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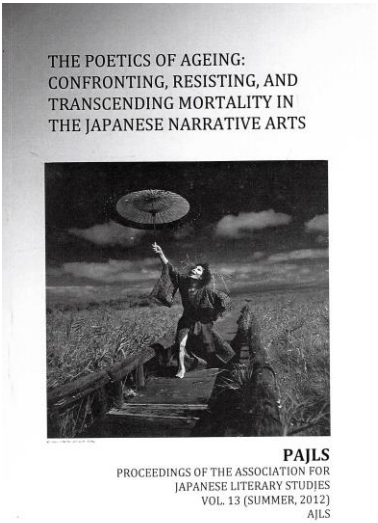

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Ageism in Sexuality: Women's Gender Struggle in Literature and Film

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The question of gender is an important part of any consideration of ageism. Little research has been done on this issue, particularly with regard to sexuality. Sexuality in elderly women (the question of when a woman becomes elderly is another problem altogether) is considered out of the question, locked into the regions of madness or pathology. Even most milder reactions to the idea are constrained to cruel mockery.

Similar prejudices exist with regard to men's sexuality, but men are socially permitted to make their desire evident. For instance, an eighty-year-old man who fathers a child becomes a species of hero. Sexual ability is congruent with men's value. However, as women's sexual value decreases through aging, they are ignored as useless. As the pseudonymous Barbara Vine, the British mystery author Ruth Rendell, writes in *King Solomon's Carpet* of an older woman: "She knew very well that the least noticeable, the most invisible and indifferently regarded of all human beings is an old woman."[1]

The violence of the male sexual gaze makes women's everyday lives a thing of discomfort. However, being uninterested in older women can also be called a form of violence. I once considered the movie star Joan Crawford in the context of aging and actresses in Hollywood. Movies, invented in the mid-nineteenth century, immediately became an essential item of popular culture. From about 1920, they began to produce superb artistic and technical effects. Many of the actresses who became stars in this era were born around the turn of the century. After the war, when they were in their forties, there were no longer roles available for them. The only roles that remained for them were of women who lose their mental stability as she they grow older.

[1] Ruth Rendell, *King Solomon's Carpet*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009 [1991]), 200-201.

Many movies were made in the 1950s and '60s depicting the identity/sexual crisis of a middle-aged woman, because the young women who had blossomed in their twenties and thirties were aging. Examples of this genre include Joan Crawford and Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and Vivien Leigh in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). All these dramas have in common a middle-aged or elderly woman who has ceased to be the focus of anyone's attention and is losing her sanity. The end result of all this is Joan Crawford's *Strait Jacket* (1962), which for all intents and purposes is a parody of itself. It abuses its actresses as if to spell out on screen the unwritten Hollywood rule that women's aging automatically leads to madness and murder. The male directors and male cameramen make their points mercilessly, as if in retribution for the many men who lost their heads over the onetime beauty of Gloria Swanson in *Sadie Thompson*, Joan Crawford in *Rain*, Bette Davis in *Of Human Bondage* and *The Letter*, and Vivien Leigh in *Gone With the Wind*.

As Barbara Vine says, aging appears as a hideous villain that can shake the foundations of a woman's very identity, causing her to lose her sex appeal and her ability to draw the attention of men, or indeed of anyone at all. One thinks, therefore, that it's impossible simply to grow older. The anti-aging ideas about which I will now speak of are not only issues of aesthetics or health, but involve greater complexities that can become major literary themes.

Released in Japan in June of this year (2011), the movie *Dendera* was directed by Tengan Daisuke, oldest son of Imamura Shohei, whose *The Ballad of Narayama* won the 1983 Palme d'Or at Cannes. *Dendera*, a sequel to *The Ballad of Narayama*, is based on a novel by Sato Yuya in which fifty old women left to die on a mountain band together to rebel against the laws of the outside world (the community of men and their right to give or withhold life and death). Sato is clearly drawing on Fukasawa Shichirō's *Ballad of Narayama*, but unlike Fukasawa's version, which relies on traditional legends from the Shinshu region of Japan, the community of old women called "Dendera" is an idea from Yanagita Kunio's *Tōno Folktales*, which come from the Tohoku region.

