

Michele MARRA, *The Aesthetics of Discontent: Politics and Reclusion in Medieval Japanese Literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991. x+222 pp. Index, glossary of romanized Chinese characters. Cloth, \$35.00, ISBN 0-8248-1336-7; Paper \$14.95, ISBN 0-8248-1364-2.

In the preface to his *Framing the Sign*, Jonathan Culler identifies what he considers to be the two most important movements in recent literary criticism. The first of these movements is the expansion of the domain in which critics work as they exert influence upon academic disciplines such as anthropology and psychoanalysis from which they earlier had borrowed theoretical structures. The second of these movements is the desire to make criticism political. Part of this movement includes “an interest in the political dimensions of literary works themselves, their role in promoting change, in subverting authority, or in containing social energies” (CULLER 1988, xiii). Michele Marra’s book falls squarely within this second critical trend.

Marra rereads several major literary works of early Japan—*Taketori monogatari*, *Ise monogatari*, *setsuwa* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the writings of Kamo no Chōmei, *Towazugatari*, and *Tsurezuregusa*—and discovers therein coded messages of discontent and denunciation directed at a political center of power. (Though the first two works on this list are not usually classified as medieval texts, Marra apparently follows the historical periodization proposed by LaFleur in *Karma of Words*. There the medieval period extends from the late eighth century until Tokugawa times, a period in Japan when the “episteme” of Buddhist ideology occupied a position of central authority [LAFLEUR 1983, p. 9].)

Each chapter focuses on a different text and its method of registering the discontent of its author or authors. Marra describes how Chinese Taoist legends are rewritten in *Taketori monogatari* (Tale of the bamboo cutter) using Buddhist ideology and unflattering allusions to historical personages of political relevance. *Taketori monogatari*’s content is seen as “the product of a mind putting legendary material well known to the people of his time to the use of a moral and political discourse” (p. 16). The elements of the story, in particular the settings and goals of the five suitors of the beautiful alien Kaguyahime, are convincingly shown to be drawn from Taoist legends, the central theme of which is the quest for immortality. Kaguyahime sits as a figure of purity and authority at the center, representing the ideal and superior other-world of Buddhism. The suitors are each shown to suggest a historical figure who participated in the Jinshin Rebellion of 672¹ that helped establish the Fujiwara family’s political control. In the suitors’ embarrassing and immoral efforts to fulfill the tasks set to them (all fail), as well as in the emperor’s inefficacy in resisting the forces that come to Earth to reclaim Kaguyahime, Marra reads an affirmation of Buddhist values as well as a critique of the Taoist emphasis on permanence. Buddhism is seen as providing the seed for a “counterideology” that denounces any claim to lasting power and control such as that pursued by

¹ A typographical error concerning the date of the rebellion—672 erroneously printed as 642—makes the logic of this argument appear skewed on a first reading.

the Fujiwara. In the text's treatment of the five suitors, Marra sees a defamation of the current rulers' characters. He presents literary allusion as a strategy of indirect political assault. Marra does not speculate specifically on who might have assembled *Taketori monogatari* in the approximate form we have today. He suggests, however, that it was a member of the aristocracy or the Buddhist power elite who was close to, but not within, the Fujiwara circle: "Their interpretation of the impermanence of reality, sustained by the idea of the inevitable decline of the Buddhist Law . . . were the tools employed by the Japanese intellectuals of the time – monks and courtiers – to express their political discontent" (p. 16).

The method used in *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise) to articulate discontent is "contextual reinterpretation." Preexisting poems are placed in a prose context to carry the message of discontent of the declining Ariwara family. Marra states, "On several occasions the text expresses [Ariwara no] Narihira's political frustration and a clear denunciation of the Fujiwara family" (p. 43). As his primary example he cites the following two verses and explanatory notes:

The host [Narihira] invited everybody to compose poems on the falls, and the Guards Commander [Yukihira] recited:

<i>Waga yo oba</i>	To no avail
<i>kyō ka asu ka to</i>	I am hoping today or tomorrow
<i>matsu kai no</i>	To rise in the world.
<i>namida no taki to</i>	Which is higher,
<i>izure takakemu</i>	The waterfall of the fall or my tears?

Next the host recited:

<i>Nukimidaru</i>	It looks as though someone
<i>hito koso arurashi</i>	Must be unstringing
<i>shiro tama no</i>	Those clear cascading gems.
<i>ma naku mo chiru ka</i>	My sleeves are too narrow
<i>sode no sebak ni</i>	To hold them all.

