

## UEDA AKINARI-MORAL PRINCIPLES AND MEDICINE

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*Abstract: Although he came from a disadvantaged background, Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) was fortunate enough to be adopted by a wealthy family of paper merchants who could afford to support his education. The fact that he survived smallpox as a child, although the consequences left him with deformed hands, would influence not only Akinari's worldview and choice of future profession, but also his artistic inclinations. Married, despite family's opposition, to a maid, called O'Tama, the younger Akinari devotes himself to writing. As an adult, however, the style Akinari would adopt was that of high fiction. For a decade after his adoptive father's death, Akinari felt compelled to continue the family business. But lack of mercantile spirit and an incident with a fire caused the business to collapse. Besides losing the family business, the first blow came in 1776 when Umaki, his friend and mentor, died. The deep feelings the doctor had for the learned would be shaken by this sudden death.*

*Keywords: medicine, fantastic, mystery, transformation, human values*

During this period of inner turmoil Ueda Akinari found emotional peace by writing Ukiyo-zōshi style stories and haiku and waka poetry. This type of literature, which appeared at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, had won the hearts of readers for its mixture of fantastic and the ordinary life. Although Akinari's debut novel was successful and was published when the author was still young, this type of literature did not seem sober enough to him.

His great passion for historical truths would prevail and his later prose is oriented towards moral principles intertwined with the fantastic and the past of his homeland. This stage of literary maturity occurred when Akinari was in his thirties. The economic conditions of Japan at the beginning of the 19th century were favorable to the emergence of an educational literature addressed to the people who were beginning to learn to read. The economic progress of the period attracted an opening of the cultural horizon that Akinari took advantage of to spread ethical principles. His distinctive mark is to approach these serious issues in an enigmatic manner, through his own emphasis.

However, "where Ueda differed from contemporary writers, however, was in his inclusion of pathos with his humor. He often showed how he was sympathetic for his characters while simultaneously providing readers with a clue towards his pessimism that became more and more apparent throughout his career."<sup>1</sup> This degradation of his own state of spirit comes from the disappointment he felt towards a harsh destiny, but also from the disillusionment with regard to human nature, which in his youth he believed to be perfectible.

Realizing that commerce was not a profession that suited him, eager to get closer to the common man and burning with the aspiration to help his fellow men, Akinari decided to study medicine. Studying with Tsuga Teishō, a Confucian doctor who lived in

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<sup>1</sup> Meghan McLaughlin, *An Intellectual Debate: Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga*, Spring 2013, Volume XXXVIII, Wittenberg University Open Journal, p. 16

Osaka, brought him closer not only to the goal of becoming a doctor but also to literature, as his mentor was a well-known writer, philologist, and scholar. In 1766 Akinari published a volume of short stories *Shodō kikimimi sekenzaru* (*Monkey Who Hears Various Things*) and followed a year later by *Ukiyozoshi* (*Books of the Floating World*). In *Characters of Worldly Mistresses*, Akinari describes everyday life “depicting the lives of contemporary urban commoners.”<sup>2</sup> These first writings, in the katagi-bon style, would increase Akinari's confidence in the value of his literature.

Although finished in 1768, Akinari published *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of the moonlight and rain*) only eight years later, under the pseudonym Senshi Kijin. The author was inspired by two iconic writings in Japanese literature: *The Tale of Genji* (medieval novel written by a woman-Murasaki Shikibu) and *Water Margin* (written by a Chinese author from the Ming period-Lo Kuan-chung). The style adopted in these stories is yomihon. The writer's inspiration was Chinese literature, a collection of stories from the early Ming Dynasty (14th century): *New Tales for Lamplight*. The volume brings together nine stories that combine the fantastic with the realistic description of Japanese society in Osaka. Akinari's pre-existing penchant for the supernatural, fantastic, and mystery had the opportunity in these pages to be honed in a harmonious manner. At the same time, European romanticism tried to subjectivize reality.

