

**More Than a Historical Novel:  
Women, History, and Metafiction in Enchi Fumiko's *Namamiko Monogatari***

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**Abstract**

The very nature of the historical novel that rests on the ambiguity between history and fiction contributes to the obscure boundary between fictional and historical discourses. Using a historical setting with people and events of historical fact, female historical novelists are capable of articulating their feminist concerns and making social protests on forbidden modern-day issues. While historical discourses mirror literary writing, the value of narrativity in historical representations of reality is merely as an aesthetic effect. Many authors of historical discourses interpret and report their materials in narrative form, in the process of which the representation is governed by certain factual criteria but also some degree of imagination. The resulting ambivalences create a space of ambiguity for women writers to address gender inequality and questionable social practices. Although Enchi Fumiko's *Namamiko monogatari* (*A Tale of False Fortunes*) has been regarded by critics as a historical novel, the objective of this essay is to defend her novel as a work of feminist historiographic metafiction. Enchi intertextually incorporates fictional and historical texts to expose the problematic conventions of the historical novel. Whereas emplotting the chronicle and the romance structures adds plausibility to the narration, the metafictional narratorial interventions undermine the truthfulness of the narrator's recounted tale. Hence Enchi has created a new form of historical fiction that uncovers a different, more inclusive version of Heian women's 'history'.

*Keywords:* Enchi Fumiko, *Namamiko monogatari*, the historical novel

## Introduction

As one of the most acclaimed prose writers in post-WWII Japan, Enchi Fumiko (1905–1986) produced over a hundred plays, short stories, novels, and essays, and received six major awards in literature (Mikals-Adachi, 2001, p. 197). Under the influence of her father, Ueda Kazutoshi, a renowned professor in Japanese linguistics, she developed from her childhood a passion for classical Japanese literature. With her unrivalled knowledge of the Japanese classics, her literary works are fraught with motifs of pre-modern elements which are reconfigured by re-situating the characters of the past in a modern setting. Her narratives not only address the social and cultural conditions of her time but also explore the psychological workings of her female characters, marking her works as among the most prominent women's literature that challenges the literary conventions and the stereotypical representation of woman. Intertextual references to classical texts and historical discourses are found in her short stories and major novels such as “Himojii tsukihi” (「ひもじい月日」 “Days of Hunger”, 1954), “Yō” (「妖」 “Enchantress”, 1957), *Onnazaka* (『女坂』 *The Waiting Years*, 1957), *Onnamen* (『女面』 *Masks*, 1958), and *Namamiko monogatari* (『なまみこ物語』 *A Tale of False Fortunes*, 1965), the work most replete with historical fictional elements.

*Namamiko monogatari* is a fictional story that mocks the historical chronicle *Eiga monogatari* (『栄花物語』 *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, late eleventh century). Although historians and scholars hold various opinions on the dates of publication and the identity of the author, according to Helen Craig McCullough (1990), *Eiga monogatari* is the earliest Japanese vernacular history, written between 1030 and 1045 by Akazome Emon (赤染 衛門, 960–1040s), a Japanese *waka* poet who served the Fujiwara family as a lady-in-waiting. It was conjectured that Akazome wrote the first thirty chapters of the work but the last ten chapters are of anonymous authorship (ibid, p. 200). Akazome's section consists of a panegyric account of the eleventh-century regent Fujiwara no Michinaga (藤原 道長, 966–1028), focusing on the glorious life of Michinaga and his family. *Namamiko monogatari* unfolds with a prologue-narrator who recounts how she came to read the manuscript of an ancient love story titled *Namamiko monogatari—shui* (hereafter shortened as *Namamiko-shui*) forty years before. When she reads *Eiga monogatari*, the discrepancies with *Namamiko-shui* that she observes motivate her to recall her memories of the latter story, in which Michinaga is portrayed as a calculating and power-obsessed individual. In the chapters that follow, the

