

A LADY'S RECKONING: TORTURE, EROTICISM, AND SALVATION IN THE NOH PLAY *SHIKIMI TENGU*

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The Noh play *Shikimi tengu*, written at the time of shifting conventions in Noh playwriting, focuses on the karmic retribution of the infamous *Genji monogatari* antagonist Lady Rokujō. Her suffering and potential redemption is framed by the motif of *tengu*—humanoid-avian creatures, variedly likened to goblins, monsters, or demons—mirroring narratives of Buddhist masters tested on their understanding of the doctrine or punished for their conceit. The following essay explores how these two narratives (one implicit, one explicit) converge in the play and create a unique discursive schema to address the religious and social underpinnings of the play in unexpected ways, complicating the notions of Buddhist salvation within the Noh. Namely, while exposing (and punishing) Rokujō's female sensuality and corporeality is supposed to bring about rejection of the material and corporeal desire, it seems to elicit a voyeuristic pleasure at the punishment that she gets. In this reading, *Shikimi tengu* ultimately challenges and subverts both the exercised Noh's theatrical conventions and the salvific project of its ritual and textual foundations.

Keywords: Lady Rokujō, Noh, gender, sexuality, enlightenment, *tengu* Noh plays

1. Introduction

The Noh play *Shikimi tengu* (榊天狗, *Tengu among the Anise*) focuses on the karmic retribution of Lady Rokujō, the infamous antagonist of *Genji monogatari* (源氏物語, *The Tale of Genji*), an eleventh-century tale about the courtly intrigue and amorous exploits of its eponymous hero, authored by a lady of the court known as Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973–c. 1014). For her earthly attachments, Rokujō is condemned to suffer grizzly torment at the hands of *tengu* (天狗)—humanoid-avian

creatures, variedly likened to goblins, monsters, or demons—who expose her to consuming flames, only to reconstitute her human body and repeat the process.

The play opens to an unnamed *yamabushi* (山伏),¹ a mountain ascetic from Kumano Shrine visiting the Shikimi Field by Mt. Atago. As he meditates on the beauty of his surroundings, he is interrupted by the appearance of a noble-looking lady picking *shikimi* (榧, “Japanese star anise”) for a Buddhist offering. The priest is curious about the lone appearance of what seems to be a high-born lady and inquiries about her circumstances. Through her enigmatic retort, it becomes clear that she is the spirit of Lady Rokujō. She intimates that, for the sin of pride over her beauty and knowledge of the *Lotus Sutra*, she was reborn into a demonic realm of a Buddhist hell and tortured by the *tengu*. Leading into the second act, the scenery transforms as the *tengu* gather at a mansion in the Sixth Ward (六条院 Rokujōin), ostensibly the former home of Lady Rokujō. There, her punishment is depicted in a prolonged scene of gruesome torture, led by the legendary fearsome *tengu* Tarōbō. The play concludes implying that Rokujō’s torment is to continue into eternity.

The play is a strikingly unusual rendering of Lady Rokujō’s fate, as direct references to the familiar *Genji monogatari* are virtually non-existent. Moreover, her suffering and potential redemption are framed by the medieval motif of *tengu*, mirroring popular narratives of celebrated Buddhist masters tested on their understanding of the doctrine or punished for their sins of pride and conceit. The way in which these two narratives (one implicit, one explicit) converge in the play poses a number of questions. Namely, what is the meaning of the gruesome depiction of Rokujō’s torture, and how is it juxtaposed with her characterization harkening back to the implied *Genji monogatari* backdrop? How is the relationship between the protagonist, her tormentors, and the observer of the scene structured through the medium of Noh, and what does that say about the nature of the sufferer, the spectator, and the punisher?

I argue that the interplay of the two narrative frameworks complicates and subverts the expected outcomes of the traditional Noh conventions—that is, aiming for Buddhist enlightenment—by rendering ambiguous the ultimate identities of the agent, the catalyst, and the achiever of the Buddhist salvation. Furthermore, I propose a reading of the scene of Lady Rokujō’s retribution as a torture-as-erotic-spectacle which invites and rebuffs the audience’s gaze, and—while overtly denying her enlightenment—covertly provides ways to reclaim her agency.

¹ A practitioner of the Japanese combinatory ascetic practice of Shugendō (修験道). The practice is known for combining elements from Buddhism, Shintō, and Daoism, and is associated with mountain asceticism.

2. Research background

In her recent study on the meanings and readings of concepts such as “body,” “woman,” and “desire,” Rajyashree Pandey (2017, 29) contends:

Misogyny, subjection, passivity, complicity, agency, rebellion, and resistance: these terms have now become integral to the repertoire that allows us to formulate the “woman question.” Likewise, it is “woman” that has become the axis around which the terms body, sex, eroticism, and gender [...] now revolve. These categories I have sought to argue are modern inventions and have a particular history that is rooted in Western thought. However, to the degree that they have now become part of our common sense, we cannot dispense with them altogether, for the questions we wish to ask of texts that belong to another time and place are inevitably driven by our own preoccupations.

Therefore, any investigation seeking to employ such concepts necessitates careful considerations of what they mean and how they are read in their own respective contexts. In the case of *Shikimi tengu*, this means taking into account medieval Japanese literary tropes, as well as the Buddhist and non-Buddhist Japanese worldviews operating at the time.

Bernard Faure has offered indispensable studies on gender and sexuality in Buddhism, particularly in his two seminal volumes *The Red Thread* (1998) and *Power of Denial* (2003). In them, he explores the internal Buddhist logic that informs views of sexuality and desire and a kind of reification of transgression in Mahayana Buddhism through the doctrines of Emptiness and Non-dualism. Diana Paul’s *Women in Buddhism* (1985) discusses Mahayana attitudes towards enlightenment for women (the possibility or lack thereof), whereas Liz Wilson writes about *Charming Cadavers* (1996), tackling the issues of visions of tormented female bodies displayed to men’s (and women’s) eyes as cautionary tales of dangers of desire and inevitability of impermanence. Wilson’s views of sexuality, desire, voyeurism, and conflation of pleasure and torture in the Buddhist contexts, inspired my own analysis of these topics, as they refer to *Shikimi tengu*.

Taking Pandey’s cautionary stance, my own approach draws on studies in classical and medieval Japanese literature with a particularly feminist bent, such as those by Pandey herself, Tonomura Hitomi, and Doris G. Bargen among others. These studies place under scrutiny relationships between coercion, courtship, and sex, as well as how those are negotiated in the very constructions of gender and body, and how they are related to subjectivity and agency in the Japanese pre-modern context. Discussions of pain and pleasure, as they pertain to premodern Japanese literature, are heavily influenced by the Buddhist frameworks and concepts of desire, suffering, and attachment. Hellish visions of torture are therefore

closely related to the idea of retribution and the “working out” of bad karma (fruits of action rooted in ignorant desire) incurred throughout one’s lifetime.

