

# The End of the “World”

## Tsuruya Nanboku IV’s Female Ghosts and Late-Tokugawa Kabuki

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**T**ōkaidō *Yotsuya kaidan* 東海道四谷怪談 (Tōkaidō, Ghost Stories at Yotsuya) is the most famous of Tsuruya Nanboku’s 鶴屋南北 IV (1755–1829) plays and indeed the preeminent ghost play in the kabuki repertoire. In it, Oiwa お岩 is poisoned and disfigured by her neighbor and betrayed by her husband, Iemon 伊右衛門, who agrees to abandon her and marry the neighbor’s granddaughter, Oume お梅. After a truly horrific scene in which she accidentally slits her throat with a sword, Oiwa returns repeatedly as a ghost to drive Iemon and others responsible for her suffering to their deaths. Oiwa has lingered in Japan’s cultural memory for almost two centuries now, reimagined again and again in any number of theatrical productions, movies, playbills, posters, and photographs.

*Yotsuya kaidan* was first staged in 1825 at the Nakamura-za 中村座, a theater in Edo. In act 5 of that production, the ghost of Oiwa, played by Onoe Kikugorō 尾上菊五郎 III (1784–1849), emerged from a consecration cloth with an infant cradled in her arms. Oiwa was thus figured as an *ubume* 産女 (literally, “a woman giving birth”), a particular type of ghost associated with pregnancy and childbirth that would have had deep psychological resonances for the audience of Nanboku’s day. Nanboku employs the *ubume* in a number of earlier plays—indeed, it appears in almost all of his major ghost plays. *Ubume* were ubiquitous in the theater and literature of this period, appearing again and again not only in Nanboku’s works but also in the fiction of major writers such as Shikitei Sanba 式亭三馬 (1776–1822), Santō Kyōden 山東京伝 (1761–1816), and Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴 (1767–1848). Our interpretation of the meaning of this scene in *Yotsuya kaidan* must be tied, then, to a larger understanding of Nanboku’s and the kabuki theater’s mobilization of the *ubume* as a dramatic trope and of the

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Figure 1. *Nagori no hana Yotsuya kaidan*, vol. 2, pp. 26 ura–27 omote. Onoe Kikugorō III as Oiwa (left) and Ichikawa Danjūrō VII as Iemon (right). Private collection.

roles the *ubume* played in the broader context of nineteenth-century cultural production. In other words, we must ask why ghosts in the theater and literature of the early nineteenth century were associated so pervasively with pregnancy, and also why the *ubume* became so popular as a motif, particularly in the first three decades of the century.

*Nagori no hana Yotsuya kaidan* 名残花四谷怪談 (The Flowers of Kikugorō's Farewell Performance: Ghost Stories at Yotsuya, 1826), an illustrated digest of the play published by Hanagasa Bunkyo 花笠文京 I (1785–1860) and Keisai Eisen 溪斎英泉 (1790–1848) immediately after the production, gives a sense of how the scene in act 5 might have looked (figure 1). On the right we see Ichikawa Danjūrō 市川團十郎 VII (1791–1859) as Iemon, coming through a temple gate to pour water on a consecration cloth hung between four bamboo poles—an object known by the name of the ritual in which it is used: *nagare kanjō* 流灌頂 (literally, “flowing consecration”). Iemon is offering a prayer for the repose of the spirits of Oiwa and their son, even as he shudders with fear at the prospect of his dead wife's revenge. The water in the ladle has turned into fire—a “soul flame,” a common visual representation of a spirit that either accompanies or stands in for the ghost itself. On the left-hand page, Oiwa's ghost rises from the cloth, hugging the baby to her breast.

Although *Yotsuya kaidan* was staged approximately twenty times during the last forty years of the Tokugawa period in both Edo and Osaka, this scene was dropped after the first production in 1825 and replaced with a special effect in which Oiwa emerges from a burning lantern. With the exception of a few modern revivals it played no part in the play’s subsequent performative or cinematic reception. The meaning of the *ubume* and the *nagare kanjō* was so particular to its time that there was no reason to revert back to the original staging, especially since, as I will demonstrate below, Nanboku essentially used Oiwa to strip the *ubume* of its conventional associations.

There is one area in which the scene has remained important, however—the texts of *Yotsuya kaidan*. Kabuki scholar Gunji Masakatsu’s 郡司正勝 edition of the script, generally acknowledged as the best reconstruction of the text of the first performance, includes this exchange between Iemon and the ghost:

*Iemon picks up the ladle in the bucket and approaches [the nagare kanjō]. Then a ghost flute (netori 寝鳥) is played with the low beating of the drum (usu doro doro 薄ドロドロ), and there is the solemn sound of a small gong. Iemon pours water on the cloth. The water turns into a soul flame as it touches the cloth. The eerie sound of the drumming picks up its pace, growing more intense. The snow falls harder.<sup>1</sup> Oiwa appears from the cloth in the guise of an ubume; her lower body is drenched in blood, and she cradles her baby in her arms. Suddenly catching sight of her, Iemon steps back, startled. They change positions and Oiwa proceeds to stage left, leaving red footprints on the white snow. Iemon edges back into the house and Oiwa follows him. Torn pieces of paper are scattered throughout the house; Oiwa walks across them, leaving bloody stains.*

IMON. Hmmm. What a spiteful woman. I know you’re a ghost, but do listen to what I have to say. I married Kihei’s 喜兵衛 granddaughter in the hope of sneaking into the Kōno’s 高野 residence and directing the other loyal retainers. Disloyal in appearance, I’m actually loyal at heart. And now everything has been ruined—all on account of a woman’s stupid grudge! You made me kill my grandfather-in-law and bride. Kihei’s daughter and nurse drowned as a result of your ghostly curse! And on top of that, you cruelly murdered our newborn boy! Is this your curse, dead woman, to discontinue my line? What a frightening woman. (*Iemon shows emotion.*)

*Iemon snaps at Oiwa. Oiwa in turn shows him the baby cradled in her arms. (Iemon shows emotion.)*

IMON. Can it be! The dead woman appears to have cared for the boy! (*Iemon shows emotion.*)

*Iemon joyfully takes the baby in his arms.*

IMON. Despite all that came between us, you’re still my wife. Well done, well done. If those are your true feelings, depart in peace. Hail Buddha, hail Buddha.

(*Iemon cradles the baby and chants Buddhist prayers. Oiwa covers her ears with both hands, blocking out Iemon’s prayers.*)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Snowfall is suggested by the beating of the drum.

<sup>2</sup> *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, pp. 382–84. This edition is based on a manuscript by Suzuki Hakutō 鈴木白藤 (1767–1851), a former Tokugawa government commissioner of documents and an avid book collector. Suzuki is thought to have had access to part of the script used in the 1825 production. In this passage from the script, Oume is referred to as Kihei’s daughter and Kihei as Iemon’s father-in-law. In



Figure 2. *Okkyōgen gakuya no honsetsu, nihen*, vol. 1, p. 16 *ura*. Hōsa Bunko 蓬左文庫, Nagoya. Courtesy of the National Institute of Japanese Literature.

A moment later, Oiwa suddenly disappears. In his shock, Iemon drops the baby, who instantly turns into a stone statue of the Bodhisattva Jizō.

This is an incredible scene for a number of reasons. First, it must have been dazzling: imagine the bloody footprints and the spectacular sight of the ghost rising up over the water, most likely with her lower body enveloped in flames, then being lifted into the air by a rope suspended from the ceiling. While none of this is described in the script, the details may be determined from the guide to kabuki special effects *Okkyōgen gakuya no honsetsu* 御狂言楽屋本説 (What Really Happens Backstage, 1858–1859) in the entry on “Asagaobi no yūrei” あさがほ火の幽霊 (Ghosts that burn like a morning glory)—a name that derives, presumably, from the shape of the ghost’s burning robe. The presence in figure 2 of a *nagare kanjō* suggests that the effect would also have been used in the *Yotsuya kaidan* scene. As explained in *Okkyōgen gakuya no honsetsu*:

Ghosts that burn like a morning glory: The actor puts on a long robe that tapers below the waist. This is then saturated with *shōchū* 焼酎 [a type of alcoholic beverage]. When the ghost is hoisted up from above, the tip of the robe is set on fire and the kimono burns below the waist. This is known as the “morning glory.”<sup>3</sup>

order to avoid confusion, since Kihei’s daughter (Oume’s mother) is also mentioned, I have made the relationships among the characters consistent with the rest of the play in my translation.

<sup>3</sup> *Okkyōgen gakuya no honsetsu* 1859, vol. 1, p. 16 *ura*. For a transcription of the text, see *Okkyōgen gakuya no honsetsu* 1967. For a discussion of other ghost-related effects taken up by the work, see Leiter 2002.



The second brilliant aspect of this scene is Nanboku's profoundly unconventional use of the *ubume* trope. These female ghosts, who generally appear holding babies, embody both the sufferings of women who died during pregnancy or childbirth and the love and concern of the dead mothers for the babies they left behind, or took with them. Oiwa, however, is responsible for her son's death. He is her very first victim, in fact: the rats that act as her agents throughout the play drag the infant to her immediately after she dies in act 2. On the face of it, then, there is no reason for Oiwa to be appearing as an *ubume* at all. And so the question arises: Why did Nanboku invoke this trope? What exactly is going on in this scene? The answer has significance for more than our understanding of this one play.

Previous scholarship on the *ubume* has focused on medieval and early modern forms of Buddhism and the gendered practices and beliefs associated with them.<sup>4</sup> Research on early nineteenth-century literature and theater has continued this line of investigation, treating *ubume* in these contexts as a reflection of religious and medical discourses.<sup>5</sup> The present article is concerned with *ubume* less as a site for the preservation of religious and folk meaning than as a figure whose significance was constructed through its representation in kabuki, specifically in the popular ghost plays of Nanboku. In the pages that follow, I will outline the complexly layered meanings that *ubume* evoke, then explore how they were mobilized in kabuki plays and prose fiction by Nanboku and his contemporaries, showing that Nanboku in particular made these ghostly figures increasingly central to his plays and ultimately used them to overturn kabuki's conventional reliance on an established body of basic plot structures—sets of characters and settings, essentially, that furnished the outline of a story.

