

# THE FEMALE BODY IN ENCHI FUMIKO'S LITERATURE. A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *One of the prominent female writers of the postwar period, Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986) succeeded in describing the modern real woman<sup>1</sup> in her works as she delved into the dynamics of gender in modern society. By doing so, she criticized the persistence of values belonging to the patriarchal system that preserve the idea of gender difference to the detriment of women.*

*Enchi challenged the idea of a purportedly standard universal body that is an idealized composite of the “best” features of real bodies and to which women are being subjected to. As some feminists have argued, for women, the body is a primary signifier of the self to the outside world and the links between identity and embodiment are more explicit for women than for men. This should be taken as one of the main reasons why Enchi felt the need to explore the characters psyche by relating it to the female body.*

*In Enchi's works, living with a radically unpredictable body or a body that has lost functions or parts calls into question the stability and continuity of identity. The female characters in Enchi's novels might not express their emotions, but their anguish manifests itself on the level of their bodies. That is to say, psychological suffering is being transformed into a corporeal suffering. In this essay I am analyzing the meaning, characteristics and ways of portrayal of the female body in Enchi Fumiko's works while referring to former critical studies and modern gender studies.*

**Keywords:** *Enchi Fumiko, women, gender, patriarchal authority, old age and the body.*

## 1. Introduction

One of the prominent female writers of the postwar period, Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986) succeeded in describing the modern “real woman” in her works, as she delved into the dynamics of gender in modern society. By doing so, she criticized the persistence of values belonging to the patriarchal system that preserve the idea of gender difference to the detriment of women. In order to represent the “real woman” in fiction, Enchi used her own experiences or inspired herself from the stories of other women, including her maternal grandmother whose story she depicted in the novel *Onnazaka*. This paper focuses on the characteristics of the female body in Enchi's fiction and explores the ways of portrayal and meanings of the female body in a gendered milieu, as Japanese society is described in Enchi's works.

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<sup>1</sup> Noguchi Hiroko, *Enchi Fumiko no kiseki*, Osaka: Izumi shoin, 2003, p. 2.

Throughout this essay I will show how many of Enchi's female characters are strongly represented by their bodies in their becoming while being denied access to or recognition through the world of thought. More, female characters are being represented by a body that is changeable and perishable and the decaying female body is portrayed as one no longer fit to live inside the system because it doesn't fulfill the parameters of the sexualized ideal female body within social mentality. Subsequently, Enchi's female characters are placed outside the social system or at its periphery. Moreover, it appears that in Enchi's novels old age by itself is a peripheral territory.

As some feminists have argued, for women, the body is a primary signifier of the self to the outside world and the links between identity and embodiment are more explicit for women than for men<sup>2</sup>. In contrast to Western thought, Asian philosophy tends to promote the integration of body/matter and mind, a desired unity that has to be acquired. The Japanese landscape of thought is built around the term *kokoro*, a concept best translated as "the embodied mind"<sup>3</sup>, a concept fundamentally different from the Western mind. Among the representative modern Japanese philosophers who have dealt with the mind/body theory in Asian and European mentality, Ichikawa Hiroshi and Yuasa Yasuo have constructed their bodily scheme as a continuum or nondualism<sup>4</sup>. These models are relevant for Enchi's portrayal of women and for the dynamics of gender that Enchi describes in her novels. They help identify the framework of Enchi's bodily scheme and explain the reasons why Enchi felt the need to explore the characters psyche by relating it to the female body. First, Enchi's female characters are isolated from their male counterparts in what looks like a mind/body dualism scenario where women are being represented by their bodies. As a second stage in their development, though not all characters achieve this stage, the women in Enchi's novels have to integrate mind with body, that is, to unify spirit and matter as a whole.

Furthermore, it is necessary to observe that there is a close relationship between Enchi's biography and her fiction, regarding issues of sickness and corporeal suffering. Enchi herself had suffered two major surgeries (a hysterectomy and a mastectomy) and had experienced temporary blindness, teeth extraction and dentures throughout her lifetime, ailments she dealt with in her writing as well.

