

The Multiple Role of the Mask in Kurahashi Yumiko's Works. A Focus on "The Witch Mask" (1985)

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the peculiar use of the mask in relation to the face in the works of Kurahashi Yumiko 倉橋由美子. The mask in her literature functions as a metaphor for the construction of identity, and yet it is often distinct from the idea of the mask as concealment. Rather, the passage from mask to face and vice versa acquires multiple nuances as the mask adheres to the face both in a metaphorical sense and as an extra layer of skin. I will concentrate on one short story in particular, which stands out among Kurahashi's works dealing with the mask: "The Witch Mask" (*Kijo no men* 鬼女の面, 1985). By reflecting on the extensive use of allusions, and by taking the concept of *jouissance* into consideration, I will explore how the notion of identity in "The Witch Mask" is investigated and what possibilities this transformation offers in terms of the narrative. In my reading, this work deepens Kurahashi's meta-level reflection on the act of writing, suggesting new possibilities for understanding the construction of (gender) identity.

Introductory Remarks

The mask as a narrative device has often been used in Japanese postwar literature. Other authors, prior or contemporary of Kurahashi, such as Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 (1925–1970), Enchi Fumiko 円地文子 (1905–1986), and Abe Kōbō 安部公房 (1924–1993), had already reflected upon different facets of the role of the mask in their literature; these were explored before many of Kurahashi's essays and works I will consider in this article. Despite their differences, all the aforementioned authors share an extensive use of allusions in their work, as well as a conceptual use of the mask, which they often employ to challenge the notion of identity. Similarly, as we will see, Kurahashi's role of the mask is not simply limited to suggest the conventional dichotomy between true and false, or the concealment of one's inherent self. By highlighting her different approaches to the concept of identity through the role of the mask, and how they differ from the previous authors, I wish this article to be a contribution to demonstrate the relevance of Kurahashi's theoretical concerns in the context of modern Japanese literature. In order to do so, I will initially give some examples of other authors that explored the topic, in order to provide a conceptual frame that can be used as a reference for my investigation.

The title of Mishima Yukio's *Confessions of a Mask* (*kamen no kokuhaku* 仮面の告白, 1949) shows an evident metaphor in itself. This can be superficially interpreted as the protagonist's attempt, from a young age, to hide his real (homosexual) self through a "reluctant masquerade".¹ Some readings, however, suggest that the protagonist intentionally shows an attempt to hide his homosexuality behind the quest for romantic, heterosexual love despite not being really interested in hiding it; this can be considered a performance in itself.² Another possible view is Graham Parks' argument that highlights the Nietzschean approach to life of *Confessions of a Mask*, where "the drama is all – and it is no more possible to separate the faces from the masks than the players from the play".³ This concept of having no actor behind the mask can also be seen under the lens of Butler's performativity of identity, that, as we will see, can be traced also in Kurahashi's works.

Enchi Fumiko has started using the *topos* of the noh mask even before Kurahashi. This is not limited to her work *Masks* (*Onnamen* 女面, 1958)⁴, but applies also to other writings, as Enchi notably continued engaging with noh-related topics until the very end of her life. The deadpan expression of a woman, whose state of mind cannot be understood from the outside, is conventionally compared to a female mask in different works such as *Masks* and *The Waiting years* (*Onnazaka* 女坂, 1957), among the others.⁵ At the same time, in *Masks*, additionally, the element is used as a metaphor for a spectrum of various feelings conveyed through the same expression, which can be interpreted differently depending on the point of view, similarly to a noh female mask that changes according to its inclination.⁶ A different example is the later *Kikujidō* (菊慈童, 1984),⁷ which I analyzed in my book on Enchi Fumiko's works dealing with the world of theatre: here the male protagonist Yūsen, in his last moments before dying on the stage, experiences the blurring of identities through the mask in a sort of Buddhist enlightenment.⁸

Like Enchi, also in Kurahashi's works the mask is often similar or correspondent to the noh mask. This object becomes a peculiar device, which not only hides the face of the wearer, but also encourages the actor to reveal aspects of his/her own identity which they are not aware of. For this reason, the act of donning the mask before the scene becomes a moment of externalization of the actor's self, rather than a full identification with the character.

¹ MISHIMA 1949: 29.

² RHINE 1999.

³ PARKES 1987: 78.

⁴ ENCHI 1958.

⁵ ENCHI 1957.

⁶ This is stressed for instance by one of the scholars who engaged most with the author, Noguchi Hiroko. See: NOGUCHI 2003: 119.

⁷ ENCHI 1984.

⁸ MORO 2015: 110.

Konparu Kunio explains what happens in the mirror room when the actor wears the mask before going on stage:

The actor awakens the awareness of himself as other and then goes a step further to develop this awareness into a consciousness of that other (the character) as himself. This transformation is the magic of recognizing on two levels the externalized self. The mirror in the mirror room is not there for the actor's last-minute grooming: using the mirror as an instrument of transformation brings life to and function to a space, and thus the true meaning of the term *kagami no ma* kagami-space, a place of god, of self and other, of reflection, and of truth.⁹

I argue that also Kurahashi's frequent use of the noh mask in her literature is not by chance. As implied in Konparu's words, the fixity of modern dichotomies self/other and true/false does not fit the noh stage, born in premodern context. Therefore, Kurahashi might have appreciated the noh mask precisely for its fluidity, in opposition to the rigidity of the modern Japanese literary canon and in a more defiant way than Enchi.

In regard to Abe Kōbō, it is worth noting that the affinities Kurahashi's works share with him are especially due to the adherence to some of the *nouveau romans* anti-classical principles of both authors. Among these, the focus on the mask represents one of their common traits. Abe's protagonist of *The Face of Another* (*Tanin no kao* 他人の顔, 1964) finds a new social self,¹⁰ however, he cannot embrace his new identity completely, thus resulting in a tragic ending caused by the supposed conflict between self and other. An interesting angle on this work is proposed by Margaret Key, who highlights a metafictional impulse underlying the act of writing described in the narration.¹¹ Another reading is suggested in an article by Atsuko Sakaki who compares Abe's *The Face of Another* to a work by Kurahashi, "The Trade" (*Kōkan* 交換, 1985), where the (noh) mask is central.¹² She writes: "One observes the pain of the collapse of normative quotidian life by the loss of the 'real' face that proved so essential to the male protagonist's sense of identity and relation to his wife. With Kurahashi's 'The Trade', one is compelled to believe that identity is nothing but performance, the face only a mask with which to perform another act".¹³ Both works explore the connections between face and self-identity, showing "how crucial the former [appearance] is in the formation of one's self-consciousness and sense of identity",¹⁴ therefore challenging

⁹ KONPARU 1983: 126–127.

¹⁰ ABE 1964.

¹¹ KEY 2011: 142.

¹² KURAHASHI 1985b.

¹³ SAKAKI 2018: 180.

¹⁴ SAKAKI 1998: xviii.

the dichotomy of surface and essence. In both works, the existence of a supposedly true self beneath the mask of the social self is firmly denied.¹⁵

The introduction above, inspecting Kurahashi's works in comparison with examples by other authors, has outlined the literary frame in which Kurahashi's theoretical use of the mask is embedded. Kurahashi's work is particularly linked to Mishima and especially Abe, in the way it denies the idea of a fixed identity, represented by the many declinations of the mask. Moreover, similarly to Enchi's *Kikujidō*, the idea of the mask as something that reveals unexpected sides of the identity of the wearer can be traced also in Kurahashi's "The Witch Mask", published just one year after Enchi's work. Like the donning of the noh mask described by Komparu which allows to be self and other at the same time, in Kurahashi's work the externalization of the self provocatively happens through the mask of Hannya (般若), overlapping the human self and the demonic self.

As it is common for many writers, Kurahashi's thoughts have undergone many twists and variations throughout the years. A fundamental element in Kurahashi's poetics, the topic of the mask in connection with the fluidity of identity, has been explored in several writings during her whole career, assuming in turn different nuances. For the purpose of this article, I chose to refer to essays and works from the 1960s onwards. I believe that her fiction and non-fiction mirrors the multifaceted phases and aspects of her thought, developed during the years by challenging conventions. For this reason, I believe that analyzing her writings from different decades can be extremely helpful in understanding how earlier concepts transform and recur throughout the years. I will be dealing with some of the possible interpretations of Kurahashi's works, however, I do not aim to outline a definitive, preferable one among the others. Indeed, due to the complexity of the author's thought and style, the same motif can imply different meanings throughout the same text or across different works. I will focus in particular on the short story "The Witch Mask" (*Kijo no men* 鬼女の面, 1985), which stands out among Kurahashi's works dealing with the topic.¹⁶ My aim is to analyze how, in this narrative, the relation between sexuality, death, and the mask is developed and metaphorically associated with the act of writing, especially for the postwar female writer. By comparing it with other works using the trope of the flesh-adhering mask, and reflecting on the use of intertextuality, I will present my perspective on "The Witch Mask" as a reflection on the act of writing.

