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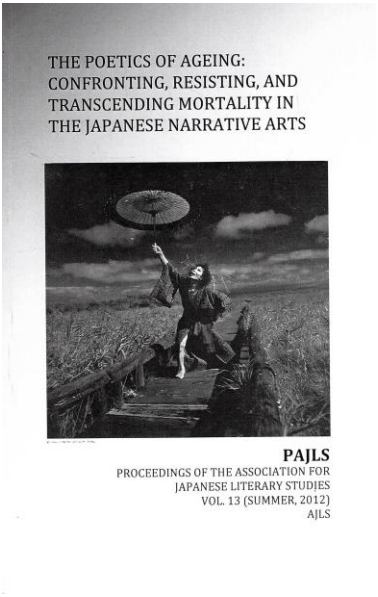

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Weak Old Men, Strong Old Women in Chikamatsu's Domestic Plays

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In the Tokugawa period, elderly men and women became stock figures in plays written for the kabuki and jōruri puppet theaters. In this essay, I will examine some of the elderly characters in the domestic plays (*sewamono*) that Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725) wrote for the puppet theater. These plays were based on real incidents and typically center on the plight of young couple—a clerk in a shop, for example, usually in his twenties, and his beloved, often a courtesan in the pleasure quarters. Many of the plays, however, also feature middle-aged and elderly characters, usually the parents or parent-figures, who have received little attention in Chikamatsu studies. In this paper I will argue that Chikamatsu uses his elderly characters to dramatize the consequences of the main characters' actions—the grief and suffering they cause to those around them; that the actions of the elderly characters often lead the main characters to their doom; and that the elderly characters embody the ideological underpinnings of the story by reminding the main characters (and the audience) of their obligations to their families and to society. Of particular interest here is the way in which the elderly male characters are shown to be ineffectual and weak, while the elderly female characters emerge as forceful, articulate figures.

To begin with a familiar play, *Meido no hikyaku*, (The Courier for Hell, 1711),[1] the lead characters are Chūbei, aged 24, and Umegawa, 22. Chūbei runs the Kame-ya, a courier service in Osaka, but in recent weeks he has been using money owed to his customers to pay for his visits to Umegawa, a courtesan in the pleasure quarters, in a desperate rivalry with another of Umegawa's customers, who has already offered to buy her

[1] A translation of *The Courier for Hell* appears in *Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, Donald Keene, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 161–94.

contract. The climax comes in Act 2, set in the Echigo House where Umegawa is employed. In an effort to stop Chūbei from destroying himself and his business, Chūbei's friend Hachiemon tells the assembled courtesans how Chūbei pretended to repay him by wrapping a pomade jar in paper so that it would look like the fifty *ryō* in gold coins that he owed him. Eavesdropping outside the Echigo House, Chūbei rushes in to defend his reputation. Hachiemon presses the issue of Chūbei's solvency further, until Chūbei breaks the seal on a packet of money he should have delivered to a samurai mansion that very evening and showers the group with coins. This forces him to flee with Umegawa, and they end up at hiding in a shack at Chūbei's home village, where they are eventually captured.

Besides Chūbei, Umegawa, and Hachiemon, however, there are two important elderly characters. The first is Chūbei's foster mother, Myōkan, who appears in Act 1. Myōkan's age is not given, but in modern performances, the puppet used is that of an elderly woman. A widow and illiterate, she has retired from the every-day matters of the business, and as the narrator states, she "scarcely ever quits the *kotatsu*." [2] Nevertheless, she is ever mindful of the business and has noticed Chūbei's recent behavior. Overhearing the complaints of the customers who come to the Kame-ya to collect their money, she reminds Chūbei of his obligations in the proper conduct of business and in maintaining the good name of the courier service: "Never since the day's of my husband has the house received a demand for even a single piece of silver. We've yet to cause the guild the least trouble. In fact, the Kame-ya has always been considered the model among the eighteen courier houses." [3] Not only is Myōkan a "strong old woman" who embodies the merchant class work ethic, but Chikamatsu uses her illiteracy for narrative purposes: it is Myōkan's insistence on Chūbei's paying Hachiemon that forces him to use a pomade jar wrapped in paper as a substitute, to take advantage of her inability to read by writing out a bogus receipt for the money, and ultimately to break the seal on another customer's money in Act 2.

