

The Eternal Flower of the Child: The Recognition of Childhood in Zeami's Educational Theory of *Noh* Theatre

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Abstract

*European theorists of childhood still tend to locate the first positive acknowledgements of childhood as a human developmental period in its own positive right between the 16th–18th century in Europe. Even though the findings of Ariès (1960) have been constantly challenged, it still remains a commonplace, especially within the history of education, to refer to Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the 18th century as one of the earliest and most prominent conceptualisers of childhood as a positive period that must not be evaluated in the light of its distance to adulthood but for its inherent value as an important and unmissable period of human life. Such a view is as unhistorical as it is biased and euro-centred. This presentation endeavours to shed at least a small light on the history of education and of childhood outwith the usual focus. The central objects of examination are the theoretical treatises of Zeami Motokiyo regarding the *Noh* theatre which have long been recognised as one of the great cultural achievements of humankind. Despite their acknowledged importance, theorists of education have hardly engaged with these treatises even though they present us with a whole theory of education that also embraces a very original and positive theory of childhood. Given that the treatises originate from the 14th–early 15th century, they pre-date everything the typical Western History of Education would bring forth as the beginning of a positive childhood and a pedagogy that acts accordingly.*

Keywords: Classic Japanese education, *Noh* theatre, Zeami, Theory of child and childhood, History of education, Pedagogical anthropology, Systematic pedagogy

Introduction

Although not a necessary part of educational theory – as education is by no means restricted to dealing with children – a concept of childhood serves as the foundation for many theories of education. It can therefore not be surprising when the discipline of Childhood Studies nowadays is very strongly connected to the discipline of Education Studies. Looking at the discussions of child and childhood within Education Studies, it becomes apparent that two particular questions are central to most of these debates: a) Is there a difference between child and adult?, and b) If there is a difference and therefore a specific developmental phase called 'childhood', how is this phase to be evaluated – what is it worth? Both questions, of course, are inextricably connected; while the first question asks for the *differentia specifica* of 'children' – the attributes by which they are to be discriminated from 'adults' (with

respect to age, competences, capacities, etc.) – the second question addresses the problem as to how this phase – given it exists – is to be judged and valued especially in comparison to any other identified phases of human life, such as adulthood, or old age.

Looking at typical debates about children and childhood in academia, one cannot fail to recognise that a profound eurocentrism governs many of the debates. With regard to the first question, debates begun as discussions around the arguments of Philippe Ariès (Ariès, 1960). Ariès introduced the very idea that child and childhood are by no means stable categories but developed and changed over the course of time. By introducing the idea of the historicity of child(hood), Ariès opened up the discussion about when the concepts of child and childhood evolved. His hypothesis that the ‘modern’ concepts of child and childhood began to evolve between the 16th and 18th century has been as influential as it has been contested: other researchers defended the view much of what Ariès described as being ‘modern’ existed prior to those centuries (e.g. Pollock, 1983; Nelson, 1994). Whatever the different views are about the period in which the modern child came into existence, they all share the idea that child(hood) is a concept that depends on historical circumstances. And what all those debates usually share is the geographical scope of the theories they analyse. Only what we might call ‘Western’ (i.e. European) concepts of child and childhood come into the focus of research with Ariès and his defenders or opponents.

With regard to the second question, this euro-centrism becomes even more visible. Even if there is no commonly shared understanding of when the modern child was born, many written Histories of Childhood, especially when connected to educational debates, are unanimous in their belief that it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who invented the ‘good child’ in his novel *Émile* (Rousseau, 1762) and who introduced the very idea that there is not only a distinct phase of human development that can be called ‘childhood’ but that this phase has its intrinsic value, is important and therefore to be evaluated positively (e.g. Jenks, 2005). Looking exclusively at cultures which were governed by Christianity, Rousseau and his renunciation of the idea of Original Sin (especially in his letter to the archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont; Rousseau, 1763/2013) seem, for many researchers, to be the exclusive turning point within the historic development of the concepts of child and childhood. (e.g. Wolff, 2015)

