A TRIPTYCH OF ASIAN DRAMA

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It is a familiar but none the less striking feature of our analytical thinking that a cupful of water serves for all practical purposes to estimate the quality of an ocean. There may be even a greater gain than mere convenience in taking the part for the whole. A comprehensive view or an exhaustive compilation often in reality proves superficial while a close inspection becomes meaningful. Similarly, the microscope has much surpassed the telescope in contribution to human happiness.

The discipline of comparative literature provides us with a choice: it admits either the broad or the intimate view. It is here proposed to take the latter but only with a belief that general ideas may logically proceed from intimate inspection. There is at least the possibility that something of value may be had by examining well selected particles. But choice must be made with caution and an eye to what is representative. Where genuine relevance is sought, the selection is of primary importance. Forced comparisons where likenesses are superficial can only be irritatingly pedantic, not genuinely useful.

The following pages place side by side three conspicuously short pieces extracted from the vast dramatic literatures of India, China and Japan. Two are self-contained little plays that may roughly be designated farces. One is an episode in a long play yet so clearly self-sufficient that, were its pages alone extant and the rest of the drama missing, it might easily be assumed a no less independent work than the others. There is a version of the long play from which it is missing altogether. To begin with, it may be observed that an obvious feature separating the plays one from the other, namely their dates of origin, is less important than might at first be supposed. The Indian work is at least 1,500

years old; although it is impossible to date the Japanese play with any accuracy, one can at least observe that it has been in print for three centuries and may, in slightly altered form, have existed for more than three centuries before that. The Chinese comedy has apparently existed in writing only in our own century; at least I have been unable to discover any printed text in Chinese whatsoever. Accordingly it appears that the only version available is an English translation based on attendance in a Peking theatre by two highly competent English-speaking scholars. The Indian work is the episode of the gamblers in Act Two of *The Little Clay Cart* (*Mrichchakatika*), the preferred English translation being that by Revilo Pendleton Oliver[1].[1] The Chinese play is *Beating the Tutelar Deity*[2] The Japanese play is *The Deva King* (*Niwo*), which has been translated by Shio Sakanishi[3].

All three plays — for henceforth the work from the Sanskrit will be so considered — are based on a single theatrical idea or plot, developed up to a certain point presently to be defined along remarkably similar lines. It is simply the story of one or more persons who, being in an impecunious state, attempt to escape by posing as religious statuary only in the end to have their ruse detected and due punishment meted out to them. As will at once be recognized, this plot lends itself readily to pantomime and no doubt has actually been used in this form, though no record of such a production is known to the present writer. However, on the basis of this eminently theatrical idea drama with varying degrees of literary substance has been created. Distinctions in style are more important than minor variations in the story. As for the latter, in the Chinese and Japanese plays the conspirators seek to better their fortunes by gifts which they are to receive from the misguided worshippers. In the Indian scene nothing is made of this; the leading figure, an eminently pathetic character, would be content merely to escape his creditors by means of his disguise. Like the others, he gets thoroughly thrashed

1. Six Sanskrit Plays, edited by Henry W. Wells, pp. 68-74, London 1964.

2. "Ta Chieng Huang", Famous Chinese Plays, trans. and ed. by L. C. Arlington and Harold Acton, pp. 345-51, New York, 1963.

3. "The Ink Smeared Lady and other Kyogen", pp. 95-101, Tokyo, 1960 ; Japanese text included in Ten Kyogen in English, by Yone Noguchi, pp. 154-175, Tokyo, 1906.

for his pains but, unlike them, in the end he escapes a much chastened and reformed man. In terms of the actions as a whole all such discrepancies remain slight. It is obviously correct to say that the same plot is used in all three instances. It is the treatment or, in other words, the creative imagination, which makes the significant differences. The Chinese play is clearly the most farcical and light-hearted; the Indian implies a much more serious view of emotional experience; yet in general all three must be acknowledged to be comic. Even the Chinese work is not complete farce and certainly the Indian is not without its powerful humorous element. Especially in distinction from the major scenes in *The Little Clay Cart* this stands out as conspicuously diverting. Its characters belong to the lower orders in society; the audience is not invited to participate in their emotions as intimately as in the instance of the leading figures in Sudraka's play viewed as a whole. This scene, it will be recalled, is entirely absent from the truncated, early version of *The Little Clay Cart*, so dubiously ascribed to "Bhasa". The play as a whole could proceed smoothly without this episode, just as the episode can exist happily without the play. This by no means signifies that the larger work would not lose even in structural merit when deprived of the interlude; it signifies only that this is one of its distinctly secondary passages.

