

## Ideal Families in Crisis

### *Official and Fictional Archetypes at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century*

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The vernacular literature of early modern Japan describes a dizzying constellation of families. They look very different in the adultery stories of Ihara Saikaku, for example, the love suicide plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the ghostly tales of Ueda Akinari, the bathhouse conversations of Shikitei Sanba, and the historical fantasies of Kyokutei Bakin. Here I explore one version of the family that achieved prominence in commercial print around the turn of the nineteenth century. It is small, stripped to basic roles (father, mother, son, daughter-in-law, daughter) and beleaguered by hardship. It is also sustained by members, steadfastly devoted to one another, who sacrifice gladly, and largely without help, to stay together. For such exemplary behavior, they are ultimately rewarded and celebrated by figures in authority.

This family is not a stem household *ie*, though it does sometimes include three generations. Nor do its trials realistically reflect contemporary life, though some are grounded in fact. A product of ethical instruction on the one hand, and sensationalized fiction on the other, this family transcends the particularities of domestic experience to appeal, with presumptive universality, to the core values and visceral emotions that attend primal relationships. The works I examine deal with small casts of players in extremis whose suffering and survival speak to the fears of the time as well as the changing resolutions available to a changing society.

What is striking about this family is its appearance in both official and popular media. I begin with the *Official Records of Filial Piety* (*Kankoku kōgiroku*), a fifty-volume compendium produced by the Tokugawa shogunate over the course of the 1790s and published in the commercial print market in 1801. It includes 787

narrative depictions of morally edifying behavior assembled as part of the regime's reform efforts during the Kansei era (1789–1801). Not all entries focus on familial relationships, but the vast majority do. And the story they tell is of filial children, loyal wives and daughters-in-law, and steadfast brothers who strive heroically for their households. Ostensibly accounts of real people, the narratives project the idealized patterns of fables.

The family of the *Official Records*—stripped down, beset by troubles, and redeemed by valiant sacrifice—also appears in the revenge fiction that thrived in commercial print from the mid-1790s through the first decade of the nineteenth century. Although revenge was a compelling theme in popular tales from the seventeenth century (and long a staple of medieval literature), the rage for the subject at the turn of the nineteenth century was unparalleled. So great was the demand that the popular writer Shikitei Sanba complained, in a work from 1805, that a writer had to “split his brains and wrack his guts, getting not a wink of sleep, to think up new forms of vengeance, uncommon murders, stirring encounters, and dangerous escapes.”<sup>1</sup> The violence frames tales, at heart, all about families. Their moral logic derives from the power of filial piety, as selfless children undergo all manner of hardship to avenge the murder of parents. Often aided by family members but rarely by outsiders, they struggle against poverty, the trials of the road, illness, and other afflictions to kill their antagonists and restore family cohesion. Only at the end do the authorities step in to reward their edifying accomplishments.

The narratives in the *Official Records* and the popular revenge fiction are not identical, since the latter leans on violent and fantastic elements hardly compatible with the former. Yet their conception of virtue and their emphasis on family cohesion through sacrifice are so strikingly similar that a common impetus derived from a shared social context appears at work. That context was turbulent. If the Tokugawa “age of peace” was never free of upheaval, the decades at the end of the eighteenth century saw exceptional crises, particularly of depopulation. A result of both periodic famine in earlier years and the widespread practice of infanticide and abortion, the demographic crisis was brought to a head by the catastrophic Tenmei famine of 1782–87, which hit the northeast and northern Kantō with terrible force.<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of thousands starved to death. Many more fled to seek better lives elsewhere, leaving fields untended, production slashed, and villages hauntingly empty.<sup>3</sup> As death and migration devastated families, shogun and daimyo focused on efforts to return labor to the countryside. In Edo, which had always absorbed migrants from surrounding provinces, the Tenmei years produced an unsettling flood of refugees who sometimes engaged in disturbing and destructive behavior.<sup>4</sup> Among the participants in the violent rice riots that broke out in 1787 were impoverished arrivals from afar.<sup>5</sup>

Disruption of the family thus became tied to larger concerns over social unrest. And recovery of the family increasingly became the target of official and popular

action alike. Authorities adopted policies for returning migrants to the land, discouraging infanticide, and promoting marriage and childbirth. Popular initiatives included publishing admonitory pamphlets against infanticide and proposing monetary rewards to support the establishment of branch households.<sup>6</sup> One symptom of alarm was the appearance, in the pages of popular fiction, of grotesquely exaggerated illustrations of abortionists.<sup>7</sup>

It was in this context of trouble, I argue, that a highly idealized vision of the family became a compelling vehicle for projecting moral clarity and inspiring social regeneration. As an all but universal unit of community forged by both biological and emotional ties, the family could appeal imaginatively, as other units could not, to readers otherwise divided by status and geography.<sup>8</sup> Because it was so visibly under assault and so broadly indicative of societal well-being, moreover, the family was key to any turn toward recovery. And at a moment when official institutions were under suspicion for maladministration and incompetence, the family remained the most trusted organ of allegiance. Stripped down to basic relationships that evoked potent values (filial piety, marital harmony, brotherhood), it could project an appealing fantasy of virtue ascendant, even in a time of strife. Regeneration had to start at home. We shall see, however, that conceptions of home would prove dynamic. The idealized family of the *Official Records* and the revenge fiction boom would mutate into something startlingly fluid within a generation.

#### THE SHOGUNATE'S MODEL FAMILIES

Matsudaira Sadanobu, who came to power as the chief senior councilor (*rōjū*) of the shogunate in 1787, initiated wide-ranging reforms that would begin to arrest social and economic crisis. Making the family a foundational concern and popular pedagogy a core mission, he instructed members of the shogunal academy in 1789 to assemble the names and stories of moral exemplars throughout the realm.<sup>9</sup> They subsequently solicited from central and domainal administrators both lists and accounts of subjects who had been formally recognized for acts of filial piety and other "exemplary" (*kitoku*) behavior.<sup>10</sup> Because the practice of acknowledging such paragons had long been established in the domains, records were abundant.<sup>11</sup> The shogunal academy compiled and edited the information over the following decade, publishing it in 1801 as the *Official Records of Filial Piety* (one of the shogunate's very few ventures into the popular publishing market).

