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# Old 'Women' on the Stage Actorship and the Ageing Body in the Works of Enchi Fumiko

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**Abstract** Enchi Fumiko's literature has frequently faced the topic of ageing, especially focused on the bodily decay from the point of view of disease or loss of beauty and femininity and often in reference to the double standard adopted for female and male bodies. In this paper, focusing mainly on the novel *Komachi hensō* (1965) and the short story "Futaomote" (1959), I analyse how in Enchi's works the figure of the actress and the one of the *onnagata* actor perceive the process of ageing vis-à-vis their gender and sexuality. The *onnagata* and the actress experience a real loss of identity when facing age, since the success they have lived has almost been based on the charm of their figure on the stage. In this paper I analyse how the protagonists cope with the reality of ageing, comparing their reaction with regard to their gender and sexuality. By looking from a peculiar perspective the idea of the 'female' decaying body, I aim at giving a further contribution to the already rich scholarship on the vision of ageing in Enchi's literature. Moreover, I aim to demonstrate that the foundational elements of Enchi's series of works, known as *rōjomono* or 'works on old women', typically believed to have originated in the 1970s, were in fact established as early as the late 1950s.

**Keywords** Enchi Fumiko. Rōjomono. Image of femininity. Actorship. Ageing body.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: *Rōjomono* and Their Definition. – 2 Old Women Are Women As Well: *Transformations of Ono no Komachi*. – 3 Even More Womanly than Women (?): "Two Faces". – 4 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction: *Rōjomon* and Their Definition

Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986)'s career as a writer spans many years and has been remarkably productive, despite her success as a novelist coming later in life. In her youth, she primarily wrote theatre pieces. Her female protagonists typically belonged to the intelligentsia, often being artists or writers, and tended to be around the same age as Enchi herself. Consequently, her fiction predominantly revolves around middle-aged or older women. This shared age with her characters has led many critics to interpret her writings largely from an autobiographical perspective, particularly concerning themes of ageing and physical decline (Furuya 1996; Hulvey 1995, 190). This emphasis on biography is further underscored by the fact that Enchi Fumiko battled cancer twice, a personal struggle that frequently surfaces in her works, particularly in relation to the theme of illness intertwined with ageing. However, some scholars, such as Kurata (2010) and Kobayashi (2005), have diverged from this biographical approach, choosing instead to analyse her works independently of her life events. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that undergoing two major surgeries for a serious illness leaves an indelible mark on anyone's life and world view, especially on a writer's creative output.

While it is acknowledged that Enchi likely drew inspiration from her real-life experiences as a writer, I refrain from incorporating biographical elements into my analysis. This stance aligns with the perspective of Noguchi Hiroko (2003, 33-4), who contends that even in works like *Ake o ubau mono* 朱を奪うもの (What Spoils Red, 1956), where the protagonist bears resemblance to Enchi herself, labelling them as autobiographical is not essential for textual analysis.

Illness is not the sole recurring theme in Enchi's works centred on older women. Monica Tamas (2012, 183) identifies three age-related changes that emerge in Enchi's narratives as elements that disrupt the female characters' sense of identity: apart from illness, there are also bodily defects and bodily instability. Additionally, I would highlight the element of senility, which, though more mental than physical, remains a significant presence in Enchi's production from around the 1970s.

These themes are distinctly evident in a substantial portion of Enchi's work, to the extent that a considerable number of scholars examining her *oeuvre* concur in employing the classification of *rōjomon* 老女もの (works on old women).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Enchi herself, at the age

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<sup>1</sup> Having no specific definition, scholars have interpreted the concept of *rōjomon* in different ways. I will focus on Kurata Yōko's interpretation, since she is the scholar who dedicated more time to the study of works who fall into the category. See also Zhang 2022.

of 71 during an interview with Kumasaka Atsuko (1976, 37), used this term, directly alluding to a category of Noh dramas centred on old women. Enchi utilised this term to encapsulate the straightforward notion that over the years, her interests had evolved, consequently leading to a transformation in her literary works:

Kumasaka: Recently, I've noticed a certain deepening of *yōbi* 妖美 (bewitching beauty) in your work, and a seasoned beauty emerging from the weight of life called age, as seen in "Hana kui uba" 花食い姥 (The Old Woman Who Ate Flowers)...

Enchi: That piece is a recent creation, but preceding it is one titled *Yūkon* 遊魂 (Wandering Spirit). I believe it evolved from works like *Onnamen* 女面 (Masks). I can not pinpoint a specific reason, but lately, I find myself gravitating towards such works. For instance, I penned a story named "Ushirosugata" うしろすがた (Back Figure), where a woman's figure captivates a man's gaze, her back turned towards him. He questions whether she is real or merely a fragment of his imagination. This scene recurs, and eventually, he realises she existed solely as a concept, an idealised image within his mind. Over the past six or seven years, something inexplicable has emerged: I've found myself crafting what could be considered as representations of women. I predominantly write pieces in which the characters from my novels blend with real individuals. I'm unafraid of producing awful results; rather, I'm driven by the pursuit of new horizons. They must exist. Lately, what I'm composing could be categorised as *rōjomonō*. I'm exploring narratives where the perspectives of older women unfold in various directions. (37)<sup>2</sup>

Enchi cites 1970 *Wandering Spirit*, part of a trilogy, as a work which embodies the fundamental traits of her later writings falling into the category of *rōjomonō*, while mentions 1968 "Back Figure" as the

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<sup>2</sup> All the translations from Japanese are from the Author unless otherwise specified. The portrayal of the old woman (*rōjo* 老女) in Noh theatre does not depict a refined or gentle elderly figure. According to scholar Yamaori Tetsuo (1997, 30), there is a tendency for the old woman character to be associated with the traditions of demon women and *yamamba* 山姥 (the mountain crone), instilling fear and dread in the audience. He further elaborates (36): "In the male realm of Noh, the distinction between the *okina* 翁 (gentle old man) and *jō* 尉 (frightening old man) is established, but in the female realm, only the frightening old woman archetype has been embraced, while the gentle old woman image has faded into obscurity".

