Revenge and the Marketplace: A Study of Chikamatsu Hanji’s
Travel Game while Crossing Iga

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Abstract

The basic proponents of Japanese revenge drama in the Edo period (1603-1868) are examined in terms of Chikamatsu Hanji’s (1725-83) joruri (bunraku) piece: Travel Game while Crossing Iga (Igagoe dochu sugoroku, 1783). The paper treats the following aspects: revenge plays deriving from a masterplot; the status of revenge in this period; the dramatization of revenge; revenge and journeying; stationendrama; a comparison with another play based on the same masterplot, Horse Charge while Crossing Iga (Igagoe norikake gappa, by Nagawa Kamesuke, 1776); revenge and monetary society; the ethics of the merchant class; and expressionism linked with highly melodramatic situations.

Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the characteristics of Japanese revenge plays, with a focus on Travel Game while Crossing Iga (Igagoe dochu sugoroku, 1783), a masterpiece of bunraku theater from the late 18th century. While revenge is a concept that is universally relevant to human affairs, its appearance has varied through ages, societies and customs. The same is true for the dramatic arts; Japanese traditional theaters such as kabuki and bunraku are abundant in revenge plays. However, these Japanese concepts are not allied to the Western conception of revenge. Often involving extended and complex plots, as well as abrupt and cruel behaviors of characters, the Japanese versions may seem to lack a logical consistency for those who are familiar with the Western revenge plays. My intention here is to search for an alternative dramaturgy of revenge that could explain why Japanese revenge plays in the early modern period had so much appeal for the audience in the past, and continue to do so today.

To this end, I will pose a hypothesis that revenge is a form of exchange in a broad sense, however bloody it may seem, which completes social systems such as the legal system and the economy. At the same time, theater is a mirror that reflects something that is missing or overlooked in the real world. Accordingly, the present article will show that theater functioned as a place for symbolic exchanges in the 18th century Japan.

Revenge plays in Japan

The Edo period, in which kabuki and bunraku theaters originated and developed, extended from the beginning of the 17th to the mid-19th century. One of the most popular themes in these theaters was revenge. Revenge dramas constituted a genre in the same sense as a number of English plays
from the late 16th to the early 17th century can be categorized as Elizabethan revenge tragedies. Here, we use the word genre for plays that have similar themes and/or plots, showing clear intertextuality between one work and another.

According to Fredson Bowers, plays such as *Hamlet*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* are all fashioned from the same preceding work, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, while they also have older ancestors in Senecan tragedies (Bowers, 1966). In these plays, a line of evolution is found in the dramatization of revenge. The same can be applied to Japanese revenge plays, as they were first adapted from real affairs of revenge, then repeatedly dramatized with increasing refinement. The most prominent example of this is *The 47 Loyal Vassals* (*Kanadehon Chusingura*, or simply, *Chusingura*, 1748), a dramatic achievement in a set of plays all treating the same theme. The pioneering work in this set is Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s(1) *The Go Game Strategy* (*Goban taiheiki*, 1706).

In this sense, most Japanese revenge plays stem from what is called a masterplot in narrative theory(2). It must be noted that Japanese masterplots of revenge afforded not only plays but also novels and kōdan (a narrative form in which historical or pseudo-historical events are dramatized and narrated theatrically by a solo narrator). Some of these masterplots still hold a narrative power for story production, as we can see with the *Chusingura masterplot*, from which new movies, television dramas, and even a modern ballet have been produced(3).

Bowers recounts the recurring plot devices in Kyd’s form of revenge tragedies. Examples include an apparition of a ghost at the beginning of the play; the disguise of the avenger (including a fake madness) to conceal his intentions; Machiavellian portraits of the villains contrasting with the ethical conflicts of the avengers; and traps laid by both sides that often result in unexpected murders (Bowers, pp.71-73). Although Japanese revenge plays do not share many of the features of their English counterparts (having neither ghosts nor an avenger’s madness) they have, some common aspects, such as conspiracy and bloodshed, which necessarily end with the triumph of the avengers.

