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Reclaiming Kurosawa Akira's Shakespearean women

Asaumi Wakaba A.
San Jose State University

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RECLAIMING KUROSAWA AKIRA'S SHAKESPEAREAN WOMEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Theatre Arts

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Asaumi Wakaba A.

December 1997

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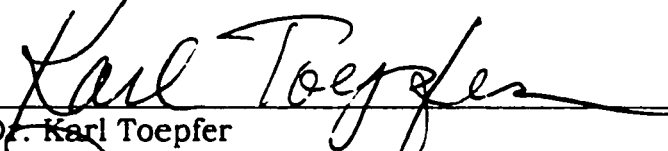
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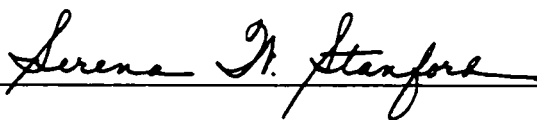


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ABSTRACT

RECLAIMING KUROSAWA AKIRA'S SHAKESPEAREAN WOMEN

By Asaumi Wakaba A.

This thesis addresses Kurosawa Akira's Shakespearean women in *Kumonosu-joh (Throne of Blood, 1957)* and *Ran (1985)*. It examines the relationship between Kurosawa's appropriation of the plays *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and their filmic expression. It is mainly through classical Noh techniques employed by the female characters in the films that Kurosawa creates distinctly Japanese versions of the Shakespearean stories.

This thesis is divided into two sections. The first part focuses on the ways Kurosawa merges cultural differences between Eastern and Western theatrical arts, periodic differences within Japanese history, and differences in film versus classical Japanese stage techniques. The second part discusses film performance analysis in his two films, particularly focusing on the female characters Ladies Asaji and Kaede. Both women use Noh techniques although traditionally women have been excluded from the Noh theatre. The depiction of these women as central figures counters the prevailing view of Kurosawa's films as male-centric.

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I am deeply grateful to Uchida Kaoru and Karl Toepfer for their abounding support, endurance, and encouragement. Without them, I know that I would never have been able to complete this work. I feel very grateful to Tanaka Tsuruji, a Noh dilettante, who so kindly accompanied me to go to see Noh and Kyogen performances and the exhibitions of Noh costumes and masks in and out of Tokyo. I do not know how many times I was enlightened by his rich knowledge about Noh. Joanne Izbicki, Sharon Hayashi, Gennifer Wisenfeld, Elana Sigall, Beth Katzoff, Sonia Johnson, and Alisa Gaunder always encouraged me to stick with my writing whenever I was stuck and did not know how to proceed. They have also, with their deep knowledge of scholarly writings in English, advised me on how I should handle my work and helped me through it. I would also like to thank Hasegawa Haruhiko, a professional Noh actor, who lent me his collection of precious books and allowed me to interview him. Staff members at the National Film Center Archives in Tokyo were so kind to extend their help to me in search of some fairly rare materials.

Although Kurosawa films have long been classics, had I not had this opportunity to study at an institution outside Japan, I probably would not have thought about using his films to do research in a cross-cultural context. Also, if I had not experienced life in the US, where the lives of women are more liberated, I am certain that I would not have been interested in the issue of women. When I started learning English, I never thought that the day would come that I would write a Master's thesis. Although I know that this work is far from being perfect, it means so much to me.

I can never find the words to express my gratitude to Karl Toepfer, who believed that I could complete my work no matter what. Without his guidance, I know that I would never have been able to complete this thesis. Karl, *magokoro yori kannsha shiteimasu.*

Table of Contents

| | Page |
|---|------|
| List of Figures | viii |
| Chapter | |
| 1. Introduction..... | 1 |
| 2. Merging Differences: Cultures, Times, Techniques..... | 11 |
| 3. The Film Performance Analysis of <i>Kumonosu-joh</i> | 40 |
| 4. The Film Performance Analysis of <i>Ran</i> | 100 |
| 5. Conclusion..... | 147 |
| Bibliography..... | 151 |

List of Figures

| Figure | Page |
|---|------|
| 1. <i>Kumonosu-joh</i> promotional poster | 23 |
| 2. <i>Ran</i> promotional poster | 24 |
| 3. A painting of Mohri Motonari | 26 |
| 4. Noh stage at Nishi Hongan-ji Temple | 46 |
| 5. A modern indoor Noh stage | 47 |
| 6. A scene from Noh <i>Kurozuka</i> , Act One | 55 |
| 7. Washizu encounters a <i>yamamba</i> in <i>Kumonosu-joh</i> | 56 |
| 8. A <i>yamamba</i> in Noh <i>Kurozuka</i> , Act One | 58 |
| 9. The <i>yamamba</i> in <i>Kumonosu-joh</i> spinning thread | 59 |
| 10. A scene from Noh <i>Kurozuka</i> , Act II | 60 |
| 11. Kabuki <i>onnagata</i> female-impersonator portrays a Fuji- musume in a Kabuki dance piece of <i>Fuji-musume</i> | 62 |
| 12. A scene from the Kabuki play <i>Narukami</i> | 63 |
| 13. A Noh mask of <i>Yamamba</i> mountain spirit | 66 |
| 14. A Noh mask of <i>Yaseonna</i> | 67 |

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 15. | A Noh mask of <i>Uba</i> | 68 |
| 16. | A Noh mask of <i>Fukai</i> | 69 |
| 17. | A <i>yamamba</i> in <i>Kumonosu-joh</i> | 70 |
| 18. | A <i>yamamba</i> sitting in her hut in <i>Kumonosu-joh</i> | 72 |
| 19. | Lady Asaji in <i>Kumonosu-joh</i> | 76 |
| 20. | Noh actors on the Bonfire Noh stage | 77 |
| 21. | A Noh character in <i>Noshizuke</i> style in the Noh play <i>Teika</i> | 80 |
| 22. | A close up of Lady Asaji | 81 |
| 23. | Washizu Taketoki and Lady Asaji | 83 |
| 24. | Washizu Taketoki as he stands and listens to his wife | 85 |
| 25. | Washizu Taketoki and Lady Asaji in conversation | 86 |
| 26. | Lady Asaji confronts Washizu Taketoki | 87 |
| 27. | The entrance scene of a Noh actor | 91 |
| 28. | Lady Asaji and the Noh mask <i>Shakumi</i> | 93 |
| 29. | Kurosawa Akira directs Yamada Isuzu | 95 |
| 30. | Kurosawa Akira directs Yamada Isuzu | 95 |
| 31. | Lady Asaji's hand washing scene | 96 |
| 32. | Saburo, Hidetora, Jiro, and Taro from <i>Ran</i> | 103 |
| 33. | Tsurumaru and Lady Su-e | 105 |
| 34. | Costume sketches by Wada Emi | 108 |
| 35. | Noh costumes woven in <i>karaori</i> style | 109 |

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 36. | Noh costumes woven in <i>karaori</i> and <i>nuihaku</i> styles | 110 |
| 37. | Samurai performing Noh | 111 |
| 38. | Costume for Ichimonji Hidetora in <i>Ran</i> | 112 |
| 39. | Costumes for Taro, Jiro, and Saburo in <i>Ran</i> | 114 |
| 40. | Lady Kaede offers sake to Jiro | 115 |
| 41. | Kabuki <i>kumadori</i> make-up | 117 |
| 42. | A Noh mask in two positions | 119 |
| 43. | Lady Kaede leaves Taro in a scornful manner | 123 |
| 44. | Lady Kaede and Taro in conversation | 125 |
| 45. | Jiro reports the death of Taro to Lady Kaede | 129 |
| 46. | Lady Kaede comes to see Jiro | 131 |
| 47. | Lady Kaede attacks Jiro with his own knife | 132 |
| 48. | Lady Kaede slashes the throat of Jiro | 134 |
| 49. | Lady Kaede stamps her foot as in Noh choreography | 135 |
| 50. | Lady Kaede forcefully seduces Jiro | 136 |
| 51. | Lady Aoi in the Noh play <i>Aoi no ue</i> | 137 |
| 52. | Lady Kaede puts on her sash after having sex with Jiro | 138 |
| 53. | Lady Kaede kills a moth while she pretends to be crying ... | 139 |

Chapter 1

Introduction

The films of Japanese director Kurosawa Akira¹ have long been considered male-centric, as almost all of them focus on the struggles of male protagonists. It is often incorrectly assumed that the emphasis on male characters in his films implies that Kurosawa is not concerned with his female characters. Yet analysis of Kurosawa's Shakespearean films reveals that not all of his work is male-centric and that women are indeed crucial to the stories. Film critic Sato Tadao has noted that "There is an established notion that Kurosawa is bad at depicting women. It is needless to cite such numerous statements, since [Kurosawa] has been broadly criticized in this manner."² Supporting this view is the fact that Kurosawa set his most well-known films in the Japanese Warring States Period,³ a time dominated by those who

¹ Japanese names are referred to in the normal Japanese fashion, i. e. surname followed by first name. Akira Kurosawa is thus presented as Kurosawa Akira.

² Sato Tadao, *Kurosawa Akira no sekai* [The World of Kurosawa Akira] (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun-sha, 1986) 319.

³1338-1600.

possessed military power. Because women, even those belonging to the samurai class, did not have access to military arms, they had no way of becoming family heads or military leaders. Women were therefore subject to the orders of their *shujin*⁴ or “masters,” these being either their fathers, husbands, or after the death of their husbands, their sons. Women in the samurai class generally lived according to the following pattern: they were born, were later wed according to their “master’s” wishes, bore heirs for their new family, and then died. As a result, modern directors of samurai films generally depict the lives of men who lived according to their own wills, regardless of their success or failure, while they cast women in superficial parts which emphasize physical appearance. Kurosawa’s samurai films are no exception.

Furthermore, critics like Ogata Toshiro and Joan Mellen have said that the absence of substantive women is not limited to these period pieces, but extends throughout Kurosawa’s work as a whole, reflecting a general indifference toward women. It is true that, in his 54-year career, Kurosawa’s protagonists have mainly been men. This is especially apparent in the films *Sugata Sanshiro* (1943), *Drunken Angel* (1948), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Red Beard* (1965). He is also well known for his

⁴ The term *shujin* is still broadly used in Japan today, especially by people who are over forty, to refer to a woman’s husband. It is used both among wives

vivid images of the samurai warrior, whose dramatic sword fighting scenes were best performed by Mifune Toshiroh in his “chambara eiga.”⁵ Kurosawa’s films rarely have female protagonists, and in only two do women play leading roles: *Ichiban Utsukushiku*, or *The Most Beautiful* (1944), and *Waga seishun ni kuinashi*, or *No Regrets for My Youth*⁶ (1946). The first was made during World War II and the second at the start of the postwar period, when male actors were in short supply and women comprised the bulk of the film-going public. Because of the exceptional circumstances under which these two films were made, most Japanese critics ignore these two works when they make statements about Kurosawa being male-centric.

This leaves only three other films which have significant female roles, namely, *Rashomon* (1950), *Kumonosu-joh* (1957), and *Ran* (1985), and it is with the latter two that this thesis is concerned. *Kumonosu-joh* (1957), which translates literally into “spiderweb castle” but is known in English as *Throne of Blood*,⁷ is Kurosawa’s

themselves and by others when referring to a woman’s spouse.

⁵ The term “chambara” refers to the sound of two swords clanking together. “Chambara eiga” is the name given to popular-style samurai films.

⁶ Donald Richie translates this title as *No Regrets for Our Youth* and the film is known in the West under this title. The direct translation from Japanese is *No Regrets for My Youth*.

⁷ *Throne of Blood* will be referred to as *Kumonosu-joh* because the Japanese term signifies the castle in which Kurosawa’s Macbeth lives and dies, and has a direct connection to the central theme of the film. Donald Richie, who wrote the subtitles for the film, translated the title into “Throne of Blood.” In the body of the film, Richie translated “kumonosu-joh” as “cobweb castle,” which implies an abandoned nest. I prefer the translation “spiderweb castle,” as it indicates that a spider still lives and

interpretation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; while *Ran*, which means "chaos," can be said to be his interpretation of *King Lear*. In *Kumonosu-joh*, Lady Asaji is the equivalent of Lady Macbeth. In *Ran*, Lady Kaede embodies the evil daughters of King Lear, as well as Edmund, the illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester. While these women may have less screen time than the principal male actors, they play roles which are pivotal to the stories being told. *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran* therefore run counter to the normally male-centric character of Kurosawa's work.

Both films are set in Japan's Warring States Period, and there are a number of similarities between this age and the medieval setting of Shakespeare's plays. However, in taking advantage of this historical affinity, Kurosawa still needed to bridge a significant cultural gap, and he accomplished this through borrowing techniques from Noh, the classical Japanese performance art. Interestingly, the female actresses in *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran* make the greatest use of these techniques, even though women have been traditionally excluded from the world of Noh performance. This paper will therefore pay special attention to the appropriation of Noh in shaping the characters of Lady

waits for its prey in the web. It is thus a more frightening place than the "cobweb," which does not necessarily evoke fear.

Kaede in *Ran* and both Lady Asaji and the *yamamba*⁸ in *Kumonosu-joh*, the *yamamba* being analogous to the three witches in *Macbeth*.

Although the Noh stage is limited to *male actors*, it does have *female roles*, and one of the five main genres of Noh theatre features women protagonists. Kurosawa takes the techniques developed in this “feminine” genre, and while using female actresses instead of male actors, employs them to focus the viewer’s attention on certain essential actions or points he wishes to highlight. Through their repeated use of Noh conventions, women thereby play a key role in heightening the drama of both *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*, and are the main vehicles through which Kurosawa integrates Western themes into a Japanese context.

It should be noted that, although Kurosawa is a Japanese filmmaker, six out of his 30 films are based on Western novels and plays.⁹ In Japan, Kurosawa’s filmmaking style was considered Western long before his films were widely known outside Japan. Nevertheless, Kurosawa struggled to become a film director familiar with the classical Japanese arts, including Noh.¹⁰ Throughout his film

⁸ The *yamamba* of Japanese folk tales are mountain spirits which usually take the form of old women. They can be both harmful and benign.

⁹ As of August 1997. These works include Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoyevski’s (1821-1881) *The Idiot*, Maxim Gorki’s (1869-1936) *The Lower Depths*, and Edward McBain’s detective story *King’s Ransom*. Gorki was a Russian novelist, playwright, and essayist and McBain was a 20th century American detective storywriter.

¹⁰ Kurosawa was familiar with Noh drama, Kyogen, *haiku* poetry, *suiboku-ga* or

career, he explored various myths and the ways in which he could represent the cultures that gave birth to them. He took this one step further by integrating elements of one culture into the other. One of the most striking examples of this was his use of Japanese Noh techniques to transmit Shakespearean themes, creating an innovative blend of Eastern and Western cultures that infused an exciting tension in his drama. Ironically, although Kurosawa produced films that he considers very “Japanese,” the complicated mixture of cultures has given him a reputation among Japanese audiences and critics for being Japan's most Westernized filmmaker.

It is difficult to research Kurosawa because, in Japan, the study of film is not yet considered to be a legitimate academic subject.¹¹ This is probably because movies are looked upon as a form of entertainment rather than art. Research materials on the subject are therefore scarce. In addition, libraries, including those of major universities, have only a few books about Kurosawa and his works. But while there are only a small number of critical studies on Japanese film, there are materials to be found in serious film-industry review magazines, such as *Kinema jumpoh* [Cinema Review] and *Eiga no tomo* [Film Fan], which feature many in-depth interviews with Kurosawa.

black and white brush painting, *san-sui-ga* or landscape water color paintings.

¹¹A university librarian in Japan suggested that information on film might be

Furthermore, while there are scholarly studies which examine Kurosawa's use of the Noh aesthetic, they do not pay attention to its non-visual elements, and they also neglect to focus on the way in which Kurosawa combined Shakespeare and the conventions of Japanese classical theatre. For example, one study by film critic Keiko McDonald analyzes the relationship between classical Japanese forms and its national cinema. Her work covers Japan's postwar cinematic adaptations of classical Japanese plays and shows how traditional Japanese theatre influenced Japanese film-making. Her study, however, is too general; it fails to explore Kurosawa's methods in-depth and does not discuss the significance of the effects brought into Kurosawa's films by merging Noh techniques and filmic expression.

Addressing the subject of Kurosawa's male-centrism, on the other hand, is the scholar Ogata Toshiro, who has studied Kurosawa's treatment of female characters. His research contains a detailed exploration, examination, and analysis unusual in Japanese books about film. His book¹² reportedly enraged Kurosawa. Apparently he was upset because the book discussed Kurosawa's perception of women based on what Kurosawa "the author's wild and crazy speculation." Ogata analyzes Kurosawa's "authorial intent" by linking

better found in community libraries rather than at the university, implying that the subject was not academic.

it to the director's personal life, a practice which is common among Japanese critical writings on film.

Nishimura Yuh-ichiroh, meanwhile, explores Kurosawa's use of sound. According to Nishimura, Kurosawa effectively used sound to create a specific atmosphere that preceded the images on the screen. The mood of the music in Kurosawa's films sometimes intentionally contrasts with the visual context. This technique serves to intensify the emotion of the scene as well as to define the characters' identity. Nishimura does not explain, however, how sound techniques from Noh performance were used by Kurosawa to create his Shakespearean adaptations, an issue this thesis will address.

Further difficulties in studying Kurosawa are encountered because of the language barrier. The films used in this thesis, which are the same as those which would be viewed by an English-speaking audience, have English subtitles. Subtitles and their translations have therefore been considered in the overall interpretation of the films. Subtitles, however, are limited by their very nature. They tend to shorten the spoken dialogue and they quickly appear and disappear on the screen. The two films under discussion include countless technical and archaic terms which most Japanese people today could

¹² Toshiro Ogata, *Kyojin to Shounen: Kurosawa Akira no Joseitachi [The Giant and the Boy: Women in Kurosawa Akira's Films]* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1992).

not understand without struggling. Translation in the subtitles is even further removed from the meaning of the dialogue because of the use of such terms.

This thesis seeks to go beyond difficulties in interpretation that arise from dependence on subtitles and ignorance of cultural contexts. To support my analysis of *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*, I interviewed Mr. Hasegawa Haruhiko, a professional Noh performer who belongs to the School of Kanze,¹³ about the relationship between Noh characteristics and Kurosawa's films. Direct participation in classical art forms enhances one's understanding of Kurosawa's work, so I also took one year of Japanese dance lessons and tea ceremony classes, in addition to three years of Noh chanting.

The remainder of this thesis is divided into three parts. In Chapter 2, I discuss the forces that shaped Kurosawa's position as an interpreter of both Japanese and Western culture. Afterwards, I focus more specifically on his use of Noh to build two bridges – one between Shakespeare's world and Japan's Warring States Period and the other between stage and film. Both Chapters 3 and 4 then illustrate the concrete elements of this strategy, which was carried out mainly

¹³ Japanese Noh theatre art is now professionally practiced and performed only by the five families who have inherited the schools established over time. They are the Kanze, Hohshoh, Komparu, Kongoh, and Kita families.

through the performances of the *yamamba* (mountain spirit), Lady Asaji, and Lady Kaede. Chapter 3 focuses on *Kumonosu-joh*, while Chapter 4 deals with *Ran*.

Chapter 2

Merging Differences: Cultures, Times, Techniques

Kurosawa had to overcome three main obstacles in the making of his films: cultural differences, period differences, and differences in film versus stage techniques. These issues will be considered in relation to his Shakespearean interpretations by asking the following questions: first, why did Kurosawa, a modern Japanese film director, choose the works of Shakespeare, a 17th-century British playwright, in creating *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*? Secondly, why did Kurosawa set these dramas in the period of the warring states (14th-16th centuries) rather than in present-day Japan? Thirdly, why did Kurosawa choose to employ techniques of Noh drama as opposed to those of Kabuki and other performance traditions?

In his autobiography, Kurosawa claims that he does not speak any foreign languages. But despite the fact that Kurosawa understands neither English nor Russian, he based his films on the works of Shakespeare, Edward McBain and Maxim Gorky. It is clear

that he has only read the Japanese translations of these Western writers.

Reading translations of foreign literature may alter one's understanding of the original work. However excellent the translation is, it necessarily reflects the interpretation of the translator. In Japan, there are at least four well-known standard translations of Shakespeare's works.¹⁴ Each reflects the translator's own views, and each represents quite different aspects of Shakespeare's world. Even if a translator manages to convey the meaning of the Shakespearean text, the style will inevitably be sacrificed. In short, Shakespeare's poetry cannot truly be translated into Japanese. Portraying a literary work in a language other than one's mother tongue is a difficult feat. With these obstacles in mind, we must analyze why Kurosawa made the attempt to base two of his films on Shakespeare.

To explain this, I will first examine how Japanese have historically accepted Western cultures as part of their own. Until the breakdown of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868, Japan was mostly closed off from Western cultural influences. Once Japan opened to the West, all sorts of cultural influences flooded into the country. Marveling at the West's technological advancement, many Japanese believed that anything

¹⁴ These translators are Fukuhara Rintaroh, Fukuda Tsuneari, Nakano Yoshio, and most recently Odajima Yuh-shi.

originating in Western culture was superior to that of the Japanese. This social phenomenon was called *bummei kaika*, or “civilization and enlightenment.”¹⁵ In the one hundred years since then, “authentic” Japanese culture has struggled to survive amid the innovations of foreign cultures. This has created a tension among Japanese intellectuals who took upon themselves the burden of locating ways in which Japanese culture could live in harmony with foreign cultures without harming Japanese individuality. Kurosawa grew up in this environment.

In his autobiography, Kurosawa writes about his cultural “versatility.” He recalls how he spent his youth “reading all kinds of classic and modern literatures of the West and the East,” and how he started seeing the films of the British comedian Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) at the age of nine. Throughout his teenage years Kurosawa watched about one foreign film a month.¹⁶ Although he went to see many movies, he rarely went to Japanese films. He was thus highly influenced by the Western films he viewed. Yet Kurosawa was also influenced by the Japanese arts he learned. In addition to being exposed to Western culture as a child, he was also taught

¹⁵ This movement was noted in a famous folk song: *Zangiri atama wo tataite mireba, Bummei kaika no oto ga suru*. It means, “I hear the sound of cultural enlightenment, as I touch my hair now cut short in the Western style.”

¹⁶ Kurosawa Akira, *Gama no abura: jiden no youna mono* [The Ointment of the Toad: Something Like an Autobiography] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990) 133-138.

traditional Japanese arts. For example, in the 5th grade, his father made him take Japanese *kendo* martial art lessons along with Japanese brush calligraphy.

Kurosawa acknowledges that he has been broadly exposed to both Japanese and Western cultures. In fact, Kurosawa describes himself as a “resident of the earth.” This is why he could choose stories from one of the world’s greatest non-Japanese playwrights to create his Japanese films. Nevertheless, Kurosawa demonstrated his cultural identity as a Japanese man by employing the Noh art form, unique to his mother country, in his films. In his open letter to Iwasaki Akira, Kurosawa states:

Generally, I am the kind of person who is extremely in love with Dostoevski at the same time as I am [in love] with Basho¹⁷ or Buson.¹⁸ I just love Gauguin,¹⁹ Lautrec²⁰ and Rouault²¹ as much as I adore Sohtatsu,²² and Tessai.²³ I

¹⁷ Matsuo Basho. (1644-1694). One of the most famous Japanese haiku poets. Basho lived in the early part of the Edo period (1600-1868). He created his own world of haiku that explored the beauty of total stasis (absolute non-movement), and by doing so, managed to refine haiku into a higher form of art. Hence, Basho is often considered to be the father of the haiku form. It should be noted that in Japan, it is common to refer to famous artists by their first names and not by their family names. This is probably because many classical arts in Japan have been passed down through the descendants of artists, such that younger artists would end up having the same last names as their artistic ancestors. Each artist therefore needed to be identified by his or her first name, rather than the family name. Kurosawa thus refers to Matsuo Basho as Basho, a very common practice in Japan.

¹⁸ Yosa Buson. (1716-1783). A haiku poet and also an artist. Buson founded a school of haiku that did much to further the artistic and romantic style of haiku poetry.

¹⁹ Eugene Henri Gauguin. (1848-1903). A French painter.

²⁰ Henri (Marie Raymond) de Toulouse-Lautrec. (1864-1901). A French painter.

²¹ Georges Rouault. (1871-1958). A French painter, Fauvist.

also collect both antique glasses from France and Holland as well as Japanese classic lacquer ware. In short, the things that are Western and [those] that are Japanese live naturally in harmony without causing any sort of discordance in my mind. Whenever I create my films, some of such [impressions of art works from both East and West] come to mind from time to time. I would say that I don't consciously struggle to use such [images].²⁴

Sato Tadao wrote in an essay published along with the complete collection of Kurosawa's screenplays that "Kurosawa digested cultures of both the West and the East."²⁵:

Kurosawa Akira loves baseball, which his father tried to popularize [in Japan]. On the other hand, he took lessons in Japanese *kendo*. And while he received professional training in oil painting, he is also well-versed in Noh theatre. Like so many other Japanese literary enthusiasts in his youth, Kurosawa devoutly read the novels and the plays of both Japan and the West, and just like many other Japanese film enthusiasts, Kurosawa saw the major film works of America, Europe, and Japan. Without discriminating, he learned from all of them. It was of course very common for modern Japanese to absorb both the cultures of the West and the East, but most of them would have had trouble establishing their own styles. Only those very few talented people with strong individuality were able to balance their "Western" along with their "Japanese" identity.²⁶

²² Tawaraya Sohtatsu. (Born and died in the earlier part of the Edo period. Exact biographical information unknown). Sohtatsu is famous for his traditional Japanese scroll painting. He is also noted for his *suiboku-ga*, a form of water mono-color brush painting.

²³ Tomioka Tessai. (1836-1924). A *yamatogae* [Japan-picture], and *nanshu-ga* [Chinese-picture] painter. He is famous for the lofty beauty in his drawings.

²⁴ Iwasaki Akira and Kurosawa Akira, "*Kumonosu-joh wo megutte: Ohfuku shokan*" [About The Castle of Spider's Web], *Eiga hyohron* March 1957: 53.

²⁵ Kurosawa Akira, *Zenshu Kurosawa Akira* [The Complete Works of Kurosawa Akira], ed. Sato Tadao, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988) 6: 255.

²⁶ Kurosawa 255.

Undoubtedly, Kurosawa was one of the talented few. Of his own influences, he wrote, "from the very beginning, I respected John Ford. I have always paid close attention to his films and they've influenced me, I think."²⁷ Kurosawa once seriously set his heart upon making a career in oil painting, a direct import from the West. But while he had interests in Western culture, he also appreciated the aesthetic of classical Japanese art. During World War II, Kurosawa realized the beautiful simplicity of Japanese *haiku* poetry and found further appreciation for other kinds of Japanese classical arts. In his autobiography, he writes that it was during the war that he first saw a Noh performance:

I saw Noh for the first time at around that time. Shortly afterward, I began intensively reading books on Noh aesthetics written by Zeami,²⁸ as well as books written about him and other related materials on Noh theatre. The reason I was so attached to Noh drama was because I was so taken in by its originality. Or maybe it was because its artistic expression just looked so remote from that of film. Anyway, I feel so happy that I was familiarized with Noh and was able to witness performances by Kita Roppeita, Umewaka Manzaburoh, and Sakurama Kintaroh.²⁹

Noh is a classical stage art form based on a variety of ancient sacred rituals and entertainment performed at festivals. Noh dramas

²⁷ Donald Richie and Joan Mellen, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 227.

