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Chapter 1

Introduction

Waiting on the riverbank, the young woman watches as her lover sails away from her. She stands barefoot, hands and feet contorted, pulling at her hair and the disheveled assortment of brightly-colored robes she wears. Discordant triangular patterns erupt across her clothes and sash like snakeskin. Her face is illuminated by the moon: a striking array of emotions, from sorrow and frustration to anger and determination.¹ Though fantastical, the scene captured in Chikanobu's print is meant to convey the climax of one of the most popular plays of the Edo period (1600-1868). The pensive atmosphere and subtly seething woman are not present in considerably contrasting interpretations of the performance, which instead portray a horrific dragon-like serpent gushing fire and blood. Yet despite such discordant imagery, these prints all reflect the same moment: the instant in which the girl decides she must become a snake.²

Women, like snakes, are frequently misunderstood. In Japan, the many strange and mysterious things which exist in the world are regarded with a mixture of fear and fascination, such as the proclivity of certain creatures to possess uncanny powers. It is important to note, however, that that which "is considered to be supernatural in one culture is regarded as merely strange –but natural– in another."³ Similarly, in Japan, otherworldly horrors are not regarded with the same type of fear such creatures may be afforded in the West. In his discussion of the

¹ Chikanobu Yoshū, "Kiyohime and the Moon," Cat. 87 in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons: Art of the Supernatural*, edited by Stephen Addiss, (New York: George Braziller, Inc. / the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1985), 156.

² Jamie Lillywhite and Akira Y. Yamamoto, "Snakes, Serpents, and Humans," in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons: Art of the Supernatural*, edited by Stephen Addiss, (New York: George Braziller, Inc. / the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1985), 148.

³ Anthony H. Chambers, introduction to *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, by Ueda Akinari, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 16.

more recent international appeal of Japanese horror cinema, the acclaimed author Suzuki Kōji explains, “[i]n America and Europe most horror movies tell the story of the extermination of evil spirits. Japanese horror movies end with a suggestion that the spirit still remains at large. That’s because Japanese don’t regard spirits only as enemies, but as beings that co-exist with this world of ours.”⁴ An interest in the uncanny is not unique to Japanese culture; however, the myriad of things which dwell alongside humans in the country are not meant to be contended with, but cohabited.

In Japan, beliefs regarding the curious qualities of snakes and their connections to human women vary greatly by time and location. Numerous influences from the continent as well as within the country significantly affect the amount of snakelike creatures which converge upon Japan. It was in the Edo period, however, that these fantastic occurrences were able to flourish. As the country closed its borders to the outside world, culture and art were incubated within “relative political stability”⁵ At the same time, due to “the emergence of a hierarchical, stratified status system . . . [which] strongly supported patriarchal values,” the Edo period “[is often] described as a low point in the status of Japanese women.”⁶ Perhaps, then, the cultural construct of women as snakelike monsters merely reflects the attitudes of contemporaneous Japanese society. A thorough consideration of the various types of snake-women found within Edo period culture, in addition to the ways in which they were presented to men and women at the time, reveals quite a different interpretation.

⁴ Kōji Suzuki, “Interview with Koji Suzuki, Novelist of the Dank and Dread”, *Kateigaho International Edition* (Winter 2005), quoted in Colette Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), ix.

⁵ Barbara R. Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 97.

⁶ Ibid.

It must be understood that snakes are not viewed the same way in Japan as they are in the West. The notion of the serpent as a vessel of evil, wrought with Biblical connotations, is not found within Japanese religious or societal culture. Rather, snakes are thought to be just as complicated and unique as humans: “[a]mong all animals [in the Japanese mythos], snakes seem to have the most ambiguous existence, for they may be evil, benevolent, awesome, loving, destructive, protective, or all of these at the same time.”⁷ The great diversity of snakes found in the Japanese islands are differentiated across regions, folklore, and religious beliefs, as are the myriad humans and divinities which also dwell there, including various combinations of the three.

The special status of snakes and their connection to the uncanny powers of women can be traced back to the oldest accounts of Japanese history. One of the earliest known records of Japan is found within a Chinese source from 297 AD, which relates the curious ruler of the country, called Himiko or Pimiko, and her equally curious abilities: “a female ruler . . . she communicated the will of deities in trance.”⁸ While Himiko’s legendary status as the bewitching ruler of ancient Japan is certainly singular, shamanism has inherently played a part within Japanese religious practice.⁹ Spirit summoning is considered to be most effective when performed by a woman, who, “being ‘insufficiently formed,’ is malleable, and has ‘space’ in her

⁷ Lillywhite and Yamamoto, “Snakes, Serpents, and Humans,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 151.

⁸ Helen Hardacre, “The Shaman and Her Transformations: The Construction of Gender in Motifs of Religious Action,” in *Gender and Japanese History* (vol. 2), edited by Wakita Haruko et al., (Osaka: Osaka University Press, 1999), 90.

⁹ J. Edward Kidder, Jr., *Himiko and Japan’s Elusive Chieftdom of Yamatai: Archaeology, History, and Mythology*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 131.

being which can be entered by another.¹⁰ She can become a spirit's mouthpiece."¹¹ The spirits themselves are part of the Japanese notion of divinities which dwell within natural phenomena, otherwise known as *kami*. Though occasionally worshiped, *kami* should not be understood as gods of a sort, rather spirits which "often visit and reside in natural areas," particularly those thought to be particularly beautiful, strange, or awe-inspiring, and should humans "disturb . . . these areas [it] will call forth [the] *kami*'s retribution, while respectful attitudes and acts can bring [the] *kami*'s protection and blessing."¹² While *kami* can choose to inhabit any number of things found in the Japanese islands, and therefore are not conceptualized as having any sort of ubiquitous corporeal form, "[s]nakes are one of the creatures most frequently perceived as *kami*, *kami*'s messenger, or . . . powerful creatures that have long been living and have control over areas."¹³ Many early sites of worship revolve around *kami* thought to possess or take the form of snakes, and indeed, the "traditional image of kami as snakes" persisted for quite some time, though the divine nature of snakes and *kami* would be altered by a number of beliefs imported from China, as will be discussed later.¹⁴ Depictions of female shamans, or *miko*, in Japanese records, legends, and folktales also emphasize this interpretation of *kami*: "[i]n all [*miko* tales] there appears with overwhelming persistence the figure of a supernatural snake."¹⁵ Early accounts of Japanese beliefs describe the analogous relationship between female shamans,

¹⁰ These phrases are taken from the *Nihongi* (or *Nihon Shoki*) and the *Kojiki*, two of the earliest Japanese records, which describes the legendary establishment of Japan by the creator deities Izanagi and Izanami. Here, Izanami, the female creator deity, becomes aware of the uniquely female attributes of her body, and proper gender roles for men and women are elucidated. See de Bary et. al., 13-15.

¹¹ Hardacre, "The Shaman and Her Transformations," 91.

¹² Kiyoshi Sasaki, Yoshinori Sasaki, and Stanley F. Fox, "Endangered Traditional Beliefs in Japan: Influences on Snake Conservation," *Herpetological Conservation and Biology* 5.3 (2003), 475.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 476.

¹⁴ Satoshi Itō, Jun Endō and Mizue Mori, *Shinto—A Short History*, edited by Nobutaka Inoue, (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 76.

¹⁵ Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, 2nd ed., (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986), 115.

snakes, and *kami*, however, women and snakes also possess an interconnectedness in Japan on a more secular level.

The arrival of Buddhism in Japan saw a marked change in *kami* belief, being replaced by or submissive to Buddhist counterparts, not only reshaping the powers associated with snakes, but drastically altering the perception of women as well. Prior to the seventh century CE, “women . . . held great power in the family and had substantial authority in the marriage systems of Japan . . . but [with the importation of Chinese thought] the power of women within the social system was significantly curtailed. Now traditional Chinese disdain for women was added to the fundamental Buddhist disregard for them, and exacerbated the decline of their authority.”¹⁶ A restructuring of the marriage system, now favoring polygyny, gave way to a number of fears regarding the unstable and potentially dangerous nature of women.

Not only were women now considered to be significantly inferior to men, but in many representations of femininity in the Heian period (794-1185), women were often suggested as being something less than or even other than human. Sexual repression was to be expected of women, yet the troubling emotions resulting from such a situation, notably, “overt female sexuality, jealousy, and resentment, were expressed metaphorically by likening women to demons – potentially demonizing women themselves.”¹⁷ Demons in Japan, known as *oni*, are quite unlike their Western counterparts, in that they, like snakes and *kami*, can be profoundly evil and fearsome, but they can also be quite innocuous, or even related to the divine. Early stories of demons almost always gendered them as male, yet in the Heian period, “we see the emergence of demons in female form . . . motivated by jealousy and rage at having been spurned.”¹⁸ Perhaps

¹⁶ Barbara, Ruch ed., *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), xxxi-xxxii.

¹⁷ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 60.

¹⁸ Ibid.

not coincidentally, many representations of the female *oni* in Japanese lore resemble something of a cross between a human woman and a snake.¹⁹ Through the arrival of Buddhism and the patriarchal restructuring of Japanese society, women became disempowered and often demonized. However, such attitudes were not restricted to matters of the religious or mere folklore.

The proclivity of jealous women to transform into monstrous, otherworldly creatures can be found in many works of Heian period literature which deplore the strange tendencies of otherwise upstanding, aristocratic women to become possessed by malicious spirits. Famously exhibited by nearly all of the female characters in Murasaki Shikibu's 11th century novel, *The Tale of Genji*, the women of the Heian court are prone to fits of jealousy, shame, anxiety, and hysteria, often resulting in a supernatural manifestation within themselves or at the expense of others. Such occurrences were not confined to works of fiction. Instances of women experiencing spirit possession were not uncommon, and were met with bewilderment and concern in courtly society.²⁰ Hardly unique to Japanese society, the implications of female spirit possession will be discussed in a later chapter. While spirit possession in the case of female shamans continued, the classical period of Japan saw the emergence of possession and supernatural tendencies of an often violent nature in women from secular positions in Japanese society.

In Japan's medieval period, nearly four centuries in a state of civil war, attitudes toward women and snakes shifted from problematic to downright misogynistic. Though Buddhist notions of the inferiority and intrinsically deleterious nature of women had fully permeated

¹⁹ Noriko T. Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present*, (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2010), 128.

²⁰ Bargen, Doris G, *A Woman's Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 7.

aristocratic society, “[d]uring the medieval period, concepts of female pollution and karmic hindrances became widespread.”²¹ Buddhist morals were espoused in popular plays and novels, with many more composed specifically for a female audience.

Though women were considered innately unclean and threatening to the salvation of men, especially during times of their menstruation and childbirth, new interpretations of Buddhist sutras suggested a potential for women to seek enlightenment as well.²² The Devadatta chapter within the *Lotus Sutra* describes the prepubescent daughter of the dragon king, herself a serpentine chimera, who, through her profound insight and wisdom, is able to achieve enlightenment. Its juxtaposition within the *Lotus Sutra*, paired with the story of Devadatta, a nefarious enemy of the Buddha who also manages to achieve Buddhahood, suggests the potentiality of enlightenment for all beings, even the intrinsically sinful, such as the scheming Devadatta himself and women collectively.²³ Further problems arise in that the dragon girl is technically unable to become an enlightened being as a human woman, or even as a female: not only has she not yet begun her menstruation, but she must first turn her body into that of a man before gaining salvation.²⁴ However, such an anti-feminist reading was not shared by many Buddhist women, who took the chapter as an impetus to become nuns themselves and spread the teachings to other women throughout Japan, as shall be discussed in-depth in a later chapter. After the dragon king’s daughter, many other beatific reptilian females cropped up in Buddhist salvation tales, contrasted with the transformation of women into snake demons as a result of lust and jealousy in both didactic narratives and popular entertainment.

²¹ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 84.

²² Ibid., 90.

²³ Kazuhiko Yoshida, “The Enlightenment of the Dragon King’s Daughter in The Lotus Sutra”, translated and adapted by Margaret H. Childs, in *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, edited by Barbara Ruch, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), 300.

²⁴ Ibid., 297-324.

With the end of the medieval period, Japan became unified under the Tokugawa regime, which at once opened up the country for its people while also closing its borders to the rest of the world. No longer engaged in a constant state of civil wars and shifting boundaries, the Japanese people from several strata of society now had access to the culture of the capital as well as the many sights and encounters found within the country due to an impressive nationwide road system.²⁵ Tourism and travel became widespread for many, especially those granted land to administer, who were compelled “to make a periodical stay of one year every other year . . . in Edo.”²⁶ At the same time, strict regulations against foreign travel and trade, as well as those which stipulated occupation, class, and public morality for the Japanese people, greatly inhibited movement both physically and socially.