Finally, to explore the concepts of “looking” and “observing” and how those relate to body, agency, and gender, I want to examine a particular kind of male gaze and voyeurism through the concept of *kaimami* (垣間見, “peeping through the fence”), the literary trope of men secretly gazing at women at their leisure, which became one of the most recognizable erotic tropes in premodern Japanese literature. I argue that in *Shikimi tengu* there is an inversion of the *kaimami* trope of sorts; namely, what is being observed is not the expected charming erotically suggestive sight, but the torture and pain of a woman.

3. The “new style” and *tengu* plays

Originating from early folk performances and ritual practices, Noh in its most well-known form was developed in the fourteenth century by Kan’ami (c. 1333–c. 1384) and Zeami (c. 1363–c. 1443), a father and son pair of actors and playwrights. For their storylines, Noh plays relied on Japanese and Chinese classics, poetry, folk tales, or historical events, while their librettos were replete with direct quotations, references, and allusions. This intertextuality of Noh drama enabled the playwrights to productively interweave varied themes and motifs with familiar subject matter to create a unique discursive schema, within which seemingly disparate characters and tropes were allowed to coexist and interact.

The play *Shikimi tengu* is dated to the fifteenth century and is attributed to On’ami.² It was revised by Kanze Motoakira³ in the late eighteenth century and, having fallen off the repertory for a period of time, was revived in the new millennium (Tamura 2014, 199). The play is a precursor of what Miyake Akiko (1984) termed “new style” (新風 *shinpū*),⁴ which emerged towards the end of the Muromachi period (1336–1573). At the time, there was a marked shift in Noh playwriting away from the emphasis on elegance of dance and movement (the recognizable hallmark of Zeami’s style informed by the principle of *yūgen*),⁵ and

² On’ami (1398–1467) was a Noh actor and playwright of the Kanze school, more prominently known for his acting. He was the grandson of Kan’ami and the nephew of Zeami. Kanze school was founded by Kan’ami Kiyotsugu (c.1333–c.1384). After receiving the support of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), it remained supported by the ruling shoguns well into the Early Modern period. Under the tutelage of Kan’ami’s son Zeami Motokiyo (c. 1363–c. 1443), it produced some of the most well-known and beloved Noh plays.

³ Kanze Motoakira (1722–1774) was a Noh actor and playwright of the Kanze school.

⁴ Miyake Akiko (1984) first coined the term to refer to this shift in the transition from the early to late Muromachi. For the traditional history of development of Noh, see Yokomichi and Amano (1987).

⁵ *Yūgen* (幽玄) is an aesthetic concept referring to the mysterious beauty and depth that Zeami

towards prioritizing narration and action. The plays were characterized by fast movement, quick changes, lessened focus on sophistication of poetry and prose, thus foreshadowing some of the characteristics associated with Kabuki, the emblematic genre of the Early Modern theater. These interventions could have partly been the result of an effort to cater to the growing and diversifying audience at the time, who were replacing the diminishing traditional patronage by the shogunal court and aristocracy. In line with their tastes, the new patrons wanted to see more dynamic stories and bombastic productions being staged, including local legends and customs, and tales featuring popular heroes and heroines of literature and lore.⁶ As well as being audience-pleasing, the new style liberated authors from the shackles of the ossified structuring and staging of the early Muromachi Noh and opened up new avenues of expression. It is important to emphasize, of course, that this in no way meant a wholesale revolution in the genre and the playwrights remained bound by the overall Noh convention, but the move was extensive enough to register a noticeable change.

Yamanaka (1996) argues that plays featuring *tengu* in particular are representative of this style and period, a claim bolstered by the fact that there are no known *tengu* plays written by Zeami, or any of his contemporaries. In fact, *Shikimi tengu* (along with *Kurama tengu*) is the earliest recorded *tengu* play. Being the earliest, *Shikimi tengu* was on the cusp of the transition towards the *shinpū* style, and so retained the characteristics of the traditional *mugen* Noh (夢幻能, “dream Noh” or “fantasy Noh”)⁷ worldview, complete with the appearance of supernatural beings, bending of boundaries of time and space, and an overall dream-like quality of the production. On the other hand, innovations emblematic of *shinpū* are clearly identifiable in the play. One of the more significant changes in the new style, for example, had to do with the traditional casting and role distribution,⁸ the increasing role of the supporting *waki* and *aikyōgen* characters in the plays, as opposed to the *shite*-centered Zeami approach (particularly associated with his *mugen* Noh plays). This pivot allowed the playwrights to explore and center multiple voices in

adopted from *waka* (和歌) poetry and made into one of the main aesthetic guiding principles of Noh. The style is characterized by paucity of means, subtlety of expression, and an emphasis on symbolic rather than representational expression on stage (and in the text).

⁶ For an extensive discussion on late Muromachi theater, see Lim (2012).

⁷ *Mugen* Noh refers to the category of plays which take place in a supernatural setting and are characterized by appearance of ghosts or demons. Typically, the first of the two acts will end with the sun going down, implying that the second act takes place in a dream world. It usually ends at the break of dawn with the ghost or the supernatural being disappearing. Whether the experience was dream or not is deliberately left ambiguous.

⁸ *Shite* (仕手) is the main protagonist of the play, while the *waki* (脇) is its counterpart. In *mugen* Noh, the *shite* typically transforms into a supernatural being in the second act. *Aikyōgen* (間狂言) is a supporting role and can perform a variety of functions.

their casting, as well as complicate the established relational poles between the protagonists. Exploring the alternative takes on the role distribution and the characters' viewpoint, as we shall see, will become an important plot point in *Shikimi tengu*, and crucial for its interpretation.

4. *Tengu* and Japanese religion

Creatures known as *tengu* are depicted as humanoid beings with a beak in place of a nose and a bird's wings and feet. This image was informed over time from a host of traditional Chinese ideas combined with local Japanese beliefs and lore. In her study of *Tenguzōshi* (天狗草子, *The Book of Tengu*), the thirteenth-century set of seven *tengu*-themed narrative picture scrolls (絵巻 *emaki*), Wakabayashi Haruko (2012) traces the epistemological transformation that *tengu* undergo in the Japanese religious tradition. Initially conceptualized as malevolent entities in the Japanese traditional beliefs, in the medieval period *tengu* were coopted within the Buddhist worldview, and in that context were variously depicted as defending or challenging Buddhism. Some of these depictions present *tengu* as vengeful ghosts, embodiments of temptation that taunt Buddhist monks, or even as transformed corrupt monks who cannot achieve enlightenment. As such, according to Wakabayashi, *tengu* are a manifestation of *ma* (魔; Skt. *māra*), the personification of the Buddhist concept of evil. This evil "does not necessarily refer to moral evil (*aku*) but rather to temptations of desire and passion that hinder one from attaining enlightenment" (Wakabayashi 2012, xv). Furthermore, Abe Yasurō (2002, 212) argues that *Tenguzōshi*, in fact, is responsible for establishing the idea of the "realm of evil" (魔界 *makai*) and conceptualizing *tengu* as demonic beings overseeing this realm.

