

*Kanadehon Chūshingura*MORE THAN JUST A TALE OF
FEUDAL LOYALTYModern Images of *Chūshingura*

K*anadehon Chūshingura* (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers) is so deeply woven into the cultural fabric of Japan that until quite recently there was hardly anyone who didn't know the story. Based on a historical vendetta known as the Akō Incident that occurred in 1702, the play has spawned spin-off works in many other genres, including a storytelling series called *Gishi Meimei Den* (Biographies of Loyal Retainers)¹ that was popular in the second half of the eighteenth century. These and other variants often developed subsidiary storylines that had very little to do with the original play.

After the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, the popular *naniwa-bushi* narrative singer Tōchūken Kumoemon² scored a hit with the song *Gishiden* (Legend of the Loyal Retainers). This entertainer had the backing of a right-wing group called the Black Ocean Society, which tinged his *Chūshingura* story with ultra-nationalistic ideals of loyalty and patriotism. In the lead up to World War II, this nationalistic flavor had evolved to the point where the story was featured prominently in government-mandated textbooks for elementary schools. It

was extolled as the “revenge of loyal retainers that lifted our hearts,” providing an “antidote” to a complacency that had supposedly set in during the Genroku era because of prolonged peace. For Japanese of a certain age today, this is the decisive image evoked by *Chūshingura*.

As a postwar corrective, the play was banned by the Occupation authorities immediately after World War II, and it wasn't until 1947 that it was revived on the kabuki stage. The ban was lifted on cinema in 1952, after which movie companies competed to produce *Chūshingura* films on a yearly basis, resulting in many variants.³

Of all the movies and television programs created on the *Chūshingura* theme after World War II, perhaps the most widely watched was the NHK Taiga Drama series *Akō Rōshi* (Forty-Seven Ronin) broadcast in 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympics.⁴ Television was quickly permeating Japanese households at the time, and this series became extremely popular, perhaps in part because programming was still quite limited. I believe that the high rate of economic growth being experienced at the time was a contributing factor to the show's success. Audiences no doubt felt that although the Japanese may be weak as individuals, by working together—just like the heroes of the TV series—the nation could recover from the devastating wartime defeat and overcome adversity. This romanticized image of *Chūshingura* has been an inspiration for the Japanese people ever since.

In the 1980s, when Japan became internationally recognized as an economic powerhouse,⁵ author Maruya Saiichi⁶ published his much-talked-about *Chūshingura to wa Nanika* (What Is *Chūshingura*?), probably out of a perceived need to discuss the tale in a way that was divorced from right-wing sentiments of loyalty and patriotism. Incorporating ethnological theories of ancestor worship and discourse from cultural

anthropology focused on carnival practices, Maruya brilliantly elucidated the secret to *Chūshingura*'s enduring popularity.

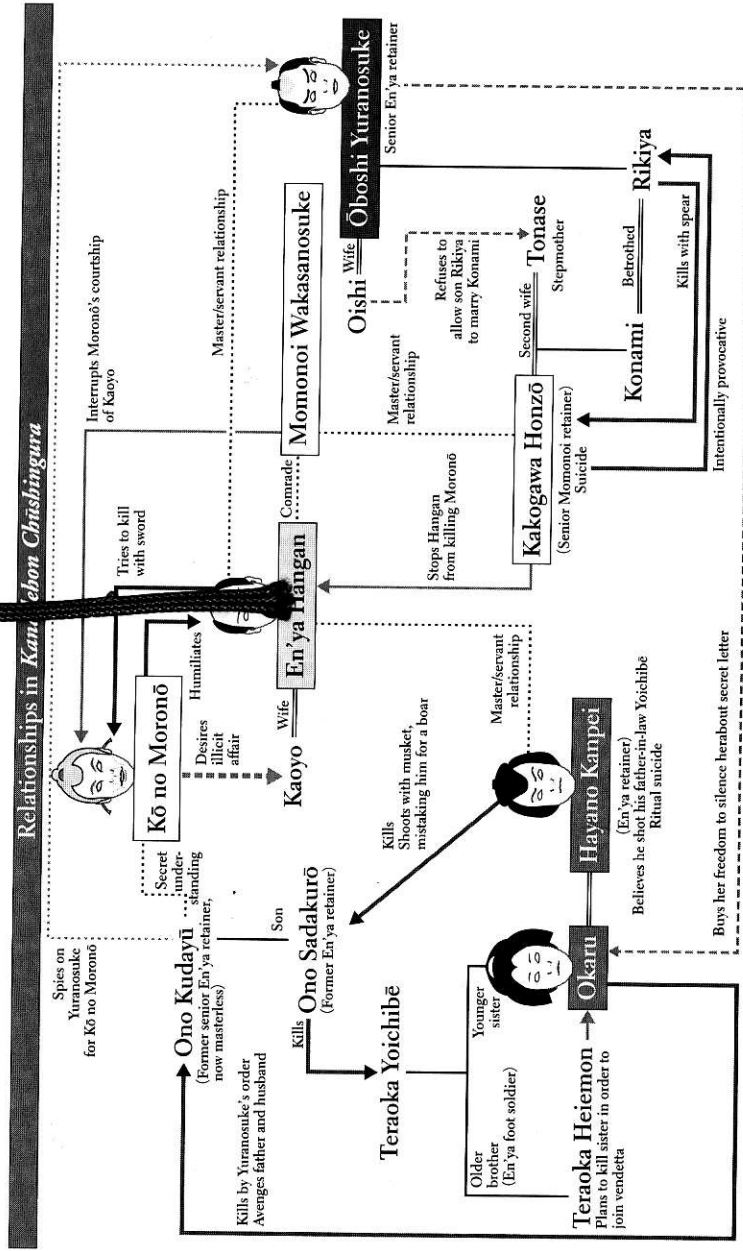
On a practical level, *Chūshingura* inspired such a vast number of films and television programs because it's so rich in potential plots, with 47 loyal retainers to choose from in addition to peripheral characters. All kinds of stories can be told in virtually endless variations, featuring characters who are so well known that little exposition is needed. It's little wonder that the play has proven so attractive to producers.

