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Mishima Yukio's Modern Noh Play *Sotoba Komachi*: Nietzsche's Influence and the Ideal Post-war Artist

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ABSTRACT

The medieval Noh 能 play *Sotoba Komachi* 卒塔婆小町 educates its audience about the Buddhist concept of *ichinyokan* 一如觀 by staging a series of conflicting concepts and then resolving them. Mishima Yukio's 三島由紀夫 modern Noh play of the same name removes the Buddhist coloring from *ichinyokan* to depict a reversal of contradictory ideas. This reversal reveals Mishima's artistic worldview that emerged from his personal experiences as a writer in a society devastated by defeat in war. Mishima's perceptions of art and the artist were influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, especially the idea that art is the realization of conflict, but also contains complementary Dionysian and Apollonian elements; I argue that Mishima learned of dualism through the dualism of Nietzsche, and that after discovering this dualism in the original *Sotoba Komachi*, he exploited it in his modern version.

Keywords: *Sotoba Komachi*; Mishima; Apollonian/Dionysian dualism; *ichinyokan*; post-war Japan

Introduction

Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 (1925–1970), a major figure in post-war Japanese literature, was highly influenced by medieval Japanese Noh 能 plays. He completed five plays based on existing Noh dramas between 1950 and 1955, and these were collected in 1956 by Shinchōsha 新潮社 under the title *Kindai nōgaku shū* (Mishima 1956) 近代能楽集 (translated as *Five Modern Noh Plays*; Mishima 2008). This paper will focus on the third of these five plays: *Sotoba Komachi* 卒塔婆小町 (*Komachi on the Stupa*, written in 1952), based on the medieval Noh drama of the same name by Kan'ami 観阿弥 (1333–1384).¹ This paper compares the medieval and modern versions of *Sotoba Komachi* to determine their differences and similarities, and discusses the features of the modern play through that lens. This analysis then diverges from previous work on Mishima's play,² as it explores how the dualistic notions in *Sotoba Komachi* mirror the duality in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, and argues that through this duality Mishima attempted to reveal his ideal of a post-war artist. I shall proceed in the following order: first, I will focus on the structure of the original play, the narrative methods used, and certain features of the characters; second, I will discuss how these features are represented in the modern version, focusing on irony and the emergence of duality. I will argue that these aspects of the modern play reflect Mishima's perceptions of art and artists. This leads to the third main section of my discussion, in which I point out that the nature of the

conflict emphasized in Mishima's play is actually a result of the influence of both Nietzsche and the original Noh drama, which leads to my argument that Mishima reveals in this work the image of the post-war artist he idealized.

Features of the Medieval Noh Play *Sotoba Komachi*

Research on *Sotoba Komachi* has generally concluded that the main idea of the work is unclear. For instance: "Although the work is describing the degraded end of an arrogant beauty, it is not written from the perspective of so-called punitive justice, and it is in fact rather unclear as to its subject matter" (Yokomichi 1976, 81). It has also been argued that "if one must identify the main topic, it might be the underlying arrogance of Komachi" (Koyama 2003, 116). Recent studies, however, argue that the play puts forward *ichinyokan* 一如觀 (a principle of Buddhism, in which all things and phenomena in the world are superficially different, but have the same underlying nature) as the main theme, through the discussions between the priest and Komachi (Amano 2013, 193). The play has heretofore generally been understood as merely providing dramatic entertainment by featuring religious dialogues and possession by a spirit. In this paper, I argue that *ichinyokan* suffuses the whole play—in addition to being the play's main theme, its narrative methods and certain features of the characters express a series of contradictory but coexisting ideas, the essence of *ichinyokan*.

Ono no Komachi 小野小町, as she appears in the original *Sotoba Komachi*, was a famous poet of the Heian period 平安時代 (782–1185), a legendary figure of exceptional beauty, who is said to have attracted the adoration of many men. In the Japanese Middle Ages (that is, the Kamakura period 鎌倉時代, the Kemmu restoration 建武の新政, and the Muromachi 室町 and Azuchi–Momoyama periods 安土桃山時代: 1185–1603), another fable became popular based on the legend that in her youth Komachi was reduced to the life of a beggar due to her arrogant rejection of her male suitors.³ Kan'ami's *Sotoba Komachi* is constructed from the medieval legend of Komachi: the "Tale of One Hundred Nights' Visits."⁴ In other words, *Sotoba Komachi* is based on the visits of Fukakusa no Shōshō 深草の少将, the dialogue between the priest and Komachi, and finally, the possession of Komachi by the soul of Fukakusa no Shōshō.

In the play, a priest from Kōya Mountain starts scolding a crone, who appears to be a beggar, for sitting on a stupa (*sotoba*), but the old woman rejects the priest's condemnation and boldly expresses her opinion. The *sotoba* on which the crone sits is a *gorintō* 五輪塔 (five-ringed stupa) with some Sanskrit inscriptions; it is considered to be a representation of mankind's pathway to salvation as taught by

¹ And (according to the dominant theory) later modified by Zeami 世阿弥.

² Previous studies have pointed out differences between the original Noh and the modern play in terms of composition, setting, and primary theme. See Ishizawa 1974; Tanaka 1980; Arimoto 1985.

³ For recent work on the legend of Ono no Komachi in English see Ryu (2014).

