

KYŌGEN-KIGO: LOVE STORIES AS BUDDHIST SERMONS

Margaret H. CHILDS

The essence of the medieval conception of literature was the evaluation of literary art in general as having a religious function.<sup>1</sup> This was the connotation of the term *kyōgen-kigo* (foolish talk and dazzling rhetoric). The development of the meaning of *kyōgen-kigo* 狂言綺語 as a statement of the religious nature of secular arts centered on poetry, but the principle of *kyōgen-kigo* also applied to narrative fiction and other art forms, including music. Most modern studies of this idea of the religious significance of secular literature have considered only poetry, but the concept is also crucial to our understanding of medieval narrative fiction such as *otogi-zōshi* 御伽草子.

Although William LaFleur considers *kyōgen-kigo* in his important book, *The Karma of Words* (1983), he does not explain why he enigmatically renders the term as "floating phrases and fictive utterances." ("Floating phrases" apparently is a literal translation of *fugen* 浮言, which means baseless, groundless, or false talk, and which occasionally substitutes for *kyōgen*, or "foolish talk" in the expression *kyōgen-kigo*.) Unfortunately, LaFleur's discussion of the concept of *kyōgen-kigo* is limited to a mention of its use by Po Chu-i (pp.8-9) and an explanation of Shunzei's views on the issue (pp.90-97). While Shunzei's exposition in his *Korai fūteishō* of 1197 reveals the basic principle of *kyōgen-kigo*, I believe that insofar as *kyōgen-kigo* was probably the essential element of medieval Japanese literary theory, it bears fuller examination.

*Kyōgen-kigo* as a compound means rhetorical flourishes or fiction. *Kyōgen* (foolish talk) refers to statements which go against reason or principle, and *kigo* (dazzling rhetoric) means

decorative or embellished expression. Originally, *kigo* was a Buddhist term for verbal deception, one of the ten transgressions,<sup>2</sup> which referred specifically to selfishly or maliciously twisting the truth. It was the Japanese rendering of the Sanskrit term *saṃbhinna-pralāpa*, meaning the transgression of speaking forth inconsiderately or at random, or of speaking prattle. It is not clear how the word *kigo* came to mean both verbal deception and decorative expression. However, I would speculate that the association was the result of a naive view of metaphor. Literary artistry appears to have been thought of as beguiling embellishment, that is, as deceitful fiction. Perhaps it was thought that poetic devices would be taken too literally and cause readers to become confused or deluded. More sophisticated readers realize the intended meanings which lie behind metaphorical levels. In any case, *kyōgen-kigo* came to be a pejorative appellation for secular literature, including both poetry and prose fiction, in contrast to *sūtras* and *śāstras*, or scripture and sacred commentary, which convey Buddhist religious truth. The term implied that secular literature was an enterprise that obstructed enlightenment.

The pejorative sense of *kyōgen-kigo* has often been exaggerated, with the result that several Japanese scholars have maintained that the spread of this idea forced classical and medieval writers of secular literature to take a defensive attitude in their work and to justify their literary activity with claims of religious intentions that today seem somewhat artificial. This, they say, accounts for some of the heavy-handed didacticism which pervades many *otogi-zōshi*. That didacticism, however, is not evidence of conflict between secular and religious interests, but of their profound integration.

#### THE HISTORY OF THE TERM AND SCRIPTURAL SOURCES

From its first use in Japan the concept of *kyōgen-kigo* reflected the paradoxical idea that secular literature, although productive of negative karma, could serve a positive religious function. Subsequently, *kyōgen-kigo* was developed into a seemingly

self-contradictory notion of the sacred nature of secular literature. *Kyōgen-kigo* denotes the belief that secular literature is a transgression of Buddhist precepts, but it came to have the connotation that secular literature has religious meaning. There are scriptural sources both for the condemnation of secular literature and for its approval as possibly sacred in function. In chapter fourteen, "Comfortable Conduct," of the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha explains to Monju that to preach scripture in the "latter evil age" (during the decline of Buddhism some thousand years after the historical Buddha's death), a great bodhisattva must "not approach with familiarity . . . those who compose worldly letters" (Hurvitz 1976, p.208). Although addressed to great bodhisattvas, this passage was interpreted to mean that no one should occupy himself with "worldly letters." The same *Lotus Sutra*, however, proclaims in chapter two, "Expedient Devices," that through the Buddha's great compassion, any expression of praise for the Buddhist law will bring salvation, whether that expression be a child's playful building of a pagoda in the sand or the beating of drums and blowing of horns:

. . . . if with joyful thought  
 They sing hymns of praise to the excellences of the  
 Buddha,  
 Producing so much as one tiny sound,  
 They have all achieved the Buddha Path (Hurvitz 1976,  
 pp.39-40).