Kanadehon Chūshingura as Domestic Drama

In 1701, Asano Naganori, lord of the Akō domain, drew his sword in the Corridor of the Pines in Edo Castle and wounded Kira Yoshinaka, a senior shogunal official.⁷ As a result of this infraction the Asano clan was abolished and Naganori himself was forced to commit ritual suicide. The next year, former retainers of the dead lord, led by Ōishi Kuranosuke, broke into Kira's mansion and murdered him in revenge. This incident became known as *Chūshingura* solely because of the popular success of the play *Kanadehon Chūshingura*.⁸

Initially produced as a puppet play in 1748, *Kanadehon Chūshingura* later achieved great success as a kabuki play. Although there were many earlier plays that dealt with the same material, the popularity of this version was unprecedented. To clarify the reasons behind this, I'll begin by providing a broad overview of the plot. I believe this tale is easier to understand if we view it as a tapestry of three or four interwoven domestic dramas.

The first drama, obviously, is the tragedy of the Asano clan. To avoid shogunal censorship, the incident was set in the past, with the protagonist Asano Naganori cast as En'ya Hangan,⁹ a historical figure who lived in the fourteenth century.



His story is told in Volume 21 of the *Taiheiki* (Chronicle of Grand Pacification) in an episode titled *En'ya Hangan Zanshi no Koto* (The Slander and Death of En'ya Hangan). In that episode, the shogunal official Kō no Moronō¹⁰ lusts after Hangan's beautiful wife Kaoyō and asks Yoshida Kenkō, the famous author of *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness) to write her a love letter on his behalf. When his advances are rebuffed, the furious Moronō humiliates Hangan by slandering him in front of the shogun. This outrageous incident provides the starting point for *Chūshingura*.

In the opening scene, the smitten Moronō tries to give Hangan's wife Kaoyō a love letter but is foiled by Hangan's comrade Wakanosuke of the Momonoi clan. Resentful, Moronō mercilessly insults Wakanosuke, who, infuriated, vows to kill Moronō the next day at the shogunal palace. He shares his intentions with his old retainer Kakogawa Honzō, who expresses false support for the plan by cutting a limb off a pine tree and urging his hot-tempered young lord to likewise cut his enemy down without hesitation. In fact, however, Honzō goes to the palace and bribes Moronō to make peace with Wakanosuke.

Honzō's ruse works. When Moronō next meets Wakanosuke, he apologizes so profusely that Wakanosuke cannot bring himself to draw his sword, thus avoiding further trouble. Honzō, who secretly watches the exchange, breathes a sigh of relief. But immediately afterwards Hangan appears and unwittingly gets embroiled in the conflict when he delivers a letter from his wife. The letter, written in response to Moronō's unwelcome advances, contains a classical poem that reads, "My night kimono already feels heavy. How then could I add another layer not my own?" Kaoyō's roundabout rejection further enrages Moronō, who had ignobly prostrated himself before Wakanosuke just moments before. The brunt

of Moronō's fury falls on Hangan, who has no idea what is happening or why. Moronō mercilessly browbeats and humiliates him to the point where he is driven to drawing his sword. At that moment, Honzō emerges from hiding and restrains Hangan.

Hangan is forced to commit ritual suicide without the satisfaction of striking down his enemy. Just before he dies, he entrusts his blood-stained short sword to his senior retainer Ōboshi Yuranosuke, (the character based on the real-life Ōishi Kuranosuke) who has just arrived from their home domain. Lamenting the death of her husband, Kaoyo becomes a nun and surrenders Hangan's castle. The young retainers in her service are spoiling for a fight, but Yuranosuke restrains them for the time being while secretly vowing to avenge their lord's death.