Enchi demolished the myth of the perfect female body to which women are being subjected to. She raised issues related to corporeality that have not been previously dealt with within the Japanese literary tradition and she represented women's relationship with their bodies by taking up elements that are being

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<sup>2</sup> Feminist philosophers and scholars like Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Michelle Boulous Walker and Elisabeth V. Spelman analyzed the implications of the mind/body dualism pointing out that associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are prevalent in European philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Gudykunst, William B. (ed.) *Communication in Japan and the United States*, Albany: State University of New York, 1993, p. 64

<sup>4</sup> See Kasulis, Thomas P.; Ames, Roger T.; Dissanayake Wimal (ed.) *Self As Body In Asian Theory And Practice*, Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1993

purported as being characteristic of the female body or of the devaluation of it. Among these, she introduced through her writings elements such as menstrual blood, the loss of sex organs, childbirth, abortion and the devaluation of the female body because of age.

I would like to discuss motifs like the abjection of the maternal body in works such as *Masks* (*Onnamen*, 1958) and *Black God* (*Kuroi kami*, 1956), the repressed female sexuality in works such as *Earrings* (*Mimiyōraku*, 1957) and *Enchantress* (*Yō*, 1956), the fear of corporeal difference and transformation in *Days of Hunger* (*Himōjii tukihi*, 1954) and *Enchantress* and the wretchedness of old age in *The Spouses* (*Fūfu*, 1962). Considering the subjectification of women within the phallogocentric system of the patriarchal Japanese society as it is represented in Enchi's novels, I would like to analyze in my paper how the oppression of women by men is being projected on the female body in Enchi's works.

## **2. Gender discourse and corporeality in Enchi's fiction**

Despite the fact that Enchi did not necessarily define herself as a feminist writer, she addresses in her writings the issue of gender relationships in Japanese society. Enchi placed female characters in the center of her stories and most of these characters were depicted within an antagonistic and dysfunctional relationship with their male counterparts. Looking for the strength of women "reborn" after Japan's loss in the war, Enchi sought to illustrate the true life of these Japanese women. And although she isolated female characters from their male counterparts in some of her writings, her characters could not have escaped the gender codes enforced by the patriarchal society in which they live. This confrontation with patriarchal values is the arena of their struggle to affirm their identity or the space of their submission. Because, as Judith Butler explains it, "it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained"<sup>5</sup>

In this context, we could say that in Enchi Fumiko's literature "gender trouble" originates from "body trouble", in other words, that the Self is threatened by the instability of the body in which important characteristics of the gender reside.

### **2.1. Earrings: the loss of sexual organs and recovering one's sexual identity.**

For example, Takiko, the middle aged heroine of *Earrings* is a woman in the middle of a sexual identity crisis. After her hysterectomy, Takiko is seized by a "monstrous fear"<sup>6</sup>. She feels that "[w]ithout any pain or fever and without her knowing when and where it came from, the illness spread its roots inside her body and it started devouring the cells"<sup>7</sup> and thinks that "an invisible enemy was hiding in her body."<sup>8</sup> She then explains to her husband: "when they removed the womb,

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York : Routledge, 2008, p. 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Enchi Fumiko, *Enchi Fumiko Zenshū*, 2:367, Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1977-1978; *Enchi Fumiko Zenshū* henceforth abbreviated as *EFZ*.

<sup>7</sup> *EFZ*, 2:367

<sup>8</sup> *EFZ*, 2:367

they gave the cavity left behind a pathetic name; they called it a “dead opening”<sup>9</sup>. Feeling that she is no longer a woman she rejects her husband’s and her friend Takanashi’s advances but Takanashi’s encouragements arouse her senses and bring back the woman inside. She then proceeds on to seducing her associate, the jeweler Jirō, but without giving him any chance to confess his feelings for her. Beauty - where wholeness of the body is seen as being indispensable - and the capacity of bearing children are essential traits of the commonly accepted image of the “Woman”. The lack of sexual organs might blur the boundaries between the sexes, but despite their existence or non-existence, gender can define itself outside the borders of corporeality. Takiko manages to recover her sexual identity and think of herself as being “a woman made out of the rib of a man”<sup>10</sup>, in other words, as perfect as Eve, the original woman.

