

Chapter 3

Reading across Cultures

Reading world literature gives us the opportunity to expand our literary and cultural horizons far beyond the boundaries of our own culture. Inspiring as it is, though, the reading of foreign works can pose serious problems. The writer may assume a familiarity with dynasties and divinities we have never heard of; the work is probably in dialogue with a range of previous writers we haven't read; the very form of the work may be strange and hard to assess. A good editor's introduction can clarify a work's historical and literary context, and footnotes can identify unfamiliar names, but there remains the danger that we will find ourselves stuck at the surface of the text, put off by its strangeness or inadvertently making it all too familiar, assimilating it superficially to what we already know. Inevitably, we approach a work with expectations and reading skills shaped by the many works we have read in the past – both those of our home tradition and other foreign works we have already encountered. Rather than trying to erase this fund of prior knowledge, we need to use it productively as our springboard into the new. This chapter will discuss several ways in which we can effectively read new material in comparative perspective, probing similarities and differences that can help us make sense of less familiar works while also illuminating familiar material in new ways.

To be effective, a comparison of disparate works needs to be grounded in some third term or set of concerns that can provide a common basis for analysis. Without some meaningful ground of comparison, we would be left with a scattershot assortment of unrelated works. Bewildered by their sheer variety, we could be reduced to constructing the random connections favored by the literary critics in Jorge Luis Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Tlön's critics believe that all literature expresses a hidden

unity, and they “will take two dissimilar works – the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, for instance – attribute them to a single author, and then in all good conscience determine the psychology of that most interesting *homme de lettres*” (Borges, *Collected Fictions* 77).

Fortunately, we are not forced to rely on random free association when dealing with works from unrelated cultures. Distant writers may not share a common fund of literary reference or poetic technique, yet there are many ways to compare works from different cultures. Using the example of drama, this chapter will discuss modes of comparison involving similarities in genre, in character and plot, in themes and imagery, and in parallel cultural patterns or social settings. Together, these examples will illustrate effective strategies for relating works from distant cultures.

Classical Drama: Greece and India

A basic ground of comparison of works from different cultures is provided by literary genres, which play a major role in the shaping of works and in forming audiences' expectations for them. While some genres are unique to a single tradition, others can be found in many parts of the globe; the previous chapter's discussion of epic within the Western tradition could be extended across cultures to look at epics from India, Persia, and North Africa. Drama is still more widespread, found in many cultures at many times. Though the world's different dramatic traditions vary widely, they collectively explore the possibilities opened up by staged performance – the embodiment of characters and actions, the use of props and scenery, the incorporation of music, dance, and lighting. Within these overall parameters, we can learn a good deal about a culture by seeing which elements a given tradition highlights, and how its writers use them. Conversely, a culture's overall dramatic norms provide a crucial starting point for understanding the workings of a particular play – including the playwright's departures from the reigning norms of the day.

We will begin by looking at two masterpieces of world drama: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. Sophocles and Kalidasa have comparable standing as foundational dramatists in their respective traditions, but there is little traceable relation between the drama of Greece and India. Hellenistic kings did rule northern India in the final centuries BCE, and the remains of a Greek theater of this period have been uncovered in

what is now Afghanistan. Any such contacts, however, lay in the distant past by Kalidasa's day in the fourth or fifth century, and Sanskrit drama developed on its own terms over many centuries, drawing for its material on Indian epic and lyric traditions rather than on any foreign material. Kalidasa would never have heard of Sophocles, and yet for all their differences, *Shakuntala* and *Oedipus* are comparable on several levels, starting with their fundamental themes.

Sophocles' play is a drama of knowledge. Faced with a plague and blight devastating his city of Thebes, Oedipus seeks to discover what crime or fault has led the gods to punish Thebes in this way. He is resolute in seeking out witnesses who may be able to provide clues, and he progressively teases out the truth. Early on, an oracle reveals that the gods are trying to force Thebes to expel a murderer in their midst, the unknown slayer of Thebes' previous king, Laius. Oedipus then vows to get to the bottom of this crime and to banish the murderer, whoever he may be. What he doesn't realize is that he himself is the murderer in question. While some playwrights might have saved this revelation for the conclusion, Sophocles brings it forward early in the drama, when the blind prophet Teiresias shocks Oedipus by declaring that "you are the land's pollution. / . . . you are the murderer of the king / whose murderer you seek" (Sophocles 101). Worse still, the murdered king Laius, unknown to Oedipus, was actually his own father, who had abandoned him in infancy, hoping to avert a prophecy that he would be slain by his son. Having unwittingly fulfilled this prophecy, Oedipus became Thebes' king and married Laius' widow, Jocasta – his own mother.