Rather than embodying "evil" (temptation, desire) itself, *tengu* sometimes appear in literature as wise and deeply knowledgeable about the doctrines of Buddhism. In numerous tales and other media (including the Noh plays), *tengu* confront wayward monks, test them on their true understanding of the Dharma, and tempt them. This is not to lead the monks astray, but rather to expose their deep ignorance, pride, and delusion, and have them acknowledge it. Keller Kimbrough (2012, 277) suggests that *tengu* tales "can be seen to function on a symbolic level by depicting Buddhist and psychological abstractions as external, concrete phenomena, allowing audiences the privilege of visualizing the invisible, or seeing the unseen." In other words, they embody one's own seed of *ma* and, by forcing one to face it, lead them back onto the path of enlightenment.

While the definitive conceptualization of *tengu* was cemented with *Tenguzōshi*, the preceding tradition, such as other narrative scrolls and medieval anecdotal literature (説話 *setsuwa*), was crucial in paving the way for constructing their

unique identity. A lineage of *tengu* narratives, drawing on the early motifs from Japanese folk traditions, is found in different *setsuwa* collections, such as *Konjaku monogatari shū* (今昔物語集, *The Tales of Times Now Past*), *Uji shūi monogatari* (宇治拾遺物語, *A Collection of Tales from Uji*), and others. The depictions presented in those collections are closer to the character of *oni* (鬼, “demon”) characterized by bloodthirst, greed, and lustfulness. In some of the stories, it is difficult to distinguish whether the villain is an *oni* or a *tengu* based solely on the characteristics ascribed to them, and in the case of different versions of the same narrative they could even be interchangeable.

The introduction of Buddhist motifs created some provocative combinations; sometimes with a pointed message, and sometimes as a result of a fortunate coincidence of confusing different stories or different variations.⁹ In an attempt to disentangle the nuances of the respective depictions and their deeper meaning in *setsuwa* literature, Kurushima (2009, 26) distinguishes between the “non-Buddhist” (非仏法の *hibuppōteki*) *oni*, and the “anti-Buddhist” (反仏法の *hanbuppōteki*) *tengu*. The subtleties in distinction between *oni* and *tengu*, while an important and worthwhile discussion, is not the topic of this chapter and deserves a more in-depth treatment. While not wholly unproblematic, Kurushima’s formulation is helpful for its framing of the *tengu* as a distinctly Japanese Buddhist phenomenon, which becomes an important feature when casting *tengu* in the Noh, and distinguishing those pieces from *oni* (“demon”) plays, even when they shared the same categorization.¹⁰ As a part of an enduring tradition, and having the literary pedigree and the religious prestige, *tengu* lent themselves as excellent raw material for dramatization on the Noh stage, especially as new movements in playwriting were developing, and fresh and exciting innovations were brewing.

5. Encounter with a lady: fresh herbs and death flowers

As with the great majority of Noh plays, the plot of *Shikimi tengu* is informed by a number of *honzetsu* (本説, “base texts”). Plucking elements from these different texts and placing them in a new shared context, while retaining their respective

⁹ For an extensive discussion on *tengu* in *setsuwa*, see Origuchi and Komatsu (2000); for an extensive discussion on *tengu* in *Konjaku monogatari shū*, see Kurushima (2009).

¹⁰ The five categories of Noh plays (五番立 *gobandate*: god plays, warrior plays, women or “wig” plays, miscellaneous plays, demon plays) were codified at some point in the Edo period (1600–1868). When performed as entertainment in an official setting (e.g., before the shogun), the full program would consist of five plays, one category each, plus the *Okina* piece and four *Kyōgen* comical plays. The fifth category is named “demon” (鬼 *oni*), but it is a broader category including other supernatural and monstrous creatures, and *tengu* plays are placed in this category. In the cycle of a day’s performance, demon plays are performed last and are, therefore, also known as *kiri* Noh (切能), or the “cut-off” plays.

backgrounds (and all the “baggage” that comes with it), is a highly creative rhetorical move which, when done right, opens an abundance of possibilities for character-building and narrative development. In order to enable the different elements (such as familiar characters from different narratives, well-known locales, etc.), to interact—and to interact believably—framing had to be built where all of the elements, however disparate, would not seem out of place. In *Shikimi tengu*, the space in which the play takes place becomes the node at which the mobilized literary tropes converge, and the locus where the *yamabushi*, *tengu* Tarōbō, and Lady Rokujō can meet. The spatial and visual clues throughout the play build a network of associations through which the audience can, not only seamlessly imagine the shared world of the characters, but draw on the knowledge and understanding of their background to ascribe new meaning and significance to the characters’ interactions.

In his introductory travel sequence (道行 *michiyuki*), the *yamabushi* references a number of toponyms which for the audience at the time would evoke well-established associations with both Shugendō and the *tengu*, namely the Shikimi Field, Mt. Atago, and Kumano Shrine.

次第「しきみが原の道分けて、／＼、愛宕の山に参らん。ワキ詞「本山三熊野の山伏にて候。我未だ愛宕櫓が原に分け入らず候ふ程に、只今思ひ立ちて候。歌「西山や嵯峨野の嵐音寒き、／＼、音も小倉のつゞき、行方をさして行く程に、其名も高き愛宕山、櫓が原に着きにけり、／＼。(Kochu yōkyoku sōshō 1987, 127)¹¹

Shidai: Shikimi ga Hara no michiwakete, Shikimi ga Hara no michiwakete, Atago no Yama ni mairan. Honsanzan Kumano no yamabushi nite sōrō. Waga mada Atago Shikimi ga Hara ni wakete irazu sōrō hodo ni, tadaima omoidachite sōrō.

Uta: Nishiyama ya Sagano no arashi oto samuki, Nishiyama ya Sagano no arashi oto samuki, oto mo Ogura no tsuzuki, yukue wo sashite yuku hodo ni, sono na mo takaki Atago Yama. Shikimi ga Hara ni tsuki ni kerī, Shikimi ga Hara ni tsuki ni kerī.

Yamabushi: Making my way through the fields of *shikimi*. Making my way through the fields of *shikimi*. I am going to Atago Mountain. I am a *yamabushi* from Kumano Shrine. Having never gone through Shikimi Field by Atago Mountain, I have made up my mind to do it now.

Chorus: The sound of icy wind at Nishiyama and Sagano. The sound of icy wind at Nishiyama and Sagano. With the wind echoing still on Ogura as I follow my course towards the illustrious Atago Mountain, I have arrived at the Shikimi Field. I have arrived at the Shikimi Field.

¹¹ The libretto used for translation in this essay is from *Kochu yōkyoku sōshō*. I also consulted three additional versions from *Mikan yōkyokushū zoku*. All translations from the play are my own.

