

**The Lonely Island of Queerness: Manifestations of Early Shōwa Homosexuality
Discourse in Edogawa Ranpo's *Kotō no Oni***

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In my paper I write about Edogawa's Ranpo novel *Kotō no Oni*, The Demon of the Lonely Isle, and the way the issue of homosexuality is treated there.

Edogawa Ranpo was born in 1894 as Hirai Tarō in Nabari (Mie prefecture). When he was 18, he left for Tokyo and received an economic degree from Waseda University. Later he held various jobs, from chief accountant through bookshop clerk to a street vendor selling soba noodles. In 1923 Ranpo debuted as a writer with a detective story *Nisen dōka* (The Two-Sen Copper Coin). This story was written already under the alias Edogawa Ranpo, wordplay with the name of Edgar Allan Poe. Ranpo was greatly inspired by Poe, the father of detective story, as well as with the works of A. C. Doyle.

But Ranpo wasn't content with classical detective stories and soon turned to ero guro nansensu sensibilities then in vogue in Japan. That is why many of his stories contain references of perversions and other unusual things. For example, in his *D-zaka no satujin jiken* a woman loses her life during a sadomasochistic play, and the hero of his perhaps most famous short story *Ningen isu* spends a month hidden inside of an armchair because he is aroused by the contact with the sitting people.

Kotō no Oni is a mystery novel written between 1929-1930 very much influenced by these ero guro nansensu sensibilities, with a somewhat overwrought plot. I'll try to summarize this plot to the extent necessary for my analysis. The main character, a young man named Minoura, is working at a business company, where he meets an 18-year-old woman clerk named Hatsuyo. The two young people fall in love and start going out together. Hatsuyo tells Minoura her life story – when she was just three years old, she was found abandoned in a harbor by a couple who adopted her. From her earliest life, she remembers being near the sea and watching a coastline in the shape of a reclining cow. She also remembers playing with a beautiful baby, probably her brother or sister.

Minoura is happy with Hatsuyo, but one day she is killed in her home by an unknown murderer. Minoura suspects his friend Moroto of the crime. The doctor Moroto is the official homosexual of the story and in many ways its key character. He met Minoura in the boarding house where they both lived and fell in love with him. Minoura didn't discourage him at first and tolerated some of Moroto's advances such as hand holding. He even let Moroto wash him in the bath. One night they both get drunk and Moroto tries to seduce Minoura. Whether he succeeds in this attempt is not very clear. I'll quote the seduction passage later.

After this seduction happened or almost happened, Moroto apologized to Minoura, claiming he wasn't "like that". They stayed friends from then on, but Moroto kept sending Minoura love letters. However, that abruptly stopped when Minoura became involved with Hatsuyo. To Minoura's unpleasant surprise, Moroto started courting Hatsuyo. Minoura understood it could be no genuine interest on Moroto's part, because he had confessed to Minoura that women didn't hold any attraction to him. That's why he suspects Moroto of jealousy and trying to destroy his and Hatsuyo's happiness, first by courting her, and when that failed, by murdering her.

However, he soon understands that Moroto is innocent of her murder, and they try to solve this crime together. During their investigation, they find a strange document. It

is a diary of young girl, who refers to herself as Hide-chan. Upon reading this diary, it becomes clear that Hide-chan is one of conjoined twins. The other conjoined twin is a boy, which is of course biologically impossible. For their whole lives, the twins have been held captive. From their prison, there is view of a coastline in the shape of a reclining cow. Moroto admits that he knows this place – it is a small island in Wakayama Prefecture where he was raised by disfigured parents and servants. However, he doesn't remember the twins.

Meanwhile, there have been more murders, and various clues point at Moroto's father Jōgorō, a cruel man suffering from kyphosis – the medical term for hunchback. Moroto and Minoura travel to the island to prove that the father's behind the murders and free the twins.

They find the twins as expected and Minoura falls in love at the first sight with Hide-chan. After freeing the twins and other disfigured captives, Minoura and Moroto go searching for a lost treasure in the island's labyrinth of underground caves. Because of Jōgorō's intervention, the two young men get lost in the labyrinth.

The second important interaction between Minoura and Moroto takes place in this labyrinth. After almost losing their lives when the underground caves are flooded by the tide, the two men find themselves utterly lost in the labyrinth. They spend some time aimlessly wandering about, and eventually come to the bleak conclusion that they would never see the light of day again. At this point, Moroto claims that the normal rules of society no longer apply to their situation: "*Just as there is no light, there are no laws, morals, customs, nothing.*"¹ and later says that they have now a whole new world just for the two of them². With these claims, Moroto tries to seduce Minoura in a violent manner, but Minoura is disgusted and fights back. This seduction/fight is put to an end when a fisherman appears. From the fisherman, they learn that Moroto isn't Jōgorō's biological son and that Hide-chan is Hatsuyo's sister, who was born healthy, but Jōgorō kidnapped her and surgically joined her with a country baby boy. This was done as a part of Jōgorō's monstrous project of creating a "cripple empire", which also included trapping infants in boxes in order to create artificial dwarfs.

