

PLAYS ABOUT OLD AGE AS THE ESSENCE OF NOH THEATRE*

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This paper deals with the issue of aging as reflected in the Noh theatre repertory. It analyses plays about elderly women based on the aesthetic concept of the beauty of old age (*rojaku*) as one of the forms of the ephemeral. The paper also offers an insight into their staging – the beauty of an aging actors acting. The fact that there are three plays revolving around the character of an aged female poet is explained by the conceptual attitude of their author. As a side product, this paper reveals some morphological connections in the staging of the plays *Sumidagawa* and *Sotoba Komachi*, which could have an effect on the dating of the plays and the identification of their author.

Key words: Ono no Komachi, Noh theatre, beauty of acting, beauty of old age, an aging actor

*Le vent d'automne
quand il se met à souffler
mal à l'œil mal à l'œil –¹*

A wandering priest is waiting for the arrival of a disguised character to pray for him and help him break free from this ephemeral world. This storyline can be considered an invariant scheme (basic model) of Noh theatre. How can this

* This paper is part of the grant project VEGA No 2/0047/13 *Noh Theatre – Models and Perspectives*.

¹ Ono no Komachi's line from the play *Kayoi Komachi*. In *Ono no Komachi et autres. Visages cachés, sentiments mêlés. Traduit du japonais, présenté et annoté par Armen Godel et Koichi Kano*. In *Connaissance de l'Orient*, pp. 87, 113, 142, 165, 191. (Translated by Eileen Kato: "Each time the winds of autumn blow, the pain!" Available at https://eee.uci.edu/clients/sbklein/articles/kayoi-komachi_E1.pdf)

model be changed so that the known appears in a new light? What can be done to prevent the repetition of the known truth from becoming tiring?

It is possible to change the mask or – in the spirit of Western tradition – to focus the plot on a literary character and his situation. This seems simple only from a literary point of view – in fact the plays on old women rank among the most difficult in the current Noh repertory. Therefore, they usually combine a literary foundation with a theatrical idea.

In the following paragraphs the synergy of the theme and acting in such plays will be discussed. The extent to which the concept of the beauty of acting (or stage beauty) overlaps with the concept of the beauty of a character will be examined.

Concepts of stage beauty – the beauty of acting

Zeami writes in *The Flowering Spirit* (*Fushikaden* or *Kadensho*) that from the age of fifty onwards, “for the most part there is no better method than ‘not doing it’ [not acting]. A saying has it that ‘even Ch’i-lin, when he gets old, can be beaten by a worn-out nag’”.² At the same time, however, he remembers his father Kannami, who died at the age of fifty-two while still an excellent actor. Zeami lived twenty years longer than his father. He witnessed his son Motoyoshi’s retreat to the monastery, outlived his son and successor Motomasa, saw his nephew Motoshige rise to glory, and had no other choice but to pass on his teachings to his son-in-law Komparu Zenchiku. Zeami was the shogun’s favourite for some time, but later fell into his disfavour, which led to his exile and to his becoming a monk. He lived to the age of seventy-two, and it is evident that he was preoccupied with the issue of stage beauty connected with age.

He was aware that the mask prolonged the age at which one could achieve the beauty of acting, and it seems that he kept increasing the original age limit to a higher age while thinking about Noh over several decades. Although the physical and mental condition are individual, an aging actor’s repertory inevitably undergoes modification. In particular, he has to abandon the roles which require acting without a mask (*hitamen*).³ As Noh theatre does not employ naturalistic acting, the actor must play someone who he is not in real life. The similarity between the actor and the character he is playing must not be great. There must be a difference in their similarity or a similarity in their difference. The most difficult roles include those of elderly women. People

² Fushikaden. Style and the Flower. In *On the Art of the No Drama. The Major Treatises of Zeami*, p. 9. Translated by J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu.

³ For example, one such role is that of Atsumori in the eponymous play, who appears in the first act as a young reaper.

below sixty are not usually cast in such roles. As far as the performed character is concerned, there is virtually no age limit: she can be over one hundred or even immortal.

