

Construction and Deconstruction of a Myth

The Vision of Komachi from Traditional Noh to the Contribution of Mishima Yukio and Enchi Fumiko

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Abstract The figure of medieval Japanese poet Ono no Komachi has been one of the most controversial and inspiring of Japanese literary tradition and it is at the centre of a number of works and Noh plays. This essay analyzes how her image is interpreted in the modern Noh play by Mishima Yukio, and the novel *Komachi hensō* (transformations of Komachi) by Enchi Fumiko, while keeping the original Noh *Sotoba Komachi* (Komachi on the stupa) as reference. The two protagonists in Mishima's play – old Komachi and the poet – are generally interpreted and explained by Mishima himself as allegories of dry and cynical realism versus dreamlike romanticism and self-deception. Nevertheless, making reference to the theory of *lieux de mémoire* by Pierre Nora, it is showed that the tendency to self-deception occurs in both protagonists. The visions that emerge in the two modern works are similar: indeed, the figure of Komachi becomes a metaphor for the idea of the impossibility of fixing an identity in regard to the passage of time, and shows the deception at the base of the idea of an abiding self, which is in line with many contemporary theories of the construction of identity.

Summary 1. «Sotoba Komachi». – 2. Mishima's Modern Noh. – 3. Komachi Legend in Enchi's Work. – 4. Dangerous Alliances and *Komachi shiken*. – 5. Reiko as a Transformed Komachi. – 6. Reiko and Shigaraki's Gendered Perception of Age. – 7. Conclusions.

Keywords Construction of identity. Age perception. Memory.

1 «Sotoba Komachi»

In the afterword to his collection of modern Noh, published in 1956, Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) used the term «polemic» to define the medieval Noh play «Sotoba Komachi».¹ Presumably with this word «polemic» Mishima referred to the argumentative and slightly ironical tone of this play.

In this essay, I will analyze how in their different narratives, Mishima Yukio and Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986) preserve and develop the 'polemic', or in contemporary terms *deconstructive*, tone of the original Noh. I will con-

1 By «Sotoba Komachi» I mean the original play, written by Kan'ami in fourteenth century, while the modern Noh in this paper is *Sotoba Komachi* (Mishima 1956).

centrate above all on the aspect of memory and on its connection with the perception of identity, since it is deeply linked to the topic of self-delusion, a theme of all three works. I will start by comparing the two Noh plays, and then I will present Enchi's literary interpretation of the figure of Komachi through an analysis of the novel *Komachi hensō*, published in 1965.

The plot of the original Noh is as follows: on their way to the capital, a group of monks of Mount Kōya come across an old beggar woman sitting on a wooden grave marker (*sotoba*). They try to chase her away from the holy stupa, admonishing her with scriptures, but she reproaches them with even more learned quotations from scriptures and they are surprised. She reveals that she is Ono no Komachi, the once beautiful and famous poetess. Suddenly she is seized by the ghost of Fukakusa, the suitor who she had forced to visit her one hundred nights to gain her love. She reenacts his miserable visits and subsequent death in a dance. The ghost finally leaves her, and she becomes calm once more, reaching nirvana.

The deconstructive action in the original «Sotoba Komachi» is developed first of all through the *mondō*, the dialogical encounter between the main actor (*shite*) in the role of the beggar Komachi, and the counterpart (*waki*), who is one of the monks. Komachi upsets the monks who scorned her for sitting on a holy stupa, demonstrating by means of rhetoric that sitting on the stupa is not a bad action in Buddhist terms, because of the concept of non-dualism which is at the center of Mahayana thought. This *mondō* is interpreted as the triumph of Zen Buddhism over Esoteric Buddhism, which did not consider women able to enter nirvana, because of their karma. This non-duality of bad and good is based on the idea of *gyaku-uen*, which emphasizes the possibility of sinners to enter nirvana precisely thanks to their bad behavior. Although Zen Buddhism, too, had some restrictions towards women, it is generally considered more egalitarian, as explained by Noh scholar Wakita Haruko (Wakita 2005, pp. 213-214). After listening to Komachi's wise utterance, the monks bow to her, apparently indicating that they have been defeated by the old woman's knowledge. But despite the theoretical superiority Komachi demonstrates, she has not yet gained enlightenment. Wakita's explanation is that the monks' bow is not an expression of admiration, but an ironical act in order to make fun of her. And perhaps this is also the reason why she needs to pass through a higher step of consciousness before reaching enlightenment (Wakita 2005, pp. 212-213). The scholar adds the motivation that Kan'ami and Zeami, who respectively wrote and edited the text, were esteemed by society and could not express countervailing ideas clearly, such as allowing a woman to enter nirvana without the intervention of the monks (Wakita 2005, p. 219).