⁴ The "Tale of One Hundred Nights' Visits" is a Komachi legend. Komachi promised Fukakusa no Shōshō, who kept trying to woo her, that she would do as he wished only if he would come to see her every night for 100 days; this was her way of trying to force him to give up on her. Fukakusa no Shōshō visited her every night but ultimately failed to win her because of his unexpected death on the 99th day.

esoteric Buddhism. When the priest scolds the old woman for sitting on the *sotoba*, the body of Buddha, she replies that she thought it was only a rotten tree stump. The priest then says, “Even the little black tree on the hillside / When it has put its blossoms on / Cannot be hid”; this is a reference to a line of a song from *Shika waka shū* (Collection of poetic flowers 詞花和歌集, 1151–154): “Amongst other trees in the deep forest it could not be seen as the bough of a cherry tree, but when it blossoms in the spring a glance tells me what it is” (*Miyamagi no sono kozue tomo miezarishi sakura wa hana ni arawarerikeri* 深山木のそのこずゑともみえざりしさくらは花にあらはれにけり).⁵ The priest blames the crone for not having recognized the *sotoba* for what it was, but the old woman defends herself saying that she too is a hidden and withered bough with “flowers in [her] heart” (*kokoro no hana* 心の花), that is, a mind still appreciative of art, and that these flowers can serve as an offering to Buddha.

In this scene, the image of the *sotoba*, which cannot be visually recognized as a symbol of the Buddha's body, for it has no figure carved on it, is overlapped by that of the crone, who maintains her appreciation for the arts despite her old and withered form. Sitting on the *sotoba*, a symbol of death, the crone is near the end of her life; however, she still appreciates art and beauty—is even obsessed with them—and shows a strong desire to live. In this way, both the *sotoba* and the old woman function in this play as symbols of the duality of life and death, beauty and ugliness.

Subsequently, the crone initiates a dialogue with the priest and his companion about the religious ideas surrounding the *sotoba*:

PRIEST

You have no heart at all, or you would have known the Body of Buddha.

KOMACHI

It was because I knew it that I came to see it!

SECOND PRIEST

And knowing what you know, you sat on it without worship?

KOMACHI

It was on the ground already. How much harm could I do by resting on it?

PRIEST

This is not the right way to lead you to enlightenment.

KOMACHI

Sometimes bad things lead one to enlightenment.

SECOND PRIEST

From the malice of Daiba. . . .

KOMACHI

As from the mercy of Kwannon.

PRIEST

From the folly of Handoku. . . .

KOMACHI

⁵ Cited from the original text (Kan'ami 2003, 120).

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As from the wisdom of Monju.⁶

SECOND PRIEST

That which is called Evil.

KOMACHI

Is Good.

PRIEST

That which is called anguish

KOMACHI

Is enlightenment

[. .]

CHORUS (*speaking for KOMACHI*)

“Nothing is real.

Between Buddha and Man is no distinction.

The vow to the Buddha is a means to save a foolish man,
Sin itself may be the ladder to salvation.”

So she spoke, eagerly; and the priests responded,

“She is a beggar who has found true enlightenment.”

Bending their heads to the ground,

Three times they paid homage before her.⁷

The earlier part of this excerpt contains objections from the priests, who do not accept the old woman’s argument. But soon, unwittingly, they are won over by her words and start reciting the Buddhist creed in unison; this is augmented by the voice of the chorus (*jiutai* 地謡). This brisk conversation expresses the substance of *ichinyokan*: the teaching that the boundaries that divide conflicting concepts—good and evil, *dukkha* (anguish) and enlightenment, right and wrong—are indefinite, and that these concepts are ultimately identical. I contend that this play is structured as a conversation that represents *ichinyokan*; in other words, this dialogue is the narrative method of the play.

In the excerpt, the priests exclaim, “A saint, a saint is this decrepit, outcast soul,” recognizing Komachi as not some common person, but as one who has achieved a state of enlightenment. As they salute her with admiration, the old woman rejoices in her victory over the priests, and flaunts her poetic skills by reciting a *waka* 和歌. Finally, the crone reveals that she once was Ono no Komachi, a woman of great beauty. The crone then dances while deploring that she has been forced to beg for a living as an old woman. During these moments, the spirit of Fukakusa no Shōshō, who was determined to visit Komachi for a hundred nights but died on the ninety-ninth day without accomplishing this pledge, possesses her body and confesses his past through her mouth.

⁶ Daiba 提婆 or Devadatta was an evil cousin of the Buddha who nevertheless in the end attained enlightenment, as did Handoku 槃特, a slow-witted disciple of the Buddha. The Bodhisattvas Monju 文殊 and Kannon 觀音 are the personifications of wisdom and compassion, respectively (Kan’ami 1976, 81).

⁷ This is a translation of *Sotoba Komachi* from *Shinpen Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū* (Kan’ami 2003, 121–22). When I translated this text, I referred to Arthur Waley’s translation (Kan’ami 2009).

