

# CHIKAMATSU MONZAEMON: A STUDY IN JAPANESE TRAGEDY

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The intention of this paper is to examine the tragic elements in Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Proceeding from a western perspective and western values, augmented with Japanese aesthetics as bases for analyses, we hope to have a deeper understanding of his work, and finally, of the Japanese "World," as objectified in his works. At the same time, we hope to discover the possibilities of the genre, tragedy as a dramatic form in a non-western situation.

For the purpose, we intend, without limiting references to other plays, to concentrate on: "The Love Suicide at Amijima." This piece having been written in 1720, must contain Chikamatsu's (1653-1725) more mature ideas. It is also considered to be the final example of his domestic plays.<sup>1</sup> In *Gonza, the Lancer*,<sup>2</sup> we recognize figures familiar to us in western literature. When we place this, however, with Racine's *Phaedra*, and for a particular purpose we have chosen this play, we find differences which can be explained through allusions to differences in cultural and ethnic experiences.

Chikamatsu's dramas are designed for the *jojuri* (puppet) and the *kabuki* theater, which from the very start juxtaposes a significant point of difference from the theater we have been accustomed to. To be able to animate lifeless objects, spectacular and sensational effects and extended narrations are perfectly legitimate, which otherwise, in our theatrical traditions we would have deemed injurious to organic unity. Thus, it is necessary for us to consider this factor, and to judge the forms by their own criteria.

At the same time, we have considered a number of postulates as our basic assumptions in our examination. These postulates do not sum-up the totality of tragic values that have been engendered in the whole tradition of western literature. There is, in fact, a multitude of literature, philosophical, or literary, concerning tragedy, that we can claim only to have a partial assessment. The postulates, however, are useful only in so far as they illuminate our present problem.

First, tragedy is a form of dramatic art that presents the "tragic rhythm of life."<sup>2</sup> Second, the sphere of tragedy is primarily the ethical,

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Shively, *The Love Suicide at Amijima* (Mass: Harvard University Press, 1953) p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

and the values generated are ethical values. Third, the sense of guilt, moral or tragic, is an essential element in tragedy.

One mental tropism we have is categorizing and classifying, which perhaps is very alien to eastern minds well accustomed to conceiving "wholes" and "The One." Our tendency, therefore, is to place comedy and tragedy in a dichotomic relation.

There is a "tragic rhythm" in life, according to Susanne Langer which is the matrix of tragedy. It exhibits the life cycle of the individual, and his 'death-bound career,'<sup>3</sup> the rhythm of self-summation and fulfillment. It is deeply personal, and "its conception requires a sense of individuality."<sup>4</sup> In comparison, comedy exhibits the "vital rhythm of life,"<sup>5</sup> vital continuity, and the conquest of life over death. It is definitely social in nature, and more prominent in society which places the communal group as the superior value, and whose religious values promise immortality. To quote Langer further:<sup>6</sup>

Tragedy can flourish only where people are aware of individual life as an end in itself, and as a measure of other things. In tribal cultures where the individual is still so closely linked with his family that not only society but even he himself regards his existence as a communal value, which may be sacrificed at any time for communal ends, the development of personality is not a consciously appreciated life pattern. Similarly, where men believe that Karma, or the tally of their deeds, may be held over for recompense or expiation is another earthly life, their current incarnation cannot be seen as a self-sufficient whole in which their entire potentialities are to be realized.

