

*History in Fiction or Fiction in History: Enchi Fumiko's Namamiko Monogatari as Historical Novel*

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**Abstract**

While Hayden White asserts that historical discourses mirror literary writing, he also recognizes the value of narrativity in historical representations of reality. Many authors of historical discourses interpret and report their materials in narrative form, in the process of which the representation is governed by certain criteria of truth but also some degree of imagination. White's theorizations relevantly underlie the reason why Enchi Fumiko's novel *Namamiko Monogatari* (*A Tale of False Fortunes*) has been regarded by some critics as historical novel. Since the novel concerns the conflation of historically authentic elements and fictitiously created texts, the difficulty in distinguishing fictitious accounts from existing historical documents reveals that narrative history and fiction are rhetorically intertwined. Different from existing literary criticisms, I contend that the novel metanarratively exposes the convention of historical novel and discloses the fictionality of the literary work. By means of incorporating people and events of historical existence, intertextual references to historical narratives, and emplotting the events in typical plot structures, Enchi has created a new form of historical fiction.

Keywords: Enchi Fumiko, *Namamiko Monogatari*, historical novel

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## Introduction

By definition, historical novel presents a story based on the events, people, and places in the past. Whereas this literary genre has had a long standing in world literature since the tenth century, it was not until Georg Lukacs (1962) that the development of historical novel was critically studied. His book, *The Historical Novel*, has often been regarded as one of the founding texts of criticism on historical fiction. Arguing for the revolutionary nature of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Lukacs maintains that what makes a novel “specifically historical” is the “deviation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age” (p.19). In other words, it is not purely the choice of a historical theme, but, as John Bowen (2002) paraphrases, historical novel reveals “the essential and casual links between the historical setting of the novel and the events and characters depicted in it” (p.247). *Rekishī shōsetsu*, or historical novel in Japanese literature, shares the same definition that the novel is constituted of historical events and people, but the Japanese genre puts more emphasis on the author’s responsibility in composing the story based on researched historical facts and in demonstrating the essence of history faithfully (Zhao, 2015, pp.10-11).

This understanding has been strongly advocated by Mori Ogai, who made pioneering contributions to the literary genres of modern fiction and historical fiction. As discussed in his famous essay “*Rekishī sonomama to rekishī banare*” (Faithful to history and departure from history), *shizen* or the naturalness in historical facts is what he feels unwilling to alter but to be maintained in a faithful manner even though the author’s subjective interpretation is inevitable (Mori, 1915, p.106). Among Mori’s thirteen historical novels, half of them tend to follow history, but those after *Sanshō Dayū* (1915) become more detached from history since Mori has sensed the limitations imposed by the “*rekishī sonomama*” approach (faithful to history). The difficulty in preserving the faithfulness in his historical novels rests on the indelible presence of fictionality, hence driving him towards adopting the alternative of “*rekishī banare*” (departure from history) (Mori, 1915, p.107). Mori’s struggle with the two ways of presentation of history genuinely informs the ambiguous nature of historical novel, and the boundary between fictional narrative and historical discourse is crossed. However, the genre is more than merely mingling fiction and history. Instead historical novel concerns the preoccupation with the past and how it is situated within the present. As Diana Wallace (2005) aptly summarizes in *The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000*:

Any historical novel is ‘historical’ in at least four senses: in its use of a particular period for its fictional setting; in its engagement with the historical moment (social, cultural, political and national) of its writing; in its relation to the personal life history of the writer herself; and in its relation to literary history, most obvious in the intertextual use of earlier texts. (p.4)

As we can see, the nature of historicity extends beyond the fictional setting, and it is exactly the obscure border between historiography and literature that gives rise to the prevalence of historical novel.