Janet Goff (1991, 130) points out that *tengu*, who were believed to dwell in the mountains, became identified with *yamabushi*. Goff further suggests that this connection explains the casting of the *waki* in *Shikimi tengu* as a practitioner from Kumano Shrine, a mountain complex associated with Shugendō. Mt. Atago is also home to a cult in which the *tengu* figure prominently. The deity of the mountain is Atago Daigongen (愛宕大権現) and at his shrine “a perpetual fire was maintained in order to worship the *tengu*” (Bouchy 1987, 257). The mountain is also associated with traditional beliefs in spirits and funerary practices of discarding the dead in the foothills, as well as rites of fire purification. The polyvalent liminality of the space—Buddhist/Shintō, the living/the dead, sacred/polluted—recommended the locale as a fitting site for a Buddhist hell or purgatory as staged in the play. Furthermore, at the *oku no in* (奥の院, “the upper shrine”) on Mt. Atago, Tarōbō himself was enshrined, representing the destructive aspect of the deity (荒神 *aragami*) (Bouchy 1987, 257). Beyond the religious tradition, Tarōbō, the great *tengu* of Mt. Atago, is a well-known character from tales, picture scrolls, as well as another Noh play, *Kurumazō* (車増, *The Handcart Priest*) also set in the Shikimi Field of Mt. Atago, where he uses his Buddhist wisdom to test and tempt a *yamabushi*.

While it is clear how the setting of the play relates to the *yamabushi* (the *waki*) and the *tengu*, the connection to *Genji monogatari* seems tenuous at best (Goff 1991, 130–132). Its allusions to and connections with other *Genji* plays are much stronger, however, and help successfully weave the Lady Rokujō narrative into the plot. The *yamabushi*'s *michiyuki* invokes the fields of Saga, the site of Prince Genji's visit to Rokujō at the Nonomiya Shrine, while the image of her picking *shikimi* flowers in the field references a similar scene from another Noh play, *Nonomiya* (野々宮), which dramatizes that episode. If these references, however, prove too subtle even for the purportedly knowledgeable Noh audience, the ghost unmistakably reveals herself as Rokujō, and removes any doubt as to her identity.

今は何をかつゝむべき。我は六条の御息所なるが、我一天の虚空として、美女のほまれ慢心となり、又一乗妙経を片時もおこたる事なければ、是又かへつて慢心となり、二の心のさはりゆえ、魔道に落ちて天狗にとられ、この愛宕山をすみかとせり。(Kochu yōkyoku sōshō 1987, 128)

Ima wa nani wo ka tsutsumu beki. Waga wa Rokujō no Miyasudokoro naru ga, ware itten no kokū to shite, bijo no homare honshin to nari, mata ichijō myōgyō wo henshi mo okotaru koto nakereba, kore mata kaetsute manjin to nari, futatsu no kokorosawari yue, madō ni ochite, tengu ni torare, kono atagoyama wo sumika to seri.

What should I hide now? I am Lady Rokujō. Insignificant under Heaven as I am, I succumbed to conceit over my famed beauty. Moreover, as

I have not for a moment neglected the *Lotus Sutra*, it also fuels my pride.
Due to these two deficiencies of my heart, I have fallen into the realm
of demons, and captured by tengu, Atago Mountain became my home.

Lady Rokujō has earned renown as one of the most popular characters from *Genji monogatari*. Her fame (or infamy) is owed to her exciting storyline as well as the traits of the character herself. In the *Genji* lore, she is known as beautiful and sophisticated, but a proud and jealous lover of Genji, whose living spirit (生霊 *ikiryō*) possesses and murders several of Genji's other lovers, casting her, arguably, as the villain of the tale. After the tragic episode (also dramatized on the Noh stage) of possession and death in childbirth of Genji's principal wife Aoi no Ue, Rokujō leaves her home to accompany her daughter, Akikonomu, who had been appointed maiden of the Ise Shrine. Upon returning to the capital several years later, Lady Rokujō dedicates herself to Buddhist activities in order to re-immers herself in the Buddhist teachings (having been estranged from them by living by Ise Shrine complex which forbids Buddhist rituals) and, possibly, to atone for her past transgressions. The play *Shikimi tengu* alludes to this latter aspect of her story, but none of her other, more gruesome, *Genji monogatari* history. It describes Lady Rokujō as an aristocratic lady who is led astray by vanity regarding her beauty and unseemly pride in her devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*.

In the opening of the play, the lonely lady gathering *shikimi* for the offering cuts a pathetic figure, evocative of Rokujō's background as a neglected lover and a dispossessed imperial wife.¹² Women picking fresh herbs (若菜 *wakana*) was a common trope in premodern Japanese literature and poetry, as well as the Noh, signifying vitality and fertility. Referencing the opening scenes of the Noh play *Motomezuka*, in which a coterie of rambunctious young women is found picking *wakana*, Terasaki Etsuko (2002, 43) writes: "Optimism is embodied in abundant natural images, such as the young herbs (*wakana*); [...] in the celebration of the coming of the new year, the anticipation of spring, and the renewal of life; and, most importantly, in images of sexuality." She continues:

Wakana is an important key word generating complex variants in the narrative. For example, the image of sexuality is always encoded in the words *wakana tsumu*. The word *wakana* literally means "young herb," but figuratively stands for a young woman. Consequently, the phrase "plucking the fresh herbs" means to seduce or to deflower a woman.

¹² Prior to the events of the *Tale*, Lady Rokujō, daughter of the highly ranked Minister of the Left, was a consort to the Crown Prince, who unexpectedly died at a young age. By the time we are introduced to the character in the *Tale*, she had lost both her husband and her father, making her position vulnerable in the context of the Heian (794–1185) court society. While she still warrants respect on account of her prior position as the future Empress Consort and her high birth, she no longer has any significant influence or power she could leverage.

At first glance, *Shikimi tengu* follows the familiar trope—Rokujō picking the fragrant *shikimi* flowers, a typical Buddhist offering. However, *shikimi* the plant was also known to be used as an agricultural pesticide, as well as to prevent animals from digging out graves (Small 1996, 337). Therefore, juxtaposed with the common literary image, the *Shikimi tengu* scene is an inversion of the trope: a single forlorn woman plucking, not fresh herbs, but the poisonous and death-associated *shikimi*. This places Rokujō in opposition with what the young women represent, while following the damning associations with Rokujō in the *Genji* lore. She is quite a bit older and a widow, and her love for Genji, as is well known, turns deadly quite literally.

