theory has permeated scholarship and influenced the perspective of academics, even when their lens for examining Shakespeare is not explicitly Marxist. What Egan and Stallybrass don't focus on is how adopting an explicitly Marxist viewpoint to read Shakespeare will reveal incredible similarities in their critique of social relations. Such a reading is what I will attempt to perform in this essay.

The necessity for such a reading is illustrated by Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well.* What Kurosawa's film shows us is that there is an inherent Marxist tendency in Shakespeare's original play. Although Kurosawa's film is unique in its structural anti-capitalist critique, it is not the only *Hamlet* adaptation that attempts to heighten the Marxist leanings of Shakespeare's play. Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) sees a similar transposition of setting. Almereyda's film takes note of the inherent Marxism of Shakespeare's play by turning the state of Denmark into the Denmark Corporation. The setting change to corporate America as it exists in New York's tallest skyscrapers lays the groundwork for drawing out the Marxist tendencies of the story, but the film never goes further than this. We never see the people that the consumer towers of New York domineer over. We cannot examine the relations of power in the society of the film because we are never exposed to anyone except the powerful. Even dialogue that hints at the citizenry in the original play is excised. (This in itself would be subject to Marxist critical theory in the implications of this omission). For a film that takes place in one of the world's most populous cities, it features a surprising lack of extras. The one exception is a scene where Hamlet meets Rosencrantz in Guildenstern in a bar and the setting is filled with patrons. However, this scene is emblematic of the film as a whole in its exclusionary focus on the bourgeoisie. The proletariat are mere set decoration and their relationship to the main characters cannot be examined because it does not exist. The setting of the heightened consumerism of New York's skyscrapers can imply an exploitation by the hands of capital, but this inference can only be gleaned when outside works and knowledge are considered. There is nothing in the text of the film to dictate that this is the relation of power that exists. Almereyda's film is worth noting for is recognition of the need for a Marxist interpretation of *Hamlet*, without fully realizing the potential of that premise.

Kurosawa's film takes that premise and not only further recognizes Shakespeare's Marxist tendencies, but emboldens them. This emboldening takes the power analysis of Shakespeare's play and repurposes it into a fully structural critique of capitalism. Where Shakespeare's power analysis may

have influenced Marx, Kurosawa then uses Marx's theory to inform his interpretation of the play. The informing of an already Marxist adjacent play by Marx's fully developed critique of capitalism is finally able to imbue the story with a revolutionary potential. Evidence of Shakespeare's initial view of power relations and Kurosawa's Marxist amplification of that view is most clearly seen through a close character analysis of both the play and the film. The way Kurosawa portrays The Prince, King Claudius and Fortinbras both highlights the Marxist underpinnings of the original play and further develops them. The respective similarities and differences between the portrayals of these three characters in the original and the adaptation provide substantial material for a close-reading through a Marxist lens.

Shakespeare shows us the failures of hegemony with the character of King Claudius. Claudius' poor leadership is evident through his unpopularity with the citizenry as evidenced by Marcellus referring to his "rotten... state of Denmark" (Shakespeare 1.4.100) and the following lines "He's loved of the distracted multitude/Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes" (Shakespeare 4.3.4). In this dialogue, Claudius refers to Hamlet being well-liked among the people of Denmark, which in turn implies that the King is not well-liked. He displays his envy of the fact that Hamlet is more popular among the people than he is. However, it's easy to see why the people of Denmark feel this way. He says that they will judge based on the appearance in their "eyes" and not their rational "judgment." This illustrates that he does not have respect for the people he rules over and views them exploitatively through a top-down lens of bourgeoisie-to-proletariat. He is so engrossed in maintaining his power and status that he can only see people as human capital through their power relations. This process of commodification is further evidenced by Claudius' marriage to Gertrude and is embodied in the quote, "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (Shakespeare 3.4.59). Here, by mentioning his "queen" as the last in a list of his "crown" and "ambition," he is equating the three and the emphasis on "my" and "mine" imply possessive ownership through an assertion of power. To Claudius, Gertrude is just another piece of the prize that comes from being King. Although it is true that he sees her as

"conjunctive to my life and soul" (Shakespeare 4.7.16), his love for her is not as Gertrude the woman, it is as Gertrude, the facet of Kingship. Literary critic, Elham Omrani, supports this analysis: "for him, all things and all people are commodities. Claudius commodified Gertrude and married her in order to help him win the throne away from Hamlet after the death of the previous king and strengthen the bases of his newly established kingdom" (Omrani 188). The subsumption of Claudius's humanity by nature of his social position shows Shakespeare's view of power was adjacent to the Marxist critique.

