

No for commuters

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NŌ FOR COMMUTERS

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This is a progress report on a multi-year writing project intended to make the colorful stories and images in Nō texts available to the general reader. It deals with problems of voice, perspective, and structure, then provides sample treatments of five plays: "Takasago," "Tamura," "Yōkihi," "Motomezuka," and "Kurozuka."

Key words: NŌ, ACCESSIBLE, NARRATIVE, PERFORMANCE, BULLDOZER, IMAGINATION, GOBAN-DATE, "TAKASAGO," "TAMURA," "YŌKIHI," "MOTOMEZUKA," "KUROZUKA."

Drama specialist Earle Ernst may have said it best:

Of these three [Nō, Bunraku, and Kabuki], the world of Noh is least immediately accessible to most Westerners, and, it should be said, to many Japanese, whose admiration of its cultural eminence does not extend to their attending performances. It offers none of the usually anticipated pleasures of the theater, neither tears, belly laughs, nor thrills of fear...There are no scenic delights, no lighting effects. There are no actresses. There is no sexual solicitation whatever. One should expect and even find necessary to eventual enjoyment, it's been said, a certain degree of boredom.

Among Westerners, one of the chief hindrances to understanding is the still fairly widespread notion that plays are a variety of literature and, as is manifestly the case with Shakespeare, can often be better appreciated by reading than by seeing them performed...The scripts of the Noh theater are no more than scenarios for the performance, so some Japanese scholars say. (They have enormous interest for students of cultural history and of language, but these are matters quite different from literature.)...The Noh exists only in performance, for the techniques of production, exquisitely refined and polished over the centuries, are the means by and through which its special kind of theatrical expressiveness is created.¹

The key word is "accessible." Nō is the "least immediately accessible" form of Japanese drama. I agree entirely. I have had to work hard to enjoy it as much as I have over the years. I enjoy it most in the theater when all the elements of performance work together to create a moment that lives in memory, but I also enjoy it on the page, when I have time to delve into the network of literary references that make up the dense texts that theater-goers could never catch on the fly. I have often taught Nō, but almost always to graduate students, in the belief that all the best features of the text are "accessible" only in the original.

In a year I spent at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, however, during 1995-1996, I began to experiment with approaches to the texts of Nō that would make them accessible to the general educated reader of English. I am still far from completing my book, but the following pages should provide some indication of the direction in which it is

heading.

Nō is often called a “lyric” theater, but, properly speaking, the various types of Nō can be described as exclamatory, narrative, lyrical, dramatic, and spectacular, with more or less emphasis on each of these elements depending on the intent of the playwright. The one indispensable element, however, is the narrative, and it is by concentrating on Nō texts as narratives — as stories — that I hope to make them available to readers who will probably never see actual performances. In spite of the list compiled by Earle Ernst of what is *not* in Nō, the book will begin something like this:

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This is a book of stories, stories full of blood and sex and heroism, of fragile beauty and miracles and exaltation. These are tales that can take you into mountain landscapes and clamorous battlefields, into burning hells and foreign kingdoms, into ghostly darkneses and sunlit beaches, undersea palaces and disintegrating hovels. They show us gods and warriors, court ladies and madwomen, prostitutes and demons. They tell of the human capacity for love and vengeance, marriage and abandonment, parental devotion and low-minded cunning. Some of them celebrate life and others cry out for release from everything that is painfully human. All have been taken from or inspired by one of the world’s most colorful and exciting theatrical forms, the Nō theater of Japan. Because it is based on storytelling, Nō can defy time and space and take its audiences to worlds inaccessible in other theatrical forms. And because it is based on storytelling, those stories can be made accessible on the page.

It has been said that Nō cannot be fully grasped except as live theater, and this must ultimately be true, as it is for any performance art. I happen to believe, however, that the literature of Nō offers images of human experience as intense as anything in the Greek theater and as universal as Shakespeare. Why not, then, simply translate the plays? English translations of Nō have been available for decades — since 1916, to be exact, when Ezra Pound first published his versions based on the notes of Ernest Fenollosa, with an appreciative introduction by William Butler Yeats. Only 350 copies of the book were then published, however, and although that work was preceded by a few journal articles and has since been supplemented by hundreds of books and articles written by a wide variety of scholars and poets, publication on Nō in English has been limited both in circulation and in readership. The fact remains that, in translation, access to the brilliant images of Nō can be impeded by the presence of abstruse notes and exotic terminology, and by references to masks and dances that the reader will probably never see.

Such are the mechanisms necessary to achieve an accurate translation of a Nō text. To convey something of the intricacies of the entire “system of performance composed of... poetry, chant, instrumental music, dance, costumes, and props” can require several meticulously executed volumes.² I have benefitted greatly from the work of specialists in the field of Nō, but what I want to do here is something quite different.

