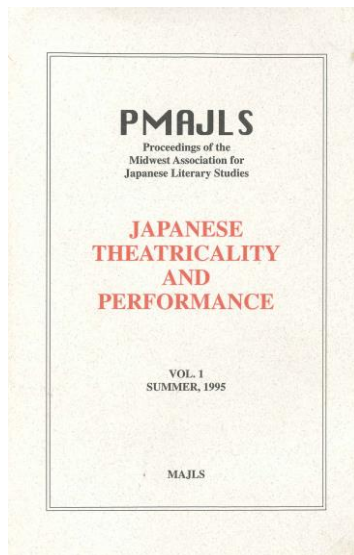


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**SIGNS OF PERFORMANCE: BENTEN KOZŌ BY
KAWATAKE MOKUAMI**

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In the Tokugawa period, the government always considered *kabuki* as a necessary evil which had to be isolated from the rest of the society. Therefore, the government imposed many restrictions over the *kabuki* production. The theaters were strictly limited in numbers and also were concentrated in particular districts far away from the center of town. The actors were considered social outcasts. Above all, the productions were under the strict governmental control and censored all the time. However, using "performance" as a method of conveying important messages, with devices such as the acting of constant and spontaneous transformation of the characters, *kabuki* could implicitly criticize the class structure of the Tokugawa society. Unlike the plot of typical western drama, which follows the gradual development of the central character, the plot of *kabuki* is built around numerous transformations. This trend was a sign of rebellion against the establishment of the strict social structure of the Tokugawa period, which, as a result of social petrification, stereotyped social roles and reduced human freedom. The Tokugawa society was a class society which placed samurai, farmer, artisan and merchant in a hierarchical order. As an individual's position in the society was practically fixed, it was extremely difficult for any individual to change his/her

profession or social status. The social difference between man and woman was also very strict. Moreover, because of the seclusion policy, which isolated Japan from the outside world, the status quo of the society was effectively maintained. By presenting the characters assuming double or even triple identities, *kabuki* plays criticize the Tokugawa class-structure which valued the fixed identity of the members of the society. The creation of the art of *onnagata*, female impersonation, also helped male-female transformation become popular in *kabuki*.

Aoto zōshi hana no nishikie, or *Shiranami gonin otoko*, a dramatization of activities and fate of a famous group of five bandits, written towards the very end of the Tokugawa period in 1862, is considered to be the last flower of typical Edo style *kabuki*. It was written by Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893), the leading playwright in late Tokugawa and early Meiji *kabuki*, for an all-star production centering around Onoe Kikugorō V, who was a dazzling young actor from a popular theatrical family, playing the protagonist, Benten kozō. The five bandits, especially Benten Kozō, the chief bandit Nippon Daemon and Benten's foster brother Nangō Rikimaru present many scenes of transformation on stage one after the other. In Act I, Benten kozō in the disguise of Shinoda no Kotarō, a noble samurai youth, seduces and rapes Princess Senjyu, a young daughter of a daimyō who has been engaged to Kotarō. In Act II, Benten reveals his true identity and takes away from the princess a precious incense-case, the princess kills herself. Benten encounters a famous bandit, Nippon Daemon and becomes his follower. Act III presents Benten and his fellow bandit Nangō Rikimaru, posing as a beautiful maiden of the samurai class and her attendant, Benten and his fellow bandit Nangō Rikimaru visit a textile shop,

Hamamatsuya. They feign shop lifting and deliberately allow themselves to be caught, demanding money in recompense upon the discovery of their innocence. An older samurai, who happens to be present, sees through Benten's female disguise. Later, however, the samurai reveals his true identity as the chief bandit Nippon Daemon and unfolds his scheme of play acting in order to break into the textile shop. Surprisingly, the confession of the shop's owner reveals Benten's hidden identity as the long lost son of the owner himself. At the same time, Daemon discovers that an adopted son of the owner is his own child whom he abandoned seventeen years ago. In Act IV, pursued by the police to the bank of the Inase River, the five bandits are introduced their names and backgrounds in rhythmical speech, displaying their gorgeous costumes. Although they make a close escape, in Act V Benten finally is cornered on the roof of a temple and commits suicide in a showy manner, while the others are captured. The lost treasure, the incense-case, is finally recovered by Aoto Fujitsuna, who is sent to capture Daemon.

