

COMPARING *SAKURAHIME* AND *YOTSUYA K Aidan*
BY THE 19TH CENTURY KABUKI PLAYWRIGHT TSURUYA
NANBOKU IV

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ABSTRACT

Comparing *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*

by the 19th Century Kabuki Playwright Tsuruya Nanboku IV

This thesis explores the evolution of female characters in 19th century Edo *kabuki* through a comparative analysis of two plays by Tsuruya Nanboku IV (1755-1829): *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* and *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*. Initially motivated by the question of whether social changes of the era could be traced through *kabuki*'s female figures, the research narrows its focus to investigate how differing portrayals of women may explain the varying popularity of these plays. By situating the plays within the socio-cultural context of late Edo Japan and examining the influence of the *kaidan* genre, the study argues that Nanboku's character Princess Sakura served as a precursor to the more radical and enduring figure of Oiwa. The analysis suggests that Nanboku's evolving experimentation with female archetypes reflects both audience expectations and a broader cultural shift, culminating in Oiwa's uniquely personal and destructive revenge—a major factor in the lasting impact of *Yotsuya Kaidan*.

ÖZET

19. Yüzyıl Kabuki Oyun Yazarı Tsuruya Nanboku IV'ün *Sakurahime* ve *Yotsuya Kaidan* Oyunlarının Karşılaştırılması

Bu tez, 19. yüzyıl Edo *kabuki* tiyatrosundaki kadın karakterlerin evrimini, Tsuruya Nanboku IV'ün (1755-1829) *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* ve *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* adlı iki oyunu üzerinden karşılaştırmalı bir analizle incelemektedir. Başlangıçta dönemin toplumsal değişimlerinin *kabuki* tiyatrosundaki kadın figürler aracılığıyla izlenip izlenemeyeceği sorusuyla yola çıkan çalışma, bu oyunların farklı derecelerde ilgi görmesini kadın karakterlerin farklılıklarıyla açıklamaya odaklanarak daraltılmıştır. Oyunlar, Edo döneminin sonlarındaki sosyo-kültürel bağlamda ele alınmış; *kaidan* edebi türünün *kabuki* tiyatrosu üzerindeki etkisi incelenmiştir. Çalışma, Nanboku'nun yarattığı Prenses Sakura karakterinin, daha radikal ve kalıcı bir figür olan Oiwa'nın öncüsü olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Analiz, Nanboku'nun kadın arketipleriyle yaptığı deneylerin, hem seyirci beklentilerini hem de daha geniş kültürel değişimi yansıttığını; Oiwa'nın kişisel ve yıkıcı intikamının ise *Yotsuya Kaidan*'ın kalıcı etkisinde belirleyici rol oynadığını ileri sürmektedir.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I was first looking for a subject I could build on for my master's thesis, female characters were not on my radar. I wanted to work on the representation of Shinto (神道, Japanese folk religion) tales in *kabuki* (歌舞伎) plays, especially supernatural characters. I gave up that idea because of my own limited knowledge of Japanese literature and insufficient source material in English. However, as I was looking for supernatural characters, I came across a very famous vengeful ghost named Oiwa (お岩), who is still a popular icon in modern Japanese culture.

During my first semester as part of a coursework, I dug a little deeper to understand what made Tsuruya Nanboku IV's (鶴屋南北, 1755-1829) *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* (四谷怪談, *The Eastern Seaboard Highway Ghost Stories at Yotsuya*, 1825), and Oiwa so special. At first glance, *Yotsuya Kaidan* looked like a simple story about a woman, Oiwa, who gets betrayed by her ambitious and cruel husband, Iemon, and comes back to haunt him and his acquaintances after her death. However, upon further reading, I came to understand the many layers pertaining to the play, especially the unexpected nature of her revenge. While I was going through English articles I could find about *kabuki* in general and Oiwa's place in *kabuki* in specific, I stumbled upon two works. One was an article by Galia Todorova Gabrovska, tracing the "female presence" in Japan's all-male theatre tradition,¹ and the other was a master's thesis by Rachele Mansi, examining *Yotsuya Kaidan* by

¹ Gabrovska, "Onna Mono," 387–415.

applying the theoretical concept of intertextuality to understand why Oiwa turned into a vengeful ghost in the first place.²

In her article, Gabrovskaja had come up with a term called *onna-mono* (おんなもの "female things") to define female versions of the popular all-male performing arts. In *kabuki*, *onna-mono* showed itself in the form of retelling famous stories of the most prominent male heroes with a female protagonist or through the eyes of a woman relative of the male hero. What made Gabrovskaja's work novel was that when you search for academic writings on *kabuki* involving the word "*onna*," what you usually get are writings on "*onnagata*" (女形), the female impersonators of *kabuki*, and their reading from a gender-studies perspective.

For example, Katherine Mezur's *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies* (2005) examines *onnagata* as "outlaw bodies" that disrupt binary gender norms. She challenges the notion that *onnagata* merely "imitate" women, proposing instead that they create a hyper-stylized, third-gender aesthetic. Sara K. Birk, in her master's thesis "Sex, androgyny, prostitution and the development of *onnagata* roles in *kabuki* theatre," investigates the historical and cultural factors that led to the development and stylization of *onnagata* roles in *kabuki*, focusing particularly on the complex relationships between sex, gender, prostitution, and governmental control. In her book *Onnagata* (2016), Maki Isaka Morinaga, on a similar vein to Mezur, shows how *onnagata* "cite" femininity without relying on biological women and overturns stereotypes of *onnagata* as "drag" performers and connects premodern gender fluidity to contemporary queer theory. Even Samuel L. Leiter's rare article that takes stock of different types of female characters in *kabuki* and gives examples of how these characters served the stories, draws the attention on the gender aspect of the

² Mansi, "Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan's Oiwa."

onnaga with its title "From Gay to Gei: The Onnagata and the Creation of Kabuki's Female Characters" (1999).

If one wanted to move away from *onnagata*, and find works based on character analysis, those were very few in number. That is where Mansi's thesis came in. Her focus was on the creation of the character Oiwa and the motivation behind her transformation. A key component of her thesis was the consensus of the scholars that *Yotsuya Kaidan* was a parody of *Kanadehon Chūshingura* (仮名手本忠臣蔵, *The Treasury of Forty-Seven Loyal Retainers*, 1748), where revenge was the central theme.³ By looking at Oiwa's position as a daughter, wife, and mother of a dismantled samurai household at the end of the Edo period, Mansi showed how the changing values of the society in which Oiwa lived had an impact on her character. Reading Mansi's thesis made me wonder if it was possible to track the social changes occurring at the beginning of the 19th century through the changes in the characterization of heroines over time. However, if I wanted to pinpoint any alterations, first, I had to have a good grasp of *kabuki*'s norms.

As I was reading, I realized that, aside from the most recent writings on *kabuki* and gender, English scholarship on *kabuki* could be divided into two groups. The first group contains the writing of the foundational scholars such as Donald

³ *Kanadehon Chūshingura* tells the story of 47 *rōnin* (浪人, masterless samurai) who plot to avenge their wrongfully killed master Enya Hangan. The play is a retelling of the famous Akō incident (赤穂事件) of 170. It all started in 1701 when the *daimyō* (大名, feudal lord) of Akō, Asano Naganori (浅野長矩), attacked court official Kira Yoshinaka (吉良義央) inside Edo Castle after being repeatedly provoked and humiliated by him. Because violence was strictly forbidden in the shogun's palace, Asano was ordered to commit *seppuku* (切腹, ritual suicide), and his lands were confiscated. After patiently planning for over a year, 47 of Asano's former retainers, led by Ōishi Kuranosuke (大石 良雄), carried out a successful revenge attack on Kira's mansion in 1703, killing him and presenting his head at Asano's grave. They then surrendered and were ordered by the shogunate to commit *seppuku*, which they did honorably. *Chūshingura* was first written for *jōruri* (浄瑠璃, puppet theatre) in 1748, set in a different era and with different character names. Later that year, it was adapted to *kabuki* and staged for the first time in Osaka. Noted in Keene, *Chūshingura*, 1-26.

Keene (1922–2019), Earle Ernst (1914–2004), and A. C. Scott (1909–1985). This group can be regarded as a gateway to the world of *kabuki*.

Donald Keene's writings on *kabuki* were a part of his broader work on Japanese cultural history. They are helpful for understanding *kabuki*'s position within Japan's early modern cultural productions.⁴ Earle Ernst, on the other hand, was the person who laid the foundation for English-language academic studies of the form. In his book, *The Kabuki Theatre* (1956), Ernst provided the readers with historical context by covering *kabuki*'s evolution from 17th-century street performances to Edo-period sophistication. The book also covered *kabuki*'s unique aesthetics, structure, and audience-performer dynamics. Last but not least, A. C. Scott's work helped introduce *kabuki* to Western audiences. As a director, he focused not just on the literary but also on performative aspects. His landmark book, *The Kabuki Theatre of Japan* (1955), was one of the first English-language surveys of *kabuki*. Aside from *kabuki*'s history, his book covered special performance techniques, such as *kata* (形, stylized acting), *tsurane* (連ねる, vocal delivery), and iconic *kumadori* (隈取り, makeup); stagecraft, such as the *hanamichi* (花道, runway), *mawari butai* (回り舞台, revolving stage), and *seri* (迫り, trapdoors); and summaries of plays that form the classic *kabuki* repertoire, such as *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami* (菅原伝授手習鑑, *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy*, 1746), and *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (義経千本桜, *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, 1747).

The second group, while at times also producing extensive works regarding *kabuki*'s history and form, like in the case of Samuel L. Leiter (b. 1940) and James R. Brandon (1927–2022), produced more specialized accounts on the art form. In this

⁴ Keene, *World Within Walls*, 438-476.

group are academicians of Japanese literature and theatre, such as Laurence Kominz (b. 1952), Jonathan E. Zwicker, and Katherine Saltzman-Li.

Samuel L. Leiter is a writer who combined rigorous academic analysis with accessible writing, which made him indispensable for both scholars and general readers. He is best known for his comprehensive reference books, *New Kabuki Encyclopedia: A Revised Adaptation of Kabuki Jiten* (1997), and *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre* (2006, 2nd ed. 2014). *New Kabuki Encyclopedia* features more than 1000 entries on plays, actors, terms, and history. It also includes cross-references, Japanese kanji, and bibliographies. *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, on the other hand, covers not only *kabuki* but also *nō*, *bunraku*, and *kyōgen* with chronologies, appendices, and thematic essays. Aside from his reference books, he has multiple analytical works that delve into *kabuki*'s artistic, social, and political dimensions. His books *Rising from the Flames: The Rebirth of Theater in Occupied Japan* (2009, editor), *Kabuki at the Crossroads: Years of Crisis, 1952–1965* (2013), and *Frozen Moments: Writings on Kabuki, 1966–2001* (2002) when read in this order, paints a full picture of *kabuki*'s 20th century. Leiter has also translated many *kabuki* plays. His book *The Art of Kabuki: Famous Plays in Performance* (1979), not only has the complete text translations of five famous *kabuki* plays, but also includes performance notes from *kabuki* actors, photos, and details on staging, movement, wigs, costumes, and music. He has also co-edited many books containing partial translations of some *kabuki* plays alongside James R. Brandon.

Just like Leiter's, James Brandon's contributions to English-language scholarship of *kabuki* also span from translations to historical analysis, as well as performance studies with a focus on making *kabuki* accessible to Western audiences.

His translations, such as *Kabuki: Five Classic Plays* (1992), and editorial work on books such as *Kabuki Plays on Stage Series* (2002-2003) are invaluable resources for non-Japanese speakers. He is one of the first Western scholars who rejected the idea of *kabuki* as "unchanging" and stressed its adaptability. In his book *Kabuki's Forgotten War: 1931–1945* (2008), he examined propaganda plays, censorship, and postwar reinvention of *kabuki*, and revolutionized WWII-era studies of the art form.

As for more specialized contributions, Laurence Kominzi, a former student of Donald Keene, provided a unique perspective to *kabuki* scholarship with his book *The Stars Who Created Kabuki* (1997) as the first scholar to examine *kabuki* from an actor-centred point of view. The book is a study of early *kabuki* actors (1603–1868), combining biography, social history, and performance analysis. Kominzi highlighted individual performers as drivers of innovation, such as how *kabuki*'s founders shaped its aesthetics, and how actor rivalries made way for the development of *wagoto* (和事, soft-style) versus *aragoto* (荒事, rough-style) acting.

Another specialized work is *Creating Kabuki Plays* (2010) by Katherine Saltzman-Li. In her book, she analysed how playwrights collaborated with actors, producers (座元, *zamoto*), and censors by examining the only extant treatise fully devoted to the subject of *kabuki* playwriting, *Kezairoku, Sakusha Shikihō* (Valuable Notes on Playwriting, A Playwrights' Methodology, 1801). Her analysis revealed *kabuki* as a commercial art shaped by audience demand and merchant-class patronage.

Last but not least, although not an academician working exclusively on *kabuki*, Jonathan E. Zwicker, with his book *Kabuki's Nineteenth Century: Stage and Print in Early Modern Edo* (2023), has contributed valuable insights on *kabuki*'s relationship to print culture, urban society, and legal discourse in early modern

Japan. By examining how *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵) prints, playbills, and actor critiques shaped *kabuki*'s reception in 19th century Edo, he argued that *kabuki*'s popularity depended on printed materials as much as live performances. He also pointed out how the actor celebrity culture mirrored modern pop-idol systems.

As I learned more about *kabuki*, I realized that my initial question, "Is it possible to track the social changes occurring at the beginning of the 19th century, through the changes in the characterization of heroines?" had already received a positive answer. Especially, Satoko Shimazaki's work *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, built a beautiful picture of how the rise of the vengeful female ghost figure was facilitated by the profound changes that took place in Edo *kabuki* towards the end of the early modern period.

Nevertheless, my search for female characters with pronounced differences from their 17th and 18th century predecessor led me to another play by Tsuruya Nanboku IV, titled *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* (桜姫東文章, *The Scarlet Princess and Her Story in the East*, 1817). The play and its main protagonist, Princess Sakura (桜姫), seemed to share many similarities with *Yotsuya Kaidan* and Oiwa. *Sakurahime* follows Princess Sakura's journey from nobility to social ostracization and her revenge against the man who is responsible for her family's ruin.

Both plays were written in a new genre that developed during the 19th century called *kizewamono* (生世話物, raw-life contemporary plays) and were heavily influenced by the *kaidan* (怪談, tale of the supernatural) literature. Unlike their predecessors, who were always defined by their romantic involvement with a male hero,⁵ both Princess Sakura and Oiwa were strong female protagonists in their own

⁵ Leiter, "From Gay to Gei," 496-510.

right. Both plays are now staples at the National Theater (国立劇場, Kokuritsu Gekijō). However, *Yotsuya Kaidan* and *Oiwa*'s popularity, both during the Edo period and today, far exceeded that of *Sakurahime* and Princess Sakura's.⁶ This situation led me to another question: Can the discrepancy between the popularities of *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan* be explained in relation to their female heroines fallen Princess Sakura and vengeful ghost *Oiwa*?

In order to answer this question, in Chapter 1, I will provide more information on Edo *kabuki* and its transformation at the beginning of the 19th century. There are two reasons for concentrating on Edo *kabuki* in particular. One is the strong regional identity that *kabuki* tended to maintain throughout the early modern period. Between Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka, many regional variations existed in almost every aspect of the form, making it difficult to form a cohesive analysis of *kabuki*'s larger social meaning during the early modern period.⁷ Second is the unique creative role *kabuki* played specifically in Edo, where it facilitated the creation of a community between people from different social classes who inhabited the city.⁸ Tsuruya Nanboku IV was part of the Edo *kabuki* scene and produced plays for Edo's dynamic society.

After defining the traditions of Edo *kabuki* and explaining why and how they were shifting with the start of a new century, in Chapter 2, I will introduce the *kaidan* (怪談) literature. As mentioned before, both *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan* are heavily influenced by stories coming from *kaidan* collections, which became

⁶ The popularity of the plays is reflected in the number of revivals they had before the establishment of the National Theater, which will be mentioned in later chapters. As for the initial reactions, publications related to *kabuki*, such as actor critiques (役者評判記, *yakusha hyōbanki*) and transplanted scripts (正本写し, *shōhon utsushi*), give us information regarding the reception of the plays. Noted in Shimazaki, "The Ghost of *Oiwa* in Actor Prints," 78.

⁷ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

especially popular in the second half of the 18th century. While it is frequently mentioned that *kabuki* was influenced by its surroundings, including popular literature, and has a sub-genre called *kaidan-mono* (怪談物, ghost plays), there are no works in English scholarship that investigate how *kaidan* literature and *kabuki* feed into each other. The aim of this chapter is to show that even if Princess Sakura, as a character, does not seem to have a connection with *kaidan-mono*, she is in fact a figure of supernatural origins that is associated with the tales of the strange.

