



Chūshingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers): A Puppet Play

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Chushingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers), also known as the story of the Forty-Six (or Forty-Seven) Ronin, is the most famous and perennially popular of all Japanese dramas. Written around 1748 as a puppet play, it is now better known in Kabuki performances. In the twentieth century, cinema and television versions have been equally successful. Donald Keene here presents a complete translation of the original text, with notes and an introduction that increase the reader's comprehension and enjoyment of the play. The introduction also elucidates the idea of loyalty. This traditional virtue, as exemplified in Chushingura, has never completely lost its hold on audiences, in spite of twentieth-century changes in Japanese society and moral ideas. Moreover, as Professor Keene points out, the excitement, color and violence expressed in the play may be considered the counterpoint to the austere restraint and understatement which are more commonly thought to be "traditionally" Japanese.

Chushingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers): A Puppet Play Details

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From Reader Review *Ch?shingura* (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers): A Puppet Play for online ebook

Tom says

So happy to have finally found a copy of this play. Based on actual events, it's simultaneously an action movie and a period piece, and Keene's footnotes are actually interesting. It's also a source for about a million later works from all over the world that deal with honor and class and loyalty; it's fun to read it, then think about every anime every with 'oh! that's where that came from!' moments.

Carolin says

At first I didn't want to list it here as I had to read this play for a class about Japanese history but then I really enjoyed and thought it'd also fit my private reading taste ;)

This story is based on a real event - the avenger of the 47 ronin (even if there were only 46 of them) in 1701. The play is set some centuries earlier but still depicts how intensely the action was discussed by then as the Tokugawa period was a time of change, peaceful and for the samurai then hard to find a place to fit in. The old rules of deep loyalty to their master were still important but a new system was becoming stronger: the shogunate law which was in conflict to the ancient samurai pride. After the ronin (masterless samurai) attack the enemy of their dead lord they act according to the old rules breaking the shogunate law by that. What follows is a long and very emotional discussion about the righteousness of this behavior and this play is part of it. But not only that, at the same time it's full with love, fights, betrayal, braveness and sacrifice - a compelling story to read even nowadays.

Kathryn says

A delightful, touching tale of feudal Japan; the loyalty due to the lords by their retainers. (Fans of King Arthur might enjoy this Eastern perspective!) All the more amazing when one considers this play was written for puppets--yet not the puppets we imagine from our Sesame Street childhoods; if you are serious about reading the play, take some time to study the theatrical aspects of the puppetry. You'll be astounded by the artistry and humanity portrayed.

Steve says

Kanadehon Ch?shingura is a play written for the Bunraku theater in 1748 by Izumo Takeda, Shoraku Miyoshi and Senryu Namiki. According to Donald Keene, "The most famous and popular work in the entire Japanese theatrical repertory is, beyond any doubt, *Ch?shingura*." The play is based upon events some 50 years earlier in which a young Japanese lord wounded a representative of the Shogun (probably because he felt insulted by him) and was commanded by the Shogun to commit *seppuku*, which he did. The Shogun then went further, confiscating the lord's properties and casting out all his family and retainers. The now masterless samurai (ronin) of the late lord Asano revenged his death a few years later by attacking the

flunkey's mansion, killing him and placing his severed head upon Asano's gravesite. After deliberating for some time and calling in the advice of leading philosophers (!), the Shogun commanded that the 46 ronin commit seppuku in their turn. Which, of course, they did. Not two weeks later the first play based on the incident was performed and promptly shut down by the authorities.

This story of duty resolutely carried out to the most extreme lengths resonated within the core of the Japanese people and became the basis for a nearly boundless waterfall of plays, novels and films. The works in this tradition are collectively referred to as *Ch?shingura*, in honor of this play, recognized as the masterpiece in the tradition. Preceded already by many plays, including one by the great Monzaemon Chikamatsu, *Ch?shingura* adopted elements from that burgeoning tradition going well beyond the historical facts and added some of its own. Later works in the tradition made additions/subtractions with differing emphases and interpretations. One can well imagine that the study of the *Ch?shingura* tradition keeps an army of scholars busy. I'm not one of them, so I'll have to leave a comparative study aside here.

One of the non-historical adjustments made in *Ch?shingura* and its predecessors was to transplant the events into the 14th century in order to placate the Shogun's censors. (In the early 1800's, Tamenaga Shunsui felt safe enough to move the setting of his novelistic fictionalization of the story, which I review here

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

back to the beginning of the 18th century.) Another was to make 47 the number of rebellious ronin, for that is the number of *kana* (letters, let's call them) in one of the main Japanese writing systems. This had already been done before the composition of *Ch?shingura*, in which the number 47 occurs in further significant ways. In some texts the 47th ronin dies before the final attack for some reason or another.

