

Death and Disease in Medieval Japanese Painting

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Introduction

"The Four Sufferings (四苦)" that group birth (生), old age (老), illness (病), and death (死) are a key concept in Buddhist teaching. It provides the foundation for a worldview in which the physical attributes of the body itself — subject as it is to the indignities of being born, of aging, of becoming ill, and of dying — are construed in clearly negative terms. The way in which the medieval Japanese viewed illness and death was closely associated with such a worldview.

In this paper, I would like to explore how this concept is manifest in works of art. More specifically, I would like to examine how the lifecycle is conceptualized in two works, *The Scroll of Illnesses* (or in Japanese *Yamai no sōshi* 病草紙)¹ and *The Nine Stages of Bodily Decay* (or *Kusō zu* 九相図)². Through a close examination of the striking images found in these works, I will be making a series of observations concerning the ways in which painting can reflect the Buddhist *mentalité* of medieval Japan.

A New Understanding of *The Scroll of Illnesses*

First, let us take a look at "Cholera" (or in Japanese, *Kakuran no onna* 霍乱の女: fig.1). This painting represents one scene from *The Scroll of Illnesses*, a work from

1) More details of this issue in Japanese, see Yamamoto, Satomi 山本聡美, "The source of *Yamai no Sōshi*: The correspondence between the *Shōbōnenjokyō Shinnenjo-bon* and twenty-one surviving pieces 『病草紙』の典拠—『正法念処経』身念処品と現存二十一場面との対応関係," in *Nihonbijutsushi no mori* (Tokyo: Chikurinsha, 2008), pp.169-192, and "Depictions of the *Shōbōnenjokyō* Sutra: *jigoku zōshi*, *Gaki zōshi*, *Yamai no sōshi* 『正法念処経』経意絵としての「地獄草紙」「餓鬼草紙」「病草紙」," *Kinjo Nihongo Nihonbunka* 85(2009):1-20, and "From the *Shōbōnenjokyō* Sutra to *Yamai no Sōshi*: Changes in Sutra interpretation and the Formation of Hanging Scrolls 『正法念処経』から「病草紙」へ—経説の変容と絵巻の生成," *Kokka* 1371(2010):5-15.

2) More details of this issue in Japanese, see Yamamoto, Satomi and Mika Nishiyama 西山美香, eds., *Kusōzu: The Nine Stages of a Decaying Corpse—The Art and Literature of Decomposition* 九相図資料集成—死体の美術と文学 (Tokyo: Iwatashoin, 2009).



fig.1 "Cholera" *The Scroll of Illnesses* Kyoto National Museum version

the latter half of the twelfth century, presumably created in the sphere of the Retired Emperor *GoShirakawa* 後白河院.

The composition places side by side two contrasting scenes. Here, on a veranda, three women are depicted: One squatting on all fours, vomiting and suffering from diarrhea, and standing next to her a nun looking after her and a woman bringing medicine. Separated by the boundary of the veranda, on the left side of the painting a woman can be seen in the interior preparing food, and besides her a young child crawling on the ground. This scene, healthy and everyday, is thus put in binary opposition to the one on the outside, in which one witnesses a dog consuming the excretions of the sick woman.

The Japanese term "kakuran," which is found in the accompanying inscription and translated here as "cholera," refers generally to an affliction at the time in which one suddenly fell ill and experienced intense nausea and diarrhea. The accompanying inscription explains, "There is an illness known as *kakuran*, for which the pain is akin to being stabbed in the stomach, causing liquid to be vomited from the mouth and diarrhea from one's rear end, and leading to fainting. It is truly unbearable."

This is not exactly the kind of elegant content one normally associates with courtly hand scrolls, but it does convey a sense of the actuality of the daily negotiations that take place between humans and their illnesses in the real world. The symptoms associated with cholera or *kakuran* are of course commonly encountered, and not at all unique. The same cannot be said for the following scene.

This is "The Hermaphrodite," also known as "The Androgyne," or what in Japanese is literally "Two Forms" or "Two Organs" (or *futanari* 二形: fig.2), referring to those people who have both male and female sexual organs. The accompanying inscription states as follows: "In the capital was a man who walked around and carried a drum around his neck, as a soothsayer. Although his appearance was that of a man, he would occasionally dress as a woman. People became suspicious, and at night crept



fig.2 "The Hermaphrodite" *The Scroll of Illnesses* Kyoto National Museum version

into his bedchamber and peeped under his sleeping gown, only to discover that he had both male and female sex organs." The figure sleeping in the middle of the composition is, of course, the hermaphrodite. Such a uniquely endowed figure was certainly not something that the initial audiences for this scroll, the Japanese of the Heian period, would have witnessed with any regularity.