This, then, is the tragedy that befalls the En'ya family. As described in the *Taiheiki* source text, the underlying cause is the sexual harassment that Moronō inflicts on Hangan's beautiful wife. We must not forget, however, that the loyalty of the old retainer Kakogawa Honzō to the Momonoi clan was the direct, albeit inadvertent, source of the En'ya clan's demise and created the thirst for revenge. If Honzō had allowed Hangan to kill Moronō, no vendetta would have been needed. Also, it was the bribe that Honzō paid Moronō to protect his lord Wakasanosuke that brought Moronō's wrath down upon Hangan in the first place.

The Tragedy of the Teraoka Family

The first family affected by the En'ya clan's demise is that of Teraoka Heiemon, whose younger sister Okaru is in love with Hayano Kanpei, an En'ya retainer. Though assigned to Lord Hangan, Kanpei was with Okaru when the incident with



Kanpei (left) mistakes Sadakurō (right) for a boar and shoots him with a musket (from *Kanadehon Chūshingura* woodblock print series by Utagawa Kunisada I). Photo courtesy of Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum.

Moronō occurred. His failure to come to his lord's aid in his time of need was considered a capital offense. Ashamed of his dereliction of duty, Kanpei decides to commit ritual suicide but is talked out of it by Okaru. She convinces him to flee with her to her parents' house and live as a hunter. Always anxious to redeem himself, Kanpei wants to join Hangan's other retainers when he learns of their plot to mount a vendetta against Moronō.

The avengers need money to fund their plan, so Okaru's father Teraoka Yoichibē sells Okaru into prostitution and donates the money to the cause. The Teraokas were originally farmers; although the oldest son Heiemon is ostensibly a retainer serving the En'ya clan, he is only a lowly foot soldier, and Okaru had been Kaoyo's chamber maid. For her to be courted by a proper samurai like Kanpei, who could be



Okaru (Onoe Baikō VII) reads the secret letter addressed to Ōboshi Yuranosuke (Nakamura Kanzaburō XVII) using a hand mirror. Meanwhile, Ono Kudayū (Suketakaya Kodenji) also furtively reads the letter while hidden under the veranda. (Performed at the National Theatre in December 1973. Photo courtesy of the National Theatre.)

welcomed as a son-in-law, was a matter of great pride for the Teraoka family. They were anxious to see Kanpei regain his former samurai status, which is why they agreed to sell Okaru and fund the vendetta.

Yoichibē receives 50 ryō for Okaru as a down payment and is on his way home when he's beset by a brigand named Ono Sadakurō, himself a former retainer of the En'ya clan who had stooped to robbery to support himself after Hangan's death. Sadakurō kills Yoichibē and steals his money but is then immediately killed himself by Kanpei, who is out hunting and shoots him with a musket, mistaking him for a boar. The incident happens at night, and though Kanpei realizes he has accidentally shot a man, he knows nothing of the preceding circumstances. He tries to tend to Sadakurō's two bullet

wounds, but Sadakurō has already died. Kanpei then discovers the money in the dead man's purse and impulsively takes it home with him.

Once home, Kanpei learns that his father-in-law Yoichibē is expected to return soon with the down payment he received for selling Okaru. When Yoichibē's body is brought home instead, Kanpei realizes that the purse he took from Sadakurō's body in fact belonged to Yoichibē. Even so, Kanpei tries to donate the money to support the vendetta cause, but his mother-in-law becomes convinced that Kanpei was the one who killed Yoichibē and stole the money for himself. The Teraoka family thus believes that Kanpei betrayed the generosity they had shown him and revile him for being inhuman. The loyal retainers hear of it and refuse to take Kanpei's money. In despair, Kanpei commits ritual suicide while offering a final apology. It then comes to light that Yoichibē died of a stab wound, not bullet wounds, making it clear that Kanpei had in fact avenged Yoichibē by killing his enemy Sadakurō. To reward that achievement, the loyal retainers add Kanpei's name to their roster of avengers, and Kanpei dies with his mind at ease.

The Teraoka family is in ruins. The family head Yoichibē and the son-in-law Kanpei are both dead, and the daughter Okaru has been sold into prostitution. Only Okaru's brother Heiemon and their mother are left to live out a lonely existence.

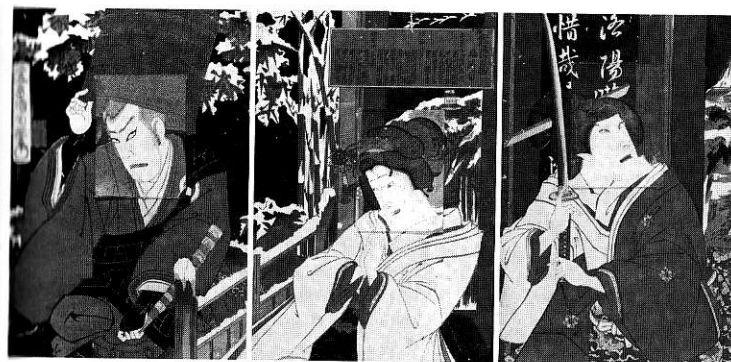
Meanwhile, Okaru has begun working at the Ichiriki geisha house in Gion, where Ōboshi Yuranosuke, who was once Hangan's senior retainer, spends every night in wild debauchery while secretly plotting revenge. Teraoka Heiemon visits him to ascertain Yuranosuke's true intentions but can't seem to penetrate the depths of his heart. Okaru happens to see a secret letter alluding to the vendetta that was delivered to Yuranosuke. When this is discovered by Yuranosuke, he suddenly offers to buy her freedom and send her home.

