

JAPANESE DRAMA—Early Modern Period

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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords—Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation—albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo—modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki—Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities—most notably, Edo and Osaka—and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chōnin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Culture and the Role of Drama

Given the centrality of entertainment and spectacle in the *chōnin*-centered society and culture of Tokugawa Japan, it is only natural that theater would prove attractive—and profitable. Closely associated with the pleasure quarters and its burgeoning leisure economy, Tokugawa drama centered on two related theatrical genres—puppet theater and kabuki. Nothing could rival the appeal of lavish productions featuring famous actors and dramatic scenes on the kabuki stage, and the virtuosic puppetry of *bunraku*, also known as *jōruri*. These seemingly disparate stage genres were in fact intimately interconnected. Indeed, plays initially composed for *bunraku* would be adapted for the kabuki stage, and it was standard practice for actors to emulate the style and manner of their wooden alter egos. What is more, the widespread use of woodblock prints to advertise plays and publicize the lead actors inspired the creation of one of Japan's most iconic art forms—the *ukiyo-e* 'floating world' print. Again, the contrast with the austere Confucian moralism promoted by the ruling classes could not have been more pronounced.

Bunraku: Puppet Theater and Dramas of Tragic Fate

Much like *Noh* drama, its classical predecessor, *bunraku* theater is a syncretic and collaborative performing art, merging literary composition, puppetry, oral narration, and musical accompaniment. *Bunraku* can be traced to a long history of itinerant performance that included puppets and accompanying stories and music. As it developed during the 17th century, *bunraku* became text-based, and the technical artistry involved in producing and manipulating the near life-sized puppets achieved a remarkable degree of virtuosity. On the other hand, kabuki would develop as an actor's theater, hinging upon improvisation, histrionics, and lavish stage effects.

Bunraku, which developed in the Osaka area, is typically associated with Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), far and away its greatest playwright. It was Chikamatsu who, at the turn of the 18th century, established a standard of literary excellence in a medium where technical virtuosity might otherwise overshadow the play's text. As with the work of *Noh* playwright Zeami, Chikamatsu's plays have been mainstays of Japanese theater as well as classics of the national literature.

Most notable are his domestic plays (*sewamono*), especially those featuring romantic encounters where the conflict between duty and passion—*giri* and *ninjō*—would have tragic consequences for the star-crossed lovers. These so-called *shinjū*—or ‘double suicide’—plays, typically based on actual events, portrayed the ill-fated affairs of lowly merchants and expensive geisha whose improprieties marked them as both outcasts in the decorous Tokugawa social order and as romantic heroes. As with the fiction of Ihara Saikaku, passion figures here as an elemental force blinding its victims to social obligation and binding them together through the so-called *michiyuki*—the poignant climax in which the lovers walk to their death. Chikamatsu's genius—which has been cast as Shakespearean but shares more with the world of opera—resides not in the comic ‘low’ but rather in the moving coda that sought to redeem ordinary people caught in the web of utterly human passions.

Chikamatsu's best-known *shinjū* drama is *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (Shinjūtenno Amijima, 1721), which concerns the ineffectual paper merchant Jihei and his beloved geisha, Koharu. Devoted to one another, the couple must endure the taunts of Tahei, a wealthy merchant whose advances Koharu has spurned, and earnest attempts by Jihei's family to have him come to his senses and abandon the affair.

The couple pledge their love, thereby sealing their fate, and are thus obliged to enact the preordained suicidal ritual. In the climactic *michiyuki* scene, the narrative becomes an extended lyrical dialogue, dripping with pathos and bolstered by Buddhist images of rebirth and salvation. Koharu remarks to her lover:

What have we to grieve about? Although in this world we could not stay together, in the next and through each successive world to come until the end of time we shall be husband and wife. Every summer for my devotions I have copied the ‘All Compassionate and All Merciful’ chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, in the hope that we may be reborn on one lotus.

As the drama reaches a crescendo, Jihei kills Koharu, then himself, and the chanter concludes the play as follows:

The tale is spread from mouth to mouth. People say that they who were caught in the net of Buddha's vow immediately gained salvation and deliverance, and all who hear the tale of the Love Suicides at Amijima are moved to tears.