According to Zeami, as one grows older, the ephemeral flower (*jibun no hana*) must be replaced with the true one (*makoto no hana*) related to elegant beauty (*hie*),⁴ the rare (*mezurashi*) and the engaging (*omoshiroshi*). This concept does not distinguish between the beauty of the actor and the beauty of the performance. After all, it is not possible to do so in such an intimate genre as Noh. Noh actors only seem to overflow with charisma on stage, and although there are talented septuagenarians and octogenarians among them even today, we would hardly recognise the artists that have beguiled us behind their modest appearance after a performance.

The concept of the human beauty – the beauty of the character

“Lost youth and physical decline... Higaki, Obasute, Sanemori and Sotoba Komachi are characters who radiate almost elusive beauty: the beauty of souled beings approaching the end of life who seem to have partly uncovered the secret of death. This beauty is related to *jugen* (invisible depths, hidden beauty) and is referred to as *rojaku*, or the beauty of old age and frailty. It is immanent; there are no instructions on how to create it, and it rests on a profound understanding of causes and effects. The frail appearance of these characters reveals the tragic nature of our illusory world.”⁵

Rojaku as a word comprises old age and peace and means “the quiet beauty of old age”. The root of the word can also be found in the notion of *sanrojo*, referring to the three plays with elderly women as heroines (*Higaki*, *Obasute* and *Sotoba Komachi*) and in the Rojo mask⁶ used in these plays. The greatest challenge for Noh theatre is to make an elderly character “blossom,” and if this happens, the result resembles, in Zeami’s words, “a flower blooming on an old tree”. Whoever can grow such a surprising flower has understood the secret of Noh and the essence of the beauty of this theatre.

Paul Claudel also recognised this aspect in the drowsy movements of Noh theatre: “It seems as though with each gesture he [the actor] has to overcome

⁴ The Japanese *hie* is translated as ‘coolness’ in Japanological literature in English. It is apparent that the literary approach prevails over the teatrological one.

⁵ Zeami et autres. Vingt-cinq piéces de nô. Traduit du japonais, présenté et annoté par Armen Godel et Koichi Kano. In *Connaissance de l’Orient*, p. 159.

⁶ The Zo-onna mask alternates with Yase-onna or Ryo no onna also in the play *Motomezuka* (The Sought-For Grave).

not only gravity and the folds of the immense garment, but death itself; the gesture is a slow copy in eternity of a dead passion.”⁷

An ideal example of a literary character who has lived to a relatively great age to see the ephemerality of beauty and passion is Ono no Komachi, a female poet from the 9th century, who is still inspiring nowadays. One stream of Japanese literature goes as far as considering Ono no Komachi as “the incarnation of compassionate Bodhisattva coming to redeem women by assuming their sins”.⁸

This concept is inspiring for Noh although not every play about the poet Ono no Komachi must follow it. Ono no Komachi appears in these plays as a poet reciting her own and other poets’ verses, but although the plays focus on her, they do not aim to offer a portrait of her. The Noh plays about Ono no Komachi open the disturbing question of a poet’s existence between worlds, outside the phenomenal world. However, what if she is tied to the world and its beauty by her own rendering of these phenomena? What if her poems constitute ties to the moments immortalised in them? On the other hand, what one has experienced or suffered leads to an awakening like in Ono no Komachi’s poems about parting.⁹

For an infinitely long time
no word
from my love –
And unnoticed, like a thief, in those days and nights
arrived the time of bright autumnal colours –

The Komachi cycle consists of independent plays whose purpose is not a chronological rendering of the material. Three plays come from the third thematic Noh group which comprises plays about women, and two (*Kayoi Komachi* and *Sotoba Komachi*) belong to the fourth group which depicts men and women as the victims of the ephemeral world. This traditional categorisation of the plays is only relative as there is an overlap between their

⁷ “On dirait que chaque geste a à surmonter, avec le poids et le repli de l’immense vêtement, la mort, et qu’il est la lente copie dans l’éternité d’une passion défunte.” In CLAUDEL, P. *L’oiseau noir dans le Soleil levant. Japon 1921 – 1927. Contacts et Circonstances. Oeuvres complètes*, p. 1171; “Letter to Professor Miyajima” (1926) in CLAUDEL, P. *Claudel on the Theatre*, p. 55.

