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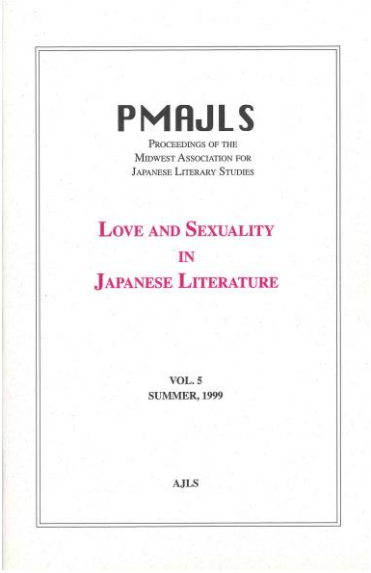

PMAJLS 5:
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A GAME OF SEXUALITY: KINUGASA TEINOSUKE'S FILM, *GATE OF HELL* (1953)

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Few people come out of Kinugasa Teinosuke's (1896–1982) film, *Gate of Hell* (Daiei 1953) without wondering what made the 12th century lady, Kesa, decide to put herself in her husband's bed to be decapitated by her aggressive suitor, Moritō. And how did this plot contribute to the film's attainment of an Academy Award as Best Foreign Film (1955) and the Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival (1954)? Among many possibilities, psychoanalytic feminism and its offshoot, feminist film analysis, seem to provide the best lead to these questions. Pivotal to our understanding is the game of human sexuality. And while using sexuality as a theoretical axis, it is important to keep in mind that (1) sexuality in psychoanalysis since Freud operates at the level of the unconscious, and (2) sexuality operates only on phallic terms; that is, man determines woman's sexuality.

Most certainly, *Gate of Hell* is about a so-called love triangle; like King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun.*(1946) And love on phallic terms is called "romance" in Alan Soble, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Monika Treut's sense;[1] that is, an aggressive man carts off a passive

[1]Soble defines love as "the principles of male sexuality through the equation of love with male power over women. [. . .] Romances teach women that love means an active, dominant, sexually aggressive male who carries off on horseback a passive, submissive woman" (97). Firestone's "romance" is "love corrupted by its power context" (139); and Millett's, "a means to emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit" (37). And Monika Treut says, "Romantic love is not reality, it is not a socially practiced form of life. It is but the ideal of a dream and of illusionary wishful thinking. This love is not experienced as an ideal of pathos, but is simply imagined and felt" (114). A definition given by M.H. Abrams is: The romance is distinguished from the epic in that it represents, not a heroic age of tribal wars, but a courtly and chivalric age, often one of highly developed manners and civility; its standard plot is one of a quest undertaken by a single knight in order to gain a lady's favor; frequently its central interest is Courtly Love, together with tournaments fought and dragons and monsters slain for a damsel's sake; it stresses the chivalric ideals of courage, honor, mercifulness to an opponent, and exquisite and elaborate manners; and it delights in wonders and marvels. Supernatural events in the epic had their causes in the will and actions of the

woman. The lead character in *Gate of Hell*, Moritō—better known for his ordained name, Mongaku (1139–1203)—is a historical figure who persuaded Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–99) to rise against the Heike oligarchy. He was about[2] 19 years old and Kesa, 17 according to the original texts, *The Tale of the Heike* (*Heike Monogatari* ca 1219–40), *The Rise and Fall of the Genji and Heike* (*Genpei Seisui-ki* 13C), and Kikuchi Kan's (1888–1948) play, "Kesa's Husband" (Kesa no otto 1923). Their ages are close to those of Romeo and Juliet. In the film, Moritō is one of the guards at the Heike headquarters, and of Genji[3] origin as is Yoritomo. The Genji were looked down upon as "vulgar" warriors compared to people like the Fujiwara[4] aristocrats (including Kesa and Wataru) around this time in history. *Gate of Hell* makes this class distinction explicit by having minor characters taunt Moritō as a "back country samurai" (*aramusha*), "crazy fool" (*ranbō-mono*), and "beast," and having Kesa's female neighbor warn Kesa against disgracing the Fujiwara name by getting mixed up with Moritō. Moritō's vulgarity, interestingly enough, helps dramatize the romance by turning the courtship into a conquest story.

