INTRODUCTION

Kanze Kojirō Nobumitsu 観世小次郎信光 (1435–1516), the late Muromachi noh practitioner, has left behind many noh plays that remain popular in the contemporary noh repertoire. Some examples include Funabenkei, which presents first a romantic tale and then a ferocious battle; Chōryō, which is based on the story of a famous Chinese warrior; and Yūgyō Yanagi, whose protagonist, the aged willow tree spirit, is identified as one of Nobumitsu’s most successful creations.

Present-day Japanese scholars identify Nobumitsu’s noh plays as demonstrating the furyū style, which is also often associated with the general aesthetic features in plays composed by Nobumitsu’s peers. There are some Japanese scholarly works that attempt to explain this feature, although nothing to date has been done in English. A review of existing Japanese material on either furyū, Nobumitsu, or the late Muromachi period only brings up more questions: who is Nobumitsu and what else has he written? What is a furyū play? Why are the late Muromachi noh plays associated with the furyū style? How do these plays relate to the historical and cultural specificities of the time? Do we see this kind of style in other time periods? And, perhaps most important, what significance does late Muromachi noh (including both the practitioners and their works) have in contemporary noh discourse?
One of the best ways to answer these questions is through a detailed examination of the representative noh practitioner of the time—Kanze Kojirō Nobumitsu. Nobumitsu’s life and long career as a prominent troupe leader, prolific noh composer and expert performer is an integral part of the noh scene of his time, while the specific political, cultural and social elements interacted and engaged with the development of the genre and its practitioners. In other words, Nobumitsu is not only an important individual practitioner who created important plays that left a strong legacy on the noh theater, his life and work also inform the discursive construct of noh during the late Muromachi period. Learning about Nobumitsu will provide the modern audience and readers with more knowledge of the late Muromachi noh theater and the modern noh discourse.

Historical Development of Noh

At the outset, it will be useful to review the general history of noh before setting out on a discussion of the late Muromachi period. This review will not only provide the broad historical background of noh in general but also fill in the gaps that exist in historical accounts of noh.

Noh scholars Omote Akira and Amano Fumio, in Nōgaku no Rekishi (能楽の歴史 History of the Noh theater), consolidated earlier works with their own research and formulated eight historical periods of noh development from the Heian period to the present.¹

The first half of this historical trajectory comprises the periods of formation (形成期 keiseiki), accomplishment (大成期 taiseiki), and development (展開期 tenkaiki), and ends at the

¹. See Omote and Amino (I) 1987, 6–191. This book is not the only scholarly work that situates noh in its historical framework, although many other historical accounts tend to include discussions of other genres, e.g., Suwa and Sugai, 1998. Ortolani 1990, chronologically introduces the major genre of each period, although not in as much depth as Omote and Amino’s study.
beginning of the Tokugawa period, which historians call the transition (転換期 *tenkanki*) period. This first half is followed by two major periods, each divided into two parts: the first and second parts of the “official ritual of state” period (式楽前期 *shikigaku zenki*, 式楽後期 *shikigaku kōki*), and the two parts of “Noh Studies” (能楽前期 *Nōgakuzenki*, 能楽後期 *Nōgakukōki*).

The formative period is identified as the time from the Heian through the Kamakura periods, when noh was still known as *sarugaku*, and when elements of comical entertainment were very common. Then Kan'ami Kiyotsugu (観阿弥清次 1333–1384) and his son Zeami Motokiyo (世阿弥元清 1363?–1443?) came on the scene in the Muromachi period, which officially began when the Ashikaga warrior General Ashikaga Takauji (1305–1358) established his military headquarters in the Muromachi area of Kyoto in 1336. The following two centuries saw the development of what later generations termed the Kitayama (北山 Northern Mountain) and Higashiyama (東山 Eastern Mountain) cultures, warrior cultures that manifested the personal ambitions and characters of their advocates, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) and Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1435–1490), respectively. Throughout this period an incessant, and at times irrational, power struggle raged between factions of the court and various powerful military families. In 1467, the decade-long Ōnin War (1467–1477) broke out, plunging the country into a century of civil warfare. The Muromachi period officially ended in 1573, when the fifteenth

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2. Looser 2008, translated *shikigaku* (式楽) as “official ritual of state.” I have decided to use his translation, as his rendering best conveys the meaning of *shikigaku*.

