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DRAMATURGICAL CROSSROADS AND AESTHETIC TRANSFORMATIONS:

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATIONS OF

CLASSICAL JAPANESE NŌ DRAMA

by

Robert Lloyd Neblett

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2011

Saint Louis, Missouri

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

*Dramaturgical Crossroads and Aesthetic Transformations:  
Modern and Contemporary Adaptations of Classical Japanese Nō Drama*

by

Robert Lloyd Neblett

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature with an Emphasis in Drama

Washington University in St. Louis, August 2011

Professor Robert E. Hegel, Chair

This study explores the various dramaturgical strategies at work within the twentieth and twenty-first-century theatrical adaptation of the Japanese Nō drama. At its core are questions regarding the methodology utilized in the updating of an innately supernatural and spiritual aesthetic into the increasingly secularized world of the present, and how those supernatural elements are often transformed into metaphorical constructs. Ultimately, I examine how the transformative aesthetic that has given the Nō its literary power over the past 700 years is the very aspect that permits it to facilitate, resist, and assimilate the strategies of dramatic adaptation.

My primary categories for adaptation include the direct and indirect, which refer to the existence (or not) of a direct textual analogue within a specific style of classical literature. I break this down further into the sub-categories of correlative, extrapolative, interpolative, and stylistic adaptation, each dependent upon the degree to which the modern author adheres to the variants and invariants of an extant text or literary tradition. Throughout the study, I return periodically to the work of Gérard Genette and Linda

Hutcheon, basing my primary criteria for successful dramaturgical adaptation on their theories of metatextuality, palimpsests, and textual oscillation. Additionally, because of the specific supernatural context of the Nō, I refer substantively to Victor Turner's anthropological theories of liminality to explore the transformative agenda of the Nō, both classical and modern/contemporary.

In order to contextualize my specific criteria and methodology for the study of textual transformation and oscillation between classical Nō and its modern analogues during the past century, I first explore the particular strategies of adaptation as they apply to twentieth- and twenty-first-century theatrical versions of classical Greek myth.

Perhaps the greatest innovator of the Nō form in the twentieth century, and the individual who may be credited with popularizing its awareness on an international level, is Yukio Mishima, whose publication of nine “modern Nō plays” in the 1950s and 1960s revolutionized the way the world looked at the classical genre. His adaptations, both extrapolative and interpolative in nature, transform textual antecedents from the popular Nō canon into statements of the increasing tension between an idealized ancient Japanese past and the Westernized world of the post-war present. He transforms the Nō into political metaphors written in a Western style, their supernatural elements altered to represent the ghosts of a disappearing culture, thrusting themselves into an alien, amnesiac world of neon and concrete to warn of impending spiritual death. My primary text for the exploration of Mishima's tactics and agenda in the creation of the “modern Nō” is his 1956 adaptation of *Aoi no ue*, in which the iconic character of Prince Genji is converted into a Westernized businessman. This example clearly depicts how Mishima engages in strategies of inversion and subversion to achieve his aesthetic and political

goals, yet retains recognizable conventions of the Nō's classical framework. I also examine Mishima's theatrical legacy within the context of contemporary Japanese playwrights like Takeshi Kawamura, who have continued the trajectory of Mishima's adaptations of Nō into the present.

My examination of contemporary American Nō plays contextualizes the strategy of indirect dramatic adaptation within the framework of stylistic homage, rather than any other forms that utilize the Nō structure and conventions for parodic or satirical purposes. My primary examples, Kenneth Yasuda's *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Nō Play* and Deborah Brevoort's *Blue Moon Over Memphis*, not only imitate the style and literary architecture of the classical Nō (while updating these conventions for contemporary audiences), but they honor the religio-aesthetic tone of the traditional Nō canon as well. This is accomplished by re-imagining their pop culture *shite* figures as modern-day bodhisattvas, spiritually transcendent beings who remain in the physical world in order to pass on their enlightenment to others, in these examples represented by the *waki* roles.

In conclusion, I propose the continued evolution of the Nō into the twenty-first century and beyond by considering the various means by which the form both resists and encourages transformation of content and context, as well as the assertion that, as a culture progresses forward in time, so do its ghosts adapt with the march of time.

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To the cast and crew of the Washington University Performing Arts Department's 1999 production of Ellen McLaughlin's *Iphigenia and Other Daughters*. As well as Ellen McLaughlin, Anne Bogart, Lola Pashalinski, Linda Chapman, and José Rivera.

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each and every day of my life.

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## INTRODUCTION

The classical Nō drama of medieval Japan represents a theatre of intersections: historical, literary, and spiritual. Time and space collide and merge fluidly as the natural and supernatural worlds traverse dimensional barriers, flowing into one another and placing contemporary human characters into intimate contact with phantasmic specters of the past, both legendary and imaginary.<sup>1</sup> It is a realm of Buddhist-inflected tropes of illusion, blurring the phenomenological distinctions between life and death, dream and waking, love and hate, sacred and profane. Even the Nō stage's unchanging stock configuration and minimalist décor imply a crossroads of the flesh and spirit, as it evokes ancient Shinto shrines ornamented by a *matsu*, or pine tree, a conduit by which the *kami*, or gods, may travel to and from the earthly plane of existence. The drama's only true "action" revolves around a standard plot paradigm in which spirits, beneficent and malignant, cling to the detritus of this world (emotional and psychological) and seek release from a type of self-imposed karmic imprisonment by rites of prayer or exorcism. The distinctive human form of the central character, or *shite*, is shrouded from view by wooden masks and layered kimonos, and its only means of expressing the powerful emotion captured within the poetic lines of the sparse Nō texts is via highly stylized singing, chanting, and dance.

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the relative dual nature of the "contemporary" is dependent upon the temporal context of the reader/audience, in proximity to the textual subject matter at hand. Because there exists in classical Nō a somewhat neutral "present" in which the *waki* confronts the *shite*, it may be argued that that "present" is flexibly eternal, as likely to occur today as in the year of the drama's composition. In fact, there is a certain requisite simultaneity in the Nō cosmology that I will explore in more detail throughout the body of this study; moreover, this expansive temporal relationship is key to my analysis of the adaptive process.

The standard trope of the average Nō drama unfolds in the following manner: the *waki* role, usually portraying a traveling Buddhist priest, comes upon a mysterious stranger, the *shite*, in a place possessing either historical, poetic, or spiritual significance. Through the persistent inquiries of the *waki*, the *shite* eventually reveals his or her hidden identity, whether it be that of spirit, god, or mad person. The *shite* then re-enacts some incident from the past, from which the *shite* cannot extricate him/herself, thus trapping his/her spirit in the physical world due to a passionate clinging to earthly attachments. At the end of the Nō play the *shite* is usually either released from this fate through prayer (or exorcism, in the case of a demon) or disappears from the stage, knowing full well it is destined to relive this moment again in an endless cycle. Often, the *shite* will appear at the beginning of the play in one mask and then return as the transformed entity in another mask. In such an instance, the former is referred to as the *maeshite* and the latter as the *nohijite*. Also, a less stylized interlude is sometimes placed at the center of the play's action (most of the time when the *maeshite* undergoes the metamorphosis into the *nohijite*) which involves a *kyōgen* actor, who recounts the exposition of the play's background in the vernacular tongue rather than the ancient chanting of the *waki* and *shite*, thus distinguishing him as a representative of the physical, natural world.

According to Zeami Motokiyo (c. 1363-1443) in his treatise *Fūshikaden* (c. 1402), the ultimate test of a play's beauty and success lies in its ability to inspire *yūgen*, an aesthetic principle whose meaning has fluctuated significantly over the centuries. While scholars such as Donald Keene and J. Thomas Rimer translate *yūgen* in its application to Zeami's dramaturgy as "grace," it is a constantly shifting concept of sublime mystery and awe

initiated by the poetry of the text and the actor's skill, often determined by that which is unseen rather than what is explicit.<sup>2</sup>

In a contemporary performance context, the Nō is often regarded as a precious museum relic of sorts, in which modern audiences are themselves transported back in time to view archaic acting styles codified centuries ago and preserved over time by strict family traditions, in much the same way that the Comédie Française in Paris has retained the Renaissance performance styles of theatrical masters such as Molière, Racine, and Corneille. Since the Meiji Restoration and the subsequent opening up of Japan to the West over a century and a half ago, the Nō has become a subject of great curiosity and intense study for European and American writers and scholars alike, inspiring many playwrights to attempt to integrate Nō structure and aesthetic techniques into their own *oeuvres*. Among its chief early Western disciples were literary luminaries such as Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, and Paul Claudel, each of whom assimilated what they perceived to be elements of the Nō into their writings in order to embrace a new sense of symbolic formalism, looking to the poetic abstract past as a vehicle to theorize a new Modern style for the present and future. Elements of Nō's influence may also be found in select works by Bertolt Brecht (by way of his fascination with Chinese opera and "Oriental" theatre) and Samuel Beckett (through his appreciation of the works of Yeats).

Between 1949 and 1962, Japanese intellectual and acclaimed *littérateur* Yukio Mishima (1925-70) composed a series of nine "modern Nō plays," a self-professed new form based on classical sources, yet possessing markedly twentieth-century characteristics, not the least of which was a utilization of techniques from the *shingeki*,

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<sup>2</sup> Zeami. *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*. Trans. J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984. 44.

the popular Western style of dramatic writing embraced by Japanese audiences in the late nineteenth century via the works of European writers such as Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov.<sup>3</sup> In his modern Nō, Mishima transplants recognizable characters and situations of the Nō from the idyllic world of ancient court romances and Buddhist homilies to a coarse, urbanized Japan that rejects the traditions of its past. Again and again, vengeful apparitions from a seemingly dead world slip through the ruptures in the veil between past and present, nature and industry, to rail against the denizens of a decadent nation taken over by concrete, glass, and neon lights. Through its use of distinctively Western dramaturgy to espouse the intrinsic value of fading Japanese traditions, the modern Nō form embodies a typical paradox found elsewhere in Mishima's personal, philosophical, and political identity, as reflected by his writings. It may be surmised that in these plays, Mishima finds the perfect outlet for his creative impulses, by exploiting the liminal nature of the classical Nō's permeable boundaries between the tangible and intangible as a metaphor for the modern world and perhaps even his own ever-shifting identity.

Other twentieth and twenty-first-century playwrights have also experimented with the Nō form and aesthetic, embracing its stylistic formality, use of dense literary allusion, and transgressive supernaturalism to comment upon the spiritual hunger of the modern world, mythologizing the present moment in the process. The introduction of Nō performance principles into popular theatre culture has been kindled by such progressive

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<sup>3</sup> Complete dated list of Mishima's modern Nō plays:

*Yuya* – 1949 (Published 1955)

*Kantan* – 1950

*Aya no tsuzumi (The Damask Drum)* – 1951

*Sotoba Komachi* – 1952

*Aoi no ue (The Lady Aoi)* – 1954

*Hanjo* – 1956

*Dōjōji* – 1957

*Yoroboshi (The Blind Young Man)* – 1960

*Genji kuyō (A Memorial Service for Prince Genji)* – 1962

arts groups as Theatre of Yūgen (San Francisco, CA) and through the innovative multicultural training techniques of Anne Bogart (b. 1951, artistic director of New York's internationally-acclaimed SITI Company) and Tadashi Suzuki (b. 1939, artistic director of Japan's Suzuki Company of Toga). Similarly, intertextual critics and scholars have begun to trace elements of Nō that appear throughout the traditional Western dramatic canon, leading to new interpretations of works such as Thornton Wilder's American opus *Our Town* and the plays of Sam Shepard, as well as classical Greek tragedy and Shakespeare.

Subject matter explored within recent Nō-influenced dramas includes inspiration from such diverse sources as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Erik Ehn, 2004), the legend of the Jersey Devil (*Pine Barrens* by Greg Giovanni, 2006), and aliens visiting the dead shell of the Earth following an apocalyptic nuclear holocaust (Janine Beichman's *Drifting Fires*, 1986). Tokyo's Setagaya Public Theatre has commissioned young avant-garde playwrights to create an ongoing series of contemporary Nō plays for a new generation, inspired by the classical texts of yesterday and the news headlines of today. Japanese auteur Takeshi Kawamura (b. 1959) melds paranoid sexual psychosis with the emerging genre of J-horror in his twenty-first-century versions of *AOI* and *KOMACHI*, borrowing heavily from the example of Mishima's own versions of these classic texts. Kenneth Yasuda characterizes the martyrdom of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a moment of apotheosis, in which the slain civil rights leader is transformed into a modern *bodhisattva*, a spiritual guide who has ascended to a new spiritual plane of existence. Deborah Brevoort creates a *bodhisattva* of a different kind altogether in *Blue Moon Over*

*Memphis*, portraying rock and roll legend and pop cultural icon Elvis Presley as a deliverer of spiritual peace and transcendence to his most loyal of fans.

### Nō as Comparative Theatre

This dissertation is a comparative study of dramaturgical strategies utilized in twentieth and twenty-first-century works of theatre, both Asian and Western, that adapt formal and aesthetic elements of classical Japanese Nō drama, focusing primarily on the modernistic models established by Yukio Mishima and employing them as a standard template by which other contemporary Nō dramas are evaluated. I hope to show that, due to its intrinsic intertextuality, the Nō is an ideal dramatic form for contemporary adaptation because, as an intrinsically adapted form in its own right, it welcomes multiple historical and stylistic perspectives; it also possesses at its heart a transformative aesthetic that drives its unique sense of action, setting, character, cosmology, and language. Further, through this process I also hope to identify and classify universal elements of the adaptive process that may be applicable to other genres and styles of classical drama, as well as those components unique to the Nō that resist transformation. Finally, I plan to trace the potential trajectory of the Nō's continued development as a dynamic form of artistic expression well into the twenty-first century and beyond.

My purpose is not to develop the scholarly tradition of classical Nō studies; my concern is rather with the field of comparative theater studies, and my focus is exclusively on recent stage adaptations of structural and thematic elements borrowed explicitly and implicitly from classical Japanese theatrical traditions, primarily in English translation. The continuum of dramatic adaptation studies is a somewhat self-perpetuating (even cannibalistic at times) system of multilayered schemes of



interpretation. It collapses in on itself in amorphous arrangements of oscillating referentiality, frequently filtered through centuries of reading and re-reading (often misreading) – adaptations of translations, which are themselves at heart a form of adaptation; adaptations based upon the acceptance or rejection of dominant cultural bias(es); adaptations which seek to correct or augment traditions of misinterpretation of linguistic or performative signs. But in the end, each new adaptation creates its own unique theatrical idiom to re-examine and reconnect with that which has been expressed before, using distinctive linguistic or performative conventions.

My research focuses on the identification and analysis of convergent and divergent patterns of plot, character development, theme, allusion, and other such literary devices within the dialogic relationship of adapted works (metatexts) and their source material (prototexts), when such source material exists. The study is especially concerned with exploring the innate intertextuality of the Nō form, and how the role of influence and intertexts, and the subversive or transformative act of adaptation itself, informs modern and contemporary stylistic analogues. Additionally, the critical and theoretical reaction to the modernized Nō provides vital clues to structural and philosophical concerns, and aesthetic agendas, of the writers who have experimented with the Nō form. The study of Mishima's modern Nō will be supplemented by an examination of other adaptive strategies exhibited within two contemporary American Nō plays based upon the lives and legends of Elvis Presley and Martin Luther King, Jr. As a means of establishing a methodological paradigm for this study of contemporary Nō, an introductory chapter that outlines similar tactics within modern dramatic adaptations of classical Greek models is also included.

Thus, by comparing and contrasting the varying aesthetic and compositional strategies employed by twentieth and twenty-first-century playwrights in their attempts to convert Japanese Nō to the contemporary international stage, using the modern Nō plays of Yukio Mishima as a standard for assessment, I intend to explore the intertextual appeal and function of the Nō as a potent source of literary inspiration.

### Adaptation as Intertextual Impulse

On the most basic level, adaptation studies depend upon the existence of at least two texts that share an intertextual relationship, explicitly or implicitly, largely determined by a system of influence. In most cases, this manifests itself via a derived text whose origins may be traced to an earlier text, yet whose intrinsic identity is dependent upon quantifiable innovations performed upon the source text through a series of additions, deletions, and other such alterations on a structural and/or stylistic level. It is therefore helpful to seek out a system of analysis that aids in the identification, classification, and critical evaluation of such textual relationships, particularly in an age of intertextual responses that do not depend upon linear, causal modes of influence to determine correlation.

Throughout his illustrious career as a scholar of poetic theory, Gérard Genette (b. 1930) has sought to systematize what he refers to as “transtextuality, or the textual transcendence of the text.”<sup>4</sup> Spurred on by the same concerns as Julia Kristeva and Michael Riffaterre, Genette devotes entire volumes to the careful step-by-step analysis of

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<sup>4</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln, NE: U of NE P, 1997. 1.

a text's micro- and macro-relationships to other texts, whether explicit or implicit. In *Palimpsests* (subtitled in English translation as "Literature in the Second Degree,"), he explores the vast relationships between new texts "written over" older ones to allow a form of "double reading."<sup>5</sup> Within this system, *hypertexts* are linked to earlier *hypotexts* through a complex series of transformations, which he traces in methodical detail throughout the expansive pages of *Palimpsests*, with great critical care and even greater humor.

Genette also refers to a category of transtextuality deemed "metatextuality," by which he means the relationship of mediation that occurs when a text provides commentary upon a pre-existing work (the example he uses to illustrate this point is the relationship of Aristotle's *Poetics* to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*).<sup>6</sup> Yet, even Genette agrees that, at least on a purely linguistic level, the distinction between "meta-" and "hyper-" may be a confusing one, as both indicate "a text derived from a preexisting text."<sup>7</sup> So it comes as no surprise that other critics have embarked upon similar intertextual pursuits under the banner of "metatextuality." The leading proponent of metatextual studies is Anton Popovič (1933-94), whose interest in the subject lies within the realm of semiotics. In the same way that hypertextuality is a subset of transtextuality for Genette, metatextuality, for Popovič, is one of many activities related to "meta-communication," or "all types of processing (manipulation) of the original literary text ... [which] is manifested in the form of further texts which are about the original texts."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Macksey, Richard. Foreword. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. By Gérard Genette. Trans. Jane Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. xv.

<sup>6</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Popovič, Anton. "Aspects of Metatext." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 3 (1976): 225-35. 226.

Popovič's system subsumes Genette's separate categories of hypertextuality and metatextuality, but the qualifying criteria for its classification and application are concise and eminently functional. Popovič and Genette do agree on a number of points, most notably the transformative nature of metatextuality, which is, for me, key to its utilization for the study of adaptations of *Nō*, particularly within the guiding aesthetic principle of liminality that I employ throughout this study.

While I am guided in principle and spirit by Genette's theories and while I base much of my specific analysis of textual inter-relationships in this dissertation upon the critical framework laid out in *Palimpsests*, I find Popovič's basic terminology and systematic breakdown of adaptive principles to be more direct and useful for my purposes.<sup>9</sup> Thus, I defer to Popovič's clarity of phrasing (and the significant supplemental criticism supplied by his adherents) in referring to this aspect of my analysis as "metatextual theory" and using his major qualifying terms, such as "prototext" (Genette's hypotext – a source text) and "metatext" (Genette's hypertext – a new text derived from a dialogic discourse with the earlier prototext), as central components of this dissertation's lexicon.

Without strict limitations of scope, the expansiveness of this study and its subject matter could easily fill up multiple volumes with valuable comparative analyses. Therefore, I attempt to limit the metatextual component of my inquiry to the direct prototexts of the original *Nō* texts, rather than the non-dramatic texts upon which the individual *Nō* plays themselves are based. For example, while *The Tale of Genji*, *The Tale of the Heike*, and the major classical poetic anthologies such as the *Kokinshū* serve

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<sup>9</sup> Genette's other major works, which include *Paratexts* and *The Architext: An Introduction* (1979), have provided great insight for my dissertation and many other areas of interest/research that form the basis of my scholarly career.

as important *honzetsu* (allusive sources) for the original Nō dramas, their importance is contextual at best for my present purposes. They are valuable “*ur*-texts” for the classical Nō’s rich literary tradition. While Mishima, Kawamura, and Yasuda are well versed in these original sources, they play a minimal role in the adaptive continuum of modern and contemporary Nō drama, except as general examples for twentieth and twenty-first-century playwrights to derive their own systems of allusion. Thus, I am interested primarily in the role that theatrical text and form play in establishing precedents for later adapted works for the stage.

### Categories, Strategies, and Tactics of the Adaptive Process

I have chosen to consolidate the varied discourse surrounding metatextual theory and adaptation into a centralized system of classification that best suits the scope of my specific inquiry. Thus, I have identified two major adaptive categories, supported by four basic textual strategies, which will be employed throughout this study to analyze not only the practice of adaptation but its impact as well.

A *direct adaptation*, which is the most common and recognizable form of adaptation, exists when a discernible correlative relationship may be identified between prototext(s) and metatext, by explicit acknowledged influence on the part of the adaptor. An example of this exists when Jean Anouilh writes a modern *Antigone* (1943), explicitly citing Sophocles’ title, or when Eugene O’Neill creates a trilogy patterned after Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* called *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), in which structural and thematic clues in the text are supplemented by the existence of the original Greek female

protagonist's name in the newer play's title. The first three major strategies listed below may be classified as employing a direct means of adaptation.

An *indirect adaptation* occurs when a metatext shares implicit or perceived relationships with a pre-existing text or series of texts, but shares no explicit structural components with, or discernible influence from, said work(s). This category of adaptation is more difficult to quantify and open to debate, as its intertextual component may depend wholly upon the interpretive skills of the reader. For example, a modern play in which a mother kills her child may be classified and analyzed as a "modern *Medea*," even if it contains very few, if any, correlatives to Euripides' original tragedy; the reader's intertextual association with the ancient Greek play's thematic trope may be enough to qualify a critical relationship. Additionally, as will be explored in this study via the final strategy below, a metatext that attempts to imitate a distinct genre as a whole, such as a modern play with an original plot but patterned in structure and execution after a medieval pageant drama, falls within the realm of indirect adaptation.

The four major strategies contained within these two overarching categories of adaptation are as follows:

1. *Correlative*: This is the most direct or "faithful" adaptation of the prototext, more akin to a new translation, in which the adaptor retains the prototext's original structure, characters, settings, plot, and context. Often, the impetus to create an adaptation of this kind may be scholarly rather than performative, as a means to rescue the extant translation from archaic language or to reconcile it with new historical findings about the text, such as the rediscovery of missing passages or the extraction of erroneous text mistakenly attributed to

the author. In other words, the original text's *content and context remain intact*. This is the strategy to which I devote the least amount of time in this study.

2. Extrapolative: In this type of adaptation, the distinctive features of the prototext remain intact and recognizable, though their correlative markers may have altered slightly, acquiring new names or associations, often as a means of applying contemporary sociopolitical relevance or immediacy to a classical text's action or themes. Thus, while the integral *content* of the prototext may remain unchanged, its *context has undergone a transformation*. The adaptor expands upon pre-existing elements of the prototext, perhaps placing new emphasis on marginalized characters or themes or transposing the action into a new locale or time. Despite such alterations, the individual components of the text retain their analogous connection to the source work. Using an extrapolative strategy of adaptation, the adaptor establishes the metatext as nexus for *convergence* that *invokes* the prototext.
3. Interpolative: This is a "loose" adaptation, in which the prototext serves as a source for inspiration, a jumping-off point, for the adaptor's own imagination and/or aesthetic agenda. While there is a clear indication of influence between the new work and its source material(s), such as echoes of title or character names, there is no conscious attempt on the part of the author to recreate a recognizable version of the prototext. Often, the source material's most distinctive features may be totally absent, or perceptible only in faint traces. The radical textual transmutations that occur alter *both content and*

*context*. The adaptor may drastically shift the structure and intent of the prototext by inserting new characters, cultural settings, and motivations, often filling in narrative gaps with new scenes. Additionally, the adaptor may subvert the authorial intent or the textual impact of the prototext by altering the trajectory of the narrative (i.e., changing the ending) or modifying character objectives. A common type of interpolative adaptation is the prequel or sequel, such as Percy MacKaye's poetic tetralogy *The Mystery of Hamlet, King of Denmark* (1950) or Lee Blessing's *Fortinbras* (1992).<sup>10</sup> Using an interpolative strategy, the adaptor emphasizes the metatext's *divergence* from the prototext in a manner that merely *evokes* the original.

4. *Stylistic*: This is an adaptation that seeks to capture the structural and thematic essence of a pre-existing genre or style in order to create a contextual framework for a new piece of literature. There is no direct correlative with the specific components of any model text, apart from a studied awareness of standard tropes and characteristics. The adaptor assimilates idiosyncratic compositional elements, such as choral odes or verse meters, the use of technical elements such as masks or puppets, or even stereotypical acting techniques, to juxtapose a contemporary plot. Examples of this type of adaptation may include a Nō play about a nuclear holocaust, a Greek tragedy about terrorism, a Shakespearean verse drama about Vietnam. The two principal forms of

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<sup>10</sup> A similarly structured, and far superior, interpolative adaptation, whose action runs concurrently with that of its prototext, as opposed to preceding or succeeding it, is Tom Stoppard's brilliant *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. It may be argued that Stoppard's work is actually a sequel, given the ultimate discovery that its protagonists, as the title indicates, exist in a state of perpetual limbo until they make the grim discovery that they have been murdered. Stoppard's play is an interesting case in point for this study, because it is in fact a dual interpolation, simultaneously adapted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.



stylistic adaptation I consider in this dissertation are *homage* and *parody*.<sup>11</sup>

Homage often attempts to place its subject within the context of an established literary genre in order to create resonant associations by proxy with its traditions and heritage. On the other hand, authors often engage in parody as a means of satirizing the traditions associated with the assimilated literary style through devices such as hyperbole and irony.

### Liminality and the Nō

The Nō is a liminal art form, as the drama occurs at a metaphysical junction between entertainment and religious ritual. Its setting is, both geographically and experientially, a spiritual crossroads at which a transformative act occurs, resulting in the transcendent passage of identity from one phase of being to the next. Time and space are stripped of their traditional boundaries at the moment in which the *shite* revisits a past moment of grief, anger, love, etc., that engenders the never-ending cyclical dream which imprisons him/her in the physical world, often changing masks in the process. The prayers of the *waki* and the chorus, accompanied by the *shite*'s dance and chanting, release the tormented soul from its attachment to this life. Even the specific poetic resonances of the drama's *mise en scène*, augmented by the supernatural conduit provided by architecture and décor of the standardized Nō stage, invite the intercession of supernatural forces.

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<sup>11</sup> Gérard Genette, in *Palimpsests* (1982), expands the role of these two concepts to also include modes of travesty, pastiche, and burlesque. When relevant, I will clarify his distinctions among these terms, but for my particular focus in this study, it is enough to establish the basic conceptual polarity between reverence and mockery that these terms convey. Linda Hutcheon, and numerous film critics, also use the term *homage* frequently as a means of tracing influential parameters between text, image, and even cinematography.

According to anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-83), this transformational poetic structure resembles the standard transitional phase of life, which often occurs during tribal rites of passage. During such rites of passage, the participant crosses a threshold from innocence to experience, from youth to maturity, from novice to warrior. But it is the specific act of transgressing the portal, and the particular details associated with its concomitant ceremony, that interest Turner and his theories' proponents. Within the spatio-temporal confines of the ritual act itself, the participant is thrust into a marginalized state of being, a condition of pure potential that is paradoxical and accommodates an altered stage of multiple consciousnesses and identities. During this stage, Turner states, "They evade ordinary cognitive classification, too, for they are neither-this-nor-that, here-nor-there, one-thing-not-the-other."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, he asserts that the process by which they attain this intermediary status briefly grants them the power to straddle the frontiers of identity as "*both this and that*."<sup>13</sup> In other words, while still confined within the borders of the transitional ceremony, the participant is temporarily *both* the person (s)he was prior to its initiation *and* following its successful completion. While within this highly receptive state, the "liminary" (Turner's terminology) is also susceptible to supernatural encounters such as spiritual possession and godlike visions.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Turner, Victor. "Variations on a Theme of Liminality." *Secular Ritual* (1977): 36-52. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Turner, "Variations," 37. Emphasis is Turner's.

<sup>14</sup> I am interested in pursuing further research and writing about this concept, determining whether it is the *shite* or the *waki* who embodies the true liminary role in the Nō, both classical and modern.

Turner actively applies his theories to an assortment of theatrical genres, including the classical Nō, in his essay “Liminality and the Performative Genres.”<sup>15</sup> Using his principles as a guideline, I will investigate the Nō’s liminal qualities as they pertain to the drama’s transformational aesthetic, tracking how these qualities vary between classical source and modern adaptation. In fact, liminality theory may be used to illuminate the intertextual adaptive impulse as well. The nature of adaptation suggests that a metatext simultaneously strives to assert its own literary or performative autonomy, while inescapably evoking reference to its prototext(s). Linda Hutcheon refers to this multiplicity as “textual oscillation,” which forces both the adaptor *and* the “knowing reader” to read an adapted text on several levels concurrently, in a “double process of interpreting and then creating something new,” thus transforming the audience into a participant in the adaptation process.<sup>16</sup> I explore these ideas in more detail later in Chapter One, within the context of a more thorough examination of the “palimpsestuousness” of the adaptation process.

### Supernaturalism and Other Aesthetic Focuses

It is impossible to embark upon a study of Nō drama without acknowledging the integral role played by its innately supernatural components. Whether one interprets these elements as religious, philosophical, occult, or merely symbolic, the classical Nō paints a landscape populated by angels, ghosts, demons, and gods, navigated by traveling Buddhist priests seeking spiritual enlightenment. How does one transpose this

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<sup>15</sup> Turner, Victor. “Liminality and the Performative Genres.” *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*. Ed. John J. MacAloon. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984. 19-41.

<sup>16</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. NY: Routledge, 2006. 20.

conventional trope of paranormal characters, settings, and themes into the modern theatre, so dominated by psychological realism for over a century? And yet, one must concede that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries possess a rich legacy of supernatural literature (fantasy, dark fantasy/horror, arguably even absurdism) that runs the gamut of a wide spectrum of interpretive possibilities, including the possibility of very real intrusion of supernatural forces into our natural world.

Therefore, while theories of metatextuality provide a semiotic framework for the adaptive process and theories of liminality provide cultural insight into the transformational landscape of the Nō's poetics, I have chosen to identify the specific uses of the supernatural as a common thematic focal point of my critical inquiry. Examining how uncanny forces manifest themselves in Nō drama developmentally, from established prototexts to their respective modern and contemporary metatexts, provides clues to the socio-historical, political, spiritual, and aesthetic agendas of the playwrights studied here. The means by which a particular author chooses to include a ghostly character or incident, or instead substitutes it with a non-paranormal surrogate (or perhaps excises it altogether), has an impact on the total effect of the modern or contemporary Nō. The metaphysical aspects of the Nō may be reduced or expanded, explained away or made more enigmatic, stripped of spiritual power or made more active. But, ultimately, in each case these dramaturgical decisions correlate directly with other adaptive transformations of character, theme, plot, and setting.

In order to contextualize the role of the supernatural in twentieth and twenty-first-century Nō, I will supplement my arguments with references to the theory of the Uncanny, which shares points of intersection with the classical Japanese aesthetic of

*yūgen*. Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) concepts of the *unheimlich* (the Uncanny), derived largely from his reading of the fantasy literature of E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822), investigate the fear and horror initiated by that which cannot be understood through conventional sensory or emotional perception. Contemporary urban architects such as Anthony Vidler have merged elements of these two theories to arrive at a definition of the "metropolitan uncanny," which investigates the psychic alienation brought on by the (questionable) advances of city life, alienation that multiplies exponentially when one considers the relocation of supernatural forces to skyscrapers and city parks flooded with artificial light.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, such a shift transmutes the aesthetic resonance of *yūgen*, that elusive, indefinable Japanese term which seeks to capture the sublime mystery of beauty hidden in shadows, among contemporary Nō metatexts.

Finally, the classical Nō's intrinsic hypertheatricality, or its self-awareness as a performative medium, as evidenced by the conventions of masks, chorus, ritualized dance and chanting, and a declamatory style of dialogue, provides a signifying trace of adaptive strategies that can be compared between contemporary Nō and its antecedents. With the introduction of *shingeki*, or Western-style performance, in Japanese theatre at the end of the nineteenth century, the rigidity of the many formal conventions associated with traditional theatre found in Nō, Bunraku, and Kabuki has been abandoned in favor of a less stylized, ostensibly realistic form of performance, as typified by Western playwrights such as Chekhov, Ibsen, and Miller. Similarly, some writers of modern and contemporary Nō have adopted naturalistic performance styles while others have retained the form's strict conventions. In the same way that I map the shifting role of the

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<sup>17</sup> While it plays a background role to my study in the following chapters, I intend on exploring the connection between modern Nō and Vidler's theories of the metropolitan uncanny in future conference papers and articles.

supernatural across time and culture in this study, I also examine the degree to which hypertheatrical conventions are retained or abandoned (and in some cases, amplified) in the transformation of Nō for modern audiences.

### The Uses of Mishima

Because I believe the modern Nō plays of Yukio Mishima represent the most successful integration of classical Nō text and contemporary theatrical experience, I establish Mishima's dramas as a template against which I evaluate the quality of other Nō adaptations, a comparative lens through which I view their dramaturgical strategies. As such, brief intertextual references to Mishima's complete modern Nō canon accompany my extended critical analysis. Since my interest in Mishima revolves primarily around his identity as a dramatist, his fiction plays a minimal role in this study. However, I do refer to several key nonfiction essays by Mishima that provide biographical, cultural, political, and aesthetic context for his interest in the functions of past traditions in the modern world, especially in terms of his criticism of the declining values and social consciousness of 1960s Japan.

In addition to providing a pattern for comparative analysis of other examples of twentieth and twenty-first-century versions of Nō, Mishima's modern Nō may also supply key insights to unlocking the enigmatic qualities of this controversial figure whose life ended prematurely with his suicide in November 1970. Throughout his career, Mishima's writing reveals a man at war with himself, struggling to reconcile the ever-shifting, extreme polarities of his identity: masculine/feminine, physical/intellectual, traditional/radical, sacred/profane, beauty/decay, classical/modern, high caste/low caste,

and Eastern/Western, to name just a few. The liminal environment of the Nō equips him with a paradigmatic setting for his dramas in which these battling dualities can coexist without the need for artificial resolution. Therefore, while a biographical analysis of Mishima's modern Nō is not within the scope of this study, I do lay the foundation for my own future research with some preliminary arguments and textual evidence that links these dramas to Mishima's own personal conflicts.

#### Scope of Inquiry: Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, I explore the basic adaptive concepts and strategies outlined in this Introduction in greater detail, applying their usage to the modern theatrical adaptation of classical Greek drama and mythology. By doing so, I am able to provide a preliminary model of these dramaturgical strategies in praxis that can be transferred to their application in the context of twentieth and twenty-first-century Nō, both from an Asian and a Western cultural/literary perspective. In addition to outlining P. J. Conradi's criteria for effective modern adaptation of classical dramatic texts, I also examine Anton Popovič's theories of metatextuality in direct comparison and contrast to Gérard Genette's theories of textual transcendence and hypertextuality. The primary works that I investigate summarily in this chapter include Jean Cocteau's philosophical comedy *La Machine Infernale* (*The Infernal Machine*, 1934), Lee Breuer's gospel musical *The Gospel at Colonus* (1983), and Ellen McLaughlin's experimental feminist revision of Euripides and Sophocles, *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (1995).

In Chapters Two and Three, I explore Mishima's use of extrapolative and interpolative adaptive strategies in the composition of his modern Nō plays, while

focusing my primary critical analysis upon the text of *Aoi no ue* (*The Lady Aoi*, 1956). In Chapter Two, I introduce the modern Nō as distinct theatrical form, contextualizing it within the aesthetic and political framework of Mishima's other dramatic and non-dramatic works. Mishima engages the original prototexts of his modern Nō in intertextual dialogue, and in doing so, contextualizes the role of various character archetypes as representations of an idealized Japan of the past. In *The Lady Aoi*, Mishima amplifies the dissonance caused by the supernatural incursion of Rokujō's spectral alter ego to turn back the sands of time, by situating it within the jarring modern setting of mid-century modern Japan. Exorcism collides with Freudian psychoanalysis and a debate of aesthetic principles mutates into a war of true love, with vampiric, life-or-death consequences. I examine Mishima's treatment of *The Lady Aoi* not only in relation to its original textual antecedent in the classical Nō canon, but also in relation to twenty-first-century prototextual transformations of the source material written by avant-garde playwright and director Takeshi Kawamura. Takeshi Kawamura's "postmodern Nō" owe a debt not only to their classical prototexts, but to Mishima's as well, thereby thrusting Mishima into the midst of a continuum of influence and intertextuality.

In addition to my extensive analysis of *The Lady Aoi*, I also incorporate brief case studies of several of Mishima's lesser-known modern Nō plays that interpret their prototextual antecedents loosely, deviating significantly from their classical source material by utilizing an interpolative strategy of adaptation. While it is possible to see the metatextual connections between *Yoroboshi* (*The Blind Young Man*, 1960), *Yuya* (1949/1955), and the canonical Nō texts from which they derive their major dramaturgical components, Mishima inserts such significant additions to the texts that



such connections are ultimately ancillary at best. These plays contemporize their subject matter through subversive tactics, altering core factors of plot, character, and theme from the medieval dramas upon which they are based. In each of these dramas, there is also a marked absence of the supernatural in the traditional manner represented within Nō texts, namely the tangible appearance of some ghost or demon, a quality that is shared with their respective prototexts. However, in the post-World War II Japan of Mishima's drama, this aspect is heightened and may be interpreted as indicative of the nation's perilous loss of faith in its past traditions.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I investigate two contemporary American adaptations of the Nō form that transform iconic historical figures from popular culture (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Elvis Presley) into *shite* roles. Translator Kenneth Yasuda's *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Nō Play* (1983) and Deborah Brevoort's *Blue Moon Over Memphis* (2003) apply the indirect strategy of stylistic homage to create formal Nō dramatic structures of dance, music, and allusion that serve as a vital theatrical framework for the poetic journey of their characters. In much the same way that Mishima's *Yoroboshi* connects his modern Nō aesthetic to classical concepts of *mappō*, the spiritual guidance provided by the *shite* figures in Yasuda's and Brevoort's contemporary Nō resonates with the traditional Buddhist role of the *bodhisattva*. Elvis and Dr. King are transformed into contemporary *bodhisattvas*, enlightened beings whose essence has remained behind to escort pilgrims towards spiritual fulfillment. Both contemporary playwrights situate their *shite* characters in relationship to *waki* whose reverence for them ranges from benign devotion to fanatical hero worship. I briefly consider classical and contemporary

hypotheses about the identity and role of the *bodhisattva* in society, in order to position my critical argument within a viable philosophical context.

## CHAPTER ONE

### METATEXT AND MONOMYTH:

#### AN APPLIED METHODOLOGY OF ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES AS EVIDENCED THROUGH MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY DRAMATIC VERSIONS OF GREEK MYTH

In the Introduction to his 1957 translation of Yukio Mishima's *Kindai nogakushū* (*Five Modern Nō Plays*), Donald Keene compares Mishima's dramaturgical transformations of classical Japanese Nō to twentieth-century adaptations of Greek tragedy, such as Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) and Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* (1934). Keene asserts:

In none of these instances is it necessary to be acquainted with the original play in order to appreciate the new one. Each stands on its own merit, but at the same time a knowledge of the earlier work adds a dimension and permits us to measure the workings of a modern intelligence against a familiar background.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief statement, Keene succinctly summarizes a core concern of contemporary adaptation studies – the ubiquitous tension between fidelity and autonomy. Is the appreciation of a new version of a classical play dependent upon an audience's foreknowledge of the original text? Is adaptation merely a derivative art, or can it be regarded as a creative pursuit? At what point does an adaptation subsume, even surpass, the source material upon which it is based? And can an adaptation retroactively illuminate hidden aspects of texts rooted in the traditions of the past? These are but a few of the central questions that drive the analytical trajectory of this study's inquiry, as they

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<sup>1</sup> Keene, Donald. Introduction. *Five Modern Nō Plays*. By Yukio Mishima. Trans. Keene. NY: Knopf, 1957. vii-xvii. xv.

relate to the process of textual transformation undertaken in the creation of twentieth and twenty-first-century versions of Nō drama.

As Keene observes in the passage quoted above, modern adaptations of Greek tragedy may serve as a helpful comparative model for the analysis of Mishima's *kindai* Nō, or "modern Nō," and consequently, other modern and contemporary adaptations of Nō as well. Scholars such as Mae Smethurst have devoted years of study to the comparative similarities between Attic tragedy and Japanese Nō drama in their classical forms – structural, thematic, performative.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to his groundbreaking English translations of Japanese Nō, Arthur Waley (1889-1966) alludes to many likenesses between Greek tragedy and Nō, not the least of which was the power of their texts as literature:

The *libretti* of Greek tragedy have won for themselves a separate existence simply as poetic literature. Yet even of them it has been said that "the words are only part of the poem." Still less did the words of Nō constitute the whole "poem," yet if some cataclysm were to sweep away the Nō theatre, I think the plays (as literature) would live.<sup>3</sup>

By tracing these common anthropological origins in indigenous religious ritual or paralleling their comparable uses of mask, music, dance, and choral conventions, it is not difficult to begin to see recurrent patterns emerge across cultural and historical boundaries that link the two styles of drama intertextually.

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<sup>2</sup> My own research has resulted in a comparative textual study of Kan'ami's *Sotoba Komachi* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, which I presented at conferences in Florida and Missouri. This study examined the structural, thematic, and performative aspects of the two works, as manifest in the respective author's treatment of the sanctity of space (both internally [within the world of the play] and externally [a hypertheatrical examination of the ritual/festival performance context of Nō performance spaces and the Dionysian theatre festivals]). Further, an expanded version of this conference paper includes a section comparing the classical texts with their twentieth century analogues, represented by Yukio Mishima's *Sotoba Komachi* and Lee Breuer's *The Gospel at Colonus*.

<sup>3</sup> Waley, Arthur. *The Nō Plays of Japan*. London: Allen Unwin, 1921. 52.

Additionally, the authors of both ancient Greek drama and Nō concentrate attention upon issues of the personal and the universal, with transcendent spirituality and human accountability among their chief recurring motifs. While the specific scope of this study does not permit an extensive inquiry into these literary similarities, we may assume that the close interrelation of the classical models suggests, by extension, the sharing of structural and thematic components with transmutations that occur across time and cultures as well.

In this chapter I intend to provide practical insight to the key concepts and terms that I will utilize throughout the next few chapters of this study. I will briefly outline and compare the major adaptive theories of Linda Hutcheon, Gérard Genette, Anton Popovič, and P. J. Conradie. As heirs to the intertextual models established by Kristeva and Riffaterre, Hutcheon, Genette, and Popovič overlap on essential points, but each emphasizes different perspectives and adopts a distinctive, idiosyncratic discursive lexicon. Although his conservative formalist and structuralist critical tendencies may seem out of place when matched with these intertextual critics, Conradie is integral to my central argument because his criteria for adaptation pertain specifically to *dramatic* adaptations derived from classical models. Throughout this discussion, I will explore the philosophy of adaptation as indicative of the transformational urge of the human imagination. Finally, I succinctly apply the analytical template suggested by Hutcheon, Genette, Popovič, and Conradie to several modern and contemporary dramatic reinterpretations of classical Greek prototexts as a practical means of illustrating the strategies that will be applied to Nō in Chapters Two through Four.

## Neon in the Theatron: Modernizing the Greeks

For the past two thousand years, generations of Western playwrights have revisited the classical Greek drama and reshaped its basic tropes within the respective spatio-temporal framework of the present moment. From the Romans to Shakespeare, from the Neoclassical poets to the Modernists, from the Absurdist to the writers of today, few dramatic traditions in the West have escaped the influence of the Attic tragedians or Aristophanes' biting satire; the liturgically-centered miracle and morality plays of the medieval European Church comprise one major historical exception. The characters and situations of Greek tragedy are as familiar as the headlines of the daily news. In fact, we often automatically contextualize the modern world within the mythic lexicon of the classical world. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the Trojan War routinely becomes a symbolic surrogate for every historical war and, indeed, for war in general. We effortlessly associate civil disobedience with its righteous Antigones. The unspeakable (and yet ominously recurrent) crime of infanticide breeds in our imaginations a parade of Medeas. A political leader consumed by his own *hubris*, be it a Bush or a Mugabe, cannot escape the connotation linked to Oedipus before his inevitable fall.<sup>4</sup> And any spokesman for unpopular truth, standing up against the masses in the face of all doubt, even at his/her own peril, may be branded a Cassandra with little difficulty.

Few literary traditions have undergone as many theatrical incarnations over the centuries as these ancient Greek tales of Olympian gods and goddesses, of Attic heroes and villains. With the exception of the works of Shakespeare, no other narratives have made their way onto the stages of the twentieth and twenty-first century with such

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<sup>4</sup> Itself, the socially standardized term for unblinking, blind pride in the face of self-destruction, derived from classical tragedy.

continued abundance and power. During the last decade alone, commercial and non-profit theatres across the United States have staged award-winning, critically acclaimed, often iconic productions based upon Greek originals, including Will Power's hip-hop version of *The Seven* (2006), based upon the warring sons of Oedipus; Michael John LaChiusa's *Marie Christine* (1999), an interracial retelling of *Medea* set in nineteenth century New Orleans; Sarah Ruhl's dreamlike *Eurydice*, whose limited Off-Broadway run was extended numerous times and which has become one of the most produced plays of the 2008-09 American theatrical season; and, perhaps most surprisingly, John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, a glam-rock concert extravaganza about an East German transsexual based upon Plato's *Symposium*, which has developed near-cult status as a stage show (1998) and subsequent film (2001). The 2008 presidential election season even brought Wendy Weiner's parody of the Clinton years, *Hillary: A Modern Greek Tragedy With a (Somewhat) Happy Ending*, to the New York stage.

Additionally, classical Greek drama has survived cross-cultural transformation relatively unscathed. In the late 1980s, Ariane Mnouchkine re-envisioned *The Oresteia*, using the dance drama conventions of Indian Kathakali, in her globetrotting production of *Les Atrides* (1990-92). Wole Soyinka infuses tribal African ritual into his new interpretation of Euripides' Dionysian orgy of sexuality and violence, *The Bacchae* (1973). The social defiance of Sophocles' *Antigone* merges with the South African apartheid movement in Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona's metatheatrical prison drama *The Island* (1973). Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. and Marvin Carlson have each outlined further African and Arab appropriations and revisions of classical Greek drama

in book-length studies and anthologies.<sup>5</sup> In response to the horrors of 9/11 and the successive creation of the Patriot Act, Chiori Miyagawa transposes the actions of *Antigone* to a mid-century Japanese internment camp in her companion pieces *Antigone's Red* (2003) and *Red Again* (2005). Americans Kenneth Rexroth and Carol Sorgenfrei have even converted the myths of Atreus and Medea into a modern Nō performance *milieu*, respectively.<sup>6,7</sup>

As evidenced by this cursory overview, this specialized sub-category of dramatic literature occupies a unique position within the continuum of the Western canon. These modern versions of Greek dramas may function as exemplars for the generic adaptive process across time, due to a combination of

1. the intrinsic familiarity of both authors and audiences with the original source material,
2. the sheer number of Greek dramatic adaptations that exist within the continuum of the Western canon,
3. the wide spectrum of conservative and radical transformations that serve as indicators of the invariant and variant components that may be traced from prototext to metatext.

Put simply, they establish an ideal model for the analysis of many strategies and tactics associated with literary adaptation, and one can apply these strategies to other similar textual transformations, such as modernizations of Shakespeare, medieval European liturgical drama, *commedia dell'arte*, or Japanese forms such as Nō, Kabuki, or Bunraku.

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<sup>5</sup> Wetmore, Kevin J., Jr. *Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002.

Carlson, Marvin. *The Arab Oedipus: Four Plays*. NY: Martin E. Segal, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Rexroth, Kenneth. *Beyond the Mountains*. NY: New Directions, 1951.

<sup>7</sup> Sorgenfrei, Carol. *Medea: A Noh Cycle Based on the Greek Myth*. NY: Samuel French, 1975.



