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Smethurst, Mae

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Mae Smethurst

A great distance—spatial, temporal, and cultural—stretches between fifth-century BCE Greece and the fourteenth/fifteenth-century CE Japan, when the best-known writers of tragedy (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides) and of noh (Kan'ami, Zeami, and Zenchiku) created their classic dramas. Since there is no evidence of any influence of one theatrical form upon the other until our times, a comparison of them is perforce ahistorical. The political and cultural milieus of the two forms of drama differed greatly. For example, Greek tragedy was a public affair, open to the citizens and thus democratic. In noh the performances were put on for an audience of the elite until a later period. The languages differ—the Greek verb is equipped with three persons and three numbers, the noun with five cases, and so forth. Therefore, it is never unclear, unless deliberately made so, who is talking at any given time in epic, lyric, or drama. Whereas in Japanese ambiguity in the identity of the speaker arises easily in a language that is not highly inflected.

And yet, somehow and somewhere the cultures shared elements in common, enough to nurture these two similar types of creative activity. It does not seem irrelevant that once the theaters had become established, governmental authorities exiled both Aeschylus and Zeami, and Euripides and Zenchiku went into self-imposed exile. If nothing else, this similarity in itself makes a cogent statement about the fragility of success in both cultures, not only in artistic endeavors but also in political endeavors, a fragility that is all too apparent in their drama.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Material for this piece was drawn primarily from my books, *Dramatic Action in Noh and Greek Tragedy: Reading with and beyond Aristotle* (Lexington Books, 2013), translated into Japanese by K. Watanabe and A. Kiso (Nogami Memorial Noh Theatre Research Institute of Hosei University, March 2014), released in paperback by Princeton University, January 2015. *Dramatic Representations of Filial Piety: A Translation of Five Noh* (Cornell University East Asia Series, 1998). *The Artistry of Aeschylus and Zeami: A Comparative Study of Greek Tragedy and Nō* (Princeton 1989), translated into Japanese by A. Kiso (Osaka University Press, 1994), republished by Princeton University as a paperback in their legacy book series, 2014.

In 1904 H.B. Chamberlain was one of the first to note the following similarities between noh and Greek tragedy: the number of actors in both dramas was limited, there was singing in rhythm, both used masks and a chorus, the theaters consisted of a location for dancing and acting and an unroofed area for the audience, and finally their plays had a religious significance and feeling. In 1938 Nogami Toyochirō agreed that both have a religious significance and feature singing in rhythm. However, tending to emphasize the differences rather than the similarities, he refined the comparison about the actors, the chorus, the theater structure, and the masks. Takebe Rinshō in 1960 with the help of the classicist Albin Lesky expanded the comparison. He made the important observation that both noh and tragedy developed out of improvisational forms of entertainment into artistic forms of theater, that they are artistic forms rather than improvised, refined rather than crude.

There are significant parallels between the performances of noh and tragedy that set them apart from other theaters. In both, three or more serious plays, often with a religious message, and the comic *kyōgen* and satyr plays were performed on religious and/or public occasions in outdoor theaters that contained few props or architectural structures compared with much of later Greek tragedy and other types of Japanese and Western drama. From the three sides of these outdoor auditoria, the audience's attention was directed toward the small, all-male casts, in its primary roles limited to two or three actors, one of whom might be the playwright himself. These actors were supplemented in some cases by mute extras, but always by choruses and musical instrumentalists - a flutist and two or three drummers in noh, and a player of a double-reed instrument (*auloi*) and perhaps a lyre player in Greek tragedy. In both forms the dances, movements, and gestures enhanced the appearance of those members of the cast who were dressed in masks and costumes, and also complemented the words of the texts. Finally, in both, the texts were poetic, and were delivered in a variety of ways: sung to the accompaniment of instruments, recited, narrated, and spoken.