narrator recounts the tale of *Namamiko-shui*, but the narration is interspersed with the narrator's metafictional intrusions. *Namamiko-shui* is a tale embedded with multiple narratives, based on historical figures and events that took place in the Heian court under the reign of Emperor Ichijō (一条天皇, 980–1011). *Namamiko-shui* gives a fuller account of the empress consort Teishi than the historical chronicle, and is infused with the stories of other fictional characters, including the shaman sisters Ayame and Kureha. The story also depicts the machinations of the regent who rises in power and status by insinuating his people among the court and instigating plots to denigrate the household of Teishi. Amidst the downfall of Teishi's family and a series of fabricated spirit possessions, the ladies-in-waiting who claim to be possessed by vengeful spirits accuse the empress consort of plaguing other royal family members with her living spirit. Nevertheless, the genuine love between emperor Ichijō and Teishi stands undefeated. Ultimately, Michinaga's conspiracy is doomed to fail. In a nutshell, this version portrays Michinaga negatively and creates a more resplendent image of Teishi.

*Namamiko monogatari* qualifies as a historical novel as the story is set in a real historical period with people and events of historical existence. As a historical novel, it also reveals “the essential and causal links between the historical setting of the novel and the events and characters depicted in it” (Bowen, 2002, p. 247). The Japanese literary genre *rekishi shōsetsu* (歴史小説) puts more emphasis on the author's research into the historical facts while writing the story and how faithfully s/he represents the history (Zhao, 2015, pp. 10–11). This understanding was strongly advocated by Mori Ōgai (森 鷗外, 1862–1922), who made pioneering contributions to the literary genres of both modern and historical fiction. As discussed in his famous essay “*Rekishi sonomama to rekishi banare*” (『歴史其儘と歴史離れ』 Faithfulness to History and Departure from History), *shizen* (自然) or naturalness in historical facts is what he feels unwilling to alter, asserting it be maintained in a faithful manner even though the author's subjective interpretation is inevitable (Mori, 1915, p. 106). Half of Mori's thirteen historical novels tend to follow history, but those after *Sanshō dayū* (『山椒大夫』, 1915) become more detached from history, having sensed the limitations imposed by the “*rekishi sonomama*” (faithfulness to history) approach. The difficulty in preserving faithfulness in his historical novels rests on the indelible presence of fictionality, hence driving him towards adopting the alternative of “*rekishi banare*” (departure from

history) (Mori, 1915, p. 107). Mori's struggle with the two methods of historical exposition genuinely informs the ambiguous nature of the historical novel. Although the boundary between fictional narrative and historical discourse is crossed, the genre is more than merely the mingling of fiction and history.

Since the historical novel concerns a preoccupation with the past and how it is situated within the present, it subsumes the potential for social protest and feminist criticism. As Diana Wallace (2005) aptly summarizes in *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000*:

Any historical novel is 'historical' in at least four senses: in its use of a particular period for its fictional setting; in its engagement with the historical moment (social, cultural, political and national) of its writing; in its relation to the personal life history of the writer herself; and in its relation to literary history, most obvious in the intertextual use of earlier texts. (p. 4)

Apparently, the nature of historicity obscures the boundary between historiography and literature in the historical novel. Wallace further notes that using the historical setting as a "fantasy space" the author can "centralise a female consciousness and explore female fears and desires" (ibid, p. 2). For women writers, the genre permits "writing about subjects which would otherwise be taboo" and "a critique of the present through their treatment of the past" (loc. cit.). Linda Hutcheon (1988) shares the view and adds a self-reflexive dimension to the characteristics of historical fiction. She defines "historiographic metafiction" as novels that "are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages", highlighting their "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (p. 5).

Considering Wallace and Hutcheon's approach to historical fiction, the objective of my essay is to highlight the characteristics of the historical novel as manifested in *Namamiko monogatari*. By means of the intertextual incorporation of historical and fictional discourses and the strategy of emplotment, coupled with the metafictional interventions of the narrator, Enchi not only exposes the problematic approach of the conventional historical novel, but has also created her own form of historical novel to articulate feminist concerns over the suppressed women in the Heian era, rendering her masterpiece a 'feminist historiographic metafiction'.