3. The Heian period lasted for about four hundred years, from around the late eighth century to the early 1180s, followed by the Kamakura period, which ended in 1333 when the Kamakura Bakufu was demolished. Yokomichi et al. (I) 1992, 8–29.

4. Like all historical periodization, there is more than one definition of these early Japanese historical divisions. According to Asao et al. 1996, the Heian period is commonly identified as starting in 794 (Enreki 13) and ending in 1192 (Kenkyū 3). See Appendix 7 for a list of successive Ashikaga shogunates.
Ashikaga shogun Yoshiaki was ousted from his military headquarters by Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582).5

The next thirty years or so is often referred to as the Azuchi-Momoyama period by Japanese historians. In 1603, after victory in the Sekigahara War in 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu was conferred with the title of shogun, thus starting the Edo Bakufu. The Tokugawa period, also known as the Edo period, lasted until 1867. In this book, I define the late Muromachi period as lasting from the onset of the Ōnin War until 1573.

In Omote and Amano’s schema, the most critical stage to the development of noh is the Muromachi period. The second stage, the period of accomplishment, refers to the time when Kan’ami and Zeami defined and constructed noh discourse through the former’s superb performance skills and the latter’s prolific writings. The third stage, the development period, begins with Zeami’s immediate successors Konparu Zenchiku (1405–1470?) and On’ami Motoshige (1398–1467). It ends in the mid-sixteenth century, before Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) came to power. According to Omote and Amano, this period saw the active participation of pseudo-amateur groups in performance, while the major Yamato troupes, the Konparu and Kanze, were facing a crisis of waning support.

The last stage—the “transitional” period—started when noh theater was rejuvenated by the renewed ardent support of the powerful military generals Oda Nobunaga and later Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Oda commissioned a noh performance as a celebration for the Ashikaga general Yoshiaki (1537–1597) in 1568 (Eiroku 11), and was a devoted patron of the four major noh troupes, just as his predecessors, the Muromachi shoguns, had been.6 The four major noh troupes continued to receive positive

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5. See Berry 1994 for a critical analysis of the civil warfare in Kyoto during this period. Also see Keene 2003 on Yoshimasa and Imatani and Yamamura 1992, 45–78, on Yoshimitsu. For a comprehensive description of the various aspects of Muromachi society, see Hall and Toyoda 1977.

attention from the military leaders, which reached a peak in 1597. In that year Hideyoshi began offering stable stipends to the four major noh troupes, marking a new historical stage in noh history. With the enthusiastic patronage of the military generals, the reward system and performance format stabilized, resulting in a very different noh theater in the Edo period and subsequently, the present day.

In the first half of the Muromachi period—when Kan’ami and his peers were performing—the noh theater began its gradual evolution from a semireligious ritual performance on temple and shrine grounds to a highly aesthetized theater employing poetry, music, song, and dance, albeit often still imbued with religious significance. The precise origin of sarugaku noh cannot be identified, and therefore it is very difficult to determine the exact point in time when noh theater started to evolve from a plebian semireligious performance into a more refined theater. According to Zeami, his father Kan’ami and Kan’ami’s contemporaries, such as Itchū and Inuō, were great performers who had inspired him in his own artistic endeavor. Kan’ami had also established new singing and dancing techniques, which became the structural foundation of noh plays as we know them today. Some of Kan’ami’s plays, such as Matsukaze, were edited by Zeami and have become representative examples of noh.

