

ASIAN DRAMA AND LYRIC POETRY

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Although no unsurmountable barriers keep those who comprehend and enjoy Western drama from rewarding contacts with that of the East nor those inheriting traditions of Eastern drama from grasping the stage of the West, striking and genuine differences exist between them. As the world inevitably inclines toward cultural unity, the ratio will unquestionably appear more favourable to the similarities. These developments, now strongly afoot, spring chiefly from increased understanding of the ends which each drama serves and include acknowledged awareness of initial dissimilarities. Each culture must learn from the other by virtue of this awareness. Thus the critical view of life developed in the West will presumably become more attractive to the East while at the same time few aspects of Eastern drama are more likely to prove of service to the West than one of its explicitly formal features which, in simplified statement, may be designated an assimilation of the lyric element into the dramatic, the short non-dramatic poem into the larger context of the play.

Terms in criticism are seldom wholly satisfactory and too often actually misleading. In the commencement of our argument some explanatory observations on the word "lyric" may be helpful. By lyric is signified the short poem well developed in its poetic idiom, imagistically, symbolically and sonorously. If didactic, it may even impinge on the epigram as cultivated by the Greeks, if relatively informal, upon the manner, let us say, of the Latin elegy. It need not be set to music nor obviously invite such a setting but it possesses a musical tone together with its considerable concentration of the poetic spirit. It is a verse-capsule more powerful than its dimensions suggest. Insofar as the practice of Asian drama is concerned, it does as a rule

enjoy some musical involvement. A large proportion of the short poems in the classical periods of Asian civilization, with which this article is primarily concerned, is in the strictest sense of the word lyric inasmuch as it was conceived to be sung, in other words, was either the religious hymn or the secular song. The greater part of the extant poetry in this category was also designed to be accompanied by some instrumental music, stressing the verbal rhythm. Not infrequently it was even a poetry accompanying the dance. Moreover, it was distinctly a performing art, not a purely literary art. Its performance at the very least called for use of the voice that the West would regard less as recitation than incantation. These descriptions apply to a very large proportion of the short poems in the early periods of Indian, Chinese and Japanese culture. Even the Japanese "poem card" had its recitational aspect. The "card" was a notation, the poem in its ideal state, a performance.

Not only was the short poem in the older periods of Asian culture in these respects musical; the classical Asian theatre, it will be recalled, was even more clearly served by music. An orchestra was almost always visible to the audience and continuously heard, even though at times its function was chiefly that of a relatively thin accompaniment, stressing the timing of the gestures and the rhythm of the words. Although there were almost invariably different levels, so to speak, in the performance itself and highly distinctive styles in different places, times and languages, the manner of performance was always, from the Western point of view, highly stylized, with much mime and much dance. Possibly the Chinese theatre used singing the most profusely but there was much singing, along with much that might be described as recitative, in the Japanese Noh Plays and instrumental music seems to have risen to special prominence in the verse passages of the Sanskrit theatre. According to a familiar, though rough-and-ready manner of speaking, all Asian classical drama, then, is "lyric drama." The word "opera," properly applied only to a variety of Western music-drama, has been used in describing the Oriental stage only in the instance of the Chinese. This is a verbal license to be regretted. Undoubtedly the Sanskrit drama is the most explicitly literary drama of Asia; yet even here, as we shall presently note in some detail, the play embraced very strong lyrical elements.

