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# Peaceful Warrior-Demons in Japan: from Empress Kōmyō's Red Repentant Asura to Miyazawa Kenji's Melancholic Blue Asura

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**Living in Peace:  
Insights from Buddhism**

Edited by  
**Chanju Mun and Ronald S. Green**

**Blue Pine  
Honolulu, Hawaii**

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# **PEACEFUL WARRIOR-DEMONS IN JAPAN: FROM EMPRESS KŌMYŌ'S RED REPENTANT ASURA TO MIYAZAWA KENJI'S MELANCHOLIC BLUE ASURA**

**Jon Holt**

Strife, and the violence begotten from it, has long been a concern of Buddhism. Anger, ignorance, and greed, namely the three great evils, must be understood and overcome in order to advance towards enlightenment. Buddhism, as a syncretic religion, incorporated other religious figures from the Asian continent into it as a part of the process of appealing to new converts. The Asura embodies all three of these vices and yet in the process of being adopted into Buddhism, he was able to change from a violent demon into a peaceful guardian of the Buddha.

The Asura devas battled Indra in the Hindu myths. Nicholas Gier describes how violence by humans or demigods against the gods, has been central not only in the Western religions but also in Eastern religions. The hubris exhibited by humans (or those representing humans), what Gier calls "Hindu Titanism", is seen in the Asuras' constant struggle against Indra. The story of the Hindu Asura, part of this "Hindu Titanism", is one of "radical humanism...gone berserk...., (they) deliberately reserve the positions of humanity and divinity; they take over divine prerogatives, and as a result of their hubris, they lose sight of their proper place in the universe."<sup>1</sup>

Far from the hubris described by Gier of these "Asura Titans", in Japan the asura came to be re-imagined as a more humble and peaceful deity. As the asura developed and evolved over the centuries as he moved east, being absorbed

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Gier, "Hindu Titanism," in *Philosophy East and West* 45.1 (Jan. 1995): 73-74.

from Hinduism into Buddhism, he became a part of the six realms of existence: deva/heavenly being, human, asura, animal, hungry spirit, and the hellbound. Once he arrived in Japan, he reached a point where he was imagined by the Japanese as a kind of dual being: at times retaining his warlike character and at other times being a herald of peace and compassion. This study examines how from the earliest visualization of the asura in Japanese art (8<sup>th</sup> century) to his reincarnation in the twentieth century poetry of Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), the Asura has maintained a powerful presence as a Buddhist avatar of peace in the popular imagination of the Japanese.

In Japan, within a couple of centuries after Buddhism was adopted, images of asura can be seen in paintings and sculpture. In the early eighth century, not only does the asura come to be represented in temple art, but also he occupies an important place alongside the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The Kōfuku-ji dry-lacquer Asura sculpture, in Nara, is one of the temple's and Japan's greatest art treasures, dating back to 734. Another prominent and important national artwork, the Sanjū-sangendō Asura King statue, in Kyoto (at Rengeō-in (Temple of the Lotus King)), dates to 1164. There are large differences in these sculptures, suggesting that this imported demigod captured the Japanese imagination in different ways at different times. Thanks to the interest of the modern poet Miyazawa Kenji, the Asura has continued to stir the imagination of the Japanese even today. Indeed, Kenji put his unique stamp on the Asura and thereby changed the way this Buddhist figure is viewed by contemporary Japanese.<sup>2</sup> According to Onda Tatsuo, if the Realms of the Preta (Hungry Spirits) and Hell are often seen in the works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, it is the Asura Realm that symbolizes the “spiritual climate” of Kenji's writings.<sup>3</sup> This is evident from the reception history of his most famous poem, “Never Losing to the Rain” (“Ame ni mo makezu”), which ironically contains no mention of the Asura, yet for some critics that poem best embodies Kenji's compassionate Asura ideal.

In his lifetime, Kenji's free-verse collection *Spring and Asura (Haru to shura)*, which he self-published in 1924, hardly attracted any attention from either the public or critics; after his death, with the help of his literary estate, his avant-garde poetry came to be known in the mid-1930s and in the 1940s when even with the decline in non-war-related literature, his works came to be discovered and enjoyed by a new audience. Although perhaps best known for “Never Losing to the Rain”, which dates to 1931, Kenji equally has captured the attention of both the public and academia with his earlier and more seminal poetry in *Spring and Asura*. His “Asura alter-ego”, as I call it, in these poems won over his first generation of admirers such as the poets Takamura Kōtarō and

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<sup>2</sup> Miyazawa Kenji is one of those rare literary figures who is called by his given name rather than his surname or literary name. In Japan, the standard practice to call him Kenji, which I follow here.

<sup>3</sup> Onda Tatsuo, “Miyazawa Kenji ni okeru ‘shura’”, in Tsuzukibashi Tatsuo, ed., *Miyazawa Kenji kenkyū shiryō shūsei* (The Miyazawa Kenji Research Materials Collection) (Tokyo: Nihon tosho sentaa, 1990), 10: 318.

Kusano Shinpei. Poems like his “Preface (Poem)” (“Jo”) to the collection, “Spring and Asura” (“Haru to shura”), and the “Voiceless Grief” poems about the death of his sister (the “Musei dōkoku” poems, also known as the Toshiko poems) all feature a vacillating spirit who walks the earth half-caught between rage and sadness, between rash action and contemplation, a side of Kenji’s personality he called the “shura” in his poetry, and it is these poems that have far more solidly established Kenji’s reputation as a poet of greatness. These poems would not have fascinated generations of Japanese readers without the dramatic appearance of the Asura.

In Buddhism, the Asura were a warring godlike clan, borrowed from the Hindu myths, but they came to be guardians of the Dharma. However these asura beings first must overcome their warring nature. This warring and angry side of the asura is a legacy from its previous incarnation in Hinduism where they were known to war with Indra. In Buddhist art, an asura appears as having red skin; and he shows anger on his face and has multiple limbs (usually containing weapons). However, when he was made a part of the Buddhist pantheon, his human nature came to be emphasized. He is a product of anger, but he is able to overcome that anger in the process of embracing the Dharma. Buddhism’s syncretization of asura is seen in the way one of his multiple sets of arms includes one with palms pressed together out of respect for the Buddha.

One of the earliest extant images of the Buddhist version of asura in China is found in a wall painting in Dunhuang, dating to 550. There, the asura has two sets of eyes rather than three faces; and he has two sets of arms rather than three sets. Another image of the asura found at Dunhuang is dated to 686 in the Tang period; and this cave painting, unlike the earlier one, is more humanized and shows less of a Hindu influence and more of a Buddhist one. His angry face is now more tranquil; and of his six arms, one pair is positioned with palms pressed together and showing respect for the Buddha’s teachings. It is thought that the Korean sculptors in Silla were influenced by this later image of the Asura, first popularized in the Tang-period. Later Japanese sculptors of the Tenpyō age (729-749) followed the Korean example.<sup>4</sup>

As Buddhism made its way across China and Korea into Japan, the demigod figure of the asura further metamorphosed into a figure of repentance and compassion. Seen in important texts such as the *Sūtra of Golden Light* or the *Lotus Sūtra*, the asura became a figure positioned near the Buddha in his immediate circle of faithful followers like the bodhisattvas, the arhats, and the top disciples. In chapter one of the *Sūtra of Golden Light*, the stage for the expounding of the sūtra is set with the Asura Kings numbering among “the Brahma-king and the Thirty-three kings, the powerful rulers of the serpents, the kings of the Kinnaras...likewise the kings of the Garuḍas, these, having

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<sup>4</sup> Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, *Ashura to no deai: Oya to ko no gyararii* (Encounter with the Asura: Gallery for Children and Parents) (Kyoto: Bukkyō bijitsu kyōkai, 1997), 5.

approached there with the might of their armies and with their vehicles, will provide protection for them, by day and by night, remaining steadfast.”<sup>5</sup> Originally part of the decoration of Empress Kōmyō’s Western Golden Hall of Kōfuku-ji temple, the Asura statue, one of the “Hosts of the Eight Divisions” together with the ten disciples statues, formed a “diorama” dramatizing the scene in the Introductory chapter of this sūtra, one so beloved by its patron Kōmyō that she took her imperial name from it.

In the introductory chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, like in the *Sūtra of Golden Light*, the asura forms a part of the audience who hears the Buddha expound his new teaching: “There were four *asura* (titan) kings, namely, the asura king Balin, the asura king Kharaskandha, the asura king Vemacitrin, and the asura king Rāhu, each with several hundreds of thousands of followers.”<sup>6</sup> This “fourfold assembly”, surrounding the Buddha on Vulture Peak as he expounds the *Lotus*, was made up of a diverse group of humans, non-humans, buddhas and bodhisattvas alike; they “felt that this (occasion) had never happened before, and, joyously joining palms, single-mindedly they beheld the Buddha.”<sup>7</sup> The asura is also mentioned in chapter nineteen (“Merits of the Dharma Preacher”) as one part of a vast cosmos that a true preacher of the *Lotus*, having become endowed with super-powered hearing, can fathom. The realm of the asuras is just one part of the cosmos now audible to the *Lotus* preacher:

The asuras, dwelling by the edge of the great sea,  
When they talk to one another  
What great sounds they utter:  
Sounds like these (are heard by) the preacher of the Dharma  
Who dwells here securely;  
This multitude of sounds does he hear from afar  
Yet they do not damage his aural faculty.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> R. E. Emmerick, trans., *The Sūtra of Golden Light: Being a Translation of the Suvarṇabhasottama-sūtra* (London: Luzac and Co., 1970), 2. In Japan, Yijing’s translation of *Sūtra of Golden Light (and the Victorious Kings)* was read and used soon after its compilation. The monk Dōji, who was an emissary to Tang China, returned with it and many other sūtras by 720, what Osabe calls cutting-edge Tang fashion and culture. Emmerick’s translation into English, which I use in this paper, is based on the extant Sanskrit version that Johannes Nobel edited in 1937. For an encapsulated history of the translation history of the sūtra, see Catherine Ludvik, “A *Harivaṃsa* Hymn in Yijing’s Chinese Translation of the *Sūtra of Golden Light*,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 124.4 (Oct-Dec. 2004): 709-710.

<sup>6</sup> Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sūtra)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 5. In Japanese the great kings are, respectively, Bachi-ashuraō, Karakonda-ashuraō, Bimashitta-ashuraō, and Rago-ashuraō.

<sup>7</sup> See the aforementioned scripture.

<sup>8</sup> Hurvitz, trans., 244.



