Man and Beast:
*Monstrosity, Identity, and the Post-War Freak Show in “Ode to Kirihito”*

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract

Monsters have long played an important role in the American and global cultural framework. While often constructed as adolescent literature, the pioneering work of Japanese comic book authors in the wake of WW2 used Japan’s rich lineage of folklore and mythology to synthesize the trauma of atomic bombing into rich cultural discourse. The analysis of monster theory in relation to *Ode to Kirihito*, a classic 1970-71 text by the “Japanese Walt Disney”, Osamu Tezuka, contextualizes the pervasive theme of monstrosity in a text newly published in North America, yet deeply imbued with Japanese post-war anxiety. I examine this text, as well as figure it within the pantheon of Tezuka’s oeuvre and other “A-bomb literature” such as *Barefoot Gen* and *Onibaba*.
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Author's Statement:

Lessons and Peril in Preparing a Scholarly Work

Preparing a paper for publication in a scholarly journal has taught me a great deal about the inherent difference between work that is substantial for the classroom and work fully realized for reader consumption. Indeed, pursuing a research project for the purposes of publication requires the two very distinct critical skills of analysis and synthesis. To fully illustrate the complexities of such work, both textually and extra-textually, it is ideal to consider the academic research necessary for such an endeavor, the nuances of scholarly writing, and the intensive revision process.

If part of my thesis relies on understanding the importance of the work of Osamu Tezuka, it is worthwhile to explore how his work came to be thesis-worthy in my estimation. While Tezuka is widely recognized publicly and critically as a master of the comic art in Japan, his reputation in the United States of America has failed to produce the same popular success. Instead, his works have been the victim of hap-hazard translation over the past twenty years. While individuals such as Scott McCloud and Will Eisner have issued praise to the man his works have failed to gain the sort of widespread critical attention the most obvious of the graphic form have attained. I have been reading Tezuka for nearly a decade and still fondly remember the brief time period when one could regularly view *Astro Boy*, the first animated Japanese television show with a long-form plot, on American cable television. While much of Tezuka's was serialized in America during the mid-2000s manga boom, the lack of large-scale commercial support or critical appraisal allowed for many of these titles to be quickly discarded or to go out of print without any
fanfare. These thoughts weighed heavily on my mind as I began my undergraduate studies; even when I did not realize I could potentially contribute to the critical scholarship surrounding them.

The initial scope of the paper was primarily confined to a close reading of Tezuka’s 1971 text *Ode to Kirihito*. Primary emphasis was placed on aspects of Tezuka’s formal illustration skills, particularly the ways in which his comic serves as a progenitor for the many authors working in the comic industry today. More broadly, the bulk of the paper detailed concerns over the nature of trauma and humanity, particularly in regards to the concept of monstrosity.

In essence, the first draft served to illustrate the most basic aspects of Tezuka’s work. It was painted in broad strokes in relation to the more complex theoretical elements of the comic form, as well as to the particularly relevant socio-cultural elements of Tezuka’s work. The paper lacked nuance, but gave a firm outline for my own close-reading of Tezuka’s complex work.

What followed in the face of this first draft was a great deal of research surrounding the nature of literary and comic criticism. I was genuinely interested in the nature of comic criticism, particularly in relation to the isolated writing on Tezuka. While a smattering of writings from the last twenty years exist, extremely little formal criticism attempted to tackle Tezuka’s work from anything more than a surface level. The majority of the criticism was focused on the novelty factor of examining comics critically, and this lack of thorough criticism in regards to thematic over purely formal aspects of Japanese comic art pushed me to examine the textual elements that characterize the comic as a worthy work of “literature”.
The following two drafts of the paper involved a more thorough understanding of the unique means of discussing specific comics scholarship. The integration of images, discussion of panels, and specific jargon all require a degree of nuanced approach to articulate properly. In essence, I realized one of the primary flaws of my initial analysis of the comic involved the fact that I was trying to read the comic as a novel or short story, in much the way my classes taught me to do so, rather than considering the specific form in relation to its potential discussion and potential scholarship. Perhaps the most difficult element in preparing this kind of critical scholarship is the discussion of specific panels, which require a very different kind of reading than a traditional paperback page. I also became aware at this point that I needed to broaden the scope of my analysis. While it is largely acceptable in close-reading papers within the English Literature discipline to closely examine a single work with light critical scholarship for comparison, I realized I needed something a bit weightier to make the transition between undergraduate style writing and a more rounded and three-dimensional critical examination of Tezuka's work.

Two of the most important lessons I learned in relation to writing for a scholarly audience involve theoretical application and de-emphasizing a relativistic approach to humanity. Initially, after several drafts of relatively inward-focused analysis of Tezuka's texts my advisor informed me of the need to take a "strict diet" of theory and begin to consider my work in both a larger artistic and ideological framework. While this initially seemed daunting, it ultimately gave the arguments for more shape and nuance than my initial musings contained. As an undergrad literature student I had done several projects with an emphasis on utilizing secondary scholarly research to bolster analytical arguments, but never before experienced the tantalizing and complex world of genuine literary
research. I would argue that most of my papers during my time in undergraduate literary studies solely required complex analysis of a single element of a text, usually historical or lens-oriented. One aspect I am very proud of in my own research, and which evolved out of more nuanced study of scholarly texts published in the journals I studied throughout the process of writing this paper, was the complex network of sources which came together to create context for my research. The paper involved a conflux of lenses, involving trauma studies, monster theory, post-colonial studies, and an intensive reading of these fields in relation to the unique medium of comic art. Without a doubt, the paper has a structure unparalleled in relation to complexity and depth to anything I have created, or been encouraged to explore, during my undergraduate career.