The *Official Records* names individuals involved in no fewer than 8,563 instances of virtuous behavior.<sup>12</sup> Most entries date from the 1780s and early 1790s, but many date from midcentury and some as early as 1602.<sup>13</sup> The information is carefully grouped, first by province, then by jurisdiction: areas under direct shogunal control come before daimyo domains and care is taken to list the larger domains before the smaller. Each entry includes the name of the domainal lord as well as the location, age, and social status of the exemplar. Men are characterized

by status (townsman or peasant, for example); women are described in relation to men (daughter of the peasant Uheimon; widow of the peasant Katsuemon). Crucially, each exemplar is defined by the virtue being recognized. While more than 60 percent of the cases illustrate the filial piety invoked in the work's title, other familial virtues are also celebrated: female fidelity, brotherly harmony, and household harmony. The compound virtue of "loyal filiality" appears on occasion, as do virtues not explicitly concerned with family, such as loyalty and diligence in agriculture.<sup>14</sup> To read the lists is to take a panoramic tour of the moral geography of the realm (from major cities and castle towns to villages and small islands such as Oki and Tsushima) and to find everywhere a sample of edifying figures diverse in status and walks of life.

Systematically winnowed, the collection omits much of the information submitted for review to focus on commoners—farmers and townsmen—and low-ranking samurai.<sup>15</sup> Its intended audience, in effect, seems to be not an elite expected to perform exemplary service but a general populace most vulnerable to hardship. Singled out for narrative elaboration are 787 "exceptionally outstanding" cases.<sup>16</sup> To make the material accessible to common readers, the editors recruited Ōta Nanpo (1749–1823), a shogunal retainer deeply involved in the milieu of commercial fiction.<sup>17</sup> An exemplary stylist, Nanpo experimented with different idioms, seeking an approach that would combine the accessibility of popular fiction with a tone of authority befitting a shogunal production.<sup>18</sup> The resulting narratives, though individually succinct and written in a straightforward style, contribute to a massive publication of fifty volumes.

What did the shogunate hope to achieve through such an undertaking? One answer appears in the notes that open the first volume. "If the hearts of those who read this work are roused, it will serve as an aid to moral cultivation (*fūka*)."<sup>19</sup> Identifying just what type of "cultivation" is meant to be modeled by so many biographies might be daunting were there not such consistency in the narratives. We find the basic message in the story of the townsman Hikoshichi, a "filial exemplar" from Hōki Province, who was formally recognized and rewarded by his lord in 1792.<sup>20</sup>

From the time Hikoshichi was six, we are told, his father suffered from paralysis and was unable to walk. "The impoverished household became yet poorer," and "because of the afflictions of hunger and thirst, his mother likely thought it difficult to go on living there and left for parts unknown." Young Hikoshichi, left alone to care for his ailing father, makes the rounds of the town to beg for food and, on occasion, the saké his father craves. At fifteen, he begins working for hire, scraping together enough money to buy back the hocked family home from the sympathetic lender (who returns it at half price, so impressed is he by Hikoshichi's fortitude). Hikoshichi ministers faithfully to his father, personally feeding him every day, but is sometimes kept late by work. When his angrily impatient father hurls a tray of food at him, Hikoshichi "soothed and coaxed him and devoted himself all

the more to filial care.” Following the death of the father, Hikoshichi faithfully carries out the funerary rites and gathers nearby relatives for the major service marking the seventh anniversary. “Fond of saké, Hikoshichi reportedly grew drunk and began to cry out of yearning for his father, raising his voice and grieving.” In 1792, at the age of thirty-three, he was formally recognized by the domain lord for his filial behavior and rewarded with silver.

Like most households in the *Official Records*, Hikoshichi’s is burdened, not least by the departure of the mother, who serves as a quiet foil in the narrative. When the going gets tough, she gets going—right out the door, abandoning her family, as did many others who struck out alone to seek their fortunes during the hard times of Tenmei. Hikoshichi, by contrast, is made all the more devoted by hardship. The news that extended relations live nearby comes as a surprise, since the text never hints that they ever provided or were entreated for help. Hikoshichi devises a means of survival on his own. And he does so, the text intimates, with love. He repeatedly brings suffering upon himself to accord delight to his father and sheds tears of grief years after losing him. Dry-eyed in the face of poverty and the occasional recriminations of his father, Hikoshichi sobs in bereavement.

Here the text suggests that physical hardship pales before the emotional pain of family dissolution. And with its invocations of tears and the sympathy inspired in onlookers by Hikoshichi’s ardor, the text invites readers to feel that emotional pain. Without overt moralizing, the *Official Records* relies on readers’ identification with prototypical characters (in this case, a son under stress) to convert a basic representation of the family into an appeal for the family. In the wake of the Tenmei crises, when cities lured mounting numbers of migrants from villages and towns, Hikoshichi’s story makes an appeal for rootedness—for placing family first and finding contentment in the choice.

Variations on this story recur throughout the *Official Records*. Hardship strikes a family, sometimes from within (a ne’er-do-well, an alcoholic, a hurler of insults), but uncomplaining members stick things out willingly and together. Indeed, drawing on mutual affection, many seem to find happiness in hardship. The message is one of family cohesion first. The focus, moreover, is narrow. Extended families and distant relatives—let alone neighborhood associations and domain officials—disappear from almost all narratives. In some instances, self-help becomes the very mark of exemplary virtue.