Chikamatsu's literary achievement is undeniable. Yet for the ordinary theatergoer, who may have had little interest in elegant tropes and classical allusions, it was the stage spectacle itself that merited the price of admission—the choreographed ballet of large puppets flawlessly manipulated by the ‘invisible’ black-cloaked puppeteers; the chanter's moving recitation of the text; and the musical counterpoint provided by the three-stringed *shamisen*, harmonizing with the shifting moods of the play.

Arguably the high point of Tokugawa drama is *Chūshingura* (Treasury of the Loyal Retainers). First produced in 1748, this monumental play recounts a famous incident in 1703: The forty-seven erstwhile retainers of the Akō *daimyō*, who had been forced to commit ritual suicide several years earlier, succeed in exacting revenge on the Shogunal official responsible for their lord's demise, whereupon they sacrifice their own lives. Intricately plotted and many hours long in its complete staging, *Chūshingura* has long been a touchstone of *bushidō* virtue—selflessness, duty, loyalty, and righteous revenge—values whose ‘correctness’ in the postwar period has been problematic. Yet the typical theater-goer would have been more taken by the drama unfolding on the stage.

Kabuki: Stage Spectacle and Virtuoso Acting

As with *bunraku*, kabuki theater has distinctly plebeian roots, which can be traced to outdoor performances by a troupe of women led by the dancer Okuni, in early 17th-century Kyoto. Tied to prostitution, though, these performances ran afoul of the authorities, who ended up banning women from the stage. What eventuated was all-male performance, which was itself subject to codes and regulations aimed at making the young actors inaccessible for sexual dalliance. Thus, kabuki emerged as a male performance genre that in effect leveraged the imposed restrictions so as to create an actor-centered theater that exerted a profound influence on Tokugawa popular culture and its lucrative entertainment economy. Although it originated in the Kansai area (Osaka/ Kyoto), kabuki established itself in Edo and would eventually surpass *bunraku* in popularity.

Another shared aspect of kabuki and *bunraku* is that their respective repertoires belong to two categories: those based on historical and legendary sources, and those set in the contemporary period.

One of kabuki's hallmarks, an artifact of the sumptuary restrictions meant to constrain it, is the *onnagata* role, whereby male actors 'impersonate' women. Kabuki devotees have long remarked on the capacity of the well-trained *onnagata* to capture a quality of femininity inaccessible to 'actual' women. Similar claims, incidentally, have been made with respect to *bunraku* puppets— mere wooden contraptions which, in the hands of the master puppeteer, can achieve a convincing and highly moving human quality.

Kabuki staging would adapt several features of *Noh* theater—the use of a chorus and musical accompaniment. Here, as with *bunraku*, the instrument of choice is the *shamisen*. And kabuki also features a chanter who intones a narrative that recounts the action, although much of the action on stage is improvised so as to highlight the 'celebrity' actor.

But kabuki is best known for its spectacle—the revolving stage, elaborate movable props, devices that enable actors to fly, catapult themselves, and do virtually instantaneous costume change. The actors themselves are lavishly costumed and adorned with flamboyant facial makeup (*kumadori*).

As with *Noh*, *bunraku*, and other Japanese performing arts, professional kabuki actors have historically belonged to hereditary lineages, whereby mastery of one's craft is handed down from father to son. Among the celebrated kabuki lineages are the Nakamura and Ichikawa families.

The standard kabuki repertoire features well-known plays such as *Chūshingura*, adapted from the *bunraku* stage; *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), which features the heroic medieval warrior of the *Tale of the Heike*; and *Shibaraku* (Wait a Moment!), the ultimate actor vehicle, featuring over-the-top stage histrionics and flamboyance.

Bunraku and Kabuki in the Modern Day

With the early Meiji period and its denigration of 'outmoded' practices and the emulation of modern Western genres and styles, Japan's performing arts went into decline. Kabuki, though, experienced a resurgence in the late 19th century, largely thanks to the brilliant playwright Kawatake Mokuami (1816-93). It was Mokuami who succeeded in modernizing the plotline of kabuki drama while preserving its chief stage conventions. It bears noting that the Meiji period also witnessed the advent of Western-inspired 'realist' theater, which has remained on the scene since then.