There are many other writings by the same author that present the *topos* of the mask as a crucial element. Nevertheless, in this article I choose to focus particularly on the author's literary works which are characterized by the strong connection between the mask, the

¹⁵ KEY 2011: 137.

¹⁶ KURAHASHI 1998: 59–65.

sexual ecstasy, and the otherworld. Before that, in the upcoming section, I would like to contextualize these works and Kurahashi's theoretical frame through her essays.

1 The "anti-world" and the Mask in Kurahashi's Works and Essays

The works of Kurahashi Yumiko are often considered to be a meta-level reflection on the very act of writing. That of the "anti-world" (*hansekai* 反世界) is a founding concept of Kurahashi's works and is formulated in the essay "The Labyrinth and Negativity of Fiction" (*Shōsetsu no meiro to hiteisei* 小説の迷路と否定性), written in 1966. Here the author declares that "fiction is a magic which gives a form to the 'anti-world' by using words and all non-literary factors freely".¹⁷ In her contribution to the seminal volume *Ōe and Beyond: Fiction in Contemporary Japan* (1999), Atsuko Sakaki explains that Kurahashi has famously expressed the idea of literature as the creation of an anti-world, which should shatter every orthodox idea of mimetic representation, morality, or originality through the construction of completely unrealistic worlds, a strategic use of transgressive sexuality, and the systematic employment of intertextuality.¹⁸ Sakaki argues that for Kurahashi "The 'Anti-World' is governed by a logic of 'dreams' or 'nightmares'. Leaps and twists which are inherent to dreams transform this world into a grotesque form (...) Thus the relationship between the 'anti-world' and the 'real' world is clarified. The former is not a representation of the latter, and yet it is a deformed version of the latter, and thus subject to it".¹⁹

Sakaki also underlines how Kurahashi's anti-world can be related to the subordinate position of women and therefore to the act of the female writer.²⁰ In the essay "Literature as Poison" (*Dokuyaku to shite no bungaku* 毒薬としての文学, 1966), Kurahashi explains the idea of writing for a woman as a "secretion",²¹ an empty act of imitation (*manegoto* 真似ごと), by analogy with the feminine body, but also with her own inner emptiness, which she defines as "an empty darkness which is probably large enough to accommodate the galactic system".²² Clearly, there is a strong essentialist stance at the base of this metaphor: Kurahashi often makes a strategic use of stereotypes adopted in an ironic context, which overturns them and creates an effect of distance.

¹⁷ KURAHASHI 1966a: 289.

¹⁸ SAKAKI 1999: 156.

¹⁹ SAKAKI 1992: 9.

²⁰ SAKAKI 1999: 159.

²¹ KURAHASHI 1966b: 301.

²² SAKAKI 1999: 161. The translation is of a passage in: KURAHASHI 1963: 100.

A strong ironic tone is also present in the essay “Diary” (Nichiroku 日録, 1965), which speaks of the role of the writer and is related to this idea of Kurahashi’s inner void, which I find crucial for understanding the use of the mask in her works. She writes:

The act of writing and publishing a novel is similar to stripping the skin from my own face and selling it. When I imagine that one day my face, vividly painted with the color of blood, might appear in every library at the same moment – my recent book happens to have a crimson illustration on the cover – I am haunted by a surreal fear. And at the same time what delights me is the fantasy that this facial skin of mine could stick as a witch mask to the face of those people without them having the possibility of tearing it off again, leading them to insanity. Of course, this is just the powerless, megalomaniacal dream of a criminal. In any case, the fact of writing and selling a novel is nothing less than a crime (...), but the essence of this crime lies in the fact that while selling an enormous amount of skin stripped off from my face, on my very face there is not the slightest sign of change. In fact, it means that I do not have a “real face”, something which is supposed to appear at the bottom, after my skin has been stripped off.²³

In this case the mask clearly embodies the negation of a unique, real self beneath the mask.

A famous work by Kurahashi that denies the uniqueness of the self is *Blue Journey* (*Kurai tabi* 暗い旅, 1961).²⁴ The novel functions as an essay as well, and it is fundamental for my analysis of “The Witch Mask”. Written much earlier than “The Witch Mask”, *Blue Journey* lacks the connections between the mask and sexual ecstasy which are at the core of my article; nevertheless, I will dedicate some space to this work as it is generally considered a literary precursor of the contemporary idea of performativity of identity.²⁵

The protagonist “you” (*anata* あなた) is a young woman who, while searching for her companion around Japan, reflects on her life and her femininity. The interior journey she embarks on leads her to the decision of writing a novel. The relationship with “him” (*kare* かれ), which is based on the transgression of social morals, is perceived as something that has contributed to the preservation of her masquerade in front of the society. In *Blue Journey* the mask reveals the continuous transformations undergone by human identity, as well as the construction of the self in line with societal constrictions. This element is similar to the quest in the aforementioned *The Face of Another* by Kōbō. In the passage “This is a body with fake flesh, the mask which, like a *noh* mask, changes its multiple expressions to perform the role of a woman”, the expression “change multiple expressions” (*senpenbanka* 千変万化)

²³ KURAHASHI 1965b: 232–233.

²⁴ KURAHASHI 1961.

²⁵ See: SAKAKI 1992; SAKAKI 1999; BULLOCK 2010; KATANO 2017.

is used to refer to a mask, the same one metaphorically donned by the protagonist. Similar to a noh mask, it changes according to the light:²⁶ therefore, the beholder can understand it in multiple ways. Quoting one of the main passages of *Blue Journey*, Bullock states:

This performance is so effective that not only does she convince her mother and others of her transformation, but she even loses sight of herself as the distinction between the masquerade and the actress collapses: “From then on you ceased being yourself and became increasingly proficient at donning the mask and playing the role of yourself. Even the word “self” came to mean to you nothing more than the crevice, the vacant passageway, between you and the mask, because from that time on you lost substance.”²⁷

With regard to this concept of the mask in *Blue Journey*, Atsuko Sakaki argues that Kurahashi parallels postmodern theories of the self, in particular the theory on the performativity of gender suggested by Judith Butler in works such as *Gender Trouble* (1990).²⁸ In this sense the mask, despite initially representing the concealment of a supposedly real self, after a closer inspection goes beyond this idea and leads to the gradual disappearance of any self behind the mask. This recalls the above-quoted essay suggesting that the layer of skin on Kurahashi’s face is stripped off, only to reveal the same face underneath, as behind it hides nothing but the feminine void created by the (gendered) masquerade.

In the narration of *Blue Journey* the mask is also connected to the idea of the objectifying gaze of society. Here the centrality of the scopic action is metaphorically emphasized, as the protagonist falls victim of a sort of group rape perpetrated through the gaze.²⁹ Bullock argues that the second-person narrative has the role of putting the reader in a “position of witnessing, and even identifying with, a protagonist who is victimized by society’s intrusive gaze”.³⁰ According to Bullock, feminine complicity is necessary to the societal hegemonic gaze: *Blue Journey* “demonstrates in its own way that feminine complicity is requisite in order for the process of engendering to be successful”. In this work the gaze is “wielded by one woman against another”, revealing the intrusiveness of the protagonist’s mother with respect to the development of her daughter’s identity.³¹

In Katano Tomoko’s crucial essay on *Blue Journey*, the “mask of woman” donned by the protagonist is further interpreted as similar to Butler’s idea of “agency” postulated in

²⁶ SAKAKI 1992: 67; KURAHASHI 1961: 106.

²⁷ BULLOCK 2010: 73; KURAHASHI 1961: 99.

²⁸ SAKAKI 1999: 167. See also: BUTLER 1990.

²⁹ KURAHASHI 1961: 98–99.

³⁰ BULLOCK 2010: 75.

³¹ BULLOCK 2010: 74.

Excitable Speech (1997).³² The woman performs her “womanliness”, acting and embodying the male desire, and this inevitably creates a gap between herself and what is being represented. Beyond the masquerade, what remains of her subjectivity is precisely this gap, which is perpetrated by the coexistence of the strong negation of the “reproductive body” (*haramushintai* 妊む身体) and her performed femininity. As per Katano’s essay, it is specifically thanks to this coexistence that the protagonist is able to avoid being objectified by patriarchy, as she is neither object nor subject.³³ On the other hand, she is released from the necessity to “regulate” her subjectivity, to define a preferable identity, and this gives her infinite possibilities.³⁴ This vision ultimately attributes an idea of agency to the object of the patriarchal gaze. Similarly, as explored below, I argue that in “The Witch Mask” the victims of the patriarchal gaze, forced to wear the deadly mask, are in actual facts not objectified, but rather empowered by it. This is because, as we will see, in the moment they lose their subjectivity they become one with the mask, which is the real and only holder of the agency.