Needless to say, their apparent similitude is due to the necessity of ultimately exacting revenge, because it is a sine qua non that the final ending should be prolonged as much as possible in order to entertain the audience. Consequently, it would be commonplace to include, between the beginning and the end, various plots delaying the action. In addition, as Elizabethan theater and Japanese kabuki and bunraku were commercial theaters, bloodshed and cruelty were required as attractions.

On the other hand, the greatest difference between the two is found in their narrative forms. Japanese revenge plays are epic in an Aristotelian sense; besides the fact that kabuki and bunraku have narrators or singers on stage, their story construction is not properly dramatic. They depict the entire revenge story from the beginning to the end, beginning with how the initial conflict is instigated, fol-

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(1) All personal names hereafter are indicated in the Japanese style: surname (Chikamatsu) followed by given name (Monzaemon).
(2) “Recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life” (Abbott, 2008, p.236). The notion of masterplot corresponds roughly to a Japanese suffix mono that refers to works deriving from the same origin, like “Chusingura-mono.”
(3) Maurice Béjart’s *Kabuki* (1986). *Chusingura* (ed., Akō-shi, Sōmubu, Shishi-hensan-shitu (The Editorial Board of the History of Akō City), 7 Vols.) is an enormous study dedicated to this masterplot; its 5th and 6th volumes contain a comprehensive list of works deriving from the masterplot, including plays, novels, satires, epigrams, movies, TV dramas, etc., from the 18th century to the present day.
lowed by the struggle between the avengers and their enemies, up to the final resolution. As a result, Japanese revenge drama becomes extremely long. Compared with *Hamlet*, for example, Japanese revenge plays have two-fold greater durations at minimum (in the Edo period, theaters normally opened in the early morning and closed in the evening).

Another trait of Japanese revenge drama is that it features traveling avengers. The heroes or heroines pursue the enemy on a long journey and experience various events. The plays are constructed around these itinerant characters. In these journey-based plays, the avenger is not always at the center of the story. In the first section of the drama, playwrights often indulge in lengthy descriptions of the incidents that occur on the road to revenge whilst, in the middle section, it is not uncommon for secondary characters, who support or interfere with the avengers, to be brought to the fore, with their actions, whether tragic or comic, being emphasized. In the final section, the revenge scene can be represented by spectacular swordplay. In this long, epic drama, it is not so much the antipathy of the avengers towards their enemies\(\text{(4)}\) that is highlighted, as their relationships with surrounding characters.

This viewpoint seems to justify the opinion that revenge in Japanese plays serves as a mere pretext for presenting a story, or a *framing narrative*, that contains different parts of independent stories. This may be true for kabuki, in which the actor’s performance and visual effects occupy an important role in the play. In bunraku, however, plays are conceived as coherent stories that should be interpreted as a whole (bunraku plays were not only staged, but widely published for the reader with interest). We must not forget that the majority of the kabuki revenge plays staged today were adapted from bunraku. This is why we must take note of bunraku revenge dramas.

**Revenge and theater in the Edo period**

In this period (1603-1868), the Tokugawa shogunate in Edo (currently known as Tokyo) had established sovereignty over the feudal lords, with its hierarchy of four social ranks composed of warriors (samurai), farmers, artisans, and merchants. From this vantage point, this was a feudal regime, which had endured since the Middle Ages.

If we change our viewpoint, however, this period had entered into a consumer society where a nationwide distribution network had been introduced through marine transportation. The main distribution channel existed between Edo (the residence of the shogun and his subjects) and Osaka (the supply center for the capital), although the two cities were separated by over 300 miles. Indeed, this society was constructed on a monetary system that was maintained by the activities of merchants, whose social rank were considered inferior to that of samurai.

As the economist Adam Smith indicated, money equalizes human beings, urging rationalism based on quantitative thinking (Smith, 1982). According to Akira Hayami, society gradually transformed into an “economic society” in the Edo period, in which economic pragmatism regulated individuals’ behavior (Hayami, 2003). This paved the way for the rapid growth of capitalism in Japan in the late 19th century.