The balance of the play concerns Oedipus's efforts to prove or disprove the truth of this horrifying and incredible news. The play is tightly focused on Oedipus and his immediate circle as they grapple with their situation, their characters revealed by their strategies of denial or acceptance. The entire play takes place in a single location and on a single day, effectively in real time, as actions of the distant past come inexorably to light. Long-forgotten or repressed events culminate in a tragic hour of reversals and recognitions, bringing a great man from the height of good fortune to the depths of despair and disgrace. Mediating between the characters and the audience, a chorus of Thebans performs moving laments, singing as they dance.

Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* also involves a great king who has to grapple with a wrong that he has committed at some point in a forgotten past. Like Sophocles, Kalidasa is dramatizing an incident handed down in epic tradition, in his case the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Hunting one day in a forest, King Dushyanta happens upon a hermitage where he espies the radiantly

beautiful Shakuntala, an orphan who is being raised by an ascetic sage. Instantly, Dushyanta falls in love with Shakuntala, and the feeling is reciprocated as soon as she sees the lordly monarch. The two consummate a private marriage, and Dushyanta gives Shakuntala his signet ring and then returns to his court, promising to send shortly for her to join him as his principal wife.

Trouble emerges, however, in the form of an angry spirit named Durvasas, who becomes enraged when Shakuntala fails to greet him with respect (her thoughts are elsewhere as she dreams of her lover). He delivers a curse, repaying her absentmindedness by decreeing that King Dushyanta will forget he ever knew her. Implored by Shakuntala's companions to lift this curse, Durvasas relents to the extent of allowing that Dushyanta will recall his love if he once again sees his signet ring. This, however, slips from Shakuntala's finger as she bathes in a river while traveling to the king's court. When she is presented to Dushyanta, the bewildered king insists he has no recollection of ever having met her, much less married her. Shakuntala – already pregnant from their few days together in the forest – is devastated that she can do nothing to restore his memory. Her own foster-family doubts her story, and disowns her. Angelic forces whisk her away to a Himalayan paradise, where she gives birth to their son and begins to raise him.

All is not lost, however, for a fisherman finds the lost ring, and is brought to the king to explain how he got it. Seeing the ring, Dushyanta immediately remembers everything; he longs to recover Shakuntala but cannot find where the gods have taken her. The situation is finally rectified several years later, when the chief god Indra commissions Dushyanta to defeat an army of demons. After he does so, Indra rewards Dushyanta by having him flown to the Himalayan peak where Shakuntala is living; they are joyfully reunited and Dushyanta meets his son and heir for the first time. The play ends with the happy family mounting Indra's chariot to fly home.

Though comic rather than tragic in mode, *Shakuntala* is as much a psychological drama as *Oedipus the King*. Like Oedipus, Dushyanta is haunted by memories he can't quite bring to consciousness, and he too struggles to make sense of an incredible story: that he has met and married the most beautiful woman in the world and yet has forgotten her within a space of days. After he has returned to his court but before Shakuntala appears, the amnesiac Dushyanta hears one of his wives singing a song of abandonment, and finds himself overcome. "Why did hearing that song's words fill me

with such strong desire?" he asks himself; "I'm not parted from anyone I love." He is moved to put his confusion into verse:

Seeing rare beauty,
hearing lovely sounds,
even a happy man
becomes strangely uneasy. . . .
perhaps he remembers,
without knowing why,
loves of another life
buried deep in his being.

(Kalidasa 134)

Sigmund Freud used Oedipus to illustrate the workings of subconscious desires; here Dushyanta is equally troubled by a memory lingering just below the surface of his consciousness. The happy ending in the seventh act is preceded by three full acts of bewilderment, confusion, and heartbreak. In the fourth act, Shakuntala and her companions at the hermitage are dismayed that no messages have come from Dushyanta to invite her to his court. Finally her foster-father Kanva determines to send her anyway, though he is full of sorrow at losing her, as well as of foreboding concerning her reception at court. In the fifth act, Shakuntala and her companions are shocked at Dushyanta's calm refusal to admit to the marriage. "Ascetics," the baffled king says to her guides, "even though I'm searching my mind, I don't remember marrying this lady. How can I accept a woman who is visibly pregnant when I doubt that I am the cause?" (139). Shakuntala is overwhelmed with shame and regret for ever having fallen in love with this seemingly faithless man. Until the play's final act, she is caught in a tragic situation, accused of sinful sexual behavior within the holy precincts of Kanva's hermitage, condemned like Oedipus to be an outcast from society.

Patterns of imagery reinforce the plays' similarities in character and plot. Drama is an eminently visual medium, and like many reflective playwrights after them, Sophocles and Kalidasa incorporate their medium's features among their own themes. In both plays, the characters talk a great deal about what they can and can't see. Oedipus and the blind prophet Teiresias trade accusations about which of them is more blind, and as Oedipus begins to realize the terrible truth of the prophet's charge, he cries out, "I have a deadly fear / that the old seer had eyes" (120). Oedipus constantly casts his quest for knowledge in visual terms: a messenger's "face

is bright . . . his news too may be bright for us”; “I wish to see this shepherd” (121, 89). Sight becomes the embodiment of insight, and at the play’s end Oedipus famously, gruesomely turns his wrath on his own eyes.