It has long been a matter of frustration to me that so few readers without Japanese are able to share in the joy that I have found in Nō. Even in the hands of a brilliant translator, Nō remains a quaint kind of armchair theater that few but college students in survey courses are motivated to read. My own work over the past three decades has focussed primarily on modern Japanese fiction, and I tend to read even medieval texts with much the same desire for immediate literary experience that I bring to modern novels. I have neither the expertise nor the patience to linger over the subtleties of textual criticism or the technicalities of performance, as a result of which

my colleagues may find much here with which to take exception.³

Mine might be called the bulldozer approach. I plow my way through the 234 texts of the current repertoire — those plays that have withstood the test of time — in search of those elements that excite or thrill me, and I attempt, through a combination of summary, translation, impressions made by live performances, and free association, to convey some of the excitement that I have found in the plays.⁴ This is an entirely subjective, arbitrary, and unscholarly method, but it is what has kept me interested in the Nō theater for a very long time. It might be objected that much of what I claim to find in Nō exists only in my fevered brain, but that is exactly the point. Nō is a minimalist theater that can only work with the active participation of each member of the audience or each reader. This book is a record of my active participation in the literature — and, in many cases, live performances — of Nō.

This is not a book of play summaries intended for those few dozen tourists who might find their way into a Nō theater on one of their thirteen nights in Japan (though I would hope it could benefit them, too), but rather a crude attempt to smash through the barriers that have hidden the immense riches of the Nō theater from the general reader who may never get to Japan. I hope that those who find their curiosity piqued by these impressionistic renderings will turn to the fine translations and studies listed in the bibliography and come to appreciate the elegant structures that Nō plays can be. But even if their foray into Nō ends here, I like to think that they will not have missed the essence. For whether in the armchair or the playhouse, Nō is above all a theater of the imagination.

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What I think I have shaping up here is a book on Nō for commuters, something that can be read on the fly, in bits and pieces. At this stage, I am writing with few preconceptions as to form. When I speak of “a combination of summary, translation, impressions made by live performances, and free association,” I am pointing to the tension in the treatment of each play between recreation of the play as a story without commentary and, at the other extreme, a commentary on the play with passages quoted or summarized. I am not sure how much of the essayist’s voice to allow through, but at this stage I am enjoying writing whatever seems appropriate to the particular work. I will probably need to go through the completed manuscript and homogenize the voice, but then again, the sheer unpredictability of the perspective to be adopted in each case could turn out to be a desirable feature.

Whatever inconsistencies there may be in voice, the book as a whole will have a distinct structure, which will be based on the Edo-period *Goban-date* categorization of plays into five types, as follows:

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My interest in Nō began with the reading of texts in the original, when I could begin to appreciate their ultimately untranslatable poetry. It was then that I began to see how vast and varied the worlds of Nō could be, and to attend the theater where these worlds are presented with all their color and irresistible rhythms. Faintly amused at the Japanese penchant for labeling and categorization, however, I tended to dismiss the five categories into which Nō plays were placed — plays featuring gods, women, warriors, lunatics, and demons — until it dawned on me after some years that those earlier categorizers had been as kind to readers of Nō as modern-day video store owners are who divide their wares into the fields of drama, horror, musical, comedy, action, and so forth for the convenience of their customers. Viewers who want to see Gene Kelly dance

don't go to the horror section, and readers hoping for a stirring tale of battlefield heroism don't choose plays about distraught mothers. The five categories of Nō plays are so different as to comprise different worlds. These are the worlds of Nō that I hope to guide readers through in the following pages. If this sounds a little like the opening of a travel book, then all to the good. All Nō plays involve travel, and with travel comes discovery and surprise, mystery and revelation.

Readers with some background in Nō may wonder why I have said nothing here about *yūgen* ("elegant and mysterious beauty") or *hana* ("flower") or Zen. I would refer them to the essay at the end of the book, "The Art of the Flower of Mumbo Jumbo." Others I would invite just to plunge into the main text, where they will find a rich conglomeration of stories dealing with the fundamental human needs and fears that lie at the core of Japan's most original contribution to world culture.

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In this way, with as little introductory delay as possible, I want to bring the reader into the worlds of the stories, consigning more general material regarding the Nō theater to the end of the book, to be read by whoever wants it and ignored by those who don't. All of the arcane terminology that readers of translated plays have been expected to learn — *shite*, *waki*, *jo-ha-kyū*, *kiri-sashi-kuse*, *kakeai*, *mondō*, and on and on — will be omitted or just mentioned in passing. Each play — or, perhaps I should say, each *treatment* — will have, in addition to its romanized Japanese title, an English title that points to the theme or central moment of the play. Thus, the section on "Tamura" is titled, "Tamura: Kill the Bastards." Each of the five sections of the book will have its own introduction, but I won't be able to write those until I have been through more plays. Here, for now, is a treatment of a play from each of the five categories.