These lines clearly imply that any creative expression, whether verbal, musical, or scriptural is acceptable, if it praises Buddhism. The paradox is easily resolved at this level; it is a transgression to occupy oneself with worldly letters except when they are used to religious ends.

#### PO CHU-I'S USE OF THE TERM

This understanding of *kyōgen-kigo* is seen in the writings of

the Chinese poet Po Chu-i (772-846) through which the term was introduced to Japan. Yanai Shigeshi, in a careful analysis of Po's use of this or similar terms on several different occasions, concludes that Po distinguished between poetry for poetry's sake and poetry that served the Buddhist faith (1962, p.30). Yanai notes that Po expressed his fear of retribution in a future life for his transgression of composing *hōgen-kigo*, "self-centered talk and dazzling rhetoric," but that Po was confident of the merit he earned in composing six hymns in praise of the Three Treasures—the Law, the Buddha, and the Clerical Community (1962, pp.28-29). However, lines of a prayer which Po wrote on the occasion of the presentation of a collection of his poems to the Hsiang-shan monastery in Soochow in 841, suggest a different attitude:

May the karma from my worldly writings in this life, the error of my foolish talk and dazzling rhetoric be changed and lead me to praise Buddhist doctrine and preach Buddhist truth in successive future lives (Yanai 1962, p.23).

While Po's prayer implies an admission that his poetry represented a transgression, he asks for the karmic result of his wrongdoing to be reversed from negative to positive. He does not make an issue of the content of the poetry. Content, apparently, is irrelevant; the only criterion for judging the religious merit of the poetry is the author's intent. Instead of punishment for writing foolish talk and dazzling rhetoric, Po could hope, in the words of the *Lotus Sutra*, to "achieve the Buddha Path." By virtue of this prayer, which became famous in Japan, Po gave his secular poetry new meaning as an expression of faith, and implied that secular literary art, regardless of content, could have a religious function.

#### KYŌGEN-KIGO IN JAPAN

The Japanese adopted one or the other of Po's views on the question. An anecdote about the monk Genshin (942-1017), which reflects Po's conservative interpretation of *kyōgen-kigo*, gained

wide circulation in both *Fukuro no sōshi* (Pocket Book of Verse) by Fujiwara no Kiyosuke, who lived from 1108 to 1177,<sup>3</sup> and the *Shasekishū* (Collection of Sand and Pebbles), a late thirteenth-century *setsuwa* 説話 collection by the monk Mujū.<sup>4</sup> Genshin, who is famous for his *Ōjōyōshū* (Collection of Essentials for Birth in the Western Paradise), a religious text which vividly describes the horrors of hell, despised poetry as *kyōgen-kigo*, as an empty, worthless pursuit. He planned to expel a student from his temple for composing poetry, something which Genshin considered a bad influence on other students, until he overheard the boy recite:

We live in a world	Te ni musubu
No more enduring than	Mizu ni yadoreru
The reflection of the moon	Tsuki kage no
In the water	Aru ka naki ka no
You can hold in your hand.	Yo ni mo sumu ka na

With this Genshin realized that poetry could be useful in concisely and powerfully expressing religious truth. He decided to keep the boy at the temple and he himself took up the composition of poetry.<sup>5</sup>

A view of *kyōgen-kigo* similar to Po's was espoused by Yoshi-shige no Yasutane (d. 1002). In 964 Yasutane established the Kangakue, a group which he modeled on a devotional society of clergy and laymen in which Po had participated. The Kangakue was a group of ten monks of the Tendai sect and ten laymen who met semi-annually for lectures on the *Lotus Sutra* and for the composition of Chinese poetry based on verses selected from that work, as well as for recitation of the *nenbutsu* 念仏 (invocation of Amida Buddha's name). The members of the Kangakue, then, composed Chinese poetry—a secular literary form—on religious subjects. In writing about the activities of the Kangakue, Yasutane frequently referred to the concept of *kyōgen-kigo*, asserting that literary pursuits were an appropriate form for religious expression. He once explained the activities of the Kangakue as follows:

First we have lectures on the sūtra, then we compose poetry. Within is a faithful heart, without is dazzling rhetoric.<sup>6</sup>

Yasutane also wrote, alluding to Chapter two of the *Lotus Sutra*:

If a child at play who builds a pagoda of sand will be saved, how can we not enter the way of Buddhism by virtue of our literature (Sakaguchi 1931, p.58)?