Sight yields insight in *Shakuntala* as well. Throughout the play, people closely watch what other people are doing, and they often comment on the act of seeing itself. When Dushyanta flies through the air in Indra’s chariot, this journey is conveyed to the audience not through special effects but by having the king and his charioteer discuss the marvels they see far below them. In Act 3, eager to learn more about Shakuntala, Dushyanta follows her track, analyzing the visual evidence like some love-smitten Sherlock:

I see fresh footprints
on white sand in the clearing,
deeply pressed at the heel
by the sway of full hips.
I’ll just look through the branches. (112)

He then describes what he (but not the audience) can see: Shakuntala’s two female companions massaging her breasts with lotus lotion as they try to cure her lovesickness, which they mistake for heat exhaustion. Dushyanta rejoices in the sight: “My eyes,” he declares, “have found bliss!” (112).

Following his first conversation with Shakuntala, Dushyanta surmises her love for him from clues picked up by observing her eyes, mouth, and movements: “Her eyes were cast down in my presence,” he reflects, “but she found an excuse to smile. . . . When we parted, her feelings for me showed despite her modesty.” He shifts into verse as he ponders the evidence he has acquired:

“A blade of kuśa grass
pricked my foot,”
the girl said for no reason
after walking a few steps away;
then she pretended to free
her bark dress from the branches
where it was not caught
and shyly glanced at me. (107)

Like Oedipus, Dushyanta prides himself on being all-seeing and all-knowing; having rejected Shakuntala under the spell of amnesia, he too

must suffer the realization of his tragic error. This realization is precipitated by the sight of his signet ring brought by the fisherman – a combined moment of recognition and reversal, the pairing of elements that Aristotle praises in the *Poetics*, singling out this pairing in *Oedipus* as the height of dramatic art.

Tragic Flaw or Fate?

Oedipus and *Shakuntala* are products of ancient, polytheistic societies, in which numbers of gods were believed to act in all areas of earthly life. Reading *Shakuntala* along with *Oedipus* can help us see how both playwrights held very different assumptions from most of their modern successors. From the Renaissance onward, Western dramatists focused their attention on individual character and judgment, and tragic heroes were understood in terms of the tragic flaws that had brought them down. The classical Greek plays came to be read in terms of such flaws as overweening pride or hubris, an emphasis more in tune with later Christian values than with those of the ancient Greeks. Aristotle valued plot over character, and argued that a true tragic hero must in fact be a good and even great man; the downfall of someone bad would be something good, not a tragedy at all. As for pride, it reflected a hero's just sense of his abilities. Certainly Oedipus is proud of his ability to govern his city, solve riddles, and control his destiny, and this pride is humbled by the play's end. Yet Sophocles is equally, even primarily, concerned to show the overpowering role of destiny in the course of human affairs. The infant Oedipus was in no way responsible for bringing down the curse that would destroy him decades later. Instead, he was wrong to think he could avert the fate decreed by the gods, and the play relentlessly takes apart Oedipus's confident belief that he can save the day by his detective work. In an implicit rebuke to his fellow Athenians' growing reliance on reason as the means to command their own destiny, Sophocles shows that even the greatest hero can be brought down by the will of the gods.

In his emphasis on fate over individual ability, Sophocles is closer to Kalidasa than to many later dramatists in the West. *Shakuntala*'s curse has more to do with the irascibility of the spirit Durvasas than with any moral failing on her part, and the curse brings equal suffering to Dushyanta, who was nowhere near the forest when Durvasas went into his

sudden fit of rage. The curse of forgetfulness prevents him from solving a problem he never knew about in the first place. Indeed, he and Shakuntala had little or no choice in falling in love to begin with. Love at first sight is a common theme in Western romantic tradition, but Kalidasa goes Hollywood one better: his hero experiences love *before* first sight. Merely approaching Shakuntala's forest glen, Dushyanta feels a suggestive trembling in his muscles:

The hermitage is a tranquil place,
yet my arm is quivering . . .
do I feel a false omen of love,
or does fate have doors everywhere? (93)

Oedipus and Dushyanta are exemplary rulers, taken by surprise by their fate. In each play, the emphasis is on seeing how the characters handle the predicament into which they find themselves thrust. Both rulers must come to accept their destiny, as their attempts to avoid it only make things worse.

When he falls in love, Dushyanta hides his love from his companions, preferring to consummate a marriage in secret and then return home to prepare the way for Shakuntala's eventual arrival. If Dushyanta had admitted the relationship openly, at whatever cost to his existing marriages and political alliances, Shakuntala would never have been left alone to pine away for him in the forest, and the issue of the curse would never have arisen. Later, while suffering his amnesia Dushyanta refuses to take Shakuntala as his bride, even though he is deeply attracted to her, because he refuses to steal another man's mistress, as he insists the pregnant Shakuntala must be. His virtuous response actually compounds the problem, much as Oedipus only makes things worse by his best efforts to flee the curse on his family and then to find the king's murderer.