Today’s students of noh by and large are familiar with what happened during the time of Zeami and his immediate successors, thanks to the voluminous work done by researchers both in and outside of Japan. Studies have also been done on the noh theater of the Edo period, especially on the military institution’s roles and on the Iemoto system. Nevertheless, what happened during the second half of the “development” stage (the late-Muromachi period) has not attracted much attention. It was a time when the four major noh troupes engaged in fierce competitions of all kinds: performing and composing new plays, securing top

or sole performance priority with religious institutions, fighting for patronage from the powerful military generals, etc. At the same time, we see the appearance of different kinds of “amateur” participants. There were the “shirōto,” performers who were paid but did not belong to any major troupes; and there were also enthusiastic fans who learned to chant and compose. During this period, the noh theater engaged with the late Muromachi period in ways unique to its time—these ways will be examined by a close reading of Nobumitsu’s plays in this book.

To summarize, I believe that it is during Zeami’s time that sarugaku noh started to develop toward the status of an officially “sanctioned” art form with Zeami’s assiduous writing of treatises and composition of plays. And two generations later, during Nobumitsu’s time, noh finally achieved the position of a form of cultural capital. The Edo period saw the last major development of the noh theater, and plays edited and refined during this period have the closest affinity with what we see today.

Three Generations of Noh Practitioners

One important feature of the noh landscape is the relationship among the various noh troupes and practitioners within each troupe—be it genealogical or artistic. It is, however, complex and not as well documented as present-day readers would like. What people of the present know of the performance repertoire of that time relies mainly on performance records, scattered mention in journals and other historical documents, as well as Zeami’s treatises. The impression that present-day popular plays were equally important during the late Muromachi period is probably

8. Shirōto (素人) is a term used to describe people who practiced noh but did not belong to any troupes. Nishino and Hata 1999, 266, classifies this group of performers under “tesarugaku” (手猿楽). Noh performers who do not belong to the major noh troupes have always existed, and they include a wide group of people ranging from court elites to females. See Rath 2004 for a discussion of the female group. For general discussion see Nose, 1972, chapter 8; Yokomichi et al. (III) 1987, 289–295.
a result of the inaccessibility of information. The emergence of new historical documents therefore brings surprising information about the noh scene. The discovery of the earliest performance record in 1999 by Yashima Sachiko illustrates this point clearly.9 Yashima’s discovery is the record of a performance at Kōfukuji (Kōfuku Temple) in 1427 (Ōei 34). The program and the list of performers involved indicate a more amicable relationship among the branches of the Kanze family, as well as a repertoire that challenges contemporary perceptions of noh repertoire of that time. Quinn most succinctly summarizes the implication of this discovery:

[S]ome of the titles mentioned are quite surprising because they seem to correspond to extant plays whose primary attractions are spectacular staging or technical virtuosity rather than poetic lyricism such as Zeami advocated. Until the discovery of this program, many scholars had assumed that plays that draw heavily on spectacle were more characteristic of late Muromachi styles that postdated Zeami.10

It is clear, from this earliest program, that the style of noh plays was not as clearly defined as thought; nor was the relationship among the different Kanze family branches as alienated as believed. The artistic influences and social affiliations among the practitioners were intricate, implying that any attempt to discuss late Muromachi noh practitioners will need to be prefaced with an introduction to the other noh practitioners for a more informed background. In this section, I will divide the noh practitioners into three generations and elaborate on the characteristics of the third generation, to which Nobumitsu and his peers belong.11

11. Another way of dividing noh practitioners into historical periods can be
The first generation includes Kan’ami and Inuō, together with a few others—all of whom we have limited knowledge. This first generation of practitioners is known more for their performance skill than their compositions, with the exception of Kan’ami. Not only did Kan’ami devise new musical rhythm and dance styles, he also composed several noh plays such as *Jinen Koji* (Priest Koji), *Matsukaze* (Matsukaze) and *Eguchi* (Eguchi)—many of which his son Zeami later revised. There are also noh plays from this period that are not attributed to any specific composer; they are given the general name “*kosakunō*” (古作能 early noh).

