

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS IN THE NŌ THEATRE

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What does it mean in a Nō play when a flower achieves buddhahood? Is such an event feasible, even necessary, on philosophical grounds? Or is it merely used as a pretext for a picturesque drama meant only to illustrate the beauty of nature? Building on earlier studies by Shively, Lafleur, and Tyler, this article focuses on a body of Nō plays that deal with the idea of *sōmoku jōbutsu*, arguing for a serious consideration of the religious and dramatic significance of this theme. Plays of this type highlight traditional Japanese views of nature and humanity's place in it. But no art form can render nature 'as it really is'; the process of turning nature into an aesthetic (not so say, religious) subject is as much a form of acculturation as any other kind. This truism needs emphasis and qualification.

Key words: NŌ, SŌMOKU JŌBUTSU, BUDDHISM, NATURE, LANGUAGE.

If we do not go to church as much as our fathers, we go to the woods much more.

— John Burroughs (1912)¹

The buddhahood of plants as a religious and a dramatic theme

Over a dozen plays in the Nō repertoire feature a flower or tree that achieves enlightenment or manifests itself as the incarnation of a god, bodhisattva, or Buddha. All Nō plays of this sort are predicated on a miracle: a plant speaks to us; it asserts its importance not only to the human but also to the cosmic scheme of things. Its existence, however humble, is singled out for our attention because it is charged with poetic or religious associations so powerful that we ourselves would be less than human were we not to take note of them. This flower or tree is a synecdoche for an underlying world view, one which draws the spectators in and assures them of their place in its order.

This focus on nature, in and of itself, as a subject for Nō plays is truly unprecedented in world drama. It suggests a system of aesthetic and religious values that are not tied strictly to a human order, but encompass a natural or even supernatural scheme that is something much grander and perhaps more enigmatic. At its root is undoubtedly a belief, shared by the Japanese since ancient times, that all natural phenomena possess a spiritual life and power. But in the language of the Nō plays, this is typically expressed in Buddhist terminology that, for all its rhetorical weight, is often of questionable doctrinal authority. As many as forty plays refer to the idea of *sōmoku jōbutsu*, or the buddhahood of plants.² The phrase is part of a longer verse,

When one Buddha attains the Way and contemplates the realm of the Law,
The grasses and trees and land will all become Buddha.

(*ichibutsu jōdō kangen hōkai sōmoku kokudo shikkai jōbutsu*)

attributed in *Sumizome-zakura* and other plays to the *Chūingyō* (Antarabhava Sutra), a relatively obscure scripture used as a liturgy for the dead during the first forty-nine days during which the spirit was thought to exist in an intermediate state (*chūin*) before either being reborn or attaining

salvation. Other modern editions of Nō plays, however, attribute this phrase to the much better known Lotus Sutra; to be sure, a number of plays cite the “Medicinal Herbs” chapter of that sutra as support for the buddhahood of plants. But, as Donald Shively has pointed out, this phrase appears in neither sutra, and the Nō plays invariably misinterpret the Lotus Sutra, which uses the botanical metaphor to stress not the already-enlightened state of plants and trees, but rather the capacity of the Buddha to rain his grace upon all living things (Shively, 1957: 141).

For all the talk of the buddhahood of plants, is Buddhism something of a red herring in these plays? A case could be made here in support of Jay Rubin’s thesis (Rubin, 1992) that religious language is not central to the meaning of a Nō play, but is employed rather as a kind of “mumbo jumbo” to impress the audience with abstruse ideas few could understand and none of which were essential to an appreciation of the play itself. Even Shively admits that the “lesson of the attainment of buddhahood by the nonsentient seems, in some of the plays, to be little more than a cliché” (Shively, 1957: 160). To focus on the apparent religious message of a given play would therefore miss the point. A play in which a flower or tree achieves enlightenment is, accordingly, not an illustration of Buddhist doctrine; instead, Buddhist doctrine is employed here merely as a rhetorical device to lend a degree of scriptural credibility to what is no more than a dramatic conceit. Thus, according to this view, the actual transformation of an insentient plant into an enlightened being is merely a picturesque way of singing the praises of nature.

Some plays about buddhahood for the nonsentient indeed seem to employ this motif as a means of injecting a degree of drama into what otherwise might be unpromising material. Such plays are filled with botanical prodigies whose miraculous feats do not simply validate their divinity but also add an essential element of dramatic interest. For example, the trees in both *Sumizome-zakura* and *Mutsura* eventually achieve enlightenment by going against natural laws: with its ink-dark blossoms, the cherry of *Sumizome-zakura* in effect dons itself in priestly vestments and abandons the world; in *Mutsura*, the maple refuses to change colour, having been slighted by a poet in the past for turning red too soon. Such “unnatural” prodigies of nature can be found in a number of other plays that are apparently more Shinto than Buddhist in their overall message. In *Takasago*, the husband-and-wife pines of Takasago and Suminoue are able to cross, by virtue of their divinity, the great distance that separates them; similarly, the pine and plum of *Oimatsu* fly all the way from the capital to Tsukushi province in order to be with their beloved master, the exiled Sugawara Michizane. More supernatural than natural, the behaviour of these trees is less an article of faith than a dramatic convention, for the religious message of such plays is both questionable (does even nature have to go against nature to achieve salvation?) and inconsistent (several plays contains passages extolling nature’s divinity precisely for its obedience to “natural” laws: the passing of the seasons, etc.).

Other plays, however, read so much like Buddhist sermons that it is hard to discount their religious content. *Bashō*, for example, in which the spirit of a banana tree achieves buddhahood after hearing the recitation of the Lotus Sutra, is essentially a liturgical work that, divest of its religious message of salvation for all forms of life, otherwise conveys little in the way of real drama to command our attention. Yet many regard *Bashō* as one of the better plays in the repertoire, certainly of much higher quality than works like *Sumizome-zakura* and *Mutsura*, which, though more “dramatic”, are seldom performed today. Buddhist terminology crops up in a number of plays on this theme (works like *Oimatsu*, *Takasago*, and *Tatsuta*) that are otherwise more Shinto in their orientation. Though perhaps used as a cliché in a number of lesser works,

some of the finest Nō plays explore this theme. *Takasago* is a great play, regardless of what we might think of its story.

