

Rethinking Body, Woman, Sex, and Agency in Medieval Japanese Narratives

Body

Even in the modern West, the body, far from being a term whose meaning is self-evident, is in fact a hotly contested concept that has become the subject of considerable debate in the last few decades.¹ Nietzsche's invective against Western thinkers on the grounds that "they despised the body; they left it out of the account: more, they treated it as an enemy,"² whether true or otherwise, seems to capture succinctly how the body has come to be thematized, a century later, in an entirely new field of research devoted exclusively to it. What we might call the "body question" has spawned a bewilderingly diverse array of scholarly works in the Western academy, much of it a reaction against its own philosophical tradition, which it accuses of neglecting the body, or worse, showering it with abuse.³

The argument runs that for all the differences between, say, Greek philosophy and medieval Christian theology, Western thinking has been marked by a profound dualism in which the body has come to be constituted in opposition to the soul/spirit/mind, and that as the unprivileged term in the binary, it has for a long time been subjected to systematic neglect or denigration. That Western thought is dualistic; that the body has always been in a position of subordination to the soul/mind; and that woman, who is identified with the body, has been positioned as inferior to man—these, it would appear, are some of the constitutive features of the Western tradition.

Many scholars have sought to complicate and pluralize this particular account of the Western tradition.⁴ They have argued, for instance, that Descartes's writings marked a seminal moment in Western thought when a radical break occurred with medieval conceptions of the body—for the first time, both the body and nature became passive and inert entities, disconnected from the cosmos and divorced from the soul, and the mind became the sole repository of thought and of mental processes.⁵ It has also been suggested that new developments in the sciences in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe brought about new ways of imagining the body. The practice of dissection, for example, led to the

body being understood as a machine, which could be observed as an object, and analyzed as a discreet anatomical entity, made up of muscle, flesh, bones, viscera, and a skeletal structure.⁶ Regardless of the differences between those who believe that the body has been reviled since the dawn of Western civilization and those who argue that it is with Descartes that the body became loaded with negative connotations, what is indisputable is that “body studies” is born of the need to subvert and challenge the discourses on the body produced by that tradition.

Until recently these debates on the body have tended to veer between two poles. On the one hand, there are those who insist that there is an ontological basis to the body prior to social meaning or linguistic signification. In this view the body is first and foremost constituted through biology, which forms the physical substrate upon which different social and cultural meanings come to be inscribed. As Chris Shilling puts it, “we ‘all know’ that the body consists of such features as flesh, muscles, bones and blood, and contains species-specific capacities which identify us as humans.”⁷ While granting that the specific features of the body may change over time—bones grow brittle, hair thins, the flesh sags—the body, understood as a biological entity, is in this view universal, regardless of time or place.

On the other hand, the social constructivist approach has sought to move away from an emphasis on the physicality of the body and the attendant dangers of biological reductionism, by focusing instead on the body’s symbolic forms, and on the meanings with which it is inscribed in different cultural and historical contexts. This approach makes the idea of the body as a given, with fixed meanings, unsustainable. For, like childhood, death, madness, sex, and so on the body too now has a history, and far from being universal and stable, bodies are seen as particular, contingent, and changing formations that are historically and culturally variable. We recognize, not least because of the work of Michel Foucault, that the “body” is historically constructed and that it varies even in the history of the West.⁸

These contesting claims, for all their differences, have been framed within the mind/body and nature/culture debates, which have haunted Western thought since the eighteenth century.⁹ Given that these debates belong to a history that has little to do with the world of medieval Japan, is there a way in which we can speak about the body in medieval Japanese texts, without reproducing some of the core presumptions that have gone into its making as a category? I would suggest that the body/bodies we encounter in these texts begin to acquire some semblance of intelligibility only when they are inserted within the context of the larger epistemic framework of what one might loosely call the East Asian medical, religious, and philosophical traditions within which they are produced.¹⁰

The medieval Japanese world shared with its European medieval counterparts a conception of the cosmos in which the human and natural order were integrally

linked. This was a world in which men, women, animals, and gods inhabited a common cosmological order, often intermingling promiscuously with one another; gods were active agents and nature was a living presence, yet to be reduced to a passive object, to be given meaning by the Man of Reason. The relationship between the body and mind was not the site of troubled debates in the East Asian traditions, in the way that it was in Western thought. The question that pre-occupied Daoists and Buddhists alike was not whether the body and mind were connected (for it was assumed that they were); it was rather how the two could work most effectively together as a mind-body complex. The body, in this framework, was not reducible to muscle, flesh, and bone. Nor was it inert and passive matter, divorced from the mind. Mental and affective processes were understood as integral parts of its materiality, and the body was envisaged as a psychosomatic process, “something done, rather than something one has.”¹¹ “Thought” did not function as the other of “feeling” or emotion, nor was form the antithesis of matter. In the medieval Japanese tradition, the word *kokoro* referred to both heart and mind; the verb *omou* encapsulated both feeling and thinking,¹² and the word for love, *koi*, made no distinction between the physical and spiritual aspects of love. Both material and mental/emotional processes were central to the constitution of a meaningful body/self.

