

Man and Nature

By Shuji Takashina

Stage drama is a cultural flower, a mirror of society. It is a collection and reflection of the ways people think and live, their values and their concept of beauty. More than a reflection, the stage is society itself.

Many of the traditional Japanese *bunraku* puppet theater and kabuki dramas often performed today are the work of Monzaemon Chikamatsu, an exceptionally talented playwright active during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. His dramas are exquisite portrayals of the intricacies and complications of human relations set against a vivid backdrop of the social conditions and customs of his time. Twentieth century Japan has very different customs and lifestyles, but Chikamatsu's plays continue to have a strong appeal because modern Japanese can still empathize with his characters' thoughts and emotions, values, and sense of aesthetics.

Chikamatsu's tragedies focus on the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo*. *Giri* are the customs, ethics, and mores of conduct necessary for one to live within society; *ninjo* the natural human emotions and feelings. To love another person is a natural *ninjo* emotion, and this emotion is celebrated as long as it remains within the bounds of social customs and codes. When, however, a person's love does not conform to society's rules, that person becomes trapped between the demands of *giri* and *ninjo*, and his suffering is the stuff of tragedy. Chikamatsu's tragedies generally conclude in death. His leading characters, a man and woman in love, almost invariably choose to die together rather than live apart.

Tragic love stories are not exclusive to Japan, of course. The suicide of unhappy lovers is a universal theme, exemplified in the West by *Tristan and Isolde*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and many other classic tales. Chikamatsu's portrayals of the tragic consequences of forbidden love are often



compared to those of the great seventeenth century classical French playwright, Pierre Corneille. In *Le Cid*, Corneille's most famous work, the hero falls in love only to find that his love's father is a hated enemy of his father's. The hero must confront his enemy to restore his father's good name, but at the risk of losing his beloved. This is the classic conflict between social obligation and personal feelings.

Naturally, the obligations of society, its customs, ethics, and codes of conduct will vary from culture to culture. The Japanese concept of *giri* does not always correspond to Western ethics and values. But the pathos of the individual coming into conflict with the mores of society is universal, and in this sense, Corneille's and Chikamatsu's dramas have the same basic appeal.

The two playwrights diverge significantly, however, in their treatment of nature. In all his plays, Corneille concentrates on people and nature hardly figures at all. In *Le Cid*, the only reference to nature is a single line referring to the dim light of the stars. Chikamatsu, by contrast, paints a vivid picture of his characters' natural surroundings, and uses nature to stress his themes. In his moving *michiyuki* scenes, in which the protagonists commence their journey to death—the only refuge from the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo*—Chikamatsu describes the glitter of the Milky Way above and the flow of the river

below, and the sad tolling of the temple bell at dawn. These devices help to heighten the climax of Chikamatsu's tragedies. His ill-fated lovers pass through a subtly changing environment as they walk to their death. We are absorbed by the scene and find ourselves in step with the lovers, full of sympathy as they renew their vows of love under the stars and as their tears flow into the river. The natural environment is more than a backdrop; it expresses and amplifies the lovers' deep feelings. Chikamatsu's employment of nature in his final, climactic scenes is deliberate—beauty is most keenly perceived when man and nature are one. This is a reflection of the Japanese affinity for nature. Nature is perceived not as something to be viewed from outside but rather as a whole of which man is a part.

In Japanese landscape painting, for example, the painter's perspective, and hence the viewer's perspective, is from within the scene depicted. By contrast, the focal point in landscapes by seventeenth-century Dutch painters and the nineteenth-century impressionists is somewhere outside, external to the scene.

Lines of *waka*, a form of Japanese verse, often embellish Heian period (794–1185) folding screens painted with landscapes. On these screens, the person depicted in the landscape becomes the poet whose thoughts and feelings are expressed in the *waka*. As the viewer reads the verse, he seeks a spiritual oneness with the poet in the painting.

When the great Japanese painter Motonobu Kano was commissioned to paint cranes on the sliding doors of a Buddhist monastery, he is supposed to have spent hours posing as a crane before undertaking the task, endeavoring in the process to become one with the graceful birds he would paint. This is probably no more than a charming legend, but it well illustrates the Japanese perception of man and nature. ●

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