## “Cultural Recycling” and Contemporary Adaptation Theory

In the opening words of her 2006 essay, “Re-runs and Repetition,” MacArthur “genius” Grant recipient and Pulitzer Prize finalist Sarah Ruhl (b. 1974) posits, “It seems we live in an age of cultural recycling.”<sup>8</sup> Ruhl dissects the role of adaptation in contemporary culture, focusing primarily on theatrical revisions of Greek myth, and arrives at the conclusion that the practice of textual revision is linked to a primal resistance to “formlessness.”<sup>9</sup> She argues that twenty-first-century audiences tend to embrace structures that they find familiar and that adaptation unlocks a means of tapping into a sense of “primal recognition”:

And if the goal of art is to put us in contact with the present moment, I would argue that the dialectic between the known and the unknown helps us. The ancient stories help us, ironically, to be in contact, really in contact, with our strange contemporary moment.<sup>10</sup>

Ruhl knows whereof she speaks. Her play *Eurydice* (2001), which modernizes the myth of Orpheus, has emerged as one of the most popular plays of the first decade of the new millennium.<sup>11</sup> In it, she deconstructs the romantic nature of Orpheus and Eurydice’s relationship and creates an Underworld that is more Lewis Carroll than Homer, whose gates are guarded not by the visceral threat of Cerberus, but rather the cruel antipathy of three Stones that challenge the infernal inhabitants’ idealized memories of life among the living. Perhaps the most striking alteration she makes to the original myth is her insertion of a heartfelt narrative in which the title character’s father is willing to sacrifice his own happiness and memories for his child’s welfare in the afterlife, an inverse parallel to the selfish motives of her vain lover. In short, Ruhl creates an alternative mythology that

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<sup>8</sup> Ruhl, Sarah. “Re-runs and Repetition.” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16.3 (2006): 283-90. 283.

<sup>9</sup> Ruhl, “Re-runs,” 287.

<sup>10</sup> Ruhl, “Re-runs,” 286.

<sup>11</sup> Ruhl, Sarah. *Eurydice*. NY: Samuel French, 2008.

reflects the “present moment,” starring a recognizable, fully human pair of lovers replete with faults and continually warring over the value of intellect and logic versus emotion and music.

Linda Hutcheon (b. 1947), a leader in the field of contemporary adaptation studies, asserts in the closing statement of *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), “In the workings of the human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception.”<sup>12</sup> She attempts to illustrate that the adaptive urge is a ubiquitous creative impulse, and that its derogatory reputation as a somehow “inferior” form of artistic expression is an unfair and inaccurate assessment. Along the way she deconstructs biases toward ideas of “originality” and “primacy” in literary creation (particularly Western predilections) as counter-intuitive, flying in the face of thousands of years of recurring macro-narratives that have formed the foundation of literature and literary criticism. Hutcheon’s work, like most scholars of adaptation studies, tends to focus upon textual transformation across different modes of media (poem into novel, novel into film, film into opera, etc.), devoting a high concentration of her attention to film and opera. Even so, her basic hypotheses are highly transferable to the field of dramatic literature.

Throughout her studies, Hutcheon stresses that adaptations must be studied *as adaptations*, and therefore must not fall prey to judgments of value that surround “fidelity criticism,” in which an adaptation is assessed by its level of faithful reproduction of the source material from which it derives.<sup>13</sup> In other words, a text’s temporal primacy does not endow it with a sense of authority or priority over adapted works that may follow it

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<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. NY: Routledge, 2006. 177.

<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon, 6-7.

chronologically.<sup>14</sup> While it is true that an adaptation is linked to an earlier text by “equivalences” of characters, plot, setting, images, etc., it distinguishes itself from its source(s) by way of introducing new information, perspectives, signs, modes of presentation, etc.<sup>15</sup> The adapted text is then an intersection of past and present, possessing a “palimpsestuous” doubleness (derived from Gérard Genette’s theories), but a work which ultimately must assert its autonomy as an independent work on some level. In its simplest and most evocative terms, Hutcheon declares that adaptations and their source(s) “exist *laterally*, not vertically.”<sup>16</sup>

Hutcheon divides her critical attention between a focus on the adaptor and on the receiver (reader/audience), granting each an equal collaborative role in the textual mediation process that is adaptation. On one hand, adaptation is a conscious act by a writer to appropriate an earlier text in order to create a new text, so one can study strategies of composition and intentionality that impact the work’s creation and autonomy. On the other, an adaptation’s power to encourage intertextual “double reading” can only occur when the receiver possesses some basic level of familiarity with the original work and its later analogue. She claims that, because adaptation is both a *process of creation* and a *process of reception*, the adaptor possesses a dual responsibility – that of creator and that of interpreter.<sup>17</sup>

She also distinguishes between *knowing audiences* and *unknowing audiences* in her examination of the role of the receiver. Knowing audiences, or receivers of an adaptation who possess prior knowledge of the prototext(s), have certain expectations and

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<sup>14</sup> Hutcheon, 174.

<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Hutcheon, 169. Emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Hutcheon, 8.

demands of the new work. For them, experiencing the adaptation is an “oscillation” between the new text and their memories of the original work.<sup>18</sup> However, she empowers unknowing audiences when she claims that, for them, “adaptations have a way of upending sacrosanct elements like priority and originality.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the reader or audience member who encounters an adaptation prior to being exposed to its prototext(s), which is often the case among modern and contemporary adaptations of classical drama, does not judge its value based primarily upon an “oscillating” textual comparison, but rather on its own singular terms. Further, that unknowing audience member participates in an inverted system of influence if and when s/he seeks out the prototext(s) – the lens through which the original text is filtered is determined by the meaning variants and invariants present in the adaptation. In essence, such a scenario transposes the accepted chronology of how memory functions, and the receiver of the text “remembers” the more recent metatext when s/he encounters the antecedent prototext at a later point in time, experientially speaking. In this instance, it is intriguing to pursue what might such an inverted exposure process reveal about the original text?<sup>20</sup>

Linda Hutcheon and Sarah Ruhl each propose that an adaptation’s repetitive nature reclaims the *aura* that Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) fears becomes lost in the rise of “mechanical reproduction” through his anticipation of such contemporary media as

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<sup>18</sup> Hutcheon, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Hutcheon, 122.

<sup>20</sup> I find this question posed by Hutcheon, and elucidated upon by Conradie in a later section of this chapter, to be of monumental importance to “upending” diachronic models of adaptation. I myself have been introduced to many of the works from the classical Greek and Nō canons by way of their modern and contemporary dramatic analogues. Hutcheon’s suggestions about textual oscillation still hold true, but it is merely the point of departure that changes. In fact, there may be an intrinsic value in experiencing the classical world through such “retroactive reading,” since that process potentially begins from the present moment and illuminates what we as a society have learned from an ancient text, interpreted through whichever meaning invariants persist over time. Again, this is an example of Hutcheon’s evocative assertion that multiple versions of a text “exist laterally, not vertically.”

television, film, video, and the internet. Ruhl suggests that adaptations do not duplicate a work of art, but instead filter it through our sense of memory, as she cites her mentor,

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel (b. 1951):

To re-remember...to remember again. Not nostalgia, but a deeper form of remembering, a structure of loss. What I believe she [Vogel] is getting at is the revelation of some kind of *being*. And conversely, what re-runs and industrial recycling diminish, in my opinion, is the evocation of being. It seems that one form of aesthetic repetition can enhance being, and the other does the opposite – it deadens.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, while an adaptation may repeat a variety of components from an earlier source, these imitations are echoes and resonances, rather than direct replicas. And when such direct reproduction does occur, it is often in the form of commentary or parody.

### Metatextuality and the Adaptive Process

As we have seen, adaptation, by its very nature, depends upon the transformation of an earlier text, whether it be a single specific source text or a collection of texts that comprise a genre, into a later adapted work, which contains significant enough traces of the original work(s) to be recognized as derivative. As Linda Hutcheon argues, this derivative quality does not indicate a lack of originality or innovation in the adapted text, nor must it necessarily suggest an inferiority of quality. The field of metatextual theory, which examines the process(es) of textual mediation that contextualize this literary metamorphosis, possesses the power to engage readers in a simultaneous “double reading” of multiple texts. It also permits the act of distinguishing the variant and invariant elements of a text that resist and/or encourage adaptation.

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<sup>21</sup> Ruhl, “Re-runs,” 288.

French critic Gérard Genette (b. 1930) has devoted the better part of his distinguished scholarly career to constructing a comprehensive system of poetics, which can be traced developmentally from the initial thesis proposed in *Introduction à L'architexte* (*The Architext: An Introduction*) in 1979 to the expansive argument and the systematic theoretical application contained within *Palimpsestes* (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, 1982) and *Seuils* (*Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 1987). Throughout these critical arguments, he explores the semiotics of metacommunication by proposing a structuralist aesthetic methodology that he coins “transtextuality,” with an acute awareness of the contributions of such intertextual critics as Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) and Michael Riffaterre (1924-2006). The clearest definition of transtextuality Genette offers can be found in the concluding section of *The Architext*, in which he engages himself in a humorous, at times self-deprecating debate about the fluidity of his theoretical terminology and its practical relevance. He claims that his primary interest in a text lies in “its *textual transcendence*—namely, everything that brings it into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts.”<sup>22</sup> In short, Genette contends that any given text does not exist in a vacuum (as proposed by the formalist tendencies of New Criticism), and is therefore incomplete without considering its inter-relational context (structural, thematic, linguistic, categorical) with other textual traditions.

In *Palimpsestes*, he divides this larger framework of transtextuality into five distinct categories:

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<sup>22</sup> Genette, Gérard. *The Architext: An Introduction*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Berkeley: U of CA P, 1992. 81. (Emphasis Genette's).

- Intertextuality: the relationship “of copresence between two texts or among several texts”<sup>23</sup>
- Paratextuality: the relationship between a primary text and its internal systems of “secondary signals” (such as chapter titles, epigraphs, introductions, bibliographies, illustrations, etc.)<sup>24</sup>
- Metatextuality: the relationship between a text and critical commentary<sup>25</sup>
- Hypertextuality: the relationship uniting a text with a chronologically earlier text, “upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary”<sup>26</sup>
- Architextuality: the abstract relationship which identifies a text within a larger genre-based taxonomy (i.e., novel, poem, play, romance, tragedy)<sup>27</sup>

It must be stated that Genette does not intend for these categories to function independently of one another, and he himself struggles with their interdependence and shared descriptors and tactics. The sub-strata of classification he establishes often interact, overlap, and sometimes even subsume one another.

The central focus of *Palimpsests*, and the subset of transtextuality that is of most use to the scope and methodology of my study, is Genette’s fourth category of “hypertextuality.” The title of *Palimpsests* derives from the multiple yet simultaneous layers of visible text that come to co-exist when a section of text is erased from a draft on paper or parchment, and other text is written over it. This evocative titular metaphor, to

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<sup>23</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln: U of NE P, 1997. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 4.

which Genette refers as literature “in the second degree,” is an implicit specter that haunts the entire volume and colors each point that the critic attempts to illustrate.<sup>28</sup>

Linda Hutcheon also returns to this metaphor time and again in her examinations of “multilaminated” adaptation.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that Genette often demonstrates these functions of hypertextuality by citing examples of classical Greek dramatists and their adaptive successors.

The primary determination of *hypertextuality*, as proposed by Genette, is the existence of a *hypertext* that possesses a traceable (explicitly or implicitly) relationship with an earlier *hypotext*, such as that which exists between Virgil’s *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 BC) and Homer’s *Iliad* (8<sup>th</sup> c. BC). Anton Popovič similarly distinguishes between *metatexts* and earlier *prototexts*, a terminological demarcation that I personally find easier to utilize within the context of literary criticism, and have thus adopted for my own uses in this study.<sup>30</sup> Genette suggests that hypertextuality implies direct or indirect *transformative* processes through simple and complex systems of *transposition* and *imitation*.<sup>31</sup> In addition to *parody* (“the distortion of a text by means of a minimal transformation”), Genette also considers the literary forms of *travesty* (which transposes an earlier text into a more familiar, modern idiom), *pastiche* (which imitates a style of genre, rather than a

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<sup>28</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Hutcheon, 21.

<sup>30</sup> For me, *hypertextuality* conjures up associations of computer-based textual interfaces and internet links. Genette’s terminology, coined in 1982, predates the technological advances of navigating cyberspace. Popovič’s terminology of *metatextuality*, while emerging more or less within the same basic timeframe as Genette’s lexicon and sharing the name of one of Genette’s own transtextual categories, offers no such confusion and is thus more germane to literary analysis. For the purposes of clarity, as I illustrate Genette’s theories in this section, I will retain his core terminology.

<sup>31</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5-6.



specific text, without satirical intent), and *caricature* (which he designates as satirical pastiche).<sup>32</sup>

Some of the basic functions that a hypertext may perform in relation to its hypotext are continuation, prolongation, reduction, and augmentation. *Continuations* fill what Genette refers to as lateral gaps, or paralipses, in an existing narrative, and seek to complete an unresolved or unfinished text.<sup>33</sup> *Prolongations*, which are themselves types of continuations and usually manifest themselves as sequels or prequels, attempt to provide additional episodes to successfully completed narratives.<sup>34</sup> *Reductions* may excise textual components in order to create abridged, yet faithful, versions of a voluminous work of literature, or expurgated versions that serve a social editorial function.<sup>35</sup> Authors may also reduce texts through concision to eliminate archaic, baroque language (often discernible through obscure historical or cultural references or overtly poetic style) as a means of converting it into a more straightforward, direct format for contemporary readers.<sup>36</sup> *Augmentation* of a text may extend the narrative to fit stylistic or thematic norms for a historical style (neoclassical five-act structure) or may amplify a fragmentary source text into a fully formed narrative.<sup>37</sup>

Genette, in his discussion of the various augmentary functions of hypertexts, proposes the idea of *contamination*, in which a hypertext extends two or more existing hypotexts through the process of combination into the final text, as in the case of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), which conflates components

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<sup>32</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 181.

<sup>34</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 162.

<sup>35</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 230, 234.

<sup>36</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 235.

<sup>37</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 262.

of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1601) and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953).<sup>38</sup> In keeping with her agenda to separate the discourse of adaptation from a negative context of inferior derivation in *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon neutralizes the derogatory connotation suggested by the term "contamination" by employing significantly more impartial language (*plurality* of adapted texts), citing Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film *Moulin Rouge* as an example.<sup>39</sup>

Once he establishes the major categories and functions of hypertextuality in *Palimpsests*, Genette demonstrates the wide spectrum of literary tactics that may be utilized in the transformative process from hypotext to hypertext. In the interest of brevity and focus, I will only explore the tactics from Genette's extensive inventory that are most pertinent to the types of dramaturgical adaptation that I will be analyzing in this study's later chapters.

On a basic linguistic level, adapted texts may undergo *versification* (the change from prose to verse), *prosification* (the change from verse to prose), or *transmetrification* (the change from one metrical pattern to another, such as the English tendency to translate French poetic drama from iambic hexameter [6 stressed beats per line] to the more common iambic pentameter [5 stressed beats per line], as seen in Richard Wilbur's translations of Molière or Brian Hooker's 1923 translation of Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897)).<sup>40</sup> Similarly, *transmodalization* traces shifts from *dramatization* of a narrative hypotext and the *narrativization* of a dramatic hypotext.<sup>41</sup> *Transstylization* is a "stylistic rewriting" of a text, either by *stylization* (superimposing additional stylistic

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<sup>38</sup> This concept will become clearer in my discussions of Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* later in this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> Hutcheon, xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 218, 219, 225.

<sup>41</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 277.

elements onto a hypotext) or *destylization* (removing stylistic elements that obscure the meaning or impact of the hypotext).<sup>42</sup>

While interpretive choices are discernible through these types of technical transformations, the voice of the adaptor is perhaps most visible in Genette's tactics of *transmotivation*, *transvaluation*, and *transfocalization*. *Transmotivation*, or the substitution of a psychological motivation within a text, often speaks to an author's desire to modernize outmoded, simplistic reasons for thought and action among characters and within a larger social context, particularly among post-Freudian adaptations of pre-Freudian hypotexts.<sup>43</sup> *Motivation* inserts psychological rationale where the hypotext possessed none. *Demotivation* "suppress[es] or elid[es] an original motivation."<sup>44</sup> *Remotivation* substitutes a pre-existing motive with another equally powerful, or occasionally more powerful, one.<sup>45</sup> *Transvaluation* alters the value systems that guide a text and its characters by either *revaluation*, or the insertion of morality among characters who lack honor in the hypotext (e.g., Goethe's redemption of Faust), or *devaluation*, the reduction/elimination of ethics from previously lionized characters or society (e.g., the revision of Richard III's persona by Tudor historians and, subsequently, Shakespeare).<sup>46</sup> *Transfocalization* occurs when the perspective of a narrative shifts through such techniques as changing the point-of-view through which the plot is told (e.g., the *Oresteia* through Clytemnestra's eyes), explorations of "missing" episodes that may occur within the spatio-temporal framework of the original hypotext (e.g., Gertrude and Claudius'

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<sup>42</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 226-27.

<sup>43</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 324.

<sup>44</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 325.

<sup>45</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 325.

<sup>46</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 350, 354.

wedding ceremony in *Hamlet*), or by employing a new interpretive context for the hypotext (e.g., a feminist retelling of *The Tale of Genji*).<sup>47</sup>

The most common type of dramaturgical adaptive transformations employ what Genette calls *transdiegetization*, or transpositions of space, time, character, and setting.<sup>48</sup> *Homodiegesis* retains a sense of fidelity among spatio-temporal hypotextual components such as place names, character names, time period of action, etc., while *heterodiegesis* alters the spatio-temporal identity of the world of the hypotext.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944) is homodiegetic insofar as it retains the character names, place, and time of Sophocles' original, despite the fact that its political perspective is a direct reaction to the Nazi occupation of France. *Antigone* employs the use of *anachronistic* devices, such as crude modern language and games of cards, to suggest "an incidental dissonance in relation to the overall tone of the action," but these elements alone cannot suggest a heterodiegetic transposition.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, Genette cites James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) and Eugene O'Neill's dramatic trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* as examples of successful heterodiegesis, because the authors transpose the complete world of their respective hypotexts into a new time, space, and cultural context.

Slovak critic Anton Popovič's (1933-84) theories regarding adaptation are based firmly in the realm of semiotics, but he and his proponents share much common ground with Genette, albeit filtered through a different critical perspective. Like Genette, Popovič is interested in exploring aspects of metacommunication in which one traces the "processing (manipulation) of the original literary text, whether it is done by authors,

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<sup>47</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 287.

<sup>48</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 296.

<sup>49</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 297.

<sup>50</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 310.

readers, critics, translators, etc.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, Popovič conflates Genette’s categories of hypertextuality and metatextuality into a single system that distinguishes between *prototext* (“a text which serves as an object of inter-textual continuity”) and *metatext* (“a model of the prototext; the way in which two texts are linked”).<sup>52</sup> He clarifies this relationship by limiting it to those functions that “have a modeling character (continuity), ie [*sic*], which develop or modify in some way the semiotic, meaning-bearing, side of the original text.”<sup>53</sup> He often characterizes his arguments regarding metatextual relationships within the context of translation, rather than literary adaptation but, like Hutcheon, implies that textual mediation is ultimately an act of interpretation. Popovič’s theories are explicitly intended to explain the transformations that occur during the *translation* process, yet his proponents like George Mitrevski have successfully applied his ideas to the study of strategies of adaptation as well. Therefore, I must clarify that any references made to “adaptation” in the discussion of Popovič that follows are an extrapolation of his specific rhetoric intended to pertain to issues of “translation.”

Popovič divides the varying aspects of relationship between prototext and metatext into the following primary categories:

- Semantic
- Stylistic
- Axiological
- Strategic

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<sup>51</sup> Popovič, Anton. “Aspects of Metatext.” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 3 (1976): 225-35. 226.

<sup>52</sup> Popovič, 226.

<sup>53</sup> Popovič, 226.

The *semantic* aspect of metatextuality examines the components that determine intrinsic meaning from prototext to metatext. Popovič distinguishes between *meaning invariants* (those elements that remain intact across textual transformations) and *meaning variants* (those textual elements that shift in the transformation process).<sup>54</sup> He even develops a semiotic formula that determines the ratio of prototext to metatext possesses a direct corollary to the ratio of meaning invariants to meaning variants, which “form a scale along which one can locate every individual case of inter-textual continuity.”<sup>55</sup>

Popovič asserts that the *stylistic* aspect of metatextuality consists of the consistency or inconsistency of linguistic and thematic components, forming a textual agreement or disagreement, between prototext and metatext.<sup>56</sup> The *axiological* aspect establishes the value of the prototext as determined by the author of the metatext, based upon choices related to the selection of specific prototexts and the extent to which its meaning invariants are retained or jettisoned through acts of textual fidelity and/or subversion.<sup>57</sup> Hutcheon, too, suggests that the “intentionality” of the adaptor, as indicated by the choice of text(s) to adapt, plays an important role in validating the prototext’s innate value, regardless of whether the metatext’s relationship with the source is reverential or parodic in nature.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, the *strategic* aspect centers on the author’s tactics in choosing to *reveal* or *conceal* the link between the metatext and the prototext.<sup>59</sup> Does the author of the metatext openly acknowledge the source material, and how do the intertextual links

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<sup>54</sup> Popovič, 227.

<sup>55</sup> Popovič, 228.

<sup>56</sup> Popovič, 228.

<sup>57</sup> Popovič, 229.

<sup>58</sup> Hutcheon, 95.

<sup>59</sup> Popovič, 229.

manifest themselves? Popovič extends this facet of metatextuality to include the *reader as co-participant* in the metatext's creation, via the diverse levels of prior familiarity (if any) the reader may possess with the prototext in approaching the metatext.<sup>60</sup> Again, Hutcheon shares an interest in this characteristic of adaptation, in her discussions of adaptive autonomy and the tension between the informed/uninformed reader, ultimately because it grants the receiver/audience a creative role in the adaptive process.

While he does not consider it a primary aspect of metatextual relationships, Popovič also acknowledges the importance of *textual scope* in ascertaining the level of interactivity between the adaptation and the adapted work(s).<sup>61</sup> A study of textual scope determines whether the metatext incorporates "individual elements or levels of the [proto]text, or does it refer to the [proto]text as a whole."<sup>62</sup> Popovič cites the use of direct quotation and allusion as examples of individual metatexts and stylization as a form that integrates a whole prototext into an adapted work. By extension, recognizable character or place names may evoke desired associations with an earlier work, even if the metatext contains no further direct reference to the prototext to which these elements originally belong. Paratextual references, such as an allusive title (e.g., A. R. Gurney's *Another Antigone* (1987)), may suggest that the new work seeks to be included within the context of a larger literary tradition, even if the narrative/dramatic action of work deviates significantly from the prototext.

Popovič's inquiry into textual scope shares vital intersections with Genette's ideas about diegetics, such that a work with homodiegetic tendencies may imply a more direct connection with the meaning invariants of a prototext, while a heterodiegetic work might

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<sup>60</sup> Popovič, 230.

<sup>61</sup> Popovič, 230.

<sup>62</sup> Popovič, 230.

possess a greater number of meaning variants yet still may contain a strong connection with the scope of the prototext and its literary traditions. Further, in “multilaminated” works, to use Hutcheon’s term, metatexts which borrow from multiple prototexts establish a polyphonic dialogue (Mikhail Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*) of textual scope that permits individual elements of one or more texts to function within the larger structure of yet another textual framework, borrowed or original.

Classical dramatic forms like Greek tragedy or Nō, which contain intrinsic formal conventions such as the use of a chorus, all-male casts, standardized character types, music and dance, and direct address dialogue/monologue, not to mention prescribed structural or aesthetic demands, which often define the form by its adherence to a recognizable plot structure or intended poetic “effect.” Therefore, when analyzing adaptations of classical works that rely upon such conventions, we must consider whether the inclusion or exclusion (in whole or in part) strengthens or weakens the intertextual connection to the prototext(s). In studies of the classical Nō, this inquiry becomes even more complex, as most Nō texts are themselves composed of intersecting allusions and quotations from a plethora of sources, linked by rigid formal patterns of dialogue, music, and dance, and rarely contain a complete narrative. Rather, a plot per se (in the Aristotelian sense of the term, as a narrative whose rising action builds to a climax, followed by a resolution) is a subtle function of classical Nō dramaturgy and often subordinate to the emotional, spiritual, or poetic journey of the *shite*. More specifically, because the *shite* is usually a well-known character from history or literature whose story is already well-known to the audience, and because the actions of that story have technically already occurred at some time in the past and what is being enacted onstage is



a reconstructed memory, narrative as revelatory dramatic device is, in essence, a moot point. As Yukio Mishima states in his essay “The Japan Within”: “Even so, since these are tales told by ghosts, their plots do not, as in most dramas, form a present progressive but depend on the evocation of the past, so that by the time a *noh* play begins, the drama is already over.”<sup>63</sup> The *Nō* is governed, however, by a similar structural paradigm, the standard *jo-ha-kyū* structure of rhythm and tempo, which determines emotional intensity as well as that of the chanting and dance.

George Mitrevski, an advocate of Popovič’s theories of metatextuality, relocates the latter’s central tenets from the field of translation and applies them directly to adaptations of dramatic literature and performance in “Semiotic Analysis of Adaptations in the Theatre.”<sup>64</sup> He, like Hutcheon, launches his primary argument from the point of view that one must study adaptation *as* adaptation. Mitrevski also conflates Genette’s categories of metatextuality and hypertextuality to include criticism, scholarship, and reader response as part of the metatextual process of textual *mediation*. He also suggests the possibility that metatexts transform over time into prototexts in their own right for direct adaptation by later authors, or at the very least, become part of the intertextual continuum that informs a multi-layered prototextual tradition.

Using ancient Greek tragedy and medieval European liturgical drama as his prime examples of dramatic texts which adapt pre-existing prototexts (in these instances, epic myth and Judeo-Christian religious scriptures), Mitrevski explores stage adaptations as semiotic junctures in which multiple systems of signification overlap. He posits that one of the major transformations that occurs in this process is that “the text changes its

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<sup>63</sup> Mishima Yukio. “The Japan Within.” *This is Japan* 18 (1971): 54-55. 55.

<sup>64</sup> Mitrevski, George. “Semiotic Analysis of Adaptations in the Theatre.” *Approches de l’opéra/Approches of the Opera*. Ed. André Helbo. Paris: Didier, 1986. 233-39.

function, and as a result theatrical laws for production and interpretation come into action.”<sup>65</sup> It is noteworthy that this change refers to adaptation by means of Genette’s strategy of transmodalization – the shift from “cultural prototext” (myth, folktale, religious text/ritual – all narrative, prose forms, whether deriving from oral or written sources) to “theatrical metatext” (dramatic, interactive, ephemeral), rather than the specific type of parallel adaptation that I address in this study (dramatic text/trope adapted into dramatic text/trope).<sup>66</sup> And yet, Mitrevski’s application of Popovič’s theories to the literary analysis of adaptive techniques helps to facilitate the types of arguments that support my study’s basic hypothesis.

Additionally, these “theatrical laws for production and interpretation” are significant in this study because they assert that a standard theatrical text, regardless of its adaptive legacy, intrinsically possesses multiple layers of interpretive potential. The aspect of live performance actually fragments the written text into unlimited interpretive possibilities that increase exponentially with each additional production. Thus, a theatrical text is, in a sense, incomplete outside of its performance context, which relies upon the collaborative intersection of multiple “readings” from producers, directors, actors, designers, critics, audience members, etc. Hence, when a work of dramatic literature is adapted, the metatext inherits a rich heritage of prototextual permutations, some literary, some performative.

Further, Mitrevski suggests a guiding principle that must be acknowledged when examining classical forms that possess distinctive formal conventions of dramaturgy and performance, as do Greek tragedy and *Nō*. He states, “Every text is controlled by

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<sup>65</sup> Mitrevski, 235.

<sup>66</sup> Mitrevski, 235.

specific, sometimes rigid structures, which may not be transportable in the process of adaptation into a text of another structure.”<sup>67</sup> Again, he is speaking first and foremost of transmodal shifts that occur from one literary form to another (i.e., epic to novel, novel to drama, etc.).<sup>68</sup> For example, literary and historical references in a text that may have been easily recognizable to the intended audience may need to be amended, updated, or even omitted, in modern and contemporary adaptations. Frequently, it may require the adaptor to expand or constrict the scope of the original text in order to convey its essential meaning. But in the end, Mitrevski suggests that there will always be a sense of entropic loss (whether limited or vast) that occurs when a prototext morphs into a metatext.

However, when one examines a contemporary adaptation of Greek tragedy or Japanese Nō, one recognizes certain innate cultural, aesthetic, sociohistorical, and structural conventions that transcend the textual transformation process, and link the adaptation to its prototext(s). This is not to say that these defining components (Popovič’s meaning invariants), while identifiable, have survived the adaptive process unchanged. In fact, they frequently merge with other textual or cultural traditions that define the contextual framework of the metatext. The chorus may be reduced from a communal body to a single actor onstage, and its chanting or singing may be replaced with naturalistic speech patterns. Shifts in the choral identity (and in the sociocultural need for such a surrogate to exist onstage) may also require the choral figure(s) in the metatext to take a more dynamic role in the action of the plot. Wooden masks and stylistic movement may find analogues in psychological “masking” of personality

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<sup>67</sup> Mitrevski, 235.

<sup>68</sup> It can be argued that the oral traditions associated with Homeric myth and Catholic liturgy do possess an inherent performativity.

traits/motives or neurotic physical tics, both means to the creation of a complex modern character.

As I will discuss in further detail in Chapters Two and Three, Yukio Mishima himself recognized that, in composing his modern Nō, he was creating a new theatrical form inspired by the structures and themes of classical Nō, a form that he hoped would have the ability to connect the present moment in mid-twentieth-century Japan with the traditions of its past. But in the end, even he concedes that the “modern Nō” is a new and separate form that was *not* to be regarded as Nō, per se. And yet, by examining the meaning invariants of classical Nō that survive after the original text has withstood the heat of the crucible of adaptive transformation, we may see the remnants of *shite* and *waki* or the echoes of a twentieth-century variant of *yūgen*.

Imrich Dénes, another adherent of Popovič, suggests that the adaptation process is more than metacommunicative; it is *metacreational* and “predetermined and motivated by the need to recode other texts...within the same literary system.”<sup>69</sup> As expected, Dénes analyzes adapted texts in much the same way as Popovič and Mitrevski, tracing operations of elimination, substitution, and alteration to arrive at mathematical formulae of semiotic construction. However, he states the implicit goal of the adaptation process in a distinctly clear fashion: “...the adapted text is intended to communicate the invariant message (the deep, global structure) of the prototext... in spite of the shifts in its micro-structure/macro-structure (surface structure).”<sup>70</sup> Thus, he intimates that the adaptor’s creative urge must take precedence over the retention of traditional elements represented

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<sup>69</sup> Dénes, Imrich. “Textual Features of Adapted Texts.” *Actes du VIIIe Congrès de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée/Proceedings of the 8th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. Eds. Béla Köpeczi and György M. Vajda. Stuttgart: Biebr, 1980. 961-963. 962.

<sup>70</sup> Dénes, 963.

by the “surface structure” of the prototext(s), regardless of the extremity of their distortion or the extent to which they have been expurgated from the text. The need to “recode” the prototext in order to contextualize it within the adaptor’s own “literary system” of the present moment, reflects on a perceived inadequacy of the original text (in part or as a whole) to speak to that present moment as effectively as it once did. This impulse increases in complexity across linguistic and cultural boundaries, such as occurs in both the translation and adaptation process of creating a Western idiom for understanding the Nō – in order to create analogous correlatives for the Western audience, the text often loses much of its poetic richness and structural cohesion within its original historical and literary context.<sup>71</sup> It also requires the adaptor’s own creative vision to perform a maieutic function and “midwife” the new text into being, a metatext containing the transcendent meaning invariant(s) of the prototext but located in a liminal space in which multiple texts fuse, coexist, and interact with one another across time and space.

#### P. J. Conradie’s Criteria for Adapting Greek Myth to the Modern Stage

During the period leading up to, including, and immediately following World War II, cutting-edge French dramatists such as Jean Anouilh (1910-87), Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944), Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) incorporated many of their evolving experimental philosophical, political, and aesthetic principles

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<sup>71</sup> As will be seen in Chapters Two through Four, attempts to Westernize the Nō (even by Asian dramatists) result in a degrading of the subtlety of the Nō dramaturgy, as covert elements of plot and stage convention become more overt, and poetic images often lose their transformative power as their associative relevance must often be explained. These elements are often replaced by other, more recognizable, “West-friendly” signs, or (as in the case of the works of Takeshi Kawamura) by shared/borrowed cultural signs that apply to more than one cultural context.

(most notably, the emergence of existentialism) into the composition of new plays based upon classical Greek models. These texts distinguish themselves as exemplary representations of adaptive techniques in praxis, as well as core works for the stage that lay the foundation for later theatrical innovations to be explored by figures like Eugène Ionesco (1909-94), Albert Camus (1913-60), Jean Genet (1910-86), and Samuel Beckett (1906-89). The strength of these dramas lies predominantly in their visceral contemporaneity, the ability to appropriate the tropes of the traditional past in definitively modern plays that reflect the turbulent fragmentation of the mid-century European political landscape and mind.

In 1963, Pieter Jacobus (P. J.) Conradie (b. 1931) published a monograph in which he systematically analyzes this collection of French dramas based upon Greek myth, and in the process, develops a beneficial theoretical framework for the development of theatrical adaptation studies.<sup>72</sup> As previously stated, because the Greek prototexts form such an intrinsically familiar root system of the Western literary canon and because the theatrical conventions of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are easily traced from prototext to metatext, classical Greek tragedies are ideal for the study of dramatic adaptive transformation across time.<sup>73</sup> Conradie's study is unapologetically formalist in tone, and it predates much intertextual theory and largely avoids customary parameters of semiotic criticism.

Conradie's criteria for successful adaptation stem from initial questions regarding the universality and staying power of the original myths upon which both the original

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<sup>72</sup> Conradie, P. J. *The Treatment of Greek Myths in Modern French Drama: A Study of the "Classical" Plays of Anouilh, Cocteau, Giraudoux, and Sartre*. *Annale* 29.B.2. Stellenbosch: U of Stellenbosch, 1963.

<sup>73</sup> Please note that Conradie does not use Popovič's terminology of "prototext" and "metatext" in his study. I utilize these terms in my discussion of Conradie's theories as a point of clarity and continuity with previously established concepts, not as an indication of Conradie's specific critical lexicon.

Greek dramas and their modern analogues are based. Not surprisingly, as is often the case with critics of his generation, he addresses the Freudian and Jungian roots of this appeal in an attempt to locate the archetypal “monomyth” that elicits a subconscious, primal psychological response.<sup>74</sup> He acknowledges that it is the process of transformation of the mythic into literary form, and the concomitant semiotic traces produced during that process, that provides the greatest clues as to the “essential” quality of the myth.<sup>75</sup> In a surprisingly intertextual observation, Conradie does concede a model for *retroactive reading* when he claims, “At the same time his [the classical scholar’s] own appreciation of Greek drama may be enriched when he studies the influence it has had on modern dramatists, for they may have seen something in the drama which has escaped his notice” and “[b]y studying the way in which succeeding poets have treated a myth, we may expect to get some insight into its significance.”<sup>76,77</sup>

The main criterion Conradie establishes for the adaptive process of classical drama is “in how far the modern dramatist has succeeded in fusing the classical and modern elements in a new unity.”<sup>78</sup> This theatrical fusion towards a “new unity” establishes a liminal dialectic between past and present in which it is essential that both the modern playwright’s view of the world, and his/her interpretation of the prototext, be present in a reading of the metatext. While specifically discussing the use of anachronism in Anouilh’s works, Conradie suggests an added liminal dynamic that applies to the cumulative effect of the successful modern adaptation: “he succeeds in giving a kind of

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<sup>74</sup> Conradie, 25.

<sup>75</sup> Conradie, 26.

<sup>76</sup> “Retroactive reading” is a critical term of my own construction that I hope to explore further through future research and writing, particularly within the context of Linda Hutcheon’s theories about the subversive, “destabilizing” potential of encountering the adaptation prior to the prototext. (Hutcheon, 174)

<sup>77</sup> Conradie, 25-26.

<sup>78</sup> Conradie, 26.

*timelessness* to his drama; it is neither ancient nor modern but belongs equally to both periods and to all time.”<sup>79</sup> This dual-existence positions the metatext in an in-between state that recalls Genette’s palimpsestuous mode of “double reading” and Hutcheon’s “lateral” coding of intertextual dialogism.

The first distinction Conrادية makes in his study is the determination of the modern author’s use of source material – whether the plot is based upon a myth that has been dramatized previously or not. While both approaches invite comparison to the perceptible components of the original myth, Conrادية asserts that the modern playwright possesses greater freedom by choosing to adapt a myth that has yet to be set into a theatrical form.<sup>80</sup> Interestingly, the scripts that serve as the best examples in his monograph of this technique each deal with the myth of Orpheus, a myth about the potentially destructive role of the godlike artist: Anouilh’s *Eurydice* (1941) and Cocteau’s stage (1925) and film (1950) versions of *Orphée*. Because these works are not based upon pre-existing dramatic texts with quantifiable conventions of structure, diction, and characterization, the playwright’s model for composition is more abstract and may take its shape without risk of comparison.<sup>81</sup>

However, it is the series of criteria that Conrادية establishes when the modern playwright chooses to adapt a myth that has been dramatized by a previous author, that is of primary concern for this study, due to my own interest in the single-medium transformation from dramatic text to dramatic text. In such a case, a comparative dialogue is established automatically, regardless of the author’s limited or extensive

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<sup>79</sup> Conrادية, 28. Emphasis mine.

<sup>80</sup> Conrادية, 26.

<sup>81</sup> It must be said, however, that upon their creation of separate dramatic representations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Cocteau and Anouilh unwittingly must submit to intertextual comparisons between their respective plays on the subject.



scope of knowledge of the prior text. Conradie concedes that, even in a “loose” adaptation, the author “may deviate as much as he likes from the original drama but he will always be influenced by it, if only to react against it, and his play will always have to face comparison with the original.”<sup>82</sup> Additionally, the “new unity” of theatrical fusion also insists upon an interpretive tension between the ancient perspective(s) of the prototext and the modern ideas infused into the myth by the playwright.

Conradie insists upon a delicate balance between the ancient and the modern in the resultant metatext, otherwise “if there is too great a gap between the two interpretations, the spectator is constantly reminded of the difference and this has a disturbing effect.”<sup>83</sup> This statement suggests that Conradie cannot conceive that such a dissonance between prototext and metatext might be desirable under certain circumstances from a playwright’s point of view, as a means of intentionally disturbing the audience (e.g., confrontational works inspired by the theories of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), à la Peter Weiss’s 1963 play *Marat/Sade* or the interactive political performances of The Living Theater in the 1960s). In fact, many of the dramatic adaptations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, based upon Greek models as well as other classical forms such as the Nō, particularly ones that employ an interpolative strategy, rely upon this subversive dissonance to achieve their aesthetic goals.

According to Conradie, modern playwrights may choose to adhere to the *primary theme* of the original text or may adopt a *subordinate theme* and expand it to primary

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<sup>82</sup> Conradie, 27.

<sup>83</sup> Conradie, 27.

status in the newer work.<sup>84</sup> Thus, in determining a comparative, side-by-side model of analysis, Conrادية insists upon a “thorough study of the ancient drama” in order to identify fidelity and possible variations in the modern drama between:

1. Main theme
2. Portrayal of principal characters
3. Cosmology (spiritual context) of the world of the play
4. Temporal setting (ancient vs. modern times)<sup>85</sup>

While this is by no means an exhaustive list of dramaturgical components subject to transmutation within a modern adaptation, Conrادية suggests that these elements are the most easily perceptible changes that occur among the mid-century French plays he examines in his monograph. Further, he classifies the modern authors’ use of anachronism, psychoanalytic character development, and coarse language as textual markers of the adaptive process.

The process by which Conrادية analyzes each text in his study is predictably methodical. He identifies the original Greek myth as presented in the prototext, carefully mapping the components that are subject to variation in subsequent versions and positioning it within its canonical context. He then lists the similarities that exist between the classical and modern texts, followed by a description of their dissimilarities, and finally determines its “success” as an adaptation based upon the balance of its own autonomy as original text and its reinvention of the prototext’s thematic paradigms for modern audiences. More often than not, Conrادية defers to the prototext as a work of

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<sup>84</sup> Conrادية, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Conrادية, 27.

primacy, not only temporally but also in terms of quality, and subsequently judges the metatext's success upon questions of fidelity rather than originality.

“The Trojan War Will *Always* Take Place”: Cyclical Strategies of Surrogacy, Substitution, and Subversion

In the Preface to *The Greek Plays*, playwright Ellen McLaughlin asserts, “Whenever Western civilization has contemplated war as a concept, since the beginning of our cultural and literary history we have thought about the Trojan War.”<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the god Poseidon opens her version of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* with the lament: “Another war has ended. When will the next begin?”<sup>87</sup> By the time the battles of the Trojan War were transformed into the epics of Homer, the actual events (if the war ever truly occurred; historians and archaeologists suggest that it may have been a conflation of several monumental historical battles) and their participants had long since attained mythic proportions. By extension, their subsequent dramatization by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides filled in gaps of continuity and introduced new perspectives, not the least of which was a sympathetic portrayal of the defeated Trojans. In *Helen* (c. 412 BC), Euripides goes so far as to question the very rationale for the war’s inception in a startlingly modern way. He suggests that the war was fought over a “phantom Helen,” over the *idea* of a woman who did not even exist, which in due course undermines its overall justification and indicts the military leaders whose rash decisions led to unnecessary bloodshed and the genocidal destruction of a noble civilization.

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<sup>86</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Greek Plays*. NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2005. xvi.

<sup>87</sup> McLaughlin, 91.

The Trojan War is the ultimate literary *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which cultures may project any number of lessons about war in general, often using the same narrative structures for contradictory effects. In this way, the components of the narrative shift according to the cultural imperatives of author and audience. For example, king and general Agamemnon is alternately portrayed as a triumphant hero, bloodthirsty maniac, and impotent coward, and his wife Clytemnestra is cast as heartbroken mother, adulterous harlot, and even demonic harpy seeking the blood of her own son, each respective of the particular author's agenda and thematic intent in the specific drama. Playwrights, actors, directors, and social activists have appropriated the Trojan War as a paradigm with which to comment upon atrocities in Vietnam and Iraq and Auschwitz, as well as to drum up military solidarity preceding and during World War II.

Jean Giraudoux's 1935 comedy *La guerre de Troie n'aura pa lieu* (literally, *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*) was written at a point when French intellectuals were once again peering at the horizon of forthcoming German aggression on their doorstep and confronting the inevitability of what would become World War II. The playwright's title establishes an irony of dissonance, derived from Trojan princess Andromache's opening line of the text. By thwarting the audience's expectations (we all know that the war will take place, in fact, that the Trojan War will *always* take place), Giraudoux creates a dramaturgical tension within the play's action between the pacifists and militarists, and criticizes contemporary French political naiveté about the impending battles in his own inevitable, immediate future. The original title subverts our understanding of the traditional outcome of the known narrative and even proposes the

possibility of an alternate reality, which piques our curiosity, causing us to become more invested in the tragic events of the play as they unfold.

When English poet Christopher Fry (1907-2005) translated the play as *Tiger at the Gates* in 1955, the new title alludes to another poetic image from the original text, but the paratextual impression relayed to its London audiences had quite a different effect. In the wake of the Allied triumph of World War II, the factor of inevitability loses its immediacy, and indeed, the Greek attack on Troy is even viewed through the perspective of the contemporary war's victors. The tension established by the French title has, in essence, been resolved, if one only sees the play as a warning against the impending aggression of the Germans in 1930s France. One may even question whether this transformation strips the play of its original power, as the retention of the play's original title prophesies the timeless inevitability of all war.

In addition to the grand scope of the expansive narrative that envelops the poetic and dramatic representation of the Trojan War, the canon of Greek tragedy abounds with unending cycles of violence. The recurring acts of revenge perpetrated by the families of Atreus (Agamemnon, Orestes, Electra) and Cadmus (Oedipus, Antigone) populate numerous dramas by each of the three major Attic dramatists. And with the exception of Aeschylus' *The Eumenides* (c. 458 BC), which insists upon an end to vendetta killings and establishes the court system of Athens as the divine seat of justice, the repetitious sequences of violence and death are rarely resolved at the end of a Greek tragedy. As much as they espouse a majestic nobility of the human spirit in the face of adversity, they also embody the horrors of war, the anxieties of filial relationships, and the tempting allure of sexual taboos. Despite the millennia that separate contemporary audiences from

the composition of these dramas, they still have the power to impact our hearts, minds, and souls in a visceral manner to “refract in the gut,” as Sarah Ruhl claims.<sup>88</sup>

What about these stories of primitive kings and queens, priestesses and heroes, gods and gardeners, allows us still to associate their fates with our own? For example, how is it that we are still so horrified by Medea’s ruthless murder of her children in the face of her husband’s abandonment? Is it because, when all is said and done, we hope against hope for a different outcome? The anathema of infanticide seems so foreign and contrary to basic human nature, causing Medea to be cast again as the “Other,” until the evening news shocks us with the stories of Susan Smith or Andrea Yates, and we are once more forced to re-evaluate our social attitudes. As playwright Tony Kushner (b. 1956) states in his Foreword to Ellen McLaughlin’s *The Greek Plays*, “...one aspect of their magnetism is that they offer as much as anything can the possibility of returning to origins, of going back to the beginning, where one is both shocked and gratified to see that certain aspects of our wretchedness and our greatness have altered very little in three thousand years.”<sup>89</sup>

When dramatists choose to adapt these prototexts, which still have the power to affect audiences on such a visceral emotional and psychological level, they must seek to capture the essence of the original while asserting their own creative voice over the material. In tracing the metatextual shifts that occur in the adaptive process, Eva Kushner stands in direct opposition to Conradie and insists that modern adaptations of Greek myth rely far more upon the changes that they insert into the adapted narratives than upon a sense of fidelity with their sources. By defamiliarizing the known through an act of

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<sup>88</sup> Ruhl, 287.

<sup>89</sup> McLaughlin, ix-x.

literary transformation, the adaptation can better bridge the gap between the past and present and suggest enduring associations between the ancient and the contemporary. She asserts, “Thus in order to renew itself for new audiences the myth must adopt a new code and new code breakers.”<sup>90</sup>

Often, this “new code” establishes itself through the implementation of substitutions and surrogates, which replace the standard adaptive strategy of creating a correlative link to the prototext through homodiegetic retention of spatio-temporal content and context. In other words, rather than preserving explicit paratextual indicators (such as allusive/verbatim titles or subtitles), an adaptation may seek to distinguish itself as independent from the source material (e.g., one must read/observe Cocteau’s *The Infernal Machine* in order to connect it to the Oedipus myth – the title offers no suggestion regarding its content). Further, heterodiegesis may cause the *dramatis personae* to contain few, if any, recognizable character names, and the time and place of the setting may have shifted radically. Dramatists may eliminate characters altogether, conflate two or more roles into a single character, or substitute a character with another whose role and function has no corollary in the original work, thereby weaving an original strand of action that intersects with the prototextual trope(s). Additionally, a surrogate may appear that performs the function of a component of the original text, but shares no other associative characteristics with the element it absorbs.

Surrogacy also works to transform recognizable constituents into representations of something quite different. In Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* (1942), the playwright retains the primary diegetic characteristics of Sophocles’ original, with the minor exception of

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<sup>90</sup> Kushner, Eva. “Greek Myths in Modern Drama: Paths of Transformation.” *Yearbook of Comparative Criticism*. 9 (1980): 198-209. 201.

the excision of Tiresias, the addition of a Nurse character, and the expansion of the role of the Guard who arrests Antigone. Even so, despite these correlative similarities, an adept audience understands that Anouilh's *mise en scène* has little to do with ancient Thebes and everything to do with the fascist occupation of France by the Nazis. The two are not directly equivalent, per se, but do function as reflexive surrogates of one another, suggesting subtle associations rather than explicit analogues. Observed through this interpretive lens, Creon becomes a conglomerate representation of despised political collaborators who facilitated the German intrusion into France during World War II. Thus, one socio-historical moment is superimposed upon another, usurping its idiosyncrasies in order to offer commentary, thus fulfilling one meta-communicative function of adaptation.

Similarly, in the first monologue of Neil LaBute's (b. 1963) play *bash: latter-day plays* (1999), a despondent father in a hotel room confesses that, several years before, he has smothered his infant daughter upon learning that his position at work was being downsized, out of fear that he would no longer be able to provide adequately for his growing family. The tragic nature of this event is amplified when he reveals that the news that incited him to perform this terrible act was a cruel practical joke. On its own, this short play is reminiscent of any number of unfortunate domestic crimes that occur when financial times turn desperate. However, LaBute endows the action and characters with added significance by titling the monologue *iphigenia in orem*, a direct allusion to Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis* (c. 408-06 BC). The paratextual indicator suggested by LaBute's title forces the audience to associate its action with the parallel sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon at the commencement of the Trojan War,



in order to appease the goddess Artemis and cause the winds to resume, which will transport the Greek ships to Troy. Further, even the author's explicit paratextual manipulation of the typography of the title of the complete play, as well as its component scenic divisions, in lower case, suggests that the epic nature of the classical myths has been relegated to the cultural world of contemporary middle-class America.

