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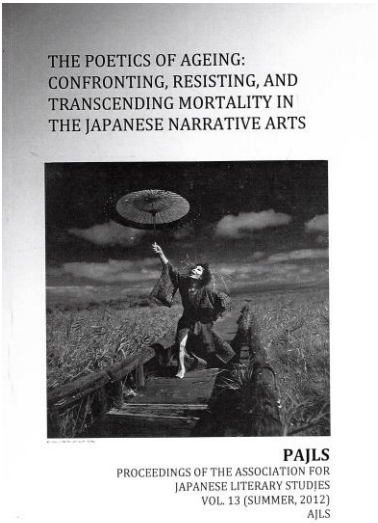

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The Aging Ame no Uzume: Gender and Humor in Sano Yōko's Writing

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Open it, that rock cave, Amenouzume-san.
Arai Takako[1]

She has laughter inside her and she elicits laughter from others.
Tsurumi Shunsuke[2]

"I was born when…," Mother said, "well, when I was very little."
It reminded me of the time when my son, then three years old,
asked me: "When did I first meet me?"
Sano Yōko[3]

Despite appearances by some iconic old women in noh and other classic genres, in general, depictions of aging by women and women viewed from a woman's point-of-view have long been neglected. One of the few exceptions is Ariyoshi Sawako's *Kōkotsu no hito* (*The Twilight Years*, 1972), which has been widely recognized as a prophetic work on the significance of aged care in women's lives. However, even in this pioneering novel the aged protagonist is the father-in-law. His wife, who is described as the ideal "good wife wise mother" dies at the very beginning of the novel (with her hair beautifully done, as she has just come home from the beauty parlor, and apparently considerately selected the most convenient day of the week for the relatives who need to come some distance for her funeral)! She leaves the care

[1] Arai Takako, *Soul Dance*, trans. Jeffrey Angles (Mi'Te Press, 2008), 18. This particular poem was translated by Sawako Nakayasu.
[2] Tsurumi Shunsuke, *Ame no Uzume den* (1991), in *Tsurumi Shunsuke shū zoku 5* (Chikuma shobō, 2001), 11.
[3] Sano Yōko, *Kami mo hotoke mo arimasenu* (2003), in Chikuma Bunko (Chikuma shobō, 2008), 142.

of her older husband, who is suffering from dementia, to her daughter-in-law, Akiko. As Ueno Chizuko has described it, this is an insightful example of an "aged care novel" or "care giver's novel" rather than a novel about an aging women.[4]

In more recent years the theme of aging has drawn much wider interest in literary production and popular/critical reception. Women are recognized and represented not only as caregivers[5] but also as current and future recipients of aged care. One of the most prominent figures to appear in studies of women's texts is the *yamanba* (the mountain crone). Although not necessarily directly concerned with aging, this legendary figure has been the inspiration for many important creative and critical works that highlight the subversive and transgressive power of marginalized female subjectivity, desire and body. There have also been some recent attempts to appreciate the positive and empowering aspects of old age in literature.[6]

Understandably, aging has been treated, at least discursively, as a serious personal and social issue—"no laughing matter." It has tended to be associated with tragedy rather than with comedy. However, humor is an important element in contemporary women's literature that deals with aging. Uno Chiyo (1897-1996) is remembered for, among many other things, her cheerful remark at age 95: "These days I feel I'll never die, ha, ha,

[4] Ueno Chizuko, *Oiru junbi* (Gakuyō shobō, 2005), 39.

[5] This has also diverged from the daughter-in-law model to include, for example, narratives of single women struggling to pursue love, work and the care of their aged parents. See, for example, Ogino Anna's *Kenage* (Iwanami shoten, 2002) and Haruka Yōko's *Kaigo to ren'ai* (Chikuma shobō, 2002/2006).

