Modernization and Dangerous Women in Japan

Onna daigaku (Greater learning for women, 1642) epitomized the misogyny of the Tokugawa social system....[F]emale genitalia, while necessary for reproduction of male heirs, were linked to dull-wittedness, laziness, lasciviousness, a hot temper, and a tremendous capacity to bear grudges. (1)

EDO JAPAN, FEMME FATALES, AND MYTH

Group-fantasies of femme fatales are common in Japanese history. The image of an endangered male encountering, or fleeing from, or in the clasp of a dangerous woman is prominent even in Japanese mythology. Before examining mythic motifs, however, we turn to the social environment in which the myths were created as a means of deciphering their meaning.

Edo/Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868) was a social world founded on male supremacy and pederasty (2). Gynophobia, male fear of females, was encoded in social mores, as menstruating females were considered kegarawashi (filthy, disgusting, unclean), (3) and social avoidance, except for impregnation, was lauded. Females were described as “borrowed” wombs, (4) socially subordinate, and the property of males. Through arranged marriage, they moved from one i.e., the family of their birth, to another i.e., the family of their marriage. Boys and youths were the preferred sexual partners. Literature heralding pederasty (shudo) was a favorite among the samurai, the clergy, artisans, and merchants. (5). The misogynistic core of Edo culture is exemplified by the publication Onna Daigaku (Greater Learning for Women), which identified the “five defects” of women—“disobedience, anger, slander, jealousy, and ignorance.” Such defects “infected seven to eight women of every ten” and accounted for their inferiority to men. (6)
Given such prejudice and discrimination against females, male dread of that half of the population that has been deliberately subordinated, maligned, and forced to bear the brunt of social existence is hardly difficult to fathom. As owners everywhere fear an uprising of the oppressed, male owners feared retribution from their gender slaves and fantasized about their fury, even as they were fascinated and repulsed at their difference. The patriarchal rationale for avoidance of women was unequivocally delineated in an old fable, the Tale of Dojoji, a parable of female treachery, male deceit, and horrific denouement.

The story concerns a celibate priest who refuses the advances of a beautiful widow, but promises to reward her overtures in the future. Time passes, and when the widow realizes that the priest has lied, she shuts herself in her room and dies. As a maid discovers the body and cries out, “a forty-foot long snake slithers out of her chamber.” News of this uncanny event reaches the priest, who concludes that his broken promise prompted “evil passions” in the widow, transforming her into the poisonous viper. Fearing for his safety, the priest takes refuge in Dojoji temple, hiding within the temple bell, but the monstrous serpent finds him there. “[W]ith tears of blood streaming from her eyes, [the snake] flails the dragon head at the top of the bell with her tail again and again until it bursts into flames.” Later, “only a wisp of ash” is left “where the priest had been.” The misogynistic moral: “the strength of evil in the female heart” is the reason that “the Buddha strictly forbids approaching women”. (7) In other words, women are poisonous monsters whose evil passions incinerate the wary male. Their ardor is lethal. Gynophobia is rational. It saves lives. Celibacy or boys are better.

Although Edo Japan was based on male dominance and fear of women, a gynarchy of females regulated family life, under the supervision of the grandmother. She, rather than the mother, was in control of the children and their care. Childrearing functioned at a primitive mode, for “care” was premised on infanticide (mabiki), abortion, (8) and abandonment as means of decreasing the surplus or unwanted population. (9) Dreading pollution and feminization, (10) males abstained from participation in birthing and child-rearing. Instead, the gynarchy bore day-to-day responsibility for rearing the children, and most of the time, women—mothers, grandmothers, and midwives—carried out the destruction of Japanese infants and children. The means of killing were varied. Infants were stabbed, hanged, buried alive in manure heaps, bashed with a mallet, thrown into the sea or rivers or toilets, drowned in tubs, suffocated with damp paper or the placenta or between the mother’s breasts, crushed between the knees, or
thrown away for animals to devour. (11) Edo filicidal love enjoyed such success that the population of Japan remained virtually level “from the early eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century”—the only such period in the history of Japan. (12) Despite such devastation, nevertheless, many children lived.

