Blowing Away Convention: Enchi Fumiko, Tanabe Seiko and Aging Women in Modern Japanese Literature

Sohyun Chun
Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds

Recommended Citation
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/838

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Sciences at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
Blowing Away Convention: Enchi Fumiko, Tanabe Seiko and Aging Women in Modern Japanese Literature
by
So Hyun Chun

A dissertation presented to the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences of Washington University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2016
St. Louis, Missouri
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................... iii

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ iv

Chapter 1: Introduction or Why We Must Listen to the Feisty Crone ........................................ 1

Chapter 2: Cranky, Crazy Crones: The Old Women of Literary Past and Present..................... 23

Chapter 3: Floral Lust: Eccentric Crones in Enchi Fumiko’s Fiction ........................................ 54

Chapter 4: Crazy Cat Ladies and Other Unruly Crones in Enchi Fumiko’s Fiction ..................... 88

Chapter 5: Dreaming the Romantic-Eyed Uba by Tanabe Seiko ................................................. 130

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 177

Bibliography ................................................................................................................................. 189
Acknowledgements

My interest in the study of “aging” is rooted in my earlier research on the use of the
grotesque female body by Japanese women writers. However, my later research in Japan from
2013-2014, funded by a Japan Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Grant, was influenced by
dramatic and arguably unfair presentations of aged women in the media after several high-profile
crimes by female senior citizens. I started to wonder how writers—especially as they became
older—reflected on their position within society, possibly through aging female characters who
confront socio-cultural expectations and oppressive circumstances. Building upon the notion of
“grotesque” from my earlier research, I began to explore writers’ depictions of elderly women
and how they might challenge cultural preconceptions.

I wish to highlight the importance of my research in America and the tremendous support
and patience of my advisers Professors Rebecca Copeland, Marvin Marcus, and Jamie Newhard.
I deeply appreciate their consistent guidance and faith which has led me to complete a long
course of study at Washington University in St. Louis. I must also acknowledge the committed
efforts of my dissertation committee’s other members, Professors Nancy Berg and Gerhild
Scholz Williams. Dr. Kazumi Nagaike of the University of Oita was an important voice of
encouragement while I conducted dissertation research, and a fundamental supporter in my
successful applications for a Japan Foundation fellowship as well as a Japan Society for the
Promotion of Science post-doctoral fellowship. Also, I thank Steve Pijut of the university’s
Writing Center and my other graduate school friends who have diligently read and critiqued my
work up until the very end. The East Asian Library’s Ryuta Komaki has also supported me a
great deal, for which I am very thankful. Once again, I wish to say “Thank you” to my family in
Korea, my professors, and my friends for all their loving support.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Blowing Away Convention: Enchi Fumiko, Tanabe Seiko and Aging Women in Modern Japanese Literature

by

So Hyun Chun

Doctor of Philosophy in Japanese Language and Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2016

Rebecca L. Copeland, Chair

Marvin H. Marcus, Co-Chair

Since the 1970s, Japan’s rapidly aging population has prompted a range of narratives addressing the issue of aging, which has disproportionately affected women. Prevailing narratives often present the elderly demographic as either a national burden that exhausts social resources, or a national pride that represents a well-structured healthcare system. This study focuses on aged women—often deemed expendable and unimportant by society—who occupy principal roles in various works by Japanese modern women writers. This study asks the question: why does literature occasionally lure its readers to the oft-ignored voice of the sultry crone? By granting their aging female protagonists unconventional interiorities and subjectivities, writers underscore elderly women’s voices and agency. In so doing, these writers challenge the popular narratives of Japan’s greying society which have reinforced restrictive representations of the elderly and overlooked the richness and diversity of their personal lives and experiences. This study examines three stories by Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986)—“Hana kui uba” (“The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers,” 1974), “Neko no sōshi” (“The Cat Scroll,” 1974), and “Kinuta” (“The Fulling Block,” 1980)—and Tanabe Seiko’s (b. 1928) novel Uba tokimeki (Silver Butterflies, 1984).
These works treat the socially regulated views on aged women by diverging from common narratives that illustrate them as weak, lonely, and socially useless characters. Borrowing Margaret Gullette’s notion of “decline ideology,” which defines aging as a social, ideological process rather than a biological process, my study builds upon and expands the previous scholarship on aging in cultural and literary realms. It explores how the two writers challenge rigid gender divisions and social propriety in modern Japan through their aged female characters, who break away from the stagnated images of the powerless and ineffectual elderly woman.
Chapter 1: Introduction or Why We Must Listen to the Feisty Crone

Concerned over the way Japan’s aging society affected women in particular, a group of women activists in Tokyo organized the symposium “Women’s Views on Issues in Aging” (女性による老人問題, Showa 57) in September 1982.\(^1\) Over six hundred women from different areas and age groups attended the event.\(^2\) Ten days later, in response to the passionate requests from a range of Japanese women, the symposium was held again in Kobe, and successively in other regions. Higuchi Keiko (b. 1932), a Japanese scholar and one of the social activists who organized the symposium, raised her critical voice against the kind of passive attitudes toward aging issues that government officials revealed in the Welfare Ministry White Papers (厚生白書), such as: “living together with aged parents is a rich benefit to the social welfare budget.”\(^3\)

Resenting such government policies, she pointed out that the Japanese government was merely trying to avoid responsibility for aged citizens by relying on individual families—particularly on the women who were in charge of managing the household and taking care of the family members—instead of establishing a firm ground for societal support. Articulating the dilemma of Japanese women who were burdened with the responsibility of taking care of senior family members,\(^4\) without a guarantee that their sacrifice would be reciprocated when they become aged, Higuchi criticized the government’s ignorance toward women’s difficulties and

---

\(^1\) The symposium continued to be held until 1990s receiving a lot of support from women.

\(^2\) http://www.yuki-enishi.com/kaiho/kaiho-06.html

\(^3\) Higuchi gives the following: 「日本の家族同居率の高さは、我が国の福祉予算の含み資産である」, but I was unable to find this text in the Welfare Ministry White Papers for 1978. She seems to be paraphrasing a passage from Kōsei Rōdōshō, 1978.

\(^4\) This dilemma worsens when considering the fact that this generation was still obligated to care for the youngest in their family as well (i.e.: offspring). See Dorothy Miller’s article “The 'Sandwich' Generation: Adult Children of the Aging” (1980) which touches on the burden of caring for both parents and children that many women faced at this time.
emphasized the importance of support for women’s independence and well-being within society. The fact that the symposiums she helped organize drew out enthusiastic responses from many Japanese women across the generations and the nation indicated how acutely aware the Japanese were of public policy for elderly care. Colette Browne notes of the American situation that “motherhood and apple pie may be sacred, but neither guarantee economic security in old age” (11), and indeed, the popularity of the symposiums signified Japanese women’s deep anxiety regarding the serious impact of aging on them, even for those who were still in the most vigorous stages of their lives.  

At the second symposium in Kobe, Higuchi claimed that “[t]he problem of aging is a problem for women” (“Rōjin mondai wa onna no mondai”), and her statement underscores the gendered aspect of aging which had been largely unnoticed before. Since the 1970s, the rapidly aging population along with the low birth rate has been a national concern. In 2014, one fourth of the Japanese population was over the age of sixty-five, and it is estimated that by 2050, the ratio will reach 40 percent, with more than a quarter of the population being over seventy-five. Also, in 2013, the birth rate was 1.39 children per woman, well below replacement level (which is roughly 2.1 children). People in Japan also live longer on average than in any other country; the average life expectancy was 80.5 for men and 86.83 for women (Danely 3-4).

---

5 Browne argues that women’s deep anxiety can be “due to such family responsibilities, together with the lack of responsive polices, that motherhood and caregiving are economically risky behaviors for women” (Browne, 35).
6 “In 1973, also known as “Welfare for the Aged Year No. 1” (rōjinfukushi gannen), it increased the average employee’s pension from 15,000 to 68,000 yen a month, and it established an Office of Policy for the Aged attached to the Prime Minister's Bureau to coordinate the manifold measures hastily established by the various ministries” (Sepp Linhart, 426).
The notably longer average life expectancy for women in comparison to men is not a uniquely Japanese phenomenon. Tavengwa M. Nhongo has pointed out that “[a]n ageing world is predominantly a woman’s world” (viii). Nevertheless, in its relevant public policy, the Japanese government has not taken gender into consideration, which eventually prevented it from improving the wellbeing of the elderly and relieving the responsibilities of women. Jason Danely, in his study *Aging and Loss: Mourning and Maturity in Contemporary Japan*, notes the problem of public policy in a hyper-aged society like Japan, stating that those societies “invest a tremendous amount of resources in supporting aspirations of what is generally referred to as ‘successful aging’ of the individual, [but] fewer resources are dedicated to the welfare and well-being of the aging social body” (4). He goes on to note that this kind of approach frequently fails because they do not “appreciate the context and conditions of aging” on the aged individuals (ibid.). As Danely points out, what is promoted as “successful aging” actually confines the social perception of aging, since it puts emphasis on the productivity and activity of older people in order to minimize their dependence on public resources, instead of supporting “the welfare and well-being of the aging social body.” Therefore, while the Japanese government did expand its budget for subsidizing pensions, medical care, and social resources, it was not enough to fully cover the needs of senior citizens, especially for the majority who are mature women, for it failed to acknowledge and address the gender aspects of aging.

---

8 Danely noted that an increasing elderly rate and declining birth rate appear as a similar pattern in postindustrial countries but that “Japan stands out as the first nation to experience this rapid demographic shift to a “super-aging society” (4). See more details in his book. Takahashi Nobuaki’s article “Overcoming Fear of an Aged Population” also points out the social anxiety for increasingly aged populations.

9 Danely, “‘disburden dependence’ focuses on delaying or preventing dependence by encouraging older people to work, stay active, and bear more of the cost of long-term care themselves by choosing from a variety of care options, insurances, investments” (4).

10 See John C. Campbell’s discussion for more regarding Japanese policy for aged people.
Similarly, the media dealt with the aging problem in light of the struggling social welfare system, burdened families, and crimes committed by the elderly. In combination with such social media and cultural narratives, a society that considers the elderly merely as a recipient of the social welfare system produces negative images of old people as annoying and useless social burdens who sometimes even threaten the social order. A recent study of crimes by elderly people, *Bōsō rōjin! (暴走老人!)*, published in 2007, emphasizes elderly people’s increasing crime rate in Japanese society.\(^{11}\) Such views of the elderly reinforce unfavorable, anti-social perceptions toward aged people. Danely explores stereotypical images of the aged with several keywords: “caregiver exhaustion” (*kaigo tsukare*), “double suicide pact” (*murishinjū*),\(^{12}\) and “dying in isolation” (*kodokushi*).\(^{13}\) More specifically, this scholar highlights the negativity that is unfairly associated with the elderly, contributing to their perception as a burden to society and those who are socially obligated to take care of them. Despite the great care Japanese society has paid to the issue of the aging population, the voices of the aged have been muted and concealed by such perspectives that present only a limited range of acceptable lifestyles for aged people. Moreover, considering the variety of investigations that exist about literary and cultural representations of old age, the presence of aged women is still a largely overlooked

---

11 The author Fujiwara Tomomi notes that along with the growing numbers of old people (over 65 years old) in Japanese society, the crimes committed by the elderly in 2005 increased to 46,980 cases, which is five times than 9,642 cases in 1989.

12 *Murishinjū* is perhaps better translated “forced double suicide.” It refers to a double suicide where the party who has decided to commit suicide murders their partner, and usually involves a parent and child, a married couple, or an ill person and their caregiver. Compare to the more well-known suicide pact (*shinjū*), where two parties agree to commit suicide together.

13 Regarding “*kodokushi*,” Danely refers to David Plath’s study “Cultural Nightmare of Old Age in Japan” (Plath 1982, 109), which examines increasing rates of dementia, depression, abuse, and neglect (5). (For more details, see Plath’s study.)
demographic. And, when older women are considered, the picture that emerges rarely represents the vast variety of women’s personal lives and voices.

Aging issues tend to compound the systemic biases that inordinately affect women, thus complicating the intersection between gender and age. This leads to problems for society’s oldest citizens, who happen to be women. This is especially true in Japan, where there are more elderly women who are over 65 years old than elderly men. This reality compels us to give adequate attention to a female-centered approach to aging. Old Japanese women are often noted for their record longevity, but the main socio-cultural narratives neglect to present their voices, while simply packaging them as an elderly group and a burdensome object of the social care system. It is ironic that there are many old Japanese women and yet their individual, subjective voices are hardly prevalent. The lack of women’s subjective perspective is not the only issue concerning elderly care. Socio-cultural narratives are oversaturated by aged people, but there is hardly a charitable view of elderly women. In this way “female superiority in longevity” as Browne cites from Turne, “is a mixed blessing” (46). Hence, it is no wonder that a symposium that addressed the particular concerns of aging from female perspectives received an explosive amount of interest and attention from the women who had been seeking a way to deal with the issues of aging as a woman.

**Literature and Aging**

There are many means to measure and assess the biased social treatment of women, the construction of stereotypes of the aged and their uncomfortable relationships with society. Sociologists and anthropologists in their ethnographies collect vignettes and conduct surveys and
interviews. Writers provide an alternative outlook toward the elderly along with a recognition of
the inequality tied to their social position and limited representation in society. In her study
Kataru rōjo katarareru rōjo (Old Women who Speak, Old Women who are Spoken For), scholar
Kurata Yōko touches on the instability related to how the term rōjo (老女, old woman) has been
applied: “The words ‘rōjo’ and ‘uba’\(^\text{14}\) have almost become unused as discriminatory
expressions in contemporary mass media, but one objective of [Kurata’s] study is to show the
history and politics of these words’ significations.”\(^\text{15}\) Although one must keep in mind the
tendency for terms like rōjo to suggest discrimination, this dissertation aims to evaluate how
women writers have played with the terms as a means to proffer fresh ways for their aged
protagonists to shape their own identities. Pam Morris, a feminisit philosopher and literary critic,
notes that “[i]t has traditionally been believed that creative forms of writing offer special insight
into human experience and sharpen our perception of social reality. Literary texts may, therefore,
provide a more powerful understanding of the ways in which society works to the disadvantage
of women” (7). Although not a precise historical record, literature provides a significant lens
through which to examine the social perception of the aged female in Japanese society.

While Japanese literature has served as a platform for the presentation of problems
affecting elderly people, Ueno Chizuko comments that within literary history, “Rōjin bungaku”
(Literature of the Aged) and “Rōkyō bungaku” (Literature of Aged Life) often refer to stories
about the inner worlds of old men (57). Many of the stories within these genres privilege the

\(^{14}\) Lucy Fraser notes uba—the kanji (Chinese character) 姥—old woman that “occurs in the words ubakawa (姥皮),
uba (姥), and yamanba (山姥). The word for wet nurse is also pronounced uba, but uses different chracters, 乳母
(lit. milk mother)” (Lucy Fraser, 75).

\(^{15}\) Kurata also considers the difference between the gendered term rōjo and the more generally applied kōreisha,
highlighting the fact that kōreisha is a word that has only more recently been applied in Japan after the World Health
Organization specifically defined a senior citizen as a persona older than sixty-five years old (Kurata Yōko, 16).
feelings of a single elderly male protagonist, rather than exploring the entirety of the protagonist’s surrounding social situation. This is notably evident with remarkable male writers such as Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886-1965) and his famous novel with an elderly protagonist Fūten rōjin nikki (Diary of a Mad Old Man: 1962), or Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), who wrote several works devoted to the interior reflections of an aging man, such as Nemureru Bijo (House of the Sleeping Beauties: 1960-1) and Yama no oto (The Sound of the Mountain: 1949-54). Both authors wrote with a self-reflective tone to explore the inner desires and subjective voices of their aged protagonists.

However, several popular stories departed from the centrally-placed old man who anchored earlier and contemporary texts. In 1957, Fukazawa Shichirō (1914-1987) published Narayama bushikō (The Ballad of Narayama), a novel featuring an aged female protagonist who is willingly abandoned atop a mountain so as not to burden her family. Due to the novel’s popularity, it was twice made into a film—in 1958 and again in 1983—by the directors Keisuke Kinoshita and Shōhei Imamura, respectively. In 1972, Ariyoshi Sawako (1931-1984) released her Kōkotsu no hito (Twilight Years) which promptly became a bestseller. Ariyoshi’s work was heralded as “a pioneering novel dealing with the issue of aged care” (Aoyama, 19) by vividly describing the difficulties of caring for elderly parents from the perspective of the daughter-in-law. While this issue was clearly common to many women in households with elderly in-laws, it had always been one confined within the household and thus concealed from the public view or discussion. Although Fukazawa and Ariyoshi were not the first to write about the issues of aging, their works underscored the social dimension of aging, delineating the troubled relationships of

---

16 Imamura Shōhei’s film “Narayamabushi kō” won the Golden Palm award in 1983.
elderly people with their family and community. Nevertheless, Fukazawa and Ariyoshi’s representations of old people, particularly aged women, are problematic in that they proffer “parasitic” and “deadly” images of the aged, which may generate perceptions of the elderly as inefficient and socially burdensome. Essentially, their works offer rather limited views of aged people, who are depicted as the cause of various social, familial, and personal problems.

In addition to Fukazawa and Ariyoshi, many more writers have shown their interest in aging issues, even going so far as to center their works around aged protagonists. However, their works hark back to the “Rōjin bungaku” (Literature of the Aged) and “Rōkyō bungaku” (Literature of Aged Life) mentioned above, primarily focused on the aged male characters, and reveal little about the concerns and realities of aged women. Inoue Yasushi (1907-1991) in his Waga haha no ki (Chronicle of My Mother, 1975), Yasuoka Shōtarō (1920-2013) in Kaihen no kōkei (A View by the Sea, 1959), and Niwa Fumio (1904-2005) in “Iyagarase no nenrei” (“The Hateful Age,” 1947) wrote about aged women; yet the characters they describe are all senile mothers or grandmothers seen from another’s perspective, that is, of the family members. While Inoue and Yasuoka illustrate the senile mother in the story with a greatly sympathetic voice—in contrast, Niwa displays a crueler familial treatment toward the old grandmother—in none of these examples is the voice that of the elderly woman.

One prewar writer whose work subscribed to the trend of presenting an objectified elderly woman is Akutagawa Ryūnosuke. His works limit the views of old women through the perspectives of youthful protagonists. His works “Aguni no kami” (アグニの神, “Agni,” 1920)

---

17 Sepp Linhart notes that Inoue Yasushi’s and Ariyoshi’s novels are “apart from the erotic novels by Tanizaki Junichiro and Kawabata Yasunari, which caused sensations because they touched upon the taboo of the expression of sexual feelings in old age, all the novels about the elderly that have become real bestsellers treat aging not as an individual problem but as a social one” (424).
and “Yōba” (妖婆, “The Old Woman,” 1919) present terrifying or undesirable crones who threaten harm against the centrally-placed world of the main character. While writers like Tanizaki and Fukazawa demonstrate the shift in focus – from directly examining old men to examining old men's surroundings—there is still a great deal to the story of aging that is being left out of the picture. Even when we progress to the narratives of old women in the 1980s, the problem of representing the rōjo with her full complexity remains problematic, as can be seen in one particular manga (comic strip) character created by male cartoonist Katsuhiko Hotta and serialized from 1988 to 1998.

Hotta’s “Obatarian” contributes to the tendency within both popular culture and the literary tradition to objectify old women in a particularly negative way. Instead of referring to a specific character, “obatarian” refers to a general group of aging women with their wrinkled skin, rotund bellies, and disheveled hair who are argumentative, egocentric, and completely lacking in social decorum. The term is a pun or portmanteau of the Japanese word for older woman, oba, and battalion, transliterated in Japanese as batarian—the latter of which has variously been identified as the English word denoting a group of soldiers or the 1985 American zombie/comedy movie Return of the Living Dead, which was given the title Batarian (バタリアン, Battalion) in Japan. Obatarian clearly creates a derogatory—as in lacking positivity—image of aged women and makes fun of their exaggeratedly annoying and pushy behaviors. However, Obatarian provides entertainment and even catharsis to a certain extent when she fearlessly raises

---

18 Kin’ya Tsuruta analyzes the characteristics of old women in Akutagawa’s works, “[t]hese old women, aggressive, selfish, and deceitful, enslave young, beautiful, and helpless women and control them like puppets. The general plot of these stories has male protagonists rescuing the pale beauties from the clutches of these old witches” (81).

19 The series, which appeared in Manga Life (published by Takeshobo), was very popular, earning Hotta the Bungei Shunjū Manga Award in 1989. The following year Sunrise produced an anime version which ran on TV Asahi.
her voice to fight back against mainstream interpretations of her absurdity and ugliness. As we go on to consider the contribution by women writers to the changing narratives of the rōjo, this survey highlights such writers’ abilities to transform old women’s traditionally “negative” and “undesirable” aspects into opportunities to explore the rich subjectivities that have been thus far denied to all but older male protagonists within literary history.

Portrayals of the elderly have increased along with the growing social attention paid old people since the 1970s. But within those literary representations, elderly women still do not play a significant part, hardly compensating for their absence in social narratives. Although these stories successfully draw attention to aged people and the aging issue in society, their aged protagonists nonetheless appear passive, sacrificial, and inadequate. In light of the limited extent of social narratives, Japanese women writers have taken more acutely to recognizing not only the lack of old women’s voices in society but the skewed way their voices sound when they are raised. Thus, the examination contained herein will focus on the perspectives and methods by which two particular women writers—Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986) and Tanabe Seiko (b.1928)—have ensured aging women a more prominent voice against the social problem of aging.

I will be particularly attentive to the strategies these writers employ to liberate those images that have typically been constrained by cultural social perceptions and expectations. In the process of this liberation, these writers challenge the attitudes that have sequestered old women to the sidelines of literary and social relevance while simultaneously acknowledging and embracing the aged condition of their protagonists. Because ageism is so pervasive, contributing to a discourse of anti-aging, the contrary approach that celebrates agedness remains novel and thus free from prevailing narrative expectations or assumptions. Moreover, anthropologists such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette have recognized a need for “[aging] studies… to
reconceptualize itself in order to decide on the questions it will ask, let alone answer” (105).

Rather than merely taking advantage of the aged body as an object of derision, disgust, or humor, these writers enjoy the inner lives and subjectivity of their characters as aged people. With notable originality and innovation, they demonstrate the individuality of their characters, revise their aged identities, and criticize—perhaps even ultimately transform—the rigid social image of old women.

**Women Writers and the Literature of Aging**

Aged women have tended to be overlooked in the canonical works of modern Japanese literature, at best occupying marginal roles. How then can literature compel its readers to occasionally cast aside the fair maiden in order to hear out the sultry crone? By investing aging women with unconventional inner lives and subjectivities, recent and contemporary women writers have highlighted elderly women’s powerful voices and agency. My study investigates how the lens of aging allows writers to manipulate and challenge rigid gender constraints and social conceptualizations of women in general, and aged women in particular. Through this research one finds that contemporary writers diverge from traditions that typically portray old women as either weak, lonely, and socially useless or selfless and sacrificial. This study expands on earlier scholarly work that has yet to fully explore the changing realities of elderly life in Japan and how this marginalized group, more and more significant as a portion of the overall population, is shedding its stagnated image and becoming increasingly influential as cultural producers and consumers.
Before exploring Japanese women writers’ works, there are several stereotypical images of old women in Japanese literature that bear mentioning, such as the *yamamba* (mountain crone) and her companion the *obasuteyama onna* (abandoned woman)—these characters, which will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2, are portrayed as either dangerous and deadly or miserable and sacrificial. Kurata Yōko’s study emphasizes the importance of discovering more old women’s stories, pointing out that Japanese literature is dominated by male writers who have established a male-centered literary establishment that concentrates on the life and inner struggles of men from a male perspective. Kurata goes on to mention that the women who are treated in such works tend to be objectified as a result of this male-centric perspective. There have been feminist literary attempts to bring women into focus as well, but they generally deal with younger women’s issues, and old women are thus doubly ignored.

Accordingly, among the relatively few works that foreground women, those that concern aged women are notably scarce. Hattori Sanae, for example, observes that “while in ancient eras there were some deities that were believed to take the form of old women, from mediaeval times gods took the form of ‘old men,’ ‘children,’ and ‘[younger] women’; [and] ‘old women’ were excluded” (Quoted in Aoyama 17). Tomoko Aoyama argues that not only are “representations of old age ...gendered” but “the old woman repertoire tends to focus on loneliness, attachment, and lamentation of ruin” (ibid.). Citing Kurata's research, Aoyama also points out that “while old men never become demons (*oni*), old women are often represented as demons,” acknowledging the fact that “discussions of literary representations of old age have tended to focus on the aging male protagonists in canonical texts written by male authors” (18).

---

20 文学史に名を連ねる作家の大半は男性であり、代表的な作品の主人公は青年である場合が圧倒的に多い (Kurata 1).
As shown in Jason Danely’s “Art, Aging and Abandonment in Japan,” the cultural and social narratives about old people resemble literary narratives in presenting similar depictions of decline and deterioration. This characterization is especially true of old women who are deeply related to loss and lack of social capital due to their aging bodies. Gullette reaffirms Danely’s findings in her own study, *Aged by Culture*, in which she emphasizes the relation between “age” ("aging") and dominant cultural narratives that have consistently shaped our conception of “age.” As her book title indicates, aging deals with more than biology and personally-lived experiences; one must also consider aging alongside the matter of sociocultural contexts that relate individuals to their society as a whole. According to Gullette, the narrative power of physiological decline is strong: “Decline’s power over our narratives is overdetermined… Decline’s ‘knowledge’ circulates in daily clichés [such as “You’re only as old as you feel”] and goes all the way up to the most elaborated age anecdote of all, the realist novel” (132). Gullette argues that “[m]ost people’s ‘age identity’ appears to be heavy on the declining body and product placement, light on culture” (124), but “[m]ost of the rest of our age identities are personal versions of how the culture has seen us from childhood on.” In other words, one might argue that the identity we possess as an elderly person is a function of the characteristics typically attributed to old age—characteristics that we tend to internalize as we interact with society’s representations of aged life.

The negative representation of aged women is deeply rooted in literary tradition and has served to solidify a fixed gender-based interpretation. Rebecca Copeland, demonstrating that these ideas had real-life consequences, notes that “because women have been constantly exposed to stories and images that define the female as uncontrollable, shameful, and defiled, they unconsciously accept this definition as irredeemably true” (23). Thus, recognizing these constant
unfavorable literary circumstances for women, women writers aimed to destroy the archetype of these female qualities, imposed by a dominant male-centered perspective, which depicts a biased view of women.

Danely’s study discusses the ability for consistently “circulating aging narratives” in Japanese society—such as the obasuteyama onna, ghost, and spirit—to provide “a ma, a space that could allow a turning point or ‘vital conjuncture’ of life circumstances to emerge in the self-narrative” (114). This assertion by Danely is useful for making sense of the efforts by women writers to refute past narratives that constrict the possibilities for women to fully express their own subjectivities while maintaining their connections to society. His study shows that stories about old people can offer the agency needed to “constitute a separate narrative…The construction of a kind of ‘master narrative’ of aging here was entangled with other narratives of youth, national history, and cultural identity, and yet, perhaps because the local stakes were relatively low, the execution of the narrative also opened opportunities for older adults to insert another spiritual narrative” (115).

One can argue that stories by Tanizaki and Kawabata support the assertions made by Danely about the use of “master narratives on aging”—indeed, the old men in Tanizaki and Kawabata’s narratives reinforce the overarching themes of fading traditions and upended male dominance that signify larger social changes. However, the spiritual narratives that Danely also mentions are a primary means by which women writers have managed to link their own individual stories to the larger cultural context in order to assert women’s autonomy and contest the limitations on their social roles.

Enchi and Tanabe undertake this insertion of narrative in order to show the changing perspective on aged people and depict aged individuals personally and subjectively. Rejecting
socially ideal roles, these writers bravely expound upon their protagonists’ individual desires without conforming to socio-cultural expectations. These authors present “women’s subjectivity” by crafting elderly women not as objects of dependency or bygone sexuality, but as subjects who struggle to find meaning in the new stages of their lives when they just so happen to inhabit an aged body. Both Enchi and Tanabe are prolific and successful post-war writers, and their interests in aged heroines offer many notable avenues for comparison, as will be elaborated upon in the chapters to follow.

Enchi Fumiko was born in 1905 in Tokyo to an elite, scholarly family, and had strong connections to the Tokyo literary world through her father, Ueda Mannen (or Bannen, 1867-1937), a famous Tokyo Imperial University professor of linguistics. While Enchi’s influences were primarily drawn from the literary world, Tanabe, a native of Osaka, has not been considered part of the Tokyo-centered literary mainstream. Born in 1928 to the owner of a photography studio, Tanabe’s life course was as plebeian as Enchi’s was elite. Both experienced WWII and the subsequent changes in women’s roles, and both produce stories about old women that are similarly nonconformist while diverging in the presentation of that nonconformity.

Nearing old age herself, Enchi frequently illustrated—often with a deeply sympathetic tone—the aged female character. Tanabe also tended toward depictions of the elderly as she aged, typically blending images of the middle-aged and the younger woman into a new hybrid. As these women writers take on the issue of aging women—whether they observe the preponderance of care for old parents or the unexpected shows of independence by the elderly—the portrayals of old women are remarkable in their innovative narratives surrounding old age.

21 See more details about Enchi’s literary background in Hideo Kamei’s study (10).
Betraying the readers’ expectation, the concept of “oldness” becomes a weapon, a method of fighting back against social oppression rather than the object of that oppression. Enchi and Tanabe’s stories show the gradual development of self-awareness within the old protagonist who recognizes the vanity and absurdity of an earlier life that was shaped in accord with social norms.

This investigation will also make a special effort to explore the fused identity of aged women within sociocultural contexts where old women’s identities may adhere to, yet manage to escape from, gendered constructions tied to being a proper wife, mother, or grandmother. I will examine how the aged characters in Enchi and Tanabe’s works take advantage of the “aged body condition” as a means to resist the constricting social identities related to age. Instead of simply rejecting their aged body, the characters willingly accept their bodily state and interpret aging as a chance to be freed from a body that is bound to social expectations and confinements. Utilizing their aging, their female characters attempt to fulfill the frustrated desires they carried over from their youths.

Three short stories by Enchi—“Hana kui uba” (“The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers,” 1974), “Neko no sōshi” (“The Cat Scroll,” 1974), and “Kinuta” (“The Fulling Block,” 1980)—and Tanabe’s novel Uba tokimeki (Silver Butterflies, 1984) refine the stereotypes linked to aging identity through protagonists who present their own subjectivities even as marginalized players within society. Once again considering Gullette’s premises on aging narratives, one can observe that “[v]oluntarily discarding ‘identities’ that have become unwanted or altering their meanings can also be part of the process of forming an age identity. Aging can give us [proof] that we have some narrative agency, some way of squeezing out from under subjections” (Gullette 125). Gullette’s focus on achieving agency through identity construction in narratives reveals more of
what is changeable and dynamic regarding age identities, making sense of how women writers deploy their characters to skillfully play upon and modify the socio-cultural concept of aging.

Enchi and Tanabe’s particular protests against earlier views of aging can be supported through Gullette’s assertions that touch on decline as “an ideology”—instead of a physiological condition—and therefore, something that can be resisted. Gullette notes that “unlearning the master narrative of decline may be as painful and prolonged as extirpating internalized racism and sexism.” The pain of this struggle is due in part to what Gullette calls “decline ideology,” an “actual and fearfully powerful public project that undoes our age identity for us” (129-130).

Enchi and Tanabe use their work to contest decline ideology while still accepting the reality of aging, albeit with more expanded and considered perspectives toward the positive aspects of aged life. Without narratives such as Enchi and Tanabe’s to provide counterarguments, the successful navigation of society entails recognizing that “[aging-related] decline is ‘truth’ and resistance is called … ‘denial’” (134).

Acceptance of decline has powerful effects—even, paradoxically, benefits. Sandra Bartky has explained that disciplinary practices that turn a ‘female’ body into a ‘feminine’ one can be conceived of as skills. […] Becoming an older body under the sign of decline involves masochistic internalizations that run all the way to self-hatred, but skillful learners of the narrative also acquire a thorough explanatory system. (133)

In Enchi and Tanabe’s works, this explanatory system works to dismiss the stigma attached to aging without patently dismissing the basic realities of getting older: decreased stamina, changing physiology, etc. Thus, the explanatory system suffices to help change the narratives in

---

22 “Decline ideology” is a term frequently used by Gullette to describe narratives that focus heavily on constructing aged identities as a function of the physiological and mental declines that are typically observed in older people (cf. Gullette’s Aged by Culture [2004]).
ways that allow productive negotiations of the nuanced images linked to mature women, so as to at least partially undermine the more restrictive images of the past.

**Framing the Study: Becoming an Aged Woman**

Japanese women become old women, not necessarily due to their age, but because of their treatment within cultural, historical, and social contexts—e.g., as other scholars have noted, the aged woman’s “[alienation] from reproductive feminine ideals of beauty,”

23 their reputation as “wise and understanding,”

24 etc. Gullette’s study allows us to better understand the conceptual process by which people have internalized and culturally scripted their earlier identities such that they accept society’s focus on their old age. Ultimately, “[a]ge identity is an achievement of storytelling about whatever has come to us through aging” (124).

25 Keeping this in mind, one can turn to writers like Enchi and Tanabe to discover how the storytelling process can shape a more nuanced view of growing older, without strictly relegating the elderly to the narrative of decline and loss.

Pam Morris argues that “literary texts as ‘writing’ challenge any simple assumptions feminists may want to stake on the inherent nature and identity of women’s creativity, insisting we pay attention to the complex interrelationship between language, gender and identity” (86).

---

23 Aoyama, 50.
24 Ibid., 54.
25 Gullette explains her definition of “age identity” that “comprehends each person’s collection of ‘information’ about age and aging in general and stories about their own age and in particular, made less random but not necessarily less perplexing by the aging narratives they have come across, since some narratives serve as evidence of their implicit theories and desired outcomes and match their experiences while others do not. Age identity as I conceptualize it keeps a moving balance sheet, evaluating what aging—or more typically where children are concerned, ‘growth’—has so far brought the self or its subidentities, as well as guessing what it is likely to bring in relation to what the dominant culture and the child’s family and subculture say ‘the life course’ is supposed to bring. The term suggests there is one and only one life course, as universal in its process as the biologized body” (15).
Aged female characters mainly appear as subsidiary characters in the fictional narratives in which the central plot typically focuses on the adventure, whether physical or psychological, of a male protagonist. By bringing such marginalized female characters to the center and making them the protagonists, the writer allows female characters to obtain stronger and clearer voices.

Enchi uses the aged body as a site where women can recognize the sexist and ageist power structures that oppress them, and explore ways to recover agency in the face of that oppression. Tanabe makes similar use of the elderly body to construct separate zones for women while staying within the confines of the patriarchal world. For this reason, this study examines the subjectivity that female characters in Enchi and Tanabe’s works seek to create for themselves, even in cases where these women may still be largely constrained within social situations that privilege the male subjectivity. Nonetheless, the effort expended in presenting a fuller account of old women’s subjectivities allows Enchi and Tanabe to surpass the often two-dimensional depictions offered by earlier male writers.

Also worth considering is how Enchi and Tanabe defy negative images of old women by drawing positive aspects from their own experiences. Rather than being beholden to negative conventions, these modern women writers have embraced the repulsive and celebrated the rejected. Using themes from pre-modern literature, modern women writers reconfigure the female figure and overturn the gendered representation of aged people. That is to say, they find new methods to describe and inscribe old women. They accomplish this in a number of ways. First, they invest their old female characters with distinct inner voices and lives. Through this subjectivity they explore the conflict between the female characters’ individuality and their prescribed social position. Furthermore, by recovering and amplifying old women’s voices, they expose a multiplicity of desires, self-expressions, and the complexity of their interior states.
Also, through the reinterpretation of traditional-style old female figures, modern women writers demystify older women’s bodies and restore their power over and against mainstream literary traditions. By providing these alternatives, these writers co-opt the marginalized, aging female figures and re-invent them in ways that deliberately challenge the social status quo. My study explores how these two women writers manipulate and challenge the negative or ideal images of old women by restoring their individuality and empowering the suppressed voices to refute the social coinage that brands them simply as “old.”

In the following chapter, titled “Cranky, Crazy Crones: The Old Women of the Literary Past and Present,” I will provide an overview of the representations of agedness in Japanese literature, while taking special care to integrate nuanced views of the aging population. This overview will be organized both thematically and chronologically, thereby allowing the survey to call attention to the themes that are commonly attached to the elderly and also to the duration of these themes as they are repeatedly explored by writers from different periods. By exploring the recurring and popular images of aged women in the literary history—e.g., yamamba, obasuteyama, Ono no Komachi, etc.—the chapter will treat how Japanese literary narratives have shaped social perspectives on aged people, especially women. From Sei Shōnagon’s The Pillow Book to modern works by writers like Ōba Minako, the chapter reveals the complex terrain that has been formed from the different ways in which aging has been conceptualized across times periods and social circumstances. The representative narratives about yamamba, obasuteyama, and Komachi are consistently called forth by various writers, genres, and mediums that have broadly influenced Japanese socio-cultural narratives.
The third and fourth chapters introduce Enchi Fumiko and three of the short stories she wrote in the later stage of her life: “Hana kui uba,” “Neko no sōshi,” and “Kinuta.” The dominant narratives and images of aged women are already well established, and because of that, women writers must recycle prevailing images as a means to assert their agency and negotiate the oppressive reality of ever-present systemic biases. With close readings of Enchi’s stories, one finds numerous ways in which the author defies the decline ideology that has so often been used to justify the marginalization of society’s elderly women. Using this discussion of Enchi and the refutation of master narratives on aging, this survey creates a springboard for the discussion of Tanabe’s work, which presents a female character who realistically struggles against and overcomes social expectations. By providing more energetic images of the mature woman—quite dissimilar from the struggling women in Enchi’s work—Tanabe’s inclusion in this survey rounds out this extensive discourse on the ways women writers challenge previous social narratives on women and aging.

The fifth chapter places Tanabe Seiko’s *Uba tokimeki* under a close examination that will highlight the popular images that contribute to new trends in understanding Japanese women who are shown to take advantage of the prevailing attitudes and attributes linked to aging. Some may challenge the realism of how Tanabe presents her aged female character—a woman who still maintains a substantial degree of her economic, physical, and social power. Still, when we analyze Tanabe’s text with a critical eye toward the ideology of decline that is so strongly ingrained within society, the authenticity of the aged protagonist becomes more palpable. Ultimately, Tanabe provides a bright, optimistic, and seemingly unreal narrative of an old woman who seems to escape the reality of declining physiology due to aging. “Unreal” is a word that might be used by people in society who see aging only in terms of waning physical and
emotional stability. However, this investigation considers how outdated those social perceptions may be in the way they construe old age as an undeniably pessimistic period of life. More specifically, the chapter dedicated to Tanabe’s work will examine how plausibly the writer illustrates an aged woman with a positive life and an empowered position—both of which she finds by engaging with and consuming the cultural capital that is tied to her local institutions and traditions.

In conclusion, the manner in which literary narratives interact with the aged female body displays the changing views, both regarding the elderly and held by them, and how to re-identify the images of decline as markers of liberation, autonomy, and subjectivity for women. In particular, the representation of Japanese old women stands to contribute to a new model of aging for young women who seek to escape the conventions that currently limit the identities for all members of society. While this investigation relies upon a handful of texts to make sense of the rōjo’s changing presentations, more can be gleaned from even more recent writers—both men and women—who manage to divorce the old women from the expectations that have relegated the aged to being inconsequential members of society. Thus, this study offers a useful starting point for examinations of aging and gender and seeks to refresh our perspectives on the twilight years.
Chapter 2: Cranky, Crazy Crones: The Old Women of Literary Past and Present

Stereotype exists where the body is absent. –Barbara Kruger

In recent years a number of literary works and movies have incorporated aged people to epitomize family connections and societal change, among other topics, but usually these narratives ignore an investigation of the realities that plague a nation’s oldest citizens. Even when a narrative does embark on such an investigation, literary representations of aged women are particularly limited, further diminishing the availability of nuanced portrayals centered on women at various stages of their lives. Whether for good or ill, aged women who do not conform to social expectations and social gender roles are frequently relegated to the periphery, even in the narratives that prominently relate to their positions within society—e.g., familial planning and care, employment and financial planning, and lack of political voice, etc. On one hand, old women who do not subscribe to gendered categories seem to be free from expectations, but on the other hand they risk losing their social positions and what little power society would normally assign to them, leaving them as outsiders in their communities.

