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2 *Yūrei*: Tales of Female Ghosts

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To infinite sorrow there is no limit. Beneath that which seems the final depth of misfortune, there may open another yet more frightful.¹

Ghosts appear in the folklore and beliefs of almost every culture of the world. To the Western mind, the word "ghost" conjures up images of barely visible apparitions floating down the hallways of haunted houses, of moans, cries, and rattling chains. The Western ghost, however, is much less common and not as dangerous as its counterpart, the Japanese *yūrei*.

In Japan, it is thought that the spirit of a deceased person travels from this life to an eternal world. However, there is yet another world between these two where the spirit must reside before moving on and becoming an ancestor spirit. This in-between world is uncertain and ambiguous; in this state angry or unhappy ghosts can reappear to wreak havoc and haunt their former residences. Powerfully gripping emotions such as spite, love, loyalty, jealousy, hatred, or sorrow can bring a spirit back into the world of humanity. Once

manifested, the ghost remains until released of its obsession. A great many of these unfortunates are female.

During the Edo Period (1600-1867) a female *yūrei* was conceived of in terms not unlike that of a Western ghost. Artists often depicted her with long straight hair and waving or beckoning hands. Pale clothing with long, flowing sleeves was draped loosely about the seemingly fragile figure, and the head and upper part of the body were strongly delineated. From the waist down, however, the form was misty and tapered into nothingness. One of the earliest ghost pictures of this type was created in the eighteenth century by Maruyama Ōkyo (1733-1795), the founder of the Maruyama-Shijō school of painting.

Ōkyo's scroll painting of *The Ghost of Oyuki* is delicately brushed with light colors on silk, and according to a note in the scroll box by a former owner named Shimizu, the image is of a former love of the artist (Cat. 9).² Shimizu wrote that Ōkyo had a mistress in the Tominaga geisha house in the town of Ōtsu. She died young, and Ōkyo





9 Maruyama Ōkyo, *The Ghost of Oyuki*

mourned her passing. One night her spirit came to him in a dream; unable to get her image out of his mind, he took up the brush and painted this portrait of her ghost. With great control of firm but delicate line, he was able to create an image of haunting beauty.

A heightened interest in such supernatural beings occurred in the Edo period, although tales of ghosts had circulated in Japan for centuries. The common theme that runs throughout many of these stories is that of wronged or jealous women. Included in the classic novel *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, eleventh century) are a number of female ghosts. In one episode, one of Prince Genji's lovers, Lady Rokujō, finds that her intense jealousy of Genji's wife Aoi has led to the separation of her own soul from her body. Rokujō's impassioned spirit possesses the body of Aoi, causing her pain and eventual death. Even after Lady Rokujō's death, her tormented spirit continues to haunt other women in Genji's life.

Ugetsu monogatari (Tales of Moonlight and Rain) by Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) also deals with the theme of female ghosts. In one story a man leaves his wife to make a business journey to Kyoto to sell silk. She is distressed at his departure, fearing that he will not return. Seeking to calm her, he promises to be home by autumn. However, war breaks out, preventing him from returning for some years. When he finally comes home to his village, he finds that his old house is surprisingly intact although the neighborhood is desolate. His wife greets him at the door, aged and tearful. The two share their stories of sorrow and separation and then lay down to sleep. When the husband awakens in the morning he finds that his wife has disappeared. He soon discovers that he has slept with a ghost; his wife had died of grief years ago. Finally, a series of all-night prayers over her grave allows her spirit to rest.

The relationship between the type of suffering the woman endured and the actions of her ghost is a notable element in many of these tales. Often, the harsher the treatment of the victim, the more violent the reaction of the ghost. The nature of the hauntings is also based upon the woman's relationship with her tormentor. In the artworks of this exhibition, female ghosts are depicted with a variety of emotional responses to their suffering.

