

WOMAN *Critiqued*



TRANSLATED

ESSAYS ON

JAPANESE WOMEN'S

WRITING



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CONTENTS

Preface vii

A Century of Reading Women's Writing in Japan: An Introduction 1
By Rebecca L. Copeland

CHAPTER 1: The Feminine Critique:

"Womanliness" and the Woman Writer 21

Introduction by Rebecca L. Copeland

On Women and Translation *Kunikida Doppo* 28

Translated by Judy Wakabayashi

Women and Poetic Thought *Miwata Masako* 31

Translated by Janine Beichman

On Women Writers *Oguri Fuyō et al.* 33

Translated by Rebecca L. Copeland

What Is "Womanliness"? *Yosano Akiko* 40

Translated by Laurel Rasplica Rodd

Women Writers *Kobayashi Hideo* 47

Translated by Kathryn Pierce and Mika Endo

CHAPTER 2: The Essential Woman Writer 53

Introduction by Jan Bardsley

Requirements for Becoming a Woman Writer *Setouchi Harumi* 61

Translated by Rebecca L. Copeland

Is Fiction Inherently the Realm of Women? *Okuno Takeo* 66

Translated by Barbara Hartley

Confessions of a Women's Literature Convert *Akiyama Shun* 72

Translated by Barbara Hartley

CHAPTER 3: The Narcissistic Woman Writer 76

Introduction by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley

On Narcissism *Mishima Yukio* 83

Translated by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley

Contemporary Women's Literature *Hasegawa Izumi* 87

Translated by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley

Narcissism, Cynicism, and the Writing of Women *Tanaka Miyoko* 95

Translated by Tomoko Aoyama

- Nakedness and Decoration in Women's Writing *Hara Shirō* 100
Translated by Tomoko Aoyama
- Women, Narcissism, and Okamoto Kanoko *Shibusawa Tatsuhiko* 107
Translated by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley
- CHAPTER 4: The Resisting Woman Writer 114
Introduction by Joan E. Ericson
- Female Sexuality and the Male Gaze: A dialogue between
Takahashi Takako and Tsushima Yūko 119
Translated by Maryellen Toman Mori
- Women's Language and the National Language *Tomioka Taeko* 135
Translated by Joan E. Ericson and Yoshiko Nagaoka
- The Subject of Women's Literature and the Transformation
of Its Consciousness *Nakayama Kazuko* 145
Translated by Joan E. Ericson and Yoshiko Nagaoka
- CHAPTER 5: Women Writers and Alternative Critiques 153
Introduction by Amanda Seaman
- Translation and Gender: Trans/gender/lation *Mizuta Noriko* 159
Translated by Judy Wakabayashi
- Yoshimoto Banana and Girl Culture *Saitō Minako* 167
Translated by Eiji Sekine
- The Consciousness of the Girl: Freedom and Arrogance *Takahara Eiri* 185
Translated by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley
- For a Gentle Castration *Matsuura Rieko* 194
Translated by Amanda Seaman
- CHAPTER 6: Women Critiquing Men: Watching the Ripples
on the Pond 206
Introduction by Rebecca L. Copeland
- On Men's Literature *Ueno Chizuko, Ojura Chikako, and Tomioka Taeko* 210
Translated by Maryellen Toman Mori
- Glossary of Names and Terms 235
- Bibliography 253
- Recommended Further Reading 259
- About the Contributors 273
- Index 275

||| On Narcissism

MISHIMA YUKIO

A woman lingers before a mirror, putting the finishing touches to her face. She then dresses and adds accessories and, *voilà*, after a last careful look to check the result, finally makes an appearance. We call this a woman's narcissism and assume it to be her second nature. However, does the woman before the mirror really see an image of her own face? Can we say that she actually views her own true self? I can't really tell. It would seem, however, that nature is quite concerned to ensure that women do not see their true faces. And while this vigilance might surprise, we can only assume that nature has good reason to act in this way.

Self-consciousness is utterly masculine, presupposing, as it does, the separation of mind and body. The mind detaches itself and drifts away from the body. Then, from the point to which it has wandered, this same mind performs the feat of regarding itself objectively, while also objectively viewing its own flesh. This feat, of course, may not always be successful. However, it would seem useful to define self-consciousness as the curious tendency of the mind to try to accomplish such a performance.

The mind of the woman, however, is inhibited by the gravitational pull of the womb. It is thus unable to separate itself and float freely away from the flesh in the manner of the man. The actions of the upper part of the male anatomy—namely, the head and the mind—are performed independently of the sex organs in the lower part. It would appear that women, however, like the reptiles of ancient times, have brains in both the upper and lower parts of their bodies.

