Creating a 'space for the mystery':
The Sacred in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract. In the wake of postmodernist fairy tale fiction, with its strong emphasis on socio-political critique, more recent folklore-inflected fiction is turning away from political engagement and risking what Josh Toth and Neil Brooks have called 'reactionary and conservative blindness'.[1] This article argues that, while such fiction does retreat from its predecessors' feminist reworking of traditional narrative and often has recourse to tired ideas of the unknowable feminine, its alternative focus on mystery still has important political implications. Using *The Crane Wife* by Patrick Ness (2013) and *The Snow Child* by Eowyn Ivey (2012) as my examples, I examine the ways in which twenty-first-century folklore-inflected novels foreground the unknown, which has been referred to by various commentators as 'wonder', the 'sublime', and 'enchantment', and make the case for this apparently apolitical turn as a form of the sacred. I take the word 'sacred' not only in its religious sense but also in the *OED*'s most suggestive definitions, as something 'dedicated, set apart' and 'regarded with or entitled to respect or reverence similar to that which attaches to holy things',[2] and examine the relationship between this form of the sacred and reworked folkloric narrative in contemporary fiction. Drawing on the work of Jane Bennett, I will ultimately make a case for these novels as sites of ethical enchantment with the contemporary world.

The 'fairy tale generation' of writers imbricated with postmodernism — Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, and others[3] — used folkloric forms including the folk or fairy tale to perform political critique of their late-twentieth-century world.[4] Their fictions 'displac[ed] the truth of traditional

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[1] *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 11.

[2] 'Sacred, adj. and n.' in *OED Online* <www.oed.com> [accessed 29 November 2017].

[3] Stephen Benson, 'Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale', in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19 (p. 2).

[4] I deliberately link folk tales and fairy tales by their shared formal features (which can be usefully opposed to other folkloric forms such as legends or myths) to undo some of the culturally imperialist work done by preserving the historical distinction between them. For more detail, see Cristina Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), p. 21, and Sara Helen Binney, 'How "the Old Stories

narratives, making marginalized subtexts central, and reversing intertexts' norms or ideologies'.[5] In comparison, twenty-first-century reworkings of similar folkloric narratives can seem woefully, even dangerously, disengaged. Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* (2012) rewrites 'The Little Daughter of the Snow', in which an American family long for a daughter; *The Crane Wife* by Patrick Ness (2013) tells and retells the titular folktale of a man who loves a woman trying to keep her feathery secret hidden; *Orkney* by Amy Sackville (2013) works with Celtic and Victorian narratives of water-bound, magical women: all these recent fictions and more feature liminally fantastic female characters presented as unknowable objects of desire. There is minimal reversing of norms or ideologies here, and a frequent recourse to tired ideas of the unknowable feminine and exoticized 'other'. This is part of a broader turn away from socio-political critique which many see as part of the shift from postmodernist to twenty-first-century fiction, and it has caused some critical consternation. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth warn that 'we must be wary of reactionary and conservative blindness, of irresponsible rejections of critical and theoretical doubt'.[6] Irmtraud Huber is less partisan in her description of recent novels which '[i]n their rejection of subversion, [...] are reconciliatory rather than oppositional, reconstructive rather than revolutionary'.[7]

In recent folklore-inflected novels, this 'reconciliatory' political stance requires a reassessment of the role of enchantment, or what John Burnside has called 'a space for the mystery'.[8] My hesitancy over naming here is deliberate. This 'mystery' is a point of crossover between several terms — 'wonder', the 'sublime', the 'sacred', and 'enchantment' — which, while related, have distinct critical histories and uses. As I examine commentators' uses of these terms and sketch out their common ground below, I attempt to get at some of the political and ethical implications of this apparently apolitical turn in contemporary fiction. In doing so I am not seeking to elide the distinctions between these terms, nor to provide comprehensive histories for any of the ideas to which they refer. Rather, I am searching, alongside the novels under discussion, for the most appropriate language to describe the textual gestures towards the unknown which many contemporary folklore-inflected novels foreground at the expense of direct critique.

Persist": Folklore in Literature after Postmodernism', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 6.2 (2018), n. p., n. 4.

[5]   Sharon R. Wilson, 'Margaret Atwood and the Fairy Tale: Postmodern Revisioning in Recent Texts', in *Contemporary Fiction*, pp. 98–119 (p. 115).

[6]   *The Mourning After*, p. 11.

[7]   Irmtraud Huber, *Literature After Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 254.

[8]   John Burnside, *A Summer of Drowning* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 328.

