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Rotting Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Horror in *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*

Abstract

The success that the kabuki play *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* enjoyed was not simply due to its spectacular stage tricks, but also because of the inescapably intimate (human) nature of the horror displayed on stage. Sexuality and gender in particular dominate the horror on stage. The central character Oiwa serves as a vehicle for gendered fears rooted in Edo-period attitudes towards sexuality.

Keywords

Kabuki, Theatre, Edo Period, Femininity, Ghosts

Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan

The kabuki play *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* 東海道四谷怪談, written by Tsuruya Nanboku IV 四代目鶴屋南北 (1755–1829), was first performed in the seventh month of 1825. It was an immediate and great success; it ran a record number of days and was frequently revived during the rest of the Edo period, both in Edo and Kamigata. The story of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* revolves around the central character Oiwa, a woman from the samurai class. She left her husband Iemon before the beginning of the play, but returns to his side during Act I to avenge her father's murder—without knowing that the murderer is her very husband. Iemon's satisfaction about the deception and return of his wife doesn't last long, however; by Act II, Oiwa

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has given birth to a son and remains weakened from the pregnancy, which aggravates their already difficult financial situation. When his rich neighbor proposes that Iemon marry his own (young, beautiful) daughter instead, Iemon agrees to get rid of Oiwa. Oiwa is poisoned, disfigured, abused, and when she tries to make herself up (usually referred to as *kamisuki*) and leave the house to face her tormentors, she is killed by a sword sticking out of a beam. In her determination to avenge her mistreatment, Oiwa returns as a hideously disfigured ghost. She tricks Iemon into killing his new wife and father-in-law on the wedding night, forcing Iemon to flee and go into hiding. In Act III, Oiwa returns to torment Iemon as a moving corpse nailed to a door he pulls out of the water while fishing (a scene known as *toitagaeshi*). In Act IV, she first seduces Iemon as a beautiful woman and then turns back into a disfigured ghost to torment him again. In Act V, Oiwa kills Iemon's mother and dramatically escapes from a lantern to haunt Iemon again (a scene known as *chōchin nuke*). The play ends with Iemon's death, though not at Oiwa's hand.

This short description hardly does justice to the play, which has a cleverly constructed storyline the product of repeated trial and error. The play stands at the end of a successive development in the oeuvre of Tsuruya Nanboku, one of the most prolific and popular playwrights of his time, but his success did not come early. His first major hit was the play *Tenjiku Tokubei ikoku banashi* 天竺徳兵衛韓噺 that was premiered in the summer of 1804, when Nanboku was already close to fifty years old. *Tenjiku Tokubei ikoku banashi* contains the elements that would eventually also ensure the success of his later plays: impressive special effects and supernatural occurrences, including the appearance of ghosts.[1] As with many kabuki plays, it was written specifically for one actor, like the later *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* too.

The historical background of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* (its *sekai* 世界) was the popular play *Kanadehon Chūshingura* 仮名手本忠臣蔵.[2] In fact, when *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* was performed for the first time, it was back-to-back with *Kanadehon Chūshingura.* Nanboku was adept at entwining different plots, usually historical *jidaimono* 時代物 and domestic *sewamono* 世話物. By interweaving the two plays, Nanboku showed two sides of the same coin: samurai heroism and loyalty in the *jidaimono Kanadehon Chūshingura* and

[1] Such as the use of real water, for example, or a fire-breathing giant toad.

[2] A *sekai*, world, refers to the defined sets of characters and events that make up the background of a kabuki play. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* is set in the *sekai* of *Chūshingura*, which deals with the fictionalised events of the historical Akō vendetta. Oiwa's husband and father are both former retainers of Enya Hangan, the tragic hero of *Chūshingura*.

