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Historicizing Japan's Object Femininity

Reading Women's Bodies in *Nihon ryōiki*

Throughout Japan's long history the female body has occupied an axiomatic role in the literary transmission and subversion of normative culture values, frequently being ambivalently figured as an object of simultaneous desire and disgust. Although commonly deployed Western theoretical modes offer a number of potentially fruitful avenues of inquiry into the problem of the feminine within the Japanese cultural imagination, in attempting to theorize these representational trends it is crucial also to consider the manner in which women have been envisioned historically within Japan. This article examines constructions of the female body within Japan's earliest *setsuwa* collection, *Nihon ryōiki*, whose compilation marks a pivotal moment in the proliferation of Buddhist doctrine within Japan. In doing so, it seeks to locate intersections between modern theoretical discourses on the object feminine and the ambivalent treatment of women's bodies within early Japanese literature and culture.

KEYWORDS: *Nihon ryōiki*—*setsuwa*—Kyōkai—Buddhism—women—bodies

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IN RECENT decades popular Japanese literature has become increasingly saturated with images of monstrous femininity as a number of writers have depicted women's bodies in various states of horrifying, and often fascinating, grotesquerie. In horror, crime, and science fiction, women are often marked by physical deformity or disfigurement; some are mutilated or dismembered, and still others are presented as undergoing metamorphosis or possessing cyborgic qualities. In less fantastical prose, as well as in poetry, such natural processes as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation have in numerous instances been figured not as phenomenon akin to life, but rather as ones linked to undesirability and death. Playing upon long-standing representational practices whereby the feminine is envisioned as occupying predominately marginal social spaces (and perhaps most commonly the domestic sphere), such conceptualizations of the female body frequently engage in a kind of double-othering of the feminine—a tactic that in its most insipid forms can serve to legitimize the subjugation of women, and which in its most intellectually engaging ones poses a major threat to the patriarchal status quo. Moreover, many of the most compelling literary representations of the feminine in its least desirable iterations are offered by women writers themselves in efforts not only to undermine conventional perceptions of femininity, but also to underscore the possibilities of one's negotiation, reconceptualization, and destruction of a historically constructed feminine space. These phenomena can be linked to a number of developments within Japan's post-wwii literary schema—among them an expanding female readership that demands the presence of subversive women in fiction, as well as a growing number of writers, male and female, popular and literary, who are eager to problematize conventional notions of femininity—and specifically Japan's long-standing domestic logic—via the literary medium.

In the work of French philosopher Julia Kristeva, the concept of abjection is described as a traumatic confrontation with an object that, though somehow familiar to the viewing subject, is envisioned as defiled due to its existence outside of the symbolic order—that is, the realm of knowledge in which the viewing subject's self-conceptualization is embedded. "There looms within abjection," she writes,

one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened,

it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful... But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (KRISTEVA 1982, 1)

Frequently deployed in discussions of hegemonic attitudes toward and treatments of marginalized social groups such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, the disabled, the aged, and the economically underprivileged, abjection provides a useful framework for consideration of the broader cultural implications of such representations of the feminine as those described above; however, the concept is in and of itself insufficient to explain the particular manner in which discourses concerning the problem of the feminine emerged and have developed historically in Japan. As such, a discussion of the abject as it pertains to contemporary literary constructs of womanhood first necessitates an examination of the manner in which the feminine—both ideal and monstrous—has been envisioned historically in the Japanese cultural imagination.

A number of Japan's earliest extant texts offer insight into classical Japanese constructions of the feminine: the origin myths included in the eighth century chronicle *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of ancient matters), for example, include an array of female figures both exemplary and aberrant, and the 759 poetry anthology *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (Collection of ten thousand leaves) contains a number of verses composed by women. However, a more substantial scope of female characters is to be found in a text of a different sort—namely, the monk Kyōkai's 景戒 late eighth-century three-volume collection *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記 (Strange records from Japan), which constitutes Japan's earliest extant collection of Buddhist *setsuwa* 説話, a literary genre comprised of historical myths and legends, religious and folk narratives, and didactic anecdotes. As Michelle Osterfield Li explains, *Nihon ryōiki* is a descendant of tales of the strange written during China's Tang dynasty (618–907), and Kyōkai recognizes two particular Chinese collections—*Mingbaoji* 冥報記 (Records of miraculous retribution, ca. 650–655) and *Jingang bore jing lingyanji* 金剛般若經靈驗記 (Records of miracles concerning the *Diamond Wisdom Sutra*, ca. 718)—as influences on the work (LI 2009, 6).

Critics both within and outside of Japan have remarked upon the significance of *Nihon ryōiki* for scholars of Japanese literary, cultural, and religious history alike. Ikegami Yoshimasa, for instance, illuminates the reality that because the tales contained in the collection are thought to have been transmitted outside of religious sites and among listeners residing within both trade cities and peripheral communities, the text is a valuable artifact representing a historical moment marked by the emergence of a “new literature” that developed in accordance with the state of affairs in the city sphere (IKEGAMI 2003, 53). William LaFleur likewise makes a compelling argument for the significance of *Nihon ryōiki* to

our contemporary understanding of this era, writing that the work offers crucial insight into the manner in which the supposition of a Buddhist cosmos founded upon the *rokudō* 六道 taxonomy¹ and karmic retribution was substantiated and popularized within classical Japan. Moreover, he argues, the text constitutes not only an important source of historical information, but also a sophisticated intellectual work below the surface of which lie both “subtlety and system.” It is a collection, he writes, that advocates “the wholesale adoption of the Buddhist paradigm of reality,” and as such represents “the introit to a new era of epistemic possibilities in Japan” (LAFLEUR 1986, 30–31).

If Ikegami and LaFleur’s claims concerning the scholarly import of the text are accurate, it follows that *Nihon ryōiki*’s one hundred and sixteen didactic tales might also offer important insights into perceptions of gender, and even the female body, in early Japan—a notion which Kyoko Motomochi Nakamura alludes to in the introduction to her English-language translation of the collection: “The stories of the *Nihon ryōiki* describe a rich diversity of women, both high and low, rich and poor, lay and clerical. Thirty tales out of one hundred and sixteen feature heroines, and women appear in another ten. Nuns appear in six stories, and the remainder are devoted to lay women. As mentioned above, the legal system of the society was patrilineal, but social conventions betrayed the persistence of the matrilineal tradition” (NAKAMURA 1973, 69). In consideration of both *Nihon ryōiki*’s pivotal temporal location and the illuminative possibilities suggested by the work’s rich diversity of female characters, this article will examine Kyōkai’s constructions of femininity, devoting particular attention to the manner in which female bodies are interpolated into the religious discourses upon which the text is predicated. It will consider the work’s representations of both devout and transgressive women, underscoring the ways in which female physiology—and particularly those characteristics which have some relationship with sexuality, procreation, and/or motherhood—functions time and again as a corporeal mark of piety, or lack thereof. In doing so, it seeks to offer a better understanding of some of the ways in which the female body was envisioned within early Japanese religious doctrine and accordingly to account, at least in part, for the emergence and endurance of the abject feminine within the Japanese literary and cultural imagination.

If *Nihon ryōiki* is to be understood as reflecting an epistemological shift in classical Japan, it is important to delineate the cultural paradigm out of which the text arose, as well as that into which Kyōkai’s discourse was later absorbed. To paint such a picture in its entirety would be a monumental task given the religious, cultural, political, and economic complexities at play; however, for the purposes of this

1. This refers to Buddhism’s ladder of transmigration, comprised of the classification of beings into six types: gods, human beings, *asuras*, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beasts.

discussion two particular aspects of early Japanese religious ideology are of crucial import. The first of these concerns a fundamental assumption within Buddhism that the condition of the human body may be understood as an attestation to one's spirituality, or lack thereof. As Nancy J. Barnes explains, many Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioners in India, China, and Japan "cultivated the art of healing using medicinal herbs and demon-quelling incantations. Moreover, several Mahāyāna scriptures proclaim themselves sources of well-being and protection against calamity; and some of the new Mahāyāna Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (beings committed to the future attainment of Buddhahood) introduced in those scriptures compassionately pledge to aid all those in need, including the sick. Understandably popular, such scriptures were used ritually in Heian Japan for healing the sick and exorcising the malignant spirits causing the malaise" (BARNES 1989, 106).

