Oko Sako (Oka and Sako): Wawashii Woman in the Kyōgen Oko and Sako

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In this play, a peasant called Oko accuses Sako, another farmer, of letting his cow graze on Oko’s grass. While Oko’s wawashii (bold) wife offers to help him rehearse his lawsuit, she secretly hopes to dissuade her husband from bringing it to the local steward. The rehearsal satirizes the oppressive feudal justice system as the domineering wife and steward role overlap.

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The kyōgen play Oko Sako (Oko and Sako)1 is a delightful exploration of the themes of social justice and marital fidelity. Kitagawa Tadahiko describes kyōgen as having three salient facets: celebratory (shūgen-teki), comical (kokkei-na), and satirical (füshi-teki). The hamen-hon’i, or principle of appreciating kyōgen scene by scene, makes it possible to have multiple types of humor in the same play (Kitagawa 2001: 537–547). Typically, kyōgen built on the husband-wife relationship portray female characters as wawashii, or the bold, strong, sly, nagging wives of timid, simple-minded husbands such as in Kamabara (The “Sickley” Stomach)2 and Chigiriki (Cautious Bravery).3 These wives express their devotion to the weak patriarchs with whom they are paired both through unquestioned fidelity and their efforts to prompt their lazy husbands to action. Both of these characteristics are called into question in this play and the result is a wawashii female with

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more depth of character than usual. The trial rehearsal scene also satirizes the arbitrariness and intimidation of the medieval feudal justice system.

As the play begins, a peasant called Oko addresses the audience in a celebratory mode to herald the year’s bountiful rice harvest. Almost immediately, he introduces ambiguity with the phrase “yo no naka yöte,” or “life is good,” which can also mean happiness in “a love relationship.” The ambiguity does not end there, however; this second reading can point to a love affair between Oko’s wife and Sako, a neighboring peasant.

The implication of an affair is extended metaphorically as Oko’s thoughts turn to a dispute he is having with Sako. Oko accuses Sako of letting his cow graze on Oko’s grass, which could be interpreted as sexual innuendo. Because of his poor speaking ability, Oko asks his wife to take his complaint to the steward. She, instead offers to teach him how to present it himself. She plays the steward in the subsequent trial rehearsal, and zaniness ensues when Oko, intimidated at the prospect of meeting strict gatekeepers, imagines that he will get by them using flattery. Oko’s wife is so domineering in her role that Oko forgets that he is in a rehearsal and faints from fear. Kitagawa notes that the way Oko loses himself in the rehearsal is a typical humor tactic in kyōgen (Kitagawa 2001: 546–547; Kitagawa 1970: 121–124). Oko complains about not receiving a fair trial; this scene tacitly criticizes the unfairness of the medieval justice system.

In addition to its social content, Oko and Sako is sometimes regarded as an exceptional Women kyōgen because, in an aside, Oko’s wife discloses that the real motivation behind helping Oko to rehearse his lawsuit is in fact to discourage him from proceeding with it because she “must” favor Sako in the grazing dispute. Although kyōgen wives are domineering but not typically deceitful or unfaithful, some scholars have used this aside to conclude that Oko’s wife is having an affair with Sako. However, the version of the text translated here never states what requires Oko’s wife to take Sako’s side in the complaint. The only textual evidence is found in the final scene, in which Oko accuses his wife of having tea with Sako, sitting close, nose to nose, “drenched in sweat” at a village gathering. In kyōgen, this phrase (shippori to ase o kaku) suggests a love affair (Kitagawa and Yasuda 2001: 321 n. 10). Whatever “special tie” Oko’s wife has with Sako, she shows genuine concern for Oko on several occasions such as when he faints during the rehearsal. She is in this sense a typical kyōgen woman who is devoted to her husband. If she is having an affair with Sako, it is not out of pure sexual gratification. When Oko does make his accusation she expresses anger and uses the expression “my shame is your shame,” suggesting that her
obligation or special relation to Sako is a result of Oko’s lack of competence in the labor and social politics of peasant farming. The obligation which Oko’s wife reveals in the aside could be in return for a loan of money from Sako or a favor solicited from the steward on behalf of Oko.

A subtle humor unfolds with the shifting of registers between Oko and his wife. Before the trial rehearsal, Oko uses a more polite term of address (sonata) to his wife because he needs a favor from her. After the rehearsal, he starts using a less polite term of address (wagoryo). As they start arguing toward the end of the play, Oko uses the least polite term (onore) while his wife is using the most polite term of address to him (konata).