LaBute does not attempt to retell the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice directly in his play, nor does he suggest that his Mormon salesman protagonist is an unequivocal correlative for Agamemnon; there is nothing noble or epic about this unnamed monologist that begs comparison between the two men. However, it is possible to establish him as a surrogate for Agamemnon by identifying heterodiegetic equivalences in the story between Euripides' text and LaBute's. Significant differences abound. In the Greek drama, Iphigenia assumes an heroic role by deciding to go willingly to the altar for the good of her country and to protect her father's reputation, an impossible role for the infant Emma (the murdered child in LaBute's monologue) to assume. The deception Agamemnon generates to lure Iphigenia and Clytemnestra to Aulis, that of a fraudulent offer of marriage by Achilles, is absent, although it is arguable that the "practical joke" that leads LaBute's protagonist to his deadly act can stand in as an adequate substitute. In the end, LaBute's salesman and his wife Deb grow closer as a couple as a result of Emma's death, the inverse of the darkly shattered relationship that leads to Clytemnestra's own murder of her husband upon his triumphant homecoming from the war. The fact that he actually prospers in his life in the wake of the horrific act for which he seeks absolution in this theatrical confession (which can itself be interpreted as a type of *catharsis*), is in line with the disturbing signature aesthetic that LaBute establishes in

his other plays and films, in which despicable characters are rarely punished and often rewarded for the most depraved, antisocial behavior.

One fascinating aspect of the 1999 text is that it possesses the power to impact a reading of Euripides' play retroactively. By reducing the mythic to the intimate, LaBute personalizes the grief and guilt of a father whose loss of a child results in his own advancement in society. When we use this transmotivational filter to re-examine Agamemnon's actions through the psychological trauma of a twentieth-century man who believes that an act of infanticide will improve his situation in life, we perhaps gain unforeseen sympathy for the Argive general in his doomed relationship with his daughter and wife in the context of unflinching social pressures and consequently fill in emotional and mental gaps in his personality, thus amplifying the grave difficulty of his decision. In this way, LaBute's play becomes a palimpsest, superimposed over Euripides' original, and this superimposition results in an illuminating double-reading of the myth that literally launched a thousand ships. Thus, we see how an adaptation like LaBute's play can intertextually inform a reading of the Greek text upon which it is very loosely based as much, if not more, as the prototext informs the metatext in a traditional scheme of influence.

In the following section, I will attempt to provide a practical application of selected adaptive strategies and techniques towards an illuminative model of textual analysis. Each section is a brief investigation of a modern or contemporary dramatic adaptation of classical Greek theatre, with each example striving to demonstrate a focused treatment of one major strategy demonstrated in this chapter and my Introduction. This model will be expanded throughout the remaining chapters of this

study as I examine the metatextual transformation of Nō texts and structures in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

### Mythos Interruptus: Past as Prologue in *The Infernal Machine*

By far the most critically recognized drama that I address in this section, Jean Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale* (*The Infernal Machine*, 1934) is a vast system of textual intersections, as well as a nexus of overlapping adaptive strategies. Primarily a comic revision of Sophocles' iconic tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannos* (*Oedipus the King*, c. 429 BC), *The Infernal Machine* actively portrays many of the incidents that comprise the exposition of the prototextual work. As a Genettian *prolongation* of the original work, it extends the action of the drama to include seminal expositional incidents that occur years prior to the inciting action of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The modern text also interpolates details, characters, and episodes that enrich the narrative while molding the aesthetic impact of the myth into a twentieth-century context. As prequel, these scenes purport to fill in gaps in the story, unimportant to Sophocles or his audiences, but which provide potential answers to long-standing questions about the part of the story we never see. Act One witnesses the period of mourning immediately following news of the death of Laius, Act Two enacts Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx, and Act Three recounts the doomed wedding night of Oedipus and Jocasta. Finally, Cocteau relegates the specific action of Sophocles' original to a heavily compressed fourth and final act. The play possesses both extrapolative and interpolative characteristics, and despite its modern prose language and tone, it relies on a homodiegetic approach to the characters and

setting – neither is displaced into a twentieth-century idiom, with the exception of the occasional anachronistic reference.

Cocteau openly acknowledges the late nineteenth-century psychosexual appropriation of the Oedipus myth by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and his disciples by exploring the erotic potential of his source material. In the first three acts, Oedipus is portrayed as a young man in his physical prime, an object of impassioned desire for both Jocasta and the nymph-like Sphinx of Act Two. Cocteau depicts Jocasta as a hyper-sexualized older woman with a healthy carnal appetite, as she not only lusts after Oedipus but also the Young Soldier to whom the ghost of Laius appears in Act One as well. In this way, Cocteau explores the maternal component of Freud's assessment of erotic neurosis, since she seems to seek out significantly younger male partners, in the wake of her husband's death, who are the age equivalent of her "dead" son. The sexual appeal of Oedipus is so strong that it entices the Sphinx, disguised as a seductive young girl rather than the monstrous, bloodthirsty horror of legend to reveal to him the answer to her deadly riddle. This in turn leads to her demise and his elevation as the hero of Thebes, a mixed blessing that leads to his own imminent downfall. Karelisa Hartigan identifies this moment as one of the most subversive, and in her opinion least effective, transformations of the original myth that Cocteau interpolates into the text, because it strips away all vestiges of Oedipus' identity as a classical "tragic hero." In her words, "Oedipus' victory is a sham."<sup>91</sup> However, this inability to solve the riddle does permit Cocteau to justify Oedipus' later cognitive blindness that prevents him from seeing the glaring truths about his own destiny as well.

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<sup>91</sup> Hartigan, Karelisa. "Oedipus in France: Cocteau's Mythic Strategy in *La Machine Infernale*." *Classical and Modern Literature*. 6 (1986): 89-95. 93.

The inevitable action of Act Three is subverted by a continual trope of *coitus interruptus*, a concept that can serve as a powerful metaphor for the play as a whole. The audience voyeuristically awaits the incestuous consummation that sets into motion the next phase of tragic implications in the myth, but the characters' exhaustion and the intrusion of Tiresias prevents even a kiss between the two. Finally, at the end of the act, Oedipus lays his head on the cradle beside the bed, a remnant of Jocasta's guilty past of which she cannot bring herself to dispose, and she strokes his hair. Alternately, she refers to him as "a child," and he mistakes her in his pre-somnolent state as his mother.<sup>92</sup> This incident, coupled with similar moment at the beginning of the act in which Oedipus promises to Jocasta that he will strive to fill the void left by her dead husband and son, frames Cocteau's action in a sphere of dramatic irony which rivals that found in Sophocles' original play.

Further, in a humorous twist that impacts not just theme but dramatic structure as well, Cocteau inverts the standard psychoanalytic trope and endows his Oedipus with a "Hamlet complex." Based in Freudian dream analysis and expanded by Ernest Jones' groundbreaking critical works, first published in 1910, and later revised and compiled as *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), this concept contends that William Shakespeare's tragic hero Hamlet suffers from an unhealthy sexual obsession with his mother that impacts his ability to act in an efficacious manner to avenge his father's murder or to form constructive relationships with potential friends and/or lovers. This inversion forces the palimpsestuous overlay of multiple inter/prototexts onto Cocteau's comedy, but insists upon a retroactive reading of Sophocles' play through the twentieth-century lens of the

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<sup>92</sup> Cocteau, Jean. "The Infernal Machine." Trans. Albert Bermel. *The Infernal Machine and Other Plays*. NY: New Directions, 1963. 1-96. 80.

psychoanalytic and literary traditions that have sprung up around the classical text, and which have become inseparable from it for modern readers.

When one reverses the traditional Freudian hypothesis in this manner, as Cocteau suggests, character traits more adequately suited to the Bard's "melancholy Dane" become superimposed upon the Theban king and his entourage. For example, like Hamlet, Oedipus' driving motivation that propels him through the play's action and ultimately spells his doom, he seeks to punish his father's murder. One ironic aspect of this simple, primal goal is that he is unaware that this is exactly what he is doing. And yet, he pursues the inquiry with a passion, a fury, that seems appropriate for a son, but not for a foreign hero who has merely inherited his crown. Additionally, each of Cocteau's characters assumes double roles and absorbs the personalities of their Shakespearean counterparts; however, this delineation holds true most specifically within the interpolated matter of the play found in Acts One through Three. Oedipus functions as the inquisitive, indecisive Hamlet seeking a truth whose full import will not be revealed until the play's climax. Jocasta performs her role as the proud queen who marries too quickly after mourning too briefly, while Cocteau's not-yet-quite-blind Tiresias ingratiates himself as a shrewd, bumbling Polonius figure. As the keeper of social order, Creon assumes some of the less villainous characteristics of Claudius, and the parallels between the dead kings Laius and Hamlet the elder are evident.

Too, within this construct, it is difficult to read Acts One and Three of *The Infernal Machine* without acknowledging the structural influence of their Shakespearean analogues. The opening of the play clearly mirrors the first act of *Hamlet*, as the ghost of the protagonist's father haunts the ramparts of the palace seeking vengeance for his

untimely murder, before disappearing into the mists of the dawn. However, as Oedipus is both avenging angel and murderer, he is not present to hear the dead king's prophecies, and they go unheeded by the lower-class guards who seek to avoid matters best suited for the aristocracy. The central focus of critics who employ an Oedipal reading of *Hamlet* resides in the infamous "boudoir scene" of Shakespeare's Act III, Scene IV, in which Hamlet implores Gertrude not to defile his father's memory any further by continuing to sleep with Claudius. Renowned Shakespearean stylist Laurence Olivier (1907-89), onstage and in his 1948 film version, vigorously adopted the Freudian interpretation of the tragedy and transformed his performance of this scene into a sexually charged assault upon his mother, with his kisses and embraces expressing much more than filial affection. In Act Three of *The Infernal Machine*, the ghost of Laius does not literally appear as King Hamlet's does in Shakespeare's text, but his presence infiltrates the loaded symbolism of the locale just as powerfully, as bedroom and nursery collide and fuse while mother and son engage in (albeit philosophical) foreplay. Oedipus reverts to being an unfocused, indecisive child who requires both mother and lover and finds satisfaction of both needs in Jocasta.

Finally, Cocteau amplifies the role of the supernatural in his play, a dramaturgical strategy that is uncommon in twentieth-century adaptations of classical works, which often subsume the paranormal within the context of psychological neurosis/psychosis. The presence of Laius' ghost, the Sphinx, Anubis, and even the godlike narrative Voice of the Author, which in essence speaks the play into existence, all embody Cocteau's rejection of the realism and naturalism espoused by Ibsen, Chekhov, and their early twentieth-century proponents. The paranormal becomes a metaphor for the strength of

the poetic imagination, and the transformative power of drama. In Act Two, the physical incarnation of the dreaded Sphinx takes the form of a beautiful young woman who empathizes with her victims and who seeks an end to the bloodshed.<sup>93</sup> Other than her constant companion, the Egyptian jackal-headed god of the dead, the only character able to recognize her true identity is a small child whose simple-minded mother lives in fear, not of the reality of the Sphinx but of the terrifying visions of monsters that haunt her day-to-day superstitions. Once Oedipus “solves” her riddle, she must die, but Anubis resurrects her as the goddess Nemesis and assuming this new role she vows to punish the young hero as he runs headlong towards his fate.

This voice of the goddess Vengeance that emerges from the conquered body of the Sphinx resembles the Voice that introduces each act of Cocteau’s drama. Prior to Act One, the Voice reveals the entire plot of the play to come and unveils the source for its title: “Before you is a fully wound machine. Slowly its spring will unwind the entire span of a human life. It is one of the most perfect machines devised by the infernal gods for the mathematical annihilation of a mortal.”<sup>94</sup> This is not a description of the power of Fate that ensnares the classical Oedipus of Sophocles per se. Nor is it the Voice of the gods – it is the Voice of Cocteau, who regularly inserts himself into his dramas as the embodiment of poetry itself. One even sees a proto-Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (defamiliarization) in Cocteau’s subversion of the narrative’s suspense and irony by summarizing the action of the drama before it even begins.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Cocteau, 41.

<sup>94</sup> Cocteau, 6.

<sup>95</sup> However, it may be argued that this strategy emulates the creation of a knowing audience, as would have been the case at ancient Dionysian festivals when Sophocles’ drama premiered.



With these speeches, the Voice/Cocteau attests that his gods are not beneficent, and they do not occupy the lofty heights of Olympus. They view the world from an infernal place away from human sight, not unlike the darkened auditorium in which his audience sits. Indeed, one may interpret this proclamation of the voyeuristic nature of the gods as an indictment of the audience in its passive role as it watches the wanton destruction of this man. Further, by alluding to the *deus ex machina* of classical Greek tragedy, Cocteau subverts the role of the god-driven literary device that rescues protagonists in peril when the action of the plot has become too complicated for them to escape by their own volition. But Cocteau's machine does not liberate; it is a cruel, ruthless trap in which the gods ensnare humanity for their entertainment.

“Was Blind, But Now I See”: The Fusion of Christian and Attic Iconography in *The Gospel at Colonus*

Whereas Cocteau expands the story of Oedipus into the realm of prequel in order to map his imminent destruction at the hands of an infernal audience of gods, Lee Breuer's (b. 1937) *The Gospel at Colonus* (1983) strives to release Sophocles' most enduring creation from his suffering. This gospel musical, in which the final day of Oedipus is transposed into the context of a late twentieth-century Black Pentecostal church service, occupies a unique place in the discourse of adaptation, particularly as it pertains to the central topic of this study. While it may, on the surface, seem a radical deviation from the source material of Sophocles' final play, *Oedipus at Colonus* (composed shortly before the playwright's death in 406 BC), Breuer's musical oscillates between a correlative and extrapolative adaptive strategy, and ultimately emerges as one

of the most faithful representations of its prototext(s) in this study, both in terms of literariness and performativity. *The Gospel at Colonus*'s central theme is one of spiritual transformation, and in this regard, form follows function in such an efficient manner that it transcends mere imitation and succeeds as an example of dramaturgical fusion. Additionally, not only does Sophocles' original read like a Nō drama, with its themes of a mysterious wanderer from legend seeking release from his past, but many of the characteristics it shares with the Japanese form continue through this contemporary gospel musical incarnation.

Both prototext and metatext concern themselves with the final day in the life of the wretched king Oedipus, who seeks to end his exile from Thebes and die in peace. He comes upon a sacred grove in Colonus (ironically, the birthplace of Sophocles) and vows to bestow upon its inhabitants, and those of nearby Athens, a blessing if they grant him sanctuary. He learns that his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, have declared war on one another over the throne of Thebes, and curses them for their betrayal of filial bonds, particularly when Creon attempts to seize Oedipus and his daughters in order to influence the outcome of the coming war. King Theseus rightly returns Antigone and Ismene to their father's side and pledges his loyalty and protection to Oedipus. Oedipus and Theseus climb to the top of a nearby mountain, and in the wake of a terrifying storm, Oedipus dies and passes peacefully from this world.

The choice of prototext in this instance is noteworthy. Unlike the deaths of other tragic protagonists in the extant Greek canon, Oedipus' death is not achieved by murder, deception, suicide, or any other violent means. Theseus therefore insists that Oedipus' passing is not to be mourned, but rather celebrated. (It may be too forward to suggest that

Sophocles himself, standing at the end of his own life and looking forward to his own imminent death, chooses to exonerate his most famous literary creation in an act of artistic absolution.) In Breuer's play, the myth of Oedipus metamorphoses into an apocryphal Judeo-Christian parable of redemption, a cautionary tale in which even the most downtrodden, wretched individual may gain the hope of a final resting place of peace, in which their past iniquities are forgiven. If a man such as Oedipus can achieve absolution and heavenly rest, then it may be afforded to all men, regardless of their transgressions. At the end of the performance, Oedipus jubilantly achieves an apotheosis of biblical proportion, joining the company of such patriarchs and saints as Moses, Elijah, and even Jesus, in a moment of glorious transfiguration witnessed only by Theseus. In addition, his sufferings rival those of Job, who is ultimately rewarded for his faithfulness. No doubt a great deal of the inspiration for the concept of Breuer's modernization of the play derives from the similarities of Oedipus' myth to these Judeo-Christian references. In this way, Oedipus assumes the role of surrogate or scapegoat for the community, and his noble suffering results in a sense of *catharsis* for the common man. This Aristotelian aesthetic principle of "purging," becomes a baptismal conversion, a "cleansing," in Breuer's play, in which the congregation and, by extension, the audience, is provided the promise of liberation from the agonies of sin.

Further, the choice of Oedipus as central allegorical figure takes on added significance within the specific context of an African-American Pentecostal church service. Oedipus' blindness, both literal and metaphorical, as well as his years of exile from his homeland, echo the themes of many standard Negro gospel spirituals. Not the least of these is John Newton's "Amazing Grace" (1779), whose first verse reads,

“Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound) / That sav’d a wretch like me! / I once was lost, but now am found, / Was blind, but now I see.” Breuer amplifies this resonance in the musical’s 1983 incarnation by casting the singing voice of Oedipus with Clarence Fountain and the Five Blind Boys of Alabama. Thus, it is impossible to separate the full impact of Breuer’s play from its original performance context. That performance context *completes* the text in a way that only theatre can. How much more poignant is the story of Oedipus, when spoken and sung by this acclaimed gospel group of sightless performers!

During the course of the church service framework, the parishioners alternate between the recitation (often responsive in nature) of “scriptural” text and the performance of hymn-like musical selections as soloists or in small choral groups, thereby assuming the character roles in Sophocles’ drama. The central role of Oedipus is divided between a Pastor Oedipus, who speaks the dialogue of Sophocles’ text, and a Singer Oedipus, who comments upon the action with emotional interjections of song. A large choir even forms the physical backdrop of the event action and interrupts/responds as a communal voice, mirroring the function of the chorus in Attic tragedy. None of these performers is ever expected actually to represent the characters they portray; the dramaturgical framework of the church service explicitly proclaims the performative nature of their endeavors onstage.

But the interactive nature of the communal ritual of the church service invites the participation of the audience as members of the virtual congregation, yet another chorus to join in the spiritual celebration at hand. At the climax of the service, once the death of Oedipus has been proclaimed, the chorus explodes with the rousing number “Lift Him

Up,” which literally calls back the actor(s) playing Oedipus from the grave and serves as an end to the artifice of the performance.<sup>96</sup> One can witness in the PBS “Great Performances” broadcast that this song inspires the entire audience to stand and take part in the cast’s ecstatic clapping and singing – the audience’s singing, I might add, is of an original song they have most likely never heard prior to the performance at hand – at whose completion the Pastor Oedipus motions to them and the onstage ensemble to be seated in a shared gesture of camaraderie.<sup>97</sup>

Yet despite all of these cultural and performative interpolations by playwright Breuer and composer Bob Telson (b. 1949), the text of *The Gospel at Colonus* remains largely within the parameters of a correlative adaptation. Breuer and Telson rarely deviate from the translation of Sophocles’ original text by Robert Fitzgerald (1910-85). While the structure of the performance takes on the characteristics of a church service, its composition still adheres to the traditional Greek alternation of dialogic episodes and choral odes indicated in Fitzgerald’s 1956 revised translation.<sup>98</sup> The lyrics of many of the musical’s most endearing songs, such as “Fair Colonus,” “How Shall I See You Through My Tears?,” and “Numberless Are the World’s Wonders” are lifted directly or lightly paraphrased from this English translation of the Greek text.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Breuer, Lee. *The Gospel at Colonus*. NY: TCG, 1989. 52.

<sup>97</sup> *The Gospel at Colonus*. Dir. Kirk Browning. DVD. New Video NYC. 2008.

<sup>98</sup> Sophocles. *The Oedipus Cycle*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1977.

<sup>99</sup> “Numberless Are the World’s Wonders” is actually derived from the first choral ode of Fitzgerald’s and Dudley Fitts’ English version of Sophocles’ *Antigone* (1938).

“Something Like / Love”: The World of Women Portrayed in *Iphigenia and Other Daughters*

*Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (1995) is first and foremost a feminist retelling of the myths surrounding the House of Atreus in Greek mythology and subsequent dramatization in Attic tragedy. Ellen McLaughlin (b. 1957) constructs her play as the story of the women left behind in Agamemnon’s destructive wake as he leaves to fight in the Trojan War. The contemporary adaptation is derived from multiple prototexts: Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* (c. 414 BC) and *Iphigenia at Aulis* (c. 405 BC) and Sophocles’ *Electra* (c. 409-01 BC), thus contributing to the metatext functioning within Hutcheon’s concept of the “multilaminated” work. The primary action of the play surrounds the *Electra* episode, with the two shorter “Iphigenia plays” serving as lyrical dramaturgical prelude and epilogue to the central focal section. She attempts to create a narrative sense of continuity, albeit fragmentary, between three disparate episodes in the history of the Atreidae, but also maintains each section’s autonomous voice.

Despite the homodiegetic retention of classical character names and geographical locale, the play’s temporal setting is unhinged by McLaughlin, who opts to modernize the action by placing it within the context of the early twentieth century, inspired by European women who warmed the tea on the home front while their husbands, fathers, and sons fought in the trenches of World War I. As I will discuss later, the concept of history is integral to the play’s theme and its feminist perspective, so this temporal shift performs a specific aesthetic function. None of the discernible linguistic patterns or structural components of standard Attic tragedy is present in the drama, nor is the use of period costume or masks. No Chorus appears until the third section of the play, and even

then, disappears into the background once Iphigenia and her crazed brother Orestes recognize one another.

The most recent period of actor-playwright Ellen McLaughlin's artistic career has been dedicated almost exclusively to the adaptation of classical Greek dramas. In addition to those texts that provide sources for *Iphigenia and Other Daughters*, to date, she has written modern versions of *The Trojan Women* (1996), *Antigone (Kissing the Floor, 2009)*, *The Persians* (2003), *Ajax (Ajax in Iraq, 2008)*, *Helen* (2002), *Oedipus* (2005), and a raucous rendition of Aristophanes' eponymous anti-war comedy as part of the global "Lysistrata Project" protest in anticipation of the Iraq War in 2003. She acknowledges that, in the wake of the policies of the Bush Administration and its vague "war on terror," part of the appeal of this selection of prototexts lies in their unapologetic questioning of issues related to social justice, a core concern that can be traced throughout her full career as a writer.<sup>100</sup> In the Preface to *The Greek Plays*, she expands this connection that attracts her to the classical Greek canon to the human need to seek out both universal and personal truths:

I think we are still finding a bearable way of contemplating the unbearable truth of our times by working with a common mythology. We toy with the stories, come up with variations that suit our needs, but that doesn't make much difference to the basic strength of the raw material we're working with. Every age will find its use for these stories. But the stories will never cease to be relevant. They belong to us as human beings and they are as recognizable as the symmetry of our bodies, two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs, and the familiar tattoo of our beating hearts.<sup>101</sup>

Not surprisingly, this statement also sums up her approach to the adaptive process, as well as her intense respect for the prototextual "raw material" that she transforms into new dramas for a new generation.

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<sup>100</sup> McLaughlin, xv.

<sup>101</sup> McLaughlin, xviii.

When the war-weary, shell-shocked Orestes arrives in the “Electra” section of *Iphigenia and Other Daughters*, he stares blankly at the façade of the palace before him and proclaims with disgust, “How depressing. A ghost town. Gaping with stillness.... Stifling. World of women.”<sup>102</sup> Taking on Hutcheon’s dual functions of interpreter and creator, McLaughlin morphs the action of Euripides’ and Sophocles’ tragedies by transfocalizing their point of view and does, indeed, create a “world of women” in this elegiac, dreamlike theatrical fantasia. In “Iphigenia in Aulis,” the opening section of the play, she banishes all of the male characters to the periphery of the action and refuses them access to the stage. Iphigenia and Clytemnestra stand alone “In a windless place [where] everything is eternal and bland.”<sup>103</sup> In McLaughlin’s play, none of the men from the prototext appears – neither Agamemnon, Menelaus, nor Achilles. Iphigenia’s opening lines describe the literal landscape of the windless shores of Aulis, but they also attest to the powerlessness of these two female pawns caught up in the eternal, male-driven current of history. Unlike the mother and daughter of Euripides’ original text, who arrive joyfully at the camp with the false anticipation of Iphigenia’s marriage to Achilles, McLaughlin’s characters navigate through the spears and tents suspiciously, avoiding the all-too-hungry gaze of the men around them. Objectified by the eyes of these soldiers, each of whom knows her ultimate fate while she remains ignorant of her impending sacrifice, Iphigenia is transformed, but not in the way she expected to be. She exclaims, “Morning comes and I am a white dress....” only to face the horrible truth: “Here is my husband / This ancient stone / And the quick shadow of the knife / I am to

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<sup>102</sup> McLaughlin, 45.

<sup>103</sup> McLaughlin, 19.



marry everyone / Every single one / This is what is it is at last.”<sup>104</sup> Marriage altar turns to funeral sepulcher, and she is reduced to community property, co-opted by the men who have deceived and conspired against her, victimized by male sexuality in an orgy of blood. Despite the fact that the third section of the play reveals that the goddess Artemis miraculously rescues her from her death at the altar, “Iphigenia in Aulis” ends abruptly with no indication of this supernatural intervention.

The “world of women” created by McLaughlin becomes warped with madness and blood in the “Electra” section of the play. Driven to kill Agamemnon for his murder of Iphigenia, Clytemnestra rules Mycenae in his stead and has banished her daughter Electra, who spends her days tethered like a dog outside the palace doors, awaiting the day when her exiled brother Orestes will return to avenge her father’s death. In this aspect, McLaughlin adheres to the basic action of Sophocles’ original text. However, once more she banishes the male characters to the margins of her drama. In addition to conflating the roles of Pylades and the Tutor into Orestes himself, she dispenses with Aegisthus and his role as Clytemnestra’s paramour, claiming in her introductory notes to the play that “Adultery also seems beside the point and vilifying in an unsatisfying way. My Clytemnestra commits murder as an outraged mother and knows that she will die at the hands of her own child. It’s an irony of which she is fully aware.”<sup>105</sup> Clytemnestra repeatedly defines herself in relation to her world within the idiom of motherhood, even dreaming of herself as a swan and her children as misshapen eggs (with the exception of her one perfect egg, Iphigenia, “the only one I ever wanted,” who has flown away).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> McLaughlin, 23-4.

<sup>105</sup> McLaughlin, 6.

<sup>106</sup> McLaughlin, 29.

Orestes' presence in both the "Electra" and "Iphigenia in Tauris" sections is a violation, an invasion into this world of women. He, like the men of the first section of the play, arrives with the sole purpose of committing an act of violence. Yet, McLaughlin subverts the role of Orestes by emasculating him, stripping him of a patriarchal desire for revenge by portraying him as an unwilling soldier, sent to perform a role that was never his by choice. He even describes himself as "...somewhat ludicrous. He was something of an actor."<sup>107</sup> Electra continually demands that he fulfill his destiny, responding to his fatigued lament, "I'm tired of killing," with her own crazed supplication, "I'm tired of waiting."<sup>108</sup> When he accuses her by pointing out the fact that she had many opportunities to kill their mother herself, she implies that this task belongs to a man's world, which resonates with Clytemnestra's own appropriation of masculine behavior as both murderess and interim ruler of the kingdom. McLaughlin inserts dialogue between son and mother that does not occur in Sophocles' original, inspired by similar incidents in Aeschylus *The Libation Bearers* (458 BC) and Euripides' *Orestes* (408 BC), in which Clytemnestra's maternal tendencies cause her to embrace the object of her own destruction.<sup>109</sup>

Perhaps the greatest interpolation McLaughlin inserts into *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* is the expansion of the role of Agamemnon's "forgotten daughter" Chrysothemis. Sophocles is the only Greek dramatist to include Chrysothemis among the children of the slain general and king, and in the original text she functions as little more than a level-headed foil for Electra's explosive passion, much in the same way that

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<sup>107</sup> McLaughlin, 47.

<sup>108</sup> McLaughlin, 51.

<sup>109</sup> It is interesting to note that all three major Greek tragedians dramatized the Orestes/Electra plot, and that it is the only surviving trope that exists in the extant canon shared by all three playwrights.

Ismene serves as a foil for her rebellious sister in Sophocles' *Antigone* (c. 442 BC). This intertextual similarity suggests to Sophocles' audience that Electra performs a similar function to Antigone, thus validating her desire for revenge. McLaughlin states that "Chrysothemis is the character that no one ever remembers after reading the Sophocles play. So she has become the center of this one."<sup>110</sup> She is "[t]he one everyone likes. The one no one worries about. I am not frightening. I'm the good girl. Everyone pities me. I'm so reliable."<sup>111</sup> In this feminist drama of women who resist the male gaze and take charge of their own fates, Chrysothemis is the representation of marginalized femininity, content to read about the battles of war in the newspaper, but never wishing to involve herself directly with the affairs of the world. She asserts that they, as women, "were never a part of the great drama."<sup>112</sup> And yet, McLaughlin gives Chrysothemis the final word of this section of the play. While Electra rages and demands recognition for her role in the history, Chrysothemis calmly contemplates the mundane, day-to-day reality of her life of female domesticity, alternately "Looking in the wrong direction" and "Trying to remember a terrible dream."<sup>113</sup>

In "Iphigenia in Tauris," the serenity of the first section returns with the restoration of the title character, who has been miraculously saved from death by the gods and made high priestess of a cult of women who must slaughter any man who sets foot on their island. By placing this version of the Iphigenia legend in the same dramaturgical macrocosm as the Aulis myth, McLaughlin immediately thwarts an audience's accepted view of history. Iphigenia perishes and survives in the same drama. Ultimately when

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<sup>110</sup> McLaughlin, 8.

<sup>111</sup> McLaughlin, 37.

<sup>112</sup> McLaughlin, 34.

<sup>113</sup> McLaughlin, 58.

Orestes is drawn to Tauris, Iphigenia must break her vow as a priestess and spare his life. By doing so, she also destroys the cycle of blood that has predetermined her family's actions for generations. Ironically, her very existence, the fact that she was not sacrificed in Aulis, negates that cycle and adds to the futility of the deaths of her father and her mother as well as Orestes' relentless pursuit by the Furies. In the final moment of the play, she and her brother "somehow thread their way into a different air," disappearing through the cracks of history by refusing to become victims of the narrative they are meant to follow.<sup>114</sup> There is no resolution at the end of the play. The characters merely fade away inexplicably, confounding the conventional audience desire for a *denouement*.

### Conclusion

In tracing the adaptive strategies and tactics outlined in this chapter, both in theory and practical application, I have attempted to show the many ways in which a metatext mediates textual transformations in order to seek clues to understanding the present moment through the literature of the past. Adaptation is not a static process in which correlative components merely undergo spatio-temporal shifts. It creates a dialogic relationship between texts and readers/audiences via processes of selectivity, intentionality, and interactivity. An adaptation of lasting quality must illuminate the timeless core that has allowed the prototext to endure, while enhancing the source material with the imagination of the adaptor, coupled with a fearless willingness to deviate from the traditional interpretation of the text across time.

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<sup>114</sup> McLaughlin, 74.

Within the next three chapters, I intend to show how these strategies and tactics transform classical Nō texts into viable twentieth and twenty-first-century dramas. The metamorphosis of a classical dramatic form such as Japanese Nō, with its many innate, often rigid, textual and performance conventions, must be examined from a perspective balancing structural and thematic fidelity between metatext and prototext with its relevance as a dynamic, autonomous form of living art for a contemporary audience, whether knowing or unknowing. Additionally, intertextual trends in literary criticism encourage simultaneous readings of convergent and divergent textual and performance traditions, as well as the possibilities of retroactive readings that have the power to transform the reception of the original texts for contemporary audiences as well. Thus, as these few brief examples from contemporary Greek adaptation have shown, relative success in adaptation relies considerably upon the ability of the adaptor to perform the dual functions of interpreter and creator. My analysis of the adaptive process in the creation of twentieth and twenty-first-century dramas inspired by the Nō, either directly or indirectly, incorporates elements of each of the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter. However, I find the terminology and principles found in the writings of Genette, Popovič, and Hutcheon to be the most advantageous to my specific arguments and return to them most frequently throughout the next three chapters.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “BENEATH THE MASK”:

#### AN INTRODUCTION TO YUKIO MISHIMA’S MODERN NŌ PLAYS

In the summer of 1957, Yukio Mishima (pen name of Kimitake Hiraoka, 1925-1970) visited New York to promote the publication of Donald Keene’s English translation of his *Kindai nōgakushū* (*Five Modern Nō Plays*). Only the second major work of the controversial Japanese author to be published in English (the first was his novel *The Sound of Waves* in 1956), these modernized versions of classical Nō dramas received largely favorable reviews from the American press and helped to establish Mishima as a major voice of twentieth-century Japanese literature in the West.<sup>1</sup> During this visit, the plays caught the attention of a pair of television producers who approached Mishima and Keene about staging an evening of three of the one-act plays in a major American premiere. This prospect excited Mishima greatly, and he extended his visit to the United States by an additional three months in order to see the production blossom into reality. However, his dreams of being a Broadway celebrity were soon dashed by numerous administrative delays, financial missteps, artistic compromises, and chronic false representation of the production’s progress by the unscrupulous promoters. By the end of the year, their broken promises became too much for Mishima to bear, and he returned to Japan. And while two of the modern Nō plays eventually were performed Off-Broadway three years later, his experiences in late 1957 irreparably disenchanted Mishima with what he called the “torture” of the American theatrical scene.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stokes, Henry Scott. *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*. NY: Cooper Square, 2000. 171.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan, John. *Mishima: A Biography*. Boston: Little Brown, 1974. 136-7.

It is not difficult to imagine that, had events in New York played out differently for Mishima, his reputation in the West as a dramatist might have rivaled, if not surpassed, his esteemed status as a novelist. Yet, even as of the present day, there have been no major productions of any of Mishima's plays in New York, and this lack of exposure is a major factor that has relegated him to the shadows of obscurity as a playwright among Western scholars. And while serious attempts have been made to expose American and British audiences to his theatrical voice, as in the case of 2009's star-studded West End presentation of *Madame de Sade* (*Sado kōshaku fujin*, 1965), critics have been less than kind to these stagings, despite their relative popularity among audiences.

In terms of sheer volume of output, Mishima outranks many of the West's leading playwrights of the twentieth century, with over sixty plays to his name, most of which were performed and revived in Japan during his short life. As for innovation in form and content, his accomplishments as a dramatist easily distinguish him as worthy of the same attention bestowed upon Western playwrights Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, and others who dominated the theatrical scene in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, not to mention other major Japanese playwrights of the period, such as Kōbō Abe (1924-93).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Japanese critics and scholars often regard *Madame de Sade* as Japan's finest twentieth-century play.<sup>4</sup> Despite these facts, it is only within the past ten years or so, with the recent publication of new anthologies of Mishima's plays in English translation, that

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<sup>3</sup> For example, it would not seem incongruous to see Mishima's *Sotoba Komachi* performed on a double bill of one-acts, paired with Albee's *The Zoo Story*, both using the same Central Park *mise en scène*. In addition to similar physical locales, the two works share thematic parallels, especially the subtle undercurrents of impending violence, leading to a shocking onstage death in their final moments.

<sup>4</sup> Kominz, Laurence. Introduction. *Mishima on Stage: The Black Lizard & Other Plays*. By Yukio Mishima. Ed. Kominz. Ann Arbor: U of MI Press, 2007. 1-65. 1.

he has begun to receive the attention he deserves as a vital force in the realm of twentieth-century dramatic literature.

The theatre plays a pivotal role in the development of Mishima's aesthetic sensibilities and, even when it only occupies the background or periphery in his writing as a setting or symbolic resonance, its continued presence can be felt throughout much of his total *oeuvre*. As a sickly child whose youth was largely confined behind closed doors, Mishima was exposed to Nō and Kabuki at an early age by accompanying his grandmother Natsu on her frequent excursions to the Kabuki-za and by listening to his mother Shizue's hobby of reciting *utai*, or the chanted libretti of the Nō drama.<sup>5</sup> At the age of fourteen, he composed one of his earliest known works, a sprawling four-act play featuring a pantheon of Christian religious icons entitled *Rotei (Journey)*.<sup>6</sup> Major novels, such as *Kyōko's House*, *Runaway Horses*, and *The Decay of the Angel*, feature characters who are actors, moments of mental and spiritual clarity that occur during dramatic performances, and even leitmotifs and symbols derived from the canon of the Nō. The short story *Onnagata* (1957) not only presents a vivid portrait of the mysterious backstage world of the Kabuki in post-war Japan, but it portrays the encroaching tension between classicism and Westernized modernity as well. These two apparently diametric poles are personified in sexual terms as well, through the characters of the *onnagata* actor Mangiku and the crass *shingeki* director Kawasaki, with whom the former falls in love during the rehearsals for a new play.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the unsteady oscillation between Western modernization as a liberating force and a destructive one forms the foundation of much of

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<sup>5</sup> Kominz, "Introduction," 8.

<sup>6</sup> Asahi News Service. "Scholars Verify Mishima Play Find," 19 October 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Onnagata." Trans. Donald Keene. *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories*. NY: New Directions, 1966. 139-61.



Mishima's work, and can be argued to act as a major contributing factor to the psychological anguish that led Mishima to commit ritual suicide, or *seppuku*, in November 1970.

Indeed, the morbid fascination surrounding Mishima's suicide has established an unsettling trend in Western scholarship about the author. Biographers and critics often use Mishima's *seppuku* as a primary point of embarkation for studies about his life and literature. This type of singularly focused, retroactive analysis in essence, has the effect of reducing his *oeuvre* into a protracted suicide note, which ignores the diversity of style and subject matter in his novels, essays, and plays. One cannot ignore the author's driven fixation with the cultural context of suicide within the history and literature of Japan, from the ancient samurai warriors to the *kamikaze* pilots of World War II. And it is impossible to discount the recurring motifs of death and destruction that pervade even his earliest works. But these literary harbingers of his potentially inevitable fate comprise merely one macabre component of a vibrant, prolific literary career unmatched by few authors since, in Japan or otherwise. And while his *seppuku* provides an interpretive lens through which one can view his life and writings, that singular scope of vision is a very constricted one and reveals startlingly little about the man behind the mask.

Additionally, this extra-textual discourse is often supplemented by the tenet that Mishima's death was a grand theatrical gesture, a final, "rehearsed" act of a man playing too many roles throughout his life and who had grown weary of wearing a mask instead of his natural human face.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that the events of November 25, 1970, possess an air of high drama, from the carefully written script of Mishima's speech to the

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<sup>8</sup> Seidensticker, Edward. "Mishima Yukio." *Hudson Review* 24 (1971): 272-82. 275.

captive audience gathered in the courtyard of the Army Self-Defense Forces building, to the immaculate uniforms worn by the Tatenokai (Shield Society) members who would accompany him on this doomed mission to reclaim the spirit of Japan. But to characterize the events that transpired that day and led to the very real, tragic end of the life of a true genius as mere performance is to deny the deep pain of a truly tortured human soul. Further, his was an irreversible act without a curtain call or return engagement.

Near the beginning of his aforementioned visit to the United States, Mishima was asked by a *New York Times* reporter, “It says here you have already published a novel in this country, and now you are publishing some plays. Which are you, anyway, a novelist or a playwright?”<sup>9</sup> This lack of understanding or respect for his multifaceted talent by an uninformed newspaper writer underscored Mishima’s dissatisfaction with his reception in America.<sup>10</sup> Whereas by the late 1950s in Japan, crowds of admirers considered him a celebrity of note, his relative anonymity in New York at the time confused and frustrated him. Further, the reporter’s need to pigeonhole him flew in the face of his unquestioned acceptance by Japanese readers and audiences as not an “or,” but an “and.” His ability to resist such easy categorization allowed Mishima to transcend literary boundaries, often destroying those conventions that sought to restrain him. In fact, the innate dialectical and liminal nature of the classical *Nō* may very well be a major factor of what attracted him to adapt the form for modern audiences.

Despite their fundamental influence on Mishima’s early career in the United States and Europe, Western critics, to date, have undertaken no major full-length, comprehensive studies of the *kindai* *Nō* as a whole. Outside of a handful of introductory

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<sup>9</sup> Keene, Donald. *On Familiar Terms: A Journey Across Cultures*. NY: Kodansha, 1994. 201.

<sup>10</sup> Keene, *On Familiar Terms*, 206.

essays by translators and editors, or scholarly journal articles that typically focus on a single play or narrow thematic concentration, Mishima's modern Nō tend to occupy secondary or tertiary emphasis in longer studies of his more familiar corpus of non-dramatic literature. References to Mishima's adaptations do occasionally emerge among traditional explorations of the classical Nō canon, as a means for comparative dramaturgy, but they rarely inform the core argument of the analyses at hand. Further, neither the modern Nō nor his other major stage texts have attracted the attention of Western dramatic literature scholars in the same manner that they capture the imagination of academics engaged in the investigation of Japanese history, language, and culture. Mishima must be (re)claimed by both critics and practitioners of theatre in the West, and his modern Nō must be seen as more than a supplementary footnote to his career as a writer, but rather as pivotal components of his defining style and creative agenda.

In this chapter, I will examine the transformative adaptive strategies employed by Mishima in the composition of his modern Nō plays, focusing on the primarily extrapolative techniques utilized in his modernization of *The Lady Aoi*, while providing supplemental brief analyses of convergent and divergent tactics utilized in the remaining *kindai* Nō. In addition to close readings of the translated texts placed within their critical contexts, as well as brief comparative analyses between the modern works and their classical antecedents, I will consider how the modern Nō exhibit many of the recognizable motifs that haunt much of Mishima's frequently paradoxical literary, political, and personal identity. The modern Nō provide a compelling metaphorical structure for the divided nature of Mishima's own ever-shifting sense of self and his perceptions of an increasingly Westernized post-war Japan. In the case of the former, the

Nō supplies Mishima with a creative construct that allows him to contemplate the warring halves without the need to reconcile them; in the case of the latter, the very act of reinventing a classical Asian form using Western models in order to caution the inhabitants of modern Japan against losing touch with their sense of history and culture, is in itself a self-reflexive act of literary innovation.

A study of the adaptive strategies at work in the composition of Mishima's modern Nō plays may provide helpful analytical tools for the critical exploration of his identity as a dramatist in general. Closer scrutiny of his theatrical writings reveals that Mishima's primary impulse as a dramatist is that of adaptation, whether of specific prototexts or of pre-existing dramaturgical styles. Of the sixty-two plays that he composed during his life, the great majority of those works are adaptations of one form or another. In addition to the *kindai* Nō, he wrote modern versions of traditional Kabuki and Kyōgen plays, classical Greek myth, and French neoclassical drama, often blending disparate forms into a modern fusion of past and present.

1959's *Nettaiju (Tropical Tree)* is a vicious psychosexual interpretation of the Electra myth, whose themes of incest, murder, and revenge are significantly informed by Freudian behavioral complexes and accentuated with tinges of the seething existential angst he observes in an emasculated post-war generation forced into destructive decadence by what he calls "an age of languid peace."<sup>11</sup> In fact, this play is not a direct adaptation of one specific version of the Orestes/Electra saga, but rather contains collective aspects of many of the Attic tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that relate the downfall of the house of Atreus. A completely different take on classical

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<sup>11</sup> Mishima Yukio. "An Ideology for an Age of Languid Peace." *Japan Interpreter* 7.1 (1971): 79-80.

Greek tragedy is *Suzaku-ke no Metsubō* (*The Decline and Fall of the Suzaku*, 1967), in which he filters Euripides' *Madness of Heracles* through the lens of an aristocratic family who must suffer the shame of defeat in post-war Japan. In 1957, he attempted his only modern Kyōgen adaptation, a collaboration with Donald Keene based upon the classic play *Busu*, which was originally intended to be included in the New York premiere of the modern Nō plays, but later jettisoned when it became obvious that the production would never materialize. Arguably his greatest play, *Madame de Sade*, is even an attempt to recreate a Neoclassical French philosophical drama in the style of Jean Racine, in which he explores the infamous reputation of the Marquis de Sade. Many of Mishima's own literary obsessions with overt sexuality and his violent fixation on the erotic nature of death are conflated with, perhaps hidden behind, those of the historical Marquis, but in typical subversive fashion, the all-female drama unfolds vicariously through the words of the women who have been abused and loved by the infamous de Sade.

While Mishima's legacy in the development of a twentieth-century Nō tradition is largely innovative, each of his *kindai* Nō is based upon a pre-existing classical prototext. Laurence Kominz suggests the existence of one possible exception to this assertion – that of the short play *Steeplechase* (*Daishōgai*, 1956). Kominz classifies *Steeplechase* as the author's only “original” modern Nō drama, by which he means an indirect stylistic adaptation of Mishima's own theatrical form that lacks a direct prototextual antecedent in the medieval Nō canon.<sup>12</sup> But in the case of each of the officially designated “modern Nō,” the degree to which Mishima reshapes the genre into a contemporary *milieu* depends upon how much he adheres to or deviates from the original subject matter in

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<sup>12</sup> Kominz, Laurence. “*Steeplechase*: Mishima Yukio's Only Original Modern Nō Play.” Eds. David Jortner, Keiko McDonald, and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. *Modern Japanese Theatre and Performance*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006. 205-13.

terms of structure, plot, character, and theme. Mishima's innovations of the form inspire later authors to create their own adapted and original Nō dramas based upon unconventional subject matter and to utilize a variety of dramaturgical styles in the service of the Nō aesthetic, while freeing them from the Nō's traditional structure. Some of his *kindai* Nō bear little resemblance to their textual and performative antecedents, yet they still contain a recognizable germ of inspiration derived from the classical Nō from which they are adapted. And even among his more "faithful" adaptations of the Muromachi-era texts, which are themselves adaptations of earlier forms, Mishima employs strategies of inversion and subversion that allows contemporary audiences to view the prototexts with fresh eyes, illuminated by the artificial glow of twentieth-century incandescent streetlamps and neon signs.

#### The Impetus Behind Mishima's Adaptation of the Nō

Mishima does not hide his motivation behind the composition of the *kindai nōgakushū*. In the 1960 essay "Modern Noh Plays and Modern Plays," Mishima openly explains that his primary goal is to transfer the Nō philosophy into a modern context by generating a new form of drama, as opposed to simply updating an antiquated one with contemporary themes or language. He rejects the classical Nō's identifiable literary and performance conventions (what he terms "poising") in order to "prove that Noh plays could be performed by actors who perform plays of Chekhov and Ibsen. This interest in the modern Noh will be cut in half if this historic irony is not fully understood."<sup>13</sup> By this, he specifically means that he wishes to impose the Western-inspired, realistic *shingeki*

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<sup>13</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Modern Noh Plays and Modern Plays" *New Japan* 12 (1960): 194-99. 198.

style of theatre performance and dramaturgy, so popular in twentieth-century Japan, upon classical Nō texts. Yamashita Mayumi quotes Mishima's desire to retain the themes and mood of the Nō, while utilizing more realistic stage language: "The words need to sound like free verse, and on the stage, a solid, simple metaphysical theme should definitely exist beyond the poetic atmosphere, like a statue in a park seen through the night mist."<sup>14</sup> The scenes are written using naturalistic dialogue that reveals the inner psychological motivations of their characters in a logical, progressive dramatic narrative structure, with the occasional exception of dream sequences and flashbacks inherently necessary to the Nō form, whether classical or modern. In short, this means it would be a mistake to attempt to analyze these plays as Nō per se, but one cannot divorce them from the Nō tradition that inspires and informs them, particularly when one acknowledges Mishima's own intense familiarity with the classical form. Thus, in my textual analysis of Mishima's *kindai* Nō, I will carefully attempt to link the modern metatexts with their prototextual analogues, all the while bearing in mind that the parallels are not intended to possess direct, one-to-one ratios of form and language.

Mishima sees the creation of a "modern Nō" genre as a natural extension of the shifting artistic and cultural landscape of mid-twentieth-century Japan when he observes, "But in today's Japan, modern plays and the Noh drama are existing in the same sort of mystic world."<sup>15</sup> Thus, he presumes it would be naïve to ignore that this immediate proximity may result in a form of influence and/or contamination between the classical and modern theatre, particularly as more and more actors begin to navigate between

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<sup>14</sup> Yamashita Mayumi. "Esthetic Resistance of Mishima Yukio in *Modern No Plays*." *Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. Vol. 1. Tokyo: ICLA, 1995. 394-402. 395.

<sup>15</sup> Mishima, "Modern Noh Plays and Modern Plays," 198.

historically disparate performance styles. As in much of Mishima's *oeuvre*, this type of oscillation between past and present plays a major role in defining the thematic and political tone of the modern Nō. His attraction to, and simultaneous suspicion of, the Westernization threatening to overwhelm post-war Japan is just one type of cultural anxiety that he explores throughout his literary career. Not content merely to place them side-by-side in the modern Nō, Mishima causes the past and present to intersect and overlap in these plays, often with catastrophic results. Thus the manner in which he summons the ghosts of the past into the urban, Westernized Japan within the imaginary world of his plays becomes a metaphor for the way in which he repositions ancient theatrical traditions into the present by reinventing them using predominantly Western dramaturgical tactics.