In other words, this society appeared to be *gemeinschaft* with predominated kinship and social

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\(\text{(4)}\) In Japanese, persons sought by avengers are generally called “enemies” (*kataki*).
ranks, but in actual fact it was *gesellschaft*, as it was maintained by human relationships on a contractual basis. Although some might not be aware of this contradiction, this duality in the social system marked the period before the Meiji revolution in 1868.

It is possible to say, in this period, revenge was a wedge driven between this social discrepancy, because the authorities, the shogunate, and the feudal lords alike were forced to accept the warrior’s right of revenge as an expression of samurai ethics. While vengeance was a challenge to the rules supported by the legal system, a curious (and perhaps very Japanese) compromise appeared, that is, a custom of licensed revenge. Warriors, if they wished to exact revenge, were required to ask permission of the authorities prior to taking action; otherwise, they would have been considered criminals, no matter how just their claim might have been. The authorities, however, did not seem to be very concerned about this challenge, because, as a result of the troublesome legal procedure, very few samurai dared to declare vengeance. According to research on this subject, the Edo period, which endured for 250 years, recorded no more than 150 cases of revenge in total, an average of one case every two years (Hiraide, 1975 and Inagaki, 1987).

In this peaceful time, known as the *Pax Tokugawana*, townspeople (composed principally of artisans and merchants, however, the lower-class samurai living in big cities like Edo had almost merged with them) were lovers of novelties. This is why the news of love suicides was widely reported by yellow journalism, and dramatized repeatedly by playwrights like Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Revenge was another source of sensationalism. These affairs were first published as purported nonfiction, then fictionalized as novels and dramas that provided gossip for townspeople.

We should not confuse, consequently, revenge in a narrative form with that which occurred in the real world. Research documents have indicated that the majority of revenge affairs were triggered by mean-spirited samurai who boasted of bravery or rank, or simply by those who were drunk. These were far from dramatic heroes\(^5\). Townspeople, the most avid readers of novels, and theatergoers anticipated news of the samurai. Considering the fact that samurai in that period were assumed to be the descendants of those who had accomplished feats of arms in historic times, it is little wonder that news of them was reported with some exaggeration.

Up to the middle of the 18th century, fictionalized revenge in novels, *kôdan*, and drama became so popular that some lower-class people took revenge for themselves (Hiraide, pp.99-102), which was a privilege reserved for the samurai. This was a phenomenon similar to Chikamatsu’s dramatization of love suicides, which inspired imitators in the real world. This was an example of reality imitating fiction.

However, as indicated above, the fictionalization of revenge, especially in theater, did not entail a realistic representation of affairs. As the authorities prohibited faithful reproductions of affairs pertaining to samurai for fear that they should lead to criticism of the establishment\(^6\), playwrights were obliged to search for a *possible world* in which they could freely narrate their revenge stories. They found such a world in historical periods. Real affairs of revenge were thus transferred to historical

\(^{(5)}\) The vendetta of Jorurizaka, for example, which took place in 1672 in Edo, was another famous revenge story in the 17th century. It is said to have been initiated by a conflict between two senior samurai who quarreled about the order in a Buddhist service (Hiraide, pp124-125).

\(^{(6)}\) This is what happened with the early dramatization of the affair of 47 loyal vassals of Akô; a play produced in the aftermath of the affair was immediately prohibited by the authorities because it contained a direct allusion to the revenge activity (Ôishi, 2007, pp.223-224).
times from which people were taught heroic stories like *Record of the Great Peace* (*Taiheiki*), which dealt with the struggle between warriors divided by loyalty for the emperor in the 14th century. The public considered these stories to be half-historic and half-legendary, much as the tales of Ancient Greece and Rome appeared to Westerners in the 16th and 17th centuries. The dramas of these civilizations are composed intrinsically of various *masterplots* for story production. As a result, Japanese revenge drama is an amalgamation of facts and legends. Facts, because it is taken from contemporary affairs of revenge, and legends, because it purports to narrate events in the historic past. Here, again, we can see the duality that was specific to this period, composed of *tatema* (principles) and *hon-ne* (real intentions).

