

BEOWULF AND THE *BOOK OF SWORDS*:
SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN
SCENES, FEATURES AND EPITHETS¹

Abstract

The Book of Swords, a Japanese analogue of *Beowulf* and a source of *Rashomon*, resemble *Beowulf* in the structure of the three fights but differs in contents. This paper gives common elements of fighting scenes and descriptions of the enemies to the heroes and shows how the two stories differ. **Keywords:** *Beowulf*, *The Book of Swords*, *Rashomon*, Epic structure, Heroes, Comparative studies

Resumen

El *Libro de las Espadas*, un análogo japonés de *Beowulf* y una fuente para *Rashomon*, se parece a *Beowulf* en la estructura de las tres peleas, pero difiere en su contenido. Este artículo ofrece elementos comunes de las escenas de lucha y de descripción de los enemigos de los héroes, y muestra cómo difieren las dos historias. **Palabras clave:** *Beowulf*, *El libro de las espadas*, *Rashomon*, Estructura épica, Héroes, Estudios comparativos.

In Ogura (1998: 64), I concluded that a Japanese analogue *Rashomon*, a fifteenth century Noh-song, had no direct connection with *Beowulf*, even though the arm-taking theme is apparently similar, because there are two crucial differences: “(1) an arm-taking [in *Rashomon*] is neither a killing nor a stage in the killing of the ogre but rather a proof of the fight and a foreshadowing of the plot of the latter half of the story (i.e. the return of the ogre); and (2) the main theme of the latter part is the metamorphosis of a woman into an ogre”. Here in this paper I try to compare the fighting scenes of *Beowulf* with the *Book of Swords* in *Heike* (1215), a source of *Rashomon*,² to show the similarity that derives from

¹ A short Japanese version of the paper was read at a symposium of the annual meeting of The English Literary Society of Japan. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers, whose proper comments made the content of this paper easier to understand.

² Concerning the relationship, see the stemma in Ogura (1998: 64). A prototype of *Rashomon* seems a combination of (1) *Kokinshu* (905), which contains a poem about *Hasbi-hime*, a beautiful lady at the bridge over the River Uji, (2) *Obkagami* (1060), in which a warrior cuts an ogre’s arm off, and (3) *Konjaku* (1100), which contains the stories of a friendly ogre, of a woman ogre at a bridge, and of an elderly mother who turned into an ogre and had her arm cut off. These half-written, half-orally delivered stories must

traditional, narrative techniques, and the differences, i.e. lack of features common to the two texts. The result will confirm the conclusion of my previous article; the two crucial differences found in *Rashomon* originate from the *Book of Swords*. More differences are expected to be added after the close investigation and comparison between the *Book of Swords* and *Beowulf*.

1 THE BOOK OF SWORDS

The *Yashiro* version of the *Book of Swords* in *Heike* consists of two parts: (i) an ogre has its arm cut off by Watanabe-no-Tsuna, the hero, flees away and then returns to take it back in his aunt's disguise, and (ii) Tsuchigumo, a monster spider, is destroyed by Lord Yorimitsu and his retainers, including Tsuna. The two parts tell the origins of the names of the two swords (hence the book is entitled *The Book of Swords*). In the first part, Tsuna goes on horseback down the main road of the capital around midnight, with a sword named Hige-kiri (lit. beard-cutter) on his side. When he comes to a bridge, a young woman asks him to take her to the place she should visit. When they arrive, she asks him to go farther and, all of a sudden, grabs Tsuna's hair (with beard) and cried, "It's Mt Atago I'm heading for!" She reveals herself as an ogre and flies up in the air. Tsuna draws the sword Hige-kiri, cut the ogre's arm off and then falls to the corridor of Kitano Shrine with the arm. Coming back, he consults with Dr Abe-no-Seimei, an astrologist, who advises Tsuna to confine himself at home for seven days, with the ogre's arm sealed in a box by offering a mighty prayer. On the sixth night an aunt of Tsuna, who brought him up in his childhood, comes all the way from his homeland to see him. When he refuses to see her, she blames him for his ruthlessness and cries bitterly. Finally Tsuna opens the door to let her in. She rejoices and, after exchanging words, asks him to show her the ogre's arm. He rejects her request but at last opens the box. She gazes at the arm for a while and, all

