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JLL FORUM

Finding the Mind in the Eyes: A Note on the Wife's Testimony in Akutagawa's "In a Grove"

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I am a professor of English literature with no knowledge of Japanese, but I have enjoyed teaching Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's "In a Grove" (藪の中 *Yabu no naka*) in translation in undergraduate literature classes at the University of Virginia in the United States. I have taught the story several times, usually in classes that focus on short stories and modes of narration that authors use in telling stories. I often teach "In a Grove" in tandem with other short stories in which authors use unusual modes of narration to introduce multiple viewpoints, including epistolary stories like Ambrose Bierce's "Jupiter Doke, Brigadier General" and Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station," in which letters from various persons in the story world present different points of view, and stories in which a single narrator "channels" and reports the thoughts of a series of different characters in the story world, like Merle Hodge's "Inez" and James Joyce's "The Boarding House."¹

"In a Grove" is like the stories just mentioned—and especially the Bierce and Munro stories—because it presents multiple accounts of a single event and leaves readers to try to sort out what really happened.² The story consists of seven depositions that record the testimony of seven people connected to the killing of a samurai, and the most important accounts of what happened (the last three) are spectacularly inconsistent with one another. The robber Tajōmaru says in his statement that he killed



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the samurai, but the samurai's wife, Masago, says that she killed her husband because he asked her to do so.³ As for the samurai, he says that he decided to stab himself in the chest with his own sword after his wife abandoned him in favor of the robber who had forced himself on her; however, he failed to kill himself and remained alive for a little while until some other person (he says he does not know who) arrived and pulled the sword out of his chest, causing him to bleed to death. Just to make the evidentiary situation even more confusing, we are told that the last statement of the seven, the samurai's statement, is delivered *from beyond the grave*, with the deceased samurai speaking through a medium.⁴

Akutagawa seems to have been inspired by the perspectivism of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9), which juxtaposes testimony by several persons involved in a criminal lawsuit, and his story provided the inspiration for Akira Kurosawa's famous film *Rashomon* (1950), which, in turn, has given us the term "the Rashomon effect." Readers (or viewers) encounter the "Rashomon effect" when they are presented not with a single, authoritative account of events but with a set of conflicting accounts representing different points of view.⁵ In some cases it may be possible to evaluate the various accounts and come to an understanding of what probably happened (as I believe is the case in Bierce's "Jupiter Doke, Brigadier General," for example). In other cases, the truth of the matter may be impossible to determine. A number of critics who have written on Akutagawa's story have argued that it falls into this second category.⁶ Tsutomu Takahashi, for example, has argued that "the objective truth of the incident [is] forever unknowable to the reader." The reader can only "oscillate between the three different interpretations of the incident" in a state of "bewilderment and perplexity."⁷ David Boyd has made similar claims. He suggests that what the story is really about is not just the "difficulty" of determining the truth but the "impossibility" of doing so. Boyd sees "In a Grove" as "a peculiarly modern meditation on the relativity of truth."⁸ I agree that the story presents many problems for readers, and I do not claim to have definitively sorted out what actually happened, but I would like to push back a little against these claims of total epistemological inscrutability and argue that one of the three key depositions is significantly more problematic than the other two, and also problematic in a different way. I hope to show that there is something odd and troubling about the testimony given by the samurai's wife, Masago, or rather about Masago's behavior as she describes it in her testimony, something that has not (as far as I can tell) been noted by any previous

commentator.

Here is the relevant part of Masago's testimony, as it stands in the Takashi Kojima translation:

That man in the blue silk kimono, after forcing me to yield to him, laughed mockingly as he looked at my bound husband. How horrified my husband must have been! But no matter how hard he struggled in agony, the rope cut into him all the more tightly. In spite of myself I ran stumblingly toward his side. Or rather I tried to run toward him, but the man instantly knocked me down. Just at that moment I saw an indescribable light in my husband's eyes. Something beyond expression ... his eyes make me shudder even now. That instantaneous look of my husband, who couldn't speak a word, told me all his heart. The flash in his eyes was neither anger nor sorrow ... only a cold light, a look of loathing. More struck by the look in his eyes than by the blow of the thief, I called out in spite of myself and fell unconscious.⁹

In the course of time I came to, and found that the man in blue silk was gone. [*] I saw only my husband still bound to the root of the cedar. I raised myself from the bamboo-blades with difficulty, and looked into his face; but the expression in his eyes was just the same as before.

