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Displaced Heroes in Medieval Literature:
A Comparative Note

Shinsuke Ando

Chaucer's *The Monk's Tale* presents a series of short histories of famous men and women who suffered terrible downfalls. It is a series of medieval 'tragedies'. The Monk offers his audience the following definition of tragedy:

> Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
> As olde bookes maken us memorie,
> Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
> And is yfallen out of heigh degree
> Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.
> And they ben versified communely
> Of six feet, which men clepen *exametron*.
> In prose eek been endited many oon,
> And eek in meetre in many a sondry wyse.
> Lo, this declaryng oghte ynogh suffise.
> 'Now herkneth, if you liketh for to heere.
> But first I yow biseeke in this mateere,
> Though I by ordre telle nat thise thynges,
> Be it of popes, emperours, or kynges,
> After hir ages, as men writen fynde,
> But tellen hem som bifore and som bihynde,

As it now comth unto my remembraunce,
Have me excused of myn ignoraunce.'

(*The Monk's Tale*, 1973-90)

The Monk goes back to this theme at the beginning of his Tale, adding that the stories he is going to tell are 'ensamples trewe and old', that is, 'traditional and authoritative *exampla*:'

I wol biwaille in manere of tragedie
The harm of hem that stoode in heigh degree,
And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
To brynge hem out of hir adversitee.
For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,
Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde.
Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee;
Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde.

(1991-8)

Even after having touched on this same subject twice, the Monk repeats it once more at the end of the story of Croesus,—the last story of the *Tale*, just before he is interrupted by the knight:

Trageiës noon oother maner thing
Ne kan in singyng crie ne biwaille
But that Fortune alwey wole assaille
With unwar strook the regnes that been proude;
For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,
And covere hir brighte face with a clowde.

(2761-6)

The word 'tragedy' had thus entered the English language by later years of the 14th century. In Chaucer's definition, there is no implication of dramatic form. A tragedy is a narrative which narrates the life of some distinguished personage who underwent a decline of fortune toward a disastrous end.

It is clear that this definition of 'tragedy' corresponds to that given by Boethius:

> What other thynge bywaylen the cryinges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune, that with an unwar strook overturneth the realmes of greet nobleye?
>
> (*Boece* Ⅱ, pr. 2, 67-70)

In this way, medieval tragedy is centred on the concept of the goddess Fortune—*Fortuna in* Roman antiquity. Two instances of the repeated formula, in which the Monk describes the goddess Fortune's power over human destiny, would be enough to show the fundamental sentiment prevailing in *The Monk's Tale*.

> a. At Lucifer, though he an angel were
> And nat a man, at hym wol I bigynne.
> For though Fortune may noon angel dere,
> From heigh degree yet fel he for his synne
> Down into helle, where he yet is inne.
>
> (*MkT, Lucifer,* 2000-4)

> b. For whan Fortune wole a man forsake,
> She bereth awey his regne and his richesse,

And eek his freendes, bothe moore and lesse.
For what man that hath freendes thurgh Fortune,
Mishap wol maken hem enemys, I gesse;
This proverbe is ful sooth and ful commune.
(*Balthazar*, 2241-46)

George Steiner, in his splendid discussion of tragedy, *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), points out as follows:

> Chaucer's definition derives its force from contemporary awareness of sudden reversals of political and dynastic fortune. To the medieval eye, the heavens of state were filled with portentous stars, dazzling in their ascent but fiery in their decline. The fall of great personages from high place (*casus virorum illustrium*) gave to medieval politics their festive and brutal character. Sweeping over men with cruel frequency, the quarrels of princes implicated the lives and fortunes of the entire community. But the rise and fall of him that stood in high degree was the incarnation of the tragic sense for a much deeper reason: it made explicit the universal drama of the fall of man. Lords and captains perished through exceeding ambition, through the hatred and cunning of their adversaries, or by mischance. But even where the moralist could point to a particular crime or occasion of disaster, a more general law was at work. By virtue of original sin, each man was destined to suffer in his own experience, however private or obscure, some part of the tragedy of death. The Mok's lament 'in manere of tragedie' begins

