

Hase-Hime Monogatari and the Japanese “Model Woman”

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“The Story of Princess Hase” is a folktale from Old Japan that recounts the early life of a Japanese girl, named Hase, born to the Fujiwara nobility. When the girl reaches the age of five her mother dies and soon after her father Prince Toyonari remarries. His new wife, Princess Terute, is so cruel towards her stepdaughter that she attempts to murder her twice: she personally tries to poison the girl and also commands that Hase-Hime¹ be taken into the mountains where she is to be killed. The servant responsible pretends to obey his Mistress but in fact stays with his wife in the mountains taking care of Hase-Hime. Prince Toyonari searches for his daughter to no avail although they are eventually reunited during a hunting expedition. The evil stepmother, upon hearing this, flees and the Fujiwara family lives happily ever after.

Through an appealing narrative centering on Hase-Hime’s early life, one is exposed to a multitude of socio-cultural aspects pertaining to female model behavior as perceived in the culture of old Japan. Hase-Hime’s rearing to be obedient, diligent, and patient, along with her artistic preoccupations catalogue the fundamentals of feminine decorum, an ideal Japanese women were trained to aspire to. This essay not only investigates the traditional Japanese feminine ethos but also resolves the oxymoron which arises from the possible authority such a woman could bear, and provides information for the origins of the influences formulating the image of a Japanese “model woman.”

Women in Japan have often been presented in Western media as very feminine, demure and quite subservient. This recurrent theme is also encountered in “The Story of Hase-Hime” in the advice of the bed-ridden mother and the actions of the heroine. The audience catches a glimpse of a heart-rending scene of Hase-Hime standing beside her mother’s deathbed.

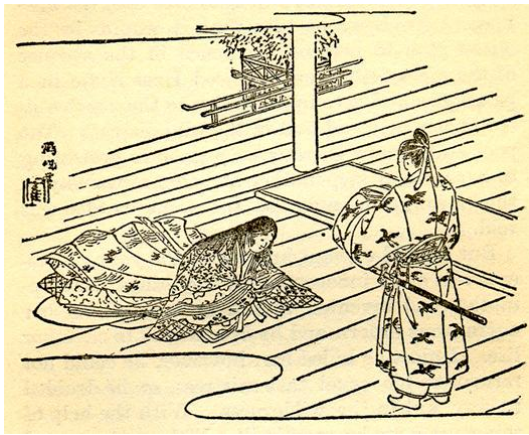
Princess Murasaki's last words to her daughter are delivered with a rare mixture of tenderness and perspicacity; her legacy seems almost too onerous for the tender shoulders of a five-year old girl:

Do your best not to give trouble to your nurse or any other of your family.... be obedient and filial to both [your stepmother] and your father. Remember when you are grown up to be submissive to those who are your superiors, and to be kind to all those who are under you. Don't forget this. I die with the hope that you will grow up a model woman ("The Story of Princess Hase" 73).

Hase-Hime heeds her mother's advice and assumes a very stoic attitude towards her abusive step-mother: "But Hase-Hime bore every unkindness with patience, and even waited upon her stepmother kindly and obeyed her in every way and never gave any trouble, just as she had been trained by her own good mother" ("Princess Hase" 73). The above examples illustrate how central was patience and obedience to a Japanese girl's upbringing. She is imbued with a heightened sense of respect and she is expressly asked to avoid agitating her family. The use of the words "obedient," "filial," and "submissive" define in Hase-Hime's mind the nature of the "model woman" her mother refers to and the little girl does not fail to adhere to them with reverence. These notions are not unique to the folk-tale. Robins-Mowry attributes them to a highly influential book called *Onna daigaku* [Greater learning for women] written in 1672 by Kaibara Ekken, a neo-Confucian moralist. The premise of this book teaches women "to develop a 'virtuous heart' and to strive for 'the only qualities that befit a woman,' which are 'gentle obedience,' 'chastity,' 'mercy,' and 'quietness'". She must observe the rules of decorum about maintaining physical distance between men and women, including her husband and her brothers" (Robins-Mowry 25). Essentially one sees more or less the exact words being repeated: "gentle

obedience,” “mercy” and “quietness” form the axes round which female decorous behavior should revolve.

