

The Demon at Agi Bridge

AND OTHER JAPANESE TALES

Translated by

BURTON WATSON

Edited, with an introduction, by

HARUO SHIRANE



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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Demon at Agi Bridge and Other Japanese Tales is designed for both the classroom and the general reader who would like to experience the richness of the fascinating and influential body of Japanese anecdotal literature in compact form. I chose the tales in this anthology from the many thousands of stories that appear in *setsuwa* (anecdotal literature) collections for the historical importance and impact of a specific story on the larger tradition of Japanese literary and folk culture, the ability of that story to represent the character and function of a particular *setsuwa* collection, and, most of all, the stories' readability in English and sheer entertainment value.

I would like to acknowledge the aid of my good friend and colleague Komine Kazuaki of Rikkyo University, who helped me with the initial choices of these stories and whose scholarship has been a great inspiration to me. I would like to thank the outside readers of the manuscript, especially David Bialock, who made some key suggestions. I am indebted to David Atherton, who compiled the bibliography and who made very insightful recommendations for the chapter on *Tales of Times Now Past*. My thanks also go to Michiko Tsuneda, who was my research assistant in the final stages of this project. Most of all, I want to thank Burton Watson, the translator, for his patience and diligence over these years.

With the exception of the illustration from the *Konjaku monogatari Picture Scroll* (reprinted by permission of the National Diet Library), all the illustrations for *Tales of Times Now Past*, *A Collection of Tales from Uji*, and *Tales of Renunciation* are from Edo-period wood-block editions of those texts, reprinted with the permission of Komine Kazuaki.

Haruo Shirane

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

The translations are from the following sources: Izumoji Osamu, ed., *Nihon ryōiki*, Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai 30 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996); Ikegami Jun'ichi, ed., *Konjaku monogatari shū*, Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai 33–37 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993–1999); Miki Sumito et al., eds., *Uji shūi monogatari*, Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai 42 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1990); Nishio Kōichi and Kobayashi Yasuharu, eds., *Kokon chōmonjū*, Shinchō Nihon koten shūsei 59, 76 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1983, 1986); Koizumi Hiroshi et al., eds., *Hōbutsushū*, *Kankyo no tomo*, *Hirasan kōjin reitaku*, Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai 40 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993); Nishio Kōichi, ed., *Senjūshō*, Iwanami bunko 30 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970); and Watanabe Tsunaya, ed., *Shasekishū*, Nihon koten bungaku taikai 85 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1966).

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INTRODUCTION TO ANECDOTAL (*SETSUWA*) LITERATURE

Setsuwa (anecdotes), which literally means “spoken story,” refers to stories that were first orally narrated and then written down. These recorded stories were often retold, resulting in new variations, which were again recorded. The result is that *setsuwa* frequently exist in multiple variants, with a story usually evolving or serving different purposes over time. In being told, written, retold, and rewritten, these *setsuwa* presume a narrator and a listener, but not necessarily a specific author. *Setsuwa* in this sense began as early as the Nara period (710–784), with the *fudoki* (local gazetteers), which gathered spoken or written stories from the provinces and recorded them in *kanbun* (Chinese-style writing) for the central government. *Setsuwa* as spoken-and-heard narration was stressed by Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), the founder of *minzokugaku* (folklore studies) in Japan, who sought out “literature before the written word” and who was influential in the modern reevaluation of *setsuwa*. However, premodern *setsuwa* survive only in written form, sometimes in *kanbun* prose, providing a glimpse of the storytelling process but never reproducing it.

Another significant context of *setsuwa* is the *setsuwa-shū* (collection of *setsuwa*), a written genre that had its own structure and conventions, inspired in part by Chinese encyclopedias (*leishu*). In contrast to the first meaning of *setsuwa*, which has its roots in oral storytelling, the *setsuwa-shū* was a literary form that provided a structured worldview and that categorized that world into different spheres and topics. For example, *Tales of Times Now Past* (*Konjaku monogatari shū*, ca. 1120), which contains close to a thousand stories, divides the world into India, China, and Japan, and separates Japan into Buddhist and secular spheres, with the latter being

further divided into such secular topics as warriors, poetry, thieves, and humor. The first such *setsuwa* collection is *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan* (*Nihon ryōiki*, ca. 822), a Buddhist anthology that was compiled and edited by Keikai in the early Heian period (794–1185). The *Nihon ryōiki* probably functioned as a sermon manual or sermon digest for Buddhist priests who used the stories to appeal to a broad audience. Although we sometimes know the editors of *setsuwa-shū*, such as Priest Mujū (1226–1312), the editor of *Collection of Sand and Pebbles* (*Shasekishū*, 1279–1283), the *setsuwa* themselves are anonymous. In short, there are three key elements to understanding *setsuwa*:

