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**“The Reluctant Masquerade”:
Constructing the Closet in
Yukio Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask***

Senior Paper

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Enigmatic, extraordinary, and erotic are just a few of the words that have been used to describe the late Japanese author Yukio Mishima and his debut novel, *Confessions of a Mask* (1949). *Confessions* belongs to a uniquely Japanese genre known as the “I-novel” (*shishōsetsu*), a type of realist confessional literature usually written in the first person, with story events paralleling events from the author’s life (Starrs 37). Indeed, the protagonist of *Confessions*, known only to the reader by the diminutive nickname “Kochan,” bears a startling resemblance to the Mishima the world knew before his death at the age of forty-five. Kochan shares Mishima’s years of sickly and frail youth, his feelings of bodily inadequacy, and his draft into and discharge from the Imperial Japanese Army. But *Confessions of a Mask*’s narrative is not driven by these autobiographical events. Instead, they form a skeleton for the story’s flesh—that of Kochan’s internal struggle with homosexuality, a topic that intrigued Mishima and appeared in a handful of his complete works.¹

The novel paints a peculiar and sometimes disturbing picture of a young man who gradually realizes that his sexual (and sometimes violent) desires for other males are incompatible with the rigid, heteronormative society of Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. In the story’s first half, Kochan chronicles the development of his sexuality throughout childhood and puberty, from a seemingly innocent fascination with the uniforms of soldiers, to discovering the pleasures of masturbation, to his crush on an older classmate. The novel’s focus shifts in the latter half with Kochan’s realization that he has thus far failed to develop sexual feelings for women. He makes it his goal to cultivate attraction to a woman, and he ends up courting a young lady called Sonoko, who becomes his first and only girlfriend. A compulsion to conform necessitates the fabrication of what the narrator calls a “mask”—a public identity that is at odds

¹ To name a few: “Fruit” (1950), *Forbidden Colors* (1951), *Primary Colors* (1955), and *School of Flesh* (1963).

with his private self. The stress of maintaining the charade eventually results in his abandonment of Sonoko and a descent into anomic despair.

In this paper, I focus on the “mask” and Kochan’s experiences with sexuality and gender norms that contribute to his despair. His “masquerade” is a metaphor for his life “in the closet”; in queer theory, this figure of speech represents the concealment of a queer identity for a variety of reasons, ranging from personal comfort to physical safety. In the 1990 seminal text *Epistemology of the Closet*, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterizes the closet as “the defining structure for gay oppression” in the twentieth century (71). I argue that this structural oppression is represented in the cultural and societal norms of early Shōwa Japan,² and resulted in the rejection of those who failed to conform. These norms contribute to the construction of Kochan’s personal closet in *Confessions of a Mask*, and include, but are not limited to, concepts of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and gender roles. They drive Kochan to inflict emotional violence upon himself, ultimately leading to his apathy and alienation from the world around him, as shown in the novel’s abrupt and hollow conclusion.

The Birth of the Closet: Enforcing the Gender Binary

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator “Kochan” describes himself as an anomaly: an “unchildlike child,” puzzling the adults around him with preposterous claims of remembering the details of his own birth. They fear that his precocious behaviors will lead to a premature curiosity about sex and reproduction, though their fears are unfounded, as Kochan insists he had no interest in “such things” (Mishima 1-2). His unusual introduction sets the stage for the rest of the novel and the realization of himself as an “other”: he discovers that sexuality is an immutable part of the self, and that *his* sexuality is entirely incompatible with society’s expectations for a

² The Shōwa period consists of the regnant years of Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito), from his accession in 1926 until his death in 1989.

man. But this discovery is a lengthy process rather than a singular moment of clarity. In the years after puberty, Kochan gradually sinks into a depression as he repeatedly fails to conform to the accepted norms of masculinity and heterosexuality. Though he does not feel tormented by his sexual attractions until he is older, the description of his peculiar childhood informs the reader that Kochan is ushered into the closet at a very young age, before he can understand gender or sexuality.

Kochan describes his birth into a declining family at the tail end of the Taishō period,³ where his parents resided with his father's parents in a single home, in the typical fashion for families of the era. In his infancy, he is snatched by his abusive and ill grandmother, who raises him in her sick room on the first floor of the house (5-6). From then until age twelve, Kochan is trapped in relative and quiet isolation, stunting his social development. In these precarious years, he claims to have experienced some of his earliest sexual awakenings, regarding these memories as crucial in the development of his sexual self, despite his physical immaturity and lack of sexual education. One such incident is a curious fascination at age four with the body and dress of a "night-soil man" (a cesspool cleaner, commonly found in Japan until the end of World War II). He explains this fascination as a desire to *become* a night-soil man, despite the obvious hygienic drawbacks of the job, borne from an admiration of the man's image: the bodily strength necessary to carry heavy barrels of waste upon his shoulders, "handsome, ruddy cheeks and shining eyes," and most of all, the way his "close-fitting jeans plainly outlined the lower half of his body" (8-9).

