

CHU YUAN

BY

KUO MO-JO

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A Play in Five Acts

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PEKING

CONTENTS

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY	i
ACT I	3
ACT II	19
ACT III	39
ACT IV	61
ACT V	78

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

CHU YUAN, *a minister, aged about forty*

SUNG YU, *pupil to Chu Yuan, aged about twenty*

CHAN CHUAN, *maidservant to Chu Yuan, aged sixteen*

CHIN SHANG, *an obsequious minister of King Huai, aged over thirty*

TZE LAN, *youngest son of King Huai, aged sixteen or seventeen*

QUEEN CHENG HSIU, *mother of Tze Lan and King Huai's favourite concubine, aged over thirty*

KING HUAI OF CHU, *aged fifty*

CHANG YI, *prime minister of Chin, aged over forty*

TZE CHIAO, *a foolish counsellor, aged about sixty*

AN OLD MAN, *aged about sixty*

AH WANG, *Chu Yuan's door-keeper, aged about sixty*

AH HUANG, *Chu Yuan's kitchen-maid, aged over fifty*

A FISHERMAN, *aged about thirty*

AN OLD FISHERMAN, *aged about fifty*

A GUARD, *aged over twenty*

CHENG CHAN-YING, *a diviner and father to Queen Cheng Hsiu, aged over seventy*

WOMEN, ATTENDANTS, GUARDS, SINGERS, DANCERS AND MUSICIANS

TIME:

The sixteenth year of the reign of King Huai of Chu (313 B.C.)

SCENE:

*Ying, the capital of the kingdom of Chu
(present-day Cbiangling County, Hupeh Province)*

ACT I

SCENE: *An orange grove one morning in late spring. Several oranges from the previous year remain on the branches. Behind the orchard stands a fence with a door in the right centre, and fields stretching outside. On the left there is another door leading to the inner chambers. At the right of the orchard stands a raised pavilion furnished with stone stools and a table, with steps leading to it from the left, on which are placed two pots of orchids, one on each side. At the foot of the steps lies a bamboo broom. In addition to the orange trees in the orchard, there may be a few other trees.*

Sixteen-year-old Chan Chuan comes out from the left, carrying a lyre, which she puts on the table in the pavilion. After seeing all is orderly, she leaves the way she came.

Chu Yuan, aged about forty, wearing a white dress and cloth hat, enters from the left. In his left hand he holds a silk scroll. He strolls for a while among the orange trees, sometimes toying with the previous year's oranges and inhaling their fragrance; finally, he plucks one casually and plays with it, placing it in his right palm. Then with slow steps he mounts the pavilion, and sits down on the topmost step. Now he breathes in the fragrance of the orange, now he looks about him; then he places the orange on the step and unrolls the silk scroll, on which is written his "Ode to the Orange" in ancient seal characters, written with vermilion. Slowly he begins to declaim the poem, unrolling the scroll as he reads:

Here the orange tree is found,
Shedding beauty all around;

Living in this southern grove,
From its fate it will not move;
For as its roots lie fast and deep,
So its purpose it will keep.
With green leaves and blossoms white,
It brings beauty and delight.
Yet foliage and sharp thorns abound
To guard the fruit so ripe and round.
Golden clusters, clusters green,
Glimmer with a lovely sheen,
While all within is pure and clear
Like heart of a philosopher.
Grace and splendour here are one,
Beauty all and blemish none.

Having read to this point he pauses and lays the scroll on his knees, then takes up the orange and fondles it, closing his eyes in reflection. Then he opens his eyes again and casually splits the orange into two, not intending to eat it, but simply to amuse himself. At this point Sung Yu enters from the outer door, carrying a small brown dog. He is about twenty, wearing a short jacket and with two tufts of hair on his head. When he sees Chu Yuan he runs to him.

SUNG YU (*standing at the foot of the steps*): Master, you have come out?

CHU YUAN: I was looking for you. Where have you been?

SUNG YU: After I swept the garden I took my little dog for a run outside.