Chapter 3 will be divided into two main sections. The first half will be dedicated to Tsuraya Nanboku IV and his earlier plays, to draw a roadmap leading up to the creation of *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*. In the second half, I will provide summaries of the plays before going on to compare them and their heroines in Chapter 4. While I will be using the stageable translations of *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan* to form my summaries, during the comparison, I will only take into account the major events driving the plots and will not pay attention to stage directions or dialogues. The reason behind this is the fluid nature of *kabuki* plays. While playwrights did write scripts, those scripts were like building blocks that shaped the structure of a play. When it came to its performance, all initiative was in the hands of the actors.⁹ That is why a full-fledged textual analysis of a *kabuki* play is more likely to lead us to the wrong conclusion.

The comparison in Chapter 4 will take place in two folds. *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan* will be compared to determine their similarities and differences on three levels: their actors, their structures, and their central plots. Afterwards, Princess Sakura and Oiwa will be compared in relation to their supernatural constitutions, the transformations they go through, and the motivations and nature of their vengeance.

⁹ Ibid, 9.

My initial assumption was that Sakura's journey from nobility to degeneracy and back to supposed nobility and her actions in the middle, which will be detailed in Chapter 3, were too radical a change for the 19th century audiences without the intermediary of an unmistakable supernatural happening. However, Oiwa's transformation into a ghost succeeded in striking a balance between satisfying her bloody vengeance and keeping her at a sufficient distance from humanity, which lessened the discomfort of the audience. However, the comparison of the plays and their female protagonists showed that their difference in popularity was not simply due to which *kaidan* elements they employed but also how much they challenged the status quo.

CHAPTER 2

KABUKI:

HISTORY, EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

As an art form that has been around for centuries, *kabuki* has undergone many changes in several different periods of its existence. The aim of this chapter is to showcase the transformation of *kabuki* experienced in the 19th century Edo city, as it evolved with and responded to the social, economic, and cultural shifts of the period.

Kabuki's transformation in this era reflected a shift in popular taste, heightened theatrical innovation, and a deeper interplay between audience demand and artistic creation. However, as mentioned before, in order to understand the significance of any change, one must first know what came before.

2.1 History of *Kabuki*

Kabuki's origin is believed to be a dance, performed by a shrine maiden called *Izumo no Okuni* (出雲の阿国) and her troupe of female performers. It was recorded that this troupe danced on a temporary stage set up in the dry bed of the Kamo River (鴨川) in Kyoto in 1603. The dancers imitated young men known as *kabuki-mono* (歌舞伎者, Edo-period samurai with an eye-catching style and eccentric behaviour) and created a new dance that was both lively and sensuously appealing. This dance style soon got adopted by professional troupes performing in the cities. Men also started participating in the performances, but this first form of *kabuki* still got dubbed as *onna kabuki* (女歌舞伎, women's kabuki). When the Tokugawa government banned women from performing in public in 1629, young, attractive boys, usually between the ages of ten and thirteen, continued performing kabuki. *Wakashu kabuki*

(若衆歌舞伎, young men's kabuki) too got banned in 1652, leaving only adult men to portray both males and females on stage.¹⁰

Kabuki developed mainly in three cities, Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka, with many regional variations. The demographic differences enabled the emergence of different genres. By the beginning of the Genroku period (元禄, 1688–1704), three major divisions of kabuki drama were recognized: *sewamono* (世話物, plays about contemporary life); *jidaimono* (時代物, period pieces), and *shosagoto* (所作事, dance pieces).¹¹ The Genroku period was also when the essential characteristics that defined Edo kabuki until the 19th century all came together. The Tokugawa government established the first laws governing the theatre. They licensed *kabuki* theatres and restricted the production of kabuki to three districts, and four licensed theatres¹² were located. The system of acting lineages came into being, and *kabuki* began to operate according to its own calendar.

Licensed theatres produced *ōshibai* (大芝居, major productions) that they were required to stage throughout most of the year. Each year, *kabuki* actors had to enter into an annual contract called “contract of affiliation” with a single theatre. In Edo, the licensed theatres were largely regulated from within. Theatre managers, who were actors themselves, ran their theatres as they saw fit as long as they stayed within the legal framework established by the government.

In 1725, the government asked the licensed theatres to submit a *yuisho* (由緒, lineage) to the city magistrate. The lineages solidified the position of the licensed theatres and their managers by illustrating the symbolic centrality of the three kabuki

¹⁰ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 1-3.

¹¹ By mid-18th century, the productions came to consist of essentially two parts, first a longer *jidamono*, followed by a shorter *sewamono*. Noted in Brandon, *Kabuki*, 5.

¹² Nakamura-za (中村座), Morita-za (守田座), Ichimura-za (市村座), and Yamamura-za (山村座). Yamamura-za later got stripped of its licence, before actor lineages were established.

theatres. Now licensed theatres had the responsibility to continue the tradition of “the great productions of Edo.”¹³

2.2 Edo *Kabuki* and society

The relationship between Edo’s society and its *kabuki* was cyclical, where the theatre and its audience continued to influence one another throughout Japan’s early modern period.

2.2.1 Content and structure

At the beginning of the 17th century, Edo's population consisted mainly of samurai and their attendants.¹⁴ Thus, Edo *kabuki* got inspired by samurai culture and history¹⁵ while shaping its repertoire and character types. However, they developed a system that allowed them to include contemporary figures, such as common townsmen and courtesans of the pleasure quarters, and contemporary events into the plays they created, where past and present coincided. As a result, Edo *kabuki* managed to create a shared "past" and contributed to the creation of a sense of community comprising both samurai and commoners.

For example, the medieval story of the demon *Shutendōji* (酒呑童子) was continuously reworked and celebrated by Edo *kabuki*. This was a story that featured the Heian-period (平安, 794–1185) general Minamoto no Yoritomo (源頼朝, 1147–1199)

¹³ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 45-51.

¹⁴ Because of the system of *sankin kōtai* (参勤交代, alternate attendance) implemented by the Tokugawa government, *daimyō* (大名, samurai lords) needed to manage a separate residence in Edo. This led to a swelling of the city’s samurai population. Even when commoners began moving to the city to meet the needs of this large group, it was not until the 1730s that their numbers caught up with the samurai. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 56.

¹⁵ In composing *jidaimono*, Edo *kabuki* drew mostly on medieval military tales, especially from historical material that the Tokugawa shogunate had used in constructing its own lineages. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 41.

1021) and his four guardians. In order to protect the imperial family, they defeated the demon that resided at Mount Ōe (大枝山) and restored the peace of the country. Plays like these both celebrated the samurai and spoke to the male population of Edo by providing them with a character type called *otokodate* (男伊達, tough and chivalrous men) that fascinated the 17th century audience in general.¹⁶ Defeat of evil figures and restoration of peace, whether of a single household or a whole domain, remained a key feature of Edo *kabuki*. Even when new plot types and structures found their way into Edo from Kyoto and Osaka, namely *sewamono* based on *oie sōdō mono* (御家騒動, household disturbance plots),¹⁷ the only major change was the replacement of the mythical evil figure with evil aristocrats and samurai.¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, these military plots celebrating the world of the samurai were presented through the lens of the landscapes, customs, and conventions of early modern Edo. This was a calculated move with two specific reasons. The first was to appeal to a broad audience, across class demarcations. The second was to work around government bans prohibiting the depiction of current events in any artistic medium.¹⁹

As early as the Genroku period, famous figures of medieval Japan were being shown having affairs, falling in love, falling victim to jealousy, often in 17th century settings. While introducing mythical and/or historical characters in urban settings was in part used as a device to surprise the audience, this melding of the past and the present allowed the conception of a communal memory by rendering the narratives

¹⁶ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 60.

¹⁷ Household, in this context, does not mean a single marital unit but a large extended family lineage of a clan. Even though *oie sōdō mono* is translated as “household disturbance plot,” *sōdō* refers to household troubles, conflict, dispute, and upheaval that erupted from within and were major upheavals caused by succession disputes, lord-vassal conflict, disloyalty, etc.

¹⁸ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 64-65

¹⁹ Ibid, 40, & 66.

of the ruling class accessible to the general public. Later on, by depicting samurai characters both high and low, Edo *kabuki* created the perception among their non-samurai audience that samurai were just like them, and to a degree blurred the lines of class between *kabuki* audiences.²⁰

The merging of the past and present was made possible by the use of a convention called *sekai* (世界). *Sekai* are “worlds” that functioned as a shared archive of settings and characters.²¹ Playwrights wrote new plays by placing the characters of a *sekai* in new situations or reinterpreting familiar ones. They also manipulated plot elements called *shukō* (趣向) in order to display their originality. *Shukō* was what enabled the refashioning of the historical world into something contemporary.²²

Every interpretation of a particular *sekai* facilitated the advancement of a dialogue between the theatre and the public. As this cycle of rewriting and space for dialogue developed, *kabuki* plays began to have more open-ended structures, where the defeat of the enemy was left to another production. This open-ended structure kept the audience looking forward to the next interpretation of a beloved story.

2.2.2 *Kabuki* calendar and actors

It was not only the content and structure of the plays that *kabuki* relied upon when shaping Edo’s society. Its calendar and actors also contributed to the process. The theatre invented annual customs capable of serving as secular rituals. By linking the

²⁰ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 66-68.

²¹ Familiar historical narratives such as *Ise Monogatari* (伊勢物語, *Tales of Ise*) and *Heike Monogatari* (平家物語, *Tales of Heike*) were the sources employed to create the *sekai* for *jidaimono*, whereas *sekai* for *sewamono* were based on widely known contemporary events that became staple dramatic materials over time, such as lovers’ suicide tales of *Yuugiri and Izaemon* (夕霧伊左衛門), and *Osome and Hisamatsu* (お染久松).

²² Leiter, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, 343.

present to the past, actor lineages helped produce another basis for historical reflection specific to Edo. Actors themselves were responsible for *kabuki*'s continued popularity.

A *kabuki* year consisted of four to six *kabuki* productions. These mostly coincided with the celebration of traditional festivals like *Hinamatsuri* (ひな祭り, Dolls' Festival) for girls in March; *Gogatsu no Sekku* (五月の節句, the Boy's Festival) in May, and *Obon* (お盆, Bon Festival) for the dead in July.²³ The start of the *kabuki* calendar did not coincide with the beginning of the new year. The *kabuki* productions of the year commenced on the 11th month with the *kaomise* (顔見せ, face-showing) production.²⁴ However, even before the actual production was staged, the public's dialogue with *kabuki* would pick up where it left off, with the announcement of new casts performing in the licensed theatres at the beginning of the tenth month. This announcement was followed by another at the end of the month, during which the fans would learn the main title of the *kaomise* production, as well as the *sekai* in which the play would be set. These were important events, for which the people of Edo would gather en masse, and would result in discussions about how certain actors might portray a certain character.²⁵

Aside from the *kaomise*, the spring productions were considered to be the most important plays in the annual *kabuki* calendar.²⁶ The interest in these productions would ideally last around four to five months. After the end of the spring production, the big stars of *kabuki* would generally take a long break. However, the

²³ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 32.

²⁴ Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo," 53.

²⁵ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 76-78.

²⁶ These productions would always use the *Soga sekai*. This *sekai* was built on *Soga monogatari* (曾我物語, *The Tale of the Soga Brothers*), a 14th century military narrative that follows two brothers who broke into the camp of a chief adviser to the *shōgun* to avenge their father's death. For more information, see Kominz, *Avatars of Vengeance*.

theatre managers and playwrights would already start working on the next year's cast and program.²⁷

On the creation of communal memory, actor lineages were important because every inherited title carried with it associations and memories of earlier actors.²⁸

Actor lineages constructed an image of actors' bodies as immortal instruments that carried the past within them and connected it to the present. By the late 18th century, the passage of time in Edo was marked, not by a formal list of era names, but by the generations of kabuki actors.²⁹

As actors as individuals, they were important figures in shaping *kabuki* and its audience, both inside and outside of the theatre. In *kabuki*, more so than playwrights, it was the actor who gave shape to a play. Actors invented acting styles and character types in accordance with the society they lived in.³⁰ The playwrights chose the *sekai* of a production and reworked its characters in a way that would highlight an actor's talents.³¹ However, the playwright only indicated where the plot would go. How the characters got there was determined by the actors. The actor would adjust his performance according to the reactions of the audience. If the

²⁷ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 76-80.

²⁸ When actor lineages were first formed, actors would pass on their names to their sons, mainly due to inheritance issues. Later in the 18th century, this handing down from father to son gave way to one actor inheriting multiple names and acting styles throughout his career.

²⁹ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 82-83.

³⁰ The Danjūrō lineage created the *aragoto* style (荒事, rough style) for and from an audience made up mostly of samurai. Noted in Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo," 54. Whereas Sakata Tojuro (1644- 1709) created the *wagoto* style (soft style) for and from Kyoto audiences who were mild in nature and enjoyed stories of love affairs rather than stories of chivalry. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in transition*, 63.

³¹ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 27.

During the Kasei (1804-1829) and Tenpō (1830-1844) periods, there was a fiery rivalry between two specialists of transformation dances: Edo's Bandō Mitsugorō III (坂東三津五郎, 1773-1831) and Kamigata's Nakamura Utaemon III (中村歌右衛門, 1778-1838). Three times during these periods (in 1808-1812, 1814-1815, and 1817-1819), Utaemon made extended incursions to Edo. Devoted fans were thrilled to have a chance to compare and argue their favorites' talents. The rivalry between Mitsugorō and Utaemon, near single-handedly raised the popularity of the transformation dance genre. So much so that two especially prolific transformation dance playwrights, Segawa Jokō II (瀬川如臯, 1757-1833) and Sakurada Jisuke II (櫻田治助, 1768-1829), ended up writing new pieces for them to perform. Noted in Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 14-15.

audience enjoyed a particular scene, the actor could prolong that scene until it ran out of its charm. Alternatively, if an audience did not like a scene, the actor could change it completely.³²

Outside the theatre, the actor was the trend setter. Famous *onnagata* became greatly influential in ladies' fashion, in coiffure, kimono design, walking style, and a general sense of "femininity."³³ Names of famous *onnagata* and *tachiyaku* (立ち役, male role specialist) actors of the period adorned the labels of various products, and the fans were loyal to their favourite actor's wares. The actors participated in the creation of *gesaku* (戯作, popular light literature). They convened with other *gesaku* writers and poets, both with samurai and commoner origins. The writers of the time were inspired both by the *kabuki* plays they saw and the connections they formed with the actors themselves. As for the general public, actors and *kabuki* were a source of inspiration for the hobbies they developed.³⁴ Some people would even mimic the actions and attire of actors while going on with their daily lives.³⁵

As can be seen from what has been described, Edo's *kabuki* and society were inextricably connected to each other. Thus, the changes that Edo society was undergoing were also reflected in *kabuki*. Of course, these changes did not happen overnight. However, their culmination became visible in the first half of the 19th century.

³² On the first day of a production written by Chikamatsu Momzaemon (近松 門左衛門, 1653-1725) and Kaneko Kichizaemon (金子吉左衛門, d.1728), the audience got bored during a comic bit in the play and started shouting "Get on with it!" The next day, when Kichizaemon went to see the play again, he was surprised to see a bigger audience than the day before. The actor Tojuro had changed the comic dialogue, and this time the audience was shouting, "Tojuro, keep it going, don't stop yet!" Noted in Dunn, *The actors' analects*, 82-83.

³³ Even courtesans, who *onnagata* based their own femininity on during the formative years of *kabuki*, started imitating *kabuki* actors in the 18th century. Noted in Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo," 63.

³⁴ *Chaban* (茶番, short and humorous improvised skits), *zashiki kyōgen* (座敷狂言, home *kabuki*), and *kabuki*-style dancing were some of the amateur arts that emerged from *kabuki*.

³⁵ Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo," 65-67.

2.3 Edo *Kabuki* in the 19th century

At the beginning of the 19th century, the feudal social order that the Tokugawa government was trying to maintain was rapidly deteriorating. Many upper-rank samurai were in debt to the wealthy merchants; natural disasters like the Tenmei famine (天明の飢饉, 1782-1787) and heavy taxation led to many unsuccessful peasant rebellions; the urban population grew with poor labourers migrating to cities in search of food and jobs.³⁶ The growing population, coupled with scarce resources, meant an increase in poverty and crime.

It was not only the people who were economically worse off. The theatres were also facing economic difficulties. Edo's licensed theatres were having a hard time paying the growing costs of staging five to six productions per year. The main reason behind the debt they accumulated was the astronomical salaries demanded by the leading actors. The actors used their salaries to buy lavish costumes to both please and attract their fans, and to come out on top in the fierce rivalry between actors.³⁷

Towards the end of the 18th century, Edo kabuki only managed to survive thanks to the *hikae yagura* (控櫓, subsidiary theatre) system.³⁸ In 1793, none of the licensed theatres could produce a *kaomise* production. After that year, some provisions were taken by the government to prevent a repeat of this situation. The government set an upper limit on actors' salaries. They also loosened the annual contract system so that an actor contracted to one licensed theatre could perform in the other two if the one with which they formed the contract was unable to hold its

³⁶ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 21.

³⁷ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 20-22.

