

R. Keller KIMBROUGH

Buddhism in Medieval Japanese Fiction

Personal Reflections

I AM ONE of those former English majors who loved college but never really wanted to work, which may be why the prospect of graduate school was so appealing when I was ejected into the post-baccalaureate world of financial obligations and responsibilities in 1990. Four years later, as a graduate student at Yale (where, ironically, I found myself working all the time), I had the privilege of taking classes with the late Stanley Weinstein, a specialist in Japanese and Chinese religions who trained many of today's leading scholars of Buddhism. I am not one of them. At the time, I was already studying Japanese literature under the supervision of Edward Kamens in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures (though Ed was himself one of Stanley's students, finishing his PhD in 1982). Nevertheless, on Ed's advice, in the fall of 1994 I began auditing Stanley's three-semester undergraduate lecture course on Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism. I enjoyed it so much that in three years I audited it twice, much to Stanley's surprise. At the graduate level, I took Stanley's course on *kanbun* 漢文 (Sino-Japanese), in which we read excerpts from Gyōnen's 凝然 (1240–1321) thirteenth-century *Hasshū kōyō* 八宗綱要 as well as a seminar focusing on Japanese Buddhist tales in *Konjaku monogatari shū*.

My interest in literature has always tended toward the sensational—stories of monsters, thieves, animals, murders, and miracles, rather than the more “serious” works that Stanley and Ed assigned. I once suggested to Stanley that if I had been a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies, I would have

written my dissertation on medieval Buddhist tale literature.¹ He laughed and asked if I meant stories of lascivious monks and that sort of thing. To him, the idea was preposterous. The study of Buddhism was the study of sutras and commentaries, sectarian founders, institutional histories, and philosophy. What was to be learned from those kinds of salacious, fictional sources? At best, what I had suggested was frivolous.

But looking back some thirty years later, it seems that I did just what I had proposed to Stanley: I made a career out of studying fantastical, inspiring, and sometimes shocking Buddhist tales and their uses in medieval and early-modern preaching, temple fundraising, and the quasi-religious performing traditions of *sekkyō* 説経, *kōwakamai* 幸若舞, *kojōruri* 古浄瑠璃, and *nō*. Two of the chapters in my first book (KIMBROUGH 2008), which was closely based on the dissertation, are titled, “Incest and Enlightenment: the *Otogizōshi Izumi Shikibu*” (about a monk who mistakenly sleeps with his own mother, leading to her enlightenment) and “Sex and Salvation: Izumi Shikibu and *The Tale of Jōruri*” (about a beautiful poet who achieved Pure Land rebirth for herself and her parents by fulfilling a vow to sleep with one thousand men). It was exactly the kind of work that Stanley feared I might produce. I sent him a copy when it was published, and I can only suppose that he was amused. After all, what was the harm? I was Ed’s student, not his.

It is a truism that one can tell a lot about a person from the stories that they tell (or, as Stanley might have observed, from what they like to read), and I would argue that as an approach to the study of Japanese religions, the exploration of non-traditional textual sources—that is, the kinds of works that tend to be studied by scholars of literature today—can provide insights into the nature of Buddhist praxis and belief that more reliably historical, doctrinal, or philosophical sources may not. That said, drawing conclusions about medieval Japanese religions based on a corpus of lowbrow, sensational, historically inaccurate, and highly entertaining (yes!) prose fiction is a bit like trying to understand twentieth-century British boarding school culture through a reading of the *Harry Potter* series. There are things to be learned and things that probably should not. Nevertheless, in what follows I share some of the things I have discovered about medieval Japanese religious culture in my years of reading, translating, and writing about medieval Japanese fiction, particularly works in the oral-narrative genre of *sekkyō* “sermon ballads” (MATISOFF 1992).

The term *sekkyō* is written with characters meaning “sutra explanation,” but *sekkyō* stories have almost nothing to do with the sutras. Rather, they are popular Buddhist tales of miracles, monks, the workings of karma, celebrity Buddhist

1. I use the term medieval as a translation for *chūsei* 中世 (“middle age”), which is widely used by Japanese scholars to refer to the period 1185–1600 CE.

icons, and many cursed, tortured, enslaved, branded, sacrificed, or otherwise mistreated children. The stories were circulated in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries by mendicant, pseudo-monastic preacher-entertainers who would tell their sad and wondrous tales to small audiences in public gathering spaces, including crossroads, bridges, and the open grounds of temples and shrines. In the early seventeenth century, under the influence of the emerging *kojōruri* puppet theater, *sekkyō* was adapted to puppet performance, transforming it from a streetcorner storytelling art into a major theatrical genre with celebrated chanters and dedicated urban venues. It is from this period, starting from around the 1630s, that most extant editions of *sekkyō* stories survive as woodblock-printed *shōhon* 正本 (“true text”) playbooks, so named for their purported fidelity to the narratives of particular chanters. The most famous works in the repertoire include *Karukaya* かるかや, *Sanshō Dayū* さんせう太夫, *Shintokumaru* しんとく丸, *Oguri* おぐり, *Sayohime* さよひめ (also known as *Matsura Chōja* まつら長じや), and *Aigo no waka* あいごの若, all of which are named after a character in the tales.²

What can we learn about medieval Japanese Buddhism from these stories? To answer this question, I will trace the plot of *Aigo no waka*, one of the most disturbing works in a disturbing genre (and, yes, one of my personal favorites), with reference to other *sekkyō* narratives and relevant stories in related literary and performance genres. Here is a short list of some of the things that I have come to know.

