

GROTESQUE FEMININITY IN *RASHŌMON* AND *IN A GROVE*

By

ISABELLA MARIA ANGHEL

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Approved by:

Dr. Kaoru Hayashi
Department of East Asian Studies

Abstract

The definition of femininity has differed among cultures throughout history. One aspect of proper behavior described in literature written in, or based on, the Japanese Heian period (794—1185) is the subversion of female autonomy with respect to their husbands. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's short story, "In a Grove" (1922) and Kurosawa Akira's 1951 film *Rashōmon*, both set in Heian Japan, are influential for the depiction of multiple viewpoints of the same event, which greatly affects the main female character, Masago's, complicated femininity.

Reconsidering the Heian depictions of expected femininity, I propose my own definition of the grotesque feminine as the nature of the female sexuality, which is at once abject and repellent yet maintains a seductive quality, thus being the object of both desire and disgust. Utilizing the frameworks of the Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque, Julia Kristeva's abjection, and the prohibition against looking (*miru na no kinshi*), I explore how Masago is depicted as a grotesque feminine character despite her subservient and attractive representation. After applying the characteristics of the abject to Masago's character, I then consider how the theme of multiple interpretations of the same event contributes to the grotesque gaze against Masago to solidify her position within the grotesque feminine.

Introduction

Women throughout history have had the responsibility of maintaining a particular image of femininity as prescribed by their respective cultures. The Heian period (794—1185) in Japan is no exception for the standards of grace, femininity, and womanhood which were placed on women. Through an analysis of the female character, Masago in the Heian set story *In a Grove*, on which the film *Rashōmon* is based, I will examine how Masago's character becomes grotesque although she conforms to the Heian standards of femininity. This will be done by the application of various relevant theoretical frameworks which pertain to the understanding of the grotesque, the utilization of the traditional prohibition on looking, and implementing the Heian notion of femininity to this definition, as it concerns Masago.

Authored by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke in 1922, *In a Grove* tells the story of the same characters of the 1950 film directed by Akira Kurosawa, *Rashōmon*, and follows the same plot. After a traveling couple encounters a bandit in the grove, the husband is tied up as his wife is raped by the bandit, eventually, the husband is found dead in the grove, and his widow, the bandit, and other characters give their testimonies as to what caused the event to occur, highlighting the influence of the Rashōmon effect. The short story was based on a tale from the early twelfth-century collection *Konjaku monogatari shū* with similar premises, written in Akutagawa's style of modernism.

State of the Field: Scholarship on *In a Grove* and *Rashōmon*

Studies on Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's *In a Grove* reveal the storytelling technique of characters giving different and conflicting viewpoints of the same account. This comes to be

known as the Rashōmon effect, named after the 1950 film *Rashōmon* and has become a mainstay of storytelling styles. Such a technique is made possible through the utilization of what scholars refer to as an unreliable narrator.¹ Fiona Otway discusses the narration style of *In a Grove* as being led by the characters themselves who “serve as the primary narrators while also inhabiting the story world,” with only the contradictions between the characters’ accounts alluding to unreliability.² I agree with this characterization of the unreliable narrator as it reveals that characters can have different varying opinions of each other which can affect their presentation to the audiences of the story. Notably, this can affect whether or not Masago is widely interpreted to be a grotesque feminine character or not.

Whilst some scholars focus on the narrative technique of Akutagawa’s work, others delve into works which have inspired Akutagawa’s *In a Grove*. Blair Davis, Robert Anderson, and Jan Walls explain that although *In a Grove* is based on the *Konjaku* tale “A Man Travelling with His Wife to Tamba Province Gets Tied Up by a Young Man at Mt. Ohe,” Akutagawa was heavily inspired by Ambrose Bierce’s *The Moonlit Road* for the “detailed statements by the main participants recounting the sequence of events leading to a murder, one of which statements were made by a murder victim speaking through a medium.”³ The widespread consensus regarding *In*

¹ The Rashōmon effect refers to a situation in which an act causes different contradictory interpretations or recounts by the witnesses, suspects, and victims involved in the act. Not only is there no singular truth, but the truths elicited by others are influenced by factors such as social and gender hierarchies. It is important to understand that the Rashōmon effect is affected by the human perspective, memories, and process of recounting unique to each individual in addition to being limited by the law which is inherently based on inequality and social hierarchy. The complexity of the Rashōmon effect lies in the understanding that there can be multiple versions of the truth even if they differ from one another. Rather than attempting to discover which version of the truth is the correct one, observers of the Rashōmon effect must come to the realization that there can be multiple truths regarding a situation and individuals must come to terms with the unsatisfactory reality that one clear conclusion may never be reached. Thus, the Rashōmon effect represents the unique perspective of the world which all people possess, and its difficulty in understanding arises from the natural human difficulty to understand others as being right. Multiple truths do not invalidate or falsify the accounts of other individuals, it simply exists among other statements and truths, highlighting an aspect of the Rashōmon effect as a communication phenomenon.

² Fiona Otway, *The Unreliable Narrator in Documentary* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 3.

³ Blair Davis, Robert Anderson, Jan Walls, *From Konjaku and Bierce to Akutagawa to Kurosawa: Ripples and the Evolution of Rashōmon* (Routledge, 2016), 33.

a Grove is Akutagawa's adaptation of a *Konjaku* Buddhist didactic tale into a murder mystery, and scholarship reveals that the combination of the *Konjaku* tale's plot with the mystery plot of *The Moonlit Road* is likely to have given birth to *In a Grove* as it is recognized today.⁴

Kinya Tsuruta's analysis on *In a Grove* supports the point that the testimonies of the wife, samurai, and bandit reveal more about the psychology of the characters than the event itself.

Tsuruta's interpretation of the short story is that "the bandit acts as a catalyst to force the couple to face new and unpleasant truths about themselves."⁵ Thus, the lack of closure offered in the short story is a purposeful choice on Akutagawa's behalf and speaks to his inherently negative perspective of humanity that the world lacks rationality and humans are better off ignoring the corruption of the world. Indeed, *In a Grove* is an irrational novel itself for despite the fact that three individuals confess to a murder, there are no charges pressed for lack of evidence. Tsuruta notes that Akutagawa's choice of setting for the novel, a bamboo grove, represents that "nature has a savage (irrational) power which was used to destroy man-made beauty (rational order)," showing how the novel blurs the line between wilderness and civility and law. This research seeks to examine how the blurred line between rational and irrational order contributes to Masago's depiction as a grotesque feminine character.

Scholars agree that Akira Kurosawa's 1951 film *Rashōmon* was directly inspired by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's two short stories *In a Grove* and *Rashōmon*. Kurosawa combines elements of the two stories, which yield the revelation that all characters except the monk are motivated by greed and self-exoneration.⁶ The cinematic technique of juxtaposing nature and unpleasant circumstances is a strength of Kurosawa's work. Tadao Sato explains the scene of

⁴ A limitation of this approach to *In a Grove* is the fact that it overlooks the crucial *Rashōmon* effect which makes it impossible for the readers or characters to determine who was the killer of the samurai in the woods, whereas *The Moonlit Road* has a conclusion to the murder and identifies a culprit.

⁵ Kinya Tsuruta, *The Defeat of Rationality and the Triumph of Mother "Chaos": Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's Journey* (International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, National Institute for the Humanities, 1999) 87.

⁶ Blair Davis, Robert Anderson, Jan Walls, *Rashōmon Effects: Kurosawa, and their legacies* (Routledge, 2016) 14.