Unfortunately a few more preliminary observations are desirable where the critical ground has thus far been so little cultivated. Before examining the major thesis of this article, that is, the relation of short poem to dramatic poem, which, whatever its length, is regarded here as long, it will be well to note the relation of verse to prose on the Asian

stage. In this regard the Eastern drama has at times resembled the Western rather closely. A large proportion of the great plays in the East include both prose and verse and so, of course, do those of Shakespeare. But the Eastern playwrights are more inventive in this regard. Shakespeare as a rule gives us prose scenes or verse scenes. Although occasionally a scene contains numerous passages in each medium, this is relatively rare. The contrary is true in the East. Furthermore, in the East the sung passages are almost invariably in verse. More important, although the great majority of verse passages in Chinese drama were sung, this is not to the same extent true in the Noh Plays and is emphatically untrue in the Indian, where there was apparently little singing. On the contrary, a considerable proportion of the sung passages in Chinese do not seem to Westerners poetic and one may reasonably doubt if the Chinese themselves, despite their rather idiosyncratic conception of poetic style, can have viewed these humbler passages as poetry. In short, the truism that all verse is not poetry is well exemplified in the Chinese theatre. This is not to say that Chinese playwrights failed to sustain their art with a firm hand. The true inference is that they did not wish always to maintain it on the highest level. They possessed a thoroughly reasonable aesthetic of their own. Their plays are as a whole scarcely less poetic or masterful than the Indian but have a much larger proportion of singing and even of verse. Besides, Chinese dramatists write very elegant and even essentially poetic passages in prose, as did Shakespeare. Their famous *fu*, which may be described as odes or verse-essays, contain many prose passages. They show a higher estimate of the possibilities of prose for serious drama than do the Noh or the Sanskrit playwrights. And just as they rise to considerable poetic heights in prose, so, on the other side, they occasionally and quite artfully and deliberately allow their verse to carry sentiments and statements which other literatures would as a rule relegate to the more familiar idiom.

Differences between the three great dramatic literatures of Asia are actually less striking than the likenesses. It is indeed remarkable that in respect to the lyric element as defined in this article these dramatic traditions share so much in common. Fine lyrical elements, or, to be downright in the matter, fine lyrics are incorporated in the classical drama of all three literatures. In short, the lyric element is everywhere the flower of classical drama in the East; its other elements are the limbs and foliage of the dramatic tree. In lyric pinnacles all Asian drama rises to its stylistic, emotional and spiritual heights. Although to Western eyes this proposition may at first seem dubious, there is really

no paradox here. Such is a thoroughly viable and, once perceived, highly delightful and successful art. Doubtless as Western dramatists themselves become more familiar with these achievements of the Eastern masters they will at times vie with them in these regards, much as Eastern playwrights, appreciating the acumen of the more naturalistic and rational drama of the West, will appropriate much from these features. But in the sense of the word as here understood the supreme lyric drama is in the East. Even more heavily than Sophocles, Euripides or Aristophanes relied on their choruses, the Eastern playwrights rely on their lyrics and songs. Incidentally, the very long and complex odes of Aeschylus, which at times amount to over half the play itself, can hardly be regarded as lyrics in the present sense. Aeschylean plays tended to be dance-cantatas; lyrical in the present sense they were not. Their massive architecture tended to the monolithic; such plays from the formal point of view even suggest pyramids. The essence of the lyric feature in Eastern drama, however, is its provision for a very large number of lyric ascents, dozens of spires, so to speak, soaring into the sky. The greater emphasis upon action, narrative or plot in the West discouraged a development of the lyric formula. To conclude, a typical Western poetic drama is a fir-tree rising in sombre geometry to its single peak; a typical Asian play is a rotund plant laden with scores of lyric flowers.

In certain secondary respects hitherto unnoted the three great dramatic literatures of classical Asia are still further alike. Partly because of strong emphasis on the lyric element, the chief character or characters will as a rule be given the greater number of the lyric passages and also the most powerful of these passages. The hero, or occasionally the heroine has the most. Minor characters, as would be expected, have a stronger propensity to speak in prose or, if in verse, in a verse of a less inspired, lyrical or musical nature. Although numerous exceptions occur, in a Chinese play only one character sings in any single scene. Thus the desired emphasis is attained. The focus in the Noh Plays upon the leading figure is strong beyond example and it is this character who delivers most of the lyrical passages. Finally, the hero's role in Sanskrit lends weight to that character and a large proportion of the lyric element is in that language, set off in opposition to the humbler dialect, or Prakrit.

