



R. Keller Kimbrough, *Preachers, Poets, Women, and the Way: Izumi Shikibu and the Buddhist Literature of Medieval Japan*

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THE APPEARANCE in the year 2000 of Murasaki Shikibu's image—along with a scene from the Suzumushi chapter of her renowned *Genji monogatari*—on the 2000 yen note was yet another expression of the persistent appeal of one of Japan's most famous women authors. Told and retold in versions that run the gamut from scholarly redaction and interpretation to popular renditions in manga and anime, the *Tale of Genji* enjoys continued popularity to this day. However, Murasaki Shikibu's reception has been contested more than these recent examples suggest. Fiction was often considered suspect by Buddhists because they viewed the stories as “wild words and fancy phrases” (*kyōgen kigo*) that led people away from the true teachings of the Buddhist Dharma. By extension, from a Buddhist perspective, writing fiction was a sinful act. From the end of the Heian period, and throughout the medieval and early modern eras, numerous accounts acknowledged the degenerate nature of fiction, and explained the pain and suffering Lady Murasaki experienced in subsequent rebirths as retribution for writing texts like *Genji monogatari*.

The ambivalent reception Murasaki Shikibu encountered from the late Heian period and after also befell other important Heian women writers. The response to prose authors, diarists, and poets Sei Shōnagon, Izumi Shikibu, and Akazome Emon was also contentious. Depending on the time period, the prose or poetry produced by these women might be praised or reviled. Keller Kimbrough's *Preachers, Poets, Women, and the Way* is a detailed account of some of the ways in which these Heian period women authors were received in medieval Japan. Kimbrough highlights how the image and reputation of these women were utilized by Kamakura- and Muromachi-era storytellers in order to advance their own ideological agendas. Thus, *Preachers, Poets, Women, and the Way* examines the relationship between late tenth- and early eleventh-century Heian literature written by women associated with the imperial court—and who subsequently attained recognition throughout Japanese history—and the later appropriation of these authors and their biographies in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods for didactic Buddhist purposes. He uncovers the concerns of raconteurs invested in trading upon the cachet of these women by focusing on medieval literary works that represented the life, death, afterlife, and related cultural perceptions of Izumi Shikibu and her contemporaries. Kimbrough expertly illustrates how various premodern stories depicting

Izumi Shikibu are often contradictory and “represented in medieval sources in a language of extremes” (16). As he notes, these accounts are sometimes reverent and sometimes libelous, and “they represent, in microcosm, the ever-changing worlds of late-Heian, Kamakura, and Muromachi-period fiction” (1–2).

These works of fiction narrate a view of Izumi Shikibu and other Heian women authors that includes their (often embellished) “virtues and vices, their beauty, elegance, vanity and lust, their poetic prowess and sometimes religious devotion (or lack thereof)” (2). Regardless of a particular narrative’s praise or contempt of Izumi Shikibu, these medieval stories were not terribly interested in factual rigor; rather, as Kimbrough makes clear, these characterizations of Izumi Shikibu were mostly concerned with contemporary Buddhist issues, and not trying to faithfully represent some aspect of Heian period experience.

In his introduction, Kimbrough articulates the three central concerns of his study. First, he is interested in the treatment of Izumi Shikibu and other Heian period cultural elites in medieval Buddhist didactic narratives. As he clearly demonstrates, such women literati were adopted as the protagonists of tales told by Buddhist proselytizers in their efforts to expound Buddhism and to raise money for temple-building and other projects. The Buddhist concept of expedient means (*hōben*) animates many of the stories that Kimbrough discusses. He claims that *hōben* is critical to understanding how Heian literary women came to be represented in medieval didactic stories: “Adhering to the principle of expedient means, late-Heian and medieval preachers adapted their sermons to their patrons. In the case of the educated and elite, from whom they might have hoped to receive their most substantial rewards, they did this by incorporating tales of famous women poets” (6–7).

A second, and related, issue entails the degree to which the use of Izumi Shikibu and others as the protagonists in these narratives shaped their subsequent reception in medieval history, literature, and drama. Kimbrough stresses how our views of these great literary women are mediated by the myriad ways in which they are represented over time. Third, he investigates the significance of gender in the writing and recounting of these didactic medieval Buddhist stories. He explores how stories preached to women always implicated gender regardless of whether the preacher was male or female. Gender was relevant because “medieval promises of salvation for women were foregrounded in a misogynistic Buddhist discourse of female sin” (23). Kimbrough also raises an implicit gender-related matter: The extent to which women preachers were specifically culpable for oppressing other women centered on the prevalence of traditional Buddhist attitudes toward women.

Based on his 1999 Yale University dissertation, Kimbrough’s monograph includes an introduction, eight chapters, and an epilogue. He provides translations of the medieval narratives he analyzes, an appendix listing extant texts, a kanji list, and sixty-two illustrations. The first three chapters—1. *Setsuwa* Sources and the Origins of an Affair; 2. Mice in the *Koto*: the *Otogizōshi Kotohara*; and 3. Incest and

Enlightenment: the *Otogizōshi Izumi Shikibu*—detail several medieval narratives concerned with Izumi Shikibu and Dōmyō (974–1020; a poet, Buddhist priest, and Izumi Shikibu’s reputed lover). The tales in the first three chapters date back to the early thirteenth century and appear in different kinds of literature, including *setsuwa* and Noh plays. Kimbrough uses these narratives to examine “the influence of Buddhist proselytizing on the development of late-medieval prose works, as well as the resulting impact of those works upon popular medieval conceptions of the Heian past” (28).

