

Myths and Tale Literature

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INTRODUCTION

The old saying, "There is nothing new under the sun," seems applicable even to considerations of the historical development of literature in Japan. Linked verse, for example, developed from the *waka*, and the *haiku* was in turn born from linked verse. *Setsumwa* (tales), which will form the topic of this essay, can be thought of in a similar way.*

According to the literary division of tales into three types, we have myth, legend (*densetsu*) and folktale (*mukashi-banashi*), all of which can be classified as narrative literature. How, then, should we explain the appearance of a new literary genre, also known as *setsumwa*? This could be stated in terms of literary history, where the problem is in the shift from works of a mythical nature, such as *Kojiki* (712), *Nihon shoki* (720) or the various *fudoki* to a work like *Nihon ryōiki*.¹ In what follows I would like, using as a con-

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**Setsumwa* is often translated as "tale," but there being no good English equivalent, it is normally left in the original in this paper. TRANSLATOR.

1. The *fudoki* are topographical records of the various provinces in ancient Japan; they were compiled according to an imperial edict of 713, and presented to the court individually by the officials of the provinces concerned in the following years. Only a few of the original documents remain extant. Because they are intended primarily to explain the names of places and geographical formulations, they contain very brief tales, many of which can be classified as "myth." *Nihon ryōiki*, or, more properly, *Nihon koku genpō zen'aku ryōiki* (A record of miraculous events concerning retribution for good and evil acts in the country of Japan), was compiled in the early ninth century by the monk Kyōkai; it is the first of the extant works now known as *setsumwa* literature. For an English translation see Nakamura 1973.

crete example a story from *Nihon ryōiki*, to discuss the question of the relationship between myth and *setsuwa*.

The story in question is *Nihon ryōiki* II.41, a tale entitled, "How a woman violated by a serpent was able to stay alive through the power of medicine." Let us quote the main portion of this tale:

In the village Umakai, in Sarara County, Kawachi Province, there was a wealthy household. There was a daughter in this household. During the reign of Emperor Junnin, in the summer of 759, the fourth month, this daughter had climbed into a mulberry tree to gather leaves. A large serpent appeared. It twined itself around the mulberry tree in which the woman had climbed, and began climbing the tree itself. Someone on the road below saw it and warned the woman. The woman saw the serpent, was frightened, and fell from the tree. The serpent also fell, with her, and, wrapping itself around her body, violated her. Frightened half out of her wits, she lay unconscious on the ground. Her parents immediately summoned a doctor, and, placing their daughter and the serpent on the same *toko*,* carried them to their house and placed them in the garden. The doctor burned three bundles of millet (three feet made one bundle, and there were three bundles of this),² then mixed it with hot water, making about fifteen gallons of brew; this was boiled down to about ten gallons, then a quantity of wild boar hair was added. Stakes were then sunk into the ground at the woman's head and feet; she was tied to these, and the brew was poured into her vaginal opening. When he had put about five gallons of this brew into her, the snake appeared, and it was killed and cast away. The snake eggs were white and stiff, and looked like the eggs of a frog. The boar hair had attached itself to the snake eggs, and nearly two-and-one-half gallons of these were flushed out through the woman's vaginal opening. When all the ten gallons of soup had been poured into her, all of the snake eggs were flushed out. The woman, who had been unconscious, came to herself and spoke. In answer to her parents' question, she said, "It was like a dream, but now I'm awake and back to normal." Medicine has virtues like this; why should one hesitate to use it? After three years, however, the woman was once again violated by a snake, and this time she died. When one has a strong feeling of love at the time of one's departure at death, one might, from love of one's spouse, parents or children, say something like this: "After I die I will

**Toko* could perhaps be translated as bedding; because of its comparison with two other words (*ya* and *muro*) later in the paper (see p. 119), it has been left in the original throughout. TRANSLATOR.

2. The parenthetic notation is supplied by the compiler of *Nihon ryōiki*.

certainly come back to meet you in the next world.” Then one’s soul will be guided by this act, and one might be reborn as a snake, horse, cow, dog or bird; because of this evil vow, one might become a snake and make love in that form, or one might become a beast. Lust is not always the same.³

Tales such as this, about the marriage between a mortal woman and a serpent (deity), had already been recorded, in the Mt. Miwa story and elsewhere,⁴ and there are two earlier tales in *Nihon ryōiki*—II.8 and II.12—that deal with attempts by snakes to marry mortal women. Indeed, the heroine of II.8, a woman who is described as “having an avid faith, and who had never had any sexual experience,” displays the profile of a shamaness, and the *ya** which she prepares for the invasion of the serpent is “all closed off, with all entrances blocked up, where she kept a strict isolation,” and seems, in mythical terms, very like the holy bed on which the sacred virgin awaits the visit of the deity, but it could also be interpreted as a type of reviewing stand at a festival site.