Arguments have been made for and against the significance of religious ideas in Nō drama. What interests me here is not the extent to which the plays illustrate religious or philosophical ideas regarding nature, but rather the poetic and dramatic potential of these ideas. The notion that plants and trees can, like humans, achieve salvation is an extraordinary theme for a play, and suggests a view of nature, and the role art plays in portraying it, that is quite different from what we find in western drama.

The drama of sentience and insentience

Can the natural (that is to say, non-human) world be a suitable subject for drama? Can a play about anything so passive as a plant make for good theatre? If the sum effect of such a play is no more than to enshrine in art the glories of nature, where is the drama in that? The majority of plays concerning this theme are now generally grouped as “woman plays” belonging to a category that are the most lyrical, but also the most static, the least “dramatic” in a western sense, in the Nō repertoire. Like women, but far more so, the flowers and trees of the Nō are frequently portrayed as pretty objects who do not act except in the sense that they are catalysts for an event or, better yet, a mood. (The iris in *Kakitsubata* is the best example of this.) The woman plays of the Nō theatre lack many of those very elements that are the *sine qua non* of western drama: the delineation of human characters and their social and psychological conflicts. And those plays, about an encounter between a tranquil nature and a Buddhist priest who has abandoned the world, must surely be counted among the least dramatic of all. Very little actually happens in a play like *Kakitsubata*, except in the sense that the plot, such as it is, becomes an occasion for great poetry.

That plants are frequently portrayed as women in the Nō may have less to do, however, with any “passive” qualities they may or may not share with the feminine sex than with expedience. An actor is required to play the role; in impersonating a flower or tree, he is obliged to give it human form. The personification of the plant world is thus a necessary dramatic convention.

But there is also what one might call an epistemological reason for this: no matter how much we may feel capable of identifying with nature, there are obvious limits to our understanding of the inner life of the plant world. Even were we to subscribe to the idea that plants can indeed feel — that they have emotions, even souls — these are surely not the same as ours. All we can say with any certainty is that it is far more common that we project our own thoughts and feelings upon nature.

In western poetics, such a personification of nature is typically dismissed as a pathetic fallacy. The point is that plants do not feel as we do, and it is simply sentimental of us to think otherwise. But this “poetic fallacy” is precisely the premise of a number of Nō plays. Whether plants achieve buddhahood or a more Shintoistic apotheosis, what is crucial to the plays is that these plants demonstrate a kind of sensitivity and loyalty that is essentially a human ideal, if not always a human quality. Love binds the twin pines of *Takasago* to each other, and the pine and plum of *Oimatsu* to their master; sensitivity to poetic slights wakes the plum, cherry and maple from their natural slumber in *Ume*, *Sumizome-zakura*, and *Mutsura* to supernatural epiphanies.

But the bathos of a happy pine or a weeping cherry is no more interesting or acceptable in the

Nō than it would be in western poetry. A good Nō play is far more subtle and complex than that. The personification of plants can in fact work to great dramatic advantage, as well as be an occasion to show off a good deal of dexterity with Buddhist ideas.

Neither Buddhism nor the aesthetic sense of the Nō accepts at face value the notion that plants have emotions. Early Buddhism resisted the notion that the botanical world could be sentient, not only because nature in itself was a manifestation of *maya* (illusion) but also because the question of personal salvation was regarded as a fundamentally human one. But (largely to accommodate Buddhism to native cults of nature worship) medieval Japanese Buddhism gradually came to accept the hitherto heterodox (or merely irrelevant) notion that plants had or could attain buddhahood. This doctrinal debate on the buddhahood of plants still hinted at a much more pressing concern regarding human salvation. Religious beliefs held by men and women obviously concern the working out of their own salvation, and non-human life is incorporated into those beliefs only to the extent that it is relevant to matters of human faith. In discussing the philosophical implications of this belief in medieval Japan, William Lafleur (1973 and 1974) notes a shift from human to natural soteric models. Human nature and society were fundamentally flawed, and therefore in need of salvation; but, in being so completely itself, the natural world was already perfected, and thus was an earthly manifestation of buddhahood. Nevertheless the actual salvation of other species remained beside the point; what *is* important is the extent to which nature itself can furnish humans with the means of salvation. For as Lafleur points out, “the discussion that began with the question of the possibility of salvation *for* plants and trees eventually led to the position that there was a salvation for man which was derived *from* plants and trees” (Lafleur 1974, 227). Thus, in this scheme we are still not entirely removed from an anthropocentric view of nature, but nature has nonetheless assumed an important role in facilitating the salvation of humanity.

But something rather different appears to be going on in the Nō plays. These works stubbornly insist on interpreting the notion of *sōmoku jōbutsu* quite literally as the buddhahood *of* plants, not *by means of* plants. It is not the human *waki* who, through an encounter with nature achieves salvation; instead, the *waki* typically assists the flower or tree who is the *shite* in achieving salvation. Thus, both thematically and structurally, the plays indeed seem to be quite literally about the salvation of the nonsentient, an idea that, even were it to have a degree of doctrinal credibility, was hardly important religiously. One might argue that such plants should be understood as symbols of people. Certainly, the flowers featured in a number of plays (including *Tōboku* and *Ominaeshi*) are in effect the reincarnations of human beings. In other plays (like *Matsukaze* or *Kakitsubata*) where the identity of the *shite* is not fixed, flowers and trees often perform a similar function.

But sometimes (*pace* Ms. Stein) a cherry is a cherry is a cherry; whatever else our botanical protagonist may be, it is not a person. That is not to deny that plants are personified, given “human” qualities in Nō; but such emotions as joy, anger, resentment or despair must first be seen as a kind of infection onto the natural world by humanity, rousing it from idyllic passivity. The drama in such plays is typically instigated by a collision between the human and natural worlds. But that is not all. The nature of this collision is itself predicated on a paradox. The point of these plays is ultimately to contrast the sensitivity of the plant world with the insensitivity of humanity. The pure lyricism and intensity of emotion of even the least “dramatic” plays, like *Kakitsubata*, is generated by an encounter with a flower. Such plants, so Buddhist teaching and

the conventions of the Nō drama would have it, are insentient but they demonstrate a sensitivity far superior to that shown by the other, human, “characters” in the play. What is more, these plants come to life on stage because they want men to acknowledge how sensitive they indeed are. In the Nō, men have much to learn from insentient nature about the nature of sentience. Such an idea of course turns on its head the commonsensical notion taught by orthodox Buddhism, that nature is excluded from the processes of salvation because it is insentient. Most of the plays based on this theme pivot on this paradox.