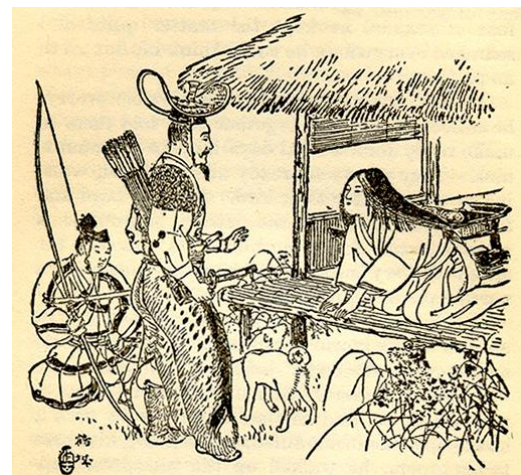
What is more, the two illustrations which accompany the folktale, present something of great interest. As the title page states this compilation of fairytales is “profusely illustrated by Japanese artists” whose visual rendering of female figures reflects the corresponding mental



Picture 1.

perception of women. The first illustration refers to the point in the narrative when Prince Toyonari summons his daughter to inform her of a set task whereby she is to save “the Emperor’s life by the merit of her verse” (“Princess Hase” 78). The second picture depicts the reunion of Hase-Hime with her father during a hunting expedition towards

the end of the storyline. One is apt to observe that in both pictures while the male figure is standing upright the woman is prostrate. Such a striking similarity should not be viewed as fortuitous: the woman offers her obeisance to the man and it is condign. This mental perception of a submissive female is once again compatible with the “Confucian teaching that a woman should obey three men in turn throughout the course of her life: her father in her youth, her husband in her maturity, and her son as head of the household in her old age” (Ben-Ari, Moeran, and



Picture 2.

Valentine 80). Although strictly speaking these images are not professions of obedience they do

constitute implicit yet cogent evidence of a woman's status and of how she was expected to behave.

The formal and rigorous education Hase-Hime enjoys at an early age is aimed to impart her with a sensibility shared amongst Japanese women. Music and poetry feature prominently in these studies as her preferred subjects:

The little Princess was very diligent, and her favorite studies were music and poetry. She would spend several hours practicing every day, and her father had the most proficient of masters he could find to teach her the *koto* (Japanese harp), and the art of writing letters and verse ("Princess Hase" 73).

The choice of music and poetry as subjects is crucial because both cultivate a delicate feeling of style and propriety. Women in the Heian period (c.1000 A.D.), to which the Fujiwara nobility can be historically traced, and especially women of aristocratic descent "were educated in the arts to develop personalities of refinement" (Robins-Mowry 15). An interview with Dr. Kimberly Jones, an Associate Professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona, has yielded the interesting fact that music and poetry were in reality not particularly gendered pursuits: "Poetry, music, and other arts were important for both sexes of the aristocracy to know." This new idea, arising from contextual research, of men too being involved in the arts, shall be discussed later. But first in order to ultimately establish the importance of art in the rearing of a Japanese girl, one must venture to scrutinize each of Hase-Hime's preoccupations individually so as to find further factual evidence attesting to this.

One such further example is Hase-Hime's skillful performance of the *koto* before the Emperor at the age of twelve and the disgrace her stepmother had suffered:

Hase-Hime was a skilled musician though so young, and often astonished her masters by her wonderful memory and talent. On this momentous occasion she played well. But Princess Terute, her stepmother, who was a lazy woman and never took trouble to practice daily, broke down in her accompaniment and had to request one of the Court ladies to take her place. This was a great disgrace, and she was furiously jealous to think that she had failed where her stepdaughter succeeded; and to make matters worse the Emperor sent many beautiful gifts to the little Princess to reward her for playing so well at the Palace (“Princess Hase” 74).