Being a *mugen* Noh play, *Shikimi tengu* follows the standard narrative structure and character outline: a religious figure, frequently a Buddhist priest (*waki*), travels to a well-known place. There he encounters a mysterious person who is then revealed to be a spirit connected to the place (*shite*), trapped in the world of the living due to a residual grudge or attachment. The priest then performs prayers and rites for the repose of the suffering spirit, to help guide them to eventual enlightenment. While following the encounter/reveal paradigm, *Shikimi tengu* does away with other parts of the convention, not least the one concerning the role distribution. The priest to whom Rokujō reveals her true identity has no explicit role in the second act and, instead of receiving placating prayers, her spirit is tortured by demonic creatures with an unabashed gusto. Additionally, depending on the version of the libretto, Rokujō's ghost either shares her role as the *shite* with Tarōbō (in a rather unusual set-up), or is not even cast as the *shite* (as would be expected according to the *mugen* Noh convention), but as *tsure* (連れ), a supporting role, "attached" to the *shite*, Tarōbō.¹³ This shift in the traditional structuring indicates that the lesson taught and enlightenment to be achieved is not directed at Rokujō, the ill-fated ghost, but at the *yamabushi*, the *waki*, who remains an invisible silent spectator all throughout the second act. The play is not therefore a story of the salvation and redemption of Lady Rokujō, but a spectacle of her torture presented to the *yamabushi*. Moreover, the depiction of the torture itself and the exchange witnessed between Rokujō and Tarōbō suggests that the spectacle is not merely staged as a Buddhist lesson, but that there is yet something more at play.

¹³ In the earliest versions of the play, Rokujō is cast as the *shite*. In subsequent versions, Tarōbō was cast as the *shite* with Rokujō as a *shitezure*, or both Rokujō and Tarōbō were cast as the *shite*. In the contemporary revival, the two-*shite* role distribution was applied (Goff 1991; Tamura 2014).

6. A lady in hell

The second act of *Shikimi tengu* opens with a carriage coming down from the skies carrying a raucous party of *tengu*, led by the imposing Tarōbō. He announces that the events are now taking place at the mansion in the Sixth Ward, the scenery appropriated for the Buddhist hell of which they are in charge. Shortly thereafter, the audience is led into the torture scene.

天狗「今に始めぬ御くるしび、一日に三どの餌食とて、熱鉄のかな湯の丸かせ。
シテ「服せんとすれば炎となつて、
天狗「御身をやけば痛はしや。
シテ「叫ばんとすれば聲出でず。
天狗「身心忽ちほのほとなつて、
シテ「五體さながら、
天狗「大紅蓮の、
地「烟の中に絶え絶えと、形はさながら炭竈の、おき火となり給ふ。あらさてこりの姿や。小天狗立ち寄りて、／＼、おき火となれる御身をなづれば、又人のかたちとなつて、たま々生ある姿となるを、大天狗たちよりて、御髪を手にからまいて、一打二打打つと見えしが。みじんの如くに打ちくだきて、嵐に散り行く木の葉のごとく、ばつとちると見えつるが、虚空に答ふる聲ありて、どつと笑ふと聞えしが、有りつるあたごの櫓が原に、影の如くに御息所、影の如くに御息所は、夢まぼろしとぞなりにける。(Kochu yōkyoku sōshō 1987, 129)

Tengu: Ima ni hajimenu on kurushibi, hitohi sando ejiki tote, nettetsu no kanayu no maru kase.

Shite: Bukusen to sureba honō to natsute,

Tengu: Onmi wo yakeba itawashiya.

Shite: Sakeban to sureba koe idezu.

Tengu: Shinjin tachimachi honō to natsute,

Shite: Gotai sanagara,

Tengu: Daiguren no,

Uta: kemuri no naka ni taetae to, katachi ha sanagara suminama no, okibi to nari tamō. Arasate kori no sugata ya. Shōtengu tachiyorite, shōtengu tachiyorite, okibi to nareru onmi wo nadzureba, mata hito no katachi to natsute. tamatama shō aru sugata to naru wo, daitengu tachiyorite, migushi wo te ni kara maite, hitouchi futauchi utsu yo to mieshi ga. Mijin no gotoku ni uchi kudakite, arashi ni chiri yuku ko no ha no gotoku, batsu to chiru to mietsuru ga, kokū ni kotōru koe arite, dotto warō to kikoeshi ga, aritsuru atago no shikimi ga hara ni, kage no gotoku no miyasudokoro, kage no gotoku no miyasudokoro ha, yume maboroshi to nari ni keru.

Tarōbō: The torture that now begins: three times a day, she is fed melted iron and a scorching metal ball.

Rokujō: As I swallow, I turn to flames.

Tarōbō: Your body burning, it is painful.

Rokujō: When I try to cry out, there is no sound.

Tarōbō: Your whole being turns to flames.

Rokujō: My entire body,

Chorus: Just like a giant blood-red fiery lotus flower, grows faint. Amid the smoke, her form, just like glowing embers from a charcoal kiln. She is retribution itself! A lesser *tengu* draws near, a lesser *tengu* draws near, and rubs her body bursting in giant flames, so she takes the human form again. As she momentarily turns back to her living form, the great *tengu* comes by her side and coils her hair around his hand. He raises his iron rod, and while it seems like only one or two blows, her body is crushed into dust, that resembles scattered leaves blown off a tree by a wild wind. The sound of voices sounding off through the void. The roaring laughter is heard, and in the very Shikimi Field of Atago, like a shadow, Lady Rokujō, like a shadow, Lady Rokujō was but a dream.

While most *mugen* Noh plays, in one way or another, tackle the issues of Buddhist suffering and afterlife, few plays present detailed descriptions of torture in a Buddhist hell. Notable examples dealing specifically with torture of women in hell are, the earlier mentioned, *Motomezuka* and *Kinuta*. In the two plays, both female protagonists are punished for a specific crime: in *Motomezuka* for indirectly inspiring the suicide of the young woman's two suitors, and in *Kinuta* for excessive attachment to the woman's husband. Rokujō can, in fact, be charged with causing death and obsessive attachment but neither of these sins are explicitly stated in the play. While her excessive desire for Genji leads her to become a known "murderer" (via possession), this is not cited as the reason for her being born into the *tengu* hell, and the torment described does not align with any specific recognizable event.¹⁴ Instead, the audience is informed, through Rokujō's own words, that she is not punished for what she *did* but for what she *is*—beautiful, defiant, and haughty, and aware and proud of this fact.

Being consumed by fire represents hell's punishment, as well as the sin she is being punished for—burning in the flames of ignorant desire. The imagery of the "burning" Rokujō is a recurring motif in both *Genji monogatari* and the "Genji plays" which feature the character. In the events of the thirty-fifth chapter of the tale, Genji's consort, and the love of his life, Lady Murasaki, is struggling with illness, exacerbated (and, arguably caused) by the fact that she is being possessed by a spirit, which turns out to be Rokujō. Amid the readings of Buddhist scriptures for the unfortunate Murasaki, the spirit of Rokujō voices out:

¹⁴ Typically, the torture is a form of reenactment. For example, in *Motomezuka*, the female protagonist is attacked by iron birds killed in the archery competition between her suitors, and in *Kinuta*, the protagonist is beaten in the way she beat on the fulling block expressing her anger and attachment.

These rites and these noisy scripture readings only surround me with searing flame, and I hear nothing holy in them. That is my torment. (Tyler 2001, 655)

Described this way, she is solidified in the tradition as an embodiment of attachment and Buddhist suffering.