²⁸ Zeami (1364-1443). His real name was Yuhzaki Motokiyo. He refined the art of the Noh drama and gave Noh the foundation that enabled it to emerge as a form of art in its own right. Zeami was also an actor and an author of Noh drama.

²⁹ All three are the most highly-acclaimed Noh actors of that time.

include chanting and dancing and often have tragic or spiritual themes. Kurosawa was drawn to the understatement and refinement of Noh and skillfully used these qualities in his work. Kurosawa writes that he was “almost intoxicated” to see Manzaburoh perform *Hajitomi*.³⁰ As a result, Kurosawa “actually visualized the light of the sunset shine upon Manzaburoh as he started dancing to tell the story,” and “felt in [his] heart that the moonflower had bloomed in [his] vision.”³¹ Thus, we see how Kurosawa’s encounter with Noh theatre in his youth strongly influenced him as an adult.

Appreciating Noh in this manner is exceptional among modern Japanese. Contrary to what Keiko McDonald writes in *Japanese Classical Theater in Film*, the essence of Noh and other classical forms of art such as Kyogen or Kabuki, along with their particular manner of speech, have long been unfamiliar to most Japanese people. McDonald argues that the Japanese audience’s perception of Noh in *Kumonosu-joh* is as follows:

The Japanese audience is quickly aware of the Noh influence in *The Throne of Blood* when Kurosawa presents the eerie woodland where the two generals – Washizu and Miki – encounter an old witch seated at a spinning wheel in

³⁰ A love story told by a female ghost. She dances to the story of her past love affair with Prince Hikaru Genji while remembering their first meeting by the moonflowers.

³¹ Kurosawa, *Gama no abura: jiden no youna mono* [The Ointment of the Toad: Something Like an Autobiography] 203.

a thatched hut.³²

Although it is true that the old witch who spins her wheel is borrowed from Noh, it is unlikely that the audience is familiar with such a character. Only those who are specifically familiar with the Noh form of art could see the direct influence on this film through this character.

With the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the new Japanese government abandoned its official isolation policy, resulting in a tremendous influx of foreign, and especially Western, culture into Japan. The modern privileging of Western culture has been accompanied by a decline in audiences for traditional art forms, so it is unlikely that Japanese audiences in the 1950s, and even more so today, would be able to fully comprehend the cultural references in Kurosawa's work.

Nevertheless, while the average Japanese filmgoer today may not have seen Kabuki or Noh theatre, s/he still possesses a familiarity with a number of the cultural images Kurosawa employs.

By the time Kurosawa presented *Kumonosu-joh* in January of 1957, Japanese people may have been able to "sense" that there was something "Japanese" about the way in which Kurosawa's film was presented, although they may not have been able to analyze its components. Even those unfamiliar with Noh or Kabuki may have

³² McDonald 129.

been exposed to various aspects of them through television and radio.

Iwasaki Akira describes the audience for *Kumonosu-joh* as follows:

Kumonosu-joh may be discussed as a transformation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into a Japanese version and also as a transformation [of what was originally written for theatrical performance] into filmic representation. But more importantly, the film draws attention as an experiment in merging the medium of film with the Japanese classical theatrical arts, especially Noh and Kabuki. Surely, those who are aware of such matters and who can view the film with thought and insight may only be a limited few. *The majority of the audience who (come to see the film) are no longer familiar with nor are they interested in Noh or Kabuki.* Without much thought, however, they can surely still feel the instinctively peculiar atmosphere created in this film and they can respond to this film either positively or negatively. That is very important.³³

This quote clearly sums up the fact that one cannot assume the Japanese audience will be aware of Japanese subtleties in Kurosawa's films, but they may still be more aware of such aspects than non-Japanese viewers.

As a general rule, most of those who attended the theatres where Kurosawa's films were showing were members of the working class. This was true because films were much more affordable than Western-style plays, Kabuki, or Noh. Women, however, tended not to view Kurosawa's films because they did not feature women in leading roles. Instead, they chose to see films by directors such as Mizoguchi Kenji,³⁴

³³ Iwasaki and Kurosawa 48. (emphasis added)

³⁴ (1898-1956). Film director. Born in Tokyo. Active in directing films from the time of talkie films. His major works include *Gion no shūmai* [Sisters of Gion]

Naruse Mikio,³⁵ or Ozu Yasujiro,³⁶ which featured female characters with whom they could identify. As a result, the bulk of Kurosawa's audience consisted of working class men who were probably not all that interested in Japanese classical forms of art like Kyogen, let alone Noh, which required its viewers to be familiar with elaborate conventions and enigmatic chants.

When it came out, *Kumonosu-joh* was ranked fourth among popular films. This ranking was not nearly as high as many of his other films. Yet no matter how badly the audience, the critics, or the producers received his films, Kurosawa's enthusiasm to search for a new realm for filmic expression never ceased. Film critic Iwasaki Akira, after seeing the special premiere of *Kumonosu-joh*, wrote Kurosawa that he was not convinced that Kurosawa's borrowing of formalistic expression from Noh was appropriate for depicting the world of *Macbeth*, and in particular Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, claiming that delicate psychological description was at the heart of the play.³⁷ In response, Kurosawa said that he just wanted to expand the realm of

(1936), *Saikaku ichidai onna* [Diary of Oharu] (1952) and *Ugetsu monogatari* [Tales of Ugetsu] (1953).

³⁵ (1905-1969). Film director. Born in Tokyo. Known for depicting the delicate relationship between a man and a woman, like *Onna no rekishi* [A Woman's Life] (1963), and *Ukigumo* [Floating Clouds] (1955)

³⁶ (1903-1963). Film director. Born in Tokyo. Joined Shochiku Film Industries in 1923. His two best known works are *Banshun* [Late Spring], (1949) and *Tokyo monogatari* [Tokyo Story] (1953).

³⁷ Iwasaki and Kurosawa 51.

filmic expression by employing a new form of theatrical expression. He defended his choice of Noh expression by saying that *Macbeth* was not a psychological play. Contrary to most readings of the character of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Kurosawa did not think of them as characters with complex and tortured personalities. Rather, he saw them as simple characters and felt that the use of Noh techniques was appropriate for both.

He also saw them as a way to strengthen the links he saw between the medieval world described by Shakespeare and the Warring States Period of Japan. When the British scholar Roger Manvell asked literary critic Sato Tadao to interview Kurosawa about *Kumonosu-joh* on his behalf, Kurosawa said that he created *Kumonosu-joh* from *Macbeth* because

During the period of civil wars in Japan, there were plenty of incidents like those portrayed in *Macbeth*, weren't there? They were called *ge-koku-jo*. Thus, the story of *Macbeth* appealed to me and I found it easy to adapt.³⁸

³⁸ Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (London: Aldine Press, 1971) 102. Interviewer Sato Tadao later published a few books that use this interview with Kurosawa. One of them is *Kurosawa Akira kaidai* [On Kurosawa Akira]. I believe that the Japanese version is more true to Kurosawa's own words. For the benefit of English readers, in this thesis, I give the page number of where one can find the equivalent citations in Manvell's book. Such citations, however, are not necessarily accurate because I am translating directly from Sato's original Japanese text. Manvell's translation of the interview has some minor problems. One such example is his translation of "being possessed in the state of madness" as "when she gets angry." (emphasis added)

The term *ge-koku-jo* literally means “the lower toppling the higher,” and refers to the practice of a retainer murdering his lord. *Ge-koku-jo* occurred frequently during the Warring States Period, such that the term is often used to refer to the period itself.

Kurosawa was familiar with the *ge-koku-jo* history of shifting political and military power among great families. Since this theme was at the heart of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Kurosawa could relate his own knowledge of Japanese history to this story, and by doing so, he overcame the significant language barrier that the English play presented. Although the switch from the 17th-century Shakespearean play to the medieval Japanese *sengoku* (Warring States Period) film would appear to be difficult, the underlying similarities allowed him to take advantage of the potential inherent within Noh.

The promotional poster for the film (See Figure 1) was distributed for a Japanese audience and bears the director’s name in thick gothic characters on the right-hand side: 黒沢明監督作品. Accompanying it at the bottom right are the names of the two producers (Kurosawa Akira and Motoki Sohjiroh) and four scriptwriters (Oguni Hideo, Hashimoto Shinobu, Kikushima Ryuhzoh, and Kurosawa Akira), which appear in smaller letters. There is no mention, however, of William Shakespeare. The poster for *Ran* also did not include the name of the original playwright (See Figure 2).



Fig. 1. Photographer unknown, *Kumonosu-joh* promotional poster circulated in Japan, January, 1957.



Fig. 2. Photographer unknown, *Ran* promotional poster circulated in Japan, June, 1985.

Indeed, Kurosawa's Japanese audience did not have to be familiar with Shakespeare in order to understand the basics of Kurosawa's world, provided they had common knowledge about Japanese history. In the same way, viewers outside of Japan did not need to know about the complexities of Japanese history in order to grasp the general structure of the world that Kurosawa depicted. This is particularly true if they were familiar with Shakespeare's plays. Of course, a knowledge of both Japanese culture, history, and society, as well as Shakespeare's original plays, leads to a deeper appreciation of Kurosawa's films.

The filmic adaptation of the story of *Ran* is an example of Kurosawa's cultural "versatility." Although many critics, including Keiko McDonald, refer to *Ran* as Kurosawa's *King Lear*, this may be too simple a characterization. Despite the similarity in their themes, the basic story of *Ran* did not originate with *King Lear*. It was actually taken from a Japanese legend about a retiring warlord, Mohri Motonari³⁹ (See Figure 3). Motonari preached the importance of firm solidarity between brothers during the Warring States Period. He demonstrated this by relating a parable in which three arrows are meant to symbolize the strength found in the unity of three brothers.

³⁹ Mohri Motonari. (1497-1571).

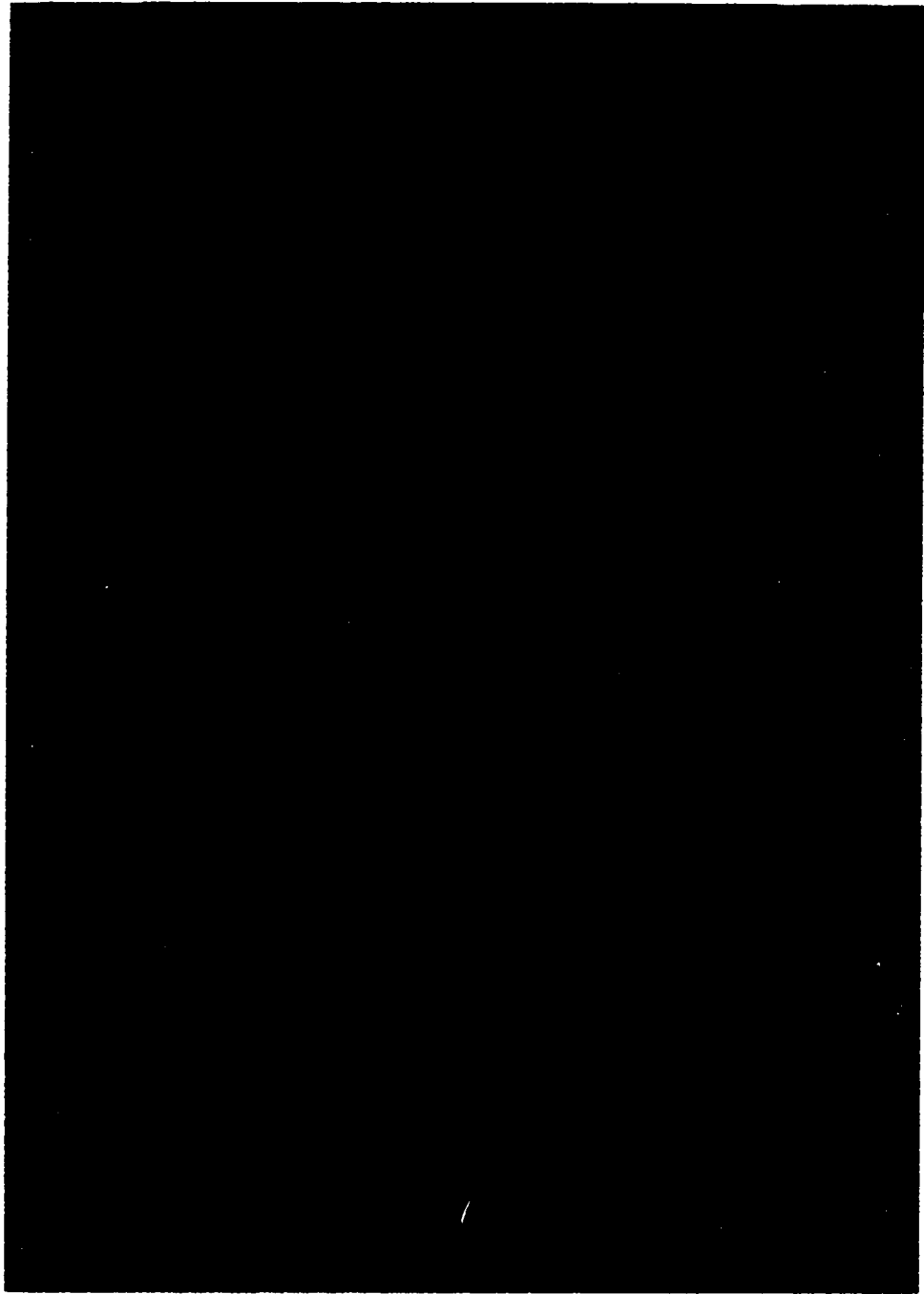


Fig. 3. Painter unknown, A portrait of Mohri Motonari. Motonari is painted wearing a kimono with his family crest woven into the pattern.

While a single arrow could easily be snapped, three together were unbreakable. While Motonari's three sons understood his lesson, Hidetora's (*Ran's* King Lear character) attempt to teach this lesson to his own sons ended in failure. Anyone with a junior high school education in Japan would be familiar with the legendary story of the three arrows. Kurosawa's appropriation of this story for *Ran* is thus familiar to viewers. During a press interview held for the announcement of his production in December 1983, Kurosawa said,

Because Mohri Motonari had three sons who listened to their father's lesson, the Mohri clan were prosperous even after Motonari's death. But then, I wondered what would have become of the family if the sons did not obey their father. All of a sudden, the story started to resemble the one of *King Lear*, and as a result, I made *Ran*. It was only then that the boundary between my story and Shakespeare effaced itself.⁴⁰

Kurosawa's cultural versatility explains why it was easy for him, as a Japanese director, to choose Shakespearean dramas as the basis for *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*. It still does not fully explain, however, why Kurosawa shot his films in the civil war period and not in a modern setting.

Macbeth and *King Lear* both tell the story of a lower status person overthrowing a person of a higher status (*ge-koku-jo*)-- a retainer overthrowing his master in the case of the former, and a child

⁴⁰ "Kurosawa Akira *Ran* goroku" [Kurosawa's Remarks on *Ran*], *Kinema-jumpoh*

overthrowing his/her father in the latter. During the Warring States Period, the country's rival feudal domains engaged in two hundred and fifty years of conflict before being unified by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1600. Before unification, battles, betrayals, traps and secret alliances were very common. One famous story that exemplifies the viciousness of the power struggles during this period is that of the military leader Oda Nobunaga, who, after his father died, killed his own uncles, brother and his wife's entire family to obtain the highest seat in the domain. After finally subjugating the barons and gaining hegemony, however, Nobunaga was killed by one of his trusted vassals before he could become the supreme ruler of the newly emerging state. It was this brutal struggle for political power in a time of confused loyalties that attracted Kurosawa to the Warring States Period.

Kurosawa received the grand prize for his film *Kagemusha* (a film whose story-line had nothing to do with Shakespeare) at the Cannes Film Festival in May of 1980. At the press conference, Kurosawa commented on the relationship between his period films and Shakespearean dramas:

Interviewer: Why did you film this [*Kagemusha*] as a period film? Are there any influences from Shakespearean plays?

Kurosawa: It is not that I've got my mind set on making period films. People have their lives no matter which period

they live in. I do not draw a line between period films and modern films. It was only because it was more effectively set in the time of this particular period that I chose it. I did not film this based on Shakespeare at all; it's only because the world that Shakespeare depicted and the Japanese Warring States Period are so similar, including their characters, that my and Shakespeare's films resemble each other. The [Japanese] warlords in those times fought in the battlefield with beautiful armor. Warfare was almost like an exhibit of artistry. I wanted to depict the beauty of it and also the cold reality of the cruelty of bloodshed.⁴¹

Although *Kagemusha* was created as a Japanese period film that was not based on Shakespeare but appeared to be, Kurosawa purposefully adapted Shakespearean plays in *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*. According to Donald Richie, Kurosawa had long held an interest in filming *Macbeth* after completing his film *Rashomon* (1950). Kurosawa waited several years, however, because he had heard that the American Orson Welles was also filming a version of *Macbeth*.⁴²

All three films – *Kagemusha*, *Ran*, and *Kumonosu-joh* – were period films. Kurosawa was particularly drawn to the genre:

Kurosawa: I think the form of the period film is very intriguing. In general, [in Japan] when you make period films, there is a certain morality that must be included. The subjects/retainers always have to be faithful and loyal to their lords. But in Japanese history, that only prevailed in the *samurai* world after the establishment of the era of the Tokugawa shoguns. The Tokugawa shoguns created moral

⁴¹ Kakuya Masaru, *Kurosawa Akira shuhsei* [The Compilation of Kurosawa Akira] (Tokyo: Kinema Jumpohsha, 1989) 185.

⁴² Donald Richie, *Kurosawa Akira no eiga* [The Films of Akira Kurosawa], trans. Miki Miyahiko (Tokyo: Kinema Jumpohsha, 1979) 202. I used this Japanese translation because the original English version (published in 1984) cut out a significant portion of Kurosawa's remarks.

codes and imposed them on their subordinate warlords throughout Japan in order to maintain the safety of their own house. During [Japan's] Warring States Period, the relationship [between the feudal lords and their vassals] was quite unstructured. Although you gave allegiance to one man, if you found he did not deserve your loyalty, you just switched masters.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah?

Kurosawa: It was only because of the nature of that period that someone like Hideyoshi⁴³ was able to emerge in our history. People had more choices.⁴⁴

In this interview, Kurosawa agreed with the interviewer that he wanted to recreate the atmosphere of Japan's warring period in *Ran*. While many films attempt to recreate Shakespeare's world faithfully, this would not mean much to a Japanese audience. Kurosawa wanted to use Shakespeare's world, but in a Japanese way. He faced the difficult task of translating the aspects typical of Shakespeare's world into a culturally recognizable form for the Japanese viewer. He achieved this transformation first by setting the film in the Japanese Warring States Period.

In an interview with Donald Richie during the shooting of *Kumonosu-joh*, Kurosawa said he was intrigued by the affinities

⁴³ Toyotomi Hideyoshi was the successor to Oda Nobunaga. Hideyoshi took his revenge on Akechi Mitsuhide, the vassal who betrayed Nobunaga. After that, Hideyoshi married Nobunaga's niece, killed his son, and became the most powerful general in Japan. He died before uniting the country, however, such that Japan did not become a unified nation until the daimyo Tokugawa Ieyasu came to power, initiating what is known as the Tokugawa period (1600-1868).

⁴⁴ Shibuya Youichi, *Kurosawa Akira, Miyazaki Hayao, Kitano Takeshi: Nippon no sannin no enshutsuka* [Kurosawa Akira, Miyazaki Hayao, Kitano Takeshi: Japan's Three Great Filmmakers] (Tokyo: Rokkingu On, 1993) 136.

between the medieval period in Shakespeare and the Japanese Warring States Period. During both epochs, the powerful were toppled, lords and vassals continuously manipulated and betrayed each other, marriages were arranged for political expediency, and there was continuous bloodshed among and between the families of the upper class. For this reason, Kurosawa has asserted that it was a smooth and natural transition to resituate stories originally set in medieval Scotland in the setting of the Japanese age of *“ge-koku-jo.”*

It is worth mentioning that, before Kurosawa, Japanese period films were primarily set in the Tokugawa era (1600-1868), when, as Kurosawa pointed out in his interview, feudal rules tightly structured the lives of samurai. These Japanese films mostly used Kabuki performance techniques to depict this world because many of the film actors came from Kabuki performing families and were thus trained in the Kabuki theatre. Kurosawa felt that there were already enough films of this genre in Japan. Instead, he engaged in making a new kind of period film; these films would be about warriors in a time of war rather than in peace. Furthermore, Kurosawa was not interested in the Tokugawa feudal setting. He became the first filmmaker to focus on the Warring States Period. By doing so, he avoided the formality and existing manners of film shooting linked to conventional period films based on Kabuki performance.

When he was asked in an interview about his intentions when making *Kumonosu-joh*, Kurosawa answered,

I have always thought that the Japanese *jidai* [period] film is historically uninformed. It only focuses on typical themes and forms. Also, it never uses modern filmmaking techniques. In short, it never brings out any new forms, but simply confines itself within one basic form and style. I find this petty and distorted. I have long wanted to revise how Japanese period films are perceived. In *Seven Samurai* we tried to do something about this, and we had the same intention when making *Kumonosu-joh*.⁴⁵

In part, Kurosawa used *Kumonosu-joh* as a model for future period films. It was Kurosawa's artistic attempt to resolve the problems apparent in Japanese period films as a genre.

By making the film this way, Kurosawa sought to satisfy his ambition to teach young people how the Japanese of the Warring States Period lived. At the start of the production of *Ran*, Kurosawa said,

You know, recently, I have only made period films. But this does not mean I am escaping from reality. These days, I know that school doesn't teach about the grand people of ancient periods. But just by looking at what they wore and the utensils of their everyday life, we can see their great stature. I just want [the young Japanese people] to know about these things [by viewing my films].⁴⁶

Prior to Kurosawa, other film directors from around the world have attempted to capture the essence of Shakespeare on film. They have had to show why their interpretation of Shakespeare is worth

⁴⁵ Richie 202.

⁴⁶ "Shirizu Kurosawa Akira: longu intavyu" ["Series Kurosawa Akira: Long Interview"], *Kinema jumpoh* 878 (1984): 27.

viewing. It followed that Kurosawa, Japan's first world-acclaimed film director, also had to be unique and create his own version of Shakespeare. Although Shakespearean plays were popular among Japanese intellectuals, no other Japanese film directors produced Shakespearean films.⁴⁷ For Kurosawa, the only available Shakespearean productions in Japan to learn from were the stage performances where Japanese actors and actresses impersonated Westerners with the help of wigs and make-up. Unlike the stage performances, Kurosawa did not choose for his Japanese actors to present themselves as Scottish or British. He also did not make them address each other as "Macbeth" or "King."

In shooting these two films, Kurosawa needed styles and forms that could bring out Shakespearean qualities. He also had to please both Japanese audiences, who were familiar with Kurosawa's grand "chambara eiga" films, and his world audiences, who were intrigued to see how a Japanese filmmaker might recreate the Shakespearean world of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* in a Japanese setting. He resolved these issues by employing Noh techniques in his films.

There are numerous explanations for why Kurosawa chose to employ the conventions of Noh theatre in his renditions of Shakespeare.

⁴⁷ To my knowledge, there are no other Japanese adaptations of Shakespearean dramas in film other than Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and *Ran*.

For one, Noh is a theatrical style that emerged and was developed under the patronage of the warrior class in the medieval period. As an art form, Noh reached the height of its refinement during the Muromachi age (1336-1568), a time that exemplifies the Warring States Period as a whole. The very concept of Noh reflects the viewpoint of warlords whose battles for power defined the period. In addition to telling stories about the lives of the warlords, Noh theatre was also patronized by powerful warlords throughout the period. In this respect, there was a natural historical connection between Noh and the medieval Japanese setting of Kurosawa's films. On the other hand, the way in which Noh conventions were employed in the depiction of the characters and the evocation of mood was original to Kurosawa.

J. Blumenthal points out that what Kurosawa achieved in making *Kumonosu-joh* was to create Shakespeare without using the scripts of Shakespeare.⁴⁸ In the entire film there is only one line that Kurosawa adapted from the original Shakespeare. It is spoken by Washizu, who says, "*Konna kimyouna tenki wa tsuizo mita koto mo nai,*" which is equivalent to Shakespeare's "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." [I. iii. 39] Here, however, it is translated by Kurosawa and his fellow writers into simple Japanese as "I've never seen such funny weather."

⁴⁸ J. Blumenthal, "*Macbeth into Throne of Blood,*" *Sight and Sound*, 7 (1965): 190-195.

This means that Kurosawa did not even make use of what has long been considered the fundamental line to describe the plot of *Macbeth*, when the witches say “fair is foul, and foul is fair.” (I. i. 11) Since Kurosawa does not read English, Shakespeare’s Middle English poetry probably meant nothing to Kurosawa. Instead, Kurosawa tried to visualize Shakespeare’s poetry and each of the lines in order to create the effects he desired. It is the aesthetic essence of Noh – both the theme and the form -- that enabled him to obtain the brilliance of Shakespeare’s texts without using them.

The beauty of the Noh performance comes from its refinement over the six hundred years of its history. French poet and diplomat, Paul Claudel, who lived in Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912) called Noh performance a “kinetic sculpture.”⁴⁹ It is this beauty that first struck Kurosawa, who had been more interested in Western oil painting before he encountered Noh in his early thirties. In an open letter to Iwasaki Akira published in the magazine *Eiga hyohron* [Cinema Review], Kurosawa wrote, “I was so overtaken by the static beauty of the style of Noh that expresses the sadness of living by appealing so quietly, not through your mind, but directly to the bottom of your heart.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Masuda Shohzoh, *Noh wo tanoshimu* [The Enjoyment of Noh] (Tokyo: Heibon, 1988) 93.

⁵⁰ Iwasaki and Kurosawa 53.

Why is the act of living seen to be lamentable in Noh? It is because the Noh performance reflects the view of the warlords whose lives were so unstable and unpredictable. At the same time, the historical background of Noh contributed to the establishment of its contradictory aspects as a theatrical form. For example, even though the most highly acclaimed genre of Noh is that which depicts women, no female actresses were actually allowed into the art. Furthermore, in Noh performance, moments between the visual sequences are more highly valued than the action or the music itself. Most performances require the Noh actor to wear a mask. The mask prevents communication between the actor and the audience through the means of facial expressions most often used in everyday life.