the life of those who fail to live up to these ideals and fall to the bottom of society in the *sewamono Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*. Nanboku is considered to also have been one of the spearheads of *kizewamono* 生世話物, "raw" domestic plays that focused on the lives of the lower classes and the criminal underworld. Instead of noble heroes, these plays are dominated by anti-heroes, villains, and people who have fallen on hard times. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* is one of these plays. As the characters descend into their individual misfortunes, often caused by their own depravity, sexuality and gender play an important role in the horrors that they experience. The examples are numerous: pregnancy as a life-threatening health issue and source of economic hardship rather than familial felicity, the female body as a tool of seduction and source of horror, the Oiwa's attempt at breaking with the idealized version of femininity in kabuki. Sex might not always be explicitly referred to, yet it is constantly present as an underlying theme. While other factors contributed to her success too, Oiwa worked so well as a terrifying haunting spirit precisely because she channeled the fears that the Edo-period audience held about sexuality and gender so well.

Performance of Gender

Different role types in kabuki have defined characteristics and purposes in the play. Yoshizawa Ayame I 初代吉沢菖蒲 (1673–1729), one of the most famous *onnagata* 女形, actors of female roles, was also one of the actors that was decisive in defining how women were portrayed on stage.[3] In his published advice, *Ayamegusa* あやめぐさ, he cemented the characteristics considered essential for any *onnagata* role: virtue and softness. According to Ayame I himself, it is the *keisei* 傾城, the role type of the courtesan, that is the ultimate reference for an actor of female roles, as they are "the most feminine among women" (Shuzui 1954, 35).[4]

The courtesan is an immensely popular figure in all fields of entertainment and art, perhaps most notably in ukiyo-e, where many pictures of beautiful women, *bijin-ga* 美人画, celebrate courtesans, both fictional and historical. Courtesans were both renowned for their skills in music, song, poetry and literature as well as for their feminine charm and manners. These are the characteristics linking them to *onnagata*—as Ayame I has pointed

[3] A detailed discussion of the impact of Ayame on kabuki can be found in Kominz (1997, 181-223).

[4] *Josei no naka no joseirashisa* 女性の中の女性らしさ.

out, it is the softness of the courtesan that is her defining feature, a feature that marks her as the stark opposite of the often imposingly masculine heroes on the kabuki stage.

However, the courtesan has two more characteristics that usually go unmentioned: sexual availability and performance of femininity. It is the job of the courtesan to perform her role to the satisfaction of her customers: to be sexually alluring and at least theoretically be available to her 'audience.' She is conscious of her audience as she performs, and what the audience desires is femininity—or rather, an absence of masculinity.[5] The *onnagata*, in Ayame's understanding, has the same task. Consequently, the femininity on stage is one that caters to male desires and ideals more than female ones. As Thompson (2006, 23) has pointed out, "[…] 'Femininity'—and indeed 'Masculinity'—are constructed through voice, gesture and other performative codes which relate to (but may not be identical to) real-life gender stereotyping and real-life behavior. Gender itself, one might say, *is* performance: a cultural construct or system of learned codes." This is certainly true for both *onnagata* and courtesans. Both strive not to emulate the ordinary woman that one might run into in the streets. Instead, they aspire to an idealized version of femininity, one that the average woman cannot hope to achieve. *Onnagata* and courtesans both sell a dream, a desire, through the performance of certain codified behaviors perceived as "feminine"—behaviors that are also tied to sexual availability.

Few performers have taken their performance as far as Ayame I. He stated that, in order to reach true mastery, it is necessary to keep up the female persona even in their daily life—which he did. This gives rise to the question how *onnagata* perceived themselves in terms of gender. Leiter argues that

> […] the original intention of Ayame and his peers was not to *act* as women but to be women, at whatever cost, in the interests of art. They were not necessarily thinking of themselves as men playing women but sought to be as true as they could to 'women' as they understood them. This was not a conscious observation but a lived experience (2006, 76).