Okaru encounters her brother Heiemon at Ichiriki and tells him what had just happened. Heiemon surmises that Yuranosuke is indeed planning to avenge Hangan's death and furthermore intends to kill Okaru because she saw the secret letter. Heiemon resolves that if Okaru is fated to die to keep the plan secret, he will kill her himself so that he may be accepted as a participant in the vendetta. Being a lowly foot soldier, he feels he must "display a most valiant heart to be admitted into their ranks." Though he bitterly rues it, he tries to kill his own sister in order to earn Yuranosuke's trust. At first Okaru resists, but when she learns that her husband Kanpei has committed suicide, she loses her will to live and meekly accepts her fate. Knowing all of this and understanding that Heiemon is trustworthy, Yuranosuke steps in at the last minute and saves Okaru. He gives her the opportunity to kill Sadakurō's father Ono Kodayū, who as Moronō's spy had also read the secret letter. Yuranosuke also grants Heiemon permission to join the vendetta conspiracy. This is the story of the Teraoka family's fate following the tragedy of the En'ya clan.

The Kakogawa and Ōboshi Families

Next comes what happened to the family of Kakogawa Honzō, the man responsible for the En'ya tragedy in the first place. Honzō was the one who paid a bribe to protect his lord, which resulted in En'ya Hangan unwittingly becoming the target of Moronō's ire. Also, it was Honzō who held Hangan back when he tried to kill Moronō, forcing Hangan to commit suicide unavenged.

Prior to the incident, plans were in place for a marriage between Honzō's daughter Konami and Yuranosuke's son Rikiya, which would have united the Kakogawa and Ōboshi families. Although Hangan's demise has made the Ōboshi



When the betrothal of Konami (center) and Rikiya is called off, Konami's stepmother Tonase (right) decides to kill Konami and commit suicide. Outside the gate, Honzō (left), who's disguised as a begging priest, watches as the scene unfolds. In these pictures, various actors are portrayed in each of these three roles, indicating that *Chūshingura* was performed with an interchangeable cast. (Woodblock print from *Chūshingura*, Act IX, by Toyohara Kunichika.)

men masterless and itinerant, Konami still hopes to marry Rikiya, so she travels with her stepmother Tonase to Yamashina in Kyoto, where the Ōboshi family lives.

Unfortunately, the two are given a cold reception by Oishi, Yuranosuke's wife, who calls off the wedding plans. She naturally refuses to allow her son to marry the daughter of a man who betrayed their lord, En'ya Hangan. Konami persists, saying that she wants to be with Rikiya, but her stepmother Tonase is at a loss and resolves to commit double suicide with Konami. Just then Honzō himself appears and, in an argument with Oishi, verbally abuses the Ōboshi family to the point where Rikiya stabs him with a lance. Honzō has provoked the attack intentionally, hoping that his own death will help Konami get her way. With Honzō on his deathbed, Yuranosuke finally reveals the revenge plot, and Honzō provides him with the ground plans of Moronō's mansion.

With his dying words, Honzō deeply laments what he calls the “shallow and ill-advised”¹¹ actions of En’ya Hangan, whose hot temper caused the fall of such a fine samurai as Yuranosuke. It may be that Honzō was castigating himself as well.

The next act focuses on the family of a merchant named Amakawaya Gihei, who procures the armaments needed for the vendetta. Gihei is so dedicated to maintaining secrecy that he has separated from his wife and children, but despite this Yuranosuke and his comrades disguise themselves as government officials to test his loyalty. This clever but somewhat unsympathetic storyline has not proven very popular, so that this act was gradually cut from performances. The final act is the well-known vendetta scene, but in Edo times it seems that it, too, was often cut; its original staging has not been properly transmitted, so that today we have instead a series of showy fight scenes that are far removed from the original script.

This overview of the kabuki play is probably enough to demonstrate just how far the modern image of *Chūshingura* has strayed from the original story. With this in mind, let’s explore why the original play was such a tremendous success among Edo-period audiences.

An Ultra-Popular Play

The book *Kokon Iroha Hyōrin* (Critical Primer of Past and Present) published in 1785 lists and critiques all of the actors who performed in *Chūshingura* in Kyoto, Edo, and Osaka starting in 1748—the year it premiered as a kabuki play. From this work we know that the play was mounted 41 times in just 38 years between 1748 and 1785.