Sometime later, Moroto and Minoura find the lost treasure and escape from the labyrinth. There is the predictable happy end – Jōgorō and his sidekicks are arrested, Hide-chan turns out to be the rightful heir to the treasure and the island estate. Moroto surgically separates her from the country boy, Minoura marries her and they use a part of the treasure to build a special facility for healing disfigured people. Minoura intends to ask Moroto to become the chief physician of this hospital. However, all does not end well – Moroto dies while visiting his real family. His last words –which are also the last words of the story – are those of devotion to Minoura.

At first glance, it may seem that the book is not very positive in its treatment of homosexuality, describing it in terms like strange and queer and having the hero renounce his friend's homosexual advances in fear and disgust. But it is important to realize some things about the author: Edogawa Ranpo was actually very interested in

¹ Edogawa 1987: 262

² Ibid. 269

homosexuality. He competed with his friend Iwata Jun'ichi (who is rumored to inspire both the idea of *Kotō no Oni* and its main character Minoura) as to who would collect more works dealing with male homosexuality, in Japanese past as well as in Western writings. Edogawa also wrote an article on Victorian intellectual John Addington Symonds who had been known for his defense of "sexual inversion" called "J.A. Symond's Secret Passion" for the journal *Seishin Bunseki* (Psychoanalysis)³.

This interest in homosexuality may have very well been personal: despite being married, he was rumored to be a frequent customer at a gay bar in Shinjuku and to have various affairs with men.⁴ Edogawa also touched upon the issue of homosexuality in his fictional works. In a short autobiographical story *Ranpo's Confession* (1926), the author describes his first love as a platonic relationship with a male classmate. He seems somehow ashamed of the fact, but at the same time he proclaims that the sex of one beloved might not really matter:

*"I experienced my first love when I was fifteen years old. I'm not boasting with my success, because my partner was not a woman. But, well, isn't it the same thing?"*⁵

Another example is *Mokuzu duka* (1936), which is not really a story but more like the traditional Japanese *zuihitsu* genre, an essay-like musing on a certain topic. Here he describes how he stumbled upon a story of two young samurai (ironically through English writer Carpenter), a tale of passionate love with a tragic ending. He proceeds to give its summary and reflects upon their fate on the titular Mokuzu mound, melancholic over the fact that it is now mostly forgotten in Japan. Nowhere in this work we find any judgment against homosexuality.

When we take into account all these Ranpo's writings and opinions, it does not seem likely that he would take a wholly negative stance on homosexuality in *Kotō no Oni*. Of course, the way he (or in fact any writer) wrote was influenced not just by his personal views and tastes, but by other factors as well. One was the rising of the Japanese Empire that brought along the strengthening of the censorship apparatus, with the number of banned books peaking between 1927 and 1936.⁶ It is not my point here to go to depths about transwar Japanese censorship, so it suffices to say that there were bans on works considered obscene (*fūzoku kairan*), together with those viewed as disrupting public order (*annei chitsujo bōgai*). The ban against supposed obscenity affected some books dealing with homosexuality, for example: Nakano Masato's (writing as Hanabusa Shirō) – *Nanshoku kō – A Study in Nanshoku* (1928) or the same author's translation of sexologist Albert Moll's study in female-female sexuality, *Dōseiai no shujusō – The Many Faces of Same-Sex Love* (1929)⁷. Apart from graphic descriptions of homosexual acts, censorship also tried to eradicate any expressions of sympathy for homosexuality.

Terminology

³ Pflugfelder 2007: 314

⁴ This is claimed by Jeffrey Angles in his *Writing the Love of Boys*: "Even now, one hears the rumors in the Japanese literary world about affairs Ranpo allegedly had with men." (Angles 2011: 28)

⁵ Edogawa 1991: 341

⁶ Of course many books were also banned during the war years, but that was also caused by shortage of paper or by the impact the war had on writers.

⁷ Pflugfelder 293

On the surface, *Kotō no Oni* appears quite unsympathetic towards homosexuality. It is in accordance with the medical discourse of its day when it refers to Moroto as *henshitusha* (pervert) and *seiteki tōsakusha* (sexual invert). The most often used adjective for speaking about homosexuality is *iyō* – strange, queer, and bizarre. The chapter where we meet Moroto and learn of his affection for Minoura is called *iyō naru koi* – queer love. Later we learn that Moroto possesses *queer* good looks⁸ and feels a *queer* attachment toward Minoura⁹, which he expresses in *somewhat queer* love letters¹⁰. He engages in a *queer* research¹¹, behaves in a *queer* manner¹² and experiences a *queer* lust¹³; ironically, when he in spite of his sexual orientation starts to court a woman, Minoura describes it as *iyō kyūkon undō* – queer courtship¹⁴.