For a four-year-old, this is merely an aesthetic attraction, though the purpose in detailing this particular memory is to establish the physical "type" of the men who will continue to attract

³ The Taishō period consists of the regnant years of Emperor Taishō (Yoshihito), from his accession in 1912 until his death in 1926.

him throughout his life. Similarly masculine aesthetics are also present in the soldiers that become a daily presence in his life as Japan begins expanding its military and its empire. Though his grandmother forbids him from speaking to them, Kochan develops an admiration for soldiers, which later becomes a fetish. It is not only their uniforms and heavy weaponry that titillate him, but also their sweaty odors, which aroused a “sensuous craving for such things as the destiny of soldiers, the tragic nature of their calling, the distant countries they would see, [and] the ways they would die” (14). The bodily strength and power seen in the night-soil man and the soldiers are represented only by men in Kochan’s world. Naturally, this strength and power would appeal to a frail child, representing a forbidden fruit that cannot be reached.

In another memory, Kochan admires an illustration of Joan of Arc in her male disguise, riding into battle upon a horse, mistaking her for a beautiful male knight. When his nurse shatters his fantasy and corrects him on Joan’s sex, his admiration quickly dissolves into disgust, and from then on, he describes feeling a certain “repugnance” for women in “men’s” clothing that persists throughout his life (12). This image of a female soldier contradicts the hypermasculine imagery of soldiers that Kochan has already absorbed, infringing on his fantasies and challenging his preconceived ideas of power. In citing this memory as one of the earliest moments in the development of his sexuality and awareness of gender, Kochan displays an early conceptualization of gender as a binary system: that the ideal man presents one way, and the ideal woman is his opposite. While it is possible to blame his revulsion on misogynist gender norms absorbed in youth, it is also worth noting that he describes yet another memory from pre-pubescence, of his idolization of a film portrayal of Cleopatra⁴ and a Japanese magician known as Shōkyokusai Tenkatsu. He is drawn to the Western, feminine, and modern aesthetics of their

⁴ Likely Claudette Colbert’s portrayal in Cecil DeMille’s *Cleopatra* (1934).

stage personas. Despite his younger self's reaction to Joan of Arc's cross-dressing, Kochan starts borrowing his mother's clothes and makeup to emulate Tenkatsu and Cleopatra, and is scolded by his mother and a maid when he shows off his outfit. The scolding he receives for his dress up games brings him to tears, but he continues to don the attire in secret (17-20). By shaming him for his innocent experimentations with gender presentation and discouraging femininity in males, his family unwittingly shoves him into his first closet, where he must conceal his true passions or risk painful rejection.

However, it is not only internal fantasy and desire that affect the development of Kochan's gender identity and expression. A near-fatal brush with "autointoxication"⁵ in infancy and repeated bouts of illness throughout childhood stunt his physical and social growth. Kochan's grandmother forbids him from rowdy play with male playmates, fearing that boys will teach him "bad things," and only allows him to play quietly with girls (24-25). Despite this, he does not long for the typical roughhousing with boys and is content with solitary activities such as reading and drawing. His grandmother's gendered rules give him an early awareness of gender norms, but it soon becomes apparent that this awareness is a detriment to his personal development. As theorized by gender studies scholar Raewyn Connell, masculinity is not a scientifically defined behavior, and it only exists in contrast to femininity, yet we can observe both phenomena in most modern societies, where certain behaviors, presentations, and objects become gendered (252-53). Kochan is inundated with these concepts of gendered behaviors as soon as he is able to speak, from his grandmother's characterization of boys as "bad" and girls as gentle, to believing that in order to act like a "boy" around his female cousins, he must "give them a hard time" regardless of his personal nature (Mishima 27). Connell further argues that

⁵ This is a literal translation of 自家中毒, or *jikachūdoku*, and the term has no true English equivalent. Kochan characterizes the illness with bouts of vomiting blood and weakness.

when masculinity becomes the dominant gender of a culture, it becomes “hegemonic.”

“Hegemonic masculinity” is defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 257). She also believes that hegemonic masculinity is intersectional, citing violent homophobia and institutionalized anti-Black racism as significant influences in the formation of gay and Black masculinities respectively (258-59). In *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan’s culture has its own hegemony of masculinity, producing unique dilemmas and challenges for a young queer male in early modern Japan. This is especially true in the context of Japan’s militarization and imperial expansion in the Pacific theater of World War II.

The Masculine East vs. The Feminine West: Cultural Clash and the Stigma of Difference

Kochan’s descriptions of his early memories present us with an interesting dichotomy. He idealizes the hegemonic masculinity of the soldier, but he identifies with the modern, lavish femininities of Cleopatra and Tenkatsu. Gender studies scholar Jason Karlin argues that a shift in Japanese attitudes towards masculinity and femininity began in the Meiji period,⁶ upon opening Japan’s borders to the West after more than two centuries of seclusion. This prompted an influx of Western trade, immigration, and cultural exchange. He characterizes the West as “feminine” in the Meiji imagination, represented in the West’s tastes for “consumption and materialism” as well as the “effeminacy of [their] fashion,” with critics claiming that Japanese imitations of Western modernity were “shallow,” particularly when Japanese men adopted the “dandy” dress of Western gentlemen (Karlin 41-42). Karlin connects the “feminization” (or Westernization) of

⁶ The Meiji period consists of the regnant years of Emperor Meiji (Mutsuhito), from his accession in 1867 until his death in 1912, and is historically characterized by the Meiji Restoration in which power was returned to the imperial family from the shogunate and Japan officially ended its 250-year-old policy of *sakoku* (closure to the West).

