

Tales of the Supernatural in Early Modern Japan: Kaidan, Akinari, Ugetsu Monogatari (Japanese Studies, 16)

By Noriko T. Reider

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This book is intended to assess the significance of kaidan, specifically its multi-dimensional reflection of an impact on Japanese culture in the Edo period. The legacy of Japan's cultural efflorescence in the late eighteenth century was far-reaching, its fruits often seen as epitomizing the entire Tokugawa period. In the years between the Kan'en era (1748-1751) and the chilling effects of the Kansei Reforms (1790), there was no dearth of innovative belletristic expression, but in the area of fiction, the yomihon of Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) eclipse all else. Professor Reider's outstanding study treats this unusual scion of a remarkable age, contextualizing his work from a unique perspective. Under various noms de plume, Akinari authored significant works in several genres of both poetry and prose, but his greatest opus is incontrovertibly his Ugetsu monogatari (Tales of Moonlight and Rain), a collection of nine stories that revolutionized tales of the supernatural, elevating the genre to unprecedented levels of style and sophistication. Such a work deserves - and has duly received - ample critical attention from scholars on both sides of the Pacific, resulting in a plethora of secondary literature, to which contribution of a truly original piece of scholarship constitutes no small challenge. Professor Reider's study not only fills numerous lacunae, but presents many interpretations that will be new to English-speaking audiences. Among these are her astute analysis of the role of "obsession" (shunen) in the stories, and her recognition of Akinari's bunjin portrayal of an ideal world in which social justice ultimately prevails as mirroring a strong social consciousness. Throughout, Professor Reider's arguments are presented in cogent terms. Tzvetan Todorov maintains that literature of the fantastic - which includes tales of the supernatural - succeeds as art only to the extent that it is able to present events and characters to the reader suspended in a state of uncertainty whether all is a product of illusion or of reality, for "once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous." The attainment of this state is no mean stylistic feat for a writer, but its efficacy depends on a readership capable of entertaining such a temporary suspension of judgment. It must be a readership whose imagination is hobbled neither by a crude credulousness nor by a sterile positivism.

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