
General Introduction

The Japanese *nō* theatre is one of the great achievements of civilization. No art is more sophisticated than this intricate fusion of music, dance, mask, costume, and language, nor does any uphold higher ideals. *Nō* plays, like those of other theatres, were written to be performed, but some can stand as literature beside any play ever put between the covers of a book. The aim of *Japanese Nō Dramas* is to demonstrate that this is so and to convey all that the printed page can convey of the beauty of *nō*.

Nō, which means ‘accomplishment’ or ‘perfected art’, is no doubt an expression of practical as well as aesthetic ambition. The actors and musicians of the early fifteenth century, when *nō* achieved its classic form, needed audiences and patronage. In those days, their theatre was known more often as *sarugaku* (a word that does not lend itself to useful translation), so that *sarugaku no nō* meant something like ‘*sarugaku* of the best sort’. Having been enshrined long ago as a cultural treasure, modern *nō* no longer needs to make any claims. But despite its present, rather esoteric reputation, at home as well as abroad, it was once simply the theatre of its time.

The choice of plays

Since the twenty-four *nō* plays in this collection were chosen for their literary interest, they are not a representative sampling of the whole modern repertoire, which includes well over two hundred works. Some plays in the repertoire make good theatre but unsatisfactory reading; others have only modest virtue of any kind; while a few – depending on one’s own tastes – are deplorable. For every masterpiece of the order of *The Fulling Block*, there are several unabashed melodramas; for every ‘warrior play’ of the quality of *Tadanori*, there are several martial thrillers. Some plays have lovely dances but only a slight text. In short, not all *nō* plays are worth translating for a wide audience. This selection represents only those that are.

Seeing and reading

Although the introductions, notes, stage directions, etc. surrounding these translations acknowledge matters of performance, they treat the plays above all as literary texts. This approach is not self-evident. The best Japanese authorities on nō, especially before the Second World War, have held that since the plays exist only in performance, they cannot be considered literature in any sense, and this opinion remains influential. Japan has had no tradition of reading nō as literature. By now, some critics do write literary essays on various plays, but the approach is not yet fully developed. One champion of literary analysis (Tashiro Keiichirō) has cited foreign translations, and their reception as literature, in defence of his own work.

English speakers first met nō in books, thanks to Ezra Pound's beautiful paraphrases made from the notes of Ernest Fenollosa, or to the fine translations by Arthur Waley. Yeats's interest in what he knew of nō sealed the literary reputation of nō in the English-speaking world. However, the many translations published since then have been made by translators increasingly familiar with nō not only as text but as theatre. In the last twenty years or so, many English-speaking students of nō, impressed by the difference between seeing and reading, have concerned themselves especially with performance. Some have in their turn adopted the position that nō exists only on the stage. Consequently, many recent translations are meant above all to guide the spectator or the drama student. Meanwhile, nō plays by now have been done by English-speaking actors in all sorts of styles, from modern dance with electronic music to faithful reproductions (in English or the original) of a Japanese performance. One can also find 'fusion' productions that combine nō techniques with Western ones.

Anyone interested in the plays in this book should of course see them performed, if possible. However, reading does have its place, for nō texts are so difficult to follow in performance, even for the Japanese, that they must be studied separately. Besides, some performances can be disappointing and some plays (like *Komachi at Seki-dera*) are rarely performed. In any case, nō can seldom be seen outside Japan's major cities, let alone abroad. For most people, reading is the only way to approach nō at all.

For reasons like these, *Japanese Nō Dramas* provides a certain amount of technical information about the plays for those readers who need it,

but leaves many technical terms undefined. It would not help to give brief definitions of musical forms or dance types and patterns. These things must be not only seen and heard, but learned in practice.

The Introductions to the Plays

Each of these translations is preceded by an introduction, often quite a long one. This is not because the plays can be enjoyed only through a commentary, for readers of English have been moved by earlier translations presented alone. However, these are complex texts, each with its own history, literary background, and theme. Pleasure in them can only be deepened by greater knowledge of them.

By the time these plays were written, in the fifteenth century, certain works of early Japanese literature had already inspired copious commentaries. However, since *nō* plays were not considered literature, they did not draw concerted scholarly attention until the twentieth century. With respect to the analysis of texts, authorship, and the history or background of single plays, it is really only since about 1960 that the academic study of *nō* has gained strong momentum. These introductions are grounded in current Japanese scholarship.