In his Introduction to *Five Modern Nō Plays*, Donald Keene goes so far as to propose that Mishima's experiments with the dramatic form may very well have "given a new lease of life" to the classical Nō by reinventing them for the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

Keene also comments on the ultimate success of Mishima's adaptive technique when he states:

The nature of our response to these modernized Nō plays is bound to differ from our response to a performance of the traditional ones. We are, for one thing, far more intellectually absorbed.... Oddly enough, Mishima manages somehow to suggest much of the uncanny symbolic quality of the originals, even in the tawdry modern surroundings of a public park or a downtown office. The five plays all have powerful overtones which even the uninitiated can feel.... all these evoke much of the same sensations as the ancient plays and suggest why Mishima should have turned to them and their particular themes after having written numerous entirely new works.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Keene, Donald. Introduction. *Five Modern Nō Plays*. By Yukio Mishima. Trans. Donald Keene. NY: Knopf, 1957. vii-xvii. xi.

<sup>17</sup> Keene, Introduction, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, xvi-xvii.



Keene foreshadows Linda Hutcheon's theories of the informed and uninformed reader, as well as the receptive oscillation between prototext and metatext, by suggesting that both those audience members familiar with the traditional Nō and those of the "uninitiated" can understand the power of Mishima's modern texts. Perhaps by stripping away those conventional elements that seem to define the classical Nō as a genre – the stylized *utai* chanting, snail-like pace of performance, highly allusive poetic texts, and standard masks, costumes, fans, and props – Mishima unearths the heart of the Nō, within which he finds its contemporary relevance: "I believe that the philosophy of the Noh plays, after the lapse of centuries, is still applicable to modern life."<sup>18</sup>

Mishima clearly professes what he considers to be the essence of the Nō philosophy in a provocative essay, "The Japan Within," published mere weeks prior to his suicide in late 1970. Based upon his self-professed habit of attending the Nō theatre regularly each month (biographer Henry Scott Stokes notes that the writer often fell asleep during the Nō performances he frequented), Mishima claims that the classical theatre is a metaphor for the inner purity of the Japanese spirit.<sup>19</sup> He envies the "perfect order" of the Nō's "prescribed form," which stands in stark contrast to the increased urbanization and chaos of modern Japan.<sup>20</sup> Yet, even so, Mishima's brief analysis of the Nō possesses an ominous quality that is startlingly prescient, in light of his impending death:

For me, the *noh* theatre is a temple of beauty, the place above all wherein is realized the supreme union of religious solemnity and sensuous beauty.... True beauty is something that attacks, overpowers, robs, and finally destroys.... by the time a *noh* play begins, the drama is already over. *Noh* cannot begin until after the drama is ended and beauty lies in

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<sup>18</sup> Mishima, "Modern Noh Plays and Modern Plays," 199.

<sup>19</sup> Stokes, 171.

<sup>20</sup> Mishima Yukio. "The Japan Within." *This is Japan* 18 (1971): 54-55. 55.

ruins.... And beneath its mask that beauty must conceal death, for some day, just as surely, it will finally lead me away to destruction and to silence.<sup>21</sup>

He repositions the Nō's aesthetic from an austere minimalism of graceful dance and poetry to a savage, destructive nihilism awash in images of death and decay. Avant-garde director Tadashi Suzuki (b. 1939) humorously echoes Mishima's sentiments when he states, "...even if a *nō* actor, in the middle of his role, falls dead on the stage, the performance continues."<sup>22</sup> And while he claims that the Nō "admits of no meddling by contemporary man," Mishima himself artfully converts the form into a twentieth-century *milieu* all its own with the composition of his modern Nō plays, between 1950 and 1962.<sup>23</sup> At first it may be difficult to reconcile Mishima's fatalistic assessment of the classical Nō with its sparse verse and disciplined, formal physicality. However, when one examines the texts of his modern Nō plays, the specific lens through which he viewed the original plays becomes more apparent. As with much of his fiction and other dramatic works, the modern Nō reflect a revolutionary upheaval of traditional social mores and literary conventions, creating a dynamic modern dialogue with their source materials.

Mishima discusses the style of *shingeki* in relationship to that of more traditional forms such as Nō and Kabuki in his essay, "A Small Scar on the Left Kneecap," originally published in 1957 as part of the *Gakuya de kakareta engeki-ron (Backstage Essays)*.<sup>24</sup> These short essays about the theatrical production process illuminate the

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<sup>21</sup> Mishima, "The Japan Within," 55.

<sup>22</sup> Suzuki Tadashi. *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*. Trans. J. Thomas Rimer. NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1986. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Mishima, "The Japan Within," 54.

<sup>24</sup> Mishima Yukio. *My Friend Hitler and Other Plays of Yukio Mishima*. Trans. Hiroaki Sato. NY: Columbia UP, 2002. 57-9.

rehearsals and performances of his 1956 play, *Rokumeikan*, the setting of which also plays an important role in his modern Nō version of *Sotoba Komachi*. In “A Small Scar on the Left Kneecap,” Mishima discusses the difference between the use of elaborate *kata*, or standardized physical gestures utilized in Nō and Kabuki to indicate emotional response, and the more subdued psychological gestures of Western performers skilled in the works of Ibsen and Chekhov, which he claims are designated primarily to serve the text. This comparison brings to mind the late nineteenth-century reaction against the grand yet artificial stage gestures associated with Western melodrama, which led to the rise of a realistic acting style (such as that of Russian master Konstantin Stanislavski), in support of naturalistic dramatic texts such as *A Doll House* and *The Seagull*.

Mishima attributes the subtleties of *shingeki* style to the elimination of the “common denominators” of patterns of shared gestures and predetermined, anticipated emotional responses to stage action. The “countless nuances” of “personal coloration” point to a necessary individuation of the specific behavior of psychologically complex characters, each of whom must respond to various stimuli in different, noticeably discernible means from one another.<sup>25</sup> Thus, easily recognizable gestures like those of the Nō dancer’s codified movements that indicate weeping, performed in exactly the same manner from performance to performance regardless of character (or even of text), seem out of place in a realistic drama based in emotional truth. Yet, even so, Mishima’s essay proposes a compromise – the need for the development of an adaptable gestural vocabulary to accompany psychological realism, which arises from textual clues but still accentuates the performer’s physical persona in ways that heighten the visceral

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<sup>25</sup> Mishima, *My Friend Hitler*, 58.

experience of live theatre. Such a compromise suggests that, while he is dedicated to writing drama meant to be performed in the *shingeki* fashion, by actors skilled in the style of Ibsen and Chekhov, Mishima's lifelong exposure to classical Japanese forms like Nō prevents him from deviating too far from their heightened theatrical style.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while Western dramatists at the turn of the twentieth century embraced the freedom from realism that the Nō aesthetic provided and Japanese playwrights conversely adopted the realism of *shingeki* as a revolution from formalized Nō and Kabuki style, Mishima, in true form, borrows the best from both forms in a unique fusion of three-dimensional psychological motivation and paranormal metaphor.

This proposed fusion of classical and modern performance is present throughout his *kindai* Nō, as these texts alternate fluidly between moments of emotional intimacy and stage spectacle. Often these moments of heightened stage action accompany a supernatural incursion into the physical world or the moment at which the characters enter the standardized dream reality so commonly associated with the Nō form. In *The Damask Drum*, the gentle ghost of the janitor Iwakichi walks effortlessly through the air from one skyscraper office to another to haunt the vain woman whose unrequited love drove him to kill himself. In *Dōjōji*, the grief-stricken dancer Kiyoko locks herself into a mammoth wardrobe that serves as a contemporary surrogate for the large prop bell that usually defines the *mise-en-scène* of the classical version of the play. In *A Memorial for Prince Genji*, the specter of the novelist Nozoe Murasaki appears to two young fans perched atop her own memorial stone, but rather than the elegant reincarnation of the bodhisattva Kannon from the original Muromachi text of *Genji kuyō*, Mishima's

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<sup>26</sup> Mishima, "Modern Noh Plays and Modern Plays," 198.

Murasaki is a vampiric, chain-smoking, cancer-ridden hag who revels in watching a recurring fantastical vision of her fictional hero's suicide.

### The Role of Nō in Mishima's Non-Dramatic Works

In addition to these critical writings and the dramatic texts themselves, other works within Mishima's fictional and cinematic *oeuvre* also provide clues to his attitudes about classical Nō and the impact its aesthetic has on his development of the *kindai* Nō. In chapter nineteen of Mishima's 1969 novel *Runaway Horses (Honba)* – part two of his epic *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy – the protagonist Honda attends a rural performance of the traditional Nō masterpiece *Matsukaze*. Although he is ignorant of the Nō and its conventions and has to be coached by a friend regarding the proper way to behave at the performance, he soon becomes deeply mesmerized by the play and experiences an intense flood of emotions that he equates with spiritual reverie. Honda's initial attitude seems to reflect that of the average Japanese audience member in the early twentieth century, to whom the stylized chanting and relative stasis of action of the Nō would be as foreign a theatrical experience as it is to the Western viewer. Within the larger context of the tetralogy, the performance's ghostly portrayal of lost love and evocation of the Buddhist concept of *samsara* conjure up memories of Kiyooki, Honda's school friend, whose cycle of death and reincarnation forms the leitmotif that binds the narrative structure and theme of the four novels together.

During this brief incident, Honda's voice appears to serve as a surrogate for Mishima's own beliefs about the arcane power of the Nō, and his fascination with the innate occult aspects of the dramatic form seems to reflect what Donald Keene refers to

as Mishima's "self-willed credulity in the supernatural."<sup>27</sup> Throughout his works, whether it originates from a purely aesthetic conceit or from a deeper, sincere desire to return to a spiritually charged sense of past traditions, Mishima readily suspends his disbelief, invoking a plausible world of ghosts, demons, and other paranormal phenomena, never seeking to explain them away with the rational thought imposed by psychology or the twentieth century's scientific and technological advances. When Honda is released from the power of the performance of *Matsukaze* at its conclusion, Mishima reflects, "The Nō stage, so close at hand, shone like the world beyond. Spirits walked there, and Honda was stirred."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the liminal environment of the Nō only compounds the strength of this aspect of Mishima's writing by inviting his phantoms to penetrate the veil between life and death, of waking and dreaming, in order to encroach upon modern man and his world.

The Nō overcomes Honda's logic with its eerie, unearthly beauty, which he can only attribute to some otherworldly, mystical influence:

That which chanted and moved about on the stage bathed in moonlight was now no longer the ghosts of two beautiful women but something beyond description. One might call it the essence of time, the pith of emotion, the dream that stubbornly obtrudes upon reality. It had no purpose, no meaning. From moment to moment it fashioned a beauty not of this world.<sup>29</sup>

This theatrical encounter causes Honda to lose his ability to delineate clearly between reality and illusion. He momentarily abandons his sense of reason and rejects his prior, scientifically objective philosophy of life: "To function as a shining, forever unchanging,

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<sup>27</sup> Keene, Donald. "Mishima Had Everything." *The Blue Eyed Tarōkaja*. NY: Columbia, 1996. 200-8. 202.

<sup>28</sup> Mishima Yukio. *Runaway Horses*. Trans Michael Gallagher. NY: Knopf, 1973. 219.

<sup>29</sup> Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, 212.

beautiful nonwilling particle.”<sup>30</sup> This admission is similar to the rationale behind Mishima’s claims that he made a concerted habit of viewing a Nō drama once a month, “In it lies the only type of beauty that has the power to wrest ‘my’ time away from the ‘exterior’ Japan of today – that outside world that, given its own way, would fragmentize it so thoroughly – and to impose on it another, different regime.”<sup>31</sup> To Mishima, and thus to Honda, the Nō has the potential to banish the quotidian aspects of life, albeit temporarily, and infuse the world with a sense of wonder and magic and the hope for transcendence. For Honda, this final insight gives him hope that he may once again meet Kiyaoki’s reincarnated self in a tangible, palpable way.

Additionally, in describing the performative contradictions found in a raspy old actor’s voice emanating from behind the elegant mask of a beautiful young woman, Honda inadvertently recognizes the medieval concept of *yūgen*.

But despite all this, the mood inspired was like the outpouring of a dark and ineffably elegant mist, like the sight of a moonbeam shining into a corner of a ruined palace to fall upon a mother-of-pearl furnishing. Because the light passed through a worn and ravaged bamboo blind, the elegance of the shattered fragments shone all the more.<sup>32</sup>

This passage contains a concise, evocative description of the classical *yūgen* aesthetic, a mysterious quality that suggests that light can be better appreciated when it is placed in contrast with darkness, that youth attains greater desirability when placed in opposition with decay, etc. It also elucidates Mishima’s nihilistic view of beauty, a core concept within his *kindai* Nō. When Honda first hears the *shite*’s chanting, the effect is that of “tearing the beauty of the words to shreds.”<sup>33</sup> Again, this foreshadows Mishima’s

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<sup>30</sup> Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, 213.

<sup>31</sup> Mishima, “The Japan Within,” 55.

<sup>32</sup> Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, 211.

<sup>33</sup> Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, 211.

contention that “True beauty is something that attacks, overpowers, robs, and finally destroys.”<sup>34</sup> The implications of these assertions weave their way throughout Mishima’s life and literature, from his personal obsession with bodybuilding to his desire to leave a young and handsome corpse, and most relevant to the study at hand, to characters such as his modern recreations of the Rokujō Lady and Ono no Komachi, who wield their beauty as weapons of destruction, drawn both from classical and modern sources of feminine power.

Full understanding of Mishima’s interpretation of *yūgen* is impossible without exploring his quest for delicate equilibrium among warring antagonistic forces in the liminal dreamscape of the Nō. Throughout his life, Mishima expounded upon the dueling halves of his nature – intellectual vs. physical, Western vs. Japanese, classical vs. modern, masculine vs. feminine, to name a few. In the seminal autobiographical essay *Sun and Steel* (*Taiyō to tetsu*, 1968 – English translation by John Bester, 1970), Mishima outlines his lifelong inner struggle with reconciling the anxiety between body and mind. However, Donald Keene prefers to speak not of an inner conflict within Mishima, but rather “the two indivisible aspects of his personality,” complementary halves working in tandem rather than in opposition to one another.<sup>35</sup> By creating a modern Nō form of drama, Mishima extrapolates his personal struggle into the realm of the aesthetic or the metaphoric and finds solace in the Nō’s conventions as a metaphysical junction that permits, even demands, simultaneous poetic coexistence of such paradoxical forces so that they may illuminate one another in the same way as the aforementioned moonbeam and ruined palace.

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<sup>34</sup> Mishima, “The Japan Within,” 55.

<sup>35</sup> Keene, “Mishima Had Everything,” 205.



Mishima's fascination with the Nō's capacity to conflate the sacred and the profane can be witnessed in the *mise-en-scène* and style of the film version of his short story *Patriotism* (*Yūkoku*; Mishima adds the subtitle "The Rite of Love and Death" to the English version of the film). This 1966 short film is a work of *auteur* cinema, since Mishima not only writes and directs, he performs the role of the doomed Lt. Takeyama himself as well. In the film, as in the short story, Takeyama is ordered to execute the members of a secret society that attempted a failed coup, a society of which he himself was a member. Rather than betray his principles and kill his cohorts, he chooses to die by *hara-kiri*. His wife Reiko decides to join him in death, and their preparations for the dual-suicide are transformed into unbridled erotic foreplay prior to its unsettlingly realistic portrayal of death by disembowelment, all the more unsettling in its prescience of Mishima's own suicide four years later.

By choosing to set the action of *Patriotism* upon a modified Nō stage, Mishima blurs the lines between the theatrical and the filmic. Instead of polished cypress, the floors and walls of the set are painted matte white, and the *matsu* which normally adorns the back wall of the stage is replaced by a banner whose characters are translated as "Wholehearted Sincerity." This banner and its nationalistic slogan, whose message looms throughout the entire film, replaces the natural spiritual conduit by which the *kami* descend either to view or take part in the Nō ritual. These choices suggest that at least part of *Patriotism*'s ultimate impact may be found within the conventions of the Nō, and the viewer may even infer that the Mishima who has already transformed several classical Nō plays into modern dramas by the date of its creation may also be transforming *Patriotism* into a Nō drama for the screen.

Within this interpretive framework, Takeyama may be seen as the *shite* and Reiko as performing the role of either *waki* or *tsure*. While not wearing a mask per se, Takeyama's face is obscured through the majority of the film by his military cap. His eyes are exposed only during the graphic lovemaking scene, which renders both Takeyama and Reiko completely naked before the camera. As *shite*, Takeyama may be seen as hiding his true identity behind the stone-faced façade of the soldier (*maeshite*) until his erotic passions are unleashed by the anticipation of his impending death (*nohijite*). The spiritual cleansing provided by Takeyama and Reiko's surrender to preserving their honor, as well as the purity of their subsequent unleashed sexuality, replaces the Buddhist prayers and fervent dancing of the Nō performance, and they transform into modern-day proxies for any number of Nō protagonists originally derived from literary works such as the *Genji monogatari* or *Heike monogatari*.

While technically divided into five "chapters" of action, the film does possess a tripartite *jo-ha-kyū* structure typical of Nō:

1. *Jo* – Takeyama's arrival and decision
2. *Ha* – Lovemaking
3. *Kyū* – Double-suicide

Further, Mishima's decision to film *Patriotism* in black and white, as well as *sans* spoken dialogue (replacing characters' speech with title cards), relegates its style to that of early twentieth-century silent film, thus crafting a modern surrogate for the Nō's traditional conventions. Even the background score, a scratchy instrumental recording of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, serves Mishima's creative and political agenda, as seen in the *kindai* Nō, by creating an intercultural tension between the subject matter's Asian traditions,

based in a samurai code of honor, and an archetypal forbidden love story from Western opera.

### Torahiko Kori's Influence on Mishima's Modern Nō

While Mishima may stand out as the defining voice in the establishment of a new Nō aesthetic for the twentieth century, he is not the first dramatist to attempt to innovate the classical Japanese theatrical form. In the West, Ezra Pound (1885-1972), William Butler (W. B.) Yeats (1865-1939), and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) all experimented with Nō structures decades prior to Mishima's efforts, each appropriating the Nō to fit his own revolutionary poetic and political agendas. In 1917, Yeats composed the Introduction to Ezra Pound's well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided, volume of Nō plays in English translation, published in collaboration with noted Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa.<sup>36,37</sup> Despite their inaccuracies, these translations inspired Yeats to appropriate the fantastic, minimalistic production elements of the Nō as a formal rejection of realistic conventions of European drama at the time. Despite the fact that some critics like F. A. C. Wilson, Richard Taylor, and Natalie Crohn Schmitt attribute similarities of plot and structure in his dramas to Pound's versions of *Nishigiki* (*The Brocade Tree*), *Motomezuka* (*The Sought-for Grave*), *Hagoromo* (*The Feather Mantle*), *Sumidagawa* (*Sumida River*), and *Kakitsubata* (*Water Iris*), Yeats's adaptations are primarily stylistic in nature, rather than

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<sup>36</sup> Fenollosa, Ernest and Ezra Pound. *The Noh Theatre of Japan*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004. Rpt. of "Noh," or *Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan*. NY: Knopf, 1917.

<sup>37</sup> Pound's "translations" are in essence esoteric poetic reinterpretations of literary works for which he possesses little cultural background and even less comprehension of the rich allusive texture of the Japanese works. His version of "Awoi no Uye" is particularly misguided, as he lacks the context of the medieval play's *honzetsu* found in the *Genji monogatari*, a work to which he never makes reference. He confuses and conflates the roles of Aoi and Rokujō, erroneously attributes the *miko*'s gender as male, and misinterprets the central conflict of the original Nō's action. According to Pound's notes, the *hannya* that appears as the drama's *nohijite* is the disembodied manifestation of Aoi's own jealousy, which appears and punishes her as a sort of spiritual self-flagellation.

possessing direct prototextual corollaries from the classical Nō canon.<sup>38</sup> Yeats aspired to create a unique poetic, symbolic nationalistic theatre form that embraced the rich mythology of Celtic mythology and Irish legend, focusing specifically on the tales of mythic demigod and hero Cúchulain. Much in the same way that Mishima gravitates toward the “classical” values of his own idealized version of feudal Japan, Yeats portrays Cúchulain as the anthropomorphic distillation of the warlike ancient spirit of Ireland that will rise up to defeat the country’s English usurpers. Yeats’s “Plays for Dancers” (*At the Hawk’s Well* (1917), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1917), *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), and *Calvary* (1920)) utilize dense poetic imagery and arcane occultism to achieve their political agendas, mirroring the qualities of the original Nō that Yeats perceived as the source of their literary potency. Additionally, remnants of the Nō style pervade the poet’s dramaturgy throughout the rest of his career, in works such as 1939’s *Purgatory*.

While Yeats intensifies the supernatural aspects in his numerous stylistic adaptations of the Nō, Bertolt Brecht completely divorces the form from its connection to the innately spiritual, as a means of approaching a sense of the political objectivity for which he strove throughout his career as a dramatist. In 1930, Brecht and his frequent collaborator, composer Kurt Weill (1900-50), composed a short opera whose libretto is derived directly from the prototext of Arthur Waley’s 1921 English translation of the Nō play *Taniko (The Valley Rite)*.<sup>39</sup> This work, called *Der Jasager (He Who Says “Yes”)* is one of Brecht’s many *Lehrstücke*, or “learning plays,” short didactic pieces of theatre

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<sup>38</sup> Wilson, F. A. C. *Yeats’s Iconography*. London: Gollancz, 1960.

Taylor, Richard. *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese Nō*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976.  
Schmitt, Natalie Crohn. “‘Haunted by Places’: Landscape in Three Plays of William Buster Yeats.” *Land/Scape/Theater*. Ed. Una Chaudhuri. Ann Arbor: U of MI Press, 2002. 53-83. 72-4.

<sup>39</sup> Waley, Arthur. *The Nō Plays of Japan*. London: Allen Unwin, 1921.

designed to espouse the values and principles of socialism.<sup>40</sup> Brecht transforms the Nō drama's controversial ending, in which *yamabushi* priests stone a young boy to death because he cannot complete a spiritual journey through the mountains, into a political invective about the necessary sacrifices one must make in service to the greater social good.<sup>41</sup> Brecht regarded the hyper-theatrical, direct-address nature of the Nō's dialogue and performance as epitomizing the qualities of his *Verfremdungseffekt* (often referred to as the "alienation effect"). This central tenet of his dramatic theories aspired to distance both performer and audience from a sentimental response to the drama's subject matter, in order to force them to view the material analytically. Brecht designed this tactic as a means to spur the artist and the viewer towards political action. Ironically, the play's original performance for a boys' school was met with severe resistance because the audience rejected the implausible nature of the central character's willing resignation to his fate.<sup>42</sup> This prompted Brecht and Weill to craft a companion piece titled *Der Neinsager (He Who Says "No")*, in which the text remains largely intact until the final scene, which depicts the young boy's rejection of blind social convention in favor of the creation of a new political custom based upon rational thought.

While these Western writers had a limited impact on the development of Mishima's *kindai* Nō, Japanese émigré Torahiko Kori (1890-1924), who himself

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<sup>40</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*. NY: Arcade, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> This voice of the greater social good is represented in the *Lehrstücke* by a monolithic collective voice translated into English as The Great Chorus or The Control Chorus, the latter implying that the "learning plays" assume many of the qualities of a scientific experiment that requires a control group against which to judge the results. Alternately, Brecht portrays this communal entity as the voice of the common man (Marx's proletariat) and the voice of blind tradition that sits in judgment over the common man. Brecht's insertion of this voice into the dramaturgy of his adaptation of *Taniko* is a reinvention of the function of the Nō chorus, conflating it with many of the identifying markers of the ancient Greek chorus. This strategy, a strategy common among Western playwrights, will be examined in further detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>42</sup> Mueller, Roswitha. "Learning for a New Society: The *Lehrstück*." *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. Ed. Peter Thomson & Glendyr Sacks. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 79-95. 90-92.

composed two modern plays patterned after the Nō dramas *Dōjōji* (1912) and *Kanawa* (1917), directly influenced Mishima's composition of the modern Nō. Kori's influence on Western perceptions of Nō in general cannot be underestimated. In fact, his personal involvement with an original London salon performance of classical Nō in 1915 inspired Yeats to write *At the Hawk's Well* the following year, as well as subsequently to experiment with the Nō form.

In January 1918, Kori delivered a lecture to the Japan Society of London entitled "Japanese Drama," in which he outlined the basic traditional forms of Nō, Kabuki, and Bunraku, but also attempted to explain the sudden emergent appeal of the Nō among English academics and intellectuals, for which he himself was partially responsible. He claims that its ultimate power as drama owes more to its "primitive" performative origins, which transcend the need for realistic representation of its subject matter.<sup>43</sup> In fact, he states that this timeless aspect of hyper-theatricalism is what supplies the Nō with the potential to develop into a form that could play a valuable role in the development of future dramaturgy. Yeats and his contemporaries agree and base much of their own adapted drama on the tenets Kori sets forth in his speech. Experimental playwright Eugène Ionesco, who said, "Japan's Noh is the avant-garde theater of the present. Its technique is of all ages," shares Kori's contention that the centuries-old Nō paradoxically may be the basis of a futuristic form for the stage.<sup>44</sup> Kori thus situates Nō as a dramatic form whose guiding principles are primed for practical application and emulation in the modern theatre, an idea that quickly gained many avid devotees among the chief playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century. Intriguingly, it is the exact inverse

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<sup>43</sup> Kori Torahiko. "Japanese Drama." *Transactions and Proceedings of the Japan Society, London* 16 (1917-18): 58-74. 63-64.

<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Nakamura, Yasuo. *Noh: The Classical Theater*. NY: Weatherhill, 1971. 29.

of this idea that appeals to Mishima as he composes the *kindai* Nō – the later author rejects the classical conventions in favor of modern ones associated with *shingeki*.

According to Yuko Chiba, Mishima described Kori as “the only playwright of early modern Japan” and sought to emulate and perfect the earlier author’s style, to the extent that many hailed Mishima as Kori’s reincarnation.<sup>45</sup> In describing his modern adaptations of Nō texts, Chiba states that Kori struggled with similar challenges as those later faced by Mishima in fusing the contemporary and the classical – “a symbolic reflection of the spirit of the age in late Meiji Japan.”<sup>46</sup> Kori abandoned the standardized poetic structure of the Nō, opting instead for ornate prose that ultimately belied the simplicity of the original texts. Largely narrative rather than active, Kori’s characters engaged in lengthy monologues that provided much-needed exposition for those Western audience members unfamiliar with their cultural referents, but did little to engage the audience’s need for visceral activity onstage, although Kori did seek to establish an effectively mystical tone through evocative stage lighting techniques.<sup>47</sup> Yet, the use of textually mandated use of puppets for performances of *Kanawa: The Incantation* (subtitled “A Play for Marionettes”), a convention that invokes the Bunraku theatre, and a cast of Kabuki actors for the premiere production of *Dōjōji* suggested a confusing amalgamation of “Oriental” styles to Westerners, rather than a strictly adapted Nō technique.

Chiba proposes that Kori’s *Dōjōji* and *Kanawa* were the first two plays in a Nō-inspired trilogy based upon the theme of female jealousy and that the most likely text to

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<sup>45</sup> Chiba, Yuko. “Kori Torahiko and Edith Craig: A Japanese Playwright in London and Toronto.” *Comparative Drama* 30.4 (1996-7): 431-51. 432.

<sup>46</sup> Chiba, 437.

<sup>47</sup> Chiba, 437.

complete the cycle would have been an adaptation of *Aoi no ue*.<sup>48</sup> Like Mishima after him, Kori chooses to adapt extant Nō texts, as opposed to composing original dramas in the Nō style, which allows for direct comparative study of prototexts and metatexts.<sup>49</sup> *Kanawa* in particular, both in its classical and modernized versions, possesses a close intertextual bond with *Aoi no ue*. Both depict terrifying demonic female spirits who have lost control of their passions, thus spurring them to enact their awful revenge against the unsuspecting usurpers of their lovers' hearts.<sup>50</sup> Kori's modernization is largely homodiegetic, in that it retains the original Nō's plot, characters, and spatio-temporal setting, but in addition to discarding classical performance conventions of poetry, music, and dance, he superimposes a tone of increased "otherness" to the text. In doing so, he intentionally amplifies the exotic nature of the prototext's intrinsically Japanese qualities as alien, odd, and quaintly old-fashioned, creating a deliberate chasm of difference between the audience and *Kanawa*'s subject matter. This conscious choice by Kori to "Orientalize" the play's less familiar aspects, and thus appear to establish a somewhat apologetic tone in his writing of it, may allow a Western audience to dismiss any potential confusion it experiences as cultural incompatibility, but it also diminishes the overall power of the original source material as well.

Kori's *Kanawa* also relies heavily on its florid, albeit ferociously sadistic, language to perform the function that violent music and dance supply within the classical

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<sup>48</sup> Chiba, 438.

<sup>49</sup> By way of contrast, in adapting the Kabuki style, Kori writes an original drama based on Kabuki conventions, *The Toils of Yoshitomo: A Tragedy of Ancient Japan* (1922), but whose scope is reminiscent of the standards of Elizabethan drama and thus, strikes a somewhat familiar chord to Western audiences brought up on the works Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

<sup>50</sup> In the classical versions of these Nō plays, there is even a shared moment of high drama where the *shite* strikes repeatedly at a stage costume element, which is meant to represent the object of her jealous hatred. In *Aoi no ue*, the *shite* symbolically beats (but doesn't actually hit) a folded kimono that acts as a surrogate for the pregnant Aoi. In *Kanawa*, the *shite* strikes at a wig on a ritual altar, meant to stand in for the new wife of her ex-husband.



form, potentially to lesser effect. Kori replaces the cacophonous din of the Nō *hayashi*'s drums, flutes, and chanting with the ominous tolling of distant temple bells at the play's opening and conclusion. Also conspicuously missing from the modern version is the traditional transformation of the *shite* that not only resides at the heart of the play's power, but also at the core of the Nō's defining aesthetic conventions – Kori's "witch" marches onstage fully transformed, in all of her horrific majesty. Yet removing the *shite*'s transformation significantly abbreviates the role's stage time, which also inadvertently causes Kori to reduce its importance in the relative action of the narrative by shifting the primary focus to the *waki-tsure* character of the cursed husband. Such transfocalization turns the play into a moralistic horror tale of sorts, concentrating on the victim of a ghastly supernatural incursion, rather than a reflective meditation on the destructive nature of revenge and jealousy, from the perspective of the tortured soul of the *shite*.

What Mishima first and foremost inherits from Kori is an awareness that the Nō, taken out of its specific literary, cultural, and performative constructs, possesses the potential to remain a viable theatrical form with capacity to speak to a contemporary audience. Chiba even suggests that Mishima's *kindai* Nō are a "continuation" of Kori's unfinished legacy.<sup>51</sup> But, upon comparison of Mishima's modernized Nō plays and those of his predecessor, we find that Mishima does not regard such a heritage as mere imitation without innovation, as he takes a far more sophisticated approach in his adaptive technique than Kori. While he shares Kori's fascination with the occult aspects of the classical Nō repertoire, Mishima refuses to distance his audiences in any way from the spirits that inhabit the world of his plays. There are no torch-filled temples with tolling bells in the background; instead, traffic and other city noise provide the

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<sup>51</sup> Chiba, 432.

soundscape for recognizable urban settings populated with everyday people going about their everyday business. Mishima adopts Kori's use of prose in the composition of his dialogue, but attempts (not always successfully) to maintain a tone of simple modern speech patterns in his characters' discourse, as opposed to Kori's baroque linguistic cadences. But most importantly, Mishima strives to imbue his *Nō* with subject matter and tone that complements and updates the original source material in a way that is relevant for late twentieth-century readers and viewers, incorporating vital elements of his audience's attitudes about cultural progress, technology, psychology, and spirituality in a post-war world.

### The Body Politic as the Body Aesthetic

In *Sun and Steel*, his 1968 “hybrid between confession and criticism,” Mishima chronicles an enduring personal struggle between a life of the mind and a life of the body.<sup>52</sup> Part autobiography, part aesthetic treatise, *Sun and Steel* depicts Mishima's quest to hone his physique in order to transform himself from the bookish, pale weakling of his youth into his own twentieth-century rendering of a samurai warrior, muscular and bronzed by the sun. True to form, Mishima positions the central argument of *Sun and Steel* as a dialectical skirmish between opposing forces – the intellectual and the physical – seeking a state of equilibrium. Further, he expands his philosophical thesis from the realm of the personal to that of the political, equating his own struggle between these dueling polarities to the “moral confusion” of the nation following the end of World War II.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Mishima Yukio. *Sun and Steel*. Trans. John Bester. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1970. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Stokes, 201.

We have seen postwar Japan stumble into a *spiritual vacuum*, preoccupied only with its economic prosperity, unmindful of its national foundations, losing its *national spirit*, seeking trivialities without looking to fundamentals, and falling into makeshift expediency and hypocrisy... We have had to stand idly by while the policies and the future of the nation were entrusted to foreign powers, while the humiliation of our defeat was merely evaded and not effaced, and while the *traditions of Japan* were being desecrated by the Japanese themselves.... Such fundamental inconsistencies are bound to cause a deterioration of the Japanese people's spirit and a *corruption of their morals*.<sup>54</sup>

This moral confusion depends upon one's acceptance of Mishima's extrapolated hypothesis that, with the abdication of the Emperor's divinity (the mind/soul) and the disbanding of the nation's armed forces (the body), Japan has lost touch with its spiritual core and its innate warrior nature. In each case, Mishima seeks to restore those elements to his own life as a symbolic surrogate for the body politic, ultimately manifesting in a self-sacrificial rite of personal transformation. In doing so, he also blurs the distinction between the political and the aesthetic in his writings, and pits literary characters and thematic scenarios against one another in a metaphorical theatre of war.

The rhetoric Mishima employs as he oscillates from the personal to the political and back again is often idiosyncratic and inexact, mirroring the contradictions that are apparent in his own conflicted lifestyle, which he classifies as that of a "semi-Westernized Japanese."<sup>55</sup> But most importantly, his discourse reflects an idealized, subjective view of Japanese tradition and national identity, rather than one based in any kind of concrete, shared cultural-historical experience among the Japanese people, as if such a common, shared experience could be possible. He crafts his ideology as carefully as he does the thematic intricacies of his novels; it is a construct of his own devising,

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<sup>54</sup> Mishima Yukio. "An Appeal." Trans. Harris I. Martin. *Japan Interpreter* 7.1 (1971): 73-77. 74. Emphasis mine.

<sup>55</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Party of One. Japan: The Cherished Myths." Trans. Donald Keene. *Holiday* 30 (1961): 9-13. 9.

rather than an accurate observation of some sort of national *zeitgeist*. In *Sun and Steel*, Mishima openly confesses that he prefers a romanticized view of Japanese values and traditions: “For me, beauty is always retreating from one’s grasp; the only thing I consider important is what existed once, or *ought to have existed*.”<sup>56</sup> He even regards his monthly visits to the Nō theatre as a salve of sorts: “. . .the only type of beauty that has the power to wrest ‘my’ time away from the exterior Japan of today – that outside world that, given its own way, would fragmentize it so thoroughly – and to impose on it another, different regime.”<sup>57</sup> As such, many of the political analogies he draws throughout his *corpus* of literary and social writings may be interpreted as rhetorically loaded, reductive, and essentialist in nature. He often laments the impending death of the “national soul,” contrasting the industrialization and democratization of contemporary Japan with the values of its feudal past, seeking a return to “traditional values” of a “classical past” (represented by the *bushidō* code of honor developed by the samurai warriors of the Edo Period). Tragically, this type of discourse reaches its zenith in his fervent tirade to the masses beneath the balcony of the Self-Defense Forces building on that fateful, final day in November 1970.

Throughout the course of my discussion of the modern Nō plays in Chapter Three, I utilize much of the rhetoric invented by Mishima (via English translation) to contextualize his political theories as they apply to an allegorical reading of his literary works. In particular, he exploits the diametrical oppositions that exist within the liminal dreamscape and dramaturgical structure of the classical Nō as a means of exploring the complex, ever-shifting modern interaction between an idealized imagining of “East and

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<sup>56</sup> Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 24. Emphasis mine.

<sup>57</sup> Mishima, “The Japan Within,” 55.

West.” I also employ a critical stance that suggests the continual oscillation between the personal and the universal in his writings, which further blurs the boundary between the objective and the subjective in his political ideology. This type of reading also amplifies the contradictions between his criticism of the Japanese people for rejecting its “identity” and his own fascination with the contemporary West. Dick Wagenaar and Yoshio Iwamoto propose that Mishima’s paradoxical, almost hypocritical nature results in an inescapable depressive anomie: “Despair was inevitable because, notwithstanding his distaste for the modern, Mishima could not escape being a product of his age, sharing with his Western colleagues an overriding concern with self, world, and the consciousness that mediates between them.”<sup>58</sup> Further, while his metaphor is meant to describe the ambiguity and controversy surrounding Mishima’s posthumous reputation, Jay McInerney’s assertion that Mishima “seems stranded somewhere in the middle of the Pacific” is a compellingly accurate depiction of the writer’s condition of inevitable despair and cultural mediation.<sup>59</sup>

Central to Mishima’s rhetorical strategy is his zealous ambition to restore Japan to its “true form,” a conceit that by its very nature falsely implies the existence of an objective epistemology. This conceit also reveals the fact that, as his career progresses, Mishima’s political views begin to skew farther and farther towards right-wing extremism, focusing on a return to pre-war “truths” based in imperialism, nationalism, militarism, and his own invented perception of “national values.” In the final statement distributed by the author to the members of the Tatenokai prior to his suicide, Mishima cries out, “We will wait no longer. There is no reason to wait for those who debase

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<sup>58</sup> Wagenaar, Dick and Yoshio Iwamoto. “Yukio Mishima: Dialectics of Mind and Body.” *Contemporary Literature* 16.1 (1975): 41-60. 57.

<sup>59</sup> McInerney, Jay. “Through Western Eyes.” *PEN America* 2.3 (2002): 167-70. 168.

themselves. But we will wait for thirty more minutes, a last thirty minutes. We will rise together and together we will fight for what is right. We will die to return Japan to her true form. Is it right to protect life only to let the soul die?”<sup>60</sup> Edward Seidensticker analyzes this last invective to the Shield Society, in order to draw out some semblance of the empirical socio-historical context of post-war Japan that might compel Mishima to arrive at such a conclusion:

Early in the statement there is a summary of what has gone wrong with post-war Japan: economic growth has been everything, the spiritual realm has been forgotten; hypocrisy, self-interest, individualism have proliferated; larger responsibilities have been abdicated, left to foreign countries; the land and its tradition have been sullied. “In the Self Defense Force, we have hoped to find, even now, a last remnant of the true warrior spirit, of the true Japan.”<sup>61</sup>

In this last statement, Mishima decries the impotence of the Self-Defense Forces as a discursive contrivance to legitimize the existence of the Tatenokai, and his leadership of the organization, as the necessary successors of the nation’s “true” spirit.

Thus, Mishima imagines himself as a sort of quixotic knight-errant, a spiritual warrior determined to heal a broken land. He takes on this role following Hirohito’s renunciation of imperial divinity (*ningen-sengen*) on January 1, 1946.<sup>62</sup> In a 1966 interview titled “Theory of the Emperor,” Mishima claims, “The *kokutai*, the national system, has collapsed since the Emperor made his *ningen sengen*. All the moral confusion of the postwar period stems from that. Why should the Emperor be a human being?”<sup>63</sup> Mishima echoes this final refrain (“Why should the Emperor be a human being?”) as a recurring, keening trope in *Eirei no koe* (*The Voices of the Heroic Dead*,

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<sup>60</sup> Mishima, “An Appeal,” 77.

<sup>61</sup> Seidensticker, Edward. “Mishima Yukio.” *Hudson Review* 24 (1971): 272-82. 273-4.

<sup>62</sup> Stokes, 198-201.

<sup>63</sup> Stokes, 201.

1966). In the absence of an Imperial persona, Mishima attempts to absorb into himself the symbolic status of national identity incarnate, the body politic usually associated with the reigning sovereign. Thus determined to transform the international perception of Japan as weak, intellectual, soft, and feminine, he molds out of his own muscle and sinew the idealized masculine body of a modern-day samurai, studying martial arts and eventually undergoing formal military training as a preface to founding the Tatenokai in 1968.<sup>64</sup>

Mishima constructs a dialectic discourse within both his body and his literature that converts him into a living symbol of Japan, hoping to lead by example, but also willing to take on himself the suffering of a nation of people, if need be – a twentieth-century bodhisattva in the Western guise of the third-century Christian martyr Saint Sebastian. Whereas the feeble teenage Mishima may have fantasized about the erotic nature of Sebastian’s arrow-riddled flesh, as portrayed in the masturbatory fantasies of the autobiographical protagonist in *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no kokuhaku*, 1948), he literally becomes the object of that fascination when he poses as Sebastian for photographer Eikoh Hosoe (*Ba-ra-kei: Ordeal by Roses*, 1961). Mishima often tends to internalize what he perceives as a “universal” struggle and reconstitute it as a personal one, and vice versa, eventually acting as a figurative surrogate for the nation. In some ways this is what makes him such a compelling writer, the oscillation between the personal and the universal, each reflecting one another in alternating moments of harmony and dissonance.

During the initial photographic session that would ultimately lead him to portray Mishima as Sebastian, Hosoe (b. 1933) responds to Mishima’s question, “I have never

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<sup>64</sup> Bayes, Ron H. “Yukio Mishima: An Informal Appraisal in Lieu of an Interview.” *West Coast Review* 5.3 (1971): 43-6. 43.

been photographed like this. Why did you do it in this way?”, with the simple reply, “This is the destruction of a myth.”<sup>65</sup> Such a nihilistic response would have appealed greatly to Mishima, whose works are full of instances, such as the fiery climax of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkaku-ji*, 1956), which depicts the destruction of monuments and false institutions. It also would have led him to consider the possibility of re-creating his own persona in new ways. For Mishima, an act of annihilation inevitably leads to an equally potent act of creation:

My mind devised a system that by installing within the self two mutually antipathetic elements – two elements that flowed alternately in opposite directions – gave the appearance of inducing an ever wider split in the personality, yet in practice created at each moment a living balance that was constantly being destroyed and brought back to life again. The embracing of a dual polarity within the self and the acceptance of contradiction and collision – such was my own blend of “art and action.”<sup>66</sup>

Utilizing the familiar Buddhist imagery of *samsara*, or the cycle of rebirth, which itself features as the prominent theme of the *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy, Mishima boldly revels in the idea that the inherent duality of his personality could be perpetually celebrated through constant destruction and reinvention, rather than through reconciliation. He metaphorically rejects the transcendence of *nirvana* in favor of maintaining equilibrium within his divided self.

This acknowledgement of the seemingly contradictory nature of the creative potential in destruction is linked to his affinity for a sense of the “classical past.” Perhaps by destroying that which is modern, his fragmented nation could one day rebuild itself in the image of pre-war Japan. In “Japan: The Cherished Myths,” Mishima refers to the symbolic, cyclical nature of tradition in reference to the rebuilding and re-consecration of

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<sup>65</sup> Hosoe Eikoh. “Subject. Matter.” *PEN America* 2.3 (2002): 173-7. 175.

<sup>66</sup> Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 47.



the Great Shrine of Ise every twenty years: “The renewal of the Ise Shrine is an excellent expression of the Japanese attitude toward tradition.”<sup>67</sup> He also suggests that recent instances of *hara-kiri* and pre-war extremism may signal a swing of the cultural pendulum; he even infers, “Perhaps even the samurai will stage a comeback.”<sup>68</sup> But Donald Keene attributes Mishima’s rhetorical devotion to his own constructed paradigm of an idealized past as symptomatic of a deep fear that “the modern” may have finally and irreversibly assimilated “the traditional”:

Indeed, the shift from modernism to an appreciation of the past has been so familiar a feature of the lives of Japanese intellectuals in the twentieth century that it has generally been a safe bet to predict that, no matter how extravagantly fond of the West and indifferent to the old Japan an intellectual might be in his youth, he would discover after forty the tastes of his ancestors. Mishima himself made this discovery very early, but he also realized that his generation might be the first that would not revert to the past; the loss of Japanese tradition might be permanent.<sup>69</sup>

These discursive patterns of “traditionalism” found throughout Mishima’s writing must be regarded primarily as literary constructs, as inflated rhetoric designed to serve the author’s idiosyncratic political agendas. However, one cannot ignore the creative skill with which he integrates these dialectical concepts of the divided self and the oscillating tension between East/West, male/female, beauty/decay, sacred/profane, flesh/spirit, etc., into the structure, characters, and themes of his *oeuvre*. In the modern *Nō*, these ideas take on additional relevance as they become situated within a liminal dreamscape that facilitates the collision of diametrically opposed forces in the service of a transformative aesthetic. Mishima’s loaded political allegories merge with classical tropes of memory

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<sup>67</sup> Mishima Yukio. “Party of One. Japan: The Cherished Myths.” Trans. Donald Keene. *Holiday* 30 (1961): 9-13. 11-12.

<sup>68</sup> Mishima, “Party of One,” 12.

<sup>69</sup> Keene, Donald. “Mishima and the Modern Scene.” *Times Literary Supplement* 20 Aug 1971: 989-91. 989-90.

and cyclical time, and he finds in the Nō “philosophy” a suitable arena in which to wage the spiritual battle for Japan’s “national soul.”

In the textual analyses of Mishima’s *kindai* Nō that follow in Chapter Three, I attempt to utilize a comparative model that situates the twentieth-century dramas within the context of their prototextual analogues and their intrinsic structural and thematic templates, focusing primarily on Mishima’s adaptation of *Aoi no ue* (*The Lady Aoi*). Using the criteria established in the Introduction and Chapter One, I categorize the modern Nō according to their predominant adaptive strategies, whether extrapolative or interpolative, and explore the extent to which this categorization illuminates Mishima’s dramaturgical techniques. Additionally, I situate them according to their influence upon late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century adaptors of Nō, such as Takeshi Kawamura. Each of the modern Nō contains its own innate philosophical and political identity, whether focusing upon the metaphorical role of the supernatural in post-war Japan or the apocalyptic reinvention of the Buddhist concept of *mappō*, and must be examined accordingly. Further, a comparative model must ultimately give way to the consideration that these plays must possess autonomy outside of the context of their relationship to prototexts and be able to succeed on their own merits as unique works of theatre.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “AFTER BEAUTY LIES IN RUINS”: STRATEGIES OF SUBVERSION

#### IN THE MODERN NŌ PLAYS OF YUKIO MISHIMA

The classical Nō version of *The Lady Aoi* (*Aoi no ue*), generally attributed to Zeami in the fifteenth century as a revision of an earlier performance text, centers around an exorcism ritual originally found in the “Aoi” chapter of Murasaki Shikibu’s eleventh-century novel *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*).<sup>1,2</sup> A malignant spirit, later to be revealed as the “living ghost” of the Rokujō Lady, one of Genji’s spurned former lovers, possesses the body of Aoi, the pregnant wife of the “shining prince” Hikaru Genji. In the novel, upon learning that her uncontrollable jealousy has manifested itself in this destructive supernatural manner, Rokujō exiles herself from the Heian-era court with her daughter and lives out the remainder of her life in secluded spiritual contemplation (this self-imposed exile is the subject of another popular Nō play, *Nonomiya*).<sup>3</sup> In the classical Nō version of *Aoi no ue*, both the *miko* Teruhi, a female Shinto medium, and a powerful Yamabushi priest from Yokawa, are summoned to draw the evil spirit from the body of Aoi, who is represented onstage not by a human actor, but rather by a folded kimono (*kosode*) placed at the edge of the stage. Rokujō, the *shite*, manifests herself in two forms, first as a noble woman of the court (*maeshite* – *deigan* mask) and later as the terrifying “living ghost,” wearing the demonic *hannya* mask (*nochijite*). Ultimately, she is

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that my labeling of *Genji monogatari* as a novel is a somewhat inaccurate contemporary attribution, as it belongs to a very specific genre of Heian-era episodic prose narratives woven together with intricate poetic allusions. However, in the interest of this particular study, the use of the term “novel” is the most efficacious means of description for a Western audience.

<sup>2</sup> Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker. NY: Knopf, 1976. 158-84.

<sup>3</sup> Murasaki, 185-214.

exorcised from tormenting Aoi, but only after expressing her irrepressible passion through a series of violent dances, accompanied by a poetic accounting of the many ways her honor and reputation had been corrupted by her irrepressible jealousy of Genji's pregnant wife Aoi.

Mishima's modern version of *The Lady Aoi* (1956) takes place in a psychiatric hospital, where the young Aoi Wakabayashi has been admitted in order to have a nervous condition treated, which has recently become intensified by horrific nightmares. Her husband, Hikaru (an analogue for Murasaki's Prince Genji), arrives in the middle of the night after returning home from a business trip, upon learning that her condition has worsened. He is apprised of the unconscious Aoi's current state by a libidinous nurse who warns him of the impending arrival of a mysterious woman who visits Aoi's room each night while she sleeps. Soon, Hikaru's former lover, Yasuko Rokujō, enters the room and reveals that she comes to Aoi's bedside every evening in order to torture her dreams, arranging "flowers of pain" by her pillow.<sup>4</sup> She begs him to admit that he still loves her. When he refuses, she conjures a vision of a night from their shared past, in hopes that it will awaken dormant feelings of love in the young man. However, the hallucination is interrupted by Aoi's cries for help, and Hikaru is returned to the present, only to discover that Mrs. Rokujō has vanished. He calls her home and learns that she has been asleep during the entire time that this weird encounter occurred, which can only mean that he has been in the presence of her "living ghost," a subconscious projection of her repressed jealousy and dark desires. The ghost returns and lures the dazed Hikaru away from Aoi, who reaches out for the telephone receiver and dies.

