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Gender and social status in Zeami’s *Noh* plays

Winai Jamornsuriya

Abstract

This article studies women’s power and negotiation illustrated in lovelorn heroines’ roles in *Noh* plays, particularly those composed by Zeami (1363?–1443?), the most famous Japanese playwright during the fourteenth century. This article examines Zeami’s eight *Noh* plays, analyzing the causes of separation and the heroine’s sadness in these stories, to illustrate the gender power and social status of Japanese women at the time.

Introduction

The representation of heroines in Zeami’s *Noh* plays is related to the social construction of gender and social status. The lovelorn heroines in Zeami’s *Noh* plays show the subordination of women in the medieval period (1185–1603). The causes for the separation of the heroines from their loved ones are classified into two types: men’s fickleness and men’s traveling away to the capital or to work.

The theme of heroines left because of male lovers traveling to the capital or to work was a new way of writing introduced by Zeami. Under this theme, there are the heroines who are still alive and others who have become ghosts. The living ones negotiate with male power by traveling to seek their lovers. The ghost heroines negotiate with their men by expressing their deep feeling of love and suffering.

The heroines who suffer from love caused by male fickleness appear in the early period of Zeami’s literary works. In *Noh* plays, ghost heroines can talk about the suffering of love. Through *Noh* drama, Zeami has created a space of power in order that women can somewhat negotiate with male domination.

*Noh* drama is a Japanese traditional performance. *Noh* drama
was originally performed for ordinary people who came to worship or pay respect to the gods in temples or Shinto shrines. *Noh* drama was later developed by Zeami and his father, Kan’ami (1333–1384). Zeami was the foremost playwright and performer as well as a famous theorist of *Noh* drama in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. *Noh* drama and his plays has been performed continually for more than six hundred years down to the present day. Zeami was patronized by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the third shogun of the Muromachi era. Zeami’s *Noh* plays were created and performed to satisfy upper-class audiences, especially those in his patron’s circle.

Academic research on *Noh* drama has touched upon many topics and issues, including masks, costumes, musical instruments, and performance as well as the content of the plays. Zeami’s *Noh* plays are a popular topic for both Japanese and foreign scholars. However, it is uncertain how many *Noh* plays were composed by Zeami. Many Japanese scholars have attempted to collect Zeami’s *Noh* plays, but their research findings do not show the exact number. For example, in *Nougaku no kanshou* (Appreciation of *Noh* drama), Tanaka concluded that there was a total of 184 plays by Zeami. However, Kobayashi states in a book named *Nougakushi kenkyuu* (Research on *Noh* drama history) that 112 plays were composed by Zeami, and another book named *Nougaku zensho* (*Noh* drama complete book) gives the number as 122 (Omote, 1979:483).

Furthermore, it is very difficult to indicate which plays composed by Zeami are originals, because he did not only compose, but also adapted some plays from older ones. For example, the ending part of *Matsukaze* was composed by Zeami but the beginning was the work of his father (Omote, 1979: 487). The selection of plays in this article is based on research by Omote Akira, a Japanese scholar who specializes in *Noh* drama. He classified the *Noh* plays of Zeami into four groups, including those with a high possibility of being composed by Zeami, and those partially composed by Zeami (Omote, 1979: 493).

Zeami’s *Noh* plays have several story types, for instance, god or goddess story, samurai story, court lady story, or story of townspeople. This article focuses on stories in which female protagonists suffer from disappointment in love. In *Noh* drama, all
the actors are male and formerly all the audiences too. Moreover, all the playwrights including Zeami were male. Zeami was patronized by a shogun, and thus his plays were mainly performed to entertain elites and higher-class audiences, especially people associated with his patron. However, Zeami’s plays, especially those about women suffering over love, might not have been reserved for male audiences. These stories show criticism of the behavior of Japanese men of that time, and would probably not have pleased the male patrons who were the audience of Noh drama. Zeami seems to have used the Noh play as an open space for Japanese women to express their deep feelings about male conduct and male-dominated ideology on love relationships and gender issues.

Gender and social status in Zeami’s Noh plays

Zeami was born in the medieval period. His Noh plays were influenced by the social environment of that time, including gender relations and social status. Sex discrimination still prevailed, based on Confucian ideas imported from China, and a Buddhist belief that women were defiled by menstruation. Women were subordinate to male power in many different ways. For example, women had the right to own property yet in many cases such property was registered under men’s names (Wakita, 1992: 83). Also several products were made by women but most of the registered names of sellers were males. This situation was found in the production of fabrics, liquor, and liquor containers.

