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Suji Kim March 28, 2020

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Abstract

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This work examines medieval Japanese aesthetics and thought in the distinguished text *Tsurezuregusa.* By exploring three interrelated but separate aesthetics *ma, mono no aware and mujōkan* that are at the heart of Yoshida Kenkō's writing, this paper investigates the relationship between the aesthetic of *Tsurezuregusa* and Japaneseness. To conclude, this paper identifies the continued influence of medieval Japanese aesthetics and thought on shaping Japaneseness in the modern period.

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Pursuit of the Imperfect: A Close Analysis of Kenkō's *Tsurezuregusa*

I. Introduction

The culture of the medieval period (1185-1605) has greatly influenced much of what critics, scholars and political figures have construed as authentic Japaneseness. Perhaps the best example of this is Japanese novelist Yasunari Kawabata's (1899-1972) "Japan, the Beautiful and Myself" while the original Japanese text is 「美しい日本の私」meaning literally "Myself of (the) Beautiful Japan." In 1968, as the first Japanese author to be nominated for the Nobel Prize, Kawabata used his acceptance speech to identify and convey the essence of the Japanese spirit to the entire world; and significantly, nearly all of the sources he referenced in doing so were from the medieval period.

Kawabata references various poems of Japanese Buddhist priests and details the specific elements of the works that reflect the essence of Japan. Specifically, he distinguishes the Japanese aesthetic from that of the Western world. In this excerpt, Kawabata describes the qualities particular to the Western and to the Japanese garden, and thus, explicitly identifies the essence of Japaneseness.

> "The Western garden tends to be symmetrical, the Japanese garden asymmetrical, and this is because the asymmetrical has the greater power to symbolize multiplicity and vastness. The asymmetry, of course, rests upon a balance imposed by delicate sensibilities. Nothing is more complicated, varied, attentive to detail, than the Japanese art of landscape gardening. Thus, there is the form called the dry landscape, composed entirely of rocks, in which the arrangement of stones gives expression to mountains and rivers that are not present, and even suggests the waves of the great ocean breaking in upon cliffs."

Kawabata contrasts the preference for what he identifies as symmetrical aesthetics of the West with the inclination for the ostensibly asymmetry of the "Orient." He advocates the disposition of the Orient and further implies an underlying ideology at the heart of the Japanese spirit by referring to "delicate sensibilities" that are needed to create purposeful asymmetry. By asserting that that Japanese art of landscape gardening is complex and requires utmost meticulousness, Kawabata dismisses any assumption from the Western audience that would suggest otherwise. The Oriental Japanese dry landscape creates physical space that does not exist in the Western garden and leaves room for the imagination of the beholder.

Although Kawabata writes of this as historical and common aspect to all Japanese culture, it is in fact, a reference to the medieval Japanese aesthetic *ma* 間. In presenting Japanese culture this way, Kawabata does what cultural critics have been doing for over 150 years – using the culture of medieval Japan to represent the essence of Japaneseness.

Kawabata is not alone. From observers as varies as art critics Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) and Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913), the philosophers of the early 20th century Kyoto School, architects Arata Isozaki (1931-) and Kenzō Tange (1913-2005), the thought and aesthetics of the medieval period have been regarded as essentially Japanese in the modern period. To understand this phenomenon, the following discussion will analyze one of the most admired works of the medieval period, *Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness)* by Yoshida Kenkō.

Tsurezuregusa (1330-1331) is one of the most well-known examples of the *zuihitsu* ("follow the brush") genre. Analogous to personal diaries or journals, works of the *zuihitsu* genre were not intended to be read. It consists of 243 *dan* ("episodes") ranging in length from a few sentences to several pages long. The episodes themselves are free-form and shift from topic to topic. Included are some short stories and personal musings, in which Kenkō expresses his

thoughts on philosophical matters. Even the order in which the episodes are arranged are seemingly arbitrary. Despite its lack of form in both content and structure, Kenkō's writing reveals coherent thoughts that embody the Japanese aesthetics that flourished in medieval Japan.

This paper aims to examine the aesthetic of *Tsurezuregusa* and its relationship with "Japaneseness." In my discussion, I will argue that several concepts that have come to be associated with Japaneseness are actually medieval in development if not in origin: *ma* (space consciousness), *mono no aware* (pathos of things) and *mujō* (impermanence). I explore the ways that Kenkō – medieval in outlook and approach – integrates these concepts at the heart of his writing. Specifically, the analysis of the text provides an insight into the development of *ma*, evolution of *mono no aware* and expansion of *mujō.* To conclude, I identify their continued influence in the construction of Japaneseness in the modern period.

II. *Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness)*

Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness) is a compilation of essays written by Yoshida Kenkō that embodies principles and values that gives us insight into the culture of medieval Japan. In *Tsurezuregusa*, Kenkō's exceptional writing style seamlessly integrates core Buddhist principles and aesthetics with Japanese values. That is, its distinguished contribution to medieval Japanese literature arises from the innovative narration and composition style of Kenkō that has progressed to be a foundational work of the *zuihitsu* genre.

Yoshida Kenkō (1283 ca. 1350) was an official at the court of Emperor Go Nijō and became a monk after the death of the Emperor. Although Kenkō was known more as a poet during his lifetime, it was *Tsurezuregusa* that became popular posthumously that established his reputation as a writer renowned for his original style of the *zuihitsu* genre (Carter 33). Kenkō explores a wide variety of subjects in his collection of essays, expressing his thoughts in very

distinct voices. He often takes on a didactic role as a teacher and occasionally advises much similarly to how a wise sage would. However, the most notably, it is the presence of his own voice expressing his personal thoughts and wonderings, absent of any obvious teachings or wisdom, that makes *Tsurezuregusa* a distinguished piece of work. As centuries have passed, Kenkō's collection of essays has come to be regarded as an exemplar of the *zuihitsu* genre.

The *zuihitsu* genre can be best understood through Kenkō's own words describing his approach to the work: "What strange folly, to beguile the tedious hours like this all day before my ink stone, jotting down at random the idle thoughts that cross my mind…" (21). *Zuihitsu* 随筆 is comprised of characters that quite literally render the meaning "following the brush" and describes the writing of works that are not planned in the traditional sense with regard to style or subject matter. Rather, literature of the *zuihitsu* genre include personal and casual musings, distinct from formal or scholarly works.

In addition to Kenkō's exceptional writing style described by the characteristics of the *zuihitsu* genre, Kenkō's musings in *Tsurezuregusa* undoubtedly reflect influence from Buddhist and Daoist thought as well as Chinese and Japanese poetry (Carter 33). While the *zuihitsu* genre provides a structural framework for comprehending *Tsurezuregusa*, medieval Japanese Buddhism and aesthetics are the major influences that serve as the foundation to Kenkō's musings. To begin our exploration, I will draw on a concept that can be related to Buddhist, Daoist and even Shintō thought, *ma.*

II. Space Consciousness - Ma 間

During the medieval period, the concept of *ma* 間 developed as a Japanese aesthetic that became a central theme in many works of literature and art. This theoretical concept has progressively been cultivated by the Japanese people to be an essential part of the culture in

modern-day Japan, such that a comprehensive understanding of the Japanese culture cannot exist without the consideration of *ma*. Although some aspects of the concept are shared with other philosophical Buddhist concepts such as *ku* 空, literally emptiness, *ma* is exclusively Japanese and provides a framework through which what can be called "the unclaimed interval" in literature of premodern Japan can be better understood.