³⁸ Subsidiary theatres were established during the time when the government gave licenses to *kabuki* theatres. Their purpose was to continue the show if circumstances such as fire or debt caused the licensed theatres to temporarily close their doors. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 47.

kaomise production due to financial difficulties. Despite the measures taken, actors continued purchasing expensive costumes and demanding higher salaries during the Kasei period (化政, 1804-1829).³⁹

On top of the salary crisis, the frequent loss of theatres to fire caused much financial distress during the Kasei through *bakumatsu* periods (幕末, 1853-1867). When the major theatres were out of commission due to the destruction the fires caused, the government had to allow actors to take temporary jobs with minor theatres or join provincial troupes.⁴⁰ The dissolution of the theatre-affiliation system in return had an impact on the conventional kabuki calendar. The *kaomise* production gradually lost its importance as audiences were able to see their favourite actors in several different venues for cheaper prices.⁴¹

Social and economic conditions also led to a change in the profile of the *kabuki* audience. As discussed earlier, from the 17th to the 19th century, the majority of *kabuki*'s audience consisted of samurai. In the major theatres, spectators from samurai households would sit in the best places, and the commoners would settle for the cheaper areas. In the late 18th century, depictions of *kabuki* audiences indicate that "a typical audience consisted largely of samurai and their guests and workers, wealthy merchants, upper-class store owners and their attendants and guests, intellectuals such as literati and monks, and courtesans and performers with their patrons."⁴² While it is difficult to know the precise makeup of the audience for *kabuki* at the beginning of the 19th century, there are signs indicating that there was an increase in the number of commoners attending *kabuki*.

³⁹ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 21-22.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁴¹ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 98.

⁴² Yukio, *Edo kabuki ron* 171, as noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 89.

First of all, it is said that due to the Kansei reforms (寛政の改革, 1787-1793) –which were implemented to restore the economy and the moral structure of the society– especially upper-class samurai were obliged to satisfy their interest in *kabuki* in a more discreet manner.⁴³ Second, as the debts of theatres increased, they increased the number of expensive *sajiki* boxes (棧敷) and reduced the number of cheap areas. When one takes into account the depleting coffers of the samurai and the growing wealth of the merchants and upper-class store owners, one can assume that the expensive seats were reserved for the wealthy commoners. Last but not least, there are countless depictions in various 19th century works of fiction of ordinary commoners attending *kabuki* performances and/or talking about their experiences at the theatre.⁴⁴

The content of the plays also shifted to meet the changing needs and tastes of its urban audience. The favoured historical military *sekai* got pushed into the background, and the presentation of the events in and around the city gained more importance. The crumbling social order created an air of unease in the city. Influenced by this mood, the stories written by this period's playwrights “realistically” portrayed the outcasts of society. The playwrights also took an interest in depicting the odd and the grotesque.⁴⁵

Plays were set in darker settings to express the sombre atmosphere. Characters were living or working in broken-down homes and shops. Scenes of desolation and poverty heightened the sense of foreboding felt by the audience. Even familiar places were shown through a different lens.⁴⁶ Plays with these characteristics

⁴³ Gerstle, “Flowers of Edo,” 65.

⁴⁴ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 89-90.

⁴⁵ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 12.

⁴⁶ Before the 19th century, pleasure quarters were depicted in *kabuki* as lively places where desire was celebrated. Both the quarters and the courtesans working there possessed a certain elegance and

were dubbed *kizewamono* (生世話物, raw-life *sewamono*).⁴⁷ When lowlife figures such as gangsters and thieves in both genders became the popular antiheroes of the plays, actors developed new character types like *akuba* (悪婆, wicked women), and *iroaku* (色悪, erotic villain) to match them.⁴⁸ However, new character types were not the only innovation actors brought to the kabuki stage in the 19th century.

In these new *kizewamono*, actors began to play multiple roles of different natures. An actor playing different characters in itself was not a novel concept. The *kabuki* audience loved seeing their favourite actor transform into new characters by changing their entire costume on stage several times, using *hayagawari* techniques (早変わり, rapid quick-change), throughout a play.⁴⁹ However, even when transformed, the actors continued to act in their specialized role type.⁵⁰ While actors could master several role types during their careers, they would move from one speciality to another and not use several of them interchangeably.⁵¹

Another major development in the 19th century *kabuki* was the growing importance of the playwrights. After their position solidified in the second half of the 17th century,⁵² *kabuki* playwrights were responsible for two tasks. First, examining the cast at the beginning of each *kabuki* year in order to choose a *sekai* that would

refinement. For courtesans, hope existed that they could one day leave the quarters if they managed to pay off their debts or were purchased by their lovers. However, the quarters depicted in this new era were tawdry places, and the characters who sold sex were common streetwalkers, carrying their own floor mat with them. Noted in Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 6.

⁴⁷ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 11-12.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 18.

⁴⁹ For example, the leading male actor played six roles in *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (*Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, 1747), seven roles in *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami* (*Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy*, 1746), and nine roles in *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*.

⁵⁰ Especially with the establishment of actor lineages, each kabuki actor would specialize in a role, such as *tachiyaku*, *katakiyaku* (敵役, villain), *dōkeyaku* (道化役者, comic), or *onnagata*. This system of role types was called *yakugara* (役柄).

⁵¹ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 17.

⁵² Until 1664, kabuki programs consisted of unrelated, short items, but after that date, plays with more than one act began to appear. Playwriting became a specialized profession with the development of multi-act plays. Noted in Brandon, *Kabuki*, 3.

allow the actors' talents to shine. Second, reinterpreting said *sekai* and its characters in a way that would be new and entertaining for the audience. However, with the diminishing importance of the historical military *sekai*, playwrights developed a practice called *naimaze* (綱交ぜ), where they combined two or more *sekai* within a single play. This practice provided them with the opportunity to create rather complex intermingled plotlines.⁵³

All in all, the beginning of the 19th century was a dynamic period for Edo *kabuki*. Conventions that governed it for over a century began to crumble just like the samurai society on which it formed its basis. As a form of popular entertainment, in order to survive, *kabuki* needed to transform alongside the city it belonged to. Playwrights found the solution in inviting the lower-class Edoites to the centre stage and depicting the decadence of the 19th century, through stories about their lives. However, the shift towards a more present-focused “realistic” style of storytelling did not change the fact that *kabuki* was a popular theatre due to its awe-inspiring tricks and physical performances that the actors provided. The playwrights had to come up with a way to combine the raw daily life with the thrilling world of the theatre, and all they had to do to find it was to look at “the tales of the strange.”

⁵³ Leiter, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, 343.

Later on, Kawatake Mokuami (河竹黙阿弥, 1816-1893), who is considered to be the most prolific playwright in *kabuki* history, eventually abandoned the *sekai* tradition altogether. Noted in Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 29.

CHAPTER 3

Kaidan:

HISTORY, EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Japanese word *kaidan* (怪談) can be literally translated as “the narration of the strange.” Initially, stories associated with *kaidan* included a variety of topics from strange and scary to funny, silly, and exotic. However, nowadays, the term has come to mean frightening ghost stories that frequently use revenge as a motif.⁵⁴

Even though the strange and the supernatural have been a part of Japanese society for a very long time, as part of Shinto and Buddhism, it was in the 17th century that the term *kaidan* appeared in extant historical records.⁵⁵ After its initial structure got established, the popularity of *kaidan* literature continued to grow as time went by. The genre reached its peak in 1776, with the publication of Ueda Akinari’s (上田秋成) *Ugetsu Monogatari* (雨月物語, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*). Some of the *kaidan* tales written in the Edo period continue to be popular among contemporary Japanese. This chapter aims to provide information about the history and content of *kaidan*, in order to explain how and why this genre became so popular and important in 18th and 19th century Edo’s society.

3.1 Historical origins of *Kaidan*

As mentioned earlier, Japanese society as a whole was familiar with strange and supernatural phenomena. Even before the emergence of *kaidan* as a literary genre, stories that showed characteristics of *kaidan* existed in literature. However, these

⁵⁴ Reider, “The Appeal of ‘Kaidan,’” 266.

⁵⁵ Reider, “The Emergence of ‘Kaidan-shū,’” 80.

stories were often part of a larger work, such as in *Nihon Ryōiki* (日本霊異記, *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition*, ca. 823),⁵⁶ *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語, *The Tale of Genji*, ca. 1010),⁵⁷ *Konjaku monogatari-shū* (今昔物語集, *Tales of Old Times Now Past*, ca. 1120),⁵⁸ and *Uji Shūi Monogatari* (宇治拾遺物語, *A Collection of Tales from Uji*, 13th century).⁵⁹ In these larger collections, especially those with Buddhist concerns, the main objective was to illustrate how good deeds in this life were rewarded while evil deeds were punished. While elements of Buddhist teachings did not altogether vanish in *kaidan*, by the time the genre got established in the Edo period, the tales of the strange were much more secular in nature.⁶⁰

Leading up to the Edo period, it was the oral tradition that laid the foundations of *kaidan* literature. With the development of the commercial economy in the 16th century, the increased mobility of some people, such as merchants, performers, artists, and priests, brought with it enhanced communication between the countryside and urban centres. These travellers carried entertaining tales with them to and from. Soon, storytelling became a form of popular entertainment, performed by professional storytellers. The practice of narrating tales about the strange, bizarre,

⁵⁶ *Nihon Ryōiki*, written during the Heian period, is Japan's first major collection of anecdotal literature. The collection contains Buddhist didactic tales featuring ghosts, karma, and divine retribution. For more information, see Watson, *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan: The Nihon Ryōiki*.

⁵⁷ *Genji Monogatari*, by Murasaki Shikibu (紫式部, 978-1016), tells the story of Prince Genji's life. It contains 54 episodes in total. The *Yūgao* (夕顔, Evening Faces) and *Aoi* (葵, Hollylock) are two of the episodes that have notable supernatural elements.

⁵⁸ *Konjaku monogatari-shū* is a collection of tales from India, China, and Japan. The collection contains both Buddhist and secular stories from all three countries. A major portion of the stories are tales of miracles. For more information, see Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past: Sixty-Two Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection*.

⁵⁹ *Uji Shūi Monogatari* is a collection of 194 tales. While not compiled as systematically as *Konjaku monogatari-shū*, the tales in *Uji Shūi Monogatari* cover a much wider variety of stories, including weird, fantastic, impossible, and mystical tales. For more information, see Forster, "Uji Shūi Monogatari," 135-208.

⁶⁰ Reider, "The Emergence of 'Kaidan-shū,'" 81-82.

and/or frightening became a part of popular social events such as village gatherings and funerary watches.⁶¹

One such event was called *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* (百物語怪談会).

These were gatherings where a group of people took turns telling one hundred *kaidan* tales in order to induce supernatural phenomena. According to Tachikawa Kiyoshi, a similar activity of telling frightening stories existed among warriors as a means to cultivate courage during the time of civil war in the 16th century. However, in the early Edo period, when death and terror of war were a thing of the past, the focus of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* was to narrate an interesting and entertaining story as opposed to cultivating courage. These popular gatherings were one of the key reasons behind the popularity of early *kaidan* collections.⁶²

The formation and popularity of *kaidan* literature as entertainment was also accelerated by both the advancement of printing technology and the education policies of the Tokugawa government. Even though the main target of the government was the samurai class, wealthy townsmen and upper-ranking commoners, such as the headman class of villages, showed a growing interest in learning.⁶³ Thus, commercial printing developed in Japan as early as the 17th century, due to the increased demand for books. For *kaidan*, this meant a new medium through which people could be entertained.

⁶¹ Ibid, 80.

⁶² Ibid 85-86.

⁶³ Noda, *Kinsei bungaku no haikai*, as noted in Reider, “The Emergence of ‘Kaidan-shū,’” 86. Commoners got educated in private schools called *terakoya* (寺子屋). While these schools were smaller and less formal than the fief schools that educated the samurai, in the late 18th century, *terakoya* education rapidly expanded. Even though formal learning was not universal among commoners, it was neither a rare occurrence. For more information, see Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan*.

3.2 Three prototypes of *Kaidan*

The seminal works were important in establishing the standards of *kaidan* tales in the form of prose fiction. These were *Otogi bōko* (御伽婢子, *Hand Puppets*, 1666) by Asai Ryōi (浅井了意, 1612-1691), *Inga monogatari* (因果物語, *Tales of Retribution*, 1660?) by Suzuki Shōsan (鈴木正三, 1579-1655), and *Otogi monogatari* (御伽物語, *Nursery Tales*, 1660) by Ogita Ansei (荻田女言爹, d.1699). Each of these works are based on different foundations, yet they all tell the tales of the strange and frightening in an entertaining manner.

Otogi bōko contains 68 stories that were adapted from Chinese fiction. It is considered to be the most influential work in the development of *kaidan* as a literary genre. Asai Ryōi had an engaging writing style that was rich in poetic form. He managed to successfully transport classic Chinese fiction into Japanese contexts and settings. His aim was to create tales of the supernatural that would surprise and excite the readers, women and children included.⁶⁴

Inga monogatari, on the other hand, is closer to earlier literary works containing *kaidan*-like tales, in that it has a Buddhist conceptual framework. The collection of the tales in the book is attributed to the Buddhist monk Suzuki Shōsan. *Inga monogatari* has two versions, one written in *hiragana* and the other in *katakana*. The *hiragana* version was published sometime after Shōsan's death and included pictures alongside the stories. The *katakana* version was published soon after without pictures, claiming in its preface that the text originally was not meant to be published. However, due to the distorted facts in the *hiragana* version, the *katakana* version had to be published in order to ensure that Shōsan's tales were told truthfully. The preface also stated that the aim of the tales was to lead people to

⁶⁴ Asai, "Otogi bōko," 1, as cited in Reider "The Emergence of 'Kaidan-shū,'" 88.

religious awakening.⁶⁵ Despite what was written in the *katakana* versions Preface, neither version was blatantly didactic in content, and they were received by the readers as entertainment and became a commercial success.⁶⁶

Otogi monogatari contains 68 tales that are a product of Japanese folklore. A lot of them include, in particular, creatures and animals that have strong ties with Japanese folklore, such as *tengu* (天狗, a type of mountain goblin), *oni* (鬼), foxes, snakes, and spiders. The work has its roots in the oral tradition of the aforementioned *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*. *Otogi monogatari* is considered to be the forerunner of *kaidan* books that became popular by emulating the *hyaku monogatari* structure.⁶⁷

Elements found in these three types of *kaidan* were not mutually exclusive. Later works that were influenced by these prototypes mixed and matched these elements in varying degrees.

3.3 The rising popularity of *Kaidan*

As the urban culture flourished, so did the *kaidan* literature. During the Genroku era (1688-1703), commoners who had the means, in particular city merchants, actively supported the popular art. *Kaidan* stories written in this era lean more towards the humorous than the mysterious.⁶⁸ While “[t]his type of *kaidan* was widely read and favored by the general population throughout the Edo period,” it was in 1749 that *kaidan* reached a high level of sophistication with the publication of the *Hanabusa zōshi* (英草紙, Tales of a Garland) by Tsuga Teishō (都賀庭鐘, 1718-1791).

Hanabusa zōshi was the first successful adaptation of Chinese stories from

⁶⁵ Reider “The Emergence of ‘Kaidan-shū,’” 85.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 89.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 89.

⁶⁸ A prime example of this era’s *kaidan* is Ihara Saikaku’s (井原西鶴, 1642-1693) *Saikaku shokoku banashi* (西鶴諸国噺, *Saikaku's Tales from Various Provinces*, 1985), a collection of various stories told like folk tales and arranged at random.

vernacular fiction into Japanese literature, and what drew the readers in was the exotic nuances that came from Chinese-style depictions of common concepts such as the underworld.⁶⁹

The Hōreki era (宝暦, 1751-1763) marked a new height in *kaidan*'s popularity. This popularity was partially triggered by the eighth *Shōgun*, Tokugawa Yoshimune (徳川吉宗, 1684-1751). He implemented the Kyōhō Reforms (享保の改革), with the aim of stabilizing and strengthening the military government. However, the reform caused a reaction from the people against the strictness with which they were implemented. When Yoshimune died in 1751, people who were fed up with the oppressive regime were “yearning for something strange, mysterious, or imaginative,” which they could use for an outlet.⁷⁰

It was in this atmosphere that Ueda Akinari published *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*) in 1776, a work which is considered to be the zenith of the *kaidan* genre. As an author who was aware of Japan's literary heritage, Akinari composed *Ugetsu Monogatari* by drawing from that heritage. He structured the nine stories within the book to resemble a traditional *nō* (能) performance.⁷¹ Besides *nō* theatre, Akinari made use of a variety of both vernacular and classical Chinese and Japanese literature sources.⁷² While *Ugetsu Monogatari* is the most sophisticated example of the *kaidan* genre, the interest in tales of the strange and frightening continued to reign well into the 19th century.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 90-92.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 92.

⁷¹ A single-day *nō* program follows the order of plays of gods, warriors, women, mad persons (or miscellaneous present plays), and demons. The stories in *Ugetsu Monogatari* are in the same order.

⁷² Ibid, 92-94.

