Yonemoto, Marcia. "Murderous Daughters as "Exemplary Women": Filial Piety, Revenge, and Heroism in Early Modern and Modern Japan." *Women Warriors and National Heroes: Global Histories*. .. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 75–92. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350140301.ch-005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:55 UTC.

Copyright © Boyd Cothran, Joan Judge, Adrian Shubert and contributors 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Murderous Daughters as “Exemplary Women”: Filial Piety, Revenge, and Heroism in Early Modern and Modern Japan

Marcia Yonemoto

Whether served cold and calculatingly or run hot through the mad blood of the moment, revenge and the violent actions it motivates—most notably the vendetta, the blood feud, and the duel—have captivated observers, scholars, and popular audiences in Europe, the Americas, and Asia from medieval to modern times.¹ Although details differ according to historical and cultural context, vendettas in the past generally involved the planned killing of an individual (or individuals) who had wronged one’s family or one’s lord or master, and they tended to be undertaken by relatives, vassals, servants, or spouses in the cause of rectifying family or household honor. Vendettas were socially and (for the most part) politically sanctioned, and little if any punishment accrued to those who committed them. Most often the perpetrator, if not the mastermind of the vendetta, was male. Over time vendettas became highly ritualized, subject to their own protocols, and took on a certain procedural rationality. And yet, they remained a viscerally human and therefore irrational act of vengeance that could provide a singularly satisfying conclusion to the otherwise messy and imprecise business of filling the void of loss.

While it has deep roots in southern European honor cultures and popular resonances in American-underworld mafia violence, the vendetta has come to be closely associated with Japan; indeed it is a central component of a death-centered, samurai-obsessed exoticism that continues to exert a peculiar appeal to Japanese and non-Japanese alike. The tale of the forty-seven loyal retainers and their undying devotion to samurai honor ending in self-sacrifice (immortalized in the eighteenth-century play *Chūshingura*, or *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*, and its countless later adaptations on stage, film, and in print) is among the most durable of the masculinist, militarist tropes signifying “Japanese culture.”² Although historians tend to take it for granted that the vendetta was an elite (read: warrior) male practice, during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), commoners and women also undertook vendettas. In fact, by the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century commoner-led vendettas began to exceed in number those led by samurai, and about half of the one dozen recorded cases of vendettas led by women were accomplished by commoners.³

This chapter focuses on the story of one such vendetta. It was said to have been undertaken by two young peasant girls on behalf of their father, who was unfairly murdered by a samurai. This particular story became hugely popular in the early modern period, and the filial daughters, far from being criticized or punished for their violent act, were celebrated as virtuous, loyal, and even “exemplary” women.⁴ The daughters’ vendetta remained in the public consciousness well into the twentieth century and continues to resonate today. The present chapter explores the vendetta’s history, and its shifting meanings and implications as a way of understanding how a particular instance of women’s violent autonomous action could be lauded as heroic by official state regimes that were, by turns, conservatively Confucian and pacifist (the early modern state, c. 1600–1868); stridently militarist, nationalist, and imperialist (the modern prewar and wartime state, c. 1868–1945); centrist-democratic and capitalist (the postwar state, c. 1945–present); and, in all cases, decidedly patriarchal and patrilineal. As several of the chapters in this volume show, before the twentieth century public acts of violence by women had to be justified and legitimized by (male) authorities in order to be deemed acceptable. As Gina Martino’s chapter shows, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American observers validated women’s martial activities by placing them in the context of maternal defense of home and hearth. Sakis Gekas shows how nineteenth-century Greek warrior women had to be portrayed as victims in order to make their heroism publicly acceptable. While in these two examples the tropes of maternal fortitude and female vulnerability render violence by women acceptable, in the case of early modern Japan, I argue that filial devotion was the legitimizing force. Expressions of extreme loyalty by daughters to parents, especially fathers, transformed violence into devotion by subsuming it within the encompassing hierarchy of the family and, ultimately, of nation (the latter in Japanese is *kokka*, literally “state-family”).

The Vendetta Itself

Any avid reader, theater-goer, or purveyor of gossip in the nineteenth century would likely have heard some version of the story of the two filial daughters of the peasant Yotarō from Sendai. A version recorded in 1801 goes as follows: in the early decades of the seventeenth century, there was a peasant in Sendai named Yotarō who had two young daughters named Taka and Haru.⁵ One day, when the older sister was sixteen years old and the younger thirteen they were out working in the fields with their father when a samurai named Shiga Danshichi passed by. A bunch of grass the younger girl tossed in the air accidentally fell on Danshichi, who flew into a rage and, even though Yotarō and the girls apologized profusely, Danshichi cut down Yotarō with his sword. The girls ran home and told their mother, who was already ill, of their father’s murder; the mother then fell into despair and died. Subsequently, the family’s land was sold and the proceeds turned over to the orphaned daughters, who were put in the custody of their aunt in another village. From there, the girls set out to avenge their parents’ deaths by waging a vendetta against Shiga Danshichi. They informed their aunt that

they wanted to go into service in Fukushima, but from there they surreptitiously went on to Edo (present-day Tokyo), where they searched for a teacher of swordsmanship, eventually finding their way to the house of renowned sword master Yui Shōsetsu (1605–51). Although he was initially resistant, they implored Shōsetsu to take them in as servants and to teach them martial arts so that they might avenge their father's death by killing Shiga Danshichi. Shōsetsu was moved by the sisters' resolve and he put them in the care of the women of his household. At this time, Shōsetsu also bestowed upon the girls' new names: the elder became Miyagino and the younger Shinobu.