While Japanese society became relegated to a rigid class structure based in Confucian ideals and “profoundly hierarchical and status-conscious,” the situation for women was surprisingly transformed.²⁷ “The development of an extensive print culture together with widespread basic literacy among women” resulted not only in “the diffusion of . . . patriarchal ideas,” through didactic texts, but adjustments to many forms of popular entertainment.²⁸ No longer reserved for the aristocratic elite, arts and entertainment flourished, much of which would relate strange sights and occurrences from far-flung regions which were considered odd, interesting, or relatively unknown in the capital. Now that women had access to such diversions, the Confucian ideals which were injected into them had to be carefully balanced so as not to dissuade female consumers. As such, much of the popular literature and theater of the Edo period

²⁵ Charles J. Dunn, *Everyday Life in Traditional Japan*, (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1972), 24-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁷ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

revived female figures and characters from Japan's past, including many of the snake-women creatures and spirits discussed earlier in this chapter.

Though virtually isolated from the world, the people of Japan were able to consider their own country in great detail, so that the synthesis of culture and tradition which had developed until this time "thickened and gelled, so that, although there was in fact a certain amount of development within these centuries, they present a largely consistent appearance."²⁹ Therefore, traditional motifs, such as those which juxtapose women with snakes, were able to be expanded upon, reimagined, and represented in a number of differing areas of cultural expression.

This essay will detail, through a close examination of three specific manifestations of snakes and women in Edo period literature, art, and theater, the ways in which these creatures were presented and understood by men and women at the time. Chapter 2, "From Snakes to Women: Folklore and Fairy Tales," will consider the various ways in which snakes are perceived in Japanese folklore, the influences and motivation in the recording and presentation of traditional Japanese folk tales, and the popularity of such otherworldly encounters with shape-shifting snakes. Chapter 3, "Snake Women: Ghosts, Goblins, and Gender," will discuss the category of bizarre Japanese monsters known as *yōkai*, which were regarded with a mixture of both dread and amusement during fashionable ghost-story parties, and their metaphorical allusions to Edo period sexuality and gender roles. Chapter 4, "From Women to Snakes: Demons and Damnation," will delve into the female snake metamorphosis trope presented in Buddhist salvation tales, as well as its often discordant representations throughout several forms of secular entertainment, with a particular emphasis on the figure of the young woman in the famous play *Dōjōji*. By taking into account the vast landscape of beliefs concerning snakes and women, as

²⁹ Dunn, *Everyday Life in Traditional Japan*, v.

well as of how an array of interpretations were presented to and understood by the Japanese people of the Edo period, this essay aims to unveil the subtle intricacies of gender and power in traditional Japanese culture.

Chapter 2

From Snakes to Women: Folklore and Fairy Tales

Though the relationships between snakes, women, and the uncanny in Japan have been intertwined throughout many spheres of culture, history, religion, and the like, the realms of Japanese folklore and fairy tales are also particularly rich in these beliefs. In Japan, snakes are overwhelmingly associated with women, and often choose to shape-shift into a feminine form in order to seduce men, thereby serving as an embodiment of female behavior, not only in cautionary tales of the dangers of female sexuality, but also as models of proper femininity.³⁰ Certainly, the long history of otherworldly feminine power and snake lore in Japan reinforces the fear of women being in league with snake spirits, if they are not actually snake spirits masquerading as women. Many scholars suggest the subconscious fear of feminine sexuality becoming embodied as a snake as a phallic symbol, heavily utilizing Freudian and Lacanian analysis to interpret the fear of snake women and female sexuality.³¹ Certainly, aggressive female desire takes on many aspects of what is considered to be acceptable only within male sexuality, and the phallic shape of the snake is acknowledged throughout Japanese folk beliefs; one folk tale concerns a common snake, overcome with lust upon seeing a girl using the restroom, attempting to enter her vagina.³² However, in-depth Freudian analyses fail to address many aspects of snake psychology and imagery found in premodern Japan.

³⁰ Snakes can also enter into relationships with young girls and shrine priestesses, often found in the legendary foundation records of shrines and temples. Commonly referred to as 'serpent-bridegroom' stories, they utilize the classicistic understanding of snakes as *kami*, impregnating the girls with divine offspring, and accordingly contain a positive depiction for both snakes and women. See Blacker, 115-23.

³¹ See Susan Blakeley Klein, "When the Moon Strikes the Bell: Desire and Enlightenment in the Noh Play *Dōjōji*," in *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 17.2 (1991): 291-322.

³² Michelle Osterfeld Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 110.

In Japan, snakes are predominantly related to water: “during rainstorms and flooding serpents are washed out of their burrows and take to higher ground, including human habitations, which makes it appear that snakes may have something to do with these natural phenomena. This eventually led to the widespread belief in snakes as controllers of water and storms.”³³ Snakes, like most animals found in Japanese folklore, are not explicitly gendered.³⁴ Such pronouns are often omitted in Japanese, an animal spirit often being referred to by its animal name, even after its transition into human form: the sex of the animal is dictated by the opposing sex of the human it seduces. ‘He’ and ‘she’ are most often used only when the true nature of the man or woman is unknown; once it is revealed to be an animal spirit in disguise, it is once again referred to as an ‘it’ or by the name of the animal.³⁵ However, elemental theories in Chinese culture and philosophy also attribute serpents to water, as well as to femininity. Like water, femininity should be “receptive, fluid, and passive, even if powerfully so.”³⁶ Associations between water and fecundity, as well as its use in the home for such tasks as cooking and cleaning, also emphasize its feminine connotations.³⁷ Dragons, a more powerful and serpentine creature in East Asia, are predominantly represented as male. While they are also associated with water, they possess fire and can make their home in air, thereby representing a masculine counterpart to the more feminine snake spirit.³⁸ The amazing strength of male dragons and their associations with

³³ Lillywhite and Yamamoto, “Snakes, Serpents, and Humans,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 140-1.

³⁴ A clear exception would be the Japanese raccoon dog (*tanuki*), a trickster creature usually depicted as possessing enormous testicles.

³⁵ This is common to many Japanese fairy tales in both Japanese and translation; many examples may be found in Royall Tyler’s *Japanese Tales* and Ueda Akinari’s *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*.

³⁶ David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Elemental Ideas*, (NY: University of New York Press, 2010), 259.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 259-60.

³⁸ Lillywhite and Yamamoto, “Snakes, Serpents, and Humans,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 139.

storms can be contrasted to male snake spirits, who are described by their female lovers as being ‘beautiful’ and their aqueous associations likened to gentle rain or dripping.³⁹

The physical appearance of snakes in these tales is also analogous to Japanese beauty standards of the time. As is common in Japanese literature and folk tales, the body itself is rarely described, “leaving such details up to their listeners’ or readers’ imagination.”⁴⁰ A snake, wishing to entice a man, will naturally acquire the form of “a bewitchingly beautiful and voluptuous woman,” the slithering, fluid movement of a snake emulating a woman further enforcing nuances of femininity.⁴¹ The color of the snake, if mentioned, is in almost all cases pure white: though this brings to mind earlier conceptions of white animals as messengers as *kami*, it also can be interpreted as a marker of the mysterious nature of the snake spirit. The traditional standards of beauty in premodern Japan, though not necessarily found in its literature, can be seen in paintings and woodblock prints dating from ancient times through the Edo period (and beyond). A soft, fleshy body with pure white skin and bright eyes denotes aristocratic elegance and marks the woman as being special; such descriptions can apply to a snake or a woman.⁴² Additionally, a cylindrical body shape lends itself well to the ideals of traditional Japanese dress (*kimono*) in the Edo period. Therefore, a snake’s body in Japanese folklore can be phallic as well as overtly feminine.

Japanese fairy tales differ significantly from their Western counterparts. Because they are often presented as factual accounts of interesting or mysterious occurrences, the structure of the

³⁹ See Blacker, 115-23.

⁴⁰ Ria Koopmans-de Bruijn, “Fabled Liasons: Serpentine Spouses in Japanese Folktales,” in *JAPANimals: History and Culture in Japan’s Animal Life*, edited by Gregory M. Pflugfelder and Brett L. Walker, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2005), 71.

⁴¹ Lillywhite and Yamamoto, “Snakes, Serpents, and Humans,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 142.

⁴² See the initial description of Manago in “A Serpent’s Lust” in Ueda Akinari’s *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, as well as the accompanying illustrations, 160-77.

fairy tales spend a significant portion of the narrative explaining the time and place, notable people involved, their official ranks, how the story was passed to the teller, and any other information which is considered helpful to frame and validate the story for its audience.⁴³ Unlike the work of the Brothers Grimm, these stories were not intended or rewritten for children; many include blatant and often shocking representations of sex and violence.⁴⁴ Stories relating to women, the body, and sex, may be considered obscene to even the modern-day reader, yet the tendency for many scholars and translators to shy away from baser content can be misrepresentative.⁴⁵ It is true that women and female sexuality are often portrayed quite negatively within these stories, yet oftentimes it is due to the intent of the author, especially those being told for the purpose of reinforcing Buddhist teachings, as the susceptibility of women to emotions and attachment is seen as a hindrance to themselves and the enlightenment of the men with whom they interact – especially if the male protagonist in the story is a monk, which is the case in quite a few of these stories.⁴⁶

Fairy tales, folklore, and tales of the strange and mysterious (*kaidan*)⁴⁷ were greatly enjoyed in the Edo period. No small number of these stories concern snakes with uncanny abilities and their involvement in human affairs.⁴⁸ Building upon Japanese snake lore, the animals serve as thinly-veiled metaphors for humans, not representing “the dangers of human-serpent contact [so much as] the risks involved in forming certain types of human-human

⁴³ Royall Tyler, “Introduction,” in *Japanese Tales*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), lvi.

⁴⁴ Fanny Hagin Mayer, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Kunio Yanagita’s *Japanese Folk Tales: A Revised Selection*, (Tokyo: Tokyo News Service, Ltd., 1966), 11.

⁴⁵ Li, *Ambiguous Bodies* 80-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁷ Noriko T. Reider, “The Appeal of *Kaidan*: Tales of the Strange.” *Asian Folklore Studies* 59.2 (2000): 265-6.

⁴⁸ Other well-known shape-shifting witch animals in Japan include the fox (*kitsune*) and raccoon dog (*tanuki*), who have similar such relations but are attributed their own distinctive powers, motivations, and common folk beliefs.

relations,” reinforcing acceptable class hierarchies as well as gender roles between men and women.⁴⁹

Snake stories in the Edo period depict these creatures as ranging in behavior from being fundamentally flawed and evil to benevolent and divine. The assorted incarnations of these narratives tend to dictate to the audience how best to understand and interpret the role of the snake; entertainment garnered from these stories often masks a didactic subtext, if it is not overtly stated. Many legends concerning Japanese witch animals were imported from China, and often reimagine snakes, femininity, and female sexuality as abhorrent. Likewise, snakes as agents of lust and desire carry heavy moral judgment, though the severity of castigation usually differs depending upon whether the snake stands in for a lustful and jealous male or female. Other stories depart substantially from such views, instead characterizing transformed snakes as exemplars of Confucian values for women. The power of snakes to transform into humans in order to engage in sexual or romantic relationships with men presents a complex understanding of the emotions of snakes, whose values, desires, and motives certainly reflect those of the humans they allegorically represent.

Many fairy tales and folk beliefs were compiled in Japan’s classical and medieval periods. Such stories, known as *setsuwa*, may be likened to the Western idea of fairy tales: “short Japanese tales that depict extraordinary events, illustrate basic Buddhist principles . . . and transmit cultural and historical knowledge.”⁵⁰ Their audience was primarily composed of the aristocracy, and as such, these tales carry a worldly, sensual appeal or concern religious themes which could be appreciated by those of high status.

⁴⁹ Koopmans-de Bruijn, “Serpentine Spouses,” in *JAPANimals*, edited by Pflugfelder and Walker, 62.

⁵⁰ Li, *Ambiguous Bodies*, 1.

By the Edo period, however, education and higher learning became increasingly accessible to people of the common classes.⁵¹ New methods of printing and publishing allowed for the prolific distribution of *setsuwa*, poetry, and other classical genres to the common people, most of which were translated or simplified into the vernacular.⁵² Chinese texts as well, long favored by the aristocracy and intelligentsia, were studied in Japanese, in addition to “the import of Chinese vernacular tales called [*baihua*] (popular tales written in the vernacular language) into Japan” resulted in the creation of erudite Japanese ‘books for reading’ (*yomihon*).⁵³ Other new genres of fiction also emerged to reflect the times and tastes of the people of the Edo period. Drawing on and updating *setsuwa* for the early modern age, new collections of strange stories and folktales began to appear, some of the most popular of which “featured traveling literati or famous monks who would go around to various regions of Japan, collecting ghost stories and strange tales. These anthologies were then presented as true stories compiled into books by these travelers.”⁵⁴ Hardly unique to the Edo period, or even Japan, accounts of the countryside were often couched in the assumption that “the provinces were . . . exotic places and definitely less civilized than the great cities . . . Thus when a story moves away from the capital, the reader is prepared to encounter strange and wonderful things; mysterious happenings are more believable when they occur far from home.”⁵⁵

One *setsuwa* which depicts a snake spirit taking female form quite graphically emphasizes the connection between snakes, women, sex, and their obstructions to male enlightenment. In it, a monk (who is noted to be married with children – not uncommon in the

⁵¹ Chambers, introduction to *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, by Akinari Ueda, 16.