CHU YUAN: That's very good. It is an excellent thing for young people to form the habit of rising early, and to take exercise from time to time. (*Slowly he puts the two halves of the orange together, then holding the orange in one hand and the scroll in the other, stands up.*) I have written a poem for you; let us go and sit in the pavilion. (*He walks to the pavilion, and sits down by the lyre, putting the orange on the*

table. Sung Yu follows and stands at his left.) Put down your dog, and read this new poem of mine.

(He gives the scroll to Sung Yu, who puts the brown dog down, to do as it likes. Chu Yuan begins to thrum the lyre.)

SUNG YU *(unrolls the first half of the scroll and reads in silence for a time, then raises his head):* Master, in this you are praising the orange.

CHU YUAN: Yes, that is so in the first part of the poem, but not in the second part. Read on.

SUNG YU *(continues to unroll the scroll and reads aloud):*

Your youthful and impetuous heart
Sets you from common men apart,
And well-contented I to see
Your resolute integrity.
Deep-rooted thus you stand unshaken,
Impartial, by no fancies taken;
Steadfast you choose your course alone,
Following no fashion but your own.
Over your heart you hold firm sway,
Nor suffer it to go astray;
No selfish wishes stain your worth,
Standing erect 'twixt heaven and earth.
Then let not age divide us twain;
Your friend I ever would remain.
Be noble still without excess,
And stern, but yet with gentleness.
Though young in years and in complexion,
Yet be my master in perfection.
Then Po Yi as your standard take,
This virtuous man your model make.

(After reading he is a little embarrassed, but very pleased.)

Master, did you really write this for me?

CHU YUAN: Yes, I wrote it for you.

(During the following dialogue he continues to thrum the lyre intermittently.)

SUNG YU: How can I be worthy of such praise?

CHU YUAN: I hope you can. (*Pointing with his right hand to the orange trees in the garden.*) Look at the orange trees, what an excellent lesson they teach! They are not in the least proud, nor cowardly, nor sluggish, nor stooping. (*Pause.*) Yes, they like the sun, but they are not afraid of the frost and snow. Their leaves are as brilliant as emeralds; the hotter the sun the better pleased they are; but however bitter the frost and snow they show no anxiety. At the proper season they blossom, and their flowers are exquisitely fragrant and snow-white. At the proper season they bear fruit, and their fruit is perfectly round and full of colour. From green they turn to yellow, from yellow to red, and inside — see how well-integrated they are, how pure and clear. (*He shows the inside of the split orange.*) They blossom and bear fruit for all to eat; and their fruit is deliciously sweet. They neither resent being eaten, nor complain if they are left: they are completely free from selfishness. But it would be wrong to think that they are willing to please anybody and have no spirit of their own. They are not like that. Look at all the thorns on the trees! (*Pointing again to the orange trees.*) They will not allow you to interfere with them as you please. They grow in the South here, and they love the South: it is no easy matter to move them. What independence and courage this shows! Don't you think it sets a good example for us?

SUNG YU: Yes, Master, after your explanation I feel I have received a very good lesson. Don't you mean that if even a tree can be like this, surely we human beings can be the same? (*He thinks a little while.*) Indeed we can.

CHU YUAN: Yes, you have grasped my meaning. You are an intelligent lad. Although you are still young you have chosen the right study, you work hard, and you rarely let scatter-brained youngsters lead you into mischief. I am very pleased with you. (*Pause.*) So I hope you will be able to be like this orange tree, independent, impartial, stern and unyielding. You must be humble, free from vain desires, unyielding

and unaffected by popular clamour. You must show more determination and cherish a pure, upright and unselfish heart; then you can avoid great faults, and take your stand as a true man between heaven and earth. (*Pause.*) If you attain this, I would like to remain your friend for ever, regardless of our difference in age. If you can attain this, even though you are still young, you can be the teacher of ordinary people. (*Pause.*) However, you must not be over-proud, but stern with gentleness. Only, when you reach the crossroads of your life you must not stoop at all, nor yield to temptation. You must imitate that great man of old, Po Yi, who starved himself to death on Shouyang Mountain; for better starve to death than lose your integrity. Do you understand me?

SUNG YU: I understand very well. I want to imitate you, Master, with all my heart and mind. I want to learn your wisdom and literary style, and your attitude towards life. But you have such a fine character that I shall never be like you.