And this is not an exhaustive enumeration. Queerness seems to be an inherent part of Moroto's identity, one that he cannot escape even when acting as a heterosexual. However, when we look at the text closely, we'll find out that the adjective *iyō* is not restricted to Moroto. Not only does the story itself describe a *queer* matter¹⁵, but the conjoined twin Hide-chan is also endowed with *queer* beauty¹⁶. Apart from *iyō*, we find that other adjectives with similar meaning are abundant in the text, especially *myō* and *hen*. Not just Moroto, but other characters and their behavior are repeatedly described with these adjectives. Finally, Minoura notes that love itself is a *strange thing*¹⁷.

What do we make of these adjectives? From one perspective, they express distancing the “normal self” from the perverted other (and by doing so, of course also defining the “normal self”, which needs the other to exist). But the use of these adjectives had other meaning – giving the readers what they wanted and expected which was the erotic and the grotesque, preferably combined. Japanese history scholar Gregory M. Pflugfelder notices that connotations of “abnormal” sexuality didn't have to be wholly negative, when the concept of *hentai* sexuality was transferred from medical discourse to the popular one – there it partially stopped being the object of condemnation and became the object of enthusiastic consumption and celebration.

Marginalization

According to Pflugfelder, three strategies of marginalization were used in dealing with the subject of homosexuality – one was to place it in the Japanese past, where *nanshoku* was celebrated. Another one was to restrict it to the period of adolescence, and deal with it as the natural phase of sexual experimentation among young people at single-sex educational institutions, especially boarding schools. The last strategy was

⁸ Edogawa 1987: 18

⁹ *Ibid.* 22

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 23

¹¹ *Ibid.* 60

¹² *Ibid.* 153

¹³ *Ibid.* 270

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 52

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 20

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 188

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 39

geographical. It restricted homosexuality mainly to a region that has a reputation of being the backwater of Japan – Kyushu.¹⁸

Out of these three strategies, only the last one seems to apply to *Kotō no Oni* as the Island in the title is located south – it is not quite Kyushu, but south enough from Tokyo that I think it counts. We can also generalize that this strategy marginalizes homosexuality as a habit of the periphery as opposed to the heteronormative center. Czech literary scholar Martin C. Putna, who also writes about different strategies used by writers dealing with the issue of homosexuality, joins the temporal and geographical distancing practice under a single heading of “stylization methods”: “The author talks openly about the issue, but transfers it from asymptomatic civilian present into distant, “romantic” eras and environments, where homosexuality may seem “more acceptable” to the reader.”¹⁹

Minoura is struggling to assert his hegemony over this periphery by normalizing the country dialect used by Hide-chan in her diary, and expressing joy over her learning Tokyo speech:

*I don't think I have to describe the happiness I felt at the moment Hide-chan's wound had healed and she appeared before me with properly braided hair, made-up and wearing a silk crepe kimono, and then she spoke to me in Tokyo dialect!*²⁰

For Minoura it is not enough that Hide-chan becomes healthy, clean and beautifully dressed – all traces of her otherness must be purged.

As the whole it is easy to see how the work couldn't show homosexuality in more positive light. In *Mokuzu duka*, exploration of an erotic bond between two samurai from Japanese past presented as a primarily scholarly interest tinted with nostalgia was safely marginalized in the past. In *Ranpo's Confession*, the author's recollection of his platonic relationship with a schoolmate was safely marginalized in adolescence. Both could therefore be openly sympathetic to homosexuality.

However, a contemporary non-platonic relationship between two adult men taking place mostly in Tokyo (even though the “pervert” himself had been raised in the periphery) definitely wasn't safe. That's why it could not be presented in an unambiguously positive fashion.

The Gap

Let us now have a closer look at the first of Moroto and Minoura's key interactions: “Let's go to your room, let's go to your room!” *With these words, Moroto dragged me in my room. My futon lay spread in there, because I didn't put it away during the day. I don't know if he pushed me or I tripped, but suddenly I fell on the spread futon. Moroto came to stand beside me and looked down on my face. Suddenly he said bluntly: “You're beautiful.”*

What I'm going to say next may sound strange, but at that moment I was overcome by a strange thought, that I had changed into a woman, and the beautiful young man

¹⁸ Pflugfelder 207

¹⁹ Putna 89

²⁰ Edogawa 1987: 288

looming over me, whom my drunken state made even more attractive, is my husband. Moroto kneeled down and took one of my carelessly outstretched hands into his. "Your hand is hot."