In Daoist religious and medical discourses, for example, the body is understood as linked to material and psychical processes alike through psychophysical matter or energy (Ch. *qi*; Jp. *ki*), and the energy arterial pulses (Jp. *myaku*). Together, they constitute the life force of the self. It is as if the distinction between the internal and the external does not apply, for the body presents itself as a perfectly transparent entity in which the viscera and organs are openly displayed. We are far removed here from the Western practice of dissection in which “the viscera are truths buried in and under dense flesh, and fat and bone . . . secrets that have to be uncovered.”¹³ This has implications for how the body is imagined and visualized in literary and visual texts.

Mark Elvin’s observation that “Chinese pictures of the human body, clothed or semi-clothed, are—to Western eyes—meagre, schematic and inadequate,”¹⁴ highlights the limits of the intelligibility of the body when it fails to correspond to the one that was produced in post-Renaissance Europe, and to which we are heirs. As John Hay observes, the literary and pictorial traditions of the premodern period in China have no “image of a body as a whole object, least of all as a solid and well shaped entity whose shapeliness is supported by the structure of the skeleton and defined in the exteriority of swelling muscle and enclosing flesh.”¹⁵ It is the principle of linearity underlying the energy arterial pulses, he argues, that “provided the most convincing way of embodying the kind of structures that gave

the body both its existence and its life.”¹⁶ This insight is highly suggestive for, as I argue in the following chapter, it is precisely through robes and hair, whose linear forms are analogous to the energy arterial pulses through which *qi* flows, that the body is imagined in a text such as the *Genji*.

Invoking the historicity of the body is not to claim that different cultures or periods produce one single, stable body at any given moment. We cannot speak of a “medieval Japanese body,” any more than we can of a “Renaissance body” or a “modern body.” For there is always a multiplicity of bodies in play in any given historical period, and both how they appear and the significations with which they are imbued are subject to the particular contexts and generic conventions within which they are discursively produced. In a courtly text such as the *Genji*, for example, the aristocratic body is imagined as a phenomenological entity whose presence is felt, not through elaborate descriptions of its physical appearance but rather through its stylized, performative modes. *Setsumuwa* tales, by contrast, which speak to a more heterogeneous audience, produce bodies that engage not only in the refined arts of poetry and music but also in the more vulgar activities of everyday life—sex, eating, defecating, and the like. And yet, the heterogeneity of these bodies notwithstanding, it may be possible to identify something that makes them recognizably akin one to the other, an affinity that rests on certain core presumptions that have gone into their making and which are grounded in the epistemic framework within which they are produced.

Let me explain further what I mean. In medieval Japanese pictorial scrolls (*emaki*), the body is made palpable not through the depiction of the body as an en fleshed entity but rather through robes and through what one might call bodily comportment. The twelfth-century *Genji monogatari emaki* (Picture Scroll of the *Tale of Genji*), for instance, seeks to capture the world of the *Genji* through the immobile postures of noblemen and women, whose faces, indistinguishable one from the other, are sketched minimally through the stylized technique of *hikime kagibana* (dashes for eyes and hooks for noses), registering little by way of emotions, thereby conveying the innate grace, self-possession, and nobility that are meant to inhere naturally to those who belong to the upper classes (Figure 1).

It is for this reason that by representing Kumoinokari in an upright position, as she approaches Yūgiri to snatch a letter from him, the scroll is able to suggest that something dramatic and out of the ordinary has occurred—Kumoinokari is in a state of agitation caused by her suspicion that Yūgiri is involved with another woman. The bodies of ordinary men and women in picture scrolls of the twelfth century such as the *Saigyō monogatari emaki* (Picture Scroll of Life of Monk Saigyō) or *Ban Dainagon emaki* (Picture Scroll of the Courtier Ban Dainagon), on the other hand, are marked by movement and action and exaggerated facial

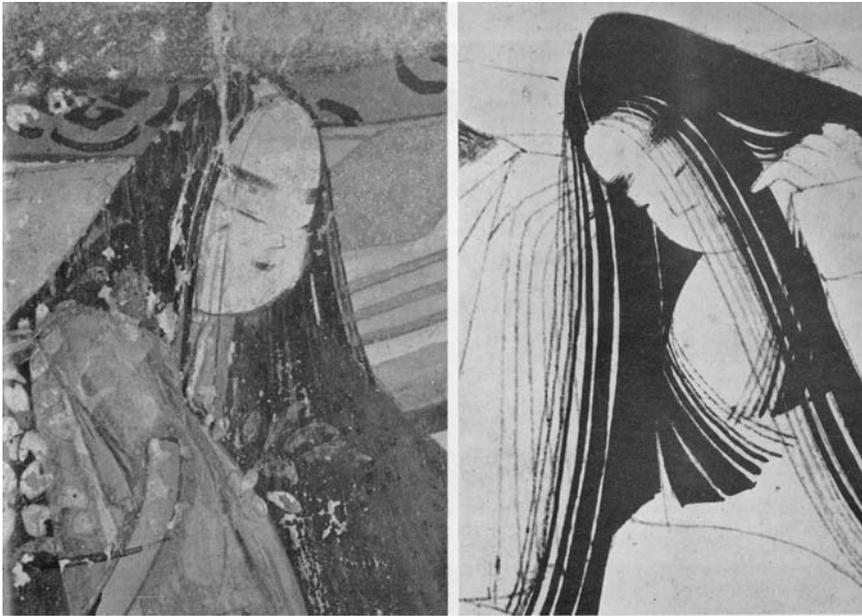


Figure 1. *Genji monogatari emaki* and *Makura no sōshi emaki* (Picture Scroll of the Tale of Genji and Picture Scroll of the Pillow Book), 12th century, Tokugawa Art Museum, Nagoya.

expressions and gestures, signaling the vast distance that separates them from aristocrats, whose self-contained bodies are manifestations of their supposed mastery of themselves and the world (Figure 2).