At the very least, the similarities allow us to posit one conclusion about noh and Greek tragedy that sets them apart from many theaters. They prevent members of an audience from mistaking a performance not only for everyday reality, as is true of

some theaters, but also for the degree of realism even, for example, of a Shakespearean or kabuki play. Various elements, such as the masks, the small number of male actors, and the presence “on stage” of the chorus and the instrumentalists throughout a performance, create a special aesthetic relationship between the plays and the audiences. The use of masks or, in some cases in noh, of expressionless faces submerges the personalities of the actors. The words because they are for the most part poetic, the stage because it is devoid of sets and many props, and the movements because they are arranged by a choreographer (the playwright himself), do not reproduce their counterparts in the real world. The scarcity, but importance, of the visual features helps the playwright in turn to focus on what in his mind is essential for the audience to appreciate in any given play.

### Actors

The masks make it possible for an actor in noh or in tragedy to assume two roles and even more than two roles in tragedy. To be sure, there can be more than three actors with speaking roles in noh, as there cannot be in tragedy, but the effect is similar—one actor, *shite*, the main actor, is the center of attention. In noh, predictably, there is the *shite* and the *waki*, the adjacent actor who prepares for and draws out the story from the *shite*. *Tsure* can attend each of these actors. The attendant of the *shite* is called simply *tsure*, of the *waki* *wakizure*. The former may, but need not, play important roles; the latter are often attendant priests of courtiers who, whatever their number, do not have a dramatic character of their own but assume a function literally as attendants of the *waki* priest or courtier. (The *waki* and *wakizure* do not wear masks.) Thus the total number of significant actors in noh is three: *shite*, *tsure*, and *waki* or only a *shite* and a *waki*. However, there can be up to ten or more actors on stage.

In tragedy, the main actor (sometimes called the *tragoidos*), and the one or two other actors (called *hypokritai*), later called the protagonist, deuteragonist, and tritagonist respectively, all can play more than one role, but in many tragedies, in which the main character appears in the beginning, middle, and end, the same actor

presumably plays this role throughout. Of the three actors in tragedy, one often plays the role of a nameless character, such as a messenger. In noh, the kyōgen actor, often playing the part of an ordinary and nameless inhabitant of the place in which the play is set, is an additional actor. Some tragedies and noh feature, in addition to the actors mentioned above, children and mutes and walk-ons, but for the most part, the limitation of two or three significant actors in both theaters helps to create a setting in which the audience's attention is attracted to, rather than distracted from, the words, movements, and visual appurtenances, the props, and the costumes of the few actors. In Aeschylus's *Persians*, for example, there are only two actors; in Zeami's *Sanemori*, there are three actors, including the kyōgen actor.

### Chorus

The constant presence on stage of a chorus of eight to ten men in noh and twelve to fifteen men in tragedy is another distinctive, if not unique, feature of these theaters that enhances the special aesthetic relationship between the actors and the audience. In opera, for example, there may be a chorus; it does not remain on stage throughout the performance, and the ensemble is externally directed by a conductor, often standing on a podium above the instrumentalists, who are not in full view of the audience. In noh and tragedy, on the other hand, the chorus, as well as the instrumentalists, remains on stage, and both groups perform without the assistance of a conductor.

The presence of a chorus is a feature that noh and tragedy share in common; the function of the chorus is different. At first the choral song was dominant over dialogue in tragedy, but then for the most part the relationship was reversed. In noh, which preserves its original style, there is no such evolution. Without changing noh, the Japanese added new dramatic forms: jōruri, kabuki, and shingeki. On the other hand, Greek tragedy was for many years not performed and the tradition was lost. Its original form could not be accurately reproduced, but was recreated. There was no lasting performance tradition, as in Japan.

