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Exemplary Lives

Form and Function in Pure Land Sacred Biography

As a literature of exemplars, Pure Land sacred biography presents the reader with the ideals of a community as much as the events of individual lives. The models for the religious life advanced in sacred biographies, however, include not only the religious practices of their protagonists, but the discursive practices of their authors, as well. The work of biography, after all, is concerned not only with depicting characters and events, but with configuring both in a meaningful form. Through a comparative reading of *ōjōden* and *myōkōninden*, this study explores some of the ways in which changes in literary form encourage different perspectives on the nature of time, causality, and community in the constitution of the religious life. These exemplary orientations to the religious life, I suggest, are a fundamental aspect of the didactic functions of these texts, and thus of their contribution to the history of Pure Land religious imagination.

KEYWORDS: Pure Land Buddhism — Buddhist hagiography — biography as literary form — *ōjōden* — *myōkōninden*

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I can only answer the question “What am I to do?”
if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or
stories do I find myself a part?”

Alasdair MACINTYRE (1981, 201)

SACRED BIOGRAPHY is perhaps first and foremost a literature of exemplars, expressing a community’s religious ideals through the lives of those who embodied them. As Peter BROWN (1987, 14) has suggested, to read these lives is to find oneself “perched...between particularity and grandeur,” as the events of an individual life intersect with the images and ideals of the collective religious imagination.

Reflecting this basic tension between the individual and the collective, the study of hagiography has generally been shaped by two fundamental methodological approaches, which Frank REYNOLDS and Donald CAPPS (1976, 28) have described as “history-oriented” and “myth-oriented.” In scholarship of the first sort, traditional religious biographies have been examined for the clues they provide in reconstructing the lives of historical figures. In these studies, the conventions of hagiography can often appear as obstacles to be overcome, obfuscating the historical record with pious mythmaking.¹ Studies of the second sort, however, have focused their attention precisely on those hagiographic conventions, using the lives of religious founders, saints, and devotees as case studies in the history of the religious imagination, charting the religious and cultural ideals of a community through the lives of those said to have exemplified them (for example KIESCHNICK 1997). As REYNOLDS and CAPPS have argued, these two methodological orientations are ultimately complementary, and a number of studies have begun to explore the complex intersection of the actual and the ideal in the telling (and in the living) of exemplary lives.²

In each of these cases, however, the study of sacred biography has been largely shaped by what Dominick LACAPRA (1983, 33–35) has called a “documentary

1. AMSTUTZ (1992, 232–33), for example, describes a “positivist bias” at work in much modern scholarship on the Pure Land figure Shinran 親鸞, one that largely ignores the “mythic” elements of traditional hagiographies, and so loses sight of the ritual uses of the texts themselves.

2. Studies of major historical figures such as Genshin 源信 (RHODES 1995) and Gyōki 行基 (AUGUSTINE 2005), for example, have explored the ways their biographies were incorporated into various (and sometimes competing) narrative projects. Similarly, DOBBINS (2004, 110–21) argues that the demythologization of Shinran’s biography was at the heart of the movement he describes as “Shin modernism,” creating an image of Shinran whose anachronism he works to combat by reinserting Shinran into the specifically medieval framework in which he lived.

approach” to textual sources. Indeed, the field of Buddhist studies has benefited from a growing awareness of the role and significance of extra-canonical literary sources as a documentary resource. In studies of materials ranging from Indian *avadāna* to Japanese *setsuwa bungaku* 説話文学, scholars have employed sacred biographies as a complement (and sometimes a corrective) to the evidence of worldviews, values, and practices contained in ritual manuals or scriptural commentaries (for example STRONG 1992, FAURE 1996, HEINE 1999). Even as it has yielded invaluable insights into the history of the tradition, such an approach nevertheless tends to extract the content of narratives from their discursive contexts, obscuring the specifically narrative functions of those documents. In so doing, it has the potential to lose sight of the distinctive character (and, frequently, the declared intent) of the texts themselves.

Given the self-conscious didacticism of most sacred biography—written (to borrow Pierre Hadot’s phrase) “to form more than to inform”—it is perhaps surprising that research on sacred biography has taken so little account of the growing body of scholarship on the relationship between literary form and moral formation.³ If, as Paul RICOEUR (1991, 428, 433) has suggested, the intellectual and cultural resources by which we make sense of narratives are of the same order as those by which we make sense of our own lives, it seems appropriate to consider the ways in which sacred biographies provide, not simply the story of an exemplary life, but the exemplary configuration of that life into meaningful form. As Martha Nussbaum notes:

Life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented as* something. This “as” can, and must, be seen not only in the paraphrasable content, but also in the style, which itself expresses choices and selections, and sets up, in the reader, certain activities and transactions rather than others.

(NUSSBAUM 1990, 5)

The didacticism of sacred biography, in this sense, could be said to rest, not simply in its advocacy of specific behavior, but also in the orientations it provides to the contexts and consequences of that behavior. Tracing the historical development of hagiographic genres within a particular tradition would thus involve tracing these interpretive structures, through which readers are encouraged to understand the religious significance of a life, that of the protagonist as well as their own.

This study will consider the implications of such an approach to sacred biography by exploring the narrative configurations of two genres from the Japanese tradition of Pure Land Buddhism. *Ōjōden* 往生伝 [Stories of rebirth] and *myōkōninden* 妙好人伝 [Stories of wondrous believers] both present accounts of individuals from various social classes who attained salvation through rebirth (*ōjō*

3. Quoted by Arnold Davidson in his introduction to HADOT 1995, 20. A notable exception to the above characterization is HALLISEY and HANSEN 1996, in whose footsteps this study gratefully treads.

往生) in the Land of Utmost Bliss (*gokuraku jōdo* 極樂淨土, Sk. Sukhāvātī) of the Buddha Amida 阿弥陀. At the same time, however, both are products of their times, and have provided modern scholarship with valuable insights into the very different doctrinal, institutional, and political contexts in which they were compiled.

The six major collections of *ōjōden*, for example, were the work of literati associated with both the Heian court and the nearby Tendai 天台 institution at Mount Hiei 比叡山.⁴ Composed in classical Chinese between the tenth and twelfth centuries (before the doctrinal and sectarian developments inaugurated by Hōnen 法然, Shinran 親鸞, and Ippen 一遍), their accounts of *ōjōnin* 往生人 (those who have attained rebirth) are typically cited in academic studies for the images they offer of the practices, doctrinal assumptions, and social composition of the early Pure Land movement (for example KLEINE 1998; STONE 2004, 88–108). The six fascicles of the *Myōkōninden*, on the other hand, were first compiled between the late-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, representing the efforts of priests affiliated with the Nishi-Honganji 西本願寺 establishment of the Jōdo Shinshū 淨土真宗.⁵ Compiled in Japanese, in an environment of sectarian doctrinal study and popular religious education constrained by the religious and social policies of the Shogunal government, these accounts of exemplary Shin believers have been of interest to academic study as practical expressions of the Shinshū mind of faith (*shinjin* 信心), especially as they reflected (and actively shaped) adherents' everyday interactions with both the Tokugawa social order and the authorities of the Nishi-Honganji (for example DAVIS 1989, AMSTUTZ 1997).

While studies of *ōjōden* and *myōkōninden* have revealed a great deal about the lives and historical imagery of the ideal Pure Land devotee, their focus has been limited largely to the *content* of these accounts—that is, the attitudes and behaviors attributed to their protagonists, and the ways in which they can be seen to change over time. Much less attention has been paid to the changing *form* of these collections, and what they reveal about the discursive practices and purposes of their authors. As Hayden WHITE (1987, xi) has argued, however, the form of narrative conveys its own content, and in the pages that follow, I will consider the ways in which these genres of sacred biography reflect shifting views, not

4. The first of these collections is the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 日本往生極樂記, composed around 986 by Yoshishige no Yasutane 慶滋保胤. The remaining collections, following self-consciously on the model of the first, are all products of the twelfth century: *Zoku honchō ōjōden* 続本朝往生伝 by Ōe no Masafusa 大江匡房, *Shūi ōjōden* 拾遺往生伝 and *Goshūi ōjōden* 後拾遺往生伝 by Miyoshi no Tameyasu 三善為康, *Sange ōjōki* 三外往生記 by Renzen 蓮禪 (Fujiwara no Sukemoto 藤原資始) and *Honchō shinshū ōjōden* 本朝新修往生伝 by Fujiwara no Munetomo 藤原宗友. All can be found in NST 7.

5. Begun by Gōsei 仰誓 (d. 1794), the first collection of *Myōkōninden* was edited by his son Rizen 履善 and his disciple Seigai 誓鑑, and substantially expanded by Sōjun 僧純, who published the collection between 1842 and 1858, including a supplementary volume (*zokuhen* 続篇) completed by Zō-ō 像王 in 1850 (see KAWAMURA 1987, 41–43). The history of this early editorial process has been considered by more than one scholarly study (see, for example, ASAEDA 1982), but must remain outside the purview of the current discussion, which will be limited to the nineteenth-century text of the *Myōkōninden* as presented in NST 57: 147–253.

simply of the religious practices associated with ideal believers in specific religious communities, but of the nature of religious practice and community itself.