The diverse bodies that appear in the Japanese pictorial tradition are only sketchily outlined and are often delineated in a stylized manner. However, regardless of the differences of gender and class, the bodies in *emaki* are repositories not only of the physical but, equally importantly, of the particular mental/social attributes that are believed to characterize different social groups.

The bodies in Buddhist sculpture, which draw on Indian figural traditions, appear to conform to some recognizable principles of physiology and anatomy, that is to say, with conventions with which we are familiar. The guardian figures that flank the gates of temples, protecting the buddhas within, are depicted in a lifelike manner with strong, muscular physiques and bulging veins. Likewise, the statues of Zen masters, like Ikkyū, are cast in a realistic mode: hair, believed to be his own, is implanted on Ikkyū's head, eyebrows, and chin.

At first glance, what distinguishes the bodies in *emaki* as opposed to the figures in Buddhist sculpture is that the latter are depicted realistically. And yet, this



Figure 2. *Ban Dainagon emaki* (Picture Scroll of the Courtier Ban Dainagon), 12th century, Sakai Collection, Tokyo.

lifelike quality is not an attempt at a representation of the human body as an object, whose entirety is captured through the precision and accuracy of its anatomical detail. The statues of the patriarchs and guardians are not symbolic representations of holy figures, for they are not envisaged in a mimetic mode. Rather, they are seen as living embodiments of a life force made manifest in material form (Figure 3). What appears to have interested Japanese sculptors was the best way to capture “the energy and power by which the dharma—invisible, inconceivable, unknowable—mystically projected itself into the everyday world.”¹⁷

The bodies in these lifelike statues are seen as repositories not only of the physical but also the psychic attributes that go into the constitution of personhood. Sculpted statues of illustrious monks often contained their ashes, thereby suffusing them with the presence of these masters.¹⁸ Likewise, in using Ikkyū’s own hair to produce his statue the aim was not to create the most perfect likeness of Ikkyū; it was rather to inject the spirit of this holy figure into his statue. When medieval Buddhist tales speak of people going to the temple to pray before the Buddha, it is telling that they do not refer to the “Buddha image” (*butsuzō*), a word, which is a more recent invention.¹⁹ That no distinction was drawn between the image and what we would call the “actual” Buddha tells us something about the way in which the image was seen as making palpably manifest the body-mind of



Figure 3. The Indian Patriarch Mujaku by Unkei, 13th century, Kōfukuji, Nara.

the sacred figure. The eye-opening ceremony (*kaigen*) that accompanied the consecration of a statue or sacred object to formally declare it as being animated by its spirit constituted an institutionalized ritual, which reflected the commonly held understanding that statues, paintings, stupas, mandalas, and the like were all living sacred presences.

What Buddhist statues exemplify is a conception of the body in which the body does not exist separately from the mind; the two are integrated into a kind of mind-body (*shinshin*) complex that functions as a single psychosomatic entity.²⁰ Life or existence in Buddhist thought is made up of the five elements or aggregates (Sk. *pañca skandhā*) of which the first, *rūpa-skandhā*, is form or matter, related to the six organs of the senses (Jp. *rokkon*), while the other four are associated with mental faculties. The distinctions of form and matter or body and mind have no valence here given that the six sense organs in the Buddhist framework include not only what we would categorize as physical attributes—the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body—but also the mind/consciousness.²¹ Both the figures drawn in *emaki* and the holy figures that appear in Buddhist sculpture, for all their differences, share in the assumption that the body is not mere matter and that the heart/mind is integral to its very constitution.

Neither materialist arguments nor social constructivist claims are entirely adequate to conceptualizing the body in medieval Japanese texts. The social constructivist move to historicize the body is critical for recognizing that the meanings with which the body is imbued are not universal or constant, and that they are inseparably linked to the social and historical contexts within which they are produced. However, historicization need not lead to a denial of the materiality of the body, as in some extreme versions of culturalism, where the body seems to disappear altogether in a fug of discourse. It is worth taking the corporeality of the body seriously, while acknowledging that what constitutes the body's materiality is itself subject to variability. The body we encounter in the East Asian tradition is not an anatomical entity made up of flesh, bones, and muscles. Furthermore, its materiality already carries within it the psychological dispositions and mental attributes that go into the formation of the body and personhood. Even the physical substrate of the body, which we assume to be universal, is itself historically variable. The choice between the natural versus the social/cultural body that is on offer in these debates is part of a very particular history that belongs to the West, and hence necessarily inadequate to thinking about other traditions of embodiment, in which the body is imagined outside of the well-worn binary of nature and culture. It is this, to us, unfamiliar body that I seek to explore in this book.