Another factor that differentiates the theatrical representation of revenge from the reality of it is that playwrights applied ready-made plots to revenge drama; the convention of a journey of revenge, for example, was not invented by this genre. It is true that real revenge often required an endless pursuit on the part of the avenger as his enemy had fled, forcing him to search for a hiding place somewhere in the country. However, the greatest reason that the plot of revenge as a journey has appealed to Japanese audiences to such a great extent is that it is deeply rooted in their literary imagery of life as a journey.

An avenger’s dissimulation, which reminds us somewhat of a hero’s disguise in the Elizabethan revenge tragedies, is another plot widely used in Japanese revenge plays. Here, a protagonist, to hide his true intentions, is seen to be drinking and having love affairs with courtesans in the pleasure quarter. This is also a commonly used plot device, constructed from what was called *yatsusi*: a prince or a son of a rich merchant, having squandered all his money in the pleasure quarter, appears to be wretched and laments his misfortune. The intent of this scene was to depict a privileged individual’s “conspicuous consumption” in the segregated place, *akusho*, or bad place, where highly refined love affairs were conducted in luxurious surroundings. In addition, melodramatic situations such as accidental meetings of characters and the misunderstanding of identities, features that cannot be ignored in commercial theaters, are commonly seen in revenge plays.

Should we conclude from the above that Japanese revenge plays are types of entertainment created from set-situations, which purport to recount the affairs of revenge? It is partly true that they relied on commercial success. It is also true, at the same time, that the same *masterplot*, from which many different stories were created, could produce an appealing narrative with more enduring quality, just as we see in the Elizabethan revenge tragedies, where competing adaptations of *The Spanish Tragedy* led to *Hamlet*. We can consider *Travel Game while Crossing Iga* as another example of a revenge drama that grew into a representative narrative through repeated fictionalization.

**Travel Game while Crossing Iga as a Representative of Japanese Revenge Drama**

Chikamatsu Hanji’s *Travel Game while Crossing Iga* (*Igagoe Dōchu sugoroku*, 1783, hereafter abbreviated as *Travel Game*) is a memorial work; it was the last piece by the author, who had supported the popularity of bunraku in the late 18th century. Indeed, after his death, the Takemotoza theater in Osaka dissolved and bunraku entered a long period of stagnation.

Chikamatsu Hanji (1725-83: in the following passage abbreviated to Hanji in order to avoid confusion with Chikamatsu Monzaemon) was not related to Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Hanji used this pseudonym
as he felt a reverence for Monzaemon, and this pen name means “half the greatness of Chikamatsu.” His works include: The Twenty-Four Dutiful Sons (1766, Honcho nijushiko), The Battle of Sakamoto Castle (1769, Ōmi Genji senjin yakata), and The Teaching for Women (1771, Imoseyama onna teikin), all of which are considered kabuki and bunraku canon today.

Travel Game is based on a revenge story associated with a samurai by the name of Araki Mataemon. If we could collect all the stories associated with this swordsman under the rubric of the Igagoe masterplot, Travel Game would be a defining work among the other existing stories. The events provided in the story of the Igagoe masterplot are counted among the three great revenge affairs in Japanese history (the others are the famous affair of the 47 loyal vassals from the domain of Akô in 1703, the sources of Chusingura masterplot, and the legendary vengeance of the Soga brothers in the 13th century).

The events of the original story occurred in 1634, 150 years before the premiere of Travel Game. A quarrel between two samurai in the service of a feudal lord ended with the murder of one. However, as the murderer sought protection from a direct retainer of the shōgun (hatamoto), the case developed into a matter of honor between the lord and hatamoto, making vengeance imperative for the relatives of the victim. As the legitimate (licensed) avenger Watanabe Kazuma, brother of the murdered, was incapable of hunting down the enemy by himself, he requested the aid of his brother-in-law, the intrepid Araki Mataemon, to exact revenge on his behalf (avengers, if they were inferior to the enemy, were permitted to ask the assistance of those related to the affair).

Hanji dramatized this story through 10 dan, or acts, if we use the terminology of Western theater, following the conventions of Japanese revenge drama. Hence, it can be divided into three sections: the first, or Act I to III, which depicts the original conflict between the samurai; the second, or Act IV to IX, which tells of the events that befall those involved in the affair; and the third, or Act X, which represents the final revenge scene.