have been handed down to make a basis of the prototype, which is now lost, and the *Book of Swords* in *Heike* (1215) is the nearest evidence. There are many versions, but it is only the *Yashiro* version that provides us with the analogue in question, which again appears in *Taiheiki*, Book 32 (c1370), the latter part of the chronicle. Here the quotations translated into English are taken from the 1973 edition of *Heike Monogatari, Yashiro Version* and the 1962 edition of *Taiheiki III* (where Book 32 is recorded).

of a sudden, reveals herself and turns to an ogre, seizes the arm, jumps up to the gable and disappears. Hige-kiri gets its new name Oni-maru (lit. ogre-slayer) after this, even though the ogre has not been slain.

In the second part, Lord Yorimitsu becomes ill in the summer of the same year. After a month's suffering from headache he passes into a slumber in his bedchamber, when a Buddhist priest of two meters tall turns up from behind the candle. The Lord draws his sword Hiza-maru (lit. knee-cutter) and attacks him, who disappears leaving blood-tracks behind. Four chosen warriors, including Tsuna, follow the blood, which led them from the gate of the hall to a mound at Kitano. Warriors break the mound, find a gigantic spider, bind it up and stab it by a huge, pole-like iron stick to show it to people on the river bed. Hiza-maru gets its new name Kumo-kiri (lit. spider-slayer) after this.

We can see the similarity between the *Book of Swords* and *Beowulf* in narrative structure. In the *Book of Swords* an ogre has his arm taken but returns to get it back in the form of a woman, and then a monster spider comes to fight with the hero and his lord. The structure of three fights can be compared with the three great fights in *Beowulf*, i.e. with Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon. But in *Beowulf* the three fights become increasingly harder and the last one results in the hero's death, while in the *Book of Swords* the first two fights are against one ogre, the elderly woman being in fact the ogre in disguise, and the last one is another story of the adventures of Lord Yorimitsu and his retainers; the first two prove the quality of one sword and the bravery of Tsuna, and the last one again the quality of the other sword and the strength of the lord and his retainers. Lord Yorimitsu takes part in many adventures and destroys ogres in various places; these stories are a few among them. The Japanese dragon cannot be an enemy of the hero in these stories, because ever since it was brought from China in the ancient period it signifies a god of water, as it does in many Asian countries, even though it has later been combined with snakes and other creeping creatures.

2 COMMON ELEMENTS IN FIGHTING SCENES

Fry's concept of a type-scene seems useful for an analysis of these narrative stories. In the *Singer of Tales*, Lord called "the group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song the 'theme'

of the poetry” (Lord 1964: 69). Fry differentiated the practice “type-scene” from the concept “theme”. His definitions are: “[A] type-scene is a recurring stereotyped presentation of conventional details used to describe a certain narrative event, requiring neither verbatim repetition nor a specific formula content; and a theme is a recurring concatenation of details and ideas, not restricted to a specific event, verbatim repetitions, or certain formulas, which forms an underlying structure for an action or description” (Fry 1969: 35). I use one of his type-scenes called the “approach to battle”, modify his elements and mine in Ogura (1989), and select the following ten elements seemingly shared by certain fighting scenes. (G stands for the fight with Grendel, GM with Grendel’s mother, D with dragon, Br with Breca, R for Ravenswood, T for Tsuna with ogre, and S with spider.) As the quotations from *Beowulf* I use Klaeber’s 3rd edition, although I refer to the 4th edition whenever necessary. For the Japanese text I use my translation from the facsimile.

(i) *Before the day*

The fighting takes place before the dawn in *Beowulf* but in the night in *Heike*. In the medieval period of Japan, especially from the eighth to the twelfth century, it is believed that all kinds of spooky things like monsters, ogres and ghosts controlled the darkness.