3.4 Appeal of *Kaidan*

The fascination with the supernatural is a common occurrence throughout the world. As human beings, we are intrigued by and frightened of phenomena we cannot understand or logically explain. However, according to Miyata Noboru, the popularity of *kaidan* literature was intrinsically linked with the formation of urban centres. He argued that the mysterious and fantastic were the product of the imagination of the urban populace, who had a subconscious longing to associate with nature.⁷³ Yet, during the Edo period, even in Japan's urban centres, the reasons why people enjoyed *kaidan* tales would vary depending on that person's socio-economic position. However, even with keeping these differences in mind, it is possible to identify four fundamental reasons that can explain the general appeal of *kaidan*.

First of all, the rigid class system that constituted the Edo-period Japanese society caused people to find entertainment in unconventional ideas. Just like how carnivals in medieval Europe were an important part of European folk humour, where people found laughter in parodying the ordinary, *kaidan* in Japan provided an escape for those who felt trapped within the class system. Grotesque realism, a legacy of medieval European humour according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is a prevalent characteristic of *kaidan* tales. Grotesque realism focuses on the body in transformation, processes such as eating, defecation, sex, birth, and death. Instead of focusing on the idealized, abstract, or spiritual, it is concerned with the physical and communal world. High and low culture are mixed, hierarchies are mocked, and everyone becomes equal in the face of bodily functions and mortality. The grotesque

⁷³ Noboru, *Ikai to no koryu-toshi no minzoku kūkanron*, 56, as noted in Reider, "The Appeal of 'Kaidan,'" 279-280.

is not merely horrifying or disgusting. It is both destructive and regenerating, reflecting death and rebirth simultaneously.⁷⁴

For example, in a collection of *kaidan* entitled *Kii zōtanshū* (奇異雑談集, *Collection of Miscellaneous Strange Tales*, ca 1650s), there is a story that is a kind of parody of the deity of fortune, in which the usually plump and smiling deity of fortune is depicted as a man with a slender frame and without a nose nor eyes. Another story within the collection tells the story of a monk who transformed into a woman after his penis fell off, which can be considered as a step backwards towards attaining Buddhahood, since according to a belief in Japanese Buddhism, a woman could not attain Buddhahood unless she managed to be reborn as a man first.⁷⁵ Yet, along with the destruction, the story also includes symbols of regeneration. The monk gives birth to two children after changing into a woman.⁷⁶

Another term that Bakhtin writes about is the Romantic grotesque, where humour fades into the background and the horror takes a step forward. In romantic grotesque, everyday faces, items, places, and feelings become alienated. This alienation from the familiar frightens people.⁷⁷ In *kaidan* tales, ordinary structures, such as toilets, sheds, and storage rooms, and everyday places where different spaces overlap, such as crossroads, bridges, and riverbeds, are locations where mysterious situations tend to occur.

The second reason why *kaidan* tales were appealing that they provided convincing explanations for inexplicable events. For example, the experience of being disoriented in a familiar environment was often attributed to the mischief of

⁷⁴ Bakhtin, *Rablelais and his world*, 5-21.

⁷⁵ For more information on transforming women into Buddhas, see Blair, “Mothers of the Buddhas: The Sutra on Transforming Women into Buddhas (Bussetsu Tennyō Jōbutsu Kyō),” 263–293.

⁷⁶ Reider, “The Appeal of ‘Kaidan,’” 269-270.

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, *Rablelais and his world*, 39.

tricksters like *kitsune* (狐, fox) and *tanuki* (狸, raccoon dog). Extremely gifted people were also explained by having supernatural origins, like being born from the stupa of one's dead mother.⁷⁸

While supernatural phenomena explained the existence of these situations, the intellectuals of the time were also interested in unearthing the logic behind the supernatural. A common theory employed in explaining the supernatural phenomena happening in *kaidan* books was the theory of yin-yang. Instead of providing an overall explanation as to why supernatural phenomena occurred in the first place, the intellectuals used the theory of yin-yang to showcase how individual phenomena came to be. For example, in his book *Hyakumonogatari hyoban* (百物語評判, Explanations to the Strange and Weird Tales, 1686), in the case of ghosts, an intellectual of the 17th century, Yamaoka Genrin (山岡元隣, 1631-1672), wrote that the reason why someone died of illness was because their *ki* (気, energy) would decline and cause their *kata* (形, shape) to wither. According to him, if the cause of death was due to murder or the person died with a grudge, both their energy and shape would still be active. Death would deprive them of their shape, but their energy would remain on this plane of existence.⁷⁹

The theory of yin-yang would not satisfy today's readers, but in a society where belief in the supernatural was familiar, the explanations of the intellectuals were sufficient. With these explanations widely accepted, readers found the *kaidan* tales not only interesting but also partly realistic. The third reason for *kaidan*'s

⁷⁸ Reider, "The Appeal of 'Kaidan,'" 272-273.

For more information on the supernatural story of the birth of *nō* actor Hazama, see Reider, "The Appeal of 'Kaidan', Tales of the Strange," 273.

⁷⁹ For more information on the application of yin-yang theory on *kaidan*, see Reider, "The Appeal of 'Kaidan', Tales of the Strange," 273-274, and Reider, "The Emergence of 'Kaidan-shū' The Collection of Tales of the Strange and Mysterious in the Edo Period," 87.

popularity was the attraction of the exotic. As mentioned earlier, some *kaidan* tales were adapted from Chinese classical and vernacular literature. During the Edo period, in part due to the Tokugawa government adopting Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology and promoting education among samurai as mentioned above, Chinese books played a major role in the secular intellectual expansion of the society. At a time when people living in Japan could not travel to the mainland, China was unknown, profound, and remote. Like with everything that is unknown, things that came from China were shrouded in a sense of mystique. The authors of *kaidan* made use of the mysterious air surrounding China by adding objects with supernatural powers to their stories. These objects were imported from China, and by citing Chinese sources, while giving an example of supernatural phenomena.⁸⁰

The last major appeal of *kaidan* was a trait shared by *kabuki*. The Tokugawa government, to establish and maintain social order, at times strictly censored the subject matter of cultural productions. Books that treated current events or included any form of social criticism were prohibited by edicts proclaimed by the government. In a similar fashion to *kabuki*, one way of going around the ban was setting the stories in the past. The cover of the supernatural was another layer protecting the authors when they wanted to comment on political and/or social institutions.⁸¹

The widespread appeal of *kaidan* tales during the Edo period stemmed from their frightening elements, their ability to explain the inexplicable, and their exotic allure, particularly through Chinese influences. They also provided a subtle means of social and political critique while blending grotesque realism and romantic grotesque to balance horror and humour. Though less central to their popularity today, these

⁸⁰ Reider, "The Appeal of 'Kaidan,'" 274-275.

⁸¹ Ibid, 276-277.

factors made *kaidan* a compelling cultural phenomenon that reflected the anxieties, curiosities, and creativity of urban society in Edo Japan.

3.5 *Kaidan* and *Kabuki*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *kabuki* theatre was sensitive to the tastes of its audience and perceptive to the general atmosphere of the urban society. For that reason, it is not surprising to see *kabuki* being influenced by *kaidan* tales and literature.

Just like how *kaidan* elements existed in Japanese literature before the genre was established, they had a place in *kabuki* plays as well. For example, in the famous *jidaimono*, *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*, there is a *kitsune* whose parents were used to make the skin of a treasured drum that General Yoshitsune owns. The *kitsune*, missing his parents, turns into a human and disguises himself as one of Yoshitsune's retainers so he can follow the drum.⁸²

There are also figures from Buddhism that make an appearance in *kabuki* plays. Another famous *jidaimono*, *Narukami* (鳴る神, 1684), portrays the Shinto god of lightning, thunder, and storms as a saintly priest. When Narukami and the Emperor have a dispute regarding the creation of a new temple, Narukami binds the Dragon God of Rain behind a waterfall in his mountain hermitage. This causes a severe drought throughout the land. The imperial court sends Princess Taema to seduce Narukami and find a way to release the dragon. She succeeds in doing both and flees while Narukami is passed out from drinking. When he wakes up to rain and thunder, Narukami understands that he has been deceived, and his anger transforms him into the figure of Fudō Myōō (不動明王), a wrathful Buddhist deity that

⁸² Kabuki 21, "Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura."

vanquishes all evil and goes after Princess Taema.⁸³ Despite these examples, the term *kaidan* does not enter *kabuki*'s lexicon until the 19th century.

In the 19th century, the *kizewamono* genre pioneered by Tsuruya Nanboku IV expanded to include a sub-category called *kaidan mono* (怪談物). These plays focused on one specific figure in *kaidan* literature: ghosts. Ghosts in themselves were not a new figure in *kabuki* theatre.⁸⁴ However, *kaidan mono* presented them in their most frightening forms in order to horrify the audience. The audience, for their part, was thrilled to see these supernatural beings magically appear before them, in otherwise grittily naturalistic surroundings.⁸⁵

The earliest of the *kaidan-mono* was Tsuruya Nanboku IV's *Tenjiku Tokubei Ikoku-Banashi* (天竺徳兵衛刻隼, *The Tale of Tokubei from India*, 1804). The ghost in the play was Tokubei's father, who appeared before him in order to guide him in his quest to overthrow Japan. The play was produced as part of the usually small-scale summer productions. It reached a success level that was unexpected from a play that was produced during the slow season. The success of *Tenjiku Tokubei Ikoku-Banashi* led to *kaidan mono* becoming a regular feature of summer productions. Although the ghost figure in this work was used to create wonder more so than horror, it still served as a basis that Nanboku could work upon to create his later vengeful ghosts, two of which will make an appearance in the later chapters as we move onto *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*.⁸⁶

That being said, the creation of the *kaidan mono* subcategory did not diminish the influence of other *kaidan* stories on the plays. Stories adapted from Chinese

⁸³ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 93-164.

⁸⁴ In *jidaimono*, ghosts of the past were summoned so their knowledge and/or experiences could be passed to the present. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 24.

⁸⁵ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

fiction and more secularized versions of Buddhist tales, focusing more on the story rather than the moral teaching, still found their way into new plays. As we will see, in *Sakurahime* especially, the Buddhist subtext will play an essential role in shaping Princess Sakura's character.



CHAPTER 4

TSURUYA NANBOKU IV AND HIS HEROINES

Before diving headfirst into the summaries of *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*, it is essential to know more about the person behind their creation. Only then can we get a better picture of where *Sakurahime*'s Princess Sakura and *Yotsuya Kaidan*'s Oiwa fit in the larger scheme of his productions.

4.1 Tsuruya Nanboku IV

Tsuruya Nanboku IV (1755-1829) was a prolific playwright who wrote many successful *jidaimono*, *sewamono*, and *shosagoto* plays. He was born as Ebiya Katsujirō (海老屋勝次郎) in 1755.⁸⁷ He inherited the name Tsuruya Nanboku at the age of 57. Officially, his family belonged to the merchant class, as his family ran a dyeing business. However, their actual status was closer to that of the city's outcasts.⁸⁸ When he was 20, he left the family business to his brother and set out to become a playwright. Four years later, he married into the Tsuruya family. This enabled him to inherit the pen name Tsuruya Nanboku in 1811, when he was working as the *tatesakusha* (立作者, head playwright) of the Ichimuraza.⁸⁹

He managed to start working at the licensed theatres and their subsidiaries as soon as he set out and officially joined one after only five years. However, for the first two or so decades, his position as a playwright was precarious due to the financial difficulties that continuously plagued the theatres from the 1790s onward. Thus, early in his career, like many other theatre employees, he had to supplement

⁸⁷ Kabuki 21, "Tsuruya Nanboku IV."

⁸⁸ Chan, "The Divine Victim," 13.

⁸⁹ Kabuki 21, "Tsuruya Nanboku IV."

his income by participating in regional plays, as well as in shows known as *misemono* (見世物, tent shows).⁹⁰ *Misemono* was in a much lower rank than kabuki when it came to the hierarchy of performance genres. However, they were just as popular in the 19th century, especially with the lower stratum of society. While they showcased all kinds of unusual spectacles and tricks, they were cheap to produce and cheap to attend.⁹¹

Nanboku brought his experience from creating *misemono* onto the *kabuki* stage. He innovated, not only the stage effects which he utilized to surprise and startle his audience, but also the content of the plays and their presentation. Nanboku was the playwright who led to the coinage of the term *kizawamono* when he began setting the events of his contemporary plays in spaces that pulsed with the energies of the lower classes.⁹² He was also one of the first playwrights to begin mixing different *sekai* within a single play. Even though he mostly still adhered to the structure of historical first part, and the contemporary second part in his all-day plays, unlike the usual system of numbering the acts separately for the first and the second parts,⁹³ Nanboku made no formal distinction between history and contemporary, and numbered acts consecutively from beginning to end.⁹⁴

When he was promoted to the position of chief playwright, he took a bold step and started presenting his new *kizawamono* plays as summer productions. The sixth and seventh months, when the summer productions took place, was usually the time star actors took a long vacation. However, probably at first due to financial

⁹⁰ The head stage-set builder Hasegawa Kanbei XI (1781–1841), with whom Nanboku worked on the special effects in *Yotsuya kaidan*, is also known to have been involved in creating tent shows, as was the wig maker Tomokurō, who is mentioned in Nanboku's plays and appears in backstage illustrations with Nanboku.

⁹¹ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 103-104.

⁹² The plazas off Ryōgoku Bridge (両国橋), where so many of the tent shows took place, were also one of Nanboku's preferred settings. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 105.

⁹³ For more information, see Brandon, *Kabuki*, 30.

⁹⁴ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 241.

difficulties, some actors were willing to stay and work. Summer productions were known for their water effects,⁹⁵ and Nanboku collaborated with Onoe Matsusuke I (尾上松助, 1744-1815) to incorporate them into his plays.⁹⁶ The summer productions were also a very opportune time to stage *kaidan mono*, because the traditional *Obon* festival, where people honoured the spirits of their ancestors, was celebrated in July. By drawing inspiration from the social decadence of the Kasei period, Nanboku created plays that satisfied the audiences with a unique blend of humour, wonder, and horror.⁹⁷

The first play that established him as the pre-eminent playwright of his generation was also his first *kaidan mono*: *The Tale of Tokubei from India* (1804). The play drew from the Tokubei *sekai*, which told the adventures of the Edo merchant mariner Takamatsu Tokubei. In the original production, Tokubei was played by Onoe Matsusuke I. The play showcased visually stunning *keren* (外連, stage tricks and special effects)⁹⁸ and introduced the dramatic concept of supernatural chaos to the audiences. As mentioned earlier, the success of this play initiated the boom of *kaidan mono* produced during the 19th century.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ According to Furuido Hideo, *hayagawari* involving water was a major highlight and was popular, especially during the first half of the 19th century. Noted in “Ranjukuki no kabuki,” 169-188 as cited in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 296-297.

For a comprehensive discussion of the use of water on the *kabuki* stage, see Leiter, *Frozen Moment*, 86-89.

⁹⁶ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 100-101.

Matsusuke developed a technique where he would dive into a big tank of water on stage, and almost immediately reappear from somewhere completely different, playing another character in a different set of clothes and without a drop of water in sight. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 105. He was also the person who developed specific techniques for performing ghost roles while acting in Nanboku's plays. This technique became the family art (*ie no gei*, 家の芸) of the *Otowa* (音羽屋) guild.

⁹⁷ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 34.

⁹⁸ Water tricks and *hayagawari* are included in *keren*. Aside from Matsuke's water *hayagawari*, the most impressive *keren* in *The Tale of Tokubei* is *yatai kuzushi* (屋台崩し), which allowed the collapse of an entire palace right before the audience's eyes. For more information, see Leiter, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, 178

⁹⁹ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 34-36.

Another important play by Nanboku is *Osome Hisamatsu Ukina no Yomiuri* (於染久松色讀販, *The Scandalous Love of Osome and Hisamatsu*, 1813).¹⁰⁰ For this play, Nanboku used the *sekai* of Osome and Hisamatsu, but instead of the tragic love story that ended with the lovers committing double suicide (心中, *shinjū*), Nanboku transformed the play into a household disturbance plot by changing the male lead Hisamatsu from simply an apprentice in a merchant's household to a samurai's son who had become an apprentice in order to find a treasured sword that had been stolen from his clan. The play ends in a congratulatory note, where Hisamatsu regains possession of the sword and the lovers manage to unite.¹⁰¹ The alternate title of the play was *The Seven Roles of Osome* (於染の七役, *Osome no Nanayaku*), because the main actor Iwai Hanshirō V (岩井半四郎, 1776–1847) played seven different roles, including both Osome and Hisamatsu, and changed between them more than 30 times.

Aside from Osome and Hisamatsu, there is another important couple in the play: Dote no Oroku and her husband Kimon no Kihei (the person who, upon his master's orders, stole the sword but pawned it afterwards when he eloped with Oroku).¹⁰² They represent the lower class of Edo's society. Especially, Dote no Oroku is special because she is the first well-known example of the *akuba* (悪婆)

¹⁰⁰ The play was popular not only in Edo but also in Osaka. Its script was first published in 1831, with pictures by the publisher Kawachiya Tasuke 河内屋太助 in Ōsaka (Yamashita, 2022, p. 119). The play continues to be performed regularly even today in Japan.