Kurosawa was drawn to these aspects of Noh performance, and used them to open up new forms of interaction among the characters in his films: "For a long time, I have been so attached to the ways in which Noh achieves its perfection in its performance. I am particularly struck by the fact that, in Noh, the abrupt stopping of the actors' movement magnifies the effects of any subtle movement."⁵¹

Kurosawa drew from the concept of time and space in Noh to help recreate the worlds of both *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. In Noh, the

⁵¹ Iwasaki and Kurosawa 53.

particular time or place of the scene is almost never mentioned. One refers to “one evening,” or “around here,” rather than a specific date or location. In this way, the audience can easily imagine its own situation based on personal experiences. Kurosawa does not give any specific year nor does he identify the location in either of his films. The films could be anywhere at anytime in Warring States Japan. On the one hand, this Noh technique inspires responses from the audience, and on the other, it sets the Noh performance free of time and space restrictions. In Noh, the concept of time and space frequently and easily changes. Chronometric devices can measure neither time nor distance in Noh.

The Noh story is told by the dead and is most often narrated by a ghost who is in disguise for the first half of the show. The real identity of the ghost is revealed only in the second half of the show. In other words, Noh is narrated by those who depict the world of the living from the perspective of those who have passed on into the world of the dead. Moreover, since the majority of Noh ghosts are women, the point of view they present is often that of a female. This Noh convention is particularly evident in both *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*, as the themes of death and the futility of power pervade the scenes in which the female characters are prominent.

As with most Japanese classical art forms,⁵² the world of Noh excluded female performers and continues to do so. In 1993, Izumi Junko became the first professional female “actor”⁵³ in Kyogen,⁵⁴ the comical shows which serve as interludes between Noh plays. As for Noh, although the first professional female actor performed in the prewar era, even half a century later, there are still not enough professional female Noh actors to do an all-woman Noh performance. This is true despite the fact that the average performance requires about fourteen actors. Because no women were traditionally involved in Noh, it is fair to say that the artistic criteria have been and are still set by men. Even though female characters in Noh far outnumber male characters, men playing the roles of women determine how women are to be represented. Kurosawa, however, had his actresses employ Noh techniques, proving that women can skillfully perform in the Noh style. This strategy also proved that Noh conventions could be used to

⁵² This includes Japanese tea ceremony and flower arrangement, now open to women. Kyogen is still quite closed to women and Kabuki is completely closed to women.

⁵³ I believe the use of the word “actor” here is appropriate in order to connote that these actresses meant to become and blend into the Kyogen world.

⁵⁴ Kyogen depicts the comical aspects of peoples’ lives. It is a form of stage art that developed along with Noh. Unlike Noh expression, whose central themes mainly focus on the sorrow of human lives or the emptiness of human vanity, Kyogen focuses on much lighter aspects of people’s lives. Some examples are stories of a husband who tries to cheat on his wife but is soon found out and punished by her, or a subject who vainly tries to steal drinks of his master’s sake and ends up being made to work harder.

create sensational effects in the filmic representation of his Shakespearean women.

In this chapter, I have discussed why Kurosawa, as a Japanese film director, chose to film Shakespeare's plays, why he did not set his films in modern day Japan, and why he incorporated Noh aesthetics in creating his filmic images, particularly in the case of the female characters. In filming *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*, Kurosawa confronted the rigid cultural codes of a Japanese classical art form that had excluded female actors for several hundred years. In Chapters 3 and 4, I shall examine in greater depth how Kurosawa challenged the presentation of female characters in art by means of Noh theatre conventions.

Chapter 3

The Film Performance Analysis of *Kumonosu-joh*

In creating *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*, Kurosawa firmly integrated aspects of Noh. He had already incorporated Noh techniques into some of his earlier movies. We see this in his third film, *Zoku Sugata Sanshiro*, [Sugata Sanshiro Part Two] (1945). In this film, the character Genzaburoh, the younger brother of Sanshiro's rival, seeks revenge for his brother. Kurosawa signifies the mad quality of his aim by having him hold a stem of bamboo grass, a symbol of madness in Noh. By carrying it at all times, Genzaburo is marked as crazed. In his 4th film, *Tora no o wo fumu otoko-tachi* [They Who Step on the Tiger's Tail] (1952), Kurosawa chose the Kabuki play *Kanjin-cho*, whose story actually originated from a Noh piece, *Ataka*, as the story-line. Before the film *Kumonosu-joh*, however, Kurosawa's occasional use of elements of Noh in his films never meshed with the central themes of his work. *Kumonosu-joh* is different from the earlier Kurosawa films in that Noh techniques are used consistently throughout. Noh is the

primary vehicle Kurosawa uses to convey his interpretation of Shakespeare's text.

In recreating Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, how did Kurosawa make use of Noh techniques? How did he create his characters and have them appropriate Noh conventions? In particular, how did this strategy work in the cases of the *yamamba*, the old mountain spirit, and Lady Asaji in *Kumonosu-joh*? One of the significant differences between traditional Noh performances and Kurosawa's films is that Kurosawa used actresses -- women who would portray women -- whereas Noh plays would only use men to fill the roles of women. What does this fact signify?

A good way to start pursuing such questions is to examine the *yamamba* in *Kumonosu-joh*. Although the story line of the film is largely based on the plot of *Macbeth*, Kurosawa made one major change. He transformed Shakespeare's three witches into an old mountain spirit (*yamamba*) whom Washizu, Kurosawa's Macbeth, and Miki, Kurosawa's Banquo, meet in the woods. Kurosawa chose not to retain Shakespeare's three witches since there was no direct counterpart in Japanese folklore.

Before I discuss how and why Kurosawa transformed the three witches in *Macbeth* into one old mountain spirit in *Kumonosu-joh*, and how this conversion was facilitated by Noh techniques, it should be

noted that Kurosawa reportedly developed these ideas after the start of the filming and not through prior planning. We can clearly see Kurosawa's uncertainty in an interview with Ogi Masahiro for the July 1956 issue of the Japanese film magazine *Eiga no tomo* [Film Fans], which took place just before he began shooting *Kumonosu-joh*. In this interview, Kurosawa talked about his plans for his three up-coming films. These were all to be period films. He also compared Laurence Olivier's⁵⁵ use of ghost characters with his own use of ghosts in making his version of *Macbeth*. The interview reads:

Kurosawa: ...this time, I am going to have my ghost character compete with that in Olivier's [Shakespearean] works! (Laughter)

Ogi: Ah, you are talking about the witches and the illusions that Macbeth will encounter! ...But you know what? The Japanese ghosts seem to be much scarier than the Western ones.

Kurosawa: Yeah, but [in the West], there is this very conventional concept of *majo* (witches.) We do not have this in Japan. So [in transferring Shakespeare's works into a Japanese setting], that is a problem for me.

Ogi: Ah...but you know, there are demonic old women portrayed in Noh plays. Right?

Kurosawa: ...oh, that. But they merely sit in a thatched hut and do nothing.

In this interview, it is apparent that Kurosawa was not yet certain as to how to alter the Shakespearean witch figures in his version of *Macbeth*. When this interview was held, Kurosawa felt that the

⁵⁵ Laurence Olivier. (1907-1989). A British Shakespearean actor and director for both the stage and film.

demonic old women figures in Noh pieces “merely” sit and do “nothing.” He did not seem to value such characters at this time. One may even surmise that Kurosawa was spurred by this very interview to consider the possibility of applying Noh characters and techniques in his cinematic representation of *Macbeth*. His “demonic old woman” character in *Kumonosu-joh* clearly resembles those in the Noh theatre. In any case, it was only after Kurosawa actually filmed *Kumonosu-joh* that he became more confident about how to use Noh conventions in his films.

Fourteen years after a world audience viewed *Kumonosu-joh*, Kurosawa explained his reasons for using Noh techniques in his film:

Sato Tadao: Noh conventions in *Kumonosu-joh* pervade the entire movie. Did you intend to use Noh when you first laid out your plans for filmic adaptation?

Kurosawa: Yes, I knew that I was going to use the old witch-like woman of the Noh piece, *Kurozuka*.⁵⁰ This demonic old woman is a monster that preys on humans. I could think of no better way than that to transform the

⁵⁰ Author unknown. Together with *Dohjoh-ji* [Temple of Dohjoh-ji] and *Aoi no ue*, [Lady Aoi], this was one of the three best known Noh stories that depicted revenge of a demoness. One late autumn evening, a group of monks on a pilgrimage wandered far into the mountains. In the midst of nowhere, they came upon a hut. To their great surprise, and relief, there lived an old woman. She refused the monks' request for a night of shelter, however, but after being asked a second time, she invited them in. She went out into the darkness to fetch some wood in order to make a bonfire. As she left, she pleaded with the monks not to peep into her bedroom. Out of curiosity, compounded by the fact that they were asked not to look into the bedroom, a servant to the monks peeped into the old woman's bedroom and found a corpse and skeletons. The monks quickly tried to escape, only to be caught by the enraged demoness. Although she meant no harm to them, because these men betrayed her faith in them, she would not relent. After a fierce battle, the Buddhist prayers of the monks ceased the rage of the mountain demoness, who then disappeared into the darkness of the night.

imagery of Western witches into a Japanese cultural context. All the other Noh-like direction was employed and developed as we shot the film.⁵⁷

Here, Kurosawa confidently expresses his idea of substituting the mountain demoness figure for Shakespeare's three witches. A reader familiar only with Kurosawa's above comment would mistakenly be led to believe that his use of Noh in the films was conceived in the planning stages. In contrast, Kurosawa's earlier interview demonstrate that his use of the demonic old woman and Noh techniques were a consequence of the filming process itself. In fact, it could have been the interviewer/film critic Ogi Masahiro himself who gave Kurosawa the first inspiration to apply Noh techniques in *Kumonosu-joh*. But no matter whose idea it was in the very beginning, it was Kurosawa who actualized the idea through his film-making.

Once Kurosawa started depicting his version of the Shakespearean witches through the use of the *yamamba*, he was able to transform many other Shakespearean elements through other Noh conventions. Kurosawa's integration of Noh achieved two basic aims. One was to create an atmosphere that would closely resemble that of Shakespeare's original play. This aim was accomplished through the appropriation of physical features like Noh sets and masks, and

⁵⁷ Manvell 103.

through the use of the instrumental interlude which is particularly unique to Noh plays.

In the first half of my analysis of *Kumonosu-joh*, I examine the ways in which Kurosawa used his knowledge of Noh in order to bring the Shakespearean *Macbeth* alive in the context of the Japanese period film *Kumonosu-joh*. In the second half of my discussion of *Kumonosu-joh*, I examine more closely Kurosawa's original creation of the witch figure and the Lady Macbeth character and how Kurosawa best brought out Noh stage art performance in filmic performance, along with their social significance.

Before discussing how Kurosawa merged his overall knowledge of Noh with Shakespeare, it is necessary to explain the general setting of a Noh performance. Today, at a general indoor Noh performance,⁵⁸ the audience is seated on two sides of the apron stage that extends into the audience. The Noh stage does not have a curtain and is shaped like a rectangle that has four pillars, one on each corner (See Figures 4 and 5).

⁵⁸ When Noh first started to develop, it was only performed outdoors with the audience seats covered by a roof. Even today, Noh performances often take place at night and outdoors under the light of torches. This type of Noh performance is called *takigi-noh*, bonfire Noh, and is said to preserve the style of Noh performance that was once performed for a samurai audience.



Fig. 4. Photographer: Yoshikoshi Tatsuo, Kita Butai [North Stage] at Nishi Hongan-ji Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Shirasu Masako, *Onoh no mikata* [A Way of Viewing Noh]. (Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1993): 8.

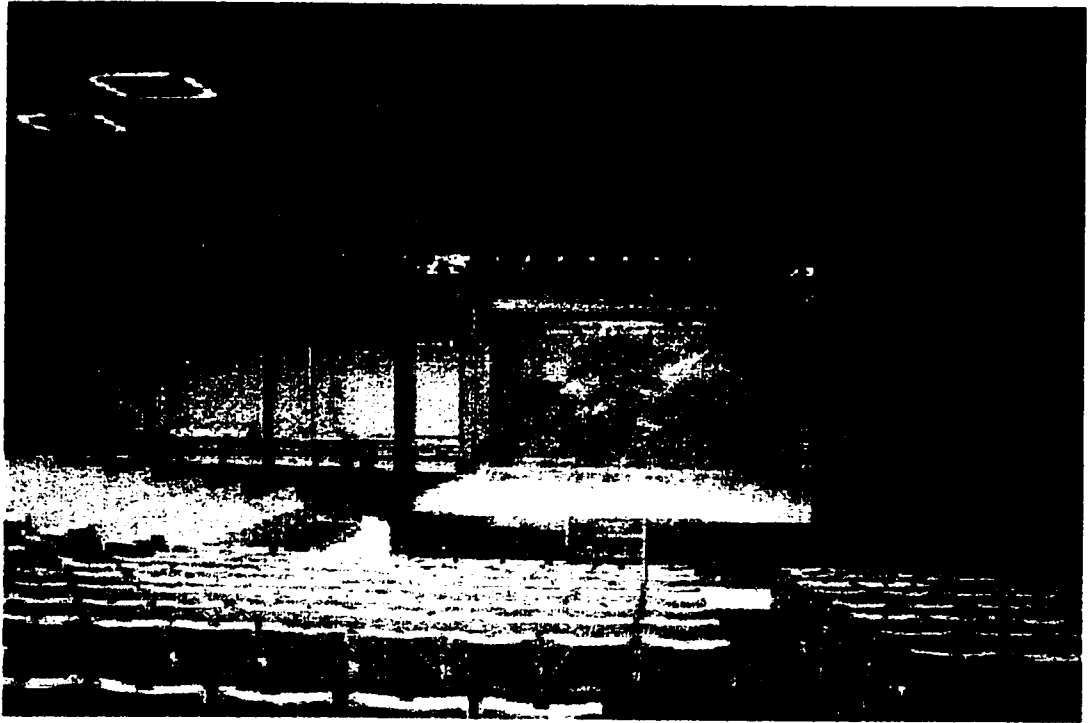


Fig. 5. Photographer: Yoshikoshi Tatsuo, a modern indoor Noh stage at the Hohshoh Noh-gakudo Theatre in Tokyo, Japan. Shirasu Masako, *Onoh no mikata* [A Way of Viewing Noh]. (Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1993): 9.

There is no announcement before the show begins, but as the audience becomes quiet, the Japanese flute player plays a very short segment of music that indicates the play has already started. In a sense, there is no clear beginning to a Noh play. After the flute begins, the quartet musicians, consisting of one Japanese flute player and three drummers, enter the stage with their instruments. Next, a group of eight *utai* chanters, the chorus who chant the Noh text, enter through the small stage door. The whole sequence indicates the beginning of the performance. During this time, the audience does not respond to the entrance of the performers, but instead, quietly tries to absorb itself into the performance. Since all Noh pieces are reproductions of a fixed repertoire, it is generally presumed that the audience is already familiar with elements of specific Noh performances: the plot, the chants, the music, the steps, the movement and the dances. This is not the case with all Noh theatre goers, but it is true that quite a few who sit in the audience can actually recite the whole script or may even be aware of the dance steps. So then, why would they come to see the performance? Perhaps it is because they are eager to share their excitement about the art of Noh with the particular Noh performer and the rest of the audience. Indeed, the world of Noh involves a great deal of audience response. So much so that the audience is considered part of the Noh performance itself. It is

generally perceived that Noh is not something to merely see or hear, but rather something to experience or share with the performers' guidance.

As mentioned above, Noh performances begin as the audience enters the empty theatre. The mode of the performance gradually builds as the chanters and the musicians take their places. Then the Japanese flute player begins his music and is soon joined by chanting from the all-male chorus. The music and chanting invite the audience to join the performers in creating the world of the particular piece that is being performed. After the first verse of chanting, the deuteragonist, called the *waki*, enters the scene from a gate that is covered by a five-colored curtain, then proceeds onto the stage after walking across a bridge-like structure which connects it to the players' waiting room. The *waki*, usually in the guise of a travelling priest, introduces himself and begins the narrative. Throughout the performance, the audience can identify with the *waki*, who is himself an observer to the events which unfold.

The silence of the audience, the entrance of both the chanters and the musicians, the chants, the contents of the lyrics, and the introduction of the *waki* all build tension for the entrance of the *shite*, or the leading character. These elements are also there to create the particular atmosphere that characterizes the Noh piece they are performing. Since the Noh stage does not depend on elaborate sets or

props, nor on any pre-recorded sound effects or lighting designs, it tries to stimulate the audience's imagination. When that is accomplished, the time for the *shite* arrives.

In *Kumonosu-joh*, Kurosawa clearly followed the prescribed pattern of the opening scene of a Noh performance. *Kumonosu-joh* opens with an outdoor scene in which there is a heavy fog. The sound of harsh wind blowing is heard. Then, out of nowhere, the male chanters' song chimes in as the mist hovers about. The camera wanders around the scene, as if vainly searching for any living creature:

Behold, within this place
Now desolate, stood
Once a mighty fortress.
Lived a proud warrior
Murdered by ambition,
His spirit walking still.
Vain pride then as now will
Lead ambition to the kill.⁵⁹

The male chorus sings in a monotone manner, just as the Noh chanters do. It should be noted, however, that Kurosawa's singers do not sing in a Japanese style in which there is not a clear difference between tones. Rather, they sing in a Western manner, with each note of music following the Western music pattern of "do, re, mi." The effect of using Western-style singing, whether Kurosawa specifically meant for it to happen or not, gives the scene a lighter atmosphere which

⁵⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of dialogue are based on translations

contrasts with the eerie impressions the lyrics create in the mind of the audience.

The audience then sees a sign written on a rotten wooden marker. It reads, “Kumonosu-joh shi” [“Here once stood Spiderweb Castle”].⁹⁰ Later, the audience learns that this is actually the final scene of the film, in which *Kumonosu-joh* is destroyed and the residents scattered. The film *Kumonosu-joh* thus begins with its last scene, letting the audience see what will become of the central characters in the story. This cyclical pattern, like the wheel that the *yamamba* spins, directly imitates the style of Noh performance. As mentioned earlier, the Noh stage always begins from and returns to a vacant space.

The next scene of the film also parallels Noh performance. In Noh, this is the point at which the *waki* enters. Although the *waki* is usually a lone priest, he may be accompanied by one or a few followers called *waki-tsure*. In *Kumonosu-joh*, Kurosawa has his secondary characters sit and wait for consecutive messengers to bring the latest

into English by Donald Richie on the videocassette release of *Throne of Blood* (copyright 1961 by Brandon Films) currently in distribution.

⁹⁰ Donald Richie describes this sign as a “grave marker” in his book, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, p. 117. The sign, however, is not really a grave marker. In the film, Richie did not include any explanatory text. Another critic, James Goodwin, in *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*, 1991, writes about this sign as bearing “the place-name Kumonosu-ju” (*sic*) overlooking one Japanese character word “shi,” which in English means “the site” [of a demolished castle]. These small points indicate the difficulty of researching an artifact created in a foreign language.

news from the warfront, positioning them in the role of the *waki* and *waki-tsure*. In this manner, the audience learns that Washizu, the film's protagonist, is fighting bravely against the enemy, who are actually troops lead by a subject who betrayed his lord. Here, Kurosawa's audience begins building an image of Washizu before seeing him, just as the Noh audience does for the *shite* before his entrance. After the film audience learns more about Washizu, the *shite* of this story, he finally enters the screen and thus the purview of the audience. When he does, he says, "*Nanto iu hi da. Konna kimyouna tenki wa tsuizo mitakoto mo nai.* [I've never seen such funny weather.]" As mentioned in Chapter 2, this utterance is the only line faithfully translated from Shakespeare's text into Kurosawa's film. This indicates Kurosawa's desire to imply a similarity between his own film and the Shakespearean play at the very start of his film.

It is not only the opening scenes that echo the Noh atmosphere in Kurosawa's version of *Macbeth*. The dialogue spoken by the samurai warriors also reflects the manner of speech in Japanese classical performances. The second messenger from the battlefield says, "*Tonoh! Gobuun shuhchaku ni zonji masuru*" [My lord! You are blessed with good fortune in battle]. The ideograms comprising "shuhchaku" [祝着] literally mean "celebration" and "arrival." The term is a very archaic one, hardly used in modern Japanese today. However, it is

used rather frequently in the world of Kyogen, whose scripts have not been revised over the course of time. It is important to note that Noh is interspersed with Kyogen performances in a full Noh-gaku program. In simple terms, Kyogen is optimistic and comic, whereas Noh is pessimistic and tragic. Formerly, samurai would spend a whole day performing and appreciating Noh-gaku, alternating Noh with Kyogen. Thus, Noh and Kyogen are to be considered as a pair – one depicting the brighter and the other the darker side of life. Kurosawa's choice of archaic words shows how he was deeply aware of both Noh and Kyogen and that he was eager to introduce the beauty of archaic Japanese words or phrases to his audiences. In this way, there is both an artistic and educational aspect to Kurosawa's use of language. Donald Richie's subtitle here merely says, "Sir! I bring good news." An audience relying only on subtitles would thus fail to appreciate the touch of antiquity in the conversations of the samurai warriors. Perhaps this is a limitation intrinsic to all foreign language subtitles.

Kurosawa gave life to his characters through the use of Noh techniques, especially in the case of Lady Macbeth. Kurosawa also borrowed from Noh performance to create his male characters, but not to the same degree as with his two main female characters. In this respect, this part of Chapter 3 will analyze the performance of Kurosawa's witch character and his Lady Macbeth.

By appropriating Noh stage performance techniques for the *yamamba* and Lady Asaji, and by employing Noh sets and props for the scenes in which they appear, Kurosawa demonstrates that he does care about creating intriguing female characters.

As previously discussed, Kurosawa's experiment of merging Noh and filmic expression first began when he transformed Shakespeare's three witches into one *yamamba* character, the equivalent of the main *shite* character in the Noh play *Kurozuka*.

Figure 6 shows the original set of the first act of *Kurozuka*⁶¹ and Figure 7 shows a related scene in *Kumonosu-joh*. The *shite*, or lead figure of the Noh play *Kurozuka*, is an old woman who has turned into a ghostly demon at the end of her long and lonely life. She resides in an old bamboo hut secluded in the mountains. These huts, as seen in Figure 6, were commonly used in Noh theatre to indicate residences for those banished from the common world. By day, the *yamamba* sits spinning thread, just as does the mysterious old woman that Washizu and Miki encountered in *Kumonosu-joh*. Some of the audience, those who have more than an average knowledge of Noh performance, might notice the fusion of Noh and film in this scene.

⁶¹ Komparu Nobutaka, *Noh men nyuhmon* [An Invitation to Noh Masks] (Tokyo: Heibon-sha, 1984) 206.



Fig. 6. Photographer unknown, A scene from *Kurozuka*, Act One. On the right, there is a hut where a demoness resides.

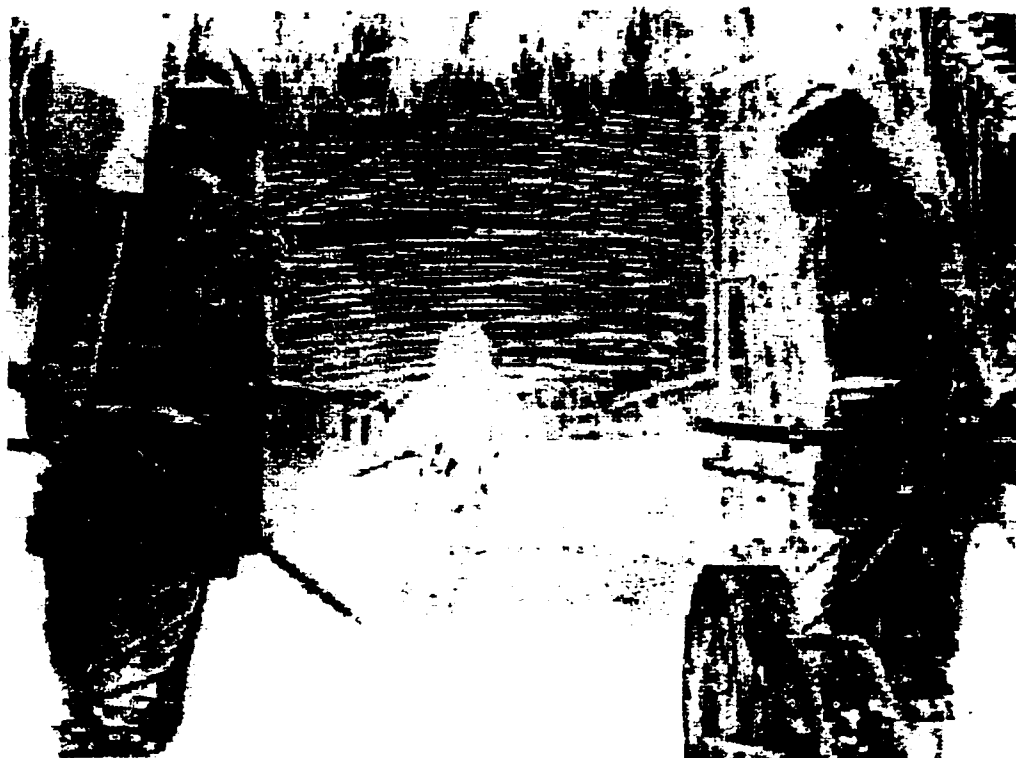


Fig. 7. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. Washizu Taketoki (Mifune Toshiroh) on the right, encounters a *yamamba* (Namihana Chieko) center, with his fellow samurai warrior Miki Yoshiaki (Chiaki Minoru), on the left.

Figure 8 is a scene taken from the original *Kurozuka*, showing an angry *yamamba* disguised as a frail, elderly-looking woman.

Kurosawa made his witch sit with her left knee folded over the right, in the way the Noh woman sits in her hut (See Figure 9). He also had her spin thread in a similar manner to her Noh counterpart. The similarity between the old woman in Kurosawa's film and the *yamamba* in the Noh play is quite striking.

In the Noh play, soon after the old woman appears, it is discovered that she lives by devouring travelers who request shelter for the night. Figure 10 shows how the frail old woman figure is actually transformed on the Noh stage.

The *yamamba* character in the Noh play *Kurozuka* suited Kurosawa's version of *Macbeth* for many reasons. In the scene when Washizu first encounters the mountain witch, Kurosawa's *yamamba* woman chants. The original *yamamba* character also chants a song about human vanity as she spins the wheel of thread. This scene echoes the images of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the first scene in which the three witches enter and say "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." The visual image of the revolving wheel of the *yamamba* is similar to the circular meaning of the words used by the witches in *Macbeth*. Both imply the fragility of the possession of political or military power, or, in other words, that power is unstable.