⁵² Masao Higashi, “The Origins of Japanese Weird Fiction,” translated by Miri Nakamura, in Kaiki: *Uncanny Tales from Japan Volume 1: Tales of Old Edo*, (Fukuoka, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2009), 5.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁵ Chambers, introduction to *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, by Akinari Ueda, 21.

medieval period), decides during the course of his travels to rest in a secluded grove. He dreams that a beautiful woman comes to him and they have passionate sex within the clearing. When he awakes, he sees that he has climaxed during his dream, and is horrified to find his ejaculate dripping from the mouth of a large white snake lying dead beside him. He realizes that the snake must have seen him and wished to share in his lustful dream, but that he mustn't tell anyone for fear he will come to be known as "the monk who has sex with snakes." The story ends with a moral lesson warning that people shouldn't sleep outside alone or share one's sexual fluids with animals, for it will kill the creatures.⁵⁶

While this story is somewhat unique in comparison to other snake-lover *setsuwa*, its general opinion on sex and morality is not uncommon. The lesson of the story does not condemn sex, though it suggests that the monk's lustful thoughts away from his wife are what attracted the snake to him, as snakes increasingly become viewed as representations of lustful corruption. The caution against bestiality is quite implicit, yet Li also argues that it serves as a deterrent from oral sex: the snake being the conscious aggressor against the sleeping monk, using its acquired feminine wiles to drain the monk of his purity and sexual energy.⁵⁷

The form of the snake in this tale also adds another layer to the conception of the serpentine body as female. The dream woman is akin to many such sexually attractive forms taken by snakes in *setsuwa*, yet because the snake transforms only within the dream, the mouth of the snake comes to represent the vagina. The tube of the snake's body being used in such a manner parallels Japanese representations of female genitalia: that which encloses a hollow space is often taken to denote the womb, or other such imagery of female sexuality and

⁵⁶ The summary and quote is taken from Li's *Ambiguous Bodies*, 108. Another telling may be found in Royall Tyler's *Japanese Tales*, 158-9.

⁵⁷ Li, *Ambiguous Bodies*, 110.

reproduction.⁵⁸ The snake's death, likewise, appears accidental; it is not killed for its indiscretions as snakes in other tales are, nor is it explicitly antagonized; one is permitted to form one's own conclusions about the snake's motives.

Setсуwa allow for greater insight into the numerous beliefs regarding snakes in Japanese culture, especially as printing and education allowed them to become disseminated anew during the Edo period. Apart from classical literary compilations, what of the folklore and beliefs of the actual residents of these provinces? An earnest effort to record and preserve the folk traditions of Japan did not begin until after the Edo period fell to the Meiji regime (beginning in 1868): Japan's borders were once again opened, accompanied by a flood of Western ideology and modernization at an almost alarming rate. The ambition of the Meiji government to become a legitimate international power also resulted in the oppression of folk beliefs which came to be considered 'superstitious' and could stereotype the Japanese people as 'ignorant' in the eyes of the West.⁵⁹ One Westerner, however, the famed author Lafcadio Hearn, was "a fan of the mystical and the ghostly, [who] decried this lamentable trend and praised the beautiful nature of ancient Japan," notably though his "obsessive . . . collect[ion of] early modern fantastic tales."⁶⁰ These stories were published for a Western audience, but later translated into Japanese as well; though the tales he recorded were considered to be common knowledge in their respective rural communities, Hearn's work actually introduced not only Westerners, but many Japanese to these traditions, including scholars or rural culture. As such, the field of Japanese folklore by Japanese folklorists was soon established.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 113-4.

⁵⁹ Charlotte Eubanks, "On the Wings of a Bird: Folklore, Nativism, and Nostalgia in Meiji Letters," *Asian Folklore Studies* 65, no. 1 (2006): 2.

⁶⁰ Higashi, "The Origins of Japanese Weird Fiction," translated by Miri Nakamura, in Kaiki, 13.

Yanagita Kunio is considered to be the father of Japanese folklore.⁶¹ Like Hearn, Yanagita traveled to remote areas and recorded folklore and practices in an effort to preserve these traditions as Japan became more and more industrialized and global. Yanagita believed that it was through such customs and beliefs that the indigenous culture of Japan could be found. In his writings, he proposes that “the Japanese have for centuries remained fundamentally one people,” and the study of Japanese folklore therefore offers to “the foreign folklorist . . . long-enduring and relatively undisturbed folk traditions in Japan.”⁶² Many scholars, both Japanese and foreign, cite Yanagita’s work as evidence of the traditional practices and beliefs of Japan, free from foreign influence since time immemorial, and therefore able to provide insight on the activities and attitudes of Japanese people throughout history, especially such marginalized populations as commoners or women.⁶³ Such interpretations are somewhat disturbing, as they ignore the personal motivations of the author, as well as the inaccuracies and inconsistencies which will inevitably follow any conclusions found in an intentionally biased discourse.

Though Yanagita Kunio was born and raised during the Meiji period, his interest in recovering and reconsidering folk traditions at a time when such practices were being discouraged was not entirely at odds with the aims of his contemporaries. Certainly, a desire to modernize, industrialize, and Westernize encroached upon many traditional or conservative values. However, the establishment of nationwide campaigns to emphasize a unified and unique Japanese people were closely connected to a number of nativist movements and scholarship. Yanagita was profoundly inspired by nativism, and viewed his work as a means through which to “catalyze Japanese unity and . . . could even serve, [to quote Yanagita himself] as ‘one measure

⁶¹ Eubanks, “On the Wings of a Bird,” 5.

⁶² Kunio Yanagita, “Opportunities for Folklore Research in Japan,” translated by Fanny Hagin Mayer, in *Studies in Japanese Folklore*, edited by Richard M. Dorson, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963), 50-1.

⁶³ Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow*, 115.

in the reconstruction of Japan.”⁶⁴ Many Japanese folklorists after Yanagita also came from the nativist school, utilizing his work and shaping their own in accordance with the ideals and morality of the time.⁶⁵ Yanagita also hoped “to retrieve the hidden power of women,” resulting in no small amount of his research painting quite a feminist – and perhaps overly optimistic – view of the roles of women in folklore and rural traditional practices.⁶⁶ Despite these problems, it is still worthwhile to consider the beliefs and traditions of the Edo period which were shared with the Meiji generation of scholars and folklorists.

One tale describes a beautiful young girl who devoutly journeyed to a temple to pray each day. A young man sees her during one of her trips, and begins to ask around in order to court her for marriage. The girl agrees to marry him once her temple pilgrimage of one hundred days is complete. Finally, they are married, though their wedding day is slightly marred by sudden rain during a clear day. The man’s family business begins to prosper, and his new bride soon becomes pregnant. She humbly requests her mother-in-law to allow her to sleep alone in a storehouse during her pregnancy, and when the baby comes due, she begs her husband not to allow anyone to come near, nor should he look inside the storehouse during the birth. The husband’s concern for his wife’s labor pains compels him to check in on her, and he is astonished to see his newborn son quietly resting in the coils of an enormous white snake. Suddenly aware of someone watching, the snake turns back into the young girl and informs her husband that, due to her true form being revealed, she must now return home (some tellings state that he found her as a human when he visited the palace of the Dragon God). Knowing her baby

⁶⁴ Eubanks, “On the Wings of a Bird,” 8.

⁶⁵ Tōji Kamata, “The disfiguring of nativism: Hirata Atsutane and Orikuchi Shinobu” in *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami*, edited by John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 314-5.

⁶⁶ Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 288. For detailed examples of Yanagita’s reinterpretations of women in mythology and folklore, see 288-97.

will need milk, she removes one of her eyes and gives it to her husband, saying that it will provide for their son all the nourishment he will need. One day, the feudal lord hears about a strange treasure which grants an endless supply of milk to the baby of a widowed merchant in his domain, so he seizes the eyeball for his own child. The husband is at a loss for what to do, and helplessly goes to the ocean (sometimes a lake or river), calling for his wife. She appears to him and acknowledges her continued worry for her child, and removes her other eye. Now blind, she implores her husband to look after the boy since she can no longer see him, raise him well, and secure for him a position as bell ringer at the temple she used to visit, so that she will at least be able to hear that he is safe and good.⁶⁷

A number of interesting elements arise within this folktale. As seen in earlier folk beliefs and *setsuwa*, the storehouse also signifies the womb, being a dark and enclosed space which is used by the snake for childbirth.⁶⁸ There is again the enduring association of snakes with water. The girl is always initially in human form, though she may be discovered by the merchant's son in the ocean and returns there or to another watery abode once discovered. Alternatively, the rain on their wedding day is not so much bad luck as foreshadowing that she is in fact a snake. However, she is a very good snake, devoutly Buddhist while also representative of the Confucian ideal of 'good wife, wise mother.' She is not attached to her husband or concerned with lust; her only care is providing for her child.⁶⁹ Koopmans-de Bruijn points out that other versions of this

⁶⁷ This summary is taken from "The Snake's Treasure" in Kunio Yanagita's *Japanese Folk Tales*, translated by Fanny Hagin Meyer, 104-6. Additions and alternate translations can be found in Koopmans-de Bruijn's "Serpentine Spouses" in *JAPANimals*, edited by Pflugfelder and Walker, 77-9, and Lillywhite and Yamamoto's "Snakes, Serpents, and Humans" in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 142.

⁶⁸ Lillywhite and Yamamoto, "Snakes, Serpents, and Humans," in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons: Art of the Supernatural*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 142.

⁶⁹ The sudden good fortune in the merchant's business after their wedding also alludes to the Japanese belief that snakes in the house bring good fortune, and certain families can in fact possess animal spirits such as snakes and foxes to achieve material and social success. See Lillywhite and Yamamoto in Addiss' *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, 139-41 for snakes associated with family fortune, and Shigeyuki Eguchi's "Between Folk Concepts of Illness and Psychiatric Diagnosis: *Kitsune-Tsuki* (Fox Possession) in a Mountain Village of Western Japan," in *Culture*,

tale, including another related by Fanny Hagin Mayer, include even more emphatically Confucian elements, such as the child growing up to encounter his blind and pitiful snake mother, whom he then cares for, as a proper son should.⁷⁰ This appears to be a later addition to other variants of the tale, which may in fact date it to the Edo period, as the Confucian ideals of family roles and hierarchy, notably the self-sacrificing actions of the mother for her child, well reflect the popular values of Confucianism which became widespread in Japan at that time.⁷¹ Having a snake wife results in the man's prosperity, suggesting that families believed to be in possession of such animal spirits were not necessarily to be avoided. Likewise, the girl, though a snake, is pretty, pure, and a good mother. Her desire to care for her husband and male child to the point of her own undoing seems to suggest to women that, if even a snake can exemplify femininity and contemporaneous gender roles, so too should a human woman.

The types of fairy tales and folklore which were known to the people of the Edo period reinforce many of the beliefs found in Japan's past, while also building upon them to reflect new ideas and philosophies. The figure of the snake could transform into a human solely to engage in sexual acts with mankind, though these tales became increasingly critical, especially if the lustful and corrupting serpent should involve itself with a male. The Buddhist notions of women as polluted, lustful, and karmic hindrances to themselves and the men in their lives are contrasted with Confucian philosophy, who acknowledge this to be the case, but suggest that, despite such flaws, women can still demonstrate positive moral values by being useful to the men in their lives. *Setсуwa* and folklore in the Edo period, however, were not always taken at face value. The morals of these stories oftentimes served as a mere afterthought, as seen in the tale of the monk's

Medicine and Psychiatry 15.4 (1991): 421-51, for an in-depth study of beliefs concerning animal-possessing families.

⁷⁰ Koopmans-de Bruijn "Serpentine Spouses" in *JAPANimals*, edited by Pflugfelder and Walker, 78.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 78-9.

erotic dream. The character of the snake is open to interpretation; because of the structure of these tales, and depending upon the context they were shared in, both women and men were free to attribute their own thoughts on snakes, femininity, sex, and the like, to the stories. While many of these stories and beliefs have quite misogynistic overtones, it may be noted that snakes themselves were not persecuted as a result, nor should it be assumed that the presentation of gender roles for women and the deprecation of female sexuality represent the only manner in which they were considered in the Edo period.

Chapter 3

Snake Women: Ghosts, Goblins, and Gender

Serpentine creatures and their relations with humans were by no means limited to folklore or religious texts in the Edo period. The appeal of the supernatural became so ingrained with Edo period popular culture that a veritable craze for all things creepy completely overtook secular art, literature, and theater. Stories of the strange and supernatural, known as *kaidan*, were no longer reimagined from older texts, but composed specifically for the men, women, and children of the Edo period. The strange and mysterious creatures found in such stories were categorized and associated with specific locales, creating a new taxonomy of monsters called *yōkai*, viewed more as humorous creatures which satirized human behavior and values in the Edo period, rather than as fearsome beasts. Ghost stories, on the other hand, became increasingly violent and scary, not to mention feminized, depicted with gory and gruesome relish in kabuki plays, the popular theater of Japan.