¹⁰¹ For more information about *The Scandalous Love of Osome and Hisamatsu*'s plot, see Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 62-89.

¹⁰² The part of the plot involving Oroku and Kihei was based on a popular Chinese story, in the book *Jingu qiguan* (今古奇觀, Japanese: *Kinko kikan*, *Mysterious Spectacles Today and in the Past*). It was first translated into Japanese by Confucian scholar Sawada Issai (沢田一斎) in 1758, for his book *Shōsetsu suigen* (小説粹言, *Novels with Elegant Words*). The plot line was reworked many times, including in Kyokutei Bakin's (曲亭馬琴) 1807 novel *Sono no yuki* (園の雪, *Snow in the Garden*). Noted in Yamashita, "Evil Women of the Lower Classes," 118.

role type.¹⁰³ While the kanji used for this word literally translates as “evil old woman,” these figures who are characteristic of late Edo-period kabuki are actually attractive young to middle-aged women. Unlike earlier evil female characters,¹⁰⁴ *akuba* are full-fledged heroines, who commit evil deeds not because of malicious intent but because the situation necessitates it. Their usual crime was extortion, and the highlight of the *akuba* play was known as the *yusuriba* (強請場, extortion scene) where they delivered a bravado speech of defiance, called a *tsurane* (連ね).¹⁰⁵

Last but not least, *Kesa Kakematsu Narita no Riken* (法懸松成田利剣, *A Surplice-Hanging Pine and the Sharp Sword of Narita*, 1823) was another summertime *kaidan mono* which includes one of the most popular dances in classical the Japanese dance repertoire: the transformation of Kasane (かさね). The main roles of Yoemon and Kasane were respectively played by Ichikawa Danjūrō VII (市川團十郎, 1791–1859) and Onoe Kikugorō III (尾上菊五郎, 1784–1849). The original legend of Kasane is a tale of the exorcism of a vengeful ghost by a Buddhist priest. In the original story, a farmer named Yoemon, who had several wives and children, murders his one-eyed son, Suke. However, once murdered, Suke’s deformities get repeated, this time in one of Yoemon’s daughters, Kasane, signing her death warrant. After being brutally murdered by Yoemon, Kasane’s vengeful

¹⁰³ While Oroku was originally played by Iwai Hanshirō V, it was actually his father, Hanshirō IV (1747–1800), who invented the *akuba* role. However, the role type is closely linked to Hanshirō V, because it was his performance in *Osome and Hisamatsu* that standardized the conventions of both the *akuba* and the extortion scene.

¹⁰⁴ For more on evil female characters of *kabuki*, see Leiter’s “From Gay to Gei.”

¹⁰⁵ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 66.

Tsurane are long monologues that were primarily associated with *aragoto* entries on the *hanamichi*, where the hero would proudly describe his background, purpose, and virtues. Noted in Leiter, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, 410.

ghost takes possession of Kikui, Yoemon's daughter by his fifth wife, before she gets exorcised by a Buddhist priest, Yūten Shōnin.¹⁰⁶

In Nanboku's play, Kasane is an elegant lady-in-waiting in a samurai mansion. She falls in love with a samurai named Yoemon. However, she does not know that Yoemon is actually having an affair with her mother, Kiku. She also does not know that Kiku and Yoemon killed Kiku's husband Suke, upon getting found out by him. Suke's murder is not pretty. He gets stabbed in the leg, gets one of his eyes gouged. When Suke comes back as a vengeful ghost, he possesses Kasane and transfers his physical deformations onto her. While this transformation is part of the *kaidan* aspect of the play, it also serves as a physical representation of Kasane's feelings being betrayed by her lover and mother.¹⁰⁷

The transformation dance part of the play got a separate title, *Iro Moyō Chotto Karimame* (色彩間苺豆, Sensual Colours, Going to Cut Beans), but it continued to be known popularly as *Kasane*. Even though this dance portion of the play was well received by the audiences according to *kabuki* related printed materials of the time, it was revived only once during the 19th century. *Kasane* got its place as an important *shosagoto* (dance-drama) in the *kabuki* repertoire when it was revived by the Kabukiza (歌舞伎座) in 1920.¹⁰⁸

We can think of these plays as a road map leading us to *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*. Before moving on to a comparison of Princess Sakura and Oiwa in

¹⁰⁶ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 120.

Plays created as adaptations of this tale are known as *Kasane mono* (累物). Meiboku Sendai Hagi (伽羅先代萩, *The Precious Incense and Autumn Flowers of Sendai*, 1777) is one of the most well-known plays incorporating this tale.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 121.

¹⁰⁸ Kabuki 21, "Iro Moyō Chotto Karimame."

the next chapter, it is important to first outline the plots of the two plays¹⁰⁹ and understand how Nanboku kept experimenting with similar tropes until he perfected them to suit the tastes of his audience.

4.2 *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* & Princess Sakura

Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō (*The Scarlet Princess of Edo*) premiered in 1817 at the Kawarasaki-za. It was the main play of that day's program and followed the *jidai-sewamono* structure. Though the play was very successful during its initial run, only acts five and six, which constituted the contemporary part of the play and centred on the scoundrel Tsurigane Gonsuke, were revived a few times until the end of the Edo period.¹¹⁰ There are two known revivals before WWII in 1927 and 1930, and a third one in November 1959 at the Kabuki-za (歌舞伎座), which was supervised by the writer Mishima Yukio (三島由紀夫). With a script written by the Kabuki scholar Gunji Masakatsu (郡司正勝), the play was revived for the fourth time in March 1967 at the National Theatre (国立劇場, Kokuritsu Gekijō). At the time, this performance of *Sakurahime* became the biggest success of the National Theatre and determined the final form of the play.¹¹¹

The play opens with a short prologue. Priest Seigen and a young male acolyte named Shiragiku approach the edge of a cliff at E-no-shima (江の島). Seigen is holding the lower part of a small incense container bearing Shiragiku's name, and Shiragiku is holding the lid of the container bearing Seigen's name. They are there to

¹⁰⁹ Materials used to summaries *Sakurahime*: James R. Brandon's translation of *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* in *Kabuki: Five Classic Plays*, 239-349; Materials used to summaries *Yotsuya Kaidan*: Paul B. Kennelly's partial translation of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* in Brandon & Leiter's *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol 2, *Villainy and Vengeance*, 138-163, Satoko Shimizaki's summaries of the plays in "The Ghost of Oiwa in Actor Prints," 78-79, and *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 116-118.

¹¹⁰ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 241-242.

¹¹¹ Kabuki 21, "Sakura Hime."

commit a lovers' suicide. Before long, Shiragiku leaps into the water with a final prayer that he will be reborn as a woman in his next life so that he and Seigen can legally be together. Seigen goes to follow Shiragiku, but faced with the height of the cliff, he suddenly gets seized by a fear of death. At the end, Seigen fails to uphold his promise to Shiragiku and continues living.

After the prologue, 17 years pass, and Seigen is now the Chief Abbot of the Kiyomizu Temple (清水). The House of Yoshida (吉田司家) is on the brink of collapse. Its head and heir apparent are murdered. The Miyakodori (都鳥) scroll given to them by the Emperor is missing, and the only surviving brother, Prince Matsukawa, is on the run because he is accused of being a traitor. Loyal retainers Shichirō and Gonsuke try to protect their master and find the scroll to clear his name. Meanwhile, the only daughter of the family, the 17-years-old Princess Sakura, is living in a hermitage and is determined to become a nun.

Our main villains are Lord Akugorō, the lowlife Gonsuke, aka Shinobu Sōta. Lord Akugorō is a retainer who wants to become the head of the Yoshida family. However, he is not in the line of succession. That is why he comes up with a plan that would help him get rid of all his competitors. He hires Gonsuke to both kill Sakura's father and older brother and steal the Miyakodori scroll from their house. Yet the scroll is not the only thing he steals the night he breaks into the Yoshida mansion. That night, Gonsuke stumbles upon Princess Sakura's bed chamber and only leaves when the day begins to dawn. Sakura never sees the face of her "lover", but she gets a glimpse of his tattoo. In order to remember her lover and their night of passion, Sakura gets an identical tattoo. She also moves into a hermitage to give birth to Gonsuke's child. She leaves the child in Nagaura's, one of her ladies-in-waiting,

care. After the whole ordeal, not knowing if she will ever be able to meet her lover again, she decides to become a nun.

Princess Sakura appears before Reverend Seigen to present her petition. When listing her reasons for wanting to become a nun, she mentions that her left hand has been clenched shut since the day she was born, and this defect causes her to shy away from society. We learn that she was actually betrothed to Lord Akugorō, but Akugorō refused to marry her because of her hand. Before approving her petition, Seigen says a prayer for Sakura that can break the effects of karma. As soon as he finishes the prayer, Sakura's fist unclenches, and from her palm falls the lid of an incense container. Sakura, now free from her defect, still insists on her determined path. Seigen, realising that Sakura is his young lover Shiragiku's reincarnation, believes his meeting with Sakura to be a cosmic sign, and approves of her petition.

While Sakura waits for her induction, Lord Akugorō learns that Sakura's affliction has been cured and now wants to marry her. He writes a love letter, but does not know how to get it to her in time. First, he asks Nagaura, who remained behind, to talk to the Kiyomizu Temple's second in command, and her reluctant lover Zangetsu. However, she refuses to take the letter to her mistress and leaves. Just then, Gonsuke strolls in. He still has the Miyakodori scroll, since he has not received his payment from Akugorō for stealing it. Gonsuke tells Akugorō he can deliver the letter for some additional payment.

Gonsuke arrives at the hermitage a short time before Sakura's induction. At first, Sakura refuses to take the letter and tries to send Gonsuke away. However, she gets a glimpse of his tattoo when he is busy telling an entertaining ghost story to her servants. She immediately asks everyone but Gonsuke to leave. It turns out Gonsuke was also unaware of the identity of the woman he slept with when he broke into the

Yoshida mansion. They begin recalling their night together and end up having sex once again. When they are done, Sakura expresses her wishes to be lovers with Gonsuke in every life they may live, though she does not mention his name. Not a moment too soon, she gets caught by Zangetsu and Akugorō. However, Gonsuke manages to flee. Sakura refuses to name her lover when Zangetsu finds the incense lid with Seigen's name on it, and uses the opportunity to accuse Seigen of leading Sakura astray. No matter the protests of Sakura's maids or Seigen's disciples, they get banished by Akugorō.

Seigen and Sakura are led to the Inase River, where they will receive their punishment in public and will be left to live among the outcasts. Just before their punishment starts, Nagaura and a middle-aged peasant woman carrying Princess Sakura's baby reach them and thrust the crying baby into Sakura's arms, saying they cannot look after a child without receiving money for it first. Afterwards, Seigen gets whipped and Sakura gets beaten by Akugorō's right-hand man in the Yoshida clan, until, Shichirō, a loyal samurai of the house intervenes. When Seigen and Sakura are left on their own on the river, Seigen pleads with Princess Sakura to become his wife. However, the more Sakura refuses due to her love for Gonsuke, the more frantic Seigen becomes. Just as Seigen tries to force himself on Sakura, Akugorō arrives and pushes Seigen away. With Akugorō's arrival, Sakura gets caught in the hail while fleeing from the rain. Akugorō snatches the baby from Sakura and threatens to kill it unless Sakura agrees to marry him. While Sakura tries to save her baby, Akugorō tries to drag Sakura away, and Seigen tries to get Akugorō to release Sakura. Akugorō runs off with the baby when Shichirō returns. Sakura tries to go after her baby, but Seigen clings to her. As they struggle, Akugorō's right-hand man comes back. In his attempt to separate Sakura and Seigen, to bring Sakura to Akugorō, he

forces Seigen to the edge of the riverbank, where Seigen loses his balance and falls into the river. While Sakura manages to get away, in another part of the river, Akugorō tries to fight off Shichirō. While fighting, they get forced to put the child down, and later on, they leave him there when Shichirō chases after Akugorō. Ironically, the baby is then found by Seigen, who manages to drag himself out of the river. Seigen takes the baby in hopes that it can lead him to Princess Sakura.

After these events, there is a filler act in the play. We see two former retainers of the Yoshida clan sacrifice a brother and a daughter to protect Prince Matsukawa and Princess Sakura, who are declared to be fugitives. This act is followed by a short scene, where Seigen and Sakura's paths nearly cross on a stormy night. However, fate keeps them apart.

Meanwhile, Zangetsu finds the tables turned on him when his love affair with Nagaura gets uncovered, and they too get banished. Now, Zangetsu is in charge of a dilapidated hermitage outside of Edo with a small temple, and Nagaura is now his wife bound by law. Somehow, their paths have crossed with Seigen, who is now very ill but still continues to care for Sakura's baby. They are not happy to be looking after Seigen and the baby. They manage to give the baby away, and soon after, try to poison Seigen. Seigen refuses to drink the poison, and in the scruffle that follows, the poison spills on his face, disfiguring the left side of his face. In the end, they manage to strangle and beat him. Afterwards, believing him dead, Zangetsu sends Nagaura to fetch Gonsuke, who works as a gravedigger.

As Gonsuke starts to dig the grave, a slave-trader comes to the hermitage with a young woman, who turns out to be Sakura, following behind. The slave-trader leaves Sakura there while he goes off to strike a deal for her at Kozukappara, an unlicensed and illegal brothel district at the edge of Edo. When Zangetsu realises the

young lady is in fact Princess Sakura, he tries to force himself on her, only to get stopped by Nagaura and Gonsuke. Gonsuke threatens to chop Zangetsu's head off for daring to lay hands on his "wife," as proved by the matching tattoos. Ultimately, Gonsuke spares Zangetsu's life, but in exchange for all Zangetsu and Nagaura's worldly possessions, including the hermitage, their house, and the clothes on their backs.

Gonsuke turns to Sakura and tells her that if she wants to stay with him, she has to learn to live as an outcast and manage to earn her keep. He decides to check her into a whorehouse so she can do both. He leaves Sakura in the hermitage and goes to find the slave-trader. While he is gone, Seigen regains consciousness. He is beaten and frail, but upon hearing Sakura's voice, he gets reinvigorated. In an attempt to convince her to allow his embrace, Seigen tells her about the baby and her being the reincarnation of Shiragiku. When she still refuses him, he tries to kill her but ends up dying instead by falling onto the upturned blade that gets embedded in his throat. Gonsuke returns soon after and starts leading Sakura to the brothel district. Just as they are leaving, Sakura sees Seigen's ghost, and her body gets wrenched by an invisible force. When Gonsuke turns back to look at her, she sees that the left side of Gonsuke's face bears the same disfiguration as Seigen's and understands that Seigen's vengeful ghost is now tied to her.

Some time passes, and now Gonsuke is a reputable householder in the Yamanoshuku village, thanks to the temple and house he confiscated from Zangetsu. He is also still in possession of the Miyakodori scroll. One night, he is late to join some councilmen and the village's night watchman when they are making their nightly rounds. When he finally arrives, it is to see them gathered around an abandoned baby that looks to be around two years old. Gonsuke proposes to take the

baby, since he does not have a son, if the ward agrees to pay him in cash to cover some of the cost of raising the boy. The watchman accepts the offer and takes the baby with him for his wife to nurse until the morning.

The watchman and councilmen depart, leaving Gonsuke alone. As he makes to go, Akugorō finds him and demands that he hand the Miyakodori scroll over. Gonsuke refuses to do so without getting his payment first. Akugorō attacks Gonsuke and ends up getting slain by him in the ensuing fight.

The next morning, a moneylender keeps knocking on Gonsuke's door. With him are Sentarō, who is actually the loyal Yoshida retainer Shichirō, and his wife Ojū, who was the person Zangetsu and Nagaura gave Sakura's baby to; however, the baby is nowhere in sight. Sentarō owes money to the moneylender, and the moneylender demands Ojū as compensation because the payment is late. They are at Gonsuke's house because, as Sentarō's landowner, he is responsible for settling such disputes. Gonsuke gets rid of the moneylender, claiming that he is ridiculous to ask for Sentarō's wife as collateral on a three-day loan.

Before Sentarō and Ojū take their leave, the night watchman comes with the baby and the money. Sentarō and Ojū recognize the baby they have been taking care of, but had to abandon because of their financial situation. It turns out Gonsuke also knew the baby was "theirs." He demands that Sentarō pay him 20 ryō of gold to give back the baby.¹¹² He knows such an amount cannot be collected in a short amount of time by a commoner, so he makes Ojū stay with him to nurse the baby and serve as insurance.

As Sentarō departs in a rage, the slave-trader brings Princess Sakura back to Gonsuke's house. Sakura now acts more like an outcast, but her speech pattern

¹¹² 20 ryō is quite a sum. Gonsuke received three and a half ryō for agreeing to take the baby. He was asking for 2000 ryō to give the Miyakodori scroll to Akugorō.

switches between the vulgar idioms of a prostitute and her old, elegant court speech. It turns out that even though Sakura was at first popular among clients due to her looks and manners, Seigen's ghost intervened whenever she was to lie with a man. She cannot work at a brothel under these conditions; however, she still has a contract to fulfil. Gonsuke, not having the money he got for checking Sakura in, which is ironically 20 ryō, makes Ojū go in Sakura's stead, saying her husband can buy her out when he comes back with the 20 ryō. Ojū, who recognizes Princess Sakura, goes willingly with the knowledge that she is helping out her Princess.