Tajōmaru running to get Masago after he has tied up her husband is comprised of fourteen short shots including the sunlight shining through the leaves, yielding a picture of pathetic beauty.⁷ Pathetic beauty in the sense of Japanese cinematography refers to the genre of showing the sufferings of someone trying to get away from a pursuer, Kurosawa is within a known genre but has illuminated it with crystalline beauty. This paper seeks to utilize Masago's character as depicted in the film, unanimously with her depiction in the story and will point out when distinctions between the two should be made for the purposes of this analysis. Therefore, Kurosawa's cinematic choice of depicting the pathetic beauty will be useful in understanding how Masago's character displays Heian's standards of femininity. I will contrast this to the "grotesque feminine" as defined by myself inspired by such concepts as Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of grotesque, Michelle Li's utilization of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and Julia Kristeva's abjection, depicted in both the film and short story. This paper aims to bring greater awareness to the depiction of Masago's character within the context of Heian femininity standards and develop the idea that she is a character that embodies both femininity and grotesque qualities, as analyzed through her depiction of other characters and portrayal in the film.

The theoretical framework for this paper will be Michelle Li's adaptation of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque to *setsuwa* and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. Li's explanation of the carnivalesque is useful for situating Masago's character as encompassing the mutually influential properties of being both feminine and grotesque, as facilitated by the carnivalesque setting of the story.⁸ Kristeva's theory is useful in understanding the concept of abjection, which is caused by border crossing and ambiguity leading to the failure to distinguish between subject

⁷ Tadao Sato, *Rashōmon* in *Focus on Rashōmon*, ed. Donald Richie (Eaglewood cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1972), 100.

⁸ Michelle Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 42—115.

and object, or self and other, which leads to repulsion.⁹ In particular, the desire to identify the self from the other causes both repulsion and attraction and will be useful in analyzing the ambiguous and often contradictory nature of Masago as a grotesque feminine character.¹⁰

The macabre theme presented in *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* can be understood as contributing to the grotesque characterization of the female characters of the story. Akutagwa's *In a Grove* draws on direct inspiration from the *Konjaku* tale "A Man Travelling With His Wife," a *setsuwa* that represents a society where social and class barriers temporarily disappear, as what Mikhail Bakhtin might characterize a carnivalesque setting. The notion of the carnivalesque would have historically been at odds with the reality of Heian Japan, which observed a social hierarchy. However, the temporal lack of barriers contributes to transgression, the abject quality of the story as the bandit Tajōmaru rapes Masago and fools her samurai husband, despite the large class division between the two parties. The breaching of social and personal boundaries is further complicated by the objectification of Masago and her perception as simultaneously desirable and abjectable both by her husband and Tajōmaru. As such, Masago's femininity becomes a point of discussion for the perception of her character as grotesque feminine, which I will analyze as occurring as a result of a carnivalesque setting contributing to abjectable situations.

In mobilizing my argument, I will first define the grotesque feminine by drawing upon scholarship which explains the Heian standards of femininity, then I will define the meaning of grotesque and what it entails for something to be characterized as such. After establishing a definition of the grotesque feminine and providing historical context about *Rashōmon* and *In a*

⁹ The causes of abjection are rooted in the upsetting of normalcy in daily life by violating the conditions which make life comfortable. For example, death is a source of trauma because it violates one's humanity by showing people the fragility of mankind through its imminent and unstoppable corruption.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection in The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 98—100.

Grove, I will apply the individual theoretical frameworks of carnivalesque, abjection, and the concept of a taboo against gazing at Masago's character. Lastly, I will draw on the information presented through the various applications of the frameworks to argue for my conclusion that Masago is a grotesque feminine character, although this is contradictory to the traditional standards of Heian femininity which she also embodies.

The Grotesque Feminine

For the purpose of pursuing this argument, the grotesque feminine will be defined as the nature of the female sex which is abjectable and repellent to individuals yet maintains a seductive quality which is attractive, thus being the object of both desire and disgust. Consulting the understanding of femininity in Heian Japan, scholar Rebekah Hunter suggests that "the aesthetic of womanhood is oftentimes related to an ideal of female passivity in romantic relations with men and of selflessness."¹¹ Two of Hunter's frameworks used for describing the notion of femininity in the Heian period are controlled visibility, and beauty and viewership.

Firstly, controlled visibility refers to the strategic ability to draw attention to what cannot be seen, therefore reinforcing one's mystery and exalted status. The audience's first encounter with Masago in *Rashōmon* is as she is sequestered in a veiled hat and wearing a flowing gown, proving that Masago's wealth and knowledge of fashion served to distinguish her from those who lacked them. Edith Sarra contends that women in Heian Japan were concerned with self-presentation, as "it was in her interest, and the interests of her family, to control the conditions under which she would be seen by others."¹² The feminine quality of controlled

¹¹ Rebekah Hunter, *Aesthetics of Womanhood in Heian Japan* (University of Oregon, 2014), iv.

¹² Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 18.

visibility is to make a hierarchical class distinction as well as attribute a certain voyeuristic quality when a lady is seen, reinforcing the separation between the public and private.

The second element of Heian period femininity is beauty and viewership, for which it was neither desirable for a woman to be too easily observed nor too hidden.¹³ Thus, the garments a woman chose to wear served as a proxy indicator of her bodily beauty, as her wealth and status made such garments accessible only to herself. In this regard, clothing functioned as an important indicator of femininity, wealth, and taste, and presented a greater appeal than the bare body. The purity and ethereal qualities of a woman directly contributed to her femininity, as such, layers of clothing functioned as a barrier from the pollutants of the outside world.¹⁴ Zoe LaLonde explains that pollution can refer to both seen and unseen agents that might affect the physical or mental well-being of an individual.¹⁵ Such pollutants might be contact with blood, wounds, excrement, corpses, spirits, and demons. Considering that pollutants would threaten the sanctity of a woman's femininity, it is expected of her status that in *Rashōmon* Masago is introduced swaddled in robes and riding on her husband's horse so as not to come into contact with the pollutants of the outdoors. This connects to Kristeva's abjection, as she states, "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything," which is why maintaining a distance and thus creating a border, as Masago does through her clothes, is important for humans to maintain their distinction from external wastes.¹⁶ Still, Masago maintains visibility to the public, but a true viewership of her face and physique is obstructed by her clothes, thus contributing to the feminine quality of her character and facilitating to the creation of a border between her and the abjectable conditions of the external world.

¹³ Rebekah Hunter, *Aesthetics of Womanhood in Heian Japan*, 76.

¹⁴ Zoe LaLonde, *Elegantly Intriguing: Form, Function, and Multisensory Aesthetics in Heian Women's Interior Space* (University of Oregon, 2019), 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection in The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 97.

I will develop and propose a concept of grotesque femininity by first understanding the components of Heian femininity and using that as a historical and cultural foundation for my own definition of femininity. By understanding the components of Heian femininity, a concept of grotesque femininity can be developed and proposed. As summarized by Philip Thomson, the grotesque “conveys the notion of simultaneously laughable and horrifying or disgusting,” and the concurrent incongruity of the comic and monstrous aspects of the grotesque initiates an emotional and intellectual response in the beholder.¹⁷ Furthermore, Thomson elaborates that the “grotesque derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way,” which is notable as the grotesque is closely associated with the physically abnormal.¹⁸ Considering the imagery of *In a Grove* is macabre, it is important to observe that the macabre and grotesque often overlap. The macabre pertains to death, and represents a heightening of one’s senses to the horrible or gruesome as facilitated by a strange comic tinge; too much comic relief dulls the response to the gruesome. Such a comic tinge is seen most prominently by Tajōmaru’s character in *Rashōmon* through his exaggerated laughing and hubris despite the gravity of the situation, insisting that he perceives the comic element of the grotesque which is grotesque itself.