However, old women are powerfully visible in contemporary anime (animation films) that situate the mature woman beyond the boundaries of society from the outset of the story, such

---

1 Quoted in Gullette, 168.
2 At least one scholar, Tomoko Aoyama, corroborates this lack of narratives about the aged woman: “Reminiscent of the legends of Obasute and Yamauba, old women have also been banished, silenced or marginalized in modern Japanese literature. Until recently they hardly existed—at least discursively. Discussions of literary representations of old age have tended to focus on the ageing male protagonists in canonical texts written by male authors” (18).
as can be seen in Miyazaki Hayao’s (b. 1941) Sen to chihiro no kamikakushi (Spirited Away, 2001) and Hauru no ugoku shiro (Howl’s Moving Castle, 2004). Many studies of Miyazaki’s animation touch on the presentation of “girl power” as an effective means to contribute to social change. Amongst such studies, few pay attention to the significance of elderly female characters; rather, they typically point out the minor role of the rōjo (old woman) in supporting the young heroine.

In Spirited Away two old women, the twin witches Yubaba and Zeniba, typify opposing lifestyles and personalities. Yubaba lives in the city (the animation’s primary setting) as the owner of a bathhouse and is symbolized as capable and powerful but also greedy and scary. Her twin, Zeniba (who lives outside the city), is the prototypical generous “grandmother” figure who supplies advice to the helpless heroine, Chihiro (Sen), and her equally helpless friend Kao Nashi (lit. “Faceless”). Although Yubaba appears to be a dangerous and harmful figure, her negative image issues from external circumstances rather than an inherently evil nature. This is symbolically shown through the danger of leading a materialistic life that manifests itself through her blind adherence to a life of decadence, her overindulgence of her infant son Poe, and her abuse of the bathhouse workers. Her sibling Zeniba appears more positive due to her choice to stay far removed from the city and its material excess, and she shows a generous, relaxed, and autonomous life. While the two old witches represent different attitudes toward aged people, they also share traits as independent and capable women who are anything but powerless.

---

3 See Montserrat Rifa-Valls’ article for his examination of Miyazaki shojo (girl) power, which focuses on selected animations directed by Miyazaki Hayao (Montserrat Rifa-Valls. “Postwar Princesses, Young Apprentices, and a Little Fish-girl: Reading Subjectivities in Hayao Miyazaki’s Tales of Fantasy”. Visual Arts Research 37.2 (2011): 88–100.)
One can venture a simple interpretation of these women as positive and negative depictions of old women who do and do not conform to the expectations for the rōjo. However, a deeper analysis might consider the importance of environment in the manifestation of these different identities, or how these twins represent two halves of the archetypically-constructed old woman. The fact that Spirited Away “takes place in a world populated with a diverse array of gods and spirits” allows Miyazaki to weave together the realism and the fantasy that is innate to the dual representations of old age (Jolyon Baraka Thomas 81). For audiences that may be conditioned to see only the negative or restricted representations of aging, Miyazaki’s fantastical approach may be a less jarring depiction of later life. The presentations of these two old women may call to mind the folkloric images of the yamamba (mountain crone) and the obasuteyama onna (old woman abandoned in the mountains, henceforth shortened to obasute), building upon spiritual worlds that are centered on the old woman, and touching on the audience’s nostalgia for cultural narratives that I will explore later in this chapter.

Howl’s Moving Castle shows another interesting dynamic surrounding the presentation of old women characters. The heroine Sophie is a young girl for part of the narrative, but her appearance frequently vacillates between the shōjo (girl) and the rōjo (old woman), depending on her state of mind and how she expresses herself. The difference in her visual appearance offers a variety of powerful interpretations through which the story can testify to both the negative traits assigned to old age and how little connection exists between appearance, age, and power. Susan Napier notes that “[Sophie] discovers other ‘powers’ of old age—the realization that one can do what one likes and not worry so much about the consequences, and the power of ‘invisibility’ that old age tends to confer. Sophie’s ‘vanishing’ is thus a (literally) nurturing
experience, [...], Sophie confronts and triumphs over some of the darkest fears of the human race: those of aging, illness, and death” (192).

Normally, the shōjo and rōjo are regarded as opposing ends of several different spectrums related to power and social position, yet Sophie’s transformations between girl and old woman are very fluid and establish greater similarity between the typically disparate identities that are forced upon women. The animation plays an especially major part in the challenges leveled against the rigid constructions of physiological decline that often characterize old people. For example, Sophie’s image continually changes in response to her mental condition—when she is timid and less adventurous she appears to be an old woman, but when she expresses romantic feelings towards Howl her youthful features emerge. As with Spirited Away, these contrasting presentations are meant to highlight the disparities that can arise within a single individual.

Upon closer analysis, Miyazaki’s fantastical depictions draw on the ability for old women to embody both positive and negative images, adding a multi-dimensional quality to a marginalized group that is often shown one-dimensionally. It also draws on the ability of his audience to expect old women to be either aberrant or self-sacrificing. Although Miyazaki situates his narratives in the world of fantasy, his treatment of rōjo—when divorced from the surreal and unrealistic spiritual elements—is quite evocative of everyday life for old women throughout Japan. Still, Miyazaki’s presentations often rely on negative stereotypes that emphasize the physical and mental changes that mark old age as undesirable. One cannot ignore, for example, the exaggerated bodily condition of wrinkled skin that distinguishes Sophie as a timid “old woman” as compared to her younger self who is represented in an energetic body that is firm and smooth, a physical form that gives her a better chance for love with the titular Howl.
For this reason, my study can benefit from considering a wealth of realistically constructed stories that touch upon more than the decline associated with aging. Such stories showcase various writers’ efforts to extend and refine the dualistic image of the *rōjo* that has come down through the literary canon and influenced the contemporary selections upon which this study is grounded.

Insofar as a comprehensive overview of depictions of agedness across the spectrum of Japanese literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will focus here on the presentation of certain archetypes of elderly women. I will be particularly concerned with—as the preceding introduction of Yubaba and Zeniba suggests—the twinned representation of the *rōjo* as either fearsome or self-effacing. The primary images that survive from animated films like Miyazaki’s are those of the *yamamba* and also the *obasute*.

Danely studies the recurring theme of the *obasute* in the work of authors such as Niwa Fumio, Inoue Yasushi, Ohta Tenrei, Tatsumi Yoshihiro, and in particular the noted film director Imamura Shōhei. Danely says of Imamura’s *Narayama bushikō* (*The Ballad of Narayama*, 1983) that it “could be considered the culmination of this expanding aesthetic genre [of the *obasute*]” (Danely 66). Danely argues that in differing from the original early fifteenth-century Noh play by Zeami (*Obasute*), Imamura’s film shows the subjectivity of the old woman Orin who “takes responsibility for her aging” (ibid. 67). In order to become “a suitable object of abandonment,” Orin breaks her teeth against the rocks. Orin’s violent act is necessary to align her with the socially-expected image of agedness, an image her hard, deeply rooted teeth defy.

---

4 These stories had already brought issues of modern *obasuteyama* into public consciousness, but Imamura Shōhei’s 1983 version of *The Ballad of Narayama* could be considered the culmination of this expanding aesthetic genre” (66). Imamura’s version is based on an adaptation of Fukazawa Shichirō (1914-1987)’s novel, *Narayama bushikō* (1956) as well as Kinoshita Keisuke’s earlier 1958 film of the same title.
But her destruction of her teeth not only situates her (forcibly) into the picture of agedness; as Danely notes, “the violent removal of the teeth mutilated not only her means to consumption (teeth and mouth), but also her means of production, a fact foreshadowed in an earlier scene of the film where she is shown using what her grandson calls ‘demon teeth’ (oni no ha) to rip plant fibers for weaving” (ibid. 68). The expression of Orin’s subjectivity is perhaps best aided by what Danely goes on to call the “creativity of loss” that is tied to “Orin’s bloody self-defacement” (ibid.). Danely’s assertions suggest that Orin’s actions reflect an agency and selfhood that make her noble because of her willingness to sacrifice a body that is “not truly frail [or] decrepit,” all in service of kinship (ibid.). However, this reading is potentially problematic because even though Orin exerts her own will and some type of subjectivity throughout the narrative, her agency tends to mask the larger ideology and paternalism that have already objectified her as a symbol of idealized old womanhood—a symbol that must conform to the need to see old age as a time of decline and reduced utility within the community, thus justifying the call to abandon the elderly. More simply, Orin’s subjectivity is able to disguise the objectification that gives rise to the existence of the obasute.

We can further unpack the issues surrounding the portrayal of old women through the yamamba and obasute by expanding on the notion of consumption in The Ballad of Narayama pointed out by Danely. The grotesqueries so tightly wound up with the final images of the

---

5 Teeth often appear in Japanese literature as a symbol of relative bodily condition, especially as it relates to agedness or illness. For example, Hotta Yoshie (1919-1998)’s short story “Rōjin” (“The Old Man,” 1952, trans. P.G. O’Neill) or Ibuse Masuji (1898-1993)’s story “Ushitora Jiisan” (“Old Ushitora,” 1950, trans. John Bester), where the image of lost teeth represents an old man’s miserable condition.

6 John W. Traphagan also highlights the self-assertive and powerful aspects of Orin, who “represents a model of internal strength, perseverance, and selflessness and Japanese recognize this and respond to these virtues in watching the movie. She can be understood as shikkari mono (しっかり者) or a person of stability and moral character” (130).
abandoned Orin are largely driven by the mutilation of her body, particularly the faculties that allow her to eat. However, Orin’s teeth serve as more than just a means of consumption; they also assist in her textile craftwork as noted in the quotation from Danely above. Nonetheless, the woman’s grandson and possibly other villagers literally demonize this form of productivity by drawing attention to her “demon teeth.” Thus, Orin’s existence is problematized by her community’s greater focus on the negative images associated with her teeth to the exclusion of their usefulness for the village—in other words, selective attention forces a greater link between her teeth and her consumption and inappropriateness. At sixty-nine, her healthy teeth connote an unseemly attachment to life, even an untoward robustness. Hence, Orin’s image begins as one unsuitable to an elderly woman—her teeth suggesting a desire for food, life, and other acts of consumption—an impression that can only be rectified by the destruction of her teeth. Still, her final act of self-sacrifice perhaps conjures a new assortment of repulsive emotions in the viewer, even as Orin is supposed to be ennobled by her altruism—that is, in sacrificial herself she frees up more resources for the rest of the village population.

One can find an array of similarly unsuitable women in the classical literature of Sei Shōnagon, *Konjaku monogatari* (*Tales of Times Now Past*, early 12c), and the *Kojiki* (*The Chronicles of Japan*, 712). An appraisal of these early depictions will reveal that, much as in Imamura’s film, the attributes that lend women their power can also undermine the likelihood that these women will be seen as properly adherent to the expectations for their age, status, and ability within society. I will next explore Sei Shōnagon’s evocations of unseemly old women, especially those engaged in the very human acts of eating, or expressing their desires.

**Chewing the Fat: The Historical Inelegance of a Woman “Beyond her Years”**
In Heian literature, Sei Shônagon’s (c. 966-1017) *Makura no sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*, c. 1000) includes numerous observations that denigrate the elderly, particularly old women. Although typically succinct, her observations touch on the rather unseemly and offensive nature of old women who display a desire for either food or companionship. As an eleventh-century essayistic narrative written by a woman courtier, Sei Shônagon, *The Pillow Book* offers opinionated, insightful, and entertaining portraits of life at court in late-tenth and early-eleventh-century Japan. One can argue that the *The Pillow Book*’s narrator merely offers individual fanciful observations, but the author’s strong judgments and opinions also provide an example of the kind of views people in Heian period Japan held of old women.

Even considering gender differences, the courtier women who are regarded more favorably because of their intelligence and youth showcase attitudes that diverge little from the insensitive perspectives that men have shown toward elderly women. In *The Pillow Book*’s forty-second section, for example, we can see the harshness of Sei Shônagon’s critique toward old people eating: “An old man who’s nodding off, or a heavily bearded old fellow popping nuts into his mouth. A toothless crone screwing up her face as she eats sour plums” (48). When she makes note of “Unsuitable Things,” she describes an “old woman who eats a plum and, finding it sour, puckers her toothless mouth” (ibid.).

However, in the thirty-ninth section, the author incorporates another critical observation in which she lists “Refined and Elegant Things” and makes note of “an adorable little child

---

7 Naomi Fukumori’s study focuses on the socio, historical contexts of *Makura no sōshi* arguing, “Scholarship on *Makura no sōshi* has long been dominated by rather dry questions of textual lineage because of the numerous variant forms in which it survives. Other studies have focused on discussion of one or the other of the three types of passages-lists, diary-like passages, and essays—which make up this assorted collection. As a subject of study, *Makura no sōshi* offers the scholar a wealth of approaches in its myriad subjects, observations, and writing styles. Indeed, what seems to be the primary difficulty in scholarship of *Makura no sōshi* s the formulation of a method for encompassing this very diversity” (1).
eating strawberries” (46). These observations are not just objectively catalogued depictions of her surrounding environment; she specifically curates the content, and through such curation one gleans useful information about how Sei Shōnagon characterizes different figures and images as desirable and undesirable. Specifically, Sei Shōnagon’s description of the aged woman relates the woman’s unsuitable nature to the act of consumption and how her appearance suffers thereby. In comparison to the pretty child with the strawberry, the old woman with the sour plum connotes, among many things, an air of inelegance and perhaps an outward expression not becoming of a woman who conducts herself in a suitable manner.

The manner which is most suited to her is often based upon her appearance, as we have already seen with Orin in The Ballad of Narayama and Sophie in Howl’s Moving Castle. In these earlier discussed narratives, the old women express their wants, either for food or for love, but their elderly appearance—which usually implies some sort of flaw, figured as a lack (such as a mouth without teeth⁸ or a body without attractiveness)—do not accord with social norms that only sanction the desires of specific groups. Thus, the expression of want from such elderly women can be deemed grotesque and ugly, while for a young child, woman or a man, such desire might be seen as natural, expected, and even attractive. This distinction is borne out in the particular consumptive acts Sei singles out: while she assigns the sweet and mild flavored strawberry to the youth, thereby categorizing the child as an example of elegance, her old woman is shown in the unattractive act of eating a tart, mouth-puckering plum.

We can extend this appraisal of Sei Shōnagon’s interpretations to the unfavorable portrayals that have attached to figures such as the yamamba and the obasute in later works,

---

⁸ This particular flaw is reminiscent of Saikaku’s comic genmetsu scene in Koshoku gonin onna—which itself parodies the shinasadame scene from Genji—where the ‘beauty’ is revealed as missing her front teeth.
particularly concerning the undesirable patterns of consumption linked to the mountain witch. The yamamba’s appearance is unconventional and terrifying, which leads one to infer that she is dangerous. The narrative of obasute depicts the way the surrounding community deems the aged woman no longer a relevant participant in the group, illustrating how the desire to remain a part of society is deemed aberrant. She thus becomes a hindrance to the social fabric—at least in The Ballad of Narayama—because she still consumes. The antagonism toward the obasute woman is that she consumes more than she produces. She becomes a parasite, eating the other villagers out of house and home.

By metaphorical extension, then, an aspect of the danger associated with these women stems from their putative desires for human flesh—especially the male body—or continued attachment to male-dominated society. That is, they literally eat the family—as represented by the eldest son—out of house and home. As such an image is passed down through the literary canon, it is further contorted until the hunger of the yamamba and the yearning of the obasute come to stand as at least one prominent trope to depict women who express their longing to connect to male-identifying institutions or figures.⁹

Considering once more Sei Shōnagon’s narrative treatments of unsuitable women, one discovers that the ways in which women are observed as deviating from social norms concerning desirability are often used to justify their marginalization. The appearances of elderly women, being so divergent from what society considers desirable, are routinely coopted for the ideology and narratives associated with decline. Once such a decline ideology is seen as a natural way to frame the lives of geriatric citizens, it is often then used to justify their positions along the

⁹ Michelle Li’s study provides a provoking analysis of the grotesque in Konjaku monogatari by applying Bakhtin’s theory. See especially her discussion of the old mother who turns into a demon and tries to eat her child (179).
periphery, as if those positions are innate. Gullette clarifies the far-reaching impacts of decline ideology being used in this way: “[…] the clearest recent results have been constructing decline as a biological fact of the early midlife, dividing the body politic into warring age classes, lowering our expectation of what the economy can provide, subjectively shortening the life course in the middle. Decline, speed-up, age obsessiveness, nostalgia. Age […] is ‘a nice new devil’” (95).

The final word of the passage above, “devil”—which Gullette attributes to Winston Langley—is especially compelling in this examination of the literature that demonizes women based on society’s harsh critiques of what value the aged woman can contribute to her surrounding community. Sei Shōnagon’s descriptions do not delve into the supernatural, but her personal voice is useful as a first example in this overview for explicating the negativity that society heaps upon the elderly. Similarly, Murasaki Shikibu’s (c. 978-1014) *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, early 11th century) shows other examples of old women and their devaluation in an environment that privileges youth and beauty. In Chapter 7, readers are introduced to the elderly Gen no naishi. Although her age is not clearly mentioned, except to point out her elderliness, from the perspective of the narrator and Genji she is described with disgust and humor:

[Gen no Naishi] was bedecked and painted to allure, every detail urging [Genji] forward. Genji was dubious of this superannuated coquetry, but curious to see what she would do next. He tugged at her apron. She turned around, a gaudy fan hiding her face, a sidelong glance—alas, the eyelids were dark and muddy—emerging from above it. Her hair, which of course the fan could not hide, was rough and stringy. A very poorly chosen fan for an old lady, he thought, giving her his and taking it from her. (Murasaki & Seidensticker 144)
Haruo Shirane analyzes the comical aspects of Gen no naishi’s depiction, calling forth Mitani Kuniaki’s interpretation that the interlude with the old woman parodies Genji’s secret liaisons with Lady Fujitsubo (70). (Both Naishi and Fujitsubo serve the emperor.) While Gen no naishi’s episode can be seen as an allusion to Genji’s oft-fantasized sexual relations, because of her age and the taboos concerning an aged women’s desire, Naishi’s social position and role in the court do not shield her from jokes and the contemptuous regard of others.

Another off-centered depiction of beauty in Tale of Genji is delivered via Suetsumuhana whose uncourteous manner, old-fashionedness, and ugliness is typically discussed in terms that evoke the notion of agedness. Genji eventually composes a poem to her referring to her as completely lacking in sexual allure (“iro to mo nashi”) even though earlier he decided to engage with her romantically on several occasions before finally seeing her face one morning and realizing that he was not particularly taken with her after all. In essence, Genji’s attitude changes once he realizes that Suetsumuhana is quite dissimilar from previous lovers who, as Shirane notes, were “associated with youth, impermanence, and fleeting beauty, [while] Suetsumuhana is linked to the opposite: the old, the lasting, and the ugly” (Shirane 69-70). This is the realization that prompts Genji to abandon any responsibility he once felt for maintaining this relationship on any but a purely social level.

In Heian texts, men are rarely lampooned or described negatively for their advanced age. Indeed, the Akashi Priest, the Eighth Prince, even the Kiritsubo Emperor himself gain depth and dignity with age. But a woman’s old age can frequently be yet another cruel betrayal of her inferiority. The Rokujō Lady, for example, Genji’s senior by seven years, is constantly aware of

10 “Naishi’s name derives from her position as naishi no suke, an assistant handmaiden in the Naishidokoto, the office that looked after the personal needs of the emperor” (Shirane 70).
11 “Why did I brush my sleeve / On the safflower / When it was a color / I had no longing for?” (Ibid. 69).
her age. In courtly society, the lives of women such as Rokujo, Suetsumuhana, and Gen no naishi differ profoundly from those of commoners, for whom agedness becomes a mark of unproductivity and a burdensome threat to communal resources. Yet these high-ranking women are still beholden to the negative associations with age due to the treatment of beauty as an essential quality for women in the Heian court. Thus, agedness functions as another disadvantage even though it does not preclude Suetsumuhana—who plays the koto—and Gen no naishi—a capable assistant to the Emperor—from participation in the social life of the court. Compared to Genji, who maintains his resplendent reputation even well into his aged years, many women can only expect to be seen as disgusting, isolated, and invisible.

Besides exploring the harsh treatment of aging in Heian texts, this overview also stands to benefit from the domain of folklore, Noh theatre, and a selection of modern stories which show the extent to which views on aged women have permeated the social fabric across various eras of the literary canon. As this investigation considers stories from these collections that dramatize the danger associated with the old woman who is later revealed to be a non-human creature, we find a normalization of the fear against even the utterly normal rōjo. This fear goes on to infect our expectations of later stories, which may not go as far as turning the rōjo into a monster, but will somehow reveal the deviance that readers have come to predict based on the history of demonic rōjo narratives.

**Monstrous Maws and Mountainous Desires: The Mythical Crone**

One of the more terrifying images of the rōjo in classical literature is that of the yamamba in Japanese setsuwa (tales) and Noh dramas. As Meera Viswanathan argues, the yamauba (or
yamamba) appears in various pre-modern Japanese literary texts as “a god, a demon, an entertainer, a mother; enlightened, tortured, helpful, and harmful” (242). Viswanathan also notes that the term “yamamba’ comes to be used for all literary/textualized treatments of the figure, including those predating or contemporaneous with the No play” of that title (242). Her study points to the prevalence of several key motifs that underpin the yamamba-like stories across the folkloric traditions of various cultures:

The figure of a man-eating female demon is peculiar neither to Japan nor to premodern narratives; we see, for example, in the myths of the New World people known as the Tainos, a similar female demon graphically described as ‘la vagina dentada’ (the vagina with teeth), reminding us as well of D.H. Lawrence’s character Bertha Coutts in Lady Chatterley’s lovers, with her dreaded “beak” down there that shreds and tears at men, not unlike the yamamba in Ōba Minako’s story ‘Rōsoku-uo’ (Candlefish;1980) (242).

As illustrated by the collection of narratives that Viswanathan pulls together, the yamamba’s image is not unique to Japanese literature, yet she takes on a powerful and culturally-resonant persona in works such as the early twelfth-century Tales of Times Now Past and various Noh plays. However, one remarkable similarity across these portrayals is that, even without knowing her exact origins, the yamamba’s image is still strongly associated with old women and more generally with the subject of advanced age.

Besides the attention that Viswanathan’s study pays to the wide-ranging textual appearance of the yamamba, her investigation also underscores the importance of this figure’s classification across cultures as non-human. Viswanathan’s argument that the yamamba can be a variety of non-human entities—whether a deity (kami) or a demon (oni)—suggests a lack of consistency in the way that the figure can serve to constrain women’s realities. However, one can also argue that the yamamba’s existence as a continually reformulated character increases its
ability to link any number of threats to the female gender. Each new adaptation of the figure does nothing to suppress the previous incarnations of the *yamamba*—rather, all depictions of the mountain witch continue forward in the canon and serve to influence and constrain future depictions of women in complicated and perhaps interconnected ways. The following excerpt from Royall Tyler’s introduction to his translation of Zeami’s fifteenth-century Noh play titled *Yamamba (The Mountain Crone)* reveals precisely this liminality that characterizes the *yamamba*, particularly her physical vitality:

What is the ‘Mountain Crone’? The Japanese term, *yama-uba* or Yamamba, appears to mean (judging from the character used to write *uba*) ‘old woman of the mountains.’ In fact, however, an *uba* may be a good deal livelier than an ‘old woman’, or ‘crone’, as the [Noh] play itself shows (310).

This observation by Tyler accounts for the old appearance so commonly attributed to the *yamamba* but also notes a vitality and strength that tends to be integrated into portrayals of the mountain witch.

Fanny Hagin Mayer shows a similar interest in the maturity and youthful vigor that figure in the construction of the *yamamba*’s essential nature. Her study considers the flexibility of the terminology that designates women in classic Japanese folktales. For example,

> [t]he term *baa san* ‘old woman’…[is] used with great elasticity as to the woman’s age. She is not an aged, helpless woman, as a rule, but a mature, experienced, and wise person having characteristics associated with ripe years. She is a villager or farm woman, usually living with her old man or an only son. She rarely is a solitary character. Although men usually take the lead in tales, the important role given to the old woman in many gives ample opportunity to study her type. (665)

Mayer also does a service to her readers by categorizing types of tales that feature old women, none of which present the old woman as exclusively good, bad, supernatural, or mundane. Her first seven categories highlight the relationships between old women and their families,
communities, and society. The eighth category touches on stories about old women who lack such relationships, instead living alone and sometimes being punished for having an appetite without also possessing an aptitude for nurturing.\textsuperscript{12} The last two categories explore the connection between old women and the supernatural—animals (foxes, snakes, cats, etc.) disguised as old women, “[Demons] disguised as old women” and “Old she-demon and the like”\textsuperscript{13}—although Mayer is careful to note that these portrayals are not always negative.\textsuperscript{14} Mayer’s categories show, if nothing else, the dynamism of the old woman’s image and how fundamentally her identity is constructed with respect to the world around her, even if she is portrayed as a solitary figure.

Noriko Reider’s study of \textit{otogizōshi} (a genre of short narratives that appeared from the fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth century) shows how even the folkloric traditions, like Noh, influenced later narratives about the \textit{yamamba} and the \textit{obasute} woman. Reider points out the prevalence of the ugly, \textit{oni}-like image of the old woman in medieval literature such as Noh plays (\textit{Yamauba}) and \textit{Tales of Times Now Past}.\textsuperscript{15} She also asserts the “complexity” of the \textit{yamauba}’s image in \textit{otogizōshi}, further noting that “In stark contrast to the \textit{yamauba}’s representation in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} The story that Mayer translates is about an old woman who goes back to a body of water day-after-day to chop off another limb from an octopus resting on the shore until one day she is dragged into the sea by the creature. The story seems to moralize the issue of a woman who benefits from receiving food without contributing to society/family in some way.
\item \textsuperscript{13} “10. Old she-demons and the like” in the episode, “Demons are frequently she-demons under various names such as old mountain women, she-demons, or \textit{amanojaku}” (670). This study also points out the various version of \textit{yamauba} stories where she appears as good and bad, but more often figures with demonic images. “Although women presented have only been old women, there are many other types of women, such as wife, mother, stepmother, bride, and daughter who would give other aspects of women in the Japanese folktale (ibid.).
\item \textsuperscript{14} In a separate survey, Mayer gives special focus to some of Yanagita Kunio’s \textit{mukashibanashi} (folk tales), which include several stories that spotlight women and eating: “The Wife Who Didn’t Eat” (26-7) and “The Ox-driver and the yama-uba” (27-8) display the tremendous appetite of the yama-uba who craves food, large cattle, and even infants
\item \textsuperscript{15} The \textit{Tales of Times Now Past} (Ury 1979) depicts one such \textit{yamauba} in the story titled “Sanseru onna minamiyamashina ni yuki oni ni aite nigetaru koto” (How a woman with child went to South Yamashina, encountered an oni, and escaped).
\end{itemize}
woman-with-child story, some tales represent a yamauba as a nurturing character” (62). This interpretation allows for various depictions of the yamauba that fall in line with Orikuchi Shinobu’s notion of the mountain crone as a “deity,” and in turn justifies Reider’s observation that:

…the yamauba may be identified as a dichotomous primordial goddess, the Great Mother, who brings fertility and wealth, as well as death and destruction, similar to other mythico-religious figures such as Isis and Kali. In medieval Europe, the pagan archetype of Great Mother who always possesses two aspects is no less complicated as it falls [under the] influence of Christian civilization [sic]: the light side is represented by the officially-worshipped Virgin Mary, and the dark side, excluded from the image of Mary and maintaining much of its pagan influence, degenerates into a witch. (63)

A Maiden in Crone’s Clothing: Ubakawa and the Manipulation of Age

Reider’s survey goes on to provide the example of ubakawa (lit. “old woman’s skin”), which, as highlighted in the previous quotation, shows the fusion of both the negative and positive illustrations of the aged woman such that she comes to show how conventionally “powerless” figures might demonstrate potency. “In the ‘Ubakawa’-type stories the yamauba…gives the stepdaughter ubakawa or clothes that transform her appearance from a youthful heroine to an old crone” (Reider 64). The story offers an interpretation of the yamauba that differs from the oni-like image frequently included in Noh plays—in this case, the elderly image becomes valuable as a means of disguise for the young woman who wishes to skirt the socio-cultural expectations for gender roles and marriage.16 Using the disadvantaged persona of

16 According Lucy Fraser’s article “Girls old women and fairytale families in The Old Woman’s Skin and Howl’s Moving Castle,” (2015) other distinct advantages may be gained from the use of ubakawa: “[…] invisibility during the periods in which these stories were told and recorded implies that a certain freedom was perceived in this invisibility. However, the freedom also seems to entail exclusion from human communities…or difficult work [e.g., physical labor]” (67).
an old woman, the story skillfully invests the often reviled skin of the aged with strength, using age to manipulate the social code. This story brings to mind Miyazaki’s animated film, *Howl’s Moving Castle*, where Sophie has the opportunity to exist as a pseudo-shōjo, yet her wrinkled appearance plays a significant role in helping her overcome other difficult circumstances.

By examining the *yamamba*’s physicality, through *otogizōshi* and Noh dramas, one gains a greater appreciation for the degree to which terror – usually coded by Buddhist beliefs concerning gender and the notions of attachment and desire – is mapped onto the overall aesthetic of the socially transgressive rōjo. If we again consider Reider’s examination of *otogizōshi*, especially her emphasis of the contrasts between Kannon (the bodhisattva of mercy, often depicted as female) and the *yamamba*, the importance of the Buddhist influences in these genres becomes more understandable: “Hayao Kawai regards Kannon as the positive image of the Great Mother in Japan, and the *yamauba*, who appears in fairy tales as an all-devouring mountain witch, as the negative image (Kawai 1996)” (63).

**A Flower Blooming on an Old Tree: The elusive beauty of age in Noh Theater**

In the traditional Japanese performance art of Noh, there is a slightly different presentation of aging. Far from avoiding the subject of aging, Noh dramas often privilege the topic with a central position in the narrative. One might argue that the commonality of this theme was supported by the Noh master Zeami who, in his establishment of the foundational theories for this genre of performance, emphasized the beauty of aging. As an artistic quality, Zeami figured aging as a prominent component of the theory he expounded in his treatise “*Fūshikaden*” (“Style and the Flower,” 1400-18). In her article titled “Plays about Old Age as the Essence of Noh Theatre,” Anna Hlaváčová offers a more detailed examination of this Noh principle
whereby the quality of old age becomes a means of assigning virtue to many of the central characters in Noh.

Hlaváčová liberally cites Zeami’s theory in her treatment of age and notes how significantly it figures in the fundamental aesthetics of Noh theatre: “According to Zeami, as one grows older, the ephemeral flower (jibun no hana) must be replaced with the true one (makoto no hana) related to elegant beauty (hie), the rare (mezurashi) and the engaging (omoshiroshi)” (91). Zeami’s critical appreciation for beauty in the aged individual largely depends on how the elderly person can signify the passage of time, a concept that draws the audience’s attention to “[themes] of loss…fear of abandonment, and hope for transcendence…” (Danely 38). The inclusion of aged women allows Noh dramas to invest the rōjo with the quality of ephemerality, drawing on her as a dynamic reference to time and its ability to deepen and complicate life. We see this especially in a specific collection of Noh plays that give prominence to their rōjo characters. In the Noh tradition, “Lost youth and physical decline… Higaki, Obasute, Sanemori and Sotoba Komachi are characters who radiate almost elusive beauty: the beauty of souled beings approaching the end of life who seem to have partly uncovered the secret of death. This beauty is related to yūgen (invisible depths, hidden beauty) and is referred to as rōjaku, or the beauty of old age and frailty” (91). Hlaváčová notes that the plays that comprise the sanrōjo 17 category are important due to their ability “to make an elderly character ‘blossom,’ [such that they become], in Zeami’s words, ‘a flower blooming on an old tree.’ Whoever can grow such a surprising flower has understood the secret of Noh and the essence of the beauty of this theatre” (ibid.). In the visual presentations of their aged characters these dramas make a grand display of

17 “The notion of sanrōjo [refers] to the three plays with elderly women as heroines (Higaki, Obasute and Sotoba Komachi)” (91).
the qualities that signify the rōjo’s elderliness, and these are the qualities by which old age becomes an artistic symbol for the discourse on spirituality and aestheticism in Noh theatre.

Hlaváčová’s study is a useful examination of how the aesthetics of aging can be regarded favorably in a particular genre of narrative (specifically, Noh theatre). Still, there is merit in realizing that even appreciative stances toward beauty and old age focus heavily on evaluating worth based on one’s exterior traits. Moreover, the appraisal is flattering—she notes that the ephemerality of beauty is what can be learned from the presentation of old people—but tends to reinforce the treatment of the elderly as a single group, when many different individuals within the group are capable of delivering a variety of messages about the value of the rōjo.

Furthermore, Hlaváčová examines Zeami’s investment of power into the voices of the elderly and departed individuals who speak to the other characters and the audience as a spirit. Typically, this spirit occupies the central, or shite, role while the secondary waki, usually a priest or traveler, is meant to assist with the unveiling of the spirit’s solemn story.

It is generally understood that the shite serves as the central role in Noh drama, but this character typically requires the presence of the waki in order even to be heard. Hlaváčová makes a similar observation when she notes that, “After all, the masked actor [shite] is not only a man playing the part of a woman, but he is also an old man playing the role of a woman older than him. In interpreting the Noh plays about old women, the protagonist needs not only empathy to be able to play a human being completely different to himself, but he also needs to find a similarity in the difference[s]—old age, frailty, ephemerality—and through them a true flower (makoto no hana). Noh is the art of aging, parting and departing” (101). In other words, while Noh incorporates a deep appreciation for the elderliness of its central characters, that
appreciation rings hollow as it seems to lack a true empathy for the experiences of the aged individual. Thus, old age is deployed for the sake of art.

Hlaváčová’s question, “Why is it necessary to intensify the expression of aging?” tends to complicate how much power Noh plays can derive from situating old female characters at the center of a narrative. Although we see old women in different dramas that accentuate their maturity in novel ways, those dramas tend to fall back on the stereotypical themes of aimless wandering, abandonment, and unsatisfying images so often bound to the presentations of old women. Like Orin in The Ballad of Narayama—which was adapted from the Noh drama Obasute—we can see how the peripheral characters are enabled to express agency and perhaps a unique voice, yet that voice may exist only as a means to confirm the privileged power of a character (like the waki) who is ensconced in society to a greater degree than the supposedly central shite.

This is partly the case in the Noh play Yamamba, where the shite learns that a song called “The Mountain Crone” is about a female demon, a discovery that leads her to proclaim, “‘Ogress’ means a female ogre, I suppose. Well then, ogre or human, as long as I am female and live in the mountains, the song is about me, is it not?”¹¹⁸ As Viswanathan notes in her study of the play, we come to see this woman “as anything but demonic in the course of the play,” but “in effacing herself, literally rendering herself invisible, in the midst of human beings, she has assumed in their minds the contours of demon” (247). Thus, there is merit to Barbara Kruger’s assertion that stereotypes take over in the absence of a body or concrete form, and no matter how powerful the voice that emanates from the Noh mask, the shite’s existence proves to be

---

¹¹⁸ Tyler, 318-19.
powerless because eventually the aged female characters succumb to the prerogatives of male authority and Buddhist power. The persistence of such stereotypical images may be what prompts modern writers – whom this overview will consider next—to fashion new and flexible narratives that account for more dynamic presentations of the *yamamba* as part of an ongoing treatment of women and their desirability.

**When the Crone Comes to Town: Modern Re-tellings of the Mountain Witch**

In contrast to the view that old women’s suffering is necessary for raising the artistic value of the Noh performance, the works of more recent women writers’ interweave various classical themes and images to provide a dynamic representation of the aged woman. Regardless of the temporal, geographical, and socioeconomic disparities between them, women writers have developed rich connections between their literature and past works in order to share new depictions of aged women that powerfully negotiate and challenge the social oppressions against this marginalized group. One example comes from Ōba Minako (1930–2007) whose “Yamauba no bishō” (The Smile of a Mountain Witch, 1976) has been described as “an allegorical tale of a legendary mountain witch transported into a modern society” (Wilson 218).

Ōba Minako is another renowned modern woman writer, whose active years were spent largely during Japan’s postwar period. She is especially well known for her narrative explorations of the *yamauba* motif. Wilson’s study of Ōba’s *yamauba* mostly focuses on interpreting not only the writer’s personal interest in folklore but the use of “[her] narratives [to] defy conventional categorization […] which emerges from a] lifelong fascination with the classical genres” (ibid.). The feminist focus of Wilson’s investigation into Ōba’s literature
suggests that, “[despite] the rich metaphorical implications of her image, the *yamauba* caught the imagination of modern Japanese people mainly for her vengeful nature…” (220-1). Wilson also notes, “As familiar as this folkloric figure is in Japan’s collective imagination, Ōba is the first modern writer in Japan to refashion the image of the female demon whose ambiguous nature clearly embodies a betwixt-and-between, neither-here-nor-there liminal space and time” (221). Ōba’s creative reconstruction of the *yamauba*’s dualistic nature is key to her subversion of the classical categories that would define the mountain crone as harmful to society. If we follow the assertions made by Wilson’s study, then “the man-devouring *yamauba* is cast in a role reversal: she is now victimized by a hierarchical modern society that inflicts trauma on a gifted but outrageous and lovable creature” (222). This argument by Wilson holds because of the technique she has identified in Ōba’s literature, wherein “[shifting] from an ancient folktale to Ōba’s own modern narrative [allows] the multilayered fairy tale [to take] on the ambiance of a satire [which] ends as an allegorical tragicomedy” (ibid.).

The conclusions we draw from Ōba’s literature can be applied to many other modern and contemporary stories about elderly people, which reflect not only the growing social attention toward the aging population but also various writers’ interest in expanding the standard depiction of the elderly. The growing prevalence of aging protagonists offers new perspectives and reveals individual concerns beyond those of social success or maintaining business-as-usual.

Before the entry of writers like Ōba on the literary scene, the world of fiction—where presumably, anything might happen—was still unaccepting of the voices that would allow aged women the forum for lively and unfettered expression. Furthermore, many of the representations that would delve into the lives of aged characters still employed stereotypical images that Ōba and other writers would need to counteract in their own literature. Thus far this overview has
studied how classical genres like Noh, *otogizōshi*, and *zuihitsu*—such as Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book*—have equally reinforced and counteracted the stereotypes that are used to illustrate—for good or ill—the elderly protagonists who are meant to offer some sort of commentary on their real-world counterparts. In contrast, in the same way as Ōba, modern writers such as Enchi and Tanabe, who we will consider later, draw from the plots and tropes of classical literature while avoiding conventional portrayals that restrict more varied images of aged women.

I will now consider one other stereotyped image—that of the abandoned woman—whose history of transformation from vitality to desolation plays significantly into the narrative of decline that has undergirded many tales of the *rōjo*, even with her most recent appearances in modern literature.

**Old Age as Punishment: Ono no Komachi and the Tyranny of Time**

What makes the character “Komachi” a compelling study of the mature woman is the contrast between the splendid image of her youth and her old age as an “Obasute”—aged, abandoned, wandering the streets and mountains, yet still somehow maintaining her intelligence and her memories of youthful glory. Kitada Sachie’s study “The Legends of Ichiyō and Komachi” argues that the legendary narratives of different goddesses, *yamamba*, demonic women, and Komachi are inter-related and provide the archetype for Japanese women. Kitada argues that the history of *yamamba* shows how women lose their power and become excluded from male-centered society where women’s space is limited, thus leaving them on the periphery.

