

Hara-kiri of a Woman at Nagamachi

(*Nagamachi onna-harakiri*)

Written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon

Translated by Paul S. Atkins

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Introduction

Hara-kiri of a Woman at Nagamachi is a three-act play written to be performed by a jōruri chanter, a shamisen player, and puppeteers in the form of traditional Japanese theater known in the West as bunraku.

It was written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), author of over one hundred plays and perhaps Japan's greatest playwright. At the time the play premiered in the autumn of 1712, Chikamatsu was 62 years old, and the play thus belongs to his mature period.

Nagamachi onna-harakiri has been translated into French and modern Japanese; this is the first English version.¹

It is a remarkable play for a number of reasons. The first is the unusual ending. The play begins like a typical double-suicide play: an ill-starred romance between a townsman and his beloved courtesan, the financial barrier to their happiness together, and the disaster that ruins him. The lovers make the customary journey to their deaths—in this case, to Osaka, to visit the aunt and bid her farewell. According to the usual plot pattern, they would then kill themselves, but instead the aunt forfeits her own life in order to save her nephew. *Nagamachi* confounds categorization; it is a tragedy that appears at first to revolve around the young couple, but comes to center upon the aunt, who resolves a crisis and provides catharsis through her own death. Although it is set in the present (i.e., it is a *sewamono*), the resolution of the play occurs not by a double suicide or capture of the guilty couple, but through the sacrificial death of a third party, in the manner of a historical play (*jidaimono*).

Second is the atypical emphasis on the role of the aunt as heroine, rather than the courtesan. Readers of Japanese puppet plays are accustomed to seeing weak male protagonists accompanied by strong female love interests, but in this play the heroine is the

¹ The French version by René Sieffert was published as “Une femme s’ouvre le ventre dans la Rue Longue” in *Les Tragédies Bourgeoises: Tome III* (Cergy: Publications orientalistes de France, 1992), pp. 142-83. The modern Japanese version by Nagatomo Chiyoharu was published in *Chikamatsu Monzaemon shū 1*, ed. Torigoe Bunzō, et al., (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1997), pp. 443-85. I have consulted Nagatomo's version in the preparation of this English translation, which is based on the classical Japanese original edited and annotated by Nagatomo in the same volume.

childless aunt, never named in the play, a woman of warrior lineage like her nephew but clearly made of stronger stuff. In this regard she resembles some of Chikamatsu's strong female characters (such as in *The Battles of Coxinga* and *Battles at Kawanaka-jima*), but differs in that she sacrifices herself not in the midst of battle, but in order to atone for a crime her nephew has perpetrated in peacetime. The extant English scholarship contains scant discussion of the depiction of female characters in Chikamatsu's plays. It would seem to be a ripe topic for research and debate, and this play provides an additional and atypical case for consideration.

Third, the play presents a complex negotiation of class and ethics. The craftsman and his aunt are both of samurai lineage, but through various circumstances have descended to the artisan class. Nonetheless, the aunt clearly shows that she clings to the samurai ethos while at the same time recognizing the extraordinary burdens one must bear in order to follow it. "Do not envy the samurai," she exhorts her nephew, and by doing so invites us to consider the relationship between happiness and social status in Tokugawa Japan. This play is set precisely at the nexus between the three worlds of the samurai, the townsman, and the courtesan, yet no samurai character actually appears. In portraying the performance of seppuku—a cultural practice that was regarded as a sacred and exclusive privilege of male members of the samurai class—by woman who is no longer a member of that class, this play invites us to consider what it means to live according to the rigorous ethics of the warrior and whether class distinctions truly correlate with ethical hierarchies.

Fourth, the familiar motif of substitution is especially prominent in this play, but with a twist. The aunt is a substitute mother to her orphaned nephew, who is in turn a substitute son to the childless aunt. The courtesan Ohana impersonates the aunt at the beginning of the play in order to meet with her lover, but is found out. Hanshichi substitutes an ersatz sword for the real thing, but he too is discovered and thereby destroyed. Finally, the aunt dies in place of her nephew, in the traditional *migawari* (sacrificial substitution). Substitution is closely linked to the practice of the commodity exchanges that constitute urban mercantile life. The craftsman's grandfather bought a valuable sword for a vast sum of money, then also "paid" for it with his life, because he was humiliated in the process. The courtesan's body is an asset with a clearly defined monetary value, but the life of a samurai too may be exchanged in order to preserve his honor or to save the life of another. This leads us to sacrifice—like substitution, a form of exchange. In this way, sacred sacrifice and profane commodity exchanges, respectively representing the worlds of the samurai and the townsman, merge and intersect.

English readers have some access to jōruri, largely through the superb translations of Professors Donald Keene and Andrew Gerstle, but of some fifteen hundred extant jōruri texts (including old jōruri), still only about twenty-five are readily available in English translation. These plays represent the pinnacle of early modern dramaturgy in Japan; their characters confront wrenching ethical dilemmas and choices in an imagined society that resembles and yet does not resemble our own known world.