2 Intertextuality and Extreme Sexuality in the Collection *The Passage of Dreams* (1989)

The common element shared by “The Witch Mask” and the three works I will deal with, is the specific role of the mask in providing a connection with the otherworld: the mask allows the wearer to experience extraordinary pleasure, impossible to explore in this world.³⁵

A strong intertextual connection to noh drama is explicit in the whole 1989 collection *The Passage of Dreams* (*Yume no kayohi ji* 夢の通ひ路).³⁶ One of its works, “Spring Night Dreams” (*Haru no yo no yume* 春の夜の夢, 1989),³⁷ alludes not only to noh: Fujiwara no Teika’s and Princess Shikishi’s ancient poems are directly interwoven in the text, and there is a strong – though not always explicit – reference to the figure of Genji’s mistress Lady Rokujō from the *Genji monogatari* (源氏物語). She is also the protagonist of the noh drama *Lady Aoi* (*Aoi no Ue* 葵上), on the possession of Lady Aoi by the spirit of jealous Lady Rokujō.

The story of “Spring Night Dreams” narrates of Saiko, an intellectual woman, who ends up becoming one of a statesman’s lovers. Almost hypnotized by the charm of the man, despite an initial resistance she falls for him and ends up waiting for him every night, experiencing extreme jealousy and feeling deprived of her previous life. At every jealousy attack, the protagonist’s features change into a mask-like demonic face similar to Hannya

³² KATANO 2017: 60; BUTLER 1997.

³³ KATANO 2017: 61.

³⁴ KATANO 2017: 62.

³⁵ KURAHASHI 1985a; KURAHASHI 1998: 59–65.

³⁶ KURAHASHI 1989a.

³⁷ KURAHASHI 1989b: 184–195.

– the mask representing a female demon in the second part of *Lady Aoi* noh drama. During the narration, one of her attacks becomes so intense that her spirit is able to reach one of the man’s lovers, a pregnant woman, and kills her. The mask of the witch at the end of the story emerges from under the woman’s skin, as if to imply that the protagonist’s real appearance, the witch mask, has been hiding underneath the whole time.

In both the works “The Witch Mask” and “Spring Night Dreams”, the two elements of the metamorphosis through the mask and the gaze are central. Diane Dubose Brunner suggests, citing Julia Kristeva and Trinh T. Minh-ha, that masking (similarly to unmasking) has the power of revealing and concealing, depending on the context.³⁸ I would argue that in both “Spring Night Dreams” and “The Witch Mask”, the concept of a true self in a way exists, but it differs from the conventional idea of concealing it under the mask. Nor is it transformed by changing mask or problematized as in other works by Kurahashi; in actual facts, it is revealed through the mask.

In both “The Witch Mask” and “Spring Night Dreams” the noh mask involved is Hannya, representing a physical transformation of a jealous woman or of a spirit that has momentarily left the body and taken another form.³⁹ In both works the use of intertextuality is very dense and meaningful, as it is typical of Kurahashi’s style. In “The Witch Mask” the first-person narrator cites a poem by the French poet Maurice Magre (1877–1941), which I will discuss fully later. Additionally, as explained above, in “Spring Night Dreams” direct and indirect references to classical poems appear as well.

The theme of transformation (*henshin* 変身) is common to both narratives, and the female character experiences the process through a mask. In “The Witch Mask” the transformation occurs through its donning, but in “Spring Night Dreams” it is the mask under the skin that comes to the fore, revealing the protagonist’s inner witch (*oni* 鬼). At the beginning, when she realizes that the face in the mirror has changed into one resembling the Hannya, the protagonist has the feeling that a mask or another person’s face has been stuck to her own. In this work too the mask is strictly linked to the idea of another world; indeed, it is considered to come from “the world beyond the mirror”:

It did not look like her face at all. It appeared that someone else’s face had intruded from the other world, the world beyond the mirror, and had stuck to her own – it was as if her face were covered by a mask. The more she looked at the “mask”, the more it became the mask of a **witch**. When she widened her eyes and distorted her mouth, her face in fact resembled nothing so much as that of a witch. “I have finally

³⁸ DUBOSE BRUNNER 1998: 94.

³⁹ PULVERS 1978: 136.

become a demon.” Mumbling this to herself, Saiko felt as if she were about to **be swallowed by the mirror**, and she tottered unsteadily before it.⁴⁰

At the end of the narration, the protagonist realizes that the mask is already inside her and it surfaces from under her flesh.⁴¹ Her lover admits: “I knew all along that your identity was a witch’s”.⁴² In that precise moment she receives confirmation of the fact that it is not only when she looks at herself in the mirror that her face changes. Thinking “it’s not bad to have a demon lover”, the man had continued to meet her without being disturbed by her face.

Considering the passages above, it could be argued that the otherworld in this work is inside the protagonist from the beginning and that the metamorphosis through the mask has the unique role of revealing her identity as a demon. That demonic identity is what triggers a strong sexual impulse in her which ultimately leads to a metaphorical mutual devouring of the two protagonists every time they meet.⁴³ They are both overcome by an animal yearning for the other’s body, to the point that despite the male protagonist’s sexual violence, she still continues to wait for him, craving sexual intercourse.⁴⁴ The dichotomy victim/predator is deconstructed in virtue of the woman’s sexual appetite brought to the fore by the mask, the embodiment of her demonic nature. The extremism of intercourse is therefore something possible in this life, in this world, thanks to the demonic nature of the female character, who not only accepts it, but desires it. Nevertheless, the image of rape and the waiting for his visit imply a certain passivity on the part of the female protagonist, despite her witch-like sexual hunger. Her sexual satisfaction (if there is any, but we do not have proof of this) is achieved through the male’s incursion into her life, which at the beginning she was not willing to accept. By contrast to this work, in “The Witch Mask”, as we will see, the sexual rapture is not due to intercourse and the mask provoking trance-like sexual ecstasy is the means of possession by the otherworld. Here the real world and the otherworld cannot coexist, except in the few moments of ecstasy before the wearer’s death.

The idea of a deadly mask linked to sexual ecstasy is also evident in the 1988 work “Autumn’s Hell” (*Aki no jigoku* 秋のお地獄), part of the same collection *The Passage of Dreams* and with the same female protagonist, Saiko.⁴⁵ In this work there is a direct reference to the story of the Heian-period poetess Ono no Komachi and Fukakusa no Shōshō. The latter was promised by Komachi that she would become his wife once he had visited her mansion for one-hundred consecutive nights – but he dies on the ninety-ninth

⁴⁰ KURAHASHI 1998: 74. Emphasis by D.M.

⁴¹ KURAHASHI 1985b: 195.

⁴² KURAHASHI 1985b: 194.

⁴³ KURAHASHI 1985b: 190.

⁴⁴ KURAHASHI 1985b: 190.

⁴⁵ KURAHASHI 1988a.

night. The female protagonist of Kurahashi's story, at the beginning, sees a noh representation of *Kayoi Komachi* (通い小町), where the ghost of Fukakusa painfully reenacts the visits. Outside the building after the event, she has a dream-like encounter with someone wearing a noh mask. The object in this case is not Hannya, but Magojirō (孫次郎), the typical woman's mask used by the Kongō School. The person's identity behind it remains unclear, as well as the wearer's voice; it is impossible for Saiko to understand whether the individual is an actor from the stage, or even Fukakusa or Komachi in person. However, what she immediately realizes is that all of a sudden they are in a different place, which she believes to be hell. At this point they start having sexual intercourse and at the peak of the climax the mask transforms into a dying woman's face, and again back to Magojirō. After the metamorphosis, it ultimately turns into a conventional wooden noh mask, and falls down. After the flesh-adhering mask falls from the wearer's face, his appearance becomes fluid, as he changes from the demon of old Fukakusa, covered in blood and flesh chunks, into a young handsome man, who could be young Fukakusa or the noh actor, or even both at the same time. In a brief dialogue, Saiko explains that the spirit of Fukakusa has returned in this world through the mask on the noh stage and, insisting that he must go back to hell, she puts the mask on his face again. Hoping to have properly closed the "lid" to hell, she then returns home. It is only towards the end of the piece that things become clearer: the mask, and the noh stage more in general, represent a door (or a lid, *futa* 蓋) to hell: a place where it is not necessary to put thoughts into words in order to find reciprocal enjoyment.⁴⁶

The story shares with "The Witch Mask" a connection that links sexual intense pleasure to the mask. The wearer and the protagonist have a dream-like sexual intercourse and the mask starts changing when they reach the climax of sexual pleasure, taking the form of a crazy woman: "Precisely speaking, it was a transformation into a woman about to die". After the orgasm, it turns into a simple wooden noh mask and falls down, revealing the demonic (male) face underneath. But ecstasy is not only the wearer's prerogative, in this work. It is also enjoyed by the female protagonist, who "had the extremely rare experience of proving orgasmic joy while observing in detail the transition from intercourse to death".⁴⁷ At that precise moment she probably has a taste of sexual pleasure so intense, it is possible only in the otherworld.