[2] Ibid., 164.
[3] Ibid.

The other elderly character in the play is Chūbei's father, Katsugi Magoemon, who appears in Act 3. Having broken the seal on a packet of money that belongs to a samurai household, Chūbei flees with Umegawa and the two make their way to Ninokuchi Village, his childhood home. The two of them hide in a thatch-covered hut of a tenant farmer and look out across the fields as it begins to rain. Watching the villagers hurrying towards a temple, Chūbei spots his father and says, "He's grown old. How unsteady his legs are! Farewell, father, for this life!"[4] This is followed by the touching scene between Magoemon and Umegawa, who rushes out to help the old man when he slips on the ice and falls. The emphasis here is on Magoemon's frailty and on his inner conflict: although Umegawa does not reveal who she really is, Magoemon guesses the truth and is torn between the desire to see his son once more and his duty not to, having sent him to Myōkan's family as an adopted son. Magoemon's physical weakness is, moreover, a sign of his powerless to save Chūbei, as the authorities are at that moment searching the village. Finally, the scene shows how Chikamatsu uses such characters to register the suffering that the lead characters cause, the consequences of violating social norms.

Another example is the character Jōkan, Yojibei's 70 year-old father in *Nebiki no kadomatsu* (The Uprooted Pine, 1718).[5] In Act 2, Yojibei has been left in the custody of his father while the authorities wait to see if the man Yojibei is accused of stabbing will recover from his wounds. Jōkan is a wealthy merchant, but he refuses to part with any money to settle the matter. Although not physically infirm, he spends his time in leisured retirement playing chess (*shōgi*) with his son's father-in-law, Jibuemon. In the argument between the two over his miserliness while they are playing chess, Jōkan defends himself by reminding Jubuemon (and the audience) of the ideology of the Tokugawa social formation.

[4] Ibid., 190.

[5] A translation of *The Uprooted Pine* appears in Keene's *Major Plays*, 313–50.

> A samurai's child is reared by samurai parents and becomes a samurai himself because they teach him the warrior's code. A merchant's child is reared by merchant parents and becomes a merchant because they teach him the ways of commerce. A samurai seeks a fair name in disregard of profit, but a merchant, with no thought to his reputation, gathers profits and amasses a fortune. This is the way of life proper for each.[6]

Chikamatsu's most highly regarded domestic play, *Shinjū ten no Amijima* (The Love Suicides at Amijima, 1721), centers on a paper-store owner, Kamiya Jihei, age 28. Jihei is married to Osan, his cousin, but like Chūbei in *Courier*, he is destroying his business in a desperate rivalry with the villain, Tahei, over Koharu, a courtesan in the pleasure quarters of Osaka. Act 2 is framed by the appearance of Osan's mother at the beginning, and her father, Gozaemon at the end. Osan's mother, who is 56, visits Jihei's home and place of business along with Jihei's brother, to voice their concerns about the rumors going around that someone is about to redeem Koharu's contract. Jihei manages to convince them that he has broken off relations with Koharu, but they ask him to sign an oath to that effect to reassure Gozaemon. Their visit, followed by Osan's revelation about her exchange of letters with Koharu, force Jihei and Osan to try to buy Koharu's contract before Tahei does in order to save Koharu from killing herself and at the same time, to save Jihei's honor. At the end of Act 2, however, Gozaemon suddenly appears just as Jihei is about to leave the house. Gozaemon can hardly be described as a weak old man, but his angry tirade voices the suffering that Jihei has caused his family, and his drastic action of divorcing Osan and Jihei on the spot and taking her away precipitates Jihei's love-suicide with Koharu in Act 3.