Woman/Sex/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. As feminist scholars have long argued, sexual difference has been the basis for justifying the idea that women are innately inferior to men. It is by associating them first and foremost with their reproductive functions and, by extension, with their bodies, that women are seen as being naturally different from and, by implication, lesser than men. The profound somatophobia that characterizes Western thought, feminists argue, has had serious implications for the ways in which women have come to be positioned within this tradition. For if the body has been seen as a danger to the operations of reason, or to the salvation of the soul, then it follows that woman, who is synonymous with the body, and with unreason, is marked as inferior to man and to everything else that is valorized in that moral and ethical system.²²

Scholars who have challenged the idea that the body has uniformly been the site of denigration or neglect have had to do so by questioning the assumption that there has been a constant and unchanging alignment, in all of Western

thought, between male and soul/mind, on the one hand, and woman and body, on the other. Caroline Bynum, for example, has argued that gender imagery in medieval Europe was marked by an extraordinary degree of fluidity and that “medieval theologians and natural philosophers often mixed and fused the genders, treating not just the body of Christ but all bodies as both male and female.”²³ Thomas Laqueur, likewise, has demonstrated how until the seventeenth century, what prevailed was the “one sex model,” in which men and women were seen as having essentially the same sexual organs—no linguistic distinction was made between ovaries and testicles, which shared the same name, and what distinguished men from women was merely that men’s genitalia lay on the outside while those of women were inverted.²⁴

The one-sex model did not presume that men and women were equal: it was taken for granted that the male constituted the normative model of which the female was simply an inferior version. What is significant, however, was that neither the body nor its sexual organs were the privileged sites for the justification of particular social arrangements. To be one’s gender, to occupy a particular place within the social order as a man or woman, was itself seen as part of the natural order. Both what we would call “nature” and “culture” were cut of the same cloth, part of the same divine scheme, and there was no need to turn to the body for affirming this preordained hierarchy. Sex did not function as a biological category any more than gender did as a social one.²⁵

The epistemological shift from the medieval world that transformed the body into a machine, whose workings were seen as being governed by the laws of nature, and whose constituent elements could be observed and analyzed through the practice of dissection, also brought with it new ways of understanding woman, sex, and gender. By the eighteenth century, men and women came to be seen as radically different, and the isomorphism of their anatomy gave way to new theories about the incommensurability of their sexual organs. Among the many causes for this there is no doubt that political developments loomed large. When hierarchy was taken as given, and seen as part of the natural order of things, there was no specific need to justify the differential and unequal treatment of women. But in an age that began to speak of equality and liberty as being the “natural” state of man, a rationale was needed for why this equality and liberty did not pertain to women (or indeed to those of different “colors” or “races”).²⁶

The radical difference that was seen to separate men from women now came to be grounded in a biological truth, a fact of nature that could not be challenged or changed.²⁷ In place of the fluid gender boundaries and a belief in the interchangeable and permeable nature of the sexes that had characterized medieval thinking, sex now became the defining characteristic that marked woman off from

man and served as the overarching explanation for differences between men and women tout court. For those who sought to contest this view, the chief argument became that sexual or biological difference did not determine intellectual and other differences. The category “gender” emerged precisely as a way of arguing that social roles were not necessarily bound to sex; gender, it was argued, was “a social category imposed on a sexed body.”²⁸

The feminist project of the sixties and seventies assumed the naturalness of sex, while challenging the social roles that were seen as following from “natural” biological differences. It was in this context that what we now call “women’s history” emerged; at the heart of the political project of feminism that informed this history was a radical questioning of the androcentric biases of history writing and an attempt to rediscover stories about women, which had been silenced and written out of historical accounts. There emerged in these writings an autonomous women’s sphere within which women were active agents, alive, and even rebellious; the task of retrieval meant that women from the past could now be re-presented as the foremothers of and role models for women today.

The project of writing women’s histories reverberated across many other disciplines. Religious traditions came to be interrogated by feminist scholars who sought to expose the patriarchal and misogynous assumptions that they saw at the very heart of these traditions. Feminists who were also Christians were the first to undertake a thoroughgoing critique of the scriptural texts and to put forward a radical new exegesis of the Christian tradition from a feminist perspective.

It is not surprising, then, that in many ways the work done on women and Buddhism mirrors some of the same concerns and strategies that were first adopted by feminists working within the Christian tradition.²⁹ It is within the tradition of sixties’ and seventies’ feminism that much of our current work on women in medieval Japanese studies is squarely located. Narratives about nuns, princesses, courtesans, and women poets are now seen as central to the way in which we tell the story of both Buddhism and literature in medieval Japan.³⁰ Likewise, there has been considerable scholarly activity to discover women and their activities in historical records.³¹ Rescuing women who until now were “hidden from history” has undoubtedly helped us rethink the nature of medieval Japanese society, of its religious practices, and of women’s place in them.