CHU YUAN: You must not think too highly of your master nor too poorly of yourself; this is most important. I am actually a very ordinary person, but I think all men at birth are equally ordinary. Whether or not a man becomes exceptional depends upon his own efforts. (*Pause.*) We ought to take higher models, and the best thing is to take as our model an outstanding figure in history; then if we do our utmost to follow in his steps or even determine to surpass him, I believe that as a result of continuous effort we shall certainly succeed. There is a scholar in the North called Yen Yuan, a favourite disciple of Confucius, who recently said something which I consider quite significant. He said, "What was Shun? Just a man. What am I? Also a man. One who sets his mind on it can achieve the same." This is indeed an excellent lesson. We all know that King Shun was a remarkable person; but what was he? Was he not a man? And what am I? Am I not a man? If he could achieve so much, why can't we? It is quite possible. Everything depends upon men's

actions. Even water can wear out rock, and even rope can wear out wood. Everything depends upon one's effort, upon one's unceasing effort.

(Enter Chan Chuan, with a pitcher of water. She goes to the pavilion, pours out the water, and offers it to Chu Yuan. After he has drunk she leaves again, carrying the pitcher.)

SUNG YU: I shall bear in mind carefully what you have said; but I always feel that in learning from ancient people the difficulty lies in not knowing where to begin. The men of old are already so far removed from us that we cannot catch their voices or their expressions; so how can we start to learn from them? I am always by your side, Master. I hear your voice and watch your expression every day, and try every day to learn from you, but I still haven't learnt to be like you.

CHU YUAN *(smiling)*: Why do you want to imitate my expression and voice? Simply to imitate these things is no better than a monkey. *(He stands and strolls up and down the pavilion.)* To learn from the men of old means to copy their spirit, to copy their indomitable spirit. We must constantly discipline ourselves, constantly endeavour to be good men. *(Pause.)* We are all alike at birth, born with many bad traits. We all want to struggle, for instance, and yet at the same time want to stay idle; and here lies the seed of our downfall. To struggle is by no means bad; indeed, strictly speaking, it is the incentive for learning to be good, because if you want to surpass others or surpass good men, you have to work very hard. Really to surpass other people, however, you have to be more able than they are. There is no doubt about that.

SUNG YU: Yes, there can be no doubt about that.

CHU YUAN: But the question is this. To surpass others is very pleasant, but to make an effort is very hard, and therefore men try to take a short cut, either pretending to be good, making false pretences, or, even worse, injuring other people, injuring those who are better than themselves. This is hypocrisy, this is sin, this is depravity! *(His voice has risen, but now drops again.)* This tendency towards idleness is a

trait received at birth, which may ruin men. We must first rid ourselves entirely of this tendency, uprooting it daily without any mercy; for if you do this your knowledge will naturally improve, your ability will naturally increase and your body will naturally become healthy. You say you don't know where to start, but actually the starting point is in yourself. (*Pause.*) However, we should also learn from other people, learning from everything outside ourselves. Naked we came into the world, and not only were our bodies naked, but our hearts also; nevertheless we brought with us one good thing — the ability to learn. We can learn, and thanks to our ability to learn we can grow in mind and body. We can learn from everything around us, for instance, from the orange trees which we have just mentioned. (*Pointing to the trees.*) Are they not excellent teachers for us? To take another example, you who stand before me I also consider my teacher.

SUNG YU (*rather embarrassed*): Master, how unworthy I am.

CHU YUAN: No, I am not merely flattering you. All young people are my teachers. When people are young the desire to outdo others is stronger, while the tendency towards idleness is not yet fixed; thus young people are more innocent, active, generous and unselfish than old ones. This is what I have to learn. (*He sits down again on the balustrade of the pavilion.*) Take poetry, for example. When we are old and experienced, our poetry shows signs of age too. In planning the structure, in forming the imagery, we become more grandiloquent; but we miss what we possessed in our youth the freshness, purity and simplicity of imagination. I often worry about this. For in this respect it seems that the older one gets, the worse one writes. (*Pause.*) So I want with all my heart to learn from you young people; with all my heart I want to learn from the sincerity and simplicity of the common people. I want with all my heart to preserve the freshness, purity and simplicity of my youth. I have spoken to you of this more than once; do you remember?

