
Atsumori

Zeami, who wrote *Atsumori*, developed in it a particularly touching passage of the epic *Heike monogatari* ('The Tale of the Taira'). The Taira clan had lorded it in Kyoto for a generation when, in 1183, the approach of the rival Minamoto forces put them to flight. The next year, they were routed from their camp on the shore at Ichi-no-tani by a daring Minamoto attack. Taking to their ships, they sailed away towards the scene of *Yashima*. Alas, one Taira youth, the gentle Atsumori, was left behind on the beach, there to be challenged by the seasoned Minamoto warrior Kumagai no Jirō Naozane. Kumagai took Atsumori's head, though he would gladly have spared him, and at the young man's waist he found a flute. To think that this noble youth had gone into battle with a flute! Disgusted with the warrior's calling and with all the crassness of the world, Kumagai entered religion and became the monk Renshō (or Rensei) of the play.

In sober fact, Atsumori may have been killed by someone else, and Kumagai became a monk some twenty years after the battle, probably in disappointment after losing a dispute over land. However, the tale told in *Heike monogatari* lived on as the truth, inspiring popular fiction, more *nō* plays by later playwrights, and plays for the bunraku and kabuki theatres of Edo times (1600–1868).

Zeami evoked in *Atsumori* the contrasts between Atsumori and Kumagai-Renshō. Atsumori was little more than a boy and Kumagai a mature man when they fought, but Atsumori was also a noble from Miyako while Kumagai was a rough warrior from the East. A social gulf yawned between them, even as Kumagai wept for Atsumori's youth. The flute brought home to Kumagai all the uncouthness of his own kind, and the fineness of that almost celestial world, Miyako. Yet, as Renshō, a follower of the Buddha, it is Kumagai who is in touch with higher things, while Atsumori, a restless shade, is deep in suffering. From these contrasts springs the conflict of the play: a conflict less of the battlefield than of the mind. The conflict is resolved not in victory for one side or the other, but in mutual sympathy.

Moreover, Zeami conveyed, especially in the passage on music and flutes, a concern with art that is still clearer in his *Tadanori*. He seems to have cared no more than Renshō for war.

The battlefield of Ichi-no-tani lies now within Suma-no-ura Park in Kōbe. Near a railway station that serves the park stands an old and imposing funerary monument to Atsumori. Not far away, roughly where the young mower of *Atsumori* played his flute, stands Sumadera. This temple prospered thanks to Atsumori's legend and for centuries has exhibited a flute identified (implausibly) as Atsumori's own. Elsewhere, in Saitama Prefecture, one can still see Yūkoku-ji, the temple founded by Kumagai in 1205 on the site of his own residence. And in Kyoto, at Kōmyō-ji where Renshō is said to have trained under the great saint Hōnen, a Kumagai Chapel contains a statue of Atsumori purportedly carved by Kumagai, a painting of Atsumori, and votive monuments dedicated by the faithful to both men.

Atsumori

Persons in order of appearance

The monk Renshō, formerly the Minamoto warrior Kumagai	<i>waki</i>
A Youth (no mask)	<i>maeshite</i>
Two or three Companions to the Youth	<i>tsure</i>
A Villager	<i>ai</i>
The phantom of the Taira warrior Atsumori (<i>Atsumori</i> or <i>Jūroku</i> mask)	<i>nochijite</i>

Remarks: A second-category or warrior play (*shura-mono*) current in all five schools of nō.

* * *

To shidai music, enter Renshō, carrying a rosary. He stands in base square, facing rear of stage.

RENSHO (*shidai*) The world is all a dream, and he who wakes
the world is all a dream, and he who wakes,

casting it from him, may yet know the real.

He turns to the audience.

(*nanori*) You have before you one who in his time was Kumagai no Jirō Naozane, a warrior from Musashi province. Now I have renounced the world, and Renshō is my name. It was I, you understand, who struck Atsumori down; and the great sorrow of this deed moved me to become the monk you see. Now I am setting out for Ichi-no-tani, to comfort Atsumori and guide his spirit towards enlightenment.

(*ageuta*) The wandering moon,
 issuing from among the Ninefold Clouds¹
 issuing from among the Ninefold Clouds,
 swings southward by Yodo and Yamazaki,
 past Koya Pond and the Ikuta River, *Mimes walking.*
 and Suma shore, loud with pounding waves,
 to Ichi-no-tani, where I have arrived
 to Ichi-no-tani, where I have arrived.