The following paper aspires to expand this view by introducing a non-Western perspective in which it will become plausible to state that the idea of childhood as a distinct and absolutely positive phase of human development, especially through educational lenses, is much older than usually stated within Western Histories of Childhood. To show this, the paper will focus on one of the most famous theoreticians of theatre: Zeami Motokiyo (jap. 世阿弥 元清). Zeami, who lived from 1363 to 1443, became immortal as the reformer of the Japanese *Noh* (能) theatre because with him it gained its Classic form. This was introduced in a series of treatises (Zeami, 2008) which, after having been handed down as esoteric teachings within the family for centuries (Morinaga, 2005), have been made public only between 1908 and 1940 (Rath, 2004). This much is generally known. However, what is not commonly known is that Zeami did not only codify the *Noh* theatre as art form, he was also the first theoretician who concerned himself with the education of the actor. Treatises about theatre theory (and even about the educational function of theatre) existed much earlier (Aristotle comes to mind and his concepts of tragedy and catharsis). However, there is no earlier example of a theoretician that wrote extensively about the personal development of

the actor, about his education and his growing into the profession. And it is exactly this concern which the following paper will explore: Zeami's ideas of actor education, and the theories of child and childhood that this educational theory is founded on. As we will see, Rousseau was by far not the first to celebrate child and childhood, and to some extent it can even be said that Zeami's theory of child and childhood bears a closer resemblance to Romantic ideas of the child than the more popularly espoused view from Rousseau.

To explore Zeami's theory, the paper is structured as follows: firstly, it will introduce the idea of *Noh* theatre in general – of what it is supposed to be or represent according to Zeami. Or, in educational terms, what is the goal or purpose of the actor's education; what does he have to achieve in the end in order to make *Noh* what it should be. Secondly, the question is asked: how does the actor evolve into the very person needed to present *Noh* as what it should be? And, thirdly, what theories of child and childhood underpin this theory of the actor's education which in itself is connected to the theory of *Noh* presented to us by Zeami?

Zeami's concept of *Noh*

In very general terms, *Noh* is a classic form of Japanese musical theatre, consisting of chants, dances and music, that evolved to its modern form from different sorts of theatre and ritual plays in the 14th and 15th century, mainly codified by Kan'ami and his son, Zeami. Plays are usually based upon old legends and tales, where the actors wear masks so that instead of facial expressions, highly stylized gestures and movements serve to convey emotions, whereas the kind of mask and the very elaborate robes signify the gender, profession, character and class of the individual. This codification is necessary as *Noh* was for centuries only allowed to be performed by men – comparable to Classic Elizabethan theatre in England. A typical performance of *Noh* theatre consists of five different *Noh* plays which are interrupted and connected by *kyogen* (狂言) plays, comical plays that serve as interludes between the more dramatic and serious *Noh* plays. *Noh*, as well as *kyogen*, were traditionally represented by specific schools which themselves were usually organised around a specific family. Although *Noh* is presented in ancient Japanese language, which is to a large extent incomprehensible to modern audiences, it is still a very much valued and cherished form of theatre in modern Japan and exercised a huge influence on the development of modern Western theatre.

This general description of *Noh* can only serve as a very crude introduction. For Zeami, and since Zeami, *Noh* as an art form is connected with some aesthetic principles which need to be discussed in order not only to understand what *Noh* truly is, but also to understand what the actor is expected to achieve during his performance.

From an educational point of view, there are two principles which need to be discussed to understand what is expected by the fully developed actor: *Monomane* (物真似, imitation or mimesis), and *Hana* (花, flower). While the first, *Monomane*, represents the ideal with regard to the content of the theatrical presentation, the acting in its presenting or possible representation of the world, it is the second, *Hana*, that refers to the achievement of the actor in his relation to the audience and to the emotions the acting should induce in the audience. Indeed, in Zeami's words, the education of an actor means the 'posture of the

flower' or *Kadensho*, a term that not only serves as the name of one of Zeami's most important treatises, but that in general refers to his endeavours to teach others how to perform *Noh* in written and oral form. What do these principles mean? (Komparu, 1983).