Oedipus, Dushyanta, and Shakuntala show their true worth in their ultimate response to their situation. Having been rejected by her husband and her family alike, Shakuntala maintains the truth but refuses to stay in the king's household as a dishonored hanger-on. She raises her son in exile, never giving way to despair, and she is able to embrace the joyful resolution at the play's end. As for Dushyanta, having realized his error in rejecting Shakuntala, he mourns her loyally for years, while also continuing to perform his royal duties: he thus atones for his actions (as a companion declares) even though they were hardly his own fault. Oedipus

too rises to the challenge of his fate. Whereas his wife Jocasta proceeds from obstruction of Oedipus's quest to suicidal despair once the truth can no longer be denied, Oedipus moves beyond an initial, paranoid insistence that the prophet Teiresias must be corrupt, in league with his brother-in-law Creon; he persists in seeking the truth, even as he increasingly realizes it will mean his own ruin. Though he inflicts blindness upon himself at the play's end, he rejects suicide, accepting his fate and preparing to let it take him where it will. In many ways, Oedipus resembles Dushyanta more than he resembles Shakespeare's King Lear or Mozart's Don Giovanni, brought down chiefly by their own flaws.

Character and Plot

Though there are fascinating similarities between *Oedipus* and *Shakuntala* on several levels, we should not ignore the noteworthy differences between the plays. Indeed, these differences become as interesting as the similarities, revealing important divergences in each dramatist's methods and in the expectations of their audiences. The differences start to be apparent as early as the opening list of the cast of characters. Typically for Greek plays, *Oedipus* has a limited number of parts. Most of the play's scenes involve Oedipus in dialogue with only one other person: his wife, his brother-in-law, or a series of minor characters who each appear in a single scene: the prophet Teiresias, a priest, two messengers, and a herdsman. Apart from the chorus, there are never more than three speakers on stage at once, and Sophocles was already stretching the cast by introducing a third actor, as two had been the norm before him. Greek actors used masks, so they could switch roles simply by changing their mask, and the Chorus itself always speaks as "I" and could at a minimum be played by a single person.

Kalidasa's stage is far more crowded than its Greek counterpart. Whereas *Oedipus* has a total of eight speaking roles, *Shakuntala* has no fewer than forty-four, not counting assorted spirits who are heard as offstage voices. Shakuntala and Dushyanta are constantly surrounded by friends, relations, and courtiers, in keeping with the densely populated social world of Indian lyric poetry discussed in Chapter 1. Even the scenes in the isolated forest hermitage involve more speakers than appear in the center of Thebes during the entire span of *Oedipus the King*. Kalidasa's larger cast takes part in a more episodic plot than is found in the Greek drama, with its

characteristic unities of time, place, and action. *Shakuntala*'s seven acts span a period of several years – enough time for Shakuntala to meet and marry Dushyanta, give birth to their son, and then raise him beyond infancy; when we see them in the final act, the bold boy is playing with a lion cub in preference to his toys.

The larger cast and greater time span of the Sanskrit drama do not mean, though, that action plays a greater role than in *Oedipus*. Where *Oedipus* is a drama of knowledge centered on the detection of a hidden crime and a repressed curse, *Shakuntala* is a drama of sentiment and lyrical reflection. Lyricism has its place in Sophocles as well, embodied in the Chorus with its strophic hymns and dance. In Kalidasa, it is the major characters who continually break into song or pause for poetic reverie. Even the mighty king Dushyanta is a meditative poet as well as a man of action. Many of his speeches take the form of a declarative sentence followed by a poem in which he reflects on the situation in general terms:

This bark dress fits her body badly, but it ornaments her beauty . . .
A tangle of duckweed adorns a lotus,
a dark spot heightens the moon's glow,
the bark dress increases her charm –
beauty finds its ornaments anywhere. (95)

In keeping with this lyrical emphasis, *Shakuntala* leaves its major actions offstage. Shakuntala and Dushyanta feel the stirrings of love in the first act, then in the second act the king thinks at length about his newfound passion but doesn't act upon it. The lovers admit their mutual devotion in the third act, but they don't even have a chance to kiss, as the king is called away to perform rituals at the hermitage shrine. Their wedding evidently occurs between acts. When the fourth act opens, Dushyanta is already back at court; Shakuntala is pregnant and pining away – exquisitely – for her departed lover. Later, the heartrending confrontation of the amnesiac king and his forgotten bride is fully staged, but we are not shown the crucial recognition scene, in which Dushyanta sees the ring and remembers all – we only hear about it, after the fact, in a brief speech between two minor characters.