19 “女神と山姥と鬼女と小町の伝説。これらは微妙にずれ、重なり、よじれ、日本の女性原型を形成しているといえる” (Kitada 189).
In this process, women gradually lose their positive images as deities and the Great Mother, and what remains is just the old, demonic character.

Despite the similarity between Komachi and the *yamamba*, Komachi is “alone without a reliable family” (単孤無頼の独人, 189), while the *yamamba*’s place on the mountain signifies her exclusion from society. Yet her exclusion leads to a gradual loss of her feminine qualities and whatever ability she has to signify the coexistence of the sacred and the sexual which has been evinced by the Great Mother and other deities. However, Komachi inhabits a rural setting (野) positioned between the village and mountain and is thus unconstrained by society, but she still maintains her sexuality, which is not assigned to the *yamamba* who is stationed even further beyond the fringes of civilization. For this reason, Komachi presents a danger that is possibly more threatening than the *yamamba* since she can still access society without being fully confined by patriarchy (189).

Komachi’s reputation as a celebrated Heian poet grants her a degree of immortality in the literary canon, especially when considering the Noh plays that praise her poetic talent and her ability to transcend the human realm. Her aged appearance is also an essential quality meant to both signify and highlight her unfading genius and elegance. As her physical beauty and public favor wane with age, her true beauty is revealed, much in the way mentioned by Hlaváčová in her study of Zeami’s *Fūshikaden* and the elderly characters of Noh who supposedly “blossom.”

The representative narratives about *yamamba*, *obasuteyama*, and Komachi regularly figure in literary works that exert considerable influence upon Japanese socio-cultural narratives. The Komachi legends show how sociocultural commentaries tend to contribute to the abundance of negative images concerning women. Komachi on the one hand symbolizes talent coupled with beauty, but that image is also representative of the danger inherent in women who manage to be
both attractive and intelligent. Moreover, her youthful pleasures are specifically emphasized as a means to show that aged life is a source of pain. Thus, her youthful depiction services two distinctly negative images: the mature woman who looks forlornly on her younger days, but also the woman who is punished for her dangerous beauty. This second image owes much to the narratives and ideologies that point to women as baleful entities who threaten society. Literary scholar Barbara Hartley’s “Under Surveillance: The Blighted Body of the Aging Woman” underscores this view of women: “While the Christian narrative of woman as the source of human corruption may not have originated in Japan, organized religion in that site, too, [regards] the woman’s body as kegare or pollution, both defiled and defiling, a threat to the perfection of the masculine physique” (226). At first one must delve further into this notion of the danger possessed by the woman’s body, but we can also observe how Noh drama takes advantage of this supposed danger and combines it with images of the old woman in order to illustrate that Komachi is an “irresistible but heartless beauty” (Strong 393) that makes her deserving of her sullied reputation.

Sarah Strong points out that Komachi’s character is a good example of how women are recreated as femme fatales by later Kamakura commentaries that present their narratives “wholly from a male point of view” (398) and that “a deliberate process of selection was at work in the commentary’s shaping of Komachi’s character” (400). Strong also cites Richard Bowring’s study of Komachi in order to show that “the ambiguity of Komachi’s original poem” is evidence for why poem 623 in Kokinshū “prov[ed] so influential to Komachi’s future portrayal as a heartless woman” (394). Through the early medieval commentaries which created Komachi’s role “as a rejecter of men” and a figure possessed of sensuality (“irogonomi”), readers are treated to evidence that supposedly justifies the critical social commentary on Komachi’s hardships later in
life. Arguably, these narratives inspire the portrayals in Noh, which typically draw on Komachi’s negative reputation to discuss, as Hlaváčová noted, the beauty of aging, but also the regret, shame, and sin that bolster the prescriptive nature of Noh dramas, especially those using aged women to dispense life lessons.

Strong goes on to analyze the Noh repertoire that relates to Komachi, and in her survey she indicates that “[all] five of the Komachi plays … portray her as being exceptionally beautiful in her youth, but the episode that implicates her most deeply as a femme fatale is the story of the hundred nights of courtship recounted particularly in ‘Kayoi Komachi’ (通小町) and ‘Sotoba Komachi (卒都婆小町)’” (393). The images from earlier narratives are amplified in the Noh dramas, and when one considers how frequently Noh concerns itself with the fundamental aspects of “aging, parting, and departing,” we see that Komachi’s miserable old age tends to be portrayed as punishment for the time she spent as an enticing woman who spurned the men who sought her. According to Strong, “Komachi’s reputation as a heartless beauty is today so well established that it may come as a surprise to learn that in most Kokinshū material there is little that would serve to indict her on grounds of cruelty” (393).

Anthea Murphy’s study also points out that “the depiction of an aged Komachi in Noh plays focuses on the tensions and conflicts between women, Buddhism, and poetry, and the ways in which the ageing female body acts to domesticate the threat of both women and their poetry” (2). Thus, we can truly see the influence of Noh, wherein Komachi becomes an interesting vehicle for commentary on female decline, but the dramas produced by Zeami and later works by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) transmit and amplify the damaging representations of women. Ultimately, these narratives show that the only fate for old women is to demonstrate how they have spent their lives traversing the spectrum of desirability.
Interestingly, Akutagawa’s “Futari Komachi” (“The Two Komachis,” 1923) presents young Ono no Komachi as beautiful, conniving, and smart enough to deceive a messenger from Hell. The messenger informs the young Komachi that she must die and go to hell because she is so beautiful—“From ancient times famous, beautiful women and clever men have usually gone to hell” (Swann, 486)—but he hesitates to take her life. Once he has finished listening to her explanations, he agrees to spare her life in exchange for a namesake who is located elsewhere in Japan. However, when Komachi becomes old, she calls the messenger back and begs for him to take her to hell.

As for Mishima’s modern Noh play, “Sotoba Komachi” (Komachi at the Stupa, 1952) Komachi appears as an ugly old beggar who is physically, socially, and economically destitute. As the play opens she is in an urban setting, collecting cigarette butts in a park. A poet in the park makes note of Komachi’s unattractiveness when she sits beside him on a park bench, after which he becomes possessed by the spirit of Komachi’s long-deceased lover. Under the influence of this spirit, the poet then only sees Komachi’s beauty, but their interaction is short lived. The spirit is overwhelmed by her beauty and both the poet and the spirit die. When the police inquire about the man’s death, Komachi nonchalantly describes the sudden death of the man. This story indicates the danger posed by Komachi when the naïve youthful spirit who yearns for her affection is ultimately rebuffed.

Mishima’s story seems to touch on the power of our fantasies and our tendency to remember only what we desire—in the case of the spirit-possessed poet, the young and beautiful Komachi who ignores his existence—rather than give in to reality. Akutagawa’s story is similar: the messenger is charmed by Komachi, and, not realizing her subterfuge, agrees to forsake his Underworld responsibilities in order to curry favor with Komachi.
We thus see that these modern dramas depend upon Komachi’s reputation to interrogate the notions of pleasure and pain with respect to male desire. Even though the spirit’s and the messenger’s choices to die or shirk responsibility do not belong to Komachi, she is shown as the reason why they cannot fulfill their responsibilities or continue to live with impossible fantasies.

Etsuko Terasaki questions why Komachi’s life has been the center of so many disparate narratives that discuss her desirability and sinful nature. Such an exploration is crucial because the stories reveal how Komachi’s image embodies the prevailing existential attitudes and artistic ideals of the period. “It is clear that the special characteristics of the poetess as an historical and legendary figure readily lent themselves to dramatic portrayal and at the same time fit the conceptual framework, i.e. the redemptive mode of Buddhism” (157). Through Terasaki’s examination, we see that Komachi is another example of Kruger’s argument about how an absent body provides the space for stereotypes. Komachi has generally come to “[personify] a poetic ideal of Heian society…[but due to] the lack of historical facts on which to base her biography many colorful legends and beliefs gave rise to popular portrayals of her life. It was these legendary sources that inspired and provided much of the material for the dramatization of Komachi’s life” (ibid.). Terasaki goes on to consider that “[because] most of these accounts were negative and unflattering, they established the main structure on which to portray Komachi’s existential modes—intellectual, social, and psychological—in keeping with the pessimistic Buddhist ethical system” (ibid.).

Such negative portrayals are prevalent in earlier narratives, but we have seen that even modern writers like Akutagawa and Mishima show versions of Komachi that conform to the prevailing views of the dangerous and unproductive woman in society. On the other hand, the presentations of lonely and abandoned women offered by Enchi reveal Komachi’s continued
existence within modern society, but she manages to diverge from well-worn tropes of the woman who is abandoned on account of her sinfulness. Rather, she develops sophisticated and diverse portrayals that consider the complexity and individual history underlying the woman who has lost aspects of her femininity but not her desire, nor her memories, attachments, and regrets.

Sylvia B. Henneberg’s “Of Creative Crones and Poetry” offers particularly helpful insights into how women writers have used literature to defy patriarchal tropes tied to aging and decline ideology. Her study focuses on “women writers who offer constructive approaches to aging and old age and whose marginalization as women has, whether consciously or not, sensitized them to the importance of a critical examination centering on the perceptions and realities of later life” (106-7). What Henneberg seems to point to in this statement is the intersection of feminism and ageism that manifests differently than in literature featuring a young adult woman or an old man. Gullette addresses the same issue when she points out how “[feminism], which was explaining male bias in so many realms of gendered difference, was rendered helpless whenever age overrode gender” (25). In this sense, Enchi Fumiko can serve to bridge the insights concerned with both gender and aging. The centrality of a protagonist’s age, not one’s gender, contributes to works such as “Hana kui uba,” “Neko no sōshi,” and “Kinuta,” in which women must negotiate life within families and a society that deems them worthless or harmful.

We can also argue that Enchi’s literature provides the re-examination of old age in society that Haim Hazan has called for in his study titled Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions. Hazan uses his investigation to draw a distinction between “languages about old age” and “languages of the old.” Hazan associates the first term with the social, cultural, and psychological “traps” that foster the misunderstandings about elderly people, and he puts forth
different approaches for rethinking old age. Hazan gives in-depth consideration to how literature promotes such reevaluation, but Henneberg states more succinctly that “literature can contribute to the development of age studies in a variety of ways […] particularly in its ability to] generate a critique of aging that we as feminists and human beings desperately need as we confront the future” (106).

Enchi offers rich depictions of women who are trapped and powerless due to varying social, cultural, and psychological circumstances, and by investing such women with a more prominent voice in the narratives of old age, she dismantles the misrepresentations that disadvantage the elderly in society. Hazan’s second term considers the social boundaries of age, the cultural boundaries of life, and how time and self must be reconsidered in order to halt misrepresentations tied to aging. We will see that Enchi is also particularly creative in this regard with the way she reframes the self through the idiosyncrasies and grotesque tendencies of her protagonists, in narratives such as “Neko no sōshi” and “Hana kui uba.”

This study will now progress to a consideration of Enchi’s “Hana kui uba,” which will be followed by a chapter that presents an account of “Neko no sōshi” and “Kinuta.” My analysis will demonstrate that, as suggested by Hazan, the exploration of “aging” through literature can reveal social oppression for individuals, and especially for women’s autonomy. A study of Enchi’s work will also show her aged female protagonist confronts the social pressures and prejudices that shape how elderly women must interact with and contribute to society. As we turn to Tanabe in the final chapter, we will see how this author re-examines agency and expression through the aged body in order to achieve a more optimistic depiction of life for aging women.
Chapter 3: Floral Lust: Eccentric Crones in Enchi Fumiko’s Fiction

“Hana kui uba” (“The Old Women Who Eats Flowers,” “花食い姥” 1974)¹

In 1974, Enchi published a story of an aged woman with a peculiar appetite. Although the title might suggest a romantic image of an old woman gracefully slipping flowers into her mouth, the actual development of the story belies such an expectation. In fact, the old woman who appears in Enchi’s story devours the crimson blossoms of a crab cactus without any trace of elegance or refinement. Such an action strikes readers as creepy and even grotesque, shocking and discomfiting both the narrator and the readers.

Why would Enchi illustrate such an eccentric old woman in her story? Does she intend to call to mind the mythical figure of the yamamba,² that monstrous mountain woman who devours the flesh of men? As discussed in the previous chapter, the yamamba is imagined to chase after her own raw desire, whether it be lust or hunger, and her disturbance of pre-established social orders is seen as dangerous, since she cannot be controlled by rules, expectations, or even rationality. Despite the resemblance of the old woman to the yamamba through her coarse devouring of the red blossoms, she does not actually appear to be dangerous or destructive. In a way, this voracious, aged woman can be seen as a continuation of Enchi’s typical “mad” female characters; however, it stands to reason that the aged female characters in Enchi’s later works

---

¹ This analysis depends heavily on the Hulvey translation, “The Old Woman who Eats Flowers” (1994), but when noted will refer to Lucy North’s version titled “The Flower Eating Crone” (1997).
² Yumiko Hulvey’s study of yamambas also questions why so many women writers, such as Enchi Fumiko, Ōba Minako, Kurahashi Yumiko, and Tsushima Yōko, invite the negative image of yamamba topos. She argues that “[t]he power of myth is so strong and pervasive that to this day women writers instinctively feel a primordial connection to the image of the yamauba. Women writers may even realize that the yamauba owes her inspiration to the vilified female deities of the Japanese and great mother creation myths, but even if they do not, they seem to sense some mysterious kinship between the female monster and archetypes of threatening, empowered females” (88).
significantly diverge from the resentful demonic women she wrote while still middle aged herself. The old woman who eats flowers is different from those yamamba-like, spirit-possessed female figures.

This chapter will explore Enchi Fumiko’s portrayal of the flower-eating crone, focusing on how she represents the old woman differently from both the enraged women of her earlier fiction and the stereotypical image of the powerless, useless, and even violent aged woman. I will also consider the way Enchi allows the old woman to seek her own desires and happiness while embracing senescence. In the process I will examine how Enchi challenges social discrimination against aging by allowing the weakening body to empower characters in their subversion of oppressive social norms and judgmental views.

**Plot Synopsis of “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers”**

Joyfully admiring the beautiful blossoms of the Schlumbergera, or crab cactus, the elderly female narrator gently brushes her hand against the flowers. It is late autumn, and the blossoms are a delightful surprise for the narrator. Earlier, when she had seen the poor withered body of the plant, she had assumed it would not survive, much less bloom again. While the narrator quietly celebrates the revival of the flowers, another old woman suddenly appears next to her. Since the two aged women share similar physical difficulties of failing eyesight, they have to crouch down to see even a blurry image of the flowers.

While peacefully enjoying the blossoms together, the second old woman suddenly picks several petals and devours them. The narrator, shocked by the abrupt and impulsive behavior,
feels repulsed seeing the red blooms disappear into the old woman’s dark mouth. She cannot help but imagine her to be eating flesh. Yet, indifferent to the narrator’s inner frustration over this strange impropriety, the flower-eating woman explains that her act of eating the pretty flower is a kind of natural and instinctive gesture to release her insatiable desire. In spite of her aged body and weakened eyesight, the flower-eating woman seems to have not renounced her carnal desire.

This encounter with the flower-eating woman triggers the narrator’s memories of the past in which she “liked flowers from the time [she] was young and…[o]ccasionally…tried tasting [a flower] with a friend.”\(^4\) This memory reminds her of a romantic relationship she had in her youth. Although the narrator and her lover had cared deeply for each other, neither could express their true feelings. This inability to deeply connect ultimately led them to end their relationship. For years, even until his death, the man seems to harbor feelings of regret, but then dies without revealing any of these feelings to the narrator. Instead, his widow sends the narrator a box of the letters he had exchanged with her. Receiving the long-kept love-letters, the narrator realizes that she shared his feelings of regret. But, unwilling to confront the past or to even acknowledge her own lingering attachment, the narrator hides the packet of letters inside her closet and forgets them; that is, until the sight of the old woman eating flowers re-awakens her long-concealed memories.

Watching the flower-eating woman freely express her desire and emotions unconcerned by what others think, the narrator is finally able to see beyond her traditional upbringing and her ingrained feelings of reticence. She considers the situation of contemporary Japan, where the

---

\(^4\) Enchi, trans, Hulvey (163).
young generation enjoys more freedom to express their natural feelings and desires, much as the people she has observed when travelling abroad. Noticing the bright side of social change, the aged narrator finally begins to see her true needs and desires, earlier dismissed by her own self-regulation. By breaking out from her own frame, the narrator can finally accept and express her own desires, just like the younger generation. While contemplating her new awakening, the narrator discovers that the flower-eating old woman has vanished.

*Aging Body: Revolting Self-pleasure*

The story provides powerful visual imagery of an old woman who shamelessly reveals her desire for and actual consumption of flowers. Despite being one herself, the unnamed narrator refers to the aged woman who suddenly appears as a “rōjo” (“old woman”), because with her shock of white hair and her poor vision, the woman seems much older than the narrator.

Her hair was completely white, but her facial color was radiant and there was a mysterious brightness in her eyes like that of a young girl's. True to her words, she moved her face so close to the flower that she almost brushed against it. “Lately I've been troubled by weak eyesight, too, but you seem to be much worse off,” I said, feeling strangely satisfied. (162)

No sooner has the narrator begun to gloat over her imagined superiority than the old woman shocks her with an impulsive act.

The old woman smiled broadly as, without hesitation, she plucked off a cluster of three flowers that had been blooming wildly for a long time at the tip of a leaf. Suddenly, she brought the mottled red flowers to her sparsely toothed mouth and stuffed them inside. “My goodness, what are you doing?” I gasped, caught off guard by the peculiarity of witnessing a living thing being consumed. (163)

The narrator’s description of and reaction to the rōjo’s eating the flowers is quite provocative. From the narrator’s view, the rōjo’s mouth “looked as if it were stained with blood” (163), as if
she were devouring living flesh, with the reddish flower stains on her lips appearing almost bloody. Emphasizing the rōjo’s “sparsely toothed mouth” and “red-stained lips,” the narrator portrays the rōjo’s act as monstrous and distasteful. Then the question arises: why does the scene of an old woman ingesting blossoms appear so repulsive and grotesque, particularly in the eyes of the narrator, herself an elderly woman? Why might the narrator be incapable of interpreting the rōjo’s behavior more generously? Considering her declining condition, the rōjo’s eating of flowers can be seen as either an old woman’s peculiar taste or as simple mischief. However, by not showing sympathy for the older woman’s eccentric expression, the narrator’s attitude toward the flower-eating woman is just as harsh and intolerant as the traditional male-centered view on mythical demonic female characters such as the yamamba.5

Offering diverse images of the yamamba (or yamauba)6 who is not just a monster but at times a great mother,7 Noriko Reider and Yumiko Hulvey’s studies question the typical demonic image of the yamamba, claiming that there are numerous versions of it with different narratives, ages, and misdeeds in Japanese literature and folktales.8 Thus, the yamamba’s origin cannot be traced to a single image, but rather a suite of dynamic and diverse characters. Nevertheless, how does the ambivalent existence of the yamamba become the symbolic figure of dangerous female power? Rebecca Copeland argues in her article “Mythical Bad Girls”:

5 Of course, this reading depends on an understanding of the rōjo as an actual person whom the narrator encounters. The possibility of reading her rather as a fantasy, a figment of the narrator’s imagination, will be discussed in more detail below.
6 Hulvey notes the ambiguous distinction between yamamba and yamauba: “[The] Classical Japanese dictionary definitions makes a distinction between yamauba and yamamba, but the modern dictionary treats the two words identically. A yamauba is usually defined as a woman with superhuman strength (kairyoku) who lives deep in the mountains, or a female demon (kijo) who lives in remote mountain” (73).
7 Hulvey points out the positive image of yamamba as “sometimes a nurturer and other times a destroyer” (72-72).
8 “Yanagita Kunio, the noted Japanese folklorist, states about the yamamba that “this kind of tale can be found throughout Japan. It may be said to express clearly the supernatural character of the mountain woman. The mountain woman as she appears in folk tales is commonly an old woman, tall and with long hair hanging down. She characteristically has a large mouth, slit eyes that glint sharply, and is extremely pale in color” (Yamaori 30).
The *yamamba* represents all that lies outside the social norm, beyond the boundaries of the civilized. She is a woman without a family, a woman who does not conform. Cast out from the security of social sanctuary—she runs through the mountains. Her freedom figured as terror. […] The nurturer becomes the murderer. The woman who eats nothing becomes the woman who eats all. (23)

In other words, despite lacking an explicit origin, the *yamamba*’s bad reputation is due not to her sinister nature, but the potential danger that her free and unruly existence represents—the “symbolic female power.” Similarly, Tetsuo Yamaori’s study examines the representation of the old women as “*yamamba*” in Japanese Noh plays by comparing it to the old male character, the *okina*, and argues that “in general, it is undeniable that while the image of the *okina* is wrapped in an aura of elegance and spirituality, by contrast there is a tendency for the old woman to be tied to the traditions of the demon woman and the *yamamba*, and to be made an object of fear and dread” (30). Similarly, the cultural narrative of old women cannot be freed from this negatively constructed image. Yumiko Hulvey points out that both theatrical and literary works continued to depict *yamamba*-like characters negatively, thus contributing to the monstrous, destructive female demon through this specific narrative, until finally the modern dictionary defines *yamamba* (also *yamauba*) as “old female monsters who live in the mountains,” completely erasing any earlier positive trace (73).

Hence, the connection between the flower-eating woman and *yamamba*-like image reflects how much the narrator has internalized social norms as well as her consciousness about social censorship. Copeland notes the influence of narrative power:

Because women have been constantly exposed to stories and images that define the female as uncontrollable, shameful, and defiled, they unconsciously accept this definition as irredeemably true. Without even being aware of their doing so, they began to locate in themselves that which conforms to this constructed definition of femaleness. And so the archetype of female evil becomes a self-perpetuating prophecy. (23)
The *rōjo* does not show any embarrassment from eating flowers; rather, she seems intentionally to display her chewing of the flowers in front of the narrator. Compared to the *yamamba*’s cannibalistic desire, the *rōjo*’s desire for flowers is not conspicuously harmful, merely offensive to those confined within the cultural norms. Hulvey points out that the works of Enchi Fumiko and other women writers “actually revel in the negative associations of dangerous women, employing images of vampires and femmes fatale who lure men to their doom, perhaps for the same reason that some religions believe that contact with defilement can sometimes empower those who dare it” (88). In “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers,” Enchi seems to have a different purpose in creating the flower-eating woman, the *rōjo* with an appetite. Rendering the *rōjo* in the image of a flesh-devouring monster, the narrator distances herself from the monstrous *rōjo*, for she is acutely aware of the censorious gaze of society. Although they share similar difficulties of having aged female bodies, failing eyesight, and similar desires (the narrator, too, used to have a habit of eating flowers when she was young), the narrator’s almost obsessive anxiety about violating social norms prevents her from sympathizing with and understanding the *rōjo*, regardless of whether or not flower eating is actually illegal, immoral, or socially unacceptable. In other words, it is the narrator’s view of the *rōjo* that creates the *yamamba*-like image, thus revealing more about the narrator’s frame of mind than the actual state of the *rōjo*. By so intensely wanting to separate herself from such a problematic woman by labeling the *rōjo* not only as a different type of person, but even inhuman, the narrator betrays her own fear of social exile.

The narrator’s emotional difference from the *rōjo* is displayed from the beginning of the story. As mentioned above, although both the narrator and *rōjo* are in a similar state of bodily
weakness, instead of sympathizing with her, the narrator gleefully notices that her own body is in a better state:

Perhaps the feeling came from empathizing with her affliction because I also couldn’t see clearly, either near or far, since eye disease had limited my vision. Or perhaps it was just an immature sense of superiority toward one who had to go closer to the flower than I. (162)

However, the narrator is not able to enjoy her feeling of superiority for long. Indeed, perhaps the rōjo’s act of stuffing the blossoms into her mouth, while frankly admitting her own bodily weakness, is done half out of spite—meant to shock the self-satisfied narrator out of her tiresome complacency.

The binary juxtaposition of youth and old age does not simply indicate the distinction between ages. In an anti-aging society, where youth is glorified at the expense of the aged, younger age and better health conditions symbolize potential power and superiority. This scene evinces this type of ageism, presenting an ugly picture where even within older groups, a slightly better health condition can be seen as a touchstone of superiority. Josephine Mary Dolan and Estella Tincknell explain “aging femininity,” or the relation between women, aging and power as “the power to position the aging female body as abject and in need of cosmetic or surgical intervention when it “fails” to conform to acceptable aesthetic or cultural norms” (xi). In other words, not just the young female body but also the aged female body are bound by the social, aesthetic, and cultural norms conveyed through the judgments of others’ views. The narrator’s judgment of the other old woman reflects an oppressive gaze that is already ingrained within individuals. By placing herself as superior to another older woman, the narrator simultaneously degrades herself as an aged woman as opposed to a younger woman, subjugating herself to the social power relations and cultural expectations of ageism.
The appearance of the rōjo is enigmatic and ambiguous in that she possesses certain youthful qualities within her aged body. Through comparison with the narrator, the aged bodily condition of the rōjo is quite vividly captured, but it seems that even the narrator notices that there is something more to her despite her completely white hair and bad eyesight. When the rōjo suddenly appears, the narrator observes that “her facial color was radiant and there was a mysterious brightness in her eyes like that of a young girl’s” (162). It is only after the rōjo creeps closer to the pot claiming that she cannot see things unless they are right in front of her eyes that the narrator notes her own feeling of superiority.

Enchi creates an interesting tension between these two women both physically and mentally. Both are elderly but, noticing the rōjo’s unusual appearance and her appetite, the narrator marks the rōjo as a dangerous woman (troublemaker) in order to protect herself, but in doing so, the narrator reveals her social anxiety about her own aged identity. Enchi then allows her protagonist to find her own subjectivity, freed from social norms, by challenging the weakness of her aged body and her marginal position in society.

**Why Does the Old Woman Eat Flowers?**

The rōjo has found the most direct way to possess the beauty and power of the flower: by literally consuming it raw and whole. Why would the rōjo eat flowers? To fully understand the flower-eating old woman, it is significant to note the symbolic meaning of the crab cactus

---

9 Regarding such mysterious portrayal of the rōjo, Yumiko Hulvey suggests the interpretation of the rōjo’s character as the embodiment of divinity. She explains that white hair, as a symbol of age, may not necessarily be associated with the ugly aspects of aging in that the mysterious power of old people might originate from the very fact of their old age. However, in her studies, Hulvey focuses more on the youthfulness contained within the old body and argues that Enchi diverges from the traditional association between the divine and white hair (207).
flower, which is better known for its ability to survive in an arid environment than for its flowers. The story carefully describes the commonplace, even unattractive image of the crab cactus: “The leaf was dark green like an orchid’s, its jagged edges lined with thorns like layered arrow feathers” (162). However, despite its ordinary appearance the crab cactus is also known to produce magnificent flowers when it blooms. One of the reasons that the narrator feels happy to see the blooming of the crab cactus is that the plant had earlier seemed almost dead, and thus she never expected it to bloom again. Indeed, its withered appearance causes the narrator to decide it will no longer produce anything of beauty, further suggesting the internalization of ageism. Nevertheless, “after its blossoms had scattered, it revived on its own in the second year” (163). In spite of the cactus’ distinctly unimpressive appearance, the splendid flower explodes from its concealment, revealing the full vitality of life. Although the cactus is merely a plant, the life within shows its true beauty; from this nature is born the desire to sprout buds that bloom into vibrant flowers.

Moreover, the visual presentation of the “crab cactus” plays a significant role in that the plant itself may symbolize the aged body. It has no leaves, only a jagged stem that looks like a leaf. The word in Japanese that means a leaf or leaves, ha, has the same sound as the word for teeth. The cactus’s lack of leaves allows an association with toothlessness, a trait often closely associated with old age. We have already seen, in our discussion of Orin in The Ballad of Narayama, how closely teeth are linked to ideas about aging and consumption. Certainly other literary figures were also associated with a “toothless” old age. Terry Kawashima’s study shows

---

10 In contrast to the deep green spines that grow out and hang down from the body of crab cactus, the profusion of deep red flowers that spring up toward the sky is so splendid—the whole cactus seems to embody a flaming passion, even sexual power.

11 The crab cactus blooms in the late autumn or winter, which is typically associated with decline and transience in poetry.
how female aging functions in the narrative construction of the marginality of aged female characters. Kawashima introduces the poem of the old woman Higaki, who was once a popular poet but now laments her lost reputation using the aged images of white hair and lost teeth. However, the poem presents Higaki’s wish to regain her power by drinking water from the Shirakawa River, which will make one's teeth grow back. The re-blossoming of the cactus in Enchi’s story, which the narrator had written off as dead for its bare (toothless) appearance, symbolizes the vibrancy of nature and the potential for renewal.

With her lips stained crimson by the flowers, the white-haired, nearly blind rōjo regains color on her ashen face. It is not a coincidence that the word for color in Japanese, iro, also signifies Eros, sex, and sexuality. Yumiko Hulvey has pointed out in her article “The Intertextual Fabric of Narratives by Enchi Fumiko” that the flowers signify the evanescent nature of life, and “the transience of beauty, youth, and spring.” She further notes that the color red is often associated with blood and passion (207-208). By consuming the flowers, the rōjo obtains passionate sexual vitality, a fundamental life force that can also be linked to blood. Kawashima argues that “old age acts as a marginalizing quality because it is imbued with connotations of lack in an economic sense (poverty) and the physical sense (loss of beauty)” (130). So the old

---

12 “Old age is not an essentially or inherently marginal category, […] then we must ask why it is represented as socially ‘marginal.’ In Komachi’s case, this quality becomes marginalized because old age is deliberately associated with the loss of beauty and livelihood” (Kawashima 127).

13 In Gosenshū (c. 951), “Since the years have passed/ my black hair, too,/ like the White River, Shirakawa/ I now have to get water there/ my teeth have fallen out but are growing back again—” (149-150).

14 “At that place, she was a famous woman who loved poetry” (Kawashima, 150, quoting from Kifune, Gosen wakashū zenshaku, pp.823-24).

15 Hulvey also notes that “the white-haired old woman eats the mottled red blossoms of the shako shaboten (crab cactus), suggests an attempt to recapture that which has been lost” (208). Hulvey’s article traces more symbolic meanings of red flower related to youth, comparing Western myth and Eastern culture. Hulvey also points out Enchi’s allusions to the mythology of the West combined with traditional themes from the mythos of premodern Japan point to her concern to explore the idea of lost youth as she faces the process of aging and accompanying physical limitations.
woman eating the flower might be seen as an attempt to regain power, to subvert the marginalizing expectation that elderly women should be asexual, stoic, self-regulated, self-sacrificing, and composed. Eating flowers is a symbolic action, a powerful demonstration of her determination. That is why the old woman's voracious appetite is depicted as not just ugly, but terrifying and horrible.

Noticing the power of flowers, the narrator also expresses her suppressed desire by brushing the flower with her hand. The narrator’s touching of the flower is not just a casual act, but her way to express her desire for the power of life. Actually touching the petals of the revivified cactus, rather than merely looking, gives her great joy and allows her to dream about a reawakening of her own, culminating in not just longer life, but also a second flowering in her late years. Although touching flowers is not necessarily an aggressive action, it is still not in line with the more refined, conventional way of observing the flower.\textsuperscript{16} In this sense, the narrator’s touching and brushing the flowers can be interpreted as her physical expression of her desire for obtaining the power of the flowers, although it means breaking away from the refined way of celebrating their beauty.

In comparison to the narrator’s gentle attitude toward the flower, the \textit{rōjo}’s attitude is more aggressive and impulsive. Naturally, the \textit{rōjo}’s blatant devouring of flowers shocks the more demure narrator. Although she expresses her desire for the flowers by caressing them, it

\textsuperscript{16} According to the classical convention of flower appreciation in Japan, in which the flower is an object of observation and is not to be disturbed. Traditionally, Japanese believed that the blooming and falling cycle of flowers evokes that of human life, reflecting the ephemerality of human life and generating a deep pathos in those who watch beautifully blooming flowers. \textit{Kadō} (“The Way of the Flower”), refers to an art for appreciating the aesthetics of flowers and their arrangement, allowing the plants to infer a meaning beyond their superficial beauty. Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement) gained traction as an art form through a number of established schools from approximately the fifteenth century. Typically the finished arrangement is placed in a specifically sanctioned space (the \textit{tokonoma}) which allows the piece to appear more sophisticated, achieving some distance from observers and their daily lives.
had never occurred to the narrator that she could try to “eat” them, to gain access to their power in reality. Since elderly women are generally considered to have lost their sexual desires and feminine qualities along with their reproductive abilities, it is regarded as unseemly and even grotesque for an aged woman to entertain desires to regain youth and fertility. Accordingly, the narrator becomes deeply troubled by the rōjo’s aggressive act of eating the flowers, which explicitly demonstrates her desire to possess the power that is clearly out of her reach. The rōjo’s transgression disgusts and confounds the narrator, but this unusual behavior of eating flowers signifies the rōjo’s power and agency. The rōjo might share the narrator’s desire for the reviving power of the blossoms, yet she goes beyond merely articulating her yearnings to physically grabbing and ingesting the flower to make it her own so that she may overcome her blind, marginalized, and limited circumstances.

The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers

In light of the above, the reader, along with the narrator, is inclined to wonder: who is this enigmatic rōjo who suddenly appears and disturbs the narrator by eating flowers? The Dictionary of Enchi Fumiko offers an interpretation that the “rōjo” represents the subconscious narrator herself, who could not admit her concealed, embarrassing self. The narrator has the desire to possess the youthful beauty of blossoms, and yet, she could not admit it publicly. As The Dictionary of Enchi Fumiko notes, the rōjo effectively exposes the narrator’s concealed ...

---

17 From the abnormal appearance of the rōjo “with radiant skin and a mysterious brightness in her eyes like those of a young girl,” Hulvey provides “the connection between elderly white-haired people and the divine” but she argues that “Enchi subverts the traditional application of white hair to the divine by alluding to elements of youth within aged women” (207).

desire and emotions, which eventually lead to the final release of the suppressed self. Hulvey also identifies the *rōjo* as one facet of the double-sided character: “The white-haired old woman can be taken as an aspect of the narrator that acknowledges the need to fulfill her desires, while the narrator is too conscious of social censure to make an attempt to fulfill her desires” (214). Considering the *rōjo’s* mysterious ability to see through the narrator’s mind and her concealed desire for flowers, it is a reasonable argument that the *rōjo* is a projection of the suppressed inner self of the narrator.20

In this vein, the *rōjo* functions as a kind of “*migawari*” (substitute). The term, as Takie Lebra explains, refers to a situation where it “is necessary [to replace and perform the role of the original character] when the honnin (true self) is physically or mentally disabled, sick, or too old, or young, helpless, or immobile to perform his/her role” (131). The concept of “*migawari*” also has a practical function that allows the honnin to avoid social criticism while revealing what might not be considered as normative and acceptable. Thus the *rōjo* becomes a *migawari* for the narrator who is confined within social expectations.

---

19 Hulvey further explains that not only “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” but also “Wandering spirit” show “fantastic themes as she grew older and faced the physical constraints of failing eyesight. […] Enchi delves into the world of fantasy with the character Suo, a female writer in her late sixties who by chance encounters the ‘other woman,’ an aspect of herself that is not bound by social constraints. Readers are made cognizant of the fact that the ‘other woman’ Suo is actually her ‘real self,’ one whose spirit leaves her body to fulfill assignations with younger men (211).

20 “I’d liked flowers from the time I was young and had heard that the nectar at the base of azalea petals was sweet and delicious. Occasionally, I tried tasting it with a friend” (163).

21 Lebra’s study is useful to understand the relationship between the self (honnin) and the “socially comfort self [sic]” that is needed to fit into socio-cultural circumstances. Lebra identifies “three levels of self as follows: the social or ‘interactional’ self is at the basic level, where Japanese find themselves most of the time; above this level is the ‘inner’ or ‘reflexive self, which centers around the kokoro (heart/mind) and engages in monologues, with a leave of absence from dialogic involvement; at the highest level, there is the ‘boundless’ or chaotic self; where the boundary disappears between subject and object, self and other, or the inner and outer self, so that both the social and inner self are upgraded into an empty self” (128). Lebra goes on to add that “[the] Japanese honnin stands for such a non-substitutive, authentic self, used in implicit or explicit distinction from the surrogate (kawari or dainin)” (130).
This interpretation of the rōjo as the alter ego or subconscious self of the narrator provides a convenient medium to express the narrator’s inner suffering and explains the enigmatic presence of the rōjo, who appears and vanishes without any further explanation in the story. However, this view treats the rōjo’s role as a secondary one—a character whose existence depends upon the existence of the narrator. Thus the rōjo’s voice becomes merely a literary representation of the narrator’s conflicting views of her aged identity, and lacks substance or effect in the real world. Seeing the rōjo as merely a figment of the narrator’s imagination unnecessarily mitigates the vibrancy of the rōjo’s jouissance and undercuts the subjectivity she displays in her challenging the oppressive social norms that seek to control the natural expression of individual desires.

Since she clearly recognizes the significant difference between merely seeing flowers and actively ingesting them, the rōjo proceeds to eat the flowers, projecting her agency. As she raises her defiant voice, the rōjo offers the narrator a new understanding. In this respect, the image of the rōjo here bears traces of the earlier legendary female figure, Ono no Komachi. In the Noh play “Sotoba Komachi,” Ono no Komachi demonstrates her keen intelligence by challenging the Buddhist monks’ pretentiousness (Terasaki 159), leading them to recognize their ignorance through her theological debate. Similarly, Enchi’s rōjo, appearing as little more than a homeless beggar, also utilizes her uncanny wit and astute sensibilities to guide the narrator to a deeper self-awareness. She sheds light on the narrator’s prescribed behavior and suppressed desire through her evident wisdom and provocative behavior.

The story’s rōjo, who is more a mentor than simply an alter-ego of the narrator, appears as an elderly hag whose decrepit body stands in stark counterpoint to her sharp insight. Drawing attention to the contrast between her physical appearance and her mental acuity, she educates the
narrator who is confined by her conventional view of her aged body as container of her personal history that appears orthodox, rigid and idealistic. Through the rōjo, who takes over the role of mentor, the narrator recognizes the potential seeds of a monster growing in herself because of her unnatural repression of her natural desires.

Moreover, the rōjo appears to have an understanding of the social stereotypes surrounding the elderly that the narrator lacks. This allows her to use humor and wit to manipulate those social conventions for her own purposes. After eating flowers, the rōjo apologizes to the surprised narrator, “I am sorry. When you get old, you become impatient… Maybe I’m senile” (163). Although the rōjo justifies her action by claiming senility, she is clearly aware of what she has done and how her action is perceived by the narrator. Considering that a primary symptom of boke, or “senility,” is the inability to perceive it in one’s self, it is not believable that the rōjo is truly senile. Senility is a convenient excuse that explicates all sorts of strange and unusual behaviors in elderly people, and here, the rōjo exploits the excuse of senility to do what she wants and get away with it. Her pose of senility becomes a disguise that allows the rōjo to fulfill her desire under the scrutinizing and judging gazes of others.

The rōjo plays with the conception of senility that treats the elderly as burdensome and marginalized. Being “senile” is often a serious familial and social burden. John W. Traphagan’s study explores the cultural and symbolic meaning of senility (boke) for Japanese elderly. Traphagan notes that the anxiety of becoming “boke” in Japan becomes serious not because of “fear for losing control over mind and body” but because “it leads to the cultural assumptions that underlie that fear” (145). His study shows that the primary reason people fear “boke” stems from the Japanese “desire to avoid becoming a burden to others (meiwaku kaketakunai)—a
concept that translates as nuisance, trouble, inconvenience, or burden—a social norm that permeates many facets of Japanese life” (153).