⁸ “un avatar de Kannon, venu sauver les femmes de leur condition pécheresse en assumant leur état” In *Ono no Komachi et autres. Visages cachés, sentiments mêlés. Traduit du japonais, présenté et annoté par Armen Godel et Koichi Kano*. In *Connaissance de l’Orient*, p. 218.

⁹ KOMAČI, Ono no. *Do slov má láska odívá se*. [My Love – Clad in the Robe of Words], p. 75.

themes. Nevertheless, it serves as a dramaturgical aid to help put together a traditional cycle of plays, which is irrelevant from our culture's point of view. After all, staging plays in traditional cycles is not very common in today's Japan either. Let us leave it aside.

Besides the thematic categorisation of Noh plays, there is also a categorisation according to structure which distinguishes between realistic or *genzai noh* and phantasmal or *mugen noh*. In terms of structure, the plays about Ono no Komachi include only one play about dreams and apparitions – *Kayoi Komachi* (Visiting Lady Komachi) by Kannami.¹⁰ It requires two masks: the poet (a *tsure* performer) wears the mask of a young woman in both acts; her suitor Fukakusa no Shosho (a *shite* performer), who does not appear on the stage until the second act, arrives wearing a Yase-otoko mask. In this play an unknown woman brings a priest (a *waki* performer) to the grave of her suitor who relates to them the story of his courting Ono no Komachi. The beautiful woman gives him one condition: if he comes to her house every night for one hundred nights, she would let him in on the last night. However, Fukakusa dies on the hundredth night and does not find peace even after his death. The man appears on the stage as a prosecutor, but thanks to the priest's prayers, both he and his beloved enter the path of Buddha.

The other plays about Ono no Komachi are realistic (*genzai noh*). *Soshi arai Komachi* (Komachi Clears Her Name)^{11,12} is quite populated. The poet (*shite*) appears wearing a Fukai mask all the time, while Otomo no Kuronushi (*waki*) and Kuronushi's servant (*kyogen*) play without a mask (*hitamen*). In the second act they are joined by other performers without masks: the emperor (*kokata* or a

¹⁰ Zeami mentions that Kannami rewrote a play in which his son-in-law's grandfather Komparu Gonnokami appeared – this is a good example of the complicated evolution of storylines and the related problem of authorship as noted by Ivan Rumánek. In RUMÁNEK, I.R.V. *Japonská dráma Nô. Žáner vo vývoji*. [Japanese Noh Drama – Genre in Development], p. 102.

¹¹ The booklet that is available in every lobby of a Noh theatre ascribes this play, together with *Kayoi Komachi* and *Sotoba Komachi*, to Kannami, and only *Omu Komachi* and *Sekidera Komachi* are ascribed to Zeami. In *Nô: A Guide to No* by P. G. O'Neil. Hinoki shoten, Tokyo-Kyoto, 1953.

¹² A contemporary Japanologist determines authorship more cautiously: *Soshi arai Komachi* is, according to him, “attribué a Kan'ami et a Zeami”. *Omu Komachi* and *Sekidera Komachi* are “attributed (attribué) to Zeami”. As for *Kayoi Komachi* and *Sotoba Komachi*, he mentions “De Kan'ami (et Zeami)” probably taking into account *Sarugaku dangi*. In *Ono no Komachi et autres. Visages cachés, sentiments mêlés. Traduit du japonais, présenté et annoté par Armen Godel et Koichi Kano*. In *Connaissance de l'Orient*, pp. 87, 113, 142, 165, 191.

child actor) and three poets (*tsure*). However, two maids of honour (*tsure*), although only marginal characters,¹³ must wear the masks of young women.

The play tells the story of the writer Kuronushi who is to take part in a poetry contest in which the famed poet Ono no Komachi is also participating. Nervous that she might win, he sneaks into her house and writes her new poem down in his anthology of classic poems to compromise her as a plagiarist. His rival, however, asks the emperor through Tsurayuki to allow her to wash the manuscript. She claims that if it is forged, the ink will be washed away by water. The experiment turns the situation around and the disgraced Kuronushi sees no other option than to go and kill himself. Komachi, however, forgives him and puts in a good word for him with the imperial court, saying that such rivalry is common in the world of literature. The emperor orders the offender to return and Komachi dances in celebration of his reign.