Kalidasa's plot serves as a frame for a succession of pantomimes, dances, and songs, which delicately unfold the characters' responses to their experiences. With the essence of poetry taken to be found in echoes, overtones, nuances, and hints, India's playwrights too preferred to emphasize

the expression of emotion over dramatic action. The downplaying of action represents a significant difference from much Western drama, though there is again less contrast between Kalidasa and Sophocles than with later Western playwrights. Sophocles too leaves major plot events offstage – not only the early history of the curse on Oedipus’s parents but also the climax of the action at the play’s end: Jocasta’s suicide and Oedipus’s self-mutilation. As in Kalidasa, these crucial events are described secondhand by minor characters. Even so, the descriptions in *Oedipus* become lush with bloody detail: “the bleeding eyeballs gushed / and stained his beard – no sluggish oozing drops / but a black rain and bloody hail poured down” (143). Almost more vivid than an actual enactment would have been, such reports gave the playwright a way to portray shocking events even when propriety dictated that they should not be put on stage. (Our word “obscene” comes from the Greek term *ob-skēnē*, “off-stage.”) The brief summaries of off-stage events given in *Shakuntala* have nothing like this dramatic effect.

Later European drama began to put more “obscene” material onstage. King Lear puts out Gloucester’s eyes before our own eyes: “Out, vile jelly!” he grimly declares as he does so. When Othello strangles Desdemona, the stage lights stay on as he declares that he will put out her light, and *Hamlet* reaches its bloody climax with a whole series of onstage stabbings and poisonings. If we have grown up with Shakespeare – not to mention the sexual display and violence of contemporary cinema and television – we need to adjust our expectations when reading Sophocles as well as Kalidasa, entering a different rhythm and literary space, a world of suggestive indirection rather than of dramatic action.

Scenes from Middle-class Life

Our examination of Sophocles and Kalidasa has centered on similarities in character and plot, but it is also illuminating to compare works in terms of their representation of social life. Age-old patterns can serve as a backdrop for artistic work, as was the case with monarchy and polytheism in *Oedipus* and *Shakuntala*, but works can also take account of new phenomena such as changing social relations or new political orders. One such upheaval was the rise to prominence of the commercial middle class in regions of the world formerly dominated by a feudal aristocracy. In more than one part of the world the merchant class began to make itself heard with new force

during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, decisively displacing the older aristocracy during the nineteenth century. Literary works began to treat this shift during its first phases, and fascinating comparisons can be made among works from very different cultures that were undergoing their own versions of this process.

As a case in point, we will look at *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670) by the French playwright Molière, and *Love Suicides at Amijima* (1721) by Chikamatsu Mon'zaemon, the greatest Japanese dramatist of the period. These playwrights were close contemporaries; Chikamatsu was twenty years old when Molière died. Though the French and Japanese theatrical traditions were completely independent of each other and varied in fundamental ways, in these plays both dramatists were thinking hard about the new social order that was starting to come into being around them. This common concern yields fascinating convergences – as well as equally interesting divergences – between their works.

Molière's title is intended as a paradox: a middle-class merchant was not supposed to be a gentleman. The term *gentilhomme* had originated in the Middle Ages to signify someone born within the extended circle of the nobility. Molière's Monsieur Jourdain, however, has deluded himself into thinking he can vault into the upper class by mere virtue of the wealth he has inherited from his father, a prosperous cloth merchant. He is embarrassed by his modest origins, and rejoices at the flattery of a servant who pretends that Jourdain's father had been a kind of connoisseur of cloth, not a merchant at all:

M. JOURDAIN: There are foolish people about who will have it that my father was in trade.

COVILLE: In trade! Sheer slander! Never in his life! It was just that he was obliging, anxious to be helpful, and as he knew all about cloth he would go round and select samples, have them brought to his house and give them to his friends – for a consideration. (Molière 50)

Monsieur Jourdain knows, though, that to become a *gentilhomme* he must do more than cover up his origins: he needs education, refinement, and aristocratic tastes. So he has hired a dancing master, a music teacher, a fencing coach, and even a philosopher to give him all the cultural advantages a true gentleman should enjoy. The play opens with the music teacher and the dancing master arguing whether Jourdain's lavish payments make up for the indignity of teaching him; though the dancing master is embarrassed

to have such an uncultured client, the music teacher gladly puts up with Jourdain, for “his praise has cash value” (4).

In this world of trade and exchange, Jourdain isn’t content to trade up only in matters of taste. He insists that his daughter must marry a nobleman, and he personally hopes to enjoy the sexual license for which the French aristocracy was notorious. Though he has a wife of his own modest background, he is deeply in love – or so he claims – with Countess Dorimène, a woman so far above his station in life that he’s never managed to have a conversation with her. He does, however, enjoy the friendship of a dissolute nobleman named Dorante, whose name could be translated “Golden” or “Glittering.” Dorante continually bleeds Jourdain for money to pay off tradesmen and to advance his own romance with Dorimène herself: he has been pretending to plead Jourdain’s case with her, though in reality he has been passing along Jourdain’s lavish presents as though they were his own.

