Introduction

Melodrama and the Family in Meiji Japan

Night enfolds the beach at Atami. Voices rise above the sound of waves. A young man and a young woman cling to each other in the moonlight. They had been raised together and had pledged their love, yet Miya's desire for wealth had led her to betray Kan'ichi and accept the marriage proposal of a banker's son. Kan'ichi tries to make her see what is right. But her mind cannot be changed, and they are left in a despairing final embrace:

> He held tight to Miya, as though trying to save her from danger. His hot tears fell on the fair skin of her neck, and his body shook like a withered reed in the wind. Miya trembled too, holding him as though she could not let him go. She sobbed, biting the sleeve of his coat.
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> "Oh, what can I do? Please, won't you tell me? What will you do if I marry him?"
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> Kan'ichi thrust Miya away; the two fell apart like the halves of a log being split. "You've finally made up your mind to go! So you won't listen to me no matter what I say. You're rotten inside! You whore!"
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> With these words, Kan'ichi raised his foot and suddenly kicked her slender waist. She fell sideways with a shudder; she could not speak, and, quietly enduring her pain, she sobbed into the sand.

"Miya, you, you whore! Your unfaithfulness has driven a man called Hazama Kan'ichi to madness, to unbearable despair. His precious life will go astray. Forget about education and all the rest. This bitterness will make me a living demon determined to eat the flesh of beasts like you." . . .

Miya suddenly tried to rise, but she fell, her injured leg made useless by pain. She slowly crawled toward Kan'ichi and clung to him; her voice fought back tears as she said, "Kan'ichi, please . . . please wait. Where . . . where are you going?"

Kan'ichi was surprised in spite of himself when he saw Miya's kimono in disarray and a snow-white knee laid bare, trembling and covered in blood.

"You're hurt," he said.

When he bent closer, she stopped him, saying, "Don't worry about this. I want to know where you're going. I have something to tell you, so please come home with me tonight. I beg you, Kan'ichi."

"If you have something to say, say it here."

"No, not here."

"What could you possibly have to say to me? Let go."

"I won't."

"If you're stubborn, I'll kick you again."

"I don't care if you kick me."

When Kan'ichi tore himself away with all his might, she crumpled to the ground.

"Kan'ichi," she cried.

Kan'ichi had already sped some distance away. Miya desperately got to her feet and followed after him, staggering in pain. "Kan'ichi, I won't stop you anymore, so please once more . . . once more . . . I have something left to say."

Miya had fallen again. She no longer had the strength to stand, and all she could do was call out Kan'ichi's name. She saw his shadow, gradually growing dim, rushing up the hill. Miya writhed on the ground and continued to call his name. The dark shadow, finally reaching the top of hill, seemed to be looking back toward her. Miya wrung out her voice and called. The man's voice came back to her from far away.

"Miya!"

"Oh, oh, oh, Kan'ichi!"

Miya craned her neck and peered into the night, but after his voice sounded the dark shadow vanished as though erased. The lonely trees she had mistaken for him stood unmoving, the waves sent forth their mournful murmurings, and the moon of the 17th of January shed its pale, heartsick light.

With longing, Miya again called out Kan'ichi's name.[1]

This outpouring of exorbitant emotion and violence occurs in what was arguably the most popular of Meiji novels, *Konjiki yasha* (The golden

demon, 1897–1903), by Ozaki Kōyō (1867–1903). Serialized in major daily newspapers, reprinted repeatedly as books, and adapted to the stage and to movies, *Konjiki yasha* and novels like it penetrated the imaginations of men and women of all classes, young and old, in the cities and the countryside.

Kan'ichi and Miya are led to this wrenching moment by a moral vision that structures their conflict as a polarized battle between pure love and filthy lucre. Miya has forsaken love for money, and both she and Kan'ichi will pay for this choice throughout a chronicle of intense suffering that consumes the rest of the novel and confirms the precious value of what has been lost. Such emotional extravagance was common in the novels of the Meiji period (1868–1912). At the turn of the last century, Japanese fiction pulsed with an urge to view the world as a moral drama in which good ceaselessly clashed with evil. Men and women fought desperate moral battles, confronted searing ethical dilemmas. Narratives were designed to wing the breathless reader from one superheated scene to another, in which no outpouring of emotion was too excessive. It was an age of melodrama.