The rōjo’s exploitation of the taboo image of senility is ironic: it both condones socially offensive behaviors and almost grants an individual the tacit permission to do as she pleases. The rōjo mocks the exaggerated censoring gaze that defines as senile behaviors that seem even slightly eccentric and nonsensical. Traphagan provides the ambiguous meaning of “boke” in Japan “because a simple translation of boke as ‘senile’ or ‘demented’ conveys a meaning much narrower than the term connotes in Japanese” (135). In Japan the term “boke” is commonly used in daily conversation by the elderly themselves. As Traphagan notes: “[o]lder people who tend to forget where they have put things or cannot recall names as they once did will half-jokingly refer to themselves as having already become boke, but there is a belief among most older people that if one can joke about it, one has not actually become boke” (135). In other words, “boke” does not necessarily refer to a serious, traumatic disease—it can refer to slight forgetfulness among elderly people. The rōjo’s usage of “senile” is closer to what Traphagan points out as a “half-joking” term to describe their aged condition. The rōjo’s flower consumption is a highly self-centered behavior to satisfy her own needs regardless of what other people think, but her advanced age allows her to be insensitive to normative social rules.

---

22 “The dictionary translation of boke as ‘senility’ conveys a sense of being ‘out-of-it’ (see for instance, Shogakukan Progressive Japanese-English Dictionary, 2nd edition). From a medical perspective, boke is viewed by some as physiologically normal aging of the brain, as opposed to dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. It also tends to be associated with minor memory loss, as opposed to the more profound loss of mental functionality connected to dementia” (Ikeda 1995, 23; quoted in Traphagan 135).

23 “In regular conversation, when referring to characteristics associated with old age such as forgetfulness, inability to recognize faces, or in extreme cases, becoming a danger to oneself (e.g. forgetting to turn off gas burners), people will use the term boke or bokeru (the verb form)” (Traphagan 135).
Hence, the rōjo is a mentor who has achieved enlightenment, passing her lessons down to the narrator.

There’s no law that says flowers are just to be seen and not to be eaten, is there? When you think something is beautiful, you want to touch it, you want to pluck it off, and even if you destroy its shape, you want to make it your own. When that desire becomes stronger, then it reaches the point where you want to eat it. Doesn’t it? (163)

For the rōjo, consuming flowers is a natural and effectual action to satisfy her desire to possess the beauty of the blossoms. Noting that there is no legal prohibition against flower eating, the rōjo points out that the dismayed reaction of the narrator at eating flowers originates from the deeply inculcated need of the narrator to fulfill the social expectations for women. However, by making a reasonable argument, the rōjo clearly indicates that she has not eaten the flower accidentally nor was it because of mental disorder or senility, overtly contradicting her claim to senility.

A more interesting point is how the rōjo, while claiming to be senile, debates with the narrator about literary expressions and the interpretation of human desire. Because the rōjo’s spontaneous action is not acceptable, the narrator attempts to contain the rōjo’s action by linking it to a performance found in kabuki, believing that such action must have had symbolic meaning beyond the literal ingestion of flowers; “a woman plucks off a white plum blossom and eats it,” a scene that has been interpreted as representing “a kind of refined eroticism” (163). Relying only on literary analysis, the narrator is able to accept the “refined” expression in art, while simultaneously remaining uncomfortable with and judgmental about the rōjo, whose expression is too frank for her. In addition, the narrator cynically comments on the rōjo’s eating of the flowers: “[p]eople who watch you stuff red flowers into your mouth and devour them might
think that you have an extraordinary illness, or that you’re crazy, don’t you think?” (164).

Borrowing the disapproving voices of other people, the narrator actually reveals her own critical opinion.

Against such a critical comment by the narrator, the rōjo presents an articulate argument regarding her expression of desire. Firstly the rōjo points out that the narrator’s interpretation has actually “idealized the concept of lust” (163). Then the rōjo discusses that Kabuki and ukiyo-e both contain abundant sexual imagery and yet, instead of candidly capturing the natural human sexual desire, Kabuki and ukiyo-e both display idealized, suggestive, and thus distorted images of sexuality.

The rōjo’s opinion reveals that the artistic or literary representations of female sexuality are biased, and that these conventions forbid self-expression and awareness of her own sexuality. The rōjo rejects those artistic expressions of sexuality because they are artificial constructions that are meant to be seen by others, not for the gratification of one’s own desire. Thus, eating flowers represents the fulfillment of the rōjo’s own desire, not something to please others. Rejecting the refined and idealized expression of sexuality, the rōjo explains that this literary belief is based on natural human desires:

In human beings there is powerful impulse to bring all animals and plants close to oneself—often generating legends and myths. In Greek mythology there are stories in which human beings become flowers, and in Japanese tales the spirits of willow trees and cherry trees become beautiful women who pledge themselves to me. I think such desires are born from the dreams of human beings who cannot look at flowers as just a part of nature. (164)

It is notable that the rōjo draws from the literary tradition to bolster her assertion—rather than tapping into myth. Compared to refined literary constructions, myth and folklore—though often
unrealistic or supernatural—display more authentic and unfiltered human emotions and desires. In this sense, a person literally transforming into a flower, or trees transforming into a woman are more direct demonstrations of human appreciation and desire for the beauty of nature. On the other hand, a Kabuki scene of a woman eating flowers is a performance of sensuality for the benefit of the viewer. The rōjo thus challenges the narrator’s confined, aesthetic perception of expressing desires—as represented in her Kabuki reference—by drawing from the counterexample of stories that center on natural human feelings and that allow free expressions of desire. She repudiates the authority of the literary tradition in an attempt to free the narrator’s mind.

Furthermore, the rōjo as well as the narrator demonstrates the difference between just seeing flowers and eating them in order to clarify the difference between reality and dream. Eating flowers is an active operation that is distinguished from mere dreaming or yearning. Verbal expressions of want may articulate the yearning, but they lack the power to physically attain the desired. The rōjo points out that such unattainable expressions of desire, particularly those in the literary tradition, remain fossilized in human dreams and can never be fulfilled because they are merely rhetorical. Through her act of eating flowers, the rōjo subverts the literary world’s depiction of refined and unobtainable desire. The rōjo becomes the crude and yet

24 Myths and folklore are useful for providing a collection of narrative constructions that reflect the interests, desires, and understandings of groups of people. “Folklore is that part of a people's culture which is preserved consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs or observations of general currency, in myths, legends and tales of common acceptance, and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual” (Davidson 132).

25 Davidson notes that, “…myth may give expression to a deeper level of the mind than the purely descriptive and rational one, and he has performed a great service in tracing out some of the main archetypal patterns… Claude Levi-Strauss has put forward his theory that mythology should be seen as a universal language, needing to be decoded by structural analysis. He saw the logic of the primitive mind as identical with that of scientifically trained modern man” (139).
real representation of living, natural desire that has been repressed by social regulation, rather than a stylization of desire, as seen in Kabuki. Such portrayal of the rōjo presents the reader with a new image of vitality in aging women, creating a voice that challenges the constructed norms, and giving voice to an otherwise typecast elderly woman. The rōjo’s “abnormal” behavior becomes exemplary to the narrator as well as the reader.

Seeing the rōjo eating the flowers, the narrator quickly conjures the image of the mythical yamamba, the demonic figure constructed to represent abominable womanhood. The narrator’s struggle not to become one shows how much she has internalized social censorship. The rōjo’s peculiar behavior erodes the rigidly molded value system that has become deeply rooted in the narrator’s mind. The rōjo’s witty argument points to the possibility of freedom from strict adherence to normative ways.

Breaking away from the Aged Mind

Opposed to the narrator, the rōjo seems to feel that the suppression of natural desire does not lead to conformance with social expectations, but rather causes someone to become a monster, a bakemono:26 “[T]he ghosts [bakemono] that dwell within you are probably beginning to stir about. In the end, it’s pandemonium” (164). The rōjo’s warning about “turning into monsters” (bakemono) surprises the narrator even more, for it is the rōjo who appears to be the inhuman creature in the eyes of the narrator.

---

26 The word bakemono, usually translated as "ghost," means literally "a transformed thing" and does not refer to the dead. A bakemono is a living thing transformed temporarily for a specific purpose. Kami, spirits, and demons can also transform themselves into something visible, but they are not the dead. While the human body dies and must be disposed of, the spirit lives on, and death is not an end in itself. See more about the ambiguous nature of bakemono in Michael Foster’s Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai.
*Bakemono*, which the *rōjo* suggests is a symbol of internal disorder, reveals the actual inner problems and conflicts caused by the internalization of the social discipline meant to control one's individual desires. Enchi’s use of “*bakemono*” is different from the monsters or ghosts in Japanese folktales. The author often employs ghostly figures in her works to represent uncontrollable outbursts of suppressed desire. Her supernatural or spirit-possessed female characters often present an idealistic female figure who may suddenly and unexpectedly use supernatural powers to express her inner suffering from social oppression. This manifestation of uncontrolled power is evident in several other works by Enchi, including *Namamiko monogatari* (*A Tale of False Fortunes*, 1965) and *Onnamen* (*Masks*, 1958).

In *A Tale of False Fortunes* Enchi offers a fictional account of the power struggles and relationships among members of the Fujiwara family as they exert control over the Heian imperial throne. Through Fujiwara Michinaga’s conspiring, the taboo surrounding female jealousy is used to suggest that Empress Teishi’s *mono no ke* (wandering spirit) is harming other members of the imperial court. However, in the final moments of her life, the extreme adversity that has dogged Teishi throughout the narrative causes her to manifest an actual *mono no ke*, visiting the Emperor by possessing the body of a woman he is with. Rather than cause

---

27 Van Gessel’s article notes *Namamiko monogatari* as Enchi’s version of “*Eiga monogatari* (c. 1028; Eng. *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*), […] *Namamiko* has as its subtitle "Gleanings from A Tale of Flowering Fortunes." The *Eiga* is clearly aimed at extolling the glorious virtues of Michinaga, while *Namamiko* is presented as a corrective, if not a subversive, account of relationships in the court during Michinaga’s regency, this time proportionately biased in favor of Empress Teishi, the ultimate victim of the marriage-politics game” (380).

28 Since a *bakemono* is an entity that originates in particular from powerful human emotions, it is not unrealistic to see the *mono no ke* as a type of *bakemono*, and thus useful in further establishing Enchi’s penchant for depicting the sudden manifestation of uncontrolled emotional energy.
harm, this true manifestation of Teishi’s *mono no ke* merely professes the love and innocence that Teishi was unable to fully express in her actual corporeal form.

Similarly, Enchi’s *Masks* delves into the suppression and manifestation of female frustration through intertextuality that draws from the Rokujo Lady’s role in *The Tale of Genji*, a work for which Enchi provided her own modern Japanese translation. The protagonist Mieko employs the discourse surrounding *mono no ke* and the Rokujo Lady in order to deliver a message concerning her own traumatic and stressful experiences with the unfair traditions tied to marriage and women’s social positions. These examples show Enchi’s flexibility in her approach to depicting how women manifest their suppressed desires in either a controlled (Mieko) or uncontrolled (Teishi) manner. Both narratives handle the social risks that women face when they allow such manifestations of their inner strife, which is why Enchi can deliver such a powerful impact through these texts by not only addressing the risks but by also challenging and even taking advantage of them.

In “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers,” Enchi deploys the *rōjo* to demonstrate the more controlled manifestation of suppressed desire, similar to *Mask*’s Mieko. However, in this latter narrative that centers on two *rōjo*, Enchi uses a more playful and perhaps effective means to address the variety of dangers that women might pose toward patriarchal expectations by either suppressing or expressing their emotions and inner conflicts. The flower-eating *rōjo*’s advice to the younger woman makes references to the “*bakemono*” in order to touch on the invisible yet powerful nature of the inner struggles that plague the narrator, but the narrator is not able to recognize the existence of the *bakemono* inside herself. In contrast to the visibly grotesque and monstrous *rōjo*—whose control is actually strengthened by her comfort with expressing desire and dissatisfaction—the narrator (who may likely contain a *bakemono* waiting to burst forth)
might actually be more threatening and uncontrollable due to the desires and discontentment that she has hidden from even herself through her efforts to adhere to social norms.29

“The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” plays upon the supernatural bakemono trope in order to subvert the stereotypical notion that every woman possesses a demonic nature that occasionally becomes revealed when she fails to contain it. To venture even further into the implications of how Enchi presents a rōjo who plays with the social objectification of the elderly, it is worth briefly revisiting this chapter’s examination of aging and the notion of bokeru. As noted earlier, the Japanese aged person who claims to experiencing boke (“senility”) is often using that term in jest, and it is this playful mindset with which Enchi invests the old woman who expresses a desire for flowers. Although the term is not expressly mentioned in Enchi’s narrative, one might suggest that the rōjo avoids transforming into a bakemono by instead indicating her status as a bokemono. The bokemono gains freedom by taking the middle ground and accepting the societal language used to define her marginal status, but then she uses such language to sanction her dismissal of the social codes that would otherwise constrain her. Such acceptance allows her to express herself—thus staving off a full-fledged transformation into a bakemono—while still abiding by societal norms.

Through the cautions that the rōjo delivers to her younger counterpart, Enchi illustrates an awareness of the criticism that is often foisted upon women who wander into bakemono territory—blame which is not leveled in the same manner against the rōjo, who is willing to accept bokemono status. When discussing the bakemono, the rōjo argues that it is not an

29 One everyday example of a woman’s hidden bakemono is the “tsunokakushi” headdress a woman wears when she marries. Translated as “horn hider” the white, triangular hat is said to hide a woman’s “demon horns” long enough for her appear gentle and docile to her future husband, and so she secures her marriage.
inherent evil that becomes exposed—instead, the suppressed women, who cannot find ways to express their natural feelings under the existing milieu, end up resorting to the extreme means of becoming monstrous creatures. Thus, in contrast to the conventional views on monstrous feminine nature, “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” emphasizes that it is extreme suppression of desires and feelings, not some innate evil, that can transform an individual into a monster. The inclusion of these assertions allows Enchi to refine the connection between women and bakemono, foregrounding how such a monstrous transformation is predicated upon self-control and an awareness of social codes. This approach allows readers to identify how works like “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” deconstruct the danger that fictional narratives have previously accorded to the rōjo and other figures used to signify the grotesque and monstrous.

The rōjo challenges the narrator by directly stating: “Even though you want to eat flowers, your shyness won’t allow you to. You’re constantly in a state of agitation from wanting to eat them” (165). While still uncomfortable, even embarrassed, the narrator is somehow motivated by the rōjo’s actions to reflect on her own life. This reminds her of forgotten memories of her youth, when she had similar habits:

I’d liked flowers from the time I was young and had heard that the nectar at the base of azalea petals was sweets and delicious. […] In fact, often when I thought a flower was beautiful, I couldn’t bear just looking at it from afar. Even if I didn’t eat it, I couldn’t be satisfied unless I touched it. (Enchi 163)

The narrator gradually realizes that she is no different from this rōjo. In her younger days, the narrator used to eat the flowers that she found beautiful, and if she did not eat them, she at least had to touch them to appease her yearning for their beauty. However, at some point in her life, the narrator stopped eating the flowers and forgot about ever having had such a desire. The
change in the narrator’s behavior was not because she stopped feeling the urge to eat as she grew older, but rather her impulses were repressed by social constraints. The remaining habit of touching the flowers is her coping mechanism—a poor substitute for eating them, but more satisfying than merely looking at them. Nevertheless, the insufficiently fulfilled desires lingered within the narrator after all these years, and the rōjo’s action leads the narrator to recognize the sediments of her desire deposited beneath her consciousness. Hence, when the narrator denigrates the rōjo’s eating of flowers, she is subconsciously rejecting her buried self. Noticing this severe self-restriction, the narrator feels a complex mixture of envy and repulsion toward the rōjo, who seems to enjoy more autonomy than herself.

The narrator comes to be aware of her own troubled state of mind due to the rōjo’s actions as well as her aged bodily condition. Hulvey points out:

[t]he narrator’s impaired sight acts as a catalyst for several other antirational occurrences. […] the narrator’s reduced vision leads her to recreate events from her past without indicating to us […] clues in the narrative read in hindsight confirm the fact that although the narrator does not want to dwell on the past, ghostly apparitions succeed in subverting her intention not to do so and creating images from the past in a vivid and seductive manner (210).

Indeed, her poor eyesight plays a significant role in reviewing the narrator’s inner state.30 It also shows how the younger narrator could not perceive her inner trouble at all until her eyesight has weakened significantly. Her healthy body was too preoccupied with being seen by others to examine her own inner condition. Hearing the rōjo’s warning, the narrator realizes that she has never been freed from her long-suppressed feelings and reflects:

It was true that ever since my eyesight had worsened, those demons and goblins inside me had become restless. How they constantly disturbed me, feeling no

30 It is also interesting that the rōjo, whose eyesight is even worse, sees through the monstrous potentials lurking beneath the socially appropriate façade of the narrator that cannot be detected by the naked eye.
compunction about interfering in every aspect of my life. I recalled a strange incident that had happened a few evenings before. Past midnight, I became suddenly conscious of a presence in the study by my bedroom, and softly opening the door, I looked in and saw that I’d left my writing box out, its lid off, and packages of old letters I had been sorting during the day strewn over my desk. (164)

Previously, the narrator’s attention was trained outward, allowing her to adhere to expectations of gender and age, but the playful demeanor and warnings of the older woman occasion the narrator’s newfound desire to investigate the interiority that she had long left neglected. The result of this shift in focus is especially evident when considering the narrator’s changing thoughts on a past love.

The narrator was at one time romantically involved with a man who was a distant relative and a friend of her elder brother. However, since their relationship never bloomed, the narrator thought little about their connection, instead dismissing it as something foolish initiated by the older man’s perverted affection for a teenage girl (165). Now, looking through the packet of letters that she had sent him, many of which contain pressed flowers, she thinks:

I didn’t feel any nostalgia for the past upon seeing the pressed flowers […] Instead, I felt keenly aware of how immature and ignorant I was then, and in the end, I felt only contempt for the man who had felt attraction for such a young girl. […] In spite of my intention to avoid dwelling on the past, in the last few days the spirits within me have begun subverting my original intention, provoked, ironically, by the old letters. (165)

However, the letters tell a different story. Although the aged narrator thinks that “[she] was only slightly attracted to him” and her love was “immature and ignorant,” the pink and violet letters and the pressed flowers enclosed within reveal a deep affection for him that she never admitted,
even—perhaps especially—to herself. \(^{31}\) In the Japanese literary tradition, letters (in the form of poetry) were a crucial communicative medium of love: the letter paper was selected carefully based on its color and quality and scented with perfume, and calligraphy and wording were just as important as the content of the letter. Accordingly, the young narrator tried to express her feelings for her beloved in this ‘classical’ fashion.

Although the narrator conveyed her affection toward her lover by enclosing pressed flowers in her letters, she was not able to more directly confess her love. Her affection was not a living one, but a dried one, wilted and compressed by her willful suppression. Even at a young age, the narrator was not able to express her desire frankly like the rōjo, and indeed it was because of her rigid self-control that her romantic relationship could not bear fruit at that time. In her youthful days, the narrator had been a bright, intelligent girl who did not want to become a typical housewife, taking care of menial chores to support the husband and the home—a humdrum life without substance. Thus the narrator did not allow the relationship with her lover to develop further, for she believed that getting married and becoming a man’s wife would make her conform to the restrictive social order of gender roles. She suppressed her love in an attempt to defy social expectations and yet, paradoxically, her resistance was the act that imprisoned her true feelings within the strictly defined social codes. This resistance evokes the way in which the pressed flower is formed into an appealing, but nonetheless faded and withered, memorial to its former vitality. In order to deal with the disappointment and remorse of the broken romance, the narrator develops an emotional defense mechanism that views their relationship as unimportant.

\(^{31}\) The widow of her former lover enclosed a note when she sent the letters to the narrator: “Please look at the pressed flowers, now faded, that you sent from Nikko and Kamakura during your summer vacation. They were keepsakes of my late husband” (Enchi 165).
in the first place. Nevertheless, the unsatisfied yearnings have remained buried deep inside her. Noticing her lingering attachment for her former lover, the narrator objectifies her youthful love as the “bakemono” that stalks her home and uncovers the evidence of her early romance.

Jennifer Waelti-Walters, in her study of adaptations of western fairy tales, explains that “[s]ocial demands push women into schizophrenic behaviors dividing them within themselves, mutilating them by creating a restrictive environment within which they cannot live” (5). As Waelti-Walters points out, social pressure forces women to find alternative means to express their bottled-up desires by separating the expressive egos from their original selves. The “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” narrator’s conceived notion of constricting gender roles prevented her from revealing her true feelings, and caused her to live with a split mind, or bakemono. By employing bakemono, the narrator finally becomes able to escape from her own judgmental perspective as well as from the scrutinizing social gaze—a view, however, that implies that her desires and actions are not those of a socially acceptable human, but of the supernatural, monstrous world where the bakemono resides.

In relation to the feminist studies of Gilbert and Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic, Enchi’s deployment of the bakemono, the inner monster, is useful in order to reveal the narrator’s complex inner state of a conforming yet resisting mind:

Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors’ submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable. Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them. (77-78)
The inner monster displays the narrator’s conflicted state of both accepting and defying social expectations. In the form of the *bakemono* that transcends the social rules and customs—or even the *bokemono* which is more specific to the condition of the elderly individual—the narrator manages to disclose her true self. Nevertheless, by labeling it as *bakemono*, which does not belong to the ordered, rational world, the narrator acknowledges and even reinforces the normative categorizations of what is socially acceptable and what is not. At the end of the story, after her encounter with the *rōjo*, the narrator harbors a sense of self-pity towards her past self, noticing the generational gulf separating past and present, when—to the narrator’s eyes—contemporary youth seem not to hide their natural feelings anymore:

> On a park bench a young man and woman chatted, ate, and threw pieces of paper, their shoulders so close together it seemed as if they were entwined. [...] with my weak eyes, I was unable to distinguish in the lively surroundings which one was the man and which one was the woman. [...] But we Japanese have such a long history of hiding relationships between men and women that even today, such an open display of affection looks unnatural to us. When I went to America some time ago, I was surprised to see male and female students lying entwined on grassy slopes on a campus of a university in California. [...] Even in Japan, young people today are becoming more natural. (166)

The narrator points to overall social changes and lessening cultural differences between Japan and America as evidence for the close interactions she is witnessing. However, her interpretation of the couple clearly emerges from how she is reconciling the effects of a changing physiology—i.e.: her weak eyes merging the outlines of people’s bodies—with her awareness of old Japanese customs. Her youthful eyes and mind were both well-attuned to discerning social norms and judging how well she and others upheld those norms, yet she was blinded to her own unconscious desires. On the other hand, the narrator’s now aged eyes are unable to detect
superficial details, and as a result, she fills in her own meanings of the blurry images she witnesses, perhaps under the influence of the surrounding beautiful scenery and her own desires. Only then does the narrator come to reinterpret earlier events from her life and understand that her former lover had been unable to fully express his love toward her. Although married to another woman, he secretly kept the love letters he exchanged with the narrator until he died. After receiving the box full of love letters from the widow of her former lover, the narrator did not open the box until one night when she suddenly found herself sitting with the letters on her lap with the box open. She believes that this mysterious event is the doing of her former lover’s ghost, because as a spirit, “[t]he only thing that he could do now was to drop a bundle of letters from my distant past into my lap in the middle of the night” (167). Reminded of her past lover and his unrequited love for her, the narrator comes to see that, just like herself, her lover, who could not express his deepest yearnings, may have come in the form of a bakemono to disclose his feelings to her—only as a bakemono could the man achieve the agency to reveal his true feelings. Perhaps the potential for the male lover to manifest as a bakemono assists Enchi in establishing a rich variety of perspectives related to the expression of desire and inner turmoil. This leads to a realization that, as noted in the previous section, Enchi’s bakemono are not just manifestations of suppressed female desire, but of every suppressed human soul regardless of gender.

“The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” is particularly powerful in its presentation of the extent to which society constricts sexual desire, especially that of aged women. Through the narrator’s behavioral patterns—detaching herself from the rōjo, the withered cactus, and her dead lover—Enchi shows how deeply rooted the sense of self-regulation is within the narrator’s mind. The narrator’s ideas about her own desire and sexuality demonstrate a complete internalization.
of social norms and conventions, which profoundly affected her life without her conscious recognition. Prior to realizing the unresolved feelings that lurked within her mind, and realigning her lingering desire to her suppressed sexuality, the aged narrator only shows contempt and annoyance toward the natural expression of one’s desires, as represented by the rōjo’s eating of flowers. However, displaying the subversive change in the narrator’s own critical view at the moment of enlightenment, Enchi emphasizes the importance of questioning the individual internalization of moral and social codes, because when confronted with true feelings and unrefined desires, these binding restrictions shall be broken in a moment of realization. Moreover, such realizations enable the narrator not only to confront her own sexuality, which she had believed was something to be ashamed of and to be concealed, but to accept others’ desires as well:

Only now do I appreciate the fact that the older youth had not regarded me with contempt. […] although I had ridiculed and despised them at that time, I now happily recall these incidents as evidence of a young girl coming into the bloom of womanhood. ‘Even a devil looks beautiful when it’s eighteen, as the old proverb goes and even coarse tea is fragrant when it’s steeped for the first time. (165)

Presenting the narrator’s reconciliation with her feelings of love which she had before regarded as immature and negligible, Enchi shows how an individual can come to terms with the way that social codes have subtly shaped the way she and others regulate their own desires.

In contrast to her earlier works such as The Waiting Years and Masks, many of Enchi’s later works focus on a solitary female protagonist. Enchi’s later protagonists do not show a strong attachment to their children or families. Considering the era in which Enchi came of age, when the Japanese government eagerly encouraged womanhood to conform to the ‘good wife and wise mother’ (ryōsai kenbo) mold, Enchi’s strategy was to depict female characters as far
removed from this moral dictum. Even though her heroines do, at times, get married, Enchi often
depicts an alternative to idealized womanhood, where the heroine never subsumes herself in
sacrifice for her family. However, in “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers,” Enchi depicts an
aged woman who seems to be unmarried and has no family or children. By creating a character
without any family members, Enchi puts the spotlight on a lone aged woman, creating a situation
where the reader can pay full attention to the woman and her inner thoughts. As if challenging
the social anxiety about women, especially single and aged women, by removing competing
voices, Enchi privileges the strong voice of the aged woman to distinguish her otherwise unheard
voice. Enchi’s narrative conveys the sense in which the elderly are not merely moving through
life on a sad path to their dying day. While they may be haunted by sadness and loneliness, they
are also more than capable of dreaming and of having meaningful social connections. Though
the body may age, and society’s expectations of the expression of desire may change along with
it, Enchi’s flower-eating woman is an embodiment of the desires and the wish to express them
that remain with the individual, even until death.

Enchi offers inspiration to the reader along with new avenues for rewriting femininity
and sensuality. She also provides room for a reinterpretation of the aged condition in a manner
than can alter the status quo where marginalization and dehumanization of the elderly remains.
Over the centuries, older women have proved to be valuable as resisters of established social
norms, feared for their disobedience, anger, and outspokenness, even if they have more often
been mocked rather than appreciated for this powerful role. The narrator, after her initial critical

32 Kawashima relates Enchi’s argument regarding how the disadvantaged narrative for single women is constructed:
“Similarly, Enchi Fumiko argues that the male fear of a single woman without a husband or child contributed
significantly to the unflattering portrayal of Komachi; she is also asserts that an ideal beauty like Komachi had to be
punished for the trials and agonies she caused men, even though such ideals were the constructions of the men
themselves” (129).
view toward the *rōjo* was subverted, is able to unabashedly reflect upon herself, and her deepest feelings. The narrator realizes how she had stubbornly resisted her own desire in deference to social norms and expectations, and even though these conventions had changed over time, she herself could not align with these changes. By using an older woman as the protagonist and employing the flower-eating *rōjo* and supernatural *bakemono*, Enchi has found the means to expose the concealed thoughts of aged women and allow them to re-discover their inner nature and their long-suppressed desires. In so doing, Enchi’s aged protagonist can finally break free from her imprisoned mindset and adopt a positive outlook on herself and her place in society.
Like “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” the short stories “Neko no sōshi” (猫の草子, 1974; “The Cat Scroll”) and “Kinuta” (“The Fulling Block,” 1980) provide evidence of how Enchi draws on well-defined fields—such as visual art and pre-modern literature—in order to point to the depth and variety of expression amongst her aged protagonists. Danely’s study on the narratives of aging emphasizes “the circulation of discourses of abandonment” in contemporary Japan. He points to Zeami’s Noh play Obasute as a significant symbol of abandonment that is frequently recalled in modern works. Abandonment is certainly a trope that is applicable to Enchi’s fiction. As discussed in the previous chapter, “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” explores aging and decline through physical weakness, which, as we shall see, also appears as a central subject in “Kinuta” and “The Cat Scroll.” However, Enchi also considers the social deaths experienced by aged women in the latter works, which is an issue that prompts the following question: How does Enchi highlight a rojō’s (old woman) marginal position while still presenting her agency and ability to express herself? After commenting on this with respect to “The Cat Scroll,” I will then turn to Enchi’s exploration of agency and expression in “Kinuta.” Through “The Cat Scroll” and “Kinuta,” readers can see the continuance of Enchi’s efforts to integrate tradition into her presentation of women who live through their abandonment in old age. They do so via personal journeys that leverage their creative will.

---

1 “The Cat Scroll, 猫の草子 first published in 1974 Japanese literary journal “Gunzō” (Showa 49.1). This work is also included in Enchi Fumiko zenshu, Tōkyō: Shinchōsha. 1977-8 Yumiko S. Hulvey has translated this work with the title “The Cat Scroll,” unpublished.

2 In her The Modern Family in Japan: Its Rise and Fall (2009), Ueno Chizuko refers to ‘age-limit retirement as a ‘social death’ and the day of retirement as a social ‘funeral’” (Ueno 211). In other words, the end of employment tends to occasion a transition into non-existence for people who once saw themselves as better integrated with society.
“The Cat Scroll” begins with a question: “Have you ever heard of something called ‘Neko no sōshi’?” Some readers may think that Neko no sōshi refers to the title of the story they are reading, while those who are familiar with pre-modern Japanese literature may think of an illustrated tale with the same title from a medieval-period otogizōshi collection. The otogizōshi Neko no sōshi depicts a mouse’s lamentation to a holy monk about his helpless animalistic nature and his miserable fate of being constantly chased by cats. The target audience of the traditional tale was the general public, and the story served to deliver religious teachings in an entertaining manner while suggesting that the monk’s own helpless nature is not significantly different from that of the mouse. Furthermore, the title Neko no sōshi can be also associated with the distinctive animal paintings of the medieval and early Edo period, such as Chōjū jinbutsu giga (Scrolls of frolicking animals and humans), which often utilized various animals—frog, cat, and monkey—to expose the absurdity of human lives. As a writer deeply familiar with classical art and literature, Enchi presents numerous literary and cultural references in her works, which have the effect of adding multiple layers of meanings and a certain aura of neo-classicism. In her “The Cat Scroll,” the title itself achieves such an effect by suggesting an association with the medieval scrolls, even before the actual story begins.

As Enchi’s story continues, it is revealed that Neko no sōshi is also the title an aged female painter has given to her notebook of hand-drawn illustrations. The peculiar and visually appealing images of cats found in the notebook invite the attention of the public and a group of art collectors who discover it after her death. The artist’s unexpected suicide and her sketchbook

---

3 This set of four picture scrolls, belonging to the Kōzanji Temple in Kyoto, depicts various animals involved in human activities, from prayers and funerals to wrestling and frolicking.
4 Below, I will refer to Enchi’s text using the title of Hulvey’s English translation, “The Cat Scroll,” and to the fictive journal/sketchbook within the story as Neko no sōshi.
elicit people’s curiosity, and they desire a more detailed story of this individual. What kinds of stories are delivered through her feline-centered notebook, and why does the aged protagonist draw the cat illustrations in the first place? Enchi reconstructs the old woman’s story through her fragmented journal and by intertwining it with various people’s perspectives and speculations. Rather than exclusively relying on a single perspective such as that of the protagonist or the family, Enchi’s story allows the reader to explore the aged woman’s life from a variety of viewpoints.

Kurata Yōko notes in her study of Enchi’s work that this story focuses on the woman’s difficult familial ties that lead to her tragic death. Kurata interprets Enchi’s story as portraying the collapsing ideal of filial piety, precisely capturing the changing familial attitudes toward the aged woman who is no longer useful to her remaining family members (164). In this way, the story is seen as a reflection upon the gender inequality wherein aged men have more stable and secure familial positions than those of aged women. As Kurata points out, “The Cat Scroll” showcases an old woman’s perspective that is typically muted or overwhelmed by stronger, more dominant voices. In other stories that explore the psychology of aging individuals, for example Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s (1886-1965) Fūten rōjin nikki (Diary of a Mad Old Man, 1961), the focus tends to be solely on the perspective of the aging subject herself, whether his experience is positive or negative. In contrast, Enchi’s story is committed to constructing the individual experience of aging through the incorporation of multiple perspectives, including those of the protagonist, her friend and family members, even the unnamed narrator.5

5 Enchi’s approach to this narrative calls to mind Inoue Yasushi’s Waga haha no ki (Chronicle of My Mother, 1964-74), which presents the mental decline and eventual death of his mother from a number of viewpoints within the extended family. However, while Inoue presents an idealized image of his senile mother, Enchi shows how the suffering of the mother is displaced by the children’s own personal difficulties.
Kurata’s study analyzes the sociocultural significance of “The Cat Scroll,” concentrating on how the narrative depicts the oppressed life of aging women in Japanese society. While Kurata’s analysis offers readers important insights, Enchi’s story does more than provide a mere depiction of the harsh reality with which elderly Japanese women must contend. Through the symbolic illustrations of cats, Enchi skillfully transforms the silenced voice of an elderly woman, lending her story greater visibility through her startling suicide and the cat paintings that surface as evidence of the pain and desire that the protagonist suppressed for many years. The unnamed female narrator who relates the story is herself elderly. By employing this aged narrator to transmit and empower the voice of the deceased protagonist, Enchi establishes a space in her literary world where women, especially elderly women, can experience and enjoy community and camaraderie. In comparison to the author’s later works, “The Cat Scroll” has not been much studied, but it very much deserves attention for its depiction of the desires and frustrations of the aged, and its ultimate suggestion of alternate perspectives on aging. Before proceeding with the analysis, I will provide a brief synopsis.

**Plot Synopsis of “The Cat Scroll”**

The unnamed narrator comes to learn about the sketchbook, *Neko no sōshi*, from her friend Horii, a professional art dealer. Although Horii’s procurement of the notebook was accidental, he decides that the narrator—because she is nearly the same age as the notebook’s illustrator—may have had an interest in its artistic works. The story describes how the sketchbook’s extraordinary depictions of cats are reminiscent of animal paintings such as *Chōjū jinbutsu giga*. Curiously, the cats in *Neko no sōshi* are not always depicted solely as animals, but are occasionally anthropomorphized, as can be observed in later images from the diaries: cats
going to school, cats painting pictures, cats hugging each other or having sex like human beings.

Horii also reveals details regarding the tragic life and suspicious death of the illustrator and author of *Neko no sōshi*, whom he identifies as Kihara Shinhojo (木原志乃女). As a traditional *suibokuga* (India ink) painter, Shinhojo had been a very capable woman in her youth; she was a recognized painter and also a school teacher. Before her retirement, she seems to have enjoyed her twilight years to some degree with her son’s family.

However, an unsuccessful cataract surgery almost cost her eyesight, and her quality of life gradually worsened. Her weakened eyesight made it difficult for her to continue her rich social life, and it ruined her relationship with her grandchildren. To make matters worse, her son, Shin’ichi, also possessed a certain underlying anger toward his mother. Shin’ichi was born out of wedlock from an affair that Shinhojo had with her teacher. The father never acknowledged Shin’ichi as his legal son, thus leaving him fatherless. Later, isolated and ignored by her son and her son’s family, the only company Shinhojo could enjoy was that of stray cats. Taking care of these feline outcasts became her sole purpose in life. As her affection for the cats grew, Shinhojo began to record her life with the cats in her notebook, the only item that she left behind when she committed suicide. Although the life of the aged woman and her inexplicable suicide did not attract much notice from those around her, the notebook, with its mysterious drawings of cats, drew much attention.

---

**An Old Woman’s Suicide and Her Journal *Neko no sōshi* (The Cat Scroll)**

---

6 The name of the protagonist is Kihara Shinhojo (木原志乃女)—*jo* at the end literally means woman, not necessarily part of the name. Although the unpublished translation by Hulvey refers to the protagonist as “Shino,” I refer to her as “Shinhojo”
The story “The Cat Scroll” does not come to grips with why Shinojo committed suicide. It only briefly summarizes her death through the voice of the anonymous narrator who has no personal relation to Shinojo. Thus the narrative reports of Shinojo’s death appear apathetic, as if her suicide had been something of an afterthought:

Later according to the story [Horii] slowly told me, the artist of “The Cat Scroll” had hanged herself in the storage shed outside her house using some strong, braided silk cords. She died shortly after she had turned seventy. Though she lived with her son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren, she had her own living room, and when she was strong, she cooked for herself, so it seemed as if she lived by herself at least half the time. But later when she was no longer healthy, people said she ate her meals with the family. (117)

The presentation of Shinojo’s suicide offers an abrupt end to a seemingly comfortable and stable life with an adult child’s family. What, then, could have caused her to take her own life? The account delivered through this news report does not venture beyond the briefest of considerations for Shinojo’s renewed “integration” with her family toward the end of her life. However, the report lacks a consideration of the new dynamics that may have arisen after Shinojo’s failing health had forced more interaction between herself and her son’s family. Although the police could not find any proof that Shinojo killed herself on account of a familial dispute, the narrator comments that “you can’t really tell only by looking at the surface of things” (118), and hence the story bolsters the suspicion that Shinojo’s suicide might have resulted from family conflict.

The indifferent attitude of the characters toward Shinojo’s death can be said to reflect Japanese societal attitudes toward the suicides of the aged—their deaths, as compared to those of younger members of society, do not draw the same concern and sense of tragedy, likely because the seniors seem to be already so close to death and are hence, in a sense, expendable. Nonetheless, “The Cat Scroll” suggests that elderly suicide should be considered more seriously
because it may serve as a final opportunity for an aged individual to express resistance to social norms and attitudes that diminish one’s quality of life. For one whose advanced age implies imminent death, it is impossible to know what benefit she might extract from hastening her own departure. However, Enchi’s narrative gives the aged woman a chance to show that her life—rather than being the picture of normalcy assumed by those on the outside—is instead full of evidence of abhorrent treatment of the elderly by their families.

Kurata’s sociological analysis of Enchi’s story provides further insight into this vexing question of why old women commit suicide (151). Kurata argues that the death of aged women is deeply related to socio-cultural issues such as gender inequality and the biological fact of the deterioration of physical strength, both of which contribute to the vulnerable positions of aged women in Japan. Kurata points out that until the 1970s, the suicide rate of Japan’s aging women was the highest in the world (169)\(^7\) Along with several sociocultural changes that affected the family structure between the pre and post war periods, women in the family were expected to be the ‘default’ caregivers, but when these women grew old and physically weak, they were rendered useless to their families.

Furthermore, Kasuga Kisuyo provides data showing how aged women have less chance to rely on the care of their family than aged men. Kasuga’s study also displays how elderly people are more often abused by their own families than by others with whom they have no blood tie. The study specifically points out elderly women’s compounded stress in being asked to sacrifice themselves to support other family members for their entire life, with no guarantee that

---

\(^7\) After 1970, elderly Japanese women’s suicide rate remained high—the second highest in the world following Hungary (157).
their efforts will be reciprocated when they need other’s help and support. Thus, Shinojo’s circumstance betrays the possible evanescence of filial piety (oya kōkō).