A world away, Chikamatsu explored similar social tensions in *Love Suicides at Amijima*. His hero, Jihei, is a paper merchant; as the chanter who narrates the action says approvingly, “The paper is honestly sold, and the shop is well situated; it is a long-established firm, and the customers come thick as raindrops” (Chikamatsu 403). Like Jourdain, Jihei is married to a woman from his own walk of life, but he has fallen in love with someone above his means: Koharu, a high-class prostitute, whose clients include samurai and other members of the nobility. Koharu has returned his love, and Jihei is desperate to buy her out of her brothel, but he has nothing like the money needed for the purpose. His romantic rival, a wealthy merchant named Tahei, is sure that money is all he needs to win Koharu: “when it comes to money, I’m an easy winner. If I pushed with all the strength of my money, who knows what I might conquer?” He believes that commerce has supplanted age-old social relations: “A customer’s a customer,” he says, “whether he’s a samurai or a townsman. The only difference is that one wears swords and the other doesn’t” (392).

In Japan as in France, clothing was a powerful marker of social status, and both Molière and Chikamatsu portray characters trying to adopt a new social role by donning a new costume. Monsieur Jourdain is obsessed with the extravagant, ill-fitting clothes his tailor foists off on him as the latest fashion among the nobility; he is discomfited that his wife and her maid can’t stop laughing when they see him in his ridiculous plumes and ruffles. In *Love Suicides at Amijima*, Jihei dresses up to impress the proprietress of the brothel when he goes to buy Koharu’s freedom, but on his way he is

confronted by his angry father-in-law, who accuses Jihei of seeking to disguise his humble origins: “My esteemed son-in-law,” he says sarcastically, “what a rare pleasure to see you dressed in your finest attire, with a dirk and a silken cloak! Ahhh – that’s how a gentleman of means spends his money! No one would take you for a paper dealer” (411).

Both plays include speeches describing the act of dressing up as a form of play-acting. Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain has refused to allow his daughter to marry her true love, Cléonte, because he isn’t a nobleman, but Cléonte’s clever servant Coveille solves the problem by proposing “an idea I got from a play I saw some time ago” (42). He dresses his master up as a Turkish prince, and Jourdain is only too happy to accept this exotic nobleman as his son-in-law. The disguised Cléonte bestows upon Jourdain a fake title, “Mamamouchi” (vaguely derived from “Mameluke,” an Ottoman military caste). Cléonte then costumes Jourdain in Turkish finery, prompting Jourdain’s astonished daughter to exclaim: “Is this a play?”

Far more seriously, in *Love Suicides at Amijima* Jihei and Koharu have realized that they can never be free in their love, and they are planning to commit suicide. Desperately trying to prevent some such rash act, Jihei’s brother Magoemon dresses up as a samurai and comes to Koharu in the guise of a customer, using the authority of his assumed upper-class rank to add weight to his words as he tries to dissuade her from throwing her life away. Magoemon feels like an actor in his samurai outfit: “Here I am,” he grumbles, “dressed up like a masquerader at a festival or maybe a lunatic! I put on swords for the first time in my life and announced myself, like a bit player in a costume piece” (401).

In both plays, traditional social norms assert themselves beneath the new roles. The vulgar Tahei claims that samurai and commoners are all just customers, yet he retreats from the brothel in awe when confronted with a genuine samurai – in actual fact, Jihei’s brother in samurai disguise (393). Monsieur Jourdain believes that clothes make the nobleman, but he can never fool anyone, partly because he hasn’t even inherited enough skill from his cloth merchant father to know what an upper-class outfit should look like. Both Jihei and Jourdain find their love lives sharply constrained by their wives’ refusal to play along. Jihei’s wife, Osan, is counseled by her aunt, who declares that “A man’s dissipation can always be traced to his wife’s carelessness. . . . You’d do well to take notice of what’s going on and assert yourself a bit more” (405). Osan confronts Jihei and even writes a letter of appeal to Koharu, puncturing their dream of simple togetherness. As the play proceeds, though, Osan comes to a deeper understanding of her

husband's bond with Koharu, and in an exceptional gesture of solidarity with both of them, Osan pawns her own clothing to help Jihei scrape together the money to buy Koharu's freedom. Jihei then dresses in his finest clothing to go and effect the ransom, only to have his disastrous encounter with his father-in-law, who refuses to countenance any understanding between Jihei, Osan, and Koharu. The lovers choose suicide as their only way out of their unbearable situation.

In Molière's comedy, society's norms are asserted far more positively against the protagonist's wishes – a happy result even for Monsieur Jourdain, who never had any chance with Dorimène to begin with. Jourdain's wife breaks up a dinner party he has arranged for Dorimène and Dorante; "I stand for my rights," she tells her husband, "and every wife will be on my side" (49). Like Jihei's wife, she confronts her rival directly: "as for you, madam, it ill becomes a fine lady to be causing trouble in a decent family and letting my husband think he's in love with you" (48). This charge puzzles Dorimène, who has only just met Jourdain and believes that he is merely providing a convenient place for her to meet her suitor Dorante. She no more approves of crossing class boundaries than does Jourdain's wife, who asserts that "marrying above one's station always brings trouble" (41).

