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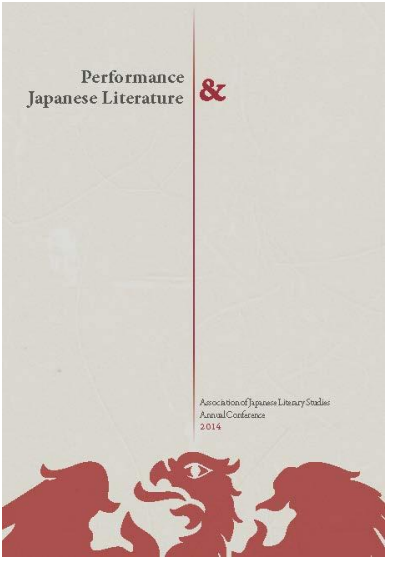

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Noh, Shakespeare, and Pedagogy in Kurosawa's *Kumonosujō* (*Throne of Blood*)

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Seventeen years ago I co-taught a ten-week course on "Shakespeare and Kurosawa" with a Restoration scholar from the English department at UC Irvine, Richard Kroll. Richard gave lectures focused on *Macbeth* and *King Lear*; I gave corresponding lectures on *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosujō*, translated more literally as "Spiderweb Castle") and *Ran,* which might be loosely translated as "Chaos." It was a wonderful course, and we both probably learned more from teaching it than the students did. We swore that we would teach it again soon, but we had trouble matching our schedules; team teaching started being seen by our campus as a wasteful use of resources in a time of budget cuts; and then the inconceivable occurred: Richard unexpectedly died at the untimely age of 56.

This last spring I decided to attempt to reprise the course on my own, in part as a kind of *in memoriam* tribute to Richard; that course is what I am going to talk about today. I will concentrate here on *Macbeth* and *Throne of Blood* and leave *King Lear* and *Ran* for another time, but the basic issues and problems were consistent throughout the course. As you all probably know very well, and I discovered quickly, things have changed since 1995: for one thing, the sheer amount of scholarship that turns up with a keyword search of "Shakespeare and Asia" or "Kurosawa and Shakespeare." Now films and performances are easily available online so that students can watch them over and over again, minutely dissecting directorial decisions and creating montages of scenes for comparative analysis. And then there are all the internet resources on Shakespeare, which are, for the most part, almost disingenuously ahistorical.

The issue of ahistoricity is particularly problematic given that the best scholarship on *Macbeth* over the last twenty years has been New Historicist, placing *Macbeth* firmly in its political and cultural moment of 1607.[1] We know *Macbeth* was written for the newly enthroned James I of England, formerly James IV of Scotland. James I was obsessed with demonology and witches; had

[1] Stephen Greenblatt has been at the forefront of New Historicist approaches to Shakesepeare; his "Shakespeare Bewitched" radically contextualizes *Macbeth* by correlating King James I's paranoia about witches with anxiety about sovereign legitimacy. Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched" in *Shakespeare and Cultural Traditions*, eds. Tetsuo Kishi, Roger Pringle, and Stanley Wells (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 17-42. See also the earlier essay by Peter Stallybrass, "*Macbeth* and Witchcraft" in *Focus on Macbeth*, ed. John Russell Brown (London:Routledge, 1982). A focus on historical contextualization in the classroom has been greatly aided by the publication of William C. Carroll, ed., Macbeth*: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: St. Martin's, 1999) which provides excerpts from most of the primary sources scholars have related to the play. See also Alexander Legatt, ed., *William Shakespeare's* Macbeth: *A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2006), which along with several important primary sources provides a contextual overview and chronology.

very recently been the target of a failed assassination attempt by suppressed Catholic terrorists (the so-called Gunpowder Treason Plot of 1605); and wrote treatises on political authority whose subtext was anxiety about the legitimacy of his succession to the throne of England. These are three themes central to *Macbeth*. But almost none of that is visible in what is easily available to the students online, so you are constantly battling to help the students get some critical and historical perspective. This is true for Kurosawa as well, especially when you are trying to talk about topics they think they know, such as *bushidō.*

In what follows I am going to concentrate on the part of the course that compared *Throne of Blood* with *Macbeth.* Although most of us had to read *Macbeth* in high school, just in case, here is a quick synopsis. Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, is returning home with his friend Banquo from a victory over the traitorous Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo meet three witches on the lonely heath who predict that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland and that Banquo will be the progenitor of kings. Macbeth is swayed by the prophecies and the urging of his ambitious wife to murder his king, Duncan, and take his place. If he had just stopped there, he might have been okay, but consumed by paranoia and guilt, and further encouraged by another ambiguous prophecy ("Macbeth shall never vanquished be until/ Great Birnham Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/ shall come against him"), Macbeth continues to kill anyone he perceives as standing in his way, including his old friend Banquo, and the young family of another lord, Macduff. Eventually the chickens come home to roost when Duncan's son Malcolm brings the English forces against Macbeth, cutting down trees as cover, so Birnham Wood appears to approach Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane. Macduff then kills Macbeth in an exciting finale.