From this perspective, Chikamatsu's plays are more comic than tragic. The spontaneity and the sense of abandonment of the characters to commit suicide seem to be prompted by a belief that in the next incarnation they will be born in the same calyx of The Lotus. In "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki," Ohatsu exhorts Tokubei: "And if a time should come when we can no longer meet, did our promise of love hold only for this world? Others before us have chosen their reunion through death. To die is simple enough—none will hinder and none be hindered on the journey to the Mountain of Death and the River of Three Ways."<sup>7</sup> The death prayer holds the same hope: "...in the world to come. // May we be reborn on the same lotus."<sup>8</sup>

Still another belief that all the more strengthens their resolve to commit suicide is the attainment of Buddhahood for everyone. "What is there to lament?" Koharu ("The Love Suicide at Amijima") comforts Jihei. "Although indeed we cannot go together through this life, in the future one, needless to say, and in the next and next, and through

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>7</sup> "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki," *The Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, Donald Keens, Trans. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961) p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

all future worlds we shall be man and wife. As a request (that we be reborn on) one lotus (calyx), I have performed the 'summer writing' of one copy each summer of the most merciful and compassionate *Fumomombon* of the *Lotus Sutra*. When we cross (Ky) Bridge, we reach the other bank (Nirvana). We will mount the calyx (attain the Law), and achieve the form of Buddha."<sup>9</sup>

Such statement of faith is astonishing when we look now through the lenses of the modern intellectual movements. Yet, side by side, with this powerful belief in the reincarnation, or to take Langer's word, the "vital continuity of life," there is a constant awareness of the evanescence, the ephemerality of things which lend pathos to the drama. Chikamatsu's lyrics repeat the same refrain:

Life is an illusion  
The pains of birth and death.  
Prescribed before our coming.  
What a world of dust,  
What a shambles.<sup>10</sup>

\* \* \*

"Farewell to this world, and to the night farewell.  
We who walk the road to death, to what should be likened?  
To the frost by the road that leads to the graveyard,  
Vanishing with each step we take ahead:  
How sad is this dream of a dream."<sup>11</sup>

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... Things that (are short) are our stay in this life  
and an autumn day.<sup>12</sup>

There is a whole philosophical tradition implicit in these lines: *Karma*, for instance, or the law of casuality, the Buddhist distrust of the concrete reality, the liberation from the senses as a prelude to the attainment of Buddhahood, "Human desires are limitless, and we are torn by the cravings of the senses as long as breath is left in our bodies. The more we think, the more we talk, the more there is to think and talk, and all our acts serve but to hinder salvation. To banish these delusions we must free ourselves of the cycle of birth and death and pass into *Nirvana*."<sup>13</sup>

Again, for the Japanese, it is a statement of fact rather than a complaint. Life's recurrent image is the fleeting moment: the falling dews, the moment when they brush the grass, the lightning flash, sparks from the flint.

They exchange glances and cry out  
for joy, happy that they are to die—  
a painful heart-rending sight. The

<sup>9</sup> "The Love Suicide at Amijima", Shively (tr.), p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> "The Love Suicides at the Women's Temple," Donald Keene (tr.), p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki," Donald Keene, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> "The Love Suicide at Amijima," Shively, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

life left them: now is as brief as  
sparks that fly from blocks of flint.<sup>14</sup>

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Shall it be here, shall it be  
there? When they brush the grass,  
the falling dew vanishes even  
quicker than their lives, in this  
uncertain world, a lightning flash —  
or was it something else.<sup>15</sup>

In Japanese aesthetics *aware* has always been considered a supreme value. And since antiquity, it has acquired varied interpretations: "Spontaneous feeling," "controlled feeling," "a balance of emotion and reason, elegance and charm," "intense sadness," "deep impressions produced by small things," and, "sensitivity to things."<sup>16</sup> But aesthetics is only one way of expression of some human element which the people deem natural and essential. The more commonplace meaning of *aware*, an "awareness of the sign of things,"<sup>17</sup> evokes the depths of the Japanese soul. "*Aware* is the not-unpleasant realization that even the beautiful and therefore the fulfilled must pass away; and it is also the momentary experience of sympathy between these things and ourselves, in a bond of perishability."<sup>18</sup> Prof. Anusuke illuminates further the meaning of aware by pointing out "the Buddhist teaching of the oneness of existence, of the basic unity that joins together different beings, and which persists through the changing incarnation of one individual."<sup>19</sup>

Yet, even with this conviction in the continuity of life, and perhaps, precisely because of this, there is a terrifying sublimity produced by this quiet acceptance of "the ashness of things." To a more cynical mind, and a more rebellious spirit, such powerful faith in what can only be viewed as absurd and irrational, would definitely be awesome.