Discussion of authorship

The introductions generally begin with a discussion of authorship. It makes a difference, from the start, to know who wrote or probably wrote a certain play. Many scholars have laboured to sift through the available evidence in order to reach the present state of knowledge on the subject. Over the past thirty years, the best-informed attributions have often changed, and disagreement continues in many cases. A sign of progress is that, with the historical documents now mastered, the debate has turned more frankly towards identifying style and the playwright's voice. These plays are not the work of anonymous craftsmen, but of individual playwrights whose voices merit recognition.

Discussion of sources

The introductions and notes also treat the textual sources of the plays. Research in this area, too, has progressed in recent decades. The

playwrights represented here drew many things, from short quotations to the theme of a whole play, from earlier, classical works. Poems and themes from such imperially commissioned anthologies as the *Kokinshū* ('A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern', 905) or *Shinkokinshū* ('A New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern', 1206) appear again and again. So do translations of lines or couplets in Chinese, especially from *Wakan rōei shū* ('A Collection of Japanese and Chinese Poems for Chanting Aloud', 1013); for Chinese poetry had much the same standing as Latin poetry in Europe. Prose classics like *Genji monogatari* ('The Tale of Genji', early 11th c.) or *Ise monogatari* ('Tales of Ise', 10th c.) gave the playwrights some exceptionally beautiful material, and for martial themes, the epic *Heike monogatari* ('The Tale of the Taira', 13th–14th c.) provided an endlessly rich source of inspiration.

Earlier in this century, it could still be said that nō plays were a mere patchwork of quotations from such sources, but detailed studies of the plays have shown this evaluation to be ill-informed and untenable. On the contrary, the playwrights' use of their sources is original, and this makes a good reason for examining it. It is interesting to see how they shaped their material. One recent discovery is that they read the classics through glosses and commentaries, just as we do today. Knowledge of the commentaries they used may change the reading of a play.

Many plays also draw on sources outside the great classics. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, most educated people, including nō playwrights, cultivated a form of group versifying known as linked verse (*renga*). The practice of linked verse required a good knowledge of the literary classics, and the imagery favoured in linked verse can be seen in many of the plays in this book. Much other literature, in both Japanese and Chinese, was available too, and included historical or religious documents of a kind not generally included under the heading of *belles-lettres*. For example, a few of these plays, such as *The Diver* and *Kureha*, are based on *engi* ('sacred origins'), a genre of sacred histories of holy sites that flourished during Japan's medieval period. (The use of the terms 'medieval' or 'middle ages' in *Japanese Nō Dramas* roughly follows Japanese usage and covers the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries inclusive.)

Discussion of theme and meaning

In performance, nō plays may be, and often are, enjoyed simply as a sequence of sights and sounds – of dance and musical forms – with a

general affective import (mood, emotion) but without intellectual content. Even people wholly ignorant of *nō* or of the Japanese language have been deeply moved by performances of which they did not understand a single word. However, in a book of translations, the text deserves particular attention. Although *nō* plays are works of art, not religious or poetic treatises, they evoke important religious or poetic themes.

To understand a *nō* text well requires a good deal of knowledge and thought, just as to translate one requires a special knowledge of language. Since these texts have greater depth and resonance than casual reading can reveal, the analyses in this book are another stage of translation. They take into account the work of Japanese critics and scholars but do not necessarily follow it, and sometimes they offer new interpretations. As already explained, the literary reading of *nō* plays does not have a long history. These essays are therefore a part of an effort now being made by many people to read them better as texts.

The plays' material traces in modern times

Each introduction ends by evoking, in the present, the place where the action of the play is supposed to have occurred. These plays have fed the imagination and the later literary endeavours of many people, have entered into folklore, and have had material consequences at many sites. The fame of *Takasago* at least partly supports two rival shrines, and although the two sisters of *Pining Wind* are imaginary, one can drive to visit their graves. It is fascinating to find such material traces of the plays, genuine or fictitious, all over Japan.

The Playwrights

The theatre now called *nō* began to reach its present form in the mid fourteenth century. It was then a provincial theatre, centred mainly in the Yamato region south of Kyoto. Four touring troupes were affiliated with Kōfuku-ji, a great temple in the old capital of Nara, in Yamato. Komparu Gonnokami (fl. mid 14th c.), the original author of *The Diver*, was among the actor-playwrights of the Yamato troupes. Another was Kan'ami (1333–1384), who made key contributions to early *nō*. Among these was his use in plays of the *kusemai*, a song and dance

form that survives in the important *kyūse* section of most nō plays. Another was simply that he fathered Zeami.