After five years of intense training, Shōsetsu pronounced the girls ready to undertake their vendetta, and with his blessing they journeyed back to Sendai, where they went straight to Shiroishi Castle, then the headquarters of Sendai domain, and appealed to authorities to sanction their vendetta. The sisters received permission and Danshichi was called to duel with them. The duel itself took place in an arena marked off by bamboo fences, with both bakufu and domainal officials in attendance. Miyagino and Shinobu entered the battleground dressed in funereal white kimono, assisted by the three samurai who accompanied them from Yui Shōsetsu's residence in Edo. At the signal of the drum roll, the battle began. The girls took turns fighting with Danshichi, Shinobu wielding her halberd (*naginata*) and Miyagino attacking with the fighting sickle (*jingama*). Miyagino succeeded in immobilizing Danshichi's arms with her weapon and then called for Shinobu, who cut off his arms with the halberd. Miyagino delivered the final blow, severing Danshichi's head with her sickle. In the end, the sisters offered the head to their deceased father's spirit.⁶ Their long sought-after goal attained, Miyagino and Shinobu then attempted to commit ritual suicide, but the officials prevented them from doing so—the officials wanted to praise the girls' filiality, and their suicide would imply that their vengeance was shameful. Instead, the girls decided to cut their hair and declared that they would become Buddhist nuns and "offer prayers for their deceased parents and Danshichi for the rest of their lives." The daimyo rewarded the sisters, posthumously granting their father stipend lands in excess of 100 *koku*, so that the sisters could support themselves in their religious life.

But the sisters' filial acts did not end with the vendetta, for in 1651 their teacher Yui Shōsetsu committed ritual suicide by disembowelment (*seppuku*) in the wake of a botched coup attempt against the bakufu, and his severed head was put on public exhibition. The tale recalls how the sisters—now nuns—surreptitiously stole their master's head and re-interred it properly at a temple. As in many other filial revenge tales, the story of Miyagino and Shinobu ends with a just resolution, embodied in the death of the antagonist, the avenging of parents *and* teacher, and the establishment of the female protagonists in suitable new lives.

There are many aspects of this story worth commenting on: the role of women and girls as vendetta leaders, the sanctioning of violence by a regime that otherwise rigorously enforced peace, the refusal by officials to sanction the vendetta leaders' self-sacrifice, and the motivating cause of filial piety, which nonetheless resulted in the extinction of the family line, since the daughters never married or had children. I will return to these issues later in the chapter, after addressing the spread and popularization of this particular tale.

Dramatizations and Representations of the Vendetta

Playwrights and novelists were quick to recognize the dramatic potential of the peasant sisters' vendetta. The story of Miyagino and Shinobu inspired two early-eighteenth-century plays *Amidai Yui no hama de* (The nuns at Yui Beach) in 1729 and *Taiheiki kikusui no maki* (The Kikusui volume of the *Taihei Chronicles*) in 1759.

In 1780 the sisters attained starring roles in "Go Taiheiki Shiroishi banashi" (The Tale of Shiroishi and the *Taihei Chronicles*). Shiroishi was the town in Sendai from which the sisters ostensibly hailed, and the play was performed in Edo in bunraku (puppet theater) and kabuki versions.⁷ The play became among the most famous of the many that were made on the vendetta theme. Like many fictional works seeking to avoid the shogunate's ban on representations of "current events," the plot was significantly altered. At the play's beginning, Miyagino is a high-ranking courtesan in a large brothel in the Edo licensed pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara, and she is said to be a descendant of the fourteenth-century imperial-loyalist samurai Kusunoki Masashige, her father a loyal retainer of the Kusunoki clan who, after the noble death of his lord, fell to the status of masterless samurai (*rōnin*), and then to peasant, which was his lowly standing at the time of his murder. Giving Miyagino—a peasant's daughter in the original tale—a samurai heritage allows the play to exploit her sense of warrior honor, which undergirds and makes logical her later, extreme filial behavior. When Shinobu appears, it is as a newly hired servant at Miyagino's brothel, a country girl with a comically heavy northeastern accent. Only through the typically hyper-dramatic discovery of an amulet she wears, the twin of which is possessed by Miyagino, do the two women realize they are sisters. The two then begin to plot revenge, inspired by the ur-revenge tale, the *Soga monogatari* (The Soga tales, c. 1266). Adaptations of the Miyagino-Shinobu story were not limited to the theater. In 1780, the same year that *The Tale of Shiroishi and the Taihei Chronicles* was first produced, Santō Kyōden wrote a comic novel (*kibyōshi*) entitled *Musume katakiuchi kokyō no nishiki* (Hometown brocade of a daughter's vendetta).⁸

The exploits of Miyagino and Shinobu became the subject of visual representations as well, most of them depicting not the tale itself, but later dramatizations of it. An 1844 print by Hiroshige from the series "Chūkō adauchi zue" (Illustrations of Vendettas Filial and Loyal) retells the "tale of Shiroishi," and shows the sisters gazing lovingly at each other, an image of filial devotion—the younger sister gazing upward in admiration at the elder—that would be reproduced in variant versions in subsequent years.⁹

In 1873 the new Meiji government proclaimed that a vendetta was a form of murder, and though it was "a natural expression of the deepest human feelings, it is ultimately a serious breach of the law on account of private enmity, a usurpation for private purposes of public authority, and cannot be treated as other than the crime of willful slaughter."¹⁰ In spite of this official condemnation, the sisters and their filial vendetta continued to be depicted on stage and in prints well into the Meiji period and beyond. In 1881 the artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi included a print showing the courtesan Miyagino's reunion with her sister Shinobu in his series *Kōkoku nijūshikō* (Twenty-four paragons of filial piety in imperial Japan).