The *Lotus Sūtra* was particularly beloved by Miyazawa Kenji, who always kept it at his bedside since discovering it shortly after graduating middle-school.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps from the *Lotus* Kenji discovered his inspiration of the peaceful Asura. He not only named his first (and only) published collection of verse *Spring and Asura*, but he intended to publish two sequels to the collection, keeping the Asura in the original title. The asura mattered deeply to this otherwise peaceful man, a community activist, who died at the early age of thirty-seven.

From its embryonic-stage, Japan quickly grew into a state in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its ruling elites, particularly Emperor Shōmu (701-756; r. 724-749) and Empress Kōmyō (701-760), embraced the cutting-edge fashion and culture from Tang China. They were fascinated by the power Buddhism could lend them to order and rule their state, as seen in Shōmu's building of the Great Buddha at Tōdai-ji, one great temple to represent his own great reign; but on the smaller scale, Kōmyō embraced the art of Tang China for the possibility of a more personal kind of salvation. By creating the Western Light Hall at the Kōfuku-ji temple complex and by populating it with the Hosts of the Eight Divisions, she endeavored to save her mother's soul. The Asura dry-lacquer sculpture, certainly a masterpiece in the Eight-Figure Group and one of Japan's greatest surviving cultural treasures, not only stands out in the group, but also curiously represents a complicated and at times seemingly contradictory blend of the desires of Empress Kōmyō herself, according to the journalist Osabe Hideo. Indeed, this peaceful three-faced, six-armed version is so far removed from its original warrior-demon DNA, it is hardly fits the stereotype. The grace and nobility of his features far outweighs the violence-obsessed warrior demon that is forever locked in a losing battle against Indra. As Osabe asserts, the Kōfuku-ji Asura has not the appearance of a young boy, but perhaps reflects that of a beautiful young boy or girl, and thus, it has an androgynous look. Is the Asura actually a reflection of Empress Kōmyō herself? Her Kōfuku-ji Asura is a peaceful warrior showing repentance for its sins. This unique image of the asura, certainly perfected in early Japan with this statue, would disappear and be replaced by the traditional warrior-demon Asura, baring his fangs and marshaling its fellow minions into armies when the original patrons of temple art, the aristocrats of Nara- and Heian-Period Japan, came to be replaced by the warrior elites of the Medieval Period (1185-1600).<sup>10</sup> From the eighth century through the twentieth century, over a large gap where the more typically violent form of the asura held sway in Japanese Buddhist art, Kōmyō and Kenji's peaceful Buddha has flickered in and out of the landscape of the Japanese

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<sup>9</sup> Miyazawa Seiroku, *Ani no toranku* (Older Brother's Trunk) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1991), 247.

<sup>10</sup> Another notable example of the warrior-elites' embracing of the asura in Medieval Japanese culture is the number of superb *shura-mono* (warrior plays) written for the Noh theater.

imagination yet their peaceful asura remains far more beloved by the Japanese today than the original violent demon.

### Recent Interest in the Ashura

In Japan, the year 2009 was certainly a watershed in terms of interest in the Kōfuku-ji's Asura statue. As a celebration of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the temple as well as the establishment of the capital at Nara, the statue was displayed from March to September for a period of six months; and it was a major event for museum-goers in both Eastern and Western Japan. Furthermore, a number of books and special-issue magazines were published to capitalize on this "Asura Boom" ("Ashura būmu"). Exhibit attendance at the Tokyo National Museum nearly exceeded one million visitors.<sup>11</sup>

The Kōfuku-ji Asura has long remained popular in the modern period since it was first photographed in 1888; and Etō Risaburō's 1908 photo collection of Japanese treasures, *Japan's Glory (Nippon seika)* helped to further popularize the statue at the national level. Beginning in 1903, it was put on public display in the Nara Natural History Museum. The statue had its first tour in 1952 to Tokyo, attended by half a million people.<sup>12</sup> It returned to Tokyo again for a second time in 1959. Yet the 2009 tour was particularly noteworthy because it had been the first time the Asura statue travelled together with the other retinue statues (the Hosts of the Eight Divisions and the Ten Major Disciples) for the Japanese to see it outside of Nara in its full context.<sup>13</sup> Today, it is normally on display at the Kokuhōkan, the National Treasure Museum in Nara. However, with the iPad "app", launched by the Kōfuku-ji temple in March 2010, one can access a 360-degree view of the Asura at any time.<sup>14</sup> This public-relations effort set into place by the temple has helped keep the Asura in the popular imagination of the Japanese. Having often appeared in Japanese school textbooks of history, the Kōfuku-ji Asura is, among all the Japanese-made artworks and treasures, perhaps the most commonly recognized by its people. Kaneko Hiroaki and Maruyama Shirō, respective directors of the Kōfuku-ji

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<sup>11</sup> Otake Tomoko, "Gods Are on the Boom," *Japan Times*, April 25, 2010, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/fl20100425x2.html#.T-I9Qo6Eba4> (accessed June 20, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, "Nenpyō: 'Ashura' wa kō mirarete kita" ("Almanac: The Way the 'Asura' Came to Be Seen"), in *Geijutsu shinchō* (Arts Shinchō), 60.3 (March 2009): 79.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Dunn, "Well-Armed to Protect the Buddha", *Japan Times*, May 8, 2009, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/fa20090508a2.html#.T-Xd016Eba4> (accessed June 20, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Otake, *ibid.* Although the app was initially offered for free, it is now for sale for 350 yen (or \$5.00 US). Additional 360-degree views of the other statues of the Eight Hosts are sold in 350-yen/five-dollar increments.

National Treasure and Tokyo National Museums, cite a long-held record of the Asura statue being the number-one, most-recognized Japanese sculpture.<sup>15</sup>

Actually, an earlier sculpted image of the asura still exists in Japan, the Horyū-ji Asura (dated to 711). These two early images of the Asura in Japan are quite similar but indicate a slight difference in influence from the Asian continent. The Hōryū-ji Asura, an earlier piece, is a three-faced, six-armed Asura made in a seated position. Like Silla Korean stone sculptures of the Asura, he has a peaceful mien yet his arms are merely crossed over his lap.

In the Kōfuku-ji sculpture, dated to approximately 734, this standing Asura has three faces and is six-armed like the one at Hōryū-ji. The face is relaxed and composed like the Hōryū-ji one, but it shared more in common with the Tang period wall painting Asura: his palms are pressed together in respect. Furthermore, this lacquer-made sculpture is painted and reveals important clues about the imagery of the Asura. His skin color is now reddish, although scholars know it was original a vermillion color, a common color for pagodas in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century architecture.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, the clothes he wears are the sari and pantaloons of an Indian elite. The design of the pants is particularly curious because only the Asura among the Kōfuku-ji Eight Guardian Figures wears not armor but clothing. For Osabe, the Asura's clothing represents "the cutting-edge fashion from abroad" that the Japanese Imperial Court (particularly the cosmopolitan Emperor Shōmu and his wife Kōmyō) at the time were eager to learn of and flaunt as signs of their own advanced tastes.<sup>17</sup> The Asura's light clothing, its neck and arm bracelet accessories, and its slim body all suggest the model for the statue was not derived from descriptions of the asura in passages from the sūtras or Asian art; and it was modeled on Kōmyō herself. "Even though Empress Kōmyō was in her thirties (at the time of its creation), ...for people today, among whom there are many who even as they age, keep their youthful sensibility, it is not hard for us to imagine and thus we cannot simply dismiss the possibility Empress Kōmyō, too, had such a youthful vitality even in the remote past of the Tenpyō age (729-749)."<sup>18</sup>

Empress Kōmyō commissioned the Ten Disciples and the Eight Guardian set, of which the Asura figures prominently, for the repose of the soul of her mother, Tachibana no Michiyo. They were housed in the Western Golden Hall of the Kōfuku-ji complex; and the hall and its contents took over a year to construct but Kōmyō's hall was completed on the eleventh day of the first month in 734 to mark the first anniversary of her mother Michiyo's passing. For

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<sup>15</sup> Kaneko Hiroaki and Maruyama Shirō, "Kaisetsu: Ashura to wa nanimono ka?" ("Commentary: What is an Asura?"), in *Geijutsu shinchō* (Arts Shinchō), 60.3 (March 2009): 80.

<sup>16</sup> Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Osabe Hideo, "*Ashurazō*" *no shinjitsu* (The Truth behind the "Asura Statue") (Tokyo: Bunshun shinshō, 2009), 212.

<sup>18</sup> Osabe, 214. All translations from the Japanese are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Osabe, Empress Kōmyō is a mysterious yet extremely important figure in early Japanese history. Together with her husband, Emperor Shōmu, they represent a turning point in the Japanese imperial family and their rule. Having achieved their imperial status through the machinations of their father Fujiwara Fuhito (659-720), they saw the agony and suffering of the clans as well as the peasants who died in rebellions, in obligatory public-work projects, and in the famines that all resulted from their misappropriation of human labor. Kōmyō, perhaps more than Shōmu, developed an attitude of piety and reverence for the dead. Michiyo herself had taken the tonsure and dedicated services to the repose of the soul of her husband, Fuhito, creating a model of conduct for her daughter.<sup>19</sup> Not only did Kōmyō commission the Saikondō for her mother, and thus followed in her pious mother's footsteps, but also Kōmyō issued edicts to help alleviate the suffering of the peasants in her lifetime. In Osabe's view, the Asura in the Saikondō is reflection of the penitent Empress Kōmyō. Far from being a male warrior of anger, the Kōfuku-ji Asura is a reflection of a woman who wanted to spread the Dharma for the people and bring peace to their lives.