702b–3a	(G)	<i>Com on wanre niht scriðan sceadugenga</i> ‘The shadow-walker came stalking in the dark night’
731b	(G)	<i>ærþon dæg cwome</i> ‘before the day came’
1311b	(GM)	<i>Samod ærdæge</i> ‘with the break of day’
2320b	(D)	<i>ær dæges hwil</i> ‘before the time of day’
565a	(Br)	<i>ac on morgenne</i> ‘but at the daybreak’

- 2942b (R) *somod ærdæge*
'with the break of day'
(T) 'when the night falls'
(S) 'in the deepest night'

(2) *Coming to duru (heall, reced)*

An unexpected approach from outside predicts an omen.

- 720a (G) *Com þa to recede*
'then came to the hall'
721b (G) *Duru sona onarn*
'the door opened at once'
1279a (GM) *Com þa to Heorote*
'then came to Heorot'
(T) 'Someone was knocking at the door of the
bedchamber ... and then at the gate ...'
(S) 'A Buddhist priest, more than two metres tall,
came sneaking from behind the candle'

(3) *Beasts of battle*

This is an important element of Fry's type-scene, but none of the three great fights nor any of Tsuna's fights has a suitable line.

- 2941a (R) [*fuglum*] *to gamene*
'as sport for birds'
3024b-27b (D) *se wonna hrefn ... earne ... wulf*
'the black raven ... the eagle ... the wolf'

(4) *Bearing of equipments*

This is the most important element in the *Book of Swords*, because the two swords are the main theme of these stories. Beowulf fights against Grendel without a sword or a coat of mail, as read in lines 671-674. During the fight against Grendel's mother and after he loses Hrunting, Beowulf finds a sword; this seems, however, improper to include here.

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- (438b–9a) (G) *ac ic mid grape sceal
fon wið feonde*
'but I must grasp with hands against the fiend'
- 1457 (GM) *wæs þæm hæftmece Hrunting nama*
'Hrunting was he name to the hilted sword'
- 2539 (D) *heard under helme, biorosercean bær*
'the bold one under the helmet wore war-corslet'
- 2562b–64a (D) *Sweord ær gebræd
god guðcýning, gomele lafe,
ecgum unslaw;*
'the good war-king had drawn his sword, an
ancient inheritance, keen of edges'
- 539a (Br) *Hæfdon swurd nacod*
'(we) had a naked sword'
- (T) 'bearing Hige-kiri'
- (S) 'grabbing Hiza-maru'

(5) *Retreat (of a man or men in an assailing band)*

There is a problem of deciding which must be taken as an assailing band; in the scenes of Grendel's mother and the dragon it is a part of hero's troop that retreats.

- 755b (G) *wolde on heolster fleon*
'(Grendel) wished to flee into the darkness'
- 763b–4a (G) *ond on weg þanon
fleon on fenbopu*
'and to flee away from there to the fen-retreat'
- 1601b–2a (GM) *gewat him ham þanon
goldwine gumena*
'the generous friend of men went home from
there'
- 2598b–99a (D) *ac hy on holt bugon,
ealdre burgan*
'but they (i.e. the comrades) fled into the forest,
protected their lives'
- 2951 (R) *eorl Ongenþio, ufor oncirde*

- ‘Lord Ongentheow turned further away’
- 2956b–7a (R) *beab eft þonan*
eald under eorðweall
‘the aged man fled away from there again to the mound’
- (T) ‘The ogre, despite the loss of his arm, kept flying towards Mt. Atago’
- (S) ‘It seems that the monster spider went out of a door to the entrance hall and then to the gate.’

(6) *Sound*

In the story of the spider, the earth resounds when retainers destroy the mound, and the description resembles the scenes of Grendel and the dragon. In the story of the ogre, he spoke with horrible voice, which could be identified as this element.