Beneath the cold contempt in his eyes, there was hatred.¹⁰ Shame, grief, and anger... I don't know how to express my heart at that time. Reeling to my feet, I went up to my husband.

"Takejiro," I said to him, "since things have come to this pass, I cannot live with you. I'm determined to die, ... but you must die, too. You saw my shame. I can't leave you alive as you are."

This was all I could say. Still he went on gazing at me with loathing and contempt. My heart breaking, I looked for his sword. It must have been taken by the robber. Neither his sword nor his bow and arrows were to be seen in the grove. But fortunately my small sword was lying at my feet. Raising it over head, once more I said, "Now give me your life. I'll follow you right away."¹¹

When he heard these words, he moved his lips with difficulty. Since his mouth was stuffed with leaves, of course his voice could not be heard at all. But at a glance I understood his words. Despising me, his look said only, "Kill me." Neither conscious nor unconscious, I stabbed the small sword through the lilac-colored kimono into his breast.¹²

Again at this time I must have fainted. By the time I managed to look up, he had already breathed his last—still in bonds.¹³

It is important to note that Masago's decision to kill her husband is, according to her testimony, based entirely on her interpretation of *what she thinks her husband's eyes are saying*. Her husband remains bound and

gagged throughout the entire passage: “his mouth was stuffed with leaves.”¹⁴ At first, Masago thinks she sees contempt and hatred and loathing in her husband’s eyes. Then, a little later, she thinks his eyes are saying, “kill me.” And, on this basis, she kills him. But did she really have sufficient warrant to do that?

It is no easy task to figure out what someone’s face is “saying.” In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, King Duncan laments that he has failed to do this. The Thane of Cawdor was a lord whose face the king had scrutinized and whom he deemed to be honest and loyal—and yet Cawdor betrayed him, leaving the king to shake his head and lament, “There’s no art / To find the mind’s construction in the face: / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust.”¹⁵ And if it is hard to “read” a face, it is even harder to “read” a pair of eyes, when other parts of the face are concealed. I recently spent several months teaching students who were wearing masks — to reduce the chances of transmitting the coronavirus. I could only see their eyes and their eyebrows, and I was rarely able to infer what anybody was thinking from the eyes alone. But that is precisely what Masago claims to have done – and that is her justification for stabbing her husband.

What I find most alarming about the passage quoted above is that Masago actually has an opportunity to confirm or disconfirm her interpretation of what her husband’s eyes are saying but makes no use of that opportunity. I inserted an asterisk [*] in the passage above at the moment when the robber departs.¹⁶ From that moment on, Masago is at liberty. The robber has left the grove: she can do what she wishes. She has a splendid opportunity to confirm (or disconfirm) her “reading” of what her husband’s eyes seemed to be saying. Does he really hate her? And does he really want her to kill him? All she has to do is remove the leaves from his mouth and ask him a few questions. She does not do this, however.

Of course, Masago might be afraid of her husband. She says that she could see hatred and loathing in his eyes, so she might be afraid to untie him. But here’s the thing: *she would not need to untie his arms and legs to verify her interpretation of what his eyes are saying; she would only need to loosen the gag and remove the bamboo leaves from his mouth.* She could do this while still leaving him tied to the root of the cedar tree. In that situation, he would be unable to harm her, but she could ascertain whether her hypotheses concerning his thoughts and wishes were in fact correct. If he then spoke to her with hatred and contempt, she could say that her suspicions on that point were confirmed; if he asked her to go ahead and kill him, *using his words*, then she would have verbal confirmation that

she had “read” his eyes correctly. In that case, I suppose many people would agree that she could stab him with a clean conscience. But Masago does not do either of those things. Instead of the adopting the “trust but verify” approach recommended in an old Russian proverb and adopted, latterly, by former U. S. President Ronald Reagan, she decides to trust her eyes absolutely and kill her husband without any attempt at verification or confirmation.¹⁷ I think most judges would find her behavior not just suspicious but legally objectionable.