Romantically, Moritō dreams of carting off a submissive woman. To drive this theme of chivalric conquest, Kinugasa introduces Moritō from his legs first, kicking the sand in the middle of a battle to save the damsel, Kesa as Cloistered Empress Jōsaimon'in's decoy. This shot underscores his masculinity. Later again, when Moritō goes to murder Wataru, another straight-on angle shot cuts to his moving legs against the backlit moonlight. As a warrior, Moritō is physically stalwart. He is even passionately violent: he slashes furniture with his sword, breaks Kesa's koto string, kicks a dinner table at a party, kicks a dog, kicks Sawa's pail, and nails Kesa against a pillar while threatening to kill Wataru. The powerful resonance of a large drum, supported by an array of musical instruments, including Japanese *biwa*, *shakuhachi*, *shō*, temple bell, wooden clappers, and those in a Western orchestra, express his single-track yet turbulent mind. The leitmotif for Moritō is physical strength. Until the night he cuts his hair off in grief for having murdered Kesa, he appears mostly

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gods; romance shifts the supernatural to fairyland, and makes much of the mysterious effect of magic, spells, and enchantments (Abrams 22).

[2]Their ages slightly vary depending on the text.

[3]"Genji" means the "Minamoto Clan." The "*gen*" and "*minamoto*" are written with the same *kanji*. Both Genji and Heike are offshoots of the imperial lineage which turned into commoners.

[4]The Fujiwaras used to monopolize influence on the imperial lineage and government before the Heike gained power.

outdoors and neither doffs his cap nor disarms himself. He is a masculine force which pushes the plots forward,[5] vanquishing his brother's ally, galloping miles through a rain of arrows, killing a spy, and winning in a horse race against Wataru. His personality is so set only someone else's death—and someone dearer than his own brother—can show him how hollow his honor code is. Moritō's masculinity, nevertheless, does not grate on our nerves because the film industry world-wide has already made its audience a fan of many other macho male characters.[6] Moritō's virility and seeming pride in himself only aesthetically counterbalance Kesa's femininity.

The stronger the man, the more romantic an aura the film will give off. The two lovers' expectations differ. "Fantasy," which Jacques Lacan defines as a mental condition where an illusory plenitude mediates between an empty subject and the physical expression of the desired object ($< >a) (Kristeva 36; Silverman 4–5) bridges them. The capitalized subject (S) in Lacan's formula is crossed out because it lacks a firm sense of self-knowledge. Kesa's ostensibly amicable relationship with her husband, Wataru, is not much different. The couple share their most romantic moments looking side by side at the moon which reflects the sunlight, or, if you will, stark reality. The subjects are not directly in touch with the so-called reality, with each other, or with themselves. When they see the moon again before Kesa's suicide, Wataru is blissfully unaware of her intention.

From a Lacanian point of view, Moritō's feeling towards Kesa is no more than an object cathexis,[7] a substitution of the Lacanian mother[8] with an object; it is romance rather than love. Explaining further with an eye on Kristeva's *Tales of Love,* both romance and love are narcissistic to the extent that both fulfill the subject's own needs, yet men's "romance"

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[5]Laura Mulvey says in her article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that the role of a man in a cinema is "the active one of advancing the story" (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 20).

[6]Kate Millett says in her *Sexual Politics*: The fairly blatant male chauvinism which was once a province of the lower class or immigrant male has been absorbed and taken on a certain glamour through a number of contemporary figures, who have made it, and a certain number of other working-class male attitudes, part of a new, and at the moment, fashionable life style. So influential is this working-class ideal of brute virility (. . .) become in our time that it may replace more discreet and "gentlemanly" attitudes of the past (37–8).

[7](Object) cathexis is investment or attachment of psychical energy to an object (Ragland-Sullivan 218).

