

The Michizane Legend as seen in the *Nō* Drama, *Raiden*

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When in 889 Emperor Uda appointed Sugawara no Michizane (845-903) to the office of Privy Counsellor, it was clear that the young Emperor was pursuing an anti-Fujiwara policy, in the difficult attempt to rebuild a bureaucracy controlled by the monarch, free from the interference of a too-powerful family. Michizane had been the only prominent scholar to support Tachibana no Hiromi, Uda's close advisor who, wishing to bring down the arrogant Minister, the Chancellor Mototsune (836-891), suggested giving him the appointment of *Asi*, a title which describes a rank rather than a specific post. Thanks to the good will of the Emperor, Michizane, a man coming from a family of literati without any particular political or military power, had a very fast and successful career: in 893 he became tutor of the Crown Prince Atuhito, the nine year old son of Uda, and, in the same year, Michizane's daughter, Nobuko, became one of Uda's consorts. In spite of his refusal to sail for China as ambassador to the Tang court (894)¹¹, he was appointed Minister of Civil Affairs and in 899 he was promoted to the post of Minister of the Right, while Mototsune's son, Tokihira (871-909), became Minister of the Left.

The misfortunes of Michizane began in 900, when Tokihira started a secret conspiracy against him, warning Emperor Daigo (r. 897-930) that Michizane was planning to depose him in favor of his grandson, Prince Tokiyo¹². The reaction of the fifteen year old Emperor was immediate: Michizane was appointed Supernumerary Governor-General in Kyūshū, the standard way of political exile of the time. He died in exile two years later.

The process of Michizane's deification began soon after his death, when many mishaps troubled the supporters of the Fujiwara family. Tokihira suddenly died in 909, when he was 38 years of age. A few years later, Michizane's other great enemy, Minamoto no Hikaru, who had supplanted him as Minister of the Right, was killed in a hunting accident. Two of Tokihira's grandsons, both appointed Crown Princes, died while still young. Daigo, fearing the furious spirit of the scholar unjustly exiled¹³, in 923 decided to appoint Michizane as Great Minister of the Right and to give him the Senior Second Rank. But the misfortunes were not yet finished. A terrible storm accompanied by great peals of thunder broke out on the capital, sowing terror at the Imperial Palace, where a high Fujiwara Counsellor was killed by a thunderbolt. *Onagami* tells us how that a storm was caused by Michizane's spirit transformed into a thunder god and how Fujiwara no Tokihira was the only gentleman present to draw his sword and advance on the ghost, reminding him of the respect he had to pay to

Michele Marra, Osaka Gaikokugo Daigaku sakuho
vol. 64 (1984) pp 437-444

Tokihira because of his higher rank. At these words the god quieted down and *Ōkagami* comments that it was not Tokihira the man who made the thunder stop, but it was Michizane who knew the respect everybody has to pay to the hierarchy established by the Emperor, whose authority is supreme⁴⁰. Emperor Daigo is said to have fallen ill as a result of this terrifying incident, and three months later he abdicated the throne. His successor, Emperor Suzaku (r. 930-946), was also a victim of the fear of Michizane's spirit; during the first two years of his life he had been kept closely confined behind curtains as a protection against Sugawara no Michizane, who was blamed for the premature deaths of his two predecessors when they were Crown Princes. This has been accepted as the reason for the frail and sickly nature of the Emperor⁴¹.

In 947, fortyfour years after Michizane's death, the great Kitano shrine (Northern Fields) was built for Michizane, north of the capital. The Emperor bestowed on him the title of Heavenly Deity (Tenjin), thus making him the first subject in Japanese history to be officially recognized as a divinity. The final promotion came ninety years after his death, when he was raised to the Senior First Rank, usually limited to royal members, and appointed to be Minister of the Left. A few months later he was promoted to Prime Minister, completing the conquest of the terrestrial hierarchy, in the same way as his conquest of the celestial⁴².

The fame surrounding Michizane made the legend outstrip reality, transforming him into an outstanding poet, gifted calligrapher, loyal subject⁴³, and making of Tokihira the merciless villain. As early as in the eleventh century, Tokihira was considered "immature and not nearly so well educated" as Michizane, "a man of outstanding learning and judgement"⁴⁴. Tokihira's political ability in promoting a reform program designed to destroy the power of local families, increase revenues and revive the dying system of public land distribution, have been forgotten in historical evaluation.