The common practice at that time was to present a new play with each new production, so this repeated mounting of *Chūshingura* was an anomaly and probably explains why the

book was published. It includes the following comment: “People flock to see how actors perform the play in each new run.” This might seem unexceptional to modern audiences, who are interested in how particular actors interpret roles performed by many others before them, but in the world of Edo-period kabuki it was highly unusual.

Tatekawa Enba (1743–1811), the founder of the Tatekawa hereditary line of *rakugo* raconteurs and a key mentor responsible for the revival of the art of *rakugo* storytelling, published *Hana no Edo Kabuki Nendaiki* (Annals of Kabuki in Glorious Edo) in 1811. In it, he describes *Chūshingura* as “the *dokujintō* of theater.” *Dokujintō* is a type of Chinese medicine containing ginseng that was considered a powerful tonic for the treatment of bloody sputum or bowel discharge. So Enba was saying that *Chūshingura* served as a booster shot that could cure a moribund theater suffering from the illness of empty seats. It’s not clear whether this turn of phrase originated with Enba himself or was already current in his time, but it was a familiar characterization of the play among theater professionals until quite recently.

Earlier Dramatizations

The Akō Incident was dramatized and performed in many other plays before *Kanadehon Chūshingura*. One account tells of a play presented at the Nakamura-za in Edo immediately after the incident occurred. That rendition was cast in the form of a vendetta carried out by the Soga brothers in 1193. However, the source cites letters written by Takarai Kikaku¹² and Chikamatsu Monzaemon, two completely different people, which casts doubt on its authenticity. Scholars tend to agree that the account is probably a forgery inserted at a later date. For one thing, it’s highly unlikely that any dramatization could be staged in Edo that even obliquely referred to such an

incident so soon after it occurred. There are extant illustrated synopses and other sources, however, that seem to indicate that Chikamatsu did write dramatizations of the story for performance in western Japan at a very early date.¹³

Two of Chikamatsu's two-part puppet plays deal squarely with the incident: *Kenkō Hōshi Monomi Guruma* (The Sightseeing Carriage of Priest Kenkō)¹⁴ and *Goban Taiheiki* (Chronicle of Grand Pacification Played on a Chessboard). As one can surmise from the titles, Chikamatsu set the incident in the world of the *Taiheiki*, a work from the fourteenth century. A retainer of En'ya Hangan named Hachiman Rokurō appears in the *Taiheiki*, and it is this character who leads the vendetta in *Kenkō Hōshi Monomi Guruma*.

In *Goban Taiheiki*, however, the leader's name is Ōboshi Yuranosuke. The low-ranking samurai Teraoka Heiemon infiltrates the mansion of Kō no Moronō as a spy sent by Yuranosuke to gather intelligence, but is then ordered by Moronō to spy on Yuranosuke. Heiemon feeds Moronō false information to put him off guard, but Ōboshi Rikiya believes that Heiemon has betrayed Yuranosuke and strikes him down. As he dies, Heiemon reveals that he was in fact a double agent, and his last action is to use a chess board to reveal the layout of Moronō's mansion. This scene has been incorporated into *Kanadehon Chūshingura* at the end of Act IX.

It seems that what fascinated Edo audiences most about the vendetta was how information about the layout of the mansion was obtained before the attack was launched. *Goban Taiheiki* was the first play to answer this question, after which an episode about the mansion's floor plan was always included in works inspired by the *Chūshingura* theme. *Goban Taiheiki* also included a realistic battle scene depicting the vendetta itself.

At about the same time that *Goban Taiheiki* premiered at the Takemoto-za (where Chikamatsu was the resident playwright),

a puppet play by Ki no Kaion¹⁵ titled *Onikage Musashi Abumi* (Stirrups of Musashi's Demon Horse)¹⁶ opened at the rival Toyotake-za. In this version of the story, Asano Naganori is transformed into Oguri Hangan,¹⁷ a fictional character who appears in *sekkyō-bushi* (sermon-ballad chanting) and other traditional performance forms. In this work, however, he is explicitly described as "hot-tempered," and the lead-up to the initial sword incident is depicted very realistically.

The vendetta leader in *Onikage Musashi Abumi* is named Ōgishi Kunai, and he is portrayed in one scene as "besotted with alcohol and debauchery" in the pleasure quarters of Kyoto. He buys the freedom of the courtesan Agemaki with the intent to kill her because of her knowledge of the vendetta plot. These elements were later incorporated into Act VII of *Chūshingura*.

There was a kabuki play titled *Onikage Musashi Abumi* that predated the puppet play, so it's assumed that the latter was an adaptation of the former, but the original kabuki script has been lost so we don't know its content in detail. *Chūshingura's* survival to the present day might be largely due to the fact that it started out as a puppet play, since puppet scripts were properly published. Kabuki scripts were copied haphazardly by hand, with actors usually only writing down their own parts, making it less likely that a complete script would survive. Also, each kabuki theater created scripts that were tailored to individual actors, so that a given script could only be performed by the theater to which the actor belonged. In this sense many original kabuki plays lacked dramatic universality, which might also explain why *Chūshingura* and so many other plays in the classical kabuki repertory originated with the puppets.