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<sup>4</sup> Mishima Yukio. *Five Modern Nō Plays*, Trans. Donald Keene. NY: Knopf, 1957. 153.

During this and subsequent discussions of the traditional Nō dramas and their modernized counterparts, I will be utilizing references to many of the inherent textual and performance conventions that are unique to the form. In each of these cases, I will strive to define and characterize these components succinctly, while drawing out the significance provided by their inclusion in or omission from the modern texts. As stated previously, for the most part, Mishima's modern Nō plays reject the use of devices like the conventional masks, costumes, music, and intricate weavings of poetic allusion that are often the defining features of the genre. When such conventions do occur in Mishima's modern Nō, they are often subverted to achieve a significantly different, if not antithetical, effect as in the classical versions. Most often, Mishima transforms the conventions of the traditional Nō by creating contemporary analogues consistent with the *shingeki* style of dramatic writing and performance. In summation, it is impossible to conduct any discussion of the Nō and its adaptations without employing its distinctive performative and dramaturgical vocabulary, but I will attempt to mention the specific terminology of the form in a manner that illuminates its relationship to the modern adaptations as clearly as possible.

#### Mishima's *The Lady Aoi*: Flowers of Pain and the Harmony of Night

First and foremost, one must identify the specific role types particular to the Nō *dramatis personae* in order to establish the source of the genre's dramatic action, inasmuch as one can label the tensions and conflicts at the core of the Nō as "dramatic." Mishima himself indicates that the appeal of the Nō lies in its "moment-to-moment evocation of beauty," in contrast to any traditional sense of progressive action based on

revelation of character or narrative leading to a heightened climax, followed by a potential resolution, all of which are based in Western ideals of Aristotelian dramaturgy.<sup>5</sup> A popular adage describing the Nō comes from French poet Paul Claudel (1868-1955), who himself adapted the form into modernized closet dramas: “*Le drame, c’est une quelque chose qui arrive, le Nō, c’est quelqu’un qui arrive*” (roughly translated as “In drama, something happens; in the Noh, *someone* happens”).<sup>6</sup> This “someone” is the masked role of the *shite* (or “doer”), who provides the theatrical DNA of the typical Nō play’s structure. Once the *shite* enters the stage, his or her chanting and dancing generally supplant the dialogue and psychological action of the other actors and even the Nō chorus, whose collective voice becomes subsumed to complement the singing and dancing of the *shite*. Thus, it may be argued, as Nogami Toyochirō and Chieko Irie Mulhern assert, that the Nō is intrinsically a “monodramatic” form and that its components exist primarily to serve the function of the *shite*’s performance.<sup>7</sup>

In the classical version of *Aoi no ue*, the *shite* is identified as the living ghost of the Rokujō Lady, and her attack on Aoi is portrayed as inflicting greater spiritual pain on the torturer than on her victim. As she strikes at the *kosode* that acts as a surrogate for the ailing princess, she exclaims her great shame and regret:

Harboring resentment towards others simply increases the misery of my floating life:  
my troubled thoughts, which I can never forget,  
if only I could pacify them for a while.  
A vengeful spirit, summoned forth by the catalpa bow  
is revealed here now.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mishima, “The Japan Within,” 55.

<sup>6</sup> Gillespie, John K. “The Impact of Noh on Paul Claudel’s Style of Playwriting.” *Theatre Journal* 35.1 (1983): 58-73. 67. Emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> Nogami Toyochirō. “The Monodramatic Principle of the Noh Theatre.” Trans. Chieko Irie Mulhern. *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 16.1 (1981): 72-86.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, Steven T. *Theatricalities of Power: The Cultural Politics of Noh*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2001. 132.

The *waki* role in the classical Nō is the Holy Man of Yokawa, a powerful mountain priest summoned to the court to exorcise the malevolent spirit. In general, the *waki* performs many functions in the Nō, not the least of which is the crucial moment in which he or she draws out the true spiritual identity of the *shite*, which is often hidden by a corporeal disguise, through a series of probing questions. Forcing the *shite* to identify itself often signals the turning point in the play's structure, which prompts the *shite* to perform the central dance (*shimai*) that defines the drama. In the Afterword to her contemporary Nō play about global destruction by nuclear apocalypse, *Drifting Fires* (1986), Janine Beichman explores the traditional role of the *waki* with exceptional clarity, summarizing its "catalytic presence" in relationship to the *shite*.<sup>9</sup> The scientific nomenclature for this concept is apropos, as it indicates the *waki*'s active facilitation of the *shite*'s transformation, in much the same way that one chemical element speeds reactivity within a chemical change. She suggests that the *waki* acts as a catalyst for the release of the *shite*'s attachment to the past, a metaphysical struggle that encapsulates the Buddhist cosmology of the Nō, in much the same way that a modern psychoanalyst draws out the neuroses of his or her patient. This observation becomes increasingly compelling as we explore the psychiatric setting of Mishima's modern Nō version of *The Lady Aoi*.<sup>10</sup>

In *Aoi no ue*, this revelatory function is divided between the *waki* and the *miko* Teruhi, who serves as the play's *tsure* (or "companion" – usually accompanying either the *waki* or the *shite*). The use of the catalpa bow is part of a Shinto ritual designed for

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<sup>9</sup> Beichman, Janine. "Drifting Fires: An American Nō." *Asian Theatre Journal* 3.2 (1986): 233-60. 256.

<sup>10</sup> I intend to study the possible maieutic aspects of the *waki*'s role, in the metaphorical capacity as a spiritual midwife to the *shite*, in the future. One component of this question that intrigues me is the possibility that there are *shite* characters in the Nō repertoire who might actually be awakened to their true identity by the *waki*.

the medium to draw out the identity of Rokujō by channeling the spirit through her own body. In fact, a minor character, the *waki-tsure*, an Imperial Retainer, finally determines Rokujō's identity by the clues that she gives that allude to both the tortured death of Yūgao (another of Genji's young lovers) and an incident in which Rokujō's carriage is damaged after being brusquely pushed aside at the Kamo Festival in order to make room for Aoi's own carriage (an event that shames Rokujō publicly).<sup>11</sup> When the *waki* finally arrives, he engages the transformed Rokujō, in full terrifying countenance as a vengeful *hannya* spirit, in a fierce battle of wills. His prayers release her from her earthly attachments and she begins the process of peaceful transcendence toward Buddhahood.

While each of the roles present in the classical version of *Aoi no ue* possess correlative analogues in Mishima's *kindai* Nō adaptation, their specific character attributions shift significantly in a way that heightens the narrative drama of the twentieth-century text. Though he maintains a fairly homodiegetic relationship between the metatext and its prototext(s) by preserving the recognizable names and relationships of the primary characters from Murasaki's *Genji monogatari* (and by extension, the original Nō version of *Aoi no ue*), Mishima's transfocalized emphasis on creating a romantic triangle between Hikaru, Aoi, and Mrs. Rokujō alters the central conflict of the original Nō play (that of austere exorcism ritual), as well as its ultimate resolution. The heterodiegetic updates in the modern play's spatio-temporal setting provide a framework for a new exploration of the dream aesthetic of the traditional Nō, as well as an effective means for infusing the metaphors of the play with political significance.

Mishima's cast of characters preserves the designation of the *shite* role for Mrs. Rokujō, although her eerie identity remains constant through the course of the drama, as

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<sup>11</sup> Murasaki, 160.



opposed to being split into *maeshite* and *nohijite*. The *waki* is not a powerful priestly figure, but rather Hikaru, a typical Westernized Japanese businessman who merely appears to be playing the role of dedicated husband at the sickbed of his ailing wife. The Nurse conflates the roles of the *tsure* from the classical Nō, acting as a shamanic herald of the arrival of Rokujō's "living ghost," and the narrative function of the standard *ai-kyōgen* role. Perhaps most difficult to categorize is the inclusion of Aoi, as portrayed by a living actor onstage; in Mishima's play, Aoi is still a cipher, more of a representation of a character than the true incarnation of a role. She shares no analogue with any pre-existing Nō role type; yet, through her corporeal presence, rather than that of a folded piece of costume, Mishima inspires an immediate, visceral sense of compassion for her fate at the deadly hands of his *shite*.

#### Without a Healer: Subversion of the *Waki* Role in *The Lady Aoi*

The inclusion of Hikaru, an analogue for the character of Prince Genji, as the drama's *waki* character, is perhaps Mishima's greatest deviation from the original Nō text. Notably absent from the classical version of *Aoi no ue*, the Genji character from Murasaki's novel is idealistically portrayed as the personification of courtly love in ancient Heian-kyō. His heightened sensitivity to nature and poetry makes him a sought-after lover, as attested by the myriad amorous escapades chronicled in the *Genji monogatari*. In the novel's "Aoi" chapter, during the incidents enacted in the classical Nō drama, Genji refuses to leave the side of his ailing wife, and despite the presence of priests and exorcists, it is he who finally coaxes the spirit possessing Aoi to reveal itself

to be that of the Rokujō Lady.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in aligning the Genji correlative role with that of the classical Nō's *waki*, Mishima's modern play actually restores an element of prototextual tradition to the metatext by returning it to the primary literary source. Even so, Mishima's *waki* is no Holy Man of great spiritual discipline, nor is his Genji surrogate the infamous poetic rake whose great sensitivity to the world around him ennobles his erotic desires.

Rather, Mishima's characterization of Hikaru is surprisingly pragmatic and unromantic, a cold-hearted professional caught up in the pursuit of capitalistic gain, devoid of any of the poetic, charismatic qualities of *The Tale of Genji*'s heroic protagonist, although he apparently shares Genji's physical appeal. Mishima's Nurse goes so far as to actually label Hikaru "a real Prince Genji," as she boldly flirts with him at the comatose Aoi's bedside.<sup>13</sup> When he arrives at the hospital at the beginning of the play, he expresses no real affection or concern toward Aoi, but instead performs the duties of a responsible husband, seeing that her medical needs have been attended to and assessing the situation at hand with cold precision. Hikaru is a man of little imagination and, as such, is soon overwhelmed by the supernatural nature of the extraordinary encounter with Mrs. Rokujō. In fact, one may well wonder if Mrs. Rokujō herself projects many of the qualities she desires in a model lover onto Mishima's Hikaru, were it not for the remarkable transformation we observe as his demeanor becomes that of a gentle, attentive lover toward Rokujō during the yacht dream sequence at the heart of the play.

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<sup>12</sup> Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker. NY: Knopf, 1976. 168-9.

<sup>13</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 149.

Of course, one may also interpret Hikaru's emotional behavior in the yacht scene with a sense of ambiguity: as a manipulation of past events and memories via Mrs. Rokujō's dark supernatural influence, in which her will subsumes his in a paranormally-enhanced act of Freudian wish-fulfillment.<sup>14</sup> When she confronts him with memories of their past relationship, Hikaru dismisses it frigidly as "a childish curiosity" and even states, "I suppose you've learned now the punishment a woman gets for taking advantage of a man's curiosity."<sup>15</sup> He repeatedly denies any sense of legitimate affection for her, and even appears to take cruel satisfaction in her present unhappiness, chalking it up to "punishment" for clinging too strongly to him, an obvious reference to the Buddhist transgression of worldly attachments that entrap the medieval Nō representation of Rokujō (as well as numerous other *shite* characters in the Nō repertoire). Further, Mishima even actively physicalizes this attachment as Mrs. Rokujō drops to the floor and desperately clings to his knees within the next few moments of the play's stage directions.<sup>16</sup>

The subversion of the classical character of Prince Genji that Mishima undertakes in his modern Nō play takes on a more malevolent timbre when one considers the destructive nature of Hikaru's behavior upon the women around him. The deterioration of Mrs. Rokujō's pride is blatantly apparent through the drama, as she kowtows frenziedly to re-enter his affections. This is further amplified by the fact that her very existence as a vengeful spirit is directly attributable to Hikaru's merciless rejection of her, as opposed to any direct agency on the part of Aoi to stir her jealousy. In other words, by eliminating

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<sup>14</sup> A similar ambiguity of psychological intent arises in the memory/dream scene in Mishima's *Sotoba Komachi*, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 157.

<sup>16</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 159.

the classical analogue for prior contact between Aoi and Rokujō, such as the Kamo Festival “carriage battle” from the *Genji monogatari*, Mishima places the accountability for Rokujō’s malevolent incarnation squarely on the modern Hikaru’s shoulders. In this way, Rokujō’s nightly torture of Aoi may be read as an example of Freudian projection, less about punishing the young wife for any specific wrong and more as a means of luring Hikaru to her icy clutches, like a sociopathic Siren. Therefore, as a twentieth-century surrogate for the medieval Holy Man of Yokawa, Hikaru is no healer, especially in the topsy-turvy world of Mishima’s uncanny hospital ward; there is even substantial evidence that it is he, and not Mrs. Rokujō’s phantom, that ultimately destroys Aoi at the end of the play.

In *A Woman’s Weapon* (1997), an extensive study of the concept of *mono no ke* (or possessing spirits) in *The Tale of Genji*, Doris Borgen notes this shift of emphasis onto Genji in several instances of possession and exorcism throughout Murasaki’s novel and the various works it inspires, such as *Aoi no ue* and Mishima’s adaptation of it. She suggests that some examples of death caused by spirit possession in *The Tale of Genji* may not be ascribable to spectral projections of Rokujō at all, but rather to paranormal manifestations of Prince Genji’s own guilt. In her discussion of the death of Yūgao, she defends the proposition that the young girl’s death is incorrectly ascribed to Rokujō, when “we can see the vision as a projection of Genji’s troubled psyche, a collective image, a composite of his betrayed women.”<sup>17</sup> This contention colors her perception of Mishima’s *kindai* Nō text, but does result in a persuasive argument:

If the classical *nō* play *Aoi no ue* shifts the focus from the possessed person in the *Genji* to the possessing spirit’s salvation through shamanism

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<sup>17</sup> Borgen, Doris G. *A Woman’s Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji*. Honolulu: U of HI P, 1997. 71.

and exorcism, Mishima creates an entirely new dynamic by relocating the source of the conflict in Hikaru's suggestibility. Initially cast in the role of exorcist, he soon becomes entranced by the nurse's evocation of Rokujō and becomes himself possessed by Rokujō's poetic remembrances of things past.<sup>18</sup>

Not only does Bargaen elucidate the translocation of intent in the adaptation process from Murasaki's novel to the Nō drama, she also reveals Mishima's similar tactics in the modernization process, which indicts his twentieth-century Genji as the ultimate locus of destruction in the modern Nō. Matthew R. Dubroff, in "Noh Women Allowed," insists that this alteration imposes a new set of values, as well as a feminist sensibility, onto the prototext: "here we find that a man, and not a woman, is the symbol of the evils of the world presented."<sup>19</sup> Thus, this new focus burdens Hikaru with a sense of direct culpability not only for Aoi's death, but for her original ailing condition as well, due to the physical and emotional abandonment of his wife.

Bargaen notes the dual nature of the *waki* in the fifteenth-century version of *Aoi no ue* – on one hand, the *yamabushi* priest struggles to free Aoi from the possessing spirit that is killing her, but the final moments of the drama evoke sympathy for Rokujō, as the *waki*'s prayers liberate her from her own tortured clinging to the repressed jealousy and rage that threatens her spiritual transcendence and peace. In Mishima's drama, rather than driving her away, Hikaru becomes wholly subsumed by Rokujō's spirit. In the end, his choice to abandon Aoi (whose cries actually save *him* from becoming trapped inside of a living memory) by following the beckoning of Rokujō's ghost offstage acts as the stimulus that triggers her death. It also nihilistically inverts the classical relationship

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<sup>18</sup> Bargaen, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Dubroff, Matthew R. "Noh Women Allowed." *Constructions and Confrontations: Changing Representations of Women and Feminisms, East and West*. Honolulu: U of HI P, 1996. 315-20. 318.

between *shite* and *waki*, transforming the play from a lyrical meditation on karmic salvation to a dissonant death rattle.

*The Lady Aoi*'s Hikaru is only one example of the vilification and inversion of the role of the *waki* that recurs as an adaptive strategy throughout Mishima's modern Nō plays. In *Sotoba Komachi* (1952), Mishima transforms the Buddhist priest who finds himself in the presence of the "wreck of" the aged poet Ono no Komachi into a vain, drunken young poet stumbling haplessly through an urban park.<sup>20</sup> Unlike his classical counterpart in Kan'ami's Nō drama, who is amazed to stand in the presence of such a renowned literary figure after she successfully challenges him to a debate on the nature of salvation, the Poet is not only unable to recognize the modern Komachi, but mocks her openly. Mishima's Komachi (like Rokujō) conjures a living memory of her Meiji heyday at the Rokumeikan ("Deer-Cry Pavilion") and ensnares him within it as a curse, so that he is finally able to recognize her beauty but that knowledge destroys him, in a striking example of Mishima's assertion that "True beauty is something that attacks, overpowers, robs, and finally destroys."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, by having Komachi transfer the fatal possession by the spirit of her dead lover Fukakusa to the Poet, as opposed to becoming possessed herself, Mishima engages in an act of untraditional role division that seems to be a characteristic tactic of his modern Nō dramaturgy. Of particular note to Mishima scholars is the dialectical clash that transpires between two archetypal writers in this drama: one, a cocky young Westernized poet, and the other, a downtrodden, forgotten woman trapped in the memories of the past her verses conjure. Each of these figures may be interpreted to represent an opposing aspect of Mishima's own personality, engaged in

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<sup>20</sup> Kan'ami Kiyotsugu. "Sotoba Komachi." Trans. Sam Houston Brock. *Anthology of Japanese Literature: Earliest Era to Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Donald Keene. NY: Grove, 1955. 264-70. 268.

<sup>21</sup> Mishima, "The Japan Within," 55.

a spiritual battle for primacy in his quest to reconcile the contradictory urges that haunt him throughout his life and career.

In *Yuya* (1949; published 1955), the Heike lord Taira no Munemori mutates into a shrewd Westernized businessman whose cruel rejection of the titular courtesan's despondent pleas to go home to see her dying mother during the cherry blossom viewing season is ultimately revealed to be a clever ploy to discover a crafty deception.<sup>22</sup> At the moment that the classical version of Munemori is moved to release Yuya because of the series of elegant dances she performs for him, Mishima's *waki* confronts her with his foreknowledge that, not only is her mother not ill, but that she seeks to leave him in order to run away with a secret lover.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Mishima's *waki* is unmoved by Yuya's tears; rather, his apparent malice is fueled by them. Interestingly, Laurence Kominz notes that the insertion of a lover into Yuya's true motivations actually stems from a secret Nō performance tradition, designed to increase the *shite*'s "allure and beauty."<sup>24</sup> By centering his entire plot on this arcane tradition and making it text rather than subtext, Mishima subverts the original Nō play. His modernized *waki* contrives this revelation to test Yuya's fidelity and honesty, but in the play's final moments, Yuya agrees to stay with Munemori, choosing a love defined by a shared deception over one based in truth and honesty, a sentiment that allows the playwright's trademark nihilism to shine darkly.

In *Yoroboshi* (1960), Mishima shatters the structure of the classical Nō prototext completely by employing primarily interpolative adaptive strategies, in which the original drama is hardly recognizable through the innovations the author superimposes on top of

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<sup>22</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Yuya." *Mishima on Stage: The Black Lizard & Other Plays*. By Yukio Mishima. Ed. Laurence Kominz. Ann Arbor: U of MI Press, 2007. 223-39.

<sup>23</sup> Zeami. "Yuya." *Japanese Noh Drama*. Vol. 2. Tokyo: Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, 1959. 33-51.

<sup>24</sup> Kominz, 224.

it.<sup>25</sup> At the heart of these changes is the splintering of the role of the *waki*, originally a grieving father inadvertently reunited with his blind son after years of separation and guilt, into two sets of parents, one natural and one adoptive, who bicker in a courtroom over their legal claim to the blind young man.<sup>26</sup> It is arguable that the arbiter Shinako might actually function more accurately as a *waki*, according to her identity as official questioner during the legal hearing at the heart of the play's action, but the quasi-romantic bond that eventually develops between herself and the *shite* Toshinori positions her best as a *tsure* role. All of the original Nō's pathos and sensitivity (the classical aesthetic of *mono no aware*) has been stripped away in order to expose the petty, cruel underbelly of the human experience. The *shite* is transformed from a young man whose afflictions have led him to spiritual enlightenment into a spiteful misanthrope wracked by apocalyptic visions. However, the *waki*'s dissection into four characters (each couple diametrically opposed to the other) renders the legitimate remorse of the classical father Michitoshi into a farce of deception – the adoptive parents fear Toshinori's constant abuse but wish to fulfill their duty to care for him, while the newly discovered natural parents have idealized the reunion with their child to the extent that they are shocked by his lack of affection (in fact, he exhibits outright disdain) toward them.

Another striking example of the subversive effects of dividing the *waki* role in Mishima's modern Nō plays occurs in another of his interpolative adaptations, *Memorial Service for Prince Genji* (*Genji kuyō*, 1962). Yet again, in the classical Nō, the *waki* is a priest engaged in a spiritual pilgrimage to pay homage to the bodhisattva Kannon; in

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<sup>25</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Yoroboshi: The Blind Young Man." *Modern Japanese Drama: An Anthology*. Ed. and trans. Ted T. Takaya. NY: Columbia UP, 1979. 41-58.

<sup>26</sup> Motomasa Jūrō. "Yoroboshi (The Stumbling Boy)." *Japanese Noh Drama*. Vol. 3. Tokyo: Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, 1960. 95-112.



Mishima's drama, he is replaced by a pair of young "literature buffs," as translator Adam Kabat calls them, taking part in a literary tour.<sup>27</sup> While, strictly speaking, Mishima retains the structural dynamic of the classical text, in which the priest is accompanied by a pair of *waki-tsure* characters, the unnamed Youths in the modern text (designated only as Youth A and Youth B) function almost as interchangeable separate halves of the same person, with neither taking on a principal role. When the Youths are confronted with the ghost of their hero, the novelist Murasaki Nozoe, they quickly lose faith in her, ultimately declaring her an emotionally manipulative fraud. Thus, rather than being edified by the *shite*, as occurs with the *waki* of the classical *Nō* when the spirit of Murasaki Shikibu reveals herself to have been the reincarnation of Kannon, Mishima's Youths become disenchanted with both the novelist and her works and quickly disown their affection for both. The dialectic opposition between enlightenment and disenchantment is a common tactic used by Mishima in the modern *Nō*, when updating the classical texts' supernatural core. Much in the same manner as occurs in his version of *Sotoba Komachi*, Mishima's *Genji kuyō* criticizes the state of modern literature, stripping its writers and their *aficionados* of legitimacy by using spiritual analogies innate to the *Nō* form, in due course declaring them false prophets of a lost religion.

#### The Destructive Feminine: Mrs. Rokujō as Adapted *Shite* Figure

While these subversive tactics provide vital insight into Mishima's reinvestigation of the role of the *waki* in his twentieth-century updates of classical *Nō* plays, how the dramatist contextualizes the *shite* role in these same works must take precedence in an

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<sup>27</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Memorial Service for Prince Genji." Trans. Adam Kabat. *Translation* 17 (1986): 141-54. 141.

examination of the transformative aesthetics he utilizes in their adaptation process. The *shite* is incontestably the central role in the Nō, and by all accounts any reinterpretation of its character and function reveals clues to the larger dramaturgical strategies at work in Mishima's nine modern Nō. It could be said that the classical Nō is a drama of discovery, and that the *waki*'s revelation of the true identity of the *shite* ultimately sparks the emotional release that signals the transfer of the covert to the overt. In other words, when the *shite*'s hidden motivations and persona become exposed, the drama's aesthetic becomes archetypally transcendent in nature, permitting the role to journey from the confines of spiritual attachment to liberation via prayer, exorcism, or absolution. In modern psychological parlance, this central discovery signals a transition from repression to expression, with the latter manifesting itself in the *shite*'s primary dance, which traditionally comprises the final section of the drama's performance.

In *The Lady Aoi*, Mishima carefully navigates the major literary and performative traditions associated with the classical Nō's terrifying *shite* figure, the Rokujō Lady's demonic "living ghost," while at the same time imbuing her modern analogue with surprising depth of character and an innovative repositioning of her supernatural aspects that reflects a keen awareness of Freudian psychology. These tactics unveil a nihilistic reinterpretation of the classical aesthetic of *yūgen*, as well as his trademark sociopolitical disenchantment with the Westernization of post-war Japan.

In the classical version of *Aoi no ue*, the *shite* appears in two forms, first as an enigmatic noble lady (*maeshite* – *deigan* mask). The *maeshite* arrives "in a secret carriage," and equates multiple veiled allusions to episodes in the *Genji monogatari*, in which the Rokujō Lady was shamed, to the famous Buddhist parable of the "burning

house” from the Lotus Sutra, which advocates that one must play an active part in one’s own spiritual salvation.<sup>28,29</sup> These carriage references allude specifically to episodes in Murasaki’s novel in which Rokujō is implicated in the death of Yūgao, and in which Genji’s wife Aoi’s carriage is forcibly pushed by her attendants past Rokujō’s own disguised coach at the Kamo Festival, resulting in the destruction of her carriage’s wheels and her public humiliation.<sup>30</sup> The classical text’s multilayered allusions to carriage wheels resonate with the Buddhist cosmology at its heart, as they bring to mind the cyclical nature of reincarnation and karma, a cycle that threatens to trap the Rokujō Lady’s spirit without intervention from the *waki*. As if driven to these actions against her will, the *maeshite* repeatedly strikes at the kimono representing Aoi before disappearing to the rear of the stage.

Once the Holy Man arrives and engages the *shite* in an exorcism rite, she appears as a horrific demon (*nohijite*) in the horned *hannya* mask. Her protests and *kata* become filled with violent fury as the ascetic struggles to expel her from her attack on the helpless Aoi. Finally pacified, she retires from the stage, “Attaining buddhahood, release from all worldly attachments,/ she becomes filled with gratitude,/ she becomes filled with gratitude.”<sup>31</sup> The transformation of mask and costume from the first half of the drama to the second is fascinating in performance because it takes place in relatively full view of the audience, as the *shite* huddles in the rear of the stage, with the stiff outer kimonos

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<sup>28</sup> Brown, 132.

<sup>29</sup> *The Saddharma-Pundarika, or, The Lotus of the True Law*. Trans. H. Kern. NY: Scribner, 1901. 60-97.

<sup>30</sup> Buddhism contains many *yana*, or modes of spiritual practice. As *yana* can be translated as “cart” or “carriage” in Sanskrit, the term takes on numerous metaphorical meanings as the vehicles by which sentient beings are conveyed towards enlightenment. Thus, in the *Genji monogatari* and the Nō plays *Aoi no ue* and *Nonomiya*, the “carriage battle” scenes may be interpreted to take on spiritual connotations, particularly by means of association with the “wheel of life” represented by the cycle of *samsara*. Rokujō’s explicit references to the Lotus Sutra and the “burning house” parable in *Aoi no ue*, in reference to the carriage battle, bridge the interpretive gaps and transform her agony into a symbolic homily.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, 137.

shielding the change of masks from the spectators' field of vision. And while both *maeshite* and *nochijite* torture Aoi equally, the second incarnation of the role is the more visceral because of the ferocity of her movements and the monstrous visage of the *hannya* mask.

In the *Nō*, the use of masks not only signals an important character differentiation between the *shite* and the other actors onstage, it possesses innate dramaturgical significance for the overall effect of the plays' conventional structure as well. These masks are both literal and metaphorical in the poetic cosmology of the *Nō*, and illuminate the dialectic between the world of the public persona and the private emotion. While there are notable exceptions throughout the *Nō* canon (including *Aoi no ue*, which features a *tsure* role who wears the *ko-omote* mask), the *shite* conventionally appears as the only masked role, and its intricately carved mask designates a specific type of character, whether haggard old woman, godlike old man, madwoman, demon, etc. In the archetypal *Nō* dramatic framework, the *shite*'s true identity is hidden from the *waki* at the beginning of the drama, often as an indication of shame, until the *waki* discerns it by deductive means or through direct revelation by the *shite* itself or by the *tsure* or *ai-kyōgen* roles. This moment of recognition signals a major shift in the play's energy and theatrical trajectory, as the *shite* becomes predominant at that point, often to the extent that the rest of the roles fade away into the background as the masked character's chanting and dance express the deep emotional attachment that prevents it from attaining enlightenment. The *shite*'s true motivations are finally brought into the light, and he or she begins the inevitable journey toward either transcendence or destruction.

Masking is of vital importance in Mishima's literary *oeuvre*, as the motif recurs regularly from the publication of his first major work, *Confessions of a Mask*, through the final book of the *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy, *The Decay of the Angel* (*Tennin gosui*, 1970), whose title itself alludes to the novel's evocation of the Nō play *Hagoromo*. Of course, this masking is primarily psychological in nature, as Mishima's characters often embody conflicting personas, one public and one private, mirroring the similar internal battles fought by the writer himself. In *Sun and Steel*, Mishima confesses that he has "concerned myself from the outset of my literary life with methods for concealing rather than revealing myself..."<sup>32</sup> According to Donald Keene, in an article composed for the *New York Times Book Review* shortly after Mishima's suicide:

He had assumed his mask as a protection from society. Gradually, however, he became aware that his greatest desire was to make the mask his real face. The mask would enable him to become whatever he chose. Mishima's various pranks were often decried as publicity stunts, but they were in fact his mask and his means of subduing the sensitivity and timidity of the boy he described in *Confessions of a Mask*. In the end Mishima was able to make his mask a living part of his flesh. Mishima rarely removed his mask, even with friends, though his gentleness showed itself from time to time, as unforgettable as it was surprising. But his mask made it almost impossible for him to reveal whatever anguish he kept hidden underneath and when he did, as when he spoke to me last summer, the mask forbade sympathy.<sup>33</sup>

Like the author himself, Mishima's characters rarely wear the same face internally that they exhibit to the outside world, and those that do create explicit masks through the use of overt costume often do so in order to misdirect recognition of their inner personae. The tension between these warring halves becomes intensified by the fracturing of traditional Japanese society (and its effect on the Japanese soul) by the nation's

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<sup>32</sup> Mishima Yukio. *Sun and Steel*. Trans. John Bester. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1970. 69.

<sup>33</sup> Keene, Donald. "Mishima Had Everything." *The Blue-Eyed Tarōkaja*. NY: Columbia UP, 1996. 200-08. 207.

embracing of Western culture, particularly in the wake of World War II. In many cases, when Mishima's characters are unmasked and forced to view themselves honestly, often for the first time, the shock is too great and they are destroyed in the act of self-recognition. Within the political context of Mishima's criticism of modern Japan, this takes on even more significance, as he insists that the mere masking of the classical Japanese soul with Western clothes and manners cannot suppress this inner turmoil. Of course, Mishima himself is a walking paradox, exhibiting in his own life the hypocrisy that he decries, wearing tailored Italian suits while lounging in his Western house inspired by Greco-Roman architecture, all the while crying out for a return to an idealized conception of classical Japanese values. The ultimate paradox arises when one asks which of these dueling personae is the mask and which is his natural human face?

In the modern Nō plays, Mishima only employs the explicit use of masks once, during the central dream sequence of *Kantan* (1950), worn by the actors in the *shite*'s vision of an alternative reality for his future. In this adaptation of a classical work, itself a revision of a Chinese source, the main character Jirō is tempted by a series of anthropomorphic allegorical figures, all of whom are portrayed by actors in stylized masks. Despite this deliberate inversion of the use of masks in the prototext (the *shite* is masked and the *tsure* allegorical figures are not), *Kantan* is notably the one modern Nō drama by Mishima that adheres most strongly to its prototextual antecedent. In this relatively faithful correlative adaptation (some subversive elements notwithstanding), Mishima maintains the core of its dramatic structure, establishing effective twentieth-century analogues for the fantastical medieval plot and its imaginary characters. Mishima's *shite*, the jaded, nihilistic youth Jirō, seeks out the magical dream-pillow of

Kantan, smugly confident that sleeping upon it will confirm his belief that life is meaningless; consequently, in his dreams, he clings to his existential philosophy yet gains immeasurable worldly success by Machiavellian means.<sup>34</sup> In the end, having proven himself right, yet ultimately being faced with the prospect of death in his dream, he chooses to embrace life and wakes, refreshed by a new sense of purpose. While Jirō's imaginary journey is a far cry from the quest for Buddhist enlightenment embarked upon by his Rosei, his medieval analogue in the classical Nō text, both *shite* characters are immersed in a vivid, alternate dream life in which they are given the opportunity to fully play out their lives, encountering trials, tribulations, and temptation, only to wake, invigorated by the prospect of embracing life's full potential.<sup>35</sup>

The modern Nō plays tend to feature a consistent inversion of the classical rationale behind the main character's masked identity. Often, the *shite* roles in Mishima's dramas are the only characters that wear an authentic face, while the others sport psychological masks of divided identity and deception. Rather than the *waki* subtly drawing out the true nature of the *shite*, the *shite*'s presence in Mishima's modern Nō brutally exposes the artifice and falseness of the world around him or her.

*The Lady Aoi*'s Mrs. Rokujō presents an ideal example of these inversive tactics applied to the *shite*'s role in Mishima's *kindai* Nō. Not only is the role intended to be performed unmasked in a naturalistic style, but Mrs. Rokujō undergoes no monstrous transformation at the play's climax; her physical visage remains constant. Instead, she alters the physical world around her to intersect with the eerie nightmare realm she inhabits, stealing Hikaru along with her into a lucid memory. Additionally, despite the

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<sup>34</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 79-141.

<sup>35</sup> Tyler, Royall, ed. *Japanese Nō Dramas*. NY: Penguin, 1992. 133-41.

mysterious nature of her supernatural identity, when Mrs. Rokujō walks into Aoi's hospital room, Hikaru recognizes her instantly; indeed, his first line after she enters is an exclamation of her name.<sup>36</sup> This is a far cry from the conventional cat-and-mouse game of hidden character played by the *waki* and *shite* in the classical Nō. It is only in the play's final moments, after the phantasmic Rokujō has disappeared from the scene, that Hikaru discovers that the woman with whom he has been speaking is merely a supernatural projection of the corporeal Rokujō, who has been asleep at her home all night.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Mishima inverts the traditional dramatic structure of the Nō to venture from recognition to obscurity, leading to an ambiguous ending that lacks resolution. It could be argued that the telephone voice of the flesh-and-blood Mrs. Rokujo provides the drama with one half of the *maeshite/nochijite* dialectic as a remnant from the classical Nō, particularly because the telephone call provides illumination to Hikaru of his ghostly companion's essence. However, as a practical stage presence, it provides no definitive progression of character development and serves little more than a basic dramaturgical function.

The telephone itself takes on symbolic significance in a double role – both as a harbinger of Mrs. Rokujō's arrival (its eerie “tinkling” warns the Nurse twice in the play that the ghost is due to appear at any moment, causing her to flee the room in terror) and as the “faint, choked” voice of the sickly Aoi. This latter instance suggests that Aoi cannot speak for herself to warn Hikaru of the danger he is about to face, due to her illness and to the sedatives which have been administered to her by the hospital staff. In fact, it is only when Hikaru is drawn into Mrs. Rokujō's dream world that Aoi regains her

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<sup>36</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 152.

<sup>37</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 170-1.



voice in the drama, as she is trapped by the *shite*'s ability to conjure nightmares as well. It may therefore be inferred that she attains the ability to cross over the liminal boundaries from dream to dream in order to cry out to Hikaru. Bargaen astutely observes that the telephone also serves a subversive role in Mishima's modernization of the *Nō*'s traditional conventions. Rather than the pine tree at the rear of the classical *Nō* stage serving as a conduit for the crossover between the supernatural and natural worlds, this device of twentieth-century technology becomes the direct link between the ghostly Mrs. Rokujō and her flesh-and-blood counterpart.<sup>38</sup> And rather than providing the potential for enlightenment and spiritual transcendence, the telephone becomes the means of Aoi's destruction.

While she may not wear two separate visages in the modern *Nō* play, Mrs. Rokujō does sense the division of the self that signals the uncanny nature of her supernatural identity. After Hikaru accuses her of seeking his pity, Mrs. Rokujō states, "I don't know myself why I've come. When I feel I want to kill you, I must be thinking that I'd like to be pitied by your dead self. And amidst feelings of every sort, simultaneously there is myself. Isn't it strange that I should be present at the same time with all those different existences?"<sup>39</sup> Not only does such an exclamation denote a divided mind that suggests warring motivations inside of her, it also implies a subtle awareness of the division of her physical and supernatural personae. In his theories of the Uncanny, Sigmund Freud theorizes that one type of supernatural incursion occurs when repressed desires force the creation of a *Doppelgänger*, or double, as "a defence against annihilation": "...a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may

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<sup>38</sup> Bargaen, 107.

<sup>39</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 156.

substitute the other's self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged."<sup>40</sup> In this way, Freud suggests that a character like Rokujō might secretly create an alternative reality wherein her double is empowered to speak openly the words she keeps behind closed lips, to perform murderous acts of revenge of which she can only dream. Noted anthropologist Victor Turner specifically refers to the Rokujō Lady's role in the medieval dramatic version of *Aoi no ue* in his discussion of liminality's relationship to theatrical performance. Her supernatural presence signals a transitory mode:

A whole world of wishes and hopes is opened up, as well as a world of moral reflexivity, in which the protagonist's actual behavior is related to how he ought to have acted. But there is a subtle interfusion of the indicative ("normal") and subjunctive ("aesthetic") moods in *Noh* drama. Where these fuse, we find magic; where the "might have been" is conceded to have indicative power, we have performative acts or magical spells.<sup>41</sup>

In Freudian terms, Turner sees the liminal world of the Nō as a dreamscape in which even our most secret wishes obtain corporeal form. Through the conventions of the Nō, Mishima is able to propel this dream self into the modern world and unleash its deadly power upon a generation of idle dreamers who need to be violently shaken from their sleep.

In the play's stage directions, as translated by Donald Keene, Mishima denotes Mrs. Rokujō's true nature from the moment she enters the scene, precipitated by a paranormal portent of chilling unease: "The telephone gives forth a faint, choked tinkle. Pause. From the door to the left appears the living phantasm of YASUKO ROKUJŌ. She

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<sup>40</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. NY: Penguin, 2003. 142.

<sup>41</sup> Turner, Victor. "Liminality and the Performative Genres." *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*. Ed. John J. MacAloon. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984. 19-41. 38.

is dressed in Japanese clothes of an expensive cut. She wears black gloves.”<sup>42</sup> While Hikaru and the audience may be unaware that she is a “living phantasm,” it appears that Mishima clearly wishes to designate her supernatural persona immediately upon her arrival. This contention is supported by the fact that, throughout the play’s dialogue, Mrs. Rokujō makes veiled comments that telegraph her non-corporeal qualities, signals that Hikaru overlooks. At one moment, when she takes Hikaru’s hand, he wrenches away from her, noting, “Your hand is like ice,” to which she responds, “That’s not surprising. There’s no blood in it.”<sup>43</sup> Because he lacks the poetic imagination or curiosity of his classical analogue, Hikaru ignores her revelatory statement and demands that she take off her black gloves, which he believes to be the source of her icy touch. Even so, he is astute enough to observe, “It doesn’t feel as if a human being were holding me...” as she clutches his legs in abject submission.<sup>44</sup> Such references often contain direct and indirect allusions to the play’s prototexts, providing a richer intertextual experience for knowing readers and audience members familiar with the *Genji monogatari* and the Muromachi period *Aoi no ue*.

Mrs. Rokujō is not the only *shite* figure in the modern Nō plays to resist a change of appearance indicated within its classical antecedent. In his version of *Dōjōji* (1957), Mishima subverts the spectacular transformation of the young dancer in the original text who mutates into a horrible serpent demon after jumping into a gigantic temple bell.<sup>45</sup> In the modern Nō, the beautiful Kiyoko locks herself inside a massive wardrobe embellished with a carving of a bell in order to mourn the death of her lover. She

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<sup>42</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 152.

<sup>43</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 154.

<sup>44</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Keene, *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*, 237-52.

threatens to disfigure her face with sulfuric acid as a symbol of her grief. However, when she emerges, her face is unchanged, thwarting the expectations of both onstage characters and audience members, who fear the worst when she emits a guttural scream from within the mirrored interior of the wardrobe. She determines that no physical scars could match the emotional ones she bears in her heart and that self-mutilation is excessive.<sup>46</sup>

In Mishima's *Sotoba Komachi*, the aged poetess Ono no Komachi does not become possessed by the spirit of her dead lover, Fukakusa, as in Kan'ami's drama. Instead, she maintains the haggard exterior of a withered bag lady throughout the play, even as she transports herself and a vain young Poet back in time to the Western-styled Rokumeikan in turn-of-the-century Meiji Japan. She curses him to acknowledge her inner beauty by thrusting Captain Fukakusa's possession onto him, which ultimately leads to the young man's death. Much of the drama's ironic impact depends upon the theatrical dissonance between Komachi's repulsive outward appearance and the brilliant illusion of her past glory that dooms the Poet to his fate.

Conversely, in his adaptation of *Yuya*, while no physical transformation takes place in either the classical or modern version of the Nō play, Mishima inserts a subversive moment in which the *shite* does not change her face, but rather completely alters her identity. While the classical *Yuya* departs from Taira lord Munemori to visit her dying mother after he is moved by the elegance of her dancing, Mishima's *shite* remains with the businessman who has enlisted her services as a courtesan after it is revealed that she has deceived him in order to escape into the arms of a lover. *Yuya* disowns her past, her friends, her lover, and her family so that she may continue living a

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<sup>46</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Dōjōji." Trans. Donald Keene. *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories*. NY: New Directions, 1966. 119-38. 136-7.

comfortable lie with Munemori, a shared deception that nihilistically defines the nature of love itself.

The Rokujō Lady makes an ideal *shite* figure because of her innately liminal identity. As a “living ghost,” she inhabits the world of dreams (the metaphysical realm of the Nō) and fluidly navigates the fragile threshold between life and death in order to torture (and kill) her perceived romantic rivals. Yet, however dark and remorseless the intent of the “living ghost,” the corporeal Rokujō is wracked by the guilt of what her passions have done while she sleeps. In this way, the classical Rokujō is a startlingly modern creation, when one considers her in the context of Freudian psychology. Using this interpretive framework, her phantasmal presence becomes a projection of her repressed subconscious desires, her unbridled Id finally given free rein of full expression, unable to be balanced by the conscious mind’s Superego. The emotional attachment that binds her to Prince Genji provides highly dramatic possibilities for Nō dramaturgy because it signals a need for spiritual release in order to attain enlightenment, a central Buddhist-inspired tenet of Nō philosophy.

However, whereas Rokujō’s own suffering ultimately supersedes that of her victim Aoi in the classical *Aoi no ue* and the drama shifts radically to focus upon her salvation, Mishima’s *shite* expresses no regret for her actions and seeks no redemption, instead reveling in her destructive potential. Nancy J. Barnes reflects upon Mishima’s expulsion of the redemptive ethos from his drama,

There is no mountain priest to exorcise the spirit, only a psychiatric nurse to diagnose the illness; and there is no healing for any of the three main characters. They remain helpless victims of their personal fantasies and

supernatural forces.... And so, in the uncharted world of the modern Nō play, no means exists to cure Aoi's illness or save Madame Rokujō.<sup>47</sup>

In the *Genji monogatari*, when Rokujō learns of the possibility that her dream self could be responsible for such violence against another person, she is wracked with shame, so much so that she eventually abandons the court altogether to live a rural life of spiritual contemplation.<sup>48</sup> In the classical *Aoi no ue*, even as she strikes at the *kosode* representing Aoi, she cries out, "Oh, how detestable!/ Even now I cannot refrain from striking her."<sup>49</sup>

Mishima's twentieth-century analogue, however, subverts this sense of dishonor when Mrs. Rokujō, having spirited Hikaru away into a shared lucid memory on board her yacht some years before, nonchalantly warns him of the inevitable actions she has already taken against Aoi:

I was just thinking that, if you fell in love with some woman much younger and prettier than I, and you married her... I don't think I would die.... I wouldn't die, but I think I would certainly kill her. My spirit would leave my body even while I was still alive, and it would go to torture her. My living ghost would afflict her and torment her and torture her, and it would not cease until it killed her. She, poor creature, would die haunted night after night by an evil spirit.<sup>50</sup>

Mishima's obsession with Rokujō's spirit's destructive potential cannot be satisfied by its ultimate subjugation and redemption. Instead, his modern drama extrapolates the Nō's "terrifying quality inherent in beauty" and follows that trajectory to its deadly, (un)natural end.<sup>51</sup>

Once Mrs. Rokujō's spirit arrives in Aoi's hospital room, she sets about her nightly task of tormenting Hikaru's unconscious young wife, despite his protests. Unlike

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<sup>47</sup> Barnes, Nancy J. "Lady Rokujō's Ghost: Spirit Possession, Buddhism, and Healing in Japanese Literature." *Literature and Medicine* 8 (1989): 106-21. 119.

<sup>48</sup> Murasaki, 167.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, 134.

<sup>50</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 167-8.

<sup>51</sup> Mishima, "The Japan Within," 55.

the violent nature of Rokujō's physical attacks on Aoi in the classical Nō, Mishima's *shite* utilizes subtler tactics of a more malevolent nature by invading the younger woman's dreams and planting invisible "flowers of pain" at her pillow that disfigure and strangle her, thus transforming her peaceful sleep into an endless nightmare.<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Rokujō's "living ghost" exists in an ephemeral realm of dreams, the traditional domain of the Nō, and as such, her existence is transitory and liminal, possessing great potential for the transformative aesthetic that drives the classical *shite*. When she peers out into the dark night, her evocative speech to Hikaru is self-reflexive, defining her own sense of freedom from repressed memories, from unrequited love, and from the physical limitations of a flesh and blood reality:

The night is not like the day, it's free. All things, people and inanimate objects alike, sleep. This wall, the chest of drawers, the window panes, the door – all of them are asleep. And while they sleep they're full of cracks and crevices – it's no problem to pass through them. When you pass through a wall not even the wall is aware of it. What do you suppose night is? Night is when all things are in harmony. By day light and shadow war, but with nightfall the night inside the house holds hands with the night outside the house. They are the same thing. The night air is party to the conspiracy. Hate and love, pain and joy: everything and anything join hands in the night air. The murderer in the dark, I am sure, feels affection for the woman he has killed.<sup>53</sup>

On one hand, this passage extols the mysterious, indefinable qualities of the medieval Nō aesthetic of *yūgen* for a modern audience. On the other, it is a warning from the playwright that the ghosts of the subconscious still have the power to glide effortlessly through the cracks in our physical world and haunt our waking reality. Applied to Mishima's political metaphors recurrent throughout the modern Nō, this admonition is a sobering caveat to modern Japanese to maintain a connection with their disappearing

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<sup>52</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 153.

<sup>53</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 155.

cultural past; otherwise, its repression may find a way to manifest itself with nightmarish clarity. In his essay “An Ideology for an Age of Languid Peace,” Mishima’s equates the Western comforts of Japanese post-War security with a dangerous sense of lethargy:

...we do not have an appropriate ideology or philosophy of life that enables us to live with a sense of spiritual satisfaction. People in this country do not know how to live in an age of peace; their lives seem to be floating without direction.... On the surface, our society appears to be calm and unperturbed, but the “impulse of death” is lurking portentously in the hearts of the people and is waiting for a chance to explode.... An ideology that is to provide spiritual satisfaction must contain the kind of dangerous allure for which men are willing to die.<sup>54</sup>

#### The Nurse as a Conflation of *Tsure* and *Kyōgen* Role Types

A symptom of this type of “languid peace” and cultural amnesia may be found personified in the role of the Nurse in *The Lady Aoi*. She is a complicated character to position within the correlative role structure of the classical *Nō*, because Mishima conflates her role to include modern renderings of two separate role types, one of which does not exist in the classical prototext. On one hand, she is a surrogate for the original play’s *tsure*, the *miko* Teruhi, who can only summon Rokujō’s spirit but is powerless to restrain it, and therefore must request assistance from the Holy Man of Yokawa. On the other, she performs the expositional function of the classical *kyōgen* actor when she provides the freshly-arrived Hikaru with a great deal of background information about Aoi’s illness and heralds the impending arrival of Aoi’s eerie nightly visitor. While the *waki-tsure* role of the Imperial Retainer in *Aoi no ue* provides minimal exposition at the beginning of the play, the classical text does not include a formal, extended *ai-kyōgen* interlude, and its designated *kyōgen* role is merely a messenger who summons and

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<sup>54</sup> Mishima Yukio. “An Ideology for an Age of Languid Peace.” *Japan Interpreter* 7.1 (1971): 79-80.



announces the Holy Man of Yokawa. Donald Keene situates the *kyōgen* as a “man of the place” whose familiarity with the setting allows him to speak clearly (without the heightened *utai* chanting style or densely poetic language employed by the other roles in Nō) to the *waki*, and therefore to the audience, of the mysterious presence of the *shite*.<sup>55</sup>

As such, the Nurse can be seen as not only a representative of the antiseptic psychiatric hospital to which Aoi has been admitted, but in some sense as a human extension of its esoteric practices, and as an active participant in them. And whereas the *kyōgen* in the classical Nō provides a sense of clarity to the drama’s plot and heightened performance style, Mishima’s Nurse speaks in confusing psychobabble and Freudian medical jargon. When she describes the unusual medical approach employed by the hospital staff, which focuses on identifying and treating the patients’ “sex complexes,” she admits that “Things are arranged so we can always satisfy our demands. The director of the hospital and the young doctors are very competent in this respect. Whenever necessary they administer the medicine as prescribed, the medicine known as sex. We never have any trouble with one another.”<sup>56</sup> When one considers the helplessly comatose state in which Aoi finds herself, the application of such sexual treatment by her doctors quickly becomes an abhorrent possibility, tantamount to rape and necrophilia. What’s even more distressing is that, upon hearing of the “treatment,” Hikaru responds not with horror or objection, but rather with titillated curiosity, “You don’t say?”<sup>57</sup> In the scientific world of the hospital, sex is stripped of any association with love, and reduced to a mere “chemical change.”<sup>58</sup> Further, despite the violence of Aoi’s nightmares, later discovered

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<sup>55</sup> Keene, Donald. *Nō: The Classical Theatre of Japan*. Rev. ed. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1973. 21.