In Oko and Sako, the principle of scene-by-scene appreciation makes it possible to deploy multiple types of humor and yields a more developed female persona. While kyögen plays about husbands and wives often rely on the comical contrast between weak husbands and faithful wawashii wives, Oko and Sako turns this structure on its head while preserving its characteristic devotion to the marital unit of husband and wife. Unlike typical wawashii women, Oko’s wife prevents her husband from taking action instead of spurring him on. Moreover, the play throws the oppressiveness of feudal justice into comedic light as the wife displays her formidable personality in the role of a haughty steward. Thus Oko and Sako presents typical yet more complex characteristics of a woman than normal kyögen.

OKO SAKO (OKO AND SAKO)

CHARACTERS

oko, a peasant who is the main character, or shite
wife, spouse of oko who is the secondary character, or ado

oko: (Speaking from the jöza) I, the person who has just appeared before you, am a peasant called Oko, who lives around here. Everyone has been talking about the excellent rice crop this year. A bumper crop. Life is good. It doesn’t get much better than this. My rice field, the one next to the raised pathways, has been especially bountiful this year. It’s great. But recently something a little unpleasant has come up, the kind of thing that I can’t figure out by myself. I’m going to call my wife and consult her on it. (He looks in the direction of the curtain.) Hello, hello. Are you in there, my dear? Are you there?
wife: (Entering down the bridgeway) You call me as if you want something. What could that be?
oko: There is something. First come over here.
wife: I respectfully obey. (She walks to the main stage.) Whenever you say that you have something to ask me, I get worried. What’s on your mind?
oko: It’s nothing special. As you know, everyone has been talking about the excellent rice crop this year. A bumper crop. Life is good. Very, very happy times, wouldn’t you say?
wife: It is exactly as you said. Your rice field, the one next to the raised pathways, has been especially bountiful. It doesn’t get much better than this.
oko: Thanks to your hard work. Seeing your tireless effort pay off is very gratifying.
wife: You make it all worth doing. I’m so glad.
oko: But there is one small thing troubling me.
wife: What is it?
oko: Well, it’s like this. The other day Sako let his cow out and it decided to eat more than half my field. I went to his place and confronted him. I asked him, “Why did you let your cow out to eat up my field?” He said, “It’s just a dumb beast, so don’t blame it.” I said, “Well, if you say it’s just a dumb beast, then I’ll pardon it. But if that’s the case, you should at least give me the cow or pay the annual tax for what it has eaten.” He refused to do either. I was so upset! I said to him, “Well then, I’ll go to the steward and bring a suit against you.” Believe it or not, he lay down right there in the living room and said, as if he didn’t care, “If that’s what you want, then just do it.” Exasperating, isn’t it?
wife: How awful! Letting a cow eat up the field that you and I worked so hard to till. It really is maddening. On the other hand, as Mr. Sako said, it is just a dumb beast. It might be best to forgive and forget.
oko: What’s this? Even you tell me the same thing. But no matter how dumb this beast is, if I forgive it, then all of a sudden I’m faced with a loss. On top of that, Sako got away with not paying last year’s taxes! Why should I forgive him?
wife: What you are saying is certainly reasonable, but listen carefully to my reply. Mr. Sako is the smoothest talker in the village and does his best to get into the steward’s favor, while you have trouble expressing a simple thought coherently. As for the steward, you don’t pay him any visits except for the New Year’s call. If you bring a suit against Mr. Sako, you are bound to lose. It might be better to forget about it.
oko: Indeed, as you say, Sako is a smooth talker and does his best to get into the steward’s favor while I have trouble expressing simple thoughts coherently. It’s also true that I never call on the steward except to pay my respects at New Year’s. These are the very reasons why I need to consult with you. As I just said, I’m not a good speaker. So will you go in my place and bring a suit against Sako on my behalf?

wife: What?! You’ve got to be kidding! How can I represent my husband in public? You’d better give up that idea once and for all.

oko: Even though I’m begging, are you still saying you won’t do this for me?

wife: How can I, your wife, speak in public?

oko: All right, then, don’t get involved. The government is just. If I speak with reason, how can I lose? You just watch.

wife: There, there . . . wait a minute.

oko: What do you mean, “Wait a minute”?

wife: So, you are determined to bring this suit against Mr. Sako no matter what?

oko: What else can I do, if not sue him?

