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Revisiting the Dragon Princess

Her Role in Medieval *Engi* Stories and
Their Implications in Reading the *Lotus Sutra*

This article examines how the Dragon Princess, one of the most celebrated characters in the *Lotus Sutra*, is represented in the noh drama *Ama* and the *Heike Nōkyō* sutra set. By doing so, it debunks the prevailing consensus in understanding the Dragon Princess and her episode in the sutra, and illustrates a hitherto unnoticed intrinsic affinity between medieval Japanese *engi* stories and Buddhist scriptural narratives.

KEYWORDS: *Lotus Sutra*—Dragon Princess—*henjō nanshi*—*ryūnyo jōbutsu*—Buddhism—gender and narrativity—*Heike nōkyō*—*ama* (female diver)

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THE *Heike nōkyō*, a twelfth-century set of thirty-three scriptural scrolls preserved at Itsukushima Shrine in Hiroshima Prefecture, is one of the most sumptuous and elaborate examples of medieval Japanese illustrated Buddhist scriptural manuscripts. One of the scrolls, the “Devadatta” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, bears a frontispiece that features the Dragon Princess, the celebrated protagonist of the chapter (FIGURE 1). The illustration is arguably the most sublime representation of the princess in visual art. Although recent studies of the Dragon Princess have made her famous for her sudden change of sex and transformation into a Buddha, the princess in the frontispiece simply offers her jewel to the Buddha. She shows no sign of physical metamorphosis. What sort of interpretive strategies are required to understand her act as represented in the frontispiece?

Engi Literature and Buddhist Scriptural Narratives

This article aims at illustrating an intrinsic affinity between medieval Japanese *engi* 縁起 materials in textual, performative, and visual genres, and Buddhist scriptural materials. The prevailing consensus among scholars has long held that the term *engi* is an appropriation of the Buddhist doctrinal term “dependent co-origination” (Sk. *pratītyasamutpāda*), which is translated in the Chinese canon as *innen shōki* 因縁生起 (Ch. *yinyuan shengqi*) and abbreviated in more common use as *engi* (Ch. *yuanqi*). However, the concept of dependent co-origination means that all things in the world are intrinsically neither rising nor ceasing; everything originates from its non-origin. Obviously such a philosophical idea would not accord well with medieval *engi* narratives, which are designed to account for the specific provenance of temples, shrines, or other sacred sites, the divinities worshipped there, and/or visual and material representations of those divinities.

Although it is not as well known today, an alternative etymology links the word *engi* to another significant Buddhist term, namely, *nidāna* (Jp. *nidana*; Ch. *nituona* 尼陀那), which literally means origin (*sho* 緒), provenance (*hokki* 発起), cause (*in* 因), and original cause (*shoin* 所因). More importantly for this article, *nidāna* is

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FIGURE 1. The Dragon Princess offers her Jewel to the Buddha Frontispiece. Scroll twelve of the *Lotus Sutra* in the *Heike nōkyō* (Itsukushima Shrine).

the name for one of the twelve categories of Buddhist scriptural discourse (Sk. *dvādaśāṅga-dharma-pravacana*; Ch. *shierbujing*; Jp. *jūnibukyō* 十二部經 or 十二分經). *Nidāna* in this sense is translated more commonly as either *engi* or *innen* 因緣. As a category of scriptural narratives, *nidāna* or *engi* consist of stories that aim at revealing the original cause of sermons delivered by the Buddha, *vinaya* rules he established, and strange and miraculous events caused or witnessed by him. In most cases, the origins of the events described are found in the former lives of the Buddha or his disciples in the distant past. In that regard, *nidāna* are closely linked to two other narrative categories in scriptural discourse, namely, *jātaka* (Ch. *bensheng*; Jp. *honjō* 本生), stories of the Buddha's former lives; and *itivr̥ttaka* (Ch. *benshi*; Jp. *honji* 本事), stories of the former lives of the Buddha's disciples, both ordained and lay.¹

Because *nidāna*, *jātaka*, and *itivr̥ttaka* are often employed as elaborate, didactic narrative figures within the scriptures, they often overlap with *avadāna* (Ch. *piyu*; Jp. *hiyu* 譬喻), yet another narrative entity within the twelve categories,

1. For finding how Buddhist terms in Sanskrit are translated into Chinese in the Taishō canon, I relied on SUZUKI GAKUJUTSU Z Aidan (1986). For a general discussion of the twelve categories in scriptural discourse, see HIRAKAWA (1964).

which consists of teaching by means of metaphors and parables. *Avadāna*, too, is translated in the Chinese canon as *innen* and *en* 縁; this indicates that stories in all these categories aim at illustrating how different causes and conditions from one's previous lives come together to produce a memorable event in the narrative present. In short, in the scriptural tradition, the terms *in* (cause 因), *en* (conditions 縁), and *ki* or *gi* (provenance 起) constitute basic methods for weaving past events into stories set in the narrative present and illuminating the intricate linkages between events across time. Naturally, in this context, questions of historical provenance, causes, and conditions are treated quite differently than they would be if they were analyzed in terms of the philosophical concept of dependent co-origination, according to which existents are neither rising nor ceasing.

As TOKUDA Kazuo (2013, 11–12) has pointed out, the terms *engi* and *innen* were often used interchangeably in medieval Japanese society; furthermore, in the context of proselytizing, *innen* meant metaphorical and didactic tales such as *hiyu* 比喩, *sekkyō* 説教, and *setsuwa* 説話. Tokuda has gone on to argue that the simplest way to understand the word *engi* in the medieval Japanese context is to see it as a type of *monogatari* or storytelling that has something to do with the past origins of things and that is relevant to the worship of Buddhist and indigenous Japanese divinities. Compared to previous research, Tokuda's interpretation thus brings the term *engi* much closer to the sense of *nidāna*, thereby relating it to narrative categories within the Buddhist scriptural tradition. In fact, in the world of popular medieval religious culture, the word *engi* had little to do with the philosophical concept of dependent co-origination; instead, it was closely tied to *engi* and *innen* accounts from the scriptures. In other words, those who took part in creating and expanding the genre of medieval *engi* literature exerted themselves as raconteurs, not philosophers.

It is therefore possible to suggest that the narrativity of medieval Japanese *engi* developed through attentive reference to the narrative discourse of the Buddhist scriptures. One example of this process can be found in the ballad dramas *Itsukushima no honji* and *Kumano no honji* 熊野の本地, which are renowned for parallel episodes in which a princess is wrongly executed (MATSUMOTO 1996, 19, 87). After the burial, her beheaded body miraculously lives on to nurture her infant child. This story is based on a sutra that revolves around the story of a king's former life (*Zhentouyuewangjing*; Jp. *Sendaetsuōkyō* 旃陀越王經, T no. 518, 14.791c–792a; see also MATSUMOTO 1996, 29). In a similar vein, many *engi* episodes in the celebrated compendium *Shintōshū* 神道集 quote or paraphrase a range of Mahayana sutras in the process of relating the former lives of *kami* in order to reveal their original identities (*honji* 本地) as bodhisattvas (ŌSHIMA 2013, 329–33).

A new generation of scholars has exposed the limitations of earlier scholarship and radically expanded the range of the *engi* literature to include oral

traditions, literary texts, visual culture, liturgy, rituals, preaching and proselytization, performing arts and street performances (TOKUDA ed. 2013; MATSUMOTO 1996, 1–18; TSUTSUMI 2005; FUJIMAKI 2013). This marks a shift away from some of the convictions of pioneering scholarship such as that of Sakurai Tokutarō, most notably by rejecting a narrow focus on “temple and shrine documents that carry the word *engi* in their titles” (SAKURAI 1975, 449) and the sense that *engi* texts are often faulty, unreliable, and fabricated documents.² In newer research, any medieval work that centers around the origin stories of temples and shrines or other sacred sites, the divinities worshipped there, and things related to their worship are included in the genre of *engi* (HASHIMOTO 2013). In other words, *engi* literature forms a genre of its own that is expansive and “capacious” (to borrow the felicitous wording by the editors of this volume) but also loose and fluid at best. It is a genre comprised largely of materials that also belong to other, diverse genres, such as *engi-e* 縁起絵, *etoki* 絵解き, and *miya-mandara* 宮曼荼羅 in visual media, and *sarugaku* 猿楽, *nō* 能, *kōwakamai* 幸若舞, or *honjimonō* 本地物 in the sphere of drama and performing arts. Thus, for the purposes of this article, any materials, whether historical or fictional in outlook, can be treated as *engi* if they use original and foundational events to 1. legitimate sacred sites, including temples and shrines; 2. to glorify and boast of the power of the divinities enshrined there; and 3. to propagate the worship of those divinities, their sacred grounds, and associated institutions.

This new approach to *engi* is beneficial because it not only critiques the rigid division created by modern academics between the historical and the fictional (WHITE 1973, 43; 1978, 81) but also highlights continuity across diverse types of medieval Japanese narratives. The same approach also helps us to measure the importance of an *engi* text not necessarily in terms of historical accuracy but rather its ability to manifest what Giambattista Vico described as “poetic history” and “poetic logic” (VICO 1948, 112, 126, 127). That is, even with ancient narratives whose nature is essentially fantastic and mythological, it is possible to recover in their rhetorical, poetic, and metaphorical dimensions the manner in which relationships between the past, present, and future were imagined and used to explain new sacred events in relation to the past. *Engi* therefore provide a fertile ground for investigating the historical consciousness and rationality animating the episteme within which Japanese religious discourse operated.

What is of particular interest in this article is the element of *reigen* 靈驗, miraculous manifestations, as a lens through which the sacred histories of

2. To be fair, in his introductory essay to the seminal *Jisha engi* volume, SAKURAI (1975) discussed a wide variety of materials as *engi*. Nonetheless, the actual texts collected in his volume are exclusively historical documents on the origins of religious institutions. This manner of selection demonstrates where his priority lies in envisioning the core of the *engi* as a genre.

divinities, their home grounds, or temples and shrines that support their worship are revealed. The significance of *reigen* has already been noted by SAKURAI (1975, 459–63). Here I wish to call attention to the fact that *reigen* episodes frequently involve the death, revival, and resurrection of protagonists, thereby acquainting their audiences with characters' past lives in both human and non-human realms. In this respect, two crucial elements highlight the intertextuality of medieval *engi* stories and scriptural *nidāna* accounts. First, the narratives traverse the cycle of transmigration by moving back and forth between past and present births and deaths; second, these stories result in the recovery of lost memory or sacred knowledge from the distant past. Thus, a careful reading of scriptural narratives can provide a key to better understand medieval Japanese origin stories, and vice versa.

As an example of how our readings of scripture and *engi* may illuminate each other, this article focuses on *engi* materials concerning the *Lotus Sutra's* Dragon Princess. The first half of this article reassesses the Dragon Princess episode, as well as its reception in medieval Japan and modern academia. The second half analyzes three diverse works about the Dragon Princess, treating each of them as an *engi*. These are the noh drama *Ama*, the ballad drama *Itsukushima no honji*, and the frontispiece of scroll twelve of the *Heike nōkyō* manuscript of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Reexamining the Dragon Princess Episode in the Lotus Sutra

The episode featuring the eight-year-old daughter of the Dragon King Sāgara is one of the most celebrated stories in the *Lotus Sutra* and occurs in the “Devadatta” chapter, which is chapter 12 in Kumārajīva’s translation.³ During annual lectures on the eight fascicles of the *Lotus Sutra* (*hokke hakkō* 法華八講), Heian courtiers celebrated as particularly auspicious the day of the fifth fascicle (*gokan no hi* 五卷日) (IMANARI 1994). This is an index of the importance of the “Devadatta” chapter as an illustration of the power of the sutra: although the Taishō canon places the chapter in the fourth fascicle of the sutra, Heian manuscripts place it at the beginning of the fifth (NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1979, 63, 121).