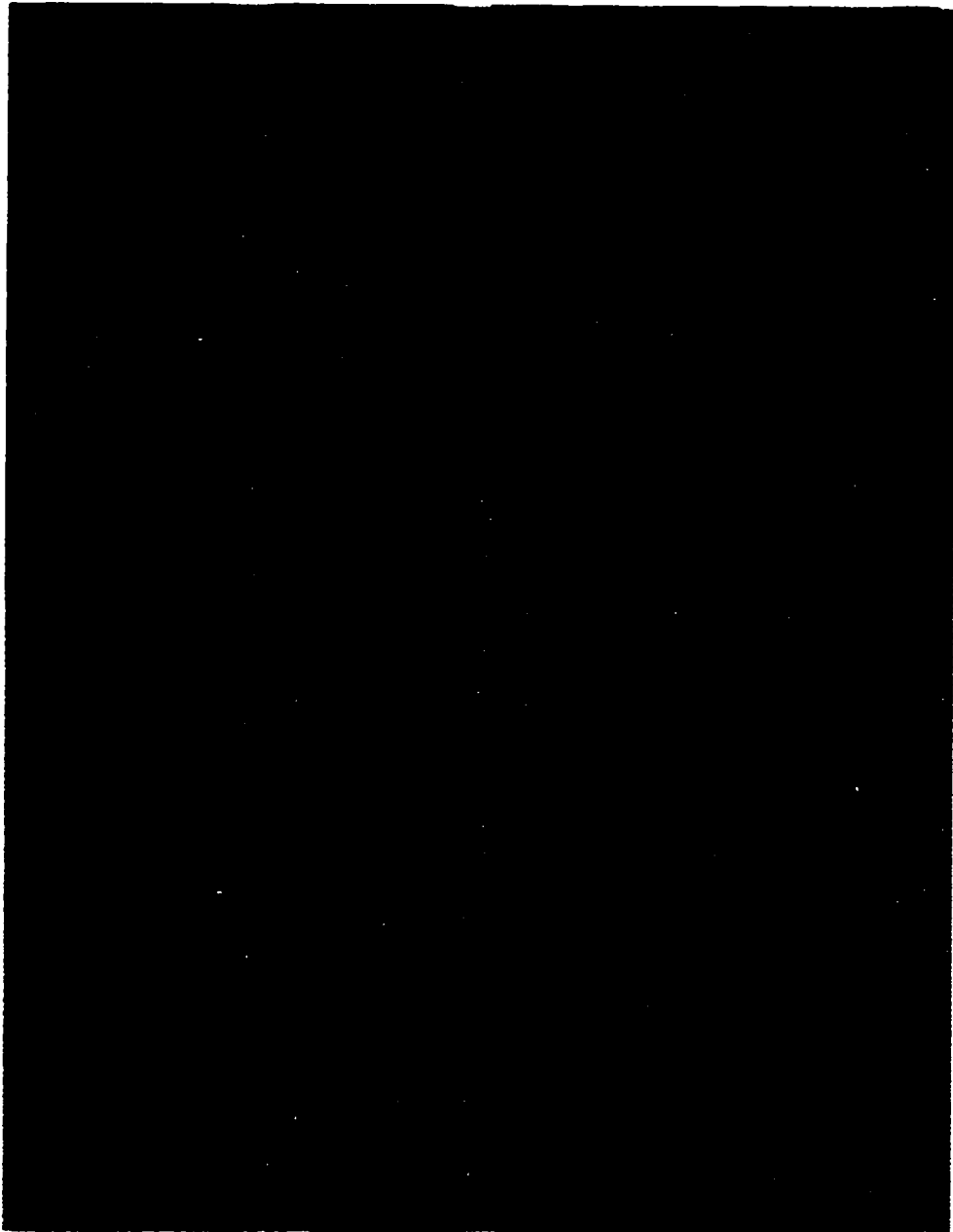


Fig. 8. Photographer unknown, A *yamamba* in Noh *Kurozuka*, Act One. A *yamamba* sits spinning a wheel of thread. Komparu Nobutaka. *Noh men nyuhmon* [The Invitation to Noh Masks] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1984): 96.

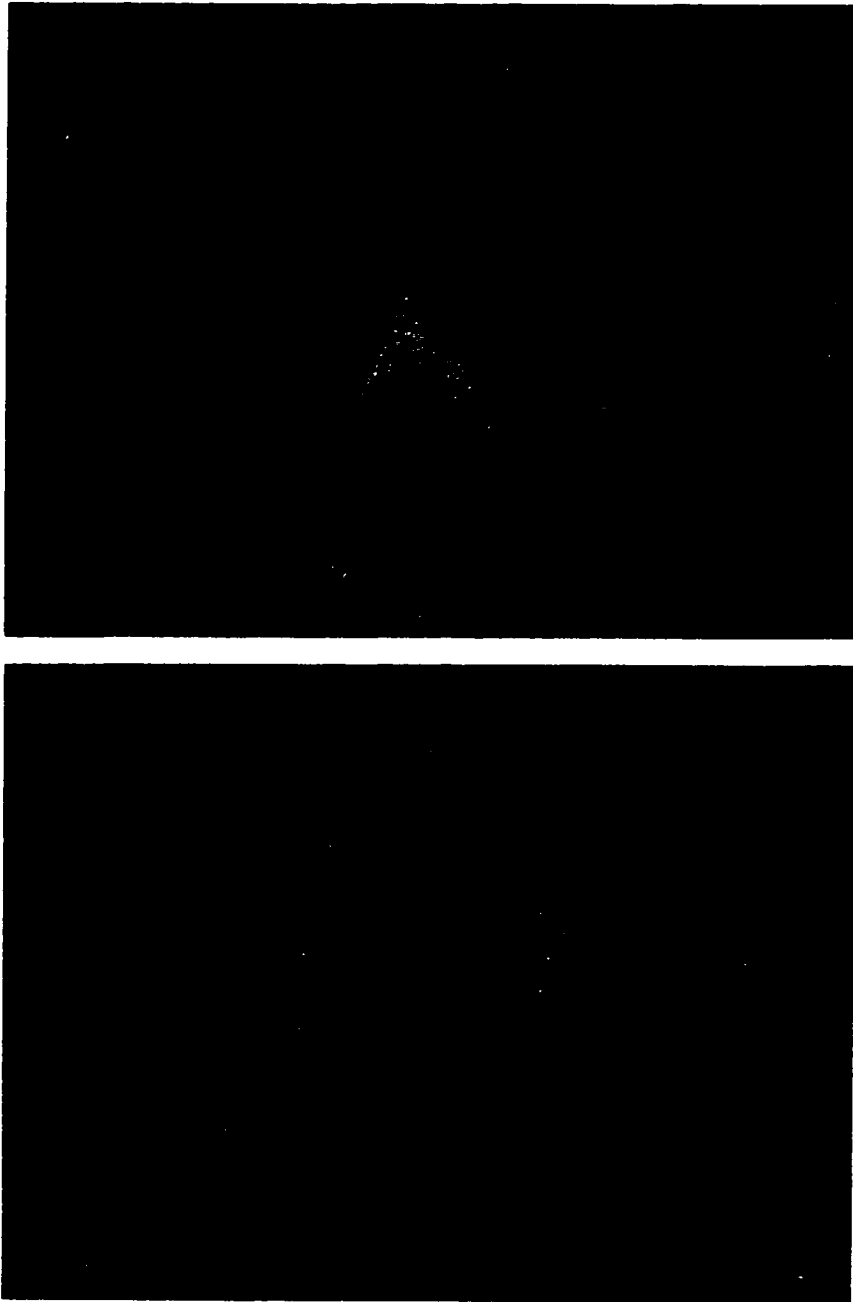


Fig. 9. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. The *yamamba* (Namihana Chieko) spins thread in her hut on a deserted mountain.

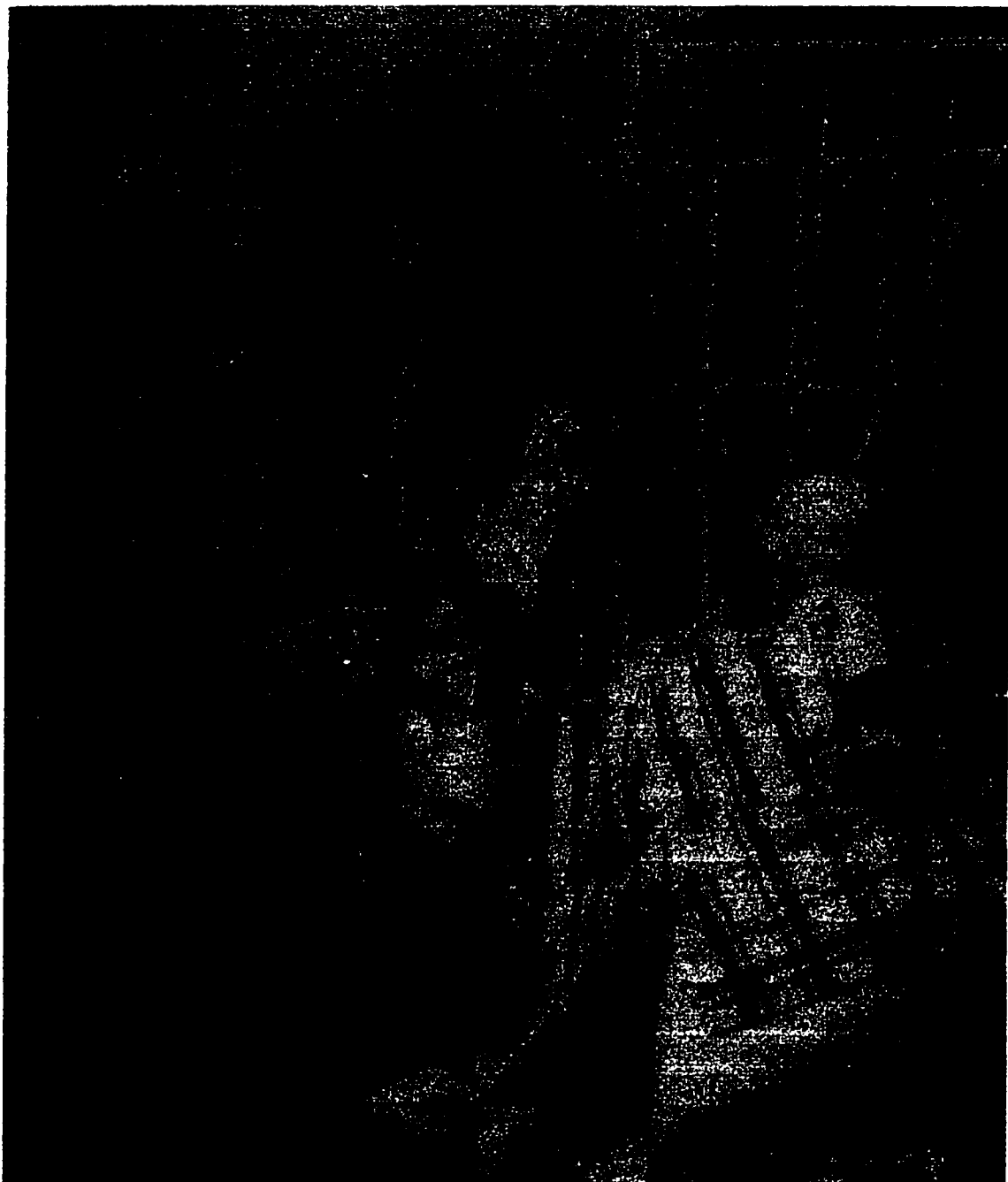


Fig. 10. Photographer unknown, *Kurozuka*, Act Two.
Here the real identity of the demoness is revealed.

The chants of Kurosawa's *yamamba* are actually prophecies on the characters' lives. She chants in a very low voice that sounds more like a man than that of a woman. This was not achieved by the efforts of the actress, Namihana Chieko's, effort alone. In addition to the actresses' voice control and her chanting of specifically Noh *utai*, Kurosawa enhanced her voice through mechanical instruments. Her voice was made to sound much lower than it actually was, and thus made to sound like a man's voice. This also made her voice sound as if it wasn't "from the earth." As a result, her chants sounded neither like a man's nor a woman's voice. The character of the *yamamba* itself is supposed to be desexualized, as it is an old woman past her prime. It should be remembered that Noh uses only men.⁶² Although Kurosawa chose to have an actress play this *yamamba* role, he manipulated her voice to make reference to classical Noh gender ambiguity. Unlike Kabuki performances, where female-impersonating-male actors (*onnagata*) (See Figures 11 and 12) speak in a high pitch to mimic women's speech, in Noh performances, actors adopt natural tones of voice. While one of the supreme goals of the Kabuki *onnagata* is to appear and sound like a real woman, or as they call it "being more

⁶² Even today, it is impossible for there to be all women on a Noh stage for two reasons. First, there are no female professional deuteragonist players. (In Noh, the *shite*, the primary player is only played by the actors who are called *shite-kata*, and the *waki*, or the deuteragonist player is only played by the actors who are called *waki-kata*). This separation is a rigid rule. You never play a *shite* if you are a *waki*

womanly than what real women themselves can be,” a Noh actor portraying a female character does not seek to look or sound like a real woman. Rather, Noh actors try to portray woman symbolically.



Fig. 11. Photographer: Umemura Yutaka, Bandoh Tamasaburoh, an *onnagata* female-impersonator in *Fujimusume*, one of the three most well-known Kabuki dance pieces. Kawatake Toshio, *Kabuki*. (Tokyo: Rippuh Shoboh, 1989): back cover page.

actor). Second, there are not enough *utai* chanters to put up a Noh stage.



Fig. 12. Photographer unknown, A scene from the Kabuki play *Narukami*. Princess Taema, played by Bando Tamasaburoh, seduces the priest Narukami, portrayed by Ichikawa Danjuroh. *Kabuki* (Tokyo: Rippuh Shoboh, 1989): 18.

In order to portray female characters in Noh, however, male actors must wear female masks. In Noh theatre, male voices therefore emanate from female characters. When viewing *Kumonosu-joh*, while the sound of a man's voice from a female character may surprise viewers who are not familiar with this Noh technique, it would not have seemed extraordinary to Kurosawa's Japanese audience, if they were at all familiar with the performance style of Japan's classical theatre arts. Although Noh is not as popular today as it was in the past, in 1957, Noh was still considered a form of performance art and audience members would probably have been more familiar with the gender ambivalence of Noh plays.

Kurosawa mentioned in his interview with Sato Tadao that in the course of the filming, he showed each actor the Noh mask that came closest to his/her respective part.⁶³ For the old woman, Kurosawa said, "The witch in the wood was represented by the mask named *Yamamba*." One might argue that Kurosawa could have been mixing up the names of Noh masks here. Yet it is true that the mountain demoness character that is disguised as an old woman in the Noh play *Kurozuka* is named *yamamba*. What is confusing, however, is that this *yamamba* character does *not* wear the Noh mask *Yamamba* (See Figure 13) in *Kurozuka*. Instead, the actor usually wears either one of

the Noh masks named *Yaseonna*, (See Figure 14) thin woman, *Uba*, (See Figure 15) old woman, or *Fukai*, deep well (See Figure 16).⁶⁴ Keiko McDonald points out that, “When she [the old mountain witch] first appears, the face is similar to the female mask called *yaseonna*.”⁶⁵ Donald Richie wrote that the *yamamba* mountain spirit’s makeup resembles the Noh mask of a demon.⁶⁶ When I asked Mr. Hasegawa Haruhiko,⁶⁷ the professional Japanese Noh player, about this, he said the facial expression of the *yamamba* character in the film (See Figure 17) appeared to be more like the mask named *Uba*. Mr. Hasegawa also mentioned that when the *yamamba* first appears, the wording of her chants were evidently not written by a Noh script writer, although they are made to sound somewhat like Noh chants due to the repetition of the verse. Kurosawa’s verse goes:

Asamashiya. Asamashiya.
Nadote hito no yo ni shou wo uke,
Mushi no inochi no hosoboso to
Mi wo kurushimuru orokasayo.

⁶³ Manvell 103.

⁶⁴ The names of these Noh masks often does not make any sense.

⁶⁵ McDonald 129. In this book, McDonald translated the name of the Noh mask “*Yaseonna*,” as “old lady.” But because the characters for *yaseonna* 瘦女 actually use “thin” and “woman,” and also, because there is another Noh mask named “*Uba*,” which literally means “old woman,” “*Yaseonna*” should be translated differently in order to differentiate the two.

⁶⁶ Richie 205.

⁶⁷ Interview by author. Tokyo, Japan, 12 June, 1997.



Fig. 13. Photographer unknown, A Noh mask of Yamamba mountain spirit. "Men to shohzoku [The Noh Masks and Costumes]." Editorial. *Bessatsu Taiyoh* Winter 1978: 50.

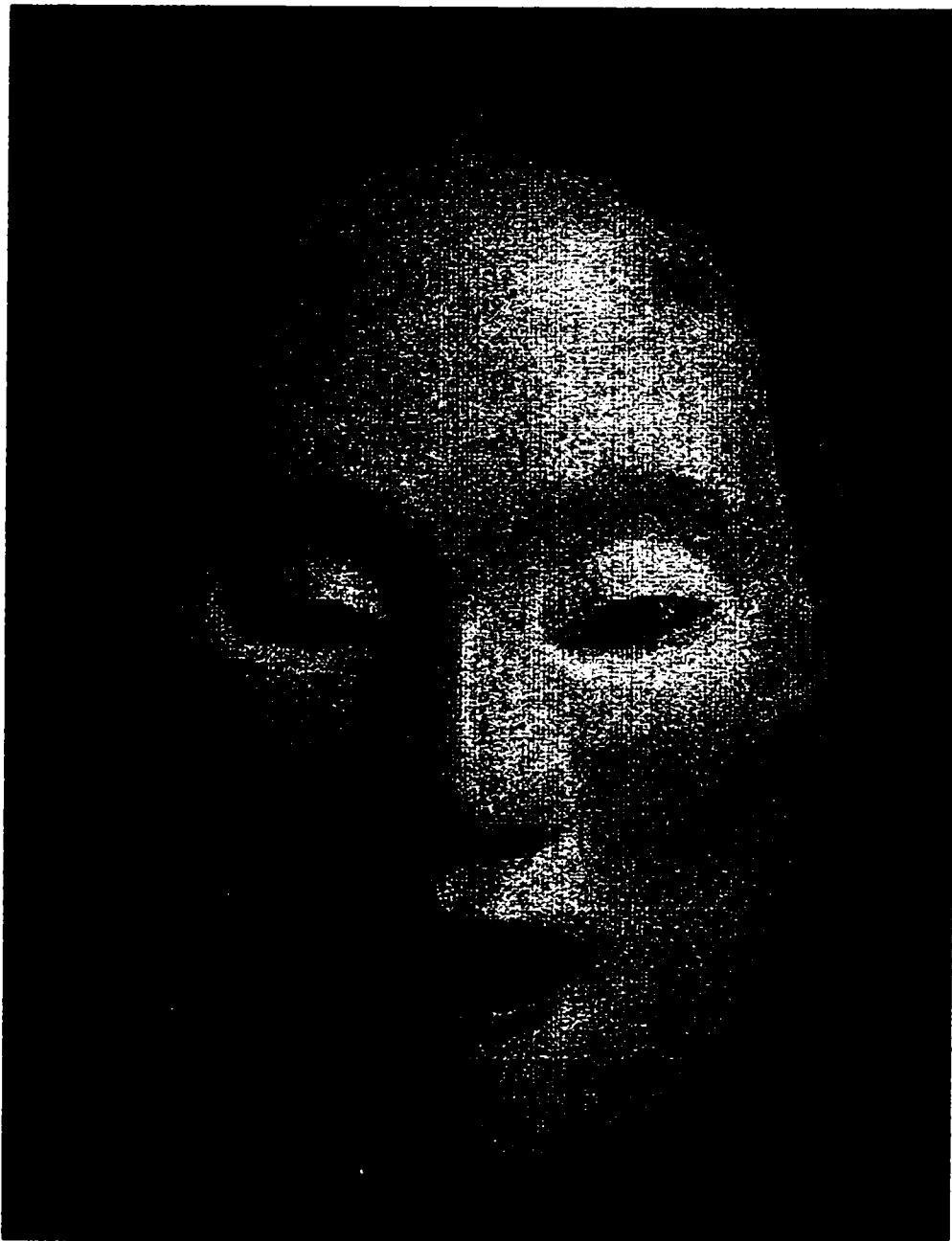


Fig. 14. Photographer: Ishimoto Yasuhiro, *Yaseonna*. Kanze Hisao, *Noh-men* [The Noh Masks]. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1974): 20.



Fig. 15. Photographer unknown, A Noh mask of *Uba*. "Men to *shohzoku* [The Noh Masks and Costumes]." Editorial. *Bessatsu Taiyoh* Winter 1978: 150.



Fig. 16. Photographer unknown, A Noh mask of *Fukai*. "Men to *shohzoku* [The Noh Masks and Costumes]." Editorial. *Bessatsu Taiyoh* Winter 1978: 147.



Fig. 17. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. A *yamamba* (Namihana Chieko) in Kurosawa Akira's *Kumonosu-joh*.

Donald Richie does not supply subtitles for the first verses of the chant. In English the above means:

How shallow, how shallow
Why in heaven do people who have the gift of living their
lives
[still choose to live] like the insects that
crawl and struggle to live

Here, Mr. Hasegawa pointed out that in Noh, in the second verse, instead of “Nadote” the word “Nadoya” should have been used, because “Nadote” sounds incorrect for those who are accustomed to hearing Noh verse. In this way, we may infer that although Kurosawa had a deep understanding of Noh, he was not a Noh professional. Perhaps, it really did not matter to Kurosawa if he was using the Noh conventions correctly or not. Kurosawa was more interested in imparting a sense of Noh than in making his characters perform an accurate Noh piece in front of his movie camera.

The way Kurosawa’s camera captures the *yamamba* character is also worth noting. The camera never closes in on her face or on any part of her body such as her hands or feet. Instead, the camera always captures her in full in a half-kneeling, half-squatting position on the ground that either takes up the entire screen or appears only in half of the screen (See Figure 18). The important point here is that she is never seen in part. This is also true for a Noh performance, where the audience sees all of the Noh performers’ bodies at all times. In film,

close-ups are a common way of focusing on particular characters, whereas Kurosawa chose to maintain the stage-like atmosphere in his film. Unlike in the Noh play, however, Kurosawa makes his *yamamba* and the hut disappear into the air by using a classical film trick. The first scene in which the *yamamba* appears thus mixes many Noh performance expressions with some filmic expressions.

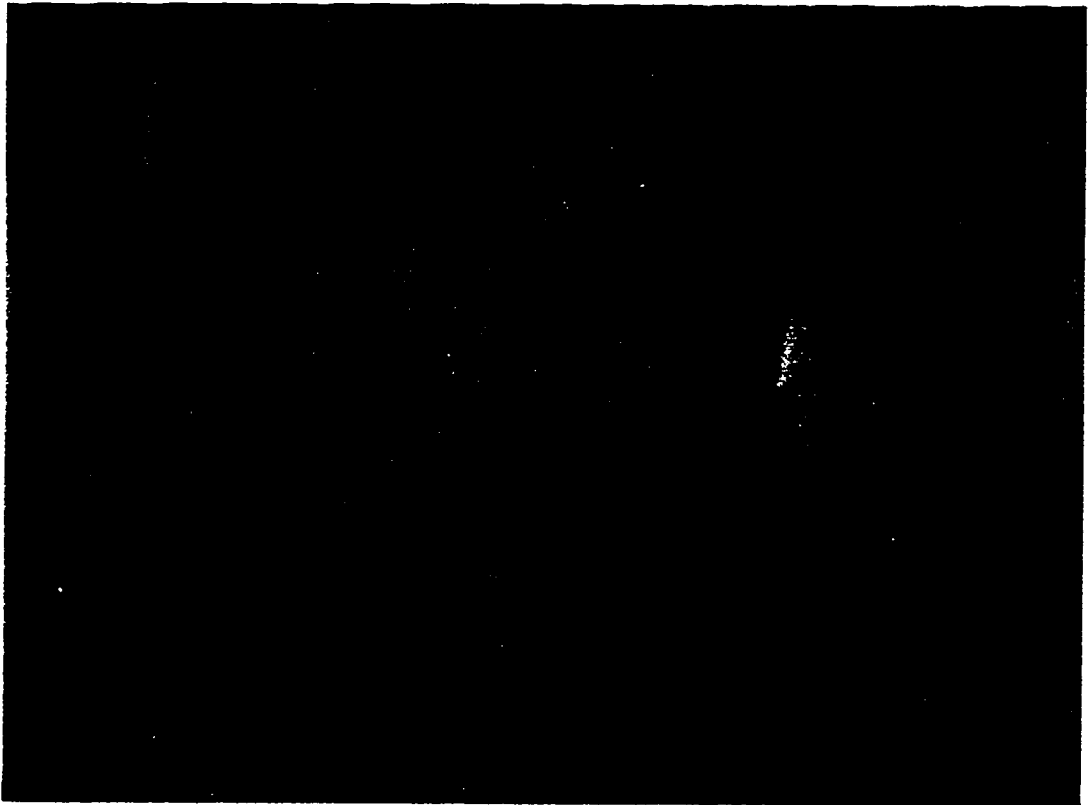


Fig. 18. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. *Yamamba* (Namihana Chieko) sitting in her hut.

As previously discussed, in the opening scene of the film *Kumonosu-joh*, Kurosawa made Washizu his film's *shite*, or protagonist. But in the scene in which Washizu and Miki first encounter the *yamamba* mountain witch, it is the *yamamba* that Kurosawa makes the *shite*. Unlike real Noh performances where conventions are strictly observed, to the extent that *shite* and *waki* actors are the only ones who perform the parts of *shite*, and neither ever plays the part of the other, such a switch of the story's focal attention is unimaginable. But Kurosawa is entirely free from Noh performance conventions and simply takes from Noh plays what he figures would best suit his filmic images.

Lady Asaji's first utterance in the film is also in Noh style. She first appears as Washizu is newly settled in the North castle, quite satisfied with what his recent promotion brought him. Washizu and Lady Asaji are seen together talking in their living room. Lady Asaji breaks the silence and speaks in an extremely emotionless and monotone manner, asking her husband "*Okakugo wa sadamari mashita ka?*" [Have you made up your mind yet, my Lord?]

The uninflected, flatness of Lady Asaji's speech here signifies her strong, determined will which becomes more apparent when contrasted with the tone of Washizu's reply: "*Iya! Ore wa, warui yume wo miteita.*" [No! I just had a bad nightmare]. While Lady Asaji's speech is completely monotone, except for a slight rise at the end of her

interrogative sentence, Washizu's speech is highly inflected. It is noteworthy that Lady Asaji only speaks in this manner when she is alone with her husband and is persuading him to follow her scheme. While Washizu speaks like an ordinary man, Lady Asaji's speech pattern indicates a controlled and dramatic effect similar to Noh style. The use of Noh elements here is intended to show that Lady Asaji is resolute.

Noh dialogue has two distinctive styles, a sort of singing style and a speaking style without much inflection. The use of uninflected speech here suggests that the speaker has a strong will. By having Lady Asaji speak in the uninflected style in her very first line, Kurosawa introduces her as a mysterious woman with power. The Japanese audience recognizes that there is something peculiar about her character. This may also be true for the reception of non-Japanese audiences. Lady Asaji's manner of speaking may sound unusual to non-Japanese speaking audiences as well, since the speech pattern between her and Washizu is so distinctively different. Because of this, they may become suspicious about Lady Asaji's character, particularly if they are familiar with the character of Lady Macbeth.