Monomane means not simply the imitation of a certain character, but the re-presentation of a character based on what the true essence of this character is. The actor has to achieve not only an external or superficial identity with the character (of, for example, an old man) in his gestures, movements, or costumes, but he has to act truly in the spirit of the role. He has to get to the heart of the character in order to change his own heart so that his performance now truly comes 'from the heart'; he no longer plays the old man but somehow is the old man, he represents the essence of an old man (Ueda, 1961). This process includes two aspects: firstly, all his movements emanate from the chanting and the music, his body follows the more spiritual character of the music. And, secondly, in accordance to general Buddhist ideas of the Buddhahood of all things, he manages to convey the idea that everything is in essence beautiful and graceful, even the fiercest samurai and the cruellest demon.

Hana can perhaps be best understood as that which the actor conveys in his performance and through his performance; it is what blossoms between actor and audience (Yuasa, 1987; Quinn, 2005; Higuchi, 2007). It is therefore dependent not only on the behaviour of the actor but also on the state the audience is in at the very moment of the play, and it is no small part of the mastery of *Noh* to not only know about the state of the audience but to adapt the performance to the specific state of the audience in any given moment. The true flower grows between actor and audience if the latter is moved in the right way, which is when she is enchanted (*omoshiroi*) and surprised (*mezurashii*) at the same time. Here we can already identify a generational principle in Zeami's theory, since he distinguishes between a 'temporary flower' and the 'true flower'. Zeami recognises that the audience is moved in the right way by the beauty and grace of young, boyish actors. However, this flower only blossoms in youth, and with growing age, the actor needs to refer to other abilities to induce the desired emotions. In achieving this, we are looking at the true flower, the flower that is founded not only upon the beguiling but inevitably fading radiance of young boys, but upon true mastery, a mastery that eliminates the difference between nature and art and makes the highly artificial presentation look completely natural. Now the question of how the actor acquires this kind of mastery, how he (and we are only talking about men with Zeami) becomes a true actor (Nishihira, 2012). What does the education of an actor look like, what is the path he has to choose in order to become a master of *Noh*?

The introduction of two different flowers already hints at the genealogical principle of Zeami's theory of *Noh* education. Indeed, an aspiring actor has to grow into the art of *Noh*, a path that for Zeami is characterised by different stages and levels of development (McKinnon, 1953). He hereby distinguishes between a scale that is based upon anthropological principles of development and a scale that is based upon different types of acting styles. The two are not totally congruent. While Zeami presupposes seven stages of human development, he discriminates in later writings between nine different styles of *Noh* which should be learnt in the right order. However, for the argument presented here this is not relevant, and therefore this paper concentrates solely upon the seven developmental stages an actor goes through, according to Zeami.

The education of the actor according to Zeami

The actor who usually is (or is made) a member of the family and is in general terms raised in this family, begins his education to become an actor at the age of seven (Zeami, 2008). Based upon their natural grace and inclination to sing and dance, children of this age should be included in *Noh* plays under the following rules: under no circumstances should they be expected to play a role or be taught a specific role; the play itself must not be explained; and in general they should be spared from teachings about what is good or bad in order to preserve their naturalness. It is only at the age of twelve or thirteen that the young actors are slowly introduced to individual plays. At this point, at the height of their youthful grace in movements and voice, the actors should be allowed to present their natural beauty in the most compelling way. More complex performances are not allowed, only what fits their momentary grace, only what they truly manage to present without losing their natural beauty should be asked of them. The learning of roles is still not of great importance; singing and dancing as the two foundational arts must be constantly practised and developed to the level where everything is exact and follows the traditional rules of presenting and expressing. Those rules and patterns – *kata* (型) – are learnt through mimesis and imitation: The student attempts to imitate what is shown to him by the masters of the art, whereas the teacher-master observes and corrects the attempts which are repeated over and over again in a never-ending process of practising. At seventeen or eighteen the natural beauty, and with it the ‘temporary flower’, disappears, and it is only now that the real work begins as the actors need to start practising to gain the true flower which is the result of constant exercise. The breaking of voice at this age especially creates a lot of despair, and many youngsters give up practising at this point, being overwhelmed by the task ahead. It is only at the age of twenty-four or twenty-five that the study of specific roles begins. Remember, the actor has already spent seventeen years practising and performing, and it is only at this age that he starts to study some theatrical roles. More specifically, he starts to learn the three foundational roles which are the Old Man, the Woman, and the Warrior. All other roles are later developed out of these three. Still there is a rest of youthful beauty, and the actor might be tempted to rest his performance upon this. But in doing so, Zeami warns, he compromises his capacity to develop even further, as it is only at the age of thirty-four or thirty-five that the artist reaches his full potential. By now, the actor should have become able to let the true flower blossom through his performance, and he should be able to keep up his high art for the next ten years, before, at forty-four or forty-five, his physical capacities begin to deteriorate. However, it is the final proof that he has developed a true understanding of the art if he now manages to keep his flower blossoming. In choosing the right roles, in harmony with his physical abilities, his mental power will allow him to continue to enchant the audience. Even over the age of fifty it would still be possible for the master to present an excellent *Noh*; he might not sing anymore as his voice has deteriorated too much, and his movements might be small, slow and limited, but as the master that he is, he will emanate a naturalness and beauty that can hardly be achieved by any younger actor. It is he who embodies more than anyone else what is known as *yugen* (幽玄), the profoundly sublime or beauty that is more felt than seen, that refers to the transcendental world, and that includes the kind of mournful beauty emanating from sadness and loss (Hisamatsu, 1963; Tsubaki, 1971).

