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# Altar And Stage: Liturgical Drama in Three Theatrical Traditions

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ALTAR AND STAGE: LITURGICAL DRAMA IN THREE THEATRICAL  
TRADITIONS

by

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## DEDICATION

For Laura, Connie, Mom and Dad

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## ABSTRACT

This paper compares the historical, religious and political situations surrounding the origins of three important dramaturgical texts: *Regularis Concordia* in tenth-century England, The *Natyasastra* in seventh-century India, and Zeami's *Fushikaden* of fifteenth-century Muromaki Japan. It attempts to explore and identify the ways that their corresponding theatres have their roots in liturgical practice, and how those liturgical practices are intricately tied up in the historical and political situations in which they came to be. The fundamental qualities of theatre which I explore are five key areas in which the three traditions, surprisingly, converge as often as they diverge: in their emphasis on religious subject matter; in their didactic intention; in their use of artistic "conventions"; in their emergence from popular, rural traditions; and in their spheres of influence on later theatrical forms. Special attention is paid both to the dramaturgical texts themselves and how these texts were used to inform and create plays within their corresponding traditions.

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## INTRODUCTION

The final scenes in eighth-century classical Indian playwright Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacharita*, or *Rama's Later History*, should be striking to any student of the Western drama. Rama, the incarnate God Krishna's human form, having been granted by his epic biographer Valmiki the gift of a play performance, witnesses for the first time a dramatization of his beloved, Sita's, trials that followed her unjust banishment from Rama's court. Jealous at his wife's seeming infidelity, Rama had cast his wife out of the kingdom, and believing her lost he watches as she endures with all virtue the tribulations of the wilderness and gives birth to his sons, blessed and escorted by the goddesses Ganga and Prithivi. Overcome with pathos, Rama emerges at last into a full recognition of his own guilty heart; indeed, into an understanding even of his own essential self:

Ah! Very terrible is the shock to my inmost heart. Ah! My queen, it was even so. Ha! Ha! The incidents of worldly life, unpleasant through sudden reverses and ending in the grief of separation, afflict us. Where now is the great delight abounding in the most intimate confidences? Where that mutual love and where the deep emotions full of admiration for each other and where that union of hearts in joy or sorrow? Nevertheless this life of mine still throbs; and the wretchedness does not cease. Oh pity! I have been forced to remember the time, though it is painful to remember, which was charming because of the wonderful disclosing at one and the same moment of the thousand virtues of my beloved. (423)

There is a long history of "plays within plays" in the Western tradition. Even drawing only from Shakespeare's canon, the key demonstration of characters' inmost selves in *Hamlet* and *A Winter's Tale*, for example, and the conversion of desire in *The Tempest*, come by way of dramatic revelation.



In *Rama's Later History*, points out Bhavabhuti's English editor and critic Henry W. Wells, Rama's transformation which occurs as a product of the play within a play prefigures what is intended to happen even to the audience, as the detached bitterness that drove Rama to thrust Sita out of his kingdom to fend for herself gives way to an overflowing compassion: "The monster, fantasy, has been tamed by art" (354). This larger meaning points to the dramatic conversion which the art form hopes to effect in a universal way: "The conclusion provides a spectacle at last uniting gods and mortals, heaven and earth, fiction and reality. Sita is honoured by all as pure and sacred as a goddess. Rama's sacred dynasty is established. Divine harmony overcomes all discord" (355). The religious embracing of this divine harmony is one of the finest examples of how the Indian theatrical tradition blurred the lines of liturgical and theatrical practice.

In fact, many theatrical traditions have their roots in liturgical practice, and most liturgical practices are intricately tied up in the historical and political situations in which they come to be: liturgy and history are in intimate dialogue. I hope in this paper to compare the historical, religious and political situations surrounding the origins of three important dramaturgical texts—*Regularis Concordia* in tenth-century England, *The Natyasastra* in seventh-century India, and Zeami's *Fushikaden* of fifteenth-century Muromaki Japan— and in so doing to explore the way that their corresponding theatres, almost certainly created in near-complete isolation from one another, are uncannily similar in style, purport, and content.

To place our consideration in context, I begin with a rather lengthy quote from Tennessee Williams:

About their lives people ought to remember that when they are finished, everything in them will be contained in a marvelous state of

repose which is the same as that which they unconsciously admired in drama. The rush is temporary. The great and only possible dignity of man lies in his power deliberately to choose certain moral values by which to live as steadfastly as if he, too, like a character in a play, were immured against the corrupting rush of time. Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence. As far as we know, as far as there exists any kind of empiric evidence, there is no way to beat the game of *being* against *non-being*, in which non-being is the predestined victor on realistic levels.

Yet plays in the tragic tradition offer us a view of certain moral values in violent juxtaposition. Because we do not participate, except as spectators, we can view them clearly, within the limits of our emotional equipment. These people on the stage do not return our looks. We do not have to answer their questions nor make any sign of being in company with them, nor do we have to compete with their virtues nor resist their offences. All at once, for this reason, we are able to *see* them! Our hearts are wrung by recognition and pity, so that the dusky shell of the auditorium where we are gathered anonymously together is flooded with an almost liquid warmth of unchecked human sympathies, relieved of self-consciousness, allowed to function. (276)

In this mid-twentieth century meditation on the unique artistic significance of the theatre, *The Timeless World of the Play*, Williams describes a theatrical experience that achieves the goal of the religious traditions I explore here: a view of life and time that transcends the limitations of the smaller self, and a larger perspective on reality through the lens of eternity. In stylistic *convention* Williams' theatrical experience, where we are not expected to "make any sign of being in company with them," may be very different from the ones I will explore here, but he touches on a spiritual dimension in theatre that most every tradition intuits. The attributes of performance may vary between the three traditions and dramaturgical texts that I discuss, but even the most cursory exploration of these three theatres will reveal a multitude of similar features.

I will delineate where the aesthetic and dramaturgical traditions diverge, but as I will further demonstrate, those departures are far less striking than their convergences, especially considering how the theatrical traditions of India, Japan and England came into

being mostly in isolation from one another. In the process of looking more deeply at the historical—and in some cases mythological— context for each theatre, I will try to expose the similarities between these traditions in five central areas:

1. Religious subject matter
2. Didactic intention
3. Stylistic and symbolic conventionality
4. Emergence from popular, rural traditions
5. Spheres of influence on later forms

## I. RELIGIOUS SUBJECT MATTER

The three theatrical traditions in question are inseparable from their religious contexts: secularization of any one of these traditions would not happen until centuries later, if it happened at all. For example, with the exception of folk drama in England, which I will discuss in greater detail in a later chapter, theatre in England would not depart from explicitly Biblical motifs, plots and themes until the British imperial state had established an independent identity potent enough to legitimize secular and commercial art. Extant plays were subsidized either by Christian churches or by local trade guilds and authorized for religious holidays whose dates had been established to coincide with—and therefore “baptize”—pagan festivals (Kretzmann 10).