The choruses, like the masks and the number of actors, differ in important

particulars between noh and Greek tragedy. In noh, the chorus is neither masked nor dressed in costumes that depict a character, because the chorus is not a character in its own right. In fact, it only rarely expresses an opinion of its own, never stands up from its seated position, and does not become involved in the movements during the course of a performance. The chorus assumes the part of characters in a different manner: it speaks for the playwright and serves as a mouthpiece for the characters. The noh chorus assumes more than one identity during a play by becoming the voice of the main actor (*shite*) or of the second actor (*waki*). (There is a tendency in many noh for the chorus to sing on behalf of the *shite* so that he can dance when the audience's attention is directed toward him.) The result is an interaction between the chorus and the actor, between the group and the individual for whom it speaks, such that often the distinctions between them disappear. In Greek tragedy, the chorus has a fixed identity. Not only do the members of the choruses wear masks and costumes that distinguish the group as a group of old men or of maidens, for example, but they also function as a group of characters in their own right. The chorus speaks in its own voice, participates actively in dialogues, sings, moves around, and even dances. It may advise, give information, express emotion in the first person, on occasion display differences of opinion within the group, and take part in the action.

If the chorus is to be considered in a comparison between noh and tragedy, that comparison is best made between the works of Aeschylus and Zeami, and then between the works of Sophocles or Euripides and later noh. In many of the works of the latter two tragedians, the choruses act as objective observers or commentators upon the action of the play; by contrast, the choruses of Aeschylus's tragedies can become so involved in the action that in two of his tragedies, the *Suppliants* and the *Eumenides*, the chorus functions as a major character. These choruses engage in a degree of physical action that most probably included a vigorous dance in the original productions of the *Eumenides*. This is antithetical to the lack of motion on the part of the seated choruses of noh. However, the choruses in Aeschylus's works can serve, if not as the mouthpiece for other actors, at least as a main character in some plays, as an important but secondary actor (like the *waki*) in others, and in all plays as a spokesman for the author (like the choruses of noh). In addition, the function of the

Aeschylean chorus as an actor provides a third or fourth actor to his tragedies as tsure provide extra actors in noh. It is therefore possible to draw a comparison between the Aeschylean chorus and that of noh. Nogami, who takes into account the differences in the choruses of Aeschylus's, Sophocles', and Euripides' plays as well as the relative importance of the chorus in Aeschylus's works as opposed to his successors, makes a particularly important observation when he argues that the idea of a one-man show is intrinsic to noh, whereas the contraposition of actor and chorus at first, as in the *Persians*, and later of actor and actor, creates a tension in tragedy that one does not find in noh.

### Theater

The theater for the performances of Greek tragedy during the festival in honor of the god Dionysus, was located on the side of the Acropolis in Athens. In Aeschylus's day, the structures of this theater were not permanent, as they were in the fourth century B.C. For most of the period during which Aeschylus was writing and performing, the slope of the Acropolis hill, either the ground itself or temporary wooden stands, served as the auditorium for the audience, and the flat area in front of it, later called the *orchestra*, served as an acting and dancing area for both actors and chorus. The audience looked down on the action. At one end of this orchestra stood a temporary wooden structure that may have served as a stage (called a *skene*), or merely as a place in which the actors changed their costumes. Outdoor noh theaters at religious sanctuaries, such as Kōfukuji in Nara where performances are still held today, were similar to this Greek theater in a number of respects. Evidence suggests that the audiences sat on temporary wooden benches or on the ground itself, around three sides of a flat area where the actors performed and the chorus sang, at one end of which there sometimes stood a temporary structure used as a stage, or sometimes a part of a temple or shrine building used as a viewing place for dignitaries. These theatrical arenas were smaller than their Greek counterparts. However, the arenas used for *kanjin noh*, "subscription noh," were at least as large, if not larger. Temporary wooden stands, boxes open to the sky were built around an arena, which measured

between ninety to one hundred and thirty-three feet or more in diameter—that is, more than three hundred feet in perimeter (sixty three *ken* at five feet per *ken*)—and in which a temporary platform was constructed for the performances of the actors, chorus, and instrumentalists.<sup>2</sup>