The others, perhaps realizing that this poem was not a laughing matter, all praised it and kept from composing their own verses. (pp. 43–44)

In his interpretation of this, section 87 of *Ise monogatari*, Marra follows one scholar's interpretation that the narrow sleeves refer to the poet's low rank, and that the other members of the audience might be of similar unhappy political circumstances. While I agree that to read these lines as an expression of political discontent is to be close to the center of what makes this poem exchange moving, I do not necessarily see these words of complaint as a movement of *denunciation*. To determine that a work contains a discourse of discontent is one thing. To establish that the writing was a political *act* is quite another. In most of the book's arguments, Marra seems to assume that to identify the presence of the first of these is sufficient to confirm the activity of the latter. I found myself often wishing that the relationship between the two had been treated more flexibly.

Also introduced in the chapter on *Ise monogatari* is a critical reinterpretation of the concept of *miyabi*, courtly elegance. Based on an entry in a Heian dictionary that writes the word *miyabi* 雅 with the Chinese character *kan* 閑 (leisure) and *ga* 雅 (refinement)—not its usual rendering—Marra embarks upon an argument pivotal to the book's presentation of the history of reclusive literature.

According to his reading of this definition (more specifically the etymology of the characters used to represent the word) *miyabi* means “the spiritual and intellectual freedom which leads to the contemplation and appreciation of the beauty of the natural order” (p. 49). This is the starting point for Marra's theory of the “aesthetics of discontent.” The compilers of *Ise monogatari* are said to

take their revenge against the Fujiwara and become the promoters of an aesthetic discourse that legitimizes their privileged position within the world of culture. Deprived of political power, the victims of the Fujiwara hegemony become the rulers of the world of *miyabi* (courtliness), the upholders of ancient values challenged by opportunistic behavior in the sphere of government. (p. 48)

Marra will expand on this theme of *miyabi* as a countervalue to political rule, and use it to link subsequent writings of reclusion, especially those of Kamo no Chōmei and Kenkō. In the former it will mean “profoundly meditated refinement” (p. 98) and in the latter an enlightened center of government (p. 127). Marra regards the literary effort of creating a fictional world of *miyabi* as a political act that secures a reclusive space for discontents while also providing a means of criticizing the political center as distant from the best of human values. There is much to be said for reading classics with an awareness of the political status of the writers and the historical context of the writing. However, in the laudable and necessarily enthusiastic pursuit of one type of reading, Marra has obliterated temporarily from our minds the most central and engaging idea of *miyabi*, namely, public charisma and private seductive appeal. *Miyabi* always includes, indeed requires, an audience of appreciative courtly men and women. It is an eminently worldly aesthetic (AKIYAMA 1984, 94–95). This was as true in China, to where Marra has looked for his definition, as it was in the Japan of the time frame he discusses (KONISHI 1986, 128–39). The loss of attention to the romance of the literature that is the general result of Marra's approach is one of the regrettable features of this study.

In certain *setsuwa* (anecdotal, didactic stories) as well as an episode from *Tsutsumi Chūnagon monogatari* (The riverside [middle] counselor's stories), “The Lady Who Admired Vermin,” Marra sees the arrival of a type of “anti-story” that overturns the values of the court. The heroes of these *setsuwa* are mad, literary types that exemplify “perfect freedom from worldly bonds Madness for them becomes synonymous with truth, while common sense modeled on worldly experience and social convention shares with the present world its character of illusion” (p. 63). The result is a “Buddhist aesthetics of rejection” (an idea that we saw was first suggested in the chapter on *Taketori monogatari*) that transforms such acts of madness into “sincere acts of religious devotion meant to assert the importance of reclusion—either physical or mental—as the only means to escape the world of political intrigue and social

reality” (p. 54). I can agree with the first half of this statement. However, this sentence’s ending is not the only possible conclusion. Reclusion can also be seen, and was represented, as a positive act towards a religious goal. It need not necessarily be the result of a political or social need to escape, though in fact in *secular* literature a need for social escape was a frequent cause for the decision to take tonsure.

Marra’s political readings lead, as any reading approach will, to repetition in understandings, in other words, to finding the same message in many different places. We can take for example his interpretation of “The Lady Who Admired Vermin.” After describing the heroine’s refusal to blacken her teeth, pluck her eyebrows, and hide herself from the eyes of men – all attributes considered at the time to enhance a woman’s beauty – Marra concludes, “The story is a manifesto of firm opposition to the court’s code of refinement and a denunciation of its rules” (p. 65). But perhaps it is just the opposite. By presenting the Lady Who Admired Vermin as a comical figure perhaps the text, through its laughter, is *affirming* the values of the time in placing the heroine outside those commonly held values. Either reading studies an ideology of oppression. The question is simply one of authorial intent. Was the author resisting an oppressive ideology or perpetuating it?