[6] Ibid., 333.

Chikamatsu's last love-suicide play, *Shinjū yoigōshin* (Love Suicides on the Eve of the Kōshin Festival, 1722),[7] concerns the double-suicides of Hanbei, and his wife, Ochiyo. Ochiyo's father, Hei'emon, now retired, has fallen seriously ill and Ochiyo's elder sister, Okaru, is constantly at his bedside. In Act 2, Ochiyo, returns home after suddenly being divorced from her husband by her mother-in-law. From his sickbed, Hei'eimon summons Okaru, with a clap of his "frail hands."[8] As Okaru slides open the door, Ochiyo looks in from behind her and is shocked to see "a tired and tortured old man climbing up the mountain of age. Although stalked by no hunters, his limbs have fallen limp, his face is rough and wrinkled like a felled beast's."[9] He tries to comfort Ochiyo but dwells on his age and health.

> Once in his fifties, a man can no longer do everything as he used to do, even though his spirit is the same as when young. Then I was strong willed and righteous, and if you were divorced again and sent home, I was determined not to see your face or speak to you. But when a man reaches his sixties, it is not just the years that pass by quickly, he feels older with each month and day and falls deeper into the depths of sickness.[10]

With his frail body, his "hoarse voice" broken by "incessant coughing,"[11] Hei'eimon is another example of the "weak old man" character type. In the scene that follows between Hei'emon, Hanbei, and Ochiyo, Hei'emon's pitiful condition and entreaties place Hanbei in an impossible situation between his foster mother, who has already divorced him from Ochiyo, and his father-in-law, who now makes him promise never to divorce Ochiyo. In this

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[7] A translation of *Love Suicides on the Eve of the Kōshin Festival* appears in Andrew Gerstle's *Chikamatsu: 5 Late Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 283–324.
[8] Ibid., 301.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 302.
[11] Ibid., 304.

instance, Hanbei has done nothing wrong, unlike Chūbei of *Courier*, and his father-in-law's sufferings are unrelated to his actions, but learning that Ochiyo is already divorced might be fatal. This seems to leave Hanbei no choice but to commit suicide along with Ochiyo.

For my final example, I will discuss a play that Chikamatsu wrote soon after *Courier*: *Imamiya shinjū* (The Love Suicides at Ima Shrine, 1711).[12] As a love-suicide play, it is unusual in that the two lovers are not only coworkers, but the woman, Okisa, is older than Jirobei, the man she loves. Since this play has not been translated into English, I will summarize the plot here in some detail.

Jirobei is 21 years old and a newly promoted assistant clerk in the Hishiya, a clothing shop in the center of Osaka. Okisa is 25 and a seamstress in the shop. Three other important characters are Shiroemon, the proprietor of the Hishiya, and Teihō, Shiroemon's mother and the matriarch of the family. The narrator tells us that though she is 73 years old, she needs "neither glasses nor a cane, and has never lost a tooth. She is a strong woman, more astute than most men."[13] Yoshibei, the villain of the play, is perhaps in his late thirties. Having risen to the rank of senior clerk in the Hishiya, with Shiroemon's help he now has a business of his own and hopes to marry Okisa.

Act 1 begins with an elaborate introduction to one of the favorite pastimes of Osaka residents: riding a boat along one of the many canals on a hot summer evening. Among them is Yoshibei who wishes to show his appreciation of his former master's kindness to him by entertaining Shiroemon, his wife and Teihō. Shiroemon, however, declined the invitation because of an eye infection. As the play opens Yoshibei's party brings their boat to the embankment by the Kawaramachi Bridge on the West Yoko Canal. In the conversation that follows, they agree that the party would be even more pleasant if Jirobei and Okisa were also present. When Yoshibei asks after them, Teihō, explains that

[12] Page numbers for my translation refer to the version of the play found in *Chikamatsu Monzaemon shū* vol. 2, eds. Torigoe Bunzō et al, *Shinpen Nihon bungaku zenshū* vol. 75 (Shōgakkan, 1998), 289–330.
[13] Ibid., 293.