In the fourteenth century Michizane's legend was widely developed and enriched with new details. In the twelfth chapter of *Taiseiki* we find Michizane visiting the thirteenth abbot of the Enryakuji, Hoshōbō, late in the summer of the same year of his death. He announces his plan to kick to death all the courtiers and slanderers who caused his unjust exile and exhorts the priest not to go to the Palace to perform the mystic rites even if summoned by the Emperor. Upon the natural answer of the priest, who cannot disobey an imperial order, the Minister shows his wrath, taking up a pomegranate from before him, crunching it with his teeth and spitting it out against the door of the hall, which is reduced to ashes. The monk, not frightened at all, extinguishes the flames with a magical sign with his hands. As soon as the Minister ascends into the heavens, the Imperial Palace is surrounded by lots of thunder, and for seven days and seven nights the rain comes down mightily. A thunderbolt falls down onto the Seiryōden, killing the Great Counsellor Kiyotsura and setting on fire the building where other three courtiers lose their lives. Requested by Tokihira who reminds him of the duty he owes to the Emperor, the thunder god quiets down. In the meantime the Emperor, willing to appease the wrath of the god through the power of the Buddhist Law, summons Hoshōbō who, having refused twice, cannot further disobey the Emperor's request. There-

fore he goes down to the capital; the Kamo river's waters part to the left and right in order to let the monk cross it. From the time that this monk goes to the Palace, the rain stops, as though the wrath of the god had been appeased instantly.

Thereafter Tokihira falls ill and from his left ear appears a small blue snake who claims to be the god Temman Daijizai Tenjin, ready to kill the minister in order to be avenged of his false slanders. Tokihira dies, followed very soon by his daughter and his two grandsons, both Crown Princes. Michizane's spirit is appeased only through the promotions we have already seen⁹⁾.

Most probably this legend came from the terrible lightning which struck the Sciryūden the 28th day of the 4th month of the 8th year Enchō (930)¹⁰⁾; we find an illustration of this episode and of Michizane's legend in the scroll of *Kitano Tenjin Enki*, attributed to Fujiwara no Nobuzane (1175-1268?). Here, the fifth book is entirely concerning the story of Michizane's wrath until his appeasement through the services of Hosshōbō.

The same legend is the material of *Raiden*, a nō-play whose source is considered to be the *Taiheiki*¹¹⁾. Called also *Tsumado* by the Kongō and Kita schools, this nō has been attributed either to Miyamasu or to Saami¹²⁾. It seems to date back to the end of the fourteenth or beginning of the fifteenth century. This nō presents the legend from the point of view of faith and loyalty. Against the insane wrath of Michizane is set the holiness of the priest whose Buddhist powers imbue all the play. The priest is the symbol of both the celestial and the terrestrial law; he always reminds Michizane of the loyalty due to the Emperor. The source of Michizane's madness is pointed out by the priest himself: the unbalance between "internal grace of Buddha and external sense of loyalty", as stated by the *waki* at the end of the play, which is translated here.

The Thunderbolt¹³⁾

Waki: the priest Hosshōbō.

Mae-shite: the ghost of Sugawara no Michizane.

Kgyūgen: a follower of Hosshōbō.

Nochi-shite: the thunderbolt (the vengeful ghost of Michizane).

On Mount Hiei, Ōmi Province.

(Hosshōbō comes on the stage wearing a square cap, a plain kimono, a narrow obi, with a fan and a rosary in his hands).

1

Sashi. Hosshōbō: I am Hosshōbō, the chief priest of the Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei. A hundred times I lighted the holy fire¹⁴⁾ for the public prosperity but, since today the rite is over, I am beginning the recitation of the "Wisdom sutra"¹⁵⁾.

(He reaches the *waki*'s seat).

Sashi. Hosshōbō: The mercy of the Buddha is renewed as the light of the day shed a long

time ago from the deity of Hiyoshi¹⁶, whose vow is as deep as Lake Biwa. In the lake the moon is mirrored while the waves approach the bay¹⁷.

Age-uta: Let's give it a name. Is it not the autumn of the sacred peak of Mt. Hiei? Is it not the autumn of the sacred peak of Mt. Hiei? The moon casts its bright light all over the famous places as far as the Three Mountains¹⁸ we call the Fuji of the Capital. The light of the Law shines naturally, thanks to the brilliant mercy of the Buddha. His vow does not miss anybody. His vow does not miss anybody.

2

(During the recitation of the poem, the ghost of Michizane appears from the pine, wearing the mask of his deified spirit, a colored head-band, a pale blue neck-band, a plain kimono and a broad robe, a waist-band, with a fan in his hand).

