

Japan

Noriko T. Reider, *Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan*

Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2016. xiii + 312 pages. 22 illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Paperback, \$33.95, ISBN: 978-1-60732-489-8.

The term *otogi-zoshi* (“companion tales”) refers to a genre of more than 400 illustrated stories composed between the fifteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. The term *otogi-zoshi* was first employed by an eighteenth-century publisher and is suggestive of “nursery rhymes” suitable for children and their care-givers, an association that was perpetuated by literary historians for much of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the genre is now achieving wide recognition as a vibrant part of the literature of medieval Japan.

Noriko Reider’s *Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan* offers us a nuanced and informative exploration of this particular literary-historical landscape. Each chapter focuses on a single text, telling the tale of a character’s encounter with a demon (*oni*). The first two stories examine the adventures of the famous warrior Minamoto Yoritomo and his band of retainers, as they brave (with no small amount of divine intervention) the mountain lair of the “Drunken Demon” Shuten Dōji and track the venomous Earth Spider (*tsuchigumo*). The third and fourth stories describe the adventures of clever scholars: Minister Kibi (whose historic diplomatic mission to China is fictionalized into a series of trials in which Kibi outwits his Chinese adversaries) and Lord Haseo (whose wager with a game-playing *oni* leads to a lesson in the dangers of lust). The third pair of stories touch on the adventures of female protagonists: the Weaving Maiden who goes off in search of her demon-husband Amewakahiko (a story that combines an etiology of the Star Festival—celebrating the yearly joining of the stars Vega and Altair—with a reflection on the marriage politics of the day) and the Blossom Princess (a “Cinderella story,” in which an abused step-daughter gains magical assistance from a mountain hag and finds love). Finally, the collection ends with the “Record of the Tool Specters” (*Tsukumogami ki*), a fascinating tale of old household implements, which not only become animate after a century of use, but grow vengeful at being discarded by their owners.

In each chapter, Reider offers translations (and black-and-white illustrations from the original scrolls), along with what she describes as “introductory research essays.” On the most basic level, these essays offer an entrée to the historical contexts of the tales, helping readers to avoid the kind of anachronistic interpretations that have bedeviled the study of this genre in the past. In doing so, however, Reider presents a model of literary-historical erudition that combines the careful tracing of prior models and influences with an examination of how those traditions were brought together to serve the interests of their authors.

The presence of demons is not one of the defining features of *otogi-zoshi* as such, but it provides a useful focal point for Reider to elaborate on one of the quintessential

aspects of the genre, namely its combination of entertainment and didacticism. It is easy to imagine, for example, the sort of dread that the figure of a flesh-eating ogre might instill, but Reider introduces some of the historical associations that would have made the stories particularly striking to their original audiences. Similarly, she points out that the *oni* is not simply an object of fear. For example, it is a mountain hag (*yamauba*, the wife of a mountain demon) that plays the role of “fairy godmother” to the Blossom Princess, granting her robes that make her appear old and enable her to escape her family and seek employment in the home of her future husband.

The dramatic tensions of these stories, however, do not simply contribute to their entertainment value. Reider shows that the figure of the *oni* provides a kind of foil by which the author demonstrates the power or efficacy of religio-political authorities, a feature central to the didactic functions of the texts. So, for example, the stories of Yorimitsu, the Drunken Demon, and the Earth Spider cast a founding hero of the Minamoto clan as a valiant foe of barbarian threats, an association that would prove important for the shoguns that would later claim descent from them. Similarly, the pacification of the angry tool specters is offered explicitly as a lesson in the efficacy of Shingon esoteric rituals compared to the lesser teachings of other Buddhist schools.

Some of the translations Reider offers are limited by the state of the illustrated scrolls (*emaki*) she uses as her sources. With portions of the narrative missing or out of order (perhaps as a result of past efforts at restoration), her translations are often marred by significant ellipses. While she compensates for these lapses with synopses drawn from other versions of these tales, her choice of source material is ultimately justified by her attention to the illustrations, which often carry much of the rhetorical weight of the tale. Perhaps nowhere is this more clear than in her consideration of “Minister Kibi’s Adventures in China.” While the narrative is the least complete of the scrolls she discusses, a careful reading of the surviving illustrations allow her to see the work as a thinly-veiled statement by retired emperor Go-Shirakawa (who commissioned the scroll) about the Taira clan, against whose grasp on the reigns of political power Go-Shirakawa would chafe throughout his life. If the (incomplete) narrative describes the clever ways in which Minister Kibi outsmarts the Chinese authorities who imprison him, the illustrations—which model the throne room of the Chinese emperor on the audience chamber of the child-emperor (and Taira puppet) Antoku, and depict the tower of Minister Kibi’s imprisonment in a way that brings to mind the palace in which Go-Shirakawa suffered under house-arrest—suggest a political rivalry much closer to home.

Seven Demon Stories is presented as a collection of essays, with many of the limitations (but also the strengths) associated with that format. The individual chapters, for example, retain many of the marks of previous publication, and although a brief conclusion offers a review of some of the recurring themes, certain areas (particularly the role of *onmyōdō*, or yin-yang divination) fairly beg for a greater synthesis. At the same time, however, this approach allows the chapters to be read in isolation, an enormous benefit for students who will certainly benefit, not only from the information but also the model of scholarship these essays present.

Michael R. Bathgate
Saint Xavier University