Likewise, working closely with the same advisor over several years and various courses has provided me a unique insight into a variety of critical concerns, and the paper has grown as my knowledge of discourse has expanded. While I was often very quick, owing to the universally oriented rhetoric of my high-school and early college literature education, to universalize the story of Ode to Kirihito as one that should ultimately appeal to any culture, my thesis advisor served as an important guide and mentor in reminding me that "the human is always culturally contingent". This became a sort of guiding mantra for me as I began to acclimate to the complex, thorny world of post-colonial argumentation. This was probably one of the most eye-opening moments for me in writing my Honors Thesis, as it in many ways directly conflicted with much of the education I was given over the last fifteen years. Classes are generally taught from the perspective of universality, and we are encouraged to read each piece of literature as though it makes a profound, thoughtful statement any reader can relate to if they have the proper tools in their literary
tool-kit. Not so in this instance, where my paper began to engage the very real disparity between national relationships in the post-war setting and their specific complexities. Considering the very real historical ramifications of acts like apartheid, and the Japanese persecution of the Taiwanese people locates *Ode to Kirihito* in a specific historical moment. To say the least, my capacity to evaluate a historical event represented through literature without the rose-colored glasses of literary universality took a considerable amount of discipline, and I count it as one of the significant accomplishments of my paper and educational career in college.

At the conclusion of my career in the honors college, I am proud to say that my honors thesis represents the culmination of the developing skill-set I have acquired over the past four years at this institution. Likewise, the creation of my thesis required significant risk-taking and adaptation, requiring me to push myself beyond the level of my classes in an effort to create thorough and thoughtful critical scholarship on a level that is wholly new to me. I am very excited to contemplate the possibility of further critical research during my time in graduate school and will absolutely refer back to the skills learned during the project as I do so. It is a testament to the strength of my education at Ball State that I was not only encouraged to undertake such a significant critical project, but that I also had willing educators happy to help me work through the process. As I prepare this project for its potential publication in a comic book scholarship journal such as the *International Journal of Comics* I am reminded of its humble origins during my first read-through of the comic many years ago.
In the wake of World War Two, Japan was forced to contend with the invisible impacts of the complex wounds produced by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, direct American censorship, which was not lifted until 1952 (Lowenstein 84), complicated the production of discourse about these real and psychic wounds for many survivors. Japanese cultural production turned towards an exploration of the simultaneously restorative and destructive power of technology only after the censorship was lifted. For artists, the three decades after the war were a time of extreme anxiety and experimentation. Some, like Japanese horror manga artist Kazuo Umezu (Scary Book, The Drifting Classroom) and horror filmmaker Shindo Kaneto (Onibaba, Kuroneko) chose to portray anxiety about the future by interrogating traditional Japanese myths or levying nightmarish trials on women or schoolchildren – the future generation. Others, like Goseki Kojima and Kazuo Koike (Lone Wolf and Cub, Samurai Executioner), followed the chanbara wave and produced works that echoed (and complicated) the past glories of the Tokugawa Era. However, among these creators one stands distinct. Osamu Tezuka, situated somewhere between the “godfather of manga” (Ode to Kirihito, book jacket) and “Japanese Walt Disney” (Ode to Kirihito, back cover). As Tezuka entered his mature period, defined by works that sought to push the limits of possibility for the manga format, he simultaneously tapped into deep psychological concerns surrounding the relationship between humans, beasts, and the deep psychic wounds of his own life. Rather than simply viewing manga as yet another in the long line of artistic mediums which sought to contend with the atomic devastation experienced by the Japanese people, critic Adam Lowenstein points to media as capable of producing an “allegorical moment” (2), or “the shocking collision of film, 

1 Critic Frederk L. Schodt points out (Adolf: A Tale 10) that Tezuka was “too young to be drafted” in World War Two, but “Tezuka and other students his age were mobilized to work in factories”. Even worse, Tezuka was “exposed to some of the worst firebombing in World War Two, in which the city of Osaka (and much of its population) were torched by American bombers”. 

spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined" (2). Essentially, Lowenstein’s use of media allegory reflects the ability of specific kinds of displaced narratives to create analogous scenarios as a way of exploring otherwise unassimilable forms of trauma. These moments, which Tezuka engages through his blending of fantasy and historical context, produce a dialogue that simultaneously seeks to echo and confront national trauma. Given Tezuka’s immense workload during his lifetime, and the limited published material that has been translated into English, an exhaustive study is outside the scope of this article. I will, however, reference some other mangas by Tezuka as a comparison with my primary text -- Ode to Kirihito (1970-1971). Ode to Kirihito, I believe, proves an ideal subject for thorough analysis about the “man-beast” hybrid and its allegorical potential. In considering Tezuka’s own experiences as they translate into his work and the cultural context of Japan, the nature of monstrosity in relation to the text, as well as the political implications of the cultural freak, it is possible to probe Tezuka’s work for deeper concerns regarding the liminal nature of the “human” in the wake of historical trauma.