- The act of narration (storytelling)
- The act of writing, which records the spoken story or rewrites an earlier *setsuwa*
- The act of editing, which brings together the stories in a certain order or by topic

In late Heian and medieval aristocratic society, when hereditary family schools were established in fields such as *waka* (classical poetry) and music, the secrets of the family school were passed from teacher to disciple or from the head of the family to his successor by means of *kuden* (secret transmissions). When the line of transmission faced extinction, the family secrets were often written in the form of *setsuwa* in an attempt to preserve the knowledge of the past and of the school. In the late Heian period, this resulted in the *Ōe Conversations* (*Gōdanshō*), a *setsuwa* collection that records the stories narrated by Ōe no Masafusa (1041–1111), one of the leading scholars and poets of the time. In 1111, Ōe no Masafusa, at the age of seventy, fearing that the Ōe lineage would disappear with his death, narrated the family secrets to his top disciple, Fujiwara no Sanekane, who took notes, referred to as *kikigaki* (lecture notes; literally, “listen and write down”). The *Gōdanshō* takes the form of a dialogue between the narrator and the listener. This kind of *setsuwa*, which emerged in the late Heian period, was the product of an age in which knowledge about aristocratic culture and its historical precedents was held in high esteem but was quickly disappearing as the aristocracy fell from power. In this regard,

setsuwa can be considered as a form of topical history, a history that is narrated before it is written.¹

The systematic attempt to provide knowledge of the past, particularly of the aristocratic past, is evident in *A Collection of Things Written and Heard in the Past and Present* (*Kokon chomonjū*, ca. 1254), which was edited by Tachibana Narisue, a low-ranking aristocrat and literatus who received the secret transmission on a biwa (lute). In the preface, Narisue asserts that *Kokon chomonjū* begins where *A Collection of Tales from Uji* (*Uji shūi monogatari*, early thirteenth century), the most popular of the *setsuwa* collections in the premodern period, leaves off and is intended to augment the official histories. The collection, whose structure shows the influence of Chinese encyclopedias, covers a variety of topics, beginning with Shinto, Buddhism, government, court matters, Chinese literature, classical poetry, and calligraphy, and ending with plants and trees (section 29) and fish, insects, and animals (section 30).

In contrast to the narrational setting of the *Gōdanshō*, which was based on a vertical teacher–disciple relationship, other *setsuwa* were born out of an open relationship among people from different backgrounds—from commoners to samurai to aristocrats—who gathered to tell or hear stories. This was probably the setting that resulted in the *setsuwa* “How the Demon at Agi Bridge in Ōmi Province Ate Somebody” (27:13), which appears in book 27 of the *Konjaku monogatari shū*. These kinds of stories about demons probably had no particular value for a family or profession, but they were of great interest to those who heard them, and book 27, which is devoted to *oni* (demon) stories, provides a systematic glimpse into this aspect of the world.

Storytelling in the Heian and medieval periods took various forms. One type was the “round-table” format, referred to as *meguri-monogatari* or *jun-no-monogatari* (tales in order), in which participants took turns telling stories, often with a listener who was an aristocrat and could write. In the preface to the *Uji shūi monogatari*, the Senior Counselor (*Dainagon*) of Uji, Minamoto no Takakuni (1004–1077), resting near the Byōdō-in

1. Komine Kazuaki, “*Setsuwa no katachi o tsukamu*,” in *Chūsei no sekai o yomu*, Iwanami seminaabukkusu 69 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1998), 27–29.

Temple at Uji, south of the capital (present-day Kyoto), calls out to passers-by and has them tell their stories, which he writes down. The *Uji shūi monogatari* can be said to derive from Takakuni's *kikigaki* on what he heard by the roadside. This format even pervades the court literature of the Heian period. *The Great Mirror* (*Ōkagami*, late eleventh century), a history written in vernacular Japanese that describes the age of the Fujiwara regents, who controlled the throne and political power in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the rise of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027), similarly begins on a rainy evening when nobles gather before the retired emperor Kazan (r. 984–986) to tell their stories. Frequently, the storytellers met in the evening and told stories into the morning, in a pattern called *tsuya-monogatari* (all-night tales). This custom of round-table or all-night storytelling continued into the Edo (Tokugawa) period (1600–1867) and resulted in such customs as the *hyaku monogatari* (hundred tales), in which each participant told a ghost story and, when all had finished, the candle was blown out, allowing a “real” ghost to appear.

In the famous conversations about women on a rainy night (*amayo no shinasadame*) in the “Broomtree” (Hahakigi) chapter of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, early eleventh century), Tō no Chūjō, Genji, and their male friends take turns telling stories about women whom they have known. As the example of *Genji* suggests, oral storytelling and story listening not only was the source of *setsuwa*, but was incorporated into Heian *monogatari* (court tales). Indeed, one of the major characteristics of Heian and early medieval court tales is the presence of a narrator or narrators through whom the action is viewed and the character's words are heard. Often taking the form of female attendants, the narrators reside within the world of the characters.