KOMACHI

No, no . . . Komachi was very beautiful.
Many letters came to her, many messages—
Thick as raindrops out of a black summer sky.
But she sent no answer, not even an empty word.
And now in punishment she has grown old:
She has lived a hundred years—
I miss people, oh I miss people! (Kan'ami 2003, 125)

The last line, “I miss people, oh I miss people!” expresses the feelings of Fukakusa no Shōshō, whose life ended before he received a response from Komachi, but at the same time it also expresses Komachi's own feelings, as she can no longer attract anyone's attention because of her advanced age. She laments having to beg; and when she receives no money, an “evil rage” (Kan'ami 2003, 124) grows in Komachi's mind, and she falls into a state of madness as Fukakusa no Shōshō's spirit takes over. In the original Japanese text, the line “I beg alms from those that pass. And when they do not give, / An evil rage, a very madness possesses me” is written 今は路頭にさそらひ、往来の人に物を乞ふ (*kofu*)。乞ひ (*kohi*) 得ぬ時は悪心、また狂乱の心尽きて (Kan'ami 2003, 124). Here, the word *kohi* (乞ひ), which means “to beg for food,” is a homophone of *kohi* (恋ひ), a Japanese word for “love,” implying that being forced to beg is Komachi's punishment for rejecting all the men who begged for her love during her youth. That Komachi, who is now old and abandoned by the rest of the world, is fixated on her past (in which she spent her days playing at love and composing *waka*) while wandering the roads begging for food—and, metaphorically, for love from men—shows that she is recapitulating the life of Fukakusa no Shōshō, who begged for Komachi's love during his lifetime. The anguish of the old woman retraces that of Fukakusa no Shōshō, whose death was also lonesome. This is what draws his enraged spirit to her.

When Komachi is possessed, she experiences in her own body Shōshō's feelings of resentment and passion for her, as well as her own obsession with her past, each of which are powerfully evoked. Moreover, the descent of Fukakusa no Shōshō's spirit is also the moment of the revival of the young Komachi from out of the past. As this past is reenacted in the present, the beauty of Ono no Komachi is confirmed by the return of Fukakusa no Shōshō's spirit. Through this experience, which transcends time and space, one could say that the old woman is experiencing absolute beauty and love. Hence, Ono no Komachi, who outwardly appears as a “mere” crone, is a character who incorporates opposing elements of life and death, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, wisdom and foolishness, sin and salvation, simultaneously within her; through her madness, the dividing lines between these oppositions are effaced. The principle of *ichinyokan* is again evident, as it was in the dialogue between Komachi and the priests—through her concurrent possession of contradictory concepts, Komachi is here portrayed as a being within whom these contradictions can coexist and unite.

After recovering from her frenzy, Komachi decides to follow the path of Buddhism (Kan'ami 2003, 127). Indeed, Komachi's moment of madness leads her

to religious salvation. As we see in the scene in which the dialogue on the *sotoba* takes place, Ono no Komachi, from the very beginning, already understands the religious doctrine claiming that *dukkha*, the torment of life, is indistinguishable from religious salvation. However, this understanding alone does not lead her to salvation; what makes that possible is the great pain she experiences as the past and the present come to overlap through the visitation of Fukakusa no Shōshō's spirit. The last image of Komachi is of one who craves only religious enlightenment, transcending life and death, and even time itself; this is unlike her former self, who could not relinquish her obsession with secular existence despite her understanding of Buddhist doctrine. Thus, one can see that this work has a structure in which *ichinyokan*, first introduced in the dialogue between the priests and Komachi, is reflected in Komachi's madness and eventually her conversion to religion, which leads to her salvation.

Features of Mishima's Modern Noh Play *Sotoba Komachi*

This section will consider how the modern play *Sotoba Komachi* departs from the original Noh drama's narrative methods and characterization, and how it continues to make use of elements from the earlier play.

In Mishima's post-war setting, the stage is operetta-esque, a vulgar and commonplace park, in which five couples sit on benches, rapturously caressing each other against a black backdrop. An old beggar woman appears, picks up some cigarette butts, and sits on the bench in the center. A young, drunk poet is watching her from the shadow of a streetlight. The opening scene begins with a conversation between the old woman and the poet.

OLD WOMAN

(turning her attention from him) I'm not chasing anybody away. When I sit down they run away, that's all. Anyway, this bench is made for four people to sit on.

POET

But at night it's for the use of lovers! Every evening when I pass through this park and I see a couple on every bench, it makes me feel so wonderfully reassured. I go by on tiptoes. Even if I'm tired or, as it happens once in a while, even if I feel inspiration coming over me, and I want to sit down so I can collect my thoughts, I refrain, in deference to them. . . . And you, old lady, since when have you been coming here?⁸

The poet, who has not had any romantic experiences, admires the beauty of the world as viewed from the perspective of the loving couples in the park. Nevertheless, when the old woman says that he is wandering in the park to “forage for things to put in your poems,” the poet affirms that he cannot use “such vulgar materials” (Mishima 2008, 6) for his poems. He thinks that a poem is sublime when it is made only from words, and not drawn from reality. In response, the old woman counters that the value of things that are currently deemed vulgar can

⁸ Cited from *Sotoba Komachi in Five Modern Noh Plays* (Mishima 2008, 5).

always change. Indeed, there are examples in this play of “vulgar” things that turn into objects of beauty. The park in the post-war days, seen in the earlier parts of the play, is described as vulgar and reflecting a commonplace taste. When the old woman and the poet are presented with the vision of the ball at Rokumei Hall⁹—which took place in the Meiji period 明治時代 (1868–1912), in a place that people at the time would have regarded as dignified and beautiful because only upper-class people could attend it—the old woman denigrates the people assembled in the place, saying “See! All the most boring people of the day have come.” The poet then responds, “These splendid looking ladies and gentlemen. . . ?” (14). Furthermore, the poet, who in this fantasy identifies himself with Fukakusa no Shōshō, becomes mesmerized by Komachi’s beauty and desires to die in this state; about this love of Shōshō’s, which risks even death, however, Komachi exclaims, “How commonplace. How dreadfully ordinary.”¹⁰ Thus, the poet, who earlier argued that the scenery of the park was too vulgar to be the subject of his poem, is ironically ready to die for another “vulgar” love. On the other hand, the crone, who originally thought that the value of crude things was changeable and asserted that love above all should be the prime subject of a poem, is now claiming that the love of men, as seen in this imagining of the past, is ordinary and commonplace. In this way, both characters experience a change in their perception of “crude things.”