Tezuka’s lengthy career produced an extremely protean relationship with his work. In fact, over the forty plus years of his career Tezuka made a point of constantly reinventing himself, utilizing his later, more mature period from the 1970s to the 1980s to turn the child-oriented medium he had helped develop with the 1952 Astro Boy series in on itself. This desire to question the nature of the “human”, as well as the concept of Japanese identity, evolved out of the censorship that dominated post World War Two, American occupied, Japan. As God of Comics, an exhaustive critical study of Tezuka, explains, “the occupation of Japan officially ended in 1952. Writers and artists were now free to explore war memories without censorship” (Power 92). While Tezuka wouldn’t make political comics directly following the occupation, he
would slowly join the ranks of artists exploring the blooming nature of the manga form. Importantly, the 1950s allowed comic book artists to slowly begin exploring the “problems of post-war society” (Power 95) and its greater psychological stress. Tezuka, who joined the comic book industry in 1946 with *The Diary of Ma-Chan*, was already an established author by the time the gekiga movement arrived in Japanese comics in the late 1950s. Gekiga was characterized by a “harsher drawing style... darker contents... its target audience was older teenagers... unlike the unstable, unmotivated generation of the wartime and the immediate post-war period, the young people were driven to construct new ways of living” (Power 95). Tezuka, ever the canny artist, expressed his distaste for the emerging movement via his 1959 essay “To New Children’s Manga Artists” espousing the old-school wisdom that “most people who use the rental bookstores are children... and [your] drawings are not good enough to withstand adult readership anyway” (Power 97).

However, even as Tezuka adopted the techniques of gekiga, like the unreliable narration of 1959’s *Cave-In*, he was ultimately “criticized for his lack of experimentation” (Power 98). Trends would continue to shift, and Tezuka would find himself authoring many of his most critically acclaimed works (*Ode to Kirihito* among them) during the period of 1968 – 1973, what Tezuka called his “darkest years” (Power 143). The introduction of Seinen manga, or manga intended for young adults, gave Tezuka an ideal place to work out a balance between his traditional and experimental nature, producing works that “explore issues of power and ethics within a highly hierarchical world of medicine” (Power 145). Tezuka, a trained medical professional who graduated from Osaka University Medical School, was able to infuse his personal knowledge of the medical community into the central component of *Ode to Kirihito* – the disfiguring (and fictitious) Monmow disease. The protagonist, Osanai Kirihito, is an aspiring
doctor. On a whim, he’s sent to a remote Japanese village to explore rumors of the disease – and contracts it himself. As Power points out, “Ode to Kirihito questions our ideas of normalcy and humanity through its disturbing and often graphic scenes” (146). Likewise, the story reflects another deeply entrenched aspect of Tezuka’s work through the destabilization of boundaries both personal and political. Considered a “humanist” (Adolf: A Tale 10) by the Japanese people, Tezuka’s works frequently examined the liminal category of human identity in the wake of the second World War. Tapping into the morally ambiguous ethics of the 1960s and 1970s, works like Ode to Kirihito and The Book of Human Insects (1970-1971) reject “the nationalist propaganda of prewar Japan” (Adolf: A Tale 10) in favor of a more nuanced examination of global identity. Indeed, the nature of Ode to Kirihito resembles a trans-continental medical mystery, one that utilizes the fantastic and international to complicate notions of essential humanity. The characters of Ode to Kirihito find themselves compromised in a deeply hostile world, one in tune with Tezuka’s vision of a world without “black or white logic” (Adolf: A Tale 10). Given pre-war assumptions about national sovereignty and invincibility evident in works like Norakuro (1931), Tezuka’s works utilize trans-national monstrosity to interrogate the idea of purity, and instead posit that “myths of purity [exist], and the conflicting emotions produced as a result of this incongruity shape and form the lives” (Adolf: An Exile in Japan 9) of the post-nuclear world.

