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| Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893) |
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| A playwright at the end of the Edo period and through much of the Meiji period, Kawatake Mokuami wrote over 360 plays during his fifty-year career which saw the advent of modernized kabuki and new dramaturgies to reflect changing Japanese culture at the end of the nineteenth century.  Born Yoshimura Shinshichi, Mokuami (as he was commonly called after his retirement in the 1880s) was kicked out of the family home for associating with geishas. He began to study dance, which led him to kabuki. He became a student of the Edo era playwright Tsuruya Nanboku V and rapidly began writing *shiranami mono* (robber plays) that were popular in the mid-nineteenth century.  After the Meiji restoration, Mokuami began to innovate and develop new techniques in kabuki dramaturgy, finding source material in contemporary novels, newspapers, and Western literature in translation. Kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838-1903) announced in 1872 at the opening of the Shintomi-za that he would “clean away the decay” that had infected kabuki, reforming and modernizing it. He subsequently asked Mokuami to develop dramas that would reflect the new modern Japan to be performed by the kabuki. Mokuami began to write ***katsureki mono***, ‘living history’ plays. One of the first was *Kōmon-ki osana kōshaku* (The Story of Komon, a Lecture for Youth, 1877), which caused a scandal because of accusations of libel. |
| A playwright at the end of the Edo period and through much of the Meiji period, Kawatake Mokuami wrote over 360 plays during his fifty-year career which saw the advent of modernized kabuki and new dramaturgies to reflect changing Japanese culture at the end of the nineteenth century.  Born Yoshimura Shinshichi, Mokuami (as he was commonly called after his retirement in the 1880s) was kicked out of the family home for associating with geishas. He began to study dance, which led him to kabuki. He became a student of the Edo era playwright Tsuruya Nanboku V and rapidly began writing *shiranami mono* (robber plays) that were popular in the mid-nineteenth century.  After the Meiji restoration, Mokuami began to innovate and develop new techniques in kabuki dramaturgy, finding source material in contemporary novels, newspapers, and Western literature in translation. Kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838-1903) announced in 1872 at the opening of the Shintomi-za that he would “clean away the decay” that had infected kabuki, reforming and modernizing it. He subsequently asked Mokuami to develop dramas that would reflect the new modern Japan to be performed by the kabuki. Mokuami began to write ***katsureki mono***, ‘living history’ plays. One of the first was *Kōmon-ki osana kōshaku* (The Story of Komon, a Lecture for Youth, 1877), which caused a scandal because of accusations of libel. His 1878 play *Nichō no Yumi Chigusa no Shidedō* (Two Bows and the Multifaceted Shigeto) was the first to be called katsureki by critic Kanagaki Rōbun (1829-94), who did not intend it as a compliment. Katsureki mono were supported by scholars and reformers but never caught on with the general public and were abandoned by 1886.  Another of Kawatake’ experiments were also the result of collaboration with a kabuki actor. Danjūrō’s rival Onoe Kikugorō V (1844-1903) asked Mokuami to write modern kabuki plays for him to perform in. The result was ‘crop-hair plays’ (***zangirimono***). The name comes from the drama’s depiction of everyday life in Meiji Japan in which members of the samurai caste have cut off their top knots and western culture is imitated. The first example of the genre, *Tokyo nichinichi shibun* (Tokyo Daily Newspaper, 1873), was based on a true murder in Tokyo. Twenty-four plays and fourteen dances were produced in the style, most written by Mokuami and performed by Kikugorō. These plays, however, merely replicated the external aspects of modern life within traditional kabuki dramatic structures and performance conventions, and like the living history plays, the genre was abandoned in the mid-eighties. Despite their lack of appeal, these two genres represented the first time contemporary life in Meiji Japan was represented on stage.  Mokuami became the playwright through whom the cultural shifts in response to modernity and the introduction of western culture to Japan came to the kabuki. Mokuami eventually wrote or had a hand in 360 plays, many of which are still staged today. Although katsureki mono and zangirimono did not succeed with the public, they paved the way for ***shin kabuki***. |
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