<sup>56</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 149.

<sup>57</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 149.

<sup>58</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 152.

to be manipulated by Mrs. Rokujō's spirit, the Nurse offhandedly remarks that, "In this hospital we accept no responsibility for the dreams of our patients."<sup>59</sup> Thus, Mishima's *mise-en-scène* is not only the direct antithesis of the archetypal Nō dreamscape but also a locale that offers no chance of cure for Aoi's true affliction. While the classical work features a Holy Man who acts as Aoi's intercessor to banish the malevolent spirit of Rokujō, Mishima's Aoi is doomed to suffer as much through the lack of care from an inattentive husband and negligent medical staff as she is at the hands of Rokujō's nightmare intrusions.

In this way, the exorcism in the classical play has been replaced by psychoanalysis and sexual therapy, both of which seem incapable of improving Aoi's condition. Indeed, at the end of the play, Aoi dies and Hikaru (as *waki*) has become, in a manner of speaking, possessed by the demon his classical antecedent exorcises successfully. In "Party of One. Japan: The Cherished Myths," an essay he composed in 1961 for travelogue *Holiday*, Mishima sneers openly at the efficacy of psychiatry as a proxy for spiritual healing:

I saw how a young man whose marriage had been unsuccessful and who had attempted suicide became a cheerful human being again after several months of studying to be a priest amid the austere routine of temple life. I realized then that this was the way nervous breakdowns had been treated in the past and that it was also a valid substitute for the psychoanalysis of today.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, he places much of the direct blame for Japan's psychological inheritance of what John Nathan refers to as "cultural ambivalence," on the West's influence: "We have

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<sup>59</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 148.

<sup>60</sup> Mishima Yukio. "Party of One. Japan: The Cherished Myths." Trans. Donald Keene. *Holiday* 30 (1961): 9-13. 13.

learned mental disease and shame from the West.”<sup>61</sup> Janine Beichman’s analysis of the relationship between *shite* and *waki* suggests that they share a similar bond as that of Freudian psychoanalyst and patient, in that “an orthodox analyst...deliberately suppresses his or her own personality as if to become a mirror in which patients can see their own psyches clearly and work out conflicts in a non-judgmental, neutral atmosphere.”<sup>62</sup> The ramifications of Beichman’s assertion as it relates to *The Lady Aoi* are startling, because they further indict Hikaru for abandoning the traditional *waki* role as healer, not only of Aoi but of Rokujō as well. Therefore, the transfer from religious ritual to medical care, and more specifically to modern treatment by psychoanalysis provides Mishima an opportunity to critique the dangers inherent in the Westernization of twentieth-century Japan. Not even the sterile halls of the most technologically progressive hospital can guard successfully against incursions by the ghosts of the past. There is something altogether unwholesome about Mishima’s hospital and its exploitative, fetishistic medical practices, so much so that it certainly inspires its own sense of the uncanny, which perhaps is the very quality that summons Mrs. Rokujō’s spirit.

The setting of the hospital also plays a role in the revised transformative aesthetic of Mishima’s modern Nō drama. In the performance of the original Nō text, the *shite* changes masks to indicate a shift that reveals her true malevolent power. No such physical shift occurs in Mrs. Rokujō in the twentieth-century play, but she does transform the physical world around her in an attempt to trap Hikaru in the past. She literally summons a shared memory of an afternoon at the beginning of her romantic relationship with Hikaru to appear onstage in the form of an ethereal yacht. The stage directions

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<sup>61</sup> McInerney, Jay. “Through Western Eyes.” *PEN America* 2.3 (2002): 167-70. 170.

<sup>62</sup> Beichman, 256.

indicate: “Weird music. From the right a large sailboat glides onstage. It moves forward with the deliberation of a swan, and halts between them and the bed, where it stands like a screen shielding the bed.”<sup>63</sup> Mishima’s inclusion of the yacht scene provides a glimpse into his adaptive tactics as well, which allow him to allude to multiple Nō texts simultaneously. This strategy is familiar to Nō scholars, as the classical texts contain multiple layers allusions that expand and contract the drama’s poetic meaning. While the references to the Kamo Festival “battle,” which link Rokujō’s earthly attachment to the memory of her unfortunate altercation with Aoi’s carriage, are fairly subtle within the text of the classical *Aoi no ue*, this incident literally takes center stage in Zeami’s Nō play, *Nonomiya*. In the latter drama, Rokujō re-enacts the “battle” as she contemplates the attachment to Genji’s affections and to bitterness toward Aoi that prevents her from attaining enlightenment.

Rather than embodying the memory herself and reliving it through an act of supernatural manifestation that occurs for the observation of the *waki*, as portrayed in *Nonomiya*, Mishima’s Mrs. Rokujō forces Hikaru to experience the memory as well. By forcing him to relive this episode, Mrs. Rokujō hopes to coerce him to recognize his abandoned passion for her. But, in an allusion to the classical text, Aoi’s shadow appears projected on the sails and she cries out in pain for help from her husband, ultimately shattering the illusion and thrusting Hikaru back into the cold reality of the hospital room. Much as Aoi’s carriage overtakes the Rokujō Lady’s in *Nonomiya* and the *Genji monogatari*, Mishima’s Aoi wins the battle for Hikaru’s attentions during this lucid memory sequence. Ultimately, however, Hikaru does abandon Aoi, which leads to her death. A fascinating aspect of this final, fatal rejection is that Hikaru does not forsake his

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<sup>63</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 161.

wife for the living Mrs. Rokujō, but instead follows the supernatural manifestation of her anger and revenge, perhaps in an act of self-annihilation (a trope not unfamiliar in Mishima's *oeuvre*). In other words, he chooses a memory of a woman, a phantom of an ideal, as opposed to the physical reality of either Aoi or Mrs. Rokujō's corporeal self.

#### Instances of *Tsukizerifu* in *The Lady Aoi*

In addition to basic (though not strict, by any means) adherence to codified character types and certain major structural patterns of the traditional Nō form, occasionally Mishima makes surprising use of literary devices and conventions related to the performative aspect of the Nō's song and dance composition. For example, *The Lady Aoi* contains two distinct examples of the *tsukizerifu*, or "arrival speech," a classical Nō convention that traditionally follows the *michiyuki*, or "traveling song." The *michiyuki* is usually sung by the *waki* in the opening section of the Nō, often to indicate the great distance that a traveling Buddhist priest has traversed to reach the setting of the drama. However, upon arriving at the location, the *waki* often comments with astonishment that this great distance has been traversed in less time than expected. For example, in Zeami's *Atsumori*, after the monk Renshō (formerly the Minamoto warrior Kumagai) describes his long journey to the location where he defeated the Taira warrior of the title, he professes: "Having come so swiftly, I have reached Ichi-no-tani in the provinces of Tsu. Ah, the past returns to mind as though it were before me now."<sup>64</sup> In this classical example of a *tsukizerifu*, the swiftness of the journey triggers a powerful evocation of memory associated with his destination.

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<sup>64</sup> Tyler, 39.

Such severe compression of time and space in classical Nō adds to its dreamlike qualities of text and performance, and Donald Keene remarks that any number of Western playwrights through the ages, bound to the Aristotelian unities, might have envied the conventions of the Nō that permit forward progression of action by the “disregard of ordinary concepts of time and space.”<sup>65</sup> In Mishima’s adaptation of *Aoi no ue*, Hikaru arrives at his wife’s bedside and proclaims to the Nurse “I was on a business trip when I got word she was sick. They said it was nothing serious....But it was a very important business trip. I managed this morning to get through my work and I rushed back as fast as I could.”<sup>66</sup> In this instance, Mishima thwarts the traditional intent of the *tsukizerifu* in order to provide evidence that Hikaru is hardly the romantic ideal that his eleventh-century analogue and namesake, Prince Genji, inspires. Hikaru’s words belie his actions; he “rushe[s] back as fast as [he] could,” but only after he has completed “very important business.” In fact, this language is mirrored when Mrs. Rokujō’s “living ghost” appears and stands over Aoi’s bed: “At any rate, I have business, important business, that must be disposed of. That’s why I have been running about this way – don’t think it hasn’t been a nuisance – in the middle of the night.”<sup>67</sup> By comparison, therefore, one may regard Mrs. Rokujō, in her dark desires to destroy Aoi, as the more faithful, attentive companion. As a Westernized Japanese capitalist, Hikaru’s true priorities are apparent in this example, and not only does this comment upon the lack of true compassion he feels for his wife, but it also exposes his complicity in, and ultimate responsibility for, her death at the end of the play.

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<sup>65</sup> Keene, Donald. *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*. NY: Columbia UP, 1970. 8-10.

<sup>66</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 147.

<sup>67</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 154.

The second example of this standard Nō convention's use in Mishima's modern version of *The Lady Aoi* occurs when the Nurse peers out the window and sees Mrs.

Rokujō's ghostly car approaching the hospital:

Oh, she's come. She's come! In that car she rides in, a big silvery car. It will race here as if it's on wings, and pull up smartly in front of the hospital. Look! ... It's going over the viaduct now. It always comes from that direction. There – you see – it's taking the long way round.... Oh, it's here already, in front of the hospital, before it seems possible.<sup>68</sup>

In this instance, Mishima does not subvert the *tsukizerifu*, but rather fully utilizes the device's ability to accentuate the uncanny nature of Mrs. Rokujō's arrival. Her "big silvery car" resonates to the knowing reader as an allusion to the Rokujō Lady's Kamo Festival carriage, but the Nurse's exclamation that it travels "as if it's on wings" lends a supernatural nuance to its journey. The ironic juxtaposition of the fact that it takes "the long way round" and then in the next breath is "here already... before it seems possible" shows that the paranormal manifestation of Mrs. Rokujō is not bound by the physical limitations of the natural world. As such, these indicators should warn Hikaru of the imminent supernatural incursion he is to witness, but he remains oblivious to their significance and their impact on his (and Aoi's) ultimate fate.

### Political Metaphors Within Mishima's Modern Nō

In his modern Nō plays, Mishima provides a metaphorical lens through which we can view what the author sarcastically derides as the "coca-colonization" of Japanese culture by the West.<sup>69</sup> This phrase strangely echoes Honda's unquenchable obsession with the carbonated beverage on the road of his final journey to an isolated Buddhist

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<sup>68</sup> Mishima, *Five Modern Nō Plays*, 152.

<sup>69</sup> Mishima Yukio. Introduction. Trans. Geoffrey Bownas. *New Writing in Japan*. Eds. Geoffrey Bownas and Yukio Mishima. NY: Penguin, 1972. 15-25. 16.

monastery in *The Decay of the Angel*, a commercial symbol of increasing Western industrialization intruding upon his spiritual odyssey to discover the secrets of Kiyooki's reincarnation as he nears his own demise.<sup>70</sup> He imbues these nine dramas with potent political symbolism that warns of the dangers of postwar Japan's assimilation by the West. Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, in her discussion of Mishima's *shite* figure in the modern adaptation of *Dōjōji*, alleges that the young dancer is an anthropomorphic representation of Japan: "She remains herself despite betrayal by the once-adored West and by postwar Japanese revisionists who maintain that traditional samurai values and national identity are deformed. The ideal of Japan – the beloved mother and idealized woman – is intact."<sup>71</sup> Throughout the *kindai* Nō, the *shite* characters, whether supernatural or not, more often than not represent aspects of a modern Japan on the brink of cultural amnesia. In some instances, such as in *Yoroboshi* and *Genji kuyō*, the damage done to the Japanese soul appears to be irreversible (a tangible fear of Mishima's, recorded by Donald Keene in his essay "Mishima and the Modern Scene"), but in others, such as *The Lady Aoi* and *Sotoba Komachi*, the heart of the nation still possesses the terrifyingly destructive ability to assert itself.<sup>72</sup>

In *The Lady Aoi*, the political metaphor is relatively clear. Hikaru, the Japanese businessman has secured a beautiful young trophy wife, Aoi, in an attempt to advance in an increasingly urbanized and commercialized society. Yet, she is both a product and representation of the Westernized modern world. Aoi is also somehow damaged by

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<sup>70</sup> Mishima Yukio. *The Decay of the Angel*. Trans. Edward Seidensticker. NY: Knopf, 1974. 220-23.

<sup>71</sup> Sorgenfrei, Carol Fisher. "Poison Women and National Identity in Postwar Japanese Performance Or 'Oedipus Schmoedipus – What's It Matter, So Long As He Loves His Mother?'" Jortner, McDonald, and Wetmore, 65-75. 72-3.

<sup>72</sup> Keene, Donald. "Mishima and the Modern Scene." *Times Literary Supplement* 20 Aug 1971: 989-91. 990.



sexual neuroses and must receive healing not from the prayers of Shinto or Buddhist priests and shamans, but from a Freudian-based psychosexual therapy exaggerated to the N<sup>th</sup> degree. The experienced older lover Mrs. Rokujō represents the elegant appeal of the traditions of pre-war Japan, but this memory from the past threatens to destroy the modern illusion of life he has created for himself. He reaches a crisis point where he must choose, and even though the past is destructive and cruel, its power ultimately eclipses that of the weak Aoi. And yet, it must be stated, that Hikaru does not leave with the actual Mrs. Rokujō, but rather a virtual dream version of her. Thus, in order to move successfully into the future, Hikaru is free to embrace the damaged Aoi but must not do so at the expense of forgetting the intimacy of his past relationship with Mrs. Rokujō. The modern inhabitants of the world of the play attempt, in vain, to shut out the ghostly superstitions of the past, but still find themselves the victims of deadly visitations and possession.

Similarly, in Mishima's *Sotoba Komachi*, a coarse young Poet confronts the haggard Komachi in a city park and ridicules the proposition that she was once famed for her beauty and her poetic prowess. The Buddhist *stupa* of the title has been replaced by a series of benches populated with necking couples, and the Poet (as *waki*) finds inspiration in their sexual exhibitionism, rather than in meditation on the sutras. Komachi, in an act of supernatural transgression, drags the Poet back in time and confronts him with the glorious beauty of her former grandeur, transforming the park denizens into graceful waltzing couples at the Rokumeikan in the process. Unable to reconcile the past and the present, the Poet dies. Like Hikaru, the Poet represents the potential of modern Japan, a Westernized dilettante who openly rejects the values of the past and cannot recognize the

beauty that existed before the war. Komachi's paranormal revelation enlightens the Poet to the value of the traditions of the past, but the cognitive dissonance it inspires destroys him. Ironically, Komachi's association with the Rokumeikan, itself designed as a venue to entertain Western dignitaries during the Meiji Period, complicates her metaphorical surrogacy as a representation of the idealized Japanese past in Mishima's play. She is a paradox, simultaneously epitomizing the elegance and grace of lost time as well as the outrageous decadence of Japan's immersive fascination with Western culture in the late nineteenth century.

In both *The Lady Aoi* and *Sotoba Komachi*, faulty (or unwilling) memory stands as the primary obstacle for inhabitants of twentieth-century Japan to recognize the enduring qualities of a traditional national identity. In the modern adaptation of *Yuya*, however, Mishima's subversive ending restores the primary characters' respect for Japan's classical beauty, but only when they agree to actively deceive themselves and engage in a mutual lie. While the political implications of this resolution pessimistically achieve Mishima's goals, there is an additional noteworthy political symbol that Mishima inserts at the beginning of the play that informs the overall interpretation of its sociohistorical message. As in the classical antecedent, Munemori stubbornly insists that Yuya come with him to view the cherry blossoms in the park, and he will not be moved by her tear-stained supplication to let her visit her dying mother instead. Mishima's Munemori eventually unmasks Yuya's true, deceptive intentions to run away with a lover, but he also reveals his own true motivations for insisting that she view the cherry blossoms with him immediately in the play's opening monologue. He states, "I'll tell you once again: this will be our last chance to see such a magnificent display of cherry-

blossoms. This year I'm going to cut down half those trees because I have to expand the zoo and rebuild the aquarium. We no longer live in an age when customers can be lured to my park by cherry trees alone."<sup>73</sup> Munemori's identity as a Westernized capitalist subverts what was originally, in the classical text, a deep aesthetic awareness. Further, so cavalierly destroying such a powerful symbol intrinsically associated with Japanese identity as the cherry tree in the midst of cherry-blossom viewing season can be read as equivalent to stripping the painted *matsu* from the back wall of a Nō stage. With this transmotivational alteration in Munemori's character, Mishima indicts modern Japan for its willing zeal to choke off the links to its vital core values of spirituality and aestheticism, in the name of financial and social advancement.

Of all of Mishima's modern Nō plays, *Yoroboshi* is his most interpolative adaptation of a pre-existing text. Hardly recognizable as a modern version of its classical antecedent in terms of plot or character, Mishima's drama retains only the slightest basic element of the core narrative, that of a father being miraculously reunited with his blind son, and builds from it a damning critique of Japan's postwar malaise and indolence. Two sets of parents compete for custody of Toshinori, the blind young man of the title, who represents the damaged soul of Japan. Unlike Shuntoku-maru, the *shite* of the classical drama, whose grief-induced blindness was caused by the false accusations of his father, Toshinori's blindness is the direct result of a bombing attack during the war. He is plagued by dark apocalyptic visions that have driven him into a nihilistic depression, which causes him to lash out at all of those around him. In the end, neither set of parents can claim him, despite their repeated attempts to mollify his eccentric personality.

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<sup>73</sup> Mishima Yukio. *Mishima on Stage: The Black Lizard & Other Plays*. Ed. Laurence Kominz. Ann Arbor: U of MI Press, 2007. 227.

On one hand, Toshinori's birth parents, the Takayasus, who have only recently learned that their son was still alive, cling naïvely to a romantic view of who their son *should* be. They are shocked to discover the twisted nature of his soul, and blame the Kawashimas, his adoptive parents, for destroying their child, oblivious to the damage they themselves have caused him by abandoning him during the bombing fifteen years prior. The Kawashimas possess a far more cynical, yet ultimately realistic, view of the young man's persona and regard him with a cold detachment that horrifies the Takayasus as cruel and potentially abusive. Yet, ironically, despite their antithetical perspectives, each set of parents is blind to their son's needs or true identity. With this, Mishima seems to imply that there is a volatility in the post-war soul that cannot exist completely in the idealized past (represented by the Takayasus) or in the pragmatic present (represented by the Kawashimas).

*Yoroboshi* provides rich material for analysis, on both a literary and political level. One may examine Toshinori's dark prophetic jeremiads as representative of paranormal second sight induced through the nuclear uncanny, that branch of fantastic literature and popular cultural which includes the Toho series of monster movies featuring such radioactive *daikaiju* as *Gojira (Godzilla)* and *Gamera*. Additionally, Mishima's awareness of the classical context of the original Nō drama injects a twentieth-century analogue for the concept of *mappō*, the final degenerate age of Buddhism, in which mankind has become so corrupt that it will no longer seek enlightenment.<sup>74</sup> Viewed through this latter interpretive lens, one may easily regard Toshinori as a surrogate for Mishima himself, railing against the dialectic cultural oppositions that have divided the Japanese soul in its desire to maintain a connection with

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<sup>74</sup> Varley, H. Paul. *Japanese Culture*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Honolulu: U of HI P, 1984. 65-66.

its past and yet move forward into the increasingly Western landscape of the late twentieth century. In a rare filmed interview conducted with Mishima in English, contained within the 1985 BBC documentary *The Strange Case of Yukio Mishima*, the author states:

You can easily find two contradictions of characteristics of Japanese culture or Japanese characters. One is elegance, one is brutality. The two characteristics are very tightly combined sometimes. Our brutality comes from our emotions. It is never mechanized or institutionalized, like Nazi brutality. And I think the brutality may come from our feminine aspects. And elegance comes from our nervous side. Sometimes we are too sensitive of our refinement or elegance or sense of beauty or suggestive side. And sometimes we are tired of it. And we need sometimes a sudden explosion to make us free from it.<sup>75</sup>

If we read *Yoroboshi* within the context of these statements, Toshinori very well may represent the inescapable explosion that destroys the cultural status quo in Mishima's Japan, eradicating the memory of the past and the present, yet permitting the creation of a new identity for the future.

### Nightmare Sensuality: Mishima's Influence on the Development of Contemporary Nō

While Mishima's modern Nō plays may serve as models of innovation for twentieth-century adaptations of classical dramatic forms, they do not exist as fixed texts, outside of time. As George Mitrevski suggests, eventually a metatext may assume the function of a prototext and inspire its own adaptations.<sup>76</sup> Thus, it is inevitable that Mishima's *kindai* Nō would compel later playwrights to explore the Nō aesthetic within the context of their own progressive artistic and political agendas. When examining late twentieth and early twenty-first-century theatrical adaptations of *Aoi no ue*, one readily

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<sup>75</sup> *The Strange Case of Yukio Mishima*. Dir. Michael McIntyre. BBC, 1985.

<sup>76</sup> Mitrevski, George. "Semiotic Analysis of Adaptations in the Theatre." *Approches de l'opéra/Approches of the Opera*. Ed. André Helbo. Paris: Didier, 1986. 233-39. 234.

notes traces of Mishima's tactics that have been passed down to a new generation of writers. Contemporary works such as *Two Women* (*Futari no onna*, 1979) by Kara Jūrō (b. 1940), *The Diver* (2002) by Hideki Noda (b. 1955) and Colin Teevan (b. 1968), and *AOI* (2007) by Takeshi Kawamura (b. 1959) take great liberties with their classical subject matter, yet retain core elements of Mishima's dramaturgy, as developed in his modern version of *The Lady Aoi*. In each of these plays, the playwrights invert the traditional Nō convention in which the identity of the Rokujō Lady's living phantom must be ascertained during the exorcism of the ailing Aoi. Instead, as in Mishima's permutation of *Aoi no ue*, there is no question as to her identity as she openly tortures Aoi; it is the fact that she is a supernatural extension of the corporeal Rokujō's jealousy and sexual desire for Genji that surprises the characters in the drama, and the audience as well. Too, these authors include key elements of psychiatric therapy in their uncovering of the true identity of the Rokujō Lady, whether she is patient or not, they constitute contemporary analogues for the classical practice of spiritual possession. Despite the fact that each of these dramas yield significant comparative perspectives, I will focus on Kawamura's *AOI* as the most startlingly evocative example not only of Mishima's influence on contemporary adaptations of Nō, but also on the continuing development of a vital Nō aesthetic for the contemporary stage and beyond.

Avant-garde director and playwright Takeshi Kawamura's *AOI* is one of two paired contemporary Nō plays intended to be performed as a single evening – the other is an adaptation of *Sotoba Komachi* called *KOMACHI* (2007). Both were commissioned by Tokyo's Setagaya Public Theatre under the auspices of the company's Contemporary Noh Series instituted by artistic director Nomura Mansai, when he assumed leadership of

the company in 2002. This series is, as he states, part of his mission to explore stylistic fusion that allows “contemporary artists [to] make use of the traditional ideas in ways that we learn from one another and discover new possibilities that will lead to the creation of new Japanese performing arts.”<sup>77</sup> The vision Kawamura evokes in *AOI* and *KOMACHI* is less a world of dreams as it is a “J-horror” inspired nightmare of violent sensuality.<sup>78</sup>

Hikaru, the Genji character in *AOI*, is a famous hairdresser who owes his career to the mentorship of Rokujō’s husband. Aoi, as in Mishima’s play, is suffering from a nervous condition and has been admitted to a hospital for treatment. Hikaru is obsessively protective of Aoi’s hair and demands that he be the only one permitted to cut it, because it is, in a word, “perfect.”<sup>79</sup> Aoi leaves the hospital and ventures into the abandoned hair salon and is captured in a bizarre mirror world of rarified emotion occupied by the phantom version of Rokujō. As the phantom Rokujō emerges from this mirror reality, she taunts Hikaru with memories of their past love, summoning a gory series of events in which she recounts his complicity with the murder, evisceration, and subsequent burial of her husband, ending in her disappearance into a whirlwind of hair that evokes the ghostly, pale *onryo* figures at the center of such contemporary Japanese horror films as *The Ring* (*Ringu*, 1998), *The Grudge* (*Ju-on*, 2003), and *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, 2002), each of which deal with Nō-like fables of revenge and redemption. Yet, when the corporeal Rokujō appears near the end of the play, an “elegant, refined woman” who appears to harbor no ill will toward Aoi or Genji, we discover that this mirror reality

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<sup>77</sup> Mansai Nomura. “On the occasion of my appointment as artistic director.” Interview. *Performing Arts Japan*, 31 July 2002. Web. 1 February 2011. < [http://www.performingarts.jp/E/art\\_interview/0707/4.html](http://www.performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/0707/4.html)>.

<sup>78</sup> This discussion of Kawamura’s *AOI* is drawn largely from a conference paper that I delivered on his contemporary Nō experiments at the 2010 Comparative Drama Conference in Los Angeles, CA, entitled “Nō Pain, Nō Gain: Nightmare Sensuality in Takeshi Kawamura’s Contemporary Nō Plays.”

<sup>79</sup> Kawamura Takeshi. *AOI*. Trans Aya Ogawa. Unpublished manuscript. 2.

is a distorted truth that challenges our own perceptions of what we have just witnessed. Rokujō's husband was never murdered, Aoi was safely escorted back to the hospital by Hikaru's assistant, and we are left to wonder whose nightmare we have just witnessed – that of the mentally unstable Aoi, that of the emotionally stunted Hikaru, or if it is somehow a terrifying sense of unbridled sexuality and grisly wish fulfillment projected by the jetlagged mind of the sophisticated fashionista who once occupied the salon chair now reserved only for Aoi.

Kawamura's representative dramatic texts often appropriate and assimilate pre-existing canonical works such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957), and Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine* (*Die Hamletmaschine*, 1977), at first fracturing them and then binding them with framing devices ripped from the current headlines in the reassembly process. For example, both *Tokyo Trauma* (1995) and *Hamletclone* (2000) depict the effects of the horrific sarin gas subway attacks committed by the Aum Shinrikyo (Aleph) cult in 1995. This distinctive propensity for fusing disparate sources into a single, albeit often paradoxical, new work lays the logical foundation for the adaptive process Kawamura employs in the creation of his *gendai Nō*, or contemporary *Nō*. In his Director's Note for *AOI/KOMACHI*, he describes the impulse that guided his transformation of these fifteenth-century works: "There is a sense of strangeness and wonder in many of the *noh* plays, even for Japanese people. I deliberated over how I could retain that alluring sense of strangeness while recontextualizing the plays to a modern setting and make them interesting to today's audience."<sup>80</sup> This desire echoes Freud's theories of the uncanny and how paranormal

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<sup>80</sup> Kawamura Takeshi. "Director's Note." *Haunting Acts: An Evening of Contemporary Japanese Theater*. Theatrical program. Hanover, NH: Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College. 30 March – 31 March 2007.



literature inspires a sense of fear that uncovers hidden layers of the repressed subconscious by transforming that which is familiar into the unfamiliar.<sup>81</sup> Kawamura's twenty-first-century sensibilities amplify this darkness, metastasizing it as a cancer and letting it infect all of the elements of his *gendai* Nō, altering aspects of character, setting, plot, and tone to reveal a decaying phantom zone that takes its cue from Mishima and renders beauty as a devastating, uninhibited force of sado-masochistic lust and grisly torture.

Both of Kawamura's contemporary Nō plays concern themselves with the portrayal of a twenty-first-century surrogate for two famous Heian-era beauties, both of whom are as known for their destructive power over men as for their poetic grace. The role of beauty, and of its illusory nature, plays a central role in Kawamura's *AOI*, as the action of the classical play is transposed to an ultra-chic hair salon owned by Hikaru, the contemporary surrogate for Prince Genji. Hikaru's current romantic obsession is the mentally unstable Aoi, whose perfect hair overshadows any personality flaws she may possess in his mind. Aoi suffers from vividly dark hallucinations in which she sees reflected the monstrous *Doppelgänger* of Mrs. Rokujō, the wife of his professional mentor and also his former lover, who eventually traps her in a mirror world "where all of your hidden emotions appear as flames or water."<sup>82</sup> Thus, the salon mirrors serve not only as a symbol of the play's obsession with physical beauty and vanity, but also as a supernatural conduit to an alternate reality that threatens to destroy Aoi. Again, these images recall Freud's theories of the uncanny: "...a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his

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<sup>81</sup> Freud, 124.

<sup>82</sup> Kawamura, *AOI*, 17.

own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided, and interchanged.... the double [is linked] with mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirit, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death.”<sup>83</sup> Additionally, by his own admission Hikaru lives in a world of lies, as a tactic to seek release from the real world’s tedium. In this sense, Rokujō’s world of mirrors forces him to look deep into his soul and see a heart that still feels pain, and fear, and love. And, as Bargaen asserts in her analysis of both the medieval *Aoi no ue* and Mishima’s modern version, Hikaru must recognize himself as the true source of Aoi’s pain, rather than Rokujō’s wild spirit.

As the play’s most potent recurring motif, hair takes on a significance as a living thing and an object of sexual fetishization – Hikaru warns his assistant Toru, “Every strand of hair cut from a woman is still alive, immersed in their memories and lives. That’s why when we sweep up the ends from the floor we have to pay extremely close attention so as to not miss a single hair. Because if the hair were to begin warring with each other, it would be out of our hands.”<sup>84</sup> It is exactly this type of war of wills that comprises the central conflict of the drama, in which Hikaru must confront a warped version of his past with Rokujō in order to be reunited with Aoi. When Toru attempts to cut Aoi’s hair at the beginning of the play, he cannot bring himself to do it, equating the act with sexual infidelity, a suspicion that is reinforced by Hikaru’s seething rage when he suspects Toru has “defiled” Aoi. Only when Toru shaves Aoi’s head at the end of the play does she feel free from the evil influence of Rokujō’s spirit.<sup>85</sup>

The shocking image of Aoi’s shaven head recalls another intertextual referent – Toru’s modeling dummy, a bald mannequin upon which he practices his styling

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<sup>83</sup> Freud, 142.

<sup>84</sup> Kawamura, *AOI*, 8

<sup>85</sup> Kawamura, *AOI*, 36.

techniques. As the opening image of the play, Toru is seen carefully cutting the hair of a nondescript woman, he turns her to face the audience and we realize that she is a human-sized doll, “devoid of any features.”<sup>86</sup> Aoi suddenly appears, strangely mirroring the appearance of the doll, and is terrified when Toru casually rips the wig from the dummy’s head. Aoi equates herself with the doll and subsequently becomes a double of the doll, which in and of itself strangely echoes the classical text of *Aoi no ue*, in which her character is represented not by an actor, but by a folded *kosode*, or short-sleeved “under-kimono,” laid at the edge of the stage. She is a cipher, a blank canvas upon which men may project their sexual desires.

As an additional indication of the deviant sexuality represented by this motif, Hikaru keeps a collection of hair hidden in a secret room, hair cut from each of his past lovers, hair that contains their vital life essence, and which he confesses to using as a bizarre masturbatory aid.<sup>87</sup> The living nature of the hair in Kawamura’s play also evokes the classic image of the *onryō*, a spirit of revenge whose familiarity has been passed down through *kaidan* plays of the Kabuki canon to the present-day cinema trend of J-horror and anime, in which films such as *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and *Dark Water* feature modern versions of this pale faced, white shrouded, young woman with limp dark hair who appears out of the shadows, inhabits the nightmares of her victims, and sometimes even manifests as a being with Medusa-like writhing tendrils of living hair. Interestingly, both Aoi and Rokujō could be mistaken for *onryō* figures in Kawamura’s play. To this end, the uncanny mirror scene, which forms the heart of the play, ends with the eerie image of a swirling mass of living hair which engulfs Hikaru and Rokujō as he finally

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<sup>86</sup> Kawamura, *AOI*, 1.

<sup>87</sup> Kawamura, *AOI*, 13-14

agrees to cut her hair one final time. When the hair creature disappears, Rokujō is gone and Hikaru is once again in the real world of his own emotional self-deception.

Sexuality and violence collide most distinctly in *AOI* when Hikaru is forced to relive a suppressed memory of the murder of his mentor, Rokujō's husband. Rokujō and Hikaru choke the man, represented onstage only by yet another mannequin (this time only the lower half is visible, but it features grotesquely realistic male genitals), then dissolve his body in a bath filled with sulfuric acid. As the body disintegrates, the duo makes love by the banks of a lake, surrounded by a creepy glow in the sky that evokes distant bombing, yet another fusion of beauty with the power of destruction, which also resonates heavily with the Japanese post-war paranoia associated with the nuclear uncanny. After the body has liquefied, their attempts to transport the remains to a shallow grave are thwarted when the bucket carrying them spills, causing Rokujō to slip and fall repeatedly, covered in the putrid soup that was once her husband. The revulsion inspired by this image awakens Hikaru from this depraved fantasy and he begins seeking Aoi once more.

In the same way that the image of Toru's practice dummy deceives the senses of the audience at the beginning of the play, Kawamura subverts the Nō-associated Buddhist doctrine that "life is illusion" at its conclusion when the corporeal Rokujō appears near the end of the play, an "elegant, refined woman" who appears to harbor no ill will toward Aoi or Genji, we discover that this mirror reality is a distorted truth that challenges our own perceptions of what we have just witnessed.<sup>88</sup> Rokujō's husband was never murdered, Aoi was safely escorted back to the hospital by Hikaru's assistant, and we are left to wonder whose nightmare we have just witnessed – that of the mentally unstable

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<sup>88</sup> Kawamura, *AOI*, 33.

Aoi, that of the emotionally-stunted Hikaru, or if it is somehow a terrifying sense of unbridled sexuality and grisly wish fulfillment projected by the jetlagged mind of the sophisticated *fashionista* who once occupied the salon chair now reserved only for Aoi.

### Nihilistic Nō

In conclusion, Yukio Mishima's modern Nō plays apply both extrapolative and interpolative dramaturgical strategies as they adapt classical texts into a twentieth-century context that adheres strongly to the author's nihilistic aesthetic and political agendas. While they maintain a self-professed rejection of traditional Nō style in deference to a Westernized *shingeki* composition and performance technique, they also contain a subtle awareness of standard Nō conventions. Mishima explicitly subverts these conventions, as well as concepts of character, plot, and theme, but seeks to retain the core essence of what defines the Nō – its “philosophy.” He willingly suspends his disbelief in the supernatural factors of the Nō, opting instead for their symbolic significance and visceral impact. Thus, he populates the modern urbanized world with ancient ghosts and demons, thereby crafting cautionary tales that warn of the impending death of the postwar Japanese soul.

The current study, while its critical analysis of Mishima's modern version of *The Lady Aoi* may be somewhat extensive, only scratches the surface of the rich intertextual relationships that exist between the *kindai* Nō and their classical antecedents, as well as their relationships to each other, Mishima's other literary works, and the numerous contemporary dramas they have inspired since they were composed in the 1950s and 1960s.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**YANKEE BODHISATTVAS: POP CULTURE ICONOGRAPHY IN**  
**CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NŌ**

Introduction: Nō in the Twentieth Century

In the half-century that has transpired since Yukio Mishima composed his *kindai* Nō based upon classical texts, many dramatists, both Asian and Western, have experimented with the Nō form and its aesthetic, with varying results. While Japanese playwrights such as Takeshi Kawamura and Hideki Noda tend to retain a connection with the plots, characters, and themes of the Nō's classical antecedents while focusing their creative energies on altering the genre's recognizable structure, Western theatrical writers generally choose to utilize the Nō's strict structural framework and poetic lyricism to explore original subject matter. Borrowing from the traditions begun a century before when poets Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats appropriated the Nō for their own artistic and political agendas, contemporary Western dramatists tend to find in Nō a respite from Ibsenesque or Chekhovian concepts of realism. Instead, they embrace the Nō's poetic constructions based in the world of heightened (yet often as restrained as the subtle literary devices at the heart of Heian-era verse) emotion and the freedom from the boundaries of the unities of space and time afforded by the form's supernatural aspects.<sup>1</sup> Even so, the works created by Pound, Yeats, and later, Brecht, were based upon incomplete and misinterpreted translations, as well as second- and third-hand exoticized

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<sup>1</sup> Another important contributor to Western conceptions of Nō is Benjamin Britten (1913-76), whose operatic "Church Parable" *Curlew River* (1964) is based upon the fifteenth-century Nō drama *Sumidagawa* (*Sumida River*). This work's value is inestimable in the study of Western adaptations of Nō, not only because of its intertextual dialogue with an antecedent prototext from the Nō canon, but also because it incorporates a Western interpretation of the Nō's musicality, linked with a liturgical religious context.

descriptions of Japanese performance. Recent Westernized adaptations of Nō possess the considerable advantage of greater access to new scholarship from both Asian and Western sources, as well as to the Japanese cultural context of academically sound translations and traditional performances (via a variety of sources, such as international touring companies and video recordings).

Despite this increased access to Nō documents and performances, Western audiences are still more likely to associate Japanese theatre with Kabuki than Nō. This tendency is largely due to the fact that the dramaturgy of Kabuki texts adheres more directly to Western styles of narrative, rather than the reliance upon abstract poetics and remnants of religious ritual found in Nō, and that their performative traditions rely heavily upon crowd-pleasing spectacle.<sup>2</sup> In 1976, noted Broadway musical theatre composer Stephen Sondheim collaborated with librettist John Weidman to create *Pacific Overtures*, a moderately successful work in the Sondheim canon that merges Kabuki performance techniques with a narrative about the opening of Japan to the West in the nineteenth century, including Commodore Perry's arrival onstage wearing Kabuki makeup, a white lion beard, and a red, white, and blue Uncle Sam outfit. In the final number, "Next," the Reciter, who has narrated the story throughout in traditional Kabuki style, appears in simple black shirt and trousers as the rest of the cast disposes of their stylized costumes, makeup, and movements, in order to adopt contemporary fashion and dance styles, stepping boldly into the Westernized twentieth century.

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<sup>2</sup> Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), the author of over 130 plays for the Bunraku and Kabuki theatre, is sometimes referred to as the "Japanese Shakespeare" (although other critics grant that attribution to Zeami), not just because of his prolific nature as a writer but also because of the similarities in episodic structure and theme shared by the two dramatists.

In 2003, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel (b. 1951) incorporated Bunraku puppets and dramatic structure into her semi-autobiographical one-act play, *The Long Christmas Ride Home*. The drama alternates back and forth in time between a wintry, emotionally tumultuous family road trip and the present, in which the protagonist bemoans the tragic losses she has encountered in adulthood, localizing much of her regret within the memory of this car ride home from her grandparents' house as a child. In addition to integrating Bunraku conventions within the play's prescribed performance style, such as using life-sized puppets to represent the children, Vogel extends the Japanese influence of the play's framework into the roles of her brother, who has become obsessed with Japanese culture as a sort of self-therapy upon learning that he has been diagnosed with HIV, and the family's Unitarian minister, who performs a *Nihon buyō*-inspired interpretive dance at the play's climax.

Both of these works, while not counted among their respective dramatists' most notable contributions to the field of dramatic literature, have received considerably more attention than any similarly crafted, if not more stylistically successful, contemporary adaptations of Nō. Each fuses Japanese and American culture to make a political or cultural statement about contemporary psychology, capitalism, or emotional vacancy, imbuing the traditional Japanese performance style with the association of "innocence lost."<sup>3</sup> On one hand, this can be interpreted as a pandering Orientalization of a misunderstood culture by Western writers, but on the other, it signals a sense of respect and wonder for the traditions of a past in danger of being obliterated by the onset of modern "progress," traditions lacking in the relatively late development of an American

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<sup>3</sup> One may even find Western parodies of Japanese culture, such as Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado* (1885), that adhere more closely to authentic performance traditions over the course of the past few decades, in an attempt to emulate a sense of theatrical verisimilitude.



theatrical aesthetic. One wonders when a work of drama will emerge that possesses the impact and innovation to thrust Nō into the Western theatrical consciousness with lasting power, or if the genre's subtle, indefinable beauty is unable to undergo such a cross-cultural transformation. That having been said, many excellent examples, such as the two plays at the center of this chapter, do exist, but have yet to receive the scale of production achieved by those emulating Kabuki or Bunraku.

In the 1974 essay "Noh, or About Signs," avant-garde theorist Jan Kott explores the semiotic nature of the Nō drama, within the scope of his own limited understanding of Japanese culture as well as according to its cross-cultural influence on Western drama and performance in the late twentieth century. He concludes that the strict, repetitive physicality of its ritualistic movements, merged with what he understands to be the Nō's innate spiritual struggle between the flesh and the soul, creates what he denotes an "unchangeable dramatic ceremonial of transformation."<sup>4</sup> He further states that these characteristics create a self-perpetuating system of signs and signifiers that lend the theatrical form a timeless universality that may be removed from its specific literary and historical context. More importantly, he posits, "In Noh theology, which is also its aesthetic, what is true are the essences, and these are the ghosts of the characters."<sup>5</sup> Thus, he contends, it is the essence of the Nō that must be achieved/preserved in modern adaptation, regardless of how strictly or flexibly the contemporary performance text adheres to recognizable conventions of the traditional Nō. He cites Shakespeare among his primary examples of the potential application of Nō aesthetics to Western

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<sup>4</sup> Kott, Jan. "Noh, or About Signs." *The Theater of Essence*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1984. 109-16. 114.

<sup>5</sup> Kott, 114.

dramaturgy.<sup>6</sup> Kott implies that a Nō version of *Hamlet* would likely be told from the perspective of the ghost of drowned Ophelia, *King Lear* from that of dead Cordelia, *Macbeth* as a madwoman play told from the viewpoint of the spirit of Lady Macbeth, etc.<sup>7</sup> In each of these cases, Kott implies that the topical material, regardless of its originality or contemporaneity, must adhere to the artistic and structural paradigms of the classical Nō.

The subject matter for contemporary American Nō stretches from backward-glancing cross-cultural theatrical fusion, such as Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei's Nō cycle based on the Medea myths (1975), to the futuristic apocalyptic sci-fi fantasia of Janine Beichman's *Drifting Fires* (1986), which depicts an alien life form's encounter with the last soul of humanity on Earth in the wake of the planet's destruction via nuclear annihilation. However, in the past two decades, perhaps no individual has contributed as much to the development of original texts for the Nō theatre in America as prolific scholar-practitioner Richard Emmert, currently a professor at Tokyo's Musashino University. Though he has only authored a handful of original Nō texts himself, his leadership of the annual Noh Training Project in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, as well as his participation in the international operations of Theatre Nohgaku, has resulted in the composition of a diverse series of Nō plays in English for the contemporary stage. Because much of Emmert's training agenda consists of exploring authentic performance style associated with classical Nō, these texts tend to follow the standard conventions of the Nō canon. But he does not limit the pedagogical focus to historical traditions of all-male acting ensembles, thus extending training and performance to female actors as well,

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's (1910-98) nods to Nō and Shakespeare in films such as *Ran* (1985) and *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō*, 1957) incorporate many of these tropes.

<sup>7</sup> Kott, 114.

which has the distinct advantage of opening up marginalized perspectives within the collaborative dramaturgical experiments that surface from his workshops. Perhaps the most notable, enduring work to emerge from these groups is David Crandall's *Crazy Jane* (2003), based upon a Nō-inspired cycle of poetry by W. B. Yeats, thus bringing the Western influence of the Irish poet's experiments with Nō full circle. In 2006, Theatre Nohgaku premiered *Pine Barrens* by Greg Giovanni, which has the ever-increasing distinction of being an American Nō based upon innately American subject matter: the supernatural legend of the Jersey Devil.

Additionally, many of the artists Emmert has mentored are now at the forefront of other Nō-based training programs and theatre companies in the United States, such as San Francisco's Theatre of Yūgen, currently led by Artistic Director Jubilith Moore, a former student of Emmert. In addition to contemporary conventions such as cross-gender casting and vibrant theatrical lighting, the company's productions often employ quirky musical orchestrations featuring modern instruments like electric guitars, in tandem with classical Japanese flutes and drums. But it is the subject matter that the company chooses to adapt to the Nō milieu that characterizes its mission and aesthetic most distinctively. At the forefront of Theatre of Yūgen's theatrical experiments with Nō is celebrated alternative playwright Erik Ehn, currently the head of Playwriting at Brown University. Among his collaborations with Theatre of Yūgen are Nō-inspired adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (2003), Homer's *The Iliad* (*Dogsbody*, 2009), and Shakespeare's *King Lear* (*Cordelia*, 2011). Less traditional works by Ehn speak to recent American tragedies, such as his twenty-first-century Nō cycle of five plays from 2007, which includes a play about the 1993 abduction and child murder of Polly Klaas (*Pretty*), as well as his current work-

in-progress, *What a Stranger May Know*, which deals with the 2007 Virginia Tech school shooting. Perhaps what Ehn's experiments with Nō elucidate most is the versatility and contemporaneity of the Nō form to incorporate even the most topical historical and cultural events, thus liberating it from the prototextual antecedents of the distant past, as well as freeing it to integrate alternative aspects of twenty-first-century dramaturgy without aborting the genre's basic essence.

In the contemporary Nō plays *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Nō Play* by Kenneth Yasuda and *Blue Moon Over Memphis* by Deborah Brevoort, the authors appropriate traditional Nō structures and conventions and convert them into an American theatrical idiom by utilizing the adaptive strategy of stylistic homage. This dramaturgical tactic provides a dynamic framework for constructing dream narratives about two twentieth-century historical figures that have entered into everyday pop culture consciousness: slain civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and pioneering rock musician Elvis Presley. While Yasuda intentionally crafts his *shite* figure as a modern-day bodhisattva, one cannot help but notice subtle comparisons shared by Brevoort's unique Nō depiction of Elvis, and therefore apply a similar interpretive schema to an analysis of her drama's supernatural/spiritual elements. In doing so, both playwrights invert core elements of the traditional *waki-shite* relationship by invoking the transformational imperative inherent in the bodhisattva vow. In this chapter, I analyze these two contemporary Nō dramas as examples of the stylistic assimilation and transformation of the classical Nō form in the service of new contemporary subject matter, as opposed to the diverse adaptive tactics utilized by Mishima in his modern versions of classical Nō texts. Ultimately, this study will propose the feasibility of the development of a new canon of Nō plays for the

twenty-first century and beyond, which I hope to prove only attests to the strength of the genre.

### Stylistic Homage and Indirect Dramatic Adaptation

The dramaturgical strategies of adaptation discussed in previous chapters (correlative, extrapolative, interpolative) depend on the existence of specific antecedent prototexts to provide the literary DNA for the process of metatextual mediation to occur, thus supplying the resultant metatext with its basic structure and content. However, the type of adaptation examined in this chapter is largely divorced from any discernible extant prototext, but relies rather on the generic prototextual markers that broadly define a literary style or tradition, derived from the distinctive commonalities found among all, a majority of, or at the very least, key examples of representative texts within that style. Yet it also divorces the discourse of adaptation theory from questions of textual autonomy, as the metatext need not distinguish itself from a specific prototextual antecedent, but rather must assert its place among other, more established examples of a genre or style. This is not to say that specific elements that denote the style's intricate textual traditions are not present, but the focus shifts from *content* to *context*. Thus, the process of adapting a *style* rather than a *text* must conform to the shared architectural framework of conventions and aesthetic principles that define and characterize not only basic structure, but also inherent aspects of tone and aesthetic agenda, that are generally associated with the style that is being re-contextualized for a new audience.