Zeami (1363–1443) was the genius who created classic nō. Nothing untouched by him or his influence survives from early nō, not even the plays written by his father. Certain extant plays used to be identified with Kan'ami, even though it was recognized that Zeami must have reworked them extensively. However, the most recent scholarship suggests that Kan'ami's literary traces have all but vanished.

Zeami remembered his father's acting talent with awe, as his writings show, and Kan'ami's contemporaries appear to have been similarly impressed. In 1374, Kan'ami received the signal honour of being invited to perform nō for the first time before the shogun, the young Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), in Kyoto. Zeami, then a boy, also appeared on stage. Yoshimitsu instantly fell in love with him, removed him from his father's care, and brought him up at his court. This son of a provincial actor was now the protégé of the most powerful man in Japan, and he received his education from the greatest men of letters of his time.

Zeami's ability was equal to the challenge. Thanks to such patronage, he developed a theatre of beauty and grace (which were not always what country audiences called for), and could stage the most elevated works. He had a superb mind and great warmth of feeling, as this collection shows. Beside his many plays (no one can say for certain how many) he also wrote penetrating treatises on the arts of acting and playwriting. Like Shakespeare or Molière, Zeami was the master of his own troupe and an all-round man of the theatre.

Later in life, Zeami suffered severe reverses. After 1429, he and his eldest son, Motomasa (c. 1400–1432), were barred by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshinori (1394–1441) from the shogunal palace and from all the great performance occasions in the capital. In 1430, his second son gave up nō to become a monk, and in 1432 Motomasa died. (This book includes Motomasa's most famous play, *The Sumida River*.) Then in 1434 Zeami was exiled, for reasons unknown, to the remote island of Sado. He returned to Kyoto only a few years before his death.

Despite Zeami's pre-eminence in the history of nō, his only personal successor was his son-in-law, Komparu Zenchiku (1405–1468), the grandson of Komparu Gonnokami. Zenchiku was active not in Kyoto but in Nara, where the relatively small Komparu school of nō is based even today. Zeami thought highly of him. Few plays can be attributed to him on the basis of solid documentary evidence, but there is reason

to believe that *The Kasuga Dragon God*, *The Wildwood Shrine*, and *Tatsuta* are his. These show him to have been an excellent playwright. Zenchiku, like his father-in-law, left behind several critical writings.

The latest playwright represented here is Kanze Nobumitsu (1434–1516), the author of *Benkei Aboard Ship*, although the latest play in the book is probably the anonymous *The Feather Mantle*. Nobumitsu was in the lineage of Zeami's nephew, the actor On'ami (1398–1467) who, thanks to Ashikaga Yoshinori's patronage and much against Zeami's own will, continued the formal line of succession from Kan'ami. (The name Kanze is made up of the first syllables of Kan'ami's and Zeami's names.) He was a fine playwright, too, but by his time the style of *nō* had changed. *Benkei Aboard Ship* is more frankly dramatic, colourful theatre than the other plays in this book.

Some plays still in the modern repertoire were probably written in the sixteenth or even the seventeenth century, and at least one (*Kusu no tsuyu*) dates from the late nineteenth. However, many of the late works have little to do with those in this book, beyond the basic performance techniques that distinguish *nō* from other theatres. Hundreds, if not thousands of other plays exist outside the repertoire, including some by Zeami himself. Meanwhile, new ones are still being written for special occasions, and formally correct *nō* plays have even been written in English and other languages.

Dramatic Roles and their Language

All the roles in *nō* are performed by male actors. Women study *nō* singing or dancing and may perform whole plays as amateurs, but even now there are not many professional women actors. Most plays have at least one masked role, unless the face of a mature man – the actor – is suitable for that of the main character. *Nō* masks are often very beautiful, and a fine mask may be the very soul of a performance. The costumes of *nō*, too, are impressively lovely. Actors playing feminine roles do not 'impersonate' women in any obvious way, for acting in *nō* is on an entirely different plane from ordinary acting as the term is now understood. Gestures are restrained and miming highly abstract.