It is Yanagita who suggests that the place name "Rendaiya" was slurred into "Dendera," but Sato gives this rather fearsome moniker the fullest treatment imaginable. Sato's protagonist, Saito Kayu, recounts that "it was village custom that people who had passed seventy, whoever they were and whatever life they might have lived, go 'to pray in the mountains' in the winter of the new year." Kayu goes into the mountains without questioning the system, prepared for death. However, the women who were thrown out of the village have been escaping to the other side of the mountain, where they have formed a woman-only community called "Dendera." Their leader, Mitsuya Mei, is already a century old, but she tells Kayu that for thirty years she has been going across the mountain at the time of the "mountain pilgrimage" to rescue the women exiled there and take them into the Dendera community, where they live in cooperation. Kayu scorns their ideas and refuses to cooperate with them, but finds herself working alongside the other women to help save Dendera from a series of disasters. Mei's dream is one day to return to the village that threw them out and massacre the villagers in revenge. The more moderate Shiina Masari dreams of proving something to the village by making Dendera into a stable, economically independent community. Mei and Masari face off against each other, but their opposition is disrupted by a bear attack in which the community is devastated and many are killed. Kayu decides to go up against the bears herself.

What we focus on in this novel, with its almost slapstick scenes of bears attempting to gobble up women, is the fact that this community of women is a merciless caricature of contemporary aging society. The old women's survival tactics in the bitterest of natural settings produce a primitive lifestyle without a hint of civilization, but also represents a desperate hunger for survival, even suggesting that aging may be a challenge full of possibility. I may be going too far in seeing the irony of demanding that the elderly pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but the violence pervading this latter-day *Ballad of Narayama* gives it a raw energy. The fifty residents of Dendera are eventually reduced to six, at which point they finally come to understand that their fates were sealed through the same kind of political judgments that permeated the male-dominated community of the

village. This bitterness is perhaps the central point of the novel.

I want to focus on the main characters of the film, the one-time beauties of the Japanese silver screen who are now clad in rags and grotesquely made up, carrying out a rigorous filming schedule in something of the same style as the changing contents of the Hollywood star system, which I discussed previously. We might say that the "myth" by which a woman achieves stability as age eradicates her sexuality is intervening here. I can't shake the doubt that within the aging society itself, the unbalanced pressure of gender is operating again. This context is perfectly suited to the legend of the old woman on the mountain.

The history of the filming of "*Ballad of Narayama* is one way to examine the discovery of social themes through folklore. *The Ballad of Narayama,* Fukasawa Shichirō's first novel, won the first Chuo Koron Best First Novel Prize in 1956, with high praise from judges including Mishima Yukio, Takeda Taijun, and Itō Sei. It was made into a movie as early as 1958, with Kinoshita Keisuke directing, and was shown at the Venice Film Festival. The lead actress Tanaka Kinuyo blacked out her teeth to represent aging, but in accordance with Kinoshita's lyrical style the movie became a gentle tale of familial love. It drew crowds. We can see here, too, a way of "disposing of" the aging elderly. It may be typically Japanese to look calmly on one's own death, but the grief of the son and his family is dismissed as "ego," and the self-preparation for death functions as a lesson, perhaps a little unusual for a movie of this era. In a Japan whose economy was about to take a huge leap forward, average lifespans were being extended as much as ten years by modern medical technology. The average lifespan for a man in 1950 was 58 years, for a woman 62 years, but by 1960 a man's average lifespan was 66 and a woman's 70.[2] This was the era when people began to cling harder to life. However, since 70 was still the average lifespan, Tanaka's Old Rin in *Ballad of Narayama* was still plausible regretting but learning to accept her death. It is symbolic that Rin decides to go up the mountain before she sees her great-grandchild born. Old people went into the mountains in order to keep down the village population, and the

[2] Data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

struggling contradictions between the family's joy at a new birth and O-Rin's choice to secure that joy by choosing her own death were still acceptable as a way to confirm familial love.

However, Imamura Shohei's 1982 *Ballad of Narayama* approaches the issue of the elderly sexuality from the opposite direction. Imamura's movie includes elements from Fukasawa's 1957 novel *The Emperors of the Northeast*. (*Tōhoku no Jinmutachi*) Rin's two younger sons, at a loose end in their village and unable to get married, deal with their excess desires by sleeping with the widowed O-Ei. However, the second son, Risuke, is such a slob that even Ei refuses him. Worried, Rin convinces her friend Kane to take him on. "I haven't used it for ages," Kane frets, but eventually gives in and afterwards says carelessly, "How about that, I haven't lost it after all." The difference between this and the Kinoshita version is above all that, while allowing old women to possess active sexuality, Imamura spotlights the women's resignation to their fate of having life and sex both cut off. Imamura succeeds here in re-placing the sexuality of the elderly in a social context.