There is very little doubt that these maidens described in II.8 and II.12 were initially shamanesses. It also seems reasonable to say that this “daughter” of a “wealthy household” in the tale under discussion contains deep within her the vestiges of the shamaness. Such an interpretation is also suggested by the words, “in the fourth month, this daughter had climbed into a mulberry tree to gather leaves.” The third and fourth months were the period to gather mulberry leaves, and this young woman, engaged in the occupation of sericulture, could be seen as the weaving

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3. The tale goes on to quote from certain unnamed sutras, but none of this material is directly connected to the story itself, so it has been omitted from the quotation. See *Nihon ryōiki*, pp. 192–197 and Nakamura, pp. 213–215.
 4. The Mt. Miwa story is to be found in *Kojiki*, p. 181. It relates how the Mt. Miwa deity, Ōmononushi, fathered a child by a mortal woman. Although the deity does not appear in his “true shape” in this tale, the fact that he leaves the woman’s room through the keyhole indicates that this shape was probably serpentine.

* *Ya* might be translated as “building,” but will be left in the original throughout. See Translator’s note, p. 116. TRANSLATOR.

maiden who prepared the sacred garments for the gods. The mulberry tree in the background of this tale is not, in short, merely a part of the scenery. There is a deep significance hidden in the shade of this mulberry tree.

Ishida Eiichirō some time ago considered the circumstances surrounding the sacred nature of the mulberry tree, considered holy in ancient China and Japan because it supported the silkworm. Ishida explains the inextricable links between the mulberry tree, silk producing rooms, the thunder deity and serpent deities, as well as the mystical procreation brought about by the tree, as follows:

When we stop to think about it, because the production of silk depends on the incubation and breeding of the silkworm, it is only natural that it should, as was also the case in agriculture, have been combined with magical rituals to insure fertility. It seems possible, then, to find faint memories of ancient sexual rituals lingering in the place name legends discussed above, which appear to refer to the locations of sacred marriages, and in the legends of the origins of the silkworm in China and the tales of the woman who married the horse here in Japan; an example would be the shrine in the mulberry forest at which it appears that men and women would meet for sexual intercourse.⁵

Thus we can speculate that lurking beneath the surface in the episode of the sexual union of serpent and woman which occurs at the beginning of the story under discussion is a myth complex that goes back to the ancient past of China and Japan. The words, "she had climbed into a mulberry tree to gather leaves," give a powerful suggestion of this background, but let us proceed to a consideration of the story as a whole.

Earlier I noted the *ya* in which the woman hid herself in *Ryōiki* II.8; in the *Kojiki* version of the Mt. Miwa story the parents tell their daughter, "scatter some clay on the *toko*" (*Kojiki*, p. 181). This *toko* is doubtless the sacred bedroom which the visiting deity

5. See Ishida 1966, p. 90. The story of the woman who married the horse is a folktale found in both China and Japan, and is one version of the origins of silkworm cultivation.

would have led the virgin to. There is a story in *Hitachi no kuni no fudoki* that is considered to be of the Mt. Miwa pattern, and here the shamaness is said to live in a *muro*, a word interpreted by the editors of the *Nihon koten bungaku taikai* text of the *fudoki* as a "sleeping chamber within the building" (*Fudoki* 79, note 11). These three words—*ya*, *toko* and *muro*—are interchangeable. We have, however, in II.41, the words, "placing their daughter and the serpent on the same *toko*." Now of course this tale does not aim at describing a deity carrying off a virgin to her nuptial bed. The myth, however, is nonetheless reflected in this passage.

In the tale from *Hitachi fudoki*, then, the shamaness Nukabime gives birth to a "small snake," from which fact we can assume that its father was also a serpent. The heroine of II.41 also gives birth to "snake children (eggs)." Although the aim of this tale is different, the snake children are nonetheless described in some detail. The tale under discussion is told as a story that actually took place, but it is beyond doubt that the tale has evolved from a mythic base. The manipulation involved in this evolution can also be considered to have been perfectly clear to the first narrators of this story, as well as to the story's audience. That the serpent is a water deity, a spirit which controlled the fall of rain; that this water deity was worshiped by a specially selected virgin; and, further, that this worship was carried out by a union of these two under the sacred mulberry tree, at which time frankly sexual activities took place—all of this would have been tacitly understood. The first narrator of the *Ryōiki* tale could be said to have developed his story on the basis of such an understanding.