- 767a (G) *Dryhtsele dynede;*
‘The warrior’s hall resounded.’
- 770b (G) *Reced blynsode.*
‘The hall resounded.’
- 1431b–32a (GM) *beahtm ongeaton,*
guðborn galan
‘they heard the noise, the war-horn, sound’
- 2558b (D) *Hruse dynede.*
‘The earth resounded.’
- 2943–44a (R) *syððan sie Hygelaces horn ond byman,*
gealdor ongeaton
‘when they heard the sound, Hygelac’s horn and trumpet’
- (T) ‘It’s Mt. Atago I’m heading for!’
‘This is my arm and so I’ll take it.’
- (S) ‘Retainers shook and destroyed the mound.’

(7) *Light*

Light may come either from heaven (e.g. sunlight or lightning) or from the enemy's side (e.g. from the monster's eyes or from the fire). In addition to the two kinds of light, there is a third kind of light; the spider comes out from behind the candle in the bedchamber of the lord (which does not belong to the spider's side).

- 726b–7b (G) *him of eagum stod*
ligge gelicost leoht unfaeger
 'from his eyes came a horrible light, most like fire'
- 1365–66a (GM) *Þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon,*
fyr on flode.
 'There a fearful wonder, fire on the flood, can be seen every night.'
- 1516b–17 (GM) *fyrleoht geseah,*
blacne leoman, beorhte scinan
 'he saw a fiery light, a glaring flame shine brightly'
- 1570–72a (GM) *Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod,*
efne swa of befeþe hadre scineð
rodores candel.
 'A gleam glittered, light came inside, just as the candle of the sky shines brightly from heaven.'
- 569b–70a (Br) *Leoht eastan com,*
beorht beacon godes;
 'Light came from east, bright beacon of God.'
- (T) 'The ogre jumped up to the gable like the light(ening) and went out of the roof, to the sky.'
- (S) 'A strange Buddhist priest came sneaking from behind the candle.'

(8) *Advancing (on both sides)*

As the element (5), who is or are advancing is the question. In the scenes of Grendel and Grendel's mother, it is the monsters that advance. In the

stories of both Tsuna and the spider, it is always the hero's side which advances.

- 702b-3a (G) *Com on wanre niht
scriðan sceadugenga*
'The shadow-walker came stalking in the dark night'
- 710a-11a (G) *Da com of more under misthleoþum
Grendel gongan*
'Then Grendel came walking from the moor under the misty hills'
- 720a-21a (G) *Com þa to recede rinc siðian
dreamum bedeled*
'Then the fighter, deprived of joys, came to the hall'
- 725b-6a (G) *feond treddode,
eode yrremod*
'The fiend stepped, walked in angry mood'
- 745b (G) *Forð near ætstop*
'stepped forth and nearer'
- 1400b-2a (GM) *Wisa fengel
geatolic gende; gumfeþa stop
lindhæbbendra.*
'The wise prince advanced in a stately manner; the foot-troop of shield-bearers stepped forward'
- 2958b-59 (R) *segn Higelaces
freoðowong þone forð ofereodon*
'Hygelac's banners overran the fastness'
- (T) 'Tsuna, after receiving the sword from his lord, goes on horseback in order to prove the existence of the ogre.'
- (S) 'The four chosen retainers follow the blood-track.'

(9) *Slaying (or attacking) a man (or men) as the beginning of battle*

The three great fights share this element as an important factor. In *Heike* there is no description about the ogre's outrageous deeds in the past, but the late 14th century chronicle *Taiheiki* (1370) tells us the demonic behaviour, not inside the capital but in the forest of the neighbouring county.³ Lord Yorimitsu catches cold and gets high fever and headache after returning from the field, and later finds the cause, i.e. the curse of the spider.

- 740-5a (G) *ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe
slæpende rinc, slat unwearnum,
bat banlocan, blod edrum dranc,
synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,
fet ond folma.*
'but he quickly seized a sleeping warrior as a
beginning, rent him greedily, bit into his body,
drank the blood from his veins, swallowed in
large pieces; soon he had eaten up all of the dead
man, feet and hands.'
- 1294-99a (GM) *Hraðe heo æpelinga anne hæfde
fæste befangen, þa heo to fenne gang.
Se wæs Hroþgare hæleþa leofost
on gesiðes had be sæm tweonum,
rice randwiga, þone ðe heo on ræste abreat,
blædfestne beorn.*
'Quickly she had grasped firmly one of the
nobles; then she went to the fen. He was the
most beloved of men to Hrothgar among the
retainers between the seas, a warrior of high
rank, glorious hero, whom she killed in the
resting-place.'
- 2333-35a (D) *Hæfde ligdraca leoda fæsten,
ealond utan, eorðweard ðone
gledum forgrunden;*
'The fire-dragon had destroyed the stronghold
of people, the land surrounded by the sea, the
earth-guard, with flames'

³ So says *Taiheiki*, Book 32.

