

# A Female Monster in Medieval Japan: The influence of Otogizōshi “Tsuchigumo Sōshi” on noh play *Tsuchigumo*

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## Introduction

If there was not the picture scroll version of Otogizōshi “Tsuchigumo Sōshi,” the famous noh play *Tsuchigumo* would not be produced. The impact of Otogizōshi influenced a variety of artistic performances, and the noh play *Tsuchigumo* is one of them.

Originally Otogizōshi descended from elements of Monogatari and Setsuwa, which flourished in the Heian and Kamakura periods. In the medieval age, Otogizōshi opened their fantasy worlds to everybody. They were for all classes of people, and their abundant and curious illustrations had a great impact especially on commoners, which allowed Otogizōshi to retain their broad popularity. With Otogizōshi’s human context and entertaining narrative form, everyone was able to appreciate and enjoy them regardless of the era or the location in which they lived. Because of Otogizōshi’s openness, everybody including noh writers and actors enjoyed its world.

## Otogizōshi

Otogizōshi comprise a Japanese literary genre. They are also called Muromachi Tales and sometimes translated as “companion tales/books.” There are more than 400 short tales which were composed by unknown writers roughly from the early 14th to the early 17th centuries.<sup>1</sup> It was the new tendency of medieval literature to express commoners’ tastes. Otogizōshi have thematic diversity: myth, legends, traditional folktales, historical incidents, religious belief, and so on. Many of their subjects are amusing, fantastic, and often weird. Otogizōshi’s endless range of characters include aristocrats, warriors, clergy, avatars of gods or buddhas, commoners, animals acting like human beings, spirits, monsters, plants, and nonhuman beings like yōkai. Sometimes the stories are set in foreign countries and imagined lands, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Northern and Southern Courts (1336-1392), Muromachi, and early Tokugawa periods.

other worlds like Heaven and Hell.

Before the appearance of *Otogizōshi*, there was the literary tradition of the aristocratic Heian and Kamakura periods. *Monogatari*, the long narrative, flourished among the nobles. *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu in the 11th century is one of the most famous archaic narratives. In contrast to *Monogatari*, which was read in aristocratic society, *Otogizōshi* were written in plain and colloquial Japanese. Medieval Japan was a war-torn climate in great political instability, in which people couldn't afford to enjoy long narratives.

With the emergence of samurai / warriors the nobility lost its power, and *gunkimono* or warrior tales appeared in *Otogizōshi*, in which famous and powerful warriors vanquish monsters and ogres. These tales show the military prowess of famous warriors.

One of the most famous works is “*Shutendoji* /The Tale of the Drunken Ogre.” It tells the story of the mighty imperial warrior Minamoto no Raikō/Yorimitsu (948-1021) and his retainers, who vanquish the *Shutendoji*, the demonic ogre notorious for abducting noble maidens from the capital of Kyoto and imprisoning them within his palace on Mount Oeyama. Ordered by the emperor, Raikō and his retainers go to the ogre's palace disguised as *Yamabushi*/mountain monks and defeat *Shutendoji* and other ogres. Plate 1 shows the scene in which Raikō cuts off *Shutendoji*'s head. Finally, the maidens are safely rescued from the lair of *Shutendoji*.

The tale's transcribed versions number over 100, which reveals its extraordinary popularity.



Plate 1. Kanō Motonobu, “*Shuten-dōji emaki* (The Tale of the Drunken Ogre),” Set of three handscrolls, 1522, Suntory Museum of Art

Raikō is on the side of imperial authority; on the other hand, the ogre *Shutendoji* represents those who defy authority. Raikō is an idealized warrior and was admired especially by the warrior class. The commoners enjoyed their exploits through looking at the pictures. Thus people's interest in *Otogizōshi* illustrated scrolls spread throughout Japan in the Warring States Period (1467-1573).