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I . God Play

Takasago: The Music of the Earth

If life is good (and this is the fundamental stance of Shintō — that life *is* good), a sense of gratitude is only natural, and communal ritual must take the form of celebration. And what more basic elements of life to celebrate than the evidence of life's goodness that comes to us through our five senses — sight, sound, smell, touch and taste?

"Takasago" celebrates sound. It starts out from the proposition that all of nature is alive and singing, and it goes on from there to build a Logic of Celebration that has far-reaching — indeed, universal — implications. Not exactly syllogistic, the logic of "Takasago" goes something like this:

1. All things in nature, both animate and seemingly inanimate, have heart.
2. Heart is the one indispensable element of poetry.
3. All the sounds of nature are, in themselves, poems.
4. Poetry, as part of nature, is eternal.
5. The sound of the wind in the pines is an eternal poem.
6. Poetry is a holy balm that softens the pain in life and unites the hearts of husband and wife into old age under a benevolent ruler.
7. The wind in the pines is the sound of two gods, husband and wife, expressing their eternal

love for each other.

8. Busby Berkeley rules!

Perhaps the last item requires some commentary. The finale of “Takasago” is a full-fledged production number in which the old god of the first act reveals himself in his true, youthful form, and he dances, surrounded by dancing girls (strictly in the text, of course, but done in the spirit of the old Busby Berkeley musicals, with lots of lively music), in praise of poetry and marriage and the benevolent rule of the emperor and good fortune and long life, the whole universe united in praise of the poetry of the sound of the wind in the pines. Everything is alive and contributing equally to the joyful noise of the Shintō universe.

Aural images are strategically placed in the play. Early on, it is pointedly noted that there is too much mist on the shore for you to see the waves, but you can surely *hear* them. An evening bell tolls in the distance — twice. Sound is heard not only from the wind in the pines but grass, sand, and water. Insects cry. The dancing girls sing. The performance underscores all this by bringing in a third drummer and letting the musicians make a great commotion.

Not that the play is all blue-eyed optimism. The initial view we have of the old couple featured in the play suggests a dark side to longevity.

Who is there to be my friend?
 Not even Takasago pine
 Is one I know from long ago.
 Years go by
 And years again I do not know
 How many piling, piling
 High like snow as white as
 Some old crane. The moon’s pale light
 At dawn still lingers on my nest
 As on these frosty springtime nights
 Awake, asleep, awake again
 With only wind in pines to hear
 And know for certain
 That my heart shall be my friend —
 My heart. And I shall lie upon
 A mat of sedge unrolled, my only
 Comfort spinning out my heart in song.

Who comes to us? The ocean wind
 That whispers in the pine.
 And on our sleeves the needles falling,
 Let us sweep them now away.
 Beneath the tree the needles falling,
 Let us sweep them now away.
 Here in Takasago
 Where the pine of Onoe has seen
 Year on year the waves of time

Rush in upon us
 As in the shadow of the tree
 We go on sweeping
 Thus our lives have been prolonged.
 And how long will we go on
 Living pines, the pines of Iki,
 Too, are known from long ago,
 Trees of Life from long ago.⁵

The aged pair have outlived their friends and find themselves spending wakeful nights alone. Their one source of comfort at such moments is feelings shared in poetry, but their apparently endless raking of the pine needles is ambiguous: is it a symbol of the pine's continual renewal, or sheer drudgery as they drag themselves into old age? Perhaps the presentation itself is the answer, for the image of the old couple in their muted earth-colored costumes, he with his rake and she with her broom, is an image of quiet, dignified beauty. Small wonder that verses from the play are traditionally sung at weddings and that the image of the old couple is a beloved icon that finds its way into many Japanese homes in the form of dolls and paintings.

The play is set precisely in historical time. The action takes place during the Engi era (901-923), which is the age in which the first imperial anthology of poetry, the *Kokinshū*, was compiled (in the year 914). Instead of the usual anonymous traveller to begin the action, we have a Shintō priest named Tomonari, modelled on a man who actually lived during Engi.

Like other Nō travellers, though, Tomonari encounters a mystery — in fact, two mysteries. He sees the old couple raking fallen needles under the Takasago pine and asks them why this pine and one in Sumiyoshi, several days' journey away, should be known as the "Paired Pines." The old man compounds the mystery by replying that he himself is from distant Sumiyoshi, while his wife lives here in Takasago, and he urges her to explain. Before she can answer, Tomonari expresses his surprise that such an apparently long-wedded old couple should live in such widely-separated areas. The woman chides him for his foolish question and declares (with her husband's help from the fourth line):

Though a myriad leagues of hill and stream
 divide them, hearts truly in touch
 do not find the way to each other long.
 Just reflect on the matter a little.
 The Pines of Takasago and Sumiyoshi
 bear, all insentient, the name of Paired;
 still more then do we, living humans
 who, since time out of mind, ply to and fro
 between this place and Sumiyoshi:
 yes, we two live in the Pines' company,
 an old couple, paired in age.⁶

