

## Abstract

This article engages with recent debates within feminism itself to rethink women, gender, body, and agency as conceptual categories for reading medieval Japanese literary/Buddhist texts. It questions the unreflexive transposition of contemporary understandings of concepts to the past, on the grounds that this produces anachronistic readings of the worlds we seek to understand. It argues that in medieval Japanese texts gender did not function as a 'social' category posited against the 'natural' fact of sex, and that gender was a kind of script and that it was the specificity of the gendered performance, rather than the sexual attributes and reproductive functions of the body, that gave substance to the categories 'male' and 'female.' The article also offers a critique of contemporary uses of the term agency in analyses of women and Buddhism in medieval Japan, arguing that agency here is defined as something possessed by autonomous individuals with free will, whose natural inclination is to strive to resist against the oppressive conditions of their lives. This modern liberal conception of agency, which is secular in nature, grants agency to humans alone. This anthropocentric view of the world necessitates the evisceration of the agency of gods, buddhas, dreams and material objects, all of whom are central actors in the cosmological/social world of medieval Japan.

### **Rethinking the politics of gender and agency: an encounter with the 'otherness' of medieval Japan**

The last few decades have seen a veritable explosion of academic writings that seek to analyze how gender and power operated in the historical, religious, and literary texts of medieval Japan. Scholars have become increasingly attentive to the workings of power and politics, and to the ideological underpinnings of even the most refined of courtly narratives and poetic compositions. Gender is a category that allows for an analysis of how one comes to occupy one's place in the social world as a man and woman. However, it is woman, the unprivileged and marked term of the man-woman binary that, for the most part, has taken centre-stage in research on gender in medieval Japan. Scholars have sought to reveal how the sex/gender system operated in the production of knowledge across a wide range of disciplines, and how it privileged the lives and activities of men, and systematically neglected or denigrated women and their roles in society.

Medieval Japanese Studies, for the most part, has taken its cue from the work undertaken by sixties and seventies feminism, making its primary task the reinstatement of women into the historical, religious and literary narratives from which they have been written out, and in so doing radically questioning the androcentric biases of scholarly writings in the field. A four-

volume collection published in Japanese in 1989, under the title *Shîrizu: josei to bukkyô* (Women and Buddhism Series) and an edited volume in English, entitled *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, which followed in 2002, for example, heralded a new departure from previous research that had focused exclusively on religious groups formed around male leaders, or on sectarian histories, and the doctrinal debates within particular schools of Buddhism.

These new works offered a critique of earlier studies on Buddhism on the grounds that both the sources that were investigated, and the questions that were asked in such accounts, inevitably focused on institutions in which men played a central role, and from which women, for the most part, were excluded. The new approach turned to popular Buddhism, highlighting the everyday aspects of Buddhist faith and practice to demonstrate that women were indeed active participants in the religious life of pre-modern Japan (Ruch 2002; Meeks 2010; Glassman 2012; Lowe 2017).

In recent decades scholars have revisited well-known Buddhist canonical works and popular literary/Buddhist tales to gauge Buddhist attitudes to women, and to reveal the misogyny at work in Buddhist texts and practices (Marra 1999; Faure 2003; Kimbrough 2008). Academic writings on classical and medieval works in a wide range of genres ranging from romance fiction (*monogatari*), poetic diaries (*nikki*) and *waka* poetry, to popular tales (*setsuwa*, *otogizoshi*) have also sought to unveil the workings of gender, and the operations of power that often lie behind the aesthetic, humorous, religious, or supernatural dimensions of courtly and popular texts (Tonomura 1994; Laffin 2013; Li 2009; Bundy 2012; Kawashima 2001; Sarra 1999; Goodwin 2007).

Scholarly writings have focused in particular on women's suffering arguing that many of the female protagonists in these texts were victims of the oppressive conditions within which they lived, whilst at the same time demonstrating how some women sought to resist male

domination, or at the very least, expressed the desire to be liberated from it. It is in this context that the concept of 'agency' has acquired critical purchase, imbuing the term with a moral, emotional, and political charge. As this far from comprehensive survey of recent academic literature suggests, invaluable work has already been done, which seeks to demonstrate the centrality of gender and agency to our understanding of the medieval Japanese textual tradition.

In this essay, I would like to take this conversation further by engaging with recent debates within feminism itself to rethink women, gender, body, and agency as conceptual categories for reading well-known classical and medieval Japanese literary/Buddhist texts. I do so on the grounds that we have not been sufficiently attentive to how these, by now highly naturalized categories, are discursively produced, and how they have come to acquire their status as ontologically given. By highlighting the cultural and historical variability of these concepts, I hope to demonstrate that a transposition of contemporary understandings of these terms to the Japanese past produces anachronistic readings of the worlds we seek to analyse. It is by addressing the problem of treating our core categories of analysis as ahistorical, universal, and foundational truths that I seek to offer new perspectives on reading gender and agency in the medieval Japanese textual tradition.

This essay does not offer a comprehensive survey of medieval Japanese writings; nor does it engage in an analysis of practice-oriented studies of Buddhism. Rather through a critical re-examination of some well-known texts, it seeks to challenge and reorient some of the dominant approaches to reading gender and agency in medieval Japanese studies. It works with the assumption that in an age when Buddhism was at the centre of medieval hermeneutics, we cannot meaningfully treat Buddhist and literary texts as if they were two distinct entities, with the former belonging to the realm of the 'religious' and the latter that of the 'secular'. A courtly romance such as *The Tale of Genji* cannot be adequately understood

without taking into account the Buddhist world-view that shapes amorous relations in the text. Likewise, the power of a canonical scriptural text such as the *Lotus Sutra* lies in the way that it functions as a 'literary' performance - a rhetorical tour de force, written in praise of a sermon, which "*never takes place*" (Tanabe 1989, 2).