Possessions are Good, but Children are Better

This first lesson is not a particularly religious one, but I include it here because it is central to understanding *Aigo no waka*, which is named after the young male protagonist of the tale (“Little Aigo” in my translation). *Aigo no waka* survives in at least three woodblock-printed editions published in Kyoto in 1661 and Edo in ca. 1670 and 1708; they are tentatively attributed to the chanters Higurashi Kodayū 日暮小太夫, Tenma Hachidayū 天満八太夫, and Tenma Hachidayū II.³ The story begins with an introduction to the second avenue chamberlain Kiyohira 清平, a wealthy noble who is said to have lived during the reign of Emperor Saga 嵯峨 (r. 809–823). Kiyohira takes great pride in his possessions, which include an heirloom Chinese saddle and an heirloom “*yaiba* sword” やいばの太刀.⁴ We are told,

2. These works are translated in KIMBROUGH (2013). For a discussion of *sekkyō* and the related genres of *otogizōshi*, *kōwakamai*, and *kojōruri*, see KIMBROUGH (2016).

3. For information on these and other extant *sekkyō* manuscripts, playbooks, and chanters, see KIMBROUGH (2013, 249–265).

4. MUROKI Yatarō explains that although *yaiba* 刃 refers to a method of hardening steel in cold water, the term is used here to indicate a kind of magical sharpness (*Sekkyōshū*, 301, n. 8).

Once when the emperor was seven years old, the imperial mother fell ill. After graciously setting Kiyohira's Chinese saddle on a two-year-old horse and strapping the *yaiba* sword to his waist, the emperor paraded to the Shishinden 紫宸殿 Ceremonial Hall and back again. The demon king of the sixth heaven was struck with fear, and the imperial mother revived. Recognizing the rarity of Kiyohira's treasures, the emperor showered him with boundless favor.

(*Sekkyōshū*, 301; KIMBROUGH 2013, 192)

Thus, because of the awe-inspiring magnificence of Kiyohira's possessions, dazzling to even an otherworldly demon king, the emperor is said to have held Kiyohira in the highest regard.

In the early spring of a certain year, the emperor instructs his ministers to amuse him with a “contest of treasures”: a formal, competitive event to determine who owns the best stuff. The chancellor, the minister of the right, the minister of the left, and many others bring their most prized possessions, and in a scene resembling an episode of *Antiques Roadshow*, they lay them out for examination. Predictably, the emperor decrees that there are no greater treasures than Kiyohira's Chinese saddle and *yaiba* sword. Seemingly drunk on his victory, Kiyohira gratuitously berates the sixth avenue lord for his arrogance and poverty before taking his leave. The lord vows revenge, which he later achieves by convincing the emperor to hold a “contest of children,” of which he has many, and Kiyohira, none. Upon observing the sixth avenue lord with his five strapping sons, the emperor declares with the utmost admiration that there is in fact “no treasure greater than a child.” Possessions are good, but children are better. It is a lesson that Kiyohira would do well to remember, but he does not.

Karma Matters, but It Isn't Everything

Humiliated by his loss in the contest of children, Kiyohira informs his wife that he intends to slit his belly and do himself in. But having more sense than her husband (or perhaps having read more medieval fiction), she suggests that instead they visit the statue of the bodhisattva Kannon 観音 at Hasedera 長谷寺 in Sakurai to pray for a child—a standard course of action in situations like these. The Hase Kannon is well known for granting miracles in works of Heian and medieval literature, including *Hasedera Kannon genki* 長谷寺観音験記 and the *setsuwa* 説話 anthologies *Nihon ryōiki* 日本霊異記, *Konjaku monogatari* 今昔物語集, *Kankyo no tomo* 閑居友, and the like. In *Genji monogatari* a character known as the Bungo deputy (Bungo no Suke 豊後介) explains that “among the buddhas, the Hase Kannon is famous even in Cathay for vouchsafing the mightiest boons in all Japan,” suggesting the extent of the statue's reputation in

the early eleventh century (*Genji monogatari*, 98; TYLER 2001, 414).⁵ In addition to *Aigo no waka*, the *sekkyō* entitled *Sayohime* attributes the gift of a child to the Hase Kannon, and in the *otogizōshi Chigo Kannon engi* 稚児観音縁起, the Hase Kannon is said to have granted a lovely and compliant young acolyte (*chigo* 稚児) to a lonely monk.⁶

It is common knowledge in the world of medieval Japanese fiction that if you want to get something done—good or bad—then you should visit the statue of Kannon at Kiyomizudera 清水寺 in Kyoto, Hasedera in Sakurai, or Ishiyamadera 石山寺 in Ōmi Province.⁷ In the fifteenth-century *sekkyō Shintokumaru*, for example, a particularly evil stepmother travels to Kiyomizudera to place a curse on her innocent stepson, Shintokumaru.⁸ She entreats the Kiyomizu Kannon to either take Shintokumaru's life or "cripple him with a repulsive disease," after which she pounds eighteen nails—the number of the festival day of Kannon—into a living tree at the temple. The Kiyomizu Kannon does as he is asked, causing the boy's eyes to rupture and his body to "burst into festering sores" (*Sekkyōshū*, 181; KIMBROUGH 2013, 110). Later, when Shintokumaru visits the temple to pray for a cure, the Kiyomizu Kannon explains that "since the distant past, people have called on me to do various things" and that because he is in the business of granting requests, he is not to blame for the results (*Sekkyōshū*, 202; KIMBROUGH 2013, 120).