Thus far for similarities. The Indian practices are the most obvious, the Japanese the most intricate, the Chinese, the most elusive. It is truly a fascinating and rewarding study to examine the various

solutions to what may be regarded as a single problem, the creation of a lyric drama. The remarkable preservation of literary forms in India from an early time has long aided study in this field. Chinese drama has long been the neglected child of the Chinese genius. The ancient Chinese seem not to have known drama in any mature form. Although drama is, at least in the opinion of a few scholars today, one of the greatest glories of Chinese literature, it has, as will presently be examined in some detail, never attained prestige. Circumstances that witnessed the birth and development of the Noh are unhappily obscure. Although it expresses the very flower of Japanese art-culture, it has long possessed somewhat the character of an art-cult. The case in India may be described as perspicuous. Accordingly from what may almost be described as pedagogical reasons, of the three it may here be examined first.

We begin to possess a fair picture of Indian lyric poetry with the rise of the great Sanskrit anthologies, of which that by Vidyakara is first and best. Probably as much as a third of its 1,700 items derives from the drama. To say that these are verse passages extracted from the plays would not be to say enough. It cannot be by accident that these passages give the keenest pleasure as lyric poems, as self-contained entities, each entirely sufficient to itself. Such sufficiency cannot be accidental. Only because these passages were so considered by their creators can they possess the integrity that is so large a part of their glory. At times the passage is embedded in a considerably longer verse passage. This does not nullify the achievement of a complete and polished poem in itself, any more than the prologues to the great arias in Mozart's operas detract from the songs themselves. The dramatist clothes himself in a costume laden with jewels which are its splendour. The anthologist merely borrows these jewels to deck his own structure. In each instance they are set in place, in each case also retaining complete aesthetic integrity. To many Westerners the conditions as here described may seem almost incredible but Kalidasa, his audiences, and his readers took such craftsmanship for granted. Jewellery has ever been almost an obsession of the Indian heart. The short poem as ornamenting the larger is an emanation of this aesthetic. A dramatist presenting a play without such jewels would have been thought to walk before his audience in unseemly nakedness. The very word, "ornament," conveys first of all a Western, not an Eastern concept. There is nothing applique, extraneous nor vulgar, no vanity of display nor diffusion of expression, no touch of undue exuberance in the master-pieces of the Indian stage, not even those by the master-rhetorician,

Bhavabhuti. The small poems that contribute so much to the large, serving as gems in an appropriate setting are, more properly speaking, vital organs which in consort produce one organism, in fact not its excrescences but its most vital parts. They are also alive when taken from their parent. With their parent they enjoy an even enhanced splendour. Even Vidyakara himself left no poem in cold isolation. With an instinct for aesthetic ordering difficult to find exemplified elsewhere, he wove his favourite little poems into an astonishing garland. There are fifty parts, or minor strands, making up the entire network of his book. Even there the particles shine in light reflected from one another. Here is further testimony to the remarkable synthetic power of Indian imagination.

One need not specify the "types" within these short though scarcely "minor" poems. There are hymns to the gods, petitions to lovers, unsurpassed descriptions of nature, vignettes of people and animals, an infinite variety of mood, great versatility of mind and ethical and aphoristic expressions. With the ripening years, or until the entire crop fell into melancholy decay, fondness for this art of miniature increased. The earliest group of plays, that ascribed to Bhasa, contains comparatively few such passages; some occur but not many. It is possible that Bhartrhari and Kalidasa, the greatest masters respectively of the short poem in the relative detachment of his "centuries," and the necessarily much longer dramatic poem, were closely associated in time. "The Little Clay Cart", containing the maximum number of quotable short poems, seems to have been of a slightly later vintage. Bhavabhuti attained the utmost peak of legitimate virtuosity in Sanskrit drama, especially as he excels in incorporation of short poems for the stage. He is one of the most favoured of Vidyakara's sources. So the tree of Sanskrit drama and poetry consistently grew and flourished until, like all other trees, it fell, though one hopes and believes, never to be forgotten.