Ōjōden: Life as the Pursuit of Salvation

One of the characteristic features of hagiographic discourse is its tendency to subordinate the particularity of an individual life to the reiteration of traditional images of sanctity (KLEINE 1998, 326–27). While the stereotypic quality of much sacred biography—concerned more with the reiteration of the ideal than with the diversity of human experience—often renders it of dubious value as biographical source material (or, indeed, as literature) it would appear to be an essential part of the didactic project motivating its authors (HEFFERNAN 1988, 17; see also CHILDS 1991, 19). Attention to the regularities within a particular genre of sacred biography can thus reveal a great deal about the way in which they were intended to influence their readers.

Viewed from this perspective, *ōjōden* are striking for the fundamental diversity of their protagonists and their practices. Monks and laity, men and women, wonder-working saints and pious devotees, renunciants, killers, and courtiers all appear as the beneficiaries of Amida's saving vows.⁶ In addition to the *nembutsu*, a practice which itself ranges from the chanting of Amida's name to more advanced visualization and meditation techniques, *ōjōden* also describe a variety of practices, from elaborate collective rituals and doctrinal discussion to the simple act of westward-facing prayer. Other accounts describe the recitation and copying of sutras (including not only Pure Land texts like the *Sukhāvativyūha sūtra*, but also the *Lotus Sūtra* and the apotropaic *Kongō hannya kyō* 金剛般若經), as well as the composition and recitation of poems and hymns in praise of Amida. In still other tales, salvation is accomplished through suicide or through grisly acts of self-mutilation. The *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki*, for example, includes both the story of the novice (*shamon* 沙門) Zōyū 增祐, whose preparation for death included descending alive into the grave, as well as the tale of an anonymous nun who expressed her devotion by having the skin removed from her own hand, and using it as the canvas on which to paint an image of the Pure Land (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 25 [NST 7: 507] and 32 [NST 7: 508]).

This profound diversity of protagonists and their practices, however, is matched by a notable regularity in the narrative structure by which they are

6. That is not to say, however, that *ōjōden* collections are in any sense demographically balanced. In his translation and study of the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki*, for example, WETZLER (1977, 248) notes that monks, nuns, and novices represent thirty-two of the forty-five individuals recounted in the collection. Similarly, KLEINE (1998, 333) estimates that women represent only twelve percent of the protagonists in Japanese *ōjōden*. Nevertheless, despite the predominance in these collections of monks over laity and men over women, the mere presence of all four constituencies of the Buddhist community (monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen) suggests at least a gesture towards religious universalism (if not egalitarianism) on the part of their authors.

conveyed. Protagonists are typically introduced by name, often accompanied by information about their birthplace, family, social rank, and religious status. An abbreviated description of their religious or secular career often follows. But this information is subordinated to the inevitable centerpiece of virtually all *ōjōden* accounts: the depiction of the protagonist's final moments and rebirth in Sukhāvati.⁷ Indeed, even when the author of an *ōjōden* appears to have drawn on more detailed historical records in compiling an account, the biographical elements of these tales are typically foreshortened, focusing on the events, character traits and religious practices that bear most directly—either as contributing factors or as obstacles to be overcome—on their ultimate achievement of birth in the Pure Land (KLEINE 1998, 329–30).

This peculiar biographical focus—telling less the story of a life than of a preparation for death—is closely bound up with the stated purpose of these texts. In his preface to the tenth-century *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki*, for example, Yoshishige no Yasutane cites as his inspiration the encouragement (*kanjin* 勧進) provided by seventh-century Chinese tales of rebirth, and offers his own accounts of Japanese *ōjōnin* to encourage others to seek rebirth for themselves (NST 7: 500). In part, this effort appears to be motivated by a desire to document instances of *ōjō*, providing evidence that, in Japan as well as in China, rebirth in the Pure Land remained attainable. Indeed, Yasutane's collection—which provided the model for subsequent Japanese *ōjōden*—is replete with marvelous signs (*isō* 異相) confirming the salvation of its protagonists.⁸ In many accounts, for example, death occurs painlessly, often accompanied by the iconic imagery of Amida's descent (*raigō* 来迎), including the appearance of purple clouds, celestial music, and preternatural fragrances.⁹ In a similar fashion, many accounts report the dream-visions of friends and disciples corroborating their rebirth in Sukhāvati. The condition of the body itself—retaining its prayerful posture without signs of putrefaction—is also often introduced into evidence. In at least one case, the body is said to vanish altogether (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 28; NST 7: 507–508).

7. A small minority of tales are exceptions to this rule. These accounts—describing the lives of such foundational figures as Prince Shōtoku 聖徳, the bodhisattva Gyōki, and the Pure Land teacher Kūya 空也—tend to focus less on the protagonist's *ōjō* (in the former cases it goes essentially unremarked) and more on the ways in which those figures laid the doctrinal and institutional foundations by which others were able to gain salvation in Amida's Pure Land (BATHGATE 2006, 78–79).

8. This aspect of rebirth narratives has led KOTAS (1987, 300) to describe *ōjōden* as a “literature of proof.” In this sense, Yasutane's *ōjōden* appear to prefigure the death registers (*kakochō* 過去帳) of the Nijūgo zanmai-e 二十五三昧会, a devotional society of which the Pure Land thinker Genshin was a founding member (see RHODES 2001, 58; HORTON 2004, 34–35). Indeed, one of the principles to which those who joined the Nijūgo zanmai-e agreed (first formulated in a covenant sometimes attributed to Yasutane) was that those who died would attempt to send some sign of their post-mortem fate to their fellows (BOWRING 1998, 243–47).

9. On the intersections between *ōjōden* and iconography, see STONE 2004, 82–83.

Certainly, portrayals of tranquil final moments present an appealing scene, and the recurrence of marvelous signs confirming their salvation of *ōjōnin* would certainly suggest that those who follow their example do not do so in vain. Yet the effort to encourage readers to seek *ōjō* would appear to have involved more than just the accumulation of corroborating evidence. The practices by which individuals obtain *ōjō*, as well as the signs that attend it, may differ from one narrative to the next, but their placement within the course of a life provided a unifying narrative pattern, a lens through which the readers of these stories could understand the scope and significance of their own lives. In this sense, *ōjōden* provided not simply an exemplary set of events—a model of the ideal death—but also an exemplary perspective on those events.¹⁰ Like Genshin's *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集, which famously encourages the pursuit of rebirth in the Pure Land by framing the present within the vast and ultimately terrifying framework of the Six Paths of birth-and-death (*rokudō* 六道), *ōjōden* encourage the reader to reconsider the significance of a life by viewing it from a particular temporal perspective, an overarching teleology from which to reconsider the events of a life in terms of their impact on its inevitable end, and thus on the life to come.

In what are the most straightforward accounts, salvation is portrayed as the culmination of a lifetime of pious ritual observance, seclusion, and/or study. In some tales, the protagonist is described as rising to some prominence, but their intentions—and thus the attention of the reader—are directed away from reputation or advancement and towards the pursuit of salvation. The monk Zōga 僧賀, for example, is described as deliberately antagonizing potential patrons among the nobility, to prevent his erudition and holiness from becoming a means to worldly advancement, and thus to avoid the karmic hindrances entailed in fame or high office (*Zoku honchō ōjōden* 12; NST 7: 574). But the accounts that are perhaps most striking in this regard are those in which the causes of rebirth—as well as those hindering rebirth—are revealed after the fact, drawing attention to the chains of cause-and-effect precisely by reversing the order in which they are presented to the reader.¹¹ Thus, for example, the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* tells the story of monk Saigen 濟源, whose pure heart and assiduous practice of the nenbutsu culminates in a death accompanied by wondrous signs. The account ends, however, by pointing out that, shortly before his death, he made an offering of five *koku* 石 of rice to the Yakushiji 薬師寺, explaining that, many years before, he had borrowed the rice, and wished to return it, thus avoiding any karmic hindrance to his successful rebirth in the Pure Land (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 9; NST 7: 504).

10. Compare this with KOTAS 1987, 32–33.

11. On the narrative rhetoric of cause-and-effect more generally, see CULLER 1982, 86–88.

This sort of retroactive approach to cause-and-effect would seem to be influenced by the narrative conventions of earlier Buddhist genres; indeed, like earlier *avadāna* literature, a number of *ōjōden* locate the antecedents of the present in the events of previous lives. In some cases, rebirth is attributed almost exclusively to good karma from past lives (*shukuzen* 宿善), as in the widely-reproduced tale of the monks Chikō 智光 and Raikō 賴光. When Raikō—who had shown little interest in traditional monastic pursuits—dies, Chikō is overcome with doubts about his friend’s ultimate fate. After months of worry, he is visited by his friend in a dream, in which he explains that the foundation for his birth had been laid in past lives, and that his penultimate rebirth as the monk Raikō had been committed to the constant visualization of Amida’s paradise rather than to study or ritual (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 11; NST 7: 504).