Although Kamei Katsuichirō (1907-1966), who famously abandoned left-wing politics and embraced Japanese nationalism like many other intellectuals in the 1930s, emphasized the “grotesque” aspect of the three-faced and six-armed Kōfuku-ji Asura, he nonetheless acknowledged it as a masterpiece of Japanese art.<sup>20</sup> Despite its shocking ugliness of its multiple faces and limbs, Kamei praised the way it maintained a harmonious balance so that one could notice its decorative qualities. “It overflows with a fresh and youthful feeling from its otherwise slender frame.”<sup>21</sup> The figure, according to Kamei, is unique among many sculpted figures from ancient time. Although Osabe quotes Kamei at length in his book *The Truth behind the “Ashura Statue”* (“*Ashurazō*” *no shinjitsu*), in a bold move, he asserts that Kamei made a crucial mistake in how he viewed the Asura. Compared to Kamei's high volume of writing about other art and architecture of the Japan's early history, his commentary on the Kōfuku-ji Asura is scant (his “Ashura” essay is barely 400 characters long). Nonetheless, Osabe believes that when Kamei wrote about the Eleven-Faced Kannon of Hokke-ji, describing the figure as “something like a beautiful Indonesian girl”, he was actually thinking about the Kōfuku-ji Asura.<sup>22</sup> The non-Japanese quality of the face(s) that Kamei attributes to Kannon, which according to legend was sculpted by an Indian artist who used Kōmyō as a model, Osabe argues, instead more likely fits the Kōfuku-ji Asura. Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960), who had

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>20</sup> Kamei Katsuichirō, “Ashura” (“Asura”), in *Kamei Katsuichirō zenshū* (Collected Works of Kamei Katsuichirō) (Tokyo: Kōdan-sha, 1971), 9: 446. Originally Kamei wrote this essay on Japan's art treasures in a series of essays for *A Housewife's Friend* (*Shufu no tomo*), running from March 1957 through December 1958.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kamei Katsuichirō, “Bibō no kōgō” (The Empress of the Beautiful Face), in *Kamei Katsuichirō zenshū*, 9: 143.

earlier described the serene beauty of the Eleven-Faced Kannon in *Kodera junrei* (Pilgrimage of Old Temples, 1918), felt that it “betrays our expectation that...we can see the flash of the refined feeling of Empress Kōmyō, the light of wisdom in her eyes, the soft movement of her sensitive heart in her mouth, the endless glow of passion in her face.”<sup>23</sup> Given the disappointment Watsuji felt when viewing this “model” of Kōmyō, Osabe feels that indeed, the Kannon is not the true reflection of the empress. Kamei describes the Eleven-Faced Kannon as “having a sense that no photograph can do it justice, especially so when it comes to its face(s), it gives the impression of profound wisdom while being extremely meek ...barely three-feet tall, so it gives off a darkening glow, one gets the feeling it is a bit like a beautiful Indonesian girl.”<sup>24</sup> Osabe feels that, again, these two cultural critics sought the reflection of Empress Kōmyō in the wrong place. Working from the legendary attribution that this Kannon was indeed Kōmyō’s image, both Watsuji and Kamei fail to consider the possibility that Eleven-Faced Kannon is not the best record of Kōmyō’s appearance. Osabe feels that instead the legendary image of Kōmyō that betrays Watsuji’s expectation can instead be found in the Asura statue; and likewise, the qualities that Kamei associates with the Eleven-Faced Kannon, especially as an “Indonesian girl”, instead more properly describe the Kōfuku-ji Asura.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Osabe believes the legendary beauty and wisdom of Kōmyō, originally thought to be captured in the Eleven-Faced Kannon, is instead best located in the Kōfuku-ji Asura that she herself commissioned to eternally serve as a part of a prayer diorama for the sake of her mother’s soul. Osabe may be overreaching the limits of his scholarship by making this extenuated argument, but his argument provides a new way to think about the Kōfuku-ji Asura, certainly one that many, including Kamei, agree is a unique masterpiece in Japanese art precisely for the peaceful and calming qualities this warrior-demon radiates.

Osabe’s thesis is twofold: he contends that the Kōfuku-ji Asura is modeled on Empress Kōmyō and thus does not have the look of a boy or even a girl, instead it reflects a (youthful) woman in her thirties who is repentant. Furthermore, he views the statue as an anomaly in the continuum of Japanese Buddhist art because the style of the statue is extremely “realistic” in that its sculptor Manpuku carefully captured his patron’s image. The fact that the asura has multiple faces and arms is not a problem for Osabe’s thesis that the Asura is a realistic reflection of Kōmyō. His explanation at times stretches belief, but he eloquently describes why Kōmyō would be best represented by a three-faced Asura:

In the Kōfuku-ji Asura statue, we will not err too greatly to see that its genius, the sculptor Manpuku, captured the spirit of Empress Kōmyō and thus rendered her in it: Kōmyō, who normally repressed great stress within herself, who could

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<sup>23</sup> Watsuji Tetsurō, cited in Osabe, 185-186.

<sup>24</sup> Kamei, 143.

<sup>25</sup> Osabe, 188-189.

stand fast and support her husband Shōmu, and could carefully fend off enemies to the state in order to become a divine protector of the Dharma, was literally, a woman who conducted herself as one with *three-faces-and-six-arms*.<sup>26</sup>

Further obfuscating his argument, he links this Asura statue and the Mona Lisa painting together as a pair, “the twins of the East and West”, which mutually remain in this world as two great unsolvable riddles in art history. Arguing by analogies, rather than direct evidence, Osabe fails to persuade his reader that Kōmyō must be feminine. Should one look a diagram of the arrangement of the Kōfuku-ji complex statues, the *Diagram of the Kōfuku-ji Maṇḍala (Kōfuku-ji mandara zu)*, dated to the twelfth- or thirteenth-century, the Asura statue, depicted in the top left area of the Western Golden Hall section, seems far more husky and masculine than the actual slim, androgynous figure. Living some five centuries after the Kōfuku-ji Asura figure was created, the artist of the *Diagram* did nothing in his painting to suggest he felt the figure was feminized. Less a feminine image, it seems simply androgynous and in keeping with the depiction of the other guardian figures as yet-unformed adolescents. Nonetheless, I find Osabe’s “reading” of the statue’s three-faces to be extremely compelling. At once suggesting the larger mood of “penitence” he feels characterized Empress Kōmyō’s attitude about this world and the next, the Asura’s three faces reveal a nuanced political figure who could be shrewd and firm yet also compassionate. Is not the penitent pose of Kōmyō’s Asura one aspect of it that surely appeals to Japanese viewers even after its creation a millennium later?

The Temyō-period Asura has a noble mien, dressed in proper attire, and, as one would expect of an asura, has a three-faced head that, regardless of the point of view, indicates the tranquility of a guardian of the Buddha. Certainly Osabe is correct in pinpointing how unique the Kōfuku-ji Asura is within the larger context and continuity of the depictions of the warrior-demon in Japan. The later Asura King of the Sanjū-Sangendō (built in 1164), after all, is decidedly marked by the fear and chaos of the Medieval Period (1185-1600), of which he only slightly predates. He is more muscular, threatening, and his three-faced head shows a far more limited range of emotions, mostly fear and anger. Even today in the Japanese language, there are a number of expressions that reaffirm the importance of the Asura’s warring aspect in the culture. “To step into the Asura Realm” is to enter a fight. In the language, it is the asura’s original warrior character that stands out. Thus, although the Kōfuku-ji Asura represents one of Japan’s earliest and certainly most important renderings of the warrior-demon in Japan art, it is idiosyncratic. Subsequent paintings and sculptures of the warring asura depict it as one would expect in the combined Asian Hindu-Buddhist tradition. As for Miyazawa Kenji’s view of the asura,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 214.

from which model did he rely upon in creating his poetic version of the warrior-demon? To answer that question, we must next look at the tradition of asura figuration in the early Medieval Period of Japan.

### The Asura in Medieval Japan

When looking at the fierce mien of the Asura King at the Sanjū-Sangendō (The Thirty-Three Bay Hall, properly known as Rengeō-ji, now part of the Myōhōin complex), built in 1164, one is reminded that in Japan by the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, it was the warriors, not the aristocratic elite, that now seized the reins of power; and they desired a new culture that would mirror their own sensibilities.<sup>27</sup> The Asura King and his fellow Hosts of Twenty-Eight Divisions that protect the Kannon at Sanjū-Sangendō may have been commissioned by Emperor Go-Shirakawa, but this grand hall and its decorative statues were paid for by his generalissimo Taira no Kiyomori.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting the emerging dominance of the warriors as the ruling elite in Japan in late Heian and early Kamakura periods, the original warrior aspect re-emerges in asura images and statues made during this time. The Asura King is red, has three sets of arms, and three heads. Each of the three heads has three eyes, making this Asura a much fiercer looking figure than the Kōfuku-ji statue. Nakano Genzō writes of its appearance, “the difference is quite clear between the sculptural style of the two eras when you compare (the Nara-period Asura) and the unconcealed and violent rage that appears in its three-eyed-per-three-face image.”<sup>29</sup>

Although pictures or illustrated scrolls depicting the Six Realms flourished in the Heian and Kamakura periods, like the statues of asuras created in this latter, warrior-dominated time, artists of the pictures of asura increasingly become preoccupied with showing his warrior prowess. In the *Kitano Tenjin Engi e-maki* (Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Shrine) (13<sup>th</sup> century), an origin story of the Tenjin shrine dedicated to the memory of Sugawara Michizane, in the final two scrolls there is a *rokudō-e* (Paintings of the Six Realms) in which the Asura Realm is both beautifully and terrifyingly revealed. Sugamura Tōru

<sup>27</sup> Despite the fire of 1249 and the destruction of the original building, the statues for the most part were saved; the Asura King statue is thought to be one of the original figures having survived the fire.

<sup>28</sup> Janet Goodwin, “The Buddhist Monarch: Go-Shirakawa and the Rebuilding of Tōdai-ji,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 17.2/3 (June-Sep. 1990): 224. The circumstances regarding the Rengeō-in’s construction is described in Jien’s *Gukanshō* (Notes on Foolish Views). See Delmer M. Brown and Ichirō Ishida, *The Future and the Past: A Translation and Study of the Gukanshō, an Interpretative History of Japan Written in 1219* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 118.