## **2.2. Male chauvinism and the female body**

Tension and inequality in relationships between men and women are typical for Enchi’s fiction. Female characters possess incomplete bodies and are represented by them. By confronting themselves with the changes that happen in their bodies like loss or malfunction, the female characters come to have an existence in which their corporeality is the main – if not the only – characteristic. Completely opposite to this, male characters are being characterized by their cognitive abilities and have a strong superiority complex towards their female counterparts. The male characters in *Black God*, *The Spouses*, *Masks* are professors or doctors, whereas the female characters Mio, Ikuyo and Harume are being placed in an inferior position and are women suffering because of changes which happen to their bodies: ailments or natural transformations. Despite that, while it may be true that these female characters are represented almost exclusively through their corporeality, it is not necessarily true that their male counterparts possess a superior nature in comparison.

Judith Butler observed that “In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. [...] The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, contemporary feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray are reanalyzing the antagonistic duality between men and women that works with the concepts of mind and body. In the same way, Enchi defies this duality and, while keeping a critical consciousness regarding gender roles in Japan, she advocates for improvement of the situation of women in Japanese society.

It becomes obvious that while the social background of Enchi’s character constellations is a society characterized by chauvinism and male dominance, a

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<sup>9</sup> *EFZ*, 2:368

<sup>10</sup> *EFZ*, 2:372

<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York : Routledge, 2008, p. 17

comparison between men and women inside these confines could not be otherwise but biased. Nonetheless, there are also female characters who disobey the internal rules of patriarchy and, by doing so, they come to affirm their identity. In *Masks*, Mieko, a poetess and researcher of Japanese classical literature, plans and accomplishes a scheme of revenge towards her late husband who had betrayed her. In order for Mieko to carry out her plot, she uses men who become mere tools in the hands of a mastered puppeteer.

In *Black God* we meet a double-edged inequality between the male and female characters. While Mio's husband is an university researcher, he ends up being arrested by the police for theft and he proves to be a kleptomaniac. Mio, who has lacked the power of decision regarding her own pregnancy and child, finally manages to set herself free from the constraints of the patriarchal society she lives in and to gain for herself the right to decide. Chigako, the main character from *Enchantress* as well envisions herself taking revenge on her husband who has constantly ignored her and their children throughout their marriage, being too absorbed in his hobby of being an art dealer. Chigako's revenge is just a fantasy, but for her, whose existence is mainly ideal – she works as a translator of classical Japanese stories – this seems to be an adequate kind of retribution.

### **3. The scarred body and the scared Self**

In her essay “Bodies in Trouble” Kristin Lindgren draws attention to the fact that “[o]ur sense of a stable identity is dependent on an unchanging, taken-for-granted body”<sup>12</sup> and “[f]or many people, living with a radically unpredictable body, or a body that has lost functions or parts, calls into question the stability and continuity of identity.”<sup>13</sup> According to Lindgren, disease is not only a crisis of the body, but also a crisis of Self-identity. If it were to analyze Enchi's writings from this perspective, we have to say that in her works not only disease but also defects of the body and the body's instability are elements that shake female characters' sense of identity and alter it. In order to overcome the crisis of the Self, female characters have to face the changes that have occurred inside their bodies and come to terms with them. For example, in order for the main character of *Black God* to gain the right of choice, that is, for her to affirm herself, she needs to admit and assimilate the existence of the child living inside her body and to start perceiving this child as being her own possession, and not the possession of others. In the same way the female characters from *Enchantress* and *Earrings* have to confront themselves with the changeability of their bodies and to redefine their sense of Self.

