

## Religion and Literature in Japan: Some Introductory Remarks

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There is a cycle of legends in Japan about a frightful creature called *katame hōshi* (“the one-eyed priest”), a character who overwhelms and terrorizes people with normal vision but who is usually put down himself by someone who is not afraid of him. He appears throughout Japan, and is inevitably malicious.

It seems to me that far too often Western Japanologists tend themselves to be *katame gakusha*, or scholars who see Japan through one eye only. This is, to a certain extent, unavoidable in the specialist, who after all cannot be expected to have a thorough knowledge of all academic fields, and who, when faced with a body of scholarship written in a foreign language, often feels fortunate just to have gotten through the “essential” parts unscathed. But that does not mean we should not try conscientiously to widen our vision, for as the legend tells us, there is nothing more terrible than a one-eyed person running unchecked through the world.

It is thus with an optometrical view that this special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* on “Religion and Literature in Japan” has been prepared. I do not intend to imply through my choice of metaphor that the authors who have contributed to this issue—and even less that I myself—see things clearly, through both eyes, for we are all open to criticism. But through the publication of these essays, which represent an approach to Japanese literature one seldom sees in English, I hope to address two all too common narrow views, one concerning Japanese religion and one Japanese literature.

The first of these is that Japanese religion is epitomized, if not solely represented, by Zen Buddhism. The reader will already have noticed that there are no articles here dealing with the in-

fluence of Zen on Japanese literature; this, it must be confessed, is largely by design. I do not mean to demean the position of Zen in Japan or Japanese religion, but this has been stated and restated, affirmed and reaffirmed, and generally grossly exaggerated, especially in the popular mind. The extent to which Zen actually *is* representative of Japanese religion is highly debatable, and a question which I will not deal with here, but it does seem that we should be able to think of Japanese religions without the word "Zen" coming immediately to mind. In this respect I am but following the tradition of this journal, which has always presented a very balanced treatment of Zen within its pages.

The second of these narrow views is concerned with the nature of Japanese literature, especially Japanese classical literature. It is widely believed that the main thrust of this literature is aesthetic rather than dynamic, and that the ancient Japanese (particularly those of the Heian period) were locked into a semi-permanent *aware* mode, spending most of their time sighing over the transience of things.

To be sure, beauty—and especially the beauty of fragility—has always been an important component of Japanese literature. It would be madness to say otherwise. But it is by no means *all* of Japanese literature, and he who would see it as such has one eye firmly closed. While it is true that there is a strong and admirable strain of lyric beauty in the classical and modern literature of Japan, it is just as true that there is a narrative strain, one which has more "vitality" and might, if properly understood, widen our perspectives on the whole.

One is again reminded of a story, this time from the tale collection *Uji shūi monogatari*, about a Buddhist monk who sees a young boy watching the cherry blossoms falling from the trees. The boy is weeping, and the monk says that he understands how the sight of the falling blossoms has moved the boy at the transience of things. The child, however, replies that what he was *really* worried about is that his father's grain crops might lose their flowers too soon and not ripen properly, which would mean finan-

cial disaster for the family. The monk is unable to cope with this more practical view of a “poetic” subject, which is his own loss, for he is unable to comprehend that a narrow vision limits our understanding.

Within the rubric of what I have called “narrative strain” in Japanese literature we can include works such as *Konjaku monogatari-shū*, *Nihon ryōiki* or *Jikkishō* (all treated in this issue), all part of the *setsuwa* genre, which is born primarily of narrative, rather than lyric, interests. But we can also include works such as *Genji monogatari* and *Heike monogatari*, also dealt with in this issue, which are generally identified as belonging to the “lyric” camp, for they are no more purely “lyrical” than the *setsuwa* are purely “narrative.”

And if the lyrical tradition in Japan is closely related to certain types of Buddhism (mostly those meditative types that eventually culminated in Zen), so, too, is the narrative tradition linked to religion, though in this case, to a slightly different type of religion. Here we begin to delve into the realm of “folk” religion, which is really a conglomeration of a variety of beliefs, both “organized” and “popular.” When we get out of the range of the “pure” religions (provided, of course, that such actually do exist), the problems get sticky, and one is never sure exactly what one is dealing with. But one is convinced, all the more, of the crucial role played by religion in the formulation of Japanese literature.

It is easy enough, of course, to find direct links between literary works and religious systems. Endō Shūsaku, as everyone knows, is a practicing Catholic, and writes “Christian” literature, about “Christian” themes. And the Gozan poets were practicing Zen monks, who wrote “Zen” literature about “Zen” themes. But what of the vast majority of works, that were not intended as “religious tracts” (not to imply that Endō so intends his own novels)? It seems unnecessary to point out that writers are products of the times in which they live, and that their societies (especially in pre-modern Japan) were strongly influenced by a variety of religious ideas, and further that these religious ideas

often helped define for a writer how he or she viewed the world. Surely it is worthwhile to investigate both how this world view influences literary structure on the one hand, and how an individual literary work reflects the world view on the other.

