

The Gender of Buddhist Truth

The Female Corpse in a Group of Japanese Paintings

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Japanese Buddhism is generally considered to be misogynist in nature. Scholars, who are familiar with paintings of the female body in nine aspects of decay, called kusōzu, believe that these paintings represent the sexist nature of Buddhism. In an attempt to interpret the paintings within religious and cultural historical contexts, this paper examines a series of these paintings with respect to the legend of the ninth-century poet, Ono no Komachi, and Tendai thought on original enlightenment (hongaku).

JAPANESE BUDDHIST IMAGERY of female cadavers in progressive stages of decay, dating from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, has been interpreted as a visual sign of misogyny in Japanese Buddhist thought by modern scholars. Painted interpretations of corporeal decay emphasize the female sex of the corpse and are highly explicit. I have never come across a Japanese painting of a male corpse in progressive stages of decay. This imagery is found in poetry, narrative literature, woodblock books and prints, as well as paintings. The reaction of modern viewers to these paintings is one of fascination and surprise. Hitomi Tonomura, speaking of this theme in narrative literature (*setsuwa* 説話) of the Buddhist didactic type, epitomizes the puzzlement of present-day audiences with this comment:

The sight of a decaying body can inspire even the worldliest with second thoughts. But what does it mean to illuminate the

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Buddha's truth consistently through the female body? Does it not configure the female as an object of observation, an entity disassociated from her own humanity?

(TONOMURA 1994, p. 145)¹

Tonomura's reaction alludes to Laura MULVEY's article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," a postmodernist critique of the cinematic treatment of women (1975). Tonomura's belief that such imagery is misogynist is supported by other studies that point out the Buddhist belief in the inferior ability of women to achieve Buddhahood (KAMENS 1993; KLEIN 1995, 1991; MINAMOTO 1993; YAMASHITA et al. 1990). While the work of scholars has been invaluable to the understanding of the function of these paintings in the teaching of the doctrine of impermanence and the foulness of the body, the meaning of the femaleness of the corpse has not been adequately addressed. In Tonomura's personal context a decaying corpse has unpleasant and negative connotations, but the symbol of the cadaver is of major significance to Buddhists as the corpse was one of three things that spurred Prince Siddhartha to seek the path of enlightenment and eventually become the historical Buddha. As Buddhism spread through East Asia, the symbols that it carried were adapted by and acculturated to each local culture, becoming multivalent and polysemous. The two primary meanings of these paintings of the female corpse in successive stages of decay is to explain the frailty of existence and the repulsive nature of the human body. Below these primary meanings is a geographically localized interpretation in which the corpse is put in the guise of a nationally recognized female poet of the ninth century to exemplify a particular type of Japanese sectarian doctrine. My paper will elaborate on these meanings through a series of Japanese paintings of the female cadaver from various periods in conjunction with textual evidence. This discussion is about a symbol whose meaning is not stable; therefore, I do not pretend to present an all-embracing interpretation of it.

The Paintings

The paintings in question depict reincarnation as a human being and the consequences of rebirth in the human world—death and decay. I will deal with five of these paintings: the works of Shōjuraikō-ji

¹ The following scholars are also of the opinion that the imagery of the female cadaver represents the misogynist attitudes of the Japanese medieval patriarchy: KAMINISHI 1996, pp. 180–81 and HOSOKOWA 1989, pp. 22–29. For a comparison of the European attitude towards the female corpse with the Japanese, see BRONFEN 1992 and KAWAKAMI 1981.

聖衆來迎寺² (early 13th century, fig. 1) and the Komatsu collection³ (formerly belonging to the Nakamura family, 14th century, fig. 2) are the two oldest, while the other three are later works to be found in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art⁴ (18th century, LACMA, fig. 3), the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria⁵ in Victoria, Canada (18th century, AGGV, fig. 4), and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts⁶ (19th century, BMFA, fig. 5). The titles of these paintings vary. The earliest extant depiction of this subject, which is also the earliest extant Japanese hanging scroll, belongs to Shōjuraikō-ji in Shiga Prefecture and is entitled *Jindō fujō sōzu* 人道不淨相圖 (Picture of the Unclean Human Path). And the earliest literary reference to an image depicting nine views of decay (*kusōzu* 九相圖/九想圖) can be found in the historical records of the Yama Hall (Enmadō) at the Shingon temple of Daigō-ji 醍醐寺, dated 1223 (TAKEI 1981, p. 58). The term *kusōzu* means “pictures of the nine aspects,” referring to nine stages of decomposition, as clearly illustrated in the LACMA work.

There are innumerable hanging scroll and handscroll paintings and printed books depicting corpses in progressive stages of decay. Most belong to Japanese temples and are unknown beyond their temple precincts, still retaining their religious functions.⁷ With the exception of the two best-known paintings of this topic, works in temples remain

² For works on the Shōjuraikō-ji paintings see NAKANO 1989, pp. 295–98; SHINBŌ 1977, p. 224; ŌGUSHI 1983, pp. 98–126.

³ NAKAMURA 1977; illustrations, pp. 112–19. Also see: YOSHITANI 1995 and YAMAMOTO 1996.

⁴ The hanging scroll painting that is a Promised Gift to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art shows ten scenes, one of the woman and nine scenes of decay without a natural setting, except in the last scene. The composition is diagrammatic, consisting of ten scenes divided into two columns of five. Each scene is accompanied by a verse from the poem attributed to Su Tung-po, with paraphrasing in Japanese kana script. With the exception of minor textual variations and a change in the sequence of verses, the poem on this painting is the same as that published in *Nihon emaki taisei*. The metal trappings on the roller of the mounting indicate the painting’s former owner to be a temple that may have used it for religious purposes.

⁵ This *kusō* painting is from the Fred and Isabel Pollard collection and is entitled *Jindō fujō sōzu* (Picture of the Unclean Aspect of the Human Path). It has a seal of Tosa Mitsuoki in the bottom right-hand corner; the attribution to Mitsuoki is spurious (VOLLMER and WEBB 1972, pp. 108–11).

⁶ This work from the William Sturgis Bigelow collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is by Kikuchi Yōsai 菊池容齋 (1788–1878), a late nineteenth-century painter of Buddhist subjects. The nine stages of decay that were previously seen in the other paintings are similar. There is a strong element of late Edo period (1600–1868) eccentric painting in Yōsai’s work. A brief inscription is in the top right-hand corner of the painting; Yōsai dedicated this work to Hyakujō 百城, a Vināya master (Hyakujō Risshi 百城律師) of Mount Hiei (SATŌ 1993, p. 18).

⁷ For a brief listing of some temples in Japan owning this type of painting, see: HOSOKAWA 1989, pp. 249–50.

unexplored by scholars, largely due to their recent dates and continued use. The painters of the female cadaver have approached their subject in very individual and imaginative ways. These paintings can be categorized into two basic types of composition represented by the works of Shōjuraikō-ji and the Komatsu collection.

The *Jindō fujō sōzu* of Shōjuraikō-ji presents the subject of the decaying corpse within the context of the natural world. Dating from the early thirteenth century, this work is part of a larger set of paintings, called *Rokudōe* 六道絵 (Pictures of the Six Paths [of Transmigration]); once a set of thirty-six works, only fifteen now remain. This set was inspired by the introduction of Genshin's (942–1017) textual compilation, the *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 (The Essentials of Salvation [HANAYAMA 1962, pp. 3–84]). There are nine stages of decay of the female body depicted in this work; the progression begins at the top and moves downward, amidst a world of seasonal trees, flowers, and other flora, indicating a movement synchronized with the main motif. Just below the inscription, a fresh corpse of a woman dressed in white funerary robes is lying on a mat with last offerings at her head. To the lower left, under a flowering cherry tree, the corpse becomes bloated, then oozes blood and breaks down. A single red maple leaf lies at the head of the cadaver that is showing its bones, while white maggots grow on the body in the next scene. Finally, hawks, crows, and dogs tear at the remains of flesh until only the bones are left.

The fourteenth-century handscroll painting from the Komatsu collection is the earliest known handscroll painting of the subject, showing the decomposing body in isolation without a background.⁸ The woman in life is shown first, then the nine stages of decay follow in a very straightforward, didactic manner. The scenes of decay are very similar to the previous Shōjuraikō-ji work, but unlike the previous work, this handscroll painting is not part of a larger set. Here the theme of the female body decaying in nine stages stands alone as an independent subject; this is the earliest extant example of *kusōzu*. This handscroll painting, like the LACMA work, is diagrammatic in its presentation, with a stark and functional composition.