[6] Ogata Akiko and Hasegawa Kei eds., *Oi no yuraku: rōjin bungaku no miryoku* (Tōkyōdō shuppan, 2008), for example, celebrates the creative and transgressive power of aged writers, protagonists, and readers. Unlike previous studies, the volume begins with eight chapters on women writers written by women, followed by men's chapters. Kurata Yōko, *Kataru rōjo katarareru rōjo: Nihon kingendai bungaku ni miru onna no oi* (Gakugei shorin, 2010) is the most comprehensive study to date of representations of old age in women's texts.

ha, ha, ha,"[7] even though Uno, who is also known to have said "All deaths before the age of 100 are accidental deaths, deaths caused by carelessness or thoughtlessness,"[8] died prematurely at 98.

Sano Yōko (1938-2010), the writer I discuss in this paper, was in this sense far too "careless" and "thoughtless," dying at 72. Born in Beijing in 1938, Sano moved with her family to Dalian in March 1945 and to Japan in 1947. After spending her childhood as a member of a large family amidst the chaos and poverty of the postwar era, she studied art at Musashino Art College and at the Berlin University of the Arts. From the early 1970s she produced a large number of illustrated story books, many of which won major prizes. The most well-known of these works is *Hyakumankai ikita neko* (*The Cat That Lived a Million Times*, 1977).[9]

Sano is equally well known as an essayist. *Shizuko-san*, her 2008 collection of essays/memoirs about her mother, is not only popular but also critically acclaimed by a wide range of commentators including Ueno Chizuko and Uchida Shungiku. Another collection of essays entitled *Kami mo hotoke mo arimasenu* (*There's Neither God nor Buddha*, 2003) was awarded the Kobayashi Hideo Prize. Sano continued to produce work that was full of life, humor and individuality until her death from cancer in November 2010. Her posthumously published collection of essays is titled *Shinu ki manman* (*Can't Wait to Die*, 2011).

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[7] Quoted by Yonaha Keiko, in Ogata and Hasegawa eds., *Oi no yuraku*, 122.

[8] James Kirkup, "Obituary: Uno Chiyo," *Independent*, June 12, 1996.

[9] Sano Yōko, *Hyakumankai ikita neko* (Kōdansha, 1977). This hugely popular and longstanding best-seller is about a very selfish cat that does not love or care about anyone, even though everyone loves and admires him. In his millionth life, however, he loves another cat, and when he dies after her death, he is no longer reborn. It is interesting that even in this early work Sano dealt with the death and rebirth of a strong, self-centered character. Parts of Sano's biographical information and some of the quoted passages overlap with Tomoko Aoyama, "Narratives of Mother-Daughter Reconciliation: New Possibilities in Ageing Japan," in *Mothers at the Margin*, eds. Marie Porter, Lisa Raith and Jenny Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 245-60.

In discussing Sano's humor, it is hard to imagine a more appropriate and useful framework than Tsurumi Shunsuke's theory of Ame no Uzume no Mikoto as a carnivalesque trickster. Tsurumi explores the multi-layered significance of this mythological figure in his 1991 collection of essays and lectures, *Ame no Uzume den*. Ame no Uzume is generally regarded as Japan's first performer, who uses her body in a comic/shamanistic manner to create laughter. She also uses words to trick *and* communicate with those who present a potential threat. Thanks to her communicative skills, art and courage, Ame no Uzume can cross boundaries, relieve tension, and resolve serious crises. Referring to the two major episodes (i.e. her famous dance outside the Heavenly Cave to lure Amaterasu out, and her later confrontation with Sarutahiko) in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, Tsurumi explains.

> In both scenes her method is to undo her clothing and expose her breasts and genitals, and thence to elicit laughter and dissolve the opponent's tension. Whether in her own land or someone else's, she does not fear the authorities. In dealing with foreigners, she never assumes them to be enemies. She has laughter inside her and she elicits laughter from others. Her mood is always lively; even when the air is heavy with anxiety, she has the power to create a whirl of wind and raise everyone's spirits. Because of this ability she is trusted by her fellows.[10]

Unlike Amaterasu, Ame no Uzume can be found in many different times, places, and figures. Tsurumi summarizes the quintessential characteristics of those who may be nicknamed or compared to Ame no Uzume.

