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## Symbolic Death and Rebirth into Womanhood: An Analysis of Stepdaughter Narratives from Heian and Medieval Japan

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Centuries before the Brothers Grimm published *Nursery and Household Tales* (1812), “evil stepmother” stories were already commonplace in Japan. For instance, in the “Hotaru” chapter of the eleventh-century masterwork, *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (The tale of Genji, ca. 1000), the eponymous hero grumbles about this to his attendants:

There were numerous old tales about evil stepmothers. “How distasteful,” Genji thought. So he carefully selected appropriate stories for his daughter, had the ladies-in-waiting copy those tales, and then attach illustrations to them.<sup>1</sup>

In this scene, Genji is attempting to protect his young daughter from frightening associations with a stepmother, precisely because she has been raised by one, namely, his “wife” Murasaki.<sup>2</sup> Why do fictional stepmothers tend to be so vicious? And why do “evil stepmother stories” seem so pervasive across time and cultures?

The current study intends to provide partial answers to these questions by examining the literary trope of *mamako banashi* 継子話 (stepchild tales)—rather than “evil stepmother tales”—through the lens of gender, sexuality, and kinship. To this end, in the first half of this essay, I will (1) expand the standard theory that *mamako banashi* are coming-of-age stories for young women (sometimes young men); (2) challenge the prevalent assumptions that the intra-female *mamako ijime* 継子虐め (stepchild abuse) can be attributed to external conditions, such as the stepmother’s desire to prioritize her biological children over her stepchild, or, more problematically, to women’s intrinsic dislike of younger females;



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and (3) theorize the historical evolutions of imaginaries of mothers in Japan.<sup>3</sup> Based on my proposed theoretical framework, the latter half of the paper will comparatively analyze five *mamako banashi*: *Ochikubo monogatari* 落窪物語 (Tale of Ochikubo), *Sumiyoshi monogatari* 住吉物語 (Tale of Sumiyoshi), *Hachi-kazuki* 鉢かづき (Bowl bearer), *Hanayo no hime* 花世の姫 (Lady Hanayo), and *Ubakawa* 姥皮 (The crone fleece).<sup>4</sup> Through my analysis, I will show how the *mamako banashi* topos was adapted in the specific historical context of Heian (794–1191) Japan and thus reflects the changing familial structures of the time, rather than being a timeless and ahistorical trope. Further, my reading of the five tales will reject the reductive and misogynistic interpretation of *mamako ijime* as a caricature of the “spiteful and jealous matron” bullying a “helpless and incompetent maiden,” and instead demonstrate their function as gynocentric coming-of-age tales depicting a dynamic range of female relations.

### ***Mamako ijime* as Rite of Passage**

The most useful existing framework for analyzing *mamako banashi* in terms of gender, sexuality, and kinship is the theory that *mamako ijime* represents the stepdaughter’s rite of passage (*tsūka girei* 通過儀礼).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the *mamako banashi* portrays the process through which the motherless girl undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth into adulthood.<sup>6</sup> This structure draws a parallel with the coming-of-age narrative for young males, known as *kishu ryūri-tan* 貴種流離譚 (tales of exiled and wandering nobles).<sup>7</sup> Within this schema, a young nobleman is exiled due to a transgression and thus undergoes a trial period of displacement, fall in status, and danger to his life (i.e., symbolic death). Overcoming these challenges represents purification of his sin and rebirth, after which the hero returns to his native land and often rules its people.

Mitani Kuniaki explains that the *mamako banashi* trope emerged as a variation of *kishu ryūri-tan* as the family system with duolocal residence (i.e., couple living separately and children growing up at the mother’s home) declined and shifted to matrimony with uxorilocal residence (i.e., couple cohabitating in the home of the wife’s parents).<sup>8</sup> In the event of polygamy, this uxorilocal arrangement is applied to the primary wife, with the husband being housed and financially supported by her parents. If the secondary wife with a small child dies, the child may move into the primary wife’s residence, and *Ochikubo* and *Sumiyoshi* are both based on such circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas Mitani and others treat the stepmother's abuse as comparable to the transgressive hero's exile to the extent that both are challenges to be overcome by the protagonists, Norma Field further likens the stepdaughter to the wandering noble by arguing that the heroine also transgresses as she becomes "sexually available" to men and thus offends her stepmother.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, according to Field, the stepmother is a figure who represents "all other women in the community including [the stepdaughter's] own mother—that is, women who have passed the age of sexual and literary interest."<sup>11</sup> This interpretation, in my opinion, is problematic for multiple reasons. First, the stepdaughter's involuntary sexual maturation is dissimilar to a man's active violations of taboo, such as defiling a sacred space and having a sexual relationship with an untouchable woman.<sup>12</sup> Second, this interpretation of *mamako ijime* cannot be applied to the narratives in which male protagonists are bullied by their stepmothers.<sup>13</sup> Third, this theory is predicated upon an unproven condition that women are inherently jealous of their younger counterparts. Fourth, the assertion that women are inherently antagonistic to younger women contradicts with the fact that the protagonists of *mamako banashi* are aided and supported by older women, from the heroines' wet nurses and attendants to their mothers-in-law and the mountain crone.

As my examinations of the five *mamako banashi* in the second half of this paper will illustrate, the fact of the matter is that there is no reason behind *mamako ijime*, just as there is no underlying, singular reason why a highborn hero commits a transgression. Because *mamako banashi* and *kishu ryūri-tan* are literary adaptations of rites of passage, the protagonists ought to face hardships. Therefore, any impetuses for abuse or transgressions suggested by the authors of particular stories cannot retroactively explicate why these tropes work the way they do. Further, I shall also note that the stepdaughter does not attain happiness in spite of her predicament; rather, she earns a loving family and prosperity as the direct reward for overcoming the challenge. This challenge, of course, was created by her stepmother's ire without a cause and the stepdaughter conquers the hardship with the help from kind people, especially other women. *Mamako banashi* are gynocentric tales whose female characters play a variety of roles, both amical and inimical to the protagonist.

### **The Triad of Motherly Figures**

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim suggests that the evil stepmother archetype

emerged in Europe as a means to alleviate children's psychological conflict with their mothers.

So the typical fairy-tale splitting of the mother into a good (usually dead) mother and evil stepmother serves the child well. It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all-good, but it also permits anger at this bad "stepmother" without endangering the goodwill of the true mother, who is viewed as a different person. (...) The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one's angry thoughts and wishes about her—a guilt which would seriously interfere with the good relation to Mother.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, it is impossible to prove that Japanese *mamako banashi* (or European fairytales for that matter) were composed for the purpose of mitigating children's disillusionment towards their own mothers. Nevertheless, albeit under entirely different cultural and historical circumstances, it appears that splitting of motherhood as a concept also took place in Japan. More specifically, fragmentations of motherly characters in literary texts occurred around the tenth century in the form of triangulation: a good (usually dead) mother, an evil *mama-haha* 継母 (stepmother), and a compassionate *menoto* 乳母 (wet nurse).<sup>15</sup> This hypothesis can be backed up by the historical changes of lexical items as well as pre-existing research to show that cruel *mama-haha* and caring *menoto* characters became prevalent around the same time (i.e., late-tenth century).<sup>16</sup>

In my view, the emergence of the three motherly characters with distinct images in the mid-Heian period mirrors the rise of marriage-procreation politics and aforementioned shift in the living arrangement of families from duolocal to uxorilocal residence. Marriage-procreation politics, most famous of which is *sekkan seiji* 撰関政治 of the Fujiwara during the tenth and eleventh centuries, is premised on the fact that daughters could have surpassed their parents' station by "hypergamy" of "marrying up," while sons rarely outranked their fathers.<sup>17</sup> Thus, within a union of one husband and multiple wives, the daughters' maternal lineage and intellectual/artistic cultivation, provided mostly by their *menoto* and ladies-in-waiting, became essential. Given this politico-social backdrop, it is not surprising for stepmother characters in literary texts to be cast in an increasingly negative light as a foil for biological mothers. Meanwhile, the fictional *menoto* came to represent the positive aspect of motherhood. On behalf of the mystical birthmother, who is normally either behind the

curtain or already deceased, the *menoto* comes to the foreground of the narrative and ensures the safety and happiness of her young charge, usually with the end goal of “good marriage” (i.e., marrying laterally or upward).