It's interesting to note that Namiki Senryū,¹⁸ one of the co-authors of *Chūshingura*, wrote an earlier play titled *Chūshin Kogane no Tanzaku* (The Golden Cards of Loyal

Retainers)¹⁹ that dealt with the same subject matter. In that play he combined the content of Acts VII and IX of *Chūshingura* and introduced a character named Hayano Kanpei for the first time, who gets killed when he tries to ascertain the true motives of the vendetta leader.

The Appeal of Life-Size Drama

After examining some of its many predecessors, one might feel that *Chūshingura* is almost completely lacking in originality. Why, then, has it survived all these years? One reason might be the times in which it was created. As I noted in chapter 3, the mid-eighteenth century was a time when the puppet theater reigned supreme. Patrons flocked to see it in numbers far higher than when Chikamatsu was still active, and puppet plays were immediately adapted for the kabuki stage.

Still, there were many other outstanding plays being produced at the time, so why did *Chūshingura* stand out above all others? One refreshingly pithy answer is provided by Jippensha Ikku (1765–1831), the famous author of *Hizakurige* (Shank's Mare), who was a highly successful author of puppet plays in Osaka before becoming a writer of humorous light fiction in Edo.

About a half a century after *Chūshingura* premiered, Ikku wrote an informal book of criticism titled *Chūshingura Okame Hyōban* (A Bystander's Look at *Chūshingura*).²⁰ In the introduction to that work, he sets out some of the characteristics of the play that he believes ensure its abiding popularity. He observes that it has a simple sentence structure throughout; stays focused on the important points in each act and avoids verbosity; and is written carefully to keep the audience engaged at all times. Although many people today might not quite concur with Ikku's claims, it is true that *Chūshingura's*

literary style is markedly different from that found in the plays of Chikamatsu and others. Because it has less ornamental language, the story is easy to understand and develops at a rapid pace, leaving no time for the audience to get bored. When we compare *Chūshingura* with other puppet plays, even modern readers will agree to some extent with Ikku's assessment.

I can suggest other aspects that distinguish *Chūshingura* from other puppet plays. One of these is a relatively direct storyline that develops very naturally, even when compared with such related works as *Goban Taiheiki* and *Chūshin Kogane no Tanzaku*. Also, villains in most other puppet plays with historical settings are portrayed as being larger than life. For example, Fujiwara no Shihei, the villain in *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami*, is an evil despot bent on usurping the imperial throne. Such superhuman villains bring great grief to the protagonists in ways that seem far removed from everyday life. In *Chūshingura*, the villain Kō no Moronō is a comparatively realistic character who happens to be a lecherous and foolish bully but is otherwise very human.

Chūshingura is also completely free of the bizarre plot twists and false identities that are often found in other puppet plays. In *Yoshitsune Senbonzakura*, for example, the boatman turns out to "actually" be Taira no Tomomori in disguise, and the live-in helper at the sushi shop is "actually" Taira no Koremori. In contrast, *Chūshingura* is based on a historical incident and is closer in tone to a domestic drama. This realistic depiction on a life-size scale is probably the very aspect that transfixed many audience members of the time.

Even today, some might grow angry and resort to violence if they were subjected to the sexual harassment by a malicious boss in the workplace. We can also easily imagine a young worker who has the misfortune of being away from his desk dallying with a lover when he should have been on

hand during a company crisis. Nor is it difficult to envision an otherwise stubborn father swallowing his pride and asking a family's forgiveness for the sake of a sweet young daughter who has her heart set on marrying the man of her own choosing. *Chūshingura* presents a story that is so realistic that it can even be transposed into such contemporary situations without too much difficulty.

It's All about *Ribenji*

Another feature of *Chūshingura* is that the entire tragedy grows out of a trivial scuffle and bad timing. The only reason Hangan suffered Moronō's relentless humiliation was because Moronō himself was in a bad mood, having groveled before Wakasanosuke just moments before. Similarly, Honzō just happened to be there to prevent Hangan from cutting Moronō down on the spot, thereby creating the need for revenge. As for Kanpei's tragedy, things seem to go awry in ways that seem strangely realistic in their randomness.

One might wonder why the dying Kanpei felt content to have his name added to the roster of ronin bent on revenge, even though he himself would not survive to participate in the vendetta. The answer is that he felt it absolved him of his guilt. For him, the greatest sin was not that he accidentally killed someone with his musket but that he failed to come to his lord's aid when needed, as a faithful samurai should do. Kanpei's ardent desire to reinstate himself as a proper retainer motivates all of his actions.

For his part, Honzō felt deep regret that his inappropriate actions—his bribing of Moronō and his stepping in to prevent Hangan from slaying Moronō—caused his daughter grief. This is why he attempted to wipe the slate clean with

his own death. In a way he resembles Kanpei, because he, too, attempts to atone for mistakes of the past.