The production of this play conveys two totally contradicting messages. The plot and the speeches of the characters strongly emphasize "morality", but the idea illustrated in the performance is "theatricality". The text gives the impression that good overcomes evil, while the visual and musical aspects of the play suggest the triumph of illusion and fantasy over everyday life and reality.

The plot of the play which depicts the rise and fall of the five bandits strongly reflects the idea of "encouraging the good and punishing the evil". The speeches of the main characters greatly emphasize Confucian moral codes, loyalty and the filial piety. The reason Mokuami created these extremely moralistic text is simply because he had to deal with

the strict censorship by the Tokugawa government. Starting his career as a young playwright in 1834, six years before the beginning of the notorious Tempo reform, Mokuami had a good reason to be extremely careful about the censorship of the government. Indeed, during the reform, the Tokugawa government suppressed kabuki by severely removing Danjūrō VII, the greatest actor in Edo, from the stage and by ordering the three main theaters to relocate into desolate settlements. Therefore, the playwright deliberately constructed the plot in order to satisfy the government so that they wouldn't interfere with the production. At first, Mokuami recasted the whole play in the background of a medieval folk tale, *Shida*. Princess Senjyu, her late father Koyama no Hangan and her fiancé, Shinoda no Kotarō are the characters taken from this folk tale. Most of the main characters of the play are somewhat related to the house of Koyama although they don't appear in the original folk tale. As *Shida* is a story which takes place in Kamakura period, the background of the play is medieval Kamakura as well. This is the device which was used not only by Mokuami but also by other kabuki playwrights as the government having a strong distaste for political and social criticism, prohibited any kabuki production dramatizes contemporary affairs. Secondly, the idea expressed in the text is the idea which the government tried to impose on the people, Confucian moral code. The playwright created the main characters as virtuous bandits, who stole and burglarized but who is "more honest and just than most men". They respect the Tokugawa moral code, showing loyalty and filial piety. When his true identity as the son of the textile shop owner is revealed, Benten suddenly starts to behave as a virtuous, devoted son. One of the members of the bandits, Akaboshi Jyūzaburō joins the troupe in order to save the life of

his old master's wife. Daemon also expresses penitence and apologizes his evil deeds when he realizes that he tries to break in a shop whose owner has taken care of his biological son.

Apparently, however, these moralistic personalities are the masks Mokuami put on these characters in order to satisfy the Tokugawa censorship. When Daemon tries to surrender, Aoto Fujitsuna praises him by saying "Those who are good at evil deeds are also good at virtuous deeds, I believe." Mokuami's characters often make statement like this to justify their sudden change of character. Because of these speeches, these characters have been criticized as being life-size marionette whose roles are governed by the superficial social moral code. The real meaning of the statement is, however, that the characters, as well as the playwright didn't care at all whether the characters are evil or virtuous. Everybody knows that the real theme of the play is the triumph of theatricality and illusion over the reality and everyday life. Mokuami deliberately portrayed his main characters as bandits because they are the ones who transform. Throughout his career, bandits were Mokuami's favorite characters. As being social outcasts, these bandits do not have any identity fixed in Tokugawa class society and they even wear disguises in order to swindle money or a treasure. Benten, the central character of the play is an orphan, whose identity switches all the time. In this sense, bandit in this play are the metaphor of the actors. Actually, the actor for whom Mokuami created this character, Onoe Kikugorō V, was an extremely versatile actor who was skilled at presenting scenes of transformation. The two most appealing and thus most popular scenes in the play, up until nowadays deal with transformation and the theatrical performance of the main characters, bandits. The one is Act III, a scene in a textile shop where Benten, removing his