The Scroll of Illnesses currently consists of twenty-one surviving fragments, most of which are found in the Kyoto National Museum. The various maladies and afflictions that it pictorializes range widely from general ones such as cholera, to more unusual conditions such as androgyny. What, however, is the logic of selection here?

In order to pursue this question, I would like to briefly survey the scholarly commentary on *The Scroll of Illnesses*. Over the years numerous interpretations have been offered concerning the subject matter of the work, with some proposing that it is a pictorialization of religious subject matter, others that it reflects *setsuwa* 説話 or tale literature that was circulating at the time, and still others asserting that it was based on actual observation. The most well received has been the idea that it reflects one portion of "The Six Realms of Existence (*Rokudōe* 六道絵)." The Six Realms refers to the six stages of existence into which a being might be reborn depending upon his or her karma, and includes hell, the realm of hungry ghosts, the realm of beasts, of *ashura* or demi-gods, of humans, and finally of heaven or paradise itself. According to this interpretation, *The Scroll of Illnesses* depicts the human realm, closely associated as it is with human suffering.

This thesis was first put forward by the art historian Fukui Rikichirō in 1931³. Based upon similarities in painting and calligraphic style, Fukui suggested that this work belonged to the same set as other well-known hand scrolls from the period such

3) Fukui, Rikichirō 福井利吉郎, "*Rokudōe ni tsuite* 六道絵に就て," in *Shinrigaku oyobi Geijutsu no Kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kaizōshya, 1931), and "*Yamato-e sūdai: Rokudōe* 大和絵数題—六道絵," *MUSEUM* 108-114 (1960).

as *The Hell Scrolls* (*Jigoku zōshi* 地獄草紙) and *The Scroll of Hungry Ghosts* (*Gaki zōshi* 餓鬼草紙), which depicted other realms in the Six Realms cycle.

In response, in 1933 the art historian Shimomise Sizuichi⁴ demonstrated that whereas *The Hell Scrolls* and *The Scroll of Hungry Ghosts* are clearly based upon Buddhist sutra texts, the same cannot be determined for *The Scroll of Illnesses*, and so it probably should be considered independently of the other works.

The debate over the subject matter of *The Scroll of Illnesses* continued thereafter, and in 1953 the scholar Okudaira Hideo⁵ noted its close similarity to contemporary tale literature, as reflected in anthologies such as *Tales of Times Present and Past* (*Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集) and elsewhere. According to Okudaira, along with this tale literature, *The Scroll of Illnesses* documents the increasing curiosity in aristocratic circles in the lifestyles and customs of the lower classes. Rather than religious texts, it is literary texts that constitute the foundation of the work. In this case as well, however, no specific tales or anthologies of the period were specified as source material, and as a result Okudaira's hypothesis remained ultimately indeterminate.

Meanwhile, among historians of medicine⁶, it was noted that part of the content of *The Scroll of Illnesses* overlaps with that of Heian-period medical texts such as the 982 anthology *Essentials of Medicine* (*Ishinpō* 医心方), or the massive Chinese-Japanese dictionary compiled in the 930s and known as the *Wamyō ruijūshō* 倭名類聚抄. These anthologies, however, by no means cover all of the maladies that appear in *The Scroll of Illnesses*. Indeed, a survey of the historiography reveals that one of the main reasons why its subject appears unclear is because the precise sources for its paintings and inscriptions remain unidentified.

In the wake of the studies just mentioned, in 1981, the art historian Sano Midori⁷ argued that the nature of the scroll was multidimensional, encompassing the religious, documentary, and literary dimensions described earlier. On the one hand, Sano acknowledged the nature of the paintings as a representation of the "Six Realms" through its graphic depiction of aspects of the human condition. On the other hand, the iconography of each of its scenes, she speculates, was developed out of earlier compilations of illustrations of symptoms that circulated among doctors. In other words, while *The Scroll of Illnesses*, along with *The Hell Scrolls* and *The Scroll of Hungry Demons* constituted part of a set of "The Six Realms," rather than referring to a specific text, it was based upon actual illnesses of the period.

As the earlier examples of "Cholera" and "The Hermaphrodite" demonstrate, the ac-

4) Shimomise, Shizuichi 下店静市, "Yamai no sōshi wa hatashite Rokudōe nariya 病草子は果して六道繪なりや," in *Yamatōe-shi kenkyū* (Tokyo: Fuzanbo, 1944), pp.633-645.

5) Okudaira, Hideo 奥平英雄, "Yamai no sōshi: Sin Kokuhō yori 病草紙—新国宝より," *MUSEUM* 15(1952):22-25.

6) for example, Hattori, Toshirō 服部敏良, "Yamai no sōshi no Igakuteki Kaisetsu 病草紙の医学的解説," in Saburō Ienaga, ed., *Shinsyū Nihon Emakimono Zensyū* 7 (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1976), pp.61-65.

