

Contexts for *Ran* (1985)

The director: Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998), Japan's best-known filmmaker, director of *Rashomon* (1950), *Ikuru* (1952), *Seven Samurai* (1954), and *Kagemusha* (1980). Among his achievements was the adaptation to a Japanese milieu of foreign classics like Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (*Hakuchi*, 1951), Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (*Donzoko*, 1957), and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (as *Kumonosu-jo*, or *Throne of Blood*, 1957). His modern revenge-tragedy *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Warui Yatsu Hodo Yoku Nemuru*, 1960) adapts elements of *Hamlet*.

The title: "Ran" means "chaos" or "turmoil" and in some combinations "revolt."

The characters (so you'll have the names: for the action, see the film; for the credits, see the Internet Movie Data Base, <http://us.imdb.com>):

- Ichimonji Hidetora, the "Great Lord" who yields leadership of the clan to his eldest son and distributes his first, second, and third castles among the three, commanding them to maintain the unity of the clan;
- Saburo, the youngest, who questions the wisdom of his father's decision and is banished;
- Taro, eldest, who strips his father of insignia and banishes him — and is subsequently murdered at the siege of the third castle in which Hidetora has taken refuge;
- Jiro, second son, who usurps Taro's power and devotes himself to seeking out and destroying Saburo;
- Lady Kaede, wife of Taro and the survivor of a family once destroyed by the Ichimonji clan; she, it turns out, has instigated these betrayals and wars to avenge her family. On Taro's death she marries Jiro and maneuvers him into unwise conflict with neighboring warlords;
- Lady Sué, wife of Jiro and, like her brother Tsurumaru (the blind flutist encountered in a hut in the wilderness), a Buddhist who forgives Hidetora his depredations. (These two are also survivors of past Ichimonji depredations);
- Kyoami, Hidetora's "fool," who accompanies him in his escape into the wild;
- Kurogane, Jiro's general -- the one with the foxy sense of humor;
- Fujimaki and Ayabe, warlords who maneuver for control of the Ichimonji clan's lands; in a tremendous final battle Ayabe's forces take the main castle and Jiro and his followers are slain.

The era. *Ran*, like *Throne of Blood*, is set in the Sengoku ("Warring States") period of medieval Japanese history, roughly 1500-1600, after the breakdown of central power in the late fifteenth century and before its re-establishment in the early seventeenth. An earlier feudal order fell into decay and turmoil as rival warlords struggled to amalgamate power through alliances and betrayals. The warrior caste's traditional ideals of loyalty and stoicism, like the bond of strict patrilineal loyalty that organized military clans, were thought to have deteriorated. Kurosawa explained the genesis of the film thus:

I started out to make a film about Motonari Mori, the 16th-century warlord whose three sons are admired in Japan as paragons of filial virtue. What might their story be like, I wondered, if the sons had not been so good? It was only after I was well into writing the script about these imaginary unfilial sons of the Mori clan that the similarities to *Lear* occurred to me. Since my story is set in medieval Japan, the protagonist's children had to be men; to divide a realm among daughters would have been unthinkable . . .

— Interview with Peter Grilli, *New York Times*, 15 December 1985

By this account, *Ran* is one of the Japanese *jidai-geki* (period pictures) which Kurosawa made with scrupulous authenticity, but it addresses a question to Shakespeare's plot:

What has always troubled me about *King Lear* is that Shakespeare gives his characters no past. We are plunged directly into the agonies of their present dilemmas without knowing how they

came to this point. How did Lear acquire the power that, as an old man, he abuses with such disastrous effects? Without knowing his past, I have never really understood the ferocity of his daughters' response to Lear's feeble attempts to shed his royal power. In *Ran* I have tried to give Lear a history. I try to make clear that his power must rest upon a lifetime of bloodthirsty savagery. Forced to confront the consequences of his misdeeds, he is driven mad. But only by confronting his evil head-on can he transcend it and begin to struggle again toward virtue. — Grilli interview

The import? Writes a contemporary critic, "What is arbitrary and irrational in *Lear* is [in *Ran*] given a moral and historical explanation Disaster and cruelty no longer have the mysterious, cosmic arbitrariness postulated by *Lear* but are shown always as the direct result of human error or evil" (Brian Parker, *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly* 55 [Summer 1986]). Does this suggest a moralization of the *Lear* matter, a reduction of Shakespeare's tragedy to a moral lesson? Are there other ways in which Kurosawa's film redefines the moral metaphysics of *King Lear*?

- On one hand, the human error and evil of the Ichimonji clan have built up a reservoir of sin that demands expiation; the Buddhist doctrine of karma teaches that good conduct creates a tendency toward similar good acts, while bad conduct brings an evil result and creates a tendency toward repeated evil actions.
- Beyond a certain point, however, karma can become a cosmic determinism, landing successive generations in a mundane hell not of their making (and references to a medieval Buddhist hell, presided over by the demonic Ashura, are frequent in *Ran*). In *Ran*, one critic writes, "the self can no longer transcend its age. Hidetora and his sons, no matter their intentions, are doomed to enact scenarios of betrayal, vengeance, and murder in their quest for power" (Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera*, 1991). Remarks of Kurosawa's from the years just before *Ran* suggest a powerful application of this drama to contemporary affairs: "All the technological progress of these last years has only taught human beings how to kill more of each other faster. It's very difficult for me to retain a sanguine outlook on life under such circumstances," he remarked; "[S]ome of the essential scenes of this film are based on my wondering how God and Buddha, if they actually exist, perceive this human life, this mankind stuck in the same absurd behavior patterns" (quoted in Prince, 284-5).
- Other religious concepts undergo changes from West to East. Broadly speaking, *Ran* transforms *Lear*'s pre-Christian paganism (with its anticipations of Christianity) into a mythologized version of Buddhism current in Japan in the film's era. For example, when Sué invokes "the Eternal Buddha, the Amida Buddha," she is calling on the most commonly used name for the Buddha who presides over the Land of Ultimate Bliss, into which one can escape from the mundane cycle of birth and death. Doing this is harder than it looks. When Hidetora says to Sué soon after, "This is a degraded age, when the Buddha's guardians . . . have been routed by raging Asuras [demons]," he is envisioning the world in its most decadent phase, peopled by people in hell, hungry ghosts, and animals. (See the materials on "[Buddhist Hells, etc.](#)" at the website.) It is from these hells that Kyoami tries to persuade him that he has been redeemed in the wilderness near the ruins of the Azusa Castle. Is Kyoami right or wrong?