

The Frolic of the Beasts

Reviewed by CHRIS CABRERA

The Frolic of the Beasts, by Yukio Mishima, translated by Andrew Clare. Vintage International, 2018; Paperback, 166 pages; \$15.00.

This year, Japan has seen a resurgence of interest in one of its greatest modern authors, Yukio Mishima, in the wake of commemorating the 50th year since his passing by ritual suicide. The writer's death was a theatrical event, staged after a failed coup at the Japan Self Defense Forces HQ where, clad in full military garb, Mishima addressed the crowd of bewildered onlookers below the balcony—military commanders and cadets, but also news crews eager for a scoop—as he demanded modern Japan return to sovereignty under the emperor in an effort to regain its former glory. The crowd, perplexed and disgusted, jeered at him, as Mishima expected. The author, who had finished the manuscript of his life work tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility* that same morning—retreated from the balcony to enact his pact with death in an inner room. While the spectacle has been immortalized by the shocking images of this performance—still replayed and circulated to this day—it betrays an author whose life was much more complex than this event would suggest—not to mention, leaving behind a catalog of writing that stands out as some of the most brilliant works to come out of Japan—or even the world—in the 20th century. Magazines in 2020 have featured Mishima on the cover once again, introducing new readers to his library of work, and television stations have spliced together archival and rare footage of Mishima—the writer, the husband, soldier, playwright, and more—to present viewers with a montage of images of his life before his suicide shook the country and literary world 50 years ago in 1970. The television program concluded with an attempt to frame Mishima's writings in the context of the global pandemic, although these tenuous connections are certainly up for debate.

The same renewed public interest in Mishima is less widespread outside of Mishima's home country of Japan—perhaps because of his controversial politics, many readers worldwide have tread with caution—but nevertheless, there has been an increase in English language translations leading up to this commemorative event. With so many novels—not to mention plays, critiques, short stories, and the like—the task of completing Mishima's vast and varied catalog of material is daunting, but in recent years more and more talented translators have taken up the task of rounding out his remaining novels for publication, perhaps anticipating the recent sparks of interest in 2020. Stephen Dodd has translated *Life for Sale* (1968—translation, 2019) and the forthcoming *Beautiful Star*, and Mishima's look into the life of a haughty young actor in cheap action movies—perhaps a reflection of his own time in the movie industry—in the novella *Star* (1960—translation, 2019) has also appeared in translation by Sam Bett. And a year before, in 2018, another novel by Mishima appeared in English for the first time: *The Frolic of the Beasts* (1961), published by Vintage International with

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a translation by Andrew Clare. Although it garnered high praise upon its publication in Japan, later on it was rarely mentioned, perhaps dwelling in the immense shadows cast by *The Golden Pavilion* that preceded it in 1955 and *A Sailor Who Fell From Grace By The Sea* in 1963. While it certainly does not dethrone these two centerpieces in Mishima's body of work, *The Frolic of the Beasts* is a reminder of some of the writer's strongest points: his keen attention to detail and vivid descriptions, his look into the increasingly complex inner workings of the mind and actions of youth, and his overall look at the masks which people hide behind and the complexities of society and the environment that serve as the backdrop.

Frolic of the Beasts was a longtime personal project of translator Andrew Clare, who shelved the completed translation for decades until he considered having it formally published—a timely decision that coincides with the aforementioned resurgence of Mishima titles that have appeared in recent years. While the number of different projects by various translators is certainly welcome news, there is some concern if these disparate publications will come together to deliver a coherent, uniform, authorial voice. Many different translators have worked on Mishima's novels and plays throughout the years—some have even worked with the author himself to have his literature presented in the best way possible to English audiences—leaving a great burden on many of these new projects to contribute to a legacy of skilled translations of Mishima's prose—and of course, between each other. A translator must deal with their work as not a stand-alone piece, but in relation to the other well-established works in the author's canon—certainly a concern for a literary figure as widely translated as Mishima, whose "voice" has already become distinct and recognizable in the English language.