Children became persons on their seventh birthday in Japan, but could be killed with impunity until that time. (13) Various forms of abuse might be inflicted upon these nonpersons. The customs of co-sleeping and co-bathing (14) provided opportunities for sexual seduction and assault on the young, sacrificing their innocence and trust to the desires, whims, and sexual depredations of adults. Such activities libidinally enslaved children to the family, inhibiting the development of autonomy and promoting “maternal” wrath and fantasies of female fury. Endogamous marriage to relatives—so common that it produced a high incidence of birth defects, (15) compounded familial bondage. Outside the family, boys were available for shudo for high-status males, (16) while girls might be sold into prostitution or sent to work as nursemaids. (17) Familial tyranny over Japanese children was nowhere more apparent than in the phenomenon of shinjyu (murder-suicide), where the culture assumed that parents and children were one; consequently, it was deemed perfectly appropriate that children be slaughtered by a suicidal parent. (18) As nonpersons, children had no rights. They could be treated in whatever way adults deemed fit, and disciplinary measures were doubtless often crude and cruel, featuring beatings, starvation, ridicule, scarification, and terrorizing. (19)

The psychological and emotional consequences of such treatment are readily discernible in Japanese myth, where archetypal monsters inflict devastation on gullible males. In an episode from the Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters) for example, Izanami, the primal mother in Japan’s creation mythology, inhabits “the domain of death” and is said to constitute “the very embodiment of desire and defilement”. Going in search of his beloved, Izanagi carries a torch to light the way and could only get to her by pushing into a “forbidden chamber.” There he finds Izanami stretched out before him—“little more than a rotting corpse, her decomposing body squirming with maggots.” Discovering that Izanami had given birth to eight thunder deities, Izanagi is terrified and flees. Inzanami is infuriated at her lover’s rejection and determines to stalk him relentlessly “with a cohort of hags.” (20)

The coital and deadly overtones of this story are, of course, apparent, but they are especially telling when viewed from the perspective of Japan’s battered and traumatized children, exposed to death and devastation, sexu-
ality and servitude, simply because of their familial membership. The myth seems little more than the nightmares of childhood writ large. Deadly and despicable erotic liaisons, carrying a torch for the female goddess, the sight and stench of a decomposing body, fleeing to escape the clutches of the furious cohort of hags (gynarchy)—commonplace experiences of family life in Edo that, minimally disguised, compose the psychological foundation of the hero’s adventures in Japanese myth.

Also included in the mythology of terrible females, the mountain crone, yamamba, is a loathsome outcast who personifies “the danger of the uncontrollable, ravenous female.” The origin of the yamamba trope is unknown, but one suggestion is that young girls who were pregnant with illegitimate children would slip off to the mountains to deliver their babies. (21) Personifying “the engulfing nature of female physiology,” the versatile yamamba also symbolizes the “perfect wife,” who is attractive, obedient, nurturing, and, ironically, does not eat—until, that is, her husband discovers a “giant mouth on the top of her head.” This mouth “can easily be connected to the mouth at the other end [of her body]—neither of which ...is easily satisfied.” (22) Exuding power and inducing anxiety in males who encounter her, the yamamba is a deviant who violates social rules, turning the world topsy-turvy, and suddenly, the “nurturer becomes the murderer.” (23)

Turning the world right-side-up again, the nurturer-murderer seems an excruciatingly apropos appellation for the childhood experiences of Japanese children, bedeviled by mabiki, abandonment, and abortion. According to one report from the Edo era, for example, in two northern provinces alone “no less than 60,000 to 70,000 infants are killed annually”. (24) From the child’s point of view, engagement with maternal-like beings evokes pleasure and horror. Life depends on these beautiful but fearsome creatures, who are capable of fulfilling puerile needs, but who also evoke terror by their monstrous deeds. (25) These are literally “killer mommies”, and the split-off components of a child’s ambivalent feelings toward mama become mythologized group-fantasies. After such brutal childhood encounters, few adult males would dream of genital rendezvous in the clutches of such gendered fiends.

It is important to note the yin-yang of generational life. Edo society was founded on reciprocal victimization between the generations. The gynarchy, wronged by misogynistic males, discharged their frustrations, passion, and aggression onto targets of opportunity: The child. In turn, child then grew up to be the man who fears, subordinates, and vilifies women. Or, the child became the woman who, growing up, internalized the tradition of subordination, resented its sting, and inflicted her pain on the next generation.
MEIJI JAPAN

Japan's introduction to modernity began in trauma. Edo was primarily a nation of peasants and fisherman. The shock precipitated by the arrival of Admiral Perry (1853–4) became the catalyst for urbanization and industrialization. Initial responses to Perry have been described as “panic”. (26) The arrival of the Black Ships triggered a “profound anxiety” with “enduring consequences”. (27) The four ships evoked “dread” in Japanese bystanders, some likening them to “monsters” belching smoke, some describing them as “castles that moved freely on the water”, while others claimed they were “as large as mountains,” but “moved as swiftly as birds”. (28)