Most students of melodrama see its host environment as a society and a culture in flux. The disappearance of former verities and the challenges of new ethical discourses breed a desire for moral certitude answered by the melodramatic mode. Japanese melodramatic fiction grapples with the traumatic discontinuities of the Meiji period: the replacement of the Tokugawa order with a nation-state wedded to industrial capitalism, the destruction of an established status system and the arrival of uncontrolled social mobility, the disturbance of gender roles by new discourses and beliefs, the dislocations in the family where modernity collided with flesh and blood. It is Meiji melodrama's portrayal of the family upon which I will focus. In part, this is because the family is a prime setting for melodrama in general. But, more importantly, this focus reflects the significance of the family within the mid- to late-Meiji ideological field, where it was seen as a key locus for the cultivation and expression of moral sentiments.

Through readings of *Konjiki yasha* and three other enormously popular novels—*Hototogisu* (The cuckoo, 1898–99) by Tokutomi Roka (1868–1927), *Chikyōdai* (Raised as sisters, 1903) by Kikuchi Yūhō (1870–1947), and *Gubijinsō* (The poppy, 1907) by Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916)—I seek to examine how the stark lighting of the melodramatic imagination illuminates the Meiji family. Turn-of-the-century novels did more than portray established models of family; with impressive fecundity they generated newer

forms that responded to the discontinuities of their time. The polarized morality of melodrama not only tears apart the budding family of Miya and Kan'ichi, it also replaces it with ever more inventive and emotionally fraught alternatives. The story I tell involves the forms of family left to the devastated young man rushing into the shadows and the brutalized young woman calling his name, the moral and ideological forces engaged by these fictive families, the social exigencies they address, and the narrative feats required to bring them into being.

LOCATING MEIJI MELODRAMATIC FICTION

We should begin by acknowledging that melodramatic fiction is not an accepted category in modern Japanese literary history. "Melodrama" is not a term that would have been applied to these works in the Meiji period, nor is it used with any frequency by Japanese literary critics today.[2] The works I examine were, in their day, called *shinbun shōsetsu* (newspaper fiction) and, in one instance, *katei shōsetsu* (home fiction). Critics would now think of most of these novels as *taishū shōsetsu* (popular fiction), although they do so aware of the anachronism involved in using a term that achieves currency only in the 1920s. I wish to argue forcefully, however, that "melodramatic fiction" is an appropriate and productive framework for thinking about these works, and that, in fact, melodrama is an important concept for understanding Meiji culture.[3]

The terms "melodrama" and "melodramatic" are, as nearly every critic working with them points out, often used pejoratively to refer to narratives damned by crass appeals to sentiment, cheap sensationalism, exaggerated coincidences, and simplistic moral values. Peter Brooks undertook a major act of redemption in his 1976 book, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, which resituates the "melodramatic" as a broad and powerful sensibility that courses through the drama and fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[4] He does this by drawing a distinction between "melodrama" as a theatrical genre and the "melodramatic" as a mode of imagination. While Brooks begins with the former and delineates the features of theatrical melodrama as they were developed by François-René Guilbert de Pixérécourt and others in early post-Revolution France, his thrust is to show how these features help to illuminate the "melodramatic imagination" found in later nineteenth-century

novelists, principally Honoré de Balzac and Henry James, but also many others. It is the melodramatic as a mode of imagination or sensibility that concerns me as I address Meiji fiction.

For Brooks, the melodramatic mode is first and foremost characterized by its moral or ethical vision. Underlying it is the claim that, somewhere beneath the exterior of quotidian manners and relations, there lies a realm of extravagant moral demand in which men and women must respond, either unwillingly or by choice, to powerful moral forces. Melodrama digs beneath the mundane appearances of everyday life in order to reveal and dramatize the hidden moral core of experience:

> Such writers as Balzac and James need melodrama because their deep subject, the locus of their true drama, has come to be what we have called the "moral occult," the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives that is not clearly visible within reality, but which they believe to be operative there, and which demands to be uncovered, registered, articulated. In the absence of a true Sacred . . . they continue to believe that what is most important in a man's life is his ethical drama and the ethical implications of his psychic drama.[5]

The drama of moral revelation is played out on a resolutely dualistic moral terrain, where good and evil are locked in combat. Melodramas stage "a heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation."[6] The moral positions are starkly arrayed, exhibiting what Brooks calls the "excluded middle"; for the melodramatic imagination, the choices are either/or and the middle ground is denied. This moral polarization underlies melodrama's hyperbolic sentiments, where emotions are supercharged by the unequivocating demands of moral opposition. Characters are put under constant emotional pressure as they face ethical confrontations that brook no easy compromises.