### **Woman, Body, and Gender**

It has become part of our common sense to assume that what distinguishes men from women is sexual difference and that this difference is biologically determined. This distinction is founded on the idea that there are two distinct domains - nature and culture - and that the body and sex are aligned with nature, whilst gender, a social construction, belongs to the domain of culture. Scholars working on pre-modern Europe have challenged the assumption that the binaries of sex versus gender and nature versus culture are transhistorical and universal, by demonstrating how these distinctions did not have any valence until the eighteenth century in Europe (Bynum 1989; Lacquer 1990). Women were undoubtedly the incomplete, lesser, inferior versions of men, but the body and sexual difference were not the grounds for affirming this preordained hierarchy, and there was no distinction made between 'natural sex' and 'social gender' (Lacquer 1990: 29).

As in medieval Europe, so too in pre-modern China and Japan, sex and gender, which are premised upon a division between natural attributes and social roles, had little meaning given that social relations were seen as mirroring the same principles that applied to the body and to the cosmos. Gender did not function here as a 'social' category posited against the 'natural' fact of sex for the human and natural order were seen as being integrally linked. This was a world in which men, women, animals, and supernatural beings inhabited a common cosmological order, often intermingling promiscuously with one another; nature and the body were living presences, yet to be reduced to being passive objects, given meaning by the Man of Reason.

However, these convergences notwithstanding, there were significant differences between the European and East Asian religious, philosophical, and medical traditions, which shaped conceptions of the body, sex, gender, man, woman and so on. For example, classical Chinese medical texts, which formed the basis of Japanese medical theories, conceived of the ideal androgynous body, that of the Yellow Emperor, as one which held the perfect balance between the feminine (*yin*) and masculine (*yang*) principles. *Yin* and *yang* functioned as complementary aspects of the body and were seen to interpenetrate both men and women (Furth 1999). However, as Furth notes, this did not mean that ‘male’ and ‘female’ principles were conceived of as equal: the medical discourse of *yin* and *yang* was based on a hierarchy that privileged male over female. As Furth’s work richly demonstrates, medical theory and practice in pre-modern China understood the body to be an on-going process in which two conflicting paradigms were at work - the androgynous body that was unmarked by gender on the one hand, and the gestational body, which was associated with women on the other. This brief summary of a rich and complex tradition is intended to highlight the importance of being attentive to the historical and cultural variability of categories such as body, man, woman, and gender, and to the danger of treating them as if they were universal and applicable across different temporal and cultural contexts. For neither the one-sex model that prevailed until the eighteenth century in Europe (Laqueur 1990), nor subsequent understandings of male and female as constituted through the incommensurability of their sexual organs, is applicable to the ways in which the body was conceived in medieval Japan.

If we consider the word *mi* (身) in the Japanese medieval lexicon that corresponds to the term ‘body,’ it becomes immediately apparent that *mi* makes no distinction between the physical body and what we might call the psychic, social, or cultural body; one of the most common usages of the term *mi* is to signify a person’s status or standing in the world. For this reason it

should not be conflated with the modern word for body, *shintai* (身体), which signifies the body understood only as a material entity.

When medieval texts speak of *onna no mi* they mean more than the physical and sexed body that makes for womanhood; for both her mental and emotional attributes as well as her relationship to others as a social being are involved in the constitution of what we might call the female body/self. The terms *onna* (女) and *otoko* (男) in medieval Japanese are not synonymous with the words for woman/women, *josei* (女性) and man/men, *dansei* (男性) used commonly today. The inclusion of the character *sei* or sex (性) reflects a transformation whereby ‘man’ and ‘woman’ came to be defined predominantly through their bodies and in particular their sexual organs - an epistemic shift brought about by the adoption of the newly imported Western discourses of sexuality to Japan.<sup>i</sup>

In the last few decades, post-structuralist feminists have posed a challenge to the foundational assumptions of core categories such as body, woman, sex, gender, agency and so on, arguing that they are socially and culturally constructed, and that we need to be attentive to how they have come to be produced rather than granting them an ontological status. No longer can we assume that ‘woman’ or indeed even the more encompassing ‘women’ constitutes a stable, pre-given and transcendental category, for “...the apparent continuity of the subject of ‘women’ is not to be relied on; ‘women’ is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, ‘being a woman’ is also inconstant, and can’t provide an ontological foundation” (Riley 1988 2-5). Judith Butler has been a particularly influential voice, calling for a re-conceptualisation of sex and gender, arguing that gender “ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker,” but rather as “an activity, a becoming,” (Butler 1990: 112). Gender here is performative, and the binaries of sex/gender, man/woman, and hetero/homosexuality, are not facts or truths about the world that are made manifest through our actions. Rather it is the other way around: it is through the

endless repetition of certain acts that we create the illusion of the stability of gender. Both the historicising move and the challenge to the foundational assumptions that question received understandings of gender, woman, agency and so on, as I hope to demonstrate, have lessons to offer us as scholars of medieval Japanese literary/Buddhist texts.

### Gender as Performance

In medieval Japanese texts, *otoko* and *onna* do not entail an understanding of man and woman as stable, unchanging, or essentialist categories. Gender here functions precisely as a kind of script, and it is the specificity of the gendered performance, that is to say, the particularity of the script that is enacted, rather than the sexual attributes and reproductive functions of the body, that gives substance to the categories ‘male’ and ‘female.’ A few examples must suffice.

The anonymous twelfth-century fictional tale *Torikaebaya Monogatari* (*The Tale of “If Only I Could Change Them Back”*) explicitly thematizes the idea of gender as something that is not a given but rather a matter of ‘becoming’ through repeated performance. The daughter of the Minister of the Right, Himegimi, is raised as a boy and takes her place at the court as a man, while her brother Wakagimi, brought up as a girl, enters court as a lady. It is through forms of rigorous self-fashioning, that is to say, through the cultivation of particular emotional dispositions and forms of bodily comportment appropriate to their respective genders that Himegimi and Wakagimi are able to transform themselves such that they can successfully take on their new gendered roles, regardless of their sexual attributes. “Words designating ‘man’ or ‘woman’ often appear with verbs that imply the mutability or superficiality of that very status” suggesting that “the free-floating nature of genders as cultural scripts is also implicit at the semantic level.” (Plugfelder 1992, p. 355). In the end, the siblings are returned to their assigned sex/gender in the social world of the court, but for the most part the text

engages in playful inversions, whose effect is to expose the fictive nature of any simple alignment between sex and gender as the basis of a stable identity.

