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Silence and Samurai: Suzuki Tadashi and Greek Tragedy

Suzuki Tadashi incorporates elements from traditional Japanese drama (Nô, Kabuki, Kyôgen, and Bunraku) into his versions of Greek tragedy. He provides Japanese commentary on the major themes of these western dramas.

There are many parallels between Nô and Greek tragedy. Both were performed by three or four male actors in outdoor theatres; both included music (specifically drum and flute/aulos), and dance; both featured a chorus and choral commentary, and alternated spoken with sung portions; both dealt with serious and universal themes; both had a comic play follow a serious one (Kyôgen is comparable to the Satyr play). In both, gods and ghosts spoke to mortals; both had religious origins, and both use masks.

Both derive themes out of a heroic and military tradition, one the Samurai and the other Homeric. Athens, with its ideas of imperialist expansion, gave birth to Greek tragedy. Euripides criticized the earlier military values enshrined in Homeric epics. Suzuki, who first reworked a play by Euripides (*The Trojan Women*, 1977), also criticizes what can be called the Samurai ethic, or that of any warlike society that believes that might makes right.

This play is a study in suffering: a woman who has survived a catastrophe (Hiroshima?) imagines herself as Hecuba, and the drama unfolds.

The Bacchae (1978) shows some unspecified people oppressed by a tyrant. They enact the *Bacchae* as a sort of catharsis. Pentheus the tyrant is killed and the people rejoice. But Pentheus comes back from the dead, and the cycle repeats itself. *Dionysus* (1993) makes organized religion and the state the villains.

Clytemnestra (1983: a combination of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes*), deals more with the war of the sexes. It shows us a woman in a patriarchal society who fights back. Suzuki returns again to the theme of this dysfunctional family in his *Electra*, performed at Delphi (1995).

Oedipus (2000) shows an emperor/shogun who is destroyed by revelations; the fates appear like ghosts in Nô. This is a long day's journey into the darkness of insight.

Opposites clash and marry as ancient Greek tragedy is used to express modern Japanese concerns. As usual in the twentieth century, Greek tragedy provides the scaffolding for political and philosophical issues.