The most distinctive feature of this drama is that the playwright recaptures the subject of revenge as a journey by using the metaphor of a travel game. Although the association of revenge with a journey itself had previously existed, the drama, especially sections two and three, concerns travel through the relay stations of Tôkaido, the main highway connecting Edo and Kyoto (and Osaka), as if the characters proceed from one place to another like pieces on a backgammon board. In fact, the title Travel Game refers to a Japanese board game which features travel (sugoroku), emphasizing that the play is a form of stationendrama.

The play’s dramaturgical refinement can be further attested to through a comparison with a preceding work based on the same Igagoe masterplot, Horse Charge while Crossing Iga (Igagoe norikake gappa, by Nagawa Kamesuke, 1776, hereafter abbreviated as Horse Charge), a kabuki play which is known to have been a considerable success before Travel Game, and with which Hanji was certain to be familiar.

Horse Charge is a stirring play, as it is constructed so as not to bore the audience at any stage. To achieve this effect, the playwright expands the plots of the first section considerably. Firstly, a samu-

(7) Strictly speaking, he could not have been a legitimate avenger because it was his younger brother who was victimized; according to the customary law, avengers could revenge only their elders, such as their father or elder brother. However, Hiraide indicated that in the early days of the Edo period it was not uncommon for elders to take revenge on youngsters (Hiraide, p.57).

(8) The translation of the title is my own.
A rai called Sawai Matagorô(9) covets a family treasure, a high-quality Masamune sword, belonging to his colleague, Watanabe Shizuma(10). Matagorô tricks Shizuma into pledging it to a merchant, with the intention of later taking the sword from the merchant. Shizuma’s father objects to this trick, but Matagorô surprises and kills him. Thus begins the revenge story; however, it only constitutes a part of the conspiracy that Matagorô and his lord form against their senior lord. The first section of Horse Charge is centered on how, during Matagorô’s escape from battle, the villain’s struggle for power is thwarted by the efforts of the loyal vassals including Shizuma.

With regard to section two, it begins with a typical scene in the akusho, or pleasure quarter, with the character Karaki Masaemon (note that this is not the real Araki Mataemon). Here, he indulges himself in the hope that his master will discharge him for his misconduct. This is because he is such an excellent a swordsman that his master will not spare him for conventional reasons. In this way, he obtains the liberty to assist his brother-in-law. In the course of their pursuit of their enemy, Shizuma, the only witness who can recognize Matagorô, begins to suffer from a serious eye disease. This difficulty is resolved through the performance of hara-kiri by Masaemon’s child who, knowing that he is in fact an adopted son of Matagorô, offers fresh blood, which is said to be necessary to cure Shizuma’s disease. Lastly, the scenes within section three are far more spectacular here than in Travel Game; these scenes, like screenplay, first feature the collective swordfight between the band of Masaemon and their enemies, and gradually focuses on a duel between Shizuma and Matagorô, their ultimate adversary.

The difference between Travel Game and Horse Charge is mainly due to the fact that the latter is a kabuki play. The playwright, Nagawa Kamesuke, makes full use of the turning stage, a device invented for kabuki theater, which enables the rapid changing of scenes. This mechanism, along with a complicated storyline, is suited to kabuki actors’ performance. In other words, this revenge play features constant action in the framework of revenge story. It constitutes another type of Igagoe masterplot that afforded the possibility of movie development in the 20th century, of which the best known is perhaps Araki Mataemon, Duel at Kagiya no tsuji (11). Travel Game, on the other hand, is a puppet play, the performance of which is significantly different from the spectacular performances of plays featuring actors. Consequently, it investigates the psychology of characters involved in revenge with more consistency, although the way of dramatization is not the same as psychological plays in the modern period.

Hanji, while following the basic storyline of Horse Charge, made a considerable change in his treatment of the details. The plot concerning a fine Masamune sword in the first part, for example, is reduced in Travel Game to Shizuma’s love affair with the courtesan Segawa, for whom he thoughtlessly agrees to pledge his family’s sword to pay a ransom. Shizuma is not only frivolous, but a weak swordsfighter. After his father has been killed by the envious Matagorô, Shizuma is counterattacked by his enemy and wounded. However, the political struggle highlighted in the kabuki play is, for

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(9) In the affair of 1634, his name was Kawai Matagorô. His name was slightly changed by the author to avoid accusations by the authorities of dramatizing a real samurai affair. The same procedure is applied to the other major characters in the drama.