A second and related reality is that the introduction of Buddhism to Japan would come to play a vital role in the transformation not only of native spiritual beliefs and practices, but also of Japanese perceptions of gender. As Hitomi Tonomura notes, Japanese scholars have challenged "the vision of universal and timeless patriarchy frequently advanced in conventional scholarship of the West," many suggesting, alternatively, that the beginnings of Japan's dissolution of gender parity emerged much later in history than has been traditionally asserted. Tonomura locates this transformation sometime within the late fifteenth century, noting that by the year 1500 women "were no longer emperors, occupied no formal governmental positions, rarely held property, and were increasingly considered biologically polluted, while marriage had become patrilocal and descent patrilineal." Moreover, she notes, while the Sun Goddess "remained the progenitrix of the imperial family," eighteenth-century Japan witnessed a scholarly attempt to change her gender (TONOMURA 1994, 131). Although Tonomura places the emergence of institutional patriarchy within the medieval period, her study, which focuses largely on *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (Anthology of tales from the past, 794–1185), later points to the undeniable influence of Buddhism on much earlier notions of gender in Japan. "Some Indian Buddhist texts bar women from any possibility of redemption, while others allow attainment of Nirvana equally to both sexes," she writes. "Mahayana Buddhism, which reached Japan, teaches flexibility in the meaning of gender categories, emphasizing that 'there are no... immutable essence or traits anywhere, no inherent qualities in any being or thing. One only appears to be female or male.' Although Nirvana was a paradise theoretically attainable only by men, the mutability of the gendered state permitted a woman's body (*mi*) to be transformed into a man's through the power of the Lotus Sutra" (TONOMURA 1994, 133).

As is evident in these passages, the introduction of Buddhism into Japan also ushered in a complex and frequently inconsistent discourse on the female body that was in certain aspects at odds with native attitudes, but which, through

Buddhism's assimilation of local belief systems, asserted a powerful influence upon the ways in which gender came to be understood in Japan. Moreover, this influence found momentum within the written word, which within Japan has historically functioned as a fundamental locus for the transmission of spiritual and cultural values. Given the crucial role of intertextuality in the dissemination of Japanese religious ideology, an attempt to historicize the long-standing problematization of the feminine within Japanese literature is inexorably tied to the question of how these newly introduced Buddhist conceptualizations of femininity, and particularly the female body, were interpreted and refigured within early Japanese religious writings. *Nihon ryōiki*, which was compiled during a critical period for the proliferation of Japanese Buddhism and in many respects attempts to reconcile long-standing Japanese cultural beliefs with newly developing religious doctrines, offers vital insights into early Japanese conceptions of femininity that would not only shape future religious discourses on gender, but also inform broader cultural attitudes regarding literary representations of women even into the twenty-first century.

The Sacrificial Body of Female Spirituality

Nihon ryōiki is rife with examples of women who are posited as corporeal embodiments of devoutness, and whose propriety, moreover, is inextricably linked with some aspect of their sexual or reproductive capabilities. Although tales of this type are devoted to an array of female figures representing diverse walks of life, collectively these narratives suggest that the act of female bodily sacrifice is one imperative to the commencement, continuance, and/or completion of the female spiritual journey. As will be elaborated upon in subsequent analyses, accounting for the prevalence of this theme in *Nihon ryōiki* presents a formidable challenge. While it would appear that Kyōkai sought to frustrate the long-standing problematization of femininity within Buddhist discourse, his models of outstanding female spiritual practice frequently build upon the same assumptions about women that served to legitimize their discrimination within, and even exclusion from, the Buddhist sphere both within and outside of Japan. More specifically, although in many of *Nihon ryōiki*'s narratives the female body is posited as a means by which to circumvent perceived barriers to female salvation, in many instances the specific nature of Kyōkai's female bodily representation serves to affirm the precariousness of women as it had been historically conceived within Buddhist discourse. Thus, by examining the ways in which the female body is positioned within the spiritual paradigms constructed in *Nihon ryōiki*'s tales of pious women, we might, I suggest, progress toward a better understanding of that which in early Japanese religious and popular ideology

constituted the feminine ideal against which both contemporaneous and subsequent conceptualizations of problematic femininities emerged.

One of *Nihon ryōiki*'s earliest and most telling illustrations of female piety is found in the thirteenth tale of the first volume, wherein a poor village woman is transformed into a model of exemplary behavior on the basis of her profound devotion to motherhood:

The woman possessed a refined disposition. She was self-aware, and acted with the utmost propriety. She gave birth to seven children, but, being extremely poor, was unable to feed them. She possessed no manner of providing for them. As they had no clothing, she sewed wisteria vines into garments for them, and day after day she bathed, purifying her body and attiring herself in rags. Continually she gathered edible grasses in the fields, and while at home she devoted herself to house cleaning. She prepared vegetables to eat, beckoned her children, and, sitting upright and smiling, told them, "Eat this food with graciousness." She was disciplined in both mind and body, and her virtuous spirit resembled that of a heavenly visitor. (SNKBT 30: 26–27)²

In her own analysis of this tale, Harada Atsuko hones in on the work's moralistic aspects, writing that while the narrative emphasizes the mother's "refinement (*fūryū* 風流)," within the context of the tale as a whole this term points to a more specific figuring of the woman as possessing "conduct and attitude that are 'lacking vulgarity (*zokuppokunai* 俗っぽくない),' 'pure (*shōjō* 清浄),' and 'noble (*kedakai* け高い)'" (HARADA 1975, 18). My own reading of this story is largely congruent within Harada's, and moreover locates in the work's heavy emphasis on the maternal body both an attempt to illustrate the possibility for female salvation and, somewhat contradictorily, a reaffirmation of long-standing conceptualizations of female bodily impurity.

In this tale the woman's spiritual discipline is presented as firmly linked to both her procreative capabilities and steadfast devotion to the maintenance of the domestic realm, establishing a model for the behavior of women that affirms reproduction as the primary function of the female body (at least, where laywomen are concerned), as well as constructing a sphere of feminized labor that is directly linked to procreation. In effect, such a model of religious devotion necessarily and wholly implicates the female body in female spiritual practice—a fact that, in light of the anecdote's inclusion of the woman's daily purification ritual, encompasses significant implications. Although the woman is said to be an embodiment of spirituality, the requirement remains that her body be cleansed on a daily basis in order to fulfill the physiological requirements of her religious journey. This obligation, I suggest, is reflective of long-standing discriminatory

2. This and all excerpts of *Nihon ryōiki* included in this article are my own translations.

views regarding women within the Buddhist tradition. As Nakamura writes, “women’s suffering in childbirth was interpreted as a result of evil deeds in past lives; the path to enlightenment which Sakyamuni had preached was thought to be more suitable for men; women were considered to be more emotional than men, and therefore, to have more difficulty in reaching enlightenment. No matter what the reasons, the traditional low view of woman gained prominence in later Buddhist literature” (NAKAMURA 1973, 10). Nakamura writes that Kyōkai rejected conventional views of women within the Buddhist institution, instead depicting female figures as “devout and compassionate, even capable of attaining enlightenment” (NAKAMURA 1973, 71). In this light, Kyōkai’s focus on the female body, and specifically motherhood, might be understood as a means of offering women a path to salvation that eludes historically male-oriented—that is, largely intellectual—religious teachings in favor of a path that is more suited to the female experience. Nevertheless, the story’s integration of female religious practice into a kind of maternal logic wherein the onus of spiritual salvation is thrust upon the self-sacrificing female body rather than the mind posits the former as inherently defiled and thus, like the mind, in demand of rigorous purification. Thus, although for Nakamura Kyōkai “maintains the equality of men and women before the dharma” (NAKAMURA 1973, 71), the story reflects a contradictory logic whereby the female body, as a corporeal embodiment of feminine emotion, simultaneously constitutes a mode of achieving spiritual salvation and a barrier to it.