When I taught the story to a class of university students a few years ago, I recruited a student to help me act out a possible scenario. I had the student play the gagged samurai, while I myself played Masago. Masago began by giving a little speech: “Oh, dearest duck! I do so love you, but I see that look in your eyes. I know that means you hate me and view me with loathing.” Meanwhile, the samurai squirmed and wriggled and tried to speak through his gag: “*mmmmfgh namismur!*” Masago continued, “What’s that you say, dearest duck? You want me to kill you? Oh, really? What a terrible task for a loving wife! I’m not sure I can do it! But if you insist...” Meanwhile the samurai struggled even more intensely, apparently trying to convey a message in spite of the gag in his mouth: “*MMMMM! IIIIIDAWNNNVVANNADIIIIII!*” I played this scene as a comedy— and got some laughs— but the scene could also be played as a tragedy.¹⁸ If this is really what happened, it is a terrible thing to do to your spouse.

Masago’s account is troubling – and not only because it is contradicted by the other accounts. It is troubling because, by her own report, she kills her husband on the basis of mind-reading and an unconfirmed hypothesis. Hers is a tale of a killing that seems to be insufficiently justified and therefore unethical.

I said at the outset that Masago’s deposition is not only more problematic than the other two key depositions but also problematic in another way. I am now in a position where I can explain what I meant by that. If we consider Masago’s story as a speech act, it seems significantly *less successful* than the other depositions in the story. What I mean by that is that her story, although clearly intended to be exculpatory, does not actually succeed in the work of exculpation – and that is something that I think we cannot say about the other major accounts in the story. For example, if we consider the deposition of the robber Tajōmaru, we may suspect him of altering the facts to promote his reputation as a fighter, but we must recognize that he has at least succeeded in telling a story that

would have that effect if taken at face value. With Masago, this is not the case. She is clearly aiming to exculpate herself, but her story is so problematic that it fails as an attempt at self-exculpation.

If Masago reveals herself to be ethically challenged in her unwillingness to seek confirmation or disconfirmation, as I have argued, we might also doubt if she is a reliable witness concerning other details. We might begin to view some other parts of her testimony with a more skeptical eye. For example, we might wonder about her alleged attempts to commit suicide (as she promised she would) in the aftermath of the rape and the death of her husband. She explains her failure to kill herself as follows: “Anyway I hadn’t the strength to die. I stabbed my own throat with the small sword, I threw myself into a pond at the foot of the mountain, and I tried to kill myself in many ways. Unable to end my life, I am still living in dishonor.”¹⁹

This statement raises a lot of questions. Is it really that difficult to commit suicide? Of course, Masago might be squeamish about using a sword, but she says she was able to stab her husband. She might be hesitant to use the weapon on herself, but she says that she did stab herself in the neck. Why then could she not stab herself a second time to finish the job? She tells us she *didn’t have the strength to die*, but, if that is the case, we might wonder how she had the strength to pull herself, in wet clothing, out of the pond? That would seem to be a situation in which strength would be required to avoid death but doing nothing at all would be sufficient to achieve death. Is it possible that Masago’s heart was not really in any of these projects? Is it possible that she actually wanted to live and therefore did not actually do these things? The implausibility of her statements gives us good reason to consider these possibilities.

We might also look with a suspicious eye on the testimony given by Masago’s mother. At one point in her deposition, she describes her daughter: “She is a spirited, fun-loving girl, but I am sure she has never known any man except [her husband].”²⁰ What prompts this apparently unsolicited statement about Masago’s sexual purity? The mother might say this because she is worried that her daughter’s honesty will be questioned by men eager to blame a wife for sexual looseness, but she might say it because she knows something about her daughter and wishes to deny it preemptively. In other words, methinks the mother doth protest too much—or at least me wonders if she doth protest too much.²¹

If the chain of ideas I have been developing here makes us less likely to trust Masago and her mother, it might make us more likely to trust the

other persons who give accounts of what happened in the grove. In particular, it might make us more likely to trust the husband's testimony because he states that he was horrified by his wife's treacherous behavior. I will come to that part of his testimony in a moment, but first I would like to point out that the husband, in the course of giving an independent account of events, flatly contradicts Masago's analysis of what his eyes were trying to say:

After violating my wife, the robber, sitting there, began to speak comforting words to her. Of course I couldn't speak. My whole body was tied fast to the root of a cedar. But meanwhile I winked at her many times, as much as to say "Don't believe the robber." I wanted to convey some such meaning to her.²² But my wife, sitting dejectedly on the bamboo leaves, was looking hard at her lap. To all appearances, she was listening to his words.²³

After this, the samurai says, things went from bad to worse:

The robber finally made his bold, brazen proposal. "Once your virtue is stained, you won't get along well with your husband, so won't you be my wife instead? It's my love for you that made me be violent toward you."