7) Sano, Midori 佐野みどり, "A study of Yamai-no-Sōshi 病草紙研究," in *Furyū, Art and Tales* (Tokyo: Skydoor, 1997), pp.519-602.

accompanying texts do appear to have a documentary aspect, mentioning where the afflicted live as well as their profession. The paintings themselves also convey a reality effect in their lively setting of each figure in lower-class environments in and around the capital. Yet at the same time, as "The Hermaphrodite" painting suggests, some of the scenes would not have been available to everyday observation, and stage views clearly meant to be rare and unusual. In this regard, the Sano thesis also has its limitations.

To reconsider this issue of the textual source of *The Scroll of Illnesses*, I reexamined the textual sources for the other works with which it is usually grouped. With regard to *The Hell Scrolls* and *The Scroll of Hungry Ghosts*, by the 1980s it had already been determined that they were based upon sutras such as the *Sutra on the Origin of the World* (*Kisekyō* 起世經), the *Sutra on Offerings to the Dead*, or *Ullambana Sutra* (*Urabonkyō* 盂蘭盆經), and finally the *Sutra on Proper Vows for the True Dharma*, which I will be referring to here by its Japanese title, *Shōbōnenjokyō* 正法念處經. Because of a close similarity of painting and calligraphy style, it appeared possible that *The Scroll of Illnesses* derived from a similar source, so I reexamined these sutra texts to determine whether there was any discussion of illness in them.

As a result, the *Shōbōnenjokyō* became an important focus, for I found that it is replete with discussions of maladies, of which a portion accord perfectly with *The Scroll of Illnesses*.

The *Shōbōnenjokyō* is a sutra that describes in detail the Six Realms. It was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese during the Northern Wei period (386-534), and was widely read, as indicated by the fact that it is a primary reference for the Tang-period Buddhist encyclopedia known as the *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma*, or *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林. The *Shōbōnenjokyō* was brought to Japan by the eighth century, and appears in the sutra inventory for the imperial repository *Shōsōin* 正倉院. Consisting of some 70 scrolls, it is of considerable scale, and it consists of seven sections. In Section Seven, titled "Chapter on Proper Vows Concerning the Body," or *Shinnenjobon* 身念處品, the composition of the body and origin of illnesses is explained in terms of eighty types of "bugs (虫)" or tiny organisms that dwell inside the body, and seventy-eight different kinds of "winds (風)" that harmonize the body. Perhaps it is easiest to understand the bugs as viruses that invade the body from the outside, and the winds as a bodily function. What I would like to do here is to reexamine "The Hermaphrodite" scene based upon the explanation provided in the sutra. Let take a close look at the painting (fig.2).

The dramatic moment of depiction consists of a person sneaking into the bedchamber where the hermaphrodite sleeps soundly, and energetically lifting up the hem of his robe to expose both of his sexual organs. Upon first glance the sleeping figure looks male, wearing as he does a courtier hat and bearing a beard. Upon further examination, however, his red lips and cheeks, as well as the red fan hanging on the

wall suggest a female persona as well. Meanwhile, the figure that has snuck in points with his right hand at the exposed organs, while with his left hand gesturing to a companion to come take a look. The pointing figure is also effective in guiding the viewer's eye to the most essential point in the skillfully conceived composition.

The coexistence of sexual organs might be rare in actuality, but in the *Shōbōnenjokyō* sutra it is frequently discussed and referred to as "Yellow Gate (*kōmon* 黄門)" or "Double Root (*nikon* 二根)". Of these designations, "Yellow Gate" refers to a eunuch, and by extension an incomplete bearer of sexual organs, while "Double Root" refers to someone with both sexual organs, in other words a hermaphrodite. In Fascicle 66, for example, the sutra states, "when a wind known as "The Womb-Turning Wind (*tentaizōfū* 転胎蔵風)" blows, a fetus that is supposed to be born as a boy can be turned into a girl or hermaphrodite in utero, or lead to a still birth. This is the result of bad karma from a previous life"⁸

Or, in Fascicle 1 of the sutra it states: "Those who perform sexual acts upon oxen or horses, or force themselves upon other humans, will go to hell and then be reborn as beasts. Even if they are reborn in the Human Realm, they will do so as hermaphrodites."⁹ Or in Fascicle 18, where it states: "Those who enjoy sodomous acts will enter the realm of either hell, hungry ghosts, or beasts. Even if they are reborn as humans, their wives will not be obedient, or they will be hermaphrodites scorned by the world."¹⁰

In this way, then, the *Shōbōnenjokyō* sutra attributes the origins of hermaphroditism to sodomy or sexual intercourse with animals in a previous life, and defines it as karmic retribution for sexually unvirtuous behavior. Furthermore, while in Buddhist philosophy the superiority of males is absolute, and this is reflected in the sutra as well, here there is the added complexity of positing several different gender identities as inferior, with eunuchs and hermaphrodites coming between males and females.