Wonder and sublimity

I will begin with the most common of the four terms in fairy-tale studies: 'wonder'. 'Fairy tale' is often considered synonymous with 'wonder tale', a translation of the German *märchen*, and Cristina Bacchilega defines contemporary fairy-tale adaptations as creating wonder, using Marina Warner's definition:

> Wonder has no opposite; it springs up already doubled in itself, compounded of dread and desire at once [...]. It names the marvel, the prodigy, the surprise as well as the responses they excite, of fascination and inquiry; it conveys the active motion towards experience and the passive stance of enrapturement.[9]

Here is both fear and delight, associated respectively with stoppage and a movement forwards, both characteristics which, according to Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, were integral parts of the pre-Enlightenment concept of wonder. 'Wonder fused with fear (for example, at a monstrous birth taken as a portent of divine wrath) was akin but not identical to wonder fused with pleasure (at the same monstrous birth displayed in a *Wunderkammer*)', a cabinet of curiosities.[10] While Bacchilega acknowledges this duality, she places more emphasis on the positive, active side: the wonder of fairy tales is a spur to curiosity, questioning, and, often, critique. She describes how fairy-tale tellers and adaptors through the ages have been 'looking to renew wonder in its complexity as both state and action, in response to the unfamiliar, the unexplained [...], and calling for our own active — and, even more so, activist — responses to and participation in the process of storytelling and interpretation'.[11] Bacchilega claims wonder as a response to the unexplained, and action — activism, even — as a response to the state of wondering, and she sees this active response to wonder not only in the fairy-tale fiction of postmodernist writers but also in more recent adaptations.

In contradistinction to this, it is the 'passive stance of enrapturement' with what is not understood which is given more space in twenty-first-century folklore-inflected novels. Rather than using wonder as a spur towards explanation and further comprehension, these novels use it to pause with what they do not understand. Often, what is not understood is problematically represented by a female character: both Faina, the eponymous snow child of Ivey's novel, and Ness's character Kumiko, who may or may not be the titular crane wife, are linked with the novels' folkloric intertexts. Both characters are represented as unknowable through the fantastic mode of each text, and too great a desire to know them fully is part of what leads to each one disappearing.[12]

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[9]   Marina Warner, 'Introduction', in *Wonder Tales: Six French Stories of Enchantment*, ed. by Marina Warner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1–17 (p. 3), quoted in Cristina Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), p. 5.

[10]   Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), p. 15.

[11]   Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed?*, p. 194.

[12]   I have gone into the mechanics of the fantastic mode in contemporary fiction in more detail

While this pausing can be seen as simply one half of the doubled wonder Warner describes, the duality of active or activist wonder and passive, static wonder has been described in slightly different terms by Philip Fisher. He draws the same distinction between delight and fear as do Bacchilega and Warner, but he uses the term 'wonder' only for that which causes delight. The other half of this binary he associates with the sublime: for Fisher, wonder is the aestheticization of the 'pleasure principle', Warner's delight, while the sublime is that of the 'death principle' — what Warner calls dread.[13] This is a useful distinction, but just as wonder is 'doubled in itself', the sublime, too, has been described as containing both the positive (active, activist, delight-ful) and negative (passive, pausing, dread-ful) elements described above. For Immanuel Kant, the sublime is a 'momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them', a short-lived pause marked by a feeling of both terror and delight.[14] This sensation, which he considered to be produced by the sight of something vast or infinite, like a far-off mountain or a distant thunderstorm, was one of pleasurable pain, or 'negative pleasure'.[15] It diminishes but does not exclude the joy and delight which is proper to wonder, just as Warner's wonder contains an element of the stoppage caused by the sublime.

While Warner's definition of wonder is crucial for understanding how 'wonder tales', fairy tales, interact with the conventions of the European novel, the Kantian sublime seems a more precise description of the orientation of twenty-first-century folklore-inflected novels. This is most clearly seen in its function as a temporary pause of 'passive enrapturement', or what Neil Hertz has called a blockage.[16] In *The Crane Wife*, George's discovery of a crane in his back garden is experienced as a moment of sublime pause, as 'one of those special corners of what's real, one of those moments [...] where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so he could, for a moment, be seized into life'.[17] This is Kant's 'momentary checking', Hertz's blockage, leading to 'a consequent stronger outflow' of energy, but on a much smaller scale than Kant describes. The similarity between Kant's description of the sublime and Ness's description in *The Crane Wife* is striking, but the novels do more than describe the sublime from the outside. In allowing the unexplained to be just that, the folklore-inflected fiction of the twenty-first century makes space for the sublime within the text, representing it as a literal pause: a stoppage of language.