The tenth-century ecclesial document *Regularis Concordia* is, as a dramaturgical text, most important for its text and explanation of the *Visitatio Sepulchris* ceremonial piece and the dialogue of the *Quem Queritas* trope. As most critics and historians point out, roots for medieval theatre—and particularly for liturgical drama—are located in the Christian Mass, and it is *Regularis Concordia*'s allowance for theatrical embellishment within Lauds, Matins and Vespers—the traditional monastic morning and evening prayers—that allowed for theatre to exist outside of the Mass liturgy. As Jorg O. Fichte describes,

During the celebration of the Mass the choral parts—the Psalms, cantica, hymns, the *Alleluia*, the *Kyrie*, and the *Gloria*—were more flexible than the strictly canonical portions and consequently could better provide room for the expression of feelings and emotions. The tendency towards

expressing somewhat more personal religious feelings in lyrical form also prompted the writing in the ninth century of tropes which complemented the liturgy. The singing and composition of tropes was especially cultivated in monasteries...Whatever may have lent the final impetus towards the development of a full-scale play, the antiphonal singing of the choir contained the dramatic seeds from which the first liturgical play sprang. (8)

William Tydeman explains in his landmark *Theatre in the Middle Ages* that “some scholars argue that only through its transference from the Mass itself to the Matins service was the trope free to develop into the performance of a play in the sense that we understand the term.” As he goes on to explain, the first, crucial step in this process involved movement from the most central prayer—the Mass—to another form of service: “In the *Regularis Concordia* and most other versions of the *Visitatio*, the dialogue is placed after a reading of the third and final lesson (*lectio*) of the Matins service with its verse and response (*responsio*), and before the final joyful singing of the *Te Deum*” (35).

When ecclesiastical authorities two and half centuries later in 1264 would use the new feast of Corpus Christi to expand liturgical and religious drama to secular audiences outside of monasteries, it was a continuation of this stepwise process to use the drama as a method of religious instruction. Glynne Wickham explains that “orders were preoccupied with this problem, others (like the new Orders of Friars) were no less deeply engaged in that of finding ways and means of projecting the newly formulated intellectual and philosophical concepts of God as man in Christ to an unsophisticated and largely illiterate laity” (62). In the same way that theatre provided opportunities for liturgical instruction within monasteries, large-scale mystery pageants could be used to disseminate Church teaching to secular audiences:

In consequence it was conceived from the outset as a *ludus*, ‘game’ or ‘play,’ and never as an *ordo* or *officium*; it was scripted in the vernacular

languages of the individual nations of Christendom and not in universal Latin; it was designed to be spoken rather than to be chanted, and to invite the participation of laymen rather than to be confined to literate clerics trained as singers. This approach helped to ensure that wealthy merchant princes would also assist in financing productions. (62)

Joyce Hill explains in “Making Women Visible,” her essay on the larger social intent and impact of *Regularis Concordia*, that “It is probably not too far-fetched to imagine that the authors saw it, when it was issued in the early 970s, as a text of iconic significance, successfully embodying the traditions of the continental reform, declaring the unity of church and king in furthering that reform, and—in something of a triumph of hope over reality—signaling uniformity of practice within the monastic life throughout the entire English nation” (153). The “hope over reality” to which Hill refers is the idea that the Christian church could retain a voice separate from secular authority, as at this moment and location in history, the two were in the midst of a somewhat uncomfortable accord. The precise descriptive language of the *Visitatio* certainly fits with a document intended to create a legalistic division between church and secular authorities. The beginning of the piece is as follows:

While the third lesson is being chanted, let four brethren vest themselves. Let one of these, vested in an alb, enter as though to take part in the service, and let him approach the sepulcher without attracting attention and sit there quietly with a palm in his hand. While the third respond is chanted, let the remaining three follow, and let them all, vested in copes bearing in their hands thuribles with incense, and stepping delicately as those who seek something, approach the sepulcher. (Wickham 38)

Likewise, in both *Natyastra* and *Fushikaden*, the worship precedes the art, and this sort of application of theatrical theory and practice to a religious or political end is something all three theatres share in common.

While both texts promote their ideas as coming first from a divine origin—*Natyasastra* directly from the mouth of Brahma, and *Regularis Concordia* from the divinely ordained magisterium of the Church—in terms of structure, length and approach, *Natyasastra* and *Regularis Concordia* are extremely different species. *Regularis Concordia*, efficiently compiled by Bishop Aethelwold and the clergy of Winchester to govern all local monastic reform in the second half of the tenth century, grounds its liturgical prescription in a precise but brief description of a single service. *Natyasastra*, on the other hand, takes a much more extended, story-oriented and mythological approach to its explanation of the divine hand at work in creating the stage, and it then launches into extensive, minute detail about how every theatrical action and gesture is loaded with divine meaning.

Bharata's personal voice dominates *Natyasastra*, and it is his conversation with a group of sages that forms the work's content. The first story that Bharata shares with the sages is the origin of drama as the fifth sacred Veda, or scriptural enlightenment, which could be used to promote right behavior and provide opportunities for worship even to the lowest castes. “ ‘Long, long, very long ago,’ ” begins Bharata's conversation with the sages in the first passages of *Natyasastra*, “ ‘people of this world of pain and pleasure, goaded by greed and avarice, and jealousy and anger, took to uncivilized ways of life.’ ” To combat these wicked ways of life, it became necessary for the gods to plead with Brahma for “ ‘something that would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears. The Vedas are there but the [low-caste] Sudras are prohibited from listening to them. Why not create for us a fifth Veda which would be accessible to all the varna-s [castes]?’ ” (1)

Theatre, then, became the foremost educational and spiritual opportunity for all Indian people of all different castes. As the editors of the exceptional critical study *Indian Theatre* explain, “Hindus have traditionally recognized three paths that lead to liberation: the way of action, the way of knowledge, and the way of devotion. Each of these approaches contributes to the texture and shape of Indian theatre” (7). Whereas the lower castes could not aspire to the knowledge, power or deeds of the warrior or priestly classes, theatre provided a very human means of devotion to Brahma and the other deities.

One conspicuous element of Bharata’s instruction is the moral imperative of actual stage worship; that is, the *stage itself* is to be adored and honored as the recipient of sacrifice and duty. Sacrifice was of particular importance in these rituals; indeed, it was the central ritual of ancient Hinduism in general (*The Hindu Tradition* 11). In the second and third chapters of *Natyasastra*, Bharata describes a four-point, step-wise order of how the stage (*ranga*) is to be constructed and dedicated, and the similarity between church and stage is immediately visible.

The first step, stage construction itself, receives an amount of attention commensurate with a sacred temple, and while its producer and founder could be of a secular orientation, the stage building could only be performed by a priest who had fasted for several days prior: “After laying the foundation on an auspicious day at a convenient moment, the raising of walls should commence. When that is finished, pillars must be raised on an auspicious day and at an auspicious moment on a Rohini or Sravana star-day. The priest, under strict discipline, should fast for three nights and at sun-rise on the



fourth morning he should start the work” (9). Precise and consistent measurements had to be strictly maintained; this was no mere blessing of an improvised performance space.

