

Busshi (“The Sculptor of Buddhist Images”)

This is a tale of a swindler in the capital who is willing to play a trick upon a person from the country but whose evil intent is at last seen through, to his great embarrassment.

A pious man has his family altar built—a long-cherished dream. But as there is no sculptor of Buddhist images in the countryside, he sets out to the capital in search of one to invite back to his home. In the capital he announces in public that he is seeking a sculptor. All at once a swindler approaches him and using his skill with words, makes the visitor believe that he is what he is searching for. He begins to discuss the type of images he can offer, and the date for completion. After listening to his advice, the visitor settles for a life-size image. The swindler disguises himself as a Buddhist image, but the client complains the gestures of the image’s hands are not what he wants and asks for some small improvements. Every time the hand-gestures are corrected, the sculptor and the image are represented in the play in quick succession by one and the same person. At last the carved image is exposed as nothing more than the swindler-sculptor himself.

Sanemori

When a travelling monk—Taami Shonin—stays in Shinowara in Kaga province (present-day Ishikawa prefecture) and preaches sermons to villagers, he notices an old man daily attending his sermons. But somehow, his figure can only be recognized by the monk alone, it seems. He asks him his name, but the old man does not reveal it willingly. By sending the villagers away, the monk finally succeeds in making him talk. He recounts that here at Shinowara there was a battle between the Genji and the Heike clans, that Saito-Betto-Sanemori (1111-1183) was killed in this battle, and that his head was examined in the presence of Kiso-Yoshinaka, the enemy general. To prove his identity, his black hair was washed in a nearby pond to everyone’s utter astonishment that it became totally white. His spirit, not finding repose, haunts the battle-field even two hundred-odd years after the battle. He tells the monk that he is in truth the ghost of Sanemori, and disappears nearby the pond.

While the monk is chanting the Buddhist scripture for the repose of Sanemori’s tormented spirit, his ghost appears attired in a red brocade robe, with his armour over it garnished with green silk braids. He thanks the monk for the bliss he attains from listening to the prayers, of being transformed from a century-long spirit condemned to haunt this world into Amitabha. He then narrates how, before going into the battle of Shinowara, he dyed his hair and beard all black so as not to be despised as an age-worn warrior, how he fought single-handed even when Koremori and all other generals had fled into western provinces, how he was hindered from attacking Kiso by Tezuka-no-Taro-Mitsumori who stepped in between them to protect his master. They grappled together, and together they fell from horses, and Sanemori, utterly spent with a long day’s fighting, had no strength to rise. Sad to recount, he had his head cut off. Having narrated thus, he at long last disappears from the place, asking the monk to offer prayers for his soul.

by Takao Saijo