### **Incorporating historical and fictional discourses**

First and foremost, the incorporation of historical people, events and places as well as historical narratives is imperative in historical fiction. At the beginning of the prologue, the narrator mentions her family's acquaintance with Dr Basil Hall Chamberlain during her childhood. Referring to the Japanologist active at Tokyo Imperial University in the late nineteenth century, she marks her first narratorial intention in establishing the authority of her accounts. This approach of incorporating people and events of actual historical existence has been pervasively adopted throughout the novel. For instance, when the prologue-narrator is speculating on the period in which *Namamiko-shui* might have been composed, she concludes that the work might be derived from a more obscure piece of writing from the Tokugawa period:

私は読んだその物語は、鎌倉か室町期の古書を更に写しかえたものか、或いは徳川時代の余り有名でない国文学者の戯作の一つで、建部綾足の垂流の筆ずさみかも知れないのである。  
(Enchi, 2004, p. 12)

Judging from that, the story must have been a transcription of an older book from the Kamakura or Muromachi period, or possibly a fictional work by a not-so-famous literary scholar of the Tokugawa period—perhaps a second-rate work by Takebe Ayatari. (Enchi, 2000, p. 11)

Here the mention of Takebe Ayatari no longer seems such a random act if we are informed that Takebe was one of the instigators of the *yomihon* (読本), the earlier form of the historical novel that pervaded Kyoto and Osaka between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Zolbrod, 1966, p. 486). Takebe made an invaluable contribution in the early period between 1750 and 1800 to the *Kamigata yomihon* (上方読本), with *Nishiyama monogatari* (『西山物語』 *Tale of Nishiyama*) (1768) being his representative work. *Kamigata yomihon* consists of “adaptations of Chinese vernacular fiction, collections of tales with a historical setting, Buddhist narratives, or anthologies of supernatural stories” (Zolbrod, 1966, p. 487). The indication of historical periods and actual figures has implanted into the fictional narrative a sense of historicity.

Apart from proper names of historical existence, historical narratives are intertextually referenced in *Namamiko-shui* as part of the reconstructed story. Developed from historical facts depicted in the chronicle *Eiga monogatari*, the embedded tale is re-created in a cut-and-paste manner, meaning that excerpts allegedly taken from the historical document are interpolated with the narrator's recounting, the narratorial commentary and the quotations

taken from other historical narratives such as *Makura no sōshi* (『枕草子』 *The Pillow Book*), *Genji monogatari* (『源氏物語』 *The Tale of Genji*) and some Chinese poetry. For instance, when the narrator attempts to support her narration about the attractiveness of Teishi, she references a passage taken from *Makura no sōshi*, wherein Teishi's exquisite beauty is likened to the depiction of a lute-playing woman in a Chinese poem, "Song of the Lute", written by the Chinese poet Po Chu-I. Likewise, while vouching for the greater credibility of the depiction of Teishi in *Namamiko-shui* than that in *Eiga monogatari*, the narrator makes reference to a (fictional) passage purportedly quoted from *Makura no sōshi*, a collection of tales and anecdotes written by another of Teishi's ladies-in-waiting named Sei Shōnagon (清少納言, 966–1025). The adulation of Teishi supports the narrator's complimentary recounting of the physical appearance and extraordinary talent of the empress consort. It is apparent that the intertextual references serve to enhance the authority of the fictional narrative.

Against the traditional approach of historical fiction that stresses faithfulness to real histories, Enchi's *Namamiko monogatari* represents an unconventional form of historical novel that challenges this positivist nature of historiography. By parodying the historical chronicle *Eiga monogatari*, Enchi problematizes the traditional mode of representing reality. As the prologue-narrator perpetually declares the accuracy of her recount and her certainty of the manuscript as a source of history that is unique and covers the 'historical facts' more comprehensively, she is exploiting the self-reflexive truthfulness inherent in the moniker 'history'. However, her inconsistent reliability and self-contradictory narration expose the limitations of historical narratives. The self-established authority of history is actually an illusion made possible by its own nature of incommensurability. When a discourse is labelled as 'historical', it immediately stands as if it represented truth. Yet the fact is that historiographic representations could provide "a mediated form of access to the past" but never "a transparent reflection or a reliable account of any historical event" (Nünning, 1997, p. 235). The truthfulness of actual past events could never be verified by historians, whose unavoidable subjectivity "lies behind the process of selecting, integrating, and interpreting the 'facts'". Thus the claim of historical truth and objectivity is nothing but a pretension (Nünning, 1997, pp. 227–228). Masuda Yūki (2013) shares a similar perception with Nünning that what proper history shows cannot fully reveal all histories. Such history is a kind of 'surface history' (表の歴史 *omote no rekishi*) which undoubtedly leaves out to a certain