In *Aigo no waka*, Kiyohira and his wife travel to Hasedera to pray for a child, and after a seven-day vigil they receive an oracle in a dream. "Dear Kiyohira," the Hase Kannon explains, "although there are more children in the world than there are stars in the heavens, for you and your wife there are none. Go home now, quickly!" Upon awakening, Kiyohira and his wife are incensed. "If you won't give us a child," they declare, "then take our lives instead!" Refusing to budge, they remain inside the temple for another three days, whereupon the Hase Kannon appears to them again. "Although I had no child for you," he says, "I am moved by your desperate pleading at the risk of your lives." He then offers them a child on the condition that either Kiyohira or his wife will die after three years, to which the wife readily agrees. It is clear from this exchange that in order

5. Translation modified from TYLER (2001, 414).

6. *Chigo Kannon engi* is translated by Paul Atkins in KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE (2018, 243–249).

7. That said, the statue of Shakyamuni 釈迦牟尼 at Seiryōji 清涼寺 in Saga, the great bodhisattva Hachiman at Iwashimizu Hachimangu 石清水八幡宮 on Mt. Otoko 男, and the statue of Bishamonten 毘沙門天 at Kuramadera 鞍馬寺 north of the capital might give these Kannon statues a run for their money. The images of the buddha Amida at Zenkōji 善光寺 in Nagano, Seiganji 誓願寺 in Kyoto, and Taimadera 当麻寺 in Nara are ideal for achieving Pure Land rebirth, and the statue of Jizō at Kongōsenji 金剛山寺 (or Yatadera 矢田寺) in Nara is useful for escaping hell.

8. The name is rendered as *Shuntokumaru* 俊徳丸 in the noh play *Yoroboshi* 弱法師, which was composed prior to 1429.

to be successful, supplications can require time, energy, and a great deal of perseverance. In addition, we can see that in some cases, miracles may entail negotiation and sacrifice.

We find a similar episode in *Shintokumaru* (*Sekkyōshū*, 155–163; KIMBROUGH 2013, 96–101). A great and wealthy lord by the name of Nobuyoshi 信吉 suggests to his wife that they visit Kiyomizudera to pray for a child because, as he explains, people say that the Kannon there is the best in India, China, and Japan. After hours of supplication, they also receive an oracle in a dream. “Dear couple,” the Kiyomizu Kannon declares, “that you’ve traveled such a distance to ask me for a child is truly very moving. However, I shall tell you now about the karma from your previous lives.” The Kiyomizu Kannon reveals that in his former existence, Nobuyoshi was a woodsman who set a fire that consumed a mother pheasant and her unborn brood. Having witnessed the death of his wife and children, the father bird pronounced a terrible curse before killing himself in anguish:

Whoever set fire to this field today, he shall surely pay a price! If he’s reborn as a stone, then he shall be a paving stone on the Kamakura highway, trampled by horses as they pass on their way. If, because of some good deed in a former life, he’s reborn as a human, then he shall be a wealthy lord. Even the poor have children, but this one—he will have none! He will long for a child in the day-time and long for a child in the night, suffering on in this way until death!

(*Sekkyōshū*, 158–159; KIMBROUGH 2013, 98–99)

The Kiyomizu Kannon then explains that in her previous life, the wife was a great river snake that ate a clutch of swallow’s eggs and then consumed the heartbroken mother and father birds after they threw themselves into the river to drown. It is because of this that the wife can have no child.

Refusing to recognize the constraints of their karma, Nobuyoshi and his wife leap up in anger. “You cruel Kannon,” Nobuyoshi shouts,

Even if our karma is bad, you should give us a child anyway, as an expedient means! If you don’t, I won’t leave. I’ll cut open my stomach right here, rip out my guts, and throw them on you. I’ll become a demon god and gobble up anyone who comes to see you! Maybe not in a week, but within three years I’ll have weeds growing in here. This place will be a deer wallow!

(*Sekkyōshū*, 160–161; KIMBROUGH 2013, 99)

When a servant cautions against making threats, Nobuyoshi and his wife resort to bribery: they write out a pair of formal petitions listing the many things that they will donate to the temple if the Kiyomizu Kannon will grant them a child, including a new temple hall constructed of precious wood from India; a new altar stage decked in silver and gold; a new sacred summoning bell cast in silver and gold; a new sacred shrine fence; and various other things. Nobuyoshi and

his wife place their petitions within the inner sanctum, after which they pray for another seven days. The Kiyomizu Kannon again appears to Nobuyoshi and his wife in a dream. “I had no heir to give you,” he explains, “but because you’ve taken such a vow, I have obtained one after all. When the child is seven, one of you—the mother or the father—will be in mortal danger. But be unstinting in your love!” Nobuyoshi and his wife gladly accept this condition, and nine months later the wife bears a son, whom they name Shintokumarū.

As we might extrapolate from this story, karma exercises a powerful, tangible force on our lives, but it can also be overcome through divine intervention. As places for supplicants to toss a coin, donation boxes (*saisenbako* 賽銭箱) are ubiquitous at temples and shrines throughout Japan, and although it would be inappropriate to call them “bribery boxes,” it is natural to imagine that the contribution of a small amount of money might help to have one’s prayers heard. Nobuyoshi and his wife take that principle to an extreme, and it pays off for them. The lesson of their story may be that karma is real, but prayers work if you work them.