> with Lucifer and Adam, for the prologue to the tragic condition of man is set in Heaven and in the Garden of Eden. There the arrow of creation started on its downward flight. It is in a garden also that the symmetry of divine intent places the act of fortunate reversal. At Gethsemane the arrow changes its course, and the morality play of history alters from tragedy to *commedia*. Finally, and in precise counterpart to the prologue of disobedience, there is the promise of a celestial epilogue where man will be restored to more than his first glory. Of this great parable of God's design, the recital of the tragic destinies of illustrious men are a gloss and reminder.
>
> (pp. 12-13)

The reason why I have dared to quote this rather long passage by Steiner is that, in my opinion, this is the most serious and judicious evaluation of *The Monk's Tale,* which is often treated by the specialist Chaucerians as merely a boring collection of threads and patches.

It is certain that Chaucer's idea of 'tragedy', as far as the lexical meaning of this word is concerned in Chaucer's works, is alien to us today. It is rather difficult for us to accept as tragic the mere 'fall' of people in 'high degree' or of 'regnes that been proude'. It also seems difficult for us to accept the 'downfall' as being determined only by the 'unwar strook' of Fortune. Indeed, as Piero Boitani Points out, in *The Tragic and Sublime in Medieval Literature* (1989),

> 'since at least 1789, the year of the French Revolution, such 'falls' would most likely fit in with the modern idea of justice or of social movements rather than that of

fortune. For us, tragedy is inevitably linked to the names of Orestes, Oedipus, Philoctetes, Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, or, in a different realm, to Christ'a Passion, to the sufferings of the Karamazovs and of Prince Myshkin. Our idea of tragedy involves the fallibility of man, his errors and sins, power and justice, ignorance and knowledge, madness and death.' (p. 42)

Boitani is right. No one would regard Ceausescu's fall as the result of the whimsical stroke of the goddess fortune. Many would even refuse to accept it as a tragedy. It is also true that Chaucer himself holds a different, more complex, mature, and sophisticated idea of tragedy. We have only to refer to the 'litel trgedye' of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Moreover, the company of pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*, the audience of *The Monk's Tale* does not seem to be satisfied with the stories of the downfall of glorious men and women. The Knight interrupts the Monk and complains as follows:

'Hoo!' quod the Knyght, 'good sire, namoore of this!
That ye han seyd is right ynought, ywis,
And muchel moore; for litel hevynesse
Is right ynough to muche folk, I gesse.
I seye for me, it is a greet disese,
Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,
To heeren of sodeyn fal, allas!
And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,
As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,
And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
And there abideth in prosperitee.

Swich thyng is gladsom, as it thynketh me……'

(*The Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale*, 2757-78)

The Host is even more brutal. He accuses the Monk of bothering the whole company and putting it to sleep. At this point there is a trap which the modern readers of Chaucer should be careful to avoid. The two severe critics of *The Monk's Tale*, (the Knight and the Host) may well lead us to the conclusion that the Monk's stories are badly written. However, they were not badly written. Chaucer's intention of locating the Monk's stories within the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* was certainly a serious one. And we must clearly take *The Monk's Tale* seriously. Also it should be noted that Chaucer was able to take advantage of the particular structure of *The Canterbury Tales* in implying some criticism of its form. Undoubtedly this is the same kind of criticism as was offered by the Host when he was bored with the 'rym doggerel' of Chaucer's *Rime of Sir Thopas*. As Donaldson points out: 'If the tragedies are to be read at all they must be read seriously, but the reader is at liberty to accept the Knight's and Host's opinion as authoritative, and skip them'. (*Chaucer's Poetry*, 1958, p. 940) But George Steiner did not skip them. Nor did he fail to grasp the meaning of Chaucer's suggestion, expressed by the Knight, of the possibility of turning from tragedy to comedy. If it is difficult for us today to accept Chaucer's idea of tragedy as serious, it may be because we have lost the sense of tragedy, and this loss of the tragic sense on the part of the moderns, Steiner may say, is undoubtedly what led to the death of tragedy, or to the 'displacement' of tragedy.