Such is the case of Sayo and her daughter, residents of the castle town of Wakamatsu in Michinoku.<sup>21</sup> Because the business of the blacksmith husband goes bad, the family must relinquish its home to become renters, then edges toward collapse when the husband falls ill. The family son goes into an apprenticeship, while Sayo and the twelve-year-old daughter take to weaving reed sieves—work barely sufficient to cover the cost of miso and firewood. A neighbor suggests to Sayo that “it must be trying [to get by] with just your strength as a lone woman. If you could receive some aid from the lord, surely that would be of at least some help.”

But Sayo replies: "Taking care of one's husband in sickness is the proper work of a wife. I should not seek aid from outside. As long as I do not fall ill myself, I will find a way to care for him, and should simply look to the day of his recovery."<sup>22</sup> The daughter concurs: "It will be bad for my father's recovery if we accept aid from the lord without reason. As long as my mother lives, she and I will use our strength together and there should not be any problem." Observers are so moved that one of the town officials appeals on his own initiative to the domainal lord. The family is rewarded with rice and the daughter is praised by the magistrate.

Why does the *Official Records* make official intervention a last recourse (and one pursued by outsiders)? The point suggests the deep investment of the compilers in the family itself as the bulwark against social disorder. By effectively advocating that problems be solved within the household, they stressed resourcefulness and encouraged readers to feel empowered, not oppressed, by their family roles. Sayo's story holds out the promise that perseverance is strengthening—that performance of the role of "wife" has greater power than a daimyo's silver.

Implied within this promise, however, may be the straitened condition of daimyo coffers. The compilers likely grasped a popular skepticism about the possibility of official support; they doubtless grasped as well the limited means of the authorities to ameliorate most instances of suffering. Making self-sufficiency itself the sign of virtue, they achieved two aims at a single stroke: promoting family regeneration, and tempering expectations of external support.

Did they actually expect readers to embrace the message? Sugano Noriko describes the compilation as "an instrument of indoctrination under the rubric of popular enlightenment and renewal."<sup>23</sup> But because it was primarily meant to "create an impression of a unified political and moral realm," the goal was not so much promoting virtue as advertising an idealized vision of the Tokugawa order.<sup>24</sup> Niels van Steenpaal goes a step further, arguing that the *Official Records* is essentially a "performance" of the shogunate's benevolent governance, a demonstration of unity and propriety in the realm. Gestures toward educating commoners and inspiring virtue are no more than gestures. In fact, he suggests, the work may not have been intended for purchase at all. The mere appearance of the massive compendium in bookstores "performed" the purpose of witnessing good rule.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps. But then why go to the trouble of crafting so many biographies and engaging Ōta Nanpo to make them readable? We have little evidence of how widely the work sold. Given its size, the cost would have been prohibitive for many.<sup>26</sup> It seems likely that Matsudaira Sadanobu, who resigned as senior councilor eight years before the project reached completion, had envisioned a more substantial print run than it finally received. Consider, though, that Sadanobu was a fervent believer in the moral and political power of books, as evidenced by his own voluminous reading and writing; his dabbling in the style of popular satirical fiction; and his concern with the ideological influence of commercial print on an expanding readership, which was keen enough to inspire new censorship protocols.<sup>27</sup>

He was also critically concerned with family regeneration. As lord of Shirakawa domain, he had not only sponsored financial incentives for marriage but, in an effort to combat abortion and infanticide, deployed performers: he enlisted Buddhist priests to explicate the dangers of hell with picture scrolls; he dispatched mediums to give voice to the spirits of dead children before village women.<sup>28</sup> As Satō Miyuki points out, these endeavors involved narrative persuasion aimed at the “ears and eyes” of audiences. This is the same confidence in story, and its appeal to feeling, that animates the *Official Records*.<sup>29</sup>

Only a sense of a real readership, I think, can account for the ingenious drama of narratives designed to be gripping. The tale of Kamematsu of Shinano is paradigmatic.<sup>30</sup> On an autumn evening in 1788, Kamematsu and his father are hunting in the mountains when a wolf attacks the father. The youth rushes to his aid, beats the animal with stones, and even tries to poke out its eyeballs with his thumbs. The wolf dies, the father survives, and Kamematsu is rewarded. The text summarizes his achievement: “Kamematsu was eleven this year and a delicate boy, but his ardor in aiding his father was enough to kill such a fierce beast. This was entirely a result of the depth of his filial heart.”<sup>31</sup> The essence of the story is familiar: a protagonist discovers the inner reserves of strength that enable the survival of the family. And the story resonates with others to insist that honoring familial bonds—whether to a paralyzed father, an alcoholic brother, a sickly husband, or a vituperative mother-in-law—is a hard but salvific choice: one as grand as killing a wolf with one’s bare hands. But the thrilling staging of the wolf fight itself seems baffling without an audience. The *Official Records* may surely have been a publishing performance designed to edify the browsers of bookshops. Readers, too, appear indispensable to an effort aimed at familial regeneration through artful instruction.

#### A CHANGING MARKET FOR FICTION

As the compilation of the *Official Records* was under way, changes were taking place in the world of popular fiction. Because of the heightened censorship protocols introduced by Matsudaira Sadanobu, writers and publishers grew cautious about material that might be thought to harbor politically satirical subtexts and, consequently, shifted away from the sophisticated humor ascendant in the 1780s to more accessible and moralistic plots that might prove popular among the increasingly literate consumers in the provinces. The question was, What material would sell best?<sup>32</sup>

Sales from the mid-1790s indicated that revenge plots might be key to larger markets. Nansenshō Somahito, for example, published in 1795 *The Blossoming of a Righteous Woman: A Revenge* (*Katakiuchi gijo no hanabusa*), an unexpected hit featuring a beautiful young woman who, unwittingly entangled in a vengeance between her fiancé and her father, sacrifices herself to save them both.<sup>33</sup> *Blossoming* is plot-driven, straightforward, derivative, and infused with a simple pathos



rooted in family relationships. Its success helped push publishers and writers toward the formulas of revenge narratives. Featuring a murder in the first pages and a vengeance in the last, the plots appeared compelling even to inexperienced readers and—as studies in filial piety—were relatively safe from censorship. For all their violence and fantasy, moreover, they focused on affectively charged family dilemmas that readers from different walks of life could recognize at some level. Like the compilers of the *Official Records*, the producers of revenge fiction treated the drama of the family as a door to the heart of the common reader.