Don’t Disparage the Buddhas

It may seem obvious that we should avoid slandering the buddhas, bodhisattvas, dharma, and monastic community, but for some characters in medieval fiction and drama, it is not. In its “Parable” chapter (Hiyuhon 譬喩品), the *Lotus Sūtra* warns that those who disparage “such scriptures as this” will fall into the Avīci hell (HURVITZ 2009, 72), the deepest and worst of the eight burning hells. Some medieval Japanese sources are more specific. For example, in the *otogizōshi Chōhōji yomigaeri no sōshi* 長宝寺よみがへりの草紙 (Back from the Dead at Chōhōji; composed prior to 1513), a nun who received a guided tour of hell reports that she witnessed the punishment for people who commit sins of speech, including “slandering the buddhas and sutras” and “disparaging priests.” She says that she watched as “a demon pulled a man’s tongue far out of his mouth. Then, after stretching it wide and staking down the edges, he used a team of horses and oxen to plow it apart. Insects seized upon the man’s tattered flesh, stinging and gorging themselves in a way that was impossible to describe” (*Muromachi monogatari sōshishū*, 432).

With that in mind, we can return to *Aigo no waka*. The wife to whom the Hase Kannon promised a child soon bears a son, the eponymous Little Aigo. Time quickly passes until the boy is thirteen, and despite the terrible stipulation of the Hase Kannon’s gift, nothing yet has happened to the wife or her husband. Then one day, “in her idleness,” the wife makes an awful observation. Addressing the people in her household, she says:

Hey, everybody, listen. Back when we received our Little Aigo from the Hase Mountain Kannon, the bodhisattva said that when the child turned three, either Kiyohira or I would be in mortal danger. But he's thirteen now, and still nothing's happened! It just goes to show that even the gods and buddhas are liars. So it's only right that people should lie to get by in this world. How about that, everyone? (Sekkyōshū, 312–313; KIMBROUGH 2013, 197–198)

The Hase Kannon hears her words, and he isn't pleased. He summons his “pestilence demons” (*yamō no misaki* 病の御先) and sends them in the form of an evil wind to kill the wife.

Again, there is a similar scene in *Shintokumaru*. Having escaped the consequences of the Kiyomizu Kannon's gift for thirteen years, the wife recklessly declares that “even the great Kiyomizu Kannon is a liar.” The Kiyomizu Kannon is enraged. Fuming, he says,

That odious wife with her impudent talk! It was because I had feelings for the child—my special charge—that I stood on top of Nobuyoshi's roof, beckoning good and driving evil off a thousand leagues. And now she calls me, her guardian, a liar! People won't revere the gods as gods and the buddhas as buddhas if I let this one stand. I'll take her life tonight.

(Sekkyōshū, 176; KIMBROUGH 2013, 108)

Like the Hase Kannon, the Kiyomizu Kannon keeps pestilence deities at his beck and call, and he quickly sends them to take the wife's life. (Kannon the “Goddess of Mercy?” Give me a break.)

One of the problems that the Hase Kannon and Kiyomizu Kannon seem to have with the wives' slander is that it is so very public; it sets a terrible precedent, encouraging irreverence in others. Shakyamuni is faced with a similar problem in the *kojōruri* puppet play *Amida no munewari* in which he is compelled to address the ostentatious and potentially contagious immorality of a great wealthy man named Kanshi Byōe かんし兵衛 and his wife. Shakyamuni reasons,

It's already hard enough to get people to do good, what with their natural tendency toward evil. If I leave that man alone there, everyone in the four directions will fall into wicked ways. If that's the way it's going to be, then right or wrong, I'll have to do something about it.

(*Amida no munewari*, 391; KIMBROUGH 2013, 217)

After summoning a host of demons from hell, Shakyamuni tells them to “grab Kanshi Byōe and kill him for me. And be sure to make him suffer.” They do. As the narrator explains, “they took their time killing Kanshi Byōe and his wife. They boiled a pot of molten iron and then poured it down the couple's throats, burning up their five and six internal organs. Then they dropped them into hell” (*Amida no munewari*, 393–394; KIMBROUGH 2013, 219–220). The wanton cruelty

of the scene, which in the seventeenth century would have been acted out with puppets on a stage, emphasizes its moral message: avoid doing evil and never, ever disrespect the buddhas—especially in public.

Beware of Stepmothers!

In both *Aigo no waka* and *Shintokumaru*, the surviving husbands quickly take new wives, who then become stepmothers to Little Aigo and Shintokumaru. Stepmothers in medieval Japanese fiction are always evil, and these two are particularly bad. There is a pervasive misogyny that runs through many works of Japanese Buddhist literature—*Konjaku monogatari*shū, for example, warns that we should all be aware of “the strength of the evil in the female heart” (*Konjaku monogatari*shū, 289; URY 1979, 96), while the *otogizōshi Fuji no hitoana sōshi* 富士の人穴草子 explains that “women’s thoughts are all evil” (*Muromachi jidai monogatari taisei* 11: 440a; KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE 2018, 207)—but the unwavering antipathy toward stepmothers that we see in *sekkyō*, *otogizōshi*, and even sectarian Buddhist commentarial sources is more extreme. There is an abusive stepmother in *Taima mandara sho* 当麻曼荼羅疏 who has her pious stepdaughter Chūjōhime 中将姫 abandoned in the mountains (TOKUDA 1988, 371; KIMBROUGH 2008, 174), and there is a stepmother who sells her two stepchildren to human traffickers in an illustrative tale in the *Lotus Sūtra* commentary *Hokekyō jikidanshō*, suggesting the prevalence of the trope in Buddhist preaching (*Hokekyō jikidanshō* 3: 229–232). Although there are many brave, loyal, and otherwise outstanding female characters in medieval fiction,⁹ there are no good stepmothers as far as I am aware. The reasons for this are unclear, but the lesson is not. (My own stepmother’s name was Joy, and at the age of six or seven, I think I found this to be ironic before I understood the concept of irony.)

