

Contemporary Tradition – Japanese Performance Genre Today

13 – 15 October 2016

National University of Singapore

Session One

Visions of Armoured Figures: Structure and Language in Early Warrior Plays

Michael Watson

Meiji Gakuin University

Non-canonical noh plays (*bangai yōkyoku*) written from the Muromachi period to the end of the Edo period are a still largely unexplored mine of information about the development of noh composition, structure, and language. Some 240 plays are contained in the total current performance repertoire of the five schools, the modern canon, but an additional 840 plays found in manuscript or early printed editions are also believed to date to the Muromachi or to the late Muromachi/early Edo period.

Modern typeset editions of a still larger corpus of non-canonical noh plays has been available since Tanaka Makoto completed the publication of his 55-volumes of editions in 1998, but there have been few attempts to go beyond the study or translation of individual works. I have made a few exploratory studies in this direction, both examining subsets of the corpus of plays not part of the modern repertoire. One was a short summary of the contents of a mid-seventeenth-century collection of one hundred “new plays. The other was a survey of dozens of non-canonical plays relating to the conflicts between the Genji and Heike—the Genpei War itself (1180–1185) as well as the earlier clashes in the Hōgen and Heiji eras. The Genpei plays in the *bangai* corpus range over the modern five categories of noh, from “god” play to “demon.”

This paper will use the convenient if anachronistic category of warrior plays (*shuramono*, second category) to reduce the number of 840 early plays to a smaller, more manageable group for analysis. According to Nishino Haruo (SNKBT 57, pp. 699–729), around 50 of the 840 early plays belong to the second category. In the case of the fifty non-canonical plays of the second-category, just half deal with episodes from the Genpei wars, while the remainder, some twenty-five, deal mainly with later conflicts. This is a notable contrast to the performed repertoire, where all but one of the sixteen second-category plays are related to clashes between Heike and Genji—the exception being *Tamura*.

The twenty-five *bangai* plays on other conflicts deal with a range of incidents, from minor skirmishes to major battles of the fourteenth-century wars that feature in the historical

narrative *Taiheiki*. One play, *Nakao*, even enacts an incident from a foreign war, Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in the late sixteenth century.

We will examine how these warrior plays make use of the *shuramono* conventions of structure and language established by Zeami, author of some of the most famous Genpei warrior plays. How far do these non-canonical noh tend to confirm to what we think of as the classic structure of noh? How much do they follow the conventional sequence of sections (*dan*)? How much do they innovate, in terms of style, language and plot? In discussing these specific plays, we will try to provide answers to questions like these, as well as to suggest how the study of non-canonical plays can benefit our understanding of well-known plays in the repertoire.