Since one of the objectives of such *setsuwa* collections as the *Konjaku monogatari shū* of the late Heian period and *Transmissions from Three Countries* (*Sangoku denki*, early fifteenth century), edited by Gentō, was to provide an encyclopedic worldview—centered on India, China, and Japan—they gathered stories from these countries. *Tales of China* (*Kara monogatari*, ca. 1165), perhaps edited by Fujiwara no Shigenori (1135–1188), is a collection of adaptations, in the style of *uta-monogatari* (poem-tales), from Chinese texts such as *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*, Jp. *Shiki*), *Book of*

Han (Hanshu, Jp. *Hansho*), Meng qiu (Jp. *Mōgyū*),² and *Collected Works of Bo Juyi* (*Boshi wenji*, Jp. *Hakushi monjū*). In *Sangoku denki*, from the Muromachi period (1392–1573), a Buddhist priest from India, a layperson from China, and a person from Japan tell stories about their respective countries. The Chinese had already translated parts of Buddhist scriptures and stories from Sanskrit into Chinese, and they were then transmitted to Japan. These translations from the Chinese were, in turn, orally narrated and written down again. The tales from India and China in the *Konjaku monogatari shū* had been circulated and narrated before being recorded and often differ significantly from their Chinese sources. Given the nature of *setsuwa*, which were not concerned with the notion of an authentic original text, these *setsuwa* are best regarded as free adaptations. Japanese knowledge of Chinese historical figures and legends as they appear in medieval *gunki-mono* (warrior tales), such as *The Tales of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*, from mid-thirteenth century onward), was often derived from such *setsuwa* rather than from the original Chinese text or Confucian classic.

The language and style of the *setsuwa* are diverse. The first *setsuwa* collection, the *Nihon ryōiki*, was written in *hentai kanbun* (literally, “unorthodox Chinese”). The *Konjaku monogatari shū* was written in *wakan-konkōbun*, a compact and highly efficient Sino-Japanese style that mixes Chinese graphs with *katakana*, a Japanese syllabary associated with Buddhist writing. The *Uji shūi monogatari* uses *hiragana*, in a more classical style that draws on the court tale tradition. The *Sangoku denki* is written in *kanbun* (Chinese-style writing). These texts, which reveal a wide range of written styles, cannot be said to be direct recordings of oral performances.

In the Heian period, *setsuwa* were regarded by Buddhist priests as a means to spread Buddhism and make it accessible to an audience that could not read Buddhist scriptures. This partially accounts for the large number of Buddhist-centered *setsuwa* collections in the late Heian and early Kamakura (1183–1333) periods. The editors, such as those of the *Konjaku monogatari shū*, were interested in China and India not only because they wanted to present a world history but because Buddhism had spread

2. Li Han and Hsu Tzu-kuang, *Meng Ch'iu: Famous Episodes from Chinese History and Legend*, trans. Burton Watson (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1979).

from India through China to Japan. With the rise of Zen Buddhism in the Kamakura period and the emergence of Buddhist leaders such as Eisai (1141–1215), the Rinzai Zen leader, and Dōgen (1200–1253), the Sōtō Zen pioneer, who stressed enlightenment without words and beyond language, the Buddhist attitude toward *setsuwa* as a component of religious education changed, and *setsuwa* were sometimes banned as a tool for teaching.³

The *setsuwa* collections embrace a wide variety of topics—from poetry to violence to sex to humor—and their contents range from folktales about animals and plants to historical legends to myths about gods to accounts about everyday commoner life to stories of the supernatural. If there is a common denominator in this huge variety, it was the attempt by the editors to provide a comprehensive vision of the world and a means to survive in the world. The readers/listeners were expected to learn a “lesson” about some aspect of life. This is apparent in the predilection for didactic endings. The editor or writer/recorder gave each *setsuwa* a particular function. The same story may appear in one collection as a Buddhist *setsuwa* and in another collection as a secular *setsuwa*. The didactic endings are particularly prominent in the Buddhist collections, which were attempting to spread the Buddhist gospel or to stress the efficacy of the Lotus Sutra or the power of the bodhisattva Kannon (Avalokiteśvara). The *setsuwa* often end with what are now called *kotowaza*, or aphorisms that provide guidance in navigating life. For example, “On Receiving the Immediate Penalty of an Evil Death for Collecting Debts in an Unreasonable Manner and with High Interest” (*Nihon ryōiki*, 3:26) concludes with the phrase “Those who fail to repay debts that they owe will atone for this by becoming a horse or an ox.” An example of a modern aphorism is *akuin akka* (bad cause, bad results), which means something like “you reap what you sow” and which derives from the Buddhist notion of karmic retribution. The use of stories that have been heard or circulated for pedagogical purposes also was common in medieval *zuihitsu* (free-form essays), such as Priest Kenkō’s *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa*, 1329–1333), some of which closely resemble *setsuwa* collections.