Accordingly, the “The Cat Scroll” family’s cold-hearted attitude toward Shinojo also reflects the burden, which was prevalent in modern Japan, of having to support the senior family members. From the 1970s, Japanese society rapidly started graying, with an ever-increasing proportion of the population becoming senior citizens. Thus, supporting and caring for older people became a new social issue due to this “elder boom” (421). However, the Japanese government heavily promoted and relied on the virtue of filial piety, rather than offering solutions to meet the increasing demand for the social welfare of its seniors. Hence, the burden of taking care of the elders was often placed onto the shoulders of the younger generations, especially on women, and to a large extent still is.8

The symptoms of this systemic problem manifest in complex ways for Shinojo’s family, particularly due to Shin’ichi’s treatment of his mother. Through the relationship of Shinojo and Shin’ichi, Enchi highlights society’s failure to address recurrent hardships for aged women, in particular their abandonment at the hands of both society and their families. Since she was not legally married to her son’s father, Shinojo was unable to give Shin’ichi the art teacher’s surname. Insofar as the family registration system in Japan is patrilineal, children born out of wedlock at the time of this story’s publishing often faced social discrimination. Stigmatized as an ‘illegitimate’ child for his entire life, Shin’ichi held a deep grudge against his mother despite her

---

8 For more on the burden of elderly care placed on the younger generation cf. Ariyoshi Sawako’s novel Kōkotsu no hito (恍惚の人, 1972). Ariyoshi’s novel was an instant best-seller, creating a new buzzword “twilight” (恍惚) in reference to those who suffer from dementia. Her novel focuses on a middle-aged woman’s lone struggles to tend to her aged father-in-law, despite the fact that there were other family members to share the burden. The novel pointed out that the burden of senior care was exclusively assigned to women in the household, contributing to the social recognition of the hardships involved in taking care of older parents—an issue that had not yet garnered much attention from society.
best efforts to raise him by herself. Ueno Chizuko, a renowned scholar of Japanese sociology and cultural studies, argues:

The surname of a child is a symbol indicating the kinship group to which he or she belongs, and affiliation of children has always been the cause of conflicting kinship structures. (203)

The shaky father-child bond mentioned by Ueno may contribute to an understanding of Shin’ichi’s anger in view of his bearing a name that indicates both his and his mother’s abandonment from the male-centered family.

As suggested by the above citations from Kasuga’s study, even in typical family structures, women’s contributions to the home can be seen as useless once they reach old age (though this is by no means a hard-and-fast ‘rule’). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that women’s past contributions will be reciprocated in their old age. Considering the deviation of Shinojo’s family structure from the patrilineal norm, Shin’ichi’s resentment can be contextualized as a product of social circumstances, confirming Shinojo’s abandonment as a function of societal norms. Instead of trying to understand the pain and difficulty of his mother’s experiences as a single parent, and far from thinking to thank her for raising him, Shin’ichi severely criticizes his mother for her affair. Furthermore, he refuses to reciprocate the love and encouragement he has received from her.

One particular dinner scene foregrounds the troubled relationship between mother and son as Shin’ichi reframes a comment by his mother into a cursory dismissal of her place within the family. Shinojo’s arrival at the family dinner table is delayed by her caring and feeding for the cats. After sensing the reproachful attitude of her son and his family, Shinojo remarks, “I get the feeling I’m like a freeloader (isōrō, ‘parasite’)…” to which Shin’ichi responds, “Well, half-
freeloader anyway.”\(^9\) In marked contrast to the convivial atmosphere one might expect at the dinner table, Shin’ichi makes little effort to feign support for his mother’s authority and instead humiliates her in front of the other family members. Afterwards, Shinojo silently reflects on the incident with grief and resentment which she feels incapable of expressing to her son:

What the hell does he mean by parasite “[isōrō]? Who has he to thank but me for singlehandedly raising him in place of his uncaring father, educating him until he became a professor at a second-tier university, and even letting him earn an income by publishing manuscripts? I have my own pension so I could eke out a living on my own. It’s a nuisance that in addition to getting older I also have this eye disease, but isn’t the only thing I can’t do now that I could do for myself in the past is cook? So how on earth could my son face me his half-blind mother and insinuate that I am a parasite [“isōrō”]? He might say that it was just a joke, but that word wouldn’t have slipped so easily from his lips were it not something he had thought of beforehand, Shinojo thought. (Hulvey, 137)

The word “isōrō” refers to a person who stays and has meals in someone else’s house, unfairly taking advantage of the others—a moocher, in the English vernacular. In the face of the filial norm, Shin’ichi rejects their blood connection by calling Shinojo “isōrō,” an openly deprecatory term.

The ill feelings between Shinojo and her son also influence Toshiko, the daughter-in-law, whose concerns manifest most palpably in her thoughts about Shinojo’s encroaching senility:

“Isn’t it awful, gradually [Shinojo]’s probably going to become senile?” [Toshiko] had used the popular word for softening of the brain, her face twisting into a grimace. In any case, not only had her mother-in-law’s eyes gone bad, but she had become drastically more warped and required a lot more care than before. Moreover, she had become dull-headed and Toshiko had to face the awful fact that were her mother-in-law to need help cleaning up after herself after going to the bathroom, like the cat did, that it would be none other than herself who’d have to face the consequences. (Hulvey 147)

---

\(^9\) Shinojo says, “居候みたいな気分になるわね、気持がいじけて,” then, Shin’ichi responds, “まあ、半分居候のようなものだけどね” (Enchi 189).
Although she does not have any specific negative feelings toward Shinojo, Toshiko notices the pressure that society has placed on her as well as her own thoughts about her role, and so she vents her stress and frustration. Even though she is also a woman who is herself on the road to old age, Toshiko cannot sympathize with Shinojo’s hardships. Confronted with her own daily burden in caring for Shinojo, she has little interest in empathy.

However, Shinojo differs from the typical aged protagonist in Enchi’s other works, who is generally portrayed as a familial burden because of senility, weakness, or poverty. In fact, Shinojo does not suffer from mental decline or weakness—despite her poor eyesight she is still perfectly capable of caring for herself and several cats—and she is not impoverished. The prevalent image of the elderly woman as abused and abandoned due to her exhausted body and the strain faced by a beleaguered family can be found in the obasute legend. The strength of Shinojo’s faculties, however, distinguishes Enchi’s narrative from other works that explore the obasute figure, such as Ariyoshi Sawako’s Kōkotsu no hito (Twilight Years, 1972) and Niwa Fumio’s “Iyagarase no nenrei” (The Hateful Age,” 1962).

As mentioned above, in Kōkotsu no hito, a daughter struggles to care for her father-in-law who is mentally and physically infirm. In “The Hateful Age,” the senile eighty-year-old grandmother Ume moves from place to place, unable to settle since none of her children have agreed to take care of her. One can find a similar narrative in Yasuoka Shōtarō’s Kaihen no kōkei (A View by the Sea, 1959), where the protagonist describes his mother’s institutionalization in a mental asylum. While a poignant portrayal of abjection and institutional neglect, the mother is depicted as completely vulnerable, helpless, and repellant.
Contrary to these depictions of helpless, pathetic old people, Enchi’s Shinojo is intelligent, capable, and—with the exception of her failing eyes—healthy. Her tenuous family bonds are tolerable, though, owing to her ability to maintain connections to the outside world. However, the loss of her connections occasions a “social death” that eventually exacerbates her alienation from family and may be seen as one reason for her act of suicide in response to her abandonment. In her study, Ueno discusses this notion of “social death” and its ability to incite an identity crisis at the threshold of old age. Ueno goes on to observe that “[p]ost-retirement life is an ‘afterlife’ in a social sense” and that “the modern-day retirement is a…severe experience in which one is declared useless by society” (ibid.). Such a “death” may thus create a renewed sense of abandonment for the elderly woman who may already be facing the growing sense of uselessness within the familial domain.\(^{10}\) The implications of this dynamic between society and a woman like Shinojo is the emergence of “hidden deaths” that appear to be sudden and unexplained—in other words, not attributable to a societal framework that does not recognize how people in marginalized groups must rely on a dwindling circle of connections.

Before the emergence of her cataracts, Shinojo was able to take care of herself, and she even enjoyed separate living quarters on the family’s property, a stable income, and ongoing social ties well into her old age. The following explanation of Shinojo’s changing life is delivered by Yaguchi, a helper and former student of hers. She occasionally visited Shinojo for painting lessons prior to the latter’s suicide:

\(^{10}\) This reality is certainly not limited to women. Scholar Andrew Blaikie notes in his study about retirement trends in some Western societies that “[what] were once regarded as basically male problems of transition into life after work are becoming far less sex specific, as male and female employment trends begin to converge” (62-3). Ueno Chizuko’s investigation provides more information that is specific to Japan, but nonetheless, the sense of abandonment is not unique to either women or men—rather the feeling of uselessness manifests differently in response to the changing connection between a retired person’s social position and their expected gender roles.
That’s why it seems that there was nothing unusual even after she quit working at school, that is, until she became unwell. But even after she retired, she had chances to give private lessons in Japanese style painting at some civic centers. However, last year she had an operation to remove cataracts and I hear that the prognosis wasn’t good. I hadn’t seen her for several years, so I didn’t know any details . . . if her eyesight was failing, then she couldn’t have painted the way she wanted to or have gone anywhere to teach. Inevitably, people say that she was confined at home and that she became a little neurotic in her old age. (Hulvey 118)

This account by Yaguchi fills in details that the narrator did not have concerning Shinojo’s transition from living independently to living and dying under the care of family. Before Yaguchi’s explanation, the narrator wonders, “[i]f she ate alone and was financially independent, then shouldn’t everyday life have been comparatively tranquil?” (118). Because Shinojo did not leave behind any suicide note, there is nothing but the suicide and Shinojo’s collection of hand-painted illustrations to show the poor quality of her final years. For this reason, both Shinojo’s final act and the illustrated notebook can be regarded as surrogate ‘texts’ that touch prominently on the protagonists’ loss of agency leading up to her voluntary death.

In contrast to the brief description of Shinojo’s death, the story pays impressive attention to Shinojo’s cat paintings through the conversation that develops between the narrator and her friend Horii. Horii is excited by his acquisition of the peculiar collection of illustrations, and the following passage details his interest in the pre-modern *Neko no sōshi* and the parallels he can draw to Shinojo’s modern variant:

“Is there such a thing as ‘*[Neko no sōshi] The Cat Scroll*’?” […] “Is it like, ‘The Disease Scroll,’ ‘The Hungry Ghosts Scroll,’ or ‘The Battle between the Birds and the Beasts Scroll’?” […]”The truth is I recently saw a ‘Cat Scroll.’ “Well what was it? A copy or what?” I asked, my own curiosity now piqued as well. “[…] It’s something drawn by someone who recently passed away . . . you might say it’s a picture album with some text entitled, ‘*[Neko no sōshi] The Cat Scroll*.’ “Oh, so there are many pictures of cats?” “Yes, there are cats and people, but it’s certainly
not the innocent sort of cat scroll […]. They look like ghosts, I tell you . . . the person who drew them committed suicide. (Hulvey 115-6)

As the conversation suggests, the collection of Shinojo’s cat paintings garners more interest on the part of the narrator and Horii, and the life and mysterious suicide of its creator only stimulates further attention to and appreciation of the painting collection. While Horii largely disregards the circumstances that inspired the paintings, Enchi and her narrator seem to explore the possibility that more than a means to pass the time or to escape one’s miserable circumstance, the creation of the notebook enabled Shinojo to render palpably her innermost thoughts.

Deploying Neko no sōshi as Self-narrative

Shinojo’s Neko no sōshi consists of three volumes with slight variations in the way the cats are portrayed. The first volume contains sketches of two actual kittens owned by Shinojo and their daily activities. The bizarre quality of the sketches increases after the first volume (132). The second volume shows cats somehow mimicking human actions such as “two cats, bodies pressed close together as if they were a man and woman locked in an embrace, […] licking each other’s fur” (163). The final volume depicts an entire lifespan of a female cat, dressing and acting like a Meiji-era female student wearing a kimono with a ribbon in her hair. Despite their mimicry of human lifestyles in the last two volumes, they also maintain typically feline behavior. Shinojo’s ‘cat people’ are not the first case of human-feline hybrid characters to appear in literature, so her decision to further explore this subject prompts viewers to wonder about her intentions.
In trying to account for Shinojo’s creation, Horii draws attention to Natsume Sōseki and his famous novel about an anthropomorphized cat, among the best-known in the Japanese literary canon:

Horii nodded as he said, “[…] Because cats move throughout the house without making a sound, we feel they’re a strange mixture of the familiar and the uncanny, as if they’re akin to ghosts. […] Even in literature, there’s Natsume Sōseki’s *I am a Cat* and Hoffmann’s *Tomcat Murr’s View of Life* that was said to have angered Sōseki when it was cited as the source for his book.” (Hulvey 116)

Sōseki created an amusingly sardonic and all-knowing narrator out of an anonymous cat¹¹ in *Wagahai wa neko de aru (I Am a Cat, 1905-6).*¹² Sōseki used the feline narrator to satirize the arrogance and vanity of modern Japan’s elite of which Sōseki was a part—indeed, the cat’s master Kushami Sensei (Master Sneeze) can be seen as a caricature of the author himself.¹³ The German author E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822), in his *Cat Murr* (1819-1821), utilized the voice of a cat to mock the stupidity and pomposity of the social elites of his time as well.¹⁴ As Marvin Marcus notes in his study of Natsume Sōseki, it is the author’s great invention of the satiric, wry, and ironic voice of the *neko* narrator that further inspired other writers to produce new *neko* parodies (193). To the extent that Shinojo’s anthropomorphized cats evoke those put forth by

---

¹¹ The novel starts with “吾輩は猫である。名前はまだない。（I am a cat. I don’t have my name yet)” published in *Hototogisu.*
¹² James A. Fujii, 555.
¹³ Sari Kawana points out: “Other critics who have cared to discuss the work agree that the story—largely the exposé of the superficiality of the pseudo-intellectual, middle-class family in later Meiji observed through the eyes of the anonymous family cat—is witty, enjoyable and stylistically innovative, […] [but] they fail to dissect the deeper, more complex issues hidden behind seemingly jovial, light-hearted humor in *Wagahai*” (3)
¹⁴ “The idea of using a cat as the narrator of a tale of intimate memoirs is not new. E.T.A Hoffmann used the technique in his *Cat Murr*, written as the diary of a cat that is accidentally printed alongside a book about the composer Johannes Kreisler. The work offers an amalgam of Hoffman’s psychological struggles along with discussions of aesthetics and a witty critical irony. Tolstoi used the memoirs of a horse for criticizing men’s follies and prejudices”
many earlier depictions, the illustrated animals may offer critical, intelligent, and innovative voices in support of Shinojo’s frustrations toward society.

Besides Sōseki and Hoffman’s novels, Shinojo’s illustrations also suggest the anthropomorphized animal characters found in classical Japanese artwork such as the *emaki-mono*, traditional hand-painted picture scrolls produced from the Heian to the Edo period. Enchi’s narrative specifically refers to the *toba-e*\(^{15}\) and *Chōjū jinbutsu giga* scrolls,\(^{16}\) which feature a variety of animals engaging in human activities, lampooning human life\(^ {17}\) through the fusion of human and animal perspectives.\(^ {18}\) Okudaira Hideo acknowledges the difficulty in precisely defining the different styles among the four sections that comprise the *Chōjū jinbutsu giga* scrolls (7). However, he identifies some coherence between the sections, suggesting that “the painter, by mimicking various human characters into monkey, rabbit, and frog, presents humorously and satirically their cultural customs and life-styles” (7). Although some scholars have proposed moral education or religious teaching as the purpose for the illustrations, there is also agreement that they may have been created for popular entertainment as well. Virginia Skord, in her study of *otogizōshi*, points out the function of illustrated books to “expand the referential world of the verbal text, inviting audience reaction and participation” (6).

---

\(^{15}\) A style of Japanese painting based on works from the medieval period that are attributed to Toba Sōjō. These “Toba-style” images were caricatures sometimes involving animals performing human tasks. Toba-e style images gained popularity as a commercial medium in mid-eighteenth century Edo. Though their popularity did not last, Toba-e images have left a lasting impact through today, particularly in manga (Suzuki Ken’ichi, 15).

\(^{16}\) A famous set of four picture scrolls, or *emakimono*, belonging to Kōzan-ji temple in Kyoto, Japan: ‘The Disease Scroll,’ ‘The Hungry Ghosts Scroll,’ or ‘The Battle between the Birds and the Beasts Scroll.’


\(^{18}\) “和紙に色刷の一枚の紙でね、猫が三味線に合わせて踊っていたり、鏡台の前で化粧していたり、お風呂に入っており、いろんな格好で動いているのが小さくいっぱいい描いてあるのよ。つまり女の風俗を猫で現しているのがちょっと色っぽいの。恐らく江戸末期から子供相手に喜ばれていた絵草子じゃないかしら”(Enchi 161). Such anthropomorphism in Japanese culture can be found in pre-modern paintings in which the cats shows typical women’s practices such as enjoying tea, wearing make-up, or taking a bath.
The popularity of *Chōjū* suggests the illustrated animals’ ability to—at the very least—attract attention and create a comic atmosphere, an effect that is readily observable in Enchi’s story through the narrator and art dealer’s responses to Shinojo’s collection of cat paintings. One of the significant images from the collection is a scene at the family dinner table, in which readers are told the adult man and woman (supposedly Shinojo’s son and daughter-in-law) are drawn without any facial features. Only circles are used to indicate their faces:19

As usual with a pencil, Shino had drawn a blank circle instead of the faces of her family as she recorded her impression of them around the dining table. In Kiyomoto-style shamisen music, there is a song called “Three Shrines Festival,” where there are people called “zendama” (good eggs) and “akudama” (bad eggs). They dance wearing round masks on which “good” and “bad” are written with a thick brush. Recently, the feelings of families and the like actually lie on the surface. It is possible to discern between “good” and “bad” eggs. As you may have expected, cats are always cats, ignorantly seeking food; they are extremely good. (Hulvey 138)

This painting, likened to a scene from a *kibyōshi*—the Edo equivalent of manga, designed to entertain readers while offering moral teachings—evinces the artist’s intention to denote the bad people in the family setting. Although the painting has no title, one can infer that it depicts Shinojo’s family. The three generations of family sharing a table for dinner constitutes an idealized scene, but Shinojo’s faceless, egg-headed renderings of her family members, labeled with the term *akudama*, allows the reader to assume that her son and daughter-in-law might be guilty of improper actions or disrespect toward her.20 As an image in the first of her three

---

19 “食事のとき居候と息子に言われたことが余ほど、芯に応えたものか、善玉悪玉の詞書をつけて顔のかわりに○を書いてある男女、少年、少女の姿が食卓を囲んでいる図.[…]” (Enchi, 221).
20 “The concept of "Akudama odori," or "The villain's dance," originated in the *Kibyōshi* (黄表紙, illustrated storybooks with yellow covers) entitled *Shingaku hayasomekusa* (心学早染艸; words by SANTŌ Kyōden, illustrations by Kitao Masayoshi; published in 1790). In this book, *Akudama* (vice) and *Zendama* (virtue) appear as the personification of each. According to the teachings of *Shingaku*, or moral philosophy, when the spirit of each character enters the human body, that person becomes a villain or a hero” (National Diet Library).
volumes, it does not feature the cat-human hybrid; nevertheless, she includes a cat in the illustration and labels it as “extremely good.” The results of Shinojo’s artistic expression, likely inspired by classical styles, becomes a way for her to vent the anger and pain tied to her familial interactions, while reconstructing her struggling relationships with wit and comic sense that eases her pain as a miserable, silenced, and helpless old woman.

Shinojo’s comical voice demonstrates her capability and intelligence in its ability to capture public attention while leveling critiques against both her family and society. Although the notebook offers a glimpse into Shinojo’s life and death, it also works to generalize her personal complaints by removing the facial features of her family and thereby effacing much of the individuality in her painting. More simply, Shinojo uses her personal experiences as a pretext for a broader illustration of the negative elements one might find hidden beneath the placid façade of family harmony—elements that will persist as long as the public remains indifferent to the struggles experienced by the aged within their families. For this reason, the notebook complicates the narrative surrounding Shinojo’s death, inviting others to transmit the elderly artist’s story as a manifestation of more than the guilt brought on by a dependence on family in old age.

Thus, Yaguchi witnessed Shinojo’s daily life and observed the way her son’s family treated her. When she found out about Shinojo’s notebook, Yaguchi stole it from the house since she believed that the family would try to get rid of it if they had known that such a painting collection existed.21

21 “Yaguchi said, looking tense about the mouth. ‘I don’t think that Mr. and Mrs. Kihara’s reputation would be quite as good as it is today were it not for the fact that I took the scroll away from the scrutiny of others. …[H]ow on earth could they sit by and not do anything until she committed suicide when they knew she had become neurotic and unstable? About a month before she died, I had to go to Hokkaidō to take care of some
“To tell you the truth,” [Horii] whispered, “Yaguchi secretly took ‘The Cat Scroll’ from Kihara’s house during the commotion that ensued after her death.” “What on earth for? I wonder if people didn’t notice it was missing.” “Yaguchi says nobody noticed, but . . . Well, even if someone noticed it was missing, they would never invite publicity by looking for it . . . she says that if it were left in the house, it would inevitably have been burned by now.” “So there is a reason for shying away from publicity. If the contents were known, then they would be at a disadvantage . . . this person called Yaguchi has got firm hold of that family’s weak point.” (Hulvey 120)

Enchi’s story narrates how the hidden story of an elderly individual’s private life and emotions comes to light: it was through Yaguchi that Neko no sōshi was rescued, eventually preserved, and finally came to be known to the public. Due to the lack of attention typically given to the stories of aged people, we can see benefit in Yaguchi—a sort of younger ally to the deceased woman—deciding to take the journal and help it gain wider dissemination. Therefore, Yaguchi can be said to give Shinojo, through the uncovering of the Neko no sōshi, a second life in which her voice might actually be heard.

**Becoming a Cat**

Although Yaguchi seems to have shown greater care for Shinojo than the aged woman’s family, Yaguchi was just as oblivious to Shinojo’s determination to kill herself, and she lacked a full understanding of Shinojo’s turmoil and the significance that cats held for her. The artist’s almost obsessive paintings of cats prove even more interesting in light of Shinojo’s intense dislike for felines when she was young, having regarded them as “dirty.” However, Shinojo’s more favorable association with cats began after her grandchildren brought home stray kittens business. When I got back and thought that I would like to visit her again, I received word that she had died.” (130)
one winter and upon losing interest in the animals, abandoned them in the freezing weather.

What began as pity for the kittens developed into a genuine sense of affection that surprised even Shinojo herself:

I myself think that it’s odd that I’m so concerned about the cats. Why in the past, when I saw somebody petting a cat at someone else’s house, I thought that the feeling of dirtiness from the cats would be transferred to the people themselves. But now that I’m old, perhaps the feeling I had about cats being dirty is similar to how young people feel about old people being dirty. Because of this, I’ve changed my way of thinking and can’t let the cats go untended. It would be certain death if we were to abandon kittens that have just managed to begin eating food on their own. I don’t want them to die. I want to have them live and grow bigger. I myself don’t quite understand these feelings. (Hulvey 127)

Ironically, it is through caring for the cats that Shinojo realizes the similarity between her former distaste for the animals and the eventual dislike that her grandchildren feel toward her. While Shinojo was close to her grandchildren during their early childhood, as she grew older, they began to distance themselves from her, remarking on her dirtiness and how badly she smelled. Painfully acknowledging, rather than resenting, her new status as “dirty” and animalistic, Shinojo considers her prior disapproval and narrow-minded stance towards the cats in her youth. Thus, the aging process, however distressing it had been, granted Shinojo a deeper and broader insight into life, at least with respect to the emergence and dissolution of certain sympathies and resentments.

As Shinojo reevaluates her earlier callous treatment of cats, she develops an empathy that fosters her wholehearted commitment to caring for the cats:

“Ms. Yaguchi, you who know of my fastidious nature, must think it strange that I can’t get rid of these cats when I am completely useless and annoying in so many ways. […] It’s self-pity after all. I probably couldn’t go on living without having something close to me. It’s said that cats can’t be relied upon, but I do rely on them to keep on living after all—these helpless little creatures.” (Hulvey 127)
Although Toshiko and Yaguchi fail to understand Shinojo’s almost compulsive devotion to caring for the animals even in her worsened physical state, the matriarch refuses to give up her “duty” of tending to the cats. Her dedication makes sense if we consider that her aged body, while no longer useful for her son’s family, can still provide for the stray kittens, who are entirely dependent on her. No matter how ugly and dirty Shinojo’s body may appear to others of her kind, her life retains its meaning for as long as she is needed by the kittens. In other words, as felt by many people cross-culturally, the cats offer purpose and a reason for Shinojo’s continued existence—or “ikigai,” as John W. Traphagan has conceptualized it, a reason for living that enables one to make a sincere effort to maintain one’s physical and mental health (75).

Shinojo’s attachment to the cats in her latter days signifies more than a change in taste or a search for consolation. It should be noted that Shinojo’s attachment to the cats began when she found identifiable traits in them. When she realized that because of her reduced eyesight and weakened bodily state she could not keep herself as tidy and clean as before, Shinojo wondered if she would turn into an inhuman creature. In accordance with the natural process of aging, her body was going through changes that she could not control, changes that were so different from what she thought possible for the human body:

If my eyesight gets worse than it is now, could my perception and mind become more corrupt and my own body change gradually into something different from what I am now? Will somebody support me or act as my support, so I can confirm the fact that I am still a human being, a person? If that were the case, then I could maintain myself in human form. But in case no one does, then I have the feeling that, though I am still myself, I would eventually change into something else, Shinojo thought. (Hulvey 140)

However, as she became older, she acutely perceived the change of social views and treatment toward her aged body, as well as the physical changes happening within her own body. She
realized that the only way to prove that she was still a human was to follow her caregivers’
expectations and accept the support of those around her. Having lost the ability to see herself, her
self-perception is regulated by the views of her family, forcing her to recognize the frailty of her
identity as a human. In a way, as Shinojo lost her eyes, other family members stepped in to be
that eyesight, guiding her around the home or through life as a means of support. Yet,
metaphorically Shinojo also came to be influenced by what they saw, which was an incapable
woman who was barely human. Through such changes in Shinojo’s quality of life and her own
self-view, Enchi questions the firmness of one’s belief in their own humanity. She shows that the
aged mind that has gradually lost its bearings and sensory capabilities is more susceptible to
taking on the identity that arises from the cruel and objectifying perspectives held by others.
Shinojo’s paintings of the cats show the extremely painful process of refiguring her identity as a
dirty, non-human creature, or a cat—essentially, what others regarded as Shinojo’s final
transformation.

Such an interpretation of her own aged body is indeed reflected in the appalling,
confusing, and intriguing amalgamation of feline and human bodies in her paintings. For
example, the story details an image of two cats in her notebook, lying upon one another like a
man and woman, grooming each other’s fur. While they are posing like human lovers, the cats
are in their feline form, licking one another as cats are wont to do. Another drawing from the
notebook is described as portraying two human bodies with ill-defined faces engaging in sexual
activity. Although the figures resemble human bodies, they assume poses that closely mimic
those of feline copulation, and due to the ambiguity of their facial features, the story notes the
difficulty of discerning whether they are human or animal.
In a particular illustration, behind the foreground of a *Hanagiri* shaded in purple, she had boldly drawn a secret illustration of a man and woman frolicking in a place that seemed to be a tea cottage. With faces rendered neither recognizably human nor feline, and bodies that were decidedly human, the male was forcibly holding down the female as if he were squashing her, exactly like the pose we had seen earlier in the scroll during the cats’ mating scene. I [narrator] don’t know whether it was revenge or sheer madness, but I’m sure that when [Shinojo] brought up the story of the cats mating at the dining table to her family that in her mind she was vividly recalling the time she had lost her virginity to her art teacher. (Hulvey 164)

In keeping with the drastic shift from the humans of the first volume to the hybrids in her second and third volumes, Shinojo experiences one pivotal incident that signifies her major change as a mature woman. During one family dinner, Shinojo suddenly speaks in a loud, shameless voice, depicting in great detail for Shin’ichi’s family a scene of feline copulation that she had witnessed that day.22 Shinojo’s erotic cat paintings and her talk about the mating cats show Shinojo’s transformation from behaving in the reserved and predictable manner that her son’s family expected of her. Considering her outburst in broader terms, Shinojo’s account of the mating cats seems symptomatic of her increasing tendency to closely observe cats in daily life. As the aging artist becomes more dissociated from her family, she shows a willingness to adopt the mannerisms of her feline cohorts, who in effect constitute her new family:

“Sometimes Granny looks like a cat,” Yoshiko [Shinojo’s granddaughter] said one time. “Why?” asked Toshiko. “Because—without making any noise, suddenly there she is with her eyes fixed, sitting behind me with her hands folded together on her lap like a cat.” “Now that you say so, it does seem that lately she walks without making any noise.” “Yes, she used to make more noise when she walked. Watch her carefully—even though her eyes are bad, she’s amazingly quiet, even more so than White or Black [the names of two of her cats]. Then suddenly when you look, there’s Granny. It’s creepy.” (Hulvey 146)

---

22 “猫は猛獣の本能なのかしら、そこは人間に似ていて、そういうところを決して見せないもののだけれど、この頃は世の中が変わったから、猫の習性も変わって来たのかしらねえ。まっ昼間、私の目でさえよく見える屋根の上の出来事よ” (Enchi 204).
In witnessing the changed behavior and speech patterns of Shinojo in front of her son’s family, Enchi’s readers may gain the sense that Shinojo is going through a transformation that will ultimately result in the aged woman’s own hybridization, like the figures in her illustrations. Unlike Sōseki’s narrator, who is a cat with human interiority, Enchi’s protagonist is like a human with a feline psyche. Gradually she becomes a cat who is unrestrained and expressive, while of course still maintaining her human appearance. However, in the final painting of the notebook—drawn just before Shinojo’s suicide—she has depicted the eyes of the cat, wide open and without pupils, not unlike her own myopic eyes. This final creation tells of Shinojo’s life, establishing both a visual and spiritual link between the artist and her subject. Similar to the hollow eyes of the cat, Shinojo’s existence in her senior years has been desolate; growing thinner and thinner, she ultimately becomes invisible to society and to her own family. Her life has no meaning to others, even to her family, and the only thing she could do was merely await death. Even though on the surface her life seemed perfectly fine, the underside bespoke Shinojo’s complete isolation from family. Hence, her attachment to the “homeless” cat reveals an awareness of her abandoned status—with no place on earth where she would be truly welcomed.

Although Shinojo ended her own life, through the illustrated Neko no sōshi, her life and experiences continue to live on. The fictive Neko no sōshi works as both a personal journal and an unusual suicide note, blending an exploration of life on the margins with an artfully coded explanation of the death. In her youth Shinojo was able to live relatively unrestricted by social codes, but as she aged she found herself increasingly confined by age and gender expectations. Forced to compromise her own identity to better fit into the prescribed family system, and treated as less than human by her children and grandchildren, Shinojo finds herself abandoned within
her own household. She finds that she is little more than a stray cat herself, a modern-day obasute who has been rendered invisible through her relegation to the periphery of her younger family members’ thoughts. Therefore, the Neko no sōshi serves as a creative reimagining of the family relations that informed her aged life. In other words, she takes advantage of her artistic talents to garner the interest that would usher her tragic story into the public space beyond the silently neglectful space of the family’s home.

I will now proceed to explore Enchi’s story “Kinuta” and the ways in which that narrative allows abandoned women to creatively express their suffering, even after death. The embedded text Kinuta, which refers back to a Noh drama by Zeami, allows the central characters in Enchi’s story to share in a form of communication that supports women’s efforts to navigate the struggles of aging.

“Kinuta” (“The Fulling Block”) as the Shout of Old Women

Published in 1980, “Kinuta” is a work that explores the difficulty that elderly women have in expressing the distress and pain of their marginalization and declining physical condition. In the story, the narrator—a hospitalized elderly woman—unexpectedly hears the pounding of the kinuta, or fulling block. The sound causes her to reminisce about her dead friend who wanted to rewrite the Noh drama Kinuta. This embedded text allows the central characters to communicate in a way that suggests women’s efforts to navigate the aging process. The narrator asks, “[w]hy am I hearing the sound of the kinuta when I have never ever heard the real sound of the kinuta before?” (Enchi 13). The old woman’s hearing the kinuta does not make

---

23 Kinuta (fulling block) refers to a wooden block upon which clothing is placed and repeatedly struck with a mallet to smooth out wrinkles.
much sense since no one in modern Japan uses the old-fashioned *kinuta* to remove creases in clothing anymore. Moreover, the woman is currently bedridden in a hospital—a setting that makes it even more unlikely for her to hear such a sound. Considering the physically weakened state of the narrator—aged, sick, losing her eyesight—the reader might wonder if the story is about an old woman’s senility, or her delusional state before her death. Why does the aged narrator suddenly hear sounds that remind her of her deceased friend, and what makes the narrator more apt to discuss her friend’s story instead of her own?

Unlike the old women in Enchi’s other stories who reveal their sexual desire and resent their marginal status, “Kinuta” offers a contemplative and restrained portrayal of aging women. In “Kinuta,” these aged female characters, while retaining a strong will to express themselves, choose not to hold forth on the travails of old age in front of an unconcerned public. Rather than directly exposing their inner torments, Enchi channels historical voices that add texture and depth to these women’s experiences. By borrowing the title of Zeami’s Noh play *Kinuta*, Enchi seems to build upon a classical image of a woman who unleashes her desires and emotions through the sound of the *kinuta*. Although Zeami often featured an aged woman in his plays, his portrayal of the aged woman, as in his play *Kinuta*, serves to reinforce the sense in which the emotional expressions of old women amount to a form of hysteria or madness. Utilizing elements of Zeami’s theatrical world, Enchi subverts such a male-centered reading by presenting *Kinuta* as an old woman’s own narrative that reveals her own subjectivity. Hers is the story of a woman who is not overwhelmed by her physical debility and social confinement. By showing aged, voiceless women listening to each other’s stories and sharing their emotions, Enchi creates a literary space where women can commiserate and bond and, through such interaction, acquire their own agency.
The aged narrator initially laments her deteriorating body and her confinement in a hospital bed. Noticing her progressing feebleness, especially the fact that she is losing her eyesight, the narrator contemplates suicide. However, recalling her deceased parents and friends, the narrator begins to feel not only more accepting of her impending death but even finds comfort knowing that it is the natural way of things. She thus shows a mature but resigned attitude toward her aging.

One sleepless night, the narrator hears something like a cricket’s sound somewhere near her hospital bed. Although she cannot see clearly, her hearing has become much more acute, enabling her to capture even the slightest sound. Startled and somewhat embarrassed by her peculiarly keen hearing, the narrator thinks that the sound of the cricket somehow resembles the sound of a *kinuta* pounding the clothes on a wooden block. Realizing that she had never actually heard the sound of a *kinuta*, the narrator wonders why she has made this association. It is then that she suddenly recalls Yumi Fujiki (藤木由美), an old friend who had wanted to re-write the Noh play, *Kinuta*, before she died.

Yumi was a well-known middle-aged actress, especially known for her beautiful voice. Despite her unhappy childhood, Yumi was an intelligent and amiable person. Her personality, combined with her extraordinary beauty and talent, made her even more outstanding. However, when Yumi was fifty years old, she suddenly had a stroke on the stage, which took away not only her beautiful voice, but also all the splendors tied to her life as a singer. Yumi had to leave her troupe and people soon began to forget about her. Her lover left her as well. Hearing the news about her friend, the narrator dropped by her house. At that time, expecting Yumi to be in a

---

24 Enchi is in fact personally familiar with this specific sort of physiological decline, as her own eyesight began to fail in her later years.
hapless state, the narrator was surprised to see her calm and peaceful face. While the narrator thinks that Yumi seems to be coping well with her pained and voiceless life, surprisingly, Yumi asks the narrator to collaborate with her on the script remake of the Noh play *Kinuta*. Once more startled and impressed by Yumi’s determination to recreate *Kinuta*, the narrator promises to do so. However, not long after making this promise, Yumi passes away.

“Kinuta”'s echoes from classical literature

At first glance, Enchi’s “Kinuta” appears to be a product of the aged narrator’s delusional storytelling, yet Enchi has her message float visibly on the surface, while letting it lurk beneath an array of literary references and subtle motifs. To fully understand the aged narrator’s story, it is necessary to explore the meaning of *kinuta* from classical Japanese literature, especially that of the Noh drama by Zeami. Zeami’s *Kinuta* is a tragic play about “jealous despair” in which a wife waits alone for her husband to return home from the capital. Three years pass, and still her husband does not return—and no word from him reaches her (Kato 333). Misunderstanding her husband’s late returning as a betrayal, the wife beats the *kinuta* to release her deep frustration and tangled love for him.

Zeami expressed deep affection for the play *Kinuta*, saying that, “[s]ince the people of aftertime will hardly appreciate such a Noh (play) as this, there is no point in my leaving any writings on it. It is of a supreme and indefinable quality, transcending the usual norms of critical

---

25 Kato states “The title drives from Chinese poetic tradition. The *kinuta* was a fulling block—a surface upon which clothes were beaten after starching in order to restore their pristine gloss and stiffness” (332).
appreciation; even if one tries to write about it, one cannot find the appropriate words” (Kato 332). As Zeami asserts, compared to his other dramatic plays, *Kinuta* was not that popular in his time because of its “coldness,” or its lack of interesting visuals. Cold plays, or *hietaru* Noh, refer to works that abstain from featuring visual spectacles “in order to pursue a higher purpose,” to precisely capture and transmit the inner mind of the main character (156). Rather than cater to the “taste for colorful, exciting, or even lyrical entertainment” (156), *Kinuta* underscores essential qualities such as “enormous human warmth,” demonstrated through the wife’s endless love for her husband and their tragic but endless love story.

Zeami’s *Kinuta* uses classical references to amplify the wife’s frustrated, lonely, and bitter situation, particularly her lamentations about how deeply she feels frustrated because of her husband’s long absence. Specifically, by referencing a Chinese tale, which also incorporates the beating sound of *kinuta*, Zeami’s play draws forth the poignant associations between the fulling block and the longing for a lost lover:

In China, a man named Sobu was taken captive by the Huns. Imagining him lying sleepless through the cold nights, the wife and child he had left behind climbed a high tower and beat a fulling block. And perhaps the message of their love did reach him, for Sobu in his exile’s sleep, ten thousand leagues away, heard that block beating at his home. (Tyler 162-163)

Finding an affinity with the Chinese tale that presents the miserable state of wives whose husbands are at war in the tale, the wife is quickly moved by the sound of *kinuta* and wants to beat the *kinuta* to convey her feelings toward her husband. While the wife’s emotional tension is punctuated by the beating of the *kinuta*, this powerful performance is soon followed by the scene of the wife’s untimely death, and thus the sound of the *kinuta* embodies not only the wife’s love
but also her passionate desire for her husband—a desire so out of bounds that it eventually costs her life.26

Upon returning home, the husband encounters the wife’s spirit—playing waki to her shite 27—leading him to save her spirit from Hell by reciting a Buddhist sutra (“The Flower of Law”).28 As in many Noh plays, Zeami’s presentation of the wife in the final scenes emphasizes the multi-faceted quality of the wife’s voice: while she is alive and after she has passed away, the wife’s voice is shown to somehow exist beyond the boundaries of her physical body (manifesting either through the sound of the kinuta or through her resurrected spirit). This is an aspect of the Noh tradition that Enchi adapts to her own style of narrative, showing a character’s strength against the hardships of love and abandonment and communicating their subjectivity in creative and transcendent ways.

**Enchi’s “Kinuta”**

Zeami’s Kinuta idealizes the wife’s beating of a kinuta, but less superficially, the performance depicts a woman who cannot find any another agency to communicate her angst and frustration. Similarly, Enchi’s “Kinuta” on the surface depicts a beautiful dramatic setting

---

26 Kato also notes that, “Much about Kinuta would seem to put it with the very poetic Woman Plays of the Third Category, but ‘mad,’ ‘realistic’ and ‘vengeful ghost’ plays belong more properly to the Fourth. […] The play is a ghost play, but is nevertheless realistic (in the Noh sense) in so far as the characters in the first part are living contemporaries, while even in the second part the ghost is known and is deliberately called up. The ghost retains the resentment of the living lady, but in her quiet despairing way she has nothing of the raging vengefulness of other on-ryo (vengeful ghost) of the Noh tradition” (333-334).

27 “There are two major characters in Noh; the shite and the waki. The role of the waki is to call the shite to the stage and to serve as his interlocutor. The theme of the play is carried by the shite” (Alland 6).