As for the mask and its connection to sex and the otherworld, the work "Dream of Jidō" (*Jidō no yume* 慈童の夢, 1988), included in the same collection, is also significant.⁴⁸ As it is clear from the title, this work is inspired by the Chinese legend of the "Chrysanthemum Youth" *Kikujidō* 菊慈童 and by its noh drama version. The same female protagonist, Saiko,

⁴⁶ KURAHASHI 1988a: 62.

⁴⁷ KURAHASHI 1988a: 61.

⁴⁸ KURAHASHI 1988b.

meets the phantom of Fujiwara no Teika, who comes often from hell to visit her. While dining together, she confesses that she has a dream of having a romantic encounter and savoring ecstasy with a young boy, so handsome that he could hardly be from this world.⁴⁹ She adds that he could be someone like the Prince Genji in his youth. Teika promises to find her such a person, and soon her wish is fulfilled by a young immortal boy, called Jidō from the legend of Kikujidō, who comes and visits her in a dream-like encounter. His face looks like the mask of an adolescent from the noh drama *Atsumori*, but somehow it is also similar to a seductive woman's mask. As Saiko knows, he became immortal by seeping the dew of a chrysanthemum on which the Lotus Sutra had been written.⁵⁰ The Jidō starts writing the Lotus Sutra's characters on her back, when all of a sudden the sensation she feels changes into being played like an instrument, and becomes an intense sexual stimulation permeating her whole body. Suspecting that this could be a plan by Teika to have intercourse with her, she takes his beautiful face off, like a mask. The maskface falls easily, but what's left underneath is a mass of darkness, or a blackhole. The black hole under the mask stands, in my opinion, for an explicit negation of the concept of self and makes it possible for the mysterious character to become a "nobody". It functions like an additional mask under the external one, which allows Saiko to have intercourse with an unidentified individual, who therefore could also be her own child and a glimpse of the otherworld in her dream.

The intercourse between Saiko "feeling like his mother" and this unknown "someone supposed to be a beautiful boy" goes on.⁵¹ In the ending scene, Saiko reflects on these incestuous desires. As it is well known, incest is one of the topics often explored by Kurahashi in order to break all the barriers of common sense and to "challenge the binary nature of self and other".⁵² Here the direct link of incest and the mask (or the lack of it and the revealing of the black mass behind) is similar to the rape scene in "Spring Night Dreams", as the mask becomes a bridge to the otherworld, where there are no common sense and no sexual rules.

⁴⁹ KURAHASHI 1988b: 42.

⁵⁰ In one version of the Chinese legend which is also at the base of the noh drama *Kikujidō*, the boy had been banished from the Court where he used to be the highly-favoured of the Emperor Zhou 周, since he had stepped on the Emperor's pillow. Being exiled in the woods, he copied the Lotus Sutra on the leaves of a chrysanthemum and he sipped the dew collected in it, becoming immortal.

⁵¹ KURAHASHI 1988b: 46.

⁵² ORBAUGH 1996: 128.

3 “The Witch Mask”: *Jouissance* as a Taste of the Otherworld.

“The Witch Mask” is a first-person narration that can be defined as homodiegetic, in which the main character speaks of events that directly affect his life. The story narrates of a mask that belongs to the protagonist’s family which is described as “strange” (*kimyō* 奇妙): it has no eye holes, but two fluorescent eyes “glimmering with other-wordly light” instead. It seems alive and its back is wet, as if it had been soaked in blood. Despite not being very valuable, it has been stored for years by the protagonist as a real treasure. The reader discovers the reasons behind the power of this scary mask only towards the end of the story: the protagonist puts it on the beautiful face of his sleeping fiancée, who is only referred to through her initial, K-ko. The girl tries unsuccessfully to take it off, when all of a sudden she starts dancing in an uncontrolled, obscene way, expressing a sexual ecstasy that results in an orgasmic convulsion and her subsequent death. Only after she dies the mask falls, showing a serene expression on her face, like a Buddha statue. After the initial shock, the man feels the desire to witness those obscene movements again and cannot resist the temptation to perpetrate what he defines as “‘sacrifices’ to the witch mask”: putting the mask on other girls’ faces again and again.

The first-person narrator of “The Witch Mask” refers to the poem “Le masque du Samourai” (1918) written by the largely forgotten and generally disdained 20th-century French poet Maurice Magre, which is at the core of the story. I will quote it here in my own translation and in the original:

The Samurai Mask

Tonight, the beloved had put the hideous Japanese mask on
and mimed a whimsical dance,
Showing to me as she laughed like a scarecrow,
desperation in the flame of the Samurai’s lacquer.
She was casting her bathrobe over her head,
Unveiling beauties and secret lines
With her narrow knees, her nervous bust
Which oddly surmounted the hideous mask.
But when she tried to remove it, the flaming lacquer
had become one with the woman’s face.
Her nails vainly dug into this horror
Glued to her, forever on the splendor
Of her beautiful pure face, there lived like a wound
The grimace of evil and true ugliness.
Beauty! Woe to those who forget you

My beloved screamed with fright, struggling,
 And her voice grew distant and mad
 Under the long silk hairs and the gleaming lacquer.

Le masque du samouraï

Ce soir, la bien-aimée avait mis l'affreux masque
 Japonais et mimait une danse fantasque,
 Me montrant en riant, comme un épouvantail,
 Le désespoir en laque feu du Samouraï.
 Elle faisait voler son peignoir sur sa tête,
 Dévoilait les beautés et les lignes secrètes
 De ses genoux étroits, de son buste nerveux
 Que surmontait bizarrement le masque affreux.
 Mais quand elle voulut l'ôter, la laque en flame
 Ne faisait qu'un avec son visage de femme.
 Ses ongles vainement labouraient cette horreur
 Collée à elle, pour toujours sur la splendeur
 Du bel ovale pur, vivait comme une plaie
 La grimace du mal et de la laideur vraie.
 Beauté! Malheur à qui t'oublie un seul
 La bien-aimée hurlait d'effroi, se débattant,
 Et sa voix devenait éloignée et démente
 Sous les longs poils de soie et la laque éclatante.⁵³

It is almost impossible to trace the origins of this poem's topic. The idea of not being able to take off a demon mask is rooted in folklore – in Japan it is called the “flesh-adhering mask” (*nikuzuki no men* 肉付きの面) legend – many versions of which also survive in Buddhist tales, or *setsuwa*. Magre was fascinated with Buddhism and may have come to know the legend from many sources.

But what interests us is what Kurahashi found in Magre's poetic rewriting of the Japanese legend, which she decided to mention in her short story. As explained by Sakaki, Kurahashi, with her strong tendency to take intertextual inspiration from previous works, was “at war with critics who put a premium on originality” and also with the need to acquire “literary citizenship, necessary to many critics in Japan who needed to construct the illusion of the

⁵³ MAGRE 1918: 247–248.

contrast between the West and Japan”.⁵⁴ I suggest that she provocatively cites Magre because he is not a famous European literary father and, in addition, his poem borrows a trope originally developed in Asia and introduces it in a different context.

Citing the work of a European male poet of the beginning of the century has different implications, especially considering the Asian origins of the concept of the flesh-adhering mask that Kurahashi refers to through Magre’s poem. At his time, Magre was famous for his inclinations to occultism and spiritualism, with a strong interest also in Buddhism and a tendency for orientalism. This aspect came to the fore especially while he was writing the collection *La montée aux enfers: poésies* (1918), which includes this poem. In this period he is said to have been in a continuous quest for wisdom, and he was defined – not in praising terms – as a “mystic” and a “delusional fantasist” (*visionnaire exalté*).⁵⁵ Magre is listed among many other writers active between the 19th and the 20th century who were inspired by “the Orient” and operated a constant mystification of Chinese and Japanese cultures in their literature.⁵⁶ I argue that by citing Magre’s poem rather than the original legend, thus othering the autochthonous trope of the flesh-adhering mask, Kurahashi can overcome both the Japanese/non-Japanese distinction and the very idea of “literary father”. At the same time, she ironically plays with the stereotypical image of the “samurai mask” as an exotic object, creating a sort of estrangement in the reader.

In my opinion, from Magre’s poem Kurahashi finds also her inspiration for the sexualization of the demon mask, as in the verse: “Dévoilait les beautés et les lignes secretes/De ses genoux étroits, de son buste nerveux” (Unveiling beauties and secret lines/With her narrow knees, her nervous bust). The mask cited by Magre is not a demon mask. Since he speaks of “long silk hairs”, the mask is probably a *menpō*, a facial armour, one of those masks donned by samurai together with their armour and often decorated with a mustache. This would also justify the title of the poem. Kurahashi takes Magre’s association of the legendary flesh-adhering mask with the sensuous movements performed by the girl after donning it, and changes the identity of the mask, from *menpō* (a human male) to something akin to Hannya, a female demon. In particular, Hannya is mainly explained as an expression of “female sexual obsession”.⁵⁷ The narrator at first thinks that it is a Hannya mask, but later understands that it is something slightly different:

I realized that it was not the face of a jealous woman such as Namanari or Hashihime in “The Iron Ring”, but that of a terrible witch [*kijo* 鬼女] – nothing more or less than

⁵⁴ COPELAND/RAMIREZ-CHRISTENSEN 2001: 311–313.