The popularity of oral traditions such as *setsuwa* and folklore in the Edo period soon inspired a unique genre of storytelling. As mentioned in the previous chapter, traveling performers would make their way up and down the major highways of Edo Japan, sharing stories of the various places and things which they had encountered.⁷² Now removed from the times of strife and civil war in which earlier stories had been composed, a desire for true crime tales, scary stories, and things relating to death and gore not only became tolerable, but sought out.⁷³ Professional storytellers became more commonplace, and were often called upon to perform at local community events and festivals. One practice in particular, all-night vigils for the deceased,

⁷² Noriko T. Reider, "The Appeal of *Kaidan*: Tales of the Strange," *Asian Folklore Studies* 59.2 (2000): 266.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 267.

(*kōshinmachi*), required the participants to stay up all night. As such, hired storytellers would entertain guests with *kaidan*, tales of the strange and unusual.⁷⁴ Consisting of many fearsome stories told throughout the night, these parties evolved into a popular type of Edo period entertainment known as “Gathering[s] for One Hundred *Kaidan* Tales” (*Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai*).⁷⁵ Rumor had it that if the guests were able to tell one hundred *kaidan* before the sun came up, something strange and exciting would happen. Numerous urban legends and supposedly true encounters with the supernatural were related at these parties, some meant to shock and scare, others to elicit laughter. Authors and woodblock print artists were able to successfully commercialize this phenomenon into their own works, compiling books of one hundred scary short stories, woodblock prints, or picture scrolls of one hundred ghosts and goblins in order to be shared at these events.⁷⁶

Some of the earliest *kaidan* were published in new genres of popular fiction, known as *yomihon* (books for reading).⁷⁷ One of the innovators of this style, Ueda Akinari, hoped to elevate Japanese literature by drawing from the classical texts of ancient Japan and China. Through his elegant prose and poetic allusions to numerous classical works, which were being reconsidered and studied anew in the Edo period, Ueda utilized his own familiarity with Japan’s history and culture in order to translate these stories into a new time and place for new audiences.⁷⁸ Perhaps his most famous work, a collection of short stories from 1776 called *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (*Ugetsu Monogatari*), Ueda demonstrates his proficiency in classical literature while composing stories to appeal to and challenge readers of the Edo period.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Adam Kabat, “Monsters as Edo Merchandise,” *Japan Quarterly* 48.1 (Jan. 2001): 66-7.

⁷⁷ Chambers, introduction to *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, by Ueda, 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 8-11.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 11.

Though several of the stories found in *Ugetsu Monogatari* are hailed as some of the earliest examples of *kaidan*, in fact, they borrowed heavily from earlier Chinese and Japanese sources. In several cases, the plots of the stories are taken directly from established tales or literature formerly studied only by academics, yet “[f]ar from trying to hide his indebtedness to Chinese and Japanese precedents, [Ueda] Akinari undoubtedly hoped and expected that his readers would derive pleasure from recognizing his sources and appreciate his ingenuity in adapting them.”⁸⁰ Rather than merely translating these texts, Ueda reinterpreted them into specific Japanese settings and locales, alluding to places in Japan wherein similar occurrences or themes were well-known, or historical situations that would provide for the most exciting and cohesive narrative that was at once distinctly Japanese while also reflecting the entertainment tastes of the moment.⁸¹

Book Four of *Ugetsu Monogatari* consists of a pair of tales involving spirits and the supernatural – though they are not presented as particularly horrific, rather mysterious and unsettling, characteristic of *kaidan* stories. The first tale, “A Serpent’s Lust” (“*Jasei no in*”), is based upon a popular Chinese vernacular tale known as “Eternal Prisoner Under the Thunder Peak Pagoda,” or “Lady White Snake,” among other names.⁸² The story itself had already undergone a number of changes to reflect the misogynistic mores of Chinese Buddhism and Confucianism. The most common telling involves a pair of snake demon sisters who control water and rain, Lady White Snake and Lady Green Snake.⁸³ Lady White Snake falls desperately in love with a beautiful young herbalist, and turns herself into a human in order to become his

⁸⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁸¹ Ibid., 14-16. For a more in-depth discussion of the sources utilized for *Ugetsu Monogatari*, see Chambers’ introduction to his translation of Ueda’s work, as well as the prefaces to the individual tales.

⁸² Ibid., 157-8.

⁸³ Neil Khor, “Lady White: the Literary Migration of a Chinese Tale,” (*Indonesia and the Malay World* 42.123, 2014), 289-90. The following description of the story is also taken from this article.

wife. She uses her powers to bring prosperity to his failing clinic, saves their village from a flood, and bears her husband a son. Some versions, presented as fairy tales for children, include an antagonist in Lady Green Snake, who reveals Lady White Snake's true form to the latter's husband. The young doctor usually realizes the sacrifices Lady White Snake has made for him and accepts her as she is, or she saves his life from her sister, apologizes for causing him trouble, and returns to her own realm. More usually, a Buddhist monk sees Lady White Snake and immediately recognizes her disguise. The monk gives her husband "a magical potion . . . that will reveal [her] true form" to him, he sees her for the snake demon she is and immediately "falls dead from shock."⁸⁴ Lady White Snake forces her way into the Heavenly Realm in order to procure a magical plant to resurrect her husband, though he only rejects her and flees with the monk to a monastery upon regaining life. Lady White Snake begs the monk to return her husband, but he instead begins to chant sutras against her, inciting a massive battle during which Lady White Snake floods the town, killing many. Lady White Snake's actions against the monk, the village, and the laws of Heaven result in both her and her sister being imprisoned beneath the Thunder Peak Pagoda.⁸⁵

Like many of the *setsuwa* tales discussed in the previous chapter, the story underwent considerable changes in order to better reflect shifting mores and notions of proper femininity. Originally a kind dragon who saves the life of her human husband, Lady White Snake is recast as a "ferocious she-demon," as dragons began to be associated more with masculinity and the element of fire, whereas women were meant to be submissive, fluid, and weak; despite the tale's popularity, a non-human female hero with supernatural powers "became a bone of contention . . .

⁸⁴ Ibid., 290.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

to Confucian rationalism.”⁸⁶ Therefore, popular folktales and literature from China that was imported into Japan “keep reminding their male reader” that, “[b]ehind every beautiful woman . . . there is a hideous, hungry monster . . . [amplifying] the ancient misconception of female sexuality and its surreptitious doubts of the abnormality and excessiveness of female sexuality and desire.”⁸⁷

Lady White Snake’s Japanese counterpart, Manago in “A Serpent’s Lust,” is clearly the result of these later additions to the Chinese tale. Ueda transports the tale to classical Japan, drawing upon a number of literary references from the Heian period, such as *The Tale of Genji*, while also alluding to such Japanese locales as Miwa, Kumano, and Dōjōji, famous in the Edo period for their connection with snakes and snake demons.⁸⁸

The main character of “A Serpent’s Lust” is Toyoo, the youngest son of a wealthy fisherman.⁸⁹ While his older brother works hard for the family business, Toyoo dreams of a life in the city, spending his time reading courtly literature instead of contributing to the household. Toyoo’s father, seeing his son’s gentle, affected nature as an inevitability, spoils him and allows Toyoo to spend his time in idle study or traveling in the company of a monk, convinced the boy will never marry and will remain dependent on Toyoo’s older brother for the rest of his life.

During one of his travels, Toyoo is caught in a rainstorm and seeks shelter under the eaves of a nearby dwelling, where he encounters a stunningly beautiful woman whom Toyoo is convinced is from the Capital. The woman, named Manago, offers Toyoo a place to stay for the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 291. Though Lady White Snake is humanized by proper Buddhist and Confucian methods, these will be discussed in greater depth and within the Japanese context in the following chapter.

⁸⁷ Hsiu-chih Tsai, “Female Sexuality: Its Allurement and Repression in Geling Yan’s ‘White Snake,’” (*The American Journal of Semiotics* 23.1-4 (2007)), n.pag.

⁸⁸ Chambers, introduction to “A Serpent’s Lust” in *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, by Ueda, 156-7. See the following chapter for more information on Kumano and Dōjōji.

⁸⁹ Akinari Ueda, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, translated by Anthony H. Chambers, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 159. The following description is from the story “A Serpent’s Lust,” 159-85.

evening at her nearby home. Though the house is uninhabited save for Manago and her handmaiden, the grand scale and rich decorations appear to have been ripped directly from Toyoo's vision of courtly living. Manago's face powder, clothing, fine furniture, and ability to quote poetry reflect the pinnacles of aristocratic society, despite her solitary residence in the far-off countryside. Naturally, Toyoo is bewitched by Manago and they pledge their love to one another through a vow and the sharing of wine (*sake*), reminiscent of the Japanese wedding ritual, though Toyoo does not spend the night with her as is the custom, instead returning to his father with Manago's gift of a gilded dagger. When his family sees the prize, they become convinced that Toyoo has robbed the treasures of a shrine or temple, and demand to know where the dagger came from. Though Toyoo attempts to describe his enchanting lover, the aristocratic family name she had supplied him is proven to be a fabrication, and the markings on the dagger do in fact identify it as one of the stolen temple treasures.

Toyoo returns to Manago's house in search of answers, accompanied by soldiers hoping to recover the lost treasures. When they reach the house, however, Toyoo is shocked to see a hovel in an advanced state of decay and disrepair, the grounds ruined and overrun with weeds, and no sign of Manago. Unable to be consoled, Toyoo goes to stay in another town with his elder sister's family, however, Manago finds him there and attempts to explain away the circumstances by blaming it on the nefarious deeds of her deceased aristocratic husband. Toyoo, convinced that Manago is a demon, spurns her, but his sister is touched by her delicate and earnest nature and dismisses Toyoo's concerns as mere superstition.

On the day of their wedding, Toyoo and Manago go to a nearby mountain stream in order to exchange their vows, but an old man, upon seeing Manago and her handmaiden, cries out that they are demons. A sudden downpour occurs and the two women dive into the waterfall,

escaping. The old man explains to Toyoo that his beauty has inspired the lust of the snake-demon, and it has marked him as its own, binding the two together until Toyoo's death. Toyoo quickly enters an arranged marriage with a beautiful young acquaintance of his family, yet on their wedding night, she reveals herself to be Manago, enraged that Toyoo would break his vows to her. Toyoo sends word to a monk famed for help in escaping Manago. When the monk opens Toyoo's bedroom door, the men are shocked to find an enormous snake "filling the door frame, gleaming whiter than a pile of snow, its eyes like mirrors, its horns like leafless tress, its gaping mouth three feet across with a crimson tongue protruding."⁹⁰

Though the first monk dies in his attempt to fell the snake demon, a master of exorcism is summoned and gives Toyoo special instructions for how to trick and capture Manago. Throwing a stole imbued with the priest's prayers over his wife, the young girl's body is saved and two snakes, one small and large, are found lurking nearby: Manago and her handmaiden. The snakes are killed and placed in a bowl, which is then buried in "a serpent mound" (*jazuka*) in front of a famous temple.⁹¹

Much of "A Serpent's Lust" is transmitted in the manner of the folk tales and *setsuwa* described in the previous chapter. The constant presence of water whenever Manago is nearby, or thunder and storms when she becomes angry, reinforces the tales relating to snakes, while also emphasizing the flood imagery from the original Chinese work. However, the depiction of Toyoo as an inept, beauty-obsessed lay-about creates a remarkable dynamic between himself and Manago: their affair is a near inversion of the proper behavior of Heian aristocrats as well as gender roles in Edo society, though Manago plays the masculine role of the mysterious courtly suitor and Toyoo as the feminine, beloved child from a wealthy family. Indeed, the priest chides

⁹⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁹¹ Ibid., 181, 185.

Toyoo for falling victim to Manago's seduction; Toyoo's susceptibility was due to his "lack of [manliness]."⁹² Manago's destructive and murderous rampage are a result of her lustful nature and pursuit of Toyoo, despite appearing as a delicate woman. Unlike the original Chinese tale, there is no happy ending for the pair, even temporarily. However, the story is not meant to be told as a fairy tale; the numerous allusions to famous literature and local points of interest, as well as the emphatic Japanese composition were meant to be read and savored; the exposure of the snake demons made all the more thrilling by the eloquent prose of the story. Edo period *kaidan* parties became more popular for the masses, exuding a sense of class through the works of literature and art which spread from simple tales from the past into the tastes and concerns of the present.

Some of the most popular subjects of *kaidan* parties were *yōkai*, a genre of creatures which developed in the Edo period and became a wildly popular cultural phenomenon. Originally found in comic strips written in the simplified Japanese syllabary in order to appeal to children, these monsters (alternatively translated as ghosts and goblins) were not meant to be scary so much as to entertain.⁹³ The success of the *kaidan* parties, however, transformed these comics into "complex parodies on contemporary mores that were . . . enjoyed more by adults."⁹⁴ In the popular culture of the Edo period, city-dwellers enjoyed *yōkai* not as traditional rural folklore, such as those found in *setsuwa* and folk tales; instead, *yōkai* were "purposefully created and sold as a commodity."⁹⁵ Many *yōkai* were crafted in order to advertise exhibits in wildly

⁹² Noriko T. Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present*, (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2010) 127. Reider translates the term *ōshisa* as 'manliness.'