While each painting of the female corpse is different, they all share a large degree of homogeneity in depiction of the progress of decomposition. Generally, the iconography of the body in decay in all the paintings follows a logical sequence. It begins with a depiction of (1) the aspect of recent death (*shinshisō* 新死相, fig. 6b), and proceeds through the various aspects to (2) the aspect of bloating (*bōchōsō*

⁸ In the past this work may have belonged to Jakkōin, a small subtemple of Enryaku-ji, the headquarters of Tendai Buddhism (NAKAMURA 1977, p. 169).

肪脹相, fig. 6c), (3) the aspect of blood oozing (*chīnusō* 血塗相, fig. 6d), (4) the aspect of putridness (*hōransō* 肪乱相, fig. 7a), (5) the aspect of being consumed (*seishokusō* 噉食相, fig. 7b), (6) the aspect of blueness (*shōosō* 青瘀相, fig. 7c), (7) the aspect of white bones linked (*hakkotsu rensō* 白骨連相, fig. 7d), (8) and finally the aspect of scattered bones (*kotsu sansō* 骨散相, fig. 8a).⁹ But some of the early scenes of the subject vary, and so too may each of the concluding sections. The later paintings all end by showing the *sotoba* 卒都婆, a gravemarker in the form of a stupa, also called (9) the aspect of the tomb (*kofunsō* 古墳相, fig. 8b), but, in the two earliest works of Shōjuraikō-ji and the Komatsu collection, it is particularly noteworthy that the *sotoba* scene is missing.¹⁰

Depending on the individual work, the number of scenes depicting the progress of human ephemerality often differ. Among the paintings discussed above, the number of stages depicting bodily decomposition vary between nine and ten. The Shōjuraikō-ji work has the least number of stages, while the LACMA work shows ten scenes. As mentioned previously, in the LACMA work the first scene depicts the woman in life, followed by the nine aspects (*kusō*) of decomposition. The reason for the use of ten scenes may be similar to the *kusō* poem in ten parts, attributed to Kūkai, which consists of nine four-line poems on meditations on a corpse and one that encapsulates the meaning of the whole poem (WATANABE 1965, p. 460, n.15).

In all the paintings the corpse is unmistakably female. In life she is seated with flowing black tresses, dressed in twelve-layered court robes. She is clearly a member of the noble class as the Japanese woman courtier represents the apex of native Japanese aesthetic sensibility (KEENE 1971, pp. 26–39). It is obvious that this person, who will become the corpse, is an aristocratic woman. The Komatsu collection painting even shows in the next scene an undraped breast (fig. 9), extremely unusual in Japanese painting before the Edo period. In the BMFA work, the woman, lying on her deathbed behind a screen, appears sensual with her tousled long hair (fig. 10).

The Japanese paintings of human carcasses also depict a subject that was used for contemplation and to narrate the process of object meditation.¹¹ Fixed in painted form, they became symbolic. These

⁹ This list is based upon the stages found in the LACMA painting.

¹⁰ Also, if the *sotoba* is seen, it is usually unattended, but in the *Kusōshi emaki* (1527) of Dainenbutsu-ji of Osaka prefecture a man dressed in Heian-period costume weeps over the grave; this is very unusual (AIZAWA 1994, plate 12).

¹¹ Pictures of monks in meditation with corpses can be found in many Southeast Asian paintings and Central Asian Buddhist sites. At Tuyok Cave Temple in Turfan in Central Asia, the theme of corpse meditation is found in conjunction with contemplative topics from the *Meditation Sutra* (Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaigyoku et al., Ch. *Kuan Wu-*

paintings were most likely created as a “skillful means” (*hōben*) for teaching the doctrine of impermanence to the laity. They were ordinarily used by Buddhist temples for the purpose of contemplation (*kan*), “picture explaining” (*etoki* 絵説き), and display during the Festival of the Dead (*Obon* 盂盆) on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, when Buddhist believers are asked to consider their destinies on the wheel of transmigration (MIYATA et al. 1989, pp. 95–97; KAMINISHI 1996).

Texts and Inscriptions

Within Buddhism the practice of contemplation on a cadaver in which the corpse, the focus of contemplation, is distinctly female is described in Indian stories of the enlightenment of monks (after 3rd century B.C.E.)¹² and in chapter six of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*, fourth century C.E.).¹³ While the symbol of the female cadaver can be traced back to early Buddhist India, there are no extant paintings or literary evidence of paintings of a female corpse in progressive stages of decay from the Indian subcontinent. The symbol was used in the decoration of an eighth-century meditation chapel in Turfan, although the scriptural source of the imagery is not evident (MIYAJI 1995).

From T’ang (618–906) and Five Dynasties (907–960) China there remain certain poems describing bodily decay found in the cave temples of Tun-huang, and there are fragments of wall painting that suggest the existence of paintings of the corpse, but this requires further investigation (KAWAGUCHI 1964). The decomposing cadaver is a topic of discussion in Chih-i’s (538–597) *Mo-ho chih-kuan* 摩訶止觀 (The

liang-shou ching, J. *Kan muryōju kyō*, (T 365.). In the meditation chapel of cave 20 of this temple, Miyaji observes three panels of groups of meditating monks; the first group is shown with animals, the second consists of meditating monks emitting fire and water, and in the third group there are monks meditating on sick people and corpses. Miyaji does not describe the sex of the sick people or the corpses, nor is it possible to make a distinction in his illustrations. The placement of the paintings in the meditation chapel indicates that they were used for contemplative purposes in Central Asia (MIYAJI 1995, p. 23).

¹² WILSON’s study of female cadavers in the Indian tradition, based on the biographies of Buddhist saints, is a thoughtful study of the Indian Buddhist tradition of meditating on corpses. Her study greatly aided my understanding of the Indian tradition (1996). Wilson’s study, however, should not be regarded as a universal interpretation of corpse meditation and the female body, since each local Buddhist culture has its own unique view of the subject.

¹³ For a translation of this work see NYANAMOLI 1976, pp. 185–203. Buddhaghosa’s attitude towards women is considered misogynist, but Sue HAMILTON believes that he does not reflect orthodox Theravāda Buddhist views (1995). For a more complete discussion of the scriptural and literary background of the *kusō* theme, see LACHAUD 1995.

Great Calming and Contemplation, T. 1911, 46. 121a–122b), which Genshin summarized in his *Ōjōyōshū*, a late tenth-century work, and used to illuminate his description of the six paths of reincarnation to inspire believers to aspire to the Pure Land (HANAYAMA 1962, pp. 38–43). The symbol of the female cadaver can be traced back to the literature of early Indian Buddhism, but now it is only in Japan that paintings of the topic are commonly found.

The inscriptions on the paintings under discussion can be traced to a variety of different sources. The passage of the “unclean human way” (*jindō fujō sōzu*) inscribed on the first extant painting of the decaying female corpse from Shōjuraikō-ji of Shiga Prefecture is from Genshin’s *Ōjōyōshū*. The fourteenth-century work of the Komatsu collection has been traditionally associated with *kusō* poetry. The handscroll painting is published in *Nihon emaki taisei* with a poem attributed to Su Tung-p’o 蘇東坡 (Su Shih 蘇師 [1036–1101]), a Chinese *litteratus* who was a devout Buddhist, but this poem is not normally included in the corpus of his work in China (NAKAMURA 1977, p. 167).¹⁴ Recently, YOSHITANI Haruna has shown that the iconography of the Komatsu painting is more closely related to Chih-i’s description of decay in his *Mo-ho chih-kuan* than poetic sources (1995). The apocryphal poem of Su T’ung-po—probably written by monks of the Gozan 五山 temples during the Muromachi period (1336–1573)¹⁵—is, however, written on the paintings at Dainenbutsu-ji 大念仏寺 (1527) and LACMA (18th century). In the AGGV painting (18–19th century), each of the stages of decay is accompanied by a *waka* poem of unknown authorship, while the BMFA work (19th century) has a personal dedicatory inscription written by the artist Yōsai 容齋 (1788–1878). So in this group of five works, the texts that accompany the images are quite varied.¹⁶

¹⁴ For a discussion of Su T’ung-po’s life, see EGAN 1994. For a translation of the poem, see SANFORD 1988.