It is easy to see how the education of the *Noh* actor is a good example of the idea of lifelong learning. There is in principle no moment when the actor can rest and is allowed to stop learning; the perfection of the art itself and the changing physical and mental capacities of the actor demand a constant adaption and change (Pilgrim, 1972). It is the interplay of the universal and the individual that results in a never-ending process of self-formation (or *Bildung*, to use here an appropriate German word). All of the roles, as well as the dances and songs, are complex and codified to the highest imaginable degree. Transmitted as tradition, they represent the universal form – or, in Japanese, the *kata* (形) – that always towers above as the example of perfection and that serves as a goal that can never be truly reached. At the same time, it is the individual actor who in his development begins to embody this universal and sets out to find a truly individual representation or expression of this universal, thereby achieving a specific sort of freedom (Nagatomo, 1981). Zeami demands of the actor not to forget to develop a personal style, and states that in having done so, this style will embrace all other styles as well.

It is indeed the interplay between universal rules and their individual instantiation that makes the art of *Noh* so difficult and yet so interesting. The acting and the education for this acting are governed by an almost incredible number of rules and laws, all of which are derived from specific metaphysical ideas of the world in general, and anthropological concepts in particular. It is within these ideas and concepts that we find a theory of child and childhood that is eminently positive. This can be seen with regard to different aspects, as will be explored in the following paragraphs.

Concepts of child and childhood in Zeami

It is a central part of Zeami's theory to assume that young boys are naturally beautiful. This is not only true for their appearance, but also for their ways of moving, singing, and speaking – for everything, really. Based upon this conviction, Zeami prohibits teachers from interfering with the boy-actors' natural ways of being. The only light influence to be exercised on the young boys (that mainly consists in allowing them to perform only specific parts on stage and to observe *Noh* performances in general) aspires to preserve all that is naturally beautiful in the child. Based upon this idea is the assumption that young actors can naturally produce the flower every actor ultimately longs for. The beauty of the child-boy is something that in itself creates the desired emotions and reactions in the audience; child-boys achieve without any effort what older actors have to preserve or re-learn for years. The child is not only very distinct from the adult, his nature even places him above the adult. However, it has to be mentioned that Zeami exclusively talks about boys here, a bias he shares with Western theoreticians of childhood far into modernity.

The positive image of the child, however, does not only rest upon his perceivable natural beauty that serves as the right foundation for the education of the actor, another important aspect that contributes to this positivity is the inclusion of the child and the period of childhood into at least two concepts of natural order, a natural order of 'processuality' (of generally being a 'process') and a natural order of correspondence.