This leads to another quality of the grotesque which is a caricature — the ludicrous exaggeration of characteristic or peculiar features to the point of abnormality.¹⁹ For example, Masago’s identity as a loyal wife and victim of her circumstances is disputed by the testimonies of her husband and Tajōmaru, who purposefully portray her as a victimizer. Through describing her behavior as shrieking and heartless, Masago is depicted as abnormal as it contrasts to Heian standards of femininity. Akutagawa and Kurosawa’s narration style of the story facilitates a

¹⁷ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, (Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972), 3, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

grotesque interpretation as they “deliberately prevent a rational and intellectual approach to [his] work, demonstrating that the intolerable and inextricable mixture of incompatibles is a fact of life,” as evidenced through the antagonistic Rashōmon effect.²⁰ As such, the most prominent and common effect of the grotesque is alienation, as the familiar and trusted are made strange and disturbing, thus aggressively disorienting and shocking one’s perspective leading to the interpretation of the grotesque. Moreover, the psychological effect of the grotesque is to highlight the horrifying and disgusting aspects of existence, which can be neutralized by introducing the comic.

Therefore, I argue that the grotesque feminine will be regarded as the transgressions of the attractive familiarity of the Heian feminine qualities to be grotesque. It is unimaginable that an exultant upper-class lady such as Masago, who follows the rigid standards of femininity and class, could be voyeuristically assaulted in front of her husband by a man of lower class and then fail to commit a double suicide out of shame. The absurdity of her character arises from the suggestion that she would choose another man over her husband, as “to make such an open show of resentment is to test the limits of the feminine.”²¹ This highlights the corruption and depravity of the sacred bond between husband and wife and suggests a Bakhtinian over-indulgence of the body which is grotesque.²² Such an exaggeration of the incompatibility of femininity and the grotesque promotes the depiction of the grotesque feminine and even suggests a sadistic pleasure to be taken from indulging the horrifying, cruel and disgusting, particularly as it occurs against one’s will which adds another dimension of cruelty and eroticism.

²⁰ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 47.

²¹ Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs*, 37.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

Working off of this definition of grotesque femininity, I will explore the background and context of *In a Grove* and *Rashōmon*, followed by an analysis utilizing the frameworks of carnivalesque and abjection, and the visual taboo against viewership.

Winner of the Academy Honorary Award and Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film, the 1950 *Rashōmon* film directed by Akira Kurosawa is often considered a classic in the crime drama genre. Based on the short story *In a Grove* authored by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, the film follows the short story's plot with some additional original elements and is titled after another one of Akutagawa's short stories, *Rashōmon*.²³ Although my main focus is on the textual analysis of Akutagawa's short story, *Rashōmon* will be a useful reference point when referring to visual elements of Masago's character which contribute to her portrayal as a grotesque feminine.

On the other hand, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's inspiration for *In a Grove* is *Konjaku monogatari-shū* "A Man Traveling with His Wife to Tamba Province Gets Tied Up by a Young Man at Mt. Ohe."²⁴ Published in 1922, Akutagawa's *In a Grove* adapts this story by introducing the element of multiple witnesses and killing off the samurai's character. Notably, *In a Grove* tells the story of the young man tying up the samurai and raping his wife, although conflicting elements in the story result in the ambiguous conclusion of whether the young man or the wife was responsible for the death of the samurai. Importantly, the trust between the young married

²³ *Rashōmon* is a short story written by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke based on stories from the *Konjaku Monogatari*. The story regards a man who is disgusted by a woman who takes hair off of corpses to make wigs as a means of survival; after which the man proceeds to rob the woman of her clothes.

²⁴ The tale tells the story of a samurai man with a bow and arrows and his wife who are traveling together until a young man with a sword joins them. After some time, the young man with the sword asks the man with the bow to trade weapons, much to the delight of the man with the bow who already had his eyes set on the young man's fine sword. After the exchange, the young man with his new bow and arrows uses the weapon to his advantage to tie down the man he traded with, and proceeds to rape his wife in front of him. After the assault, the young man runs away, leaving behind the wife and samurai.

couple is broken in Akutagawa's short story, significant to the portrayal of Masago's character as a grotesque feminine.

Through understanding the institution of marriage in the Heian period, the effect of Masago's violation and role as a wife will be appreciated to further the argument of her portrayal as a grotesque feminine character. The minimum conditions for the existence of a marriage in Heian Japan are defined by William McCullough as follows:

“1.) the physical relationship between a man and woman, continuing normally over an extended period of time and resulting in children; 2.) the recognition of the relationship by society as an accepted mode of behavior; and 3.) the acknowledgment of family responsibilities (however minimal) by both members of the marriage.”²⁵

In addition, customary regulations existed that followed the principle of class endogamy whereby the husband and wife came from roughly equal social statuses, making Masago's assault by a man blatantly below her social status particularly vexing for readers, and particularly concerning that she would be more attracted to her assaulter than her husband.²⁶ This instance of displacement of Heian class endogamy norms would contribute to Masago's grotesque femininity as her character breaks rules. Divorce in Heian period marriages was remarkably simple and informal, as the practice simply involved the termination of any relation with the other spouse and no additional requirement was necessary to make the divorce officialized.²⁷ Regarding sexual partnerships, “as long as they showed due regard for the persons involved, both men and women were able to sustain multiple, sometimes simultaneous sexual partnerships in the course of a life, some of which were considered ‘marriages,’ some of which were treated as of lesser importance and were usually of lesser duration.”²⁸ As such, Masago is depicted as

²⁵ William H McCullough, *Japanese Marriage Institutions in the Heian Period* (Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 1967), 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁸ William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900—1200 CE* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 296.

though she owes it to her husband to demonstrate her loyalty to him, which is why she suggests a double suicide: “you saw my shame. I can’t leave you alive as you are.”²⁹ This is because “the motif of female suicide motivated by erotic complications is not uncommon in early Japanese literature, but it is usually associated with a differently balanced love triangle — a woman caught between two competing men” and considering the limited feminine power in marriage at the time, suicide would be an easier option for Masago than divorcing her husband.³⁰

It is noteworthy also that although multiple sexual partnerships in Heian Japan might not have been regarded as taboo, Masago’s husband witnessing her sexual activity with Tajōmaru can be regarded as abjectable.³¹ This is because this viewing crosses the social prohibition on looking at immoral activity, known as *miru na no kinshi* or “prohibition against looking.”³² Tajōmaru’s first gaze towards Masago in the film *Rashōmon* was very intense and violated the taboo against looking, particularly because his gaze remained fixed on Masago, taking advantage of the wind blowing her veil.³³ Additionally, Tajōmaru turns his whole body to prolong his observation of Masago which suggests his attraction towards her is illicit because he has seen something he should not have, yet leers at her despite the presence of her husband. This observation of Masago goes beyond casual viewing or peeping because of the deliberate intent for Tajōmaru to stare behind Masago after she has passed him. Through analyzing the violation of the traditional prohibition of looking, Masago will be interpreted as a grotesque feminine.

²⁹ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1970), 26.

³⁰ Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs*, 37.

³¹ “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules”. Julia Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection in The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 97.

³² Charlotte Eubanks, *Re-writing Gendered Hierarchies: Tsushima Yuko's “The Marsh”* (Utah Foreign Language Review, 2000), 51.