¹⁵ This explanation of the origins of the Su T’ung-po poem is found in NAKAMURA et al. 1989, p. 208.

¹⁶ Scholars have extensively researched the textual sources of the iconography of the nine stages, comparing the textual differences in literary works, such as poetry, and Buddhist texts (e.g., *Mo-ho chih-kuan*) and have discovered that the iconography of the nine stages is different in the two genres. YOSHITANI believes the Komatsu collection handscroll painting is based upon Chih-i’s *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, not Su T’ung-po’s poem (1995, p. 36). While there is truth in Yoshitani’s findings, I have never found a painting of the decomposing body that is inscribed with Chih-i’s text, although the inscription on the Shōjuraikō-ji painting about the unclean human way is from *Ōjōyōshū*, which is itself based in part on the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. For a partial English translation of this work, see DONNER 1993.



Figure 1. *Jindō fujō sōzu*, Shōjuraikō-ji, Shiga Prefecture, early thirteenth century. (Sherman Lee, *Reflections of Reality in Japanese Art* [Cleveland: Cleveland Art Museum, 1983], Color Plate II. The Realm of the Humans.)



Figure 2. *Kusōzu*, private collection, fourteenth century. (Komatsu Shigemi, ed., *Gaki zōshi, jigoku zōshi, yamai sōshi, kusōshi emaki*, vol. 7, *Nihon emaki taisei* [Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1977], p. 113)



Figure 3. *Kusōzu*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Anonymous Promised Gift, eighteenth century. Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Figure 4. *Jindō fujō sōzu*, Fred and Isabel Pollard collection, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, eighteenth century. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

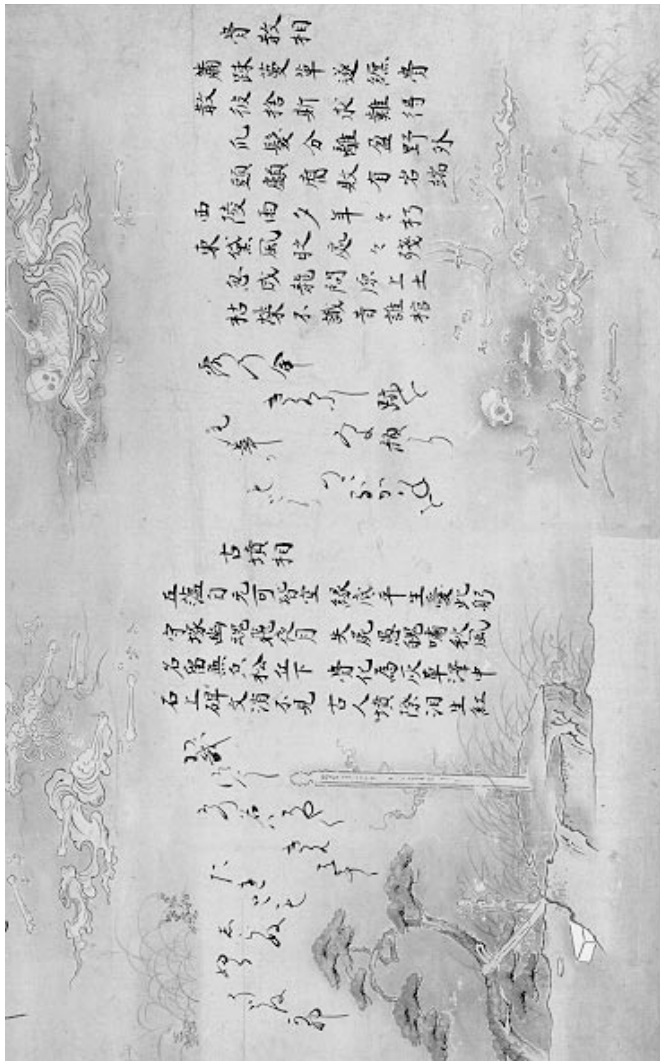


Figure 5. *The Inevitable Change*, Kikuchi Yōsei (1788–1878), William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Courtesy of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.



Figure 6. Detail of *kusōzu*, (a) life; (b) aspect of recent death; (c) aspect of bloating; (d) aspect of blood oozing. Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

a



b

Figure 8. Detail of *kusōzu*, (a) aspect of scattered bones; (b) aspect of the tomb. Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Figure 9. Detail of *kusōzu*, cadaver with breast showing. (Komatsu Shigemi, ed., *Gaki zōshi, jigoku zōshi, yamai sōshi, kusōshi emaki*, vol. 7, *Nihon emaki taisei* [Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1977], p. 111)



Figure 10. Detail of *The Inevitable Change*. Courtesy of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Two Primary Functions of Kusōzu

One of the most striking aspects of Japanese paintings of the female corpse in nine stages of decay is the explicit nature of the works in question. At the top of the Shōjuraikō-ji work the woman is, without doubt, dead, lying on a mat with an offering bowl at her head. The process of decomposition advances with the bloating of the body, gradual loss of human features, and the putrefaction of flesh; the process is depicted in a factual scientific manner, probably based upon actual observation. The spectacle of the birds and animals devouring the cadaver is the most gruesome scene in all the paintings of this topic. In the BMFA work Yōsai exaggerates the macabre character of black crows sitting on rotting willow trees, hovering over the corpse.

The function of these works is to demonstrate the effects of impermanence and the gross nature of the human form, especially the female one. The pictorial function is attuned to Buddhist meditation on the corpse, which is to instill a deep sense of revulsion for the human body, particularly that of the opposite sex, so that the monk or devotee will not be tempted by the flesh and realize the impermanence of the body, especially their own, and renounce it. TANIZAKI Jun'ichirō's 谷崎潤一郎 (1886-1965) novella *Shōshō Shigemoto no haha* 少将滋幹の母 (Captain Shigemoto's Mother) describes the austerity practiced by an old man who desires to forget his beautiful, but stolen, wife (1994).¹⁷

Despising one's own body and the bodies of women can be explained in the following manner. In Buddhism the acknowledgement of death and the realization of human ephemerality are necessary steps towards the achievement of enlightenment. Closely tied to the realization of human spiritual frailty is overcoming sexual desire, which the early Buddhists considered identical to necrophilia, because the body, especially the female body, emits fluids and wastes that were thought to be analogous to the putrefaction of the corpse (WILSON 1996, p. 60). Since the female body was a source of desire for men, meditations on the decaying corpse became a form of aversion therapy for monks (WILSON 1996, p. 86). The female cadaver was not used only by male Buddhists; women were also asked to meditate on the repulsive aspects of their own bodies (WILSON 1996, pp. 141-79). When *kusō* paintings are displayed during the *Obon* season, both men

¹⁷ The question has been raised as to whether Buddhist practitioners actually use *kusōzu* for contemplation, or real bodies. I have never found a reference, fictional or otherwise, where the devotee refers to a painting of the corpse as his/her focus of practice, and this raises questions of all types. I believe that in painting the cadaver is used to enhance symbolic thinking, rather than for contemplation itself.

and women are given access to them, as the images and their lessons are directed to both sexes. Yet, despite the realism of bodily decay, all the paintings are alluring; part of the beauty of these works is the careful juxtaposition of the rotting body with the burgeoning natural world, so that the two parallel and complement each other.

The nature of life in this world is mutability or impermanence (Skt. *anicca*); this is one of the basic truths of Buddhism. The ancient Indians abhorred evanescence, but the Japanese found it charged with a deep sense of beauty. Donald KEENE aptly described impermanence as “the necessary condition of beauty” in Japanese culture (1971, p. 24). The theme of *mujō* 無常 or impermanence became pervasive in the literary arts of the Heian period (794–1185) and has persisted throughout Japanese history (NISHIDA 1970). In the tenth century *mujō* was indicated by metaphors of seasonal change and inconsistencies in affairs of human love, but by the late twelfth century, with the suffering imposed by steady civil war, natural disasters, and the belief in *mappō* (age of degeneracy), the fragility of human life as a theme became widespread in literature, such as the *Hōjōki* 方丈記 (An Account of My Hut). Impermanence is expressed metaphorically in these paintings, using the subject of the decaying corpse. The concept of impermanence in the guise of a decaying female corpse has a long tradition in Japanese literature, dating back to the ninth-century poem attributed to Kūkai, *Kusō no shi* 九相の詩, and extending to the twentieth century with Tanizaki’s *Shōshō Shigemoto no haha*. Feelings and concepts such as *mujō* are rendered in Japanese literature by fixed epithets called *makura kotoba* 枕詞, or “pillow words.” In *kusō* painting the female body is a fixed epithet, or “pillow image,” used to evoke the concept of evanescence, playing out the theme of the mutability of existence with references to the natural world in which the human condition is analogous. This poetic aspect is well illustrated in the work of AGGV (VOLLMER and WEBB 1972, pp. 108–111). The AGGV work is lyrical in its treatment of the corpse in nature, and the artist paid particular attention to the depiction of seasonal plants to indicate the passage of time. The painting begins its narration at the bottom with a deathbed scene attended by three women, accented with sprays of cherry blossoms, the flower of spring. In the next scene the blossoms have scattered and fallen beneath a grove of pine trees, symbols of winter, while the corpse fills with gas. As the corpse oozes blood and rots, it is accompanied by lotus flowers that bloom in summer and bush clover of autumn. Then it is eaten by animals, leaving skeletal fragments lying amidst mugwort, scattered under a large silver moon. Finally, two stone stupas remain. As can be seen from this painting, the theme of the female corpse in succeeding stages of decay is didactic but also poetic.