28 Although scholars recognize Zeami’s efforts to provide a forum in which we can consider women’s suffering, his presentation focuses very heavily on her madness and its extirpation. Scholars like Etsuko Terasaki (cf. *Figures of Desire*) have published studies on Noh with regard to the foregrounding of women’s madness as a common trope in the theatrical art.
where, on the moonlit night of late autumn, the aged narrator hears the chirping of the cricket.
The sound of crickets already has poetic associations that serve to amplify the woman’s sorrow as she confronts her “autumn years,” and Enchi compounds the poetic resonance of the scene by having the protagonist mistake the cricket for the sound of *kinuta*. This leads the aged narrator to recite the well-known verses by the famous Tang dynasty poets Li Bai and Bo Juyi who both deeply appreciated the sound of the *kinuta* in their poems:

The moon is above the city of Chang-an,
From ten thousand houses comes the sound of cloth pounding;
The sad autumn wind blows, and there is no end
To my thought of you beyond the Jewel Gate Pass.
When will the barbarian foe be vanquished,
And you, my beloved, return from the far battlefield?

- Li Bai (63)

[…]  
In the eighth month, in the ninth month  
just when nights are long,  
a thousand poundings, ten thousand poundings  
it never has an end!  
[…]

- Bo Juyi (108)

Though succinct, these poems can be called “multi-layered” due to the different ways in which both point to a sense of community. In the first poem, Li Bai takes the perspective of a woman who is beating a fulling mallet, which establishes a connection between the poet himself and the poetic subject that is suffering from the absence of a lover. However, even more obvious is the communal suffering that is signified in the sound of fulling mallets from “ten thousand houses” around the city. And in Bo Juyi’s poem, one has the same sense of community because the poet
remains vague about whether it is just one mallet that is responsible for the “ten thousand poundings” or perhaps, an entire group of mallets from which the sound is issuing. In either case, the strength of the agony is still provocative since the act of pounding one mallet ten thousand times is quite arduous, but the thought of a group of one thousand mallets pounding one thousand times is also particularly moving.

The inclusion of these poetic sequences related to the kinuta allows Enchi to present a richly evocative suggestion of sound that invites a multitude of artistic forms that have also deployed the same auditory motif, like Noh plays or even The Tale of Genji. In the “Evening Face” (Yūgao) chapter of Genji, the titular character is with a lover one autumn evening when suddenly he hears “the faint thump of fulling hammers against coarse cloth; and mingled with it—these were sounds to call forth the deepest emotions—were the calls of geese flying overhead” (Seidensticker 67).29 This scene from Genji shows the great stirring of emotion within Genji, which sets up the story for an additional mention of the fulling blocks later on. Genji’s lover from that evening had died suddenly that night, and as he reminisces about her later, he thinks that “even the memory of those fulling blocks was sweet” (80-81) and he recites half of Bo Juyi’s couplet. Thus it is very notable that Enchi has her narrator recite the same half of the Bo Juyi couplet seen in Genji, after which the woman recounts the story of her friend Yumi who desperately wanted to create her own version of Zeami’s Kinuta. Hence, Enchi interweaves a variety of texts associated with the symbolic kinuta: the poems, Murasaki Shikibu’s tale, the

29 The poem by Bo Juyi cited above is actually noted as the inspiration for this scene in Genji. Scholar Thomas Rimer writes, “This couplet plays a crucial role in one of the greatest episodes of Lady Murasaki’s masterpiece, Tale of Genji. This is the chapter entitled ‘Yūgao.’ As Genji and Yūgao lie in bed in autumn, they hear various sounds from the street outside, including the echoing of the fulling blocks and clothes are being prepared for the colder weather. Later, after Yūgao’s tragic death, when Genji hears this sound again, he recalls the [Bo Juyi] couplet, which now takes on a deeper meaning for him as it conjures up memories of Yūgao” (108).
Zeami play, Enchi’s own story for modern audiences, along with an embedded text belonging to one of her protagonists. This lends to Enchi’s “Kinuta” a multi-layered narrative interweaving a variety of voices and emotions that imbue Yumi’s story about her abandonment with greater depth.

The narrative of “Kinuta” moves from the narrator’s story to Yumi’s, but it is still unclear how the sound of the *kinuta* is related to the narrator’s personal story or why the sound proves meaningful for her. Although “Kinuta” features only two characters, the narrator and Yumi, it does not reveal much about the personal life of the narrator. In fact, it seems that the narrator is the subsidiary character utilized to present the main story, the story of Yumi. This narrative thus seems to resemble the “waki-shite”30 structure of the Noh play. The narrator functions as the *waki*, using classical Chinese poetry that refers to the *kinuta* in order to direct the reader’s attention to Yumi, the *shite*. While the narrator is seemingly marginalized, her ailing voice presents Yumi’s story from an outside perspective—in fact, it is the only way to access the already deceased Yumi. This use of a narrator who is not omniscient leaves the audience uncertain of whose story is central and what kind of story is delivered by the sound of the *kinuta*.

While Yumi’s story is at the center, her voice is not fully represented due to the positioning of the story within the narrator’s perspective. Moreover, Yumi’s story relies on the narrator’s memory, which provides a necessarily limited and subjective account of Yumi’s life. According to the aged narrator’s memory, her relationship with Yumi was not on the level that

---

30 There is an interesting parallel here with Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s “Yoshino kuzu” (Arrowroot, 1931). Anthony Chambers suggests this “waki-shite” relation with respect to the narrative structure of Tanizaki’s story. Chambers argues “The relationship between the narrator and Tsumura (protagonist)...is probably modeled after...the waki (“side-man”) and the shite (protagonist) of a noh play; the waki appears on stage first and draws the attention for the audience, but his main function is to set the scene for the shite, provide a foil for him, and encourage him to tell his story” (488).
could be regarded as friendship. The two women worked at the same theater in roles that were very different yet related through their significant connections to the performance material—Yumi as singer and actress, and the narrator as writer. There was also an age difference—Yumi was ten years older than the narrator. They had known each other for several years during the war, but once the narrator left the theater after the war, their connection was severed. Why, then, does the aged narrator start to think about Yumi, a woman with whom she had a curiously detached relationship? Finding herself in the same situation as Yumi was in before, the narrator finally comes to understand and empathize with the other woman. Enchi deftly points to the women’s similarities despite the evidence of a gap attributable to their lack of a blood relationship.

Enchi works through her narrator to probe the depths of an abandoned woman—signified by Yumi—offering an alternative to past representations treating women as mad and sinful characters. The author forges her exploration through several key elements in the narrative, most notably through a consideration of how the narrator views Yumi’s smile. Keeping in mind the detachment between the women, it is noteworthy that the narrator devotes considerable attention to Yumi’s facial expressions. According to the narrator, Yumi was always smiling, and despite her troubled childhood, Yumi never talked about the hardships she faced growing up. Although many experienced difficulty and privation during the war, Yumi never lost her gentle and good-natured disposition, which deeply impressed the narrator. Yet Yumi’s persistent amiability, along with her tight-lipped attitude toward her private life, prompts the narrator’s suspicion that Yumi is in fact concealing her true nature: “Yumi always shows her bright charming face, but she
might have another face” (15). This cordial-yet- reticent attitude is hardly unusual in daily interactions, yet it is significant that the narrator wishes to peer beyond the mask and perhaps learn more about the sort of person that Yumi might be. While Yumi’s bright smiling face is meant to cover her emotions, it also fixes Yumi’s visage in the narrator’s mind and perhaps stirs the narrator’s curiosity about Yumi’s inner struggles, which she never revealed. In other words, this nonverbal cue in Enchi’s “Kinuta” initiates the narrator’s journey into Yumi’s mind, whereas the inaudible communication in Zeami’s Kinuta does not necessarily occasion a deeper inspection of the wife’s subjectivity.

After leaving the theater, the narrator learns of Yumi’s stroke—which took place on stage—and the series of losses experienced by the former singer. During the narrator’s visit, Yumi does not complain about sickness or the new sense of loneliness. But just before the narrator’s departure, Yumi suddenly grabs her hand and utters the word “kinuta” in a cracking-yet-strong voice. The narrator quickly understands Yumi’s reference to their conversation long ago about Yumi’s hope to one day compose music rather than continuing to sing others’ creations. At that time, Yumi suggested that they should collaborate on remaking the Noh play Kinuta for which Yumi would compose the song and the narrator would write the lyrics. However, the narrator understood that the proposal was for a much later time in both of their lives and thus forgot about their conversation, until Yumi’s sudden utterance.

During this visit, readers learn of the unrealized project that is Yumi’s Kinuta, which contributes to the air of uncertainty that informs the rest of the scene. Not only does Enchi’s narrative fail to provide details of the proposed play, but there is an emptiness that surrounds the

31 “藤木さんはいつでもあんなに明るい愛嬌のある顔をしているけれど、あの人に別の顔があるのかしら。”
one momentary emergence of Yumi’s voice. Hence, the narrator must fill in the context for both: she contextualizes the play through her present-day experience of the chirping crickets, and from Yumi’s crackling voice on the day of the visit she intuits a desire to realize the theatrical play. Essentially, with the nonexistent play and with Yumi’s sudden expression, the narrator finds some way to invest each with greater meaning, and that meaning is largely derived from the narrator’s personal experience. Therefore, the meaning of *kinuta* for Yumi remains a mystery to the narrator. However, Yumi’s desire to write her own *Kinuta* is the only chance for the narrator to explore Yumi’s inner conflicts—essentially, finding the hidden face behind the fixed smile—a task that the narrator left unfulfilled until Yumi’s death.

The smile noted by the narrator is also important because it highlights the restraint expected from women, lest they face the threat of abandonment once more at the hands of society rather than just one’s lover or family. Thus, Enchi fashions for Yumi a mask of a perpetually smiling face that signifies her dearth of options for expression, but in the eyes of the narrator, it is a mask that cannot hide Yumi’s desire for the more profound expression that can be achieved through writing a play like *Kinuta*. Yumi’s smiling face is her means to continue living within society and the key to being remembered as an amiable person, since the aged woman has already been forsaken by those closest to her: Yumi was an orphan raised by her stepmother and sold to the theater; Yumi lost her lover after her sudden illness; even Yumi’s connection to the narrator eventually wanes after leaving the theater.

At first, the narrator—like many of Yumi’s other acquaintances—initially has no sense of Yumi’s troubled mind even after hearing of unhappy life. Through the portrayal of Yumi—always depicted with a smile, yet finally revealing her true suffering and resentment—Enchi
points out the dilemma of women who do not wish to wear a mask and yet have no choice besides the façade of an optimistic smile.

Like Zeami’s *Kinuta*, which celebrates the expression of the suppressed woman’s feelings, Enchi constructs a female character who does not necessarily fit within the literary tradition that stigmatizes women’s free expression. The women’s suffering is accepted and more fully treated without eventually labeling the woman in ways that evoke the figure of the *yamamba*. While still acknowledging the ways in which the aged woman must observe social inhibitions and express her discontentment in specifically sanctioned ways, Enchi gives a degree of freedom to Yumi and eventually the narrator as they struggle to navigate the sunset years of their lives.

However, a key difference between the Zeami and Enchi versions of *Kinuta* lies in the marital status of the central figures in these texts. While Zeami’s play focuses on an abandoned wife, Enchi’s female characters are single and thus evocative of figures like Komachi, who have strong associations with abandonment. Terry Kawashima considers Enchi’s story in her exploration of how the disadvantaged narrative for single women is constructed: “Enchi Fumiko argues that the male fear of a single woman without a husband or child contributed significantly to the unflattering portrayal of Komachi; she also asserts that an ideal beauty like Komachi had to be punished for the trials and agonies she caused men, even though such ideals were the constructions of the men themselves” (129). Thus, unlike the wife in the Noh drama, Yumi’s marginalization resembles the literary canon’s treatment of Komachi, whose “increasing marginalization was related not only to the development of familial ‘patriarchy’ and male revenge but also to the question of how sexuality is located vis-à-vis old age” (129). Due to
Yumi’s decision not to marry, her condition makes her all the more isolated and unnoticeable within society—a fate shared by the narrator.

**Transmitting Painful Stories through the Aged body**

Does the narrator struggle to understand the pain behind Yumi’s smile or does Yumi possess the ability to disguise her turmoil through an innocuous expression of happiness? Or, does the narrator practice willful blindness toward Yumi’s pain, and if so, to what end? When the narrator finally experiences for herself the deep pain of being sick, aged, and lonely—as similarly felt by Yumi in her final years—she ventures a deeper reconsideration of the meaning behind Yumi’s smile. In other words, the narrator’s “blindness” allows her to see another side of Yumi that was inaccessible through her “normal” eyes before. Her hearing made more sensitive by her blindness, the narrator realizes that her body yearns to hear more of the kinuta sound.

It is an important point in the story for Enchi’s aging female characters when they face their decline, so what, then, is the meaning of kinuta for them? Yumi and the narrator are physically disabled old women, and both had been healthy, and talented. In some way, Enchi’s story can be read as a representation of how two women handle their aged bodies in different ways, of the difference between sudden and gradual decline. Yumi had a stroke, which robbed her of her social life and isolated her from society. The narrator’s frustration stems from losing her eyesight and suffering from a chronic illness. Susan Wendell says “the fates of old people and of people with disabilities tend to be linked in a society because aging is disabling” (18). As Wendell points out, aging is often seen as equivalent to becoming disabled.

Realizing that aging is disabling helps non-disabled people to see that people with disabilities are not ‘other,’ that they are really themselves at a later time.
Unless we die suddenly, we are all disabled eventually. Most of us will live part of our lives with bodies that hurt, that move with difficulty or not at all, that deprive us of activities we once took for granted, or that others take for granted—bodies that make daily life a physical struggle. (18)

Wendell cites May Sarton’s journal *After the Stroke* about the relation between illness (or disability) and the awareness of the body: “Youth, it occurs to me, has to do with not being aware of one’s body, whereas old age is often a matter of consciously overcoming some misery or other inside the body. One is acutely aware of it” (170). Sarton emphasizes that “the awareness of body is often awareness of pain, discomfort, or physical difficulty” (170), and thus, while the body is in the process of aging, we may remain unaware of this until it is too late. In other words, her aged and ill body disconnects Yumi from a community that has no interest in embracing her. In light of this abandonment, Yumi understands that the *kinuta* sound is the only way to express herself and her feelings. With the introduction of the narrator’s thoughts on the *kinuta* in her hospital room, it becomes clear how prominently the narrative links together the women’s isolation through the combination of their physical illnesses and disabilities, which left them no other means to express themselves other than the mutual commiseration afforded by the sound of the *kinuta*. Their physical decline pushes them to the periphery—in the hospital and the backroom of an out-of-the-way home—and effectively remove them from society. Thus, in place of the spiritual communication that took place in Zeami’s Noh drama, Enchi’s story constructs a different conduit for empathy between the women, through their shared interest in the symbolic *kinuta*.

This explains why Yumi finally expresses her desire to create the *Kinuta* play after she has problems with her health. When she first discussed her proposed play with the narrator, Yumi was only around forty years old, thus lacking the awareness that she would find later in life.
after her stroke. However, upon being robbed of her voice by the sudden illness, Yumi gains an awareness of her disabled body and must find an alternate way to express herself. In other words, she relies on her ongoing mental fortitude to pursue the realization of *Kinuta*. Akin to Wendell and Sarton, Gullette discusses and “age unconsciousness” that can make sense of Yumi’s continued resolve to write her play: “To acknowledge the deeper psychology of decline, we would have to investigate people’s struggles against age apprehensiveness, their attempts to continue to feel resilient and in control as they age past youth in an ideology that appears youth-obsessed” (33). In the face of losses that render her incapable of expressing herself through singing, Yumi becomes more dedicated to producing the play simply as a means of somehow communicating her story.

In contrast to Yumi, the narrator has suffered from a chronic illness that has left her hospitalized many times. Unlike Yumi’s stroke, the narrator’s age-related decline has developed more gradually, and she comes to possess a more positive attitude than Yumi. However, four years before she begins hearing the *kinuta*, the narrator’s eyesight begins to fail, and in her frustration, she attempts suicide by jumping from the roof top of the hospital in which she is staying. The narrator could not accept that the loss of sight which accompanied her decline was a natural process, and she believed her body was malfunctioning and becoming useless. At first, the narrator felt that the only thing left to do with her debilitated body was wait for death, but while suffering through these changes, the narrator comes to a deeper understanding of old age through the deaths of her friends, parents, and caregivers. For this reason, although she remains frustrated with her own bodily decline, through the deaths of other people in her social circle, the narrator eventually learns to accept the difficulties of living as an elderly woman.
Nevertheless, when she hears the *kinuta* sound and thinks of Yumi, the narrator begins to fear the growing sensitivity of her hearing as a sign of impending death, for which she is not yet prepared. Thinking of Yumi, who tried to carve out meaning for herself and did not give up on a life filled with pain, the narrator, too, finds the hope and strength to face old age. Listening to the *kinuta* sound, she realizes that one’s physical condition is relative, not absolute, and the fact that she could clearly hear the *kinuta* is perhaps a gift of aging along with the greater insight into life gained from the memory of Yumi. In remembering Yumi, the narrator becomes more meditative and capable of overcoming her own fear of aging, hence breaking away from the depressing connection between old age and death.

Through the classical symbolism and lyrical depth attached to “*Kinuta*” by Noh and other narratives, Enchi reinforces and enriches the messages that emerge from the isolation experienced by different women. Zeami’s text aestheticizes female expression and extends the reach of her voice both through spiritualism and the symbol of the *kinuta*, along with the lyrical and spiritual qualities of the Noh genre itself. However, the consolation offered by the voices of the dead is more explicitly presented in Enchi’s text. Yumi’s *Kinuta* represents the chance to vent suppressed emotions and to express her true self, in opposition to other’s expectations. And what is more, the play also enables the narrator to relieve her own suffering.

Enchi’s brilliant deployment of the sound of the *kinuta* creates multiple voices of aged women expressing their deepest emotions and allowing their voices to resonate with one another. Additionally, through the *kinuta* performance as a powerful expression, Enchi’s women come to share the vehicle to bond with one another. This is especially important in light of the fact that Yumi’s play was never realized or performed, but through the narrator’s own memory of her friend, the personal story that inspired the content of Yumi’s play is eventually shared with a
larger audience beyond the two women. This transmission of the hope and suffering of one woman through another, is not unlike the sound of the kinuta in the initial poems that was meant to carry forth the desire and agony felt by women awaiting their warrior husbands. Still, Enchi’s text refreshes the motif, providing a sense that rather than connecting just separated lovers, the kinuta sound can also connect a variety of people who share a bond forged by mutual suffering and a desire for better lives. Thus, even though Yumi and the narrator are aware of approaching death, their bond leaves both women unintimidated and uninhibited, instead boldly voicing their desires and their life stories. Incorporating the lyrical depth of Japan’s classical literature and the narrative techniques of its modern literature, “Kinuta” allows readers to hear the marginalized voices of aged women and to empathize with those voices and with the characters to whom they belong.
Chapter 5: Dreaming the Romantic-Eyed Uba by Tanabe Seiko

“Aging involves a narrative. Aging is a set of narratives.” – Margaret Gullette

Utako, the protagonist of Tanabe Seiko’s *Uba tokimeki* (*Silver Butterflies*, 1984), barges into the narrative with the proud statement: “I’m a seventy-seven year old shrew, that’s why!” As indicated by the word *tokimeki* in the title, suggestive of the fluttering pulse of passion, the protagonist refuses to relinquish her passion, despite her advanced age and societal expectations. She is proud, opinionated, and outspoken. Her strong opinions eminate intermittently from either a bright optimism, or a smoldering anger—both atypical of the aged in most literary treatments.

“‘I am now in my ‘golden age’” (53), Utako claims. How can this elderly woman argue that this—a time of physical and social decline—is the best stage of her life? From where does her confident and positive outlook originate? If her optimism is not a symptom of an old woman’s senility then how can we make sense of such a positive view of aging?

As discussed earlier, Enchi’s *rōjo* are often “old women” who lack the power to cast off their socially and culturally assigned masks, but Tanabe’s aged protagonists forthrightly engage with their “agedness” as a means to reinvent their marginal positions within families that typically privilege male power. Tanabe’s Utako reconstitutes her social identity by linking herself to different institutions that give her a share in the power of the local culture, among them the Takarazuka theater and the Osaka merchant culture. This participation invests Utako with

---

1 “私は七十七のシタタカ婆さんであるから” (40).
2 “The Takarazuka Revue Company (Takarazuka Kageki Dan), which gets its name from the city of Takarazuka, Japan, where the company was founded and is principally headquartered, is located about fifteen miles northwest of Osaka. The performers in this company are all unmarried women who are organized into four troupes of about eighty five to one hundred women in each” (Berlin 35).
confidence, willing her to express her desires and her dissatisfaction more openly. By situating her character within a specific culture and giving her a relatable personal history, Tanabe gives Utako a voice that one can easily see as based in reality rather than delusion. By presenting the protagonist in this way, Tanabe replaces the negatively constructed image of old women that is so commonly seen in earlier narratives. In contrast to the yamamba and the abandoned obasute woman—figures whose anger is often ignored and whose desire is often unsatisfied—Tanabe presents the old Utako as a woman who is satisfied in her aged identity and who has a voice that is frank in its confrontation of the obstacles that prevent her from living more confidently, properly, and beautifully.

Not only is Tanabe’s aged protagonist a capable woman; she also demonstrates the author’s skillful utilization of Osaka cultural institutions. In taking advantage of the local atmosphere, Tanabe offers an empowered voice that diverges from the mainstream stereotypes typically assigned to aged people. Osaka dialect (Osaka ben) is prominent in this and other works by Tanabe, where young and old women alike accumulate a modicum of power through their use of the dialect. Differing from Tokyo dialect, which having been made the national standard is now considered more sophisticated and proper, Tanabe privileges the Osaka, and specifically Senba, dialect. As will be discussed in this chapter, the dialect usage contributes to her protagonist’s subversive manner and enhances her robust strength, while at the same time offering a tinge of nostalgia.

Utako’s participation in the local economy enables her to live independently from her family even after retiring. Rather than face marginalization, as with Enchi’s Kihara Shinojo in “The Cat Scroll,” Utako can create a life of her own and put herself at its center. In contrast, Enchi’s protagonist Shinojo transitions from living alone to living with family, and thus suffers
greater isolation as she tries to cope with her family’s negative treatment. Utako’s living arrangement is just one of the narrative elements that will be considered in more depth in this chapter as we examine how Tanabe reverses the conventional views of the elderly woman. I will explore how Tanabe avoids portraying Utako as a rōjo who is only admired for selfless sacrifices in support of the male-centered social system, and how she presents an old Osaka woman who maintains autonomy and subjectivity in spite of her family’s oppressive treatment. I will also consider the way the author depicts Utako as capable of improving her social position by taking advantage of Osaka culture even as she works through the changes associated with her aged condition. Finally, this analysis will account for the ways in which Utako frees herself from conventional socio-cultural roles in order to represent the power of aged women who strive to live meaningful lives. Utako becomes living evidence of a new kind of elderly woman, one who is no longer bound by male-centered expectations and customs.

**Tanabe’s Uba Series**

Between 1984 and 1993 Tanabe published a series of collected stories that treat an “uba” as she navigates her twilight years. Each collection focuses on the same character, Utako, who is 76 years old in the first of the series, *Uba zakari* (Old Woman in Full Bloom, 1981); 77 in the second (the focus of this study); 79 in the third, *Uba ukare* (Old Woman in a Frenzy, 1987); and 80 years old in the final collection, *Uba katte* (Old Woman Does it Her Way, 1993). The stories are quite episodic in nature; rather than constituting a journey toward some goal or message, each story presents a different aspect of Utako’s social and familial relationships. Like other *Uba* series, “dealing as it does with sexuality of elderly people, elderly care, marriage fraud, elderly
people’s dating” (Dollase, 196), *Uba tokimeki*, more so than the other collections, pays the most attention to the topic of women’s passion and romantic feelings. More simply, the story incorporates themes that writers have typically reserved for younger female protagonists. Given the centrality of the Takarazuka musical theater to the protagonist’s self-identity, even her name, Utako, could be said to contain a jovial nuance since *uta* means “song” (the final “*ko*” is a common suffix for female names).

Despite Utako’s advanced age, she is a remarkably active and optimistic character—far from the more familiar image of a shrunken, enfeebled old woman. Living alone in a luxurious Kobe condominium, Utako is portrayed as a single woman experiencing daily joys as well as hardships. Along the way she tangles with her adult children, who resent the fact that their mother does not adhere to the standard lifestyle of “old age.” A widow, she journeys in and out of love, encountering frustrations, renewed sexual desire, and loss. Coerced into attending dating events for the elderly, and sincerely hoping to find a romantic partner, she nevertheless struggles to maintain her independence. Utako owns a family-run business in Osaka. Although she has putatively turned the reins of the business over to her son, she claims to have not quite retired—at least she has not “retired” from life, which is shown by the continuation of her busy social schedule, including teaching calligraphy, learning English, and enjoying coffee outings with her friends. Readers of Tanabe’s romances will notice that Utako shares features with the writer’s younger protagonists, who lead free and independent single lives. The fact that Utako, despite her age, actively expresses a desire to engage in romantic relationships adds to the impression

---

3 After her husband passes away, her children suggest living together, but Utako insists that she should live alone to enjoy her freedom (Tanabe 10).

4 Nathaniel Preston notes: “Common features of Tanabe’s fiction include romance-based plots, the regional dialect of her native Osaka, and humor based on word-play and verbal banter” (65).
that she serves as the aged counterpart to Tanabe’s typical female character: in a word she is a “high miss.”

Far from being a picture of idealized, self-sacrificing womanhood, Utako is frank in revealing her crankiness and annoyance toward whoever disturbs her mood, including her children and grandchildren. Utako’s self-assertive and aggressive voice reminds one of the stereotypical “obatarian,” a stock comic character in Manga Life, a Japanese manga magazine published from 1988 through 1998. The obatarian figure is an older woman whose appearance is a grotesque caricature of the mature female body, with special focus given to wrinkled skin, sagging breasts, rotund belly, and unstylish hair. Although the obatarian figure, as it elbows its way through the manga, lampoons old women’s annoying and pushy behavior, the figure allows the reader to feel a sense of empathy with those fearless souls who fight back against the slights they endure. In fact it is through her comic absurdity and ugliness that she can more effectively resist social expectations, regulations, and normalization. Similarly, although the self-confident and intimidating obatarian-like image presented by Tanabe’s old woman character may be seen as strange and discomforting, it plays into Tanabe’s strategy of challenging the rigidly conceptualized image of old women in Japanese society.

---

5 The term “high miss,” not often used today, “appeared in postwar Japan as a corrective to the pejorative ‘Old Miss’ used to describe unmarried female office workers who had passed their mid-twenties, the assumed upper limit of the age of marriageability. Tanabe did not create the term ‘High Miss,’ but in the late 1960s and early 1970s she began consciously using it to refashion the image of unmarried working women” (Preston 65-66).

6 Obatarian, a comic character created by Katsuhiko Hotta, a combination of the Japanese word oba (from obasan, which literally means “aunt” but is applied also to all middle-aged women) and “Battalion,” the Japanese title of a well-known horror movie (The Night of the Living Dead).
Tanabe and Aging

Tanabe Seiko is a prolific writer, known for a succession of literary awards, starting with the 1964 Akutagawa Prize. Although the Akutagawa Prize distinguished Tanabe’s earlier works as superior examples of *junkyō* (純文学, “pure literature”), the writer’s later pieces, which were noted for their light and humorous narrative style and mass appeal have been characterized as *chūkan bunka* (中間文学, “in-between”/ “middle-ground” literature)—an intermediate genre located between the *jun* (pure) and *taishū* (大衆, popular) literary extremes. We can see Tanabe’s ability to leverage the characteristics of both pure and popular literature in works such as “*Joze to tora to sakana tachi*” (“Josee, Tiger, and Fish,” 1984). Owing to its incredible popularity, it would be adapted into a feature film in 2004. In this story, Tanabe shows narrative power through her depiction of the heroine Josee, a young woman with cerebral palsy who struggles to live independently, and poignantly demonstrates her will to survive through numerous challenges. Other Tanabe stories feature young women or “high miss” characters who display their capability and autonomy in the face of challenges born from social expectations and norms like marriage, conforming to womanly behavior (*onnarashisa*), and living as a dutiful wife. Even though the author is depicting the struggles inherent in Josee’s sorrows and hardships,

---

7 Along with the Akutagawa Prize and the Joryū bungaku shō (Women’s Literary Prize, 1987), Tanabe has received the Yoshikawa Eiji Prize (1993), the Kikuchi Kan Prize (1994), the Yomiuri Literary Prize (1998), the Izumi Kyōka Prize, the Ihara Saikaku Prize (1998) and others more typically assigned to writers of popular literature. Tanabe’s extensive publications have shown her wide-ranging literary themes from modern settings to classical ones. She has also written historical fiction. Major works include: *Hanagari* (Flower Gathering, 1957), *Shin Genji Monogatari* (New Tale of Genji, 1974-78), *Mukashi akebono* (Once Upon a Time at Dawn, 1979), *Sensuji no kurokami* (A Thousand Strands of Black Hair, 1972) and more (Mulhern 398-402).

8 See more analysis by Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase.
she draws the reader’s attention to the character’s empowerment by adopting tropes that allow
the character to redefine her own identity. Josee takes her name from the strong female
protagonist in a novel by Françoise Sagan, and she also appropriates the image of the tiger and
the fish because these animals represent power (the tiger) and the ability to survive in even the
darkest, coldest, and most alien circumstances (the fish). This intertextual construction of Josee
thus resembles Tanabe’s construction of Utako. The effect of Tanabe’s borrowing is that her
characters can then reinvent their identities, and in the case of Utako, this practice seemingly
confirms the assertion by Margaret Gullette that “age identity is an achievement of storytelling”
since Tanabe’s protagonists often tell their own stories by adapting narratives from elsewhere
(124).

Although she has written over a hundred books in a variety of genres (fiction, historical
fiction, biographies, translations, adaptations, etc.) and published many short stories in popular
literary magazines, only a handful of Tanabe’s works have been translated into English, making her relatively unknown outside of Japan when compared to women writers such as Enchi
Fumiko and Ōba Minako. However, considering Tanabe’s well-established reputation in Japan
and Korea, her works deserve more attention, especially her critical perspectives on social issues
such as aging. As a Japanese intellectual who is aware of the limitations placed upon aged
women, Tanabe seems to have been motivated by other works—especially those by Enchi—that
treat the issues of marginalized groups such as elderly people. Enchi, with her aged women’s
stories, was a pioneer in that she revealed the inner worlds of elderly women in opposition to the

---

9 The novel by Sagan from which Josee takes her name is titled Dans un mois, dans un an (lit. In a month, in a year; tr. Those without Shadows, 1957).
10 A Thousand Strands of Black Hair, Anthem Press (2012), which surveys the relationship of Yosano Akiko and
her husband Tekkan, translated by Meredith McKinney, a scholar of classical and modern Japanese literature who
has also translated Sei Shônagon’s The Pillow Book, and Kokoro by Natsume Sôseki.
male-centered perspective. Pointing to the marginalization of aged women in Japanese literature, Tanabe expresses a desire to develop the depth of aged women’s characters by creating a literary stage on which the *uba*’s personal thoughts and experiences can unfold. At this point, Tanabe’s “*uba*” stories are significant as correctives against the flattened image of aged women; her works flesh out the representations of older female characters, allowing them to imbue the aged female voices with greater agency. Tanabe also affirmed that available stories about elderly people were not what she wanted to read in her own advanced years, because she was unsatisfied with the characters’ unhappy voices. She felt that those voices expressed regrets about and obsessions over their lost youth, keeping them hopelessly trapped by societal norms and expectations.

Tanabe’s purpose in writing and reading aged people’s stories is to find a more positive and proactive aging that offers dynamic agency for old women. Therefore, it is interesting to see how Tanabe’s aged-women stories both resemble and differ from those of Enchi and others, and how effectively she creates an energetic image of the old woman by challenging the negative, homogeneously prescribed notion of the *uba*.

When investigating the influences that Tanabe has had on contemporary literature, it is worth noting Yuika Kitamura’s opinion that Tanabe’s narratives are like “*girls*’ novels for adults” (334);¹¹ Tanabe’s narrative style—sentimental, humorous and light—creates a distinctive literary world, filled with warm, bright, and powerful images of female protagonists who are often unmarried, single women. The representative example is *Shin Genji monogatari* (The New

---

¹¹ Kitamura also points out Tanabe’s wide-ranging concern for women’s contemporary experiences: “[I]n her ‘girls’ novels for adults,’ she often made a single woman in her thirties the protagonist. From the end of the 1950s, when more and more married women became full-time housewives, single women in their thirties who worked outside the home were often severely criticized. Tanabe, however, treated them sympathetically. She has continued to portray women in various situations—not just unmarried salaried women but also housewives and women who are disabled, elderly, or divorced. As a novelist who gives dreams and vitality to women, she has enjoyed a wide female readership” (334).
Tale of Genji), her rendering of the classical *Genji monogatari*, published in 1979. Differing from the previous translations, Tanabe creates a romanticized and dramatized courtly world that aims to appeal to the tastes of the contemporary reader. She also abridges the more lackluster sections in favor of amplifying those that she finds sexually exciting, thus amplifying the overall sense of romance and drama. Although Murasaki Shikibu’s classic tale employs courtly aesthetics meant to romanticize the noble world, Kitamura mentions that Tanabe’s “beautiful and ingenious addictions” allow her to “[depict] a romantic world that appeals to the fantasies of ‘eternal girls’ (*eien no shōjotachi*), women of all ages who want to remain *shōjo* forever…” (338-39). Nonetheless, Kitamura also acknowledges that her adaptation of the tale “came to be enjoyed by a wider range of readers than the original target audience of teenage girls and young women” (ibid.).

While works like *Uba tokimeki* were written for an adult readership, the serious nature of the narratives is belied by the quality of lightness that characterizes girls’ novels. In addition, Tanabe’s clever narratives contain many of the well-established themes and tropes that mark the classical literary fantasies with which the author was familiar. That is to say, her engagement with and translations of classical literature— for example, *Genji monogatari, Konjaku monogatari* (Tales of Times Now Past), and *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book)— provides her with a repository of texts from which she can draw inspiration, and it enables her to bridge the gap between elegance and comedy. Tanabe’s narrative also makes permeable the barriers between youth and age, thereby enabling her to offer more entertaining accounts of old people.

---

12 In comparing Tanabe’s adaptation with other versions of *Genji monogatari*, Kitamura explains that “[in] Tanabe’s…the agonies of love cause only mental distress, whereas the heroines of [Setouchi Jakuchō’s] *Nyonin Genji monogatari* experience their sexuality physically and agonize over it again and again” (341). This observation corroborates other evidence of Tanabe’s efforts to construct a text that perhaps outpaces the romanticization of the original story.
Tanabe expresses a desire to celebrate the growth of “Old Women's Power”—or more generally, “Ladies’ Power”—in Japanese society, with the hope that by gaining reader’s attention, aged female characters will be noticed by contemporary people as figures of strength. Tanabe asserts that her empowerment of female characters is one manifestation of a Japanese society changed by economic growth. Nobuko Awaya, in her study “The Literary World of the Japanese Working Woman,” notes that these social changes placed new focus on women’s liberation and their active roles in family and society as they are depicted in popular media:

In the 1980s, popular television programs and movies began to include numerous scenarios in which women were having affairs, pursuing success in double careers as homemakers and working women, or just striking out on their own. [...This] focus on new roles for women indicates the fascination with which viewers pondered the topics of marital infidelity and the foibles of the “career woman”.... Popular media has raised television and film viewers’ consciousness of women’s roles in society. (245)

In response to societal changes that have benefited younger women, Tanabe presents a more dynamic portrayal of the older woman, describing her as “a beautiful silver-aged lady” who takes the stage with a powerful elegance. “Old though she may be, she still has the energy, vitality, and physical looks not to be undone by the younger women on the scene” (176).

In her article “The Girl-Grandmother Relation in Japanese Children’s Literature,” Tomoko Aoyama identifies several different types of old women in Japanese literature, pointing to the emergence of a “superstar-like obāsan” (56) by the late 1990s, when “the media was no

---

13 Here Aoyama also introduces Saitō Minako’s opinion about the pessimistic and limited fictional existence of “superstar-like obāsan: “After the period of rapid economic growth, haven’t we abandoned old people in the countryside? To a child brought up in an urban nuclear family, the grandmother is a resident of the nostalgic world whom s/he meets only in the summer holidays; she is an ‘alien’ who has hardly anything to do with daily life. There are superstar-like obāsan who have a symbiosis with nature; and there are active, youthful obāsan who refuse to behave like old people. These images of the obāsan dissolve subtle discomfort [about old age] and feelings of guilt in the writer and the reader” (56).
longer able to neglect or segregate women, children and elderly people as readers, writers and protagonists” (55).

Tanabe’s powerful image of the “Old Lady,” while reminiscent of the “superstar-like” uba of the 1990s, appears to be more sober and realistic. Rather than simply rejecting stereotypical images by displaying active and powerful traits, Tanabe creates characters who pursue lives of luxury. Still, Tanabe’s Uba tokimeki, a more serious depiction of an aged woman’s life, has been criticized for over-romanticizing old age and ignoring the difficulties most women face. Kan Satoko, for example, suggests that Utako’s healthy image might be seen as an indictment of elderly people who are unfortunately unhealthy (34). Furthermore, she argues that the story presents not only Utako’s viewpoint, but also includes voices that are critical of Utako’s perspective. As Kan observes, though Tanabe’s story focuses on Utako’s self-confident perspective, which celebrates her own happy life, it also intertwines the challenging voices of others and their critical perspectives on Utako. This allows Utako to continue negotiating her individual desires vis-a-vis sociocultural expectations and encumbrances, revealing her contradictory and self-conflicted attitude.

Thus, we can argue that Tanabe presents the uba in narratives that draw on conventions from both canonical literature and the more popular novels that are meant to appeal to a broad readership. Perhaps as a credit to the author’s ingenuity, even when she is offering subtle social critiques, Tanabe’s readers have come to regard her stories as “delicious” (oishii) or “wrapped in humor” (Morley 157). In her interviews with several literary magazines, Tanabe points out that modern Japanese literature lacks a sense of humor and popular appeal, and she reveals her desire

---

14 See more details about Patricia Morley’s study about Japanese women’s lives that includes the interview with Tanabe Seiko as well as Enchi Fumiko and Ōba Minako in her book, The Mountain Is Moving: Japanese Women's Lives.
to create more accessible and entertaining novels for contemporary readers. Yet, as Kan Satoko suggests, “Tanabe’s works appear humorous but they are sharply critical of contemporary social problems and issues” (24). Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase, when commenting on the popularity of the “Uba” series, notes that “Utako’s free-spirited personality and sharp tongue quickly gained the series popularity among female readers, and it continued for over twenty years” (196). In considering how Tanabe embeds critique within a narrative with broader appeal, we must look to the ways in which the author leverages the local culture of a community with which she is familiar: Osaka. One can argue that Utako’s interest in the nonfictional Takarazuka Revue, a theatrical institution closely associated with the Kansai region, allows Tanabe to explore how her protagonist navigates the intersection of elegance, humor, youth, and old age through the lens of local culture.

It is evident that Tanabe was moved by the classical tale, but she seems to have felt the need to produce her own stylized interpretation of Genji monogatari that would complete what she felt was lacking in the earlier translations, especially that of Tanizaki and Enchi. Regarding Tanizaki’s translations, Tanabe commented, “It’s not interesting” (57), and for Enchi’s, “I had a certain expectation for Enchi’s translation of Genji monogatari. It is beautiful but that was not what I wanted to read” (24). Even though earlier Genji translations by Enchi and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō were highly acclaimed, Tanabe found them unsatisfactory because she felt their stilted

---

15 “Takarazuka’s history brings into relief the commercial nature of the theatre. The Takarazuka Revue Company was founded by an industrialist and entrepreneur who loved theatre, Kobayashi Ichizo. Around 1910, Kobayashi was working for Hankaku Tetsudō (which became part of Hankyū Railroad), a firm that had constructed a commuter railroad line from Osaka to the small hot springs town of Takarazuka. To build ridership on the line at off-peak hours, the company developed the town into a resort. As one of their first ventures they installed a swimming pool—the first in Japan—called "Paradise." Restrictions against mixed bathing and problems with heating the pool left it empty. "Paradise" was turned into a theatre” (Lorie Brau, 83).

