
JAPANESE NŌ DRAMAS

Edited and translated by ROYALL TYLER

"Funa Benkei"

1992

Funa Benkei · BENKEI ABOARD SHIP

Benkei Aboard Ship, by Kanze Nobumitsu (1434-1516), differs from most of the plays in this book by being relatively late and unabashedly theatrical. The 'villager' (a boatman) is integral to the action, and the *shite* of part two contrasts thrillingly with the *shite* of part one: the actor who has just played a grieving beauty now takes the role of a warrior's vengeful ghost. Poetic depth and resonance are not the issue. *Benkei Aboard Ship* is richly varied entertainment.

The Benkei of the title fought under Minamoto no Yoshitsune, the late twelfth-century commander who routed the Taira forces at Ichidani (see the introduction to *Asunoro*) and again at Yashima and Dan-no-ura. Yoshitsune appears in many *nô* plays, including Zeami's *Yashima*. But in *Yashima* he is a mature warrior. Why, in *Benkei Aboard Ship*, should he be played by a child and seem smaller than life, while Benkei — who does not figure in *Yashima* at all — seems so much larger?

For one thing, between the events of *Yashima* and those of *Benkei Aboard Ship*, Yoshitsune met with misfortune. He had won his battles on behalf of Yoritomo, his elder brother, who was soon to become Shogun. Yet Yoritomo did not reward him. Instead, he heeded the slander of Yoshitsune's villainous rival — or so it is said — and sought to have him killed. *Benkei Aboard Ship* starts as Yoshitsune, suddenly reduced to flight, slips out of Kyoto for ever. The time is late in 1185.

However, the greater difference between the two Yoshitsunes has to do with the playwrights and their sources. Zeami's is from the epic *Heike monogatari* ('The Tale of the Taira'). For *Benkei Aboard Ship*, however, Nobumitsu looked to the much later *Gikeiki* ('Record of Yoshitsune'), a fantastic work that tells how Yoshitsune, as a child, learned the art of arms from a supernatural master; how he then bested the awesomely powerful warrior-monk Benkei; and how Benkei swore service to him. The Benkei and Yoshitsune of *Gikeiki* are mythical types: Benkei a paragon of loyalty and Yoshitsune a sort of eternal youth, curiously dependent on his brawny retainer. None the less, the custom of having Yoshitsune played by a child seems not to date from

Nobumitsu's own time. At the expense of dramatic interest (how could a boy be a great general and Shizuka's lover?) it throws the roles of Shizuka and Tomomori into sharper relief as pure spectacle, and leaves Benkei as the uncontested master of the play.

Nobumitsu followed only the spirit of *Gikeiki*, for he freely adapted its content to his own purpose. For example, *Benkei Aboard Ship* has Yoshitsune send his mistress, the dancer Shizuka, back to Kyoto, then sail from Daimotsu shore to his victorious encounter with the ghost. In *Gikeiki*, however, Yoshitsune and Shizuka flee together, from the same Daimotsu shore, towards the Yoshino mountains. Tomomori, the Taira ghost, is largely a fantasy too, though one Taira commander did bear that name. The fantasy is not frivolous, however. Japanese religion fears the spirits of those who died violently or in the grip of rage, and the wrath of the Taira ghosts is a theme that lasted in folklore and the theatre into the present century.

Daimotsu shore was north-west of present Osaka. The area is now an industrial zone built largely on reclaimed land. A faded sign in a vacant lot marks the imagined spot where Shizuka danced her farewell.

BENKEI ABOARD SHIP

Persons in order of appearance

Musashibō Benkei	<i>waki</i>
Two or three Warriors under Yoshitsune's command	<i>wakezure</i>
Minamoto no Yoshitsune	<i>katata</i>
A Boatman	<i>ai</i>
Shizuka Gozen (<i>Waka-onna</i> , <i>Ko-omote</i> or <i>Fukaei</i> mask)	<i>machite</i>
Taira no Tomomori (<i>Mikazuki</i> or <i>Awa-otoko</i> mask)	<i>nochiyite</i>

Remarks: A fifth-category play (*kirin-nō*) current in all five schools of *nō*.

* * *

To *shidai musu*, enter *Yoshitsune*, *Benkei* and *Warriors*. They stand facing each other along front of stage.

BENKEI Of course.

BOATMAN Oh, thank you, sir, thank you so much! Then I *will*. You see, sir, my lord may be gone from Miyako a while, but he certainly will be back soon. And when that happens, I wonder whether you'd be good enough to put in a word with him, and have me appointed overseer of shipping between here and the west. Could you see your way to doing that, Master Benkei?

BENKEI Captain, I see no reason why you should not entertain such hopes. Yes, I will do my best to see to it.

BOATMAN I am very, very grateful, Master Benkei. With you on my side, the thing is as good as done. But please, sir, don't forget your promise. It so often happens that people forget their promises when something else comes up to claim their attention.

BENKEI Never fear, captain, I will not forget.

BOATMAN Pull, pull away! Why, now there's a cloud hanging over Mount Muko.¹⁶ There wasn't any cloud there before!

BENKEI What is that you are saying, captain?

BOATMAN That I see a cloud over Mount Muko, sir. It's nothing really to worry about, but still, if that cloud comes our way, we'll be in for some wind. Yes, just as I thought, here it comes! Pull away, lads, put your backs into it! And here's the wind now, sure enough! Take care, gentlemen! [*Goes down on one knee and bares right shoulder to do battle with the elements, then rises and wields the war lustily.*] But never fear, Master Benkei, never fear. I've picked for his lordship's voyage an outstanding crew, and with myself at the helm, we can cut straight through any storm. So please don't worry.