In Japan the doctrine of impermanence, or the ephemeral nature of life, was regarded as a beautiful, though undeniably sad, aspect of any existence along the six paths (*rokudō* 六道) of reincarnation.¹⁸ The lives of women were considered analogous to the concept of impermanence as well. While there are no extant Chinese paintings similar to Japanese *kusōzu*, there are poems concerning the ages of a woman from China that may cast light on the relationship of the female body and the doctrine of impermanence. Among the manuscripts found at the cave grottoes of Tun-huang by Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot are two types of relevant poems, some that deal specifically with the decay of a corpse and others that deal with the ages of a woman (KAWAGUCHI 1964). Both types of poems date from the early T'ang to Five Dynasties periods. The poems dealing with women are called *Nü-jen pai-sui p'ien* 女人百歲篇 (Chapters in the One-Hundred-Years of a Woman). They divide the one-hundred-year life span of a peasant woman into segments of ten years. The woman has a youth, a middle age, and then her eyes grow weak, her hearing fades, her beauty disappears, and what remains of her teeth fall out. After one hundred years, her body turns to dust, and a cold moon shines on her tomb (KAWAGUCHI 1964, pp. 397-98). While these poems on the ages of woman do not describe the decomposition of a corpse, the theme of evanescence is traced through the life of a woman. Not only is the life of a woman a metaphor for impermanence, but the imagery of the female body passing through the ages and passing through the seasons refers to women as the embodiment of the doctrine itself. It may seem odd that the female body—thought to produce so many impurities—would be used to symbolize a truth that is the crux of the Buddhist teachings.

Ono no Komachi

Medieval Japanese literary men needed to locate the female body in a distinct historical human personality, so they chose the ninth-century poet Ono no Komachi 小野小町. The first scenes in the Komatsu handscroll (fig. 11) and the LACMA work (fig. 6a) both show a female courtier with long black hair and seated as though bent in thought over the composition of a poem; the iconography is identical to poet portraits called *kasen'e* 歌仙絵. As one of the “six poetic geniuses” (*rokkasen* 六歌仙), Komachi is usually depicted this way in handscroll-format portraits of poets participating in poetry contests (*utaawase*

¹⁸ There are six forms of reincarnation: heavenly beings, asuras, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and denizens of hells.

歌合, fig. 12; GRAYBILL 1983). Furthermore, in the Shōjuraikō-ji, AGGV, and BMFA paintings the first scenes of death are accompanied by the cherry blossom, which is the flower of Komachi (MOSTOW 1996, p. 169). Clearly, it is reasonable to assume that Komachi is associated with the decomposing cadaver. When the Komatsu (formerly Nakamura) handscroll was displayed in 1974 at the Tokyo National Museum, its title was given as *Ono no Komachi sōsui emaki* 小野小町装衰絵巻 (The Dissolution of Ono no Komachi; TŌKYŌ KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1974, plate 51). A passage in *Azuma kagami* 吾妻鏡 (Mirror of the Eastern Court, notation of 1212) speaks of a painting of the *kusō* theme in which Komachi is identified with the cadaver (HOSOKAWA 1989, p. 248). And the last of the three stories presented in the section on corpse meditation from *Kankyō no tomo* 閑居友 (A Companion in Solitude, 1222) ends with a brief note, describing how the poet Komachi also lost her physical beauty, like the lady-in-waiting of the *Kankyō no tomo kusō* story (PANDEY 1995, p. 350; KOIZUMI et al. 1993, p. 443). From these two pieces of literary evidence, it seems that by the early thirteenth century Komachi was identified with the image of a female corpse in gradual dissolution. The identification of the cadaver with Komachi was a Japanese development in Buddhist iconography.

Komachi lived in the first quarter of the ninth century. Just over one hundred poems have been attributed to Komachi; they are all thirty-one-syllable *waka* on the theme of love. Because her poems are included in an imperial collection known as the *Kokinwakashū* 古今和歌集 (Collected Early and Modern Japanese Poetry, ca. 905), she was probably active in literary circles at court (TEELE et al. 1993, pp. 1–9; MCCULLOUGH 1985). She is the only woman to be considered one of the “six poetic geniuses” of Japan. This is all that is known of her, yet literary men from the thirteenth century onwards created images of a powerful woman of mythical dimensions (HOSOKAWA 1989, pp. 219–28; STRONG 1994).

Komachi is typically portrayed as a young woman of great physical beauty; lusted after by men, she is cold and unfeeling towards them. Japanese medieval literary commentators cast Komachi as an “inconstant woman” or “fickle woman” (*irogonomi no onna* 好色の女), who causes men to be consumed by desire and die.¹⁹ But her beauty does not

¹⁹ The classical Japanese term used to epitomize Komachi is *irogonomi*, but the translation does not possess the subtleties of the classical meaning that imply passion in both love and the arts. Komachi demonstrates her passion equally with her poetry as with her sexuality. A passionate woman or man in the classical Japanese sense is sensitive, refined, and eloquent. Therefore, I do not view the medieval description of Komachi as *irogonomi* as necessarily negative, as STRONG states in her article (1994, pp. 410–12). Also, it is necessary to bear in mind that multiple sexual relationships were not regarded negatively (NAKAMURA 1985).

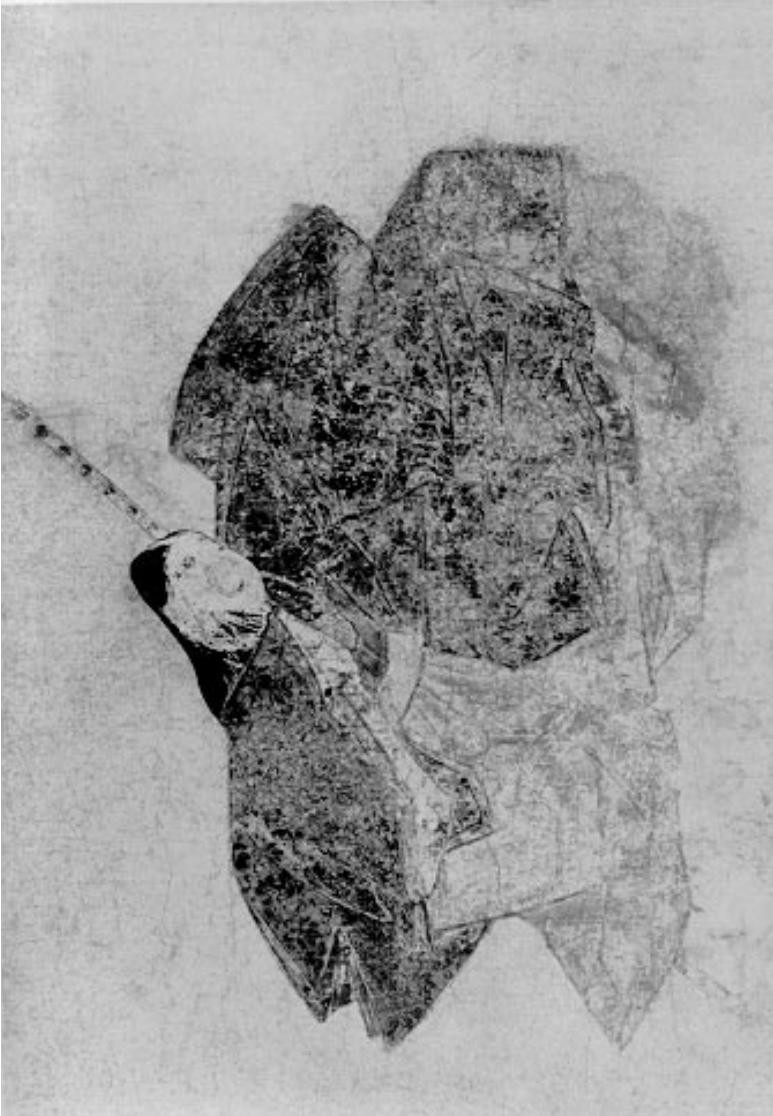


Figure 11. Detail of woman in life, in the Nakamura family collection. (Komatsu Shigemi, ed., *Gaki zōshi, jigoku zōshi, yamai sōshi, kusōshi emaki*, vol. 7, *Nihon emaki taisei* [Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1977], p. 110)