The “Devadatta” chapter consists of two parts. The first is a startling revelation by Śākyamuni Buddha that Devadatta, the Buddha’s evil cousin, is in fact the Buddha’s good friend and teacher. In a former life, the Buddha had been a

3. Unless otherwise noted, my discussion is based on Kumārajīva’s translation of the sutra (T no. 262, 9.1–62). Although Buddhologists have long debated whether the chapter was originally included in the sutra or was a later addition, the premodern East Asian commentators and writers discussed here all treated the chapter as a fully legitimate part of the sutra; therefore, this debate is not relevant to this article.

king who sought the highest teaching of the Dharma, which a holy man living in the mountains had mastered in the form of the *Lotus Sutra*. The holy man promised the king to teach it to him if he would agree to serve as his servant. The king accepted, and for many years he gathered firewood, collected wild fruits and nuts, brought stream water, and prepared meals for the holy man. In the end, the holy man, who was in fact Devadatta in a former life, taught the king the *Lotus Sutra*'s teaching of the *ekayāna* (One Unifying Vehicle, Ch. *yicheng*; Jp. *ichijō* 一乘). The king was reborn, eventually becoming Śākyamuni, who expounds the sutra's teaching on Eagle Peak before his final extinction. In recognition of Devadatta's contribution in a former life, the Buddha grants him a prophecy: Devadatta is destined to attain Buddhahood in a future world (T 9.34b–35a).

The episode of the Dragon Princess immediately follows this prophecy. It begins as Mañjuśrī engages in a conversation with the bodhisattva Accumulated Wisdom, one of the attendants of the Tathāgata Many Treasures, who has come from a cosmic system in the east to visit Śākyamuni Buddha's assembly on Eagle Peak. Mañjuśrī tells the assembly that during a short stay in the Dragon King's undersea palace, whence he has just returned, he guided innumerable dragon beings into the path of the Mahayana. As soon as he finishes speaking, a countless number of dragon bodhisattvas emerge out of the ocean palace riding on flying lotus seats and gather in the sky over Eagle Peak. When Accumulated Wisdom praises Mañjuśrī's great act of guiding these beings to the bodhisattva path, Mañjuśrī explains that throughout his stay in the Dragon King's ocean palace, he preached only the *Lotus Sutra*. Accumulated Wisdom then questions Mañjuśrī: "This sutra is extremely profound, excellent and subtle. It is the treasure among all sutras. I wonder if you found any being among your students there who diligently applied effort to practice this sutra's teaching and reached Buddhahood swiftly."⁴ Mañjuśrī's answer is crucial for understanding the characterization of the Dragon Princess in the sutra:

Yes there is one! She is the Dragon King Sāgara's daughter, who is merely eight years old. Yet she is sharp in her capacity of wisdom and observes well how karmic deeds play out in sentient beings' senses. She has mastered *dhāraṇī*; has excelled in upholding the profoundest of the teaching of all the Buddhas, their secret treasury; has entered into deep meditation; has thoroughly understood the nature of all things. In an instant she gave rise to the mind of enlightenment and reached the stage of non-retrogression. Her eloquence is limitless. She loves sentient beings as if they were her own infant children. She is perfectly endowed with merit. Whatever she thinks in her mind and

4. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from primary sources are mine.

utters through her mouth is sublime, grand, compassionate, and kind. With her gentle and elegant nature, she succeeded in reaching Bodhi. (T 9.35b)

Mañjuśrī's depiction of the Dragon Princess makes it immediately clear that she is unusually advanced among the dragon bodhisattvas to whom he taught the *Lotus Sutra* in their underwater palace. Interpreting this passage in his celebrated *Lotus Sutra* commentary, *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏, the Sanlun master Jizang 吉藏 (549–623) identifies the princess as a bodhisattva of the tenth bodhisattva stage (T no. 1721, 34.592b). He comments that Mañjuśrī's statement that she had reached "the stage of non-retrogression" stands as a testimonial that she is one of the bodhisattvas whose grasp of the wisdom of enlightenment is equal to that of the Buddhas (Ch. *dengjue*; Jp. *tōgaku* 等覺) and has only one more transmigratory life waiting before her attainment of Buddhahood (Ch. *yisheng buchū*; Jp. *isshō hoshō* 一生補処). That is to say, despite her appearance as "a nonhuman, female, and child," she is at least as advanced as the bodhisattva Maitreya regarding her reach of Buddhahood; more likely she is actually superior to him because of what she demonstrates in the rest of her episode.⁵

Accumulated Wisdom, however, is unable to accept Mañjuśrī's answer. He says that even Śākyamuni Buddha subjected himself to austerity, accumulated merit, and practiced the bodhisattva's way incessantly for countless kalpas everywhere in the universe. "How then is it possible for me to believe that this girl realized the perfect unsurpassed enlightenment of the Buddha in such a short period of time?" (T 9.35b). As a careful reader of the sutra may notice, Accumulated Wisdom's question is presented in such a way as to show that he is in fact ignorant and has made a category mistake. On the one hand, he points to the training the Buddha underwent in the countless former lives of his cosmic life span. On the other hand, he is comparing all that to a short passage of time during which the Dragon Princess received Mañjuśrī's teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*

5. In agreement with Jizang, in his *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanzan* 妙法蓮華經玄贊 the Faxiang School master Kuiji 窺基 (632–682) identifies the Dragon Princess as a bodhisattva of the tenth stage (T no. 1723, 34.816c). In addition, he notes that the Dragon Princess achieved enlightenment in a short moment of time because of her sixteen virtuous powers: "1. She belongs to the dragon race; 2. is a woman; 3. is a child; 4. is intelligent; 5. is knowledgeable; 6. has mastered all sorts of *dhāraṇī* and sutra teachings; 7. has mastered meditation; 8. understands the nature of all things; 9. is resolute and non-retrogressive; 10. has a gift of eloquence; 11. is compassionate and kind; 12. is virtuous; 13. is quick-witted; 14. is profound in her speech; 15. is humane and modest; 16. is gentle and elegant" (T no. 1723, 34.816b). It is noteworthy that Kuiji here lists the princess's status as a nonhuman, a female, and a child among her obvious assets. That is, like the celebrated goddess in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* (T no. 475, 15.547c–548a), the Dragon Princess represents the Mahayana philosophical stand of nonduality, in which it is asserted that the ability to attain Buddhahood has nothing at all to do with a practitioner's physical appearance, whether male or female.

in her ocean palace. That “Accumulated Wisdom” is unable to imagine that the Dragon Princess may very well have undergone all kinds of excellent training in her former lives puts an ironic spin on the very name of this bodhisattva.

One of the most common premises in the *Lotus Sutra*’s narratives is that those disciples to whom the Buddha grants prophecies of their attainment of Buddhahood in the distant future have all studied the *Lotus Sutra* in their former lives but have completely forgotten their education (ABÉ 2005). The Buddha is now instructing them in the sutra’s *ekayāna* teaching as a reminder. When bestowing a prophecy on Śāriputra, the Buddha has this to say:

In the distant past, under the twenty thousand million Buddhas, I constantly guided you in the path that leads to the unsurpassed Way. For a long night of transmigratory lives you followed me and studied under me. Because I have employed expedient means to lead you, you have attained a birth in this life as my disciple again.... But now you, Śāriputra, have forgotten that completely and have thought that you have attained your final goal of nirvana. Therefore I now make you recall the way that you originally pursued. For that reason and for the sake of all the arhats, I expound this Mahayana sutra that is entitled the *Exquisite Lotus, the Dharma for Instructing Bodhisattvas, the Dharma Protected by the Minds of the Buddhas*. (T 9.11b)

This speech by the Buddha is indicative of the sutra’s grand narrative: in countless previous life existences, the Buddha taught the *Lotus Sutra* and guided innumerable beings on the path toward the attainment of the perfect enlightenment of the Buddhas. In clear contrast to Śāriputra and many other disciples marked in the sutra by their lost memory, Mañjuśrī, the Dragon Princess’ teacher, is introduced as the one disciple who is capable of retaining his memories of studying the *ekayāna* in the distant past. In the introductory chapter, before he begins his sermon on Eagle Peak, the Buddha sits in meditation and enters into a *samādhi* entitled “innumerable meanings.” In his meditation the Buddha issues forth beams of light from the white tuft on his forehead, thereby illuminating countless world systems where innumerable beings excellently practice Buddhism. No one in the assembly but Mañjuśrī is able to understand the gravity of this unprecedented event. Then Mañjuśrī relates the “*engi* story” for the Buddha’s innumerable meanings *samādhi*. In a previous life existence, Mañjuśrī was a bodhisattva named Sublimely Bright and was studying under the Buddha Sun Moon Radiance. Before that Buddha’s final extinction, he entered that same “innumerable meaning *samādhi*,” and then preached the highest Dharma of the *ekayāna*, which integrates within itself all sorts of Buddhist teachings. Since that time, all the Buddhas in cosmic history who expounded the *ekayāna* teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* practiced this unusual *samādhi* prior to their final preaching and extinction. Mañjuśrī therefore foretells that the time for the aging Śākyamuni

Buddha to go into his nirvana is drawing near, but that the assembly at Eagle Peak will get a chance to listen to the Buddha's teaching of the ultimate Mahayana (T 9.3c–5b). Because of his unexcelled capacity, Mañjuśrī is given the task of acting as caretaker of the *ekayāna* after the passing of the Buddha (T 9.37a–39c), and in chapter 24, “Bodhisattva Exquisite Sound,” he serves as the host when the Buddha's assembly on Eagle Peak welcomes a bodhisattva from a world system in the eastern universe who is renowned for his unusually excellent grasp of *ekayāna* (T 9.55b–56b).

Therefore, in the larger context of the sutra's narrative, the conversation between Mañjuśrī and Accumulated Wisdom regarding the Dragon Princess' enlightenment is an exchange between the one who remembers and the other who forgot. Mañjuśrī is fully cognizant of events of the distant past—the “*engi*” in which characters' previous life existences intertwine through the progress of spiritual training. In contrast, Accumulated Wisdom is devoid of such memory: he cannot even begin to imagine the *engi*—the story of the Dragon Princess's previous lives—that must have enabled her to make such great accomplishments in her current life. Grounding himself in insight into practitioners' spiritual progress in their past lives, Mañjuśrī chooses the Dragon Princess as the most advanced bodhisattva, one who has already attained perfect enlightenment. Accumulated Wisdom's objection derives from his ignorance and should therefore be understood as a *rhetorical* question. When he asks, “How then is it possible for me to believe that this girl realized the perfect unsurpassed enlightenment of the Buddha in such a short period of time?” he actually confirms that the princess is a very special practitioner who has realized the perfect unsurpassed enlightenment of the Buddha. For that reason, Mañjuśrī does not even need to answer Accumulated Wisdom. The Dragon Princess suddenly manifests herself before the Buddha. Having prostrated herself in reverence to him, and then having seated herself in a corner of the assembly, she praises him with a *gāthā* and expresses her resolve to save living beings.

When the Dragon Princess has announced in her verse to the Buddha her vow to engage in salvific acts that benefit living beings, it is Śāriputra who now opposes her. He says that he is not able to accept her enlightenment because he believes that a woman's body is soiled and thus cannot serve as a vessel to advance the Mahayana. Śāriputra supports his point by referring to “five obstructions” (Sk. *pañca-āvaraṇa*; Ch. *wuzhang*; Jp. *goshō* 五障) for women: that they are unable to become Brahmā, Indra, Māra, a *cakravartin*, or a Buddha.⁶ The Dragon Princess presents a rejoinder to both Accumulated Wisdom and Śāriputra through not words but action. She offers to the Buddha her legendary

6. For a general discussion of the five obstructions and their implications for Japanese poetry and poetics, see KAMENS (1993, 393–94, 401).

jewel whose worth is equal to the entire universe system, and he immediately accepts it. Having seen the Buddha receive her jewel, the Dragon Princess turns to Accumulated Wisdom and Śāriputra and asks whether or not the manner in which the Buddha accepted the jewel was swift. They answer her in unison: “It was very swift.” Her act of offering the jewel and the Buddha’s acceptance of it create a crucial moment of transition, after which the episode moves into its finale. The significance of this vignette will be further discussed in relationship to the *Heike nōkyō* frontispiece in the last section of this article.