After the *mondō*, Komachi is possessed by the spirit of Fukakusa, her old lover. In her body, the spirit of Fukakusa manifests his longing, and reenacts the pain he suffered for her in life because of the promise she extracted from him to visit her for a hundred consecutive nights. Fukakusa

died of exhaustion on the very last night before obtaining Komachi's love. By reenacting the memory of these painful visits in front of the monks, Fukakusa's spirit is liberated from the frustration of unrequited love, and Komachi is freed from her sense of guilt. As mentioned before, in the original Noh, both Fukakusa's spirit and Komachi herself need the monks to rid themselves of their burden of attachment to the past. Compared to the strength of memory, Komachi's deep knowledge of Buddhist principles is of no use until she meets the monks.

2 Mishima's Modern Noh

In Mishima's rewriting of the play, the religious discussion that challenges the theoretical stereotypes of the monks is transformed into a dialogue between the beggar Komachi and a young and unskilled poet. The poet is infatuated with the heady atmosphere of the park where the play is set: couples embrace on benches, transported into another dimension by their romantic feelings. At the core of the dialogue between the poet and the beggar is the deconstruction by Komachi of his idealistic vision of life. She denies the value of intoxicating feelings like love, seen as an obstacle to understanding real life, and a delusion, which ultimately leads to symbolical death. On the contrary, Komachi's cynical vision exalts the boredom of real life, which apparently keeps her 'alive' (Mishima 1956, p. 91).

In *Notes on «Sotoba Komachi»*, Mishima (1952b, p. 742) explains his «trivial thoughts» - as he puts it - on the opposing artistic visions of Komachi and the poet. Mishima thinks that every artist should go beyond «adolescence» and kill it, in order to reach in him/herself the eternal youth of Komachi's vision. He enlarges on the explanation of his particular theory in another essay, *Notes on the performance of «Sotoba Komachi»* (1953, p. 742) by explaining that the woman embodies a «being which has surpassed life, or metaphysical being», while the poet, who has a «romantic aspiration to tragedy», incarnates a «sensual being», and therefore, I shall argue, is destined to artistic death.

The young poet whom Komachi meets when she is ninety-nine is initially disgusted by her wretched appearance, but later in the play there is a sort of reenactment of her memory, where the poet takes the part of Fukakusa. This scene is set in the middle of a ball in the Rokumeikan, the Deer-Cry Pavilion completed in 1883, but in reality everything is happening in the poet's mind. From that moment, in his sight, the Komachi in his arms is as fascinating as she was in her youth and he says she is «beautiful», although he knows the word will be fatal for him, as all men who said it before then died.

Apparently, the old woman's realistic stance is stronger than the thought of her romantic male counterpart, since just before dying, the poet realizes painfully that for the sake of a fleeting instant of exhilaration, he will

lose his life. Nevertheless, he decides to say that she is «beautiful» and consciously chooses death, just to live a full moment of intoxication. In my reading this is because this intoxication is what he has been looking for, it is in a way his *raison d'être* and he cannot hold back.

But the poet is not the only victim of self-deception. In the modern version, Komachi struggles to make the poet wake up from the illusion of his romantic vision of life, but her words are inconsistent with her own behavior. In my reading, the fact that the old Komachi re-enacts her personal memory with the poet, even if she knows that it will be fatal for him, is because the will to keep her own identity is stronger. Moreover, Komachi argues that there is no other meaning in life apart from living itself, therefore she seems to be free from any preconception or link to the past, but she cannot consider the discomfort of not recognizing herself as a beauty. It is evident that she is perfectly aware of her present physical aspect, since she invokes her wrinkles and her bad smell to make the poet desist from saying the fatal words. On the other hand, she arrives at the point of describing herself with the oxymoron «ugly beautiful woman» (*minikui bijin*), just because she does not want to find another identity for herself after losing her charm (Mishima 1956, p. 94). The poet, before entering the trance which will lead him to say that she is beautiful, takes for granted that the old Komachi is ugly because she is ninety-nine years old. Komachi replies to that provocation, and there follows a crucial dialogue:

Old woman: «[...] Idiots like you think that no matter how beautiful, any woman after growing old becomes ugly. Ahaha! It's a big mistake! Beautiful women remain always beautiful! If you think I am ugly now, it is because I am just an ugly beautiful woman. I have always been told that I am good looking, it has been seventy-eight years already. I can't be bothered (*kotomendō*) thinking that I am not beautiful, or even thinking that I am something other than a beautiful woman».