wife: If that’s the case, listen to what I’m going to say once again. Generally speaking, what we call a lawsuit is something that can make what’s reasonable unreasonable depending on the way one argues. As I said before, you aren’t a good speaker. Why don’t you rehearse what you’re going to say to the steward here at home? I’ll play the role of the steward and listen to your plea. Afterward, I’ll correct you, saying “this is not good” and “that is not good.” How would that be?

oko: What are you saying? Since I’m not a good talker, I should rehearse what I’m going to say to the steward here at home, while you, playing the role of the steward, will hear me out. Is that what you’re saying?

wife: Yes. Exactly.

oko: Well, that’s even better. You listen and correct me, right?

wife: Just one more thing. If you think that you are speaking to your wife, just your wife, you may begin to feel like you can throw your weight around as usual. You must truly think of me as the steward in the magistrate’s courtyard and practice talking to me with respect.

oko: Of course, I’ll practice with respect. The thing is, you don’t look like the steward in those clothes. Why don’t you dress up more like a steward?

wife: Of course I’ll dress up. Now, quickly, come forward.

oko: I’ll be right there. (He goes to the kyōgen-za, turns his back to the
Oko: (He stands up and walks forward to the first pine tree.) Well, well, it’s understandable why the people in our village as well as the neighboring villages all praise this woman of mine. Since I’m not good with words, she has offered to play the role of the steward, listening to me rehearse my suit against Sako here at home so that she can correct my speech. I’d better hurry and begin my rehearsal. (He walks to the main stage.) Let’s see, to get to the office of the steward I go straight here, turn right, then straight to the gate. Usually at a gate there are gatekeepers. I should greet them as I pass. “Hello, hello, I’m called Oko, a peasant who lives around here. I’m passing through the gate because I have some minor business or something like that with the steward. Please let me pass.” “Blah-blah, blah-blah.” “Go ahead.” (Bowing) “Yes, yes, yes, just passing through, passing through, passing through. Thanks for your trouble. Just passing through, passing through, passing through.” (He walks in a small circle and laughs.) That’s what I’ll say to somehow pass through the gate. Next is the inner entrance. There should be warriors posted there, so I will have to be very polite to pass through. (Kneels) “Hello, hello, I have something to say. I’m Oko, a peasant who lives around here. I need to gain entrance to the magistrate’s courtyard for something like bringing a suit. Please let me pass.” “Go ahead.” (Bowing) “Yes, yes, yes, I’m just passing through, passing through, passing through. Thanks for your trouble, everyone. I’m passing through, passing through.” (He walks in a small circle, his knees bent slightly. He then laughs and stands.) That’s what I will say to pass through the inner entrance and enter the magistrate’s courtyard. What am I going to do? The steward himself will be there. I’m feeling a little nervous. I should have listened to my wife when she told me to give up this idea. Should I go back home now? (He looks in the direction of the far end of the bridgeway.) No, no. I’ve already passed through the gate and the inner entrance too. I can’t easily turn back at this point without paying a price. This is very unpleasant. What am I going to do? (Thinking) Like they say, “As for the hearts of men and the pillar of the Great Buddha, the stouter the bet-
If I make up my mind, there’s nothing to stop me. I’ll enter the courtyard. *(From the front of the stage, he tries to pass in front of the wife, who is sitting.)*

**wife:** Hey you, loitering there! Who are you? Quickly, quickly, speak up and tell me who the hell you are!

**oko:** Oh, please forgive me. I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you. I’m called Oko, a peasant who lives a-a-around here.

**wife:** What brings you, this someone called Oko, here? Quickly, quickly, speak up! What the hell are you doing here?

**oko:** I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you. The other day, Oko’s cow ate up Sako’s field.

**wife:** If that’s true, then Sako should be here. Why is it that you, Oko, are here? Quickly, quickly, speak up. Quickly, tell me why the hell are you here!

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**Figure 1.** The Wife, dressed in male official’s lacquered hat (*eboshi*) sits in judgment of her husband, Oko, at the mock trial in *Oko and Sako*. (Photo: Muranaka Osamu)
oko: Uhh . . . well, what I just said is a little bit incorrect.

wife: How is it incorrect? Out with it! Why the hell don’t you speak?
oko: I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you. Sako’s cow ate Oko.
wife: What? A cow ate Oko?
oko: No, no. What I just said is also not quite right.21
wife: How is it incorrect? Out with it! Why the hell don’t you speak?!
oko: I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you. Sako ate Oko.
wife: What? Sako ate Oko?
oko: No, no. What I just said is also not quite correct.
wife: How is it incorrect? Out with it! Why the hell don’t you speak?
oko: I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you. Oko is Sako and Sako is tako [octopus].
wife: That doesn’t make any sense. Out with it! Fast!
oko: Oh, forget it. I’m going home.
wife: You insolent bastard. Guards, tie this man up! Tie him up!
oko: Ah, what misery! What misery! (He rolls his eyes and faints.)
wife: Oh, no. What happened? Well, well, now I feel sorry for him. (She puts the pole down, removes her headgear and dagger, and revives oko.) Hello! Wake up! Wake up!
oko: Ah, please forgive me. I’ll go home. I’ll go home.

