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Notes and Discussions

There is No Such Thing as "Nō"

Royall TYLER
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Big, lump-it-all-together rubrics do not work, but some are hard to get rid of. Take "the West." What does it mean? Try saying, "We in the West" in Australia; yet even in Australia the temptation to say it is strong. So too with "Shinto" and "Buddhism." You give an introductory lecture on Japanese religion, and you know better than to distinguish sharply between "Shinto" and "Buddhism" (except after 1868); but then you do anyway, because you know that if you try anything else you will just confuse the students if not yourself.

"Nō" is another example. "In Nō," people say, "the *waki* is typically a wandering monk..." Or, "Nō is the art of *yūgen*," and so on. Get off this track, and you have a lot of explaining to do. But "Nō" is like "poetry," defined as a series of lines that are all too short to reach to the other side of the page. That is to say, Nō is a complex of performance patterns, the sum of which corresponds to the short lines of "poetry." The short-line definition of poetry says nothing about content because generalizations about the content of poetry are useless. The same is true for content-based generalizations about Nō. Apart from a characteristic complex of performance patterns, there is no such thing as "Nō."

I have long wanted to say this and am reminded to do so now by the appearance of three articles on Nō in two recent issues of this journal (by Jay Rubin and Mark Cody Poulton in *Japan Review* 8, 1997, and by me in this one). There is always someone around who has something to say about Nō.

Despite understanding why practically every introduction to Nō repeats the proposition that the *waki* is a wandering monk and the *shite* a suffering spirit, I hope I never hear, see, or (much harder) say this again myself, because it is not true. There are a great many plays in which the *waki* is not a wandering monk, etc., and they may well represent the real mainstream of this theatre, despite the superb aberration of Zeami's *mugen nō* ("dream vision" plays). In fact, in some repertoire plays *(genkōkyoku)* one can hardly tell the *waki* from the *shite,* at least from the script, or even be sure that the play *has* a meaningful *waki* or *shite* at all. Is Nō a theatre of *yūgen*? What about *Mochizuki,* where the *shite* and *kokata* kill the *waki* on stage? This sort of thing is obvious in the theatre, once one sees content through performance, and more so still from reading alone. The *Yōkyoku taikan* (Sanari Kentarō's great compendium of plays) is full of scripts that confound any content-based definition of Nō.

I have mentioned diversity of intent (some plays pursue *yūgen,* others not) and of form (some plays correspond more or less to the agreed model of what a Nō play should be, others not). Form in this sense is

related to plot (a Nō play is not supposed to have a plot, but many do), and plot to story. Do I then mean that, despite continuity of performance technique, Nō plays tell all sorts of different stories? No. Or, rather, of course they do, but that is not the point. The repertoire is a collection of plays and play scripts, not folktales. What matters more is that these scripts are by all sorts of different people.

Many plays in the repertoire are of unknown authorship, and many author attributions are contested. Other plays are linked by early sources to people who are hardly more than names. Nonetheless, it is clear that repertoire Nō playwrights lived at different times, from the fourteenth century onward; had widely varying audiences and patrons to please; varied in taste themselves; conceived the theatre differently; were differently and more or less educated; and, finally, had varying degrees of talent. Their plays therefore vary widely in style and (dare I say it?) quality.

Ominameshi illustrates the range of this variation. In "The Language of Flowers in the Nō Theatre," Mark Cody Poulton discussed the cherry blossoms of Zeami's famous *Saigyō-zakura,* the pine trees of his still more famous *Takasago,* the red fall leaves of *Tatsuta,* a work attributable to the youthful Zenchiku, and the irises of *Kakitsubata.* These are distinguished plays. He did not mention *Ominameshi.*

Ominaeshi (called *ominameshi* in the Muromachi period) is a common plant of the valerian family. Its unassuming yellow flowers gave their name to a classic *kasane* (costume "layering") in which the outer layer is woven of *ao* (a yellowy green) warp threads and *ki* (yellow) weft threads, and the inner layer is plain *ao.* In *Ominameshi,* the *nochizure* is, more or less, the spirit of this plant and its flowers, and also the wife of the *shite,* one Ono no Yorikaze ("Wind Approaching across the Meadows"). So blatantly contrived a name (Yorikaze is fictitious) immediately sets *Ominameshi* apart from anything associated with the likes of Zeami or Zenchiku.

I once asked a Nō actor whether he knew *Ominameshi.* He made a sour face and said yes, he had danced it. He explained that it is a difficult play to perform and a lot more trouble than it is worth. His reaction matched mine after reading the script.

Ominameshi is an earnest but disjointed and unsuccessful melodrama quite unlike the plays discussed by Mark Cody Poulton. It has isolated, competent passages, but its wrenching and sometimes gratuitous mood changes must indeed make it difficult to perform. It seems to foreshadow another theatre than Nō.

The key difference between *Ominameshi* and classic plays on the theme of plants and flowers is simple. In classic plays, plants are defined as insentient, in keeping with Buddhist and particularly medieval Tendai thought, and with the Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū.* In contrast, the *ominaeshi* of the play has human reactions. When approached by the wind (Yorikaze, the man), it (she) *leans away in aversion.* This is out of bounds. The flower of *Ominameshi* is sentient and in a sense even motile. Of course, the playwright is entitled to this device, but once he uses it, he is no longer working in the literary or religious mode now identified with the content of "Nō." Nevertheless, *Ominaeshi* is a Nō play.

This is why there is no such thing as "Nō." There is a repertoire of plays that are performed in Nō theatres by Nō actors using the performance techniques characteristic of Nō. However, these plays vary as much in content as, say, a few

centuries' worth of European paintings all framed in the same way. I hope that in the future we will begin to take it for granted that the painting should be distinguished from the frame, and that when discussing certain plays of the Nō repertoire, one needs to discern what sort of plays they really are and how they relate to one another and to the repertoire as a whole. There are many distinctions to make. "Nō" by itself will not do.