Even though *menoto* characters in fictional tales did not become common until the tenth century, such people certainly existed before the Heian period. *Nihon shoki* (Chronicle of Japan, 720) includes variants of the legend of Princess Toyotama 豊玉姫, the elder daughter of the king of the undersea world. When Toyotama was about to birth her child, she entered into the parturition hut built by her husband, Luck of the Mountain 山幸彦. Despite her instruction not to look inside, he witnessed his wife reverting to her true form (sea monster) to give birth. Toyotama resented her husband’s betrayal and returned home alone.<sup>18</sup> One of the versions of this story notes that Luck of the Mountain designated a team of women to be his son’s caretakers: “milk mother” (*chiomo* 乳母), “warm water mother” (*yuomo* 湯母), “gruel feeder” (*iikami* 飯嚼), and “bather” (*yue* 湯坐). And the narrator adds that this is the origin of the custom of fosterage in Japan.<sup>19</sup> It is notable that the compound of “milk” (*chi*) and “mother” (*omo*) above was pronounced not just as *chiomo* but also as *omo* during the Nara period (710–785), which indicates that, when spoken, *omo* could have referred to either a birthmother or a wet nurse.<sup>20</sup> Such porous boundaries between birthmothers and other female caretakers of children point to an understanding of mother primarily as someone who rears a child and her biological ties to the child is secondary. By the Heian period, however, *menoto* (denoted in the same kanji compound as *chiomo*), which is clearly dissociated from “birthmothers,” becomes the most common lexical item to stand for “wet nurses.”<sup>21</sup>

Another intriguing aspect of female caregivers is the potential lexical overlap between “wet nurses” and “stepmothers.” Scholars such as Wakamori Tarō and Ikeda Yazaburō suggest that *mama* まま, or the colloquial term for “wet nurse,” is the etymology of *mama-haha*.<sup>22</sup> Several observations can be made to support this theory. The earliest example of *mama-haha* listed in *Nihon kokugo daijiten* is from the dictionary *Wamyō ruijūshō* (Japanese terms classified and annotated, ca. 934), which was compiled merely four decades before the composition of *Utsuho monogatari* (The tale of the hollow tree, ca. 970), the oldest extant tale that features a wicked stepmother and kind *menoto* characters.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the Chinese loanword 繼母 (*keibo* or *keimo*) already appears in the legal codes of 757 and the native Japanese reading of this compound is *tsugu-*

*haha*, a word that never caught on until the sixteenth century.<sup>24</sup> This means that *mama-haha*, or the native Japanese word for “stepmother” most commonly used since the late-tenth century until now, was coined independently of the Sino-Japanese legal term *keibo*.<sup>25</sup> Given this partial evidence and lack of strong counter-evidence, I support Wakamori and Ikeda’s theory that *mama* originally referred to caregivers of children in general and later developed into two separate lexical items: *mama-haha* and *mama* (wet nurse).

To summarize, it appears that the previously overlapping concepts of “birthmother,” “wet nurse,” and “stepmother” gradually diverged into “birthmother” and “surrogate mother,” and the latter further split into the good *menoto* and evil *mama-haha* sometime before the late-tenth century. Even though not all birthmother characters dote on their children, not all *menoto* characters are loyal supporters of their charges, and not all *mama-haha* characters are abusers of their stepchildren, it is undeniable that such literary tropes were established by the mid-Heian era. The hero of *Genji monogatari*, who complains about the ubiquity of “old tales of evil stepmothers,” is also a victim of *mamako ijime* by Lady Kokiden and a beneficiary of Daini no Menoto’s affection.

### **Basic Components of the *Mamako banashi* Plot**

To return to the structure of *mamako banashi*, it bears repeating that the eventual fortune of the heroine is not something she attains despite the stepmother’s abuse. Rather, *mamako ijime* is an opportunity for a young person to undergo a symbolic death and rebirth into adulthood. This, of course, is comparable to the function of coming-of-age rituals, such as girls’ *mogi* 裳着 (donning of the skirt) and boys’ *uikōburi* 初冠 (capping). Upon completion of these ceremonies, the initiated individuals are considered sufficiently mature to take spouses, raise a family, serve the court, and create and/or inherit wealth.<sup>26</sup>

Even though it is impossible to attribute stepmothers’ wrath to some underlying, knowable cause, modern readers may unwittingly project the misogynistic stereotypes onto the aggressors as women who perpetually harbor resentment toward their younger counterparts.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in regard to *Ochikubo*, *Utsuho*, and *Sumiyoshi*, Monica Dix writes that in “these stories, a stepmother torments the stepdaughter out of jealousy,” although it is clear that jealousy does not cause any of these cases of *mamako ijime*.<sup>28</sup> The eponymous heroine of *Hachi-kazuki* is a girl with a large bowl attached to her head. Her new mother loathes her, not because she is young and pretty but because of her strange appearance. Yet, in her

summary of this story, Dix still defaults to the go-to explanation: “The father remarries, but the stepmother’s jealousy and false accusations against Hachikazuki force him to expel his daughter from home.”<sup>29</sup>

It goes without saying that some texts provide ostensible pretexts for the particular *mamako ijime* beyond jealousy. Yet these conditions are never sufficiently accountable for the magnitude of the women’s hostilities towards their stepdaughters. The *mama-haha* of Hanayo (the heroine of *Hanayo no hime*), for instance, grows vengeful supposedly because her husband is not very affectionate. She then hires a man to kidnap the girl, which is highly unlikely to help her marriage in any way. In contrast, stepmothers in *Ochikubo* and *Sumiyoshi* have biological daughters who are close to their stepdaughters in age, which may make one wonder if the mother is simply looking after her own children and trying to give them a leg up in the marriage market. Nevertheless, this still does not hold true because the viciousness and abuse never relent even after their biological daughters find desirable husbands.

As I stated above, *mamako ijime* never requires a reason (and, indeed, *Ubakawa* does not even try to provide one), because the stepmother’s abuse in the *mamako banashi* schema is merely a means to an end, namely, a plight for the stepchild to conquer. Just as a *menoto* character is defaulted to a loving surrogate mother of her charge, a fictional *mama-haha* torments her stepchild because that is what she is supposed to do.

Another fundamental component of *mamako banashi* is the stepchild’s aids, whether they are humans, spiritual beings, or the girl’s prospective husband. Unlike the wealthy and powerful *mama-haha* in *Ochikubo* and *Sumiyoshi*, who reward their accomplices and threaten disobedient servants, the protagonist has no apparent leverage. This means that the stepdaughter ought to be someone who compels others to come to her help voluntarily. It is no surprise that an archetypal heroine of *mamako banashi* is selfless, caring, filial, talented in music, calligraphy, and poetry, and, of course, stunningly beautiful. In short, the most basic components of the *mamako banashi* plot amount to only two entities: stepmother’s rage and the stepdaughter’s overarching goodness. By employing the interpretive framework I have discussed thus far, I will offer a comparative reading of the five *mamako banashi* in the remainder of the essay.

### **The Five Coming-of-Age Tales of Motherless Girls**

One of the “numerous old tales about evil stepmothers” Genji is referring to in the “Hotaru” chapter is *Sumiyoshi monogatari* (tenth century), which enthuses his adoptive daughter Tamakazura.<sup>30</sup> Another is likely *Ochikubo*

*monogatari* (tenth century), a work some scholars deem as a parody of the *Sumiyoshi*.<sup>31</sup> After the Heian period, the theme of *mamako ijime* continued to be written about in a range of texts, including *giko monogatari* 擬古物語 (Heian-style courtly tales), anecdotal tales, religious tales, sermon ballads, and *noh* plays throughout the medieval times (1192–1600) and beyond.<sup>32</sup> The medieval literary genre in which *mamako banashi* proliferated the most is *otogi-zōshi* 御伽草子 (companion books).<sup>33</sup> There are more than a dozen *otogi-zōshi* that revolve around *mamako ijime* and they are often classified further into “pseudo-Heian tale type,” “folk tale type,” and “*honji suijaku* tale type.”<sup>34</sup> Of the three, the best-known is the “folk tale type,” which includes three narratives with a similar plot: *Ubakawa*, *Hanayo no hime*, and *Hachi-kazuki*.

On the macro level, all five stories I will examine in this essay share the same basic plot: (1) The female protagonist’s mother dies, (2) she suffers from a series of hardships due to her abusive stepmother, (3) she escapes the adversarial circumstances with the help from others, and (4) she marries a nobleman and the couple is blessed with beautiful and talented children, wealth, and prosperity. Beyond the basic plot structure, there are some predictable differences among the stories based on the time period of composition and genre, as I will detail in the next section.