In the words of Noh scholar Masuda Shōzō (1990, 95), the role of the *rōjo* is one that Zeami cultivated for its psychological depth, as it combines the beauty of old age with the beauty inherent in female roles. However, Masuda notes that this role has primarily been depicted through the lens of the male gaze (97). This likely explains why only menacing images have endured. I believe that this emphasis on the male perspective shaping the fearful *rōjo* image is also pivotal to Enchi's use of the term.

genesis of this thematic exploration. She implies that this writing reflects on how the male gaze idealises femininity as a concept rather than engaging with real women directly. In "Back Figure", the idealised woman's figure is perpetually turned away, observed but never reciprocating the gaze, adorned in a kimono with an allure not found in contemporary women. This highlights the contrast between today's real women and the idealised feminine figures purportedly existing in the past. The ideal woman transcends time, embodying stereotypes of femininity such as condescension, tenderness, and fragility, while the contemporary women in the story are depicted as wearing a mask of femininity yet being stronger and fiercer than men (Enchi 1968, 98).

To fully grasp the idea of *rōjomonō*, it is crucial to consider the author's confession that the ideal woman forms the foundation of her exploration within this category. This reflection on the construction of an ideal, a figure shaped by the patriarchal gaze over centuries, triggers various 'horizons' for these elderly female protagonists.

Kurata Yōko is the scholar who wrote most extensively on figures of old women in Enchi's literature. In her book chapters dedicated to Enchi's *rōjomonō*, referencing the aforementioned interview, she explicitly acknowledges the absence of a unified definition for the category (Kurata 2010, 249). However, Kurata repeatedly cites a single statement by Enchi indicating that, in her *rōjomonō*, the perspective of old women unfolds in various directions (164, 268), as to suggest that this is the sole possible definition.

As a first important feature of *rōjomonō*, Kurata lists the mingling of *genjitsu to kagen no sekai* 現実と仮現の世界 (reality and a world of phenomena) (251). Kurata admits that fantastic elements such as the spirit possession were already present in Enchi's earlier production. She notes, however, that compared to earlier protagonists who were driven by anger, the characters in *rōjomonō* exhibit the courage to unleash their erotic desires by establishing a *kyokō no sekai* 虚構の世界 (fictional world) (242). In Kurata's view, a tighter connection between erotic desire and fantasy may characterise *rōjomonō* compared to earlier works centred on middle-aged or older women.

Furthermore, *rōjomonō*, in contrast to other works, are not only less preoccupied with emotions such as hatred and more focused on desire and hope, but they are also adept at deconstructing normativity and systemic stereotypes (Kurata 2010, 242) by dislodging them from their naturalised state and presenting alternative narratives. As Kurata suggests (242, 291), Enchi's works explicitly associate gender and age stereotypes, thereby preempting a contemporary intersectional approach that recognises gender and age identity as interdependent constructs.

What I do not entirely agree with in Kurata's definition is the chronological limitation of *rōjomonō*. I recognise that Kurata primarily

examines Enchi's works within the Japanese social context of the early 1970s, a time ripe for scrutinising the condition of the elderly in a changing society. Undoubtedly, works like *Saimu* 彩霧 (Coloured Mist) from 1975 can be viewed as a response to the impact of the 1972 bestseller *Kōkotsu no hito* 恍惚の人 (lit.: A Man in Ecstasy) by Ariyoshi Sawako.

However, Kurata's chronological restriction likely stems from Enchi's own interview, where she mentions reflecting on the idea of 'ideal woman' at the core of *rōjomonō* for the past seven years. Nevertheless, I find Enchi's explanation contradictory, and I propose that the foundation of *rōjomonō* existed long before the end of the 1960s. Specifically, I discern elements of *rōjomonō* already present in the well-known novella "Yō" 妖 (Enchantress, 1956) and I believe it is essential to consider the concept in a broader sense. Enchi herself, in the same interview, prior to the passage I quoted above (Kumasaka 1976, 35), acknowledges that the tone of her works shifts slightly from "Enchantress" onwards. She feels that while erotic energy is implied in works such as 1957 *The Waiting Years*, the distinction lies in the fact that in "Enchantress" it becomes intertwined with *hyōreitekina mono* 憑霊的なもの (elements of spirit possession).

In "Enchantress" (Enchi 1956), the use of phenomena serves as a conduit for the middle-aged protagonist's daydreams and experiences of erotic ecstasy. Drawing inspiration from the ancient books she translates, she crafts romantic narratives while traversing the slope behind her house, seamlessly oscillating between past and present, reality and fantasy. The protagonist Chikako employs thick makeup as a means of transformation, allowing her to transcend her unhappy marriage and the inevitability of bodily decay within her daydreams.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the male character of Tōno serves as a poignant reflection on the intersection of age and gender identity. Despite appearing older due to the toll of war on his body, Tōno seems unperturbed by his altered looks, a sharp contrast to Chikako's reliance on makeup to conceal hers. Through Tōno, the perception of age intertwined with gender identity is vividly portrayed.