(*tsukizerifu*) Having come so swiftly, I have reached Ichi-no-tani in the province of Tsu. Ah, the past returns to mind as though it were before me now. But what is this? I hear a flute from that upper field. I will wait for the player to come by and question him about what happened here. *Sits below witness pillar.*

To shidai music, enter the Youth and Companions. Each carries a split bamboo pole with a bunch of mowed grass secured in the cleft. They face each other at front.

YOUTH and COMPANIONS

(*shidai*) The sweet music of the mower's flute
 the sweet music of the mower's flute
 floats, windborne, far across the fields.

YOUTH (*sashi*) Those who gather grass on yonder hill
 now start for home, for twilight is at hand.

YOUTH and COMPANIONS

They too head back to Suma, by the sea,
 and their way, like mine, is hardly long.
 Back and forth I ply, from hill to shore,
 heart heavy with the cares of thankless toil.

(*sageuta*) Yes, should one perchance ask after me,

1. The moon suggests the monk Renshō himself. The 'ninefold clouds' refer to Miyako. 'Ninefold', an epithet for the imperial palace, hence for the capital, refers to the nine gates of ancient Chinese palaces.

my reply would speak of lonely grief.²

(*agenta*) On Suma shore
 the salty drops fall fast, though were I known
 the salty drops fall fast, though were I known,
 I myself might hope to have a friend.³
 Yet, having sunk so low, I am forlorn,
 and those whom I once loved are strangers now.

While singing, Youth goes to stand in base square, Companions before Chorus.

But I resign myself to what life brings,
 and accept what griefs are mine to bear *Renshō rises.*
 and accept what griefs are mine to bear.

RENSHŌ (*mondō*) Excuse me, mowers, but I have a question for you.

YOUTH For us, reverend sir? What is it, then?

RENSHŌ Was it one of you I just heard playing the flute?

YOUTH Yes, it was one of us.

RENSHŌ How touching! For people such as you, that is a remarkably elegant thing to do! Oh yes, it is very touching.

YOUTH It is a remarkably elegant thing, you say, for people like us to do? The proverb puts the matter well: 'Envy none above you, despise none below.' Besides,

the woodman's songs and the mower's flute

YOUTH and COMPANIONS

are called 'sylvan lays' and 'pastoral airs':⁴
 they nourish, too, many a poet's work,
 and ring out very bravely through the world.
 You need not wonder, then, to hear me play.

RENSHŌ (*kakeai*) I do not doubt that what you say is right.

Then, 'sylvan lays' or 'pastoral airs'

YOUTH mean the mower's flute,

RENSHŌ the woodman's songs:

YOUTH music to ease all the sad trials of life,

RENSHŌ singing,

YOUTH dancing,

2. These and the following three lines allude to the poem by Ariwara no Yukihiro (818–893) that figures so prominently in *Pining Wind*. Yukihiro was exiled to Suma.

3. Yukihiro's poem alludes to a friend in Miyako; and the Youth is probably longing for a similar friend, in the Miyako now lost to him, who would know his true quality. In fact, his only possible friend, Renshō, is already present.

4. In a line of Chinese verse by a Japanese poet, included in *Wakan rōei shū* ('Collection of Japanese and Chinese Poems for Chanting Aloud', 1013).

RENSHŌ fluting –
 YOUTH all these pleasures

Below, Youth begins to move and gesture in consonance with the text.

CHORUS (*agents*) are pastimes not unworthy of those
 who care to seek out beauty: for bamboo,
 who care to seek out beauty: for bamboo,
 washed up by the sea, yields Little Branch,
 Cicada Wing, and other famous flutes;
 while this one, that the mower blows,
 could be Greenleaf, as you will agree.⁵
 Perhaps upon the beach at Sumiyoshi,
 one might expect instead a Koma flute;⁶
 but this is Suma. Imagine, if you will,
 a flute of wood left from saltmakers' fires
 a flute of wood left from saltmakers' fires.

Exeunt Companions. Youth, in base square, turns to Renshō.

RENSHŌ (*kakeai*) How strange! While the other mowers have gone
 home, you have stayed on, alone. Why is this?

YOUTH You ask why have I stayed behind? A voice called me here,
 chanting the Name. O be kind and grant me the Ten Invocations!⁷

RENSHŌ Very gladly. I will give you the Ten Invocations, as you ask.
 But then tell me who you are.