What do both mentioned plays have in common? In both plays Ono no Komachi is an embodiment of beauty and grace. In the other plays, Zeami, fascinated by this character, seems to be asking what would happen if she grew old or if she disappeared from the court and was rediscovered only later living in oblivion and poverty. Zeami raises this question three times in his later works. The plays differ in details about the age of the heroine, but these differences are not mirrored in the systemic use of different masks in each of them.

Hypothesis 1: If she was 99 years old ...

Zeami tackles this hypothesis in the play *Omu Komachi* (Parrot Komachi). The play is theatrically modest, but its focus is literary. It features only two actors: the poet (*shite*) wearing an old woman's mask (*Uba*) and an imperial messenger (*waki*). The messenger has been assigned the task of finding the poet and getting her poetic response to a poem written by the emperor himself. The poet, who has poor sight and hearing, must ask the messenger to read the poem for her, emphasising that he should read the poem aloud. She responds to the poem with an ingenious variation whose meaning is changed by one word. She is still a great poet, and she comes out of the game victorious, defeating time rather than her rival poet.

In my opinion the next two plays can also be ascribed to Zeami despite the fact that *Sotoba Komachi* is considered Kannami's work in Motoyoshi's

¹³ As Noh actors were originally men, this type of female mask does not emphasise the character, but is only an obligatory face cover.

Sarugaku dangi. My doubts concerning that attribution do not relate to the theme, but to the form of the play that has been preserved. It was probably significantly revised. Zeami lived longer than his father, and therefore he had more good reasons to deal with what would have happened if Ono no Komachi had lived longer. This can cast some light on his motivation, but as proof of authorship it is insufficient. Therefore, let us take a closer look at this play and its stage form.

Hypothesis 2: And if she was a hundred years old ...

In the play *Sotoba Komachi* (The Salvation of Komachi)¹⁴ the protagonist Komachi (*shite*), who is partnered by an abbot (*waki*) and two priests, also wears only one mask (Uba, or possibly Yase-onna),¹⁵ which shortens the intermission (*nakairi*). The actors can do costume changes on the stage and thus ensure the continuity and unity of developments on the stage, which is typical for the genre of realistic plays (*genzai noh*).

A literarily and theologically beautiful exposition, which features two priests, is followed by an exceptionally ingenious sequence of changes. An old woman comes onto the stage wearing a mushroom-shaped hat and leaning against a stick. She sits down and takes off her hat. She stands it on the edge of its roof and leans it against herself. The hat assumes the role that is usually played by an open fan: it reflects the subtle, but still not articulated tremor of the soul, and its quivers repeatedly reveal hesitation. Embarrassed by the revelation of her identity, the protagonist hides her mask behind the black hat. It looks as if her face has been eclipsed by a black sun. Komachi stands up and turns the hat upside down as if she was about to start begging.

After a slight change in the costume (the appearance of a pointed man's cap), she gets possessed by the spirit of Fukakusa no Shosho, her jilted suitor: "I come and go, one night, two nights, three nights, four ...". The suitor came to her house for ninety-nine nights, and all in vain because he died on the hundredth. Now he returns in the body of Ono no Komachi, who seems to be turning into a ghost ("*mugenize*") before our eyes. The priests pray for both souls to rest in peace and Fukakusa and Komachi attain the state of Buddha. And the more experienced viewers realise that they have already seen something very similar...

¹⁴ Sotoba – a tombstone.

¹⁵ As confirmed by the picture on page 199. In TAKAHASHI, Mutsuo, MORITA, Toshiro, TAKAOKA, Kazuya. Noh plays invite us to witness and experience the salvation of souls. Tokyo: Pie books, 2010.

Sotoba Komachi's stage morphology is very similar to *Sumidagawa*, whose author, Motomasa, became famous for his preference of realistic or *genzai noh*. This genre needed to rid itself of the protagonist's departure during the intermission (*nakairi*) to preserve the unity of the plot while preserving the appeal of phantasmal plays (*mugen noh*). There was a question: if the theatre production does not have an intermission, how will the revelation escalate? If we cannot change the face by putting on a mask, can we not do so by taking something off? And what could we take off if not the mask?