<sup>29</sup> Nakano Genzō and Kondō Yutaka, “Zuhan kaisetsu” (“Explanation of Illustrated Plates”), in Usami Eiji and Misaki Kisen, eds., *Kodera junrei Kyōto: Myōhōin, Sanjūsangendō* (Pilgrimage of Old Temples in Kyoto: Sanjūsangendō, Myōhōin) (Kyoto: Tankō-sha, 1977), 134.

describes two Kamakura-period characteristics of *rokudō-e* found in the Asura scene of this *emaki*. “This Asura, depicted here with his (usual) three-faces and six-arms and his red-skinned body...who normally fears his enemy (Taishakuten), and who decides to fight yet can never feel confident, is (an image of the Asura) not to be found in (Genshin’s) *Essentials of Salvation*.”<sup>30</sup>

Sugamura notes that the difference between images of Six Realms depicted before and after the Kamakura Period begins is that, unlike the earlier Heian-Period *emaki*, those produced later rely much more heavily, indeed try to faithfully depict, the Six Realms that Genshin described in the *Essentials of Salvation* (*Ōjō yōshū*, 985).<sup>31</sup> However, the exception is that when it comes to depicting the Asura Realm, these Kamakura-period *rokudō-e* do not rely on *The Essentials of Salvation*. Other *rokudō-e* produced in or after the Kamakura Period, such as the Shōjuraigō Temple’s *rokudo-e* (13<sup>th</sup> century), depict an Asura Realm scene similar to the one the Kitano Shrine *emaki*. Kept in the Enryaku-ji complex, the headquarters of the Tendai school, on Mt. Hiei, the Shōjuraigō-ji Temple *rokudō-e* consists of fifteen hanging scrolls that depict the Six Realms with a different degree of emphasis. The Asura Realm is featured in one scroll painting. This Kamakura-period image, like the Asura Realm seen in the Kitano Shrine *emaki*, also relies on its description in the *Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sūtra* (J. *Shōbō nenjō kyō*) rather than on the one in *The Essentials of Salvation*. This is clear in the way they depict a scene of the Asura Kings’ battle with Taishakuten that is present only in the former text. What is interesting about this depiction of the war is that all four Asura Kings are here. Tracing them from the top left of the scroll to the bottom of the page, Kasuya Makoto describes the first, King Rago as having “a deep red skin color, three faces and two sets of arms (holding a bow and arrow with one set; and the moon and sun with the other)” and that Rago is “largest and most powerful.”<sup>32</sup> Immediately below Rago is Hakasha, who has a vermilion-colored skin, one face and two set of arms. Hakasha, unlike Rago who appears more like a general commanding the forces, is on the ground directly confronting Taishakuten. Hakasha, with his two sets of arms, holds close combat weapons of a spear as well as ranged weapons of a bow with arrows. The third Asura, Keman, appears to be flanking Taishakuten further below in the painting. Mekan, like Hakasha, with two sets of arms, has a ranged weapon of a bow and arrow, but he has a sword instead of a spear. Commenting on the differences between the armies of

<sup>30</sup> Sugamura Tōru, “Jigoku-e, rokudō-e no rekishi no naka no Kitano Tenjin Engi emaki” (The *Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Shrine* in the History of Hell Paintings and Six Realms Paintings), in Takei Akio, ed., *Kitano Tenjin Engi o yomu* (Reading the Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Shrine) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2008), 168-169.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>32</sup> Kasuya Makoto, “Zenbamen kaisetsu” (Descriptions of All Scenes), in Izumi Takeo, Kasuya Makoto, and Yamamoto Satōmi, eds., *Kokuhō: Rokudo-e* (The Six Realms Paintings in Shōjuraigō-ji Temple) (Tokyo: Chūōkōron bijitsu shuppan, 2007), 295.



the Asura and Taishakuten, Kasuya keenly observes that the defeat and suffering of the Asura army is logically explained by the way the soldiers' dress is depicted. Compared to the "heavy armor" of the Taishakuten forces,

Even three of the four the Asura king-commanders are naked from the waist up, like most of their ground troops who otherwise might simply have helmets on their heads, so that no matter how brave the Asura army may be, looking at how poor their defenses are, their army is assuredly going to lose to Taishakuten's.<sup>33</sup>

One should note that the asuras wear armor in the Shōjuraigō-ji *rokudō-e* image. However light the armor of these Kamakura-period asuras may be, they have a more warlike appearance than the Nara-period Kōfuku-ji Asura, commissioned by Empress Kōmyō, that certainly only is adorned with thin clothes.

Another slightly common asura aspect found in both the Kōfuku-ji Asura and the Shōjuraigō-ji *rokudō-e* is an attitude of sadness particularly in the scene of the fourth and final Asura King Yūken. This Asura King is convalescing far from the battle at the bottom of the painting; and he is wounded, bleeding from his right leg and holds nothing in his two sets of arms. Surrounded by crying women (the wives of the Asura Kings), he is part of the "Pond of All Seeing" ("Issai-kanchi") scene, which Kasuya describes as a unique feature of the Shōjuraigo-ji *rokudō-e*. As briefly depicted in the *Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sūtra*, when the wives of the Asura look into the All-Seeing Pool and discover that the actual battle with Taishakuten was far from going well and that their husbands were retreating, they break down into tears. The keen eye and imagination of this painter to notice this scene and include it, in Kasuya's words, "should make us value this *rokudō-e* even more."<sup>34</sup> Unlike the Kōfuku-ji Asura, King Yūken does not seem repentant, although one could argue he is, by the proxy of the Asura wives surrounding him. The inclusion of tears and defeat in the Shōjuraigō-ji *rokudō-e* narrative provides some continuity to the Kōfuku-ji Asura statue and Miyazawa Kenji's poetic asura to come.

Although the images of the asura in the Kamakura period share much in common and often borrow from the *Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sūtra*, each image often has its own unique characteristic approach to depicting the demon-warriors or their realm. "A deeply interesting motif" Sugamura discovers in the *Kitano Tenjin engi emaki* is the Asura King's use of giant human-faced shields that form a poor line of bulwarks against the onslaught of Taishakuten. Sugamura feels these human-faced shields look like face-shaped earthenware shields that embody the epidemic gods/demons.<sup>35</sup> The variety of faces on each of the Asura's bulwarks reflects and perhaps even amplifies the multiplicity of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>35</sup> Sugamura, 169.

emotions – a mixture of pain and anger – seen in the losing general’s own head of three faces.

Thus, looking back on the history on the asura imagery in Japanese from the Nara Period through the Kamakura Period, there is a noticeable shift as the asura moves from a figure of repentance and grace, exemplifying the nobility of the ruling elite, back to its origins in Asia as a figure craving a fight against his archrival Taishakuten. One on hand, it is curious that Japan’s earliest extant examples of the asura began with a highly stylized and unorthodox image of this figure. Only after centuries of unrest and the rise of the warriors to the ruling class in Japan did the Asura return to his more basic origins as a warrior demon in Japanese Buddhist art. On the other hand, it is equally curious why Miyazawa Kenji in modern times essentially returned to that older, Nara-period image of the asura when he cast himself as the warrior demon in his poetry.

Miyazawa Kenji’s asura, a literary creation, best represents a modern interpretation of the figure that displays a nuanced understanding of the asura’s complexity. His first (and only) collection of free verse, published in his lifetime, is entitled *Spring and Asura* (*Haru to shura*, 1924). In three important poems or “mental sketches” in the collection, he describes himself as a blue asura. Torn between feelings of frustration and anger as well as intense grief, Miyazawa’s blue asura not only embodies the earlier Nara-period traits of the asura, and in doing so underscores Miyazawa’s deep Buddhist knowledge, but at the same time his blue asura breaks the classical mold. His asura is a truly peaceful warrior, weighed down by a Romantically-inspired, blue melancholy. In Kenji’s verse, his asura “gnashes his teeth” in vexation, yet no one but himself suffers the wrath of his warrior-demon.

### **The Asura in Kenji**

Although it is not the first chronological instance of *shura* in Kenji’s poem collection, the first instance of the term after the title itself is found in the poet’s poetic “Preface” (“Jo”), which he describes was written some twenty-two months after the first poems in the collection were written (a total span of time from January 1922 through December 1923). In the preface, he explains his method of creating not poems but “mental (image) sketches,” which are products of sketching the world as it is hit by the alternating waves of light and darkness powered by a “karmic AC lamp”. He subtitled *Spring and Asura* as a “mental sketch collection”, so one understands that this distinction, that is, between modern free verse and his approach of sketching the world with words, was important to the poet. His “mental sketches” are thus a record by a living being to describe both the movement of through time as well as how cause-and-effect relationships (or karma) shape life in all of its forms. The diversity of life is important to Kenji, a soil scientist and amateur astronomer. His worldview of the cosmos includes not only the smallest biological forms and larger cosmic

entities, but also religious realms. He places his asura into a combined scientific and religious context, as seen in the opening of the poem:

“Preface to *Spring and Ashura*” (“Jo”)

The phenomenon called I  
Is a single blue illumination  
Of a presupposed organic alternating current lamp  
(a composite body of each and every transparent specter)  
The single illumination  
Of karma’s alternating current lamp  
Remains alight without fail  
Flickering unceasingly, restlessly  
Together with the sights of the land and all else  
(the light is preserved...the lamp itself is lost)

These poems are a mental sketch as formed faithfully  
Passage by passage of light and shade

....

People and galaxies and Ashura and sea urchins  
Will think up new ontological proofs as they see them  
Consuming their cosmic dust...and breathing in salt water and air  
In the end all of these make up a landscape of the heart  
I assure you, however, that the scenes recorded here  
Are scenes recorded solely in their natural state  
And if this is nihil, it is nothing but nihil  
And the totality is common in degree to all of us  
(just as everything forms what is the sum in me / so do all parts become the sum of everything)<sup>36</sup>

According to Kenji, all life forms, even Asura, eat. They breathe. They also reflect on their existence (“think up new ontological proofs”). Moreover, through their ontological queries, they write their own “mental sketches” recording their reality as they see it. The prejudices one has as a result of one’s point of view shapes the record of one’s world. What ties Kenji’s “mental sketches” together with the sea cucumber and the Asura is that they are all pictures of the same “sights of the land” or landscape. The interpenetration of life (“just as everything forms what is the sum in me / so do all parts become the sum of everything”) seen in this section demonstrates the poet’s personal expression of the concept *ichinen sanzen* (three thousand realms in one thought), a concept that was crucial to Nichiren’s (1222-1282) concept of the universe, and thus this passage reminds one of Kenji’s faith in the Nichiren or Lotus (Hokke) school of Buddhism.

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<sup>36</sup> Miyazawa Kenji, “Preface to *Spring and Ashura*,” in Roger Pulvers, trans., *Strong in the Rain* (Northumberland, England: Bloodaxe Books, 2007), 31.

