

SAM GEORGE

Amabie goes viral: The monstrous mercreature returns to battle the Gothic Covid-19

We live in a world of monsters

‘*Yōkai*’ is an umbrella signifier for things we usually associate with terms such as monster, spirit, goblin, demon, phantom, spectre, shapeshifter and so on.¹ Originating in local legends in Japan, in folktales and regional ghost stories, *yōkai* take many forms.² They are commonly associated with folklore, but they have also long populated literature and visual culture. Toriyama Sekien (1712–88), an eighteenth-century scholar, poet, and artist, produced the illustrated books of *yōkai* that appeared in *Hyakki Yagyō*, or monster parade scrolls. This creation of images is profoundly important to the cultural history of *yōkai*.³ It has meant that certain *yōkai* have become fixed regarding how they are depicted.⁴ Sekien’s compendia of everyday demons was translated into English and published as *Japandemonium* in 2016, triggering a resurgence of scholarly interest in *yōkai* and their visual representation. Today *yōkai* are found in anime, manga, film, video games and role-playing entertainments.⁵ This essay will focus on one *yōkai*, Amabie, a mer-monster from Japan’s Edo Period (1603–1868), who is being revived to ward off the Covid-19 virus in 2020. I will argue that our understanding of crises is enhanced via the hybrid monsters they engender; here, I focus on the viral spread of the apotropaic image of Amabie via the internet. I also position Amabie as a Gothic artefact, though one which invites a revision of some of the approaches to monstrosity prevalent in Gothic studies.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s monster theory, developed at the end of the twentieth century in 1996, asserts that ‘the monster is born at a metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place’.⁶ He argues that ‘the monster’s body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the

monstrum is etymologically “that which reveals”, “that which warns”, a glyph that seeks a hierophant’.⁷ Cohen’s monster theory appears on first reading to be applicable to the hybrid *yōkai*, and thus relevant to its deployment in the current pandemic. However, there are questions that arise over how the theory might accommodate a benevolent and reassuring monster, such as Amabie, whose story is a consoling fantasy, rather than a myth of terror. The playfulness of *yōkai*, which exhibits a tension between the fearful and the comic, is perhaps more easily accounted for in Catherine Spooner’s theory of post-millennial happy Gothic (2017), as I will show.⁸ With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, a mode of ‘CoronaGothic’ may be discerned; it is the significance of Amabie’s role in crises to which I now turn.

[Insert Fig. 1: 1846, a woodblock print (Credit: Historical Collection/Alamy)]



Japan's curious first encounter with Amabie was recorded in wood-block printed bulletins, or *Kawarabanj*, in May 1846, accompanied by a likeness of the creature (see Fig. 1).⁹ This helped to disseminate its image widely across Japan. Amabie's story begins with a government official investigating a mysterious green light in the water in the former Higo province, whereupon a glowing-green creature with fishy scales, long hair, three fin-like legs and a beak emerged from the sea. The creature introduced itself to the official and predicted two things: a rich harvest would bless Japan for the next six years, and a plague would ravage the country. The mysterious mercreature insisted that in order to stave off disease, people should draw an image of it and share it with as many people as possible.¹⁰

For many of the 174 years following 1846, Amabie has remained dormant. But as the Covid-19 virus has swept across Japan, Amabie's image has resurfaced on social media, bringing hope to those who share it that it will help to end the current pandemic. Artists have been quick to publish cartoon versions of Amabie on social networks.¹¹ Orochi Do, an art shop specialising in hanging scrolls of *yōkai*, is said to have been the first to post Amabie on Twitter as a new 'coronavirus countermeasure' in late February 2020.¹² This fishy, longhaired, birdlike *yōkai* has now inspired thousands of images of itself in Japan in recent weeks, appearing on cakes, noodles, face masks and hand sanitisers. It has even sparked the #AmabieChallenge on Twitter – urging people to share their own Amabie image world-wide to save them from the coronavirus. Its popularity has since spread to five continents.

[Insert Fig. 2: public safety campaign against coronavirus (Credit: Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare)]



In Japan, as the country declared a state of emergency, people reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic in a unique way: by sharing images online of this mystical, mermaid-like being believed to ward off plagues. Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has since enlisted Amabie for an awareness flyer it circulated on social media, urging people to 'stop the spread of infection' (see Fig. 2).¹³ A feeling of hope is generated by each new sharing of the mercreature's image, and Amabie is now a unifying force as Japan reaches deep into its own folkloric past to find solace during the current crisis.