Andrew Clare's translation will not disappoint avid readers of Mishima's work, who will immediately recognize this as a "Mishima" novel, with Clare's reworking of the original Japanese assuming an air very similar to one familiar to those who have read many of the author's works in English. From the opening chapter, ripe with lavish descriptions of the most mundane or deplorable workings of a prison shower to the reoccurring ventures into each character's psyche—there is no mistaking this as a novel by Mishima himself. Clare has navigated the complexities of Japanese to ensure that the *Frolic of the Beasts* keeps a natural flow that is largely uninterrupted by questionable word choice or mishaps of translation, a challenge for a translator retrieving a novel from almost 60 years ago that was written by Mishima with meticulous attention to detail.

Of course, a fine-tuned translation is nothing if its source material is bland or uninteresting and this is certainly not the case for *The Frolic of the Beasts*. The story depicts a strange love triangle between Ippei, a successful businessman and literary figure, his cold but beautiful wife Yuko, and a student apprentice, Koji, who begins working for Ippei at his luxury shop in the middle of Tokyo. Koji encounters Ippei's beautiful wife and immediately falls in love. His admiration for Yuko is perhaps fueled by his resentment for Ippei, who is openly in affairs with many other women. On the surface, Yuko is indifferent to her husband's infidelity, but this only strengthens his desire to continue. Koji agrees that something needs to be done, staging a

confrontation that catches Ippei in the act. Yet the two stop short of any real understanding, and Koji, realizing in an instant that the event is meaningless, takes matters into his own hands by striking Ippei in the face with a wrench he picked up by chance.

The bulk of the novel takes place years after this crime, after Koji is released from prison. Yuko is now living in a scenic village in the mountains of rural Japan—the fictional town of Iro located in the Izu peninsula—tending to a horticulture business, managing the green houses with an assistant, the elder Teijiro, as she tends to her husband. Ippei survived the attack but incurred damage to his physical and mental state: he is paralyzed on one side, resulting in “indeterminable smile” and can barely speak. Yuko, however, agrees to house Koji upon his release from prison—the young boy has no places to return—no relatives or parents in the city. A strange dynamic develops between the three as their pasts fester like a wound, unhealing even as time passes. Koji is still in love with Yuko, she is indeed still in love with boy, too, but cannot forsake her ill husband. Koji’s brash act of violence that was enacted to set events in motion has only rearranged the complicated love triangle and brought things, once again, to a halt. In the end, Koji’s life in the village with the couple ends in the way it only can—in death, tragedy, and without much resolution, suggesting they were all doomed from the start.

The events are arranged in the novel in a non-linear manner, causing enough confusion to justify a second reading. The novel opens with an episode of the three taking a photo together that comes before the tragic events at the end of the novel. Nonetheless, the narrator alludes to future tragedies that will shatter the smiles of the three reflected in this photograph. We are then directed to a hill with their graves. Although the three will be buried together, Ippei’s grave and Koji’s grave lie on opposite sides of Yuko’s—the only one which has yet to be filled. The opening chapters rely on repeated foreshadowing of Koji’s future crime, building suspense for a climactic incident that will tie the events together. Yet the suspense dissipates barely halfway into the novel, and things change gear to focus on the happenings of the three after the incident. It feels as if the novel could have benefitted from a rearranged timeline, with the opening feeling unbalanced and rushed to present the complicated back story only to approach a slower pace later.

But conforming to a standard narrative structure is admittedly not typical of Mishima. Damian Flanagan points out in his review that the disturbed sense of linear time that runs through *The Frolic of the Beasts* is predicated on its heavily reliance on tropes from Noh theater.¹ An avid fan of the traditional art, Mishima was not only heavily influenced by the plays in his writings but also a Noh playwright himself.² The odd and unbalanced timeline, then, is perhaps intentional; avid readers of Noh theatre may not feel that Mishima’s sense of time is jarring. The seemingly out-of-place Epilogue will also make more sense to those familiar with Noh. After the events of the novel, the narrator switches to the first person, as told by a young researcher who comes to the village of Iro by chance and learns of the events of the novel through a conversation with the priest of the local temple. This intervention in the main narrative by a third party is actually itself emblematic of the structure of many Noh stories, where

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traditionally a travelling monk, messenger, or other third-party character relays the events of the main narrative.³ The Translator's Note at the end of the novel suggests the novel is itself a parody of the *plot* of a traditional Noh play, but *The Frolic of the Beasts* perhaps owes much more to the structure of this art form than meets the eye.