In any case, Little Aigo’s stepmother, Kumoi no mae 雲居の前, is the worst of the worst. And that is saying a lot, given that Shintokumaru’s stepmother places a curse on her stepson and then has him abandoned at Tennōji 天王寺. Kumoi no mae marries Kiyohira, and in no time at all she and her husband are “like birds that fly with wings as one or like trees with branches entwined.” Nevertheless, upon first glimpsing her teenage stepson, Kumoi no mae is smitten with desire. She confides in her servant, Tsukisayo 月小夜, who is appalled. “My lady,” Tsukisayo blurts, “this is all too rash! That child is Master Aigo, Lord Kiyohira’s heir! What you’re saying is outrageous!” Nevertheless, when she sees how much it means to her mistress, Tsukisayo agrees to help her try to seduce the boy. Kumoi no mae composes a love letter in which she speaks of her swelling passion, her

9. There are Sayohime さよ姫 in *Sayohime*, Terute no hime 照天の姫 in *Oguri*, and Anju no hime 安寿の姫 in *Sanshō Dayū*, to name a few.

“sumptuous brocade bed of desire,” and her pillow “soaked with terrible tears.” “When,” she asks, “might I speak to you about my love?” Little Aigo is aghast. “Oh, how awful!” he exclaims. “A stepmother falling in love with her stepson! It’s unheard of!” (*Sekkyōshū*, 317–319; KIMBROUGH 2013, 200–201). Pondering the shame of it, he tears up the letter and throws it away.

Kumoi no mae is stirred to even greater longing by the boy’s rejection, and abandoning all caution, she sends him seven letters in a single day. Her behavior is egregious by any standard. There is no term in classical Japanese for the sexual harassment of a minor, but the great bodhisattva Asama 浅間 explains in the 1603 text of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* that those who lust after their stepchildren will be reborn in the animal realm. In addition, the bodhisattva declares that the punishment in hell for a woman who falls in love with a man while being involved with another is to be sawn in half at the crotch for 405,000 years—a suggestively fitting punishment for a woman with divided sexual loyalties (*Muromachi jidai monogatari taisei* 11: 446a, 439a; KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE 2018, 206, 212). Little Aigo is distressed, and after the seventh letter he says, “Look, Tsukisayo, if my father gets a glimpse of this, he’ll have you tortured for sure. What do you think about that?” Tsukisayo conveys this to her mistress, who is enraged. “I’ll break into the buddha hall tonight,” she cries, “stab Little Aigo to death, and then kill myself, too! I can get over it in the course of my future lives. How about it, Tsukisayo?”

Fortunately for them, Tsukisayo has a better idea: she’ll steal Kiyohira’s Chinese saddle and *yaiba* sword, have her husband dress up as a peddler and hawk them at a public gate, and then, when questioned, put the blame on Little Aigo. Kumoi no mae is pleased: “Even if it dooms me to five hundred lives of torment, including the pains of serpent incarnations, I can’t stand the thought of simply leaving my love unfulfilled! Oh, the cruelty of that boy’s hateful heart! Slander him well, Tsukisayo.” The plan works perfectly, and Kiyohira soon hears that his son has stolen and tried to sell his most valuable, prized possessions in a humiliatingly public way. Not having learned his lesson in the contest of children, Kiyohira beats Little Aigo and has him suspended with rope from the branches of an old cherry tree. Before returning to his duties at the palace, he forbids anyone from setting the child free. The narrator explains that “the boy wept as if to die” and that “Kumoi no mae and Tsukisayo laughed, and no one undid his bonds” (*Sekkyōshū*, 324; KIMBROUGH 2013, 203).

You Can Trust King Enma

If there is one thing that I have learned from reading medieval Japanese fiction, it is that after we die, we are all assured a fair hearing in the court King Enma 閻魔王, the great judge of the dead. Not everyone may believe this, given that

Enma has been so frequently satirized in early-modern literature. For example, there is a children's picture book from ca. 1661–1677 that depicts the august king leering at Datsueba 奪衣婆, the “clothes-snatching hag” of the afterworld.¹⁰ And in Hiraga Gennai's 平賀源内 satirical *Nenashigusa* 根南志具佐, Enma is said to have fallen in love with a portrait of an *onnagata* 女形 kabuki actor, whom he seeks to abduct to the afterworld for his own personal pleasure.¹¹ Nevertheless, medieval sources tend to be consistent in their depictions of Enma as a stern yet just adjudicator. The king appears in countless *setsuwa*, and he is a major character in *Chōhōji yomigaeri no sōshi*, in which he explains to the nun Keishin 慶心 about karmic transgressions, punishments in hell, and the fundamental nature of people: “They tend to devote themselves to evil and plant few good roots” and are “always committing crimes, hardly ever storing up merit or establishing ties to the Buddha.” Keishin reports that “when King Enma spoke, his voice was dreadful like thunder,” but that he was reassuring to the righteous, telling them, “You planted great good roots! I’m not going to throw you into hell for something you didn’t do” (*Muromachi monogatari sōshishū*, 422–423, 426, 433). In short, Enma is well suited to his position.