(10) Similar to above: originally Watanabe Kazuma.

(11) Araki Mataemon Ketto Kagiya no tsuji, directed by Mori Kazuo and featuring Mifune Toshiro, with a screenplay written by Kurosawa Akira, 1952.
the most part, ignored in the bunraku drama. The playwright moves directly to the scene where the
central figure of the drama, Karaki Masaemon, gains the freedom to assist in the quest for revenge.

Differing from the depiction of Masaemon in *Horse Charge*, Hanji prepares an entangled situ-
ation for his hero: as he is married to Otani, Shizuma’s sister, without the consent of her father (now
deceased), she has been disinheritd by him. If we follow the formalistic thinking of the age, Masae-
mon cannot be considered to be a brother of Shizuma. To restore his position as a concerned party in
the revenge, he divorces Otani, entering into an apparent matrimony with Shizuma’s younger sister,
who is merely a child. Another difficulty for Masaemon is his lord, as he has recently been given a
permanent post in the service of a feudal lord. In return, he must prove his ability as a swordsman in
a match scheduled for him. He purposefully decides to be defeated. The lord, realizing the true situ-
ation, allows him to leave.

As Masaemon’s trouble indicates, what Hanji stresses in his drama is the distress in which a quest
for revenge places the characters. This is most distinctively seen in the two acts contained in section
two, Act VI: “Numazu” and Act VIII: “Okazaki.”

In “Numazu,” the action occurs in the Numazu station of the *Tokaido* highway, located at the bot-
tom of the foothills of Mount Fuji. It is late autumn and, towards nightfall, a poor old man (Heisaku)
finds a traveling merchant (Jûbei), who is without lodging. He invites him to stay in his ramshackle
house. A young woman who is found with Heisaku is called Oyone; she is in fact the former courte-
san Segawa. She is caring for the wounded Shizuma, now her husband, in a nearby place. During the
course of the conversation, Jûbei realizes that Oyone is his sister and that the old man is his father,
from whom he had separated long before. Because he is in the service of their enemy, Matagorô,
Jûbei departs the house hastily but leaves a large sum of money for his family. Heisaku follows him
and returns the money, asking for the enemy’s whereabouts. To prove his sincerity, Heisaku commits
hara-kiri in exchange for information. This information is overheard by Oyone, who is hiding behind
the scene.

“Okazaki”, the title of Act VIII, is a relay station found in mid *Tokaido*. It is a winter’s night with
heavy snow-fall. Masaemon, now legitimately a concerned party for the avenger, appears in pursuit
of Matagorô. He asks for a night’s lodging at the gatekeeperis house, concealing his identity. To his
surprise, the old gatekeeper is his former sword master, who now supports Matagorô’s band. The old
man, not recognizing his disciple, asks him to join them, to which Masaemon feigns agreement. At
this very moment, Masaemon divorced wife, Otani, with her baby, wanders into the house, lost in
the snow. The gatekeeper is delighted to discover that the baby is the son of the famous Masaemon
by reading the nametag, and has the intention of taking the infant hostage. Masaemon, in a difficult
situation, instantly stabs the baby.

Melodramatic devices such as coincidence, dissimulation, and trickery pervade both acts, as in
many other bunraku and kabuki plays. The playwright presents these scenes in this way so as to em-
phasize the harshness of the characters when they are placed in a dilemma. The unlikeliness of their
conduct, as well as the incongruity of the bloodshed, has been criticized by modern reviewers (Uchi-
yama, 1996, p.560). These criticisms, however, are based on the premise that the character’s acts must
be proportional to his/her psychology, which is commonly encountered in modern Western drama.

It is precisely this disproportion, exaggerated as it is, upon which Hanji stresses the discrepancy
between the characters’ intentions and the situations they encounter, provoking them to excessive-
ness. Moreover, apart from the critical moments, such as those involving Heisaku and Masaemon, the drama develops in a quite “realistic” setting.