This phenomenon of reversed cognition can also be found among the dualisms, such as beauty and ugliness or life and death, which appear in the dialogues between the old woman and the poet. For example, when the crone claims that “A beautiful woman is always a beautiful woman,” the poet seems to suggest otherwise, but she insists, “I am still beautiful.” Here, the audience becomes aware that the crone is the famous poet and beautiful woman Ono no Komachi, while in contrast, the male poet is initially scornful, unable to see her as anything but an ugly crone. However, after she reveals that she was once the great beauty Ono no Komachi, he demands that she tell him stories from her younger days, and the two sink seamlessly into the fantastical past. Notably, an exchange corresponding to this one appears again in their fantasy, later in the play.

OLD WOMAN

I’m ninety-nine years old. Wake up—open your eyes. Look at me well!

POET

(stares at her awhile as though stunned) Ah, I’ve remembered at last.

OLD WOMAN

(overjoyed) You’ve remembered?

⁹ Regarding the setting of Rokumei Hall, Mishima explained elsewhere that “It was the place which kept the most beautiful memories of the Meiji period” (Mishima 2003e, 138). Therefore, it was the best stage on which to depict Komachi’s most beautiful days.

¹⁰ Mishima (2008, 14). In the original Japanese text, the line beginning “See!” is written 見ててごらん、当時飛び切りの俗悪 (zokuaku) な連中がやって来るから; “These splendid looking ladies and gentlemen?” is あれが俗悪 (zokuaku)? あんなすばらしい連中か; (“you say they are vulgar? All those splendid people?”); and “How commonplace. How dreadfully ordinary.” is まあ、俗悪 (zokuaku) だわ! 俗悪 (zokuaku) だわ! The term 俗悪 (vulgar; undignified) appears in all lines (Mishima 2002, 539).

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POET

Yes . . . that's right. You were an old woman of ninety-nine. You had horrible wrinkles, mucus oozed from your eyes, your clothing stank.

OLD WOMAN

(*stamping her foot*) Had? Don't you realize I have wrinkles now?

POET

Strange . . . you have the cool eyes of a girl of twenty, and you wear magnificent sweet-scented clothes. You are strange! You've become young again.

OLD WOMAN

Oh, don't say it. Haven't I told you what will happen if you say I'm beautiful?

POET

If I think something is beautiful, I must say it's beautiful, even if I die for it. (26–27)

The text above is from the scene in which the old woman attempts to wake the poet from the fantasy by making him recognize her as an old and ugly woman, since the poet, enraptured by his love for Ono no Komachi, is determined to face death. The stage direction “stamping her foot” uses the same expression as in the previous excerpt. This movement is described when Komachi leads the poet into the world of fantasy or reality or both. Earlier in the text, Komachi emphasizes her everlasting beauty and by doing so guides the poet into the world of fantasy, while later she tries to make him perceive her as an old woman in order to save his life. The poet sees Komachi as an old woman only when he first meets her; later in the play, he perceives her as a woman of unmatched beauty.

As shown in these examples, the characters' perceptions of Komachi's beauty reverse as the play progresses; this is possible because dual times, the present and the past, are reenacted simultaneously, giving further expression to the duality that structures the play. This aspect is one the modern play shares with the original work, since the crone also possesses these contradictory traits in the Noh play, in that her beauty is shown through her apparent ugliness when the spirit of Fukakusa no Shōshō reenacts the past. Such duality is also reflected in the dialogue between Komachi and the poet: expressions such as “eyes,” “remembered,” and “clothing stank” in Komachi's lines are repeated in the poet's lines, but their implication is the opposite. As such, in this work, the expressions in one character's lines are repeated in the other's lines, sometimes showing a change in those words' meaning into their opposite. The unique effect created by such repetition can be considered to represent the poetic style of the dialogue, and effectively conveys the dualistic nature of the play.

Along with beauty and ugliness, and vulgarity and loftiness, another dualism that appears frequently in the play is the question of life and death. Within both the poet and the crone there coexist images of life and of death. Concerning the bench on which the old woman is sitting, the poet comments, “When you sit here it becomes cold as a grave, like a bench put together out of slabs of tombstones” (7); on the other hand, upon observing the face of the poet, who is sauntering drunkenly about the park, the old woman says “You haven't much longer to live. The mask of death is on your face” (4). Moreover, the lovers on the park benches

seem different in the poet's perspective and in Komachi's, and this difference is yet again related to the question of life and death. The poet argues that the couples are the ones who are truly alive.

POET

And this bench, this bench is a kind of ladder mounting to heaven, the highest lookout tower in the world, a glorious observation point. When a man sits here with his sweetheart he can see the lights of the cities halfway across the globe. But if (*climbs on the bench*) I stand here all by myself, I can't see a thing. . . .