However, Morinaga (2014, 44) challenges this view, citing three points in relation to gender and its economy: "(1) gender identity can be divorced from sex identity, (2) the gender dichotomy is actually based on the gender

[5] Edo was notorious for its unbalanced ratio of male to female residents. Many men were likely not of the extremely well-mannered sort, so the wish for more gentle company from time to time is not entirely surprising.

spectrum, and (3) gender is presentation and not representation." The first point has long become a focus in gender studies, for example with the topic of transgender or nonbinary people, whose gender expression or identity does not match one's assigned sex. Morinaga argues that while *onnagata* like Ayame might have a gender identity other than male, their sex remained very much male. While Leiter (2006, 76-77) lists Ayame's advice that an *onnagata* should blush when one asks him about his wife as evidence for the fact that Ayame saw himself as a woman, Morinaga (2014, 45-46) reads it as proof for the opposite. The fact that he was married to a woman and produced offspring was public knowledge, and at no point did Ayame deny that his sex was male—on the contrary, he explicitly refers to the bodies of *onnagata* as male in *Ayamegusa* (Shuzui 1954, 33-34).

Gender is often seen as a dichotomy, two mutually exclusive opposites, when in practice, it is anything but. Ayame, Morinaga argues, saw femininity as spectrum with gradations, which is why he championed the *keisei* over all other role types for being the "most feminine." This also suggests that he thought of other role types as less (ideally) feminine. Ayame chose the *keisei* because she lacks any hint of masculinity. The *onnagata* however was a man who possessed male qualities (and a male body) from birth and therefore, he needed to consciously train his entire life in order to eliminate all masculinity for the sake of his art—at least in public (Isaka 2009, 29).

The third point, that gender is presentation (or rather, performance) and not representation, has already been touched upon. [6] Leiter writes that *onnagata* like Ayame strived to be as true to women as they understood them. This, however, is proven incorrect by the fact that Ayame chose the *keisei* as the true embodiment of femininity, rather than any other category of women. The *keisei* herself is already a deliberate performance of femininity, a femininity that is performed with the (desiring) male gaze in mind.

This relatively rigid understanding of female role types started changing during the period Tsuruya Nanboku was active. One of the representative female characters in *kizewamono* plays, Dote no Oroku, first appeared in the play *Osome Hisamatsu Ukina no Yomiuri* 於染久松色読販 in 1813. She was originally written for the actor Iwai Hanshirō V 五代目岩井半四郎 (1776–1847), who contributed significantly to the development of the *akuba* 悪婆, the (not really) evil women role type. An entertainer dwelling at the bottom

[6] To clarify the difference between presentation and representation: Presentation tries to achieve expressing an *idea*, while representation tries to achieve expressing the *truth*. Presentation can differ by upbringing, personal environment, and choice; representation is an imperative (i.e. women are weak, men don't cry).

of society, she embodies all the characteristics of a *kizewamono* anti-heroine. Unlike the beautiful courtesans, she has a coarse appearance with a long ponytail and a short padded coat (*hanten* 半纏) worn over a checkered kimono, and has a sharp, direct manner of speaking. She was a great success with the audience and reappeared two years later in the play *Kakitsubata Iromo Edozome* 杜若艶色紫 as the main character. Both plays were written by Tsuruya Nanboku.

Oroku incorporates all the negative and positive qualities of the *akuba*: she is able to hold her ground in a fight and willing to resort to murder or fraud to reach her goals, but she commits her crimes for a larger cause, eventually revealing that she is a good person, loyal wife, and respectful daughter still. With characters like Oroku comes a development away from the rigid ideals championed by Ayame, adding variation to the cast of kabuki plays and giving female roles more, and more varied, opportunities. Without this development, Oiwa as the main character of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* would have been unthinkable. It is important to note, however, that even Oroku is still subject to expectations of filial piety, loyalty, and beauty, although in the way of a sexually mature woman who is acquainted with the hardships of life.

Women, Ugliness, and Ghosts

In kabuki, beauty and goodness are intertwined. Even the *akuba*, who is more morally ambiguous than other female role types, can infallibly be expected to be a sexually attractive woman. The only exceptions to this are women who are truly evil and actual antagonists of a play. Leiter (2002, 225) notes that "such murderous creatures are considered too treacherous to play for pure *onnagata* and are almost always cast with *tachiyaku* to underline their uglier qualities."[7] Once again, we see an implicit assessment of what femininity is supposed to be—these women are so diabolical and "ugly" (perhaps not on the outside, but certainly on the inside) that they are, in fact, excluded from the category of "femaleness."