Akinari distorts objective reality through the prism of the fantastic in an attempt to meet the standards of a rigid society. For doctor Akinari, the well-being of the individual is paramount, freedom from the restrictions of a society that stifles individualism acquires a much stronger value in the pages of this neophyte writer. The human being and individual values taking precedence over a society increasingly suffocated by change are concepts that only a doctor would have the power to feel. The emotion generated by the doctor's prose is a liberating one.

Akinari was convinced that any form of physiological suffering is only a reflection of the mind, that disease exists only in the mind of the sufferer. His way of relating to the outside world was a broad construct made up of indulgence, the desire to do good to his neighbor and a humble life. The simple values that Akinari embraced have as their source his own humble origins (he came from a prostitute mother), but also his readings of various religious-Buddhist and Confucian writings. The two elements of nature referred to in the very title of Akinari's stories—the rain and the moon—represent the opposition between the feminine and the masculine. The harmonization of these elements induces the reader the idea of perfection achieved through art.

Akinari practiced medicine with the deep conviction that the doctor must fight for the patient's life. He often felt frustrated by his helplessness in the face of illness and suffering. The loss of a patient to a misdiagnosis would prompt Akinari to retire from the medical world and devote himself entirely to writing. The society of his time, oriented towards the acquisition of prestige, fame and wealth, deeply disgusted the writer who

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<sup>2</sup> Haruo Shirane, *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 269

had dedicated his life to fighting the disease. Confined to a modest home, Akinari barely got over the death of his consort and even went blind for a while.

The first story, which opens the *Ugetsu Monogatari* volume, presents the fictional encounter between the poet and Buddhist Saigyō Hōshi (1118-1190) and the ghost of a ruler who foretold the coming of an age in which war, destruction and despair will take hold of the human soul. The interweaving of real history through the realistic description of the medieval era up to Edo feudalism with the phantasmagoric, the fragile balance between the bizarre and the natural, the mixture of revelation and normality, make this volume a special read. Slipping from the spirit world into the tangible, the fluctuation between dream and reality are the guidelines of these nine stories.

The 1778 volume is the synthesis of Dr. Akinari's system of thought, readings, and lifestyle. Convinced that good wins, that universal balance restores things to a normal course, Akinari was a follower of Confucianism that promoted deep human values. Akinari's stories reveal a multifaceted reality where evil can only be defeated if the individual becomes aware of it and confronts it with a creative and proactive attitude "the misery, the pitifulness, the wretchedness, the anger resulting from the wrongdoer-victim relationships in the basic mutuality of living things (...) At the same time, it confronts the basic problem of evil in man's existence, in his determination to live and in the various realities that surround him."<sup>3</sup>

Akinari's prose revealed complex characters in a multivalent construction that brought together lyricism, the robustness of common language and traditional literature. The writer himself often moved from one locality to another and his writings reflected this aspect. The descriptions of landscapes that Akinari built with his pen have a sobriety that allows us to see a gentle sadness of the one who does not find his place, of the traveler accustomed to spend his life in motion.

This feeling of alterity, of not belonging can be associated with the events experienced by Akinari both in his private life and in the practice of medicine. The theme of the trip is one of initiatory pilgrimage. Also the second story of the volume (*The White Peak*), resumes the theme of the journey between two provinces of Sanuko and Kako, which symbolizes the journey on water and the land, and the central theme is that of friendship. The third story (*The House Amid the Thickets*) moves the perspective to the east of Japan and the tone becomes melancholic as it is about an initiatory journey of numbness and love, of a wife waiting for her husband. After her death, the love for the partner manages to cross the border between life and death.