YOUTH In truth, I am someone with a tie to Atsumori.

RENSHŌ One with a tie to Atsumori?
 Ah, the name recalls such memories!

Presses his palms together in prayer over his rosary.

'Namu Amida Bu,' I chant in prayer:

Youth goes down on one knee and presses his palms together.

YOUTH and RENSHŌ 'If I at last become a Buddha,

5. It was felt that bamboo washed up by the sea yielded particularly fine flutes. Atsumori's own was in fact the one named Little Branch (*Saeda*). The divine music of Greenleaf was legendary.

6. Because Sumiyoshi (celebrated in *Takasago*) was where ships from Koma (Korea) once used to put in. The *koma-bue* ('Koma flute') is used in the ancient court music known as *gakaku*.

7. The Name is that of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, whose invocation goes *Namu Amida Bu* ('Hail Amida Buddha'). The Ten Invocations (ten callings of the Name for the benefit of another) were often requested of holy persons even by the living. Renshō's teacher, Hōnen, was an outstanding Amida devotee. In *Pining Wind*, too, the Monk invokes Amida for the spirits of the dead, although the dead are comforted more often with passages from the *Lotus Sutra*.

then all sentient beings who call my Name
 in all the worlds, in the ten directions,
 will find welcome in Me, for I abandon none.⁸

CHORUS (*uta*) Then, O monk, do not abandon me!

One calling of the Name should be enough,
 but you have comforted me by night and day –
 a most precious gift! As to my name,
 no silence I might keep could quite conceal
 the one you pray for always, dawn and dusk: *Youth rises.*
 that name is my own. And, having spoken,
 he fades away and is lost to view
 he fades away and is lost to view. *Exit Youth.*

* * *

Villager entered discreetly during the ageuta above, and sat at villager position. He now comes forward to base square.

VILLAGER You see before you one who lives here at Suma, on the shore.
 Today I will go down to the beach and pass the time watching the ships
 sail by. [*Sees Renshō.*] Well! There's a monk I've not seen before. May I ask
 you, reverend sir, where you are from?

RENSHŌ I came from Miyako. Do you live nearby?

VILLAGER Yes, I do.

RENSHŌ Then would you please come nearer? I have something to ask of you.

VILLAGER Very well, reverend sir. [*Sits at centre, facing Renshō.*] Now, what
 is it?

RENSHŌ Something rather unexpected, perhaps. I hear this is where the
 Minamoto and the Taira fought, and where the young Taira noble,
 Atsumori, died. Would you tell me all you know of the way he met his
 end?

VILLAGER That certainly is an unexpected request, reverend sir. I do live
 here, it is true, but I really know very little about such things. Still, it
 would be too bad of me, the very first time we meet, to claim I know
 nothing at all. So I will tell you the story as I myself have heard it told.

RENSHŌ That is very kind of you.

8. The canonical vow made by Amida, before he became a Buddha, to save all beings by his grace. These lines, in Chinese, are from the sutra known in Japan as *Kammuryōjū-kyō*.

VILLAGER [*Turns to audience.*] It came to pass that in the autumn of the second year of Juei, Minamoto no Yoshinaka drove the Taira clan out of Miyako. This is where they came. Then the Minamoto, bent on destroying the Taira for ever, split their army – sixty thousand and more mounted warriors – into two wings and attacked without mercy. The Taira fled.

Now one among them, a young gentleman of the fifth rank named Atsumori, was the son of Tsunemori, the Director of Palace Repairs. Atsumori was on his way down to the sea, meaning to board the imperial barge,⁹ when he realized that back in the camp he had forgotten his flute, Little Branch. He prized this flute very highly and hated to leave it behind for the enemy's taking. So he turned back, fetched the flute, and again went down to the beach. But by this time, the imperial barge and the rest of the fleet had sailed. Just as he was riding into the sea, hoping to swim his horse out to the ships, Kumagai no Jirō Naozane, a warrior from Musashi province, spread his war fan and challenged him to fight.