To return to the main issue. True, the prevalence of this theatrical idea from the southern extremity of Asia to Japan is eloquent evidence of a considerable homogeneity throughout Asian drama. A clever comic device such as represented here clearly appeals to the keenly histrionic Asian mind, equally alert to the values of miming and choreography and to those of drama and dramatic poetry. But the chief profit to be gained from placing one play beside the others lies in observing the contrasts, not the similarities. Each playwright exhibits qualities characteristic of his own national theatre and these qualities become the most strongly evidenced when the three works are included within a single frame of reference. Each theatre and each dramatic literature is defined by its peculiar style to such a degree that even in pieces so brief as almost to seem fragments the distinguishing qualities stand forth in unmistakable relief. What, then, are these qualities?

One observes first the number of words. To all appearances the

playing time in the original performances must have been pretty much the same in the three cases. In each instance the printed text here recommended comes to seven pages, although it may be admitted that the page containing the Indian play is itself slightly the longest in format. Actually, wide differences exist in the mere quantity of speech. Although there is possibly as much moving about the stage in one play as in another, language is much the most lavishly employed by the Indian dramatist. He uses between two to three times as many words as the Japanese and considerably more than the Chinese. In word-count the Chinese takes a mean position, that may be felt to symbolize the geographical disposition of the three peoples. As the reader's eye falls on the Japanese page, whether in its true form or in translation, the text looks distinctly thin. Most of the page is bare. There are, to be sure, 125 speeches in the Japanese play, 75 in the Indian and 55 in the Chinese. In the Japanese the average speech is less than half-a-dozen words. One immediately observes the love of the Indian for eloquence and the Japanese for succinctness. The Indian work at all times resembles a poetic recitation, the Japanese, a film or spectacle as in mime or dance, for which words offer only an occasionally heard accompaniment. The actor speaks in the pauses that occur between gestures and even between elaborate actions.

From the lively action also found in the Indian work one might presume a relaxation in poetic texture yet such proves not the case. All the chief characters at times ascend to passages in verse that are palpably lyrical and conspicuously eloquent. Brilliant metaphors occur and are even expanded and conjugated through several lines. All the more striking is to hear persons, in certain respects vulgar, using such an eminently poetic idiom. Darduraka waxes baroque even when describing his tattered cloak. These persons have fallen from the wealth and physical opulence which they once enjoyed but have in no way lost their capacity for magnificence in speech. One immediately infers, also, that the Indian play throughout is conceived for a specifically aristocratic and literate audience, whereas the Japanese play, at least in its tradition, descends from a folk theatre and the Chinese may even be thought to be demotic. This is not to deny that the Chinese and Japanese comedies have literary merit but only to observe the richer texture of the earlier

work, or, figuratively speaking, the tropical lushness of its verbal vegetation. Each work proves remarkable in its own special fashion. The difference is more or less that between fruit-cake, a bun and plain bread. The Indian dramaturgy is extremely subtle throughout. Verse and prose even in broad comedy are more sharply distinguished than elsewhere in the East. Allusions to poetical works are taken for granted. The characters speak in long, involved and sinuous sentences. Stanzas are arranged in conscious sequence. Although the action in the Indian play here examined may have been no more stylized than in its rivals, the speech is certainly more stylized.