Young poet: (aside) «oh, no! It must be a big burden for women when once they were a beauty. (Speaking to the woman): I understand that. Even men, once they have been to war, speak all their lives of the memories of war. Of course, you must have been beautiful...».

Old woman: (stamping her feet) «It's not that I "have been"! I still *am* beautiful!».

Young poet: «Well, then tell me your past stories. Maybe eighty years ago or ninety (counting with his fingers). No, please tell me about eighty years ago». (Mishima 1956, p. 94, trans. by the author).

With these words the poet's journey into Komachi's past starts. In the same way that the poet is enticed into her past by the charm of intoxication, Komachi is driven by the will to keep her glorious memory alive, attitude which shows a mix of gender and age stereotypes together. The close

connection between women and beauty as identity is indeed the result of the common acceptance of the fact that woman is the passive object of the male gaze, and therefore her own identity is based on the male point of view, whose preference is for beautiful and young women. Moreover, the interconnection of gender and age here emerges, since aging for a woman means losing beauty, which is connected to losing desirability, therefore her womanliness. In a famous article Susan Sontag (1972, pp. 31-32) explains very clearly how the «double standard of aging» is what makes ageing for women much more painful than for men.

A man, even an ugly man, can remain eligible well into old age. He is an acceptable mate for a young, attractive woman. Women, even good-looking women, become ineligible (except as partners of very old men) at a much younger age. Thus, for most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification. [...] What makes men desirable to women is by no means tied to youth. On the contrary, getting old tends (for several decades) to operate in men's favor, since their value as lovers and husbands is set more by what they do than how they look.

Komachi, by losing her identity as 'beauty', loses at the same time her identity as Woman, or object of desire, and she cannot cope with such a great change. Her self-deceptive attitude recalls the need of modern man to create the *lieux de mémoire* theorized by Pierre Nora, which is provoked by the «will to remember». Nora (1989, pp. 11-12) explains:

The moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history. [...] These *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it. They make their appearance by virtue of the deritualization of our world – producing, manifesting, establishing, constructing, decreeing, and maintaining by artifice and by will a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past. Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders – these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity.

As a reconstituted object, the *lieux de mémoire* have the feature of being adaptable, depending on the necessity of memory itself. Nora (1989, p. 12) explains: «*lieux de mémoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications».

The comparison by the poet in *Sotoba Komachi* of Komachi's memory with the stories tirelessly told by men who have survived war is meaningful, because it clarifies the fact that it is a memory based on a historically finished situation, but that it still has a strong personal impact on the construction of subjectivity. Nora (1989, p. 15) explains that: «The transformation of memory implies a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to remembrance».

Similarly, Komachi adapts her own *lieu de mémoire*, not by simply saying that she is a beauty, but an *ugly* beauty, creating an illusion of reality through this oxymoron. But ultimately, this ironically only confirms the need of every human being for a fixed core identity. I would argue that what the old woman apparently despises and denies throughout the whole play – the necessity for delusion – is finally seen as a general tendency of humans.

Since as Hewitt (1989, p. 153) argues, the feeling of continuity is fundamental for identity, the concept of «successful ageing», born in the 1980s among the so called «new gerontologists» as a method to subvert stereotypes of age as decline and weakness, is based on the idea of considering as positive whatever allows the person not to change their activities and lifestyle despite ageing. For example, maintaining an active social life or keeping fit are the central tenets of this concept. In the end, even if she is not good-looking or sociable or fit, Komachi in Mishima's work shows a similar attitude to that of the «successful ageing» movement in the fact that with her own definition of «ugly beauty», she tries to find a way, even if illusory, not to change identity with age, to prove to herself that «beautiful women remain always beautiful» (Mishima 1956, p. 94).

Critical gerontology and the latest theories of ageing argue that, on the contrary, to «successful ageing» principles, the idea of positivity is not useful to overcome stereotypes linked to age. Trying to hide or minimize the changes which are an inevitable part of ageing, does not help to face it positively. Linn Sandberg (2011, p. 51), a scholar specialising in age and gender relations, explains that what critical gerontology seeks is rather the «conceptualization and acceptance of old age in all its diversity, from active to sedentary, from sexually vibrant to sexually indifferent».

The subtle irony which pervades the whole narrative of *Sotoba Komachi* preserves the tone that emerges from the *mondō* in the original play and effectively conveys the inconsistency of human behavior at the base of Mishima's play.

