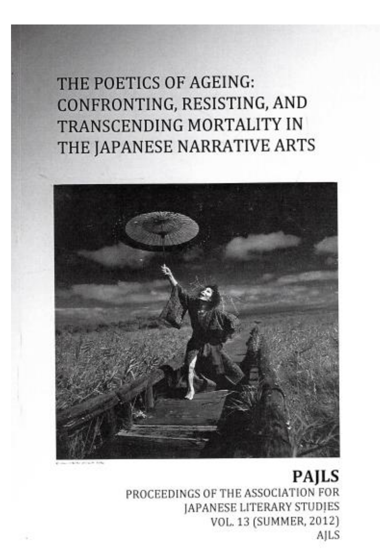
Front Matter for

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 13 (2012)

Including a foreword by Susan Napier



PAJLS 13:
The Poetics of Ageing: Confronting, Resisting, and Transcending Mortality in the Japanese Narrative Arts.
Edited by Hosea Hirata, Charles Inouye,
Susan Napier, and Karen Thornber

THE POETICS OF AGEING: CONFRONTING, RESISTING, AND TRANSCENDING MORTALITY IN THE JAPANESE NARRATIVE ARTS

EDITED BY
HOSEA HIRATA
CHARLES INOUYE
SUSAN NAPIER
KAREN THORNBER

PAJLS

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies

VOL. 13, SUMMER 2012

PAJLS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ASSOCIATION
FOR JAPANESE LITERARY STUDIES

VOL. 13 SUMMER 2012

HOSEA HIRATA
CHARLES INOUYE
SUSAN NAPIER
KAREN THORNBER, EDITORS

THE POETICS OF AGEING

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Forward to *Proceedings*

Susan Napier
Tufts University

In Act 3 of *Hamlet* Shakespeare famously has Hamlet describe death as "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns." Such a vision of death is not restricted to the West. In the deathbed poem of Matsuo Basho, the famous haiku poet writes, "Stricken on a journey/ my dreams go wandering/ on withered fields." (tabi ni yande/yume wa kareno / wo kake-meguru. Scott Miller, in his essay for this volume, talks about the paths two younger writers take in anticipating their "night journeys" towards death.

Aging and death are indeed our final journeys but these journeys can be the most emotionally resonant ones that we will ever take. As this volume shows, aging and death in Japan come in many fascinating and moving guises—sometimes, noble, sometimes grotesque—but always memorable. Our conference theme "The Poetics of Aging: Confronting, Resisting and Transcending Mortality in the Japanese Narrative Arts," was partly inspired by an article that our keynote speaker, the Nobel Prize winner Oe Kenzaburo published in the *New York Times* in August, 2010. Entitled "Hiroshima and the Art of Outrage" the article movingly discussed how Mr. Oe's "late work" was to serve as the protest of "an old Japanese man" against nuclear proliferation. The fact that in his seventies Oe is still active and dynamic in a variety of causes and in his writing encouraged the conference organizers to ask for papers on the many ways aging and death can be portrayed in Japanese culture.

As this volume makes clear, what Edward Said has called "the last great problematic" has preoccupied Japanese writers for centuries. In articles by Washburn, Brownstein, McGee, and Huang we see old age and death weaving into premodern poetry, narratives, and plays. Although in a Confucian society respect for the aged is considered a given, these pre-modern narratives sometimes show the aged as figures of derision. They include Naishi, the randy 60 year old woman in *The Tale of Genji*, described in Washburn's paper, the aged and incompetent male

characters appearing in Brownstein's analysis of several Chikamatsu plays, and the aphrodisiac -swilling old lechers in seventeenth century erotica discussed by McGee.

Reactions to aging and to the aged are major issues as well. Besides derision and respect, love towards the elderly also exists. Evelyn Huang shows how perhaps the most famous legend of aging in pre-modern Japanese literature, the so-called *Obasuteyama* (old woman abandonment) story is actually a variant on Indian and Chinese abandonment stories. But the Japanese version contains a moving twist—the young man who is supposed to abandon the old woman cannot bring himself to do so because he is overwhelmed by memories of her many kindnesses. Modern people can still find wisdom in the words of the aged. Chiara Ghidini links the past to the present by showing the respect the anthropologist Origuchi Shinobu accorded elderly women story tellers who served as vehicles of oral transmission across centuries. Eiji Sekine presents the way in which the autobiographical writer Yasuoka Shotaro deals with the death of his mother by seeing her demise as "a return to nature." John Solt contributes an original poem for this volume on the death of Ohno Kazuo, the 103 year old butoh dancer pictured on our front cover, in which Solt works through a complex continuum that includes horror, reverence, confusion and love.