There are several frameworks that have emerged to illustrate the concept of *ma* that are applied to different aspects of the Japanese culture. Simply stated, the concept of *ma* refers to the existence of a negative space. As introduced by Richard Pilgrim in his proposal of *ma* in "Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan," Pilgrim defines *ma* by referring to the kanji, or Chinese character of the word itself. *Ma* is made up of two radicals, indicating two essential elements: the inner character meaning "sun" or "moon" from the earlier variant and the surrounding character meaning a gate (Pilgrim 258). According to Pilgrim's proposal, the character suggests that the concept of *ma* can be understood as a light shining through a gate or door. This interpretation does not only acknowledge the negative space or the emptiness that exists in the gate or door. It also emphasizes the function of the *ma* as the space that allows the light shine through. That is, the interval exists as a gap that is not merely negative space but one that is full of tension; it is an emptiness that is quivering to be filled.

Ma is demonstrated with respect to terms of music wherein *ma* is understood as gap in time that slightly expands and contracts, much like silence between notes soon waiting to be filled by the following note. When extended to the arts, this framework applies to the idea of accepting beauty in intentionally created blank spaces in paintings and literary works. Conclusively, the definition of *ma* has two essential components: first, the existence of negative

space in the arrangement of elements and second, the imagination of the individual who experiences those elements. *Ma* clearly takes on a relational meaning through its sense of being in, with, among or between others (Pilgrim 256). Thus, it is not surprising that the origin of this space consciousness in Japanese culture emerges from the importance that Japanese people place on relationships between themselves and others. The awareness of space between individuals, often construed as 'distance' continues to be a consciousness that is respected by the Japanese people even today.

While emptiness is inherently included in the meaning of *ma,* it should not be understood as the equivalent of the Buddhist philosophy of *kū* 空 that is also present in many literary works of premodern Japan. *Kū* is a philosophy that describes the idea that the essence of existence is empty, without substance; the world is fundamentally empty but perceived to exist relative to other phenomena (Ramirez-Christensen 29). Therefore, an understanding of *kū* indicates that nothing in existence is fixed because of the innate emptiness. This emptiness allows for an unlimited number of possibilities. Despite the similarities between the two ideologies, *ma* is distinctly Japanese because the consideration of the space between relationships between individuals is the basis of this space consciousness.

As Ramirez-Christensen demonstrates, the concept of *kū* was central to literature in medieval Japan, especially *renga* 連歌 (linked verse). I would suggest that the closely related concept of *ma* is likewise central to the *zuihitsu* genre, especially *Tsurezuregusa.* While Kenkō does not explicitly refer to *ma* in his collection of essays, particular passages in *Tsurezuregusa* suggest that he understood the aesthetic through its structural influence. That is, Kenkō's writing distinctly reflects both the literal and figurative implications of the aesthetic by accentuating a physical space that is intentionally created.

> "Though a home is of course merely a transient habitation, a place that is set up in beautiful taste to suit its owner is a delightful thing.
>
> Even the moonlight is so much the more moving when it shines into a house where a refined person dwells in tranquil elegance. There is nothing fashionable or showy about the place, it is true, yet the grove of trees is redolent of age, the plants in the carefully untended garden carry a hint of delicate feelings, while the veranda and open-weave fence are tastefully done, and inside the house the casually disposed things have a tranquil, old-fashioned air. It is all most refined" (Kenkō 25).

Through Essay 10, we can understand Kenkō's framing of the home as a transient habitation as the structure that is the surrounding outer gate, as demonstrated by the radical of the word 間, referenced in Pilgrim's religio-aesthetic paradigm. The home creates a space that is occupied by its owner or inhabitant. However, as Kenkō suggests, the space should not be filled in any manner. Although occupied by the inhabitant, a space should be intentionally created in the home to be filled by the moonlight that shines through the house at night. Echoing Pilgrim's interpretation of *ma* as a light shining through a gate or door, this is the heart of *ma.* It is the creation of a space in preparation for that which will soon fill it.

In the following passage, Kenkō's understanding of space consciousness is illustrated to a greater detail upon encountering a home that embodies the characteristics described in the passage above.

> "Around the twentieth day of the ninth month, someone invited me along to view the moon with him. We wandered and gazed until first light. Along the way, my companion came upon a house he remembered. He had his name announced, and in he went. In the

> unkempt and dew-drenched garden, a hint of casual incense lingered in the air. It was all movingly redolent of a secluded life.
>
> In due course my companion emerged, but the elegance of the scene led me to stay a little longer and watch from the shadows. Soon the double doors opened a fraction wider; it seemed the lady was gazing at the moon. It would have been very disappointing had she immediately bolted the doors as soon as the visit was over. She could not know that someone would still be watching. Such sensibility could only be the fruit of a habitual attitude of mind" (37).

Kenkō describes the house and its surrounding environment as "elegant," reflecting his belief that a home should be refined. Again, in Essay 32, Kenkō writes of moon gazing. However, the focus of *ma* in this excerpt is not the moon itself; it is the lady who is gazing at the moon. The imagery of double doors opening slightly illustrates the physical creation of space that fills Kenkō's view. While reading the first passage provides the perspective of the inhabitant from inside the house, observing the moonlight filling the space that was created intentionally, the second introduces a different perspective of an observer of the inhabitant in the home. In doing so, Kenkō develops the *ma* aesthetic on various levels and remarks on the specific beautiful scenes that occupy each. These two passages establish the ideas central to Kenkō's understanding of *ma.* In Essays Fifty-five and Seventy-two, Kenkō provides insight on the practical implications of the *ma* aesthetic and further emphasizes the aspect of intentionality in space consciousness.

> "Houses should be built with summer chiefly in mind. One can live anywhere in winter, but a house that is ill suited to hot weather is unbearable.
>
> Deep water is not cooling to the eye. Shallow, running water is far cooler.

A room with a sliding door makes things brighter than one with wooden shutters, and so is better for looking closely at something.

A high ceiling is cold in winter and darkens the lamplight.

I recall a discussion where all agreed that including areas of no particular use when making a building creates a visual interest, and they can be made to serve all sorts of purposes" (48).

"Unpleasant things – a great many things cluttering up the area where someone is sitting. A lot of brushes lying on an ink stone. A crowd of Buddhist images in a private worship hall. A large collection of stones and plants in a garden. Too many children and grandchildren in a house. Too much talk when meeting others. A long list of one's virtuous acts in a supplicatory prayer.

Things that are not unpleasant in large amounts are books on a book cart, and rubbish on a rubbish heap" (56).

These two latter passages inform Kenkō's distinct understanding of the *ma* aesthetic as a space that is consciously created. That is, *ma* is a space that expands and contracts at the will of the creator. It is no surprise then, that Kenkō provides specific instructions for building a home. Kenkō's instructions are largely based on the consideration of space in the home. Depicting a preference for sliding doors rather than wooden shutters and including areas of no particular use exemplifies this. In addition to providing more light, more space can be readily created with sliding doors. Moreover, sliding doors can be rearranged to create customized rooms. Kenkō reiterates the advantage of creating space, both aesthetic and practical in the final lines of the passage: "…all agreed that including areas of no particular use when making a building creates a

visual interest, and they can be made to serve all sorts of purposes" (48). These spaces can be understood as the space wherein moon-gazing, mentioned in previous passages, can take place.