³³ Another different form of viewership is known as *kaimami*, which is known as stolen glimpses. This complexity of viewership is seen in Heian period literature such as *The Tale of Genji* to depict complicated traditional aristocratic courtship. See more in Doris Barga's *Mapping Courtship and Kinship in Classical Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

Another component of Masago's femininity within the context of Akutagawa's story is the pilgrimage excursion with her husband which is the root of all misfortune that plagues the couple. Although Akutagawa's story never discloses what the purposes of the couple's journey was, for the purposes of this paper it will be reasonably inferred that the couple was on a pilgrimage given the couple's social class and attire, in addition to the seemingly springtime season which *Rashōmon* appears to be set as customary pilgrimages most often occurred in springtime or early autumn.³⁴ Notably, "many practiced sexual abstinence during travel to temples and shrines"³⁵ in Heian Japan, which Masago violates though unwillingly. Barbara Ambrose examines the pilgrimages of noblewomen in Heian Japan and observes that "if married women accompanied their husbands or fathers, they were usually secondary pilgrims," which explains why Masago did not have an entourage attending to her as would be the norm if she were the primary pilgrim.³⁶ However, the pilgrimage also represents a liminal passage which facilitates the carnivalesque setting, notably as the carnivalesque represents a lack of socio-political boundaries as well transgression of the sacred and mundane. This lack of boundaries then furthers Masago's character as abject because it means that Masago is not cut off from that which threatens her, rather she acknowledges Tajōmaru which causes her perpetual danger.³⁷ Tajōmaru is an embodiment of something that is opposite to the couple's pilgrimage which represents why the encounter between the two parties contributes to the sense of the carnivalesque. As observed in *Rashōmon*, the couple is of high status, cleanly dressed, well groomed, and stoically ignore Tajōmaru's presence while maintaining a physical distance and

³⁴ Barbara Ambrose, *Pilgrimages of Noblewomen in Mid-Heian Japan* (Nanzan University, 1997), 304.

³⁵ William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900—1200 CE*, 338.

³⁶ Barbara Ambrose, *Pilgrimages of Noblewomen in Mid-Heian Japan*, 308.

³⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection in The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 101.

elevation from him, marking a clear distinction between their social classes. On the other hand, Tajōmaru appears in tattered, dirty clothes, unshaven, covered with beads of sweat, and uncivilized as he relaxes in the shade at the foot of a tree scratching himself.³⁸ Through understanding the setting of the initial transgression against Masago, the conditions which cause such debilitating loss of control over the situation will be used to analyze how the grotesque feminine is manifested through elements of abjection, as resulting initially from the carnivalesque.

Carnavalesque

The starting point of the depiction of the feminine grotesque character of Masago both in the film and the text can be attributed to the original transgression of boundaries which occurs when the traveling couple meets Tajōmaru, the bandit, but continues as individuals from different social statuses give their testimonies in attempting to solve the death of Masago's husband, the samurai Takehiro.³⁹ Following Bakhtin's scholarship on the carnivalesque, the breakdown of social classes will be observed as contributing to a chaotic environment, where Li's theoretical framework will be helpful for furthering understanding of Masago's character as a grotesque feminine.

The carnivalesque as defined by Bakhtin is "temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank" in which etiquette and decency were fully disregarded and communication of individuals from different social strata was freely possible.⁴⁰ As such, the carnivalesque is a state of being which is suspended from the laws governing society and reality, with an emphasis on

³⁸ *Rashōmon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (Daiei Film, 1951), 00:19:36, https://archive.org/details/Rashomon1950_201905.

³⁹ The original Japanese text authored by Akutagawa and Kurosawa's film refer to the characters as Masago 真砂 and Takehiro 武弘, although there are discrepancies in the translation of the characters' names. For the purposes of this research they will be referred to as Masago and Takehiro.

⁴⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

the temporal quality of such a state. Michelle Li approaches Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque by mentioning that "even a relatively closed body resistant to outside influences can be used to undermine other people and ideals."⁴¹ She states that although there is no overt focus on the lower half of the body, "the use of sexual desire and determination to undermine powerful men" is itself a grotesque representation of the body.⁴² The concept of carnivalesque will be important in approaching the setting of the story as a place that transcends social boundaries, thus contributing to the insatiable sexual desire which causes both Masago's husband and Tajōmaru to feel simultaneously repulsed and attracted by Masago. This concept of carnivalesque is relevant to the grotesque feminine because it lays the foundation of a location where imaginary uncanniness and a tangible threat become blurred, drawing attention to the fragility of the human will and the inability to stand up for oneself or uphold a personal border from an abjectable encounter. The pilgrimage of the young couple is the initial point of vulnerability, as they traverse with no entourage and therefore have a limited border between themselves and the cruelty of the world. This analysis with the carnivalesque helps us understand Masago as grotesque because her character is supposed to represent the ideal of Heian femininity, but her actions and encounters with Tajōmaru are a direct contradiction to that standard of femininity, thus being a character both repelling and attractive, which is a property of the grotesque.

The climactic events of *In a Grove* and *Rashōmon* are set in a grove in the mountains of Yamashina, blurring the boundaries between proper society and an isolated environment, and the sacred and the mundane, where extraordinary things can occur. In particular, the incidents did not happen in the capital, where there are plentiful watchful eyes or strong law enforcement, but

⁴¹ Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales*, 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 45.

rather the temporal state of travel in nature contributes to a carnivalesque setting. Bakhtin emphasizes the carnivalesque as being a state in which nothing is permanent nor reaches completion, which can be compared to the couple merely having a temporary experience in the grove. Nature is a prevalent theme throughout Akutagawa's work, where a confrontational stand is taken against it, as nature can destroy rational order, "the only weapon available is one's rationality, or artistic sense,"⁴³ however rationality is apparently absent in *In a Grove* and *Rashōmon*. Thus, Akutagawa's approach toward the inherent powers of nature reveals that he attributes a sense of losing oneself when in nature, similar to the effect of the carnival upon an individual. Hence, when experiencing the carnival, Bakhtin states "in his body and life man is deeply aware of the earth and of the other elements, of the sun and of the star-filled sky,"⁴⁴ which ties into the concept of the story setting is in a grove, surrounded by nature. Cinematic elements as seen in *Rashōmon*, such as the sunlight filtering through the trees in the grove, add to the surreal and otherworldly aspect of the scenes set there. Such an environment also contributes to the grotesque, "for within a closed fantasy world, anything is possible. The reader, once they are aware that they are confronted with such a closed world, accepts the strangest things without turning a hair, for they are not being asked to understand them as real."⁴⁵

The reason why the carnivalesque element of no social boundaries would have been shocking to the traveling couple is due to the strong implementation of hierarchical differences in distinguishing between classes during Heian Japan. Considering the pilgrimages made by upper classes, it is important to note that even when individuals arrived at a temple, contact with other pilgrims (especially those of a lower class) was unwanted and avoided, and great care was taken

⁴³ Kinya Tsuruta, *The Defeat of Rationality and the Triumph of Mother "Chaos": Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's Journey* (International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, 1999), 87.

⁴⁴ Bakhtin, 256.

⁴⁵ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 23.

to avoid encounters with thieves during the pilgrimage.⁴⁶ The maintaining of borders and distance from the abject, between the individual and unwanted encounters, can be observed through the implementation of physical barriers, such as bearing weapons, traveling with an entourage, or clothing.

An example of an effort being made to avoid unwanted encounters is Masago's attire as presented in the film *Rashōmon* appears to be a *tsubosozoku*, functioning not only to protect her from strangers' eyes, but also as a status symbol and presentation of following the proper rules of conduct.⁴⁷ Tajōmaru states that "a puff of wind blew, and raised her [Masago's] hanging scarf, so that I caught a glimpse of her face. Instantly it was again covered from my view,"⁴⁸ this simple event can be regarded as the first instance of the transgression of boundaries as Masago was momentarily visible to strangers below her class. The brief physical exposure of Masago then made her a target to Tajōmaru's lust, which was uncontrolled if not heightened, given the carnivalesque setting.