In other accounts, past-life karma is presented as a hindrance to be overcome, as in the story of a monk from Higo province who, after a lifetime’s dedication to Buddhist practice, took up living with a woman in his fiftieth year. Despite her devotion to him, “performing all the duties of a wife,” the monk insisted that she not be present at his final moments, and demanded that the other monks in attendance not even notify her of his condition until he was already dead. Only when she was informed of his auspicious death and passage into the Pure Land did the reasons for the monk’s strange insistence become clear. Overwhelmed, not with grief but with fury, the woman exclaimed that she had followed the monk from one life to the next over much of the past kalpa, acting as his servant and mate in order to prevent his escape from the cycle of birth-and-death. Only by excluding her from his final moments in this life, turning from her clinging devotion to the saving power of Amida, had he succeeded in escaping her clutches (*Shūi ōjōden* 2: 20; NST 7: 619–20).

Stories such as these reveal a recurring orientation to biography as the charting of cause and effect. In this respect, it is not surprising to encounter tales that appear to be concerned primarily with advocating the efficacy of one practice over another. The priest Myōshō 明靖, for example, is described as abandoning his accustomed practice of esoteric ritual when it proves unable to dispel the terrifying visions of hellfire that plague his final days. The reader is told, however, that by chanting the nenbutsu along with his disciples, his vision of hell is gradually replaced with one of the celestial entourage, coming to usher him to the Pure Land (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 19; NST 7: 506). In a similar fashion, the centerpiece of the story of Chikō and Raikō is a dream-vision in which the departed Raikō informs his friend that, far from making him a superior candidate for *ōjō*, his lifetime of assiduous study and practice were insufficient to earn him rebirth in Sukhāvati. Instead, he is advised to adopt the exclusive visualization practice by which Raikō had accomplished his salvation. Commissioning an image of Amida and the Pure Land, the so-called *Chikō mandara* 智光曼荼羅 of Gangōji 元興寺 that was given to him by Amida himself in his dream vision,

he devotes the rest of his life to its contemplation. In so doing, he succeeds in joining his friend in Amida's Land.¹²

The causal logic of *ōjōden* is taken to what is perhaps its logical extreme in the narrative motif usually known as *akunin ōjō* 悪人往生 (the rebirth of evil people), describing the power of past-life karma and efficacious practice in the present to overcome a lifetime at odds with the Dharma to gain salvation in Amida's Land of Utmost Bliss. In the preface to the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki*, Yasutane praises the inspirational example of "ox-butchers and fowl merchants" described in Chinese collections (NST 7: 500), but it is not until Ōe no Masafusa's *Zoku honchō ōjōden* that Japanese accounts of *akunin ōjō* appear. The first of these portrays the venal careerism of Minamoto no Noritō 源章任, whose dedication to the pursuit of wealth and status was matched only by his devoted practice of Pure Land ritual. Reciting the *Amidakyō* 阿弥陀經 forty-nine times every day, he was able to face his death in the proper state of mind, and was born into Amida's paradise. The second describes the blood-drenched career of his kinsman Yoriyoshi 頼義, who eventually turned from his brutal efforts to assert the military hegemony of the Minamoto—the severed heads of his victims are described as beyond count—and devoted his life to the practice of nenbutsu. His birth in Sukhāvātī, the reader learns, was corroborated by the dreams of many people.¹³

Given the diversity of the practices themselves, however, the encouragement offered by *ōjōden* as a whole should perhaps be understood, less in terms of their advocacy of specific behaviors, than of the perspective they offer on the nature of the religious life. As Paul RICOUER (1980, 175) has suggested, "the art of story telling is not so much a way of reflecting on time as a way of taking it for granted." Events, after all, are not merely recorded in narrative; they are rendered significant by their selection and placement within a particular plot, a chain of cause-and-effect oriented towards a particular conclusion. Similarly, the reader's

12. *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 11; NST 7: 504. On Chikō as a Pure Land thinker and the role of the mandala within that thought, see DOBBINS 1998, 118–20.

13. *Zoku honchō ōjōden* 35 and 36; NST 7: 578–79. Scholarship on this theme usually depicts *akunin ōjō* as a significant innovation, a departure from earlier imagery of *ōjōnin* that prefigures the thought of later Pure Land thinkers (see DOBBINS 1989, 152–53). Yet it is precisely the superficial similarity between the imagery of *akunin ōjō* and Shinran's later doctrine of *akunin shōki* 悪人正機 (that is, that evil people represent the principle object of Amida's Vow) that should put us on guard against too easy a teleology, anachronistically interpreting the imagery of *akunin ōjō* primarily as a precursor to later developments, without considering both in their proper contexts. STONE (2004, 97–98) describes the notion of the salvation of evil people as expressing a fundamental "discontinuity" between one's final moments and the rest of one's life, reflecting "an implicit questioning of a direct causal relation between morality or merit-accumulation and salvation." While such accounts clearly question the efficacy of traditional moral conduct as a source of saving merit, the emphasis on the causal efficacy of practice nevertheless remains central to these texts. Indeed, by advocating specific rituals as having the power to overcome a lifetime of impiety or immorality, the theme of *akunin ōjō* appears to exemplify, rather than reject, that causal logic.

work of following a narrative entails a recapitulation of the selective attention of its author, making note of individuals and actions to the extent (and in the order) that they are represented in the unfolding of the story (RICOUER 1991, 432). In *ōjōden*, the course of a life—with all its accomplishments and regrets, its unintended consequences and past-life karma—appears, less as a sequence of events than as a complex of causes leading towards a single effect, the attainment of rebirth in Amida's Land of Utmost Bliss. In this sense, the didacticism of *ōjōden* can be said to rest, at least in part, in their recurring literary structures, inculcating in their readers particular habits of attention, shaping their experience of the world beyond the text according to a particular kind of story.

Myōkōninden: Life as the Expression of Salvation

The kind of story expressed in *ōjōden*, however, appears to have been largely a product of the late Heian Period. A few new tales can be found in the fragmentary thirteenth-century *Nenbutsu ōjōden* 念仏往生伝, as well as in *setsuwa* collections like the *Shasekishū* 紗石集. In a similar fashion, *ōjō* remained a major theme in the warrior epic *Heike monogatari* 平家物語. The compilation of *ōjōden* as a genre, however, appears to have essentially come to an end in the thirteenth century. Writing on the decline of *ōjōden* in this period, Kasahara Kazuo has characterized it as part of a fundamental shift in Pure Land discourse “from hagiography to doctrine,” a movement bound up with the transformations of Pure Land thought in the Kamakura Period:

In their preaching, the Kamakura sects could not use the Heian-Period hagiographies to provide examples of holy men and devotees of the Pure Land teaching, since the literature embodied the very principles, criteria, and qualifications that the Kamakura Buddhist leaders had rejected. But neither did the founders of the Kamakura sects attempt to create their own hagiographic works extolling choice, exclusive practice, and easy practice, because there was as yet no popular tradition of Pure Land holy men and devotees consonant with the new Kamakura-Period point of view.... In contrast to the earlier reliance on pious biographies, appeals to the masses in the Kamakura Period were based on reasoning.¹⁴

Clearly, the diversity of practices portrayed in *ōjōden* would have been incompatible with the teachings of Hōnen—who advocated exclusive reliance on the nenbutsu—and Shinran—who rejected the notion of self-motivated (*jiriki* 自力) practice altogether, viewing the nenbutsu itself as a sign of Amida working through the individual rather than a means to establish *ōjō* for oneself.¹⁵ As I have

14. KASAHARA 2001, 160–61. Responding to another iteration of Kasahara's argument, KOTAS (1987, 198) has suggested that such a characterization “leaves many—if not most—questions unanswered.”

15. A brief introduction to these doctrines may be found in SHIGEMATSU 1996, 296–307.

suggested above, however, it is possible to devote too much attention to the protagonists and practices described in these texts, and to lose sight of the message and functions of the narrative form itself. Authors of *ōjōden*, for example, repeatedly emphasize the goal of their efforts, not only in terms of the encouragement such accounts provide, but also their capacity to forge karmic ties (*kechien* 結縁) between the saved and those still seeking salvation.¹⁶ Indeed, accounts of religious deaths are replete with descriptions of the audiences gathered to witness them, and so establish a karmic connection to salvation for themselves (STONE 2004, 103–104). Those who could not witness these events personally could nevertheless do so vicariously through the imaginative recreations made possible in narrative.¹⁷ The reading and compilation of *ōjōden*, in other words, represented, not simply an account of diverse religious practices, but a religious practice in its own right, one that would have been fundamentally inconsistent with later understandings of Pure Land practice (BATHGATE 2006, 84).