In addition to the structural differences between the Heian(-style) *monogatari* and medieval *otogi-zōshi*, *Ochikubo* has been positioned as a comedic and more vulgar (*zoku* 俗) counterpart to *Sumiyoshi* due to the unambiguous depictions of sexuality, violence, and excrements. A similar (albeit to a lesser degree) parallel can be drawn between the elegant (*miyabi* 雅) *Hanayo* and more *zoku*-oriented *Hachi-kazuki*. *Ubakawa* can be best understood as an antecedent of *Hanayo* and *Hachi-kazuki* as it exhibits common characteristics of an orally transmitted folk tale, including its brevity and lack of details.

### Backgrounds of *Mamako ijime*

*Sumiyoshi* and *Ochikubo* both take the form of Kyoto-centered courtly tales and they significantly influenced *Genji monogatari* and other Heian narratives. In terms of length, the number of major characters, and complexities of the characters and the storyline, they are greater in scale than the three *otogi-zōshi*. The protagonists, whom I will hereafter call Lady Sumiyoshi and Lady Ochikubo, are born to mothers of imperial lineage and fathers who are mid-ranking courtiers (*chūnagon* 中納言



[middle counselor]; later promoted to *dainagon* 大納言 [great counselor]).<sup>35</sup>

### **Living Arrangement**

In keeping with their status as elites in the capital, Lady Sumiyoshi's father (hereafter Chūnagon) and Lady Ochikubo's father (hereafter Tadayori 忠頼) are in polygamous marriages. At the outset of each tale, the narrator notes that the heroine's birthmother is a lady of royal blood; what may surprise the reader is that she is also the secondary spouse.<sup>36</sup> To explicate the lesser status of Lady Sumiyoshi's birthmother, upon mentioning that Chūnagon and his primary wife have two daughters (Naka no Kimi 中の君 and San no Kimi 三の君), the narrator of *Sumiyoshi* describes that his courtship with the royal lady began as a secret affair: "As people came to learn about their relationship, perhaps due to a karmic bond from their previous life, a dazzlingly beautiful baby girl was born."<sup>37</sup> As for Tadayori's relationship to Lady Ochikubo's mother, details are not given. The deceased wife is simply mentioned in passing, as a part of the introduction of the tale's protagonist: "[Tadayori] had a motherless daughter, born to a lady of royal blood, whom he used to visit occasionally."<sup>38</sup>

Each man's primary wife is, in turn, a daughter of a wealthy court official. This mirrors the uxori-local matrimony of the mid-Heian period where the primary wife's parents look after their son-in-law at home, incentivizing the husband to prioritize his financial security in the process of spousal selection.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Tadayori's wife is eager to expand her political and financial power by attracting wealthy, well-connected sons-in-law. While her two adult sons are out of the house (one a provincial governor and the other a priest) and living modest lives, she pours herself into spoiling the husbands of her eldest daughters.<sup>40</sup> The tale opens with Tadayori and his wife's planning of the *mogi* ceremonies for their younger daughters (San no Kimi and Shi no Kimi 四の君), after which they will take husbands. Unlike her half-sisters, Lady Ochikubo is being left to decay without a chance to formally undertake the *mogi* ceremony, let alone finding a husband.

In contrast to *Ochikubo* and *Sumiyoshi*, the protagonists' parents in the three *otogi-zōshi* are provincial officials who are in monogamous marriages. Their daughters (I will call them Hanayo, Hachi-kazuki, and Lady Ubakawa) acquire stepmothers due to the remarriage of their widowed fathers (Moritaka もりたか, Sanetaka さねたか, Kiyomune きよむね

ね). None of the stories mention the wives' (first or second) lineage. What is special about the births of Hanayo and Hachi-kazuki is that they were born to childless couples as a direct result of the wives' prayers to Bodhisattva Kannon.<sup>41</sup> Such divinely conceived children are called *mōshigo* 申し子 (requested children) and they tend to exhibit unusual traits (e.g., extreme beauty, extremely small stature, extreme laziness).

### **Late Mothers' Wishes**

Considering that these *mamako banashi* are coming-of-age stories of young women, it is not surprising the protagonists' success is inseparable from their sexual maturation and marriage. In this vein, the birthmothers of Lady Sumiyoshi, Hanayo, and Hachi-kazuki specifically express their concerns about their daughters' marriage prospects on their deathbeds. For instance, the dying mother of Lady Sumiyoshi firmly conveys to Chūnagon that he must enter their daughter into the imperial service and he shall never treat the girl any lesser than his other two daughters.<sup>42</sup> Hachi-kazuki's mother conversely speaks directly to her thirteen-year-old daughter, saying, "This is regrettable. How I wish to take care of you until the age of seventeen or eighteen, see you marry someone nice, and then die in peace (...)." <sup>43</sup> Then, the mother puts something in her toiletry box, places the box on the girl's crown, and covers her entire head with a giant bowl. Finally, the mother recites the following poem:

*Sashimogusa / fukaku zo tanomu / Kanzeon  
chikai no mama ni / itadakasenu*

All sentient beings deeply depend upon you, Bodhisattva Kannon—  
In trust of your oath, I made my daughter wear the bowl.<sup>44</sup>

This is the moment when the mother swears her daughter into the arduous and necessary process to become an adult woman with the help from the bodhisattva of compassion.

### **Absence of the Milk Mothers**

Within the *mamako banashi* plot, the protagonist's surrogate mothers—*menoto* and *mama-haha*—are diametrically opposed to each other, one of whom promotes the girl's initiation into adulthood and the other tries to obstruct it. To create a significant difficulty for the stepdaughter to overcome, however, there must be a strain on the *menoto*'s power. For this reason, unlike other romantic tales, *mamako banashi*'s *menoto* tend to be

absent. Her role, however, is fulfilled by multiple substitutes. This is comparable to how coming-of-age rituals are indeed conducted by a group of people taking up various roles, which demonstrates the collective support for the newly initiated member of their community.<sup>45</sup>

In the case of *Sumiyoshi*, upon the passing of his secondary wife, Chūnagon entrusts their eight-year-old daughter into the care of her *menoto*, knowing that “a parent-child relation without a true tie [*makoto naranu oyako no naka*] has never been easy.”<sup>46</sup> This arrangement, however, creates a catch-22 situation, because, if the girl is to be betrothed to emperor, she must receive premium care and education at her parents’ home. For this reason, Lady Sumiyoshi leaves the sanctuary of the *menoto*’s home and moves into her father’s mansion. Also, the *menoto*’s daughter, Jijū 侍従, follows the Lady and continues to wait on her, and one of the stepmother’s servants, Shikibu 式部, becomes the Lady’s covert supporter. The stepmother lays the groundwork to undermine the heroine’s marriage prospect and, at last, she plans to have a hideous old man sexually assault her. When Shikibu discovers this and reports it to the Lady, she is horrified and decides to run away from home. Although her *menoto* is already dead by then, the *menoto* of her late mother, the Nun at Sumiyoshi 住吉の尼君, happily agrees to take in the Lady and Jijū. The women spend two years at the nun’s abode near Sumiyoshi Bay, until the Lady’s long-term suitor, Shōshō 少将, discovers the whereabouts of his beloved, thanks to the divine intervention of Hase Kannon. This means that the void created by the *menoto*’s absence and death have been filled in by three women: Jijū, Shikibu, and the Nun at Sumiyoshi. It should be also noted that Lady Sumiyoshi’s younger half-sisters are kind-hearted and they always take her side over their mother’s, painting a picture of women’s solidarity that confronts the abuse put forth by the stepmother and her primary accomplice, Mukutsuke Onna むくつけ女, who is San no Kimi’s *menoto*.

Less fortunate is the heroine of *Ochikubo monogatari*. At the time of her mother’s passing, she had “no reliable guardians or a *menoto*” (*Hakabakashiki hito mo naku, menoto mo nakarikeri*).<sup>47</sup> Yet, Lady Ochikubo still receives support from her attendant, Akogi 阿漕, the *mama-haha*’s servant, Shōnagon 少納言, and the Lady’s youngest half-brother.<sup>48</sup> The same tendency of absence or ineffectiveness of *menoto* is observable in the *otogi-zōshi*. On the one hand, *Hachi-kazuki* and *Ubakawa* never mention the protagonists’ *menoto*. On the other hand, Hanayo is surrounded by loving attendants and a *menoto*, but the stepmother

manages to eliminate the girl while her father, attendants, and *menoto* are away.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, the medieval *mamako banashi* compensate for the lack of the *menoto*'s protection with non-human saviors, namely, Bodhisattva Kannon and the mountain crone. Some variants of *Hachi-kazuki* explain the origin of the mysterious bowl and box, which the birthmother attaches to her daughter, as objects that she stumbled upon, when returning from a pilgrimage at Hase Kannon to pray for a child.<sup>50</sup> Some other versions explain that the mother had a dream about receiving the items from Kannon right before conceiving the baby.<sup>51</sup> Even though others do not provide the origin, the bowl clearly represents “a physical symbol of Kannon’s divine compassion” because of the prayer/poem the mother dedicates to the bodhisattva on her deathbed.<sup>52</sup> This strange bowl brings the girl both sorrow and protection. Sanetaka and his second wife kick the girl out of their home, supposedly because of her uncanny appearance; but the bowl also prevents Hachi-kazuki from drowning, when she jumps into the river to commit suicide.<sup>53</sup> Further, as she wanders about in a remote village, strangers stare and laugh at her.<sup>54</sup> Though this heartless ridicule from the strangers greatly pains her, for the girl who must travel alone on foot, while wearing only a thin underrobe, the bowl keeps predatory men away, as well.

