

## The Medusa, the Centaur, and the Dragon-Goddess: An Indirect Look at Benzaiten

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The massive two-volume masterpiece, *Gods of Medieval Japan*,<sup>1</sup> is both immense and “fluid,” something that, at least in my mind, resists easy categorization and continually multiplies. Reflecting on it as a whole somehow called to mind the story of Proteus in the *Odyssey*, in which Menelaus holds the shape-shifting demigod through many forms, including that of a serpent and water, in order to get the information he needs. These specific thoughts of Proteus led me to further thoughts on Greek mythology, which in turn led me to the specific feminist lens I have chosen to bring to bear on Dr. Faure’s work—and that is the challenge and the possibility presented by combinatory bodies—transgressive bodies that burst traditional boundaries of meaning.

In *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender*, the second part of a larger project that began with *The Red Thread*, Faure observes that “Transgression may seem more ‘natural’ to women...because of their social position as marginals in a male-dominated symbolic order.”<sup>2</sup> This insight resonates when examining the goddesses of medieval Japan, particularly insofar as they both highlight continued areas of challenge for women and women’s identities, but at the same time, they suggest new possibilities as well. This is particularly true in the case of Benzaiten.

In what follows, then, I take two figures from Greek mythology—the centaur and Medusa—and use them as a way to read and interpret the

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1. Bernard Faure, *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 1: The Fluid Pantheon*; and *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 2: Protectors and Predators* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015–2016).

2. Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 337.

body of the goddess Benzaiten and better understand how her ability to shapeshift, to combine and recombine, to simultaneously manifest traditionally male and female characteristics, both reveals challenges for women's identity in Medieval Japan but also opens up fertile ways of thinking about what it means to be a woman and the interpretation of women's experience. To be clear, these two figures do not presume any overall typology or the assumption of any universals about Greek mythology, women's bodies, or medieval Japanese gods. Instead, I am utilizing them as a means of making a particular feminist critique of the body of Benzaiten in particular, and, by extension women's bodies in medieval Japan, which might have something to offer an analysis of women's bodies today as well.

#### FAURE AND FEMINIST THOUGHT

Before diving into the specific topic of my paper, I want to make one general observation. Those who know Faure's work will not be surprised to hear that his overarching approach and scholarly commitments are quite congenial to feminist thought in general, and there are many points of concord between them. In *The Power of Denial*, he cites Hélène Cixous' statement that feminine texts are texts that strive in the direction of difference; he observes that, if that is true, "my work [he says] can be said to possess a certain feminine quality, one apparently at odds with my gender and sex."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, throughout the two volumes of *Gods of Medieval Japan*, Faure lifts up favorably the blurring of boundaries and the nonduality and interpenetration between deities. So, for example, in his chapter discussing Aizen and Fudō, he describes the many different ways they relate, including as counterpoints, a nondual pair, a symbolic sexual union, two literal birds of a feather, and a polarity of life and death—and this is all before a third deity is added to the mix: Kōjin, as one possibility, or Amaterasu.<sup>4</sup>

The list of characteristics he emphasizes in his analysis of Japanese deities includes the following: they are perceived as liminal; they have a secret, mysterious nature; they are always ambiguous and can even be malevolent; they stand at the intersection of various religious currents; and their very existence invites us to question the traditional

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3. Faure, *The Power of Denial*, 19.

4. Faure, *The Fluid Pantheon*, chap. 5.

models of medieval Japanese religion.<sup>5</sup> All of these characteristics are particularly conducive to feminist analysis. So, in what follows, I am building on a “thread” that Faure himself considers central to his study.

#### THE CENTAUR

I begin with the centaur. In this article, the centaur represents the challenge of a transgressive body. In Greek mythology, centaurs were said to be descended from gods but trapped in a liminal state in which their animal and human natures were in conflict. Often, they were depicted as dangerous, violent, and unpredictable, as in the famous painting by Peter Paul Rubens, *Rape of Hippodamia*. (It should be noted that the centaur Chiron is remarkable as an exception; he was said to have tutored some of the greatest Greek heroes, including Achilles, Aeneas, and Hercules.)

Margaret Miles, in her book, *Beyond the Centaur*, opens with this description: “usually a man, with a human head and torso, joined at the waist to the body of a horse, described....as perpetually struggling with its two natures: wild as an untamed horse, he was also a civilized human being.”<sup>6</sup> She argues that this same tension between the physical and the mental—between the “angel” and the “beast”—is present in every human, and it creates a dichotomy that only can be resolved by imagining the human being as an integrated “intelligent body.”