Figure 4.1 Utagawa Hiroshige, “Shiroishi banashi (The Tale of Shiroishi),” from *Chūkō adauchi zue* (Illustrations of Loyalty and Vengeance), 1844–45. Photograph © 2019 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection.

This image echoes Hiroshige’s print from almost thirty years earlier, placing the sisters in similar poses, which evoke a highly emotional tenor. In this series of prints, Miyagino and Shinobu are depicted along with other filial men and women from the recent and distant past, such as Wake no Kiyomaro (733–99), the upstanding and loyal imperial official; Katō Kiyomasa (1562–1611), a loyal vassal of the great late-sixteenth-century warlord Hideyoshi; Hideyoshi himself; Tokiwa Gozen (1138–80), mother of the great warrior Minamoto Yoshitsune, who sacrificed her virtue for her family’s safety. But notably, unlike previous versions of the twenty-four paragons, this Meiji-era print is part of a series lauding filial virtue in the Japanese empire, and in so doing it places Miyagino and Shinobu firmly among a panoply of historic, national, imperial heroes and heroines. The sisters were thus historicized and glorified at the same time.

Miyagino and Shinobu’s story even spread to the foreign community in Japan as an apt illustration of key aspects of Japan’s history and “civilization.” In 1877, the Yokohama-based *Japan Weekly Mail* included a detailed account of the vendetta as part of a profile of the sword master Yui Shōsetsu. The article ran under the heading “Some Other Chapters of Japanese History.”¹¹ The French writer Antoine Rous (the Marquis de la Mazelière) included a short account of the event in his multi-volume study *Le Japon, Histoire et Civilization*, published in Paris in 1907.¹² Although both accounts contain some errors of fact and discrepancies in detail, they share an emphasis on the valiant deed accomplished by the sisters, in order to properly avenge, as the *Japan Weekly Mail* put it, the “dastardly murder of their father.”¹³

In sum, by the late Meiji period, Miyagino and Shinobu seem to have shifted from the realm of folklore to the status of folk heroines, their filial deed of vengeance commemorating not only a personal cause, but a national, even imperial one. In order to become true heroines, however, Miyagino and Shinobu had to be just that—true and real. And here their story encounters an unexpected, perhaps unwelcome plot twist, because Miyagino and Shinobu were neither true nor real—they *never existed*, at least not in any way even vaguely resembling the story that was told and retold over the course of more than one hundred years. How did this happen, and why, and in what ways did their story continue to resonate with readers and viewers in the twentieth century, and even today?

Veracity and the Sisters’ Vendetta Tale

With regard to the veracity of the Miyagino and Shinobu tale, to date, no archival historical sources have been found that prove unequivocally that the sisters lived in Sendai, certainly not in the early-seventeenth century. Several different written accounts of the Miyagino and Shinobu incident are held by the temple Sennenji in Shiroishi, but they are compilations of local hearsay and embellished stories performed orally for popular audiences by chanters (*kōshakushi*) in the eighteenth century.¹⁴

The closest we get to a written source verifying a vendetta by two peasant daughters is an account from 1723, in a volume of reportage entitled *Getsudō kenmonshū* (Getsudō’s collection of things seen and heard), by the author Motojima Chishin. This genre of text, popular in the later Tokugawa period, was, as its title suggests, a

compilation of newsy current events, much of it gleaned from hearsay passed on in writing or orally. In an entry for the fourth month of 1723, Motojima writes that: “from Sendai we hear a report about a vendetta (*adauchi no koto*). In 1718, there was a peasant named Shirōzaemon who lived in Adachi village, which was in the territory of Katakura Kōjūrō, a *karō* in the service of the lord of Rikuoku, Date Yoshimura. The sword teacher to Kōjūrō was a samurai with a 1000-koku stipend named Tanabe Shima. One day when Tanabe was going around inspecting the territory, Shirōzaemon got into an argument with him, and Tanabe cut him down. At the time Shirōzaemon had two daughters, ages eleven and eight, who upon his death were left homeless, so the lord of Rikuoku (Date Yoshimura) ordered his sword master Takimoto Denpachirō to accept the girls as his servants. For six years the girls served Denpachirō, and during this time they secretly observed how swordsmanship was taught, and they learned the techniques themselves. One day Denpachirō was passing by the servant girls’ room and he heard the sounds of wooden swords being wielded and so he opened the door and found the two sisters practicing. When he asked what they were doing, the girls said they were planning a vendetta against their father’s murderer. Denpachirō was so moved by their resolve that he began to teach them swordsmanship properly, passing on to them his secret techniques.”¹⁵

Eventually Denpachirō told his lord Date Yoshimura of the vendetta plan, and it was arranged that the sisters would engage in a duel with Tanabe Shima in a fenced-off area in front of the Hakuchō Daimyōjin shrine in Sendai in the third month of 1723 (about a month before Motojima recorded his account). With a group of samurai from Sendai observing and officiating, the sisters took turns fighting their opponent, and succeeded in slashing Shima crosswise from shoulder to armpit. Finally, the older sister came in and finished him off.