Although Yasutane reversed his position on the issue of *kyōgen-kigo* in 986, when he became a monk—he wrote then that poetry was useless for religious pursuits—examples of the whole range of his views are preserved in the *Honchō monzui* (Choice Literature of the Realm, a important collection of prose and poetry in Chinese which was compiled around 1037-45).

#### AUTHORS: FROM DAMNATION TO DEIFICATION

A debate which figured importantly in the application of the concept of *kyōgen-kigo* to narrative fiction centered on Murasaki Shikibu (978-1016), author of *Genji monogatari*, who was thought to have gone to hell for writing that work of fiction, an act considered equivalent to writing lies. *Ima kagami* (Mirror of the Present), a history of the years 1025-1170, and *Hōmotsu shū* (Collection of Treasures), a *setsuwa* collection compiled by Taira no Yasuyori in the late twelfth century, both recount that this was Murasaki Shikibu's fate. Apparently, readers feared that they too would be damned for reading such lies. While *Hōmotsu shū* encourages the destruction of the text of *Genji monogatari* (Harper 1971, p.58), *Ima kagami* advises that poems praising Amida Buddha be added at the end of each chapter (Mitani 1967, pp.501-502), advice which implies that *Genji monogatari*, like Po's poems, could be dedicated to the religious purpose of praising Amida.

The recognition of the religious functions of secular literature led to a reappraisal of the authors of some of the great classics.

The *Ima kagami* asserts that Po Chu-i was a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Monju and that his poetry inspired faith in others. It supports this statement with the reminder that the Buddha himself used parables and fictive examples in his teaching. About *Genji monogatari*, the *Ima kagami* declares:

For a woman to have produced such a work, the author could not have been an ordinary person. The Bodhisattva Kannon manifested himself as this saintly woman to preach the Buddhist law and lead people [to enlightenment] (Mitani 1967, p. 505).

In light of these assertions, it may be argued that *Genji monogatari* is simultaneously *kyōgen-kigo* and the word of the Bodhisattva Kannon, and can therefore be considered sacred scripture.

#### WORLDLY DESIRES AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Reflected in the identification of authors as Buddhist deities is a further development in the interpretation of *kyōgen-kigo*: the transition from the idea of secular literature as possibly useful as a medium to express religious sentiment to a view of the content of secular literature as having a religious function. An explicit example is found in *Genji ippon kyō* (The *Genji Sūtra* in One Section), by the priest Chōken, who lived from 1126-1203. He criticizes *Genji monogatari* and other classics as fabrications, concerned only with love affairs (Ikeda 1968, vol. 1, p.364). In conclusion, however, he advises his reader, an avid fan of *Genji monogatari*, to:

Copy out the twenty-eight chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* and write the name of the chapter from *Genji monogatari* at the end of each *Lotus Sutra* chapter (Mitani 1967, p.502).

"Ultimately," he wrote, "worldly desire changes to enlightenment." His point is that writing *kyōgen-kigo* or reading it can lead to a

religious experience insofar as it is only the realization of the suffering caused by worldly desires which leads one to seek salvation from suffering through enlightenment. Thus, *Genji monogatari*, a tale of illicit worldly desire, can function as a religious text by inspiring the quest for enlightenment.

An unusual example of this view is found in *Heike monogatari*. Kumagai no Naozane (d. 1208) experienced a religious awakening which was inspired by the sound of Taira no Atsumori's flute, a case of musical *kyōgen-kigo*. Naozane, of the Minamoto clan, grapples with Atsumori, a Taira warrior, and discovers that his opponent is a mere boy. Reminded of his own son, Naozane decides to spare his youthful enemy's life, but is forced to kill him when other Minamoto men appear on the scene. Having beheaded Atsumori, Naozane sees that the boy had been carrying a flute and surmises that the music he had heard coming from the Taira camp the night before had been played by Atsumori. Remembering the elegant melody, Naozane is struck by the contrast between an unexpected glimpse of the gentle disposition of his victim and the callousness of war and is thus inspired to take the tonsure. The narrator of *Heike monogatari* concludes his account of the incident with the comment:

While we know the principle of foolish talk and dazzling rhetoric [leading to enlightenment], how wonderful that [the sound of Atsumori's flute] should lead to praise for the Buddhist doctrine [through Naozane's renunciation of the world].<sup>7</sup>

The pursuit of the enjoyment of music has led one man to reflect on the futility of secular activities and therefore to seek enlightenment.