As in all else, so in this province of art, the Japanese are unique yet not to such a degree that they can be regarded as other than late-comers on the immense field of the Eastern imagination. They both follow and create. An unique evidence of this capacity for following without embarrassment or humiliation is seen in their fondness for quotation of short poems from the Chinese, frequently left untranslated in the playbooks. Much as the Japanese painters imitated and all but copied their Chinese predecessors, so did the Noh playwrights the non-dramatic Chinese poets. (Imitations of the Chinese romantic drama in the puppet-plays of Chikamatsu are, of course, related matter that need not be discussed in detail in the present context, where attention falls on

the vastly more poetic Noh.) With characteristic refinement and nuance, the Noh dramatist often changes a few words in his quotation or, with much sophistication, flatters his learned audience by introducing a few lines and omitting others, trusting that his audience will supply what is missing. Many Japanese poets are also quoted. The entire practice raises questions ranging in many instances beyond the penetration of modern scholarship but it is hardly excessive to say that nearly a third of a typical Noh Play is quotation. It is a learned style, making "The Waste-Land" seem almost barbarous. The inserted poems are all very short, for the Japanese are succinct beyond precedent, making even the masters of the Sanskrit short poem appear verbose by comparison. One is always tempted to give too little, the other, too much. The quality of the quoted poetry in the Noh is, as would be presumed, exceedingly high. By this device the worship of antiquity which the playwrights exhibit throughout is given an appropriate tongue. A Noh Play wears an almost incredibly classical dress.

This, however, comprises only a part of our basis for describing the Noh-Play composition-technique as lyric. On the stage the plays move with extraordinary slowness. No text takes over ten minutes to read at a normal pace but no person sensitive to its power would wish to read it any but the slowest pace, both reading and re-reading. The explanation is that not only in quoted passages but in virtually all passages the technique is a manner of segmentation. So strong was the influence of the short poem on the Japanese consciousness that its manner virtually throughout obtrudes on the loftiest of its poetic expressions. One takes a long breath between the passages, marked in production by a rest or silence. Actually, all the segments in style and extent closely accord with prevailing usages in the short poems. Thus just as the Noh itself makes abundant use of quotation, it becomes the source for quotation. Types of music, mime and dance frequently change along with the play's forward poetic movement. On the one hand the playwrights contrive to achieve magnificent effects of montage, climax and surprise that amount to astonishment, while on the other hand using a technique in aesthetic constructions close to that of tile or mosaic art in the Near East. The Noh Play is, accordingly, a series of medallions building in the end a faultlessly organized over-all design. The Noh is one of the most musical forms of drama. It is also comprised of lyric segments lending themselves ideally to a presentation including a considerable variety of music, mime and dance. A few words that in themselves constitute a polished lyric provide the clue for a long-drawn-out symbolical dance. It is virtually impossible to grasp the spirit of

the Noh without realization of the lyric as the equation on which it is based. It is hardly too much to say that in no other instance have plays been composed with the conjunction of so rigorous and surprising a formula and yet with such a high degree of aesthetic excellence. This is not, of course, to praise all aspects of the Noh, a dramatic literature that undeniably has many limitations. Most of the plays are inspired by an intensely nihilistic religious conviction; a minority are inspired by a peculiarly austere, narrow and almost provincial feudal idealism. But whatever remains of emotion and insight is pure gold and the finishing and polishing of the form reaches as nearly as possible to aesthetic perfection. It marks one of the most astonishing achievements in lyric drama.