Japan with the reactionary “masculinization” that developed with Japanese nationalism in the Taishō and Shōwa periods, fueling the brutal military policies of World War II. He cites the words of then-Minister of Agriculture and Commerce as early evidence of this attitude:

What [he] resented was the Meiji state’s decision to place dance balls before military batteries, decoration ahead of function, and appearances before essence. His view of modernity was not only utilitarian and instrumental, but also “masculine” insofar as it equated modernity with production, diligence, and militarization. The Meiji state with its self-conscious celebration of decoration and form over content and essence appeared weak, decadent, and self-indulgent. In other words, accommodation to the West suggested weakness and effeminacy, while militarism signified strength and masculinity.

(55)

These Meiji perceptions of gender persisted through the end of World War II, passed along to Kochan by his parents and grandparents through their restrictions on his playmates and shaming of his dress up play. Kochan’s negative reaction to Joan of Arc’s masquerade can be seen as evidence of this culturally-entrenched misogyny and anti-Western attitude; she symbolizes the feminine, “degenerate” West threatening the traditional, “masculine” East. On the other hand, the very erotic and Western personas of Cleopatra and Tenkatsu represent an appealing freedom that is continually denied to him throughout his childhood, and donning their outfits and makeup allows him to engage in the “decadence” rejected by the post-Meiji nation state.

Despite continuing his costume play in secrecy, Kochan is not alone among his countrymen in challenging the norms of gender and sexuality. In his book *Contact Moments*, scholar Katsuhiko Suganuma explores a decline of Meiji prudishness in Japan in the 1920s and 30s, in favor of a “carnality and sexual perversity” inspired by the popular culture of the West.

Suganuma stresses that such perversity was by no means universally respectable, especially for women when they adopted Western clothing and “Western values such as short-hair (sic), consumption of alcohol, and sexual promiscuity” (43). Misogynist journalists and disgruntled men hurled criticisms at these so-called “modern girls” (akin to the first-wave feminist “New Women” in the West), for “[epitomizing] the collapse of Japanese tradition” and their “decadence, debauchery, and consumption” (44). Kochan uses similarly derogatory language when he compares his habits to those of Heliogabalus, a third-century Roman emperor whose alleged cross-dressing and sexual exploits with both sexes have led many historians to characterize them as sexually queer and possibly transfeminine⁷ (Mishima 20). He asks, “What was I hoping for from this feminine attire? . . . I discovered hopes the same as mine in Heliogabalus, emperor of Rome in its period of decay, that destroyer of [Rome] . . . that decadent, bestial monarch.” This clever allusion directly links Kochan’s perceptions of gender with his sexuality: desire for men is a feminine trait and therefore a negative one. It also characterizes femininity and homosexuality as perverse and destructive in Kochan’s imagination, indicating that he suffers from a degree of internalized homophobia.

This perception of male homosexuality as feminizing and degrading is somewhat at odds with Japanese history. Media studies professor Junko Saeki argues that *Confessions of a Mask*’s exploration of homosexuality has its roots in the centuries-old practice of *nanshoku*,⁸ in which an adult *samurai* warrior (“*nenja*”) would take a young male lover (“*wakashū*”) as part of the youth’s initiation into the *samurai* tradition. Contrary to modern Western perceptions of male queer sexualities, this sexual relationship between a man and a boy was one of education, in

⁷ I use the gender neutral pronoun “them” for Heliogabalus (also known as Elagabalus), because I am reluctant to apply contemporary transgender theory to a long-deceased ancient Roman in order to assign them a binary identity. For further reading, see Icks.

⁸ 男色, lit. “man love.” See Mishima 227 for *danshoku*, an alternative romanization of the word.

which the adult would provide a model of manliness for the youth by mentoring him and removing him from spheres of feminine influence (namely, the home) (Saeki 129). The two would engage in sex acts, but Saeki emphasizes the rigidity of roles in the situation: the *nenja* would always be the penetrative partner, and the *wakashū* would always be receptive, characterizing him as the “feminine” partner (132). The feminization of the *wakashū*, coupled with the intentional exclusion of *samurai* wives⁹ from military affairs, defines the relationship as a standard component of heterosexuality rather than an indicator of homosexuality as an identity.

While these practices died out with the nineteenth-century decline of *samurai* might, Saeki links Mishima’s special interest in *samurai* customs as the embodiments of Japanese traditionalism¹⁰ with the development of Kochan’s homosexuality. The reader is presented with a cultural clash: a distinctly Japanese queer tradition versus the Western epistemology of sexuality as an identity, rather than a practice, that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This clash leads Saeki to caution us against applying Western queer theory in readings of *Confessions of a Mask*, claiming that Kochan’s desires for “ephebes”¹¹ are more representative of *nanshoku* than of Western homosexuality (127). Indeed, she argues that the development of Kochan’s crush on and friendship with Omi, an older post-pubescent boy at his school with delinquent tendencies, resembles a *nanshoku* relationship: he not only loves Omi but idolizes his masculine body and wants to *be* him (128-29). Numerous passages in the novel support Saeki’s reading of their relationship, particularly the following:

⁹ The importance of having sons required that *samurai* take wives, and sometimes concubines as well. Their *nanshoku* partnerships were separate affairs, and Saeki believes this indicates a culture of bisexuality.