The Vice President of Public Corporation, Iwabuchi, is *The Bad Sleep Well*'s version of King Claudius. By taking Claudius' traits of commodification and hegemonic incompetence and placing them in the corporation's Vice President, it highlights how these characteristics flourish in a capitalist structure. Much like Claudius' rule making Denmark rotten, Public Corporation does not benefit the people of Japan and Iwabuchi is an unpopular figure in Japanese society. This is made clear through the relationship Iwabuchi and Public Corporation have with the press. We see news headlines like "Do Suicides Prove Corruption?" (Kurosawa) and "Underlings Sacrifice Themselves to Contain Scandal" (Kurosawa). After Iwabuchi refutes a journalist's claim that the suicides are cover ups for the company's corruption, another reporter retorts by saying, "you think so? The public isn't so sure" (Kurosawa). The press see through Iwabuchi's incompetent lies and the Japanese public distrust of Public Corporation, the same way the people of Denmark distrust Claudius' state. The Vice President also commodifies his daughter, Yoshiko, much like how Claudius commodifies Gertrude. This is exemplified when he drugs her with a hallucinogenic, to trick her into telling him where Koichi is hiding. After convincing her to "drink it all, quickly" (Kurosawa), he steps out into the hallway and paces back in forth in front of a mirror with his head down. When he finally looks up at the mirror, he dons a look of disgust and covers his face with his handkerchief. By his facial expression and the fact that he feels the need to literally cover it, it shows that he is appalled at what he sees. He knows that by doing this he has lost all trace of his humanity. He has this moment of self-recognition that he is so

engrossed in the world of churning out profits for Public Corporation that endangering and betraying the trust of his daughter are secondary. The transactional nature of Iwabuchi is necessary for a capitalist economy to thrive and public distrust of incompetent rulers is a symptom of that's system's failures. Mark Fisher comments on how these traits are a necessity in *Capitalist Realism*. He writes that "'good management'... can only be maintained if one has a near-total absence of any critical reflexivity" (Fisher 54). By transposing elements of Claudius' character into Iwabuchi, this film magnifies how those traits serve and function a modern capitalist system.

Hamlet serves as a foil to Claudius in this way, for he is aware of Claudius' inept ruling and he has the ability to forge meaningful human relationships. The Prince slanders Claudius as "a king of shreds and patches" (Shakespeare 3.4.117) and further proclaims that Claudius is:

A murderer and a villain;
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule

(Shakespeare 3.4.113)

This boisterous attack on the King shows us that Hamlet has insight into the King's motivations. The use of the words "tithe," "vice" and "cutpurse" all have connotations of monetary gain. Hamlet is perhaps the only character in the play who correctly attributes the King's primary motivation as the maintenance of his power. Unlike Claudius, Hamlet displays an empathy for the working class evidenced in the line, "Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows" (Shakespeare 2.2.282). Here, he recognizes that both he and the beggars don't see the King as fit to rule. He also recognizes the importance of the popular support of the beggar class, notably, a support Claudius wishes he had. In contrast to the view of people as commodities, Hamlet forges a true friendship with Horatio. Hamlet says, "Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice...

Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man/As e'er my conversation coped withal" (Shakespeare 3.2.67). By making specific reference to his "choice," Hamlet proves that his friendship with Horatio is genuine and is not bound by any transactional purpose. The elevation of Hamlet's humanity and his recognition of class consciousness in contrast to Claudius, shows Shakespeare rejecting the notion that "there is no alternative" to "capitalist realism" (Fisher).