Subsequent narratives within *Nihon ryōiki* further illustrate the extent to which the maternal body was interpolated into Kyōkai’s discourse on female spiritual practice. One particularly compelling tale, the second in Volume II, relates the story of Dhyāna Master Shingon, who, upon discovering the death of an adulterous female crow’s abandoned chicks, is compelled to abandon his own family and governorship and enter into monastic practice. Following his departure, Shingon’s wife remains the quintessence of motherhood, in stark juxtaposition with the adulterous crow that had compelled her husband to leave:

After her husband left his administrative post, his wife offered neither her heart nor her body to another, remaining properly chaste. When her son fell ill and his life was coming to an end, he looked at her, saying, “If I drink my mother’s milk, I will certainly live longer.” Obeying her son’s request, the mother allowed her afflicted son to drink her milk. Drinking the milk, he wept, proclaiming, “I cast aside the sweet milk of my mother and die,” whereupon his life came to an end. Forlorn over the death of her son, the woman likewise departed her home and took up the learning and practice of the sacred teachings. (SNKBT 30: 61)

Perhaps the most evidently gendered aspect of this story is its establishment of an inequitable range of expectations for its parental figures. While Shingon,

not unlike the adulterous female crow, abandons his family, his actions are ultimately celebrated. His encounter with the crows teaches him the reality of worldly suffering, and he dies shortly thereafter, having rapidly achieved liberation from the material world. The spiritual path of Shingon's wife, on the other hand, is inextricably tied to the completion of her familial obligations, which are enacted via two primary modes of bodily sacrifice: the maintenance of her chastity and the proffering of her breast milk.

In her recent examination of the politics of wet-nursing in the Heian court, Kimura Saeko suggests that nursing practices within the upper echelons of Heian society functioned according to an anti-Oedipal model. During the Heian period, she explains, perceptions of the potential for breasts and breastfeeding to evoke sexual desire resulted in the figuring of the real mother's breasts as taboo. Consequently, she claims, wet nurses were employed to substitute their milk for the biological mother's own, as well as to take primary responsibility for raising these children. They also frequently functioned as *meshūdo* 召入, or concubines, engaging in sexual relationships with the fathers of the children left in their care (KIMURA 2009). While the figure of the wet nurse does not appear in the tale of Shingon and his wife, in light of the text's emphatic linkage of the mother's breast to her virtue, the central question of Kimura's study—"Breasts for whom?"—is one that should be asked also in reference to the tale.

According to Nakamura, in offering her breast milk to her dying son the wife in this story is transformed into a bodily symbol of spiritual love: "Unlimited motherly love is embodied in the bodhisattva, who was believed to possess the power to save children destined to die. A mother's milk symbolizes her love" (SNKBT 30: 75). While the symbolism Nakamura ascribes to the maternal body here is certainly congruent with her view that the text attempts to articulate the possibility for female salvation, this same element of the tale reflects also a degree of anxiety concerning the potential of the female body to evoke and/or act upon sexual desire. This anxiety, I suggest, is similar to that which Kimura identifies in her discussion of breastfeeding within the Heian court in that it is predicated upon a heavily ambivalent view of women's bodies as sites of obedience, on the one hand, and potential transgression, on the other. While within the real-world aristocratic sphere this tension was alleviated via the exclusion of the mother's breasts from the process of child rearing—in other words, in the cutting off of the possibility for a child's gastronomic desire to transform into a libidinal one—in this tale the dissuasive process is reversed twofold: the mother, rather than her child, is figured as the object embodying transgressive potential, and so her sexual proclivity is transformed into a (soon to be denied) maternal one in order to ease her along the path to salvation.

Another example of maternal bodily sacrifice appears in the forty-second tale of *Nihon ryōiki*'s second volume, wherein Amanotsukai Minome, a poor mother

of nine children, is rewarded by Kannon³ with one hundred *kan* for her devotion. Amanotsukai's good fortune is revealed when, upon opening a box soiled with horse dung left in her care by her sister, she discovers the coins therein. That the event is a consequence of her spiritual faith is subsequently affirmed when Amanotsukai, while giving thanks before a statue of Kannon, notices that its feet, like the box, are soiled with horse dung. The narrator writes: "How delighted was the mother of the Amanotsukai family, who in the morning had looked upon her starving children and shed tears of blood, then in the evening had burned lamps and incense while praying for Kannon's favor. Yes, fortune had entered her home, and the grief of abject poverty subsided, this holy blessing persisting as the abundant spring of wealth voluminously flowed" (SNKBT 30: 114).

Like the tale of the adulterous crow, this episode presents the maternal body in a kind of sacrificial state in order to affirm the devoutness of the female figure. Here the mother's devotion to her children is signified by the shedding of her blood—the most vital of her bodily fluids—as she weeps, just as in the prior tale Shingon's wife proffers her breast milk in order that her son might live. Moreover, the crying mother's bodily sacrifice, like that of Shingon's wife, is immediately juxtaposed with her commencement of prayer, a heavily consequential spiritual activity. Again, Nakamura's view of motherly nurturing in *Nihon ryōiki* as symbolic of Buddhist compassion suggests that such a representation of female spirituality is comparatively favorable; however, this example very clearly demonstrates the resounding echo of long-standing Buddhist perceptions of the bodily economy of femininity.

Yet another exemplary illustration of the maternal logic of *Nihon ryōiki* is found in the third story of Volume II, wherein a soldier named Kishi no Ōmaro attempts to murder his mother, Kusakabe no Matoji, so that he might obtain permission to return home to visit his wife under the guise of mourning. Ōmaro invites his mother to join him for a public reading of the *Lotus Sutra*, whereupon she purifies herself and the pair set out for the mountain. When Ōmaro reveals to his mother his intent to murder her, Kusakabe tells him, "The aim in planting a tree is to acquire its fruit, and moreover take refuge in its shade. The aim of raising children is to rely on their strength and receive their support. It is as though the tree that once protected me now allows the rain to leak through. What are you doing? This seemed unthinkable for a child of mine, but now I feel differently" (SNKBT 30: 63). In this brief moment the roles of nurturer and nurtured are reversed as Kusakabe posits herself as entirely dependent upon the strength of her son; however, as Ōmaro prepares to kill her, Kusakabe is transformed into a paragon of maternal love as she removes her clothing in order that it may be distributed among her three sons, then, kneeling, appeals to the deities to forgive Ōmaro's impending transgression.

3. Kannon is a bodhisattva commonly associated with compassion.

Although not as explicitly concerned with the female body as the preceding tale, this story—which concludes with Ōmaro being swallowed up by the earth as his mother attempts to save him—makes subtle reference to the maternal body in its didacticism. In Nakamura's view, this work is yet another in which the mother figure is intended to represent a physical embodiment of Buddha-like compassion. This notion is undoubtedly reflected in a number of Kusakabe's deeds, from her appeal to the deities to her attempt to save Ōmaro from death to, finally, her requests that her son be granted funeral rites and his hair be placed in a box in front of a Buddha image. It is of crucial importance, however, that Kusakabe's display of compassion is reflected also in the removal of her clothing and kneeling in submission to her son, for both of these constitute bodily surrenders signifying the limitlessness of her devotion to her children. Thus, the female body is here positioned once again at the center of female spiritual practice. That the incident is preceded by Kusakabe's engagement in a purification ritual provides further evidence for such a reading, for Kusakabe's compassion-driven spiritual journey may now be understood as having both commenced and concluded with corporeal action.