Barbara E. Thornbury (2002, 236) states that "the artistic process itself is based on the actor, who functions through a multiplicity of role and character interrelationships in a play: *yakusha*, *yakugara*, and *yaku*."[8] The actor, the

[7] *Tachiyaku* 立役 being actors for male roles.

[8] Meaning the artistic process of giving expression to the complexities of human nature and society.

general role type and the individual role portrayed are always simultaneously present as a kind of overlay on the stage. The audience is aware of this overlay, as can be seen by the regular calls of stage names by experienced spectators (Watanabe 1998a, 14-15).[9] For this reason, the appearance of a *tachiyaku* actor in a technically female role is already a statement. Evil is coded as masculine rather than feminine. As Watanabe (1998b, 48) puts it, "Just like other villains, [evil women] are played by *tachiyaku* because more than femininity, it is tenaciousness that is most important." This suggests that these two qualities are, in kabuki terms, diametrically opposite. As a result, the casting of a *tachiyaku* also has a connotation in terms of agency. Evil characters usually have their fair share of agency, or tenaciousness, as Watanabe puts it, while female characters tend not to. Their fates usually lie in the hands of the men around them.

The preoccupation with ugliness and the difficult negotiation with femininity also becomes a theme in Nanboku's ghost plays. Nearly all the ghosts appearing in his plays are female. Shimazaki (2011, 229-230) states that many previous ghosts had been played by *onnagata* who refused roles that "disadvantaged their looks," but Nanboku's ghosts were now written for *tachiyaku*. While this is not entirely wrong, it is also not fully correct. Nanboku's ghosts such as Irohata in *Tenjiku Tokubei Ikoku Banashi*, Kasane in *Kesakake Matsu Narita no Riken*, 法懸松成田利剣 or Oiwa in *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* were written for and played by Onoe Shōroku I and his adopted son Onoe Kikugorō III 三代目尾上菊五郎 (1784–1849). Shōroku I was originally an *onnagata*, switching later to *tachiyaku* status. This switch is a transgression of sorts—Ayame had advised against such a change since he himself had failed when he tried his hand at male roles. Shōroku I succeeded in the change, and became a specialist in portraying female ghosts on stage at the same time. His pupil Kikugorō III switched between female and male roles, often even in the same play, a skill that earned him the reputation of a *kaneru yakusha* 兼ねる役者—an allrounder.

It would be wrong to conflate Nanboku's female ghosts with the category of the female villain, excluding them from the realm of femininity. Earlier female ghosts played by *onnagata* did exist; however, as Shimazaki (2012, 230) states, they had been confined to subplots. By using an actor who

[9] Watanabe also mentions the case of Ichikawa Danjūrō IX 九代目市川団十郎 (1838–1903), who hated these calls. He insisted that during the performance, he was the role he played, not the actor. Traditionally, however, the actor has always been an enormously important part of the role (and promotion of the play) itself, as seen by the fact that many roles, such as Oiwa, were written for a specific actor.

would otherwise perform male roles, the female ghosts could take on a more active role in the plays. Yet while Shōroku I and Kikugorō III technically subscribed to the label *tachiyaku*, their activity on stage suggests that they were not coded as exclusively male. The casting of such actors as female ghosts is a comment on the role type, since the actors, too, neither fit into the realm of the feminine, nor were they exclusive to the realm of the masculine. Predecessors like Oroku as well as the actor that the role was written for made it possible for Oiwa's status to move outside of the kabuki gender spectrum as envisioned by Ayame, and it is this special status that gives her a larger scope of action compared to earlier female ghosts. Her death, it could be argued, eliminates the restraints of gender. Once dead, she strips off the pressure of the desiring male gaze too—as chillingly illustrated in the fourth act of the play, when Oiwa seduces Iemon as a young beauty, only to suddenly turn back into her hideous ghost form and turn his sexual fantasy into a horror show. At the same time, however, she still remains bound by the concept of femininity: the only person we ever see her lay a hand on is Iemon's mother. Iemon is the perpetrator behind nearly all other murders, and he is himself brought to justice by a samurai and not Oiwa herself. Even in death, the scope of her action is limited by her gender. She falls short of the actual agency of a *tachiyaku*.