In short, even as plants are humanized in the Nō theatre, we are still reminded that nature, and not humanity, is the real subject of these plays. The human subject, who in any event plays a subordinate role, virtually disappears. What, exactly, is going on here? The key to understanding these plays has, I think, to do with a fundamental ambiguity implicit in the Japanese terms for sentience and insentience (*ujō* 有情 and *hijō* 非情、respectively). It needs to be stressed here that “sentience” does not mean “reason” which, along with the existence of the soul or religious instinct was regarded as one of the attributes traditionally thought in the west to distinguish humanity from the bestial and botanical worlds (see Thomas 1983, 137 ff.). Though *jō*, 情 in this context means “sentience”, read as *nasake* it conveys more the ideas of “sensitivity”, “sensibility” or “emotion”. Although a prerequisite for salvation, sentience, in its latter meaning as “emotion”, is also an impediment. In order to achieve enlightenment one must give up all worldly desires and attachments. One must give up the emotions. As Tyler (1983, 50) has pointed out, the typical *waki* (or “witness”) in these plays is a priest who, having himself abandoned human society, resembles in many respects the plants he encounters. He has grass for a pillow and his sleeves are overgrown with moss. More importantly, he is “without feelings” (*kokoro naki*). This epithet is a Japanese rendering of the term *mushin* 無心、equivalent to *hijō*. Both are expressions characteristically used also to describe the insentience of the botanical world.

That plants are “insentient and without feelings” is a stock phrase in these plays, but these expressions inevitably appear in a grammatical form that at once negates the idea. For example:

Though plants and trees, they say, have no feelings...”

(*somoku kokoro nashi to mosedomo; Kakitsubata*);

“Who says that flowers and leaves, in all their various forms, have no feelings?”

(*kayo samazama no sugata o kokoro nashi no ta ga iu; Mutsura*)

Though you say you are truly a plant without feelings...”

(*geniya kokoro naki somoku nari to mosedomo; Oimatsu*)

The pines of Takasago and Suminoue are insentient, yet...”

(*Takasago Suminoue no matsu wa hijo no mono da ni mo; Takasago*)

For all the talk about the insentience of the botanical world, the point, of course, is that plants are indeed sentient, certainly sensible enough to feel when they are being slighted. These plays pit rather “humane” (if not actually human) flowers and trees against, typically, priests who have tried their best to slough off the attributes of humanity. And one of the highest attributes of humanity for the courtly culture that the Nō theatre emulated was an elegant sensibility. The expression *kokoro naki* is used to refer, not only to insentient life or to the priest who has cut his ties to the world of emotions, but also to one who lacks poetic sensitivity. It is one of the conceits of these plays that plants are called upon to criticize or correct a poem addressed to them by an inconsiderate human. In *Fuji*, for example, the spirit of the wisteria upbraids a priest for reciting a poem lacking in sensibility, with the words “you heartless traveller” (*ara kokoro na no*

tabibito).

Within a natural setting, priest encounters plant; they exchange words, a wonder in itself; finally, through this medium of human language, they grow together in sympathy. The “punch line”, as it were, of these plays occurs when the man realizes, after all, how heartless he had been. Nature, it would seem, has much to teach us about being human.

Hearts and flowers in *Saigyō-zakura*

One senses in these plays, for all their use of Buddhist terminology, a critique of Buddhism’s negation of those very feelings that make us human after all. It is neither human nor natural to deny oneself emotion. Such a tension has existed in Japanese culture for as long as Buddhism has been a part of it. But the *Nō* plays are of course not anti-Buddhist tracts, any more than they are meant to be seen or read as simple sermons proselytizing the Dharma. Their grasp of the dialectics of sentience and insentience makes for sophisticated reasoning, and subtle drama, that is both religiously and aesthetically satisfying.

A work that demonstrates this with great wit and skill is *Saigyō-zakura*. The setting is the priest and poet Saigyō’s hermitage in the western hills of the capital.³ It is spring. A tree growing in his garden is famous for its blossoms and has attracted a flock of visitors from the city. Saigyō, however, is not keen on being disturbed — he has retired from the world, but the tree has drawn the world back to him. A gracious host, he reluctantly admits the party of flower-viewers, turning his resentment instead on the tree itself, the source for all the ruckus:

“Flowers! Do let’s look” —	<i>hana min to</i>
and on they come,	<i>muretsutsu hito no</i>
amateurs in droves.	<i>kuru nomi zo.</i>
Ah, lovely blossoms,	<i>atara sakura no</i>
this is all your fault!	<i>toga ni arikeru.</i>

(Sanari 2: 1174; tr. Tyler 1992, 220)

This poem was indeed composed by Saigyō, and was included in the anthology *Gyokuyōshū*, as well as in the *Sankashū*, Saigyō’s personal collection of poetry, where the poem is accompanied by the heading: “Composed on the occasion of a visit by people come to see my blossoms, just as I had planned to spend my time in peace.”⁴

In the play, the spirit of the cherry steps out of the hollow bole of this aged tree just as the sun is setting. Singing “I am but a buried tree, long hidden from the knowledge of men, but in my heart there are blossoms still!” (*umoregi no hito shirenu mi to shizumedomo kokoro no hana wa nokorikeru zo ya*), the cherry compares itself to a long line of men and women forgotten by the world but whose poetic spirit lives on. (Here *kokoro no hana* signifies that poetic sensibility.) The spirit then quotes Saigyō’s poem right back at him, asking him: why blame the tree for the poet’s problems?

SAIGYŌ: Please understand that I am living alone in the mountains precisely to avoid the world of sorrows and to clear my mind of all its vexations. With a horde of visitors at my gate, I found their arrival distressing, and gave this feeling modest expression in my verse.