Discussing courtship in classical Japan, Doris G. Borgen (2017, 93) summarizes what is more or less the established position in scholarship about the roots of Rokujō's resentment towards Genji's lovers and his treatment of her:

If Lady Rokujō virtually personifies jealousy, it is largely because of her treatment in Noh plays in later centuries. In *The Tale of Genji* she expresses some envy of Aoi no Ue and Genji's other lovers, but what really motivates Lady Rokujō, as others have noted, is the fact that she is repeatedly humiliated [...].

In analyses of the two referenced episodes of the *Genji*—"Aoi no Ue" and "Yūgao"—named after the two women who both succumb to the possession by the living spirit of Lady Rokujō, scholarship largely places the emphasis on Rokujō's humiliation and injured pride. In the highly dramatic episode of the carriage fight in "Aoi no Ue" chapter, Rokujō is humiliated by Lady Aoi whose men push her carriage out of their way at the Kamo Festival, which she sought to attend incognito, in hopes of catching a glimpse of Genji. Earlier in the tale, when possessing Genji's mysterious lover Yūgao, the apparition disparagingly refers to the unfortunate young woman as a "person of no consequence" (かくことなるなき人 *kakukotonarunaki hito*). It is, therefore, not a stretch to assume that the resentment expressed is about status rather than jealousy over women themselves, or possessiveness over the man.

However, while Murasaki Shikibu's brush follows the genre conventions of the Heian storytelling, she also resists the idiom skillfully and her treatment of Lady Rokujō's character could be the most prominent example of this. Rokujō is a disruptor. She stakes claim to things that are not appropriate for her to desire. She has issues with Genji's lower-ranking lovers, as well as his principal wife. She refuses to stay in her lane, metaphorically and literally—in the aforementioned episode of the carriage fight, she finds herself in the way of her illustrious rival and suffers great ignominy for refusing to move. Furthermore, while much has been made of Rokujō's jealousy being primarily based on feelings of disrespect and broken pride, it cannot be neglected that in the most infamous instances of her *ikiryō*'s crimes of possession and murder, the scenes depicted are highly erotically charged. The expressions of her anger are emphatically corporeal, and she attacks her victims in physically vulnerable states and in the intimacy of their bedchambers (for example, she attacks Yūgao just after she has had sex with Genji and Lady Aoi during and shortly after giving birth, unmistakable evidence of their sexual union).

Description of the torture that she endures in the play is typical of depictions of fiery hells in Buddhist literature, but it is reminiscent particularly of descriptions of torture in the (menstrual) blood-pond hell, from *The Blood Bowl Sutra* (血盆經 *Ketsubonkyō*).¹⁵ In the play, there is no mention of a blood-pond, but the fire and smoke envelop Rokujō's body transformed into a "giant blood-red lotus" (in both Buddhist and Chinese/Daoist tradition, the red lotus flower symbolizes female genitalia).¹⁶ The association with the sutra is particularly pertinent, as the scripture was aimed specifically towards the redemption of women, just as the blood-pond hell was specifically reserved for retribution of women (for the "sin" of being women). In Japan, the scripture came to be widely used for funerary services by the end of the fifteenth century and was in circulation from at least the early 1500s (Meeks 2020b, 1–2), so at the time the play was written it would have been well-known. The *Blood Pond Sutra* was geared, however, towards the salvation of women, which Rokujō is ultimately denied. No one speaks for her and no compassion is accorded to her. There is only "roaring laughter" as her body turns into a pile of dust. Therefore, as suggested above, her torture in the play seems not to be framed as a salvific process for Rokujō, but as an object (or object) lesson to the *yamabushi*.

7. Watching a lady

In her study of the motif of possession in *Genji monogatari*, Barga (1997) casts Lady Rokujō as a figure of resistance who uses possession as a way to reinvest both herself and her victims with agency and a voice, and defy the Heian patriarchy that rendered them powerless and mute. Rather than simply being a wanton malicious woman, Rokujō questions and resists the social structure and gender dynamics that keep her oppressed. Representations of evil (魔 *ma*) are often constructed to explain phenomena that disrupt society. Identifying those who disturb social order as evil (usually challengers or defiers of authority) legitimizes the institution seeking to establish and maintain that order. Evil, as Wakabayashi (2012, xvii) notes, in that sense is a "social as much as a religious construct." Rokujō in the *Genji* tradition challenges that order. Can we not say, then, that her punishment in the play is ostensibly for the sin of vanity, but in truth it is for her sexual and

¹⁵ The *Blood Pond Sutra* is an indigenously East Asian (Chinese) sutra (血盆經 *Xuepenjing*), consolidated between eleventh and twelfth centuries, and popularized in Japan from around the early fifteenth century. It depicts a Buddhist hell-realm where women are born to suffer retribution for karma incurred due to their sex, primarily related to pollution caused by menstruation and childbirth (Meeks 2020a, 2020b). For a more extensive discussion on imagery and conceptualization of Chinese Buddhist hells and purgatories, see Teiser (1994).

¹⁶ For more on this topic, see Lopez (2018).

social forwardness, and the audacity to challenge the status quo? Rokujō, having dared to seize power—Bargen (1997, xx) calls it the “woman’s weapon”—in *Genji monogatari*, in the play gets her comeuppance in the eyes of the established Order by being violated in all possible ways—mentally, physically, sexually. She remains a perpetual lesson, but also a source of *schadenfreude* over absolute ownership over her body, her spirit, her voice, and her salvation.

In Buddhist literature and practice, there is a long tradition of using women’s decaying bodies as objects of meditation to teach lessons about impermanence, and the relationship between desire and suffering. Liz Wilson’s (1996) analysis of literary conventions used in Buddhist hagiographic literature shows women frequently represented as objects of meditation whose sole function in the narratives in which they appear is to lead to the edification of the male subjects who observe them. In Theravada hagiographic literature, male protagonists “become Arhats, or ‘worthy ones’ through viewing dead, dying, or disfigured female bodies” (Wilson 1996, 3). Wilson (1996, 11) continues to discuss how Buddhist texts use unconventional literary methods, such as the blending of erotic and repulsive imagery, to suggest “homologies between carnal pleasure and carnage, bedrooms and battlefield, bliss and bondage—homologies to persuade the sensitive reader or listener of the rapacity of the sex act and the perversity of sexual desire.” Female sensuality and physicality/corporeality is contrasted with Buddhist rejection of the material and corporeal desire. In Japan this trope was known as *fujōkan* (不浄観, “meditation on the impurity of the body”), and emphasized the notion of impermanence, and “rather than creating an unambiguous aversion to all forms of sexual and amorous attachment, it leads to an aestheticized rendition of the evanescence of beauty and love” (Pandey 2005, 197). I suggest, however, that the spectacle of Rokujō’s torture is not a somber Buddhist lesson, but a voyeuristic pleasure at her punishment.