On the Tōkaidō roadway which ran between Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and Kyoto there is a famous stone called the "Nightly Weeping Rock." The legend of this rock concerns a pregnant woman who was traveling from Nissaka to Kanaya to meet her long absent husband. She was set upon by a thief who ruthlessly murdered her. Her blood fell on a rock nearby; it then became the abode of her spirit and was said to cry out every night. Utagawa Kuniyoshi's (1797-1861) print of this *Nightly Weeping Rock* (Cat. 10) is a dramatic design which shows the sorrowing ghost of the dead woman appearing before her husband, who holds their child in his arms. In this version of the story, the ghost has just handed the baby to her husband and now tells him the story of the murder, and how Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, has rescued the baby and reared it on sweets. The ghost then remains with her husband, assisting him as he takes revenge for her death.

Kuniyoshi draws us into the story with his somber depiction of the meeting between the husband and his deceased wife. The moon shines on the darkened landscape as grasses sway in the wind. The ghost seems to weave through the air, its form lit from within. The transparency of the ghost and of the flame which reflects its movement is an excellent example of the technical expertise so often seen in Japanese prints. The husband grasps the baby with both hands, his eyebrows knitted together in

pain and sympathy for his wife's suffering. His body, however, leans slightly away from the spectre, as if showing fear upon seeing the ghost. Diagonals throughout the picture tie the composition together and heighten the drama of the scene by creating a sense of motion. Similarly, the blue and orange of the flame are repeated in the blue of the man's sash and the orange of the baby's robe, enlivening the scene with repeated contrasting colors.

The story of the weeping rock tells of a relatively passive reaction by a female ghost to injustice. As in Akinari's story, the ghost bemoans her condition and relies upon her husband to free her spirit from its torment. Often these tales of grief and murder are highly moralistic. In the Edo period a woman had little legal recourse or financial resources when threatened with abandonment or abuse. Yet the idea that cruelty to women, especially to wives, was abhorrent is apparent in these tales. The conviction that the tormenting malefactor would pay for his deeds is clear, and was in part an extension of a Buddhist belief that harm to any living creature must be atoned for by the guilty.

An example of a tormentor suffering psychological punishment appears in the well-known ghost story of a maid servant by the name of Okiku. Her master, the samurai Aoyama Tessan, possessed ten precious ceramic plates received from Dutch visitors. He entrusted the keeping of them to the beautiful Okiku, who steadfastly refused to accept his advances towards her. In the course of time the impassioned Aoyama hid one of the plates and suddenly ordered Okiku to produce the whole set. "A hundred times she wearily counted them, but could only find nine. Aoyama then suggested that if she became his mistress he would overlook her supposed carelessness. She refused and he killed her, throwing her body into an old well."³ From that day on,



her ghost would rise from the depths of the well after nightfall, counting slowly from one to nine, and then breaking off each time with a heartrending wail. The continual harassment by the ghost drove Aoyama to distraction until a neighbor agreed to exorcise the well. Hiding beside the well the man waited until the ghost had risen and had begun to count. When she reached the number "nine" the man cried out "TEN!" and the ghost, with a scream, disappeared.⁴

Okiku takes a natural role in the punishment of her murderer by her continual appearance and wailing, persistently reminding the guilty man of his crime. The girl is sympathetically rendered by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892) in a print from the *Thirty-Six Ghosts and Demons* series (Cat. 11). Many of Yoshitoshi's early prints are brutally graphic, but this design reveals the artist's ability to use subtler ways of telling a story. The sad little ghost stands by the well into which she was thrown, framed by tree branches hanging down from above and waving grasses from below. Through her semi-transparent form can be seen the grasses and portions of the well which are behind her. Delicate shades of color such as pink complement the ghost's gesture of sorrow. The print does not suggest a particular moment in the story, but conveys its lonely atmosphere and forlorn mood.