Moreover, Ode to Kirihito taps into the increasingly sophisticated, self-reflexive trends of manga pursued into the post-war period. Grafting the psychic nihilism of the atomic era onto an increasingly exploratory medium, Tezuka uses Ode to Kirihito to examine liminal human categories. Psychologically based projections, like the immense cave-in used to represent a character’s mental stress (Ode to Kirihito 766), when one of Kirihito’s fellow doctors
contemplates slipping away from his post and literally turns into a drop of ink (*Ode to Kirihito* 639), or the honey-comb panel pattern used to represent a character’s schizophrenia (*Ode to Kirihito* 617, FIGURE 1), enhance the work and mark a clear shift from more straightforward propaganda comics of the 1930s such as *Norakuro*. While pre-war manga pursued moralist notions of nationalism and homogenous Japanese identity, Tezuka’s emphasis on isolated outcasts in works like *Blackjack*, the story of a disfigured doctor, and *Apollo’s Song*, whose protagonist is an incarcerated psychopath, highlighted a rise in individualistic, often anti-heroic figures reinforced by outlandish or experimental art techniques. This is in keeping with Tezuka’s moral universe, which rejects an “us vs. them” (*Adolf: A Tale* 10) binary of heroism in both content and form. Likewise, the transitions themselves move away from the more simplistic linear readings of early manga (*Metropolis* 19, FIGURE 2) and, during Kirihito’s transformation sequence (*Ode to Kirihito* 115), serve to express his bodily mutation by blurring the horizontal and vertical reading lines rather than guiding the reader through the transformation. The rape of a nun (*Ode to Kirihito* 351, FIGURE 3) is expressed via surrealism, rather than shown in the vivid detail that defines the gekiga period. Later, Tezuka further complicates the reader expectations regarding transitions through the use of photo-realistic panels within panels (*Ode to Kirihito* 591) that collude and overlap without instruction. Such experimentation was typical of Tezuka in the 1960s and 1970s, where his mature gekiga work in *Ode to Kirihito* was complicated by his foundational work for shojo, or manga intended for young girls, in *Princess Knight*, early foray into horror manga with *Dororo*, and the daring homo-erotic thriller *MW*.

While Tezuka’s themes are definitively mature, his dark exploration of splintered human

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2 Onoda Power refers (143) to the “darkest years” of Tezuka’s career as 1968-1973, and his comics of that period feature few “stars” or visual jokes. As he puts it, “working with adult jokes, satire, and irony was really cathartic for me.”
identity is reinforced through an imaginative art style concerned with deconstruction, dissolution, and a desire to force the reader into the process of identification and meaning making.

Tezuka’s exploration of monstrosity is hardly a unique phenomenon. Rather, Tezuka’s work exists in a complex cultural conversation regarding the de-stabilized nature of humanity in times of trauma. The yokai, or demon, draws its roots from ancient historical Japanese folklore. The prevalence of the Shinto religion, referenced frequently in the works of acclaimed Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki in movies like *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*, illustrates the strong connection between Japanese cultural identity and the world of the supernatural. Likewise, manga artist Shigeru Mizuki is credited with re-popularizing yokai in Japanese popular culture with his shonen, or comics for adolescent boys, series *Gegege no Kitaro*. For a people obsessed with the cultural “other” the uniquely traumatic experiences of atomic bombing produced an ideal laboratory for the critical reconfiguration of traditional myths and folktales to reflect post-nuclear terrors.

One specific yokai that contributes to an understanding of Kirihito’s persecution is the tengu, which bears the character for “dog” (Foster 89) in its name. Normally thought of as a kind of goblin, the yokai bears a similarity to Kirihito in that both originate in mountain settings, which are characterized by general stereotypes of “abnormal psychology” (Figal 87) in contrast to Kirihito’s urban background. Like Kirihito, the distinctive physical characteristic of tengu is an enlarged dog-like snout. However Kirihito becomes monstrous through contamination in the mountains, linking him more closely to the “nuclear terrors” (Foster 161) reflected in 1954’s *Godzilla*³. Foster suggests that the existence of creatures like Godzilla, Gappa, and Gamera,