These structures, called *sekai* 世界 (“worlds”), served in effect as the communal memory of the kabuki theater. Kabuki adhered so closely to established *sekai* that playwrights found it necessary to consult a manual, *Sekai kōmoku* 世界綱目, which listed *sekai*, their associated characters, and source texts. *Sekai* with extensive sets of characters appeared in this manual under overarching headings such as “*Sekai* for Kabuki History Plays” (*Kabuki jidai kyōgen sekai no bu* 歌舞伎時代狂言世界之部),

<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as Tsutsumi Kunihiro 堤邦彦, Tamamuro Taijō 圭室諦成, Kōdate Naomi 高達奈緒美, and recently Hank Glassman have situated the *ubume* in the context of beliefs and practices associated with the *Ketsubon kyō* 血盆経 (*Blood Pool Sutra*) and religious salvation for women. Sasaki Kōshō 佐々木孝正, Shinmura Taku 新村拓, and Yasui Manami 安井真奈美 have also shed light on medical practices that competed with Buddhist means of pacifying the *ubume*.

<sup>5</sup> In an insightful analysis of Nanboku's ghost plays, Takahashi Noriko 高橋則子 argues that Nanboku superimposed images of female suffering and grief onto the ghosts by presenting them as *ubume*. See Takahashi 1985. Kitashiro Nobuko 北城伸子, who has written on popular Buddhism and *ubume* in the nineteenth century, notes that from the late eighteenth century, the monk Yūten 祐天, who was well known for pacifying the ghost of Kasane 累, came to be even more famous for his ability to assure safe childbearing, and temples frequently held pacification rituals alongside kabuki productions featuring *ubume*. See Kitashiro 2005. Few other scholars have discussed *ubume* in literature and theater. For a general discussion of *ubume* in literature, see Nishida 1980 and 1989; for an analysis of images of *ubume* in Santō Kyōden's studies of Buddhist hells and ghosts, see Inoue 1997.

many of which were adapted from military chronicles, and “*Sekai for Kabuki Household-Crisis Plays*” (*Kabuki o [ie] kyōgen sekai no bu* 歌舞伎御[家]狂言世界之部), which included the subcategory of “Revenge Plots and Similar Types” (*Oie kyōgen no uchi katakiuchi no bu narabi ni rui* 御家狂言之内 敵討之部并に類). The large majority of the *sekai* included in the manual concerned samurai themes, suggesting the frequency with which productions drew on those well-known frameworks.<sup>6</sup>

From the seventeenth century onward, female ghosts were routinely incorporated as spectacle into the framework of historical *sekai*, including those dealing with household crises (*oie sōdō* 御家騒動) and revenge (*katakiuchi* 敵討). Analyzing presentations of Oiwa descending upside down from a lantern, Hattori Yukio 服部幸雄 has explored the subversive potential of female ghosts in the early kabuki *onryōgoto* 怨霊事 (ghost performances), arguing that the ghosts’ “violent eruption of emotion” represented the only means available in the feudal context for female characters to “become equal to men, or surpass them.”<sup>7</sup> He cites Nanboku’s use of female ghosts in kabuki as a particularly vibrant example of what he sees as the subversive popular culture of the late Tokugawa period.<sup>8</sup> My own investigation leads in a different direction, showing that Nanboku gradually brought female ghosts to the center of his plays as a means of reworking or even dismantling the *sekai*. Nanboku innovated the *ubume* by assigning these ghosts for the first time to actors of leading male roles (*tachiyaku* 立役). In contrast to earlier plays, in which female ghosts were played exclusively by female-role actors and remained confined to subplots where they served merely as spectacle, Nanboku’s ghostly women supplanted the male heroes and came to perform a central role in the context of entire plays, and thus in the history of kabuki itself. The trope of the *ubume*, then, illustrates that a highly self-conscious reworking of kabuki convention had already begun in the early nineteenth century, decades before the Meiji era and its elite movements to reform the social and cultural meaning of kabuki theater.

### *The Origins of the Ubume Image*

The association of ghosts with death during pregnancy or childbirth can be traced back a very long way. Childbirth was one of the most common causes of women’s death in premodern Japan, and the fear of this very real danger inspired numerous tales in a wide variety of genres. The earliest known account of the ghost of a woman holding her baby in her arms—a distant ancestor of Nanboku’s *ubume*—occurs in the

<sup>6</sup> There are also *sekai* for ancient times, contemporary plays, chivalrous male parts, and religious and ceremonial themes. These entries tend to be much less significant and to contain fewer characters than those listed under the historical categories. See *Sekai kōmoku*.

<sup>7</sup> Hattori 2005, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Hattori explores Nanboku’s chaotic upheaval of order in the chapter “Nanboku geki no kōzu: Gyakuten to konton no kōshō to kyōfu” 南北劇の構図: 逆転と混沌の哄笑と恐怖 (The Structure of Nanboku’s Plays: Farce and Fear in Subversion and Chaos), in which he argues that Nanboku attempted to subvert the late Tokugawa social order and its expectations through nonsensical farce. Hattori 2005, pp. 9–98.

story “Yorimitsu no rōdō Taira no Suetake ubume ni au koto” 頼光郎等平季武值産女語 (How Yorimitsu’s Attendant Taira no Suetake Encountered an *Ubume*) in the early twelfth-century collection *Konjaku monogatari* 今昔物語集. In this tale, a group of men discuss a certain frightening *ubume* who has been appearing in a place called Watari 渡. One of the men, Taira no Suetake 平季武, goes off on a dare to cross the river at Watari. As he makes his way across, a strange woman appears and asks him to hold her crying infant. The woman is not described in visual terms: her words are simply overheard by three of the other men from the group who were brave enough to follow Suetake and hide behind a bush as he crossed the river, and we are told that her appearance was accompanied by a terrible stench. The narrative concludes with an extremely ambiguous note by the compiler: “Some people say this *ubume* was a fox playing a trick on a human, others say it was a woman who turned into a spirit (*ryō*) when she died before being able to give birth to her baby girl. That, they say, is the story that has been passed down.”<sup>9</sup>

The image of the *ubume* had been fixed much more clearly in the popular imagination by the mid-Tokugawa period, when a revealing rewriting of the story appeared in *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* 考訂今昔物語, the first widely circulated, woodblock-printed edition of stories from the Heian collection, compiled by the Shinto scholar Izawa Banryō 井沢蟠竜 (also known as Nagahide 長秀, 1668–1730).<sup>10</sup> Banryō, who based *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* on a manuscript he had discovered, included only stories in the Japanese section (which he called *wachō* 和朝), adapting them in a relatively easy-to-understand style mixing kanji and hiragana. He published his collection in thirty volumes, the first half appearing in 1720 and the second in 1733, with illustrations by an unidentified artist.

Banryō’s edition has been much criticized for its cavalier treatment of the original.<sup>11</sup> Banryō explains in his preface (*hanrei* 凡例) that because the manuscript from which he worked was old and contained numerous mistakes, he “made corrections by consulting old journals and records”; omitted episodes found in other collections such as *Uji shūi monogatari* 宇治拾遺物語 (A Collection of Tales from Uji, ca. 1880–1220), *Kokon chomonjū* 古今著聞集 (Notable Tales Old and New, 1254), and *Jikkin shō* 十訓抄 (A Miscellany of Ten Maxims, 1252); and corrected errors in the stated sources of stories.<sup>12</sup> In short, Banryō seems to have been most interested in preparing a readable,

<sup>9</sup> *Konjaku monogatari* 27:43, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> The title of this work is given as *Konjaku monogatari* on the cover and inside cover; the wording *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* appears, strictly speaking, only in the preface. See *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* 1820. Even so, I use *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* to avoid confusion with the Heian-period text and also to accord with standard academic practice. Inagaki Taiichi’s 稲垣泰一 1990 facsimile publication of the work, for instance, is titled *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari*.

<sup>11</sup> For example, it falsely attributed the original *Konjaku monogatari* to Minamoto no Takakuni 源隆国 and thus initiated a long-lived misbelief. The compiler of *Konjaku monogatari* is unknown. For background on *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari*, see Inagaki 1990; Ueda 1991; Katō 1995. For a facsimile of the text, see *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* 1990.

<sup>12</sup> *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* 1990, vol. 1, pp. 25–27.

enjoyable text. He felt free to change the order of the anecdotes, to edit their content, to fill in segments missing from his source manuscripts, and even to include interesting stories from his own time period.

Viewed from the perspective of a modern-day *Konjaku monogatari* specialist, Banryō's approach decreases the value of his text, making it little more than a corrupt variant of the twelfth-century collection. Katayose Masayoshi 片寄正義, for example, takes issue with it as "a total rewriting in which the body of the text has been changed and reorganized and sections inserted and discarded as the compiler saw fit." While he allows that "it may have had the positive effect of familiarizing the public with the anecdotes in the collection," he takes a dismissive attitude toward the edition itself, stating that "in terms of its value as a text and its success in transmitting the true form of *Konjaku monogatari*, it is a poor edition."<sup>13</sup> For the vast majority of Tokugawa readers, however, apart from a select group of intellectuals who had access to manuscript editions of the collection, *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* was the only available text of *Konjaku monogatari*. Banryō's edition was clearly read by, and served as source material for, Tokugawa writers of historical fiction—particularly of *yomihon* 読本 (reading books, collections of sophisticated short stories or extensive narratives that often draw on Chinese sources)—such as Tsuga Teishō 都賀庭鐘 (1718–ca. 1794?) and Kyokutei Bakin.<sup>14</sup> In that sense, Banryō's editing and rewriting was a successful attempt to incorporate *Konjaku monogatari* into the literature of his age, and to make it resonate with Tokugawa-period sensibilities.

The *ubume* anecdote from *Konjaku monogatari* appears in volume 13 of *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* under the title "Taira no Suetake ubume ni au hanashi" 平季武值姑獲鳥語 (Taira no Suetake Meets an *Ubume*). While the general contours of the story remain the same, Banryō rewrites it to heighten the drama and introduces three significant alterations. First, he writes the word *ubume* not as 産女 (woman who gives birth) but as 姑獲鳥, a combination that can also be read *kokakuchō*, the Japanese pronunciation of the name of the legendary Chinese bird *guhuoniao*. Second, he deletes the two explanations of the woman's nature that are offered at the conclusion of the Heian-period text: clearly by the mid-Tokugawa period, it was no longer even necessary to pose the question of whether the figure was a mother or a fox, because the existence of the *ubume* was now widely accepted. Finally, as an indication that the figure of the *ubume* had by this time also been defined in visual terms, the woman (who in the original is only *heard* by the men behind the bush) is shown in the illustration passing her infant to Suetake (figure 3). She has long hair; her lower body is drenched in blood, evoking the blood she shed during her miscarriage and suggesting that she is suffering in Blood Pool Hell (*chi no ike jigoku* 血の池地獄, a Buddhist hell associated with childbirth and menstruation); and her body fades away, ghost-like, toward the bottom.

<sup>13</sup> Katayose 1974, vol. 1, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Inagaki 1990, p. 557.