At the beginning of each play in this book, a list of 'Persons in order of appearance' gives the name or description of each person in

the play, together with the name of the mask, when one is used. Opposite the person's name appears the name of the corresponding role-type, as defined by Japanese usage: *waki*, *wakizure*, *shite* (often subdivided into *maeshite* and *nohijite*), *tsure*, *kokata*, or *ai*. Modern Japanese editions of the plays all identify speakers by role-type rather than name, although some of the earliest nō manuscripts use names or descriptive words. The idea that role-type overrides the passing identity of a figure in a single play is characteristic of nō. Music, dance, and text are similarly built up of established 'modules'. Consequently, although each performer (whether an actor or a musician) learns his part separately, nō performances are hardly rehearsed. All the parts fit together precisely, because of their modular structure.

The *waki* and *wakizure*

In most plays, the first person to appear is the *waki* ('person on the side' or 'witness'). It is difficult to generalize about the *waki*'s identity or function, since these differ visibly from play to play. (In some later plays, the differences of function between all these role-types break down.) In principle, however, the *waki* watches, from the side, the display of the *shite*. The Monk in *The Well-Cradle* perfectly follows the theoretical model of a *waki*. Often, the *waki* is accompanied by companions or attendants who are called *wakizure* ('companions to the *waki*'). These generally have little to say.

Waki and *wakizure* roles are performed by lineages of actors that are quite distinct from the *shite* lineages. *Waki* actors never perform *shite* roles. In theory, the reverse is true as well, but in fact, for various reasons, *shite* actors do sometimes perform as *waki*.

Waki figures speak in both verse and prose. Verse will be covered below, in connection with the language of the *shite*. As to prose, the *waki*'s self-introduction, at the start of the play, is a good example, and Benkei's prose speeches, in *Benkei Aboard Ship*, illustrate the style at length. It is often weighty, with a high ratio of bulk to semantic content. In performance, these passages are impressive to listen to. The translator's main difficulty is to make them sound suitably formal without allowing them to become unbearably stiff.

The *shite* and *tsure*

The *shite* ('actor') is the centre of attention in any play that follows the classic form. The role may be subdivided into *maeshite* ('*shite* in part one') and *nohijite* ('*shite* in part two'). It is the *shite* who is masked, and who sings and dances. Some plays have more than one *shite*-like figure, and in these cases, one is the *shite* and the others, defined as subordinate, are called *tsure* ('companion'). *Tsure* figures, too, can be masked, although they do not normally wear so fine a mask as the *shite*. *Shite* actors also perform *tsure* roles. Their major lineages are known as the five 'schools' of *nō*, discussed below. An amateur who studies *nō* singing (*utai*) and dancing (*shimai*) studies them as they apply to the *shite* roles.

Like the *waki*, the *shite* may speak either in prose or in verse, but verse dominates. Actually, the distinction between prose and verse, in most passages that involve the *shite*, is not nearly as clear as it is in English. There are several intermediate styles of sung prose or quasi-verse.

One of these intermediate styles is epic prose of the kind found in *Heike monogatari*. Another is the style used for passages that are, or that are meant to resemble, Japanese translations of Chinese poetry. In this book, passages of such language are laid out like verse, but against the left-hand margin of the text.

Most of the *shite*'s sung passages, in most plays, are in the metre of classical Japanese poetry: alternating five- and seven-syllable phrases. As a rule, the more intense the emotion, the more regular the metre. The *waki* sometimes sings similar verse or enters into sung verse dialogue with the *shite*.

The true poetry of *nō* can be extraordinarily dense and complex, even though its vocabulary is relatively restricted. The difference between the lyrical prose and the poetry of *nō* is roughly that between the poetry of Walt Whitman and that of Hart Crane, or between Charles Péguy and Stéphane Mallarmé. Cascades of images, telescoped into one another far beyond the limits of consecutive grammar, like double and triple exposures on film, and echoing each other in an inspired play of precise conventions, render the very concept of literal translation meaningless. The translator simply does his best (I speak of myself), sometimes not even understanding how it is that he grasps the heart of such poetry. Among these translations, *Pining Wind* probably comes the closest to conveying a glimpse of this kind of language.

Only one device of *nō* verse has been regularly attempted in these

translations, and especially in *Pining Wind*. This is the 'pivot word' (*kakekotoba*). A word, or even a part of a word, may mean one thing when taken with what precedes it and something else when taken with what follows. The meaning 'pivots' on that word. There also exist what one might call 'pivot phrases' or 'pivot lines' that go both with what precedes and what follows, although these, unlike the pivot word, do not involve a double meaning. A particularly common pivot word in these translations is 'pine' ('pine tree' and 'to pine'), since this word corresponds precisely to the double meaning in Japanese. However, there are far more pivot words than this in the originals.