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³ Chon Noriega notes (*Asian Cinema* 42) that *Godzilla* is “the first image westerners think of when they think of Japan”. Additionally, the film spawned “a dozen other radioactive dinosaurs” (42) and acts as a “symbolic narrative” (46) for the trauma of the A-bomb.
which are characterized as “kaiju”, or “strange beast”, rather than yokai, reflect a period of transition between quaint pre-war folklore and the rapid economic downturn of the 1970s. Tezuka would chronicle the frustrations of rapid industrialization in his *Book of Human Insects*, while Kirihito’s journey into the mountain village at the beginning of the manga reflects the “longing for... rural community” (Foster 163) that goes awry upon his infection with the Monmow disease. This “nostalgic commodification” (Foster 26) is fertile ground for Monmow disease, which serves as a bridge between these two approaches to re-constructing Japanese national identity after the horrors of the war and Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It is impossible, though, to ignore specific cultural influences as they combine in the creation of the terrifying Monmow-infected individuals in Tezuka’s text. This is a significant relationship, as critic Jeffrey Cohen theorizes in his 1996 text *Monster Theory* that a “monster is born only... at a certain cultural moment” (Cohen 4). For Tezuka, the post-war landscape and the freedom offered artists both nationally, as a result of the abolishment of American imposed content codes, and artistically, as the manga industry flexed its artistic muscles in an effort to craft new and challenging stories, provided an environment suited to the representation of monstrosity. Likewise, “the monster always escapes” (Cohen 4), and a central concern of *Ode to Kirihito* is the world traveler-esque quality of the narrative, providing opportunities for culture clash and revelation. Much emphasis is placed on Kirihito to fit the stereotype of the beast; to lose his essential humanity in a world of crumbling morals, and on relegating Monmow afflicted individuals to the world of the “dangerous hybrid” (Cohen 6). In this world the Monmow victims are “assembled from the parts of other creatures” (Foster 23), dog, demon, and only rarely human. Kirihito, like Frankenstein’s Monster, finds himself, despite his intelligence, relegated to the world of monstrosity where external fears trump internal traits.
Cohen also points out that "for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual" (7), and the characters of Ode to Kirihito are unique in falling into several categories. A longstanding tradition of defining monsters through national politics exists, at least in the west, dating back to the Hobbesian assertion that monsterization is the "exclusive domain of sovereign authority" (Avramescu 87). Monsters, then, are as much creatures of political power as fantasy. I argue the representation of monstrosity in Ode to Kirihito is comparable. Kirihito, for instance, finds himself the victim of what Cohen deems "sexual monsterization" (9), forced to participate in grotesque sexual acts with a dog when he's imprisoned in a Taiwanese freak show midway through the text. Elsewhere, after escaping the freak show with a young girl named Reika, he is sexually assaulted and notes her preference for sexual outcasts. Kirihito characterizes Reika as having "a fetish for freaks... paraphiliac" (Ode to Kirihito 290) after she lists off a "dwarf... spider man, and the man of rubber" (Ode to Kirihito 290) as previous sexual conquests, but rejects the sense of what critic Rachel Adams calls "shared marginality" (42), or the insistence that freakish individuals gravitate towards each other based on a shared sense of otherness. Echoing the assertion that Kirihito is something other, Reika calls him a dog and, when Kirihito replies that he is human, she demands he "be a wolf for [her]" (Ode to Kirihito 290). As Cohen also links monstrosity and attraction to the culturally taboo or forbidden. The freak show sequences, as well as Reika’s perverse fetishization of Kirihito’s monstrous body, appeal to Cohen’s assertion that monstrosity breeds cognitive dissonance between attraction and repulsion, at its core associated with the subversion of traditional categorization. Indeed, "monstrous irruptions provide constant reminders of the instability of appearances and the arbitrariness of categories: they throw the parade of daily existence, with its hierarchies and ordered procedures, into a state of pandemonium" (Foster 23)
Later, a nun named Helen, the second most developed Monmow disease carrier in the text, is similarly victim to sexual monsterization of her body. When asked to undress and reveal her body for a group of doctors, a panel (Ode to Kirihito 439) on the bottom-left of the page reveals an entirely male audience of fascinated on-lookers. On the following page, the top-right panel (Ode to Kirihito 440) is a close-up of Helen’s fur-covered breasts in floral lingerie. When fully disrobed in front of the audience in the right-most panel of the following page (Ode to Kirihito 441), the audience is instead rendered as a gallery full of eyes. The monstrous body is not only sexualized and exoticized, but also forced into a state of near-constant surveillance and evaluation. While hybrids are generally offered the ability to move between classes easily, and therefore provided the ability to manipulate those around them, Helen and Kirihito are subjected to humiliation as a result of their simultaneously coveted and rejected monstrous otherness.

One of the critical areas of monsterization Cohen taps into is the blending of “boundaries between personal and national bodies” (10). Ode to Kirihito taps this theme subtly by tethering Monmow disease and various instances of institutionalized racism. While Monmow characters are purposefully bestial, the first instance of a native African is portrayed with jet-black skin, a squat nose, and enlarged lips (Ode to Kirihito 178). When the Japanese medical staff travels to a conference in South Africa one of the African doctors makes an important note that “white people could never contract such a shameful illness” as Monmow disease (Ode to Kirihito 93). The doctor draws a link that characterizes the “monstrous” (Ode to Kirihito 95) qualities of the disease with Japanese culture. Later, that same doctor characterizes the Japanese people as “eat[ing] human meat and slit[ting] their bellies at the drop of a hat” (Ode to Kirihito 140). This characterization, which establishes the Japanese as inherently sub-human regardless of Monmow infection, establishes a western cultural perception that marks the Japanese individual as a
monster in waiting. Importantly, after being labeled a “chinee” (Ode to Kirihito 166), Kirihito’s
colleague Dr. Urabe points out “where there is ignorance, sickness will survive” (Ode to Kirihito
166). It is worth considering, in light of the fact that the nature of humanity is deeply in flux
throughout the novel, that “during times of war or unrest… enemies are often depicted as
strange, funny, weak, separate, or different” (Izawa). Urabe is making a connection with one of
the fundamental themes of the text, that illness and monstrosity not only make our implicit
concerns explicit, but that they drive out latent cultural attitudes and stereotypes which further
manifest literally through the disease. Furthermore, later on in the story circus girl Reika hurls
the racial slur “Japanese are so repulsive, especially this worm” (Ode to Kirihito 535) at a
stranger who travels with her and Kirihito. What makes this remarkable is that she makes the
comment in front of Kirihito, without addressing the fact that while Kirihito has the face and
body of a dog - he is still Japanese. Kirihito’s decision to begin masking himself (Ode to Kirihito
525) to pass in the unafflicted world is an indication that post-Monmow his physical appearance
no longer grants him easy access to identity and acceptance. Likewise, it taps into the iconic
Japanese image of contagion masks, adopted in 1918 “as a prophylactic against Spanish
influenza” (Foster 197). This iconic image not only reflects the contamination anxiety of the
1970s, in which mask wearers were stigmatized as “separated… from the rest of society” (Foster
197), but provide the narrative suggestion that Kirihito is protecting himself from a polluted
world in which the “environment itself [is] unclean and dangerous” (Foster 197). However this
symbol is interpreted, Kirihito has lost the physical identifier of his national and racial identity
and, implicitly, the right to be categorized as authentically Japanese. Ultimately, at the
conclusion of his narrative, Kirihito makes the connection between the experiences of the
monstrous outcast and the cultural foreigner explicit when he notes “I feel only as uneasy about
my appearance as a foreigner probably does getting stared at his whole time in Japan” (Ode to Kirihito 811). For Tezuka, the racial divides that become exacerbated by the introduction of the monster are lurking just below the surface, waiting to be deployed in times of crisis.