While the element of spirit possession connected to eroticism is already present in 1956 "Enchantress", I believe that the contemplation of the eternal woman image, which Enchi refers to in relation to *rōjomonō*, emerges fully with the novella *Komachi hensō* 小町変相 (Transformations of Ono no Komachi), published in 1965. This work in my opinion must be considered a *rōjomonō* in virtue of the fact that,

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<sup>3</sup> Writer Hirabayashi Taiko, quoted by Noguchi Hiroko (2003, 84), reads Chikako's makeup as an effort to *nanikani bakeyōto shiteiru* 何かかに化けようとしている (try to transform into something) and Tanaka Yuki (1998, 153) argues that makeup could be a device to become similar to *kami* 神 (goddess).

as we shall see, includes all the above-mentioned elements. Furthermore, by illustrating the striking parallels between *Transformations of Ono no Komachi* and the earlier short story "Futaomote" 双面 (Two Faces, 1959), I attempt to demonstrate that a significant contribution to the development of *rōjomonō* was made by an almost obscure work, paradoxically centred on a male protagonist.

In order to do this, I will conduct a close reading of both the novella and the short story, examining how the protagonists navigate the challenges of ageing and comparing their responses in terms of gender and sexuality. This comparative analysis seeks also to illustrate how Enchi, as early as the late 1950s, engaged in a highly relevant exploration of the construction of femininity and age, and the ways in which these intersect.

## 2 Old Women Are Women As Well: *Transformations of Ono no Komachi*

In *Transformations of Ono no Komachi* (hereafter *Transformations*), the protagonist is Reiko, a charming actress of Shingeki theatre in her sixties, often likened to the Heian poetess Ono no Komachi 小野小町 within the narrative. She is invited to portray Komachi's character in a contemporary play penned by her former admirer, professor Shigaraki. Despite his lifelong love for Reiko, Shigaraki felt obliged to move away and married a woman he did not love. Throughout the years, he idealised Reiko, finding solace in this image amidst a life he found dissatisfying. As he is tasked with writing a play for Reiko in old age, he fears that meeting her will shatter his idealised perception of her as an 'artisticised Reiko'. Though it is not explicitly stated, Shigaraki perceives Reiko's loss of her uterus due to cancer as an obstacle to his idealisation of her image (Enchi 1965, 67). When they finally reunite, he is not disappointed by her aged appearance, but his conception of a 'sterile' and devoid-of-sexuality Reiko hinders his writing process. To rekindle his perception of eternal femininity intertwined with sexuality and fertility (referred to in the text as *Urmutter*, 'primeval mother'), Shigaraki takes his disciple Natsuhiko on a trip to view waterfalls, evoking the symbolism of the female body and sexuality. Ultimately, the image of Reiko as sexless is dismantled in Shigaraki's mind. Shigaraki's ability to idealise Reiko's figure once again and subsequently write the play is likely due to the waterfall imagery overlapping with the concept of the eternal female, as well as his realisation that Reiko is sexually active, notably with her young lover, Natsuhiko. The story concludes with Reiko stoically performing the Komachi role crafted by Shigaraki, fully aware that her recurrent uterine cancer will claim her life shortly after the performance. The narrative perspective alternates among Reiko, Natsuhiko, and

Shigaraki, offering insight into each protagonist's mind and allowing for comparison of their differing perspectives.

The connection between the archetype of poetess Ono no Komachi, established by the canon over centuries, and the character of Reiko is evident from the outset of the work. Reiko has opted for a solitary life, sacrificing love for her career, as the man she loved ultimately married another actress, Umeno, who left the stage for him (the mother of Natsuhiko). This is why Reiko is frequently likened to the *fumō* 不毛 (sterile) Komachi, who rejected the advances of men and ended up alone. The myth of Komachi as an unattainable woman is encapsulated in the expression *ana nashi* 穴なし (without a hole), commonly used to describe her as a woman who rejects men and, therefore, is not considered a real woman.

In *Transformations*, an essay discussing the figure of Komachi, titled "Komachi shiken" 小町私見 (A Personal Vision of Komachi), is interwoven into the narrative. "Komachi shiken" is based on an analysis of various texts written by Ono no Komachi herself or focused on her figure. The essay delves into the negative stereotypes associated with Komachi, traditionally viewed as an arrogant woman, illustrating that these stereotypes were constructed by men out of both fear and desire for women who chose roles divergent from societal expectations, such as marriage or motherhood. *Transformations* has been previously examined in a few studies, with the primary focus often being on the comparison between Reiko and Ono no Komachi, particularly regarding the significance of the metatextual essay within the narrative. The process of ageing and bodily decay has thus been interpreted from a universal perspective on the human condition. Here, I aim to delve into the bodily decay experienced by the protagonist Reiko in old age, considering it through the lens of the actress's imperative to maintain eternal youth.

Various interpretations exist regarding the identity of "Komachi shiken"'s author within the narrative, with some scholars suggesting it is Shigaraki, while others propose it is his wife. Here, I aim to focus solely on the role of the essay as a narrative device that propels the plot forward. It is through this essay that Natsuhiko becomes closer to Reiko, as Shigaraki tasks him with explaining its contents to her. Another significant aspect of the essay within the plot is its empowering effect on Reiko. Indeed, Reiko directly draws upon the words of the essay to justify her decision to not forego another operation, prioritising her performance as Komachi over her own health and over her affair with Natsuhiko (Enchi 1965, 112):

It is alright. The moment I saw blood flowing from my own body, the absurd obsession I once harboured for that person vanished... Ultimately, I am a woman who loves herself more than any man. The fact that Umeno took his father away from me is not entirely

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incomprehensible. [...] I am a sterile woman. Perhaps I am a descendant of Komachi. But the thing that comes out of the void, like the empty shell of a woman unable to conceive... as long as I have life I want to keep going on to see which fireworks it can launch into the sky.

In these few sentences, Reiko encapsulates the essence of her existence: she devoted herself entirely to her art, forsaking other aspects typically associated with women's lives, such as starting a family and having children. Paradoxically, her condition of being 'sterile', and thus deviating from the conventional notion of womanhood tied to familial roles, unleashed the full force of her creativity, akin to the brilliance of fireworks.

