

A MIGRATORY TALE

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Migratory tales form an interesting subject. Popping up here and there, often thousands of miles apart, they change their contents by randomly adding and losing elements. Their routes can be hard to follow and their original form and content hard to identify. The task of tracing these tales is further complicated by their age - some go back not only hundreds but thousands of years - plus the fact that their dissemination has been by mouth so that even the earliest attempts to crystalize them into writing may have found them aged and in much altered and, as the folklorists say, contaminated forms.

In the present case, however, we are so privileged that we have to do with a literary story whose various stations can be pinpointed precisely. I shall here make an attempt to follow its trail and show how it evolves until it finds its final form.

ROBERT BROWNING: *The Ring and the Book*

When, on January 2, 1698, the Italian count Guido Franceschini, with the help of a pair of henchmen killed his wife and her parents in their home in Rome, he couldn't possibly have dreamed that his grim deed would be the starting point of a literary migratory tale which would spread over three continents. It took form in England, had its contents changed and picked up an important element in America - the element that would turn it into a ghost story - only to cross the Pacific and, in Japan, be combined with two 12th century legends and, in the end, form the basis for one of the world's most famous movies.

Franceschini was sentenced to death, and it is the proceedings of his case that make up the first version of the story. At that time, legal statements were not given in court, but were written down and copied for the use of the attorneys. One day in the year of 1860, well over 150 years after the dramatic events in Rome, the English poet Robert Browning (1812-89), by an act of fate, at the Piazza di San Lorenzo market in Florence stumbled upon a bound volume containing the pleadings of the Franceschini case. Following an impulse, he bought the book which later, because of its binding, he would call *The Old Yellow Book*. We do not know whether he bought the book as a mere curiosity or whether he immediately got the idea of turning the material into a literary work. Whatever the case may be, it was not his original intention to throw himself into such a project. Upon his return to England, he tried in vain to persuade his fellow poets Coleridge and Tennyson to take upon themselves the task of writing a crime story based only on rival court pleadings. It was not until 1862 that he began to write what would become his longest and most famous book, *The Ring and the Book*, published in parts in 1868-69.

The book is written in verse and consists of twelve parts. Browning himself is the narrator in the first and last part, while two parts contain town gossip, and three the pleadings of the attorneys. Three parts consist of the statements of the accused, a priest, and the dying woman. In addition you find Pope Innocent's dismissal of the appeal of the convicted, and finally, in the second-last part, the convicted Franceschini expresses his anguish from his cell.

Browning might well have arranged his dramatic material as a play, and you can, if you wish, regard a good part of the book as a theatre play, consisting of very long monologues. Technically, however, this opus magnum of Browning is a poem, or a versified novel.

The Ring and the Book provided Browning a literary comeback of considerable proportions. The book appeared in many editions and was read all over the English-speaking world. The idea of basing a story upon rivalling statements inspired, among others, Balzac in his *La grande Bretèche* from 1831, and Edith Wharton in her short story *All Souls*, as well as in her novel *Ethan Frome* from 1911. These offspring, however, do not form part of our migratory tale; they are mere blind alleys. It is a third author who seizes the idea of the story, rewrites it, and sends it on like a baton in a relay race.

AMBROSE BIERCE: The Moonlit Road

Ambrose Bierce (1842-1913?) was a cynic whose motto was *Nothing Matters*. He is known for a number of short horror stories that reveal his deep interest in undermining the well-being of the reader and leaving him in an estate of uneasiness. Bierce worked as a journalist in London during the years 1872-75, and it may probably be here he encountered *The Ring and the Book*.

Bierce was a great stylist, but in his horror stories he preferred a no-nonsense style without literary ornamentation and unnecessary explanations, the better to leave the reader alone with his fear. When, in 1894, he wrote a story titled *The Moonlit Road*, he emptied *The Ring and the Book* of its contents and kept only the frame: a crime illustrated by three rival statements. As a replacement for the Italian murder story, Bierce constructs the story of a husband who returns to his home, meets an unknown intruder who is fleeing the house, and finds his wife strangled. The three statements that form the story are given by the son of the couple, who repeats his father's testimony from the inquest, the murderer, and finally, the murdered woman who - and this is Bierce's important contribution to the migratory tale - speaks through a medium.