The decline of *ōjōden* can be linked, however, not only to the tradition's changing images of Pure Land practice, but also to new understandings of the very nature of soteriological cause-and-effect itself. As Jacqueline Stone has argued, the medieval discourse of Original Enlightenment (*hongaku shisō* 本覚思想) involved a reversal of commonplace understandings of cause and effect, a vision of practice as the expression of enlightenment that would profoundly influence not only the development of medieval Tendai but many of the so-called “New Buddhist” schools, as well (STONE 1999, 164, 229). In the Pure Land tradition, this critique was perhaps nowhere more fundamental (or more fraught) than in the Shin sect, where Shinran's rejection of self-motivated practice in favor of the “Other power” (*tariki* 他力) of Amida constituted a departure from the most basic assumptions and orientations of *ōjōden* narrative discourse as a teleological chronology of cause and effect (UEDA 1984; see also STONE 1999, 87–88).

Indeed, the doctrinal history of Shin Buddhism suggests that the implications of Shinran's teaching of absolute reliance on Amida frequently ran counter to the common sense of his followers, as well. As James DOBBINS has suggested (1989, 8), Shinran's formulation of faith, practice, and salvation “did not translate easily into a socially viable religious institution,” and the early community continually struggled to navigate a course between the twin extremes of “licensed evil” (*zōaku muge* 造悪無碍) and the “salvific power of practice” (*kenzen shōjin*

16. In the preface to the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki*, Yasutane notes that he “never fails to form a karmic connection with priests, laymen, men, and women who aspire to the Pure Land and pray for rebirth” (NST 7: 500). Similarly, the author of the *Shūi ōjōden* gives pride of place to such karmic considerations noting that his accounts “were recorded, not for wealth or fame, but rather to establish karmic connections [*kechien*] and to encourage [*kanjin*]” (NST 7: 567).

17. The idea that one might bear witness vicariously through narrative appears to be reflected in the practice—advocated both by the Pure Land patriarch Shandao 善導 and in Genshin's seminal treatise *Ōjōyōshū*—that those attending on the dying record their last moments (*Ōjōyōshū* 300–301, cited in ANDREWS 1973, 83; see also STONE 2004, 80).

賢善精進). Among the two, the latter position appears to have been the more entrenched, perhaps because it reflected an enduring, commonplace pragmatism that understood moral and religious practice as a means to an end, whether that end be defined in terms of worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益) or ultimate salvation.¹⁸

The idea that such central Pure Land practices as the calling of Amida's name represented not the cause of salvation but an expression of gratitude by those already saved provided the foundation for Kakunyo 覚如 and Rennyō 蓮如 to establish both a ritual program and a social ethic as signs of the soteriologically settled mind (*anjin* 安心) (DOBBINS 1989, 81–86, 93–98, 144–48). Insofar as the Honganji appeared at the center of this ritual and social paradigm, these teachings were certainly a contributing factor in the survival and growth of the Honganji as an institution, but they did not ultimately eliminate the tendency of some of its followers to think of religious practice in terms of means-ends pragmatism. This is witnessed, for example, by the *sangō wakuran* 三業惑乱 (1796–1806), a controversy in which factions within the Honganji community advocated a vision of the nenbutsu as an act of refuge (*kimyō* 歸命) requiring the total involvement of the believer, as expressed in the traditional threefold formulation of efficacious action (*sangō*): body, speech, and mind (*shin-ku-i* 身口意) (OKAMURA 1963, vol. 1, 705–11). According to this position, for example, Rennyō's own exposition of the nenbutsu as the cry to Amida to “please save me” (*tasuke tamae* たすけたまへ) was interpreted as the essential mental component of the nenbutsu, without which the physical voicing of Amida's Name would lack efficacy.¹⁹

As Asaeda Zenshō has suggested, it is precisely in the context of this controversy that the Honganji's own contribution to the Edo-Period revival in popular Pure Land biography was initially compiled.²⁰ Begun by the priest Gōsei in the late eighteenth century, the *Myōkōninden* reached its final form in an 1858 edition of six fascicles, but its image of the *myōkōnin* as an ideal Shin believer—“a Lotus among people”—would continue to appear in subsequent accounts, including scholarship on the writings of such later *myōkōnin* as Asahara Saichi 浅原才市 and Kobayashi Issa 小林一茶.²¹ Considered as part of this more general

18. DOBBINS (1989, 77–78) notes that the emphasis placed on *kenzen shōjin* by the *Tannishō* 歎異抄 suggests that, by the time of its composition, the influence of licensed evil doctrine had been largely curtailed.

19. According to DOBBINS (1989, 147–48), this interpretation of the nenbutsu probably originated in the Ikkōshū 一向宗, although by the time of the *sangō wakuran*, it was most fully associated with the Chinzei 鎮西 branch of the Jōdoshū 浄土宗.

20. ASAEDA 1998, 323. The publication of the *Myōkōninden* was by no means the beginning of this resurgence. In part facilitated by the unprecedented growth of a popular printing industry—the first Edo-Period tales of rebirth in the Pure Land were editions of the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki*, published in 1632—*kinsei ōjōden* 近世往生伝 began to appear in the late seventeenth century (see KOTAS 1987, 199–201, and KASAHARA 2001, 408–16).

phenomenon, the characteristic behavior of *myōkōnin*—a life oriented around gratitude to Amida, Shinran, and the Honganji, spontaneously expressed in the nenbutsu and in the uncalculating fulfillment of social obligations—is frequently discussed as a concrete manifestation of Shinshū doctrine in practice. This is what Alfred BLOOM (1987, 10) has described as the expression “in personality” of the mind of faith.²² At the same time, the composition of the *Myōkōninden* should also be read in terms of its immediate historical contexts, as a response to the difficulties inherent in locating moral and ritual practice within the Shinshū vision of faith. In this light, its accounts of *myōkōnin* appear as a corrective to the kind of ritual pragmatism that characterized commonly-held orientations to the religious life, a view that was at the heart, not only of the *sangō wakuran*, but of Heian-Period *ōjōden*.

Reading the stories of the *Myōkōninden* from this perspective, one is immediately struck by the relative dearth of stories describing protagonists’ final moments. Indeed, the few tales that do include such accounts appear specifically intended to follow the pattern of earlier sources in order to contradict their underlying assumptions. The story of the impoverished commoner Rokubei 六兵衛, for example, portrays a religious career marked primarily by the practices that he *refused* to perform, turning away from the accrual of merit through such practices as observing the precepts—to which he is repeatedly invited by an adherent of the Shingon 真言 sect—in favor of the nenbutsu. The recitation of Amida’s name is described, moreover, not as a uniquely efficacious practice for attaining rebirth (as it appears, for example, in the above-mentioned *ōjōden* account of the priest Myōshō), but rather as a sign of the salvation already guaranteed by Amida’s Original Vow. Like many Heian-Period *ōjōden*, the story of Rokubei ends with a dream vision, providing an indication of his successful rebirth. It is a vision, however, in which Rokubei appears, not in the midst of the Celestial Entourage or seated on a Lotus in the Pure Land, but simply passing away while reciting the nenbutsu. The story ends with the editorial remark, “More than purple clouds, marvelous scents or music, the calling of ‘namu amida butsu’ is the most auspicious sign of *ōjō*.”²³ Such a comment, however, only serves to reiterate what is already present in the narrative itself: The reader,

21. Following Shandao, Seigai links the meaning of the term *myōkōnin* with the statement in the *Kanmuryōju kyō* 觀無量壽經 that “one who performs the nenbutsu is a lotus (*fundarike* 分陀利華) among people” (NST 57: 148). On Saichi and Issa, see SUZUKI 1967; KASHIWARA and OMINE 1992.

22. An example of this approach can be found in MINAMOTO 2006.

23. NST 57: 179. A similar rhetorical device is used in describing the last moments of Seikurō 清九郎, the *myōkōnin* who arguably forms the centerpiece of Gōsei’s collection. After describing Seikurō’s deathbed nenbutsu, the author tells the story of the similar practice of Shinran’s disciple Kakushinbō 覚信房, in which the dying man explains that his recitation is not a means to attain rebirth in the Pure Land but an expression of his gratitude to Amida for already assuring his salvation (NST 57: 170).

expecting a marvelous sign, is given precisely that, a refiguration of the nenbutsu as a sign of salvation rather than a means to attain it.

This orientation to practice—as the result rather than the cause of salvation—is further conveyed by the number of accounts in which the spontaneity of the nenbutsu borders on the involuntary. In several stories, *myōkōnin* appear virtually incapable of stopping themselves from calling out Amida's name, in spite of the sometimes dangerous consequences of their behavior. One tale, for example, describes an encounter between a short-tempered samurai and the pious pack-horse driver Jirozaemon 治郎右衛門. Taking offense at the man's constant—and inauspiciously funereal—recitation of the nenbutsu as he led the warrior's horse along the road, the warrior ordered him to desist, but Jirozaemon quickly forgot himself and before long returned to his habitual expression of faith. Even when the enraged samurai drew his sword and made to strike him down, Jirozaemon awaited the blow, the nenbutsu still on his lips (NST 57: 158–59). A similar account describes the struggles of the samurai Araki Mataroku 荒木又六, who was dismayed to find his constant practice of the nenbutsu the subject of mockery and criticism, not only by the young men with whom he worked, but by his own father, who saw his public expressions of piety as inappropriate to a member of the warrior class. In spite of his wish to obey his father's wishes, however, he repeatedly found himself unintentionally reciting Amida's name. Described his desperation in verse, he begged to be pardoned, saying, “my nenbutsu burns with a fire that cannot be extinguished with water” (NST 57: 183–84). In accounts such as these, the spontaneous recitation of the nenbutsu provides the source of the narrative's dramatic tension: In contradistinction to *ōjōden* like the story of Myōshō (who employs the nenbutsu to escape his visions of the hellfire that awaits him), the nenbutsu appears in these *myōkōninden* not as the solution to a problem but as its cause. In this sense, such tales redefine the nature of the nenbutsu as a practice, presenting it as a natural, even unintentional, expression of faith rather than as a calculated means to an end.

