

The early history of the noh play: Literacy,  
authorship, and scriptedness.

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## The Early History of the Noh Play: Literacy, Authorship, and Scriptedness

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### The Early History of the Noh Play Literacy, Authorship, and Scriptedness

*Noel J. Pinnington (bio)*

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Noh theatre, a subtle and sophisticated masked musical drama, is one of the most celebrated and studied of Japan's literary and theatrical traditions. Noh employs both narration and enactment, using several arts: mimicry, singing, dance, drumming, and flute playing, as well as such ancillary arts as mask making and costume and prop design. In addition, it has its own prescribed stage, with special methods of construction, design, and maintenance. Noh is much more than the acting out of a story; it has religious roots and exists on the border between entertainment and ritual. At the same time, it is profoundly literary; most of its master-works reveal their playwrights to have been familiar with both Japanese and Chinese classics, employing a diction based on allusion to earlier works.

Noh has been continuously performed for more than six centuries, with several unbroken lines of specialists, all claiming origins in the fourteenth century. Growing out of a genre of popular plays, called *sarugaku* 猿楽 (also read *sarugō*), noh can be traced back at least as far as the late Kamakura period. The *sarugaku* plays were included in the repertoires of a number of performance traditions, some of which were transmitted by *za* 座, or troupes affiliated with religious or public institutions. The most prominent troupes in the fourteenth century that put on plays (in addition to other types of performance) were *sarugaku za* and *dengaku* 田楽 *za*. Whether and to what degree the plays that were called *sarugaku* had any special connection with the troupes called *sarugaku* is not clear.

*Sarugaku* as a performance tradition can be traced back to Chinese entertainments imported into Japan in the Nara period, but by the fourteenth century it had gone through numerous transformations. By then, *sarugaku* troupes were associated with several religious institutions; their associations with such institutions in Yamato, Ōmi, and other provinces are particularly important in tracing the history of noh. The *dengaku* performance tradition derived originally from agricultural work songs, but had evolved beyond recognition. Two troupes (the “new” *shinza* 新座 and “original” *honza* 本座) became particularly

prominent in the Kamakura period, winning [End Page 163] the patronage of warrior leaders in Kamakura. This patronage continued in the fourteenth century under the Ashikaga shoguns in Kyoto.

Beyond the repertoires of these particular groups of performers, the fourteenth century also inherited a number of other performing arts traditions. For example, in large temples, monks and acolytes performed entertainments, called *ennen* 延年, for their own pleasure. *Ennen* included popular dances and songs, and also possibly plays, although the details are unclear.<sup>1</sup> The warrior elite, for their part, had a tradition of banquets that they brought to Kyoto at the start of the Muromachi shogunate in the late 1330s. At such banquets, party songs called *sōga* 早歌, or *enkyoku* 宴曲, were commonly offered, as were the newly popular *kusemai* 曲舞, a genre of song accompanied by dance in which the beat took precedence over the natural rhythm of the words. Another occasion for the performing arts was the shrine festival. The most famous was probably the Gion shrine festival, a revival of which—the Gion Matsuri—is still celebrated in Kyoto. These events included processions in which various types of performers paraded through the streets; the festivals culminated in sacred dances, performed at shrines by shrine maidens and priests. Lastly, public performances called *kanjin* 勧進 were organized by temples and other institutions to raise money. The increase in the popularity of plays in the fourteenth century was intimately bound up with the search, by those who organized *kanjin*, for entertainments that large numbers of people were willing to pay to see. Both *dengaku* and *sarugaku* troupes performed plays at *kanjin* in the provinces and in the capital.

When scholars consider how these plays developed into the refined art of noh theatre, they pay a great deal of attention to two actors, Kan'ami 観阿弥 (1333–1384) and his son, Zeami 世阿弥 (1363–1443), ancestors of today's Kanze 観世 school.<sup>2</sup> These two men are generally credited with having established the new noh theatre, writing its plays and developing its theories on training, acting, and aesthetics. Their plays, as well...

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## Literacy, Authorship, and Scriptedness

NOEL J. PINNINGTON

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Penelope Francks: *Technology and agricultural development in pre-war Japan*. [xiv], 322 pp. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984. £22.50, the node, in the first approximation, emits a direct valence electron.

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