This is the effect of Chikamatsu's dramas. For one brief moment before the lovers commit suicide, these characters who believe that their suicide is a foreordained necessity, take one last look at the concrete world they are going to leave behind. The immediacy and the finality of their end, make this moment very intense. What is actually played up is not the conflicting desires to hold on, and yet to forfeit at the same instance these worldly attachments, but the beauty of every single little thing, of every sound, of every touch, that they certainly know is possible only within the sphere of human existence. The world is

<sup>14</sup> "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki," Keene, pp. 51-52.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> Hisamatsu Sen'ichi, *The Vocabulary of Japanese Literary Aesthetics* (Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo: Nippon Oyo Printing Co., Ltd., 1963).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "Gentle Interpreter of the Japanese Mind," (Yasunari Kawabata) *Asia Magazine* (January 12, 1969) p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Masaharu Anesaki, "The Mythology of Japan," *The Mythology of All Races*, Vol. VIII (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc. 1964) p. 296.

too beautiful, one regrets leaving. And this moment is beyond ethical considerations. This is perhaps the reason why the lovers' journey (*michiyuki*) which some critics look upon as no more than theatrical convention, becomes an organic necessity. There is always a bridge, symbolically the edge of mortality, at the same time, the way to another world. The ritual is presented with meticulous care: from the very first step of flight, until the "blade goes deeper and deeper" and the lovers expire their last breath.

At this point, the poetry becomes most lyrical, and most profoundly sad. In some cases, this moment is the first time that the lovers will be united, and their last. And at this moment, far from the world that is but a "delusion," every wish becomes true. Another law, not of this world, has been given to them, and they become man and wife forever. Their lives have reached a fulfillment and a consummation.

"The tragic form is closed, final and passional."<sup>20</sup> This is the logical extension of what Langer calls the "tragic rhythm of life": the cycle of birth, growth, efflorescence and decline.

Certainly, Chikamatsu's dramas do not end in an "absolute close." (Visions of another life remain though they be unfulfilled wishes.) It is not an absolute close, but neither is it arbitrary. As far as the current lives of the characters are concerned, there is a final close. What they have exhibited is their "death-bound career" which is what is realized within the structure of the play.

What is insufficient in the conception which distinguishes Chikamatsu from the western classic tragedies is the treatment of personality. There are no heroes who are acting, and willing from a purely individual motivation. This can be explained from a cultural perspective. Actually, what is dramatized is Destiny, predetermined, and acting with the iron law of necessity. In a way, this is reminiscent of the Greek tragedy with its own law of necessity fulfilling a terrible fate assigned to the chosen man. But there is a difference. The absence of resistance on the part of characters, their obedience to this law, which astonishingly, they seem to understand, do not give us heroes like Oedipus and Hamlet. The question that we may raise: Is it possible to have tragedy without tragic heroes? We would insist, however, that what tragedy dramatizes is *persons* and not some cosmic law or some abstract principles. Yet, we cannot deny that there is a great deal of pathos which profundity and sublimity reduces the sentimentality, and if this alone does not necessarily make a tragedy, nevertheless it claims a tragic dimension of its own.