This newfound positive self-perception in Reiko is directly influenced by the *apologia* of Komachi presented in the essay, alongside her realisation that her relationship with Natsuhiko has detrimental effects on her. Prior to this realisation, from the outset of the narrative, Reiko had been grappling with uncertainties regarding her own self-worth and life choices. She had faced the dilemma of choosing between pursuing a career as an actress or starting a family, ultimately opting for the former, albeit not without feelings of regret and envy towards Umeno, who chose differently. However, while this decision initially brought her happiness, doubts about her identity as a renowned actress began to surface more recently. Needless to say, this shift in perspective and the ensuing uncertainties are rooted in the passage of time. Despite being aware that her allure remains intact, Reiko finds herself confronting an identity crisis triggered by her ageing body and her involvement with a much younger man.

It is widely recognised that society frequently imposes a double standard of ageing, favouring the notion that male ageing is less concerning than female ageing. As an actress, Reiko epitomises the concept that one's perception of their own age is influenced by external scrutiny, and the notion of ageing as problematic only arises when the audience and those in her circle begin to perceive her body as deteriorating.

The discourse surrounding age is multifaceted, with some scholars focusing on the cultural construction of age while others emphasise its medical or physical aspects (Twigg 2004). Clearly, both aspects are undeniable, as later critics have pointed out. Kathleen Woodward (1991, 149), an influential figure in the study of age, contends:

In addition to being a state of mind, aging is a biological phenomenon and a social construction. To subjective or personal age, we must add social age, which is mediated by chronological age (how many years old we are) and biological age (the state of health of the body).

I find that Enchi, through her works, delves into the interplay between these two aspects. Specifically, by focusing on a middle-aged actress who portrays young roles of idealised femininity, Enchi anticipates the notion of age as something that can be constructed, akin to many other facets of identity (not solely confined to the stage). However, simultaneously, for an actress subjected to constant scrutiny, the reality of bodily decline can be particularly distressing compared to the experiences of women in other professions. Margaret Gullette (2004, 163), who authored a seminal work on ageing and dedicated a chapter to the performance of age on stage, highlights it as an example of our daily performance, where “we both have a body [...] and perform our body” (162). She argues that in our everyday lives, we possess “default bodies” that are constantly at work whether we are conscious of them or not, and these bodies generate diverse age effects (162). This phenomenon is even more apparent on stage, where the “‘meatiness’ of bodies” is tangible, and the “default body” is continuously present and prone to peek out of their performance (163-4).

Reiko’s acknowledgment of her ageing process is vividly depicted throughout the narrative, often portrayed through scenes where she meticulously examines her appearance, usually at the mirror (Enchi 1965, 12, 105, 114). Particularly noteworthy is a lengthy scene at the outset, prompted by an offer for her to portray Komachi’s character, during which Reiko scrutinises all the signs of ageing and exclaims:

Oh! I am really in decay. How many more years will I be able to make the spectators believe that I am beautiful? [...] Of course, there is a promise inherent in theatre, but that promise is not strong enough to conceal every trace of decay in the actor’s body. Especially in the case of an actress, unlike the allure created by the *onnagata* actor of Kabuki, who from the outset makes the eerie promise of burying his gender. The allure of a feminine body captivates the audience directly, but at the same time, they can mercilessly and ferociously discern its deterioration. (12)

The “promise” she speaks about can be viewed as the audience’s conditioning, as they “contribute a great deal to the dramatic illusion” of age, as noted by Gullette (2004, 165). Not only critics and audience members, but also those in her circle, perceive the changes in her ageing body. Specifically, Natsuhiko (Enchi 1965, 52) becomes aware of her physical decline, to the extent of envisioning himself in the protagonist role of the story of *The Peony Lantern* engaging in intimacy with a skeleton (102). Tsune (22, 55), her assistant, and Umeno (90), her eternal rival who nonetheless supports her portrayal of Komachi on stage, express doubts about whether her performances will continue to be appreciated. Umeno (36) describes Reiko’s stage presence as *zōka* 造花, an ‘artificial flower’, where the idea of artificiality is

associated with the diminishing brightness and depth in an actress' performance. This is because her "default body" is the sole instrument she possesses to bring to life vastly diverse characters. The default body represents "the current visible manifestation of my selfhood, my embodied psyche in culture over time" (Gullette 2004, 161) and despite this, the audience must suspend disbelief in the reality of the character on stage, where age and disease should not interfere. What Reiko truly fears is that not only those close to her in private, but also the audience, will begin to perceive her aged body instead of the characters she portrays. Ageing thus becomes a threat to her success and to her lifelong identity as an actress.

Reiko's identity crisis likely influences her involvement with the young Natsuhiko, who initially appears to offer a *wakagaeri* 若返り (rejuvenation) effect, ironically likened by Reiko's assistant to taking hormones (Enchi 1965, 54). However, Natsuhiko's youth is not the primary reason for Reiko initiating their relationship. On the contrary, she is drawn to him solely because of his striking resemblance to his father, Shōgo, the cherished love of her youth. Reiko openly acknowledges that the motive behind their relationship is vengeance against Umeno, Natsuhiko's mother, who separated Reiko from Shōgo (60). Furthermore, it becomes clear early on that Natsuhiko merely serves as a conduit for her: reminiscent of his father, Reiko yearns for him to *mō ichido onna ni shite kureru* もう一度女にしてくれる (to restore her sense of womanhood), effectively using him as a *katashi-ro* 形代, a surrogate reminiscent of those prevalent in Heian literature (Uesaka 1993, 339), to reignite her romance with Shōgo (Enchi 1965, 60). This lack of a deep attachment likely explains why Reiko ends the relationship with the young student as soon as she learns about her poor health condition. She reflects:

I have more important matters to attend to than affairs between men and women. After initiating the relationship with him, I felt inferior, a sensation I had never experienced before, and my heart was tainted by this... For those one or two months, on stage, I felt like a skeleton dancing in a cemetery, but finally, this week, I have reached a point of resolution. (111)

She has come to realise that instead of rejuvenating her, the contrast with his youth makes her feel uncertain and amplifies her sense of inferiority. Moreover, in her dissertation, Pammy Yue Eddinger (1999, 306-7) argues that medical treatment "would signify the death of passion and desire, essential human experiences that Reiko identifies with her artistic life". Therefore, Eddinger believes that the character of Reiko somehow introduces the protagonists of *The Wandering Spirit* trilogy, *rōjomon* par excellence, with her "desire for life and human experience in old age" despite the looming threat of death.