⁵⁵ BLIN 1960: 60.

⁵⁶ SCHWARZ 1927: 183.

⁵⁷ NOGAMI 2009: 713.

that. It looked like the witch in “The Autumn Foliage Hunt” for example – but even more like some witch older [*furui hannya* 古い般若] than the bloody witch [*aka hannya* 赤般若] of the Edo period. It was also a size bigger than a Noh mask – that is, it was just big enough to completely cover an adult's face. And there were no eye holes. In short, this mask was not for Noh plays.⁵⁸

With this introduction, we get a sense of greater strength and power compared to Hannya. Moreover, an image of redness is also conveyed to the reader by the mention of the red Edo Hannya. From the very beginning, therefore, we get an image of a terrifying mask, resembling a demon more than a woman.

Compared to Magre's poem, Kurahashi's work makes the girl's whimsical dance much more sexualized, to the point of describing it as “beastlike violence” and “raw obscenity”. Moreover, in the poem it is the girl who voluntarily dons the mask with an ironic intent, while in Kurahashi's work it is the narrator who decides to sacrifice his victim, even though he senses the danger of the mask. In my reading, this emphasis on eroticism is needed to convey the sexual ecstasy the girl feels before death. The erotic content of Magre's poem is light and limited to provoking the male gaze until he sees “the grimace of evil and true ugliness”, living “like a wound” on her “beautiful pure face”. What turns off the sexual arousal in Magre's poem is precisely the image of the wound, which reminds the blood in “The Witch Mask”. In the case of Kurahashi's work, the grace and the dissoluteness of the body movements are mixed with the terrifying image of the demon, which becomes one with the girls' beautiful face and gets “inflamed with bloody rapture”.⁵⁹ Precisely this clash leads the narrator to admit: “Completely out of my senses, I could not wrench my eyes away for an instant”.⁶⁰ The fear caused by the demoness' face is part of the fascination that steals his gaze. Nevertheless, when it comes to K-ko (and later victims too), even while she is arousing her male voyeur, the involuntary donning of the mask can be defined as a moment of pure Lacanian *jouissance* for her, surpassing pleasure because it is an ideal state of rupture of the symbolic order, which is impossible to reach in reality, in “the real world” (*genjitsu no sekai* 現実の世界).⁶¹

According to Bruce Fink, one of the major Lacanian theorists, the (Other) *jouissance* is “fundamentally incommensurate, unquantifiable, disproportionate and indecent to ‘polite society’”.⁶² In this sense, by representing pleasure coming from the otherworld (and partially manifest in the anti-world), “The Witch Mask” confirms the need to bring out our potential

⁵⁸ KURAHASHI 1998: 59.

⁵⁹ KURAHASHI 1998: 64.

⁶⁰ KURAHASHI 1998: 63.

⁶¹ KURAHASHI 1965a: 102.

⁶² FINK 1995: 122.

self, distant from social mores, in order to feel pure *jouissance*, which in most cases is never experienced in life. As postulated by Kurahashi's concept of anti-world, this is where literature can arrive: it can catch a glimpse of the other-worldly thanks to the mask. The narrator himself, being the cause of this *jouissance* strictly linked to death, can only imagine what is going on under the mask, because he cannot hear her (or him in the case of the male victim) scream. And it is likely that under the mask nothing is going on, because the mask has become one with the victim. The girl (or the boy) has become the witch and soon s(he) has joined the otherworld.

Another important aspect is that the donner of the witch mask loses both sight and voice, since the mask has no eyeholes and no sound is heard from the outside. (S)he has no privilege of seeing others while not being seen by them as in Abe Kōbō's *The Box Man (Hako otoko)*,⁶³ and on the other hand (s)he is deprived of the two most important senses in modern epistemology. Before dying, therefore, s(he) experiences an in-between state where (s)he is suddenly distant from the symbolic order and on her or his way to death, the metaphor for rupture. By being blind, one could also imagine that her/his tactile sense is even more enhanced, so that the sexual rapture becomes even more effective by the loss of sight.

Just before the donning of the mask, K-ko is described as "graceful", "intelligent and reserved. Yet she was capable of becoming unexpectedly passionate (...) in the bedroom".⁶⁴ In brief, she is the ideal beauty, comparable to the noh mask *Waka onna* (若女), the Eternal Woman with no identity (as the impersonality of the initial emphasizes) trained to serve her future husband. As such, she not only has the perfect qualities for being a prototype of the subservient wife, but she can also show a demonic side, so to speak, where needed, namely in the bedroom.⁶⁵ It is well known that on many occasions Kurahashi does not miss the chance to deconstruct the idea of marriage as a situation in which a woman can find her *raison d'être*. In some essays she goes so far as to speak of it as a "prison" (*ori* 檻).⁶⁶ One essay titled "Sexuality as the Key to Evil" (*Sei wa aku e no kagi* 性は悪への鍵) is particularly meaningful, in this respect, because Kurahashi speaks of the ideal feminine as "demonic" (*akumateki* 悪魔的).⁶⁷ She argues that although men are excited by the idea that in every woman there is the "evil" of "sex", and although at the beginning of a relationship a woman will often display it, over time her tendency to think about the family will transform her from an evil creature into "good wife, wise mother", leading her to distance herself from

⁶³ ABE 1973.

⁶⁴ KURAHASHI 1998: 62.

⁶⁵ KURAHASHI 1998: 62.

⁶⁶ KURAHASHI 1964a: 154.

⁶⁷ KURAHASHI 1964a: 151.

sexuality.⁶⁸ Therefore, the only chance for a man to see a woman embody pure erotic evil is to step outside the context of the couple, because it is not in the couple's sex that the demoness can emerge.

Probably in "Spring Night Dreams" the female protagonist with her mask under the skin expresses – if only 20 years later than the above-mentioned essay – this idea of a perfect combination of evil and sexuality, only possible outside marriage. Leaving aside the strong essentialist ideas at the basis of these concepts of marriage and female sexuality, which in 1964 Japan were still largely accepted but nowadays must be problematized, it is interesting to note the similarity with the female figure in our short story. She is the ideal future wife, but also embodies the ideal of the woman who shows her evil side in bed. But once she has donned the mask, the male narrator realizes that the erotic aspect he had been seeing until that moment was nothing compared to the pure erotic expression of the demon, no matter how uninhibited his girlfriend could be.

In order to move beyond the symbolic order, it is not sufficient to be liberal with regard to moral issues, like K-ko's father or the narrator himself; rather, it is necessary to step outside the order, something which is only possible through (anti-world) literature and/or death. Kurahashi in the above-mentioned essay directly links sexual pleasure and the death drive,⁶⁹ since extreme pleasure touches the subtle boundary between life and death. K-ko needs to enter another world to attain complete joy. The Buddha-like serene expression on her face, once the mask has fallen, reveals that probably she has reached that state, which is impossible in this world. The demon is not other with respect to the Waka onna-like beautiful woman. It is just something that normally would not emerge in this world. By revealing the demon hidden within, if only for a few instants, K-ko and later other women (as well as a young male lover) can embrace their evil side, which otherwise would not come out.

Here the Lacanian association of the (Other) *jouissance* with femininity comes to mind.⁷⁰ However, it must be said that, as suggested by many theorists of Lacanian thought, for Lacan the distinction between "female" and "male" is not a question of chromosomal sex. By explaining the difference between the "Other *jouissance*" and "phallic *jouissance*", Bruce Fink makes it explicit that "a man is someone who, regardless of chromosomes, can have one or the other (or at least thinks he can have the other by giving up the one), but not both; a woman is someone who, regardless of chromosomes, can potentially have both".⁷¹ By "phallic *jouissance*" we must understand the *jouissance* coming from genitalia and available

⁶⁸ KURAHASHI 1964a: 154.

⁶⁹ KURAHASHI 1964a: 153.

⁷⁰ BARNARD/FINK 2002: 40.