Indeed, if the nenbutsu can be said to have a soteriological effect in stories such as these, it appears to be on the stories' *antagonists* rather than on the *myōkōnin* themselves. Faced with Jirozaemon's calm acceptance of his fate, for example, the samurai stayed his hand as his rage gave way, first to surprise and then respect. Questioning him about the source of his steadfastness, the two began to discuss the power of Amida's Vow, and the samurai gradually became established in faith himself. In a similar fashion, *myōkōninden* frequently present what Elizabeth HARRISON (1977, 85) has called “conversion stories,” encounters with people of superior religious insight that lead individuals to a deeper appreciation and reliance on the power of Amida's compassionate Vow. The story of the samurai Arakawa Sōuemon 荒川想左衛門, for example, begins with a description of his struggle to overcome his doubts and cultivate the mind of

faith. When he seeks the advice of a scholar on these matters, his questions are answered in terms repeated throughout Shinshū literature:

Possessing the mind of an ordinary deluded person (*bonbu* 凡夫), if you try to dispel your doubts with lengthy thought and deliberation, they will only grow. *Ōjō* is not settled through the quality of our own minds. Only through the inconceivable power of Amida's Primordial Vow, believing deeply that the power of the Tathāgata saves even a wretch like you, will you receive the great gift of his embrace. Even as you wonder how it is possible, you will no longer doubt your rebirth in the Land of Reward (*hōdo* 報土) through Amida's Vow to save all beings. (NST 57: 184–85)

In other accounts, the conversations between *myōkōnin* and those yet to achieve the settled mind focus on the nature of religious practice within the life of faith. In a conversation between the oil merchant Sanzaemon 三左衛門 and his wife, for example, she complains that his constant practice of the nenbutsu leads to inattention at work and errors in bookkeeping. His reply, however, reminds her that the nenbutsu is not a distraction from what is important, but—even more than bookkeeping—is first and foremost an expression of one's awareness of the debts that matter most:

I make records in my account books so that I do not forget even the little things of this world. How much less can I forget, even briefly, the boundless benevolence of the Tathāgata that saves me in the life to come. (NST 57: 175–76)

It would be tempting to view such conversations as the centerpiece of the text's didacticism, using the events of a religious life as the pretext for a reiteration of Shin doctrine. In fact, however, *myōkōninden* pay only sporadic attention to the content of these conversations. In more than one story, it is simply noted that such a conversation took place, with little indication of what was said (NST 57: 172). In this sense, the significance of conversion accounts would seem to lie less in their content than in their placement within the overall structure of the narrative. Unlike Heian-Period *ōjōden*—in which salvation is portrayed as the culmination of the character's life—the moment of conversion appears as a kind of turning point, a point of *discontinuity* with the past, when self-motivated practices are rejected in favor of an exclusive reliance on the “Other power” of Amida. It is a discontinuity, moreover, that encourages a similar orientation in the reader, a reconfiguration of the religious life concerned less with the efficacy of an individual's actions (for good or ill) and more with the impact of powers outside the individual.

Indeed, a number of conversion stories present the moment of salvation, not as the conclusion of the narrative, but as its beginning.²⁴ One account, for

24. In this sense, *myōkōninden* appear to reflect Shinran's own use of the term *ōjō* to refer as much to the realization of faith within this life as to rebirth in the Pure Land at the moment of death (see UEDA 1984, 73).

example, describes a discussion between the eight-year-old daughter of a cotton merchant named Oshimo おしも and the priest of the local Shinshū *dōjō* 道場. Despairing of her evil karma—she confesses to committing petty theft in order to buy sweets—she inquires if there are any means by which she could overcome the deeds of her past and obtain *ōjō*, to which the priest responds:

When you trust yourself exclusively to the inconceivable Original Vow, deeply acknowledging your evil karma, your rebirth in the Pure Land is established without doubt. (NST 57: 174)

Her tearful embrace of Amida's Vow, however, is only the first in a series of anecdotes describing the firmness of her faith and the striking ways in which it was reflected in her behavior. When an earthquake struck her family home, for example, everyone fled the building except Oshimo, who remained at the family shrine, calmly chanting the *nenbutsu*. When asked why, she responded that, if it were her karma to die in the earthquake, she chose to do so before the Buddha, chanting his Name (NST 57: 174). A similar tale describes the story of the faithful peasant Yoichi 与市, whose experience of hell in a dream led him to attend sermons and dharma-talks at local temples and so awaken the mind of faith. The account then goes on to describe some of the ways in which that awakening was expressed in his subsequent life. When he happened to stumble on the local fishmonger stealing millet from his garden, for instance, he avoided a confrontation, explaining that if he charged the fishmonger with theft, he would cease to visit, and Yoichi would no longer have the opportunity to discuss the Dharma with him (NST 57: 192).

Indeed, a great many tales seem to show little or no interest with how faith was attained, focusing entirely on the character's subsequent life. Thus, for example, the story of Seikurō—the most detailed and perhaps most well-known of Gōsei's *myōkōninden*—presents a host of anecdotes recounting his pious behavior and its effects on those around him, but gives only the barest mention of how his faith came to develop. When asked by the mother of the local feudal lord when he had attained faith, Seikurō replied,

I realized the desirability of the Pure Land when I was about 32 or 33. At that time I adhered to the path of liberation, but I had all manner of doubts. Somewhere along the way, without my knowledge, those doubts cleared.... This is certainly the work of [Amida's] Other power, for which I am thankful.

(NST 57: 164–65)

Given its fundamental importance in Shinshū soteriology, the substantial number of accounts that do not address the circumstances of their protagonists' settling of faith is as striking as it is significant. In a sense, the events recorded after a *myōkōnin*'s attainment of faith could be said to be analogous to the marvelous signs recorded in Heian-Period *ōjōden*, the external indications of a

religious transformation that would otherwise remain hidden. In *ōjōden*, however, these signs refer back to the specific practices by which the *ōjōnin* sought to accomplish his or her goal, providing a confirmation of their effectiveness. Insofar as *myōkōninden* omit events prior to their protagonist's settling of faith, however, they emphasize only the consequences of faith. Like the story of the peasant Kuhei 九兵衛—whose life before his conversion is mentioned only to contrast his later kindness with his earlier reputation for cruelty and violence—*myōkōninden* encourage the reader to view the actions of the faithful as expressions of a salvation already accomplished, rather than as a means to attain it.²⁵

In a similar fashion, some of the most striking aspects of *myōkōnin* behavior may have served to emphasize this kind of expressive orientation to behavior. Like Oshimo's response to the earthquake or Yoichi's failure to report the fishmonger's theft, *myōkōnin* are frequently described as acting in ways that at first appear inexplicable, even mad: an episode from the life of Seikurō describes him rolling naked in the snow, the *nenbutsu* on his shivering lips; an account of the self-tensured nun Myōki 妙喜 portrays her giving thanks for a painful burn; and the story of the cattle dealer Kihei 喜兵衛 presents an instance when he grabbed his wife's leg with fireplace tongs (*hibashi* 火箸), telling her that "since it was just laying there by the fire, I thought it was firewood."

Such pious antics could be described as questionable behavior in more than one sense of the term, however. By falling outside the boundaries of ordinary mean-ends rationality, they prompt not only bystanders within the story but also the readers of *myōkōninden* themselves to question the rationale for that behavior.²⁶ Seikurō, for example, is said to have rolled in the snow in order to better appreciate the struggles by which the bodhisattva Hōzō 法藏 (Sk. Dharmākara) brought salvation to others as the Buddha Amida (NST 57: 169). In a similar fashion, when someone makes the snide comment that Amida's grace must be unendurable that it should result in such painful injuries, the nun Myōki responds that the burn reminded her of the much greater suffering from which she was saved by Amida's power (NST 57: 205). And when Kihei's wife grew angry at his bizarre behavior, he responded more seriously:

This fire is also where we put the pot to boil rice offered to the Buddha (*obutsuhan* 御仏飯). If you are not reverent in ordinary times, I fear that you will follow your ordinary habit, and just lay your legs out when you boil rice for the Buddha. (NST 57: 151)

These responses highlight the fundamentally different perspective of the mind of faith, one focused on Amida, even in the midst of the most prosaic activities.

25. NST 57: 152. LEWIS and AMSTUTZ (1997) describe this quality of *myōkōnin* behavior as reflecting an ethics focused on character, rather than a matter of teleology or virtue.