On the other hand, summarising Natsuhiko's feelings for Reiko is rather complex. He appears to be involved in the relationship with Reiko not entirely of his own volition, but rather succumbs to what seems like an external force. The narrative employs straightforward expressions to imply Reiko's bewitching power, which can draw him towards her, such as "a butterfly in a spider's web" (Enchi 1965, 53) or *suikyō* 酔狂 (rapture) (100). Indeed, in *Transformations*, we can already discern more than a trace of the theme of erotic involvement as spirit possession, which forms the foundation of later *rōjomonō* (Eddinger 1999; Akagi 2020). Not only Natsuhiko but also Shigaraki (93) experiences *kōkotsu* 恍惚 (ecstasy) by imagining a sexual encounter with Reiko as if it was real. However, this phenomenon is not solely induced by Reiko's eerie beauty towards both Natsuhiko and Shigaraki but the triangle is also provoked by Shigaraki himself towards Reiko and Natsuhiko. Reiko experiences a hallucination in which she believes she is embracing Natsuhiko, only to realise in the end that it is Shigaraki (109).

Akagi Tomomi in her article (2020) perceives Reiko as ultimately unable to break free from the archetype of the eternal woman desired by men, the *mirareru sei* 見られる性 (gender to be looked at) as she is ensnared in the ageist perception of a decaying body as something to be concealed. I disagree with this interpretation because Reiko's fear primarily revolves around the potential loss of her identity as a successful actress, rather than the loss of beauty in her private life. Being 'looked at' is an inherent aspect of her profession as an actress, and this aspect should not be overlooked when analysing this novella. In fact, when Natsuhiko visits her, she makes no effort to conceal her body and foregoes wearing makeup, in stark contrast to the care she takes with her appearance when she goes out (Enchi 1965, 52). Additionally, she decides against meeting Shigaraki in a dimly lit restaurant as previously planned, opting instead to reveal her true figure to him (61).

It is undeniable that Reiko falls victim to her internalisation of ageism, as evidenced by her feelings of inferiority towards Natsuhiko. However, it is precisely this temporary internalisation that ultimately leads her to realise her desires and choose to dedicate herself entirely to her career for the rest of her time, aiming to create an enduring image of success and beauty as an actress within the illusory space of the stage (Moro 2015, 98).

As we have observed, Enchi, in her *rōjomonō*, begins to consider and reflect on 'female figures' - stereotypes of eternal and ageless women that either do not exist or are absent in contemporary society. As Kurata (2010, 52) describes it, these images, when presented and scrutinised, ultimately serve to critically expose the constructs upon which they are built and to denaturalise the stereotypes associated with age and gender. Enchi's decision to cast an ageing actress as the protagonist in a work that marked the beginning of her

*rōjomono* is in my opinion very significant. Reiko, in order to portray each role effectively, must embody a *man'nen musume* 万年娘 (eternal girl) (Enchi 1965, 35) on stage, reflecting the efforts of every woman striving to conform to society's idealised image of womanhood.

In this context, the scenes at the mirror hold significant meaning and are a recurring motif in *rōjomono*. However, according to Kurata (2010, 284), they do not necessarily signify the internalisation of gender stereotypes or ageism. Instead, they symbolise the challenge of reconciling womanhood with ageing and acknowledging that *rōjo mo onna dearu* 老女も女である (old women are women as well).

For Reiko, the mirror is not just a reflection of her physical appearance; it also symbolises her life on stage (Enchi 1965, 16). As an actress, she is constantly scrutinised by the audience and critics, and she sees herself through their eyes. In essence, her perception of herself is intertwined with the feedback she receives from others, creating a cyclical relationship between self-perception and external validation. Indeed, the transformation in Reiko's self-perception following her disillusionment with Natsuhiko is pivotal to her success on stage as she portrays the role of Komachi. Equally crucial is the essay on Ono no Komachi, which provides Reiko with a sense of belonging to a category and empowers her with self-determination. Throughout the narrative, derogatory terms like 'sterile woman', 'without a hole' or *bakemono* 化け物 (monster-like) are repeated vis à vis the figure of Reiko, yet they are often employed by unconventional characters in Enchi's works as a form of reappropriation.

The expression of disgust or fear *gimi ga warui* 気味が悪い (creepy) (60, 110) is frequently directed towards Reiko by others, reflecting a fear associated not only with her illness but also with the image of Komachi's aged figure, resembling a crone or a skeleton. This fear stems from encountering someone who was once a *femme fatale* but now lacks the quintessential organ of femininity.

Enchi skilfully navigates the ironic juxtaposition between the expectation for Reiko to embody eternal femininity as an actress and the reality of her 'monster-like' body. By seeking solace in the realm of theatre, Reiko finds the opportunity to subvert her condition, transforming from a 'monster' into a figure who dazzles with fireworks precisely because of her deformity, which imbues her with a unique strength.