Another characteristic of *Otogizōshi* is that they have non-human protagonists, that is, animals, insects, plants, and even objects. In *Otogizōshi*, they humorously act like

human beings and engage in everyday human activities. It is interesting to see interactions between humans and non-humans. For example, in “Nezumi Sōshi (The Tale of the Mouse),” the mouse lord seeks salvation from the animal realm and prays that he can marry a human woman. Through marriage, he believes that he can be reborn as a human. At the Kyoto temple Kiyomizudera, which is famous for its Kannon belief, he fortunately meets a beautiful princess and realizes his dream. But poor mouse lord! Learning his real identity, she runs away from him.

Some of the most famous non-human beings are household furnishings and pots. If they are used by humans for fewer than 100 years and are discarded, they transform into *tsukumogami*, a kind of yōkai. Their parade is depicted in the handscroll format, such as “Hyakkiyagyo (The Night Parade of a Hundred Demons).” Illustrations of these weird creatures were tremendously popular among the people at that time.

#### “Tsuchigumo Sōshi”

In another of Minamoto no Raikō’s monster-hunting tales which belongs to Gunkimono/warrior tales, “Tsuchigumo Sōshi (Picture scroll of an earth spider),” Raikō vanquishes Tsuchigumo, a gigantic supernatural female spider. Initially the spider disguises itself as a beautiful woman and then reveals her real identity, holding numerous skulls of her victims inside her body. Though the cannibalistic spider is regarded as an evil being, it is depicted as comical as well as weird. This story also has an entertainment element.

#### A beauty turns into a monster in “Tsuchigumo Sōshi”

The oldest “Tsuchigumo Sōshi” picture scroll, which is written and painted in the 14th century, is housed in the Tokyo National Museum. I follow the plot of this version of “Tsuchigumo Sōshi.”

The story begins thus: “Minamoto no Raikō, descendant of the emperor, was renowned as a courageous, daring, and resolute warrior.”<sup>2</sup> One day in Autumn Raikō goes to Rendaino in Kitayama located outside of Kyoto with his retainer warrior Watanabe no Tsuna. There they happen to see a skull floating through the air. Thinking it mysterious, they follow it and find it entering into an ancient and decaying house in a place called Kaguraoka, which is a haunted mansion. First they find a weird 290 year old woman and then yōkai such as a nun with a tremendously

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<sup>2</sup> From the text.

large head and lots of grotesque animal-like creatures. At dawn, unexpectedly a mysterious, beautiful woman with big eyes appears---her eyes seem like those in modern Japanese girl's comics. Dazzled by her beauty, Raikō loses his calm. Suddenly she throws ten or so cloud-like white balls at him. Though almost blinded by them, Raikō cuts them with his sword, but the tip of his sword is broken and it disappears. He finds that her blood remains on the grip of his sword. Though her figure has disappeared, she has left a puddle of her blood on the floor which has been streaming from her body. Following the trail of the blood, Raikō and Tsuna reach a cave in the mountain, where they find a gigantic monstrous spider about 200 feet tall---the description is different from the picture in the scroll (see Plate 2). The spider struggles to fight to kill Raikō and Tsuna. Continuing attacking, at last Raikō decapitates her head, from which 1990 skulls and numerous small spiders as large as human beings pop out of her body. They seem to be her children.



Plate 2. "Tsuchigumo Sōshi," The Kamakura Period, 14th century, Tokyo National Museum

### Who is Tsuchigumo?

The Yamato imperial court in which Minamoto no Raikō belonged as subject to the emperor had to vanquish the inhabitants beyond the reach of the emperor's control to rule Japan. Tsuchigumo was the generic appellation of those inhabitants. It was told that their physical features were different from those of the Yamato tribe--their arms and legs were longer, and they had a custom of dwelling in caves. That is why they were called the Tsuchigumo (earth spider) tribe. They were thought to be less-cultivated native inhabitants.

What is written in *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* (the oldest chronicles of Japan) is: The Tsuchigumo tribe in old Japan were the people who were eliminated under the reign of the Yamato imperial court. They were regarded as wild barbarians. From the viewpoint of White Anglo-Saxon Americans, their situation is similar to the Native Americans. What we call history is the conqueror's history. Japanese history is not

written from the Tsuchigumo tribe's point of view. In the first place the Tsuchigumo tribe were living peacefully, but the more powerful latecomers the Yamato Imperial Court eliminated the Tsuchigumo tribe without legitimate reason.