Such a defensive function of another divine gift, *ubakawa*, or a magic gown to turn the wearer into a wrinkly old woman, is clearly stated by the Kannon himself in *Ubakawa*. The bodhisattva appears in the girl’s dream, instructing, “Because your beauty is without parallel, people may try to kidnap you. So put this [gown] on.”<sup>55</sup> In *Hanayo no hime*, having been abandoned in deep mountains, the heroine prays to Kannon and the mountain god for help. Moments later, she arrives at the dwelling of a frightening but kind-hearted mountain hag (*yamanba* 山姥). In exchange for burning the worms that have been itching her head, *yamanba* gives Hanayo the magic gown (this time called *ubakinu* 姥衣), among other things. In short, the bodhisattva of compassion and the mountain crone seem to represent the merciful motherly image of the *menoto*.

Yet Kannon and the *yamanba* are not substitutes just for the *menoto*. For the protagonists of the *otogi-zōshi*, who experience the adversities away from home, *menoto*'s protection and *mama-haha*'s harm inhere in the divine “beauty-concealers,” as the magic bowl and gown both shield the young women from the eyes of criminals and undesirable suitors while at the same time enabling others to mistreat them. Moreover, not only do

the items obscure the protagonists' physical beauty, but they also erase their class as daughters of provincial officials. Hachi-kazuki is reduced to the status of a homeless girl wearing a ragged undergarment and an enormous bowl on her head. Hanayo and Lady Ubakawa turn into dreadful hags, also homeless. Being unattractive outcast women, they are hired as lowly fire attendants and endure grueling menial labor at wealthy men's mansions. Yet it is through the plight of humiliation and hard physical labor that they eventually meet their future husbands (sons of their employers).<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in *Hachi-kazuki* and *Hanayo no hime*, the men's parents oppose their sons' choice of wives and demand holding a "bridal contest" (*yome kurabe* 嫁比べ), in which all of their daughters-in-law compete in their beauty and talents. The morning of the contest, *Hachi-kazuki*'s bowl suddenly falls to the ground and she discovers a mound of gorgeous robes, sashes, and accessories kept inside the box. Hanayo, too, unwittingly reaches inside a sack given by the *yamanba* and discovers treasures. Thanks to these gifts and their own splendor and talents, Hachi-kazuki, Hanayo, and Lady Ubakawa greatly impress their in-laws, after which they are welcomed into the families. As Shimauchi Keiji remarks, "Hachi-kazuki was put through a series of predicaments because of the bowl, and she attained happiness also because of the bowl."<sup>57</sup> The same is applicable to the hag gown; these divine objects are physical extensions of *mama-haha*'s hostility and *menoto*'s unconditional sanctuary.

#### **Protagonists' Menotogo (Foster Siblings)**

When Lady Sumiyoshi comes of age, Chūnagon moves his daughter out of the *menoto*'s home and brings her to his mansion. The *menoto*'s daughter Jijū—the Lady's *menotogo* 乳母子—also follows the Lady to remain in her service.<sup>58</sup> Yet, as Yoshikai points out, the young Jijū is not tough or clever enough to ward off the stepmother's evil schemes.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, due to her fixation on the idea that the Lady should become an imperial consort, Jijū rebuffs the courtship by Shōshō on many occasions. Meanwhile, the stepmother intercepts Shōshō's love letter and forwards it to her own San no Kimi; he ends up marrying her, believing his wife is Lady Sumiyoshi. When the stepmother masterminds to have an old widow (Mukutsuke Onna's brother) sexually assault Lady Sumiyoshi, too, Jijū is unaware of this; it is the stepmother's attendant Shikubu who catches wind of it and saves the day. All in all, Jijū does not make significant contributions to improve her mistress's life. Another *mamako*

*banashi* in which the heroine's *menotogo* appears is *Hanayo no hime*. Similar to Jijū, Kochō-no-mai is there to loyally wait on Hanayo but she remains in the backdrop and does not take major actions.

In contrast, *Ochikubo monogatari* is an unusual *mamako banashi* in that someone who seems to be the protagonist's *menotogo*, Akogi, plays a major role in helping the Lady to the degree that she is characterized as the *fuku-shujinkō* 副主人公 (sub-protagonist) of this tale.<sup>60</sup> Though none of the pre-existing scholarship I have consulted has pointed this out, I will first argue that Akogi is Lady Ochikubo's *menotogo*, or, at least, that the text expects the reader to make such an assumption. In the opening of this tale, the narrator states that the Lady had no reliable guardians or *menoto* at the time of her mother's death and continues by saying:

[The young lady] only had one attendant, someone who started serving her before her mother's passing. It is a very sharp-witted girl, whom the young lady named Ushiromi 後見 (guardian). The young lady and this attendant were very devoted to each other and were never apart.<sup>61</sup>

Upon the passing of his secondary wife, Tadayori has no choice but to bring the girl to his residence and Ushiromi accompanies her. Tadayori's primary wife, however, whisks the attendant away from her stepdaughter and makes her serve San no Kimi, the stepmother's third daughter, instead. Now that Ushiromi is no longer the Lady's "guardian," the stepmother evilly renames her "Akogi."<sup>62</sup> Akogi laments about having to serve San no Kimi, saying, "It was only because I was going to serve *you*, my lady, that I declined my relative's offer to adopt me [when the Lady's mother died]."<sup>63</sup> Later, this "relative" turns out to be her aunt (Akogi's late mother's sister).<sup>64</sup> Within this tale, the only person who fits the description of Ushiromi/Akogi's mother is the Lady's *menoto*. Because it is impossible for a daughter of a royal lady not to have a *menoto*, it is reasonable to assume that the Lady's *menoto* has either disappeared or, more likely, died at some point. Therefore, the servant whom the Lady named Ushiromi is the substitute of the *menoto*: her daughter. However, when the Ushiromi's employer (the Lady's mother) also passed away, the aunt tried to adopt her niece. Ushiromi turned down this offer not only because of her love for the young lady but probably because her mother instructed her to protect the young lady after she was gone.

Even after her nickname was changed by the wicked woman, Akogi remains in her role as Lady Ochikubo's guardian, constantly looking after her and seeking for ways to make her life less miserable. Unbeknownst to

Akogi, her own marriage to a man turns out to be the beginning of Lady Ochikubo's long road to happiness. As Akogi serves San no Kimi during the day, she meets Tachihaki 帯刀, an attendant of San no Kimi's husband (Kurōdo no Shōshō 蔵人の少将) and they marry. Akogi confides to Tachihaki that her gorgeous and sweet mistress is confined in a dark corner of the mansion and mutters, "I will somehow find a perfect gentleman and have him rescue my Lady." This vignette piques the curiosity of Tachihaki's other lord, Michiyori 道頼: the handsome, up-and-coming nobleman, the eldest son of a prominent courtier, and older brother of imperial consort.<sup>65</sup>

### Stepmothers' Maltreatments of the Protagonists

When it comes to the three *otogi-zōshi*, the severest suffering of the stepdaughters occurs after they are uprooted from home: Hachi-kazuki's parents abandon her in the middle of a desolate field, Hanayo's stepmother hires a samurai to kidnap and desert her in the deep mountains, whereas Lady Ubakawa leaves home on her own accord. This means that the duration and magnitude of abuse that the stepmothers directly inflict on their stepdaughters are more limited in the medieval *mamako banashi*. Conversely, the heroines of the Heian stepchild tales are directly tormented by their stepmothers at home, though the severity of the abuse greatly differs between the two.