The son's statement seems objective and trustworthy but, in the end, mystifies the reader by reporting the strange disappearance of his father a couple of months after the murder. The next part of the story consists of the father's written confession of the murder, but since he is obviously in a strange, schizophrenic state between dream and reality, it is not possible to judge whether his confession can be taken as a true account. He suddenly changes his name and one may get the impression that we are dealing with a case of double identity. True to his aim of offering the reader no assurance, Bierce leaves us without any explication. This is where we really find Bierce in his element, ever trying to undermine the reader's concepts of reality. The third and final part of the story, which consists of the statement of the murdered woman as rendered by a medium, does not throw light on the identity of the murderer; instead we encounter another unpleasant stock-in-trade of Ambrose Bierce, the idea of speaking of a living being - in this case the murderer - as "it".

As previously mentioned, it is my impression that Bierce as a writer was motivated by the desire to leave the reader in a most uncomfortable state of mind. From that point of view, *The Moonlit Road* is a very successful story. Bierce liked to blur the distinction between the dead and the living. It is not every author who manages to exemplify the themes and thoughts of his writings in his own life (or death), but Bierce stands out as one who did so. Some twenty years after the publication of *The Moonlit Road*, he disappeared on a train ride to Mexico and was never seen again. No corpse has been found. Many mysteries are solved as the years go by, but to this day, a hundred years later, no one knows what became of Ambrose Bierce.

RYUNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA: In a Grove

To find the next stop in our story's journey, we must go to Japan, where it meets and merges with two other tales. Like Ambrose Bierce, the Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927), was an intimate friend of the macabre and had a fondness for presenting the human existence as hopeless. He found models for a number of his stories in an anonymous anthology of weird and fantastic tales, *Konjaku Monogatari Shu*, which dates back to around the year 1120 and contains no fewer than a thousand short if not rudimentary stories, all beginning with the Japanese equivalent of "Once upon a time" and, in stark contrast to their macabre and disgusting content, all told in a most deadpan style, deprived of drama. Two of these stories are of importance to our migratory tale.

Akutagawa based his short story *Rashomon* (The main gate, referring to the monumental south gate of the city of the old imperial city of Kyoto) on the *Konjaku* tale *How a Thief Climbed to the Upper Story of Rasha Gate and Saw a Corpse*. He didn't make much out of the material though; basically, he just retells the not very edifying story about a thief who climbs to the upper storey of the giant dilapidated gate where people, during the city's long period of decay, had developed the habit of dropping the corpses of homeless people and executed criminals. Here he finds an old hag busy plucking hair out of the head of a young woman's corpse, with the cynical intention of selling them to a wig-maker. The thief then steals not only the hair but also the clothes of the two women, and walks off, period. Not much of a story, but Akutagawa fell for its cynicism. He did little to add to its literary quality, and it was not he who combined the story with our tale, nor with the next tale from *Konjaku* that he rewrote; this only happened on the migratory tale's next stop where the three tales were inextricably knitted together.

But let us now look at that other story from the *Konjaku*, adapted by Akutagawa, *How a Man Who Was Accompanying His Wife to Tanba Province Got Trussed up at Oeyama*. It is, once again, a very basic story, this time about a man who, with evil intent, joins company with another man who is traveling with his wife from Kyoto to Tanba; he on foot, she on horseback. When they reach the middle of a grove, the first man succeeds in tricking away from him the husband's bow and arrow. He then binds him, rapes the woman, and rides off on the man's horse. Another immoral story, and one begins to see how attractive Akutagawa must have found the old *Konjaku* anthology. With this story, he took much greater pains with his reworking. He had an idea, and the source of that idea was *The Moonlit Road*. Bierce's horror stories must have had the same effect on him as the bizarre old anthology of gothic tales, and it comes as no surprise that Akutagawa, in one of his essays, states that Bierce was the western author he admired most.