In terms of what Kenji's image of the asura is, we should note that the asura he describes in this section of the preface is not an angry or warring demon. He does not even appear with three-faces or three sets of arms like in pre-modern Buddhist imagery. Like the smallest sea cucumbers (who also exist at the bottom of the sea) and the greatest cluster of stars, like people and one specific person, Miyazawa Kenji, the asura here is a peaceful and thoughtful being that examines his own existence. One might construe that he is, like Kenji, a vegetarian, from the fact that he eats "cosmic dust" and not meat and thereby he indicates that the asura is peaceful rather than barbaric or warlike. In a sense, for Kenji, the asura is an ideal form of existence. Thus, Kenji's "Preface" not only imparts to the reader Kenji's interest in the Asura Realm, but more importantly he also shows the wide dimensions of his cosmic view, obviously shaped by both Buddhism and science. Hagiwara Takao rightly describes Kenji's poetry as "modernist" in the way Kenji synthesizes opposing worlds — the scientific and non-scientific, the modern and the pre-modern, and inorganic and nonorganic — without bearing any modern sense of pessimism or gloom.<sup>37</sup>

### Internal Strife in Kenji's Asura

Although Kenji mentions the asura in the collection's preface poem, his characteristic mode of the being does not truly appear until the tenth poem in the collection, the title-cut "Spring and Asura". For many scholars, this is a significant poem because Kenji gave the poem an English subtitle, marked with parenthesis: "(mental sketch modified)". Although a discussion of Kenji's composition process of "sketching" could illuminate our understanding of his "Asura", it is quite complex and outside the scope of this essay. Like many of Kenji's poems, it is typical in that his "mental sketch" records what the poem's speaker sees and hears on a walk. The poem's speaker passes into nature seemingly because he cannot contain his feelings of anger (glossed in line 4 of the poem as "a pattern or tune of self-flattery") in human society. This anger is most likely directed at the self, but it is significant that the poem's speaker cannot share these feelings with others and therefore he is further alienated from society. The poem begins:

"Spring and Asura" ("Haru to shura") (mental sketch modified)

Basket-weaving vines entangle the clouds  
 up above in that grey-steel mental image of mine:  
 a pattern or tune of self-flattery that's everywhere, every-  
 where, up there, in wild rose groves, and in humus bogs, etc., etc.,  
 (at a time when fragments of amber rain down  
 thicker than afternoon woodwinds).

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<sup>37</sup> Takao Hagiwara, "Overcoming Modernity' and Miyazawa Kenji," in Roy Starrs, ed., *Rethinking Japanese Modernity* (Boston: Global Oriental, 2012), 313.

The sense of violent separation from society is seen in descriptions of fragments falling amber-rain. The poem ends on a similar image in its final line with sparks, or fragments of fire, raining down with a dark backdrop, which certainly imparts a feeling that this is the fighting Realm of the Asura. Through the use of these parallel images (water and fire, combined with earthen amber, reinforce the totality of the image), the mood of the poem yet strongly remains one of separation and fragmentation. When the Asura figure is introduced, he fits perfectly well into this scene of soul-rendering alienation:

The blue color and bitter taste of Wrath:  
 He walks gnashing his teeth, spitting, and pacing back and forth  
 through the abyss of the light of April's atmospheric layer  
 That solitary Asura is me  
 (Landscape wavering in my tears)

Although not quite a refrain, this passage is repeated again some ten lines later with some minor modifications.

Bound to the visual byways made by shattered clouds  
 there in that sparkling ocean of the sky  
 a wind made of holy crystal comes and goes  
 through a row of Spring ZYPRESSEN,  
 deep and black things, they breathe the ether  
 Even though Heavenly Mountain glitters with snow  
 that fell from the sky's dark stepladder  
 (shimmering waves of heat and polarized light)  
 The True Words have been lost  
 Clouds rip apart and dash through the sky  
 Ah! Gnashing his teeth, and in flames he paces back and forth  
 through the abyss of glittering April  
 That solitary Asura is me.  
 (Milky-crystal clouds flow on  
 and I know not where the spring bird sings)  
 When the sun's outline shimmers  
 the Asura forms a symphony with the forest  
 The cluster of blackwoods stretch down  
 from the sky's soup bowl, itself sinking and growing dim,  
 and their branches sadly bunch up  
 and while the treetops of the forest aren't watching  
 in a flash, the crows burst through everything that is  
 in this double-layered landscape.

The poem concludes with two coda sections. The first involves a speculation on the part of the speaker whether his internal emotional state that he describes as the asura can be seen by others. In other words, is his asura real?

And finally, the second coda properly works as a refrain echoing previous imagery that reinforces the sense of alienation felt by this vacillating spirit who is both outside of humanity and outside of nature's embrace. The hellish aspect of the Asura Realm follows him with sparks of fire raining from the sky.

(When at long last the atmosphere layer burns away clean  
and even the cypresses hush and stand to the sky)  
He who passes through the gold of the meadow  
he who surely has the form of man  
that farmhand, wearing a straw jacket, looks at me.  
Can he really see me?  
there in the deep abyss of the ocean that is this sparking atmospheric layer  
(The sadness is ever more blue, ever deeper)  
ZYPRESSEN quietly wavers  
A bird again cuts through the blue sky  
(The True Words are not here;  
The Asura's tears fall to the earth.)

Renewed, I breathe out to the sky and  
My lungs then contract, turning faintly white.  
(This body is interspersed throughout the dust of the firmament)  
Ginkgo treetops and light:  
At long last ZYPRESSEN darken  
and from the clouds sparks rain down.<sup>38</sup>

Kenji's Asura embodies a wrath that embodies "blueness" and "bitterness". The Blue color he chooses is unorthodox. The Kōfuku-ji Asura in Nara, which Kenji may have seen after he graduated high school and travelled with his father to Nara, is red colored.<sup>39</sup> It is quite different from Kenji's Asura. Whereas the

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<sup>38</sup> Miyazawa Kenji, *Shin kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū* (New Definitive Edition of the Collected Works of Miyazawa Kenji) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1995), 2: 22-24.

<sup>39</sup> Kenji ran away from home in January 1921 after mounting frustration at his inability to convert his family to Nichiren Buddhism. Only his younger sister Toshi converted with him. His father, Masajirō, had long led the family to be Pure Land Buddhists. Kenji, swayed by Tanaka Chigaku's writings and the Pillar of Nation Society's efforts to change Japan, tried to live in Tokyo near the organization's headquarters. In April of that year, Masajirō finally boarded a train to meet his son. They decided to go on a trip to Nara and Kyoto region, the birthplace of Japanese Buddhism, as a part of the 1,300<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial of death of Prince Shōtoku. His father hoped that through this Buddhist-themed journey they could reconcile their religious differences. Kenji at that time had been writing tanka (thirty-one syllable poetry) for nearly ten years. His "Song Manuscript" ("Kakō"), which he presumably wished at one point to publish but never did, retains a record (in tanka poems) of their trip to important Buddhist sites such as the Ise Shrine, Mt. Hiei, and Kasuga Shrine. Although Kenji and his father stayed at an inn outside of Kōfuku-ji, no mention is made of the temple in this diary-like manuscript. (The Kōfuku-ji statue at this time anyway would have been on

Kōfuku-ji Asura is seen as an image radiating peacefulness, Kenji's poetic alter-ego is angry and bitter: he paces back and forth, spits, and gnashes his teeth. Furthermore, he is burning. Although one can burn with passion, Kenji often uses the verb to mean suffering. In the poem "Love and Sick Fever" ("Koi to byōnetsu"), which precedes "Spring and Asura", Kenji describes his sick sister Toshi "burning" with a fever. Yet her "burning" is a result more from emotional suffering. Her brother, who is walking outside, tells her he will be cruel to her by not bringing flowers to comfort her. Self-revulsion is a strong aspect seen in his early poetry and is usually focused through the Asura image.

Amazawa Taijirō challenges the views of Onda Tatsuo and Nakamura Minoru who conflate the initial line's "shinshō" (mental image, or feelings) with the "self-flattery" of the fourth line. For Amazawa, the poem is less about the inner landscape of the poet's mind and instead, through the use of the asura image, Kenji shows how he has objectified his feelings as a part of a larger landscape.<sup>40</sup>

'Anger' is so abruptly announced here, but what is the object of his anger? ... what is at stake here is not that his anger is a closed-off inner world of self-abuse, self-denigration, or self-loathing. Instead, the anger is connected to the entirety of 'the sights of the land and all else' (mentioned in the "Preface" poem) – everything outside of himself.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Kenji's alter-ego emerges through the process of objectifying his feelings towards the outside world. He should not hate the world, but he does hate it, and that discovery of his own weakness leads to the metaphor of the Asura. Kenji's mental sketches often reveal how one's subjectivity is constituted when one becomes aware of how others see oneself. Instead of indulging in mere self-loathing, Kenji's Asura is aware that others may loathe him. Amazawa explains how this dark self-doubt obscures his self-love and love for others in the following way:

(Kenji's) Asura is not frustrated by the love for one specific woman, instead the (Asura's) darkened image (eclipse) lurks in the background for the very thing

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display not at the temple, but at the Nara Museum.) Kenji revised this "Song Manuscript" at least twice, so one wonders if perhaps he had not seen an asura statue on this trip to Nara (Kōfuku-ji) and Kyoto (Thirty-Three Bay Hall) and either simply did not write about it or that he did write about it but discarded the poem. The 1921 Kyoto/Nara poems can be found in the "Taishō 10, April" section: Miyazawa, *Shin kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū*, 1: 280-285.

<sup>40</sup> Amazawa Taijirō, "Kenji shi ni okeru 'shura'" (The 'Asura' in Kenji's Free Verse), in "*Miyazawa Kenji*" *kagami* (Mirror of "Miyazawa Kenji") (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1986), 147.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

called 'love', which he uses to sublimate his feelings for something higher, into a metaphysical concept.<sup>42</sup>

For Amazawa, Kenji's self-loathing is linked to his sense of compassion or love that is seen in the references to the asura, especially in the later "Voiceless Lamentation" poems.

Elsewhere in the collection, the asura image briefly appears in "Mt. Iwate, East Crater" ("Higashi Iwate-kazan"), a long soliloquy poem in which Kenji describes a trip he made up the region's largest mountain with the students he taught at Hanamaki Agricultural School. The poem displays Kenji's passion for hiking and geology, and when the asura appears near the end of the piece, it comes as a bit of reflection of himself. Despite his energy and enthusiasm about sharing his love of geology with the young men, he finds himself alienated from them. Although in the "Preface" poem, the asura appears to be existing in harmony with other creatures, in this poem the reality of being an asura is quite different as seen in the following excerpt.

