



A review of
**The Book of Yokai:
Mysterious
Creatures of
Japanese Folklore**

Judith Woolf

While it does include a detailed bestiary of 'mysterious creatures', many of them brought to life by Shinonome Kijin's vivid and vigorous line drawings, Michael Dylan Foster's engaging book offers more than its title promises, since his exploration of *yokai* as a cultural phenomenon combines folklore with anthropology, art history and media studies to reveal a twilight realm of the imagination lurking on the borders of everyday reality. As Foster points out, 'so often folklore is relegated to the past, or it is thought of as something untainted by commercial interests and contemporary media or, similarly, as something "authentic" in danger of disappearing', (84) whereas *yokai*, which can be monsters, spirits, ghosts or shape-changing animals, but can also be the stuff of modern urban legends and playground scary tales, 'are a kind of communal intellectual property: anybody can play with them, change them, believe in them, and make new versions of them to be sent out into the world' (8).

As Kijin explains, 'for something to become a yokai, it needs to be named' (93), and the first half of Foster's book offers a history of the ways in which ancient animistic beliefs, combined with the primitive fears we still share today, led to the naming of a myriad of 'mysterious phenomena and weird creatures' (14), many of which crossed the boundary between folk belief and popular art and literature – a process which also happens in reverse, and still continues today in manga, anime, role-playing and video games. For instance, the medieval *hyakkiyagyo*, the terrifying 'night procession of one hundred oni' (15) (the red, blue, black or yellow-faced ogres or demons familiar from Japanese prints), becomes transformed in Edo-period picture scrolls into 'a carnivalesque, topsy-turvy parade in which all manner of creatures and objects dance riotously, musically, through the streets,' (17) while in turn this procession of comic and grotesque monsters, now all impersonated by shape-shifting *tanuki* (raccoon dogs), provides a spectacular set-piece in Studio Ghibli's anime, *Pom Poko* (1994).

Isao Takahata's satirical film, in which the magical powers of shape-changing beasts are used to illustrate the real-life problem of the loss of natural habitat to aggressive

urban development, shows how traditional folk beliefs can themselves change shape and be put to meaningful new uses in the modern world. However, the modern world also generates its own *yokai*, such as *kuchi-sake-onna*, the slit-mouthed woman:

A young woman would walk up to people on the street. She was attractive, but she wore a large white surgical mask over her mouth. She would tap a stranger on the shoulder and ask, “Am I pretty?” Then she would remove the mask. Her mouth was slit at the corners all the way up to her ears. “Even like this?” (8-9)

Less terrifying but no less spooky is *Toire no Hanako-san* (Hanako of the Toilet), ‘a ghostly girl who haunts school bathrooms’ and will answer to her name ‘if you go to the girls’ bathroom on the third floor and knock three times on the door of the third toilet stall’ (219). Given that Edo-period *yokai* were often invented or pieced together gryphon-fashion by their collectors and illustrators, it is appropriate that these modern apparitions co-exist with such marketing and media phenomena as Pokémon, which exerts its malign draw on children’s pocket-money by spiriting them away into a world of ever-proliferating mini-monsters.

The second half of Foster’s book takes the form of a ‘Yokai Codex’, in which the mysterious creatures are arranged by habitat, beginning with unpopulated areas of mountain and forest and gradually moving closer to human dwellings. This geographical schema, plus the fact that the ‘Alphabetized List of Yokai’ omits translations of their names, can make it hard to locate particular monsters, though it does make for enjoyable browsing. One of the pleasures of the book for an English-speaking reader is the way in which motifs from our own folklore and fantasy literature are reflected or transformed. Since Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Europeans have personified Echo as a nymph; the *yamabiko*, or mountain echo, as portrayed in one of Toriyama Sekien’s Edo-period illustrated catalogues of *yokai*, is ‘a floppy-looking, monkeylike creature sitting atop a high stony peak’ (128), and Kijin’s version of it strikes exactly the right balance between almost believable wild animal and fantasy goblin. *Tsukumogami*, or object monsters – ‘tools and other objects that change into spirits after a span of one hundred years’ (240) – cast a new light on the dish that ran away with the spoon, while the long-lived cats that become demonic and sometimes speak in a human voice recall the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. As for Alice herself, the alarming episode in which she discovers ‘her shoulders were nowhere to be found,’ and ‘all she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck’ which ‘would bend about easily in any direction, like a serpent,’ shows her transformation into a pulley-necked *rokurokubi*, though fortunately Carroll stops short of allowing her head to ‘become completely detached from her body’ (220). More recently, this kind of mirroring has become an international and two-

way process, with, for example, Studio Ghibli's most famous anime, *Spirited Away*, drawing on elements of Carroll's *Wonderland* and J.K. Rowling including several mentions of the turtle-like *kappa* (the *yokai* which started Foster on his quest) in her Harry Potter series.

While Foster's scholarship is attested to by nearly fifty pages of notes and bibliography, his book is lively, lucid and accessible (apart from the index and the list of *yokai*, which presuppose a knowledge of Japanese) and he succeeds admirably in opening up an unfamiliar and fascinating field to the general reader. But perhaps the most memorable aspect of *The Book of Yokai* is its demonstration that we have no need to pray for deliverance from 'ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggit beasties', since these twilight 'creatures of the borderlands' (5) enable us to personify, and thus to master and mock, our own hidden fear of 'things that go bump in the night'.

Author: Michael Dylan Foster.

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