While the criminal talked, my wife raised her face as if in a trance. She had never looked so beautiful as at that moment. What did my beautiful wife say in answer to him while I was sitting bound there? I am lost in space, but I have never thought of her answer without burning with anger and jealousy. Truly she said, . . . "Then take me away with you wherever you go."²⁴

This is not the whole of her sin. If that were all, I would not be tormented so much in the dark. When she was going out of the grove as if in a dream, her hand in the robber's, she suddenly turned pale, and pointed at me tied to the root of the cedar, and said, "Kill him! I cannot marry you as long as he lives." "Kill him!" she cried many times, as if she had gone crazy. Even now these words threaten to blow me headlong into the bottomless abyss of darkness. Has such a hateful thing come out of a human mouth ever before? Have such cursed words ever struck a human ear, even once?²⁵

The husband depicts Masago as a nasty person and a treacherous wife—and that is consistent with the reading of her character I developed earlier in my analysis of her own testimony. Both his description of her and her description of her own actions should lead us to conclude, even if we do not know precisely what happened in the grove, we should at least be very suspicious of Masago's version of events.²⁶

In closing, I will add that I hope this note may be of some use to others who have occasion to teach this fascinating story. In particular, it seems to me it might be useful insofar as it suggests a strategy for getting classroom discussion *unstuck*. Once students recognize that the three crucial depositions in the story are inconsistent, they may shrug and say “there’s no way to get at the truth of the matter.” It is possible that this is the message of the story—many critics think so—but this way of thinking also poses a danger for teachers, as it may encourage students to give up on close analysis of the text prematurely, when there are still interesting things to be noted. If the class seems to be heading in this direction, the teacher may wish to focus on the testimony of Masago and the various issues it raises.

NOTES

For assistance with this project, I am grateful to Anri Yasuda, Anne Sokolsky, and two anonymous readers affiliated with *JLL*.

¹ Discourse theorist James Moffett calls the mode of narration used in these last two stories “anonymous narration [also known as “third-person” narration] with multiple character point of view.” This is a mode of narration in which the narrator “has access” to the minds and thoughts of several different characters in the story and tells the reader what these characters were thinking and feeling at various points. Moffett’s spectrum of eleven modes of narration is laid out in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1968), 120–154 and in a delightful and useful anthology of short fiction that he edited with Kenneth R. McElheny, *Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories* (New York: Signet, 1966). *Points of View* contains the Bierce, Munro, and Hodge stories mentioned above.

² The title of the Akutagawa story has been translated as “In a Grove” by Takashi Kojima and “In a Bamboo Grove” by Jay Rubin. I have used the Kojima translation as my reference text in this article: Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, trans. Takashi Kojima (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1952). All quotations in the main body of the article are taken from the Kojima translation. However, in the endnotes that follow I have sometimes added the Rubin translation: *Rashomon and Seventeen Other Stories*, trans. with notes by Jay Rubin (New York: Penguin, 2006). My purpose in presenting certain passages in two versions is to allow English readers to compare the two English translations and look for small variations that might suggest different interpretations.

³ The samurai’s name is given as *Takejiro* in the Kojima translation and *Takehiro* in the Rubin translation.

