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Frog Jump Plop! Translating and Interpreting the “Frog” Haiku by Matsuo Basho

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Matsuo Basho’s (1644-1698) “Frog” haiku was originally written in Japanese in the 17th century, and has been translated into English over a hundred times using a multitude of different approaches. This simple poem consists of a mere three lines and six words, and yet each translation is unique; some are vastly different from others. Each translation essentially creates a different poem, which are more like offspring of the poem, rather than a direct rendering of the original. Since we cannot know what the author’s intentions were, as translators, we each have to make choices both in reading the original and choosing the right words for the translation that most fully conveys what we think the author intended. But, how can we do that? What elements need to be considered in order to create a “perfect” translation? Through an in depth analysis of the haiku in its original language, and discussion of several different translations of the “Frog” haiku, I first explore the different theories and methods the translators used in their renderings. Then I explain the structure and essence of the original haiku. Through this exercise, I identify the subtle nuances and difficulties involved in reshaping a written material into a different tongue, highlight the complexities involved in the translation of Japanese materials into the English language, and suggest translation practices that best embody the values and essences of the original.