

Remembrance of Wars Past: The Trojan War and the  
Fall of the Heike in Greek Tragedy and Noh Drama  
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Along with many formal attributes and performance conventions that have often been noted, Greek tragedy shares with Japanese noh drama another important feature: both draw a substantial part of their repertoire from a stock of stories about a legendary/mythic war (the Trojan War; the twelfth-century Genpei War) transmitted through an oral epic tradition that had already selected certain episodes in accord with the particular interests and attitudes of its audience (e.g., the *Iliad*; the *Tale of the Heike*). Just as the formal similarities between noh and tragedy mask fundamental differences, so are the parallels between their inheritances of a tradition of war tales seen to diverge when we look closely at what each makes of these stories. This paper will explore differences in religious and political concerns, focusing on two representative plays, Sophocles' *Ajax* and Zeami's *Atsumori*. These plays provide interesting grounds for comparison in that each is about a warrior who attempts an act of vengeance.

To begin with, the Trojan War was recalled even in the epic tradition as both a great exploit (and triumph for the Greek side) and a great waste. In addition, justice on both Greek and Trojan sides was a central concern, especially the justice and limits of revenge. The Genpei War was looked at from just one side in the *Tale of the Heike*: as a moral lesson of the inevitable fall of overreaching power, exemplified by the rise and collapse of the Heike, or Taira, clan; the triumph of the Genji (Minamoto) rates hardly at all. In noh this theme of downfall is augmented by a concern with releasing the spirits of slain warriors from the bad karma brought on by their feelings of vengeance, so their souls may find rest.

In respect of religion, I will argue that *Ajax*, much like the *OT*, is structured around the Greek obsession with the position of man between beast and god. (*Ajax* does not become divine, but is lifted from the level of beasts to that of a hero with protective powers, along the logical lines of the god-human-beast continuum.) *Atsumori* focuses on the Buddhist view of the evanescence and ultimate nothingness of life, and the need to obtain release from karmic attachment. While this view overlaps with a crucial strain of Greek thought about human transience (itself corresponding to the mortal beast versus immortal god), it goes much further; and there is in it no idea of a divinely exalted side of man.

As for politics, tragedy as is well known was intimately engaged with issues of concern to the city-state. *Ajax* questions whether heroic ideals of justice (*Ajax*) can be integrated into the democratic polis (*Odysseus*), with an ultimately pessimistic conclusion (*Teucer* who cannot fully assume *Ajax*'s position, *Odysseus* excluded from *Ajax*'s funeral). *Atsumori*, like other "warrior" noh, focuses on reconciliation between *Atsumori* and his killer and his release from karma; sad, but hardly pessimistic; rather, consolatory and uplifting, and with no reference to (intractable) civic or political problems.

We can explain these differences by noting that tragedy operated in a setting of citizen participation in a civic festival, where power is regarded as in the open and the polis can examine itself. Under the shogunate there was no comparable politics. The plays were not part of civic/political festivals. The political dimension of noh is not overt, but covert. By dramatizing release from struggle through Buddhist detachment, noh served the need of the shogunate to keep the peace. And by focusing on war's waste rather than glorifying the triumph of the Genji that had after all brought the shogunate to power, noh comported with the Japanese practice, ancient and modern, of keeping power hidden.