Beyond any one monstrous trait – location, language, etc. – the monstrous individual poses questions to the society that creates it at large. As Kirihito blends Japanese mythology with more contemporary post-war nuclear anxiety, the “metaphorical landscape constantly threatens to intrude on the present and is repeatedly repressed by the protagonist seeking to define his place within a modern society” (Foster 137). This interpretation of the cultural other extends beyond Japan and complicates notions of monstrosity through parallel with the American conception of “mutants” or individuals tied to “social and cultural differences [that] more broadly underscore the tie between expressions of popular fantasy and the ideals of radical politics in the post-war period” (Fawaz 357). Ode to Kirihito, with its blending of older monstrous images and more overtly political concerns regarding the stability of identity, is uniquely privileged to allow its characters to interrogate a Japanese consciousness fractured by the bomb. Cohen argues that monsters “ask us how we perceive the world… our perception of difference” (20). The central debate regarding Ode to Kirihito concerns whether the disease is transmitted through contact or external substances. Orbiting the nucleus of that debate are important questions regarding what the disease means, and how its victims should respond to affliction. Early after his transformation, Kirihito’s wife reminds him “even with a dog’s face, you’re still you” (Ode to Kirihito 125). When he loses a series of patients, though, Kirihito for a time abandons his practice as a doctor. Fellow Monmow survivor Helen is initially locked away in her convent. Near the close of her narrative, however, she establishes a successful religious following for herself caring for similarly disfigured outcasts. When the two meet, Kirihito
criticizes Helen and argues that “no God... can save a man who’s become a dog” (*Ode to Kirihito* 714). For Helen, there are many “who suffer far worse than [her]” (*Ode to Kirihito* 711), and her dedication to the sick and dying reflects a personal part of her religious destiny. Helen’s sacrifices place her within the larger Japanese context of the figure of the “A-bomb maiden” (Lowenstein 86), or female characters created in the wake of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings who serve as “tragic young heroines suffering from A-bomb illness” (Lowenstein 86), and help mediate the intense anxiety of the post-war age. Rather than the often-violent response to trauma presented by Kirihito’s frustration and depression, Helen’s largely silent acceptance reflects the post-war attitude towards female empowerment and is characterized by “victimization [that] replaces responsibility for aggression” (Lowenstein 86) and post-war anxiety. That Kirihito and Helen draw unique conclusions from their afflictions, and that Kirihito can transition from “no longer exist[ing]” (*Ode to Kirihito* 110) as a man, to serving as the “guest of honor” (*Ode to Kirihito* 808) at a meeting for disfigured patients, to ultimately defining himself as “human again” (*Ode to Kirihito* 811), reflects the capacity for change inherent in monstrosity. Kirihito ends his conversation with Helen noting “I just wanted to know what your outlook on life was” (*Ode to Kirihito* 714), and reminds readers that the Monmow victims are not simply the frail, segmented limbs portrayed in the containment camp (*Ode to Kirihito* 256), but complex characters which complicate the monstrous classification and are capable of diverse desires and outlooks on life.

The monstrous hybridity suggested by Cohen takes root in the sociological standards that connote both the pure and impure. This impurity, or what critic Julia Kristeva calls “the abject” (1), is strongly linked with the concept of identification. Kristeva refers to abjection as the process of recognizing and categorizing certain actions as indicative of impurity, and further
defines abjection as "the "something" that I do not recognize as a thing" (2). The "radically separate, loathsome" (Kristeva 2) individuals, like Monmow victims, are rendered as "other" through their inability to exemplify or perform prescribed cultural acts due to unique appearance and medical conditions. These individuals become what Kristeva calls "hieroglyphs" (34), or constructed symbols that embody larger cultural fears. The labeling of Kirihito as a "dog" (Ode to Kirihito 156) throughout the text, despite his frequent protests, is indicative of the larger cultural fear of contamination which plagues the various nations visited within the story. In fact, he becomes a receptacle for all of the "fear, deprivation, and nameless frustration" (Kristeva 35) that plagues the anxious, uncontaminated individuals attempting to diagnose and cure the disease. These fears are not simply confined to Ode to Kirihito, but are also manifested in Kaneto’s 1964 film Onibaba. Kirihito’s recurring statement that he is "a human being" (Ode to Kirihito 290) is echoed as the old woman screams "I’m not a demon, I’m a human being" (Onibaba) at the close of the film. These fantastic representations of traumatic anxiety, fracturing traditional special categorization into liminal categories of human, demon, dog, engage deeper concerns regarding the nature of "victimizer and victimized" (Lowenstein 89) in a seemingly lawless universe. This reflects both the desire to quarantine the other, as well certain specifically Japanese concerns regarding mutation that surfaced in the Japanese popular culture following the Second World War.