The natural order of 'processuality' determines that every process, i.e. every temporarily extended period of change, is governed by the universal principle that became known as *jo – ha – kyu* (序破急). (Hoff, 1981). Zeami discusses this amongst other things with regard to

the right order of plays, but *jo – ha – kyu* is an universal principle. In general it means that every natural process is, and every artificial process therefore should be ordered according to this principle in which *jo* means a slow beginning, *ha* a speeding up, and *kyu* a swift ending. This concept that originated in Japanese classical music governs most of the traditional Japanese arts like tea ceremonies, martial arts, poetry, etc. Taking this principle as universal, it becomes clear that the process of human development is also governed by this principle, and that childhood has its place in this as being the *jo* of human development (and maybe it could be said, that it is a ‘slow beginning’ with regard to the fact that children are usually exposed to only a fraction of the complexities of adult life). As such, it has its own meaning, its own dignity and relevance. It is not a derivative state or one of deficit which needs to be overcome in order to achieve ‘real’ humanity in adulthood; childhood is a distinctive, self-sufficient and celebrated period of human life.

The second natural order, the order of correspondence, refers to the idea that the right state of being is one of appropriateness. It is not that being a child or being an adult are in themselves good or bad states (except for the reasons given above), the value of being is dependent upon the correspondence of the developmental stage and the behaviour shown. Or, in Zeami’s theory, all is fine as long as children do or are expected to do appropriate things on stage; their natural beauty is perfect as well as their natural clumsiness and limitations, and nobody can or should expect a child to behave like an adult. There is no deficit in a child behaving childishly. Because of that, Zeami sets out detailed rules about what is appropriate for a child-actor; the idea of appropriateness preserves the perfect state of being for everyone, regardless of age. This concept of appropriateness therefore prevents the degradation of childhood in itself. According to Zeami, every life has to be evaluated with regard to the appropriateness of the specific form it takes on in every moment; and it becomes obvious that this concept is based as much on a very normative view of the child (and the adult) as are all the other concepts that refer to some idea of the ‘nature’ of the ‘child’ (or the ‘adult’).

The general positivity Zeami connects with childhood leads him to propose that throughout his career, the actor should remember and somehow re-live his childhood. Zeami states that although the actor slowly changes and gains more and more insight into the art of *Noh*, thereby changing his style and therefore changing the very foundation that allows him to produce the true flower of *Noh*, he must not forget his first flower of youth and his first style of acting (Ishii, 1987). One might use a Hegelian notion here. Zeami expects the actor to abolish, preserve, and at the same time transcend the child’s flower; or, in one word, grow, as a *Noh* actor is in a process of Hegelian *Aufhebung*. There is nothing here of the traditional Christian dislike of childhood and its pollution with original sin (or innate animalism). Subsequently, there is no trace of education as the tool for departing from a deficit state of being called ‘childhood’ in order to achieve a far better state of being called ‘adulthood’. For Zeami, education (of the actor) is the thoughtful reaction towards the changing conditions caused by natural growth; it is basically the art of keeping up or establishing appropriateness and harmony between the general state of being and the way it is enacted in every moment of life. Education here supports the existence of harmony between the universal principle and its individual exemplification; it is not the instrument that secures the leaving of one deficit state of being in order to arrive at a better state of being.

Concluding remarks

Two concluding remarks might be allowed here. Those remarks are not meant to present final answers but aspire to open up a horizon of possible discussions around the specific characteristics of Zeami's philosophy of education.

1) There can be no doubt that Zeami's appreciation of the boy-child and childhood is rooted in the widely accepted practice of *shudo* (衆道) in medieval Japan (Pflugfelder, 1999). Like in ancient Greece, pederastic relationships were not only normal, but represented an acknowledged educational practice within the samurai-class without being restricted to this class. In the minds of Zeami and his contemporaries, *shudo* itself takes on the form of a codified practice of self-formation – a 'way of loving the youth' – that stands in the same tradition as other Japanese ways like *sado* (茶道, tea ceremony) or *kado* (華道, flower arranging). Zeami himself, and with him *Noh* as theatre form, benefitted from the admiration of the young shogun of the Muromachi Shogunate, Yoshimitsu Ashikaga (足利義満), who, after he had seen a performance of Zeami, desired to establish an intimate relationship to the then eleven year-old boy (MacDuff 1996). This liaison not only secured the success and protection of the theatre troupe of Zeami and his father, but also brought the young boy in connection to other aristocrats who not only shared the shoguns embracing admiration but introduced Zeami to the classic culture of Japan. It is in this realm of *shudo* where Zeami's talk of the 'flower' originates. The fleeting beauty of a young boy was constantly compared with short-lived blossoms, and from here it was only a small step towards describing the emotional reaction of a spectator, of that which is evoked through the sight of the beauty of the boy as a flower. This can easily be seen in the words of Nijo Yoshimoto (二条良基), the court's senior statesman, who was as equally enchanted by the young Zeami as his master:

Should [Zeami] have time, please bring him over with you once again. The entire day was wonderful and I quite lost my heart. A boy like this is rare - why, look at his linked verse [renga], and his court kickball, not to mention his own particular art! Such a charming manner and such poise! I don't know where such a marvellous boy can have come from ... I should compare him to a profusion of cherry or pear blossoms in the haze of a spring dawn ... It's no surprise that the shogun is so taken with this boy... In spite of myself, I feel as if the flower of the heart still remains somewhere in this fossilized old body of mine (Crompton, 2003, p. 424).

However, this is not the place to engage in a wider discussion about the erotic foundations of metaphysical and, based upon those, educational concepts, theories and practices, for which Zeami would offer an interesting example: Although he does not include the practice of *shudo* in his concept of actor-education, his conceptual (or metaphorical?) framework is founded to some extent on *shudo* practices and their conceptualisation.

2) The second remark is to draw attention to the similarities between Zeami's theory of *Noh* education and its concept of the child and later, especially romantic theories of not only art, but also of child and childhood.

Zeami's description of the temporary and the true flower seems to introduce an important distinction. It does, however, also link the two phases of childhood and adulthood together. As it appears, Zeami views the child as somehow perfect (again, he only addresses the boy-child as he only talks about actors; nothing is said or precluded with regard to girls), a perfection that is given by nature and must not be disturbed or distorted by human influence. It is then by natural principles that the child loses this perfection as he grows and his natural beauty and grace vanish. It is then only by somewhat artificial means that the adult regains this natural state of beauty and perfection. The true flower is almost eternal, and it is a state that aspires to nothing less than re-establishing nature through art (Ôhashi, 1994). In the end, at the highest level of mastery in *Noh* theatre, the actor achieves naturalness through art, and art and nature merge and become indistinguishable. It is education that enables a person to regain its lost, or to preserve its threatened, naturalness. Romantic concepts of art and education present us with similar concepts. The child, then, is perceived as somewhat perfect and departs from this perfection either through societal influence (the corruption by society Rousseau was talking about when in the opening sentences of *Émile* he points out that: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man"), or the change is part of the course of nature itself. It is often the education of the person that reverses this process. "We must become children again in order to reach perfection", Philipp Otto Runge, a celebrated German Romantic, claimed (Runge, 1840, my translation). Here, it is through aesthetic education that this is achieved, whereby it is only true art that has the capacity to transform people. True art, then, is art which is indistinguishable from nature; true art is art that loses its apparent artificiality and can be taken for being natural. This conflation of art and nature is not only seen in Friedrich Schiller's theory of Aesthetic Education (Schiller 1993), but also in, for example, the English landscape garden where the artificial aspires to be perceived as natural, a place, where art and nature become one. We can observe the same structure in Zeami, for when education turns art into nature to achieve perfection, it is the child that provides the model for natural perfection which the art of the adults has to aspire to in some sort of return to prelapsarian innocence. It is this version of the circuitous journey that M.H. Abrams (1971) has identified as one of the key concepts behind the Romantic Movement. This is, arguably, not one of the key ideas of Rousseau: He designed a general education to aid the preservation of redeemed naturalness, and not an aesthetic education as a path to regain the original state of salvation.

In this paper I have endeavoured to show that modern, especially Western, accounts of the history of the child and of childhood and, based upon this, of the history of education, are at best biased, if not wrong. The idea of childhood as a specific period in human life that needs to be distinguished from adulthood did not develop only between the 16th and 18th century, nor was it Rousseau who introduced the idea that we should cherish and celebrate childhood as a period in its own right. Looking at Zeami, we find similar ideas, very vividly expressed, much earlier, ideas that share the same gender bias by talking almost exclusively about boys, but that introduce a metaphysically grounded concept of child and childhood and, based on that, an elaborate theory of education, of life-long learning, of developmental stages and corresponding ways of teaching. Zeami Motokiyo is not only one of the most

important theorists of theatre – he, indeed, deserves a place amongst those revered in the history of education.

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