This little excerpt serves a dual purpose. It firstly observes how all the hours put into developing musical proficiency have doubly benefited the little Princess who becomes the recipient of the Emperor’s gifts as well as an object of his admiration. Alice Mabel Bacon, a private American scholar who was the first Western woman to live in a Japanese household, in her book entitled “Japanese Girls and Women,” written at the turn of the last century, does not fail to remark that “Music in Japan is an accomplishment reserved almost entirely for women, for priests, and for blind men” (34). She “sketches” a dainty vignette of a *koto* player, which shows how formalized the playing of the instrument is, thus implying the significance attributed to the knowledge of this skill. The player is described as sitting “before the *koto* on knees and heels, in the ordinary Japanese attitude, and her motions are very graceful and pretty as she touches the strings, often supplementing the strains of the instrument with her voice” (Bacon 36).

The excerpt mentioned earlier serves also in fulminating against the traits of laziness and jealousy as ascribed to the character of Princess Terute. The stepmother unlike Hase-Hime is portrayed as an intemperate woman whose murderous intentions evince her rancorous envy. This

juxtaposition of Hase-Hime's general conduct to that of her stepmother's enhances the story's didactic nature by providing examples of individual characteristics that women should eschew. Indeed, once again in the *Onna daigaku* women are advised to guard themselves "against the 'five worst infirmities' that afflict the female: 'indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness'" (Robins-Mowry 26). Moreover jealousy is cited as cause for divorce: "Seven reasons are given for divorce if she should fail in her husband's house: disobedience, sterility, lewdness, jealousy, leprosy and foul disease, talking overmuch and prattling disrespectfully, and stealing" (Robins-Mowry 26). Jealousy and sloth are therefore so much abhorred that are placed on the same level as immorality, crime, and physically debilitating illnesses.

Poetry was an art form much revered in Japanese culture and believed to be an interest highly befitting a gracious woman. One is told that by the time Hase-Hime was thirteen years old "she had already become mentioned as a poetess of some merit" ("Princess Hase" 77). The sentence concerning the value placed on poetry that follows the textual quotation just given could not have been more unequivocal: "This was an accomplishment very much cultivated by the women of old Japan and one held in high esteem" ("Princess Hase" 77). It is exactly this high esteem that prompts the attachment of a supernatural nuance to poetry. Hase-Hime succeeds by the merit of her verse to pacify the waters of a river whose roaring sound was the cause of the Emperor's nervous disturbance:

she proceeded to the bank of the roaring torrent and raising up her heart to Heaven, she read the poem she had composed, aloud, lifting it heavenwards in her two hands.... The waters ceased their roaring, and the river was quiet in direct answer to her prayer. After this the Emperor soon recovered his health ("Princess Hase" 78).

Hase-Hime's verse is presented as a *specific* for the Emperor's illness hence verifying the great veneration in which poetry was held. Dr. Kimberly Jones confirms the significance of poetry in Heian Japan: "Aristocratic women of [Hase-Hime's] era did need to know how to compose poetry, ... as that was an important part of social interactions." As mentioned earlier, poetry seems to have been a pursuit of both sexes. Alice Mabel Bacon's report of how in the ancient times "much attention was given by both men and women to poetry" (118) corroborates this. However, she particularly mentions the fact that "many of the classics of Japanese literature are the works of women" (Bacon 118). These ancient times, described as being before the long civil wars of the Middle Ages, identify once more the Heian period of Japan. During this period there had been many distinguished writers amongst whom one could name Murasaki Shikibu, the authoress of the "Tale of Genji," allegedly the first novel ever written, and Sei Shōnagon who wrote the famous "Pillow Book" (Bacon 118). Both women were court ladies at the time of Emperor Ichijō who evidently seems to have been a patron of the arts: "The court at that time was the center of learning, and much encouragement was given by the Emperor to literary pursuits, the cultivation of poetry, and music. The Emperor gathered around him talented men and women, but the great works that remain are, ... mostly those of women" (Bacon 118). Although the utmost importance was placed on poetry by both sexes, it was women who excelled in the field. It is then undeniable that women had a natural aptitude for poetry and music, something which enhanced the notion that such studies were crucial for the upbringing of a Japanese woman, especially of one of noble ancestry, since it provided her with a sense of sophistication and elegance.