Although I use the term "brain," there are in fact two centers that control the mind of the woman. One is indeed the anatomical brain. The other, however, is the womb. These two work intimately together. The woman's mind is unable to divest itself of the flesh because it is subject to the constant pull of both the brain and the womb. We know that the word "hysteria" derives from a word meaning "womb." Put simply, we might think of the male mind as structured like a circle around a single point, while a woman's mind is oval in shape, featuring two points of focus.

Thus it is apparent that the female mind returns to and resides in existence. The male mind, however, is located in nonexistence. That which we call consciousness of the self is a form of pure thought associated with nonexistence.

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It is the most uncorrupted of all thought and that which is closest to a state of nonexistence.

Women's minds, of course, may think in ways that appear to engage the conscious self. However, their thinking lacks any capacity for self-reproduction. This is the process of the conscious self infinitely propagating itself, like two mirrors that dazzle by creating never-ending images of each other. Given that it fails to absorb the thinker truly, we might call the thinking of women "pseudo self-consciousness." The element that *appears* to be the conscious self in women actually has a safety valve—namely, the physical presence of the womb. Therefore it is impossible for a woman to plunge headlong, brake disengaged, into a state of self-consciousness in the manner of a man. (Strangely, when this happens, it is as if the reckless vehicle of the male conscious self plummets into what is actually a sea of its own self-consciousness.)

We may now begin to understand the reluctance of nature to permit women to see their true faces. It is clearly a matter of biological necessity and the need to ensure that women commit to their child-bearing responsibilities. It would lead to the extinction of the human race were the women who have such intimate and ongoing relationships with their mirrors to throw themselves completely into these mirrors and self-destruct. Since men do not fall pregnant, this is not an issue for them. Narcissus, obsessed by the beauty of his own reflection seen in water, plunged into that water and drowned. That he was a man, and not a woman, is evidence of the wisdom of the ancient Greeks. For Narcissus must, of necessity, be a man.

We have now generally confirmed the fact that women do not see their own image in the mirror. And since it would clearly be a misuse of the word narcissism to apply it to a fascination with something that is not a self-image, it is obvious that there can be no such thing as narcissism in women.

2

I have pointed out that nature appears to be at pains to persuade women not to see their faces. "Face," of course, is used here in the psychological rather than physical sense. Perhaps I go too far in rashly asserting that the woman before the mirror is able to infer the psychological face from the physical face. It may not be possible to draw an analogy so easily between the exterior and interior face or to make a direct connection between the face in the mirror and the inner self.

It is well known that women are notoriously inept at talking about themselves. Even the most distinguished woman will rarely give the impression of having an accurate self-image. No matter what she may have endured or what worldly wisdom she may have acquired, a woman is generally blind in matters

relating to herself, displaying an inescapable stupidity that adheres to her like lint to a coat back. The more intellectual she is, the more morbid both her conceit and her inferiority complex are likely to be. Her reasoning is clouded and her logic obtuse, lacking any spring of lucid thought. I have no idea why this might be. However, this is the reason that I detest arguing with women so.

It may well be that what we call logic is, in fact, the logic of the male rather than a universal human attribute. The autonomy of male logic resides in nothing more than the fact that the male psyche is able to separate itself from the body and, therefore, from a state of being. I have argued that the inherent lack of objectivity that is a feature of women's logic, if we can even use such a term, is inevitably tied to a state of being through the unique structure of the feminine psyche. Without a division between mind and body there can be no objectivity and, hence, no capacity for self-criticism. As a result, women are unable to engage in considered criticism of others, since the sole criterion for this process is the ability to critique one's self. The blind spot that afflicts women is their perpetual inability to critique themselves and the associated tendency to criticize others unjustly.

Women say of each other, "'A' may think she is wonderful, but what a stupid woman she really is!" This criticism is invalid, however, unless the speaker too is aware of her own stupidity. But no woman will ever admit to being stupid. She might say, "I'm so stupid." But what she actually means is, "Unreasonable people like you may think I'm stupid, but this is not the case." Women say to men, "My eyes are so small, aren't they?" However, only a brave man would respond in the affirmative. And should a woman lament the shape of her flat nose, it would be equally dangerous for a man to try to comfort her by responding, "But it's much more charming than a pointy one."

You may have noted that I have made a gradual shift here from the inner to the outer face of the woman, for I believe that there is no defining line between the two. There is a huge difference between a man's declaring himself to be stupid, on the one hand, and ugly, on the other. In the case of a woman, however, any difference is so slight as to be almost negligible. Self-mockery in men is generally informed by irony and criticism—that is, elements of the conscious self. A woman's declaration of stupidity, however, involves a deliberate blurring of subjectivity as a result of ambivalence concerning who is making the judgment. While she may claim the judgment as her own, in reality she is assigning the negative assessment of herself to "unreasonable people like you." On the contrary, when a man says, "All right, I'm stupid," he has in fact arrived at this position by exercising his own powers of judgment. He furthermore feels a clear sense of pride that the decision has been made of his own accord.