Figure 3. *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari*, vol. 13, p. 19 omote. Waseda University Library.



Figure 4. *Gazu hyakki yagyō*, vol. 2, unpaginated. Tōkyō Geijutsu Daigaku Fuzoku Toshokan 東京芸術大学附属図書館.

*Gazu hyakki yagyō* 画图百鬼夜行 (The Illustrated Night Parade of a Hundred Monsters, 1776) by Toriyama Sekien 鳥山石燕 (1712–1788) offers a similar portrayal of this type of ghost.<sup>15</sup> Published fifty years after the first volumes of *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari*, Sekien’s catalog of fantastic creatures, many of which had not until then had an established pictorial form, had a huge influence on subsequent depictions of the beings it includes, especially in book illustrations. The entry on the *ubume* uses the same kanji for the name as Banryō’s work, alluding to the legendary bird (figure 4). The picture shows a woman holding the baby she lost, which she hopes to entrust to someone still alive and thus restore to life. As in the *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari* illustration, her robe, which fades into thin air before it reaches the ground, is stained with blood—here again, an indication that she is suffering in Blood Pool Hell.

The *nagare kanjō* that is visible in the background was typically erected in running water, along with a wooden stupa, for use in a Buddhist ritual intended to free the souls of women who died during pregnancy or childbirth from the agonies of Blood Pool Hell. The ritual took various forms, but most often involved passersby chanting

<sup>15</sup> See *Gazu hyakki yagyō* 1776. For a reproduction and transcription, see *Gazu hyakki yagyō* 1992.

a prayer and pouring a ladle of water over the cloth; people would continue doing this until the words that had been written on the cloth (or sometimes the red with which the cloth had been dyed) were completely washed away.<sup>16</sup> The things we see here—the consecration cloth, stupa, and running water, as well as the ghostly mother cradling her baby in her arms—are precisely those that appeared in the *Yotsuya kaidan* scene. Nanboku was drawing, then, on an image of the *ubume* that had already been firmly established by the eighteenth century.

*Ubume: Religious Beliefs and Medical Practice*

As noted above, the kanji 姑獲鳥 that Banryō and Sekien used to write the word *ubume* evoked both the image of a dead woman holding the child she hoped somehow to revive as well as that of the legendary bird known in Chinese as *guhuoniao*. This semantic duality was characteristic of the Tokugawa-period reception of *ubume*, and the two seemingly different associations were in fact often loosely connected in contemporary writings. I will take up the two aspects separately here, beginning with the *ubume* as a dead woman.

To a large extent, the potency of the *ubume* as a symbol of death during pregnancy or childbirth derived from the notion of Blood Pool Hell, and from the religious and medical practices that emerged from belief in this hell. Since the ninth century, pregnancy, along with menstruation, had been viewed in the context of *onmyōdo* 陰陽道 (the Way of Yin and Yang) as a source of female defilement, and women's connection to these conditions became a reason to exclude them from Shinto ritual.<sup>17</sup> Then, as the blood taboo spread among aristocrats and even beyond, the notion of defilement was reinforced by Buddhist discrimination against women. In the Muromachi period in particular, as the concept of Blood Pool Hell gained currency, death during pregnancy or childbirth came to be regarded as a severe sin.

By this time, pictorial depictions circulated visions of various new types of hell reserved specifically for women: *futame jigoku* 兩婦地獄 (Two-Woman Hell) or *futamegurui jigoku* 二妻狂地獄 (Hell of Competing Wives), where jealous women were turned into serpents; *umazume jigoku* 不産女地獄 (Hell for Childless Women), for those who were barren; and Blood Pool Hell, for the sins of menstruation and the shedding of blood during childbirth. The fact that these hells were related to the major events in women's lives—love, marriage, and childbirth—imbued them with a particular immediacy. Already by the late medieval period, the existence of Blood Pool Hell was commonly accepted.<sup>18</sup>

The emergence of this belief in Blood Pool Hell has been linked to the importation from China, sometime in the medieval period, of a short Buddhist scripture known

<sup>16</sup> Tamamuro 1963, pp. 202–203.

<sup>17</sup> Narikiyo 2003; also see Minamoto 1996. The menstruation taboo is set out in *Kōninshiki* 弘仁式 (Procedures of the Kōnin Era, ninth century) and *Engishiki* 延喜式 (Procedures of the Engi Era, 907–927).

<sup>18</sup> For more on these hells, see Tsutsumi 1996 and Kawamura 1996.

as the *Blood Pool Sutra*. An apocryphal sutra that was first circulated by the members of local religions in tenth-century China, the *Blood Pool Sutra* was accepted over time by various Buddhist sects.<sup>19</sup> In most versions of the text, Mokuren Sonja 目蓮尊者, a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha, visits Blood Pool Hell and sees the immense suffering women undergo as punishment for the blood they shed during childbirth and menstruation—blood that pollutes drinking water and defiles the earth gods. For the sake of his mother, the disciple asks to be taught some means of obtaining salvation for women. He is told that women can be saved by attending or holding ceremonies at which a monk recites this very sutra.

The *Blood Pool Sutra* and the hells associated with it were promulgated in the late medieval period by traveling nuns from Kumano 熊野. As Hank Glassman has noted, Blood Pool Hell “only became a real place, capturing the imagination, when collectively recreated through public storytelling”: the nuns’ performances, complete with visual aids, established a common notion of the topography of this hell and helped generate various redemptive practices.<sup>20</sup> Monks of the Jōdo 浄土 sect actively preached the salvation of women in the early Tokugawa period; in the mid- to late Tokugawa period, Sōtō Zen 曹洞禅 monks became the most active proponents of the *Blood Pool Sutra*.<sup>21</sup> Throughout these years, the redemptive power of the sutra, and by extension of the religious establishment, offered a remedy for women’s pollution at the same time that the Buddhist sects reinforced the very notion of this pollution.<sup>22</sup>

As the view that it was deeply sinful for a woman to die with an unborn baby in her womb took hold, techniques were developed to free women from this sin and thus from the fate that awaited them in Blood Pool Hell. The *nagare kanjō* was one such ritual. Special burial practices were also developed for pregnant women who had the misfortune to die before giving birth. The fear that the baby might still be alive in the dead woman’s womb led to the practice of separating the mother and baby, either physically or symbolically. By the early modern period, if not earlier, it was common for the fetus to be surgically removed from the dead mother before burial.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> According to Kōdate Naomi, the *Blood Pool Sutra* appeared in the context of tenth-century popular beliefs in China and became extremely prevalent in the Ming and Qing periods. See Kōdate 2004 and Kōdate 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Glassman 2008, p. 184. For visual sources and a discussion of the Kumano nuns’ proselytizing, see Tsutsumi 1996, pp. 178–207.

<sup>21</sup> Williams 2005, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> The *Blood Pool Sutra* exists in many forms. Some Japanese adaptations associated the origin of Blood Pool Hell with the sins of a jealous woman, so that women who had turned into serpents out of jealousy were depicted as residing there as well. Most often the sutra was invoked for the sake of deceased mothers.

<sup>23</sup> According to two articles by Minakata Kumagusu 南方熊楠 that were first published in *Kyōdo kenkyū* 郷土研究 in September 1931 and August 1936, the practice is also mentioned in early Chinese texts such as *Yiyuan* 異苑 (Garden of Marvels, fifth century) and Hong Mai’s 洪邁 (1123–1202) *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志 (Records of the Listener). See Minakata 1979.

Instances of such folk separative practices are recorded in *Nihon san'iku shūzoku shiryō shūsei* 日本産育習俗資料集成 (Compilation of Birth and Rearing-Related Practices in Japan, 1975), the report of a massive research project originally begun in the 1930s by folklorist Yanagita Kunio 柳田国男 (1875–1962).<sup>24</sup> The section on rituals and beliefs pertaining to the death of pregnant women reveals that separative surgery was practiced throughout Japan even after the Meiji restoration of 1868.<sup>25</sup> Many of the materials presented stress the importance of this surgery in preventing the mother's return as a ghost—which is to say, as an *ubume*.

The Buddhist clergy, for their part, actively promoted paths to salvation that could take the place of the surgical practice by separating the fetus from the mother's corpse in symbolic ways. Tsutsumi Kunihiro describes one procedure developed by the Sōtō Zen sect in which the monk would place a charm, often an inscription of a section of the *Blood Pool Sutra*, in the dead woman's mouth and chant a prayer over her, freeing the woman's soul from the *ubume* fate.<sup>26</sup> The symbolic Buddhist ritual did not replace the surgery entirely, as seen from the persistence of the latter procedure into the nineteenth century and beyond. *Tassei zusetsu* 達生図説 (Illustrated Explanation of Childbirth, 1858)—a book on obstetrical nursing consisting primarily of a transcription by Kondō Kenzan 近藤謙山 (1814–1861) of the teachings of Kondō Naoyoshi 近藤直義 (dates unknown), a doctor from Echizen 越前 province—details the proper procedure for the separative surgery and argues that Buddhist practices are ineffective, serving only to alleviate people's fear.<sup>27</sup> Clearly both practices coexisted throughout the Tokugawa period.

Any number of fictional tales suggest just how prevalent the fear of death during pregnancy was, and how keenly people felt the need for a special procedure to separate fetuses from their dead mothers. *Kōya monogatari* 高野物語 (The Tale of Kōya, Muro-machi period), a collection of stories told by monks about the reasons they took the tonsure, includes a revealing episode. In it the narrator recounts the story of his pregnant mistress, who is brutally murdered and buried by his jealous wife in his absence. The mistress's ghost entrusts a monk with her bloodstained sleeve and a message written in blood, hoping that her husband will realize what happened and find her and separate the fetus from her body: "For a woman to die while pregnant is a terrible sin. Please swiftly dig me out of my grave and take out the infant inside me. And then please pray for me."<sup>28</sup> In the 1692 song "Nippon nyogo no shima" 日本女護之島 (Japan: The island of women) a pregnant woman threatened with death pleads, "I'm terrified of the Buddhist punishment that is bound to befall me if I die with an infant inside me!"<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Onshi Zaidan Boshi Aiiiku Kai 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Shinmura 1996, pp. 151–52. The surgery was performed using a sickle. For an analysis of this practice from the perspective of folklore studies, see Katsurai 1979; Yamaguchi 1979.

<sup>26</sup> Tsutsumi 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Kondō 1858, vol. 3, 39 *ura*–40 *omote*.

<sup>28</sup> *Kōya monogatari*, p. 339.

<sup>29</sup> The song is cited in Nishida 1989, pp. 111–12.