It becomes obvious that Enchi Fumiko does not give into the illusion of the perfect “universal” body, but through her female characters she is actually challenging the preconceived idea that stands at the root of common evaluation of the human body and that has such a powerful relationship and influence to the Self. This is the social paradigm in which Enchi's characters are situated and

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<sup>12</sup> Lindgren, Kristin, “Bodies in Trouble” in *Gendering disability*, ed. Smith, Hutchinson, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004, p. 150

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 148

deprived of any control over their own corporeality. According to Ruth Barcan, “Differences between living bodies are to be imagined as aberrations or exceptions to this abstract idea of a putatively “universal” body; ageing, blemishes and so on are conceived of as deviations from an ideal rather than equally typical variations within a field.”<sup>14</sup>

This characteristic is striking in Enchi’s short novel *Days of Hunger*, a story that has at its background the chaotic social conditions at the end of World War II. Saku, the main character, is haunted throughout her life by the birthmark she has on her back, a small detail that will cause her to develop a strong complex of inferiority. Feeling ashamed of her “flaw”, she rejects one by one the marriage proposals that she receives until she has passed the marriageable age. At last she finds herself compelled to give in to her matchmaker’s proposition of marriage. Saku spends her days fulfilling her role as a dutiful wife and taking care of her family, but one day she collapses over the washboard in her bathroom and dies. While it might not be considered a physical handicap, a birthmark is a sign of difference. Rejecting this difference (“special” spot) on her body, Saku ends up being in no way unlike any other common woman during the gloomy after-war period, when all Japanese people were trying striving to survive in spite of dire straits.

The main character of *Enchantress*, Chigako, is a woman who is trying to fight against one of the imagined aberrations of the “universal” body as she attempts to turn back time and set back the process of ageing. A translator of Japanese classical literature, Chigako spends her days working and day-dreaming in a special room attached to the house where her husband is living in. The short novel focuses on Chigako’s efforts to preserve her physical appearance – a youth lost for the eye that can be faked with the help of and rejuvenating cosmetics. Nonetheless, Chigako is young at heart. She envisions herself daring an adventure with the student who passes by her house now and then and in her daydream the borders between fantasy and the real world seem to melt, for one night Chigako and her husband are woken up by a young couple (supposedly her young Doppelgänger and her daydream partner) hugging at the gate of the house. It is interesting to observe how deep into the world of fiction the character ventures: like the authors of *Sarashina Diary* and *The Kagerō Diary* who have dealt with feelings of loneliness in their writings, Chigako finds her balance in the world of fiction. She even goes as far as identifying with Tsukumogami, the old woman in *Tales of Ise* who has an affair with a younger man. More precisely, Chigako, who has never known the moments of happiness that a woman could experience with a man, is aroused by the stories she has to translate and in spite of the dryness in her love life she rejoices in sensual excesses of the mind. Confused, Chigako wonders to what purpose she is disguising her body. Spectacles, false teeth, cosmetics, soon enough false locks to cover her thinned hair form a masquerade costume that transformed her into an unrecognizable “creature”. Although she thinks all her efforts to be fruitless, this transformation is necessary for the ambiguous space she is inhabiting. The entire construction of the house placed at the foot of the hill resembles a womb and Chigako’s bed resembles a coffin; the slope

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<sup>14</sup> Barcan, Ruth. *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004, p. 35

is being depicted as a “border” - it is the place she used to run up and down when she was a child and where she would stop to observe funeral processions. As well, the house lies near a dense forest where the abundant vegetation does not allow anyone to go inside. It is the borderline between life and death, between past and present, and Chigako seems capable to trespass it with little effort. As well, the nature surrounding the house can be interpreted as a metaphor for Chigako’s awakened sensuality. According to Leonard Lutwark, “the forest is [...] equated with woman by virtue of its vegetation and periodic renewal of vegetation. Like the garden it is a fertile place, though its vegetation, being wilder than the well-cared-for and well-contained plants of the garden, signifies an unruly sexuality.”<sup>15</sup>