¹⁰ Yukio Mishima authored a novel-length modernist commentary on the eighteenth-century *bushidō* manual known as *Hagakure* (“Hidden Leaves”). His commentary was translated to English in 1977 by Kathryn Sparling and published under the title *The Way of the Samurai: Hagakure in Modern Life*.

¹¹ Kochan uses this word to describe the males he is attracted to throughout his life. It indicates males in late adolescence, approximately fifteen to twenty years of age.

Coarse features—even though I use the words, actually such a description [of Omi] is nothing more than that of the impression created by the ordinary face of one lone young man mixed in among boys. . . . The pretentious uniform our school required, resembling a naval officer’s, could scarcely hang well on our still-immature bodies, and Omi alone filled his with a solid weight and a sort of sexuality. Surely I was not the only one who looked with envious and loving eyes at the muscles of his shoulders and chest. . .

(Mishima 62)

In this passage, Omi is idealized as the pinnacle of masculinity, and he stands out among his prepubescent classmates. However, Kochan is convinced that he is not alone in his idolization of Omi, believing that Omi represents a perfection they all strive for. Interestingly, his love for Omi does not make him feel like an “other.” He believes that his classmates are keeping their love for Omi a secret as well, while recognizing that the erotic quality of his own feelings is unique, and fearing that he will be outed. The relationship between Kochan and Omi holds more than a passing resemblance to *nanshoku* despite its lack of erotic physical intimacy, and it is highly likely, given Mishima’s own sexual proclivities and interest in *bushidō*,¹² that this resemblance is intentional.

The Makings of Manhood: Heterosexuality and Homophobia in the Assertion of Masculinity

Saeki’s research urges us to be cognizant of ethnocentric thought and avoid value judgments in our criticisms and analyses of global literatures and experiences. However, it would be a fallacy to isolate Kochan’s experiences with hegemonic masculinity and its influence on his sexual development from those of Western men. His experiences in school parallel a number of phenomena observed among contemporary American school-aged boys by sociologist C.J.

¹² Lit. “the way of the warrior,” referring to the *samurai* ways of life.

Pascoe. This correlation suggests a cross-cultural epistemology of masculinity that has evolved in the age of globalization. Pascoe discusses a phallogentric “game” played among her subjects:

[After becoming the target of a homophobic joke,] Brian initiated a round of a favorite game in autoshop (sic), “the cock game.” Brian quietly, looking at Josh, said “Josh loves the cock,” then slightly louder, “Josh loves the cock.” He continued saying this until he was yelling. . . . The rest of the boys laughed hysterically as Josh slinked away saying “I have a bigger dick than all you motherfuckers!” (“Dude” 470-71)

The purpose of such behaviors, says Pascoe, is to deflect the derogatory label of “gay” (or in the case of her study, the slur “fag”), and transfer it to another boy, making *him* the vulnerable target instead. Similarly, Kochan describes a game that the boys played in the schoolyard called “Dirty,” where one boy surprised another with an uninvited grope of his groin. If the aggressor was successful, the victim would drop the load in his arms while scrambling to shield himself, resulting in laughter from his classmates. This behavior was often followed with a comment from the aggressor about the size of the victim’s penis, calling attention to his body and exploiting stereotypical male insecurities (Mishima 50).

Ironically, there is a degree of homoeroticism present in such phallogentric “games,” despite intentions of reaffirming the participants’ alleged heterosexuality. In the case of Kochan, he begins avoiding the game of “Dirty” upon realizing he loves Omi, fearing that contact with Omi will inspire a physical reaction that he cannot hide (an erection) and cross the wires of his “communal” life with his “solitary” life, or in other words, homosociality with homosexuality (51-52). “Dirty” loses its childish innocence when Kochan begins to fear a forceful ousting from the relative safety of his closet. He must opt out of future games, or run the risk of betrayal by his own body, outing him against his will. This is the first moment in the novel when Kochan is

actively concerned with the gender of his object of desire. Previously, he had been more concerned with concealing the existence of his sexuality in general, referring to masturbation as his “bad habit” and believing for a long time that other boys did not masturbate. However, he realizes that it is not physical arousal itself that threatens to shatter his mask. While it would certainly be embarrassing to have an erection in front of his classmates, Kochan’s greater fear is that the erection’s “cause” will become apparent and endanger his secrecy. His refusal to play puts him in a state of constant vigilance, where he must avoid participating in group activities and remain wary of surprise “outbreaks” of the game, further isolating him from his peers.

Pascoe further connects these fears and behaviors with “compulsive heterosexuality,” an idea that draws upon the extant concepts of “compulsory heterosexuality” and “compulsive masculinity,” as described by lesbian feminist writer Adrienne Rich and gender studies scholar Michael Kimmel, respectively. Rich posits that “heterosexuality has been forcibly and subliminally imposed on women,” especially lesbians, and Kimmel claims that “violence, aggression, extreme competitiveness, [and] gnawing insecurity” are features of compulsive masculinity, “a masculinity that must always prove itself and that is always in doubt” (Rich 30; Kimmel 93). Pascoe combines the two, describing compulsive heterosexuality as “a set of practices through which boys reinforce linkages between sexuality, dominance, and violence” (“Guys” 180). She describes male heterosexuality as more than attraction to women: it is a “defensive” expression of heterosexuality that does not necessarily reflect internal emotions, and involves “showing a sexualized dominance over girls’ bodies” (179).