SPIRIT: Forgive me, but it is just this feeling of yours that troubles me so. The eyes can see any spot as the world of sorrows or as a mountain retreat: that depends solely on

the seer's own heart. Surely no flowers upon a tree, which after all is insentient and without feelings of its own, can be held to blame for the vexations of the world. (tr. Tyler 1992: 220-221)

The tree's logic is quite remarkable: if the cherry is indeed blameless because it is an insentient plant without feelings (*hijō mushin no sōmoku*), then what but feelings have stirred it now to respond to Saigyō's reproach? The point is that it has feelings enough to be hurt by someone, but not to hurt others. The tree, in other words, is quite innocent and pure, but certainly not insentient.

But rather than appear in the form of a child or young woman as one might expect in such a case, the spirit, being that of an ancient tree, has assumed the form of an "old man in a dream" (*muchū no okina*). In this way, the cherry hints that it is a kind of double for Saigyō himself, because, after all, the dream is Saigyō's. Indeed, there is finally little to distinguish between the poet who loves blossoms or the blossoms loved by the poet. But it is up to the cherry to show Saigyō the error of his own ways. He is rather like a crusty old man who, scorning the noisy vitality of youth, betrays his own regrets and attachments to the world. Saigyō begrudges the fact that others delight in his blossoms. The tree is right to point out that it is not to blame for this: the poet has only himself to blame, for in reproaching the flower he is in fact finding fault with those very feelings that enable him to enjoy the blossoms and, furthermore, try to monopolize them.

In this fashion, *Saigyō-zakura* reveals that the conflict is not between man and flower, but one within the man himself. What began in discord is resolved in harmonious acceptance. The *kakeai*, or exchange in which the *waki* and *shite* typically cap each other's comments so that they seem to move toward each other in growing sympathy, underscores the merging of the twin identities of Saigyō and the cherry:

SPIRIT: Yes, I am indeed the spirit of the flowers.
Spirit and tree have grown old together,

SAIGYŌ: And though cherries bloom, like all trees, in silence,

SPIRIT: To protest my innocence I stand before you

SAIGYŌ: With moving lips, to speak for the blossoms. (Tyler 1992: 221)

Then, in what is the high point of the first part of this play, both priest and tree are dissolved into a chorus which sings of *sōmoku jōbutsu*:

CHORUS: [...] Plants and trees perhaps lack feeling,
yet in season forget neither flower nor fruit.
Yes, all of them, with the soil and land,
are the sacred Teaching of Buddhahood. (Tyler 1992: 221)

I have said that the tree is essentially a double for Saigyō himself, and that it is even a projection of the poet's own feelings which, until this dream, he has hidden from himself. This is only partially true, because it places too much emphasis on Saigyō and his own psychological processes. The fact is Saigyō is only a witness and the drama belongs to the cherry. Thus, at the point where their identities fully merge into the chorus, the central theme of the play, the buddhahood of plants, is announced to us. We are pulled away from a too anthropocentric reading of this play in a kind of riff on Chuang Tsu: did Saigyō dream he was a cherry, or was it really the cherry dreaming it was Saigyō?

Both structurally and thematically the play throws greater emphasis on the tree than the poet. The remainder of the play leaves Saigyō behind as it focuses on the dance of the cherry's spirit.

Saigyō-zakura ends in a long catalogue of famous cherry-viewing places about the capital: Lord Konoe's trees growing near the palace; the elegant avenue of cherries on Senbon, whose name means "a thousand trees"; to the east, the Bishamon Hall at Eikandō, Kurodani, Shimogawara, and Kachō-zan ("flowertop mountain"); to the south, Kiyomizudera; and finally Arashiyama and Ogura to the west. This catalogue provides a panorama of the flowery capital (*hana no miyako*) that sweeps in an arc, from a central point near the imperial palace, east and south then back toward the west and north, resting finally in the region where Saigyō's cherry tree was said to grow. Along the way, various sites are linked to temples, deities, and sacred sites of Buddhist legend, such that the catalogue is no mere description of the picturesque delights of spring in the capital, but a symbolic evocation of a mandala in which a sacred landscape is superimposed upon a profane one. Saigyō's aged cherry tree thus joins a veritable constellation of his botanical brothers and sisters, all spirits that in their blossoming sing of the perfection of being.

Are these mere platitudes, or simply a clever exercise in the picturesque? Neither, because the poet is no more than a bystander (one possible translation of *waki*) to this drama. Saigyō's complete submersion into the natural scene is very much the point, not only of this play, but of so much of his poetry. The drama here is revealed to have a religious dimension: does salvation involve removing oneself from the world, or throwing oneself whole-heartedly into it? Ultimately, the man/nature dichotomy is shown to be a false one: human salvation is achieved only when a total identification is made with a nature that is revealed to be already saved. Concerning Saigyō's poetic apostrophes of nature, Lafleur writes that such an identification with nature goes beyond the "poetic fallacy", in which nature is merely humanized. Here, "the sacred meaning of nature as natural" is emphasized: "the tree as tree performs for man a religious role and in its own extraordinary mode of being is an adequate substitute for the rites and actions normally associated with religious cultus" (Lafleur, 1973: 118, 119). Another of Saigyō's poems,

In a willow's shade	<i>michi no be ni</i>
by the roadside, where	<i>shimizu nagaruru</i>
a clear stream flows —	<i>yanagi kage</i>
Stop here,	<i>shibashi tote koso</i>
stay awhile	<i>tachidomaritsure</i>

is the *locus classicus* for the play *Yūgyō yanagi*, in which the spirit of the aged willow immortalized by Saigyō's poem requests a prayer from a travelling priest to guide it to enlightenment. But the point in *Saigyō-zakura* is that the cherry really does not require Saigyō's, or any other human's, intercession for it to achieve salvation. It is already saved; enlightened, it is also blameless. It is the cherry that intervenes and corrects Saigyō's wrong-headed and dualistic way of thinking. An analogous debate, between spiritual and erotic feeling, is resolved to surprising effect in another play about Saigyō, *Eguchi*.