NEW WINE, NEW FLASKS

Even though this tale doubtless utilizes a mythical pattern, and, additionally, also even sometimes uses a specialized mythical vocabulary, the tale is not a myth. In addition to the continuity with myth to be found in the tale, we must not fail to recognize the break it makes from the mythic tradition. By "break," I mean here the story's creativity. Returning to *Ryōiki* II.41, in this tale

the characters, the location, the day and time of the action, and the process of the event are all made clear. The character does not have a generalized name, such as Tama Yori Hime,⁶ but is, rather, introduced as a person who actually lived. The location—which I will discuss in more detail below—is said to be an actual village from the ancient period, the village of Umakai, in Sarara County of Kawachi Province. The time, moreover, is given as the summer, fourth month, of the year 759. Then it is reported that an incident involving a snake raping a maiden who was picking mulberry leaves occurred. That the characters, the place and the time are all made clear is related to the narrative method, which stresses that this was without question an event of the real world. This, in my opinion, is what the *setsuwa* is—a type of literature which embellishes and works to make more aesthetic things which apparently actually occurred in the secular world.

The literary method of the *setsuwa* lies in its advancing of the story so as to convince the listener that such individual events as these have unquestionably occurred in this profane world. There are one hundred sixteen stories in *Nihon ryōiki*, and the largest part of them clearly record places and dates; there are, further, a large number of people who actually lived making appearances in these tales. Seen from this perspective, also, it can be argued that the *setsuwa* constitute a literature different in essence from the myth, which records the words and deeds of the gods. Also, the life of any *setsuwa* is derived from its interest. If the event described is out of the ordinary, the story will be interesting. If this is also an event which actually took place, then this interest increases greatly. It is the *setsuwa* which skillfully exploit this psychology, and which are formed as an aesthetic version of an actual event.

Did a snake and a maiden actually have sexual intercourse in the village of Umakai during the Nara period? This, of course, will

6. The name "Tama Yori Hime" is given to a variety of female characters in Japanese myth; it generally indicates a shamaness who was the bride of the deity she was in service of.

remain an unanswered question. It is true, however, that the undergarments of the women in the pre-modern period were not the same as they are now, and that there are many stories about women who had intercourse with snakes in farming villages during the past. For these reasons, it is not likely that people would have doubted the truth of this story if it were presented to them as fact. As has already become clear, however, the main point of this tale is not that a woman had intercourse with a serpent, but rather it is the separation of the woman and the snake. Here we find no belief in the snake as a serpent deity (or water deity).

Myths were recounted during rituals to explain origins. On the one hand, in this tale we have an account of the strange union between a woman and a snake, and the removal of the snake from the woman through the power of medicine. Moreover, the story tells how two stakes were driven into the ground by the woman's hands and feet, and how she was tied to them and a large quantity of medicine was poured into her vaginal opening; this is an extreme of erotic grotesqueness. So we must conclude that both the narrator and the audience of the tale had a sizeable interest and concern in this aspect of the story. In any event, the story aims at presenting the miraculous nature of the event, and it unquestionably appealed to human curiosity: "Such things have happened in this mundane world!" or, "Human beings are indeed such creatures, and, of course, that which humans do is of interest." These are the excited words of both narrator and audience that we can somehow hear coming from behind the scenes in this tale.

Then, when the serpent is removed from her body, the woman says to her parents, "It was like a dream, but now I'm awake and back to normal." From these words it follows that the woman did not—like her parents and observers—see the serpent as a menace. It would be too much to say that her union with the snake has sent her into a state of ecstasy, but words such as "frightened half out of her wits, she lay unconscious on the ground," or "the woman, who had been passed out, then regained her consciousness and spoke," do indicate, in a most interesting way, the karmic relation-

ship between the woman and the serpent. The karmic relationship between the woman and the serpent is, here, unfolded through the sexual union of the two.