In the next chapter, Kamo no Chōmei is convincingly presented as the originator of a genuine tradition of reclusion for politically estranged writers. His failures at court are presented with utmost care and provide an informative backdrop for reading *Hōjōki* (An account of my hermitage). As with *Taketori monogatari*, Marra reads the Buddhist discourse on impermanence as a criticism of the political center. His interpretation seems more appropriate in this case. In *Taketori monogatari* there are such a variety of issues (purity and impurity, human trust, the status of woman, the status of the outsider, the nature of love, etc.) embedded within a complex and fairly lengthy text that I resist the conclusion that it is mainly a political text. The comments in *Hōjōki*, on the other hand, are more self-consciously aimed and indeed seem to ride a tide of anger and discontent. This chapter of Marra’s book has thoroughly added to my pleasure of reading Kamo no Chōmei.

Marra is at his best in the chapter that deals with *Towazugatari* (Confessions of Lady Nijō). Again, by meticulously laying out the complicated court politics of the time he presents a convincing argument that “Lady Nijō” was used by her emperor and lover Go-Fukakusa as a sexual ambassador to four other men to strengthen ties with his friends and diminish unrest among his enemies. He has not only given us a better portrait of Go-Fukakusa’s sadism, he has also successfully reminded the reader of the important close connection between sexual activity and political activity (as it is recounted in classical literature). He presents Lady Nijō as a pathetic figure who tells the reader of her pain and criticizes her benefactor in coded language through skilful use of *honkadori* 本歌取り, which Marra has very adroitly translated as “allusive variation.”² My

² It is a small point, but the use of the word “intertextuality” in this chapter’s heading is, in strict terms, incorrect. “Intertextuality” is used here, and elsewhere in a recent journal

only difference with Marra in this chapter is to wonder if he has not attributed enough intelligence to the author herself in portraying her as a victim ignorant of her political role. *Not* to do so leads into even more interesting readings that suggest either a still more tragic figure, or a woman of political ambition herself who is also using the situation to the best of her abilities, or a woman of masochistic qualities – the least charitable (but neither impossible nor uninteresting) reading of all.

The chapter on *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in idleness) presents *miyabi* as an ancient ideal that Kenkō believed could provide a model for a better central government that would rule over an orderly world where the best of Buddhist and Confucian ideas would constructively coexist. By his unwavering admiration of things of the past and critical report of contemporary ways, Kenkō attempts to influence the current government's actions through a process of literary appropriation. Kenkō “presents as a reality belonging to the past a court that is made of both benevolent authority – Confucian political structure – and reclusive refinement (*miyabi*) – the Buddhist alternative to power that the compilers of the *Ise monogatari* had put forward in the Heian period” (p. 148). Here Marra brings together, perhaps a little improbably, the two main arguments of his book. *Miyabi*, first presented as an “aesthetic of discontent” in *Ise monogatari*, is wedded to Buddhist “counterideology” that was argued in the chapter on *Taketori monogatari* to provide a launching ground for political discontent.

Both of these elements are traditionally considered as *supporting* rather than undermining central political authority. This transposed interpretation is thought-provoking and delightfully bold. To embark upon such a project is an act of true scholarly value, pleasurable to observe and consider. Though I am dismayed at the ease with which Marra sometimes arrives at his conclusions, the overall direction of this well-researched volume should be viewed as an important stimulus to our understanding of the impact of religious ideology and political activity on the form and content of classical Japanese texts.

In addition, though I have passed over them in the above critical summaries, Marra has a fine eye for intriguing details. For example, I enjoyed reading his argument that the *take* of *Taketori monogatari* should be read as the *take* of “mushroom” 菌, not the *take* of “bamboo” 竹 (p. 19). The resulting image is of a Taoist searching for a special mushroom that brings immortality, rather than a bamboo harvester. Also interesting was the notion that when Matsuo Bashō set out on his journeys through rural Japan it was as a Tokugawa shogunate agent (*ninja*) (p. 153). Finally, the discussion of Buddhist attitudes towards fiction, and the variety of theories about the final age of the Dharma (*mappō*)

article by another scholar, to mean “attention to other literary sources.” However, the word has a more original and important meaning that should be preserved since it adds sophistication to the way we think about language and communication. It refers to the “transposition of one (or several) *sign* system(s) into another” (KRISTEVA 1984, pp. 59–60, emphasis mine), the result being a shattered, plural sign and signifier whose meaning derives from many sources at once.

add to the many worthwhile facets of this book, which needs only to be read with some critical distance.

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