In addition, the actual words Lady Asaji uses resemble those uttered by women in Noh theatre. She uses archaic words in a style of speech that is very close to the chanted *utai* poems of Noh. In Noh the

vast majority of lines are poetic verse interspersed with prose. Although Lady Asaji's speech does not follow the Noh patterns precisely, her cadence is reminiscent of *utai* chanting.

This scene in which Lady Asaji first appears before the audience's view requires further analysis. While I have already discussed Lady Asaji's aural appropriation of Noh, the following analysis focuses on her visual appearance. In the scene in which Lady Asaji is first seen together with her husband, Kurosawa establishes a clear distinction between the roles of the two characters in relation to the use of Noh.

In Noh, although the basic performance is usually narrated by only two actors, the *shite* and the *waki*, sometimes each may be accompanied by characters known as *shite-zure* and *waki-zure* respectively. In the first scene in which we see Lady Asaji and Washizu, we see that Washizu takes on the role as a *shite*, while Lady Asaji takes on the role of a *shite-zure* actor in the style of the Noh theatre.

During the dialogue with her husband in the scene noted above, it is peculiar that Lady Asaji remains seated from the beginning of the scene until the very end of the scene (See Figure 19). She never moves, never stands up, but sits with her left knee drawn up, her right leg folded under her left, in the same posture as the *yamamba* figure in the

hut. This is exactly the way in which the Noh's *shite-zure* sits and waits while the *shite* either acts or tells her or his story (See Figure 20).

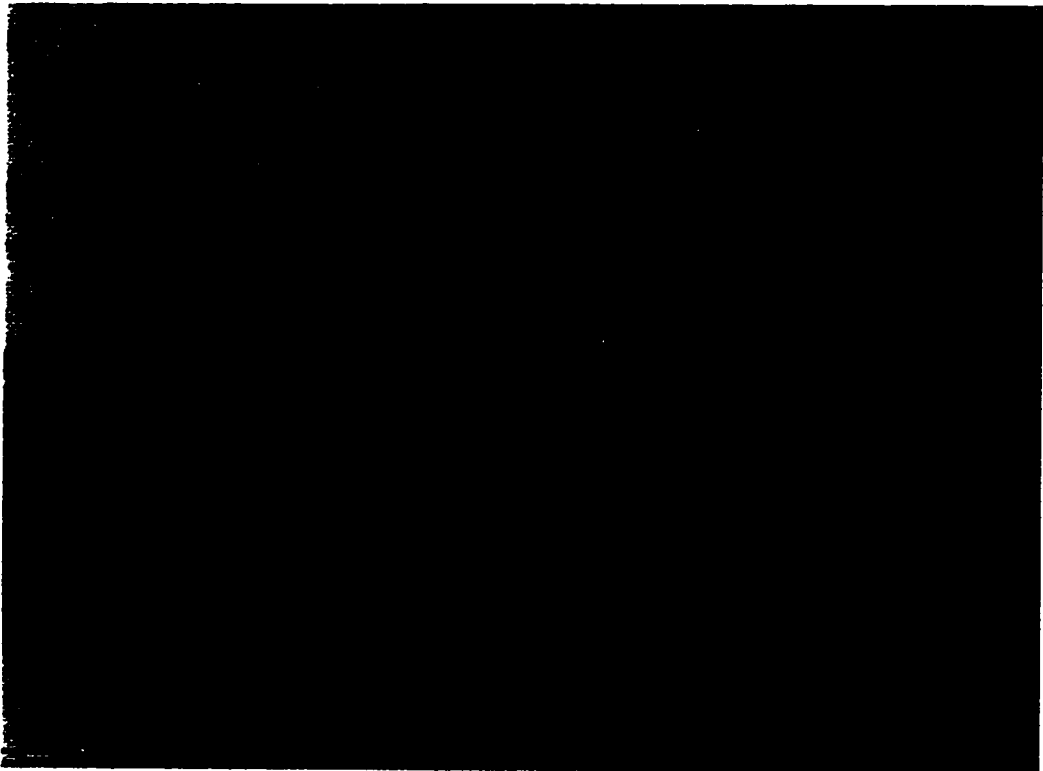


Fig. 19. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. Lady Asaji (Yamada Isuzu).

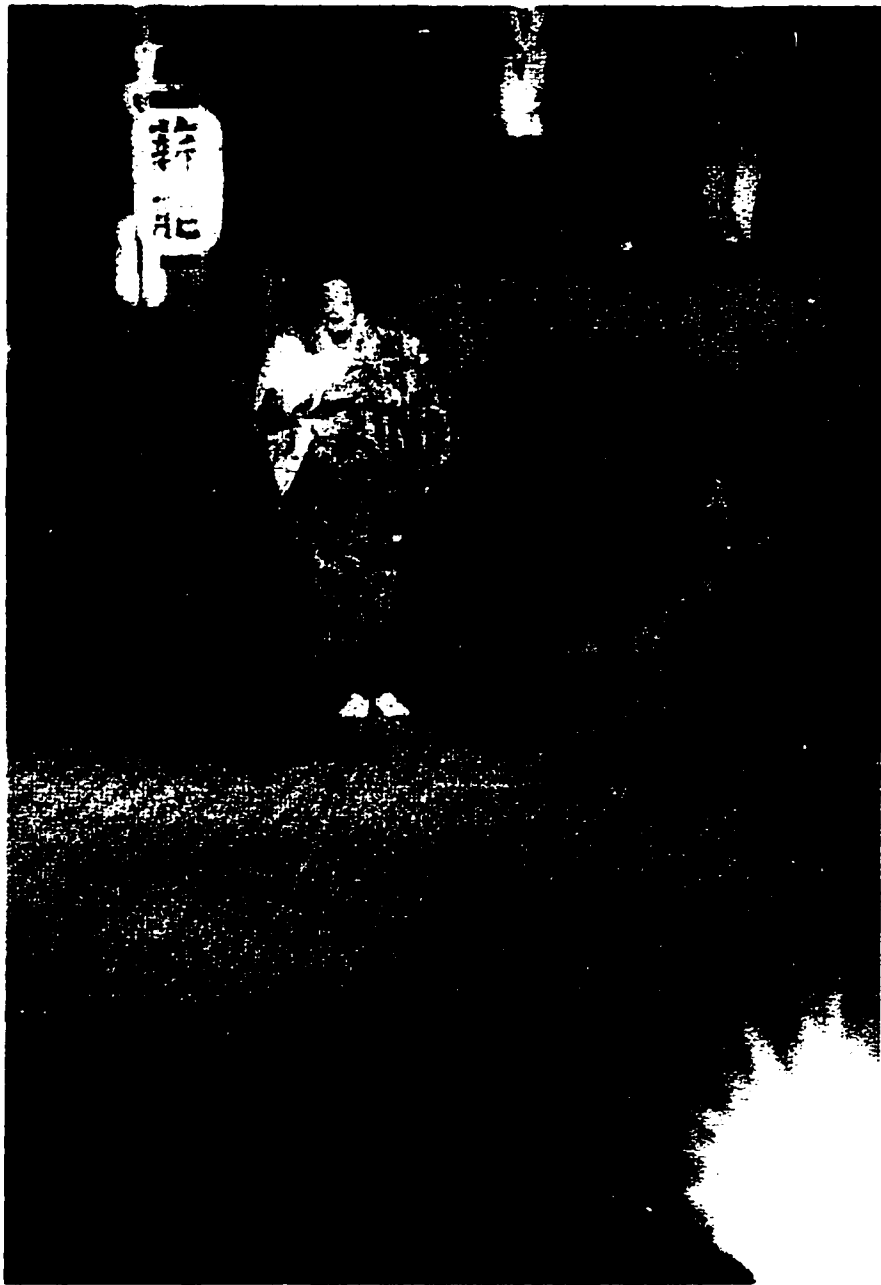


Fig. 20. Photographer: Yoshikoshi Tatsuo, Noh actors on the Bonfire Noh stage. Shirasu Masako, *Onoh no mikata* [A Way of Viewing Noh]. (Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1993): 4.

From the audience's perspective, the *shite-zure* specifically waits to the right of the *shite* actor, a place where he does not move. In Noh, the *shite-zure* figure is regarded as representing the *shite* in one way or another. This *shite-zure* usually only sits and listens to the story, which is either being told, danced, or acted out by the *shite*. This notion of *shite* and *shite-zure* is again appropriated in Kurosawa's Shakespearean filmic images. Washizu and Lady Asaji each take on the role of a Noh *shite* and *shite-zure* in Kurosawa's film. In this particular scene, Kurosawa gives his male character a slightly more important role than that of the female character. In this sense, we may say that Washizu is depicted in the position of *shite*, and Lady Asaji in *shite-zure*.

At the same time, Kurosawa wanted to have both his female character, Lady Asaji, and his male character, Washizu, on an equal footing in terms of their exposure to the audience. By having both perform the roles of *shite* and *shite-zure*, Kurosawa shows that in his *Macbeth*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are representations of each other. Washizu may appear to be the film's central figure, but at the same time, it is Lady Asaji who represents the inner self of Washizu. Their roles are, therefore, inseparable. Neither is considered to be more or less central than the other, since they really are two characters joined into a single person.

In addition to the fact that Kurosawa employs Noh hierarchy between the two actors in this scene, it should also be noted that the way Lady Asaji wears her kimono top robe is exactly the way Noh actors wear their kimonos when they play female characters. This way of wearing a kimono is called *noshizuke* (See Figure 21). *Noshizuke* kimono-wearing-style is unique to the Noh performance. One would not see a Japanese wearing her kimono in this style walking about town, nor in Kabuki and Kyogen performances. So while Lady Asaji is sitting with her left knee drawn up, in her kimono style of *noshizuke*, she would appear exactly how the Noh *shite-zure* performer would appear (See Figure 22). The way Lady Asaji wears her kimono also indicates Kurosawa's intentional appropriation of Noh attributes. In the way Kurosawa uses such Noh aspects, we see how he creates the Noh atmosphere in his filmic world of *Macbeth*.

In addition to Lady Asaji's speech pattern discussed earlier, there are other non-visual elements in Lady Asaji character that were taken from Noh. Examining such Noh appropriations shows us Kurosawa's enthusiasm for a pure Japanese formalistic style in the creation of his Shakespearean films, as well as the significant role his female characters play.



Fig. 21. Photographer: Yoshikoshi Tatsuo, A Noh character wearing her kimono in *Noshizuke* style in the Noh play *Teika*. Shirasu Masako, *Onoh no mikata* [A Way of Viewing Noh]. (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1993): 61.



Fig. 22. Photographer Unknown, A close up of Lady Asaji (Yamada Isuzu) in the same scene. Keiko McDonald, *Japanese Classical Theater in Films*. (Rutherford: Associated University Presses, 1994): 127.

Kuniharu, Kurosawa's Duncan, visits the residence of Washizu. On the first night of his stay, Lady Asaji tries to talk Washizu into assassinating Kuniharu. In this scene, the audience sees Lady Asaji sitting in the same room, in the same position, while, Washizu is again, standing up (See Figure 23), and laughing off Asaji's concerns that the king is trying to get rid of him and that it might be better to eliminate him first. Once again, Lady Asaji does not move her position. To be more precise, she does not move her entire body, legs, arms, hands, and face, with the exception of her lips, which she moves when she speaks with Washizu. This particular scene parallels *iguse*, a central technique of Noh performance. Very often, the *shite* may sit with one knee drawn up, without moving for several minutes. This appears to be forever from the point of view of the audience. *Iguse* enables the actor to prepare for the next scene that requires him to be either dancing or moving in specifically choreographed motions at a vigorous speed. Although the actor appears motionless, *iguse* is considered to be an important point when the actor suppresses movement rather than moving forward. Because the two modes are pulling the actor's body into two opposite directions, -- stopping and moving -- the actor does not seem to move at all. However, this notion of motionlessness is completely different from a lack of movement. While silently sitting in that position, the *shite* actor is actually building inner tension,

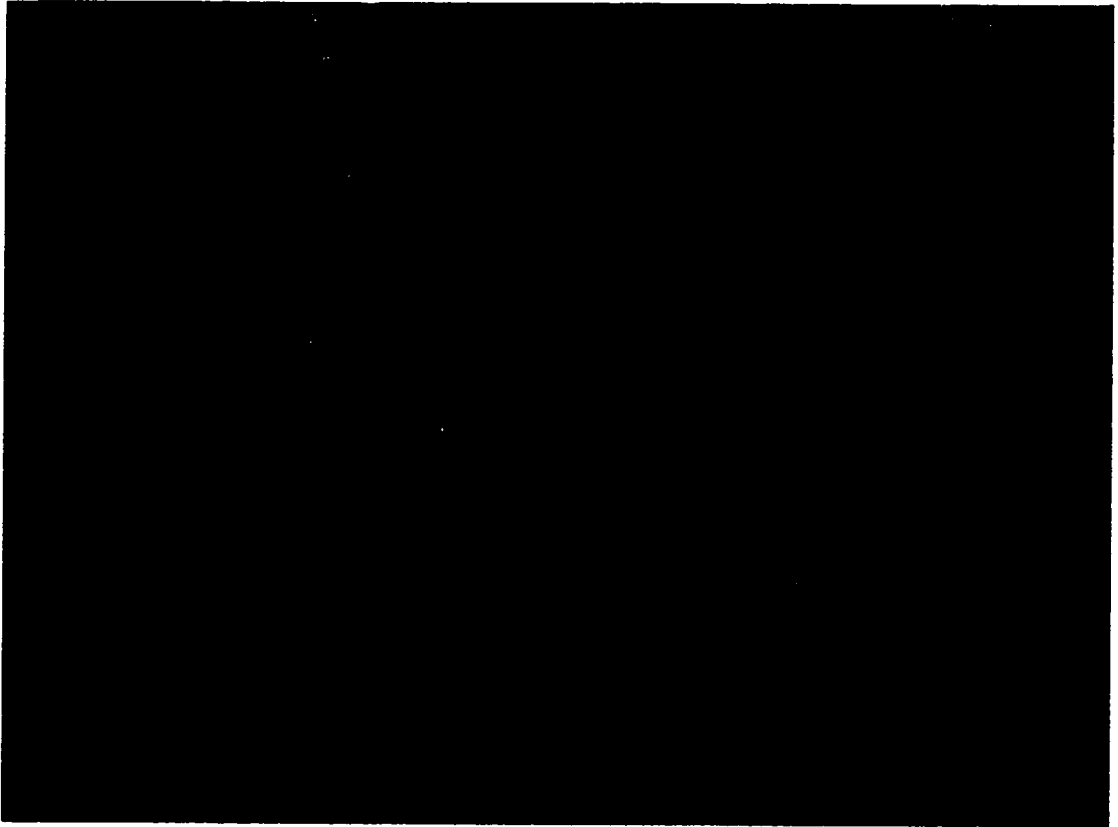


Fig. 23. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*.
Washizu Taketoki (Mifune Toshiroh) and Lady Asaji (Yamada Isuzu).

waiting for it to reach its peak and burst out. In fact, for many Noh actors, this *iguse* is the most difficult performing skill to acquire. Just as the Noh actors in the *iguse* phase appear motionless before much movement, Lady Asaji's posture indicates that a significant amount of energy is about to burst out of her body.

Lady Asaji continues talking to Washizu about how she thinks the great lord is shrewdly trying to eliminate him. She convinces Washizu to kill the lord before he could kill him. She then offers Washizu a precise plan as to how he could execute the murder and blame others (the guards) for the crime. From the very beginning of this scene until the moment when the ominous cuckoo cries out in the dark, Lady Asaji remains absolutely motionless. The camera first captures Lady Asaji seated, then follows Washizu, who restlessly walks around the room. When the moment comes in which Lady Asaji finally convinces Washizu, the audience witnesses Washizu's full body reaction to her words, while hearing Asaji's voice (See Figure 24).

When the two hear the cry of the cuckoo, just as if it was her cue, Lady Asaji slowly stands (See Figure 25) and quickly turns her face to Washizu. In Noh, this is called *kiru* or cutting with your mask and it indicates a sudden change in the character's mind. "What did you hear the cuckoo cry?" says Asaji. As she says these words, Lady Asaji passes by Washizu, who is in a state of losing his mind. She does not

look at him, but as she passes him, she stops and stands in front of him (See Figure 26). She then pushes Washizu a final time: “I heard it cry ‘are you taking this dare or what?’⁶⁸” It is in this very moment that,



Fig. 24. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. Washizu Taketoki (Mifune Toshiro). Lady Asaji’s voice is heard from off-stage: “His Lordship has just placed himself in your hands. Now is your very chance, if you miss it, it will never come again.” (Because Richie’s subtitle does not fully translate what has been said by Lady Asaji, I altered and added some parts of what is spoken to Richie’s text).

⁶⁸ Richie’s translation here is “Even the crow is telling you...‘The throne is yours.’...That is how I hear it.”

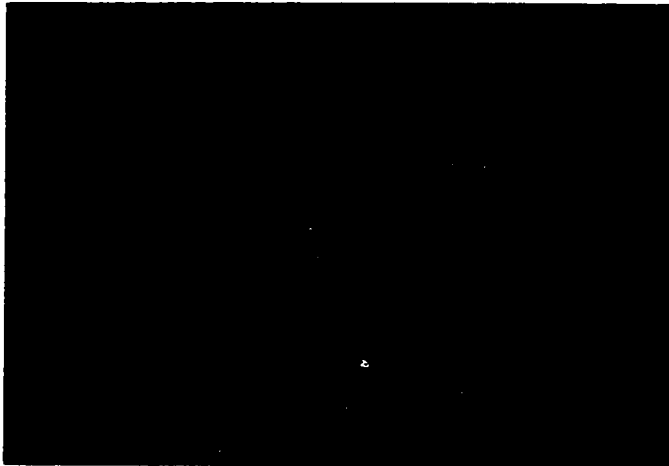


Fig. 25. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. Washizu Taketoki (Mifune Toshiroh) and Lady Asaji (Yamada Isuzu) in conversation.



Fig. 26. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. Lady Asaji (Yamada Isuzu) confronts Washizu Taketoki (Mifune Toshiroh).

from a Noh performance perspective, Lady Asaji acquires the Noh *shite* role. The process of transition began as their conversation took place. The moment she broke the silence and stood in front of Washizu was the very turning point when Kurosawa switched his *shite* from Washizu to Lady Asaji. In the subsequent scene, Kurosawa has Lady Macbeth leave to fetch a flask of sake (Japanese rice wine). The sake is for intoxicating the Great lord's guards such that they will sleep during the murder. In this scene, Lady Asaji strangely walks away from the room and returns to it. The focal point here is, again, not that she is seen but it is the way she is heard that is significant.

The subtle squeaking sound of Lady Asaji's *tabi* (Japanese kimono socks) when she walks, draws attention to the beauty of the stylized movement of Noh. In Noh, the actors only wear white *tabi*, a color that represents *mu* or nothing. The Noh performers believe that a step taken on the Noh stage may represent a thousand or even some ten thousands of steps taken by the character in order to reach specific places.

Lady Asaji suggests that she will give the great lord's guards *sake* to distract them. When Lady Asaji leaves the room to fetch the flask of *sake*, she disappears into the darkness of the next room, but the sound of her footsteps lingers long after she is no longer visible on the screen. There is a palpable moment of silence after which the

squeaking sound of her *tabi* is again audible in the darkness, as though she were a silent phantom. Her figure then glides onto the screen. Lady Asaji's movement or gait in which she walks from heel to toe is also characteristic of Noh; it resembles that of the *Noh* women who have vanished into hell only to reemerge onto the stage as an ill-intended phantom.

This scene in *Kumonosu-joh* recalls the concept of "*nakairi*" in Noh. *Nakairi* is the break between the first and second act of a Noh performance in which a Kyogen actor gives a plot summary of the first act. It is not equivalent to an intermission in the Western sense since the performance continues although in altered form. This break is essential for the Noh *shite* actor to change his costumes and masks, because in Noh, the central character is supposed to be in disguise in the first act and in its real character in the second. The audience is kept involved in the performance during this break so that the dramatic tension is not lost. As indicated above, in Noh, the *shite* or protagonist usually possesses a dual identity. In the first part of the play, the *shite* appears in disguise as a warrior, a cherry blossom spirit, or a female aristocrat. In most cases the *shite* is in conflict with the secondary character during the first act and disappears off-stage. Then, in the

second act the *shite* reveals her/his⁶⁹ true identity and confronts the character that challenged him. Thus, the change of costumes and Noh masks are essential to indicate this transformation of the *shite* character. This disappearance and re-entrance is part of *nakairi* (See Figure 27). It is important because it suggests that a significant change has taken place while the *shite* character was off-stage. Lady Asaji's disappearance into and then re-emergence from the darkness symbolizes a drastic change in her identity. She was the dutiful wife of a warlord when she stepped into the darkness; but when she reappears, she has been transformed into a murderer.

When Kurosawa finished writing *Kumonosu-joh* with his team of script writers, it was quite different than it turned out in the film. In the original script, the dialogue is,

Asaji: Wait.... How are the Great Lord's guards doing?
Subject: They are all alert, with their spears ready for any attacks.
Asaji: Admirable! ...Well then, I shall serve *this* sake or something.
Asaji stands up silently, and goes *to the dark corner of the room*. She reenters the scene with a flask of sake.⁷⁰

During the process of shooting the film, Kurosawa apparently made changes to this scene such that the final filmic version went as follows,

⁶⁹ The majority of Noh's central figures are women. The order of these two words thus connote the fact that there are more female characters that are central to the stories than male characters.

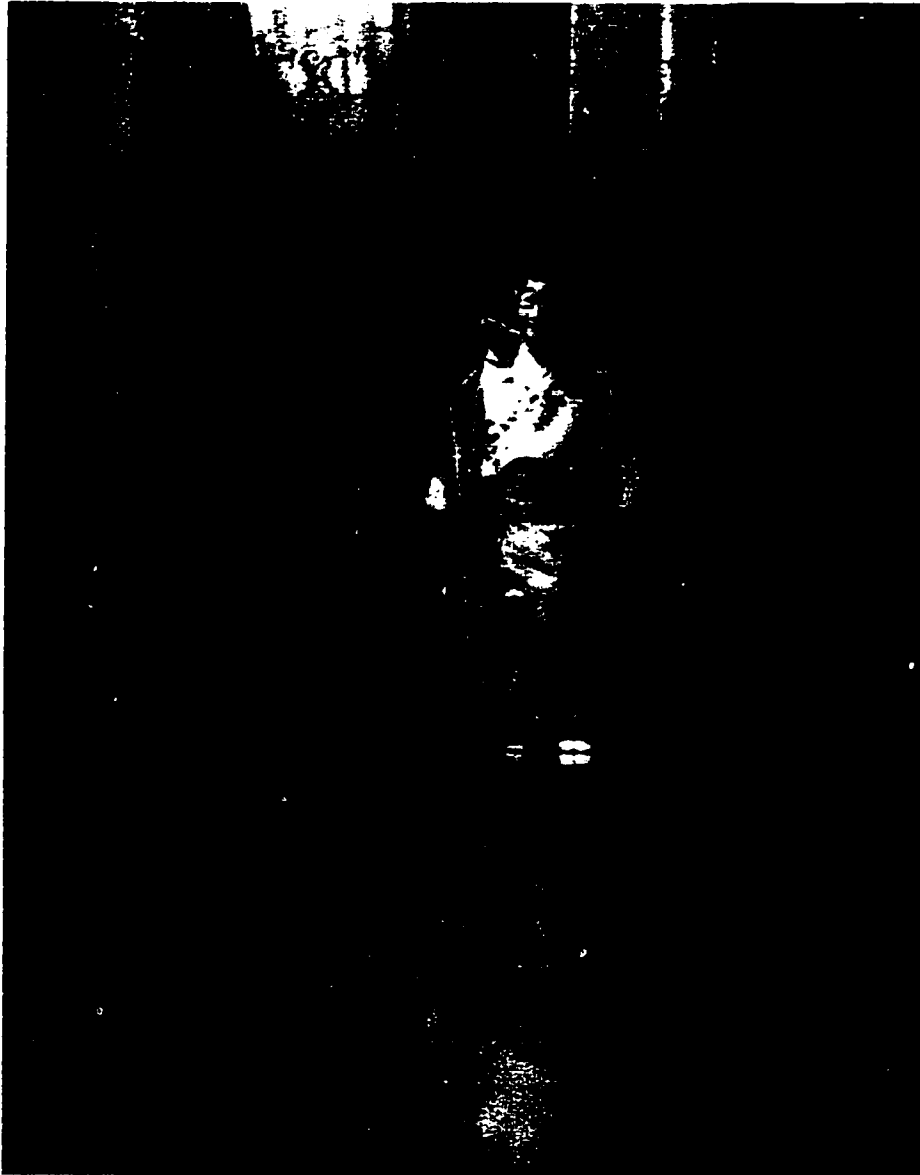


Fig. 27. Photographer: Yoshikoshi Tatsuo, The entrance scene of a Noh actor. Shirasu Masako, *Onoh no mikata* [A Way of Viewing Noh]. (Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1993): The front cover.

⁷⁰ Kurosawa 154.

Asaji: Wait.... How are the Great Lord's guards doing?

Subject: They are all alert, with their spears ready for any attacks.

Asaji: Admirable! (*Turns to Washizu and lays her eyes upon him*)...Well then, I shall serve *some sake* or something.

Asaji goes *into the darkness*. Shortly, she reenters the scene with a flask of sake, *with the sound of her silk attire rustling*.⁷¹

It is clear that Kurosawa strengthened the importance of Lady Asaji's character in this scene by specifically appropriating Noh's *nakairi* concept. With the combined use of *nakairi* and the notion of *iguse*, it is Lady Asaji, who takes over the *shite* role, and it is Washizu who takes on the part of the *shite-zure*. Kurosawa thus gives his female characters some of the most highlighted scenes in *Kumonosujoh*.

In addition to *nakairi*, Kurosawa also had his female characters use Noh masks. The faces of Lady Asaji and of the *yamamba*, are made to resemble the Noh-masks of *Shakumi*, literally translated as "distorted look (See Figure 28)," and the Uba, an "old woman," respectively. Such makeup is reminiscent of Noh masks. The special effects on the actress's faces were achieved by training the actresses to make their facial muscles look like these masks, and by shaving off the

⁷¹ Kurosawa 401. (emphasis added)

eyebrows of the actresses and applying makeup that would look like masks. Kurosawa is quoted as saying:



Fig. 28. Photographer unknown, Lady Asaji (Yamada Isuzu) and the Noh mask *Shakumi*. Kurosawa Akira, *Zenshuh Kurosawa Akira* [The Complete Works of Kurosawa Akira] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988) 4: 125.

I showed the *Shakumi* Noh-mask to Yamada Isuzu, who portrayed the role of Asaji (Lady Macbeth). This [Noh-mask] represents a beautiful woman past the prime of her youth, and is worn when such a woman character is about to go insane. When the character that wears this Noh-mask becomes mad, she exchanges it for one whose eyes are colored gold. This mask [Kurosawa does not give a specific name of the mask here, but it is called *deigan*] represents a woman who is obsessed with unworldly desire and revenge, and this is what Lady Macbeth becomes.⁷²

In shooting the scene of Lady Asaji going mad, Kurosawa took care that the actress Yamada Isuzu's eyes would catch the light (See Figures 29, 30, 31). The significance of wearing a mask on the Noh stage and the characteristics of Noh masks in relation to film performance will be further discussed in the context of *Ran* in Chapter 4.