In the fifth century B.C., for late Aeschylus, for Sophocles, and for Euripides, the Greek theaters evolved from temporary structures, which included an orchestra where actors, chorus, and instrumentalists alike performed, to more solidly built structures, which included orchestras and stages that could separate the chorus from the actors. The structures made of wood during the earlier period, later were made of stone.<sup>3</sup> By the middle of the Edo period (1600/03-1868) in the eighteenth century, the conventional *noh* theaters had evolved into intimate indoor auditoria with raised and roofed wooden stages measuring approximately twenty feet square. The audiences look up at the performance. These stages are used for performances throughout Japan today. In *noh* theaters, there seems at first to have been no backdrop; later the painting of a pine tree was and still is used in all performances. On the Greek side, for a performance of Aeschylus's *Persians* (472 B.C.), no scene painting or backdrop was needed; however, by the time his *Oresteia* (458 B.C.) was staged, some representation of a building that could serve as a palace and temple must have been used. In other words, in antiquity until the time that Greek tragedy was no longer a viable form of entertainment, the theater structures in Greece changed from temporary to permanent structures, and from one acting arena for both actors and chorus to a separation of some of their functions between the *skene* and the orchestra; in Japan, public *noh* theaters of Zeami's day were not permanent structures, but the later indoor theaters, which have remained essentially the same from the eighteenth century on to the present day, were. Throughout the history of *noh* the actors and chorus have performed together on the same surface. Thus, since Greek tragedy was always performed outdoors, the Greek theater of fifth century B.C., especially the early

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2 In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the one *hashigakari*, a bridge by which the actors entered the stage from center back, or the two, on either side of the stage back, were comparable to the *parodoi*, "passageways," used in the Greek theater.

3 Remains of later stone theaters still exist today, the most nearly complete at Epidaurus.



theater of Aeschylus's day in which a stage with a backdrop was not needed, is most nearly comparable to that of Muromachi period (1336-1573) noh. In fact, because they accommodated a variety of props and mechanical devices, later Greek theaters dating from the end of the fifth and from the fourth centuries BCE are more nearly comparable to the present-day kabuki theater.

In the Muromachi period's *kanjin noh* there could be as many as 6440 people in the audience each day of seven. Later when noh was limited to performance for the daimyo the size of the stage was smaller (20' square) as was that of the auditorium. The theater evolved into a roofed stage with an *atoza* (the back area where the musicians are seated), *butai* (stage), *verandah with hashigakari* (the walkway between backstage right and the stage). The audience today numbers 300-500, in its heyday the sloped seats held 3,000 to 10,000 people. In antiquity, the Greek theater consisted of a separate dancing area for the chorus and a stage for the actors. There were more than ten thousand in the audience.

### Masks

The single actors change masks in Greek tragedy from one character to another and back again. In noh the *shite* can change masks from his position as the *maeshite* the *shite* of the first half, to *nochijite* the *shite* of the second half often in the form of a spirit, ghost, or god, but rarely does he change roles or wear masks of more than one character. The masks of noh were wooden and small; those of Greek tragedy were large and made of hemp, discarded after the first use. In both theaters the features were limited to gender, degree of kindness, and age, but they were exaggerated in tragedy and more delicate in noh. There were special masks in both theaters for supernatural beings and certain characters, such as the blind Tiresias and the blind Kagekiyo; however, most masks were of types of characters. Unfortunately, none of the masks survived from the Greek classical period, but on the basis of inferences drawn from the texts of the plays and from Greek vase paintings dating from the fifth century B.C., it seems likely that the masks of tragedy from the early rather than the late periods are more like those of noh. In the fourteenth century, there is evidence to

show that noh masks could be expressive and realistic compared to those of later centuries. All these later masks, and many of the earlier masks as well, including those Zeami used, were more elegantly carved and more subtle in the depiction of differences in facial expression than the earliest versions. The same degree of subtlety of expression is not apparent for those masks represented on Greek vase paintings and in later sculpted models. In fact, along with the changes that took place in the development of the theaters, the Greeks, like the Romans, moved toward greater distortion of facial expression on the masks and larger masks than we find in the noh theater.