"What characterizes tragedy," writes Lucien Goldmann, "and provides its real perspective is a primacy accorded to ethics, and to an

<sup>20</sup> Langer, *op. cit.* p. 324.

ethical system which does not admit degrees of difference."<sup>21</sup> This statement is a reiteration of Hegel's triadic proposition which has been re-interpreted in so many ways by contemporary thinkers. Lionel Abel affirms Hegel's concept that the cause of tragedy is the "opposition of two conflicting goods."<sup>22</sup> In the collision of values, it is inevitable that one must undermine, if not totally annihilate, another. Furthermore, it is necessary, Max Scheler augments, that these values be both positive, both superior in nature and causing the destruction of the other. "The manifestation is purest and clearest," he adds, "where objects of equally high value appear to undermine and ruin each other. Those tragedies most effectively portray the tragic phenomena in which, not only is everyone in the right, but where each person and power in the struggle presents an equally superior right, or appears to fulfill an equally superior duty."<sup>23</sup>

The Japanese ethical system is a very complicated scheme, that we almost wonder how they can ever reconcile one obligation with the rest. One receives an *on* (debts passively incurred) simply by virtue of being born, consciously and unconsciously, as determined by his social status, and the various actions and situations he meets in the course of his life. The recipient, and for that matter, everyone wears an *on*, is obliged to return this debt. Hence, he has a *giri* (duty to perform) both conditional and unconditional, towards the highest, (the Emperor), down to the lowest animate and inanimate object. The Japanese sense of honor is an intricate pattern of *giris*: the *giri* to the world (the Lord, the family, to related and non-related persons), and the *giri* to oneself (equivalent to *el valor Español*). The necessities imposed by *giri* involve the simplest performances in daily life, the payment of *utang-na-loob*, expressions of gratitude, as well as of vengeance. This sense of honor (the closest equivalent of *giri*) is held above life. And this is perhaps the rationale behind *seppuku* (*hara-kiri*) when the only possible choice is to kill one-self: or, as in most cases, when suicide becomes a duty, according to the law of society, rather than an individual choice. *Seppuku* is regarded not with repulsion but with a high esteem which suggested that as far as the Japanese ethical system is concerned, it is a very positive value.

In "Yosaku from Tamba," a mother disowns her son for fear that such a liaison would bring dishonor to the princess in whose service she is in, and whose family she owes a debt of gratitude. To us, her reason might appear very flimsy: "The princess is leaving for the East to be adopted and married. Any girl about to be married, whether she's of a great or humble family, must be very careful. She's

<sup>21</sup> Lionel Abel, (ed.), *Moderns on Tragedy* (New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961) p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

going among strangers, and she has to worry about what they think. It's bound to interfere with her marriage if people learn that she has a foster brother named Sankichi who's a horse driver."<sup>24</sup> Apparently, this strikes us as an over-concern for mere appearances. It seems the height of hypocrisy that appearances should be esteemed at the sacrifice of some deeper human relationship. Shigenoi explains to her son: "It is true that you were born of my flesh, but you're not my child any longer, nor I your mother."<sup>25</sup> Appalling as it may seem, there is a sense of justice rendered, and that Shigenoi's renunciation of past attachments is likewise in the performance of her duty to husband and son, as well as to her Lord. Anyone who does not belong to the very rigid social structure of the Japanese and to their strict ethical system would probably find this imposition of *giri* towards the lord tyrannical. This code of action is prescribed specifically for the *samurai* class, the observance of which is demanded even when one has been cast out of the class. In most cases, this code interferes in, and determines the private lives of the people. From the same play, we see Yosaku, Shigenoi's wayward husband, rebuked for his attempt to commit suicide by his *samurai* friend. "Do you think that suicide is such a remarkable feat? Remember, death for a *samurai* should mean that he was first in storming a castle, or first to aim his lance in open fighting, or that he was slain after taking the head of a worthy enemy. It is not easy to die like a *samurai*. Nowhere in the whole body of sacred literature will you find it written that a lovers' suicide with Koman will bring you glory. Don't you realize that failure to requite a master's kindness is a much greater disgrace to a *samurai* than the petty humiliation which so upsets you? How contemptible you are! A *samurai* with a sense of humor would ignore personal affronts, even the finger of scorn pointed at him, even being called a vile cur, in order to serve loyally a generous master. That is what being a worthy samurai means."<sup>26</sup>