In other words, stylistic adaptation is more than just mere imitation of the external form or internal components of a recognized literary genre such as Greek tragedy, French

farce, or Japanese Nō. The adaptor must also actively seek to capture some level of the style's artistic vision and scope through careful evocation of tone, agenda, philosophy, and overall impact. This mandate requires the adaptor to possess at least a basic familiarity with the style in its original historical and cultural context, while also possessing the freedom to transform it for a contemporary audience. This permits the author to utilize an informed sense of selectivity when choosing which meaning variants and invariants to retain or excise or alter in the adaptation. Anton Popovič refers to this as the "textual scope of the contact between proto- and metatexts," which determines the extent to which the adaptor involves "only individual elements or levels of the text, or...to the text as a whole."<sup>8</sup> However, in doing so, the adaptor must be aware, as George Mitrevski indicates that "Every text is controlled by specific, sometimes rigid structures, which may not be transportable in the process of adaptation into a text of another structure."<sup>9</sup> This is especially important in contemporary adaptation of a cross-cultural nature, particularly when one considers the transfer of signs and meaning from Asian to Western contexts, or vice-versa.

In the case of theatrical adaptation, these issues are further complicated by the often-conflicting performative traditions that accompany the literary conventions as the text is brought to life onstage. Can a dramatist adapt one without the other? If one speaks the text of a Greek tragedy in the style of David Mamet, what is lost? Conversely, does performing an all-male *Oedipus the King* in full Greek regalia, with masks and *kothurnoi*, as a sort of ancient sung-through dance drama, alienate a contemporary American

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<sup>8</sup> Popovič, Anton. "Aspects of Metatext." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 3 (1976): 225-35. 230.

<sup>9</sup> Mitrevski, George. "Semiotic Analysis of Adaptations in the Theatre." *Approches de l'opéra/Approches of the Opera*. Ed. André Helbo. Paris: Didier, 1986. 233-39. 235.

audience from the text too much to be able to connect to its tragic emotional center? To which extent must these conventions be present in order to identify correctly a contemporary work as belonging to a style such as “Nō,” as opposed to the creation of a new form or genre *inspired* by the style, as in the case of Mishima’s *kindai* Nō? And to which extent may a contemporary style be layered or fused with that of the classical work, in order to strike a delicate balance that satisfies the needs of a modern audience, while simultaneously honoring the formal core of the original text? Thus, in a consideration of these types of questions, the shared dialogue between traditions bears out Mitrevski’s assertion that adaptation is an ongoing process of “mediation” between divergent and convergent systems of textual coding.<sup>10</sup>

In *Palimpsests*, Gérard Genette maintains that the type of stylistic adaptation discussed in the current study results in the creation of a “mimotext” which may exist as one of three categories: travesty, parody, and pastiche.<sup>11</sup> Of these three, pastiche is the category onto which I will focus my attention, since it implies a mimetic paradigm devoid of satire. More specifically, Genette ultimately arrives at the more traditional concept of homage, which signifies an imitation of style that attempts to adhere respectfully to its original intent and honor those who have mastered it previously.<sup>12</sup> While Yasuda’s and Brevoort’s contemporary dramas do take certain textual and performative liberties, often tinged with humor, as they attempt to replicate the classical Nō style, both dramatists do so in deference to the spirit of the Nō tradition. Thus, I categorize them as participating in the adaptive strategy of stylistic homage.

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<sup>10</sup> Mitrevski, 233.

<sup>11</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln, NE: U of NE P, 1997. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 98.

Genette's various theories of transtextuality become increasingly important as an adaptation ventures farther away from a discernible, specific prototext, into the vague arena of the general imitation of literary style. Without specific content referents such as character, setting, plot, theme, and diction, paratextual clues provide the prototextual markers that allow the reader and audience to identify and analyze the parallels to and deviations from the defining elements that comprise a style's conventions. In fact, these paratexts are the strongest indicators of the intentionality of the adaptors to replicate and layer the style in question. Paratexts are the textual indicators such as titles, subtitles, footnotes, prefaces, introductions, stanza dividers, appendices, etc., that serve as a structural "threshold" into the text.<sup>13</sup> In a stylistic dramatic adaptation such as I am discussing in this chapter, such paratextual markers often coincide directly with the structural and aesthetic factors that determine the metatext's adherence to the classical Nō form.

Designations of style and genre adorn the titles and subtitles of Yasuda's *Martin Luther King, Jr.* and Brevoort's *Blue Moon Over Memphis*, indicating that they are, in fact, intended to be read and performed as Nō plays.<sup>14</sup> Author's notes, in the form of introductions and afterwords, as well as footnotes, provide clues as to the appeal of the Nō style (as well as that of the specific subject matter being reinterpreted as Nō) to each of the adaptors, as well as their background experience with the form. These notes also provide valuable insight into the extent to which the contemporary plays are meant to be

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<sup>13</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Such paratextual markers are a relatively recent literary denotation, and are therefore notably absent from the texts of classical Nō, except in modern and contemporary translation and annotation, as aids to the reader, performer, or audience member. As such, these indicators are not shared textual markers inherent to the Nō structure, but they do show direct authorial intent to pay homage the Nō style and aesthetic.



read or performed *as* Nō, including which classical conventions may have been intentionally retained or discarded and the rationale behind these textual choices. Such insights pinpoint the relative value placed upon specific aspects of the classical form by the authors and suggest which elements are fundamental to the Nō style as they see it, and which may be negotiable. One such aspect is the reliance upon a tightly woven fabric of allusion to court literature as a structural component in the dialogue of the classical Nō. While Brevoort's allusive content is fairly restrained in her dialogue, Yasuda layers interconnecting references to literature, history, King's sermons, and gospel music throughout his characters' modes of discourse; by doing so, he is compelled to document these vast references via a comprehensive series of footnotes that illuminate his own allusive fabric. Such an impulse, particularly when one compares these footnotes with those of his classical Nō translations that accompany *Martin Luther King, Jr.* in his anthology, *Masterworks of the Nō Theater*, reveals Yasuda's scholarly drive to emulate traditional Nō as closely as possible, as opposed to Brevoort's less academic inclination to create a decidedly modern American performance text that appropriates elements of the Nō but is not enslaved to them.

Certain paratexts are unique to works of dramatic literature and often function as the performative bridge that allows the text to cross over from the page to the stage. These specifically theatrical paratexts also provide distinct connections between the structural framework of the classical Nō and its stylistic adaptations. For example, the *dramatis personae* of a printed Nō text, whether classical or contemporary, reveals one of the primary defining characteristics of the style – the standardized role designations that drives its intellectual, emotional, and physical action. Indications of *shite*, whether

divided into *maeshite* and *nochijite* or not, as well as those of *waki*, *tsure*, and *kyōgen* roles, establish the basic rules for the central character interaction during the drama and create a structural paradigm by which the contemporary characters' actions must be held accountable. As will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, both Yasuda and Brevoort strongly adhere to the basic role designations of the Nō, while adapting them to suit the aesthetic agendas and tone of their plays, incorporating distinctly American traits into their dialogue and psychological/emotional motivations.

Additionally, indications of mask type, musical notation, dance style, and categories of dialogue aid in unraveling the dramaturgical functions of the Nō. Throughout Yasuda's text of *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, one finds clearly marked Nō conventions, such as traditional sung verse and speech designations (e.g., *michiyuki*, *shidai*, *jidori*, and *nanori*); indicated divisions of *dan* (specific segments of a Nō play structure) and *jo-ha-kyū* (tripartite tempo designation pertaining not only to music and dance but to dramaturgical pace as well); and dance styles (e.g., *iroe* or *hayamai*). Whereas the subject matter of *Martin Luther King, Jr.* is distinctly different from the classical Nō presented in his anthology, one would be hard pressed to distinguish between its typography and, say, his translation of *Atsumori* (with the exception of the presence of parallel romanized Japanese text and the English translation); it contains all of the same editorial markers and structural divisions and tonal indicators present in the more traditional Nō. Conversely, while Brevoort may utilize the same devices and their functions in her drama, she rarely refers to them according to their Japanese demarcation. *Blue Moon Over Memphis* follows a general Nō structure, but the playwright leaves it to the reader and performers to infer the specific structural elements – indeed, she often

transforms them into a more discernible, easily comprehended English analogue, such as “The Dance of Many Elvises.”<sup>15</sup> Both Yasuda and Brevoort enlist the use of modern stage directions to determine the physical action onstage. However, Yasuda’s stage directions are designed to clarify the standardized Nō actions performed by the characters, and Brevoort’s indicate more of a generic introduction to Nō actions translated into an American *milieu*, thus maintaining her insistence that *Blue Moon Over Memphis* “spins [the conventions of Noh] into a distinctly American context.”<sup>16</sup>

### The Bodhisattva Ideal and the Nō Aesthetic

One of the more illuminating statements of authorial intent found in the paratextual fabric of these contemporary American Nō dramas is a serendipitous discovery described by Kenneth Yasuda in his Introduction to *Martin Luther King, Jr.* He comes to realize, as he is in the process of composing the drama, that his *shite* figure performs the role of bodhisattva during the course of its action.<sup>17</sup> This breakthrough is the result of a scholarly transfocalization of the play’s identification with a traditional Nō category from that of a “warrior play” to that of a “demon or saint play,” a change which leads Yasuda to conclude, “the thrust of King’s life, for the masses who followed him, was like that of a bodhisattva or a saint sent down from the Lord. ‘Freedom’ thus becomes bigger than political and economic rights and approaches salvation.”<sup>18</sup> Such a revelation compels him to alter the dramaturgy of the piece in order to conform to Mahayana Buddhist conceptions of the bodhisattva ideal, fusing it with the already

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<sup>15</sup> Brevoort, Deborah. “Blue Moon Over Memphis.” *The Best American Short Plays 2003-2004*. Ed. Glenn Young. NY: Applause, 2006. 45-87. 63-65.

<sup>16</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 50.

<sup>17</sup> Yasuda, Kenneth. *Masterworks of the Nō Theater*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1989. 488.

<sup>18</sup> Yasuda, 488.

intrinsically Buddhist cosmology of the classical Japanese Nō and the Judeo-Christian theology associated with the *shite* figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. The theatrical construction at which he ultimately arrives reconfigures the dynamic between *shite* and *waki*, a dramatic framework that foreshadows many of the tonal and motivational innovations attempted by Deborah Brevoort in *Blue Moon Over Memphis*.

According to Mahayana traditions of Buddhism, a bodhisattva (“Buddha-to-be”) is, in its simplest terms, an enlightened being who has achieved Buddhahood and escaped *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth), yet actively chooses to forego *nirvana* and remain in the physical plane so that he or she may guide others along the path to spiritual peace.<sup>19</sup> Rather than pursue his own personal salvation, the bodhisattva vows to serve his fellow creatures to share the teachings of the Buddha and guide them toward their own release from the sufferings of the world. Jung Shik Hong summarizes the fourfold nature of the bodhisattva’s vow: “However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them; however inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them; however limitless the dharmas are, I vow to study them; however infinite the ultimate truth is, I vow to attain it.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the bodhisattva takes upon himself a commitment to total self-sacrifice, regardless of consequence, in order that those suffering around him might find relief through his example.

It is not difficult to transfer the concept of the bodhisattva into a Western theological perspective and see its reflection in the prophets and saints of the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly that personified by the ministry of Christ. In the *Bodhicharyāvātāra* of Shantideva (*The Way of the Bodhisattva*, c. eighth century AD),

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<sup>19</sup> Varley, H. Paul. *Japanese Culture*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Honolulu: U of HI P, 1984. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Hong, Jung Shik. “The Mind of a Bodhisattva in Contemporary Society.” *Buddhism and the Modern World* (1976): 209-13. 211.

one even finds language that parallels the basic tenets of Christian forgiveness and selflessness<sup>21</sup>:

All those who slight me to my face  
Or do me some other evil,  
Even if they blame me or slander me,  
May they attain the fortune of enlightenment.  
May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,  
A guide for those who journey on the road.  
For those who wish to cross the water,  
May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.  
May I be an isle for those who yearn for land,  
A lamp for those who long for light;  
For all who need a resting place, a bed;  
For those who need a servant, may I be their slave.<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, Yasuda's recasting of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a bodhisattva in his contemporary Nō drama, with its multiple layers of reference to Christian martyrdom and social transformation, finds a potent analogue within the cosmological constructs that govern the Nō's aesthetic structure. This *shite* figure does not remain in the earthly realm because of the burden of clinging to emotion or memory, as is the case for most of the ghosts who haunt the Nō canon. Rather, Yasuda creates a theological rationale for his presence: the desire to continue to share his message of nonviolence and a peaceful vision for the future of America compels him to postpone a heavenly reward. Yasuda's Rev. King is a character driven by intense humility and magnanimity, denying his own importance throughout the course of the drama in favor of shifting focus to his iconic "dream," itself the purview of the Nō philosophical framework. Despite his secular identity as a rock-and-roll musician, Brevoort's *shite* resonates just as strongly as a

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<sup>21</sup> The rejection of concepts of "the self," while characterized by different methodologies and moral imperatives between the specific ideologies of Buddhism and Christianity, is a core aspiration for both systems of belief.

<sup>22</sup> Shantideva. *The Way of the Bodhisattva: A Translation of the Bodhicharyāvātāra*. Trans. Padmakara Translation Group. Rev. ed. Boston: Shambala, 2006. 49.

bodhisattva figure, yet within a much more intimate, personal scope for the *waki* character, healing her emotional distress with his tender words.

The willful rejection of transcendence positions the bodhisattva in a unique state of double-existence between the corporeal and the mystical, experiencing a constant state of becoming. When one considers the supernatural nature of the *Nō*, its liminal setting, and the role of the *shite*, such qualities strike a familiar chord with the dramatic form's aesthetic and philosophical structure. In fact, although she never mentions the theatrical form explicitly, Sylvia Swain's 1995 address to the Buddhist Society Summer School, entitled "The Bodhisattva Pilgrimage," often reads like a guidebook to the liminal aspects of the cosmology of the *Nō*.<sup>23</sup> She states, "The bodhisattva deity is the most articulate in that it elucidates and connects both worlds, the earthly and the heavenly, in one image and one being. As a symbol of non-theistic religion, it is best able to meet human needs and bridge the remaining cultural divides between East and West."<sup>24</sup> One cannot deny the similarities such a statement evokes when contemplating the central encounter between *shite* and *waki* in a *Nō* drama, which facilitates an expansive moment of transcendent meditation for the *waki*, in which the boundaries of time, space, life, and death melt away in order to glimpse at a spiritual truth. However, one must note a fundamental difference between the traditional *shite* and the bodhisattva: whereas the *shite*'s refusal to transition from the physical world results from extreme suffering and clinging, the bodhisattva's decision to remain among humanity empowers him because he has escaped those very challenges. Thus, the dramatist who seeks to incorporate the bodhisattva as a *shite*

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<sup>23</sup> Swain, Sylvia. "The Bodhisattva Pilgrimage." *The Middle Way* 78.3 (2003): 169-80.

<sup>24</sup> Swain, 173.

character must realign the essential nature of the *waki* and the *shite* in order to reflect the *shite*'s new function and cosmological positioning.<sup>25</sup>

While, for all intents and purposes, this new construct does not substantially alter the *waki*'s journey that forms the expositional frame for the drama's moment of inception – a priestly pilgrimage towards enlightenment – the ultimate interaction with the *shite*, particularly that in the final section of the Nō drama, inverts the conventional dynamic of spiritual power that determines the philosophical/theological perspective of the Nō ethos. Yasuda and Brevoort emulate many of the characteristics of the traditional *waki Nō*, since their *waki* roles confront enlightened beings and consequently contemplate their own paths to salvation through the encounters. Both dramas conclude with the release of the *shite* characters, but the moment of liberation is constructed not as an end of suffering; rather, it is the well-earned completion of a spiritual mission. They may pass on into eternity, secure with the knowledge that their lives and their messages have reached open, receptive ears and made the world a better place for their living in it.

“I’m really not a dreamer, but I have a dream.”

Originally composed by Kenneth Yasuda in 1983 and subsequently published as the final entry in his *Masterworks of the Nō Theater* anthology in 1989, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Nō Play* is the accomplished translator/editor's attempt to infuse a classical Nō dramatic structure with original, contemporary subject matter. As he states in his Introduction, Yasuda was inspired to write the play when he learned that the birthday of

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<sup>25</sup> Classical Nō texts exist that do feature bodhisattva characters, including *Genji kuyō*, which transforms Murasaki Shikibu into a manifestation of the bodhisattva Kannon, and by extension, casts the *Genji monogatari* as a tome of Buddhist wisdom. In future studies, I would like to attempt a more in-depth comparison between the function of the bodhisattva in classical Nō and that of twentieth century theatrical surrogates for the bodhisattva entity.

the slain civil rights leader and Nobel Laureate would finally be designated by the United States as a national federal holiday.<sup>26</sup> He crafts the play with care, adhering closely to the formal conventions of the classical form; in particular, he is most adept in merging the Buddhist-inspired dream aesthetic with the specific identity of his chosen *shite* character. Yasuda even approaches a spark of genius when he uses Dr. King's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered in August 1963 at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., as the ideological pivot of both the drama's spiritual perspective and its poetic symbolism. Such a choice fuses the Nō's Buddhist cosmology with Judeo-Christian imagery and tone, creating an oscillating intertextual dialogue between the new work and its medieval antecedents. In the end, what emerges is a heartfelt, evocative homage not only to the message, mission, and ultimate sacrifice of Dr. King's life, but to the potential of the classical Nō structure and aesthetic to unlock the transcendent within an intrinsically American *milieu*.

In his 1992 review of *Masterworks of the Nō Theater*, critic Robert Bethune describes Yasuda's original Nō drama as "unintentionally ludicrous," and suggests that the volume would have benefited more instead from the inclusion of a previously untranslated Nō play.<sup>27</sup> Despite this unnecessarily harsh (and, in my opinion, unjustified) verdict, Bethune does concede the play's basic value as an introduction to the Nō form for American audiences. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* is an uneven text that lacks many qualities that would allow it to thrive as a vital work of living theatre, most of which can be traced directly to Yasuda's inherently scholarly instincts rather than those sensibilities befitting a twentieth-century theatrical artist. Recurring instances of stilted language,

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<sup>26</sup> Yasuda, 485.

<sup>27</sup> Bethune, Robert. Rev. of *Masterworks of the Nō Theater* by Kenneth Yasuda. *Asian Theatre Journal* 9.2 (1992): 252-54. 254.



forced metaphors, and a limited sense of dramatic action (even within the naturally rigid context of Nō's own dramaturgical restrictions) condemn this work to be read more than it is ever to be performed. Yet it would be a mistake to estimate that the playwright approaches his material without an impulse toward innovation of the classical form.

The action of Yasuda's play is simple. A young African-American seminary graduate (*waki*) embarks upon a pilgrimage from Washington, D.C. to "some noted places" on his way to the small Southern church where he has secured a pastoral position.<sup>28</sup> When he arrives in Memphis, Tennessee, he encounters a mysterious stranger who guides him first to the Lorraine Motel, the site where Dr. King was assassinated in April 1968 (*maeshite*). Then the stranger draws the *waki* into an extended dream vision, during which the *shite* manifests the highlights of King's career as a civil rights activist, including the tragic moment of his martyrdom. After the stranger disappears, the young pastor is encouraged by an old man from the area (*kyōgen*) to light a candle at the Mason Temple, the church where King delivered his final sermon the night before his death. The stranger, now revealed to be the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr. (*nochijite*), passes on his message and mission to the young pastor, and then ascends gloriously to heaven.

Yasuda separates the play into two major dramaturgical sections, adhering to the primary structural aspects of the classical Nō, as well as specifically designating the form's traditional tempo and tonal indicators that make up the *jo-ha-kyū* triad. *Jo-ha-kyū* is an expansive model of the drama's musical, textual, and performative growth, which can be applied simultaneously to the development of action and theme, building from inception to climax. The qualities of *jo-ha-kyū* exist on both the macrocosmic and microcosmic level of Nō dramaturgy – they guide the movement (physical and

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<sup>28</sup> Yasuda, 489.

metaphorical) within a single play or within a cycle of several plays, but also affect the moment-to-moment dynamic within the characters' speeches, songs, and dances. Part One of *Martin Luther King, Jr.* includes both the *jo* and *ha* scenic divisions, which comprise the *waki*'s entrance, the entrance of the *shite* in its disguised *maeshite* incarnation, as well as an extended *kyōgen* section. Part Two encompasses the *kyū* division, signaled by the appearance of the *shite* in its unobscured *nochijite* manifestation and concluded by the exit of the *shite*.

As the play begins, before the *waki* even introduces his identity, he and his companion (*waki-tsure*) proclaim one of the drama's central themes in the *shidai* (prelude song), which will be amplified and transformed throughout the course of the performance:

From this dream-filled world of man  
we wake with a start  
on the Way that all must take,  
let us hurry.<sup>29</sup>

Not only does this conventional Nō trope (echoing translations of the language found in the opening of most classical Nō texts) establish the importance of the dreaming as a central conceit of the play, contextualized within the Buddhist belief that all life is illusory, but it also fuses Western and Asian theology, thus establishing the intertextual dialogue that must exist within a Nō play whose primary characters are both Christian ministers. "The Way," as alluded to in this initial verse, simultaneously refers to the Buddhist "Middle Way" of seeking balance between the earthly and the spiritual through moderation and meditation, but also Jesus Christ's directive to his disciples that, "I am

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<sup>29</sup> Yasuda, 489.

the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the journey of the *waki* and his companion, as depicted in the drama, is established primarily as a spiritual quest towards salvation.

The *waki* then introduces himself in the *nanori* (“naming speech”) as a young pastor who has recently graduated from Washington, D.C.’s historically black Howard University. Before taking a post at a Southern church, he has embarked upon a tour of “noted places on the way.”<sup>31</sup> In this sightseeing young pastor, Yasuda crafts a perfect modern analogue for the prototextual antecedent of the classical *waki* role, usually indicated to be a wandering priest participating in some holy pilgrimage to a site replete with spiritual potency. According to Yasuda, both his identity and his journey are designed to mirror those of the *shite*, in order to fulfill the *waki*’s destiny of meeting King and taking up the slain leader’s mantle in the nonviolent fight for racial equality.<sup>32</sup> The *waki*’s travels from Washington, D.C. to Memphis reflects King’s own journey from the site of his greatest triumph (the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered the famous “I Have a Dream” speech) to that of his ultimate downfall at the hands of assassin James Earl Ray in 1968. For the *waki*, this is also a rite of passage, the transitional crossing from one phase of life (that of student) to another (that of teacher and community leader). Such a shift of identity results in an unexpected spiritual conversion, derived from his encounter with the spirit of King, who resists enlightenment in order to guarantee the continuation of his dream.

As one of the “noted places” along the *waki*’s journey, Memphis is not the young man’s ultimate destination; his religious mission continues once the action of the play concludes. In the same way that King’s life was sharply interrupted by death on the

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<sup>30</sup> *King James Bible*, John 14:6.

<sup>31</sup> Yasuda, 490.

<sup>32</sup> Yasuda, 486.

balcony of the Lorraine Motel, the *waki* finds himself temporarily halted along his quest to begin his ministry by a dream of a better world, an inspiration that will potentially shape his own pastoral career in the image of King's. One may even regard the ephemeral nature of the *waki*'s encounter with King's spirit as a metaphor for the *shite*'s own supernatural transcendence – he is not trapped in this particular place and time by memory and desire (a potent phrase that takes on significant literary relevance in the *kyū* section of the play), as is so often the case in Nō dramas, but merely delayed along his final pilgrimage toward eternal rest. Yasuda refers to the suitability of Memphis as a model geographical and ideological setting for a Nō drama according to its liminal dual-nature, when he describes it as both the “scene of the assassination but also site of the rebirth and continuation of the ideals the bullet was meant to end.”<sup>33</sup> An American city as rich with cultural heritage as it is rife with social conflict – religious, racial, economic, musical – Memphis is a metaphysical intersection of diametrically opposed forces, ideally suited as an “in-between space” that serves as a conduit for the supernatural to manifest itself in the Nō.

Temporal setting plays as great a role in facilitating the supernatural incursions that occur at the heart of the Nō aesthetic as does the drama's physical locale. Accordingly, Yasuda places the action of *Martin Luther King, Jr.* in the month of April for a variety of historical and metaphorical reasons, and many of the work's richest allusions are tied to the month's myriad religious and lyrical associations. Throughout the play, “April” oscillates between its function as both literal and literary construct, imbuing the poetic action of the piece with shifting patterns of signification. First and foremost, on its most basic level of interpretation, April is implicitly regarded as a period of natural

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<sup>33</sup> Yasuda, 486.

transition between the seasons of winter and spring; therefore, the month attains a firm symbolic connection to themes of renewal and rebirth. The primary historical significance of April, as it pertains to the play's subject matter, lies in the fact that King was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Themes of assassination extend to religious themes such as the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, typically commemorated as Good Friday and Easter, respectively, each often occurring in April. This cycle of death and renewal, which forms the basis of the Christian religion, is further extrapolated into association with the historical murder of President Abraham Lincoln, which occurred on Good Friday, April 15, 1865. The inextricable connection between Lincoln's nineteenth-century emancipation of the American slaves and Dr. King's own campaign for racial equality and social justice for all men, exactly a century later, cannot be denied.

At the commencement of the *sashi* (verse that typically precedes the *shite*'s entrance), the waki chants:

When April with its showers,  
when April with its showers  
sweet with fruit has pierced  
the drought of March and lilacs  
in the dooryard bloom'd,  
we taxi through the city...<sup>34</sup>

This passage not only situates the literal action of the scene within a specific month and season of the year, it utilizes multilayered literary allusions to foreshadow the impending appearance of the *shite*, as well as to subtly hint at the play's leitmotifs of rebirth and holy pilgrimage. Yasuda efficiently conflates a modernized transcription of the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* with the opening refrain of Walt

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<sup>34</sup> Yasuda, 490.

Whitman's 1865 elegy concerning the death of President Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." By invoking the words of Chaucer, Yasuda links the *waki*'s spring journey to Memphis with that of the medieval poem's pilgrims, on their way to visit the shrine of martyred Saint Thomas à Becket at the cathedral in Canterbury. The dramatist superimposes these verses upon the first lines of Whitman's poem without transition, thereby layering a second tier of the theme of martyrdom and infusing the *sashi* with a distinctly American flavor. Whitman's poem transforms the natural beauty of "ever-returning spring" into a mournful funeral dirge for the murdered President, a song of grief that will be sung anew each year that the "heart-shaped leaves" of the lilacs bloom once more.<sup>35</sup> In the same way that Memphis simultaneously represents Dr. King's martyrdom and ideological rebirth of his ideal, April is replete with concurrent symbols of death and renewal as well. And as presented by Yasuda, April becomes a multi-layered, continually shifting aesthetic construct that morphs effortlessly from the historical to the poetic to the religious to the sublime throughout the span of his drama.

This literary device of superimposed and conflated literary allusion is itself Yasuda's loose homage to the Japanese poetic convention of the *kakekotoba*, or "pivot word." This convention utilizes a word's double-meaning to convey multiple ideas or moods simultaneously; it also capitalizes on a word's particular placement as the linguistic transition from the end of one line of poetry (concluding a previous thought) to the start of the next line of poetry (beginning a new thought), linking the two lines and their respective imagery. As a scholar of classical Japanese verse, Yasuda is well acquainted with devices such as the pivot word, and he strives to adapt it into an English

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<sup>35</sup> Whitman, Walt. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. NY: Library of America, 1982. 459-67.

equivalent throughout the text of *Martin Luther King, Jr.* In the final song of the *ha* section's first division, the *shite* and *tsure* hear the echoing sound of the Liberty Bell at Independence Hall and exclaim,

How it tolled!  
How it told  
of the future clear and loud  
proclaimed this nation's freedom  
and independence  
to the four corners of the earth,  
telling still the truth that all  
men are created equal...<sup>36</sup>

The homophonic pairing of “How it tolled!” and “How it told...” and later “telling” is inventive wordplay that anthropomorphizes the symbol of the Liberty Bell and gives it voice that spans the years, linking the revolutionary vision of the Founding Fathers with that of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. One final example of this type of device in Yasuda’s play utilizes the double-meaning of the word “pine,” which possesses a similar double-meaning (“a pine tree” and “to yearn for”) in its Japanese equivalent, *matsu*. In the final lines of the *kyū* section of *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, the *shite* and chorus share a discourse on the spiritual yearning for truth and justice among the world’s oppressed masses, which leads the *shite* to remark in his last line of the play, “all pine from every corner...”<sup>37</sup> Not only is Yasuda paying homage to the double-meaning of the word “pine” across American and Japanese cultural boundaries, but he is inserting a metatheatrical statement that refers to the placement of pine trees at the corners of the traditional Nō stage as well.

After describing his airplane ride from Washington, D.C. to Memphis in a series of verses peppered with allusions to the patriotic song, “America the Beautiful,” the *waki*

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<sup>36</sup> Yasuda, 492.

<sup>37</sup> Yasuda, 506.

chants the *tsukizerifu*, or “arrival speech.” As discussed in Chapter Three, this device often signals the traveling priest’s increasing awareness that the traditional boundaries of space and time have begun to dissolve around him, in advance of the *shite*’s imminent arrival, as he remarks with surprise that the journey has not taken as long as expected. Yasuda’s *waki* makes a similar observation when he states, “Since we have flown so fast, we have arrived at Memphis at sunset.”<sup>38</sup> However, unlike the classical *waki*, his young pastor does not express surprise at this, nor does he conclude that it is perhaps the intensity of his meditation, or the sudden entrance into an alternate dreamscape, that has condensed his travel time. Instead, his early arrival is summarily explained as a result of the power of contemporary transportation technology. Thus, in an attempt to insert an element of American realism into his drama, Yasuda has created a modern, slightly subversive analogue for the speed of the journey in the conventional *tsukizerifu* that is based in scientific rationale, rather than any type of supernatural intervention.

Central to the dramaturgy of any Nō play is the author’s choice of *shite* character, whose emotional journey drives the poetic action at the core of the piece. The *shite* also acts as the repository for the supernatural elements that facilitate the characters’ access into an alternative dreamscape and expose the drama’s philosophical and theological schema. As previously mentioned, Yasuda originally intended to create *Martin Luther King, Jr.* as a play from the *shuramono*, or warrior, category of standardized Nō classification. This designation governs the drama’s ultimate poetic structure, as well as the action of his *shite*. Further, this structure that remains largely intact despite the fact that the playwright later alters the play to conform to the classification of a *kiri* Nō (demon/saint play), transforming King into a late twentieth-century bodhisattva.

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<sup>38</sup> Yasuda, 491.



Yasuda's inspiration for this initial choice was a phrase spoken by Ralph David Abernathy, Dr. King's close friend and ultimate successor in the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), who often described King as "the peaceful warrior."<sup>39</sup> Abernathy's appellation reveals a poignant irony that Yasuda takes full advantage of in the casting of King as a fierce leader of the battle for civil rights in 1960s America, yet a fervent proponent of nonviolent protest, in the mold of Mahatma Gandhi and, of course, Christ himself. Rather than falling heroically in a bloody *mêlée* as is typical of the classical warrior *shite* roles drawn from Japanese literary sources such as the thirteenth-century *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*), Yasuda's drama depicts King's final moment of combat as that of a great spiritual leader on the verge of a transcendent vista of "dreaming forward," his great meditation on peace and equality cruelly cut short by an assassin's bullet.

One of Robert Bethune's most pointed critiques of Yasuda's play is that the author's portrayal of the *shite* figure "is too hagiographic to elicit genuine acceptance."<sup>40</sup> Yet, it must be noted that, while the classical *Nō* is rich in nuance and subtle poetic turns in its representation of the emotional depth of its *shite* roles, the genre has never relied upon a well-balanced, three-dimensional representation of its characters. In fact, the particular personality aspects of the *shite* that are prioritized are the ones that conform to the play's aesthetic themes. Too, classical *Nō* deals with characters who are, by and large, drawn from fiction and legend. Whenever a *shite* is based upon a historical personage, such as the many *Nō* dealing with quasi-legendary Heian poet Ono no Komachi, the portrayal is hardly comprehensive or objective in terms of its basis in historical truth.

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<sup>39</sup> Yasuda, 486.

<sup>40</sup> Bethune, 254.

However, Yasuda's subject is not merely a dynamic, multidimensional character from history, but one culled from recent cultural memory, which further complicates the idealized representation found in his contemporary Nō. The audience confronts the subject matter with its own direct and indirect reminiscences and biases, judging its "truthfulness" accordingly. The playwright weaves a rich tapestry of biographical references and allusions to King's own words, in an attempt to lend a sense of historical truth. But he never sets out to represent the biographical King onstage; instead, he admits that what he wanted to capture in his drama was "a vision of his soul."<sup>41</sup> Yasuda further states,

This vision was close enough to the reality of King to continue promoting insights into his life and honor to his memory. At the same time, that vision was just distant enough, just abstract enough, that I felt it might serve the *shite* role, pointing to the common yearnings of all mankind.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, what Bethune characterizes as a "hagiographic" tone is a reflection of direct authorial intent, of the desire on Yasuda's part not only to create an abstracted theatrical representation of King's essence (thereby supporting Jan Kott's earlier assertion about the Nō's universality) but also to expand his identity from the personal and the historical to the universal.

Yasuda separates his *shite*'s identity into two distinct divisions of standardized Nō characterization: the *maeshite*, usually representing a hidden, obscured version of the *shite*'s persona, who persistently resists naming himself or herself to the *waki*, often out of shame; and the *nohijite*, the *shite*'s fully-manifest spirit, who draws the *waki* into a living dream of his or her memories. Traditionally, the *maeshite* appears in the *ha* section and interacts with the *waki*, then disappears when the priest's questions strike too close to

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<sup>41</sup> Yasuda, 485.

<sup>42</sup> Yasuda, 485.

the heart, only to reappear in a magnificent costume and mask in the final *kyū* section, finally divulging its true identity. In adapting Martin Luther King, Jr. as an American *shite*, Yasuda indicates no standardized mask type for either *maeshite* or *nohijite*, which leaves the reader to wonder if Yasuda therefore suggests that new, original masks should be fashioned for contemporary *Nō*, or if the *shite* role in his drama is meant to be performed without masks at all. The emotional honesty and recent historical nature of the *shite*'s identity would suggest the latter, but Yasuda gives no clues either way in his paratextual markers (introduction, *dramatis personae*, or footnotes). This lack of instruction further complicates the *waki*'s trope of figuratively unmasking the *shite*'s persona, as well as differentiating between the *shite* in the *ha* and *kyū* sections of the play. If there is no visual demarcation between the *maeshite* and *nohijite*, why signify a division of character at all, except as a slavish adherence to the classical *Nō* conventions and structure?

When the *shite* initially appears as an old man in the first *ha* section, he and his companion (*tsure*) praise the natural beauty of Memphis at dusk and sing the Negro spiritual, "Steal Away."<sup>43</sup> But folded within this poetic admiration of the natural world lies a subtle metaphor for the bodhisattva's, and by extension King's, mission. The *shite* exclaims:

How delightful all appears  
in this spring season  
for the aged oak shelters birds  
warbling joyously  
and their morning songs will ring  
from its leafy folds.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Yasuda, 491-2.

<sup>44</sup> Yasuda, 491.

In the same way that “the aged oak shelters birds/warbling joyously,” so does the bodhisattva provide a firm foundation of wisdom and experience for the sentient beings going mindlessly about their lives. In a gesture of self-sacrifice, he suppresses his own sense of self to provide spiritual refuge for those wandering through the world in search of enlightenment. He facilitates the joy and music of those around him, and encourages them to embrace life’s vitality while providing a safe haven to which they may return when the night comes. Sylvia Swain asserts,

This is because the bodhisattva is not an entirely unconscious influence, as are the instinctive archetypes, but is a ‘creation’ at the meeting point of conscious and unconscious – neither a take-over of unconsciousness nor an assertion of wilful [sic] ego-consciousness but an expression of holistic consciousness.<sup>45</sup>

Further extrapolation of this imagery within a Christian context, set against the play’s temporal setting of April/Easter, elucidates potent Crucifixion symbolism as well. The tree, symbolic of the cross within a Christian idiom, provides both liberation and sanctuary at the intersection of life and death, with the promise of spiritual resurrection as manifest by Christ’s own conquering of the grave.

In the second *dan* of the *ha* division, the *waki* asks the *shite* for suggestions for lodging, and the old man suggests the Lorraine Motel, but does not mention its overt connection with the 1968 assassination. He also advocates that the *waki* visit the Bishop Charles Mason Temple Church of God in Christ, “. . . where a famous speech was delivered at that evening meeting a good many years ago,” alluding directly to King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” sermon.<sup>46</sup> The *shite* describes the ominous portents of the weather on that night in 1968, including the historical facts surrounding the tornado

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<sup>45</sup> Swain, 175.

<sup>46</sup> Yasuda, 493.

warning that delayed King's address. Suddenly, the previous beauty of the natural world erupts into a cataclysmic keening for the saint's murder as the supernatural power of the Nō dreamscape begins to manifest itself onstage, a metaphor for the persecution he and his followers have withstood and that which is yet to come. The *shite*'s foreshadowing of the impending tragedy mirrors how the text of King's sermon on that night retroactively reads as an uncanny, prescient predictor of his own looming death.

The *waki* presses the *shite* for more details about the famed oration and its orator, which compels both *shite* and *tsure* to engage in a standard Nō trope of humility, denial, and deflection, designed to prevent the *waki*'s recognition of the *shite* in its ghostly incarnation. Without much persuasion, the *tsure* names King as the famed speaker in question and praises his numerous contributions to the fight for civil rights in the 1960s, but concludes by stating, "He does not want you to mention that he received a Nobel Peace Prize and a few hundred other awards."<sup>47</sup> The *shite* modestly adds, "That isn't important. It does not matter. It really doesn't matter."<sup>48</sup> In addition to redirecting the focus from King's public accolades and fame to the core values of his ministry, the *shite*'s statements quote directly from the final movement of the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, which is literally brought to life onstage within the next section of Yasuda's drama. This characteristic humility inundates the historic text of King's final sermon, whose central theme revolves around the conceit that the fight for equality must continue, with or without him. As Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments and then led the Israelites to the border of the Promised Land of Canaan, but was forbidden from entering with them, King encourages his followers to fight for a

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<sup>47</sup> Yasuda, 494.

<sup>48</sup> Yasuda, 494.

better future that he may never see.<sup>49</sup> At this point in the drama, time and space shift fluidly in a dream projection, into which the supernatural force of the *shite*'s memory draws the *waki*.

As the *shite* embodies his past/true self, the chorus responds to Dr. King's words, quoting the Memphis audience at the Mason Temple that night. This becomes the first instance of a recurring trope of responsive reading common within Protestant Christian religious services that Yasuda metamorphoses during the remainder of the play. An intriguing innovation of the part of Yasuda's dramaturgy, he instills (albeit briefly) the Nō chorus with a specific identity, that of the church crowd in attendance. He thus incorporates a communal voice into the play, drawn from the written transcriptions of Martin Luther King, Jr's speeches, in which editors have chosen to retain the various audience responses as a parenthetical supplement to the primary texts.<sup>50</sup> These responses encompass two types of responsive discourse: impromptu and liturgical; the first is generally a spontaneous outburst of emotion from the crowd, the second is a controlled, unison reply of coded wording based in scripture or the specific worship traditions of a particular religious denomination. In the case of King's Baptist background, moments of emphatic truth during his homilies are accentuated by simultaneous cries of "Go ahead" and "Yes, Doctor," which Yasuda integrates into the dialogue of the Nō chorus in *Martin Luther King, Jr.* Such cries from the chorus also recall the *kakegoe* of Kabuki, in which audience members call out to the actors during the course of a performance.

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<sup>49</sup> King regularly invoked the story of Moses and the Israelite Exodus from Egypt as a motif in his sermons, due to its cultural association with and relevance to the plight of African-Americans in the wake of the nation's tumultuous history with slavery, particularly since the Old Testament story is a standard theme in American Negro spirituals.

<sup>50</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* NY: Grand Central, 2001.

Perhaps the most difficult Nō convention for contemporary American dramatists to adapt to the stage is that of the chorus. According to Donald Keene, the chorus

tak[es] no part in the action. The function of the chorus is to recite for the actors, particularly when they are dancing. Unlike the chorus in a Greek play, it makes no commentary on the action, and is never identified as townsmen, warriors, or demons; the chorus, in fact, has no identity, but exists solely as another voice for the actors.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, whether it serves as a component of a classical Attic tragedy or the newest Broadway musical, Western playwrights and audiences inextricably associate the chorus with dramaturgical functions of identity and commentary, often serving as the surrogate voice of the community-at-large. So, the Nō's separation of the chorus from these theatrical roles into a purely technical function may confound Westerners upon their initial exposure to the classical style. Thus, the chorus is the feature that is routinely excised from extrapolative and interpolative adaptations of Nō like those of Torahiko Kori, Yukio Mishima, and Takeshi Kawamura, which also owe a considerable debt to Western modes of performance as well. By instilling his chorus with a sense of specific persona in *Martin Luther, King, Jr.*, Yasuda therefore innovates the classical Nō style by fusing it with the dramaturgical and performative expectations of his contemporary American audience.

In the midst of the extensive allusive quotation of King's speech, the *waki* declares, "This is the 'Mountaintop Speech' I have learned. Please continue."<sup>52</sup> He initially does not recognize the address in its historical context or the identity of King himself, but the young pastor acknowledges the spoken text of the sermon as if he had studied it formally during his seminary studies. Thus, the spirit of Dr. King learns that his

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<sup>51</sup> Keene, Donald. *Nō: The Classical Theatre of Japan*. Rev. ed. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1973. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Yasuda, 495.

life has had a lasting impact on the world around him and that his message continues to influence and drive a new generation of freedom fighters. This realization is the first step for Yasuda's *shite*, as bodhisattva figure, to begin to extricate himself from the physical world and finally accept the spiritual transcendence that his enlightenment brings. Too, his sermon takes on the aura of a modern-day Christian equivalent of the sutras recited by the traditional *waki*, as Buddhist priest, throughout the Nō canon.

### Dreaming Forward

After being thrust back to 1968 to relive King's speech at the Mason Temple, the third *dan* of the *ha* section of Yasuda's contemporary American Nō continues this theatrical collapse of linear space and time, as past and future intermingle in a startling instance of "dreaming forward." The storm clouds clear the next morning, and the *shite* relives the moment immediately prior to the deadly shooting. Standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, he dreams of a second march on the Capitol in Washington, D.C., destined to eclipse the momentous event five years earlier, during which he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech:

Oh glory, glory,  
for the March on Washington  
makes me visualize  
another one I'm planning  
to lead my people.<sup>53</sup>

This dream mixes details of the 1963 march with a utopian vision of the future, in which throngs of every color, every social class, and every walk of life attend the protest. This is King's dream of America, "a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their

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<sup>53</sup> Yasuda, 496.



skin, but by the content of their character.”<sup>54</sup> No dream of peace for King can exist disengaged from his faith in the power of nonviolent protest – absent from the scene in his dream are the riot-gear-clad soldiers and policemen who fired rubber bullets into the marchers for peace in Birmingham, Alabama, set upon them with attack dogs, and doused them with high-pressure hoses:

Words are the bullets they fire,  
hats are the helmets they wear,  
and shields they hold are the placards  
waving, tossing, swaying,  
above the rippling multitudes...<sup>55</sup>

Dr. King, utilizing the transformative aesthetic of the *Nō*, metamorphoses the world by virtue of his re-imagining it according to his own devices.

However, Yasuda signals the temporal displacement that occurs in this section by reversing the dialogue patterns established in the previous *dan*, thereby expanding his innovations of the choral function. While King is engaged in the “forward dreaming” of the march that unfortunately will never come to pass, thus fulfilling his prophecies likening himself to Moses on the verge of Canaan’s borders, the chorus speaks the lines that would normally be attributed to the *shite*. The *shite*, conversely, only interrupts the glorious vision that unfolds around him in order to chant refrains from the Negro spirituals that filled the air at the 1963 March on Washington, and to repeat his watchword, “I HAVE A DREAM/I HAVE A DREAM TODAY.”<sup>56</sup> On one hand, this dramaturgical innovation strengthens the communal voice of the American people, transforming them into a multitude of Kings, each dedicated to guaranteeing that his

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<sup>54</sup> King, 85.

<sup>55</sup> Yasuda, 497.

<sup>56</sup> Yasuda, 498.

dream comes to fruition. On the other, the reversal signals that the conventions of the Nō have been eerily upended, and this dream is a fictitious distortion.

It is precisely at this moment that the dream is interrupted by reality, and the *shite* recounts the terrifying details of his own murder, which evokes similarities to a traditional warrior Nō play. Yasuda contrasts the “dark horror” of the shooting with images of golden light “from the mountaintop” enshrouding Dr. King, as heaven welcomes him.<sup>57</sup> As the angels from the Negro spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” beckon King to accompany them to eternal bliss, the *shite* establishes his true nature as a Christian bodhisattva:

Mine eyes can see the splendor  
of the promised land  
where all are free and equal.  
I’m really not a dreamer,  
but I have a dream.<sup>58</sup>

To this image of the Baptist minister and civil rights leader rejecting transcendence in favor of continuing to fight for a humble view of a better world, the chorus adds, “So he wishes you a dream...”<sup>59</sup> This series of lines seems to be directed at the *waki*, in whom the *shite* endows the dream, hoping that he will carry Dr. King’s standard into the future, thereby making possible his interrupted dream for America. After an extended *nakairi*, or interlude, during which a *kyōgen* role provides the biographical details of Dr. King’s life and affirms that the vision observed by the *waki* must be his spirit, the young pastor travels to the Mason Temple in order to light a candle for the slain martyr and to “await the dream.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Yasuda, 499.

<sup>58</sup> Yasuda, 499.

<sup>59</sup> Yasuda, 499.

<sup>60</sup> Yasuda, 504.

When the *shite* appears as a *nohijite*, he does not engage in a vibrant *shimai*, or final dance, but rather sits in stillness, facing the audience. To the *waki*, he imparts:

As this world is full of dreams,  
what you see you dream,  
what you dream is my vision  
in a form like this...<sup>61</sup>

He actively transports the *waki* into a shared lucid dream state, which is colored at first by an allusive repetition by both *waki* and *shite* (an echoing mantra from the spectral plane) from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), that "April is the cruellest month."<sup>62</sup> Once more, Yasuda expands the temporal motif of the play's setting to include a further permutation of April's literary and philosophical significance by citing this epic Modernist poem, in essence embodying Eliot's sense that spring "breed[s]/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire..."<sup>63</sup> Not only does Yasuda once more invoke the resonance of Whitman's mournful lilacs (repeated by the chorus moments later), he creates an intertextual bridge for the knowing reader between his play and Eliot's poem, not by direct quotation but rather by subtle association, inference, and textual extension. In doing so, he uncovers a near-perfect descriptor of the classical Nō aesthetic and its temporal and experiential fluidity ("mixing memory and desire"). Eliot's quest to find respite from the existential modern cry of a fragmented, wounded world devoid of heroes leads him to accidental encounters with a series of wounded kings (the Fisher King from Arthurian legend and Christ are the primary examples), thus mirroring Yasuda's *waki*'s pilgrimage and its inadvertent, fortuitous discovery of a twentieth-century "King." Thus, with a single allusive reference, he appropriates Eliot's own complex, ever expanding and

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<sup>61</sup> Yasuda, 504.

<sup>62</sup> Yasuda, 504.

<sup>63</sup> Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. NY: Norton, 2001. 5, lines 1-3.

contracting imagery associated with the ironic simultaneity of death and rebirth found in April/spring/Easter season, transforming tropes of assassination (Christ, Lincoln, King) into liberation hymns of holy sacrifice.

In the midst of this scene, the *waki* finally realizes the true identity of the *shite* and names him: “Now I find out who you are./Oh Lord, your name is King....”<sup>64</sup> This inevitable moment of naming is not only an integral turning point in the dramaturgy of the conventional structure of the *Nō*, it is also at this moment that Yasuda’s ultimate reclassification of *Martin Luther King, Jr.* from warrior play (*shuramono*) to saint play (*kiri Nō*) begins to solidify.<sup>65</sup> This recognition does not trigger a theatrical shift in the action, in which the *shite* transforms into a majestic Heike warrior in full combat dress parading across the stage, re-enacting his final acts of glory. Instead, the *nohijite* projects his dream of social and spiritual battles already fought and those yet to win, drawing both *waki* and audience into an intense moment of prophetic revelation. According to Zeami, in his treatise *Sandō* (*The Three Elements in Composing a Play*, c. 1423), the transition that Yasuda attempts is a natural extension of basic *Nō* dramaturgy: “Demon plays show the quality of Delicacy within Strength. These plays derive from the warrior plays. In them, the *shite* has the appearance of a demon but the heart of a man.”<sup>66</sup> As saint plays occupy the same category as warrior plays, the same literary derivation applies to them.<sup>67</sup> Zeami implies that the aesthetic conceit of “Delicacy within Strength” injects a deeply human emotional response into the supernatural exterior, whether that

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<sup>64</sup> Yasuda, 505.