Discrimination against women was also found in household arrangements. In the prior Heian period (794–1185), polygamy was widely practiced, allowing one husband to have many wives, was widely practiced during the Heian period. But only woman who were properly married were treated as a lawful wife. A proper marriage meant that a marriage announcement was made after the man’s third consecutive night visiting the woman’s house. The husband might continue visiting the wife at her own house or move into his wife’s house. In the latter case, she was called the “first wife.” Cohabitation would come to an end if the husband stopped visiting the wife’s house. In the medieval period, these arrangements changed. A wife could move into her husband’s house and would
be a “principal wife,” while other wives would automatically be called minor wives. A system of one husband and one principal wife system was formally established.

In this way, women’s status subordinate to men was specified and fixed by society. The principal wife was considered to have more power than the other wives, but there was no guarantee that her husband would come back home everyday. The wife was compelled to wait for her husband, while the husband had the right to choose to visit any wife. The social status of minor wives was even worse. In the Heian period, a woman had the chance to become the “first wife” if the husband came to live in her house, but in the medieval period a minor wife could never become the principal wife.

Condemned to this lower social status, women suffered in love because of the fickleness and playful behavior of men. Although Noh drama is a male genre, some of Zeami’s plays have women as the main protagonists. Zeami helped women to negotiate with male fickleness by composing scenes in which heroines expressed the deep feelings and sadness of women.

The audiences for Noh drama came from various social strata while the performers were from the lower class. Zeami paid most of his attention to the higher-class audiences. In Fushikaden (his first Noh theory), he advised the performers to start promptly when the high-class spectators reached the theatre. Zeami also asked his performers not to display typical lower-class behavior when performing in front of higher-class audiences. Satisfying the audience was an important factor for the success of Noh performance. Many Noh and other troupes competed to satisfy higher-class audiences, and received gifts and extra money as reward from the audiences. They strived to please higher-class audiences so that they could simply survive.

The shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, also patronized other Noh performers such as Dou’ami. There was competition, and Zeami probably had to worry about his future if he were no longer the shogun’s favorite. Relationship across different social statuses were unreliable. Lower-class people could not expect anything from higher-class and elites. Difference in social status between Zeami and Ashikaga Yoshimitsu probably was a motive for Zeami to
compose Noh plays on the theme of love and relationship among people in different social statuses.

According to Omote Akira, there are eight Zeami plays that are Genkoukyoku (still performed in the present time) in which the main female characters suffer over love and separation from their lovers. These plays are Aoi no ue (Prince Genji’s wife in Genji monogatari), Izutsu (part of the well on the ground), Uneme (court lady), Kinuta (stand of stone or tree), Hanagatami (flower basket), Hanjo (name of court lady at the Han dynasty), Matsukaze (wind that blows pine), and Minazuki barae (ceremony of purifying in June). In these eight plays, Zeami tries to please his main audience by not blaming male behavior for woman’s suffering over love. The causes of separation fall into two groups: first, male fickleness, as found in Aoi no ue, Izutsu and Uneme; and second, men traveling to the capital or to work, as shown in Kinuta, Hanagatami, Hanjo, Matsukaze and Minazuki barae.

Why did Zeami make male fickleness the cause of separation in the three plays, even though Noh drama was performed to entertain patrons who were male? Probably the answer is that these plays were based on older Japanese literary works, and Zeami could not avoid the theme of male fickleness leading to separation, yet he avoided taking a critical stance on male behavior in these plays.

The main female characters in these three plays are found in older Japanese literary works where they are subordinate to male power. For example, the main character in Aoi no ue is Rokujou no miyasudokoro, one of Prince Genji’s lovers in Genji monogatari, a Japanese tale assumed to have been composed during the middle Heian period. Rokujou no miyasudokoro is the wife of the Crown Prince yet she loves Prince Genji. In Genji monogatari, the lawful wife of Prince Genji, Aoi no ue, dies after giving birth to a girl, and it is believed she was killed by the soul of Rokujou no miyasudokoro. Rokujou no miyasudokoro has held a grudge against Aoi no ue after the two competed for a good place to view a parade including Prince Genji, and Rokujou no miyasudokoro lost and her carriage was ruined.

Rokujou no miyasudokoro appears in the Noh play as a soul attempting to kill Aoi no ue. Certainly, the carriage matter is one of the causes of her grudge, but Prince Genji’s fickleness is also an
important element. Yet Zeami’s play focuses on the carriage incident as the cause of the grudge. There is no sentence or phrase that blames Prince Genji’s fickleness.

The main character in Uneme is also found in other literary works, including Yamato monogatari (a tale assumed to have been composed in the mid-tenth century). Uneme is not a name but the position of a court lady. In Yamato monogatari, Uneme has a love affair with the emperor, but he then has a change of heart. In sadness, Uneme decides to commit suicide by throwing herself into a pond. The emperor composes a poem regretting her death. Yamato monogatari portrays the subordination of woman to man. The emperor has many wives including the empress and court ladies. Women are compelled to tolerate such behavior. Uneme dies without expressing her great sorrow and suffering over love.