To suggest that gender is fluid and a matter of performance in medieval Japanese texts does not mean that how gender is performed is arbitrary or a matter of individual choice.<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, the model for ideal male and female behaviour that Himegimi and Wakagimi cultivate conforms to normative understandings of what it means to be ‘female’ or ‘male’ in the courtly world of Heian Japan. However, what is significant for our purposes is that gender is disassociated from the body and sex and is principally a matter of certain prescribed stylizations of performative roles. This is particularly true of courtly *waka* poetry.

In a work of romance such as the *Tale of Genji*, which has almost eight hundred poems (*waka*) interspersed within its long prose narrative, for example, we can see that the conventions of *waka* poetry have a significant bearing on the ways in which amorous relationships between women and men come to be articulated within the text. *Waka* poetry’s dominant themes are nature and love, both of which are expressed through a prescribed repertoire of images and vocabulary. The central figures of love poems are *otoko* (man) and *onna* (woman), who appear in the poems through terms such as *kimi* (you) or *hito* (male or female lover) or *ware* (I). These terms are used for both men and women alike. They indicate nothing about the gender, identity, or social status of either the poet or the one who is being addressed. Furthermore, *ware* speaks to fluid, multiple selves that often blend into one another, inhabiting as they do the same experiential space (Miyake 1996, p. 63). When a poem is described as being a woman’s poem (*onna no uta*), what is at issue is not the sexual or personal identity of the composer of the poem (Vieillard-Baron 2013, pp. 1-23), but rather the particular stylized role or persona to be adopted by the poet that is consonant with woman, not as a real, living being, but rather as a trope or an idea. Even when a poem is marked as

anonymous, or when there is no headnote explaining the circumstances under which it was composed, it is possible to infer which persona a poet has adopted.

This is because in the *waka* tradition, woman is always positioned as the one who waits and pines for her male lover, while man is the one who visits at night, and departs before dawn. He is the one who initiates the affair and composes the morning after poem to which his lady is expected to respond. A poet, regardless of his/her biological sex (a category that has no real meaning in this context) can slip seamlessly into the persona of the waiting female or the male who visits. It is through the performative stances adopted by poets that *otoko* and *onna* come into being, and only provisionally so, within the discursive space of *waka* poetry.

### **Buddhism and Gender**

Many of the observations I have made above could no doubt be challenged by turning to Buddhist texts in which undoubtedly ‘woman’ is the marked category, both implicitly and explicitly defined as different from and inferior to ‘man,’ the normative ideal. Her gendered difference in these texts takes many forms: her body is marked by the impurities of childbirth and menstruation; she is hindered by the five obstructions;<sup>iii</sup> she is given to greed, anger, pride, and envy; and her beauty is dangerous to men, for it serves as a hindrance on the path of renunciation.

However, it is hard to distil from either Buddhist canonical texts or from the popular tales that sought to proselytise the faith any sense of ‘woman’ as an essentialist and abiding identity.

This is in large part because all bodies, even those of women, are conceptualized as active agents that can defy common expectations and perform miraculous transformations, thereby attesting to the power of the Buddhist faith. The fact that the body in medieval Japanese texts is unstable and granted enormous potential for transformation renders the boundaries between ‘man’ and ‘woman’ porous and unstable. ‘Man’ and ‘woman’ are marked by a certain

indeterminacy, defying any consolidation of them as unchanging and essentialist categories, always fixed in the same way.

In the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, Prajñâkutâ is sceptical of Mañjuśrî's claim that his disciple the eight-year-old dragon princess has, at such a young age, attained perfect Enlightenment. The elder Sāriputra, likewise, expresses doubts about the dragon princess possessing the necessary requisites for attaining Buddhahood on the grounds that the female body is a 'filthy' thing, subject to the five obstructions. The dragon princess does not engage in dialogue with them, but acts swiftly, transforming herself into a man and achieving Buddhahood. This passage has been the site of considerable debate particularly with regard to its implications for women's enlightenment (Abe 2015; Yoshida 2002; Yamamoto 1993). Abe Ryûichi argues that scholars have focused rather narrowly on two aspects of this text, namely the transformation of the dragon princess into a man (*henjô nanshi*) and her immediate attainment of Buddhahood (*ryûnyo jobutsu*) (Abe 2015, 40). He suggests that "the characterisation of an eight-year-old nonhuman girl as one who has grasped the unsurpassed enlightenment of the Buddhas purposely debunks a conventional view that equates attaining Buddhahood with acquiring the adult male body of the Buddha" (Abe 2015, 42).

Yoshida Kazuhiko argues that the Buddhahood of the dragon princess serves as a particularly profound instantiation of the miraculous power of the *Lotus Sutra* precisely because she is triply disadvantaged as a child, an animal, and a woman (Yoshida 2002, 302-3). While it is undoubtedly the case that women's shortcomings and sinful dispositions were often used in Buddhist discourse, these writings seem less concerned with establishing women's inferiority to *men* than with rhetorically deploying the figure of 'woman,' who precisely as an exemplar of shortcomings and vices, served as a skilful means, a *hōben*, if you will, to demonstrate that even the most profound hurdles could be overcome through faith in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>iv</sup> The dragon princess's transformation also demonstrates the fluid and

shifting nature of the boundaries between men, women, dragons, and Buddhas, thereby highlighting the temporary and provisional nature of all that seems real in the mundane world of *samsāra*.

The instability of man and woman as fixed and enduring entities is the subject of conscious thematization in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. As in the *Lotus Sutra*, Sāriputra is given the role of ‘devil’s advocate,’ so to speak, for he challenges a goddess residing in the house of the lay bodhisattva Vimalakīrti by saying that if she were truly endowed with wisdom she would be able to change herself into a male. The goddess promptly does so by changing herself into a man *and* turning Sāriputra into a woman. This is followed by her observation that like all phenomena, man and woman have only a provisional existence, and that it is for this reason that the Buddha taught that phenomenal existents lacked male or femaleness (Thurman 1976, pp. 56-63).