Meanwhile, the fundamental tragic motif, or tragic feeling in classical and medieval Japanese literature seens to be thoroughly imbued with the idea of 'the legends of exiled nobles' [*kishuryūritan*].

There are many Japanese tales and legende in which an infant god comes from the 'other world' to undergo various hardships in the human world before being restored to the other world, or otherwise a young man and woman of high birth are banished from the prosperous city and obliged to live a wandering life. It was round about 1920 that Origuchi Shinobu, eminent scholar of ancient Japanese literature, coined this new word '*kishuryūritan*' as a technical term for this prominent folkloric and literary tradition. Origuchi examined how this tradition had come to foster the tragic temperament of the Japanese people, giving rise to various tragedy.

The archetype of 'the legends exiled nobles' is a story recounting the wandering life of a hero or heroine. The hero is often a divine being or such a noble personage as can be compared to a god. The cause of the hero's wandering is attributed to a certain crime or sinful act—very often related to amourous affairs. The hero is displaced from his sovereign position and begins a painful wandering. Wandering is a ordeal for the sinner-hero to be redeemed from sin. Once the redemption or expiation is accomplished, the hero is allowed to return to his former position. The paradise lost is regained in the end. However, the story of the 'wanderer' is really a sad one full of pathos. The wanderer suffers a succession of hardships in the human world and laments the loss of his fortune. The tone is that of lyric rather than epic. Aristotelian '*eleos*', that is 'pity' [the Monk's 'pitee' in Chaucer], is the effect of his tragic autobiography. The literary tradition of the 'legend of exiled nobles' is clearly based on the folkloric archetype of tragic feeling. After the eleventh century, the story of a wandering exile came to receive continental influences and grew much more complex and sophisticated. The narrator even applied this traditional pattern to historical facts to create a literary work. The

narrator's intention in this case may be regarded as corresponding to that of Chaucer in adding modern instances to *The Monk's Tale* to show the contemporary relevance of the theme. The tradition of the 'legends of exiled nobles' finally attains its culmination in two books of *The Tale of Genji,* 'Suma' and 'Akashi'. The hero of the *Tale,* Hikaru Genji, commits religious and political crimes by getting married with his mother-in-law and having an affair with the empress. This prince is displaced from the palace for redemption and lives in Suma, a dilapidated district away from the capital as an exile. According to the traditional pattern he is supposed to be able to return to his former life in happiness and comfort. Separation and restoration are again the characteristic elemets of this tradition, but the description of his life in displacement is full of pathos. 'Suma' begins as follows:

> For Genji life had become an unbroken succession of reverses and afflictions. He must consider what to do next. If he went on pretending that nothing was amiss, then even worse things might lie ahead. He thought of the Suma coast. People of worth had once lived there, he was told, but now it was deserted save for the huts of fishermen, and even they were few. The alternative was worse, to go on living his public life, so to speak, with people streaming in and out of his house. Yet he would hate to leave, and affairs at court would continue to be much on his mind if he did leave. This irresolution was making life difficult for his people.……
>
> Unsettling thoughts of the past and the future chased one another through his mind. The thought of leaving the

city aroused a train of regrets……

(*The Tale of Genji*, translated by E. G. Seidenstecker)

In this passage one can not fail to recognize the sense of mutability, the tragic sense of displacement which is characteristic of the literary tradition I have been discussing. It is extremely interesting to find the theme of the 'displaced hero' also playing a crucially important role in the tradition of Japanese literature.