16 Contained in a special edition of the literary journal “Eureka: Poetry and Criticism

17 See more details about Kan Satoko’s interview with Tanabe in Kan Satoko’s edited volume Tanabe Seiko: Sengo bungaku e no shin shikaku.
translation styles were not able to interest or engage contemporary readers. Thus, Tanabe can be said to have designed her own literary worlds with the aim of appealing to a broader readership.

“Kiyoku, Tadashiku, Utsukushiku”: Empowering Women through Local Culture

“Pristine, Proper, and Pretty” (清く正しく美しく)—these are the words Utako intones throughout the novel, claiming them as her motto. In fact, these words form the motto of the Hyōgo-based, all-female Takarazuka Revue. A fan of Takarazuka, Utako continually expresses her desire to live out her twilight years according to this motto, which is likely an attempt to link her identity with the glamor of the theater and avoid being brushed aside as just another old woman leading a meaningless life. Essentially, Utako narrates her life through Takarazuka language and principles, conjuring up images of the troupe’s lavish performances and thus exemplifying the power that Gullette attributes to the use of narratives to “tell about one’s self, to self and others, whether informally in conversation or written for archival purposes” (Gullette 124). Moreover, this sort of storytelling works for Utako because it points to a type of consumption that differs from that of the yamamba or obasute. In the case of the yamamba, consumption means death to social order and male power, while in the case of the obasute, consumption threatens the survival of the remaining community. Participating in Takarazuka fan culture signifies an engagement with a local institution that promotes both the local economy and social expectations for women. Utako’s acts of consumption are inscribed in mass culture, making her behavior comparatively safe and appropriate. Still, as I will shortly illustrate, the Takarazuka Revue manages to carve out a space in which women can subtly subvert expectations and explore their fantasies through roles and identities that have previously only been accorded males.
Utako’s participation in the economy is chiefly figured through her attention to fashion, which she claims is another way for her to uphold her belief in the Takarazuka principles. Utako attributes her appearance and energy—despite the fragility of her physical and mental condition—to the Takarazuka motto,\(^{18}\) which supports her adoption of a trendy fashion sense while still demonstrating her own embrace of “Pristine, Proper, and Pretty.” For example, Utako’s outfits reveal her consciousness of eye-catching styles: a light-toned green or brown dress, color-coordinated necklaces, and middle-heeled shoes. Noting the poor fashion sense of her aged peers, who pursue comfort over style, Utako tries to dress herself with greater appeal in accord with the Takarazuka motto. While it may seem as though Utako is modeling herself after fashion-obsessed women, she actually frames her interest in fashion as a way not only to revitalize her aesthetic expression, but also to engage with the prevailing modes of thought typically ascribed to young people. Utako suggests that were she to turn her back on fashion trends, “distasteful, disreputable, disgraceful” would be a more suitable motto, and that she would become a rigid, inflexible old woman who would play into the stereotypes typically associated with the elderly.\(^{19}\) Thus, one must consider how Utako uses the troupe’s slogan to maintain a fresh outlook and to progress beyond the antiquated expectations for aged women—particularly as she strives to make her life “proper” and “pristine.” The protagonist’s use of the slogan shows how Tanabe can present an aged character with an elegance inspired by a notable symbol of the regional culture.

\(^{18}\) 私は七十七のシタタカ婆さんであるから、内心、恍惚としていることなど、誰にもけどうらせない (40).

\(^{19}\) ふしぎなもので、いくら「清く正しく美しく」を実行していても、流行に完全に背を向けると「ダサく、ふざまに、あさましく」という風情になるので、ある程度は、時勢に敏感でもあらねばならぬ (53).
Gullette calls attention to the ability of people to develop their aged selves by “concentrating on the rich history of their identities” and thus reframe age-related physical decline as “achievements.” Doing so helps the elderly “build up their sense of the overall value of time passing”—in other words, finding value in becoming older (Gullette 128). In drawing upon the principles of Takarazuka, Utako integrates the cachet of this institution to build a history of her own aged identity.

It is worth noting here the social influences that led to the Takarazuka’s success, At the time of its inception in 1913, there was arguably a strong accord between the Takarazuka Revue and the ideals espoused by the early Meiji slogan “civilization and enlightenment,” as the Revue showcased productions that were often inspired by Western performance art (e.g., opera, cabaret, etc.) at a time when political discourse was focused on integrating ideals and philosophies from the West. The troupe also drew attention as a marked contrast to the all-male acting tradition of the Kabuki theater. As a modern performing art, Takarazuka succeeded not only because of its unique performance repertoire, but also its ability to bring together talented women performers who drew a largely female audience.

However, Kobayashi Ichizō, the Takarazuka founder, viewed the theater as one of the most powerful means of promoting social norms and expectations for young women to live as ideal future wives and mothers, serving as embodiments of the “good wife and wise mother”

---
20 “During the early Edo period (1603-1868), androgyny was epitomized by the onnagata, the Kabuki theater actor specializing in girls' and women's roles. From the 1910s to the present, generally speaking, androgyny has been embodied, in a delightful role reversal, by the otokoyaku, the Takarazuka Revue actor specializing in boys' and men's roles” (Robertson 422).
21 Jennifer Robertson: “The Takarazuka Revue, founded in 1913, was among the modern theatres which marked the return of females to a major public stage after being banned from public (Kabuki) performances in 1629 by the Confucian-oriented Tokugawa Shogunate” (167/422).
Despite this history of promoting the ideal of ryōsai kenbo, Lorie Brau has considered the success of Takarazuka as a challenge to patriarchy despite the socially-oppressive goals put forth by the institution’s founder:

“[…] it is important to recognize that when it was created, Takarazuka represented some progressive and artistically avant-garde points of view. At least it gave women freedom to perform in an era when there were few respectable places for them to do so. And even if Takarazuka does not address the inequities in Japan's sexist society, but reinforces the status quo and sublimates women's desires through its dreamy narratives, there remains some possibility that certain spectators find it empowering simply to watch women play men. The theatre offers up images of release from oppressive gender-bound roles.” (80)

Takarazuka can be seen as a contradictory space, which is supposed to promote idealized femininity but is instead utilized as a space for indulging female fantasy while allowing women to ‘trespass’ into male roles and identities from which women had been barred. In the same sense, regardless of how Takarazuka was designed by its founder and utilized for the promotion of a state-sponsored gender code, Tanabe uses Takarazuka to subvert this code and present the aged woman venturing bravely into romantic relationships on her own terms.

Utako’s voice undercuts the standard tale of elderly isolation and misery by celebrating bright, expressive images, and in a way, channeling the subversive strength that Robertson suggests is inherent in Takarazuka. Robertson argues that in allowing women to perform male gender roles, Takarazuka reflects—and has substantially contributed to—a blurring of gender boundaries. This is the aspect of the Takarazuka Revue through which Tanabe strengthens her

---

22 Kobayashi envisioned the Takarazuka Revue as the cornerstone of the "state theater" movement in the 1930s and 1940s—a movement whose agenda included the portrayal of state-regulated gender roles and an emphasis on the patriarchal, conjugal household (Robertson 1991b) (Robertson 425). Jennifer Robertson notes “how the Takarazuka Revue was conceptualized as constituting an infusion of the ‘superior’ Japanese spirit into Euro-American theatrical forms. Kobayashi also wanted to use the stage as a showcase not just for the ideal man, but for his version of the ‘New Woman’” (169).
narrative. Though Utako’s adoption of Takarazuka fashion may seem merely superficial, she also provides an alternative image of aging that parallels the success and subversive stance toward gender roles attributed to Takarazuka.

Notwithstanding Kobayashi’s promotion of the “good wife and wise mother” ethos, his Revue effectively established a female-centered world where actresses are free to cross the boundaries between feminine and masculine. In particular, the chūsei image of the “otokoyaku” challenges the idealized feminine while also illustrating the potential freedom for women whose gender roles can be freed from the regulations and social expectations that limit the family-centered definition of “femininity.” The otokoyaku, or male role, best exemplifies this notion of chūsei. The woman who performs the man does so without the “rough” masculinity usually associated with the gender. A reversal of the onnagata role type, she idealizes manliness and provides the female audience with the “dream” of what a man might be—attentive, sympathetic, attractive, while simultaneously “familiar.” Robertson provides yet more insight into the sort of freedom presented by this particular theater company:

Some of the more "progressive" writers and critics sympathetic to the Revue, such as the novelist Yoshiya Nobuko (1904-73), a lesbian, preferred the safe ambiguity of chūsei, with its allusions – like Yoshiya's fiction – to a "dream world" (yume no sekai) free from the constraints of fixed, dichotomous, and hierarchical gender roles. Takarazuka itself was conceived of as a dream world – "a place where dreams are made and sold," according to the Revue's advertisements – and the early theater complex was named, appropriately, "Paradise" (Paradaisu).\(^{23}\)

Although Takarazuka is a stage spectacle divorced from reality, the achievement of various freedoms by its individual characters inspire real women—who must find their own fulfillment

---

\(^{23}\) According to Kitamura, Tanabe has noted that “there is a strong affinity between The Tale of Genji and Takarazuka as girls’ culture,” and Takarazuka has also adapted the works of Tanabe for the stage (Kitamura 339).
within conservative society—to dream and move toward their personalized expressions of freedom. Nowhere is the theater company’s ability to inspire more evident than in Takarazuka fandom, especially among female audience members, which proves the power of women’s consumership and thus bolsters the self-fulfillment and individualism that Tanabe portrays through Utako. Zeke Berlin notes that “another remarkable aspect of Takarazuka is the makeup of the audience, [which] is overwhelmingly female and predominantly under twenty five years of age” (Berlin 39). Berlin also notes that this “predominance of women in the audience has always been the case” for this performance group (ibid.). Tanabe’s depiction of Utako partially pivots upon woman’s central presence on the Takarazuka stage and the cachet afforded to women as they “face the new period of Showa…and finally gain distance from male-centered Osaka culture” (206). The chūsei image associated with Takarazuka is helpful to Utako as she projects a persona in which her subjectivity takes a higher position than the men with whom she interacts. She “acts” like a man while flaunting her femininity.

In shaping her life and appearance by the standards that draw from the chūsei image, Utako faces frequent criticism from her peers, particularly men. In Tanabe’s story, Utako has many proposals from men and matchmakers on the lookout for healthy older women with little means for support who are willing to care for aged men in lieu of professional caretakers.24 She is constantly being coerced into attending arranged meetings by those wanting to match her with a man her age or older. Meetings of this sort differ from those intent on forming friendships. In the former, there is still the expectation that aged women should confine themselves within their own categories:

24”結婚して下さいよ…男はもう、食べるものからして、自分でできませんなぁ。…家庭婦を雇うと高くつきますし、娘は忙しくて私の面倒を見てくれませんし、身のまわりの世話をして下さる方が、明日からでもほしいです。急ぎますんでですよ” (85). In other words, the men seek a sort of wife who will take responsibility for managing the aged men’s household.
specific gender roles in support of men. During these meetings, Utako is confronted by aging men who describe her as “dried up” (shiruke ga nai onna), callously referring to her post-menopausal body and her presumed loss of sexual attractiveness. In their eyes (and by extension the eyes of society), an aged woman is no longer a “woman,” relegated to a state of “chūsei” (in-between). However, just as young single women are forced into marriage-oriented interactions with men, even elderly women are not free from such social pressures.

Utako angrily chides herself after participating in a particularly unpleasant match-making session designed for senior citizens: “I had no business attending such a meeting. At the very least, I have the dignity to live as a single woman by the code of ‘Pristine, Proper, Pretty.’” In this instance, Utako’s self-criticism also serves as a social critique, perhaps implicitly questioning men’s inability to commit to the single life that she pursues herself: “Why is it that old men cannot live without women’s support? And why do women have to take care of men even after casting off their wifely and motherly roles?” Utako’s questions show her desire to live by herself without upholding any sort of gendered responsibilities. Utako rejects domesticity, though not necessarily sexual desire (as will be discussed in more detail below). However, even though Utako’s single life seems secure, her aged body is consistently challenged by a male-centered view that still sees her as wanting in femininity because of her perceived lack of sexuality. Against this male perspective, which is fixed on her aged body, Utako admires the

---

25 “汁気足らん、というのは、もひとつ、オナゴの精気みたいなもんがおまへんことだんにや、ご寮人さんとに” (81).
26 “私があんな会へ入るはずはなかったのだ。いやしくも「清く正しく美しく」を揚げて気位たかき一人ずらしを誇ってきた私が” (50).
27 “自分の一人で生きろ、というのだ、毅然として！” (Ibid.).
Takarazuka not only for entertainment, but also as a means of finding freedom from socio-culturally constructed gender roles.

To counteract the patriarchal view of women’s bodies as valuable only insofar as they are useful to society (i.e. as objects of sexual desire), Tanabe privileges the Takarazuka Revue as a means to inspire Utako in her challenges against the misogynistic sexual advances of men. For example, reflecting upon the group dates that she has been obliged to join, Utako remarks, “I don’t need to have sexual relationships with men,” which suggests her espousal of the motto’s “pristine” values. Instead Utako interprets “kiyoku” as way to reinforce her decision to live beyond the male-dominated feminine code and thus beyond the patriarchal ideals that clash with her personal goals and wishes. In light of her potential male partners’ selfish quests for women who will provide nursing and caretaking, rather than the mutual emotional support that Utako seeks, Tanabe’s protagonist raises her voice in protest, using a slight reinterpretation of the Takarazuka code. The Takarazuka offers a base upon which Utako can develop a personal philosophy that can protect her personal convictions from influence at the hands of those men who have predatory intentions toward women—even aged women.

Co-opting Regional Culture for Empowerment

In her study of old age, Sharon Kaufman argues that “[s]uccessful adaption to old age involves older individual’s connecting meaningful past experiences with current circumstances. Thus, being old does not mean adopting a new self-concept” (126). In Utako’s case, her strong voice and confident attitude emerge from the constructive self-perception generated from reflecting on the achievements of her earlier life. Utako’s personal history testifies to how she
maintains her autonomy and power even after she becomes widowed and aged. Furthermore, by overlapping the aged Utako’s life with the historical struggles of Senba, the traditional commercial center of Osaka where Utako established her strength and self-identity, the story allows Utako to project a voice that reinforces her autonomy by leveraging Senba culture. Utako’s stability in later life is not merely the result of good fortune, but rather the product of her own will to support herself and her family within the larger regional community.

The local culture of the Osaka region, especially Senba, enhances Utako’s remarkably strong voice. Even though Utako lives in a modern condominium in Kobe, her family originally hails from Senba, Osaka. The Senba area has a long history centered on the flourishing merchant culture of the pre-modern period and marked by its own unique customs and dialect, but its cultural clout has waxed and waned over the centuries. Utako’s confidence is a function of her Senba upbringing and her position as a pillar of the community, not merely a personality quirk or the stubbornness of a senile individual. Utako’s life in Senba showed her that strong-mindedness was the way to survive, but Senba does not only secure Utako’s economic power and socio-cultural connections. Senba, with its once-splendid, now-disappearing merchant culture,

---

28 “Senba 船場 was once the center and powerhouse of the Japanese economy and, even after the Meiji Restoration, remained Japan’s most prestigious financial and commercial quarter. As such, its merchants and business people formed a kind of aristocracy with its own unique dialect, customs, values, and lifestyle. Senba is one of the oldest distinct sections in Osaka. Its origins date to 1598, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 was said to have ordered the removal of 17,000 merchant and manufacturing households to make room for Osaka Castle expansion” (Torrance 29-30).

29 According to Richard Torrance, Senba established its central position in various fields during the Tokugawa period, but after the Meiji period, Senba lost its prior cultural dominance by only emphasizing economic power: “The Senba merchants were active in the creation of homily-like codes that evolved into what was probably a quite influential ideology throughout Japan...[and] they also founded important academies in capitalism, politics, science, and medicine during the Meiji era. [...]The traditional family institutions of Senba that survived the transition to a modern economy maintained a physical presence...that transformed the area from a feudal merchant quarter to a focal point for national and international corporations. As its cultural significance declined, however, Senba’s role as the locus of Japan’s modern capitalism led to the depopulation of the old commercial center of Osaka” (35-37).
parallels the course of Utako’s own aging life. Still, Utako has a strength that persists even in old age, and this sets her apart from the faded glory that is represented by Senba.

From the Edo Period playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725)\(^3\) and novelist Ihara Saikaku (1642-93),\(^3\) to modern writers such as Oda Sakunosuke (1913-1947)\(^3\) and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886-1965), the Osaka setting has captured not only the local lifestyle, dialect, and customs, but also two unique gender archetypes, the hopeless man and the strong woman.\(^3\) This stereotypical image of the useless husband and reliable wife persists not only as a fictional trope but also because it reflects the traditional merchant-apprentice system of Osaka.

Although the conventional system degraded women and placed them lower than men, it still allowed women to have access to business and commercial training.\(^3\) Moreover, it demonstrates how family businesses would use the “adopted sons” (yōshi) system that allowed strong,

---

\(^3\) The typical image of “strong women and useless men” may be seen in Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s *sewamono* plays, such as *Shinjū Ten no Amijima* (1721) and in Kamitsukasa Shōken’s ‘Hamo no kawa’ (1917), “whose protagonist Ofumi takes responsibility for running her family’s restaurant, while her husband (who had been adopted into her family as a muko yōshi) runs off to Tokyo and spends his time and money in dissipation” (Murakami-Smith 293).

\(^3\) Richard Torrance traces the records of the Senba area through various literary accounts in his article, “Literary Accounts of the Decline of Senba.” He also mentions Ihara Saikaku’s “Nippon eitaigura 日本永代蔵 (The Japanese Family Storehouse, 1688), which points to the central place Senba held in merchant success stories. One vignette “concerns an older woman who cleans the docks at Senba’s Kitahama, where rice shipments are unloaded” (31).

\(^3\) Burton Watson states that the popular “pattern of the hard-working, all-forgiving woman and the spoiled, ineffectual man is a long-standing one in Osaka literature, already recognizable in the domestic dramas of Chikamatsu and repeated often in later times. Here the reversal of the husband and wife roles that is associated with the pattern allows Oda to poke sly fun at the stereotypes of Japanese thinking on the subject of marriage” (xvi). Oda Sakunosuke, usually listed as a member of the Burai-ha or “Hoodlum” faction of writers in postwar Japan, was a native of Osaka. He is noted for stories that feature the lusty and often illicit lives of its “ordinary” people.

\(^3\) “[These] stereotypes [of the strong woman and spoiled man] can be seen [as] a sort of masochistic male fantasy subscribed to by these male writers (Chikamatsu, Kamitsukasa, and Oda), in which the man is dependent on the woman, but is free to ‘play’ as he wishes, with the naïve confidence that she will continue to support him regardless of what he does” (Murakami-Smith 293).

\(^3\) “By custom, businesses carefully selected boys from families with which they had close, long-standing ties, including the families of men or women who had risen through the apprenticeship system” (Torrance 53). However, Torrance notes that Senba was still run by a male-centered system, “The female counterpart of Senba’s detchi bōkō system was called jochū bōkō 女中奉公 (maid apprenticeship). This form of labor was less important to the Senba economy and appears only peripherally in the literature portraying the area. First, Senba was, in terms of population, a male society. Due to the male apprenticeship system, young men vastly outnumbered young women” (54).
competent women to take charge of the business in place of their ineffectual husbands (264).\textsuperscript{35}

Speaking of this image of a strong Osaka woman, Miyamoto Mataji states that “male predominance (\textit{dansonjohi}) was balanced by a ‘worship’ of reliable women with a talent for making money” (263).

Calling to mind the prevailing pattern of a strong wife and a powerless husband, Utako fits into the Senba and Osaka cultures since she managed to empower herself in the face of various post-war challenges. Utako’s life mirrors the hard times—for instance, struggling to sell off household items in order to keep food on the table\textsuperscript{36}—that affected Senba during and after World War II. And although the war brought about tremendous casualties, damage, and deprivation for both Utako and the region, it opened up new opportunities for those willing to be enterprising. Utako proclaims that, “At that time, it wasn’t the familial name or my husband’s face that allowed me to secure the loan from the bank. […] It was my fighting spirit” (11).

Along with the infrastructure and merchant assets destroyed in the turmoil accompanying the war, conventional customs were broken down. With the men either dead, disempowered, or debilitated, women were left with the responsibility for rebuilding. Tanabe depicts Utako as one of the women who, in her husband’s stead, strives and succeeds in rebuilding her family’s business after the war. As Kan Satoko points out, Tanabe’s penchant for single female characters is more than a show of empathy for the independent lives that women sometimes lead (154-55).

\textsuperscript{35} Murakami-Smith cites Kobayashi’s text (27, 52-54).

\textsuperscript{36} 船場の商家の秩序は崩壊してしまった。空襲でどこもかしこも焼野が原、[...] よう大阪へ帰らなかった船場人も多い。…私のうちでも、舅、姑は腑抜けのようになってしまった。夫は幸い、兵隊にとられ年のではなかったけれど、これからオバオタして呆然自失、私は焼け残った家財道具を売ったり、いろんな商売を試みて食いつなぎ、…もともとの商売をはじめるようになった (11).

\textsuperscript{37} “そのとき銀行が融資に応じてくれたのは、家のノレンや夫の顔ではなかった。[...] つまり、私のファイトである” (11).
Tanabe’s interest also touches on the experience of “war widows” (戦争独身女性), whose situation did not gain much public attention. While Utako is not a war widow, she most certainly contends with the disadvantages of single life since she must survive without assistance and guidance from her husband, who became sick and burdensome with the war’s outset. Without the imposition of male power via her husband as she navigates the complexities of the business world, Utako demonstrates the independence that an enterprising woman can achieve. Thus, despite the devastation and trauma wrought by the war, Utako does not give in to pain and anguish, and instead shows her capability and fortitude by dealing with her experiences as opportunities to prove herself and get ahead in the world.

In this view, Tanabe celebrates Utako's single life just as it is. Rather than depicting an older woman who covets the fulfillment and independence potentially available to younger women, Tanabe portrays an older woman who embraces the possibilities afforded by a single lifestyle, including both overcoming pain and trauma and working toward personal accomplishment and peace of mind.

Her independent spirit has given Utako the strength to oppose her son when he blithely reiterates the tiresome maxims about ideal women. Her son says:

There are two types of Osaka women […]: one is that “Dear, rely on me” type. That loyal type that will say, “Even if you’re sick, I’ll take care of everything, even if it takes years for you to get better.” …Then there’s the other type, that seems different. Dad told me about it, that “unreliable, pitiful woman who will simply collapse alongside her man, following him into death” (157-58).

Countering her son’s assertions, Utako replies, “God, by ‘unreliable’ I think you mean useless” (ibid.). The debate between Utako and her son regarding the image of Osaka women highlights the paradox at the heart of that image: that a woman should be strong enough to support her man
completely, while at the same time being completely reliant on and submissive to his protection and guidance. The son, while pretending to reveal his father’s hidden thoughts, claims that the ideal Japanese woman—fragile, delicate, and dependent upon the support of men—is essentially the total opposite of Utako. He denigrates Utako’s strength, overlooking the fact that not only his father, but he, too, benefited from her courage and personal sacrifices. In other words, it was precisely her independent and positive attitude that allowed her to preserve the family during the chaotic war-time. It is thanks to her that her children now enjoy comfortable lives, yet when the first son says that “all men like the Oyuki-type woman, who always walks one step behind a man,” he deploys an image of ideal womanhood that excludes Utako.

The description of Oyuki refers to a popular 1970s enka (Japanese ballad) song performed by Naito Kunio (b. 1939), which sold over one million copies. The following is a particularly apt excerpt that tells of the unwavering dedication and commitment displayed by Oyuki toward her lover:

```
Motte umareta unmei made
Kaeru koto nado dekinai to
Kata ni oita te furikiru you ni
Ore no senaka ni mawatte naita
Are wa … Oyuki to iu onna…
Unable to change the fate
that’s been born unto her…
She rejected the hand upon her shoulder
and cried upon my back,
this woman Oyuki…
```

In the song, Oyuki appears as the typically docile woman who gains the protection of an unnamed man. As the lyrics show, Oyuki resigns herself to her fate, weeping upon the man’s back. The image of Oyuki walking a step behind him projects a sense of self-restraint or a lack of

---

38 男という男は、みんな、『おゆき』という女がすき、少し遅れて歩く癖 (160).
39 The original text of the song, translated for inclusion here, is as follows: 持って生まれた 運命まで 変えることなど 出来ないと / 肩に置いた手 ぷりきるように / 俺の背中に まわって 泣いた / あれは… おゆきという女.
confidence in the presence of a man. Noticing the idealization and fantasy supported by such an image, Utako voices criticism against her son, saying, “If there are only those sort of women then Japan is already doomed…more than Oyuki, “O-uta”\textsuperscript{40} is what we need now. You’re behind the times” (160-61). Utako’s words show how Tanabe adopts images of stereotypical women in her story to expose the absurdity of “ideal” womanhood. The Oyuki of the past should now be replaced by the “O-uta” of the present, a woman who refuses to cry in the silent shadows behind her man’s back.

While the name “Oyuki” has many associations and does not refer to a specific woman, another association that comes to mind is Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s novel, \textit{Sasameyuki}, set in Ashiya, near Osaka. This celebrated novel details the lives of four sisters struggling to maintain their lives against the backdrop of the Sino-Japanese war. The third sister, Yukiko, is unmarried and quickly approaching an age when it will be too late for her to find a husband. She is depicted as a traditional Japanese beauty who appears delicate and frail, like the wispy snow suggested by her name and the title of the novel, both of which contain the character for “snow.” But her ability to hold out against the unsatisfying marriage matches sent her way suggests a headstrong woman not unlike Utako.

Among Tanizaki’s many works, \textit{Sasameyuki} in particular shows the author’s deep admiration of Osaka culture as a means to portray male desire through the fantasized woman.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Utako adds the honorific “O –” to the first character of her own name to create a character parallel to Oyuki, this one created in her image.

\textsuperscript{41} Tanizaki employs a familiar typology of Osaka merchant society, with a male character, Teinosuke of the branch family who fits the prototype of “the weak son of a wealthy Senba merchant household, (…) incapable of earning a living, who wastes his days in dissipation and often is supported by a woman; and the strong, self-reliant Senba woman, successful in business and able to support a shiftless husband” (Murakami-Smith 263). As one of Tanizaki’s feckless male protagonists, Teinosuke worships the unreachable beauty of the female character. Recreating the Osaka world through the male perspective, Tanizaki skillfully provides his own presentation of womanhood.
Although Tanizaki’s Yukiko appears strong-willed in refusing marriage until she finds the man she wants, from the perspective of the male gaze Yukiko is depicted as introverted and restrained, which makes her more attractive to men.

While his works touch upon Osaka women’s strength, Tanizaki eventually praises the more introverted Yukiko as the epitome of eternal beauty. Among all the female characters in the story, Yukiko is the most romanticized. She is rendered through the primary male character’s affectionate gaze and the lens of Osaka culture such that she appears exotic compared to the other Osaka women. Yukiko, whose idealized femininity might be seen as outmoded, is the means by which Tanizaki revives a past that has been lost.42

In her work, Tanabe utilizes the Osaka character to oppose male fantasy. This opposition takes the form of Utako’s objection to her son’s outmoded beliefs. Therefore, Utako might be seen as the vehicle for Tanabe’s challenge to male-centered discourse, as noted by Sharalyn Orbaugh below:

…women writers might choose to maintain the current binary configurations of power, but to reverse the gender coding of the hierarchical power roles. Instead of being silent, women can speak; instead of being the objects of others’ gaze, they can use their eyes; instead of being killed, they can kill; instead of being dominated, they can dominate. Women who choose this strategy in writing realist fiction must show their protagonists overturning the power hierarchies in a world still configured by those hierarchies. (123)

In an effort to provoke audiences to reassess the feminine docility and fragility supported by the men around Utako, Tanabe dispenses with the characteristics that one might attribute to the ideal

42 Itō Sei’s interpretation of Yukiko’s difficulty in finding a husband offers insights concerning the ultimate use of her status as an idealized woman. Ito suggests that readers may be “hoping that she will never marry, that she will never become the exclusive property of one man, and will retain forever her incomparable beauty” (Tanizaki Jun'ichiro no bungaku 13).
heroine who remains dependent on men. Through the image of the Osaka woman, Tanabe reveals the unwelcome pressure, from a woman’s perspective, added by male desire as it seeks out both the powerful and the aestheticized woman.

Moreover, Utako’s separate residence shows a woman’s strong determination to remain independent even in her old age, and her desire not to use her seniority to dominate her sons. Unlike the stereotypical mother-in-law figure in Japanese literature, she does not intend to interfere with the lives of her adult children. It was a social convention at the time, and largely still is, for the first son to take care of his parents. Utako, as a wife, had followed the custom by living with her mother-in-law, with whom she had a troubled relationship. However, instead of mindlessly adhering to this social convention, Utako rejects what is expected of her now that she has herself become a mother-in-law. When the eldest son invites Utako to live with his family, she refuses and insists upon living alone. With her ample financial resources, Utako still maintains enough power to control her sons and daughters-in-law if she so desired, but she separates herself from the younger generation and allows them to live their own lives, while she enjoys the rest of her life as an independent woman.

Tanabe also reinforces the contrast between Utako and her family members when the older woman, who manages to cope within an ever-changing society, draws the ire of her sons and daughters-in-law, who despite their youth appear much more conservative than the aged protagonist. Such generational conflicts draw attention to the struggles that aged women face when trying to express their voices in opposition to the will of those to whom society has granted more authority and power. When one of her sons says that “an aged old mother should follow behind her son,” it also brings to mind the traditional Confucian dictum that exalts the “three obediences”: daughter to father, wife to husband, and widow to son. A staple of prewar (kindai)
education, the Confucian credo emphasized the virtue of women’s subjugation to men. Moreover, the son’s insistence on his mother living with him, rather than being based on his filial piety or concern for his mother, stems from his concern for the family’s reputation and his business, which would benefit from his mother’s abilities and financial support. It is possible that the son wishes to avoid criticism for neglecting his filial piety, but Utako references his overly-controlling attitude, calling her son a “kejime suki ningen” (12) which carries the same tone as the English expression “little emperor.” Privileged by Senba culture but at the same time breaking the bad cycle of some of its customs, Utako’s life is presented as a model of happy aging. This story pictures both the independent life of an aged woman and the self-centeredness of children wanting to take advantage of their mother for personal gain.

“Senguri, Senguri!” – Osaka-ben and the Rōjo’s Voice

While Tanabe shows the empowerment of an elderly woman through her participation in regional business activity—particularly Utako’s experiences with owning and directing a business in the Osaka area—her use of the Osaka dialect enhances the story’s treatment of power in yet another way. The dialect helps Tanabe maintain a light and humorous tone, while at the same time de-centering the standard narrative that would have Tokyo as the norm. In the process, Tanabe explores the depth of Utako’s personality and her difficult journey as an aged woman in the context of various relationships—romantic, familial, and societal. Her narrative maintains a humorous tone within a painful world, dealing with the loneliness, regret, and grief that may accompany old age, all the while avoiding excessive dramatics. Utako’s voice differs from the
annoyance and anger conveyed by the *obatarian* figure or the lamentations of the abandoned woman. Instead, Utako speaks frankly and directly, but her voice is softened and enlivened by the levity that people associate with the Osaka dialect. The pattern of speech that Tanabe accords Utako still allows for the *rōjo*’s voice to express dissent, but in a manner that adds a pleasant quality that may serve to dispel negative images assigned to aged woman.

Scholars have linked Tanabe's light and humorous mood with her Osaka background and the Osaka dialect that appears in many of her works. Here Tanabe can be compared with other Osaka writers—for instance, Tomioka Taeko (b.1935)—whose use of dialect has been regarded as more humorous than the Tokyo dialect. However, the creation of a humorous tone was not Tanabe’s sole intention when she opted for dialect in her narrative. Tanabe states in her essay “The Intrigue of the Osaka Dialect” that she began using dialect to challenge the inflexible attitude of the biased literary community and the general public, who considered Tokyo’s standardized language to be the proper medium for expressing human emotions, especially love (2). As an Osaka writer Tanabe challenged such perceptions: “Young people in Osaka also express love just like anyone else. Are they expected to start speaking a different language to their lovers?” (2). Andrew Murakami-Smith’s study, *Dialects and Place in Modern Japanese Literature*, raises the same issue:

> “Language is a system which depends on discriminations, categories, rules, and exclusions for its intelligibility; in short, it is inextricably linked with normative power. […] Can dialect, a form of variety, provide a resistance to the totalizing

---

43 Hiromi Kinjo compares of Tanabe’s use of Osaka dialect and her humorous narrative style with those of Tomioka, “Although both Tomioka and Tanabe are from Osaka, Tomioka does not use the Osaka dialect as Tanabe extensively does; rather she writes in the standard Tokyo dialect. … Tomioka’s humor is *kansō shita* [dry], while Tanabe’s humor is *akkerakan toshita* [open and cheerful]” (199).

44 Those of Tanabe’s readers who are used to the standardized language will have difficulty understanding the exact meanings of the Osaka dialect. However, the dialect’s dynamic intonation is better than the standardized Tokyo dialect at communicating humor.
power of the ‘standard language’ (標準語 hyōjungo), a form of standardization which is linked with the Tokyo center, the government’s language policies, and the commodification of cultural products?” (22-23)

Kawasaki Kenko also argues that Tanabe’s socio-critical view is manifest in the “Osaka dialect” (209).45 This suggests that Tanabe’s use of dialect reveals not only her concern regarding the standardization of cultural forms by the Tokyo-centered literary establishment (bundan) and the Japanese government, but it also demonstrates her determination to show how the Osaka dialect can effectively describe delicate, vivid, and romantic emotions.

However, Murakami-Smith also claims that,

any Japanese literary texts which feature dialect appear at first glance to be an unproblematic case of caricaturing of dialect for the purposes of humor, or of the use of simplified dialect merely for local color, or on the other hand, of resistance of dialect against the center and ‘standard language.’ However, literary texts, like other cultural products and practices, are complex, hybrid things not reducible to a single ‘theme.’ (24)

As he mentions, the literary texts written in dialect are capable of producing complicated, multilayered meanings beyond the author’s design. We see Tanabe’s own embrace of this objective in her use of the local dialect.

Tanabe also delves into Utako’s upbringing in the refined, elite manners of Senba, which is set apart from other Osaka merchant subcultures. The Senba dialect has a more complex hierarchical aspect compared to the more general Osaka dialect. In her essay “Regarding Osaka Dialect,” Tanabe relates an anecdote about the Osaka writer who wrote Senba monogatari (Tales of Senba): “He recalled his troubled childhood experience concerning proper honorific usage; when describing a cat when he was young, he had to use an honorific suffix even for the cat; [he

45 田辺文学の社会性、批評意識は「大阪言葉」のうちにひそまされている (Kawasaki 209).
would refer to the cat] not as ‘neko ga iru’ but ‘neko san ga iharu’” (161). Regarding the
difference between the standard Kansai dialect and the local Senba dialect, Murakami-Smith
explains that Senba merchants used more honorific verb forms, such as “-haru,” that are now
used mainly in Kyoto as a form of refined politeness (35). Utako, as a daughter of a prominent
merchant family in Senba, was of course raised in that local culture and still enjoys and
appreciates its refined language. In integrating this refinement into Utako’s character, Tanabe
underscores her protagonist’s sophistication and elegance—qualities likely to evoke a sense of
nostalgia for pre-war life. At the same time, Tanabe uses this refinement to add depth to what
might otherwise be dismissed as mere comic interludes in Utako’s life.

For instance, Utako has occasion to remark on the elegant manner in which her
companion Tatsugen speaks: “To my ears, his free-flowing style is rather refined” she says at
one point. Tatsugen’s distinguished demeanor is evident in his conversations with Utako, insofar
as he uses Senba dialect interlaced with words and styles associated with Kyoto’s upper-class
community. Tatsugen tells Utako how much he anticipates spending time with her again, saying
“I think so fondly on that time. We should get together again at the temple in our hometown and
talk about this and that. Lately, I just think about how much that would brighten the life of this
old-timer” (123).46 On the one hand, Tanabe invests her texts with examples of how the dialect
can elicit serious, genuine, and sensitive emotions by featuring character’s strong feelings of
nostalgia or excitement upon using or hearing the dialect. At the same time, Tanabe also explores
a light-hearted and cheerful application of dialect, particularly where Utako’s emotions—be they

46 なつかしくなつかしく存じます。ぜひもう一度目にかかり、生まれた町の天満の事、あのことこの
ことなだ歌子さんにお話し申しあげべく、愚老の人生に希望の光の再び差し込むのをおぼゆる、今日こ
の頃てございます。
excitement or anger—are concerned. Upon deciding to go on a romantic outing with Tatsugen, Utako thinks to herself, “This is happiness and satisfaction” and is pleasantly surprised as she recalls an old Osaka expression that had enjoyed wide currency: “Senguri, senguri” (128). The phrase is meant to convey supreme delight and joy, and Tanabe attributes this heightened emotion to Tatsugen. In this moment of elation, it is the local language that Tanabe uses to convey romantic sentiments that might seem inappropriate for older people.

Tanabe does not set her stories in Osaka simply because of her familiarity with its culture or language, or because it is a novel setting for a story. Rather, her opting for local dialect serves as a narrative strategy for resisting a biased socio-cultural perception. In utilizing Osaka culture to help ‘empower’ her character, Tanabe positions Utako in direct opposition to the stereotypical image of the pathetic, useless old woman.

The Starry-eyed Uba (Yume miru uba)

It is in the context of Utako’s seventy-seventh birthday party that Tanabe illustrates the aged woman’s strained relationship with her three sons and their wives, and it is her resistance to their party-planning ideas that symbolizes the transition between old and new social orders. In fact, more so than the younger generations in her family, Utako tends to show greater flexibility in her attitudes. It is this flexibility that moves Utako to desire more control over her party in order to change the event from a social obligation into an occasion to assert herself. Her family, however, has different plans in mind. The eldest son offered to host the birthday celebration at a luxurious restaurant and invite his business contacts, but Utako dismissed the idea, saying:

“unlike the olden days when everyone suffered from malnutrition, nowadays people stay alive for eighty or even ninety years; though the 100th birthday would
be meaningful, the seventy-seventh is nothing to fuss about. If I can live until a hundred without becoming demented, that should be celebrated, but who knows? You [the first son] might die before me. Hahaha.” (8)

The celebration for having survived seventy-seven years, called “喜寿” (kiju) in Japanese, can be interpreted as “happy aging,” or “happy longevity”—ki (喜) not only represents the number seventy-seven 47 but also contains the meaning of happiness and joy, while ju (寿) signifies longevity. Utako’s reaction to her son’s offer to host the party may be seen as peculiar, for celebrating the seventy-seventh birthday is a well-established event. As Satsuki Kawano observes:

Longevity’s recent increasing presence in Japan has undermined its cultural value. Older persons today are reconsidering the meaning of a long life in their family and social lives, but also ceremonially. Japanese folklore studies show that people's desire for achieving long life pervaded customary celebrations, which were conducted for persons aged 61, 77, 88. (Kawano 155)

Utako’s critical view of the seventy-seventh birthday celebration indicates her consciousness of social changes in her time. Living seventy-seven years is not worth special attention, considering the increasing longevity of the Japanese. However, this scene points as well to the conflict between the young and old. Ritualized events for the aged are significant not only to celebrate parents’ long lives, but also as a way for the younger generation to fulfill their obligation of filial piety (oya kōkō) and maintain family connections. Utako's indifference toward the event may be said to reflect her critique of such meaningless rituals. Her eldest son enjoys an especially lavish social life, and the party was merely a ploy to invite his business associates and earn their praise, rather than a sincere effort to please his mother. Utako’s rejection of the party plan was

47 The simplified version of this character contains the character for ‘seven’ twice.
motivated by her family’s treating the celebration as a mere performance, a means for younger people to put on a show of respect. Instead of indulging them, she continues living her independent and socially active life.