Donald Shively, in his study of *The Love Suicide at Amijima*, suggests that Chikamatsu, having been born in the *samurai* class, might be imposing another class' code of values to the *hoi polloi*. In his plays, even the *chonin*, (the townsmen) which includes the merchant and the artisan, act with a severity expected more of the *samurai*. This might be so, which may not give us a "true-to-life" picture of the townsmen involved in his domestic tragedies. Yet, the same consciousness of their *giri*, the realization of their incapacity to be equal to their obligations, the conflicting effects on their sense of honor, make domestic life approach dramatic and heroic moments. This is to the

<sup>24</sup> "Yosaku From Tamba," Donald Keene (Tr.), p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

merit of the dramatist, who delivers to us, not sob stories cut of newspaper reports, but dramas and characters exhibiting human situations immediately understandable to us, inspite of cultural barriers, because of their universality.

In "The Love Suicide at Amijima", as in other plays, the conflict is between *giri* (obligation) and *ninjo* (human feelings). The warm reception of these *shinju-shi* (love suicides) plays proves that this is a real problem during the period of Chikamatsu. The writer himself does not deny that his sources are actual incidents of *shinju-shi*. While these may supply materials for town gossip, we feel that the audience must have looked upon these unfortunate victims of ill-starred love with sympathy. Even for this seemingly immovable Japanese, human feelings are a superior value. Chikamatsu, very often, ends his plays with a eulogy: "No one is there to tell the tale, but the wind that blows through Sonezaki transmits it, and high and low alike gather to pray for these lover who beyond a doubt will in the future attain Buddhahood. They have become models of true love."<sup>27</sup> Japanese literature from *Manyoshu* is full of spontaneous expressions of honest passions which become more intense as emphasis is laid on control and restraint in later literature.

The problem of love is made more complex by the varied calls of *giri* that the lovers encounter, as well as the other characters involved. It becomes more acute as the impossibility of renouncing one *giri* for the sake of another forces them to renounce their lives altogether. It is only through this act that the reconciliation and fulfillment of these calls is possible.

Jiheï is torn between his filial obligations, his duty to Osan, his wife, and his duty to ransom Koharu, with whom he has sealed a promise of eternal love. Osan, on the other hand, is the incredible image of the perfect dutiful wife whose highest concern is to save her husband's honor, to the point of pawning her and her children's clothes just so Jiheï can ransom Koharu and not be put to shame by his rival. She sanctions, even urges Jiheï to redeem Koharu and set her up as a concubine, even if she becomes only "a nurse for the children or a cook, or even go into retirement." Besides Osan, Jiheï is a puny despicable male too underserving of her sacrifices. Most often, in Chikamatsu's plays women have stronger personalities than men.

In "The Love Suicide at Amijima," what is amplified is the *giri* towards another woman. "If I let this woman die," Osan says, "I shall not be meeting my obligations to a fellow woman."<sup>28</sup> Koharu herself, the picture of the virtuous prostitute, acknowledges her debt to Osan. Earlier, she resolves to sever her relationship with Jiheï,

<sup>27</sup> "Love Suicides at Sonezaki," p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> *The Love Suicide at Amijima*, Shively, p. 8.



in fulfillment of her vow to Osan not to hasten her husband's death. While violating this oath because of a change of circumstances actually re-arranged by Osan herself, she is too careful in the manner of their suicide if only to demonstrate her intention to keep her promise, and her *giri* towards Osan. "... I have been thinking along the way that if it is reported that Koharu and Kamiya Jihei committed a love suicide and our two dead faces were side by side, I shall be making waste-paper of my letter in which I vowed, when Osan-sama begged me not to let you die, that I certainly would not, and that I would cut off my relations with you. If I entice her beloved husband to a love suicide, she will consider me a typically deceitful prostitute, a treacherous person who has no sense of obligation. I should certainly rather have a thousand, a myriad people (think this), than to have the contempt and hatred of Osan alone. That she will surely resent me and hate me is the only concern I have about (entering) the future life. Kill me here, and you choose a place for yourself somewhere else . . . <sup>29</sup>