Nevertheless close reading of the text will give rise to the apparent oxymoron of a woman who could enjoy great authority. One comes across a noteworthy reference to the

reward that Hase-Hime receives as a token of the Emperor's gratitude for succeeding in curing his illness: "His majesty was highly pleased, and sent for her to the Palace and rewarded her with the rank of *Chinjo*-that of Lieutenant-General-to distinguish her" ("Princess Hase" 78). Given the image so far of a submissive woman, one who is clearly perceived as inferior to men, how is this reconcilable with the image of a powerful, respected woman who holds such high office? In order to find what lies behind this contradiction one has to refer to even older times. The first piece of evidence suggestive of the power women could yield in the ancient times is the existence of the Goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami who according to Japanese legend was the Sun-Goddess and the founder of the Japanese imperial family (Robins-Mowry 5), the former of course being in direct contrast to Sun-Gods of other civilizations— for example Apollo or Ra in the Greek and Egyptian respectively— who are traditionally male (Renshaw 60). Jean R. Renshaw points out the existence of evidence in prehistoric Japan indicating that its social order was probably matriarchal: "One tribal group, ruled by Queen Himiko, appeared to have authority over the other tribes. The country itself was called the 'queen's country' by the Chinese, giving credence to the concept of a non-patriarchal society, with women rulers" (Renshaw 60). Dr. Kimberly Jones explains how some scholars "have theorized that Chinese influence on an older matriarchal society may have led to a decline in the status of women." However she proceeds to warn that this presaged decline in the status of women is not be viewed so simply: "Certainly both of the religions/thought systems that were adopted from China, Buddhism and Confucianism, saw women as inferior to men. On the other hand, the indigenous Japanese religion, Shintoism, doesn't see women as equals either." She finally concludes "In actuality, the reality of women's roles and how the ideal woman is conceived have varied greatly in Japan over time, geographical area, and class."

Whatever may or may not be the truth behind these speculations, the fact remains that women could indeed be influential. Catherine Oshida, in an on-line article entitled “Voices In Amber: Women in Japanese Folklore,” examines women as portrayed in Japanese folktales and concludes that in them “we find women who advised, admonished, assisted, set rules, and sometimes issued and enforced ultimatums.” A chief and recurrent theme dominant in these folktales is the requirement of a man to complete a number of set tasks in order to get a spouse, namely the suitor must *prove* his worthiness. Oshida claims that “if these requirements are ignored or the limits trespassed, then the women depart. These are women we should take seriously, whose cooperation is fundamental to society, and whose cooperation must be earned” (Oshida). In this way one realizes how the oxymoron proposed earlier is resolved. Although women did not occupy the “proscenium” of a male-dominated society they albeit could assert their power through the inner culture, merit, and freedom of mind they were disciplined to develop.

In the story’s concluding paragraph the existence of a piece of needlework at one of Kyōto’s numerous temples establishes an implicit purport of Hase-Hime’s being an actual person. This revelation makes the “model woman,” exposed in the course of this folktale, something attainable and not just a distant ideal. Via an intricate system of principles pertaining to feminine propriety “The Story of Hase-Hime” reveals quite skillfully the tenets of obedience, diligence, patience, and artistry as forming the core of Japanese feminine gender identity, some of which tenets have reverberated throughout the centuries into recent history.

Notes

¹“Hime” is a Japanese honorific denoting a Princess.

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