The Indian art-style is by comparison not only more complex in its verbal texture; it is much the most sophisticated in its psychology. This is not to imply a generalisation between cultures but only between traditions in comedy. India at all times presumably has possessed an important folk theatre and certainly in the periods from which the two other comedies derive their roots many major works of the highest sophistication and courtly elegance are to be found both in the theatre and in non-dramatic literature. But it is significant for the present argument that especially from the Sanskrit drama and above all from the earlier and more fruitful years of this drama little except work of considerable sophistication has been preserved. That psychological observation is especially acute may be observed in many instances. The masseur who poses as a statue is tormented by his lust for gambling which he knows to be fatal to him but which he nevertheless finds irresistible. When the game that is only a trick, is being played by the gambling-master and his companion to entrap him, the masseur cannot overcome his temptation to take part. Overwhelmed by his passion, he wholly forgets that his safety depends on his successful disguise; he leaps from his protective niche to the scene of the game, loudly protesting that it is his turn to play. Clearly, the actor enjoys an extraordinary opportunity to express his conflicting emotions. Little or nothing is imagined in this playlet or a single plane. Darduraka would dearly love to remain aloof and so escape contact with the gambling-master to whom he is also indebted but this his pride denies him. The two men pursuing the masseur are only for a moment lost in their chase. Almost immediately on their entrance they detect the deception of the reversed foot-

steps in the sand. In the Chinese and Japanese plays on the contrary the detection of the trick is reserved till a relatively brief denouement. In the Indian it is all but instantaneous. The humour, which is the dramatist's chief concern, lies in the devious means of the gambling match by which the victim is made his own worst enemy, in other words, tormented mentally as well as physically. The entire action proceeds in terms of innuendo. The core may be farce; the style is marked by much sophistication.

The singularly powerful theatrical imagination of the Sanskrit stage is further well exhibited in its realization of imaginary space. The Chinese style as witnessed by the anonymous work in question and likewise by most classical plays is by no means as strongly metaphysical as the Hindu. It is true that travels are often conducted on the Chinese stage; the scene may shift abruptly and miming indicate the entrance into a room or the mounting and riding of a horse. The imaginary vision shifts but wherever it goes remains, so to speak, normal. Also, on the Japanese stage a maximum of travel takes place but this again is in a sense literal and explicit, much as the action of a travelling camera. The Indian realization of space proves much more distinctly mental, or poetic. Travel is accomplished in the mind. Many schools of theatre admit occasional off-stage voices yet none cultivates them with the persistence and elaborate series of conventions conspicuous in the multi-dimensional Indian stage. In the present instance we hear the pursuers before we see them. The masseur speaking from this unframed stage talks to invisible characters and thus acts in the manner of the pure mimist. He even speaks on their behalf, answering, as it were, his own questions. He is further imagined to step out unto the public highway to offer himself for sale into servitude and then, with no warning, to return to the scene of his original misfortune. Entrances and exists provide for elaborate solliloquies. One part of the stage is a temple, the other, Vasantasena's house. Even the ground itself is vividly realized, as in the mimed episode when Darduraka picking up handfuls of imagined sand throws them into the gambling-master's glaring eyes. This Indian scene is typical. We find ourselves in the midst of a square or at least an open space in a city with passages leading out in various directions. Their description may at first sight suggest to a modern theatre-

scholar such a classical stage-design as the famous Teatro Olympico at Vincenza but what the Italians execute so laboriously in neo-classical architecture serves as an image for the unbounded scope of the Indian poetic vision, where openings for the pure imagination lead everywhere and nowhere, as circumstances require. One vision is actually the antithesis of the other. On the Indian stage space is imagined virtually with the freedom of metaphor. Even in so brief a scene as this from *The Little Clay Cart* these conditions are perspicuous. Hence the use of the aside to the audience is treated with special grace in the Indian theatre, owing in large part to this poetic conception of space. The Chinese and Japanese comedies have, to be sure, several addresses to the audience yet these are treated in a comparatively simple and strictly formalized fashion. Such an address often occurs, for example, on the character's first entrance. In the present selection from the Indian theatre all the chief characters employ asides, which occur with considerably more frequency and are used with the utmost ease. The playwright enjoys virtually the freedom of a novelist by utilizing the readily available facilities of his theatre.