[8]By Lacanian mother, I mean Lacanian "the Other," the memory of the mother whom an infant had thought to be part of himself/herself.

is what Kristeva characterizes as "narcissistic delegation" (Kristeva, *Love*, 21). The woman he seeks is a "delegation" or a substitute of the mother he once had during the Lacanian Imaginary phase in life.[9] But a woman's love is more self-reflectively narcissistic as explicated by Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva: "the soul is established through loving itself" (Kristeva 33). It "radiates in itself and for itself"(111) like the sun which is missing from Kesa and Wataru's dialogue scenes. Moritō (and because of him, the audience also) sees Kesa as a fetish, "an externalizing displacement of masculine insufficiency" (Silverman 46) or an alternative to the lost mother (Mitchell and Rose 25). Sure enough, Moritō's mother is absent from the film and he lives with an old servant whom he calls "*jii* (gran'pa)."[10] And even this *jii* does not respond to Moritō's repeated calls. Moritō, who sees Kesa as his fetish, asks Kiyomori, the Heike Clan head, for Kesa as a reward for his great accomplishment in the Heiji Insurrection[11] while other soldiers ask for material rewards such as a suit of famous armor and a piece of land. Had Kesa not been already owned by Wataru, she would have been given to Moritō as a commodity so long as Kiyomori had already promised to grant anything Moritō wanted.

Kesa as a woman and a fetish compounds Moritō's romantic fantasy in Hélène Cixous (48–9) and Laura Mulvey's sense:

> . . . fetishism is born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to know, and a refusal to accept the difference that the female body symbolizes. Out of this series of turnings away, of covering over, not the eyes but understanding, of looking fixedly at any object that holds the gaze, female sexuality is bound to remain a mystery, condemned to return as a symbol of anxiety while overvalued and idealized in imagery. (Mulvey, "Pandora" 18)

Moritō's strong infatuation with Kesa and his refusal to know her as a person enforce each other, particularly because Kinugasa harnesses this oximoronic relationship to widen the gender gap, an important compo-

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[9] Lacan claims that children are perfectly fulfilled by their mothers before they realize the difference between themselves and their mothers.

[10]Japanese sometimes use kinship terms for non-kin as an expression of endearment.

[11]The Heiji Insurrection (*Heiji no ran*) in 1159 is the name of the battle in which Minamoto no Yoshitomo (Yoritomo's father) and Fujiwara no Nobuyori revolted against Taira no Kiyomori. In the film, Kesa feigns Retired Empress to avert the enemy's attention from the actual Jōsaimon'in and Moritō escorts her out of the palace, but in other accounts, this battle has nothing to do with Moritō's encounter with Kesa.

nent of a romantic narrative. When Moritō first encounters her, for example, she is disguised as the Retired Empress Jōsaimon'in. Before Moritō finishes his sword fight against his brother's new ally, she disappears. Until he is ridiculed for having asked Kiyomori for Kesa's hand in marriage, neither Moritō nor the audience know that Kesa is already married to Wataru. When Moritō pays her a surprise visit, she feigns absence. After agreeing to accept Moritō, Kesa exchanges bedrooms with Wataru so that Moritō will kill her instead of Wataru. She is dead before anyone reads her mind.

Moritō's gaze on Kesa further distances the gender gap. Without fail, initial innocent eye-contacts lapse into Moritō's "sadistic mastery of the object" (Moi 134) and Kesa's humble evasion of it. At their first encounter after the Heiji battle, Moritō in the far center spots Kesa while Kesa crouches down completely covered by a coat which she uses as a veil. Their sizes and locations switch as Moritō finds Kesa beautiful and her "aunt" Sawa rattles on about Kesa's background. There, Moritō's back covers the right foreground, focusing our (which implies Moritō's) attention on Kesa, a smaller figure in a red jacket in a frontal view in the far center. After the utterance, "Such a pretty name!" Moritō's eyes in a close-up shot give off a flash of predatory determination. As he establishes Kesa in his mind as his fetish, the camera cuts to Kesa's face which shows her awareness of her vulnerability. Later, when Kiyomori arranges their meeting in his mansion, Kesa minimizes her eye-contact with Moritō. It is Moritō's' glaring stare at Kesa that we see more of. At the horse race and at Sawa's house also, the straight-on shots squarely catch Moritō's predatory gaze at Kesa. Kesa's spacy gaze inadvertently helps Moritō and the camera idolize and fetishize Kesa, making her an object of "scopic erotization," which would postpone "the erotic act and introduce amatory time, which would thus be none other than the fortitude of idealization" (Kristeva 350).