The solutions offered by Buddhist exegetes to the question of her inferiority, and her potential to become a Buddha, were inventive, diverse and wide-ranging, drawing on different strands within Buddhist discourse to argue their particular positions.<sup>v</sup> Saichō, the founder of the Tendai school of Buddhism in Japan, for example, offered an interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* from the perspective of *sokushin jōbutsu*, or the attainment of enlightenment within one’s own body and within this very existence, emphasising that all hindrances could be overcome in an instant, thus displaying the truth of *hongaku* or original enlightenment (Groner 1989; Stone 1999). Another creative reworking of the question of the five hindrances and women’s potential for enlightenment can be found in the *Sutra on Transforming Women into Buddhas*, an apocryphal scriptural text composed in Japan in the ninth century, which uses the figure of woman as the mother of Buddhas, and bypasses the requirement that women be born as men in order to attain Buddhahood, by making a claim for a reproductive soteriology, and for the efficacy of practice over sex change (Blair 2016, pp. 263-293).

The story of the dragon princess in the *Lotus Sutra* came to be recounted and interpreted in a variety of ways across a wide range of genres in medieval Japan (Yoshida 2002, 304-321). Indeed, the five obstructions, far from being a disabling discourse, was often used by high-ranking women *waka* poets, and by men who wrote in their personae, to assert that despite their shortcomings, women would succeed in attaining Buddhahood, given that the dragon princess had unequivocally done so.<sup>vi</sup> Of particular interest is the poetry of the Imperial Princess Senshi who composed poems on Buddhist themes (*shakkyōka*) focusing in particular on the topoi of the dragon princess and the five obstructions. In her *Collection of Poems of Religious Awakening (Hosshin wakashū)* she refers obliquely to the dragon princess, whose precedent is often invoked to reassure herself and other women of the certitude of salvation:

sawari ni mo	Given that we have the example of one
sawaranu tameshi	who was unhindered
arikereba	by the hindrances
hedatsuru kumo mo	I firmly trust that no clouds
araji to zo omou	will obstruct the way

Obstructive clouds, which in love poems were a standard image for the barriers separating lovers, came to be creatively reconfigured to signify the various hindrances that stood in the way of salvation for women. And, as in love poems where the parting of the clouds afforded lovers a view of each other, these poems rhetorically claimed that the clouds would indeed dissolve and enlightenment would be assured to all, even women with the five hindrances. Indeed, through repeated use, the topoi of *itsutsu no sawari*, *hedatsuru kumo*, *ominaeshi* (maidenflower) become part of a stylized repertoire, which expanded and enriched the possibilities of verbal play that was at the heart of *waka* poetics. Over time, *itsutsu no sawari*, which had its origins in Buddhist discourse, became integrated into both the religious *and* the poetic imaginary of the medieval age (Kamens 1993, 389-442).

### Agency

It was in order to get away from narratives of ‘victimology’ that positioned women as passive objects, subjected to oppression under patriarchal norms and structures, that the term agency gained currency; it came to be used as a way to describe the actions of women, who were indeed oppressed, but who sought nonetheless to rebel against the dominant forms of authority that worked to subjugate them. However, ascribing agency to women has been no easy task, for there is little consensus on how one might gauge the significance of representations of women’s activities in medieval texts: sometimes women are seen as heroically mobilizing their agency by acting in ways that challenge the attempts by Buddhism and patriarchy to degrade them as *women*; at other times, possessed of false consciousness, they are seen as being complicit with Buddhism’s ideological agenda, or simply passive victims of it (Faure 2003, Kimbrough 2008).<sup>vii</sup> The actions of women who appear in literary texts such as the *Tale of Genji* have, likewise, often been judged through the prism of either victimhood or empowerment (Field 1987, Bargen 1997, Li 2009).<sup>viii</sup> Which of these readings is then favoured often becomes an exercise in arbitrariness, for the same textual material can yield different readings ranging from women’s insubordination to passivity or even complicity in the face of oppression. Some women have been celebrated as proto-feminists and reclaimed as our foremothers. However, not all women fit these criteria as role models, and those who are excluded from these somewhat hagiographical accounts can often become the objects of pity or of blame.<sup>ix</sup>

These contradictory claims, which often do not go beyond assertions that women either had or lacked agency,<sup>x</sup> fail to examine some of the core presuppositions that have gone into the making of agency as a category. Agency here is implicitly understood as a capacity for action that inheres to humans, defined as autonomous individuals with free will, whose natural inclination is to strive to resist against the oppressive conditions of their lives (Johnson 2003: p. 115). This modern humanist conception of agency, born of liberal thought, necessarily

assumes that agency is something possessed by humans alone. And yet this anthropocentric view of agency would have been unrecognizable to our forebears, both in the West and non-West, for they inhabited worlds where humans were not the sole actors and makers of meaning: gods, beasts, and even material objects worked together with humans as active agents in a shared cosmological and worldly order.

The epistemic shift to a human-centred world, which excised the agency of gods and spirits, was closely associated in the West with the emergence of a new conception of a separate sphere of human life called ‘religion,’ which from the nineteenth century came to be understood as “a set of propositions to which believers gave assent” (Asad 1993, p. 41).

Webb Keane has demonstrated how this particular understanding of religion had its provenance in Protestant Christianity, which rejected the attribution of divine agency to words, ritual practices, relics, liturgy, offerings, and holy books and instead “privileged belief, associated with immaterial meaning, over practices that threatened to subordinate belief to material form” (Keane 2007, p. 67). Even whilst acknowledging the transcendence of divine agency, Calvinists, Keane argues, placed emphasis on self-transformation, and on the cultivation of one’s own inner beliefs rather than a reliance on external objects. As missionaries Calvinists tried to impress upon those they sought to convert that stones and statues were simply symbols or signs - representations – lacking any intrinsic divinity or meaning. In attributing agency to the world of objects, the native, they claimed, had forfeited what was rightfully his own (*ibid*, p.77).

We can see here one of the central elements constitutive to modernity, namely the belief in an ontological distinction between Man and his world, where Man is the sole creator of meanings, values and purposes. This is what Weber in a melancholy vein called ‘disenchantment’ – modernity in this view makes it possible for the first time for Man to recognize that nature and the cosmos lack any inherent meaning except that which He

attributes to it, and there is inevitably a loss in uncovering this truth, and in recognizing that we as humans are agents of our own destinies.