In recent years, the word *ribenji* (revenge) has gained currency in Japanese as a borrowed word from English. It was first used in the sports world in the 1990s to describe "revenge matches," in which one of the contestants tries to redeem a past defeat. Usage of the term has gradually broadened, and with it there has been a softening of the meaning. Today it doesn't mean "retaliation" so much as "making recompense" and is often used without reference to any particular enemy but rather as a description of a desire to correct one's own failures. As so often happens with words borrowed from other languages, the Japanese have put "revenge" to a use that is somewhat removed from its original meaning. The evolution evidenced by the word *ribenji* strikes me as a distinctively Japanese process.

Ribenji in the Japanese sense is perhaps *Chūshingura*'s true theme. Of course, retainers loyal to their dead lord Hangan do mount a vendetta against Moronō, but their underlying purpose is not simply to kill their enemy. Each character is trying to restore the world to its proper order, by which means they hope to recover a self that was lost. I think this is why *Chūshingura* reverberates so deeply with so many Japanese.

Highlights

Before ending this chapter, I'd like to briefly describe some act-by-act highlights that were glossed over in my plot summary.

At the very beginning, a puppet appears before the curtain and introduces the characters of the play. The curtain then opens to reveal the actors looking down with eyes closed. As the *takemoto* narrator²¹ calls each character's name, the

the *takemoto* narrator²¹ calls each character's name, the corresponding actor uses puppet-like gestures to slowly lift his face and begin to act. This opening sequence symbolizes the fact that *Chūshingura* originated as a puppet play. Today, it's the only play in the kabuki repertory that begins in this manner.

Act III depicts the confrontation between Hangan and Moronō. Hangan is subjected to merciless ridicule and abuse, and his forbearance is one of the main highlights that modern audiences come to see. A similar scene is found in the puppet play *Kagamiyama Kokyō no Nishikie* (The Color Prints of Kagamiyama),²² which is sometimes called the women's version of *Chūshingura*. Iwafuji, the chief lady-in-waiting, maliciously insults Onoe, the second lady-in-waiting, who bears it patiently as long as she can before committing suicide. This, too, is a highlight scene, underlining a fondness the Japanese seem to have for a pattern of forbearance that I explore more fully in the next chapter.

Act IV depicts Hangan's ritual suicide in a documentary style that pays great attention to procedural detail. As such it is a highly unusual scene within the kabuki repertory. During performances in Edo-period theaters, it was normal for vendors to walk up and down the aisles selling their wares and for viewers to come and go at will. When this act was performed, however, and this act alone, these distractions were not permitted. For this reason it came to be known as the "no walking scene." The audience has been watching Hangan prepare to die in an extended scene filled with quiet tension. Just as he touches the dagger to his belly, in rushes Yuranosuke, making a great clatter as he enters down the bridgeway. Enjoying a cathartic release, viewers might well be tempted to call out the famous line spoken by Hangan: *Machi kaneta wa yai* (I've been waiting for you!) It's hard to imagine a more dramatic and effective entrance for a hero. The Edo-period



Nakamura Nakazō I in the role of Ono Sadakurō. (Woodblock print by Katsukawa Shunshō.)

author and critic Ikku agrees with this assessment in his *Chūshingura Okame Hyōban*, where he notes that, although audiences are curiously unaware of it, Yuranosuke's entrance is extremely well crafted and one of the high points of the play.

Act V features the character Ono Sadakurō, who originally appeared dressed like a mountain brigand. However, the actor Nakamura Nakazō I²³ changed the costume completely into what we see onstage today—a masterless samurai who could have easily been found walking the streets of Edo. This anecdote is so well known that there's even a *rakugo* story about it. Nakazō created various other costume designs and

acting techniques that heightened realism and increased his popularity. From that time onward, Sadakurō ceased to be a mere side character.

In today's productions, Sadakurō leaps with sword drawn out of a stack of rice straw behind Yoichibē. This entrance was not invented by Nakazō, however. It probably dates to the time when the roles of Yoichibē and Sadakurō were played by a

single actor who made quick, onstage costume changes. As I noted, *Chūshingura* was regarded as a “tonic” for financially ailing theaters, which meant that the cast often lacked an adequate number of good actors. From the early days of kabuki, we see records of productions in which actors made quick costume changes onstage in order to perform more than one role, and this approach was touted as a display of their skill.

Act VI features Kanpei’s ritual suicide. According to *Kokon Iroha Hyōrin*, which lists all the actors who performed in *Chūshingura* from 1748 to 1785, there were productions in which both Act V and Act VI were cut because audiences had already seen Hangan’s suicide scene, and in any case the storyline at this point was too gloomy and depressing. It wasn’t until the success of Onoe Kikugorō III in the role that Kanpei became one of the most important characters in the entire play. Since then, Kanpei has always been portrayed as a peerless pretty boy, an image that was ingeniously refined by Kikugorō III’s grandson Kikugorō V²⁴ and great grandson Kikugorō VI to create the distinctive role so popular among Tokyo audiences today. The main purpose of that staging is to enhance the colorful beauty of Kanpei’s appearance in order to brighten up a generally dark scene.

