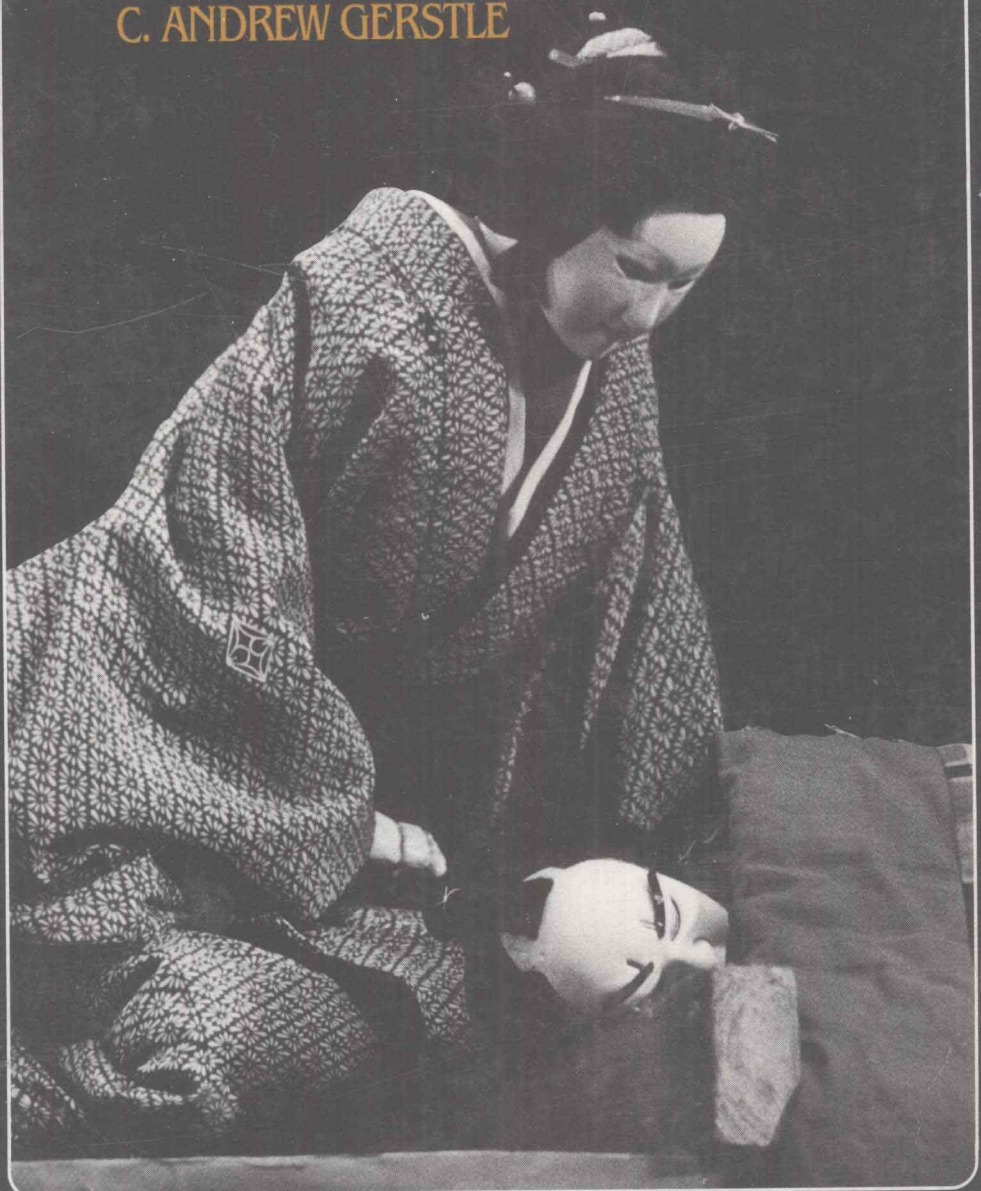
CIRCLES OF FANTASY

Convention in the Plays of CHIKAMATSU

C. ANDREW GERSTLE



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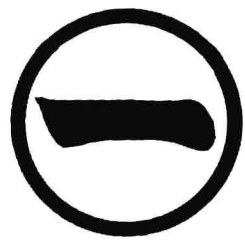