The examination of how Kurosawa set up the overall atmosphere for his Shakespearean play in a Japanese period film style, and how he created his central female characters by using Noh stage art performance techniques, leads to questions of social significance. This section will discuss what we can infer from Lady Asaji's performance, or, in other words, the ways in which Kurosawa depicted her in relation to Washizu.

⁷² Manvell 103.



Fig. 29. Photographer unknown, Kurosawa Akira directs Yamada Isuzu. Sato Tadao ed, *Kurosawa Akira Zensakuhinshu* [The Kurosawa]. (Tokyo: Toho Shuppan, 1985): 110.



Fig. 30. Photographer unknown, Kurosawa Akira directs Yamada Isuzu. Kakuya Masaru, *Kurosawa Akira shuhsei* [The Compilation of Kurosawa Akira]. (Tokyo: Kinema Jumpohsha, 1989): 185.

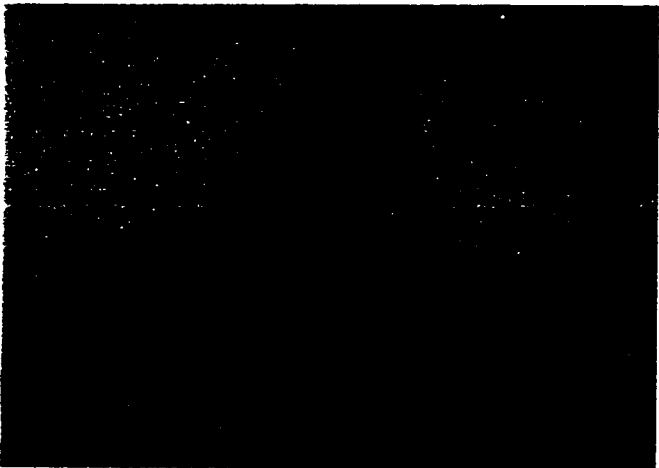
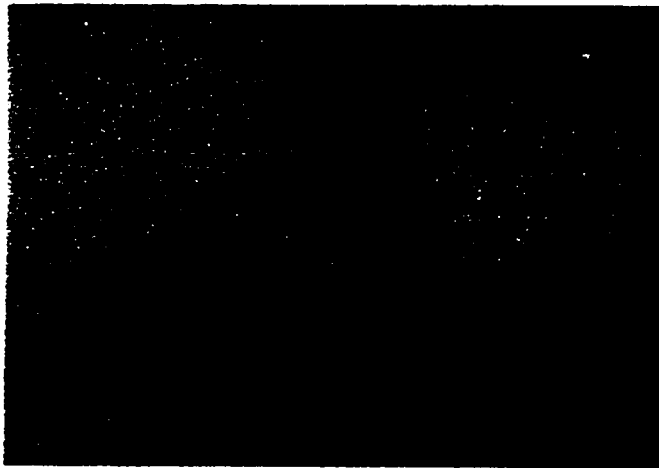
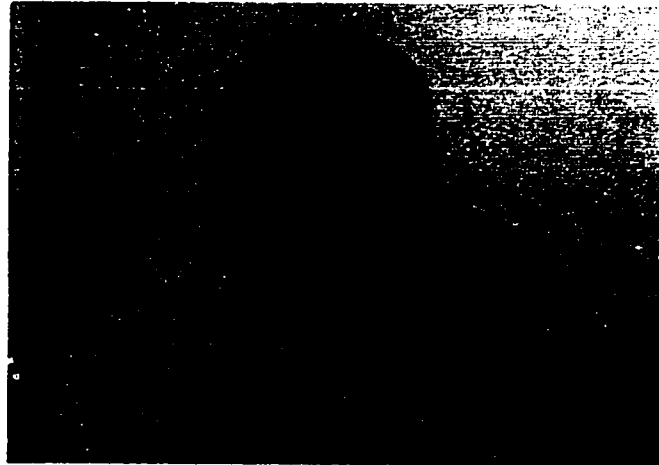


Fig. 31. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Kumonosu-joh*. Lady Asaji's hand washing scene. Lady Asaji (Yamada Isuzu).

Kurosawa did not have Lady Asaji utter the lines in which Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to unsex her as in Shakespeare's play. Due to the lack of this line, film critics Stephen Prince and Ogata Toshiroh argued that Lady Asaji was vicious and evil-hearted without needing to ask for supernatural power. Prince writes,

By eliminating Lady Macbeth's speech in which she calls on the spirits to unsex her and to fill her with the direst cruelty, Kurosawa transforms Asaji into a figure of unmitigated evil, lacking the human dimension of Shakespeare's character because she is "endowed instead with a purely physical power." (The quotation marks indicate Prince's quote from Blumenthal, "*Macbeth into Throne of Blood*," P.195.)⁷³

Here, Prince is saying that Kurosawa purposefully made Lady Asaji evil by nature. With the same point of view, the Japanese critic Ogata Toshiroh writes that the spider that symbolically resides in the midst of spiderweb castle is Lady Asaji, and that "man' was trapped by 'a woman,'"⁷⁴ indicating that Washizu was trapped by Lady Asaji. (Ogata further uses this point as evidence of Kurosawa's hatred or fear of women in general). Is Lady Asaji evil by nature? Is it really she who brings all the misfortune to Washizu? Did she trap him? My answers to all of these questions are negative.

In arguing that Lady Asaji was the spider woman for Washizu, Ogata wrote:

⁷³ Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 143.

Women are the passage to the earthly desire for human beings. [Washizu,] when outside the home, is tempted by ambition, when at home, [he] is tempted by lust, and these two forces are represented by the *yamamba* and Asaji respectively. This is in fact a point that I would like to emphasize in terms of discussing how Kurosawa perceives women as a person.⁷⁵

Ogata's comment is the same as saying women are not human beings. It is true that unlike other film adaptations of *Macbeth*, such as those by Orson Welles and Roman Polansky, Kurosawa's *Lady Macbeth* does take an active role in urging her husband to go along with what the witch figure has predicted. As Ogata argues, Lady Asaji succeeds in convincing Washizu to kill the king when he hesitated, and it is she who first takes the spear and hands it to Washizu. Both Ogata and Prince, however, neglect the fact that Lady Asaji is only doing these deeds because she herself believes that that is the way to obtain the throne for her husband.

At the end, the audience sees that both Washizu and Lady Asaji are punished equally. They both die excruciating deaths. Right after seeing his wife go mad, Washizu dies from being shot with arrows by his own men. He has arrows all over his body when the final arrow shoots through his neck. After having a stillborn baby, Lady Asaji dies haunted by the nightmare of having invisible blood stains on her hands

⁷⁴ Ogata Toshiroh, *Kyojin to shonnen: Kurosawa Akira no joseitachi* [The Giant and a Boy: Kurosawa Akira's Women] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjuh, 1992) 210.

⁷⁵ Ogata 183.

that will not wash away (See Figure 31). Contrary to Ogata and Prince's argument that Lady Asaji is a vehicle for Washizu's fatal destruction, Lady Asaji and Washizu share the same fate. Their fate is inseparable. How then, could Lady Asaji possibly want to bring misfortune to Washizu? Therefore, Kurosawa's Lady Macbeth character should not be regarded as one that brought the demise of his Macbeth. Kurosawa is not saying that women are at fault for chasing men to their deaths in *Kumonosu-joh*.

As discussed above, the Noh counterparts of Asaji and Washizu were interchangeable. In some scenes, it was Washizu who took the part of the *shite*, while Lady Asaji was Washizu's *shite-zure*, and in others, it was Lady Asaji who was Kurosawa's *shite*, and Washizu, who was the *shite-zure*. Interestingly, in the world of Noh, the *shite-zure* is considered to be another side of the *shite*. Although Kurosawa appropriated Noh techniques and concepts in creating *Kumonosu-joh*, the film is not intended to be an actual Noh play. Lady Asaji is therefore Washizu's shadow at the same time that he is hers. Although Lady Asaji appears for a shorter time on the screen, because Kurosawa takes much care to depict Asaji's character, her part is as important to the story as Washizu's.

Chapter 4 will continue this discussion of performance analysis by looking into Kurosawa's main female character in the film *Ran*.

Chapter 4

The Film Performance Analysis of *Ran*

Kurosawa's experience of employing the concepts and performing techniques of Noh with his period film *Kumonosu-joh* prepared him for his later film *Ran*. Perhaps because the transfer of Shakespearean women into Japanese women in *Kumonosu-joh* went so smoothly, Kurosawa was able to create another Shakespearean woman in *Ran*. Lady Kaede, as Kurosawa named her, embodied two Shakespearean women (Goneril and Regan) and one man (Edmund) put together. Kurosawa's film has fewer characters than the original Shakespearean *King Lear*. Lady Kaede thus parallels Lear's two oldest daughters by acting as wife to Hidetora's first and second sons. She also takes revenge on Hidetora just as Edmund takes revenge on his father for treating Edmund as inferior to his legitimate brother Edgar. All three are vicious characters who ultimately destroy King Lear.

Unlike *Kumonosu-joh*, in which the story was largely faithful to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Kurosawa's *King Lear* altered the basic plot.

As a result, it is first necessary to discuss the significant changes made in creating the *Ran* story from *King Lear* before discussing the actual performance of *Ran*.

In Shakespeare's version, Lear's two older daughters fight for the power of the throne and the youngest daughter is banished. Lear ultimately wanders out into the stormy, desolate countryside because he banished the one daughter who actually cared about him.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* also has a subplot concerning the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons, one legitimate and the other illegitimate. In *Ran*, however, there are no daughters, nor is there such a subplot.⁷⁶

There are two major changes that Kurosawa made in terms of transforming Shakespeare's *King Lear* into *Ran*. The gender switching of the main characters from Lear's three daughters into three sons is a significant change. Kurosawa explained that he had to convert the daughters into sons, because during the Japanese Warring States Period, women would not be likely to inherit a domain, let alone to fight against each other for it. Kurosawa's transformation of Lear's daughters into sons in *Ran* should not be viewed as an indication of his

⁷⁶ In *Ran*, there is a character named Tsurumaru, the brother of Lady Su-e, the wife of the second son Jiro. The father and the entire family of Tsurumaru and Su-e were slain by Hidetora. Tsurumaru was also blinded by Hidetora. In *King Lear*, Gloucester's eyes were plucked out by the husband of Regan, Lear's second daughter. Although there are two blinded people in *King Lear* and in *Ran*, their significance in relation to the construction of the story is quite different from each other.

dislike of female characters. Just as he converted Shakespeare's three witches into one *yamamba* mountain spirit, for cultural reasons, he also changed Lear's daughters into sons.

As he noted in an interview, when he first conceived the film, Kurosawa envisioned it as a rendition of a famous Japanese story in which a *samurai* warrior had three obedient sons who obeyed their father and worked to support the entire family (See Figure 32). Kurosawa wondered what would have become of the family if the sons had not listened to the advice of their father and had pursued their individual desires for power. Kurosawa explained that it was only later that he noticed the similarity between his idea and the story of *King Lear*. In Japanese history there are no known cases in which women fought for political power against other women. In the time of Shakespeare, however, Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Mary were half sisters who fought over the English throne.⁷⁷ In order to make his story-line historically plausible, Kurosawa therefore needed to replace the daughters with sons.

⁷⁷ Women did not hold political power as did men. Still, there were some cases of political disputes between women who fought against each other through their husbands/sons. There were also battles among concubines to win a man's affection. Women were thus able to seek power through the status of their husbands, lovers, or sons.



Fig. 32. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. From left to right, Saburo (Ryuh Daisuke), Hidetora (Nakadai Tatsuya), Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi), and Taro (Terao Akira).

The other major change in *Ran* was that Hidetora, the film's central character, had a history of cruelty unlike Shakespeare's King Lear. In *Ran*, Hidetora's past history of cruelty while attempting to become the region's central military power is depicted through the dialogues exchanged among the characters in various scenes. Shakespeare does not write a word about King Lear's past. But Kurosawa wanted to add this part in order to have the film clearly represent a Japanese Warring States film. Ladies Kaede and Su-e (See Figure 33) are given dual roles in the context of the film plot construction in this prospect. On the one hand, in order to help Kurosawa's *Ran* look more like Shakespeare's *King Lear*, they each represent Shakespearean characters of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund (Lady Kaede), and Cordelia (Lady Su-e). On the other hand, in order to give his Japanese period film feasibility, they are presented as daughters of two families which Hidetora destroyed. Hidetora took the families' property and mated the daughters with his own sons, in order to gain legitimate excuses to claim the family wealth of these women. Once again, Kurosawa displayed his skill at integrating several different factors into one form of film. As with *Kumonosu-joh*, Kurosawa used Noh techniques in *Ran* as a practical vehicle to merge these different factors.



Fig. 33. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Tsurumaru (Nomura Takeshi), Lady Su-e (Miyazaki Yoshiko), and a lady-in-waiting try to flee from the assassin that Lady Kaede sent.

As in *Kumonosu-joh*, there are two different levels of appropriation of Noh techniques incorporated in *Ran*: the first is to create the overall atmosphere of the film; the second is in Kurosawa's creation of his central female character, Lady Kaede. Chapter 4 will first briefly introduce how Kurosawa used Noh theatre concepts to set up the atmosphere for this film, and then it further analyzes the performance of the film's central female figure, Lady Kaede.

Ran opens as the clan of Ichimonji, led by Hidetora host a boar hunting party in honor of Lords Fujimaki and Ayabe who seek a marital bond between the families by marrying their daughter to Hidetora's third son. The opening of the film contains a thought-provoking scene. Hidetora himself shoots an arrow and kills a huge old boar. The film begins with this scene of hunting and death. Soon after, Hidetora figuratively compares the boar to himself. He calls the boar "so aged and therefore its meat is too tough and stinky to be eaten, just as he is so." As previously elaborated in this thesis, one of Noh's most important central themes is the world of death. Here, Kurosawa uses the notion of death to emphasize that this world of *Ran* is a story about a man who haunted himself to death, with the underlying image of the dead boar as a representation of the film's central figure. Just as Noh begins and ends with the same image, this film begins with the death of a boar representing Hidetora's death, and ends with Hidetora's death.

Before we move on to a detailed analysis of Lady Kaede's performance, we will briefly examine the elaborate Noh costume that Kurosawa's filmic world brought into the filmic Shakespearean experience. Costume designer Wada Emi conducted an extensive amount of research before she started to design a piece of kimono used in *Ran* (See Figure 34). Unlike *Kumonosu-joh*, *Ran* is in color. The new notion of Noh fit perfectly into the creation of Shakespearean film using Japanese experiences. The link between Noh kimono costumes (See Figures 35, and 36) and the attire samurai wore in the Warring Period States is very close, since at that time, the Noh actors were performing in the costumes that actually their patron samurai once wore and gave to them. This means, that among the medieval Japanese samurai residences, samurais at home and Noh actors on the stage were dressed alike (See Figure 37). This gave Wada a reason to explore the color, the pattern, textile, the embroidery, and the weaving of Noh kimono as her inspirational starting point in creating the costumes of *Ran*.

Wada gave each character a specific color and/or basic conceptual pattern. For example, Hidetora, wore a white color to represent his high age (See Figure 38). An indication of retirement is



Fig. 34. Sketches by Wada Emi for the costumes of Lady Kaede on the left and Jiro on the right. *Wada Emi no ishou* [emi wada's costumes (sic)]. (Tokyo: Kyuhryuhdoh, 1996): 170.

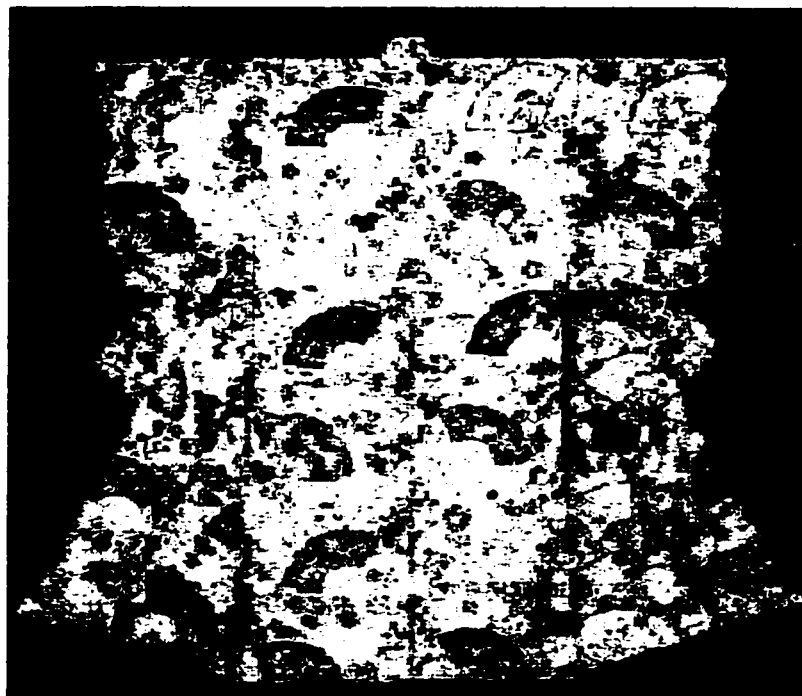
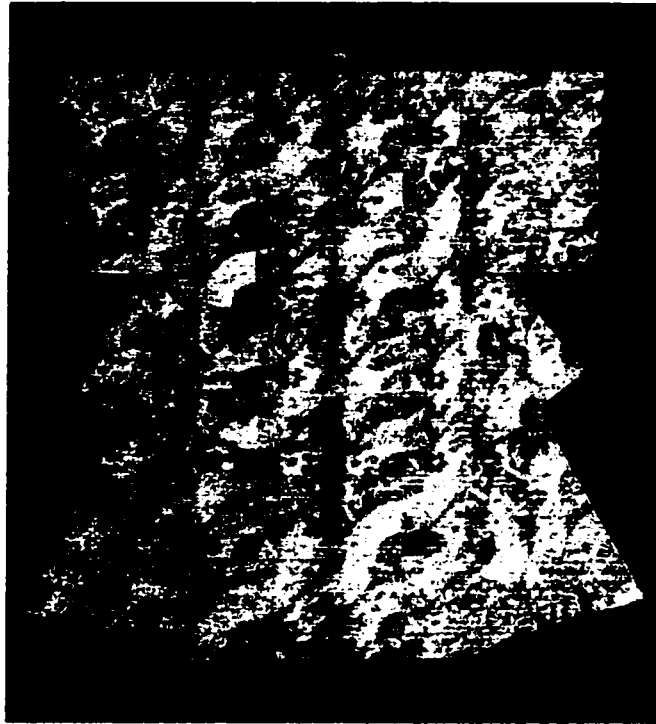


Fig. 35. Photographer unknown, Noh costumes woven in *karaori* style.

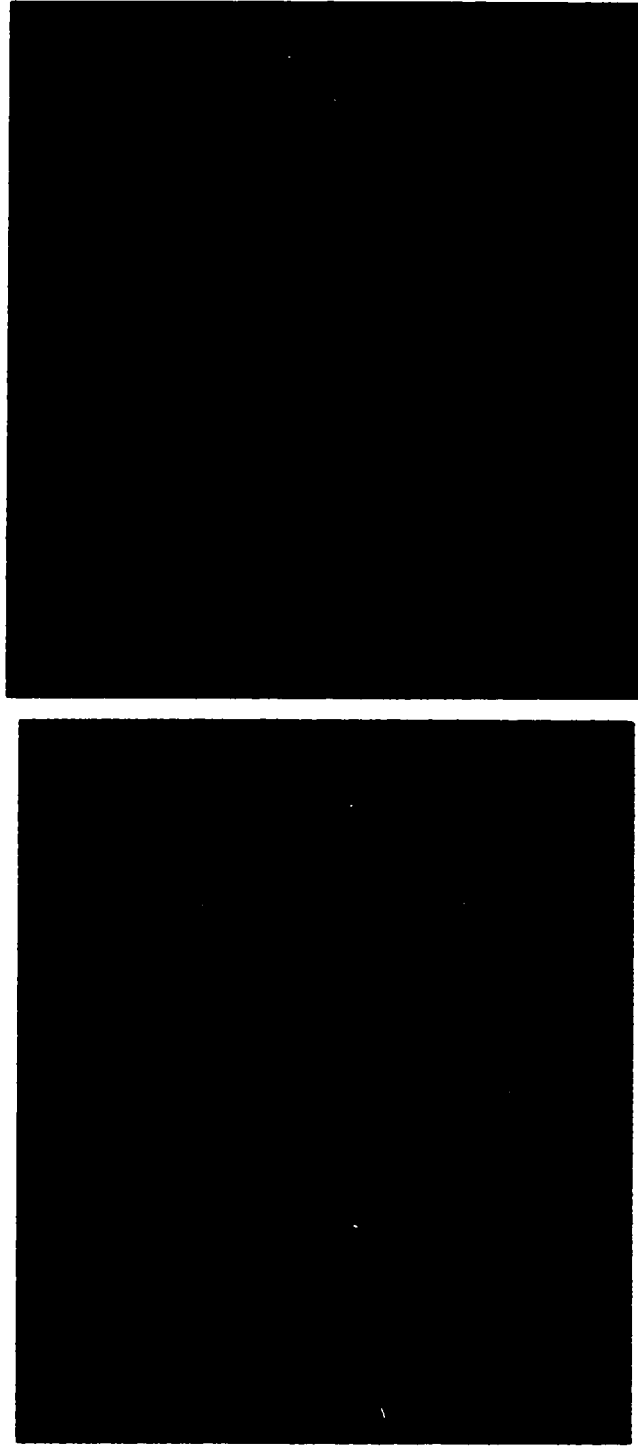


Fig. 36. Photographer unknown, Noh costumes woven in *karaori* style (top) and *nuihaku* style embroidery (bottom).



Fig. 37. Painter unknown, Samurai performing Noh. "*Hana no rekishi* [The History of the Grace]." Editorial. *Bessatsu Taiyoh* Winter 1978: 46.



Fig. 38. Photographer unknown, Costume for Ichimonji Hidetora. *Wada Emi no ishou* [emi wada's costumes (sic)]. (Tokyo: Kyuhryuhdoh, 1996): 23.

also represented in his conceptual color of white to mean “*mu*” or nothingness. (“*Mu*” is a Japanese Buddhist concept which represents the idea that the beginning is the ending at the same time that it indicates supreme power.) In the same way, Wada gave Hidetora’s three sons, the basic conceptual colors of yellow, red, and blue to represent each son’s basic character as timorous, passionate, and bracing (See Figure 39). Wada used the patterns of pitiable wild herbs and flowers in creating Lady Su-e’s character; in a palpable contrast, Lady Kaede’s costumes heavily relied on geometric patterns (See Figure 40). The appropriation of Noh costumes into filmic representation of the lives of samurai suited well for Kurosawa’s purpose of linking Noh expressions in period film, and furthermore, to help establish the Shakespearean sense of his world.

One of the other important incorporations of Noh techniques in *Ran* is Lady Kaede’s use of the Noh-mask to replicate her own facial expressions. The world of the Noh play is constructed through layers of characters’ emotions. Because “emotions” are not easily expressed only through actors’ torsos or limbs, the use of facial expressions and voices are critically important. While stage actors overly dramatize the emotions they attempt to convey, film actors have the benefit of close-ups on their faces such that they can be more subtle in their facial



Fig. 39. Costumes for Taro, Jiro, and Saburo in *Ran*. *Wada Emi no ishou*. [emi wada's costumes (sic)]. (Tokyo: Kyuhryuhdoh, 1996): 12-3.



Fig. 40. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi) and Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko). Lady Kaede offers sake to Jiro.

expression. In Kabuki plays, elaborate make-up called *kumadori* (See Figure 41) emphasizes the movement of the facial muscles, whereas in Noh plays, a mask on the actor's face takes away all these delicate effects. The Noh mask itself can only express what the mask represents. Yet it is by no means limited to a single emotion. On the contrary, the masks sometimes enable the actor to create expressions that are even more intense than they would be without the masks.

Noh actors consider Noh masks to be the very top layer of a series of invisible "masks." Indeed, in Noh, masks are not considered to be masks, but rather, the true faces of the characters. The Chinese character "*men*," which means "mask" actually has another reading, "*omote*" which signifies the face. Referring to "Noh-men" as "Noh masks," should therefore be avoided as much as possible. Since the term, however, is broadly translated as such in English, I employ it to remain consistent with the practice of other scholars.

There are a wide range of Noh-masks representing a variety of characters from this world and beyond. These include old men, young and old women, aristocrats, female demons, ghosts of defeated warriors, and an embodiment of the cherry blossom spirit. Only some masks embody certain emotions such as surprise or jealousy, whereas others, although they have specific representations, do not express particular emotions without the movement of the actor. Of these,

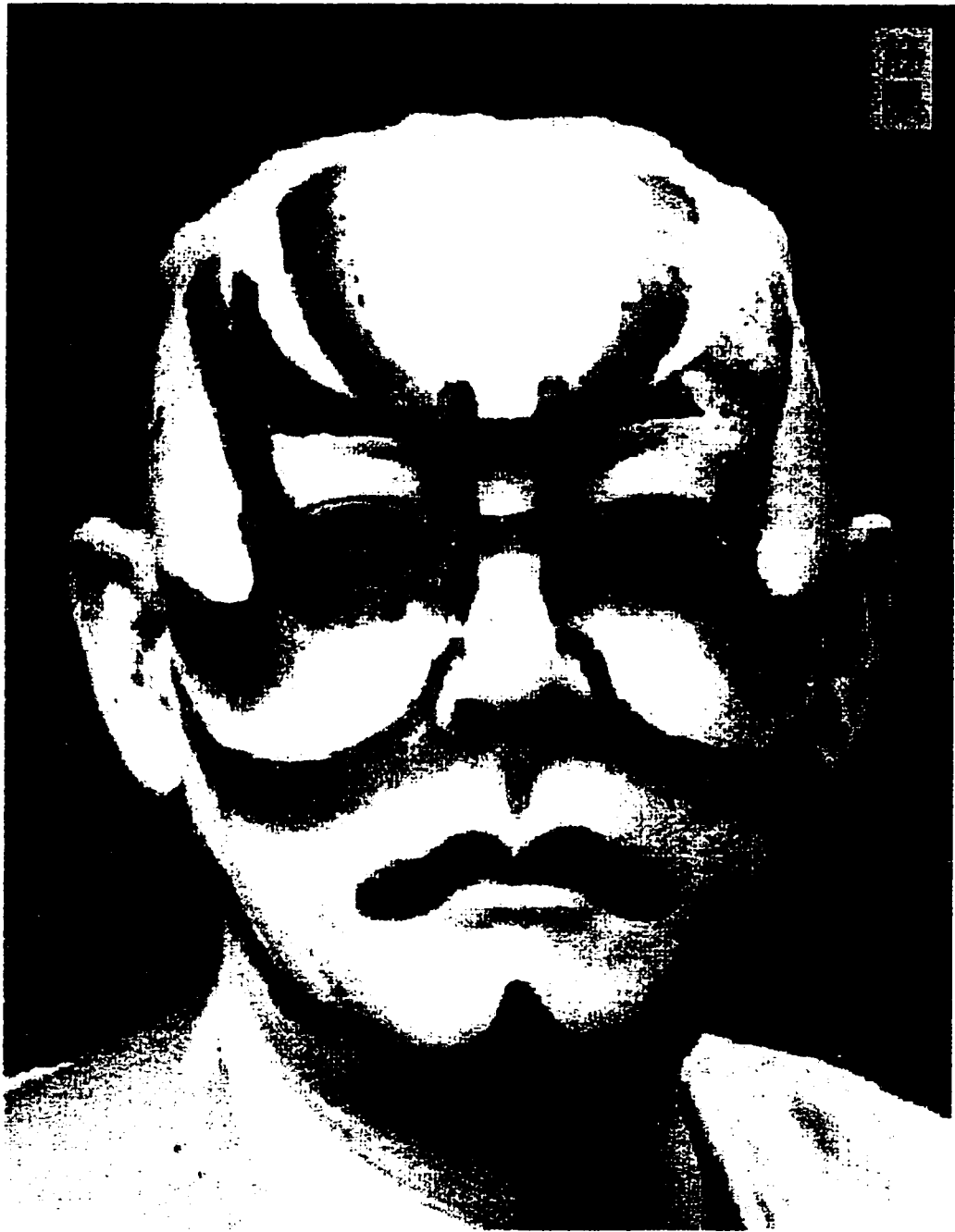


Fig. 41. Photographer unknown, Kabuki *kumadori* makeup. Kawatake Toshio, *Genshoku Kabuki Shohsai* [Kabuki in Its True Colors]. (Tokyo: Gurafu-sha, 1982): 35.

female masks tend to display enigmatic facial expressions. The mask may be an identifiably female face, but the emotion it is used to portray is only apparent through the actor's performance. In other words, the emotion the mask portrays is evident through a tilt or turn of the head. Kurosawa effectively used these kinds of enigmatic expressions in his period films. An example of the expressionless mask, "chukan-hyoujou no men," is shown in the next page (See Figure 42).

