

by Seami Motokiyo

This play is based on an episode in "The Tale of the Heike," which appears on page 179.

Persons

THE PRIEST RENSEI (formerly the warrior Kumagai)
 A YOUNG REAPER, who turns out to be the ghost of Atsumori
 HIS COMPANION
 CHORUS

PRIEST: Life is a lying dream, he only wakes
 Who casts the world aside.

I am Kumagai no Naozane, a man of the country of Musashi. I have left my home and call myself the priest Rensei; this I have done because of my grief at the death of Atsumori, who fell in battle by my hand. Hence it comes that I am dressed in priestly guise.

And now I am going down to Ichi no tani to pray for the salvation of Atsumori's soul.

(He walks slowly across the stage, singing a song descriptive of his journey.)

I have come so fast that here I am already at Ichi no tani, in the country of Tsu.

Truly the past returns to my mind as though it were a thing of today.

But listen! I hear the sound of a flute coming from a knoll of rising ground. I will wait here till the flute-player passes, and ask him to tell me the story of this place.

REAPERS (*together*): To the music of the reaper's flute
 No song is sung
 But the sighing of wind in the fields.

YOUNG REAPER: They that were reaping,
 Reaping on that hill,
 Walk now through the fields
 Homeward, for it is dusk.

REAPERS (*together*): Short is the way that leads
 From the sea of Suma back to my home.
 This little journey, up to the hill—
 And down to the shore again, and up to the hill—
 This is my life, and the sum of hateful tasks.
 If one should ask me
 I too would answer
 That on the shore of Suma
 I live in sadness.
 Yet if any guessed my name,
 Then might I too have friends.
 But now from my deep misery
 Even those that were dearest
 Are grown estranged. Here must I dwell abandoned
 To one thought's anguish:
 That I must dwell here.

PRIEST: Hey, you reapers! I have a question to ask you.

YOUNG REAPER: Is it to us you are speaking? What do you wish to know?

PRIEST: Was it one of you who was playing on the flute just now?

YOUNG REAPER: Yes, it was we who were playing.

PRIEST: It was a pleasant sound, and all the pleasanter because one does not look for such music from men of your condition.

YOUNG REAPER: Unlooked for from men of our condition, you say! Have you not read:

"Do not envy what is above you
 Nor despise what is below you"?

Moreover the songs of woodmen and the flute-playing of herdsmen,

Flute-playing even of reapers and songs of wood-fellers
 Through poets' verses are known to all the world.
 Wonder not to hear among us
 The sound of a bamboo flute.

PRIEST: You are right. Indeed it is as you have told me.

Songs of woodmen and flute-playing of herdsmen . . .

REAPER: Flute-playing of reapers . . .

PRIEST: Songs of wood-fellers . . .

REAPERS: Guide us on our passage through this sad world.

PRIEST: Song . . .

REAPER: And dance . . .

PRIEST: And the flute . . .

REAPER: And music of many instruments . . .

CHORUS: These are the pastimes that each chooses to his taste.

Of floating bamboo wood
 Many are the famous flutes that have been made;
 Little Branch and Cicada Cage,
 And as for the reaper's flute,
 Its name is Green Leaf;
 On the shore of Sumiyoshi
 The Korean flute they play.
 And here on the shore of Suma
 On Stick of the Salt-kilns
 The fishers blow their tune.

PRIEST: How strange it is! The other reapers have all gone home,
 but you alone stay loitering here. How is that?

REAPER: How is it, you ask? I am seeking for a prayer in the voice
 of the evening waves. Perhaps *you* will pray the Ten Prayers for
 me?

PRIEST: I can easily pray the Ten Prayers for you, if you will tell me
 who you are.

REAPER: To tell you the truth—I am one of the family of Lord
 Atsumori.

PRIEST: One of Atsumori's family? How glad I am!
 Then the priest joined his hands (*he kneels down*) and prayed:

Namu Amidabu.

Praise to Amida Buddha!
 "If I attain to Buddhahood,
 In the whole world and its ten spheres
 Of all that dwell here none shall call on my name
 And be rejected or cast aside."

CHORUS: "Oh, reject me not!

One cry suffices for salvation,
 Yet day and night
 Your prayers will rise for me.
 Happy am I, for though you know not my name,
 Yet for my soul's deliverance

At dawn and dusk henceforward I know that you will pray."

So he spoke. Then vanished and was seen no more.

(Here follows the Interlude between the two Acts, in which a recitation concerning Atsumori's death takes place. These interludes are subject to variation and are not considered part of the literary text of the play.)