The lanterns float above crater like before  
and someone is whistling  
I too head back  
Do they see my outline, that's why the lanterns too are heading back?  
(My outline for them must seem like a solitary Asura  
in this steel-colored landscape.)<sup>43</sup>

Like in the closing of the "Spring and Asura" poem, not only does the poetic speaker view himself as an asura, but also he expects others to see him that way as well. By believing himself to be an asura, the speaker believes that others, especially those who know him well, will therefore understand his conflicted and troubled nature (indicated by his dim, "steel-colored" background). Blended into both the comic and relaxed atmosphere on the mountain, Kenji's description of himself as an asura reveals that irrepressible melancholy that figures so largely in his alter-ego image. Here in the dim pre-dawn light, the color of the Asura is nearly monochromatic; and the blue color of the Asura is only suggested by the background of the "steel-colored" landscape. When Kenji invokes his Asura identity, it reveals his conflicted, self-alienated, and melancholic nature – perhaps the three faces of his Asura alter-ego. Given that Kenji published so few pieces in local and national journals, it is noteworthy that he did want this poem, one that has both the Asura alter-ego and the "mental sketch" subtitle, to see print. It ran in the *Iwate Daily Newspaper* on April 8, 1923. The connection between the appearance of the asura and poems that carry the title or subtitle "mental sketches" is strong, and thus further contributes to how the asura is strongly connected to his poetic worldview.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>43</sup> Miyazawa, *Shin kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū*, 2: 128.



Finally, the blue color suggested in the “Spring and Asura” and “Mt. Iwate, East Crater” poems is seen again in other poems and writings by Kenji. He is most explicit about the blue color’s connection to his imagined asura in a letter he wrote in either June or July of 1920 to Hosaka Kanai (1896-1937), a literary confidant and former classmate. To this friend whom Kenji had been proselytizing the *Lotus Sūtra*, encouraging him to become a convert to Tanaka Chigaku’s (1861-1939) Pillar of the Nation Society (Kokuchū-kai), Kenji attempted to describe his own weakness in Buddhist terms:

Anger appears red. When it’s really strong, the light of anger becomes more intense and instead it can seem like water. It’s then that it becomes pure blue in color; yet anger, as a feeling, is certainly not bad...I’ve now come to automatically put my palms together and shout the True Title (the *Lotus Sūtra*) like a machine as a reaction when I feel like I’m going mad. The human world is the Asura’s Becoming-Buddha World.<sup>44</sup>

Although “blue” may be too extreme of a translation for the Japanese *aoi*, which traditionally can mean either green or blue-green, Kenji’s additional gloss of the world of anger being like water certainly enables us to imagine his Asura painted more of a bluish, or blue-steel tint. What’s more, Kenji’s asura is most assuredly not red, like the Kōfuku-ji Asura. Indeed, Kenji’s true Asura state, or his alter-ego, goes beyond the red traditional color of the asura into a new, perhaps hyper-asura state.

With the exception of the “Preface” poem (for its description of his scientific-Buddhist worldview), the most important poems that reveal the Asura’s inner meaning for Kenji are those in the “Voiceless Grief” (“Musei dōkoku”) section.<sup>45</sup> The first three poems of the section, written about and close to the time of the death of Kenji’s closest sibling, his younger sister Toshi, reveal the true emotional upheavals between love and hate that the asura embodies for the poet.

Although no mention is made of the asura in the first poem “Morning Farewell” (“Eiketsu no asa”) in that section, a revision made to the ending indicates the juxtaposed and contradictory states of the warring demon. Like the three-faced Asura of Kōfuku-ji, his Asura simultaneously presents a series of conflicting emotions. As Toshi’s fever consumes her, the speaker attempts to provide comfort for her:

I now pray from my heart  
that the snow you will eat from these two bowls  
May it become ice cream of the highest heaven  
for both you and others to become a sacred provision

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<sup>44</sup> Miyazawa, letter #165, *Shin kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū*, 15: 186.

<sup>45</sup> This group is often called the “Toshiko poems” because in them Kenji calls his sister “Toshiko” in the poem, not by her true name, Toshi.

I so pray, wishing you the most happiness.<sup>46</sup>

In a revised (but never realized) version of the poem, Kenji rewrote the middle line to read “may it become food for Tūṣita heaven” and thus indicates how Toshi, on her way to Tūṣita Heaven to be reborn, is already alienated from Kenji, who, as an asura, must reside at the base of Mt. Sumeru.

The strife felt as an asura is felt ever more strongly in the second poem in the series, “Pine Needles” (“Matsu no hari”); and in this poem, a slightly weaker version of the first, the speaker reiterates his journey to find something from nature that will comfort his dying sister. Now requested to find a fresh sprig of pine, he journeys into the woods outside their home. He agonizes with the realization that Toshi will soon pass from this world. She will be reincarnated in a better world, but it will be a world far away from him. When presented with the pine branch, she seems to be already transmigrating into the Animal Realm. Kenji is loath to see her leave and is torn between giving her comfort in this world if it means she will soon leave him for the next:

Like a squirrel, like a bird  
 You were longing for the forest.  
 Do you know just how envious I was?  
 Ah! Little Sister who in today’s time will be going so far away!<sup>47</sup>

Kenji’s “envious” nature is a sign of his Asura self. In the third and most emotional poem, “Voiceless Grief” (“Musei dōkoku”), Kenji opens the poem with lines that clearly establish his Asura persona as the “dark blue” vacillating demon. These lines mostly clearly reveal his personal twist on the Asura icon.

While you are being watched over like this by everyone  
 Must you still suffer here?  
 Ah! I am all the more further removed from the great power of faith  
 and I lose things like purity, a number of small morals,  
 and when I am walking through the dark-blue Asura’s realm  
 Are you, sad and lonely, about to go out  
 on your own self-determined path?<sup>48</sup>

Like in “Pine Needles”, Kenji’s warring self is at once envious of Toshi being able to leave (on her “self-determined path”) and also saddened at being left alone in his dim, dark-blue Asura realm. Kenji again contrasts his own realm of the *shura-dō* with the inevitable-yet-freely-accepted other path that Toshi, as a transmigrating soul, will take. In these seven short lines, Kenji uses the asura image to speak of a traditional aspect of Buddhism while making the imagery of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2: 140.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2: 141-142.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2: 143.

his faith extremely personal. She knows “purity”, but the asura knows it not. He feels “loss”, but she does not. Aware of his attachments to his sister, he is nonetheless caught in delusion. His “dark-blue” Asura aspect should know better that the “loss” of the “purity” of his greatest confidant and “separation” from her, the great rock of his faith, is not only inevitable but part of this transient life. Nonetheless, he clings to her, somewhat irritated and saddened, that she will leave him for a path she “decided herself.” Since he cannot die with her, he walks instead frustrated and angry that he must remain in this world weaker than he was when she was here. In this fractured asura state, without Toshi by his side, he is really only half the man he was. Although the “Voiceless Lamentation” poem appears only two-thirds into *Spring and Asura*, it is certainly one of the high points of the collection. It is the asura image in “Voiceless Lamentation” that makes Kenji’s pain fully resonate with his audience.

### Once an Asura, Always an Asura?

After 1924, one sees less and less of the asura appear in Kenji’s poetry. It is true, the figure may be gone but the feelings of a conflicted soul do remain in his poetry as well as his children’s story. For example, one of Kenji’s most beloved children’s stories, “The Nighthawk Star” (“Yodaka no hoshi”) describes the transcendence of a nighthawk (*Caprimulgus indicus*) that is bullied by other hawks into a constellation. Because the nighthawk is not a true “hawk”, the other hawks in the forest pressure him into changing his name, even threatening him with violence: “If you don’t, I’ll squeeze the life out of your neck”.<sup>49</sup> Because the name was given to him by the gods, he cannot forsake his name so he has no other choice but to leave the bird community. Furthermore, the hawks’ questioning of his name triggers self-doubts about his existence: if his name is a joke, why must he prey, like other hawks, on other animals in order to live? That self-doubt is figuratively manifested in the nighthawk’s choking on his insect prey. “Another beetle went into the nighthawk’s maw, but this one flapped about as though it were actually scratching at his throat. The nighthawk got it down somehow, but even as he did so his heart gave a lurch, and he started crying in a loud voice.”<sup>50</sup> Bereft of the will to fight back and even live, and certainly unable to challenge the bigger birds, the nighthawk begs the divinities of the stars to free him from the earth.

Although given the nighthawk’s inability to swallow (or stomach) insects because of his depression, one might better attribute the nighthawk belonging to the Preta Realm rather than that of the Asura, “Nighthawk Star” typifies the Asura-like alter-ego that he first developed in his 1920s poetry. At the core of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 8: 84.

<sup>50</sup> Miyazawa Kenji, “The Nighthawk Star,” in John Bester, trans., *Once and Forever* (Tokyo: Kōdan-sha, 1997), 270.

Kenji's Asura is an ego that is destabilized and demoralized when faced with questions of self-worth ("As a result people and galaxies and Ashura and sea urchins / Will think up new ontological proofs as they see them"). Kenji's nighthawk, much like the Asura in the Toshiko poems, vacillates between the needs of himself and the needs of the family or community. Forced to choose between the two, Kenji's protagonists always forsake the ego and ultimately make the right choice for the community, the super-ego. Anger towards the outside world is always turned inward. Kenji's Asura-like figures are never violent to other beings. Instead, self-hatred, carried to the point of self-annihilation, is required to transmute the anger, pain and tears into a higher state of love and compassion.

Certainly Kenji's love of the asura image remained with him even in his final years. His insistence on using the *Spring and Asura* title for each projected volume of his free verse indicates how strongly he felt about the warrior demon being a part of his poetic voice. Although it was once believed that Kenji had organized even the beginnings of the fourth volume in the series, today most Kenji scholars recognize he had only organized material for a third volume in his final years. Although his persistence in recycling the asura image in the sequel volumes of *Spring and Asura* makes it hard to disprove how much Kenji wanted this alter-ego to manifest in his later poetry, it is far more accurate to say that Kenji's life as an asura mainly overlapped with the years 1920 to 1924; and scholars who assert otherwise are given somewhat to hyperbole.

The case of the reception of Kenji's trademark poem, "Never Yielding to the Rain", certainly one of his most important poems from his final years, best indicates the over-identification made between Kenji and the warrior-demon alter-ego of his youth. The lack of explicit mention of the warrior demon has not prevented many from reading this poem as one informed by the spirit of the asura. The poem begins with seven well-known lines:

Never losing to the rain,  
 never losing to the wind,  
 never losing to snow, nor to summer heat,  
 having a sound body  
 without desire, 5  
 never to anger,  
 he is always smiling quietly.