Let us return again to "The Hermaphrodite" and take a closer look at the attitudes of the men who mock the afflicted. If this image is based upon the passages just described from the *Shōbōnenjokyō* sutra, then this laughter is based upon the understanding that this condition is the result of karmic retribution for sexually indecent behavior. The laughter is not directed so much at the oddity of the man's condition as it is the punishment he bears for acts by a former self.

In this way, the reason why such conditions were taken up in *The Scroll of Illnesses* becomes clearer. The illnesses chosen for this work are those that are understood to be the result of karmic causality. I believe that the various scenes of the handscroll were not based upon actual observed illnesses, but in consultation with the *Shōbōnenjokyō* sutra. Let us look then at another scene.

8) In *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (TSD) 17, p.392

9) TSD 17, p. 3

10) TSD 17, p.104



fig.3 "Man with Hallucinations of Miniature Monks"
The Scroll of Illnesses Kosetsu Museum version

This is another scene from *The Scroll of Illnesses* titled "Man with Hallucinations of Miniature Monks" (or *Koboshi no genkaku wo shōzuru otoko* 小法師の幻覚を生ずる男: fig.3). The accompanying inscription is succinct, stating "This man has a chronic illness in which, when it recurs, he sees countless miniature Buddhist monks of a height of five sun [or fifteen centimeters or so] dressed in paper robes by his bedside."

Sure enough, in the painting a man lays in his futon, while near his pillow a crowd of monks with staffs in their hand torment him. Meanwhile the man's wife, while nursing a baby, offers her husband a cluster of loquats. Near his feet can be found another woman, but unfortunately, because of damage to the pictorial surface, it is difficult to make out what she is doing. In the hearth a pot is placed with the fire underneath causing smoke to rise up, depicted in finely rendered lines. It appears that he is in the midst of a meal, and a bowl filled with food is placed near the man's pillow, but he apparently does not have the wherewithal to partake of it.

This is an interesting scene that depicts a hallucination amidst sleep, a rendering of the human soul. When one examines the *Shōbōnenjokyō* sutra for this type of illness, the following description can be found in Fascicle 66: "In the human body is a type of wind known as "The Spirit of Mischief" or *gaisei* 害精. When this is not right, then it practices deception upon the afflicted, and all sorts of mischief during sleeping hours. Demonesses are made to walk in his dreams, and lies pierce through the truth. One cannot even contemplate eating."¹¹ This description accords well with the symptoms depicted in the painting. And the miniature monks depicted in both the painting and inscription accord with the description in the sutra.

In addition, although this scene includes food-related motifs that are nowhere mentioned in the sutra, such as the loquats offered by the wife, the cooking in the hearth, and the food by the pillow, these are ignored by the stricken man, in accordance with

11) TSD 17, pp.393-394

the passage concerning one's inability to "even contemplate eating." The motifs may thus be interpreted as a representation of one of the symptoms of the afflicted man, that is to say, his lack of appetite. In this way, even minor details in scenes throughout *The Scroll of Illnesses* take on significance when interpreted in light of the sutra.

The same can be said for the first scene we examined, *Cholera*. Fascicle 65 of the *Shōbōnenjokyō* discusses "Bone-Eating Insects (*goukotsuchū* 嚙骨虫)" which "when active can cause diarrhea, pain to be experienced in both sides, and the nose to fill with mucus. Eating cannot be contemplated." The inscription for the painting speaks of "knife-like pains in the stomach, water ejected from the mouth, and diarrhea."¹² which corresponds reasonably well to the sutra text. And minor motifs in the painting, such as the woman preparing food with her child, or the dog eating the excrement in the yard, also resonate with the lack of appetite cited as one of the symptoms of the affliction. In this scene, the plight of the suffering woman who is unable to place food in her mouth is all the more graphically conveyed through comparison with the healthy woman preparing food indoors, and the dog who sustains itself by consuming feces.