The number of plays featuring ugly, disfigured women that Nanboku produced points towards a popular fascination with the hideous and the shocking. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* is the crowning achievement, combining a collection of themes which appear in Nanboku's plays again and again, constantly altered and refined. Most of the misfortunes that befall Oiwa are not original. In the play *Kesa Kakematsu Narita no Riken* (1823), Kasane, gets possessed by her late father, who was murdered by her lover. The possession leads to crippling and disfiguration, the hatred towards her former lover turning her into a ghost of revenge after he brutally murders her. In the play *Kasane ga Fuchi Satemo Sono Uchi* 累淵扨其後 (1807), Kasane gets disfigured by mistakenly drinking poison, and is again turned ugly in the play *Okuni Gozen Keshō no Sugatami* 阿国御前化粧鑑 (1804) through possession by a ghost. The list of possible examples is long.

The spectacle and the emotions evoked by the play that are of utmost importance. For this reason, plot elements that engage and shock the audience, such as the disfiguration of a woman's face or a ghost hell-bent on revenge, can be easily reused in different plays. It is hence less the originality of the story that plays a defining role, but rather the choice of actors, context, role type, emotional impact, etc. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*, it can be argued,

was not successful because it was a completely new type of play. It was successful because it managed to combine a range of elements, both old and new, particularly well, and because the audience could relate to the characters on stage.

The events occurring on stage might be fictitious, but the fears they invoke are anything but. While recent studies emphasize that there existed women with considerable influence and power (Lindsey 2007, 15), this does not mean that women were not put under considerable pressure. As kabuki and *bijin-ga* celebrated the beauty and sensuality of women, *jokun* 女訓, moral guide books aimed at women, took on a different tone: "Generally speaking, there are five bad qualities a woman can have: to be wild and disobedient, to act irate and vindictive, to rebuke the people surrounding her, to be jealous and to be of inferior intelligence. These qualities apply to at least seven or eight out of ten women. Men, on the other hand, do not have these bad qualities" (Köhn 2008, 232).

This is a very harsh assessment of the female sex, and has little in common with the soft and virtuous (yet still sexually appealing) maidens described by Ayame. *Jokun* such as the popular *Onna daigaku* discourage women from placing importance on their looks, and urge them to treat their husbands as their lords. In a similar vein, Buddhist teachings lay the focus of the female body and its inherent uncleanness. The *Blood Pool Hell Sutra* 血盆経 *ketsubon kyō* and mandala such as the *Kumano kanshin jukkai zu* 熊野観心十界図 illustrate how women would invariably fall into Blood Pool Hell after death because they menstruated and bled during childbirth, causing pollution to the earth and water. Their normal bodily functions were interpreted as a sign of inherent depravity and moral weakness that condemned them to a horrible fate (Moerman 2005, 226).

Another fine example from Buddhist art are *kusōzu* 九相図, paintings of the nine stages of a decaying corpse.[10] As their name suggests, *kusōzu* illustrate nine stages of decay that happen after the death of a human being, from the time immediately after death until nothing is left but bones or dust. Usually, the body of a woman was used for this kind of enlightening practice, likely because monks were overwhelmingly male, and the purpose of the images was to help them renounce their earthly and fleshly desires by facing the ephemeral and gross nature of life, particularly their sexual desire for the female form. By the Edo period, the *kusōzu* had become part of a genre of books that were used for the instruction of Buddhist thought (Kanda 2005,

[10] For an in-depth analysis of *kusōzu*, see Yamamoto 2015.