Figure 2. Shigeyama Sensaku IV (when still Sengorō XII) is Oko, the cautious plaintiff in Oko and Sako. (Photo: Courtesy of the Shigeyama Kyōgen Association)
wife: Oko, it’s me, your wife. It’s your wife.
wife: Yes. It’s me, your wife.
oko: (He comes to his senses.) What are you doing here?
wife: You’re still saying such crazy things. This is our house, our house.
oko: What? Our house?
wife: Certainly. This is our house.
oko: (Stands up) Where did the steward go?
wife: You’re still saying such irrational things. I was the steward. That was me.
oko: What? It was you?
wife: Certainly.
oko: You mean the person wearing the headgear and carrying the dagger, the one who just said, “Tie him up,” was you?
wife: You bet it was. It was me, your wife.
oko: Why, you . . .
wife: What is it?
oko: When listening to my case, how could you order me to be tied up without even coming to a verdict?
wife: Think about what just happened! How could you possibly bring a suit against Sako like that? You better give the whole thing up.
oko: You’re right. I blew it. If I hadn’t asked you for advice, I would’ve won the lawsuit. It’s a damn shame.
wife: That’s not what I was expecting to hear. What do you mean? 25
oko: From the beginning, you were on Sako’s side.
wife: Come off it! 26 How could I, who already have a husband, favor Sako? What proof do you have?
oko: Would I say anything without any evidence? If I disclosed the evidence, you would be shamed.
wife: I have no reason to be shamed. If you think I do, tell me. Just tell me.
oko: Shall I say it then? The other day there was a village gathering.
wife: What does that have to do with anything?
oko: Just listen to me. I went to the gathering. Sako was there too. When I arrived, Sako left his seat as if he had some business to attend to. I thought that it was strange and decided to follow him. Damned if I didn’t find you right by Sako’s side!
wife: It was because Mr. Sako said, “Have some tea.” So I was sitting there, having some tea.
oko: What? You were having some tea?
wife: That’s right.
oko: (Laughs cynically) If you say that you were just having tea, why is
it that you and Sako were so close, nose to nose, drenched in sweat like that?

wife: Now I’m so upset! I’m so upset! Whose shame is my shame? Isn’t it all your shame? You wretched beast of a man! You wretched beast of a man!

oko: What! A wretched beast?

wife: That’s for sure.

oko: Wait a minute. You know what they say, “Even though he is skinny and looks like a chopstick with eyes and a nose, a man is a man.” How can you call your husband a beast?

wife: All the same, knowing someone else’s shame but not knowing your own means that you’re as dumb as a beast.

oko: All these years I let you have your own way, saying whatever you please. Now I’ll teach you a lesson! (He picks up the pole and brands it.)

wife: Oh, is it the pole-beating again?

oko: Yah, yah, yahhhh! (He prepares to strike her.)

wife: What are you doing?

oko: Yah!

wife: (Grabs the pole) You bastard! I’ve got you now!

oko: (Stumbles) What are you doing? What are you doing?

wife: Yah, yah! (Swings the pole.)

oko: What are you doing? What are you doing?

wife: Yahhhh! (She knocks oko down.)

oko: Ouch, it hurts! It hurts! It hurts!

wife: I got you. I’m mad! I’m mad! I’m so mad! I’m so mad! (Exits.)

oko: (He stands and looks toward the curtain.) Hey, hey, hey, how can you leave me like this? I’m warning you, your future is dark! No matter what you say, you and Sako are lovers. (He faces the audience.) Laugh, everyone. Laugh.²⁷ (He laughs and exits.)

NOTES

1. This translation of Oko Sako is from Kyōgen shū in Kitagawa and Yasuda (2001: 312–323). The source book is the Okura School text belonging to the family of Shigeyama Sengorō, and this title comes from this school’s text. In the Izumi School text, this play, with a slightly different opening, is referred to as Uchizata (The Private Trial). My notes to the play owe much to Kitagawa and Yasuda’s annotations.

