

ABSTRACT

Yuranosuke and Okaru at the Ichiriki Teahouse: Exploring Bunraku and Kabuki from a Single Scene

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My idea is to construct a site around a single scene as performed on the stage of both the bunraku and kabuki theaters, and to analyze it in detail, with a wide variety of supporting data, as an entry to understanding the larger worlds of both of these two main forms of Edo popular theater.

The scene itself is not just any scene: it is the best-known scene in the most popular act of the most frequently performed play of both the bunraku and kabuki repertoires since the initial performances in 1748-49. In annotated Japanese versions of the jôruri text, it is labeled “Yuranosuke Redeems Okaru,” but a more theatrical description would be “Reading the Letter and Descending the Ladder.” Everyone at the symposium will probably be familiar with the scene; the text of the original jôruri version may be found on pp. 115-18 of Donald Keene’s translation of *Kanadehon Chûshingura*.

This one scene should obviously not be taken as representative of all bunraku and kabuki, but it has the advantage of having spawned a rich documentary legacy, both of actual performances, and also of the complex ways in which theatrical themes were interwoven into various other media of Edo culture. This legacy is accessible, and can easily be made available in digital form. It is precisely the permeation of this one scene beyond the stage that I consider to be one of its greatest assets for the JPARC database, because it provides a richly-documented case study of the connection between theater and the many other arts of Edo Japan.

At the same time, there is much to be said for the intensive analysis of a single scene as a way of understanding some of the fundamental components of both bunraku and kabuki, and of the relationship between them. These are two theatrical worlds that are so vast and so complex that they can never be documented outside of Japan in any but the most strategic ways. *Kanadehon Chûshingura* is a very long and complex play, too long any more to perform in its entirety in a single day, so that there is no way of documenting it as a whole. But perhaps one scene can suggest the ways in which the many other scenes can be approached.

Hopefully such a site could function as a resource for a wide range of users, from beginner to expert. I would hope that it could be used as a supplementary teaching tool in a course on Edo culture. I myself have found that *Kanadehon Chûshingura* is a difficult play to teach within a limited compass of time. It is easiest to teach as literature and history, since students become absorbed in the facts of the Akô Incident and in the endlessly complex sub-plots of the play, which in turn raise countless fascinating issues of interpretation. But the stage performances, both bunraku and kabuki, remains largely inaccessible, although in fact it was more through stage than text that *Kanadehon Chûshingura* spread so widely. So perhaps a close look at a single scene like this, in both bunraku and kabuki forms, might at least give a glimpse into the broader world of Chûshingura performance. Focusing on a single highly dramatic scene would help bring it to life as performance, if only briefly, and further linking could reveal how widely the play echoed through Edo culture.

At the same time, expert scholars of Edo theater as well might be able profit from such a site, and over time introduce their own emendations and supplements. My exploration is still in a preliminary stage, but I am convinced that there is much to be teased out of this one scene that has not yet been closely examined (at least not in English). Just think for a moment, for example, about Okaru reading the letter with a mirror. What is the really all about? Depending on whether the angle is optical, erotic, psychological, or dramatic, one will probably reach quite different conclusions, perhaps provoking wider thoughts about the meanings of mirrors in Japanese culture. And the scene as a whole raises important issues of power and gender in Edo culture.

In my presentation, I hope to give a taste of the wide range of documentary materials that are available for this one particular scene, with selective examples from each of the major categories, including: librettos, videorecordings, photographs, handbills (*banzuke*), and actor and theater prints (*yakusha-e*, *shibai-e*). The challenge will be to organize this all effectively into a single site that is both deep in its resources and easy to navigate for a broad level of potential users.