After giving the Buddha her jewel, the Dragon Princess tells her audience: “Use your supernatural power and watch me attain Buddhahood. It will be even faster!” (T 9.35c). That she urges them to employ their supernatural power makes it clear that what happens next takes place as a *vision*, a vision she prepares as an expedient means to help them see what Mañjusrī has already told them: that there is a perfect wisdom of enlightenment within a small girl of the dragon race.⁷

At that time everyone in the Buddha’s assembly saw, within an instant flicker of time, the Dragon Princess transform herself into a man, complete all his bodhisattva practices, travel to the Spotless World in the south, sit on the jeweled lotus seat, realize the complete unsurpassed Bodhi, have his body adorned with thirty-two major and eighty minor auspicious marks, and preach the exquisite dharma [of the *Lotus Sutra*] for all sentient beings in the ten directions. At that time in our Sahā World, all bodhisattvas, śrāvakas, heavenly beings, and dragons in the eight tribes, humans and nonhumans alike, saw in the furthest distance that the Dragon Princess attained Buddhahood and broadly preached the Dharma. They all gave rise to great bliss in their minds and sent their reverence to her in a far distant land.

Countless sentient beings in her assembly who heard her Dharma preaching realized enlightenment and reached the stage of non-retrogression. Countless other beings in her assembly received her prophecy of their future attainment of Buddhahood. Her Spotless World trembled in six different ways [to celebrate her preaching]. In our Sahā World, three thousand sentient beings advanced to abide in the stage of non-retrogression. Another three thousand gave rise to the mind of attaining enlightenment and received prophecies of their future Buddhahood. Accumulated Wisdom, Śāriputra, and all in the assembly [on Eagle Peak] remained silent and faithfully accepted what they saw. (T 9.35c)

7. The Dragon Prince episode itself does not tell its readers if this is a vision of something that actually happens far away in the Spotless World or if the vision itself is fictional. However, that may not matter much because as discussed below, the central theme of the episode is not the Dragon Girl’s physical transformation into a Buddha but rather her inner enlightenment and resulting salvific power.

This passage concludes both the Dragon Princess episode and the “Devadatta” chapter as a whole. In the very last sentence, Accumulated Wisdom and Śāriputra are simply dumbfounded by her vision and accept their defeat in silence. Their defeat means the defeat of all their arguments for women’s inability to attain enlightenment.

It is important to note that Chinese exegetes categorically rejected Śāriputra’s claim that women cannot attain Buddhahood. The Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597), for example, writes in his *Fahua wenguo* 法華文句:

As for Māra, Brahmā, Indra, and women as well, without abandoning their bodies, without taking up other bodies, and in their apparent current bodies, they are capable of attaining Buddhahood. Therefore, it is said in a verse:

The nature of the Dharma is like a great ocean
in which there is no need to distinguish good and bad;
ordinary beings and holy beings are equal;
there is no high and low between them.

When the mind’s stains cease, as swiftly as flipping a palm,
one attains the proof of enlightenment. (T no. 1718, 34.117a)⁸

Other seminal Chinese readings of the *Lotus Sutra*, including those by Kuiji and Zhanran 湛然 (711–782), fully agree with Zhiyi regarding the five obstructions (T no. 1723, 34.816c–817a; no.1719, 34.314b–c). In fact, I have found no major Sui or Tang Chinese commentaries that attempt to substantiate Śāriputra’s claim as a basis for establishing women’s inferiority in their pursuit of spiritual progress. Zhiyi’s observation affirms that in the Dragon Princess episode, Śāriputra, just like Accumulated Wisdom, is presented as a counterpoint in order to emphasize that the princess’s unusual enlightenment was simply beyond the arhat’s grasp. In other words, Śāriputra’s point about the five obstructions, just like Accumulated Wisdom’s objection to the Dragon Princess’ enlightenment, should be understood rhetorically; it is aimed at disclosing his ignorance and dramatizing his defeat.

Śāriputra’s role in this part of the *Lotus Sutra* narrative closely resembles the one he plays in the goddess episode of the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* (T no. 475, 15.547c–548c; PAUL 1985, 221–32). In the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, Śāriputra, the proud leader of the celibate male clergy, is unable to understand that the Goddess, who had been studying under the householder Vimalakīrti for many years, is a very advanced bodhisattva with a fine grasp of the nature of emptiness as nonduality. In order to guide Śāriputra, the Goddess manifests a vision in which her body and Śāriputra’s body are switched. Having seen himself as female and the God-

8. Zhiyi notes that he bases his argument here on the *Sutra for the Matrix of Bodhisattva* (T no. 384, 12.1015–1058; 菩薩胎經 [Ch. *Pusa taijing*; Jp. *Bosatsu taikyō*]).

dess in the form of himself, Śāriputra finally frees himself from his androcentric bias, accepts her as his teacher, and is able to enter into the dharma gate of non-duality. At the end of the episode, Vimalakīrti tells Śāriputra that the Goddess in her previous lives trained herself under ninety-two million Buddhas. Just like the Dragon Princess, she has already reached the bodhisattva stage of non-retrogression (T 15.548c). Here, too, Śāriputra plays the role of a foil to bring to the fore the exceptional spiritual quality of the female protagonist.

The vision manifested by the Dragon Princess should be understood in the same way as the Goddess' sex change. As Zhiyi made clear, the princess did not need to abandon her body and take up another body, even if it were the body of a Buddha. However, to emancipate Accumulated Wisdom and Śāriputra from their biases and limitations, as an expedient means, she kindly manifested a vision of her attaining Buddhahood in the manner they are able to understand and "swallow" even with their imperfect abilities.

The ending also shows that the most outstanding quality of the princess rests not in her appearance in a Buddha's body, nor even in her perfect enlightenment, but rather in her skillful employment of expedient means to save beings. Zhiyi paid particular attention to the Dragon Princess' unusually impressive display of expedient means. Regarding her transformation into a Buddha in the Spotless World, he states:

Both humans and heavenly beings took delight in what they saw and received benefit from it.... Exactly when her karmic link to our land was fading, she guided living beings. That was all made possible by her power of expedient means by which she attained one Buddha body, all Buddha bodies, and the *samādhi* of manifesting all physical bodies. (T no. 1718, 34.117a)

Just watching the Dragon Princess's attainment of Buddhahood in a faraway land, three thousand beings in Śākyamuni Buddha's assembly on Eagle Peak took a great leap forward to reach the "bodhisattva stage of non-retrogression." In other words, her visual expedient means spurred them on in their spiritual cultivation, so much so that they become comparable to the princess as she had been when she was first introduced by Mañjuśrī. Furthermore, another three thousand in the assembly received the Buddha's prophecy of their future attainment of Buddhahood.

Zhiyi's statement "exactly when her karmic link to our land was fading, she guided living beings" draws a strong parallel between the Dragon Princess and the Buddha. That is because according to the *Lotus Sutra's* narrative, the Buddha, too, expounded the *ekayāna* to save beings in an unprecedented manner exactly when his extinction was drawing near, when his "karmic link to our land was fading." It is not her attainment of inner perfect enlightenment but rather her outer, visual expedient means that influences the audience on Eagle Peak,

demonstrating that she has fulfilled her vow of saving living beings. The Dragon Princess episode shows, therefore, that the ultimate proof of her attainment of Buddhahood lies in her ability to employ expedient means to save beings, not in her appearance, even if that appearance takes the form of a Buddha's body.

In that regard Zhiyi's last sentence in the quote above is noteworthy. In chapter 16, "Eternal Life of the Tathāgata," the Buddha proclaims that it has in fact been more than innumerable kalpas since he first attained the unsurpassed perfect Bodhi. Since his attainment, he has been known as Dīpaṃkara Buddha (Ch. Randeng fo; Jp. Nentō butsu 然燈佛) and countless other Buddhas who rose in this Sahā World and numerous other worlds. Each of them took their extinction and, before they did so, preached the dharma of the *Lotus Sutra* and guided beings by skillfully employing expedient means. The Buddha thus states that his life will continue indefinitely because even after he, as Śākyamuni Buddha, passes into extinction, his life will go on in the forms of countless Buddhas and bodhisattvas who will teach the *Lotus Sutra* in the future (T no. 262, 9.42b–c).⁹ Zhiyi has identified the Dragon Princess with all these innumerable spiritual leaders who are none other than the single Buddha of eternal life, precisely because he sees her salvific power as comparable to that manifested by the Buddha in the sutra. Here again, at the conclusion of the Dragon Princess episode, Zhiyi reconfirms that its theme is the prioritization of expedient means over the attainment of a Buddha body.

Problematizing henjō nanshi and ryūnyo jōbutsu

In light of the foregoing review of the Dragon Princess episode in the *Lotus Sutra*, it seems puzzling that almost all modern scholarly inquiries into this episode have focused narrowly on two concepts: *henjō nanshi* 變成男子, her transformation into a male, which is said to have enabled her to complete all requisite bodhisattva training at lightning speed; and *ryūnyo jōbutsu* 龍女成佛, that is, her instantaneous attainment of Buddhahood in a distant Buddha-world in a southern corner of the universe.

In medieval Japan certain Buddhist doctrinaires dared to misread this episode, totally ignoring the tradition of Chinese Buddhist commentaries on it in order to combine these two ideas in such a way as to form a particularly discriminatory theory against female practitioners. According to their *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory, the Dragon Princess stands for all female practitioners of Buddhism: because of their intrinsic defilement, which Śāriputra identifies as the "five obstructions," women are denied salvation. Only by means of their

9. For the significance of the Buddha's eternal life and *ekayāna* as the two essential themes of the *Lotus Sutra*, see SUGURO (2001).

thorough devotion to the *Lotus Sutra* can they be saved, and even then, they first must be reborn as men. Although the terms *henjō nanshi* and *ryūnyo jōbutsu* do appear in the Dragon Princess episode (T 9.35c), they describe her visual expedient means, which awaken Accumulated Wisdom and Śāriputra from their ignorance, and therefore cannot be substantiated as conditions essential to women's salvation.

One articulation of the discriminatory Japanese *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* discourse occurs in the work of the late-Heian scholar monk Chinkai 珍海 (1091–1152), who was renowned for his combined study of the Sanron school and Pure Land Buddhism. In his *Bodaishinshū*, Chinkai explains the claim that only men inhabit Amitābha Buddha's Pure Land of Extreme Bliss through reference to the Dragon Princess' sex change. Specifically, he urges women: "If you seek rebirth in the Pure Land, cast away your female body" (530a–b). In his *Keiran shūyōshū* 溪嵐拾葉集, the scholar monk of Tendai esotericism Kōshū 光宗 (1276–1350) expands on the conviction that women's bodies are soteriological liabilities by discussing the Dragon Princess's "dragon-animal body," "female body," and "child body" as manifestations, respectively, of rage, greed, and folly (T no. 2410, 76.599a–b)—the three poisons of delusion, which in turn symbolize both the dragon race's karmic suffering in their abysmal realm and women's suffering in this world (YAMAMOTO 1993, 248).