By smuggling modern conceptions of agency and religion into our understanding of medieval Japanese literary/Buddhist texts, what we do is consistently privilege *human* agency, which presupposes the supremacy of Man, who replaces gods and other agents as the maker of meaning in the world.<sup>xi</sup> When medieval Japanese texts attribute agency to non-human and material forms, we cannot take such claims seriously for they strike us as little more than fanciful confabulation. Our mode of interpretation of these distant texts necessarily entails correcting these ‘category mistakes’ and restoring agency to humans to whom we believe it rightly belongs.

However, we cannot simply wish away the problem of non-human agency thus, for in medieval Japanese narratives we are confronted by the ubiquitous presence of gods, buddhas, men, women, animals, dreams, and material objects, all working together as active agentival forces. Below I present some examples from a range of literary/Buddhist genres to argue that we need to historicize the concept of agency by taking into account the actions of non-humans, who were central to the Buddhist world, and who were seen as both creating and circumscribing the possibilities of action for men and women in the medieval texts of Japan.

### **The Agency of gods, buddhas, bodhisattvas, dreams and karmic forces**

In many collections of medieval popular tales (*setsuwa*) such as *Konjaku monogatari* (*Tales of Times Now Past*), *Uji shûi monogatari* (*Tales of Uji*), *Shasekishû* (*A Collection of Sand and Pebbles*) and so on, women who are destitute, and who have no prospect of finding husbands who can support them, end up marrying rich men with whom they live long secure lives.

What unites these different narratives is one common theme, namely the miraculous power of gods and bodhisattvas to change the destinies of women who place their trust in them. I begin

with a summary of one such 'rags to riches' narrative from *Konjaku monogatari* (*Konjaku monogatari* Volume 2 1972, pp. 216-221).

A young orphaned woman who lives an impoverished life, goes unfailingly every morning and evening to pray to Kannon at Kiyomizu Temple. The young woman attributes the abject state of her robes to "her own destiny produced from karma in past lives" (*ibid*, p. 217). The way to the temple is deserted except for a rough thatched hut inhabited by an old woman who, taking pity on her miserable condition, offers her food and assures her that her life will improve in the future.

One day on her way back from Kiyomizu temple she encounters a man on horseback with a large retinue. The man approaches her, and leading her to a small hut, says that he has something to tell her. "It was dark, and the woman was alone; there was no way in which she could say no, and so in the end she did what the man told her to do, and lay down beside him. Saying that it was all because of karma from previous lives that he was able to have her, the man expressed a wish to establish a deep bond with her and asked if she would accompany him to the provinces where he was posted" (*ibid*, p. 217).

The young woman explains that she has no ties that might hold her back, and that she is happy to go with him no matter what the destination. Before leaving she visits the old woman in her hut, and cutting off some of her hair, she offers it to her as a memento of her gratitude. The old woman wraps the lock of hair around her fingers and says that she will never part from it, come what may. Four years later when the young lady has occasion to visit the capital again, she visits the old woman but discovers that she has disappeared. When she goes to pray to Kannon at Kiyomizu Temple she is immeasurably moved and awe-struck by the sight of the statue of Kannon in whose fingers she finds entwined the tresses of her hair. Realizing that the old woman was in fact an avatar of Kannon, she weeps uncontrollably. We are told that the young woman ends up living in harmony with her husband, and that she lacks for

nothing during her life. Those who hear of this story observe that had it not been for the benevolence of Kannon this would never have come about.

This tale is readily amenable to being read purely through the prism of gender and human agency. In such a reading what is likely to be foregrounded is the position of dominance that the man holds over the young woman; she is 'saved' by him, but only after she is forced to engage in non-consensual sex with him. The question of agency here is likely to take two forms: in order to establish that she is a victim it is important to demonstrate that she has been subjected to male domination; however, it is equally important to find in her actions a form of female agency, even if in a highly attenuated form, which could be explained thus: the woman is aware of the fact that she has no choice but to sleep with the man, and under these constrained circumstances she makes a strategic decision to do so without protest in order to secure his affection and long-term commitment. Female agency, in this reading, lies in a woman working out what is in her best interest as a woman; even her seeming passivity is seen as a form of a nascent consciousness that, in the face of dependence on men in a patriarchal society, recognises the need to act in order to ensure her own wellbeing.

Making human agency central to the tale necessarily entails the evisceration of the Buddhist explanatory framework, within which this narrative is framed. We cannot seriously entertain any explanation that attributes the meeting between the wealthy man and the destitute young woman to the workings of karma, and to the divine agency of Kannon. A vast chasm opens up between our secularised mode of reading the tale and the medieval world-view of the text itself. While we are entitled to produce new readings of old texts, there is little warrant to assume that our explanations are *truer* than those offered in the narrative in question. For to claim the universality of human agency as an ahistorical reality, and to privilege the modern humanist subject who *knows* that his mode of interpretation is superior to those who believe in gods and supernatural beings is to enact a form of epistemic violence on the very worlds

we seek of understand. To render their world intelligible to us we perform an unwarranted act of translation whereby gods and buddhas are recast as little more than symbolic representations of their social realities, or as reflections of their individual anxieties and aspirations.

To take one more example from within the medieval Japanese repertoire, in which dreams are accorded centrality as agents, I turn below to another story from *Konjaku monogatari* (*Konjaku monogatari* Volume 2 1972, pp. 552-554). A certain man, who is unnamed, is told by a person who appears in his dream that Kannon is going to visit the local public bathhouse, and that he is to instruct the residents of the village to gather to form a karmic tie with the bodhisattva. The dream provides a detailed description of Kannon who is to appear in the guise of a warrior. When a warrior, who fits the description offered in the dream, does indeed arrive at the village, everyone starts paying obeisance to him. When he hears why people are worshipping him he seeks to explain to them that he is in fact a warrior who, having fallen off his horse and broken his right arm whilst hunting, has come to the public bath to partake of its healing waters. When he attempts to leave, people follow him, and continue to worship him. At this point he thinks, “Well then I wonder if this self of mine (*mi*) is indeed Kannon! In which case I will take the tonsure at once and become a monk” (*ibid*, p. 554). So saying he throws away his bow, arrow, and sword, cuts off his topknot, and becomes a monk.