<sup>65</sup> The designations that Yasuda uses are based on the five traditional categories into which the *Nō* canon is generally divided. In his introduction to *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, he specifically identifies the shift from 2<sup>nd</sup> category (*shuramono* – warrior *Nō*) to 5<sup>th</sup> category (*kiri Nō* – demon/saint *Nō*).

<sup>66</sup> Zeami. *On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*. Trans. J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazuki Masakazu. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984. 157.

<sup>67</sup> Yasuda, 488.

outer façade is wild like a demon or serene like a saint. Thus, in the case of a saint play like Yasuda's Nō that features a bodhisattva as its *shite*, the role's spiritual double nature is suppressed so that its human qualities and memories may be accentuated over its embodiment as an enlightened being. In the case of *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, the role's continued sense of humility and altruism certainly epitomize this quality.

Despite the fact that the play ultimately transforms into a play of the demon/saint category, the language Yasuda chooses to accentuate King's dialogue, particularly his choice of allusive material, retains many military elements of the warrior category that are preserved even through the final *kyū*. The *shite* cites lyrics from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," a patriotic song that recurs time and again as a cornerstone of the historical King's speeches, as he performs the drama's final elegant, invigorating dance (*hayamai*).<sup>68,69</sup> In a moment of clever metatheatrical resonance, Yasuda pairs the lyric "He is trampling out/the vintage from the harvest/where the grapes of wrath are stored..." with the performative action of the disciplined stomping associated with Nō dance choreography.<sup>70</sup> While the *shite* wears no battle armor, he still sings of God's "terrible swift sword." The clarion call of "sound[ing] forth the trumpets/that shall never call retreat..." accompanies the truth that "is marching on."<sup>71</sup> And, like troops following a great general, the chorus sings of the *shite*'s legacy:

as we chant and march ahead,  
marching, shouting joyously,  
all together, side by side,

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<sup>68</sup> Yasuda, 572.

<sup>69</sup> The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is itself an adaptation of "John Brown's Body," a marching song from the American Civil War, which celebrates the eternal nature of the soul of hanged abolitionist John Brown, as well as the endurance of the dream of freedom from slavery for which he died. Thus, metaphorically, the "Battle Hymn's" relevance to the dream and ministry of Dr. King is shared by its metatextual relationship to its prototextual antecedent.

<sup>70</sup> Yasuda, 505.

<sup>71</sup> Yasuda, 506.

he's let us see the promised land,  
he's let us lie down in green pastures,  
beside the still waters,  
and we go up to the mountaintop  
as he ascends into heaven  
graciously with a saintly air  
at April daybreak...<sup>72</sup>

Echoing Psalm 23, the chorus accentuates Dr. King's saintly qualities, attributing his spiritual shepherding as the leadership that brought them to the peace of "still waters." The language of battle turns to that of eternal rest, and victory manifests itself in the ascension of Dr. King, which is performed onstage as the *shite* "exits, with slightly bended knees, across the Nō bridge. As he disappears behind the five-colored brocade curtain, he straightens up, as if he is ascending to heaven upon the five rainbow-colored clouds."<sup>73</sup>

In this final movement of Yasuda's play, Dr. King as bodhisattva figure adheres to the conventional dramaturgy of the Nō and exits the stage in a metaphorical moment that implies the *shite*'s spiritual liberation from the earthly plane to nirvana. However, unlike that of the traditional Nō, the *shite*'s transcendence is not due to any intercessory action on the part of the drama's *waki* role. While the young pastor does execute a spiritual sacrament by lighting a candle to the ghostly incarnation of Dr. King at the Mason Temple, there is no direct plea from the *shite* to pray for its freedom nor does there exist a need for the spirit's immediate exorcism. In fact, Yasuda's dramaturgy inverts this dynamic between *waki* and *shite* and implies that the words and actions of the *shite* are the vehicles for the emancipation of the *waki* and the chorus, and by extension, the audience as well. The play's dreamscape serves as a sort of testing ground for the

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<sup>72</sup> Yasuda, 507.

<sup>73</sup> Yasuda, 507.

*waki*, to determine whether he is worthy to carry on the standard of Dr. King's dream into the next generation, to ensure that his ideals will live on. Thus, while the play ultimately results in the *shite*'s transfiguration, its focus appears to concentrate upon the rite of passage undertaken by the unnamed *waki*, who could in essence be a surrogate for any audience member touched by the play and its message, and his subsequent transformation into a novice who has been guided onto the bodhisattva path, in hopes that he will become America's next "peaceful warrior."

### A Performance Proposal

As an attempt to adapt the style and structure of classical Japanese theatre into a twentieth-century idiom, Kenneth Yasuda's *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Nō Play* succeeds on many levels. It illustrates that appropriate *shite* figures may exist within American popular culture, and that such characters possess the poetic resonance necessary to elevate the form's apparent lack of narrative to a level in which potent theatrical imagery does not supplant, but rather coalesces with, traditional Western dramaturgical values. Yasuda integrates contemporary theme, allusion, and characterization into a piece of dramatic literature that fuses classical and modern, one that maintains the Buddhist nature of the transformative aesthetic of the Nō's world of dreams, without necessarily conforming to its specific theological tenets. Nevertheless, the play's chief failures lie in the arena of its performative qualities. Regardless of its textual strengths, the sense of intercultural dichotomy and alienation that arises from placing a recognizable American character within the strict stage traditions of the Nō may be too much dissonance for Western audiences to overcome.

Yet, one could adapt the play's text, with relatively little alteration to Yasuda's dialogue, into a primarily American performance idiom, borrowing core aspects of Nō's acting conventions and minimal stagecraft, while intermingling them with identifiable elements of musical theatre and alternative performance style. Indeed, contemporary movement-based acting techniques such as those espoused by avant-garde directors such as Anne Bogart, Tadashi Suzuki, and Robert Wilson, all owe much of their aesthetic dynamic to the deliberate physical discipline of Nō; Suzuki and Bogart openly acknowledge this debt in their own published treatises on theatre. Therefore, application of such practical theories and systems of performance to a production of Yasuda's play might not only illuminate it in a refreshing way, but continue to pay homage to the Nō style through a secondary degree of theatrical influence.

First and foremost, the infusion of an African-American gospel sensibility to the performance of the text might realign the text with its religious ideology and the specific social context of its *shite* and *waki* roles. In such a performance, which would share similarities with Lee Breuer's *The Gospel at Colonus*, the chorus could be reinterpreted as a Southern church choir; Yasuda's repositioning of the Nō chorus's function to include commentary on the action and a communal voice, particularly in the responsive reading sections of the *ha* section, already facilitates such a contextual transition. A skilled director and design team could even accentuate aspects of Nō staging through the subtle inclusion and choreography of church fans carefully placed among the chorus to suggest the versatility of the prop's nature already enmeshed within the classical Japanese performance milieu.



Such textual accentuations and amplifications would suggest the need for the composition of an original musical score in the gospel style to accompany the spoken and sung text, but since so much of Yasuda's choral dialogue derives from allusions to hymns, patriotic songs, and Negro spirituals, this undertaking could be easily extrapolated from the text as written. As the stage setting (both the theatrical and the textual) is integral to the Nō's meaning and its artistic expression, the transfer to a Black gospel idiom would demand that the Nō stage, originally resembling the architecture of a Shinto shrine, would need to transform itself into a similar theatrical configuration that appropriates the structural design of an American church. The tree on the back wall of the Nō stage could easily be replaced, with an equivalent retention of symbolic potency (albeit of a different associative nature) with the Christian symbol of a cross suspended above a pulpit. In much the same way as the figurative function performed by the traditional painted *matsu*, this Christian "tree" signifies the locale as an intersection of life and death, of the natural and the supernatural, of the past and the present, of the ephemeral and the eternal.

These few examples of the potential adaptability of Yasuda's text in performance exhibit that, while there is a textual strength present in the composition of *Martin Luther King, Jr.* in a strict stylistic homage to classical Japanese Nō, it lacks the versatility to bridge the gap in order for contemporary audiences to relate to the subject matter in a visceral way. Yasuda's approach to the text is academically sound (if not, at times, brilliantly poignant) as literature, but his slavish attempts to insert the innately American characters and themes into a series of rigid traditional Japanese performance traditions severs their ability to mediate between past and present, thus crippling the metatextual

process. Thus, by approaching the specific prototextual markers that identify the Nō style with a broader dramaturgical perspective, one that incorporates other literary and performative traditions that might seem more familiar to the intended audience, a dramatist frees himself or herself to create a contemporary work of Nō theatre that simultaneously pays homage to classical convention while it innovates the form. Deborah Brevoort excels at this strategy in her composition of *Blue Moon Over Memphis*, which shares many of the literary strengths of Yasuda's adaptation, while at the same time innovates and energizes her subject matter with theatrical vitality.

“Are You Lonesome Tonight?”: The Cult of Hero Worship in *Blue Moon Over Memphis*

Deborah Brevoort directly addresses the cult of hero worship that attached itself to the persona of Elvis Presley – historical and fictional, as well as living and posthumous – in her 2003 contemporary American Nō drama *Blue Moon Over Memphis*. Originally drafted in 1992 as *Blue Moon Over Graceland*, Brevoort's play appropriates the classical Nō structure and conventions as a framing device through which to express her theatrical vision. However, unlike Kenneth Yasuda, she takes a much more relaxed approach in her interpretation and dramaturgical application of the Nō aesthetic and its textual principles. As a working theatre artist, rather than a scholar, Brevoort's aims to compose an emotionally satisfying drama that echoes the Nō without being held prisoner by its conventions. In doing so, she creates a stylistic homage to the Japanese form that emerges as a unique theatrical experience on the page and in performance, fusing past and present, tradition and innovation.

*Blue Moon Over Memphis* is only the most recent in a series of dramatic adaptations of classical form and theme attempted by Brevoort. While the majority of her produced play scripts to date depict the history and culture of her native Alaska, a significant portion of her *oeuvre* features contemporary spins on recognizable canonical theatrical genres. She has written a Feydeau-inspired backstage farce about the former Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution (*The Velvet Weapon*, 2010), a Handel-esque Christmas oratorio about a true story from the Bering Sea (*King Island Christmas*, 1999), and a magical-realist American road trip comedy based upon the Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah (*Signs of Life*, 2004). However, the work for which she is currently best known is *The Women of Lockerbie* (2000), a heartbreaking exploration of the nature of grief and forgiveness based on the events surrounding the 1988 Pan Am 103 terrorist bombing over Scotland, told through the stylistic frame of a classical Greek tragedy.<sup>74</sup> In this drama, she integrates structural components of the Greek tragic form (episodes, dialogue, choral odes) into the paratextual scenic divisions/indicators and even borrows associative resonance from the ancient Greek canon through the play's title, which evokes correlations with Euripides' *The Trojan Women* and *The Phoenician Women*, Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis*, as well as separate versions of *The Suppliant Women* by both Euripides and Aeschylus.

Brevoort's attraction to adapting classical forms and styles is simple and direct: "They work. The structure is tested, and proven."<sup>75</sup> Yet she admits an aversion to the idea of adapting a form "just for form's sake"; she insists, "The material I am working with

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<sup>74</sup> Brevoort, Deborah. "The Women of Lockerbie." *New Dramatists 2001: Best Plays by the Graduating Class*. Ed. Todd London. Hanover, NH: Smith Kraus, 2002. 199-265.

<sup>75</sup> Brevoort, Deborah. Personal email interview. 8 Feb. 2011.

has to ‘suggest’ the form – otherwise it won’t work.”<sup>76</sup> In a 2008 keynote address to the students of Goddard College, she describes the writing process behind the creation of *Blue Moon* and *Lockerbie* in detail, comparing and contrasting the roles of convention and innovation in the dramaturgy of these two works. Early on in the process of composing a preliminary draft of *Blue Moon Over Memphis* as a graduate playwriting student at Brown University, she was forced to confront her own prejudices as an American playwright. Describing her initial research and brainstorming of the play in a Nō style, she felt as though she were “painting by numbers,” but as she began to imitate the formal elements laid down by Zeami in the fourteenth century, she came to realize some of the specific challenges of the adaptive process:

This very approach to writing is anathema in America. We believe that artists should never follow the rules, we should break them! Artists should never imitate, artists should innovate! Imitation in America is always discouraged; it runs counter to our ideas of freedom and originality. But the process of imitating and copying the Noh drama launched me on an unexpected journey that was characterized by freedom – it was the most liberating experience I had ever had as a writer – and also by originality. I think that of all the works I have written my Noh [d]rama about Elvis is probably the most innovative and original.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, by adhering to the traditional form and structures of the Japanese Nō – as she perceived them – early on in her career, she discovers the contradiction of extreme discipline as a liberating force in her writing, a lesson she has applied to the creation of many other dramas since.

The plot of *Blue Moon Over Memphis* revolves around a middle-aged secretary from Cleveland named Judy who journeys to Graceland on the eve of the fifteenth anniversary of Elvis’s death. She hopes to hold a vigil by his graveside at the hour of his

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<sup>76</sup> Brevoort, 2011 email interview.

<sup>77</sup> Brevoort, Deborah. “Convention/Innovation.” MFA in Creative Writing Residency. Goddard College, Plainfield, VT. June 2008. Keynote address.

death, in order to express her devotion to his memory. When she arrives, she is barred from approaching the grave by members of the Memphis Mafia (Elvis's close friends and bodyguards) and by the swelling throngs of other fans outside the gates of the estate. In a tearful moment of solitude, she sings softly to the moon, and the *maeshite* (a heavy-set, older African-American man dressed in Elvis's infamous Las Vegas white polyester pantsuit) emerges, as if summoned by her reverie. He opens the gate of the Meditation Garden, allowing Judy to sit next to the grave, and she reveals to him that she always viewed Elvis as a lonely soul, much like herself. This revelation, coupled with Judy's inquiry as to his name, moves the *maeshite* to disappear suddenly. After a comical *kyōgen* interlude featuring Oscar, a lecherous groundskeeper who derides the mania exhibited by the fans and rejects the urban legends surrounding continued "Elvis sightings." As the hour of Elvis's death tolls, the *nochijte* appears directly to Judy, an incarnation of the young Elvis. They share a moment of intense, soulful solidarity, and then he disappears as the blue moon overhead fades in the coming rays of dawn.

An analysis of the text of *Blue Moon Over Memphis* shows that, while Brevoort does not engage in a strict line-by-line imitation of the *Nō* style, as does Kenneth Yasuda, she attempts to follow the external manifestations of the classical form's primary aesthetic principles, while merging them with innovative dramaturgical tactics that highlight the *Nō*'s power for a modern audience. Taking a cue from the early twentieth-century stylistic experiments of Yeats and Pound, she eschews naturalism in her adaptation and embraces the *Nō*'s nonlinear, fantastic dream logic. She expands the doubling usually associated with the *shite*'s divided persona by applying it to the entire cast of characters in a strategy that reflects the form's psychological foreshadowing of

Freud's and Jung's theories of the hidden self that manifests itself in the supernatural arena of the Uncanny or the primitive myth-based archetypes of the repressed mind. These psychological divisions also unveil the potential to regard the dramatist's *shite* as a modified bodhisattva figure, using Yasuda's earlier reinterpretation of Dr. King as a guide. However, her bodhisattva engages in a dedicated mission to heal the specific spiritual pain of a single individual, rather than a more universal goal of bringing enlightenment to all of mankind. In the end, Brevoort creates an emotionally powerful work that may be closer in tone to Mishima's loose modernizations of the Nō and its conventions, but still engages in the adaptive strategy of stylistic homage.

Brevoort sets the play's dramatic action in the Meditation Garden of Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee, on the evening of the fifteenth anniversary of Elvis Presley's death (August 16, 1977). Unlike Yasuda, she does not intend for the play to be performed on a traditional Nō stage, with Nō masks and costumes, as such staging would potentially alienate the audience from its American subject matter.<sup>78,79</sup> However, her dramaturgical objectives do not divorce the play from its traditional Nō aesthetic, either. She indicates in the opening stage directions that the stage setting should be as minimal as possible, in order to emulate the spare production values of a standard Nō performance, complete with a bridge leading off upstage right, serving as a twenty-first-century surrogate for the *hashigakari*. Stylized props representing iconic architectural components from Graceland, "which should not be of realistic size or proportion," are to be brought onto the stage at various points during the action: the Music Gate, Elvis's Grave, and the

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<sup>78</sup> Brevoort, "Blue Moon," 50, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Intriguingly, as of summer 2011, Brevoort has indicated that plans are in effect to adapt her text into a fully, traditional Nō performance, and that she is currently collaborating with composers in Tokyo in order to create a score for the production. (Source: Personal email correspondence, dated 9 Feb. 2011)

Eternal Flame.<sup>80</sup> In deference to the poetic resonance connected with the painted *matsu* on the back wall of a Japanese Nō stage, Brevoort transforms the Japanese symbol into an American Southern analogue: “On the back wall of the stage is a stylized painting of a tree. The tree could be a magnolia or dogwood tree, or some other tree found in the American South.”<sup>81</sup>

The physical inclusion of the painted tree on the back wall further suggests that Brevoort also wishes to honor the conceptual aspects of the Nō setting, which opens up the characters’ perception to a world in which supernatural incursion can and does occur, and that the boundaries between life and death, flesh and spirit, past and present, are fully malleable, given the proper set of circumstances. Perhaps one of the most intriguing, possibly coincidental, echoes of classical Nō dramaturgy that exists in *Blue Moon Over Memphis* is the fact that it takes place in “Graceland.” Brevoort maintains that Graceland is “a shine. A gravesite. A place where ghosts appear. People make pilgrimages to Graceland, just like they do in traditional Noh plays.”<sup>82</sup> Further, while much heated debate still exists among Japanese scholars about how to translate the Muromachi aesthetic principle of *yūgen* adequately, Donald Keene asserts that in Zeami’s day, the meaning of the word, as applied to performances such as the Nō, most likely referred to a quality of “elegance” or “grace.”<sup>83</sup> J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu uphold this translation in their 1984 translation of Zeami’s treatises.<sup>84</sup> Although *yūgen* expresses so much more about the hidden, mysterious, unnamable facets of the Nō and its artistry than can be captured in a simple act of translation, this basic sense of elegance pervades every

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<sup>80</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 52-53.

<sup>81</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 52.

<sup>82</sup> Brevoort, Deborah. Personal email interview. 18 Jan. 2006.

<sup>83</sup> Keene, *Nō*, 22-23.

<sup>84</sup> Zeami, xxiii.

aspect of the disciplined, effortless movements and subtle emotional transitions that the actors in a Nō performance convey, as breathlessly captured in the nineteenth chapter of Mishima's *Runaway Horses*. By setting her drama in a "Grace-land" – both as a historical, geographical construct and as an ideological one as well – Brevoort welcomes the audience into a illusory dream world in which the rough properties of the realistic outside world are smoothed over and in which spiritual transcendence is not only possible; it is an inevitable end result of the theatrical paradigm of the Nō.

Brevoort complies with the standard *dramatis personae* of the Nō when creating the role types that her characters will enact within the drama; there is one major exception, however. She divides each of these roles in two, mirroring and expanding the conventional division between *maeshite* and *nohijite*. Two actors perform the role of Judy, the *waki* – one is silent, yet provides all of the character's physical movement; one speaks all of the character's lines, but remains seated on a bench at the back of the stage. One could technically regard the silent Judy as a *waki-tsure* role, but such a conceit diminishes its relation to the power of Brevoort's other doublings throughout the cast. This tactic parallels the traditional Nō chorus when it speaks or repeats the lines of the *shite* during demanding dance sections of the performance. Like that in Yasuda's contemporary Nō, the voice of Brevoort's chorus takes on a communal function, interacting with characters and commenting on the events played out on stage. Yet, she divides it into two sub-choruses of three actors apiece: the Fans and the Memphis Mafia.<sup>85</sup> Each of these chorus groups perform distinctly different tasks throughout the

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<sup>85</sup> The "Memphis Mafia" is the derisive nickname for a group of Elvis's friends who acted as his bodyguards and constant companions. In recent years, they have become the subject of intense criticism as the primary negative influence over the last years of Elvis's life, serving as drug dealers, pimps, etc., who collected paychecks while driving him deeper into despair. Many regard these hangers-on as the root cause



drama, but most often act as antagonist forces preventing Judy from attaining her dreams without the intervention of the *shite*. This tactic of doubling even transforms the customary division of the *shite* role. She does not merely split the role into the disguised self and the exposed self; she casts distinctly separate actors to play *maeshite* and *nohijite*. In her production notes, Brevoort implies that her drama should be performed without masks, and that this double-casting is a “nod” to the traditional convention: “Not only does having a black actor serve to mask the identity of Elvis, it is also my own small way of acknowledging the African-American community from whom Elvis took most of his music.”<sup>86</sup> As an additional homage to Nō stagecraft, she even includes a *kōken* role, a stagehand who traditionally assists with costume and prop shifts in classical Nō performance, to act as a contemporary stage manager.

The play opens with a jarring metatheatrical moment in which this *kōken* announces to the cast, “Places!” As the two actors portraying Judy enter along the converted *hashigakari*, the Fans provide a communal, unison voice as they speak the opening *nanori* (naming speech) that introduces the *waki* and her journey to Memphis. In this midst of this speech, the first of several allusions to Elvis’s music occurs: “I’ve never been to Graceland before. It’s a trip I’ve always wanted to make. *It’s now or never*. I’m 40 years old, I’m not getting any younger.”<sup>87</sup> Much like the ghost of Lady Murasaki’s quotation of the chapter titles of her *Genji monogatari* in the Nō play *Genji kuyō*, Deborah Brevoort permeates the text of *Blue Moon Over Memphis* with titles and lyrics of the songs that have entrenched themselves in Judy’s heart and drawn her to the

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for the musician’s death. This takes on added resonance in the context of Brevoort’s play, as Presley is portrayed as tragically lonely, despite the constant presence of this group of inattentive attendants, creating a travesty of the function of the *tsure* roles that accompany the *shite* in the classical Nō.

<sup>86</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 87.

<sup>87</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 53. Emphasis mine.

encounter at the core of the drama. Additionally, the driving, insistent quality of the lyrics to the 1960 recording “It’s Now or Never” adds a sense of urgency to the character’s motivation and elevates the importance of her Memphis escapade.

In the unison speech by the Fans that follows this allusive reference, the chorus again acts as Judy’s mouthpiece and establishes a recurring metaphorical trope that is necessary for the play’s aesthetic to align with that of the classical Nō: “My dream trip to Graceland doesn’t begin until the moon rises before me on the highway and I leave the city behind.”<sup>88</sup> Throughout the text of *Blue Moon Over Memphis*, the *waki* makes numerous references to the dreamlike quality of her journey, and of her life in general. By the end of the play, the audience learns that the introverted Judy has lived her entire life inside of her Elvis-fueled imagination, and the *shite* urges her to escape the prison of her mind, and embrace the fullness of existence while she still lives. In the same way that the classical *waki*, as wandering Buddhist priest, seeks out some holy place, Judy’s destination is a shrine of undeniably secular origin. However, her acts of meditation are no less transformative.

In her introductory notes to the play, Deborah Brevoort seeks to capture a contemporary parallel to the Buddhist meditative state: “I found my answer in pop culture, because it is the only culture that all people in America share by virtue of the fact that it invades everyone’s homes and cars through radio and television. Elvis is the King of pop culture...”<sup>89</sup> This statement by the playwright also leads to clues that uncover her rationale for choosing Elvis Presley as her *shite* character. She insists that the Nō engages its audiences in a meditative state that is separate and apart from the need for narrative

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<sup>88</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 54.

<sup>89</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 49.

plot development, as it is understood in Aristotelian terms in the West. Thus, the “story” of the play must be one that the audience knows before it begins. Thus, in the same way that Yasuda was attracted to the persona of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., she was drawn to the identity of her *shite* in *Blue Moon Over Memphis* because:

Elvis was the only pop culture persona that everyone knew. My mother knew him, as did my Eskimo friend who is a seal hunter in the Bering Sea. I wanted to write a Noh drama about someone who everyone in America would know. I didn’t want to tell a story, so I had to choose someone whose story was known by all.<sup>90</sup>

Placing Elvis at the core of her contemporary Nō opens it up to international appeal and intercultural relevance, as well. Even at the height of his literary career, Yukio Mishima envied Elvis’s superstar status; he answered a questionnaire for *Bungei* magazine in 1963, responding that the person he would most like to be was “Elvis Presley.”<sup>91</sup>

Like Yasuda, Brevoort infuses an element of realism into the *michiyuki* and *tsukizerifu* of the *waki*’s travels, providing a logical modern rationale as the suddenness of her arrival. Judy drives into Memphis at the liminal intersection of daybreak, after “do[ing] 70 all the way.”<sup>92</sup> At dusk the next evening, yet another middle ground between day and night, Judy finally makes the trek to Graceland. She joins the Fans in a communal recitation of their fondest memories of Elvis, as they stand outside the Music Gate. While they finish each other’s thoughts and share common stories, she reminisces separately, “Whenever he sang a love song, I felt like he was singing to me.”<sup>93</sup> She is soon ridiculed by the other Fans, who rebuff her by stating, “Everyone feels like they’re special,” and then engage in the first of several pieces of Nō-inspired choreography that

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<sup>90</sup> Brevoort, 2006 email interview.

<sup>91</sup> Hijiya-Kirschner, Irmela. Rev. of *Deadly Dialectics: Sex, Violence, and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima* by Roy Starrs. *Journal of Japanese Studies* 22.1 (1996): 177-82. 177.

<sup>92</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 54.

<sup>93</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 56.

pervade the play's structure, the "Fan Dance."<sup>94</sup> In addition to playing with the double-meaning of the word "fan," which also conjures images of classical Nō costumes and props, Brevoort inserts a textual series of comparisons between the hardships that Judy feels she has suffered to arrive at this sacred place, and this point in her life. The Fans are joined in their recitation by the second chorus, the Memphis Mafia, who seek to belittle Judy's sense of emotional entitlement by recounting the stories of other fans from across America whose journeys to Graceland mirror her own. Performatively, the spoken text is accompanied by a single Fan performing "the hand and body gestures exhibited by women at his concerts."<sup>95</sup> By providing the chorus with a choreographic function, Brevoort extrapolates the movement vocabulary usually confined to the *shite* into that of the chorus, which traditionally remains motionless at the side of the stage. One may interpret this innovation as her suggestion that the extreme influence of her *shite* has infiltrated each and every one of the role types in the play and has now become a part of their collective unconscious and even their basic physical expression. Much in the same way, Elvis's presence is felt throughout contemporary popular culture, whether as instantly recognizable comic parody on television, within the burning sensuality of the swiveling hips of the newest boy band on the music charts, or as the basis for a Cirque du Soleil acrobatic extravaganza in Las Vegas.

After the "Fan Dance" concludes, Judy is left alone onstage to contemplate her own humility and solitude. After a moment, the Man, Brevoort's *maeshite*, interrupts Judy's trancelike meditation and claims to have heard someone singing the lyrics to his favorite song, "Unchained Melody," the second major musical allusion in the play. Not

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<sup>94</sup> Brevoort, "Blue Moon," 57.

<sup>95</sup> Brevoort, "Blue Moon," 86.

only does the Man exhibit a supernatural ability to appear to read Judy's mind at this moment – she claims to have been thinking about the song, but not singing it aloud – but the choice of lyrics he quotes to her (“Time goes by so slowly...”) signals the transformative impact on the flow of linear time and space that is initiated by the *shite*'s appearance in the classical Nō.<sup>96</sup> He opens the Music Gate for Judy and allows her to enter the inner sanctum of Graceland's Meditation Garden, where Elvis is buried. In doing so, he exhibits behavior epitomizing the *shite*'s desire for secrecy from detection of his identity by exclaiming, “I don't want the others to see!”<sup>97</sup> Judy crosses the threshold into the site of Elvis's interment at the beckoning of the Man, which isolates and differentiates her from the other Fans.

She distinguishes herself further after the conclusion of the play's next dance section (“The Dance of Many Elvises”), performed by the Man and spoken by the two choruses, led by the members of the Memphis Mafia. This dance, prompted by the Man's question “Which Elvis Presley did you like?”, catalogs the various sociocultural archetypes that Elvis portrayed throughout his life: Elvis from Tupelo, Elvis the Pelvis, Elvis the Sensuous Cyclone, Private Presley, Elvis of Hollywood, “Fire Eyes,” and “Memphis Flash,” and “The man/who grew tired of being Elvis Presley/and died one night/from an overdose of drugs.”<sup>98</sup> Judy points out that the list is incomplete and lacks one more Elvis, “The lonely Elvis. The Elvis who walked a lonely street... That's the Elvis I know best of all”<sup>99</sup> With this, the *shite* subtly expresses his surprise at her recognition of his true identity, that of “the Blue Moon Boy,” the forlorn wandering spirit

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<sup>96</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 60.

<sup>97</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 61.

<sup>98</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 63-65.

<sup>99</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 65.

who “has not yet found his resting place,” and disappears from view.<sup>100</sup> In this single instance, Brevoort’s two primary poetic symbols, the moon and the color blue, intersect within the rightful ideological locus of the play, the secret identity of the *shite*. Thus, the playwright establishes the *shite*’s supernatural purpose for haunting the “shrine” at Graceland, one that echoes the Buddhist prohibition against “clinging” to the world, and sets into motion the trajectory that will drive the *kyū* section of her play, despite the fact that she ultimately resists endowing the drama’s conclusion with a clear resolution.

After a brief comical interlude featuring the *kyōgen* character of Oscar the groundskeeper, the final section of the play unfolds, in which the *nochijite* – the true, fully revealed incarnation of Elvis – appears to Judy to share a brief moment of spiritual resonance. Yet one must not dismiss the value of the interlude, which consists largely of crude sexual jokes and a complete inversion of the sense of *mono no aware* (“sensitivity to things”) established in the previous encounter between Judy and the Man. As Deborah Brevoort discovers during the course of her composition of the play, the rough qualities of the *kyōgen* interludes, which often seem incompatible with the tone of the rest of a Nō drama, serve a vital purpose to the dramaturgy of the style, whether in its classical or in a contemporary incarnation:

It’s because laughter is a necessary step to catharsis. You can’t arrive at the moment of deep weeping, which is required at the end of a Noh drama, without it. Laughter shakes open the human heart. It prepares the heart for weeping. And there is a direct proportion between the depth of the laughter and the depth of the weeping. The lower you go with humor, the more your audience will laugh and the more they will ultimately weep. The form told me this secret.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 66.

<sup>101</sup> Brevoort, “Convention/Innovation.”

Brevoort even infuses a moment in which Oscar commits an act of relative blasphemy, according to the play's system of spiritual devotion to the memory of Presley, with a sense of tonal poignancy, as a dissonant parody of the previous scene. He squats upon Elvis's memorial stone to rest, wiping his brow with a pair of panties, and then jumps up to twitch his leg and swivel his pelvis directly on the grave. In the midst of this distorted perversion of the "true image" of Elvis, which will imminently appear, he too stops to look up at the blue moon overhead, and attributes the night's unusual occurrences to its presence in the sky.<sup>102</sup> Even his raging against the tabloid depictions of posthumous Elvis sightings seems to point to the possible interpretation of the drama's *shite* as a form of bodhisattva, whose sustained presence in the world continues to bestow inspiration on the crazed masses who currently swarm outside the Memphis mansion's gates.

### The Blue Moon Boy

Oscar's exit signals the beginning of the *kyū* section, and as the hour of Elvis's death nears, the veil between the natural and the supernatural grows ever more permeable, thus facilitating the play's final spectral incursion. At this moment, the blue moon passes behind a cloud, and Brevoort inserts a theatrical image in the stage directions that suggests an artful grasp of the darker, mysterious qualities of *yūgen*: "[*The shadows in the Meditation garden dance and waver with the passing of the moon.*]"<sup>103</sup> Unlike the raucous chorus-led dances that have preceded this strange and beautiful stage picture, the dance of shadows occurs in silence, providing a moment of solemn reflection

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<sup>102</sup> Brevoort, "Blue Moon," 71.

<sup>103</sup> Brevoort, "Blue Moon," 73.

and meditation that prepares the scene for the *nochijite*'s entrance. Judy stares up into space and reflects:

How pretty it is  
The moon in the night sky  
It makes everything blue  
You don't know if you're awake  
or dreaming...  
I must be dreaming  
This is the moment I've been waiting for  
And the moments you wait for  
never seem to come  
except in dreams.<sup>104</sup>

The *waki*'s tragic solitude and self-deprecation not only expands the metaphor of the moon, which "makes everything blue" (denoting her mood as well as the quality of the night's luminescence), but it also presents her character as a woman who is trapped in the world of her dreams. As such, she must be released from her own form of spiritual clinging, just as the *shite* must be. Thus, Brevoort once more innovates the form through doubling the crisis point of the classical *Nō*'s dramaturgy – the *shite* must be liberated through Judy's recognition of his true self ("the Blue Moon Boy"), but the *waki* must find salvation through her encounter with the *shite* as well.

Once the *shite* convinces Judy that she is actually speaking with Elvis under the glow of the blue moon, he continues her theme of dreaming in language that suggests a common point of view, infused with the *Nō*'s Buddhist cosmology: "My whole life was a dream/A dream I didn't wake up from/until I died."<sup>105</sup> Now that he has achieved some semblance of enlightenment in the afterlife, he seeks to impart the wisdom of his own experiences, colored by the perpetual loneliness that prevents him from finding his final rest. He then dances "The Dance of Loneliness," accompanied by the members of the

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<sup>104</sup> Brevoort, "Blue Moon," 73.

<sup>105</sup> Brevoort, "Blue Moon," 75.



Memphis Mafia, in which he recounts the disastrous seclusion and introversion of his final days. Throughout this section, Elvis repeats a paraphrase of the noted lyric from the song “Heartbreak Hotel” – “I’d get so lonely...”<sup>106</sup> However, Brevoort never permits the incessant echo of this phrase to reach its ultimate lyrical conclusion, always stopping shy of “I could die,” thus positioning Elvis’s spirit on the cusp of his own mortality.<sup>107</sup> At the dance ends, Judy confides in Elvis that she has “been lonesome like that for most of my life.”<sup>108</sup> Having finally located a compatible soul who recognizes his true essence, the *shite* is finally free to pass on to his eternal rest.

In one final supernatural manipulation of time and space, the *shite* transports himself into the blinding glare of a concert spotlight, where the questions he has asked Judy over and over manifest themselves in a fictionalized recreation of the spoken word section of the 1960 hit song “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”<sup>109</sup> But rather than serenade Judy with the gentle tune of this soft ballad, whose elegiac lyrics recall the trope of reawakening memories so familiar to the Nō, Elvis provides her with a moment of spiritual instruction, “Darlin, you’re still hiding in the darkness, I’m still hiding in the night. Can we ever end this loneliness? Could we end it here tonight?”<sup>110</sup> He then disappears along the *hashigakari* as the moon (regarded by the Memphis Mafia as a “one-night lover”) fades from the sky with the first rays of the new day.<sup>111</sup> Having aided her in the fulfillment her life’s dream, the *shite* covertly advises Judy that it is finally time to embrace her future with hope and courage. However, Brevoort’s play ends on an

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<sup>106</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 78.

<sup>107</sup> Presley, Elvis. “Heartbreak Hotel.” By Mae Boren Axton, Thomas Durden, and Elvis Presley. *Elvis Presley: The 50 Greatest Hits*. BMG, 2002. CD.

<sup>108</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 80.

<sup>109</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 81-2.

<sup>110</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 82.

<sup>111</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 82.

unresolved note, as Judy desperately pleads for just one more moment with the *shite*, “search[ing] the morning sky/for words/that do not come.”<sup>112</sup> As the two actors playing the divided halves of the *waki* role come together once more, reuniting the earthly and the spiritual components of her personality, her loneliness has not subsided and she is chilled to hear the Memphis Mafia exclaim, using pop culture terminology to signal the *shite*’s transcendence, “Ladies and Gentlemen/ Elvis/ has left/ the building.”<sup>113</sup> Thus, one could imagine Judy’s unresolved desires binding her to this site as a *shite* in a future Nō drama.

The interpretive model that facilitates the recasting of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a modern-day bodhisattva in Kenneth Yasuda’s Nō play does not apply directly to Elvis Presley in Deborah Brevoort’s drama. While Elvis’s life and contributions to society may pale in comparison to the accomplishments and spiritual leadership of the Nobel Laureate, *Blue Moon Over Memphis* illustrates that his intensely personal impact on the emotional lives of his fans was just as transformative. Like the *shite* in Yasuda’s play, the lingering spirit of Elvis requires the recognition by a soul with whom he possesses a poignant synchronicity of the heart, in order to ensure that his life’s true impact is complete before he may make the supernatural transition into the realm of the eternal. Despite the suggestion that the *waki* remains bound by her solitude at the end of the play, the *shite* attains enlightenment after completing a lifelong pilgrimage to enlighten others with his music. Thus, Brevoort portrays a mutual emotional deliverance between her *shite* and *waki*, as each supplies the other with salvation.

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<sup>112</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 83.

<sup>113</sup> Brevoort, “Blue Moon,” 84.

### Stylistic and Thematic Homage

Both of the playwrights discussed in this chapter utilize the rigid structures, conventions, and aesthetic principles of the literary and performative traditions associated with the classical Japanese Nō drama in varying degrees, and for distinctly unique agendas, in the composition of their contemporary American Nō plays. However, in the cases of both *Martin Luther King, Jr.* and *Blue Moon Over Memphis*, the stylistic homage of the Nō form ultimately transforms into thematic homage of the cultural icons at the center of their poetic action, thereby suggesting that the integration of a Nō framework into contemporary dramaturgy allows form to follow function, and vice versa. The disparate qualities and impact of the two dramas suggest that innovation and convention can merge successfully in the creation of a new generation of imaginative Nō-inspired plays for the twenty-first century and beyond. Additionally, these plays retain a strong sense of textual autonomy, despite their application of extensive intercultural borrowing of form and style to depict vividly theatrical illustrations of their innately American subject matter.

In the end, what I hope emerges from this study is the validation of my contention that the Nō is not an antiquated literary form with limited relevance for today's audiences. When placed in tandem with the creative minds of innovative dramatists who can recognize the paradoxical freedom to be found in the adherence to formal and stylistic conventions within a classical context, contemporary subject matter can manifest itself in new, surprising ways. Separated from Western conceptions of character, plot, and action, the playwright is forced to engage with text, audience, and staging in a manner that liberates him/her from the realistic strictures of linear narrative and spatio-temporal

continuity. The supernatural aspects of the Nō's aesthetic readily permit the interaction between naturalistic and fantastic elements, with no need for logical motivation (other than the logic of poetry). Thus, dramatic adaptation, particularly that of a pre-existing literary style and its traditional structures such as belong to the Nō, does not imply a lack of imagination or originality; quite the opposite – it possesses the potential to unleash the full creative capacity of intellect, emotion, and spirit, using time-tested tactics that have the power to challenge and transform performers and audiences alike.

## CONCLUSION

### RESTLESS INCARNATIONS

A smoky composite face with the hungry anxiety of the unemployed, the neurotic restlessness of the person without purpose, the jerky tension of the high-pressure metropolitan worker, the uneasy resentment of the striker, the callous opportunism of the scab, the aggressive whine of the panhandler, the inhibited terror of the bombed civilian, and a thousand other twisted emotional patterns. Each one overlying and yet blending with the other, like a pile of semitransparent masks...It's a rotten world...Fit for another morbid growth of superstition. It's time the ghosts, or whatever you call them, took over and began a rule of fear. They'd be no worse than men.<sup>1</sup>

This quote, from Fritz Leiber's uncanny short story "Smoke Ghost" (1941), postulates what "a ghost of our times would look like."<sup>2</sup> Leiber (1910-92) suggests that the supernatural manifestations of the modern world would take on the familiar characteristics of its sordid urban grime, its psychological neuroses, and its sociopolitical dysfunction. Thus, in his estimation, paranormal forces must reflect the world they haunt; as society and culture evolve through industrialization and depersonalization, so also do their ghosts alter and shift. In short, we ultimately become haunted by the distorted funhouse mirror images of our inner selves, whether we recognize them as such or not. Such a conceit would not be foreign in a critical analysis of the supernatural aspects of Yukio Mishima's modern *Nō* plays, as the escalating disconnection of his spectral *shite* figures from the world of post-war Japan seems to parallel what the playwright perceives as his nation's growing disengagement from its "classical past." Further, as the contemporary world eschews the traditional heroes and spiritual guidance of its ancestors, in favor of analogues found in popular culture, the *shite* characters that could be written

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<sup>1</sup> Leiber, Fritz, Jr. "Smoke Ghost." *The Prentice-Hall Anthology of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Ed. Garyn G. Roberts. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice, 2003. 283-93. 284-5.

<sup>2</sup> Leiber, 284.

into new, Nō-inspired dramas resemble figures like Elvis Presley, Victor Frankenstein, and even modern-day monsters such as Jeffery Dahmer.

Leiber's hypothesis also provides an illuminating metaphor for the theatrical adaptation process itself, intimating that one cannot judge the ghosts of today based upon preconceived notions of past supernatural incarnations, those that are "white or wispy, or favor graveyards."<sup>3</sup> Instead, one must be willing to recognize that they possess the same evolutionary trajectory that transforms our corporeal world, and that they also possess the precarious capacity to supplant us at any time. His image of the merging, overlapping "pile of semitransparent masks" recalls Linda Hutcheon's theories of multilamination and Gérard Genette's palimpsestuous superimposition of texts. Hutcheon portrays the twenty-first century's fragmented dialogic relationship with the literature of the past as one of constant oscillation, in which adaptations and their original source materials inform one another with ever-expanding complexity. She also repudiates critical biases of textual primacy, insisting that an adaptation relies as much on the value of its own autonomous literary merit as it does on its adherence to, or deviation from, prototextual antecedents. Thus, an adaptation must not be regarded as a subordinate art form, but rather as a natural extension of the intertextual urge to create new independent works, while acknowledging the various contributions of a literary past that is itself the result of countless cycles of adaptation.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to trace the development of adaptations of Japanese Nō drama into the twentieth and twenty-first century, focusing primarily on the particular literary strategies at work in the transformation of this theatrical form into a modern and contemporary textual and performance context. In order to analyze this

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<sup>3</sup> Leiber, 284.

adaptive process, I employ methodologies derived predominantly from the critical theories of Linda Hutcheon and Gérard Genette, each of whom propose an expansive, inclusive view of adaptation as a creative process rather than as a derivative process of mere imitation. As I explore the modern Nō plays of Yukio Mishima and the contemporary Nō plays of Takeshi Kawamura, I systematize levels of direct and indirect adaptation according to the inclusion, exclusion, and fusion of meaning variants and non-variants, as evidenced by the metatextual works' relationship to existing prototextual antecedents. In the case of Kawamura's *gendai* Nō, such analysis incorporates the palimpsestuous qualities of second- and third-degree inheritance of textual traditions and tropes, by way of Mishima and an appropriation of trends from popular culture. In the case of the stylistic homage found in the "American Nō" of Kenneth Yasuda and Deborah Brevoort, I explore the potential application of Nō structures and poetics to contemporary subject matter, derived from a predominantly Western perspective. In the end, I hope to suggest that twentieth and twenty-first-century experiments with Japanese Nō inevitably result in the creation of innovative, distinct dramatic forms that may not be explicitly classifiable as "Nō," per se; yet, it is the very diversity of the resulting metatextual mediation between past and present that attests to the enduring quality of the classical form's transformative aesthetic.

Over the years, this dissertation has undergone many significant changes in scope and focus, and my extensive research on its subject matter has led me to encounter many trends and critical perspectives that are not contained within the study as it currently stands, or if they are present, are only touched on summarily. Therefore, my study only establishes a general framework within which to contextualize the broader context of

adaptation studies and the more specific concentration on their application to the textual and performative transformation of Japanese Nō drama in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The theories of Genette have been invaluable to my development of my own personal hypotheses about theatrical adaptation and my interpretation of the works of other critics like Hutcheon and Popovič. However, I find Genette's work is often too expansive in scope, yet meticulous in its application, to utilize in a broad analysis such as mine; therefore, I would like to explore an isolated application of his terminology to a close reading of a single adapted text in future research.

Because theories of the supernatural play such an integral role to the study of the Nō, I found Michael Saler's concepts of enchantment and disenchantment in the genres of fantasy and science fiction to be incredibly helpful, as he traces the anomie of the modern world to its investment of in/credulity in the paranormal, as part of the "ironic imagination." Further, my cursory exploration of the works of Marilyn Ivy and Gerald Figal, as they relate to the function of ghosts and monsters in the literary constructions of modern and postmodern Japan, have opened up avenues of research that I intend on following in future. Too, Anthony Vidler's proposal of the "metropolitan uncanny" has many applications within the industrialization and Westernization of nineteenth and twentieth-century Japan, including the fiction and drama of Izumi Kyōka (and suggested links between Mishima's and Kyōka's aesthetics). By extension, I refer repeatedly to the Uncanny as conceived by Sigmund Freud, and subsequently reinterpreted by Carl Jung, as it relates to the paranormal context of the Nō, but more concentrated application of this association is definitely worth pursuing. Finally, Victor Turner's theories of liminality in



culture and literature are key to my understanding of the Nō's transformative ethos, and I hope to continue my studies in this field towards a more detailed integration of the two.

One major aspect that I wish I had been able to explore in further detail within the dissertation is the performative context of the Nō, in its classical production setting and in its twentieth and twenty-first-century permutations. In the summer of 2003, I had the unique pleasure to direct a small professional production of four of Mishima's modern Nō plays, including the English language professional premiere of Jonah Salz and Laurence Kominz's translation of *Yuya*. The challenges and rewards of this experience were many, and I wish that I had been able to find a way to integrate this practical experience in my discussion of the subject matter contained within Chapters Two and Three. I had originally planned to explore more of Mishima's dramatic texts in greater detail, supplemented by my impressions as a director, but as the scope of this dissertation became more unwieldy, I jettisoned this aspect of my studies. I do intend on presenting my experiences as a director with these texts in a conference paper at the 2012 Humanities Education and Research Association (HERA) conference in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Elements of my current research that I plan to expand in future conference papers and articles include my emerging concepts of "retroactive reading" as a natural extension of Hutcheon's ideas of adaptive textual oscillation; the application of Vidler's "metropolitan uncanny" to modern and contemporary Nō texts; and theatrical traces throughout Mishima's fiction. Additionally, I want to explore the adaptive strategies I have herein applied to Nō, in relation to other genres and styles, such as Greek tragedy (specifically as it pertains to the notion of creating a composite, comprehensive,

cumulative narrative out of the fragmented, often contradictory dramatic accounts of the Trojan War) and modern transformations of Shakespeare. As a Western theatre scholar whose knowledge of Asian culture seemed to shrink rather than grow as I delved deeper and deeper into the literary and cultural trends that inform the Nō, such as Buddhist cosmology. Because of their invaluable personal contributions to the scholarship contained within this study, I hope to continue a vibrant academic dialogue with Linda Hutcheon, Laurence Kominz, Cody Poulton, Kevin Wetmore, and Carol Sorgenfrei, as peers and mentors.

Foremost in my scholarly career has always been the intersection of theory and practice, particularly as it pertains to the study of theatre as a living art form. Therefore, I would like to expand my dissertation research into the practical realm of theatre performance in the next stage of my academic and professional artistic career. In order to do so, I intend to further develop the valuable professional contacts that I have made during my graduate career, such as my ongoing relationships with playwrights Deborah Brevoort, Erik Ehn, and Ellen McLaughlin, each of whom embrace adaptation in their own ways as a means of bringing new focus to the contemporary world by glancing backwards. I plan to seek out grants in the near future in order to attend the Noh Training Project at Bloomsburg University, as well as to seek out professional networking opportunities with the artists of Theatre of Yūgen and Theatre Nohgaku, in order to experience Nō in both traditional and experimental performance contexts. These training opportunities, combined with supplementary expansion of my previous exposure to Anne Bogart's Viewpoints techniques and Suzuki-based training, will further mature my skills as an actor and acting teacher. As a director, adapted texts have always appealed to my

aesthetic sensibilities, so I wish to explore many of the Nō-inspired texts I have encountered in my research in production settings with both students and professional actors, in particular emerging plans to produce *Blue Moon Over Memphis* and Kawamura's *gendai* Nō, as well as future performances of Mishima's *kindai* Nō. As a playwright, I want to apply many of the dramaturgical adaptive strategies I discuss as a scholar to my own writing style, with the goal of attempting my own theatrical experiments in crafting Nō-inspired works for the stage.

In conclusion, the ghosts of the Japanese Nō continue to haunt us in the twenty-first century, regardless of how much our world transforms with the advent of new technologies, political systems, or spiritual beliefs. At the heart of the Nō aesthetic is the promise that, through a recognition of the human faces beneath our masks (social, psychological, etc.), we may escape the cyclical patterns of human behavior that prevent us from attaining enlightenment, whether that manifests as religious transcendence or interpersonal connection. And at the center of that promise is a vital act of theatre, simultaneously elegant and primal, sacred and profane, ephemeral and eternal.

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