Tengan Daisuke's *Dendera* shows the possibilities inherent in O-Rin's later life. However, ironically, the conditions for survival are so difficult here that sexuality goes unmentioned. When Rin chooses life, she might find sexuality possible as well, but the struggle for physical survival destroys that possibility. The women's community of Dendera exists through the eradication of sexuality, and the iron rule forbidding entrance to men is the most blatant appearance of sexlessness. Baisho Mitsuko, who played the promiscuous Ei in Imamura's movie, whose vision of the women's community is the most ascetic of all, appears in Tengan's as Masari. Have we fallen so far in the thirty years since 1982? Capitalism supercedes sexuality, which should be individual, never able to take or be taken by force. Imamura depicts this paradoxically.

Imamura Shohei's masterpiece, *The Insect Woman* (*Nippon Konchu ki*, 1963) (Nikkatsu) uses the life of Matsuki Tome (Hidari Sachiko) to depict the problem of women's sexuality in postwar Japan. Born in a remote northern village, Tome grows up with her slow-minded father's absolute love and trust, but is married against her will to a landowner's son and then tossed out

again, giving birth during the war to a daughter, Nobuko. To support her family she goes to work in a munitions factory; after the war, she becomes involved in union organizing through the enthusiasm of the fellow worker she has been in a relationship with, and loses her job. Uncomfortable in her village, she moves to Tokyo and becomes the maid for a prostitute whose clients are American soldiers. Through carelessness, she causes the death of the prostitute's half-American child, and out of guilt becomes a member of a new religion. Solicited by a coreligionist madam, she becomes a prostitute herself. To Tome, struggling to "pull herself up by her bootstraps" in order to achieve stability, her own sexuality is an effective source of capital. For this reason, she hates the madam who exploits her and reports her to the police. She starts her own prostitution organization with the help of a patron. But as she grows older her patron turns away from her, and her organization is betrayed by a young employee. At the end of the movie, Tome's patron demands her own daughter as a lover, and Tome makes the journey to the mountain village where her daughter is working, leaving a bitter melancholy for the viewer.

This cruel depiction of a woman's life is the flip side of a woman's success story, but it shows vividly the punishment exacted on women by society as they age. Aging itself can be a kind of cancer for women, affecting their very right to exist. Society indeed often treats aging as an illness. And if women's actions verge on insanity in the process of aging, they are represented not only as objects of mockery but as a kind of pathetic beauty. The persistent representations of aging women who lose their sanity owe something to men's fantasies as a continuing literary theme. Imamura refused to allow his heroine to slip into insanity, showing instead a Tome who continues stubbornly to survive, using aging itself as the fount of energy.

Fukasawa Shichirō's old women, who come to a point where they can be freed from sexuality as a means of expressing a purer familial love, were perfectly depicted by Kinoshita Keisuke. However, Imamura dared to express the casting out of old women as a way to cut off the powerful urge toward life in traditional Japanese village society, with sexuality as its medium. Rin is effectively Tome's last gasp. Imamura's *Ballad of Narayama* shows the merciless amputation of traditional sexuality as

portrayed in *Insect Woman*, not freedom from sexuality itself. And in the unbalanced workings of male/female sexuality, women work skillfully and yet have their sexuality determined by men on the outside: Tengan, the son, picked up women's anger at this and used it to make *Dendera*.

I can't help feeling that in the end, *Dendera* is saying that unless sexuality is abandoned, the gender imbalance will never disappear, and women will only then be able to grasp a larger freedom by virtue of deviating from their sexuality. Tengan's film version emphasizes this, spotlighting the aspect of women's revenge on men. When the bear attack prevents the women from attacking the village, Mei wails, "But [the bear] was a female, it was a female!" Tengan deliberately creates an almost futuristic, brutal dystopia from which sexuality is deleted, similar to Francois Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) or Michael Radford's *1984* (1984). The use of the women's community against the world emphasizes the impossibility of such a situation, making it ever more difficult to accept this world.