Kurosawa takes *Macbeth* as his point of departure, but creates a new autonomous work, with a new narrative. Washizu Taketoki and Miki Yoshiaki, commanders under *daimyō* Tsuzuki Kuniharu, are returning from a victorious battle over the traitorous Fujimaki, when they get lost in Spiderweb Forest, which surrounds Tsuzuki's castle. There they meet a mysterious hag who predicts that Washizu will be named commander of North Castle and Miki will command Fort One. She further predicts that Washizu will ultimately be lord of Spiderweb Castle and that Miki's son will also be lord of the castle. Washizu is swayed by this prophecy (and his wife Asaji's urging), to kill Tsuzuki when he visits and become lord of the castle. He then goes on to kill his friend Miki, but Miki's son escapes. Driven near madness by guilt and paranoia, he goes back to the hag of the forest to get reassurance. She tells him that he will not be defeated until Spiderweb Forest rises against the castle. Reassured, he returns to the castle to rally his troops against Tsuzuki's son, Kunimaru. But then when Kunimaru cuts down the trees of Spiderweb Forest and uses them as cover to approach the castle, Washizu's troops revolt and turn on him, killing him in a shower of arrows.

Both Shakespeare and Kurosawa chose to set their stories approximately

500 years in the past, but it is clear in both cases the end product is completely symptomatic of the contemporary context. Kurosawa sets *Throne of Blood* in an unspecified Sengoku Warring States period that appears to be before the introduction of guns (1543), so probably the early fifteenth century, but otherwise the film is allowed to float free of historical reference. This enables the film to function as an allegory of more recent events, in particular, problematizing the samurai values of *bushidō* that helped support Japan's catastrophic involvement in WWII.

I could talk about a lot of things at this point, considering that I am trying to compress five weeks of a ten-week course into 20 minutes. But I am a theater scholar, so I will focus on how appropriating traditional Japanese theater, particularly Noh, was helpful to Kurosawa in creating this timeless yet timely period piece. I have always been interested in the ways Kurosawa used Noh to "theatricalize" his films related to Shakespeare, but there was not much academic work on the topic when I taught the course the first time in 1995. When I started prepping for the course this time I was expecting to find some real progress in how scholars have looked at this topic, but it turns out that has not been the case. There are studies that elucidate Kurosawa's sources (especially his use of masks, based on Kurosawa's own comments[2]) or which make generalized comments about Noh (often stereotypes) which are meant to clarify Kurosawa's appropriations, but because the scholars do not really understand Noh, or the Buddhist underpinnings of Noh, they do not see how Kurosawa has translated those literary and visual sources to achieve very different effects. I could spend a good deal of time here talking about all the ways that Kurosawa uses Noh, but instead I am going to try to focus in on just one appropriation: the chanting used to open and close the film.

[2] Kurosawa, in an interview with Sato Tadao, mentions borrowing a demonic hag and her spinning wheel from the Noh play *Kurozuka* (The Black Mound) as the model for his witch; his use of Noh masks (Heita, Shakumi, Chūjō, Yamamba) as a means to help the actors become one with their role; the movement style; and the interiors, which have the feel of a Noh stage. James Goodwin, ed. *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1994), 104-105. For the most part, critics limit themselves to these points, with a further consideration of Kurosawa's possible use Noh's rhythm of *jō-ha-kyū* to structure individual scenes and overall narrative, and influence of Noh on the musical score. James Goodwin's analysis of Kurosawa's use of Noh, based on the interview with Sato, is typical: "Kurosawa values Noh for its symbolic range, dramatic compression, manner of understatement, and its fusion of form and substance." Goodwin suggests other possible Noh masks for Washizu (Mikazuki and Yase-Otoko), elaborates on Kurosawa's possible use of *jō-ha-kyū* rhythm, and while correctly identifying the overall narrative as analogous to a *mugen* (dream vision) Noh, misidentifies *Kurozuka* as a *mugen* Noh. James Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 169-91. It is only quite recently that Mátrai Titanilla identified the short excerpt from a Noh play performed at the banquet as *Tamura* ("The Use of Nō in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*," a paper presented at the annual Asian Studies Conference Japan, Sophia University, Tokyo, June 2009). Prior to that critics appear to have assumed Kurosawa simply made the fragment up. The lack of interest in going beyond a very superficial understanding of the influence of Noh on visual representation, music, and narrative pacing is apparent.