### *Sumiyoshi monogatari*

As mentioned earlier, Lady Sumiyoshi was raised by her *menoto* for ten years until she came of age and moved into her father's home. Even then, Chūnagon aptly set up the Lady's residence in the western building, away from the main quarters of his mansion, to minimize the risk of *mamako ijime*. In fact, throughout this tale, the stepmother and the stepdaughter never see each other face-to-face. This stepmother's *mamako ijime* mostly consists of means to squash the Lady's chances to find a husband, let alone someone who suits her beauty, talents, and royal pedigree. First, the stepmother ignores the birth order and weds Naka no Kimi, who is junior to Lady Sumiyoshi in age, to a nobleman. Then, she tricks her stepdaughter's suitor into believing he is corresponding with Lady Sumiyoshi and has her third daughter wed him (after the brief marriage with San no Kimi, Shōshō divorces her).

Again, we can observe the inexplicability of the stepmother's behaviors. Even though her biological daughters have already found

respectable husbands, the woman's hostility intensifies as soon as Chūnagon tries to enter Lady Sumiyoshi into the service at court. Not only are there no sibling rivalries nor clear benefit to the stepmother if Lady Sumiyoshi remains single but there is a risk of repulsing her husband, daughters, and attendants if the *mamako ijime* goes too far. Such enigma notwithstanding, the stepmother goes on to crush Chūnagon's plan by fabricating a story that some lowly monk of Rokkakudō has been clandestinely visiting the Lady. To convince her doubtful husband, she hires a shabby-looking priest to act as if he was coming out of the Lady's bedchamber. Witnessing this, the father gives up on his late wife's dream, though he is far from giving up on his daughter's future. To the wife's great frustration, Chūnagon swiftly arranges his eldest daughter's wedding with an attractive son of the late *dajō daijin* 太政大臣 (Chancellor of the Realm). She summons Mukutsuke Onna and shares her keen desire to have someone truly disgusting kidnap and harm her stepdaughter. Mukutsuke Onna suggests employing her recently widowed brother, Kazue no Kami 主計頭, whom she describes as "a seventy-or-so-year-old, unimaginably ugly man whose eyes are covered with gunk."<sup>66</sup> Thanks to the help from the stepmother's attendant, however, Lady Sumiyoshi and Jijū evade the danger.

### ***Ochikubo monogatari***

Out of the five *mamako banashi* examined in this essay, Lady Ochikubo's stepmother is by far the most sadistic; her wish is not to eliminate her stepdaughter or to simply keep her unmarried but to make sure that she gets to watch the Lady suffer every day as long as they live. The types of *mamako ijime* inflicted on Lady Ochikubo are utterly cruel and come in numerous varieties. Unsurprisingly, the tale does not explain what compelled the *mama-haha* into bullying an innocent motherless child, merely eight or nine years of age. Rather than offering a backstory to contextualize the woman's overblown hatred, the narrator simply ponders, "What on earth could have gotten into the primary wife's mind?"<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, to "compensate" for this cumulative injustice, so to speak, after rescuing his wife out of Tadayori's home, Lord Michiyori orchestrates a multi-year-long, elaborate revenge scheme against the wicked stepmother and her accomplices (the *Ochikubo* is thus twice as long as the *Sumiyoshi*).<sup>68</sup> The detailed depictions of what Ikeda dubs "*mama-haha ijime*" is one of the reasons why some scholars consider this



tale as a parody of the *mamako banashi* genre, if not specifically that of *Sumiyoshi*.<sup>69</sup>

The most apparent form of *mamako ijime* in this tale pertains to the reason why she is called Lady Ochikubo (Ochikubo no Kimi 落窪の君). It is unclear if the term “*ochikubo*” existed prior to the composition of *Ochikubo monogatari*, for the oldest use listed in *Nihon kokugo daijiten* and *Kadokawa kogo daijiten* comes from this very text. Regardless of the historical usage of this term, its meaning must have been salient to the readers: *ochi* and *kubo* are stems/gerund forms of the verbs *otsu* 落つ (to fall) and *kubomu* 窪む (to become hollow), respectively, and *ochikubo* literally means “that which is lowered and hollow.” In the story, it refers to the constricted, small chamber built on a lower level of the mansion near the outhouse. Assuming that *ochikubo* was a common noun to refer to such a space, calling the girl “Ochikubo no Kimi” seems to follow the premodern Japanese custom of addressing people according to the physical spaces they occupy, as in Lady Kiritsubo (Genji’s mother), who lived in the Kiritsubo court. Yet, as Takahashi Tōru has pointed out, *kubo* (that which is hollow) was a code for the female sexual organ in the classical Japanese lexicon, rendering the heroine’s nickname something to the effect of “a low-grade pussy,” or, more mildly, it may connote a “dysfunctional/barren womb.”<sup>70</sup>

Since childhood, the primary wife confined her stepdaughter in the *ochikubo* room and made her create fine garments for her biological children (while the girl herself was made to wear an unkept singlet). The wife soon realizes the stepdaughter’s usefulness in pleasing her sons-in-law as the girl can produce stunningly intricate robes and trousers for the gentlemen—for free. Even after Lady Ochikubo secretly marries Michiyori, she keeps sewing clothes so as not to raise any suspicion in the *mama-haha*. On the couple’s eighth night as newlyweds, however, the stepmother angrily storms into the *ochikubo* room to scold the Lady for the declined productivity and throws the materials for Kurōdo no Shōshō’s robe at her. As Michiyori eavesdrops from behind the partition, he is flabbergasted at the verbal and physical abuse to which his wife is subjected. After the *mama-haha* leaves, he asks his wife about a name the evil woman uttered, saying, “Whose name is ‘Ochikubo’?” Too embarrassed to tell the truth, the Lady pretends not to know. Then, the stepmother returns with Tadayori, who yells at the Lady, “If you cannot finish the needlework tonight, I will no longer think of you as my child!”<sup>71</sup>

As much as this incident shames Lady Ochikubo, it also changes something inside her husband. Towards the end of the tale, Michiyori looks back on the many years of happy marriage and remarks, “It was that night, when your stepmother called you Ochikubo and tormented you, that I felt the utmost affection for you. The plan I schemed, while lying in bed with you that night, has been completed.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, rather than the dingy room she was kept in, the unattractive clothes she wore, or the amount of needlework she had to perform, for Michiyori, it was the degrading sobriquet that ignited the fury towards the evil woman and profound compassion and affection for his wife.

With that being said, I shall also illuminate the layered meanings of sexuality and sexual organs in the context of premodern Japan. Most notable references to these entities are found in the genesis myth of Japan, which vividly describes a goddess’s sexual intercourse with a male god and her vaginal birth of the land of Japan and the couple’s offspring.<sup>73</sup> Aside from the Shinto-based mythologies, more Buddhist-oriented anecdotal tales such as *Nihon ryōiki* (Record of miraculous events in Japan, early-Heian period) and *Konjaku monogatari-shū* (Collections of tales of times now past, late-Heian period) include narratives that depict sexual organs and intercourse with little reservation.<sup>74</sup> The reason why *ochikubo* elicits such shame in the Lady and anger in Michiyori is because *Ochikubo monogatari* presents itself as a courtly tale, which normally operates under particular conventional rules regarding diction and aesthetics, especially when the body parts and actions pertain to the upper-class characters. The nickname given to the heroine is shocking in the context of a courtly tale, which points to the subversive ethos of *Ochikubo*.<sup>75</sup> In this regard, *Hachi-kazuki* is similar in that the stepmother gives the heroine the humiliating nickname “Hachi-kazuki” (Bowl bearer): the word *hachi* 鉢 is another code for the female sexual organ and *kazuki* is the gerund form of *kazuku* 被< (to wear something over one’s head).<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, we may lose sight if we think of the sexual connotations of the crude nicknames only in terms of degradation, because the girls’ sexual maturity, marriage, and procreation are central to the *mamako banashi*’s theme. Whether the authors put them in words or not, the protagonist’s sexuality is at the core of coming-of-age tales, including the *miyabi* stories such as *Sumiyoshi* and *Hanayo no hime*. Therefore, despite the humiliating connotations of “Ochikubo no Kimi” and “Hachi-kazuki,” these names do not translate into the tales’ erotophobic or misogynistic messaging.

