**Zangirimono** (“crop-hair plays”)

In Meiji era Japan, as part of the reforms to Kabuki in response to modernization, playwright Kawatake Mokuami (1816-93) and actor Onoe Kikugorō V (1844-1903) developed a new genre of Kabuki that focused on presenting both external Western elements and contemporary dramatic narratives on stage Kabuki style.

In the late 1870s, seeking contemporary pieces that would meet government-dictated reforms within kabuki, Onoe Kikugorō V (1844-1903) asked Mokuami to write modern kabuki plays for him to perform in. The result was ‘crop-hair plays’ (*zangirimono*). As the reforms of the Meiji period took hold, an obsession with the surface elements of western culture and modernity took hold over the middle and upper classes. The social elite rejected traditional garments and hairstyles of the samurai, perceived as pre-modern. Kimonos were discarded in favor of western suits. Swords were no longer worn. Bowler hats, pocket watches, rickshaws, newspapers and canes grew in popularity, and topknots (*chonmage,* the hairstyle of the samurai) were cut off, resulting in ‘crop hair plays’: dramas that featured modern office workers and government officials without topknots in contemporary settings.

Mokuami’s first zangirimono, *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun* (Tokyo Daily Newspaper), named after the paper in which the article that inspired the play was found, was staged at the Morita-za (Morita Theatre) on October 31, 1873. While not a critical or popular success, the play remains significant because it was the first kabuki play to be set in the Meiji (modern) era. Traditionally, kabuki plays are set in the distant past.

Many zangirimono dealt with criminals and crime, including two regarded as Mokuami’s best cropped hair plays: *Kanzen Chōaku Kōshi no Honmare* (Encouragement of Virtue and Chastisement of Vice, 1877) and *Shima Chidori Tsuki no Shiranami* (Plovers of the Island, White Waves in the Moonlight, 1881). Another popular play was *Onna Shoesei Shigeru* (The Woman Student, 1877), which presented a plot involving a woman disguising herself as a man to gain entry to a university in order to study. These plays individually and collectively presented the challenges of modern society within the dramaturgy of traditional theatre, by their very nature presenting the dislocation of the modern within the traditional in a rapidly changing society bridging both.

Twenty-four plays and fourteen dances were produced in the style, most written by Mokuami and performed by Onoe Kikugorō V. These plays, however, merely replicated the external aspects of modern life within traditional kabuki dramatic structures and performance conventions, and the genre was abandoned in the mid-1880s after less than a decade and a half. Mokuami’s *Shima Chidori Tsuki no Shiranami* and *Suitengū Megumi no Fukagawa* (The Grace of Suitengū Shrine in Fukagawa, 1885) are among the few zangirimono still occasionally performed.

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