In addition to instructions for designing and building a house, Kenkō further writes of clearing clutter to create an organized space in the second passage. Unlike the first of the two passages, Kenkō does not provide explicit instructions for building a home. Rather, he describes specific environments that he would categorize as "unpleasant." As expected, all instances illustrate a lack of space. All of his scenes counterintuitively describe objects in their appropriate settings. For instance, Kenkō writes of "a lot of brushes lying on an ink stone" (56). It is not unusual for many brushes to be found on an ink stone. We can easily imagine a scenario wherein an individual inadvertently leaves many brushes after using them. Therefore, the focus of Kenkō's musings is not the mess per se but rather, the lack of space. Furthermore, Kenkō demonstrates his understanding of the *ma* aesthetic by emphasizing that to have space, one must be intentional in creating it. The decluttering is a conscious decision and act to create space. In any scenario, there can be too much, despite how fitting it may be. Kenkō pursues the cultivation of space as a means to encourage moderation.

Having established these central aspects to his application of the *ma* aesthetic, Kenkō yet presents a different characteristic that informs his understanding and appreciation of space consciousness in Essay 82.

> "When someone complained that it was a great shame the way fine silk covers are so soon damaged, Ton'a replied, 'It is only after the top and bottom edges of the silk have frayed, or when the mother-of-pearl has peeled off the roller, that a scroll is truly impressive' – an astoundingly fine remark, I felt. Similarly, an unmatched set of bound books can be considered unattractive, but Bishop Kōyū impressed me deeply by saying

> that only a boring man will always want things to match; real quality lies in irregularity – another excellent remark.
>
> In all things, perfect regularity is tasteless. Something left not quite finished is very appealing, a gesture towards the future. Someone told me that even in the construction of the imperial palace, some part is always left uncompleted.
>
> In the Buddhist scriptures and other works written by the great men of old there are also a number of missing sections" (61).

Kenkō praises imperfection in this excerpt and in doing so, demonstrates appreciation of *ma,* an intentional space leaving a work uncompleted. There are features that can be considered imperfections, such as the fraying of the edges of silk, that do not literally create physical space. In contrast, there are those that are considered imperfections because there is a physical space that is purposely left, resulting in an incomplete work. That is, the *ma* aesthetic is identified in the figurative space that is imperfection or incompleteness. For Kenkō, the focus is not the nature of the imperfection itself. Nor is it the possibility of the space being filled to completion. It is the appreciation of the space that is intentionally left. In doing so, Kenkō identifies the imagination of the observer as an indispensable component of the *ma* aesthetic. To have an appreciation for the imperfect, one must be able to see beyond its incompleteness in imagination.

An analysis of the above passages wherein the *ma* aesthetic is foregrounded contributes to the understanding of Kenkō's interpretation and application of *ma*. It appears that for Kenkō, *ma* is the intentional creation of space. The space that is made can have many purposes. More importantly, Kenkō exhibited a deep appreciation for the space that was consciously built for the beauty that could fill it. In the next section, I will explore another major Japanese aesthetic that informs the content of *Tsurezuregusa*, *mono no aware* or pathos of things.

III. Pathos of Things – Mono no Aware 物の哀れ

Mono no aware or the "pathos of things" is not a view that originated in the medieval period of Japan. Initially introduced in the Heian Period (794-1185), *mono no aware* was not explicitly defined at its inception. This Japanese aesthetic has come to be defined in the Early Modern Period of Japan by literary critic Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) in his theoretical formulation of its meaning:

> "Regarding this phrase *"mono no aware"*: first of all, *"aware"* originally signified the sighing voice felt in and emitted from the heart when one sees, hears, or otherwise touches some object in the world, and as such is no different from the interjections "*ah*" and "*hare*" of our common colloquial speech. For example, when we are moved upon the sight of cherry blossoms or the moon, we say things like, "Ah, what beautiful flowers," and "*Hare*, isn't the moon lovely tonight?" "*Aware*" is formed by the combination of this "*ah*" and "*hare*" (Meli 64).

In some sense, *mono no aware* is understood as the emotional response to impermanence. It is the wistful appreciation for the beauty of things, heightened by their temporality.

The Heian Period was characterized by the expanding culture of court aristocracy that was engrossed in aesthetic refinement leading to developments in art and literature of Japan. Lady Murasaki Shikibu's (c. 973 – c.1014) novel, *The Tale of Genji*, considered to be one of the great works of world literature exhibits the *mono no aware* aesthetic, which is a steady theme throughout the development of the novel. While the aesthetic is demonstrated in a variety of ways, it is predominantly expressed in the context of the many fleeting romantic relationships that emerge throughout the novel. Since its conception during the Heian Period, numerous theoretical views on this Japanese aesthetic have been proposed in an effort to better comprehend

and define this sentiment.

In his article "The Moving Image of Eternity: Idealism, Incompleteness and *Ise Jingū*," architectural historian Simon Richards explores Yuriko Saitō's discussion on the Heian Period aristocratic sentiment of *mono no aware* as embodied in *The Tale of Genji, The Pillow Book* and *Essays in Idleness* (Richards 810). Saitō's discussion frames *mono no aware* as the "celebration of those qualities commonly regarded as falling short of, or deteriorating from, the optimal condition of the object" (ibid). However, Saitō clarifies that the appreciation of the imperfect was not only towards the characteristic qualities such as "asymmetry, irregularity or obscurity, or their contrast with the opposite qualities" (ibid). Rather, the qualities of the imperfect are aesthetically appreciated because their contrasting qualities can be achieved: "…the positive aesthetic experience of concealment and obscurity presupposes a premise that the object of quest will be available to us sooner or later" (ibid). In other words, the appreciation for impermanent, imperfect things of this world is rooted in the awareness that the opposite – the perfection or completeness – is attainable.

Saitō's interpretation of *mono no aware* alludes to Motoori Norinaga's criticism of Yoshida Kenkō concerning Japanese aesthetic tradition. Norinaga was disapproving of the popular definition of *mono no aware* and by association, Kenkō, and advocated instead, an aesthetic that focused on clarity, perfection and order (Richards 811). In evaluating the sensitivity of Kenkō, he claims that the focus of Kenkō's writings does not accurately reflect the true, natural sentiments of humans, and thus, is a "fake refinement:" What this priest [Kenkō] says is simply a violation of man's innermost feelings, the result of pretended smartness on the part of people living in later ages…The creation of an aesthetic by opposing the feelings of most people lends itself to the formation of many artificial statements" (Marra 129).

At surface level, the views held by Norinaga and Kenkō seem conflicting. However, Richards notes that Kenkō did not encourage the aesthetic celebration of decay and transience per se, as Norinaga writes; rather, the appreciation is rooted in a memory of a time when the opposite was true: "…it is clear that the pleasure derives from the memory of a time when they were perfect, revealed and attained, and the anticipation of a time when they might be so again" (ibid). That is, the bittersweet feeling of admiration of a fleeting thing is framed by the memory of its once complete, perfect state and a longing for its attainment once more. Kenkō advocates for a sensitivity to the states of things when they are not perfect. It is in these moments that the *aware* is heightened by the evanescent nature of all things. Kenkō's original interpretation of *mono no aware* that is evolved from the interpretation of the aesthetic in the Heian Period is evidenced throughout the *Tsurezuregusa*. In the following passage, Kenkō alludes to *mono no aware* established throughout classical works and offers his own musings about the things that provoked *aware* in writers of an older period.

"The changing seasons are moving in every way.