In these translations, passages originally in verse, regular or irregular, are centred on the page. Passages that look like verse but are aligned against a narrower left-hand margin are, as already explained, translated from one style or another of lyrical prose. The short passages of verse which are indented to the right of the median are poems or parts of poems quoted directly from earlier sources. A full poem makes five short lines.

The Chorus

To one side of the stage sits a chorus of about eight people. It has no identity of its own, even when it sings lines that do not clearly belong to any single figure on stage. Usually, it sings for the *shite* and occasionally, especially in part two of a play, for the *waki*. The language of chorus passages is lyrical, sung prose, or verse. Members of the chorus are all *shite* actors, sometimes senior ones. The chorus may have been less prominent than now in the early period of nō.

The *kokata*

Some plays have roles for children (*kokata*). These are always boys, and as a rule they are the sons of professional *shite* actors, in training to become professionals themselves. *Kokata* may have to remain silent and immobile for a long time, but when their turn comes to speak, they deliver their lines in ringing tones.

The *ai*

Most plays include a role-type known as the *ai*. The word can perhaps be taken to mean, literally, 'interlude', since the *ai*'s major function is

usually to perform the interlude between parts one and two of the play. The principal purpose of this interlude is to fill in the interval while the *shite* actor changes costume and mask in preparation for part two. Most *ai* characters are local villagers.

Ai actors are not *nō* actors at all. Their main speciality is performing the comedies (*kyōgen*, 'mad words') that are traditionally done between *nō* plays. As a result, their bearing, dress, and language are quite different from those of either a *shite* or a *waki*. In the hierarchy of the *nō* world, the *shite* actor is supreme, but the *waki* has his own dignity. In comparison with either, the *ai* role is on a distinctly lower plane.

The sections of a *nō* play that involve the *ai* are not considered a part of the text proper. They are the province of the *kyōgen* actors, and in the past, printed *nō* texts omitted them entirely. Nowadays they are generally included in annotated editions, but in smaller type, and the stereotyped dialogue surrounding the *ai*'s major speeches may be left out. The full text of an interlude may compare in number of words with a major section of a *nō* play, but it goes by more quickly and is usually far less absorbing. Since print can exaggerate the 'weight' of an interlude, the size used for interludes here is smaller than that of the main text.

The language of the *ai* lacks the formality of the *waki*'s prose but is none the less ceremoniously verbose. Moreover, most *ai* speeches are delivered in an intentionally monotonous manner quite unlike the same actor's delivery in a *kyōgen* play. A *shite* actor may scold an overly animated *ai* for upstaging him. A translation that conveyed the combined impact of the *ai*'s language and usual delivery would be unreadably dull. In these versions, the tone of the *ai* speeches follows the overall tone of the play. The colloquial tone adopted for the *ai* parts in *Chikubu-shima*, *Benkei Aboard Ship*, and *The Mountain Crone* is in keeping with the way these exceptionally lively passages are done in performance. In *Benkei Aboard Ship*, in particular, it is essential to convey a difference of weight and dignity between the *waki*, Benkei, and the *ai*, the Boatman.

Persons speaking for one another; inconsistencies of grammatical person

Japanese avoids specifying grammatical subject, verbs are invariant as to person or number, and nouns have no plural form. This may make the subject of a verb difficult to determine with certainty. Moreover, in

texts like these the very concept of 'person' may at times seem to be indistinct, or at least different from what one assumes to be normal in English. Sometimes the *waki* and *shite* seem to speak for one another, although inevitable choices of grammatical person obscure this phenomenon in English. In some Chorus passages, the reader or translator must decide from line to line who is really speaking. Finally, a speaker who seems to be in a first-person mode may suddenly shift to a third-person point of view in order to narrate his or her own actions. Various explanations of this phenomenon have been offered, but the best solution is simply to accept it.

Other Aspects of Performance

The stage assistant

In several plays, a stage assistant discreetly performs an important function by assisting the *shite* at key moments. He is a *shite* actor, and may turn out to be the most senior person on stage. His expert movements are in perfect harmony with those of the *shite*.