Seeing him take the tonsure thus, the people are deeply moved. After some time has passed, a man comes along who has known this warrior, and he explains to the people that the warrior is Lord Odô of Ueno province.

Thereafter, the villagers refer to him as Odô Kannon. After taking the tonsure the warrior goes to Yokawa to become the disciple of Kakuchô. He spends five years there and then goes on to the province of Tosa, after which no one knows of his whereabouts. The story concludes with the comment that this was an unusual occurrence, and asks whether the warrior who had

come visiting the bathhouse was really Kannon. Those who talk of this event all comment on the fact that the warrior taking the tonsure in this way was a measure of the wondrous nature of the Buddha.

What is the conclusion that we can draw from this episode in terms of our discussion on agency? In popular religious tales in medieval Japan, dreams constitute the favoured media through which bodhisattvas, gods and buddhas communicate with holy men. The propensity to have dream visions is proof of a monk's engagement in rigorous religious practice and his cultivation of the path to enlightenment. However, there are equally many instances where dreams are not the rewards bestowed on those who engage in religious activity. They are often uninvited, and beyond the control of the dreamer. As Pandolfo notes, dreams "are never one's own" (Pandolfo 1997, 9). In the episode described above, it is hard to locate any single force that propels the action that unfolds in the tale. An unknown person appears in a man's dream; the person who dreams unquestioningly accepts what he is told; neither of them is accorded any significance, for it is the dream itself that has the oracular power to communicate to the people of the community that an unusual and blessed event is to take place. When the man who has the dream communicates it to the village community, no one questions the veracity of the dream, and all the villagers make preparations to receive Kannon. The faith that they place collectively in the dream propels the warrior to see reality differently and to accept that he might indeed be an embodiment of the bodhisattva Kannon. It is faith in the dream, and the unquestioning worship of the people that spurs the warrior into action and leads him to take the tonsure.

In the end, the question of whether or not he was indeed Kannon becomes irrelevant in the face of the miraculous and wondrous workings of the Buddha, who produces the effect of creating the perfect conditions for the warrior to follow the religious path. What we see in this narrative is a kind of 'distributive agency,' (Bennett 2010) in which dreams, bodhisattvas,

karmic forces, and humans act together to make manifest the divine powers of the Buddhist Dharma. Far from being simply vehicles for communicating divine messages, dreams function as agents for they have the power to reshape the dreamer, connecting him with the world beyond, and helping forge a sense of community among the inhabitants of the village. Rather than focusing on the dreamer, this tale suggests that what is central is the dream itself. As Mittermaier argues in the context of the significance of dreams in contemporary Egypt, “Conventional idioms of agency (particularly those that make agency dependent on consciousness) easily obscure the ways in which subjects are often not only acting but also are acted upon (Mittermaier 2011, 251).

Popular tales that appear in texts such as *Konjaku monogatari* were compiled by men, and it is this fact that is often invoked to account for the supposed misogyny of literary/ Buddhist texts. Such claims are harder to make in the case of a work such as the *Tale of Genji*, which was authored by a woman. Shaped by feminist concerns, the analysis of gender and agency in the *Genji* sees in the work a consistent voice, that of a female author, who through the plot device of romance, draws our attention both to women’s suffering and oppression, as well as to their struggle to resist male authority and desire.

And yet the text, not unlike the popular tales in *Konjaku monogatari*, consistently fails to attribute romantic liaisons solely to human intentions and will; rather it presents these encounters as effects unfolding as a consequence of a concatenation of forces, in which a significant role is assigned to the power of the divine and to karma from past lives. The unlikely union of Genji with the Akashi Lady when Genji is in exile in Suma, for example, comes about not as a result of the personal agency of either of the protagonists but due to the intervention of a number of supernatural agents. In the ‘Akashi’ chapter, the spirit of Genji’s deceased father appears to him in a dream and urges him to follow the Sumiyoshi god to Suma. The father of the Akashi Lady also receives a divine message, which instructs him to

bring Genji from Suma to Akashi. It is the power of the Sumiyoshi god that the texts credits for the miraculous bond between Genji and the Akashi Lady that results in the birth of a daughter who eventually becomes an Empress, thereby securing Genji's political fortunes, and bringing true a prophecy made when he was born that he would rise to extraordinary heights (*Genji monogatari* 1994, pp. 52-90)

In the *Genji* many of the amorous entanglements in which women find themselves embroiled are viewed not through the prism of coercion or consent, but rather through the Buddhist notion of *sukuse*, fate or karma, a recurrent term in the text. When the Fujitsubo lady discovers that she is pregnant after the illicit and transgressive liaison forced on her by Genji, her stepson, she attributes this crisis to a 'shocking destiny' (*asamashiki onsukuse*) ((*Genji monogatari* 1993, p. 177) Likewise, her attendant Myôbu also views this situation as a reflection of the 'inescapable bond formed from previous lives' (*nogaregatakarikeru onsukuse*) between Fujitsubo and Genji. Time and time again both men and women in the text read the circumstances that unfold in their lives as the workings of inexplicable causes and contingencies reverberating through past existences rather than primarily as consequences of their own actions as autonomous individuals who are in control of their own destinies.

### **Agency as Resistance?**

In what follows, I would like to consider the implications of theoretical perspectives that pose a challenge to the existence of an a priori humanist, transcendental subject, and to the stability of the status of man and woman as pre-given and self-evident identities, for these insights have considerable bearing on how we might understand agency (Riley 1988, Butler 1988, Scott 2005). Butler, for example, is concerned with the ways in which identity is an effect created through the naturalization of particular normative practices. Subjectivation for Butler is produced through performativity, that is to say, through the iteration of particular modes of conduct and bodily comportment that reinforce gender and other social norms. In other words,

we inhabit and perform a script that is not entirely of our own making (Butler 1993, 220).