The act of female disrobing embodies similar implications in two other narratives included in *Nihon ryōiki*. The first, which is the twentieth work in the second volume, is yet another tale in which motherhood is implicated. The narrative commences with a mother who is separated from her family and receives a disturbing omen concerning her daughter in a dream. Too destitute to pay a monk to recite a scripture for her daughter, she is driven to remove her robe and skirts so that she may exchange them for scriptural recitations. Far away, her daughter is drawn out of a building by the mysterious sound of seven chanting monks who disappear upon her seeing them. As she exits the structure, the wall collapses. When the daughter learns of her mother's role in saving her life, she professes her own faith in the Three Treasures (of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha).

The second narrative, number thirty-four in the same volume, relates the tale of an impoverished orphan who prays to an image of Kannon for a fortune. Soon thereafter a wealthy widower proposes marriage, and when, after lying together, he requests a meal, she prays again to the image for prosperity. When her wealthy neighbor's wet nurse appears at the door with a plethora of consumables, the girl is able to offer only her soiled robe in return. When, the following day, the girl visits the neighbors to thank them for their generosity, they deny having sent her the gifts. Upon her return home, the girl discovers her soiled robe hanging upon the image of Kannon, and thus comes to believe in the law of karma. Thereafter she amasses a great fortune and, with her husband, lives a long and prosperous life.

In the first of these stories, the mother's disrobing is celebrated as a kind of bodily sacrifice for the sake of the child. Having nothing else to give, she displays

an unhesitant willingness to exchange the clothing off of her back for spiritual intervention in the saving of her daughter's life. That the daughter's escape of bodily harm leads her onto her own path of salvation serves to reinforce the text's positioning of the female body as central to female spiritual practice. In the second narrative, the female orphan's body is twice implicated in the story's discourse on karmic causality. In marrying the wealthy widower, the orphan exchanges her virginity for the promise of fortune. Her subsequent disrobing represents a similar kind of bodily exchange, also for material gain. However, as indicated by the robe's appearance on the statue of Kannon at the end of the tale, both incidents embody heavily spiritual implications: the girl's ardent religious devotion is revealed to be inextricably tied to her newfound good fortune, her bodily sacrifices constituting physiological testaments to her piety.

In addition to the text's many tales of devout laywomen, *Nihon ryōiki* also offers stories of female religious figures whose exemplary spirituality becomes manifest in the flesh. One of the earliest appearances of such figures is found in the eighth story of the second volume, in which Okisome no omi Taime, the daughter of a nun, is rewarded for saving the lives of a crab and a frog. Okisome's tale is structured around the negotiation of her chastity, which early in the narrative is posited as proof of the extent of her devoutness: "She was devoted to the way of Buddha, so much that she committed no sexual transgressions. She collected herbs regularly, and daily, without fail, presented and served them to the Venerable Gyōgi" (SNKBT 30: 74). Okisome's chastity becomes endangered when, while collecting herbs one day, she encounters a snake devouring a frog. In return for sparing the frog's life, she promises to become the snake's wife, the loss of her virginity, too, being implicit in this promise. Afraid, Okisome speaks with her master, who encourages her to maintain her faith in the Five Precepts.⁴ The extent of her devotion is subsequently revealed: upon meeting a strange man who has trapped a crab, she removes first her robe and then her skirt in order to convince him to set the creature free. The crab having been handed over to her, she returns with it to her master, who, after performing religious rites, frees it with a prayer. The same night, the snake appears in her bed, and the crab returns and rips it apart. The man from whom Okisome had liberated the crab, she realizes, had been an incarnation of Buddha, and had intervened as repayment for her spiritual piety.⁵

4. The Five Precepts are a Buddhist code of ethics which forbids the harming and killing other beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drunkenness.

5. A variation of this story appears in the twelfth story of this volume. The second version closely resembles the first in terms of both plot and representation of female bodily economy. The tales differ predominately in that while the crab man in the first is revealed to be an incarnation of Buddha, in the second tale the crabs themselves are credited with saving the woman from the snake and, as such, become honored among the inhabitants of the province.

This narrative offers a particularly ambivalent envisioning of the female body. On the one hand, chastity is highly valued from the beginning of the text until its conclusion, Okisome's virginity being a signifier of her spiritual devotion and its maintenance her ultimate reward for good deeds. On the other, the female body is posited as a site of negotiation as Okisome twice utilizes her sexuality in her attempts to adhere to the non-killing precept. The gendered quality of this tale is further illuminated by a comparison of the narrative with another tale in the collection, the seventh story of the first volume. In this story, a traveling monk advises individuals residing near the port of Naniwa to purchase turtles from a local fisherman and then to set the creatures free. The monk is subsequently thrown into the sea by a band of mischievous sailors, whereupon the liberated turtles come to his rescue, saving him from drowning. Although the morals proffered by both of these tales are more or less identical, their deliveries are couched in decidedly gendered terms. While the monk locates authority in speech alone, the model of spirituality proffered in Okisome's tale dispenses with a cerebral path to salvation in favor of a corporeal one. Although she is cunning, it is ultimately through her willingness to sacrifice her body rather than the employment of her intellectual capabilities that Okisome is twice able to intervene on behalf of others and fulfill the requirements of her spiritual journey.

In a study of snake imagery in *setsuwa* tales, Yi Yean illuminates an aspect of this story that, when compared with the circumstances presented in the monk's tale, serves to further emphasize the gendered assumptions underlying the narrative. Arguing that the snake in the tale represents a deistic force, Yi suggests that the work reflects a somewhat unusual figuring of the serpent deity in that the creature's decidedly "licentious (*jain* 邪淫)" behavior toward Okisome functions as a mode of emphasizing the Buddhistic doctrinal elements of the tale by underscoring the inherently evil nature of the snake, a creature whose own life is predicated upon the killing of other beings for sustenance (Yi 2003, 247). Yi's observation draws attention to yet another crucial difference between the tale of Okisome and that of the monk: while both works propound the merits of one's adherence to the non-killing precept through the depiction of bodily salvation, by positioning Okisome as the object of the deistic creature's sexual appetite the former also exploits the femininity of its protagonist as a means of gesturing, if only subtly, toward the powerfully erotic capabilities embodied by even the most virginal of women.

One of the most enigmatic female religious figures in *Nihon ryōiki* appears in the nineteenth tale of Volume III, which offers an account of a girl who is born in the form of a ball of flesh and who, after enduring the ridicule of the community, is eventually revealed to be a bodhisattva. The narrator writes, "After eight months had passed, the girl grew very large. Her head and neck were joined together, and unlike other human beings, she lacked a chin. Her height was

three *shaku*, five *sun*.⁶ She was born with knowledge and expounded Buddhist doctrine.... She had a voice so grand that it rendered her listeners compassionate. Her body differed from those of other people, for she lacked a vagina, and so she was not married” (SNKBT 30: 156).

An oft-cited narrative within *Nihon ryōiki* scholarship, this tale is frequently posited as an example of Kyōkai’s progressive attitude regarding the possibility of female spiritual salvation. Brian O. Ruppert’s discussion of the story articulates a number of justifications for this claim, suggesting that in addition to depicting a female figure whose spiritual capabilities exceed even those of male practitioners, the narrative associates Sari by name with both the relics of Buddha (*shari* 舍利) and the renowned disciple Śāriputra, as well as comparing the girl to a rather impressive list of other female figures within Buddhist tradition: “the daughter of the first great patron of the Buddha, the wealthy merchant of Sudatta, who gave birth to ten eggs, out of which hatched boys who eventually became *arhats*; the account emphasizes that even in Japan there is such a good (female) figure” (RUPPERT 2000, 200). While this story would appear to constitute one of the collection’s most celebratory representations of femininity, however, it is also one of the text’s most troublesome ones. While for Ruppert the association of a female child with Buddha relics in this and other Buddhist tales constitutes a “realization of fecundity” whereby woman is figured as the bearer of salvation to sentient beings (RUPPERT 2000, 200), I suggest that female reproductive potential is here rendered an object of extreme ambivalence.