#### KYŌGEN-KIGO AS RELIGIOUS TRUTH

A major step in the evolution of the view of *kyōgen-kigo* as inherently religious in nature, as distinguished from *kyōgen-kigo* as



only possibly fulfilling a religious function is the development of the view that *kyōgen-kigo* was a source of ultimate religious truth (*daiichi gi* 第一義). This idea is found in a variety of texts with minor variations. The *Ryōjin hishō* (Secret Selection of Songs), compiled by emperor Go Shirakawa (1127-1242, r. 1155-58), includes the verse:

Even the transgression of *kyōgen-kigo* leads us to praise the Buddha; crude words, any words accord with the ultimate truth.<sup>8</sup>

Another early example of this attitude is found in the *Junji ōjō kōshiki* (Lectures on Birth in the Pure Land Continued), which dates from 1114:

Crude words and gentle words all are the source of the ultimate truth. Poetry that stirs up emotions is, after all, the way to salvation (Sakaguchi 1931, p. 59).

Similar statements are found in the *Hosshin shū* (Collection of Religious Awakenings), a *setsuwa* anthology compiled by Kamo no Chōmei before 1216, the *Shasekishū* (p. 59), and the *Sasamegoto* (Musings), an essay on poetics by Shinkei (1406-1475), a monk of high rank and a linked-verse poet. The scriptural source for this concept is the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which states:

The Buddhas always [use] gentle words (*nango* 軟語), [but] in order to save the people, they teach [with] crude explanations. Crude words and gentle words are all, finally, the source of the ultimate truth.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that *kyōgen-kigo*, or indeed, any verbal locution, can be an expression of the ultimate truth is based on the concept of *shohō jissō* 諸法実相, that is, "true reality is things as they exist." According to this ontology, all things are affirmed; the conventional distinction between good and evil is rejected (i.e., *zen'aku fu'ni* 善惡不二, good and evil are not two distinct phenomena) and

an equivalence between worldly passions and enlightenment is asserted (*bonnō soku bodai* 煩惱郎菩提, worldly desires imply enlightenment). The very concept of transgression is challenged in affirming the sacred meaning of all existence, and *kyōgen-kigo* is validated as a religious activity. This is essentially the interpretation that William LaFleur identifies as that put forward by Shunzei. Mahāyāna doctrine, in LaFleur's words, "demands a rejection of any bifurcation of the holy and the profane" (1983, p.91).

The culmination of the development of the concept of *kyōgen-kigo* is the assertion of the superiority of secular literary arts over traditional religious texts. An example of this extreme position is found in *Sasamegato*. There Shinkei wrote:

You will certainly achieve birth in paradise through poetry . . . . From the beginning, the way of poetry has been the *dhāraṇī* [magic incantations with the power to maintain wisdom and knowledge] of our country. When one speaks with dazzling rhetoric, reading sūtras and practicing meditation are illusions.<sup>10</sup>

*Kyōgen-kigo* is no longer being merely justified or excused with the argument that secular forms can be used to religious ends, but is being encouraged on the basis of the principle that religious truth is inherent in seemingly secular material.

#### MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE FICTION AND KYŌGEN-KIGO

In late medieval short stories and specifically in some religious awakening tales, we find almost the same range of attitudes toward *kyōgen-kigo* as in the earlier essays and anecdotes discussed above. At the conclusion of *Hachikazuki*, a Cinderella-type story, the narrator praises the Bodhisattva Kannon (who is credited with arranging Hachikazuki's happy marriage), exhorts the reader to call out the name of Kannon ten times, and invokes Kannon's name himself.<sup>11</sup> The tale, as an example of *kyōgen-kigo*, and its concluding *nenbutsu* seem analogous to the practice of

reciting Chinese poetry and the *nenbutsu* at meetings of Yasutane's Kangakue.