⁹³ Kabat, "Monsters as Edo Merchandise," 67-8.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁵ Adam Kabat, "'Sōsaku' to shite no yōkai," *Nihon yōkai taizen*, edited by Kazuhiko Komatsu, (Tokyo: Shōgakusan, 2003), 146. Quoted in Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 95.

popular Edo carnivals (*misemono*), which featured freak-show like oddities from the grotesque to the tantalizing.⁹⁶

Many *yōkai* appear to be allegories, living puns which poke fun at various aspects of human nature. One such example can be found in the story of the *Rokuro-kubi*, (Potter's Wheel-Neck), so named due to the skin striations found on the neck of the *yōkai*-in-disguise.⁹⁷ The *Rokuro-kubi*'s appearance is that of a normal woman by day, yet when night falls, her neck stretches, snakelike, to an exorbitant length, so that she may feed on the lifeblood of her husband and neighbors. Sometimes the woman will not know she is a *Rokuro-kubi* at all, and it is only after both husband and wife have woken up exhausted and can take no more that they call in a specialist to investigate.⁹⁸ An alternate interpretation of the *Rokuro-kubi* sees the *yōkai* as a metaphor for gossiping women, who are constantly strain their necks to hear juicy details, unknowingly fatiguing both self and husband.⁹⁹

A less fanciful *yōkai* which appears in many such collections is the *Nure-onna*, or “Wet Woman.”¹⁰⁰ The *Nure-onna* is a literal snake-woman: half woman, half snake, she slithers from the waters of the ocean or a river in order to terrorize men. Her long black hair, loose and soaking wet, clings to her bare skin, thus inspiring her name. Her bottom half is that of a water snake, though occasionally she may appear as a large snake with the head of a beautiful woman. Often, she will masquerade as a human. The most common tale relates the story of a man who went fishing at night, and was met with the good fortune to completely fill his creel with fish.

⁹⁶ Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 25.

⁹⁷ Natsuhiko Kyōgoku, *Yōkai zukan* [*The Picture Book of Ghosts and Goblins*], (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 2000), 158-9. (ろくろ首, or 轆轤首, *rokurokubi*), translated by the author.

⁹⁸ Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Oakland, CA: The University of California Press, 2015), 222.

⁹⁹ Kyōgoku, *Yōkai zukan*, 158-9.

¹⁰⁰ Translated by the author. The character for wet (*nure* 濡) can also be used as a play on words to refer to lovemaking, reinforcing the relationship between the *Nure-onna yōkai* and sexuality.

Sometimes, he sees a beautiful half-naked woman sitting beside the water, sensually running her fingers through her wet hair, or else cradling a baby. In other versions, he returns home, where he is met by a woman standing in front of his house dripping wet and holding an infant. She pushes her baby upon the man, wherein the child either grows to enormous size, crushing him to death, or he is chased by a towering demon when he attempts to rid himself of the unwanted baby. The demon cries out at him, and he recognizes the voice as that of the *Nure-onna*, who reveals herself to be in actuality a huge snake. The *Nure-onna* then slithers back into the sea, dragging the man with her.¹⁰¹

The *yōkai* scholar Kyōgoku Natsuhiko has written extensively on the connection between *yōkai* and gender. The manners in which *yōkai* express themselves can easily be seen as metaphors for gender roles and a commentary on Edo period society.¹⁰² Moreover, Kyōgoku suggests that *yōkai* are not merely allegories of human behavior, but of human sexuality.¹⁰³ The ways in which men and women interact with *yōkai*, a mixture of fear, fascination, and usually misunderstanding, does well to support this theory. The *Nure-onna* bewitches men with her loose hair and damp, exposed skin, yet the man is always undone by her once she turns monstrous, or else he is crushed under the pressure of children. Similarly, the repression and subversion of female sexuality in the Edo period, so thoroughly linked with snakes, adds to the terrifying nature of the story. The *Nure-onna* as a *yōkai* is not funny; she should be avoided.

As with *kaidan* and *yōkai*, Japanese ghost stories also experienced a surge in popularity at parties, in art, and in theater. These ghosts, known as *yūrei*, are rather distinct from *yōkai*, yet

¹⁰¹ Natsuhiko Kyōgoku, *Yōkai zukan*, 45-6.

¹⁰² Takarajima Henshūbu [Takarajima Editorial Department], eds., *Bokutachi no sukina Kyōgoku Natsuhiko* [Our Dear Kyōgoku Natsuhiko], supplemental volume, reprint of the 2004 edition, (Tōkyō : Takarajimasha, 2009), 166-73.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 166-7, 12.

“can be thought of as a special subcategory of yōkai just as we think of human beings as a special subcategory of animals.”¹⁰⁴ Like the tales discussed above, one may experience a strange occurrence or encounter an unusual person who is finally revealed to have been a ghost all along. Often, the *yūrei* is the spirit of a specific person who died with unfinished business. An attachment so strong as to confine the *yūrei* to the in-between world of life and death is usually the result of extreme emotions such as love, pain, betrayal, murder, or the need for vengeance.¹⁰⁵ As such, the form of the spirit appears as easily recognizable as it was in life, and it is free to wander in search of those to whom it feels bound. The latter such *yūrei* are much more fearful than the fanciful *yōkai* or mysterious *kaidan*, and being less personal than the ghosts found “in folk narratives or local legends . . . makes for good theater and artwork.”¹⁰⁶

Early versions of Japanese ghost stories, especially those which involved *yūrei* of the vengeance-seeking sort, known as *onryō*, were usually the souls of men who had been betrayed and humiliated, often politically, or died violently and unjustly in times of war.¹⁰⁷ Some stories state that the spirit of one who has wrongfully died then turns into a snake spirit, which returns to seek vengeance against those who betrayed it in life.¹⁰⁸ By the Edo period, however, *yūrei* in popular culture were almost overwhelmingly female.¹⁰⁹ *Onryō* can be thought to embody the souls of the marginalized, those left so helpless by their status or lot in life that it is only through death that they may achieve satisfaction. The shifting and often diminished roles for women, as

¹⁰⁴ Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Brenda Jordan, “*Yūrei*: Tales of Female Ghosts,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons: Art of the Supernatural*, edited by Stephen Addiss, (New York: George Braziller, Inc. / the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1985), 25.

¹⁰⁶ Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 23-4.

¹⁰⁷ Jacqueline Ilyse Stone and Mariko Namba Walter, eds., *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, Honolulu: The University of Hawai’i Press, 2009, 120.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁰⁹ Jordan, “*Yūrei*,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 25.

dictated by the class structure of the Edo period and popular Confucian morality, may account for the abrupt change in gender for *yūrei*.

The *yūrei*'s appearance stems from a number of popular woodblock prints which took their visual cues from earlier conceptions of a *yōkai* known as the *Ubume*.¹¹⁰ Like the *Nure-onna*, the *Ubume* is sometimes also said to trick strangers into holding her baby, which then grows and overtakes its well-meaning victim. The *Ubume* is infinitely more tragic and pathetic, however, being a hybrid of human and bird which has manifested from the spirit of a young woman who died in childbirth or was unable to have children of her own.¹¹¹ Irrevocably tied to the inability to properly realize one's womanhood as a mother, the *Ubume* is known for her pitiful sobbing and disheveled appearance, her hair and clothes torn loose, her lower half drenched with blood. Woodblock prints of *yūrei* similarly depict them as women with long, unbound hair dressed in flowing white clothing, in the way that a female would be arranged for death.¹¹² Her form often seems fragile and quietly lonely, though her lower half is not covered in blood, but is "misty and taper[s] into nothingness."¹¹³

The compassion afforded to these spirits, which haunt and torment their human victims in many popular stories, is often a direct result of the way they are portrayed in life. Stories and plays about *yūrei* often build slowly, depicting the ill-fated woman as she dutifully withstands a succession of atrocities such as rape, betrayal, an unfaithful husband, or her own brutal murder. *Yotsuya Kaidan*, one of the best-known of such tales, and indeed, one of the best-known Japanese ghost stories, well reflects the tastes of Edo period popular culture.¹¹⁴ The protagonist

¹¹⁰ Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 205-6.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 206-7.

¹¹² Jordan, "Yūrei," in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 26.

¹¹³ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 32.

of the story is Oiwa, whose disgraced warrior of a husband Iemon, unbeknownst to her, has murdered her father and hopes to murder her as well, so that he may marry another woman from a wealthy family, thus regaining status and fortune for himself.¹¹⁵ Over the course of the story, Iemon viciously rips Oiwa's clothes from her body and tears down the mosquito netting which protects their baby, has Oiwa poisoned, resulting in her horrific disfigurement, and attempts to arrange for her to be raped. Upon seeing Oiwa's pitiful state, the masseuse hired by Iemon is overcome with sympathy for her. As Oiwa finally realizes the depths of her husband's treachery, she is unable to come to terms with it; her "throat is accidentally cut" by a servant's blade, the latter of whom Iemon murders and ties to a door alongside the corpse of Oiwa, which he then disposes of by floating it down a river.¹¹⁶ Oiwa's vengeful spirit returns throughout the second half of the play in order to torment Iemon and ruin his life. Consumed by guilt, Iemon attempts to hide in a remote cottage on a mountain called Hebiyama, literally, "Snake Mountain," though the numerous vines and ropes about the hut shapeshift into serpents and chase him toward his death.¹¹⁷

Exemplifying Buddhist and Confucian values, Oiwa is bound in life by her duties to her child, husband, and father (whom Iemon has promised Oiwa he will avenge, thus her devotion to him despite his cruel treatment of her), and is confined within her home for the entirety of her role as a living woman; it is only after she becomes a ghost that she is able to see the real Iemon,

¹¹⁵ Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, "'Supernatural Soliciting': Pathways from Betrayal to Retribution in *Macbeth* and *Yotsuya Kaidan*," *New Theatre Quarterly* 31.1 (Apr. 2015): 28-9.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹⁷ Jordan, "Yūrei," in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 32. Interestingly, the 1959 film version of the story, *Tōkaido Yotsuya Kaidan*, foreshadows the inherent evil of Iemon and the fate of Oiwa wherein, near the beginning of the film, a small snake curls up alongside Oiwa at a picnic and Iemon is unable to cut it down, despite his vicious and increasingly manic attempts to do so. Oiwa begs him to spare the lowly creature, protesting that snakes are servants of the *kami*, and she is a snake herself, in that she was born in the Year of the Snake according to the Eastern zodiac. See *Tōkaido Yotsuya Kaidan*.

exact revenge upon him, and wander about the world in search of him.¹¹⁸ However, “[a]s both a female and a ghost, Oiwa cannot kill Iemon,” and instead must be avenged by her brother-in-law, who acts as a *deus ex machina* in the play, arriving suddenly and unexpectedly at Hebiyama to strike Iemon down, despite the fact that this brother-in-law was thought to be long dead.¹¹⁹ Oiwa’s spirit, though vengeful, is then able to find peace while still upholding the prescribed Confucian mores for women.

The play, performed in the Japanese kabuki theater, reflected the trend of the time for playwrights “to create more graphic scenes in order to produce the shocks and chills that their viewers wanted.”¹²⁰ Though the story of Oiwa and other such downtrodden female *yūrei* may be viewed as commentary on the oppression of women or a means of obtaining satisfaction, even if it is through death or the vicarious observation of a theatrical revenant, the feelings of helplessness and marginalization were not confined to the women in the audience. In fact, women of warrior families, like Oiwa, were in reality quite active within the public sphere; it was not uncommon for a woman to assume her husband’s role as head of the household after his death, and “many women of the lower classes actively participated in business or farming, and sometimes even in social protests.”¹²¹ Instead, several scholars suggest that the increasing social and political instability of the later Edo period, resulting from a corrupt government which was powerless to aid the populace in times of disaster and facing increased international pressure to open the country, are reflected in such stories of the weak obtaining vengeance.¹²² Regardless, the violent yet complex characters of the kabuki stage and the “personification of repressed

¹¹⁸ Sorgenfrei, ““Supernatural Soliciting,”” 30.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Jordan, “*Yūrei*,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 28.

¹²¹ Sorgenfrei, ““Supernatural Soliciting,”” 30.

¹²² Ibid.

emotions” exhibited by female *yūrei* spoke in a number of ways to both men and women from a wide array of class structures.¹²³

The fantastic tales of *kaidan*, *yōkai*, and *yūrei* all flourished in the Edo period, overtaking popular culture and presenting new ways of viewing and understanding the supernatural. From manipulative monsters, to snakelike *yōkai*, to vengeful spirits, issues of repression and sexuality found within the secular arts of the Edo period were met sometimes with revulsion, sometimes with allure, but always with enjoyment. The appeal of stories of the strange and unusual spoke to a populace which was obsessed with supernatural horror stories, a welcome distraction from the realities of life within a severely stratified yet increasingly unstable society. Women became powerful creatures, monsters embodying the minutiae of human life, or expressions of feelings of abuse and mistrust, offering vicarious vengeance to Edo period audiences. Characters became more complex; sexuality and gender roles became blurred, relatable, and even funny. Like the women in scary stories, or the marginalized masses of the Edo period, ghosts and goblins were never what they initially seemed to be.

¹²³ Jordan, “*Yūrei*,” in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 32.