Turning to the contemporary period, we find fewer visions of elderly men among the conference papers but Mary Ellen Mori and Michael Cronin give us two intriguing examples. Mori's paper goes back to premodern ideals of reclusion to link with Oe Kenzaburo's modern twist on the forest hermit. Cronin's paper also discusses a work that incipiently goes back in time, the Kansai area novel and movie *Noren* which feature a lost Osaka embodied in the ghostly character of the works' aging father.

Where the older woman was perhaps less important in pre-modern Japan (with the major exception of the *yamamba* or mountain witch legends), aging or elderly women take virtually center stage in many of our conference papers dealing with the modern period. Particularly frequent were papers exploring aging women and sexuality in literature, popular culture and manga. Not surprisingly, there were two papers on Enchi Fumiko, perhaps twentieth century Japan's most important female writer and one

known for her uncompromising and imaginative visions of complex and often dark male-female relations. Yoko Kurata's paper discusses clothing as a metaphor in Enchi's late work while Barbara Hartley discusses the fearsome presentation of "blighted bodies" in another Enchi text.

Premodern archetypes of female aging continue resonating, as Mano Takako points out in her discussion of the *yamamba* in contemporary poetry. Here the witch is seen in opposition to stereotypes of feeble old woman, existing instead as an exemplar of '[a woman] who exists on the borders of life and death, filled with life and bringing with her blessings and calamities." The notion of old women still possessing agency and sexual energy is central in several other papers, including Naoko Sugiyama's "Looking Old. Feeling New," in which she discusses a sympathetic female-centered approach towards aging in some *shojo manga* and the sometimes thorny gap between perception and reality. Hiromi Dollase's paper on Tanabe Seiko's *Ubazakari* stories also highlights an optimistic vision of aging, with Tanabe's heroine fighting against the many negative stereotypes of old women that she encounters. Tomoko Aoyama's discussion of Sano Yoriko's vision of role reversal between a senile mother who thinks she's a child and her exasperated but still loving daughter is more poignant than optimistic, yet it still shows Sano's capability for finding humor in a stressful situation.

Other visions of women and aging are far more pessimistic. Ellen Tilton-Cantrell discusses the depressing reality of caring for aged parents embodied in the notion of "thorn pulling" in the work of Ito Hiromi. Nakagawa Shigemi's paper calls for a rethinking of our limiting notions of women, aging and sexuality, while Amanda Seaman explores the fears of menopause experienced by a sexually active middle aged woman in Uchida Shungiku's popular manga series. Most disturbing of all is Natsuo Kirino's powerful novel *Grotesque* in which, as Paolo Scovelezza suggests, the aging prostitute who is the story's protagonist becomes a symbol of the "grotesque body…unmarried, on the brink of precipice of her fertile age, through the choice of excess she breaks the edges of gender and sexuality."

In a perverse sense we can see Kirino's protagonist fighting against the strictures of society. A more positive form of

resistance may be seen in the novel and movie *Dendera* mentioned in several of the papers. Featuring a contemporary twist on the *Obasuteyama* legend, the novel and film portray abandoned old women forming a community in the mountains and attempting to fight against the village that had condemned them to exile and death.

Going beyond the death of the individual, two papers bring up larger issues of death in Japanese society, partly in relation to the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011. Saeko Kimura's essay "Placating the Dead" extends from the thirteenth century *Hojoki* to contemporary novels to explore the rituals practiced by the living to appease the fear of death. Sayumi Harb's discussion of a nuclear generated mother-daughter dynamic in Ohara Mariko's science fiction novel *Haiburido chairudo* touches on post-Fukushima nuclear issues and how, after 3/11, Japanese society seems to be moving toward "a new awareness of aging and the proximity of death."

Aging and the proximity of death have inspired an enormous variety of responses in Japan, as our conference papers effectively show. But perhaps the greatest vision of death in Japanese culture is a non-vision—the death of the eponymous hero of *The Tale of Genji*, the tenth century romance that is still Japan's greatest literary masterpiece. What is extraordinary about this death is that it takes place "off stage." We are given hints of the hero's aging but are not allowed to participate in the final event. As Dennis Washburn argues in his paper on *Genji*, "[by showing Genji's death only obliquely] the narrative transfigures him aesthetically and religiously so that he comes to embody the aesthetic ideal of an ephemeral sublime." The papers in this conference all depict writers confronting the "ephemeral sublime" in their own complex and distinctive manner, turning an inexorable process of decay into moments of art.