In *Hizen no kuni Fudoki* (account of the topography of Hizen province),<sup>3</sup> there is an episode in which Emperor Keikō proceeded to Hizen no kuni (Hizen province) in Kyushu to subjugate the Tsuchigumo tribe. In the account we learn that he kills Princess Yasome at Omina Mountain. She is thought to be a female leader of the tribe, or a daughter of its head. What impresses us is that their chief was female.

There are episodes of the Tsuchigumo tribe in *Bungo no Fudoki* (account of the topography of Bungo province), *Hitachi no Fudoki* (account of the topography of Hitachi province), *Higo no kuni Fudoki* (account of the topography of Higo province), *Hyuga no kuni Fudoki* (account of the topography of Hyuga province), *Settsu no kuni Fudoki* (account of the topography of Settsu province), *Mutsu no kuni Fudoki* (account of the topography of Mutsu province), and *Echigo no kuni Fudoki* (account of the topography of Echigo province) as well.

In the fictional story world, they are not people but monsters which must be eliminated. For the Yamato imperial court, these inhabitants had to be evil and horrible. That is the process of the production of the monstrous earth spider, Tsuchigumo.

### A mysterious woman in noh play *Tsuchigumo*

In *The Tale of Heike*, there is the following story in "The Chapter of The Sword."

In the summer of the same year, Raikō becomes ill. All the incantations and prayers by the monks and priests fail to cure his illness. Raikō's intermittent fevers continue for more than thirty days. One night a seven-foot tall priest unfamiliar to everyone approaches Raikō's bed and tries to restrain him with ropes. Raikō takes up his sword called Hizamaru<sup>4</sup> and strikes the priest, who then vanishes. As his shitennō (four super warriors) and others rush to Raikō's room they find a trail of blood that leads to a mound in Kitano where there is a giant earth spider. Raikō realizes that his illness has been caused by this earth spider. Raikō and his men impale the spider and transport it to the

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<sup>3</sup> Now in Saga prefecture and Nagasaki prefecture in Kyushu.

<sup>4</sup> The name derives from an episode in which the sword can cut even the knee.

riverside as a warning. Raikō renames his Hizamaru sword Kumokiri (spider-cutting).<sup>5</sup>

The plot of the noh play *Tsuchigumo* is similar to the episode of “The Chapter of The Sword” in *The Tale of Heike* as I have quoted above.

In the noh play *Tsuchigumo* the exciting scene of Tsuchigumo’s spinning its threads to ensnare Minamoto no Raikō is well known. In this paper, however, I would like to focus on the existence of a mysterious woman in the play. As in “Tsuchigumo Sōshi,” in the noh play *Tsuchigumo* an earth spider appears first in the guise of a mysterious woman. She is called Kochō (Butterfly). Kochō waits on Raikō as a maid. She brings medicine for Raikō who is ill, but actually it does not work. In spite of her nursing, Raikō’s condition does not improve. He is getting worse. It is suggested that Kochō bring medicine for him every day, but it does not seem like a medicine. What we can imagine is that she puts poison in the medicine secretly, which leads Raikō to death. He does not find what she has done to him because he must have felt for her. The following conversation is held between Kochō and Raikō.

Kochō: Excuse me, my lord. I received your medicine from the chief of the medical department. How do you feel today?

Raikō: My soul has grown weaker since yesterday. So does my body. I am now only waiting for my last moment.

Kochō: Please do not say such things, my lord. You have become too anxious right now. Illness is always agony; however, it is cursed most of the time.

Raikō: I therefore do not give up,

Try various diverse cures day and night—I do all I can do.

However, my condition is so serious that I cannot distinguish day and night.

I am too sick to feel the flow of time.

Really, there is nothing that I can do to distract myself.

I can think only of my illness and it makes me more depressed.

The more depression increases, the more the pressure on my chest increases.<sup>6</sup>

“Iro o tsukushite yoru hiru no (Try various diverse cures day and night)” has

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<sup>5</sup> This part is Noriko Reider’s summary. Usually “The Chapter of The Sword” is not included in the popular *The Tale of Heike*.