- ((T) An ogre approaches to Tsuna both on the highway and at home. Later, it is written in *Taiheiki* that a monster ogre appears at night in the forest, devours people and tears off horses and oxen.)
- (S) 'Lord Yorimitsu suddenly fell ill.'

(10) *Surging water*

In the scene of the dragon we see a description of the surging fire as well as water. There is no real surging water depicted in the *Book of Swords*, but both stories have some connection with a river. In the early 14th century picture scroll, it is said that the body of the monster spider was burned and buried in the earth.⁴

- 847-9 (G) *Ɔær wæs on blode, brim weallende,
atol yða geswing eal gemenged
haton heolfre, heorodreore weol.*
'There the water was boiling with blood, the horrible surge of waves welled up, all mingled with hot gore, with battle-blood.'
- 1373-74a (GM) *Ɔonon yðgeblond up astigeð
won to wolcnum*
'from there the surging water rises up, dark to the clouds'
- 1494b-95a (GM) *brimwylm onfeng
hilderince*
'the surging water received the warrior'
- 2410-12a (D) *to ðæs ðe he eorðsele anne wisse,
blæw under hrusan holmwylme neh,
yðgewinne;*
'to the point where he knew an earthy hall, a cave under the ground, near the surging of the sea, the tossing water'
- (2546b-47a (D) *Wæs hære burnan wælm
heaðofyrum hat;*

⁴ *Tsuchigumo-Zoshi* (ed. 1984), pp. 10-11.

- ‘Hot was the welling of the flood with deadly fire’)
- (T) ‘He was crossing a bridge over the river Horikawa, when he found a woman standing at the edge of the bridge.’
- (S) ‘Retainers stabbed the body of the spider with an iron stick and exposed it at the riverbed.’

Table 1 summarises the elements contained in the fighting scenes. The sign + means that the element seems to be identified in the scene, while (+) means that the element has got a somewhat different phase. Scenes of Grendel and Grendel’s mother share most elements, and again, most of these selected elements are found in the scenes of Tsuna and the spider.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
G	+	+		(+)	+	+	+	+	+	+
GM	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+
D	+		+	+	+	+			+	+
Br	+						+			
R	+		+		+	+		+		
T	(+)	+		+	+	(+)	+	+		(+)
S	(+)			+	+	+	+	+		(+)

Table 1. Elements contained in the fighting scenes of Beowulf and the Book of the Swords

3 FEATURES AND EPITHETS OF THE ENEMIES TO THE HEROES

Table 2 enumerates words and epithets which describe the three enemies of Beowulf. Words in boldface are common to more than two of them, e.g. *feond*, *æglæca* and *lað* for Grendel and the dragon, *ellorgast* and *grim ond grædig* for Grendel and Grendel’s mother, and *manscaða* for all three. Some such elements of compounds as *-gæst* and *-sceaða* are also part of common epithets. It should be noted that, in the fight with Grendel, both Beowulf and Grendel are referred to as *renweardas* ‘guardians of the house’ (770a), *heapodeorum* ‘the battle-brave ones’ (772a) and *þa gramman* ‘the wrathful ones’ (777b), and in the fight with the dragon, both the hero

and the dragon are *ða aglæcean* ‘the warriors’ (2592a). While fighting, therefore, they are fighters as well as a hero and an enemy.⁵

In the *Book of Swords* there is no direct connection between the ogre and the spider, but these enemies have a skill of metamorphosis. The ogre tries to attract Tsuna’s attention in the shape of a woman and then reveals himself; he comes to Tsuna’s house in the form of his aunt and then turns to the ogre again. The monster spider appears in the shape of a Buddhist priest inside the bedchamber of Lord Yorimitsu and is destroyed in its own mound. The common skill of the enemies is transformation.