Chapter 4

From Women to Snakes: Demons and Damnation

The deep connection between shape-shifting snakes and the female body in Japan is certainly conspicuous; however, it is the prevalence of human women throughout Edo period culture to transform their own bodies into that of a snake demon which carries remarkable insight into questions of gender and power. Like the Dragon Girl of the Lotus Sutra, the conscious decision to alter one's form in order to accomplish feats of strength and power are reflected in a number of stories, plays, and religious beliefs found in the Edo period; and while many of these narratives appear to carry strongly negative overtones, the transformation itself appears to offer another option for women who find themselves in difficult situations: one which garners sympathy, fear, and respect, or at least vicarious entertainment.

The metamorphosis into a snake demon from human form is almost entirely limited to women. Men may become partial-demons by being born of a demon mother, or else through a particularly difficult birth for a human woman.¹²⁴ Additionally, they may unwittingly find themselves becoming demonic due to the influences of lustful demon or a nefarious woman, occasionally one who has mastered the demonic art of mind control.¹²⁵ The late medieval and early Edo periods saw increased sympathy in stories depicting demons; several theories suggested that they were allegories for or the effects of marginalization in society.¹²⁶ Demons, though murderous, cannibalistic, and otherworldly, could occasionally be just as ambiguous, or at least emphasized with, though not to the extent afforded to ghosts, goblins, and *kami*.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 34; 79.

¹²⁵ Li, *Ambiguous Bodies*, 92-4.

¹²⁶ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 48-50.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

It is important to note that, like snakes, demons were perceived in Edo Japan rather differently than their Western counterparts. The most common word translated as demon, *oni*, is perhaps better expressed as ‘ogre’: monstrously powerful creatures who torment humans, often by shape-shifting into beautiful women in order to seduce men as snakes, foxes, and other magical creatures do, albeit with more gruesome results.¹²⁸ Though usually conceived as being genderless, their muscular bodies are often envisioned as representations of masculinity.¹²⁹ In fact, there are a great number of terms which are applied to different types of demons, their appearances, and their habits, but the primary concern of this paper are those which began their lives as human women and managed to join the ranks of otherworldly monsters.

As we have seen, much of the negativity ascribed to women in the Edo period is indebted to Buddhist beliefs concerning feminine impurity. Resulting in the literal “demonization of femininity,” open female sexuality became the impetus for demonic transformation, though sexual repression or secrecy only served to mask the demonic potential lurking inside all women.¹³⁰ The evils of women are expounded in a number of Buddhist texts, many of which were intended to educate women on their impure status: women’s bodies are inherently unclean due to the lust they inspire in men, as well as the acts of menstruation and childbirth; they are condemned to hell due to their very nature as women, as well as their ignorance of female impurities and transgressions.¹³¹ Examples include “failing to bear children and being lustful, vain, envious, stingy, cruel, and jealous.”¹³²

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1-3.

¹²⁹ Li, *Ambiguous Bodies*, 154-5. From the Heian period, *oni* were designated as female only when their actions stemmed from lust or jealousy, as these were thought to be inherently feminine traits. Demons which inhabit the underworld or Buddhist hell, while fearful, serve as tormentors due to the transgressions made by humans; they are not as wrathful as their earth-dwelling counterparts. See Reider’s *Japanese Demon Lore*, 1-29.

¹³⁰ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 76; 90.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

Such characteristics are also attributed to snakes, thus the transformation of human women into snakelike demons. Though snakes are most commonly portrayed as an allegory of feminine lust, they were also conceived as representations of jealousy. Of course, since “[j]ealousy was regarded as an exclusively female emotion,” demons, snakes, and other creatures which exhibited such feelings may have been conceived of in the feminine.¹³³ Medieval Buddhist texts acknowledged that many *kami* took the form of horned snakes; not as divine messengers, but as a worldly emanation of poison, creatures which felt strong jealousy and resentment due to their inability to become enlightened.¹³⁴

Snakes transformation as a result of lust and jealousy is not always presented as a vice, though such emotions, particularly those of women, are considered attributes of mortal attachment, which prevents enlightenment. One folk tale discusses a beautiful and intelligent young girl who adores spending time in her father’s garden.¹³⁵ The girl is so enraptured by the red blossoms of a plum tree that she spends all of her time alone, looking at the tree, and carefully collects each fallen petal as they fall. Once the tree has lost all of its blossoms, the young girl pines for it, growing weaker and sicker until she passes away. The following year, a small snake comes into the garden and collects the fallen petals in its mouth, curling its body around the plum tree to protect it. Passersby believe that the snake is the spirit of the deceased girl, and weep for her love and devotion to the tree. The story ends when a monk recites the Lotus Sutra for the girl’s soul. Though the girl is able to achieve salvation, her love of the tree and desire to preserve its petals from being lost is presented rather like a love story, and no moral judgment or condemnation is offered, save for the sorrow her parents feel before she is saved by

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Itō et al., *Shinto—A Short History*, edited by Nobutaka Inoue, 75-6.

¹³⁵ Tyler, *Japanese Tales*, 198.

the monk.¹³⁶ While the Lotus Sutra often factors into stories depicting women's salvation, which contains the parable of the young Dragon King's daughter and her bodily transformation, freedom from attachment, and eventual enlightenment, it was not the only sutra which contained soteriological teachings for women in Japanese Buddhism.

Near the end of the medieval period, the cult of the Blood Pool Sutra emerged, reinforcing the impure status of women within the Buddhist context, while also offering a strikingly different means of interpretation. The Blood Pool Sutra (*Ketsubonkyō*) depicts a particular realm of Buddhist hell known as the Blood Pool Hell (*chi no ike jigoku*), which “threatens damnation for the sin of female biology.”¹³⁷ Women's blood was considered to be particularly pollutive, specifically as a result of menstruation and childbirth. Because this blood could taint the earth upon which it was spilled or even seep into rivers and be consumed by holy men, the karmic punishment for existence as a woman is to serve time within the Blood Pool Hell.¹³⁸ As such, women must spend their time adrift in a pool of their own contaminated blood before they can be reborn into a better, preferably male, body. Additional punishments were afforded to those who died in childbirth, who were forced to imbibe of the parturitive blood in greater quantities.¹³⁹ Women who were particularly jealous, specifically towards their husband or lover and his wife or mistresses, swam through the pools in the form of a horned snake.¹⁴⁰ In several picture scrolls which illustrate the torments of certain Buddhist hells in graphic detail, jealous mistresses find one another within the pools of blood and resume their spiteful battles in snake form: “completely entwined and demobilizing one man in their pythonlike grip . . .

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Stone, et al., *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, 177.

¹³⁸ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 85.

¹³⁹ Ibid.; Stone, et al., *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, 177.

¹⁴⁰ Stone, et al., *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, 208. Ruch, ed. *Engendering Faith*, 567.

[e]xegesis differs as to whose sin, the man's multiple sexual interests or the women's painful jealousy, has caused this suffering all around."¹⁴¹

The horrors of the Blood Pool Hell can be interpreted as a warning to both men and women, to avoid falling victim to female jealousy. It is easy to dismiss these beliefs as simple misogyny. A famous parable depicts the future monk Ippen, who had two mistresses whom he took on outings together as they were both "beautiful and good-natured."¹⁴² One day, while the two women are napping together, their hair becomes tangled; Ippen looks down and notices that their hair has in fact transformed, Medusa-like, into a number of snakes striking at each other with rage. Ippen is forced to cut the hair of the sleeping women apart with a sword. Realizing the jealousy which dwells in the hearts of even the most amiable of women, Ippen renounces a life of attachment and takes the vows to become a monk.¹⁴³ Of course, at no point is it suggested that the polygynous situation should be amended.

The teachings of the Blood Pool Sutra, however, strongly appealed to women. In addition to the Lotus Sutra, which depicts the ability of the Dragon King's Daughter to achieve enlightenment despite having lived a female body, by the end of the medieval period and into the Edo period, the Blood Pool Sutra was overwhelmingly copied and recited specifically for the bodies and souls of women after death.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, the cult which developed around the sutra was predominantly spread by traveling nuns, rather than monks, who utilized the teachings in lectures, songs, and picture scrolls, to appeal directly to other women. As Barbara R. Ambros explains, "not all women who propagated the texts were vulnerable victims of sexist propaganda . . . the Blood Pool Sutra was perhaps a graphic and gripping tool for proselytization

¹⁴¹ Ruch, ed. *Engendering Faith*, 567.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 486.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Stone, et al., *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, 178.

and a means to encourage women to take their posthumous salvation into their own hands.”¹⁴⁵

Further scrolls depict the salvific figure Kannon, in particular the feminine Nyoirin Kannon believed to watch over women and assist them in childbirth, guiding the sufferers away from the blood pools and towards a more favorable rebirth.¹⁴⁶ Both nuns and laywomen were able to speak openly with one another about matters salvation for women, and find hope and empowerment in these beliefs and in their faith.

In life, however, the practice of polygyny forced many women into marginalized and uncomfortable roles, with few options available to her which could help to alleviate the situation. Often, the best a woman could hope for was an education in manners which would help her “cultivate virtues such as obedience, chastity, gentleness, and calmness,” in order to remain respectable and pure even if her husband and his family gravely mistreat her.¹⁴⁷ One of the traditional accessories worn by a Japanese bride on her wedding day is the wrapped veil (*tsunokakushi*) which encircles the brow of her head. *Tsunokakushi* translates to ‘concealing one’s horns,’ reinforcing the notion that a woman, once married, must persevere to hide her jealous nature.¹⁴⁸

A number of stories depict women unwilling to submit to unfair treatment in polygynous relationships, and seem to speak directly to audiences of women experiencing similar frustrations. These tales, which often play out as revenge fantasies, culminate in women making the conscious decision to embrace their inner snake demon and manifest such characteristics externally.

¹⁴⁵ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 87.

¹⁴⁶ Ruch, *Engendering Faith*, 572-3. Stone, et al., *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, 181.

¹⁴⁷ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 103-4.

¹⁴⁸ Michishige Udaka, *The Secrets of Noh Masks*, (Tōkyō: Kodansha International, 2010), 50. Zvika Serper, “Shindō Kaneto's films *Kuroneko* and *Onibaba*: traditional and innovative manifestations of demonic embodiments,” (*Japan Forum* 17.2 (2005)), 246. Translated by the author.

The Seven Nuns, a book of medieval revelatory tales, describes a number of melodramatic events in the lives of seven women, eventually leading them to renounce their secular lives in order to become nuns.¹⁴⁹ The text presents several interesting dynamics; a life of renunciation is not always considered a positive option, especially if the woman in question is beautiful, married, and able to bear children. Additionally, the stories themselves, wrought with action, drama, and intrigue, are easily readable as mere entertainment. *The Seven Nuns* is intended as a series of didactic tales and almost certainly written by a male author; however, “[a] text may have didactic potential, but it cannot have didactic effect without a reader’s cooperation.”¹⁵⁰ In any case, the stories speak of female concerns from the points of view of seven female characters from different backgrounds.

Sex, love, lust, and loss plague the women, though it is the tale of the Fifth Nun which is of particular importance to the topic of this paper, providing a first-person account of the conscious transformation from human to snake demon. Before becoming a nun, the woman married a man of rank and dutifully pined for him when his work called him to the capital soon after their wedding.¹⁵¹ Upon his return, however, the man brings with him a concubine, younger and more beautiful than his new bride. Though the woman attempts to go about her wifely duties without jealousy, her husband begins to spend less and less time with her, and she “develop[s] a strange condition on [her] back.”¹⁵² Scales mark patches of her skin and horns begin to develop on her forehead.

¹⁴⁹ Margaret Helen Childs, *Rethinking Sorrow: Revelatory Tales of Late Medieval Japan*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1991) 91-140.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 114. This tale can be found in Childs, 114-119.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 115.

The woman recounts: “I had thought that this kind of thing only happened in old tales to other people, but now I was in more and more pain. I began to feel as though my body was on fire.”¹⁵³ An attendant offers to bring a monk to speak to her about the hells for women to which she will be damned due to her jealousy, but the woman dismisses salvation and thinks only of killing and consuming her rival. She vows, “I’ll spout flames . . . and drive that hateful woman away from my husband . . . After that my husband and I will live together in the Three Evil Realms and wreak havoc for the rest of eternity. I want only to become a great villain.”¹⁵⁴ The monk promises to teach her how to get in touch with her true power, advising the woman to meditate on the Lotus Sutra. After some time, she discovers that this practice has cured her of her concern over her rival and attachment to her husband, and the woman becomes a nun. The nuns for whom the woman told her story praise the monk for his assistance without judgment, though she was a demon, and recite the moral lessons her story is meant to illustrate.¹⁵⁵ The majority of the Fifth Nun’s story addresses the feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and helplessness experienced by the woman, and the depiction of her transformation is not meant to be metaphorical; simply by giving herself over to her feminine nature, she is able to channel enough power to “[shake] the mountains and valleys and [make] the earth tremble” at her will.¹⁵⁶ The story reinforces the belief that is only through careful and conscious repression that women adhere to societal expectations and remain human; it also serves as a warning to men that a wife or lover who does not adhere to the teachings of the Buddha can easily become “a powerful being, victimizing men in a reversal of expected power relations.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 117.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 118-9.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 117.

¹⁵⁷ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 91.

