

The Crane Wife

Tsuru Nyōbō, *The Crane Wife*, also known as *Tsuru no Ongaeshi*, *The Crane's Return of a Favour*, is a traditional Japanese folk tale. This tale is a particular favourite of mine and I have chosen to retell it for a modern audience. In this document I will talk about the history of the story and then go into my own version of the tale and the choices I have made.

The crane has been depicted in Japanese art as far back as the Heian Period (794-1185CE), symbolising beauty and long life. The origins of their veneration are possibly an influence of Chinese culture, as this was seen as “high culture” to the Japanese aristocracy. Stories about cranes in ancient China go back as far as the 4th Century, which is also when get the first stories about them being able to transform into women. One story, which dates to the 10th Century CE, is almost identical to the western myth of the swan maiden complete with the woman's capture and the feather cloak as the key to transformation. This feather cloak, known in Japanese as a *hagoromo*, appears in other Japanese folktales in a transformative nature, even apart from the woman who wears it being a bird.

The Crane Wife story itself I have not (as yet) been able to find a record of it being written down prior to 1600. Such is the nebulous nature of folk tales. However, I have been able to locate a variation of the tale in the *ko-e*, small narrative scroll, called *Tsuru no Soshi*, *The Story of a Crane* dated to the Muromachi period (1336 – 1573). In this version, the woman/crane fends off the attentions of a local lord. This does indicate that the original pre-dates this.

Another indication are several themes from the story itself, that of the cloth of feathers and that of animal brides. In the story, the crane wife weaves upon a loom using her own feathers to make the cloth. This cloth, though truly lacking the transformative nature from the story mentioned previously, does appear to of a supernatural nature. And like the other story, its discovery is also linked to the woman leaving her husband.

The second theme of animal brides is something that is found in other Japanese tales. There are stories of a fox, a snake, a fish, a clam, a duck, and a pheasant pretending to be a woman, marrying a man, and then leaving him once her true self is discovered.

When I began forming my own story, I had several of different versions from various folk tale collections and I was able to combine elements in some of these to create one I preferred. One element I included was the ending where the husband attempts to find his wife and can say good-bye to her. This is not included in all versions and is a nice conclusion, even though it is a nature of many Japanese folk tales to end rather abruptly.

One thing I chose to omit from my story was the names, which I did basically for more ease of telling and I felt I was able to pull off without confusion due to the relatively small number of characters.

I also added some literary elements that did not change the nature of the story. I described the woman with “dark hair, pale skin and red lips” akin to a crane for a bit of foreshadowing of her true nature. Another element I included was the use of numbers in terms of time, the seven days that it takes for the woman to weave the cloth and the three days the man was able to fall in love with her. This latter part I added, as the nature of her arrival and declaring herself to be his wife is a little controversial in terms of modern issues of consent, so I added the three days to establish some semblance of courtship.

In hindsight, I am rather pleased with my version of the story. The only thing I would change is perhaps using a different story that is far more easily documented next time, that way I am more reliably able to date the text.

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Detail from Tosa Mitsunobu, *Shiro no Soshi*