This is the type of study that the English speaking world has seen very little of, though it is common enough in Japan, and one of the purposes of this special issue is to bring it to the attention of Western scholars. Perhaps because of its background in the so-called "new criticism," American scholarship in particular has often isolated literary works from their contexts; if their "world" is seen to be important, it is the world of the "shining princes," the social structure of the court, to which attention is paid, and not the context of interrelated beliefs held by their writers. Works such as *Genji monogatari* have been treated as closed-off worlds of beauty into which "superstition" would never dare creep. If anything is said about "superstition," it is done almost apologetically, to explain some apparently irrational act of a character.

It is my hope that the articles in this issue will begin to show that this "superstition"—that is to say, beliefs that appear irrational, and which the analyst does not share—is an integral part of Japanese literature and needs to be understood before we can deal with structure or theme. I will discuss the essays briefly here, with an eye to showing how they can enlarge our vision of classical and modern Japanese literature as a whole.

KUROSAWA Kōzō has been active for several years as a champion of what might be called the "mythological school" of interpretation of early Japanese tale literature (*setsuwa bungaku*). A specialist on *Nihon ryōiki*, a story from which collection is analyzed in his contribution to this issue, he has taken the position that the stories in this oldest of the Buddhist tale collections are linked closely to Japanese myth. The apex of his work is to be found in his monograph, *Nihon kodai denshō bungaku no kenkyū* (Research on ancient Japanese oral literature), published in 1976 by Hanawa Shobō.

Kurosawa's work has been controversial, and many scholars have

taken him to task for having a too-active imagination that finds myth around every corner, but his book has opened fruitful avenues of research and must be considered important in the history of Japanese literary studies. The reader who wishes to look at more documentation and a fuller discussion of the points raised in the brief essay translated here is advised to consult it.

In essence, Kurosawa argues that the first Buddhist preachers were often from fairly important families, and that it was natural for them in their preaching to utilize myths well known to them and their audience. But, as he notes, stories in works such as *Nihon ryōiki* are no longer myths, but are now Buddhist. This point is made quite clearly in the article included here, and such analysis is of particular interest to those concerned with the continuities and disruptions between pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Japan.

Through the concrete analysis made by Kurosawa and others we can begin to perceive a general pattern in the development of the new, Buddhist culture in Japan from the old, Shinto one. We can also gain a more complete understanding of the roots of the Buddhist thought that was to prove so important in later Japanese literature and history. And, perhaps, we can come to recognize the reincarnated form of the “vitality” that many feel was lost somewhere between the ancient and Heian periods.

If Kurosawa is working but one level away from the core of this vitality, FUJII Sadakazu is working from a position two or three levels removed. In his analysis of *Genji monogatari* Fujii is concerned with the gods and myth, but these now occupy a position “outside the pages of the romance.” No longer can we go directly from a story to its pre-Buddhist, Shinto background, as Kurosawa has done, but now we must realize that the gods have been pushed even further back into the shadows of the work of art.

The fact that they are not immediately visible, however, does not mean that the gods themselves are not an important aspect in the formulation of *Genji monogatari*. Fujii takes two scenes from this vast work—the Tamakazura chapters and the Uji chapters—

and shows how the characters in the romance are under constant observation by powers outside the immediate world of the work.

To those who would understand *Genji* as a “novel,” a closed world that is primarily concerned with beauty, this analysis might seem almost blasphemous. In taking this stance Fujii somehow denies our idea of the novel as an “imaginary garden, peopled by real toads,” for he shows that this world has a hole in its wall, a hole which permits free entry from forces in the “real” world. In showing the role of belief—and specifically, the role of ghosts—in the structure of *Genji*, Fujii gives us another way to view the beauty in this work. Fujii’s role is similar to that of the youth who challenges the priest’s idea of transience.

It will be noted that, throughout the essay, Fujii pays no attention at all to the idea that *Genji*’s artistic life is based on *aware*, or the awareness of pathos in the world. In fact, he suggests that this *aware* is linked to the Heian views of the supernatural, for his analysis of the Ukifune story involves an attempt to understand the ways by which the spirits control the lives of the living, and, as everyone knows, Ukifune is one of the most *aware*-filled characters in all of *Genji monogatari*.

Fujii’s essay is brief, but suggestive. What he is attempting is no less than a wholesale re-evaluation of *Genji monogatari* that will take its total context as a starting point, and his views deserve respect and consideration. Any interpretation of *Genji* that considers it as a self-contained, imaginative world is bound to be lacking, if for no other reason that such a view will give us no understanding of how *Genji* was understood by those who first read it. Certainly any sound analysis of this work must take its initial world into consideration. While it would be insanity to deny the aesthetic nature of *Genji*, it is also a mistake to deny its more “mundane” aspects, for they were vital in producing this aesthetic quality.