Following the construction of the stage, elaborate dedication ceremonies were performed for the “Warming of the *Natyagrha* [play-house].” Consider the commands that Bharata imparts at the introduction to his third chapter:

Once the auspicious *natyagrha*, with all its requirements, is ready, Brahmins, doing their *japa* (chanting or bead-counting), and cows should stay in it for seven days. Then, the priest sprinkling water, purified by mantra-s, over his body, should occupy the *natyagrha* and the *rangapitha* at the approach of the evening. He should fast for three nights, should be controlled and disciplined, should not change his clothes and be in his proper place. (16)

The third step of stage sanctification is the summoning, installation and worship of the stage and stage deities, which had to be performed at a key moment in the day: “At the end of the day, at the moment which is frightful and cruel with the *bhuta* deities (spirits of the dead), he should sip water and install the deities according to the proper rites. These deities should have red hand-bands, red sandal-paste (applied to them), red flowers and red fruit (offered to them)” (17). Special formulaic attention is paid to each god in turn before the fourth and final step of dedication, to which Bharata gives the briefest attention of the four steps, but which will probably strike the modern reader as the most interesting: “The Illumination of the Stage,” which is described in these vivid terms:

Holding the lighted torch one should run about the stage roaring, cracking the joints of fingers, turning round and round, making loud noises and thus, illuminating the entire stage, should come to the centre of the stage. Battle scenes must be enacted to the resounding accompaniment of conch drum, *Mrdanga*, and *Panava* etc. If in the course of that, things are broken or are cut or torn, with blood showing on the wounds, then it is a good omen indicating success. (20)

Indeed, stage and church are hardly distinguishable in Bharata's depiction of worship. Adya Rangacharya, the great critic, playwright and translator of the *Natyasastra* into English explains that "every nook and cranny of the stage is worshipped" (10) for the reason that it is the stage that brought even the warring gods and demons to a universe-saving accord. What is more, in the *Natyasastra* an expression of fidelity to the stage is itself a divine act, and violation of right worship is punished even beyond the grave: "Whoever goes against the rules and worships the stage arbitrarily will suffer a loss, and be reborn in the lower species... Gods worshipped and respected reciprocate accordingly, so every effort should be made to worship the stage. No fire, fanned by strong winds, will burn as quickly as a wrong (or defective) worship" (20).

In light of such grave consequences for poor religious practice and rewards for right worship, it is less curious that Bharata should extend such extensive attention to theatrical guidelines in the rest of the *Natyasastra*. I will speak at greater length on the precision and extensive detail involved in Bharata's outline of artistic conventions, but suffice it to say that his concern with precise bodily form, pronunciation and performance gesture is all-encompassing.

Like *Natyasastra*, *Fushikaden's* aesthetic finds its origin in an ancient, heavenly conflict. *Noh* theatre is the name given later to the merging *kagura*, or spirit appeasement ceremonies, and *Sarugaku*, acrobatic and musical performances, after Zeami and other artists had codified its symbol and sign into a distinct system. At the time of *Fushikaden's* composition in the fifteenth century, traditional Shinto—the ancient Japanese religion of animism and ancestor-worship—was in the midst of a crucial

dialogue with the relatively new Buddhist religion, and much of the Japanese theatre tradition was largely an offshoot of Shinto ritual life.

As scholar Tom Hare explains in *Zeami's Style*, and more succinctly in his notes to *Fushikaden*, *kagura* “is a diverse body of ancient performance in Japan aimed at placating or summoning the *kami* (gods). By the ‘middle ages,’ it had reached into the remote countryside with various kinds of religious performances and was closely linked to early *sarugaku*” (49). We can turn to Zeami directly for his explanation of Sarugaku’s more ancient origins:

*Sarugaku* had its beginning in the age of the gods, when the Great Goddess Amateru secluded herself behind the boulder door in the heavens; she cast the whole world into darkness, so the eight hundred myriad gods, gathering together on Mount Ama-no-kaguyama, performed *kagura* music and for the first time ever used a comic performance in order to catch her august attention. Ama no Uzume no Mikoto came forth from among the group and sang and danced with a consecrated branch from the *sasaki* tree in her hand, her voice raised high, prancing and stomping in the light of bonfires, in order to provoke a divine possession. Secretly listening to her voice, the Great Goddess opened the boulder door a little. The land grew light once again. The faces of the many gods shone white. The festivities on this occasion were, so they say, the beginning of *sarugaku*. (47)

While all three theatres arise from political and religious contexts, it would nonetheless be a mistake to reduce all three theatres to mere instruments of their respective states or churches. The three theatres reflect varying degrees of movement toward secularization or, at least, toward a certain autonomy from state control. *Regularis Concordia's* allowance for a theatrical departure from the Mass liturgy, for example, is even less notable than the entire document’s rather revolutionary *raison d’etre*: to establish political autonomy from the state by identifying where secular authorities ruled, and where local ecclesiastical authorities could impose political authority. As historian Michel Kobiak explains, “this quest for harmony was also the quest for the modes of

control and power that would distinguish monastic institutions from other institutions and defend them from other social forms of existence” (40).

The importance of this attempt to distinguish religious authority from state authority and to define parameters for the Church’s independent autonomy should not be understated. *Regularis Concordia* was an attempt to solidify a force—monasteries and their residents—that could work in dialogue with, rather than as an arm of, local civil authorities. Its success was mixed:

Nevertheless, theirs was a lost battle. Monasticism in England was institutionalized not only with the papal approval but also with the approval of secular powers defending monasticism against both the attacks of the canons and landowners fighting for their *saecularium prioratus* (secular domination) as well as against robbing God of the possessions that rightfully belonged to him. In about 963, after the pestilence of 962, King Edgar promulgated a code consisting of a religious section, a secular section, directions about the circulation of the code, and a conclusion in which he promises to be a good ruler. (Kobialka 45)

Though not a clerical representative for any specific church, the author of *Fushikaden*, Zeami Motokiyo, was in a similar position to the authors of *Regularis Concordia* in that his work had to be written with an eye to the agenda of the state. At the time of *Fushikaden*’s composition in the first twenty years or so of the fourteenth century, in the midst of the Muromaki period, Buddhism was the dominant court religion, but as historian Byron Earhart explains, the long-standing Shinto animism was still the country’s dominant mode of spirituality: “Buddhism never completely superceded Shinto. Even at the capital, Shinto lived on in the cult headed by the emperor. In fact, as long as Buddhism was centered at the capital, it tended to remain the religion of the aristocracy... Buddhism would become a religion of the people only when it entered the life of the people” (107).

Zeami embraced Buddhism and used traditional Buddhist stories to explain the divine origins for his theatrical styles. Conventionally, for example, it was very important to demonstrate that dance forms had their origin in the will of the Shinto *kami*—animist spirits and spirits of the dead—and the deities, and that theatre could be used to impart ethical lessons. Zeami's appeal as a critic—prior to his exile after the monarchical transition—probably had to do with his ability to define a theatre that appealed to many different modes of thought. Earhart explains why this was so:

In part, Shinto's appropriation of Buddhist systems enhanced Buddhism's popular appeal. People eventually came to accept various Buddhist *bodhisattvas* on the same level as their Japanese *kami*. Therefore, although Buddhism seemed to triumph on the surface, the religious life of Shinto persevered—even within Buddhist forms. While Buddhism was being transformed into a Japanese movement, Shinto was quietly incorporating the various strands of continental influence... In general, Shinto borrowed various religious expressions from the three traditions. Ethical concepts came from Confucianism; religious Taoism provided cosmology, a religious calendar, divinities, festivals, and charms; Buddhism furnished philosophy, cosmology, rituals, objects of worship, and formulas. (107)

Critic Frank Alanson Lombard argues that while Zeami's *Fushikaden* worked of necessity within a Muromachi-sponsored *Noh*—and therefore Buddhist-oriented Shinto—framework, his work exhibits strains of a humanist aesthetic that would transform the drama in a powerful way:

In spite of his serious-mindedness, however, he did much, through the inclusion of more human elements, to free *Sarugaku no Noh* from the crushing domination of the Buddhist priesthood, which sought to use it almost exclusively for purposes of religious propaganda; and, since it still retained greater plasticity than did *Kagura* or *Dengaku*, he was able to make of it an entertainment which, however saturated with the more austere elements of Buddhism, appealed to men as no temple ceremony had ever done or as no simpler *Kuse* had ever aspired to do. As this style of entertainment developed in his hands, Zeami began to drop the extended title and to call it simply *Noh*, the entertainment *par excellence*. (Lombard 88)

Zeami was ultimately at the mercy of the power structure of the day, and eventually suffered artistic rebuke and even exile at the command of later emperors and shoguns (Hare 4).