As long as sex is not equally open to men and women, the tendency of aging to depreciate women's value will be strengthened. Some still insist that this is retribution against women who have sold off their sex appeal with their youth and their looks, and this idea is pervasive enough in society that many women sign onto it as well. Prostitution is the clearest expression of this concept. This mechanism for translating the value of women's existence into hard cash is clearly something set up by men, and it is natural to criticize its inequality. However, I want to consider also the question of women's sexual desire.

One excellent example here is Nakamura Usagi's *A Disease Called Me* (*Watashi to iu yamai*) Nakamura made her debut as a fantasy novelist, eventually becoming notorious for compulsive shopping, spending money like water at gigolo clubs, and repeated cosmetic surgery. *A Disease Called Me* describes the three days she spent as a sex worker under the name of "Kanoh Kyoko." She presents the use of sexuality as a means of "self-confirmation." Her time as a sex worker was intended to roll back the years that had diverted men's attention from her, exposing herself to men's desire as a "product," in a world where everything was for sale. While her actions are rife with contradictions, when I

think that the old women of Dendera are struggling in a fantasy world, dressed in rags, I can understand Nakamura's point. Sexuality is an important factor in the way one places oneself in a social context. What kind of reality becomes visible through the use of one's sexuality? This was the nature of Nakamura's experiment.

Nakamura writes that in the long run the experiment didn't get her anywhere, and she didn't achieve her "self-confirmation." What she did confirm was the double bind of male prejudice. Many men wrote her off as "a sullied woman who sold her body," and declared her an emblem of "the decline of values." "I want to affirm myself," she says. "We feel that we've achieved existence as a whole human being by having our identities accepted in a multifaceted way."[3] "We need the same sense of sexual roles and values as we did in our youth, and long for self-confirmation the more as we get older. In particular, women, who have fewer chances than men for confirmation of their sexual role and value, struggle in chains."[4] This was perhaps Nakamura's real objective. Nakamura explores the unreasonable quality of the idea that loss of sexual value represents loss of personal value for a woman; and she does this in the field of sexuality and in one of the most avant-garde of sex-work contexts, a choice I must respect. It is, of course, on condition that she close her eyes to the workings of capitalism and to the risks for a woman of pregnancy and disease.

We can draw many conclusions from the Tōden OL murder case, to which Nakamura repeatedly alludes. A woman's strangled body was found in an empty apartment in Shibuya in 1997: the case shocked the nation because she turned out to have been an elite employee of Tokyo Electric during the day, and a streetwalker in Maruyama at night. Nonfiction writers, notably Sano Shin'ichi, and novelists have had a field day with the case. In particular, Kirino Natsuo's *Grotesque* (*Gurotesuku*) describes the tragic contradiction of sex as both a woman's disaster and her quickest route to self-confirmation, especially when reduced to the numerical value of cold hard cash.

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[3] Nakamura Usagi, *A Disease called Me* (Shinchōsha, 2006), 87.
[4] Ibid., 88.

Kirino's fictional Kazue thinks thus. "In my business the cash goes right into my pocket. It's not like money that comes in by bank transfer. I adored the feel of the bills I'd sold my body for. I actually wanted to wave goodbye to them every time I put them in the ATM for deposit, even though they were going into my own savings account! Cash told me I was alive. So as soon as the johns go away, I start worrying I'll never be able to earn again. If I can't earn money and get by on the street, it's like the whole world is rejecting me as a person."[5]

This sense of existence is not simply a question of sexuality. Sexuality is one part of existence, and that which most straightforwardly makes clear the physical sensation of existence. However, here the protagonist Kazue gets her sense of existing from the medium of money. It seems sad that she can only confirm her own value in this way, but what else was left for her? Women's sexual desire has always been minimized, and for a long time male-centric societies have taken it for granted that female sexual desire disappears altogether in older women. This is a statement of the fact that men no longer feel desire for older women, but in order to turn this on its head, I feel that this insistence on the existence and praxis of sexuality is effective. At the root of the idea that women stop being sexual objects as they grow older is men's fear and awe of women's sexual desire. For this reason, representations of older women's sexual desire are often—as in the Hollywood examples—cliches of madness and crime. Isn't it time we protested against this? Literature and film are already involved in the process of accepting this issue straightforwardly, rather then rejecting it as criminality or madness.

[5] Kirino Natsuo, *Grotesque* (Bungei Shunjū, 2003), 489.