Some direct glimpses into this “mundane” world are given us by the essay of MORI Masato on the supernatural creatures that grace the pages of *Konjaku monogatari-shū*. Mori is most interested in

exploring the idea of the *oni*, or demon, as held by the Heian Japanese. Though *Konjaku*, written about 1100, postdates *Genji* by about a century, an understanding of its demons should help us to understand those found in *Genji* more fully.

While the supernatural forces in *Genji* (Fujii has dealt primarily with ghosts, but there are other types as well) are relegated to a position outside the pages of the work, in *Konjaku* they are not so shy, and often take center stage. This is due in part to the differences in the nature of the works themselves, but another reason for such differences is the fact that the two were products of totally different ages. The *Konjaku* compiler was witnessing the collapse of the social order, and it is not surprising that he would attribute this in part to the invasion of his world by creatures of darkness. Mori's remarks about the equation of the *oni* with the forces of Chaos not only shed light on the overall nature of *Konjaku monogatari-shū*, but they can give us a key to unlock some of the puzzles of *Genji monogatari*, for we can see that when Hikaru Genji himself must do battle with these dark forces, at stake is the very clarity of his own existence. The battles presented in a rather simple, straightforward manner in *Konjaku* are retold and embellished in *Genji*, but the basic nature of the battle remains the same. And it is instructive to note the major role played by bridges in both papers.

Mori's article does not, however, stop with merely categorizing the types of supernatural creatures found in *Konjaku*; he uses this knowledge in an attempt to explicate the structure of this mammoth collection. Thus his article is all the more welcome, for there is a virtual ignorance of *Konjaku* in American academic circles. This is an ignorance we can ill afford, and anyone interested in classical Japanese literature should be able to profit from Mori's article.

THE article written by Robert E. MORRELL offers an interesting case study of the convergence of the lyrical and narrative strains in Japanese literature. Myōe Shōnin, the subject of this study, is

known in literary circles for his poetry, and in religious circles for his attempts to revive the Kegon sect of Buddhism. But, as Morrell shows, it was his intensity as a human being rather than any of the concrete products he left behind, that has assured him of a place in Japanese history.

This is an intensity befitting a lyric poet and religious reformer, and it is the stuff from which legend is made. Kurosawa and Mori have shown us that the *setsuwa* owe much of their life to mythology and popular religion, and Morrell shows us yet another aspect of the genre, one which owes its life to legend, to the perceived lives of actual historical personages. As a character who refused to be cowed by the forces of Chaos around him, Myōe has captured the imagination of more than one *setsuwa* collector, and these were the people who breathed new life into his image.

Life itself, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke once said, is not very interesting; it is only when life is reinterpreted, much as a piece of wood is reinterpreted when it is made into a chair, that we sense some deeper meaning. Akutagawa's use of *setsuwa* collections such as *Konjaku monogatari-shū* is well known, but I know of no studies which have attempted to relate his literary theories to principles found in *setsuwa*; one is nonetheless struck by the similarity in thought here. The "setsuwa-ification" of a character like Myōe that Morrell documents is surely a worthy object of study, and it is to be hoped that more such studies will follow, for they shed a considerable light on the creative principles found in Japanese literature.

The monk as literary figure is also the subject of the essay on *Jikkīnshō* contributed by Ward GEDDES. Rather than concentrating on a single figure, such as Myōe, Geddes is more interested in drawing a composite, and in the process shows us what was expected of monks by the medieval Japanese. A reading of Geddes' paper will give us a deeper understanding of Myōe, for it puts him into an overall context.

The society of the *Jikkīnshō* compiler was a difficult one, and the collection was made in the midst of social instability. The



emphasis in this work is less on the murky figures of the other world who came to symbolize Chaos and confusion as demons and ghosts (although such do exist in *Jikkīnshō*), however, than it is on the actual responses of human beings to the chaotic nature of their times. The drama to be found in the ethical conflicts of the day is, as Geddes shows us, one of the major interests of the *Jikkīnshō* compiler.

*Jikkīnshō* is not especially well known in either Japan or the West, but it is worth our attention for the actual case studies of morality at work that it presents. The questions of virtue and the way one should conduct oneself are of course important in a variety of literary works throughout Japanese history, and Geddes' essay provides a handle on at least one way by which Japanese religions helped define these points. One example discussed by Geddes of a man in moral conflict is the monk Ryōshū, who watches his family perish in a fire; his story was treated brilliantly by Akutagawa in his short story, "Hell Screen."