Regarding Utako’s own party, the sons shamelessly reveal their bias towards old people, in particular their own mother. Using the term oban (an impolite abbreviation of obahan/obasan, “old woman”) to refer to their mother, her children express their objection to her ideas for the party, resentfully saying, “What on earth! Try acting like a proper old woman and stand behind your children and grandchildren” (25), and “I will talk to you about how to behave like a proper Japanese mother… living obediently, depending on your children. When your children prepare a birthday party for you, then you should demur and be grateful for your children’s efforts” (25). Utako’s son emphasizes his mother’s proper role: even in old age, she should be mother-like; worse, the aged mother should adopt a “docile, obedient” attitude because of her age. The son pronounces his male-dominant prescription for a mother-son relationship, where the aged mother should dutifully obey the son—thus abiding by the Confucian “three obediences” dogma mentioned earlier.

Also, as previously noted, in opposition to the demands of her son, Utako further detaches herself from the maternal role. During one argument with her family Utako says, “What the hell is a Japanese mother?! Once I passed seventy, I got rid of the “Mom” badge. I’ve paid my dues!” (25). Kinjo Kiyoko, in her Kazoku to iu kankei (Family Ties), treats the resurgence of the ie system—which in turn reinforces values concerning proper motherhood—in the post-

---

48 This response by Utako illuminates the oppression attached to “boseiron” (motherhood discourse) and the “ryōsai kenbo” (good wife, wise mother), both concepts carried over from pre-war times that emphasize the woman’s sacrificial role.
49 The Japanese traditional family system, based on a male head of household and succession based on primogeniture.
war and contemporary period, as a means of revalidating patriarchal authority (36). Utako’s words are significant in that for her, entering her seventies entitles her to celebrate her liberation from the yoke of Japanese motherhood. At long last she can claim her freedom and proudly express her individuality. Utako’s liberated perspective underscores the sense in which the elderly are victimized by families that have become painful burdens that one wishes to discard.

In this regard, Laura Dales holds forth on independent living in her “Suitably single?: representations of singlehood in contemporary Japan,” while highlighting Ueno Chizuko’s “Singlehood at the End of Life: Following Widowhood or Divorce”:

The term *ohitorisama* is less pejorative. It is variously translated as ‘single’ or ‘singleton’ … Iwashita defined *ohitorisama* as ‘an adult woman with an established individual identity.’ Although Iwashita explicitly noted that even married women could be *ohitorisama*—and she herself was married—in popular discourse the term is used to refer to unmarried women who dine alone, go on holidays alone, or otherwise act independently. […] While the *ohitorisama* discussion is often tied to women’s consumption and materialism, the model *ohitorisama* is primarily characterized by her independence. She may also challenge popular feminine ideals, by being career-focused rather than domestically inclined, or by being active in pursuing romance. The *ohitorisama*, as depicted in Iwashita and Ueno’s models, offers an alternative to versions of femininity categorized by their adherence to ideals of nurturing, family and care. (23)

Tanabe portrays Utako’s “*ohitorisama*” lifestyle by illustrating a single woman’s independent life, challenging the image of dependent, aged parents, especially the widowed mother’s unflattering depiction.

---

50 Ueno Chizuko’s discussion of “mid-to-old age singlehood” in her best-selling 2007 study, *Oshitorisama no rōgo* (Old age for the singleton), brought the term *oshirorisama* into popular use. The term, coined in 1999 by the late journalist Iwashita Kumiko (see Iwashita, 2001), is one of the more recent additions to the popular lexicon of often disparaging terms used to refer to single women—including ‘Christmas cake’ for unmarried women over 25 years (as diminished in value as a Christmas cake after 25 December), ‘dokushin kizoku’ (single aristocracy) and ‘parasite singles’ (who live with their parents and spend their disposable income on luxury items)” (Dales 23).
Further evidence of Utako’s eagerness to embrace a life beyond traditional roles comes when she devises the idea of hosting a fancy party at a luxurious hotel as an alternative to her children’s offer of a token gesture of a party at a convalescent home. Utako also proposes hiring a real band instead of a karaoke machine, and inviting her own friends instead of relatives or business associates. Not meaning to spitefully reject the formalized ceremony or birthday customs, Utako rather intends to have a party where she can actually enjoy the occasion in the company of friends. Her resolve only strengthens in response to her daughter-in-law’s opposition: “That kind of fancy party is proper for younger people” (20). While the sons and their wives think Utako ought to go along with the traditional custom of celebrating one’s seventy-seventh birthday, at the same time they think that she does not deserve to have an enjoyable party that they deem improper for their aged mother. Utako responds: “Why is it that an old woman cannot enjoy a party like young people? Actually, young folks can enjoy their party anytime” (20). Utako’s argument is an effective strategy for countering her children’s interruptions, claiming the few remaining years left to her (though she personally does not think she will die soon) to get her way.

Clearly, Utako’s plan for her own seventy-seventh birthday party points to her unflagging claim to personal autonomy, in the face of familial hegemony. This suggests the growing generational divide regarding attitudes toward the aged. Here, Utako’s question of “why” is especially significant. Tanabe enables Utako to act assertively by taking advantage of the prerogatives of old age. As Andrew Blaikie points out, “[a]lthough 'elderliness' is generally denoted by physical appearance, cognitive and social changes often move along separate trajectories; a person may look old but retain strong mental alertness and possess 'youthful' social
attitudes” (7). The family’s view of Utako's party is blinded by the biological factors tied to aging, failing to acknowledge her own desires and preferences.

Utako makes her final argument against her family’s wishes with the following statement: “You’ve already benefitted greatly at my expense. […] I want to do what I want now that I'm old enough” (25). In the final analysis, she hosts her own party without asking for her children’s help. The disagreement can be seen as merely a family spat, a perfectly commonplace argument between an aged mother and her grown-up sons. But Utako’s situation suggests that such conflicts have long existed but rarely subjected to the critical gaze of writers and scholars.

Ueno Chizuko points out that “[e]lderly people often have a very negative self-image because they look at themselves through the eyes of people in their thirties and fifties” (215). Utako untethers her self-image from this socially constructed view of the elderly, which leads her to possess a more positive self-image than is the case with her peers. She resists labeling herself according to the views of others, because she thinks of herself as still being competent and active. Although Tanabe presents Utako as conscious of the culturally constructed image of the elderly, she ultimately privileges Utako’s desire to create an age-identity that is not bounded by family or social customs.

In an interesting departure from other stories about aging women, in which troubled familial relationships are the primary cause of suffering for the elderly, Tanabe's story portrays Utako’s familial conflict as an opportunity for her to voice her own thoughts about her aging process, her shifting identity, and her personal desires. Utako’s seventy-seventh birthday party serves as her declaration of freedom from social and familial expectations. Tanabe subverts what could have been a source of burden and suffering, turning it into an occasion for claiming one’s freedom and independence.
The Rekindled *Tokimeki* in the Hearth of Local Culture

Utako eventually selects a paramour for herself, her old friend Tatsugen. The romance that ensues does much to soften Utako’s character and adds the refinement associated with her Senba dialect. Through the affectionate presentation of the aged couple’s relationship, Tanabe creates a beautiful, if sentimental, image of an aged woman who appreciates both the traditional refinement of Senba manners together with the freedom to conduct her life as she sees fit. This is one of the strengths of Tanabe’s narrative strategy: it suggests an alternative, more positive portrayal of aged people’s lives and loves, rejecting the biased views of their romantic relationships as something improper and shameful. Furthermore, Tanabe makes a point that the ideal romantic relationship for the aged couple does not necessarily have to be limited to the platonic level by showing Utako’s open attitude toward sexual relationships among the elderly. Although Utako occasionally expresses a fondness for single living, she does not reject all romantic relationships, as she says, “Being a fan of Takarazuka, I hold ‘Pristine, Proper, Pretty’ as my life code, but even so, I’m not so rigid as to think of love as detestable” (27). Rather, Utako is concerned about finding a partner with whom she can experience a romance that is free from the social constraints she had experienced earlier in life. During the group dating experience, Utako encountered a number of peers who were still concerned with social markers such as alma mater, home ownership, and job security—factors that might make sense for a young person intent on starting a family. However, Utako had already passed the test of raising a family, and now looks to move beyond the concerns that typically weigh upon younger

---

51 “私は宝塚愛好者で、「清く正しく美しく」の生活信条を持っているが、それだからといって、恋を、「いやらしい」と思うような動脈硬化オバンではない” (27).
individuals, instead seeking deeper emotional connections outside the domain of socioeconomic necessity.

In the introduction to his edited volume *Women Ageing Through Literature and Experience*, Brian Worsfold offers additional insight into the expectations that aged people have for their romantic partners, and he finds that a dilemma can arise with the “underlying difference in gendered sexualities that characterizes female and male ageing; while ageing women worry about their diminishing sex appeal, ageing men worry about their diminishing sexual prowess” (xxi). Worsfold continues by noting “[t]he asynchrony of the difference is augmented by the fact that, while preoccupied with their own power to attract men, elderly women are not concerned about the physical appearance of their male partners” (ibid.). In *Uba tokimeki*, we see a slight accord between Worsfold’s assertions and Tanabe’s presentation of Utako, but the protagonist’s experiences also show the concern that aged people may have for matters beyond sexual attraction and stamina—two factors of courtship that can be said to weigh heavily even on young people’s minds. For instance, the group dating experience showed that some elderly men were searching for a sexual partner who could double as a maid. And from Utako’s perspective, we see that she is interested in a male partner who will be a companion in romance without the expectation for Utako to fulfill roles that resemble her earlier duties as mother and wife.

We can see the overwhelming concern that Utako has for a relationship to be about more than physical appeal in the critical perspective that Utako shows toward her friends’ search for eroticism in their own romances. Through Utako’s desire for a multi-faceted relationship, Tanabe creates an aged woman character whose voice and attitude are not easily categorized within the conventional domain of female literary characterization. Tanabe’s presentation of Utako’s desire
is unrelated to depictions of the *yamamba* in Japanese fiction, and her independent life does not fit with the ‘abandoned woman’ pattern.

Thus, Tanabe’s depiction of an aged love relationship takes on a more nuanced and positive portrayal that strays away from the suggestion that aged women are grotesque and unsuited to romantic affairs. Also, by highlighting Utako’s liberated lifestyle, social skills, and business acumen, Tanabe creates a distinctly positive image of a strong yet refined woman, one that belies the stereotype of the pathetic old hag or the comically obnoxious *obatarian*.

In retirement, Utako remains socially active by teaching calligraphy using *Kokinshū* poems, haiku, and for fun she enjoys *senryū* (*川柳*), a popular comic variant of haiku. Utako has a good reputation among the locals; even younger students become interested in traditional aesthetics and emulate her stylish and elegant manner. Hence, through the various details of Utako’s social life, Tanabe presents her protagonist as an exemplary figure who bridges the older and younger generations.

Readers learn more about Utako’s vitality when she rekindles her romantic relationship with Tatsugen, whom she had met as a teenager when he was living nearby in the Senba area. Although time has passed and Tatsugen has changed a great deal from his youthful days, when Utako is exposed to his refined and gentle manner and his usage of the Senba dialect, she is reminded of her long-forgotten girlhood. Back then the two may have harbored romantic feelings, but these were never expressed. The Senba dialect, which helped conjured up these old memories, becomes the medium for Utako and Tatsugen to reinitiate their relationship. Here again, we see Tanabe’s work with different elements of local culture as an avenue for building a connection between two elderly people. Rather than playing up their sexual attraction to one another, Tanabe highlights their cultural affinity and shared background, which generates a
nostalgic link with one’s youth. This nostalgia in turn helps remove the barrier between age and youth by connecting Utako to her past.

Moreover, Tatsugen’s refined manner and the elegant correspondence he sends move Utako, who is at first skeptical about love or friendship among aged people. Being conscious of how younger people would view them, and having lost her trust in men after having endured much suffering, Utako takes a jaundiced view of aged people who shamelessly expose their love life in public. Even as an aged woman herself, Utako views aged people’s romantic relationships as unseemly. This resembles the pattern in Tanabe’s love stories of single women, in which a heroine in her thirties voices her skeptical view of the male-female relationship, regarding it as mere fantasy. Eventually, however, the heroine resigns herself to a romantic relationship because of her unremitting loneliness and as a last gesture to place trust in other people.

Nonetheless, it was Utako and Tatsugen’s long life experience that led the protagonist to develop an affection toward the elderly man. Tatsugen’s manner of writing and speaking and his deep consideration for other people reflect both his character and his wealth of experience. Utako believes that younger people are unable to emulate such manners, and so she becomes attracted to Tatsugen. Shortly before their courtship, she remarks to herself, “Tatsugen’s style of letter writing shows his masculine, straightforward personality, and in the way he chooses words, I can see his refined and cultivated attitude. […] His writing shows what a modest and mature person he is, having been trained over the course of many years” (123). Even the characters’ aged bodies contribute to the romantic mood: they first exchange love letters as a means to compensate for Tatsugen’s hearing difficulty. Their correspondence reveals their facility with stylish prose, and Utako gradually develops a romantic relationship with Tatsugen, whereupon they plan a trip to a hot spring.
Since their advanced age reminds them that death may be imminent and that they may not have many chances left to pursue their relationship, Utako and Tatsugen quickly schedule their romantic getaway. However, when Utako arrives at the hot spring location where they are supposed to meet, she learns that Tatsugen has passed away due to a sudden heart attack. Rather than breaking down in grief and dismay, Utako reacts with composure. While she sees other old people praying for a quick and painless death, Utako instead seeks to widen her social circle and enjoy the company of others.

In an interview with Ueno Chizuko, the gerontologist Inoue Katsuya discusses the reasons why elderly people may wish to visit a temple dedicated to ‘pokkuri’—quick and painless death—arguing that the “pokkuri wish is not a death wish. Although it takes the form of a death wish, it is essentially a wish for […] a life filled with pride as a human being who tries to preserve quality of life by dying” (Ueno 215). Such a wish also reflects a “consideration for caregivers who will be inconvenienced” and a “sadness and indignation about being regarded as a nuisance” (214). Thus, the concept of a ‘pokkuri death’ touches on older people’s legitimate concerns about being ill and bedridden, all the while awaiting death. However, Utako considers the ways in which she can continue to enjoy life instead of fretting about whether she might be a burden to her younger relatives.

In some ways, Tanabe uses Utako’s romantic relationship to draw more on the local culture and its use in helping Utako empower herself as an aged woman who chooses to live outside the confines of family. This is evident in the “Pristine, Proper, Pretty” motto epitomizing her dedication to living as a single woman, which in turn helps her create such a life—one that makes romantic relationships not only possible, but desirable. Also, through personal expression and participation in the local atmosphere, Utako maintains strong connections with her
community even in old age—for instance, as a calligraphy instructor—and she rekindles old connections that reinforce her independent lifestyle.

Furthermore, Tanabe includes aged characters other than Tatsugen with whom Utako associates, thus presenting various vignettes of the elderly, some of which run counter to Utako’s personal credo. Still, her flexible and tolerant attitude towards others shows a wisdom broad-mindedness that acknowledges the complexity of elderly lifestyles. Here, Tanabe’s readers are inclined to reflect on our twilight years as potentially rich and fulfilling—anything but a death sentence that promises nothing but pain and depression.

Reframing Aging: Putting the A-G-E-D back into “Golden Age”

Gullette’s survey suggests that were the concept of “age identity” to be defined using a gerund—in other words, using the word “aging” rather than “age” to emphasize the “‘–ing’ of ongoingness”—then “[a]ging identity’ would be less static” and would avoid the current predicament that makes the notion of aging “so crowded toward later life” (129). In the “aging identity, aging is the ground of possibility [sic] of developing any identities at all” (ibid.). Utako’s aged life calls to mind the “ongoingness” that Gullette describes, emphasizing the continuity of personal narratives that do not vanish as one ages. Utako resumes a romantic liaison from her younger years, expresses her desires even after her husband, friends, and lovers perish in old age, and fashions an independent life for herself. Furthermore, her example shows how a narrative of old age can be decidedly positive, insofar as it foregrounds the potential for freedom and fulfillment of one’s personal wishes and desires. In short, one is entitled to free oneself from burdensome impediments—including one’s own family.
With statements like the following that appear at various points in Tanabe’s narrative, Utako shows her power to dream even as her position in society moves to a more marginalized status: “These feelings of passion—that’s what I want to use as my medicine. This is my dream, and maybe this makes me an old woman with a dream or a dreamy-eyed old woman….” (129). This statement shows Utako’s determination to hold onto her free spirit, engaging in romantic and social activities that can heal and satisfy the aged body. Rather than going along with the prevailing ideas that old people represent the dying and deteriorating portion of a community, Utako embraces the notion that the elderly can hold on to the vivacity that is often only attributed to youth. Nonetheless, she is still aware that others may view her outlook as unrealistic, shameful, and selfish. Utako admits that her thought process either figures her as a rōjo with an optimistic viewpoint or one who is completely divorced from reality. However, Utako seems not to care, instead maintaining a positive outlook that fuels the dreams that the elderly are not generally encouraged to embrace. Because of the inevitable association between advanced age and illness/death, people are socialized to focus on the physical and economic burdens and problems that they might cause as they become older. However, Tanabe portrays Utako as someone in pursuit of her desires without posing a threat to society, who finds a way to claim her independence despite the disapproval of family and peers.

By depicting how the aged Utako deals with others—primarily members of her own family—Tanabe’s readers gain a sense of how elderly people are encouraged to relinquish their personal dreams and autonomy in order to fulfill prescribed roles in the society at large. In her effort to show how Utako forged an independent identity apart from the conventional roles of

---

52 心のときめき、これを大切なクスリにしたい。これは私の夢、私は夢見る姥、夢見姥なのかもしれないが (Tanabe, 129).
“mother,” “wife,” and “grandmother,” Tanabe presents an alternative image of the *uba*, whose acts of consuming culture and engaging in the larger community allow her to share in various mass cultural establishments (e.g., Takarazuka, Senba business).

Unlike Enchi, whose *rōjo* earn the sympathy of readers when they give voice to the bitter realities of living in an aged body, Tanabe Seiko makes little effort to gain readerly sympathy for her aged characters, whose traumas are not always foregrounded to the same degree as with Enchi’s characters. In Enchi’s work, the aged protagonist typically remains anonymous or lacking a sympathetic treatment, which the author achieves by leaving the *rōjo* character nameless—or, even if she has a name, channeling her individual expression through the creative output of other women.

On the other hand, Tanabe’s Utako figures prominently not just within the narrative, but also in the context of family. And as we have seen, she considers her twilight years as a “golden age” (ゴールデンエージ) and displays an unapologetic self-confidence and optimism. Nonetheless, Utako is not exempt from the normal travails of aging—illness, family problems, emotional isolation, and anxieties concerning death. Yet Utako is undaunted in her resolve to achieve independence and personal fulfillment.

Here, in other words, is a character who enriches the landscape that authors have carved out for treating the elderly. In a sense, then, Tanabe does for Japanese literature that which Gullette has called for in other domains when she notes that “[i]t is dehumanizing to ignore the diverse ways we experience ‘aging’” (Gullette 124). Gullette also states that “[i]t is illogical and damaging to keep ‘aging’ in artificial conceptual isolation from our multiple identities” (ibid.).

Gullette’s perspective touches on the distinctions one might draw between Tanabe and Enchi in how they have contributed to the discourse on women’s aging. While Enchi’s stories
still garner sympathy for the ヵョ by giving marginalized old women a voice to express their sorrow, Tanabe fashions a protagonist who sees the end of her life as offering new challenges and possibilities. Here Tanabe’s move to privilege the individuality and strength of the elderly recalls Ueno Chizuko’s call for overcoming pernicious stereotypes of old age and the elderly. In her study, Ueno adopts Taro Hanamura’s opinion that “the issue of old people and the issue of old age should be distinguished, and it is the latter that requires an urgent discussion (Hanamura, 1980)” (Ueno 222). As she argues for the importance of undoing the stigmatization of old age, Ueno states that “what the old age issue is demanding is a re-examination of the whole value system of modern industrialized society, which can only give old age a negative identity” (ibid.).

As we have seen, Tanabe manages this reaffirmation of the elderly and their value to society through the figure of Utako. In contrast to Enchi’s portrayals, which touch on a shared experience of pain and suffering among elderly women, Tanabe showcases aging as a horizon of opportunities for a renewed meaningfulness and vitality.

In conclusion, while Enchi empowers women by collectively exposing their inner thoughts and feelings Tanabe empowers them by exploring the subjectivity of one woman who resolutely resists the unfortunate denigration of old age and the elderly. While the approach of these authors does indeed differ, the impact of their work is uniformly positive in its widening the domain of literary characterization and stimulating discussion and debate regarding societal norms and values relating to old age.

53 “…[T]o talk of the elderly is to create a category of people definable by their elderliness alone (they can possess no existence independent of their elderliness, and thus considered ‘not fully human’)” (Blaike 16).
Conclusion

“…our bodies become evaluative markers…judged in ways that define our self worth.”

– Kathleen F. Slevin, “Managing the Aging Body”¹

Is the aged body truly deserving of the innumerable derogatory labels attributed it by society? Even if we admit the disadvantages that stem from becoming older, the lessening of physical strength and the dimming of mental acuity, should they be enough to warrant terms such as “undesirable,” “disgusting,” and “repulsive”? Is it fair to believe, as some do, that aged individuals are less fulfilled than their younger counterparts? Our everyday encounters with aging are likely to be clichéd, further grounding our experiences within a system of bias that unduly affects women. Evelyn Pezzulich’s “Breaking the Last Taboo” points out that “[gender] politics make clear that although aging is a difficult process for anyone in a culture that privileges youth, it is especially difficult for women. Women receive a disproportionate share of their power through their youth, which is often equated with beauty, as compared to men. In addition, older women are more apt to be discriminated against in terms of being stereotyped through clichés about aging […]” (92). The monstrous image of the flesh-eating crone is just one stereotype that exaggerates the insatiable desire—especially sexual desire—of an old woman such that she is construed as a threat to those around her, particularly men. The other stereotype considered in this investigation was that of the abandoned crone, whose potential to harm society is mostly delineated in terms of her marginalization and uselessness, which threatens scarce resources. Because these unfair images of old women mostly work to disadvantage a specific segment of the population, the subject has not often been discussed or studied, mostly because

¹ Slevin, Kathleen F. “‘If I Had Lots of Money... I'd Have a Body Makeover:’ Managing the Aging Body”.

177
such a discussion would need to come from those who are not affected—yet. However, greater attention to the plight of aging women might come by doing more to uncover the wider effect of the problems surrounding age and gender as put forth in this investigation.

The task of escaping marginalization and relegation to decline-focused narratives may be an especially difficult undertaking, but nonetheless an undertaking that is worthy of pursuit if we are to believe Gullette’s assertions about the positive gains that result from such an enterprise. In response to the preponderance of stories that speak pessimistically of aging, Gullette suggests, “Perhaps when ‘the body’ intersects with age, our stories cannot ever be entirely free of cultural imposition. But…we can imagine a good deal more freedom and pleasure and hopefulness in having an age identity than many of us currently experience—a better chance at those values that the master narratives deny” (139). In other words, the inclusion of and increased attention to stories that treat aging from a variety of perspectives allows more opportunities for writers and readers to appropriate the age identities most suitable to their experiences and hopes for the final stages of life. One demographic that has particularly benefited from this expansion in the possibilities for aging narratives is that of Japanese women.

Without authors such as Tanabe Seiko and Enchi Fumiko, the representation of the elderly in the literary canon would tend toward stories that propagate biased sociocultural views that work subtly to silence the voices of aged women. Enchi’s method of challenging conventions (Chapters 3 and 4) provides an awareness of the current constraints on our realities, and how the aged body is used as an implement of social oppression. Through the flower-eating crone, the cat lady, and the sound of the *kinuta*, Enchi allows the reader to visualize, share, and hear their struggles. In her story “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers,” the old woman’s actions toward the crab cactus become a means to confront the expectation of self-confinement that her
younger counterpart is still struggling against. Rather than curb her desires and self-expression, the old woman explores the connotations of allowing oneself to freely reveal one’s interiority. With the help of this particular rōjo, the younger woman begins to reflect on the implications of a past in which she constantly closed off her emotions from the world. As for the aged protagonist in “The Cat Scroll,” her decline is very closely tied to the pressure of continuing to live within a family environment, as her son and his relatives refuse to show anything other than contempt. Under such oppressive surroundings her existence is ignored, but the old woman manages to express her desires and feelings through her paintings and caring for stray cats.

Enchi’s “Kinuta” shows yet another example of the creative endeavors (e.g., plays, artwork, etc.) that women pursue as a means to challenge social expectations, but in this particular narrative, the creativity is shared between women. Thus, the shared exploration of gender roles in “The Old Woman Who Eats Flowers” and the coping through artistic expression in “The Cat Scroll” are both used in “Kinuta” which presents two women who attempt to understand and ease the pain of their physical decline. Hence, rather than eschew the troubles experienced by marginalized women, Enchi’s narratives delve further into the self-confinement and adherence to social codes that plague the aged woman, making her readers witness to the suffering to which much of society had been ignorant or indifferent thus far.

As examined in chapter 5, Tanabe’s aged character proclaims her determination to challenge the will of those who would restrict her behavior. Utako dedicates much of her time to defining herself and proving the vitality that she still carries with her, even at an advanced age. Although she, too, endures struggles that may remind readers of the trials that test Enchi’s protagonists, Utako relies upon the wisdom and experience afforded by her age to challenge arguments by family and friends that she should continue to uphold the social code for old
women. Thus, Utako presents herself as still capable of enjoying her life to the utmost, an image of the rōjo that is still quite rare in the literary canon.

As an alternative to the large swath of stories that limit the depiction of the aged woman, the two authors considered in this study have reshaped the discussion surrounding decline and the aging female body by integrating more prominent images of the liberated and autonomous rōjo. This changing treatment of female aging still acknowledges how the body functions as a significant marker of old age, but there is a willingness to refine the models that constrain how all members of society might view the process of becoming older. Inspired perhaps by their predecessors, a number of authors have recently begun to examine more closely the clichéd slowness, dullness, and unattractiveness that makes aging undesirable through the subjectivity of the affected women, and thus, these writers have encouraged readers to refresh their viewpoints on aging and reassess the social oppression that continues to treat the elderly as a marginal and inconsequential group. According to Tomoko Aoyama, “[a]s the world’s most advanced ageing society, Japan has seen rapidly growing scholarly interest in literary/cultural representations of old age, although here again old women have long been neglected” (50). Aoyama corroborates her assertion by citing criticism from Tanabe who argues that “even when old women play important roles in classical texts such as the early eighth-century Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and the mid-Heian Ise monogatari (The Tales of Ise), male scholars have often ignored or distorted such scenes and texts” (ibid.). This leads us to explore how at least one female writer manages to bring the elderly into central focus after their isolation to the periphery in such classical narratives.

Contemporary woman writer Kirino Natsuo (b. 1951) offers one such challenge through her fictional revival of the mythical figure Izanami, who was forever condemned to live in Yomi
after dying in childbirth. By retelling this particular episode from the *Kojiki*, Kirino’s *Joshinki* (*The Goddess Chronicle*, 2008; tr. 2013)² re-explores the female goddess Izanami and her dark home in the underworld where women’s pain continues forever. In many ways, Izanami might be described as the first “-aged character” in Japanese literature because she lives on in death, forever. Her decayed body is displayed as a testament to the frailty and infirmity of the human form. In contrast, her male counterpart, Izanagi (or Izanaki, as Kirino has it), who never ages, suggests the noble purity of youth. After all, it is from the unblemished male body that the most exalted deities are born.

Kirino appropriates Izanami’s voice to retell the *Kojiki* myth. In so doing she overturns the original male-centered account that had abandoned Izanami to her fate and had effectively silenced the goddess’ ability to give voice to her rage. Treated as an outsider by those who have recorded history, Izanami is locked within the realm of death, known as Yomi, and is driven by profound anger to kill those who remain in the land of the living. In this way, Izanami becomes associated with death—perhaps too easily—in multiple ways: not just suffering from it but also meting it out to others. The result is Izanami’s perpetual defilement, which prevents her from ever being able to rejoin the world of the living.

In a similar way, the aged can become isolated from society due to the inevitable association between aging and death. In extreme cases, as can be seen in certain examples from *The Goddess Chronicle*, the link between death and old age leads to an individual being completely barred from reentry into society. The elderly become pariahs, set apart from their younger, more robust counterparts. Yet, these links between certain groups and death do not

---

change reality or yield solutions to guard against death. Rather, the associations serve to illustrate the desperation of humans’ efforts to make sense of the mysterious dynamics surrounding death.

Kirino’s revision of the ancient tale in *The Goddess Chronicle* emphasizes the barriers between the dark world of death and the world of the living. In the *Kojiki*, the borders between these two worlds are rigidly constructed. The giant boulder Izanagi placed between the worlds effectively sealed the goddess in place and prevented any possible breach or travel across realms. But in *The Goddess Chronicle* the boundaries are permeable. Even so, when given the opportunity to leave, Izanami refuses to forsake the underworld and the vengeful promise she made to end one thousand lives every day. The goddess’ decision to remain in Yomi stems from her acute feelings of resentment. Once she had been celebrated as the mother of Japan. But suddenly she was deputized as the goddess of death and darkness after her death in childbirth and her abandonment by Izanagi, who trapped her in the underworld using a large boulder. This painful reality for Izanami is closely related to the dynamics of the patriarchal system which informs the cultural customs and religious traditions that have so effectively redefined this woman and confined her within Yomi. Therefore, even when Kirino’s story introduces a way out of the underworld—which would require her to acquiesce to a request by Izanagi, who had earlier spurned her—the goddess’ decision to stay shows her resistance against a reality governed the male desire and repulsion which led to her confinement in Yomi. Without a change in the social system, Izanami’s escape from Yomi is unlikely to result in increased fairness for other women who suffer under the burdens placed upon them by sociocultural standards. Hence,

---

3 “My defilement bothers me not in the least, and I have no interest in saving anyone! All who end up here will stay here forever, doomed to drift, directionless. […] It is my lot, my choice to accept all of the world’s defilement. And should one delve deeper and deeper still into the heart of this defilement, one might discover there something entirely unexpected. But, Izanaki, that has nothing to do with you” (ibid. 306).
Izanami seems to be trying to define her own position apart from men’s willingness to summon, dismiss, and redefine women in accordance with their needs. The fact that Yomi becomes the convenient space in which men can carry out their need to isolate a dangerous entity like Izanami can lead us to consider how the elderly—a group whose connection to death draws out similar social anxieties—are also isolated as a means to somehow protect society. In fact, as we will see, by also relating a story about a small group of island inhabitants in ancient times, Kirino’s narrative touches on the parallel between the isolation experienced by Izanami and the isolation forced upon certain marginalized demographics (i.e.: the aged, women, etc.).

The same fears that form the barriers used to separate women from society have also been used to preclude the experiences and participation of aged individuals from their communities, a dynamic that is also portrayed in The Goddess Chronicle. Unlike Izanagi, Izanami’s aging and decaying body is placed front and center in both the old and the new accounts of her exile to Yomi. After death, all creatures decay according to natural laws, meaning that decay is not a personal fault for which only Izanami is guilty, yet the god Izanagi does not experience the same confinement and association with death as accorded the goddess. Izanami’s defilement allows society to pardon itself for its harsh treatment of her, disguising its disdain for her willingness to challenge patriarchy by using her familiarity with death as a supposedly objective sign of her malevolence. A similar tactic is also employed against the aging bodies of humans in The Goddess Chronicle, as the protagonist Namima recalls that the most elderly residents on her island were often “rounded up” and locked within a beach hut until they

---

4 In both Kirino’s retelling and in the original Kojiki, when Izanaki first stumbles upon Izanami’s body, he finds that she “was festering with squirming maggots; her beautiful face had sunken into itself. […] And on her face, her hands, her legs, on her stomach, her chest, and her female parts, the thunder gods crouched and writhed” (ibid. 122).
starved to death.\textsuperscript{5} Like Izanami, these individuals are deemed closest to death due to their age—no matter their actual vitality or contribution to the community—and under the guise of protecting scarce resources they are summarily cast out of the island society. Furthermore, these individuals are cloistered away from the eyes of the other residents, much as Izanami is trapped in the far off realm of Yomi. Thus, \textit{The Goddess Chronicle} shows the pattern of women struggling to thrive within cultures that readily take advantage of or abandon them, and the same can be said of the oldest members of a given community. Therefore, when an old woman must interact with society, one can reasonably infer that she is on the receiving end of at least two well-established modes of objectification due to her elderliness and her womanhood.

Scholars such as Slevin “[highlight] some of the unique challenges women face as they grow old in a culture that devalues women in general and old women in particular” (1006). As we investigate the uneven treatment of Izanagi and Izanami, even more of Slevin’s observations grant us insight into this lack of balance: “there is a double standard of aging whereby old men’s bodies are viewed as distinguished, but old women’s bodies are seen as failing to live up to feminine ideals—indeed, they are reviled and stigmatized. If older women fail to do the body work needed” (ibid.). During one particular discussion between Namima and Izanami, the two characters critique the mysterious system that allows Izanaki to remain unscathed even after venturing to Yomi, while the goddess is forever locked in the dark world. “Why is it that Izanaki alone is permitted to walk freely in the world of sunlight?” asks Izanami, to which Namima answers, “There is nothing you could have done. And since Izanaki-sama is male, his life has never been so threatened. It was childbirth that decided the difference in your fates” (136).

\textsuperscript{5} “Whenever the chief noticed an increase in the number of old people, they would be rounded up and locked in a hut on the beach where they’d be left to starve to death. Such were the cruel customs on the island of my birth” (ibid. 59-60).
Izanami immediately counters by stating, “So you say, but male though he may be, Izanaki gave birth to all those other gods after he left the Realm of the Dead, did he not?” (ibid.). Hence, Izanami and Namima’s conversation illustrates the double standard of which Slevin speaks.

Furthermore, considering the fact that the *Kojiki* is a fictional work, it stands to reason that Izanami’s return to the world of the living could very well have been integrated into the story. With this in mind, the arbitrary nature of the goddess’ banishment becomes very clear. Slevin includes yet another argument that illustrates the possible damage of the capricious standards that society heaps upon women: “[compared] to men, women of all ages have historically been defined through cultural prisms that present images that are narrower, distorted, trivializing and harmful” (1006). Kirino’s narrative points out each of these repercussions not only with respect to the goddess,⁶ but also using other aged figures that populate the story.⁷

The trivialization, distortion, and narrowing of images assigned to the elderly body touch upon what scholar Frits de Lange observes of the long history behind “the idea of old age as horrific, disgusting, and tainted by mortality” (176). De Lange also notes the “three Rs of ‘Repudiation, Repugnance, and Repulsion’” before going on to ask, “What makes the elderly so easily the object of indifference, neglect, or even abuse?” (ibid.). One might look to the lack of voice granted to old women when accounting for the ease with which such negative identifications arise. Without a clearly defined voice, the *rōjo* is objectified by society as a means to play “other” to younger cohorts who dislike the aged body for its ability to “[remind] us of our

---

⁶ One notable example of Izanami’s trivialization comes at the hands of Izanaki, who abruptly ends their union with the following decree: “My beloved wife, Izanami! You are now the goddess of the Realm of the Dead, and we must go our separate ways. I hereby declare our divorce” (Kirino 124).

⁷ Namima’s great-aunt proves to be another case of trivialization—this time with respect to an aged human in the story—since Namima only discovers that she had a great-aunt after the woman had died: “No one had told me about Nami-no-ue-sama because they saw me as they had seen her— as someone beneath notice. It was as if we were invisible” (ibid. 73).
own vulnerability and mortality” (ibid.). De Lange calls forth the term “ageism,” as the concept is particularly suited for indicating a discomfort and social anxiety that is borne of a “terror” likely surrounding death. More specifically, this terror drives “the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves, thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings” (ibid.).

De Lange also points to “[ageism as an]…anxiety buffer, keeping the awareness of aging and its inevitable decline and end at a distance […] and] constructing a cultural worldview of growing older in which everything that reminds us of deep old age at the threshold of death is kept far away” (177). This reality seems to compel the authors treated in this study to break the silence that allows such othering to persist. As Slevin notes, “[given] the cultural devaluation of old age, it is not surprising that people internalize negative notions of aging throughout their lives” (1003). But this examination has considered how writers like Tanabe actually invite the images of old women for reevaluation even if they are unsettling. These acts of reappropriation in contemporary literature have prompted us to focus on why female characters are associated with grotesque imagery, allowing us to discover more critical and realistic views within the range of depictions concerning marginalized women’s lives and the ongoing social mistreatment and disregard of these people. Thus in a way, even though our bodies cannot be completely freed from their cultural connotations, for the aged body there is power in at least being critical in how the prescribed social meanings are internalized—an approach that can be seen in the stories of Tanabe and Enchi.

---

8 In defining “ageism,” de Lange uses the following explanation: “a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old” (De Lange 177).
9 “…[the] origin of ageism is to be found in terror…” (ibid.).
Tanabe’s aged protagonist never betrays a sense of desperation about being alone or depending on others. Furthermore, Tanabe seems to tip the scales more in favor of depicting the decline of men in contemporary society, rather than solely focusing on the struggles typically attributed to women. This contrasts with the original version of the *Kojiki* mentioned above, in which the aged woman’s escape from decay, loss, and hardship becomes a narrative that is less privileged than the analogous male experience. On the other hand, Tanabe shows women managing their social lives and positions with seemingly less trouble than men who are shown to struggle without the aid of women. This depiction of men in need of women’s assistance is quite plausible in light of men and women’s differing roles after retirement: Men can be retired, but women cannot retire from their social burdens. Both Enchi and Tanabe recognize the importance of mediating their unconventional portrayals of the aged body with the more rigid conceptions—loss of physical attractiveness, power, erotic desire, etc.—assigned by society. Thus, these and other writers highlight the aspects of aging that feign their adoption of the decline narrative along with social conventions for gender roles. Nonetheless, the authors also turn such principles on their head in favor of the abnormal, unfamiliar, and somehow uncomfortable.

Therefore, contemporary writers have strongly presented evidence in line with scholar Sylvia Henneberg’s assertion that “[aging] and senescence…became fertile ground for self-development and creativity” (114). Still, when a scholar points out that “[self] identities are

---

<sup>10</sup> Men can also suffer severe social deaths after retirement, especially if they were leaders in their professional cohort. Still, at the time of the writers primarily considered in this study, Japan was in its economic boom, and men had a higher likelihood of receiving generous retirement benefits that signaled the appreciation for their earlier professional work. On the other hand, many women may have restarted work after caring for children. Or they kept their careers but were not valued as much as male co-workers. So, their social death comes after a long experience with being undervalued professionally. Moreover, they must transition back into the domestic (home) space where they still have obligations, and their work may again be taken as undervalued and granted.
intimately connected to how our bodies appear and perform” (1003), how do we measure the power of a writer’s creative focus on the body to assist with releasing society’s deep-seated aversions to aging, possibly occasioning a reformation of unfair treatment towards old people? After all, basing a redefinition of women’s bodies upon the frightening images that have been accorded them throughout history can be a risky gamble. Nonetheless, from the selection of narratives included in this study, we can argue that without the writers’ attentions to the body, their criticisms of the unfairness against old women and their efforts to enhance the subjectivity and individuality of this marginalized group may have struck only a weak blow to the social norms that repeatedly blind readers to women’s dynamic lives. Gullette notably affirms the ability of literary explorations to assure a richer variety of portrayals, if not through a complete separation from culture, at least through a measured awareness of it: “Perhaps when ‘the body’ intersects with age, our stories cannot ever be entirely free of cultural impositions. But even now we can imagine a good deal more freedom, pleasure, and hopefulness in having an age identity than many of us currently experience—a better chance at those values that the master narratives deny” (139). And if the works of Tanabe, Enchi, and others are to serve as a yardstick, the awareness of future writers must be well-poised to overtake the illustrations that have substantially restyled the age-old rōjo thus far.
Bibliography