Furthermore, Shigaraki has contributed to re-establishing a new figure of Komachi, one unaffected by the male desire for revenge against her freedom and unconventional femininity. In the cruel legend analysed in the essay, Komachi is depicted as an abandoned skeleton, pleading with a monk to remove a blade of grass from her empty eye socket. In Shigaraki's reinterpretation, Komachi is not portrayed as pitiful, but rather is transformed into her youthful and enchanting form (Enchi 1965, 72):

I have no intention of portraying Komachi as deformed or crippled in the play I am writing. Her stunning beauty and dazzling talent had become a hindrance; she simply could not bring herself to rely on a man. It is a type of narcissism. She delighted men with poetry and captivating gestures, but surrendered nothing of herself. The men soon felt betrayed, tossing and turning in anguish, labeling her an evil woman. When she lost her beauty to old age, she had to suffer the cold stares of hatred from these men, and live out the rest of her life as a mad old crone. Next we find her as an abandoned corpse in a field of pampas grass. One thin reed had pierced through the eye socket of her skull, causing her spirit to moan in pain. But when a travelling monk plucked out the grass to relieve her spiritual torment, she transformed into the beautiful figure of her youth once again, and attempted to seduce the holy man. You see, I want to depict the karma of a woman who cannot enter nirvana.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing from Kurata's perspective, I would argue that this scene removes the barrier of ageism, which often obscures the fact that 'old women are women as well'. While Reiko is still subjected to the spectators' gaze, she now possesses a newfound confidence in her abilities. Her performance as Komachi is a resounding success, attributed in part to the depth and maturity she brings to the role:

Reiko masterfully captured Komachi's enchanting transformation with a seasoned performance that only someone of her age could deliver. [...] Each day, voices praising Reiko's beauty likened her to a fully bloomed chrysanthemum. (113)

In this scene, Reiko embodies both the aged Komachi and the youthful Komachi simultaneously, highlighting the skill required of an experienced actress to portray such contrasting roles. As Gullette suggests, portraying a younger character is more straightforward in realist theatre (Enchi 1965, 168). However, the key to Reiko's success in this performance lies in her own confidence and the reflected image in the spectators' gaze, which empowers her in turn.

The symbolism of the chrysanthemum is significant. In an earlier scene (35), the envious Umeno scoffs at the idea of Reiko's beauty being compared to that of a chrysanthemum, known for its ability to retain its beauty until it falls. Yet, contrary to expectations, Reiko's final stage appearance is akin to a fully bloomed chrysanthemum.

Despite her health struggles, Reiko is able to create a world of beauty on stage and defy ageism or what Gullette terms "the decline

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<sup>4</sup> Translation is taken from Eddinger 1999, 305.

gaze" (2004, 163) through her newfound confidence and the image of eternal femininity portrayed by Shigaraki.

### 3 Even More Womanly than Women (?): "Two Faces"

The story of "Two Faces" revolves around the fictional protagonist Segawa Senjo, a renowned and exceptionally skilled middle-aged *onnagata* 女形 (actor playing female roles in Kabuki) of the Segawa family. The title originates from a Japanese dance incorporated in 1784 in the Kabuki play known today as *Hokaibō* 法界坊, from the name of one of the protagonists, a mendicant priest. This intertextuality is rooted in the metaphorical connection between a scene in the play and Senjo's gender identity. In the play, the spirits of a deceased man and woman simultaneously possess a single woman's body, granting the female character on stage both masculine and feminine attributes. The title suggests that Senjo's dual gender identity parallels this supernatural phenomenon.

The ageing Senjo is hospitalised for an anal ailment, and his disciple recounts his treatment in explicit terms that portray the doctor's sadism and Senjo's apparent masochism, hinting at a homosexual attraction between them. The narrative vividly depicts the 'perverted' ambiance of the hospital room, likened by a medical staff member to that of a brothel (Enchi 1960, 173).<sup>5</sup>

In "Two Faces" the plot is simple and the narration starts with the actor's preoccupation with bodily decay after his illness which could reveal the 'maleness' of his body on the stage. The main event in the story is that the convalescing Senjo encounters a young female university student, Akiko, researching the gender and sexuality of *onnagata*. She elucidates:

In my thesis, I aim to delve into the inner persona of the man residing within an *onnagata*, while he endeavours to portray a woman. Essentially, as Kabuki *onnagata* art encompasses the portrayal of femininity in men and masculinity in women, it is a remarkable form of expression, incomparable to that of actresses, in my opinion. (177)

Despite Senjo's disinterest in women following the heartbreak of a youthful romance and his subsequent exclusively homosexual relationships, the female student manages to captivate him, sparking a romantic *liaison* between them. However, we get to know that the

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis on the problematic notion of 'perversion' in Enchi's works and its meaning as an inherent trait of a talented or 'authentic' *onnagata*, see Moro 2015.

real motive at the base of Senjo's *liaison* with Akiko is the fact that she is strikingly resemblant to her aunt, who actually is Senjo's past unique woman. Here the device of *katashiro* triggers his heterosexual behaviour, which otherwise would be difficult to justify after so many years. Akiko admits satisfaction in confirming that "Segawa Senjo is indeed a man, just like any other" (Enchi 1960, 180).

After the affair, Senjo takes on the role of Tamate Gozen, a brave and skilled female warrior, with remarkable success. Both critics and audience attribute his powerful performance to a newfound energy following his prolonged convalescence. However, the narrative explicitly attributes Senjo's revitalised skill to his affair with the student, linking his supposedly regained masculinity directly to the improvement of his *onnagata* art.