Suicide in another culture, would be an expression of despair, of rebellion, or a desperate attempt of a man to assert his values which without resorting to this negative violent way, would not survive in the world. This action is heroic in so far as it is a deliberate attempt of a willful man to perish rather than compromise. This is the reason why we find Antigone worthy of tragic heroism. Creon, or the law of the state, is much too powerful for her, and her resistance would only be futile. Yet, she chooses her love towards her brother, and with it she wills her death.

In Chikamatsu's world, on the other hand, we do not find willful individuals deliberately resisting the social system in order to assert their own values. Much less do we find them questioning the justice of their ethical order, so typical of the western spirit. Their suicide is not an expression of rebellion, rather it is an attempt to reconcile themselves to the ethical system which they have accepted from the very start. If Chikamatsu himself sympathizes with his characters, and should he try to elevate their passions above the ordinary question of good and evil, right or wrong, or should his intention be to assert the claim of individual to some natural freedom, this is not at all articulated by the characters. There is no destruction of one value, inevitable in this collision from the western point of view. Both *ninjo* and *giri* are celebrated as essential elements in the human and social life, and they both survive. The characters who died for love are only accidental exemplifications of the stability of the social and ethical order.

In contemporary Japanese literature, the influence of western ideas and values is most apparent in their examination of the problem of

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

the consciousness of sin and the absence of guilt. When we talk of sin, however, we do not equate it with the purely Christian concept of Heaven and Hell and the God of Judgment. We mean the personal attitude towards every single commitment, for every single motivation and action, and a consciousness of a personal responsibility since every act is a consequence of a deliberate choice and will.

This is, of course, a western value, which originates from different historical and cultural circumstances. Deeply imbedded in our consciousness is the sense of individuality which Christianity has extended to a sense of personality, that each person is one, self-conscious and rational being with a freedom and will to choose between good and evil.

In Japan, on the other hand, Shinto religion does not make distinction between good and evil. All natural thing is good, upon which we must look with gratitude and awe. All creation is one, which does not encourage the sense of individuality. The supreme value is *aware*, the recognition that one is a part of the whole, bound by the same nature and law. The Japanese modify Buddhism that it may fortify this concept. *Karma*, the law of causality, determines one's manner of existence in the world; hence, an ineluctable fate which does not admit choices, chances and probabilities. At the same time, it liberates one from the acceptance of a total responsibility. Finally, just as *kami* has the power of ubiquitousness, Buddha is within and without. Every one attains Buddhahood.

At this point, we wish to stress that our discussion touching these issues is without value judgment. It is relevant only insofar as it explains our conception of tragedy. Evidences from our tragedies suggest that a sense of guilt, in its self, has a tragic value, and can sufficiently provide thematic materials. Our intention here is to discover the role it plays, and the possibilities of the same theme from the perspective of two obviously divergent cultural experiences.

Ruth Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* stresses the dominant role of external sanctions rather than the internal in the culture of Japan. "It falls on the importance of shame, rather than on the importance of guilt."<sup>30</sup> This is a significant distinction since in shame cultures, where censure and standard of behavior come from the communal group, it is easy to exculpate oneself as long as in the eyes of the public, one is beyond reproach. Likewise, it is not difficult to relinquish responsibility for an action to a body of collective guilt. At the same time, however, the feeling of shame, even when it is instanced by trifles or by ridiculous circumstances, may be so intense, that, unlike in guilt cultures, "it cannot be relieved by

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1946) p. 222.

confession or atonement."<sup>31</sup> Strong pressures from the outside force one to "purify" himself by violent means. While in another culture, the measure of oneself is the image that one has set up for himself; in Japan, one is gauged against the image that society has prescribed for the individual.