The multiple authorship of this play, in which, according to experts, different authors wrote different acts, led to a recognized unevenness in quality among the acts, as well as inconsistencies in the characters, resulting in one particular character being played by one actor early in the play and by another at the end! But it also resulted in a great variety in the scenes, which has contributed greatly to the dominance of this particular play in the tradition, according to Keene.

Reading theater, as opposed to seeing it performed as intended, is problematic - one can only appreciate certain aspects of the piece. Not unexpectedly, the text is much less formal than Noh plays; there are long passages of natural conversation. The many moments when a Noh play intensifies its language to high poetry are absent in this play. The narrator's role is to describe the action and setting in lieu of stage directions in nearly the same manner as the narrator of an occidental novel. A modern Western reader needs to make very little adjustment in their literary expectations when undertaking this text.

Though I appreciated Shunsui's portrayal of mid-Tokugawa society, going well beyond the tale of the 47 ronin, this play is less sentimental and less repetitive than his novel *The Loyal Ronins*. The characters are more clearly and convincingly drawn, and, probably due to the lack of digression, the powerful underlying drama of the incident is more effectively brought to the fore in the play. Unlike the novel, the play builds up to the initial wounding of the flunkey, which, after all, precipitated all of the tragedy, in a foreboding manner that made the wounding ineluctable instead of merely a sudden hot headed act of anger (though, in fact, there is one). There are also moments of comedic relief, and consider this: A woman places her hand in a man's hand and indirectly suggests a tryst. At that moment, from a Noh play being performed in the castle wafts over to the pair the line "I approach the base of the pine and rub the trunk..." No pruders, these Japanese... Nor were they in the least prudish about violence - the many forms of violent death are described in great detail by the narrator.

This play, even more than the classic texts on *bushido* (the way of the samurai), brings home to me the terrible coherence and alienness of a culture willing to sacrifice absolutely everything and everybody to a code of honor in which duty to one's liege is far and away the highest value, where parents will sell their daughter into prostitution so that their son-in-law will have money to contribute to a monument to his deceased liege (and she goes willingly in the name of her duty to her husband and parents), just to mention one example of many. It is made clear in the play that not everyone is equal to the demands of this duty, but that those who are are the most admirable of human beings. Now imagine that this play would be at the center of your culture...

Though later adapted for the Kabuki theater, *Chushingura* was originally written for the unique puppet theater called *Bunraku*. Briefly, the puppets are large and not manipulated by strings from above or hands from below, but by three operators garbed in black who stand behind the puppet in full view of the audience. The operators are silent. One man at the side of the stage, the *Tayu*, accompanied by a samisen player, recites all the parts as well as his part of narrator. A little introduction, as well as excerpts from a performance, can be seen here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TKt67...>

A lengthier broadcast may be found here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44dH7j...>

Keene provides an excellent introduction and footnotes to help the lay reader with orientation and context.

Rating

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James Violand says

A Japanese puppet play (not like anything known in the West) based on the doomed heroism of 46 Ronin – leaderless Samurai. They plot to take the head of a tyrant responsible for their leader's seppuku. Bloody throughout, the play emphasizes duty, loyalty and honor above all other virtues, which is pretty typical of Japanese culture for centuries. It is exciting and well paced. A good read.

Kaila says

I'm going to see this as a kabuki in March. I'll try to remember at that time to come back and write a rating - I don't think reading it as a play does it justice.

Edit, after seeing the kabuki play:

Definitely better performed. It was heavily edited, as the play is very long and would be over 10 hours if the entire thing were performed. As it stood, it was still a 3 hour play. I stayed completely enthralled, but then again, I have been studying Japanese literature all quarter and had read the play, so I knew what was

happening. The people I brought with me thought it overly long.

There were little to no stage directions in my edition, so actually seeing what was happening was way more compelling than just reading lines.

It made it a better story for sure. It is very strange and just seems really foreign without a lot of context.

Leanne Ritchie says

Amazing.

Kat Becker says

Important canon text, but not a play I especially enjoy.

Emma says

I liked this so much more than I thought I would. It's definitely of its time and it reads like a novel but it's also incredibly exciting. Impossibly heartbreaking in like 10,000 different ways, at literally every turn, and even a little funny. Also - interesting to imagine it being acted with puppets!