In his own examination of *Nihon ryōiki*, Nagafuji Yasushi considers the collection’s recurrent depictions of the female body as a site manifesting what he describes to be a “holy sickness (*sei naru yamai* 聖なる病)” (NAGAFUJI 1997, 136). I suggest that Yasushi’s analysis of this theme within a different narrative—the thirty-first in Volume III, in which a virgin gives birth to two stones that are later revealed to be the children of a kami—also offers a convenient framework for understanding the tale of the girl born of a flesh egg. He writes: “Accordingly, because this occurred by a kami’s logic, this is a ‘holy’ miracle. However, because of their female container, they were born ‘deformed,’ and this came to be perceived as an extremely tragic state of affairs. To put it another way, the female sexual body here is sick. And if this is the case, this sickness combines the negative symbol of ‘deformity’ and the positive symbol of ‘holy,’ rendering them virtually one and the same” (NAGAFUJI 1997, 138).

A similar reading may be applied to the tale of the flesh egg girl, wherein female bodily deformity is situated at the crux of the narrative—the moral of which is that anyone, even a disfigured woman, might be a spiritual entity in disguise. Once again, such a depiction of female spirituality would seem to affirm

6. About three and one-half feet.

views of the text as embodying a charitable attitude regarding women. This story, however, reflects an intrinsic ambivalence shared by a number of the tales discussed here—namely, that the author's exaltation of the female body simultaneously problematizes it. Like the stones birthed by the virgin in III.31, the deformity of the girl in III.19 suggests a kind of holy sickness on the part of the maternal figure, who in her procreative capabilities is simultaneously divine and defiled. This logic is extended also to the paradoxical child, a tragically grotesque female vessel within which a saintly entity resides.

It is meaningful also that the narrative's celebrated female figure is, in fact, entirely devoid of female genitalia, which constitute a woman's only external primary sexual characteristics. Within Buddhist discourse, such distortions of the female body are not unprecedented. In fact, religious literature in Japan and elsewhere is saturated with examples of women who achieve salvation, but only through the provisional transformation of their bodies into male ones. In her analyses of images of female mutability in two early Buddhist tales, one from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* and the other from the *Lotus Sutra*—both of which became authoritative Buddhist texts within Japan—Serenity Young discusses some of the implications of this phenomenon, suggesting that while stories of sex change were intended to demonstrate the emptiness of all beings and objects of an enduring reality, “their cumulative effect made the point that being male was much better than being female” (YOUNG 2007, 33–36). The girl in Kyōkai's story reflects the influence of such tales as those discussed by Young in a number of respects. Although she is eventually ascribed a title—Sari Bodhisattva—as she receives a name only she is revealed to be a figure decidedly bound for enlightenment, a fact that is outwardly manifest in her bodily deformities and lack of female genitalia, rendering her unidentifiable with the common woman. Moreover, that the girl's absence of a vagina in effect serves to altogether deny her female sexuality indeed appears to function as a rejection of the notion of an enduring reality; however, her corporeal de-feminization is a prerequisite to her enlightenment, reflecting the long-standing logic that in spite of the ostensible emptiness of gender distinctions and sexual characteristics, the female body constitutes an especially formidable obstacle to spiritual practice, and so its sacrifice is imperative to female liberation.

Meditations on Monstrous Femininities

Given the centrality of the female body within Kyōkai's models of feminine piety, the question remains how such paradigms might play out when the model in question is one not of spiritual devotion, but of impropriety. As Oda Susumu notes, *Nihon ryōiki* includes ample images of such figures, with almost one-fifth of its tales depicting cases of female transgression (ODA 2001, 264). Within many

of these tales the evil deeds committed by women both in their past and present lives become manifest as corporeal monstrosity, and although depictions of these women differ drastically from those of their pious counterparts, both the expectations to which they are held and the punishments they receive for failing to adhere to such expectations reflect many of the same perceptions of female spirituality and bodily economy that permeate Kyōkai's tales of womanly piety. Both motherhood and chastity remain paramount within female spiritual practice, and one's divergence from these ideals frequently demands the transformation, violation, or even annihilation of the female body in order that karmic retribution may be fulfilled.

One of *Nihon ryōiki's* earliest and most disquieting examples of female impiety appears in the thirtieth tale of Volume II, wherein a woman's painful experience of motherhood is revealed to be the penalty for her sins in a previous life. In the narrative, the woman twice journeys to hear the teachings of Venerable Gyōgi, a monk who appears in several other stories discussed here. The woman's education is interrupted, however, by her son's misbehavior: "The child cried and provoked her to such an extent that she could not hear the teachings, and though he was over ten years old, he did not walk. Weeping and complaining, he drank milk and ate without end" (SNKBT 30: 108). Gyōgi instructs the woman to throw her child into a stream, and though initially she resists this advice, finally, unable to tolerate his incessant crying, she does as she is told. Upon landing in the stream, the boy professes, "How deplorable! I had planned to exploit you and continue to eat for three more years" (SNKBT 30: 108). When the woman returns to Gyōgi, she learns that the child had been a reincarnation of someone from whom she had borrowed, but failed to return, something in her previous existence.

In this tale, the motherly body becomes an object of punishment as the woman's love for her child—a love once again resembling Buddha's compassion—compels her to fulfill through her labor the boy's need to be carried, and through the proffering of her breast milk his incessant demands for sustenance. The woman's body thus undergoes a kind of commodification whereby both her physical exertion and the vital fluids she produces are exchanged, seemingly at a high rate of interest, for the items she had failed to return to her past-life creditor. This delineation of karmic retribution reinforces the perceived relationship between femininity and a maternal desire to nurture, the woman's vulnerability to karmic punishment being located in her profound devotion to motherhood.

A second tale in which the motherly body is problematized is the ninth narrative in Volume III. In this story, the devout Fujiwara no Asomi Hirotari dies and is led to a pavilion wherein he encounters Bodhisattva Jizō,⁷ as well as the ghost of his own wife, who had years earlier died in childbirth. His wife's ghost

7. Jizō is a bodhisattva who in Japan is commonly represented as the guardian of children.

pleads with Jizō to allow Hirotari to return to the world of the living in order that he might atone for her offenses. Jizō agrees to her request, and Hirotari, now protected from disaster, dedicates his life to his wife's salvation.

As earlier noted, within Buddhist doctrine the suffering of women during childbirth was frequently perceived to be a consequence of their evil deeds in past lives. In this tale, the woman's experience of childbirth is characterized not merely by pain, but, rather, by the complete annihilation of her body through death. Thus, the motherly body here, as in the narrative discussed prior, is posited as an ideal site for the administration of female karmic retribution. Moreover, the punishment of Hirotari's wife does not end in death, for she continues to suffer posthumously, her ghostly form precluding her from atonement. The responsibility for her salvation is thus thrust upon the actions of her husband, who is allowed to reoccupy his worldly body while she remains in a state of disembodiment, her insubstantial corporeality serving to evince her spiritual impotence.

In the sixteenth tale of Volume III, *Kyōkai* reinforces an idealistic perception of motherhood by detailing the horrifying karmic retribution inflicted upon a licentious mother who fails to provide nourishment to her hungry children. The woman, who is named Yokoe no omi Naritōjime and is said to have died in the first lines of the narrative, appears in a dream to Dharma Master Jakurin: "Both of her breasts had grown enormous, like ovens, and pus poured forth from them. Kneeling, she held her knees with her hands, looked at her diseased breasts, and said, 'How my breasts hurt!'" When Jakurin asks the woman who she is, she explains, "In my prime I was wild and licentious, and spent many days neglecting my young children so that I could sleep with men. For days they were starved of my breasts, and among them, Narihito was the hungriest. Because I committed the crime of denying my children my milk, I now receive retribution in the form of these swollen, sickly breasts" (SNKBT 30: 151–52). Yokoe is released from her punishment when, upon her instruction, Jakurin informs her children of their mother's situation and they make Buddhist images and copy scriptures in order to atone for her transgressions. The story concludes: "Though it is said that a mother's two sweet breasts embody great kindness, if, regretfully, she fails to use them to nurture, they may, contrarily, become a locus of sin" (SNKBT 30: 152).