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Preface

Reading a traditional work of literature from an unfamiliar culture is not an easy task. Fundamental themes pervade all the world's literature, but each tradition has its own means of addressing the common concerns of the human condition. Learning to read and to criticize a work competently demands that the reader try to understand the conventions that artists have either followed or abandoned. We must not attempt to bring the work within our own literary experience. Rather, we must ourselves enter the complexities of the unfamiliar text. To achieve that, the reader must explore the conventions of the art and learn to respond to and appreciate the alien forms and styles. The critic's task is continually to learn new reading techniques for each new genre and style encountered. Too often readers approach this task without considering that the work is of a different tradition based on unfamiliar conventions.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725) is the foremost playwright of popular Japanese drama. Soon after his death, he came to be revered as the "god of writers" for the Jōruri (Bunraku) and Kabuki theaters. Consequently, there is a large amount of Japanese scholarship about his plays; and, thanks to Donald Keene's *Major Plays of Chikamatsu,* for over twenty years we have had good English translations of eleven of his works. Yet, surprisingly little scholarship or criticism in English deals with this major

figure or his many plays. This book undertakes to fill part of that lacuna.

Theater, the art of creating effective illusion on the stage, must rely on conventions that provide the audience, as well as the performers and playwright, with a common ground of suspended disbelief. To help Western readers to find this ground from which they can view Chikamatsu's plays, I have attempted to delineate two fundamental conventions of the Jōruri theater. The first is musical form, upon which the play is organized. The second is cyclical movement within the plays, influenced by Buddhist tradition. Ultimately the two conventions are complementary. There are descending and ascending movements of plot that usually begin and end in the same place after a journey through a dark hell of suffering. Music leads the audience along this journey.

Three types of plays are examined. The first is the long *jidaimono* (history or period) play, which most critics do not regard as unified drama; the second is the *shinjū* (love-suicide) play, which appears difficult for non-Japanese readers to appreciate; and the third is the happy-ending *sewamono* (contemporary-life) play, which many critics have condemned as artificial because of its comic ending. Here the focus will be on those conventions common to all three that directly affect narrative style.

For modern Western readers who cannot enjoy Chikamatsu's works on the stage, these fundamental conventions of Jōruri drama are essential to an understanding of the plays. In particular, the musical notation in the texts can help a modern reader or director understand the performing aspects in greater depth. I do not suggest that directors follow exactly the conventions of Jōruri theater, but, were a director or playwright to attempt to adapt a Jōruri play for performance on a Western stage, he or she could make considerable use of the musical notation to detect dramatic methods employed in the original, and possibly incorporate some of them into the production. In hindsight, one can imagine that George Bernard Shaw, who experimented with notation in his plays earlier in this century and wished to develop a system to guide actors' voices, might have found the Jōruri system of notation intriguing. The notation is also a unique guide to the "reading" of Jōruri by past chanters; it lets us see how they interpreted each new text presented to them by

playwrights. Their reading determined how the world saw and heard the play. The fundamentals of the musical formulas of Jōruri could provide stimulating ideas for contemporary theater, for Jōruri contains elements similar to realistic dialogue drama, Broadway-style musicals and classical opera.

Although I show how important it is for the musical notation to be included in translations, one question I have not discussed as fully as needed is how most effectively to incorporate the musical notation into translations. Musical notation can assist the translator in imagining how the lines were delivered in performance—their emphasis and rhetorical weight. However, since the word order will be different in a translation, the translator may wish to adjust the notation to better fit the demands of the language of the translation. Where I have inserted notation into the English version I have retained the original order of the notation marks and have tried to place them approximately above the English equivalent of the Japanese. Future translators may wish to experiment with different methods in order to develop a more effective system for reading and stage production.

The critical perspective in this study is primarily from within the tradition. Critical theories imposed from outside often tend to confuse the reading experience rather than to aid it, because they force upon the author hitherto unknown conventions. The ideal reader, of course, should not be limited to the view from within the tradition, but should also draw upon his or her own experience to judge the plays and compare them with other, more familiar works. But criticism must first take into account the conventions of the playwright's theater and the reading conventions of the period.

Many readers of this book will already have an interest in Japan, its literature, and its drama. For those less familiar with Japanese drama, Donald Keene's short book, *Japanese Literature,* particularly the twenty-page chapter on theater, provides an introduction to the subject. A more recent book, *The Voices and Hands of Bunraku,* by Barbara Adachi, will give the reader a sense of the life of Bunraku through pictures, interviews, and descriptions of performances.

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. . . all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images
And grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable.

Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

1 · *Introduction*

Japan has one of the most highly developed and active theatrical traditions in the world. The singular fact that several different kinds of drama have lived on in an unbroken tradition for centuries makes this tradition unique, and fascinating for anyone interested in the development of theater. In contrast to Western theater of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which eschewed the "theatrical" in favor of the "realistic," traditional Japanese drama is a theater of histrionics and technique, ranging from the subtle art of reducing action to symbolic movement in the Nō to the grandiose, often comically exaggerated, antics of Kabuki. Japanese drama is a drama of action, not words—whether in the fleeting "non-action" of an intensely poetic moment in a Nō play or, at the other extreme, the carefully choreographed sword-fight in Kabuki. Even words themselves are action on the Japanese stage; they are not simply spoken, they are acted. In Nō they are sung, in Bunraku chanted, in Kyōgen mimicked, and in Kabuki declaimed.

One of the most exciting and satisfying aspects of Japanese theater is its multisensuality. Music is important in most performances, but never usurps the stage as in Western opera or Broadway musicals; in Japanese drama it is, however important, only one element in the performance and can seldom stand on its own. Its role is to carry and give rhythm to the action. The language of the play, as well, whether colloquial dialogue or

cast in the cadences of classical poetry, is no more than a part of the whole. Unlike European theater, in Japanese drama, verse has never dominated the stage. Costume, makeup, and props also add to the total effect of the performance, and are often spectacular. The masks and robes of Nō are art objects in themselves; the nearly life-size and certainly lifelike puppets are the central focus of that drama; and, in Kabuki, costume and makeup tell us exactly what type of character the actor is playing. No one of these elements ever eclipses the others; each has moments of glory, but remains nonetheless a component.

Another facet of this multisensuality is the organization of a day's program of Japanese theater. In the West, one goes to the theater in the evening for two to three hours. Electric lighting makes this possible. In Japan, even now, traditional theater is performed from around 11:00 a.m. until about 10:30 p.m., the program being divided into two parts. In the not-so-distant past, Japanese theaters began their programs early in the morning and continued until dusk. Troupe managers and playwrights planned their programs to span twelve hours or more.

Early records of Nō performances and particularly the writings of Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), the most important figure in the history of Nō, make it clear that a varied and effective program has from the outset been a prime consideration. In Nō this means a group of relatively short, serious Nō plays are interspersed with comic Kyōgen interludes.

Nō plays are narrow in focus and theme. Most center on a single character and a single emotion, such as jealousy, vengeance, or longing. Each is categorized according to character and theme: God, Warrior, Woman, Mad person, Demon. A program of Nō combines these, usually in that order. Between the Nō are Kyōgen light comedies, usually short and farcical but occasionally longer and more serious in theme. The composition of a program of theater is fundamentally different from a typical Western program. Japanese audiences of the Nō (as well as those of Bunraku and Kabuki) expect variety in a performance, a fact not emphasized in Western Nō criticism as plays have generally been treated individually. But the effect of the juxtaposition of plays within a program is as important as the effect of the plays themselves; for the emotions of an audience will be affected by the preceding play and they will view each play in relation to

those around it. A Japanese audience must react to a variety of acting and musical styles in the course of a day of theater.

To understand the dramatic conventions of Jōruri (pre-1800 puppet drama)[1] or Kabuki, it is necessary to examine some of the conventions of Nō, the classical model from which later theater evolved. Zeami says, "Music is the spirit of Nō. The discipline of music is essential to Nō theater."[2] In his many treatises, Zeami repeatedly describes the structure of both the individual plays and the day's program in terms of the musical structure of *jo-ha-kyū* (introduction, intensification, and quick conclusion). The terms *jo-ha-kyū* go back to early Bugaku and Gagaku, the court dances and music imported from the continent. This musical concept has since remained central to all Japanese performing arts. It originally referred to tempo: the *jo* is the slowest and introduces the piece or program; the *ha* is more forceful and rhythmical, though not much faster; and the *kyū* is a quick finale. Zeami considered the *ha* the most important portion of the program where the actor "breaks apart the 'orderliness' of the auspicious *jo* and exerts his skill at different roles to the greatest extent in the most detailed manner."[3] To that extent Zeami used the word *ha* in its literal sense of *yaburu,* to "tear" or "break." In the context of theater, *jo-ha-kyū* refers both to musical and to dramatic rhythm, and it is in the *ha* that dramatic climaxes occur. In the *Nōsakusho* (On composing Nō plays, 1423), Zeami describes the writing of a Nō play as a three-stage process: first, "the choice of a suitable source"; second, "the construction of a *jo-ha-kyū* sequence in five movements"; and third, "the gathering of the words (from source), the creation of a melody, and the writing out of the play."[4] The second stage, where the structure is outlined, is the most important, because here the essence of the play must be carefully organized into five sections based on the principle of *jo, ha* (in three sub-sections), and *kyū*. After this, the appropriate musical mood for each section must be determined as well as the melodic patterns.