Obviously, such readings of the Dragon Princess episode deviate egregiously from the way in which her character is constructed in the *Lotus Sutra*'s narrative. As these two examples show, the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory vulgarly disregards how her role in the sutra is developed in relationship to Mañjuśrī, the Buddha, Accumulated Wisdom, and Śāriputra. First, it negligently conflates the attainment of perfect enlightenment with finding refuge from saṃsāric suffering. In the Dragon Princess episode, she is presented not as a sufferer but as the leader among bodhisattvas, one who manifests unusual salvific power. As Kuiji's comments made clear, the Dragon Princess—a nonhuman, a female, and a child—showcases the universal possibility that all sorts of beings can master the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*. The sutra does not use her to place women at a disadvantage in spiritual cultivation.

Furthermore, the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory refuses to comprehend that in this episode Śāriputra is a foil: his purpose in the narrative is to highlight the superiority of the Dragon Princess. Instead, the theory attempts to substantiate his claim that there are five obstacles for women. It is true that the "five obstructions" are mentioned in other Buddhist scriptural sources; however, what exactly constitutes the five obstacles differs from one source to another. For instance, in Dharmarakṣa's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* (T no. 263, 9.106a), as well as in the Nepali edition of the *Lotus Sutra* (KERN 1963, 252), the fifth item ("Buddha") is replaced respectively by "mahāsattva" and "the rank of a bodhisattva incapable

of retrogression.” In other words, these texts have Śāriputra assert that women cannot become highly advanced great bodhisattvas. By this point in the narrative, however, Mañjuśrī has already introduced the Dragon Princess as an exceptionally great bodhisattva in the stage of non-retrogression. Thus, these versions of the sutra make it even more obvious that Śāriputra’s objection is meant to be immediately denied when the princess manifests her vision. Within the episode’s narrative development, then, it is impossible to substantiate the idea that the five obstructions would block her (or any other female) from attaining Buddhahood.

Finally, the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory’s emphasis on women’s bodies as sources of defilement runs utterly counter to the central motif of the Dragon Princess episode. The characterization of an eight-year-old nonhuman girl as the one who has grasped the unsurpassed enlightenment of the Buddhas purposely debunks a conventional view that equates attaining Buddhahood with acquiring the adult male body of a Buddha. On this point the Sanlun master Jizang points out in his *Fahua yishu* that in contrast to Śākyamuni Buddha, who attained the Buddhahood that demonstrates expedient means in both sudden and gradual forms, the Dragon Princes realized the Buddhahood that employs expedient means whose nature is sudden. Thus, in contrast to Śākyamuni’s enlightened body, which is that of a full-grown adult, the Dragon Princess manifests her enlightened body as an innocent child. Jizang also states that while Śākyamuni is among the Buddhas who showed his Buddha body as a male, the princess belongs to a different group of Buddhas whose enlightened bodies consist of both female and male manifestations (T no. 1721, 34.592b–c). As Jizang makes clear, the princess stands as proof that genuine inner enlightenment can be realized regardless of one’s physical appearance or sex. In chapter 25, “Universal Gate of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara,” it is said that the celebrated bodhisattva who is introduced in this chapter saves sentient beings universally by manifesting himself in thirty-three different forms. The twenty-fourth transformation is a “body of a young girl,” and the twenty-sixth, a “body of a dragon” (T 9.57b). Here as well, there is no intrinsic separation between being a female, child, and nonhuman on the one hand and being an enlightened being on the other.

Overall, the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory sees the Dragon Princess as being paired with Devadatta in the same chapter because she is as sinful as Devadatta. However, in the sutra’s narrative she is presented as a figure who is spiritually far more advanced than Devadatta. Whereas the Buddha’s prophecy explains that Devadatta will become the Tathāgata Heavenly King in the world system Heavenly Way only after spending countless lives as a bodhisattva, the Dragon Princess needs neither the Buddha’s assurance nor an encouraging prophecy of future attainment. By her own power alone, in an instant of her own visual expedient means, she gives proof of her own genuine enlightenment right before the eyes of the Buddha, Śāriputra, and all the others in the assembly on

Eagle Peak. The stark contrast between the indirectness of the Buddha's recounting of Devadatta's enlightenment in a far distant future and the immediacy of the princess's enlightenment creates the chapter's dramatic effect.

Precisely because of its perceived deviation from the sutra episode, the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory encountered serious opposition in medieval Japan. In the “Uji jūjō” 宇治十帖 books of the *Tale of Genji*, one finds examples that treat the idea of the “five obstructions” with cynicism and suspicion (KOBAYASHI 1987). Similarly, in her poetry, Princess Senshi 選子内親王 (964–1035) expresses her view that the belief in the five obstructions itself is a hindrance to women's spiritual progress (*Hosshin wakashū*, 396). Edward KAMENS (1993, 400) has aptly pointed out that in one of her poems, Senshi shows that the Dragon Princess's greatness rests neither in her sex change nor attainment of the Buddha's body but rather her power of saving beings. Similarly, Lori MEEKS (2007) has identified in the aforementioned *Bodaishinshū* the voices of lay female practitioners who utterly disagreed with Chinkai's view of women and their rebirth in the Pure Land. Meeks argues that these voices reflect the practice developed by the ladies of the Heian court in which they aimed at attaining rebirth in Maitreya's pure land (where women were said to be permitted) and devoted themselves to the ten *rākṣasī* ladies led by Samantabhadra (*Fugen jūrasetsunyo* 普賢十羅刹女), former man-eater ogresses who turned themselves into champions of the Dharma without casting away their female bodies.

It must also be mentioned that there were eminent scholar monks who utterly opposed the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory. For example, in his *Hokke kaijishō* 法華開示抄, the Hossō master Jōkei 貞慶 (1155–1213) of Kōfukuji praises the Dragon Princess as an unprecedentedly advanced bodhisattva; in doing so, he carefully paraphrases the arguments developed by Kuiji (T no. 2195, 56.392a–b, 394c). Even more radically than Jōkei, Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253) categorically denies women's disadvantage regarding the attainment of enlightenment in an essay entitled “Raihai tokuzui” 禮拜得髓 in his *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 collection. He urges all monks who seek the Dharma to prostrate themselves before a nun who has grasped the Dharma. He also states that whoever masters the Buddha Dharma is entitled to be the leader of the *saṃgha*, even if she is a seven-year-old girl just like the Dragon Princess. In this manner, Dōgen dismisses any interpretation of the Dragon Princess episode as grounds for discriminating against women (TERADA and MIZUNO 1979, 321–23).¹⁰

In short, two opposing readings of the “Devadatta” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* operated in medieval Japanese society. One aimed at advancing an androcentric theory in which the Dragon Princess was misappropriated as evidence for

10. For other examples of medieval Japanese texts that express their objection to the idea of women's inferiority in practicing Buddhism, see TAIRA (1990) and McCORMICK (2013; 2014).

women's inferiority and defilement, whereas the other recognized her role in the sutra's narrative, remained faithful to continental exegetical traditions, and developed a network of what might be called anti-*henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* discourse.¹¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to give a survey of how the former gained broad currency in late medieval and early modern Japan. Suffice it to say, however, that there was no sign of theories of gender discrimination grounded in the Dragon Princess episode during the Nara period or earlier—the age when Japanese Buddhist scholasticism developed by avidly modeling itself on continental traditions.¹² Nor did continental East Asia see the rise of any analogous theory asserting the need for women to change their sex to attain salvation (see, for instance, LEVERING 1982, 22, 30–32). The *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory was thus a product of a particular section of the medieval Japanese Buddhist community and cannot serve as the sole standard for assessing the significance of the *Lotus Sutra's* Dragon Princess episode and its influence.

Nevertheless, a majority of modern and contemporary inquiries into the Dragon Princess approach her through the ideas of *henjō nanshi* and *ryūnyo jōbutsu*. Many of them probe into rather esoteric and thaumaturgic aspects of this discriminatory medieval theory—for example, *henjō nanshihō* 變成男子法, an esoteric ritual aimed at transforming women into men for their salvation (YAMAMOTO 1993, 258–64)—and thus eventually aggrandize it. More constructively, other research employs the methods of gender studies or women's history in order to critique the way in which such a discriminatory discourse defined women's salvation. Either way, however, other significant elements in the episode—such as the princess's offering of the jewel to the Buddha, her vow of saving beings, and the extraordinary effects resulting from the vision of her attaining Buddhahood, all of which to this author are far more important than *henjō nanshi* and *ryūnyo*

11. It has been pointed out that *ryūnyo jōbutsu* was an important doctrinal idea within the Tendai School. In response to Kūkai's theory of *sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛, attaining enlightenment within one's lifetime, which highlights his Esoteric Buddhism, Saichō 最澄 (767–822) used the Dragon Princess' instantaneous attainment of Buddhahood to argue that *sokushin jōbutsu* is not a monopoly of the Kūkai's Shingon School but can be achieved within the framework of his Tendai Lotus School (*Hokke shūku*, 261; see also ŌKUBO 2006; 2014). However, that alone would not have spawned the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory as a gender discriminatory discourse. In contrast to the Pure Land Buddhists' claim that women need to be reborn as male before they are allowed to enter the Pure Land, *sokushin jōbutsu* by definition does not require them to go through either sex change or another transmigratory rebirth. In other words, if the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory had *sokushin jōbutsu* as a premise, the theory would contradict itself (see, for example, TAIRA 1992, 408–15).

12. Myōitsu 明一 (728–798), for example, a leading Tōdaiji scholar priest of the Nara period, discusses the “Devadatta” chapter only in terms of its salvific power, making no mention at all of *ryūnyo jōbutsu* or *henjō nanshi*. See his *Hokke ryakushō* 法華略抄 (T no. 2188, 56.140b–c); see also YOSHIDA (1989, 58–60).

jōbutsu—have escaped the attention of students of the *Lotus Sutra*. As will be discussed in the following sections, there are noteworthy examples in the medieval *engi* literature that concern exactly these aspects of the Dragon Princess narrative. They constituted a significant part of the medieval anti-*henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* discourse, preventing the Dragon Princess from being reduced to the symbol of women's inferiority, preserving her positive role as she appears in the sutra, and creating new forms of art and literature from a propitious reading of her character.

The Dragon Princess and the Legendary Origins of Shido Temple

Ama 海士, one of the oldest noh dramas, is said to be by Konparu Gonnokami 金春権守 (n.d.), the head of a Kōfukuji-based Sarugaku troupe active in the middle of the fourteenth century and grandfather to the celebrated noh dramatist and theoretician Konparu Zenchiku 金春禪竹 (1405–1471).¹³ The drama revolves around the heroic and tragic adventures of a female diver on the shore of Shido bay 志度之浦 in Sanuki province. She sacrifices herself to steal back a legendary jewel from the Dragon King's palace for her husband, who is none other than the court minister Fujiwara no Fuhito 藤原不比等 (695–720). The noh drama generally bases itself on the older legendary origin story of Shido Temple, *Sanshū Shido dojō engi* 讃州志度道場縁起.¹⁴ In the Shido Temple origin story, when the diver dies, Fuhito prophesies that because of the merit of her heroic self-sacrifice she will be reborn in her next life as the Dragon Princess. Years later, their son, Fujiwara no Fusazaki 藤原房前 (681–732), visits Shido, where he makes a generous offering to a small hall that his father built for the diver, transforming it into a majestic monastic complex. The noh drama distinguishes itself from the temple's origin story in that the diver manifests herself to Fusazaki as the Dragon Princess and informs him that thanks to his filial devotion, she has been able to find spiritual repose. Her dance of bliss and her act of handing a scroll of the *Lotus Sutra* to Fusazaki mark the final climax of the drama.

13. Royall TYLER (1992, 23) has discussed the historical background for this play and has suggested that its ending may be an addition by Zeami 世阿弥. For the Japanese text, I have relied on the annotated edition in NISHINO (1998, 573–80).