The point of her argument that is most relevant for this analysis is that when we think differently about bodies we actually *experience* the world differently, and thereby open up new avenues for meaning-making—about ourselves, others, and the world at large.<sup>7</sup> In this context she discusses the concept of the “docile body.” Miles argues that intelligent bodies are bodies that move—that dynamic movement is actually our “primary way of making sense of the world.”<sup>8</sup> The alternative to the intelligent body is the “docile body,” the body that is “manipulated, shaped, trained....shaped in societies according to gender roles and expectations.”<sup>9</sup> And, perhaps to no one’s surprise, this is particularly true for female bodies. Thus, one might argue that one challenge

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5. Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 331.

6. Margaret Miles, *Beyond the Centaur* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), ix.

7. *Ibid.*, 42.

8. *Ibid.*, 49.

9. *Ibid.*, 51.

of a “divided” or “transgressive” body is its lack of agency (passive rather than active, fragmented rather than cohesive) and its inability to engage the world out of an integrated identity.

#### THE MEDUSA

The Medusa, by contrast, represents the fertile and sundry possibilities of a transgressive body. Medusa is herself a goddess—or at least, she is descended from gods. She is Gorgon, a woman with wings and snakes for hair. She is terrifying, and gazing directly upon her turns the viewer into stone—one can only gaze at her indirectly, or through a mirror. However, later mythology also included beauty, as well as terror, as part of her aspect; Ovid recounts that originally she was a beautiful maiden who was turned into a monster by Athena after Medusa was raped by Poseidon in Athena’s temple. (Ovid tries to tell us that this punishment is somehow deserved, but I am suspicious.) Athena carries a grudge, and it is she who helps the demigod Perseus hunt her down; he eventually decapitates her. However, beauty continues to flow from her blood: the white winged horse, Pegasus, springs from her torso; and Medusa’s head ultimately ends up on Athena’s shield, which itself is a powerful symbol of wisdom and justice.

A more modern, feminist interpretation of Medusa was inaugurated with H el ene Cixous’ essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” published in 1976. The title of the essay is somewhat misleading; Medusa herself only shows up in little more than one sentence, which reads as follows: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”<sup>10</sup> The essay itself, however, does not look at her straight on: it only hints at her presence, assumes her presence, even as her body looms over the whole—a body that is dark, stormy, breaking loose; a body that demands to be heard; a body that flies, a body that loves, a body that “depropriates unselfishly”—a “cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros.”<sup>11</sup> Medusa, then, represents the fecund possibilities of a fluid body, a body made of parts. I argue that Benzaiten embodies both the challenges and the possibilities of a transgressive body and suggests how those same tensions also are present for women in medieval Japanese society.

10. H el ene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 885.

11. *Ibid.*, 889.

## THE GODDESS: BENZAITEN

Benzaiten's identity is complex and multivalent, and the fullness of her expression is beyond the scope of this article, so what follows is only a small selection of her dynamic manifestations—an indirect look, perhaps, not a direct gaze.<sup>12</sup> Faure begins his chapter on Benzaiten proper by noting that while she has her origins in Sarasvatī, she is more than a pretty lute player: while she was seen in Japan as a goddess of music, she also was viewed as the protector of warriors and a goddess of wealth and fertility.<sup>13</sup> Not only in her person, but also in her choice of worshippers she refuses easy categorization.

In this way, she also symbolizes the tensions around women who did not keep their place: for medieval Japanese Buddhists, “[Benzaiten] was not only a woman, but a dragon and a snake as well.”<sup>14</sup> This follows directly from the suspicions around women's duplicitous identity in general: as Faure quotes, “a woman...outwardly may look like a bodhisattva, but in her heart she is like a *yakṣa*.”<sup>15</sup> This point is emphasized in the medieval story of her appearance to Minamoto no Yoriie; he is seduced by her beauty, but when he asks her to reveal her true form, she shows herself as a large snake with horns, whose terrifying presence is heralded by a “putrid wind.” No wonder, then, that Faure describes her as a “Janus-faced deity...not only a goddess but also a *nāga*—that is, an animal.”<sup>16</sup>

This association with snakes—and then also with dragons—comes up repeatedly, linking her not only to the animal world but also to the natural world, more specifically to water: “The connection is through the mysterious powers of the fertilizing rain, and its extensions in running streams, lakes, and marshes. In common belief as in literature, the dark, wet side of nature showed itself alternatively in women and in dragons.”<sup>17</sup> This “dark side” comes through in a variety of ways, in a variety of stories, such that “although she seeks deliverance, she

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12. For example, I am not going to discuss her overlap with Dakiniten, which Faure discusses in *The Fluid Pantheon*, chap. 3.

13. Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 169.