The problem of Phaedra (Racine's *Phaedra*) is that with such an incestuous passion in her heart, she finds herself too contemptible in her own eyes to be able to live with herself. Even as she appears faultless in the public eyes, and how flawlessly she has masked her desire for Hyppolytus by pretending to be his archrival in the power struggle for the throne of Athens, to the extreme that Hyppolytus is banished by his own father, still she cannot suppress this internal tempest, a sorry mesh of conflicting passions: pride, love, hatred, anger, jealousy, a desire to avenge herself, as well as to save her love. Phaedra confesses to Hyppolytus:

...I love. But think not  
That at the moment when I love you most  
I do not feel my guilt; no weak compliance  
Has fed the poison that infects my brain,  
The ill-starr'd object of celestial vengeance.  
I am not so detestable to you  
As to myself...<sup>32</sup>

Osai, in "Gonza the Lancer," approaches the complexity of Phaedra's character. At least, she is one character who examines with honesty her conflicting passions. At the same time, she exhibits a wilfulness, a determination to make her will dominate over the events, even while secretly defying conventions. She wants Gonza, the most distinguished looking *samurai* for her daughter, and this, in spite of her daughter's protest, and Gonza's lukewarm assent. She manipulates the situation in such a way that Gonza could not refuse. In exchange for his vow, she offers him the tradition of the True Table Tea Ceremony, on which Gonza's honor as a *samurai* depends. The moment she learns that Gonza is actually engaged to Oyuki, "Osai inside her house, gives vent to a fit of pure jealousy. Her wrath breaks its moorings and cannot be tamed."<sup>33</sup> She probes into herself:

The more I think about it, the more jealous I feel. Must I give my beloved daughter to some utterly undistinguished man? I searched and searched, as if I were getting married myself, till finally I found the truly unusual man I had set my heart on as a husband for my precious daughter. But how can I keep from being jealous now? This afternoon that old witch blurted out that Oyuki and Gonza were secretly engaged. Oh, I'm seething with jealousy! I don't care if people call me a jealous woman, jealous over somebody else's

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Racine, "Phaedra," *A Book of Dramas*, Bruce Carpenter (ed.). (New York: Prentice Hall, 1949) p. 225.

<sup>33</sup> "Gonza the Lancer," Donald Keene (tr.), p. 286.

love affair. Secret traditions, indeed! They're nothing to me than empty husks. The tea table, the kettle, and the rest mean less than discarded peel. How hateful! How infuriating!<sup>34</sup>

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I wonder, is my jealousy decreed by fate or is it some kind of sickness? How could a woman as jealous as I have allowed my husband to slip out of her hands and go to Edo, mountains and oceans away? I must have been afraid of his lordship. Yes, I see how my jealousy comes entirely from my wilfulness. A mother's jealousy over her daughter's husband is the first seed of a bad reputation. I will put it from my mind completely.<sup>35</sup>

"She tries to shake off these thoughts, but her breast still burns with emotion. Her tears flow not out of habit."<sup>36</sup>

The ironic twist comes in when the "villain" of the play, Bannojo, who desires Osai, stealthily creeps in and with sashes as proof, announces to the world the "crime" of the "adulterous" pair. This is enough. Even without the actual commitment of the deed, and on Gonza's part, without the least intention, they are judged and condemned. It is Osai who urges Gonza: "Nothing can restore matters now. We are ruined, whether we live or die. And once people point at Ichinoshin and whisper about his stolen wife, he won't be able to look them in the face, much less continue in the service. We are doomed, but at least let us give Ichinoshin the chance to regain his reputation. Let us become lovers, adulterers, and then let him kill us. I would be most grateful."<sup>37</sup>