The project of retrieval, however, has been fraught with problems. Underpinning much of our work is the assumption that “Woman” is a self-evident, transcendental category that subsumes within its fold the diverse multitude of women who appear in medieval texts. We may grant that women in this period did not all belong to the same social class and that there was a vast gap in their material

and cultural circumstances. In place of “Woman” we may choose the more encompassing “women” as our category of analysis. And yet, this lowercase, pluralizing amendment still leaves us trapped in an ahistoricism whereby the very processes through which the category came into being is left unexamined. What is at issue here is obviously not the existence of real women, for who would deny that claim? It is rather the assumption that women constitute a self-evident and distinct category, and that women recognize themselves everywhere and at all times as so constituted. Many of the questions and doubts I have raised above have been central to recent debates within feminism itself; it is a measure of our inattentiveness to these ongoing conversations that we continue to speak of women in medieval Japanese texts as if they formed a natural, pregiven identity, in little need of further examination.³²

What is more, we assume unreflexively that men and women in medieval Japan were merely versions of us moderns, and that for them, like us, the sexed body was the single most important and overarching site of difference between men and women. And yet, what are the grounds for claiming that men and women, regardless of time or place, have always been seen as being constituted through the differences between their sexual organs? Neither the “one-sex” model that prevailed in the West until the seventeenth century nor the sexual dimorphism that informed subsequent understandings of the body are necessarily applicable for interpreting how “male” and “female” came to be constructed in premodern China and Japan. As Charlotte Furth argues, classical Chinese medical texts, which formed the basis of Japanese medical theories, conceived of the feminine (*yin*) and masculine (*yang*) principles as complementary aspects of the body, which were seen to interpenetrate both men and women. The ideal body was the androgynous one, which held together both elements *yin* and *yang* in perfect balance. In Chinese medicine “healthy males and females, when seen as a fertile couple, formed the matching *yin yang* opposites of homologous gender.”³³

In this schema, not unlike the one that obtained in medieval Europe, sex and gender, which are premised upon a division between natural attributes and social roles, had little meaning given that “the categories of male and female were understood as both natural and social, and their bodily powers were given spiritual significance as fitting microcosmic participants in a universal order.”³⁴ It is for this reason that social relations were seen as mirroring the same principles that applied to the body and to the cosmos. “Male” and “female” were understood as complementary rather than mutually opposed, antagonistic forces. This did not imply, of course, that the two were equal: the male principle was the normative one and necessarily superior, but the perfect balance of the two was seen as central to producing harmony in both natural and social relationships.

For all the differences between medico/philosophical texts and literary creations, what marked the textual tradition of the medieval period in Japan was that “man” and “woman” made sense only when imagined in relation to others within the society to which they belonged, rather than as autonomous and transcendental entities, whose meanings were fixed and immutable. It was often as mothers, wives, and daughters, rather than as women qua women, that they were identified in texts. Rather than as individuals, it was their status and position in society at large that determined the manner in which they came to be known. In the *Tale of Genji*, for example, Onna Ichi no Miya, Onna Ni no Miya, and Onna San no Miya are introduced to us in terms of their social status and their relationship to each other as the first, second, and third imperial princesses, respectively. That they are women is not without relevance, but what their names signal is the fact that they are siblings, born of an impeccable lineage.

If we consider the semantic range of the word *onna* (woman) and *otoko* (man), it is clear that it was conceptually fluid, carrying many significations, which were always contingent upon context.³⁵ It is only within the specific context of amorous encounters that men and women in the *Tale of Genji* appear simply as *otoko* and *onna*, without any reference to their kinship status or rank. Even here, however, what these terms signify is not generic man and woman. Through its use of the terms *otoko* and *onna* the text evokes those suspended moments when intense emotional and erotic possibilities unfold, bringing into play *young* men and women who are still of an age when they can participate in the secular world of amorous sport, before their inevitable withdrawal from a life of worldly pleasures and attachment. For example, Murasaki is referred to as *himegimi* in the Aoi chapter. It is when the text suddenly transforms her into *onnagimi* and Genji into *otokogimi* that it becomes clear that their union has been consummated.³⁶ Likewise, it is when Yūgiri puts all his energies into trying to convince Ochiba no Miya to give in to his advances that the text transforms him from Taishō (Commandant), the social rank he holds, to simply *otoko*.³⁷ In the *Genji*, it is in that moment when amorous union takes place that *otoko* and *onna* erase the particularity of the two lovers in question, recasting them as figural sites of love, longing, and amorous desire.

In the world of the *Genji* and *waka* poetry, animals and plants are also metonymically associated with *otoko* and *onna*—morning glory (*asagao*), for example, is the face of a female lover in the morning; the child who is stroked (*nadeshiko*) is at once a flower as well as a girl, who is much loved and raised into womanhood by a man, while *ominaeshi* (maidenflower) functions both as flower and “maiden.”³⁸ Through a thick web of connections the deer is figured as male, while the bush clover, for whom it/he pines, is associatively linked to the female.

What is striking about the flora and fauna, however, is that they are not treated as symbols or representations of real men and women. Everything that exists within nature and the cosmos—animate and inanimate alike—is organized around a set of correspondences, and male and female is one among many ways of imagining relationships that are complementary to one another.

Onna in the medieval lexicon is a world removed from the modern word for woman/women, *josei*, which was coined in the Meiji period and which, as the character *sei* demonstrates, was founded on new biological understandings of men and women as constituted through their sexuality.³⁹ There is little to suggest that in medieval Japanese texts sex was “natural” while gender was socially learned and “constructed.” It is this sense of the term “gender,” understood not purely as a social construction, as opposed to the biological truth of sex, that I seek to maintain when I use it as an analytical category in the book. Gender, in this context, I see 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, that gives substance to the categories “male” and “female” in medieval texts. This is what makes it possible for a male poet to slip seamlessly into the persona of the waiting female, and allows even a monk who has ostensibly renounced the world to enact the role of a woman pining for her lover.⁴⁰ While acknowledging that “textual cross-dressing” was less available to women than it was for men in courtly texts, I maintain that what it meant to be a woman in a text such as the *Genji* or the *Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*) was not predetermined by her sex, and that gender as a performative act always left open the possibility of deviating from script, thereby creating polyphonus voices, which can only provisionally be recuperated under the sign “woman.”