Michelle Li mentions that "in a carnivalesque way, many setsuwa offer 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,'" this aspect extends beyond the interaction of the couple with Tajōmaru to the collective testimonies given by other members of society in attempting to solve the crime.⁴⁹ In both *In a Gove* and *Rashōmon*, the individuals who give their testimonies to the high police commissioner are a woodcutter, a traveling Buddhist priest, a policeman, an old woman (mother of Masago), Tajōmaru, Masago, and the deceased samurai husband Takehiro himself (speaking through a medium). It is notable that all the individuals are of different social standings and would have otherwise unlikely had contact

⁴⁶ Barbara Ambrose, *Pilgrimages of Noblewomen in Mid-Heian Japan*, 321.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 313, 314.

⁴⁸ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 21.

⁴⁹ Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales*, 46.

with each other had the crime not transpired. However, although a superficial order is established by the system of the high police commissioner's questioning the truth never prevails which is a property of the carnivalesque.

The coming together of various individuals from different social classes to give their testimonies about the murder leads to the Rashōmon effect, which highlights the bizarre destabilizing of hierarchical rank for all the individuals involved. Importantly, a property of the grotesque is a conflation of disparities, which occurs in Masago's case as she casts aside the traditionally feminine virtue of passiveness and instead attempts to defend herself from Tajōmaru's advances in both *In a Gove* and *Rashōmon*.⁵⁰ This contributes to her character as a grotesque feminine character because her combative behavior is not acceptable for her status as an upper-class lady, and rather the carnivalesque could cause the interpretation that Masago is not just a rape victim, but instead an aggressor.

The reason why the carnival induces the abject is because of the corruption caused as a result of lack of boundaries. Kristeva states "the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them," which aligns with the carnival sense of unregulated freedom and permissiveness of belligerent expression.⁵¹ Such unregulated freedom might mean that females could be stronger than their prescribed roles of passivity and fragility, which could cross the border of social expectation as was the case for Masago's altercation with Tajōmaru. Rather than succumbing to her situation of vulnerability, she immediately stands up for herself: "I [Tajōmaru] dodged, but she kept on slashing at me. She might have wounded me deeply or killed me."⁵² Her behavior is out of the Heian norm for women, which incites both fascination

⁵⁰ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 20.

⁵¹ Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, 106.

⁵² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 23.

and disgust, particularly on Tajōmaru's behalf, both of which are properties of the grotesque.⁵³ This is because the trusted expectation of Heian female behavior is upset through Masago's sudden aggression, which to Tajōmaru "jolts him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confronts him with a radically different, disturbing perspective."⁵⁴

Another example suggesting Masago as the victimizer is Tajōmaru's statement that "she [Masago] asked that either her husband or I die. She said it was more trying than death to have her shame known to two men."⁵⁵ Through this statement, Masago is essentially establishing a proxy phallogocentric desire to be the only woman of the two men, by suggesting that Tajōmaru do her bidding as to whose woman she will be, through the act of fighting to the death for her. This scene is a demonstration of Masago's attempt to possess the patriarchal desire to have the phallus. However, the most poignant instance of Masago's possession of the phallus is when "she drew a small sword. I've never seen a woman of such a violent temper."⁵⁶ In this case, the dagger is anthropomorphic and represents the phallus, particularly in the *Rashōmon* film as Masago possesses a coital grasp and upturned angle when holding the approximately fifteen centimeters, simple lacquer decorated dagger encrusted with a couple of pearls.⁵⁷ In this regard, the dagger represents an unacceptable fetish object for the woman, given its nature as a weapon and the intrinsic and immediate psychological association between weapons, destruction, death, and blood, which is abject.⁵⁸ However as explained in *In a Grove*, Masago is overpowered by Tajōmaru and she regresses back to a symbol of powerlessness as seen in his utterance, "I

⁵³ A property of the grotesque is the abnormal, and people's reaction to the abnormal varies. In Tajōmaru's case, his reaction in both *In a Gove* and *Rashōmon* to Masago's self-defense is one of excitement. In an animalistic sense, he enjoys the chase of making Masago succumb to his pursuit as he claims his plans to isolate the couple "worked well."

⁵⁴ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 58.

⁵⁵ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁷ *Rashōmon*, 00:31:04.

⁵⁸ Creed, *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection*, 69.

managed to strike down her small sword without drawing my own. The most spirited woman is defenseless without a weapon.”⁵⁹ Notably, there is a deliberate intention on Tajōmaru’s part to establish his masculinity by stating that he defeated Masago without drawing his own sword, which is a phallic extension of himself and could represent his being castrated. Masago is portrayed as a grotesque feminine in this interaction because of the carnivalesque setting which upsets general assumptions of the gender hierarchy in which men are stronger than women.

More importantly, this scene must be examined from Masago’s perspective to understand how it shapes her character. In her testimony, Masago states “his [Takehiro] look said only ‘kill me.’ Neither conscious nor unconscious, I stabbed the small sword through the lilac-colored kimono into his breast. Again at this time I must have fainted.”⁶⁰ Rather than being depicted as a fetish object, the dagger represents a source of salvation from her husband’s suffering, and Masago’s character can be elevated as merciful for helping to end his life. Most importantly, however, Masago’s repeated allusions to fading in and out of consciousness serve the purpose of deflecting responsibility for her actions and even demonstrate a sense of passivism within the world of the carnivalesque. Passivism is an important hallmark of Heian period femininity, as women were expected to behave delicately, “like a high-born woman who is troubled by illness. The reason for the lack of strength must be that hers is the poetry of a woman.”⁶¹ An example of Masago’s state of consciousness in the film is seen through the cinematographic practice of alternating shots of her face pointed upwards in the midst of a kiss with Tajōmaru, and rustling overhead foliage with light filtering through. In Tajōmaru’s explanation of the encounter, Masago drops her dagger after a shot of the overhead scenery blurring, suggesting that she fainted,

⁵⁹ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶¹ Edith Sarra, *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs*, 15.

however, the scene shows her now unoccupied hand crawl across Tajōmaru's back, rather than pushing him away, potentially suggesting that she is willfully submitting to his desires.⁶²

The boundary transgressions caused by a carnivalesque interpretation of the story provide a broad look at the general context of the crime's environment and the social chaos which ensued at the so-called trial. In conclusion, as seen in *Rashōmon*, Masago's clothes functioned as a barrier between her and the prying eyes of individuals besides her husband, in addition to representing a fundamental class differentiation between herself and those around her. Therefore, the momentary inability of her clothes to cover her led to the initial infringement on her being as she was objectified and pursued by Tajōmaru. The setting of a wild grove further isolated the characters from the regulations of the law and societal expectations, thus contributing to the chaotic carnivalesque.

From the carnivalesque setting, the obstruction of social and personal boundaries leads to blurred hierarchical order, law-breaking behavior from Tajōmaru's character, and ambiguity about Masago's victimization. As previously established, law-breaking is a perverse quality which is related to abjection. In the following section, by using Julia Kristeva's framework which describes the root causes and nature of the abject, I will examine the abject elements of the perverse, unclean and improper, consciousness of the individual as related to Masago's being to understand why her encounter with the abject causes her presentation as a grotesque feminine character.

Abject

The theoretical framework of abjection informs the notion of the grotesque feminine by approaching Masago's character in *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* by analyzing the infringement of

⁶² *Rashōmon*, 00:30:59.

her personal boundaries as pertaining to her as a victim. On the other hand, using elements of the grotesque such as alienation and rejection, Masago can be analyzed as the victimizer. This enables us to understand how she becomes polluted from making contact with her husband's corpse, and thus encountering the abject, as it might inform her erratic departure from the scene of the crime.