As *Aigo no waka* continues, the scene shifts to King Enma's court, where the narrator explains that “there was no one as pitiful as Little Aigo's mother.” Despite being dead, she knows exactly what is happening to her son, who is now hovering on the edge of death. His pet monkey, Tejiro 手白, had tried to save him by loosening his lower bonds, but that only increased the pressure on his neck. The mother prostrates herself before King Enma and pleads: “You know, sir, I have a darling child back in the human world. His stepmother has slandered him, and because of that, he's about to die. Please let me return for a little while to save his life!” Moved by her love, the king decides to send her back to the human realm for a short time. However, there is a problem. Because she was cremated, and because no one has died recently, there is no physical form for her to take. Still, there is the body of a weasel that died three days before, and Enma allows her to reanimate its decomposing carcass. She soon finds herself at the old cherry tree on her husband's estate, and while Tejiro supports Little Aigo from below, she chews through his knots above. She is in fact a talking zombie-weasel, and before returning to the afterworld, she tells her son to visit her brother, the abbot of Saitō Kitadani 西塔北谷 on Mt. Hiei 比叡, in order to receive the tonsure.

King Enma's decision to return the mother to the human realm is not unusual in medieval fiction. In *Oguri*, for example, the king similarly allows the obstreperous hero Oguri 小栗 to return to the human world to seek revenge for his murder. Enma first explains that because Oguri died as a result of his karma, there is

10. The book is titled *Dōke ezukushi* どうけゑつくし (KIMBROUGH 2015, 118).

11. See Chris Drake's translation in SHIRANE (2002, 462–486).

nothing that he, the king, can do. Nevertheless, insofar as Oguri's ten retainers died unjustly, and insofar as they request to trade places with their master, Enma agrees to send Oguri back. In fact, he wishes to send all ten retainers back as a reward for their loyalty, but because they were cremated, he cannot (*Sekkyō shōhonshū* 2: 372; KIMBROUGH 2013, 145–147). Enma's decision is hardly the work of a cruel or capricious judge, and it fits well with his status as a popular cult figure in medieval and early-modern Japanese religion.¹² In summary, there are at least two lessons to learn from these episodes in *Oguri* and *Aigo no waka*: 1) we can trust King Enma to treat us fairly when we die, and 2) try to avoid being cremated too soon, in case you can work something out with the king.

Esoteric Rites Work!

Following his dead mother's advice, Little Aigo flees to Mt. Hiei to seek assistance from his uncle. On the way, he begs shelter for the night at the home of an artisan, and it is at this point that the story begins to reveal itself as a *honjimon* 本地物, a tale of the human origins of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities. Upon learning the boy's identity, the artisan invites him inside, where he constructs an altar by placing a plank on a mortar and spreading a rough straw mat on top. He takes out some rice, purifies it seven times in water from the Kamo River 鴨川, places it in an unglazed earthen vessel, and presents it to the boy. The artisan's actions are odd—inexplicable, even—until the narrator declares that “it was from this time that people began spreading rough straw mats as a way to purify the vicinities of gods.” For readers who are familiar with *honjimon*, this is an ominous turn in the tale, because it is a well-established convention of the genre to recount the harrowing tribulations of human heroes before their apotheoses. For Little Aigo, this means that things are about to get worse.

Little Aigo arrives at his uncle's temple after nightfall. The gate is closed, and when the guards explain to their master that a boy claiming to be his nephew is outside without a carriage or a retinue, the abbot concludes that it is a *tengu* 天狗—a kind of shapeshifting, anti-Buddhist bird-demon known for harassing monks—that has come to trick him and steal his ascetic powers. The holy man is wise to be on the lookout for *tengu*, but in this case his caution is misguided.¹³ Several of the monks beat the boy severely, and Little Aigo weeps and withdraws, whimpering pitifully. He tries to descend the mountain, but he loses his way and wanders lost for three days. Then, after a humiliating encounter with an old woman who beats him with an “invalid's stick” (*ireija no tsue* 違例者の杖)—a

12. For a scholarly overview of the cult of King Enma in China, see TEISER (1994). For an English-language discussion of Enma in Japan, see WAKABAYASHI (2009).

13. For a discussion of *tengu* and their danger to monastics, see KIMBROUGH (2012).

cane used by lepers and the like—he comes to a place called Kiryū きりう Falls, where he decides to kill himself. But first, he bites open one of his fingers and uses the blood to write a long and bitter explanation on his small-sleeved robe, which he hangs from the branch of a cedar tree. “Then,” the narrator explains, “at the age of fifteen, Little Aigo threw himself into Kiryū Falls, where he finally met his end.”¹⁴

Little Aigo’s suicide is unusual in medieval fiction, and it would seem to violate the oft-repeated dictum that “it is the long-lived turtle that reaches Mt. Hōrai” (Mt. Penglai 蓬莱), the legendary island of Daoist immortals; in other words, because good things come to those who survive, we should all take care to preserve our lives. It is advice that is typically offered to characters in extremis, including the suicidal children in *Sanshō Dayū* and the *kōwakamai Shida* 信田 (Little Lord Shida; fifteenth century); the beaten, abducted, and soon-to-be-sacrificed daughter in *Sayohime*; and the sick and betrayed Yoshitsune 義経 in the *kojōruri Goō no hime* 牛王の姫.¹⁵ In all of these cases, it is advice that the recipients take to heart, which makes Little Aigo’s act all the more shocking.