BENKEI We all count on you, captain.

BOATMAN The fine weather today was enough of a surprise. Now it's suddenly taken a turn for the worse, we must look lively. [*Dramatic music.*] Oh, I knew it, I knew it! The waves are rising! [*Raws frantically.*] Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my! [*Soothing the waves.*] Hush, hush, hush! Pull, pull away! Oh, this is no ordinary storm! I just don't understand it! Heavens, here come those waves again! [*Dramatic music.*] Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my! Hush, hush, hush!

WARRIOR (*mondo*) How very strange! The wind has shifted!

BENKEI So it has! With a gale like this howling down from Mount

16. The old name of Mount Rokkō, which rises behind modern Kōbe.

Muko and Yuzurtha Peak, our ship has no hope of ever reaching land. Pray, everyone! Pray with all your heart!

WARRIOR Master Benkei! An evil spirit has possessed our ship!

BENKEI Hold your tongue! Never say that aboard a ship at sea! Just leave everything to me!

BOATMAN Hey, you! I spotted you the moment you stepped on board, with that look on your face! I knew you'd be blabbing some sort of nonsense! And now, sure enough, you've gone and done it! Don't ever say a thing like that aboard ship! Just leave everything to Master Benkei and me!

BENKEI Never mind, captain. This man is no sailor. He has no idea how to behave at sea.

BOATMAN That's all too obvious, sir. Heavens, here they come again! [*Dramatic music.*] Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my! Hush, hush, hush! Oh, we're in for it now!

BENKEI (*unmamed*) Ah, this is eerie! I see upon the ocean the whole host of the Taira, who not long since perished in the west, all of them riding the uproarious sea! For them, the moment is perfect to vent upon us all their pent-up wrath!

YOSHITSUNE (*mondo*) A word, Benkei.

BENKEI At your service, my lord.

YOSHITSUNE There is no need to be alarmed. Though evil spirits resolve to destroy us, what harm could they possibly do?

(*leant*) They whose sins, whose crimes are many,
who raised dismal rebellion against Buddhas and Gods,
who at Heaven's command drowned: all the Taira,

CHORUS (*ata*) their own Sovereign the first among them,¹⁷
and all their great nobles gathered like clouds,
wave-borne, now swarm before our eyes!

To hayafū music, enter Tomomori, carrying a halberd and with a sword at his waist. From third pine he glares at the ship, then rushes on stage and steps in base square. Below, he continues to move around stage, miming as appropriate.

TOMOMORI (*nanori-gari*) You see before you the phantom of one in the ninth generation from Emperor Kammu. Taira no Tomomori is my name.

(*unmamed*) Ahal! A marvel indeed!

17. The child-emperor Antoku, whom the Taira took with them when they fled Kyoto. He and most of the Taira nobles drowned in the battle of Dan-no-ura.

What say you, Yoshitsune?

I had not imagined the thundering waves
CHORUS (*noji*) might lead you to me as you sailed the sea

might lead you to me as you sailed the sea

TOMOMORI where Tomomori drowned! Just so, today,

CHORUS I will drown Yoshitsune in the blue abyss!

TOMOMORI And with this cry, on the glowing waves,

he grips his halberd for battle,

in the 'curling wave' pattern sweeps it wide,

kicks high the salt foam, belches noxious vapours,

till all sight grows dim, all hearts quake with terror.

Each man, dumb-struck, stares, wide-eyed.

(QUASI-DANCE: *mai-bataraki*)

Tomomori does two mai-bataraki circuits round the stage, threatening Yoshitsune.

As text continues, the figures on stage mime and dance as appropriate. When at last repelled, Tomomori flees onto bridgeway.

KOKATA At that moment Yoshitsune, wholly untroubled

CHORUS at that moment Yoshitsune, wholly untroubled,

draws his sword as though true flesh and blood

challenged him to fight,

trades words with the phantom and closes in combat.

Yet Benkei thrusts between them, crying,

No skill at arms can ever best this foe!

Rasping his prayer beads against one another,

he summons the Five Mantra Kings:¹⁸

in the east, Gōsanze, in the south, Gundari-yasha,

in the west, Daitoku, in the west Kongō-yasha,

in the centre Lord Fudō:

the Mantra King whose noose binds evil powers!

Fiercely he prays until the baleful spirit

step by step falls back.

Benkei lends his strength to the straining crew,

rowing the snip on low waves yonder away,

while the evil spirit, pursuing them still,

is ever repelled by prayer and the sword,

till the ebbing tide bears him, tossing and rocking

till the ebbing tide bears him, tossing and rocking,

far across the waves: he is gone.

As third pine, Tomomori leaps into the air, then comes down with a crash, kneeling with one knee raised: he has disappeared. He then rises and stamps the final beat.

18. Benkei quells the ghost just as other monks in other plays quell similar apparitions. He rasps his rosary beads rhythmically together rather as a Christian might display the Cross. The 'Mantra Kings' (*myōō*) whom he summons are a mandala of wrathful, protector divinities: Fudō ('The Unmoving') in the centre, surrounded by a guardian for each of the four directions. They belong to the Esoteric Buddhist tradition and are still invoked in Japan.