The beliefs and practices I have described reflect changes that took place at the beginning of the Tokugawa period in the way infants were regarded. In earlier times, children who died before they reached the age of seven did not have to be buried because they were not yet entirely “human”; they were considered closer to deities or to the other world. It was only from the late Muromachi and early Tokugawa periods that children really came to be viewed as human, as we can see from their appearance in illustrated hell scrolls of a type of hell or limbo specifically for small children that took the form of a dry riverbed and was known as *sai no kawara* 賽の河原.<sup>30</sup> The gradual incorporation of infants and children into pacification rituals is seen in *Shiryō gedatsu monogatari kikigaki* 死霊解脱物語聞書 (Stories Heard about the Salvation of Dead Spirits, first published 1690, first illustrated edition 1712). In this Buddhist tale, which illustrates the priest Yūten’s holy powers and features his exorcism of the famous ghost Kasane 累, Yūten gives a Buddhist name to the spirit of a six-year-old boy drowned in a lake by his parents.<sup>31</sup>

If women had long been particularly afraid of dying during pregnancy or childbirth, the living now gradually became subject to a new fear, nourished by a web of beliefs reinforced by Buddhist institutions, of the dead woman who lingered in this world as a ghost to try to revive her child. Indeed, as time passed, the *ubume* seems to have gone from an object of sympathy to one primarily of fear. Yasui Manami suggests that the practices and beliefs originally intended to save a woman from suffering in hell gradually changed in significance, coming to focus less on the woman herself than on those who survived her: it became necessary to separate the deceased from her child, either surgically or symbolically, and to perform rituals of pacification precisely so that the woman would not appear as a ghost in an attempt to revive her baby.<sup>32</sup>

This fearsome Tokugawa image of the *ubume*, with her bloody robes and her baby in her arms, ultimately found its way into Nanboku’s oeuvre, where—even as it retained its potential to evoke the horror and pain associated with Blood Pool Hell and separative surgery—it would be put to dramatically different use.

<sup>30</sup> Kuroda 1989, pp. 106–13.

<sup>31</sup> *Shiryō gedatsu monogatari kikigaki*, pp. 374–85. For a detailed analysis of this work see Takada 1991.

<sup>32</sup> Yasui 2003, p. 498. Not surprisingly, this shift is reflected in literary depictions of *ubume*. The seventeenth-century *kanazōshi* 仮名草子 (kana booklets) were very much concerned with the situation of the woman herself—they focused on her sin, suffering, efforts to attain buddhahood, and final salvation by a monk. In one tale in the katakana edition of *Inga monogatari* 因果物語 (Tales of Retribution, 1660?), a collection attributed to the monk Suzuki Shōsan 鈴木正三, a young woman whose lower body is “drenched in blood” appears to a traveling monk in a dream. She instructs him to rewrite the text on her stupa and copy the sutra to help lighten her suffering. She turns out to be a daughter—who died in childbirth—of the proprietor of the inn where the monk is staying. Again, the blood serves as a reminder both of the woman’s suffering during childbirth and of her present suffering in Blood Pool Hell. It is no coincidence, of course, that the authors of texts like this one, with their emphasis on the efficacy of religious practice, were often monks. For the text of this tale, see *Inga monogatari*, p. 294.



Figure 5. *Bei Bei kyōdan*, vol. 1, p. 7 *ura*.  
Hōsa Bunko, Nagoya. Courtesy of the  
National Institute of Japanese Literature.

### *The Ubume as a Bird*

As noted earlier, the term *ubume* also referred to a legendary bird. This second meaning, superimposed on the image of the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth or pregnancy, appears, for example, in a late seventeenth-century work, *Kokon hyakumonogatari hyōban* 古今百物語評判 (An Analysis of a Hundred Ghost Stories Old and New, 1686). This *kanazōshi*, based on a manuscript by Yamaoka Genrin 山岡元隣 (1631–1672), offers a Neo-Confucian interpretation of the *ubume* as a hybrid image of a bird and a pregnant woman. A disciple asks his teacher about the familiar ghost, saying, “Stories tell that when a woman dies during pregnancy, her attachment (*shūshin* 執心) takes the form of this ghost [the *ubume*]. Typically, her lower body is drenched in blood.” The teacher replies:

In China, the *ubume* is called *guhuoniao* or *yexing younū* 夜行遊女 [Jp. *yakō yūjo*; literally, “night-wandering woman”].<sup>33</sup> *Xuanzhong ji* 玄中記 (Record of Mysterious Creatures) says that this bird is a type of evil deity. When it puts on feathers, it turns into a bird; when it takes the feathers off, it turns into a woman. This is what happens after the death of women in childbirth. For this reason, the bird has breasts and takes pleasure in snatching people’s children and making them its own. You should never hang children’s clothes outside because then the bird drops blood on one of them as a mark, and the child develops convulsions. This bird is seen a lot in Jingzhou 荊州 province. In addition, *Bencao gangmu* says that there are no male *ubume* and that they often appear at night in the seventh or eighth month to inflict harm.... Originally this creature must have emerged spontaneously from the corpse of a pregnant woman, and then later others of the same sort were born. Since it originated from the *qi* 氣 [energy] of the pregnant woman, it acts on that nature.<sup>34</sup>

The text continues with a general explanation of ghosts and spirits as the *qi* of people who harbor grudges and remain in this world after they die. While an illustration of

<sup>33</sup> The teacher probably cites directly from *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Compendium of Materia Medica), in which *yexing younū* is written 夜行遊女, using the character 游. Almost all Tokugawa-period Japanese texts seem to substitute the character 遊.

<sup>34</sup> *Kokon hyakumonogatari hyōban*, p. 32.

a woman drenched in blood accompanies the text, the text clearly associates her with the form of a bird.

The notion of the *ubume* as a bird occurs frequently in Tokugawa-period natural science dictionaries and in the personal journals of literati, who had wide access to Chinese texts. Similar accounts of the *ubume* appear in *Tenchi waku monchin* 天地或問珍 (Questioning the Rare Things of Heaven and Earth, 1710), the encyclopedia *Wakan sansai zue* 和漢三才図会 (Collected Illustrations of the Three Realms, Japanese and Chinese, 1713) by Terajima Ryōan 寺島良安 (dates unknown), and *Matsuya hikki* 松屋筆記 (The Journal of Matsuya, early nineteenth century), among other works. In these sources, the image of the bird tended to inspire a view of the *ubume* as a rather aggressive and harmful ghost.

As the passage from *Kokon hyakumonogatari hyōban* shows, this aspect of *ubume* belief drew heavily on the imported legend of the Chinese bird while also fusing it with older folk conceptions of the *ubume* as the ghost of a woman who had died in pregnancy or childbirth. The Chinese legend, however, has a completely different basis. Yamada Keiji 山田慶児 demonstrates that the *guhuoniao* originates in old medical beliefs concerning malicious spirits that fly into a child's body, displacing the child's spirit and causing convulsions, as described in the earliest extant Chinese pharmacological work, *Wushier bing fang* 五十二病方 (Prescriptions for Fifty-Two Ailments, ca. third century).<sup>35</sup> Old legends of the *guhuoniao* harming children gradually fused with another about women who could put on feathers and turn into birds, which then led to stories about pregnant women who coveted other people's children. Originally, then, the *guhuoniao* was a sort of metaphor-turned-folktale of a dangerous flying thing, a bird that pursues little children.

The coincidental development of this trope into a female bird connected with pregnancy was given another life in Japan. At some point, the Chinese characters for the bird were given the Japanese reading *ubume*, expanding the semantic range of the term. One early instance of the conjunction of the two images appears in *Shintōshū* 神道集 (Collection of the Way of the Gods, fourteenth century), an anthology of shrine and temple foundation stories by an author from the Agui 安居院 school of the Tendai Buddhist sect. In one story, a woman claims that if she is murdered before giving birth, she will turn into an *ubumedori* 鵜羽妻鳥 (written here with yet another set of kanji indicating a type of bird) and steal other people's babies in the next life.<sup>36</sup>

In the late Tokugawa period, the image of the *ubume* as a bird became more and more explicitly embedded in both theater and fiction. A frontispiece (*shūzō* 繡像) by Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎 (1760–1849) for Bakin's *Bei Bei kyōdan* 皿皿郷談 (A Country Tale of Two Sisters, 1815) depicts an avian *ubume* (figure 5). In the story, the ghost is in fact not a bird, but a woman who comes to ask a man to hold her baby;

<sup>35</sup> Yamada 1990.

<sup>36</sup> *Shintōshū*. This story is from the section entitled “Kumano gongen no koto” 熊野権現事 (Avars of Kumano), pp. 31–42. The relevant section appears on p. 36.



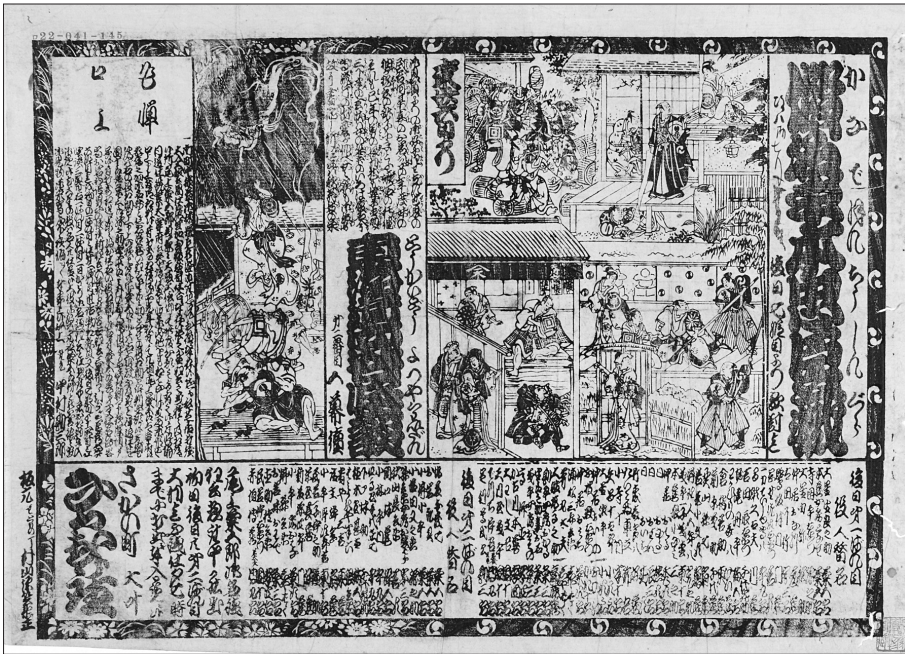


Figure 6. Anonymous Torii-school artist, street playbill for *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, performed with *Kanadehon chūshingura* at the Nakamura-za, 1825. □-22-041-145. The Tsubouchi Memorial Theater Museum, Waseda University.

one has the sense that Bakin may have been drawing on the scene in *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari*. Here, in a perfect visual fusion of the two currents, the depiction of the *ubume* as a bird functions as a symbolic representation of the ghost.