In this way, many tales which recount a human woman's transformation into a snake demon suggest that the process of metamorphosis is not always volitional. It is only when the woman becomes aware that the transformation is beginning that the climax of the story is set into motion; once the potential to become a snake demon is realized, the woman can be saved in accordance to Buddhist teachings (or in the case of the Fifth Nun, through the skillful means of a male monk), or choose to continue her transformation into a vengeful and demonic being.

One of the earliest tales which depict a woman turning herself into a demon concerns the demon *Hashihime*, whose name translates as “the lady of the bridge.”¹⁵⁸ A number of stories from various places describe similar tales of local women turning themselves into monsters out of jealousy and rage, so in this manner, *Hashihime* may be thought to represent a specific type of demonic creature which haunted certain bridges, rather like a *yōkai*. An early variant expands upon the idea of bridges representing a “boundary space” between different worlds, both figuratively and literally, as bridges were often used as arranged meeting-places for men and women.¹⁵⁹ Borrowing from tales of spurned women who jumped off of bridges in their frustration only to be enshrined or bound to the bridge in the afterlife, the legend of *Hashihime* more closely resembles the man-eating troll lurking under the bridge, waiting for unsuspecting men and women to pass by.¹⁶⁰

Like the Fifth Nun discussed above, a woman discovers that her husband has taken a lover and, overcome with jealousy, wishes to become a demon in order to do away with the offending girl.¹⁶¹ Other variants, such as the excellently-titled story “How a Woman Out of Deep Resentment Changed into a Demon in Her Present Existence,” depict a woman whose lover

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 90; Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 53.

¹⁵⁹ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 54.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

comes to visit her less and less, so she retreats into her room and broods until she is suddenly struck with the idea to turn herself into a demon and kill people.¹⁶² In the stories, the woman in question sets about becoming a demon by dressing up like one: she uses resin to figure her hair into hornlike bunches, puts on vermillion pants, crowns herself with an iron candelabra alight with flame, and paints her face to appear bright red and vicious.¹⁶³ She then travels to a nearby bridge and murders her husband, his mistress, and the girl's family, and, though she is still human, appears to switch genders depending upon her victims: "[t]o kill the men, she changes into a woman. To kill the woman, she changes into a man."¹⁶⁴ Eventually, she becomes fully demonic and therefore genderless, frightening and killing unsuspecting passersby at random. Whether this is a result of her newly-acquired demonic way of thinking or acceptance of the fact that her husband will never return to her is not explicitly stated in the stories. Perhaps the violence of demonic action may be considered the antithesis of the woman's inaction during her period of depression.

Hashihime is generally considered to be the female variant of an *oni*; her masculine counterpart, the fearsome *Shuten Dōji*, was popularly thought of as a bandit who called himself an *oni* and preyed on, or robbed, people going into the capital.¹⁶⁵ In "the Edo period, many intellectuals attempted to explain supernatural phenomena logically," thus transforming monstrous beasts back into human terms; if *Shuten Dōji* is a human in disguise, he is a male demon; *Hashihime* has a gender because she begins as a human, as opposed to changing into one.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Haruo Shirane, ed., *The Demon at Agi Bridge and Other Japanese Tales*, translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 121.

¹⁶³ Ibid.; Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 90; Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 54.

¹⁶⁴ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 54.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 54, 92.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 73.

The physical appearance of *Hashihime* and the Fifth Nun, though the latter possesses scales, may not initially appear particularly snakelike. However, they represent the conception of demons, particularly snake demons, within Japanese cultural beliefs. The horns, as detailed above, represent jealousy. As snakes themselves may also be thought of as jealousy in physical form, the horns they possess are evidence of their demonic nature. However, snake demons are conceived of in a number of ways with their own distinctive traits, representing the emotional impetus and extent of transformation from human woman to demonic snake.

Noh masks, intricately crafted wooden masks which represent the multitude of distinctive characters in Japan's Noh theater, are often worn to easily identify the performers. Plays which feature women becoming snake demons employ certain masks and costumes to communicate which type of snake demon appears before the audience.¹⁶⁷ The earliest stages of metamorphosis are *Hashihime* and *namanari*. *Hashihime* appears rather like other masks representing women, though her eyes are golden and wicked, her face is ruddier, and her mouth is in a grimace; she is still mostly human, or has only painted up her face.¹⁶⁸ Next is the *namanari*, like the Fifth Nun, which has sprouted horns and snakelike fangs which burst from her mouth.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps the best-known of Noh masks, and certainly of snake demons, is *Hannya*, ironically meaning 'Buddhist wisdom.'¹⁷⁰ Reptilian eyes flashing gold bulge from a face wrought with frustration and confusion; her hair represents her lack of sanity, a wild and matted mess, nothing at all like the neat and clean hairline female masks usually possess.¹⁷¹ The horns are golden and the longest of all masks, sprouting outward from her temples. Her mouth is a bright red grimace of pain and

¹⁶⁷ Udaka, *The Secrets of Noh Masks*, 34.

¹⁶⁸ Friedrich Perzynski, *Japanese Nō Masks: With 300 Illustrations of Authentic Historical Examples*, edited and translated by Stanley Appelbaum, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 139.

¹⁶⁹ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 56; 136.

¹⁷⁰ Perzynski, *Japanese Nō Masks*, 139. There is no apparent connection between *hannya*, the Japanese word for *prajna*, or Buddhist wisdom, and the *Hannya* mask and its related stories. Translated by the author.

¹⁷¹ Udaka, *The Secrets of Noh Masks*, 50.

bitter laughter which “seem[s] to rend the face from ear to ear.”¹⁷² Snakelike fangs dart out from the snarling, snapping lips, which Zvika Serper suggests resembles a *vagina dentata*.¹⁷³ It is only used in three Noh plays, but it represents the last instance of both the demon and humanity within the transforming woman.¹⁷⁴ The final stage, *shinja* (literally meaning ‘true snake’), is the most horrific: its face is crimson, hateful, and inhuman.¹⁷⁵ Veins slither across its forehead, its horns pop out at odd angles, and its “ears are not depicted . . . [it] no longer wishes to hear.”¹⁷⁶

The most famous tale of female to snake demon transformation, as well as the most famous instance of the *Hannya* mask in the Noh theater is known simply as *Dōjōji*. Though the story can be dated to the medieval period, the dances performed in both the Noh and Kabuki versions (the latter of which is known as *Musume Dōjōji*, “The Girl at Dōjōji Temple”), are considered to be among the most impressive and challenging dances in a theater’s repertoire, and were much beloved by Edo period audiences.¹⁷⁷

The story of *Dōjōji* depicts a young girl who falls in love with a beautiful young priest. In later versions, the pair are known as Kiyohime (Lady Kiyo) and Anchin, respectively.¹⁷⁸ A pair of monks, one old and wise, the other young and beautiful, are making their yearly pilgrimage to the Kumano shrines, and stop for the night at Kiyohime’s home. In some versions the decision to rest there is by chance; Kiyohime’s father may be an innkeeper, or Kiyohime herself is a widow who rents lodging to monks. In the former tales, she is captivated by the beauty of Anchin and follows after him when he leaves; in the latter she steals into his room in the night and begs him

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Serper, “*Kuroneko and Onibaba*,” 246.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Udaka, *The Secrets of Noh Masks*, 54. Translated by the author.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Donald Keene and Royall Tyler, eds., *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 238.

¹⁷⁸ For the sake of clarity, I shall refer to the pair by these names in all versions discussed.

to sleep with her.¹⁷⁹ Later versions implement the pair of monks as yearly visitors to Kiyohime's father's home. Likewise, Kiyohime is recast as a naïve young girl whose father jokingly tells her that she will marry Anchin one day when she is older; when she comes of age and meekly professes her love to Anchin, his amusement at her confession results in Kiyohime's humiliation. As such, the audience is meant to feel sympathy for Kiyohime, despite her later actions.¹⁸⁰

The next day, Anchin leaves Kiyohime, though he often promises to return to her once his pilgrimage is complete. In many versions, Anchin has spent the night with Kiyohime and promised to marry her. Later, when Kiyohime sees Anchin sneaking aboard a different boat, or is told by villagers that he has taken a different route home in order to avoid her, Kiyohime pursues Anchin to the riverbank across from the Dōjōji temple. As she watches Anchin sail away, she is overcome with hatred at his treatment of her, as well as her continued lust for him. It must be noted that women in Japan were not expected to be chaste. Quite to the contrary, a woman from a good family who remained a virgin was considered odd, and potentially possessed by an evil spirit.¹⁸¹ Traditionally women, especially those of nobility, took a number of lovers, and it was only if a man chose to stay until dawn to be discovered by the girl's parents that he meant to marry her.¹⁸² Kiyohime is promised marriage and then denied. Therefore, Kiyohime's transgression is not that she feels lust, jealousy, and resentment, but because she cannot manage them properly. No longer able to control her emotions, Kiyohime's body begins to change, becoming that of an enormous snake, with which she is able to swim across the river after Anchin.

¹⁷⁹ Lillywhite and Yamamoto, "Snakes, Serpents, and Humans," in *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, edited by Stephen Addiss, 148; Haruo Shirane, ed., *The Demon at Agi Bridge*, translated by Burton Watson, 47.

¹⁸⁰ Keene and Tyler, eds., *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*, 239.

¹⁸¹ Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, (London: Peregrine Books, 1969), 224-5.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 224-9; 227 n.29.

Anchin, who has taken refuge in the Dōjōji temple, is concealed by the other monks beneath the large bronze temple bell. Kiyohime, now completely demonic, shrieks with rage and cries tears of blood.¹⁸³ Using her serpentine body to coil around the bell, Kiyohime emits fire from her mouth and heats her skin to boil, immolating herself, melting the bell, and burning Anchin to death beneath her. In some versions, Kiyohime survives, only to slither back into the water of the river to drown herself. Often, the murder of Anchin culminates with Kiyohime's fiery death wrapped around both the bell and Anchin.¹⁸⁴

In many traditional Japanese stories, certain elements are amended or added to the conclusion in order to instill positive moral values. Specifically, the exorcism of the snake demon from the temple, and the judgment passed upon Kiyohime become emphasized to instruct the audience, or at the very least, to preserve the notion of societal decency.¹⁸⁵ While the horrific denouement may condemn women for giving into their jealous and lustful natures in some interpretations, others present Kiyohime's plight quite sympathetically. Moreover, these stories can also speak to men and instruct them in their relationships with women, warning them against mistreating their wives or breaking promises to their lovers.

One version of Kiyohime's tale concludes with an episode wherein Kiyohime and Anchin appear in a dream to a monk who witnessed the ordeal.¹⁸⁶ Anchin, reborn in a realm of torment, has taken the "vile and lowly form" of a snake as well, which he explains to the monk is the result of Kiyohime's womanly evil, as she has forced him to become her husband in the afterlife.¹⁸⁷ He begs the monk to make Buddhist offerings and copy the Lotus Sutra for them so

¹⁸³ Masahiro Hamashita, "Dōjōji no onna: henyō no bigaku," ["The Lady in the Story of Dojoji: The Aesthetics of Metamorphoses"], (*Women's Studies Forum* 12 (1998)), 129.

¹⁸⁴ For further discussion on the variations and their sources, see Hamashita, 129-35.

¹⁸⁵ Hamashita, "Dōjōji no onna," 131-2; 136-7.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 131-2.

¹⁸⁷ Haruo Shirane, ed., *The Demon at Agi Bridge*, 49-50.

that they may escape the punishment Kiyohime has doomed them to. After the monk makes the necessary arrangements, he has another dream, where Anchin and Kiyohime have “cast off their serpent bodies.”¹⁸⁸ Anchin thanks the monk for his goodness and devotion. Kiyohime is able to be reborn in the world of desire, while Anchin disappears into the upper heaven in preparation for enlightenment. The story concludes with the dire warning, “we know from examples such as this how fearful are the evil impulses in a woman’s heart. Therefore, the Buddha sternly warned us to keep women at a distance. Understand this and avoid them.”¹⁸⁹ However, such abrupt and didactic conclusions to stories, reminiscent of the structure of *setsuwa*, allow for the individual to interpret the lesson as he or she sees fit. Indeed, this version of the tale may have been targeted at a monastic audience. The ending suggests that, though Kiyohime is still at fault for being a woman, a transgression was also committed by Anchin for disobeying the teachings of the Buddha to avoid women. Anchin has become distanced from the correct path as a monk, and it is through the purity of another monk that he is able to achieve salvation.