SUNG YU: I never forget it.

CHU YUAN: So, when people say my poetry is vulgar and free, and has lost the authentic note of the traditional poetry, I am not in the least disturbed. I am doing my utmost to imitate the common people and to imitate children, so naturally it is "vulgar." I am doing my utmost to break the rules of traditional poetry, so naturally it is free. Those traditional poems are all strictly limited to so many words a line, and when ordinary people and children hear them, they seem to be hearing a strange tongue. Aren't they divesting poetry of all human feeling? But, from another point of view, since I am older than you, and, as a boy, was influenced by the rules and conventions of the old poetry, it is difficult for me to rid my writing of them entirely. It is like the mark branded on the forehead of slaves. Even if they are set free they cannot get rid of the brand. But it is different in your generation, for you have never been branded; so when you write poems you are the masters in every sense. In this respect I envy your generation.

SUNG YU: How indomitable and indefatigable you are! Today I have indeed received most valuable instruction. Will you give me this "Ode to the Orange"?

CHU YUAN: Of course. It is for you. I wrote it for you, so why shouldn't I give it to you?

SUNG YU (*bows*): Thank you very much indeed, Master. From now onwards I shall read it aloud once every morning when I get up.

CHU YUAN: There is no need to make such a rule, for as poetry it is not very good; the main thing is that you should try to learn to be a good man like Po Yi.

SUNG YU: Thank you very much for your instruction, but I still want to imitate you; for I feel that one like Po Yi is too bigoted. King Cheo of the Shangs was such a cruel tyrant, why shouldn't King Wu of Chou have fought against him? When the tyrant was killed, why should Po Yi starve himself to death? I don't quite understand this.

CHU YUAN: The actual facts are rather debatable. Let us walk in the orchard, while I explain it to you in detail. (*He walks down the steps, followed by Sung Yu.*) According to history, King Cheo of the Shangs was not such a bad man. Indeed the people of our kingdom ought to be especially grateful to him; for our kingdom was formerly an ally of the Shangs. Both King Cheo and his father Ti Yi made great efforts to conquer the barbarians of the Southeast; this gave the Chou people an opportunity to strengthen themselves until they were able to take the Shangs by surprise and conquer them. Then our ancestors and the people of Sung and Hsu were so oppressed that they gradually moved from the North to the South. In the North, as you must know, there is a district called Mount Chu where our ancestors used to live. But if King Cheo had not conquered the barbarians of the Southeast, we should not have had a place of refuge, and our ancestors would have become the slaves of the Chou people. As the Chou people overthrew the Shang dynasty, naturally they painted the last king of the Shangs very black, accusing him of many imaginary crimes, although actually he was not so bad. The fact that Po Yi opposed King Wu is proof of this.

SUNG YU: Ah, I have never heard this explanation before! It is really most original and interesting.

CHU YUAN: We need not concern ourselves now with these old stories; but a man like Po Yi is worthy of our respect and emulation. He could have been the sovereign of the kingdom of Ku Chu, but he abandoned such a position of wealth and splendour, for he understood there is something in life which is more precious than kingship. If a man is not true to himself, what glory can there be in kingship? Certainly, when the Chou people overthrew the Shang dynasty, Po Yi need not have died. He could have lived on, and nobody would have said anything; while if he had stooped a little, the Chous would probably have given him high position. But he realized that such high position and such a meaningless life were

more to be dreaded than death, so he preferred to starve himself to death rather than lose his integrity. We should follow his example. Do you understand this?

SUNG YU: Yes. And now that I understand the historical background, I am convinced that a man like Po Yi is worthy of our respect.

CHU YUAN: During these troubled times, character is of paramount importance. It is easy to act like a man in peaceful times, for then a man is born in peace and dies in peace. But, during a time of great changes and upheavals, to act like a man is a very difficult thing. The main reason for this is that all men instinctively fear death. They pass their lives without reflection, and when death comes they are unwilling to face it; thus their character is ruined. *(Pause.)* The age in which we are living is one of great changes and upheavals, so I make special mention of Po Yi, hoping that you, as well as I, will take him as an example. We should live honourably and die honourably. Do you understand me?

SUNG YU: I understand, Master.

