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Japanese Demon Lore

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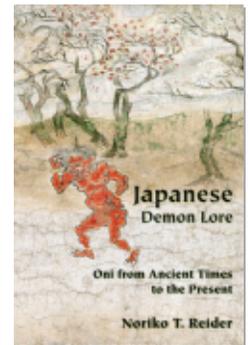
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Women Spurned, Revenge of Oni Women

Gender and Space

THE MEDIEVAL TIME PRODUCED A GREAT MALE ONI called Shuten Dōji as we saw in chapter two. Indeed, the medieval period also created an awesome female oni who is as destructive as Shuten Dōji. Named Uji no hashihime (Woman at Uji Bridge) as described in the “Tsurugi no maki” (Swords Chapter) of *Heike monogatari* (Tale of the Heike), this fierce female oni goes on a killing spree. Spurned by her lover, she is turned by her angst and jealousy into an oni while she is still alive, and takes the lives of her husband, his mistress, and many others. The Uji no hashihime story illustrates the Japanese version of “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” A famous Noh play titled *Kanawa* (Iron Tripod), also a product of the medieval time, is based upon this Uji no hashihime episode, though the heroine of *Kanawa* gives much pathos to the wild image of a jealous woman. I postulate that Uji no hashihime, which predates the Shuten Dōji legend, is a possible literary source for the Shuten Dōji texts. It is intriguing to conjecture that the texts of Shuten Dōji may be related to or even derived from the Uji no hashihime story, underscoring the gender-crossing powers of an oni. While examining the women who turned into oni because of their strong desire for revenge, this chapter also studies the different sociopolitical spaces that male and female oni occupy in the minds of Japanese.

Uji no hashihime (Woman at Uji Bridge)

The Stories of Uji no hashihime

The legend of Uji no hashihime, also mentioned in the *Genji monogatari* (*Tale of Genji*, ca. 1010), existed long before stories of Shuten Dōji emerge. According to a legend known in Heian poetics, a wife suffering from morning

sickness asked her husband to get seaweed for her, so the husband went to the sea palace in search of seaweed. At the palace, however, a sea goddess became enamoured of him and he became the sea goddess's husband. His human wife, who had been waiting for his return in vain, felt bitter and threw herself into the Uji River. After her death, the abandoned wife was enshrined at the foot of the Uji Bridge. In folkloric studies, a bridge represents a boundary space where frequently a pair of male and female *dōsojin* (traveler's guardian deities) is enshrined. In the case of hashihime (woman of a bridge), her grudge is deeper because she was enshrined alone without a partner (Tanaka, *Ayakashi kō* 38). The *Heike monogatari* version of Uji no hashihime, the topic of this chapter, is similar in that the woman is abandoned by her husband for another woman and the abandoned woman jumps into Uji River. But instead of killing herself, the woman in the *Heike monogatari* takes revenge aggressively.

The Uji no hashihime episode in the "Swords Chapter" of *Heike monogatari* goes as follows: during the generation of Raikō, people mysteriously began to disappear, and through divination it was discovered that in the reign of Emperor Saga (reign. 809–823) a certain noble woman, overcome by jealousy, goes to the Kibune Shrine. There, she prays for the Kibune deity to change her into an oni while she is still alive so that she can kill the woman with whom her husband has fallen in love. The deity answers her prayer and instructs her to change her appearance and to bathe for twenty-one days in the rapids of the Uji River. Pleased by the oracle, the woman changes her appearance as instructed: she divides her hair into five bunches and fashions them into five horns. She applies vermilion to her face and body, puts an iron tripod (*kanawa*) on her head and carries three torches. Late at night, as she runs out on the Yamato Avenue toward the south, those who see her are so terrified that they swoon and die. Thus she becomes an oni and is also known as Uji no hashihime. As an oni, she seizes the relatives of the woman who is the source of her jealousy, and of the man who rebuffs her, both men and women high and low. To kill the men, she changes into a woman. To kill the women, she changes into a man. As she murders many people, she becomes increasingly terrifying and consequently, after the hours of Monkey (3 p.m. to 5 p.m.) the people of the capital cease to visit each other; they firmly close and bar their doors and stay in their houses.¹

1 The story of "Uji no hashihime" is found in Asahara, Haruta, and Matsuo 517–19. For the texts of "Swords Chapter," see note 35 of chapter one. A similar story to "Uji no hashihime" appears in *Kankyo no tomo* (Friend of an Idle Life, 1212). A jealous woman becomes an oni, eating her lover who abandoned her, and other innocent people. The

In contrast to the passive Uji no hashihime of the Heian poetics who puts an end to her own life and is later enshrined, the *Heike monogatari*'s Uji no hashihime belligerently kills not only the people involved with her, but innocent people as well. Interestingly, she takes the lives of people in and around the capital, which brings us back to the story of Shuten Dōji.