Another key point is that, unlike Lady Sumiyoshi and Hanayo, Lady Ochikubo and Hachi-kazuki have yet to undergo the *mogi* ceremony, after which they would have received adult names. In premodern Japan, it was customary for boys and girls to use *dōmyō* 童名 (child names) until they go through the rituals to be recognized as adults. Due to the influence of animism, many *dōmyō* are simple nouns that stand for animals (e.g., dog 犬, cow 牛), monsters, (e.g., demon 鬼), mundane objects (e.g., sleeve 袖, rock 石), and defiling things (e.g., feces 屎) or combinations of these nouns and other morphemes.<sup>77</sup> Most significantly, the names based on frightening or defiling objects were believed to have the protective power to ward off evil spirits, which is reminiscent of the defensive function of the “beauty concealers” mentioned above. In fact, as much as the sunken room made Lady Ochikubo’s life painful, it also physically shielded her from undesirable men for years. Nevertheless, unlike the hag robe that turns the wearer into an asexual being, the vulgar nicknames represent the dual meaning of the heroines’ sexuality: “unproductivity” and “chastity.” When Lady Ochikubo left the lowered room and Hachi-kazuki’s bowl suddenly fell to the ground, the women shed their old identities and acquired new lives and new names: Onna-gimi 女君 “Lady” and Kita no Kata 北の方 “Madam,” and Himegimi 姫君 “Young Lady,” respectively. Their long-suppressed sexuality and fertility blossomed in full and they gave birth to many children.

To continue to think of the plurality of women’s sexuality represented in *Ochikubo monogatari*, let us consider how else the stepmother purportedly tries to debase the protagonist’s sexuality. Even after Lady Ochikubo and Michiyori consummated their marriage by spending three nuptial nights and sharing ceremonial rice cakes, the nobleman had to wait for an opportunity to bring his wife to his residence in ways that Tadayori (i.e., Michiyori’s senior colleague at court) would not be able to track them down. So, he would visit the Lady at night for the time being and hide behind the partitions. One night, the stepmother peeks into the *ochikubo* room to be dumbfounded by the sight: an elegant nobleman, far more handsome than her favorite son-in-law, Kurōdo no Shōshō, helping the Lady with needlework.<sup>78</sup> Much like *Sumiyoshi*’s stepmother did to slander the Lady, this *mama-haha*, too, fabricates a story, claiming that her stepdaughter is having an affair with Tachihaki, and reports it to Tadayori. Curiously, despite her intention to portray the Lady as someone licentious who steals her own attendant’s husband, Tadayori is enraged for an entirely different reason: Tachihaki is too low-ranking and short-statured

to match his daughter.<sup>79</sup> Still satisfied with her husband's fury, the stepmother suggests he should lock up the Lady so she won't be able to elope with Tachihaki. In response, Tadayori exclaims, "What a fine idea! Drive her away from the room and shut her up in the [food storage] room in the northern building. Do not feed her anything. Just torture her to death!"<sup>80</sup> Here, there is another gap between the cunning stepmother and delusional Tadayori, whom the narrator describes as "completely senile and unaware of what is happening."<sup>81</sup>

Though the stepmother failed to sell a promiscuous image of Lady Ochikubo to Tadayori, she has another plan to sexually harm her stepdaughter: allowing her own aged bachelor uncle, Ten'yaku no Suke 典薬助, to "marry" the Lady inside the dark and smelly food storage, far more horrifying than the *ochikubo* room. Fortunately, Akogi, with some assistance from the youngest son of Tadayori, manages to repel the old man for two nights in a row. On the level of plot, this horrendous incident (likely parodied after the *Sumiyoshi*) encapsulates the stepmother's astonishing evilness. Nevertheless, in the framework of *mamako banashi*, this ordeal implies a symbolic significance of death and rebirth. Fujii construes this food storage as a paranormal, liminal space, wherein the young lady dies a provisional death, putting her in a figurative pupal state.<sup>82</sup>

Although the Lady is already wedded to Michiyori, in order for this union to be a true marriage, she needed to retroactively undergo the coming-of-age ritual. (...) Unlike this stepmother's other methods of *mamako ijime* (...) that merely demonstrate her evil personality, this last incident is a different matter. She carefully masterminds an elaborate plan to shut her up in a dark place, force her to fast, and engage Ten'yaku no Suke in sexually assaulting her—this is obviously the abstraction of a rite of passage.<sup>83</sup>

In Fujii's words, Lady Ochikubo "cleared the last challenge of braving the danger to her sexuality," and thus she was able to be "reborn as a beautiful butterfly and sore into the sky."<sup>84</sup>

### Into Adulthood and Beyond

The day after the Lady survived her symbolic death, Tadayori's family go out to watch the processions for the Kamo Festival. Michiyori and his men break into the empty mansion, rescue the lady, and bring her to the Nijō mansion, owned by his mother. Reborn as a properly initiated adult woman, the Lady continuously achieves every this-worldly fortune prescribed for

Heian women: she runs the Nijō mansion as the only wife of Michiyori; she is beloved by all of her attendants; her in-laws, including the imperial consort (Michiyori's sister), admire and respect her; and Michiyori's court rank constantly rises, culminating in the post of chancellor, the highest possible position obtainable by a non-royal. The couple is blessed with adorable and gifted children: three boys and four girls. Their oldest son is eventually promoted to the rank of *sadaishō* 左大将 (major captain of the left), the second son *udaishō* 右大将 (major captain of the right), and the oldest daughter becomes the imperial consort. It is no coincidence that the author has the heroine bear the same number of sons and daughters as her stepmother. Thus, the reader sees the staggering contrast between the two families' prosperity. This tale's heroine, who overcame severe abuse and neglect, and her seven children completely outrank and outshine the spiteful perpetrator and her offspring. Furthermore, as the tale seems to indicate, the protagonist has also far surpassed her birthmother—the lady of imperial lineage who was relegated to the station of a commoner's secondary wife and bore only one child.

The heroine of *Sumiyoshi monogatari* never suffered from the same graveness of *mamako ijime* as Lady Ochikubo did. Nonetheless, in this elegantly narrated tale, the well-bred aristocratic lady is overcome with poignance upon arriving at the desolate, bayside dwelling of the Nun at Sumiyoshi. Witnessing the Buddhist law of impermanence of all things, the Lady cannot shake off the feeling of being born into another world (*aranu yo ni umaretaru kokochi shite*), pointing to her version of symbolic death and rebirth. After the divinely assisted reunion, Shōshō and the Lady marry and have a son and a daughter. Shōshō eventually rises to the rank of regent, while his son becomes a major captain and his daughter imperial consort. Hachi-kazuki's husband is promoted to the governor of three provinces and the couple is said to have many sons. Hanayo gives birth to one son and one daughter; and the narrator of *Ubakawa* informs the reader that the Lady and her husband were blessed with many children.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the well-known trope of “evil stepmother” tales in the context of premodern Japan. I have argued that the evil stepmother as a concept did not spontaneously come into existence but, rather, it was conceptualized as one of the complementary archetypes of motherly figures: the mystical and elegant birthmother; the loving *menoto* who cherishes and protects her charge on behalf of the (often dead)

birthmother; and the malicious stepmother who tries to interfere with her stepchild's success in his or her life. The saga of the stepchild is predicated upon the intricate power balance within the triad of motherly figures. Interestingly, to the extent that the stepmother's viciousness is the necessary evil for the *mamako banashi* plot, it is even possible to cast her in a somewhat positive light. Perhaps, we can construe the stepmother and her antithesis, *menoto*, as a pair of surrogate mothers who figuratively collaborate in the style of "good cop, bad cop" to realize the dead birthmother's wish to raise the girl into an upstanding lady.

The "evil stepmother" tales are known in Japanese as *mamako banashi*—the tales of stepchildren. In a typical *mamako banashi*, its female protagonist undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth into womanhood and, then, motherhood as a direct result of enduring a series of hardships. Because the stepmother functions as an anthropomorphized predicament in the narrative and her rage is a built-in feature of the character, naming a non-existent cause of this rage inevitably skews our understanding of the text. By the same token, it would be inaccurate to assume the heroine of *mamako banashi* is a "damsel in distress" who is merely at the mercy of her knight in shining armor. Granted, as the heroine of a romantic tale, she cannot completely defy the idealized feminine traits and rebel against her stepmother. Rather, she shows her strength by maintaining her virtues such as patience, diligence, filial piety, and Buddhist faith when it is most difficult to do so. All in all, *mamako banashi* can be best described as gynocentric narratives that showcase the heroines' virtues far beyond their beauty, diversity of female characters—from the feisty *menotogo* Akogi and the wicked *menoto* Mukutsuke Onna to the hideous but sweet mountain crone—and their dynamic intra-gender relationships.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Shinpen Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū* (hereafter *SNKBZ*) 22, 216. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Multiple fortunetellers and oracles predict Genji's daughter is destined to become empress. Given this, he asks Murasaki, who does not have a child of her own, to adopt his daughter born to Akashi no Kimi (a lady with a provincial upbringing), to give the girl better chances to succeed in the marriage race. Growing up in the dedicated care of Genji and Murasaki, the prophecies are proven to be true.