The sociological standards that Kristeva suggests mold cultural attachment to purity are in fact directed by specific traditions and acts. One of the major indicators of purity is food consumption, as "orality signifies a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body" (Kristeva 75). One specific cultural barrier transgressed by Monmow victims is their craving for raw meat, something "repressed, private" (Foster 18) in its taboo nature. When Dr. Urabe visits a Monmow
containment camp in South Africa he encounters a group of zombie-like victims crying “please, master, we want meat” (Ode to Kirihito 164). The distinct dietary requirements of Monmow victims are out of step with more traditional cultural trends, and exemplify Kristeva’s notion that “food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories” (75). Urabe also notes, as he approaches the cage that contains the Monmow victims, “the stench is unbearable” (Ode to Kirihito 164). In the sole group image of Monmow victims in the text (Tezuka 165), they are shown in almost complete darkness. While Kirihito is typically drawn as white, these individuals are pictured with nothing but loincloths for clothing, huddled together into one indistinguishable mass, and heavily inked to represent their impure cultural body. Whether it is by their abject physical appearance, dietary conditions, or hygiene, Monmow individuals complicate the ideal image of human purity. Monmow sufferers are often constructed as martyrs or objects of humiliation and suffering, and Kristeva points out that such pollution may have powerful symbolic effect on the story itself, given that “under certain conditions, however, the Brahmin can eat remainders, which, instead of polluting him, make him qualified to undertake a journey” (Kristeva 76). Considering that Ode to Kirihito concerns itself with Kirihito’s odyssey towards acceptance of his disease, as well as the fact that the second most developed narrative is that of Helen, a devout nun who comes to believes her Monmow affliction is the work of “things that only God knows” (Ode to Kirihito 713), the narrative suggests that complicating the traditional purity standard allows for characters to embark on complex, identity-altering quests of discovery.

Beyond monsters and disgust, the freak show commodifies the “othered” body for the enjoyment of supposedly normal individuals. Adams characterizes the denizen of the freak show, the freak, as “becom(ing) freaks when their unusual bodily appearances are coupled with
exclusions from communal bonds" (106). The nature of the freak show as a center for display, and its complex rhetorical meaning for both the proprietor and the freak, makes its appearance in Ode to Kirihito a unique commentary on the cultural exploitation of the other. This specific locale highlights “the existential difference between freak and audience... concretized in the physical separation between the onlooker and the living curiosities resting on the elevated platform” (Adams 12). When Kirihito is imprisoned in a Taiwanese freak show midway through the text, he is subjected to this very same division. Historically, freak-show performances like that of exhibiting Central African Ota Benga in “the monkey house of the Bronx Zoo” (Adams 31) reinforced many stereotypes about the relationship between Africans and primates. Likewise, the Taiwanese portrayal of Kirihito as a “dog-man... acquired in Japan” (Ode to Kirihito 207) suggests a link between Japanese national identity and analogous representations of connections between animals and humans. Critic Robert Bogdan suggests that the freak show is a performative space where ideology is constructed, and “what [makes] them freaks is the racist presentation of them and their culture by promoters” (Bogdan 29). Likewise, Adams suggests the “implicit alignment of anomalous people with animals – a common strategy in the personae of side-show performers” (37) is reinforced by the bars of the cage. While animals housed in zoos are traditionally kept in cages, so are prisoners. This connection between human and animal representation is exemplified in the freak show tendency to emphasize the “more conventional distinction between humans and animals firmly established by the bars of the cage... reconfigured in terms of differences among humans based on race and national affiliation” (Adams 37). The freak show, then, appropriates aspect of animal representation and re-contextualizes them to reinforce racial divides and stereotypes. However, Kirihito’s appearance in the Taiwanese freak show is unique in that it simultaneously engages both of these ideals.
Kirihito is identified as originating in Japan, but is displayed for the benefit of Taiwanese individuals. Much as in a zoo, the Kirihito recognized as a dog is exhibited for the entertainment of humans, and indeed forced to mate with an actual dog to further highlight the divide between the species of the observers and participants. His unique cultural status manages to satisfy all of these narratives simultaneously, creating a complex rhetorical tapestry into which Kirihito's own assertion, "I'm not a freak" (Ode to Kirihito 148), is utterly drowned out.

One of the complicating factors of the freak show is its tendency to represent the freak as disabled or dysfunctional, despite evidence to the contrary. As critic Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes in Extraordinary Bodies, "though actual impairments usually affect particular body parts or physical functions, one specific difference classifies an entire person "disabled" even though the rest of the body and its functions remain "normal"" (34). In Kirihito's case, his resemblance to a dog makes him an instance of the definable other. In fact, other characters often remark at the incongruity between Kirihito's freakish body and other aspects of his personality.