> Everyone seems to feel that 'it is above all autumn that moves the heart to tears', and there is some truth in this, yet surely it is spring that stirs the heart more profoundly. Then, birdsong is full of the feel of spring, the plants beneath the hedges bud into leaf in the warm sunlight, the slowly deepening season brings soft mists, while the blossoms at last begin to open, only to meet with ceaseless winds and rain that send them flurrying restlessly to earth. Until the leaves appear on the boughs, the heart is endlessly perturbed.
>
> The scented flowering orange is famously evocative, but it is above all plum blossom that has the power to carry you back to moments of cherished memory. The

exquisite kerria, the hazy clusters of wisteria blossom – all these things linger in the heart.

Someone has said that at the time of the Buddha's birthday and the Kamo festival in the fourth month, when the trees are cool with luxuriant new leaf, one is particularly moved by the pathos of things and by a longing for others, and indeed it is true. And who could not be touched to melancholy in the fifth month, when the sweet flag iris leaves are laid on roofs, and the rice seedlings are planted out, and the water rail's knocking call is heard? The sixth month is also moving, with white evening-glory blooming over the walls of poor dwellings, and the smoke from smoldering smudge fires. The purifications of the sixth month are also delightful.

The festival of Tanabata is wonderfully elegant. Indeed, so many things happen together in autumn – the nights grow slowly more chill, wild geese come crying over, and when the bush clover beings to yellow the early rice is harvested and hung to dry. The morning after a typhoon has blown through is also delightful.

Writing this, I realize that all this has already been spoken of long ago in *Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* – but that is no reason not to say it again. After all, things thought but left unsaid only fester inside you. So, I let my brush run on like this for my own foolish solace; these pages deserve to be torn up and discarded, after all, and are not something others will ever see" (Kenkō 29-30).

Interestingly, Kenkō alludes to *Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* in this passage, both written during the Heian Period when *mono no aware* was introduced. In mentioning his thoughts on this Japanese aesthetic and referencing these classical works, Essay 19 epitomizes the *zuihitsu* genre through the undefined structure and inclusion of personal musings, not

necessarily pertaining to the topic at hand. Furthermore, by writing that "[these pages] are not something others will ever see," Kenkō explicitly describes an essential characteristic of the *zuihitsu* genre. Writings of this genre are not written with a specific, intended audience in mind. They are simply musings, and thus, an invaluable resource from which an unintended reader can acquire an understanding of the cultural landscape of a past time.

Moreover, this passage encapsulates the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware.* While Kenkō may not explicitly employ this term in his writing, his choice of diction to describe his response to the seasons directly reflect the central significance of *mono no aware*. He describes spring as the season "that stirs the heart more profoundly" and says that the "heart is endlessly perturbed" by the wonders of nature only seen during this season. While Kenkō refers to festivals or events such as Buddha's birthday, the Kamo festival and Tanabata festival, this is only done to indicate the changing times and reflections in nature. As evidenced in this passage, Kenkō's definition of *mono no aware* constructed throughout this passage based on his response to such exquisite occurrences in nature align with Norinaga's definition of *mono no aware*: it is the state of being emotionally moved or stirred upon beholding a beautiful scene in nature.

However, Kenkō's definition is not only prescribed to this aspect of *mono no aware.* In the following paragraph, an excerpt from Essay 19, he identifies another aspect of *mono no aware* that alludes to an internal connection, urging an emotional response or appreciation of nature:

> "The scented flowering orange is famously evocative, but it is above all plum blossoms that has the power to carry you back to moments of cherished memory. The exquisite kerria, the hazy clusters of wisteria blossom – all these things linger in the heart" (Kenkō 30).

Unlike the other sections of this passage, Kenkō identifies the significance of memory in his understanding of *mono no aware.* While being stirred by the beauty of nature is a part of this Japanese aesthetic, it is only the external response of a deeper impression on the observer. Beneath the outer appearance, there is a profound connection that the observer has between the scene and a cherished memory that prompts the interjection that Norinaga describes as "*ah*" and "*hare*." As latter passages will demonstrate, Kenkō elaborates on this aspect of his interpretation of *mono no aware.* To that end, the role that the significance of memory plays in Kenkō's development of *mono no aware* distinguishes his understanding of this Japanese aesthetic from that of others.

Further contributing to the development of Kenkō's perception of *mono no aware,* the following passage (Essay 21) identifies unconventional scenes that are not commonly described to be moving and presents his own musings about them:

> "You can find solace for all things by looking at the moon. Someone once declared that there is nothing more delightful than the moon, while another disagreed, claiming that dew is the most moving – a charming debate. Surely there is nothing that isn't moving, in fact, depending on circumstance.
>
> Not only the moon and blossoms, but the wind in particular can stir people's hearts.
>
> The sight of a clear stream breaking against rocks is always delightful, whatever the season.
>
> I was truly moved when I read the words of the Chinese poem that run, 'Day and night, the Yuan and Xiang go flowing ever east, / never pausing for a grieving man.' Then there is Xi Kang, who wrote how, roving among mountain and stream, his heart

> delighted to see the fish and birds. Nothing provides such balm for the heart as wandering somewhere far from the world of men, in a pace of pure water and fresh leaf" (Kenkō 31-32).

In Essay 21, Kenkō identifies the seasons and scenes in nature that are conventionally described by Japanese poets to evoke *mono no aware.* However, in this passage, Kenkō claims that all things can be emotionally moving, depending on the circumstance. He alludes to the long-held debate among poets about which season – autumn or spring – is more moving and proposes that rather, the wind particularly can be moving but does not provide any reasoning for this. Furthermore, Kenkō claims that "the sight of a clear stream breaking against rocks is always delightful," with no justification. Both statements contribute to Kenkō's greater argument that is presented in this passage that his aesthetic is not restricted to preconceived notions of beauty. Subsequently, Kenkō's understanding of *mono no aware* can be extended beyond the typical interpretation of the aesthetic.

At the core of *mono no aware* is the idea that the beauty of something is heightened by the awareness of its impermanence. This is most commonly and best exemplified by the cherry blossoms that bloom, only for the flowers to fall shortly thereafter. Therefore, *mono no aware* is understood as an emotional response to the evanescence of all things in this transient world. However, Kenkō's musings in this passage suggests this may not have been Kenkō's understanding of the aesthetic. The wind and the currents of the stream that breaks against the rocks are not scenes in nature wherein their height also defines its end. Surely, both things are impermanent, but they do not conjure the heart in the same way the waning moon or spring blossoms do. There is another, unidentified element to *mono no aware* as described by Kenkō. Essay 26 provides insight into this distinctive element:

> "How mutable the flower of the human heart, a fluttering blossom gone before the breeze's touch – so we recall the bygone years when the heart of another was our close companion, each dear word that stirred us then still unforgotten; and yet, it is the way of things that the beloved should move into worlds beyond our own, a parting far sadder than from the dead. Thus, did Mozi grieve over a white thread that the dye would alter forever, and at the crossroads Yang Zhu lamented the path's parting ways.
>
> In Retired Emperor Horikawa's collection of one hundred poems, we read:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Where once I called on her | *mukashi mishi* |
> | the garden fence is now in ruins – | *imo ga kakine wa* |
> | flowering there I find | *arenikeri* |
> | only wild violets, woven through | *tsubana majiri no* |
> | with rank spring grasses. | *sumire nomi shite* |
>
> Such is the desolate scene that once must have met the poet's eye (Kenkō 34).

