Book Review

Dancing the Dharma: Religious and Political Allegory in Japanese Noh Theater

By Susan Blakeley Klein

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401 pages.

Reviewed by Hanna McGAUGHEY

Audiences at noh performances today may seek to immerse themselves in intuitive, and thus highly individual, experiences of noh aesthetics. The audiences for whom these plays were written, however, could decode specific—often religious or political but also erotic—messages. In *Dancing the Dharma*, Susan Blakeley Klein "re-embeds" noh plays "in the contemporaneous beliefs and practices of the medieval period" (p. 5). In doing so, she not only reveals hidden meanings in a selection of plays treating themes from the *Kokin wakashū* (tenth century) and *Ise monogatari* (ninth century), but cautiously explains how those plays may have been understood by their first audiences.

Klein's analysis of noh plays in chapters four through nine is convincing. For example, esoteric commentaries to the *Ise monogatari* identify its ostensible author, the legendary imperial aristocrat Ariwara no Narihira (825–880), as a bodhisattva and an avatar of Dainichi Nyorai and the Sumiyoshi divinity (p. 34). Homophone punning (*kakekotoba*) on Narihira's name layers up these identities and destabilizes historical time in the plays *Unrin'in* (p. 132), *Oshio* (p. 177), and *Kakitsubata* (pp. 209–210). Furthermore, Narihira slept with, and in doing so enlightened, as many as 3,733 women, twelve of whom were "important" enough to name according to the *Waka chikenshū* (1265) by the Shingon priest and poet Fujiwara no Tameaki (p. 36). In noh, too, these women are sometimes named—as in the *bijin zoroe* ("line-up of beautiful women") section of *Maiguruma* or the fragmentary *Kuzu no hakama*—and sometimes referred to merely as flowers, as in *Oshio*, where Narihira bestows on them "dew-drop pearls of passion," that is, semen (pp. 103–104, 106–108, and 185). This dewy intimation reappears in *Kakitsubata* (pp. 197, 214, 224) and—not associated with Narihira this time—in *Ominameshi* (pp. 245, 261). Without knowledge of the esoteric commentaries, these erotic readings would remain speculative.

Knowing when these plays were originally performed is crucial for scholars seeking to decipher how they were received, but this is extremely rare. *Oshio*, exceptionally, can be dated to 1465 (p. 152). The play both commemorates a grand cherry blossom viewing party shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa and his wife hosted that spring, and celebrates an imperial poetry collection Emperor Go-Tsuchimikado (1442–1500) commissioned that year but never completed (pp. 152, 156). Incidentally, the book under review would have benefitted from a translation of *Oshio*, which is as yet unavailable in English. Klein's dating of *Haku*

rakuten (Bai Juyi) to 1419 agrees with the circumstantial evidence most recently set out by Amano Fumio. Two events that year shook the confidence of shogun Ashikaga Yoshimochi, who had terminated ties with China: a short-lived Chosŏn attack on Tsushima (*Ōei no gaikō*) and the arrival of an envoy from the Ming emperor (pp. 268–269 and 287). This explains why the Sumiyoshi deity trounces Bai Juyi, an otherwise beloved poet in Japan, in a poetry contest.

Klein analyzes the intellectual influences on medieval noh playwrights Zeami, leader of the Kanze troupe who might have written *Haku rakuten*, and his son-in-law Konparu Zenchiku, leader of the Konparu troupe, and probable author of *Oshio* and *Kakitsubata*. This excavates the theoretical underpinnings of their plays' rhetorical structures. In chapter 2, Klein traces the Chinese source of the "six modes" (*rikugi*) in the Great Preface of the Classic of Poetry (Ch. *Shijing*), their adaptation in the Chinese and Japanese prefaces to the *Kokin wakashū* (ca. 920), and in a number of esoteric commentaries on the Japanese preface (late thirteenth century), in order to come to Zeami's critical writing *Rikugi* (1428). However, she interprets Zeami's use of the character 風 as "allegory constructed through implicit metaphor" (p. 73), failing to engage with Matsuoka Shinpei's assertion that Zeami idiosyncratically used the graph to indicate a quality of dance rather than poetry—despite its title, dance remains absent from this book.[1] I take Klein's reading of *Rikugi* as one conducted through Zenchiku's eyes, for as Noel Pinnington writes, most likely "the contents were a response to Zenchiku's own interests."[2]

Klein's comprehension of Zeami suffers elsewhere as well. She mistakenly identifies his use of "two sounds" in a passage of *Sandō* as "a pun" (p. 128). Elaboration by Zeami in the same passage and annotations in the standard edition and in translation make clear that the "two sounds" are not two punning homophones, one sound with two meanings, but rather a unified blend of language and music.[3] While an error, it does not undermine Klein's argument that homophone puns layer meaning at key points in the plays, evidenced through examples from *Sarugaku dangi* and another citation from *Sandō* (pp. 129–131, 128).

Considering Klein's interest in how these plays created meaning, it would be worth asking if Zenchiku's plays could be read as parodies of the commentaries. Klein notes that some commentary material was popularized by the late fourteenth century (p. 3) and that Zenchiku was irreverent in simply ignoring inconvenient readings (p. 217). This reviewer wonders if Zenchiku was familiar with the outright dismissal of all allegorical and especially erotic readings by his patron Ichijō Kanera (Kaneyoshi, 1402–1481) in his *Ise monogatari gukenshō* (1474), a draft of which Kanera finished in 1460, five years before the first performance of *Oshio*.[4] Is it possible to read *Oshio* as a parody? How might playwright-performers have handled disapproving reviews from patrons?

Dancing the Dharma convincingly argues that allegory was intentionally employed by noh's performer-playwrights to appeal to the desire of their martial patrons for novel entertainment with imperial cultural trappings. The book is aimed at scholars and intellectuals with an interest in premodern literary theory and performance literature. By

1 Matsuoka 2000, p. 315.
2 Pinnington 2010, pp. 77–78.
3 Omote 1974, p. 141; Quinn 1993, p. 82.
4 Bowring 1992, pp. 451–452.

seeking to understand noh plays as their first audiences might have, Klein rightfully claims that readers "will begin to recover at least some of their original intellectual richness and thus … their scholarly allure" (p. 265). As *Dancing the Dharma* makes clear, the road is difficult and littered with pitfalls, but the rewards are worth the effort.

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