Women and Buddhism

I have suggested above that in texts such as the *Tale of Genji*, “woman,” far from being framed as a transcendental category, is endowed with different meanings, which are always contingent upon context, and that in these texts, being a woman is not a function of her body’s sexual attributes but rather something that is tied to the enactment and performance of the protocols that give gender some semblance of stability. But what then of Buddhist canonical texts and popular narratives often used for proselytizing the faith, which identify certain characteristics as intrinsic to women, and sometimes claim that these attributes constitute an impediment to the attainment of enlightenment? For, as we know, women are often seen as being burdened by the five obstructions;⁴¹ they are afflicted by particularly jealous dispositions; and their bodies are marked by impurities connected

to menstruation and childbirth, which call for special injunctions prohibiting them from entering sacred places.

Scholars have focused precisely on these negative representations of women to argue that Buddhism is discriminatory toward women, and that the portrayal of women as inferior to men is a structural feature of its beliefs and practices. Indeed, part of the project of reinscribing women into patriarchal historical and religious narratives has entailed not only an investigation of the hidden and unacknowledged role played by women in shaping Buddhist doctrines and practices but also an exposure of the power structures that have been instrumental in their discrimination and exclusion.

Many of the debates regarding Buddhist attitudes to women rest on contending claims that seek either to establish Buddhism's misogyny or else to argue for its inherent egalitarianism. The claim for egalitarianism can take different forms. The fact that women often appear in Buddhist narratives as bodhisattvas and other enlightened beings is offered in support of the argument that Buddhism fundamentally holds women in high regard. Another approach has been to acknowledge Buddhism's decline into misogyny by historicizing the different phases of Buddhism, claiming that Buddhism's origins were pure and unsullied and that it became antiwoman only when it became corrupted by influences that were extraneous and antithetical to the core beliefs of its religious system. These claims, for all their differences, rest on certain shared assumptions that merit closer examination.

Buddhism is often treated as if it were a single, unitary, purposeful, and highly anthropomorphized category (rather than as a heterogeneous set of doctrines and practices) that either consciously or unconsciously seeks to impose its will on women. The fact that Buddhist texts speak of women's impurity and sinfulness, or of their power to arouse men and trap them in the web of deluded attachment, is offered as incontrovertible proof of the fact that Buddhism holds an essentialist view of women as constituted through their sexual organs. In a curious circularity, the critique of Buddhism as a religion that reduces women to their sex is made precisely by invoking the same master code, sexuality, that gives substance and cohesion to the category "woman."⁴²

And yet, is there sufficient evidence in the texts themselves to suggest that women formed an identifiable group that cohered around the specificity of their sexual attributes? The word in the Japanese medieval lexicon that corresponds to the term "body," *mi*, like the word *shintai*, which is used today to signify the physical body, refers to the bodies of human beings and animals as well as to the life force that animates these beings. *Mi*, however, makes no distinction between the physical body and what we might call the psychic, social, or cultural body; indeed,

mi extends beyond the body to signify a self, understood not as an individual subject, or autonomous agent separate from society, but rather as one that is meaningful only as a social entity. It is for this reason that one of the most common usages of the term *mi* is to signify a person's status or standing in the world. We are far removed here from modern conceptions of the individual, as a lone figure, abstracted from society, and often in opposition to it. 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 body in the medieval context was not something set in stone, where the distinction between man and woman was predetermined by their respective sexual characteristics; neither the body nor nature was seen as inert and passive matter with immutable attributes. This was of profound significance with far-reaching consequences, for it meant that medieval bodies were granted transformative powers that rendered the boundaries between gods, humans, and beasts porous and fluid. Both within canonical texts as well as in popular narratives, women and their bodies became shape-shifting forms that defied any consolidation of "woman" as a stable entity.

If the Lotus Sutra made rebirth as a man one of the conditions for attaining enlightenment,⁴³ the Vimalakirti Sutra argued that viewed from within the Buddhist doctrine of nonduality, neither maleness nor femaleness could be seen as innate or stable characteristics, thereby attesting to the provisional nature of gendered identities.⁴⁴ In many Buddhist texts, women who lure men into the trap of attachment are revealed to be bodhisattvas, and beautiful women turn out to be fox spirits or demons, seamlessly crossing the boundaries between the human and nonhuman worlds.⁴⁵

"Woman" in the Buddhist schema was at once singled out by a particularity that marked her as different. She was hindered by the five obstructions; her beauty was dangerous for men who had chosen the path of renunciation; her body was marked by the impurities of childbirth and menstruation. At the same time, woman could never be an unchanging and essentialist category, always fixed in the same way. For all bodies, even those of women, far from being "the flat, horizontal, immovable foundation of physical fact: sex,"⁴⁶ were conceptualized as active agents that could defy common expectations and perform miraculous transformations, thereby attesting to the power of the Buddhist faith.

That women were positioned as different from men, and that they were not their equals, is beyond dispute. This does not, however, render Buddhism misogynist, if by that term we mean a conscious and willful hatred of women by men.