Like peoples everywhere, the Japanese were ethnocentric. All agreed that the Japanese “differ[ed] completely from and... [were] superior to the peoples of ...all other countries”. (29) Perry's intrusion challenged Edo's certainty, even as the white skins were ridiculed. Westerners were described as “beasts that merely look human” or “demonlike monsters” or “devils”. Much was made of the foreign meat-eaters, who failed to bow, rarely bathed, “blustered and bragged”, who were rumored to “lift their legs before urination”, and to “use their canine-like penises as lasciviously as the dogs to whom they were believed to be related” (30)

After the signing of treaties favoring the United States, anti-foreign feeling ran high. One partisan wrote in 1861, “...by obtaining an imperial rescript to kill and expel barbaric aliens, let patriots throughout Japan sweep away the stinkers with repugnant odor”. Another called for citizens to begin “attacking and expelling the 'burglars' at once”. (31) Ethnocentric bravo to the contrary, however, Japanese leaders understood the military and technological challenges that Edo faced. As early as 1858, a scholar had written that the only way for Japan to cope with the West was to “imitate [the] good things which the enemy has”. Japan sought to find a way of Westernizing while retaining the essence of Edo tradition. *Wakon yosai* (Japanese spirit, Western skill) (32) was the compromise that became policy. Japanese missions were dispatched to the West to study the beasts' alien science and technology so that Japan might compete. In the midst of such monumental beginnings, the government was reorganized and power was consolidated. The Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) gradually transformed feudal Japan into a nation state and grafted onto the government a religious ideology that proclaimed the emperor as god-leader and his subjects as divine children. (33)

By the late 1870s and 1880s, industrialization and urbanization were well under way. Peasants, previously tied to the land, began to move to urban environments. The barter economy diminished, as a money system emerged. Capitalist profits became a means of upward social mobility. A
broader accumulation of wealth was discernible. Consumer items, often from the United States, were featured in store windows. Factories sprang up, workers (often female) were hired, and manufacturing began to play a greater role in the economy. The production of steel and modern ships became significant indicators of Japanese progress. Unionization was championed and decried. People read daily newspapers. Women’s groups organized and debated and protested the status of women. “Progress” and “change” in cities began to challenge the traditionalism of the countryside. The government encouraged citizens to give up their old ways of life and adopt Western ways.

Also in Meiji society, the status of women changed. The Education Ministry published *Meiji Greater Learning for Women*, an 1887 tract which declared that the traditional Japanese woman should be educated, frugal, and run the household. The Ministry decreed that an adult female’s role should be that of “Good Wife, Wise Mother”. A woman’s place was in the home. The Japanese woman was “a civil servant”; and the home, “a public place where private feelings should be forgotten”. Gradually displacing grandmothers, mothers became the domestic authority within the family. They became the drill masters of domesticity. Their duty was not to love their children and develop their potential, but to make them into obedient subjects of the emperor. (Infants were still slaughtered in *mabiki*; fetuses, aborted; children, abandoned—though the extent of the carnage diminished. Institutionalized *shudo* had ended. Children were still members of the family, not individuals. Discipline remained harsh and punitive. Education was stressed, but girls continued to work as nursemaids, or in the factories that were springing up.

Industrialization and urbanization eroded the ideal of the woman in the home, even as it was promulgated. As females moved outside the home to work, they experienced the world differently and revealed in their newfound freedom and autonomy. Shopping allowed choices for those who never before had any. Magazines provided pictures and articles for living fashionably. Women’s groups lobbied for female equality. Novelty became desirable, rather than deviant. And into this milieu came the stories of the poison woman, a sexually aggressive, murderous and, to Japanese readers, an absolutely mesmerizing figure.

As Meiji Japan was shocked by the massive alterations wrought by modernity, a genre of group-fantasies regarding women began to appear in novels, magazines, newspapers, and other venues. Fraught with fascination and anxiety, these shared images of the “poison woman” (*dokufu*) were wildly popular. Poison women were actual people who became
media sensations because of their deadly deeds. They killed people, sometimes literally poisoning unsuspecting males, but more generally committing murder or robbery or both. Altogether around twenty women are remembered in this category, far fewer than the number of male murderers, of course, but what was so appealing about poison woman stories was their scandalous sexuality, autonomy, and freedom. The most popular was Takahashi Oden, or “Demon” (yasha) Oden. (37) Her story offers a glimpse of how women in Japan came to be seen as a barometer of changing times and the dangers of straying from Japanese tradition.