Uji no hashihime vs. Shuten Dōji

Shuten Dōji's killers, Minamoto no Raikō and his *shitennō* have long been associated with stories about conquering supernatural creatures. In addition to Shuten Dōji, they also subjugate *tsuchigumo* (earth spiders), which are, as we shall see in detail in chapter eight, considered a variant of oni. Watanabe no Tsuna (953–1025), a leader of Raikō's *shitennō*, also features prominently in oni stories. As discussed in chapter one, Tsuna cuts off an oni's arm at Modoribashi Bridge in the Heian capital. Their stories are widely known through Noh, Kabuki, *otogi zōshi*, and *kusa zōshi*. With the exception of Shuten Dōji, it is commonly known that a major source for these stories is the section describing the Raikō's generation in "Swords Chapter" of *Heike monogatari*. Shuten Dōji, who is associated with Abe no Seimei, Raikō and his *shitennō*, does not appear in "Swords Chapter." Indeed, the main source of Shuten Dōji is unknown. Or is it? Close examination of various texts shows some remarkable similarities between the narratives of Shuten Dōji and the "Swords Chapter"—specifically the opening section of Shuten Dōji and that of an Uji no hashihime episode of the "Swords Chapter." In chapter two, we saw a variety of possible origins for Shuten Dōji and the Shuten Dōji legend. Could Uji no hashihime, an abandoned woman who eats people in the capital, be one of the many sources of *Shuten Dōji*? Shuten Dōji could be a twin brother of Uji no hashihime, or Uji no hashihime herself at the beginning.

This conjecture is important in that oni are not only adept transformers but also gender-switchers as well. Uji no hashihime's episode is immediately followed by the Tsuna story in "Swords Chapter." This allegedly happens during the reign of Emperor Saga (reign 809–823) as a related incident of people's disappearance at the time of Minamoto no Raikō (948–1021). One logical interpretation of these two narratives is that the disappearance of people at Raikō's time is caused by the lingering Uji no hashihime's

woman uses candy to fashion her hair into five horns. She also wears red trousers and runs away at night. For the text of this episode, see Taira et al. 422.

evil spirit, who has since lingered on earth. This means that the oni who attacked Tsuna was female, although Tsuna's story does not mention oni's gender. The oni's arm Tsuna cut off, which he thought was as white as snow, turns out to be ebony-colored, packed with earth-like white hair. It is a masculine arm. Interestingly, in the Noh play, "Rashōmon," whose foundation is the Tsuna's episode in "Swords Chapter" of *Heike monogatari*, the oni appears as a male. This indicates that an oni can shed its gender, becoming genderless. Of course, oni can also be androgynous. What this speculation highlights is the very issue of oni and gender identity to wit that as spiritual beings that switch readily between male and female, oni have no essential gender and any attempt to assign one is a metaphysical venture at best. The extent to which a particular oni is characterized as masculine or feminine is then largely contextual and says more perhaps about cultural influences on a given narrative than anything particularly inherent in the oni.

Let us look at the opening passages of the Uji no hashihime episode and the texts of Shuten Dōji. They are remarkably similar, using comparable language. First, both episodes begin with the disappearance of people. In both cases, numerous people *strangely* begin to disappear, using the same word, *fushigi* (strange). The backdrop of the time during which the incidents occur is a close match: in the generation of Minamoto no Raikō (948–1021) for *Heike monogatari*; and during the reign of Emperor Ichijō (reign 980–1011) for Shuten Dōji. Second, in both stories, the disappearances during Emperor Ichijō's time are followed by the retrospective description of people vanishing during Emperor Saga's reign (r. 809–823). Among the texts of Shuten Dōji, *Ōeyama Ekotoba* does not have this retrospective section, but by Shuten Dōji's own confession, he was active at the time of Priest Dengyō (d. 822), i.e., during Emperor Saga's reign. In both stories, after having people deliberate on the situation it is discovered that the culprit is an oni—one is Uji no hashihime and the other, Shuten Dōji. Third, Uji no hashihime and Shuten Dōji share an association with the color red and an oni-like appearance. Uji no hashihime divided her hair into five bunches and then put turpentine on them to fashion them into five horns. Then she applied vermilion to her face and cinnabar to her body. She is a horrific five-horned, red oni. Likewise, Shuten Dōji has five horns on his head and a red body.