In a world that was both naturally and socially (understood not as two separate realms) hierarchically ordered, Buddhists assumed that women were lesser than men, and there was little need to justify this “truth” by making women the objects of sustained attack through polemical treatises and learned disquisitions. While it is true that women’s shortcomings and sinful dispositions were often used in Buddhist discourse, what these writings sought to highlight was not women’s inferiority to *men* but rather the nature of the profound hurdles that had to be overcome in order to attain salvation. In other words, “woman” served as a kind of placeholder, who made possible the playing out of questions and solutions that were central to the Buddhist project.

Buddhist texts creatively used the topos of “woman” (marked by particular shortcomings and failings, but only provisionally so), as a skillful means, a *hōben*, if you will, to demonstrate the miraculous powers of the Buddhist teachings, which made enlightenment possible for all beings. In the process, what they revealed, through the topos of woman, was the temporary and provisional nature of all that seemed real in the mundane world of *samsāra*. This may be one way of reading the drama that unfolds in the Devadatta chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in which one of the Buddha’s disciples, Sāriputra, expresses doubts about the eight-year-old daughter of the dragon king possessing the necessary requisites for attaining Buddhahood on the grounds that the female body was a “filthy” thing, subject to the five obstructions. It is by overturning this narrative and recounting how the dragon girl swiftly transforms herself into a man and eventually achieves Buddhahood that Manjusri demonstrates the shifting boundaries between men, women, dragons, and buddhas. The rhetorical tour de force acquires its particular potency from the use of “woman” as a particularly graphic instance of the ways in which conventional and supposedly unchangeable realities can be overturned and reversed.⁴⁷ It is in this sense that the figure of “woman” is structurally central to the soteriological aims of the Lotus Sutra.

Discussions about women in *setsuwa* narratives, while ostensibly about women, also suggest an order of inquiry in which the central point of interest is not women qua women. What might be the best way to make one’s way in this world, and ensure one’s salvation in the next; how to outsmart one’s partner; how to make sense of events that befall one; what might be learned by being attentive to the intricate workings of karma? It is these mundane predicaments, attendant on living in the world of *samsāra*, that often find expression through narratives about women. Their pedagogical value goes beyond proselytizing exclusively to real women, for the textual figure of woman in these tales is a powerful reminder to men and women alike of the miraculous transformations that faith can effect.

Agency

I have argued that imputing egalitarianism or misogyny to Buddhism is based on the assumption that women constitute a self-evident category and that they recognize themselves as such, and hence work in their own interests as *women*. Let me return again to the project of “retrieval,” which presumes the existence of a female subjectivity, which is under constant threat by the workings of Buddhism. Once “retrieved,” woman presents herself in many guises: she sometimes appears to be able to mobilize her agency heroically and act in ways that challenge the attempts by Buddhism and patriarchy to degrade her as a *woman*; at other times, sadly, as a creature of false consciousness, she is complicit with Buddhism’s ideological agenda, or simply a passive victim of it. The project of unveiling women’s agency, empowerment, and resistance is always haunted by the doppelganger of women’s oppression, victimhood, and, worse, their own collusion with patriarchal values.⁴⁸

How we then judge medieval texts that are seen as offering these conflicting perspectives becomes an exercise in arbitrariness. To sustain the idea of Buddhist misogyny it is imperative to show that women are oppressed. At the same time the emancipatory project, built into feminism, demands that women be seen as agents, actively fighting oppression. If the texts themselves are resistant to either of these interpretations, then extratextual evidence is often mobilized to secure the argument—texts here are often treated as little more than ideological reflections of a reality that lies outside of them. In each case what is left unexamined is the concept of agency itself.

As I have argued earlier, the medieval world was populated by gods, buddhas, men, women, and animals, all of whom consorted together as active agents within a shared cosmological order. Humans had yet to be privileged as the sole bearers of agency, with gods and buddhas explained away as “projections,” or manifestations of the human mind.⁴⁹ In the medieval universe, gods and buddhas were often the central actors who instigated, inhibited, or mediated the actions taken by human beings. Our privileging of human agency bears the marks of our particular history—modern liberal thought presumes the existence of a subject who has complete political and moral autonomy, and who is naturally predisposed to seek freedom. Liberal notions of freedom presuppose the existence of a free will, which operates independent of social and religious customs and traditions, such that both a challenge to these traditions or complicity with them are to be read as emanating from a woman’s own desire or will to be liberated or dominated.⁵⁰ Agency is often treated as conceptually interchangeable with the idea of resistance against relations of power and domination. Even when female agency is not expressly

articulated, or is hard to locate, the actions of women are read as signs of a “nascent feminist consciousness”⁵¹ that may produce effects that challenge or disrupt the dominant male order.

Underlying modern conceptions of agency is the assumption that behind every act there is the presence of an autonomous individual, who has the innate desire to strike out against the norms of her society. What if we were to let go of this anachronistic assumption, and were to decouple agency from liberal thought?⁵² Would it not then open up a space for imagining alternate readings of agency that do not presuppose the validity and universality of conceptions and norms based on modern notions of autonomy and freedom? It is this, from our point of view, limiting notion of agency that is worth reinstating in considering women’s actions in medieval Japanese texts.⁵³

The tradition of taking the tonsure is a case in point. 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 favorable death. Furthermore, there were many forms that tonsure could take, requiring varying degrees of seclusion from the secular world. The category “nun,” for example, incorporated a wide variety of religious practices and living arrangements, ranging from women who continued to live within the household without taking part in sexual activities and procreation to those who lived in complete seclusion.

