

Noh Yûgao 夕顔

(“Moonflower”)

This is based on the “Yûgao” chapter in the Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu in which Genji had a tragic affair with the mistress of his wife’s elder brother. They met while Genji viewed the moonflowers (yûgao) in front of her humble house and consequently Genji knew her only as Yûgao. One day Genji took the woman to an unoccupied mansion and during the night the apparition of a lady seemed to try and drag Yûgao away. Yûgao died that night. The apparition was the living spirit of Genji’s wife Rokujô no Miyasudokoro.

In the noh, several priests visiting the capital hear a woman reciting poetry in a house near Gojô. When she appears, they question her and she reveals that it is the house where the woman known as Yûgao died while having an affair with Prince Genji. That night the priests recite the Lotus Sutra and the ghost of Yûgao appears, thanks the priests for their prayers, and then dances before disappearing at dawn.

Author: Unknown, or attributed by various sources to Zeami (1363?-1443?).

Scene: Gojô (Fifth Street) in the Northern part of Kyoto.

Category: Third category woman (true wig) play, phantasm (mugen) noh in two acts, jo-no-mai (slow, elegant dance) piece, without taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by Kanze, Kongô, and Kita schools only. Obsolete in Hôshô.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): a travelling priest.
- Wakizure (accompanying waki actor): 2-3 companion priests.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): a young woman. Mask: young woman (ko-omote, waka-onna) or mature woman (fukai)
- Ai/Ai-kyôgen (interlude actors): a local man.
- Nochijite (second half shite): the ghost of Yûgao. Mask: same as in the first half.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Waki/Wakizure entrance: Several priests enter to nanoribue solo flute. The main priest introduces them as coming from Bungo Province in Kyushu and on their way to worship at the Hachiman Shrine of Mt Otoko. They sing of visiting famous places near the capital, notably the Unrin’in temple. In a travel song, they sing of worshipping at the Kamo Shrines, passing Tadasu Woods, passing the humble dwelling of the nameless stranger, and thus spending the whole day. They tell of arriving in the neighborhood of Gojô and hearing a woman reciting a poem.
2. Shite entrance: A woman enters to ashirai dashi drum accompaniment, and then sings quoting a poem from the Tale of Genji. This poetry tells of the moon which ventures out not knowing its true heart, only to lose her light and fade away, as well as a Chinese legend expressing the briefness of love. She further sings of a well-known place filled with memories which Murasaki

Shikibu had written about it, of tears which hinder salvation, of her wretched spirit clouded by delusion, and her prayers that the moon of perfect truth may shine through.

3. Waki/Shite exchange: The main priest asks about the place and the woman tells him that it is “a certain villa” as Murasaki Shikibu wrote about, and where also Minister Tôru once lived. As he is from Bungo close to the place where Yûgao’s daughter Tamakazura was brought up, the priest asks the woman to tell about Yûgao who vanished like dew, saying also that he will pray for her.
4. Shite narrative, exit: With the chorus mainly singing for her, the woman relates how the tale of the Shining Prince Genji is refined and profound, fostering true enlightenment. She sings then how the chapter on Yûgao is particularly moving, and how Genji’s interest was aroused when he had moonflowers plucked in front of her house and she wrote a poem for him which eventually led to a lasting bond. Later, in this ancient house, the torch suddenly expired and her breath ceased too. Asking if the moonflower can blossom again, the woman suddenly disappears, saying she will appear in dream.
5. Ai narrative: A local man relates how Genji stopped once along Gojô where the moonflowers were blooming, how having them plucked led to an exchange of poems with the lady inside, how this led to their pledged of love, how he took her one night to a certain villa where waking in the morning he found her dead. The priest tells what he has just seen and the local man suggests that he prays for Yûgao.
6. Waki’s wait: The priests sing of reciting the Lotus Sutra.
7. Nochijite entrance: The ghost of Yûgao enters to issei music and sings how women, by nature deeply sinful, cannot attain the highest Buddhist realms, and asks the priest to pray hard on behalf of this being who, killed by an evil spirit, now appears in dream.
8. Waki/Shite exchange: The priest asks the ghost to reveal the dew like story of Yûgao. Together they describe the desolate autumn field, the pond full of weeds, the shadows of the ancient pines, the clamoring birds, and the water of the heart muddied by passion.
9. Shite’s dance: Asking that the solemn bonds should not be betrayed, the ghost dances an elegant and slow jo-no-mai dance.
10. Conclusion: The ghost and chorus in exchange sing of receiving the priests’ prayers and being filled with boundless joy, and the smiling petals of the moonflower unfolding. The chorus for the ghost sings of her being reborn a man, of the pine winds clearing her delusion, of following the path of the law, and disappearing in the early morning clouds.
[Richard Emmert]