extent things forgotten or unrecorded in historical discourses. This kind of history, the ‘inside history’ (carrying the meaning of ‘behind-the-scenes’: 裏の歴史 *ura no rekishi*), is traced and recovered in the way *Namamiko monogatari* has been narrated: the conscientious manner of the narrator, who recounts the tale and speculates on such details as its author, the period of composition, and the unknown whereabouts of the manuscript, represents the way history is interpreted by subsuming the ‘inside history’ into the so-called ‘true history’ (真の歴史 *shin no rekishi*). And by so doing, such narration challenges the traditional approach of historical writers who conduct research on historical facts before composing their novels. Enchi has produced a new and unconventional framework of the historical novel (op cit, pp. 43–44).

### **Emplotting plot structures**

The intimate relationship between fictional and historical representations in the historical novel can be achieved by another narrative ruse—emplotting the events in typical plot structures. By means of emplotment, narrativity is added to history. According to Hayden White (1996) in “Storytelling: Historical and Ideological”, emplotment means to “endow historical events with a figurative meaning by endowing them with the structure of a generic plot type, such as farce, romance, tragedy”, etc. (p. 74). These generic plot types possess the narrative coherence found in real events, which is that of “structures, tonalities, auras, and meanings” (p. 65). In other words, when historical events are represented in generic plot types, the value of reality is attached to the historical discourse. Representing history with narrativity exerts an effect of immediacy or an illusion of the reader’s experiencing the events ‘realistically’, and this value “attached to narrativity” is an aesthetic effect of the emplotment of real events within the model of “imaginary” life (White, 1980, p. 27). The aesthetic effect is made possible by the fact that history borrows from fiction the figurative imagination. Paul Ricoeur (1984) enunciates in *Time and Narrative* that in composing historical discourses historians can only imagine what happened, without having witnessed the events themselves. They intentionally write as if the past had taken place. This fashion of writing to some extent imitates what Ricoeur indicates as the “metaphorical reference” in poetic writing, when the reconstruction of the past is achieved metaphorically by the historian’s re-imagination of history. Conversely, “[h]istorical intentionality” is borrowed by historical novelists who tell

their narrative as though it had actually occurred, as evident from the use of “verbal past tenses” in narrating the unreal events as if the actions had happened or the state had previously existed. This “reciprocal borrowing” reveals that fiction borrows “as much from history as history borrows from fiction” (op cit, p. 82). Enchi’s historical novel illustrates what Ricoeur contends to be the “interweaving reference between history and narrative fiction” (loc cit). The events in the recounted tale formally and stylistically imitate the chronicle of *Eiga monogatari*. Other than the chronicle plot, history is also represented in the typical romance plot of Emperor Ichijō and Teishi. These typical plot structures greatly enhance the plausibility of the fictional narrative.