In the wake of *Blossoming of a Righteous Woman*, revenge works appeared with great frequency throughout the 1790s and, in the first years of the nineteenth century, flooded the fiction market.<sup>34</sup> Shikitei Sanba's complaints about the pressure to fabricate plots are illuminated by the career of Santō Kyōden, whose works I analyze below.<sup>35</sup> Kyōden was a best-selling author of (among other genres) illustrated fiction, a type of book in which narration and dialogue are written into the blank spaces of the illustrations that dominate each page.<sup>36</sup> He turned to the revenge theme in earnest in 1804, a year in which roughly half of the sixty works of illustrated fiction published in Edo were revenge tales.<sup>37</sup> By 1806, three of Kyōden's five illustrated works for the year were revenge tales, and the following year, it was five out of five. By 1809, however, he began relegating vengeance to a subplot and ceased putting "revenge" into his titles, and by 1810, the craze for vengeance had largely run its course—in Kyōden's fiction and in the publishing market in general.

Vengeance held a privileged place in Tokugawa law as one of the few acts of deadly violence permitted to nonofficials: an avenger could licitly redress the murder of a senior family member after applying for, and securing in advance, the approval of authorities. Instances of licit revenge were, in fact, rare under the Tokugawa regime (perhaps one hundred successful revenges over 270 years of rule).<sup>38</sup> But their spectacular quality captured the imagination of audiences on both the page and the stage throughout the Edo period. Authors and playwrights varied considerably in their treatment of revenge. If the conventions required murders at the beginning and the end of the action, the intervening plots unfolded with exceptional moral ambiguity in the work of Ihara Saikaku, for example, and kaleidoscopic emotional complexity in *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers* (*Kanadehon chūshingura*, 1748). My focus here, the illustrated revenge fiction from the turn of the nineteenth century, turned away from all such subtlety, however, to rely on formulas lacking in irony or equivocation. Writers eschewed realism, relied on ideological tropes and stereotypical characters, and delivered unadorned prose further distilled by illustration. Very few based their tales on historical episodes. The results became so clichéd, grumbled Shikitei Sanba that "this one or that one—they're all alike, all dancing to the same tune. Look at the illustrations alone, and you've already grasped the plot of the whole thing!"<sup>39</sup>

The same goes for the casts of characters. One good son resembles the next. Much like the protagonists in the *Official Records*, each lead figure is exemplary.





FIGURE 10.1. The poor but harmonious family at the outset of *The Women of Okazaki*.

From Santō Kyōden, *The Women of Okazaki: A Revenge* (*Katakiuchi Okazaki joroshu*, 1807). Courtesy of Waseda University Library.

Children are always filial, wives loyal, siblings committed to one another. And each, to signal lofty character, is attractive and intelligent. These characters make up typically small households enacting the core Confucian relations of husband and wife, parent and child, sibling and sibling.<sup>40</sup> They conventionally belong, moreover, to the samurai community, perhaps because revenge literature arose when vengeance was primarily a prerogative of warriors. Although commoners engaged in licit vengeance by the mid-Edo period, they seldom appear in the fiction.<sup>41</sup> Still, the samurai protagonists remain sufficiently accessible—they are variously low ranking, impoverished, or living in obscurity as *rōnin*—to appeal to a range of readers.

More important, the appeal of the stories turns not on any particular actor but the collectivity of the household as their true protagonist. The point is best conveyed by the illustrations, which are critical to each tale. For example, *The Women of Okazaki: A Revenge* (*Katakiuchi Okazaki joroshu*, 1807), by Santō Kyōden, opens with an image of a three-generational *ie* gathered about the hearth in a run-down dwelling (fig. 10.1). The aging head and his wife sit close to the fire; an unmarried daughter massages the father's shoulders; the heir and his wife work nearby, weaving sedge hats to provide some income; their four-year-old son lies asleep behind a screen. Everyone is smiling. The heir's



FIGURE 10.2. The avenging family rewarded and celebrated at the story's end.

From Santō Kyōden, *The Women of Okazaki: A Revenge* (*Katakiuchi Okazaki joroshu*, 1807). Collection of the author.

wife addresses her mother-in-law: “What do you think, mother? We may be poor, but with such filial children, could anything be more delightful?”<sup>42</sup> This family—content, hard-working, affectionate, and united—would not be out of place in the *Official Records*.

In the illustration that closes the story, the household is united again, but this time in fine clothing and arranged around an auspicious botanical display (fig. 10.2). The members have also changed. We see the aged mother, the heir (now the household head), and his young son. We also see the younger sister and her newly acquired husband. Absent are the aging father and the daughter-in-law. Even so, the members again express their contentment: “Nothing could be as happy as this!” “Our former sufferings now seem like an old tale.”

Together, the images encapsulate a narrative focused more on the household unit than any individual player. As portrayed here and throughout these illustrated revenge works, the family is united (if impoverished) at the outset and then imperiled by an act of murderous violence. Subsequently cast out from home, the protagonists take to the road where, in disguise and frequently close to starvation, they endure punishing hardships before accomplishing their redeeming acts of revenge. The face of the household changes as some members die and others assume new roles. Yet through the act of revenge the family achieves recognition

from authorities (typically with full reintegration into the social order) and recovers security.