In Zeami’s play on this story, the account of her love with the emperor takes up only a quarter of the play. The rest is about the history of Kasuga jinja (a Shinto shrine in Nara), a party that she attended, and other matters. In the play, there is no emphasis on the image of a lovelorn woman because Zeami wanted to avoid talking much about male behavior and relationships.

Zeami could not alter the theme of separation, which came from earlier versions of his stories, but he avoided any direct criticism of male fickleness. Further, Zeami went beyond the earlier versions of these stories by creating space for women to express themselves. Zeami created the world after death of the lovelorn women in his plays. These dead women, such as Uneme, become ghosts who talk about their sufferings over love and their inability to stop loving, rather than talking about male fickleness. Zeami thus created a space for woman who suffered from love to reveal their deep feelings about their suffering. The feelings of these women did not appear in the older literary works, but were clearly expressed in the plays composed by Zeami.

Another cause of separation is due to male traveling to the capital or to work. The main female characters of the five plays (Kinuta, Hanagatami, Hanjo, Matsukaze and Minazuki barae) are not drawn from older literary works. Zeami himself created new heroines and invented the causes of separation. The man’s work and duty were good reasons for leaving his wife at home, because a
man was expected by society to prioritize his work and duty over domestic matters. In line with this social expectation, the female characters are deserted by their male lovers because of circumstance. This theme may be interpreted as Zeami’s tactic to avoid blaming men who leave their wives or lovers. Zeami probably did not want to hurt the feelings of elite audiences, especially the shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, who was his main patron.

Male traveling as the cause of separation is found in some other stories. For example, the male character in Kinuta travels to the capital for a lawsuit; the man in Hanagatami leaves his lover to become an emperor; and the men in Hanjo, Matsukaze, and Minazuki barae travel to work. For these reasons, the women are left at home, waiting for the return of their husband or lover. This situation clearly reflects the situation and status of men and women at that time.

The female leads in Zeami’s Noh plays can negotiate with male power in many ways. The five plays on travel fall into two groups. In the first group, including Hanagatami, Hanjo, and Minazuki, the female lead is alive. In the second group, she is dead. In the first group, the female lead can negotiate with her husband by following after him in the hope of being able to live together again. In the second group, the female lead has become a ghost who can express her suffering.

In Hanagatami, Hanjo, and Minazuki barae the female leads initially wait for their husbands to return, but later decide to travel in search of their husbands. Zeami composed these stories to emphasize the courage of women. Even though the women do not know whether they can meet their lovers, and there is a possibility the husbands have forgotten them, they still travel in search. Finally, the women in these three plays meet their lovers and live together again. Zeami probably wanted to show that loyalty to one’s husband brought a good result, as well as offering comfort to wives who waited for their husband’s return. Possibly Zeami also wanted to teach women to have only one husband.

At the start of Kinuta, the female lead is alive. She also waits for her husband, and dies from sadness after hearing he will stay longer in the capital. She becomes a ghost who visits her husband and is then able to express her suffering.
In all Zeami’s plays except *Aoi no ue* the woman has lower status than the man. Zeami depicts the sadness of such women after separation from their lovers. Even though some of the women (as shown in *Hanagatami*, *Hanjo* and *Minazuki barae*) can meet their lovers again, most of the plays portray the unhappiness and anxiety of the women while waiting for their lover’s return.

In the medieval period, the sufferings over love of lower-class women was probably concealed in real life because males departed without any commitment. Zeami’s *Noh* plays gave the women an opportunity to reveal their deep feelings of suffering and disappointment.

**Conclusion**

*Noh* drama is generally considered a male genre. Zeami himself was born in a social environment of male chauvinism. But his *Noh* plays concerning lovelorn women can be seen as creating space for women to show their reactions toward male fickleness. Zeami was successful in composing *Noh* plays that both satisfied the shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, by not blaming male love behavior while at the same time giving a chance for women to reveal their feelings. Zeami subtly disclosed the gender inequality of his period.

Zeami’s plays were influenced by the gender relations and social structure of the medieval period. In the male dominated society, women were taught to be subordinate to male power and control. But some of the female leads in Zeami’s plays show their courage by leaving their homes to look for their beloved ones, while others die of love’s suffering and become ghosts who openly express their deep feelings. Zeami attempted to create a space for women to negotiate with the male-dominant ideology on gender relation. Zeami’s *Noh* plays depict women who dare to speak about their unhappiness and who have enough courage to step outside their houses in order to look for their husbands or lovers.
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