The final section of the poem has made many readers recall earlier images of Kenji's crying asura, especially seen in the Toshiko poems from volume one. The final section is certainly Asura-like:

Letting flow tears during times of drought,  
 walking fretfully during cold summers, 25  
 being called a dunce by everyone,  
 never being praised,

never being reviled,  
let me be  
a person like him.<sup>51</sup>

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True, the lines reading “Letting flow tears” and “walking fretfully” will remind many readers of a parenthetical couplet in “Spring and Asura” where the speaker notes “(The True Words are not here; / The Asura’s tears fall to the earth)”. Moreover, the sense of alienation felt by the poem’s speaker in “Never Losing to the Rain” certainly has echoes of the “walking, teeth-gnashing” self-doubting asura seen in poems like “Spring and Asura”, “Mt. Iwate, East Crater”, and “Voiceless Lamentation”. Alienation, commonly seen in Kenji’s poetry, originates from the speakers in the poems sensing that they are different from the surrounding community. In his poetry from the 1920s, the figures in Kenji’s poetry “walk the Asura Realm” because they cannot communicate their intense emotions (love, frustration, anger, etc.) for a variety of reasons: the speaker feels that being stoic is perhaps more respectable; and the speaker does not have a suitable partner who can understand and sympathize with him; or, in the Toshiko poems, it is for both of the above mentioned reasons, because Kenji’s true confidant Toshi is dying, he does not want to burden her with his own feelings of selfishness and his fear of being alone. In “Never Losing to the Rain,” however, the alienation the speaker feels is entirely generated by the tension between him and his community, the poor farmers of Hanamaki with whom he greatly desired, but was denied, membership.

The strife felt by the poem’s speaker is seen in how he walks “fretfully during cold summers”, the onomatopoeic word *orooro* serves to keenly emphasize his worries about the farmers whose crops will surely fail without warmer summer months. However, is this strife truly worthy of being seen as Asura-like? Instead of anger, the poem’s closing section indicates a high degree of sorrow for the plight of the farmers. Like the saddened Asura in Toshiko poems and “Spring and Asura”, the ambulating Asura-like speaker lets “flow tears”, but these tears are not the result of a state of frustration with one’s lack of communicative power. The asura in those early poems was born out of a communicative paradox: the speaker in the poem could not share his feelings like a regular human with other human beings and instead resorted to mental sketches, such as the poetic use of the hyperbolic Asura image, in order to vent his pent-up feelings. Unlike that highly poeticized Asura image, the poetic persona in “Never Losing to the Rain” has less of the metaphorical charge of the earlier Asura poems; and Kenji is more prosaic in the description of the speaker’s appearance and feelings through the use of *Orooro aruki* instead of the choice of a bolder expression like *shura o aruku*.

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<sup>51</sup> Miyazawa, *Shin kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū*, 13.1: 521-525.

### The Asura in the Reception History of Kenji's "Never Losing to the Rain"

Nonetheless for many Kenji scholars, his signature poem "Never Losing to the Rain", which was most likely written in November 1931, is not just an extension of the Kenji's grand theme of compassion; and the thirty-line poem represents its apotheosis. Although I do not share this view, I do think an understanding of the elevation of his poem in Kenji Studies illuminates how both the image of the asura and peaceful practices are strongly linked in Japanese culture. For several important critics of the poem, even though there is not one mention of "asura" in it, they feel that it is best understood as crystallization of Kenji's "Asura" poetics. Therefore, in the remaining section of this paper, I would like to briefly describe how three different critics approached "Never Losing to the Rain" (Tanikawa, Satō, and Taguchi) and how their readings of the asura into the poem represents the current understanding of Kenji's Asura. Since they framed their arguments using the asura, for better or worse they have contributed either directly or indirectly to the trend of reading the warrior-demon in all of Kenji's works.

The story of Kenji's most famous poem is curious. In the years following Kenji's death, his brother Seiroku found a small leather notebook inside a suitcase Kenji had last used on a business trip to Tokyo in late 1931. Having slightly recovered from pneumonia, Kenji worked for a manufacturer of fertilizer and stone tiles; and urged by his employer to travel to the capital to promote their tiles, he boarded a night train for Tokyo with a heavy, twenty-kilo suitcase filled with samples. Someone next to him on the train left the window open all night long and the already weakened Kenji arrived in Tokyo nearly incapacitated, having a relapse of pneumonia. Barely able to make it to an inn, he collapsed with fever. In the week that followed, alone and with minimal aid from the staff at the cheap inn, he began writing in his black notebook what scholar Ogura Toyofumi describes as his last will and testament. There are numerous places in the black notebook where Kenji copies down the Nichiren (Hokke) object of worship, the *go-honzon*, a textual maṇḍala consisting of the *daimoku* reverence to the Lotus Sūtra as well as a list of important Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Over the four pages preceding one of Kenji's copied *go-honzon*, Kenji drafted an untitled poem that has come to be known as "Never Losing to the Rain" (from its first line).<sup>52</sup> In other words, the poem may have been meant as a kind of poetic final testament he wrote before paying reverence to the *go-honzon*.

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<sup>52</sup> Writing in blue pencil, a different color from the text of the poem, Kenji wrote "11.3" which many believe to be the dating of the poem to November 3, 1931. For this reason, some scholars and translators, such as Hiroaki Satō, have chosen to keep "November 3" as the title of the poem. The common practice is to call it by its first line, "Ame ni mo makezu".

Given the poem's long reception history, first dating to 1934 when Seiroku presented his discovery of it in Kenji's suitcase to poets and writers of the Miyazawa Kenji Association, which became his literary estate and helped publish his collected works, until today where it is still widely enjoyed as an object of scholarly interest as well as for its popular sentiment, there are three important scholarly analyzes of the poem that are premised on the idea that the poem reflects Kenji's Asura spirit.

Tanikawa Tetsuzō was the first to present and provide commentary on the poem as early as 1935, but it was in his speech to a graduating class of the Tokyo Women's University in 1944 where he first fully expounded on the meaning and significance of the poem.<sup>53</sup> Not only was it Kenji's finest poem, he said, but it was "the greatest among all of the poems created by the Japanese since the Meiji period (1868-1912). There might be a poem more beautiful, or a poem that is deeper; however, as for its having spiritual loftiness, I know of nothing to compare it to. The great meaning of this poem is, perhaps, lost on today's generation."<sup>54</sup> Written and published during the beginning of the Pacific War with the United States, Tanikawa's essay is particularly curious in that he stresses that the new generation cannot understand the poem. In other words, the sense of sacrifice as well as the speaker's sage-like humility belong to an earlier time. They are qualities that cannot be understood in this day and age, but they should be. He encapsulated the nobility the poem with the term "spiritual loftiness". Here in this second of five essays on the poem he would eventually write, Tanikawa expresses an absolute, all-encompassing quality to the poem: its spiritual nobility. In his latter essays on the poem, he would be more specific and he would divide and specify different aspects of the poem's complicated and conflicted spirit.

Another early commentator on the poem, perhaps now mostly forgotten, was Satō Katsuji, an educator and activist living and working in Kenji's hometown of Hanamaki, who first saw the multi-faceted aspects of the poem. In "Ame ni mo makezu", an essay he devoted to the poem in his book *Portrait of Miyazawa Kenji* (*Miyazawa Kenji no shōzō*, 1948), Satō not only locates in specific lines the Asura figure but also nearly all of the "Ten Worlds" of Buddhist cosmology. His approach was unique for the time and represents a

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<sup>53</sup> Tanikawa Tetsuzō published a short, early evaluation of the poem, "Kenja no bungaku" (Sage Literature) in the July 1935 issue of *Shisō* (Thought). See Tanikawa, "Kenja no bungaku," in Tsuzukibashi Tatsuo, ed., *Miyazawa Kenji kenkyū shiryō shūsei* (Tokyo: Nihon tosho sentaa, 1990), 1: 252.

<sup>54</sup> Tanikawa Tetsuzō, "Ame ni mo makezu" (Never Losing to the Rain) in *Ame ni mo makezu* (Never Losing to the Rain) (Tokyo: Kōdan-sha, 1979), 8. Tanikawa's "Ame ni mo makezu" essay first saw print a year later in a monograph by the same name, published in the 1945 issue by Seikatsu-sha. Later in 1963, he collected his five essays on Kenji, three of which deal mainly with the poem, in his book *Miyazawa Kenji no sekai*, which has been republished by Kōdan-sha as *Ame ni mo makezu* in multiple re-printings since 1979.

problematic theme in Kenji Studies: namely, does the specific reading of Kenji's Nichiren faith into his work help us understand it any better? Satō was not loathe, like later commentators, to connect Kenji's problematic relationship to Nichiren Buddhism, particularly to Tanaka Chigaku's Pillar of the Nation Society. By reading the poem as Kenji's "map" of the "Ten Worlds", Satō positively reinforced how even at the end of Kenji's life, it was Nichiren Buddhism, and perhaps even Tanaka Chigaku's version of it, that inspired the poet. (One suspects Satō's work has not endeared him to posterity in Kenji Studies precisely because he did so forcefully assert Kenji's connection to the Tanaka Chigaku's Kokuchū-kai, a group that was closely associated with wartime nationalism.)<sup>55</sup>

The poem, for Satō, represents Kenji's "view of humanity", or "how best to live". As the poet cycles through metaphors for each of the Ten Worlds, the poet expresses how humans should avoid vice and temptations and strive for a Dharma-informed perfection. The asura, according to Satō, can be seen in second line of the couplet in lines 6-7, "never to anger / he is always smiling quietly". Satō points to Kenji's irregular use of "ikaru", rather than "okoru" to show the Buddhist defilement of anger/wrath actually more fitting of the realm of hell, whereas the speaker had transcended the anger of the Asura Realm and is now "smiling quietly". Other Realms exemplified in the poem's verses include: the realm of the *preta* (hungry ghosts): line 5's "without desire", "*yoku wa naku*"; and the realm of animals line 6's again, "never to anger", showing the speaker's conquering ignorance; and the human in opening four lines and also in lines 8-9 "Eating four cups of brown rice, / miso, and a bit of vegetables each day"); the voice-hearers and self-enlightened beings together in lines 10-13: "...so he understands by watching and listening carefully / and never forgetting"; the bodhisattva in lines 16-23 where he carries out service to those in need; and finally, the Buddha in the final six lines (note: "let me be / a person like him").<sup>56</sup> Of the Ten Worlds, only that of the deva/divine is omitted. Satō apologized for this oversight in a postscript by saying there is an "unconscious" connection to that realm.<sup>57</sup> One of the problems of Satō's argument is that, although he does delineate how nearly all of the Ten Worlds can be seen in the poem, he makes no effort to explain Kenji's ordering of them. The random attributions Satō makes to the Ten (Nine?) Realms is ultimately disappointing, and while he is right to argue that it makes more sense to see, as Kenji would have following Nichiren's teachings, that each world is not ultimately mutually

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<sup>55</sup> Moriyama Hajime and Ryūmonji Bunzō have written about the "allergy" Kenji Studies scholars have had about the Kokuchū-kai and Kenji's lifelong Lotus School beliefs. See Ryūmonji Bunzō, "*Ame ni mo makezu*" no konpon shisō (The Thought Underlying "Never Losing to the Rain") (Tokyo: Daizō shuppan, 1991), particularly pages 15-16.