This connection between masculinity and heterosexual male dominance is seen in the novel when Kochan’s classmates begin exchanging rumors of Omi’s (allegedly numerous) sexual adventures with girls (Mishima 49). Omi’s debauchery impresses the younger boys,

creating a link in Kochan's mind between masculinity and virility: in order to become strong and manly like Omi, he must participate in the rituals of courtship with women (83). In his later years, he also notices that there are specific behaviors expected of boys towards girls, and vice versa; for instance, he believes that he should offer to carry Sonoko's bag regardless of her ability or the sincerity of his gesture ("... I instantly wanted to play the lighthearted cavalier and carry Sonoko's bag. This too was with the intention of producing an effect within sight of everyone") (155). Kochan thinks that the "masculine" act of carrying Sonoko's bag will inform the people around them of their budding relationship, and convince them of his heterosexuality, if they had any doubt. The gesture is performative rather than genuine, and he is self-aware enough to feel guilty about its insincerity, like "a fugitive from justice" (156). It is one attempt of many that Kochan makes in the novel at "becoming" heterosexual, and the beginning of his realization that such a feat is impossible.

"I Felt Miserable": Heteronormative Society and the Creation of the Other

It is not difficult to imagine how such pressures to conform could affect the self-perception and self-worth of a teenager. The feeling of being an outsider is often considered an integral part of the adolescent experience. Though othering and ostracism occur among all ages and all marginalized identities, these behaviors seem to be especially prevalent among children and adolescents, who are quick to become aggressors in order to avoid becoming victims. Pascoe's research shows that a "playful" teasing occurs among male friends in order to reaffirm their alleged masculinity and heterosexuality, but not all teasing has benign intention, and perceived deviations from the norm can result in malicious bullying. Sociologist Bernadette Barton explores the ramifications of such anti-queer bigotry in the lives of queer-identified people in the southern United States in her book *Pray the Gay Away: Extraordinary Lives of*

Bible-Belt Gays. While Barton's subjects are separated from Kochan by a distance of seventy years and six thousand miles, some of their experiences are alarmingly similar. For example, one of Barton's interviewees, an African-American lesbian from Cincinnati called "Annie," compares her "unhappy" life in the closet to "going around with [a] mask on" (Barton 90). Annie describes her attempts to shame herself out of her attraction to women, and attributes these sentiments to her Southern Pentecostal upbringing. The shame, she says, led her to treating other gay people poorly in her attempts to convince herself and others that she was heterosexual. She echoes Kochan's feelings of artificiality and misery that begin to manifest in his adolescence when he realizes he is different from his peers, evidenced in one passage where Kochan fails to pick up on a classmate's (hetero)sexual innuendo: "I felt miserable. . . because the incident had revealed such an obvious difference between his focus of interest and my own" (Mishima 99-100).

The majority of Barton's research addresses the unique brand of homophobia that proliferates in the ultra-conservative and religious American South. Despite the similarities in the experiences of Kochan and Barton's subjects, there is a significant cultural gap between the contemporary South and early Shōwa Japan, most evident in Japan's minimal Judeo-Christian presence. The vast majority of modern Japanese people identify with Buddhism, Shintō (the indigenous Japanese belief system),¹³ or most commonly, a unique combination of the two. Only 1% of Japan's population professes Christianity in the twenty-first century, and even fewer identified themselves as Christian or openly practiced in the years between the Meiji Restoration and the end of World War II ("Japan Fact Sheet"). Buddhism and Shintō lack a condemnation of

¹³ Shintō does not have a holy text, a code of ethics, or a set of practices, nor does it require a god or gods to be worshipped. "Gods" are found in various aspects of nature (trees, mountains, rocks) and shrines are erected to honor them. Prayer to the gods is often superstitious rather than faith-based, such as wishing for good luck in the New Year.

homosexuality that some argue is present in the Old Testament of the Bible as well as the Qur'an (Lev. 18:22 KJV; Qur'an 7:80-84). Therefore, religion does *not* factor into Kochan's individual experience with internalized homophobia; he does not refer to any particular religious practice nor does he feel guilty for masturbating to the painting "The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian" by Renaissance artist Guido Reni. On the other hand, religion is frequently, and somewhat unfairly, treated as the foundation of internal and external homophobia for Westerners. (One's faith or lack thereof does not exclude them from compulsory participation in patriarchy and heteronormativity, as seen in previous anecdotal evidence from Saeki and Pascoe.) Because homosexuality has been historically practiced and even accepted in a number of cultures, and grows in its acceptance today among both religious and secular peoples, it stands to reason that faith is only a *potential* factor in what forces one into the closet.