I argue that this resurrected folkloric narrative is a Gothic one. *Yōkai* have Gothic credentials, as shown in their affinity to darkness and shade. Michael Dylan Foster explains that *yōkai* can appear at any time of the day or night, but they prefer 'the dim light of twilight or dawn [...] the *ushimtsu*, the third quarter of the hour of the ox, about 2.00–2.30 a.m. when night was at its darkest'.¹⁴ Another common characteristic of *yōkai* is their liminality, their 'inbetweenness'. Foster relates that *yōkai* are 'creatures of the borderlands, living on the edge of town, or in the mountains between villages, or in the eddies of a river running between two rice fields [...] they haunt bridges and tunnels, entranceways and thresholds. They lurk at crossroads'.¹⁵ 'Liminality' refers primarily to the concept of the threshold, the area between two spaces, or what lies between the known and the unknown; it is frequently claimed for the

Gothic mode.¹⁶ It is perhaps unsurprising that Amabie has returned at a symbolically dark moment in history. Rather than lurking obscurely in the shadows, the Amabie is now the beacon that is guiding us out of the darkness.

Yōkai haunt thresholds and shadows, they are unsettlingly hybrid, and undeniably Gothic. Amabie is also reassuringly prophetic (and Cohen claims that monsters serve to warn). Yumoto Kōichi uses the term ‘Yogenjū’, or prophesy beasts; Amabie is one of these types of *yōkai*.¹⁷ There are others too. Kudan is a human-faced bovine. Upon being born, it utters a prophecy which will always come true, then dies. It is said to appear at times of unrest, natural disaster or epidemic.¹⁸ Images of *yōkai* were popular good luck charms in the Edo period despite their monstrosity, and Amabie is more powerful than most because it is apotropaic, averting evil via the circulation of its own image.

The mermaidisation of Amabie

Despite having three legs, Amabie is often referred to as a mermaid, as are the *ningyō*, or Japanese ‘human fish’ *yōkai*.¹⁹ The size, shape, and countenance of *ningyō* vary. Generally, the upper body of the creature, sometimes just the head, sometimes the arms as well, are human, while the lower body is of a fish. The inverse has also been found on occasion. In many Edo-period illustrations, *ningyō* also have horns protruding from their otherwise human-like heads.²⁰ *Ningyō* bring good fortune and in some cases immortality: there is an old Japanese myth that eating mermaid flesh brings immortality, as in the tale of Happyaku Bikuni, an eight-hundred-year-old nun who ate a *ningyō* as a child.²¹ The *ningyō* have undergone a ‘mermaidisation’, with the traditional *ningyō* folklore becoming hybridised through contact with Western mermaid lore (including American Disneyfication) over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.²² The recent reporting of Amabie as a mermaid figure participates in this.

In parallel with the global spread of the Covid-19 virus, the viral dissemination of Amabie's apotropaic image has crossed national and cultural boundaries. This makes it interesting to compare it with the mermaid of European folklore. Since the Amabie is credited with the ability to repel pestilence as well as predict the future, it resembles a kind of mermaid deity. (A key concept associated with *yōkai* is *kami*, which can mean 'god' or deity'.)²³ In European lore mermaids can also be seers. The mermaid's mirror, for example, is often seen as a sign of vanity and sin, also represents the mermaid's ability to see through the veil that separates the visible and spirit worlds. There is even a canonised Irish mermaid: St Li-ban, who was caught in the net of Fergus of Miliuc.²⁴ Clerics gave her a choice, to be baptised and go to heaven within an hour, or to wait 300 years on earth. She chose to die; miracles were wrought through her and she became St Muirgen of Donegal.

Unlike Li-ban, Amabie, is disturbingly and inhumanly hybrid, its externally incoherent body resists any attempt to include it in systematic categorisation. *Ningyō* – the Japanese word for the human fish, has no gender. Amabie is also genderless, a departure from the stereotypical mythical mermaids who, siren-like, seduced sailors, causing shipwrecks. By contrast, the Orientalist imaginings of Asian 'mermaids' by westerners does resemble the uncanniness of Amabie. In his 1876 account, Nichols Belfield Denny recounts seeing the circus entrepreneur P. T. Barnum's celebrated purchase (allegedly from Japanese sailors), which became known as the Fiji Mermaid.²⁵ She consisted of a monkey's body, joined to a fish's tail.²⁶ Mummified Japanese mermaids (*ningyō mirra*) were lined up by Europeans and Americans for exhibition at a price in the early to mid- nineteenth century.²⁷

One of the reasons why such hybrid creatures are unsettling in Western culture is because of the iconography surrounding demons. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, demons have their origins in the Fallen Angels who followed Satan when he was cast out of heaven. Descriptions from antiquity portray demons as shapeshifters who can assume any form,

animal or human or hybrid. Because they are evil, they are imperfect, shown in flaws such as malformed limbs and cloven feet. Throughout the Christian era, the activities of demons have been thought to cause illness and disease. Demons can send bad weather, and pests such as armies of rats and mice, and swarms of locusts. Amabie, by contrast, wards off evil and presents us with a positive view of hybridity. The process of cross-fertilisation can, of course, create something new, more than the sum of the original parts.