- <sup>2</sup> During the Heian period, polygyny (one husband with multiple “wives” who were hierarchically ranked) was extremely common within the ruling class. A nobleman’s marriage to his primary wife (*chakusai* 嫡妻) was usually arranged by the two families. In the case of *Genji*, the hero’s primary wife, Aoi, died young and this position was vacated. Meanwhile, despite her unofficial conjugal status, Murasaki was regarded as an equivalent of *chakusai* and remained in this position for decades, until Genji married his own niece, the Third Princess, who thereby filled the post of primary wife.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Haruo Shirane, *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of ‘The Tale of Genji’* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), 4; Joshua Mostow, “Early Heian Court Tales,” in *The Cambridge History of Japanese Literature*, ed. by Haruo Shirane, Tomi Suzuki, and David Lurie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 127.
- <sup>4</sup> For the English translations, see, for example, Wilfrid Whitehouse and Eizō Yanagisawa, trans., *Tale of the Lady Ochikubo* (London: Arena, 1985); Harold Parlett, “The Sumiyoshi Monogatari,” *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 29.1 (1901): 35–123; Chigusa Steven, “*Hachikazuki*: A Muromachi Short Story,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 32.3 (1977): 303–331; Noriko T. Reider, “Hanayo no Hime or Blossom Princess,” *Asian Ethnology* 70.1 (2011): 59–80; and Keller Kimbrough, trans., “The Crone Fleece,” in *Monsters, Animals, and Other Worlds*, ed. by Keller Kimbrough and Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 265–272.
- <sup>5</sup> Seki Keigo, “Kon’in-tan to shite no *Sumiyoshi monogatari*,” *Kokugo to kokubungaku* 39.10 (1962): 91–92.
- <sup>6</sup> Saitō Toshiko, “Mamako-tan no haikai: Shōjo seichō no shudai o megutte,” *Ōtani gaku* 64.4 (1985): 60.
- <sup>7</sup> Mitani Kuniaki, “*Ochikubo monogatari*: kaisetsu,” *Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū* (hereafter *NKBZ*) 10, 29. The term “*kishu ryūri-tan*” was famously coined by the folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953). See, for example, Orikuchi Hakushi Kinenkai, ed. *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* 7 (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1955), 344. For a book-length study of “*kishu ryūri-tan*” in English, see Jonathan Stockdale, *Imagining Exile in Heian Japan: Banishment in Law, Literature, and Cult* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> Mitani Kuniaki, “Keiboshi monogatari no keifu,” in *Heian-chō monogatari* 3, ed. by Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō kankōkai (Tokyo: Yūseidō shuppan, 1979), 187.
- <sup>9</sup> The other three *mamako banashi* from a later period, in contrast, revolve around neolocal residences (husband and wife maintain their own household) and monogamous unions.

- <sup>10</sup> Norma Field, *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 99.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> In the mythology of Japan, the sea god Susano-o is exiled after defiling the celestial realm governed by his sister Amaterasu. The hero of *Ise monogatari* (The tale of Ise, tenth century) and Genji engage in illicit affairs with imperial consorts and leave the capital due to self-imposed exiles.
- <sup>13</sup> Examples include Tadakoso in *Utsuho monogatari*, Genji, and protagonists of medieval tales *Ashibiki* and *Hanamitsu*. Ukifune, the heroine of the Uji chapters of *Genji monogatari* is one of the rare examples of a woman who is slighted by her stepfather. Moreover, the *kishu ryūri-tan* plot is applicable to the heroine of *Takekoto monogatari* (The tale of the bamboo cutter, tenth century), princess of the Moon Palace, who was exiled to the earth due to her transgression.
- <sup>14</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1st ed.) (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1976), 69. See also Marian Ury, “Stepmother Tales in Japan,” *Children’s Literature* 9 (1981): 69.
- <sup>15</sup> Although the term *menoto* is often translated as “wet nurse,” these two words are different in that a *menoto* normally continues to serve her nursling into his or her adulthood. Breastfeeding is not always required for one to be considered a *menoto*, either. Moreover, during the late-Heian period, male *menoto* (usually denoted in kanji as 乳父 or 傳 and often translated as “tutor”) emerged. See, for example, Yoshikai Naoto, *Heian-chō no menoto-tachi* (Kyoto: Sekai shisōsha, 1997); Yoshikai, *Genji monogatari no menoto-gaku* (Kyoto: Sekai shisōsha, 2008); as well as Furuta Masayuki, *Heian monogatari ni okeru jijo no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kasama shoin, 2014). Whitehouse and Yanagisawa’s translation of *Ochikubo* renders *menoto* as “foster-mother,” which can be misleading.
- <sup>16</sup> Yoshikai, *Heian-chō no menoto-tachi*, 38–39.
- <sup>17</sup> *Sekkan seiji* is a form of marriage politics in which the Fujiwara family held the post of imperial regent (*sesshō* 摂政 if serving an underage sovereign; *kanpaku* 関白 for an adult sovereign) by marrying their daughters to crown princes or emperors. Once the Fujiwara woman gives birth to a prince and he is enthroned at a young age, the maternal grandfather customarily serves the child emperor as regent and controls the government.
- <sup>18</sup> *SNKBZ* 2, 155–187.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 179–189.
- <sup>20</sup> Yoshikai, *Heian-chō no menoto-tachi*, 14. This is analogous with the fact that many kinship terms in native Japanese lexicon do not specify gender and/or



birth order, but, when written in kanji, specific characters must be chosen to reflect such information.

- <sup>21</sup> The etymology of “*menoto*” is thought to be a contraction of “*me no oto*” 妻の妹 (wife’s younger sister). See *Kokugo daijiten*, s.v. “*menoto*.”
- <sup>22</sup> Wakamori Tarō, *Nihon minzokuron* (Tokyo: Chiyoda shobō, 1947; reprinted by Kureshu shuppan in 1990), 229–235; Ikeda Yazaburō, *Bungaku to minzokugaku* (Tokyo: Iwasaki bijutsusha, 1966), 186–188. The term *mama* (wet nurse) appears in *Makura no sōshi* (The pillow book, ca. 1000), *Genji*, among other texts. See, for example, *SNKBZ* 18, 448; *SNKBZ* 21, 342.
- <sup>23</sup> *Kokugo daijiten*, s.v. “*mama-haha*.” Also, Saitō Toshiko notes there is no mentioning of *mamako ijime* in the mytho-histories of Japan, even when stepmothers appear in the texts. See Saitō, “Mamako-tan no haikai,” 58.
- <sup>24</sup> Hu Jie, “Yōrōryō ni okeru shinzoku meishō ni tsuite,” *Gengo bunka ronshū* 28. 2 (2007): 53–68. The earliest example of “*tsugu-haha*” listed in *Nihon kokugo daijiten* is from a late-sixteenth-century text.
- <sup>25</sup> The Chinese characters attached to the native Japanese lexical items “*mama*–” 継 and “*menoto*” 乳母 are both semantic-based applications (*ateji*).
- <sup>26</sup> Seki, “Kon’in-tan to shite no *Sumiyoshi*,” 91.
- <sup>27</sup> As Anne Campbell observes, many cultures normalize men-on-men aggressions and in turn stigmatize women’s aggressions as pathological. This pathologization of intra-female aggressions may compel scholars to explicate *mamako ijime*. See Anne Campbell, “Staying Alive: Evolution, Culture, and Women’s Intrasexual Aggression,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 22.2 (1999): 212.
- <sup>28</sup> Abuse of the heroine of *Ochikubo* begins when she is still a small child; the protagonist of *Sumiyoshi* does not interact with her stepmother; Tadakoso of the *Utsuho* is a boy and his stepmother begins *mamako ijime* after he rejects her sexual advances.
- <sup>29</sup> Monika Dix, “Hachikazuki: Revealing Kannon’s Crowning Compassion in Muromachi Fiction,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 36.2 (2009): 281.
- <sup>30</sup> *SNKBZ* 22, 210. The original form of *Sumiyoshi monogatari* has been lost and the variants currently available are based on a revised text from the Kamakura period (1192–1332). Scholars generally agree that the revised *Sumiyoshi* does not depart too far from the original’s plot and theme. See, for example, Kuwabara Hiroshi, “kaidai,” *Chūsei ōchō monogatari zenshū* (hereafter *COMZ*) 11, *Sumiyoshi monogatari* (Tokyo: Kasama shoin, 1995), 134.
- <sup>31</sup> See Yoshikai, *Heian-chō no menoto-tachi*, 271; Yoshikai, *Sumiyoshi monogatari no sekai* (Tokyo: Shintensha, 2011), 180; and Fujii Sadakazu,