In *Sumidagawa* Motomasa found a solution: the protagonist comes onto the stage wearing a mask which is partly hidden or overshadowed by a mushroom-shaped hat. Having this appearance, she spends quite a while talking to a ferryman. Only when she takes a seat in the boat does she take off the hat. It seems as if the mask has appeared on the stage only then. *Sumidagawa* has this ingenious solution to thank for its unity and suggestiveness – the stage developments happen smoothly.

Motomasa follows the conventions of the genre closely – in his version the child is not supposed to appear on the stage because it is dead. Zeami, however, insisted on the child appearing despite the fact that it is only a ghost and an embodiment of his mother's longing. If the genre of the play is not determined only by the *genzai* character of its main protagonist, this intervention of Zeami's shifted the play *Sumidagawa* a bit towards the phantasmal or *mugen noh*. Thus the argument between the father and his son was not only about a minor stage detail.

Based on a comparison of both plays, I dare say that *Sotoba Komachi* presented Zeami with the challenge of creating a play without the changing of masks and the intermission (*nakairi*) based on his experience with the genre of realistic plays, and particularly Motomasa's *Sumidagawa*. Since the stage handling of the hat in *Sotoba Komachi* is more refined than in *Sumidagawa*, it may be assumed that its final version is of a later date than the final draft of *Sumidagawa*. I think that both plays could be considered instances of a transitional genre between *genzai* and *mugen noh*. In both of them, the vision does not occur after the change of costumes, but at the end of the final act.

Under the influence of his son's drama, Zeami may have rewritten his father's play substantially – to such a degree that its authorship can be legitimately ascribed to him. It may have been due to the author's reverence for his father that he claimed it was Kannami's work, but there may also have been a mistake in Motoyoshi's *Sarugaku dangi*, on which the attribution of the play is based nowadays.¹⁶ The book may be right in that two plays about Ono no Komachi

¹⁶ "Kan'ami has written the following plays: *Sotoba Komachi*, *Jinen Koji*, and *Kayoi Komachi*." An Account of Zeami's Reflections on Art. *Sarugaku Dangi*. Notes taken

are ascribed to Kannami, but Motoyoshi does not mention Kannami's play *Soshi arai Komachi* (Komachi Clears Her Name). Thus it is possible that *Sotoba Komachi* and *Soshi arai Komachi* were not clearly distinguished. In addition, Rumánek asserts that the original title of the play, *Sotoba Komachi*, was simply *Komachi*,¹⁷ which may have led to many misunderstandings.

Zeami's son Motoyoshi mentions the play *Sotoba Komachi* in his notes from conversations with his father (*Sarugaku dangi*) twice, but the second detail is not taken into account in determining the authorship of the play even though the context makes it evident that it was Zeami who revised the original play. Motoyoshi writes that *Sotoba Komachi*, originally an exceptionally long play, was abridged substantially to begin with – after a separate introduction of the priests and the poet – with the moment when they meet. The play no longer features the deity of poetry or the raven, whose dance, according to Zeami, represented the climax of the older version of the performance.¹⁸

Since Kannami (1333 – 1384) did not live long enough to see the birth of his grandson Motomasa (1401 – 1432), let alone be familiar with his dramas, the only person who could influence the posthumous form of their works is Zeami (1363 – 1443), who outlived both his father and his son. The degree of this influence is usually questionable, but we have a relatively clear idea of that influence in *Sotoba Komachi* thanks to its comparison with *Sumidagawa*.

Given this logic and with respect to the successiveness in time, it is not impossible that Motomasa gave the final shape to his grandfather's play *Sotoba Komachi* some time after he finished his *Sumidagawa*. However, other factors that speak in favour of Zeami's authorship are his experience with aging, the conceptual logic of the plays about the old poet (she is 99 in the first play, 100 in the second and more than 100 in the third play) and his tendency to transcend the genre of realistic Noh and move towards phantasmal Noh as evidenced by Zeami's intervention in Motomasa's *Sumidagawa*. However, what is more important than the authorship of the play is the question of the similar stage morphology of both plays.

down by Hata No Motoyoshi. In *On the Art of the No Drama. The Major Treatises of Zeami*. Translated by J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu, p. 222.

¹⁷ RUMÁNEK, I.R.V. Japonská dráma Nó. Žáner vo vývoji. [Japanese Noh Drama – Genre in Development], p. 101.

