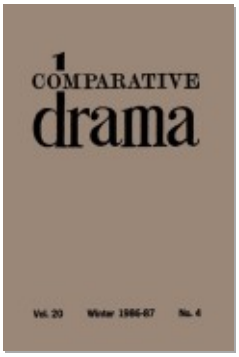
Ze-Ami and His Theories of Noh Drama by Masaru Sekine (review)



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matic and mimetic importance of self-conscious devices and believes that the "artificialities" present at the close of tragedies like *The Spanish Tragedy, Othello,* and *Macbeth* reveal their protagonists' awareness of the roles they have played as "authors" of their tragedies. He defines tragic identity in these terms: "The world is a stage on which each man must play a part, but the part, whether of his own or another's authorship, is the man. A man is free to determine his own character, but once determined, character is fate" (103). And he examines the use of parody scenes, plays-within-plays, dreams, and final narratives and proposes that "at death a man becomes a character in a story," "self-possessed" as well as "self-alienated" by the artificiality of his contrivances (111-13). Macbeth's theatrical images provide him with a way to assess the role he plays, and Othello's final narrative is punctuated by a "bloody period." Hamlet, however, escapes the "self-imposed mimetic artifices that limn the ends of other tragic heroes" (114) by "playing" only the part Providence provides him. His role is one that "passes show." Slights' and Hyde's essays are indeed complementary.

Lois E. Bueler's subject is incest, not so such in its sensational appeal as in its structural use in Jacobean and Caroline drama. Her finely researched and written essay offers a useful table of "incest" plays and provides an analysis of the actual, fictional, witting, and unwitting "kinds" of incest found in these plays. Claude Lévi-Strauss' theories of kinship and incest prohibition are adduced to show the cultural and structural underpinnings of incest and to lead us to see the societal ills and solipsistic mazes characters create when they indulge in forbidden pleasure. Indeed, incest is a "distinctive motif" because it realizes an absolute clash between "individual urges and social demands." It is "society's anti-image" (144-45).

Bueler's essay rounds out the volume's examination of social and histrionic identity. Margaret Scott's reassessment of "Machiavelli and the Machiavel" and Walter Cohen's discussion of what he terms "intrigue tragedy" push into new areas. Once again, however, theatrical conventions and generic categories are brought into question as Scott reconsiders the similarities between the stage figure and the master political theorist and as Cohen cuts across international boundaries to compare similar plays in Spain and England. In these essays, as in the others in the volume, new historical, sociological, and cultural theories are used to redefine formalist notions about Renaissance dramatic conventions and genres. These essays raise larger theoretical questions about the relationship between artistic form and cultural poetics.

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Masaru Sekine. *Ze-Ami and His Theories of Noh Drama.* Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1985. Pp. 184. $29.95.

If Zeami had ever been a popular subject of study, one could well speak of a Zeami renaissance. The Japanese discovered the fascination

and worth of Zeami's sometimes down to earth and sometimes recondite treatises soon after the beginning of the twentieth century when the so-called "secret" writings surfaced in a second-hand bookstore in Japan. Since then, scholars in the West have been slowly translating and interpreting these fundamental writings on the Noh, writings which for centuries were treasured and passed on only to those at the highest levels of learning and rank within the Kanze school, heirs to Zeami.

Among the translations and commentaries that Sekine lists in his bibliography are several of the works that have marked important developments in Zeami studies in Western languages: René Sieffert's 1960 *La Tradition secrète du nô*, Komparu Kunio's *The Noh Theatre: Principles and Perspectives*, 1983, and Thomas J. Rimer's and Yamazaki Masakazu's *On the Art of Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, 1984. Strangely enough, although he lists a number of articles from the prestigious publication *Monumenta Nipponica*, Sekine fails to include in his bibliography any reference to the brilliant translations and commentaries of Mark Nearman which appeared in that publication beginning in 1978. Nearman's work on Zeami's Kyūi and Kyakuraika, for example, strikes a depth of meaning and a richness of interpretation rarely seen in Nō studies. His attention to detail, his approach at once scholarly and theatrical, bring to light in Zeami's treatises a breadth of application and a modernity of meaning that have perhaps been suggested by other scholars but never developed so carefully and cogently.