Much like how Hamlet accurately ascribes the King's motivations to him, *The Bad Sleep Well's* Koichi is the only character who is willing to look Public Corporation in the eye and critique their social position. Koichi refers to Public Corporation's inner-workings as a "snake pit" (Kurosawa) and confronts Moriyama after he kidnaps him from the company by saying, "Shirai pocketed seven million. You probably got twice that, at least fifteen. In your position, it'd take ten years of self-denial to set aside fifteen million. You came out of his office stuffing ten bankbooks into your briefcase" (Kurosawa). This speech is parallel to Hamlet's tirade on Claudius to his mother. The use of "position" implies that Moriyama's corruption is tied to his role as a member of the managerial-boss class. By referring to Moriyama's "self-denial," Koichi implicates that the betrayal of one's humanity is necessary to hold this position. Also similar to the Prince and Horatio, Koichi has a genuine friendship with Itakura. Michael Almereyda calls Itakura Koishi's "Horatio-like pal." There is a scene where they lament the death of their old industrial jobs and talk about how they used to haul oil during the war period. Itakura says, "You were an arrogant asshole... but once we started fighting -" Koichi interrupts, "I wasn't such an asshole after all?" (Kurosawa). The two then share laughter. This creates a stark dichotomy between their former labor and the cold, lifeless inhumanity we see in the corporate sector, where the lives of people you work with are expendable. In taking Hamlet's humanity and placing it against the backdrop of corporate capitalism, Kurosawa makes a much more direct link between power imbalances and their intrinsic role in an exploitative economic system.

Fortinbras' relevance to a Marxist reading of *Hamlet*, comes from the fact that he offers a sense of hope and confidence with the structure of how Denmark is ruled. When Fortinbras says, "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom" (Shakespeare 5.2.432), he implies that he will be next to rule Denmark and repair the broken state. Proof that the play puts faith in Fortinbras' ability to rule after Hamlet and Claudius are dead is evidenced by how he is viewed by Hamlet and Horatio. Prince Hamlet is awe-struck by "delicate and tender prince" Fortinbras' "army of such mass and charge" (Shakespeare 4.4.50). Shakespeare also makes a point of Fortinbras' capabilities in the following lines:

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honor's at the stake

(Shakespeare 4.4.56)

By using the word "great" three times successively, it drives home the idea of greatness belonging to Fortinbras, a greatness neither Claudius or Hamlet have. This nobility ascribed to Fortinbras juxtaposed with the hegemonic incompetence of Claudius alludes to the fact that Shakespeare's pessimism about the wealth and power that drives corrupt rulers is *not* a structural critique. Shakespeare is suggesting that the problem of poor rulers is determined by the actions of the individual in the role, not the system they take part in. Shakespeare offers consolation for Denmark, not through collective action and the unification of the working class, but through a noble ruler ascending as opposed to the other fallible prospects we have seen throughout the play.

The President of Public Corporation is the film's version of Fortinbras. We never see the President or directly hear him speak. He serves the same narrative role of being a character we hear about as background noise throughout the entirety of the story until the end, where he plays a pivotal role. The film ends with the suggestion that the President is hatching a scheme to force Iwabuchi to

commit suicide next. Much like in the original play, we have the death of the protagonist and the implied death-to-come of the antagonist at the story's end. The difference lies with how the film frames the President as opposed to how the play frames Fortinbras. Despite Iwabuchi's punishment, the President still remains and is continuing the cycle of forced suicides. This signifier that the workings of Public Corporation are cyclical tells us that Kurosawa's critique *is* structural. This ending implies that the hegemonic incompetence does not come from Iwabuchi, the individual, but the systemic design of how the company has to function. To quote Shakespeare scholar, Kaori Ashizu, "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." Contrasted to Fortinbras' nobility, we get a cold and lifeless figure with the President. The fact that we don't ever see his face and only know what he is saying by Iwabuchi's responses contribute to his lifeless presence. Portraying the President this way suggests to the audience that it doesn't matter what he looks like or sounds like. Just like Iwabuchi, he is merely a role that is serving a function to the company. Portraying the President as a lifeless figure who's purpose is to carry out the cyclical nature of Public Corporation's dealings shows us that the failures of hegemony stem from the system that causes power and wealth to be disproportionately attributed to those at the top of society, not the individuals who occupy those roles.

In adapting *Hamlet* into a world of corporate bureaucracy, Kurosawa is able to turn Shakespeare's hints of a Marxist critique into a film with a systemic anti-capitalist worldview. While Shakespeare touches on power imbalances, commodification and class consciousness through Claudius and the titular character, Kurosawa transposes these elements into a structural analysis. *The Bad Sleep Well* offers much more in the way of revolutionary potential in its subversion of Fortinbras. Kurosawa rejects the prospect of a noble ruler in favor of a President who "invoke[s] the shadowy, centerless impersonality proper to a corporate"(Fisher 67) capitalist structure. In Kurosawa's film, the cyclical wheels of capital will keep turning, regardless of the individual they will possess next.

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