In the possession scene of the original play, for both Fukakusa and Komachi memory becomes a means of salvation from delusion through Buddhist faith. By contrast, in the modern play, for both characters memory becomes a source of self-delusion, the only way to find the strength to continue with a boring life.

Another important aspect to consider while speaking of memory is time. Noh, being distant from the Aristotelian dramatic unities, uses memory to explain past events, in the same way as novels use flashback. Kunio Konparu calls this technique «reversed time» (1983, p. 61) and Mishima Yukio (1957a, p. 460) himself writes that the «drama» (*gekitekina mono*) in Noh finishes before Noh starts. This is exactly what happens in *Sotoba Komachi*, where in the possession scene the memory of Fukakusa is acted out in Komachi's body. Konparu (1983, p. 61) declares that this phenomenal Noh is the reenactment of an experience from the past in the form of reversal of self and other. He argues (1980, pp. 87-88) that in general possession scenes in Noh provoke a phenomenon of «split time» when two characters live in two different dramatic times (past and present), even if they are speaking from the same mouth.

As for the original «Sotoba Komachi» play, I would suggest that the dramatic time of the possession scene is blurred rather than split. Together with the memory which becomes one, mingling the painful past of Fukakusa, and the miserable present of Komachi – as Peter Thornton (2003, p. 224) explains – the binary division of female-male gender and of subject-object mingles in one.

At the same time, in the reenactment of the hundred nights, we have not only «condensed time» during the act of recollection shared by both characters and provoked by possession, but also «shift of space» (in the eternal wandering to Komachi's house) accompanying Fukakusa-Komachi's inner space perception.

In Mishima's modern *Sotoba Komachi* too, even if *in lieu* of possession the reversion of time is due to the capacity for self-illusion of the male protagonist, the perception of memory is fundamental in order to develop the story and create the character of Komachi. The first part of the play, when Komachi is still seen by the poet as an old beggar, is set in the space and time of reality – the park – and is shared by the two characters. The second part starts when Komachi begins narrating her past to the poet and they pretend to be dancing at a ball in the Rokumeikan. While Komachi can remember her own personal facts without blurring the glorious past and the miserable present, the poet confuses her narration of the past with the present. Here the time and space perceptions of the two characters are divided; seen from the poet's point of view, the second part is set in the space and time of Komachi's memory – the Rokumeikan – while Komachi's point of view is still focused on time and space of the present. Following the instructions in the libretto by Mishima, the ball at the Rokumeikan is materially set in the same scenario as the park, with the exception of the backcloth, and the appearance of the beggar remains the same, also when she is in the arms of the poet (Mishima 1953, p. 742). In this way, the audience can see both the internal times and spaces of the two characters represented on the stage, and the gap between the two perceptions becomes evident. The

young man is 'intoxicated' and romantic, whereas the old woman appears lucid and cynical. The reenactment of the past is not only a means to operate a flashback, but it is above all a way to emphasize the contrast in perceptions of reality between the characters, as they differ in gender and age.

3 Komachi Legend in Enchi's Work

In Enchi Fumiko's novel *Komachi hensō*, published in 1965 in the magazine *Gunzō* (1965a, 1965b), the protagonist is not the historical Komachi, but a beautiful, mature actress, Reiko, who is often compared to Komachi in the narration. She is selected to perform Komachi's role in a modern play written by her old admirer and playwright Shigaraki. He had always been in love with Reiko, but since she refused him in their youth, he moved far away and ended up marrying a woman he didn't love. For all those years, he thought of Reiko and built around her an idealized image, which gave him the strength to live a life he didn't like. When he is asked in old age to write a play for Reiko, he is afraid that by meeting her that image of an «artisticized Reiko» (*geijutsuka sareta Reiko*) (Enchi 1965a, p. 67) will be shattered. When they meet, his idea of a 'sterile' and sexless Reiko is dismantled in Shigaraki's mind, because Reiko has a young lover, Natsuhiko, who is Shigaraki's disciple. The story ends with Reiko stoically performing the Komachi role Shigaraki has written for her, while knowing that the late-stage uterine cancer she has will kill her just after the performance. The narrative perspective shifts between Reiko, Natsuhiko, and Shigaraki, so that the reader comes to understand the mind of each protagonist and to compare the different versions of the facts.

In *Komachi hensō*, there is an essay intertwined in the narration about the figure of Komachi, entitled *Komachi shiken* (a personal vision of Komachi). At the end of *Komachi hensō* Enchi writes that for the image of Komachi, she borrowed many ideas from an existing book by Maeda Yoshiko entitled *Ono no Komachi* (Maeda 1943). In fact, comparing the essay and the work by Maeda, one can notice many common points. In this essay and also in another almost identical article (Enchi 1977, pp. 113-134) which she published as a critical work ten years later, Enchi provides evidence of the process of construction in Komachi's image.