14. For photo reproductions and an annotated print edition of this *engi* text as preserved at Shidoji, see WADA (1967, 52–65). The *Sanshū shido dojō engi* is the second of a series of seven *engi* stories that concern Shido Temple, all of which are included in WADA (1967). The first six have extant corresponding *engi-e*, origin story paintings; these too are preserved at Shidoji (see UMEZU 1968, 158). For a range of primary sources of the origin stories, see ŌHASHI (2001); for scholarly literature in Japanese on the origin stories, see SANO Midori (2010, 38). As Melanie TREDE (1999, 63) has discussed in detail, the *engi* resembles the Kōwakamai play *Taishokkan* 大織冠, which most likely came into existence about the same time as *Ama* (see also ABE 1986).

The diver's superhuman acts, her fateful link to the jewel, and the realization of Fuhito's prophecy, namely, her manifestation as the Dragon Princess, make this *noh* drama resonate with the Dragon Princess episode in the *Lotus Sutra*. *Ama* begins with a scene in the imperial court at Nara in which Fusazaki hears an aristocratic peer saying that Fusazaki's mother was of a low birth and, in fact, a diver who died offshore in Shido Bay in Sanuki. Though Fusazaki is only thirteen years old, he is already a powerful courtier because his father, Fuhito, has designated him heir to the Fujiwara clan. Desirous of learning more about his mother and her untimely death, Fusazaki departs to Sanuki Province accompanied by his retinue. Having arrived on the shore of Shido Bay at dusk, he comes across a village woman who happens to be a diver. He asks her to remove seaweed from the shallows nearby because it is blocking his view of the moon reflected in the water; this image is suggestive of her future enlightenment.

The village woman tells Fusazaki that something similar to his request was heard by a village diver in the past when another courtier visited Shido village. She begins to relate to him a local story: a long time ago an aristocrat disguised himself as a commoner, settled in Shido, and married the diver, who soon gave birth to a boy. Then, the courtier revealed his true identity, Lord Fujiwara no Fuhito, and asked her to travel to the Dragon King's palace at the bottom of the sea to retrieve a jewel that had been sent by Emperor Gaozu of Tang 唐高祖 to Kōfukuji, the Fujiwara clan temple in Nara. This jewel, known as *Menkō fuhai no tama* 面向不背之珠, "Jewel That Never Turns Away," was the most precious treasure of the Chinese empire: a crystal sphere containing at its core a redwood image of the Buddha. From whichever direction one gazes into it, the Buddha always faces the viewer. This wonderful jewel represents Fujiwara connections with the Chinese throne: after hearing of the peerless beauty of Lady Kōhaku 紅白女, Fuhito's sister, Emperor Gaozu sought to make her his queen. When Lady Kōhaku accepted the emperor's proposal and arrived in the Tang court, the emperor sent the jewel as a gift to honor the Fujiwara house. The Dragon King, however, heard that the jewel was traveling to Japan and grew covetous of the gem. When the ship carrying it reached Shido, the Dragon King had his powerful water-creature retainers snatch the treasure away. Thus, the invaluable Jewel That Never Turns Away was lost in the sea and taken to the abysmal realm of the dragons. Fuhito's diver wife accepted his request to retrieve this jewel on one condition: that their son be named the sole heir of the Fujiwara house. When she succeeded in recapturing it—but only by throwing away her own life—Fuhito kept his promise and made their son his heir, the Minister Fusazaki.

Hearing his own name uttered by the village woman, Fusazaki tells her: "But I am none other than the Minister Fusazaki!" Now realizing that the aristocratic visitor before her has an immediate karmic link to the story she has recounted, the village woman goes on to tell Fusazaki how courageously the diver, his

mother, retrieved the jewel from the Dragon King's palace. She tied a thousand-fathom rope around her waist and jumped into the sea from a boat on which Fuhito rode. Plunging straight into the dragon castle, she found the jewel glowing atop a soaring tower there. Monstrous sea creatures guarded the enshrined treasure, but, having offered a prayer to the bodhisattva Kannon on Shido Bay¹⁵ and holding a dagger at her forehead, she rushed to the tower and took away the jewel. As she fled, furious guards pursued her closely, and the diver realized that she had no chance to escape their reach. Therefore she gouged a deep cut under her own breast and hid the jewel inside. Fearful of the pollution of death, the sea creatures gave up their chase. Just before she fainted, the diver pulled the rope with all her remaining power. When the crew of the boat pulled her up to the ocean surface, the sight of the damaged body of his dying wife saddened Fuhito. He saw no sign of the jewel; before she passed away, however, with her last breath the diver told Fuhito to look underneath her breast, where he found the radiant jewel within her wound.

This scene of the diver's self-sacrifice shows that she physically internalizes the jewel. The jewel becomes a part of her body even if that causes her to die. In establishing her identity with the jewel, this heroic act creates a powerful condition, or *en*, that destines her to be reborn as the Dragon Princess in her next transmigratory life.

In an episode omitted in the *noh* drama, the *Sanshū shido dōjō engi* has Fuhito make his son bid farewell to his mother on the boat, as if to make sure that the infant understands that she sacrificed herself for him. Not knowing that his mother is now dead, the infant suckles at her empty breast and brings all aboard the boat to tears. (This vignette resembles the comparable scene in the *Itsukushima no honji* discussed in the next section of this article.) Right next to her grave site, Fuhito erects a small hall and names it Shido Dōjō 死度道場, Temple for the Salvation of the Deceased. Acknowledging the extraordinary courage and wisdom demonstrated by the diver, Fuhito proclaims: "She is no ordinary human. Doubtless, she will be reborn as the Dragon Princess!" The ten *rākṣasī* ladies led by the bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Fugen *jūrasetsunyo*), who are saviors for lay female Buddhist practitioners, appear at the site, thereby confirming that Fuhito's foretelling will be realized.¹⁶ The *Sanshū shido dōjō engi* also states that Fuhito was then able to deliver the Jewel That Never Turns Away

15. The *Sanshū shido dōjō engi* forms a pair with *Misogi no engi* 御衣木之縁起, a story of a divine log that drifts for a long time in the sea before reaching the rocky beach at Shido Bay. It relates a story of a nun who brings the log to her convent and with the help of a heavenly boy carves the log into an image of an eleven-headed Kannon. The image is enshrined in a hall that was to be known later as Shido Temple; see WADA (1967, 45–51).

16. For lay women and the worship of the *jūrasetsunyo*, see MUKASA (2009) and FABRICAND-PERSON (2001).

to Kōfukuji, where it was enshrined in the forehead of the principal image of the Buddha (WADA 1967, 61–64).

In the play *Ama*, the village woman now addresses herself to Fusazaki and informs him that because of the diver's sacrifice and contract with Fuhito, "you became a court minister, and you were named Fusazaki, the name of this very shore. And why should I hide it now? I am the ghost of the diver, your mother" (NISHINO 1998, 578). The morning is breaking now. The ghost who came as a night's dream bids Fusazaki farewell, leaves him a letter, and disappears amidst the ocean waves. This concludes the first act of the noh drama. During the interlude, Fusazaki has his retainers order the villagers to abstain from using nets and catching fish for seven days and prepare a ceremony of music to comfort his mother in her afterlife.

At the opening of the second act, Fusazaki reads the letter his mother's ghost left for him: "For thirteen years my body was buried in white sand, my road of death, darker than night. Yet I have no one who prays for my repose and peace. My son, show me your filial love and help me out of the darkness! It has indeed been thirteen years since then."¹⁷ Immediately answering his mother's plea, Fusazaki offers copies of the *Lotus Sutra* to Shido Temple together with other gifts. There he finds the annual *Hokke hakkō*, the lectures and recitation of the *Lotus Sutra* in eight volumes, and commemorates his mother in the thirteenth year after her passage into the darkness.

As soon as the voices chanting the sutra are heard, Fusazaki's mother, now reborn as the Dragon Princess and holding a *Lotus Sutra* scroll in her hand, enters the stage. When she speaks, the noh drama makes it clear that Fuhito's prophecy has come true: "O how grateful I am to your service for my repose! Guided by this sutra, even Devadatta, the transgressor of the five cardinal sins, received the Buddha's prophecy of his rising as Tathāgata Heavenly King, and the eight-year-old Dragon Princess was reborn in the Spotless World in the south. O please go on, go on chanting the sutra!" (NISHINO 1998, 579). The Dragon Princess now opens the *Lotus Sutra* scroll and joins the chanters in reading the "Devadatta" chapter. When she finishes, she hands the scroll to Fusazaki. *Ama* ends with the following proclamation by the Dragon Princess:

Thanks to this sutra's virtuous power (*tokuriki* 徳力) of saving beings, thanks to its virtuous power, all the eight tribes of devas and dragons, all the humans and nonhumans alike, from far away in the Buddha's assembly [on Eagle Peak] witnessed the Dragon Princess reach Buddhahood. As wonderful as that is at this Shido Temple in Sanuki Province, the Buddha Dharma thrives now! The temple's celebrated annual Eight Lectures on the *Lotus*, as well as devout ser-

17. The diver's line here in the *Ama* faithfully paraphrases the corresponding passage from the *Sanshū shido dōjō engi*; see WADA (1967, 63); NISHINO (1998, 579).

vices every morning and evening, mark this temple as a holy site. These are all made possible by a son's filial devotion. (NISHINO 1998, 579–80)

It is the relationship between the jewel, on the one hand, and the Dragon Princess and her former life as the diver, on the other, that forms the central strand of the narrative of *Ama*. The Jewel That Never Turns Away is an excellent metaphor that represents the power of the *ekayāna* teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*. As demonstrated by the celebrated parable of the burning house, the sutra claims that it enables all beings to reach Buddhahood, whether they practice the path of the bodhisattva, the arhat, or the *pratyekabuddha* (T 9.12b–13c). The jewel, which enables viewers from any direction to see the Buddha in the middle looking back right at them, visually translates the sutra's power of saving beings of all different capabilities.

In that sense, *Ama* can be read as a story of the transmission from China to Japan of the *Lotus Sutra*'s salvific power, symbolized by the jewel. The story suggests that the Buddha image at Kōfukuji was not complete until the jewel was inserted into its forehead. Only then was the image recognized for its efficacy in saving living beings. What made this transmission possible was, of course, the diver. Her unusual courage and self-sacrifice for the sake of her child empowered her to bring the jewel back from the dragons' abyss to the human realm. The *Lotus Sutra* emphasizes through and through the employment of expedient means as the principal mode of manifesting its "virtuous saving power." As demonstrated by the celebrated parables of the burning house, the wealthy man and his lost son, and the skillful physician and his poisoned children, the relationship between the giver and receivers of the expedient means, the Buddha and his disciples, is depicted metaphorically throughout the sutra as that of a father and his children (T 9.12b–13c, 16b–17c, 43a–b).¹⁸

That relationship is replaced by the mother-son interaction in *Ama*. The diver's death and descent into the darkness of the netherworld can therefore be seen as expedient means for awakening Fusazaki to devotional deeds. She is the agent that moves Fusazaki to offer the sutra to Shido Temple and provide a generous donation so that the temple can develop into a powerful holy site and center for the worship of the *Lotus Sutra*. That is to say, the diver-Dragon Princess personifies the virtuous saving power of the sutra in the drama; hence, her character is intrinsically linked to the jewel, which symbolizes the same power. Her physical oneness with the jewel caused her death but at the same time sends her on to her next transmigratory journey, in which she becomes the great bodhisattva Dragon Princess. Therefore, when she hands the *Lotus Sutra* scroll to Fusazaki, it

18. For the significance of expedient means and its relationship to ideas of the *ekayāna* and the Buddha's eternal life as they are expressed in the *Lotus Sutra*, see BIELEFELDT (2009) and MASUDA (1971).

represents the most legitimate transmission of the sutra's teaching imaginable: a transmission from a divinity in the *Lotus Sutra* to a human who implements her power to make Shido Temple flourish. Precisely because of that transmission, *Ama* depicts the Dragon Princess as far more efficacious in her agency than the Buddha image at Kōfukuji, which only passively receives the jewel.