1. They are not beautiful but charming.

[10] Tsurumi Shunsuke, *Ame no Uzume*, 11.

2. They do not care about their appearance. They move without inhibition and do not worry about respectability.
3. They invite and encourage people to enjoy the party/company.
4. They are full of vitality, which draws out the life force in others.
5. They make people laugh; they create peals of laughter and relieve anxiety. They will even tell a lie to reassure.
6. They do not shy away from obscenity. They play a role that goes beyond sexual restraint.
7. They do not mind if an outsider joins the company; they are open-minded.[11]

As an eighth characteristic Tsurumi also cites the ability to create illusion through the act of exposing one's genitals. Referring to Susanne Langer's *Problems of Art* (1957), he emphasizes that dance as expression is not the movement of the body itself but the illusion that the movement leaves behind. In Ame no Uzume's case, "it is not the sexual organ itself but the illusion that it creates in combination with her face," "the illusion as if there were another face."[12]

Apart from the founder of *kabuki* Izumo no O-Kuni and the founder of the Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō Kitamura Sayo (1900-68), Tsurumi cites poet Nagase Kiyoko (1906-95), Setouchi Harumi/Jakuchō (b. 1922-), and Tanabe Seiko (b. 1928-) as latter-day Ame no Uzume types. Tanabe and her protagonists are, according to Tsurumi, "Katei ni haitta Ame no Uzume" (Ame no Uzume in the household). This "household" is not the oppressive and repressive *ie*; it has room for pleasure (singing, dancing, drinking, eating, chatting and joking, among other things) as well as for domestic and professional work. The threshold does not enclose this space as it "expands towards the outside."[13] Tsurumi's examples are not limited to Japanese women; Gandhi, Shakers, and Oneidas are also discussed. In fact, we might say that Tsurumi himself is an Ame no Uzume who does not place one gender,

[11] Ibid., 20.
[12] Ibid., 21.
[13] Tsurumi, *Ame no Uzume den*, 95.

culture, ethnic group, age group, language, genre, style or field above others but moves freely between them and brings out the life force through his performance.

Even though *Ame no Uzume den* does not specifically deal with the theme of aging, it contains a number of insightful observations that are highly relevant to our understanding of old age as it appears in life and in literary texts.[14] Another important point to note is that Tsurumi clarifies his standpoint (or rather his awareness of his standpoint): "What I have been writing here is a form of ideal that men seek in women."[15] This ideal, however, has none of the conventional splitting of women into the two extremes of good and evil, virgin and whore, goddess and witch. It is, almost miraculously, free of misogyny. Citing some newly created comic *iroha garuta* proverbs in Tanabe's *Onna no chūnen karuta* (1985), Tsurumi comments:

> If women's determination that "Onna ni teinen nashi" (women never retire) were applied to politics, the world would be a much better place, although it would be possible only if it were combined with courageous men who would accept being "*Nuide kara kotowarare*" (Rejected after taking their clothes off).[16]

Although Tsurumi's list of contemporary Ame no Uzume does not include Sano, she is mentioned briefly in his concluding remark in a dialogue with Donald Keene about *zuihitsu*.[17] Referring to Sano's introduction to the "Husband and Wife" volume of *Nihon no meizuihitsu*, Tsurumi says, "It's very interesting indeed […] it's incomprehensible (laugh), it devastated

[14] Tsurumi has been acutely conscious of his own aging. He started his personal *Mōrokuchō* (lit. *Senile Notebook*, it carries the English title *Commonplace Book*) in 1992, when he was 69, and several months after the publication of *Ame no Uzume den*. Its first volume was published in 2010, while he continued to write in his twelfth notebook.