41). These books usually featured woodblock prints of the nine stages of decay, accompanied by poetry and, in some cases, additional commentary. They were used, just like the *jokun*, as guides for the moral education for women.

There have been arguments that *jokun* and similar texts were read by a limited number of people and therefore had little influence on society. However, samurai women and daughters of wealthy merchants did read such texts, and some daughters of peasants received a certain degree of education about these things if resources permitted (Tocco 2003, 206). With the use of lending libraries, communal reading and other means of dissemination, it is difficult to determine how limited the circulation of these texts really was. It is not difficult, however, to see the parallels between the rotting female bodies of *kusōzu* (Image 1) and the disfigured body of Oiwa slowly falling apart in Act II of the play (Image 2), and trace back where the inspiration for Oiwa's disfigurement likely came from.

The loss of Oiwa's physical beauty (and sexual appeal) in Act II is one of the most jarring scenes in the play. The act of deliberate poisoning and disfiguration is an act of ultimate cruelty towards a woman, stealing the one thing which she is usually celebrated for. When Oiwa tries to do her toilet in order to go out and face her neighbors after she realizes that she has been deliberately poisoned by them, she emulates a popular theme in *bijin-ga* but does so most wretched and distorted way possible. The prints show women gracefully combing their hair or blackening their teeth suggesting a sense of privacy and intimacy and containing a certain sexual allure. But as Oiwa combs her hair, it falls out in big, bloody clumps, and she smears the black for the teeth all over her lips, so that she now truly resembles a walking corpse reminiscent of the half-rotted corpses in the *kusōzu*. The audience experiences horror not just by the reversal of the usual sensual experience of a woman's personal grooming, but is also reminded of the Buddhist fate of humanity in general and women in particular.

The social status of women could not be compared to that of men. Even in marriage, that most defining event in a woman's life, a husband could unilaterally divorce his wife, while a wife had to request her husband to divorce her. Often, however, it was not the couple but the parents of the couple that had the ultimate say about marriage and divorce, as many legal cases concerning divorce show (Fuess 2004, 36). Marriage was generally considered through a rational or economical lens rather than through an emotional one, which usually lead to marriage inside of the same social class, as well as marriage arrangements that mutually benefited the involved families, espe-

cially among the higher social classes. This left women little room to make decisions on their own terms, and Oiwa both reflects the impossibility of choice as well as the desire to break this mold.

Beauty and ugliness also serve an additional purpose in the play, however. Toshio Kawatake (1990, 220-221) stated: "In order to beautify scenes featuring revengeful spirits, which should be essentially ugly, weird and frightening, recourse is had not only to the stylization of the spirit itself, but also to the technique of placing them beside completely opposite bright and beautiful scenes." However, beauty perhaps serves more as an intensifying contrast to the horror barely hidden under the surface. For this reason, we have the dark, despairing mood of Iemon's house juxtaposed with the liveliness and the brightness of the neighboring Itō household in the second act, and in between the *toitagaeshi* scene in the third act and the final scene on Snake Hermitage Mountain in the fifth act, we have the dream scene where Oiwa returns to her young, beautiful self, before she transforms back into her ugly ghost form. Beauty thus serves a dual purpose: First, it makes the audience sympathize with those who possess (and lose) it and them to face their own fear that beauty is at best temporary, and second, the juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness makes the scenes of torture and horror even more shocking. As the audience learns in the several instances (Iemon killing his new wife instead of uniting with her, Oiwa seducing Iemon as a ghost), sexual desire and horror are separated only by a thin veil and are two sides of the same coin.