Date Yoshimura then appealed to the assembled vassals, asking if any wished to take the two sisters into their households. But the girls adamantly refused, saying that “the fact that we killed our father’s enemy Shima does not negate our crime; for this we should be punished.” Upon hearing this, “everyone was moved.” Then Denpachirō intervened, telling the girls that he had been their master and taught them swordsmanship, and out of respect to him they should accept the Lord’s decision. After hearing his impassioned plea, the sisters accepted the plan. The older sister was at that time sixteen years old and she was taken in by the lord of Aki, Date Muranari. The younger sister, who was thirteen, was taken in by a vassal named Ōshōji Gonkurō.

There are some key differences between Motojima’s account of the sisters’ vendetta and later versions, including the one enshrined as fact in Shiroishi. One is of course the timing. The event described by Motojima took place in 1723, and so of course the sword master in question was not and could not have been Yui Shōsetsu, who died in 1651. Also, in Motojima’s account, the cause of the vendetta is somewhat less noble—the father got into an argument with the samurai Tanabe, and was cut down for his rudeness (which was, of course, the prerogative of any samurai with regard to any commoner). And in the end, the sisters—who in Motojima’s account are never named—do not retire to the religious life; they are taken in, de-facto adopted, by vassals of Date Yoshimura who, like the other individuals named, was an actual Sendai samurai official at the time.

There are also similarities between the earlier and later versions of the story: both tell of the sisters' crafty initiative in learning swordsmanship, the patronage of the sword master, the official sanctioning of the vendetta, and its ritualized public performance that results in the killing of the samurai. And of course, there is the sisters' moral rectitude and attention to justice when, upon completing their vendetta, they seek to be punished themselves. Although Motojima Chishin's version seems on the face of it more believable than later elaborations of the tale, at the end of his account, Chishin writes: "we don't know if this story is true or not, but it has spread out of Sendai and has become a popular tale among the people."¹⁶

If Motojima was equivocal in assessing the truthfulness of the Miyagino-Shinobu story, other notable local observers at the time declared flatly that the tale was false. The travel writer Furukawa Koshōken (1726–1807), whose accounts of his journeys throughout Japan in the late-eighteenth century gained him considerable notoriety and official recognition, wrote in his report on Sendai that "there is no evidence and the local people say it is a false story... I don't know if in other provinces there was another Yotarō who was avenged by his daughters, but here in Shiroishi it is safe to say there was no such vendetta."¹⁷ The prominent Edo-born woman writer Tadano Makuzu (1763–1825), who married a Sendai samurai official, lived for years in the northeast and wrote widely about the culture and history of her adopted home, dismissed the tale of the filial sisters as inflated hearsay: "The women's vendetta and the talk about Miyagino and Shinobu, the two daughters from Shiroishi, absolutely did not happen. Both stories are made-up and have been passed around by people."¹⁸ Mitamura Engyō, a prominent twentieth-century scholar of Edo culture, was of the same opinion, calling the tale "a complete lie."¹⁹

And yet, despite the absence of evidence and refutation of the story by contemporary observers, not only the tale has persisted through time, it has been re-made as true over the past century, most notably in the girls' "hometown" of Shiroishi, but elsewhere as well. The sisters' story has become, to borrow the satirist Stephen Colbert's phrase, not so much true as "truthy," that is, true enough to be rhetorically, ideologically, or practically useful to someone or some agenda. Like many apocryphal accounts, the Miyagino and Shinobu story clearly served and continues to serve particular purposes at particular times, purposes that made the story's meaning transcend fact. What were these purposes and meanings? To answer this question, we need to turn to the broader context framing the sisters' purported actions.

Vendettas in Historical Context: The Changing Perspectives on Filial Vengeance and Female Heroism

What did early modern readers, writers, and observers find compelling about the sisters' vendetta? As noted above, by the late-eighteenth century the sisters' story appeared in collections of biographies of "exemplary women," individuals culled from Japan's distant and recent past, whose lives and actions were meant to inspire virtuous behavior in women of all classes.²⁰ That this honor was accorded Miyagino and Shinobu at first glance seems strikingly odd, given that they were commoners who planned

and executed a violent act of private vengeance, both of which were grave offenses to the status-bound and pacifist Tokugawa regime. But, however counterintuitive it may seem, it was precisely the exceptional nature of the sisters' (invented and embellished) act that made it simultaneously newsworthy to the public at large and laudable by the authorities. The non-elite public audience in the later Tokugawa period could focus on the underdog nature of the young orphaned sisters' campaign against their callous samurai enemy.²¹ Elites and officials could point to their attention to proper procedure in pursuing their vendetta, and their willingness to feel remorse, accept punishment, and atone for the killing.²² And elites and commoners alike, steeped as both populations were in the ideology of filial piety, could celebrate the girls' devotion to their father.²³ In a time of crisis and challenge for both families and state, the sisters' story provided a satisfying narrative arc of completion and resolution for all concerned.