In this manner, I have attempted to interpret three scenes from *The Scroll of Illnesses* based upon the assumption that they reflect the content of *Shōbōnenjokyō*. The remaining scenes also closely reflect the content of the sutra. If *The Scroll of Illnesses* is indeed based upon the sutra, then we might interpret its subject as illnesses that are a manifestation of karmic retribution. In this regard, it is in keeping

<p>復有異処，名髮火流， 是彼地獄，第三別処， 衆生何業，生於彼処， 彼見有人，殺生偷盜， 邪行飲酒，樂行多作， 彼人則墮，叫喚地獄， 髮火流処，殺盜邪行， 業及果報，如前所説， 何者飲酒，優婆塞五戒人辺， 説酒功德，作如是言， 酒亦是戒，令其飲酒， 彼人以是，惡業因縁， 身壞命終，墮於惡処… (TSD 17,p.41)</p>	<p>→またこの地獄に別所あり，名をば髮火流といふ There is another place in this hell, named "Burning hair" →このところの衆生，昔人間にありて，殺生偷盜邪淫， When they were human being, committing sev- eral sin such as kill, theft, lust, →およびまた五戒をたもちたる人のまへにして， 酒を飲むはめてでたき戒なりと言ひて酒を与へて戒 をやぶらしめたりしものこの地獄に墮つ（後略） Or who encourage another person to drinking, by telling a lie drinking is the best way to keep the Commandments of Buddha, will go to the hell.</p>
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table 1

12) TSD 17, p.386

with a long history of interpreting the scroll, along with *The Hell Scrolls and Scroll of Hungry Ghosts*, as part of a larger set representing the "Six Realms of Existence." With the source text now clear, the religious dimension of this scroll can be better understood. Furthermore, with the sutra text as an axis, the following comparison also becomes possible.

Let us see the table 1. On the left I have listed corresponding passages from *Shōbōnenjokyō*, and on the right inscriptions from *The Hell Scrolls* fragment in the Tokyo National Museum version (fig.4). Shown here, this inscriptions literally transcribes the sutra text into Japanese, and the painting is faithful to its content as well. There are no motifs in the painting that are extraneous to the sutra passage.

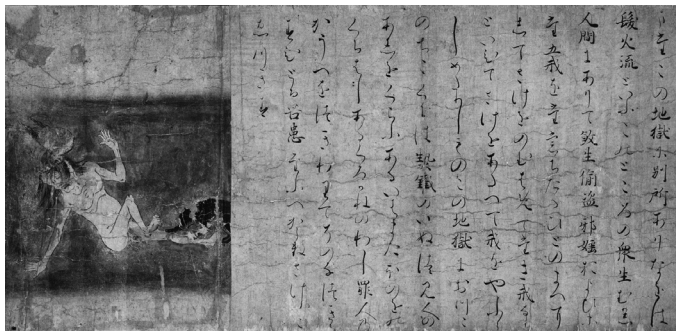


fig.4 *The Hell Scrolls* Tokyo National Museum version

In contrast, let us take a look at this fragment from *Scroll of Hungry Ghosts* in the Kyoto National Museum version (fig.5), titled "Hungry Ghost Stealing Funerary Offerings (施餓鬼に忍び寄る餓鬼)". While based upon *Shōbōnenjokyō*, the painting is embellished quite a bit. The inscription simply describes its accompanying image as "The hungry ghost pacifies itself by stealing and drinking the water that had been taken from the river as an offering to deceased parents." The motifs go well beyond this description, however.



fig.5 *Scroll of Hungry Ghosts* Kyoto National Museum version

This scene is also considered a masterpiece of grouped figural depiction among Heian-period hand scrolls. In front of a temple gate, a priest chanting *nenbutsu* 念仏 and collecting alms, children, young men and women, and elderly people all intermingle energetically. A Buddhist painting is hung on the fence, and in front of it rice and other offerings are placed. A priest makes printed Buddhist images, and even here alms are given. If one takes a close look in this manner, it becomes clear that the crowd in front of the temple gate is accruing merit through the good deed of alms giving.

Toward the left are people offering water to a stupa and thereby worshiping their ancestors. This portion accords with the sutra text, and it is here that the hungry ghost finally makes an appearance. Here, again, the hungry ghost steals and consumes the offered water. The shame of the ghost's act is highlighted all the more through its contrast with the good deeds of the others. The scene can also be read as a warning that hungry ghosts live in close proximity to their human counterparts.

Although both of the scenes just discussed are based upon the *Shōbōnenjōkyō* sutra, their relationship to the sutra is not uniform. Where *The Hell Scrolls* painting in the Tokyo National Museum is faithful, the *Scroll of Hungry Ghosts* painting in the Kyoto National Museum embellishes. This type of comparison, in turn, allows one to articulate with greater precision the characteristics of *The Scroll of Illnesses*.

If one compares the works in terms of their distance from their scriptural source, and imagines them emanating outward from the sutra in ever larger concentric circles, then the most proximate circle is represented by *The Hell Scrolls*, followed by *Scroll of Hungry Ghosts*. And finally one arrives at *The Scroll of Illnesses*, which contains so many adaptations that upon first glance it might appear to have no relation to the sutra. Yet the sutra was at the basis of its selection of illnesses and scenes, which were simply embellished beyond recognition. Although the worldview of the sutra is obscured in *The Scroll of Illnesses*, its basic assumptions concerning karmic causality would certainly have been shared by the painter and patron alike.