Sakura's change in attitude is clear in her treatment of the child Ojū leaves behind. Not knowing the baby is hers, she is dismissive of him. His crying is not something she wants to soothe, but is simply an annoyance. However, her nurturing self occasionally shows itself when she recalls the baby she was parted from.

That night, Gonsuke goes out drinking with the other council members. While he is out, Seigen's ghost appears before Sakura. However, Sakura is no longer afraid of Seigen's ghost. Fed up as she is, she tries to get rid of him. Before finally disappearing, Seigen communicates to Sakura that the baby is actually hers. Sakura is overjoyed to be united with her baby and remorseful for not recognizing him sooner.

As she cradles the baby to her chest, Gonsuke enters the house, drunk. Sakura tries to talk to him, but in his inebriated condition, he keeps blubbering nonsense. As he staggers around, a letter falls from his breast that is addressed to Matsui Gengo, Akugorō's former right-hand man, from Shinobu Sōta. This is how we and Sakura learn that Gonsuke was actually a former samurai in the name of Shinobu Sōta. Gonsuke is not done drinking, and after learning of Gonsuke's samurai background and reading the letter, Sakura encourages him to drink more. Gonsuke keeps on

babbling and not only ends up showing the Miyakodori scroll to Sakura, but he also confesses to murdering her father and brother as well. She keeps forcing him to drink until he passes out cold. After making sure he is not going to wake up, she removes the scroll from inside his kimono and puts it safely away. She unsheathes Gonsuke's old sword and apologizes to her son before first killing him and then Gonsuke.

The last scene of the play is set at the Asakusa Kannon Shrine in Edo on the day of the Three Shrines Festival. The news of Sakura murdering Gonsuke has spread, and the constables are after her. A loyal retainer of the Yoshida house, disguised as Sakura, is running away from them. Just as he is surrounded, he reveals his real identity and starts fighting off the constables. He is soon joined by Shichirō, and we learn through them that the Princess and the Miyakodori scroll are hidden in a large hamper that the retainer was carrying on his back. Their plan is to go together to the mansion and restore the House of Yoshida. The constables demand that they surrender the murderess Princess Sakura, and the play ends with the declaration of the loyal retainers that they shall go on with their plan no matter what.

4.3 *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* & *Oiwa*

Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan (東海道四谷怪談, *The Ghost Stories at Yotsuya on the Tōkaidō*) premiered in 1825 at the Nakamura-za as a summer production. It was staged as a dual production with the aforementioned *Kanadehon Chūshingura* (*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*), the very popular *katakiuchimono* (敵討物, revenge play). *Chūshingura* functioned as the *jidaimono* part of the program, while *Yotsuya Kaidan*, using the *sekai* of *Chūshingura*, represented the *sewamono* section.¹¹³ In the first playbill announcing *Yotsuya Kaidan*, it was written that the two plays in the dual

¹¹³ Brandon & Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, vol. 3, *Darkness and Desire*, 136.

production would be divided neatly into two alternating parts. However, the follow-up street playbill suggests that all five acts of *Yotsuya Kaidan*, along with the end of *Chūshingura*, were not performed until more than a month after the play's premiere. After its initial production, the play was revived around 24 times in four decades.¹¹⁴

Yotsuya Kaidan begins after the collapse of Lord Enya's house after he was forced to commit seppuku. His retainers have been dispersed, and a number of them are hiding in the seedy areas of Edo with their wives. Oiwa is the daughter of Yotsuya Samon and the wife of Tamiya Iemon, two of Enya's former retainers. Samon has another daughter, Osode, who is married to yet another former retainer, Satō Yomoshichi. Oiwa is estranged from her husband at her father's wishes, for Samon suspects Iemon has stolen money from the Enya house. Oiwa has been secretly working as a street prostitute in order to help her father, who, out of poverty, has been reduced to a vulgar beggar, and while Osode works at a toothpick store, she also takes customers at night to get by.

One night, Naosuke, a former low-ranking samurai of the Enya house who now works as a medicine peddler, goes to a venue for prostitution to buy Osode for the night. However, Osode's husband, Yomoshichi, who has been in hiding, turns up and snatches Osode away before Naosuke can be with her. Driven by his lust for Osode, Naosuke decides to get rid of Yomoshichi. Naosuke follows Yomoshichi out into the night, but instead of Yomoshichi, he ends up murdering Okuda Shōzaburō, who had changed clothes with Yomoshichi because of a mission regarding the revenge plot of Enya's loyal retainers. Meanwhile, in the very same area, Iemon confronts his father-in-law about his meddling in his marriage with Oiwa. When Samon refuses Iemon's demand to be reunited with his daughter and accuses Iemon

¹¹⁴ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 1.

of theft, Iemon murders Samon. After their simultaneous murders, Iemon and Naosuke stumble upon each other and conspire together to mislead Oiwa and Osode to get what they want. They proceed to peel off the faces of the bodies to make them unrecognizable. When they hear Oiwa and Osode come along the path, they conceal themselves behind the trees. Oiwa and Osode come across the mutilated bodies and recognize the clothing as Yomoshichi's and Samon's. While the sisters are grieving, Iemon and Naosuke return and promise to avenge Yomoshichi and Samon. However, they can only do so if they are legally bound to Oiwa and Osode, as their husbands. Not knowing they are tying themselves to the guilty parties, Oiwa and Osode agree to go with Iemon and Naosuke.

Time passes, and Oiwa gives birth to a baby boy. However, she is bedridden due to some type of post-partum sickness, and Iemon, who is impatient to restore his rank and stipend one way or another, treats her cruelly. Meanwhile, their neighbour Itō Kihei, a retainer of Enya's former enemy Kō no Moronao, wants Iemon to marry his granddaughter Oume. Kihei invites Iemon to his house and sends a servant to deliver a potent poison intended to disfigure Oiwa, disguised as a packet of medicine. Iemon learns of Kihei's plan and sees it as an opportunity to both get rid of Oiwa and regain his former status. He agrees to marry Oume that same night in exchange for a generous sum of money and a position in Kō no Moronao's service. He also takes Kihei's plan a step further, and to ensure he can divorce Oiwa, hires the masseur Ama Takuetsu to take advantage of, so he can claim adultery. While this is happening, Oiwa takes the "medicine," which causes a horrendous bulge to develop above her right eye. However, she remains unaware of her deformation until Takuetsu, who does not have the heart to force himself on her, gives her a mirror and confesses everything.

Upon learning the plot devised against her with the help of her husband, Oiwa decides to confront Kihei. While getting ready, she unwittingly disfigures herself further. She blackens her teeth but smears the dye around the corners of her mouth. She then combs her hair, but the more she combs, bigger clumps of bloody hair fall to expose more of the bulge above her eye. Though before she can get to Kihei's house, as frail as she is, she stumbles and accidentally slits her throat on a sword stuck in a post. As she dies, she vows to return as a vengeful ghost.

When Iemon returns to find Oiwa dead, he decides to blame her death on his servant Kōhei, whom Iemon had previously locked up in the closet for stealing a precious medicine from him in order to cure his sick master, the former Enya retainer Oshioda Matanojō. He accuses Oiwa and Kōhei of being lovers and murders Kōhei. In order to display the alleged adultery, he nails the bodies of Oiwa and Kōhei to opposite sides of a raindoor (戸板, *toita*) that he has his friends throw it into the Onbō canal.

Both Oiwa and Kōhei end up coming back as ghosts, and their first action is to possess Iemon to make him murder his newly wedded wife Oume and her grandfather Kihei. However, Oiwa's revenge extends not only to those who were directly responsible for her death, but also to their relatives. Two such figures are Kihei's wife Oyumi and her faithful servant Omaki. They are sitting near the Onbō Canal graveyard. After the murder of her husband and granddaughter, Oyumi has been reduced to a shadow of herself. She is broken and grieving, and the only thing that keeps her going is her obsession with taking revenge on Iemon. While Omaki tries to comfort her, Oyumi clings to a red brocade amulet that once belonged to Oume, praying in vain for peace and justice. Suddenly, a rat appears and snatches the amulet from Oyumi's hands. While they try to fend off the animal, Omaki slips and

falls into the water, and Oyumi collapses beside the canal, her spirit seemingly extinguished.

Shortly after, Naosuke arrives, hoping to catch eels from the canal, but discovers something strange in the water. He fishes out a lock of hair and a beautiful tortoiseshell comb that once belonged to Oiwa. At the same time, Iemon appears and sets his own fishing line. Just as he settles, his mother, Okuma, arrives and tells him about a plan she came up with so he can escape the law, since he is wanted for the murder of Oiwa, Kihei, and Oume. She suggests erecting a grave tablet with Iemon's name to throw off any pursuers. She also mentions a letter that she has been given by Lord Moronao when she retired as their cook. Lord Moronao has told her that the letter would guarantee his help if she ever needed it. She hands Iemon the letter and tells him to use it to gain employment at the Moronao clan. While they discuss their plan and erect the grave tablet, Naosuke, unseen, watches and listens, already scheming for his own benefit.

After Iemon's mother departs, Naosuke confronts him, revealing that he is married to Osode, Oiwa's sister, and demands Iemon's letter of recommendation to Lord Moronao if he does not want Naosuke to kill him for murdering Osode's sister. Iemon resists, but their tension is interrupted by movement from Iemon's fishing line. While they try to reel in the fish, they dislodge the fake grave tablet and send it down where Oyumi lies. Oyumi awakens when the fake grave tablet lands. Seeing Iemon's name carved into it, she rejoices, believing he has finally died. She calls out to Naosuke and Iemon, hoping for confirmation. In a desperate ploy, Iemon whispers to Naosuke to lie. Naosuke stumbles through his lie, claiming that today marks the forty-ninth day since Iemon's death. Oyumi starts weeping out of grief and delight. While she is distracted, Iemon creeps down behind her. As she speaks of her long-

held hatred and her desire for revenge, he suddenly kicks her into the canal. She disappears beneath the surface without a trace. Naosuke departs shortly after.

Still reeling from the encounter, Iemon tries to return to fishing, but he gets confronted again, this time by Chōbei, a former accomplice turned blackmailer, who threatens to turn Iemon in unless he receives payment. Desperate, Iemon gives him the precious letter that was to ensure his future. Chōbei smugly accepts it and departs.

After desolately watching Chōbei leave, Iemon collects his stuff and goes to leave, but gets drawn back to the embankment where he spots the raindoor bearing the corpses of Oiwa and Kohei. He uses his fishing pole to draw it to shore. When he peels back the covering, he is faced with the horrifying sight of Oiwa's corpse. She is clutching Oume's amulet. Her lifeless body moves subtly, almost imperceptibly, and with a weak voice, she pronounces a chilling curse: may the branches of the Tamiya and Itō families wither. Panicking, Iemon flips the raindoor to hide her, only to reveal the corpse of Kohei, which also speaks to haunt him. Terror-stricken, Iemon pleads with Buddha to save him. As he prays and tries to fend off the ghosts, Naosuke and Yomoshichi make their way towards Iemon from opposite sides. They end up in a three-way fight without a winner.

The next act of the play serves to conclude Naosuke and Kohei's stories. Although she is now legally married to Naosuke, Osode refuses to sleep with him until she learns about Oiwa's murder. Hoping that officially becoming his wife would obligate Naosuke to avenge the deaths of her loved ones. However, no sooner have they consecrated their marriage than her true husband, Yomoshichi, appears. Though it was done unknowingly, Osode cannot forgive herself for betraying Yomoshichi. She tricks both Yomoshichi and Naosuke into killing her. However, she

leaves a note behind for Naosuke. In the letter, she discloses that Samon was actually her stepfather, and her real father was Motomiya Sandayū, who also happens to be Naosuke's father. Besides realizing he has committed incest, Naosuke also learns that the man he murdered when he went after Yomoshichi that first night was actually his former master. Upon these revelations, Naosuke ends up killing himself.

As for Kōhei, he goes to obtain and deliver the medicine to his sick master Matanojō. After completing his unfinished business, Kōhei's ghost disappears, and Matanojō completely recovers from his sickness, allowing him to become part of the 47 *rōnin* planning to avenge Lord Enya.

From then on, we continue with the tale of Oiwa's revenge. However, the first scene that welcomes us back to Oiwa and Iemon's story sets off with quite a different tone from the rest of the play. It is the Tanabata Festival, and we are at an idyllic summer cottage that is surrounded by bamboo poles and flowering vines with fireflies drifting through the air.

Iemon arrives accompanied by Chōbei, a hawk, and a dog. Iemon is dressed formally and ceremoniously, and even Chōbei looks dandyish. As they approach the cottage, they are greeted by the image of a youthful, radiant country girl spinning thread. Her gentle manner and rural charm enchant Iemon. He sends Chōbei to inquire about the hawk, which has flown into the cottage. Oiwa confirms it is there, and as Iemon enters, he is struck by her beauty. He tries to stay longer under the pretext of darkness, but Chōbei reminds him of the lantern he brought. Annoyed, Iemon orders Chōbei to leave with the hawk and the dog, sparking a quarrel. The argument turns heated, revealing tensions between them and dredging up Iemon's shameful past, including his abandonment of Oiwa. Oiwa intervenes, charmingly diffusing their conflict and offering sake and pickled fish in a gesture of harmony.

Oiwa and Iemon exchange sake cups and affectionate words. As Chōbei drinks himself into a stupor, he is coaxed into dancing for their amusement. Eventually, he staggers off, leaving the two alone in intimate silence.

At this point, the mood shifts. Iemon asks about Oiwa's background, and she starts giving subtle clues about her real identity. When she hands Iemon a Tanabata poem inscribed with her name, the dream begins to crack. The poem, about two branches of a river separated by a rock but destined to meet again, is loaded with omen. As they converse, their words dance between affection and menace. He confesses to leaving his wife and calling her evil, not realizing he speaks to that very woman. At his confession, Oiwa's tone grows sharper, and her face begins to change.

When Chōbei returns in drunken confusion, he decides to peek into the cottage to see what Iemon is up to. Unlike Iemon, who is under Oiwa's spell, Chōbei sees Oiwa's deformed form. He tries to flee but is surrounded by increasingly terrifying images. The lantern he grabs morphs into Oiwa's face. A basket hanging nearby splits open, revealing her severed head. Screaming in terror, he flees the scene.

Inside, Iemon prepares to leave. Oiwa clutches his hand, confronting him one final time. He accuses her of resembling his cursed former wife. At last, she plainly reveals that she is Oiwa, and she has returned to exact vengeance. As she utters the words "Vengeance on Iemon!", the dream collapses into a full-on nightmare. Iemon's hawk transforms into a rat and attacks him. The moon disappears behind a black curtain. Oiwa reveals her ghostly form, her arms outstretched, her stare fixed with wrath. Magical green flames swarm around Iemon, attacking him as he flails with his sword. A haunted spinning wheel catches fire. A broken cart careens around

the stage. Desperate and exhausted, Iemon tries to escape, but Oiwa grabs him, and together they sink into the underworld.

Iemon jerks awake at the Snake Mountain Hermitage. He shreds the mosquito net and stumbles out, delirious. He cries out for Oiwa to show herself, his madness plain. When he recognizes his father, Genshirō, and the monk Jōnen, the master of the hermitage, he collapses, sobbing in exhaustion. His mother, Okuma, arrives shortly after. She too has been suffering as Iemon. Iemon complains that Oiwa's spirit continues to haunt them, for she must be responsible for his growing fever and the rat infestations that seem to mirror her vengeance.

Soon, a retainer of Moronao, Heinai, arrives with gifts and ceremonial clothing to invest Iemon with his new rank. However, before making his position official, he demands to see the letter. Iemon hesitates, claiming it is safe elsewhere, but Heinai warns he will return to inspect it. Alone again with his mother, Iemon reveals that he gave the letter to Chōbei as collateral under duress. He vows to retrieve it, though his anxiety grows as the sun begins to set. As night deepens, he steps outside into the snow. He notices Oiwa's grave tablet is there, and nervously offers a prayer, hoping to pacify her spirit. But the lantern beside him begins to flicker. Flames dance, then burn through the paper. The lantern splits in half, revealing the ghostly head of Oiwa, terrifying and disfigured. Her full spectral form emerges, cradling their dead infant. Iemon recoils, horror-struck, as Oiwa wordlessly indicts him by pointing to her scars, then to the child, a bloody vision of maternal grief and wrath. Madness tightening around him, Iemon rushes back inside.

Chōbei appears, battered and wild-eyed. He, too, has suffered Oiwa's wrath, tormented by rats and haunted dreams. He agrees to return the letter. But as they talk near the Buddhist altar, Oiwa's ghost reappears. She descends from behind the altar

on a hidden wheel and strangles Chōbei with his own towel. She drags his corpse away unseen. Blood begins to drip from the altar above, and Moronao's long-sought letter falls down. However, when Iemon hands it to Heinai, who has just returned with retainers, they find the seal chewed away by rats. Heinai scoffs and departs with the gifts, mocking Iemon's failure. Iemon, enraged and unravelling, turns on Oiwa's grave tablet, intent on breaking it, but his father intervenes. Genshirō, disgusted by his son's deceit and cowardice, disowns Iemon and leaves.