Atsumori wheeled his horse and closed fiercely with Kumagai. The two crashed to the ground between their mounts. But Kumagai was a very powerful man. He instantly got Atsumori under him and ripped off his helmet, meaning to take his head. He saw a youth of fifteen or sixteen, with powdered face and blackened teeth – a young man of high rank, there was no doubt about that.¹⁰ Kumagai wanted to spare him. Then he glanced behind him and saw Doi and Kajiwara riding up. A good seven or eight other warriors were with them. 'I do not wish to kill you,' said Kumagai, 'but as you can see, there are many men from my own side behind me. I will take your head myself, then, and afterwards pray with all my heart for the peace of your spirit.' So he cut off Atsumori's head. On examining the body, he found a flute in a brocade bag attached to the waist. When he showed the flute to his commander, all present wet the sleeves of their armour with tears. To think that he had been carrying a flute at a time like that! Even among all those gentlemen from the court, he must have been an especially gentle youth! Eventually, Kumagai found out that his victim had been Atsumori.

I wonder whether it's true, as they say, that Kumagai made himself into a monk to pray for Atsumori. If he was that sort of man, though, he wouldn't have killed Atsumori in the first place. But he did kill him, so the

9. The Taira had fled Kyoto with the child emperor Antoku. Antoku drowned in the final Taira defeat at Dan-no-ura, the battle evoked at the end of *Yashima*.

10. Courtiers of both sexes wore white powder and blackened their teeth. Teeth in their natural state (like Kumagai's, no doubt) were felt to be unsightly.

story must be wrong. I'd like to see that Kumagai here now! I'd kill him myself, just to make Atsumori feel better.

Well, that is the way I have heard it told. But why did you ask? I am a bit puzzled.

RENSHŌ Thank you very much for your kind account. Perhaps there is no harm in my telling you who I am. In my time I was Kumagai no Jirō Naozane, but now I am a monk and my name is Renshō. I came here, you see, to give Atsumori's spirit comfort and guidance.

VILLAGER *You* are Kumagai, who fought in the battle here? Why, I had no idea! Please excuse all the silly things I said. They say the man mighty in good is mighty, too, in evil. I'm sure it's just as true the other way round. Anyway, do go on comforting Atsumori's spirit.

RENSHŌ I assure you, I am not in the least offended. Since I came here to comfort Atsumori, I will stay on a while and continue chanting the precious Sutra¹¹ for him.

VILLAGER If that is your intention, then please accept lodging at my house.

RENSHŌ I will do so gratefully.

VILLAGER Very well.

[Exit.]

* * *

RENSHŌ (*agenta*) Then it is well: to guide and comfort him
 then it is well: to guide and comfort him,
 I shall do holy rites, and through the night
 call aloud the Name for Atsumori,
 praying that he reach enlightenment
 praying that he reach enlightenment.

To issei music, enter Atsumori, in the costume of a warrior. He stops in base square.

ATSUMORI (*shimo-no-ei*) Across to Awaji the plovers fly,
 while the Suma barrier guard sleeps on;
 yet one, I see, keeps nightlong vigil here.
 O keeper of the pass, tell me your name.¹²

11. The *Lotus Sutra*. Perhaps an inconsistency introduced by analogy with other plays (this dialogue is not a part of Zeami's text), since Renshō actually chants the Name of Amida. However, it is not impossible, in practice, that he should have chanted both.

12. The barrier on the pass through the hills behind Suma was well known in poetry, as was its nameless guard. In the language of poetry, an older man seen at night at Suma can only be this guard; so that Atsumori's playful challenge, 'O keeper of the pass, tell

(*kakeai*) Behold, Renshō: I am Atsumori.
 RENSHŌ Strange! As I chant aloud the Name,
 beating out the rhythm on this gong,
 and wakeful as ever in broad day,
 I see Atsumori come before me.
 The sight can only be a dream.
 ATSUMORI Why need you take it for a dream?
 For I have come so far to be with you
 in order to clear karma that is real.
 RENSHŌ I do not understand you: for the Name
 has power to clear away all trace of sin.
Call once upon the name of Amida
and your countless sins will be no more:
 so the sutra promises. As for me,
 I have always called the Name for you.
 How could sinful karma afflict you still?
 ATSUMORI Deep as the sea it runs. O lift me up,
 RENSHŌ that I too may come to Buddhahood!
 ATSUMORI Let each assure the other's life to come,
 RENSHŌ for we, once enemies,
 ATSUMORI are now become,
 RENSHŌ in very truth,
 ATSUMORI fast friends in the Law.

Below, Atsumori moves and gestures in consonance with the text.

CHORUS (*uta*) Now I understand!
 'Leave the company of an evil friend,
 cleave to the foe you judge a good man':
 and that good man is you! O I am grateful!
 How can I thank you as you deserve?
 Then I will make confession of my tale,
 and pass the night recounting it to you
 and pass the night recounting it to you.