The diver's rebirth as the Dragon Princess is central to her characterization. It does not make sense *logically* that the Nara-period Japanese diver is reborn as the Dragon Princess, who in the sutra is a contemporary of Śākyamuni Buddha. However, the diver's great self-sacrifice could be imagined *fictionally* as one of the memorable bodhisattva acts that the Dragon Princess may have performed in one of her numerous past existences. The *Lotus Sutra's* narrative has nothing to say about the Dragon Princess' former lives, the long night of her transmigratory journey before she establishes herself as a bodhisattva. It is that darkness into which the authors of the noh drama released their imagination in creating the character of the diver. In the sutra, the Buddha compassionately guides his disciples by evoking the memory of their past lives and turns his own extinction into the ultimate skillful means to guide them further. Likewise, in her ghost form the diver makes her son recover his lost memory of her sacrifice, and empowers him to become a great benefactor of the dharma of the *Lotus Sutra* in Japan. It is by means of this metaphorical affinity between the diver and the Buddha that the noh drama *Ama* succeeds in glorifying and eternalizing the Dragon Princess.

Importantly, the drama treats the Dragon Princess, who embodies the deliverance of Fusazaki's mother, as a divinity who possesses her own finality. She is not a transitory figure who needs to abandon her body or transform into another body, even if it is a Buddha's. On the contrary, the female-to-female transformation of the diver-Dragon Princess underscores her potency as the agent who rouses Fusazaki to devotion and patronage. It is his mother's self-sacrifice that moves Fusazaki, a sacrifice his crafty father Fuhito would never be able to make.

To conclude, *Ama* depicts the Dragon Princess as comparable in skill to the *Lotus Sutra's* Buddha in employing expedient means. This resonates harmoniously with the gist of the Dragon Princess episode, according to which, despite her appearance as a nonhuman female child, she is genuinely enlightened and as qualified as the Buddha to save beings. In contradistinction to the crude and vulgar reading of the Dragon Princess episode advanced by proponents of the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory, the creators of *Ama* performed a refined reading of the episode that accords with seminal Chinese commentaries. *Ama* also urges readers of the *Lotus Sutra* to pay closer attention to the princess' legitimizing relationship to the jewel. All these elements give insight into the way in which the Dragon Princess is represented in the *Heike nōkyō* frontispiece, a reinterpretation of which will be given in the last section of this article.

The Dragon Princess, Benzaiten, and the Itsukushima no honji

The female protagonist's ordeal, suffering, death, and eventual transformation into a divinity in the play *Ama* strongly resemble the structure of many *honji-mono*, a genre of medieval ballad dramas that relate the former life stories of local deities. In this sense, the *Itsukushima no honji* (Original form of the goddess of Itsukushima) is particularly interesting because it makes it possible to look into the origin stories concerning the birth of the goddess Benzaiten (Ch. Biancaitian 辯才天; Sk. Sarasvatī) of Itsukushima in relation to the episode of the Dragon Princess in the *Lotus Sutra*.

Together with Chikubushima 竹生島 in Lake Biwa and Enoshima 江ノ島 in Kamakura, Itsukushima Shrine on the island of Miyajima 宮島 in Hiroshima Prefecture has long been known as one of the three principal waterfront holy sites for the worship of Benzaiten, the goddess of eloquence, art, and wealth. What makes her worship at Itsukushima distinct is that since the early medieval period, the Itsukushima Goddess has been understood as a younger sister of the Dragon Princess in the *Lotus Sutra*. As Tanaka Takako has pointed out, the celebrated Tendai Abbot Jien 慈円 (1155–1225) states in his *Gukanshō* 愚管抄: “The Itsukushima goddess in question has been recounted as a daughter of the Dragon King” (TANAKA 1993, 36; for original text, see OKAMI and AKAMATSU 1967, 265). The *Jitokushū*, a fourteenth-century compendium of the traditions of Onjōji 園城寺, carries a record of a question-and-answer session on Ituskushima: “Question: Who is the principal form of the deity [at Itsukushima]? Answer: The divine revelation by the Itsukushima divinity in Aki Province has said, ‘I am a princess of the Dragon King Sāgara. My older sister, at the time of the ‘Devadatta’ chapter, attained instantaneous Buddhahood” (*Jitokushū*, 18b). The *Daigoji shin'yōroku* provides a slightly different interpretation, in which the Itsukushima divinity is the eldest daughter of the Dragon King: “It is said in the divine revelation by the deity of the first-rank shrine in Aki Province, ‘I am the first daughter of the Dragon King Sāgara. During the Buddha's time, my sister, the second daughter, was eight years old when she received Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī's teaching and left for a residence elsewhere. The third daughter, my other sister [that is, Shōryū Gongen 清滝権現], resides on Daigo Mountain” (*Daigoji shin'yōroku* 1: 88).¹⁹

One of the obvious reasons why the Itsukushima Benzaiten is imagined as the Dragon Princess's sister is to present her as the princess' analog in soteriological efficacy. That is, Benzaiten is imagined in these sources as a divinity who is comparable to the Dragon Princess in her power to save living beings. There are other elements that make the sisterly association between the Itsukushima

19. For a detailed discussion of the primary sources that concern the sisterly relationship between the Dragon Princess and the Itsukushima goddess, as well as its relationship to Japanese mythology, see TANAKA 1986.

goddess and the Dragon Princess look quite natural. On the one hand, since the time of the Vedas, Sarasvatī was understood in Indian mythology as a water goddess in addition to being the divinity of eloquence and art (LUDVIK 2001, 10–41). On the other hand, in the context of ancient Japanese myths, the Itsukushima divinity is Itsukushima-no-hime-no-mikoto 伊都伎嶋姫命, one of the three sisterly ocean goddesses who were born of Susanoō and the tutelary divinity of the Munakara clan. These goddesses, the Munakata Sanjoshin 宗像三女神, were said to control the maritime traffic between the Yamato kingdom and the Korean kingdoms (HIRAFUJI 1998). The combination of these two elements gave rise to yet another Japanese form of Sarasvatī: the serpent-bodied Uga-Benzaiten 宇賀辯才天 (YAMAMOTO 1998, 326; LUDVIK 2001, 287–91), whose physical form recalls that of the Dragon Princess.

The *Itsukushima no honji*, one of the oldest among the *honjimon* genre, recounts the story of Princess Ashibiki 足引宮 of a western Indian kingdom.²⁰ King Senzai 千才王・善哉王, who rules a powerful nation in eastern India, one day looks at an image of Lakṣmī (Jp. Kisshōten 吉祥天) painted on a jeweled fan, and helplessly falls in love with her. A minister informs him of Princess Ashibiki, who is renowned as Lakṣmī-on-earth due to her exceptional beauty. Senzai seeks to marry Ashibiki, but as soon as she arrives at his court, she becomes the object of jealousy and hostility on the part of the consorts of Senzai's father. When Senzai leaves on an expedition, these women wrongly accuse Ashibiki, who is now pregnant, of having an affair and have her beheaded in the mountains. Ashibiki gives birth just before she is executed, but her body lives on and feeds the infant child until a holy man saves the child and raises him. When Senzai returns to his court, he looks for Ashibiki in the mountains but only finds her remains; however, thanks to the holy man's help, he meets his son. Senzai becomes the holy man's disciple and practices austerities. When he completes his training, the holy man teaches him a magical ritual that revives Ashibiki. The holy man then throws two swords into the sky, and they fly away to lands where Senzai, Ashibiki, and their child will find happiness.

The couple and their child find the first sword in an island kingdom, but Senzai falls in love with another princess there. Abandoned by her husband, Ashibiki boards an empty boat and conceals herself alone in a cabin. After a long time drifting in the ocean, the boat arrives at the shore of Itsukushima, where

20. There are two main variations within the extant manuscripts of *Itsukushima no honji*. This article bases itself on the Keiō University Library manuscript, which is regarded as retaining the oldest form of the ballad drama. For the annotated text of this manuscript, see *Itsukushima no honji* 1974. For the annotated text of the other, later variation, as represented by the National Diet Library manuscript, see NOSAKA (2002, 452–77). For an analysis of the texts of the *Itsukushima no honji*, as well as academic literature on the ballad drama and the analysis of its general narrative pattern, see SHIRAIISHI (1976), and MATSUMOTO (2002).



FIGURE 2. *Heike nōkyō* container box (above) and the *gorintō* and a pair of dragons on the lid (below) (Itsukushima Shrine).



the holy man's second arrow had landed. Ashibiki emerges from the boat, and as soon as she receives worship from the villagers, she is reborn as Benzaiten.

Although there is no direct mention of the Dragon Princess in the *Itsukushima no honji*, the ballad drama makes important references to the “Devadatta” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* (TANAKA 1993, 34–38). For example, when Princess Ashibiki is falsely accused by the consorts and captured by her executioner, she holds the fifth volume of the *Lotus Sutra*, which, as explained earlier, begins with the “Devadatta” chapter, as a charm in her left hand. More importantly, after she revives, her husband devotes himself to the holy man in the mountains. To express his gratitude that Ashibiki has been brought back to life, “he collects firewood, harvests wild fruits, scoops stream water, and prepares meals” (*Itsukushima no honji*, 289b–290a), just as, according to the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha served Devadatta in a former life (T no. 262, 9.34c). In this manner the *Itsukushima no honji* characterizes King Senzai as comparable to the Buddha.

Ashibiki's implied connections to the Dragon Princess are established when she departs to Aki Province and attains her final transformation into Benzaiten after her betrayal by Senzai. That is, Ashibiki needs to establish her independence from her husband before she attains divine status. Similarly, in the *Lotus Sutra*, the Dragon Princess's disappearance from the Buddha's assembly on Eagle Peak and her manifestation in a Buddha's body in the far-off Spotless World demonstrate that she is spiritually so advanced that she does not even need the Buddha's assistance. In contrast, other stories in the sutra depicting disciples' attainment of Buddhahood unfold only through prophecies of distant futures.

Itsukushima no honji also resonates with *Ama*, where the diver has to face many ordeals before she is reborn as the Dragon Princess. She realizes that her husband is merely using her to regain the jewel; she travels to the abysmal realm to recapture it from the underwater palace; she dies in order to complete the mission; and she is forced to separate herself from her infant child, for whom she has sacrificed her life. Similarly, Princess Ashibiki undergoes a number of trials before emerging as Benzaiten at Itsukushima: she is unjustly killed; though she must leave behind her infant child, her body lives on to feed him; she is revived by the holy man only to face a betrayal by her husband; and she then travels by herself to a far-away realm. And, just like the diver in *Ama*, by means of female-to-female transformation at the end of her journey, Ashibiki establishes her independence as a crucial step in realizing her own divinity at Itsukushima.

Such parallelism in their former life experiences suggests that the sisterly association between the Itsukushima goddess and the Dragon Princess developed as a way to illustrate that devotion to the local goddess, and worship of the *Lotus Sutra*, are compatible and complementary. Because the Dragon Princess personifies the efficacy of the sutra's salvific power, positioning the oceanic Itsukushima Benzaiten as her sister is a legitimating gesture. In addition, both



FIGURE 3. Scroll twelve and two other scrolls from the *Heike nōkyō* (note *gorintō* roller finials, left), and the cover illustration and glass title plate of scroll twelve (below) (Itsukushima Shrine).



figures are known for their unusual eloquence. In fact, just like Shido Temple, Itsukushima Shrine was an important cultic center for the worship of the *Lotus Sutra*, as exemplified by Taira no Kiyomori's offering of the *Heike nōkyō*, to which this article now turns.