For Miyata Nao, this narrative constitutes a particularly significant example of the negative imagery that pervades *Nihon ryōiki's* tales of karmic retribution, a phenomenon which she attributes not only to the fact that "cautionary tales of bad acts are both more powerful and more interesting than tales of virtuous behavior," but also to what she perceives to be the axiomatic position of admonitory didacticism within long-standing Buddhist discourse: "Fundamental to Buddhism is the basic embracement of a prioritization of the cautioning against evil over the exhortation of good. In reality, although the collection is called

‘Japanese tales of the miraculous,’ it employs introductorily and conclusively the concepts of ‘avoiding all evils and administering all that is good’ as derived from the Buddhist scriptures” (MIYATA 2000, 178). Significantly, the collection’s emphasis on cautioning against transgression is articulated in the representations of male and female bodies alike; however, it is precisely this reality that illuminates the heavily gendered quality of the text.

Compare, for instance, tale eight of the first volume with the story of Yokoe. In the former, a man finds himself suddenly stricken with deafness along with an incurable skin disease, both of which he immediately recognizes to be penalties for his deeds in a past life. He subsequently cleans his surroundings, calls upon a monk to perform services, purifies himself, and immerses himself in scripture, and as the monk’s service progresses he regains his hearing in both ears. While in this tale the man’s karmic penalty is enacted on a corporeal plane, the gender non-specificity of his afflictions contrasts starkly with the suffering of Yokoe, whose motherly body constitutes a kind of antithesis to the text’s positive representations of motherhood, her corporeal punishment connoting a total reversal of what is presented throughout *Nihon ryōiki* as the most virtuous act a laywoman can achieve: the sacrifice of her bodily fluids for the nourishment of her child. Accordingly, this narrative constitutes not only a grotesquely titillating mode of dissuading depraved behavior, but also serves to consolidate the collection’s depictions of female virtue via negative reinforcement. Moreover, unlike the man in tale I.VIII, Yokoe, like Hirotari’s wife, is denied the possibility of traversing her own spiritual path, the responsibility for her salvation being shifted upon her children. Finally, the concluding lines of this narrative reaffirm the problematic implications of this and other constructions of femininity that pervade *Nihon ryōiki*: the motherly body, as an embodiment of Buddha-like compassion, is again posited as a viable locus of female spiritual practice; however, the expectation of total bodily sacrifice precludes any action aimed toward the achievement of corporeal pleasure and renders female participation in sexual reproduction and the fulfillment of female sexual desire mutually exclusive activities. Thus, the ideal woman is posited again as one whose agency is restricted to the confines of the reproductive realm, suggesting that it is only therein that female spiritual practice may be actualized.

Although not explicitly concerned with motherhood, the forty-first story of Volume II, which relates the gruesome tale of a girl’s rape by a snake, makes rather peculiar use of images associated with female reproduction in order to evidence the workings of karmic law. In the tale, a girl, while climbing a tree, becomes frightened by the appearance of a snake, falls to the ground, and is knocked unconscious. The snake crawls into her vagina, whereupon the girl’s parents bring her home, and the process of removing the snake commences. A concoction of plant matter and boars’ bristles is assembled, whereupon a rather

ghastly ritual ensues: “The villagers hung the girl upon stakes by her head and feet, and poured the brew into her vagina. When they had poured in one *to* (almost five gallons) of the brew, the snake exited the girl and was killed and thrown away. The snake’s eggs were white and stiff like frog eggs. Boars’ hairs stuck out of them, and around five *shō* (nearly two and one-half gallons) of them came out of the vagina. When the people had poured in two *to* of brew, all of the snake eggs came out” (SNKBT 30: 121). Following the incident, the text proclaims the efficacy of the drugs used to concoct the brew, and then relates the fact that the girl died three years later, having been violated by a second snake.

In her own translation of the text, Nakamura suggests that Kyōkai’s commentary regarding this tale is somewhat difficult to follow, noting the ambiguous nature of one particular claim: in offering the reader a brief concluding explanation of karmic causality, the narrator writes that depending upon one’s sensual attachments, he may be reborn as one of a number of things, one example of which may be read either as one who “falls in love with and is married to a snake” or, alternately, as one who, “in the form of a snake, falls in love and takes a bride.”⁸ It is thus unclear which figure in the narrative is intended to be the recipient of karmic retribution; however, in either case, the tale constitutes a rather extraordinary example of female bodily representation within *Nihon ryōiki*.

In his examination of images of snakes in Heian and medieval *setsuwa*, W. Michael Kelsey distinguishes between early Shinto and early Buddhist images of snakes, writing that within the former tradition the snake typically represented an external threat to either the community at large or to women in particular, while within the latter the snake represented an internal threat—an embodiment of the darker side of the self: “That is to say, it was a symbol of attachment to things of the world, and transformation into a snake was that which happened to individuals who valued such things too highly. But it posed no threat to innocent bystanders. It merely lurked behind the scenes a symbol of the evil inside us all” (KELSEY 1981, 110). Kelsey’s observation that some *setsuwa* compilers produced hybridized iterations of these two conceptualizations of snakes offers important insight into female representation within tale 11.41. While Kelsey’s study makes no mention of this story, and in fact claims that *Nihon ryōiki* contains only one tale in which the Buddhist snake appears—11.38, in which a monk is reborn as a serpent owing to his attachment to money—by virtue of the narrator’s insistence that the events of 11.41 have arisen owing to sensual attachment, I suggest that this work, too, may be read as a tale of this type, and moreover one in which the

8. SNKBT 30: 121. The original text reads 蛇に愛び婚はれ. NAKAMURA (1973, 214) translates this line as “falls in love with a snake” or, alternately, “makes love as a snake.”

divergent conceptualizations of snake images identified by Kelsey are integrated through the deployment of female bodily imagery.

In this tale the girl's body functions as a site of subjugation on a number of levels. On a private plane, she is not only unwillingly penetrated by the snake, but also experiences a total bodily violation as the creature takes up residence in her womb—a bodily organ which, as a number of *Nihon ryōiki*'s other tales suggest, functions within Buddhist discourse as a corporeal locus of female piety. The girl's body subsequently becomes a site of public violation, too, as the villagers gather to subject her to a communal cleansing—a moment in which the concept of motherhood is further evoked as the abundance of snake eggs are flushed from the girl's vagina in a scene of monstrous birth. While these images are largely congruent with what Kelsey identifies as a Shinto figuring of serpentine violence, the ambiguous commentary that concludes the tale would appear to be an attempt to retrospectively infuse the narrative with Buddhist connotations, while simultaneously reflecting a considerable degree of divergence from the model suggested by Kelsey. More pointedly, if the woman is to be understood as the object of karmic retribution, it is significant that, unlike the monk in II.38, her penalty is enacted not in the form of her transformation into a snake, but rather in her sexual violation by one. If, on the other hand, the snake itself is to be viewed as the evildoer, the girl's suffering is inconsistent with the claim that in early Buddhist snake mythology innocents are not subjected to harm. The nature of this imagery is difficult to reduce to a gender-equal contemplation of karmic retribution, for whichever figure is to be perceived as the tale's object of karmic penalty, the shockingly horrific consequences of sensual attachment are played out via the transformation of the archetypal image of the motherly body into a grotesque abomination. The girl's subsequent death due to a second serpentine bodily invasion makes further use of this imagery, with the girl's corpse—which signifies her total bodily annihilation—functioning as the text's concluding reminder of both the suffering that permeates existence and the unrelenting nature of karmic law.