In fundamental ways, the narrative mimics the accounts in the *Official Records*: an idealized family faces crisis but, through sacrifice, achieves recognition and security. Drama is paramount, however, as murder supplants more prosaic trouble and the road epitomizes vulnerability and isolation. Extremity is further heightened by the introduction of villains who personify affliction (they are calamity made flesh) and choices that put moral imperatives in collision and lives on the line. Still, the addition of villains and existential choices ultimately reinforces the worldview of the *Official Records*: the family, as the essential unit of identity and meaning, must somehow cohere if futures are possible.

The villain is typically a loner, unfettered by the bonds of affection or obligation, who is loyal to no one but himself. Authorities provide little protection against him. Thus, for example, the villain in *The Women of Okazaki* is Kanpeita, an unemployed samurai depicted as large, terrifying, clothed in black, and capped with wild hair. When his bribes and threats fail to persuade the virtuous father to permit a marriage with his younger daughter, Kampeita murders the father, kidnaps the daughter, and bludgeons to death the daughter-in-law who intervenes. These acts set in motion the quest for vengeance. In killing the villain, the avengers will enact a fantasy of human control over the evil forces he represents and symbolically assert the power of a united family over avaricious self-interest.

Their corporate commitment is underscored by the chilling choices family members are willing to make on the way to executing justice. In *The Women of Okazaki*, the heir Sagorō (son of the murdered household head and husband of the murdered daughter-in-law) finds himself in a triple bind: he must avenge his dead father, care for his ailing mother, and serve as father and mother alike to his young son. As the family slides into poverty and starvation, Sagorō discovers that his mother has been feeding her own meager ration to his son. He prepares to make a horrible sacrifice:

"In China there was a case of a filial son who buried his child under the earth [to save his parents]. If I can bring myself to kill my son, then I can tend to my mother." He quietly beckoned the child into the shadows. Because he was just four years old, he was completely innocent. Seeing his father beckoning him, he thought, "Maybe he will give me some rice." When Sagorō saw him looking so happy, he felt pierced to the heart and began to cry.<sup>43</sup>

His mother is making a similarly drastic decision:

"Because Sagorō is a filial son, he treats me with care but gives my grandson just scraps, and he himself goes without eating for days at a time. Recently he looks so thin and weak, not at all the way he looked in the past. I've turned out to be an obstacle to the revenge, and my grandson is so pitiable as well. Since I'm just a useless old person, it's better that I end my life." Resolving to die, she began praying the





FIGURE 10.3. Virtuous violence brings the family to the verge of self-destruction.

From Santō Kyōden, *The Women of Okazaki: A Revenge* (*Katakiuchi Okazaki joroshu*, 1807). Courtesy of Waseda University Library.

*nenbutsu*, picked up a razor, and was ready to slit her throat. Sagorō knew nothing of this. Without telling his mother, and careful that she not suspect, he dragged his son outside, stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth, drew the dagger attached to his scabbard, and was just about to stab the child in the throat.<sup>44</sup>

The illustration depicts the household at this moment (fig. 10.3). Starkly unlike the harmonious family portrayed when the narrative opened, the members face away from one other as the mother touches a blade to her throat and Sagorō raises a dagger against a terrified child pinned to the ground.

The paradox here is inescapable: the very selflessness that demonstrates familial virtue puts the family at risk of extinction. Sagorō's house cannot survive suicide and infanticide. By posing choices that push virtue to violent limits, the revenge fiction assails the reader's emotions, and in so doing introduces questions about the viability of ethical imperatives for households in extremis.

Only to forestall those questions. For, just as the blades are raised, a voice calls out from the gate, "Wait!" And there appears the lost daughter-in-law—Sagorō's wife, the child's mother—who, bludgeoned earlier by the villain, has seemingly returned from the grave. (We will learn that the apparition is a magical bird who has assumed the wife's form to rescue the family.) With this supernatural

intervention, the family recovers. Sagorō and his mother put away their blades and the child rushes to his mother's breast. The apparition addresses Sagorō:

"I see that you are suffering from extreme poverty, but now that I am here we can work as husband and wife, take care of your mother, raise our son, and finally attain our goal. Until we achieve that long-cherished desire, it is important that you take good care of yourself, so do not suffer over things or let yourself get ill." Comforted in this way, Sagorō regained his strength and his mother was as happy as if she had been brought back to life.<sup>45</sup>

Thus restored, the family is able to undertake a successful vengeance.

The whiplash of the narrative, which transforms tragedy into recovery with the turn of a page, conveys competing lessons. On the one hand, it appears to insist that a family kept intact (in this instance by the return of the wife and mother) can withstand even poverty and violence to compose the lovely tableau that closes the story. Union overcomes adversity, devotion enables the mastery of circumstances, and suffering brings reward. And by spotlighting basic relationships and primal horrors (as a father raises a sword over his son), the narrative appeals emotionally to readers of all stations, inviting them to identify with the protagonists and take pleasure in the lesson of strength through cohesion. On the other hand, however, this story appears to insist that the family cannot save itself. The returned wife is no member of a resilient household but a miraculous apparition. What reader can count on supernatural intervention?

#### THE DEUS EX MACHINA

The self-help urged throughout the *Official Records*, wherein families face hardship largely alone, is not absolute, of course, since outsiders sometimes assist the virtuous protagonists and authorities ultimately reward them. The revenge fiction moves well beyond such friendly intervention, though, to stage rescues, in the face of disaster, by miracle. Deus ex machina plot twists become increasingly common in the later, longer works of illustrated revenge fiction, as plots become more convoluted and the casts of characters more thickly populated. Why should this be so? If the point really is that families cannot survive as autonomous units, no matter how ardent their members, why introduce fantastic salvation rather than conventional forms of support? If the point is that fanatical virtue is more dangerous than hardship, why save families in moments of peril rather than letting them destroy themselves? Is the point simply that the miraculous meets a need for more and more plot convolutions in ever-longer works dependent on cliffhangers to maintain excitement?