The focus on Miyagino and Shinobu's vendetta as an act of filial piety is at one level unsurprising, given the importance accorded that value in Confucian thought, in canonical texts as well as in popular literature. But of course, it was only one of many moral and ethical values in a crowded discursive field. A comparison to the contemporary Chinese case reveals some important differences in degree of emphasis on filial piety as compared to other Confucian values for women, such as chastity and conjugal fidelity. In Qing China (1644–1911), there was a significant upsurge in the number of suicides and incidents of self-mutilation by women in order to display their devotion to deceased husbands.²⁴ In theory, widows, and even young women who were engaged to be married when their fiancés died, were expected to remain chaste, living with and serving their late husbands' families. Widows who remarried were subject to punishment and criticism.²⁵ Although there was considerable debate among Qing literati over the ethics of widow suicide, and the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722) and the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723–35) attempted to ban the practice, for many women, overt acts of conjugal loyalty could honor both the dead and the living. Offering a sacrifice of one's life or one's body consoled the spirit of the deceased and burnished the worldly reputation of the family who remained.²⁶

In early modern Japan, however, commoner women were expected to have sexual experiences before marriage, and among all classes—even samurai—divorce and remarriage were frequent.²⁷ Furthermore, women divorced and remarried, sometimes repeatedly, with the full knowledge and endorsement of their families. The reason was simple: the Japanese stem family was relatively small, and its existence was tenuous. Every family needed an heir—and only one heir—so strategic, even multiple marriages were one way to better the odds of producing a viable candidate.²⁸ A corollary of this was that, unlike Qing China or Chosŏn Korea, continuity of patrilineal blood relations was not as important in early modern Japan as continuity of the nominal familial line of descent, through whatever means necessary. Women were key players in this process of lineage management, as mothers, wives, and daughters, but also as conduits between natal and married families and kin networks.²⁹ In this context, it makes sense that in Japan filial piety tended to be more often and more forcefully emphasized than conjugal fidelity.

By being extraordinarily filial daughters, Miyagino and Shinobu were thus cast, far and wide, as heroines. They were also represented as deeply loyal, not only to their murdered father but also to an ideal of family that transcended the honor theoretically

restored by their successful vendetta. For after avenging their father's death, the sisters were completely bereft of actual family. Their mother was gone, they had no other siblings, and, having taken Buddhist vows, they foreswore marriage and childbearing. Ironically, by performing the ultimate act of filial devotion the fictional sisters also committed the greatest offense against their parents and ancestors: they extinguished the family line. Their devotion was thus to a vanished reality, and only their subsequent fame and (invented) legacy served to perpetuate the ideals they were said to have upheld. Early modern readers would have easily related to these two commoner women who were bound not to masculine warrior-centered ideas of loyal service, whose object was a flesh-and-blood overlord, but instead to a transcendent, fragile, and widely understood ideal of the family.

If the importance of family was the framework through which early modern Japanese readers and observers were encouraged to interpret the Miyagino and Shinobu story, modern readers learned to see them through different eyes. We can see most clearly the modern manipulations of the sisters' story in Shiroishi itself. By the early-twentieth century, Miyagino and Shinobu's act of loyalty and filial piety—developed and spread through print and performance—had become a cornerstone of local history and identity, and any doubts about the veracity of their story were simply suppressed. In Hachimaida, the area where Shiga Danshichi supposedly cut down the peasant father Yotarō, a commemorative temple called the Kōshidō, the “Hall of Filial Children” was built in 1926, dedicated to honoring the sisters and their valorous act. Today, a neat row of eight miniature rice paddies is maintained at the site.³⁰ Informational signage explains the history of the event, noting the killing of Yotarō by Shiga Danshichi in 1636 (“in this spot”), and the daughters' subsequent revenge. The only hint that this explanation is not a recitation of historical fact comes at the end of the long second paragraph, which ends with the phrase “*to tsutaerarete iru*,” a passive construction meaning, roughly, “it has been said.” At about the same time that the Kōshidō was built in the 1920s, local officials put on an exhibit of the weapons used by Miyagino and Shinobu in their battle with Shiga Danshichi, and local historians wrote numerous articles tracing the etymology of local place names back to people and events related to the vendetta as a way of showing how the event was embedded in the very physicality of the town itself.³¹

In the postwar period, the aura of factuality around the incident persisted. A stone monument standing next to the rice paddies at Hachimaida, erected in 1966, commemorates the 330th anniversary of Yotarō's “death.” Another monument in Shiroishi, put up the following year to mark the purported location of the girls' duel with Danshichi, stands several miles away at the riverside site of Ropponmatsu. And despite the staunchly pacifistic attitudes of the generation who survived the horrors of the Asia-Pacific conflict, Miyagino and Shinobu's legacy of legitimate violence in the name of honor and redemption seems to have been harnessed to the cause of honoring the war dead, as two more stone memorials were erected at the Hachimaida site in the postwar decades, one honoring the town's fallen soldiers and the other praising the loyalty of the imperial army.

Miyagino and Shinobu appear elsewhere in present-day Shiroishi as well—one can go on historical walks to sites related to the vendetta, including a stroll on “Danshichi

dōri,” and one can visit the Shiroishi Castle Exploratory History Museum (Shiroishi-jō Rekishi Tanbō Myujiamu), which on a daily basis screens, in 3-D, a brand-new historical drama called “Shiroishi-banashi Miyagino, Shinobu Monogatari” (The tale of Shiroishi: The story of Miyagino and Shinobu). This film, shot in Shiroishi and completed in 2017, is a retelling of the local version of the sisters’ vendetta. In March 2018 the film premiered with much fanfare at the new and sleekly modern Shiroishi White Cube Community Center, which also put on exhibit numerous Miyagino-Shinobu artifacts, and held a panel discussion with the actors and director. In the supporting and promotional materials for the film, the vendetta is described as having occurred in the seventeenth century. In these materials, descriptions of the vendetta as an example of “daughterly revenge” are clearly highlighted—there is no suggestion that it is a legend, not an historical event. Only in the museum’s second-floor documents room can one find, at the end of a description of the “tale of Shiroishi,” an acknowledgment that “there is no record [of the event] in the *Katakura dai dai ki* (Great records of the Katakura family) the documents of the Katakura family, lords of Shiroishi Castle ... one cannot confirm [its occurrence] in the historical record.” The description goes on to state:

however, the story of the daughters of a peasant who were able to publicly take revenge for a samurai’s unjust act and plan a vendetta spread throughout the country during the Edo period, was taken up as a theme in kabuki and *jōruri* dramas, and became very popular. Today, from Aomori Prefecture [in the far northeast] to Okinawa Prefecture [in the far southwest], folk songs, *obon* dances, Shinto ritual music and dance, stage performances and the like, [the story] has spread in various forms.³²