⁷¹ BARNARD/FINK 2002: 41.

in the real world as “the *jouissance* that fails us, that disappoints us. It is susceptible to failure, and it fundamentally misses our partner”. On the other hand, the Other *jouissance* is defined in the following terms: “What is the status of this unfailing *jouissance* that could never miss the mark? It does not exactly exist, according to Lacan, but it insists as an ideal, an idea, a possibility thought permits us to envision. In his vocabulary, it “ex-sists”: it persists and makes its claims felt with a certain insistence from the outside, as it were”.⁷²

Fink later adds that the Other *jouissance* can only ex-sist because “to exist it would have to be spoken”. He compares it to the writings of mystics, where “what they experience in moments of rapture and ecstasy simply cannot be described: it is ineffable. No words come at that moment. That is, presumably, why Lacan says women have not told the world more about this *jouissance*: it is inarticulable”.⁷³ It is interesting to note that we find a very similar definition of extreme sexual pleasure linked to religious rapture in Kurahashi’s essays: “pleasure is an illusion. What the woman wants is not sexual ecstasy, but communication with the ‘gods’”.⁷⁴

To return now to “The Witch Mask”, Andrew Ng Hock-Soon argues, quoting Nina Cornyetz,⁷⁵ that the male protagonist victimizes his partners by making them don the mask for his desire, a desire which leads to *jouissance*.⁷⁶ While I agree with Ng that this behavior will probably ultimately lead the male protagonist to other-worldly *jouissance*, I also think that it is important to underline that the *jouissance* in this text could not only be a mere supposition or possibility. In my opinion this presence does not exist in this world, but it belongs to the otherworld, persistent and ineffable. The wearer can partly experiment it through the mask for a few instants before death. The ejaculation of the only male partner the protagonist chooses and the Buddha-like serene expression of the women after the mask has fallen are concrete proof of that possible *jouissance*, making “its claims felt with a certain insistence from the outside”.

4 The Trope of “The Flesh-Adhering Mask” in *Onibaba* (1963) and “The Witch Mask”

When speaking about the peculiarity of Kurahashi’s vision of the mask, it is also worth looking back at the original legend of the flesh-adhering mask. We do not know exactly when it was born, but one of the channels by which it became popular was the preaching of Rennyō (1415–1499) – the Buddhist leader and patriarch of the Temple of Honganji in Kyōto

⁷² BARNARD/FINK 2002: 35.

⁷³ BARNARD/FINK 2002: 39–40.

⁷⁴ KURAHASHI 1965c: 200.

⁷⁵ CORNYETZ 1999: 9.

⁷⁶ NG HOCK-SOON 2009: 328.

– and especially his transposition of the story into a noh drama. Yasutomi Shin'ya argues that:

The story passed down in the Yoshizaki town of Kanazuchō in Fukui prefecture called *Yome-odoshi no oni no men* (The Devil Mask of Daughter-in-Law Intimidation) (...) The story is about an old woman who resents her young daughter-in-law's cherished desire to go to Yoshizaki every night to hear Rennyō. In order to stop her from going to hear the Dharma, the mother-in-law puts on a mask with the face of a devil and pops out along the road to scare her. But then the old woman finds that the mask has stuck to her face and she cannot remove it. Furthermore, after repeated encouragement from her daughter-in-law, she begins to recite the nenbutsu and then suddenly the mask falls off her face onto her lap.⁷⁷

This legend provided inspiration for Magre's poem, but also for all of Kurahashi's works exploring the same trope. In Rennyō's tale, the mask, as a possession, has economic and political value, as Yasutomi explains: "When the mother-in-law dons the 'mask that had been secretly held by her family since the time of her ancestors,' in essence she is holding up a shield against the daughter-in-law, asserting her own status and protecting her authority as head of the household". On the contrary, the narrator of "The Witch Mask" affirms: "It's not a memento by which our ancestors established the family's social or financial status. I am the only person who looks on this piece as a family treasure".⁷⁸ I would argue that this opening of the work emphasizes from the very beginning the lack of worldly power of the mask, thereby distancing it from the androcentric logic of authority and domination.

This story and many other versions of it convey a strong Buddhist message. But there is a famous cinematic rendition of the pattern of "daughter-in-law intimidation" which is based on the legend, yet carries strong sexual implications that make it very distant from the Buddhist message: the 1963 film *Onibaba* (鬼婆) directed by Shindō Kaneto 新藤兼人 (1912–2012). This film, set in Japan during the period of civil wars in the fourteenth century, begins with the image of a pit in the ground surrounded by reeds – "a hole, deep and dark, a reminder of ages past".⁷⁹ This pit is the key element of the whole film, together with a strong sense of sexual desire linked to death.

The two women protagonists are widows (a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law living together in a hut) and their sexual desire is emphasized throughout the film. This unsatisfied desire leads the mother-in-law to feel a strong jealousy when a man of the village, Hachi, returns from the battlefield and the daughter-in-law starts visiting him at night to

⁷⁷ YASUTOMI 2006: 183.

⁷⁸ KURAHASHI 1998: 59.

⁷⁹ McDONALD 2006: 113.

have intercourse. The pit is where the two protagonists throw the corpses of soldiers they kill in order to sell their armors to survive. And it is also where the older woman (the mother-in-law) descends in order to get the (Hannya) mask donned by a samurai she kills by deceptively leading him into the pit. She plans to scare her daughter-in-law by wearing the demon mask when she visits the man at night, in order to put an end to her visits.

The older woman's jealousy is explained by her fear of being abandoned by her daughter-in-law, but at the same time it is clear that she would like to be the one visiting the soldier at night. In particular, there is one meaningful scene where the older woman spies on the two as they are having intercourse and is overwhelmed by a strong desire. McDonald describes the scene as follows: "She begins to massage her breasts. A medium shot shows her clinging to a tree, writhing lubricously. The camera slowly pans up to show the tree in silhouette. It is a leafless dead snag. (...) The barren tree confirms some earlier Freudian symbols of frustrated sexual energy".⁸⁰ Here sexual drive and death are clearly combined, since the tree she clings to is a dead one.

In *Onibaba* the Hannya mask embodying death-bringing jealousy and sexual drive – in accordance with its original role in noh dramas – is matched with the pit, where the older woman first finds the object, and where she risks her life. As John Petty notes, "In psychoanalytical terms, the pit might be read in terms of vaginal symbolism, in which the hole becomes an enveloping pit that literally swallows men, and into which they disappear forever, making explicit the male fear of female sexuality".⁸¹ By implicitly referring to the matching of sexual drive and death, Petty ultimately sees the pit as a passage into the otherworld:

It is, unmistakably, a gateway, literally and functionally separating the land of the living from the land of the dead. Following this reading, the scene in which the old woman descends into the pit to retrieve the mask and the armaments of the dead samurai takes on new meaning, as it emphasizes the fact that she enters Hell willingly, unlike the young woman and Hachi, who are caught up in a situation beyond their control.⁸²

In my view it is possible to consider *Onibaba* as another source of inspiration for "The Witch Mask", although Kurahashi never explicitly mentions the film. In her story it is not a pit but the mask itself which provides a passage into the otherworld; but exactly like the pit in *Onibaba*, the mask inevitably leads to death. The male protagonist in Kurahashi's work is attracted to the mask even though he knows that it brings death, just as the older woman,

⁸⁰ McDONALD 2006: 114.

⁸¹ PETTY 2011: 124 (footnote).

⁸² PETTY 2011: 124.

the protagonist of *Onibaba*, is attracted to the pit and risks her life to descend into it and retrieve the mask. Both endings are open and while there is no certainty that the protagonists will die, we are made aware of the risk that they might face and are left in doubt.⁸³

In my reading, the two protagonists' attraction to death is due to sexual desire, a desire which is unsatisfied. But there is one big difference in the outcomes of the two works: in *Onibaba* this desire is destined to remain unfulfilled because it depends on sexual intercourse with a man, and Hachi – the only available man – is dead by the end of the film. Indeed, the flesh-adhering mask does not fall from the face of the older woman, but it is broken by the daughter-in-law. She smashes it because it is the only way to free her mother-in-law from the mask, and hence from her deadly jealousy and desire. And when she takes it off, the mask has left many scars on the woman's face. On the other hand, in my reading of the "The Witch Mask" the protagonist's desire at least brings *jouissance* to his victims, a *jouissance* which is only possible thanks to the mask, which enables the characters to reach the otherworld. Therefore, the mask can fall naturally, once it has fulfilled its task.

Despite the fact that the legend of *nikuzuki no men* has been re-narrated and rewritten in different versions over the centuries, to the best of my knowledge, the wearer never finds death because of the mask. The only cases in which the flesh-adhering mask is directly connected to death is in Kurahashi's "The Witch Mask", "Spring Night Dreams" (even if the death is of someone else and not of the protagonist), "The Autumn Hell" and the essay "'The Rope-walking' and the Mask" ("*Tsunawatari*" to *kamen ni tsuite* 「綱渡り」と仮面について),⁸⁴ which I will speak about in the next section. In the same essay Kurahashi also makes it explicit that she sees the narration of sex as impossible without the experience of death or evil. For the above reasons, we could argue that in "The Witch Mask" Kurahashi borrows the sexualization of the mask from Magre, pushes it to an extreme, and finally connects its attractiveness to the deadly fear it causes. Moreover, the link between the flesh-adhering mask, death and the act of writing is entirely Kurahashi's own, and completes the quadrinomial mask-sex-death-writing.

5 The Passive Act of Writing Seen through Kurahashi's Essays and "The Witch Mask"

As is well known, the postwar context consolidated the separation of the two spheres of "female-style literature" (*joryū bungaku* 女流文学) and "(male standard) Literature", which confined the woman writer to the margins as intellectually and artistically inferior. Bullock

⁸³ McDONALD 2006: 120–121.