The narrator elucidates Senjo's conflictual sentiments following the performance:

even though a hint of masculinity now enhances the vigour and grace of his *onnagata* portrayal, that concealed truth reverberates like discord within him. (184)

What he feels sad about is the fact of realising that "as an old man he could love a young woman in an ordinary way" (182). This sense of melancholy is not in the least due as in the case of Reiko to the age difference which makes her feel inferior, but only to the fear of being 'normal', fitting the heteronormative stereotype of an older man who is attracted to a younger woman. For Senjo, following the old style of *onnagata* art as we shall see, being a 'normal' man means losing brightness on the stage. Senjo begins to realise that the romantic entanglement with the young girl, while adding allure to his performance, has also disrupted the delicate balance of the gender identity he meticulously crafted through years of practice. Here, we observe how Enchi explores the concept of Senjo's inherent femininity, hinting at post-gender theories that suggest fluid sexuality. However, simultaneously, the narrative reinforces a binary view of gender and sexuality, implying that his emerging masculinity automatically draws him towards women. This notion stems from a heteronormative assumption that male gender and sexual orientation towards women coincide, yet it offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of *onnagata* art, which transcends - used to transcend - mere impersonation of the female gender (Moro 2015, 30).

Examining the aspects of the work more closely related to the perception of age, there are several elements that mirror those in *Transformations*. One such element is the ideal of dying on stage (Enchi 1960, 169) as the ultimate dream for an actor, a fate experienced by Reiko in the final moments of *Transformations*. Another obsession shared by Senjo, reminiscent of Reiko's own concerns, is the actor's



reliance on the audience's presence and the praise of their work by critics, a theme that permeates the narrative (169).

In "Two Faces" the reflection of the protagonist on ageing as an *onnagata* is stimulated by a really existing *waka* 和歌 composed by his ancestor Segawa Kikunojō:

Along the shadowy river-bank,  
the wild pink grows weary with the deepening autumn;  
alas, that my rising from and retiring to bed is known to  
others<sup>6</sup>

The narration comments:

For women, particularly actresses and singers, whose physical beauty holds great significance, ageing is somewhat acceptable as it aligns with their natural gender. But for a man who had transformed himself into a woman, the onset of old age lays bare an undeniable reality. For him, then, the only way to cover the quotidian loss of youthfulness with ever more exquisite charm was to guard the secret of "alas that my rising from and retiring to bed is known to others". (Enchi 1960, 170)

The above *waka* is only one of the ancient texts authored by Senjo's ancestors to which the narration refers to and which holds significant value by providing Senjo with a reference for his art and ultimately contribute to shaping his identity. This mirrors the metatextual essay on Ono no Komachi inserted in the narration of *Transformations*.<sup>7</sup>

From the outset of the story, Senjo's concern with his ageing body becomes apparent, anticipating themes we can find in *Transformations*. While hospitalised, he frequently gazes at his reflection in the mirror, attempting to smile and assess his charm despite the pain. However, unlike in *Transformations*, where the protagonist faces the scrutiny of others, Senjo's concern with ageing stems from his own perspective - the 'decline gaze' is self-imposed:

Although he was confident in his established reputation within the theatre world and in his ability to excel in specialised roles unique to him, the thought of his youthful beauty gradually fading away from his made-up face was unbearable. (168)

Furthermore, his maleness is accentuated even more by his *liaison* with the student and it intensifies Senjo's fear of losing grace on the

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<sup>6</sup> The translation is taken from the dissertation by Asmita Satish Hulyalkar (1998, 26).

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the other metatext in "Two Faces" see Moro (2015, 30).

stage. However, in the end, when he performs Tamate Gozen, he distinctly senses that the audience experiences no uneasiness while watching. On the contrary, he receives numerous words of praise such as:

The last time I saw Hamamuraya perform, the fault was that the actor had seemed too feminine and weak. Today he has charm as well as strength and there is nothing to criticise. (184)

Despite his apprehension, Senjo's art is not adversely affected by his masculinity. On the contrary, it is what Katherine Mezur (2005) would term the "body beneath" that lends charm to the *onnagata's* performance. The 'two faces' of the title are manifested in this unique beauty of the *onnagata*, which blends male and female genders. This beauty is not attained without suffering and is characteristic of a figure, that of the *onnagata*, which is deemed 'perverted' precisely due to its gender on the stage as mirrored in private life.

The narration of "Two Faces" implies that there are two ways to interpret Senjo's beauty: "one is as the typical beauty of an *onnagata*, the other is as the monstrous creepiness of someone who camouflages his sex" (Enchi 1965, 167). Senjo is described with the same words used in *Transformations* to delineate Reiko's character, but it is remarkable that this otherness is never connected to his bodily decay or illness as for Reiko. The only 'creepy' thing in Senjo is his gender connected to his sexuality, which gives to Senjo's hospital room a grotesque ambiance, but at the same time gives grace to Senjo's performance.

Here, I need to draw a distinction based on Maki Isaka's book regarding the gender of the *onnagata*. Isaka (2016, 150-1) explains that there is a significant difference in the perception of *onnagata* art between the premodern and modern periods. In the premodern era, *onnagata* would convincingly pass as women both on and off the stage, embodying specific characters with distinct traits akin to actual women. However, in modern times, the *onnagata* actor is not expected to exhibit female gender characteristics in his personal life. Instead, the *onnagata's* gender identity is starkly divided: on stage, they embody the epitome of feminine beauty devoid of personal traits, while in private life, they identify as males. Isaka contends that the notion of the *onnagata* being "even more womanly than women" is therefore a modern construct.

Taking into account the aforementioned argument, the character of Senjo embodies a fusion of both *onnagata* paradigms. Isaka (155) elucidates that the period immediately following the end of World War II and the US occupation was pivotal for the evolution of Kabuki as a whole. "Two Faces" was first published in 1959, a time when the debate from the 1950s regarding the necessity of *onnagata* may

not have been fully settled, thus the modern image of the *onnagata* was not entirely solidified.

Senjo draws inspiration from ancient biographies and manuals authored by his ancestors, attempting to replicate their ability to pass as women in private life (Enchi 1960, 170). Renowned *onnagata* of the past like Kikunojō or Ayame would conceal their marital status and familial ties, living public lives as women and exerting continuous effort to maintain their youthful appearance (Isaka 2016, 38-42).