As the day progresses and the curse intensifies, Okuma begins to scream, first because of the rats swarming her body and then out of sheer pain Oiwa inflicts on her. Monk Jōnen and his followers try to fend off Oiwa with their prayers. Oiwa appears again, this time visible only to Okuma and Iemon, and tears out Okuma's throat with her teeth. Then, she afflicts Iemon with spasms of agony while cornering him against the room's wall. When Iemon strikes at the wall while trying to slash Oiwa with his sword, the wall collapses to reveal Genshirō's lifeless body hanging by a rope.

In the chaos, Kanzō and Bansuke, former allies of Iemon, before he tried to put the blame of his murders onto them, rush in to warn Iemon to flee. However, their warning turns out to be a trap. They seize him, hoping to capture him for their own gain. When a fight ensues, despite his poor condition, Iemon manages to defeat not only Kanzō and Bansuke but also Heinai and his footmen who came to arrest him. Even with a blizzard going on, he leaves the hermitage.

As Iemon travels to go as far away from the hermitage as possible, Yomoshichi appears through the snow. He knocks Iemon off-balance from behind and assumes a fighting stance. He is there to avenge Oiwa for his now deceased wife.

In the fight that follows Yomoshichi, with a little help from Oiwa and her rats, he kills Iemon and finally brings Oiwa's vengeance spree to an end.



CHAPTER 5

COMPARISON

After learning the plots of the plays, we can now move on to our comparison. In order to better understand Oiwa and Sakura's roles in the plays and to make sure that any differences in the plays' popularity stem from them, it would be appropriate to start by comparing the plays before we continue to the characters themselves.

5.1 *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* versus *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*

When comparing plays, I will follow a method similar to the process of writing the plays. I will start by looking at the actors who played the main roles to assess how their involvement might have shaped the plays. Then, I will move to the structure of the plays, especially Nanboku's use of *sekai*, in order to understand how he manipulated them to suit his desired narrative. Last but not least, I will concentrate on the different resolutions of the household disturbance plot (*oie sōdō mono*), the overarching plot element in both plays, which will lead me to the comparison of our female leads, Princess Sakura and Oiwa.

5.1.1 Actors

In *Sakurahime*, the lead actors were Ichikawa Danjūrō VII and Iwai Hanshirō V.¹¹⁵ Danjūrō played three different roles: the priest Seigen, the scoundrel Tsurigane Gonsuke, and the loyal retainer Inanoya Hanbei. He was an outstanding *tachiyaku* and one of the most popular actors of the 19th century. He specialized in the *aragoto*

¹¹⁵ Kabuki 21, "Kawarasakiza."

style of acting, known for portraying valiant warriors, fierce gods, or demons.¹¹⁶

Throughout the play, he entertained the audience by changing from role to role with the *hayagawari* (quick-change) technique.¹¹⁷ His good looks and charisma had a huge impact on developing the *iroaku* (sexually appealing rogue) style as the new *katakiyaku* (敵役, archvillains) of *kizewamono*.

Hanshirō, on the other hand, was one of the best *onnagata* in history. In this play, his primary character was Princess Sakura.¹¹⁸ He was also the lead actor in Nanboku's *Osome Hisamatsu Ukina no Yomiuri* (*The Scandalous Love of Osome and Hisamatsu*), where he played seven different roles, including the male protagonist. He specialized in playing townswomen in *sewamono*, and as mentioned earlier, he was the one who firmly established the *akuba* type with Doto no Oroku in *Osome Hisamatsu Ukina no Yomiuri*. Even though he did not play an *akuba* in *Sakurahime*, his expertise in playing lower-class townswomen was invaluable when performing Sakura, after her life in the pleasure district.

As for *Yotsuya Kaidan*, the familiar face of Ichikawa Danjūrō VII makes a reappearance, this time performing across Onoe Kikugorō III.¹¹⁹ In this play, Danjūrō portrayed only one character: Oiwa's husband, Tamiya Iemon. He was once more the rakish rogue with a devious brain. However, his role partner is not an *onnagata* but a *kaneru yakusha* (兼ねる役者, double-duty actor), who came from the Otowaya guild and specialized in portraying ghosts.¹²⁰ In fact, Nanboku wrote

¹¹⁶ Kabuki 21, "Ichikawa Ebizō V."

¹¹⁷ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 243.

¹¹⁸ In the cast playbill, it is written that he played three other female characters, but those characters do not exist in the current version of the play we are examining. It is likely that they were from scenes that were advertised but never staged, as it was prone to happening in *kabuki* plays. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Kabuki 21, "Nakamuraza."

¹²⁰ Onoe Kikugorō III, was one of the first, and arguably best, *kaneru yakusha*. He was known as the "man of a thousand faces," and could switch between all kinds of *onnagata*, *tachiyaku*, and *katakiyaku* roles. Noted in Kabuki 21, "Ōkawa Hashizō I."

Yotsuya Kaidan specifically for Onoe Kikugorō III, who played three different roles: the female protagonist Oiwa, the loyal servant Kobotoke Kohei, and Osode's husband Satō Yomoshichi. Arguably, Kikugorō's portrayal of Oiwa was a key factor in the play's positive reception, for only he could bring the vengeful ghost of Oiwa to life in such a striking manner.

5.1.2 Structure

Though experimenting, Nanboku continued to use familiar *sekai* even in his most radically contemporary productions. One way he experimented was by altering their meaning by jumbling together a number of them, which is what he did with *Sakurahime*. There are three major *sekai* identifiable in the play.¹²¹

The first one is the Sakura-Seigen *sekai*, which tells the story of Priest Seigen's unrequited love for Sakura. *Kabuki* borrowed this *sekai* and its story from *jōruri* (浄瑠璃, puppet theatre) at the end of the 17th century. The second one was called *Sumidagawa* (隅田川, the Sumida River) *sekai*, which was concerned with the struggle for succession within the Yoshida clan. The original *sekai* comes from a *nō* play with the same name. However, that story was about a mother searching for her kidnapped child, who unfortunately passed away before she could find him. In *kabuki*, the mother figure was replaced by a samurai who proves his loyalty by looking for the missing child, fitting the story into a narrative of a household disturbance plot.¹²² While Sakura-Seigen and Sumidagawa *sekai* covered the *jidai* aspect of the play, the third one, the gangster *sekai* of Tsurigane Gonsuke, constituted the *sewamono* elements of the play. Nanboku wove these worlds together

¹²¹ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 241-242.

¹²² Chan, "The Divine Victim," 14-16.

by making Sakura, a princess of the Yoshida clan, the object of Seigen's love, and the victim of Gonsuke's greed. The play supposedly takes place during the Kamakura period, but the conditions under which the characters operate are clearly drawn from the Kasei period.

Aside from these *sekai*, Nanboku mixes and matches elements from different stories and places them in unexpected places. For example, the play opens with Seigen and Shiragiku's attempted lovers' suicide. Not only are both characters male, instead of the customary male-female coupling, but also lovers' suicides are in a later part of a play, after we witness the conditions keeping the lovers apart.¹²³

Another plot element that came with the *jidai-sewamono* territory was a contemporary figure revealing himself to be a famous historical personage, initiating an upward social movement. However, in *Sakurahime*, famous historical figures Princess Sakura and Priest Seigen get demoted from aristocrats to social outcasts.¹²⁴ Moreover, the disfiguration and transformation the audiences usually associate with female lust and jealousy, which will be discussed in more detail when comparing Princess Sakura and Oiwa, is experienced by a male character: Priest Seigen.¹²⁵

One structure Nanboku does stay faithful to is the open ending of the play. Though it is claimed that Princess Sakura will be restored to her position and the Yoshida clan will prosper once more, this is all said in a dialogue between Sakura's retainers, Hanbei and Shichiro, and the constables surrounding them. Not only do we not see it happen, but Princess Sakura is also absent during the last scene of the play. The implications behind her absence will be discussed further when talking about her supernatural origin.

¹²³ Leiter, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, 357-358

¹²⁴ Brandon, *Kabuki*, 22.

¹²⁵ Chan, "The Divine Victim", 17-18.

As for *Yotsuya Kaidan*, the main *sekai* is undisputedly that of the Ako vendetta, and the plot of the play is to some extent woven together with that of *Chūshingura*. However, instead of any other *sekai*, this time Nanboku chooses to take small elements from various different stories. The most obvious ones being Kasane, with her disfiguration, and a very popular *kaidan* story called *Botan Dōrō* (牡丹燈籠, *The Peony Lantern*, 1666). The story was adapted into Japanese by Asai Ryoui from a Chinese story in his previously mentioned book *Otogi bōko* (*Hand Puppets*). The story opens on the night of the *Obon* festival.

A beautiful woman strolls by a young samurai's house accompanied by her young servant, who holds a peony lantern. The young samurai becomes enchanted by the woman's beauty and invites her into his house. Infatuated with each other, they swear an eternal relationship on the very same night. From then on, the beautiful woman starts visiting the young samurai nightly, but every time departs at dawn. After hearing a woman's voice coming from the young samurai's house every night, an elderly neighbour decides to peek inside the young samurai's house and finds him in an intimate embrace with a skeleton.

The next day, the old neighbour seeks out the young samurai to tell him what he saw and to warn him against continuing his association with the deceased. The young samurai, now terrified, goes to a Buddhist priest and receives a charm in order to prevent the entity from entering his house. Some time passes, and one night, the young samurai carelessly strolls near a temple while intoxicated. It is the temple that the woman had claimed to live in on the first night they met. Suddenly, the woman appears and leads the young samurai into the temple. Later, the young samurai is found dead inside the coffin holding the woman's skeleton. They bury the young samurai, but he, the woman, and the young girl holding the peony lantern

occasionally get seen on rainy, cloudy nights. Whoever has the misfortune of meeting them falls gravely ill. In the end, a priest invokes the Lotus Sutra to release the spirits, after which the ghosts cease to appear.¹²⁶ The dream scene in *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* is clearly a retelling of the Peony Lanterns, with minor changes, like setting the story during the Tanabata festival, dedicated to star-crossed lovers, instead of the *Obon* festival, dedicated to the souls of the dead, and without the Buddhist undertones.

Going back to the structuring of *Yotsuya Kaidan*, its first double showing with *Chūshingura* frames it as a *jidai-sewamono*. As discussed before, the norm for a *jidai-sewamono* was to share one *sekai*, divided into two parts, but were interconnected, with one beginning leading up to a single ending, though that ending might be left open, as is the case with *Sakurahime*. However, in the case of *Chūshingura* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*, with its separate title, what is supposed to be the *sewamono* portion, *Yotsuya Kaidan* is a play that can and does stand on its own. That is one of the reasons why, after the initial production, there were no other double showings of the two plays together. *Yotsuya Kaidan* may share the beginning point and one character, Satō Yomoshichi, with *Chūshingura*, but at the end of the day, it has its own unique definitive ending.

After looking at the general structural differences between *Sakurahime* and *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*, the last element before moving on to comparing Princess Sakura and Oiwa, is examining how Nanboku used the same plot element in both plays with a similar alteration of the traditional trope, with two very different outcomes.

¹²⁶ Reider, “The Emergence of ‘Kaidan-shū,’” 82-83.

5.1.3 Household-disturbance plot

In the 1st Chapter, while talking about its development, we have seen how the defeat of evil and the restoration of peace were key features of Edo *kabuki*. For samurai, their idea of selfhood was closely linked to being a member of a household. Thus, in early *kabuki* plays, the heroes were obsessed with household's survival.

Most household disturbance plays begin with a scheme to take over a prosperous samurai house. The house collapses after the loss of a treasure, which then leads the lord of the house to commit suicide. The schemers try to get rid of the young heir, who then is forced to flee. These events are followed by hardships and selfless sacrifices by former retainers and their loyal wives or female relatives. In the end, the loyal retainers succeed in exposing the evil plot against the house, the evildoers get punished, and the house gets restored.¹²⁷

One subcategory of the household-disturbance plot was the revenge plays (*katakiuchimono*). They would begin with an unfortunate and unjust death. Then the surrogates of the deceased, usually the loyal sons or former retainers, would undergo hardships and sacrifices as they would plot to avenge their father or master. The play would end with them successfully taking their revenge.¹²⁸

Blood revenge, in early modern Japan, was not an action one could simply go through with, but a formal bureaucratic procedure that necessitated the approval of the government and would not be granted if not in accordance with the moral foundation of Tokugawa society.¹²⁹ Thus, vendetta was an action understood in the context of hierarchical social relations and duty, and not by personal motivations.

¹²⁷ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 128.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 128.

¹²⁹ Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai*, 241–64

Revenge was also a gendered action. This socially sanctioned act could only be undertaken by a male figure. The only way in which female characters could participate in the act and prove their loyalty was by sacrificing their bodies, such as being killed to save someone of importance, or sold into prostitution to raise funds, all decided by their husbands, fathers, and male siblings.¹³⁰

Out of our two plays, *Sakurahime* follows a more traditional household disturbance pattern. Even if we think about *Chūshingura* and *Yotsuya Kaidan* as a unit, there is still no restoring the Enya clan, even after the 47 *rōnin* successfully avenge their master. In *Sakurahime*, however, we have an evil plot by Akugōro, made possible by Gonsuke's participation. The family treasure is stolen, the head of the family and the heir apparent are dead, and the second son is forced to flee. The loyal former retainers continue protecting the remaining members of the family and looking for the treasure. Two of them sacrifice their blood relations in order to save said members, and another watches as his wife gets sold into prostitution. In the end, both villains die, the treasure gets found, and the clan is restored. What sets *Sakurahime* apart from other household disturbance plays is the fact that, despite their struggles, the loyal retainers are not the ones who carry out the revenge and restore the name of the clan. It is Princess Sakura. The significance of her being the one avenging her father and brother will be discussed when comparing her revenge with Oiwa's.

As for *Yotsuya Kaidan*, it is not only the gender of the avenger that gets turned upside down. In *Yotsuya Kaidan*, the loyal former retainers of the Enya clan are hapless and impoverished. They cling to their anachronistic samurai values, but the more they persist in maintaining the selfless devotion to their demolished

¹³⁰ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 131.

household, the more they suffer. However, their counterparts, who have foregone the concept of loyalty, are clever and attractive despite their evilness. At the beginning of the play, Oiwa starts out as a character who is still firmly bound by the morals of the samurai culture and is having a hard time adapting to her new reality of living on the outskirts of the city. Even though she wants someone to avenge her father, at the end of the day, there is no family fortune that can be restored or a status she can regain, because her family is already gone, and the new environment she found herself in has no use for her loyalty.¹³¹ By halfway through, she falls victim to the scheming of others and dies a gruesome death, which ironically wakes her up from her illusion of samurai grandeur, and her ghost goes on to become her own avenger.

5.2 Princess Sakura versus Oiwa

As we can see, revenge is an important part of both Princess Sakura's and Oiwa's characters. However, as women, they have to have certain qualities or go through certain transformations before they are able to take part in the act. This is where *kaidan* tales come in.

5.2.1 Princess Sakura

For Princess Sakura, her *kaidan* elements come from Buddhist tales and are more subtle. They tend to get overshadowed in the play by Seigen's ghost and the grotesqueness of his transformation, which Oiwa parallels in *Yotsuya Kaidan*. As a direct opposite of Oiwa, Princess Sakura is actually a divine figure. She is a manifestation of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion.

¹³¹ Ibid, 129-132.

Sakura's relationship with Kannon has two origins. One is the *kojōruri* (old puppet play), *Isshin niga byakudō* (一心二河白道, *The White Path of the One Heart Crossing Two Rivers*, 1673), that helped crystallize some important features of the Seigen-Sakura *sekai*, and the other is Princess Sakura's identity as the reincarnation of Shiragiku. In *Isshin niga byakudō*, Princess Sakura is born thanks to Kannon after Sakura's parents pray at the Kiyomizu Temple (清水寺, Pure Water Temple), the same temple that Seigen becomes the Chief Abbot of in *Sakurahime*. In the story, Kannon is the one who assists Princess Sakura to give birth to a healthy son, even though Sakura ends up dying during childbirth. Last but not least, when Seigen, in a serpentine form, pursues Princess Sakura in the beast realm after they both have died, it is Kannon who gives Sakura a helping hand by guiding her into the Pure Land and providing her with a way to slay Seigen.

The second connection, as mentioned, comes from Shiragiku. He was not only Seigen's lover, but also his *chigo* (稚児, acolyte). In Japanese Buddhism, the figure of *chigo* came to be seen as divine, and in Japanese art was often portrayed as a manifestation of bodhisattvas.¹³² There is a genre called *chigo monogatari*,¹³³ where the majority of stories consist of a monk falling in love with a *chigo*, who often ends up dead. After his death, it is usually claimed that the *chigo* was a manifestation of a Buddhist god or bodhisattva.¹³⁴ As for *chigo*'s direct connection with Kannon, there were certain Buddhist sects that believed all *chigo*, as long as they underwent specific rituals of initiation, could literally transform into Kannon.¹³⁵

¹³² Guth, "The Divine Boy in Japanese Art."