It is quite possible that these remarkable similarities in setting and language are just a coincidence, or the authors of *Shuten Dōji* refer to the Uji no hashihime episode, adding more elements to Shuten Dōji's passages to give

rhetorical flourishes. Yet, if Shuten Dōji has some relationship to the Uji no hashihime's narrative described in "Swords Chapter," it then suggests that an oni's gender is indeed a matter in flux. As mentioned earlier, the episode of Uji no hashihime is immediately followed by the story of Modoribashi Bridge where Tsuna cuts off an oni's arm, indicating that the masculine oni was in fact the lingering evil spirit of Uji no hashihime. As if to confuse the matter more, this "female" oni looking like a male appears in the narrative of Shuten Dōji in the Shibukawa version as one of Shuten Dōji's right-hand "men," Ibaraki Dōji. In the Noh play, "Rashōmon," which is based upon the Tsuna's episode, the oni is a male. While oni can change their gender as they wish, the authors/narrators also contribute to cross gendering to suit their stories, and this is perhaps more telling than anything else. In chapter one, I mentioned that the label oni was applied to the supernatural possession of ordinary household objects brought on by age. Named *tsukumogami*, the abandoned old household objects bear grudges against people.² Household objects do not have gender in Japanese. If a gender-less object can become an oni after it ages, it stands to reason that an oni can become gender-less after it ages as well.

Sociopolitical Space for Gendered Oni

What is interesting about the gender switching of oni is the different space and scope that each oni as male or female occupies. Put simply, Shuten Dōji, a masculine oni, occupies public space whereas Uji no hashihime of *Heike monogatari*, a female oni, resides in private and personal space. Shuten Dōji is marginalized by hegemonic authority when he is deprived of his living space. His resentment is both public and political; it is aimed at the court and the Japanese people at large. He does not choose his targets at random, he kidnaps the Kyoto maidens—daughters of the ruling class—albeit for his personal pleasure as well as for his sustenance. From this the arch demon derives his power in the world and because of this the emperor orders the courageous warriors to eliminate him. The head of Shuten Dōji—a symbol of his formidable opposition to the central authority—is stored in the regent treasure house as a status symbol, and importantly, the head becomes a source of nourishing power for the Heian capital. In contrast, a female oni, the Uji no hashihime described in the *Heike monogatari*, is marginalized by

2 For a discussion of *tsukumogami*, see Rambelli 211–258; Reider "Animating Objects"; Lillehoj 7–34; Tanaka *Hyakki yakō no mieru toshi*; Komatsu Kazuhiko *Hyōrei shinkō ron*, 326–342.

her husband, a private person. Her jealousy targets individuals—specifically her husband and the mistress to whom her husband's love shifts. Her unleashed fury that results in the killing of numerous innocent people in the capital and has everyone else locking their doors and hiding, is less a public act than a warning against the danger of women entering the public sphere. Also, in spite of her vicious attacks, no public imperial command for her subjugation is issued, as if to emphasize the private origins of her acts.³ While there it may be true that the Uji no hashihime of Heian poetics is enshrined at the foot of Uji Bridge, this is not so much a public act, as an act of concealment. In any case, it is no match for the treatment of Shuten Dōji whose head becomes a public treasure stored in the prestigious treasure house of Uji. Uji no hashihime occupies private space without political involvement.

Noh *Kanawa*: Lingering Affection of a Spurned Woman

The point of spurned women occupying private space becomes more acute in the story of the Noh play entitled *Kanawa* (attributed to Zeami Motokiyo [1363–1443]), which uses the episode of Uji no hashihime in *Heike monogatari* for its base. Noh's *Kanawa* consists of two acts: with no mention of disappearing people, the first act starts with a woman's nightly visit to the Kibune Shrine. She prays for the Kibune deity to change her into an oni while she is still alive so that she can kill her former husband who abandoned her for a new wife. While the woman professes to still love her husband, she is consumed by grief and jealousy. The deity answers her prayer, and through a shrine attendant, instructs her to change her appearance and fill her heart with anger. She is instructed to apply vermilion to her face and wear red clothing, put an iron tripod on her head and carry three torches. In the second act, her ex-husband visits Abe no Seimei's residence to have his bad dream divined. According to Seimei's oneiromancy, his ex-wife is