Jirobei has been given leave to pay a visit to his home village near Nara for the anniversary of his mother's death, and that Okisa has caught a cold and gone to stay with her sister to recover. Yoshibei suspects that Jirobei has not returned to his home but is rather secretly spending his evenings with Okisa at her sister's house, which is close by. As his guests prepare to take their leave, Yoshibei pretends that he has forgotten to bring candles for the lanterns to guide the ladies home and tells a servant, Kyūza, to hurry to Okisa's sister's to borrow candles. He adds that if Okisa is feeling better, Kyūza should bring her back with him and join them in a cup of saké.

After Kyūza departs, Jirobei, on his way to visit Okisa, spots Yoshibei and his guests, and hides in a shed. From there he sees Kyūza escorting Okisa back to Yoshibei's boat. Okisa greets the people in the boat and asks for Teihō's help: she explains that her father suddenly arrived the night before to take her back to her village because the man to whom she has been promised since childhood now wants to marry right away. Okisa's father then appears. In the conversation that follows, Teihō deftly handles the awkward negotiation between Okisa's father, who insists on taking Okisa back to the countryside, and Yoshibei, who persuades him to leave his daughter's future in Teihō's hands. As Jirobei looks on from his hiding place in a shed, Yoshibei thinks Teihō intends to give Okisa to him and with Teihō's approval, writes down the terms of the agreement they have reached. Whether his note specifies whom Okisa is to marry remains a mystery for the rest of the play and the cause of the trouble to come.

Act 2 takes place several days later in the Hishiya clothing shop. It begins with Jirobei making snide remarks directed at Okisa because he thinks her affections have shifted to Yoshibei and because he is worried about what Yoshibei wrote in the note. Shiroemon makes his entrance, barking orders as he waits for Bokuan, a doctor, to arrive to examine him, after which he intends to have a moxa treatment. Shiroemon orders Jirobei and Okisa to prepare the moxa, then after Bokuan arrives, accompanies him to a back room. While alone, Jirobei and Okisa have a brief quarrel and make up. Bokuan reappears but wishes to stay awhile and enjoy some refreshments. A comic scene ensues as Jirobei,

trusting to an old superstition, lights some moxa on Bokuan's sandals. Sure enough, Bokuan suddenly decides he must leave right away and despite their mock pleas to stay, he departs. Alone once again, Jirobei asks Okisa what Yoshibei wrote in the note, but Okisa did not see it at the time. Jirobei pessimistically assumes that it names Yoshibei specifically as Okisa's fiancé and so decides that he must steal and destroy it.

Shiroemon appears from the inner room and asks them to begin the *moxa* treatment. He puts his robe on backwards so that Okisa can apply the moxa to his back with Jirobei's help. As she does so, she and Jirobei engage in some love-play, kissing and touching each other behind Shiroemon's back in an erotically charged scene that turns serious when Shiroemon's pouch, which is attached to his sash, moves around to his back and the keys to the Hishiya slip part of the way out. Jirobei signals to Okisa that he is going to take the keys, but Okisa silently tries to warn him off such a foolhardy act. Jirobei finally manages to take the keys. Shiroemon, exhausted and sweat-soaked, thanks them for their efforts and retires to the back room completely unaware of what has just happened.

Jirobei searches for Yoshibei's note, using the keys to unlock first a chest of drawers and then a closet. When he finds it, he tears it up without reading it and stuffs the pieces into his robe. Just then Yoshibei arrives. Jirobei slips into the closet and Okisa closes the door as Yoshibei comes into the room. He spies the keys and quickly realizes that Jirobei is hiding in the closet. He locks the closet door and confronts Okisa with a choice: to either give herself to him or he will report what he has discovered to Shiroemon. When Okisa angrily refuses, Yoshibei calls out. Teihō and others household members rush in and Yoshibei announces that Jirobei, now locked in the closet, has stolen the master's keys. Yoshibei briefly consults with Shiroemon, who remains in the back room, and they decide to take Okisa to her sister's and leave Jirobei in the closet until morning.