This statement in many ways brings us full circle with regard to the issues of veracity and violence. Edo-period writers and artists, not to mention their audiences, did not seem to be much bothered by the question of whether vendetta stories were actually true or not—indeed it hardly mattered, given that the drama (and the dramatization) was what interested them, and the topic of vendettas became hugely popular in fiction as well as in stage drama by the turn of the century.³³ The exercise of violence, in reality forbidden to commoners and highly regulated even among samurai, exerted a powerful appeal to audiences of all classes when represented in fiction or performance. And as for the compilers of early modern “exemplary women” and filial piety tales, their mission was to teach and preach about the importance of honoring one’s parents, so embellishment and invention—making the story really compelling—were part of their job. Violent revenge and sacrifice of self and others, especially when committed by women, upped the dramatic ante, and if facts fell by the wayside, so be it. In short, the sisters’ story clearly resonated with a wide range of people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it seems to continue to resonate with a perhaps smaller sector of the population today, regardless of whether it really happened or not. And in any case, the “truthiness” of the Miyagino and Shinobu story seems to have filtered upward, for even reliable standard scholarly reference works refer to the vendetta as if it actually occurred.³⁴

The sisters’ story and its modern fate remind us that people have always cared about the reputation of their native places—in the early modern period localities proudly promoted local people who were deemed virtuous, especially if the designation came from on high. In terms of acts of filial piety, the epitome of such official recognition was inclusion in the *Kankoku kōgiroku* (The records of filial piety) compiled by the shogunate in the early-nineteenth century.³⁵ Likewise today, the people of Shiroishi and its environs are trying their best to create or recreate Miyagino and Shinobu as local notables, but not necessarily for official recognition. They are primarily trying to market the sisters as a tourist attraction on a very crowded domestic market. And for that, they need to suggest that they were real people who did real things in real historical time.

Perhaps they also want to rally the locals to focus on a valiant act from the distant past, especially now, and especially in the Tōhoku, where the memory of the 2011 tsunami disaster is much more present and real than it is anywhere else in Japan, and individuals and families feel the precarity of modern life especially acutely. In addition, it doesn’t hurt that Miyagino and Shinobu are shown to be powerful women, in a time when the Abe government is exhorting women to “shine” in the workplace and as mothers and wives at home, so as to heroically help lead Japan on to renewed glory, even if it means exhausting themselves by working around the clock doing paid and unpaid labor. Miyagino and Shinobu remind us how women’s life stories from the past, however “tall,” fabricated, or violent, have been strategically deployed at different historical moments, at different spatial scales, to serve ideological needs. At key historical junctures, including perhaps the very recent past, official encouragement has transformed acts of rage and revenge by women into laudable and legitimate acts of female heroism, albeit in the service of a “higher” calling defined by people other than women themselves.

Notes

- 1 The literature is vast, but notable studies include: Kevin McAleer, *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Faction in Friuli during the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Donald Weinstein, *The Captain’s Concubine: Love, Honor, and Violence in Renaissance Tuscany* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Barbara Holland, *Gentlemen’s Blood* (Harrisonburg, VA: Bloomsbury USA, 2004); William Ian Miller, *Bloodmaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); D.E. Mills, “Kataki-Uchi: The Practice of Blood-Revenge in Pre-Modern Japan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 10, no. 4 (1976): 525–542. For a comparative study of dramatic representations of vendettas, see K.J. Wetmore, Jr., ed., *Revenge Drama in European Renaissance and Japanese Theatre: From Hamlet to Madame Butterfly* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

