

Shunkan on Devil Island

A kabuki adaptation of a scene from *Heike nyogo no shima*, by Chikamatsu Monzaemon

Translated by Samuel L. Leiter

The noh play *Shunkan* and the puppet-kabuki piece *Shunkan on Devil Island* (Shunkan, or Kikaigashima no ba) draw on the same materials from *The Tale of the Heike*: both open with three exiles describing their lives and close with a depiction of Shunkan's loneliness. The way each play progresses from its beginning to the shared conclusion, however, is strikingly different and reveals much about the two traditions. The noh play isolates Shunkan's emotions, portrays the intensity of his loneliness, and advocates the effectiveness of religious practice. Chikamatsu Monzaemon, in writing the puppet play of which "Shunkan on Devil Island" is but a single act, invented new characters to create romantic interests, conflict (leading to the almost obligatory fight scene), and self-sacrifice, all staple elements of the puppet-kabuki tradition in which love, honor, and sacrifice are the predominant virtues.

The kabuki version of this act, the version translated here, contains clear traces of its noh and puppet antecedents. All three musical traditions are represented. The noh flute and drums accompany Shunkan's entrance, and the gidayū shamisen and chanter sit at stage left to describe and accompany much of the action. In kabuki most of the lines of direct speech are spoken by the actors rather than by the chanter, although as is usual in traditional Japanese theater, the boundaries between direct speech and description are often not clear. Typical kabuki music and sound effects echo forth from the music room (geza). Large drum patterns related to water predominate, with ripple patterns (*sazanami*) accompanying the emotional passages and wave patterns (*namimoto*) accenting the entrances, exits, and stage action.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon's puppet play *The Heike and the Isle of Women* (*Heike nyogo no shima*) was first performed at the Takemoto Theater in Osaka in 1719 and was adapted to the kabuki stage in the following year. In 1759 Ichikawa Danzō III (1709–1772) performed the role of Shunkan so successfully that the scene on Devil

Island—most of act 2 of the five-act play—became an independent and frequently produced number and is now the only part of the original play to be offered regularly. It was taken on tour to the Soviet Union in 1961 and to Western Europe in 1965 and was received enthusiastically in both places.

The text used for this translation is that of the National Theater production found in *Kokuritsu gekijōen taihonshū*, II, and in *Meisaku kabuki zenshū*, I. The description of stage business is derived from a performance at Tokyo's Kabuki Theater in May 1975. Samuel L. Leiter's book *The Art of Kabuki*, in which this translation first appeared, contains extensive descriptions of variant performance practices, some of which are included in the footnotes to this translation.