Virtually nothing that has thus far been observed of the Indian stage applies to the Japanese. This the examination of our chosen specimen quickly shows. *The Deva King* (*Niwo*) is a typical *kyogen* or Japanese popular comedy of the traditional type. It is, of course, anonymous and of undetermined origin, though there is a good presumption that in one form or another it should be considered medieval. Although such plays were often, it seems, transmitted orally, for some works manuscripts exist and printed collections of considerable extent date from the seventeenth century. These plays have what to foreigners may well seem a remarkable history in that they were associated with the eminently serious *Noh* plays when these first became a well established form, that is, by the fourteenth century. At theatrical festivities it was customary to present five or more *Noh* plays with *kyogen* interspersed between them. At times the comedies even parodied the serious works by whose side they appeared. Many *Noh* were originally temple plays, with specific references to the shrines and their monuments. *The Deva King* may well owe its story to such a condition and have been performed along with one of these works of dramatic piety. There are only loose

analogies elsewhere; like so much in insular Japan, this condition seems curious though it is undeniably real.

The comedy itself bears most vivid and strongly marked features of its national origin. Something has already been observed of the economy in its linguistic expression. But on every side this chastity and restraint is apparent to such a degree that for Westerners the work must have a distinctly classical aspect. In Indian or even in Chinese eyes it might well seem a scenario or "plot", sparsely filled in with verbal expression. Virtually every word is accompanied by its demanded action and every action and gesture is, with the utmost clarity, designed to serve its appointed end. The Chinese play in question here has bright colours; the Indian has positively luscious colours; the Japanese, the utmost purity of outline. We are confronted with a simple, geometrical graph. The Chinese play calls for three persons who pretend to be statues. For the Japanese one suffices. It will be recalled that the Indian playwright deals in many complexities. There is a long antecedent action. The central figure engages in much besides the disguising of himself as a statue. He gambles; he attempts to sell himself into servitude. Moreover, he is aided by a secondary but highly important character, Danduraka. Just as the masseur poses as a statue, so Danduraka assumes a statue-like pose. There is, accordingly, an elaborate conjunction of ideas and images. But in the Japanese play all is transparent. Scenes and incidents minutely duplicate each other. The hero repeats his attempted deceit; the only difference between his appearance on the two days within which the action is comprised is that, alas! on the second day he rashly poses with his mouth open. Undoubtedly we have a theme with variation but from the usual point of view the severity of the repetition is far more notable than the extent of the variation. In regard to the latter, the differences are more often in a change of intonation than of the actual word. The deceiver repeats his performance. The crowd goes through much the same movements and exclamations as on the preceding day. The moment the action changes drastically the play itself comes to its end. This reminds us that both the *Noh* and the *kyogen* are essentially lyrical dramas severely focused on a single act or idea. Japanese playwrights could at times, of course, write otherwise but in this particular type of playwriting they achieve

a degree of economy probably unequalled in any other school of theatre or of drama, *The Deva King* being a fair instance of their art. Our pleasure derived from it derives largely from experiencing the clear-cut dramatic idea executed in faultless style. A purist might quarrel with any number of incidents in the Indian and Chinese works considered here. Confronted by the shell-like perfection of the Japanese comedy, a critic whose pleasure lay in finding weak spots might be driven to maddening frustration. The Indian or Chinese playgoer might possibly discover the Japanese play leaving him cold. This would virtually be the only quarrel he could find with it. The language of the play will satisfy all who find the comedy delightful because the speech shows a perfectness for its theatrical occasion. The sprightliness and wit of the Chinese play, the warmth and richness of the Indian, are wholly lacking. We have a perfected miniature in ivory. It is the essential flower, or rather the bud. In the Chinese play the bud has unfolded but is still relatively compact. In the Indian it has opened wide though in its development as yet no trace of wilting, discolouration or decay is seen. What reasonable man will insist that one phase of the bloom is ultimately preferable to another? Here is not only a matter of national taste but of universal taste. Today the individual may decide for himself, as the nation has decided for itself. We live to this extent in an age of relativity. Yet it is difficult to posit an age where the texts of these plays are known and where each will not be admired. Which is to be preferred remains a personal matter. Personally, for example, I cannot decide whether the Sanskrit or the Chinese style gives me the greater pleasure; all depends on the mood of the moment. But should one distinguish between pleasure and admiration, it might well be that the Japanese would appear most admirable of all. In any case, it suggests a vast potentiality, a germ from which the other forms may spring. One returns to it with wonderment. It possesses the utmost stability. Something of value is said and yet it is the formal perfection which stands out most strongly. Any such abstract form assumes almost a mathematical or intellectual character. Both the Indian and the Chinese works are warmly addressed to the emotions. At least to our perplexed current ways of thinking in aesthetics, all art takes on an ambivalence, an awkward division being apparent between its formal