The coexistence of the two conceptions of the *ubume* enriches the image of the mourning ghostly mother, lending it a certain aggressive potential that Nanboku draws on in *Yotsuya kaidan*. We see this, for instance, in a street playbill (figure 6); though very difficult to discern, Oiwa is pictured here in the top left frame. We also see it in an early actor print (figure 7) created for the first performance of *Yotsuya kaidan* in 1825. Both prints reflect early preproduction ideas that never made it to the stage. In both prints, Oiwa flies in the air with a baby—probably her sister's—in one hand, reaching out to seize her sister with the other. Though it is possible that the decision to depict Oiwa flying and grabbing the baby was pure coincidence, the prints do seem to evoke the image of the *ubume* as a malicious bird; as I will discuss in detail later, women who are jealous of other women's babies or who even inflict violence on a pregnant second wife, as in *Kōya monogatari*, appear quite frequently in late-Tokugawa narratives.

The bird aspect of the *ubume* belief, circulated chiefly through writings of literati who had firsthand access to Chinese texts, made the ghost even more frightening than before and expanded the possibilities for its use as a plot device. When Nanboku





Figure 7. Utagawa Kuniyasu I 歌川国安, ukiyo-e triptych of Onoe Kikugorō III as Oiwake's ghost (top); Iwai Kumesaburō II 岩井 桑三郎 as Osode お袖 (middle); Onoe Kikugorō III as Kobotoke Kohei 小仏小平 (left); and Ichikawa Danjūrō VII as Tamiya Iemon (right), in *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, performed at the Nakamura-za, 1825. An unusual stepped triptych preproduction print that does not match the content of the performance. 100-8767, 8768, 8769. The Tsubouchi Memorial Theater Museum, Waseda University.

decided to have the ghost of Oiwake appear as an *ubume* in act 5 of *Yotsuya kaidan*, he was exploiting these possibilities to the fullest.

#### *Ubume in the Theater*

In contrast to the high proportion of so-called “contemporary plays” (*sewa mono* 世話物) that are staged in today’s kabuki theaters, kabuki in Edo was almost always based on historical *sekai* and their associated characters; this was true throughout most of the Tokugawa era. Plays were chiefly structured around the concerns of daimyo households, as the famous contemporary chronicler Kitagawa Morisada 喜田川守貞 noted



Figure 8. *Kokusen'ya kassen*, vol. 1, pp. 4 ura–5 omote. Waseda University Library.

in his *Morisada mankō* 守貞漫稿 (*Morisada's Miscellaneous Notes*, 1837–1853): “In all three cities [Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka], the ‘first play’ or the ‘first number’ is always a historical play. Historical plays focus on daimyo households and so on, whether they are based on old military tales or on material from recent times.”<sup>37</sup>

Kabuki frequently translated the folk, surgical, and religious practices surrounding failed pregnancy, as well as the various meanings and images of the *ubume*, into plays centered on succession troubles and power struggles in daimyo domains. The household-crisis plot drove the development of kabuki from one-act plays originating in seventeenth-century Kyoto and Osaka to increasingly fuller productions. Plays in this mold open with the fall of the daimyo house and conclude with the restoration of order, which is accomplished, above all, by the lead male-role actor.<sup>38</sup> Children, babies, and even fetuses still in the womb serve a central purpose as keys to the preservation of a household or clan, much in the same way that treasured objects such as swords, seals, and handscrolls earlier bestowed on the household by the emperor or

<sup>37</sup> *Morisada mankō*, vol. 5, p. 143.

<sup>38</sup> Kawatake Toshio 河竹登志夫 outlines the structure as follows: “The play opens with a scheme to take over the house; a treasure is lost, which leads to collapse of the house following the lord’s suicide. In other scenarios, attempts are made to poison the young heir, or schemes are made to lure the head of the domain into drunkenness and debauchery; these events are followed by the hardships and selfless sacrifices of the former retainers, as well as of the loyal and strong female characters. Eventually, the evil plot against the house is exposed; there are punishments and confrontations; and the evildoers are crushed, the house restored, and peace and unity recovered.” Kawatake 1969, p. 65.

the shogunate function as emblem and guarantee of the household's status. When a woman pregnant with the future heir to a household is murdered—or, in even more extreme cases, the baby is stolen from the mother's womb—the ghost of the would-be-mother returns and attempts to deliver the son to the household's loyal retainers.

The play *Tanba Yosaku tazuna obi* 丹波与作手綱帯 (The Reins of Yosaku of Tanba Province, late seventeenth century, Kyoto) by Tominaga Heibei 富永平兵衛 (dates unknown), for example, features the pregnant mistress of the daimyo of Tanba province (disguised as Yosaku), who is unable to give birth for three years as the result of a curse put on her by the daimyo's mother-in-law to prevent her from producing an heir. After the mistress is murdered, the baby, protected by the Jizō of Koyasu 子安 shrine, is born from a wound in her neck; the mistress then appears as a ghost to nurture the boy and ultimately deliver him to the daimyo as an heir.<sup>39</sup>

An even deeper link between performance and folk practice is seen in the puppet play *Kokusen'ya kassen* 国性爺合戦 (The Battle at Coxinga, 1715; Takemoto-za 竹本座, Osaka) by Chikamatsu Monzaemon 近松門左衛門 (1653–1725), which was immediately adapted for the kabuki stage.<sup>40</sup> Go Sankei 呉三桂 separates a fetus from an imperial consort's corpse in order to keep the baby, the rightful heir to the throne, alive; he then kills his own infant son and inserts him into the consort's womb to fool the enemy. Torii Kiyonobu 鳥居清信 II (1706–1763) depicts the scene in his *kurohon* (black covers) digest *Kokusen'ya kassen* こく性や合戦 (before 1756), which recounts the first five acts of the bunraku play largely through illustrations. Neither the bunraku nor the kabuki script make explicit mention of *ubume*, but the gruesome extraction of the infant from the mother's womb (figure 8, at right) clearly places the folk practice of separative surgery in the framework of the theater.

It was during the late eighteenth century, especially after the publication of Sekien's encyclopedia of monsters, that *ubume* came to be staged as they appear in book illustrations of the day. One of the first explicit theatrical references to an *ubume* occurs in *Hana to mimasu Yoshino no miyuki* 花三升吉野深雪 (It Looks Like Flowers: The Deep Snows of Yoshino) by Fukumori Kyūsuke 福森久助 (1767–1818), staged in Edo in 1798.<sup>41</sup> The work is set in the world of *Taiheiki* 太平記 (Chronicles of Great Peace, 1370–1371). The final act features a dance by Kureha no Mae 呉服の前, played by Iwai Hanshirō 岩井半四郎 IV (1799–1836), to a *tokiwazu* 常磐津 chanting of “Yoru no tsuru yuki kegoromo” 夜の鶴雪皚 (Crane at Night, the Fur in the Snow), also known as “Ubume no kowakare” うぶめの子別れ (The *Ubume*'s Separation from Her Child). She is accompanied by the typical music for ghosts (*yūrei sanjū* 幽霊三重), which is also

<sup>39</sup> See *Tanba Yosaku tazuna obi*. The depiction of the mistress's ghost in a so-called “illustrated kabuki text” (*e-iri kyōgenbon* 絵入狂言本) for this play shows her not in the familiar visual form of the *ubume* but dressed in ordinary clothes and riding a horse.

<sup>40</sup> The puppet play *Kokusen'ya kassen* was popular in the Kamigata region but was performed infrequently in Edo.

<sup>41</sup> This was first pointed out by Furuido Hideo 古井戸秀夫. See Furuido 2001 and also Furuido 2006, pp. 108–111.





Figure 9. *Hana no Edo kabuki nendaiki*, vol. 16, p. 35 ura. Waseda University Library.

used in staging Oiwake's *ubume* scene; the eerie strains of the flute (*netori*); and a low, intermittent drumming representing the sound of wind.

Having been murdered, Kureha no Mae here returns as an *ubume*, cradling her baby in her arms as she walks through the snow to entrust her son to his father. As visualized in Utei Enba 烏亭焉馬 I's (1743–1822) anthology of kabuki productions *Hana no Edo kabuki nendaiki* 花江都歌舞妓年代記 (Edo in Bloom: A Kabuki Timeline, 1811–1815), she emerges, holding the baby, from a little bird standing in the snow—possibly a prop, and a visual evocation of the dual meaning of the word *ubume* (figure 9). The chanting explains: “I was killed and left this world. Hoping to entrust this child to his father, though I no longer exist among mortals, I’ve been wandering in Chūu 中有 [the intermediate existence between death and the next life].”<sup>42</sup>

The figure of Kureha no Mae embodies a mother’s concern for the well-being of her child as well as her desire to preserve the household’s heir—and, furthermore, to recover an important treasure that is also necessary for the household’s survival. “How sad it is that I’m going to the realm of the dead,” Kureha no Mae says, expressing her torment at being deprived of her baby. “Once we are separated, I will never again see my son until the end of time. The attendants of Enma [the King of Hell] are watching carefully, and I must depart. How I yearn to stay. How dear to me you are!”<sup>43</sup> Accord-

<sup>42</sup> *Hana to mimasu Yoshino no miyuki*, p. 155.