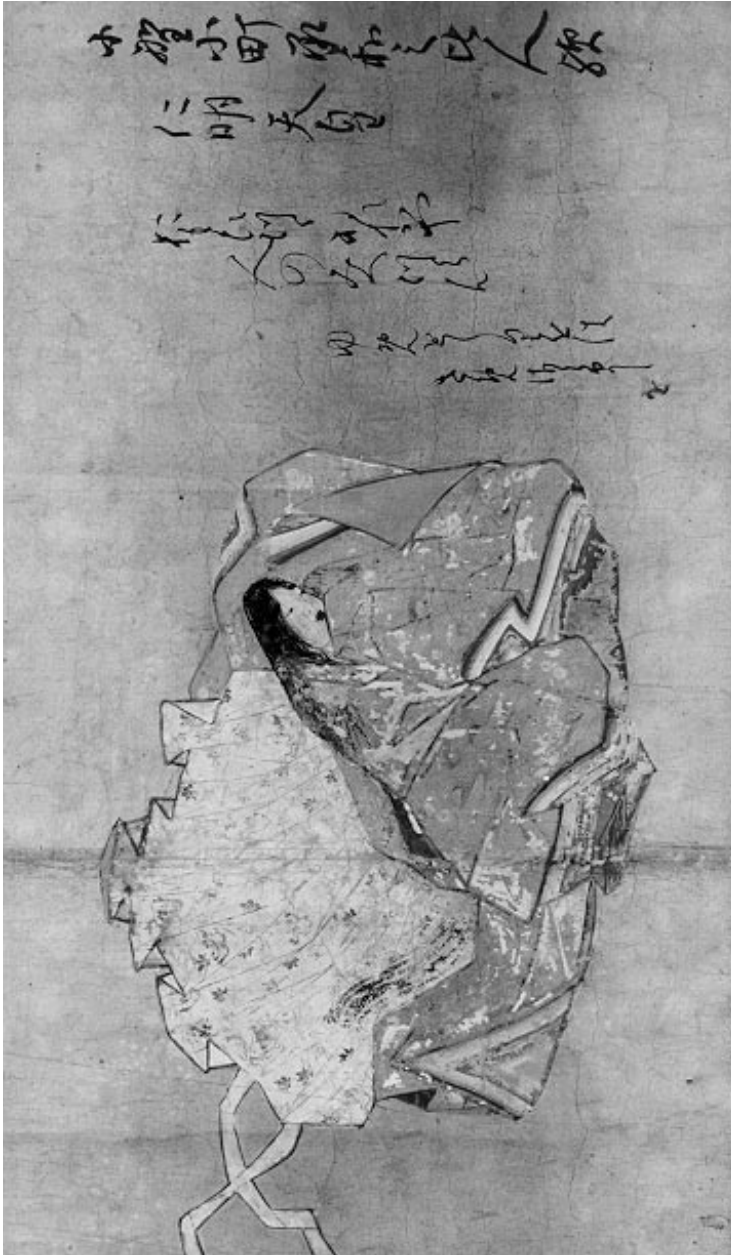


Figure 12. Portrait of Ono no Komachi by an unknown artist in *Sanjū rokkasen emaki*, of the late 16th century (Spencer Japanese MS 28). Courtesy of the Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

weather the ravages of time, and she becomes an ugly old hag, lingering in desolate places, impoverished. The story of Komachi reverberates with the theme of female beauty transformed into unspeakable horror.

Komachi as the Cadaver

The tradition of Komachi as the decaying corpse appears to be an unstudied tradition, but there is a logic to it. In the tenth-century kana preface to the *Kokinwakashū*, translated by Roy Teele et al., Komachi is described in the following manner: “Although her poetry is deeply sensitive, it is not strong. It might be said that hers is the poetry of a beautiful woman who is ill and suffering. The lack of strength in her poetry may come from the fact that she is a woman” (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 222). The *kanbun* preface to the same is very similar: “The poetry of Ono no Komachi is in the style of Princess Soto’ori [sic]. Although it is very beautiful, it lacks strength. It is like a sick woman wearing makeup” (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 27). A similar description appears in McCullough’s translation of the *Kokinwakashū* preface: “Ono no Komachi belongs to the same line as Sotoorihime [sic] of old. Her poetry is moving and lacking in strength. It reminds us of a beautiful woman suffering from an illness. Its weakness is probably due to her sex” (McCULLOUGH 1985, p. 7). These sentiments are echoed in Zeami’s 世阿弥 (1363–1443) Nō play *Ōmu Komachi* (Komachi’s Parrot-Answer Poem) which says, “Included among those poets,/was Komachi,/like a gorgeous flower, and amorous/even in her poetry,/which is feminine but weak” (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 171). In these tenth-century prefaces to the first imperial anthology of poetry, the imagery of Komachi’s physical decay recurs again and again. Her weakness appears to be her femininity, which is also considered the source of her literary strength. These descriptions of Komachi seem to value her sickliness, weakness, and femininity.

The feminine nature of Komachi’s poetry is connected with physical illness to create an image of a woman who is closely bound to her body. In the paintings of the female cadaver, the gender is emphasized, and physicality in these works is displayed through the depiction of secondary female characteristics of the corpse. The graphic portrayal of bodily decay amidst the biological world of flowering plants and animals is all heightened by the sensuous polychrome nature of the paintings themselves. Komachi is similarly a physical poet (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 27). This physicality in her poetry is fed by her frequent referral to either body parts or to herself with the word *mi* 身, meaning “body” or “self.” This is further extended by the descriptions of Komachi as “*irogonomi no onna*” (passionate woman),

which is resonated by bedroom and night imagery in her poetry. Relying upon traditional poetic imagery borrowed from China, there is also the theme of fading female beauty as a constant current in Komachi mythology. Physiology and physicality rebound in the interplay between pictorial and poetic imagery, entwined with the mythological portrayal of Komachi as the corpse.

The Nō Playwright Kan'ami's Interpretation of Komachi

As we have seen, the image of Komachi as a fragile woman can be traced back to the tenth century. But the connection between Komachi and the cadaver, with its religious symbolism, seems to have occurred at the time of Kan'ami 観阿弥 (1333–1384), the first Nō playwright, who wrote a play entitled *Sotoba Komachi* 卒都婆小町 (Komachi of the Stupa), which was revised and abridged by his son, Zeami.²⁰ In standard early medieval versions of the Komachi story (*Komachi sōshi* 小町草紙), circulating prior to the writing of Nō plays, Komachi only lives to the age of eighty, and, while literary admirers regarded her as the bodhisattva Kannon, she was not religious (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 39). But the theme of decay is present, as seen in the following description.

Komachi appeared in the world of flying flower petals and falling leaves, blooming richly once and then withering, falling as a mysterious blossom, decaying as a tree covered with moss.

(TEELE et al. 1993, p. 43)

The exaggeration of Komachi's natural aging process in the medieval stories and Nō plays about her can be easily allegorized as bodily decay. In the Tun-huang poems on the ages of woman, the woman lives one hundred years; Komachi also lives one hundred years in Kan'ami's *Sotoba no Komachi* and Zeami's *Ōmu Komachi*.²¹ Through Zeami, Komachi describes herself in this way: "This face is haggard and emaciated/skin wrinkled like an old frozen pear" (TEELE et al. 1993a, p. 172). Through Kan'ami, Komachi says that she is so ashamed by her loss of beauty that she fears the eyes of men, now that she has become a hundred-year-old crone (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 186).