Further discussion reveals that the Takasago pine is symbolic of the age of the *Man'yōshū*, Japan's oldest poetry collection, while the Sumiyoshi pine symbolizes the *Kokinshū*, compiled

during the present enlightened rule, itself a cause for celebration. Both anthologies have been written in words as immortal and unchanging as the very pines. “The spring is mild,” sings the old man, and the chorus takes up the chant in sentiments to be expressed over and over again in god plays: “the Four Seas calm, the realm at peace. / A timely breeze rustles no boughs / in this blessed reign.”⁷

There follows a lengthy sung disquisition rejecting Buddhism’s distinction between “sentient” beings with a potential for salvation and “insentient” beings for which salvation is irrelevant: “Though it is said that plants and trees have no heart, / they never miss the times of flowering and bearing fruit.”

The voices of beings sentient
and insentient are all poetry.
There is a heart contained in all things
including grasses, trees, soil, sand,
voice of wind and sound of water.
Spring woods moving in the eastern wind
and fall insects crying in the northern dew,
do not both have the form of poetry?⁸

The old man and woman then reveal their true identities: “The Takasago and Sumiyoshi / Paired Pines’ spirits, man and wife, / stand before you,” after which they board a boat and sail across the evening waves to far-off Sumiyoshi, inviting the others to join them. Tomonari and his companions follow in their own boat, and in Sumiyoshi witness the spectacle of the young god’s dance.

And so the mystery of the Paired Pines is solved: the same spirit that unites a man and woman in marriage, that makes it a point of celebration for the two of them to grow old together, whatever the hardships, is what unites the trees. It is the communion of hearts achieved through poetry: through song; through sound.

II . Warrior Play

Tamura: Kill the Bastards

Fanciers of *sushi* must be familiar with the sharp taste of the green Japanese horseradish called *wasabi*. Readers who are not familiar with this condiment should hurry to their nearest Japanese restaurant and find out for themselves how delicious it is, and how it can bring tears to the eyes if applied too liberally.

Lying near the base of the magnificent snow-capped Japan Alps in Nagano Province, along a bend of the River Sai, is Japan’s largest *wasabi* farm, a curving green swath covering some 37 acres where the fresh river water is kept flowing only a few inches deep across carefully cultivated gravel beds. The tourist center at Daiō Wasabi Farm will sell you a freshly picked *wasabi* root for \$12 or so and invite you to sample *wasabi* in an amazing variety of foods, ranging from *sushi* and buckwheat noodles to ice cream and chocolate candy — most of it quite good. The farm provides pleasant walkways that crisscross the *wasabi* beds and lead to several large mounds and shrines at the heart of the cultivated area.

At first glance, these rather grandiose shrines look like an anxious entrepreneur's excessive attempt to provide supernatural insurance for the Daiō farm's continued prosperity, but a perusal of the informational placards reveals that the religious cites have been there far longer than that—indeed, since the late eighth century. The shrines are intended to quell the wrath of Gishiki Hachimen Daiō himself, the “Great Eight-Faced King Gishiki,” leader of a local tribe, whose torso supposedly lies buried under one of the mounds. So powerful had Daiō been that dismemberment was thought to be the only way to keep him from coming back to life. Other widely scattered mounds in the area are said to contain arms, legs, head and ears, not only of Daiō but probably of the others who died with him resisting troops dispatched by the central government.⁹

After having caused the government a lot of trouble for years, Daiō and his people (perhaps Ainu, perhaps not ethnically distinct from other Japanese) were finally destroyed by the very first “Barbarian-Subduing Generalissimo” (or Shōgun for short), Sakanoue Tamura-marō (758-811), the man who is the central figure of the play “Tamura.” Only three of the 16 warrior plays depict victorious warriors, and this is one of them. As a member of one of the first generations of Americans to be shocked into consciousness of the history that lay behind innocent childhood games of cowboys and Indians, I find myself uncomfortable with this play, which is one of the most frequently performed springtime plays, primarily for its lovely cherry-blossomed setting and its upbeat tone.

I hope that my remarks thus far will provide sufficient warning that you will be getting a wishy-washy liberal revisionist reading here. Although events in Bosnia and elsewhere give little cause for hope, I do like to think that some small part of mankind has become sensitized to the kind of racism and the perversion of religion that provide the cause for celebration in this play. What Zeami tells us unwittingly (after all, he lived in the fifteenth century!) is that the most universally accepted way to kill your enemies is to (1) tell yourself that they are not human, and (2) pray to your god for help. Apparently this message didn't prevent the editors of a 1955 edition of translations from including “Tamura” as one of the ten most representative Nō plays — and to crank up the non-human rhetoric even more than that of the original. (Might the all-Japanese committee that worked on the book so soon after a losing war against the American devil-brutes have been taking a little literary revenge?) Let's get right to the battle scene (which, by the way, depicts a different campaign from the one against Daiō.) Tamura's ghost says:

An order from the gracious Sovereign
 Decreed I should subdue
 The tribe of demons
 Infesting the Suzuka Mountains...
 Hill-shaking and stream-tossing demon-cries
 Filled the earth and echoed to the skies,
 And the green hills trembled before our eyes...
 Along the shore,
 Numberless as the pines of Ano,
 Swarmed the demon-hosts
 Who spewed forth inky clouds and dreadful
 thunderbolts,

Then, transformed into countless mounted knights,
 Like a mountain they towered over us.
 But look—miraculous!
 Above the banners of our host,
 The gleam of the thousand-armed Kannon
 Flashed across the sky.
 Each arm held a bow of mercy,
 Each bow affixed with an arrow of wisdom.
 At once, Kannon released a thousand arrows
 Which beat like rain or hail upon the demons
 Till all were stricken down!¹⁰

First of all, Kannon has to be credited with the neatest trick of the week shooting a thousand arrows with a thousand arms. Secondly, Kannon is supposed to be a god of mercy, for God's sake! "Bow of mercy?" "Arrow of wisdom?" With a name meaning "bodhisattva hearkening to the prayers of humanity," Kannon is thought by believers to come to the aid of anyone in distress when called.¹¹ A soft, sweet, androgynous deity, he/she would be the last one to aid in killing, you would think.

Instead, Tamura, in gratitude for Kannon's help in wiping out the evil demons of the east, decided to found a temple in his/her honor. Although the building he is thought to have donated in 798 has not survived, the temple has thrived ever since under the name of Kiyomizu-dera, one of the most beautifully-situated, famous, and popular temples in Japan. (As long as I'm ranting, let me point out that you can get good luck charms for *anything* at Kiyomizu-dera. It is the most commercialized bastion of superstition I've ever seen in my life. The roof is nice, though.)

More balanced than my commentary, the play "Tamura" is unusual in having *two* textual high points (*kuse*), one in each half. If the one in the second act describes an expedition against demons, the one in the first act is an evocation of all that is best about Tamura's Kyoto temple, Kiyomizu-dera. "Kiyomizu" means "pure water," referring both to the drinkable spring water that gushes out of the side of the mountain below the main hall, and to the function of Kannon as a benevolent purifier of the world's filth. It is the height of cherry blossom season in Kyoto in the play, and the white clouds of blossoms give an impression of freshness and cleanliness. The main architectural feature of Kiyomizu-dera is the massive deck built out from the side of the hill, from which the views of Kyoto are spectacular. A long dialogue between a travelling monk and the ghost of Tamura reads like a guided tour of the city, naming the famous places that can be seen from Kiyomizu amidst the blossoms. The moon rises in the course of the tour, catching the surrounding blossoms in its glow:

What a breath-taking sight!
 The moon-rays pierce the branches,
 Evening breezes tempt the blossoms,
 Filling the air with snowy petals
 And ravishing the heart!
 Truly worthy of its name
 Is Flowery Kyoto under the vernal sky,

When spring is decked in all her beauty.¹²

The first act seems almost more Shintō than Buddhist, with its repeated praise of the pure, clean view. Which is perhaps why performances of this April play begin as early as January on the Nō calendar. Out of place among the anguished cries of the other warrior ghosts, this play goes well with the god plays that celebrate the rebirth of the year, if only one can avoid thinking about the reality behind Tamura's rousing victory.

III. Woman Play

Yōkihi: Love Beyond the Grave

A man is so distraught at the loss of his wife that he sends a wizard to look for her spirit in paradise. The wizard finds her, she tells him the secret vows she shared with her husband so that he can have proof he met her, and he leaves her there, alone, in a land of ironic immortality, weeping for the husband she will never see again; "forever" means "never." There is no suggestion that the husband will join her there, nor do we get to see the wizard take his message back.

A million stupid love songs vow "I'll love you forever," but when two people are really in it for life, they have to face the fact of death. "Till death do us part," says the wedding pledge, but we don't like to think about that. Yōkihi (in Chinese, Yang kuei-fei) and her husband, the emperor, *did* think about it, and they pledged a love beyond the grave: "We shall grow old together and share a single grave... In heaven may we be twin birds that share a wing; / On Earth may we be twin trees with branches intertwined."¹³

Truer than their pledges, though, is the truth of death: "All who meet must part" — the principle that underlies much East Asian literature. Yang kuei-fei's spirit will be weeping forever.

This play by Konparu Zenchiku is a sad and lovely lyric piece, drawing on the deep roots of Chinese-inspired Japanese literature, an utterly fragile moment on the stage that works best with little reference to the bloody historical events in eighth-century China that inspired the Chinese poet Po Chū-i and his Japanese readers. The Chinese phraseology throughout the text adds an exotic dignity to the story.