Molière and Chikamatsu both explored the stirrings of a new class mobility, using their own profession, acting, as a powerful metaphor for life in a world of unstable social identities. Yet the differences between their plays are considerable as well, not only because of broad cultural differences but equally as a result of the personal choices the two playwrights had made in their own lives. Molière had come from the very merchant class he satirizes in his play. His father had been a wealthy upholsterer who had built on his connections to his noble clientele to promote himself and his family into a tenuous position within court circles – just the ambition of the cloth dealer's son Jourdain, whom Molière actually played in the play's premiere. Distancing himself from his roots even as he drew on them, Molière wrote *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* as a farce to entertain the court of Louis XIV; the serious tensions of class upheaval motivate the drama but are cast in a ridiculous light.

By contrast, *Love Suicides at Amijima* is a heart-rending tragedy, one of two dozen plays that Chikamatsu wrote about commoner life. Throughout the play, the middle-class characters reveal depths of emotion and painful sensitivity that bourgeois characters rarely exhibit in Molière or indeed in most European drama of the day. The intense emotionality of Chikamatsu's characters is particularly impressive as they aren't embodied by human

actors at all, for *Love Suicides at Amijima* is a puppet play. Chikamatsu had moved in the opposite social direction from Molière in establishing himself as his century's greatest master of the puppet theater. Born into a wealthy family of the samurai class, he had served in aristocratic households as a youth, but then had left the capital of Kyoto and moved to Osaka, center of the growing class of commoner merchants. There he became involved in the popular entertainment form of the puppet theater, full of colorful incidents and rollicking action. Chikamatsu helped develop puppetry into a remarkably fluid and intense form of art, with the puppets brought to life by solemn puppeteers as a narrator described their fleeting joys and lasting griefs, endowing the puppets with all the nuances of human emotion.

Watching Koharu through her latticed window as she entertains a customer, Jihei "beckons to her with his heart, his spirit flies to her," the narrator says; "but his body, like a cicada's cast-off shell, clings to the lattice-work. He weeps with impatience" (396). As Jihei helps Koharu slip away from the brothel to consummate their suicide pact, the simple opening of the door becomes a scene of agonizing suspense:

She is all impatience, but the more quickly they open the door, the more likely people will be to hear the casters turning. They lift the door; it makes a moaning sound that thunders in their ears and in their hearts. Jihei lends a hand from the outside, but his fingertips tremble with the trembling of his heart. The door opens a quarter of an inch, a half, an inch – an inch ahead are the tortures of hell, but more than hell itself they fear the guardian-demon's eyes. (418)

Finally they make their escape, and the narrator sorrowfully chants their progress toward their chosen place of death: "The frost now falling will melt by dawn, but even more quickly than this symbol of human frailty, the lovers themselves will melt away. What will become of the fragrance that lingered when he held her tenderly at night in their bedchamber?" (418).

Chikamatsu's world is both intensely realistic and freighted with poetic symbolism. In the play's final act, the doomed lovers cross a series of bridges with names such as Onari, "Becoming a Buddha." Whereas in a European play we would expect religious symbolism to stand on the side of the sacrament of marriage, Chikamatsu shows his hero and heroine progressing together to spiritual enlightenment at the play's end. Just before

committing suicide, they cut off their hair, renouncing the world as if they are a monk and a nun; but they look forward to being reborn together in the future. As Koharu says, “What have we to grieve about? Although in this world we could not stay together, in the next and through each successive world to come until the end of time we shall be husband and wife.” Koharu has made this expectation a centerpiece of her religious practice: “Every summer for my devotions I have copied the All Compassionate and All Merciful Chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in the hope that we may be reborn on one lotus” (420).

By infusing his play with such deep poetic and philosophical elements, Chikamatsu built a bridge of his own: between the rough-and-tumble world of the puppet play and the meditative, refined aristocratic art with which he had grown up. Like Chikamatsu, Molière made his mark by revolutionizing what had been a simpler, popular dramatic form: stage farce up to his day had consisted largely of buffoonery, with stock characters played for broad humor by actors in colorful masks – human puppets, we might say. If Chikamatsu brought an aristocratic sensibility to the world of popular entertainment, Molière brought a down-to-earth realism to his portrayal of the aristocratic world. Though he wrote his play for the court, his portrayal of courtly life is hardly flattering: Dorimène is a cynic, and Dorante is a lying, manipulative creep. There can be little doubt that their marriage will be an endless series of intrigues and bad debts. The characters who are destined for happiness at the play’s end are the plain-spoken Cléonte and Jourdain’s lively, loving daughter Lucile – played by Molière’s wife at the play’s premiere. The future belongs to them, rather than to the aristocracy that Jourdain impossibly hopes to join.