The mask on the left is in the "terasu" or "enlightened" position, which is achieved by slightly tilting the mask upward to represent joy. The mask on the right is in the "kumorasu" or "clouded" position, which is tilted slightly downward to represent sadness. Although the expressions on each of these Noh-men convey a different emotion, the two pictures shown here are actually the same mask. The expressions are markedly different from each other, only because the positions are different.

Harada Mieko, the actress who portrayed Lady Kaede, skillfully conveyed a variety of emotions while maintaining a Noh-mask-like expression on her face. She achieved this through the shining of light on her eyes, such that they glowed in a manner similar to the mask known as "Deigan" or "Eye of Mud." The light created the appearance of gold in her eyes implying the intensity of her disturbed mental state. To create other masks for Kaede's character, Kurosawa also instructed



Fig. 42. Photographer unknown, A Noh mask in two positions. The mask on the left in the "terasu" or "enlightened" position. The mask on the right in the "kumorasu" or "clouded" position.

the make-up team to make Kaede's face similar to that of the "Zounonna" mask. They did this by shaving and repainting her eyebrows and instructing her to limit the movements of her facial muscles. The combination enabled Harada to obtain subtle effects.

Noh actors never consider Noh-masks as barriers to their freedom of expression or emotion in their performance. In real life, people show their emotions and attitudes to different people differently, depending upon the time or social setting. Indeed, it could be said that we wear a variety of masks in our daily lives.

In addition to concealing her feelings, the restricted expression of Lady Kaede's face actually increases the dramatic effect. Although, when wearing a Noh-mask, an actor can express only a limited range of facial expressions, a well-trained Noh actor can use the mask to create a strong impression. Noh is quiet and slow. Most of the time the actors do not move much. Any slight movements of the body or head thus become extremely significant. Because every subtle movement of the Noh actors' body can convey many things, each movement must be prescribed and rehearsed. In this way the actor creates a lasting impression.

Finally, this thesis explores the filmic representation of Lady Kaede and her use of Noh techniques. Kurosawa made the Lady Kaede character have a strong self-awareness. She appears only a limited

amount of time in the film, but her presence is felt in each scene.

People are either talking about Lady Kaede or their lives will be affected by some action taken by Lady Kaede. In this film, Lady Kaede controls the outcome of everyone's life, the only exception being the death of her husband, Taro.

Shortly after the audience sees Lady Kaede move into the castle's grand keep, we see her and Taro, her husband who is Hidetora's first son, sitting and talking together. Taro has become the new head of the Ichimonji clan, assuming the responsibility from his father. In this scene, although Taro sits on a higher seat, the audience quickly senses that it is actually Lady Kaede who dominates him. Taro utters how happy he is that they have moved into this castle's grand keep, expecting Lady Kaede's approval. Lady Kaede, instead, ignores Taro's comments and asks him in a very taciturn way about the whereabouts of the family banner. The family banner is, of course, the symbol of her family, the former rulers of this castle. What is interesting about this scene is that Lady Kaede, although she sits with her left knee drawn up in the manner of a Noh *waki* or *shite-zure*, does not play the *waki*. Instead, Taro takes on the role of *waki* while Lady Kaede plays the *shite*. She controls her husband and is therefore the principal player in the scene.

As soon as she learns that her husband allowed the banner of the house to accompany the former great lord, Hidetora, she angrily leaves Taro's presence in a scornful manner (See Figure 43). She stands up and turns herself around counterclockwise, thus showing her back to her husband and indicating her strong rejection of how he is handling the situation. This is, in fact, a very rude way of turning oneself. If Lady Kaede was to show even a little respect to her husband, she should have, instead, turned clockwise, minimizing the time she showed her back to him. This is a practice that is still strictly observed in the Japanese tea ceremony. Left alone, Taro desperately orders his men to retrieve the banner. Here, Kurosawa uses the Noh concept of *shite* and *waki* roles to sharply distinguish between the roles of a husband and wife. Taro, a man, is supposed to possess much more power than Lady Kaede. This scene proves otherwise. The switch of power in this scene is underscored by Kurosawa's use of Noh techniques. As in *Kumonosu-joh*, upon leaving the room, the central female character makes the sound of her *tabi* footsteps linger long after she is no longer visible on the screen. Later, we see many other characters enter and leave on the same path as Lady Kaede. Nevertheless, Lady Kaede is the only one whose footsteps Kurosawa emphasizes.

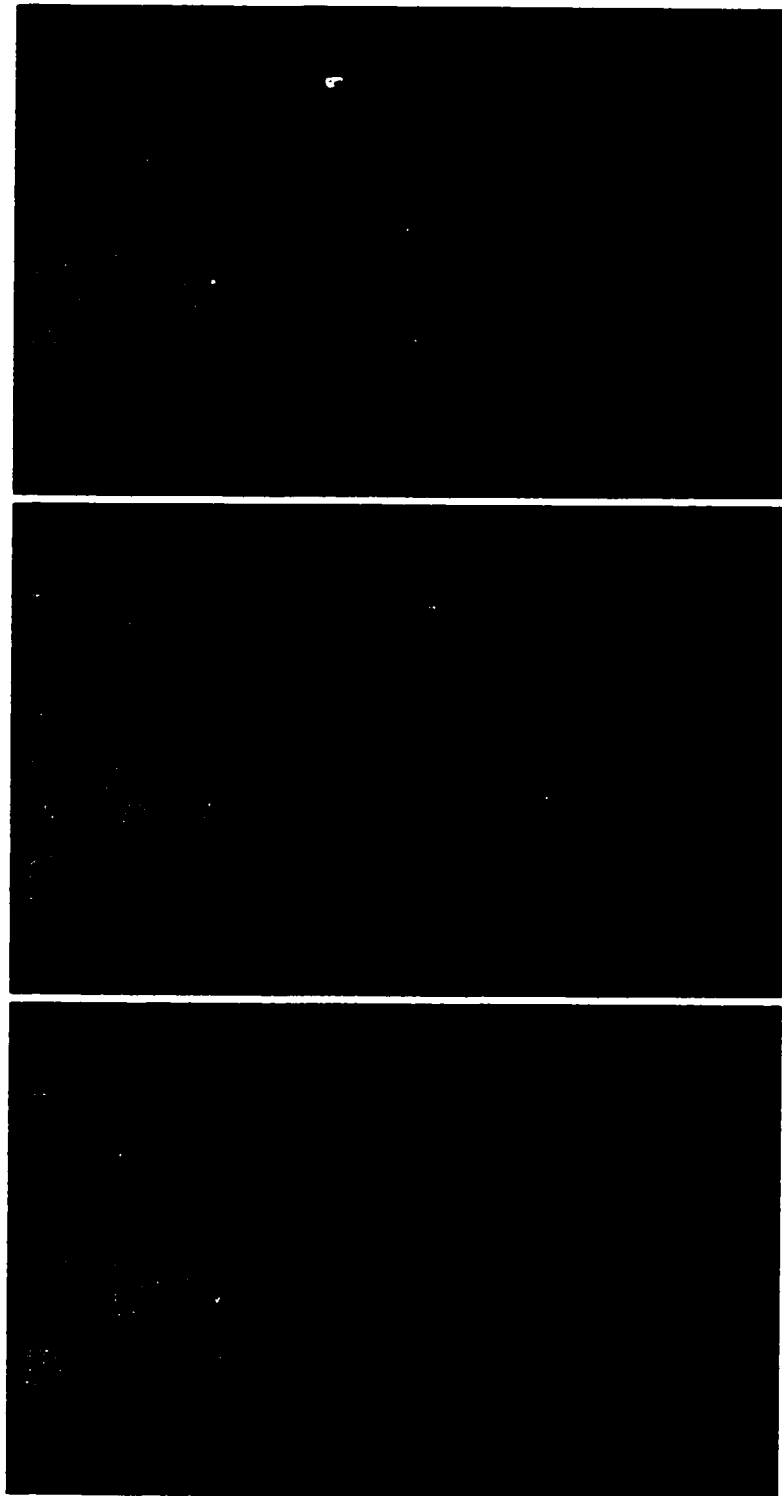


Fig. 43. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Taro (Terao Akira) and Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko). Lady Kaede leaves Taro in a scornful manner.

Kurosawa accentuates Lady Kaede's presence by having her employ Noh techniques in all scenes in which she appears. In the following scene, she and Taro are in the same spots in the castle grand keep as in the previous scene, yet here, Hidetora is being compelled to sign an official form of resignation in his blood. In response to this insult, Hidetora leaves the castle keep in outrage. Lady Kaede's comment to Hidetora's betraying adviser, Ikoma, makes it clear that it was her command that had been carried out through Taro.

This scene is rather unusual in that there is no apparent action for *fifteen* seconds (See Figure 44). Yet surprisingly, this fifteen seconds of inaction does not bore the audience. Rather, it introduces a very keen moment when Lady Kaede intensifies the audience's awareness of her. As examined in Lady Asaji's performance of *iguse* in Chapter 3, Kurosawa uses this usually theatrical technique in his film to great effect. We should keep in mind that the absence of action in Noh does not mean nothing is going on in the scene. On the contrary, it signifies one of the film's most important climaxes. As is true with other Japanese classical forms of art, the gap or the moment (sometimes this moment could extend for as long as a few minutes) of nothingness is an important part of the story. The effect of this long pause is to highlight the subsequent dialogue or action of Lady Kaede. In this case, the audience first learns that her entire family was actually

deceived and murdered by Hidetora. Lady Kaede discloses feelings, which she must have kept to herself for a long time.



Fig. 44. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) and Taro (Terao Akira) in conversation.

Expressing her feelings means that she is aware of the power she has over her husband. Unlike Washizu and Lady Asaji's equal relationship, Taro and Lady Kaede have a hierarchical relationship in which Kaede is always superior. She always takes on the role of the *shite* even if she is not in the usual *shite* position in the scene.

Whereas Washizu and Lady Asaji pursue similar interests -- ambition -- Taro and Kaede have opposing interests. Taro wants the Ichimonji family to prosper, while Kaede wants to destroy it. Whereas in *Kumonosu-joh*, Noh conventions highlight equality, in *Ran*, Noh techniques indicate the unequal power relationship between the leading woman and man.

Stephen Prince argues that in *Ran*, Kurosawa's depiction of the fall of the castle of Saburo (the third son of Hidetora) was an example of Kurosawa's employment of his "cinematic gifts." Prince says that such gifts "are fully engaged *only here*, in offering an expression of pure despair."⁷⁸ While I agree that the massacre scene of Hidetora's troops at Saburo's castle was one of the most memorable scenes in the film, there are other striking scenes in which Kurosawa's gifts are totally employed.

Previously, this chapter examined how Lady Kaede controlled her husband. She was, in a sense, enacting her political power through

the position of her husband. While Lady Asaji had good intentions for her husband Washizu, Lady Kaede only appreciated her husband's social position as the heir to the Ichimonji clan. Lady Asaji was truly interested in Washizu's well being, as was Washizu interested in hers. Lady Kaede, on the other hand, could have cared less about Taro's well being. When Kurogane, one of Jiro's faithful retainers assassinated Taro, Lady Kaede had to find someone who could take the place of her dead husband in order to maintain her status in the family and to see her revenge accomplished. This was the sole reason for her interest in Jiro after the death of Taro.

In *Ran*, power shifts among the main characters, but it ultimately rests with Lady Kaede. There are two more scenes in which Lady Kaede plays the *shite* and dominates the men around her. Lady Kaede, indeed, acts as the "power behind the throne." In the first scene, power seemingly shifts to the second son Jiro because of the death of Taro, yet Lady Kaede skillfully manipulates Jiro such that he bends to her will. In this scene Jiro reports the death of Lady Kaede's husband. She is seated alone on the highest position in the room while Jiro reports Taro's death from a position beneath her (See Figure 45). Surrounded by his men, Jiro hands over Taro's top-knot to Lady Kaede, while notifying her of his death. Rather than responding

⁷⁸ Prince 288.

directly to Jiro, Lady Kaede speaks to him through Taro's assistant Ogura. While it might seem to be the end of Lady Kaede, she belittles Jiro who wears Taro's armor so soon after his death. As the armor symbolizes the head of the family, she strikes at Jiro for taking over, implying that he may have something to do with the death of Taro. Jiro seems to win this verbal battle because he offers to remove the armor, which requires her to leave the room. Jiro demonstrates his power in that Lady Kaede is the one who is forced to leave the scene. She leaves the room in the manner of Lady Asaji, who left the room to fetch the sake flask before the murder of the king. Her footsteps and silk kimono can be heard as she walks. In a real Noh performance, there is a climax prior to the *shite's* departure from the stage. Here too, Lady Kaede leaves Jiro's presence after an intense conversation.

The second scene of importance has to do with Lady Kaede regaining her political power. This scene actually has to do with the transfer of power among the men who serve the two previous heads of the Ichimonji family, Hidetora and Taro. While Jiro's men take over from Taro's men, Lady Kaede enters to the surprise of the men and begins to take over from Jiro. Her entrance is noteworthy in that she

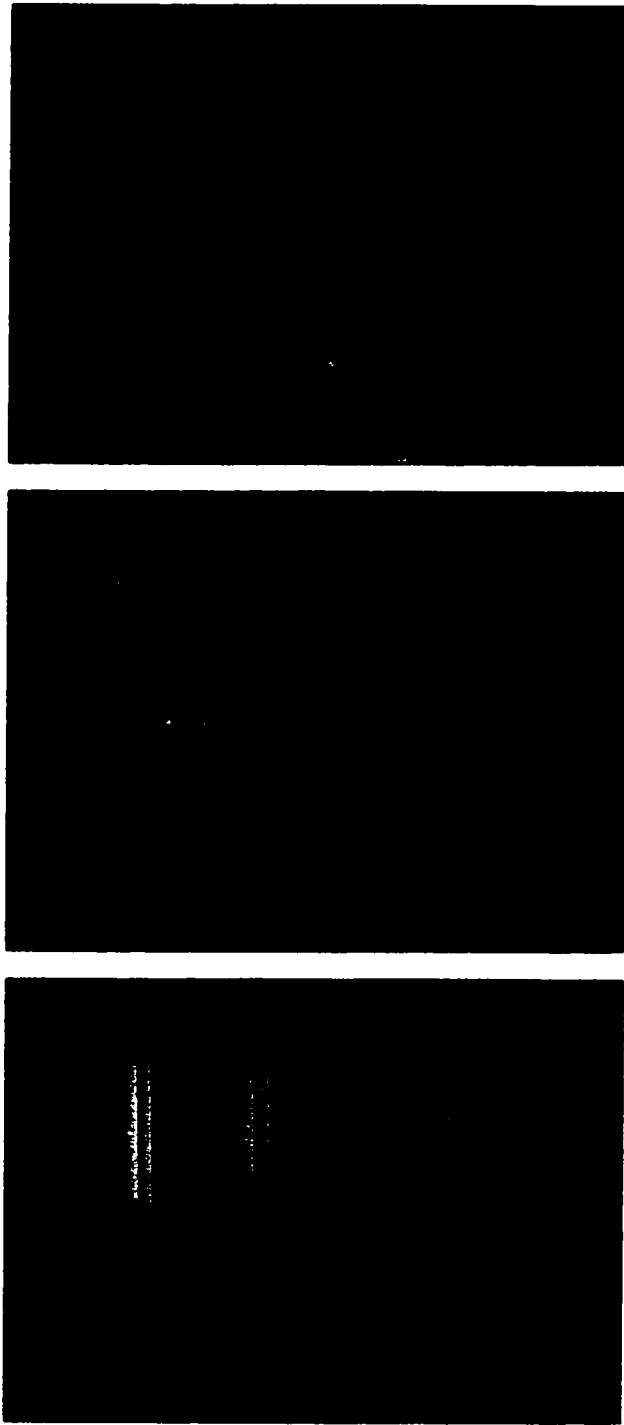


Fig. 45. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi) reports the death of Taro to Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko). Jiro is wearing the armor of his dead brother, Taro.

appears as the *shite* does in the second Act of a Noh play (See Figure 46). Even before she is visible, the viewer hears Lady Kaede's footsteps on the staircase. She comes up the dark staircase from a lower room, as if she rises from hell. Dressed in the white robe of a dutiful widow, indicating that she will never marry again, Lady Kaede makes a strong statement about her duty to her former husband. She holds *juzu* (Buddhist rosary beads) in her right hand, implying her faith and position as a woman in mourning. She uses this conventional widow's costume to relax Jiro's guards who would otherwise not leave Jiro alone. She offers the helmet of Taro to Jiro, indicating that she supports his assumption of the role of family head. Once all the men leave the room and Lady Kaede is alone with Jiro, Kaede submits to Jiro as he is now her lord. Although she seems to be a weak and submissive woman, she takes advantage of Jiro's sympathy by physically overpowering him just as he moves to accept the helmet (See Figure 47). She uses his own knife to threaten him. Once she has him in a compliant position, she seduces him. Lady Kaede surprisingly overpowers Jiro, a military man who was physically stronger than her. Her ability to weaken him and to physically dishonor him is enhanced by the choreographed Noh movements. The flickering light on her eyes indicates the madness of her character that is also a Noh convention. Beneath the knife Kaede holds, Jiro

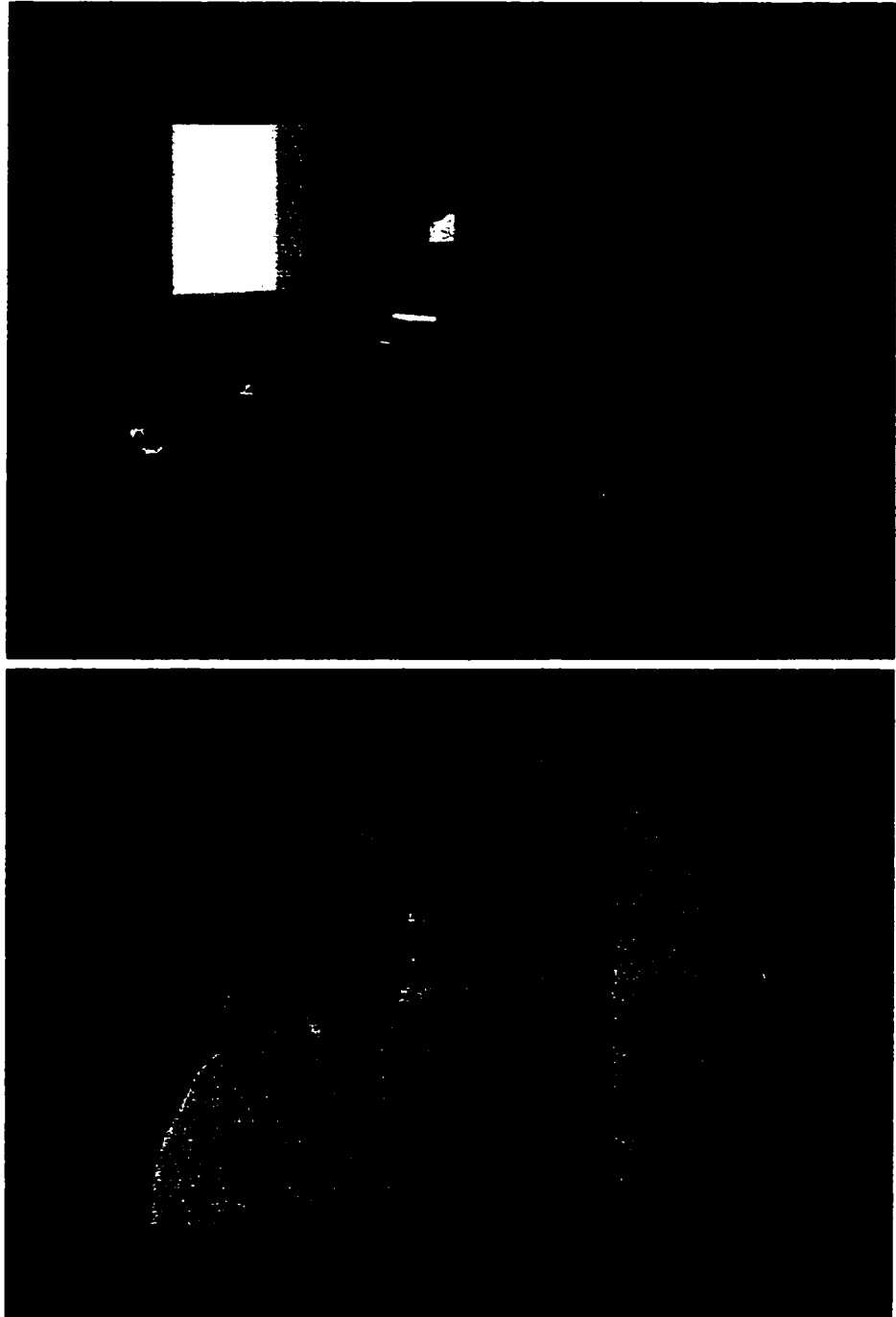


Fig. 46. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. (Above): Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) enters the castle keep to hand over the helmet of Taro to Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi). (Below): Lady Kaede dressed in the garb of a widow confronts Jiro.



Fig. 47. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) first offers the helmet of Taro to Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi). She then attacks him with his own knife.

confesses the name of the murderer of Taro, his guard Kurogane (See Figure 48). This confession is a turning point in that Jiro hands over his power to Kaede. She stamps on the floor as in the Noh theatre (See Figure 49). While he attempts to flee from her murderous advance, Lady Kaede instead throws away the knife and licks the blood from the wound that she has inflicted on his neck (See Figure 50). Lady Kaede reveals herself as a serpent spirit (See Figure 51). In Noh, the serpent signifies a woman who madly chases men. As she winds the sash of her kimono around her, the viewer (but not Jiro) sees her serpentine nature symbolized in the sash (See Figure 52). After their sexual relationship, Lady Kaede continues her manipulation of Jiro by demanding that she be treated as a wife. Although Jiro already has a wife, Lady Su-e, Lady Kaede demands that Lady Su-e be eliminated and that she regain her rightful position in the family (See Figure 53).

This scene has been variously interpreted by audiences in Japan and abroad. At the premier in New York City, for example, the audience gave Lady Kaede a standing ovation in the middle of this scene. While critics have labeled Kaede a completely villainous character, this scene would not be possible without the participation of Jiro who is attracted to her. She has bewitched Jiro, who desires Lady Kaede. Lady Su-e, on the other hand, is depicted as a religious and obedient wife who is rarely in the same scenes as Jiro. His



Fig. 48. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) slashes the throat of Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi) with his own knife.

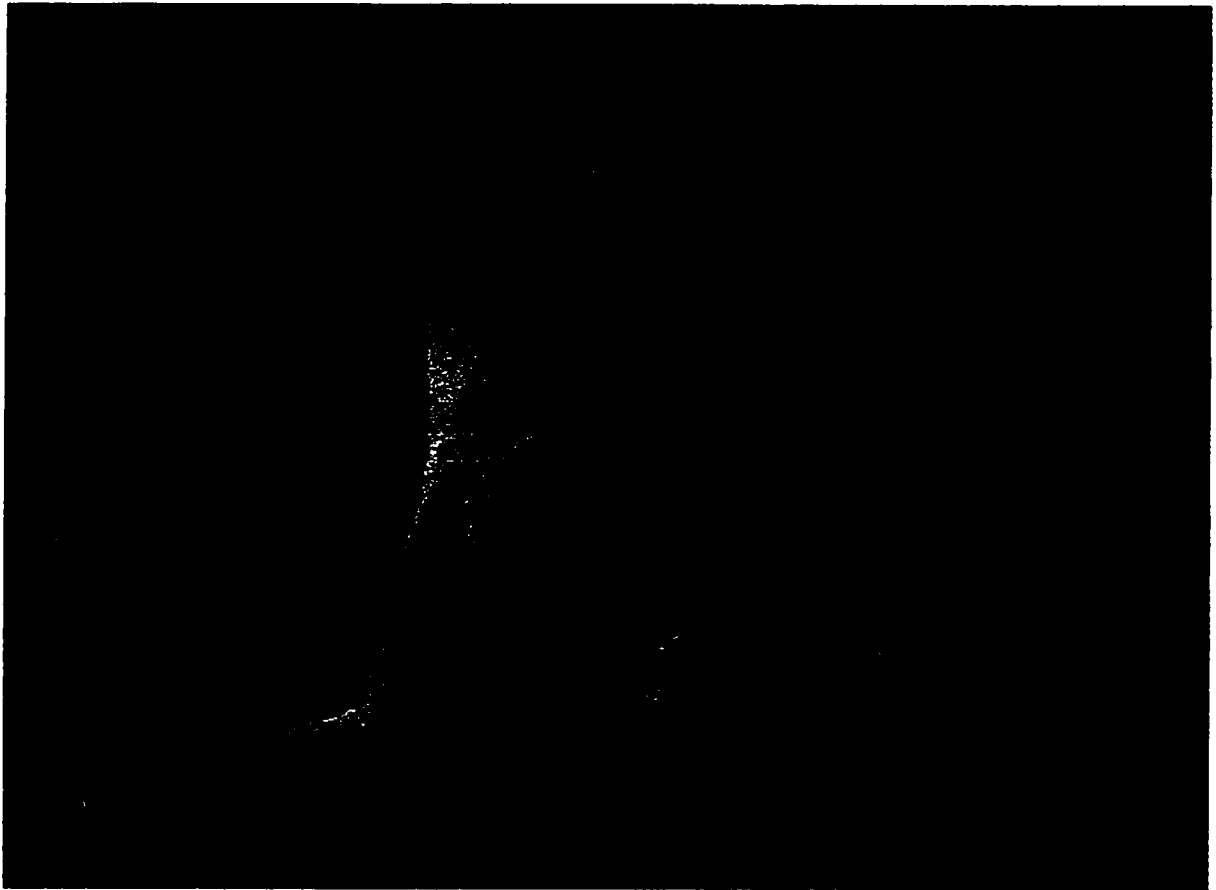


Fig. 49. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) stamps her foot as in Noh choreography, while threatening Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi). Jiro backs away from her threatening stance.