Nature of course cannot perform such a religious function unless the poet identifies himself with it. This identification is typically made in Japanese poetry on the level of *kokoro*, the emotions, and *Saigyō-zakura* is no different. The fusion of heart and flower is expressed rhetorically through such devices as parallelism and contrast. Early on in the play, Saigyō and his servant praise the spring, singing of how the hearts of all who gaze on the blossoms also bloom, which is to say they are moved by a spirit of life that instills both erotic and poetic feelings. The flowers exist both outside and within the human heart: this idea is expressed by such phrases as *hana naru kokoro* ("hearts in flower"), and *kokoro no hana* ("the heart's flower"). But Saigyō

tells the revellers at his gate that these flowers signify to him a “different heart” (*kokoro kotonaru hana*) from those of his visitors, speaking less of the joys of youth perhaps than of the inevitability of its passing. Certainly such talk verges on a cliché comparison of human life with the seasons, but this figure of speech is a necessary prelude to a reversal in which the flower is no longer a metaphor for the human heart, but the heart instead becomes an expression of the flower itself. This brings us back to the idea that, though flowers are said to be insentient, yet they have feelings. The old cherry tree tells us that the flower of its heart (*kokoro no hana*) still blooms though it has been forgotten by men, the point being that, just as Saigyō and the revellers have flowers in their hearts, this tree has a heart in its flowers.

The flowers of language

Classical Japanese grammar and syntax allow for a verbal identification between human emotions and the natural landscape that cannot easily be rendered in English. The language of Nō drama is particularly adept at this, telescoping through a string of images evocations of both inner states of being and outer, apparently “objective” phenomena. There are no clear divisions between the two, nor would such divisions be welcome, because the aim here is to forge a union between the personal and the impersonal, the human and the natural. In this operation, there is a significance that the term “metaphor” does not quite convey, because the natural world is not employed simply to give shape and colour to human sensibilities. A conventional figure of speech such as *kokoro no hana* links humanity with nature, but also animates the natural, imparting to it a form of sentience. In the most important sections of a Nō play where its poetry is most intensely concentrated, such tropes frequently take flight into a kind of cadenza of *kakekotoba* (“pivot words”) and *engo*, or associated images, that leave all logic, and humanity, far behind.

If I have used Tyler’s translations so much here it is because I feel that he has conveyed better than anyone (certainly better than I can) a sense of the poetic texture of these plays, of the way its language flows over us. Compare, for example, Tyler’s translation of part of the *kuse* passage of *Tatsuta* with the original:

Age upon age, the poets of old, suffused their hearts with the red of the leaves.	<i>shikareba yoyo no kajin mo kokoro o somete momijiba no</i>
Morning mists upon Tatsuta mountain, rising in spring, have nothing of fall, yet a poet, in love with scarlet, wrote:	<i>Tatsuta no yama no asagasumi haru wa momiji ni aranedomo tada kōshoku ni medetamaeba</i>
Ah, how this morning the Tatsuta cherries glow with rich colour, dyed in long sunsets, like leaves in autumn rains!	<i>kesa yori wa Tatsuta no sakura iro zo koki yuhi ya hana no shigure naruran</i>
Lines like his betray a heart touched, like the leaves themselves, with autumn’s bright hue.	<i>yomishi mo kurenai ni kokoro o someshi eika nari</i>

(Tyler 1992, 306; Sanari 3: 1932)

Despite the tendency in English grammar and syntax toward a strong causal structure, Tyler succeeds in conveying the sense in the original that the images of poets, scarlet leaves, morning

mist, spring cherries and sunset seem bleed into one another, into a single tone, leading finally back to the poet himself whose heart is steeped in crimson (*kokoro o someshi*). Spring and fall, morning and evening, man and nature are fused together here. Red gives way to white in the imagery of the concluding lines of the play, in which the crimson maple leaves are transformed to moonlight, ice and frost, the white wand or the votive strips of paper and cloth of the deity. Colour gives way to clarity, in images of water and wind, or in the pure voice of the goddess herself, who having restored order to the world (*sanka sōmoku kokudo osamarite*) finally disappears altogether. A similar swirl of images in *Bashō* links the lowly plant and its fragile leaves to associations with sleeves and skirts, an angel's feathered mantle, then back to the natural world of frost and dew, flowers and grasses, and the winds rattling through the banana's foliage.

The association between natural phenomena and clothing is a poetic conceit in *Nō* (cf. Tyler 1983, 54-58), and seems to be yet another case of the personification of flora. But this is to trace the images in only one direction; as in *Tatsuta*, we can just as easily follow them back to the image of the poet who imbues his heart, like the dye on a robe, with the brilliance of nature. The *shite's* apotheosis or enlightenment in these plays is typically prefigured by a dissipation of all this colour, a progress from the *shiki* (色 “colour”) of the phenomenal world to the *kū* (空) of the void, but it is the colour of the natural world and not the transparency of Presence (or Nothingness) that gives flight to the poet's song and the dancer's sleeves.

That the source for all this song is to be found in nature is most beautifully expressed in *Takasago*:

Nothing, neither sentient nor insentient,	<i>ujō hijō no</i>
goes without voice,	<i>sono koe mina</i>
nor does not give that voice to song.	<i>uta ni moruru koto nashi</i>
The grasses and trees, the soil and sand,	<i>sōmoku dosha</i>
even the wind's voice and the rushing water,	<i>fūsei suion made</i>
all things,	<i>banbutsu no</i>
are filled with spirit.	<i>komoru kokoro ari</i>
The spring groves	<i>haru no hayashi no</i>
that rustle in the eastern breeze,	<i>tōfu ni ugoki</i>
or the autumn insects	<i>aki no mushi</i>
crying in the northern dew —	<i>no hokuro ni naku mo</i>
Are not all these too	<i>mina waka no</i>
the very embodiment of our poetry?	<i>sugata narazu ya</i>

This passage reflects of course a system of poetics that goes back at least to *Ki no Tsurayuki's* famous preface in the *Kokinshū*, where it is said not only that the heart is a seed giving birth to leaves of words, but also that all life gives voice in poetry. Elsewhere in *Takasago* we are told that “the leaves of words are drops of dew that turn into seeds that illuminate the heart” (*koto no ha no tsuyu no tama kokoro o migaku tane to narite*), Seeds; leaves, and flowers are directly linked to human feeling and expression in such a way that these become key concepts in Japanese poetics.