Monsters and category crises

Cohen argues that ‘because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis’, forcing binary thinking into a crisis.²⁸ The propensity of Cohen’s monsters to radically undermine taxonomic systems and refuse an easy compartmentalisation of their monstrous qualities crucially rests on their hybridity; they demand a radical re-thinking of boundaries and normality and are ‘full of rebuke to traditional methods of organizing knowledge and human experience’.²⁹ For Cohen, ‘The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis’; it is something of a taxonomical nightmare, refusing to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’.³⁰

Amabie contradicts this in several ways. It goes against the presuppositions of monsters as threatening and it challenges Cohen’s notion of category crisis. Its very hybridity, rather than breaking down distinctions, is a constructive unification. The real monster is of course Covid-19, which renders individuals isolated and atomised before destroying them, whereas Amabie reaches out across the new media to unite them. Amabie does not exacerbate difference. She is akin to the new sympathetic monster of paranormal romance, though she is actively benevolent (in contrast to the tortured soul of the new kind of vampire, say, teetering on the edge of malignancy).

Catherine Spooner, discussing such figures in the Gothic of the new millennium, is more able to accommodate the comic or playful monster and defend it against those who see it as a dilution and contamination of the Gothic:

The idea that contemporary, postmodern forms of Gothic represent a diminution or a falling off from an earlier more rigorous form is common in Gothic Studies, espoused most prominently by Fred Botting, who [...] has argued repeatedly for a cultural exhaustion of present-day Gothic. Botting measures the success of Gothic by its powers of affect, and specifically its power to shock or frighten.³¹

Spooner argues that Gothic 'is not co-extensive with horror and cannot be reduced simply to its affective capabilities'.³² Thus, 'CoronaGothic' might be extended to include the *yōkai*'s playfulness, embracing the tension between the fearful and comic, the repulsive and appealing.

The virality of the replication of Amabie's image through social media mirrors, as I have said, the spread of the pandemic itself, with a benevolent monster confronting a deadly and brutally inhuman one. Inserted between this there is at work another level of viral monstrosity, with the dissemination of dangerously mendacious hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and snake-oil cures across the very same media that Amabie swims in. And at a further level, in reaction to the democratically spontaneous adoption and circulation of the Amabie folklore into a unifying force, there is the cooption of this phenomenon by official agencies that is again viral. These four levels succeed each other and interact, exhibiting a dialectic between viral processes – a battle between monsters aligned with fragmentation on the one hand and unity on the other.

The monster returns

Cohen insists that the monster always escapes: rising from the dissection table Frankenstein-like as its secrets are about to be revealed, it vanishes into the night. Those interpreting the monster must then content themselves with ‘fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows [...] obscured glimpses – signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself)’.³³ Amabie escaped into the sea, returning centuries later as a viral electronic image. Its power in the twenty-first century is apotropaic, tied to representation and reproduction, to the circulation of drawings and likenesses on the world-wide web amid a pandemic. Monsters such as Amabie do return; they ask us how we perceive the world. More importantly, as Cohen says, ‘They ask us why we have created them?’.³⁴ In this case, we have created a monster which is part of a revisionist Gothic in order to combat a truly terrorising monster that is not our creation and which has escaped our control.

Notes

¹ For a list of equivalent terms, see Michael Dylan Foster, *Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore: The Book of Yōkai* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2015), 14.

² Individual Yōkai can be found in *Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yōkai Encyclopedias of Toriyama Sekien*, trans. and ed. Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt (New York: Dover, 2016). This work is a re-publication in one volume of Sekien’s *Gazu Hyakki Yagyo* (1776); *Konjaku Gazu Zoku Hyakki* (1779); *Konjaku Hyakki Shui* (1781); and *Hyakki Tsurezure Bukuro* (1784). This resurgence of scholarly interest in them is shown in the reprints and annotations of Sekien’s work, Michael Dylan Foster’s criticism, and the work of the artist and scholar Hinonome Kijin. Seminal critical works on Yōkai include Michael Dylan Foster’s

Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2009) and *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Oakland: University of California press, 2015). See also popular histories, including Catrien Ross, *Haunted Japan: Exploring the World of Japanese Yōkai, Ghosts and the Paranormal* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 2020); Kazuhiko Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History*, trans. Matt Alt (Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2017).

³ Koichi Yumoto, *Yōkai Museum: The Art of Japanese Supernatural Beings from Yumoto Koichi Collection* (Tokyo: P-I-E Books, 2013).