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elsewhere: see Binney, 'How "the Old Stories Persist"'.

[13]   Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 2.

[14]   Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement Part I: Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. by J. H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), p. 102.

[15]   Ibid., p. 102.

[16]   Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York; Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 40.

[17]   Patrick Ness, *The Crane Wife* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013), p. 11.

Art and silence

The starkest example of this literal pause comes in Sackville's *Orkney*, where Richard's wife's absence is made textual. When Richard loses sight of her on the beach, he says:

> I will go out to her. Out on the beach, she

> she is gone.[18]

The woman's absence from view is not only an absence from the text, but an absence *of* text; she is represented through blank space. The text literally stops, for a moment, to contemplate something it cannot represent, before continuing: this is the textual version of Kant's 'momentary checking of the vital powers and consequent stronger outflow of them'.[19] *Orkney* is an extreme example, but the same association between textual silence, fantastic folkloric characters, and sublimity is present in other examples of contemporary folklore-inflected fiction. In *The Crane Wife*, too, the unknowable, folkloric character inspires silence. When George first meets her, he says:

> 'I didn't hear the door —'
> '...'
> '...'
> '...'
> '...'
> '...'
> 'Can I...?'
> 'My name,' she said, 'is Kumiko.'[20]

This is not the narratorial silence of a blank page, as in Sackville's novel, but a moment of wordlessness between characters. Rather than narrate the moment, and put words to the characters' instant connection, Ness uses ellipses to gesture towards it. The dialogue which surrounds this moment is itself incomplete: George cuts himself off with a dash when he sees Kumiko, and falters into silence when he tries to speak to her. Only Kumiko herself is sure of her language, and only after a moment of pause; she is the catalyst for silence in others. In *The Snow Child* it is Faina who is herself silent, or potentially so. While the dialogue is generally placed in quotation marks, there are none when Faina is involved in a conversation:

> Do you want me to stay? he asked Faina. Maybe you should come in now, anyways?
> No, she said gently. Go inside.[21]

[18] Amy Sackville, *Orkney* (London: Granta, 2013), p. 161.
[19] Kant, *Critique of Judgement Part I*, p. 102.
[20] Ness, *The Crane Wife*, p. 25.
[21] Eowyn Ivey, *The Snow Child* (London: Headline Review, 2012), p. 392.

The contrast is especially stark here, at the end of the novel, when Faina disappears:

> Faina. Aren't you here, at my side?
> But she wasn't.
> 'She must be in the cabin, tending the baby.'
> 'No, she isn't there.'[22]

Demarcating the dialogue like this gives an otherworldliness to Faina and the conversations other characters have with her. It also puts Faina's dialogue on the same textual level as internal thoughts. Later on: 'Mabel saw the wedding quilt buried in snow. How could she be so negligent? She picked it up'.[23] Mabel's thought — of her own negligence — is staged in the same way as Faina's dialogue, implying that perhaps Faina's speech is all in Mabel's head, too. This simple trick of punctuation deepens the fantastic hesitation surrounding Faina, but it is not the lack of quotation marks itself which does this. Rather, it is the change between the two styles which causes Faina's dialogue to seem imagined in contrast with the marked dialogue of the other characters. Faina may not inspire silence in the other characters like Kumiko does, or textual silence as Richard's wife does, but her words are only tentatively real within the world of the novel; all three of these characters inspire or enact a form of wordlessness, or silence.

This silence can be seen as the 'momentary checking of the vital powers' of the sublime, but the 'consequent stronger outflow of them' is bound up with the visual art which these characters also all inspire or produce. These artworks are all linked directly to the novels' folkloric intertexts: in *The Crane Wife* Kumiko makes and inspires George to make what the novel calls tiles, collages of feather and paper, which retell the titular folktale; in Ivey's novel Mabel draws her own snow child, Faina, and the landscape of which she is a part. Rather than straightforwardly representing the second part of the Kantian sublime, the moment of being 'seized into life', these artworks are also bound up in the characters' and often the novels' moments of silence. Not only are the artworks visual and therefore wordless themselves, but they are also catalysts for silence in each novel's characters. In *The Snow Child*, Mabel puts away her drawings of Faina once she has completed them: 'never would she speak' of the images again.[24] Her husband Jack comes across them by accident, and notices that '[i]n the soft pencil marks something was captured that he had sensed but never could have expressed. It was a fullness, a kind of warm, weighted life that had settled into Faina during her last days'.[25] What is 'captured' here is not Faina herself, nor what Jack sees as the wild, unknowable landscape of Alaska; the feeling evoked is not fully explained or described beyond Jack's