14. Bernard Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 163.

15. *Ibid.*, 163.

16. *Ibid.*, 179.

17. *Ibid.*, 186.

can be draconian, and one cannot trespass upon her privacy, without danger.”<sup>18</sup>

Benzaiten has another appearance as well, which Faure calls “Uga Benzaiten,” who is somewhat of a hybrid deity between Benzaiten herself and Ugajin—distinct from both, yet also “indebted” to both. It is in this form that we see not only her connections to water, but also to the earth; not only to snakes and dragons, but also to the fox. Yet even here, the snake remains; in the form of Uga Benzaiten, she sometimes even appears fully as a white snake—her female form entirely subsumed.

So, having said all this, I now want to return to the images of the centaur and Medusa, asking how Benzaiten is perhaps like both, with the challenges and opportunities each suggests. As noted previously, in Miles’s interpretation, the centaur represents the limitations and challenges of a transgressive body, and even perhaps the lack of agency such a body entails; pulled between two contradictory natures, it is difficult to act with deliberation and consistency.

Thinking about this as it relates to Benzaiten, then, I wonder if her polyvalence is not also in some sense a limitation: Is it better to be the master of one thing than to have one’s energies diffused in many things? Is one’s agency compromised when one’s manifestations are irrepressibly multiple? Returning to the myth of Proteus for a moment; in the story with Menelaus, Proteus ultimately exhausts himself in his shape-shifting—such changeability takes significant energy. Does her polyvalence siphon activity away from other divine engagements for Benzaiten as well? Are other deities more reliable in their consistency, more trustworthy?

Certainly, it seems that in medieval Japan, women themselves were viewed with suspicion insofar as their own bodies were regarded as a combination of two opposing ideals or natures—human and something other than human, something “animal-like,” even, certainly something closer to nature. It seems that there is a cost to being viewed as “not-one,” as fluid, as transgressive—both for women in general, and perhaps for Benzaiten herself.

Yet, there is a positive side to this fluidity as well, represented by the figure of Medusa. I would argue that Benzaiten also is like Medusa

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18. *Ibid.*, 189.

in that she manifests “all kinds of secret bodies,”<sup>19</sup> bodies that have the capacity to heal and help, as well as wound and punish—beautiful bodies, terrible bodies; bodies that seduce, and bodies that repulse. In this way, Benzaiten exercises power over herself and others by refusing to be easily categorized, defined, and compartmentalized. Ultimately, then, Benzaiten is able to be “more”—more than any one description can contain, more than any one set of rules can confine, and more than any one group of people can control. She is ultimate possibility, rather than finite actuality; and, certainly for some women in medieval Japan, especially those who sought other religious models than what was standard for men, they, too, found possibility in transgression.

At the end of the first volume, *The Fluid Pantheon*, Faure uses the image of “metamorphosis” to describe gods that are elusive, “revealing their traces” as they simultaneously “cover their tracks.”<sup>20</sup> He talks about these deities as selves existing between spaces, subverting and transcending structures, representing what John Law describes as the realm of the “slippery, indistinct, elusive, complex, diffuse, messy, textured, vague, unspecific, confused, disordered, emotional, painful, pleasurable, hopeful horrific, lost, redeemed, visionary, angelic, demonic, mundane, intuitive, sliding, and unpredictable.”<sup>21</sup> This is Benzaiten as Medusa, Benzaiten at her most powerful, at her most original, at her most awe-inspiring. Yet, as all women know, such power comes with a cost—fear, disgust, and hatred at not staying in the lines that society has rigidly drawn for women and women’s agency. After all, inherent to the figure of Medusa are the snakes in her hair.

#### CONCLUSION

Faure ends his chapter on Uga Benzaiten, applying to her the words of José Ortega y Gasset: “Benzaiten is an ‘ontological centaur, half immersed in nature, half transcending it.’ ”<sup>22</sup> As I hope to have shown, this transgressive existence—this multiple existence—that characterizes Benzaiten contains within itself both potential and limitation. She sacrifices all that comes with stability, security, and clear explanation for the sake of possibility, uncertainty, and risk. This is dangerous, and

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19. Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 191.

20. Faure, *The Fluid Pantheon*, 323.

21. *Ibid.*, 323.

22. Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 234.

there are some who always will go to great lengths to reign in such deviance, or at the very least reject it and marginalize it.

And yet: as Faure notes, “Gendered symbols have their own dynamics, and they can on occasion fool the ideologues who claim to manipulate them.”<sup>23</sup> Medusa is not so easily dismissed, and sometimes looking at her straight on provides deliverance, not death.

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23. Faure, *The Power of Denial*, 333–334.