3. Komine, “*Setsuwa no katachi o tsukamu*,” 15–16.

Another major characteristic of *setsuwa* was that they were not confined to the world of the court and the aristocracy in the way that Heian court tales and classical poetry tended to be. Instead, *setsuwa* embraced a wide range of social groups, encompassing commoners, warriors, priests, and aristocrats. The *Konjaku monogatari shū*, compiled in the twelfth century, is one of the first collections that includes stories about warriors, who were emerging as a social class in the Heian period. These anthologies also explore the underworld of thieves, pirates, and social deviants. When compared with the early chronicles, such as the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon shoki*, 720), or the late Heian, Kamakura, and Nanboku-chō (1336–1392) vernacular histories, such as the *Ōkagami* and *The Clear Mirror* (*Masukagami*, 1338–1376)—which focus on the imperial line, the Fujiwara regency, or retired emperors—the *setsuwa* collections offer a broad view of the underside of history.

The *setsuwa* collections also deal with the divine (gods), the supernatural (ghosts, demons, long-nosed *tengu*, and other otherworldly beings), and the world of dreams, which were thought to provide access to the other world, to those not immediately or physically accessible such as the spirits of the dead and gods. Significantly, the storytelling scenes in *setsuwa* are often set near or at a temple or shrine, where the narrators have implicitly close access to divine spirits. In a related fashion, the stories also provide access to the underworld of the erotic and sexual, which often manifested itself in the form of dreams, spirits, and the supernatural. In the *Konjaku monogatari shū*, for example, snakes, which appear in the earlier *Nihon shoki* as gods (such as the god of Mount Miwa), appear as evil serpents and often as phallic symbols. However, in contrast to Heian-period *monogatari*, such as *The Tale of Genji*, which admit to their fictionality, *setsuwa* present the narration as history, as a record of past events, even when these events are about the strange or the miraculous. In the medieval and Edo periods, *setsuwa* collections were generally considered to be a kind of historical record or a type of vernacular Buddhist writing (*hōgo*).

In terms of form, the *setsuwa* differ from court tales and military chronicles in their brevity, rarely extending beyond five or six pages. They tend to be action-oriented, plot-centered, externally descriptive, and compact, often focusing on a single event or a limited chain of events. The

collections, by contrast, can be very large—such as the *Konjaku monogatari shū*, with over a thousand tales—have complex thematic structures, and attempt to be comprehensive and historical in coverage. Like the poems in a poetry anthology, the individual *setsuwa* thus can be read both independently and as part of a subgroup of a book (*maki*) or section, in which each story is a variation on a theme such as Kannon, humor, or demons. Within each book, furthermore, successive tales are often linked by a shared topic or motif.

In the late medieval period, the *setsuwa* genre came to be overshadowed by a new genre, the *otogi-zōshi* (Muromachi tale), a longer narrative form that incorporates elements of the Heian court tale and draws on many of the same sources as the *setsuwa* collections. The *setsuwa* collections, however, saw new life in the Edo period when they were printed for the first time, widely read, and compiled anew. Throughout their history, *setsuwa* have provided a constant and deep source of material for other genres, such as the *nikki* (literary diary), *monogatari*, *gunki-mono*, historical chronicles, *nō* drama, *kowakamai* (ballad drama), *kyōgen* (comic theater), *otogi-zōshi*, and *sekkyō-bushi* (sermon ballads). A closely related genre is the warrior tale (such as *Heike monogatari*), which often integrates various shorter *setsuwa* into a longer chronological narrative that traces the arc of a particular war.

In contrast to Heian classical poetry and court tales, which were canonized in the form of the *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems*, ca. 905), *The Tales of Ise* (*Ise monogatari*, tenth century), and *The Tale of Genji* in the late Heian period, the *setsuwa* collections were not considered serious literature for most of the premodern period and were not the object of commentary or used in school textbooks. The *Uji shūi monogatari* became popular in the Edo period, but the *Konjaku monogatari shū* appears to have been totally neglected until the modern period. It was not until the twentieth century when the *setsuwa* collections drew the attention of modern novelists such as Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927)—who adopted and combined the *setsuwa* in such noted modern short stories as “Nose” (Hana) and “Rashōmon”—that *setsuwa* collections such as the *Konjaku monogatari shū* became part of the Japanese literary canon and