and its emotional values, the shape and the content, the abstraction from experience and the relevance to experience. True, much Japanese art is deeply moving and even ironical in its power to evoke thought. But scarcely any culture equals the Japanese in the formal distinction of its productions; in the strong and inherent genius for the decorative. Almost all the *kyogen* are amazingly firm theatrical constructions. They present a theatre astonishingly efficient in sheer aesthetic functionalism. The theme behind all three plays considered here may well in itself be thought slight. The plot which they share in common is in no case transformed into the dignity of myth or raised beyond the apparent level of entertainment. One hardly finds the image symbolic. To be sure, Arlington and Acton in writing of the Chinese play refer in passing to "satire" directed against the cult of the local deity. But one may question whether the word is not here used in a strained sense. The same editors refer to the entire play as "farce", and farce is not satire. The truth clearly is that no general term in English describes a distinctly Oriental production. Be this as it may, the content of the Japanese play obviously remains relatively slight, while its formal perfection proves highly impressive. It yields a type of pleasure not found equally in the Indian or Chinese work.

Whereas the Japanese comedy is smooth as purest jade, the Chinese is particoloured as a harlequin. Although beyond doubt a work of art, it has all the variegation of our actual experience of living and may well owe to this very condition much of its own quality of aliveness. We have noted that in the more general sense of the word the Japanese play is classical. By contrast, the Chinese may seem more or less Elizabethan since, like the Elizabethan age itself, it is in many respects eclectic. This is easily demonstrated. Whereas the version witnessed by its translators early in the present century contains references to motor cars and the game of poker, its major action is dependent on the building of the Great Wall of China! Historical verisimilitude apparently means nothing. The editors plausibly assume that the body of the play existed at a comparatively early stage in the development of the Chinese theatre and that successive generations of actors have treated it as their own times and temperaments have suggested. Nevertheless, what may at first sight

appear arbitrary proves on more thoughtful inspection at least aesthetically valid.

The play presents three major characters who, as its story advances, are metamorphosized into the tutelar deity, an attendant lesser deity and an attendant demon. According to an extremely well established convention of the Chinese stage each on entering introduces himself by a long autobiographical harangue. Each is a rascal, in love with mischievous fun, essentially unscrupulous, comically amusing and endearing to the audience. They are virtually three clowns — and clowning the popular Chinese theatre has long perfected in the highest degree. As a trinity in moral fallibility they constitute the protagonists. The antagonist is the mob from which no individual of any importance emerges. In this respect the play resembles the Japanese analogue but not the Indian, as anonymous folk art naturally differs from aristocratic art.

That the Chinese are unsurpassed in adroit and complicated stage business and clowning appears still further in the unique development of the plot. This divides itself into three scenes or actions. On each occasion gifts are placed before the shrines. The rascals conceive life as a game where the individual plays to win and cheats to win. In restless search for special favours they change their places while the crowd itself likewise changes the special object of its devotion. On its first visit the crowd places its offerings before what it imagines to be the feet of the statue of the main tutelar deity, on the second occasion, before his assistant, on the third before the demon. In each case there is some rough handling. Since the knaves have shifted their places, in actuality it is the first and greatest rascal who receives not only all the gifts but all the buffets. He impersonates in turn the major deity, the assistant and the demon. In the end the crowd, hitherto extremely stupid, discovers the ruse and abruptly the entire game is up. The scene terminates in a general thrashing. This elaborately clever multiple-sided plot differs completely from the simple, austere Japanese design and from the subtler and vastly more complex Indian narrative. It is much more ingenious than the one and considerably more logical than the other. For virtuosity in stage business it would be hard to surpass. Here is the ingenuity

of the people who loved to put boxes within boxes, who carved the most intricate designs from rhinoceros horns and who elevated almost to the degree of a religion the games of go and chess. The essential genius of a people expresses itself even in so minor a form as light comedy. Here are three adorable rogues all the more astonishing in that they utilize for their game the religion or superstitution of the people.