A blurring of the line between Eros and Thanatos permeates the entire *Genji monogatari* due to the dominance of the overarching classical literary aesthetic of *mono no aware* (物の哀れ, “sadness of things”), the bittersweet sensitivity to and appreciation of the impermanence of earthly phenomena. In *Genji monogatari*, this often translates to a near-fetishization of dead and dying women. Haunted by the memory of his own fatally fragile mother, Genji is always moved by the beauty of his lovers the most when they are on the brink of expiring; for example, Yūgao’s frail body exhausted (and eventually defeated) by the possession, or his wife Aoi’s physique wasted away both by her own experience of possession and the pains of the difficult childbirth (which in that time would often end up being fatal for the mother). There is an uncanny parallel and odd mirroring in this view of a tortured woman’s body as stirring emotion and arousal, and the aforementioned meditation on women’s decaying corpses.

Shikimi tengu takes this a step further and, in doing so, completely subverts the motif, as it is not Rokujō's decaying corpse that is on display; rather, the entire process of retributive suffering inflicted on Rokujō's body (and spirit) is exposed in what could be viewed as an act of the ultimate humiliation and violation. Therefore, there is an argument to be made here that Rokujō's tortured body is one such object of meditation, especially considering that the entire event is observed by the *yamabushi*. As concerns the structuring of the scene and the fact that Rokujō, in the scene, is not a lifeless rotting corpse, but an active animate (if not strictly "living") being, described in her corporeality, with her lush hair, this scene is evocative of a different tradition of men looking at women in premodern Japanese literature, the *kaimami*, or the "peeping through the fence" trope that was mentioned above.

Kaimami represents a very intriguing counterpart to the Western concept of the male gaze, where women are being "hypersexualized" (and fetishized) as "passive subjects and objects" (Mulvey 1975, 13) in that it presents a peculiar structuring of the positionality of the observer, the observed (and the one telling about the observing, namely, the narrative voice describing the scene). Bargaen (2017, 57) notes that "[i]n the paradigmatic form of *kaimami*, a male character secretly observes a female character. [...] In other words, in scenes of *kaimami* the observed female character is perceived through the male character who sees her and also through the narrative voice that articulates his vision." The most provocative instances of *kaimami* come, however, from the classical literature authored by women, where the women appropriate the male gaze, or even themselves gaze at men gazing at them, as well as potentially putting themselves on display to be gazed upon, which automatically denies the men setting the conditions of and having the authority over the gaze. While Bargaen (2017, 66) contends that "[i]n *kaimami*, agency resides mainly—if not entirely—in the observer," there could well be agency provided by knowing or expecting that one is being observed. And speaking of agency, let us also not forget that "gazing" is, in a way, at the basis of the sins for which Rokujō is being punished. Her unseemly desire to see (Genji) during the Kamo festival led to the unfortunate encounter with Lady Aoi and the carriage fight, while her living spirit's presence at (i.e., seeing) Genji's love-making with Yūgao led her to possess and kill the young woman.

Referencing Edith Sarra's research, Bargaen (2017, 59) notes that "[Sarra] has suggested that female Heian authors shifted the focus to the women's gaze by 'eliminating what is arguably one of the distinguishing structural features of fictional tales: the mediating figure of the male character as voyeur.'" In her eponymous study, Sarra (1999) has raised some pertinent questions about women creating "fictions of femininity" through female narrators. She asks, "How do we account critically for the fact that the gaze of the hero in the *kaimami* scene frequently

depends on the mediation of feminine narrators and female authors? Who is looking at whom in these scenes?" (Sarra 1999, 26). While the playwrights of Noh were uniformly male, we can recognize the possibility that they have, even if unwittingly, adopted what Sarra calls the "fictions of femininity," or perhaps even appropriated them. In this sense, the very fictional feminine then presents an agency in which the imaginary, "fictional" feminine, created by women themselves, is taken as the "true" feminine.

As expounded above, *kaimami* presents itself as gazing with overtly erotic connotation, so how do we square this with what is going on before the *yamabushi*'s eyes in *Shikimi tengu*? If we look closely at the description of Rokujō's torture, there is a strong undertone of eroticism in the way her torture is presented and in the language used to describe it. Her body is rubbed; Tarōbō coils her hair (a symbol of female beauty and sexual allure) around his hand, and pulls her head back, as he raises an iron rod (a phallic object) towards her; the fire consumes her body transformed into a "huge flaming lotus red as blood," which, as pointed out earlier, was a known metaphor for female genitalia. In order to understand how the torture section in *Shikimi tengu* can be read as an erotic scene, and how Rokujō's and Tarōbō's interaction can be read as an erotic encounter undergirded by desire, it is necessary to disentangle the imagery utilized. To better clarify just how this imagery indeed alludes to an erotic vision, I will draw again on Rajyashree Pandey's discussion to elucidate the coded language referring to the female body, sexuality, and the eroticism utilized in premodern Japanese literature.

8. A lady's body

Given the generic conventions of both Noh and *monogatari* (物語, "tale") as well as classical and medieval Japanese poetry, it is clear why explicit expressions of sexual desire and indulging in it would not be displayed. Pandey (2017, 33) notes that the "decorum" of courtly literature, to which *monogatari* and much of the poetry referenced in Noh belongs, did not mean that there is no sexual activity taking place, but rather that the depictions are given in a literary idiom of ellipsis. Addressing the concept of the body specifically, Pandey (2017, 13) states that "[i]n a courtly text such as the *Genji*, for example, the aristocratic body is imagined as a phenomenological entity whose presence is felt, not through elaborate descriptions of its physical appearance but rather through its stylized, performative modes." She further notes that the depictions of corporeality were presented differently depending on the genre and the literary convention. Namely, while courtly literature "observed a certain decorum and restraint," genres such as *setsuwa* depicted baser aspects and bodily functions, such as sex, eating, defecating, etc. (Pandey 2017, 13). Relying on the principle of *yūgen*, Noh had a clear affinity with

the courtly sensibilities, but the “new” (*shinpū*) Noh was responding to more popular tastes. I am not suggesting that *Shikimi tengu* was necessarily written the way it was because of or in order to cater to those tastes, but rather that due to the ongoing innovation within the genre, the convention became liberated (or, at least, started to move away) from the said “decorum.”

Given that the site of the torture as well as of erotic arousal is Rokujō's body, it is important to unpack both how body and the workings of the body as a source of arousal were understood in premodern Japanese literature. As mentioned earlier, we are urged to rethink the idea of the body as an object of erotic desire. Pandey (2017, 1) has suggested that in *monogatari* there was “barely anything like body” but rather a conglomerate of shadowy qualities in its place. That is not to say that references to and images of the body (and bodies together) and corporeality were wholly absent, but rather that they were represented metaphorically through subtle and sophisticated poetic imagery. She writes: “Desire in Japanese texts [...] needed to be disentangled from modern discourses of sexuality, which assume that it emanates from an individual subject, who is constituted through his/her sexual identity” (Pandey 2017, 8). Sure enough, in the Buddhist worldview, rather than thinking of individual bodies and privileging their corporeality therein, there was a holistic view of a mind-body complex which extended beyond the flesh-and-bone and sex as a fluid category.