Zeami, On’ami, Motomasa (?–1432) and Konparu Zenchiku are the major members in the second-generation. Zeami was On’ami’s uncle, although the two practitioners ended up treading very different paths in their performance careers. Zeami left behind a large number of treatises and noh plays, while On’ami left only the reputation of a great actor. Motomasa, Zeami’s son, and Zenchiku, Zeami’s son-in-law, both composed noh plays that reflected Zeami’s influence. Motomasa was the Kanze troupe leader for about ten years, succeeding his father Zeami. He died in his thirties, and only a handful of plays, such as *Morihisa* (Morihisa) and *Sumidagawa* (Sumida River) are attributed to him. Zenchiku was popular as a performer, and together with On’ami he enjoyed great fame as one of the two best performers of his time. He was also a prolific writer whose religious and poetic knowledge can be seen in both his treatises, such as *Rokurin Ichirō*, and noh plays, such as *Bashō*. 

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12. Other than the occasional mention of their names and activities in historical documents, much of what we know of these performers is from Zeami’s treatises.  
13. See Yokomichi et al. (III), 121–147 for a detailed account of these achievements. Also see, Omote and Amino (I) 1987, 35–37.  
14. These noh plays are identified in Go on (五音) one of Zeami’s treatises. See Yokomichi et al. (III), 1987, 222–242, for a general introduction to Motomasā’s life and work.  
The third and final generation of professional noh practitioners who left behind a substantial number of noh plays are Nobumitsu, Kanze Nagatoshi (1488–1541) and Konparu Zenchiku’s grandson Konparu Zenpō (1454–?). According to Nōhonsakusha Chūmon (An index of noh composers), thirty-one noh plays are attributed to Nobumitsu, out of which fourteen are still performed today. The number of plays created by Zenpō and Nagatoshi is estimated to be more than twenty, although only about five of each are still performed.

**Plays by the Third Generation Practitioners**

Plays by the third generation practitioners exhibit characteristics that differ from the majority of noh plays performed today. In Funabenkei (Benkei on board) by Nobumitsu, for example, we see a play that adeptly weaves together the bravery and wit of the loyal retainer Benkei with the tale of a sad romance, followed by a ferocious battle. Another example, Momijigari, also by Nobumitsu, tells the story of the Taira general Koremochi. This dramatic play with its mesmerizing characters has continued to charm audiences since the Muromachi period.16

Nobumitsu’s contemporary Konparu Zenpō also produced plays that emphasize visual elements and drama. One of the several existing plays attributed to Zenpō is Hatsuyuki (Hatsuyuki, the pet bird), a short two-part mugen (dream) play in which a pet chicken attains enlightenment after her owner offers a seven-day prayer session for her.17 This play is unusual in that there is no waki role. In Act One, the shite plays Hatsuyuki’s owner; in Act Two, the shite takes up the role of the pet chicken and performs a thanksgiving dance, while Hatsuyuki’s owner is played by the tsure.18

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16. Translations of both plays can be found in Tyler 1992. Also see Chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion of the plays.

17. Mugen noh (夢幻能), or dream play, is an important category identified in present-day noh discourse. See Chapter Five for more details. Also see Nishisei 1986 and Lim 2005, 35–37, for a discussion of Hatsuyuki.

18. One characteristic of the noh theater is that each individual character
Kanze Nagatoshi, Nobumitsu’s eldest son, also has several noh plays attributed to him, such as Rinzō, which is characterized by the large number of performers appearing on stage. The rinzō, a huge circular stupa-like stand where temples place their holy scriptures, is often situated in the middle of the temple hall. In this play the waki, a holy monk, visits a temple in Kitano where five thousand volumes of holy Buddhist scriptures are stored in a rinzō. While the priest is admiring the scriptures an old man, performed by the tsure, suddenly appears. He is the protecting deity of the rinzō. Together they hail the transmission of Buddhism from China to Japan and sing praises to Buddhism. In Act Two, another deity, Fudaishi, performed by the shite, appears with his two attendants (kokata, child performers). The deity Fudaishi brings a case-full of scriptures as a present for the monk, and the play ends with the attendants and the two deities each performing a celebratory dance.