From Oedipus to Elesin

A fruitful basis for reading across cultures is often the comparison of two works that resonate with and against each other on several levels, as in the pairings discussed above. As we build up a fund of reading, we can also triangulate among a variety of works, reading across several eras and cultures at once as we find different works that relate to different aspects of a text. To take one example, Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) combines many literary strands as it dramatizes multiple conflicts: between cultures, generations, and the sexes, and between contradictory impulses

in its hero's heart. The play is based on an event that occurred in Nigeria in 1946, when a Yoruba king died and the Horseman of the King prepared to commit suicide, as commanded by tradition, in order to accompany his king into the afterlife. Nigeria was then a British colony, and the colonial District Officer placed the horseman under arrest in order to prevent the ritual suicide from taking place – an act of mercy that backfired when the horseman's eldest son committed suicide in his father's place.

In staging this story, Soyinka drew extensively on traditional Yoruba drama, in which music, song, and dance convey much of a work's meaning. In its dramaturgy, *Death and the King's Horseman* can be compared with *Shakuntala*; Soyinka's tragic hero, Elesin, is as eloquent a poet as Kalidasa's King Dushyanta, and his powerful songs and dances dominate several of the play's key scenes as he prepares to lay down his life. Soyinka also draws on the traditions of Greek tragedy; two years before completing his play, indeed, he had published an adaptation of Euripides, *The Bacchae: A Communion Rite*. Oedipus and Elesin are each faced with the need to carry through an ancestral pattern that some in the play – Jocasta in Sophocles, District Officer Pilkings in Soyinka – wish to relegate to ancient history. In both plays, however, the life of the community requires the hero's self-sacrifice. *Death and the King's Horseman* also ends with a Sophoclean combination of reversal and recognition, complete with dialogue concerning vision and blindness: when Elesin's son discovers that his father has not succeeded in committing suicide as he should, Elesin reacts to his son's palpable disgust by crying, "Oh son, don't let the sight of your father turn you blind!" (Soyinka 49). The son's blinding insight into his father's failure is then doubled with the father's reciprocal vision of his son's success, when his son's body is displayed to him in the final scene.

Soyinka's play can also be compared to Shakespeare's dramas. In five-act Shakespearean form, *Death and the King's Horseman* builds to a dramatic climax when Elesin, confronted with his son's corpse, shocks his captors by strangling himself with his own chains – the kind of violent incident that Kalidasa and Sophocles would have kept offstage. Soyinka also resembles Shakespeare and later dramatists in the emphasis given to the hero's internal contradictions: Elesin has delayed his suicide in order to consummate a last-minute marriage, unable fully to free himself from earthly attachments as he should. Elesin can be seen as embodying a modern tragic hero's fatal flaw of pride.

Yet his story is also the tragedy of a community struggling to uphold its traditions in the face of colonial domination, in ways comparable to

the influential novel *Things Fall Apart* by Soyinka's friend Chinua Achebe, as well as to many other works of colonial and postcolonial drama and fiction written elsewhere. Elesin's downfall comes about not only through his own pride, but also through the interference of District Officer Pilkings, who thinks he knows what is best for Elesin and tries to save him from himself. As a wise woman, Iyaloja, tells Pilkings at the play's end as they stand over the bodies of Elesin and his son: "The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride" (62). Iyaloja is a voice for her community's collective experience, and in shaping her character Soyinka has drawn not only on traditional Yoruba and classical Greek traditions but also on such modern tragedians as Bertolt Brecht and Eugene O'Neill. Iyaloja inherits qualities from Brecht's *Mother Courage* as well as from O'Neill's *Electra*.

Taken together, Sophocles, Kalidasa, Molière, Chikamatsu, and Soyinka can suggest the different levels on which we can compare works from distant traditions, in terms of theme, imagery, character, plot, or broader social and cultural concerns. Once established, a productive comparison will suggest many further avenues to pursue. Deeper examination of these works would reveal new levels of difference and of similarity, and further reading in the literature of each culture can greatly deepen our understanding of these varied levels. New juxtapositions will open up over time as we read further: *Shakuntala* and *Dushyanta* could be compared, for instance, to *Viola* and *Count Orsino* in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, struggling to fathom an attraction that defies the evidence of their senses. We can find Sophocles's *Oedipus* ironically re-created as a young woman, *Oedipa Maas*, in Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49* – a book very much concerned with hidden, fatal patterns. Love leads to suicide for Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, whose tragedies could be compared in various ways to that of Chikamatsu's *Jihe* and *Koharu*. Like the suicides of *Elesin* and his son, their double suicide represents an ambiguous redemption of age-old passions amid the tensions of a new modern world. As we cross the boundaries between their worlds and the wider worlds before, after, and around them, we can see new facets of *Death and the King's Horseman* each time it is staged, and find new possibilities for *Koharu* and *Jihe* each time they are reborn on their lotus leaf.