Atsumori sits on a stool at centre, facing audience.

(*kuri*) The flowers of spring rise up and deck the trees
 to urge all upwards to illumination;
 the autumn moon plumbs the waters' depths

me your name,' seems intended to remind the more rustic Renshō of his place. His words, based on a twelfth-century poem, are as elegant as the music of his flute.

to show grace from on high saving all beings.

ATSUMORI (*sashi*) Rows of Taira mansions lined the streets:
we were the leafy branches on the trees.

Like the rose of Sharon, we flowered one day;

CHORUS but as the Teaching that enjoins the Good
is seldom found,¹³ birth in the human realm
quickly ends, like a spark from a flint.
This we never knew, nor understood
that vigour is followed by decline.

ATSUMORI Lords of the land, we were, but caused much grief;

CHORUS blinded by wealth, we never knew our pride.

Atsumori rises now, and dances through the kuse passage below.

(*kuse*) Yes, the house of Taira ruled the world
twenty years and more: a generation
that passed by as swiftly as a dream.
Then came the Juei years, and one sad fall,
when storms stripped the trees of all their leaves
and scattered them to the four directions,
we took to our fragile, leaflike ships,
and tossed in restless sleep upon the waves.
Our very dreams foretold no return.
We were like caged birds that miss the clouds,
or homing geese that have lost their way.
We never lingered long under one sky,
but travelled on for days, and months, and years,
till at last spring came round again,
and we camped here, at Ichi-no-tani.

So we stayed on, hard by Suma shore,

ATSUMORI while winds swept down upon us off the hills.

CHORUS The fields were bitterly cold. At the sea's edge
our ships huddled close, while day and night
the plovers cried, and our own poor sleeves
wilted in the spray that drenched the beach.
Together in the seafolk's huts we slept,
till we ourselves joined these villagers,
bent to their life like the wind-bent pines.

13. It is only rarely, and by great good fortune, that a sentient being is able to hear the Buddha's teaching; and it is only as a human being that one can reach enlightenment.

The evening smoke rose from our cooking fires
 while we sat about on heaps of sticks
 piled upon the beach, and thought and thought
 of how we were at Suma, in the wilds,
 and we ourselves belonged to Suma now,
 even as we wept for all our clan.

Atsumori stands before drums.

ATSUMORI (*kakeai*) Then came the sixth night of the second month.

My father, Tsunemori, summoned us
 to play and dance, and sing *imayō*.¹⁴

RENSHŌ Why, that was the music I remember!
 A flute was playing so sweetly in their camp!
 We, the attackers, heard it well enough.

ATSUMORI It was Atsumori's flute, you see:
 the one I took with me to my death

RENSHŌ and that you wished to play this final time,

ATSUMORI while from every throat

CHORUS rose songs and poems
 (*issei*) sung in chorus to a lively beat.

(DANCE: *jo-no-mai*)

Atsumori performs a lively chū-no-mai, ending in base square. Below, he continues dancing and miming in consonance with the text.

ATSUMORI (*unnamed*) Then, in time, His Majesty's ship sailed,

CHORUS (*noriji*) with the whole clan behind him in their own.

Anxious to be aboard, I sought the shore,
 but all the warships and the imperial barge
 stood already far, far out to sea.

ATSUMORI (*unnamed*) I was stranded. Reining in my horse,
 I halted, at a loss for what to do.

CHORUS (*noriji*) There came then, galloping behind me,

Kumagai no Jirō Naozane,
 shouting, 'You will not escape my arm!'
 At this Atsumori wheeled his mount
 and swiftly, all undaunted, drew his sword.
 We first exchanged a few rapid blows,
 then, still on horseback, closed to grapple, fell,

14. The popular songs (much appreciated at court) of the late twelfth century.

and wrestled on, upon the wave-washed strand.

But you had bested me, and I was slain.

Now karma brings us face to face again.

‘You are my foe!’ Atsumori shouts,

Brandishes sword.

lifting his sword to strike; but Kumagai

Drops to one knee.

with kindness has repaid old enmity,

Rises, retreats.

calling the Name to give the spirit peace.

They at last shall be reborn together

upon one lotus throne in paradise.

Renshō, you were no enemy of mine.

He drops his sword and, in base square, turns to Renshō with palms pressed together.

Pray for me, O pray for my release!

Pray for me, O pray for my release!

Facing side from base square, stamps the final beat.