⁸⁴ KURAHASHI 1965c.

explains: “Keenly aware of these distinctions, the women writers who made their debuts during the 1960s boom in women’s literature explicitly sought to inhabit this ‘masculine’ sphere so as to disrupt it from within, challenging its privileged claim to artistic and intellectual authenticity”.⁸⁵ Kurahashi was one of the biggest contributors in this respect and she made a huge effort to problematize this categorization throughout her life.

Apart from this distinction, Kurahashi’s general idea is that the act of writing as she conceives it is “evil” (*aku* 悪), because it has no social usefulness whatsoever and therefore it is only useful to the writer as an act of “prayer” (*inori* 祈り) or “self-salvation” (*jiko kyūsai* 自己救済).⁸⁶ As she explains in the essay “The Labyrinth and Negativity of Fiction” (*Shōsetsu no meiro to hiteisei* 小説の迷路と否定性), the anti-world which is created in the novel is the imitation (*nisemono* 贋物) of the everyday world, but it could also be interpreted as “a god” (*kami* 神) or “void” (*mu* 無).⁸⁷

In the essay “The Medium and the Hero” (*Miko to hīrō* 巫女とヒーロー) Kurahashi imagines having two identities within herself, which metaphorically bring her paranoia and a sense of schizophrenia: the writer and the “normal” woman.⁸⁸ The normal woman is her outer layer or skin (*gaihi* 外皮) which has endured by virtue of her normality and attractiveness as “everybody’s friend” (*happō bijin* 八方美人). On the other hand, the writer is the “monster-like witch” (*bakemonojimita yōjo* 化物じみた妖女), or the *miko*, mediating between gods and humans at a Shintō shrine.⁸⁹ In my reading, this mediation is akin to the in-between position of the anti-world created by the writer and embodied by the mask in “The Witch Mask”, which separates the everyday world from the otherworld. To illustrate this point, Kurahashi refers to the tale of Archimedes and the golden crown story:

By counterfeiting the crown of “existence” of the real world through the acquisition of a time in the imaginary world different from the everyday-life time, this not only becomes another “reality”, but burns the world off through the fire of “evil” or “principle of death”, in opposition to “good”, or the principle of “endurance” which dominates the real world.⁹⁰

The image of the female writer as a witch or *yōjo*, a woman not feeling comfortable with her gender,⁹¹ or a person who only has the appearance of a woman but is not a real one,⁹² is

⁸⁵ BULLOCK 2010: 165.

⁸⁶ KURAHASHI 1964b: 150.

⁸⁷ KURAHASHI 1966a: 289.

⁸⁸ KURAHASHI 1965d: 180.

⁸⁹ KURAHASHI 1965d:180–181.

⁹⁰ KURAHASHI 1966a: 289.

⁹¹ KURAHASHI 1964b: 149.

⁹² KURAHASHI 1965a: 184.

frequent in Kurahashi's essays. In "Literature as Poison", the above-mentioned essay she wrote in 1966, at the age of 31, Kurahashi declares that in her thirties she has finally become an "elderly person" (*rōjin* 老人) – she is no longer a young witch,⁹³ nor is she an elderly woman.⁹⁴ In the same essay, she explains that she has always aspired to become a man, but since this is not possible, she at least hopes that becoming an elderly person will help her find freedom from her "femaleness", which confines her to the mere role of "secretion" or "imitation", compared to the "action" of male writers (the reference here is clearly to the discrimination of women writers).⁹⁵ These affirmations, taken as they are, are rather controversial from the perspective of contemporary feminism. Nevertheless, what she refers to is obviously not her idea of "woman". On the contrary, we are clearly in front of a strategic use of the sexist and essentialist concepts rooted in Japanese society of her period; Kurahashi uses these in order to defy them, denouncing the stereotype at the base of the powerless position of women at the time.

In this essay the change of perspective with respect to the concept of *yōjo* becomes clearer when she declares that when she was still in her twenties, she was obliged to perform the role of the young witch, since as a "hermaphrodite" (*han in'yōteki guyūsha* 半陰陽的具有者) she was writing from a position between "girl" (*shōjo* 少女) and "boy" (*seinen* 青年). But later she realized that the "girl" was an imitation and that the "boy" was something "other" inside her, turning into her desire to become a man. This "man" is the part of herself who is in charge to punish her when she, as a woman writer, behaves "falsely" and tries to communicate superficially with the external world, in order to cope with expectations. This device became the foundation of her literary career and she defines it as "the secret of her own literature seen from the point of view of psychology".⁹⁶

It must be said that Kurahashi's complex intellectual outlook and her view of identity as multiple and fluid does not allow us to interpret her definitions in a single, unambiguous way. The idea of the "him" within herself, like many other crucial concepts, appears more than once in her work, and in different forms. In another essay, for example, it is defined more broadly. Kurahashi confesses that just as an adolescent will masturbate to the ideal woman he has in mind, she writes by trying to communicate with an imaginary reader, or the "him" within herself (*watashi no naka no kare* わたしのなかのかれ).⁹⁷ Kurahashi's internal "him" is therefore the ideal "other" par excellence, yet it is part of her. On the one hand, this means that she is trying to communicate with a reader who is only ideal and therefore

⁹³ KURAHASHI 1966b: 301.

⁹⁴ KURAHASHI 1966b: 299.

⁹⁵ KURAHASHI 1966b: 301.

⁹⁶ KURAHASHI 1966b: 299; KURAHASHI 1964b: 149.

⁹⁷ KURAHASHI 1964b: 149; KURAHASHI 1966a: 296.

does not exist, and that she cannot really reach “him” beyond the darkness on the other side of her works: she can only reach the “him” within herself.⁹⁸ Moreover, speaking of the “world of fantasy” (*sōzōteki sekai* 想像の世界) in which the writer is supposed to accompany the reader, she declares: “the route to accompany the reader into this world is a ‘labyrinth’ similar to anguish itself, and at the end of it what awaits is not a golden ‘kingdom’, but only ‘death’ and ‘void’”.⁹⁹ On the other hand, this means that Kurahashi ultimately writes mainly for herself: a lonely onanistic act without any social impact – as already noted. In this case too, the idea she conveys is that she writes “lost in fantasies and shut up in her room”.¹⁰⁰

In “The Witch Mask” this passive act is embodied by the erotic and solitary ecstasy brought about by the mask. The latter brings out evil and is a means to communicate with the otherworld, just as the evil act of writing, as the creation of the anti-world, is a way to communicate with the other (or the reader) within oneself. Needless to say, the association of evil and literary writing is not unique to Kurahashi, as is clear from Julia Kristeva’s seminal *Powers of Horror* (1982). Here, referring to Bataille’s “Literature and Evil” (among other works), she states: “Because it occupies its place, because it hence decks itself out in the sacred power of horror, literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word”.¹⁰¹ Pointing at Kristeva’s idea of literature, Toril Moi explains that “the revolutionary subject, whether masculine or feminine, is a subject that is able to allow the jouissance of semiotic motility to disrupt the strict symbolic order”.¹⁰²

The act of writing is not only frequently linked to evil, but also to *jouissance*, as Gustavo Restivo notes: “Lacan’s frequent recourse to writers and to literature concerning which, and in differing from Freud, he did not so much seek to recapture the message of the unconscious, but rather its very materiality, that is, its letter. The letter does not represent *jouissance*, it is *jouissance*”.¹⁰³ Bruce Fink also stresses the connection of the *jouissance* of the Other with writing, for instance in the following passage, where he refers to *Finnegans Wake*:

The sacrifice involved in castration is to hand over a certain jouissance to the Other and let it circulate in the Other, that is, let it circulate in some sense “outside” of ourselves. That may take the form of writing, for example, or of the establishment of

⁹⁸ KURAHASHI 1966a: 296.

⁹⁹ KURAHASHI 1966a: 295.

¹⁰⁰ KURAHASHI 1964b: 149.

¹⁰¹ KRISTEVA 1982: 208.

¹⁰² MOI 1985: 169.

¹⁰³ RESTIVO 2013: 161.

a “body of knowledge”, knowledge that takes on a “life of its own,” independent of its creator, as it may be added to or modified by others.¹⁰⁴

Getting back to “The Witch Mask”, the male protagonist is here invested with a peculiar role. It is true that the male is victimizing women to satisfy his voyeuristic desire, as underlined by Andrew Ng Hock-Soon,¹⁰⁵ but I argue that in this case it is not a hegemonic act, because he is not superimposing a moral and controlling gaze. In a way he is liberating those women from their yoke of family and society constrictions. It is the male gaze to be satisfied, but in this case the narrator’s desire ends up helping the woman catching a taste of real freedom. If we take death and access to the otherworld as a metaphor in “The Witch Mask” for escaping the symbolic order through literary writing, we can also explain why the male protagonist thinks that sooner or later he will write about that experience and then don the mask himself, knowing that it will mean the death of social mores and entrance into another world of unknown (Other) and ineffable *jouissance*, a *jouissance* “that cannot be said” like the darkness of the otherworld.¹⁰⁶ This probable act will lead to the shattering of the symbolic order and to the “feminization” of the male protagonist, whose dominating role is threatened by his attraction to the deadly mask, as a bridge to the unknown, a world which cannot be controlled by the symbolic and which one can only passively embrace. Nevertheless, the male protagonist has the crucial role of allowing women to know an unknown part of the self. Without him the mask would not accomplish its task.