Another feature added to the drama by the playwright is that the affair of revenge is colored by a keen sense of the seasons. “Numazu” should be set in late autumn, as if to suggest the unfortunate and declining years of the old man, while in “Okazaki,” the appearance of Masaemon’s divorced wife and their child through snowfall constitutes a visual image of their hardship. In Japanese revenge drama, it is not unusual to have the most impressive scenes accompanied by seasonal settings. This is because revenge is conceived as a stationendrama, in which a journey is a metaphor for life. The avengers, as well as the other characters concerned in the affair, are itinerants who tread uncertain paths through the changing seasons.

**Revenge and the Marketplace**

Here, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the incongruity between the character’s actions and their thoughts, I examine revenge from a different viewpoint. According to Karl Polanyi, revenge is a form of exchange based on reciprocity (Polanyi, 1968). Many examples indicate that revenge did not always accompany bloodshed; it could be replaced by the offering of human beings, goods, or money. This specific form of exchange must be made, at the same time, through ritualistic settings symbolizing the parity of both sides. If the custom of revenge had remained at this stage, however, it would not have constituted a source for drama.

A turning point comes in the next stage, where different moral criteria for transgressions were integrated under the notion of justice. This means that we can weigh sins and punishments according to a common standard. Aristotle, in his *Ethics*, arrived at this point, making all violations commensurable with this standard. Richard Seaford indicates that the increasing usage of money in Greek society urged Aristotle into this mindset because, as mentioned above, money exercises a nominal quantification, not only for goods and services, but also for human actions in general. The same is true for Greek tragedies depicting revenge; the characters are obliged to find, by themselves, equilibrium between the act of revenge and the notion of justice, hence their conflict and solitude, segregated as they are from conventional communal thought (Seaford, 2004, p.147).

Assuming the correlation between market and theater as a place for exchange, it is no coincidence that the three major epochs during which remarkable revenge plays appeared in the West, namely, Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the 19th century, correspond to the three important stages of the development of the Western economy: the birth of the money-based economy, the formation of capitalism or the World System, and the advent of imperial-colonialism.

The association of revenge in the theater with the marketplace can be best illustrated by *The Merchant of Venice*, as Katsuhito Iwai explains in his essay (Iwai, 1992). This play depicts the process through which the passion for revenge is calculated in monetary terms and then excluded from the legal system. The community of the merchants of Venice, of which Antonio is a representative, is based on a conventional system of values, such as friendship and racial ties. Ironically, after they have overcome difficulties, it is suggested that this community will transform into a capitalist society, based on a solid legal system. However, Shylock, after having been overly insistent upon blood revenge, fails in his attempt to obtain retribution. With the prospect of losing all of his fortune, it is the
Jewish usurer who now belongs to the old system, which will be surpassed by a more merciless one.

The late 18th century Japan that produced Travel Game was far more commercialized than Renaissance England; not only were bills of exchange used for remote transactions, but futures trading, which was the first of its kind, was also introduced in the Osaka rice market. Money plays an indispensable part in the revenge plays of this period. In Travel Game, it is the prodigal Shizuma’s pledging of the sword that triggers the revenge story. Apart from the initial situation, scenes where transactions using money appear are abundant in the drama, suggesting that revenge requires a large amount of money, both for the fugitives and the pursuers. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that, besides The Merchant of Venice, in Western theater there are no similar revenge tragedies so filled with pecuniary conversation as kabuki and bunraku revenge dramas. The samurai is obliged to be dependent upon the activities of merchants in order to meet his practical needs. Thus, in the drama, Matagorô, having killed Shizuma’s father, is helped by a merchant, Jûbei, to flee. The latter will reappear in the “Numazu” act.

The merchants in Japanese revenge plays are generally neither wicked nor crafty. This is contradictory to the fixed image of those who look for an opportunity to use their masters. When it comes to his ability to protect the criminal Matagorô, this is the reason why Jûbei, although he is loyal to the villain, declares that he is not a merchant who inflates prices (Hanji, 1996, p.25).