Morality and conflict prove to be among the most important elements of *Genpei jōsuiki*, the variant text of *Heike monogatari* that makes up the subject of the study of MINOBE Shigekatsu. *Heike monogatari* is, of course, well known in the West, but, alas, primarily in the form of the Kakuichibon texts. As is well known, there is a staggering number of texts associated with *Heike*, and they are generally divided into two camps: those intended for reading, and those intended for chanting.

The Kakuichibon texts were intended for chanting, and since World War II they have come to be considered the "authoritative" texts of the work, partly at least because of their selection for inclusion in the Iwanami *Nihon koten bungaku taikai* series of annotated versions of the Japanese classics. The Kakuichibon texts did not always enjoy the predominance they have now, however, and this examination of the Heike story in light of a different text is most welcomed. Each of the various Heike texts has its own peculiarities and its own character, and here, for the first time, the English reading public is afforded a glimpse into some of

the richness of this tradition.

The lyrical aspect of *Heike monogatari* has been stressed by Western Japanologists, certainly not without reason. *Heike* seems, as Edward Seidensticker points out in his foreword to Kitagawa Hiroshi's English translation of *Heike* (see the references to Minobe's article), less a sustained, epic-like narrative than a series of loosely connected lyrical episodes (p. xix). Even if *Heike* is not united as a narrative, however, each of the texts approaches the story with a unified world view. As Minobe shows, in *Genpei jōsuiki* this world view does not derive from a poetic sensitivity, but rather comes from a concrete religious interpretation: Kiyomori and the Heishi declined because of the fact that Kiyomori worshipped a fox-god to quench his illegitimate thirst for power.

If Fujii's essay is unusual in that it does not deal with the idea of *aware*, Minobe's is also unique in that it makes no attempt to treat the idea of *mujō*, or impermanence, as a poetic concept blowing life into the story. Minobe shows convincingly that that which we now think of as lyrical and poetic was seen quite differently by the original audience of the work, and he gives us a learned tour through a series of sutras, commentaries, and other works to show that the poetic vision of *Heike monogatari* grows from a concrete attempt to explain the fall of the Heishi in terms of conventional morality. He raises some of the same questions about *Heike* that Fujii does about *Genji*, though the methods of the two are vastly different.

THE final essay in this issue represents a large leap in chronology, from the thirteenth century to the twentieth, and marks a difference in topic as well. Paul McCARTHY takes up the question of women in the author Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, and with a treatment that is quite different from the other essays in this collection. There are, however, some points of comparison that bear notice here.

Central to Tanizaki's image of woman for McCarthy is a dualism formed by Mishima Yukio, that of the *jibo*, or benevolent mother,

on the one hand, and of Kishimojin, or the deity who ate people's children, on the other. If we are to accept this interpretation—and it certainly explains many aspects of Tanizaki's women admirably—then we need to come back to Mori's paper, for the forces of Chaos are very much in evidence in this twentieth century writer. There is a great deal to cause thought here, and a study of Tanizaki from the perspective of how the forces of Chaos—represented by one type of woman he favors—stand in relationship with his male characters would be of great interest.

Another point not brought up by McCarthy, but of interest in the overall context of this issue, is that of the extent to which the “dual” woman in Tanizaki might be traced to Japanese mythology or folklore. Izanami no Mikoto, for example, is the “first mother” (*jibo*) in Japanese myth, and she becomes the first lord of the realm of the dead (Kishimojin). In certain folktales, as well, one can find very ambivalent mother figures, who sometimes devour their own children.

McCarthy has done a convincing job of demonstrating that the Christian image of Madonna/Harlot is insufficient as an analytical tool in understanding Tanizaki. Reading his essay in the overall context of the articles presented here will, I believe, open insights into how problems dealt with in works such as *Konjaku monogatari-shū* appear in the books of a more modern writer. Let us not forget, for example, that the demon conquered by Watanabe no Tsuna took the form of a beautiful woman before the conflict.

Looking at the papers in their totality, one is struck by the key role played by women, especially in the studies of Kurosawa, Fujii, Mori and Minobe. This is a question that has gone largely unexplored in the West, and it is evident that there is a real need for concrete work here.

There are, of course, gaps in the treatment of the topic of literature and religion as presented in this issue. Especially regrettable is the absence of any studies of Edo literature. Overall, however, I think the papers have much to teach us about both the role played by religion in literature and the use of works of literature

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in understanding religion. The Japanese contributions give us a look at a method of scholarship that is important here and will become increasingly more so.

It is time we dropped our preconceptions of Japanese religion and literature and began a more detailed and concrete investigation into the total context of literary works. The studies gathered here offer a positive step in this direction, and open several new areas of study as well. I would like to thank the individual writers for their cooperation with my many and often unreasonable demands on their time, and Jan Swyngedouw, the editor of this journal, for allowing me the freedom of preparing this edition.