<sup>6</sup> From the text by the Noh.com.

another meaning: “exhausting love day and night.” In Japanese, “iro” means “love” as well as “various.” Raikō seems to be mesmerized by her.

At night, an unknown priest appears. In spite of his role as a priest, he recites a waka (poem) which was originally recited by Sotohori Iratsume. Through the poem, we see that the priest is a disguised woman, and we find it strange that Raikō recites the latter part of the poem. From his behavior, we understand that Raikō knows who the person is. By reciting the latter part of the song, it shows that Raikō has found the disguised priest is Kochō whom Raikō is in love with, and at the same time he has understood that the one who he loves is a kind of monster related to the spider from the waka (the poem).

Originally this poem appears in *Nihon shoki* on the eighth year in the reign of Emperor Ingyo. Sotohori Iratsume was the wife of the Emperor who was the fourth prince of the ex-emperor Nintoku. At the time Sotohori Iratsume’s beauty was well known. In *Nihon shoki*, it reads: “Otohime’s (Sotohori Iratsume’s) countenance was of surpassing and peerless beauty. Her brilliant color shone out through her raiment, so that the men of that time gave her the designation of Sotohori Iratsume.” Otohime was nicknamed Sotohori Iratsume because of her shining skin.

In *Nihon shoki*, there are two poems composed by Sotohori Iratsume. One of them is put in this noh play *Tsuchigumo*. The poem in *Tsuchigumo* was recited in 419. At that time the Emperor went to Fujihara and secretly observed how matters were with Sotohori Iratsume. That night she was sitting alone, thinking fondly of the Emperor. Unaware of his approach, she made a poem, reciting:

This is the night  
My husband will come.  
The little crab<sup>7</sup> ---  
The spider’s action  
Tonight is manifest<sup>8</sup>

From old times, a spider was considered a good sign in that it brings the person one waits for. The poem by Sotohori Iratsume is one of the oldest examples of such usage. Originally an appearance of a spider as a good sign came from China. It was

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<sup>7</sup> “Little crab” is poetic epithet for spider.

<sup>8</sup> This poem is also included in *Kokin wakashu* (A collection of poems ancient and modern). In *Kokin wakashu*, the last line is: “it manifests in advance.”

a sign that an intimate person, especially a lover, would come. That is why the spider was used as an expression of feeling of love in the Heian and medieval Japan. The female earth spider transforms herself into Kochō and then an unknown priest. And on that night in the guise of the priest, the earth spider throws her thread and tries to tie him up. At that point, Raikō finds her real identity as a killer, and he tries to cut her body with his sword named Hizamaru. But she escapes from his mansion. Raikō orders one of his warriors and asks him to follow the blood she has left and kill her.

In “Tsuchigumo Sōshi,” an earth spider in the guise of a beautiful woman throws a white ball, and in the noh play *Tsuchigumo* an earth spider in the guise of a priest casts white threads to Raikō to trap him.

Why does Raikō let his retainer go to the den of an earth spider? It might be because he understands that he will succumb to the earth spider’s allure if he sees her.

Earth Spider: You must have no idea who I am.

I am the spirit of the earth spider, who has resided in Mount Kazuraki for thousands of years.

I first tried to approach Raikō in order to disturb the world of the Emperor again. Yet you now try to take my life in turn?

In the end she reveals her real identity as an earth spider who has been under the oppression of the Emperor for a long time.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the mysterious woman appears in “Tsuchigumo Sōshi” as well as the noh play *Tsuchigumo*. In *Otogizōshi*, Raikō encounters a beautiful woman and is mesmerized by her. Then she turns from a seductive woman to a destructive female killer, Tsuchigumo. We then find that she is Tsuchigumo in disguise. In the noh play as well, a mysterious woman appears, and Raikō seems to become ill because of her conspiracy. From his words we find that he is in love with her.

The earth spider seems to have femme fatale elements. The femme fatale, the fatal woman—charming and seductive as well as dangerous—is a figure of fascination in a variety of legends, myths, folktales, literary works, and pictures in the west and in the east. Different from ordinary women, she has an immense power. She is not

predictable or manageable. In most cases, however, she is conquered by heroes in the end.

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