That Nearman's work is not mentioned in Sekine's book is perhaps indicative of the difference in approach of the two writers. *Ze-Ami and His Theories of Noh Drama* represents an effort to make the difficulties and repetitions of the fourteenth-century theoretician less evident to the twentieth-century reader. Where Nearman plunges fearlessly, but carefully, into the very depths of Zeami, studying his Buddhist thought, the Chinese connections, and symbolic values of imagery, Sekine stays at the surface, where things should be neat and clear cut. "For the convenience of readers," he writes in his Introduction, "I have selected and translated passages from [the treatises] and written about Ze-Ami's views on such matters as acting techniques and performances of plays in different chapters, arranging the material by theme to avoid Ze-Ami's frequent repetitions." Unfortunately, it is never quite clear who Sekine's readers are intended to be. For those who are already acquainted with the Noh, he offers too much introductory information, too many explanations, plot summaries, and the like, information that anyone conversant with the Noh would presumably have at his fingertips. In that case, one begins to think, perhaps his reader is the neophyte. But the reader unacquainted with Noh would soon be lost in the morass of Japanese terminology, allusions to unfamiliar writings, authors, historical figures, and other details that the Japanese specialist takes for granted. For the uninitiated there are too many technical words; for the initiated there are perhaps not enough.

Essentially *Ze-Ami and His Theories of Noh Drama* is not a book about Zeami and his theories of the Noh drama; it is an introductory study of the Noh drama, heavily larded with quotations from Zeami. As one progresses through the book one gets deeper into Zeami, but

nowhere is there any critical assessment of his work, any analytical approach to his theories, any effort to synthesize or to look at Zeami's *oeuvre* as a whole or to give us an overview. Instead, we find a narrative and descriptive approach to the Noh theatre buttressed by Zeami's statements.

The first chapter relates the history of Noh, and is perhaps the least successful part of the book, as well as the section least concerned with Zeami's theories. Succeeding chapters deal with the five groups of Noh plays, training, acting, playwriting, grades of acting, the audience, and *hana*, or flower, an expression that Zeami used frequently and with shifting meanings throughout his life. The chapters on training and on *hana* deal most directly with Zeami's thought and are most enlightening. They suffer, however, like much of the book, from a certain randomness, and a refusal—or an inability—to deal with the subject at any depth. One feels the author is simply mentioning one thing and then another rather than developing a reasoned argument or following a fundamental through-line. There are a number of lengthy translations which offer substantial insights into Zeami's thought, but they are not developed in the text. Zeami claims, for example, "If one does not have very high literary attainments, one can still write good Noh plays if one can devise dramatic techniques." Sekine adds that the only requirement is a knowledge of *waka*, a popular poetic form. Nowhere does he discuss the contradiction inherent in these two assertions.

This purely descriptive, uncritical approach is typical of the book, and, for the western reader at any rate, is a minor source of annoyance. On page 77, for example, the author offers us a diagram of drum rhythms in the Noh. He expresses his gratitude to a Mr. Maruoka for allowing him to reprint the diagram, but there is no further explanation of what the diagram shows or how the symbols are significant. It is virtually useless to the reader and adds nothing more than a bit of exoticism to the page.

Editorial work was apparently minimal. Errors proliferate: Sieffert is written "Sieffest," the title of Nogami's book is written now as "Ze-ami," now as "Zeami," Yoshimoto becomes "Yoshimito," etc., etc. The titles and descriptions of photographs 17 and 18 are reversed. Sekine, a Japanese writing in English, has mastered our language to an unusual degree, for this book lacks the quaint tone that so often prevails in works written by Japanese or even in those that are translated from Japanese. There is certainly substance in the work, even if it is not approached with the critical attitude prevalent in the West. One only wishes that a firm editorial hand had wiped out the many avoidable errors and urged the author to aim his work clearly at the novice or the scholar. There is keen interest today in the theories of Zeami, and we are in need of a serious book-length study that would take us to the heart of this master of theatre. Is it not time for book publication of Nearman's translations and commentary?

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