Toyohara Kunichika (1835-1900) adopted a more dramatic approach when illustrating this story in his triptych of 1892 (Cat. 12). He depicted the performance of Ichikawa Danjūrō IX as the cruel samurai in a kabuki theater production of Okiku's story. The format of a vertical triptych, extremely rare in Japan, heightens the drama of this extraordinary scene. Okiku sweeps down from above to pull her master's umbrella inside out, a reference to one version of the story in which Okiku was hung upside down in the well by her

angry master. As with the print by Kuniyoshi, strong diagonals serve to add vigor to the composition. Their juxtaposition leads the eye upward from the startled samurai and his retainers to the avenging ghost, and beyond to the calligraphy which informs us that this play was currently being performed in Edo. As is true of most depictions of ghosts, Okiku is accompanied by the symbol of fire which floats in the upper left of the print.

Not all female ghosts were powerless to react violently to the cruelty they suffered. Avenging ghosts quickly became a major theme in the theater world of the late eighteenth century, when kabuki developed in a more exaggerated and dramatic manner than before. Killings became much more detailed in depiction and ghostly tales of revenge more picturesque. No doubt part of this development had to do with the natural progression of the genre. An increased level of exposure to violence on the stage may have led to a higher level of tolerance, and thus a need for writers and actors to create more graphic scenes in order to produce the shocks and chills that their viewers wanted.

Social conditions may also have led to the increasing number of portrayals of violence during the nineteenth century. In its later years, the Tokugawa shogunate was beset by local rebellions and was not always able to maintain civil order. Physical insecurity and economic troubles helped produce a taste for more overt thrills among the populace; scenes of bloody killings were frequently depicted in kabuki dramas. These scenes were also portrayed in woodblock prints by many nineteenth-century masters, especially those with close ties to the theater. As in the previous century, actors remained among the consistently popular subjects in the world of ukiyo-e, and artists were quick to show the scenes which most excited audiences when performed on stage.

Local tales and newsworthy events often provided inspiration for kabuki playwrights. One famous drama, *Yotsuya kaidan* (The Yotsu-ya Ghost Story), includes the true stories of two murders committed by servants. Each servant had killed his master, but had failed to escape capture. Both of these murderers were executed on the same day. The drama also includes the tale of a samurai's concubine who was having an affair with his servant. When the samurai discovered the infidelity, he murdered the lovers, nailed the bodies to a wooden board, and threw it in the Kanda River. Finally, from legendary sources, the drama incorporates the story of a woman named Oiwa who was betrayed by her husband and died of anger. Her ghost, unable to rest, was said to have haunted her husband and his relatives. These seemingly unrelated incidents came together in Tsuruya Nanboku IV's well-known ghost play.

Yotsuya kaidan is based primarily upon the story of Oiwa. This tragic and gruesome kabuki play opens in the dead of night at the scene of a murder. Iyemon kills the father of his pretty young wife, Oiwa, because her father possesses knowledge concerning evil deeds on Iyemon's part. Iyemon is a *rōnin*, a masterless samurai who has been forced to earn a living as an oilpaper umbrella maker in order to support his delicate wife and newly born child. His troubles destroy his feelings for his wife and he begins to hate her. Temptation appears to him in the form of the granddaughter of a well-to-do neighbor; she is in love with Iyemon and wishes to be his wife. Her grandfather convinces Iyemon to give a "blood-road medicine" to Oiwa to strengthen her. Iyemon hesitates, but then gives way to his passion for the granddaughter, and Oiwa drinks the medicine which in reality is poison.

When the medicine does not immediately kill Oiwa, Iyemon in his desper-

ation seeks to torture her further. Oiwa has few allies, but an old masseur takes pity on her. Holding a mirror before her, he reveals to her that she has been horribly disfigured by the poison. Overcome by the treachery of her husband and her hideous appearance, Oiwa is filled with resentment and anger. The poison and her illness are secondary to the powerful emotions which cause her death.