One characteristic of the noh theater in this period can be seen in the role-character relationship. The waki might be absent, as in Hatsuyuki, or the shite performer might play two different characters, as in Funabenkei. Note that although we do occasionally see two different shite characters in some of the earlier plays, this practice was less common during that time, and the results less dramatic. For instance in Fujito, the shite plays the mother of a murdered fisherman in Act One and the anguished ghost of the fisherman in Act Two. This play, probably by Zeami’s son Motomasa (1394?–1432), focuses on the sense of suffering and

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is performed by specific role-type, e.g., “shite” or “waki.” In this book I call the relationship between the role type and the character the “role-character relationship.” The basic role types in a noh play are the shite and the waki. Shite, literally the “doer,” is sometimes translated as the protagonist. Characters are often identified by the role types that perform them. Usually a role will perform the same character throughout a play (one act or two acts). For example, a shite performer takes up the character of a warrior in act one, and continues to play the same character in act two. Other times, however, the character each role takes may differ in the two acts. For instance, in Funabenkei the shite plays a beautiful woman and later a ferocious ghost.

injustice shared by the mother and son. This is very different in nature from the late-Muromachi plays, in which the shite plays two vastly different characters in order to heighten the dramatic impact and demonstrate the range of the acting.

Another distinctive feature of many of the plays created during this period is the deployment of elaborate stage props. Nagatoshi's *Rinzō* uses two of these: the *rinzō* that opens on eight sides and a platform on which the deity Fudaishi sits. Zenpō's *Ikkaku Sennin* (The wizard Ikkaku) has a hut and a rock cave, represented by two simple stage constructions. Almost every play produced by Nobumitsu requires some kind of stage prop. For example, the boat in *Funabenkei*, the platform used for Yōkihi's bed in *Kōtei* (The emperor), the stand of blooming plum blossoms in *Kochō* (The butterfly), and a prop to represent the ancient willow tree in *Yugyō Yanagi* (The priest and the willow).

In terms of musical instruments, many plays from this period employ the stick drum (*taiko*) as well as the two hand drums (*ōtsuzumi* and *kotsuzumi*) and the flute. The stick drum, which is often used to create a lively and boisterous effect, is an important component in many plays that end with a quick tempo *maibataraki* dance. Compared to plays produced by Zeami and Zenpō, a much larger number of plays by Nobumitsu and his contemporaries end with a dance performed with the accompaniment of a stick drum. One example is *Kōtei*, which concludes with a battle between the illness demon and the exorcist. In short, in view of the examples provided, one can argue that in general plays created in Nobumitsu's time have different emphases from those of the second generation. The former are more dramatic and lively, the latter more introspective and elegant.

In many of Nobumitsu's other plays, the primary focus is neither solely on the main character nor on their internal experiences. Instead we see a stronger emphasis on the external dramatic events, and the responsibility for the presentation of

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21. See Sachiko 1985: 20–49. Also see Yokomichi 1992 for a list of props used on noh stage.
these events is distributed among the various role types. As the noh historian Nōgami Toyoichirō (1883–1950) has pointed out, shite-focus performance (shite-ichinin-shūgi) is an important characteristic in many noh plays, especially those created before the Ōnin War attributed to Zeami and Zenchiku. Later plays, like those that I have just mentioned, often ascribed a more important dramatic significance to the waki character, and sometimes even the tsure and kyōgen characters. We no longer see the shite monopolizing the entire stage. Closely related to this role-character feature is the number of characters actually appearing on the stage. The plays composed by Nagatoshi, the youngest of the three major noh composers and practitioners of the late Muromachi period, often had many characters and props on the stage. One example is Rinzō, described above. Another is Kasui (The river), which has more than ten different characters.