Embracing Kikunojō's principles, Senjo is troubled by the deterioration of his body, which betrays his male physique, and fears that his off-stage masculinity might detract from his femininity on stage. Additionally, he is profoundly embarrassed at the prospect of the audience discovering his affair with a woman. Interestingly, he exhibits no shame regarding the hospital staff gossiping about his flirtation with the male doctor. The narrative elaborates that following his illness, Senjo was meticulous about preserving his 'beauty as an *onnagata*' in the eyes of others, even going so far as to request his assistant to sponge his lower body instead of the nurse, so as not to compromise his public image. Unlike Reiko, Senjo, in his capacity as an *onnagata*, is concerned about how others perceive his beauty not only on stage but also in his private life.

I want to emphasise that Senjo's anxiety is a personal matter stemming from his internalised ageism, influenced by his emulation of premodern *onnagata*, who prioritised maintaining a youthful appearance even in old age. However, as a modern *onnagata*, he is expected to embody femininity and beauty exclusively while performing on stage. The acclaim for Senjo's performance, highlights its artificiality, lauding him as possessing a "sensual elegance which nowadays women have lost" (Enchi 1960, 167, 173). In reality, since Senjo's performance is expected to embody what Mezur (2005, 228) terms "artificial beauty" closely linked to artificial youth, ageing is not perceived as detrimental to his success on stage. Obviously, this is not the case of an actress like Reiko, whose performance is evaluated on the base of its 'naturalness'.

This concept of artificiality is evident in descriptions of Senjo's art using terms like *zōkei* 造型する (construct) and *kamosu* 醸す (brew) (Enchi 1960, 169), whereas the artistry of young and inexperienced *onnagata* is likened to an 'artificial flower', the same term used by Umeno to criticise Reiko's performance after her illness. This suggests that the transient beauty of youth (referred to by Noh master Zeami as "temporary flower") is inherently weaker than the enduring beauty crafted through practice (Zeami's "genuine flower").

Mezur's analysis does not neatly separate the premodern practice of 'passing' as women from the modern construction of the eternal woman on stage, as Isaka does. However, she does assert that the *onnagata*'s stylisation of beauty and youth has evolved over time, with

contemporary performances showcasing an even greater emphasis on these qualities (Mezur 2005, 69).

Senjo's discomfort, in my view, arises from the conflict between the contemporary world he inhabits and the legacy of his predecessors, which he believes in and seeks to embody. Drawing from Isaka's insights (2016, 158), in the eighteenth century there was no clear distinction between body and mind, natural and artificial. Consequently, older *onnagata* could convincingly portray young women both on and off the stage. However, with the advent of modernity came an epistemological shift, leading to a separation between gender performance on stage (the Artificial) and gender expression in daily life (the Natural). Senjo endeavours to emulate a youthful femininity, a practice deemed unnatural for an elderly man in his time and accepted only within the confines of theatrical performance. Consequently, Senjo finds himself ensnared between idealising an antiquated model of the *onnagata* and performing a modern interpretation, a situation that inevitably leaves him frustrated despite the audience's admiration for his craft.

#### 4 Conclusion

Sunami Toshiko (1998, 151) references Enchi's statement that she had been contemplating *Transformations* for four or five years before actually writing it, a period that coincided with her work on "Two Faces". This, in my view, strongly suggests a direct connection between the two works I have analysed in this paper.

In the preceding chapters, I have highlighted the commonalities between the two works as well as the differences in how they depict the ageing process of their protagonists. Both Senjo and Reiko ultimately prioritise the reception of their performances and how the audience perceives their beauty and youthful appearance on stage (Isaka 2016, 18-19; Gullette 2004, 177). However, the key distinction lies in how Reiko needs to believe in her art first for the audience to appreciate it, whereas Senjo is admired regardless of any personal doubts or insecurities he may harbour about his role as an *onnagata*.

During the pivotal transition from adulthood to old age, the actor and the actress face crises in specular ways. For Senjo, whose artificial beauty is celebrated, ageing is primarily a personal question of identity. Conversely, for Reiko, it signifies a physical change that threatens to undermine her artistry. This may also explain why she chooses not to undergo surgery and instead opts to fulfil a final dream of death on the stage.

However, Reiko's lack of predecessors leaves her with more freedom to decide how to navigate her life and career. The metatextual device of the essay on Ono no Komachi serves as an empowering tool, providing her with the language of self-determination. Conversely, for

Senjo, texts like the aforementioned *waka* have the opposite effect, constraining him and making him uncomfortable with his masculinity, thus perceiving ageing as a threat. Paradoxically, we could argue that Reiko, by overcoming her insecurities and refocusing solely on her art, finds fulfilment in embodying the ideal of dying on stage, while Senjo is burdened by the impossibility of maintaining the traditional *onnagata* art form, leading him to see his success as fleeting.

In many of Enchi's works, regardless of the time period, women often seem to lose in both art and love but find solace in alternative dimensions, while men, regardless of how 'perverted' or 'creepy', are successful. However, in comparing these two works, what becomes apparent is an actor who falls victim to the patriarchal gaze and an actress who somehow resists it. Ironically, the man portraying eternal femininity feels frustrated by the physical decay, while the actress finds satisfaction on stage despite her ageing and suffering body.

Indeed, Enchi's exploration of the reality of ageing bodies prompted her to reflect, through her works, on the image of eternal femininity constructed by the male gaze and its diverse implications for women throughout history. In my view, the evident parallels between "Two Faces" and *Transformations* concerning the perception of ageing deepen the contemplation of identity construction in Enchi's *oeuvre*. I hope to have also illustrated that the idea at the base of those works by Enchi later called *rōjomon* originated as early as the late 1950s in a dialogue with the ideal of eternal feminine beauty epitomised by the 'woman' on stage.

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