26. In this sense, HARRISON's description (1977, 85) of these tales as "riddle stories" seems particularly apposite.

Another frequent theme in such accounts is an awareness of the inescapable roots of the present in the karma of the past. This can be seen, for example, in the story of the unlikely friendship of the woodcutter Jirozaemon and the merchant Ryōgen 了玄. Having met at the Honganji, the two became friends in the Dharma, despite their very different circumstances. When illness kept Jirozaemon from his usual visit to the city, Ryōgen went in search of his friend, and was surprised to learn the true depths of poverty in which he lived. But when he offered his friend money, Jirozaemon refused, saying:

What you've said makes me wonder if you even understand. After all, poverty and wealth, suffering and joy are caused by the karma of past lives. Your prosperity is a matter of past karma, and I am destitute because of past karma. Even saints cannot escape the power of karma: It seems that in attempting to help me, you fail to grasp the principles of cause-and-effect. (NST 57: 156)

Such comments direct the reader's attention in a similar direction. In contrast to *ōjōden* accounts, in which salvation depends on overcoming the karma of the past, these tales suggest an image of karma as ultimately insurmountable by one's own effort. It is an understanding that demands reliance on the benevolent power of Amida, who provides salvation precisely to those whose past karma renders them unable to save themselves. Moreover, the fact that such accounts present the actions of *myōkōnin*—in contrast to the commonsense pragmatism of others—not as an attempt to achieve salvation in its own right, but as a response to their faith-inspired vision of the world, the reader is continually reminded of an orientation to behavior as the effect rather than the cause of that faith.

Indeed, the most compelling aspect of the rhetorical structure of the *Myōkōninden* may be the ways in which it presents, not simply a reconfiguration of the narrative discourse of earlier biographies, but a subversion of the commonplace inclination to interpret events according to the causal fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, described by Roland BARTHES (1977, 94) as one of the mainsprings of narrative. Like the “persistence of vision,” by which our minds translate a succession of still images into the illusion of movement in film, the reader of a narrative will naturally tend to translate a sequence of events into a chain of causation (CHATMAN 1978, 45–46). In accounts of human salvation, this tendency to read causality into a sequence of events may just as naturally incline readers to view events prior to the moment of deliverance as their cause, an orientation that was at the heart of Heian-Period *ōjōden*, but which was inimical to Shinshū orthodoxy. In this sense, the challenge of the *Myōkōninden* was to configure its narratives in such a way as to frustrate the easy equation of sequence and causality. Responding to this challenge gives shape to some of the most distinctive aspects of this collection, an expressive orientation to practice that presents behavior as the result rather than as the cause of salvation.

Intersecting Lives: Character and Community in Ōjōden and Myōkōninden

The distinctive narrative orientations of *ōjōden* and *myōkōninden* have important implications, not only for their portrayal of character's actions, but also for their depiction of characters themselves. Just as events are rendered significant by their placement in a particular narrative sequence, so characters are rendered significant not only by their attributes and behaviors, but also by the ways in which they intersect with others in the telling of a story. As Alex WOLOCH (2003, 14, 177) has argued, narrative is shaped by the author's (and, subsequently, the reader's) selective attention to characters as well as to events, a configuration of characters into a system—as major or minor, supportive or antagonistic—analogue to the configuration of events within a plot.²⁷ Moreover, just as an author's representation of a series of events conveys an implicit temporal perspective, the representation of characters relative to one another expresses an implicit social perspective, an understanding of the constitutive role of others in the unfolding of a particular life.

In both *ōjōden* and *myōkōninden*, the lives of protagonists are replete with supporting characters. Frequently anonymous, these disciples and family members, neighbors and passersby present a social framework for the telling of a protagonist's life, one that is as essential and as formative as the temporal framework of the plot itself. A protagonist's exposition, after all, requires the narrative presence of an interlocutor, and the auspicious signs associated with rebirth—whether they are the postmortem marvels of *ōjōden* or the expressions in the present life of *myōkōnin* faith—require the narrative presence of witnesses to those signs. And it is in many respects through these witnesses that readers experience the exemplary lives of *ōjōnin* for themselves.

The presence of such characters is also fundamentally shaped by the bodhisattva ideal that informs both these genres (and the Pure Land movement as a whole). In these texts, salvation is never a purely solitary enterprise; rather, it is always bound up with the salvation of others. As noted earlier, for example, the compilation of *ōjōden* are motivated precisely by the desire to facilitate the rebirth of others, through the power of narrative to encourage (*kanjin*) and to establish karmic connections (*kechien*). These twin principles of *kanjin* and *kechien*—which informed not only the compilation of *ōjōden* but also much of the subsequent history of Buddhist evangelism in Japan—were bound up with nothing less than the formation of a shared community of salvation, linking author and audience, seeker and saved within the embrace of Amida's compassionate vows (GOODWIN 1994). Indeed, Yasutane's preface to the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* concludes with the classically Mahāyāna prayer for the *ōjō* of all living beings, and

27. As Woloch notes, the implicit link between narrative structure and characterization can be seen in the etymology of the term “protagonist” itself, which derives from the “first actor” (*protagonist*) in Greek drama (322).

his own hagiography—in the *Zoku honchō ōjōden*—portrays him as returning to the world as a bodhisattva after his own rebirth in the Pure Land (*Zoku honchō ōjōden* 31; NST 7: 577–78). In a similar fashion, the actions by which *myōkōnin* express their faith are routinely described as drawing others towards Amida’s embrace: As one tale concludes (paraphrasing of Shinran’s *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証), “the mind bent on achieving Buddhahood encompasses all beings” (NST 57: 175; see also DOBBINS 1989, 30, 35). Indeed, the same vicarious quality of narrative that allows the reader to forge karmic connections with *ōjōnin* also permits the reader of *myōkōninden* to experience their protagonists’ striking expressions of faith, and so open themselves to be moved to greater faith.

The distinctive social orientations of *ōjōden* and *myōkōninden* can perhaps best be seen with regard to the role played by the “good teacher” (*zenchishiki* 善知識), a central figure in Pure Land thought and in Buddhist imagery more generally. An important theme in both *ōjōden* and *myōkōninden*, the distinct ways in which the image of the good teacher is conveyed in these texts nevertheless reveal the fundamental differences in the two genres’ portrayal of the social contexts of the religious life.

In the preface to the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki*, Yasutane makes note of the Chinese precedents that led him to compile his own collection, describing tales of “ox butchers and fowl merchants” who accomplish the “ten contemplations” (*jūnen* 十念) leading to *ōjō* thanks to their encounters with *zenchishiki* (NST 7: 500). In that spirit, Yasutane devotes considerable attention to those great masters (*daihōshi* 大法師) and bodhisattvas responsible for disseminating the practices by which rebirth in the Pure Land can be attained. The Tendai master Ennin 円仁, for instance is credited with “half the transmission of the *Buddhadharma* to the East,” a contribution described entirely in terms of the rituals of the Pure Land cult, including the Amida nenbutsu and the Lotus Repentance Rite (*hokke senpō* 法華懺法; *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 4; NST 7: 503). Similarly, Yasutane’s account of the prototypical Pure Land *hijiri* 聖 and bodhisattva Kūya concludes with the statement:

Until the Tengen era, nenbutsu meditation was uncommon, both in the halls of practice and in the towns and villages. Indeed, many small men and foolish women shunned it. After the holy man came, people recited it themselves and encouraged others to recite it. Soon everyone practiced the nenbutsu. This is doubtlessly due to this holy man’s power to save living beings.

(*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 17; NST 7: 506)

Other accounts portray more specific encounters—frequently in the form of dream visions—in which the protagonist is able to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land thanks to the tutelage of a more advanced being. In the previously-noted story of Chikō and Raikō, for instance, Chikō is advised by his departed friend Raikō to abandon his former practices, and is told by Amida himself to devote

himself to contemplation of the Tathāgata and his Pure Land. A similar story relates the dream-vision of the Tendai high priest Enshō 延昌. Told by a mysterious figure in court robes that *ōjō* can only be obtained by copying the *Lotus Sūtra*, he abandoned his other practices and devoted himself entirely to that task, and the tale ends with an account of his auspicious death (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 16; NST 7: 505).

Depictions of the role of others in one's salvation, however, are not limited to their advocacy of particular practices. In a fashion reflecting Genshin's *Ōjōyōshū*, the deathbed accounts of *ōjōden* are frequently characterized by collective ritual practices, in which *ōjōnin* (especially those dwelling in monastic communities) are accompanied in sutra recitation or the nenbutsu by a number of disciples. In deathbed manuals like the *Ōjōyōshū*, the religious role of these *zenchishiki* appears essentially two-fold: in addition to tending to the physical needs of the dying, they are enjoined to assist them in maintaining the state of mind necessary to achieve *ōjō*, and to record their last moments for signs of their ultimate success (STONE 2004, 80–81). In *ōjōden* accounts, the narrative function of those attending on the dying seems to revolve primarily around the latter role, serving as the witnesses through which the reader is able to experience the protagonist's final moments. Numerous stories, for example, describe disciples struck with wonder (and, sometimes, concern for their master's sanity) when he claims to hear celestial music or to see a celestial entourage that no one else perceives. These visions, however, are vindicated when the protagonist peacefully passes away immediately afterwards.