The identity of the deus ex machina, which is never random, helps point to an answer. In *The Women of Okazaki*, the savior is a female mandarin duck whose mate had been killed, over the protestations of the family father, by the villain. After the father, too, is slain by that villain, the bird remembers his generous intervention and comes, supernaturally, to the aid of his family (abetting, in the process,

her own quest for vengeance). The rescue is portrayed, then, as the harvest of good deeds: reward awaits those who do right.

But it is also something more. Not simply an act of (fantastical) reciprocity, the rescue is an expression of affective bonds grounded in voluntary attachments and mutual relief rather than the obligations of status or local community. The very strangeness of the *deus ex machina* underscores the idiosyncrasy of relationships formed through feeling and shared goodwill. And it effectively opens up the insular family of revenge fiction to the possibility of new and surprising networks of support. Below the surface magic of the apparition is the deeper magic of expanding social connection.

The affective bonds signified by the *deus ex machina* remained crucial to revenge fiction even as the tight focus on the insular family faded. As the turmoil of the late eighteenth century receded under the impact of the Kansei reforms, writers remained fixed on the family, but in fresh formations. The small, inward-looking household—which represented the virtuous cohesion and self-reliance projected as an antidote to migration, economic unrest, and demographic crisis—never disappeared. Yet the opening up to less conventional relationships exemplified by the *deus ex machina* continued in the increasingly lengthy works of the Bunka era (1804–18). Writers began to look *through* the family to a social landscape beyond its bounds. Exploring how households and individuals could cohere in unconventional varieties of community, they also suggested new approaches to identity. I turn now to an example.

#### INTERLOCKING FAMILIES, NAMELESS COMMUNITIES, NEGOTIABLE IDENTITIES

Near the denouement of Kyōden's *Plovers of the Tamagawa: A Revenge* (*Katakiuchi chidori no Tamagawa*, 1807), the villain Unpachi comes across six statues of the Bodhisattva Jizō on a bleak moor. Floating above the heads of the statues are the heads of six people whom Unpachi has victimized: a samurai whom he murdered in cold blood; the samurai's wife, who rebuffed the villain's advances and later died of illness; an executed man, framed by the villain for a crime he did not commit; that man's wife, who, kidnapped before her marriage and sold into a brothel by the villain, ultimately died mad; and her sister, who committed suicide out of grief. The sixth head belongs to Unpachi's mother, who slit her throat because of her son's terrible deeds. The heads glare fiercely at Unpachi and cry out the crimes he has committed against them.

Aligned side by side in the illustration, they evoke a terrifying, otherworldly community—men and women, old and young, samurai and townsmen—called into existence by Unpachi's seemingly random violence and bound together by rancor (fig. 10.4). But they are also bound by multiple connections—of blood, marriage, obligation, and goodwill—that had united them in life. These surprising connections



FIGURE 10.4. The deathly community of victims confronts Unpachi, in *Plovers of the Tamagawa*. From Santō Kyōden, *Plovers of the Tamagawa: A Revenge* (*Katakiuchi chidori no Tamagawa*, 1807). Courtesy of Waseda University Library.

are at the heart of a story that, in the end, is less about the disorder Unpachi wreaks on households than about the support the characters find in one another.

Thus, in an early episode of the story, we find the samurai and his wife helping the kidnapped courtesan to reunite with her family and, subsequently, to marry her lover. And before that lover is framed by Unpachi for a crime he did not commit, we find the same samurai couple helping him reconcile with his merchant father (who had disinherited him). These good turns are reciprocated. After the murder of the samurai, his widow and young daughter rely for support on both the natal and marital relatives of the courtesan. Unpachi sows misery; his victims give strength to one another.

Crucially, this strength derives from affective relations rather than social structures or conventional obligation. Rooted in chance encounters on the road that bind strangers across class and geography, the bonds are neither normative nor hierarchical, but horizontal and voluntary. And there is no suggestion that they are enabled by official activity and benevolent governance. If anything, the bonds provide a bulwark against disorder in the realm, even the failures of rulers themselves. The murdered samurai's wife and daughter turn to the former courtesan's family because they have been cast out by a cruel lord. When the courtesan's lover is wrongly executed, the culprit remains at large. The authorities guarantee neither protection nor justice.



If Unpachi brings the households together through his transgressions, the samurai's daughter, Kosan, brings them together through virtuous vengeance. Orphaned by the murder of her father and the death of her mother on the road, she remains committed to avenging her natal house even as she comes to play the role of "daughter" in a succession of other houses. Kosan acts as daughter to the ransomed courtesan and her merchant husband; then to their childless relatives; then to the courtesan's father-in-law, a wealthy bathhouse proprietor in Osaka. These families, like puzzle pieces, keep finding new ways to fit together in the face of disaster. When Kosan exacts revenge on Unpachi, she does so as the daughter of her slain father as well as of the households she enters subsequently. She is the lynchpin of a community without a name.