This personality should be interpreted, nonetheless, as an idealized one, which has been derived from the ethics advocated by the moralist philosopher Ishida Baigan (1685-1744) or from his school, which was influential among urban lower-class people. Ishida claimed that the merchants should have virtues based on sincerity (Takenaka, 1998). This is also important because the merchants composed a major portion of bunraku and kabuki theater audiences. As Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s sewamono (a genre of drama depicting the ordinary life of merchant-class people) indicates, the morality of lower-class people constituted a common theme for bunraku and kabuki dramatists.

In Hanji’s drama, the main character, Masaemon, is trapped in this troublesome situation because, as Uchiyama observed (Uchiyama, p.557), the playwright, referring to one existing version of the Igagoe masterplot, scrutinizes Masaemon’s personal background. Masaemon is not samurai by birth and was promoted to the upper class as an exceptional case because of his uncommon talent as a swordsman. As a result, he must overly represent himself as samurai, which leads him to a crucial scene in which he kills his own child.

Travel Game presents the processes through which the main characters give proof that they are credible in terms of revenge. However, this cannot be achieved without harsh self-sacrifice, because the characters cannot take action as long as they respect the social ties within which they are bound. As shown above, the actions of Masaemon in acts IV and V are motivated by a desire to restore his position as an interested party in the affair, without regard to the abandonment of his wife or loss of his position in samurai society. The audience would accept the abrupt hara-kiri of Heisaku, assuming it to be a trade-off between his impoverished life and the right to participate in the affair to which he has been an outsider. Similarly, the sudden appearance of Otani and her child in the snow, which is difficult to explain in the logical development of the drama, could only have meaning if we suppose that they too are involved in the revenge, and that they should not be forgotten, although their act accompanies a horrible sacrifice.

The characters’ hardships seem to repeat the following questions: Am I legitimately engaged in
the revenge affair? If this is the case, how much do I owe for my engagement? Being involved in revenge makes it possible, for those who are in principle excluded from the affair, to bargain in relation to precious things that are beyond their reach. The higher the stake, the greater is the emotion. We that find the rare object in this transaction is credibility, and the currency used for it is a stake in the revenge quest. Characters, in exchange for being engaged in this costly business, gain the reward of becoming a credible people, because, as stated by Ishida, the most valuable item for the merchant is not money, but rather credibility backed by the merchant’s sincerity (Takenaka, pp.333-335). If it is true the Japanese Revenge plays in this period did not reproduce real revenge affairs of samurai, they nonetheless represent townspeople’s desire to be duly placed in a world dominated by samurai ethics; this was achieved in the form of an economic transaction with which the merchant-class people were very familiar.

It is never asked, however, if revenge itself has a meaning, as money has value insofar as it is exchanged and circulated among individuals. In Japanese revenge plays, revenge is a medium by which people are evaluated. The value of this medium remains indeterminable. If we change the perspective, it can be said that revenge symbolizes the shogunate regime, which, by its oppression of explicit critics of all kinds, was ultimately fictitious.

Conclusion

Revenge in bunraku and kabuki has a character of stationendrama featuring the wanderings of avengers. We can also discern this feature in Western dramas such as Oresteia and Hamlet (the hero’s dispatch to England and his return), although this motif was not fully developed here as in Japan.

Another specific aspect of Japanese revenge plays is that those who are involved in revenge are treated with as much importance as the protagonists. In other words, it is the process before the achievement that is highlighted, whilst the goal itself becomes an opaque object. In Western revenge tragedies, by contrast, whether from Ancient Greece or Renaissance England, the characters must suffer from the moral judgment connected with the exacting of revenge.

If Western dramatists have repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of engaging in the act of revenge, it is the legitimacy of being engaged in the process of revenge that is pursued in kabuki and bunraku. This specific aspect of Japanese revenge drama reflects the discrepancy between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft in the Edo period. It is centered on scenes featuring highly melodramatic situations in which extravagance and harsh absurdity belong in the same vein as the 20th century expressionist drama.

Acknowledgement:

I express my sincere gratitude to Masami Iwai, an eminent scholar of kabuki and bunraku theater and my devoted friend, in whose kind advice I have great confidence.
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