Mother and Wife

The first two acts of the play heavily depend on Oiwa's femininity: her sexual attractiveness, her pregnancy and her motherhood—in short, she moves through all the steps a woman is expected to undertake in life. Unlike the femininity that Ayame imagined or that the *jokun* propagated, however, Oiwa's femininity begins showing cracks. While technically, Oiwa belongs to the role type of *nyōbō* 女房, the wife of a samurai, she is an uncomfortable fit from the very beginning of the play. The *nyōbō* has been described as often a little foolish, yet still meticulous and dutiful in her support of her husband or lover (Watanabe 1998b, 54ff). Oiwa is foolish and meticulous, but she has no loyalty for her husband. Her loyalty belongs to her father. From the very beginning of the play, Oiwa is not a woman fulfilling her duty as a wife, but instead a woman willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of her filial duty. With this, she breaks with the ideal of femininity found in the *jokun* that

commanded women to treat their husbands as their lords, as well as that commonly portrayed by *onnagata*; even Oroku, the *akuba*, only tried to chase her husband away in order to protect him. Oiwa, on the other hand, is not willing to suffer for the sake of her husband, quite unlike the majority of virtuous kabuki women, but as a woman, and especially a woman of samurai status and without money, her scope of action is very limited. There are strict social expectations placed upon her; however, she also takes pride in her elevated social status, despite her actual social and financial disadvantages. She feels compelled to avenge her father, even at the cost of her personal happiness—a feeling less tied to her gender than the fraught ideals of her social status. Shimazaki (2016, 112) quotes a playbill advertising *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* that refers to the play as "a farewell letter at the time of the divorce, written in a woman's hand." As we have established earlier on, it was the usual practice of men to write a divorce letter. Shimazaki connects this to criticism of samurai values in *Chūshingura*, but it also uncovers a struggle for agency by a woman beyond the fatalistic obeisance of her more "virtuous" predecessors.

Oiwa's arduous birth that has left her ailing, making her fear of dying in childbed. For the audience, this fear was real too; since the mortality rate of pregnant women was more than sixty times higher in the premodern period than it is today, women were "bearing children while battling with the fear of dying" (Yokoyama 2008, 150). Since the possibility of dying during childbirth was high, so was the probability of becoming an *ubume* ("birthing woman") after death, unable to rest because of the child they left behind. Men, on the other hand, did not have to fear this fate. For them, it was the fear of being haunted by a restless spirit which made the *ubume* so uncomfortable. Sexuality and procreation, in that sense, were intrinsically anxiety-inducing. This fear is accentuated by Iemon's cruelty towards her and the child, making it clear that he sees the boy only as an additional nuisance and not as what it should ideally be seen as: the fulfilment of her duty as a woman and a wife. What should be a happy event is instead the start of a nightmare.

But when Oiwa appears as an *ubume* during the final act, any aspect of motherhood is negated. As she emerges from a burning lantern in front of Iemon, she does so cradling her child in *ubume*-like fashion, but when she hands the baby to its father, it falls to the ground and turns into a Jizō 地蔵 statue—a reminder that the child is dead.[11] This is of course a nod to tradi-

[11] Jizō being the Buddhist guardian of deceased children, especially those stillborn and miscarried.

tional *ubume* narrations where the ghost of a mother tries to pass off her child to travelers in order to ensure its wellbeing and it turns out to be a stone instead. Here, however, the mother hands the child over to the very father to remind him that it is dead. The scene is therefore not a faithful adaptation of traditional *ubume* imagery but again a woman in strong conflict with the femininity she is supposed to adhere to. Oiwa uses the child to torment Iemon, not because she is a mother.

Female Jealousy and Oiwa

The reason why it is women rather than men who turn into ghosts hell-bent on getting revenge during the Edo period has often been discussed. One of the commonly cited arguments is that women had less freedom and suffered from oppression, and that only death gave them the chance to overcome these limitations and take revenge on those who had made them suffer during their lifetime (Suwa 1988, 197).[12] Many texts, such as Shimazaki (2016, 150ff), which discuss Oiwa's motivations, come up with the ultimate verdict of jealousy or mention jealousy as a possible incentive. Jealousy is a specifically female motivation, which is rarely, if ever, attributed to men. While Shimazaki correctly identifies the *kamisuki* scene where Oiwa sheds her hair as a shorthand for a woman who suffers from jealousy, this might be the intended, but not the only possible reading of the scene. When Oiwa realizes her disfigurement, she cries: "Even when the wet nurse came, the destroying poison in her hand, to force me to my ruin, I clapped my hands in gratitude. Now each time I think of it, my heart fills with shame. They must laugh and laugh at me. Bitter, oh how bitter is this humiliation" (Oshima 1998, 476). The thought of humiliation is the first on her mind.