The fifth story (*Bird of Paradise*), whose action is contemporary with the author, is the initiatory journey of a father and his son reminiscent of Akinari's own journey with his stepfather during which he reached the peak of Koya where he the hall was a buddhist temple. *Lust of the White Serpent* is the story of the revenge of a fantastic being - Manago - a snake disguised as a woman on the mortal Toyoo who cheated her by marrying another woman. At the same time, this story has the richest references to the

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<sup>3</sup> Kengi Hamada, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain: Japanese Gothic Tales by Ueda Akinari*, Tokyo, Japan, University of Tokyo Press, 1971, p. XXIX

geography and history of Japan among all the writings that make up the volume. Akinari also uses the supernatural to warn his readers about the dangers of false appearances. The protagonist goes beyond the grounded social rules, loved by an evil spirit. The author's warning is multiple: attraction is not the basis of healthy relationships, laziness and lack of action can generate the attraction of evil forces and prudence, balance and conscience can prevent the individual from falling into the nets of evil.

In *The Chrysanthemum Vow*, the central character commits suicide and becomes a ghost. Respecting the agreement he had with his friend who is still alive, he returns to the land of the living on the date he promised he would. The story, beyond its fantastic, is a warning of the transgression of the boundary between the dimension of the living and that of the dead. But the importance of this story is deeper. Akinari, a doctor by profession, sneaks here knowledge of medicine, preparation and various potions. Samon, the writer in the story, appears to be the alter ego of the author as he has the gift of herbal healing and uses his skill to heal the sick samurai, Soemon, with the help of a decoction of herbs and rice porridge. Although Japan was closed to foreigners from 1641 to 1853, access to Western technology and medicine was maintained through contacts with the Dutch from Dejima, a remote island near Nagasaki. This body of Western knowledge to which Japanese scholars had limited access was called rangaku. Beyond the exotic nature of the story, Akinari emphasizes in this short story the need for knowledge, the exchange of information that, as a doctor and scientist, he would have wanted. Unfortunately, this policy of closing the country of the Tokugawa shogunate would continue even after Akinari's death.

In *The Blue Hood* we witness a divine punishment of sexual deviations. The monk Myokei Kaian is turned into an ogre after lusting after one of the young men under his tutelage. And the love of material benefits is harshly criticized by Akinari. The mystical journey of the monk in *The Blue Hood* is one of sacrifice for noble purposes. Thus, in *On Poverty and Wealth*, a money-loving samurai, Sanai, is visited by the spirit of gold and talks to him about material possessions and the fact that, sooner or later, they end up subjugating the human spirit. The dialogue between the two brings into focus Confucian discussions of past lives, karma, good and evil. The central idea is that money is not, in itself, evil. What we assign as the value of evil is human ungenerosity, greed, and the desire for glory. It is these characteristics in man that bring destruction. *The Carp of My Dreams* is the dream journey of a Buddhist priest who, during his dream, enters an underwater journey. *The Cauldron of Kibitsu* is a journey beyond death. The unfaithful husband is haunted by the dead wife who exacts justice from beyond the grave.

All the stories in this volume bring together the theme of the original journey that brings together past and present in a continuum beyond space and time in the permanence of existence. The lives of these characters, the journey as a form of transformation and the persistence of values that are eternally human make the reader understand that humanity relates to the same primordial elements regardless of time and space. The indisputable merit of Dr. Akinari is to demonstrate how similar we are in our essence regardless of the historical era and the race to which we belong to. The doctor's affinity for the classics, for the refined forms of literary expression but also the

reverence for the historical past are the subtle heritage of the Ming writings, from the Chinese language, which Akinari appreciated and tried to translate into his language.

Under the direct influence of the teachings promoted by the philosopher Mencius (372–289 B.C.) who carried forward the life principles of Confucianism which he interwoven with elements of Taoism, Akinari perceived life as a school in which the soul has the duty to perfect itself by adopting an altruistic and benevolent attitude (called Ren). Education is more than necessary, in the view of doctor Akinari, for the one who wants to evolve because the influence of knowledge is that of polishing and perfecting the good elements of the character. The principles that Mencius enumerated millennia before Akinari would find a fervent supporter in the eighteenth-century Japanese physician.