It is no coincidence that Kinugasa objectifies Kesa most brilliantly by spotlighting her when she enters her aunt Sawa's dark house. The intensity of this light equals the intensity of Moritō's and the audience's gaze at Kesa. They glorify Kesa in a petrified and frozen stillness. Kesa's identity is diminished into her physical figure, cut off from all other contexts. This arrangement augments the romantic gender dynamism E. Ann Kaplan expounds:

> . . . our culture is deeply committed to myths of demarcated sex differences, called "masculine" and "feminine," which in turn revolve first on a complex gaze apparatus and second on domi-

> nance-submission patterns. This positioning of the two sex genders in representation clearly privileges the male (through the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism, which are male operations, and because his desire carries power/action where woman's usually does not). (Kaplan, *Women*, 29)

A man's gaze proclaims his power over a woman as it fetishizes her.

Kesa's downcast eyes, which are culturally defined as feminine, are her defense mechanism; femininity was women's means—as Lacan has insightfully revealed—to "attain an associational value, that is, to enjoy the status which he (as *tout*) gives her (as *pas-tout*) within the social discourse" (Lacan explained by Ragland-Sullivan 293). However limited it might have been, some privilege was believed to be better than none. Women, particularly of the aristocracy, had too much to lose should their marriage go to ruin. Since around the fifth century, imported Buddhism and Confucianism made every attempt at denigrating Japanese women, but the gender hierarchy finally fell into place in the late Heian period (794–1192). Patriarchy, patrilineage, and patrilocality became a norm (Wakita et al. 48–49). In conjunction, sayings like "the relationship between parents and children lasts for one generation, but that for a married couple, two generations (*Oyako wa issei, otoko wa nisei no chigiri nari*)," (*Gikei-ki* 91)[12] and "a virtuous woman must not see two men (*Teijo ryōfu ni mamiezu*)," (*Otogi-zōshi* 171)[13] were pounded into educated people's conscience. As Japanese psychologist Baba Ken'ichi says, "femininity (*joseisei*) is passivity (*juyōsei*)" (134). And Komashaku Kimi regrets—very much in agreement with Talcott Parsons, Kate Millett, Gayle Rubin, Hester Eisenstein and others[14]—that "men call meek

[12]My excerpt is from Ōkami Masao ed., *Gikei-ki* (*Yoshitsune's Life*) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1959) 91. The original was assumed to have been written in the 14th century.

[13]My excerpt is from Ichiko Teiji, *Otogi-zōshi* (*Tales for Women and Children*) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1958), 171. The original is an anthology of tales from the medieval period.

[14] Kate Millett quotes Talcott Parsons who has said that male traits are instrumental to the male role (Millett 229), and supports him by saying that the masculine/feminine traits are a product of the "master class values, those it invents for itself and those it assigns to the under class it shapes and controls" (Millett, *Sexual Politics* 232). Gayle Rubin insists that the sex/gender system is a "set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity," in her "The Traffic in Women," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) 159. Eisenstein cites Millett to prove her point that social pressure has kept women conforming to "a role that dictated confor-

passivity 'feminine' just so that they can dominate women" (34). Aristocratic women acquiesced to the gender code on men's terms. In the film, the aristocrats' magnificent homes and their luxurious life-style as backgrounds of many shots flaunt men's power. Power dynamics, sexuality, and commodification frolic with one another.

So, masculinity and femininity in a romantic love play the dual roles of widening and narrowing the gender gaps. Kate Millett elaborates on this:

> The concept of romantic love affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit, since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity. And convictions of romantic love are convenient to both parties since this is often the only condition in which the female can overcome the far more powerful conditioning she has received toward sexual inhibition. Romantic love also obscures the realities of female status and the burden of economic dependency. (Millett 37)

Exaggerated gender difference attracts the two sexes to each other, thereby making the narrative romantic.