Rereading the Dragon Princess in the Heike nōkyō Frontispiece

In the ninth month of the second year of the Chōkan 長寛 era (1164), Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛 (1118–1181) and the leaders of his Heike clan made an offering to Itsukushima Shrine of a thirty-two-scroll set of lavishly decorated Buddhist sutras that have gained fame as the *Heike nōkyō* 平家納経. This set consists of the *Lotus Sutra* (twenty-eight scrolls), the *Sutra of Immeasurable Meaning* (one scroll), the *Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* (one scroll), the *Amitābha Sutra* (one scroll), and the *Heart Sutra* (one scroll). Accompanying these is yet another scroll that contains Kiyomori's vow or *ganmon* 願文 (KOMATSU 2005a, 6–9; KAMEDA 1979, 34–35). At age forty-seven, Kiyomori was rising rapidly in prominence, moving from his initial status as a military noble to senior aristocrat, and eventually *de facto* ruler of Japan. In his vow, Kiyomori expresses his gratitude for his clan's phenomenal rise to prosperity and asks the tutelary divinities enshrined at Itsukushima (or "Itsukishima" 伊都伎嶋 as it was known in his day) for continued protection in this world and for peaceful repose in the next. Written with his own brush, the text of Kiyomori's vow grounds itself in a deep understanding of both exoteric and esoteric traditions of Buddhism and employs refined rhetoric in describing the relationship between the Buddhist and native Japanese divinities (KOMATSU 2005a, 6–9; 2005b, 115).

Kiyomori involved himself deeply in the whole project of the *Heike nōkyō*—design, copying of the text, other aspects of material production, and the manner of offering the sutras to the shrine (KAMEDA 1979, 31; KOMATSU 2005b, 15–27). The exceptionally sumptuous and exquisite sutra scrolls result from a sophisticated combination of knowledge of Buddhism and the court culture of calligraphy, painting, text decoration, and poetry. As Heather Blair has shown, in the larger context of Kiyomori's investment in creating new religious rituals at Itsukushima, these sutra scrolls exude his political intention to show that his Taira clan had now established itself as a legitimate inheritor of the Heian court culture, both in its religiosity, aesthetics, and poetics (BLAIR 2013, 22–23). In this sense, Benzaiten, the goddess of eloquence, art, good fortune, and wealth, was the perfect tutelary divinity for Kiyomori and his clan.

With the exception of the *Heart Sutra*, which is written in gold ink on deep indigo paper, all the scrolls open with multicolor frontispiece illustrations in the *yamato-e* 大和絵 style; these capture major motifs in the scriptural narratives. The twenty-eight *Lotus Sutra* scrolls correspond to the twenty-eight chapters in



FIGURE 4. The Dragon Princess offers the jewel to the Buddha. Detail from the frontispiece for scroll twelve of the *Heike nōkyō* (Itsukushima Shrine).

Kumārajīva’s translation. Although in his vow Kiyomori only mentions the Heike clan’s male leaders as being in charge of the production of the *Heike nōkyō*, the frontispieces in scrolls one (“Introduction”), thirteen (“Encouragement of Devotion”), fifteen (“Emergence from the Earth”), seventeen (“Distinguishing Merits”), twenty-three (“Medicine King”), and twenty-seven (“Glorious King”) all feature women, both nuns and court ladies. The Dragon Princess, who is depicted in the frontispiece in scroll twelve (see FIGURE 1), the “Devadatta” chapter, should be understood in relation to these other female figures, who showcase the visual doubling of female characters in the scriptural narratives and female members of the Heike clan who devoted themselves to the worship of the sutra (KOMATSU 2005a, 12, 42, 48, 52, 66, 74).²¹ These images suggest significant involvement in the *Heike nōkyō* by female clan members, especially Kiyomori’s wife, Taira no Tokiko 平時子 (1126–1185), and her sister Shigeiko 滋子

21. For an analysis of the frontispiece in scroll twenty-three, see EUBANKS (2009, 223). Also see TANABE (1988).

(also known as Kenshunmon'in 建春門院, 1142–1176), who happened to be the Retired Sovereign Goshirakawa's consort.²²

As discussed in the previous section, the principal divinity of Itsukushima Shrine is Benzaiten, who had been integrated into the native Japanese pantheon of gods. She was worshipped as a local manifestation of both Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara (Jp. Jūichimen Kannon 十一面観音), and Mahāvairocana (Jp. Dainichi nyorai 大日如来) (KUBOTA 2002). Because the Benzaiten enshrined at Itsukushima was understood as a younger sister of the Dragon Princess in the *Lotus Sutra*, Itsukushima Shrine was imagined as the “Dragon King's Palace in our human world” (*utsusomi no ryūgū* うつそみの龍宮).²³ In the same manner, because dragon kings are depicted in Buddhist scriptural literature as powerful protectors of the dharma, Itsukushima Shrine was also understood as a major guardian institution of Buddhism in Japan. By building up Itsukushima and sponsoring extravagant ritual ceremonies there, Kiyomori intended to position himself as the chief benefactor of the Dharma in the realm, a position that had been reserved for emperors and retired emperors (BLAIR 2013, 38).

All of these religious elements are integrated within the overall design of the *Heike nōkyō*, which emphasizes homage to Avalokiteśvara and Mahāvairocana, the original grounds or Buddhist forms of the Itsukushima goddess. The thirty-three *Heike nōkyō* scrolls numerically match the thirty-three different ways in which, according to the *Lotus Sutra*, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara manifests herself to save living beings (T 9.57a–b). Furthermore, the splendid three-story black bronze container (the *Heike nōkyō nōchi* 平家納経納置) produced both to offer and to preserve the scrolls is extremely important because it visually expresses how the Heike conceptualized their offering. The box's elaborate lid features a pair of dragons protecting a five-ring stupa (*gorintō* 五輪塔), which symbolizes Mahāvairocana, while flying dragons carrying *cintāmaṇi* jewels decorate all four sides of the box (see FIGURE 2).

With this in mind, it seems that scroll twelve, the “Devadatta” chapter, must have received special attention (see FIGURE 3). Together with its frontispiece, which captures the moment of the Dragon Princess's offering of her jewel to the Buddha, the decorative elements of this scroll echo the central design motifs expressed in the sutra container box (HARADA 2005; KAJITANI 2005). The orna-

22. Tokiko, Shigeko, and Kiyoko 清子, Tokiko's daughter and Taira no Munemori's 平宗盛 wife, are particularly renowned for their avid worship of the Itsukushima divinities and are considered to have taken an active role in the production of the *Heike nōkyō* (KOMATSU 2005a, 99–102).

23. See “Sahyōe no kami Fujiwara no Shigenori no shōjō” 左兵衛督藤原成範書状, cited as a document from the *Itsukushima monjo* 厳島文書 in KOMATSU (2005a, 100). Shigenori (also known as Narinori, 1134–1187) was Kiyomori's son-in-law.

mental crystal pieces (*jikushu* 軸首) attached to either end of the roller take the form of *gorintō*, replicating the principal image on the sutra box. The scroll's cover illustration shows monstrous sea creatures that are suggestive of the Dragon King Sāgara, the Dragon Princess, and their retinue in their underwater palace. Whereas other scrolls have small silver plates on their cover sheets with the titles of the chapters embossed or carved in Chinese characters, scroll twelve has a special title plate made of dark blue glass, again suggestive of the dragons' abysmal realm.

All these considerations make it clear that the sisterly affiliation between the Benzaiten of Itsukushima and the Dragon Princess in the *Lotus Sutra* made the “Devadatta” chapter particularly important to the Heike clan's offering to Itsukushima Shrine. What made them choose the scene of the Dragon Princess' offering of the jewel to represent the “Devadatta” chapter on its frontispiece?

Kajitani Ryōji has suggested that Kiyomori timed the offering of these decorated scriptures in 1164 because his and Tokiko's daughter Tokuko 徳子 (also known as Kenreimon'in 建礼門院, 1155–1214) was then about the same age as the Dragon Princess in the *Lotus Sutra* (KAJITANI 2005, 257). Kajitani has also argued that the image reflects Kiyomori's wish for his daughter to grow up into the “jewel lady” (*gyokujo* 玉女), the wise, virtuous, and beautiful queen of Buddhist mythology who legitimates her husband as a *cakravartin*, a virtuous monarch who rules by the power of the Dharma (*tenrin shōō* 転輪聖王).²⁴ Kajitani's point makes sense because in Shōan 2 (1172) Tokuko married Emperor Takakura 高倉天皇 (r. 1168–1180), thereby increasing Kiyomori's political influence. Tokuko's wedding robe was donated to Itsukushima as an offering in order to celebrate this auspicious and advantageous marriage. As the queen mother of the crown prince Tokihito 言仁親王 (later Emperor Antoku 安徳天皇, 1178–1185) she solidified the power of Kiyomori and his clan members (GOMI 1999, 172, 216–18, 254). At the time of the offering of the *Heike nōkyō* in 1162, Kiyomori must have expected his daughter to play a significant political role for his clan in the not-so-distant future.

Historical context thus suggests that the Heike men and women who participated in the production of the *Heike nōkyō* chose the image of the eight-year-old Dragon Princess for scroll twelve's frontispiece because it evoked—and therefore united—both the Itsukushima goddess and Tokuko (see FIGURE 1 and FIGURE 4). The image extols the potent power of Itsukushima's Benzaiten as the Dragon Princess's sister and at the same time expresses the Heike clan's hope that Tokuko would be protected and empowered by the goddess. It is difficult to imagine that the Taira had any interest in either Tokuko's transformation into a male practitioner or her

24. For the *gyokujo* as one of the *cakravartin*'s seven regalia and how she was imagined by the Tendai Abbot Jien in relationship to the Japanese emperor, see ABÉ (1999, 331, 363).

attainment of the male body of a Buddha; indeed, the design of the frontispiece has nothing to do with these.²⁵ In other words, the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory does nothing to explain the image and its implications.²⁶

With her delicate court robe and flying scarf, a royal diadem adorning her hair and two court attendants accompanying her, the frontispiece places a particular emphasis on the Dragon Princess's regal qualities. She is no ordinary girl, but the princess who represents the dragon race—just as Tokuko represented the Heike clan.²⁷ In the sutra, the princess offers the jewel to the Buddha on the summit of Eagle Peak. In the frontispiece, however, she stands on the waves, making it look as if she has freshly emerged from the ocean. This is suggestive of her freedom in swimming through the bitter sea of samsara and rising above it through her unparalleled enlightenment; simultaneously, it is evocative of her oceanic sister divinity, the Benzaiten of Itsukushima.

The placement on the topside of the frontispiece of the Buddha to whom the Dragon Princess is offering the jewel makes it clear that he is Śākyamuni Buddha on Eagle Peak. However, he is not depicted in the standard way, that is, against a background showing a mountain shaped like an eagle's head. Instead the Buddha is residing in a palace in a pure land with musical instruments flying over the sky (FIGURE 1). This must be an attempt to demonstrate visually that Śākyamuni Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* is the Buddha of Eternal Life (Ch. *jiuyuan shicheng*; Jp. *kuon jitsujō* 久遠実成), who declares his identity with all the Buddhas of all Buddha lands in the past, present, and future, and ten directions in the universe.

This image of the Dragon Princess carrying the jewel also makes sense against the historical backdrop of the Heike's offering of the decorated scriptures. The most precious jewel, the *cintāmaṇi* gem, had been recognized in Buddhist literature as one of the most important regalia of the *cakravartin*. The

25. This point becomes even more obvious when one compares the frontispiece in question to the *Hokke mandara* 法華曼荼羅 at Honpōji 本法寺 in Toyama Prefecture. One of the illustrations for the "Devadatta" chapter in this fourteenth-century set of illustrations of the *Lotus Sutra* specifically shows the process of the Dragon Princess' sex change. Haraguchi Shizuko has demonstrated that the image was produced in relationship to a specific group of monks in attempts to advance their *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutu* theory (HARAGUCHI 2014, 36–42, note 4).