**After the Muromachi Period**

Starting with Ashikaga Yoshimitsu’s patronage of Zeami, the formerly marginalized sarugaku performers and the genre they

22. See Nogami 1948, 1–42. Nogami comments that noh is the kind of play that focuses on the shite and the shite alone (シテ一人主義 shite ichinin shūgi), when he refers to mainly mugen noh plays that are composed by Zeami and his contemporaries. Tracing the historical development of dengaku and sarugaku, Nogami argues that the noh theater is a theatrical form that emphasizes only the shite. All other role types, including the waki, resemble the audience in that they are observers most of the time, and that they do not engage in any form of dramatic confrontation with the shite. Nogami also argues that noh is not meant to be “realistic” but is a genre that emphasizes “showing” (miseru) and “hearing” (kikaseru), or more accurately, “to make the audience listen by means of style” (shikata ni yotte, kikaseru mono). If we contrast this style with the plays produced by Nobumitsu and his peers, we will be able to see that there is a changing trend in these later noh plays to expand beyond the practice of focusing on the shite when presenting the play. There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to this new trend. The obvious advantage is the possibility of enacting the events as they unfold, although at times this is done at the expense of the poetic aesthetics which is especially essential when the shite performs “solo.”

represented rose steadily in the social and cultural hierarchy.\textsuperscript{24} This change in the social and cultural definition of the genre is part of an intricate trajectory of political and economic development that helped shape, among other things, the audience-performer relationship. The incessant civil wars that occurred after the Ōnin War greatly weakened the financial power of the military and religious institutions—the sources of traditional patronage and income for noh troupes. The Kanze troupe, like others, ventured beyond the capital and performed in the provinces as far away as the Kyushu area\textsuperscript{25}. This expanded geographical scope was another important feature in the changing social scene.

The noh theater developed within this new social context was understandably different from that developed during the earlier two generations of noh practitioners. The relatively smaller number of plays created during the late Muromachi focused more on the active and external, in contrast to plays that are meditative. A much wider scope of themes also became the norm rather than the exception.

And what happened in noh theater after Nobumitsu’s time? To answer this question, it is important to discuss briefly another military patron, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who unified Japan in 1590 and started a new political era. According to noh historian Steven Brown, “Hideyoshi’s patronage and involvement with noh helped create a cultural space within which noh drama would eventually be designated the official ceremonial music and entertainment (\textit{shikigaku}) of the Tokugawa shogunate.”\textsuperscript{26} It is clear that Hideyoshi and some of his successors had a tremendous impact on noh. They selected, categorized, and refined the repertoire. The

\textsuperscript{24} See Lim 2004: 111–133, for more details on the interactions between performers and the social and cultural elite.

\textsuperscript{25} In medieval diary records such as \textit{Inryōken Nichiroku} (The Inryōken Journal, 1435–1466, 1484–1493) and \textit{Sanetaka Kōki} (Diary of Sanetaka, 1474–1536) we see mention of Nobumitsu’s activities at the temple and at Sanetaka’s home. Elsewhere I have discussed Nobumitsu’s involvement in the cultural circles of the late Muromachi period court officials and Zen prelates. See Chapter One for a more detailed discussion of these journeys. Also see Lim 2004.

\textsuperscript{26} Brown 2001, 119.
gradual selection process resulted in fewer than three hundred plays remaining in the modern repertoire. Among those that have survived is a group of plays that were labeled *ityoku* (exotic pieces) during the time of the fifth Tokugawa shogun Tsunayoshi (1646–1709). Many of these plays, revived thanks to Tsunayoshi’s preference for unconventional plays, were later termed furyū noh in modern noh scholarship, and many of these were produced by late Muromachi noh practitioners, best represented by Nobumitsu.

In 1960, the visual-oriented style of noh plays composed by practitioners such as Nobumitsu, Zenpō, and Nagatoshi was labeled “furyū noh” by Yokomichi Mario in his two volume *Yōkyokushū* (Collection of noh plays) in the “Classical Japanese literature series” (*Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*) published by Iwanami Shoten. Yokomichi addressed the nature of plays by late Muromachi noh practitioners and proposed that in order to differentiate these plays from earlier ones a specialized name should be given to them. He suggested “furyū” because the term “always has had a lively and spectacular connotation since the ancient period.”

Yokomichi’s commentary is very important, as it succinctly describes the nature of plays by Nobumitsu and his peers. The name furyū noh not only highlights their distinctive emphasis on

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27. Looser 2008, 3, n7 elaborates on the implication of the legislation of noh as the official ritual of state and aptly summarizes it as “… these [institutional] divides have helped the noh to become a repository of a more transcendentally essentialized Japanese identity.” To a certain extent this Japanese identity plays a part in the formation of contemporary noh discourse which deems furyū style plays inferior. But to further pursue this issue in the present book would distract attention from the main subject, Nobumitsu.

