

UNDER COVER

Shogun, The Mikado & Modern America

James Clavell's *Shogun* celebrates Japanese feudalism and the code of the samurai. The culture it praises is hierarchic, rigidly formal, and careless of human life. *Shogun's* authoritarianism evidently appeals to a wide audience in America; NBC appears to have won its multimillion-dollar gamble on a televised version of the novel. This good news for NBC, however, is no evangel for American democracy.

Of course in 1980 it is no surprise if Americans show a longing for leaders who know what they are doing. The appeal of NBC's drama, however, goes deeper than our discontent with presidential candidates. Clavell's Japan is an antiliberal, antimodern utopia. It is an "Eden" free from the curse of technology. Even the wheel is not allowed. It is doomed, of course, by European avarice and firearms, but these enemies of ancient Japan only enhance its attraction. Japanese are clean, and their environment is not polluted. Most important, Clavell's Japanese are uninhibited in sexual matters, equaling the vaunted liberation of modern America.

The great secret of *Shogun*, in fact, is that we are animals who need governance in our high faculties as well as our low ones. In what must have been a calculated decision NBC departs from the novel in having Japanese characters speak Japanese. Here and there we catch a word or a phrase. More often we understand by facial expression, gesture, and tone of voice. The American audience is returned to the experience of a child hearing the incomprehensibilities of adults. NBC's version replicates our earliest fantasies about authority and lets us be "born again" with the sort of authority we have found lacking in our lives. Americans, so often told that they must make their own choices and live with the consequences, are bound to revel in a world in which people are told what to do and, so long as they obey, are free to be resentful. Not long ago Geoffrey Gorer exposed the fact that death had replaced sex as the chief taboo in American society. I suspect that today discipline is an equally forbidden attraction. We are tempted to "escape from freedom," not because we had authoritarian families, as Erich Fromm's Nazis did; we have not had authority enough, and we fear that our lives lack meaning. If those who command know what they are doing, and Lord Toranaga in *Shogun* always does, then our obedience serves some purpose. And some purpose is evidently better than none.

Toranaga's purpose is not so admirable. An open secret in *Shogun* is that samurai virtue depends on keeping the lower classes in their place, where they are "dung" and "animals." The samurai lords do not disdain firearms out of ecological anxiety; they fear the gun because it makes the peasant as good as the warrior. The falsehood on which it rests—the denial of equality—is the serpent in Clavell's Eden.

When the West was more confident and Japan a new discovery, Gilbert and Sullivan wrote *The Mikado*. Oddly enough, the old comedy and the modern drama do not differ much in their picture of Japan. The difference lies in the moral. A good part of *The Mikado* plays on the supposed Japanese propensity for executions and suicides. The Mikado himself equates civilization with decapitation, threatening to reduce the city of Titipu to the status of a village if Ko-Ko, the lord high executioner, cannot find someone to dispatch. The Japanese, in Gilbert's fancy, are scrupulous in observing form, but the form conceals corruption (Pooh-Bah offers to sell secrets of state, for example). Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum pursue forbidden delights with impeccable form. They ask what each would do "were you not to Ko-Ko plighted." Form, in Gilbert's view, does not prevent shameful conduct or foolishness, it only encourages pretense. Form and authority are Gilbert's devices for resolving his plot. How can Ko-Ko be forgiven for telling the Mikado that Nanki-Poo is dead? Nanki-Poo argues that since the Mikado's word is law, if he orders an execution, it is as good as done; that Nanki-Poo is alive is a mere technicality.

Gilbert had other, more domestic, irons in the fire when he wrote the libretto for *The Mikado*. But Gilbert's verdict on Japan seems clear enough. Japanese culture is irrational not because it is emotional, but because it *feels* disproportionately, caring more for a thing than it deserves. The Japanese, as Gilbert understood them, combine violent patriotism with sentimentalism, sorrowing over a maiden's coldness or promising to die for blighted affection. Either patriotism or sentimentalism reflects a failure of mind or, more creditably, of digestion. "Is it weakness of intellect, birdie?" I cried. "Or a rather tough worm in your little inside?"

Gilbert set a severe standard. A regime or culture is just only when it treats things as they deserve and truly are; it is no excuse to say that a regime or culture has acted with good form. The process of law does not do what is "due" unless it acquits the guiltless and convicts the guilty, and unless, as the Mikado hoped, it can "make the punishment fit the crime."

Today we are not so likely to laugh at a thing because it is foreign. Quite the contrary, a great many Americans believe any absurdity if it is exotic, from mystery cults to the Republic platform. We need to be reminded that a man who "praises in enthusiastic tone/All centuries but this and every country but his own" is, as Ko-Ko says, an idiot.

The popularity of *Shogun*, however, tells us that American culture needs healing. We need humane, democratic authority, a way of disciplining ourselves as a people. We must subordinate technology to the betterment of life, individual liberty to personal honor, and violence to just purpose. Our political pendulum is swinging, and we will need all our political art and imagination to keep it from swinging too far.

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