[15] Tsurumi, *Ame no Uzume den*, 118.

[16] Ibid., 100.

[17] "Zuihitsu no miryoku, miryoku no zuihitsu," included in Tsurumi, *Ame no Uzume den*, 283-96.

me. This is *yūgen* [subtly profound] (laugh)."[18] This captures not only the devastatingly comic and profound nature of Sano's writing but also the genre of *zuihitsu* (or "follow the brush" to use Keene's translation), [19] which is the genre she is both commentating on and writing in.

The texts I discuss here are usually labeled *essē* rather than *zuihitsu*; they also have elements of memoir and autobiography. The main protagonists of Sano's narratives, the narrator Yōko, her mother Shizuko-san, and other family members, friends and neighbors, fit the description "not beautiful but charming." The figures in Sano's cover illustrations are plump, often nude, and disarming. Commenting on a reality TV show called *Beauty Coliseum*, in which ordinary people (who, in the episode she watched, included a 64 year-old woman) volunteer to undergo an aesthetic metamorphosis through plastic surgery and many other procedures, Sano writes: "Now that I am old with wrinkles, bags, and speckles all blossoming, I feel completely at peace. It doesn't matter any more!"[20] The comic effect of this declaration is quite different from that in Dazai Osamu's narratives where a middle-aged male laments his unsightliness; there is no reverse narcissism or expectation that this should be interpreted as a form of *yatsushi* or humble disguise. The above statement is not simply a frank and honest admission; Sano rejects the uniformity of anti-aging: "'Active Old Age' and 'Mature and Lively'—I find these print slogans really annoying."[21] However, in Sano's writing, anger or annoyance occupies very little space. What dominates is a sense of freedom, the happiness and amusement that are attainable in everyday life—despite everything.

The discovery of death, illness, and the various signs of aging may shock or puzzle Sano; yet her writing does not shift to

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[18] Ibid., 296.

[19] Ibid., 283. See also Tsurumi's comments on Sano's picture books in Tsurumi Shunsuke, Mori Tsuyoshi, and Sano Yōko, "*Bunmei ni kainarasarenai yasei no chi*" (1992), included in *Sano Yōko: Hyakumankai datte yomigaeru* Kawade Yume Mukku, Bungei bessatsu (2011), 1 (Kawade shobō shinsha, 2011), 160-70.

[20] Sano Yōko, *Kami mo hotoke mo arimasenu* (Chikuma shobō, 2008), 169.

[21] Ibid., 177.

lamentation. When her 88 year-old mother says to her, "I hope you don't mind my asking, but how old are you?" she answers, "I'm 63."[22] As her mother, who has advanced Alzheimer's disease, keeps politely asking her the same question over and over again, she becomes tired and a little irritated, but she also finds it unbelievable that she is 63. She then asks politely, "May I ask how old you are, Mother?" to which her mother replies: "Oh, me? I am … about four I think."[23] As her mother's answer some time before had been 42, Sano "was shocked but also laughed." This time "without laughing I looked at the four year-old covered in wrinkles, and thought, 'I see. So that's it, then: four years old.'"[24] This reminds us of what Honda Masuko proposed in her chapter entitled "Ibunka to shite no rōjin," a title that is a takeoff of her own book *Ibunka to shite no kodomo*: childhood is a time when anima and persona are still mixed together, while the aged gradually regain that chaos by shedding one persona after another.[25]

There is neither sentimentality nor misery in the depiction of the "four-year-old" Shizuko-san. Even though the laughter is gone, there is still a faint smile—of resignation rather than of disgust or despair. The seemingly simple, nonsensical words spoken by the senile mother and retold by her aging daughter create a subtle humor. In another essay, the daughter tells the mother: "I'm 60. I'm an old lady now," and the mother's response is: "*Oh, poor thing! Who did such a thing to you?*"[26] As Sano writes, this is "really profound."[27] Sano records numerous other conversations with her mother, whose words have a sad but gentle humor, with a tension-relieving and strangely revitalizing power.