28. Classical literature anthologies often include performance genres such as noh and kabuki. We see here a conscientious participation of consumers (readers) and producers (publishers, scholars) in the construction of a body of “classics” that theoretically represents the highbrow culture of premodern times. In the case of noh, this inclusion seems to reaffirm the literary value of the genre, contributing to the more literature-oriented emphasis of the noh paradigm. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Six.

dramatic elements and visual presentation, it also (probably unintentionally) implies that possibly a different perspective can be adopted to examine late Muromachi noh plays. This new perspective is particularly clear when furyū plays are compared with those by Zeami and his followers. At the end of Yokomichi’s commentary, he hints at the “inappropriate” popularity of the furyū style plays while affirming the higher aesthetic values of plays produced by Zeami. Yokimichi’s definition also echoes the position of many noh scholars of his generation and earlier.\(^\text{30}\) It is no exaggeration to say that Zeami is the main architect in constructing the noh paradigm that we all know today. But the overwhelming emphasis on and romanticization of Zeami and his noh aesthetics in modern noh discourse has become at times an insurmountable obstacle to a better and more comprehensive understanding of noh and also limits our understanding of medieval cultural history.\(^\text{31}\) Fortuitously, in recent years Japanese scholars have started to drift away from concentrating solely on Zeami and have begun to work on other areas. Two recent works on the late Muromachi noh theater have been written by Yamanaka Reiko (1998) and Ishii Tomoko (1998), and Omote Akira presented his latest findings on the birth date of Nobumitsu in 1999. In English-language noh scholarship, however, there are still relatively few studies on the late Muromachi period, although many excellent scholarly works on Zeami and Zenchiku continue to be produced.\(^\text{32}\)

30. A few scholars have published papers on topics pertinent to the late Muromachi noh scene, such as Haruo 1973; Nishisei Hideki 1986, 15–30, on Konparu Zenpō; and Oda 1985, on the development of stage props.
31. It was an illuminating moment for me when I heard the living national cultural treasure, shite performer Kanze Hideo, discuss his childhood training. In a public talk in Singapore on April 4, 2002, the renowned shite performer repeatedly cited Zeami’s treatises on the importance of early training for performers, as if there had been no change in any of the performance elements between Zeami’s time and now. (Again, Looser’s 2008 work illustrates the perception of time, which is beyond the scope of this book.) Aside from the problem with ignoring the six hundred years between Zeami’s treatises and the present, Kanze Hideo’s numerous references to Zeami also demonstrates the canonical position of Zeami’s theories.
32. There are plenty of examples: Zeami’s treatises have been translated by
About This Book

The goal of this book is to fill the gap in English-language scholarship on late Muromachi noh. I examine the specific cultural and societal framework in which Nobumitsu functioned as a noh practitioner—ranging from troupe management to composition and performance. In the process of discussing Nobumitsu’s career, life and peers, I would like to find answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of this book. My ultimate intention is to propose an alternative way to discuss and debate noh theater in present-day noh discourse.

I start with the proposition that even though it is often regarded as being less important in contemporary noh scholarship, late Muromachi noh theater was really quite eventful, especially as practiced by Nobumitsu and his contemporaries. Nobumitsu, whose extant plays are second only to Zeami in number, has not received enough scholarly attention. A detailed study of his contribution and significance in the late Muromachi period will not only introduce an important noh practitioner to English-language noh scholarship, but, equally important, it will illustrate the significance of his work and times within noh history.