Resistance implies the ability of an autonomous individual to stand outside of the normative framework within which we are produced, and yet we cannot stand outside of relations of power that constitute the self; if our own sense of a self depends on the norms that bring it into being, then as Butler argues, "...there is no "uprooting" of myself from such formative norms without a full destruction of myself" (Butler 2006, p. 285).

However, she still holds on to the emancipatory project of feminism by suggesting that there is always a certain open-endedness to each iterative performance of gender that may work not only to consolidate the norm, but also to effect its destabilization. Stripped of the heroic dimensions evoked by the word 'resistance', Butler's conception of agency allows for the possibility of subversion, understood not as something born entirely of will or intention, but rather as the effect of a slightly altered performance of the naturalized scripts that are intended to secure the stability of gender and identity.

Saba Mahmood's work on a women's pietist movement in contemporary Cairo pushes further the poststructuralist critique of agency and self-realization, understood as emanating from the will of an autonomous, transcendental subject, by seeking to decouple agency from the liberatory project of progressive politics. Mahmood does so by calling into question the universality of liberal conceptions of freedom, arguing that "the desire for freedom from, or subversion of norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also mediated by cultural and historical conditions..." (Mahmood 2005, p. 14).

If agency is treated as conceptually interchangeable with the notion of resistance against relations of power and domination, then acts, particularly religious ones, that work in consonance *with* social conventions rather than *against* them cannot be granted real agency.

Agency, particularly in religious contexts, often lies in the cultivation of forms of bodily comportment and other acts of self-fashioning to craft the self into a pious and ethical subject.

Wearing the veil, for example, is not a symbol of a pious woman's belief in Islam. It is the other way around: it is by disciplining the body and cultivating the qualities of humility and modesty through the donning of the veil that a pious subject is produced. A conception of agency that speaks only the language of compliance or resistance is clearly inadequate to capturing this mode of inhabiting the self and the world. Mahmood shifts the register through which we can understand agency by inquiring into how norms are "performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (*ibid*, p. 22).

This supplement to the discussions on agency I have outlined above is highly suggestive, for it offers a critique both of the transcendental subject, while at the same time locating subjectivity within the specificities of the historical and cultural contexts within which it is produced. Her attempt to delink the agency of the pious female subject from liberal conceptions of emancipation is particularly useful for thinking about female tonsure and agency in medieval Japanese texts.

### **Tonsure and Agency**

In medieval times, both men and women, regardless of their status in society, or the circumstances that led to them taking religious vows, shared in the aspiration to become lay nuns or monks at some stage in life, in the hope of retiring from the world of social obligations and preparing for a favourable death. Scholars have singled out nunhood as one of the sites upon which women's response to Buddhism's 'misogyny' came to be played out in the medieval period. Some have seen the act of tonsure as an act of resistance to unequal social arrangements: nunhood, in this reading, becomes the space of freedom that a woman actively chooses (Ruch 1990, p. 510). Others, working within the same conceptual framework of agency, have claimed precisely the opposite, arguing that the practice of tonsure was proof of women's oppression and subservience, in the face of patriarchal domination and Buddhist

misogyny, (Ishida 1978, pp. 1-15, Hosokawa 1989, pp. 143-151), “a form of death in life” (Field 1987, p. 189).

If we work within the framework of agency understood as either liberation or subjection, the particular reading that we favour becomes little more than an arbitrary choice. Becoming a nun may well have been a consequence of unfortunate social circumstances, but to see these acts solely as manifestations of either empowerment or victimhood reduces medieval players to little more than versions of our own selves. Many of the central female figures in medieval Japanese texts take the tonsure. In the *Tale of Genji* Murasaki is singled out as an exemplar of piety. It is the manner in which she cultivates and works towards the production of herself as a pious subject through certain affective and embodied practices that wins her the reputation of being a bodhisattva on earth in the text. In the religious rituals performed in honour of Genji’s fortieth year, for example, the ceremonies organised by Murasaki are singled out as comparable to the ‘true Paradise.’ The seriousness of her intent to take religious vows and her initiative in organizing the ceremonies for the recitation of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hoke Hakkō*) demonstrate her commitment to the Buddhist Way, which offers the possibility of disengaging from worldly attachments, and preparing for death. In the end she performs an exemplary death.

Female piety is usually given little credence in our readings of such narratives. Scholarly attention, for example, is directed to the fact that despite Murasaki’s repeated wish to take the tonsure, Genji refuses to let her do so. Murasaki’s reason for becoming a nun is emptied of religious content and seen solely as a way for her to deal with her husband’s infidelity. Her decision to leave worldly life is construed either in very negative terms as ‘death in life’ or as a heroic rebellion against a selfish and self-serving husband. However, both the taking of the tonsure and the inability to do so carry multiple significations in the *Genji*, and neither is reducible to being seen solely through the prisms of gender and agency, understood in terms

of a binary framework of domination and subordination. To do so produces anachronistic readings, which turn the *Genji* into a secular text where piety simply becomes a displacement or metaphor that obscures (when read through the lens of ‘gender,’ ‘agency,’ and ‘resistance,’) the ‘truth’ of the inequality and injustice of gender relations.

The starting point for our study of medieval Japanese texts must involve historicizing ‘Man,’ ‘Woman,’ ‘Body,’ ‘Gender,’ and ‘Agency’ – the analytic categories that are central to our readings of women in the literary and Buddhist texts of medieval Japan and recognizing that these concepts do not travel seamlessly across different temporalities and cultural traditions. Recent debates on agency, coming from a wide range of perspectives, have sought to challenge the self-mythologizing claims of modern liberal and neo-liberal ideologies by demonstrating that even in the contemporary West humans do not function as autonomous individuals, who exercise their freedom and choose that which is in their own self-interest. Modernity is no longer seen as the moment of arrival, when man’s search for autonomy and self-realization is finally achieved. On the contrary, in a curious coming together of pre-modern and contemporary perspectives, scholars have challenged the anthropocentric assumptions at the heart of modern conceptions of agency (Latour 1993, Latour 2004; Bennett 2010).