CHU YUAN: Good. I have spoken too much. It is very fine today; let us go for a walk in the fields.

SUNG YU: I would like to go with you.

(He starts off, carrying the lyre under his left arm. The two of them are walking slowly towards the gate when Chan Chuan enters hurriedly.)

CHAN CHUAN *(approaches and calls Chu Yuan)*: Master! Master! The minister Chin Shang called just now and left a message for you.

CHU YUAN: What is it?

CHAN CHUAN: He said Chang Yi is going to the kingdom of Wei. The king has taken your advice, rejecting Chang Yi's proposal, and is unwilling to sever relations with the kingdom of Chi. So Chang Yi feels ashamed to return to Chin, and has decided to go back to the kingdom of Wei, which is his native land. The minister came to let you know.

CHU YUAN (*pleased*): Good! This is certainly good news.
(*To Sung Yu.*) Sung Yu, there is something I want you to do immediately.

SUNG YU: Yes, Master.

CHU YUAN: On my desk there is a manuscript. It is the letter the king instructed me to write yesterday to the kingdom of Chi to further our friendship. I want it copied at once. Since Chang Yi has decided to leave, the king will probably soon send someone with the letter to the kingdom of Chi.

SUNG YU: Yes. After I have copied it, I shall bring it to you.
(*To Chan Chuan.*) Please take the lyre. (*Gives her the lyre and leaves by the left door.*)

CHAN CHUAN (*hesitating*): Master, when the knight was leaving, he mentioned something else.

CHU YUAN: What did he say?

CHAN CHUAN: He said the queen had told him that she intends to take me to the palace to serve her.

CHU YUAN: The queen has said the same thing to me too; but she wasn't serious, so I didn't tell you. If the queen really wanted to take you to the palace, Chan Chuan, would you be willing?

CHAN CHUAN (*decidedly*): No, Master, I wouldn't. I cannot leave you.

CHU YUAN: Don't you like the queen? She is clever, beautiful and talented.

CHAN CHUAN: No, I don't like her. And I don't believe she likes me either.

CHU YUAN: If she doesn't like you, why should she send for you?

CHAN CHUAN: I don't know what is in her mind, but I shiver whenever I see her. She has eyes like a snake, so cruel and cold! I can't help trembling whenever she looks at me. Master, with you I feel as calm as a dove; but with her I feel as helpless as a sparrow in the clutches of an eagle. I hope you will save me, Master!

CHU YUAN (*smiling*): You describe her very well. Yes, the queen is quite a forceful personality. Since you do not want to go to the palace, if she mentions it again in earnest, I shall decline for you.

(Chu Yuan strolls in front of the pavilion. He casually walks up the steps, picks up the split orange which he has put down on the balustrade, and toys with it, dividing it and putting it together, but without tasting it. Chan Chuan also walks up the steps, puts the lyre on the table, then descends. Prince Tze Lan enters from the back door on the right-hand side; he is about sixteen and slightly lame in the left foot.)

CHAN CHUAN: Master, Prince Tze Lan is here.

(Chu Yuan turns round. Tze Lan approaches the pavilion and standing under the steps bows to him.)

TZE LAN: Good morning, Master.

CHU YUAN (*nodding*): Good morning. Come here, both of you, and sit in the pavilion. *(Chan Chuan leads Tze Lan to the pavilion.)* Sit down, and make yourselves at home. *(As Chu Yuan does not sit down, the others dare not do so.)* I have an orange here, just picked from the tree, for you both. *(They take the orange.)*

TZE LAN: Thank you, Master. Have you been well recently?

CHU YUAN: Very well. I have been very happy recently; but I have not seen you for several days. Have you been studying at home?

TZE LAN: No, Master. I have had a cold and my mother told me to stay at home. Today I come by my mother's orders to invite you. *(Coughs.)*

CHU YUAN: Do you know what the queen wants of me?

TZE LAN: No, I'm not sure; but I think it may have to do with Chang Yi's departure. Father is giving him a farewell feast at noon today. . . . My mother is rather worried because Chang Yi is leaving. Yesterday afternoon Chang Yi suddenly came with the minister Chin Shang to take his leave of my father. He said that since the King of Chin had great