Considering these parameters and the sense of historicity, this essay examines the nature of historical fiction in Enchi Fumiko’s award-winning novel *Namamiko Monogatari* (A Tale of False Fortunes, 1965). Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986), one of the

most acclaimed female prose writer in post-WWII Japan, produced over a hundred plays, short stories, novels, and essays, and received six major awards in literature (Mikals-Adachi, 2001, p.197). Her unrivalled knowledge in classical Japanese literature developed since her childhood. Under the influence of her father, Ueda Kazutoshi, a renowned professor in Japanese linguistics, her literary works were fraught with motifs of the classical elements which are reconfigured by re-situating the characters of the past in her modern socio-cultural and psychological setting. Although intertextual references to classical texts and historical discourses are indispensable in her short stories such as “Himajii Tsukihi” (Days of Hunger, 1954) and “Yō” (Enchantress, 1956), and in major novels including *Onnazaka* (The Waiting Years, 1957) and *Onnamen* (Masks, 1958), *Namamiko Monogatari* is most replete with historical fictional elements. Thus the objective of my essay is to highlight the characteristics of historical novel in *Namamiko Monogatari* while arguing that by means of specific narrative ruses Enchi exposes the problematic approach of the traditional historical novel. Alternatively, using the historical fiction genre Enchi has created her own form of historical novel to articulate feminist concerns over the suppressed women in the Heian era, rendering her masterpiece a feminist historiographic metafiction.

### **Incorporating historical and fictional discourses**

*Namamiko Monogatari* is a fictional story that mocks the panegyric account of the eleventh-century regent Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1028) in the historical chronicle *Eiga Monogatari* (A Tale of Flowering Fortunes, 1028-1107) written by Akazome Emon, who served the Fujiwara family as a lady-in-waiting. The novel unfolds with a prologue-narrator who recounts how she came to read the manuscript of an ancient love story titled *Namamiko Monogatari – Shui* (hereafter shortened as *Namamiko-Shui*) forty years ago. After some years when she reads *Eiga Monogatari*, the discrepancies she has observed in *Namamiko-Shui* motivates her to recall her memories of the latter story in which Michinaga is portrayed as a calculating and power-obsessed person. Thereafter in the chapters that follow, the narrator recounts the tale, *Namamiko-Shui*, but the narration is interspersed with the narrator’s metafictional intrusion. *Namamiko-Shui* is an embedded tale based on the historical people and events taken place in the Heian court under the reign of emperor Ichijō (980-1011). Different from the historical chronicle, *Namamiko-Shui* gives a fuller account of the empress consort Teishi and is infused with the stories of other fictional characters, including the shaman sisters Ayame and Kureha. The story also depicts the machinations of the regent who comes to his power and status by retaining ramifications of his people among the court and instigating plots to denigrate the household of Teishi. Amid the downfall of Teishi’s family and a series of fabricated spirit possessions, the possessed mediums accuse the empress consort of plaguing other royal family members by her living spirit. Nevertheless, the genuine love between emperor Ichijō and Teishi stands undefeated. Ultimately, Michinaga’s conspiracy is doomed to fail. In a nutshell, this version portrays Michinaga negatively and creates a more vivid image of Teishi. Whereas *Namamiko Monogatari* is qualified as historical novel by its nature that the story is set in a real historical period with people and events of historical existence, they are interweaved with certain fictional elements, resulting in the ambiguity between history and fiction. This ambiguity is essential in historical novel in the sense that the novel alternatively exposes

fictionality and enhances the plausibility of the narration, making it increasingly difficult to draw the distinction. In the followings, I will examine the narratological ruses that contribute to this ambiguity.

First and foremost, the incorporation of historical people, events and places as well as historical narratives is imperative in historical fiction. At the beginning of the prologue, the narrator mentions her family's acquaintance with Dr. Basil Hall Chamberlain during her childhood, an active Japanologist at Tokyo Imperial University in the late nineteenth century, marking the first narratorial intention of establishing the authority of her accounts. This approach of incorporating people and events of actual historical existence has been pervasively adopted throughout the novel. For instance, when the prologue-narrator is speculating on the period in which *Namamiko-Shui* should be composed, she concludes that it might be a second-rate work by Takebe Ayatari in the Tokugawa period:

私は読んだその物語は、鎌倉か室町期の古書を更に写しかえたものか、  
或いは徳川時代の余り有名でない国文学者の戯作の一つで、建部綾足  
の垂流の筆ずさみかも知れないのである。(Enchi, 2004, p.12)

Judging from that, the story must have been a transcription of an older book from the Kamakura or Muromachi period, or possibly a fictional work by a not-so-famous literary scholar of the Tokugawa period – perhaps a second-rate work by Takebe Ayatari. (Enchi, 2000, p.11)