In this passage, Kenkō reflects not on the impermanence of things in nature but instead, the mutability of the human heart. The human heart is as impermanent, perhaps even more so, than things found in nature. Kenkō recalls the poem of retired Emperor Horikawa, wherein Emperor Horikawa finds only wild violets at the place where he once called on his past lover. In doing so, Kenkō suggests that *mono no aware* is not merely evoked upon seeing beautiful scenes in nature. Scenes found in nature inspire introspection and remembrance of things that moved the human heart in the past. That is, *mono no aware* is manifested in the reminiscence of moments that once moved the human heart in both joy and grief. This further contributes to Kenkō's statement in the previous passage: "Surely there is nothing that isn't moving, in fact, depending on circumstance" (Kenkō 31). Indeed, in Kenkō's conception of *mono no aware,* all things can

hold emotional significance in the memories of a person, and therefore, can evoke *mono no aware* upon its remembrance. The sensation that captures *mono no aware* is not only evoked in the present moment upon beholding a breathtaking scene in nature; it is also awakened at the memory of a past time that stirred the individual's heart.

As demonstrated by the passage above, *mono no aware* is a sentiment that is perceived in interpersonal relationships, particularly of the romantic nature. The following passage, resembling a personal narrative, captures the full development of a relationship, leading to the denouement where *mono no aware* is felt. Rather than express in words, Kenkō narrates a story that conveys the sentiment central to pathos of things in Essay 104:

> "A lady who had reason to withdraw from the world for a time had retired to a lonely tumbledown house, where she was idling away the long days of her seclusion, when one dimly moonlit evening a certain man decided to call; but as he was creeping stealthily to her door, a dog set up a fierce barking. This brought one of the maidservants. 'Where do you hail from?' she inquired. The man promptly announced himself, and was shown in.
>
> His heart was heavy as he took in his forlorn surroundings. How must she spend her time here? He stood hesitating on the veranda's rough wooden boards. 'This way,' came a wonderfully serene and youthful voice, so he slid open the door with some difficulty and entered.
>
> The place was not so shabby after all but was modest and refined. At the far end a lamp shone softly, revealing the beauty of the furnishings, and the scent of incense lit some time earlier imbued the place with an evocative and beguiling air.
>
> He heard orders being given among the servants – 'Take care to lock the gate. It may rain. Put the carriage under the shelter of the gate roof' – and talk of where his

retainers should spend the night. Then one added, in a soft murmur that nevertheless reached his ears because he was quite close, 'Tonight at least we can sleep easy.'

The two spoke together of all that had happened since they last met, until the first cock crowed while it was yet night. On they talked earnestly, of matters past and to come, and now the cock's crow was loud and persistent. The day must by now have dawned, he thought, but this was not a place he must hasten to leave before light, so he lingered on a little, until sunlight whitened the cracks in the door. At last, with promises not to forget her, he departed.

Recalling the enchanting scene, he remembers how beautifully green the trees and garden plants glowed in that early summer daybreak, and even now, whenever he passes the house, he turns to gaze until the great camphor tree in the garden is lost to sight" (Kenkō 71).

Unlike the passages previously discussed, this one narrates a personal experience of an unidentified protagonist who spends the evening with a lady. Kenkō does not divulge in the details of the nature of the relationship between the man and the lady. The only information that he explicitly discloses is that the man and woman had a preexisting relationship: "The two spoke together of all that had happened since they last met…" (ibid). This was not a visit from a passing stranger. Although the events that unfold following this visit remains a mystery, the final paragraph of the passage suggests that the protagonist of this narrative relies only on his memory of that summer night as he passes by the lady's house. Kenkō's writing also conveys a sense of longing that the protagonist feels about the lady: "…even now, whenever he passes the house, he turns to gaze until the great camphor tree in the garden is lost to sight" (ibid). The memory of the lady and their time together on one summer night is tinged with a sense of wistfulness. In this

passage, the protagonist's sentiments about the lady and conceivably, their relationship are associated with the camphor tree in the garden. Upon seeing the camphor tree outside the lady's house, the protagonist's heart is stirred once again. Thus, *mono no aware* is evoked.

The way that *mono no aware* is exemplified in this passage pays homage to how the aesthetic was exhibited in perhaps the most influential work in all of Japanese literature *Tale of Genji.* There are various instances throughout the tale wherein Genji, the main character of this novel from classical Japan, finds himself reminiscing a past lover upon seeing a certain flower associated with a specific lady, much similarly to the protagonist of Kenkō's passage above. The resemblance in the way that *mono no aware* is portrayed during the Heian Period and the medieval period, as suggested by the comparison between Kenkō's passage and scenes throughout *Tale of Genji* suggests the persistence of this component of this Japanese aesthetic over time. Therefore, its significance to the understanding of *mono no aware* is undeniable. The essence of *mono no aware* cannot be captured without the nostalgia and melancholy associated with a memory of a past time of happiness and perfection. The present is only evidence that all things have succumbed to the inevitability of impermanence. In continuing this component of this Japanese aesthetic, Kenkō identifies the natural instinct of all humankind to romanticize memory and yearn for the past. In doing so, an emotional bond is forged and a poignant appreciation, heightened by the realization of the certainty of impermanence, is felt. This is exhibited in Essay 137 that demonstrates Kenkō's quintessential expression of his understanding of *mono no aware*:

> "Should we look at the spring blossoms only in full flower, or the moon only when cloudless and clear? To long for the moon with the rain before you, or to lie curtained in your room while the spring passes unseen, is yet more poignant and deeply moving. A

branch of blossoms on the verge of opening, a garden strewn with fading petals, have more to please the eye. Could poems on the themes of ‘Going to view the blossoms to find them already fallen’ or ‘Written when I was prevented from going to see the flowers’ be deemed inferior to ‘On seeing the blossoms’? It is natural human feeling to yearn over falling blossoms and the settling moon – yet some, it seems are so insensitive that they will declare that since this branch and that have already shed their flowers, there is nothing worth seeing any longer.

In all things, the beginning and the end are the most engaging. Does the love of man and woman suggest only their embraces? No, the sorrow of lovers parted before they met, laments over promises betrayed, long lonely nights spent sleepless until dawn, pining thoughts for one in some far place, a woman left sighing over past love in her tumbledown abode – it is these, surely, that embody the romance of love.

Rather than gazing on a clear full moon that shines over a thousand leagues, it is infinitely more moving to see the moon near dawn and after long anticipation, tinged with most beautiful palest blue, a moon glimpsed among cedar branches deep in the mountains, its light now hidden again by the gathering clouds of an autumn shower. The moist glint of moonlight on the glossy leaves of the forest *shii* oak or the white oak pierces the heart, and makes you yearn for the distant capital and a friend of true sensibility to share the moment with you.

Are blossoms and the moon merely things to be gazed at with the eye? No, it brings more contentment and delight to stay inside the house in spring and, there in your bedroom, let your heart go out to the unseen moonlit night” (Kenkō 87-88).

That which Kenkō implied in previous passages, he explicitly states in this passage.

Kenkō's musings in this passage reflects his impression of not only *mono no aware* but also the natural tendency of humans, at large. He contends that contrary to popular belief, it is the beginning and the end that are the most captivating. Kenkō does not dismiss the fact that the apex is also moving. However, to Kenkō, it is the beginning and end, tinged with yearning and melancholy, respectively, that intensifies all emotions, and thus, is more moving than the culmination of all things. In Kenkō's framework of *mono no aware*, it is the remembrance of the once perfect state of things that evokes the feeling of yearning and anticipation that truly embodies the essence of *mono no aware*. Kenkō's understanding of *mono no aware* is further distinguished in this way.

The Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware,* as exhibited in *Tsurezuregusa,* frames the concept as an emotional response to impermanence. Kenkō broadens the definition of *mono no aware* by identifying the aesthetic in various instances that are not conventionally thought to evoke the sentiment. In doing so, Kenkō identifies an indispensable component that further emphasizes the impermanence of all things: memory. It is the only thing that withstands the unrelenting tides of time in this transient world. Memory is that which guides humans in this ever-changing existence, and it has the powerful capacity to evoke the emotion that is identified in the Japanese aesthetic *mono no aware.* The last term we will explore *mujō* or *mujō-kan*, is closely related to *mono no aware.*

IV. Impermanence - Mujō 無常

Mujō 無常 or *mujō-kan* 無常感 is a Japanese term that originates from Buddhism meaning impermanence, transience or mutability (Hull 1998). It is central to the Buddhist analysis of existence: all things exist and perish through dependent origination. That is, all things are impermanent, without substance and subject to change at any time. If *ku* 空 emphasizes the

central emptiness of all things in existence, *mujō* 無常 emphasizes the resulting impermanent nature of all things. In Buddhism, these two ideas inform the most prevalent existential problem for all human beings. All humans, ignorant or are unaware of the ubiquity of the impermanence of all existing things, attempt to secure a lasting contentment from things by holding onto that which is transient and mutable. This ultimately leads to suffering. These ideas comprise the truth of suffering and the cause of suffering which are two of the Four Noble Truths at the heart of Buddhism. Thus, *mujō* is an awareness that underlies the core tenets of Buddhism, and through its influence on Japanese culture, its thematic presence in many works of Japanese literature and art is pervasive.

While *mujō* is inherently a Buddhist belief, its interaction with the Japanese culture in the medieval period has informed a distinct Japanese understanding of the same. Impermanence or temporality has not been viewed by the Japanese people merely as a fundamental problem of the human existence. Rather, it was regarded as a condition that contributes to the pursuit of a meaningful existence (Hull 1998). This distinguished interpretation of *mujō* has consequently informed the emphasis on a profound emotional response to transience. That is, ephemerality heightens the appreciation of beauty. This perspective of *mujō* has contributed to the Japanese aesthetic *mono no aware* "pathos of things." Although the idea *mujō* premises *mono no aware*, they can be distinguished by their respective principal beliefs. *Mujō* concerns the ephemeral nature of things, and this concept of temporality is at the center of this Buddhist thought. *Mono no aware* is oriented towards the emotional response resulting from the awareness of *mujō*. Though both concepts arise from the same thought, they pertain to separate, distinct aspects.

While the concept of impermanence is not limited to the medieval period, its influence is extensive in literary and artistic works from the medieval period. Examining the perspective and

approach to temporality in works such as *Tsurezuregusa* can provide a deeper understanding of its initial influence on Japanese culture. Furthermore, it can establish a framework through which its contribution to the development modern Japaneseness can be understood.

In several passages, Kenkō skillfully explores both the concept of *mujō* and *mono no aware* in his musings. He reflects on the impermanent nature of the human existence and emphasizes the futile efforts of humans in pursuing the fleeting things in life. In these passages, he offers guidance to those who seek the ephemeral. In doing so, differently from before, the meditations of a monk are articulated.

> "If our life did not fade and vanish like the dews of Adashino's graves or the drifting smoke from Toribe's burning grounds, but lingered on forever, how little the world would move us. It is the ephemeral nature of things that makes them wonderful.
>
> Among all living creatures, it is man that lives longest. The brief dayfly dies before evening; summer's cicada knows neither spring nor autumn. What a glorious luxury it is to taste life to the full for even a single year. If you constantly regret life's passing, even a thousand long years will seem but the dream of a night.
>
> Why cling to a life which cannot last forever, only to arrive at ugly old age? The longer you live, the greater your share of shame. It is most seemly to die before forty at the latest. Once past this age, people develop an urge to mix with others without the least shame at their own unsightliness; they spend their dwindling years fussing adoringly over their children and grandchildren, hoping to live long enough to see them make good in the world. Their greed for the things of this world grows ever deeper, till they lose all ability to be moved by life's pathos and become really quite disgraceful" (Kenkō 24).

At first glance, Essay 7 embodies the central ideas of *mono no aware.* However, this is only reflective of the writing style of the *zuihitsu* genre: the content mirrors the structure of the *zuihitsu.* Similar to the style of his writing that lacks an obvious organized structure, Kenkō seamlessly intertwines the ideas that are central to both *mujō* and *mono no aware.* By weaving both concepts in his musings, Kenkō suggests that *mujō* and *mono no aware* are inextricably related to one another. Solely emphasizing the temporality of human existence will not do; it is far more significant to consider what makes the ephemeral human existence meaningful. Tinged with a wistful appreciation for this life, Kenkō sensibly connects the two concepts whilst emphasizing the characteristics specific to *mujō.*

The central idea in this passage is the impermanence of all existence – both that of humans and non-human creatures. He highlights the ephemeral nature of the human existence by comparing it to the dew of the morning, which dissipates quickly, unnoticed. Simultaneously, Kenkō draws attention to the fact that the existence of other living creatures is shorter still. He alludes to the dayfly and cicada, whose existence are limited to a day or a season, respectively. In consideration of this, Kenkō expresses his tender sentiments by comparing the human existence to a "glorious luxury." He continues by writing that the luxury of this life is squandered if consumed by greed for things of this world, resulting in losing the ability to be moved by the same things. Desire to possess destroys the ability to appreciate. He draws on his own meditations as a monk and reflects: "Why cling to a life which cannot last forever, only to arrive at ugly old age?" In doing so, Kenkō identifies the futility of human efforts to vainly hold on to a passing life. He further illustrates this thought in the Essay 25.

> "This world is changeable as the deeps and shallows of Asuka River – time passes, what was here is gone, joy and grief visit by turns, once splendid places change to abandoned

wastelands, and even the same house as of old is now home to different people. The peach and the plum tree utter nothing – with whom can we speak of past things? Still more moving in its transience is the ruin of some fine residence of former times, whose glory we never saw.

It is deeply poignant to see the Kyōgoku-dono and Hōjōji Temple and witness there the hopes of the man who built them, now so transfigured. The Midōdono created these magnificent buildings and donated many of his estates to the temple, full of plans that his family would continue to act as regents for future emperors and retain its worldly power – could he have dreamed then that an age would come when all that he had set up would lie in such ruin? …

In places where such remnants no longer exist, one can sometimes still see foundation stones in the ground, but none now know what buildings these once were.

And so we see how fickle is the world in all things, for those who would plan for a time they will not live to see" (Kenkō 33-34).

In this passage, Kenkō chronicles the deterioration of once magnificent temples that have now been turned to ruins with the passage of time. The protagonist of Kenkō's musings in this passage is Midōdono, referring to Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027), who was one of the most powerful statesmen in the Heian Period. By contrasting the once grandiose condition of the temples to the current demolished state, Kenkō seeks to illustrate the inevitable plight of human dreams and hopes, even those of great, powerful men. Despite Fujiwara Michinaga's power and wealth, the infrastructural work that he built could not withstand the passing of time. Just as these splendid works could not resist the influence of time, the hopes and dreams of humans

cannot endure despite efforts to continue them long after one's death. Both objects and humans cannot escape the reach of impermanence.