IV. Lunatic (or Realistic) Play

Motomezuka: Hell for the Innocent

This is a shocking play. One minute we see an innocent girl picking young greens in the early spring, and the next we see her in hell, her skull smashed open by a huge iron duck that sucks her brains out. What could she have done in the meantime to deserve such punishment? The answer is simple: Nothing. Which is why the play is so shocking. The girl is an innocent victim of male lust.

Long ago, in the village of Ikuta, there lived a young maiden by the name of Unai. Two young men of the village fell in love with her and courted her with passionate letters that arrived at the very same hour of the very same day. Unai did not know what to do. She did not want to anger one by favoring the other, and besides, there was nothing special about either of them: they were

just men, men who had decided that they wanted her.

An archery contest was set up in an attempt to distinguish one of the men from the other, but this only made matters worse. Not only did their arrows strike the same bird in the same wing at the same time, but the tenderhearted girl was horrified to think that, because of her, a loving pair of mandarin ducks had been separated forever. She loved her life, she loved her village, the name of which, ironically, meant “Field of Life,” but death to her seemed the only way out of this unbearable situation, and so she threw herself into the river.

Visiting her grave mound together, the young men felt they had nothing left to live for, and so they ran each other through. Just as Unai, in life, had felt guilt about the murdered duck, in death, her ghost took on the burden of the young men’s death, and so, year after year, she clung to the mound in Ikuta.

Centuries went by, five centuries in all, and then, very early one spring, a wandering monk was passing the vicinity of the old grave mound when he stopped to watch a group of girls plucking tender young herbs that were peeping up through patches of lingering snow. The sight was so lovely and innocent, he could not tear himself away, though they worked on and on for hours, singing all the while. He tried to question them about the whereabouts of the legendary grave mound, but they ignored him until the sun was going down and one of the girls remained behind after the others had gone off through the chilly wind, bearing their bounty.

“Why have you alone remained behind?” asked the monk.

“To tell you about the grave mound you were asking about before,” she said, guiding him to the very spot.

There, she told him the story of Unai, her emotions rising, until Unai was no longer “she” but “I” — a sad creature racked with guilt and begging the monk to save her as she disappeared into the mound.

Into the night the monk raised his prayers, urging the ghost to escape the endless cycle of life and death and achieve detachment once and for all.

“Oh, how I long for the world!” cried the ghost when she appeared. For this was all she really wanted: the world, the life that she had been cheated out of in the Field of Life. Other ghosts were there, in hell, suffering endless torment for their sins of lust, but she was different, she had done nothing but incur the longings of two indistinguishable men.

The monk prayed more fervently, but the ghost’s suffering seemed only to increase. From either side came the two young men, each pulling on an arm, each urging, “Come with me, Come with me!” but she was caught in a house of flame. Then came the mandarin duck they had killed for her, transformed now into an iron monster. With its beak of steel, it smashed her skull open and devoured the brains within.

“Could this be punishment for some sin I committed?” she cried, but for this there was no answer. “Oh, monk! Oh, save me from this torture!”

Instead, flames arose and utterly consumed her — but only for a moment, until she rose up whole again to be whipped by demons:

They drive her off. Away she stumbles,
 Destined to suffer again and again
 The infinite tortures of the Eight Great Hells.
 Behold them now, and repent your sins!

First is the Hell of Ever-renewing Wounds,
 Next the Hell of Iron Cords,
 The Mountain of Swords, the Hell of Boiling Oil,
 The Hell of Hideous Screams, the Hell of Terrible Burning,
 The Hell of Unendurable Fire,
 And, last, the Bottomless Pit
 Where she hurtles head over heels
 For three years and three months.¹⁴

Total darkness suddenly descended, and through it she groped her way back to the grave mound, the Mound for Which She Sought, Motomezuka, the peace of death her only salvation from the undeserved torture, the monk's prayers powerless to help.

The girl knows she has done nothing bad enough to deserve the suffering she endures. Indeed, if the girl were guilty, we wouldn't be quite so appalled at the treatment meted out to her. We don't feel so bad about the fisherman in "Utô: Hell on Earth" when he gets torn to shreds in hell because he was sent there for violating the bond between parents and children, something quite despicable. The girl in this play is tormented both in this world and the next. Buddhism tends to see women as jealous demons and temptresses who need to be reborn as men before they can hope to enter Nirvana, and the best that male commentators on Nô have been able to do is suggest that "perhaps" the girl's punishment in hell may seem a bit harsh for her supposed offense.¹⁵ One doesn't need to be a feminist to feel queasy about what happens to her: from beginning to end the play is about undeserved punishment — Buddhist punishment, for which Buddhist prayers can provide no help.

If this all sounds suspiciously anachronistic, as though there couldn't have been a playwright in the fifteenth century capable of overcoming the Buddhist prejudices against women, remember that traditional tales of women subjected to unwanted wooing by indistinguishable men are usually told from the woman's point of view with sympathy for her plight. We can conclude that the long, song-filled section on the girls picking greens was arbitrarily pasted together with a section from another play; or we can conclude that the sweet first part was put in merely to contrast with the harrowing second part to provide a showcase in contrasts for the lead actor: pure showbiz. If we grant the playwright a degree of (perhaps prescient) insight, though, the problem takes care of itself.