Here the mention of Takebe Ayatari seems not a random act if we are informed that Takebe was one of the founders of the *yomihon*, the earlier form of historical novel that pervaded in Kyoto and Osaka between mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Zolbrod, 1966, p.486). Takebe made an invaluable contribution in the early period between 1750 and 1800 to the *Kamigata yomihon*, with *Nishiyama Monogatari* (Tale of Nishiyama) (1768) being his representative work. *Kamigata yomihon* consists of “adaptations of Chinese vernacular fiction, collections of tales with a historical setting, Buddhist narratives, or anthologies of supernatural stories” (Zolbrod, 1966, p.487). The indication of historical periods and actual figures has implanted into the fictional narrative a sense of historicity.

Apart from proper names of historical existence, historical narratives are intertextually referenced as part of the reconstructed story of *Namamiko-Shui*. Developed on the historical facts depicted in the chronicle *Eiga Monogatari*, the embedded tale is re-created in a cut-and-paste manner, meaning that excerpts allegedly taken from the historical document are interpolated among the narrator's recounts, the narratorial commentary and quotations taken from other historical narratives such as *Makura no Soshi* (The Pillow Book), *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji) and Chinese poetry. For instance, while justifying for the higher credibility of the depiction of Teishi in *Namamiko-Shui* than that in *Eiga Monogatari*, the narrator makes reference to a passage purportedly quoted from *Makura no Soshi*, a collection of tales and anecdotes written by Teishi's another lady-in-waiting named Sei Shōnagon (966-1025). The adulation of Teishi is supportive of the narrator's complimentary recount of the appearance and the talent of the empress consort. Embedded within this quoted passage is an allusion to the Chinese poet Po Chu-i's “Song of the Lute”. It is apparent that the intertextual references serve to enhance the

authority of the fictional narrative.

Using the framework of chronicle in *Namamiko-Shui* is pivotal since chronicles are important sources of court history. Unlike national histories, chronicles tend to record the “realities of aristocratic existence” and ordinary daily subject matters, which are believed to be reflecting the actual history (McCullough and McCullough, 1980, p.8). The way Enchi mimics the discursive style of the chronicle form in the composition of *Namamiko-Shui* evidently indicates her intention to take advantage of the authoritativeness of historical chronicle. For example, the linearity of the narrative is maintained and temporality is frequently stressed by giving the exact time, date, and month in the calendar (e.g. 正暦五年二月二十一日, 巳の時) (Enchi, 2004, p.47; p.98), the season (e.g. 夏の盛り) (Enchi, 2004, p.115), or festive and ceremonial events (e.g. 元服) (Enchi, 2004, p.19). The theme of *Eiga Monogatari* centers on the splendor of aristocratic life but the events are often organized in a disjointed, episodic manner. Since the Heian language style has been adopted in the passages allegedly quoted intact from the historical documents, the contrast in style is particularly marked in its comparison with the narration of the tale retold by the narrator. S. Yumiko Hulvey (1995) describes the imitation as “pseudo-classical” style by which the embedded quotations are interspersed with classical Japanese suffixes, honorific prefixes attached to nouns, and certain special vocabulary, adding an authentic and archaic flavor to the narratives (p.180). Further, adopting the chronicle plot structure significantly contributes to the credibility of the fictional representations of events in historical novel (White, 1996, p.67). By depicting events resembling the style used in *Eiga Monogatari*, its plausibility can extend to the recounted tale. Since the retold story conforms to the general outline of the historical events and the people lived in history, the illusion of literal truthfulness is naturally maintained (White, 1996, p.67).

Although the narrator has been constantly emphasized the veracity of the tale, her unreliable accounts and narratorial interventions simultaneously expose the fictitiousness. Right from the beginning of the prologue, the narrator frequently stresses the truthfulness of her narration. For instance, based on her fairly accurate memory, she remembers the tale she has read forty years ago. After a couple of lines she reminds the reader that her deteriorating memory might cause errors in her recount. In another occasion, claiming that the manuscript is the sole copy and she is the only person who has read it, she also regrets that nobody has heard of it and its whereabouts has been unknown. While metanarratively admitting the possibility of conflating her childhood memories and personal emotions with the historical accounts, she earnestly indicates the infallibility of her memory and hints at some imperfections in her narration. Most importantly, all verisimilitude has been virtually destroyed by the metafictional closing when the narrator intervenes immediately after quoting the final sentences taken intact from *Namamiko-Shui*:

「生神子物語」の本文はこの文章で終わっている。年譜を調べると道長の薨じた万寿四年はまだ後一条帝の後世であるから年代の記述に誤りがあるが、これは物語のことで作者の語りたいた諷諭をのべる手段に歴史を前後させたものであろうか。(Enchi, 2004, p.196)

*A Tale of False Fortunes* ends with these lines. An investigation of the

chronologies reveals that when Michinaga died in the fourth year of Manju (1027), it was still the reign of Emperor Go-Ichijō, so there is some error in dates. But then it is a work of fiction, and perhaps the order of historical events was inverted as a means for its author to suggest something. (Enchi, 2000, p.150)

The inconsistency in the date of death and the reign of the emperor irrevocably refutes all kinds of authority and credibility established throughout the narrative. Here the implication of the closure is not about the overriding of fictionality over factuality, but instead what historical novel concerns most is the inseparability and interdependent relationship between fiction and history.

### **Emplotting history with narrativity**

The intimate relationship between fictional and historical representations in historical novel can be achieved by another narrative ruse - emplotting the events in typical plot structures. By means of emplotment, history is added with narrativity. According to Hayden White (1996), emplotment here means to “endow historical events with a figurative meaning by endowing them with the structure of a generic plot type, such as farce, romance, tragedy”, etc. (p.74). These generic plot types possess narrative coherence found in real events which are endowed with “structures, tonalities, auras, and meanings” (p.65). In other words, when historical events are represented in generic plot types, the fictional narratives will become credible. In Enchi’s novel, the events in the recounted tale are endowed with the form and the style that imitate the chronicle of *Eiga Monogatari*. Other than the chronicle plot, history is also represented in the typical romance plot of emperor Ichijō and Teishi. These typical plot structures have greatly enhanced the plausibility of the fictional narratives.

Representing history with narrativity exerts an effect of immediacy or an illusion of the reader’s experiencing the events “realistically”. This is made possible by the fact that history borrows from fiction the figurative imaginations. Paul Ricoeur (1984) enunciates in *Time and Narrative* that in composing historical discourses historians could only imagine what had happened without witnessing the events themselves. They intentionally write as if the past had taken place in a fashion that imitates the “metaphorical reference” adopted in poetic writing. Thus the reconstruction of the past is achieved metaphorically by the historian’s re-imagination of history. The “historical intentionality” is borrowed very much alike by historical novelists who told their narrative as though it had occurred, as evident from the use of “verbal past tenses” in narrating the unreal. This “reciprocal borrowing” reveals that fiction borrows “as much from history as history borrows from fiction” (p.82). The “interweaving reference” between history and fiction what Enchi’s historical novel is all about. The narrative ruse of fusing fictional narratives with historical discourses significantly reinforces the tensions, hence enhancing the plausibility between the two types of accounts. The novel should be read by considering both worlds and their relationship because history and fiction are intimately connected and virtually inseparable. While *Namamiko-Shui* is claimed as the true version of the history about Michinaga and Teishi, the tale is compared against Akazome’s historical representation in *Eiga Monogatari*. The presence of the two versions suggests that the author, whether of the fictional narrative or the historical discourse, could give

different interpretations of the same history. Hence the activity of emplotment might “generate alternative and even mutually exclusive interpretations of the same set of phenomenon” (White, 1996, p.68), indicating that history is not about “one authentic representation of the past but a plurality of competing versions” (Nünning, 1997, p.227). Further, the contrast in the characterization of the main characters diegetically encourages the formation of a different image of Michinaga and Teishi. Takenishi Hiroko (1967) supports this view in her contention that the incorporation of the fabricated ancient tale functions to create a more vivid image of Teishi (p.168). After all, the historical novel poses the question of truthfulness and falsehood of the historical and fictional accounts. The fact is that there is no pure history or pure fiction, and history is simply the presentation of the image of the past.

