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Gender in Traditional Japanese Theatre¹

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Traditional Japanese theatre has been habitually a male domain, with women physically absent for the most part. The representative classical genres: *noh* and *kyogen*, *kabuki* and *bunraku* are performed by men, although recently in some genres women are gradually being admitted. Other forms of traditional performance such as *bugaku*, most of the folk types of *kagura*, and sumo, for example, are also a preserve of men. The aim of this presentation is to search for and map a trajectory of the female presence on the predominantly male traditional stage in Japan, by exploring a practice that has been largely overlooked: the conception of female versions of popular all-male performing arts and prominent masculine heroes in kabuki.

The former could be traced back to the medieval times (thirteenth to sixteenth century) with the emergence of *onna sarugaku* (female sarugaku), *onna kusemai* (female kusemai), *nyôbô kyôgen* (female kyogen), *onna noh* (female noh), etc. During the Edo period (seventeenth to nineteenth century) this phenomenon continued. There is a reference in sources from the late seventeenth century of *onna saruwaka*, staged by courtesans in the brothel districts. *Onna jôruri* (female jôruri narration) was very popular in the early seventeenth century, to the extent that it was banned, together with the overall ban on women to perform onstage in the 1630s. The genre reappeared again towards the end of the eighteenth century under the appellation *onna gidayû*. Nowadays, it is also called *joryû gidayû* (female style gidayû) and has become a respected part of traditional performance culture. Early twentieth century saw the birth of *onna bunraku* (female puppet theatre), still performed today, and *onna kengeki* (female sword drama), very trendy in the 1930s. There is even *onna zumo* (female sumo), especially popular in the late-Edo period, which could still be seen at some festivals (*matsuri*) in the countryside, albeit in a very different form.

The most popular performing art in the premodern period was *kabuki*, embodied entirely by male actors (*yakusha*) and famous for its female impersonators (*onnagata*). Its popularity brought into being a special category of female performers – *okyôgen-shi* (theatre masters). From the late

¹ This research will be published in the future in Japanese and English.

eighteenth century onwards they staged well-known *kabuki* scenes and dances in the residences of feudal lords (*daimyo*) and the shogun's inner palace, where men were forbidden to enter. Their audience was mostly the high-class samurai women who could not go to the theatres. With the abolishment of the *daimyo* system during the Meiji period (1868–1912), *okyōgen-shi* lost their wealthy patrons. Some of them formed their own troupes and were called *onna yakusha* (female kabuki actors), thus for the first time performing *kabuki* at official theatres, although not at the grand ones since these remained reserved for the all-male *kabuki*. *Onna yakusha* disappeared from the stage by the 1930s because their art was no longer in demand, and actresses were performing on the modern stage.

Edo-period *kabuki*, however, was more significant with the female versions or counterparts of its prominent male characters. Numerous plays were staged from the very outset in the late seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, in which either a well-known masculine character was recast as a “woman” or a female relative of him was intentionally conceived to play a main role in the production. The opening word of the play titles always denoted female gender and was followed by the name of the male “original” – like *Onna Narukami* “The Female Narukami”, for example, or *Onna Shunkan* “The Female Shunkan,” in which a central character was Shunkan's wife or sister. This type of kabuki plays has almost disappeared from the modern repertory. The last part of the presentation focused on the comparison of *Shibaraku* and *Onna Shibaraku* “The Female Shibaraku” in terms of performance and gender presentation.

I have denoted these specific female-centred performances in the predominantly all-male traditional Japanese culture as *onna mono* (おんなもの) “female things.”

References:

Galia Gabrovskia, “*Onna Mono*: The ‘Female Presence’ on the Stage of the All-Male Traditional Japanese Theatre,” in *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 32, no. 2 (*Special Issue Section: Women in Asian Theatre*), Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 387-415, 2015.