At the same time, however, it is true that all kinds of visual "noise" intrude into the paintings that have no relationship to the sutra. Thus the inscriptions mention over and over again details of locale and the backgrounds of the afflicted figures, while the paintings include descriptive details of everyday life, and more than anything, graphic representations of the illnesses that go beyond anything described in the sutra. In this paper I have necessarily emphasized the religious framework within which the hand scroll should be interpreted. However, as Sano Midori has noted, it should be acknowledged that it also mobilizes tale literature, rumor and knowledge concerning actual ill-

13) Kasuya, Makoto 加須屋誠, *Bukkyō Setsuwaga no Kōzō to Kinō: Shigan to Higan no Iconology* 仏教説話画の構造と機能—此岸と彼岸のイコノロジー, (Tokyo: Chuo koron bijutsu shuppan, 2003), pp.235-302.

14) Satō, Yasuhiro 佐藤康宏, "Miyako no Jiken: *Nenchū gyōji emaki, Ban-dainagon emaki, Yamai no sōshi* 都の事件—『年中行事絵巻』・『伴大納言絵巻』・『病草紙』", in Naoyuki Kinoshita, ed., *Studies in the History of Japanese Art* 6 (Tokyo: University of Tokyo press, 2005), pp.79-108.

ness to close the gap between scripture and scroll. One can say that the worldview of *The Scroll of Illnesses* begins with the sutra, but builds onto this further layers of texts and contexts.

Lastly, I would like to discuss some future vectors of research concerning *The Scroll of Illnesses*. Recent years have witnessed the appearance of quite a few studies that emphasize the political nature of the work based on the assumption that it was commissioned by the Retired Emperor GoShirakawa. In a study from the year 2000, the art historian Kasuya Makoto¹³ emphasized the work's embodiment of the authoritative gaze of the ruling classes, which consistently subjected the lower classes to ridicule. Likewise, in 2005 Satō Yasuhiro¹⁴ made the same analysis, and further understood the depiction of the downtrodden and chaos within controlled environments as a way of providing psychological solace for those in power during a time of intense political upheaval. In other words, this was chaos that could be controlled, and therefore safely neutralized. Whatever their arguments, both Kasuya and Satō view the scroll as clarifying the transition from an ancient to medieval society and political order. Their aims go beyond the interpretation of an individual work to an understanding of the social context reflected in the work.

In this manner, research on *The Scroll of Illnesses* is being pursued in extremely stimulating directions, but much more work remains to be done in considering its most fundamental aspects, that is to say, its subject and sources. A greater understanding of these will naturally lead to a richer grasp of its production context. In particular, it is significant to note that the system of knowledge reflected in foreign texts such as Chinese sutras provided the foundation for the fundamental disposition of yamato-e scrolls such as *The Scroll of Illnesses*. This is suggestive for understanding the cultural production and worldview of the late Heian aristocracy as a whole.

The Nine Stages : The Art and Literature of Decomposition

"The Nine Stages" so called *Kusōzu* 九相図 in Japanese, which take as their subject a decaying corpse. These works depict the decay of a corpse in nine stages, and numerous examples survive from medieval and early modern Japan. These examples take various formats, such as hanging scrolls, hand scrolls, and printed books, and appear to have been widely familiar to the Japanese before the early modern period.

While the "Nine Stages" subject is also sensationalist, it too has Buddhist origins. It goes without saying that death, one of the "Four Sufferings," is nothing other than an extreme reminder of the mortality of the human body. One Buddhist practice encourages meditation on the corpse in nine stages as a way of overcoming one's attachment to the flesh. Paintings of the "Nine Stages" originated as a way of providing practitioners with pictorial surrogates to actual decaying corpses. Such surrogates can be found, for example, in the Toyuk Grottoes in Central Asia¹⁵.



fig.6 "Aspect of Impurity of the Human Realm" *The Six Realms* Shōjuraigōji Temple version

In Japan examples survive from the Kamakura period onward. The oldest of these is part of a set of works depicting "The Six Realms" in Shōjuraigōji Temple (fig.6), dating from the latter half of the thirteenth century. The scroll in question is titled "Aspect of Impurity of the Human Realm." The iconography of this work is based upon a text known as *The Great Calming and Contemplation* (in Chinese *Mohe shiguan*, in Japanese *Maka shikan* 摩訶止観). And this scroll consists of the following nine stages of decay:

The Newly Dead Stage (*shinshisō* 新死相), in which the recently deceased body lies prone.

The Bloated Stage (*bōchōsō* 肪脹相), in which the corpse fills with gases.