Kenkō does not only recognize that the human existence is impermanent. He notes that the abstract is also impermanent. Hopes, dreams and aspirations that seem to be able to persist across time and space are not unchanging nor unwavering. All things, both abstract and concrete things in existence are ephemeral, subject to the greater power at work in the world. Kenkō specifically frames the world as a force that commands the influence of impermanence on all things: "And so we see how fickle is the world in all things, for those who would plan for a time they will not live to see" (34). In doing so, Kenkō emphasizes the inevitability of death and the vanity of human efforts to survive its effects. Although impermanence is the predominant theme in both passages, Kenkō's tone is tinged with a wistful emotion as he ponders such ideas.

In contrast, Kenkō writes with a didactic tone in Essay 38 that exhibits with a greater clarity Kenkō's understanding of temporality.

> "It is foolish to be in thrall to fame and fortune, engaged in painful striving all your life with never a moment of peace and tranquility.
>
> Great wealth will drive you to neglect your own well-being in pursuit of it. It is asking for harm and tempting trouble…Big carriages, fat horses, glittering gold and jewels – any man of sensibility would view such things as gross stupidity. Toss your gold away in the mountains; hurl your jewels into the deep. Only a complete fool is led astray by avarice.
>
> Everyone would like to leave their name unburied for posterity – but the high-born and exalted are not necessarily fine people, surely. A dull, stupid person can be born into a good house, attain high status thanks to opportunity and live in the height of

> luxury, while many wonderfully wise and saintly men choose to remain in lowly positions, and end their days without ever having met with good fortune. A fierce craving for high status and position is next in folly to the lust for fortune.
>
> We long to leave a name for our exceptional wisdom and sensibility – but when you really think about it, desire for a good reputation is merely reveling in the praise of others. Neither those who praise us nor those who denigrate will remain in the world for long, and others who hear their opinions will be gone in short order as well…No, there is nothing to be gained from leaving a lasting name. The lust for fame is the third folly.
>
> Let me now say a few words, however, to those who dedicate themselves to the search for knowledge and the desire for understanding. Knowledge leads to deception; talent and ability only serve to increase earthly desires. Knowledge acquired by listening to others or through study is not true knowledge. So what then should we call knowledge? Right and wrong are simply part of single continuum. What should we call good? One who is truly wise has no knowledge or virtue, no honor nor fame. Who then will know of him, and speak of him to others? This is not because he hides his virtue and pretends foolishness – he is beyond all distinctions such as wise and foolish, gain and loss.
>
> I have been speaking of what it is to cling to one's delusions and seek after fame and fortune. All things of this phenomenal world are mere illusion. They are worth neither discussing nor desiring (Kenkō 40).

In this passage, Kenkō's message extends beyond the idea of impermanence and its ubiquity in all things. Kenkō identifies and warns against three follies that may appear to be worth pursuing. First of these is avarice. His thoughts on the pursuit of great wealth echoes his

musings in the previous passage wherein he reflects on the legacy of Fujiwara Michinaga: "Though you leave behind at your death a mountain of gold high enough to prop up the North Star itself, it will only cause problems who come after you" (ibid). In further support of his ideas expressed in earlier sections of the collection, Kenkō explicitly disapproves of the pursuit of fame and fortune and suggests that impermanence reaches these things first. He says, "Only a complete fool is led astray by avarice" (ibid). In other words, any person who has an inkling of some sensibility would not be lured by such things. He then continues to identify a second folly, which is similar to the first: a craving for high status and position. While this is less materialistic as the pursuit of great wealth, it is just as foolish. A high status or position can be achieved by anyone, and as such, is not indicative of the character of the individual of such status or position. It is evident that the character of an individual has a greater significance to Kenkō in consideration of all things. Similar to the second folly, Kenkō identifies the lust for fame as the third folly. Although not intended for an audience, Kenkō urges the reader to think about what is at the heart of desiring a good reputation – seeking the praise of others. Bearing in mind that impermanence and temporality lie at the essence of all things, pursuit of good reputation fundamentally hinges on the fleeting acknowledgement from individuals whose existence is evanescent. Hence, it does not do to waste one's own transient life to achieve something that is too, momentary.

In Kenkō's discussion of all three follies, he frequently refers to "the wise" and "any man of sensibility," suggesting that a wise or sensible person would not be tempted by such foolish desires and pursuits. For this reason, Kenkō's position on this topic would imply that the pursuit of the wise and sensible individual of knowledge and understanding is worthwhile. However, Kenkō offers a few words for those who can be considered "wise" and "sensible" that appears to

contradict this presupposition: “Knowledge leads to deception; talent and ability only serve to increase earthly desires” (ibid). In this text, Kenkō seems to disapprove the pursuit of knowledge and understanding as well. However, a close analysis of the text to follow suggests that there is a quality that distinguishes the truly wise from those who appears to be wise: “One who is truly wise has no knowledge or virtue, no honor nor fame” (ibid). It is these individuals that Kenkō approves of. Considering the context in which *Tsurezuregusa* was written, with Kenkō having composed this collection of essays in reclusion, Kenkō advocates the choice that he has made.

While contemplating the impermanent nature of all things, Kenkō offers enlightenment by drawing attention to the temporality of all things of this world. He does not deny that the world offers extraordinary things as he refers to this world as a “phenomenal” one. Kenkō aims to emphasize that it is an illusion for the reason that all things are fundamentally impermanent. In providing jottings of instruction for an unintended audience, Kenkō contributes to his discussion of impermanence in his collection of essays and conveys a clear understanding of his perspective on the matter. In the Essay 49, Kenkō continues his advice to the unforeseen reader:

> “Do not wait until old age is upon you before taking up religious practice. Most graves of the past hold men who died young.
>
> It may be only when unexpected illness has overtaken you and you are soon to leave this world that you become aware for the first time of past error. By ‘error’ I mean, quite simply, taking you time over what should be accomplished swiftly, and rushing into what should be dealt with slowly. Regret fills you, but there is no point in repenting now.
>
> You must cling to the certain knowledge that death presses in on us, and never for an instant forget it. If you do this, the corruptions of the world will surely fade from your life, and you will of necessity dedicate yourself in earnest to the Buddhist Way.

> In his treatise *The Ten Causes*, Zenrin wrote of a holy man who one day was visited by someone on business that concerned them both. 'There's something urgent I must attend to,' he responded. 'It is almost upon me.' He thereupon blocked his ears, began to recite the *nenbutsu,* and before long was carried into paradise.
>
> The holy man Shinkai was so deeply aware of the transience of this world that he would never relax and sit comfortably, but only ever squatted at the ready" (Kenkō 44).

This passage highlights another aspect of Kenkō's interpretation and application of impermanence. Specifically, Kenkō draws attention to the imminence of death. He reminds the reader that death is impending and overtakes when it is least expected. Hence, humans should embrace religious practice without delay. Kenkō conveys a tone of urgency when addressing the audience by employing diction such as "unexpected" in describing an illness that ultimately leads to death. The following quote from the passage above vividly illustrates Kenkō's radical perspective on impermanence and the gravity with which he concerned himself with death, and thus, a meaningful life: "You must cling to the certain knowledge that death presses in on us, and never for an instant forget it" (ibid). Kenkō creates an image for the audience that death is ever-present, and its inevitably bears down on humans. Not only should one not forget the imminence of death, but one should "cling" to this knowledge. To Kenkō, impermanence informs his awareness and urgent attitude towards the inevitability of death. In other words, while Kenkō is concerned with the temporality inherent to all things, he conceives the entire perspective of existence and death.