All nature gives voice in song, while the poet gives expression to the “seeds of the heart” in “myriad leaves of words”: thus are the movements of both the human spirit and natural phenomena linked to one another. Of course over long usage or in the hands of unimaginative

poets such figures of speech turned conventional to the point of being trite. But with Tsurayuki or with many of the playwrights of the Nō texts, one feels that these are not mindless clichés, but suggest a kind of faith or ontology in which humanity and nature indeed coexist in a continuum. Nō may personify nature, but by the same token it naturalizes language, giving voice to the insentient. The plots of Nō plays are often a literal working out of this idea, in which a “metaphor” is translated into the *shite*’s metamorphosis from lowly plant to the veritable embodiment of song itself. In this way, the verbal is embodied; through a miracle of poetic and dramatic transubstantiation, the word is made flower, if not flesh. Conventional metaphors and imagery are recharged; the reader or audience is struck once more with their freshness, and obliged to reconsider their meaning.

The language of flowers: *Kakitsubata*

The task as well as the mystery of any art form is to find a way to instill a kind of life into the materials that it uses. Like any form of literature, Nō is an art that creates a fictional reality out of words. Through language, it summons up a speechless nature and gives it voice and life so that it responds to the movements of our own hearts. Whether sacred or poetic, its language animates the inanimate and serves as catalyst between the human and the natural worlds.

The nature it summons is of course highly selective. For the premodern Japanese, man’s connection with the natural world was chiefly forged through botanical, and not animal, life. Certain Nō plays exist concerning insects (*Kochō*), birds (*Nue*, *Sagi*), or other natural phenomena such as mist (*Saoyama*) or snow (*Yuki*). With the exception of the supernatural lions (*shishi*) in *Shakkyō*, animals are notable by their virtual absence in the Nō theatre. One possible reason for Nō’s focus on flowers over four-legged beasts is the genre’s preference for the symbolic and abstract over the realistic. Like demons but even more so, animals are too violent and vulgar for the rarified atmosphere of the Nō stage. Even *Shakkyō*, which is based on Chinese sources, is an exception that proves the rule: this fifth category demon play makes for spectacular theatre, but otherwise holds little literary or dramatic interest.⁵

One other possible reason for the lack of plays to do with the animal world is that, unlike many other societies, Japan was not a pastoral one, and having no great tradition of animal husbandry felt no strong connection to beasts, domesticated or otherwise.⁶ But the courtly culture which Nō idealized, and from which it drew deeply for poetic and narrative material, valorized botanical life and derived from it a rich symbology. Not all plants and trees were given consideration, though. The pines, cherries, plums, irises, and wisteria that are featured in the Nō are all plants that had first been immortalized in the imperial anthologies of poetry compiled during the Heian period; other, more humble vegetation had to wait for the haiku, centuries later, for their poetic apotheosis.

The nature eulogized in Nō is thus not nature in the raw but, in Tyler’s words, “a patterned garden” (Tyler 1983, 63), both refined and highly circumscribed: only that part of the natural world that had first been caught in the screen of literature was deemed worthy of dramatic treatment. There are no narratives, no plays, about plants that have not first been sung to life in poetry. The trees and flowers of the Nō dramas have all been memorialized, they all “bear names” (*na ni ou*), and are once again regenerated by the words of passing poets and priests. Language therefore plays an important role in the acculturation of the natural world. Saigyō’s

cherry is, in effect, a botanical pet, for the tree's identity depends on its domestication as a poetic subject for its owner. Similarly, the plums of *Tōboku* and *Oimatsu*, which are both described as "trees who love letters" (*kōbunboku, fumi o konomu ki*), are accorded immortality by virtue of their poetic sensibilities. Nature thus derives its identity through its function as a symbol of transcendent literary values. In *Takasago*, the pines of Takasago and Suminoue stand for, respectively, the *Manyōshū* and the *Kokinshū*, the two monuments of classical verse.

Nature in the Nō, as with all the classical literary arts of Japan, was quite literally sung into existence. An unsung nature is both mute and unknown to us. When it is not completely devoid of interest, it is an occasion for fear. But who gives this nature voice? To be sure, the poets, who in the course of time have laid on flowers and trees a dense web of allusions and associations that draws botanical life within a human rubric of signification. But there must have been something in the plants that first appealed to those who sang them into literary existence.

The designation of a flower or tree as a literary subject is not arbitrary. We have seen that there is a tendency in Nō to focus on the natural world, sometimes at the expense of human values. Regardless of the symbolic (and therefore human) significance of the natural world in the Nō plays, there remains a fundamental and structural resistance to an excessive humanization of nature. This resistance is often seen on the level of the designation of roles in a Nō play. Neither Ariwara no Narihira nor his mistress Takako, for example, is the *shite* in *Kakitsubata*, despite their obvious importance to the play and the poetic sources upon which it is based. Instead, the leading role is given over, remarkably, to a flower. What is it about the flower in this play that commanded such attention?

Kanai Mitsuharu has suggested that "there must have existed a powerful convention of some sort that insisted on the spirit of an iris" as *shite* (Kanai 1969, 281). This convention was not literary but religious, because the original purpose of Nō was not to feature *yūgen* (the elegant beauty of medieval high culture) but to work magic. Before Nō's elevation at the time of Zeami into an aristocratic art form, it had its origins as a form of folk performance that, though popular in nature, had specific ritual and religious functions. According to Kanai, *Kakitsubata* was linked to a number of magical rites associated with flowers of the iris variety. Irises or flags (*ayame* or *kakitsubata*) bloom during the fifth month, well after the cherries have blossomed but before the onset of the summer's heat. Being long and sharp like swords, the leaves of these flowers were commonly used as a form of magic to ward off pestilence and evil influences. For example, at the time of their blossoming, as the *saotome* (young women who would take a leading role in the rituals of rice planting) sequestered themselves indoors so as to purify themselves, the flowers and leaves were woven into the thatch of the roofs in order to protect them from malicious spirits.