The authors of all three of these works, working within sophisticated and rich histories of literature and ritual practice, recognized, acknowledged and recommended the theatre as a vehicle for religious ideas to reach the heart, and further refinement of the theatre became each author's aim. Stepwise, it would seem that all three traditions proceed in this general path: 1. Religious idea—2. Religious ritual— 3. Critical refinement of religious tradition. Out of each ancient history of religious symbol and sign emerged an artistic tradition that provided to its community and priests opportunities to formalize and refine liturgical practice. Liturgy and liturgical theatre were ways in which formal practice could codify meaning from a distant past. This leads very clearly into our next discussion—of theatre's didactic purposes within the three traditions.

## II. DIDACTIC INTENTION

Like Homer may be, the author of *Natyasastra*, Bharata, may be a mythological character himself, who represents a collection of thinkers, teachers and authors rather than a single theorist. Bharata is also the Indian word for “actor,” and this sage Bharata should not be confused with the mythological king of India, whose sons fought the war chronicled in *Mahabharata*. As Adya Rangacharya explains in his *Introduction to Natyasastra*, the unity of didactic message is the most essential point of the text: “It is immaterial whether Bharata was an actual individual or when he lived, etc. Like Aristotle among the Greeks, Bharata in India stands as one of the greatest lawgivers for good taste in literature and drama. *Natyasastra* is a work codifying those laws... the present *Natyasastra* seems to convey the views more of a school of thought over a period of differences and debates than [of] any one individual” (9).

Although, as I mentioned earlier in this discussion, we can ascertain the historical situation in which *Natyasastra* was conceived, its drawing together an aesthetic and practical mission statement is what is most essential to the text, and the vehicle for this grounding is conceived mythologically. In *The Natyasastra's* story of the drama's—or “natya's”—origin, the play, on the one hand, is “entertainment (*kridaniya*) and, on the other, an enlightenment (Veda). These two characteristics were insisted upon by Bharata and the result was what we now call the urban theatre or a sophisticated drama” (Rangacharya 7).

In fact, argues Rangacharya, prior to *Natyasastra*, theatre's *sole* purpose was entertainment, and by adding elements of formality and worship *Natyasastra's* great theatrical revolution was in turning theatre into a didactic practice, guided by Brahma, who used the sage Bharata as his instrument to record and disseminate a new Veda. (49)

In the mythology, this teaching was also uniquely oriented to obtain an earthly accord that could mimic the spiritual one of Brahma's heaven: "Sanskrit theory discovered the wisdom of encompassing one's enemies and making the demonic element part of the theatrical event... In its goal of educating and entertaining, the all-inclusive Sanskrit theatre rejects no subject—except death, which always takes place offstage and is never mentioned directly. The defeat of the demons is celebrated not as the extinction of one's enemies but as their transformation" (Theatre, Theory 84).

The details of this transformation rear their heads in a few interesting stories that appear mostly in *Natyasastra's* opening chapter. The first performance of theatre is set to dramatize and "celebrate the event in which Indra, with the help of a host of gods, had destroyed [the rebellious gods and demons] asura-s and danava-s... Brahma and other gods were so pleased with the performance that they showered presents on the actors" (2). However, this joy soon gave way to chaos: "But when this first performance ended with the defeat of demons, the latter were enraged and, in a body, led by Virupaksa who encouraged the vighna-s (probably the professional rowdies)... then by their black magic (maya), they managed to freeze the speeches, movements and even the memory of the performers" (3).

The curious, *Eumenides*-esque end to this episode—the "transformation" to which my earlier quote refers—is that, when the demons are utterly defeated by Indra's might,



Brahma's tone is conciliatory to both god and demon, when he grants the demons pardon and rights to a portion of the stage sacrifice: "There is no art, no knowledge, no yoga, no action that is not found in natya" (4).

Where the mission of *Natyasastra* is grounded in myth, and Bharata is historically elusive, we have in *Regularis Concordia* a sort of corporate author—identifiable as specific conciliar clergy with a clearly articulated agenda. Aethelwold and the Winchester clergy who authored the text set out to create a means and method for catechetical instruction of the monastic community, and theatre was a sort of cutting edge technology for that purpose. At this point, theatre was strongly discouraged in lay circles for its tendency toward paganism, but practice in monasteries could be very precisely administered.

In *The Medieval Theatre of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence*, a long study of, among other phenomena, medieval methods of conversion and instruction through the medium of suffering, Jody Enders illustrates how empathy could play a part in winning hearts and minds: "In the *Quem Quaeritis* trope, the perfect body of Christ is mutilated, only to regain its perfection when resurrected before the eyes of those who seek to remember it... In the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, Christ's terrestrial body was subjected to torture. But the traces of his ordeal disappeared along with the body itself, the search for which was expanded and dramatized in centuries of liturgical performance" (77). Cathartically, the sad Passion of Christ's suffering yields to the fulfillment of Easter hope.

As William Tydeman explains in another study, *The Medieval European Stage 500-1500*, the purpose of the stage was twofold: first to fortify the spiritual lives of those

in the monasteries, and, in so doing, establish grounds for dialogue with authority outside the Church: “Drama presented itself not only as an accessible popular amusement for distracting the community, but as appropriate means of upholding political, religious, ethnic and social values and continuities.” He continues to explain that this is especially true in a situation where the intent is subversively missionary: “Rational authority and regularized anarchy could often achieve a state of mutually supportive rapport: perhaps the best way of regarding the history of the medieval theatre is to view it as a sequence of constant readjustments between contending forces which time and again succeeded in creating conditions favourable to the emergence of great theatrical art” (2). Tydeman supports and expands his claim with further explanation:

That the stage remained popular in the West during the early medieval centuries is undoubted, if only from the agonized injunctions which emanated from both temporal and ecclesiastical officials castigating the wanton behavior into which performances could entice the weaker-willed clergy. The medium, whether realized in actuality or deplored as one further suspect feature of pagan antiquity, exercised the troubled consciences and occupied the legislative energies of medieval rulers and church leaders. (3)

*Fushikaden*'s author, Zeami, a court genius of discernible historical fact but of rather unidentifiable personality, also locates part of theatre's fundamental purpose of establishing peaceful order in a story of the Buddha: “In order to distract heathens who were causing a ruckus during Buddha Kakyamuni's sermon, Sariputra and his companions performed sixty-six acts of dramatic imitation so that the heathens, hearing the sound of the drums and flute, gathered at the back door and settled down to watch. Given this respite, the Buddha continued with the consecration” (48).

Off-handedly, Zeami mentions in his introduction to *Fushikaden* that the purpose of theatre is “for both the peace of the realm and the enjoyment of the people” (26). To

Zeami, this calming social influence of the theatre, however, is less important than the transcendent spiritual effect that he anticipates his aesthetic system will have on those that fully embrace *Noh's* contemplative depth. The tale he tells about the Buddha belies the fact that Zeami recognizes that *his* audience is not the common people but is instead the educated, aristocratic elite, and his constant advice to the actor is to refine his craft, for the actor's own sake, for the pleasure of the gods and for the enlightenment of the aristocracy, those people "out of our ken" (31).

Perhaps the strong didactic features of these three texts have to do with the fact that, historically, they were written by authors who were largely concerned with political ends as much as they were with artistic ones, but the fundamental, theoretical origins for all three aesthetic paths lie in their intent to teach audiences something specific—about morals, God, the gods, Heaven or their place in the cosmos.