22   Ibid., p. 393.
23   Ibid., p. 393.
24   Ibid., p. 347.
25   Ibid., p. 399.

vague description, and not specified any more than that 'a kind of'. Jack will not interpret in words what the pictures evoke for him, and remains in this moment of silent refusal. While Ivey gestures towards his silence and the art's wordlessness by using words here, in *The Crane Wife* Ness uses ellipses to stand for these silences, as we have seen. Here the characters attempt, but fail, to describe their reactions to Kumiko's artworks:

> 'It's...' George said.
> 'Holy...' Mehmet said.
> 'That's...' the man in the suit said.[26]

The response to her art is not described, except by a gesture towards something holy — sacred — which cannot quite be articulated. George's initial response to Kumiko's work is not the total speechlessness of Ivey's characters, but a failure to grasp the words he is reaching for:

> 'Your pictures are...' George started, and faltered.
> 'And again, the sentence you cannot finish.'
> 'No, I was going to say, they're...' Still the word failed him.
> 'They're...'[27]

As Kumiko points out, the tiles are described precisely by an unfinished sentence, by a wordless ellipsis, and in this way they evoke the sublime stoppage.

As in Kant's sublime, the stoppages caused by these novels' silences lead directly to the 'consequent stronger outflow' of 'vital powers' described by Kant. In *The Snow Child*, this return to life retains some of the silence of the 'momentary checking': '[w]hen Mabel called out to [Jack], asking when he was coming to bed, he had carefully folded the drawings back among the pages of the book and returned it to the shelf, where it remained, unmentioned'.[28] The drawings have been a catalyst for a pause of silence and lead to reverent, 'careful' action. While the structure of the sentence places emphasis on the stoppage, Jack's silent moment of reverence does lead him back to life, and to Mabel. In *The Crane Wife*, George's return to life is marked by a more immediate return to speech: Kumiko asks him again what he is trying to say, and: '[h]er face [...] was so beautiful and kind and somehow looking right back at George that to hell with it, in he went, "They're like looking at a piece of my soul"'.[29] George, like Jack, is forced to pause by the sublimity of the artwork; unlike Jack, he reaches with difficulty for words to describe how it makes him feel. The fragmented, visual image he reaches for — it is only a piece of his soul, he says, not his whole soul — does not make any claim to totality. Instead, Ness uses the Kantian sublime created by gaps or stoppages of language to gesture towards a form of the sacred.

[26] Ness, *The Crane Wife*, p. 98.
[27] Ibid., pp. 71–72.
[28] Ivey, *The Snow Child*, p. 399.
[29] Ness, *The Crane Wife*, p. 72.

The sacred in the twenty-first century

Part of what Andrew Tate has called a 'now widely recognised [...] "sacred turn" in contemporary literature', this form of the sacred is not connected with organized, mainstream religion, but takes account of the variety and uncertainty of post-secular spirituality.[30] While religion is the main association of the term, the *OED* offers more suggestive definitions as well. Something sacred is 'dedicated, set apart, exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose' and 'regarded with or entitled to respect or reverence similar to that which attaches to holy things'.[31] As we have seen, this 'respect or reverence' is created in the novels under discussion by their silences, those sublime pauses which gesture towards but do not encompass something unnamed or unknown. This is what these texts do: in place of socio-political critique, they evoke the negative pleasure of the sublime, the passive form of wonder rather than its active and activist double. This form of the sublime generates the textual silences and wordless art explored above, and these pauses allow for and gesture towards the sacred.

Folkloric intertexts are key to this. Tate reminds us that the current 'sacred turn' is one in which 'encounters with the uncanny, the unexplained and, occasionally, the divine have slipped their generic boundaries and quietly crossed the threshold into the predictable world of everyday, mimetic realism'.[32] The generic boundary here is the always porous one between folkloric narrative and the European novel. While the folklore in these novels is not bound up with belief in the way myths and even legends are, these folktales still bring to the novel something magical which is beyond the knowledge and understanding of the characters. This fantastic mode, like Daston and Park's wonders, 'register[s] the line between the known and the unknown,' making up 'a distinct ontological category, the preternatural, suspended between the mundane and the miraculous'.[33] This 'suspension' is not only the antimony of the fantastic but the pause of the sublime, too, and the response to these pauses, as to the novels' silences, is the art described by both novels and what happens afterwards: in *The Snow Child* through Jack and Mabel's increased closeness and in *The Crane Wife* through George's faltering speech. In both cases, these texts enact what McClure called 'a form of reaching', not only towards the unknowable and lost Kumiko and Faina, but between characters, for each other.[34]

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[30] Andrew Tate, *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 3.
[31] 'Sacred, adj. and n.' in *OED Online*.
[32] Tate, *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity*, p. 3; p. 10.
[33] Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, pp. 13–15.
[34] John McClure, 'Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41.1 (1995), 141–63 (p. 152).