kimono and displaying gorgeous tattoos, transforms from an elegant, decent maiden to an attractive but lowly juvenile delinquent and eloquently introduce himself as a member of five famous bandits. The other is the “gathering” scene by the Inase River in which the five bandits wearing gorgeous costumes and holding umbrellas with “Bandit” logos, proudly introduce their background with musical accompaniment. Likewise, the scene Benten kills himself, on the roof of a temple surrounded by cherry blossoms is a great spectacle which is designed to display not a miserable fate of a villain but the pathetic beauty of a dying youth. Although the five bandits are eventually defeated, their gorgeous costumes, rhythmical speeches, attractive, dance-like acting and above all, their numerous and spontaneous transformations show the audience that the world of illusion and theatricality is more attractive than their strictly controlled everyday life.

It is important to note that the visual aspects also clearly illustrate that the real background of the play is not Medieval Kamakura but the nineteenth century Edo. The theatrical adventure of the bandits appealed the Tokugawa audience because the characters confront not with a fantastic medieval society but the contemporary Tokugawa society and its moral code. For example, although the text states that Hamamatsuya the textile shop in Act III is located in Yukinoshita, Kamakura, the stage setting and the costumes of the scene clearly display that the action takes place in a shop in contemporary Nihonbashi, the central part of Edo. Likewise the Act IV is called “the Inase River” a well-known river in Kamakura but the illustration which is drawn on the backdrop is the scenery of the nineteenth century Sumida River in Edo.

Interestingly, extreme theatricality of the work is emphasized by the device that some of the scenes are the

parodies of other plays which were popular in nineteenth century Edo. Act I takes place in front of the Hase-temple in Kamakura. The whole plot of the scene, however, an innocent princess who falls in love with a handsome youth in front of beautiful cherry blossom is based on the same kind of scene in *Shin usuyuki monogatari*, a play which was extremely popular at the time of the first production of *Shiranami gonin otoko*. Therefore, Benten who is in a disguise of Shinoda no Kotarō also plays a part, in the imagination of the audience, of Sonobe Saemon, the hero of *Shin usuyuki monogatari*. In Act V Scene ii, a pagoda with Daemon in a striking black and gold costume rises through the trap-door set in the stage. This scene is based on another famous piece, *Sanmon gosan no kiri*. Thus, Daemon's image doubles with the legendary bandit Ishikawa Goemon, the hero of *Sanmon gosan no kiri*. Moreover, Aoto Fujitsuna, who appears briefly in the very last scene in order to capture Daemon is the hero of *Aoto zōshi*, a popular play based on two novels of Takizawa Bakin and first produced in 1846.

As the protagonist of the play is Benten who represents theatricality and transformation, the antagonist of the play is Yokurō, a clerk of the textile shop who represents everyday life. Throughout Act IV, he antagonizes with Benten, finding out Benten's fake shoplifting, hitting Benten with an abacus and eventually is struck by Benten on the cheek. In Act V, Yokurō, who has stolen the precious incense-case is caught and killed by Benten's fellow bandit and foster brother, Nangō. Indeed, Yokurō is a negative image of Edo commoners who were also the majority of the audience of the play. Yokurō's name itself suggests his greediness. It reflects the situation of Edo commoners who were living under pressure of commercialism. While the bandits always appear

on stage in gorgeous costumes, often in bright colors, Yokurō is wearing drab color, a typical uniform of a shop clerk. This costume reflects the fact that in Edo period commoners were not allowed to wear any gorgeous clothes. The theatergoers of the Edo period loved theatricality, especially towards the end of the period when social unrest threatened people's life. As they hated their own everyday life, Yokurō eventually had to be defeated by one of the bandits.

In the Tokugawa period, *kabuki* actors were social outcasts, isolated from all commerce with society at large. Being outcasts, however, they could criticize the class society by their acting of constant, spontaneous transformation. *Shiranami gonin otoko* (The five famous bandits) means the five attractive actors. No matter what the characters say, their true function is to transform, in order to implicitly criticize the strict class structure of the Tokugawa period.

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