- 2 During the Tokugawa period, samurai were not only obliged, they were legally required by the state to avenge an attack on a family member. On the centrality of the vendetta to the “way of the warrior” (*bushidō*), see Taniguchi Shinko, *Bushidō kō: kenka, katakiuchi, bureiuchi* (Tokyo: Kakokawa Gakugei Shuppan, 2007). For a case study of two late-Tokugawa vendettas, see Mills, “Kataki-Uchi.”
- 3 Precise numbers of vendettas are difficult to come by, and some went unregistered and unreported, but the shift away from samurai-led vendettas and toward those led by commoners seems clear. According to Hiraide Kōjirō there were around 103 registered and recorded vendettas committed over the course of the Tokugawa period. Of these, thirty-three took place between 1609 and 1703, and of those twenty-nine were led by samurai and four by commoners; between 1703 and 1804, thirty-five vendettas took place, of which nineteen were led by samurai and sixteen by commoners; between 1804 and 1865 there were thirty-five vendettas, sixteen led by samurai and nineteen led by commoners, for a total of sixty-four samurai-led vendettas to thirty-nine commoner-led vendettas over the course of the entire Tokugawa period. See Hiraide Kōjirō, *Katakiuchi* (Tokyo: Saigetsusha, 1975), 129–136; see also Mills, “Kataki-uchi,” 531. Makita Isao counts twelve vendettas led by women between the late-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth century, of which four were led by peasant women, one by the daughter and wife of a mountain ascetic/priest (*yamabushi*), and two were of unknown status; see Table 1 in Makita Isao, “Kinsei jōsei to katakiuchi: ‘Ōshū Shiroishi onna katakiuchi wo chūshin ni,” in *Rekishi to minzoku ni okeru kekkon to kazoku*, ed. Miyachi Takahiro and Mori Kenji (Tokyo: Daiichi Shobō, 2000), 59. Eiko Ikegami would attribute the shift toward commoner-led vendettas to the “taming,” or pacification and bureaucratization of the samurai status group over the course of the Tokugawa period; see Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*. On legal regulations and attitudes toward vendettas, see Taniguchi Shinko, *Kinsei shakai to hō kihan* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2005), esp. 194–235.
- 4 Biographies extolling the virtues of “exemplary women” (Ch: *lienü*, J: *retsujō*) served as prescriptive texts and circulated widely in pre- and early modern East Asia; see Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan Piggott, eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Joan Judge and Hu Ying, eds., *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women’s Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Marcia Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 22–25.
- 5 The version recapitulated here is based on Matsudaira Yorinori, *Daitō fujo teiretsu ki* (The Record of Exemplary Women in the Great East [1801]), in *Kinsei jōshi kyōiku shisō*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Sentaa, 1980), 1–56. For a more detailed analysis, see Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women*, 21–37.
- 6 Matsudaira, *Daitō fujo teiretsu ki*, 40.
- 7 The kabuki version can be found in: Ki no Jōtarō, Utei Enba, and Yō Yōtai, *Go taiheiki shiroishi banashi*, in *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, vol. 77: *Jōruri shū*. (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2002); for an English translation of the scene that continues to be performed in kabuki today, see “The Tale of Shiroishi and the Taihei Chronicles,” in *Kabuki Plays On-Stage*, vol. 2, ed. James Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 83–106.
- 8 Santō Kyōden, “Musume katakiuchi kokyō no nishiki,” in *Santō Kyōden zenshū*, vol. 1, ed. Santō Kyōden Zenshū Henshū Inkai (Tokyo: Perikansha, 1992), 37–54. Their exploits also merited their inclusion in a major collection of biographies of

exemplary women, the aforementioned *Daitō fujo teiretsu ki* (Record of Exemplary Women in the Great East, 1801).

- 9 In addition to their depiction in a variety of woodblock prints, beginning in the late Edo period Miyagino and Shinobu also appear on satirical *banzuke*—the rankings or ratings of all manner of things and people, displayed in the format of a multi-tiered *sumo* wrestling-meet schedule, and which served as popular commentary on trends of the time. In these texts, different vendettas (*adauchi*) are ranked, with the more important or significant ones—like the forty-seven loyal retainers made famous by *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*—represented as if they were the highest-ranked “wrestlers” (*ōzeki*), placed visually at the top of the list, and lesser vendettas represented as mid-ranking wrestlers (*maegashira*), and placed in the middle and lower tiers of the list. In one *banzuke* from the early Meiji period (1871), “Miyagino, Shinobu” are positioned in the first tier, although they are relegated to middling *maegashira* standing. On the representation of vendettas in *banzuke*, see Setoguchi Ryūichi, “Mitate banzuke ni miru adauchi to o-ie sōdō,” in *Banzuke de yomu Edo jidai*, ed. Hayashi Hideo and Aoki Michio (Tokyo: Kashiwa Shobō, 2003), 258–275.
- 10 Quoted in Mills, “Kataki-Uchi,” 525.
- 11 *Japan Weekly Mail*, Yokohama, November 3, 1877, 982–983.
- 12 Marquis de la Mazelière (Antoine Rous), *Le Japon: Histoire et Civilization*, vol. 3, *Le Japon des Tokugawa* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1907). The Marquis writes of “deux paysannes, Miyagino et Shinobu, de Shiraishi [*sic*] en Ōshū, qui obtiennent de leur suzerain la permission de venger leur père assassiné par un keraï.”
- 13 *Japan Weekly Mail*, 982.
- 14 Although such accounts are referred to generically as *jitsuroku bon* (lit. books of true accounts), this is not because they are factual—the term is an abbreviation of the longer term *chūjitsu kiroku*, or “records of loyalty and devotion,” and thus do not necessarily connote accuracy or truthfulness per se. See Makita, “Kinsei jōsei to katakiuchi,” 61.
- 15 The entire account can be found in Motojima Chishin, *Getsudō kenmonshū*, in *Kinsei fūzoku kenmonshū*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1925), 618–619.
- 16 *Getsudō kenmonshū*, 619. Other textual sources telling of a vendetta by two peasant daughters are of similarly dubious veracity. Ōta Nanpō (1749–1823), a shogunal official turned popular writer and poet, recorded in his miscellaneous writings a letter that relates an unverifiable story resembling that of Miyagino and Shinobu, and which was likely a compilation of several different vendetta tales; see Makita, “Kinsei jōsei to katakiuchi,” 65–66.
- 17 Furukawa Koshōken, *Tōyū zakki* (Miscellaneous records of a journey to the East), quoted in Makita, “Kinsei jōsei to katakiuchi,” 74. On the travel writing of Furukawa, see Marcia Yonemoto, *Mapping Early Modern Japan: Space, Place, and Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1603–1868)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 69–100.
- 18 Makita, “Kinsei jōsei to katakiuchi,” 74; on Makuzu’s life and writings, see Bettina Gramlich-Oka, *Thinking Like a Man: Tadano Makuzu (1763–1825)* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
- 19 Mitamura Engyō. “Katakiuchi no hanashi,” in *Mitamura Engyō zenshū* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1976), 305–51.
- 20 Earlier texts in this genre featured mostly elite women (imperial noblewomen and women of the samurai class) but later texts focused on commoner women as well. See Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women*, 21–50.