Believing in human nature's capacity to be perfectible, Akinari fell in love with these moral principles and promoted them through his literature. The quality of a doctor, the understanding of suffering, the great empathy he had for his fellow men represented the fertile ground on which the seeds of Confucianism bore fruit. Communication with the reader is facilitated by the colloquial tone, the language accessible to most of those who read these charming stories. Through this procedure, Akinari aimed not only to get closer to the reader but also to propagate his ideas and principles so dear to him. The Japanese public was already accustomed to Chinese literature, to the classicism of moral values, and the doctor managed, with great skill, to combine this need of the reader with his own moral values, for his stories bring together stylistic conventions, images and bookish connections with the classical literature of his country, at the same time remaining faithful to the Chinese literary genre that the Japanese population appreciated.

The strict moral code that Akinari applies to the characters is identified by Noriko Reider as a strict one in which any transgression attracts divine punishment: „When a character in one of his stories deviates from Akinari's strict ethical code, he or she is destined for severe, divine retribution.”<sup>4</sup>

Uprooted since childhood, married to a maid, suffering from a visible handicap, the doctor Akinari found his peace in the supernatural, in mysticism, in the undaunted faith in the gods but also in the readings he made especially of Chinese literature. Akinari, especially in the volume *Ugetsu Monogatari* manages to combine tradition with modernity, respect for fundamental and timeless values with originality. The author emphasizes the human wisdom that can discern the subtle relationship of the human being with the most enduring values.

The mixture of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhist teachings make this volume of prose more than just fiction, promoting it at the level of moral edification. Akinari delicately reveals the fine balance of good and evil. The two are sides of the same coin and their coexistence makes man evolve. The joining of the historical fact, the fantastic with incursions into the everyday world reflects the extent to which Akinari perceives

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<sup>4</sup> Noriko T. Reider, *Tales of the Supernatural in Early Modern Japan: Kaidan, Akinari, Ugetsu Monogatari*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, p. 108

existence, because he “attempted to critically explore the process of historical change from the perspective of the individual within the history.”<sup>5</sup>

However, his writings endanger the pre-established order because the physician perceived writing as a joyful activity that can change customs, rigid and ancient norms. The doctor's involvement in the cultural life of Japan was much more defined after the move to Kyoto. The experiment that the author makes in relation to how to write history in a colloquial and lively manner is an assumed one, by which the distance placed by previous literatures between the individual and the historical fact decreases. By way of extrapolation, reducing this emotional and temporal gap, Akinari achieves his goal of promoting historical identity, traditional values in an innovative way, much better adapted to a society in full expansion of intellectual and industrial development. Anchored in the present of his homeland but with eyes directed towards the past whose fragrance we can feel through the fantastic brought to the written page, Akinari positions himself in a timeless bookish dimension.

Even if the literature promoted by Akinari had already been practiced for almost a century, the doctor has the merit of having brought this style of literature to the next level, preceding modern Japanese literature. The female characters in *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* have been cataloged by exegetes as atypical of Japanese society. These female characters have the ability to sacrifice themselves, to take revenge when they feel cheated. This aspect marks “a new development in Japanese fiction and emerges in the nineteenth century kabuki and fiction.”<sup>6</sup>

The impact on subsequent literature is undeniable. The events that Akinari's pen put on paper are inspired by everyday or historical reality having a moral purpose even if the unusual is the central element a direct and stable connection with reality is maintained. The Japanese doctor managed to perfect the characteristics of the literature up to him by tying them into a unitary whole, a versatile mixture of romance and realism.

Following a two-week trip in 1779 with his wife, the thoughts put down on paper in the form of a diary would become prose in the form of two volumes of literature published over the next two years: *Akiyama no ki* and *Kozo no shiori*. The two literary pieces combine prose and lyric haiku and waka, the colloquial style with descriptions of nature. Probably around 1801, Akinari writes *A Basket of Writings*, a collection of excellent works of waka and wabun. Two of his waka-kaishi poems are inspired by his visit to Zenrinji.