Again, the logic of this resolution would be difficult for us to understand, yet it falls into a clear pattern. It is not a question of love, or passion, but of *giri*. Gonza's reluctance to take Osai for his wife is in congruence with the feudal sense of honor. Osai is another man's property. Hence, it is a shame for him who is a *samurai* to appropriate her, the wife of another *samurai*. But even without wishing it to be so, neither can he disown her now. The real motivation of their flight is the *giri* towards Ichinoshin: to help him save his reputation. "Yes, I understand your reluctance, of course. But if our names are later cleared, Ichinoshin will be humiliated a second time, this time for having killed a man who was actually not his wife's lover..."<sup>38</sup> Even, the manner of their death is dictated by this code of honor. Osai says: "I want to be killed by my husband's sword. It would be a dog's death to be killed by my brother."<sup>39</sup> And for Gonza, glory is regained by dying like a *samurai*: an exhibition of blind courage and skill. Here is the description of the fatal duel between Gonza and Ichinoshin:

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

His movements as he ducks under his enemy's blade, himself swordless, are incredible in a wounded man and worthy of a master. Ichinoshin throws all his strength into the greatest effort of his life. He slashes Gonza aslant from the right shoulder to the chest, but Gonza does not flinch, despite this staggering blow. His final actions are worthy. In this rare encounter of enemy and enemy, Ichinoshin charges again and again, until Gonza, wounded five times, at last tumbles over backwards. His is the corpse of a true *samurai*. — not a single wound says he has turned his back.<sup>40</sup>

Our sensibility perhaps would be repelled at this system of justice. Yet, it holds for us a fascination. What man would easily take another man's life, and give up his own for a "fleeting wisp of glory," and maybe to us, a jaded sense of honor. But in the Japanese world, it is perfectly justified, in much the same way that we find "poetic justice" in the death of Hyppolytus and the suicide of Phaedra. In Phaedra's case, she is beyond salvation, even if her crime is not revealed. Her guilt intensifies when she learns that not only has she slandered Hyppolytus, but has also caused his death. "His silence would be vain. // I know my treason, and I lack the boldness // Of those abandon'd women who can taste // Tranquility in crime, and show a forehead // all unabash'd... // Death only can remove // This weight of horror..."<sup>41</sup>

At the base of all human situations, however divergent are our historical and cultural experiences, always, there is a sense of the tragic, or to take Lionel Abel's words, "the vision of the irremediable."<sup>42</sup> Ethical values may be different, and character and commitments, right and wrong, may be measured by different standards, yet these characters suffer the same consequences. They are all driven to a point where there is only one possible resolution: *death*.

Neither in "Gonza the Lancer," nor in "Phaedra" do we find a willing defiance of their code. We cannot say, however, that their violations are acts of pure accident. Even while Phaedra protests to Venus and to the gods for giving her such a passion, and Osai claims that it is the machinations of *Karma*, somehow they appear to be the knowing agents of their own misfortunes. While each of them may have a different concept of morality, for Osai, a morality which depends on the public image of herself, and for Phaedra, a more private and personal sense of morality, it is in the severity by which they impose their own rules on themselves that make them emerge as figures of tragic dimension. There is no attempt to compromise, or to deceive themselves by re-defining the laws. Osai fully accepts the social law as given, and Phaedra while protesting, recognizes that there is justice in penalizing the transgressor. And this is the source of their guilt: *a very high degree of moral awareness and a very clear awareness of*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> "Phaedra," p. 230.

<sup>42</sup> *Moderns on Tragedy*, p. 180.

*their own condition.* Condemned, this is also what proves their superiority over the rest.

For any man who reaches this crux of the human situation, it does not matter so much whether guilt is brought about by "shame," or by "conscience," or by a "sense of sin." What is significant is that, at this point, the next step— whether a case of self-offering to restore the ethical order of the society as in *Osai*, or one of self-punishment as in *Phaedra*,— this step is as imperative as it is inevitable. And this essentially tragic strain in human life is no monopoly of a single race or culture.

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