<sup>43</sup> *Hana to mimasu Yoshino no miyuki*, p. 156.



ing to the script and secondary sources published in connection with a modern-day revival of the dance, at this point Kureha no Mae does a quick costume change called *bukkaeri* ぶっ返り (turning inside out) in which the upper half of her white death robe drops away to expose a colorful red kimono as she picks up an iron rod decorated with flowers—a dazzling image appropriate for the final scene of the play. Thus Kureha no Mae returns the baby to his father, retrieves the household treasure from the enemy, and passes it on to the loyal retainers even as she is being tortured by the flames of hell.<sup>44</sup>

The kabuki association of the *ubume* not only with motherly sorrow but also with loyalty and the restoration of order is closely connected to the prevalence in Edo theater of the historical *sekai*. According to the general kabuki conventions prevalent in the three major cities, a full day of performances opened with a historical play, called the *ichibanmono* 一番物 or “first play,” followed by a second story focusing on contemporary situations (although in actuality it was not uncommon for productions to consist only of the “first” play). In Edo, however, it was customary to stay with the historical framework even for the second part. As the home of the bakufu, perhaps Edo afforded kabuki less freedom and incentive to dramatize popular contemporary incidents, as was common in Kyoto and Osaka by the late eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup> This held true even after the playwright Namiki Gohei 並木五瓶 I (1747–1808) brought Kyoto- and Osaka-style kabuki to Edo in the 1790s, loosening the rigorous Edo-style adherence to the historical *sekai*.<sup>46</sup>

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Nanboku both inherited and reinvented the uses of the child and the *ubume*. Nanboku’s three representative ghost plays before *Yotsuya kaidan*—*Tenjiku Tokubei ikoku banashi* 天竺徳兵衛韓噺 (Tokubei from India, Foreign Tales, 1804), *Iroeiri otogizōshi* 彩入御伽草 (*Otogizōshi* in Color, 1808), and *Okuni gozen keshō no sugatami* 阿国御前化粧鏡 (Lady Okuni’s Makeup Mirror, 1809)—all include female ghosts who exemplify the standard image of the *ubume* as defined in Sekien’s *Gazu hyakki yagyō* and before that in Banryō’s *Kōtei Konjaku monogatari*, but with two innovations.<sup>47</sup>

The first was that Nanboku wrote almost all of his ghost roles for male leads, specifically Onoe Matsusuke I (1744–1815) and Onoe Kikugorō III, enlarging the horizon

<sup>44</sup> For an interpretation of this scene, see Hirano 2001. My own analysis draws on the script and on the illustrations in playbills from the 1798 production.

<sup>45</sup> Hattori 1996, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> This was the case until Kawatake Mokuami’s 河竹黙阿弥 productions in the last decades of the Tokugawa period began explicitly moving away from conventional historical drama. See Furuido 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, the script of *Tenjiku Tokubei ikoku banashi* seems not to have survived, and existing playbills and records do not confirm that Iohata 五百機 cradled an infant. There are, however, numerous variant texts that aid our understanding, such as Namiki Gohei’s *Nami makura ikoku no kikigaki* 波枕韓聞書 (The Pillow of Waves, Anecdotes from a Foreign Land, 1806), in which Onoe Matsusuke 尾上松助 I performed the same roles, and Nanboku’s *Tenjiku Tokubei banri no irifune* 天竺徳兵衛万里入船 (Tokubei from India, Ship from a Thousand Ri’s Distance, 1841).



Figure 10. Anonymous Torii-school artist, street playbill for *Iroeiri otogizōshi* performed at the Ichimura-za in 1808. Edo: Yamamoto Jūgorō, 1808. □-22-042-008. The Tsubouchi Memorial Theater Museum, Waseda University.

of possibilities for the performance of the female ghost. All previous female ghosts—including Kureha no Mae, who was explicitly marked as an *ubume*—had been written for and performed by female-role actors, who avoided scenes that disadvantaged their looks. These ghosts provided excitement and action, creating visually arresting scenes as they presented their grief or anger through dance and acrobatic performance, but they were essentially confined to subplots. In a radical departure from this history, Nanboku's ghosts injected a note of dramatic, horrific spectacle, giving male-role actors a chance to perform as female characters who dive into water and erupt back into the air, or disfigure or wreak revenge on those who had caused them to suffer—and then reappear after a stunning quick change as another, male character. In other words, Nanboku's female ghosts took over elements of kabuki performance—the settling of a household struggle or the perpetration of revenge—that had previously been reserved for male roles.

The representation of the character Kōzaki 幸崎 as an *ubume* in a street playbill for *Iroeiiri otogizōshi* (figure 10, near bottom left), for example, indicates that her scene was one of the play’s major highlights. Kōzaki, originally played by Onoe Matsusuke I, is the nursemaid of Lord Kikuchi’s 菊地 grandson. As a nurse, Kōzaki’s mission is to protect the baby boy. On the verge of death after being gruesomely tortured, she nonetheless jumps into a river to rescue him when an enemy throws him into the water. When she surfaces, she has changed costumes, assuming the guise of an *ubume*:

*Kōzaki emerges from the water as a ghost. There is a soul flame burning and she is carrying the baby. . . . Cradling the infant in her arms, Kōzaki walks over to the reeds and takes up the seal she had buried there earlier. She holds the seal between her lips when the baby cries; she pats the baby and then takes it to the river, where it urinates. Then, peering at the baby’s face, she bursts into tears as she stands among the reeds.*<sup>48</sup>

Kōzaki’s tender treatment of the little boy and her sentimental reaction, even as a ghost, infuses her ghastly figure with an aura of motherly warmth. The seal she digs up is the “Seal of the Female Dragon” (*meryū no in* 女龍の印), one of two treasures that the Kikuchi household needs in order to continue. Kōzaki later appears in the same *ubume* guise to hand the baby and the seal to the baby’s mother. No sooner has Kōzaki accomplished her mission than she leaves. “I’m happy now,” she says. “Having safely given the boy to you, I have no regrets.”<sup>49</sup> The heroism of her act is imbued with the conventional overtones of *ubume* sorrow.

Here, Nanboku evokes the familiar cultural icon of the *ubume* as a nurturer even as he translates it into a different context by focusing on the social mission of these women. The loss of the seal precipitated the Kikuchi clan’s downfall, which provides the basic framework of the play. Thus we see the combination of private, solicitous grief with a heroic, social act by a secondary female character. This act, moreover, brings closure to the play, ending the struggle that gave it meaning and tying together the scenes that served as its highlights. The power Kōzaki and characters like her exhibit even after death allows them not only to occupy the stage in climactic moments but also to rework the larger, overarching frame stories by taking the place of the male hero.

The second and most significant characteristic of Nanboku’s *ubume* is that they have no connection to childbirth—indeed, in one play he even staged a male ghost emerging from the water with a baby. In essence, the motherly ghost was a distant vision consciously evoked by Nanboku through visual and sensory associations, a sort of theatrical montage based on images of a type of ghost that resided deep in the popular imagination of his Edo audience. It is telling that Nanboku set his *ubume* scenes near water, often on riverbanks, since water offered a point of access to the other world, and running water in particular was associated with the pacification of

<sup>48</sup> *Iroeiiri otogizōshi*, p. 172.

<sup>49</sup> *Iroeiiri otogizōshi*, p. 179.





Figure 11. *Hara no uchi gesaku no tanehon* 1811, pp. 7 ura–8 omote. National Diet Library.

ghosts. Except for Iohata, who was newly created for *Tenjiku Tokubei ikoku banashi*, Nanboku's *ubume*—Kōzaki, Kasane, and even the male Koheiji 小平次—are all based on historical and legendary figures related to water. Kōzaki, for instance, is modeled on the servant from the familiar legends of *sara yashiki* 皿屋敷 (the plate-counting mansion); in different versions, the servant is either killed or drowns herself in a well after breaking a plate in her lord's favorite set. Koheiji is murdered in a swamp, and Kasane is killed by her husband on a riverbank. The ghosts' connection with water naturally linked them to the *ubume*; when Nanboku staged these characters with a baby, then, he was superimposing the images of the *ubume* over them, using the trope to add layers of meaning to the spectacle unfolding on the stage.

By drawing on these distant images while linking the *ubume* to female characters who no longer had the conventional association with pregnancy, Nanboku summoned into the world of the theater ghosts that evoked deep fear but remained engaged with the world, carrying out a social mission even in death. This new character type ultimately made it possible for him to break out of the established conventions that had long governed kabuki playwriting in Edo, as he did so spectacularly in *Yotsuya kaidan*.



*Ubume in Nineteenth-Century Literature: Jealousy and Private Interests*

Nanboku's *ubume* must also be situated within the larger context of early nineteenth-century cultural production, above all popular fiction (*gesaku* 戯作) in the *gōkan* 合巻 (combined booklets) and *yomihon* genres, in which these female ghosts suddenly became ubiquitous. Here, *ubume* were presented not as anonymous monsters, as was frequently the case in the earlier genre of *kibyōshi* 黄表紙 (yellow covers), but as women with particular histories who played significant roles in narratives focused on revenge or household crises.

To a certain extent plays and popular fiction belonged to different realms of cultural production, but the boundary between the two became increasingly blurred, particularly during the nineteenth century, when both *gōkan* and *yomihon* began to draw upon theatrical frameworks, characters, and plots in the wake of the Kansei 寛政 reforms (1787–1793). There were more concrete links as well: Gunji Masakatsu has pointed out that Nanboku and Kyōden both consulted each other's materials.<sup>50</sup> This was especially true in the case of works dealing with ghosts and supernatural figures that drew self-consciously on similar plots, scenes, and frameworks, including those of Tokubei from India, Koheiji, Kasane, and Sakurahime 桜姫. Many of Nanboku's most spectacular scenes—involving, for instance, women's disfiguration, representations of *ubume*, ghostly hands emerging from death robes, or women's hair turning into serpents—have counterparts in the illustrations to Kyōden's *gōkan* and *yomihon*.<sup>51</sup> Yet Kyōden's popular fiction, especially works he wrote in the first decade of the nineteenth century, employed images of pregnancy and death in contexts very different from those created by Nanboku. By exploring private female interests, Kyōden subverted the larger theater-inspired plot framework that was based on the themes of communal interest and household crisis.

The sudden popularity of *ubume* in popular fiction is comically captured in the *gōkan* work *Hara no uchi gesaku no tanehon* 腹之内戯作種本 (What Goes On in Shikitei Sanba's Mind: A *Gesaku* Sourcebook, 1811) by Shikitei Sanba. In this humorous depiction of the writing of *gesaku*, popular types of fictional characters are shown waiting around in Sanba's mind (literally, his stomach, where the soul was believed to be located) like actors waiting backstage for their cues (figure 11).<sup>52</sup> On the right-hand page, we see a selection of stock kabuki character types, including a look-alike of Matsumoto Kōshirō 松本幸四郎 V (1764–1838) in an “evil character” (*katakiyaku* 敵役) role at upper left, a bandit resembling Nakamura Nakazō 中村仲蔵 I (1736–1790) on

<sup>50</sup> Gunji 1990. Kyōden was close to the playwright Sakurada Jisuke 桜田治助 I (1734–1806), under whom Nanboku worked early in his career. Gunji shows that Nanboku adapted the ghost scene from Kyōden's *yomihon* work *Ukibotan zenden* 浮牡丹全伝 (The Tale of the Floating Peony, 1808) in his 1809 play *Okuni gozen keshō no sugatami*, which was then readapted by Kyōden in a *gōkan* titled *Kabuki no hana botan dōrō* 戯場花牡丹灯籠 (The Flower of Kabuki, the Peony Lantern Ghost Story) the following year.

<sup>51</sup> Gunji 1990, p. 309.