- 21 It is difficult to know to what degree the sisters' vendetta appealed to commoner audiences who wanted to see a samurai receive his comeuppance. Edward Muir raises the question, in *Mad Blood Stirring*, of whether private vendettas in early modern Friuli served to resolve disputes that could not be adjudicated through official channels, and thus served as a means for people to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the state. However, the comparison with Japan is imperfect, and in any case, dramas centered on samurai heroics (like *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*) remained popular throughout the Tokugawa period.
- 22 All vendettas, whether perpetrated by samurai or commoner, had to be registered and approved by authorities in order to be considered lawful. See Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, esp. pp. 241–253.
- 23 The importance of filial piety spread widely through educational texts used in commoners' schools (*terakoya*). A total of 126 separate texts on filial piety and loyalty were published between the mid-seventeenth and late-eighteenth century and official edicts enforced proper observance; see Taniguchi, *Kinsei shakai to hō kihan*, 131–149.
- 24 See Tian Rukang, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Ethical Values in Ming and Ch'ing Times* (Leiden: Brill, 1988). See also Qian Nanxiu, "Lienü versus Xianyuan: The Two Biographical Traditions in Chinese Women's History," in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History*, ed. Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 55–87.
- 25 On the unmarried yet chaste "faithful maiden" phenomenon, see Weijing Lu, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 26 On the debates over suicide and extreme displays of female chastity, see Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 29–59, and Janet M. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- 27 On marriage practices and sexuality among rural Japanese women, see Anne Walthall, "The Life Cycle of Farm Women in Tokugawa Japan," in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600–1945*, ed. Gail L. Bernstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 42–70, and "Masturbation and Discourse on Female Sexual Practices in Early Modern Japan," *Gender & History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 1–18. On the frequency of divorce in the early modern period, Harald Fuess writes: "Statistical records confirm that divorce was a common feature of life in the Edo period. From about 6 percent to 40 percent of marriages ended in divorce. Divorce was least likely among samurai in western Japan and most likely among village outcasts. Although the evidence is not conclusive, there is a hint that the frequency of divorce rose during the Edo period." See Fuess, *Divorce in Japan: Family, Gender, and the State, 1600–2000* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 24. See also Kurosu, Satomi, "Remarriage in a Stem Family System in Early Modern Japan," *Continuity and Change* 22, no. 3 (2007): 429–458.
- 28 Adoption—which in the Japanese case meant adoption of kin-related or unrelated women, men, adults, children and even couples—was another strategy for ensuring family continuity. On the importance of adoption for heirship within the samurai class, see Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women*, 164–192, and Yonemoto, "Adoption and the Maintenance of the Early Modern Elite: Japan in the East Asian Context," in *What Is a Family? Answers from Early Modern Japan*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Berry and Marcia Yonemoto (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 47–67; Satomi

- Kurosui and Emiko Ochiai, “Adoption as an Heirship Strategy under Demographic Constraints: A Case from Nineteenth-Century Japan,” *Journal of Family History* 20, no. 3 (1995): 261–288; Ann Waltner, *Getting an Heir: Adoption and the Construction of Kinship in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1990); Kuentae Kim and Hyunjoon Park, “Family Succession through Adoption in the Chosun Dynasty,” *Reproduction in East Asian Historical Demography* 15, no. 4 (2010): 443–452.
- 29 See Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women*, 164–192.
- 30 Hachimaida means “eight rice paddies,” and their presence can also be seen to connote an essentialist connection to rice as Japan’s “national” crop and rice cultivation as Japan’s sustaining civilizational practice.
- 31 Makita, “Kinsei josei to katakiuchi,” 67–68.
- 32 From “About Ōshū Shiroishi banashi,” unpublished, collection of Shiroishi Castle Exploratory History Museum (Shiroishi-jō Rekishi Tanbō Myujiamu).
- 33 On literary representations of vendettas, see David Atherton, “Valences of Vengeance: The Moral Imagination of Early Modern Japanese Vendetta Fiction,” PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2013.
- 34 A vendetta against the samurai Tanabe Shima by two peasant sisters in 1723 is included along with actual vendettas in a comprehensive table listing Tokugawa-period vendettas in the *Kokushi daijiten*, an authoritative multivolume historical encyclopedia; see entry for “katakiuchi,” in *Kokushi daijiten*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1979), 348–352. It is also mentioned as a representative vendetta in another major historical dictionary, *Nihon shi daijiten*; see “katakiuchi,” in *Nihon shi daijiten*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1992), 229–231; also cited in Makita, “Kinsei josei to katakiuchi,” 67. Brandon and Leiter write that the play is based on “an incident that occurred in Ōshū in 1723.” See Brandon and Leiter, *Kabuki Plays On-Stage*, vol. 2, 84.
- 35 On the *Kankoku kōgiroku*, see Sugano Noriko, *Edo jidai no kōkōmono: Kōgiroku no sekai* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1999), and “State Indoctrination of Filial Piety in Tokugawa Japan: Sons and Daughters in the Official Records of Filial Piety,” in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, ed. Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, Joan R. Piggott and Joan Piggott, 170–189. For the original text, see Sugano Noriko, ed., *Kankoku kōgiroku* (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 1999).