

THE PEONY LANTERN

Asai Ryōi, "Botan no tōrō" from *Otogi bōko*
(1666)

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Japanese literature
of the Edo period (1600-1868)
rendered into English
by his former students
of which this is
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INTRODUCTION

Asai Ryōi (d. 1691) is generally regarded as the finest writer of “kana zōshi,” prose literature produced in Japan between 1600 and 1682. Asai’s career was already well-established when he wrote the collection of sixty-eight supernatural tales called *Otogi bōko* (Hand Puppets) in 1666. The term “otogi bōko” actually refers to a doll, in the likeness of a child, that was traditionally placed by a child’s pillow to ward off harmful spirits. Asai probably chose this image for his book’s title because of the doll’s association with women and

children, his intended readership, as well as with the supernatural.

Eighteen of the stories in Asai's collection, including the one translated here, "Botan no tōrō" (The Peony Lantern) are derived from the well-known Ming Dynasty collection of ghost tales, *Chien Teng Hsin Hua* (New Stories After Snuffing the Lamp, Ch'u Yu, 1378). The Chinese collection, a Korean version of it, and Japanese translations of a few of the tales, had existed in Japan before Asai's lifetime, but it was *Otogi bōko* that introduced the tales to a wide reading public. Asai was the first Japanese writer to make extensive use of this tale collection, and in doing so he brought about a transformation in the Japanese supernatural tale. Until this time most such stories had been written to illustrate the Buddhist doctrine of karmic retribution; miraculous events were depicted as rewarding religious piety or punishing wickedness. Although Asai's tales are not free of didactic nuances, they shift attention from moral concerns to human nature, by suggesting a link between intense emotions and fantastic occur-

rences. Stories like "Botan no tōrō," a pre-modern variation on the timeless theme of a man's "fatal attraction" to an enchanting female (who here happens to be a ghost), use the supernatural mainly to dramatize the power of human longing, love, and rage.

"Botan no tōrō" is an adaptation of the Chinese tale "Botan tōki" (Account of a Peony Lantern). Many literary works of the Edo period were influenced by this story, usually through Asai's version of it, among them Ueda Akinari's "The Kibitsu Cauldron," in *Ugetsu monogatari* (Tales of Moonlight and Rain), and several works by Santō Kyōden. The famous *rakugo* performer, Sanyūtei Enchō, rewrote the story in the late nineteenth century, altering and embellishing it considerably. Largely thanks to Enchō, whose spellbinding recitations of the tale were immensely popular, "Botan dōrō" (as Enchō called it) became familiar throughout Japan, and it has remained in modern times a favorite "summer evening ghost story."

Asai made several changes in the tale that enhanced both its atmospheric and literary appeal to the Japanese. He gave the story cultural immediacy by setting it in Kyoto, in the turbulent era of the Ōnin War, during the wistful season of *obon*. He also introduced poems into the tale. The addition of *waka*, especially those alluding to poems in imperial poetry collections, helped to situate the story within Japanese literary tradition, infusing it with classical resonance and courtly sensibility. Except for the fact that the woman is a phantom, the couple's affair conforms to the model of the courtly love affair as described in Heian romances and poetry anthologies.

The deeply ingrained ambivalence toward both ghosts and women in Japan have helped ensure the tale's enduring appeal and effectiveness. The notion of a spirit realm that exists parallel to the mundane world, and occasionally infiltrates it, lingers in the cultural imagination. Rites are performed to pacify the souls of the dead so as to keep the two realms balanced and separate. Death is a source of pollution; there is a

strong taboo against blurring the boundary between death and life. As the incarnation of death-in-life, the ghost is the epitome of the abject.

The tale also involves the tenacious stereotype of woman as femme fatale—seductive but treacherous. Women, like ghosts, are ambiguous, and hence abject creatures. According to both Shinto and Buddhist discourses, women are taboo because of their physical defilements and moral turpitude; they exist in a liminal zone, neither fully inside nor outside the symbolic order, inferior and thus subordinate to men. Yet the depth of their passions, both loving and vengeful, is believed to endow them with uncanny power.

Women as maternal beings are associated with infantile gratifications that are tempting to men. The bliss they seem to promise, though ultimately destructive, may be hard for a man to resist. In this story, the woman's allure proves stronger than the protagonist's desire for self-preservation.