This vision of community—cross-class, translocal networks shifting in shape—is not without danger, since characters who assume multiple roles in multiple households in multiple locales forfeit clear family identities. Unexpected complications ensue. They arise for Kosan after she is adopted by the bathhouse proprietor and later meets, falls in love with, and marries the handsome young Kingorō. But once she discloses to him her true identity and requests aid in avenging her natal father, Kingorō blanches. He, too, had been orphaned when young and adopted into a childless household, Kingorō tells his wife. Fatefully, his birth father was a retainer of Kosan's birth father: "Had I known you were the daughter of my master, I never would have married you! Please, take this letter of separation and return to your home." Kosan sobs into her sleeve and replies: "How cruel of you. Please, think this over carefully!"<sup>46</sup>

In this tangle of identities, where do the obligations of the protagonists lie? Kosan and Kingorō married as members of unrelated adoptive households. Neither was born when their fathers were master and retainer. And they married for love. So, what now? The ethos of the *Official Records* would favor Kingorō: the prior and hierarchical relationship between the two families requires setting aside feeling to separate. Kosan thinks otherwise: "Even if long ago [our fathers] were bound as master and retainer, I have fallen in the world." She continues: "With my adoptive father as parent, I married you. Do not now think of me as the daughter of your master and create a barrier between our hearts!"<sup>47</sup> While Kingorō elevates a preordained obligation over feeling, Kosan imagines a variety of identities among which she can choose. In her quest for revenge, she affirms the bond to her natal house. In her defense of the marriage to Kingorō, she affirms the role of adopted daughter to a merchant. She crafts multiple selves without sacrificing virtue.

Kosan is the hero of the narrative; Kingorō is no match in intelligence and bravery. When the author puts the argument for self-fashioning in her mouth, he makes it the effective point of the story. Without intimating absolute self-determination or moral relativism, Kosan declares the freedom to align complex obligations at will and to navigate disparate identities through choice. Here we find a remarkable departure not only from the *Official Records* but from earlier revenge fiction as

well. Remember that the heroine of *Blossoming of a Righteous Woman*, when caught between the obligations of wife and daughter, resolves the conflict through suicide.

Kingorō follows Kosan's lead and adjusts his interpretive frame: "For me, [the murderer of your father] is the enemy of my master! Whatever it takes, I will use all my strength to help you cut him down. Have no fear!"<sup>48</sup> The decision allows the two to stay together both as spouses and as partners in revenge. Kingorō's concerns about marriage to his "master's daughter" are quietly forgotten. But not quite, at least by the author if not by his characters. Once vengeance is achieved, the happy ending finds Kingorō rewarded with the very office and stipend previously held by his master, which, by erasing the status distinction between husband and wife, restores hierarchical propriety. This intervention suggests a need to right the status order for readers. Yet even more powerfully, I think, it affirms the boldness of the boundary-crossing at the heart of the story.

So, have we entered a moral landscape very different from the terrain of the *Official Records* and earlier revenge fiction? Yes and no. If the earlier texts indicate that hard sacrifices must be made among multiple roles and obligations, Kosan's story indicates that the multiplicity itself provides opportunities for self-definition that can be liberating. Still, the choices cannot be made with impunity or from selfish interest. The only character who switches identities heedlessly is the villain Unpachi. Nor does Kosan's story intimate that the household, with its hierarchical roles and ethical imperatives, is a source of oppression rather than stability and protection. Rather, Kosan's example suggests that in an unpredictable world, finding stability may require more than cleaving to conventional visions of the family. It may require an embrace of community and identity as dynamic, fluid, and elective.

#### CONCLUSION: FAMILY LEGACIES

The focus on Kosan's choices in *The Plovers of Tamagawa* points to subsequent directions in popular fiction. Decades of good harvests and population growth redirected writers from small households that must sacrifice to survive to widely connected households that embrace novel forms of community and supple visions of identity. While the families portrayed in the revenge boom had linked audiences throughout Japan as a reading public, the families of the next wave asked them to consider what held the social body together.

Thus, in *A Pure Tale of the Peak's First Flowers* (*Seidan mine no hatsu hana*, 1819), Jippensha Ikku tells the story of Sutegorō, the son of a poor *rōnin* who had been adopted into a merchant household when his parents died.<sup>49</sup> Disinherited through no fault of his own, Sutegorō wanders the realm, finds work in various corners of the merchant world, and—once reunited with a lost love—rediscovers his samurai lineage and achieves success. Again, self-fashioning is the theme. But the emotions that bind the hero to his merchant and samurai families come

to the fore in what is regarded as the first “book of sentiment” (*ninjōbon*), a genre that would flourish through the end of the Edo period. The genre picks up, in a semi-realistic mode, the ideas explored in the story of Kosan, even as it insists with greater clarity that voluntary ties of affection are the source of union.

Fiction in a fantastic register likewise probed the changeable aspects of identity and the tensions between elective and normative communities. Kyokutei Bakin’s *Eight Dog Chronicles* (*Nansō Satomi hakkenden*), arguably the most celebrated work of early modern fiction, focuses on eight mystically connected brothers who have been born from the wombs of different mothers, setting up a tangle of familial identities. This massive historical fantasy, published serially from 1814 to 1842, hinges on kaleidoscopic networks of social connection and *deus ex machina* plot twists that push the protagonists into situations where they must choose among family relationships of blood, affection, and supernatural affinity. And because the brothers must ultimately work together to restore a fallen lord’s house and bring order to the domain, it links the consequences of those choices to the health of the polity. The work builds to a conclusion in which all relationships are at last clarified, fitting together like a magnificent puzzle. But the path to that idealized finale revels in explorations of the messiness of identity and the contingent aspects of familial and social bonds.

In retrospect, then, the decade of the *Official Records* and the revenge boom seems a unique (and peculiar) moment, both for its emphasis on an idealized, insular vision of the family and for the alignment of official and popular investment in that vision as a bulwark against social dissolution. The moment would not be repeated. The trajectories of the revenge theme and the *Official Records* project present a stark contrast after the 1820s, as stability once more ceded ground to famine and unrest. As Satoko Shimazaki has shown, revenge as a narrative of family restoration gave way on the kabuki stage to a fascination with the vengeance of female ghosts like Oiwa, who, murdered by her husband, returns to unleash her violent rancor upon the living in *Ghost Stories at Yotsuya* (*Yotsuya kaidan*, 1825). Oiwa points away from the supple identity choices of Kosan to a solipsistic obsession with personal grievance.<sup>50</sup> She inaugurates a popular celebration of protagonists who resemble the villains of earlier revenge fiction: shapeshifters beholden to no one but themselves who violently unravel the traditional stays of family and polity. By the chaotic last decade of Tokugawa rule, hoodlums, thieves, and murderers had become the great heroes of the stage.