The Tearing Stage (*kaisō* 壊相), in which the skin of the bloated corpse begins to tear.

The Bleeding Stage (*kechizusō* 血塗相), in which blood oozes from the corpse.

The Rotting Stage (*nōransō* 膿爛相), in which bodily decay advances.

The Mummification Stage (*seiosō* 青瘀相), in which the decayed corpse hardens.

The Scavenged Stage (*tansō* 噉相), in which the corpse becomes prey to crows.

The Scattered Stage (*sansō* 散相), in which the various parts of the corpse are scattered.

15) See Miyaji, Akira 宮治昭, "On the Wall paintings in "Changuan-ku" Cave of Tuyok Cave Temple at Turfan: *Jodo-zu*, *Jodokanso-zu* and *Fujokanso-zu* (I)(II)(III) トウルファン・トヨク石窟の禅観窟壁画について—浄土図・浄土観想図・不浄観想図 (上)(中)(下)", *Bukkyo Geijutsu* 221(1995):15-41, 223(1995):15-36, 226(1996):38-83.

The Skeletal Stage (*kotsusō* 骨相), in which nothing remains but white bones.

These graphic depictions of a corpse are certainly powerful enough to sever one's attachment to the physical body. Yet this painting here includes elements that are completely unrelated to the subject's religious dimension — namely, representations of the four seasons, filled with a kind of Japanese lyricism.

As one proceeds from the top of the composition downward, one finds a movement through the four seasons, as witnessed in the presence of cherry blossoms, pines, autumn foliage, and dry withered grasses. The graphic realism of the corpses is somewhat mitigated by these nature motifs. As pointed out by Yoshitani Haruna in 2000¹⁶, or again by Kanda Fusae in 2005¹⁷, this imagery refers specifically to the early eleventh-century "Poem on the Nine Stage (九相詩)" that was misattributed to the Esoteric monk *Kūkai* 空海. This Chinese-style poem, while based upon the meditation on the nine stages of the decaying corpse, is characterized by its inclusion of scattered nature imagery, such as "autumn grasses," "spring flowers," "fallen leaves," "autumn chrysanthemum," "cold moss," and "summer flowers," as it proceeds through a description of these nine stages. Its literary sensibility is manifested in its use of the seasonal cycle to express the passage of time and ephemerality, in other words to symbolize the evanescence of life itself.

As this work in Shōjuraigōji Temple demonstrates, Japanese paintings of the "Nine Stages" do not serve so much as aids to meditation as, in the overwhelming majority of cases, use the sight of a decaying corpse as a pretext to thematize the passage of time and convey an appreciation of the lyrical experience that results. In addition, most Japanese examples feature the corpses of women, thus conveying the idea that a woman's beauty is as ephemeral as the seasons. This tendency becomes that much clearer in the format of works during the Muromachi period. A type of work known as "Scroll of the Poem of the Nine Stages (*Kusōshi emaki* 九相詩絵巻)" appears that combines both the "Poem of the Nine Stages" and *waka* 和歌 verse about the nine stages in its textual passages.

Recently such a scroll dating to 1501 was newly discovered, and is now in the collection of the Kyushu National Museum (fig.7). This work reflects the pictorial style of the Tosa school (*Tosa-ha* 土佐派). Although the brushwork does not accord with that of *Tosa Mitsunobu* 土佐光信, the head of the Imperial Painting Studio at the time, as Aizawa Masahiko notes in 2009¹⁸, it is close to the painter of *The Tale of the Fox* 狐草子, which is assumed to come from Mitsunobu's circle. It is full of appeal as a *yamato-e* やまと絵 work of the late Muromachi period whose date is known.

In the work's text, Chinese and Japanese verse forms are elegantly paired in a time-

16) Yoshitani, Haruna 吉谷はるな, "Kusōzu Saikō: Sono Tenkyō ni tsuite 『九相図』 再考—その典拠について," *Bijutsushigaku* 17(1995):27-60.

17) Kanda, Fusae "Behind the Sensationalism: Images of a Decaying Corpse in Japanese Buddhist Art," *The Art Bulletin* 87(2005):24-49.

honored binary opposition. Although the scroll itself dates to the early sixteenth century, as Aizawa suggests, the idea of creating an emaki scroll out of a Buddhist subject such as the "Nine Stages" and coupling it with both Chinese and Japanese poetic forms goes back to the harmonizing of cultural references practiced in the early fifteenth century by the shogun *Ashikaga Yoshimitsu* 足利義満.