The body we encounter in the East Asian tradition is not an anatomical entity made up of flesh, bones, and muscles. Furthermore, its materiality already carries within it the psychological dispositions and mental attributes that go into the formation of the body and personhood. Even the physical substrate of the body, which we assume to be universal, is itself historically variable. (Pandey 2017, 13)

In the case of Noh, the body was always shapeshifting, a body of transformation: a body which appears in its corporeal and ghostly, literal and symbolic, and performative (both literal and conceptual form). *Shikimi tengu* capitalized on all these conceptualizations. Additionally, rather than privileging the idea of an embodied self, there was a reliance on the Buddhist concepts of emptiness (無 *mu*; Skt. *śūnyatā*) and non-dualism (不二 *funi*; Skt. *advaita*),¹⁷ within which the subjects (as well as subject/object dichotomies) always coexist in the mutual process of becoming. They depend on each other for a shared kind of subjectivity, i.e., the

¹⁷ The Doctrine of Emptiness, one of the central Mahayana Buddhist concepts expounded in the *Perfection of Wisdom* (Skt. *Prajñāpāramitā*) sutras and by the Mādhyamaka (“Middle Way”) school, posits that all phenomena are “empty” of any self-nature. As an extension and further expounding of this doctrine, the concept of non-dualism posited that due to phenomena being empty of self-nature, any distinctions between them are erased. Both concepts were well-known to have influenced and been cited in Noh plays.

subject and the object are ultimately inseparable and indivisible, at least within the moment of interaction where they always constantly mutually produce each other.

While acknowledging this very salient characteristic of Buddhist understanding of the body and the self, however, it is important not to fall into the trap of summarily dismissing any individual corporeality of desire. Objects of desire are more than just a product of an amorous atmosphere prompting the characters' urges and feelings along. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that Rokujō's desire and anguish would persist so continuously, steadfastly, and single-mindedly if she was just "in love with love," so to speak. Genji is the object of her desire and she goes to unimaginable lengths to thwart as many of his love pursuits with other women as she can by literally physically eliminating the objects of his desire (their bodies, if you will). The desire is always a desire for "something," and while it is worthwhile to reconceptualize what that "something" is, it cannot be so diffuse as to be rendered meaningless.

Let us, finally, examine how the body of Lady Rokujō in *Shikimi tengu* is constructed as the body of desire through coded language and visual clues. In the exchange between Rokujō and Tarōbō cited above, her torture is depicted in emphatically corporeal terms, allowing for the more straightforward language in line with the new style. There are repeated references to her body: "(my) body" (御身 *onmi*), "entire body" (五体 *gotai*), "mind-body" (心身 *shinshin*), "form" or "shape" (形 *katachi*, 姿 *sugata*), and acts performed on it (enforced swallowing, rubbing, coiling, and pulling of the hair). Moreover, the body being rubbed, pulled, and tugged, takes the form of the red fiery lotus, which, as noted earlier, is known to symbolize female genitalia. At the same time, the playwright employs well-known erotic imagery drawing on the symbolism of classical poetry and *monogatari*. Rather than, say, voluptuous curves or smooth silky skin, it was a woman's hair and robes that "constitute[d] radically alternate forms of embodiment," and operated as "potent sites for the generation of erotic and affective feelings" (Pandey 2017, 33). In classical poetry, imagery of hair is frequently utilized as a trope through which women articulate feelings of sexual pleasure and longing (Tonomura 1994, 147–151; Pandey 2017, 60). In the case of *Genji monogatari*, Pandey (2017, 60) writes:

As with other markers of beauty, hair [...] is described in highly stylized terms, for it is taken for granted that a woman of distinction is likely to be blessed with long, lustrous hair. It is when hair deviates from the norm, in situations that are unusual or out of the ordinary, as in childbirth, tonsure, or death, that it becomes particularly charged with erotic significance.

And in the case of Lady Rokujō, what could be more out of the ordinary, hence more erotically charged, than the hair attached to her body tortured in hell, as the monstrous Tarōbō coils her lush locks around his hand as he raises his rod towards

her, while the entire scene is awash in the glow of the red fiery lotus? Through such clear and recognizable visual clues, Rokujō is transformed into an object of desire, as her torture is presented as an erotic spectacle for the *yamabushi*. The lens of object and subject position is inverted, however, as she is conscious of the eyes that gaze at her. Recalling Sarra's (1999) "fictions of femininity" and the workings of *kaimami* as a kind of gaze with an ambiguous and fluid subject/object positionality, Rokujō's torture could be read as one such "invited" gaze. In fact, tracing the narrative thread starting with the *Genji*, the entire Rokujō narrative is an exercise in subjectivity; she demands Genji's attention, she is not submissive and when she does not get that attention, she exacts her gruesome revenge. It is this, taking the subject position or daring to claim it for herself, that lands her in hell.

9. Conclusion

Shikimi tengu represents an excellent example of the intertextuality of Noh drama through its interplay of the two main and several supporting narrative frameworks. Placing a famous literary character (Lady Rokujō) within the context of a seemingly unrelated plot trope (stories about *tengu*) and then unraveling the intertwined hidden narrative threads brought into the shared structure, unlocked a repository of plentiful storylines, background content, and characterizations. This, in turn, created a powerful symbolic language which could be used to address broader religious and social issues in unexpected ways. We see how both Rokujō and *tengu* are constructed as multifaceted signifiers that question and subvert generic conventions and allow for a multiplicity of readings. *Shikimi tengu* was well positioned to enact the new strategies, being created in the moment of shifting dramatic conventions which provided novel ways for its characters to interact through innovative role distribution. This broadened the interpretative scope of both the religious and social underpinnings of these narrative traditions, but at the same time complicated the project of Noh as a salvific ritual.

As we have seen, *Shikimi tengu* is a play that inverts several well-established and recognizable plot tropes. It uses these inversions as a discursive strategy to subvert the expected development rooted in the convention, such as relationships established by traditional role distribution, the religious goal and achieved through mobilizing those relationships, the final outcome for the protagonist expected of the denouement presented, namely a Buddhist lesson for the observer of the female protagonist's painful retribution, and the nature of this retribution itself. Furthermore, the scene of her torture, while depicting excruciating pain, offers a tantalizing and arousing view to the *yamabushi*. While her female sensuality and corporeality is supposed to bring about rejection of the material and corporeal desire, it instead seems to elicit a voyeuristic pleasure at the punishment that

she gets. In this reading, *Shikimi tengu* ultimately challenges and subverts both the exercised Noh's theatrical conventions and the salvific project of its ritual and textual underpinnings, and in turn broadens the interpretive scope of the narrative, performative, and poetic expression of the genre, opening up new venues of looking at the tradition as a whole.

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