Oden married a man who became ill with leprosy and died. It is unclear whether she poisoned her husband to be rid of financial burdens, or whether the poisoning was accidental. Either way, Oden was not tried for the death of her husband. Rather, she became involved in the silk trade and met and lived with Ogawa Ichitaro. Using her wiles, she convinced another man, Goto Kichizo, to invest in silk and tried to procure a loan from him to ease her lover's financial difficulties. One night, Oden apparently lured Kichizo to bed, and while he was asleep, “slit his throat with a blade, stole his purse and fled”, (38) leaving behind a note that claimed that Kichizo's murder was a revenge killing for his murder of her elder sister. Eventually, Oden was tried, convicted, and beheaded for Kichizo's murder.

Echoing the femme fatale discourse emerging in Western countries which associated female sexuality with evil and inherent biological inferiority, (39) Oden's murderousness was said to be the result of heredity. It was alleged that she inherited “a congenital evil nature” from her mother, whose own inherently “promiscuous nature” doomed her daughter to a life of crime. Fledgling biological and physiological discourse contended that Oden's origins “literally began to infect her brain like a cancer”. (40) Further, in a changing world, women's movement outside the home was suspect. Demure women were proper, they knew and stayed in their place; aggressive women were criminals. Inherent in poison woman stories was a critique of change, a deep disquiet, even panic, at the reality of change. (41)

An earlier poison woman story of street minstrel Omatsu had also featured the importance of heredity. A poison woman from an outcast group, she worked as a street performer, supporting herself by serenading those “enamored of her beauty and voice”. She took a lover, and the two swindled a soldier. After a law was passed that ended discrimination against outcasts, she dreamt of marrying into a better life. However, her innate tendency toward criminality doomed her to lechery and eventually to murder. (42) Explanations of Omatsu's deviance emphasized that, by nature, she was “an untrustworthy whore”, unworthy of Meiji laws according
freedom to outcasts. Her downfall was framed as "a natural outcome of her 'polluted' origins". Indeed, it was declared that "[t]he poison woman does not progress to a higher, more civilized state but rather devolves". The moral: Assertive women are poison and barbarous—"sexuality and aggressiveness in woman leads to the corruption of the self and the state". (43) Thus, the poison woman group-fantasies were cautions against women's emergence into society outside the family. Such unfettered female access to social life constituted a threat to an ordered social existence.

INTERWAR JAPAN, GROWTH PANIC, AND DANGEROUS WOMEN

DeMause has linked dangerous women to growth panic, which, he argues, is the stimulus that pushes nations into war, and in the period preceding World War II, Japan experienced tumult so severe that it is properly designated "growth panic". (44) Throughout the social order there was grave concern that Japan's emulation of the West was toxic, an impurity that would contaminate and destroy the essence of the country. (45) Social and economic conditions were driving the Japanese into a "valley of panic" situated in "hell" (nanraku). Life seemed like a dream, an alien group-fantasy. Peasants were impoverished and starving. (46) To say they were disturbed by, and resentful of, the enrichment and excesses of urban society is an understatement. Rioting was common. In cities, a new psychoclass—middle-class salaried workers, the salaryman class, experienced acute distress. Circumstances were believed to be so dire that one observer called this period "The Salaryman's Panic Time". (47) The salarymen were alleged to be facing starvation, but this was fanciful. Salarymen problems were often psychological and family-centered. They strove for an orderly life, but often found themselves berated at home by their wives. These middle-class women, conjuring up infantile images of dragon mothers in salaried heads, (48) blamed their spouses for domestic distress, faulting them for lack of effort and incompetence, thus intensifying their husbands' alarm. (49) The salarymen found themselves caught between two worlds: the stability and familiarity of the feudal order and the dynamism and excitement of Japan's urban society. Fearful of losing their tenuous place in the new order, they experienced intense anxiety over the possibility of downward mobility and suffered bouts of panic over their future. Nor were they alone, for farmers and peasants felt left out of the new culture and frantic over the future, their survival threatened by the supplanted, alien culture.
In the deMausian scenario, in addition to growth panic, a key indicator of impending bellicosity is the appearance in the media of the group-fantasy of femme fatales, dangerous women, who both arouse and terrify. (50) For interwar Japan, the symbol of all that was appealing and repellent in this new, Westernized world, was the “modern woman” (atarashii onna)—or the “modern girl” (mogu)—an individual who “transgressed social boundaries and questioned her dependence on men” (51) She represented a rebuke to the “Good Wife, Wise Mother” doctrine of the status quo of Meiji society. (52) Instead of the hard-working housewife, she herself worked and made her own money; she was independent and high-spirited—a rebel. “The Japanese woman was no longer secluded in the confines of the household but was out in the open, working and playing alongside men. This was the real transgression: she would not accept the division of labor that had placed her in the home.” (53) In the popular mind, nevertheless, she was identified with lavish consumption and the commodification of everyday life. (54) Urban hedonism, modern girls, and what appeared to be the demise of patriarchal authority seemed to signal the “feminization of culture” and the diminution of male power and prerogatives. (55)