Theatrical versions of *Dōjōji* expand upon the story not only to accentuate the performance, but to add further Buddhist elements and morals, often in an attempt to offset the sexual and horrific overtones of the plot. In both the Noh and Kabuki versions, the play begins with the dedication of a new temple bell, which hangs high above the stage. The story of Kiyohime and Anchin is related, which serves to explain why a new bell has been cast, as well as why no women are allowed on the temple premises.¹⁹⁰ A beautiful young dancing girl approaches the temple and asks to be allowed to perform in honor of the new bell. The girl is

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Keene and Tyler, eds., *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*, 242; Arendie Herwig and Hank Herwig, *Heroes of the Kabuki Stage: An Introduction to Kabuki with Retellings of Famous Plays, Illustrated by Woodblock Prints*, (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2004), 212.

allowed to enter the temple grounds in order to display her celebratory dance, as a young temple servant muses, “A dancer? That’s right, I suppose she doesn’t count as an ordinary woman.”¹⁹¹

The dancer in the Noh version performs her dance, singing a song about her love and desire for the bell. This leads to the climax of the play, wherein the dancer jumps at the bell and it falls on her, a dangerous and stunning feat as it is performed by an actor wearing a Noh mask, whose vision is severely limited.¹⁹² The servants run to the Abbot to tell him of the accident. The monk senses the vengeful ghost of Kiyohime, and instructs the acolytes to begin chanting prayers to exorcize the demon. As the Abbot suspected, when the bell is lifted, the actor has transformed from a beautiful dancing girl to a ferocious snake demon. Now wearing a *Hannya* mask with wild red hair attached, the Abbot compels the demon to disappear as the actor walks the length of the Noh stage, thoroughly frightening the audience before retreating behind the curtain.¹⁹³

The Kabuki version, known as *Musume Dōjōji*, slightly alters the story. As in the Noh theater, all parts in Kabuki are portrayed by men, however, masks are not worn. Because of this, actors who specialized in female parts (*onnagata*), were widely renowned for their beauty and mastery of femininity. Because *onnagata* were able to be attractive, graceful, feminine, and male all at the same time, they were often considered to be superior to real women not only through their femininity and grace, but because they did not have female bodies or women’s status.¹⁹⁴ Perhaps as a result, Kabuki plays are often more raucous, flashy, and sexual than their Noh

¹⁹¹ Keene and Tyler, eds., *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*, 244.

¹⁹² Ibid., 239.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 250-1.

¹⁹⁴ Maki Isaka, “Box-Lunch Etiquette: Conduct Guides and Kabuki Onnagata.” in *Manners and Mischief: Gender, Power, and Etiquette in Japan*, edited by Jan Bardsley and Laura Miller, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) 49-50.

counterparts. In any case, Kabuki plays were considered somewhat lower in artistry yet more appealing to the common masses; they were much preferred by Edo period audiences.¹⁹⁵

The performance itself, at least in plot, is essentially similar to the Noh version, yet the series of dances performed by the actor portraying Kiyohime create a strikingly different atmosphere. A number of costume changes into brightly-colored clothing and distinctive, challenging performances showcase the skills of the actor. The songs reference a multitude of popular customs, locations, and people of the Edo period that have been lost to time, the dances creating ever-increasing tension and fervor.¹⁹⁶ Near the middle of the dances, the actor performs the ‘lamentation’ piece, a slow, writhing dance which signifies passion and lust. The snakelike movements are accompanied by the actor, as the dancer holding “a white silk towel between her lips in a very suggestive manner. During some performances, the dancer and the priests distribute cotton replicas with the actor’s crest to the audience.”¹⁹⁷ There are nine dances which the actor performs, meant to signify “the number of times a [snake demon] sheds its skin.”¹⁹⁸ Finally, the actor climbs atop the bell and reveals the final garment: a pure white *kimono* with a snakeskin pattern, hair hanging loose from its traditional style. The actor poses atop the bell until it is removed from the stage, possibly after an exorcist has performed his part before it.¹⁹⁹

The snake demon of *Dōjōji* represents a number of characteristics relating to feminine lust and the female body. Unlike the snakes discussed in previous chapters, the epitome of a woman’s transformation into a demon is associated, not with water, but with the masculine element of fire. Becoming a demon, taking on masculine traits, or at least lessening one’s

¹⁹⁵ Herwig and Herwig, *Heroes of the Kabuki Stage*, 215.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 215, n2.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 212.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 214, n1.

association with the female gender, imbues the woman with profound supernatural power and strength, which she is able to use to exact her revenge on men. However, I contend that the significance of the snake does not carry the Freudian connotations expressed by several scholars on the subject; certainly, men would fear being chased by an enormous phallic symbol, yet the traditional visualization of snake demons in Japan are not particularly snakelike; they possess horns and human-esque bodies.

As evidenced above, the form of a snake itself may still be seen as remarkably feminine in Edo period society. Representing jealousy, a feeling considered unique to women, snakes and snake demons were attributed to the evils of femininity in Buddhism. However, Edo period audiences were not limited to the prescribed didactic interpretations of these tales. As entertainment, the ability to change one's form offered an image of power and control to women who often had little of either in their relationships. The snake demon's body, as a woman's body, may also serve as a literal representation of another type of womanly power. The snakelike dance of the *onnagata* in *Musume Dōjōji* represents female body movement. Indeed, Carmen Blacker suggests that, when stripped of its Buddhist context, the wild hair and grimacing features of the *Hannya* mask may also be thought to resemble the face of a woman "in the throes of a divine *furor*."²⁰⁰ Perhaps it may be conceived simpler still, as a means for women to understand and take control of their own bodies.

²⁰⁰ Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow*, 126.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In 1868, the Edo period came to an end. The beginning of the Meiji period, also called the Meiji Restoration, saw power transferred, or ‘restored,’ to the Emperor, previously a figurehead. Japan began to industrialize at a rapid pace, spurred on by newly open borders, which encouraged Westernization and modernization. The need to consolidate the country and the Japanese identity saw a number of changes enacted in order to limit things which were considered distasteful in the eyes of the West, such as practices regarded as ‘superstitions’ and open female sexuality.

New incentives for women consisted mainly of the Confucian notion of “good wife, wise mother,” providing education for women akin to that afforded in the West, while also relegating them “to the domestic sphere, reducing them to supportive roles for the men in their lives.”²⁰¹ As Barbara R. Ambros asserts, the conception of the Edo period as a low point for women relies on an incomplete understanding of Edo society and ignores the reality of life for many women “across regions and class[es],” who “enjoyed much greater freedoms in regard to gender relations.”²⁰² This also serves to explain the need for a number of changes which had to be made in the following Meiji period in order to take away some of these freedoms which proved to be unseemly in the eyes of foreign visitors to Japan.

Among those practices regarded as being superstitious, active roles for women within the religious sphere were greatly amended. Early accounts of life in Japan by Western writers reported (often fabricated) on the disturbing violent and sexual practices of women in Japan,

²⁰¹ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 115-6.

²⁰² Ibid., 114.

specifically those calling themselves ‘nuns’ – they were presented as beggars, prostitutes, and “not too modest to expose their breasts to a generous traveler on the road.”²⁰³ Female shamans and priestesses, especially those said to have the ability to become possessed or perform exorcisms, were actively legislated against for spreading superstitions which led to an unenlightened populace; in reality, the sway held by such women over local villages threatened the homogenized ideology the government was attempting to create.²⁰⁴

Women prone to possession – predominantly by foxes, but also by snakes, *kami*, ghosts, or other animals, depending upon the region – were reevaluated in accordance with newly imported ideas of Western psychology. As the twentieth century began, female possession began to be considered a mental illness, the diagnosis hysteria. Women who exhibited symptoms of possession were considered incurable and offered none of the state-of-the-art psychiatric treatment; they were instead “shut away in . . . asylums, essentially privately run prisons for deviants and undesirables, to protect the health of the nation.”²⁰⁵

Writers and scholars were employed to travel Japan and document the fallacies of superstitious beliefs. *Yōkai*, *yūrei*, ghosts, demons, and other mainstays of Edo period folk and popular lore were dismissed as relics of the past, and those who believed in them as exceedingly rural and ignorant. Ironically, the extensive work on these subjects by such skeptics as Inoue Enryō, who hoped to definitively stamp out rural superstitions by pointing out their numerous inaccuracies, actually resulted in the careful cataloguing and preservation of these legends, rather than allowing them to be lost to modernization.²⁰⁶ Despite the government’s position on the subject, compendia of newspapers from the Meiji period even through the Taishō (1912-26)

²⁰³ Ruch, ed. *Engendering Faith*, 541-5.

²⁰⁴ Figal, *Civilization and Monsters*, 199-200.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-1.

detail weekly columns depicting continued encounters with *yōkai*, ghosts, and the like. The strange actions of snakes or other shape-shifting creatures are also reported on, with accompanying drawings.²⁰⁷

As for the presence of shape-shifting snake women in popular entertainment, though the mass publication of plays, art, and stories of the Edo period allowed for their continued exposure to Japanese audiences, they quickly grew out of style. One author recounts the changing attitudes towards the lurid entertainment of the time, in a review for a performance of the story of Oiwa: “Up to seventy or eighty years ago the amorous play of men and women was suggested by an exchange of glances; if the man ever took the woman’s hand, she would cover her face with her sleeve in embarrassment . . . Nowadays sexual intercourse is plainly shown on the stage, and women in the audience watch on, unblushing, taking it in their stride. It is most immoral.”²⁰⁸ This is not to say that popular entertainment became sanitized with the advent of the Meiji ideology; rather, Freudian concepts were allowed to come into their own, and the fearsome demon women of Edo entertainments were considered too old-fashioned.

The snake women of the Edo period came to be replaced by Poison Women in the Meiji. Rather than fanciful tales of supernatural encounters, true-crime stories of real women who murdered their husbands and lovers were presented in graphic detail. Fictionalized novelizations of the women’s crimes were published in books bound as were the *yōkai* comics and *kaidan* tales before them.²⁰⁹ One of the earliest of the so-called Poison Women, Takahashi Oden, was referred to as ‘Demon Takahashi Oden,’ the book of her life of crime, the brutal murder of a man, and her

²⁰⁷ See Kōichi Yumoto, ed., *Meiji-ki kaidan yōkai kiji shiryō shūsei*. [A Collection of Newspaper Articles from the Meiji Period Concerning Ghosts and Goblins], (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 2009).

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 99.

²⁰⁹ Christine L. Marran, *Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japanese Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 32.

subsequent execution and autopsy are related in a novel expressly fashioned to appeal to female readers.²¹⁰ Explicit accounts of the murderess's sexual exploits, as well as the circumstances of the crime and pseudo-scientific interpretations of her autopsy were meant to vicariously stimulate the reader while subconsciously passing moral judgments against any woman who would think of acting on her passions, as they lead to violence and death.²¹¹

If tales of demonic real-life Poison Women took the place of shape-shifting snake women, it is not unreasonable to think that the women of the Edo period enjoyed consuming popular ghost stories, plays, and other such beliefs regarding the supernatural power of women as vicarious entertainment. Indeed, one introduction to a Meiji period pulp novel states that these Poison Women represent a reimagining of sexy and mysterious supernatural women from Japan's past.²¹²

Unlike the vengeful ghosts of the previous era, women transforming themselves into snakes or murdering their lovers are able to obtain power within their own bodies, as well as within their own lifetimes. It is more difficult to believe that the teachings of Buddhist, Confucian, and medieval morality plays were accepted by women at face-value, contented to suffer in submissive silence. The ways in which audiences understood and interpreted these tales may be considered similarly to the presentation of women's pictures of American Hollywood's Golden Age. Certain cues known to the viewer serve as allegories, and hastily written endings which restore balance in accordance to the morality of the period demanded that those who commit transgressions must be punished in the end, yet could also be ignored by audiences in favor of a more desirable outcome; actions or phrases meant to signify something which was not

²¹⁰ Ibid., 2; 36.

²¹¹ Ibid., 36-7.

²¹² Ibid., 174.

necessarily considered decent to present on a public stage may have acted as stand-ins, lost to us in the modern age.²¹³

Sex, love, jealousy, and revenge are universal. The figure of Lady Macbeth from Shakespeare's famous play exhibits such emotions, driving herself to madness when she perceives her skin has been stained by blood. Elizabethan views on women, gender, physiology, and witchcraft are discussed within the narrative, culminating "[w]hen Lady Macbeth commands the spirits of darkness to 'unsex' her."²¹⁴ *Macbeth*, and, indeed, of many Shakespeare's plays which depict strong, complicated, supernatural, well-criticized women, are contemporaneous to the majority of works discussed within this paper. Much feminist scholarship and discussion is offered to humanize and empower characters from the traditional theater of the West, yet Kiyohime, who is the protagonist of her own story, is not commonly seen in the same way, if she is seen at all. I contend that Kiyohime and her kin must be called to the world stage.

The rich heritage of supernatural creatures and mysterious encounters are still dwelling in Japan: female snake demons are now upheld as a prime example of traditional entertainment.²¹⁵ As such, the inherent power within women, perhaps still as revolutionary a concept today as it was in Edo Japan, allows for an entirely new reading of how women were perceived, and how they may perceive themselves. Ideas of gender, power, and the female body can be transformed into something fantastic just as figuratively as they are literally. Conceptions of women in traditional Japanese society as submissive, helpless, and powerless may be found in folklore,

²¹³ Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) 19-23.

²¹⁴ Jenijoy La Belle, "'A Strange Infirmary': Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea," (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980), in *William Shakespeare's Macbeth: A Sourcebook*, edited by Alexander Legatt, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 71-2.

²¹⁵ Jan Bardsley and Laura Miller, eds., *Bad Girls of Japan*. (Gordonville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 28.

fairy tales, and fantasy, yet it does not reflect the reality of sex, gender, and power in Edo Japan;
it is a skin which must be shed.

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