The Nara period saw the appearance of a group of people who were fond of such straightforward, frank stories. Preserved through oral tradition, the *setsuwa* were not the work of an individual creator, and, furthermore, they were not finished after just one telling; in these respects they resemble myths. One can, further, sense a candid mood in the *setsuwa*, a mood imbibed by both narrator and audience. There is a kind of unilateral line that can be drawn from myths, which were told by members of the ruling classes, and the *setsuwa*, which were recited freely in the more common vernacular. The *setsuwa* use myth as their base and draw gradually and quietly from established forms, but they can also, in truth, be called “new wine.” And this wine was, furthermore, served out in what must be termed “new flasks.”

THE QUESTION OF LOCATION

The narrators (or, alternatively, the creators) of the individual tales in *Nihon ryōiki* were, in my opinion, primarily Buddhist monks. Among them were privately ordained monks and those serving at private temples, and one of their characteristics was that they came from powerful families in the provinces; in this respect it is difficult to separate them from the laity. We must also consider the question of the audience of the tales, and I believe these people to have also come primarily from families in the provinces which were important both economically and politically. They were, in short, people who belonged to the ruled class, but, at the same time, they had a good deal of power in the provinces in which they lived, and they were in search of a new form of literature which would differ from that of the myth. In order to clarify the circumstances which lie between these two literary forms, I propose to examine the location of the story under discussion, Umakai Village.

“Umakai^a” refers to horse raisers, and the village of Umakai^b

is thus, in addition to being the name of a place in Sarara County in Kawachi Province, the home base of a clan of horse raisers. This clan, the "Umakai-be," was engaged variously in the training and raising of horses, and it is important to remember that during the ancient period horses were not native to Japan, but were imported from Korea. In *Nihon shoki* we have the notation, "The Sarara Umakai clan head and the Uno Umakai clan head." Sarara^a, while written with a different set of characters,* is identical to the "Sarara^b" of the tale under discussion, and the Umakai clan here was from the Korean kingdom of Kudara. The "Uno Umakai clan" is noted in *Nihon shoki* as residing in "Sarara County, Uno Village," and was a clan from the Korean kingdom of Silla. Sarara County, thus, was an area reaching from the village of Shijonawate in northern Kawachi County in Ōsaka Prefecture to Daitō City and Neyagawa City, and it was a center of imported culture.

For that reason it was in an advanced state of development, and it is to be expected that "wealthy households" of the type mentioned in *Ryōiki* II.41 were numerous. The "daughter" in this tale was a typical daughter from such a powerful provincial family. Also, as we have already noted, there was a story in ancient China dealing with the marriage of a woman to a horse; we can speculate that this tale would have been known in the Sarara area via Korea. It would also appear to suggest that, at that time, there were tales of sacred marriages associated with mulberry trees current in the home province of the Umakai clan. In short, mulberry trees and silkworm culture were transmitted to Japan along with riding horses and their husbandry, and together these planted the seeds of an ancient, foreign myth in the soil of Umakai Village.

One can imagine that there was a large number of Buddhist temples constructed in the Sarara area, which was inhabited by immigrants and advanced in its development; a monk at one of these temples then probably heard the tale of a daughter of a "wealthy household" as a rumor. He, in turn, transmitted the

*See Glossary. TRANSLATOR.

tale, his own feelers of interest being extended toward the act of removing the serpent from the woman. His concern, in other words, was with the erotic and grotesque nature of a tale about the female body. This, however, constituted a new twist to the story.

The center of the tale was by this time no longer the gods. We have here, rather, an interest in humans who exist on the same level that we occupy. This is what supported this new literary genre. On the one hand, the first audience of this story would have been composed of members of the “wealthy households” in the area. Their interest was, indeed, in the removal of the serpent from the woman, and the erotic grotesqueness and miraculous power of medicine this entailed, and it was they who listened to this tale amid loud peals of laughter.

The ending, then, with the words, “lust is not always the same,” is an affirmation of the humanity of both the narrator and the audience. The newly powerful provincial families embraced the imported Buddhism, and discovered, above all, humanity in the midst of their own social class; then they faithfully transmitted the actions performed by these human beings. The “new flask” into which the new wine called *setsuwa* was poured must be called the consciousness of these powerful provincial families.

GLOSSARY

<i>densetsu</i> 伝説	'Tama Yori Hime 玉依比売
<i>mukashi-banashi</i> 昔話	<i> toko</i> 床
<i>muro</i> 室	Umakai ^a 馬飼
Sarara ^a 沙羅羅	Umakai ^b 馬甘
Sarara ^b 更荒	<i>waka</i> 和歌
<i>setsuwa</i> 説話	<i>ya</i> 屋

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