*I, too, at that moment felt the other man's burning palm.*²¹

Here we can see how Minoura tries to rationalize his behavior using heteronormative terms. For him, it is less stigmatizing to think that he had become a woman for a moment, than that he felt a homosexual desire. But even this illusion of becoming a woman is soon shattered, because the scene continues as follows:

*At the moment I have huddled myself up in the corner, pale as a sheet, I saw that Moroto's face assumed an expression of regret over something that couldn't be taken back. Then he said in a strangled voice: "What just happened was a joke, just a joke. I don't do such things!"*²²

However, I would like to draw attention to a seemingly inconspicuous typographic element, that I consider actually quite important. Between the seduction here, and the rebuttal there, there's a blank line.

The hero who cannot admit feeling other than heterosexual desires, to an extent of preferring to become a woman, also wouldn't be able to admit that he engaged in a homosexual act with another man. But the fact that the rebuttal follows not immediately after the touch of Moroto's "burning palm", but only after the blank line, is telling.

Someone might argue that the author used the blank line to increase the narrative tension. But it is peculiar that it's the only line of this kind in the entire book. Other blank lines are always used to divide chapters or main narrative from other texts inserted in it, such as notes and letters. We don't encounter any blank lines in objectively more dramatic parts of the story. This leads me to the conclusion that the function of this blank line is other than dramatic – it could well be an omission of the consummation of a sexual act.

Moroto's Character

Finally, I would like to say something about Moroto's character. Although Moroto's personality and behavior are often described as "queer" and Minoura is downright disgusted by his friend's actions in the cave, the overall impression we get of this character is positive. He's willing to sacrifice himself to save Minoura, urging Minoura to leave him behind on the island, in his father's clutches. He is brave in face of danger and death, showing courage when Minoura has given up, and therefore acting more manly:

"You mustn't despair. Until the very last moment, you mustn't despair!" Moroto cried in an unnecessarily loud voice. "Can you swim?" "Yes, I can, but there's no hope for me left. I want to die with all my heart."

²¹ Ibid. 20-21

²² Ibid. 21

*“Why are you saying such weak-spirited things? It’s not that bad. Darkness changes people into cowards. Stay strong!”*²³

Minoura seems to be appreciating these qualities very much, finding solace in Moroto’s support:

*Moroto put his arms hands around my hips and gripped me in a strong embrace. In the dark, I couldn’t see his face even though it was just a few inches from mine, but I could hear his regular breathing and feel his warm breath on my cheek. Through our wet clothes, I could feel his warm firm muscles hugging me. Moroto’s body scent, which I found far from unpleasant, was floating in the air next to me. All of this gave me strength in the dark.*²⁴

Furthermore, he had loved Minoura steadily for eight years, even though he knew his feelings would likely never be returned. In comparison to this, the main example of heterosexual love we see in the story seems fleeting. Minoura seems much in love with Hatsuyo and when she dies, he claims that she was irreplaceable for him. However, contrary to this statement he replaces her rather quickly with her sister.

Moroto’s affecting is unwavering. After he died in his hometown, his father wrote to Minoura this:

*“Before he (Moroto) drew his final breath, he didn’t call out the name of his father or mother, but, while embracing your letters, kept calling only your name.”*²⁵

The novel ends with this very sentence. There are no more judgments or lack of understanding love for queer love afterwards. To end the story not with fulfillment of heterosexual love, but with the final proof of Moroto’s devotion for Minoura, seems to me no random decision on Ranpo’s part. Rather, I consider it a conscious act of subversion.

Conclusion

The time and environment in which Edogawa wrote his novel wouldn’t have permitted him to openly express any sympathy for homosexuality. He had to cater both to the censors, who would have banned such a novel outright, as well as to his readers, who expected the topic of homosexuality to be treated in a certain – mostly scandalizing – way. Edogawa meets these expectations by using the proper vocabulary (“perverted”, “queer”, “strange” and so on) and by having his main character Minoura denouncing his friend Moroto’s homosexuality. However, at the same time he artfully subverts this conforming attitude, both in his other writings and more interestingly in the novel itself. He achieves it, among other means, by extending the “queer” terminology to other, non-homosexual characters and phenomena (including love itself), by hinting that something more might have taken place between Minoura and Moroto and – maybe most strikingly – by the presentation of Moroto’s character as manly, brave and self-sacrificing, and his homosexual attachment to Minoura as far more lasting and convincing than any heterosexual relationships in the novel.

²³ Ibid. 255

²⁴ Ibid. 254-5

²⁵ Ibid. 290

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