In order to coordinate what seems to be a fairly ambitious argument situated in two different time periods—the late Muromachi and present—I have divided this book into four parts. This introduction provides an overview of the book: its aims and

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Rimer and Yamazaki 1984; Hare 1986 and 2008 discusses Zeami’s biography and gives annotated commentary on his plays and treatises; de Poorter 1986 presents a detailed translation and analysis of Zeami and his treatises; Nearman published a series of translations and commentaries of Zeami’s Kakyō and Kyakuraido in the 1980s and another series on Zenchiku’s Rokurin Ichirō in the 1990s; Quinn 2005 examines in detail Zeami’s treatises; Looser 2008 and Yokota 1997 discuss Tokugawa period noh; Thornhill 1993, Atkins 1999, and Pinnington 2006 have all done studies on Zenchiku.

33. Even though this may seem to imply that my intended audience are readers who are more knowledgeable of the noh theater, I do intend this book to be read also by those who are interested but who have not had encountered the genre before. I believe that the noh theater can, and probably should, be introduced to beginners from different perspectives.
approach, structure, and rationale. A general historical account of
the noh theater, critical as background information for the ensuing
discussion, is also presented here.

Part One continues with the sociohistorical specifics of
the late Muromachi period. Referencing various historical
documents and contemporary scholarly works, I present a
narrative of Nobumitsu's life and time. The most important of
these sources is the Kanze Kojirō Nobumitsu Gazōsan (観世
小次郎信光画像贊), which was written by Keijō Shūrin (景徐
周林 1429–1518), a Zen monk who was Nobumitsu's contempo-
rary. This historical document provides reliable information on
Nobumitsu's life, not least because Nobumitsu himself contributed
to its writing. Equally important is the nature of the writing and
how it sheds light on the perception and reception of noh in the
late Muromachi period. Nobumitsu's biography highlights his
significance as a noh practitioner during the late Muromachi
period; this second chapter also provides a general introduction to
some of the common features seen in Nobumitsu's plays.

By presenting a historical overview of the noh theater and
Nobumitsu's biography, starting with contemporary scholars’
presentation of a noh timeline and ending with an introduction
of Nobumitsu's plays, I want to emphasize the importance of
relating historical accounts to contemporary discourse—I believe
that this approach will yield more interesting discoveries and
livelier discussion. I also believe that an understanding of the
historical and cultural specifics, including that from recent times,
will be critical in providing a more comprehensive picture of noh
discourse.

Part Two highlights Nobumitsu's talent as a noh composer
who created a wide variety of noh plays that are still enjoyed by
contemporary audiences, as well as the general tendency of noh
composition in his time. These plays, presented under three
different categories—the furyū plays, the karamono (Chinese)
plays, and the mugen dream plays—are divided according to
their most representative characteristics. They are well known
as Nobumitsu's plays, and in a wider sense as plays of the late
Muromachi period. I try to include the discussion of as many
Nobumitsu plays as possible. When I need to make a choice, decisions are made in accordance with my intention to situate this book as part of a wider debate in the contemporary scholarly discourse on noh—I focus more on plays that are better-known and are still performed. In other words, plays that are easier to access. I discuss the individual merits of each play, calling attention to features that make them good theater. Close reading and discussions are not restricted only to these plays—comparisons with other plays help to substantiate my arguments.

Part Three switches the focus from Nobumitsu and late Muromachi noh plays to modern noh discourse, examining the concept of “furyū noh”—a term that is often used simultaneously with late Muromachi period noh plays. An understanding of this modern construct, which is partially premised on Zeami’s aesthetic paradigm, is very useful in illuminating the reception of late Muromachi plays in contemporary noh scholarship. In this final part of the book, I construct the likely trajectory of the term and try to answer the question Why, despite its refined features as a theatrical genre, the noh plays of Nobumitsu and his peers have been treated as somewhat inferior. It is important to examine this aspect of contemporary noh discourse because it will provide alternative ways to think about noh theater.

Between Zeami’s time and the Tokugawa period, noh theater ventured in various directions, with different participants attempting innovative trajectories—perhaps more as a means of survival than a conscious effort in the development of the genre. Among these participants of noh, Nobumitsu and his peers’ works occupy a special position in that they not only represent the potential of a new noh theater, but they are also witnesses to the history of noh. I argue in this book that Nobumitsu and the late Muromachi period should be accorded a more important position in noh history and suggest another perspective from which the noh theater can be examined.