The opening sequence is chanted as though by a Noh chorus, and if we just read the English subtitles, the chorus would appear to be presenting a very generalized vision of the evils of treachery:

> **Subtitles:**
> Look upon the ruins
> Of the castle of delusion
> Haunted only now
> By the spirits
> Of those who perished
> A scene of carnage
> Born of consuming desire
> Never changing
> Now and throughout eternity[3]
>
> **English translation of the Japanese screenplay:**
> Behold the ruins of a castle inhabited by deep-rooted delusion,
> Perpetually haunted by spirits.
> The ruins show the fate of demonic men with treacherous desires.
> Life is the same now as in ancient times.[4]

But let us take a closer look at the Japanese:

> 見よ妄執の城の址
> 魂魄未だ住むごとし
> それ熱心の修羅の道
> 昔も今もかわりなし[5]
>
> **Alternative translation:**
> Behold, the ruins of a castle of deep-rooted delusion,
> haunted even now by spirits/the souls [of men who followed]
> this Ashura path of bloodlust;
> in the present, as in the past, nothing has changed.

[3] *Akira Kurosawa's Throne of Blood* (The Criterion Collection); subtitles by Linda Hoagland. The Criterion Collection version of *Throne of Blood* also provides alternative subtitles by Donald Richie: "Behold, within this place/Now desolated, stood/Once a mighty fortress/Lived a proud warrior/Murdered by ambition/His spirit walking still/Vain pride, then as now will/Lead ambition to the kill." Richie's translation goes further than Hoagland's in erasing any Buddhist understanding of the introductory chant.

[4] Hisae Niki, *Shakespeare Translation in Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: Kenseisha, 1984), 109.

[5] Kurosawa Akira, *Zenshū*: *Kurosawa Akira* vol. 4 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988), 143.

The key here is the phrase *nesshin no shura no michi* (the path of Ashura warriors overcome with passion/bloodlust). One understands completely why this phrase is not translated literally in the subtitles or even in the English translation of the screenplay—it would take a lengthy footnote or a talk like this one to explain it to a western audience. But we have a few minutes here, so let us think about it together. The phrase itself signals a Buddhist framework to the story, since the *shura no michi* refers to the Ashura Hell, one of the six or nine paths of reincarnation, where warriors are forced to relive their final battles over and over again. Kurosawa is saying quite explicitly that the path of the samurai (*bushidō*) is the path of the Ashura, and that whether you chose that path in the past, or the present, it will only lead to an unending cycle of violence. He is not differentiating between good samurai values or bad samurai values, as he does in some of his other films; here he is making a blanket statement.

Another point here is that the phrase *shura no michi*, especially when chanted Noh style, is going to immediately evoke the category of Noh plays known as *shuramono*, literally plays about Ashura, but in practice, plays about samurai warriors who figured in *Tales of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*). These samurai come back as ghosts, appearing in a dream vision to a wandering Buddhist priest in an attempt to get his help achieving release from the Ashura Hell. In the course of the play they reenact their final battles for us, but often as they do so, they fall back into the obsessive bloodlust that caught them in the first place. The question in the end is whether they will be able to break free of that dream hell and achieve enlightenment or not.

So the reference to Noh here is functioning in several ways. First, the chanted section which opens and closes the film frames the story as a dream vision in which samurai will be tempted by ambition and obsessive bloodlust, with the implication that now, as then, the path of the samurai can only lead to souls haunting the devastated ruins of their former glory. In the film the chanted sections at the beginning and end of the film are identical, but in the original screenplay, the film was marked even more clearly as a kind of dream vision Noh (*mugen nō*) by the addition of these lines:

寄せ手見えしは
風の葦
鬨の音と聞こえしは
松の風
それ熱心の修羅の道
昔も今もかわりなし[6]

The attacking force we saw:
reeds in the wind.
The sounds of war we heard:

[6] Kurosawa, *Zenshū* vol. 4, 174.

wind in the pines.
This Ashura path of bloodlust;
in the present, as in the past, nothing has changed.