Female bodily penetration is featured also in the eighteenth tale of Volume III, wherein a male scripture copier approaches a female devotee from behind, lifts her skirt, and engages in intercourse with her. As his penis enters her vagina, both the man and woman die. In his discussion of conceptualizations of gender and transgression in Japanese cultural discourse, Oda, who cites *Nihon ryōiki* as an early example of the problematization of femininity within Japan, suggests that women have long been figured as loci of transgression who represent threats not only to themselves, but also to members of the opposite sex: “men exist within the shadow of female transgression” (ODA 2001, 264). Tale III.18 is wholly congruent with this figuring of woman as a source of proscribed behavior, for although the male initiates intercourse (and moreover there is no indication

that the woman invites the act), the woman is made complicit in his deed and thus becomes subject also to the penalty he receives.

That the onus of male sexual impropriety here placed upon the woman suggests that the female body constitutes a threat not only to female salvation, but also to the spiritual practice of men—a notion that, as Rajyashree Pandey notes, would come to be articulated insistently by many Buddhist practitioners and storytellers of the medieval period: “In Buddhist narratives there was often a significant shift or slide from a discourse on the impurity of the body in general to a more clearly gendered discourse on specifically the impurity of the female body.... Women became the targets of criticism as the generators of lust and attachment and as the root cause of male delusion. Meditating on the female corpse was a way of curing men who were seduced by the illusion of female beauty” (PANDEY 2005, 196). Although the *setsuwa* collections to which Pandey’s study is devoted—Kamo no Chōmei’s *Hosshinshū* 発心集 (Collected tales of awakened faith, circa 1216) and Keisei’s *Kankyo no tomo* 閑居友 (A companion in solitude, circa 1222)—represent the epistemological landscape of thirteenth-century Japan, a period characterized by the rapid proliferation of new Buddhist sects as well as the temporal site of immense socioeconomic and political transformation, as tale III.18 of *Nihon ryōiki* illustrates, medieval Buddhist anxieties concerning female sexuality find their precedent in some of Japan’s earliest religious works. As such, the death of the female devotee in this narrative stands out as the most meaningful moment in the tale: the female reader is implicated in male desire, rendering her inherently impure by virtue of her body, while the male audience is intended to realize the transient nature of beauty via his encounter with the unsightly female corpse.

A similar example of female impiety appears in the thirty-third narrative of Volume II, wherein a woman is devoured by a demon as repayment for evil deeds in a former life. In this brief tale, a chaste girl, after refusing to marry a number of high-ranking men, takes a husband, invites him to her room, and consummates the marriage. The following morning, the girl’s parents enter her room to discover that she has been devoured by a demon, only her skull and one finger having been left intact. In the tale’s conclusion, the girl’s parents encase her skull in a decorative box, place it in front of an image of the Three Treasures, and engage in a vegetarian feast. The narrator offers the concluding remark that although some perceived the event to be the work of a deity and others asserted that the innocent girl fell prey to a fiend, “upon reflection, this is retribution for her past” (SNKBT 30: 112).

Kyōkai’s ambiguity regarding the exact nature of the girl’s alleged crime frustrates an understanding of the text’s full implications, though we note that he is firmly convinced that the woman’s terrible fate is tied to her own prior spiritual failings and not attributable to other possible causes. Moreover, the fact that

within Buddhist literature the female corpse is frequently positioned as an object for male contemplation of the illusory quality of beauty offers useful insight into the tale's depiction of femininity. As the girl is being devoured, her parents, hearing her cries of pain, assume that her distress is a result of her being sexually inexperienced. This scene serves to underscore the loss of the girl's virginity, establishing a direct relationship between the moment of her sexual awakening and that of her bodily destruction. Moreover, the girl's skull—placed in a site of spiritual contemplation—functions, like the body of the female devotee in the previously discussed tale, as a grotesque corporeal affirmation of the tenuous nature of feminine beauty.

An ideologically congruous employment of the female body is located in the twenty-sixth tale in Volume III, in which Tanaka no Mahito Hiromushime, the wife of a provincial governor, is subject to horrifying bodily punishment as penalty for her greed. Hiromushime, a mother of eight children, is said to have engaged in multiple questionable lending practices, and her debtors, it is written, feared her to such an extent that many abandoned their homes in order to escape her wrath. Hiromushime's punishment begins when she is confined to her bed with illness. Therein she dreams that she is summoned to King Yama's⁹ palace and warned that she will receive penalty in this life for her transgressions. Hiromushime subsequently dies, and thirty-two religious figures pray over her body for nine days. When the lid of her coffin is opened, she is restored to life, but in the vilest of forms: she has taken on an indescribable stench, and the top half of her body has been transformed into that of an ox while her lower half remains in human form. Hiromushime becomes an object of tremendous fascination, and people travel from surrounding areas to look upon her while her husband and children, in order to atone for her deeds, offer unto the local temple a wealth of treasures. After five days in this state, Hiromushime finally dies.

In a discussion of images of bodies in *Nihon ryōiki*, Inagi Masami, noting that rebirth as an ox is commonly depicted to be a phenomenon transpiring as retribution for theft, suggests that such incidents signify two distinct types of death: "The first of these is 'the corpse' and its disappearance within the real world; 'death' is also enacted on a societal level, prompting others (those who have no Buddhist faith) to ask 'what kind of 'death' is this?'" (INAGI 2004, 1116). While Inagi's observation applies to tales of both male and female beastly rebirth within the collection, a comparison of this story of transformation with one featuring a male figure underscores a considerable degree of gendering within works of this type. In the tenth tale of the first volume, a monk contemplates stealing a quilt from his host, only to be chastised by an ox who reveals himself to be the reincarnation of the master of the house, transformed into a beast owing to his

9. A wrathful deity believed to preside over the purgatories and the cycle of rebirth.

transgression of stealing rice from his son in a former life. The ox shames the monk for his evil thoughts, voluntarily reveals himself to his relatives, and is forgiven by his son for his past crime.

The male ox in this tale differs from Hiromushime in a number of respects. First, while the former is enabled not only to reveal himself to the public on his own terms but also to effectuate the monk's change of heart through the power of his words, Hiromushime's potentially transformative powers are circumscribed entirely within the confines of her physical form as her post-mortem body, like those of the women in the two previously discussed texts, is positioned as a site of spiritual contemplation. Moreover, while both Hiromushime and the male ox are posthumously metamorphosed into largely inhuman entities, only Hiromushime maintains the bottom half of her human body, which, significantly, bears her female genitalia. Thus, while Hiromushime's sexuality is not overtly implicated in her impiety, her still-partly feminine form becomes an object of public scrutiny, a simultaneously fascinating and horrifying corporeal affirmation of the unrelenting constitution of karmic law and the ephemeral quality of the material world.

Conclusion

In the wake of this examination of *Nihon ryōiki's* construction of the female body, two critical questions arise. First, given that the text's employment of corporeal imagery is not exclusive to female figures, to what extent can the text be said to reflect an unduly gendered religio-cultural discourse? Second, what evidence exists to suggest that representations of the female body in *Nihon ryōiki* and early works like it bear a relationship with later, and often considerably more grotesque, Japanese textual and cultural conceptualizations of the feminine? The answer to both questions, I suggest, lies in part in the fact that the tales discussed here collectively reflect a self-contradictory logic according to which the sexualized female body is simultaneously celebrated as a corporeal manifestation of spiritual sacrifice and disparaged as a site embodying and stimulating worldly desire.