- ⁴ Kojima titles the last section of the story, “The Story of the Murdered Man, as Told Through a Medium” (30); Rubin’s title for the same section is “The Testimony of the Dead Man’s Spirit Told through a Medium” (17).
- ⁵ On Rashomon-like, multiple-perspective tales, see Sarah Halperin, “From Didactic Folk-Tale to Ingenious Arts: Akutagawa’s Use of Old Sources to his Stories ‘Rashomon’ and ‘In a Grove,’” in *Genres as Repositories of Cultural Memory*, ed. Hendrik van Gorp and Ulla Musarra-Schroeder (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 505–520, especially 505–6.
- ⁶ For a useful summary of divergent critical interpretations of the story put forward in Japanese criticism up to c. 1977, see Kinya Tsuruta, “Akutagawa’s ‘In a Grove’” in Katsuhiko Takeda, *Essays on Japanese Literature* (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 1977), 95–105.
- ⁷ Tsutomu Takahashi, “The Irony of Sin: Akutagawa’s ‘Yabu no Naka’ and Ambrose Bierce’s ‘The Moonlit Road,’” *Studies in English Language and Literature* 71 (2021) 21–41, at 25, 30; <https://doi.org/10.15017/4377705>.
- ⁸ David Boyd, “Rashomon: From Akutagawa to Kurosawa” *Literature Film Quarterly* 15.3 (1987): 155–158, at 156. See also Johanna Zeh, “Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s ‘In a Grove’: An Exercise in the Aesthetics of Literature,” *Literature East and West* 15/16 (1971-72): 872–889, at 886–887 and Tsuruta’s article.
- ⁹ Rubin translation: “And that was when it happened: that was when I saw the indescribable glint in my husband’s eyes. Truly it was indescribable. It makes me shudder to recall it even now. My husband was unable to speak a word, and yet, in that moment, his eyes conveyed his whole heart to me. What I saw shining there was neither anger nor sorrow. It was the cold flash of contempt—contempt for me. This struck me more painfully than the bandit’s kick. I let out a cry and collapsed on the spot” (16).
- ¹⁰ Rubin translation: “His eyes were exactly as they had been before, with the same cold look of contempt and hatred” (16).
- ¹¹ Rubin translation: “But then I had the good luck to find the dagger at my feet. I brandished it before my husband and spoke to him once again. ‘This is the end, then. Please be so good as to allow me to take your life. I will quickly follow you in death.’” (17).
- ¹² Rubin translation: “When he heard this, my husband finally began moving his lips. Of course, his mouth was stuffed with bamboo leaves, so he couldn’t make a sound. But I knew immediately what he was saying. With total contempt for me, he said only ‘Do it.’ Drifting somewhere between dream and reality, I thrust the dagger through the chest of his pale blue robe” (17). One of my anonymous

readers at *JLL* indicated that she/he believes that “dagger,” which Rubin uses in this translation, is a more correct translation of the original 短刀 (*tantō*).

¹³ Kojima translation, 27–29.

¹⁴ Kojima translation, 29.

¹⁵ *Macbeth*, I, iv, 11–14; *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Viking Press, 1969).

¹⁶ The man who leaves is wearing “blue silk”; he is clearly the man “in the blue silk kimono” who forced Masago “to yield to him” earlier in the story.

¹⁷ For an explanation of this Russian proverb and its use by Reagan, see “Trust but verify.” Wikipedia. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust,_but_verify (accessed 15 June 2023).

¹⁸ Johanna Zeh points out that the scene in which the husband tries to communicate with his wife by winking can be seen as “ludicrous” or “pathetic” (885).

¹⁹ Kojima translation, 29.

²⁰ The Rubin translation confirms the sexual innuendo: “She’s as bold as any man, but the only man she has ever known is Takehiro” (12).

²¹ I am not the only reader who senses something suspicious in this quarter: Kinya Tsuruta writes that Masago’s attempt to present herself as “the chaste wife of a samurai” makes readers suspect that “the very reverse might be true” (99).

²² Rubin translation: “I could say nothing, of course, and I was bound to the cedar tree. But I kept trying to signal her with my eyes: *Don’t believe anything he tells you. He’s lying, no matter what he says.* I tried to convey my meaning to her, but.... (17).

²³ Kojima translation, 30.

²⁴ Rubin translation: “And what do you think this beautiful wife of mine said to the bandit, in the presence of her husband bound hand and foot? My spirit may be wandering now between one life and the next, but every time I recall her answer, I burn with indignation. ‘All right,’ she told him, ‘take me anywhere you like.’” (18).

²⁵ Kojima translation, 30–31.

²⁶ My focus in this note on the disagreements between the samurai and Masago is consistent with Tsuruta’s thesis that the “real core” of the story is the emotional relationship between these two characters, and that the robber Tajōmaru, usually treated as a third main character, should in fact be viewed as a secondary character who is really just a “catalyst” for the dramatic conflict that ensues between the husband and the wife (100–101).