The immediate postwar period in Japan also witnessed a decline in 'traditional' cultural production, in part owing to restrictions imposed by Occupation authorities concerned about vestiges of militarism in performances that might extol samurai virtues. However, in line with the nation's economic recovery in the late Fifties, kabuki and *bunraku* experienced a renaissance. Both have gone on to enjoy a sustained popularity, bolstered by tie-ins with film, television, and the burgeoning pop culture marketplace.

Osaka is home to the National *Bunraku* Theater, which offers a rich performance calendar and materially sustains the demanding apprenticeship system that the art requires. As for kabuki, its 'classical' kabuki repertoire is staged in Tokyo and Kyoto at theaters devoted to kabuki performance and to the training of actors and musicians. What is more, *bunraku* and kabuki troupes perform throughout Japan, and overseas as well. And performances are regularly broadcast on the NHK network. As with many

Japanese traditional arts, local and regional groups are dedicated to the performing arts, employing a range of plays and theatrical techniques.

Readings

- Brandon, James (ed.), *Chūshingura: Studies in Kabuki and the Puppet Theater* (Hawaii, 1982)
_____, *Kabuki: Five Classic Plays* (Hawaii, 1992)
- Brazell, Karen (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Theater: An Anthology of Plays* (Columbia, 1998)
- Keene, Donald, *Bunraku: The Art of the Japanese Puppet Theater* (Kodansha International, 1965)
_____, *Major Plays of Chikamatsu* (Columbia, 1961)
_____, *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era 1600-1867* (Holt, 1976)
- Leiter, Samuel, *The Art of Kabuki: Famous Plays in Performance* (California, 1979)
- Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2015) [Note: Material from this work has been incorporated into the essay.]
- Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900* (Columbia, 2002)

Discussion Questions and Topics

How might we best appreciate the syncretic quality of kabuki and *bunraku*, which hinge upon an unusual degree of collaboration and coordination? What aspects of these arts are most appealing? Why? What may be said to account for the iconic quality of these arts?

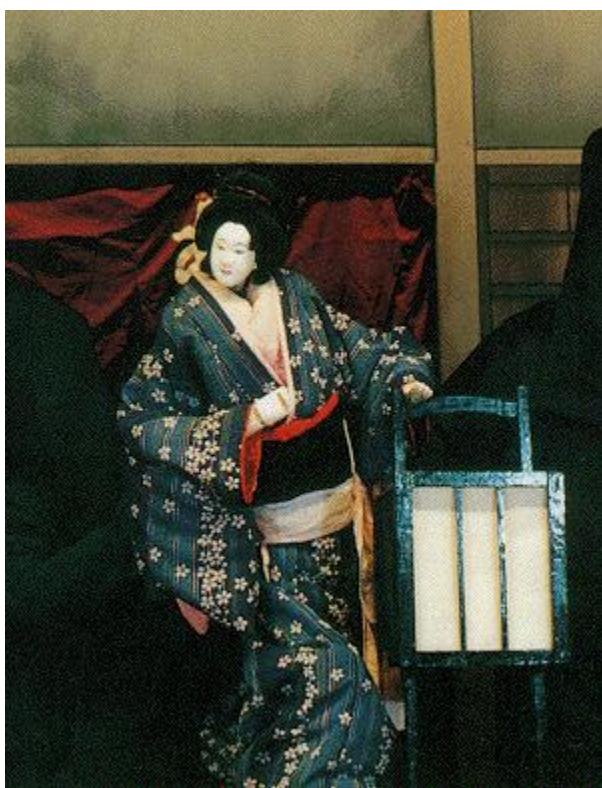
What does one gain—or lose—by concentrating on the dramatic plotline (as exemplified in Chikamatsu's *bunraku* texts) as opposed to the stage spectacle? Consider the contrast with mimetic theater, which presents 'realistic' stories, characters, and staging?

In what ways can *bunraku* and kabuki be said to epitomize the society and culture of the Tokugawa period?

Images



Bunrakuchanter (*tayu*) and *shamisen* player



The character Osono from the *bunraku* play, *Hade Sugata Onna Maiginu*



Woodblock poster for the March 1849 production of *Chûshingura*, in Edo



Woodblock print, by Sharaku, of the actor OtaniOniji (1794)



Woodblock print, by Utagawa Toyokuni III, of an 1858 production of the play *Shibaraku*, in Edo



The Kabuki-zatheater in Tokyo

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