Yet the notion that a *zenchishiki* may serve a more central ritual function can nevertheless be detected in other tales, where the success of the *ōjōnin* hinges on the efforts of good friends in the Dharma. Thus, for example, the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* tells the story of the wife of a provincial governor, whose pursuit of *ōjō* is hindered in spite of her noteworthy piety. Only after some reflection does she remember an incident from the past, when she had released two carp into a well, a misguided act of charity that saved their lives but condemned them to confinement. Rescuing the fish, her husband undoes the karmic hindrance to his wife's salvation, releasing his wife and the fish with the same act (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 37; NST 7: 509). Another tale concerns the posthumous *ōjō* of the Vinaya Master (*risshi* 律師) Mukū 無空. Concerned for the well-being of his disciples after his death, he secreted away an enormous sum of money, but died without telling anyone of the treasure. Appearing to a friend in a dream, he informed him that he had been reborn, not in the Pure Land, but in the form of a serpent. Explaining that it was the money that kept him snared within the bonds of birth-and-death, he asked that it be used to commission copies of the Lotus Sutra. This friend did as he was asked, discovering, not only the hidden money, but also a small snake, coiled among the coins. Once the money had been spent, Mukū appeared to him again, thanking him for his efforts on his

behalf and announcing his successful birth in the Land of Utmost Bliss (*Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 7; NST 7: 503).

As Stone notes, the notion that *zenchishiki* might play such a definitive role in the salvation of others—not only by their advocacy of efficacious practices, but by performing those practices on others' behalf—underlay the growth of the *chishiki* as a ritual specialist, and was central to the institutional growth of such Pure Land movements as the Jishū 時宗 during the Kamakura Period (STONE 2004, 84–8). In the Shinshū, as well, the imagery of the clergy (especially the Honganji head priest) as *zenchishiki* was of considerable importance to Rennyo's efforts to consolidate and expand the social and institutional networks on which his movement depended (ROGERS and ROGERS 1991, 302). In accordance with Shinran's teaching of absolute reliance on Amida, however, the *zenchishiki* appears in Rennyo's writings, not as an advocate or practitioner of ritual, but as the means through which individuals come to encounter—through the maturation of past good made possible by Amida's all-encompassing Light—the true significance of Amida's Inconceivable Vow (*Ofumi* 御文 11–11, in ROGERS and ROGERS 1991, 186–87). In this formulation, gratitude to Amida was frequently bound up with gratitude to the teacher (and the institution) through which that encounter took place, placing the Honganji at the center of a soteriological economy of benevolence (*on* 恩) and gratitude (*hōon* 報恩).²⁸

This understanding of the role of *zenchishiki* is reflected in the stories of *myōkōnin* like Yoichi, whose repeated expressions of gratitude included both Amida—whom he worshipped as “the only parent to love someone like me”—and the Honganji head priest (described as *zenchishiki-sama* 善知識様), whose influence he credits entirely for the arising of faith “in a fool like me” (NST 57: 193). A similar expression of gratitude can be seen in the strange behavior of the peasant Kuhei. Heading into the mountains to cut grass during a summer drought, he saw that someone had blocked the irrigation works leading to his field. Immediately, he returned to his home altar and began to pray, expressing his thanks. Responding to his family's questions, he said,

This is retaliation for my deeds in a previous life, when I must have dammed up the water to someone else's rice paddy. If this had happened in the old days, I would have grown angry, and blocked off their water supply. That I should be made aware of the deeds of a previous life is solely due to the kind teaching of the great good teacher [*daizenchishiki* 大善知識]. That is why we should give thanks. (NST 57: 152)

28. As the confessional statement (*ryōgemon* 領解文) usually attributed to Rennyo states: “We gratefully acknowledge that our hearing and understanding these truths is [due to] the benevolence of the founding master in having appeared in this world and to that of the good teachers (*zenchishiki*), his successors in the transmission [of the teaching], whose exhortations were not shallow” (ROGERS and ROGERS 1991, 280).

A consideration of the *Myōkōninden* as a whole, however, suggests an image of Amida's compassion manifested throughout the entire spectrum of social relationships. Rather than a simple expression of centralized religious authority in which Amida's grace flows solely (or even primarily) through the Honganji, *myōkōninden* are replete with incidents in which characters encounter Amida's saving power in virtually every conceivable human relationship. While traditional religious authorities—priests, *dōjō*, and the Honganji itself—appear in various capacities as teachers and objects of gratitude throughout the text, what is perhaps most striking are the number of improbable social reversals, in which servants teach masters, wives teach husbands, and children teach parents.²⁹ It was the packhorse driver Jirozaemon, after all, who led his short-tempered samurai master into the life of faith, and the illiterate peasant dullard Seikūro who led the mother of his feudal lord to embrace the Dharma. In a similar fashion, an account of the decades-long religious struggles of Chūzaemon 忠左エ門, which included Zen meditation, fasting, pilgrimage to Shinto shrines, and the repetition of the nenbutsu and the *daimoku* 題目, culminates with his introduction to the teaching of Rennyo by his humble young wife (NST 57: 180–83). Moreover, the *Myōkōninden* is replete with accounts of pious children instructing their elders. The seven-year old Onamu おなむ, for instance, is portrayed as chastising her grandmother when she advised her to use the nenbutsu to treat a painful mouth sore:

Use medicine to cure sickness. It's ingratitude to use the nenbutsu for worldly benefits. It should only be to convey our gratitude for Amida's boundless benevolence. (NST 57: 190–91)

The lowly status of such figures appears to affirm the notion that the settling of faith is not a product of the learning or eloquence of the teacher, but of the power of Amida's Vow working *through* the individuals with which one comes into contact, whatever their social or institutional status. Indeed, even the actions of scoffers and unbelievers are presented as instruments of Amida's benevolence. In one account, for example, some youngsters push the *myōkōnin* Yoichi into a rice paddy. Rather than responding to their prank with anger, however, he happily accepted it as a reminder that death might come unexpectedly (NST 57: 192). But the mysterious workings of Amida's compassion can perhaps best be seen in what is one of the most poignant stories in the collection, telling of the conversion of the physician Ishibashi Jukan 石橋寿閑. A man with no connection (*muen* 無縁) to the Dharma, he showed nothing but learned disdain for what he characterized as the teachings of "money-grubbing priests." When his six-year-old daughter was stricken with by an incurable disease, however, his devotion to his daughter proved greater than his disdain for the Dharma. Motivated by a desire to comfort her on her deathbed, he told her that by saying the nenbutsu

29. This was a point made previously by HARRISON 1992, 195.

she would be reborn after death “in a wonderful place called Utmost Bliss (*gokuraku*).” The sight of her passing—gratefully and single-mindedly repeating the nenbutsu—in turn moved him to take the prospect of *ōjō* seriously. After visiting temples and hearing sermons, he experienced an understanding of Amida’s Other power and became a faithful member of the Honganji community.³⁰

It is in this context that the oft-criticized social conservatism of *myōkōnin* might best be understood. Throughout the *Myōkōninden*, devotion to Amida appears inseparably linked to a wider recognition of one’s obligation to the authorities. The peasant Kuhei, for instance, is described as weeping for joy at the sight of fighting dogs, an expression of gratitude to the feudal authorities for preventing a similar anarchy among humans (NST 57: 152–53). Similarly, the *myōkōnin* Yoichi is said to have knelt in thanksgiving whenever passing by a nearby prison, giving gratitude for the warning it provided against lawlessness (NST 57: 193). At the same time, tales frequently dwell on the devotion shown by the faithful to the Shinshū religious authorities, often traveling great distances in order to express their gratitude with striking displays of generosity. The *myōkōnin* Shichisaburō 七三郎, for instance, is described as making a yearly pilgrimage of fifty *ri* 里 (about one hundred and twenty miles) from his home in Mikawa province to Kyoto, eating and sleeping rough so that his offering to the main temple would be as large as possible (NST 57: 208). And one of the many anecdotes of Seikuro’s piety describe him making repeated journeys each year to the Honganji, carrying firewood that he had carefully washed and dried before making an offering of it. When, on another occasion, his reputation for filial piety earned him a sizeable reward from the local feudal lord, he gave all of it (“not withholding a single *sen*”) to the Honganji, in spite of his own poverty (NST 57: 163–64).

The social and historical implications of such accounts are likely to give the contemporary reader pause.³¹ Writing on the composition history of the

30. NST 57: 160. A similar account can be found in one of Rennyō’s own letters, suggesting that he, too, was disinclined to limit the role of *zenchishiki* to members of the Honganji leadership. Describing his recently-deceased daughter Kengyoku 見玉, who converted from the Jōdoshū to the Shinshū, and whose last days inspired thoughts of the impermanence of things in those who cared for her, he encouraged others to view her as a good teacher, and look to her example for guidance (ROGERS and ROGERS 1991, 76–77 n. 19).