The *Nōsakusho* states that the dramatic and musical structure must be completely and minutely planned before the author actually writes out the play. The writing of a Nō drama thus demands that the playwright understand the musical principles upon which the theater is founded. In another work, Zeami discusses how playwrights can learn about music.[5] One method is

to practice writing plays. That is, one does not study music to learn to write plays, but, rather in the process of writing plays, one learns the principles of music. In Zeami's system, a Nō play is first musical and only then dramatic.

In the *Shudōsho* (The training of actors, 1430), Zeami states that a program performed at a temple or shrine consists of three Nō and two comic Kyōgen, but, in performances for private patrons, as many as ten pieces are often demanded.[6] He considers the ideal to be a five-play program arranged in the order of *jo*, ha_1, ha_2, ha_3, *kyū*, with the greatest effort of the actors concentrated on the three *ha* plays. Even if the program were arranged differently, the actors should perform in a *jo-ha-kyū* spirit. An eminent scholar of the Nō, Nose Asaji, points out the practical importance of Zeami's emphasis on the *jo-ha-kyū* organization, suggesting that this system places each drama in the most effective position within the program.[7] A play of lighter musical mood and theme is best at the beginning or end, where it can serve to introduce the program or to lift the spirits of the audience after a number of weighty or sad plays. The musical mood, subject, and tempo of the play determine its placement in the sequence. Each play is thus enhanced by its relation to the plays around it. This is in some ways analogous to the organization of Japanese imperial anthologies of poetry, in which poems are arranged in thematic sequences. Each poem is placed within a sequence so that it draws added meaning from the surrounding poems, while also contributing significance to them.[8] Indeed, this skill of arranging disparate elements into a unified whole is a marked characteristic of all Japanese arts, whether graphic, literary, dramatic, or musical.

Zeami himself never states specifically the sequence of types of plays in the program, but the *Hachijō kadensho* (The eight-chapter *Kadensho*), a treatise which directly influenced the development of Jōruri and Kabuki in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, outlines precisely the overall plan of a day-long program of Nō. The program outlines six types of plays. The following is a summary translation:

1. Auspicious God play.
2. Warrior Shura play: exorcism of evil spirit.
3. Wig (woman) or *yūgen* (elegant, sad) play: love.

4. Demon play: those suffering after death; purpose is to induce a spiritual awakening (*hosshin*) by showing the suffering of hell.
5. Morality play.
6. Return to auspicious play. Return to spring.[9]

Auspicious plays begin and conclude the program. In contrast, the middle plays generally are tragic. The warrior, woman, and demon dramas all depict suffering in one of the Buddhist samsaric realms in retribution for transgressions in former lives. This pattern of auspicious beginning, journey through the agonies of hell, and return to the auspicious ending, is what I call the cyclical journey or progression of Japanese drama. The quotation above suggests that pathos is the core of the performance. In religious terms, the purpose of the imaginative cyclical journey in which the audience participates is a kind of "awakening." In the terms of Western dramaturgy, "catharsis" might describe the intended effects of such a performance. The Japanese theatrical program, however, does not conclude with tragedy.

Buddhist terms in a treatise on the Nō theater implies that its theatrical framework has been influenced by Buddhism. The popular Buddhist concept of the Six Realms appears in many Japanese works of literature and drama from the introduction of Buddhism in the seventh century onward, and often plays a crucial role in the structure. The Six Realms are beneath the Four Realms of nirvana, thus parts of the illusory world of desire and places of varying degrees of suffering and varying frequencies of transmigration through death and rebirth cycles. They are not totally unlike the circles in Dante's Inferno. However, human existence, too, is considered one of the realms. The fundamental concept concerning these realms is that cyclical movement—death and rebirth—recurs until one achieves "enlightenment," freedom into the state of nirvana. Suffering and hardship can lead to escape from death and rebirth within the Six Realms.

Cyclical or circular movement has always been a central tenet in Buddhism, and many rituals and iconography are organized on circular patterns. In Japan, this concept is fundamental in works of literature and drama such as the *Heike monogatari* (Tales of the Heike), and Nō and Jōruri plays. One manifestation