V. Demon Play

Kurozuka: Mound of Death

On the Plains of Adachi — Adachigahara — in the deep north of Japan, stands a huge, black mound that has been there as long as anyone can remember. Legend has it that a demoness, an *oni*, lives inside the mound. No one has ever seen her, but when night falls, strange things begin to happen, and people disappear.

A mountain priest, a *yamabushi* named Yūkei, was leading his small band of disciples on a trek many hundreds of miles north from their home temple near the great Nachi waterfall of Kumano. These were hardy, disciplined men whose rigorous training gave them special powers. They would stay on the road for months at a time, aided by the one lowly servant who

accompanied them to carry the heaviest loads, but otherwise living off the land and seeking shelter at night in the homes of the faithful.

As they crossed the Plains of Adachi, however, Yūkei and his men were far from places of human habitation when the sun began to set. It seemed, at first, that they would have to sleep in the open, but then Yūkei noticed a firelight in the distance and suggested that they investigate.

The light led them to a hut, at the door of which appeared a sad-looking woman in her middle years. "Take pity on us, and give us shelter for the night," begged Yūkei.

"The night winds howl around this place, and the moonlight seeps into my bedroom through the tattered roof," she said. "I cannot put you up here."

The monk persisted, and before long she relented. As spartan as their lodgings had been thus far, though, Yūkei was shocked to see the shabby condition of the woman's shack, and he doubted that any of them would get a decent night's sleep. He cordially thanked the woman nevertheless, and asked what the strange object was that she had standing on the floor.

"That is my spinning wheel," she said. "Poor women like me use these things to keep themselves alive."

Fascinated by the new object, Yūkei asked her to show them how she used it. She would be embarrassed to be seen operating such a tool of the poor, she said, but soon she began to spin thread and give voice to her misery. "So lonely, cold and sad am I, I truly live at night alone, in sleep. What good is it to have been born into this human realm to live in wretchedness?"

"How wrong you are, Madame," replied the priest. "A living human being is but one step away from the joy of Buddhahood."

"True enough," she said. "And think how short a stay we have here: young one moment, old the next. Why do we cling so tenaciously to this fragile dream of ours?" and before she knew it her busy hands were accompanied by a song of spinning, her rude hut filling with elegant verses on the handsome Prince Genji and his lovely women. Yūkei and his men found the woman's performance strangely hypnotic.

On and on the woman spun into the night, until she began to feel the cold. She stood and told the monks that she would be going into the hills for wood to build a fire.

"We will wait here for you," said Yūkei.

The woman started for the door, then stopped and turned with startling swiftness. "Before I go, let me tell you this, o monk. Be sure, while I am gone, that you do not look into my bedroom."

"I see. Don't worry, I won't look."

"Very good," she said. "And be sure the others don't look either."

"I will," he replied.

She reached the door, paused as if in thought, and then, apparently satisfied, she went out into the night.

The monks settled down to wait, but the servant was feeling restless. "There's something creepy about that woman," he thought. "What's she hiding in that bedroom of hers?" He asked the leader, Yūkei, for permission to look into the woman's room, but received only a scolding.

"We are all going to sleep now, and you had better, too," the monk concluded.

"Yes, your holiness."

But the servant burned with curiosity. He tried twice more to creep out of bed, foiled each time by the vigilant Yūkei. A woman's bedroom was no place for his men to be looking. Finally, when even Yūkei could no longer fight off the need for sleep, the servant tiptoed over to the door

and opened it a crack. What he saw inside sent him sprawling on the floor.

“Bones!” he screamed. “The place is piled high with bones and corpses! Master! Master! Wake up!”

Yūkei was momentarily annoyed with the servant for having disobeyed his order, but as the servant went off screaming into the night, he himself had to go for a look.

“How horrible!” he cried, waking the others. “Pus and blood everywhere! Ghastly smells! Corpses bloated with bursting skin and flesh! Corpses beyond counting, piled to the rafters! This could only be the dwelling of the Black Mound Demoness of Adachi Plain!”

Frightened out of their wits, the monks were ready to run anywhere their legs would carry them — until a roar shook the cabin.

“You monks! I told you not to look! Now my anger has turned to searing flames!” It was the demon in all her horrifying reality, no longer just a woman.

Thunder, lightning, howling gales filled the night. The demon charged at them, mouth agape, ready to swallow them whole, her deadly iron mallet swishing through the air.

“Pray now, men! Pray for all you’re worth!” cried Yūkei, grinding the beads of his rosary in the direction of the horrid creature. “Pray to the gods of the East, of the South, of the West, of the North — and in the Center, Dainichi Daishō Fudō Myōō!”