Given Japan's relatively secular society and queer history, it is tempting to imagine that Japanese people are more accepting of queer relationships and sexuality. It is certainly fair to wonder how Japanese attitudes towards queerness would have developed if not for the influences of colonialism and white-dominated globalization. However, despite the West's undeniable influence in creating a new epistemology of heteronormative sexuality, the nationalist movement that gained momentum in the early years of Kochan's and Mishima's lives counters this influence. It would be remiss to damn the West and its religious hegemony as the sole origins of bigotry, when heteronormativity and homophobia persisted through the Empire's active efforts to purge Western influence from Japanese society. Sukanuma refutes the idea that the lack of religious influence in Japanese state affairs somehow creates a more "tolerant" society for queer people than that of the United States. Instead, he describes it as a "quiet" homophobia rather than an overt one:

Japanese homophobia functions in a way that allows a certain presence of homosexual culture, but only to the extent that its presence does not pose any threat to the social ideology and value system of the majority population. In other words, the visibility of homosexual culture in Japan needs to be contained in hetero-normative (sic) ideology in order for it to be “tolerated”. . . the [quiet] homophobia keeps its pretence of being “tolerant” about homosexual culture, but it also does its job to condemn it in an implicit manner. (Suganuma 141)

His argument reflects a greater element of Japanese society that Kochan contends with: a group harmony that values the welfare of society over the welfare of an individual, discouraging expressions and behaviors that challenge the accepted norms. It is a complicated and complex facet of Japanese interactions that sociologist Yoshio Sugimoto refers to as “friendly authoritarianism,” in that non-normative behaviors are subtly discouraged by concealing them in normative rhetoric (e.g. propagating an ideology of equality in order to obscure images of inequality) (271-72). A fear of being seen as an outsider and a challenger to societal expectations is what sets Kochan’s plans in motion to discard “childish” same-sex desires in favor of pursuing a heterosexual relationship (Mishima 100).

“My Love of Normality Itself”: Sonoko and the Gate to Adulthood

The first half of the novel sets the stage for the latter half, in which Kochan advances to an age of thinking critically about his sexuality and comes to the realization that thus far, he has failed to become “a man.” Kochan utilizes the stage and costumed performance as metaphors for his life, convinced by this time that it was not only his desire but his duty to pretend to be someone different, “to play my part on the stage without ever once revealing my true self” (101). In his metaphor, he ultimately characterizes masculinity and heterosexuality as roles that he must

master in the same way that an actor would. Kochan explains: “Where women were concerned, I was devoid of that shyness which other boys possess innately” (106). Upon this realization, he is driven to discover that “shyness,” and to force himself to develop heterosexual desires—an adolescent milestone he believes he has missed due to his youthful frailty and unique upbringing (107). These feelings are evidence of the overpowering presence of heteronormativity in Kochan’s life and culture, where heterosexuality is not only seen as a component of maleness but also of adulthood. Much like the *nanshoku wakashū*, he is expected to grow out of his youthful same-sex attractions and eventually take a wife, joining the heterosexual society of adults (Vincent 157).

The focus shifts in the third chapter, when Kochan becomes determined to overcome the disadvantages of his childhood illness and isolation in order to become an adult. He convinces himself that despite the fact that the bodies of women hold no sexual appeal for him, he is not very different from his male peers. He discovers later that he could only draw this conclusion due to a lack of knowledge about other boys and how their identities were influenced by heterosexuality (Mishima 110-11). This shift in focus presents the reader with a narrative of causation, where the cause of Kochan’s self-identification as an “other” is his failure to conform to hegemonic masculinity, and its effect is inspiring him to compensate with a successful performance of heterosexuality. The rest of the narrative primarily focalizes the development of Kochan’s relationship with Sonoko and his attempts to “catch up” with the sexual and romantic experiences of other young males in his age group.

The pursuit of these experiences is called a “script” of heterosexuality by sociologist Pepper Schwartz. In her essay “The Social Construction of Heterosexuality,” she explores the heterosexual identity and how it is created in order to oppose perceptions of queerness and

gender nonconformity. When Kochan begins “following the script,” he supports her assertion that a successful performance of heterosexuality, rather than being a “natural” inclination, is in fact “an act of will” (Schwartz 83). For instance, upon realizing he has never kissed a woman nor truly desired one, Kochan becomes obsessed with having his first kiss and fixates on the beautiful older sister of a school friend called Nukada. Known to the reader only as “Nukada’s sister,” she is in her early twenties, and a relationship with her is entirely unattainable for a weedy high school boy (Mishima 120). Indeed, the impossibility of such a union may have made her a safe target for his misplaced desires. Kochan determines that she is out of his reach by “watching the men who surrounded her” and believing he is unattractive in comparison. He later regards his attraction to and desire to kiss her as purely artificial (119). His efforts to cultivate genuine desire for Nukada’s sister are not only fruitless, but also damaging:

The realistic portion of my mind sensed the artificiality in the eternal protestations with which I persuaded myself that I was in love with her, and it fought back with this spiteful fatigue. There seemed to be some terrible poison in this mental exhaustion. Between the intervals of these mental efforts I was making toward artificiality I would sometimes be overwhelmed with a paralyzing emptiness. . . . (Mishima 121)

It is evident in this passage that Kochan is already experiencing the hardships of the closet. He is not yet willing to believe himself a lost cause, but his attempts to perform are tiresome and fake. Schwartz calls this a “psychic violence” and a punishment for failing to “preserve normative heterosexual roleplaying along narrowly constructed and strongly idealized stereotypes” (81). Soon after, he experiences a brief but genuine crush on a junior classmate, Yakumo, who excels at his daily military drills. When pining for Nukada’s sister, Kochan forced himself to act as an infatuated young man might, by hanging around near her house in hopes of getting a chance to

talk to her and practicing kissing with a pillow (Mishima 121). But his attraction to Yakumo is natural and relentless; it is an unscripted lust, rather than one resulting from social pressures (“Even when I was determined not to look at him. . . I found it impossible to keep my gaze off his smooth, white body”) (125). The crushes on Nukada’s sister and Yakumo fade when Kochan graduates from grade school in December of 1944, and enrolls in a university law program at his father’s insistence. Despite leaving grade school, he maintains a friendship with a young man called Kusano, and it is Kusano’s younger sister, Sonoko, who later becomes Kochan’s first girlfriend (126-28).