In the following three chapters—4. Tendai Tales: *Sangoku denki* and the *Lotus Sutra* Commentaries; 5. The Pure Land Proselytizing Traditions of Seiganji Temple; and 6. Writing Redemption: *A History of Seiganji in the Capital*—Izumi Shikibu’s relationship with another Buddhist priest, Shōkū Shōnin, is explored. These stories, which appear in a variety of Buddhist sources such as *setsuwa*, temple histories, and sermon records, illustrate “the uses of Izumi Shikibu’s poetry and persona ... in the medieval marketing of Buddhism to women” (102). As Kimbrough points out, these narratives deal with various “aspects of the popular rhetoric of women’s sin and salvation” (102). In the examples studied in these three chapters, Izumi Shikibu’s Buddhist piety obliterates her literary transgressions. These stories effectively recruit Izumi Shikibu’s celebrity status for the purpose of promoting a variety of Buddhist agendas, from expounding the *Lotus Sutra* to temple fundraising. “In the various accounts, Izumi Shikibu is made to discover, and thereby endorse, the truths of the groups and institutions recounting her story. Cast in the role of a celebrity spokesperson, she is made to lend her seemingly neutral voice to the causes and beliefs of those recreating her past” (191). Kimbrough’s analysis of how these stories achieve their didactic goals is enriched by his careful attention to narrative details and the rhetorical nuances employed by medieval storytellers.

In chapters seven and eight—7. Climbing the Forbidden Mountain: *Nyonin kinsei* and the Gendered Proselytizing Traditions of Medieval Japan; and 8. Sex and Salvation: Izumi Shikibu and *The Tale of Jōruri*—Kimbrough’s focus turns to the treatment of women in medieval Japanese Buddhism, such as the exclusion of women from certain religious sites. These prohibitions on women (*nyonin kinsei*) were likely associated with traditional notions of female impurity. In the stories discussed in these two chapters, the possibility of women attaining Buddhahood, and ways they might accomplish this, are articulated through the example of Izumi Shikibu’s success in overcoming her gender-based spiritual limitations. As Kimbrough explains, “Izumi Shikibu is shown to have overcome the many obstacles in her path, uncovering ways in which all women can attain Buddhahood. She does this most often by her skill as a poet, using *waka* to protest the physical, doctrinal, and psychological barriers emplaced against women, including the supposedly intrinsic impurity of her gender” (191). This is a remarkable reversal of fortune for Izumi Shikibu. Attributes associated with her sinfulness are now employed by medieval storytellers to promote the idea that through expedient means, and other Buddhist ideas such as

the bodhisattva's non-discrimination (*musabetsu*), Izumi Shikibu in particular, and women in general, are capable of attaining salvation.

In assessing Kamakura- and Muromachi-era stories of Izumi Shikibu and others, Kimbrough's theoretical point of departure is the work of Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), who first systematically studied this genre of medieval Buddhist didactic literature. Yanagita found evidence that mendicant women—who mixed together the roles of preacher and entertainer—often included stories of Heian-period women writers in their peregrinations through the Japanese provinces. These itinerant women solicited donations for temple construction and other public works projects, and Yanagita argued that the sometimes conflicting stories told were the result of tailoring the message for the particular audience. Kimbrough reexamines Yanagita's research, extending it to “issues of religion, gender, and medieval literary production” (4) in his discussions of medieval stories involving Heian women writers. The result is a detailed and cogently argued examination of intersecting influences: medieval literature—including tale literature (*setsuwa*), medieval short stories (*otogizōshi*), temple and shrine histories (*jisha engi*), military tales (*gunki mono*), and some Buddhist narrative painting—and Buddhist storytelling geared toward proselytizing and fundraising. As Kimbrough argues, preaching and entertaining often merged in the telling of these Buddhist didactic stories. Tales promoted specific Buddhist agendas and at the same time provided amusement. Protagonists of these stories, like Izumi Shikibu, clearly enhanced the appeal of this kind of literature.

Kimbrough's engagement with Yanagita's work is, in the end, mostly as a corrective to aspects of Yanagita's analysis rendered problematic because of such developments as updated research and contemporary perspectives on religion and gender. Beyond this, Kimbrough refrains from significant theoretical reflection. This seems odd, especially because he raises matters that would benefit from theoretical analysis. For example, *Preachers, Poets, Women, and the Way* expounds on representations of Izumi Shikibu in medieval narratives. What is the nature of representation that the same historical figure can be used to such different ends? Are the same rhetorical strategies used to create these representations found in other Japanese religious and literary texts? Such analysis, along with a discussion of reception theory, would have enriched Kimbrough's account. Similarly, gender issues are one of the primary concerns of this volume. As Kimbrough says, he takes “a special interest in the problems and possibilities for women in Buddhism in the twelfth through sixteenth centuries” (4). Given this, deeper theoretical consideration of the nature of gender differences in medieval Japanese Buddhism would situate Kimbrough's work in broader discussions of women and religion in other periods of Japanese history and across cultures.

These theoretical concerns aside, *Preachers, Poets, Women, and the Way* is a thoroughly researched, richly detailed, and convincingly argued account of the representation of Heian literary women in the didactic narratives of medieval Buddhists. This volume investigates how literary narratives contributed to the con-

struction and dissemination of Buddhist thought and practice, and Kimbrough recognizes that such tales also shaped enduring perceptions of Heian literary icons. Because distinctions between historical, literary, and religious genres tend to blur in the kinds of stories he analyzes, Kimbrough's book is an excellent addition to our understanding of how literature and religion converged in medieval Japan. Thus, Kimbrough's study is highly recommended to anyone interested in such issues as the nexus between literature, religion, and gender, Buddhist proselytizing, and the construction of literary eminence.

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