Kanai goes on to relate a number of rituals and legends more specifically related to Yatsuhashi in Mikawa, the setting for *Kakitsubata*. For example, a late-Edo text called the *Yatsuhashi engi nami kakitsubata no yurai* tells that the mother of a child who had drowned in that place was instructed in a dream to build the eight bridges that gave this place its name. The flowers growing there were said to be a sign of the drowned boy's spirit. Another legend relates that a certain *Kakitsubata-hime* was in love with Narihira and followed him to Yatsuhashi where she drowned herself in one of the eight forks of the river. Her grave is said to be located in the precincts of a local temple, the Muryōjūji. Admittedly, neither of these stories is pertinent to the play itself, which may also predate these legends. (The work dates at least to the mid-fourteenth century; it is traditionally attributed to Zeami but may be by Zenchiku.) But whether or not the play actually

predates these legends is ultimately beside the point; the legends speak of a need to place this work inside some kind of ritual context.

The play is more obviously based on the famous episode in the *Ise monogatari*, in which Ariwara no Narihira, in disgrace at court for having an affair with Takako, travels east and stops at Yatsushashi where he is called upon to compose an acrostic poem, using the word “iris” or “flags” (*kakitsubata*), on the theme of travel:

From far Cathay	KArakoromo
Long has the robe been a comfort	KItsunarinishi
As is the wife I miss,	TSuma shi areba
Gone from sight into the distance	HArubaru kinuru
Sorrows being what travel brings.	TAbi o shi zo omou

(tr. Miner 1993, 18)

The flowers in the poem thus signify Narihira’s “wife” Takako, but in the play their associations are expanded to encompass several other women, both related and unrelated to Narihira. *Kakitsubata*’s symbology is derived from medieval commentaries on the *Ise monogatari* and other poems on the flower cited in the play. A number of women, lovers of Narihira, are alluded to in the play and are represented by the eight streams spanned by the bridges of Yatsushashi. At one point, the *shite* also speaks of “flags planted by our old house” (*ueokishi mukashi no yado no kakitsubata*), alluding to a poem in the *Gosenshū* by Yoshimine no Yoshikata. A note accompanying a poem in the *Ungyokushū* by Sanjonishi Sanekata (which speaks for the woman to whom Yoshikata’s poem was addressed) relates that Yoshikata’s lover turned into the spirit of the *kakitsubata*. Finally, the flowers are also memorials to Narihira himself, whose art as both lover and poet is so renowned that he is described in the medieval commentaries and the play as no mere mortal, but as a bodhisattva of song and dance (*kabu no bosatsu*), and even as the god of conjugal love (*innyō na kami*).

We have travelled a long way from the magical function that irises and flags may have originally performed. The complexity of *Kakitsubata* is due in large part to its recourse to a variety of independent or related literary sources. This also helps to explain the fluid identity of its *shite*. But it should be stressed here that the flower — whether symbol of something natural, human, or supernatural — is indeed a memorial (*katami no hana*). As such it serves as the focal image for a complex web of poetic and narrative allusions.

As a memorial, the flower acquires a ritual significance. The commemoration and pacification of spirits (*chinkon*) is undoubtedly the dominant theme in Nō plays. Usually those spirits are human in origin, but sometimes they are of plants. This may in part explain why certain plays cite the *Chūingyō* as the basis for the idea of buddhahood for plants. The function of this sutra was obviously to bring comfort and guidance to the dead whose spirits still wandered in a Buddhist limbo. By citing this sutra as the scriptural source for the play’s theme, such works employ a Buddhist liturgy intended for the human dead in order to pacify the spirits of botanical life.

Whether human or botanical, the pacification of such spirits is not simply a dramatic subject: we know from its early history and development that Nō was originally performed as a type of exorcism, a means of laying to rest unquiet entities. “The basic structure of the nō event”, writes Jacob Raz, “is nothing but a shamanic process, albeit highly literary and refined. Invoking spirits is its dominant subject matter” (Raz 1981, 5). A central feature of such exorcisms was the

medium's possession by the spirit. The ethnologist Orikuchi Shinobu saw in such rites the origin of narrative poetry and performance related in the first person:

The *kami* possesses a person and tells the story of its own origin, or it relates the history of the tribe and that place where they live. All these stories are, of course, no more than fantasies formed during the shaman's ecstatic experience. But they are nonetheless fantasies informed by the tribe's own disposition.

(Orikuchi, 1985: 69)

Orikuchi saw such rites of participation mystique as forming the origin of Japanese theatre, which became an artistic event only after that point when others, who were not themselves participants in the rite, entered the event as *spectators*. The actor's impersonation of a role is thus analogous to, even derived from, the shaman's possession by a spirit. This spirit need not be human; indeed, within the context of certain seasonal and agricultural rituals, it was necessary that the medium be possessed by the spirits of nature itself. In this way, the extraordinary appearance of the spirits of flowers and trees on the Nō stage is not simply a means to provide dramatic impetus to an otherwise static poetic image, but rather to re-enact an actual ritual event.

Kakitsubata is certainly one of the most "literary" of all Nō plays, but it still clings tenaciously to the original pattern in which a spirit seeks and finds release from its suffering. The apotheosis of the flower as both bodhisattva of song and dance as well as the god of sexual relations in this play forges a union between insentient nature and artistic expression through the medium of an erotic sensibility. Before our eyes, the lowly flower is transformed into several human characters, then finally into something altogether supernatural. Both poetry and scripture are employed here as vehicles of salvation. To be sure, many Nō plays exploited the theme of the buddhahood of plants for purely poetic and dramatic purposes. But an underlying ritualistic structure still informs these works. Numerous rites are still performed for the pacification of non-human life: for the spirits of the rice, flowers, insects, and other creatures associated with the seasonal and agricultural cycle. Would a medieval audience who went to plays about cherry blossoms, like *Saigyō-zakura* or *Sakuragawa*, not at least have been reminded of such rituals as *hanashizume* (still performed at the Imamiya shrine in Kyōto)? Before they ever became simply an object of aesthetic interest, the blooming and falling of the cherry blossoms were considered important auguries of the coming rice harvest. Certainly Buddhism, and the formal requirements of poetry and drama, have made of Nō a considerably richer artistic experience than could ever have been afforded by such rituals, but the underlying meaning and patterns that can still be traced in these plays is not, ultimately, Buddhist, but rather Shintoist, certainly shamanistic in origin.