In his short story *Yabu no naka (In a Grove)* from 1922, Akutagawa turns the *Konjaku* story of rape into a story of murder where the husband is stabbed to death, either with the use of a knife or a sword. The story is comprised of six distinct statements to a magistrate. Exactly like in Bierce's story, they stand as mere appositions, without any conclusion and without the slightest literary ornamentation. Together they form the story of a samurai and his wife who are traveling through a grove, he on foot, she on horseback, when they encounter a somewhat suspect man - a notorious criminal as it turns out - who, attracted by the wife's beauty, manages to lure the couple deep into the grove in order to kill the man and rape the woman. The six voices are those of a woodcutter who has found the body of the man, a priest who has seen the couple before the crime, a policeman who has caught the murderer, the woman's mother (whose statement is irrelevant and should have been omitted), the murderer, the woman, and finally the murdered man who, as in Bierce's story, speaks through a medium. The three last statements, given by the three who were

present at the scene of the crime, differ so much from each other that they cannot possibly all be true. The bandit claims to have killed the man in a swordfight, the woman that she, out of shame after having been raped, killed her pinioned husband with a knife, and the man that he committed suicide with his own knife. We have here three different confessions and are unable to decide which is true. The story seems to lead to the cynical moral: everybody is lying - even the dead. The last few lines of the story indicate that the woodcutter stole the knife out of the dying man's body. If this happens to be true, the deadly weapon was not a sword, and we can at least conclude that the rogue who has confessed the murder and will no doubt be found guilty and executed, may be guilty in rape but is innocent when it comes to the murder.

What a misanthropic view of life! Cynicism runs as a red thread through Akutagawa's writings and it seems little wonder that he committed suicide at the age of 35. On the other hand, a true cynic has no illusions about life, so life shouldn't really be able to disappoint him. Did Akutagawa perhaps only pretend to be a cynic while actually nourishing secretly the hope that life would bring something better? A secret hope like that will often lead to disappointment.

AKIRA KUROSAWA: *Rashomon*

In 1950 the Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa based a film on Akutagawa's *In the Grove* and used elements from *Rashomon* as a frame story. The film was named *Rashomon* and, thanks to its success at the film festival in Venice in 1951, meant an unexpected breakthrough for Japanese film in the West.

Kurosawa wanted to make a film out of *In a Grove*, but had rejected a manuscript by script writer Shinobu Hashimoto because the story was too short for a full-length film. By a stroke of luck he got the idea of combining Akutagawa's two stories. He follows the murder story closely in letting the film consist of rivalling statements, but fills out the gaps by letting the woodcutter appear in the delapidated *Rashomon* gate and retell the statements to a thief. Thus Kurosawa lets a person walk from one story right into another. The macabre part of the story, the hag that pulls out hairs from a dead body, is replaced by a rather sentimental ending: the woodcutter finds a crying infant who has been abandoned on the upper storey of the gate and brings it home to his wife. This blubbery addition seems rather out of place and certainly takes the edge off the story. Akutagawa and Kurosawa were far from each other; Akutagawa a pessimist; Kurosawa, on the contrary, a humanist who only in his later years dared to make disillusioned films like *Kagemusha* (1985) and *Ran* (1990).

The central statements in *Rashomon* come from the bandit, who has been captured and trussed up, the wife, and the dead husband who speaks through a female shaman. We also hear statements from the woodcutter who has found the body and the officer who has captured the bandit. The superfluous statement from the woman's mother has been left out. Kurosawa follows Akutagawa in letting the bandit confess the murder, the woman claim that she is guilty, and the man that he committed suicide.

Rashomon has a running time of less than an hour and a half, but still seems a bit prolonged. To stretch the story, Kurosawa lets the woodcutter tell a second version of his story which serves no other purpose than to bring the film to an acceptable length. This, combined with the awfully sentimental and contrived ending, weakens the film, which however still makes a powerful impression. This is due to the remarkable performances of all the actors, effects like the nine minutes long panning shot through the grove that opens the film, the amazing light and shadow effects, the monumental set of the gate ruin, the contrast

between the torrential rain of the frame story and the baking sun of the main story, which at one point is emphasized by the camera pointing directly at the sun, something not seen, I believe, since Stroheim's *Greed* from 1924, plus the many exotic elements, among which ranges highly the frightening appearance of a raving female shaman who speaks with the dead man's voice. She is played by Fumiko Homma, who played minor roles in a number of Kurosawa's movies in the fifties and also appears in a short, silent role in his *Rhapsody in August* from 1991, quite far from her wild performance in *Rashomon*.