Man is no longer the sole maker of meaning in the world, and some of the fundamental dualities at the heart of the modern - nature and culture, subject and object, reality and representation, the human and nonhuman, have been shown up to be not truths about the world, but rather the story that modernity has construed about itself. The medieval view of the world, which once seemed radically incommensurable to our own is no longer so, as we recognize the limits of human agency by rediscovering how it is enabled and circumscribed by the most insignificant of material objects and living organisms. However, the medieval world can never be entirely assimilated into our own: the shadow of Man still lurks behind

our rejection of anthropocentrism, for there is no place there for the agency of gods, spirits, ghosts, and dreams.

### **Coda**

I have argued that in our well-meant concern and sympathy for women in medieval Japan we often treat as entirely unproblematic key terms such as gender, women, resistance, subjecthood, and agency, which we deploy as if they were universally applicable, rather than as contested categories that have been the subject of impassioned debates amongst serious scholars. By ignoring these debates, we fail to do justice to the very cause that we claim to have espoused. There is also a danger here that in our desire to speak on behalf our ‘sisters’ we sometimes unwittingly reproduce the imperialising gestures of first-world feminism (Talpade Mohanty 1984, pp. 333-358), taking upon ourselves the burden either of seeking to liberate non-western women (who are doubly disadvantaged in that they are seen as belonging to an unenlightened past), by finding in their actions something that might correspond to our conception of agency; or arrogating to ourselves the right to accuse them of either of passivity or complicity with patriarchy if their actions do not support the goal of ‘liberation.’

We need to remain open to the otherness of the world of the distant texts we encounter rather than trying to domesticate it to become a mirror of our own; some measure of humility is called for, whereby we allow the strangeness of other worlds to discomfit and unsettle our own categories and provoke critical examination of them. The result may be a better understanding of worlds other than our own, as well as a better understanding of the capacities, and the limits—including, perhaps, the unsurpassable limits—of our modes of comprehension, and a recognition that we too, as much as them, are inescapably in and of our times.

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<sup>i</sup> Tani Barlow charts a similar transformation for the case of China (Barlow, 1994).

<sup>ii</sup> Judith Butler makes this point when she argues that gender is for the most part the performance of a script that is given to us, rather than something of our own making. As she puts it, gender is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (*Gender Trouble*, 1990a, 33).

<sup>iii</sup> The ‘five obstructions’ (*itsutsu no sawari*) refer to the impossibility for women to attain rebirth as a Brahmâ, Indra, Mâra, Cakravartin or Wheel-turning King, and, most significantly, Buddha.

<sup>iv</sup> For a detailed account of how the impurity of the female body was used as an expedient means and deployed rhetorically in different genres in medieval Japanese writing see Pandey 2016, Chapter 5.

<sup>v</sup> For a study of the diverse uses to which the figure of Izumi Shikibu as topos was put in medieval narratives to tease out the connections between ‘woman,’ poetry, sex and enlightenment, and to portray her as both lascivious and sinful, but also as a bodhisattva, see Pandey 2016, Chapter Four.

<sup>vi</sup> Scholars have rightly argued that in pre-modern Japan social class rather than the gender divide was of greater significance (Wakita 1999). Focusing on their activities in nunneries, the burial practices for women, and women’s religious rituals and practices, they have demonstrated that women of the aristocracy played an active role within Buddhism. See Nishiguchi, 1989; Nishiguchi 2002; on the intersection of gender and class in the *Tale of Genji* see Pandey 2016, Chapter Three.

<sup>vii</sup> Faure, for example, recognizes the problems of treating “woman” as a unified category and of treating gender as the only prism through which to read medieval texts, and yet the question of women’s victimhood or agency looms large in his work. He claims that “women were full-fledged historical actors, and we should not be too quick in concluding that they were passive victims” and that “some resisted with more or less success . . . while others seem to have been ‘active’ victims, wilful agents of their own victimization (or of that of their ‘sisters’)” (Faure 2003: 331–332). Citing the case of Kumano *bikuni*, Faure argues that while purporting to work “on behalf of women,” they “contributed, albeit unwittingly to their debasement . . .” (53), and that “They tried to conceal the sexist nature of the dogma by presenting their message as one of feminine emancipation . . . these nuns contributed to the subjection of women to Buddhist male ideology” (78). Keller Kimbrough follows Faure’s approach, arguing that “while Kumano *bikuni* and other female proselytizers were obviously and perhaps unavoidably complicit in propagating aspects of traditional Buddhist misogyny, they were simultaneously engaged in its subversion. . . Kumano *bikuni* were pro-woman within an overwhelmingly misogynistic context” (Kimbrough 2008: 215).

<sup>viii</sup> Doris Borgen argues that “the possessed woman [in the *Tale of Genji*] is not a passive victim but an active agent who uses – subconsciously, surreptitiously, subversively – the charisma of others in the guise of *mono no*

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*ke* to empower herself” (Bargen, p.27), and that “spirit possession was yet another way to criticize and perhaps to lessen male domination (*ibid*, p.58). Norma Field observes that women such as Murasaki, Yûgao, Tamakazura and Ukifune are victims who “rarely protest, but that is because they cannot, either from ignorance or from the knowledge that life offers them no suitable alternatives.” And that “A profound passivity characterizes these women at such junctures” (Field, p. 167). Speaking of the young noble lady in the Heian period tale *Mushi mezuru himegimi* (*The young lady who loved insects*) Li observes that “the association of women with demons in her story is empowering even while self-derogatory (Li 2009, p.157).

<sup>ix</sup> This is what Barbara Newman, in her critique of such approaches to European medieval texts, calls “the temptation to idealize, the temptation to pity, and the temptation to blame.” (Newman 1990, pp. 704-705).

<sup>x</sup> Lynn Thomas, in her analysis of scholarly work on Africa suggests that “agency often slips from being a conceptual tool or starting point to a concluding argument, with statements like ‘African women had agency’ standing as the impoverished punch lines of empirically rich studies” (Thomas 2016, p. 324).

<sup>xi</sup> For a study of how the term ‘religion’ emerged in nineteenth century Japan see Josephson 2012 and Kraemer 2015.

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