Sonoko is the novel’s other major character, though she is not introduced until more than halfway through the story. She is two years Kochan’s junior, described as tall and beautiful with a childlike face and a graceful gait (145). Like Kochan, she is quiet and bookish, and she has a talent for playing the piano that enchants him upon their first meeting. Sonoko becomes the first woman that Kochan is “truly” attracted to, and he takes great pains to distinguish his attraction to her from his earlier “attraction” to Nukada’s sister, claiming that the mere sight of Sonoko filled his heart with “a deep and unexplainable grief, a grief moreover that was no part of my masquerade” (144). He does not comprehend the strange feeling of grief until later, when he realizes that subconsciously, he already knew upon their first meeting that he would not be able to love Sonoko like a wife, despite her beauty and their compatibility.

Kochan’s love for Sonoko is platonic. Their courtship is virginal, save for a few prudish kisses, but despite the artifice of his efforts, he seems happy enough to continue the charade. It turns out that his happiness hinges on the ubiquitousness of the raging war, as he fully expects that he will die in the firebombings of Tokyo or in another violent, impending attack from the Allies:

I was hoping—no, it was more than mere hope, it was a superstitious certainty—that during that month the Americans would surely land at S Bay and we would all be sent out as a student army to die to the last man, or else that a monstrous bomb, such as no one had ever imagined, would kill me, no matter where I might be taking shelter. . . . (199)

The constant threat of death looming over the country allows Kochan to exist in a nihilistic fantasy, where nothing that he does seems to matter in the long term. While everyone else is concerned with bomb threats, evacuations, and the possibility of a ground invasion, his relationship with Sonoko could hang in limbo without the need for a resolution. Indeed, their relationship is meandering on Kochan's part, while Sonoko is the one who pushes it further. In his book *Deadly Dialectics*, scholar Roy Starrs argues that the Sonoko subplot is “the weakest part of the novel. . . The truth is that [Kochan's] heart is just not in any relationship with other people, whether male or female” (104). I do not believe Starrs is attempting to erase Kochan's queerness with this statement, and I do agree Kochan is a person who has trouble maintaining close relationships regardless of gender, as he describes himself as “a person who has no particular desire to have friends” and favors solitary activities (Mishima 128). However, Starrs continues on to say that these lone-wolf habits are due in part to Kochan's “intellectual detachment” as a writer. Instead, I would argue that the reader witnesses the progress of his *emotional* detachment. This detachment becomes necessary for him to cope with the surroundings of war and also allows him to pursue Sonoko despite his true inclinations.

It is when Kusano writes him a letter asking about the possibility of an engagement to Sonoko that Kochan realizes others do not share his attitude towards war. As it turns out, “the everyday affairs and responsibilities of life” continue throughout even the bloodiest of conflicts. He breaks up with Sonoko, realizing that marriage would mean sex and a lifelong commitment to

his painful masquerade. Instead of breaking up with her directly, he responds to Kusano's letter with an "indirect refusal," claiming that he is not invested enough in their relationship for an engagement, and he blames his disinterest on emotional immaturity rather than sexual orientation (211-16). He maintains the sincerity of his nonsexual love for her after they part ways and she marries another man, calling her "the incarnation of my love of normality itself, my love of things of the spirit, my love of everlasting things" (241). He also maintains that his sexual desires for men and "ephebes" are independent of his enduring love for Sonoko, though it seems likely that his fixation on her and reluctance to pursue men in the aftermath of their breakup are suggestive of internalized fears of bringing his private desires into his public life, rather than of a bona fide interest in dating her again. Kochan calls it a struggle between his soul and his body: his soul is drawn to Sonoko, who represents a "normal" life and a love that his body will not let him have.

"A Quiet Violence": The Destruction of the Self

The breakup occurs very shortly before the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, when Kochan receives the news of Japan's surrender to the Allies, he is filled with fear rather than relief; the incessant chaos of war had allowed him an escape from thinking about his future. The war's end meant that his chances of spontaneous death were significantly lowered and that "fearful days were beginning": days in which he must assimilate and "begin that 'everyday life' of a member of human society" (218). For the years of his young adulthood, war allowed him to live without concerns for the future that he might not survive to see. Surrender meant freedom for many of his countrymen—freedom from the fear of more death and destruction—but for Kochan, the surrender shattered a comfortable illusion where his sexuality did not matter because he was going to die anyway. Without the chaos of war to mask his

internal struggles, Kochan falls into a deep depression. He rightfully believed that others were more concerned with evading death than with criticizing or judging his personal life, but when they are no longer concerned with daily survival, they begin observing the mundane once again.