The Japanese dragon never appears as a creature to be destroyed. It is a god of water, dwelling in the bottom of a waterfall in the shape of a big carp; when it knows its time, it swiftly swims up the fall and flies up into the clouds, bringing great rainfall to the farmers who had been suffering severe draught for long. It grabs a crystal or gold ball in one hand with three fingers (later five fingers), flying through the clouds in a grand manner. The dark side or an evil part of reptiles is played by snakes. The famous examples are Yamata-no-Orochi (lit. eight-headed snake) which is destroyed by Prince Susanoh, a younger brother of the Sun God, and a snake at Dohjohji Temple, where a young woman turned to a snake to chase a young Buddhist priest she fell in love with, swam over a big river, coiled up the temple-bell in which the priest was hiding himself, burned him up through her fiery jealousy. These images of dragons and snakes must have been mixed locally.⁶

Either good or evil, it is the power of transformation or metamorphosis that Japanese medieval monsters have. Enemies to Lord Yorimitsu were mostly aristocrats of the preceding period, political opponents exiled to remote areas, and chiefs of other clans whose power could have been a threat to the capital in Kyoto. They were then depicted as ogres and monsters, remodelling folklores of each region. Adventures of Lord Yorimitsu and his retainers were reported to advertise military as well as political power of the capital, further centralisation and serve as a help

⁵ For detailed lexical comparison see Ogura (1989: 33–35, Appendix).

⁶ For illustrations, see picture scrolls, especially pp. 106–7 in *Dohjohji Engi* (in the 1982 edition). The crucial difference seen in the pictures is that a snake has no legs, while a dragon does.

or salvation to the minds of people living in the very last, degenerating period after the death of Buddha.

4 SUMMARY

Beowulf and the *Book of Swords* have some similarities in narrative structure based on their respective folktale traditions but differ in various points. The crucial differences are metamorphoses, the arm-taking theme as evidence of hero's strength and as the fame of his lord, existence and advices of an astrologist, and the way of accepting the influences of Buddhism found in the *Book of Swords*. Metamorphoses give power to the character in the story, an astrologist gives advice to the hero and exercises the power of prayer in addition to hero's valour, and the treatment of Buddhists and Buddhism as non-decisive factor shows that medieval monsters or supernatural creatures must be slain by powerful swords, not by Buddhists' prayers.⁷ The ogre in the story of Tsuna is originated from a noble lady in the ninth century, who eagerly prayed a god to tell her the way to turn herself into an ogre to kill a woman she was jealous of. After she succeeded, she continued her transformation and appeared in the figure of a woman to kill a man, and in the figure of a man to kill a woman, until the ogre met Tsuna. The astrologist Abe-no-Seimei, who helped Tsuna, was said to be born from a female fox which had supernatural power of metamorphosis. As the monster spider in the first appearance took the form of a Buddhist priest, Buddhism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries did not have an almighty power as Christianity, but as one of the saving powers parallel with Shintohism, which was indigenous to Japan, and the Inyoh-Gogyo theory of a Chinese philosophy.

Beowulf took a long time to be properly estimated as literature, as Tolkien (1983) discussed. *The Book of Swords* itself was put at the very end of one particular version of *Heike* but nowhere else. It took us not so long as *Beowulf* that the stories of Tsuna, the ogre and the monster spider were

⁷ By saying "locally", I mean "in Japan, after the dragons have landed from China". Buddhist priests have the power to make ghosts, not monsters, disappear. In Japan, ghosts are visible and give a bad omen to people; but people cannot touch them, because they are wandering between the present world and the doomed future. Huge snakes, monstrous spiders and ogres, therefore, seem beyond the control of Buddhists.

all treated in Noh-songs and then to Kabuki. It was lucky for both Tsuna and the enemies that they had stages to appear in public.

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