Ethically ever after?

This 'space for the mystery' — a space created by the sublime for what I have called sacred — is more politically substantial than it may initially appear. A stance of passive enrapturement and reverence can be, and often is, enabling of problematic hegemonies, and the folkloric, fantastic characters' unknowability is coded along gendered and to an extent racial lines: there is much more work to be done here. Despite this, the 'reactionary' politics Brooks and Toth warn of are not necessary conditions of this reverence or the fantastic mode which facilitates it. Jane Bennett associates what she calls enchantment with ethical living, and it is her argument for enchantment which best describes what I see as the ethical implications of the novels under discussion and of possible future iterations of fantastic, folklore-inflected fiction.

'To be enchanted,' Bennett writes, 'is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday'.[35] As Kant's sublime causes a temporary stoppage, enchantment here is a break in one's everyday life: '[t]o be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter'.[36] The nature of this stoppage is as doubled as Warner's description of wonder, as '[c]ontained within this surprised state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition'.[37] As in Kant's description of the sublime, and as in the definitions of the sacred cited above, enchantment here is a momentary effect. Bennett claims to 'pursue a life with moments of enchantment rather than an enchanted way of life', occasional brief encounters with enchantment rather than enchantment as a constant state.[38] This is because the choice to lead an 'enchanted life' has often attracted the same charges of political disengagement as the novels I have discussed. Enchantment can 'temporarily [eclipse] the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world's often tragic complexity'.[39] As a result of this, Bennett writes, for many commentators, 'the quest for enchantment is always suspect, for it signals only a longing to forget about injustice, sink into naïveté, and escape from politics'.[40] Bennett, however, sees enchantment as imperative for ethical living: 'in small, controlled doses, a certain forgetfulness is ethically indispensible' as 'the will to social justice' is in fact 'sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored of existence', of being enchanted.[41] This is because, 'to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted

[35] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life; Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 4.
[36] Ibid., p. 5.
[37] Ibid., p. 5.
[38] Ibid., p. 10.
[39] Ibid., p. 10.
[40] Ibid., pp. 9–10.
[41] Ibid., pp. 10–12.

in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others'.[42] It is by encountering such moments of enchanted pause, of sublime checking or fantastic hesitation, that one can continue to act ethically and usefully in the world. Enchantment, in Bennett's formulation, acts as an energizing 'shot in the arm';[43] it is not a turn away from the impulse towards social justice, but an ethical choice in its favour.

This ethical enchantment is what I see as the function and effect of the work of Patrick Ness, Eowyn Ivey and others, precisely because of the silences at their hearts. Such ethical enchantments are staged in the novels, leading to an ethical turn in the characters' relationships each other: Jack and Mabel learn to listen to each other and therefore to work together successfully on their isolated farmstead; George comes to understand clearly that his quest to uncover all of Kumiko's secrets is driving her away from him, and begins to repair his relationship with his daughter. Ethical enchantments are also enacted by the novels. If 'moments [of enchantment] can be cultivated and intensified by artful means', then the novels can be seen to function as Bennett's enchantment-driven 'shot in the arm', potentially sustaining the impulse towards ethical living in their readers.[44] To read a novel is to pause in your daily life for a moment; if that novel is a sublime encounter with the fantastic which stages the silent reverence of these novels, then perhaps it can generate and encourage reverence in its readers. As George finds after his love-story with Kumiko ends, these novels leave their readers 'ready to speak [...] of astonishment and wonder'; ready, that is, to engage once again with the world.[45] Having read novels such as these is to have found 'one of those special corners of what's real, one of those moments [...] where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so that he could, for a moment, be seized into life'.[46] In our current political climate of division and suspicion, perhaps art like this, which both stages and engenders a sense of the sacred, can better equip us to engage with rather than retreat from the increased polarization of our twenty-first-century societies.

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[42] Ibid., p. 4.
[43] Ibid., p. 6.
[44] Ibid., p. 10.
[45] Ness, *The Crane Wife*, p. 305.
[46] Ibid., p. 11.