[. . .]

POET

And that's exactly why I never invade this bench. As long as you and I are occupying it, the bench is just so many dreary slats of wood, but if they sit here it can become a memory. It can become softer than a sofa, and warm with the sparks thrown off by living people. . . . (6–7)

In these lines, positive words such as “light” and “warm” are repeatedly used, and may be associated with the imagery of “fire.”¹¹ Depicting people in love in terms related to “fire” suggests that an image of passion and life is being created within the play.

In contrast, the old woman denies the poet's claim that people who are in love are more truly alive.

OLD WOMAN

You're young and inexperienced, you still haven't the eyes to see things. You say the benches where they sit, those snotty-faced shop clerks with their whores, are alive? Don't be silly. They're petting on their graves. Look, how deathly pale their faces look in the greenish streetlight that comes through the leaves. Their eyes are shut, the men and women both. Don't they look like corpses? They're dying as they make love. (7)

The old woman associates the enraptured and whispering lovers with death through expressions such as “their graves,” “the greenish streetlight that comes through the leaves,” and “deathly pale.” Her logic is as follows: even though being in love is a vitalized state, with emotions surging to their peak, it also touches upon death. The happiness of falling in love is hard to preserve in reality, but when one dies, this sense of happiness is completed. The old woman talks about her youth, likening her experience of love to the state of being drunk. She confesses that she was thus intoxicated during her younger days, and that she decided to never again become “drunk” after realizing that such intoxication is little better than being dead, explaining that this decision is the secret of her long life (11–12). Indeed, in the flashback scene, as she is waltzing with the poet—who is now Fukakusa no Shōshō—and whispering her love to him, young Ono no Komachi says “And if you climb a tree and look around, you'll see the lights of the whole city, and it will be just

¹¹ In *waka* and Noh plays, the word *omohi* 思ひ is used to express a person's feelings for a lover; the *hi* is a homonym of 火 (*hi*), which means “fire.” This method of *kakekotoba*, multiple meanings given to one word using homonyms, appears frequently in Noh plays.

as if you saw the lights of all the towns all over the world” (22). This is analogous to the poet’s image of the world as seen through the eyes of the enraptured lovers—“the highest lookout tower in the world, a glorious observation point”—cited above. The old woman in the present equates love with death, but Komachi in the past claims that love is the best state through which to feel one’s aliveness.

The dialogue between Komachi and the poet earlier in the play shows that they are at odds with each other: unlike the poet, who associates the lovers with vitality, the old woman sees death in them. However, in the fantasy world of the past, the poet’s earlier words are reversed. The poet, who is gradually becoming Fukakusa no Shōshō through the act of waltzing, exclaims at the moment immediately before the hundredth day, “My dreams realized. . . . And perhaps one day I shall grow tired even of you. If I should tire of someone like you, my life after death would really be horrible. And how frightening the eternal months and days until I die. I should simply be bored” (23). He confesses that he would not be able to bear the dull daily life that would follow the fulfilment of his dreams. Instead, wanting to die in a moment of ecstasy rather than after it fades into smug self-satisfaction, he proclaims Komachi’s beauty—“You are beautiful” (27)—and promises to meet her again after his rebirth, saying “I’ll meet you again, I’m sure, in a hundred years, at the same place” (28). Thus the poet chooses death in order to live the life he wants, and his will towards death at this moment of vital ecstasy is what proves the point: life and death are holding each other’s hands, and cultivating one’s will to live leads to death. The poet chooses a death fully intoxicated by love, thereby embodying the old woman’s logic: that the loving couples are the very beings closest to death.

Through this analysis it becomes evident how skillfully Mishima utilizes the *ichinyokan* of the original Noh drama *Sotoba Komachi* to achieve the desired effect in his modern play. The original play professes religious teachings—which argue that good and evil, life and death, *dukkha* and enlightenment are eventually the same—through the words of Komachi, who has been brought down to her lowest. These words lead to a story of religious salvation, in which Komachi, after being tormented by a vindictive spirit, determines to seek enlightenment in Buddhism. Mishima takes this Buddhist *ichinyokan* as a motif but eliminates its religious color: instead, he develops the action and symbolic meaning of his play using a number of conflicting concepts that are dramatized through the main characters, and which, though initially discordant, appear to reverse themselves in the later parts of the play. The contrasting concepts of beauty and ugliness, youth and old age, vulgarity and loftiness, life and death, artistry and materialism, are twisted in both the present and the past, with Mishima demonstrating that these dualistic ideas are inseparably related. In this sense, the reason Mishima chose the original *Sotoba Komachi* as the basis for his modern play was likely the possibility of developing the story by means of such a twist in a set of dualistic concepts.

It is well known that Komachi was a poet and a beautiful woman, but Mishima emphasizes this point to create Komachi’s character. However, it would still require a male to acknowledge her beauty, and she is willing to wait a hundred years for him. At this point, one can identify a crucial difference between the

original and the modern *Sotoba Komachi*. While the original *Sotoba Komachi* attempts to dramatize the transcendence of life through religious salvation after experiencing extreme pain, the modern *Komachi* transcends physical life by her will to live as long as possible, despite her attraction to the moment of ecstasy that leads to death. This *Komachi*, who has waited a hundred years for Fukakusa no Shōshō, is a being close to death, who yet never quite reaches it—an existence that transcends realistic human life, and at the same time transcends time, turning her into a timeless or legendary poet. Certain aspects of Mishima's perceptions of art and artists are illuminated by his contrasting portrayals of the poet who was doomed to be forgotten due to his early death and of Ono no *Komachi*, an everlasting poet.