Shunkōsai Hokushū's (active 1808-1832) *The Ghost of Oiwa* (Cat. 13), was printed in 1826, the same year the play opened at the Sumiza Theater in Osaka, one year after its premiere at the Nakamuraza in Edo. She is recognizable from other female ghosts by her partial baldness (a result of the "medicine" she drank) and by one eye looking up while the other is swollen shut. Her ghostly robe fades away towards the bottom of the print, while the strong lines on the upper part of her body create an upward thrust that not only emphasizes her torso and head, but aids in the illusion of the ghost as being weightless, unbound by gravity. The darker black at the top of the print increases this floating feeling by drawing the eye upward. The woman before death was weak and ill; the lines that delineate her hands, arms, and head are correspondingly delicate, while the deep black of the background emphasizes the blackness of her fate.

As the kabuki play continues, Iyemon realizes that his servant, Kobotoke Kohei, is aware of his master's evil deed. Iyemon accuses Kohei of stealing a treasured family medicine and uses this excuse to brutally murder him, thus destroying the only witness to his crimes. He then crucifies the bodies of Kohei and Oiwa to the two sides of a wooden door, and discards the door in a nearby river.

Believing his troubles to be over, Iyemon prepares to receive his new bride, the granddaughter of his neighbor. The celebration begins, but when





喜好画
北野画

11. Shima no H. koshū. The artist's name.



15 Masatoshi, *Oiwa Emerging from a Lantern*

Iyemon approaches the girl and lifts the veil which covers her head, he discovers the frightful visage of Oiwa. The startled bridegroom draws his sword and, slashing at his bride, severs her head. Horrified as he realizes what he has done, he runs to tell her grandfather only to encounter the ghost of Kohei blocking his way. Again, Iyemon strikes in his defense and cuts off not the head of the ghost he sees, but that of his neighbor.

Iyemon discovers that whatever he does and wherever he goes, the spirits of the dead haunt him relentlessly. Oiwa's face appears everywhere, even in a lantern which sways over his head. The scene is depicted in a print by Shunkōsai Hokuei (active 1829-1837) entitled *The Lantern Ghost of Oiwa* (Cat. 14). Based upon a Hokusai design, this print shows the lantern catching fire and assuming the visage of the mutilated Oiwa. Her husband turns in alarm to respond to the lantern's threat as it hangs over his head. The lantern appears to sway as if a breeze were moving through the grasses at the lower left, yet the effect is one of arrested action. On

the lantern's front is a holy Sanskrit letter, while written on the back are the words *Namu Amida Butsu* (Hail to Amida Buddha), a Buddhist chant often recited just before death. Like the setting in the kabuki play, the background is dark so that the transformation of the lantern into Oiwa becomes especially horrifying.

An unusual netsuke depicts the same scene (Cat. 15). It is shaped like a lantern, with Oiwa emerging from one side with flames around her. Holes appear throughout the lantern, seemingly fire-eaten areas that leave faces or parts of faces staring out at the viewer. A grinning monster on another side stretches his mouth wide with his fingers, like a child. Teeth are shown on each of the three main faces of the lantern, a triad created by Oiwa, the grimacing monster, and a one-eyed demon. A single large eye stares at the viewer from the opening at the top of the lantern. The *netsuke* has been carved to be viewed from any angle, with a ghastly face always visible to haunt the wicked.

As with many ghost stories, Iyemon's



torture in *Yotsuya kaidan* is largely a manifestation of his own guilt. The climax occurs when he seeks peace by fishing in a river. To his dismay he finds that he has hooked a large board. When he pulls it out of the water he discovers the bodies of Oiwa and Kohei. Ghostly voices call to him from the corpses as the door turns to reveal them bound to either side. Iyemon is defeated. He confines himself to a cottage at Hebiyama, "Snake Mountain." Yet even here he cannot escape the spirits of the dead. In the print entitled *Hebiyama* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Iyemon hides in his mountain cottage only to find that the ropes and vines around him have come alive in the form of writhing snakes (Cat. 16). Yellow flowers peering through cracks in the wall have the appearance of accusing eyes. Smoke rises from the bottom left to envelop a lantern above Iyemon's head, the black and gray trails turning into long strands of Oiwa's hair. The figure of Iyemon is visibly unnerved and leans away from the apparition. Iyemon is now almost ready to welcome his own death. He meets his end at the hand of his brother-in-law, who thereby avenges all of Iyemon's victims.