### III. CONVENTIONALITY

One of the most interesting and essential traits of all three of these theatrical traditions is that they are *conventional*. Critic Farley Richmond provides an insightful definition for this term in his study of Sanskrit theater: conventional theatre “called upon actors and spectators alike to understand and decipher a complex code of gestures, movement patterns, and vocal expressions” (*Indian Theatre*, 33). In all three of the theatrical traditions in question, symbolic meaning is of greater importance than realism, and the striking implication seems to be that the unseen—spiritually, historically, mythologically, existentially and esoterically— is more “real” and effectual than the seen, and that theatre provides insight into that invisible reality.

Convention is often the only part of a theatre tradition with which potential audiences are familiar. It is very easy, for example, for even the most unfamiliar audience to identify a traditional Japanese *Noh* play and distinguish its conventions from that of a Medieval trope. Indeed, it is probably in the details of each tradition’s performance conventions that they are most obviously different.

Bharata’s idea of *Rasa* is the most fundamental generic component of Indian theatre. There is a long history of translational issues with this term; the literal meaning of the Sanskrit word in English translation is “flavor” or “taste,” but this food-oriented metaphor is used to designate a more complicated aesthetic idea. The origin of the theory lies in *Natyasastra*’s sixth chapter, and Bharata explains eight dominant tonal

“emotions,”—or as Susan Schwartz shares Michelle Rosaldo’s term, “embodied thought,” (50) forms—and their corresponding colors and deities:

1. Erotic/*Srngara*: Dark blue, Visnu
2. Humor/*Hasya*: White, Pramatha
3. Terror/*Raudra*: Red, Rudra
4. Compassion or Pathos/*Karuna*: pigeon color, Yama
5. Heroic/*Vira*: Yellowish, Mahendra
6. Wonder or Magical/*Adbhuta*: Yellow, Brahma
7. Disgust/*Bibhatsa*: Blue, Mahakala
8. Dread/*Bhayanaka*: Dark, Kala

After Bharata’s lengthy discussion of theatre’s mythological origins, it is from this generic separation and discussion that Bharata derives his other conventions, which account for the rest of his dramaturgy and about eighty five percent of the entire text of the *Natyasastra*.

The colors correspond to a mystical and synesthetic interpretation of a character’s *aura*, which is the visual indicator of one’s spiritual mood. Obviously, this has helpful repercussions for theatrical performance. In the same way that these colors function, so does each gesture of the hand, foot, shoulder or hip: through a complicated system of symbol and sign, audiences can draw interpretive parallels between a character in one play and characters from other works. One might compare this part of *Natyasastra* to a psychoanalyst’s handbook of dream symbols or—more accurately—a list of common visual motifs in lyric poetry or in the Victorian novel: over time, the sheer volume of

literature in this tradition creates an rich, enormous wealth of dialogue to which the careful observer can refer.

For example, Bharata goes into precise and extensive detail about “The Abhinaya [Acting] of the Hands and of the Major Limbs” in his ninth and tenth chapters. Any neophyte acquainted with Indian drama can identify how hand gesture in Indian drama is very “up front” and active in classical performance styles. Bharata calls for twenty-four overarching hand positions, each with its own name and *rasa* function. “*Pataka*,” for example, is “With thumb bent and other fingers stretched out. To convey striking, driving, joy, pride, etc. With both hands moving, it suggests rain, showering of flowers, etc. Both hands forming a swastika suggests something falling down; and loosening and tightening the swastika position suggests opening and concealment, etc.” “*Catura*,” on the other hand, is described as “Three fingers spread out with the thumb beneath them and the little finger raised. This suggests, as Bharata himself says, many things, including grace, hope, affection, youth and so on” (84-85).

While the detail paid to the hands is the most important bodily convention in the author’s description, Bharata’s explanation of *Rasa*’s impact on the body continues with discussions of the chest, the sides, the belly, the hip, thigh, the shanks and the feet. “*Prakampita*,” for example, is the shaking of the chest, with the admonition that “repeated high jumps make the chest tremble,” and the “*Ksama*” belly position is ““emaciated.”” When the belly is drawn in, it is *Ksama*. That position of the belly is used for humour, crying, letting out breath, yawning, etc” (87-88). In a similar way, he goes into a thorough explanation of features of the face, character types, and musical accompaniment’s instruments and techniques.

*Natyasastra*, then, is a dictionary of aesthetic symbol and sign, and in much the same way that Bharata's compilation organized this language, *Fushikaden* gave instructions for how an actor might become the perfect instrument of Zeami's aesthetic principles. He did so, however, with more general rules than Bharata's. In *Fushikaden* he describes nine fundamental character "types" and recommends what to embrace and what to avoid in the performance of each one. In the course of doing so, he provides some serious philosophical questions to put into play. Consider this advice—particularly his explanations of "fear" and "interest"—to the actor who wishes to play the Demon "type" effectively:

Now then, because there are interesting ways to portray demons such as angry ghosts and people possessed by spirits, they are easy. If you keep your eye on your dramatic opponent and move your feet and hands precisely, moving in accord with the *monogashira*<sup>1</sup>, you will find ways to create interest. As for a true demon from hell, the better you portray it, the more terrifying it will appear, so there's no opportunity to create interest. Or is it instead that the portrayal is so difficult that it's rarely accomplished with interest? First of all, the role should be, fundamentally, strong and fearsome. But what creates interest in the mind is different from what creates fear or the impression of strength. So then, the dramatic imitation of a demon really is a matter of great difficulty. If you truly perform it well, it only stands to reason that it shouldn't be interesting. Its essence is, after all, fear. Fear and interest are as different as black and white. So, shouldn't we say that an actor who can create interest in portraying a demon is a truly expert master? But the actor who does only demons well can hardly be one who understands the flower. (36)

The "Flower" in *Fushikaden*'s English translation—*Transmitting the Flower Through Effects and Attitudes*—refers to the beauty, attractiveness or appeal of one's acting style. Some of the flower of performance is eternal and heavenly, but he makes much of the individual actor as a flower himself, with skills that are "specific to particular techniques

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<sup>1</sup> Zeami's translator and editor, Tom Hare, has this to say about the *monogashira*: "It could refer to the emblem of a demon or a lower-ranking god, which often tops the headgear in such roles, or it could refer to the *kashira* pattern on the drums, which often marks cadences in the music" (36).

of performance” and “in time they will scatter, just as real blossoms do. Since they are short lived, as blossoms are... But by both coming into bloom and scattering, the authentic flower should be in the control of the mind. In such a case it is long lasting” (46). This quality of “blossoming,” death and renewal is the most meaningful in all of Zeami’s dramaturgy and criticism; it is the essence of his aesthetic thought, both in *Fushikaden* and the rest of his writings. Meditation on the essential quality of attractiveness and on the application of aesthetic innovations within the *Noh* framework is the actor’s most important duty.

One interesting component of Zeami’s instruction is his breakdown of “Notes on Training Through the Years,” which gives age-specific advice for seven stages from young childhood through old age, with a constant reference to the motif of the flower in bloom. About children twelve or thirteen years of age, he says “A pretty little boy with a good voice who is talented besides can hardly go wrong. All the same, such a flower is not the true flower. It is merely the flower of the moment. Training at this time, therefore, should always be gentle. To that extent, it is unlikely to be definitive with regard to the child’s lifetime potential” (27). The true flower is not reached by any actor until he is forty years old. Even those who are in their late thirties will not achieve full mastery unless they receive acclaim from the nobility: “By this time, if you should fail to gain the recognition of the powerful and remain unsatisfied with your portion of fame, then no matter how expert you may be, you should realize that you have not yet reached the fullest flowering of your art” (29). Even in the establishment and course of one’s career, the power of convention—in this case, *social* convention— becomes very important.