To simultaneously widen the gender gap and close in the affectionate relationship in a romantic way, lovely ladies had to follow certain protocol. Revealing Moritō's scheme and involving Wataru in a duel was something a virtuous woman could not do without being tarnished by the image of "*femme fatale*" (Mulvey, "Pandora" 6), "dark lady" (Barthel 72), or *akujo* (evil woman). Kesa's neighbor would surely condemn her. Having began his film career as a female impersonator (*onna-gata*) at Nikkatsu Studio in 1917 and having played a woman's role in as many as 44 films per year at the peak of his acting career, Kinugasa knew what those specifications were, and the images he drew on the screen match those laid out by Diane Barthel, an analyst of advertisements. (A) As in the advertisement, a fair-maiden's sexuality must be either unstated or understated (Barthel 72). Kesa—except for her beautiful face—is clad in multilayers of a long and heavy garment and she lives surrounded by thick veils and curtains. (B) She is like a delicate blossom and "any rude contact with reality might spoil the maiden's perfection" (73). Soft-focus

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mity and obedience, while men occupied the instrumental role of rationality and power" in her *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1983) 8.

photography, in a narcissistic, self-involved pose de-emphasizes her sexuality (72). Kesa's movements are graceful and self-imposed like those in the *kabuki* dance. When she leaves Wataru for the last time (as he sleeps in her bed), her feet slowly head for Wataru's bedroom followed by a more reluctant torso which is pushed forward by her arms which pull and gather her long jacket toward the way her feet are going. Her eyes are the last to let go of Wataru. Alone, wrapped in her own thoughts, she is delicately beautiful. Moreover, (C) she must look young and innocent, half-child and half-woman; there must be no pretense of sophistication. This relates to Laura Mulvey's finding that "woman has not, traditionally, been the possessor of knowledge and which has, traditionally, tended to consider femininity as an enigma" (Mulvey, "Pandora" 4); feminine women are ignorant and impossible to understand. A fair maiden is supposed to be innocuous, much less guiding two men to fight over her. Knowledge spoils her flower imagery. Kesa is as obedient to Wataru as a good child, looks young and innocent, and mischievously dusts her belongings only to be scolded by Tone, her maid. And finally, (D) this romantic heroine is "meant to live as in a fairy-tale stupor" from which she must be "awakened—sexually, emotionally, even intellectually—by her prince" (75). Kesa is unconscious when a high-angle camera catches her, all stretched out like a doll, in Moritō's house at the end of her journey as Jōsaimon'in's decoy. Without Moritō's care and ensuing love, she may have stayed a doll all her life. She follows the cultural code to the letter of the law. If Moritō's powerful base drum did not disturb her, Kesa's mellow lullaby-like melody would have serenaded much longer.

A question as to whether or not there is true love—that is, "narcissistic reward" in Freud, Kristeva, Irigaray and Chodorow's sense—anywhere in *Gate of Hell* remains unanswered. But Luce Irigaray's metaphorical explanation of women's autoeroticism in association with women's sexual organs[15] and Freud elaborated by Chodorow[16] single out Kesa as a good and perhaps the only candidate to love narcissistically.

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[15] "Autoerotic" is the adjective Luce Irigaray uses to characterize women. And she attributes this characteristic to women's biology:
And this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity. As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman "touches herself" all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other (Irigaray 24).

[16] Chodorow's story does not begin in the dark interior of human unconscious where Oedipus and Narcissus live. Rather, it begins in a more mundane and

Women, by contrast, tend to love narcissistically—on one level, to want to be loved or to be largely self-sufficient; on another, to love someone as an extension of their self rather than differentiated object. (Chodorow 202)

Kesa's autoerotic moments (meaning when she worries about her own identity) appear as shots of her reporting to Wataru of the humiliation of confronting Moritō in Kiyomori's mansion, praying in a dark room surrounded by prison-like grids, coming home from Sawa's house with a determination to have herself killed, sadly looking at Wataru as she receives his sake and as she watches Wataru sleep in her bed, and finally in her slow walk from her room to Wataru's. She looks pensive and almost determined when she lowers her eyes. Kesa's doll-like presence "tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure* 309). These moments suggest that Kesa's narcissistic *eros* (basic life energy) can no longer keep masochistic *thanatos* (woman's wish to give themselves up for others) under control.[17] Left to itself, quoting Kristeva, "the Ego takes itself for a preferential target of aggression and murder" (124). Narcissism and masochism start feeding on each other. In other