“ON-KO-RO-KO-RO-SEN-DA-RI-MA-TŌ-GI,” intoned the monks in unison. “ON-NA-BI-RA-UN-KEN-SO-WA-KA! UN-TA-RA-TA-KAN-MAN!” Then, “HE WHO SEES MY FORM WILL KNOW THE STRENGTH OF DHARMA! HE WHO HEARS MY NAME WILL RID THE WORLD OF EVIL! HE WHO HEARS MY WORD WILL GAIN THE GIFT OF WISDOM! HE WHO KNOWS MY HEART WILL GAIN REBIRTH AS BUDDHA!”

Over and over they invoked their strongest spells, rubbing and rubbing their rosaries in the direction of the roaring demon. For a long time, she resisted their power, but suddenly the strength went out of her, and she seemed to shrivel up. Howling her shame at having been exposed to the eyes of men, she dashed out into the night and vanished in the screaming wind.

The worst human fears of death and putrefaction are played out before our eyes with all the classical predictability — and thus the archetypal sense of doom — of a Grimm’s fairy tale. Since this is all that awaits us, the monk’s little sermon implies, we had better not waste the rare opportunity granted us through birth into the human realm. Religious spells may have chased the demon back out into the night, but they have not dispatched her. She still lurks in the black mound of death.

*

These five play treatments present a range of approaches, from a fairly academic analysis to an apparent summary in story form (though a comparison of my “summaries” with the originals would reveal a fair amount of disguised interpretation and commentary). God plays tend to be “simple” exclamations of good wishes, but the sophisticated material in “Takasago” seems to require explication. “Yōkihi” is a good example of a play with virtually no narrative content that demands to be seen on stage. Fourth- and fifth-category plays like “Motomezuka” and “Kurozuka” (or, as it is also known, “Adachigahara”), containing more dramatic conflict and development, tend to be more adaptable to presentation as stories.

Even this limited selection should give some indication of the great variety contained in the Nō theater, which is what I want to demonstrate more than anything. Not all Nō plays feature frail ghosts who cling to the world in search of salvation from the prayers of passing priests. I may not

succeed in convincing many people of the truth of this statement, but I intend to have a lot of fun trying.

NOTES

- 1 Earle Ernst, "The Noh: An Appreciation," in Yasuo Nakamura, *Noh: The Classical Theater*, tr. Don Kenny (Tokyo: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1971), pp. 14-15.
- 2 Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell, *Dance in the Nō Theater*, 3 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Papers No. 29, 1982).
- 3 For my "current repertoire" and texts, I am relying on the admittedly outmoded work, Sanari Kentarō, *Yōkyoku taikan*, 7 vols. (Meiji shoin, 1931-39), though I have turned to more modern texts where available.
- 4 I briefly discuss "Okina" in introductory material but do not count this storyless ritual among the current plays. "Fue no dan" is treated as part of "Hashi Benkei."
- 5 All translations mine unless otherwise noted.
- 6 Royall Tyler, *Japanese Nō Dramas* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 283-84.
- 7 Tyler, pp. 284-5.
- 8 Richard A. Gardner, "Takasago: The Symbolism of the Pine," *Monumenta Nipponica* 47: 2 (Summer 1992) pp. 221, 225.
- 9 This account is based on the informational plaques posted at the Daiō Wasabi Farm (Daiō Wasabi Nōjō, Hodaka, Nagano). For more details on the legend, see the special *bessatsu* issue of *Shakai kagaku kyōiku* (Meiji tosho shuppan, April 25, 1996), pp. 62-63. Thanks to Takahashi-san for the reference.
- 10 Adapted from Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai (NGS), *Japanese Noh Drama: Ten Plays Selected and Translated from the Japanese*, 3 vols. (Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, 1955, 1959, 1960) 1: 33-36.
- 11 NGS 1: 21n3.
- 12 NGS 1: 29.
- 13 From the translation by Carl Cesar in Donald Keene, *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 214, 216.
- 14 From the translation by Barry Jackman in Donald Keene, *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*, p. 49.
- 15 Sanari Kentarō, *Yōkyoku taikan* 5: 3061; Keene, *Twenty Plays*, p. 36. Kenneth Yasuda, *Masterworks of the Nō Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 367, rhapsodizes on the "irrationality... beyond our logical comprehension" of this aspect of the play. Hayashi Nozomu, *Hayashi Nozomu ga nō o yomu* (Seidosha, 1994), pp. 272-73, seems merely bewildered.

通勤者のための能
ジェイ・ルービン

要旨：謡曲に現われる色彩豊かなストーリーとイメージを西洋の一般読者に鑑賞出来る形に書き直す、数年に渡るプロジェクトの中間報告である。声、角度、構造の問題に言及した後、能の五番立に相当する五つの曲（「高砂」、「田村」、「楊貴妃」、「求塚」、「黒塚」）を一例として提示する。