Compare this wording to the ending of the Noh play *Yashima,* in which the Minamoto warrior Yoshitsune reenacts the battle of Yashima, which took place at sea:

水や空
空行くも又雲の波の
討ち合ひ刺し違ふる
船車の駆け引き
浮沈むとせし程に
春の夜の波より明けて
敵と見えし
群れゐるかもめ
鬨の声と聞こえしは
通風なりけり高松の
朝嵐とぞ成りにけり[7]

Sea and sky
mixed in waves of clouds
rising and falling
we grapple boats
stabbing and striking, until
the spring dawn breaks through the waves
and the enemies we saw:
a flock of seagulls;
the sounds of war we heard:
a bay wind sighing through tall pines,
remnants of a morning storm.

In the film, Kurosawa chose to simply repeat the opening chant, but the alternative ending in the screenplay, which clearly alludes to *Yashima,* adds further support to the idea that Kurosawa is using the chanting to frame Washizu's story as a dream vision *shuramono* from Noh.

However at this point, in the course and in this lecture, it becomes necessary to think about how Noh is different from what is happening in the film, and this is usually where both critics and students run into trouble. In particular, I want to focus on how the Buddhist themes central to Noh are deployed only selectively by Kurosawa. When I teach this course, I have the students read a text on the basics of Buddhism, and give a short introductory lecture on it to

[7] Nishino Haruo, ed. *Yōkyoku Hyakuban* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998), 459.

help them understand the reference to *nesshin no shura no michi* here, as well as later Buddhist statements voiced by the hag of the forest about the futility and transience of human life and the dangers of passionate attachments.

With regard to Kurosawa's use of Buddhism, it is striking that in Kurosawa's dream vision there is a *shura no michi* (an Ashura Hell), but there is no wandering priest, no chanting of the Lotus Sutra, no Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to help us out of the hell of passionate attachments. And if you think about religions, and how they function, you can see that this is an untenable position. How religions generally work is that you start with a god that saves you from death and promises you a heavenly afterlife; pretty soon, however, it becomes clear that the promise of a great afterlife is not enough for a lot of people. If you are trying to convince people to follow your religion, you need more than a carrot, you also need a stick. At this point horrendous hells develop that you can fall into for various, often fairly trivial, reasons, and which you need help to get out of. So what is striking in *Throne of Blood* is that Kurosawa keeps the supernatural references (*yūrei*, *bakemono*, *mononoke*), but removes all reference to saving deities who might help these ghosts and demons caught in hell. It is all stick, no carrot. Kurosawa's version of Buddhism is an existentialist, even nihilist version, a seemingly completely modern view, which makes sense, because he has constructed an allegory for modern times. Life is brutal and short, and we are stuck here all by ourselves, a theme that becomes even more pronounced in *Ran*, where Amida Buddha is mentioned, but shown to be powerless to stop the suffering and carnage in this degenerate age. The references to Noh are there to help locate the story in a very specific time period (Muromachi) but then, paradoxically, by referencing dream vision Noh, to create a dreamy, other-worldly atmosphere; the sense that this story is timeless, that the characters transcend time and place, and so the story is just as true now as then. And stripping out the references to Buddhist deities that are so central to Noh enables the allegory.

Having made that point, in closing I want to problematize it slightly. Let us return to the problem of hell and how it is represented in Noh. There are two basic versions of hell in the medieval Japanese imagination. One views hell as a literal place. This is the hell that is portrayed in *emaki* and *etoki* scrolls that itinerant Buddhist entertainers used for didactic entertainment. This kind of literal hell is also spoofed in Kyogen comic plays, where the dead spirit of a bird-catcher, say, arrives at the crossroads of the Six Paths of Reincarnation and meets up with Enma the King of Hell, who has been having a hard time getting sinners lately because the Pure Land Sects have been so successful. Invariably in these Kyogen, the human being manages by some quick thinking to trick Enma into letting him go to heaven rather than hell. In the case of the bird catcher, he offers Enma some tasty fried bird and Enma is so enamored of the taste, he sends the bird catcher back to life to catch him some more.[8]

[8] For a fuller discussion of Kyogen plays that deal with hell, see Carolyn Haynes, "Comic Inversion

