



The Bunraku Puppet Theatre: Honor, Vengeance, and Love in Four Plays of the 18th and 19th Centuries

Stanleigh H. Jones

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The four plays presented here—“Moritsuna’s Camp,” “The Mountains Scene,” “Vengeance at Iga Pass,” “The True Tale of Asagao”—were first performed between 1769 and 1832, a time when the Japanese puppet theatre known as Bunraku was beginning to lose its pre-eminence to Kabuki. During this period, however, several important puppet plays were created that went on to become standards in both the Bunraku and Kabuki repertoires; three are found in this volume. This span of some sixty-odd years was also a formative one in the development of how plays were presented, an important feature in the modern staging of works from the traditional plebeian theatre. Only a handful of complete and uncut plays—often as much as ten hours long—are produced in Bunraku or Kabuki nowadays. Included here is one of these. There are also two examples of the much more common practice of staging a single popular act or scene from a much longer drama that itself is seldom, if ever, performed in its entirety today.

Kabuki, while better known outside Japan, has been a great beneficiary of the puppet theatre, borrowing perhaps as much as half of its body of work from Bunraku dramas. Bunraku, in turn, has raided the Kabuki repertoire but to a far more modest degree. The fourth play in this collection, “Asagao,” is an instance of this uncommon reverse borrowing. Moreover, it is an example of yet another way in which some plays have come to be presented: a coherent subplot of a longer work that gained an independent theatrical existence while its parent drama has since disappeared from the stage. These later eighteenth-century works display a continued development toward greater attention to the theatrical features of puppet plays as opposed to the earlier, more literary approach found most notably in the dramas of Chikamatsu Monzaemon (d. 1725).

Newly translated and illustrated for the general reader and the specialist, the plays in this volume are accompanied by informative introductions, extensive notes on stage action, and discussions of the various changes that Bunraku underwent, particularly in the latter half of the eighteenth century, its golden age. Because many of the features we see in Bunraku plays today owe their origins largely to the changes the theatre experienced more than two centuries ago, this volume will be a valuable reference for those interested in contemporary Japanese theatre as well as its historical antecedents.

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