Word reaches the abbot that a boy has drowned himself at Kiryū Falls, and when he is presented with Little Aigo’s small-sleeved robe, he realizes his mistake. He sends the robe to Little Aigo’s father, who is appalled to learn that his wife lusted after his son. In his grief, Kiyohira has Kumoi no mae rolled up in a reed mat and drowned. This turns out to be a very bad decision. Like the Floo Network in the world of *Harry Potter*, in which all fireplaces, everywhere, are connected and thus enable travel, all bodies of water in medieval Japanese fiction are understood to be connected underground. This is why the great serpent in *Sayohime* is able to dive into a lake in northern Japan and emerge in Sarusawa 猿沢 Pond in Nara (*Sekkyō shōhonshū* 3: 486; KIMBROUGH 2013, 187), as well as why the dragon lady of Seta 瀬田 Bridge in the *otogizōshi Tawara Tōda monogatari* 倭藤太物語 (The Tale of Tawara Tōda; ca. sixteenth century) is able to swim through Lake Biwa 琵琶 to the undersea palace of the Dragon King (*Muro-machi monogatari* 100; KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE 2018, 79).¹⁶

Kiyohira hurries to Kiryū Falls, but when he arrives, Little Aigo’s body has strangely disappeared, despite having been left floating in the waves, we are told. Kiyohira summons the abbot, who, sensing that something is amiss, sends for a *goma* 護摩 prayer altar to perform an esoteric rite. Now if there is one more thing that I have learned in my time reading medieval fiction, it is that esoteric

14. The issue of Little Aigo’s age is problematic; when he arrives at his uncle’s temple, a guard takes him to be twelve or thirteen years old.

15. For relevant passages in *Sanshō Dayū*, *Sayohime*, and *Goō no hime* (woodblock-printed play-book of 1673), see KIMBROUGH (2013, 35, 173, 238). For the passage in *Shida*, see *Mai no hon* (80).

16. The narrator explains that “as for Tsukisayo, they cut her into pieces and threw them away,” which poses no particular problem.

rites work. They can take a while—as in *Tawara Tōda monogatari*, in which the rites performed by the esoteric masters Son'i Sōjō 尊意僧正 and Jōzō Kisho 浄藏貴所 seem to fail at first—but they are nearly always effective (*Muromachi monogatarishū*, 344; KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE 2018, 226). In *Shida*, the intendant of Kashima Jingū 鹿島神宮 performs a series of esoteric rituals to emplace a terrible curse (*Mai no hon*, 77–78; KIMBROUGH 2019, 224–225), and in *Sanshō Dayū*, a temple intendant erects a *goma* prayer altar to enact an elaborate oath that results in the character Saburō 三郎 being struck down by a blinding flash of light (*Sekkyōshū*, 123–128; KIMBROUGH 2013, 45–47). In *Aigo no waka*, the abbot's ritual is no less effective. The narrator explains:

Miraculously, the water in the lake began to shudder and shake, and dark clouds descended to the north. A 150-foot serpent rose from the depths with Little Aigo's corpse on its head, and it placed it on the prayer altar.

(*Sekkyōshū*, 341–342; KIMBROUGH 2013, 214)

It is relatively commonplace for women in medieval fiction to transform into serpents as a result of their anger, jealousy, or lust, and the serpent here is none other than Kumoi no mae. As a reptile,¹⁷ she is able to travel freely from one body of water to another—that is, from the place where she was drowned to Kiryū Falls. In the late sixteenth-century *otogizōshi Isozaki* 磯崎, a young Buddhist acolyte explains to his mother how and why women transform, telling her that “when the wife of Mibu no Tadayoshi 壬生忠義 in Awa 阿波 Province became especially jealous, she sprouted scales on her back and a single horn from her brow. Her mouth split open from ear to ear, and she actually became a serpent in this very life” (*Muromachi monogatari sōshishū*, 344; KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE 2018, 226). And in a famous tale in *Konjaku monogatarishū*, a young widow transforms into a giant serpent after she is spurned by an attractive monk, and she chases him down and incinerates him in a temple bell (*Konjaku monogatarishū*, 286–290; URY 1979, 93–96). Her story is retold in a large number of medieval and early-modern sources, including the fifteenth- or sixteenth-century picture scroll *Dōjōji engi* 道成寺縁起, the *otogizōshi Kengaku no sōshi* 賢学草子, and the noh play *Dōjōji* 道成寺.

The Dōjōji woman is notorious for murdering the young monk, but what she is said to have done in her story is considerably less disturbing than what Kumoi no mae confesses to have done to Little Aigo's corpse:

“Ah, how humiliating!” the creature cried. “I lightly set my heart on the boy, and now, at last, I have fulfilled my desire! The holy man's ascetic powers are strong, so I'll return Aigo's body now. Please pray for me in the next life.” And

17. Snakes and dragons overlap in the medieval Japanese imagination.

with that, the giant snake disappeared beneath the surface. It was enough to make a man's hair stand on end. (Sekkyōshū, 342; KIMBROUGH 2013, 214)

I'll pause now to state that I always enjoy teaching this work to undergraduates, and that I have found over the semesters that few of them seem to understand the implications of what the serpent says until I ask them, specifically, what the desire was that Kumoi no mae now claims to have fulfilled. From their changing facial expressions, I can usually tell who gets it and who does not. As I wrote before, Kumoi no mae is a really bad stepmother.