Additional facets of the mode are emphasized by later critics working on melodrama. Linda Williams, for example, stresses that moral legibility is established through the simultaneous presence of "pathos *and* action—the sufferings of innocent victims *and* the exploits of brave heroes or monstrous criminals."[7] Ben Singer points to the importance of sensationalism, because emotionally charged spectacle—the train rushing toward the helpless heroine—reveals the connection of melodrama to the "hyperstimulus" of the modern urban environment.[8] Other critics point to qualities such as melodramatic narrative's reliance on coincidence, episodic plotting, and

deus ex machina climaxes, or the melodramatic character's undivided nature, an attribute that allows the illustration of specific moral coordinates. Perhaps the wisest overall approach is Singer's: melodrama is a "cluster concept," in which these various characteristics are capable of appearing in many combinations. Here, melodrama is defined not by the occurrence of all possible identifying characteristics, but rather by the differing combinations of constitutive elements.[9] In this study, I will refer to many of the components of the melodramatic cluster, but I return repeatedly to moral dualism, because this strikes me as the key to understanding Meiji melodramatic fiction and the cultural work it undertakes.

Although a dualistic moral vision can suggest a world of abstract categories, Brooks emphasizes melodrama's connections to the specifics of a social milieu. Because melodrama seeks to excavate the moral significance of everyday life, its extravagant moral claims are made in texts that also attempt to reproduce the textures of quotidian experience and the material solidity of physical settings. Of particular import for my study is Brooks's assertion that certain melodramas attempt to uncover moral polarities through the detailed depiction of social relations. Writers whom Brooks calls the "social melodramatists"—Balzac and James, but also Dickens, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Proust, and Lawrence—undertake a "dual engagement with the representation of man's social existence, the way he lives in the ordinary, and with the moral drama implicated by and in his existence. They write a melodrama *of* manners."[10] The texts I study are very much melodramas of manners: they concern themselves with the ethical implications of commonplace problems in Meiji society.

The other facet of melodrama's engagement with the social has to do with the historical role it fulfills. Melodrama, as Brooks conceives it, is a socially and politically active mode that seeks to articulate morality in response to specific historical situations. Brooks makes this point most powerfully when he describes the rise of theatrical melodrama following the French Revolution:

> It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily political concern. . . . We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era.[11]

Melodrama arises amidst epistemic rupture. It speaks at historical moments when prior structures of belief have given way and where ethical positions must be located in fluid and contingent circumstances. Its function is to illuminate, with its stark and polarized lighting, the moral significance of human endeavor.[12]

Brooks's arguments on the social functions of melodrama have enabled much of later melodrama criticism. Students of melodrama have frequently sought to discover the cultural work it undertakes by locating specific manifestations of the mode within their social and historical settings. Marsha Kinder, for example, interprets Spanish melodramatic cinema as an expression of a shifting search for national identity.[13] And Linda Williams uncovers the melodrama in representations of American race relations ranging from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the media coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial.[14] My study, too, finds melodrama's significance in the way it responds to particular social and cultural circumstances. Positioning Meiji melodramatic fiction within the ideological contestations of the Meiji period, I investigate how it marshals the morally exorbitant trope of family to mediate anxieties over social mobility and new expectations of gender.

One implication of Brooks's insights demands extension, and this concerns melodrama's ultimate potential for achieving what it seeks. What chance does melodrama ultimately have of establishing moral certitude, if it is, as Brooks says, "constructed on, and over, the void, postulating meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code"?[15] What are the consequences for melodrama when it undertakes its cultural work in the face of absent transcendent standards? If Brooks does not explicitly explore this question, a rich line of thinking has developed, particularly in film studies, to theorize the ambivalence of melodrama's relations to a contested ideological terrain. Much of this discussion has focused on 1950s Hollywood melodramas, whose moral platitudes frequently seem self-contradictory. Thomas Elsaesser famously called attention to this problem in a foundational essay in studies of film melodrama:

> There seems a radical ambiguity attached to melodrama, which holds even more to film melodrama. Depending on whether the emphasis fell on the odyssey of suffering or the happy ending, on the place and context of rupture . . . melodrama would appear to function either subversively or as escapism—categories which are always relative to the given historical and social context.[16]