As I have noted, by and large the religious devotion of *Nihon ryōiki's* most exemplary figures of male piety is presented as an intellectual or speech-oriented, rather than bodily, practice. This contrasts starkly with the text's depictions of pious women, whose spirituality is, in nearly all narratives of this type, manifest in bodily sacrifice—be it in the form of maternal or domestic labor, sexual endangerment or surrender, or physiological de-feminization. Moreover, while *Nihon ryōiki's* spiritually wayward men, like its women, experience a wide array of bodily transformation and destruction, such imagery infrequently positions men's sexual characteristics at the center of their spiritual practices. When male

sexuality is implicated in such discourse, the guilt associated with sexual desire is shared between the male figure and the female object of his lust—regardless of whether the latter is an active participant in the man's indiscretions. Finally, the collection's positioning of the female body as a site for male contemplation of immateriality is perhaps the most unequivocal example of the text's ambivalent treatment of femininity.

In addition to wholly implicating the female body in both female and male spiritual practice, images associated with female bodily violation, transformation, and, particularly, destruction in *Nihon ryōiki* serve to firmly secure the feminine body as an object of simultaneous desire and disgust, calling to mind Kristeva's discussion of abjection, whose fundamental contradiction, she explains, lies in the contrast between life and death:

Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit, are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. (KRISTEVA 1982, 3)

In this light, the female body as presented in the text functions not only as a testament to the ephemeral nature of the material world, but also as a mode of confirming the substantiality of its male spectator. It exists, an object of disgust, in order that its male viewer may live—and, ideally, extricate himself from profane attachments in his pursuit of liberation. Thus, unbridled femininity is posited as inherently antithetical to spirituality, and the irrevocable imperative of female bodily sacrifice within spiritual practice reaffirmed.

The ambivalent treatment of women's bodies outlined above would be not only re-substantiated but also actualized in increasingly imaginative and, frequently, misogynistic ways within a number of later Japanese Buddhist and secular texts, and perhaps most significantly within *ōjōden* 往生伝¹⁰ and *setsuwa* produced during Japan's medieval period. In her discussion of the figuring of women within the tradition of *ōjōden*, Jacqueline I. Stone writes that "although not barred from Buddhist liberation, in being bound by the 'five hindrances and three obediences' and subject to the pollution restrictions associated with menstruation and childbirth, women were often thought to constitute a soterio-

10. *Ōjōden* are a hagiographical genre comprised of records of individuals who achieved rebirth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land.

logically challenged category. The treatment of women in *ōjōden* is ambivalent; not infrequently, they are represented as potential hindrances to the deathbed contemplation of men” (STONE 2004, 95). Li’s ambitious study of the grotesque in medieval *setsuwa* tales likewise emphasizes the complex ambivalence that would increasingly characterize female representation throughout the medieval period, drawing particular attention to the axiomatic role of female sexuality, reproductive potential, and maternity in the literary and artistic figuring of women—who frequently appear as phallic-yet-ynic snakes, mothers and beautiful women-turned-demons, objects of human and inhuman sexual and gastro-nomic desire, and both unblemished and brutalized corpses—within medieval Japan (LI 2009).

Hank Glassman, in his study of *Ketsubonkyō* 血盆經 (The blood bowl sutra), also hones in on ambivalent representations of the female—and particularly the maternal—body within medieval literature, noting that the proliferation of this sutra, which by virtue of its assumption of female reproduction as polluted “threatens damnation for the very potential motherhood that is a woman’s passport to salvation,” and contributed to the rise in the late medieval period of a literature linking pregnancy and violence. “In these stories of jealousy, suffering, and redemption,” he writes, “there is focus on the pregnant corpse, particularly on the life-giving breasts filled with milk, and on the blood of the dead woman Increasingly, the fetus (and newborn child) came to be seen as an independent entity, and, perhaps more significantly, as the embodiment of a creative act by the father with the mother acting as a growth medium, as a nurturing vessel rather than genetrix” (GLASSMAN 2009, 195–97). What Glassman identifies as a kind of exclusion of the motherly body from identification with the child is articulated also in other literary representations of motherhood. As R. Keller Kimbrough notes in his study of *Kumano bikuni* 熊野比丘尼 (wandering nuns) preachings on the animal realm, for instance, late medieval Japan witnessed the emergence of a number of stories in which parental figures are reborn as animals or hungry ghosts owing to their excessive attachment to their children, a phenomenon which, he suggests, pointed to “the primal, animalistic side of human nature” (KIMBROUGH 2006, 191). Both Glassman and Kimbrough’s observations are particularly significant, for they not only underscore a continuance of the general trend toward the ambivalent objectification of women within late medieval Japan, but also locate in this period the proliferation of increasingly negative attitudes concerning the concept of maternal love, which in *Nihon ryōiki* is posited as a quintessential representation of female spiritual devotion.

Other genres of medieval Japanese popular fiction—and perhaps most notably *otogizōshi* 御伽草子—feature countless examples of feminine monstrosity, including the legendary flesh-craving *onibaba* 鬼婆, a female demonic figure who would materialize time and again within Japanese literature, visual arts,

and, eventually, both live-action cinema and anime. Elements and adaptations of both earlier and later *setsuwa* are visible also within the sphere of Japanese theater, one oft-cited example being the Muromachi Noh play *Dōjōji* 道成寺, in which a woman is transformed into a giant serpent and subject to exorcism. Noriko T. Reider locates within *Nihon ryōiki* and *Konjaku monogatari* the early beginnings of *kaidan-shū* 怪談集 (tales of the strange), a literary genre that would become popularized by Ueda Akinari's 1776 *Ugestu monogatari* 雨月物語 (Tales of moonlight and rain) (REIDER 2001, 81–82), a short story collection that, as translator Anthony H. Chambers notes, derives some of its material from *Konjaku monogatari* (CHAMBERS 2007, 113, 141), and which would play an essential role in the proliferation of Japanese supernatural narratives—a number of which belong to the genre of body horror—throughout the Edo period and beyond.

Modern authors who have adapted early *setsuwa* include Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, whose *Rashōmon* 羅生門 (1915) and *Yabu no Naka* 藪の中 (In a grove, 1922) heavily implicate female bodies—in the former as a site of depravity and the latter as a site of violation—into their narratives, as well as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Mishima Yukio, whose works evidence substantial concern with women as entities embodying mystery, danger, desire, and/or disgust. Japan's interwar period witnessed the energetic proliferation of female-centric iterations of *ryōki* 猟奇, a cultural aesthetic centered around the scopophilic desire to seek out the strange—which, as Jeffrey Angles notes, was frequently represented within the fiction of crime writers such as Edogawa Ranpo as the “coalescing of the seemingly disparate phenomena of eroticism and grotesquerie” (ANGLES 2008, 103). Finally, a number of contemporary Japanese women writers, among them poet Itō Hiroimi and novelist Kirino Natsuo, have refigured historically ambivalent representations of the female body as a means by which to question what they perceive to be Japan's persisting attitude that female sexuality and reproductive possibility render women inherently suited to marriage, child rearing, and the maintenance of the domestic realm.

Although the inexhaustive literary genealogy outlined here encompasses a diverse array of writers, textual practices, and cultural epistemes—many of which, it should be noted, contributed to the secularization of images and ideologies that first appeared in early religious source texts—this overview is intended to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Buddhist constructions of the problematic female body within Japanese literary and cultural discourse throughout the nation's long history. As modern literary constructions of the female body as an object of abjection—whether as reiterations of or attempts to undermine conventional perceptions of womanhood—illustrate, early Japanese religious assumptions regarding the relationship between spiritual practice and the human body heavily informed long-standing perceptions of the female body as a locus of

conflict. In early times an embodiment of moral ambiguity and spiritual anxiety, the feminine occupies a similarly precarious position within contemporary Japan's literary and visual arts, having been envisioned time and again as a site of metamorphosis, hegemonic subversion, and even cultural annihilation. In this examination of *Nihon ryōiki*'s discourse on femininity as a body-centric practice, I have identified in part the early origins of such representational trends in order that we might better understand the deeply ingrained and ideologically complex logic underlying popular Japanese representations of the female body as a paradoxical locus of virtue and vice, desirability and disgust.

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