As Noguchi Hiroko (2000, pp. 120-133) observes, the stress on the fact that the canon is male-centered and that the stereotype around Komachi has been created from a gender-based point of view, is specific to Enchi's theory, even if the main points are taken from Maeda's study. By comparing the core of the essay *Nonomiya ki* (chronicles of Nonomiya) at the center of the famous work *Onnamen* (masks) (1958), and the core of *Komachi shiken*, it is easy to find similarities, which are indeed at the base of the personal theory added to Maeda's. The device, used in both *Onnamen* and

Komachi hensō, of intertwining in her fiction an essay with her own ideas, is a skillful way by which Enchi revisits characters of the past and gives them a new reading in the light of modern sociological and psychological issues. Suganami Toshiko (1998, pp. 159-160) is the first to compare the two essays, and demonstrates that in both *Onnamen* and *Komachi hensō* the basic idea around the 'dangerous woman' myth is the same.

Here I borrow the expression 'dangerous woman' from Nina Cornyetz, who wrote extensively about the modern and contemporary transformation of the femme fatale-like archetype of Japanese tradition born out of men's fear of the independence and power of self-expression of women. In this inspiring book (Cornyetz 1999) she dedicates a chapter to Enchi Fumiko's works, especially focusing on the concept of female karma originating in medieval Buddhism and skillfully re-elaborated in *Onnamen*.

Komachi shiken is based on the analysis of various texts written by Ono no Komachi herself, or centered on her figure, such as the Noh play «Sotoba Komachi». It demonstrates that even if all the stereotypes of Komachi's character are negative, they are all different and sometimes contrasting, depending on which text is analyzed. They were created by men out of both fear of and longing for women who choose a role different from the one they are supposed to, such as to marry or to have children.

Here the link between the archetype of Komachi, created by the canon throughout the centuries, and the character of Reiko becomes clear. Reiko, too, chose a life without a partner, renouncing for the sake of her career the man she loved, who ultimately married another actress who left the stage for him. The fact that Reiko, often compared to 'sterile' Komachi in the narration, renounces her private life because of the obligations that marriage implies – and still implies in Japan – for a woman, adds a modern touch to the analysis of the myth of the 'dangerous woman'.

As further proof of her theory of the creation of the Komachi myth, at the end of the essay, the author describes the impressions she had visiting two main temples (Zuishin-in and Komachidera) supposedly connected to Komachi's life. The author argues that they are unlikely to have really been involved in Komachi's life, and implies that the monuments dedicated to her were built in later years (Enchi 1965a, pp. 48-49). At those sites, the inconsistency of the various images of Komachi comes to the fore and underlines the «capacity of metamorphosis» of the memory around her character, which Pierre Nora identified as prerogative of every *lieu de mémoire*.

It is precisely the fact that no certain history is at the base of the image of Komachi, but only her poems, that the legends around her have developed. At the beginning of his article Nora tries to explain the difference between history and memory that characterizes modern times:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, born by living societies founded

in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. (Nora 1989, p. 8)

Even if later in the article Nora himself calls into doubt the existence of a pure history, and underlines the difficulty of separating history from memory, the temples visited by the narrator are clearly distinct from what Nora defines *milieux de mémoire*, or archaeological locations, real environments of memory which are significant without being preserved on the basis of a «will to remember» (Nora 1989, pp. 19-21). They are, on the contrary, places which preserve the myth of Komachi born out of the lack of actual historical places linked to her character.

4 Dangerous Alliances and *Komachi shiken*

The author of *Komachi shiken*, the essay central to *Komachi hensō*, is not explicitly revealed throughout the work. We only know that the author's pen name is Morinari Atsuko, and that it was published in the magazine *Ōchō*. The mystery around the identity of the author opens many possible interpretations, since the meaning of the article itself inside the work changes completely, depending on who supposedly wrote the article.