⁴ Michael Dylan Foster argues that, ‘as image making continued through the years, many of the Yōkai pictured did not come from local beliefs: rather, they were invented for purposes of recreation, pleasure and amusement’ (*The Book of Yokai*, 29).

⁵ The stand-out series being Mizuki Shigeru’s *Kitaro* comic series, the best-selling suspense novels of Kyōgoku Natsuhiko and the videogame-based *Yo-kai Watch* (Yoda and Alt, eds, *Japandemonium*, 1x).

⁶ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses), in *Monster Theory, Monster Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25 at 4. Cohen’s theory offers seven theses towards understanding cultures through the monsters they engender: The monster’s body is a cultural body; the monster always escapes; the monster is harbinger of category crisis – due to its hybridity; the monster dwells at the gates of difference; the monster polices the borders of the possible; fear of the monster is really a kind of desire; the monster stands at the threshold of becoming.

⁷ Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, 4.

⁸ Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁹ Eishun Nagano, Head Librarian at the Fukui Prefectural Archives in the central Japanese prefecture of Fukui, is the leading authority on Amabie sources (see ‘Edo Period Ghost “Amabie” Popular in Japan amid Virus Crisis’, *Nippon.com* (12 March 2020), <https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2020031201079/edo-period-ghost-amabie-popular-in-japan-amid-virus-crisis.html>, accessed 8 August 2020).

¹⁰ A brief but reliable account of the Amabie story can be found in Yuki Furukawa, ‘Amabié – A Japanese Symbol of the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, July 2020, <https://jamanetwork.com.ezproxy.herts.ac.uk/journals/jama/fullarticle/2768645>, accessed 8 August 2020.

¹¹ Haruno Kosaka, ‘Plague-predicting Japanese folklore creature resurfaces amid coronavirus chaos’, *The Mainichi* (25 March 2020), <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200325/p2a/00m/0na/021000c>, accessed 8 August 2020.

¹² Matt Alt, ‘From Japan, a Mascot for the Pandemic’, *The New Yorker*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/from-japan-a-mascot-for-the-pandemic>, accessed 8 August 2020.

¹³ <https://twitter.com/MHLWitter/status/1248143633225666562>, accessed 17 July 2020.

¹⁴ Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 23.

¹⁵ Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 5.

¹⁶ See for example, Peter Messent’s definition of liminality as Gothic in ‘American Gothic’, *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, 23:4 (2000), 23–35 at. 23.

¹⁷ Koichi Yumoto, *Yōkai Museum*, 66

¹⁸ See Foster, ‘Kudan’, in *The Book of Yokai*, 216–7; and Kazuhiko Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture*, 3.

¹⁹ For *ningyō*, see Yoda and Alt, *Japandemonium*, 168; Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 154–7.

²⁰ Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 155.

²¹ Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 154–5.

²² This ‘mermaidisation’ of the Ningyo figure has taken place from the 1980s onwards according to Philip Hayward; ‘The Mermaidisation of the Ningyo’, in *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid*, ed. Philip Hayward (East Barnet: John Libby, 2018), 51–68 at 64.

²³ Foster, however, warns that translations can be misleading and there are ‘multitudes of kami’ inhabiting all sorts of things in the natural world (see ‘Yōkai and Kami’, in *The Book of Yōkai*, pp. 19–22).

²⁴ See ‘The Overflowing of Lough Neagh, And the Story of Liban the Mermaid’, *Old Celtic Romances*, trans. from the Gaelic by P. W. Joyce (London: Kegan Paul, 1879), pp. 97–106. Joyce explains that this story comes from ‘The Book of the Dun Cow’, the oldest book of Gaelic literature we possess. It was transcribed from older books by Maelmuire Mac Ceilechair, who died CE 1106 (*Old Celtic Romances*, Preface, x1–xii).

²⁵ See Steven C. Levi, ‘P.T. Barnum and the Feejee Mermaid’, *Western Folklore*, 32:2 (1977), 149–54.

²⁶ Nicholas Belfield Denny, *The Folklore of China* (Hong Kong: China Mail Office, 1876), 114.

²⁷ See ‘Mermaids from Japan’, *Penguin Book of Mermaids*, ed. Christina Bacchilega and Marie Alohalani Brown (London: Penguin, 2019), 205–10. Linnaeus listed mermaids under ‘Animalia Paradoxa’ in early editions of *Systema naturae* (1735); see Gordon McGregor

Reid, 'Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778): His Life, Philosophy and Science and Its Relationship to Modern Biology and Medicine', *Taxon*, 58:1 (2009), 18–31.

²⁸ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 6.

²⁹ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 7.

³⁰ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 6.

³¹ Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, 54.

³² Ibid.

³³ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 6.

³⁴ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', 20.