The use of the chronicle framework in *Namamiko-shui* is pivotal since chronicles are important sources of court history. Unlike national histories, chronicles tend to record the “realities of aristocratic existence” and ordinary daily subject matter, which are believed to reflect actual history (McCullough & McCullough, 1980, p. 8). The way Enchi mimics the discursive style of the chronicle form in the composition of *Namamiko-shui* evidently indicates her intention to harness the authoritativeness of the historical chronicle. For example, the linearity of the narrative is maintained and temporality is frequently stressed by giving the exact time, date, and month in the calendar (e.g. 正暦五年二月二十一日 *shōryaku gonen nigatsu niyūichinichi* (the twenty-first day of the second month of Shōryaku 5), 巳の時 *mi no toki* (the hour of the serpent)) (Enchi, 2004, p. 47; p. 98), the season (e.g. 夏の盛り *natsu no sakari* (the middle of summer)) (ibid, p. 115), and festive and ceremonial events (e.g. 元服 *genpuku* (the Coming-of-Age ceremony) (ibid, p. 19). The theme of *Eiga monogatari* centres on the splendour of aristocratic life, but the events are often organized in a disjointed, episodic manner. Since the Heian language style has been adopted in the passages allegedly quoted intact from historical documents, the contrast in style is particularly marked in its comparison with the narration of the tale retold by the narrator. S. Yumiko Hulvey (1995) describes the imitation as a “pseudo-classical” style that adds an authentic and archaic flavour to the narratives (p. 180). The embedded quotations are interspersed with classical Japanese suffixes, for instance, the final predication marker *-i* as in おはしましけり *ohashimashikeri* (*ohasu* is the honorific form of ‘to be/go/come’) (Enchi, 2004, p. 18). Other features include honorific prefixes attached to nouns like *mi-* in 御髪 *migushi* (hair) (ibid, p. 19) and certain special vocabulary like まゐる *mawiru* (the humble



form for ‘to go/come’) (ibid, p. 25). Further, as noted earlier in general, adopting the chronicle plot structure significantly contributes to the credibility of the fictional representations of the events in the historical novel (White, 1996, p. 67). By depicting events resembling the style used in *Eiga monogatari*, that work’s plausibility can extend to the recounted tale. Since the retold story conforms to the general outline of the historical events and people, the illusion of literal truthfulness is naturally maintained (loc cit).

Although the narrator has constantly emphasized the veracity of the tale, her unreliable accounts and narratorial interventions simultaneously expose its fictitiousness. Right from the beginning of the prologue, the narrator frequently stresses the truthfulness of her narration. For instance, she stresses the accuracy of her account while reminding the reader that her memory is deteriorating:

もし私のこの記述がもとになって「生神子物語」の原本がどこかから探し出されるとすればこれほど有難いことはないし、そうでないにしても、私ももう知命をすぎて、記憶力など若いころに較べて著しく減退していることを思えば、幼い頃私だけが読んで比較的正確に暗記している「生神子物語」の内容を、「栄華物語」その他の文献を参考にして一応補修し、書き残して置くことも満更無駄ではないように思われるのである。(Enchi, 2004, pp. 14–15)

If, based on this description, the original copy of *A Tale of False Fortunes* should turn up somewhere, there could be nothing more gratifying. But barring that possibility—and considering that my life is half over and that my memory is rapidly deteriorating—there may be some value in my recording for posterity the contents of *A Tale of False Fortunes*, a work no one but myself seems to have read and that I have committed to fairly accurate memory. I shall fill in gaps by referring to *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* and other documents. (Enchi, 2000, p. 13)

On other occasions, claiming that the manuscript is the sole copy and she is the only person who has read it, she expresses regret that nobody has heard of it and its whereabouts remain unknown. Despite her asserting the infallibility of her memory, the unreliability of her narration is exposed when she admits the possibility of having conflated her childhood memories and personal emotions with the historical facts. Most importantly, all verisimilitude is virtually destroyed by the metafictional closing, when the narrator intervenes immediately after quoting the final sentences taken intact from *Namamiko-shui*:

「生神子物語」の本文はこの文章で終わっている。年譜を調べると道長の薨じた万寿四年はまだ後一条帝の後世であるから年代の記述に誤りがあるが、これは物語のことで作者の語りたいたい諷諭をのべる手段に歴史を前後させたものであろうか。(Enchi, 2004, p. 196)

*A Tale of False Fortunes* ends with these lines. An investigation of the chronologies reveals that when Michinaga died in the fourth year of Manju (1027), it was still the reign of Emperor Go-Ichijō, so there is some error in dates. But then it is a work of fiction, and perhaps the order of historical events was inverted as a means for its author to suggest something. (Enchi, 2000, p. 150)

The inconsistency in the year of death and the reign of the emperor irrevocably refutes all the kinds of authority and credibility established throughout the narrative. Here the implication of the closure is not about the overriding of factuality by fictionality, but instead about the major concern in the historical novel: the inseparability of and interdependence between fiction and history.