31. The social ethics of *myōkōninden* have been perhaps the central concern of contemporary scholarship in this area. On the one hand, social historians like Winston DAVIS (1989) have viewed the characteristic behaviors of *myōkōnin* as one of the “passive enablements” to the historical transition to modernity, a manifestation of a Weberian “inner-worldly asceticism” akin to the Protestant Ethic that supported the rise of capitalism in the West. Other studies have subjected the *Myōkōninden* to a scathing ideological critique, viewing the behavior of *myōkōnin* as emblematic of the Shinshū’s capitulation to the status quo, a fundamental compromise of the most radical implications of Shinran’s teaching for the sake of institutional power and social stability (see, for example, AMSTUTZ 1997, 26, 96). Indeed, Gregory GIBBS (1998) describes the imagery of the *myōkōnin* as “one example of how Jōdō Shinshū Buddhism...has been reduced to a charming and harmless teaching which can be easily tolerated by the watchdogs of authority” (267).

Myōkōninden, for example, Doi Jun'ichi points out the editorial comments of Sōjun (the editor of Gōsei's original body of tales, and the author of many others), who describes the life of faith as a response to four fundamental obligations (*shion* 四恩): in addition to expressing one's gratitude to Amida, the faithful should also be aware of their debts to teachers, to the nation, and to parents. Passages such as these, Doi argues, largely reflect the sociopolitical and economic concerns of the Nishi-Honganji establishment: a program to bolster the position of the Honganji among the faithful while establishing the Shinshū community as a bastion of Confucian virtue in the eyes of the feudal authorities (DOI 1981, 86–90). Indeed, *myōkōninden* frequently take pains to note the exemplary Confucian virtue of their protagonists. The behavior of Seikurō, for example, is explicitly linked to a passage from the Analects (NST 57: 163), and an 1843 colophon to Sōjun's own contribution to the collection (penned by the priest Sōrō 僧朗) associates the message of the *Myōkōninden* with the teachings of Confucian and *shingaku* 心学 scholars (NST 57: 253).

It is important to recognize, however, that such expressions of *myōkōnin* social ethics do not represent a form of special pleading on the part of their authors and editors; again and again, one's obligations to teachers, country, and family are portrayed as integrally linked to one's gratitude to Amida. Rather than a simple capitulation to the sociopolitical order in which it was composed, such depictions reflect an overarching vision of the role of social relationships in the life of faith. The social order, after all, is part and parcel of the karmically-dependent framework through which Amida's Light embraces sentient beings.³² Like the story of Ishibashi Jukan—who encountered the mind of faith, not out of a personal desire for salvation but out of paternal devotion to a sick little girl—a number of *myōkōninden* describe social virtue as an entrée to the life of faith. The story of the Edo fireman Shōnosuke 庄之助, for example, recounts a life of faith that begins with the realization of his debt, not to Amida but to his mother, a filial piety that provided the foundation for his later establishment of faith (NST 57: 210–11). Another account, describing the efforts of the merchant Gozaemon 五左衛門 to bring his wife into the life of faith, renders the link between faith and social obligation still more explicit. Although she proved uninterested in matters of salvation, she was nevertheless a wife of impeccable social virtue. One day, when Gozaemon was thanking a friend for the dinner the two had shared the night before, she joined them to thank the other man for the kindness he had shown her husband. Later, Gozaemon asked her why, if her duty as a wife required her to thank those who had been kind to her husband, she did not also give thanks to Amida, who had not simply aided him in this life, but had saved him from the suffering of future lives. Motivated by her sense of duty, she began

32. As HARRISON (1992, 194) notes, this was also a recurring theme in Shin Buddhist sermons of this period, focusing “on believers fulfilling their place in society while maintaining their faith, on obeying *ōbō* while understanding that it, too, was given by Amida and thus is *buppō*.”

to do so, and soon came to realize the mind of faith herself (NST 57: 218–19). Like the story of Yoichi, who described Amida's compassion as the love of a parent (*oyasama* 親様) (NST 57: 193), social obligation appears in these texts, not as an end in itself (nor, for that matter, as a means to an end in any pragmatic sense), but rather as a kind of analogue, an expression in human terms of the sense of obligation to Amida at the heart of the Shinshū vision of Other-power faith.

Conclusion: Chronotopes of the Religious Life

The fact that later readers should find reason to object to some of the behaviors recorded in these texts—including, not only the unquestioning acceptance by *myōkōnin* of the Tokugawa social order, but also the acts of religious suicide and self-mutilating piety found in *ōjōden*—is ultimately neither surprising nor particularly unusual. Scholarship on sacred biography often remarks on the ambivalence evoked by the actions of exemplary persons, a recognition by readers and authors alike that, in their most radical behavior, the protagonists of sacred biographies may best be viewed as objects of wonder rather than emulation. Indeed, negotiating this “tension between imitability and inimitability”—identifying the extent to which the actions portrayed in sacred biography are meant to be replicated (and by whom)—is a recurring theme in the history of virtually all traditions of sacred biography.³³

As I have argued in the preceding pages, however, the exemplary character of sacred biography is seldom limited to the behavior of its protagonists. Narratives, after all, do more than represent characters' actions; by configuring those characters and their actions within a particular image of the world, they also convey “a specific way of conceptualizing the possibilities of action” (MORSON and EMERSON 1990, 370). In his study of the history of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin identified one aspect of such configurations as the “chronotopes” of narrative discourse, the concrete settings around which the time and space of the narrative are organized, “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (BAKHTIN 1981, 250). Just as the history of the novel may be illuminated by an exploration of the changing temporal, spatial (and social) implications implicit in the use of different chronotopes over time—Bakhtin makes note of several that characterized the literature of different periods, including the road, the parlor and the threshold—so the changing understandings of the exemplary life in sacred biography might be better understood by attention to the narrative contexts in and through which those lives are expressed.

In this sense, Heian-Period *ōjōden* might best be characterized by the chronotope of the deathbed (*rinjū* 臨終). It is this “liminal period right before and after death” that serves both as the point of intersection between this world and

33. COHN 1987, 1. Examples of this negotiation can be found in BYNUM 2001, 51–3; TAMBIAH 1987, 121–3; and GELBER 1987, 16–17.

the Pure Land and as the narrative focal point of virtually all *ōjōden* (STONE 2004, 93). It is at the point of *ōjō* that the consequences of past practices (their own and others', for good or ill, in this life and in previous lives) become apparent. And it is in reference to that moment that subsequent signs of rebirth manifest themselves to others.

In comparison, the narrative focus of the *myōkōninden* appears considerably more diffuse, both in time and in space. It is possible to delineate a number of scenes and settings in which these lives unfold. In accordance with Sōjun's editorial comments on one's obligations to parents, country, and teachers, for example, one might distinguish between episodes focusing variously on the private space of the home (where faith is expressed in and through the familial dynamics of husband-and-wife or filial piety), the public space of the village or road (where the faithful express their gratitude in the context of social relations with their neighbors or the state), and the institutional space of the temple or *dōjō* (where the faithful receive the Dharma and respond with offerings). Nevertheless, these different settings, with their characteristic economies of *on* and *hōon*, can all be said to refer back to an overarching narrative structure, as ciphers for and instruments of the saving power of Amida. In this sense, the physical, temporal and social space of the family, the village or the Honganji institution itself appears as a reflection of the more fundamental relationship between this life and the Pure Land, and between the mind of faith and Amida.³⁴

As Bakhtin notes, narrative chronotopes, and, indeed, narratives more generally, ultimately derive their significance from the "continual mutual interaction" between the "real and represented world" (BAKHTIN 1981, 253–54). This interaction, often implicit in other narrative genres, is at the heart of exemplary literature, a portrayal of historical lives as the embodiment of a community's ideals. The complex intersection of representation and didacticism—of lives as they were and as they ought to be—has been the subject of numerous studies of sacred biography, providing invaluable insights into the history and literary formation of exemplary individuals, many of whom stand at the heart of their respective religious traditions. Exemplary lives, however, are less a matter of exemplary individuals or exemplary behavior, than of exemplary stories. It is as part of an overarching narrative framework that the actions of individuals achieve coherence, the configuration of a collection of events into a meaningful unity: a life. Returning to the comments of Alasdair MacIntyre that provided the epigraph to this work, it is one's understanding of the kind of story—the kind of life—of which one is a part that provides the ground by which one's actions become meaningful. Insofar as a life can be viewed as a story—that the self, in other words, can be configured through narrative—it becomes possible

34. In Bakhtin's parlance, the private, public, and institutional spaces of *myōkōninden* might be described as "minor chronotopes" that together work to articulate the "major chronotope" of the religious life as a point of contact with Amida and his Pure Land (BAKHTIN 1981, 252).

to trace, not simply traditional roles and archetypal actions as they are reflected, shaped, and challenged in literature over time, but also the traditional genres in which those roles are played. Whether the actions of exemplary individuals are understood as objects of emulation or of wonder, they are experienced as part of a particular sort of story, stories it behooves us to take seriously.

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