By contrast, the shogunate responded to the turbulent circumstances of mid-century with a new raft of reforms and then, in 1848, attempted to launch a sequel to the *Official Records*. The authorities’ return to an investment in the self-sacrificing family as a social bulwark seems quaint in comparison with the growing celebration of ghosts and gangsters. The project reached ninety volumes before unaccountably stalling.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps it was deemed too costly, or possibly the authorities feared it wouldn’t sell. But I see the project’s failure as emblematic of a simple

resignation: this time the problems facing the realm were greater than even the most resolute family could solve.

## NOTES

1. Shikitei Sanba 1805, 2-ura. The passage can also be found quoted in modern print in Honda 1973, 97.
2. Totman 1993, 249–59; Drixler 2013.
3. Drixler 2013, 130.
4. In 1786, for example, elderly beggars came flooding into the metropolis singing and performing an “eerie, trancelike” dance. Ooms 1975, 75.
5. Iwabuchi 2014, 202.
6. Drixler 2013, 130–35.
7. Satō 1996, in particular 71–74.
8. My articulation of this aspect of the argument is influenced by Sarah C. Maza’s discussion of the role of literary depictions of the family in the imagination of social fusion in late-eighteenth-century France. Maza 2003, 61–68.
9. Sugano 1999, 494.
10. Sugano 1999, 494.
11. Domains in which similar compilations had already been produced included Tsu, Aizu, Chikuzen, Tosa, Obama, and Higo. Sugano 1999, 501.
12. The sole, unexplained exception is Hida Province.
13. Sugano Noriko provides a convenient table of the number of cases in a compendium broken down by “reign era and categories of virtue.” Sugano 2003, 174–75.
14. The full list, included in the work’s introductory explanatory notes, consists of filial piety (*kōgi*), loyalty (*chūgi*), loyal filiality (*chūkō*), female fidelity (*teisetsu*), brotherly harmony (*kyōdai mutsumaji*), familial harmony (*kanai mutsumaji*), harmony in lineage (*ichizoku mutsumaji*), appropriateness in manners and customs (*fūzoku yoroshi*), purity (*kepaku*), exemplarity (*kitoku*), and diligence in agriculture (*nōgyō shusse*). *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 1, p. 3. For the 60 percent figure, see Sugano 2003, 173.
15. These guidelines are expressed in the sixth entry of the explanatory notes at the start of the compendium. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 1, p. 4.
16. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 1, p. 3; Sugano 2003, 172.
17. Sugano 1999, 498. Sugano notes that, as Confucian scholars, the editors were more accustomed to writing in *kanbun* than in Japanese.
18. Kobayashi 2014, 46–47.
19. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 1, p. 3.
20. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 3, p. 5.
21. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 2, pp. 252–53.
22. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 2, pp. 252–53.
23. Sugano 2003, 178–79.
24. Sugano 2003, 173.
25. Van Steenpaal 2009, 47–50.
26. For the information we have concerning the work’s publication, see Sugano 1999, 494–96. Unfortunately, we do not know how many copies were produced, though the

National Diet Library does possess a complete copy of the fifty-volume work. Sugano (2003) comments, “Anecdotal evidence suggests that a variety of people ended up acquiring it, including women,” and also suggests the possibility that “instead of the entire text the *bakufu* sold or sent only the relevant chapters to each domain” (172).

27. On Sadanobu’s extensive reading and writing, see Ooms 1975, 23–26. On his venture into satirical writing, which combined playful and morally suasive intent, see Iwasaki 1983, 1–19.

28. Ooms 1975, 57; Satō 1997, 35–36.

29. Satō 1997, 36.

30. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 1, pp. 275–76.

31. *Kankoku kōgiroku* 1999, vol. 1, p. 276.

32. Tanahashi 2012, 28–31; Kimura 2009, 131–36.

33. Nansenshō Somahito 1983.

34. Tanahashi 2012, 30. The contemporary writer Kyokutei Bakin identified the height of the demand for revenge works as the end of the Kyōwa era (1801–4) and the beginning of the Bunka era (1804–18). Kyokutei Bakin 2014, 35, 294.

35. To limit my scope, I focus on revenge works by Santō Kyōden. Though not primarily remembered for his revenge fiction today, Kyōden was a pioneer of the theme in popular fiction. His works helped set the standard for the duration of the revenge boom, and many of the aspects I discuss about them extend to the body of illustrated revenge fiction as a whole.

36. I use “illustrated fiction” to translate the term *kusazōshi*. The revenge boom played out in the pages of its two subgenres *kibyōshi* and *gōkan*.

37. Hayashi 1987, 13.

38. This number is based on the table found in Hiraide (1909) 1990, 99–106. Some of the examples found in the table, however, are likely apocryphal, so the number is probably lower.

39. Shikitei Sanba 1805, 1-ura.

40. The one exception is the occasional inclusion of a loyal retainer, in narratives in which the family is of high enough samurai standing to employ a retainer. This retainer typically embodies the virtue of “loyalty.”

41. Hiraide (1909) 1990, 99–106. According to Hiraide’s table, after 1750 the rate of revenges carried out by nonsamurai begins to equal and at times exceed that of samurai revenges.

42. Santō Kyōden 1995b, 148.

43. Santō Kyōden 1995b, 170.

44. Santō Kyōden 1995b, 171.

45. Santō Kyōden 1995b, 174.

46. Santō Kyōden 1995a, 91.

47. Santō Kyōden 1995a, 90.

48. Santō Kyōden 1995a, 91.

49. Jippensha Ikku 1995.

50. Shimazaki 2016.

51. Sugano 1999, 496–97.

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