Sashi. Ghost: Oh, how blessed is this mountain! From ancient times this has been the first temple to follow the way of the Buddha; my temporary coming here is not certainly worthless. I invoke the divine protection, while standing on this mountain¹⁹. Let the gods of this mountain grant my request!

(Bowing to the protective deities of the mountain, he knocks at the door of the main entrance).

Hosshōbō: The night deepens, the eaves whiten²⁰. The moonlight pierces inside. I cannot believe that a man is knocking at the door. What could it be? Perhaps the wind blowing through the pines? It is strange indeed!

Ghost: When you listen to my story, you will not believe your ears.

(He strikes his fan).

Hosshōbō: It is strange indeed! When I cast a glance from a cleft, a miracle, the Minister²¹ appears. How agitated, how helpless!

Ghost: I come to this hermitage invited by the moon, now that dawn is approaching. (When he is still knocking at the door, a voice comes from the inside).

Hosshōbō: Wonderful indeed! Is he not the Minister? Please, come in, this way.

Ghost: The nightly moon

Chorus: lights up an unexpected guest.

(The *shite* comes on the scene and sits down in the middle of the stage. The *waki*, leaving his seat, sits in front of the *shite*).

An unexpected guest. He meets with him so rarely he thinks it is a dream and the words do not come out. Both the priest and the Minister speak very frankly and look very happy. How would it have been if he were still a man of this world!

3

Hosshōbō: When I knew you died in Tsukushi²² I held many memorial services for you. Did they reach you?

Ghost: All your prayers reached me and I feel very grateful to you. The old leaves, lasting until the end of autumn, easily fall down even without any wind. The tears, mourning the grief, fall down without having been asked. Extremely precious is the vow binding master and pupil.

Hosshōbō: Strong is the relation between master and servant.

Ghost: Intimate is the vow between parents and child.

Hosshōbō and ghost: This must be what is called the triple relation.

Ghost: And among these, for the deep desire of truth, there is no more binding relation than the vow between master and pupil.

Sage-uta. Chorus: He is grateful to the priest, how can he step on him?

Kuse: Long ago, when he was a child, he didn't have either his father or his mother and he didn't know where to go. Having been raised by the Counsellor Sugawara (Koreyoshi), he felt suddenly bound to him by a filial vow. He was brought up with so much care that he considered the Counsellor his real father. When he entered the way of learning, he was entrusted to the chief priest. He invited the moon to his window and, gathering fireflies, he opened his heart to the summer insects.

Ghost: The forest of poetry grew very thick.

Chorus: He never exhausted the power of the words and even the priest, whose efforts until now have never been shaken by any storm, was happy with his achievements. How could he forget that teaching's worth, each word a thousand coins?

4

Ghost: I didn't fulfill my hopes in this world. Thanks to the mercy of Brahma and Indra I became, after my death, a roaring thunder. I'm going to fly to the Imperial Palace since I must kick to death the nobles who caused me so many troubles. At that time they will summon you, but remember do not go there!

Hosshōbō: If an imperial order comes once or twice, I will not go there.

Ghost: Even if the imperial envoy should keep on coming, you would never go there.

Hosshōbō: Since I live in the realm of the Emperor, if the envoy comes three times, how could I refuse to go to the Palace?

Ghost: Then, suddenly, the Minister changes into a demon.

Hosshōbō: And, at the same time, he lays his hands on a pomegranate standing as an offering in front of the Buddha's image,

Chorus: he grasps it quickly, crushing it with his teeth

(The *shite* stands up with the fan open).

He grasps it quickly, crushing it with his teeth.

(He beats time with it).

He bites it, standing close to the paneled door

(He throws away the fan, facing the pillar)

and, when he spews it, the pomegranate turns at once into flames, burning the door. The

priest, observing,
(The *waki* stands up)
does not show any trace of agitation.
(The *waki* sits down).

He makes magical signs with his fingers, using the water of purification²³ and, when he recites an incantation, the flames disappear. Hidden in the smoke, the Minister vanishes, not knowing where to go. He vanishes, not knowing where to go.

(When the chorus says "He recites an incantation", the *shite*, turning right, leaves the middle of the stage. He turns a little bit when the chorus says, "The flames disappear" and leaves the scene at the words, "not knowing where to go". The *waki* follows him).

Interlude

(The *kyōgen*, a follower of the priest, comes on the stage wearing a striped kimono and carrying a fan and a short sword).