Conclusion

Nature's intrinsic meaning in Nō is to be found in the symbols and images that had been carefully laid out in both ritual and literary precedent. Its rendering as an artistic subject ultimately creates a second nature, one that is idealized and patterned to human needs. This may seem too obvious to warrant mention, but the recognition of nature as a cultural artifact in Japan should make us more sceptical about the country's much-vaunted "love of nature". Japanese nature worship (which may take either religious or aesthetic forms; the distinction is in any event unclear) finds its expression only along a narrow spectrum, and there are vast tracts of territory that escape its purview.⁷

It is in this sense that the buddhahood of plants in the Nō plays is essentially a form of domestication and acculturation of wild nature. Buddhist terminology, texts, and liturgies overlay earlier, native practices to appease the spirits of the land. Poetic and narrative materials provide the plot and texture of a Nō play. To speak of a flower attaining buddhahood is therefore to tell a story about nature's religious and literary "education" (*kyōka* 教化), its incorporation into human culture. This is not to deny, however, humanity's obligation to align itself with natural processes. Both heart and flower must go out to meet each other for there to be any communication between them.

NOTES

I wish to thank the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria for giving me a fellowship in 1994-95 which initially provided time to do research and thought on some of the issues raised here. A visiting professorship at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in 1996 furnished me with the opportunity to see many of the plays discussed here, and to write up my research.

- 1 Quoted in Thomas (1983, 216).
- 2 cf. Shively (1957) for a listing and discussion of these plays.
- 3 Shōjiji, popularly called *hana no tera*, or "flower temple", claims to be the site of Saigyō's hermitage. It is located a short drive (or a good hike) from Nichibunken, and a tree there is said to be a descendent of the cherry in this play.
- 4 One legend relates that, hearing Saigyō's recitation of this poem, the spirit of the cherry tree appeared and berated him with a poem of its own for what it regarded as an unfair charge. Sanari, who cites the cherry's poem ("*tsumi toga wa ikaga arashi yamazakura, nagamuru hito no waga fukayama ki o*"), notes that his source for the legend, the *Yōkyoku shūyōsho* is a later work than the play itself. He adds that even if that work is correct in attributing the story to an earlier collection, the *Ungyokushū*, it is strange that the cherry's reply is not quoted in the play itself.
- 5 That is not to say that animals are not made the subject of many plays in other genres: Kyōgen's repertoire contains several plays about insects and four-legged beasts, including *Semi*, *Kasumo*, and *Tsurikitsune*; foxes are likewise featured prominently in the Bunraku and Kabuki plays, *Yoshitsune Senbonzakura* and *Kuzunoha*. While the animals of Bunraku or Kabuki are frequently portrayed as the servants or mates of the human heroes, the notion of *irui kon'inran* or "beast marriages" in particular would not seem appealing as a theme for the Nō. (The original legend of *Hagoromo* fits this pattern, but the Nō play has excised all mention of a marriage to the supernatural being.)
- 6 For example, Keith Thomas's study (1983) of attitudes toward nature in early-modern England has much to say about animals but very little to say about the botanical world.
- 7 The Japanese often overlook both the intrinsic value of nature (for example the preservation of wilderness for its own sake) as well as other cultures' valorization of natural space. The exploitation and destruction by Japanese trading companies of first-growth forests in Asia and South America is notorious. In Canada, much of the rainforests of the west coast have been already clearcut and sold off to Japanese and American clients. One first-growth forest in the Kootenay mountains in British Columbia that has recently come under threat from Japanese investors has been called the "singing forest" because local native beliefs ascribe to the trees a spirit that is able to communicate to human beings in the form of song. Indeed, many practices of the Salish and other west coast Indian tribes resemble Shinto and Shugendō rites in that they involve a period of ascetic training in the wilderness, culminating in a mystical experience of communication with the spirits of the land. Perhaps Japanese investors would think twice about cutting this forest if they knew how close native Canadian beliefs were to their own, but this is doubtful.

This is not to point the blame at anyone — we are all accomplices in the exploitation of nature, and Canadian governments and business have been only too happy to sell off the country's natural resources — but rather to emphasize that a culture's deeply held beliefs do not necessarily reflect they way in which they actually live. In this age Japanese "nature worship" has a fine ring to it, but it has rarely expressed itself economically or politically in environmentalist or preservationist action. The notion that the exploitation of nature under a "natural" religion like Shinto has been any kinder than under a Christian ethos is simplistic, and a distortion of the facts. Economics and not religion has exerted a far profounder influence on the human exploitation of the natural environment. Marx suggested that it was capitalism, and not Christian ideas on the supremacy of

humanity over the natural world, that precipitated the onslaught on Canadian wildlife during the fur trade of the 17th and 18th centuries (cited in Thomas, 1983: 23).

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「能」舞台における花の言葉

マーク・C・プールトン

要旨：花が仏 (Buddha hood) を実現するならば、能は一体何を意味するのか？そのようなことは、哲学上の理由から、およそ可能であり、そして必要でさえあるだろうか？あるいは、それは、絵のようなドラマが自然の美しさをただ示そうとするための口実として用いられているだけなのか？シバリー、ラフロアー、タイラーによる先行的研究を参考にしながら、本論文は、草木成仏の考えを扱う一連の能（戯曲）に焦点をあて、この主題の宗教的、戯曲的な意味に関する真剣な考察の必要を提起する。この種の戯曲は、日本人の自然および自然の中における人間の場所についての伝統的な

日本人の見方を浮き彫りにする。しかし、いかなる芸術も自然を、「それが現実にあるように」しうるものではない。すなわち、自然を審美的な（宗教的などはいわないまでも）対象に変えるプロセスは、文化変容の一形態である。この自明のことが改めて強調され、さらに明らかにされる必要がある。