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[22] Ibid., 9.
[23] Ibid., 10.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Honda Masuko, *Fikushon to shite no kodomo* (Shin'yōsha, 1989), 103. See also the chapter entitled "Rōjin to kodomo" in Honda Masuko, *Kodomo no ryōya kara*" (Jinbun shoin, 1983), which includes an insightful analysis of Takano Fumiko's manga "Tanabe no Tsuru" with an 82 year-old woman depicted as a little girl of about three.
[26] Sano Yōko, *Shizuko-san* (Shinchōsha, 2010), 217. The mother's words are written in katakana.
[27] Ibid.

As I have already noted, one of the main themes concerning aging in these essays is the refusal to comply with norms and stereotypical expectations, such as the expectation to fight against aging. Another is that there is no clear boundary between the young and the old. In her 1985 collection of essays Sano writes:

> It's pointless to ask questions such as what kind of old lady you would like to be. Because you are already an old woman—almost. You don't become an old woman suddenly one day. It begins from the prime of your youth at twenty-four, do you understand, young lady? Or actually, if you look carefully, even a five year-old girl offers a faint glimpse of herself as an 80 year-old. In other words you can't become an old woman who is anyone other than your current self.[28]

The reversal of ages and expected roles within the family and society in general is also a recurrent theme. When the daughter is 63, the mother is four.

> My mother was sitting in a chair today, absentmindedly. I went to her side and stroked her head. "Sweet mommy." Mother held my hand and pressed her cheek against it hard, and said, "*I want a big sister like you*." Actually I'm tired of being your big sister. I said, "I want a mother like you." My mother laughed and said, "*You never know!*"[29]

and again,

> I went into my mother's bed and stroked her cheek. "You are pretty, aren't you, Mom? Were

[28] Sano Yōko, *Ganbarimasen* (Shinchōsha, 1985/1996), 298.
[29] Sano Yōko, *Shizuko-san*, 49; also 216-17. As above, the mother's lines are in katakana.

> you very popular with boys when you were young?" "So so." I laughed. Then my mother laughed, too. She is quite clever, knowing how to respond. In her fuzzy mind she said, "I have no mommy or daddy any more. Poor me. […]"[30]

Corporeality plays an important role in Sano's art and writing, and it appears in a wide range of contexts, which may be something as gentle as the above examples, but may also concern abuse and abjection associated mainly with the mother. *Shizuko-san*, in particular, includes detailed recollections of earlier mother-daughter conflicts. In the immediate postwar years, the family's circumstances changed dramatically from a privileged middle-class lifestyle in colonized China to dire poverty. Her father lost his job, and three of the seven children died. The family lost their home and were forced to stay with relatives. Though still very young, Sano had to fetch several bucketfuls of water every day, wash her baby brother's nappies in the river—even in the middle of winter—and work in the field, rather like the television program *O-Shin*. But it was neither poverty nor physical labor but the mother's harsh words and treatment that hurt Sano during her early years. And it was the mother's dementia that made communication and reconciliation between mother and daughter possible for the first time. The blurb on the front cover of the paperback edition reads:

> **For a long time I hated mom.**
> Disliking the mother, abandoning the mother, and caring for the mother—a true story written by the daughter.

The "disliking" is visceral. Even though there are detailed descriptions of the mother's skills and resourcefulness in cooking, sewing, and many other things, the daughter finds it impossible to like or love her bullying (at times violent), meddling, selfish, and snobbish mother. The "abandoning" refers to sending her mother

[30] Ibid., 100-01.

to a very expensive nursing home. As if staying at a four-star hotel, the mother is being looked after by specialists, and her daughters visit her regularly with presents. Yet Sano feels as if she has "abandoned" her own mother. Obviously, this sense of guilt is closely related to her deep aversion for her. However, the relationship changes as her mother develops Alzheimer's disease. For the first time the daughter can touch the mother without feeling hatred, and she begins to love her and enjoy being with her.