Kochan's experiences with homophobia have been varied, and mostly of the sort described by Sukanuma: a "quiet" violence, rather than a direct or institutionalized one. Instead of the slurs and bullying endured by the subjects in Pascoe and Barton's studies, he is subtly encouraged to hate his "feminine" body and desires. It is after the war that Kochan first experiences what he feels is a direct attack on his sexual orientation. When discussing the works of gay writer Marcel Proust with a college friend, the friend disdainfully refers to Proust as a "sodomite." An awkward reaction on Kochan's part leads the friend to drop the subject and avoid eye contact for the rest of the evening. Though the friend says nothing more, Kochan believes he has discovered his secret and cries himself to sleep later that night, dreaming of the brutal and violent fantasies that have "comforted" him since youth (227-28). It is at this moment that Kochan fully realizes his sexuality's incompatibility with the world around him, and the end of the novel chronicles his withdrawal.

Aside from the incident with his college friend, Kochan's continuing struggle remains internal, and he cannot bring himself to speak of his troubles to anyone. Though he begins attending frequent parties, and manages a friendly reconciliation with Sonoko after she has married another man, his interactions with other human beings remain shallow and distant at best. In a heartbreakingly similar anecdote in Barton's *Pray the Gay Away*, she interviews another closeted Southern American lesbian, "Misty," who describes her experiences with depression.

It wasn't that I wanted to kill myself, but the thought of no longer being alive and having to deal with my life was appealing. I would cry for hours at night in my room on a regular basis until I fell asleep. . . I was like this for the better part of a year. I wouldn't interact with my parents for days at a time. . . No one in my family expressed concern or even seemed to notice. (qtd. in Barton 93)

Misty's haunting description of her struggles echoes the despair that plagues Kochan after the war. It is tempting to assign him the label of "suicidal," but it is not entirely suitable as a descriptor for his feelings. He describes the feeling as "waiting for something to do me the favor of killing me," rather than wanting to do the deed himself (Mishima 208). Kochan's fixation on his own death is a recurring theme throughout the novel. He romanticizes images of violence, blood, gore, and the battlefield, no doubt influenced by his constant exposure to soldiers and militarized upbringing. When he is rejected from the Army for his poor health and survives the Allies' attacks, his hopes for such a favor are thwarted. Indeed, though the war's end makes him nervous for his future, he gains a feeling of liberation after ending his relationship with Sonoko and is able to move on with the daily life he feared. But this perseverance comes at a price. Because he cannot engage with a society he does not fit into, he is only going through the motions rather than finding true contentment.

I was not paying attention to anything, nor was anything paying attention to me. I had acquired a worldly-wise smile like that of a young priest. I had the feeling of being neither alive nor dead. It seemed that my former desire for the natural and spontaneous suicide of death in war had been completely eradicated, and forgotten.

True pain can only come gradually. It is exactly like tuberculosis in that the disease has already progressed to a critical stage before the patient becomes aware of its symptoms.

(Mishima 220)

By the end of the novel, Kochan's "pain" has developed into a detachment from the world around him. His relationship with Sonoko and a blundering, uncomfortable experience with a sex worker convince him that he will never manage to assimilate or achieve the "normality" that Sonoko symbolizes. He gives a cruel voice to his inner pain, and it tells him, "You're not human. You're a being who is incapable of social intercourse. You're nothing but a creature, non-human and somehow strangely pathetic" (230). His repeated failures created a closet he cannot escape from, and he retreats into himself, unable to be honest with Sonoko nor able to pursue the desires that truly call his heart and body. The text ends abruptly as Sonoko snaps him out of a homoerotic and sadistic fantasy at a dance hall.

Conclusion: The Masquerade Endures

Upon publication of *Confessions of a Mask* in 1949, Yukio Mishima found himself catapulted to national fame in Japan, as the nation and its people struggled to recover from the carnage of World War II. At that time, he did not know his legacy would endure as one of Japan's most prolific and talented authors of the modern era, nor had he planned to stage the right-wing *coup d'état* that failed and led to his suicide by *harakiri*¹⁴ in November of 1970. He also did not know that *Confessions of a Mask* and a later novel, *Forbidden Colors* (1951), would become hallmarks of literature in Japan's postwar gay community (Vincent 197). However, *Confessions* owes its enduring legacy to the authenticity of Kochan's experiences. It should alarm, disturb, and anger us that Kochan's pain, his exclusion, and his othering are still relevant

¹⁴ Lit. "cutting the belly." A *samurai* suicide practice in which one would honorably die by gutting himself and then allowing a companion to decapitate him.

today. Whether or not Mishima was speaking from personal experience when writing *Confessions* has turned out to be irrelevant, because he accurately captured a facet of the modern queer experience: queer people are dominated and threatened by the establishments of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and gender norms.

Much like the events that transpired on the day of Mishima's death, the conclusion of *Confessions of a Mask* is sudden and unsettling, leaving us with more questions than answers. If Mishima *were* using Kochan to safely express his own queer desires within the realm of fiction, and scholars generally agree that he was, that makes *Confessions of a Mask* all the more significant as a queer narrative in the wake of Mishima's suicide. It may be that Mishima gave us the true end of Kochan's story more than two decades after its publication, leaving us to mourn the loss of two troubled but talented souls who could not endure the eternal performance Kochan called "the reluctant masquerade" (Mishima 27).

"Most writers are perfectly normal in the head and just carry on like wild men.

I behave normally but I'm sick inside." — Yukio Mishima, 1951

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