In *Komachi no sōshi*, a legendary account of the life of a Heian-period poet, the reader is advised that merely hearing or reading the tale is equivalent to carving and worshipping a statue of Kannon.<sup>12</sup> The implication being that the tale, although it is *kyōgen-kigo*, also represents homage paid to the Bodhisattva.

*Sannin hōshi*, a religious awakening story that weaves three monks' experiences into a single tale, presents the idea that good and evil are not distinct or separable. One monk is a man who experienced a religious awakening when his wife reacted cold-heartedly to his murder of an aristocratic woman. Another monk is the widower of the murdered woman, whose religious awakening dates from her tragic death. The two men rejoice that her demise inspired them to seek enlightenment. At this point in the text the narrator comments:

There are different paths, but they all lead to unwavering faith. We must not necessarily despise evil. It is the reverse side of good. Nor should we despise love. It comes from feeling. How could we believe in Buddhism without feeling? This principle is a means to teach people to have feeling and to lead them to the Buddhist faith.<sup>13</sup>

Insofar as *Sannin hōshi* rejects the distinction between good and evil, it also implies the equivalency of *kyōgen-kigo* with religious truth.

The idea that *kyōgen-kigo* expresses ultimate truth is explicit in *Genmu monogatari*, a religious awakening story that involves a tragic love affair. The text concludes with the narrator's assertion of the religious value of his tale of mundane experience:

Tales of the past are said to be foolish talk and dazzling rhetoric, but they are devices useful in teaching the ignorant. By comparing the state of this uncertain world to the fragile blossom of a youth who succumbed as though to a gust of wind, and by likening his short life, his

evanescent self, to a dream inspired by the sound of the bells that toll at dawn, this tale sweeps away the clouds of darkness and brings us face to face with the moon of ultimate reality.<sup>14</sup>

A postscript dated 1668, fifth month, third day, contains one reader's response to the tale: ". . . while this tale is crude, there is not a single lie in it. It expresses truth."<sup>15</sup> Both the narrator and the author of the postscript see the fictional story of Genmu as a metaphor for the reality of this world, a clear vision of which is the ultimate truth.

### CONCLUSION

Such references to the concept of *kyōgen-kigo* are solid support for an understanding of medieval love stories as having been written and appreciated not simply to be entertaining, but because the entangling passions were a religious issue. The didactic conclusions of so many *otogi-zōshi* are not a facile means to justify beguiling fictions, but rather the product of the idea that there is a religious aspect inherent in secular literature. Just as Mahāyāna Buddhism refuses to distinguish between sacred and secular, or between good and evil, it would reject the traditional Western distinction between amusement and utility.

### Notes

1. In Childs 1980, I argued against the classification of certain medieval tales of homosexual love as a type of love story, suggesting instead that we recognize that the religious interpretation of those texts was a higher priority for the medieval reader. I blame a modern antipathy towards homosexuality for blinding certain scholars to the fact that their classifications are anachronistic. The present article is a refinement of my earlier position that many medieval love stories should be seen as tales of religious awakening. The literary theory behind *kyōgen-kigo* shows that

instead of making a choice between categorizing texts as romantic or religious, we should recognize the religious significance of the romantic content of texts.

2. The ten evils 十惡 or transgressions are taking life, theft, lewdness, lying, dazzling rhetoric, slander, equivocation, greed, anger, and complaining. See Nakamura 1981, p.651.

3. *Fukuro no sōshi*, in *Nihon kagaku kenkyū*, vol. 2, pp.54-55.

4. *Shasekishū*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 75, pp.219-222.

5. *Ibid.* This poem is also found in *Shūi waka shū*, number 1322, in Tsukamoto 1930, p.257, as Ki no Tsurayuki's deathbed poem. The last line in the Tsurayuki version is *yo ni koso arikere*.

6. *Honchō monzui* 10, cited in Sakaguchi Genshō 1931, p.58.

7. *Heike monogatari*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 33, p.222.

8. *Ryōjin hishō*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 73, p.283.

9. *Nehangyō* 20, as cited in *Ryōjin hishō*, p.509.

10. *Shinkei Sasemegoto*, in *Nihon kagaku kenkyū*, vol. 5, p.315.

11. *Hachikazuki*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 38, p.459.

12. *Komachi no sōshi*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 38, p.101.

13. *Sannin hōshi*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 38, p.459.

14. *Genmu monogatari*, in *Muromachi jidai monogatari taisei*, vol. 4, pp.415-416.

15. *ibid.*, p.416.

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