Music

The 'orchestra' of nō, seated at the back of the stage, consists of a flute (*nōkan*), a shoulder drum (*kotsuzumi*), and a hip drum (*ōkawa*). Many plays also require a larger drum (*taiko*) that rests in a stand placed on the boards of the stage. The cries of the drummers, eerie until one is familiar with them, are a part of the music. The music of nō is unusual and complex.

The stage and props

The stage is an independent, roofed structure, even when it is placed inside a modern theatre. Pillars at the four corners support the roof, and a bridgeway leads from the rear left-hand corner of the stage towards the 'mirror room' from which the actors enter. No scenery is used. The boards of the stage are perfectly polished, and on the wall at the back is painted a single pine tree. The lighting is constant. Some plays require a special prop, such as a boat, a grave-mound, a shrine, a

gate, or a loom. All such objects are elegant but sketchy representations of what they describe. Against the distinguished plainness of the stage and props, the magnificent costumes worn by the actors stand out brilliantly, and the masks may seem to come alive.

Length of a performance

Nō texts are short but performances are long. A brief performance will take about an hour, and certain plays can last over two hours. Delivery is therefore slow, and some dances can be almost indefinitely prolonged. In general, those plays that are felt to have the highest 'dignity' (*kurai*), like *Komachi at Seki-dera*, are given the most time. It is interesting that in the fifteenth century, plays were probably performed in no more than half the time they take now. The slowing down of performances is one aspect of the refining process that has gone on over the past several centuries.

The traditional classification of the plays

The 'Remarks' that follow the list of 'Persons in order of appearance' at the head of each play start by naming what customarily defined category the play belongs to. There are five of these: (1) *waki-nō*, or 'god plays'; (2) *shura-mono*, or 'warrior plays'; (3) *kazura-mono*, often translated as 'woman plays' although the *shite* in this category is not invariably a woman; (4) *yonbamme-mono*, or 'fourth-category plays', which cannot be usefully defined further in a few words; and (5) *kiri-nō*, 'concluding plays'. These categories are always cited and discussed in connection with nō, but they are not actually of critical importance to the reader. They did not exist in the fifteenth century, although others, now less well known, did.

The 'five schools' of nō

The category of the play is followed, in most cases, by the mention 'current in all five schools of nō'. These 'schools' are named Kanze and Hōshō (which can be designated together as the 'Kamigakari schools'), and Komparu, Kongō, and Kita (the 'Shimogakari schools'). They are hereditary lineages of *shite* actors, of which by far the largest is the Kanze. Some plays are current – that is, in the formal repertoire – in only one or two schools. Each school has its characteristic style, and

details of music, dance, staging, and text (especially in the prose passages) may vary from school to school.

Variant performances

There are, associated with many plays, variant performance traditions known as *kogaki*. Each school has its 'normal' manner of performing a given play, but many plays, even within the same school, have recognized, named performance variants. If a variant is adopted for a performance, its name will be printed on the programme together with the title of the play and the names of the actors and musicians. Some *kogaki* are old, some surprisingly recent. They are not a trivial matter, since certain plays can be completely transformed by the choice of a *kogaki*. This book mentions only those *kogaki* that are meaningful in terms of the information provided about each play.

The subdivisions of the plays

In the translations themselves, at the beginning of certain prose speeches or immediately to the left of the first line of a passage of verse, the reader will find an italicized Japanese word, in smaller type and enclosed by parentheses. This word is the name of a *shōdan*, or standard subsection of the play. For example, *The Diver* begins with a three-line verse section labelled *shidai*. This is followed by a nine-line *sashi*, a three-line *sagenta*, and an eleven-line *agenta*. Then comes a prose speech labelled *tsukizerifu*. These *shōdan* names, and many others, appear in each play. They recur with different frequency and generally in a different order from play to play, although certain common patterns are easy to spot. For example, many plays begin with a *shidai* and end with a *noriji*.

The *shōdan* names provide precious information for those concerned with the musical structure of the plays. Prose *shōdan* like *nanori* ('self-introduction'), *tsukizerifu* ('arrival speech') or *mondō* ('dialogue') are easily understood, but the verse *shōdan* are musical in nature and therefore difficult to describe usefully. All passages shown as verse in these translations are sung, and each verse *shōdan*, for instance a *shidai* or an *agenta*, has a musical form that remains constant from play to play. *Shōdan* sequences can effect comparisons between plays or conclusions about the historical evolution of a play.