PRIEST: Since this is so, I will perform all night the rites of prayer
 for the dead, and calling upon Amida's name will pray again for
 the salvation of Atsumori.

(The ghost of Atsumori appears, dressed as a young warrior.)

ATSUMORI: Would you know who I am

That like the watchmen at Suma Pass
 Have wakened at the cry of sea birds roaming
 Upon Awaji shore?

Listen, Rensei. I am Atsumori.

PRIEST: How strange! All this while I have never stopped beating
 my gong and performing the rites of the Law. I cannot for a
 moment have dozed, yet I thought that Atsumori was standing
 before me. Surely it was a dream.

ATSUMORI: Why need it be a dream? It is to clear the karma of my
 waking life that I am come here in visible form before you.

PRIEST: Is it not written that one prayer will wipe away ten thousand
 sins? Ceaselessly I have performed the ritual of the Holy Name

that clears all sin away. After such prayers, what evil can be left?

Though you should be sunk in sin as deep . . .

ATSUMORI: As the sea by a rocky shore,

Yet should I be saved by prayer.

PRIEST: And that my prayers should save you . . .

ATSUMORI: This too must spring

From kindness of a former life.¹

PRIEST: Once enemies . . .

ATSUMORI: But now . . .

PRIEST: In truth may we be named . . .

ATSUMORI: Friends in Buddha's Law.

CHORUS: There is a saying, "Put away from you a wicked friend;
summon to your side a virtuous enemy." For you it was said, and
you have proven it true.

And now come tell with us the tale of your confession, while the
night is still dark.

CHORUS: He² bids the flowers of spring

Mount the treetop that men may raise their eyes

And walk on upward paths;

He bids the moon in autumn waves be drowned

In token that he visits laggard men

And leads them out from valleys of despair.

ATSUMORI: Now the clan of Taira, building wall to wall,

Spread over the earth like the leafy branches of a great tree:

CHORUS: Yet their prosperity lasted but for a day;

It was like the flower of the convolvulus.

There was none to tell them³

That glory flashes like sparks from flint-stone,

And after—darkness.

Oh wretched, the life of men!

ATSUMORI: When they were on high they afflicted the humble;

When they were rich they were reckless in pride.

¹ "Atsumori must have done Kumagai some kindness in a former incarnation." This would account for Kumagai's remorse.

² Buddha.

³ I have omitted a line the force of which depends upon a play on words.

And so for twenty years and more

They ruled this land.

But truly a generation passes like the space of a dream.

The leaves of the autumn of Juyei⁴

Were tossed by the four winds;

Scattered, scattered (like leaves too) floated their ships.

And they, asleep on the heaving sea, not even in dreams

Went back to home.

Caged birds longing for the clouds—

Wild geese were they rather, whose ranks are broken

As they fly to southward on their doubtful journey.

So days and months went by; spring came again

And for a little while

Here dwelt they on the shore of Suma

At the first valley.⁵

From the mountain behind us the winds blew down

Till the fields grew wintry again.

Our ships lay by the shore, where night and day

The sea gulls cried and salt waves washed on our sleeves.

We slept with fishers in their huts

On pillows of sand.

We knew none but the people of Suma.

And when among the pine trees

The evening smoke was rising,

Brushwood, as they called it,⁶

Brushwood we gathered

And spread for carpet.

Sorrowful we lived

On the wild shore of Suma,

Till the clan Taira and all its princes

Were but villagers of Suma.

ATSUMORI: But on the night of the sixth day of the second month

My father Tsunemori gathered us together.

⁴ The Taira evacuated the capital in the second year of Juyei, 1188.

⁵ Ichi no tani means "First Valley."

⁶ The name of so humble a thing was unfamiliar to the Taira lords.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we shall fight our last fight.
Tonight is all that is left us."

We sang songs together, and danced.

PRIEST: Yes, I remember; we in our siege-camp

Heard the sound of music

Echoing from your tents that night;

There was the music of a flute . . .

ATSUMORI: The bamboo flute! I wore it when I died.

PRIEST: We heard the singing . . .

ATSUMORI: Songs and ballads . . .

PRIEST: Many voices

ATSUMORI: Singing to one measure.

(Atsumori dances.)

First comes the royal boat.

CHORUS: The whole clan has put its boats to sea.

He⁷ will not be left behind;

He runs to the shore.

But the royal boat and the soldiers' boats

Have sailed far away.

ATSUMORI: What can he do?