Essay 74 nicely summarizes Kenkō's interpretation of *mujō*:

> "We swarm like ants, scurrying to east and west, dashing to north and south, folk of high birth and of low, old and young, some going, others returning, sleeping at night, rising

again next morning…What is all this busyness? There is no end to our greed for life, our lust for gain.

We tend our bodies – to what end? Old age and death are the only sure things awaiting us. Swiftly they come, without an instant's pause. What pleasure is to be found while we await them?

The deluded have no fear of this truth. In thrall to the lure of fame and fortune, they never pause to see what lies so close before them. Fools mourn it. In their longing for eternal life, they have no understanding of the law of mutability" (Kenkō 58).

Once again, Kenkō evaluates the emptiness and futility of a life lived in pursuit of fame and fortune. He reiterates that the value that humans believe to exist in the materialistic things of this world are only a delusion. It is worth nothing that he refers to impermanence as a law. Specifically, he refers to it as the "law of mutability." To further support the discussion of the previous passages above, Kenkō's understanding of temporality is uncompromising, and his adherence to it, seemingly stringent. Impermanence is more than awareness of temporality inherent to the essence of all things; for Kenkō, it is the principle that directs his life. Furthermore, Kenkō's musings allude to the core beliefs of Buddhism and although not explicit, encourage devotion to the pursuit of enlightenment. Through the analysis of passages from *Tsurezuregusa* centered on the theme of impermanence and temporality, we can better comprehend influences from Buddhist thought throughout the Japanese medieval period and its continued influence on Japaneseness today.

Conclusion:

This paper has analyzed *ma, mono no aware* and *mujōkan* as they informed the medieval *zuihitsu Tsurezuregusa.* While these concepts were deeply influential in the medieval period, as I

argued in the discussion above, they, in addition to other medieval values, have been presented as fundamental aspects of a purported unchanging national character as Japan sought to remake and rebrand itself during the period of intense economic development following the Second World War. Interestingly enough, however, the impulse to identify these medieval values with so-called essential Japaneseness has persisted into the 21st century, as evidenced by the widespread popularity of the KonMari Method, established by Marie Kondo.

A modern work that introduces Japaneseness on the international platform in an innovative presentation with traditional beliefs at its core is Marie Kondo's 近藤 麻理恵「人生がときめく片づけの魔法」(2010) (translated into English as *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: the Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*). Delivered to the modern audience as a guide for cleaning and organizing one's space in a highly materialistic society, Kondo's philosophy is constructed on the expansion of traditional Japanese thought onto application of household tidying that transcends any cultural boundaries. At the heart of the "KonMari Method," the novel approach to tidying by category, rather than location, are two fundamental tasks: discarding and deciding where to keep things (Kondo 35).

The KonMari Method guided by Kondo's philosophy closely resembles Kenkō's perspective on space consciousness. Kenkō's conception of *ma* in Essays 10 and 72, wherein he emphasizes the element of intentionality in creating space to bring happiness to the owner of the home, is resonated in Kondo's principles:

> "Though a home is of course merely a transient habitation, a place that is set up in beautiful taste to suit its owner is a delightful thing" (Kenkō 25).
>
> "Unpleasant things – a great many things cluttering up the area where someone is sitting. A lot of brushed lying on an ink stone. A crowd of Buddhist images in a private worship

> hall. A large collection of stones and plants in a garden…Things that are not unpleasant in large amounts are books on a book cart, and rubbish on a rubbish heap" (Kenkō 56).

In both passages, Kenkō acknowledges the importance of a home and the capacity it has to bring joy to its owner if thoughtfully constructed and organized. Furthermore, as previously discussed, Kenkō encourages the cultivation of space as a means to encourage moderation through decluttering. In this following passage, we observe Kondo's approach to decluttering through the selection criterion that she is commonly known for: asking if an item sparks joy.

> "I came to the conclusion that the best way to choose what to keep and what to throw away is to take each item in one's hand and ask: "Does this spark joy?" If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it. This is not only the simplest but also the most accurate yardstick by which to judge" (Kondo 41).

The phrase "spark joy" is an unlikely construction for a native English speaker. "Spark joy" is an attempt to grasp the essence of the Japanese word 「ときめく」that appears in the original Japanese text. 「ときめく」has two definitions; the first means "to be prosperous, to prosper, to flourish" while the second means "to beat fast (of one's heart); to flutter (with joy, anticipation); to palpitate" ("ときめく"). Presumably, the phrase coined by Kondo derives from the second definition, to express the joy that one should feel when selecting items to keep. By deciding which items "spark joy," Kondo's selection criterion echoes Kenkō's urging for moderation through decluttering. The process of deciding which items "spark joy" simultaneously eliminates the excessive. In other words, the excessive items are the ones that do not truly "spark joy." There is a careful intentionality to the use of the space, and through this process, Kondo recommends leaving sufficient space for creativity and happiness – effectively that which Kenkō motivated others to do.

As demonstrated in the discussion above, Kenkō's musings consistently indicate his keen awareness to the space around him and its role on creating a particular aesthetic. Similarly, Marie Kondo exhibits the aforementioned awareness in her Netflix show "Tidying Up with Marie Kondo." Before embarking on the tidying process, Kondo encourages her clients to join her in thanking the home through a brief meditation. While this can be understood as a simple meditation to the Western audience, this practice demonstrates a process of cultivating *ma.* It fosters an awareness of space by inviting the individuals to contemplate the space of their home and reimagining their aspirations for the same. The first of the two tasks similarly exhibit characteristics that Kenkō would have approved of based on the passages examined previously.

The first task in the KonMari Method is the process of discarding. Kondo encourages discarding everything and completely to tidy effectively and efficiently. As Kondo writes in her book, the key is to discard in order to achieve a sudden change, for this is the source of transformation in one's life:

> "When you tidy your space completely, you transform the scenery. The change is so profound that you feel as if you are living in a totally different world. This deeply affects your mind and inspires a strong aversion to reverting to your previously cluttered state. The key is to make the change so sudden that you experience a complete change of heart. The same impact can never be achieved if the process is gradual" (Kondo 34).

Beyond the mere act of discarding to create space, Kondo emphasizes the consequential transformation that happens in the mind and heart. In doing so, Kondo differentiates her philosophy from other household-keeping methods that focus on tidying for the sake of tidying. Once the significance of the space is acknowledged, there is a clear vision for how one desires the space to be, and this is the element that deters an individual from rebounding to their

previous habit of clutter. There is a clear goal for the tidying – a purpose designated to the space. In this way, the connection Kondo creates between the space and the mind of the individual encourages an awareness of space. This is an aspect of *ma* that Kenkō repeatedly depicts in his musings.

The thoughts that guide Marie Kondo's philosophy are distinctly Japanese, as suggested in the title of her book. Moreover, the ideas are reminiscent of the medieval Japanese aesthetic *ma* that is informed by Kenkō in *Tsurezuregusa*. From the approach of thanking the home to purposefully creating space to keep the items that truly matter and make one's heart flutter with joy and thus, giving meaning to the space, Kondo's philosophy is evidence that the aesthetics that flourished during medieval Japan continue to have influence in shaping Japanese ideals today. Furthermore, they contribute to the construction of the Japanese spirit and identity on an international platform in the modern world. As such, studying the development of medieval Japanese aesthetics provides a framework within which modern Japanese culture can be considered. *Tsurezuregusa* is an exemplary work of its kind from the medieval period that gives an authentic insight into the origin and development of aesthetics and ideals that have become the ultimate understanding of Japaneseness.

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