¹⁸ “Originally the noh play *Sotoba Komachi* was an extremely long play. From the line “who is that who passes by?” the actor chants at great length. Later in the play, *Komachi*, because of the god *Tamatsujima* [the deity of poetry] is enshrined nearby, makes an offering to that spirit, at which point a raven, representing the deity of the shrine, appears. An actor in the Hie troupe was so skilful at performing this role that he was given the name ‘Master Raven.’ These days, however, the entire scene has been eliminated.” An Account of Zeami's Reflections on Art. *Sarugaku Dang*. Notes taken down by Hata No Motoyoshi. In *On the Art of the No Drama. The Major Treatises of Zeami*, p. 215.

Anyone who would wish to refute this interpretation would have to base his argument on finding another play with a similar stage morphology. Since I am not familiar with the whole corpus of the classical Noh repertory (approx. 240 plays), this possibility is not totally excluded.

Although the language limitation helps to sharpen the attention on what happens on stage, and a certain theatrological narrowing of the focus can bring interesting results, I have never intended to comment on the issue of authorship and dating in Japanese medieval drama because this type of research generally requires work with original literary sources. The above mentioned hypothesis is only a side product of my analysis – just a digression from my original intention to focus on old age and its rendering through the figure of the ancient Japanese poet.

Therefore, let us now return to the original aim, which may be interesting for our European theatrical and cultural context.

Hypothesis 3: And if she was more than a hundred years old ...

This is an issue tackled by Zeami's *Sekidera Komachi* (Komachi at Sekidera) through the characters of Komachi (a *shite* wearing an Uba mask), an abbot (*waki*), priests and a boy (*kokata*).

The play is based on the idea that due to his sensitivity a poet is afflicted, more painfully than others, by the shifts from joy to sorrow, and so is passionately (in Buddhism sinfully) bound to this ephemeral world. But, at the same time, poetry is also the way to a higher awareness of the human condition: by feeling human emotions to the fullest, poets attain higher knowledge.

Therefore, in the play *Sekidera Komachi* a more than a hundred-year-old poet living in the vicinity of a monastery is visited by priests. They do not know that it is Ono no Komachi.

It is typical for Noh that the protagonist comes onto the stage crossing a footbridge lined with pine trees, but *Sekidera Komachi* surprises us with the old woman's appearance from between the curtains in the house¹⁹ where she is sitting. It is evident that she cannot walk. She cannot walk, but she can speak about poetry knowledgeably. She unwittingly lets slip that she has written a well-known poem: She confuses "When she wrote it ..." with "When I wrote it ..." Thus she gives herself away, and, ashamed about her destitute situation, she bursts into tears. She says, "It is me who wrote those lines, but they have nothing in common with my present condition."

¹⁹ Tsukurimono (stage prop) – a skeleton structure the size of a window wrapped in white cloth.

When she is invited to a festivity, she watches a boy dance and much to our surprise she stands up, moved by the beauty of his expression. It is true that she has had a sip of sake (which is immaterial in the language of Noh and Kyogen and poured from one fan to another). Komachi knows that one must raise one's arms in loose kimono sleeves above one's head seven times while dancing²⁰ because it is the seventh day of the seventh month,²¹ but she has already forgotten how to raise her arms. Her body does not listen to her brain, so she sits down crying again.

The living go on dying,
the dead increase in number;
Left in this world, ah –
how long must I go on
lamenting for the dead?²²

On this beautiful festive day, which celebrates the starry skies, Ono no Komachi, having revealed her identity, parts with the world to join the stars.

Mugen noh often features the ghosts of those who had died a premature death. They return with a deep sense of grievance that they did not manage to live a full life and prepare themselves for death. This grievance is frequently mentioned by their parents who outlived them and remained alone.

Genzai noh introduces characters in the opposite situation. They are confined to this world. They have grown old, they have suffered, but they cannot die. Like Motomasa's *Sumidagawa* and *Yoroboshi*, where the story unfolds smoothly without an intermission during which the protagonist changes masks, the plays about the aging Ono no Komachi need only one mask. Using a different mask in the second part of the play does not simplify the actor's approach to the character. The actor is supposed to lead the character like a marionette on invisible and weak strings.