*Regularis Concordia* helped to establish and spread the use of symbolic movement in the *Quem Quaeritis* trope. One authoritative definition of a trope comes from Dunbar H. Ogden's exhaustive study of practical Medieval stagecraft, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church*: "A trope is an addition to the regular liturgy: one or more extra-liturgical lines inserted in and sung during a regular church rite" (20). The authorship of the *Quem Quaeritis* trope, when it was still solely a part of the Mass liturgy in Switzerland and France, and prior to its inclusion in *Regularis Concordia*, "may be quite definitely ascribed to Tutilo of St. Gall, about 900 A.D" (*The Liturgical Element* 134). The trope, then, was an offshoot of the long tradition of the Mass liturgy, which is the highpoint of Christian conventional prayer.

The actual performance of the piece evolved from a short, sung dialogue during the Mass into a more full-blown performance piece. Its form prior to the dramaturgical instruction of *Regularis Concordia* went, in its entirety, as follows:

Interrogatio. *Quem quaeritis, in sepulchro, o Christicolae?*  
Responsio. *Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o caelicolae.*  
Angeli. *Non est hic; surrexit, sicut praedixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro.*

Or, in English:

*Question* [by the Angels]. Whom do you seek in the sepulcher, O followers of Christ?

*Answer* [by the Marys]. Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, just as he foretold.

*The Angels*. He is not here: he is risen, just as foretold. Go, announce that he is risen from the sepulcher. (Gassner 35)

With the instruction of *Regularis Concordia*, however, came concrete directorial additions to the traditional, well-known conventions of the original trope. One particularly demonstrative example is as follows: "These things are to be performed in

imitation of the Angel seated in the tomb, and of the women coming with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. When therefore the seated Angel shall see the three women, as if straying about and looking for something, approach him, let him begin to sing in a dulcet voice of medium pitch: Whom seek ye in the sepulcher, O followers of Christ?"

(Gassner 37)

In these selections from the three works, it becomes clear that the emphasis on the language of sign and symbol for all three theorists is of paramount importance to the essence of theatre. It is equally clear that the actual signs and symbols themselves are exceedingly different from one another. As different as they are, the origin for all three traditions is nonetheless to be found in the rural traditions of each theatre's parent culture.

#### IV. EMERGENCE FROM POPULAR, RURAL TRADITIONS

In his study of the origin of medieval theatre prior to *Regularis Concordia*, Leonard Goldstein argues that the most fundamental step in the creation of any theatrical tradition is that a society must first conceptualize a sense of personal individuation:

The act of personifying involves the realization of subject and object, the vivid consciousness of the subject as individual, a person, and then the projection of that personality over into an object realized as distinct... The question here is not whether in the tenth century self-consciousness occurred for the first time; it is, rather, why with the integration of feudalism whose culture was rapidly maturing, imitation became objectified in the form of impersonation. But not only impersonation, for dialogue is an imitation of conversation and plot an imitation of an action. (*Origin* 11-12)

For Goldstein theatre is primarily a way to emotionally reconnect with the tribal self, defined most essentially by community: “The point is that art and ritual express a socially shared emotion; if they copy, it is not for the sake of the copy but for the sake of the emotion of social unity and the needs of the social whole...What is represented as imitated are social feelings: they are collective representations” (71). He finds it ironic, then, that such a concept could even begin to form in a feudal culture, as it did in the one in which the *Visitatio* was first performed.

Theatre in medieval England prior to *Regularis Concordia* was largely a “primitive form of theatre, intimately related to seasonal rites dealing chiefly with winter and spring... Well established by the time Celtic and Germanic Europe was converted to Christianity. They were not completely eradicated by Christianity but assimilated by the

medieval Christian world in the form of dimly understood folk performances” (Gassner 28). Indeed, this is the process of “baptizing” that I mentioned earlier in this paper: missionaries converted tribal, pagan traditions in England by slow conversion of sympathetic chieftains over a long period of time. *En masse* conversion of the chieftain’s people would follow. This is in contrast to the imperial, military methods followed by the Roman Empire more than four hundred years before the first Christian missionaries. As Christianity became a potent political force in England, popular theatre was squelched for its abrasive attitude toward the Church, but some traditions survived.

“In essence, ” continues Gassner, “the pagan pieces that have come down to us reenact death and resurrection rites concerned with the dying of the vegetation in the winter and the return of the vegetation in the spring. But they have been reduced to the status of games, mummings, and other forms of play, such as maypole dancing” (28). Examples of these plays, such as Robin Hood dramatizations and—more completely—“A Christmas Mumming: The Play of Saint [Prince] George,” still survive, and give us a clue to the style and conventions of performance in pre-*Regularis Concordia*, tribal England.

The Saint George Christmas mumming play is a great example of a sort of “bridge” play between tribal traditions and full conversion of the English stage. The play begins with the players in revelry, most likely mixed in with the audience so that the play is performed not on a stage so much as around a table. Into this scenario enters the ribald and devious new band of “mummers or performers, led by FATHER CHRISTMAS, who is swinging a mighty club.” This Father Christmas is not yet similar to the Christian Saint Nicholas; he is instead a wild, Puckish giant of a spirit, dedicated to Solstice pranks and pleasure:

FATHER CHRISTMAS: Here come I, old Father Christmas.  
Welcome, or welcome not.  
I hope Old Father Christmas  
Will never be forgot!  
I have not come here to laugh or to jeer.  
But for a pocketful of money and a skinful of beer  
To show some sport or pastime,  
Gentlemen and Ladies, in the Christmas-time. (Gassner 30)

This mumming contains a strange mix of local, Anglo-Christian politics which seem to establish Saint George as a sort of mythical hero whose greatest heroism is in slaying a Dragon and a Turkish knight, both of whom keep being resurrected by Father Christmas' magical doctor. The "Saint" in Saint George—and in fact the entirety of the piece—has nothing explicitly to do with Christianity at all. With the advent of religious tropes and their organization and reorientation in *Regularis Concordia*, however, English theatre became a definitively Christian art form that could be used to communicate doctrinal concepts inside and outside of the monastery.<sup>2</sup>

Rural, pagan theatre traditions in India are easier to trace than they are in England, as they are mostly still active in village life. Only in the twentieth century, with the rise and success of Indian nationalism, have new examinations of the Indian theatre tradition yielded recognition of two distinct theatres: Rural and Urban "types" or forms. The editors of the critical collection *Indian Theatre* identify under these two types five spheres of performance genre in the Indian theatrical tradition, some impacting the others and others being too "Urban" to have contact with the "Rural" forms, or vice-versa. Strict isolation of the two forms is rare, however, and is a phenomenon limited to plays

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<sup>2</sup> As V.A. Kolve points out in his work in *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, it would not be until the Reformation that the Church was not the predominant theatrical authority in England. He explains, in the chapter "The Feast and the Impulse toward Cycle Form," the transformation from the *Quem Queritas* trope inside of the church on Easter into secularly funded, didactic religious theatre within the mystery plays, which were produced in observance of the Corpus Christi festival.

produced in the second half of the twentieth century or later. Indeed, as it is pointed out in *Indian Theatre*, one defining characteristic of the tradition even now, decades after India has become an independent nation, is that it has “... one foot planted in international marketplaces and business and one foot firmly rooted in village soil, bridging two fundamentally different worlds” (Indian Theatre, 3).