<sup>52</sup> For a transcription of this text see *Hara no uchi gesaku no tanehon* 1987.

the right, a handsome man seeking revenge appearing with the obligatory straw hat and raincoat at lower right, and a tough, chivalrous commoner (*otokodate* 男伊達) at the top; on the left-hand page is a courtesan drawn in the style of the artist Hishikawa Moronobu 菱川師宣 (1618–1694). Also on the left-hand page are two stars among the low-ranking “actors herded into a single dressing room” (*oikomi yakusha* 追込み役者): an *ubume* and a male ghost who is gnawing on a woman’s head—an allusion to the ghost of Koheiji, who had by then been popularized through Nanboku’s play *Iroeiri otogizōshi*, in illustrations by Hokusai and Utagawa Kunisada 歌川国貞 (1786–1864), and in Kyōden’s narratives.

Needless to say, Sanba is poking fun at the overuse of these popular character types: “Writers have been strewing *ubume* everywhere, quite carelessly, using them as tools, and so now she’s married that ghost gnawing on a head and they’ve joined the troop as low-ranking actors.”<sup>53</sup> Sanba even has the *ubume*’s husband criticize her for trying to be the center of attention: “You! You’re just a female ghost, but you’re an incredibly immodest one! You’ve been popping up totally randomly in both *yomihon* and *gōkan*, and as a result no one takes us ghosts seriously anymore. You’re a disgrace to me, your husband, as well!”<sup>54</sup> *Hara no uchi gesaku no tanehon* indicates just how popular the figure of the *ubume* had become—so popular, indeed, that Sanba predicts overuse will soon lead it to go out of fashion. In actual fact, *ubume* and other ghosts remained a popular trope in later years as well, although not to the extent that they had been in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Sanba also playfully draws our attention to the fact that what we now think of as “literary” production was in fact closely and self-consciously bound up with the theater. Not only does the text envision the characters as actors backstage in a kabuki theater, but it opens with a long metaphorical comparison of the process of writing popular fiction to the making of a puppet-theater production. Most importantly, the character types Sanba introduces reflect the nineteenth-century interest in vengeance plots and household crises. Although different in format, presentation, and narrative interest, both *yomihon* and *gōkan* drew on common story paradigms that had been circulating in the theater. Something of this intergeneric fluidity is suggested by the promise made by the courtesan and the handsome man in the raincoat: “Even if we are used in *gōkan* and then transplanted into *yomihon*, eventually to find a home in a wastebasket, we’ll still be man and wife.”<sup>55</sup> This theatricalization of prose narrative is attributed to the Kansei reforms, which led writers to move away from witty depictions of the extravagance of the pleasure quarters. *Sharebon* 洒落本 (books of wit and humor) disappeared; *kibyōshi* began to focus more on sober revenge plots and grew longer, evolving into the new genre of the *gōkan*; and *yomihon* began experimenting with different plot patterns and formats that incorporated theatrical

<sup>53</sup> *Hara no uchi gesaku no tanehon* 1811, 8 omote.

<sup>54</sup> *Hara no uchi gesaku no tanehon* 1811, 13 omote.

<sup>55</sup> *Hara no uchi gesaku no tanehon* 1811, 10 omote.



Figure 12. *Katakiuchi kokoro wa Takasago*, p. 2 ura. Hōsa Bunko, Nagoya. Courtesy of the National Institute of Japanese Literature.

frameworks.<sup>56</sup> In the case of *gōkan*, the relatively simple vengeance tales popular in the *kibyōshi* and early *gōkan* developed over time into the more complex plot type of the household crisis, which drew heavily on motifs from kabuki.<sup>57</sup> This, in part, was what allowed a playwright like Nanboku to participate in the genre through a number of theater-inspired *gōkan*. His 1809 *Katakiuchi kokoro wa Takasago* 復讐爰ハ高砂 (Vengeance: This is Takasago, also known as *Katakiuchi tokoro wa Takasago*), for instance, was a *gōkan* rewriting of Chikamatsu's puppet play *Kako no Kyōshin nanahaka meguri* 賀古教信七墓廻 (Kako no Kyōshin Makes the Rounds of Seven Graves, ca. 1696).<sup>58</sup> In the play, Sono'o no Mae 蘭生の前, the pregnant wife of the household heir, returns after her murder to nurture her son. Whereas in Chikamatsu's script her presence is indicated only by a blue soul flame,<sup>59</sup> in the illustration to his version Nanboku had Kunisada depict the spirit in the typical guise of the *ubume* (figure 12),

<sup>56</sup> After 1806, most historians of Japanese literature agree, *kibyōshi* were supplanted by *gōkan*. For a historical overview of *kibyōshi* in English, see Kern 2006. The *yomihon* was more expensive than the *gōkan* and was issued in much smaller numbers. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, publishers produced smaller *yomihon* with more illustrations. These books—known, for lack of a better generic categorization, as *chūhongata yomihon* 中本型読本 (medium-sized reading books)—are close in subject matter and visual appearance to *gōkan*.

<sup>57</sup> Koike 1935 discusses these developments with special reference to Kyōden. My own survey of early nineteenth-century *gōkan* principally in the collection of the Waseda University Library indicates that ghosts in these works function largely as they do in the theater.

<sup>58</sup> This work was later republished with the title *Matsu no midori Takasago banashi* 松緑高砂話.

<sup>59</sup> *Kako no Kyōshin nanahaka meguri*, pp. 272–73.

turning the ghost of the nurturing mother into a spectacle that clearly reflects his nineteenth-century sensibility. In a rather startling twist, Sono'o no Mae's spirit possesses a male corpse and returns to the world as a male ghost breast-feeding an infant.

In his discussion of Edo-based *yomihon* of the nineteenth century, Takagi Gen 高木元 suggests that the *yomihon*'s temporal setting, place, and characters were all subject to a specific structure: "the principle of the *sekai*, a traditional framework that was cultivated in the theater."<sup>60</sup> Even as writers constantly invented new plot devices and scenes, *sekai*, which served both as a communal imagination of historical worlds and as story paradigms, remained important elements of both *yomihon* and *gōkan*. Using the established theatrical *sekai* to hold their long narratives together, authors were able simultaneously to work against these frameworks by focusing on themes of prophecy, women's revenge, and karmic retribution (*inga ōhō* 因果応報).<sup>61</sup>

Kyōden, too, was deeply influenced by kabuki and attuned to the popular sensibilities of his fellow Edoites. In his iterations of the household-crisis plot, prophecies and grudges harbored by women played an important role. From this perspective, Kyōden's narrative focus—particularly in his *yomihon*—on pregnancy, ghosts, and the figure of the jealous woman represents a significant experiment that differs markedly from Nanboku's early use of the *ubume* in similar stories. Kyōden is particularly fascinated by the conflict between a childless wife and a pregnant mistress, and by the mistress's resentment after the wife murders her. The mistress returns not as a motherly *ubume* attempting to preserve her child for the sake of the house, but as a ghost with a private grudge toward the woman responsible for her death. This is seen, for instance, in *Sakurahime zenden akebonozōshi* 桜姫全伝曙草紙 (The Book of Dawn: The Whole Story of Princess Sakura, 1805) and *Baika hyōretsu* 梅花氷裂 (Plum Flower and the Cracking of Ice, 1807), which are roughly contemporaneous with Nanboku's early *ubume* ghost plays.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Takagi 1995, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> The *yomihon* consists less of a linear narrative than of a series of climaxes that often fuse communally shared story paradigms. In Bakin's case, to give one example, the framework is typically karmic retribution, sometimes involving women's grudges; see, for instance, Tokuda 1994; Tanaka 2006. Ōtaka Yōji 大高洋司, a scholar of nineteenth-century *yomihon*, has proposed that while the theatrical framework centered on the vengeance plot or the household struggle, the *yomihon* developed a different structure: "Usually a key figure or item appears early in the narrative—a human, an animal, a supernatural thing, or even a word—and although it does not surface in the narrative, the element continues to affect the development of the story either directly or indirectly. Closure comes in historical *yomihon* once that thread vanishes: when, for example, an angry ghost attains salvation, or past karmic ties disappear, or the meaning of a mysterious word is discovered." Ōtaka 2000, p. 348.

<sup>62</sup> See *Sakurahime zenden akebonozōshi* 1805. For transcriptions of these texts, see *Sakurahime zenden akebonozōshi* 1997 and *Baika hyōretsu*. In the late Tokugawa period, Kyōden and other writers such as Bakin published texts known as *kōshō zuihitsu* 考証随筆 (antiquarian miscellanies) describing their research into earlier customs and objects. Kyōden showed a particularly keen interest in all sorts of issues related to women, from the belief in women's hells to pregnancy and childrearing—all themes he included in his literary oeuvre. Kyōden's concern with the contention between the wife and the mistress is reflected in *Kottōshū* 骨董集 (Collection of Ancient Matters),



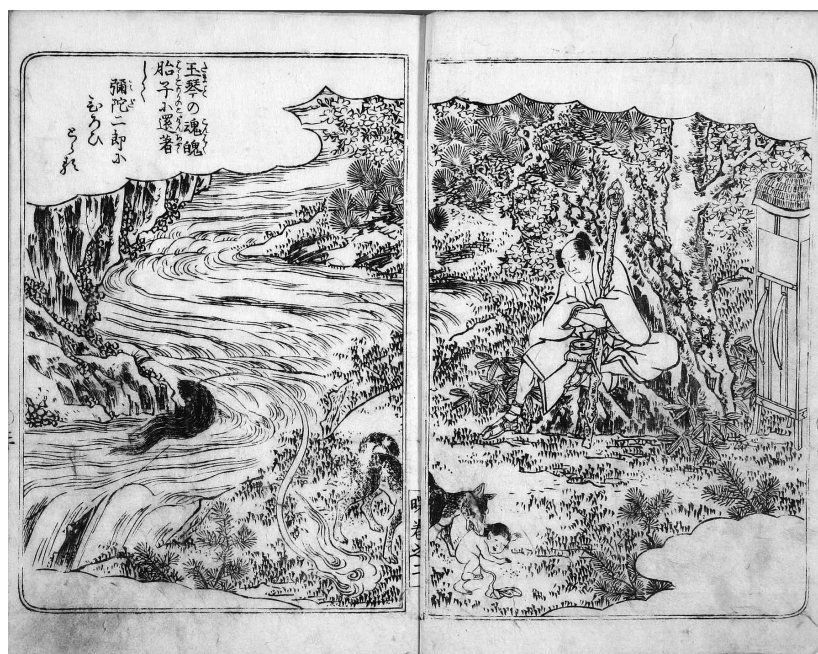


Figure 13. *Sakurahime zenden akebonozōshi*, vol. 2, pp. 2 ura–3 omote. Waseda University Library Collection.

