Ending the Cycle of Violence: The Story of Atsumori and a Connection to Miyajima

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In conclusion to a difficult session I want to talk a little about two Japanese texts about Kumagae no Jiro Nanzane, a historical figure of the 12th Century written about two hundred years later in The Tale of the Heike and again later in a Noh play by Zeami. There is a connection to Miyajima where you are going to go this afternoon.

Kumagae was a general in the forces of the Minamoto Clan in the great civil war ending in 1185. Kumagae’s enemies were the Taira or Heike Clan, who had controlled the capital for twenty years, an aristocracy of cultivation, but also arrogance. Kumagae’s side was the challenging one on the rise, with better warriors and strategists, who finally imposed military dictatorship, order, and peace. Kumagae’s enemy, the Heike, had more culture and refinement, and the beginning of their tale of defeat begins with the famous lines:

“The sound of the Gion Shoja bells echoes the impermanence of all things, the color of the salsa flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.”

The story of Kumagae I want to tell you concerns Atsumori, a member of the defeated Heike. Kumagae is riding a horse on the beach watching his enemies flee. He sights one lone rider “splash into the sea, headed toward a vessel”. The account details the lace of the armor, the dapple of the horse.

Kumagae challenges him to return and fight, calls out that fleeing is dishonorable. They fight, the strong Kumagae pins down his opponent, and pushed aside his helmet to cut off his head. He discovers a 16 year old boy, a boy the age of Kumagae’s son, and so handsome that Kumagae “cannot find a place to strike.” This phrase arrests me—in this hand to hand battle the human intervenes and stops massacre. Kumagae’s hand in stilled; he cannot do it.

“Who are you?” Kumagae asks. “Who are you?” the boy responds. My students love this line. They see the bravado that is brave, the pride and defiance. Finally when more on Kumagae’s side are about to kill the boy anyway, Kumagae is forced to kill him first.

The Japanese tradition of retelling this story is not done however. Zeami, the greatest of Noh playwrights, adds an imagined sequel. We begin with Kumagae who has become a wandering Buddhist priest out of remorse. He comes upon some reapers, and in the defiant proud response of one of them he realizes he has discovered Atsumori reincarnated. Atsumori then appears as himself, in a beautiful green silk stiff billowing kimono of the Heike leaders. The two fight once again. But this time the name of Buddha is invoked by Kumagae. There is no blow, no death, and the promise is indicated
that both are to be reborn again, on one lotus seat. Neither is the enemy; the cycle of violence ends.

I will not too explicitly interpret the meaning of this story to me to make it relevant to either the 1930’s and 1940’s or the current day. It is a story of highest honor in the Japanese canon. I teach it each year using Norton anthology translations and videotapes supplied by Columbia University. What begins with a grisly episode of chopping off a head with a samurai sword of the sharpness and heft intended for this act, turns into beauty. One can see history turning into legend, legend turning into literature, art and religion. What do we make of the past? How shall we recall the facts, retell the story, interpret it, shape it, imagine the possibilities anew? What would we like to imagine would ideally happen?

The main reason I retell the story today is because two years ago I was climbing the hills of Miyajima, past where the cable car ends, and we were with a Japanese friend. We passed a Japanese worker coming down the path who pointed out to us a bell in the woods next to the vertical path. The bell was large, hanging in a wooden frame, a pavilion. The two Japanese spoke to one another, and then it was translated to me: This is the bell that Kumagae had placed here. It was to honor his son. And I thought, I know his son. He looked like Atsumori, sixteen, so handsome one cannot find a place to strike. And the bell – it must be – that the echo of such a bell tells us “The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.”

So you can either go see the bell --- or imagine it.

Quotations from:


“Atsumori” written by Zeami Motokiyo (1364-1443) translated by Arthur Waley.


A video showing a clip from the Noh play can be purchased through the Annenberg/CPB Collection (1-800-Learner). Ask for Japanese History and Literature, Tape 2: “Medieval Japan and Buddhism in Literature (1185-1600)”. The segment that influenced my retelling is narrated by Professor Paul Varley.