The play *Sotoba no Komachi* opens with monks from Mount Kōya, who find Komachi as a one-hundred-year-old crone, sitting on an old

²⁰ TEELE et al. 1993; MASUDA 1977. For a discussion of Kan'ami's play, see NIHON KOTEN BUNGAU DAIJITEN HENSHŪ IINKAI 1984, vol. 4, p. 55. For a study of the play, see TERASAKI 1984.

²¹ KAWAGUCHI believes that the Komachi legend is patterned after the Chinese poems of the one hundred years of a woman (1964, p. 398). References to Komachi living to the age of one hundred years can be found in TEELE et al. 1993, pp. 171, 186, 191, 207.

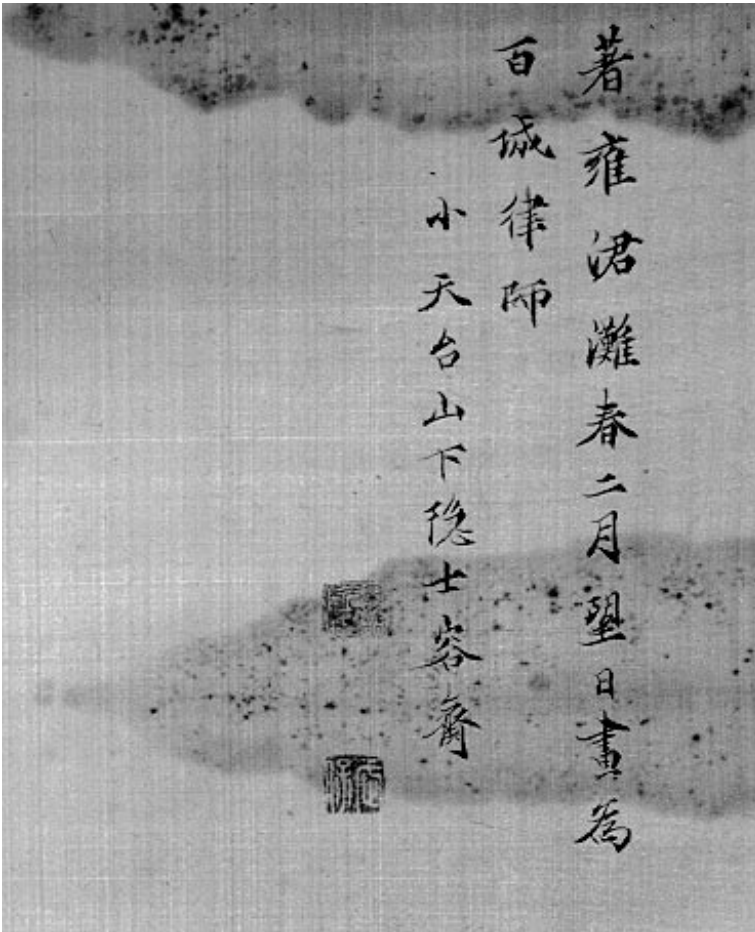


Figure 13. Detail of calligraphy of *The Inevitable Change*. Courtesy of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

stupa, which she believes to be a tree stump. The monks rebuke her for dishonoring the symbol of the Buddha's body. Komachi then declares that she herself is also a half-buried tree. The monks reply that though she and the wooden stupa may both be decayed, "the heart and virtue are different," and that her action was not correct (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 188; MASUDA 1977, p. 50). Komachi retorts that "contradictory actions may also lead to enlightenment." Entering a repartee, the monks begin a series of Buddhist maxims, which Komachi completes with correct, but antithetical answers; this is an elaboration of the relative qualities of the universe. At the climax of the scene, the monk says, "What we call passions too" (*Bonnō to iu mo*

煩惱といふも), and Komachi answers, “becomes enlightenment” (*e bodai nari* へ菩提なり), thus demonstrating her deep learning (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 189; MASUDA 1977, p. 51). When this phrase appears in the play, it is particularly poignant as Komachi, the promiscuous woman, is affirming her original state of enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覚). She sets forth the notions of nonduality and nondiscrimination between herself, the ordinary person, and the Buddha, which is the first part of *hongaku* (original or innate enlightenment) thought. Then she enters a discussion with the monks about world affirmation—complete acceptance of the world and all its creatures just as they are—as an expression of true nonduality, proving that all sentient beings are inherently enlightened. Here Kan’ami has set forth a classic exposition of Tendai *hongaku* thought.

In the play, when Komachi debates with the Shingon monks, she is clearly advocating Tendai doctrine. The practice of corpse meditation is common to most Buddhist schools, whether Theravāda or Mahāyāna, but most of the Japanese paintings of the female corpse in progressive stages of decay in this study are associated with the Tendai sect. According to legend, Shōjuraikō-ji is a Tendai temple that received the painting entitled *Jindō fujō sōzu* as part of a set of *Rokudōe* from the Imperial Palace (ŌGUSHI 1983, pp. 92–97). The provenance of the Komatsu collection work can be traced to a temple called Jakkōin 寂光院 on the Sakamoto side of Mount Hiei, the home of Tendai Buddhism (NAKAMURA 1977, p. 169). The sectarian associations of the LACMA and AGGV are uncertain, while the nineteenth-century work by Yōsai is dedicated to a Tendai cleric (fig. 13). Therefore, three of the five works under discussion can be associated in some way with Tendai Buddhism.

Tendai Hongaku Thought and Women

Hongaku thought consists of two parts: the first is that of nonduality, the second of relative qualities; its aim was to prove that all beings are endowed with the potential for Buddhahood (STONE 1995). The question of how to achieve enlightenment arose between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries in Japan and was of major concern to Buddhist leaders as it raised the issue of who can practice Buddhism and what kind of practice is appropriate. *Hongaku* thought was not discussed openly but was orally transmitted; later in the twelfth century it was written on slips of paper (*kirigami sōjō* 切紙相承), which were collected by the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, and then the first open commentaries appeared in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (HABITO 1995, p. 88). The fact that Kan’ami, not an intellectual cleric

but a playwright and an actor, should present these ideas as a form of entertainment for his Zen patron, shows that certain elements of *hongaku* thought were not restricted to the confines of monastic lecture halls. Themes such as *hongaku* thought, *bonnō soku bodai* 煩惱即菩提, evil, etc., were common in Nō plays written under the influence of beliefs that emphasized universal enlightenment as written in the *Lotus Sutra* (ANESAKI 1942 pp. 89–111).

In the exchange Komachi negates the dualities of concepts that are normally diametrical opposites. “What we call passions too” (*Bonnō to iu mo*), and Komachi’s answer, “becomes enlightenment” (*e bodai nari*) is a variation of *bonnō soku bodai* (passion is enlightenment), a Chinese phrase found in T’ien-t’ai (Tendai) Buddhist writings (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 185; MASUDA 1977, p. 51; STONE 1995, pp. 19–20). These lines between Komachi and the monks may seem contradictory, but are not. Rather, they are an acknowledgement of relativity, recognizing that there are no absolutes and no separation of the qualities of good and evil, ugly and beautiful; differences are collapsed and everything is regarded as a mass of interrelationships. Everything has an identity, but nothing is independently unique. Therefore, Komachi can be the Buddha and the Buddha can be a decayed, ugly old woman. The culmination of *hongaku* thought in the play is when the chorus announces that, “In truth, when essentially all is one, there is no distinction between buddhas and living beings” (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 189; MASUDA 1977, p. 51).

Immediately after the culmination, Kan’ami refers to “foolish mortals” as *bonbu* 凡夫, which is a term used in a Pure Land Buddhist context to denote the soteriological plight of ordinary men and women, a problem of major concern to early medieval Japanese Buddhists (HANEDA 1979). Kan’ami’s play conveys the message that Komachi, the decisively human person, is not alienated from Buddhahood, because she, like any plant, grass, insect, or sentient being, is also imbued with the Buddha-nature. The idea that women had the potential to become Buddhas is often questioned in current scholarship on Japanese Buddhism and women. As Edward Kamens has pointed out, certain Japanese poems written about a century before the creation of Shōjuraikō-ji work raise the topic of the “five hindrances” (*goshō* 五障) that incapacitate female salvation.²² Scholars also point to documents, such as *Tsuma kagami* 妻鏡 (Mirror for Women, ca. 1300), by Mujū Ichien 無住一円 (1227–1312), which quotes the Chinese monk Tao-

²² The five reasons why women have difficulty achieving enlightenment are: 1) they do not cultivate the Bodhisattva path, 2) they lack insight into the Dharma, and 3) they are sensual, 4) lusty, and 5) deceitful (KAMENS 1993, p. 394).

hsüan 道宣 (596–667), who speaks of the physiology of women as being repulsive, leading them to be morally and spiritually corrupt and, hence, a danger to men (MORRELL 1980, pp. 67–68). On the other hand, it is precisely because Komachi epitomizes bodily and spiritual weakness, all those things that encumber the enlightenment of ordinary people, especially women, that she is the perfect symbol to represent, not only the Buddha potential of all beings, but also the Buddha's vow to save all. In Kan'ami's play, Komachi is equally a representative of the general human condition, which is capable of salvation despite an inherently evil and weak nature, as well as a symbol of female capacity.