We should also consider the statement, "I'm not good-looking." When a

woman says this, we see an almost identical example of the deliberate blurring of subjectivity that occurs when she claims to be stupid. However, when a man declares that he is not handsome, uncomfortable though this may be, the subjectivity of the judgment clearly resides completely in an invisible and independent third person. For from an early age men must learn the bitter wisdom, through the training of the conscious self, that the beauty or otherwise of one's face or appearance is essentially a social value judged only by others. Men develop complexes of inferiority or superiority early in life by experiencing the objective judgment of comparison. It is true that, like a girl, even a man will become aware of his own charm upon being loved for the first time by a woman. However, this will never lead to a direct relationship between his outer and inner selves, no matter how such an experience might inspire or pervert the latter.

When a man looks into the mirror, he clearly views his own face, his uncorrupted external appearance. A woman viewing her image is subject to the workings of a complex and captivating imaginative process. This process invokes a connection not only between the inner and outer selves, but also with a second made-up exterior. While a man may shave, he has no need for makeup. For it is only when viewing the unadulterated facial exterior, and when the subject of the gaze is the uncorrupted conscious self, that narcissism, the love that appears in the myth of Narcissus, is possible. . . .

4

. . . Men are secreted away behind concealed values while women are forced into public view. This is apparent in modes of attire. Men dress in dark, uniform outfits, no longer adorned in suits of gorgeous armor, for it is women who are now slaves to myriad fashions, increasingly covering less of their bodies. The concept of women's narcissism seems to have been adapted from that of men. It is clear, however, that if women had been granted the usual sort of physical narcissism, the rules relating to the conscious self could not have come into play. It was therefore necessary to devise a different method for the woman narcissist. Thus the advent of makeup. For makeup is the sole factor that can rescue the usual sort of physical narcissism from the comic. The widespread practice among women of the second method, the application of makeup, is compensation for their lack of awareness of the conscious self. Through the process of applying powder and lipstick, thus transforming themselves into something beautiful, women insist on the wholesale corruption of physical narcissism.

Whether a woman is beautiful or ugly, she will spend an eternity before the mirror making herself up. Yet people will never laugh or say that she is ugly. For it is not a question of the objectivity of the conscious self, nor is it merely that

she wants to make herself beautiful. If the ugly woman looks more beautiful with makeup than without, it is merely because this is what society demands. Both women and society in general, however, confine the praise of women to physical appearance, for men do not want women to invade their jealously protected territory of spiritual-intellectual narcissism. Thus men have opened up and passed to women the hellish anxiety of physical narcissism that once belonged to ancient men.

It seems unlikely, however, that this realm passed on to women has actually generated anxiety. Women in front of the mirror clearly look happy, although it is a complete and utter mystery to men why someone would be so overjoyed by the application of makeup. Since narcissism and happiness are mutually exclusive, the emotion felt by these women must be something else, something indefinable. For while "happiness" is the concept that is most difficult for men to understand, it is the most feminine concept of all.

||| Contemporary Women's Literature

HASEGAWA IZUMI

In an essay entitled "On Narcissism" Mishima Yukio outlines his forthright views on the difference between men and women. Mishima, who had a complex and highly insightful view of sex, points to the existence of men and women as a biological given, a natural phenomenon. It is for this reason, he argues, that we use terms such as "the opposite sex." In the essay Mishima explains his position on narcissism and consciousness of self while also theorizing the "natural" difference between men and women.

Narcissus, the mythological character who drowned after being captivated by the reflection of his own beauty, was a man. He was not a woman. Noting that the concept of narcissism derives from the fact that Narcissus was a man, Mishima reasons that narcissism cannot therefore exist in a woman. Mishima maintains that while Narcissus was able to view the image of his own face, a woman is incapable of confronting her own natural image.

Mishima's theory is grounded in his belief that only men are capable of the mind-body dichotomy and that without this ability it is impossible to be conscious of one's self. Consciousness of self, he argues, demands the mental acrobatics that permit the subject to separate mind and body and thereby consider its

TRANSLATED BY TOMOKO AOYAMA AND BARBARA HARTLEY. From Hasegawa Izumi, "Gendai joryū bungaku no yōsō" (Contemporary women's literature), *Kokubungaku knishaku to kanshō*, September 1976: 6-14.