I argue that the male protagonist of “The Witch Mask” could be interpreted as the metaphoric “him” inside the woman writer. The “him” inside is the traditional holder of the objectifying gaze, but at the same time “his” control is paradoxically necessary for the woman writer, so that she may not be tempted to follow *bundan* expectations in order to gain legitimation and to be accepted, as mentioned before.¹⁰⁷ With the “him” inside her, she can continue expressing herself and showing her dark side, which she could not do if she were to unveil every fragile part of herself. The mask, as in *Blue Journey*, is only a temporary device, useful not to show too much to the real world, or society, and to continue with the painful and lonely activity of writing the anti-world.

As mentioned before, I argue that the act of wearing the mask is an act of agency on the part of the victim. It is initiated by the male protagonist; however, the narration reveals that the male is not free to act as subject. The mask is the real holder of the agency. Indeed, at the beginning of the narration the mask stares at the protagonist with its golden eyes. The

¹⁰⁴ FINK 1995: 99.

¹⁰⁵ NG HOCK-SOON 2009: 327–328.

¹⁰⁶ BARNARD/FINK 2002: 83.

¹⁰⁷ KURAHASHI 1964 b: 149.

protagonist confesses: “Gleaming with phosphorescence in the darkness were the two eyes of the witch [...] as I contemplated the mask in my hands, I was tempted, perhaps by that mysterious gleam, to put the mask on”.¹⁰⁸ At the very end, he is aware that he will eventually succumb to the temptation of wearing the mask, surrendering to its dangerous and seductive gaze: “All that remains in my mind, a clearly drawn picture occupying a corner of my brain, is the thought of putting the witch mask on my own face. I feel as if the golden eyes of the witch smile at me seductively every time they see me”.¹⁰⁹ The victim is referred to as “witch” (*kijo* 鬼女) after donning the mask and, as soon as the victims wear it, they become one with it. It is therefore arguable that the agency is perpetrated by the mask together with the spirits of the past and present victims it collected. I believe that the temptation felt by the protagonist, who cannot resist putting the mask on the victim’s face and look at them dancing despite knowing that they will die, is the mask’s wish, transmitted through the gaze. It is a sacrifice to the witch mask more than a crime committed for his own pleasure. Moreover, the protagonist admits that he took inspiration from the film *The Collector*, based on the homonymous novel by John Fowles (1963), for the seriality of the crime and the idea of not engaging emotionally with the victims anymore.¹¹⁰ He clearly says: “Since then, I have become a ‘collector’ who catches and chloroforms ‘prey’ – my ‘sacrifices’ to the witch mask now occur approximately once a year”.¹¹¹ In both *The Collector* and in “The Witch Masks” there is premeditation, but the urge comes from a different source. In *The Collector* the male protagonist fully embodies the objectifying gaze of patriarchy, but in Kurahashi’s work, while objectifying the girls, he is victim of the gaze himself. In an article on Hitchcock’s films and assuming as his starting point Laura Mulveys’ theories on the male objectifying gaze, Michael Walker argues that the gazer’s power is undermined by the “forthright returning of the look”.¹¹² And the mask’s gaze is much more powerful, since it comes from the otherworld, therefore it is even stronger in defying the male’s sense of power.

From Kurahashi’s perspective, writing and masquerading are intertwined not only for women, as in *Blue Journey*, but also for male writers. In the 1965, in the essay “‘The Rope-walking’ and the Mask”, she explained why she did not appreciate Ōe Kenzaburō’s 大江健三郎 (born 1935) latest essays collection, “The Solemn Rope-walking” (*Genshuku na tsunawatari* 厳肅な綱渡, 1965), by stating that she could not perceive his mask. I will quote her words:

¹⁰⁸ KURAHASHI 1998: 60–61.

¹⁰⁹ KURAHASHI 1998: 65.

¹¹⁰ FOWLES 1963.

¹¹¹ KURAHASHI 1998: 64.

¹¹² WALKER 2005: 166; MULVEY 1975.

My irritation with Oe's "rope-walking" is linked to the impossibility of finding a solid mask. By mask I mean that the darkness of the otherworld dons in facing this world and which, when reversed reveals on its back side an idea of death which is as sticky as blood. But in the case of Ōe, this sensation of death is almost always lacking. At a glance, this could be seen as a strange (or even unique) way of thinking, like, for instance, narrating sex without having yet encountered death or evil.¹¹³

In Kurahashi's opinion, the mask is not a tool to hide the writer's real self; by contrast, it can reveal his or her hidden sides, something that seems to be possible only through literary writing and not through essays. The mask, therefore, a metaphor for fictional writing, helps to explore multiple facets of the self and "entering in communication with the him inside her". Instead, when writing non-fiction she is tempted to show an "I" that does not exist – or "if it existed, it should be killed".¹¹⁴ The risk when writing essays is that the author shows a "soft and vulnerable" side, as in Ōe's case. For Kurahashi this revealed fragility forces the reader to accept a sort of "congestion of the self". She argues that the words expressed by this side, revealing and protecting the fragile self, have an ambiguous essence, at once aggressive and complicit.¹¹⁵ For this reason, as a reader of Ōe, Kurahashi wishes his writings could transform into a powerful mask, stable like the moon in the sky, and reveal the writer's (and probably also the reader's) dark self.¹¹⁶

Clearly, Kurahashi's words refer to the *shishōsetsu*, a very well-established genre in the postwar Japanese literary scenario, which was supposed to reveal the writer's inner thoughts and frailties. Here, by implicitly comparing essays to *shishōsetsu*, she encourages the readers not to look for a "real self" in non-fiction. Regardless of how complex and full of metaphors Kurahashi's essays could be, the dichotomy surface/depth she is implying here might look in apparent contrast with the idea of fluidity of identity I mentioned above. Nevertheless, in my opinion it is not. Indeed, she plays with the same dichotomy used by supporters of *shishōsetsu* and brings an opposite theory: when showing a fragile side, rather than revealing a deeper self, the result is actually superficial. The "I" that is being narrated is inevitably fake, as there is no real and unique "I". On the contrary, by using the mask of fiction, the writer can explore much deeper (and darker) aspects of reality, revealing a potential self that was initially hidden and is neither unchangeable, nor inherent.

¹¹³ KURAHASHI 1965c: 209.

¹¹⁴ KURAHASHI 1965c: 208.

¹¹⁵ KURAHASHI 1965c: 208.

¹¹⁶ KURAHASHI 1965c: 208–209.

6 Concluding remarks

In Kurahashi's works the mask is often compared to an extra layer of skin and therefore perceived as being one with the face. But we have seen that, depending on the work, the mask can take on many different roles. It can show the fluidity of the self; it can conceal a supposed "self" which in the end is found to be the same as the mask itself; or it can deconstruct the very concept of self, revealing an aspect of identity which without the mask would remain forever suppressed, as in "The Witch Mask".

In this paper I have shown how in "The Witch Mask", a short story published in 1985, Kurahashi offers a reflection on the act of writing. I have analyzed the trope of the flesh-adhering mask, used in many works and essays by the writer, and I have shown how this work could be considered a metaphor of the (female) writer's exploration of the submerged (or evil) side of herself through the painful act of writing. The mask is a bridge to the extreme or to the otherworld, and it is possible for the wearer to explore his or her interiority thanks to the superimposing gaze of a male counterpart, representing in my view the "him" inside, necessary in order for the female writer to avoid over-exposing her vulnerability in response to external expectations. If the mask is a prerogative of the writer, this is because the void or death can be hidden beneath it, and for Kurahashi these are the only things worth representing in literature: the anti-world, a glimpse of the otherworld which otherwise could not be explored, and which is embodied by the deadly reverse of the mask. The anti-world is indeed the closest place to the otherworld (or our deep dark side) that we can get to know in this life, and literary or poetic writing (in Kristevian terms) is a painstaking way to get an idea of it, as are the hole in *Onibaba*, the noh stage in "Autumn Hell" and the mask in "The Witch Mask", "Spring Night Dreams" or in "Dream of Jidō". For a postwar woman writer the task is even more difficult, insofar as she is subjected to the demanding gaze of society, which relegates her to the rank of "female writer". But probably it is worth the effort, since through the anti-world of the mask or literature what we can grasp from this side is a taste of *jouissance*, a complete and extreme freedom from the constrictions of this world, unattainable without facing "death" and the "void".¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ KURAHASHI 1966a: 295.

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