Sonshun 尊舜 (1451–1514), a Tendai monk, wrote an interesting commentary on *hongaku* thought, entitled *Hokke mongū ryakutaiikō shikenmon* 法華文句略大綱私見聞 (The Great String of Abbreviated Personal Expressions and Questions about the *Lotus Sutra*), where he relates the themes of the decaying corpse and enlightenment (BUSSHO KANKŌKAI 1922).²³ In speaking of Vulture Peak, believed to be a place where cadavers were abandoned, and where the *Lotus Sutra* was preached by the historical Buddha, Sonshun writes that a pure place (*kiyoki tokoro* キヨキ處) in this world is a pure land (*jōdo* 淨土), which is a charnel ground (*sanmaitokoro* 三昧處). In the pure land where there are no impurities or hindrances, one can achieve enlightenment. Therefore, the Tendai position equates the seeing of white bones with realizing the Dharma-nature (BUSSHO KANKŌKAI 1922, pp. 26–27). Later on in his commentary, Sonshun posits the superiority of Tendai *hongaku* thought by pointing out that a woman, just as she is, can become a female buddha, since delusion and enlightenment are originally inherent, and the belief in the necessity of transforming into a male body reflects inferior thinking, which contradicts the doctrine of the *Lotus Sutra*. He goes on to point out that in the esoteric teachings, having a female body, a woman must have already attained enlightenment in this very body (BUSSHO KANKŌKAI 1922, p. 131). Sonshun's commentary and the paintings of the decaying female body make sense in relation to each other. The scenes of nature in the background of many of the paintings can now be interpreted as not only metaphors of ephemerality, but the Pure Land itself, in which the deluded are enlightened. And women, according to *hongaku* thought, in light of their passions, are female buddhas, and there is no difference between living beings and buddhas, just as was realized at the culmination of the debate between Komachi and the monks in Kan'ami's play. The secretive nature of the transmission of Tendai *hongaku*

²³ I wish to thank Jacqueline Stone for pointing out Sonshun's work to me.

thought probably led to the obfuscation of the meaning of the sex of the corpse in visual and literary form. Later patrons and their artists copied the iconography, some probably understood the concept of original enlightenment, but others may have construed it differently.

The Sotoba as a Visual Symbol of Enlightenment

The early thirteenth-century painting of Shōjuraikō-ji and the 1223 *kusōzu* of Daigō-ji were parts of painting cycles of *rokudō*. In the works of Kan'ami and Zeami, Komachi is also associated with the six paths of reincarnation. In *Sotoba* the monks claim that a single glance at a *sotoba* will free one forever from falling into hells and becoming a hungry ghost or animal (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 185; MASUDA 1977, p. 51). Komachi, the anti-hero, reminds the monks of the ability of every sentient being to arouse the Buddha-nature in a single thought (*ichinen hokki bodaishin* 一念發起菩提心); "Is this a lesser way" than looking upon the stupa, she asks (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 188; MASUDA 1977, p. 50). If she really desires to aspire to the Buddha-mind, then she should renounce the world, the monks say. Komachi replies that one does not renounce it through the cutting of hair or the donning of robes, but through the heart. She says that she was drawn to sit on the *sotoba*,²⁴ because she must have instinctively recognized it for what it is, indicating that she has the potential of a *sotoba*. Following the discussions of original enlightenment and the collapsing of distinctions, the theatrical audience is led to conclude that to look upon Komachi, the decayed woman, is similar to looking at the *sotoba*.

The theme of the female and ultimately human enlightenment is visually represented in painted form through the *sotoba*, the stupa, the symbol of the Buddha's body, which is the only reminder of the human body that has returned to the elements. In all the paintings of the corpse in decay, with the exception of the earliest two from Shōjuraikō-ji and the Komatsu collection, the narration of impermanence ends with the *kofunsō* (Aspect of the Tomb), in which only the *sotoba* remains. While the LACMA painting is diagrammatic in its portrayal of bodily decomposition, moving in a downward progression towards the gravemarker, the narration of the AGGV and BMFA works moves upward towards the *sotoba* at the top of the picture plane as though ascending above the world of sorrow. After the ascent, the *sotoba*, standing alone, seems to symbolize the annihilation of suffering. The visual images are much more oblique than the theatrical and literary presentations of Komachi and the *sotoba*, but in these paintings

²⁴ It is interesting that the Japanese transliteration of Su Tung-p'o's name is Sotōba.

the *sotoba* is clearly the human body, weak and full of illness, transformed into the immanent Buddha-body. This parallels the conviction of early medieval Buddhist leaders who believed in universal salvation.

Didactic Literature and Dead Women Who Teach Men

In Kan'ami's play, after the culmination Komachi is told by the monks that she is "an outcast beggar/who is truly enlightened!" (TEELE et al. 1993, p. 190; MASUDA 1977, p. 52). Despite being trapped in a body that has become repulsive, Komachi's mind is sharper and closer to enlightenment than those of the men of the patched robes. The implication is that female beauty that turns into wizened flesh can also be a vehicle of innate wisdom. Clearly Komachi is the woman who imparts insight to men.

There are also stories from the collections of *setsuwa* from the didactic Buddhist tradition in which female bodies impart the principles of Buddhism to males, who are otherwise misguided. In the collections of *Konjaku monogatari* 今昔物語 (Tales of Times Past, ca. early 12th century), *Uji shūi shū* 宇治拾遺集 (The Collection of Tales of Uji, ca. 1190–1242), and *Kankyo no tomo*, there are several stories involving men meditating on female corpses.²⁵ The stories chronologically parallel the earliest extant painting of the *kusō* theme. Therefore, these stories cannot be ignored in a study of the iconography of the decaying female corpse.

In the story collected in *Konjaku monogatari*, it was said that the keeper of the office in the Eastern Palace had a wife, who became ill and died (MABUCHI et al. 1975, p. 549). He placed her in a coffin but kept it at home for more than ten days. The body decomposed in front of the man's eyes. The experience aroused his mind to the path of the Buddha (*dōshin* 道心), and, as a result, he became a devout monk.

The story of Ōe Sadamoto 大江定元, who was the governor of Mikawa Province, is found in both *Konjaku* and *Uji shūi shū*.²⁶ One day his wife died, but he was so attached to her that he could not bring himself to bury her, lusting for her even after death. After lying with the corpse and observing its changes, he kissed its lips and a foul odor arose from his beloved. Realizing the emptiness of his attachments, he buried the body and was instilled with deep religious feeling; he later became a monk. Through the decay of his wife's corpse, he became

²⁵ For a partial translation of these works see URY 1979; MILLS 1970; and PANDEY 1995.

²⁶ This story is found in several collections; see MABUCHI et al. 1975, pp. 487–89; KOBAYASHI 1973, p. 185; for English translations, see: MILLS 1970, pp. 227–29; and KOTAS 1987, pp. 423–25.

closer to nirvana.

In these stories, the woman is an object of meditation; she has no voice, only a body. This concurs with the findings of Liz WILSON in her analysis of stories of female cadavers from Indian Buddhist hagiographic literature (1996, pp. 3-5). But the woman, whose body is considered defiled, is not always voiceless. There is a story in the *Kankyo no tomo* about a lady-in-waiting of high birth who was loved by a monk. When he went to her, she told him that she had an important message to convey to him. "This body of mine is an indescribably smelly and foul object," she said, proceeding to describe grey matter, blood, intestines, and pus (PANDEY 1995, p. 349; KOIZUMI et al. 1993, p. 441). Then she revealed herself to the monk with dishevelled hair, discolored face, filthy body, and odorous clothes. She said, "This is what I look like. How can you bear to look at me?" The monk replied, "I have indeed met a true friend who has guided me to reform myself." The monk learned the truth about the impermanence of beauty and sexual desire from a woman, who, by embodying these teachings, understood them better than he, an ordained cleric. Lust led the monk to the woman, who, in turn, led him to the Buddhist truth. In this story the lady-in-waiting, who is linked to Komachi, is not a nun, nor does she appear to be directed by men; she has a voice, which she uses to command the monk to ponder her words. And, unlike the previous stories, she is not dead but is active in securing the salvation of a man.