The other hell is metaphorical. A good example is the "Tree of Swords" located in the "Hell of Bodily Clashes." Here is the Tendai monk Genshin's description of the Tree of Swords in *Ōjōyōshū* (Collection of Essentials on Going to Rebirth, 938), as translated by William LaFleur:

> Sometimes the wardens of hell seize those sent there and put them in the grove of trees whose leaves are really blades. If the men there look to the top of such trees what they see are seated women, former lovers, who are gorgeous and beautifully attired. This delights the men so much that they immediately try to climb such trees—only to discover that their leaves, like blades, cut into their skin and then pierce right to their muscles, lacerating their entire bodies. When at last these men reach the top of these trees they discover that the women they were after are now down on the ground level. But with coquettish looks these women turn their eyes up towards the sinful males at the top of the trees and say things such as they did in the past—phrases like: "It is my karmic destiny to be in love with you. That is why I have come here. Oh, you! Why don't you come down this minute to be close to me and embrace me?" At this point the deluded men get fired up with erotic passion once again and start to descend the trees. But when they do this the blade-leaves rotate so that, like razors, their edges now point upward—thus to sliver and slice completely the bodies of these males as they make their way groundward. And then when they reach that goal they discover the women are once again back on the treetops. So all over again the males begin their ascent of the trees. This process goes on for more years than can be counted—at least ten trillion. This is what it is like to be deceived by the hallucinations that one manufactures in one's own mind. This is the infinite repetitions that are produced—the burnings that result from passions in the domain of sex and eros.[9]

Note that unlike some of the other hells represented in medieval hell scrolls, there are no demons standing around with clubs forcing the man to do this. The man is bringing this torture on himself; in fact, he appears to be in a hell constructed out of memories and desires specific to him. So when I

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in Kyôgen: Ghosts and the Nether World," *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 22:1 (1988): 29-40.

[9] For a fuller description in English of the Tree of Swords and the deployment of its associated imagery in a Noh play, see William LaFleur, " Vegetation from Hell: Blossoms, Sex, Leaves and Blades in *Ominameshi*" in *The Noh* Ominameshi: *A Flower Viewed from Many Directions*, ed. Mae J. Smethurst and Christina Laffin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2003), 149-68.

am talking about this with my students, I always ask them, how can the man escape this hell? And the answer is, simply, he wakes up to the fact that his own obsessive sexual passion is what is causing him pain and suffering, and that all he needs to do is let go of that passionate attachment. Once he does this, the hell will end. He does not need a Bodhisattva, he just needs to make a decision for himself and he will be released. The correlative to this reading of hell, is that hell is metaphorical, not literal. There is no suffering worse than the hell that we experience in this life from our obsession with sex, and ambition, and worldly success. And that all we need to gain release from that suffering is to make a decision to not keep going down that path of violence, to not keep climbing that sword tree of passion. And as it turns out, most warrior Noh plays that reenact the suffering of a samurai ghost in Ashura Hell take this more metaphorical view of hell. To gain release from their suffering takes a conscious choice on the part of the ghost to break out of the personalized dream of hell that holds them in thrall, and instead choose enlightenment.

So here is the real conclusion. Although Shakespeare is in the title of this talk, I have not mentioned him much. I want to bring him in now. One of the discussion questions that I have the students think about is the question of free will in *Macbeth* and *Throne of Blood*. That is, does Macbeth have a choice? Could he have chosen otherwise? What about Washizu? If I ask that question before I have talked about the medieval metaphorical view of hell, 95% of the students will say, "Macbeth has a choice, Washizu does not." And this is actually the position of most of the critics as well.[10] The framing of the story as an endless cycle of violence, heaping up karma upon karma, pushes critics to read Washizu as having no choice, and they therefore read the film as deeply pessimistic. But from my perspective, when Kurosawa strips out the Buddhist deities from his dream vision Noh framing, he is actually giving agency back to Washizu in a way very similar to how hell is understood metaphorically in Noh. Washizu decided to follow this path, and his life became a hell on earth. But he could have decided otherwise. And this leaves open the possibility that we too, could choose not to go down that path to war and its endless cycle of retributive violence, a lesson that is just as badly needed today as it was back in 1957.

[10] Donald Richie makes this argument most succinctly in his introduction to *Throne of Blood*: "The characters have no future. Cause and effect is the only law. Freedom does not exist." Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, revised edition 1998), 115.