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The meaning of death in Kenkō Yoshida's *Tsurezuregusa* [Essays in idleness]

**Abstract:** This article discusses the meaning of death in Kenkō Yoshida's *Tsurezuregusa* [Essays in idleness], completed around 1330 at the end of the Kamakura Period (1185–1333). Kenkō, who was a Buddhist monk and hermit, naturally construed the concept of death in terms of the impermanence of the world. Taking Lakoffian conceptual metaphor theory, in which death is understood as an abstract category, as a jumping-off point, I contrast the Buddhist conception of death with different conceptualizations of metaphor and metonymy by contemporary scholars to locate the notion of "death" in the medieval linguistic context. I claim that while death in *Essays in idleness* is more frequently considered non-literal, it is not interpretable metaphorically. This hints at an alternative, namely, that Kenkō's concept of death is created metonymically. Impermanence as a literary aesthetic thus crystallizes in the form of death as a syntagmatic metonym.

**Keywords:** death, impermanence, metonymy, *Tsurezuregusa* [Essays in idleness]

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1 Introduction

Death is a spiritual concept that is integral to many religions. Although its exact meaning may vary subtly according to each one, most religions share a common belief that physical death is not the end to human life but is rather an entry to a new phase of life (Spira 2005: 326; Leaman 2006: 170). The existence of an afterlife is central to the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; that is, after the physical termination of a human body, the possibility that life will continue remains. Baker (2005: 366), who is concerned with the Christian doctrine of resurrection, writes that "biological death is not the permanent end of a human being's existence", while Leaman (2006: 170) points out that in Islam, the afterlife is considered to be an actual home. The message conveyed here is...