? Jessica Marie says

I do not want to give too much of the plot away, since the play is very short and proves to be a very quick read. Chushingura is about samurai whose master is forced to commit seppuku (ritual suicide), making them ronin (master less samurai). They pledge to avenge the death of their late master and plan to attack the man who provoked their master to disgrace his honor. The play was written by three different playwrights, which is why some of the characters personalities change drastically throughout the play.

The play does an amazing job showing the devotion of samurai to their code of ethics and to their masters. The samurai believed in their duty to their master to the point that they would commit seppuku if they felt that they had disgraced their master in any way. It also shows how much the family of a samurai has to devote to the master, like the wives being sold as prostitutes to help fund the plan to avenge their late master.

The play was originally written for the puppet theater, bunraku, but was originally adapted into a play for the kabuki theater. Since the original play was written there have been numerous adaptations in film, novels, and television productions. The Sprouse twins (The Suite Life of Zack & Cody) have even made a graphic novel series called the 47 R.O.N.I.N., which has nothing to do with samurai's but involves ninjas and underground societies....

I would definitely recommend Chushingura to anyone who has a love of Japan or who find samurai interesting. I do not read many plays, but I was able to be enveloped in the story and was so compelled by it

that I finished it the day that I started it. However if you have not seen any of the adaptations of the book, I would recommend saving the intro for last because it does give away many of the important twists and turns of the storyline which kind of ruined the shock factor of some of the famous parts of the play.

Marielle says

This play is a retelling of a true story of Feudal Japan. The plot is filled with villains and heroes, and even if you aren't a fan of ritual suicide, much of the characters' motivations are easy to understand. Of all the renditions (and translations) of this classic tales, this is the best. It is essential reading for anyone interested in classical literature from East Asia.

Greg says

The Treasury of Loyal Retainers, or the revenge of the 47 ronin, is one of the most popular kabuki plays and familiar stories in Japanese history. It is a fictionalized account of real events that occurred between 1701 and 1703, and so was set much earlier. The story is relatively straightforward - a crime and affront to the honor of the master of the ronin is committed, and each plots revenge. One of the retainers was not present and should have been, and his humiliation, and that of his wife, are correspondingly worse. This play is, in short, fantastic. There is a reason it has been remade so many times, and adopted into so many different stories. It is timeless, and tells of morality, history, honor, and honesty. It is filled with action and wit. In it are great lines, such as this adaptation from the Chinese classic Li Chi, "The sweetest food, if left untasted, / Remains unknown, its savor wasted." Honzo quotes a proverb, "that if you keep to the shady side of the street in winter and to the sunny side in summer, steering clear of people on the way, you'll be as safe as in your own back yard, for there's no danger of a quarrel or argument with anyone crossing your path." This play, in short, is an absolute classic. That it is not read by more western readers is a shame. It has much to offer in the way of fantastic language, entertainment, and understanding. It is a must.

Phillip says

Really a fascinating play, especially since I am more familiar with the traditions of English Medieval, Renaissance, and Restoration theatre. It is interesting to read a play that comes from not only a completely different value system, but also a completely different theatrical tradition.

Like many Western plays, this Japanese drama reveals and comments on many of the values of the samurai in the Tokugawa period.

Justin says

A.k.a. The 47 Ronin, this is a great revenge tragedy with post-Sengokujidai sensibilities. Having been originally conceived and presented as a joruri, or puppet play (bunraku, for you theatre majors), this is absolutely one of those dramatic works that needs to be experienced in performance in order to obtain the full scope of the play's impact. On the page, despite Keene's beautiful translation of the original

Takeda/Miyoshi/Namiki text, the narrative can be very tedious, especially when straying away from the titular material. Nevertheless, a fantastic example of 18th century tragic drama, and a cornerstone of popular Japanese theatre.

Laela says

Definitely a Japanese classic. If you're ever looking for a book on loyalty, this is the one. Not one thing said and not one action was done without thoughts of loyalty. It did kind of get redundant, but it was interesting to be able to experience reading a classic Japanese text.

One thing that was tough about reading this was keeping track of the names. Characters were at times referred to in different ways so just keeping track of everything was a little difficult.

An interesting aspect of this play is what it gets from the bunraku (puppet) theatre of Japan. In this type of theatre, characters would commit ritual suicide, but after they stab themselves, they continue to have long speeches about how loyal they are to their retainers. When reading the play, it's a bit odd, but one interesting thing to note about the text.