Later that night, Teihō sneaks back into the room and lets Jirobei out of the closet with a harsh reproach: “I may be an old woman and a shopkeeper, but I'll cut off your head even if I have

to use a vegetable knife!" [14] After explaining his reasons for stealing the keys, he begs her to refrain from telling Shiroemon. Teihō explains to him that she destroyed Yoshibei's note the night he wrote it, but now "all the efforts of this old woman to make you and Okisa man and wife, and have your own household someday have come to nothing."[15] The only way to keep Shoroemon from finding out that he stole the keys and save himself is to give up Okisa. Jirobei responds:

> Your words are most reasonable. I would be worse than a beast not to heed them. Even if I said "yes," I could never repay your kindness. I was promoted to the position of clerk, but Yoshibei looks down on me as even lower than an apprentice, and finds the slightest excuse to walk all over me with his criticisms. Hard as it was to bear, I put up with it because I thought that if I could live in a house with Okisa for even just one day, thanks to my Master's kindness, I would be getting back at Yoshibei. Every day I work my heart out, but if I meekly hand over Okisa to him now, I could not bear to see the smug look on his face. It would be humiliating.[16]

Jirobei's words reveal that his love for Okisa is fueled by and inseparable from his rivalry with Yoshibei, and that his "honor" (*ichibun*) is at stake. In a desperate attempt to save him from his folly, Teihō breaks down in tears and angrily reminds him of what she had sacrificed for him.

> You ungrateful fool! Have you forgotten the past? Hardly a day went by when you weren't sick and of no use to anyone. They all said "Send him home!" "Send him home!" But this old woman stood her ground. I would have died before I let

[14] Ibid., 316.
[15] Ibid., 317.
[16] Ibid., 318.

> them send you back to your home. That is true compassion! Up to the spring of your eighteenth year, between charms and medicines, I took better care of you than I would my own grandchild. I even made Shiroemon pay the costs, till at last I made a man of you. I was twice as kind to you as I was to the other clerks, enough to make them envious, but when you go to prison, people will say that the old woman of the Hishiya was an utter fool, that she raised a thief. They might even speak ill of Shiroemon and say that because of his eye trouble, he may lose the business. And you're worried about saving your honor? Then there's my attending the dawn services. I thought waking up the maids and troubling them to accompany me would jeopardize my prayers for the next life, so I took only you, but from now on, I won't be able to go, to pray with a clear conscience. I don't want to see someone like a member of the family meet with a bad end, like some dog or cat. It is because you are so dear to me that I prattle on like this. But enough: if you insist on thinking only of yourself and want to die, then go back into the closet.

With this angry, tearful entreaty, Teihō finally manages to persuade Jirobei to give up Okisa. What makes this powerful scene all the more compelling is the question that must have occurred to the audience: if Teihō destroyed Yoshibei's note, what did Jirobei tear up? It is the first thing he asks himself the moment she leaves the room to retire. He is stunned to find that the note is for a loan that Shiroemon secured using another property as collateral. Realizing that nothing can save him now (the torn note is proof that he stole the keys), he decides to flee. In Act 3, he and Okisa tearfully make their way through the streets of Osaka in the dead of night to Ima Shrine south of the city, where they hang themselves.

In this play, the weak old man is Shiroemon, the owner of the Hishiya. Though not deathly ill like Hei'eimon in *Kōshin*

Festival, Shiroemon's eye infection makes him symbolically blind to what is going on in his own household. He remains offstage for much of the play and lets Yoshibei speak for him when Jirobei is caught. The strong old woman is obviously Shiroemon's mother, Teihō. In the tense exchange between Teihō and Jirobei discussed above, Teihō shows the depths of her concern, not only for Jirobei, but the Hishiya as well. She clearly articulates the ideological issues at stake, reminding Jirobei and the audience of the threat that personal desires pose to the social order.