Furthermore, as Adya Rangacharya points out, the original purposes of the theatre remain: “Apparently play-performance served two purposes, if we could judge from what used to happen in the villages till recently; on the one hand, it was a great enjoyment after the harvest days and, on the other, it was kind of worship of Indra for blessing rains during the following season” (49).

Where it is somewhat difficult to identify precisely how mummings looked and were carried out, extensive studies of traditional Indian rural theatre are plentiful and rich in detail. For example, Terukkuttu performances, the tribal, theatrical recapitulation of tales from *Mahabharata*, are a vital artifact in the study of the anthropology of Indian literature and theatre, since these performances represent a ritual life of rural Indians that has been relatively untouched by non-Indian civilizations for thousands of years. Richard Armando Frasca’s in-depth examination of practice, symbol and sign in these performances, *The Theatre of the Mahabharata: Terukkuttu Performances in South India*, explores the relationship between these ancient performances and contemporary Indian religious traditions.

In both the contemporary and ancient Indian performing arts, the traditional, flowing, trancelike rhythmic musical form known as “raga” plays a vital function in establishing a conventional atmosphere for the play. In the ancient rural forms of Indian

theatre, raga established scene transitions and set the sound stage for the gods to become manifest in performance. As Frasca explains, these dance and musical conventions are modes of invocation and identification: “A violent and dramatic type of possession that is frequently seen at *terrukkuttu* in which the ‘inspired’ individual loudly and continuously shouts out the possessing deity’s name. It appears that this shouting is a process of both ‘summoning’ and ‘identification’: while calling the relevant ritual entity into himself, the loud articulation of its name appears to merge the individual psychologically with it” (20).

Of the three dramatic theorists in question, Zeami draws the clearest objective link between his own thought and rural traditions before his work: *Natyasastra*’s origin is directly from the gods, and *Regularis Concordia* ignores any discussion of primitive theatres, but *Fushikaden*’s aesthetic code discusses explicitly the rural sources for the theatre Zeami would transform into *Noh*. In fact, much of what we know about Japanese rural theatre we have obtained from Zeami’s explanations, and his references to his theatre’s divine origins are in the far-distant past.

In the introduction to *Fushikaden*, Zeami gives simple but serious advice to any student that wishes to take up his dramatic approach, and this advice demonstrates his approach in creating *Noh* on the foundation of older, rural *sarugaku* and *kagura* forms: “Study the old, then, and make certain that you do not neglect tradition even while appreciating the new. Within his heritage, the accomplished master is, after all, someone who shows no vulgarity in speech and exhibits *yugen* in his attitude” (26).

*Yugen* is a fundamentally important term in both the study of Zeami and in the study of his rural origins. This important term, explains Tom Hare in the notes to

*Fushikaden*, appears often throughout the text and is the conceptual soul of the work. As an aesthetic concept, it may help to compare it to *rasa* in Indian theatre: it is the profound aesthetic feeling-foundation for all of *Noh* in much the same way that *rasa* serves that purpose in Indian theatre. In acting, *yugen* is transmitted in the spark of perfect imitation, and Zeami's mission in creating *Noh* seems almost to add *yugen* to traditional rural *sarugaku* and *kagura* forms in order to refine what has existed since ancient history. As Hare describes, "Imitation as imitation preserves the artificiality or duplicity that it aims most ambitiously to eliminate, so it somehow must be refined into nonexistence. This task is extraordinarily difficult. It may be partly for this reason that imitation proper gradually gives way to an interest in singing and dancing in performance in the *Notes*" (12).

Zeami's historical explanation of *sarugaku*'s historical origin is as follows:

Now if you inquire into the practices and origins of *sarugaku*, with its promotion of long life, some will tell you it arose in the time of Buddha, and others will say it was passed down from the age of the gods; but that time has gone, and in either case, the age is so remote that it is beyond our power to imitate the effects they created. Ever since Prince Shotoku, during the reign of Empress Suiko, commanded Hada no Kokatsu to make sixty-six entertainments and to call them "*sarugaku*" (for both the peace of the realm and the enjoyment of the people), it has persisted generation after generation, taking the beauties of the landscape as an impetus to performance. This is what has caught so many people's attention in recent years. Since that distant time, descendants of that Kokatsu have transmitted the art in their position as priests at the Kasuga and Hie shrines. And so it is that the performance of groups from Yamato and Omi flourishes even today, in service of the gods at these two shrines. (26)

Zeami, then, seeks to do what the other two theorists also aspire toward: the codified refinement of an ancient, and in some cases prehistoric, tradition so that it might be oriented toward new social, artistic and religious ends. Interestingly, Zeami and Bharata very clearly idealize the rural histories of their art form, while in Medieval



England, there seems to have been a very clearly articulated desire to wipe the slate clean before systematizing a theatre that would be appropriately pious and edifying for members of monastic communities.

As I have already mentioned and will explore in greater depth in my next section, while roots of these theatres lie in rural traditions, one of the most important functions of each of these texts is that they all provide a sort of theoretical bridge from strictly rural theatres into more urban or courtly theatrical traditions that were more theologically and liturgically refined. This is, again, most likely because of the strong correspondence between urbanization, centralization or collectivization—in cities, large governments or monasteries—and the likelihood that a written tradition can thrive and survive.

## V. SPHERES OF INFLUENCE ON LATER FORMS

As political structures and climates change, how did these theatres evolve? More to our purposes, how did each of these dramaturgical texts incite change in its fundamental tradition? Consider, for example, the sheer size of the Indian subcontinent against the other two theatres in question, and *Natyasastra's* influence becomes more astounding. This is not to say that *Natyasastra* created any of the theatres in question—rural theatres in India are basically prehistoric—but the impact of Bharata's thought on theatre's purpose was almost universal. In his collection of essays on rural theatre forms, *Lesser Known Forms of Performing Arts in India*, for example, editor Durgadas Mukhopadhyay illustrates that in forms across the entire Indian subcontinent, Bharata's articulation of *Rasa* as an aesthetic concept is one that has been brought to bear on even the most remote rural forms.

It is not surprising that in the world of Indian theatre the question of how remote Indian theatre forms retain a common kinship across the entire subcontinent has spurred a field of research into how performance tradition can remain flexible while maintaining fundamental similarities. In commenting on this remarkable phenomenon, the editors of *Indian Theatre* point out that “an ‘ancient’ performance tradition is not necessarily ossified. To the contrary, what often differentiates one tradition from another, or a group of similar traditions from a group of distinctly different traditions, is the degree of change

that is allowable within the limits of the tradition and the extent to which the weight of authority can be flexible in adapting to socioeconomic or artistic change” (5).

One way in which *Natyasastra*'s impact on later theatrical forms is truly striking is the way in which later dramaturgical texts and theory, in particular the *Dasarupa*, which is probably the most important and lengthy work of its kind, consider themselves mere addendums to Bharata's divinely-inspired work of genius. Dhananjaya, the late-tenth-century author of *Dasarupa*, introduces his dramaturgical text with an acknowledgment of Bharata's perfect service to the gods: “Homage to that omniscient Visnu whose senses revel in the semblance of his ten forms [of incarnation], and to Bharata, whose poetic sensibilities revel in the imitation of the ten forms [of drama] (*dasarupa*)” (1). Whereas Bharata's work provides the mythological foundation for Indian theatrical practice, and then goes into elaborate visual explanation, *The Dasarupa* is far more technically interested in providing descriptions of *rasa* moods, character types and general suggestions which might be used for the actor or director in production or for the playwright in play preparation.