The *shōdan* indications need not concern most readers, but they remain generally useful for two reasons. First, they are convenient when one wishes to refer to a specific passage of a play. In the case of *Eguchi*, for example, the *kuri-sashi-kuse* section (a section in part two made up of a *kuri*, a *sashi*, and a *kuse*) is critically important and is discussed in the introduction to that play. Second, the *shōdan* that label discrete verse passages should remind any reader that the verse is not really as continuous as it looks. At the beginning of *The Diver*, for example, four different *shōdan* are indicated during a verse passage of twenty-six lines. Even if one knows nothing about them, a new *shōdan* clearly indicates a change of topic or mood.

The stage directions

A *nō* play in translation needs some stage directions, yet full information on movement and gesture would be impractically bulky, and in any case, would represent only one 'school' or style. The directions included here tell what happens on stage at important moments and keep track, except during dance passages, of where the persons of the play are situated on the stage. Vital yet wordless passages are indicated in upper-case letters so that the reader should not miss them. Most are marked 'dance' or 'quasi-dance'. A dance, in particular, can last twenty minutes or more, even if it comes between two consecutive lines of verse. Other important, wordless events include a woman's donning of her lover's robe, or the dropping of a curtain around a 'hut' or 'shrine' to reveal the figure seated within.

The Religion of the Plays

As a matter of convention, all writers who discuss Japan in English speak of Shinto 'shrines' and Buddhist 'temples'. In this book, Buddhist temples are referred to by their Japanese names only. For example, Hōryū-ji means 'Hōryū Temple' ('Temple of the Law Ascendant'). In most temple names, the character read *-ji* means 'temple'. In a few, however, the same character is read *-dera*. An example is the title of the play *Komachi at Seki-dera* ('Komachi at Seki Temple').

In medieval Japan, as in medieval Europe, religion coloured all of life. Religion meant Buddhism above all, but not a Buddhism with

which many people are now familiar. Zen, although present in a few plays, is unimportant beside the legacy of an older, richly complex Buddhism that embraced, more or less closely, nearly every conception of the sacred held in Japan. Even Shinto (the roster of cults of the 'native' Japanese deities) was then continuous in most respects with Buddhism, and neither excluded the other. God plays like *Takasago* may seem free of Buddhism, but the patterns of Buddhist thought are there beneath the surface, as occasional references to Buddhist matters show.

God plays evoke a perfect world that has no need of the Buddhist teaching, since Buddhism is concerned with spiritual or psychological wholeness; in a perfect world wholeness is not lost or threatened. In other kinds of plays, however, one Buddhist issue is often central: attachment, or clinging, to the objects of sense and desire, and the need to renounce this clinging. Since Buddhism teaches that this clinging is a grievous error, it is called *mōshū*, 'wrongful clinging'. In many plays, the *shite* is a spirit still clinging to some aspect of its earthly life and eager for the *waki*'s help to renounce this clinging. When the *waki* is a monk, he normally begins by offering the spirit 'comfort and guidance' (*tomurai*) by reciting scriptural texts so as to bring the spirit peace and guide it towards the light. Later on, he confronts the spirit more directly, in a vision or dream.

An important religious issue for thinking people in medieval Japan was the relationship between art (especially dance, music, and poetry) and enlightenment, since art actually creates objects of sense. Several plays, among them *Eguchi* and *The Mountain Crone*, touch on this issue, which naturally concerned a playwright like Zeami.

The Ideal of the Capital

Although grounded in some ways in obstinate human reality, the world of nō is in other ways a world of the imagination. This is clear, for example, from the way these plays evoke the figure of the sovereign. One would never guess from them that in the fifteenth century, the emperor had no significant political or any other kind of power. The line of emperors survived, it is true, and imperial sanction was essential if a new shogun was to claim legitimacy. However, the emperor was in no position to refuse this sanction to the Ashikaga lord who asked it of

him; and as the fifteenth century wore on, even the Ashikaga shogunate began to crumble. In the time of the playwright Nobumitsu, Kyoto was all but destroyed by civil war. Nevertheless, the sovereign of *Kureha* or *Takasago* presides over a halcyon world in which 'the provinces all enjoy peace and ease'. Even if the image of the sovereign includes at times that of the shogun, as some writers have suggested, it is only an ideal.