*Sakurahime zenden akebonozōshi*, which opens as the narrative of a typical household crisis, soon shifts in focus to a private struggle between Nowaki no Kata 野分の方, who is unable to bear her husband a son, and Tamakoto 玉琴, her husband's mistress, who dwells in a separate residence and has been brought in specifically to give birth to a male heir.<sup>63</sup> Nowaki no Kata has a servant capture Tamakoto and torture her in her presence. Tamakoto begs Nowaki no Kata to let her live at least until the baby is born, but to no avail. Tamakoto's resentment and her attachment to her unborn baby are so intense that her hair turns into snakes as she dies. After her corpse is abandoned, a wild dog drags the baby out of a wound inflicted by the torture, and "a burning soul flame flies out of the wound"<sup>64</sup> to revive the infant (figure 13). This infant grows up to become the monk Seigen, who later falls madly in love with Sakurahime. In Kyōden's

which includes a detailed explanation and illustration of *uwanari uchi* 後妻打ち (beating the second wife), a medieval and early Tokugawa-period practice in which a first wife orchestrated an attack on a second. See *Kottōshū*, vol. 4, 4 omote–6 omote.

<sup>63</sup> *Sakurahime zenden akebonozōshi* draws on many sources including the Buddhist *kangebon* 勧化本 (wide varieties of Buddhist books for preaching and popular enlightenment) *Kanzen Sakurahime den* 勧善桜姫伝 (The Exemplary Legend of Sakurahime, 1765) and the lineage of stories about Sakurahime and the monk Seigen 清玄 that derives from the *kojōruri* play *Isshin niga byakudō* 一心二河白道 (White Path between the Two Rivers, 1673), which was rewritten in 1698 for kabuki by Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

<sup>64</sup> *Sakurahime zenden akebonozōshi* 1997, p. 49.

version Sakurahime is none other than the daughter Nowaki no Kata gives birth to in later years, adding a further twist to the popular story paradigm. Tamakoto's malevolent spirit continues to appear throughout the text, haunting Sakurahime in revenge for her mother's wrongdoings even after the household crisis is resolved—the point at which an ordinary play or story would have ended.

Kyōden's focus, then, is on the woman's personal grudge, not on the preservation of communal order. At the same time that Nanboku was both working within and reinventing the framework of the household crisis, Kyōden—through his interest in the themes of jealousy, pregnancy, and death as played out in the private struggles between two women—was moving away from those same theatrical frameworks that had been transported to fiction around the late eighteenth century.

#### *Oiwa as Ubume*

Finally, having untangled the complex meanings and traced the various lineages of the *ubume*, we can return to *Yotsuya kaidan*. By situating Oiwa as an *ubume* in a story not about a household crisis but about personal revenge, much as Kyōden had done with his female ghosts, Nanboku dissociates her from the commitment to communal interests that his previous *ubume* had embodied. Oiwa overturns the trope of the *ubume* itself: although herself a mother, she appears as an *ubume* only to flaunt her total lack of concern for her son before her husband in a manner again similar to Kyōden's mothers. Oiwa cleaves to her own personal resentments and her determination not to preserve, but to extinguish, her husband's family line. We see this, for example, in the scene of her death, when her attention suddenly shifts away from the child—who would have stood at the center of the plot in the typical household-crisis play—and becomes concentrated instead on utterly private, personal matters. Oiwa tears out her hair in a rage and then, as blood drips from the tangled clump in her hands, she cries out in fury: "How can I rest until I've carried out my will!"<sup>65</sup> It is this inward turn—the separation of her character from the larger communal concerns that had been so fundamental to earlier kabuki, and a new focus on her descent into a ferocious, jealous rage—that Nanboku had Kikugorō III express through the character of Oiwa.

This shift becomes even more interesting when we consider *Yotsuya kaidan* in relation to the popular image of Oiwa that Nanboku drew upon from the various versions of her story that existed prior to the play. According to manuscript texts of *Yotsuya zōdanshū* 四谷雑談集 (Collections of Rumors in Yotsuya) that circulated through lending libraries as "true accounts" (*jitsuroku* 実録) and served as source material for both *gōkan* and *yomihon*, Oiwa marries Iemon only to have him fall in love with the pregnant mistress of another man.<sup>66</sup> Oiwa flies into a rage when she finds out, haunts Iemon and the woman's children, and years later, as a ghost, kills the woman, now

<sup>65</sup> *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, p. 184.

<sup>66</sup> Various manuscript and printed editions of these true-life accounts survive. The oldest is *Yotsuya zōdanshū* (1727) in the Yaguchi Tanba Kinen Bunko 矢口丹波記念文庫. For information about the various editions, see Konita 1997; Takada 2002.

married to Iemon and again pregnant. The crucial point is that in these earlier representations, Oiwa is jealous of another woman who has a child when she does not. The relationship between the two women is the same as that in Kyōden's tales. When we bear in mind Nanboku's reversal of the original story of Oiwa's life, the names of the two women in *Yotsuya kaidan*, Oiwa and Oume, take on an almost horrible irony. In Japanese literature the name Iwa, written with the character for “stone,” hints at sterility; *ume*—literally, “sour plum,” a food pregnant women were said to crave—is associated with pregnancy.<sup>67</sup>

By making Oiwa a mother who later appears as an *ubume*, Nanboku was calling up the various resonances that the *ubume* had acquired over the course of its long history, only to obliterate that conventional image. The ghost with the baby is here utterly at odds with its complex lineage of meanings, both as a sign of motherly sorrow and as a paragon of dutiful concern for the preservation of a household. Thus Nanboku used Oiwa to overturn the most fundamental feudal fantasy constructed on the Tokugawa kabuki stage. Oiwa is an ironic *ubume*, for instead of trying to preserve the life of the heir, she has, in fact, sworn to destroy Iemon's family line. Indeed, she causes the baby to turn into a stone statue of the Bodhisattva Jizō the moment she hands it to Iemon—another cruelly ironic twist, since Jizō is considered the savior of parentless children from hell.<sup>68</sup>

In Oiwa, Nanboku discovered a means to turn away from the larger communal interests of the conventional *sekai* and their plot types and instead explore deeply personal emotions; he found a way, in other words, to begin dismantling the kabuki tradition. The onset of modernity is often portrayed in terms of transition, change, and new beginnings brought on especially, in the case of Japan, through external influence; one might, however, also interpret it as an internally motivated process of destruction, iconoclasm, and loss. Around the time *Yotsuya kaidan* was first staged in 1825, kabuki gradually began to shed some of the traditions that had retained their symbolic significance for more than a century. The *sekai*, which had served not only

<sup>67</sup> *Umazume jigoku* 石女地獄, the hell for childless women, is also written using another kanji for “stone.” A similar juxtaposition of stone and flower is seen in the episode in *Kojiki* 古事記 (712) about the ugly Iwanagabime 石長比売 (whose name can be roughly glossed as “stone princess”), who is spurned by Ninigi 邇々芸 for her sister Konohana no Sakuyabime 木花之佐久夜毘売 (“flower-blossoming princess”). Konohana no Sakuyabime becomes pregnant with Ninigi's baby on their first conjugal night. See *Kojiki*, pp. 121–23. In *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720), Iwanagabime even places a curse on Konohana no Sakuyabime's baby. See *Nihon shoki*, p. 141.

<sup>68</sup> It is significant, in this sense, that in later productions of *Yotsuya kaidan* Oiwa stops appearing as an *ubume* at all: the effect is replaced with her emergence from within a lantern. Sawamura Gennosuke 澤村源之助 IV revived the original appearance scene when he played Oiwa in August 1938 at the Miyako-za 都座. Interestingly, he makes apologies for not following the “authentic” manner of appearing from a burning lantern, indicating that the significance of the *ubume* scene had been completely obscured and the new effect had become the staple in *Yotsuya kaidan*'s performance history. The new effect was perhaps more challenging for an actor performing the role of Oiwa for the first time. See Sawamura 1971.

as a basic plot-structuring device but also as an extremely important conduit of communal history and indeed as a socially unifying force in the relatively new, bureaucratic city of Edo, increasingly fell apart as conventional divisions between female and male roles were abandoned and new types of plots emerged.

The loss of interest in *sekai* is obvious in the work of playwrights who followed in Nanboku's footsteps, including Segawa Jokō 瀬川如皐 III (1806–1881) and Kawatake Mokuami 河竹默阿弥 (1816–1893). Mokuami's plays in particular tended to focus on characters without military bonds or blood ties, featuring in their place non-samurai figures or abandoned children whose origins were unknown or unimportant—an impossibility in the vengeance or household-crisis plot. Tellingly, the ritual of *sekai sadame* 世界定め (deciding on the *sekai*), in which the theater community gathered before the start of the kabuki new year to decide which of the established *sekai* would be used in the first production, had by the 1830s already come to an end.<sup>69</sup> The loss that this shift entailed for kabuki in terms of the theater's social function in Edo, even as it revitalized the plays themselves, is tragically symbolized by the forced relocation of Edo's kabuki theaters in 1841 to the then-rural part of Asakusa that came to be known as Saruwaka-machi 猿若町. This occurred as part of the Tenpō reforms, in the wake of a fire that burned down two theaters, the Nakamura-za and Ichimura-za 市村座, located in Sakai-chō 堺町 and Fukiya-chō 葺屋町, respectively.

Nanboku wrote in a period of intense cultural, social, and political transformation. Early on, his *ubume*, staged as female figures deeply rooted in a complex layering of everyday fears and beliefs, participated in the spectacular, thrilling feudal fantasies of the established *sekai* by taking over roles conventionally reserved for male heroes. Then one of his female ghosts buried those shared traditions altogether. Oiwa is probably the first Japanese ghost, at least in the history of kabuki, who does not quickly attain salvation after accomplishing her purpose; in fact, her relentless resentment has lingered, hovering over stage after stage and even moving beyond theater walls into literature and other artistic realms. Still, there is something special about her appearance as an *ubume* in that first 1825 production. A fleeting performative moment that occurred in the very early history of *Yotsuya kaidan*, never to be staged again until modern times, it marks the loss of a certain cultural form—the beginning of the end of Tokugawa-period kabuki. Perhaps we might even see that image of Oiwa as an *ubume* bent not on saving her son, but on destroying him and the particular future and structure he represents, as a symbolic, metatheatrical representation of the playwright Nanboku himself, casting aside the treasures he had inherited so that the theater could be new again.

<sup>69</sup> This phenomenon is analyzed in detail in Imao 2010.



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