However, there are also plays about elderly women where the protagonists change the masks. The whole category of plays about old women comprises

²⁰ Unlike the Gosechi dance, which requires the dancer to raise his arms and turn his loose sleeves five times.

²¹ The Tanabata festival celebrates the annual meeting of the deities Orihime and Hikoboshi (represented by the stars Vega and Altair respectively). According to legend, they have to cross the Milky Way using a bridge that a flock of magpies have made with their wings.

²² "Sekidera Komachi." In *Twenty Plays of the No Theatre*, p. 73. Ed. by Donald Keene. Transl. by Karen Brazell. Lines from *Shinkokinshu*: Aru wa naku/ naki wa kazu sou/ yo no naka ni/ aware izure no/ hi made nagekan.

only five pieces, three of them about Ono no Komachi. The *sanrojo* group, which is considered the most difficult in terms of rendition, includes Zeami's *Sekidera Komachi*, *Obasute* and *Higaki*. Only *Sekidera Komachi* makes do with one mask as is typical of the genre of realistic plays.

The other two need two different masks for the two acts, which means that they are more in the spirit of *mugen noh*.

Why is it necessary to intensify the expression of aging? Unlike Ono no Komachi, the other two characters are mythical rather than modelled on historical personalities. In addition, they are dead. Upon their death *Obasute* and *Higaki* change their identity (as a result, they change the masks too) and allow us to see this world from a different perspective than poetic intuition.

Obasute (The Deserted Old Woman), in which the masks of Fukai and Uba change, is based on a play with *utamakura*:²³ *Obasute* is both the name of the person and the mountain where she was taken. It seems that the unjust deed has turned into stone and achieved the dimensions of a rock. The old woman did not die a natural death and was not duly buried; like a person who was not allowed or able (both of these became one in *Noh*)²⁴ to indulge in the beauty of this world, she observes the moon even after her death. Her aimless wandering is reminiscent of the mysterious *Yamamba* (The Mountain Crone). The open ending of the play is interesting too. It suggests what happened long ago – the pilgrims rise and leave the stage. Only then does the deserted protagonist speak up and say, “The deserted old woman.” And she is answered only by the chorus, “The deserted old woman.” The interplay of causes and effects in the play reveals responsibility for life and the way it ends and thus also for the salvation of others.

Higaki (in which the *Rojo* mask is replaced with *Higaki onna*²⁵) is an old woman who lives in a cypress grove on the bank of the Shiragawa River. Having been a dancer (*shirabioshi*) and a courtesan, she must have lived a sinful life. In the other world, she has to draw glowing buckets of ice-cold water by pulling a burning rope as a punishment. She brings water from the River of Three Crossings onto the stage and makes an offering to Buddha. Thanks to the prayers of a wandering priest, she is liberated, and free of gravity she dances off to paradise.

In the analysed corpus of *Noh* plays the protagonist is not redeemed only by prayer, prescribed by the text and plot of the play. There is compassion and

²³ *Utamakura* – a word composite of the signs ‘song’ + ‘pillow’ = ‘pillow of the song’.

²⁴ This is the result of interconnectedness of causes and effects, so ‘she has not had enough of’ would be probably more fitting.

²⁵ The mask of a ghost used only in this play.

empathy at the very heart of the *shite*'s rendering of the character. This is where the decision about the blossom is made – of course, in coaction with the concentrated energy of his acting partner (*waki*). After all, the masked actor is not only a man playing the part of a woman, but he is also an old man playing the role of a woman older than him. In interpreting the Noh plays about old women, the protagonist needs not only empathy to be able to play a human being completely different to himself, but he also needs to find a similarity in the difference – old age, frailty, ephemerality – and through them a true flower (*makoto no hana*).

Noh is the art of aging, parting and departing. In Western drama something happens; in Noh, someone appears, notes Paul Claudel.²⁶ To paraphrase, in Noh someone appears to show us how to depart.

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²⁶ “Le drame, c'est quelque chose qui arrive, le Nô, c'est quelqu'un qui arrive.” In CLAUDEL, P. *L'oiseau noir dans le Soleil levant. Japon 1921 – 1927. Contacts et Circonstances. Oeuvres complètes*, p. 1167.