The model for the ideal reign, as *Takasago* makes clear, was that of Emperor Daigo (r. 897–930). It was more a poetic than a political ideal, since 905 is the year when the *Kokinshū* ('A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern'), the fountainhead of the classical poetic tradition, was compiled. The Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū* (there is also one in Chinese) describes all the sounds of the world as 'song' (*uta*), which is the generic word for poetry. It is therefore one source of legitimacy for all song and music, including the art of *nō*. That is why, in these translations, words like 'song' or 'to sing' are often associated with matters of poetry. The significance of poetry went far beyond words.

The capital, often called Miyako, is the seat of the ideal sovereign. In *The Diver*, Miyako is Nara, the imperial capital from 710 to 784. Elsewhere, it is Kyoto, the imperial capital from 794 to 1868. Kyoto enjoyed the same sort of reputation as other royal or imperial capitals have in other countries. It was acknowledged to be the centre of civilization, and, as several plays suggest, people from Miyako were assumed to be more cultivated than those from the provinces. The plays in this book are an art of the capital.

Form, Meaning, and the Mind of Heaven and Earth

In conclusion, it is worth returning to the issue of meaning. All the longer introductions in the pages that follow assume meaning in the plays, and set out to translate something of this meaning into rationally ordered, expository language. In Japanese terms, however, the validity of doing so is not self-evident. As already noted, *nō* plays are often watched as sequences of dance and musical forms, without thought of intellectual content. This matter deserves further comment.

In Japanese artistic practice, form generally precedes meaning. Once form is correct, appropriate content appears. Training in the performing arts generally stresses mastery of form over theoretical knowledge; the student learns forms without a word of theoretical explanation.

Differences in talent and achievement are recognized, but talent, however brilliant, is not the foundation of accomplished performance. That foundation is form.

The same principle applies to classical poetry. There certainly were inspired poets, but for the basic practice of poetry, ‘inspiration’ was neither here nor there. The task was to combine learned poetic vocabulary into correct forms. From childhood on, one studied models to this end. Classical poetic manuals catalogued matters of form and vocabulary, and glossed obscure words. What poetic criticism discussed was the affective quality of a poem. The question of intellectually conceived meaning did not arise. This is not to say that the poems had no meaning; far from it. Rather, meaning transpired naturally from the appropriate choice of words and the proper execution of the form, and was not an issue in itself.

The forms of nō are more diverse in kind than those of poetry, but otherwise nō works in the same way. Most people who have read about nō are familiar with the term *yūgen*, which has a range of meaning between ‘graceful elegance’ and ‘subtle mystery’. First used in poetic criticism, it was later applied to nō. Many writers have described nō as a theatre of *yūgen*, or treated *yūgen* as the goal or pure essence of nō. *Yūgen* arises, when it does, like the scent of a flower: from the harmony of countless perfectly realized, cellular forms. The text of a play makes up only one subcomplex of these forms. This is why nō is often held to exist only in performance. *Yūgen* transcends words.

Seen from this standpoint, the ‘meaning’ of a play is a sort of by-product of accomplished form – form the goal of which is *yūgen* – and not an issue in itself. Some Japanese scholarly writings on nō, including very valuable ones, leave a similar impression. Reading them, one comes to feel that meaning is an accidental by-product of history – of the evolution of an inherently meaningless motif through countless practices, documents, legends, poems, and stories.

Zeami wrote about nō in the same spirit. Intensely concerned with form, he never made interpretive comments about the plays or betrayed any wish to give them a depth reachable through language alone. None the less, his plays, above all others, give the careful reader almost inexhaustible riches. *Japanese Nō Dramas* is an acknowledgement of those riches. Whether accidental or intentional, they deserve to be seen. It is difficult to believe that Zeami himself did not carefully put them there.

Working within extremely sophisticated conventions, the classical

poets and the playwrights who followed them had a wonderful freedom! Since no element of their poetry was their own, they were unencumbered by the need to be original. Zeami merely put words together in the service of his theatre. Yet as he wrote down what he hoped would make good plays, the conventions of the literature ranged themselves, through his brush, into marvellous patterns. He once wrote:

That which creates seed and blossom of the full range of *nō* is the mind playing through [the actor's] whole person. Just as the emptiness of crystal gives forth fire and water, . . . the accomplished master creates all the colours and forms of his art out of the intention of his mind . . . Many are the adornments of this noble art; many are the natural beauties that grace it. The mind that gives forth all things, even to the four seasons' flowers and leaves, snows and moon, mountains and seas – yes, even to all beings, sentient and insentient – that mind is heaven and earth.

If he danced in that spirit, surely he wrote in that spirit too.