What we know from the text is the declaration (Enchi 1965a, p. 83) of Shigaraki that it is a «collaboration between my wife and myself» (*boku to tsuma no gassaku*). And in another moment, Shigaraki says that he «added the last part» (Enchi 1965a, p. 83). But in the first version of the novel, published in the magazine *Gunzō*, while this sentence appears (Enchi 1965, p. 90), the previous one on the collaboration does not. This is a clear sign that the idea of a collaboration was not present in Enchi's original conception of the novel, therefore the interpretation that in reality the essay was written by the wife of Shigaraki and he just added the last sentence, is plausible. Moreover, the very last sentence is not in line with the apologetic tone of the rest of the essay, and sounds very much like a forced justification by a man for the critical tone of the essay. It is very possible that Shigaraki, before publishing it, decided to add a sentence in order not to admit his own errors to the public. The sentence is: «In the end if you wonder why as a woman, I have this kind of attachment to the figure of Komachi, the answer is that it seems that I have the same blood of Komachi in my veins, having inside of me the same sterility» (Enchi 1965a, p. 49).

Despite the belief of many critics such as Noguchi Hiroko (2000, 2003) that the essay is mostly or entirely written by Shigaraki, in my understand-

ing this essay is entirely written by Shigaraki's wife as a way to explain to herself and others how much male fantasies and the tendency to idealization can be hurtful to women. This interpretation affords us deeper insight into this gendered vision, through the correspondence to the theory emerging from *Onnamen*, as mentioned above.

At the heart of the novel *Onnamen*, which is generally regarded as one of Enchi's most representative works, there is the essay *Chronicles of Nonomiya* that analyses the phenomenon of spirit possession in *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, eleventh century), which depicts life at court through the amorous adventures of the womanizer protagonist Genji (Tyler 2002).

The essay in *Onnamen* stresses male responsibility for the vengeance of Lady Rokujō's «living spirit» (*ikiryō*) towards Aoi, wife of Genji.² Despite the male-centered canonical interpretation of female jealousy and *karma*, Aoi's possession is seen as a possible effect of a reaction resulting from the victim's own conscience, due to her suppression in an androcentric society (Enchi 1983, pp. 56-57). This is depicted indeed as the consequence of female karma, but in *Onnamen* it functions as a sort of alliance between women: «an obsession that becomes an endless river of blood, flowing on from generation to generation», ultimately confirming the stereotype of the «dangerous woman», but giving it a sense of rebellion towards male subjugation (Enchi 1983, p. 127).

As mentioned above, some critics as Noguchi (2000, 2003) have not interpreted the sentence of Shigaraki – that *Komachi shiken* is a creation of himself and his wife together – as truthful, but as an excuse for Shigaraki to write the essay. Without taking into consideration the above intertextual context, the wife of Shigaraki, a woman whose husband was never in love with her because of his love for Reiko, was indeed supposed to have been jealous of her counterpart and therefore not supportive of her image. As Natsuhiko, Shigaraki's disciple and Reiko's young lover, notices, the wife of Shigaraki, who is married and has children, is not the embodiment of «sterility» and therefore should not have been writing an apology for Komachi, who is the archetype of the independent and «dangerous woman» (Enchi 1965a, p. 83).

In my view, the attitude of Shigaraki's wife, in writing an essay in defense of Komachi and indirectly of Rieko herself, is consistent with concept of female alliance outlined above. Even though Shigaraki's wife is the victim of his negligence, at the same time she recognizes that it is not Reiko's fault that Shigaraki does not love her. She goes a step further, and by analyzing the canonization of the Komachi archetype, she shows the process of

2 In the Heian period (794-1185) it was especially believed that a spirit of a living person (*ikiryō*) would unconsciously leave his/her body driven by will of self-expression or repressed anger and possess the rival's body. See Bargen 1997.

the idealization by men of women in the time, and therefore she also finds indirectly an explanation of the problems of her husband's married life, which is the idealization of Reiko.

Shigaraki, by reading his wife's theories on the figure of Komachi, understands and becomes conscious of his own process of idealization. On the basis of this new awareness, he intentionally writes the play *Komachi hensō*, which ultimately creates an even worse image of Komachi than the canonical one: in his hands, she becomes a woman who cannot achieve salvation.

5 Reiko as a Transformed Komachi

When meeting Reiko after many years and therefore breaking his ideal of a 'sterile' and sexless woman, Shigaraki is obliged to create another ideal in himself in order to write the play. Before meeting with Reiko in old age, Shigaraki had consciously idealized her image for dozens of years in order to survive the severe environment of Hokkaidō and life with a woman he didn't love, his wife. As rightly supposed by Natsuhiko, that image was based on the fact that Reiko had undergone an operation for uterine cancer and therefore was easily idealized «because she is not a woman» (Enchi 1965a, p. 67). In Shigaraki's words, that image of Reiko was an «illusion that I have created myself» (Enchi 1965a, p. 66).