### **The new form of historical novel**

Against the traditional approach of historical fiction that stresses faithfulness to real histories, Enchi's *Namamiko Monogatari* represents an unconventional form of historical novel that challenges the positivist nature of historiography. By parodying the historical chronicle *Eiga Monogatari*, Enchi problematizes the traditional mode of representing reality. As the prologue-narrator perpetually declares the accuracy of her recount and her certainty of the manuscript being the only and more comprehensive source of history, she is exploiting the self-reflexive truthfulness inherent in the name of “history”. However, her inconsistent reliability and self-contradictory narration expose the limitations of historical narratives. The self-established authority of history is actually an illusion made possible by its own nature of incommensurability. When a discourse is labelled as “historical”, it immediately stands as if it represented the truths. Yet the fact is that even historiographic representations could provide “a mediated form of access to the past” but never “a transparent reflection or a reliable account of any historical event” (Nünning, 1997, p.235). The truthfulness of the real events of the past could never be verified by the historians whose unavoidable subjectivity “lies behind the process of selecting, integrating, and interpreting the ‘facts’”. Thus the claim of faithfulness to history is nothing but a pretension to historical truth and objectivity (Nünning, 1997, pp.227-228). Masuda Yūki (2013) demonstrates a shared perception that what history shows cannot fully reveal all histories. Such history is a kind of “surface history” (表の歴史) which to a certain extent must have missed out something that was not recorded in historical discourses or had been forgotten. This kind of history, the “inside history” (裏の歴史), is traced and recuperated in the way *Namamiko Monogatari* has been narrated. Thus the conscientious manner of the narrator, who recounts the tale and speculates on its details such as the author, the period of composition, and the unknown whereabouts of the manuscript, represents the way of interpretation of history that aims at transforming the “inside history” into the “real history” (真の歴史). And by rendering the “inside history” as “true history”, it not merely challenges the traditional approach of historical writers who conduct research on the historical facts before composing their novels but it has also genuinely produced a new and unconventional framework of historical novel (pp.43-44).

As aforementioned, whether the historical tale is faithful to history should not be assessed on the extent to which it is attached to historical facts but on the plausibility of the plot type chosen. Other than giving the historical discourse literal and figurative

dimensions, transforming history into romance “allows reinsertion of women’s concerns” (Wallace, 2005, p.20). By emplotting the historical events in a romance plot structure, it makes the characterization of the image of Teishi more natural. If we regard the laudatory depiction of Michinaga in *Eiga Monogatari* as a representation of proper histories, it metaphorically reflects the masculine nature of canonical histories that often exclude women. Conversely, *Namamiko-Shui* foregrounds the status of the women characters and exemplifies “an imaginary recovery or recreation of women’s lost and unrecorded history”, resulting in a disruption of the exclusive view of history itself as “unitary and closed” (Wallace, 2005, pp.16-18). The feminist concerns in the novel involve more than the appealing account of Teishi but more broadly the roles of the women in the Heian court. The women suffered from the system of patriarchy and polygyny and were frequently manipulated by men for obtaining political powers. Heian women were oftentimes associated with the vengeful spirits that haunt the royal members and acted as possessed mediums who were depicted as horrid beings. Further, these women were assigned the roles of child-bearing and motherhood whose sufferings were often granted a subjective and feminist perspective in traditional historical records. However, by means of historical novel, women readers are presented with “the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of ‘history’” (Wallace, 2005, p.3). Historical novelists “supplement those incomplete and partial accounts of the past which systematically ignore the viewpoints and roles of women” (Nünning, 1997, p.223).

## **Conclusion**

Re-considering Diana Wallace’s definition of historical novel, although the embedded story in *Namamiko Monogatari* is a fictional narrative, it is set in the historical Heian period and engages with the historical moment in its present narration. To understand the narrative ruses of the novel, the erudition of Enchi and her personal life have to be taken into account in the sense that the identity of the prologue-narrator is put in question when the names of her father and Dr. Chamberlain are mentioned. The overall effect of historical novel can take shape when the literary history of Japanese literature is addressed. It means that the intertextual references to classical texts and literary genres have been a convention in Japanese literature. Considering *Namamiko-Shui* as a reconstruction of “history” and the metafictional role of the narrator who metanarratively discusses the composition of her recounted tale and makes authorial comments on the plot, characters, and the credibility of her accounts, *Namamiko Monogatari*, can be concluded as a feminist historiographic metafiction.



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