The first encounter with the abject in *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* is caused by the infringement of boundaries initiated by Tajōmaru's initial uninvited viewing of Masago and act of defilement. Under these circumstances, religion, law, and morality are rejected and the oppressive desire to corrupt others against their will is actualized by Tajōmaru. Kristeva states that "the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject... what is abject, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses,"⁶³ that place can be regarded as the carnival and the subject can be regarded as Masago. Masago's rape is characteristically abject considering that it disturbs her identity as a wife, and draws attention to the fragility of the law and of self. Masago's rape causes her feminine identity as a wife and virtuous woman to falter, initially from the perspective of her husband, and then from Tajōmaru's viewpoint too. This is because she betrays her loyalty to her husband and allegedly suggests that Tajōmaru kill him, which highlights her disloyalty, presenting the risk to Tajōmaru that she may betray him in the future too.⁶⁴ This leads to one of the psychological effects of the grotesque: it both liberates or disarms and creates anxiety.⁶⁵ In

⁶³ Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, 96, 98.

⁶⁴ It is alluded to Tajōmaru that Masago might betray him one day, since she fails to keep her loyalty to her own husband. Although Tajōmaru wants Masago to become submissive to him, betraying her husband crosses the boundary of acceptable submissiveness to Tajōmaru. This is because Tajōmaru is aware of his assault, and is wary that Masago is a woman of no morals for betraying her husband, thus Tajōmaru's interest in Masago wanes after he sees how easily he made her submit to him. A cause of concern for Tajōmaru would be that if she submits to him so easily, she can readily betray him for another man too. This would contribute to her image as a grotesque feminine because it shows Masago's abnormality via demonstrating disloyalty.

⁶⁵ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 60.

both *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove*, it is clear that the sexual interaction between Masago and Tajōmaru was forced, and Tajōmaru uses the common Heian approach of insisting that his insatiable longing for the beloved had caused him to desire Masago so aggressively, however “pursuit of such partnerships often led to disappointment even when the desired partner was won over”⁶⁶ which can explain why Tajōmaru rejects Masago. Masago’s actions also result in alienation from her husband, as I will discuss further shortly.

Rejection, abjection, and grotesque feminine are related as alienation is an effect of rejection, which occurs to Masago. Masago is rejected by her husband as she states, “his [Takehiro] eyes make me shudder even now...only a cold light, a look of loathing...beneath the cold contempt in his eyes, there was hatred.”⁶⁷ From her husband’s viewpoint, “the familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange,”⁶⁸ is a characterization of Masago as grotesque as caused by a rejection of the familiar. This enables us to understand how she is perceived as abjectable by her husband who demonstrates “a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory.”⁶⁹ Takehiro’s contempt towards his wife is irreconcilable because of the voyeuristic nature of the assault, which attracts Takehiro’s attention while also causing him to loathe and reject Masago for openly demonstrating her sexuality in front of him with another man.

Another instance of her husband's profound rejection and attraction to Masago is his statement that “while the criminal talked, my wife raised her face as if in a trance. She never looked so beautiful as in that moment...when she was going out of the grove as if in a dream, her

⁶⁶ William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900—1200 CE*, 343.

⁶⁷ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 25, 26.

⁶⁸ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 18.

⁶⁹ Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, 99.

hand in the robber's she...said, 'kill him [Takehiro]! I cannot marry you as long as he lives.'"⁷⁰ Masago's husband is utterly consumed with jealousy and rage, but he is nonetheless attracted to her which causes "the interweaving of totally disparate elements, producing a strange and often unpleasant and unsettling conflict of emotions."⁷¹ Following this rationale, it can be inferred that Masago is regarded as a grotesque feminine character by her husband; he still can appreciate her beauty, an indicator of femininity, but is also repulsed by the familiar notion of his wife, which is a property of the grotesque and a symptom of encountering the abject.

Masago fails at ending her own life but claims that she instead killed her husband, "I stabbed the small sword through the lilac-colored kimono into his breast...I untied the rope from his dead body."⁷² From this statement, her encounter with her deceased husband can be characterized as one of the most abject moments as "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached on everything... is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. It is something rejected from which one does not part, it beckons us to and ends up engulfing us."⁷³ Importantly, the requisite for femininity in the Heian period emphasized purity, particularly caused by widespread concern over pollution and disease, and "not just imperial court ceremony but all of daily life was filled with ritual observances aimed as propitiation or at the avoidance of pollution."⁷⁴ In the event that pollution does occur, the proper protocol for remedying such a situation would be to undergo a period of isolation and propitiation before returning to normal social life.⁷⁵ However, there is no indication that Masago follows the social expectation of undergoing proper purification, which contributes to the grotesque notion of her grotesque

⁷⁰ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 29.

⁷¹ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 14.

⁷² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 27.

⁷³ Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, 79.

⁷⁴ William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900—1200 CE*, 305.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 306.

femininity. As such, Masago's contact with her husband's corpse would have been another layer of defilement on top of her already having been sexually assaulted and a self-proclaimed murderer.⁷⁶ As a result, Masago's impurity makes her grotesque because of her pejorative self-association with Tajōmaru, which is both ludicrous and terrible, conjecturing a sense of Stockholm Syndrome on Masago's part. Hence, Masago's attempt to control the situation she is in fails, and rather than defeating or rejecting her assailant, she becomes an aggressor herself, which is grotesque.⁷⁷ This transgression caused by Masago calls attention to her different identities of victim and assailant, which contribute to her ambiguous image as either protagonist or antagonist. This instance of border crossing is one of the characteristics of abjection where meaning collapses, and therefore causes the interpretation of Masago's character as grotesque.

Takehiro demonstrates such a strong loathing for his wife that he nearly feels compelled to pardon Tajōmaru for his crime. This is because he is shocked at Masago's shift in attitude, being willing to sacrifice her marriage with Takehiro in favor of Tajōmaru, which is her forbidden desire: encouraging Tajōmaru's fleeting interest in her, Masago appears insincere about her relationship with both men. Tajōmaru asks Takehiro whether he would like his wife killed or spared for her outrageously degenerate behavior, which indicates that he feels sympathy or pity for Takehiro regarding Masago's cold-heartedness. Therefore, within the context of Takehiro's testimony, Masago is alienated by both men for her abjectable behavior. Notably, alienation is a property of the grotesque as familiar elements are made disturbing and irreconcilable.⁷⁸ In the brief moment that Takehiro hesitates to answer the bandit's question

⁷⁶ Benedetta Lomi, "Dharanis, Talismans, and Straw-Dolls: Ritual Choreographies and Healing Strategies of the "Rokujikyōhō" in Medieval Japan," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 41, no. 2 (2014): 257.

⁷⁷ "The grotesque is an attempt to control and exorcise the demonic elements in the world." Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 18. However, Masago becomes part of such demonic elements of the world as she allegedly murders her husband in her planned double suicide. It is also difficult to determine whether she truly failed at their attempt of double suicide by accident, or if she strategically planned to only kill her husband so she could carry on living with Tajōmaru.

⁷⁸ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 59.

regarding Masago's fate, she "shrieked and ran into the depths of the grove. The robber instantly snatched at her, but he failed even to grasp her sleeve."⁷⁹ At this moment, Masago is depicted as grotesque because her action of shrieking and fleeing is a caricature of the feminine, elegant and poised demeanor with which she is initially introduced.