The resulting ambivalences between fictional and historical discourses create a potential literary realm for women writers to transform history into romance for the “reinsertion of women’s concerns” (Wallace, 2005, p. 20). Emplotting the historical events in the romance plot structure makes the portrayal of Teishi’s gentle and uncalculating personality more natural, which is unlike the unfavourable characterization of Teishi in *Eiga monogatari*. The laudatory depiction of Michinaga in *Eiga monogatari* represents ‘proper’ histories that do not privilege women’s subjectivity but glorify men’s power and the patriarchal domination in Heian aristocratic society. In contrast, *Namamiko-shui* foregrounds the denigrated status of the female characters and exemplifies “an imaginary recovery or recreation of women’s lost and unrecorded history”, disrupting the exclusive view of history itself as “unitary and closed” (Wallace, 2005, pp. 16–18). In woman’s historical novels, it is common to incorporate “romance, fantasy, the Gothic, the adventure story and the detective novel”; particularly, romance has its roots in the Gothic historical novel (ibid, p. 3). The feminist concerns in the novel involve not just the appealing account of Teishi but more broadly the roles of Japanese women in the eleventh century. Under the practice of a polygynous and patriarchal family and social system, Heian women suffered from an inferior position bereft of agency. Having to share their husbands with other women, they were doomed to be unhappy in marriage, their identity and obligations attached to “family, clan, and country rather than to themselves as individual moral beings” (Lewell, 1993, p. 78). Taking on the roles of mother and wife, they were often manipulated by men to obtain political power. To endure life in such a society, they had to maintain their composure while suppressing their own anger, jealousy and misery. Hence it is not surprising that the women in the novel should be associated with the vengeful spirits that haunt other royal members. Although the female mediums possess more autonomy in a trance possession since they are allowed to voice their sufferings, they are depicted as horrid beings in the story. Enchi challenges these masculinist assumptions by incorporating fake spirit possessions and establishing an unconventional image of Teishi, as a result creating a genuine and invincible romantic relationship between the emperor and his empress consort.

## Conclusion

The narrative ruse of fusing fictional narrative with historical discourse greatly reinforces the tension between history and narrativity. The novel should be read by considering both writerly domains and their relationship, because history and fiction are intimately connected and virtually inseparable. While it is claimed that *Namamiko-shui* is the true version of the history of Michinaga and Teishi, the tale is contrasted with Akazome's historical representation in *Eiga monogatari*. The presence of the two versions suggests that the author, whether of the fictional narrative or the historical discourse, could give different interpretations of the same history. Hence the activity of emplotment might “generate alternative and even mutually exclusive interpretations of the same set of phenomena” (White, 1996, p. 68), indicating that history is not about “one authentic representation of the past but a plurality of competing versions” (Nünning, 1997, p. 227). Further, the contrasting characterization of the main characters encourages the formation of a different image of Michinaga and Teishi. Takenishi Hiroko (1967) supports this view in her contention that the incorporation of the fabricated ancient tale functions to create a more vivid image of Teishi (p. 168).

Enchi employs a variety of narrative strategies to address the question of truthfulness and falsehood between the historical and fictional accounts. Plausibility is attached to the chosen plot type. There is no pure history or pure fiction, and history is simply the presentation of an image of the past. Incorporating the chronicle and romance plot structures poses questions of the evaluative criteria about how faithfully historical novelists represent historical facts. The style of narration in *Namamiko-shui* aims to reconstruct a ‘history’, whereas the metafictional interventions undermine the credibility of the narration. The ambivalences present the novel with a multivalency that allows the exploration of gender issues and the rewriting of history from a perspective that foregrounds women's concerns. Therefore, by means of the historical novel, women readers are presented with “the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of ‘history’” (Wallace, 2005, p. 3). Historical novelists “supplement those incomplete and partial accounts of the past which systematically ignore the viewpoints and roles of women” (Nünning, 1997, p. 223).

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