Nietzsche's Influence and the Post-war Artist in Mishima's Modern Noh Play *Sotoba Komachi*

Here I will argue that Mishima's representation of dualisms in the modern *Sotoba Komachi* was influenced by his reading of Nietzsche, which led him to depart from the ideas of Buddhism present in the original play, and instead to reflect in his play his ideal conception of a post-war artist. Mishima Yukio explained the subject matter of *Sotoba Komachi* as follows:

One should not confuse the audience by making unnecessary comments about the theme. However, considering the fact that the author's confession is the poetic representation of his determination as an artist, [the theme] has the same idea as *Kantan* 邯鄲 (the title of one of the plays in Mishima's *Five Modern Noh Plays* as well as the capital city of Zhao 趙). In other words, the author considers that it is the true way of an artist to aspire towards becoming an indomitable, everlasting poet like ninety-nine-year-old *Komachi* by first quieting the youth (much like the poet in the play) who resides within one's mind. (Mishima 2003a, vol. 27, 689)

And further:

Komachi is the incarnation of "life beyond life," that is, of life in a metaphysical sense. In contrast, the poet is the embodiment of physical life, the life that changes with the physical reality. Within *Komachi* there dwells the tragedy of one who is never defeated, while the poet possesses the "will for tragedy" which is characteristic of romanticism. The interaction of these two people is based on admiration for each other, mixed with misunderstanding, curiosity and contempt.

(Mishima 2003b, vol. 28, 19)

Mishima composed this work during his "classicist" era.¹² That Mishima wished to take *Komachi*, who maintains eternal youth and represents "life in a metaphysical sense," as his ideal model of an artist, and who wished to avoid falling into an

¹² Previous studies define the period from 1949, with *Confessions of a Mask* 仮面の告白, to 1954, with *The Sound of Waves* 潮騒, as Mishima's classicist era; Andō (2003, 492–93) points out that Mishima tried to make a transition in this period to a more rationalistic or intellectual, less emotional style.

ecstasy like that of the poet, makes it all the more apparent that he himself had an underlying inclination towards romantic tragedy, that is, ecstasy and death. And the plot of *Sotoba Komachi*, in which the conflict between two artists, the old woman and the poet, leads to the death and loss of self of the intoxicated poet, while the immortal Komachi rejects his romantic sentiment, was inspired by his own experiences before and after the war.

Beginning in 1945, Mishima faced great emotional upheaval. The entire world had been caught up in the war, which was in many cases experienced as a total war and an existential struggle; living in Japan in this period, when anyone could die tomorrow, gave rise to Mishima's will for death, which emerged from his emotional sensitivity as a boy. He recalled wartime in this way: "Not to mention my own unpredictable survival, that time when the fate of the whole country hung in the balance was a rare era in which my view of apocalypse as a single person coincided perfectly with that of the whole society" (Mishima 2003f, vol. 32, 278). With the focus on the all-encompassing war, the literary and critical worlds in Japan were unable to operate properly, and they did not provide Mishima, as a budding writer, with any education or socialization. As a result, he lived an idiosyncratic literary life, in which he read as much classical Japanese literature as he wanted while still indulging in contemporary preoccupations like reading the work of Raymond Radiguet, thus following his own aesthetic whims.

However, the reality of the post-war period did not allow Mishima to isolate himself any longer in his own world of literature. The defeat in war had made him realize that the writers he loved, "Radiguet, Wilde, Yeats, and Japanese classics," had become "out of date" (Mishima 2003f, vol. 32, 282); from about the year 1949, he began to reform his style of writing. Mishima said this change occurred with the transition from emotional life to intelligent life (Mishima 2003d, vol. 29, 246). During those days, his authorial role model was Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922), the literary giant of the Meiji era:

Mori Ōgai never appealed to emotions in any respect. Since I despised my own sentimentalism, I found myself increasingly attracted towards Mori Ōgai's attitude that scorns sentiment, his overwhelming cool-headedness, great intellectual pride and the realism hiding behind it, as well as the enormous serenity, and so on. This may have meant that I couldn't even hope to resist the dangerous and fierce current of the post-war time by merely holding on to the charms of Radiguet. (Mishima 2003c, vol. 29, 183)

This quote reveals Mishima's attempt to imitate the writing style of Mori Ōgai, which can indeed be characterized as one of cool-headedness and intellectual pride. Mishima's post-war enthusiasm for Ōgai reveals that, at a time when every known value was inverted, he needed to cleave to a strong rationality to resist this new reality, where free discussion of various artistic philosophies was no longer banned but where any idea could be casually discarded if it did not fit into then-current orthodoxies or social conditions. The time in which one could indulge in Japanese classics and romanticism had disappeared with the bitter loss of the war, and because of Mishima's sentimental nature, he did not fit comfortably into the

spirit of the post-war era. As a result, he came to reject his sentimental side and strove to become an artist of his time, arming himself with an iron rationality. This question of intellect versus sensibility found its place in his theory of art: influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, 1872; Nietzsche 2008), which he read during the war, Mishima came to feel that the unification of dualized concepts—the Apollonian and the Dionysian—was the essence of art.¹³