Regarding her caricatured portrayal, Philip Thomas mentions that the grotesque in literature is "not just the degree of distortion or exaggeration which determines whether we find the caricature simply funny or disgusting," indeed Masago is never distorted.⁸⁰ Rather, Masago signifies grotesqueness because of the characterization of her malevolent nature which induces a collective feeling of abjection and alienation from both her husband and Tajōmaru. Thus, Masago's escape into the grove can be her attempt to escape the carnivalesque setting, to regain her rationality and purify herself from the abject. However, in *Rashōmon* she is depicted as a grotesque feminine for her reactionary behavior and failing to follow Heian standards for femininity in addition to not demonstrating any purification on her behalf. This suggests an inconsistency between her outward appearance and the expectation of her behavior, as "the public face one projects often bears little correspondence to the private mind that lurks beneath."⁸¹

In conclusion, Masago represents the abject to both Tajōmaru and her husband because of the following elements of abjection: transgression of boundaries, the encounter with death, and caricature. The transgression of boundaries is initially caused by the carnivalesque setting which facilitates Masago's rape. This initial action of defilement eventually manifests in the death of Takehiro, leading Masago to come into contact with his corpse, which is a grave transgression of

⁷⁹ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 29.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸¹ Todd Joseph Miles Holden, *Surveillance: Japan's Sustaining Principle* (Journal of Popular Culture; Bowling Green, Ohio, 1994), 201.

the Heian standard of femininity to maintain physical cleanliness and purity. Furthermore, Masago becomes alienated from both men as her desire to protect her feminine image becomes malevolent and neglectful of her responsibility to remain faithful to her husband regardless of having been defiled. This alienation of her character results in the caricature of Masago, greatly contributing to her image as a grotesque feminine character for being subjected to abject circumstances and contributing to the abjection of her character with her alleged behavior. As the factors subscribing an abject depiction of Masago have been established, it is important to analyze how she retains a feminine appeal while simultaneously being depicted as grotesque.

Grotesque Gaze

Combining the elements of the abject, carnivalesque, and grotesque, Masago's character in *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* takes on a different dimension as she is outcast by both her husband and Tajōmaru to become depicted as a grotesque feminine. Through an analysis of Masago's voyeuristic assault, I will explain why breaking the visual taboo against witnessing female forms of reproduction contributes to her portrayal as a grotesque feminine.

The visual prohibition against looking, *miru na no kinshi*, places a taboo upon witnessing female acts of sexuality, especially intercourse and childbirth. This taboo can be seen in Japan's creation myths of Izanami and Izanagi, for which the father god Izanagi looked at the rotting postpartum corpse of the mother goddess Izanami and was immediately repulsed and ran away.⁸² A reason for why the taboo against looking is particularly damnatory against women is because of the horror of witnessing female genitals, particularly known as the *vagina dentata*

⁸² Osamu Kitayama "'Mirukoto' to 'miruna no kinshi'." *Gastroenterological Endoscopy* 56 (Supplement1), 2014, 826—827.

“symbolizing the fears of castration, the dangers of sexual intercourse, of birth.”⁸³ Consequently, the prohibition of not looking is used to protect, particularly men, from facing the betrayal and disillusionment of viewing female sexuality which is itself grotesque for the threat it symbolizes towards masculinity.

The taboo against recognizing female sexuality is obviously demonstrated by the fact that Masago is rejected by both her husband and Tajōmaru. This is because the Heian standards of femininity entail “longing expressed through highly elaborate displays of compassion, clothed in prescribed forms of glamour and luxury, seclusion and movement, learning and reverence,” in complete contrast to the manner in which Masago’s affair occurred.⁸⁴ Thus, “beauty was not just a physical characteristic but displayed itself in speech, demeanor, dress, and taste as well,”⁸⁵ which can account for the initial attraction which Tajōmaru felt towards Masago in *Rashōmon* as being facilitated through her clothes and demeanor. Proper Heian courting etiquette involved the sending of poetry or letters to one’s lover, but never the overt demonstration of sexual behavior to another, as seen in other Heian period romances such as *The Tale of Genji*.⁸⁶ This mode of courtship was likely popular among upper classes as a means to maintain the prohibition of viewing and demonstrate their elegance through alternate means besides physical beauty, as well as maintain a distance from the unpleasantness of the grotesque and uncleanness associated with bare bodies.

The taboo of viewership being followed in *In a Grove* occurs in Tajōmaru’s testimony, he states that Masago’s husband averts his gaze and turns his head away from the pair once

⁸³ Charlotte Eubanks, “Re-writing Gendered Hierarchies: Tsushima Yuko’s ‘The Marsh,’” *Utah Foreign Language Review*, 2000, 57.

⁸⁴ William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900—1200 CE*, 345.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

Tajōmaru overpowers his wife,⁸⁷ hiding his gaze from viewing the forbidden. From this account, Takehiro appears as a victim of Masago along with Tajōmaru by Kurosawa's directing showing the audience his pitiful state of helplessness, and how he feels tortured by viewing his wife in a similar manner that the father god Izanagi was tormented by the grotesque presence of his partner. In this regard, Takehiro protects himself from the perpetually castrating and grotesque nature of Masago's engagement in sexual activity with Tajōmaru. This is an example of Takehiro following the prohibition against looking, and also denying himself access to Masago's demonstration of sexuality.

On the other hand, in Masago's testimony Takehiro "went on gazing at me with loathing and contempt,"⁸⁸ which facilitates Masago's erratic behavior in *Rashōmon*. The cinematography utilized in the scene highlights the distress which Masago feels by being stared at by her husband, the camera follows her as she attempts to break her gaze and hide her face from Takehiro,⁸⁹ and shows her disorientation as the scenery of the grove spins with her as she moves.⁹⁰ Notably, the motion of the setting contributes to the creation of a carnivalesque realm, conveying that Masago's rationality is being influenced by the pressure of her husband's gaze and isolation in nature. In this instance, Takehiro breaks the prohibition of viewership and is actively engaged in looking at her, which causes Masago stress that she did not experience from Tajōmaru. This may be because Takehiro's relationship with Masago contributes to the grotesque and uncanny by making Masago disgusted by his prolonged gaze; causing her to reject his familiarity and develop feelings of hostility towards him, with an intent to kill him as a means of salvation from the fear of being observed. In addition, Masago was easily able to ignore the

⁸⁷ *Rashōmon*, 00:30:30.

⁸⁸ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 26.

⁸⁹ *Rashōmon*, 00:44:36.

⁹⁰ *Rashōmon*, 00:46:22.

Tajōmaru's initial viewership of her because of their social class differentiation and lack of familiarity, however, her knowledge of obligation to her husband renders her incapable of breaking his gaze and demonstrates Takehiro's possessiveness over her. As such, Masago's response to the grotesque nature of being unwaveringly viewed by her husband is "an experience of horror...tinged with mild hysteria or embarrassment,"⁹¹ solidifying her role as the abject and object which induces the grotesque in others and herself.

Likewise, in both *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove*, Masago mutually denies Takehiro access to her sexual self, claiming that "you [Takehiro] saw my shame. I can't leave you alive as you are."⁹² Her assertion to choose death stems from the abject narcissistic crisis to purify oneself from defilement.⁹³ In the instance of Takehiro's prolonged observation of her as in *Rashōmon*, Masago's hysteria is caused by the knowledge that her husband witnessed her display of sexuality, a taboo behavior itself, and his continued viewership of her associates her presence with the grotesque body of womanhood, therefore there is a chance for her to return to a purified, non-grotesque state if the sole viewer of her shame dies. As Kristeva states, "death would protect us in the last resort from the abjection contemporary literature claims to expend vehicle uttering it."⁹⁴ Therefore, considering Heian daily life was filled with ritual observances aimed at propitiation or at the avoidance of pollution, combined with the violation of the prohibition on looking, Masago attempts to reclaim her purity both from Takehiro's viewership of her and Tajōmaru's assault, by her decision to kill Takehiro. Additionally, as priorly mentioned Masago can superficially disguise her desire to kill Takehiro as an act of devotion, as is portrayed in *In a Grove*, thus freeing herself from the situation and creating her image as a victim, which can be

⁹¹ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 56.