In reading Enchi’s short novel *Spouses* one should have in mind Joan W. Scott’s observation in her study “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”, that “gender becomes a way of denoting “cultural constructions” – the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men”<sup>16</sup>. In *Spouses* Enchi depicts dynamics of gender characteristic to the Meiji period and beyond and describes a dreary picture of old age, as she has imagined it while in her fifties. The story illustrates Ikuyo and Kaichi on their way back home after a funeral and focuses on Ikuyo’s ailments. Feeling sick after the long journey, Ikuyo vomits in her husband’s handkerchief. As Kaichi throws the handkerchief outside the window of the taxi he also throws Ikuyo’s dentures that have fallen inside it. The descriptions of bodily processes and bodily parts are grotesque, as if to illustrate in minute detail how pitiable old age can be. Ikuyo’s body is compared to that of an animal and her submission is in no way surprising. In this relationship that preserves values relevant to the past, Ikuyo cannot receive any other role than that of the victim, looking through the lenses of modern society. She cannot overcome her inferiority complex towards her husband and she meekly follows him without complaining – the typical behavior of a woman who has been raised under the influence of the *ryōsaikenbō* (good wife, wise mother) ideology. The weakness of the body is a trope that illustrates women’s low status while the broken dentures are clearly a metaphor for the silence of women in a patriarchal society.

As one can construe from the stories in *Days of Hunger* and *Spouses*, the female characters are not defeated by their bodies but by their situation as women belonging to a phallogocentric system.

On the other hand, characters that have cut off their binds with this patriarchal system like Takiko in *Earrings*, Chigako in *Enchantress* and Mio in *Black God* are characters who manage to recover their emotional strength and affirm their identity. And through these novels Enchi has depicted the strength of Japanese women. Nonetheless, the novel that best illustrates Enchi’s idea of feminine strength is *Masks*, a novel in which Enchi molds her characters based on the empowered female archetype of the “woman forever feared”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Lutwark, Leonard. *The Role of Place in Literature*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984, p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”, p. 1056 in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec., 1986), pp. 1053 – 1075.

<sup>17</sup> A syntagm first used by Okuno Takeo when describing the main character of *Days of Hunger*. See Noguchi Hiroko, *Enchi Fumiko no kiseki*, Osaka: Izumi shoin, 2003, p. 4

#### 4. Pregnancy and the silenced body

In discussing keywords like pregnancy and delivery in connection to the novels *Black God* and *Masks* I would like to refer to Michelle Boulous Walker's research entitled *Philosophy and the maternal body: reading silence*<sup>18</sup>. According to Walker, "women are silenced most effectively by their association with maternity"<sup>19</sup> and "the maternal body operates as the site of women's radical silence"<sup>20</sup>, observations that can be easily identified in Enchi's depictions of the maternal body as well.

Walker explains that women are perceived as a body trapped in a crisis situation, that is to say, they are perceived as a "hysterical body in pain"<sup>21</sup> and this is the domain where women are being silenced as being unfit for the world of ideas or the world of philosophy. In the same way, in Enchi's novels *Masks* and *Black God* the characters Harume and Mio are pregnant women unable to express themselves and assert their cognitive faculties.