This Chinese play proves, then, in many respects the Chinese theatre in epitome, a fragment highly expressive of the genius of its audience. Admittedly, no such gay trifle expresses the entire culture of a civilization that produced such diverse figures as Confucious, Mencius, Lao-tse, Li Po, Tu Fu and Po-Chui. Its pages are wholly lacking in the fine lyricism contained in such a drama as *The West Chamber*, or in the austere Confucian morality of such a play as *The Chalk Circle*. But one comprehensive and profound quality of utmost importance and widest provenance it does possess: its intimate touch with humanity, the tie between art and public, stage and audience. The Chinese theatre expresses the spirit of its public more liberally and more fully than the Sanskrit theatre, so largely a court stage, voices the temper of the Indian people. Moreover, the Japanese theatrical world is in a sense a world apart, even from Japan itself. It is emphatically a created world and to some aesthetic theorists this must even confer upon it the highest commendation. Yet other thinkers ask of art a fuller exchange between art and life, postulating a need for the ideal art to express the heart no less than the taste of a people. Besides, there are forms of art that express the human heart in the fullest possible sense without apparently being scrupulous in the most austerely aesthetic terms, at least as these are commonly conceived in modern aesthetics, which are fashioned chiefly to justify modern taste itself.

Beside the Japanese theatre and even beside the Indian, the Chinese playwriting may appear casual, hardly in competition for the highest laurels of dramatic art. Many crtics have thought so but in the opinion of the present writer, only to commit a grave error. It is abundantly clear, for example, that the Chinese play in question makes far less pretention to be art or in any case "high art", as we commonly conceive it, than the analogous works from India and Japan. No one who has care-

fully studied *The Little Clay Cart* as a whole will, I think, doubt it to be one of the world's greatest and most profound dramas, a work possibly to be called a comedy, possibly not. The richness shown even in one of its lesser scenes, that extracted for special attention here, can hardly be exaggerated. When attention shifts to the world of Japan, the lacquer-like perfection of the particular *kyogen* studied here, will also hardly be denied. In the third play we have yet another commodity. How, with as small pretention as exhibited in the Chinese work, can the human touch be so achieved? There is no easy answer, inquire as we will of the miniature clay dancers and musicians from the 'Tang tombs, of the popular songs in the Confucian *Book of Odes*, or of the seemingly casual pages of that consummate poet, Tu Fu. There are secrets here with no formal solution in view. We somehow feel that the Chinese depict us as we really are, without the affectations with which other cultures have been tempted to gloss their image of humanity. In these secrets lie the unfailing fascination of Chinese art whenever true to its own good genius. *Beating the Tutelar Deity* as known today is undeniably one of the most modest manifestations of a great cultural tradition, celebrated for a species of modesty. It is by no means far removed from the best of Western vaudeville. It comes quite as close to folk art as *The Deva King*, in fact it may even better merit that description. It may not in itself be a masterpiece — I can scarcely imagine anyone who would support such a claim for it. Yet it must indeed be a work of some aesthetic consequence when, without straining the point in the least, from its inherent quality can so readily be deduced one of the world's most eminent cultural traditions. Even in such a fragment we detect the essential nature of a civilization. If China were personified, this might truly be a jewel worn on her breast.

Indian, Japan and China — how vividly their classical cultures rise before us even in a short inspection of three such brief and unpretentious works! From the viewpoint of the literal-minded each short play merely reflects the same content; from the standpoint of the imagination or, in other words, when seriously considered, each evokes with surprising vividness the world from which it comes, the parental soil from which it springs.

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