The story of Oiwa is perhaps the ultimate Japanese ghost tale, a classic of its genre which is still performed today. The play met with such great success in its own time that the management even scheduled a performance out of season as the finale for a New Year's program. The popularity of the play stems from a variety of factors, including its complex, heartrending, and grisly story line. Oiwa's ghost represents the most active level of supernatural reactions on the part of wronged women. Unlike the woman murdered on the Tōkaidō road or the nagging ghost of Okiku, Oiwa's spirit actively torments and haunts her murderer, pursuing him wherever he goes. Because her torture and death were slow and painful, the amount of

pain she was forced to endure increased the level of her emotional response, resulting in an active and angry spectre which could not rest. Her vengeful spirit pursues Iyemon everywhere, but as is the case with many ghosts, she must rely on the aid of a mortal in order to complete her revenge.

Oiwa's legend follows major precedents in Japanese literature and folklore as well as including elements based on actual events. The drama is filled with universal themes: vengeance taken by kindred upon kindred, murderous adultery, slaying of unrecognized kinsmen, the discovery of the dishonor of a loved one, crime, cruelty, and misfortune. A woman finds herself forgotten, a man discovers that he has married his own sister, and another man must kill his brother-in-law as duty demands.

The level of violence in the story is a reflection of various aspects of the Bunsei era (1818-1829) during which it was written. *Yotsuya kaidan* was first performed in 1825 at a time when social unrest was a concern of the Japanese populace. The drama also reflected an extreme reaction to the repressed position of women in society. They were required to obey their fathers, husbands, and brothers, could not venture out in public alone, and were expected to use a more formal and polite form of speech than their male counterparts. These and other restrictions might have had some bearing on the fact that female ghosts are often particularly vicious in Japanese lore. It is thought that the manifestations of spirits represent a personification of repressed emotions,⁵ and that a direct relationship exists between social conditions and art.⁶ Thus the story of Oiwa is founded on a psychological basis as well as having social and literary precedents.

Psychologically, the tragic element of *Yotsuya kaidan* does not lie only in the suffering of the helpless, but abides also in the mind of the villain who changes from tormentor to tormented, from

powerful to helpless. At each performance, as the drama drew to a close the audience may have come to sympathize with Iyemon. In a society which relied heavily upon a sense of moral obligation and duty, Iyemon's sense of guilt, his mental torture, and his punishment must have been easily understood by the Japanese audience.

In an age of increasing violence and action in the theater, when warrior and ghost stories were becoming extremely

popular, the story of Oiwa had something to appeal to everyone: a black-hearted villain, a beautiful suffering heroine, multiple murders, and ghostly revenge. The author, Tsuruya Nanboku IV, combined fiction with fact, and made use of people's fears and insecurities while catering to their desires to be thrilled and horrified. All the while he was dealing with deep psychological aspects of humankind—the dark side of nature to which we are ever drawn and repelled.

- 1 George Polt, *The Thirty-six Dramatic Situations* (Boston, 1954), p. 31.
- 2 Judging from the brushwork style and the slight damage to the seals, this is a work of Ōkyo's mid to late forties. Another fine ghost painting, believed to be the work of Ōkyo although it has no signature or seals, is in the temple collection of Zenshōji.
- 3 Henry L. Joly, *Legend in Japanese Art* (Rutland, Vermont, 1967), p. 175.
- 4 In other versions of the story, the girl is the daughter of the owner of the plates and is thrown into a well for breaking one of them, or she is a servant who broke one of the plates and is imprisoned, or she is a servant who is falsely accused of stealing a plate by a jealous wife. In a kabuki play version, the lustful samurai is brought to ghostly justice.
- 5 See Thomas Rimer, *Modern Japanese Fiction and Its Traditions* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 3-4.
- 6 See Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979) for further discussion.