### **Movements of Actors**

The kinetic elements—the dances, movements, and gestures—made it possible for the actors who wore masks to display emotions. We know little about dance and movements, important features of performances of tragedy at least in early fifth-century B.C., Greece, for the Greek texts do not contain choreographic directions, as the noh texts do. However, to judge from Greek vase paintings, albeit late evidence, and the texts themselves, the gestures and the dances were more flamboyant in the Greek theater than in the Japanese noh theater. Yet this difference, like the others, is less pronounced if we compare the noh of the early period rather than that of the present day with Greek tragedy. During the earliest period, and again when we enter the second half of the fifteenth century and the sixteenth century, many of the noh performances were melodramatic. But under the influence of government changes, the dances, not to mention the speeches and songs, became very solemn and slow in tempo. The effect of this change can be seen in the slow-moving and dignified performances today in which the words of the songs and the speeches are sometimes so muffled that they are unintelligible. In Greece, on the other hand, vase paintings strongly suggest that there was flamboyant acting during every period of tragedy.

### Conclusion

In Greece, during the second half of the fifth century BCE, when Sophocles and Euripides wrote, the rise of rhetoric, prose, and oratory took tragedy on a course different from its earlier one. This means that, although we might compare the spirit type of noh with the earlier, Aeschylean tragedies, these spirit noh are not comparable with the later tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. In the second half of the fifth century, dialogue in iambic meter often replaced the lyric poetry of Greek tragedy, the choral role decreased although not consistently, the number of actors increased to three, and action became primary. The later tragedies also revealed logical and probable sequences and progressions in the plot, actions emerging contrary to expectation, and argumentation between characters—elements that are not the material of the spirit noh as they are of real-time noh. In Zeami's time the aesthetics of noh took a different course from his father Kan'ami's. That is, "his critical insights into nō were adapted to the systematic poetics he inherited". This meant that in addition to embracing his father's use of *monomane* in noh, Zeami developed the aesthetic of *yūgen* further and added *hana*. For the present purposes let it suffice to say that the former is concerned in performance more with the abstract and formal beauty of singing and dance than with theme. *Hana* at first seemed to imply visual interest, but increasingly in the middle and later books of Zeami's *Notes*, it implies other kinds of attractions, as well: "aural, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual." But then in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries after Zeami and his immediate successors, with the collapse of the shogun's power, noh turned to realistic and dramatic themes. "Noh troupes had no choice but to rely on popular support, and the general public was ever more insistent on dramatic action." In other words, in order to compare the Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedies with noh and best determine the parameters of the essential similarities and differences between them, we must focus on these later real-time noh with plot, not the spirit noh and real-life noh without plot that come to mind in the writings of so many scholars, artists, and Japanologists.

Most Sophoclean tragedies enact human events and tragic situations that test or

define the character of the main dramatic figures, who are living characters. The realistic types of *noh*, as noted above, are not the two-part spirit *noh* without plots; instead, these *noh* focus on main characters who are alive from the beginning to the end of the play or, if not, are killed at a time contemporary with the dramatic action rather than before that action begins, and, unlike the two-part *noh*, the plots involve many of the components that Aristotle prescribed for Greek tragedy. The best plots, according to Aristotle, enact painful, harmful events or threats of them; tragic situations involving loved ones, such as a parent and child, husband and wife, or friends; sudden reversals in the action; recognitions of the identity of someone or something; and changes of fortune for the main character.

If we can return to Nogami and the others, we see that there are both significant similarities and differences between these two dramatic forms that changed over time. But, in spite of the differences, a comparison is apt. First, *noh* and Greek tragedy are both widely recognized as great classical theaters. Second, by looking at Aeschylus in the light of Zeami's poetics, and later *noh* in the light of Aristotle's poetics, we can gain insight into both theater forms.

One can treat the similarities between the theater structures and the performances, which Takebe also discusses in his article, for all Greek tragedy and all *noh* once they had developed into artistic forms of theater. At the same time, a close look at these similarities helps to explain why one would limit a comparison to tragedy of early, rather than late, fifth century B.C., and to *noh* of the fourteenth and early fifteenth century A.D., rather than to that of later centuries and of the present day.