Of course, Clare also notes how the quintessential element of Noh, its signature masks, is particularly important in understanding the emotions and appearances of the characters in the novel. In Noh, these highly stylized and sometimes jarring masks express specific emotions and characters of the actor who wears them—some are extremely particular and complex, requiring a detailed understanding of the art. But in *The Frolic of the Beasts* Mishima is arguably more concerned with complexities of the exterior and interior of his characters, and how this inner world and outer appearance is frequently disturbed and unpredictable. The form of an interior self that is discontinuous with a public selfhood is rooted in Japanese culture; Mishima has arguably expressed this doubleness in his writing more than any other Japanese writer, and it involves masking outward appearances, attention to aesthetics beauty and peace, to hide a much darker and deeper interior strife that often makes it difficult to decode the actions of a person. This is especially true in Mishima's novels, and in *The Frolic of the Beasts* it contributes to the complicated actions of the characters, namely of Yuko. While we learn much about Koji through the narrator—and little about Ippei, in fact—Yuko herself seems difficult to fathom. Ippei's vice is that no matter how ill his deeds, his wife never seems to voice her concerns or get angry in front of him. And while the connections to Noh theater invite readings of her emotions as a kind of mask to shield her inner self, it is made even more complex by the fact that her face is truly shaded from view by her parasol. Neither Koji nor Ippei has been able to see *through* her "mask" but neither have they ever been able to clearly see the mask itself. The layers of distortion and indeed the complexities of the mask scramble any simple congruence with Noh mask readings—of which there are many for specific masks—and reminds one of Mishima's own complex I-novel *Confessions of a Mask*, wherein it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the narrator's confessions from Mishima's own self-revelations.

In *The Frolic of the Beasts*, however, Mishima gives readers ready access to the mind of the main character, the nihilistic youth Koji. Character psychology, as in Dostoevsky, is one of Mishima's strong points; his probing of the monk's incentives for arson in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* come to mind as a prime example. It is noteworthy that the nihilistic spirit of Koji's youth invites comparison to the psychological perturbations of Kiyooki, the wealthy young protagonist in the first novel of his tetralogy, *Spring Snow*. While these characters are markedly different on the surface, Mishima awards them the same morbid complexities, the same flaws, and the same frustrating imperfections. A good example is the rash behavior of Koji, who strikes out at Ippei or holds back his feelings for Yuko at the last moment; such inwardly troubled, erratic behaviors stir reader interest if not empathy.

Overlooked in other reviews of *The Frolic of the Beasts* is Mishima's framing of nature and the rural village as a space of aesthetic beauty that hides a deeper layer of sin underneath. Mishima spends paragraphs exploring the richness of the countryside

landscapes, his narrator sometimes even losing track of himself as he relishes in passages that praise its vast sublime beauty. Rural life is idealized when Koji and his friends spend a night under the stars on an island of the coast, “content in the feeling of superiority that came from indulging themselves in a special kind of pleasure, the likes of which they knew was alien to city dwellers.”⁴ But far from a simple claim that the beauty of the countryside contrasts to depressing city life, Mishima instead opts to complicate the view of such a pristine location by also exposing how it can be unsettling. Koji—along with Ippei, too, as we later learn—is wary of the darkness in the village: “The graphic quality of everything that lay in slumber during the day awakening all at once was so much more physical than nights in the city...night itself was like a colossal, intense piece of meat saturated with hot blood” (116). The vast beauty of the countryside also masks an endless unknown, one that inciting fear as much as wonder. On their hike to a waterfall and small shrine in the mountains, the pristine natural landscape contrasts with the tension boiling within the characters themselves. Perhaps there is something more to the characters than a tenuous link to the environment of this place, especially when considering that the scene in which Yuko uses Koji to mock and torture Ippei begins when the sound of the waterfall arouses a change within her. Nature, too, is affective and a part of the actions of Mishima’s characters. Village life away from the busy city is far from simple, with rumors spreading like wildfire and a collective mentality that ceaselessly monitors the household of Yuko. The villagers distance themselves from Koji when they hear rumors of his time in prison, although this dissipates as some of them become curiously attracted to his fresh new face.