3 Later in *Kanawa* of the *otogi zōshi* version (the late 16th to early 17th century), an imperial decree to subjugate the female oni is issued almost at the end of the story like an afterthought. Receiving the decree, instead of going out himself, Raikō dispatches his men, Watanabe no Tsuna and Sakata no Kintoki, with his treasured swords. In the face of Raikō's swords, the oni surrenders, promises to protect Japan, and disappears into the water. The same oni appears in a woman's dream later and begs to have a shrine built for her. *Otogi zōshi's Kanawa* is an amalgamation of Noh *Kanawa*, *Taiheiki* and the *Rashōmon* episode of the "Swords Chapter." The complex plot grafts several plots one after another. In this later story, the shrine built for the oni plays a part in the auspicious ending rather than the oni-woman's power. For the text of *Kanawa* of the *otogi zōshi* version, see Yokoyama and Matsumoto, 3: 451–62.

cursing him and he is going to die that night. In response to the man's pleas, Seimei performs a ritual to save his life. Seimei makes two life-size dolls representing the man and his new wife, in an attempt to transfer his former wife's curse to the effigies. When the oni-woman appears in the room to kill her husband, various deities summoned by Seimei prevent her from exacting her revenge. After she fails and proclaims that she will wait for her revenge, she disappears.⁴

It is poignant that, although through divine help the Noh protagonist successfully becomes an oni and plots to kill her husband for abandoning her, she still cannot extinguish her feelings for him. While she is determined to destroy him, she cries, "Why did you abandon me?" She is a pathetic and empathetic figure with uncontrollable passion. Indeed, the very unreasonableness of her action comes to define her agency within the play. Some audiences may find solace or inspiration in the story of an abandoned woman who takes action rather than endure her suffering; some, however, may even prefer Uji no hashihime for her non-discriminatory, all-out killing sprees.

Unlike Uji no hashihime, the woman in the play fails to kill her husband because of the intervention of Abe no Seimei. It should be noted that in the story of Shuten Dōji, Abe no Seimei was at his public residence protecting the Heian capital against Shuten Dōji, whereas in the play, Seimei is at his private residence protecting one man who has had a bad dream because of the abandoned woman's curse. Symbolically, as if to underscore the societally mitigated power of the woman in *Kanawa*, the scene in which she attacks her husband occurs in the private confines of a bedchamber. Thus it is political disappointment, resentment, and rage against a public entity that drives the plot in stories about male oni, while jealousy, shame and grudges involving love affairs that serve as the driving force in stories about female oni. It may be reasonable to speculate then that the reason the female oni of Uji no hashihime becomes the male oni of Shuten Dōji is exactly to maintain this divide between public male role and private female role as the tale evolved over time from the personal to the political.

Uji no hashihime is born of the spite she has towards the man who abandoned her; and in that sense, she is considered a spiritual descendant of Yomotsu-shikome discussed in chapter one. These stories issue warnings to men in the then-polygamous Japanese society not to cheat on their wives.

4 For the Japanese text of *Kanawa*, see Sanari, 1: 703–714. For an English translation, see Kato.

Conversely, that living women can turn irreversibly into hideous oni stands as an imperative for women to rein in their unruly emotions and passively accept the *status quo*. In this sense, a female oni may seem little different from evil spirits (*mononoke*) appearing in such classical Japanese literature as *Genji monogatari*. Notably in *Genji monogatari*, the spirit of Rokujō Lady leaves her living body because of her anger, jealousy and/or stress, and attacks and kills her rival mistresses—the cause of her angst. Haruo Shirane writes that “*mononoke* become a dramatic means of expressing a woman’s repressed or unconscious emotions, particularly [in expressing] the jealousy and resentment caused by polygamy” (114). A noteworthy difference between Rokujō Lady and Uji no hashihime is, however, that the former is morbidly concerned about her decorum and her spiritual transgressions are quite unintentional. Uji no hashihime is, on the other hand, extremely conscious of her action. She prays to the Kibune deity with great intensity to become an oni; when she is told to change appearance and run down the main avenue of the capital as an oni, she carries the order out without hesitation. Decorum is clearly not her concern. Indeed, when a female becomes an oni, stereotypical feminine decorum goes out the window. Uji no hashihime goes on an all-out killing spree in public space, and yet, as I have shown, her actions remain within the private realm of a marital relationship as presented in the Noh play, *Kanawa*. Whereas the irrational comes to define the interactions of female oni in *Kanawa* and Uji no hashihime, the interplay between male protagonists and male oni in *Shuten Dōji* is one of political intrigue. On certain levels, in *Shuten Dōji* it is simply a matter of who deceives and kills whom first and, at least as far as the struggle for political power is concerned, there is little question about the rationality of the struggle itself.