Mieko Toganō's daughter, Harume, whose head had been damaged while still inside her mother's womb from the pressure of her twin brother's feet was born weak-minded (first time Harume becomes a victim of the phallogocentric order). As Mieko wishes to fulfill her revenge, she uses the barely conscious Harume to bear a child apt to become Mieko's heir. Her desire was that of revenging the child she has lost because of a trick played to her by the mistress of her now late husband. She orchestrates the impregnation of her own daughter (the second victimization of Harume) and then she accepts with little remorse Harume's death (the third victimization) as a result of the pregnancy and deliverance that have exhausted her body. Mieko's plot was that of overthrowing the patriarchal system from its inside – her children were born of an illicit affair, which means that there was no Toganō blood in them, and the same can be said about Harume's child. Harume becomes a victim of this system but her character can also be regarded as a ritual sacrifice in Mieko's (who also plays the role of the shaman) puppet play. The "crimson drops of blood"<sup>22</sup> that Harume leaves behind – the natural flows of biological rhythm – stand as a metaphor for the immanence of reproduction. She is the untainted woman, the pure virgin to be sacrificed and she "embodies the modern male imaginary of Heian femininity: she lacks "interiority" and is alternately perceived either as alluringly and dirtily erotic or as a blank to be filled by a male longing."<sup>23</sup> In *Masks* though, the image of the "Woman" is ambivalent and the female body and its metabolism are mostly seen as polluted. It is a plausible representation, for "[t]he idea of soiling oneself, of dirt, of the very dirt produced by the body itself, staining the subject, is a "normal" condition of

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<sup>18</sup> Walker, Michelle Boulous, *Philosophy and the maternal body – reading silence*. New York: Routledge, 1998

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 1

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 1

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 3

<sup>22</sup> *EFZ*, 6:173

<sup>23</sup> Cornyetz, Nina. "Bound by Blood: Female Pollution, Divinity and Community in Enchi Fumiko's *Masks*." , p. 43 in U.S.-Japan Women's Journal, English Supplement 9 (December 1995): 29-58



infancy, but in the case of the maturing woman it is a mark or stain of her future status, the impulsion into a future of a past that she thought she had left behind”<sup>24</sup>, hence Harume’s erratic behavior during her monthly period, her retardation (she is, after all, the absolute icon of childbearing) and her isolation on the premises of a temple near Nonomiya shrine during her pregnancy<sup>25</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

Wanting to closely depict how it is to be “living the woman”<sup>26</sup> Enchi dared to tear down taboos related to women and the female body and she seems to have claimed through her fiction that in order to completely understand the substance of the Feminine, one has to first break down the outside shell, that of the body, and observe like a scientist under the magnifying glass where this shell and the psyche come together.

Enchi Fumiko challenged the generally accepted ideal image of the Woman (and of the “Feminine” for that matter). Throughout her writings, Enchi rejected the idea of a singular, universal body, an idealized composite of the “best” features of real bodies that is supposed to be the main asset of the Ideal Woman. In doing so she tore down taboos related to women and their bodies, breaches that helped her depict and represent the psyche of her female characters, their frailty or their strength. The incomplete and imperfect bodies stand as symbols of a broken psyche and of a delicate spirit but it is of absolute necessity to note that the ailments of the body also are – in most of Enchi’s novels – metaphors for the suffering of women under the oppression of a phallogocentric society and have resulted from the unequal relationship of power they have with their male counterparts.

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<sup>24</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies – Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, 205

<sup>25</sup> The isolation of Harume recalls the childbirth hut (*ubuya*). On a more extended study concerning pregnancy, childbirth and *ubuya* in Japan, see Teigo Yoshida, “The feminine in Japanese folk religion: polluted or divine?” in Ben-Ari, Eyal; Moeran, Brian; Valentine, James. *Unwrapping Japan : Society and Culture in Anthropological Perspective*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991, pp. 58 - 77; Tonomura Hitomi, “Birth-giving and Avoidance Taboo: Women’s Body versus the Historiography of the *Ubuya*” in *Japan Review*, 2007, 19: 3-45 and Sugitatsu Yoshikazu, *Osan no rekishi: Jōmon jidai kara gendai made*, Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2002

<sup>26</sup> *Onna wo ikiru* (Kōdansha, 1961) is the title of a collection of twelve essays that Enchi had serialized in *Gunzō* magazine between January and December 1960. One of the main themes discussed is the performativity of the gender. *EFZ*, 15: 189 - 250

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