After that encounter which «cancelled the artisticized Reiko», during which Shigaraki is forced to see the real Reiko, who is moreover sexually active with Natsuhiko, he looks for the sexual aspect of femininity which he had avoided in all those years of idealization. Shigaraki goes to watch some striptease performances as well as natural phenomena like waterfalls, which he considers the highest expression of femininity, as a symbol of eternal motherhood and female sexuality at the same time. The play which Shigaraki writes on the base of this new image of Komachi-Reiko is entitled *Komachi hensō* (transformations of Komachi) and gives the title to Enchi's work.

In the end Shigaraki dies before seeing his play performed, but he leaves this world satisfied, having consciously deceived himself with a newly constructed image of Reiko in his mind, and acting like the male critics, who in past centuries shaped Komachi's figure to suit their own purposes. This awareness he has of his tendency to idealize Reiko, probably gained through the essay written by his unhappy wife, does not prevent him from continuing to idealize Reiko. On the contrary, by doing this consciously, he admits his frailty and the fact that without an ideal female image he cannot live.

This new image he creates is completely different from the one he had before, which gave him the strength to live his life until he met her again.

While the previous image was of a sexless woman, this time he takes inspiration from the relationship Reiko has with Natsuhiko, and in voyeur style, while imagining their intercourse, he creates a new sexually active image of Reiko. And yet, while taking inspiration from reality, this is again a *lieu de mémoire*, a memory which changes according to what we want to remember, embodied in the figure of Komachi in the play *Komachi hensō* he writes before dying. Shigaraki explains that this time he wants to depict «the karma of a woman who cannot achieve salvation» (Enchi 1965a, p. 72). It is even more derogatory than the vision of Komachi coming out of *Sotoba Komachi*, for example, since the possibility of salvation is denied her even after the encounter with the monks.

Natsuhiko explains that he had felt the gaze of the «eyes full of eye discharge» of Shigaraki while being with Reiko (Enchi 1965a, p. 73). The gaze here assumes the features of a metaphoric control of man over woman in an effort of idealization. If in the famous theory of Laura Mulvey (1975), the gaze is the embodiment of male subjugation of women, here it is more the attempt to compensate for an unrequited love. It is more the sign of the frailty of man, instead of the force. Shigaraki is not trying to conquer Reiko's heart, he is simply resigned to her refusal in reality, therefore he lives in the illusion of having her heart, and to support this illusion he imposes his 'stalking' gaze on her and eventually on Natsuhiko.

6 Reiko and Shigaraki's Gendered Perception of Age

Reiko is perfectly conscious of the limits that patriarchal society and sickness impose on her, and despite - and thanks to them - she succeeds in going on with her life productively until the end, even at the cost of renouncing her private happiness. Shigaraki, however, instead of acknowledging reality, creates for himself a dream-like world with Reiko's idealized image at its center.

Reiko and Shigaraki's artistic and life visions differ as do the ways they deal with memory, which affect their perception of age. This is made clear by the fact that Shigaraki, who interiorizes a kind of positive ageism, not only accepts the tendency of old age to blur «the things one experiences in life and the things one's mind makes up» (Enchi 1965a, p. 80), but even encourages it, trying to recall sexual intercourse between him and Reiko which never happened.

The ageism exploited and self-inflicted by the male protagonist is in contrast to the woman's attitude: she fights against age and weak health in order to perform until the end. Nevertheless, if the self-illusion of Shigaraki recalls the quest for 'intoxication' of the poet in Mishima's *Sotoba Komachi*, the attitude of Reiko, who is taking refuge in her art from the pain of real life, is also similar to the apparent lucidity of old Komachi, hiding a strong desire to protect her identity as a «bijin».

After having an affair in old age with Natsuhiko – the son of her former lover – Reiko comes to understand the illusionary nature of all the emotions she felt on the stage while she was in that relationship. However, she overcomes this feeling when she breaks up with Natsuhiko and just before her performance of the play written by Shigaraki, she reverts to the refuge of her art, declaring:

I have things left to do much more important than affairs between men and women. After starting the relationship with him, I felt myself to be inferior, a feeling that I had never had before, and my heart was tainted by this [...] During those one or two months, on the stage I was like a skeleton dancing in a cemetery [...] but finally this week I have reached a point of resolution. (Enchi 1965a, p. 111)

In Reiko's mind, this image of the skeleton is a metaphor for illusion, but she deceives herself so well that she attributes the illusion of the stage to her love affair, not to the fictional nature of theatre itself. Reiko takes the cynicism of the Komachi of Mishima's play to its extreme: renouncing life for Reiko means believing that the reality on the stage is more real than life off the stage.