Just a year before his own death, Akinari writes *Harusame monogatari* (*Tales of the Spring Rain*) around 1802. Increasingly depressed, the doctor begins to think more and more about his own passing. Thus, he designed his tombstone but also destroyed a number of manuscripts. However, struggling with his own feelings, Akinari continues to write. This last volume - *Tales of the Spring Rain* - contains the entire ideology of the

<sup>5</sup> Susan L Burns, *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p. 127

<sup>6</sup> Haruo Shirane, *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 14

author about existence, the moral values by which he guided himself and the religious eclectic system he adopted.

A difference from *Tales of the Moonlight and Rain* can be seen in that the author abandons the mystical and supernatural. Anchoring the actions of these short stories in reality indicates a painful process unfolding in Akinari's inner forum. Towards the end of his life, tired of the many frustrating experiences, disappointed by people's lack of desire to evolve but also by the personal losses suffered, Akinari seems to take stock of his existence, an emotional retrospective. Among the doctor's last writings are *Kinsa* (1804) a monograph devoted to *Manyoshu* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*)—a medieval anthology of Japanese poetry, and *Tandai shōshin roku* (1808), collections of scholarly essays, opinions, and accounts of his experiences. *Tandai shōshin roku* (*A Record of Daring and Prudence*) is an acid satire and historical criticism. The transformation of his personality is also evident in his literature. If in the writings of the youth, optimism and a positive view of life prevails, as the author gets older, a shift towards skepticism, sarcasm and disillusionment can be observed. Other essays signed by Akinari are *Yoshiya Ashiya* (*For better or for worse*), a monograph on Ise Monogatari (*Tales of Ise*) and *Nara no Soma* (*Japanese oak wood*), *Seifu Sagen* (*Miscellaneous Comments on the Way of Pure Elegance*) dedicated to Japanese national green tea sencha, *Kakizome Kigen Kai* (*New Year Calligraphy and a Changing Sea of Feelings*), *Kuse Monogatari* (*Tales of Compulsion*).

As a youth, Akinari signed poems by *Nishiyama Soin* under the influence of the Danrin School, which emphasized rapid, improvised composition with colloquial lines intended to amuse the reader for a moment. The future doctor was writing *Yakanasho* - a remarkable poetic theory of punctuation. The next literary stage was dominated by waka poetry, Akinari being friends with the revolutionary waka poet Ozawa Roan. In the period of literary maturity, the writer's interest turned in his stories to moral aspects, deep ethical principles and an austere philosophy dressed in the garb of the fantastic, allegory and the story within the story, raising philosophical issues and joining the reader to a much deeper reflection in relation to human nature.

The charm of these Akinari coming-of-age stories remains valid in the modern age because it appeals to the essence of humanity, who we are, and the struggle each of us has in the inner forum between good and evil. The passions of the characters are ours, everyone's. The universal truths that Akinari shares with his lecturer transcend geographical boundaries, differences in mentality and culture, and linguistic limitations. The stories that Akinari constructs with literary flair are perennial. The last literary stage is that of despair, skepticism and existential philosophizing. Distrust in the human being, the instability of feelings, the lack of consistency in interpersonal relations led Akinari to be increasingly withdrawn in his last years.

His influence on Japanese culture and especially on later literature is undeniable. Although the reader on the part of the author some desire to avoid the ugly, Akinari has the merit of being innovative in the field of psychology of characters. The introspections of the characters created by the doctor-writer bring the author into the literary modernity of the 19th century as he “in each tale emphasized a single moment of insight,

as have good modern short story writers. As a totality of related parts all of the tales combine to form an integral and unified work of art.”<sup>7</sup> The unique combination of fantasy, tradition and innovative literary technique makes this doctor writer unique in the Japanese literary landscape, and many authors of the following centuries referred to the standards imposed by him.

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<sup>7</sup> Ueda Akinari, Translated and Edited by Leon M. Zolbrod, *Ugetsu Monogatari or Tales of Moonlight and Rain, A complete English Version of the Eighteenth-Century Japanese Collection of Tales of the Supernatural*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1974, p. 77