

The Successful Citizen or the Harmony of the Realm? Drama Theory and Society in Aristotle and Zeami

This paper will argue that comparison of Aristotle's theory of tragedy with Zeami's writings about Japanese noh drama can shed significant light on both. While Zeami's statements about the social function of noh, in view of the very different function of Greek tragedy, can be seen as more interconnected with his remarks about how to perform noh to best effect than he himself makes explicit, Aristotle's analysis of how to construct the best tragic plot, in light of the different form and performance goals of noh, can be seen as more pertinent to tragedy's social function than is often recognized.

For both Aristotle and Zeami the function of the art form in question is essentially bound up with its origins and nature. Zeami finds the origins of noh in mythic rites of shamanic possession that brought powerful spirits into harmony with the rest of nature, and in accounts of Buddhist plays that had the purpose of calming discord among Buddha's followers. Hence noh's function came to be "to soothe the minds of the people, and to move the sensibilities of both the high and the low equally," so as to calm disturbances and bring peace to the country. Noh accomplishes this by presenting a drama that does not develop a plot so much as bring the audience into a deep identification with the mind of the main character, in a process akin to spirit possession, as Zeami illustrates through his many references to the crucial need for performance to touch the mind of the audience. I will argue that this performance goal puts in practice the key Confucian concept of *shu*, "deference," a process by which people come to a oneness with the minds of others to the end of effecting social harmony.

Aristotle locates the origins of all mimetic art in the human tendency to imitate and in the pleasure people take in mimetic objects, especially their cognitive contents. The unitary tragic plot specifically models a significant pattern of human action for cognitive perception. Stephen Halliwell has shown how far this treatment of plot departs from mere aestheticism. I will argue that we can further see in Aristotle's theory of the origins and nature of mimetic art, as well as in his primary example of the tragic plot, a fundamental impulse of polis life from the beginnings of democracy. That is, to employ the new technologies of thought—tragic mimesis, historiography, rhetorical theory, moral and political philosophy—to model basic patterns of human action, an understanding of which can better enable people to direct their own individual or collective activities toward success and happiness in the competitive arena of the polis, and to avoid failure or misfortune. This function of tragedy stands in vivid contrast to the purposes of noh drama. Further, Aristotle's focus on individual ethics and achievement in tragedy shows to what extent Greek society, for all its concern with political stability, was animated by personal fulfillment, in contrast to the natural-social harmony that was of paramount importance to medieval Japan.

Main Bibliography:

Halliwell, Stephen, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago 1998).

Zeami, *The Flowering Spirit [Fûshikaden]*, trans. William Scott Wilson (Kodansha 2006).