Were it not for an almost equal reliance on the lyric form and spirit, the various types of classical Chinese drama would be as unlike the Noh as possible. The first quality to gain the reader's admiration viewing the Chinese drama as poetry is not its form but its spirit, a humanity in some respects Shakespearean. Although it is everywhere more convention-bound than Shakespeare, it is also singularly close to the most patent realities of life and to the inherent quality of life itself to flow freely into a thousand channels. Whereas the Noh is confined within a strictly reduced number of emotional connotations and theatrical forms, the Chinese is incomparably more flexible; one seems the product of a rocky island, the other of a wide, variegated and fertile continent. The Chinese plays have humour, sophisticated manners, nuances of sentiment, intimate relevance to daily living. Although on the stage they appear to a foreigner almost unbelievably exotic, with their gorgeous costumes and pheasant plumes, their words are for the most part as palpably close to life as the precepts of Confucius. The vital relation of lyric poetry to the plays accordingly, may not at first be obvious, indeed it may appear contradicted on the one hand by the engrossing brilliance of the stage-picture and on the other by the naturalism of reference and imagery, the almost prosaic insistence on Chinese ideals of manners, morals and social relations. Can lyrics flourish in such a climate? The emphatic answer is that they can and do.

The direct and intimate relation between the Chinese poem and play goes much deeper than the fact that many of the plays are founded on popular or well-known songs or ballads. The affinity can hardly be intelligible to the foreigner without at least some acquaintance with the peculiar character of the non-dramatic poetry of China itself. *The Canon of Poetry*, as the Chinese proudly prefer to call the collection of songs beloved, studied and approved by Confucius, who may even

have in some ways edited them and established their musical settings, is remarkable in what appears to a foreigner as two antithetical qualities. In sentiment it is naturalistic, at times moralistic, and almost always down-to-earth. Yet it is one of the most entrancing collections of songs in the world, truly lyrical to the very core. These are largely folksongs, though some court poems are included. The difference in social setting makes in the end remarkably little difference in this most democratic anthology. It is true that some poems with the fantasies of folk superstition are included in the *Canon* and that elsewhere a poetry of magic though hardly of religion makes brilliant showing in Chinese. But the apocalypse of the mundane image through lyric artistry of a high order is the formula for by far the greater part of Chinese verse, as conspicuously, in "China's greatest poet," Tu Fu. Such is the spirit of the poetry in the plays. It resembles neither the almost excruciating tensions of Noh poetry nor the baroque grandeurs of the Sanskrit. Although it is almost without parallel, a fine Sanskrit scholar has confirmed my own opinion that the nearest analogy in English—which is actually not English but Scotch—is the poetry of Robert Burns.

The Chinese, at least as playwrights, are less doctrinaire than the Indian or Japanese masters. They use a larger proportion of prose than the Noh playwrights and are much less courtly and elegant than the Sanskrit dramatists. They enjoy a leisurely theatrical story-telling. Although in its decadence Sanskrit drama indulges in melodramatic narrative and fondness for action, none of the greatly and justly admired Sanskrit plays places any stress whatsoever on story-telling or action. The essence is with the poetry, the mood, the lyric splendour. Some of the prose in the Chinese plays, on the contrary, is likely to seem prosy or at least merely colloquial to one not to the manner born and even much of the verse, which is invariably sung, is stylistically low-pitched. Yet all major Chinese plays have sung passages of great poetic beauty and force in terms of the traditional values of Chinese classical verse. As many pure lyrics may be abstracted from the Chinese "Palace of Eternal Youth" as from the Sanskrit "Little Clay Cart," something like a hundred in each case. With skill deriving from long practice in a tradition that presumably embraced at any given time more theatrical companies than found in any land outside China, the playwrights perfected the art of focusing attention on these essentially poetic elements that rise above the lowlands of the surrounding prose and even above the plateau of the essentially non-lyrical sung verse. Almost precisely as in India and Japan, no visible difference either in form, content nor merit can be found between the native tradition of the short poem and

that of lyrical passages to the plays. Any number of passages in the Chinese plays, for instance, can be abstracted from the plays and placed in anthological collections from the leading masters of Chinese poetry. In brief, the lyric in China was of one substance and one basic value on or off the stage. The primary cause for the non-appearance of the dramatic lyrics in Chinese anthologies is not difficult to discover.