The Chinese verse at the beginning of the text titled "Su Shi's Poem on the Nine Stages" differs from the earlier mentioned poem that is attributed to the monk *Kukai*. It appears to be Japanese in origin, despite its attribution to the Chinese poet *Su Shi* 蘇軾. Currently it is believed to have been authored by a Zen monk in Kyoto's Five Mountains monastic system (京都五山) at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

The *waka* poems of the text number eighteen total, and center around the passage of time and the theme of ephemerality. They are not previously anthologized (and thus not necessarily well known) poems, and their origins are unclear. Among them, however, several bear a close resemblance to anthologies of tale literature from the Kamakura period.



fig.7 "The Scavenged Stage" *Nine Stages* Kyushu National Museum version

Among "Nine Stages" paintings in this format, as a collection of Dainenbutsuji Temple, there is also another hand scroll in the Kano style dating to 1527 (fig.8). This work represents an extremely high-status commission in which the textual passages are brushed on paper decorated in gold ink, from the hand of the high-ranking imperial monk *Jōhōji Kōjo* 定法寺公助.

When one surveys works in this manner, it appears that during the Muromachi period, the creation of hand scrolls on the subject of the "Poem on the Nine Stages" was fashionable among the upper classes. The reasons for this popularity remain a subject of future inquiry, but when one considers the fact that these works all record their dates of production, it is possible that they were created for a specific Buddhist

18) Aizawa, Masahiko 相澤正彦, "Muromachi-jidai no futatsu no *Kusōshi-Zukan: kyūhaku-bon to Dainenbutsuji-bon wo megutte* 室町時代の二つの「九相詩図巻」—九博本と大念佛寺本をめぐって," in S. Yamamoto and M. Nishiyama, eds., *Kusōzu: The Nine Stages of a Decaying Corpse— The Art and Literature of Decomposition* (Tokyo: Iwatashoin, 2009), pp.212-224.

rite or offering. On the other hand, they are also tied to the secular arts of Chinese and Japanese poetry, and it is necessary to consider the possibility that they were created for a semi-religious, semi-secular occasion such as a linked-verse gathering commemorating a Buddhist event of some kind.



fig.8 "The Scavenged Stage" *Nine Stages Dainenbutsuji* version

Finally, as a work suggestive of the development of paintings of "The Nine Stages," I would like to introduce an *emaki* illustrating "Poem of the Nine Stages" from the collection of Butsudōji Temple dated to 1651. The whereabouts of this work were only recently recognized, and since then it has garnered attention because of the presence of the signature and seals of *Kano Einō* 狩野永納. It has an elegant air to it, very much the artistic equal of the two Muromachi predecessors we viewed earlier. With Chinese and Japanese-style poetry in its textual passages, it follows the same basic template for hand scrolls of Nine Stages poetry established in the medieval era. However, the inclusion of a male aristocrat gazing at the corpse in each scene represents a departure from earlier examples.

This figure does not appear to be mourning the deceased. I understand the conceit here as being that the male is viewing the corpse and reciting the *waka* poetry included in the accompanying passages.

Clearly this figure, in keeping with the tradition in classical literature of the figure "peeking through the fence," or *kaimami* 垣間見, is observing the corpse abandoned in the field and reciting *waka* concerning the impermanence of the world. While following the practice of the Nine Stages in which one becomes aware of the impurity of the body through meditation on a corpse, this figure expresses himself through attainment in rarefied literary expression. In this *emaki*, the iconography of the Nine Stages has been transformed from its religious mission into a secular form with more levity. As such, it seems like a typical example of an early modern parody picture or *mitate-e* 見立て絵, but at the same time it reflects an 800-year-old process by which the Kyoto aristocracy had gradually perfected expression of the harmonic convergence of sacred and secular cultures. This phenomenon can also be understood as the

creation of *wa* 和 or indigenous culture from a foundation of *kan* 漢 or continental culture.



fig.9 "The Scavenged Stage" *Nine Stages* Butsudōji version

Conclusion

As discussed with regard to *The Scroll of Illnesses*, for medieval Japanese, Buddhism was a system of knowledge that represented a foundation for their worldview. Within this framework, illness and death were given definition, and the meaning of life itself was continuously explored. On the other hand, while works from this period that survive reflect this Buddhist framework, the skillful incorporation of literary expression engenders a dual structure generative of a new worldview.

For example, earlier I proposed that the laughter of "The Hermaphrodite" scene represents a manifestation of the idea of karmic retribution. Without doubt an understanding of this scene is predicated to a large extent on this idea. At the same time, however, it cannot be overlooked that the mirth of this moment is also directly engendered by the textual passage, which evokes the comical and unusual sight of someone with an unstable social status, a man who is somehow also a woman, walking the streets reading people's futures with a drum hanging around his (or her) neck. In this scene, the gravitas of karmic retribution is instantly sublimated into laughter through the brief textual passage. This sublimation is the essence of this *emaki*. And by extension, it is also, if I may, an embodiment of the very structure of the culture of medieval Japan.

Remarks:

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