All the *kusō* stories are similar in that the benefactor is always a female who bestows insight upon a male. The men were attracted by beauty, but, when it began to decay, they were inspired to seek a more permanent truth. The dead women symbolized that the male protagonist had realized the truth of impermanence, conquered flesh, and risen to the spiritual, but the women are heroic at their own expense. With or without a voice, the female body directs the man through its natural changes, turning him away from his somatic urges towards aspiring for the Buddha path in each of these stories. The man becomes beholden to the female body, which, as his teacher, liberates him from illusion. Visually, the female cadaver is also a guide. In the paintings, the corpse is the single focal point of all the scenes, and it is realistically portrayed as it undergoes changes that are represented through a series of cinematic vignettes. The eye of the beholder follows the flow of body forms, directing attention, moving the viewer through space and time. We, the viewers, are compelled to seek the meaning of such grotesque beauty that symbolizes the Buddhist truth.

In the Indian tradition, there are stories of women teaching the

Dharma through denigrating themselves, similar to the *Kankyō no tomo* story. WILSON sees these women, not as self-directed heroes, but as servants of a male sangha (1996, pp. 142–79). In the case of the lady-in-waiting from the *Kankyō no tomo* story, she does not appear to be acting under the guidance of men. Wilson’s interpretation is quite compelling, however; in the traditional Buddhist context of “skillful means” the use of any body, male or female, that can teach the Dharma is appropriate. Sexuality is, as is the rest of the body, a moot point.²⁷

Defiled Women as Divine

As has been shown, women are defiled by the very nature of their bodies, yet they are also closer to the divine than men. This aspect of divinity or being closer to insight is illustrated in the painting by Yōsai, which depicts a woman looking on, standing outside the blinds of the hut in which a woman is dying (fig. 10). SATŌ describes her as a *kōyū jinbutsu* 交友人物, a “companion” or “friend” to the dying woman (1993, p. 18). I believe she is more than that. The woman is dressed in red *hakama* (trousers) and a white-flowered top with her hair swept up. The modern-day shrine maiden or *miko* 巫女 dresses in red *hakama* and a plain white top, wearing her hair loose; neither one wears an *obi*. I believe that, despite the differences, Yōsai was deliberately alluding to the ancient tradition of the divine *miko*.

Miko are shamans in Shinto belief. They, with women of pleasure often associated with shrines (*asobime* 遊女) and puppeteers (*kugutsume* 傀儡女), formed a class of mantic women, who worked in the fields of arts and entertainment (WAKITA 1990; GORAI 1990). Women, who worked as shamans, oracles, prostitutes, poets, and entertainers, were liminal beings in ancient Japanese society; they were considered the lowest class of society, yet their artistic abilities permitted them to consort with the highest echelons of the same society. They acted as

²⁷ The teachings of Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), the Pure Land Buddhist leader, on the salvation of woman can also be interpreted in a similar vein. In the third and fifth scenes of Scroll 34 of the *Hōnen Shōnin eden* 法然聖人繪伝 (Pictorial Biography of the Holy Man Hōnen, compiled after 1307), a set of biographical handscroll paintings of Hōnen can be seen on a boat on the Yodo River where courtesans ply their trade. The courtesans greet Hōnen to ask for redemption from ever being born as women again, and he tells them to chant the *nenbutsu* 念仏 and deny their female bodies; this is also repeated in Hōnen’s *Muryōjūkyō shaku* 無量壽經釈 (ŌHASHI 1989, pp. 97–99); for an illustration, see MONBUSHŌ BUNKACHŌ 1974, p. 105. Hōnen’s words are based upon the thirty-fifth vow of Amida Buddha’s bodhisattva vows (T. 354 [XII] 268c). The meaning of the vow and of Hōnen’s teaching has long been a matter of controversy. Hōnen’s words are less denial of the female body than a rejection of somaticity in general, as taught by these paintings of the female cadaver. Also see: SCHUSTER 1981.

mediums, exorcists, etc., dealing with the world of the dead for the living, as well as providing dance, song, and poetry; we know of these women chiefly through a collection of poetry, the *Ryōjin hishō* 梁塵秘抄 (Treasured Selection of Superb Songs, ca. 1169; KIM 1994). Their protective deity was a phallic figure named Hyakudayū 百太夫. As women working in the field of entertainment, they were often associated with promiscuity, like Komachi. They were also regarded as *irogonomi onna*, an aspect that may have complemented their divine status.

From texts relating to the poet Saigyō 西行 (1118–1190), La Fleur finds images of courtesans as teachers of impermanence, bodhisattvas in disguise. The body of the prostitute, her profession, and her residence “articulate impermanence/instability”; the promiscuous woman is the tutor to the wandering monk (LA FLEUR 1986, p. 74). MARRA, in his interpretation of the life of the poet Izumi Shikibu 和泉式部, a courtesan, sees her as being a spiritual medium between the monk and the Buddha (1993, pp. 52–55, 63). She is the mouth speaking the Buddhist truth, an exorcist or shaman in indigenous religious beliefs. Izumi Shikibu’s femaleness is not a sin, according to native Japanese culture; in fact, it is precisely because of her female body that she is closer to the Buddha. These references to female wisdom found in courtesans and prostitutes may have been influenced by Tendai *hongaku* thought.

Conclusion

The brotherhood of monks on which Buddhism was based found fault with the physical characteristics that defined femaleness. Being born with a female body meant not only denial of Buddhahood; it was also popularly thought that women were condemned to the Blood Pool Hell.²⁸ This hell to which women who menstruated and gave birth were condemned reflects misogynist attitudes, but not all Buddhists held such beliefs. The Tendai view of the female sex as seen through these paintings of the decaying corpse neither completely heroicizes nor denigrates women. Rather, through *hongaku* thought, it regarded the qualities of good and evil in women not as absolute, but as relative. The female body was seen as synonymous with Buddhist truth, as interpreted by the promulgators of *hongaku* thought. The realization of Buddhist truth is instrumental in the achievement of enlightenment, but it is also a cruel truth that acts upon the body and forces believers to acknowledge suffering and death. It is a realization of the

²⁸ In China and Japan menstruation was viewed as polluting, and women were condemned for it in the Blood Pool Hell (TAKEMI 1983 and DOUGLAS 1966).

relative qualities of not only women but also the world. Komachi, the sophisticated worldly woman, was unfaithful and haughty, yet wrote incomparable love poetry. She was beautiful, but became ugly; she was unwise in her youth, yet her knowledge in her old age was beyond that of learned men. And while she was a woman, through her poetry and legendary life, she already achieved the Buddha-body. The image of the decomposing female cadaver, created in painted form and through fictional biographies of Komachi, is a materialization of complex thoughts that are paradoxical, but there is no duality in them. In the same way, the symbol of the female corpse defies any brief explanation; it is polysemous. The gender of Buddhist truth in these paintings is female, yet truth also transcends gender as it is universal and resists definitions.

The Buddhist symbol of the female cadaver can be construed in many ways, misogynist or otherwise, in different cultural, religious, epochal, and personal milieux. The paintings that I have discussed possess imagery that is ambiguous and polysemous, which is the strength of visual language. The culturally localized interpretation of the female body presented here is based on the understanding that aristocratic literary women of the Heian period hold a special place in Japanese culture as a whole. Their acute aesthetic sensitivity accompanied by fragile physical beauty was greatly admired in a society that placed positive value on transiency, but anxieties and forebodings also accompany the red maples of autumn. Therefore, how appropriate it should be that a woman, whose life is filled with artistic creation that inspires anxious passion, should be used as a symbol for Buddhist truth. Also, it has been shown that the strength of a woman as depicted in these paintings called *kusōzu* is precisely her bodily and hence spiritual weakness. In the end, who else but a woman can prove for all humanity that even the most utterly vulnerable will without doubt achieve Buddhahood.

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