Slowly, I came to think that the absence of either of the two elements, intellect and emotions in literature—that is, as Nietzsche puts it, the Apollonian and the Dionysian—cannot result in the ideal form of art. So I now dislike the romanticism of wartime, and at the same time regard classicism without any romantic impulse to be quite dull; looking back on it now, the popular literary works during wartime, such as Paul Bourget's novels, are the product of dry intellect, and hence I came to know precisely that those things do not possess any power as a work of art. I gradually realized that what formed the basis of Radiguet's cool and collected art was his resistance against the romantic emotions of his boyhood. It felt as though I had discovered the secret of art from within the word "resistance." (Mishima 2003c, vol. 29, 183)

From the above, one can gather that as a person who survived a time of war, during which the personal will to die was closely connected to and subsumed by political and military events, Mishima needed a strong rational faculty that would never be defeated by romanticism in order to live through the post-war period as a writer; therefore, he showed an interest in the Apollonian as a way to resist his own romantic sentiments. Within *The Birth of Tragedy* he found a new way of understanding rationality in art, which then naturally led to his interest in classical Greek art. It was after Mishima completed *Kamen no Kokuhaku* 仮面の告白 (*Confessions of a Mask*) in 1949 (Mishima 2000) that he began to explore Western classicism. In particular, his trip to Greece in 1951 had a crucial influence on the formation of his classical tendencies (Nagayoshi 1993, 26–27):

The spell of bright art that I cannot resist began to dawn within me once again. Something like Mozart, for instance, to speak in terms of music, or Stendhal, in terms of fiction; and beyond all of them, there existed Greek art. Still I think my appreciation of Greek art was based upon a Nietzschean way of thinking, yet it touched my heart to see that things like merriness, which allows no shadow to be cast from whatever angle you look, and perfect cool-headedness, in some cases gaiety, cheeriness, and youth, are the things that embrace within them the most enigmatic aspects, and not only within their appearance. . . . It felt as though within these trivial surface movements of humans or drawings on a surface exposed

¹³ Famously, in Nietzsche's conception, the Apollonian is the world of "dreams," which gives rise to the imagination and possesses the discipline and clarity of rational form. In contrast, the Dionysian is the world of "intoxication," in which people lose the ability of moderation. This moderation is what Apollo, as an ethical god, demands of people, while Mishima too thinks it reasonable to refrain from Dionysian ecstasy. On the relationship between Mishima and Nietzsche, Tasaka has discussed the clash of Apollonian and Dionysian in Mishima's transition from romanticism to classicism, which influenced Mishima's own life, as well as his works (1985, 80). For more information on Mishima and Nietzsche, see also Saitō (1974) and Tasaka (1970).

to sunlight, things like the horror and darkness of human existence were unveiled. (Mishima 2003c, vol. 29, 184)

That Mishima was looking at Greek art from a Nietzschean perspective implies that he was studying it using his interpretation of the dualistic approach proposed in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

As a result of his reading of Nietzsche, Mishima longed to write works in a classical mode, a longing that was also a hope to break from the conventions of modern Japanese novels and dramas, which at the time mostly emphasized realism through confession. The 1950s also saw the development of the poetic drama movement in Japan, which formed part of the “three-dimensionality literature” movement. The trigger for this development was the introduction around this time of works by T. S. Eliot, who had initiated the poetic drama movement in the West.¹⁴ Due to such Western influences, many Japanese novelists, playwrights, and poets attempted to implement the formal aspects of poetry in drama, a feature that can also be found in Greek tragedies. Mishima joined the Kumo no Kai 雲の会 (Cloud Society), which was associated with the Poetic Drama Movement. Many people who participated in this movement had an interest in Japanese Noh plays as a form of poetic drama, including Mishima. Therefore, one can surmise that *Five Modern Noh Plays* may have been created as a modern expression of poetic drama on the basis of the form and subject matter of the medieval Noh play, and that Mishima’s Nietzschean perspective on Greek tragedy as representative of Western classicism would have played a part in his achievement of this goal.

In the original play *Sotoba Komachi*, both the proximity of and the conflict between dualistic concepts are portrayed. Mishima’s reading of Nietzsche alerted him to the dualism which he was able to discover within *Sotoba Komachi*,¹⁵ and he adopted the method of reversing the meanings of conflicting concepts (life and death, beauty and ugliness, etc.) within the characters’ inner selves in the development of his own play.

Furthermore, the depiction of the old woman and poet in Mishima’s play directly reflects Nietzsche’s concept of the Apollonian and Dionysian. The poet secretly yearns for the beautiful world of the lovers while watching them sitting on the park bench, but at the same time he is drunk and overwhelmed by sorrow, believing himself isolated from them, and thus refers to himself as a “poet doomed to be forgotten.” Driven by the pain and insecurity he experiences in the real world, he is intoxicated by the effect of the dream; this image corresponds to his falling into the world of “the Dionysian.” According to *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian

¹⁴ In the April 1950 edition of *Modern Literature*, there was a discussion of Western poetic dramas by T. S. Eliot and others in “About Poetic Drama” by Nakamura Shin’ichirō and “Poetic Drama’s Potential” by Uchimura Naoya.