¹³³ Childs, "Chigo Monogatari," 127.

¹³⁴ Atkins, "Chigo in the Medieval Japanese Imagination," 952.

¹³⁵ Chan, "The Divine Victim," 26.

For more information on *chigo*'s initiation rituals, see Faure, *The Red Thread*.

Aside from this background information, there are also references to Shiragiku and Sakura's link to Kannon in *Sakurahime*. First of all, at the beginning of the play, it is explicitly stated that both Seigen and Shiragiku are from the Hasedera Temple (長谷寺), which is commonly called Hase-kannon, and is famous for housing the eleven-headed massive wooden statue of Kannon.

Later on, just like in *chigo monogatari*, Shiragiku has a tragic ending, However, he does not take his true form as Kannon. Vincent Chan, who examines Sakura's divine origins in his work "The Divine Victim," argues that Shiragiku's manifestation was delayed because, unlike the other monks in *chigo monogatari*, Seigen failed to go through with their suicide, for he was motivated by lust and was neither in love nor entirely devoted to Shiragiku, in other words, Kannon. So, instead of manifesting, Shiragiku reincarnates as Princess Sakura and becomes the cause of Seigen's downfall later in the play, as karma would dictate it.¹³⁶

Last but not least, the closing scene of the play is set at Sensōji (浅草寺), also known as the Asakusa Kannon Temple, on the day of *Sanja Matsuri* (三社祭, Three Shrine Festival). The festival is held to celebrate the founders of Sensōji. According to legends, three brothers caught a statue of Kannon while fishing on the banks of the Sumida River. They put it in a makeshift shrine that became larger and larger, as more and more people heard of this miraculous catch and came from various places to pray to this particular statue. Later on, the statue got hidden from the sight of the public and became a *hibutsu* (秘仏, secret buddha).¹³⁷ The hiding of Princess Sakura at the end of the play, on the day celebrating the founding of a temple based on a

¹³⁶ Chan, "The Divine Victim," 28.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 39.

hibutsu image of Kannon, forms another connection between the Princess and the bodhisattva.

This divine identity is important for Princess Sakura's revenge because, just like Oiwa's transformation into a ghost, her being the manifestation of Kannon allows Sakura to break the rules of society without retribution. This again works for two reasons. One reason comes from the Sumidagawa *sekai*. Stories set in this *sekai* almost always end with a form of divine intervention centred on a young boy, the heir of the family in household disturbance plots, who is often both the manifestation of the divine and the victim of the play.¹³⁸ In our case, this role is fulfilled by Princess Sakura as Shiragiku's reincarnation. The second one comes from a popular religious belief that developed between the late 18th and early 19th century among those who were alienated from political power, that since the government was incapable of solving problems of the present day, a supernatural being would come and restore the world to a perfect state.¹³⁹ A common identity for this millenarian figure was usually a bodhisattva, with the most popular ones being Miroku, the Buddha of the future, followed by Kannon.¹⁴⁰ Thus, with Princess Sakura being the manifestation of Kannon, her being a woman enacting revenge becomes more acceptable, for it is part of her divine intervention done to bring back order and prosperity to her clan.

However, before she can restore her household through divine intervention, she has to go through a second transformation. It is a second one because I consider Sakura's birth to be her first, as Shiragiku's spirit passes from one body into another. This first transformation is physical, whereas her second one is more psychological.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 15-16.

¹³⁹ Desai and Eckstein, "Insurgency," 441–465.

¹⁴⁰ Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, 445–446.

It happens when Princess Sakura gets sold into prostitution. Before going to the unlicensed pleasure quarters, she continues to talk and act like a princess and hold on to the morals of her upbringing. However, after she comes back, we see a Sakura who has adapted to her new position in life, who acts and speaks in accordance with her low standing. That being said, Sakura's second transformation is an unfinished one, leaving her in a hybrid state that goes between two extremes. Aside from her nurturing side bleeding through while thinking about her lost baby, her speech pattern also showcases her in-between condition. While she talks, she mixes in words and phrases typically spoken by court nobles with the crude language of the outcasts.¹⁴¹

When the time comes, she can murder Gonsuke and their baby, as the carrier of Gonsuke's blood, with minimal moral dilemma because, apart from her divinity, as a lower-class woman, she is now free from the samurai moral code that restrained her and other women from participating in revenge. However, the act of taking revenge in itself would not make sense without her identity as the noble Princess of the Yoshida clan, for she does not murder Gonsuke because of what he has done to her, but to avenge her father and brother and restore the household they left behind.

5.2.2 Oiwa

Oiwa, on the other hand, does not have a divine origin to fall back to, nor does she have a household she can restore. This makes her revenge intrinsically different from Princess Sakura's from the get-go. However, she does get help from the supernatural and goes through a three-phase transformation before she can exact her vengeance.

¹⁴¹ Her irregular and often meandering dialogue was a unique innovation by Nanboku, and Princess Sakura was the first character to utilize such a speaking pattern. Noted in Brandon, *Kabuki*, 22.

Oiwa's transformation starts off purely physical. Her face gets disfigured because of the poison she ingests, believing it to be medicine. Afterwards, she makes it worse when she learns about Iemon's betrayal. While she sits in front of her mirror, getting ready to confront Kihei, the physical disfiguration sets in motion the psychological phase of her transformation. Until that point, Oiwa had managed to cling to her older position in her community, where she was the daughter and the wife of samurai, even after living and working on the outskirts of the city. Her inability to adapt continued until she was faced with a gruesome wake-up call. After seeing and digesting her disfigured state, she finally let herself open up to feeling emotions deemed improper for a moral person, in her case, anger, resentment, jealousy, and a desire for personal vengeance.¹⁴² Oiwa dies soon after embracing these emotions and enters the final stage of her transformation, which turns her into a vengeful ghost.

The *kaidan* figure of vengeful ghost suits Oiwa for three reasons. The first reason has to do with the origins of female ghosts, which suddenly became popular in the early modern period. Jealousy (妬心, *toshin* or 嫉妬, *shitto*), which was also referred to as *jashin* (邪心, serpentine feeling), was a central characteristic of the female ghosts.¹⁴³ This particular feature stemmed from the popular Buddhist discourse that often linked femininity with sinful emotions, such as lust, love, and jealousy. The very blood that ran through the female body and got excreted during menstruation came to be a sign of accumulated jealousy and desire.¹⁴⁴ What made these jealousy and desire even more dangerous was that, in premodern Japan, emotions were not just something you felt inside and then acted upon but were

¹⁴² Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 27.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 155.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 162.

bodily realities that were sometimes not even realized by a subject until they caused outward physical transformations.¹⁴⁵

The most common female transformation related to first sexual desire and then jealousy was the image of a woman turning into a serpent. This image existed as early as the 11th century, and its most popular example was the tale of *Dōjōji* (道成寺). In the story a woman lusts after a monk, turns into a snake and invades a temple in pursuit of him.¹⁴⁶ The shift from sexual desire to jealousy happened in the 17th century, when in warrior households, the wife's main responsibility became producing an heir and even though technically illegal, mistresses became important members of samurai households.¹⁴⁷

In the late early modern period, it became increasingly common for townspeople to adopt the samurai custom of taking a mistress if their wife could not bear a child. This likely played a role in the noticeable rise of portrayals of jealous and vengeful wives in popular fiction during the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁸ By that time, however, it was not only the emotion but also the representation that shifted. While leaving behind some abstract and fragmented imagery, serpents gave way to female ghosts.¹⁴⁹ One major difference between serpents and ghosts that led to this shift was that when female characters changed into other beings, they passed into another plane of existence, disconnected from their human realities, whereas ghosts lingered in the human world and carried their memories and grudges with them.¹⁵⁰ If we go back to Oiwa, we can say that her jealousy and resentment preconditioned her

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 160.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 165.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 169.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 172.

¹⁴⁹ For example, many female ghosts had a scale pattern called *uroko-moyō* (鱗模様) on their clothing, and in *kabuki*, a hair style called *sabaki-gami* (捌髪, dishevelled hair) came to function as a stand-in for the serpent. Noted in Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, 174-175.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 178.

transformation into a ghost. However, her becoming a ghost also enabled her to choose the way in which she would act upon those feelings.

The second reason why becoming a ghost is a necessity for Oiwa is the lack of surrogates who would avenge her. In the case of Lord Enya, there are his 47 royal former retainers. In any other play set in the Sumidagawa *sekai*, besides *Sakurahime*, there is the male heir, or again, the royal retainers of the Yoshida clan. In other words, in a conventional household disturbance play, the existence of male surrogates deems the need for a character to become a ghost redundant.¹⁵¹ However, as far as Oiwa knows, there is nobody who could take revenge on her behalf, meaning if she wants it done, she has to do it herself.

This brings us to the third, and arguably the most important reason for Oiwa's transformation into a ghost. As a woman who was alive, even one living as an outcast, Oiwa would not have the rights or the means she would need to become her own avenger. Her becoming a ghost serves to sever her bonds more thoroughly with the rules governing the society. Oiwa, as a ghost, is free from the basic set of Confucian relationships that shaped her whole world. Now, not only can she act on her desire for vengeance, but her revenge does not have to be about avenging her father as a filial daughter. Now, it can be about what she, herself, was made to suffer. Now, she does not have to restore a household to justify her actions, but can demolish several others because they were unjust towards her. And I believe, despite their other similarities and differences, it is this freedom that truly sets Oiwa apart from Princess Sakura.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 144-145.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

When I first started to develop my thesis, I had hoped that by the end of it, I would have a definitive answer to one question. My initial question was a general one that developed after coming across the vengeful ghost Oiwa, one of the most famous characters of 19th century Japan. Would it be possible to trace the social changes occurring at the beginning of the 19th century by analysing *kabuki*'s female characters written during that era? Of course, such a general question had already been broadly answered, and, of course, changes in a popular genre would reflect the changing tastes of society.

As I tried to narrow my question down, I realized that with the lack of work focusing specifically on characters in English scholarship of *kabuki*, I could still contribute to the question by showcasing the process through which female characters evolved by concentrating on the works of a single prolific playwright. Oiwa's fame, not only in popular culture but also in the scholarly field, helped me pinpoint whose characters I would be examining. However, I soon realized that attempting to go through Tsuruya Nanboku IV's extensive bibliography within a master's thesis would only end up with a shallow cataloguing of his multilayered characters. At the end, I found myself altering my question and asking, if we know it is popular demand that shapes *kabuki*, what does two seemingly similar plays receiving different levels of attention mean, and can this disparity be explained through the differences of their female protagonists?

To answer these questions, it was necessary to become more familiar with the environment that led to the creation of *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* and *Tōkaidō*

Yotsuya Kaidan. The first step was introducing *kabuki*, its unique position within Edo's society, and how it all evolved in the 19th century. Up until the 19th century, the main inspiration for Edo *kabuki* came from the samurai class, which constituted the majority of the city's population. However, aside from the lay people who inhabited the city to serve the samurai, with the rise of commerce in the 16th century, Edo's population grew to be more and more diverse. Edo *kabuki*, by implementing contemporary figures and/or situations within historical settings and vice versa, managed to create a shared "past", which in return contributed to the creation of a sense of community between different classes.

This sense of community began to crumble towards the end of the 18th century, due to the Tokugawa government's inability to manage the aftermath of several natural disasters and increasingly severe economic crisis. The more the government tried to take control of the situation with progressively stricter reforms and bans, such as the Kyōhō and Kansei Reforms, the more the society grew dissatisfied and weary. Aside from the negative shift in public view of the samurai administration, the composition of the Edo *kabuki* audiences also changed from being mostly samurai to being mostly wealthy commoners. As a result, the content of *kabuki* plays shifted away from the greatness of the samurai culture and towards the struggles of the common folk, with particular attention to the outcasts of the community, with darker tones and gruesome sights. As playwrights and actors toyed with the old and the new to come up with innovative ways to entertain their changing audience, they found inspiration from a popular literary genre called *kaidan*.

Kaidan, as a literary genre, developed during the 17th century and became popular during the 18th century. However, *kaidan* elements existed in Japanese literature and theater for nearly all of their existence. That is why the second step was in-

roducing *kaidan*, tracing its evolution and rise in popularity, and figuring out how it directly or indirectly affected *kabuki* in general and Nanboku's plays in particular.

Kaidan tales stemmed from three different sources. These were translations of Chinese fiction, Buddhist stories for moral teachings, and Japanese folk religion, Shinto. In time, elements found in these three types of *kaidan* began to be used interchangeably, and the Buddhist stories lost their religious functions and came to be read as secular tales for entertainment. *Kaidan*'s general appeal stemmed mainly from three reasons. Just like the function of European carnivals, *kaidan* tales provided an escape from the rigid class system that constituted the Edo-period Japanese society by taking everyday life phenomena and turning them upside down. They also offered explanations for inexplicable events, thus easing the discomfort felt from not knowing why things occur. Last but not least, *kaidan* tales provided a layer of protection for the authors when they wanted to comment on political and/or social institutions, despite the government ban on discussing current events or making social criticism in any form of cultural production.

Regardless of these appealing features, what made *kaidan*'s popularity possible was the advancement of printing technology, the relatively high level of literacy in the cities, and the patronage of the city merchants of popular art. As these tales were widely spread and known by the end of the 18th century, it is no wonder that Nanboku turned to *kaidan* tales when in need of fresh material to use in his plays. As a master of matching and mixing, Nanboku not only weaved together several *sekai* within a play, but he also took certain tropes from popular stories and found ways to incorporate them into his stories. If a certain troupe was successful, meaning it got a positive reaction from the audience, he would upcycle them in his new plays. That is precisely how he created *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*.

We can easily distinguish the overlapping elements in *Sakurahime* and *Yotsuya Kaidan* by looking at their summaries. Both of the plays belong in the *kizewamono* and *kaidan mono* genres. Unlike prior villains, their morally corrupt male protagonists are depicted as handsome, clever, and overall attractive people. Though different in gender, they both have a vengeful ghost figure that goes through a physical disfiguration prior to their death, and actually die not through their mutilation, but due to unfortunate accidents with sharp objects. Both plays make their female protagonist adapt to a low-class life, and both end with said female character taking revenge.

However, a closer analysis also shows that, just as his earlier plays can be regarded as stepping stones for a female character capable of revenge, *Sakurahime* with Princess Sakura is also a stepping stone for *Yotsuya Kaidan* and *Oiwa*. When we look at the structure of the plays, *Sakurahime*, even if it's made up of three different *sekai*, follows a more traditional pattern, where the historical and contemporary parts use one set of characters and form one whole play with an open ending. On the other hand, *Yotsuya Kaidan*, as the contemporary part, is set within the same *sekai* as its historical part, but is a play on its own right with a different title. Only one character crosses over between the two parts, and the play has a definite ending.

As for the characters, though radical on her own with her half-noble, half-prostitute hybrid state and her act of vengeance, when compared to *Oiwa*, Princess Sakura remains a tame character. Her revenge, just like those in any other household disturbance plot, is in the name of duty and results in a restoration of order. By painting Princess Sakura as the manifestation of the bodhisattva Kannon, Nanboku manages to spin Princess Sakura's revenge as a divine intervention that would not

only be accepted but also anticipated by the general public. On the other hand, Oiwa's revenge has nothing to do with duty. It is personal, and it is as destructive as it can get.

Going back to my research questions, I came to the conclusion that due to too many variables and the scarcity of English data, it is not possible to claim that any difference in popularity levels of the plays was a direct result of the differences between their female protagonists. However, I believe it can be argued that Nanboku's mixing and matching of various *sekai*, alongside stories from popular literature, was an active search towards the perfect recipe that would take the audience completely under his spell.

According to our knowledge, *Sakurahime* is the first play in which Nanboku wrote a sexually appealing male rogue protagonist with Gonsuke. The role was played by Ichikawa Danjūrō VII, who also played Oiwa's husband Iemon in *Yotsuya Kaidan*. Nanboku also took inspiration from the *kaidan* story of Kasane while coming up with Priest Seigen's transformation into a vengeful ghost. Seigen's ghost must have been a success, for Nanboku used the tale of Kasane in his play *Kesa Kakematsu Narita no Riken (A Surplice-Hanging Pine and the Sharp Sword of Narita, 1823)*, two years before *Yotsuya Kaidan*. The role of Kasane's lover was once again played by Danjūrō, and Onoe Kikugorō III, who would later portray Oiwa, was cast as Kasane. Kasane's transformation dance became the most popular part of the entire play, which no doubt influenced Oiwa's transformation scene. Last but not least, *Sakurahime* is the first play in which Nanboku gave the role of the avenger to a female protagonist. For these reasons, while my existing data is insufficient to claim Princess Sakura's character on her own was responsible for any of the play's popularity or lack thereof, I can say that *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* and

Oiwa would not be able to reach their level of popularity if *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* and Princess Sakura did not exist.



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