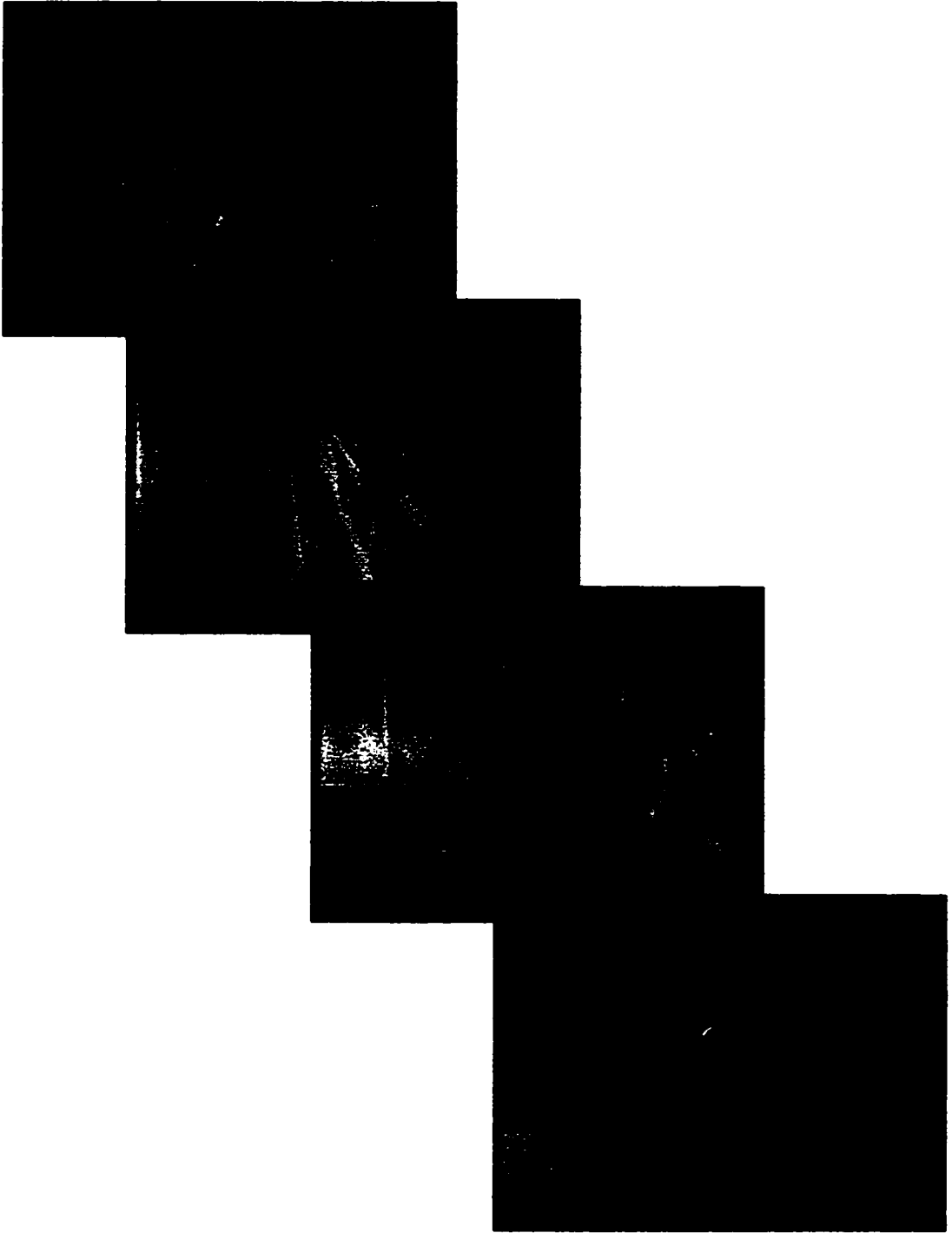


Fig. 50. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) forcefully seduces Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi). After kissing him, she licks the wound she inflicted on him as if she were a snake.



Fig. 51. Photographer unknown, Lady Aoi in the Noh play *Aoi no ue* [Lady Aoi]. This costume has a serpent scale pattern. Lady Kaede wears a similar pattern on her kimono beneath her white widow's robe in *Ran*.

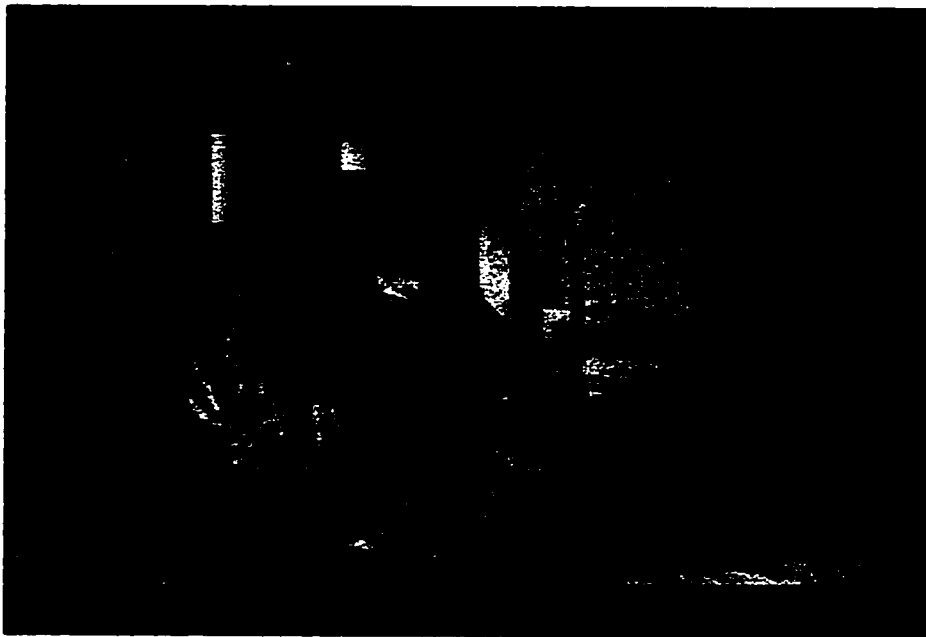
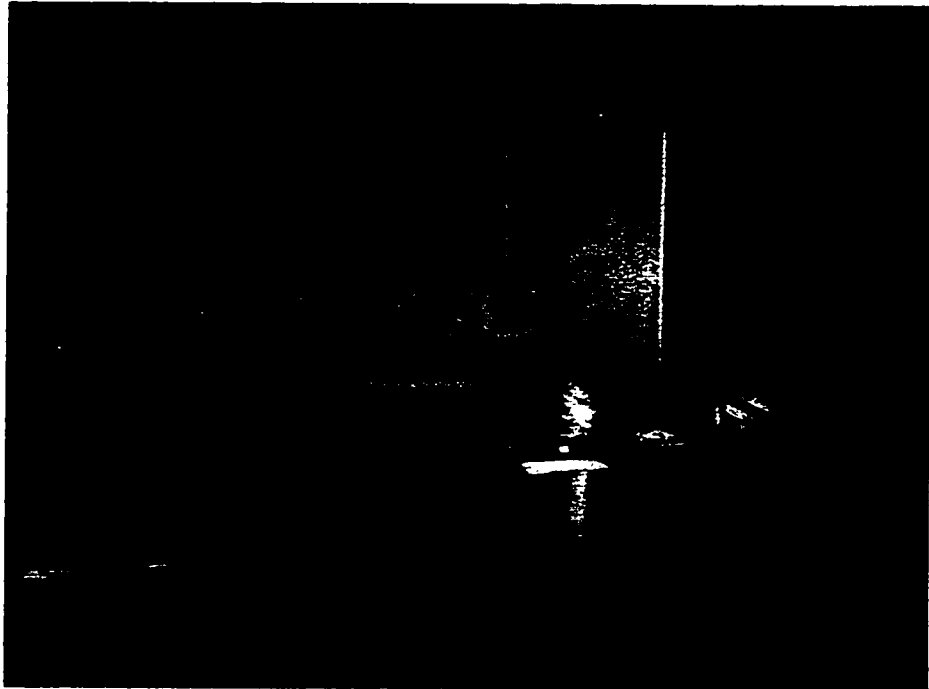


Fig. 52. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) puts on her sash after having sex with Jiro (Nezu Jimpachi). Her sash moves across the floor like a snake. The audience sees this, but not Jiro, whose back is turned to her.

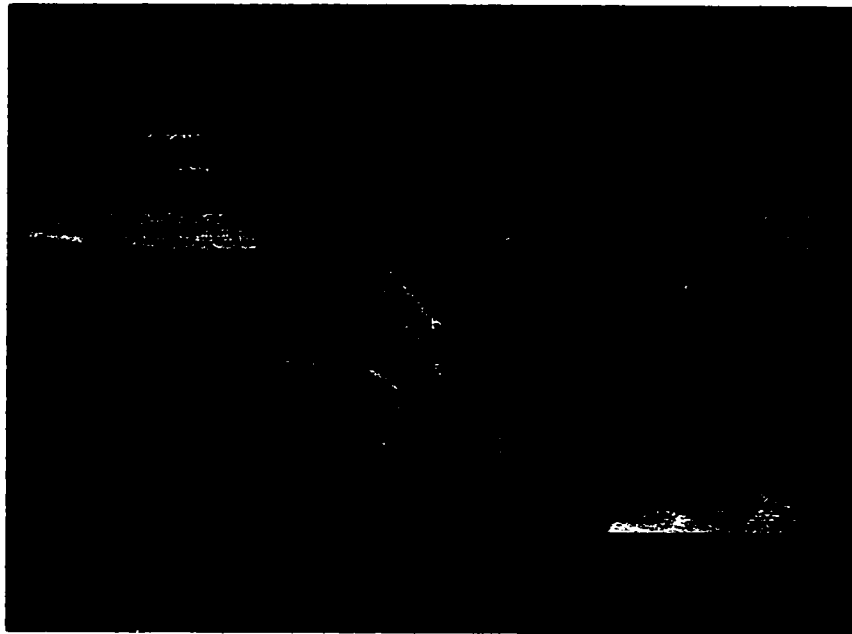
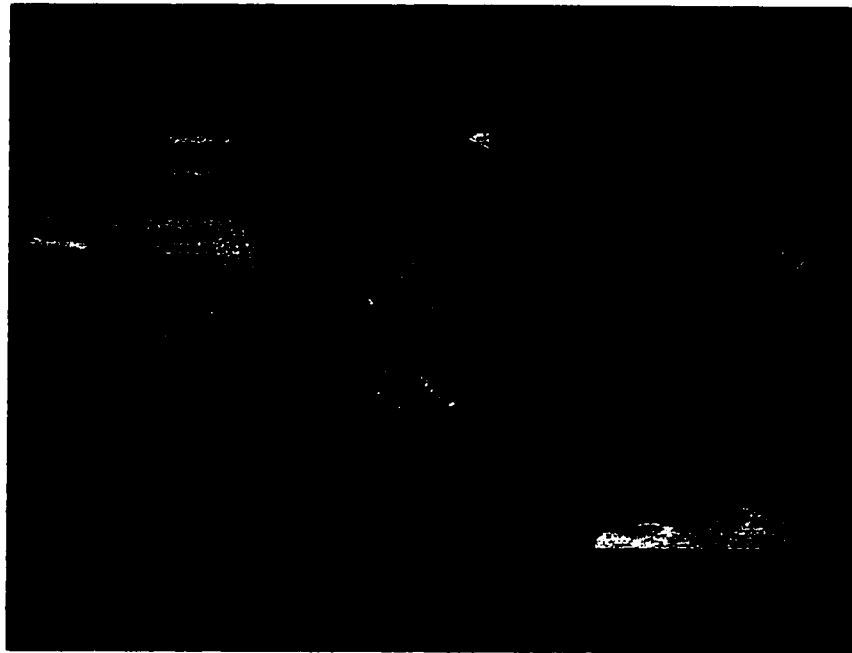


Fig. 53. Taken directly from the videocassette of *Ran*. Lady Kaede (Harada Mieko) kills a moth while she pretends to be crying about her future.

relationship to Lady Kaede is thus based on a very different kind of attraction.

During the feudal period in Japan, marriage was considered to be a unification of families, not a unification of two individuals. This tradition and social custom continued until very recently. It was only after Japan's defeat in World War II, when foreign concepts of marriage and the family came to Japan that this was modified. The notion of marriage as that of merging families prevailed among the *bushi* (*samurai*; the warrior class), however, and not all classes. Among the samurai, when a child was born into a family it was understood that if it were a boy, he would be a family successor. Girls were to be wed only after careful consideration of strategic family alliances. Daughters were almost never considered eligible as heirs, nor were women allowed to engage in any political activity. Moreover, the situation a woman entered into when she joined her new family was often not congenial. As a bride, she was not considered a true member of her husband's family.

When a woman bears a *chakunan*, a baby boy who is eligible to succeed as the heir, she then gains a significant role in the family. In *Ran*, Kaede did not have children, but her position in the family was assured due to her role as survivor of the formerly ruling power in the realm. Hidetora attacked and massacred the family of Lady Kaede

whose life was spared because she was the legitimate wife of Taro and thus considered a member of the Ichimonji family. Hidetora thus based the legitimacy of the Ichimonji family on the stolen house of Kaede.

Lady Kaede's wrathful treatment of Hidetora in the early part of the film makes sense if one remembers that a wife's duty was essentially to her husband and not to her father-in-law. Because it was through her husband that Kaede's own power was guaranteed, Lady Kaede schemed to secure her husband's newly gained status in the family. It eventually became clear, however, that making her husband head of the household was not merely Lady Kaede's final objective. She did not pit her husband against his own father in order to establish herself as the legitimate wife of the head of the entire clan. Rather, Kaede sought the full extermination of the Ichimonji clan, including her husband.

It is intriguing to observe how Lady Kaede seemed to live for herself although she ended up dying for her family. During the entire time Lady Kaede carried out her plan, she acted on her own and maintained great self control. Although Kaede seemed to possess a dual sense of loyalty -- one to her original family and another to her new family -- she took revenge on the Ichimonji family for the retribution of her original family. To facilitate her revenge, she had to be at the

center of the Ichimonji family and to appear loyal to her husband Taro. Beneath the surface, however, she still possessed the soul of the daughter of an annihilated family to whom she owed greater allegiance. When Lady Kaede learned that the Ichimonji Clan had slaughtered her family, she became a ghost-like woman set on avenging the annihilation of her family. Although revenge was almost always taken by men and rarely by women in Japanese history, Kaede was able to take revenge on the Ichimonji family. In fact, it was because Kaede was a woman that she was able to bring about the total execution of the Ichimonji family in such a manner. Although she was presumably physically weaker than the men in her life, she used sex, her intelligence, and her political savvy to carry out her plan. The scene, which begins with Jiro reporting the death of Taro to Lady Kaede, makes her seem helpless at first. Having just lost the only source of power she had -- her husband -- Lady Kaede pragmatically turns to his brother as her new power source. She overpowers Jiro psychologically, then physically, and finally, politically.

Although the achievement of her revenge took time, in the Noh sense, it was as if almost no time had passed. Because the sense of time for human beings is different from beings of the spirit world, the whole course of Lady Kaede's revenge took place in what seemed like the blink of an eye for those in the spirit world. In this sense, only a

moment after her parents were forced to commit suicide, Kaede accomplished her task (took revenge) and followed her parents into death. In this respect, one might even say that Lady Kaede's soul died at the same moment as her parents, even though her body remained in this world. Her soul was stained by bloodshed but her body found the motivation to live through the possibility of obtaining revenge. Kaede thus resembled ghost-like women characters that appear in Noh plays known as *shura-noh*. In *shura-noh*, the spirit of the dead haunts those who are alive until they are dead. To those around her, Lady Kaede's corporeal being may have appeared to belong to the family of her husband, but it is evident to the audience that her soul was her own to devote as she pleased. By the conclusion of the film, it becomes apparent that Lady Kaede never considered herself a member of the Ichimonji clan. In this way, Lady Kaede managed to be different from the women of her own time. She maintained her original allegiances even after her marriage.

Kurosawa's portrayal of women changed from the time he created Lady Asaji in 1957 to the time he created Lady Kaede in 1985. As we have seen, Kurosawa actually took great care in the depiction of the women characters in his films and created in them interesting and complex personalities. Although the roles Kurosawa assigned to these women seem similar, the two women differed significantly in the way

they related to the men in their lives. Lady Asaji hardly interacted with men other than her husband, Washizu. In contrast, Lady Kaede interacted with Taro, her husband, Jiro, her lover, and Kurogane, Jiro's loyal subject, who opposed her. It is important to note that Lady Asaji saw her fate and fortune as inextricably linked with that of Washizu. His fate was her fate. In other words, Lady Asaji saw herself through the life of Washizu. Lady Kaede's character, on the other hand, reflected independence perhaps not possible in a portrayal of women in the 1950s. Upon receiving the report of her husband's death, Kaede had sex with Jiro for the ultimate pursuit of avenging her family. She was both sexually and politically powerful, demonstrating an unusual independence of character. She lived her own life, and although Kurogane at the end of the film executed her, she died only after she succeeded in accomplishing what she set out to do. Unlike Jiro or Kurogane who died in the burning castle, Kaede's life's work was achieved. Her death reflected her liberation from the Ichimonji family and her victory over those who had destroyed her life.

Contrary to the common criticism that Kurosawa is concerned only with creating interesting male characters, in *Kumonosu-joh* and in *Ran*, he also took great pains in the depiction of his female characters. It is also important to note that in terms of applying Noh performance in

his films, Kurosawa was much more interested in his central female characters than their male counterparts.

As has been repeatedly stated in this thesis, it is true that most of Kurosawa's films focus on men. There are only three named female characters in *Kumonosu-joh* and four in *Ran*, including the ladies-in-waiting who have few, if any, lines. In contrast, *Kumonosu-joh* had thirty-eight and *Ran* had sixty-nine named roles for men, let alone the two thousand extras who were soldiers⁷⁹ in *Kumonosu-joh* and fourteen thousand in *Ran*.⁸⁰ Men definitely outnumber women in Kurosawa's works. The ratio of men to women, however, is not nearly as important as the significance of the specific female characters to the overall meaning of the films.

Lady Kaede's role in *Ran* indicates both an unusual female character who was most probably not typical of Muromachi period women and a Noh *shite* character who dominates the scenes in which she is present and those in which she is merely mentioned. Kurosawa releases the female characters from Noh performance conventions at the same time that he has them incorporate them into their

⁷⁹ This statistic comes from Mr. Nagata Magosaku, who was in charge of the extras for Kurosawa. He made this comment for *Zenshu Kurosawa Akira* [The Complete Works of Kurosawa Akira] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988) 4: 401.

⁸⁰ Saigoh Hideo, Abe Yoshinori, and Yamada Takashi, *Kurosawa eiga no genzai* [Kurosawa Akira Today] (Tokyo: Cine Front, 1985) 92.

performance. This creatively brings together Shakespearean characters and Japanese Noh performance techniques.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The women in Kurosawa films are far more important than his audience may initially perceive. As I articulated at the beginning of this study, the marked shift in Kurosawa's rendering of women characters from *Kumonosu-joh* to *Ran* possibly resulted from larger changes in the position of women in Japanese society. Changes in Japanese postwar society affected the environment in which Kurosawa made his films. Japanese women in the 1980s were more independent than women were in the 1950s, and this is apparent in the characters of Kaede and Asaji. When Kurosawa created Lady Asaji in 1957, the dissolution of the *ie-seido* (family system) was only just starting to affect the lives of Japanese women and men. Women's options for surviving outside of marriage – both socially and economically – were rather limited. But, by 1985, when Lady Kaede was featured in *Ran*, the women's liberation movement had already transformed Japanese

society such that notions of independent women were more widely-accepted.

From the time of the Meiji Restoration which ended the Shogunate era in 1868, until 1946, one year after Japan was defeated by the allied forces, Japan maintained the *ie-seido* or the household system, in which social relations between men and women were hierarchically defined. This system discouraged women from working outside the home and precluded them from owning property or assets. Women – either married or single -- were not allowed to engage in political activity nor were they able to earn or invest money without the permission of their husbands. Unmarried young women were strictly controlled by their fathers, who determined whom they would marry. As a rule, Japanese women were married, unmarried and living with their family, or prostitutes who would never marry. Women did not gain suffrage until the postwar period. Generally, a woman's value was assessed according to her ability to produce children, particularly a male heir for her husband's family. The traditional Japanese expression, "leave your new family if you bear no heirs after three year of marriage," was not meant as a joke. Women had no way to achieve financial independence and very few alternatives to an arranged marriage. Fifty years ago when Kurosawa started making his films, this was the general condition of Japanese women and is well reflected in the

development of his female central characters. It is especially evident in terms of the way these women attached themselves to their “husband” figures in both the films *Kumonosu-joh* and *Ran*.

I conclude by reiterating my view that, despite the opinions of his detractors, Kurosawa was both interested in and capable of creating well-developed female characters. Moreover these characters reflect the times in which they were conceived. Kurosawa’s use of Noh theatrical conventions in creating and developing his female characters innovatively inserted women into a traditional Japanese art form from which they have been almost entirely excluded.

Today, the lives of Japanese women have changed in the realm of politics, education, and everyday life. Half a century after the dissolution of the *ie-seido*, in the year 1995, a woman first became a chairperson in the Japanese Diet. In addition, there are now more women than there are men pursuing higher education. During the time period in which Kurosawa has made his films, the social status of women has changed so radically in Japan that his work could not help but reflect the changing conditions. Although the films of Kurosawa discussed in this paper are artistic works, their portrayal of women are an important source for social analysis.

In trying to create a new form of expression that would merge the cultures of East and West, Kurosawa also discovered what women in

his films could offer. Through imaginative use of Noh techniques for his women characters, Kurosawa ironically brought the element of women into works that formerly excluded them. At the same time, he created films that were as much Japanese as they were Shakespearean.

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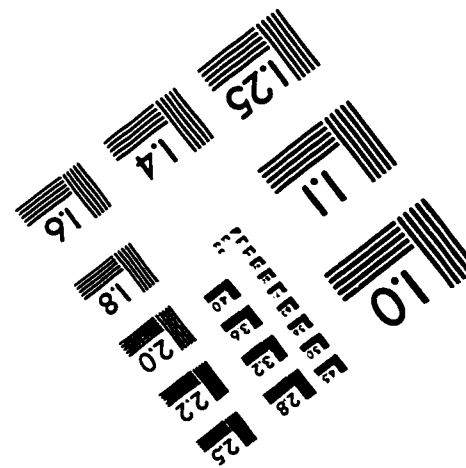
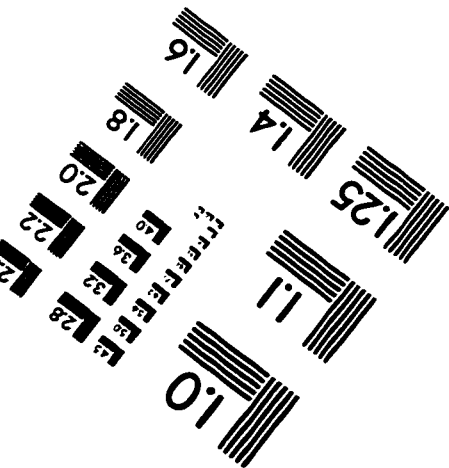
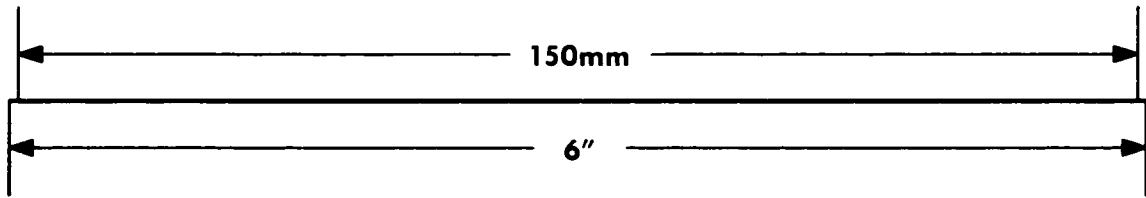
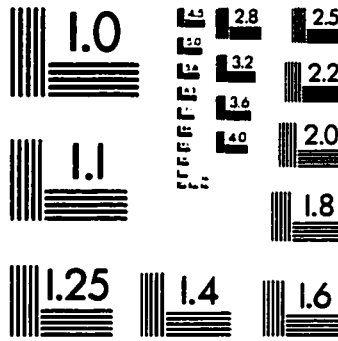
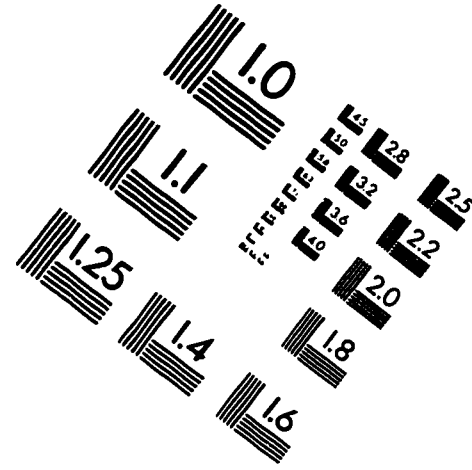
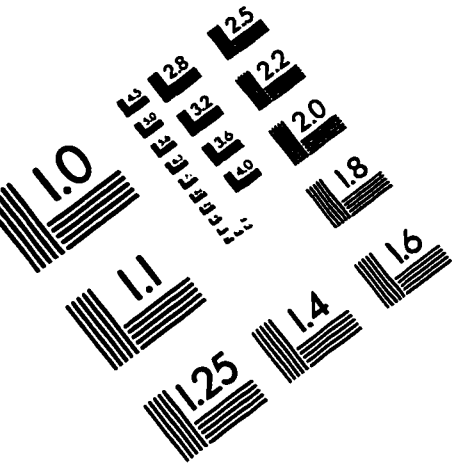
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