A notable distinction, more accidental than profound, exists between the essential quality of the two branches of Chinese poetry and between both and the analogous branches in India and Japan. The theatre in China is highly popular but barely respectable; it has at no time had a literary prestige comparable to that of other literary forms or to the prestige of drama in India and Japan. It is virtually unrecorded until the Mongol period, although allusions to what may well have been dance-drama and hence not dramatic literature occur centuries earlier. Confucius seems not to have known drama and none received his all-important blessing. Poetry and song he commended with an almost surprising enthusiasm but not plays. From the number of playbooks extant it seems clear that at least for the last four centuries the reading of plays has been popular. But four centuries are a short span in Chinese history. Although plays were often memorized and their songs sung, none were included in the Confucian literary examinations. These circumstances at least describe and in part account for their humble station in the official Chinese estimate itself, though possibly only in the Spain of Lope de Vega has the theatre been as popular as in China. It may also be conjectured that there was small need to treasure the plays as literature or to anthologyze their lyrics, after the practice in India, for China possesses an incredibly prolific body of non-dramatic poetry to which, though the drama might have contributed short poems of high merit, it could contribute little or nothing new. Nevertheless, any serious analysis of Chinese classical drama must recognize not only its high intrinsic literary merit but its firm foundation in lyric poetry.

Special care must be spent in discriminating study of the lyric element because of the distinction between the profuse singing and use of verse and the genuinely lyrical passages. As already observed, by no means do all the verses or sung passages answer the requirement of lyric quality. For example, in many scenes a character will speak a few words in prose, then sing a few words in verse, and so weave a most complex pattern where no secondary entities appear. The scholar will often take much satisfaction in noting the skill and nuance by which the playwright determines his use of prose and verse or, more important, his use of colloquial language and art language, of flat statement and

poetic imagery. But there is nothing truly lyrical in all this. The lyric achievement, of which there is much, occurs only in passages where a climax is reached, a peculiar height is scaled, captured and for a few moments or lines maintained and a self-sufficient lyrical form and beauty achieved. By virtue of these passages Chinese classical drama stands on substantially equal footing even with the triumphs of Zeami and Kalidasa.

In poetry in general, in the lyric and in the lyric-drama are many mansions. In such an immense and venerable terrain as Asian drama only an indiscreet critic will insist that he has taken the precise altitudes and judged one height greater than another. Presumably each individual has his own preference and if, unlike the present writer, he is either Indian, Chinese or Japanese, he will be extraordinary indeed if he does not prefer the classics of his own literature. But there are qualifications here and certain mitigating circumstances. No one writes great Noh plays today nor great plays in the classical Chinese manner nor in that of Kalidasa or Sudraka. All men today look at these Asian masterpieces from a comparatively cool distance and oblique perspective. These plays are in this sense removed from us and, one hopes, removed from vulgar prejudice. Yet like all the world's supreme art they share two qualities, eternal youth and eternal relevance. One reason for their youth is this relevance, both in their evocation of life and their brilliance of imaginative form. This article deals primarily with their form, in itself so eloquent of each culture. Good evidence exists, which space and circumstance forbid me to develop, that all three schools will exercise considerable influence on playwriting throughout the modern world. There are signs that today men everywhere long for a more complex, imaginative and lyrical manner in playwriting. To move forward securely there is ample reason to glance backward admiringly at cultures that successfully unite virtues of the lyric and the dramatic poem. A generation or two ago all keys to this precious secret appeared lost. Today when not only the world as a whole but the three great peoples themselves here considered have become increasingly convinced of the supreme beauty and power of these classical plays, a more confident light shines everywhere on both our lyric and our dramatic art.

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