> "I'm sorry, mom, I'm sorry."
> I cried hard. Something inside me snapped.
> "Thank you, mom, for becoming senile! Thank you, god, for giving her dementia!"
> All the antipathy that had been hardening inside me for decades was melting like an iceberg with hot water poured over it.[31]

There are several things at work here. By revealing what might have been regarded as serious *problems*, and by declaring her guilt out loud, Sano gives both authenticity and power to her account of this mother-daughter reconciliation. The revelation is frank yet totally different from that found in naturalist novels and *shishōsetsu*, in that it opens up rather than caves in, or distances, the guilty self.

> If I have something called *kokoro*, I feel it in my relationship with my mother. I had it wrapped round and round tightly with hemp threads for many decades. I felt as if all those threads were undone to allow me to breathe freely and revive.[32]

Thus the daughter's *kokoro* strips itself naked and dances a joyful dance. The abject body becomes "sweet" and "pretty" as it ages, but this sweetness has nothing to do with the kind of *kawaii obāchan* ideal that Ueno Chizuko critically views as "a woman's

[31] Sano, *Shizuko-san*, 212, also quoted on the back cover blurb.
[32] Ibid., 216.

strategy for survival as a dependent being."[33] Both Sano and Ueno have publicly declared that they are not *kawaii*. While Ueno points out the importance of making it possible for old people to live, regardless of whether they are cute or not, active or inactive, and with or without disability, Sano, like Ame no Uzume, amuses us with her performance and tells us that it is possible to enjoy life, and even death.

> I know this sounds imprudent, but I like funerals […] The best funeral would be that of someone who lived in this world for a long, long time and died as if going to sleep. No one would cry but all the mourners would be excited and happily running about.[34]

The subject of this passage is the funerals of her neighbors, relatives and acquaintances.

> "I wouldn't mind dying any day. But I wouldn't mind if it's not today."[35]

Her readers sense that she would take the same attitude if it were her own funeral, though in reality she did not live for such a long, long time.

> Meanwhile, I had a breast cancer operation. I went completely bald. Without covering my bald head, I went into my mother's bed. She stroked my head and said, "Oh, my, who is this boy?" and kept on stroking.
>
> "It's Yōko."
>
> "*Oh, really? Well, you might be right.*"[36]

The mother passed away in 2006, aged 93. Sano, too, feels that her memory is deteriorating.

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[33] Ueno, *Oiru junbi*, 28.
[34] Sano, *Ganbarimasen*, 275.
[35] Sano, *Kami mo hotoke mo arimasenu*, 41.
[36] Sano, *Shizuko-san*, 216.

> I will die one day. There are children who never come into this world but there is no one who never dies.
>
> Every night when I go to bed and turn off the light, my mother appears at the foot of my bed with three little children. […]
>
> I feel calm and nostalgic.
>
> I will come to the calm and nostalgic place over on your side. Thanks, mom, I'll be there soon.[37]

Based on Tsurumi's theory, I read this conclusion to *Shizuko-san* thus: Like Ame no Uzume, Sano arrives at a place where the road splits in two. Standing there is, instead of Sarutahiko, her mother, who is also an Uzume. The daughter Uzume realizes that the mother Uzume is no enemy and will happily accompany her to her new residence, where she will be welcomed. Through exposing her guilty feelings about "abandoning" her mother, Sano communicates with both her inner self and her readers. However, the purpose of her narrative is neither confession nor condemnation; through humor and with warm and gentle frankness Sano relieves our fear of death, dementia and disability, and encourages us to enjoy life until we, too, go to a "calm and nostalgic place." Even if it is a trick or an illusion, she makes us believe—at least for a moment—that there is such a place.

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[37] Ibid., 238.

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