He spurs his horse into the waves.

He is full of perplexity.

And then

CHORUS: He looks behind him and sees

That Kumagai pursues him;

He cannot escape.

Then Atsumori turns his horse

Knee-deep in the lashing waves,

And draws his sword.

Twice, three times he strikes; then, still saddled,

In close fight they twine; roll headlong together

Among the surf of the shore.

So Atsumori fell and was slain, but now the Wheel of Fate

Has turned and brought him back.

⁷ Atsumori. This passage is mimed throughout.

(Atsumori rises from the ground and advances toward the Priest with uplifted sword.)

"There is my enemy," he cries, and would strike,

But the other is grown gentle

And calling on Buddha's name

Has obtained salvation for his foe;

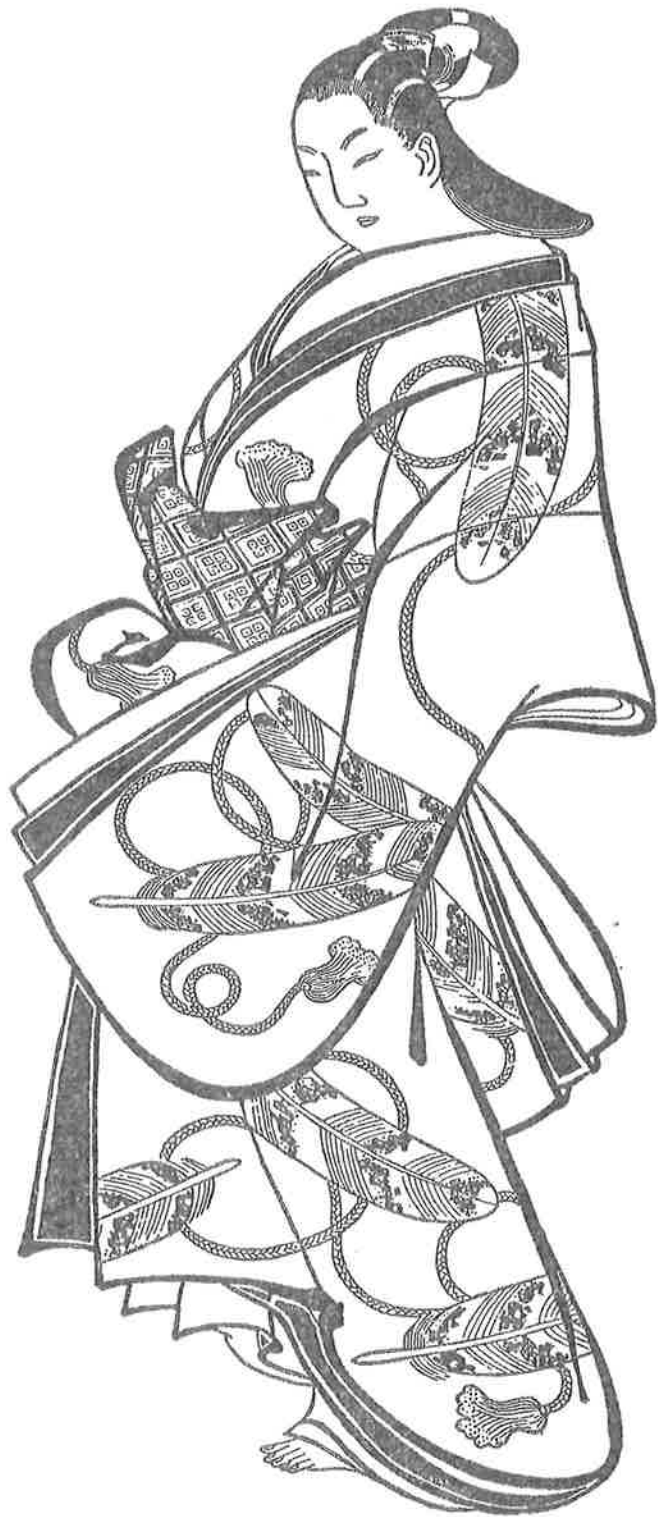
So that they shall be reborn together

On one lotus seat.

"No, Rensei is not my enemy.

Pray for me again, oh pray for me again."

TRANSLATED BY ARTHUR WALEY



Anthology of

JAPANESE LITERATURE

*from the earliest era to the
mid-nineteenth century,
compiled and edited by
Donald Keene*

GROVE PRESS, INC.
1955

NEW YORK

UNESCO COLLECTION OF REPRESENTATIVE WORKS