In the twentieth century, when Indian nationalism succeeded in dissolving British colonial control in the country, a theatrical return to the traditional structure, style and spirit of Bharata's work became a popular rallying cry against “The spread of English drama” which “was part of colonizing Indian culture; it was designed not only to shape artistic activity but to impose on Indians a way of understanding and operating in the world and to assert colonial cultural superiority” (Mee 1). This comment from director and critic Erin B. Mee describes the context for her own experiences applying Bharata's

dramaturgical emphasis on symbol, sign and improvisational inspiration over the text-oriented approach of her earlier training, which she goes on to describe:

This definition of modern theatre—playwright-initiated, text-driven and plot-based—marginalized indigenous, performance-driven genres of theatre based on actor improvisation, composed of short and unrelated pieces of entertainment and/or of a number of song-and-movement sequences and/or taking place over an entire night or a series of days and nights. Genres with these dramaturgical structures came to be thought of as ‘theatrical’ but not as ‘theatre’ per se. The exclusive definition of theatre as dramatic literature contributed to a construction of theatre history that effectively erased several centuries of performance-based theatre. According to this definition, there was no theatre between the decline of Sanskrit drama around 1000 CE and the rise of modern drama in the nineteenth century because there were very few theatrical genres that produced dramatic literature as a stand-alone product outside the context of performance. (2)

The explanation for this performance-oriented phenomenon is very reasonable: rural theaters are usually the product of oral, rather than written traditions. The *Natyasastra* is most likely a product of a small but burgeoning court life: rural traditions were still the dominant theatrical traditions, but with the rise of small cities and city-states came the possibility for investment in writing and in the establishment of aesthetic philosophies, and with the rise of such philosophies also came the possibility for larger scale productions and the codification and application of Bharata’s ideas. Indian theatre’s most incredible accomplishment, however, is that through the passage of so much time and across so enormous a landmass, a school of thought and a single sage could have such universal weight in the oral and written traditions.

Similarly, in medieval England, the performance of theatre outside of the Mass soon became the far-reaching practice of theatre performance outside of the monastery. As dramatic production became a more popular enterprise among the laity in England, religious drama and festivals soon became arranged and produced by trade guilds and

other private institutions associated with local churches. Where there is a dearth of extant theatrical texts in England prior to *Regularis Concordia*, there is a wealth of medieval “Cycle” and “Mystery” plays from England in the four hundred years following the document’s dissemination. For example, “The Wakefield Cycle” is composed of thirty-two plays, and the “York Mystery Plays” are forty-seven in number, and in their popularity, scope and size represent a massive social and artistic evolution of the theatre in England in the approximately three hundred and fifty years between the creation of the *Quem Quaeritis* trope and the publication of the two full cycles of the plays. (York ix-xvii) The impact of the Protestant Reformation and the conversion of the official state religion to Anglicanism had a massive impact on English religious theatre, especially during the reign of Elizabeth I who, in order to squelch inflammatory religious propaganda appearing in various religious plays, outlawed religious theatre in the realm, and in fact made all theatre subject to imperial censorship.

Zeami’s *Fushikaden* outlined aesthetic principles for *Noh* that clearly impacted and continue to influence the performance of *Kabuki* theatre. Most scholars describe *Kabuki* as a transformation of the *Noh* drama, initiated by more popular urban—rather than court—theatre practices. The Muromachi period (1338-1443), which was marked by burgeoning cultural influence from mainland China, and in which Zeami’s *Noh* elicited what critic Frank Alanson Lombard calls “a refining influence over the military class in particular,” was marked by a new sort of self-awareness in the military-oriented shogunate power structure. *Kabuki*, however, was born in the latter stages of the Ashikaga Shogunate (1338-1573) while “the great mass of the people were entertaining themselves upon the dry river-beds or in vacant lots within the city with popular

*Dengaku, Sarugaku*, and other sports of rude promiscuity, wherein not infrequently men of rank also found relaxation” (287). By the sixteenth century, Noh was the older, seed form, and Onna Kabuki—Art of Song and Dance of Woman— by taking what stylization served its purposes, was the artistic vanguard.

As I discussed in my examination of these dramaturgical texts’ theoretical grounding in earlier rural traditions, one trend that becomes clear in our exploration of the three traditions is that a theoretical text tends to come onto the stage after primitive rural theatres have been active for a long time. But while the text in question may develop a lively cohesion for the ideas that grounded theatrical performance in the past, the dramaturgy does not necessarily determine where the theatre will go. Each text in question, therefore, serves as a bridge between an ancient theatrical form and forms that are recognizable in popular performance today, but it is curious to notice that dramaturgical texts comment just as thoroughly—more so, in fact—on how things have been done than how they will be done, and often the rulebook that these theorists give their readers have an authority that is revered but far from rigid.

## VI. DIVERGENCES AND CONCLUSION

In the course of this discussion, I have pointed to a number of ways that these three texts and traditions, while very similar, also diverge in both style and intent. It is helpful to consider these divergences from a two-fold focus on the theatres' and dramaturgical texts' audiences and on their plays' content.

To understand a text's audience and to fully appreciate the theatrical mission for each dramaturgical text, first consider its author's voice or style. While each text shares definite similarities in content and mission, which I have already explored, the voice of each theorist (or group of theorists) implies a distinct type of relationship with the reader, and this relationship may also speak to the theorist's dramaturgy as well as his theory does. Put simply, for example, one might describe *Natyasastra's* tone as sacred and remote, *Regularis Concordia's* as clinical and *Fushikaden's* as fraternal or co-conspiratorial. But what about the content of plays that actually emerged as a result of the dramaturgical texts? Did they accomplish a transformative change on the theatres they intended to influence? The overwhelming answer is, as I have demonstrated in both text and form, yes: in each tradition, each theatre's respective dramaturgical text brought to bear on each stage a cohesive theory that had never existed prior to the text's introduction.

It might usually be a mistake to attempt to sort out an author's intention from a work of art, but when we read these three texts, which argue for a specific agenda to be accomplished by way of a theatrical work of art, it makes sense to identify what his

intentions are. In this discussion I have outlined five similarities that these works share, and I have argued that the three theatres have attempted a similar mission—worship and instruction—but the voice and style of each author is really what helps us to construe how important each of these tasks is to the author’s aesthetic and who in the theory is really responsible for *accomplishing* the task of theatre production.

What is it about the theatrical experience that allows an audience a perspective that transcends time? “So successfully have we disguised from ourselves the intensity of our own feelings, the sensibility of our own hearts,” says Tennessee Williams in the essay to which I referred at the beginning of this paper, “that plays in the tragic tradition have begun to seem untrue” (27). Any number of historical, social or personal forces has contributed to this “disguising,” but there remains in all theatre the possibility for a violent confrontation with truths larger than our immediate selves, and I believe that it is this world of possibility that inspired the dramatic theorists that I have explored here. As Rama’s witness of the trials of Sita and the births of Lava and Kusa, and as in the Marys’ witness to Christ’s resurrection in the *Quem Quaeritis* trope, theatre allows us to have real—transformative—encounters which are otherwise impossible in lived experience. “Time itself is wholly fluid in the playwright’s hands. His characters live at once in reminiscence, present action, and prophetic vision,” writes Henry Wells in his description of the playwright Bhavabhuti’s masterpiece: “Its universe is a seamless garment” (354).



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