The image of the modern girl was more fantasy than reality—in the sense that few Japanese women actually lived out the modern girl fantasy; however, the media-driven icon did represent “the possibilities for what all women could become”. (56) Ultimately that ideal was expressed in a slogan, “Women Are People, Too” (Onna mo Hito Nari”), (57) and, indeed, steps toward that goal had been taken. Defying tradition, modern girls worked, were independent, cut their hair and bobbed it like their movie star idols, Gloria Swanson and Clara Bow. They wore high-heel shoes and dresses that showed off their legs. They shaved and penciled in their eyebrows. (58) In the minds of many, modern girls were synonymous with hedonism, sexual and social decadence, and fundamental change. (59) The Japanese way of life seemed imperiled, and not surprisingly, reactions to the modern girl were “fraught with anxiety”. She seemed to be shockingly immoral and something of a dominatrix. (60) Modern Japanese life was being called a “parade of goblins”, a madhouse where tradition, the countryside, and less advanced psychoclasses were being sacrificed to the new, urban world of the mogu. In this world, women were omnipresent in the everyday life of urban Japan—dancing, going to movies, lounging in restaurants, window shopping, working here and there, and society itself seemed to be becoming feminized. (61) It was a time of “erotic grotesque nonsense” (ero guro nansensu), i.e., what seemed to many a decadent culture celebrating eros, degradation, and the absurd. (62)
The new ways of the West were frightening to those who could not cope with the freedom and autonomy of the new urban ways. Movement toward autonomy only reawakened the panic they experienced over individuation from their controlling, fearsome dragon mothers. (63) The mode of childrearing in which they were reared had been too archaic to support the change to modernity. (64) The new consumerism, self-gratification, and open sexuality were too threatening. The obsession with modern girls was revelatory. The loathing, fear, and fascination with modern girls among large segments of the population indicated that the split-off components of ambivalent relatedness to mama during childhood had reached critical mass, and imminent explosiveness was at hand. The war against China and the Rape of Nanking were in the offing. (65)

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ENDNOTES

4. Ibid., p. 88.
5. Gregory M. Pflugfelder, Cartographies of Desire, p. 47.
10. Timon Screech, Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700–1820. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999, pp. 81-4. Urbanization and feminization were blamed for men “becoming womanish.” Feminization was linked to the diminution of military conflict. As warfare declined, “instead of sex with boys being a way of avoiding the debilitation of women..., it began to be presented as a way of males avoiding any masculine role at all.” One source estimated that by 1833, the number of male prostitutes (nanshoku) was “down by 90 percent”. Ibid.
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21. Mountain areas have been sites for abandoning children, and this would be especially so if the children were bastards. Adams, “Child Abuse in Contemporary Families,” p. 367. Children were not the only ones abandoned in remote sites. It is alleged that “old women who had outlived their usefulness...were left on mountaintops to die.” Copeland, “Mythical Bad Girls,” pp. 21-2.

22. Ibid., p. 22.

23. Ibid., pp. 22-3.


27. Ibid., p. 3

28. Ibid., pp. 4-5.

29. Ibid., p. 2.

30. Ibid., pp. 28-9.


32. Ibid., p. 47.


34. Ibid., pp. 143-4.

35. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 5.

38. Ibid., pp. 5-6.


41. "Poison woman stories assert again and again that sexuality and aggressiveness in woman leads to the corruption of the self and the state...." Ibid., p. 11.

42. Ibid., pp. 9-10.

43. Ibid., pp. 10-11. The most notorious poison woman was Abe Sada, who became involved in a passionate love affair and ultimately asphyxiated her lover before cutting off his penis. The event occurred in 1936—interwar Japan—and therefore is not discussed in detail here. See Ibid., pp. 104-77.


50. Ibid., pp. 53-7.


52. Ibid., p. 15.


55. Ibid., pp. 39-40.

56. Ibid., p. 49.


58. Ibid., p. 51.

59. Ibid., pp. 67, 72-3, 10.

60. Ibid., p. 51.


62. Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, p. xv. Although, as Silverberg demonstrates, a case can be made for the notion that ero guro nansensu constituted a challenge to forms of Japanese domination.


64. See deMause, *The Emotional Life of Nations*, pp. 245-54.

65. Ibid., pp. 178-225.