As we might imagine, Kiyohira and the abbot do not handle this revelation well. "How can this be?" they cry, clinging to Little Aigo's body, and they both jump into the falls and drown. Next, the abbot's disciples all jump in and drown, followed by the old woman with the invalid's stick, the artisan and his wife, and various others, for a total of 108 suicides. The monkey Tejiro runs away, and the *daisōjō* 大僧正 of Minamidani 南谷 comes to worship Little Aigo as Sannō Daigongen 山王大権現 of Hie Taisha 日吉大社, at the eastern foot of Mt. Hiei. To this day, Hie Taisha boasts of its own popular association with monkeys (although not with Little Aigo, alas).

Conclusion

So, what would Stanley Weinstein say? I think he might have recognized that since taking his courses in the mid-1990s, I have learned some interesting things about the nature of medieval Japanese religious culture. Fortunately, Stanley was never one of those people who liked to tell me, in no uncertain terms, that "Buddhism is a philosophical religion" or that "Buddhism is all about peace." Because in many cases, it's not. Judging from the vast non-scholarly textual record (works like *Aigo no waka*, *Shintokumaru*, and *Sayohime*), one could say that outside the major temples and monastic centers, Japanese Buddhism was a religion of miracles, celebrity icons, and competing and contradictory fundraising and proselytizing traditions. As we have seen, according to a widely shared medieval worldview, even the law of karma was negotiable. The lines between buddhas, deities, and bodhisattvas were blurry at best, and although those beings could be quick to anger, they could also be appeased. Supernatural dangers lurked around every corner, but steps could be taken to mitigate their threat. Stepmothers were always bad (for the child, at least), King Enma was usually good, and esoteric rites generally worked.

In the introduction to a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* published in 2009 on "Vernacular Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Literature," Hank Glassman and I sought "to consider premodern Japanese religious culture through the lens of literature, rather than more traditional Buddhist scriptural, historical, biographical, and exegetical sources"

(KIMBROUGH and GLASSMAN 2009, 201). In the process, we coined the term “vernacular Buddhism” to describe a localized form of a much larger, trans-regional and trans-linguistic entity (Buddhism with a capital “B,” so to speak). We had started with the term “popular Buddhism,” but we abandoned it for several reasons, including Paul Swanson’s acute observation that it implied its corollary, “unpopular Buddhism,” which we wished to avoid. As we explained in our introduction to the special issue, like the term “popular religion,” medieval vernacular Buddhism:

[I]ncludes Buddhism as it was preached and experienced on the street, in the marketplace, and at busy crossroads and bridges, but it also includes temple preaching to lay and monastic audiences (*sekkyō* 説経 / *shōdō* 唱導), as well as some religious ceremonies conducted at court and private residences: wherever, that is, Buddhism was represented in a way that conformed to local interests and local forms. (KIMBROUGH and GLASSMAN 2009, 204)

Since co-writing that introduction, I have increasingly come to think of popular Japanese religious culture—a subcategory of vernacular Buddhism—as being trans-sectarian. While it is true that many *otogizōshi* show clear sectarian proclivities,¹⁸ it is also true that those and other stories tend to be far less concerned with doctrine or philosophy than with the miracles and benefits of specific temples, icons, and cultic figures. This bias toward blind faith and magic may be a result of the narrative genre in which we find it—after all, the stories were meant to be entertaining—but it may also reflect the nature of popular religious culture as it was experienced outside of the scholarly monastic communities of medieval Japan.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that there are many other things about medieval Japanese religious beliefs that are not included in *Aigo no waka* but that we can learn from popular Buddhist literature more broadly. For example, we can see that the buddhas, deities, and bodhisattvas routinely recognize and reward filial piety; that we can all put our trust in the *Lotus Sūtra* (literally, and not in an abstract, philosophical, or vaguely metaphorical way); that due to the karmic connections of our former lives (*tashō no en* 多生の縁), nothing ever happens by chance or coincidence except in cases of divine intervention; that the promise of Amida’s Pure Land is real (and that with supernatural assistance, some people have visited it in the present life); that hell is real and definitely a

18. Most *otogizōshi* have a Pure Land Buddhist orientation: for example, *Chūjōhime no honji* 中将姫の本地, *Suzume no hosshin* 雀の発心, and *Ko Atsumori* 小敦盛. A few favor the practices and beliefs of the Zen schools, such as *Isozaki* and *Kurumazō sōshi* 車僧草子; others promote the *Lotus Sūtra*, such as *Hamaguri no sōshi* 蛤の草紙. In addition, there is at least one that favors Tendai *mikkyō* 密教 esotericism, *Tawara Tōda monogatari*. I translated *Chūjōhime no honji* in SHIRANE (2007, 1138–1150). All the other works are translated in KIMBROUGH and SHIRANE (2018).

place to avoid; and that as a result of “contrary causes” (*gyakuen* 逆縁), the most terrible deeds can sometimes lead to the most splendid results. The six realms of existence are always overlapping and interpenetrating, and for individuals making their way through the human and non-human planes, it is usually affiliation with a particular icon or institution that matters most. In the end, children are more important than possessions, and it is the long-lived turtle that lives to see Mt. Hōrai.

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