After the freakshow sequence, Kirihito's imprisoned even asks him "how did an intellectual wind up a dog" (Ode to Kirihito 222), while his fellow freak comments "how cruel of them to use such a learned man in their freak show" (Ode to Kirihito 198). Likewise, freaks are expected to maintain their distance from the rest of society. Traditionally, "disabled people have for the most part been segregated as individuals or in groups" (Thomson 35), and Kirihito's imprisonment behind bars with Reika the Human Tempura and an ambiguously disfigured man reinforces the idea of freaks as an entirely detached community subject to the laws and governance of others.

Given the strong associations disability, disfigurement, and freakery can connote, there is often a strong desire to label the body as "out of control" (Thomson 37). Given Kirihito's unique physical appearance, other characters frequently subject him to bestial treatment reflective of his
physical appearance. This takes on various forms of obedience training, in which a torturer who “think[s] [Kirihito] [is] a dog” (Ode to Kirihito 200) proceeds to electrocute him after he bangs on his cage and demands release. Kirihito’s freak show captor eventually forces him to further embody the role of the obedient dog by forcing him to “lick [his] feet” (Ode to Kirihito 223), and insisting his men “teach [Kirihito] some manners” (Ode to Kirihito 224) after Kirihito reacts violently. In the final scene from the freak show (Tezuka 226) Kirihito is shown strung up by a heavy iron collar. While chains would be symbolic in any sense, they have particular emphasis regarding obedience given that Kirihito so closely resembles a dog. He is shown naked, his snout prominently displayed, with his fur heavily shaded in contrast to his more traditionally white appearance. When Reika rescues Kirihito from his imprisonment, the bottom right panel (Ode to Kirihito 228) shows him splayed out like a house-dog with a collar around his neck. Given the inherently performative nature of the freak show, the “subject-to-subject” (McCloud 71) transition from a panel of a broken chain to an image of Kirihito limp and dog-like implies the performance of the freak show can force otherwise healthy individuals to become the freak they play.

In examining the world of the freak, many roles and rules are constructed both for presentation and survival. Bogdan notes in his essay “The Social Construction of Freaks” that there are several kinds of freaks, including “born freaks, made freaks, and novelty acts” (24). Kirihito complicates this set of rules, as he is neither born into Monmow disease nor purposefully makes himself freakish. However, his presentation as a “dog-man” (Ode to Kirihito 207) would likely lead freak show customers to view his condition as life-long. Reika the Human Tempura, however, who practices a trick in which she dives into a fiery pan and emerges unscathed, is considered a novelty act. The nature of her performance, which emphasizes her
foreign hair, naked body, and highly trained ability, align her as both exotic and other. When she is forced to exhibit herself again later in the text to raise money while the group is stranded in the Middle East, her showman refers to her as the “lovely princess Reika of the East” (Ode to Kirihito 579). For both Kirihito and Reika, however, the notion of exhibiting foreigners by “emphasizing their anomalies plus their “strange ways”” (Bogdan 29) marginalizes their identities and leaves them voiceless to author their own life narratives. Kirihito may scream “I’m a human being” (Ode to Kirihito 199) when imprisoned, or “get off” (Ode to Kirihito 209) when he is mounted by an actual dog, but his voice is ultimately ignored. Freaks attempt to find their voices, and as Adams points out, “freaks talk back, the experts lose their authority, the audience refuses to take their seats” (13), and so Kirihito also consistently attempts to exercise agency throughout his stay in the freak show. While his pleas are always ignored, and he is forced to escape rather than granted his freedom, Tezuka engineers a unique reversal of Kirihito’s plight by having his captor become infected by Monmow disease after Kirihito escapes. That the story ultimately acknowledges that Monmow is born from external pathogens, and that Kirihito the freak is not contaminated or infectious, serves as a final triumphant aside to the assumptions and persecution that define the freak show.

For Tezuka, the comic book was never as simple as it seemed. Rather, it served as a melting pot for both creative expression and cultural critique. Monsters and freaks appear everywhere in the work emerging from post-war Japan. In an era where the concept of corporeal “normalcy” was shattered by the bomb, artists began to seek out ways to address the prevalent Japanese anxiety towards growth, change, and the dissolving certainty of identity. Focus became less emphasized on historicity, as echoed by the portrayal of the A-bomb in another 1970s manga, Barefoot Gen, in which “hideous injuries cause the [A-bomb survivors] to be treated like
ghosts by those around them” (Takayuki 238). Tezuka siphoned this sensation through his own ambiguous relationship with the changing world of comics, in doing so producing a text that simultaneously entertains and probes the nature of post-war Japanese identity. It is simple to assume that comic books are just comic books, just as it is simple to assume that a creature that resembles a dog is a dog. Even more dangerously, as the story of Kirihito proves, the desire to resist categorization lies in contention with greater societal anxieties about otherness and outsiders following extremely traumatic historical moments. Tezuka reminds us of our own tendency towards the simplest conclusion, the power of the fantastic to distill complex historical circumstances, and most importantly – as we enter into the age of technology, change, mutation – that our schema of the “normal” cannot remain narrow.


FIGURE 1: Tezuka’s distinctive honey-comb panel pattern.
FIGURE 2: An example of Tezuka’s early, relatively simplistic manga style of the 1940s.
FIGURE 3: Tezuka’s visceral use of surrealism.