- “*Ochikubo monogatari*: kaisetsu,” *Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei* (hereafter *SNKBT*) 18, 415–416.
- <sup>32</sup> Ōchi Yuriko, *Otogi-zōshi to mukashi banashi: Nihon no mamako banashi no shinsō* (Tokyo: Miyai shoten, 2005), 7. Another pre-*Genji* work, *Utsuho monogatari* also includes an episode of *mamako ijime* but this incident is not central to the main plot.
- <sup>33</sup> The term *otogi-zōshi* originates from the proper noun *Otogi bunko* 御伽文庫 (Companion library), a set of twenty-three short narratives, including *Hachikazuki*, on various topics from the medieval and early modern periods, compiled and published during the early eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the appellation became an umbrella term to retroactively refer to medieval vernacular tales in general, a corpus of several hundred texts. An alternative nomenclature, *chūsei shōsetsu* 中世小説 (medieval novels) was coined by Ichiko Teiji. In his *Chūsei shōsetsu no kenkyū* (A study of medieval novels), Ichiko classifies *mamako banashi* as a sub-genre of “*kuge shōsetsu*” (aristocratic novels). See Ichiko Teiji, *Chūsei shōsetsu no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1955), 90–105.
- <sup>34</sup> Fukuda Akira, *Mukashi banashi kara otogi-zōshi e: Muromachi monogatari to minkan denshō* (Tokyo: Miyai shoten, 2015), 176–180. The Buddhist term *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 refers to the principle that native deities of Japan (*kami*) are local manifestations of the Buddha and bodhisattvas.
- <sup>35</sup> Most characters are addressed by generic terms such as “lady” (e.g., *onna-gimi*, *hime-gimi*) and “third lady/daughter” (e.g., *san no kimi*), nicknames (e.g., Akogi, Jijū), or court titles such as “lesser captain” (*shōshō*). To avoid confusion, I will use the most representative appellation for each character and use it as a proper noun.
- <sup>36</sup> Lady Sumiyoshi’s mother is a princess; Lady Ochikubo’s mother is a “daughter of a lady of imperial blood,” which means she may not be a princess.
- <sup>37</sup> *SNKBT* 18, 295. The editor notes that their marriage was not formally arranged *kōka* 降嫁 (i.e., wife renounces her royal status and enters into the household of her commoner husband). The *COMZ* version emphasizes the secret nature of their relationship by saying “*shinobite kayoi tamaikeru*” (he visited her clandestinely). See *COMZ* 11, 54.
- <sup>38</sup> *SNKBT* 18, 3.
- <sup>39</sup> Being of imperial lineage does not guarantee financial security. For instance, Princess Suetsumuhana and the Eighth Prince are examples of impoverished royals in *Genji*.
- <sup>40</sup> Her third son is a young boy, to whom Lady Ochikubo teaches *koto* (Japanese zither). He helps Lady Ochikubo when his mother locks her up in a food storage.

- <sup>41</sup> It is not clear if Lady Ubakawa was a *mōshigo* but Kannon appears in her dream and says that her mother used to pray to him for the girl's well-being. See *Muromaji jidai monogatari taisei* (MJMT hereafter) 2, 551.
- <sup>42</sup> SNKBZ 39, 8.
- <sup>43</sup> NKBZ 36, 77.
- <sup>44</sup> NKBZ 36, 77–78.
- <sup>45</sup> See, for example, Fukutō Sanae, “Heian ōchō shakai no chakko,” *Seikatsu girei no rekishi to bunka*, ed. by Fukutō Sanae and Kojima Naoko (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2003), 31–77.
- <sup>46</sup> SNKBT 18, 296.
- <sup>47</sup> SNKBZ 17, 18.
- <sup>48</sup> In *Ochikubo*, the protagonist's half-sisters are apathetic bystanders of the horrific abuse; they also benefit from the beautiful garments the Lady creates for their husbands. The first and second sons are away from home and the third son (age ten or eleven) is the only sibling who is kind to the Lady.
- <sup>49</sup> MJMT 10, 523–525.
- <sup>50</sup> Fukuda, *Mukashi banashi kara otogi-zōshi e*, 226–227.
- <sup>51</sup> Shimauchi Keiji, *Otogi-zōshi no seishinshi* (Tokyo: Perikansha, 1988), 55.
- <sup>52</sup> Dix, “Hachikazuki”: 284.
- <sup>53</sup> NKBZ 36, 82
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.
- <sup>55</sup> MJMT 2, 551.
- <sup>56</sup> Hachi-kazuki's future husband, Saishō 宰相, falls in love with the protagonist because of her caring demeanors, sweet voice, and silky skin, even before the bowl was removed from her head. In *Hanayo no hime* and *Ubakawa*, the suitors chance upon the beauty of the old hearth-maids when they are resting without the hag gowns on.
- <sup>57</sup> Shimauchi, *Otogi-zōshi no seishinshi*, 13.
- <sup>58</sup> Scholars have debated if this notion and/or appellation existed during the mid-Heian period. See Furuta, *Jijo no kenkyū*, 245–264.
- <sup>59</sup> Yoshikai, *Heian-chō no menoto-tachi*, 275.
- <sup>60</sup> Mitani, “Kaisetsu,” NKBZ 10, 19.
- <sup>61</sup> SNKBZ 17, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 20–21.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>65</sup> *SNKBZ* 17, 21. Tachihaki's mother is Michiyori's *menoto* and the former is the latter's *menotogo*. This "foster siblinghood" is quasi-kinship and less businesslike than a lord-vassal relationship based on labor-money trade. Many *menotogo*, including Akogi and Tachihaki, have contractual charges other than their "foster siblings" and serve them as their employees. See Yoshikai, *Genji monogatari no menoto-gaku*, 60 (Note 6).

<sup>66</sup> *SNKBZ* 39, 76.

<sup>67</sup> *SNKBZ* 17, 17.

<sup>68</sup> Once his vengeance is complete, Michiyori devotes himself to undo some of the damage by promoting all the male members of Tadayori's family at court, financially supporting everyone in the family, among other things.

<sup>69</sup> Ikeda, *Bungaku to minzokugaku*, 159; Yoshikai, *Heian-chō no menoto-tachi*, 271; Yoshikai, *Sumiyoshi monogatari no sekai*, 180; and Fujii, "kaisetsu," 415–416. It is clear that Yoshikai and Fujii presuppose an earlier composition of *Sumiyoshi*. Conversely, the pre-war scholar Fujita Tokutarō has argued that *Ochikubo* must have been older because it exhibits the brutal depiction of *mamako ijime*, which is more characteristic of orally transmitted narratives. See Fujita Tokutarō, *Ōchō bungaku no rekishi to seishin* (Tokyo: Rakurō shoin, 1941; reprinted by Kuresu shuppan in 1999), 150–158.

<sup>70</sup> Takahashi Tōru, "'Ochikubo' no imi o megutte: Monogatari tekusuto no hyōsō to shinsō," *Nihon bungaku* 31.6 (1982): 89–94.

<sup>71</sup> *SNKBZ* 17, 85–86.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>73</sup> *SNKBZ* 1, 31–35, *SNKBZ* 2, 25–27. This story makes a stark contrast to the creation myth of the *Old Testament*.

<sup>74</sup> See, for instance, *SNKBZ* 10, 2:11, 2:13, and 3:18; *SNKBZ* 37–38, 24:9 and 28:25.

<sup>75</sup> In addition to the heroine's nickname, the narrator repeatedly describes Lady Ochikubo and Michiyori as well as Akogi and Tachihaki "lying down together" (*fushitamaeri* 臥したまへり, *fushite* 臥して), which is a euphemism for making love and rarely used in romantic court tales. See, for instance, *SNKBZ* 17, 138. There are also multiple scatological references (e.g., *SNKBZ* 17, 133).

- <sup>76</sup> See, for example, *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, s.v. “*hachi*,” “*hachi o waru*” 鉢を割る, and “*arabachi o waru*” 新鉢を割る (both mean “to lose virginity”).
- <sup>77</sup> Tateishi Kazuhiro, “Hōyō to dōmyō,” *Seikatsu girei no rekishi to bunka*, 165–208. See, also, Amino Yoshihiko, *Nihon no rekishi o yominaosu* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2005), 109–112. The common suffix *-maru* 丸 used to create *dōmyō* also means “feces.”
- <sup>78</sup> *SNKBZ* 17, 95–96. At this point, Tadayori and his wife are trying to arrange marriage between their fourth daughter and Michiyori, although the wife does not know what Michiyori looks like.
- <sup>79</sup> *SNKBZ* 17, 100–101.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>82</sup> *SNKBT* 18, 418.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 417–418.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*