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sociological setting: "In our society, a girl's mother is present in a way that a boy's father, and other adult men, are not" (175). And it proceeds to tell that a daughter identifies with a real person (mother) while a boy learns the absent father's abstract and categorical role. A girl first embraces narcissistic love towards her mother, mistaking her to be part of herself. This narcissistic love survives through her Oedipal stage when she experiences affective object love towards her father. When she loves another man, both types of love come into play. That is, she wants a child *by* him, *with* him, and she wants a child as her extension. The girl's journey, then, may be called the reproduction of mothering as the title of her book shows. A boy's odyssey is stormier in that he must fight back his mother's narcissistic and object love with his "penis" (super-ego) and venture forth into the cultural world until he meets a woman in whom he finds "narcissistic-phallic reassurance rather than mutual affirmation and love" (196). So, the women retain broader bisexual love while men become capable of joining an affect-denying world of alienated work. This sexual inequality will peter to a close if parenting is shared by men and women. Chodorow's story unaffectedly replaces Freud's metaphors.

[17]For detail, see: Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: 1990) 38.

words, Kesa's suicide is "narcissistic reward" (Kristeva 21) and autoeroticism.[18] Kesa kills herself for love of herself (and others by extension).

All start from Moritō's gaze on Kesa. His gaze on Kesa directs her gaze towards herself. And eventually, her gaze, which is pushed into narcissistic masochism ends up swaying Moritō and Wataru's Lacanian gaze[19] onto themselves. Most arresting to Western viewers must have been the film's ending with (a) Kesa's suicide, (b) Moritō's request that Wataru should kill him, and (c) Wataru's refusal to do so. Moritō's request to Wataru to chop him up into pieces is as suicidal and autoerotic as Kesa's in the sense that he wishes to identify with others' anger at him. He wants to be the subject and object of the anger; he finally experiences narcissistic reward. Wataru's refusal to kill Moritō is a refusal to direct his anger at an object, a refusal of object cathexis. He, too, finally experiences narcissistic love, love based on (self-)awareness. Although the film does not mention Wataru's case, both men in *The Tale of the Heike* and in *The Rise and Fall of the Genji and the Heike* become monks so that they can pray for Kesa for the rest of their lives. Their entry in the priesthood is comparable to Oedipus' departure on his journey into a desert in search of (self-)awareness. According to *The Tale of the Heike*, tonsured Moritō owned nothing other than the clothes he wore, a begging bowl, and Kesa's portrait. And according to the two oldest texts, Moritō walked around Kesa's grave for three years. In denying daily wants, Kesa, Moritō, and Wataru come to terms with true love in a narcissistic way; they succeed in fusing the subject and the object of love. In narcissistic love, the gender gap collapses.

A beautiful woman's silent body is a fetish in its ultimate form as Kristeva proclaims, "The dead woman is the untouchable absolute that serves as a halo for the forbidden mother. The dead woman may also be, moreover, *jouissance* as nostalgia" (Kristeva 356). Her corpse reminds men of everything beautiful and wonderful. Beauty and love override any logic. This is why a film that ends with the death of a beautiful woman

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[18]Freud explains the "auto-erotic" as a primal psychic situation at the very beginning of mental life where "the ego's instincts are directed to itself and it is to some extent capable of deriving satisfaction. Freud calls this potentiality for satisfaction "auto-erotic." So, for a cultured adult woman like Kesa to take refuge in auto-eroticism must be her very last resort. For detail, consult: Rickman, John ed., *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957) 81.

[19] With Lacan, the "*regard* is not simply a glance cast from the eye, nor a glance from reflective consciousness, because the *regard* has the power to activate within consciousness an awareness of unconscious motivation and intentionality" (Ralang-Sullivan 94).

holds its audience captive. Unlike Akutagawa, who manipulated the iconoclastic realism in his "Kesa and Moritō" (1918), Kinugasa has triumphed by disporting romanticism, that is human sexuality.

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