After cutting open his belly, Kanpei launches into a long speech that reveals his inner feelings. This speech is not found in the original puppet play and was inserted later into the kabuki version. Kanpei regrets his erotic interest in Okaru at a time when, unbeknownst to him, his lord’s life was at stake. As he delivers the line, “I embarrassed myself with lust,” he slaps his own cheek with his bloodstained hand, leaving a red mark. This gesture, attributed to Kikugorō III leaves an impression of terrifying, grotesque beauty that reflects the overripe decadence of the late Edo period (see plate 3).

In Act VII, Okaru is told that both her father Yoichibē and her husband Kanpei are dead. She regards their loss with a frankness that makes her seem like a modern girl, saying: “I’m sorry about father’s untimely death, but he was old, after all. Kanpei, though, was barely 30. How sad that he should die, when I wanted to see him so badly.” Not all of this speech is delivered by the actor; parts of it are set to a melody and chanted by the *takemoto* narrator while the actor dances. This type of choreographed passage is called a *kudoki*, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter 8.

Yuranosuke’s entrance was reputedly first conceived by Sawamura Sōjūrō I²⁵ for the kabuki play *Ōyakazu Shijūshichi Hon* (Launching of 47 Great Arrows) and then “re-imported” into the puppet version of *Chūshingura*.²⁶ As one might expect, it has the most kabuki-like feel of all the scenes in the play. Apparently Ōishi Kuranosuke, the real-life model for the Yuranosuke character, actually did frequent geisha houses, so that part of the story has the ring of truth. But having the character spend his days in dissipation in the pleasure quarters in order to throw his enemies off the scent is a quintessentially kabuki-like conceit. A man concealing his true intentions, pretending to be a complete fool who cares nothing for his reputation, and enduring public scorn until the time is ripe to take action is a character type that seems to resonate deeply with the Japanese.

The challenge of this role is to convey Yuranosuke’s true desire for vengeance throughout the play. In Act IV, when Hangan’s castle has been surrendered and the young samurai are clamoring for revenge, Yuranosuke calms them down. Left alone afterward, he shows his inner resolve by taking out the dagger of his dead lord and gazing at it in silence. When he finally does reveal his intentions after exposing Ono Kudayū

to be a traitor in the Ichiriki scene, he allows his long-suppressed anger to explode. This is a moment of great cathartic relief, both for him and the audience.

Act VIII is a dance scene in which Tonase and her daughter Konami travel down the Tokaidō Road. Since limiting the scene to just these two women seemed comparatively drab, the authors added other travelers, including samurai attendants and pilgrims on their way to Ise.²⁷ These additions lend the scene extra vitality and color.

In Edo productions, another travel scene was created to depict Okaru and Kanpei traveling as newlyweds to Okaru's family home. Called *Ochūdo* (The Fugitives), it is now more often performed than the original travel scene that featured Tonase and Konami. *Ochūdo* is based on Act III of the original puppet play, in which Kanpei is convinced by Okaru not to commit suicide but instead flee home with her. The scene is set in the hills of Totsuka along the Tokaidō, showing Mt. Fuji in the background with cherry blossoms in full bloom. It is truly a stunning dance piece that portrays a beautiful young couple talking of love. Particularly when performed after the dark and somber Act IV, *Ochūdo* provides a moment of light.

The lead character in Act IX is Kakogawa Honzō, who generated a bit of controversy in Edo Japan. Some observers, such as a commentator quoted in *Chūshingura Okame Hyōban*, felt that Honzō was "drunk with love for his daughter and a fool for losing his life because of it." Others felt differently, however. Chikamatsu Hanji,²⁸ for example, argued articulately that Honzō's "death for the sake of his daughter may not have been the correct path for a samurai but was the true path in light of the situation."

Chikamatsu Hanji was a famous author of puppet plays and one of Jippensha Ikku's mentors. He also wrote several successful kabuki plays, including *Honchō Nijūshi Kō* (Twenty-four

Models of Japanese Filial Piety)²⁹ and *Imoseyama Onna Teikin* (An Example of Noble Womanhood).³⁰ His comment concerning Honzō illustrates how much antipathy playwrights of the time felt toward the prevailing ideals of feudal loyalty, and how much they cherished humanistic values.

Modern people tend to associate *Chūshingura* with right-wing nationalism, but the original play as written for the kabuki stage was not particularly nationalistic. Most of the characters, including Honzō and Kanpei, are simply swept along by natural human emotions. This is a drama about people whose families were destroyed and who suffered deeply because of a single unfortunate incident. In bringing this chapter to a close, I'd like to emphasize just how large a gap there is between modern renditions of the *Chūshingura* story and the kabuki version, *Kanadehon Chūshingura*.