It goes without saying that the discomfort felt by Reiko is partly due to the mingling of sexism and ageism which are often at the base of the socially constructed stereotypes towards the kind of love relationship she has enjoyed. A couple consisting of an older man and a younger woman is more acceptable in terms of heteronormative thought, because it is believed that men are sexually active until later age, thanks to their reproductive capacity. When the woman is older than the man and therefore not capable of reproduction, the love relationship is stigmatized. Nevertheless, the sense of inferiority Reiko felt in having an affair with a much younger man was caused by Reiko herself. Before starting the relationship with Natsuhiko, Reiko asks him: «Can you please make me feel like a woman again? I want to meet one more time the part of your father you have in yourself». And later on, when Natsuhiko hugs her, she asks: «Does it feel creepy?» (Enchi 1965a, p. 60).

It is evident from these words that she herself is not sure of her sex appeal, and that she doesn't consider the possibility that Natsuhiko could be attracted by her despite the difference in their ages. Moreover, the idea that sex with a young man can make her 'feel like a woman again' perfectly matches the conventional ageist and sexist view of old women as sexually unattractive, and recalls the concept of sexual activity as part of the 'successful ageing' agenda. Because of the interiorization of ageism, her feelings towards Natsuhiko remain ambivalent from the beginning of the relationship. Reiko, before ending the relationship, thinks:

«For what reason am I performing on a stage, casting myself in the forms of an art which idealizes real feelings, moving, shouting, crying? Why

should I give myself to a much younger man whom I don't love, why should I have to wait for him until I dry up, hating him all the while?» Reiko, who was asking herself these kinds of questions without answer, was naturally losing the expressivity of her performance. (Enchi 1965a, p. 93)

On the other hand, Natsuhiko seems perfectly willing to have this relationship with her, and despite his young age he thinks that «trees are beautiful, and humans could become beautiful as trees when they age» (Enchi 1965a, p. 73). After Reiko refuses to continue the relationship with him, Natsuhiko ponders the relation that has just ended. The attraction he felt for Reiko, defined with expressions which indicate a strong amorous passion such as «mad» (*suikyō*), becomes clear (Enchi 1965a, p. 100). Natsuhiko even thinks that «he probably would never taste again in life a density of feeling like the one felt in the relation with Reiko, and he wanted to immerse himself avidly in the eerie delicious taste of the climax of obsolescence» (Enchi 1965a, p. 102).

If Reiko could have fought the interiorization of ageism which ultimately led to their separation, probably she would have died happily, surrounded by Natsuhiko's warmth. But she chose to deny love, which was making her face the reality of age and bodily frailty, in order to continue until the end to create for herself an unchanging image of success and beauty as an actress on the illusionary space of the stage. Ultimately, then, Reiko is not very different from Shigaraki, consciously blurring reality and fantasy, nor from the 'intoxicated' poet, nor from the 'ugly beautiful woman' Komachi. All of them, depending on their gender and age, attempt in different ways to avoid seeing reality.

7 Conclusions

In *Komachi hensō*, the concept of self-delusion inherent in every human being, which is connected to memory in both Mishima and Enchi's works, is pursued deeply and made more concrete. It is shown how not only personal, but also collective memory, such as is embodied in the canon, can often be substituted for reality, especially when reality is unknown, as with the figure of Ono no Komachi.

I chose to tackle two different works, the modern Noh play *Sotoba Komachi* by Mishima and the novel by Enchi *Komachi hensō* because, despite the clear differences between narration in drama and in fiction, I find these two modern works similar in their depiction of the human tendency to self-deception, traceable to the delusion of worldly passions in the Buddhist tones of the original play. The Buddhist idea of attachment in «*Sotoba Komachi*», which is overcome by the blurring of Komachi and Fukakusa's identity and the trip into memory during the possession scene, in the modern Noh by

Mishima becomes attachment to identity for Komachi and self-deception in the poet which, on the contrary, memory enhances. In Enchi's re-elaboration, the same attachment to identity and self-delusion is shown through the creation of a *lieu de mémoire* around the image of Ono no Komachi.

Fluidity of identity is at the centre of Noh, thanks to the Zen principles at the base of the art. Lamarque (1989, pp. 165-166), introducing the «dissolution of personality» in Noh argues: «there is a widely held view in Buddhism, the *Anatta* doctrine, which rejects any enduring 'self' over and above the flow of consciousness; and, more radically, a view in Zen Buddhism which seems even to reject the condition of coherence». In the re-elaborations of the original play, the dissolution of personality does not occur, but by revealing the necessity for human beings to recognize identity, the ultimate effect is to deconstruct the concept of identity itself.

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