26. Some studies of the scroll twelve frontispiece have suggested that the image is a visual expression of Buddhism's ambivalence toward women's salvation or is nothing other than a clever avoidance of the issue of transformation into a male (for example, MOERMAN 2005, 191, 239; MEEKS 2010, 69–72, 307). Despite differences in opinion, these studies have approached the image with a presupposition that because the frontispiece features the Dragon Princess it must have to do with *henjō nanshi*, *ryūnyo jōbutsu*, or both. My point here is simply that the painting is about what it depicts, that is, the Dragon Princess' offering of the jewel, and has nothing to do with other vignettes in the scriptural episode.

27. I am indebted to Melissa McCormick for her assistance in reading the image of the Dragon Princess in the frontispiece.

cintāmaṇi, together with the jewel lady, is also among the seven attributes of the Buddha Eka-uṣṇīṣacakra (Jp. Ichiji chōrinnō 一字頂輪王 or Ichiji kinrin 一字金輪), who simultaneously personifies Mahāvairocana and the *cakravartin* (ABÉ 1999, 266–69, 353–55, 364). The frontispiece scene therefore doubly serves as an expression of the Heike clan’s hope that Tokuko would be the future legitimizer of the Japanese emperor’s rule, and likewise that with the tutelage of the Itsukushima goddess, their clan could play a key role in supporting the imperial house and controlling the imperium.

As discussed in the preceding analysis of *Ama*, in the *Lotus Sutra* the jewel symbolizes the sutra’s salvific power as the Buddha’s ultimate teaching. As a visual metaphor, then, the image of an eight-year-old girl offering the most precious jewel to the Buddha extols the Itsukushima goddess as the Dragon Princess’ sister while also suggesting the Heike’s devotion to the goddess, her shrine, the *Lotus Sutra*, and Buddhism. This explains why the design motifs of this particular scroll—the cover illustration, title plate, finials, and frontispiece—resonate so well with the *Heike nōkyō* container. Together, these are excellent material and visual examples of the way in which the Heike clan skillfully integrated into their worship the combined practice of esoteric and Exoteric Buddhism (*kenmitsu sōshū* 顕密双修), setting the standard for the religious engagements of Heian courtiers, both lay and ordained.²⁸

In turn, the frontispiece can be read as a special type of *engi-e* or *etoki*, which may be termed “a ciphered origin story self-portrait.” Having the Heike clan itself as a narrator, and through the metaphorical qualities of the Dragon Princess, it tells a story of how the patronage of the Heike clan transformed Itsukushima from a provincial shrine into a major cultic center and how the tutelage of the Itsukushima Goddess brought eminence to the clan.

There is one remaining question: does the scene of the Dragon Princess offering her jewel to the Buddha indeed capture the essence of the “Devadatta” chapter? In the episode discussed in the first half of this article, Mañjuśrī speaks of the Dragon Princess as the most advanced bodhisattva among his dragon disciples. Then, when she suddenly appears before the Buddha and his assembly on Eagle Peak, she bows before the Buddha’s feet and praises him with her *gāthā*, for which the last four lines run:

Having heard [the <i>Lotus Teaching</i>], I realized the Bodhi	又聞成菩提
To which the Buddha alone should be able to bear witness	唯佛當證知
May I spread the Great Vehicle	我闡大乘教
And save beings from their suffering!	度脫苦衆生
	(T 9.35b–c)

28. For another example of representations of *kenmitsu* Buddhism in visual art the late Heian period, see ABÉ (2014).

These lines deserve particular attention as the Dragon Princess' proclamation of her vow. They make it clear that, as we have already seen, her ultimate goal is to employ the *Lotus Sutra*, the most advanced Mahayana teaching, to save living beings. Zhiyi, Jizang, and Kuiji all point out in their commentaries that the Dragon Princess is unique among the characters of the *Lotus Sutra* because unlike the Buddha's other disciples, she did not have the chance to study the *ekayāna* teaching directly from him on Eagle Peak (T no. 1721, 34.463a–b, 591b; no. 1723, 34.659b–660 and 34.815a–816c; see, for example, T no. 262, 9.115a–117a). Despite this apparent disadvantage, according to her teacher Mañjuśrī, the Dragon Princess has reached unsurpassed perfect enlightenment (*mujō tōshōgaku* 無上等正覺), none other than enlightenment as attained by the Buddhas. Therefore, when she appears at the Buddha's assembly, it is particularly important that she receives the Buddha's own authentication of her Bodhi. With his approval, she is now ready to teach the *Lotus Sutra* and save beings. When she proffers her legendary jewel, which as we have seen represents the saving power of the sutra, to the Buddha, he immediately accepts it, much as an expert gemologist is able to effortlessly ascertain a stone to be genuine. In the more general context of Mahayana scriptures, jewels serve as metaphors for the perfection of wisdom and the perfectly enlightened mind.²⁹ Indeed, the Buddha's acceptance of the Dragon Princess's jewel is none other than his acknowledgment of her perfection of wisdom. Zhiyi explicates the significance of the Dragon Princess offering the jewel to the Buddha in terms of cause (her study of the *Lotus Sutra* under Mañjuśrī) and effect (her attainment of Bodhi) in her bodhisattva practice:

Her offering of the jewel manifests the perfect understanding of the Dharma attained by her. The round jewel indicates that she perfectly mastered the cause. Offering it to the Buddha represents her act of manifesting the effect of the cause that she gathered within herself. That the Buddha accepted the jewel swiftly means that her attainment of the effect was even faster. Thus in an instant of thought in which she took a seat in the assembly, she demonstrated that she had attained Buddhahood without fail. (T no. 1718, 34.117a)

This passage from Zhiyi's commentary on the *Lotus Sutra* (*Fahua wenguo*) directly feeds into his refutation of Śāriputra's belief in women's inferiority, which was examined in the second section of this article. Zhiyi observes that by accepting the Dragon Princess's jewel, the Buddha has authenticated her study of the *Lotus Sutra* under Mañjuśrī in the Dragon King's palace, her resulting

29. For example, for the jewel as the perfection of wisdom, see the *Greater Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, T no. 220, 6.536c, 551c, 717c, and 7.290c; and for the jewel as the perfectly enlightened mind, see the *Flower Garland Sutra*, T no. 278, 9.622c.710b, 715b, 777b–c. For a general discussion of the significance of the jewel in the Mahayana tradition, see ISHII (2001), especially 118–20.

enlightenment, *and* her ability to employ the sutra's power of expedient means to save beings. In that sense, too, she is already acknowledged as an equal of the Buddha.

The Dragon Princess then urges Śāriputra to recognize the Buddha's acknowledgement by asking him if the Buddha's acceptance of her jewel was quick. He replies to her, "It was swift indeed!" And yet the episode goes on because Śāriputra, sadly, and perhaps pathetically too, does not understand that the Buddha's swift receipt of the jewel has already proven wrong his own insistence on women's inferiority. Precisely because of his ignorance, the princess needs now to alert him as follows: "Use your supernatural power and watch me attain Buddhahood. It will be even faster!" (T 9.35c). With this proclamation, the episode reaches its finale, wherein the Dragon Princess's use of visual expedient means finally silences Śāriputra.

Thus, if one reads the Dragon Princess episode from the vantage point of the Buddha in the narrative, as did Zhiyi, the story reaches its climax at her offering of the jewel and the Buddha's acceptance of it—the moment in the narrative that reveals her attainment of the unexcelled enlightenment and salvific power. However dramatic her transformation into a male and her instant attainment of the Buddha's body may appear, they simply explain her exceptional spiritual accomplishment to those who had been unable to comprehend it.

Those responsible for production of the *Heike nōkyō* must have selected the scene of the Dragon Princess offering the jewel due to their thorough grasp of the "Devadatta" chapter, which they read in a manner paralleling the sophisticated interpretations of Zhiyi, Jizang, and Kuiji. Even more impressively, they grounded themselves in such a profound knowledge of the poetics and rhetoric of the sutra that they designed the Devadatta scroll as a whole—its cover illustration, title plate, and scroll finials—so as to present the image of the Dragon Princess in the frontispiece as a sophisticated visual metaphor. Precisely because they aptly selected the climax of the chapter, where the Dragon Princess's inner enlightenment is revealed, the image of her offering of the jewel is empowering, at once evoking their devotion to the Itsukushima goddess and expressing their prayer for Tokuko's success as an elite courtier.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this article has raised a few intriguing issues that deserve further consideration in the study of *engi* literature. First, it supports a new approach that understands medieval Japanese *engi* as a capacious and fluid genre integrative of diverse subgenres, such as fiction, drama, poetry, myths, visual culture, and historical documents. Second, it proposes to isolate this sense of the word *engi* from the philosophical idea of dependent co-origination, instead understanding the

word's implications in line with the Buddhist narrative tradition, in particular, various origin stories found in the scriptures. It therefore advocates as a productive research method a juxtaposed reading of medieval Japanese *engi* stories together with other, Buddhist scriptural narratives. Third, as a case study, it has exposed the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory as none other than a dogmatic misrepresentation of the Dragon Princess grounded in bigotry and prejudice. However influential it may be, that theory is simply a dreadful exegetical distortion of the *Lotus Sutra*. It diametrically opposes the manner in which the character of the Dragon Princess is constructed in the sutra's narrative.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the foregoing discussion suggests that medieval Japanese Buddhist doctrinal commentaries do not necessarily hold a privileged position in interpreting Buddhist scriptural narratives. Demonstrating how scriptural exegesis may deteriorate into bad practice, the proponents of the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory justified their stand by isolating these terms from the larger narrative context and treating them as if they were stand-alone concepts. The medieval Japanese *engi* materials discussed in this article do exactly the opposite. In line with conscientious exegetical practices exemplified by seminal Chinese commentaries, they pay close attention to the manner in which the words in a scriptural text intertwine with each other to form narrative strands, and then weave those strands into the poetic texture of a new text. It is therefore not surprising that the creators of medieval *engi* literature, as raconteurs, performed a reading of scriptural narratives superior to that of doctrinaires who were preoccupied with fabricating dogma. *Engi* literature therefore has the potential to serve as an effective tool for illustrating the intricacy of narrative developments in and around Buddhist scriptures.

In the second chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha explains the discursive uniqueness of the sutra: "I illustrate the nature of all things by means of countless expedient means and all sorts of origin stories (*innen* 因緣), metaphors and parables (*hiyu* 譬喻), and rhetoric (*gonji* 言辭). What I teach [in this sutra] cannot be understood by means of analyses and discriminations" (T 9.7a).³⁰ In other words, the *Lotus Sutra* is a scriptural text that celebrates its own figurative and rhetorical qualities. It is this prioritization of the literary over the dogmatic that inspired the creation of diverse medieval *engi* materials in fictional, dramatic, and visual media.

30. In Chinese, the passage is as follows: 我以無數方便種種因緣譬喻言辭演說諸法。是法非思量分別之所能解。There are numerous passages that are identical or similar to this one throughout the sutra. Because the word 因緣 (Ch. *yinyuan*; Jp. *innen*) is grouped together with words for metaphors, parables, and rhetoric, and because that group in turn is contrasted with doctrinal speculation, I understand the word 因緣 to correspond to the ideas expressed by the Sanskrit terms *nidāna*, *jātaka*, *ittivṛttaka*, or *avadāna* in Sanskrit; therefore I have rendered it here as "origin stories." See also the introduction to this article.

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