¹⁵ This dualism is not the same as that of the Apollonian and the Dionysian; rather, it refers to such opposing ideas as life and death. Mishima explained the difference between European and Japanese culture in terms of duality as follows: “A dualistic Greek was established by the appearance of Nietzsche. The most essential influence I received from Europe is this dualism and it is rooted in my thinking. Japanese people tend not to think dualistically” (Mishima 2004, 769). Mishima developed the idea of a dualism that is at the same time connected to and in conflict with Nietzsche’s concepts of the Apollonian and Dionysian.

destroys individual principles and make one feel the common psychology of the crowd. The poet, surrounded by loving couples, felt an individual emotion of loneliness, but as he becomes enraptured by Dionysian ecstasy he experiences the same emotions as the lovers. In particular, he becomes trapped in ecstasy through the basic Dionysian act of dancing: "The two begin to dance" (Mishima 2008, 19):

In the Dionysian dithyramb, all the symbolic faculties of man are stimulated to the highest pitch of intensity; something never before experienced struggles towards expression, the annihilation of the veil of Maya,¹⁶ unity as the spirit of the species, even of nature. Now the world of nature is to be expressed in symbols; a new world of symbols is necessary, a symbolism of the body for once, not just the symbolism of the mouth, but the full gestures of dance, the rhythmic movement of all the limbs. Then the other symbolic forces will develop, particularly those of music, suddenly impetuous in rhythm, dynamism, and harmony. (Nietzsche 2008, 26)

Dionysian ecstasy, in which everything is merged into harmony through bodily movements and music, is the poet's mindset as he moves towards death. His acclaim for Komachi's great beauty shows that he is trapped inside a world of aesthetic sensation that is wholly subjective, and held by an artistic experience of endless admiration until the very moment of death:

POET

I'll tell you, Komachi. (*He takes her hand; she trembles.*) You are beautiful, the most beautiful woman in the world. Your beauty will not fade, not in ten thousand years.

OLD WOMAN

You'll regret saying such things.

POET

Not I.

OLD WOMAN

You are an idiot. I can already see the mark of death between your eyebrows.

POET

I don't want to die.

OLD WOMAN

I tried so hard to stop you.

POET

My hands and feet have become cold . . . I'll meet you again, I'm sure, in a hundred years, at the same place.

OLD WOMAN

A hundred years more to wait! (Mishima 2008, 27–28)

Here, the old woman takes the role of a guide who leads the poet out of his Dionysian fetters into the fictional world: in fact, into an Apollonian dream world

¹⁶ Term from Indian philosophy appropriated by Schopenhauer and thence by Nietzsche. The veil of Maya is the deceptive world of human perception, whose relationship to any underlying reality is uncertain (Nietzsche 2008, 137).

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of her own creation, where she becomes a beautiful woman and symbol of reason. Although she is attracted to the ecstasy of love that the young poet experiences, it is precisely because of the depth of her attraction that she fights all the more desperately to suppress that ecstasy and survive. In the vision of the past, the poet assured the old woman of her unchanging beauty, and now, relying on that assurance, she wishes to live through eternity, by virtue of her reason and strength:

POLICEMAN

His body is still warm.

OLD WOMAN

That proves he must have just stopped breathing.

POLICEMAN

That much I know without having to ask you. I was asking you when he came here.

OLD WOMAN

About half an hour ago, I suppose. He was drunk when he came and he started making advances to me.

POLICEMAN

Advances to you? Don't make me laugh.

OLD WOMAN

(*indignantly*) What's so funny about that? It's the most likely thing in the world. (29)

That the dualism of the poet and the crone in *Sotoba Komachi* was constructed on the basis of *The Birth of Tragedy* gives a new cast to the emotional turmoil that Mishima experienced under the exceptional circumstances of the post-war era. That is, the reversal of dualistic ideas found in the play as the time shifts from the Meiji era to the post-war era symbolizes the rapid changing of the age, and at the same time the emotional conflict Mishima faced. The ball at Rokumei Hall and the character of the poet, respectively, reflect the atmosphere of the time before the loss of the war, with a tendency toward romanticism in response to the sense of impending death, and the image of Mishima himself. More precisely, as mentioned above, for Mishima, Rokumei Hall is the place that represents the romance of Meiji culture. The poet's death by romantic intoxication in this period setting shows that he is unable to live through the post-war period as an artist. In contrast to him, Mishima and the old woman resist the urge toward romanticism, which is emotional and brings chaos, and move toward a logical and orderly Apollonian aesthetic. Indeed, that Mishima portrayed his preferred model of an artist as a cool-headed old woman, who resists the rapture of emotion, indicates that he intended to highlight and privilege the Apollonian qualities that Nietzsche described in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In other words, his image of the artist was that of a dispassionate person who had to live through the cultural and aesthetic loss and the pervasive vulgarity associated with post-war Japan.

Thus, while before World War II ended, Mishima was invested in romanticism and longed for death, after Japan's defeat in the war, he felt he needed to become a more rational artist. His modernization of *Sotoba Komachi* expresses this need. This implies that he believed that the duality of Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian, analogous to what he saw in the medieval Noh play, could reflect his change. Komachi in the modern play, rational and dispassionate, embodies

these ideal characteristics of the post-war artist. However, Mishima could not maintain his ideal image as an artist for long; around 1954, he again began to lean toward the Dionysian and started to notice the resurgence of a sensibility that could not be controlled by the intellect.

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