⁹² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Rashōmon and Other Stories*, 26.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹⁴ Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, 107.

attributed to the “privatism act — the hiding of one’s true nature.”⁹⁵ In this case, the visual taboo can be used to the advantage of Masago to distance herself from an abject encounter and work to regain her Heian feminine appeal.

Through a violation of the visual taboo, a pleasure in perversity is shown to Takehiro, identifying “women’s sexuality as the source of all evil,”⁹⁶ particularly because the sexual jealousy he feels towards Masago manifests itself as disappointment and anger. By being an onlooker at Masago’s sexual act, Takehiro is discovering her true form as a promiscuous woman and suggesting that the audience of *Rashōmon* is also participating in the tabooed visual act. Masago’s true form as a promiscuous woman may be inferred because she mistreats Takehiro by ignoring the respect due to his rank and suggesting his death.⁹⁷ Additionally, Masago’s failure to keep her improper relation with Tajōmaru within the bounds of visual and social discretion highlights the incapacity of empathy of her character and poor discernment in choosing sexual partners, facilitating her image as a grotesque feminine character.⁹⁸

On the other hand, Masago demonstrates malice towards her husband during her viewership of him in the film and overturns the expectation of loyalty to her husband. As per Takehiro’s testimony, she obscures her body and face behind Tajōmaru when she orders the bandit to kill her husband.⁹⁹ The cinematographic technique provides a close-up of Masago’s glare upon Takehiro, illustrating how she uses Tajōmaru’s body as a barrier between her husband and herself. Additionally, she flashes a pleading facial expression demonstrating unsophisticated innocence to Tajōmaru as she raises her eyebrows in naivety when begging him to kill her

⁹⁵ Todd Joseph Miles Holden, *Surveillance: Japan’s Sustaining Principle*, 195.

⁹⁶ Creed, *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection*, 60.

⁹⁷ William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900—1200 CE*, 337.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁹⁹ *Rashōmon*, 00:55:08—00:55:10.

husband.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, Masago is violating visual taboos herself by demonstrating her preference for men not only with her words but also with her manner of looking. Her behavior in looking at the two men in such drastically different ways contributes to her depiction as a grotesque feminine because she delights in seeing the taboo flouted,¹⁰¹ as long as it contributes to her final goal, and she is breaking the taboo herself. Because compassion was a marker of elegance in Heian Japan,¹⁰² rather than working in her favor to attract empathy from the audience and Tajōmaru, Masago's pointed complaints towards Takehiro repel both Takehiro and Tajōmaru, in addition to the audience. This is because she demonstrates emotional unawareness of her community and a clash of incompatibles: desire to remain with her assailant and dispose of her innocent, if not victimized, husband, which is grotesque.

The aforementioned examples of scenes from the short story and film reveal the influence of the visual taboo against looking, as it affects observing and seeing. Tajōmaru initially saw Masago which caused him to develop an attraction towards her, whereas Takehiro observed the assault of his wife but by Tajōmaru's account chose not to see it. Masago too observed her husband as he was tied up, but chose not to see him when Tajōmaru and Takehiro stated that she tried to incite violence between the two men. The distinction between observing and seeing is based on the degree of consciousness present when one observes, which is an involuntary act even if the subject of the observation is not registering within the observer's mind.¹⁰³ In contrast, seeing something involves a level of involvement on the viewer's behalf, such as producing a

¹⁰⁰ *Rashōmon*, 00:55:26—00:55:28.

¹⁰¹ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 56.

¹⁰² William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900—1200 CE*, 331.

¹⁰³ Todd Joseph Miles Holden, *Surveillance: Japan's Sustaining Principle*, 199.

visceral reaction to what is seen.¹⁰⁴ Masago was observed by both men as an attractive feminine being who fascinates them but seen as a grotesque being for the way she handled the situation. Thus, Masago's desire and suggestion to Tajōmaru to kill her husband represents her desire to destroy Takehiro's awareness of a reality that she wants to exclude from her life. Takehiro's eyes are metaphorically opened by the dark act perpetrated against his wife, causing him to view the immoral and perverted side of humanity. Prior to the assault, Takehiro was an unsuspecting observer of reality who was ruled by his greed which readily allowed him to trust Tajōmaru's invitation to find treasure.

Conclusion

This case study of Masago being depicted as a grotesque feminine in both *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* explains the transgressions which upset Heian notions of femininity but result in the simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards her character. I have attempted to explain through reliance on the theoretical frameworks of Michelle Li's carnivalesque and Julia Kristeva's abject how this portrayal of the grotesque feminine can be approached and understood within the Heian Japan context. Some of the theoretical frameworks are mutually influential, such as the carnivalesque setting contributing to an upset of boundaries which informs aspects of the abject. The prohibition against viewership can also be inferred to be a tool developed for maintaining an appropriate distance from abject situations or entities, as I have explained through referencing Japan's creation myth as an example of an early notion of the viewership taboo. As noted in the Introduction, the conflicting feelings of fascination and aversion toward Masago can be seen in the depiction of female characters throughout history, therefore this research seeks to bring

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 199.

clarity and understanding of how these features can be identified and summarized as the grotesque feminine.

The depiction of Masago in *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* is important for not only understanding the grotesque feminine but also the structure of the world she is in which facilitates the setting of the carnivalesque. Hence, the possible switch in roles from victim to victimizer contributes to her as grotesque because it uses the effects of the carnivalesque blurring of social hierarchies to upset the Heian gender roles of men as aggressors. Li's framework of the carnivalesque lends a plausible explanation for the setting of the pilgrimage in a grove in which *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* is set to understand how it might contribute to the character's irrationality. On the other hand, Kristeva's definition of abjection is applied to the contact with Takehiro's body which Masago encounters to facilitate an understanding of the transgressions of Heian purity culture which makes Masago a grotesque feminine. Lastly, a grotesque gaze is the mode in which the transgression against Masago occurred and mobilized a method of sexual encounter which stirs feelings of fascination and horror towards her display of female sexuality.

The resigned observation Takehiro had of the assault against Masago highlights the overarching theme of viewership present in *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove* which is that "humans are better served to turn their gaze from the darker corners of human nature and society"¹⁰⁵. Observation and the visual taboo are important elements of the story, as the distinction between observation and seeing becomes appreciated through each of the characters' testimonies. The *Rashōmon* effect impacts the role of viewership in the film and short story, as each of the individuals allegedly observes the same event, although they each have different ways of seeing it. This is influential to the characterization of Masago because she is observed as an appealing

¹⁰⁵ Todd Joseph Miles Holden, *Surveillance: Japan's Sustaining Principle*, 199.

woman by both men, however she is seen as a person who repulses the men, making her a grotesque feminine.

The study of this literature and film through the lens of abjection and grotesque sheds a new light on the way the works are understood because of the analysis of particular details, such as the use of a phallogocentric weapon to regain power among her masculine counterparts in Masago's case, and the impact of the Rashōmon effect as different ways of observing the same event results in differing seeing and characterizations of Masago. Through this study, I hope to contribute to the field by showing the influence of the classical framework of grotesque, with the properties of abjection, and Japanese visual taboo towards the depiction of Masago, and therefore women who possess similar characteristics too. My own exploration of the grotesque feminine proposed in this paper is a useful concept to explore female characters from new perspectives, and I believe it can also be a versatile theoretical concept to examine different cases and contexts beyond the field of Japanese literature and film.

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