

Institute for Japanese Studies Lecture Series

Staging Enslavement: Gestural Economies and the Question of Personhood in Medieval Japanese Performance

2020-2021

IJS
LECTURE
SERIES

Wednesday, October 28

12:00-1:30 pm

Online



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Premodern Japanese Literature and Performance
University of Michigan

How might dramatic portrayals of slavery help us rethink the relation between labor, personhood, and performance? I consider such portrayals through readings of the writings of master Noh actor, playwright, and theorist Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), and the play *Jinen Koji* (Genuine Preacher *Jinen*), a Zeami revision in which enthralling dances liberate a slave. The play's plot is simple: Filial girl sells herself into slavery to pay for parents' funeral rites. Daring Buddhist preacher dances to purchase her freedom. But what might these coupled exchanges say about calibrated gestures' capacity to reshape how human life was valued within medieval Japan? What types of physical exertions, emotional transactions, and potentials for solidarity does the figure of the slave mobilize—and toward what ends? I argue that Zeami deploys spectacles of gestural economy to question economies of enslavement, rewrite histories of dispossession, and pose alternatives to performers' dehumanization.

Reginald Jackson is Associate Professor of premodern Japanese literature and performance at the University of Michigan. His research interests include medieval calligraphy and illustrated handscrolls, Noh dance-drama, contemporary Japanese choreography, queer theory, and critical race theory.

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The IJS Lecture Series is supported by a U.S. Department of Education title VI grant to The Ohio State University East Asian Studies Center.