Margaret H. Childs writes:

> The real issue for women enduring infidelity by their partner is insecurity, or anxiety regarding the stability of one's status or reputation. […] Patterns of so-called jealousy provide evidence of what women really wanted, at least in the world that is depicted in these texts. Female characters in this literature are, in my view, not commonly truly jealous. They are, rather, often insecure. Female characters tend to show concern about women who pose a threat to their status (2010, 120).

[12] Suwa also adds, however, that this alone is still a weak motive. His argument is that women are naturally more connected with the Beyond. This is not entirely convincing, since for example the *onryō*, vengeful spirits, of the Heian period were mostly male. On the other hand, it is usually women who take on the role of a spiritual medium, so Suwa's claim is not completely unsupported.

Image 1: Kusōzu, Death of a noble lady and the decay of her body,
fifth in a series of nine paintings

Wellcome Collection, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/jwpjdf4v

Image 2: No. 21 Oiwake Kisokaidō rokujūkyū tsugi no uchi (Sixty-Nine Post Stations of the Kisokaidō) by Utagawa Kuniyoshi 2008,3037.14721, AN587606001

British Museum, https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3277753&partId=1

Childs speaks about jealousy in the male-female relationships of Heian period court literature, where dynamics are obviously quite different from those of the Edo period.[13] The notion holds true in the Heian period as well as in the Edo period, however: jealousy is often ascribed to women who show a type of behavior which does not benefit the men faced with it. It often happens—and not just in fiction—that a woman's extraordinary behavior is quickly ascribed to jealousy or general maliciousness. The *jokun*, as already mentioned, support this notion strongly.

The reading of Oiwa as jealous is well-established, but it also generally is a reading as established by men who had little interest in delving deeper into the psychology of seemingly irrational behavior. But Oiwa has no urge to keep Iemon, or his sexuality, for herself; rather, he is the means to give her agency, and the loss of that is what pains Oiwa much more than the loss of a husband. For at least a part of the audience in the kabuki theatre, this situation must have been familiar: abuse and humiliation suffered at the hands of those that were closest to them, and no means of resistance to this treatment available to them. Intentionally written by Tsuruya that way or not, Oiwa also serves as a vehicle for the abuse usually suffered by people in silence. Iemon's torment, viewed from this point of view, is cathartic (and frightening to those who usually hold the power in their hands for exactly this reason).

Conclusion

Oiwa is so successful and enduringly popular as a character precisely because her character and motivations can be seen from a variety of different viewpoints, and retain the fascination and interest of a diverse audience. She successfully invokes fears and conflicts present in Edo period society and acts them out on stage, in a controlled environment. Oiwa eclipses nearly all the fears that men and women have around the topic of sexuality—she touches on religious, social, and personal fears about pregnancy, marriage and the expectations placed on women. With the use of imagery such as the *ubume* or the rotting female body, the audience is faced with the same fears that they also know from religious and moral teachings, such as the *jokun* and the *kusōzu.* Unlike most female characters in kabuki like those that Ayame envisioned, Oiwa moves beyond a purely female space and into

[13] Notably, in the aristocratic society of the Heian period, polygamy was the norm, while Edo period society worked more along monogamous patterns (excluding extramarital activities for the men).

a more ambiguous place—one that simultaneously rejects and reinforces gender and sexuality. Oiwa's femaleness is uncomfortable and shocking because it does not correspond to common notions of femininity, and because it touches on some of the most reviled aspects of it. She escapes the curse of imposed sexual availability and performance of femininity and receives agency in return. Ultimately, however, she still remains caught within the established rules of kabuki, however: at the conclusion of the play, Oiwa's personal agency is negated once more as Iemon is defeated by a heroic samurai, and gender stereotypes are reinforced once more.

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