Kyōgen: I am a servant of the priest, who for seven days lighted the holy fire in order to protect the country. Marvelous indeed is the appearance of the Minister Sugawara who ended his days in Tsukushi. When he knocks at the door, the priest wonders who it is and through the opened door the Minister appears. The priest, thinking him dead in Tsukushi, asks him the reason for his visit. Then, the Minister answers: "I am born in an impure world, without the power of showing the falsehood of a slander. Exiled to Tsukushi, I addressed prayers to Brahma for dispelling my chagrin. If I rush to the Palace in my posthumous form of thunder, surely the priest will be summoned by an imperial envoy, in order to perform the holy rites. Since the vow binding master and pupil is not shallow, don't go to the Palace, even if an imperial envoy summons you". Quite natural is the refusal of the priest: this mountain is the place of the Emperor's devotions. Therefore, the priest says that he will not go to the Palace if summoned twice; but, if a third call comes, how could he refuse, living in a land ruled by the Emperor? A similar refusal could never be made in an imperial domain. Then the features of the Minister change. Showing his wrath, he grasps the pomegranate lying in front of the Buddha and, when he bites it, the fruit turns into flames. The priest, observing, makes magical signs with the water of purification and, when he recites an incantation, the flames disappear. The Minister, hidden in the smoke, makes a thunderbolt fall from the black clouds. Arriving at the Palace, he accomplishes many misdeeds. As expected, the imperial envoy comes to summon the priest. At the beginning he hesitates, but at last he cannot stand the envoy's continuous requests. Let's see all together what happens!

5

At the Imperial Palace.

(The priest comes on the scene, wearing a broad-sleeved robe, a white broad divided skirt, a waist-band, and with a fan and a rosary in his hands. He reaches his seat).

They go on following each other. There is no way of finding a similar display of powers, terrible indeed!

(Following the *waki* to his seat, he covers his head with a sleeve and sits down on the bridge).

When the priest has completed the reading of the magic formula of the Thousand-arms Kannon, the thunder could not even endure to stay in the Thunder-room³⁹.

(He stands up).

Going away from the internal doors of the Palace

(he comes on the scene),

"Forgive all this uproar", he says. He obeyed the secret formula and, since the Emperor enshrined him as Temman, the deified spirit of Michizane

(sitting down, he bows towards the frontage),

he is so happy! He felt so bitter while living

(he stands up)

and is so delighted now that he is dead!

(He starts going towards the bridge).

Getting onto the black clouds, he rises into the sky.

(Covering his head with a sleeve, he stops).

Footnotes

- 1) Three arguments are adduced in order to explain Michizane's refusal: 1. His incapability of speaking the contemporary Chinese of his time. This is a very good reason if we think that Michizane was the most praised sinologue of his times; 2. His fear of the dangers of travel; 3. His desire to remain in Kyoto in a moment of struggle with the Fujiwara. The official reason was that the conditions of China were far too unsettled to justify a resumption of diplomatic relations. Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure. Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), p. 49. Henceforth, *The Nobility of Failure*.
- 2) While the *Ōtagami* does not give any detail on the events leading to the Minister's fall, the *Taishiki* explains the conspiracy of Tokihira, Hikaru (son of Nimmyō Tonnō), Sadakuni (son of the Minister of the Centre Takafuji), Sugane, who inform the Emperor against Michizane, saying: "The Kan Minister of state governs the realm with a selfish heart, cares nothing for the people's misery, and makes wrong right". Helen Craig McCullough trans. *The Taishiki. A Chronicle of Medieval Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 354. Henceforth, *The Taishiki*. Tanji Gotō and Gisaburō Kamada ed., *Taishiki*, I, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965), pp. 402-403. Henceforth, Gotō.
- 3) *Taishiki* supports the thesis of the unjustness of Michizane's exile: "Nor might it have been otherwise, even had he not yearned after his home, since he had been thus grievously and unjustly accused". *The Taishiki*, p. 356.
- 4) Helen Craig McCullough trans., *Ōtagami. The Great Mirror. Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027) and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1980), pp. 108-104. Henceforth, *Ōtagami*. Even in *Taishiki* the thunder god quiets down out of respect for the Emperor. Tokihira says: "Though you are become a god, do you no longer owe a duty to the Emperor?". And the *Taishiki*'s commentator goes on: "Perhaps the thunder god became quiet because of his logic, for he climbed up to heaven, not striking down the Great Subject Tokihira or harming the Emperor". *The Taishiki*, p. 359.
- 5) *Ōtagami*, Chapter six, "Chancellor Michinaga", Part II, p. 217.
- 6) *The Nobility of Failure*, Chapter four, "The Deity of Failure", pp. 41-66.
- 7) On the confutation of Michizane's gifts, see *The Nobility of Failure*, pp. 62-65.
- 8) *Ōtagami*, p. 96.

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