2. A wife chases her lazy farmer husband with a sickle. Through the mediation of a third person, the husband is persuaded to go to work; however, he feels humiliated and tries to kill himself. Learning of her husband’s attempt, the wife tearfully rushes to stop him. For a translation see McKinnon (1968: 63–72).
3. Learning that her husband has been beaten by members of his renga, or linked verse group, the wife runs to his aid and encourages him to seek revenge. For further discussion of this play see Compton (1997: 668–671).

4. “Steward” is a translation of jitö, a feudal official who managed the manorial holdings of a landowner. They had the authority to enforce laws, pronounce legal judgments, and collect taxes. To peasants they represented power.

5. Koyama points out that most Women kyögen plays depict strong ties between husbands and wives except for Oko Sako, in which the wife has an affair with another man (1960a: 6). Analyzing Uchizata (see note 1), Compton also points to the exceptional infidelity of the wife in this play (1997: 760–764).

6. All stage directions are given using Western terminology with the exception of two important stage positions: the wakiza (literally waki seat), located at the downstage left corner of the main stage area, where the waki side-character in nô usually sits, next to the right pillar; and the jöza (literally “usual seat”), located in the upstage right corner of the stage, a few steps downstage of the pillar in the corner where the bridgeway joins the main stage. These key positions form a diagonal on the stage. The jöza is generally where characters first stand when introducing themselves, as well as being a key starting and ending position for many movement patterns on stage, while the wakiza is where the Master or secondary character stands to converse with the main character along the diagonal.

7. This is a nanori, or name-saying. Through the use of the humble expression makari ideru, the actor politely shows respect for the audience. This type of nanori was used originally for more formal opening plays, such as the Auspicious Plays called Waki kyögen, or plays in which landowners are cast as protagonists, the Great Lord Plays (daimyö kyögen). Later, nanori began to be used in a wider variety of plays, including this Woman kyögen (onna kyögen) (Kitagawa and Yasuda 2001: 108 fn 2).

8. O-yakushö, the Japanese word translated here as “peasant,” means literally “hundred names.” In kyögen, this term is typically used for peasant protagonists in Auspicious Plays. It is not clear why the honorific “o” is used with hyakushö in performing a self-introduction. One possible reason is that the actor is being polite to the audience, whom kyögen actors often directly address.

9. The Chinese characters of Oko’s name are usually read as “Ukon,” so this unusual reading puns on the homophonous oko, or “stupid.”

10. For analysis of this phrase, see the introduction.

11. There is an accusatory tone in Oko’s exaggerated account. However in the play it is not clear whether Sako intentionally allowed his cow to get loose or whether it was merely an accident.

12. For the definition of this term, see note 4.

13. Oko brings up Sako’s unpaid taxes because it indicates Sako has an unfair advantage with the steward.
14. At the beginning of each year, it is customary to visit influential people, to procure their continuing favor.

15. The Japanese phrase is “bukkyō ya, bukkyō ya,” which means, literally, “It’s crazy, it’s crazy.” Here this phrase expresses the woman’s surprise. Later, when her husband accuses her of having an affair with Sako, I translated it as the harsher “Come off it!”

16. The Japanese is oshirasu, which originally referred to the white sand gardens located in stewards’ mansions where trials took place. Later it became metonymy for a magistrate’s office.

17. The kyōgen-za is located at the end of the bridgeway, upstage of the first pine tree.

18. Eboshi is the headgear worn by nobles in court dress.

19. Wakizashi is the dagger usually carried with a sword.

20. Kazuraake is a cylindrical lacquered case originally made to hold wigs, which is used for a variety of purposes in kyōgen.

21. The Japanese phrase literally means “bend one’s arm,” an archaic expression that survives in theatrical forms like kyōgen. The expression for a left turn is “bend one’s left arm” (Kitagawa and Yasuda 2001: 317 fn 18).

22. Oko is speaking as a guard.

23. The saying means that a man has to be brave at all costs.

24. The next four lines were recently added to the text of the Shigeyama Sengorō family (Kitagawa and Yasuda 2001: 318 fn 6).

25. The wife is ascribing Oko’s latest remark to his distracted state when, in fact, Oko has cannily turned the tables on her.


27. It is not clear what Oko means: “Laugh at my wife and Sako,” “Laugh at me,” or “Laugh at the situation.”

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