<sup>56</sup> Satō Katsuji, *Miyazawa Kenji no shōzō* (Portrait of Miyazawa Kenji) (Tokyo: Jūjiya shoten, 1948), 119.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.



exclusive but rather interpenetrating, (i.e., one thought in three-thousand worlds), Satō fails to coherently account for a poem that, given its heavy use of parallelism, is clearly far more structured than for which Satō gives it credit.<sup>58</sup>

Two years after Satō's argument appeared, Tanikawa returned to analyze the poem again in his essay "Tears of the Asura" ("Shura no namida", 1950), in effect, to reclaim the poem from Satō's attempt to lock it into the context of Nichiren Buddhism. In fact, throughout Tanikawa's scholarship on Kenji's life and writings, one detects a strong move by Tanikawa to obfuscate the specific details of Kenji's Nichiren Buddhism as a part of a larger project to connect Kenji to a broader audience. When Tanikawa speaks of the Asura in Kenji's work, it is in the most general sense found in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Unlike Satō, who teased out esoteric formulations from Nichiren's writings in Kenji's verse, Tanikawa wrote of Kenji's religion in a way that all Japanese, regardless of their particular Buddhist leanings, could relate to Kenji's works. At the end of "Tears of an Asura", Tanikawa returns to his theme of "sage literature" (the theme of his first essay on the poem, published in 1935). Instead of the "spiritual loftiness" he mentioned in his 1944 address, he describes the speaker in "Never Losing to the Rain" as a sage-like person who chose to live a life of "spiritual labor" over the life of physical labor. His final pronouncement that "there was not a lack of influence here from the principles of Buddhism that Kenji knew all too well" clearly shows Tanikawa's preference to indirectly, rather than directly, connect Kenji's poetry to his religious faith.<sup>59</sup>

Given the overall context in which Tanikawa describes Kenji's Buddhism, why does he insist on using the Asura as a rallying point to understanding Kenji's life and oeuvre? Moreover, how does he describe Kenji's Asura-like alter-ego? In "Tears of an Asura", Tanikawa draws from Kenji's biography to advance his own idea of Kenji's literary avatar. Among the qualities of the asura are empathy, patience, intolerance of violence, anger, and love. Anger, a quality that one certainly attributes with an asura, is, for Tanikawa, different in Kenji's version of it. Kenji, the man and poet, felt anger, but, as one would expect from a sage, he was able to overcome those feelings.<sup>60</sup> (In this sense, like Satō, Tanikawa reads the overcoming of anger, rather than the display of anger, as the basis to equate the speaker in Kenji's poem to the asura image.) Perhaps because of the range of emotions Kenji's "Asura" have, Tanikawa feels that "sensitivity" is the term that best encompasses Kenji's Asura ideal. It is because he can feel so much and sympathize with so many, that caught between his own feelings and the feelings of others, the depth of his compassion becomes all the more evident. Two lines of the poem, lines 24-25, remain a constant place for Tanikawa to identify both the climax of the poem and the essence of the poet and speaker (Tanikawa clearly conflates the two): "letting tears flow during

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>59</sup> Tanikawa Tetsuzō, "Shura no namida" (Tears of the Asura), in *Ame ni mo makezu* (Tokyo: Kōdan-sha, 1979), 183.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 178.

times of drought / walking fretfully in cold summers”. These lines of course recall the image of the Asura found in “Spring and Asura” and the Toshiko poems previously mentioned, when Kenji describes his vacillating speakers, “walking the Asura Realm,” albeit in the ten-year interval his Asura has mellowed (he is no longer spitting and gnashing his teeth). Despite these similarities, Tanikawa’s equation of Asura to the “Never Losing to the Rain” speaker is flawed precisely because ultimately “Tears of an Asura” connects the poem not to the figure of the Asura, but to that of the Sage, Tanikawa’s preferred way of envisioning Miyazawa Kenji, the man and the poet.

Taking Tanikawa to task for this oversight, scholars, who have been pro-Lotus, for a lack of a better expression, have rebuked Tanikawa for overlooking the connection between the ending of the poem and the *go-honzon*, which appear respectively on pages 44 and 45 of the notebook. Following the critic Moriyama Hajime, who was an early critic seeking to reconcile Kenji’s specific religious views with his writing, Taguchi Akisuke has continued to push for a deeper understanding of how Kenji’s specific religious worldview is manifested in his literary works. What Taguchi finds is that, far from Tanikawa’s vague, generalized view of a Buddhist Asura, he sees a more direct connection to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging; and this paragon proselytizer was praised by the Buddha in the *Lotus Sūtra* for having the courage to connect others, no matter what the cost, to the *Lotus*. For Taguchi, lines 25-27 speak of a specific Buddhist figure Kenji had in mind when writing “Ame ni mo makezu”: “being called a dunce by everyone, / never being praised, / never being reviled”.<sup>61</sup>

Following Taguchi, I feel that for Kenji, especially in his later years, the asura was crowded out for other, more pressing role models, such as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. Nichiren equated himself with that bodhisattva because of his tireless energy in demonstrating the importance of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Earlier in his life, Kenji copied out a passage from Nichiren’s Writings that demonstrates the importance of this bodhisattva. “Now is the time to benefit the world in the same manner as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. You who are my disciples, each of you should work diligently at this, work diligently at this!”<sup>62</sup> In the passages of scripture that Kenji copied out (presumably as a primer to aid in proselytizing), not one mention is made of asura, although the term bodhisattva

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<sup>61</sup> Taguchi Akisuke, *Miyazawa Kenji nyūmon: Miyazawa Kenji to Hōkke-kyō ni tsuite* (Introduction to Miyazawa Kenji: Miyazawa Kenji and the *Lotus Sūtra*) (Kamakura: Dekunobō shuppan, 2006), 205.

<sup>62</sup> Kenji entitled this collection of copied passages of scripture “Writings on Peaceful Practices and Forceful Conversions; Critique of the Priests and Laity” (“Shōshaku gomon, Sōzoku go-han”) found in Miyazawa, *Shin kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū*, 14: 312. The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s name comes from his treatment of those who disbelieve him. “He would run away and abide at a distance, yet he would still proclaim in a loud Voice, ‘I dare not hold you all in contempt. You shall all become Buddhas!’ Since he constantly said those words, (they) called him Never Disparaging.” Hurvitz, trans., 258.

appears quite numerous. Kenji, as a follower of Nichiren's teachings and a devotee to the *Lotus Sūtra*, highly idealized the bodhisattva, particularly the bodhisattva Never Disparaging. The passages he copied out from scripture in his notebooks make that clear. Returning to Tanikawa's argument, it is therefore puzzling why he would suggest that it is the asura that dominates Kenji's mental outlook, leaving no room for the bodhisattva. Indeed, the lack of even one mention of an asura in Kenji's black "Ame ni mo makezu" notebook and the repeated mention of the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging makes Tanikawa's thesis that we understand Kenji's oeuvre through the lens of the asura all the more untenable. Instead, we must appreciate how the asura is central to the period when Kenji's writings came into maturation (1920-1924) rather than the whole span of time in which he wrote.

## Conclusion

Miyazawa Kenji's contribution to asura lore in Japanese culture is significant in that during a brief resurgence of interest in religious exploration in literature in the Taishō Period, Kenji's Asura is perhaps one of the best-articulated reinterpretations of Buddhism's message of compassion and peaceful practices. At once orthodox and completely original, Kenji's use of the asura image both reinforces the traditional Buddhist, particularly Japanese Buddhist, worldview while at the same time he describes a different, far more individual side to the warrior demon. Kenji's Asura shares much in common with the Kōfuku-ji Asura, which originally was created to celebrate the sophistication of Japanese awareness of both Asian fashion and Buddhist compassion. Like the Kōfuku-ji Asura, his Asura is an angry demonic warrior but the anger is tempered by a stronger sense of sadness and compassion. The love of the Dharma is more strongly exhibited in Kōmyō's and Kenji's asura than the angry and fearsome warrior mien of other Japanese asuras. If Osabe is correct in that Empress Kōmyō strongly wanted a sense of "repentance" to be felt in the Kōfuku-ji statues, particularly with the Asura figure, one may say Kenji's Asura is one that carries on that line of tradition, skipping over the Asura images of the Medieval Period, such as the Shōjuraigō-ji *rokudo-e* example, that emphasize the Asura's warrior might. An Asura that comforts the sick and solves quarrels, like Empress Kōmyō herself, is perhaps like the paragon that Kenji perhaps had in mind when he wrote "Never Losing to the Rain", but more precisely, the Asura he actually described in the Toshiko poems is much more similar to Kōmyō's. He fights only with himself and recognizes he must be compassionate to others. This aspect of the asura certainly resonates more with contemporary Japanese audiences who enjoyed the "Ashura boom".

Did Kenji walk the Asura Realm alone? Previously Ozawa Toshirō suggested that Kenji may have not discovered the asura on his own. Discoveries of the notebooks, letters, and poems written by Kenji's higher school classmate and good friend, Hosaka Kanai, suggest that, in Ozawa's words, "it is possible

that even some terms that seem characteristic of Kenji's literature (such as the asura, the heavenly cup (*tenwan*), etc.) may reveal an influence that Hosaka had on Kenji.<sup>63</sup> Hosaka, it will be recalled, was the classmate to whom Kenji wrote explaining his "blue Asura". Although Ozawa originally made this claim in 1968, with the curatorial work recently done by the Hosaka family and the Yamanashi Prefectural Culture Committee to reconstitute Hosaka's writings, it may be possible to further trace where the Kenji's interest in the Asura originated and what role, if any, Hosaka had in the germination of the idea in Kenji.

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<sup>63</sup> Ozawa Toshirō, "Miyazawa Kenji, Hosaka Kanai to no kōyū" (The Friendship between Miyazawa Kenji and Hosaka Kanai), in Kurihara Atsushi and Sugiura Shizuka, eds., *Ozawa Toshirō Miyazawa Kenji ronshū* (Collection of Ozawa Toshirō's Essays on Miyazawa Kenji) (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1987), 1: 73.

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