The minor characters in the village—that Mishima spends time to detail—are also not without their depravity. The “purest” of characters, the town priest, who later corresponds with Yuko even after Koji’s crimes have him sentenced to death and Yuko sent to prison, is hardly a saint. Mishima personifies him as a beast who “thirsted after people’s suffering” and was “trying for a good catch.” He seems like a predator when he is described as “detecting” the “delicious smell” of Koji and Yuko’s anguish, perhaps anticipating that their plunge into sin will lead them to him someday (68-69). And not only does the priest of a small rural shrine hide an appetite for the misfortune of others, but the helper at the greenhouse, Teijiro, also confesses a secret he has hidden for years. Koji sleeps with his daughter Kimi when she visits the village; the estrangement from her father is a mystery to everyone in the village. Yet upon learning of her departure, Teijiro nonchalantly confesses to Koji that Kimi chose to leave the village after he raped her. The sudden confession about this incestuous affair shocks Koji—the reader too, no doubt—and suggests how even the least suspecting characters have a dark secret, and that the quiet village, too, is home to many secrets under its tranquil exterior.

Mishima is said to have been rather serious about the field work he conducted for his novels, taking the utmost care in immersing himself in the areas that appear in his writing. *The Frolic of the Beasts* is no exception, and the vivid portrayals of the countryside elevate the level of realism and immersion for the reader. Mishima also describes the time Koji spends in prison, writing at great lengths about the peculiar customs of prison life one can only imagine Mishima had learned from inmates

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themselves. *The Frolic of the Beasts* presents at its start the assembly line workings of the prison bath house, a dingy dilapidated facility that nonetheless excites Koji in some way for its organized and *repetitive* structure; Mishima goes so far to call the gathering of bodies for three minutes at a time, in and out of cubicles as, “something of a marvelously pure sanctity” (14) that Koji is constantly reminded of throughout the novel. Koji relates the customs of the prison when he speaks of the *gori*, the way inmates used a comb scratched on a rough surface to light cigarettes, or the practice of using a dustpan in turn with the window as a makeshift mirror to see one’s self before leaving prison; having no mirrors, inmates grew increasingly concerned with their image when their release drew near.

While the casual reader may find themselves roused into confusion by its nonlinear plot and presentation, fans of Mishima that possess an apt knowledge of his influences will know what to expect and look forward to rereading the novel to enjoy it in its entirety. Thanks to the masterful translation by Andrew Clare, another work by Mishima joins the growing catalog of his work in English, and while it may not compare to his greatest writings, it still has lasting merit and plenty of potential for a novel that has otherwise been overlooked in Mishima’s career.

NOTES

¹ Damian Flanagan, “‘The Frolic of the Beasts’: A Mishima Classic, Roused from Its Long Hibernation,” *The Japan Times*, November 24, 2018. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2018/11/24/books/frolic-beasts-mishima-classic-roused-long-hibernation/>.

² See Yukio Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, Translated by Donald Keene, Vintage International: 2009, and *My Friend Hitler*, Translated by Hiroaki Sato, Columbia University Press: 2002.

³ Mikiko Ishii comments on some of the typical ways in which Noh theater programs are structured, and she particularly points out how these stories are relayed via a kind of interview between supporting characters—usually a page or travelling monk—and the main characters of the story.

⁴ *The Frolic of the Beasts*, p. 96. Subsequent references to Mishima’s novel will be in bracketed page numbers within the main text of the review.