



### A Matter of Life and Death

Writing of Mizoguchi in these columns about a year ago, I remarked that ‘One hopes that *The Life of O-Haru* will be sufficiently successful to encourage our more enterprising distributors to release other Mizoguchi films - particularly *Chikamatsu Monogatari ...*’. And here it is, for a season at the Gate Cinema, Notting Hill, whose supremely enterprising management are also putting a 16mm print into distribution immediately. CineGate have in fact committed themselves to introducing one Mizoguchi film into this country every year. If they sustain this project, we should have the complete extant works of the classical cinema’s greatest master available between 70 and 80 years from now. It is enough to reconcile one to longevity.

Outside occasional screenings at the National Film Theatre, we still know nothing in Britain of Mizoguchi’s work in the silent period, nor even of his thirties and forties films; nor have we access to his contemporary dramas, though *Street of Shame*, his shatteringly intense study of a modern Tokyo brothel, enjoyed (if that is the word) brief exposure in the sixties as a ‘sexploitation’ movie, in a horribly mutilated version accompanied by lurid and misleading publicity (‘Night Women of the Orient ...’, if memory serves). To place *Chikamatsu* chronologically within the context of the four films (all late works) currently available in England, it was made in 1954, the same year as *Sansho Dayhu*, after *Ugetsu Monogatari* and *The Life of O-Haru*, before *Shin Heike Monogatari*. Mizoguchi died in 1956.

On the evidence available, it would be pardonable to think of Mizoguchi as a creator of exotic ‘art’ movies. It is therefore salutary to recall that he worked throughout his career within one of the world’s largest commercial industries, an industry from the outset indebted to Hollywood for its basic narrative patterns; that his earlier

works include adaptations of American gangster stories; that ‘period’ films of various kinds are as central to the Japanese genre system as the Western is to Hollywood’s; that his interviews speak repeatedly, like those of the major Hollywood directors, of restrictions and interference from studios and producers; that, in terms of the conditions of production, it is more realistic to compare him with Ford and Hawks than with Bergman and Fellini. The pictorial beauty of his films, though his style is no more ‘typical’ of the Japanese cinema than the very different styles of Ozu and Kurosawa, clearly derives from a complex cultural tradition and is no more esoteric or narrowly personal than the compositions of Ford.

*Chikamatsui*, though set in the seventeenth century, does much to offset this sense of the exotic. It is a film that speaks very directly to contemporary audiences - western as well as Japanese - to the extent that for long stretches one almost forgets it is a period piece. Its plot (freely adapted from a play) is in its basic outline in no way alien to the western tradition. An account of the action up to the film’s mid-point, culminating in a scene where mistress and maidservant exchange beds in order to trap an errant husband, would suggest how easily it could be inflected towards European high comedy (eg *The Marriage of Figaro*) or even bedroom farce.

It would be absurd to reduce it to a protest, three hundred years too late, against crucifixion as the penalty for adultery. Its central concerns are with the position of women in a society where men make all the rules, and with people’s ideological entrapment; with the triumph of human need over laws not merely written in the statute-book but internalised in the characters’ psychological structuring. Centred on the developing love between Osan, the wife of the Emperor’s scroll-

maker, and Mohei, the craftsman-employee who is the mainstay of her husband's establishment, the film is built on a complex structure of interlocking oppressions: the oppression of woman by man, the oppression of servant by master, of artist by capitalist (one might see parallels with the respective roles of director and producer within the commercial cinema).

One obstacle (it is far from insuperable) to the ready acceptance of Mizoguchi by western audiences may be that in his work contemplation takes precedence over identification. The two commonest technical means of encouraging identification in the western cinema, the individual close-up and the subjective shot, are used only very sparingly in his films. If a character is alone on the screen, he / she tends to be seen at a distance, within an environment; more commonly, Mizoguchi's images are composed in a way that divides our attention between different characters, inviting awareness of a relationship rather than an identification with one of the participants. Rare examples of the subjective shot in *Ugetsu* and *O-Haru* have the function of signifying private fantasy or hallucination rather than of forcing a character's point-of-view on the spectator. Throughout the first half of *Chikamatsu* we are brought by the camera positions unusually close to the characters, but the screen is for the most part shared by at least two, our sympathies clearly directed but our interest divided. We follow the precise analysis of a complex situation of increasing intolerability, of a process whereby the protagonists are forced into a desperate, spontaneous rebellion against the rules of their society.

The closeness is crucial to the film's structure, based on the strongest possible contrast between its two halves. The first part is all interiors and constriction: a claustrophobic world without privacy, where every moment of personal contact is subject to interruption. At the mid-point of the film Osan and Mohei flee, and the film moves out into nature: there is an abrupt change of style, long-shot predominating, marked by those exquisite figures-in-a-landscape compositions in which the director of *Sansho* and *Ugetsu* is instantly recognisable. The effect is not, however, simply one of release: Mizoguchi's apprehension of nature is never sentimental. The characters move from a world of entrapment whose conditions are known and fixed into a world of freedom where nothing is certain: even the freedom proves merely relative and temporary. The celebrated sequence of the nocturnal lake-crossing in *Ugetsu* (so often cited as an example of Mizoguchi's mastery of atmosphere) is here recapitulated and excelled.

At this point in the film the spectator knows how each of the protagonists feels towards the other, but nothing has been declared. The wife is disgraced, the man a wanted criminal, but both remain paralysed by their acquiescence in social roles. As a good servant, Mohei helps his mistress prepare for suicide by drowning, binding her feet, intending to follow her; but, knowing that everything is over, he feels compelled to confess his love for her. Suddenly, she has a reason to live. In the small boat in the middle of the lake, surrounded by mist and night, mistress and servant become two human beings who love each other, and for us as for them social restrictions dissolve. The consummation of their relationship is depicted in one of the most eloquently reticent shots in the whole of

cinema: a single static take looking out over the dark, misty lake; right of the screen, a rough reed hut; centre, the moored boat, now empty.

Many of Mizoguchi's films have centred on women and their oppression, but ambiguously: the tendency (in *Ugetsu*, in *O-Haru*, in *Sansho*) is to celebrate their passive endurance. In this respect, *Chikamatsu* occupies a privileged position among the late films. Always faithful to the historical realities of his material, Mizoguchi seizes the opportunity to show the woman (in love with a man even more oppressed than she) taking the initiative. The last third of the film is centred on Mohei's education in daring to love. Finding that only he is officially 'wanted' (Osan's husband wishing at all costs to avoid scandal), he runs off to give himself up. In panic and desolation she rushes after him, and collapses - whereupon, obeying his servant mentality, he emerges from his hiding-place to help her up. 'You are no longer my servant, you are my beloved husband', Osan tells him passionately. From that point on, the film is about their rejection of the temptation to sacrifice themselves for each other, and their acceptance of the profounder sacrifice that acknowledges their deepest needs: the certainty that the assertion of their mutual commitment will result in one another's death.

Hence the last scene. Bound back-to-back on a horse, the couple are led off to crucifixion. Through the ropes that bind them, their hands interclasp (a moment to which Chabrol beautifully paid homage at the end of *Les Noces Rouges*). 'I've never seen her look so serene before', says one of the girls from the scroll-maker's shop. Each of Mizoguchi's late films is quite distinct from the others in subject-matter and has its own particular tone, yet each moves towards a similar affirmation: within a world whose conditions for those who refuse compromise are tragic waste and irreparable loss, the triumph of personal integrity, the celebration of spiritual union. Like *Ugetsu* and *Sansho*, the film ends with a rising crane-shot, raising our view above that of the crows as the lovers ride to their death.

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