All in all, *Rashomon* deserves its status as an outstanding film. I would like to see the moral, Everybody is lying - even the dead, expressed in Akutagawa's short story and Kurosawa's film, but this isn't quite the case. The occurrence of one single element, namely the stolen knife, makes it possible to draw at least some definite conclusions as to who is lying and who is not. In the book *Rashomon*, a collection of essays about the film, editor Donald Richie makes an attempt to find out what the true story behind the rivalling statements is and actually arrives at a - rather boring - conclusion. In his book *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, Richie even states that everybody in the film is speaking the truth. So what is the film about? What is the idea of telling all these stories if they only add up to the conclusion is that everybody is right? After all, *Rashomon* is supposed to be a film with an edge.

MARTIN RITT: The Outrage

In 1959, Fay and Michael Kanin did a remaking of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* for a Broadway theatre and thus brought the story back to the United States, along with all the elements it had gathered in Japan. The scene is now a cactus forest in the American Wild West; the villain a Mexican outlaw; the shaman a native medicine man, and the gate has been replaced with a desolate railway station where a priest, a prospector who plays the role of the woodcutter, and a quack from a medicine show meet during a storm. In 1964, the play was made into a movie, directed by Martin Ritt and titled *The Outrage*.

The film follows its Japanese prototype fairly closely and does not spare us the whining infant in the final scene. The theme of rape is toned down; instead, you see the woman crying loudly over a tear in her dress. This is like Wagner transformed into a light opera. In the final version of the story, as told by the prospector, a flop of a duel is followed by an equally amateurish fight which ends lamely with the man accidentally falling upon the knife and killing himself.

We are in a Christian setting, and the priest is shocked by the extensive lying of people who have sworn upon the Bible. The quack, a liar by profession, sees it as his task to give the priest a lesson about the hypocrisy of mankind. Through his various statements, we actually reach the conclusion I begged for: *Everybody is lying - even the dead*, but regrettably, his lines are embarrassingly banal. *The Outrage* is a bad film. The performances are mediocre and the lines often horrific. It is obvious that the film is based on a theatre play; the dialogue is too long and the lines mostly resemble theatrical monologues. The quack, the woman, the man and the villain try to outdo each other in preaching banalities and pretending to psychological insight. The scriptwriters seem to have seen it as their purpose to explain everything to the audience as if we are idiots that need to be spoonfed. Kurosawa, in his script, left a lot unspoken; he knew the golden rule: Show it - don't tell it.

The prospector's theft of the weapon, a jewelled Apache dagger, is revealed already in the opening scene. Throughout the film, there is no question about the nature of the murder weapon. This was the weak point

in both Akutagawa's story and Kurosawa's film; the question allowed for an irrelevant discussion about whether someone in the story was really speaking the truth. *The Outrage* is a bad film that must have made Kurosawa cringe if he ever saw it, but it does have one advantage over *Rashomon*; it is impossible to make any qualified guesses as to who is speaking the truth and who is not.

Since the appearance of *The Outrage*, several stage versions of *Rashomon* have been performed in both the United States and England; some based on Kurosawa's film, others on Akutagawa's short stories, sparing us the episode with the crying infant. These plays illustrate a fundamental characteristic of migratory tales, whether their spreading is by mouth or written word: they do not follow a one-dimensional trail. Every stage of their development can give birth to new offsprings. Anybody is free to give the material in *The Old Yellow Book* a new treatment and, likewise, *The Moonlit Road* and the stories from the *Konjaku* anthology can inspire authors to new stories that incorporate elements other than those added by Akutagawa and Kurosawa.

Rashomon is the culmination of our migratory story, at least so far. Its elements come from three continents and have taken 800 years to come together and form the film. There is no reason that it should not evolve even further. I, at least, am still eager to see this ultimate moral expressed: *Everybody is lying - even the dead.*

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The Old Yellow Book - a complete English translation is found on the internet: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38238/38238-h/38238-h.htm>

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