Scholars have singled out nunhood as one of the sites upon which both Buddhism’s misogyny and women’s response to it came to be played out in the medieval period. Some have seen the act of tonsure as an act of resistance to patriarchal social arrangements, and in that sense as an illustration of female agency. Fighting against the constraints that society imposes on them, women who take the tonsure are seen as exercising their right to decide and to choose how they want to live. Nunhood, in this reading, becomes the space of freedom.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ Or, in another manifestation of their subjection, nuns are seen as traitors who betray their own sisters by subscribing to patriarchal norms. As Bernard Faure puts it, “What if they [nuns] were only the ‘spokespersons’ of a dominantly male tradition and so complicit in the silencing of female voices?”⁵⁶

If we work within the framework of liberation or subjection, the particular reading that we favor becomes little more than an arbitrary choice. No one would deny that a woman taking the tonsure served a variety of ends, ranging from

testing the affections of a lover whose attentions had flagged to withdrawing altogether from a relationship that had gone wrong.⁵⁷ Becoming a nun may well have been a consequence of unfortunate social circumstances, but to see these acts as manifestations of either empowerment or victimhood reduces medieval players to little more than versions of our own selves. If personhood in medieval Japan is located in the social, and if it is not imagined as an individual and secular identity, then agency in this context would have to be disentangled from nineteenth-century liberalism, which speaks an altogether different language of choice and self-determination.⁵⁸

This would allow us to read women's tonsure as providing a socially available model for escaping from the trials of worldly life as well as engaging in the performance of pious and virtuous deeds that work not against but rather in conformity with the traditions and practices of medieval society. It would also allow us to recognize why tonsure, which bespoke a faith that enabled both men and women to give up what they and the world to which they belonged held most dear, resonated deeply within medieval texts. For tonsure in religious/literary texts, regardless of the circumstances that may have led to the act, elicited both admiration and sadness in equal measure.

Taking the tonsure and leading the life of a nun suggests the expression of a very different modality of action, which lies outside of the category of agency understood as resistance. Often the proper enactment of a pious and ethical life prescribed by that tradition meant "losing" rather than "finding" oneself. It was for this reason that stories about men and women who had performed acts of great self-sacrifice were retold in various forms over many centuries. The many versions of the Karukaya legend, for example, which focus on the religious quest of a father who abandons his family to become a monk at Mount Koya, and his wife and son who set off in search of him, gain their poignancy from the suffering and ultimate death of the wife and the sorrow of her husband, who now turned monk, cannot but be moved by the power of worldly ties.

That such stories, which were often narrated by Kumano *bikuni*, had such extraordinary appeal was in no small measure because they spoke to men and women alike; by dramatizing a tension that was central to becoming a good Buddhist, they brought to life the pain and suffering that were the necessary conditions for breaking the bonds of attachment. The forms that suffering and pain took were undoubtedly gendered and it was the stylized enactment of these conventional roles that had the power to produce affective intensities. However, religious acts for both men and women involved abandoning the self—understood not as an individualized entity but rather as something inextricably tied to clan and kin

by bonds of affect and duty—and reconfiguring it through surrender to the ascetic discipline and/or devotion required by Buddhism.

When we seek to reveal the misogynist and patriarchal assumptions undergirding medieval Japanese texts, we are not surprised to find our claims vindicated in works written or promoted by men, for it is assumed that men, for the most part, speak for their sex, in the process maligning or denigrating women, their oppositional other. More puzzling and inexplicable for us are those texts written by women that depict their own kind as passive beings, who lack the ability to shape their own destinies. For passivity implies subjection. Often an explanation for this curious lack of female agency in a woman-authored text is found by turning to the world outside of it: polygamy and other oppressive social arrangements during the Heian period are made, for example, to account for women's helplessness in texts such as the *Genji*. In medieval times, this text came to be associated with the sin of falsehood and had to be defended from the charge of lasciviousness and immorality by arguing that its author was in fact a bodhisattva who wished to alert readers to the dangers of amorous attachment.⁵⁹ Today, we no longer take seriously the medieval defense of this text. Modern interpretations of the text are equally products of their times and are often situated in secular assumptions, which revolve around questions of the inequality of social and gender relations. It is not surprising then to find that some of the more extreme denunciations of the sexual politics that the text reveals have come from such secular readings, which argue that *Genji* was a rapist, and that it was the cruelty of men toward women that Murasaki, the author, sought to lay bare in her work.⁶⁰

We may have distanced ourselves from the more extreme readings of our own times that caricaturize *Genji* as a rapist,⁶¹ but the ascription of either resistance or passivity to women continues to color our readings of the female characters in the *Genji*. However, as I have argued, agency understood purely in terms of *human* will and consciousness, acting upon the world, independent of gods and buddhas, does not adequately explain why so many of the protagonists of the tale view the circumstances that unfold in their lives less as consequences of their deeds in their present lives, but rather as manifestations of karma from previous existences.

There is also a problem with conflating gender relations in the real world with their textual figurations;⁶² in medieval *waka* poetry, *setsuwa*, and *monogatari*, *otoko* and *onna* often function not as literal representations of man and woman as fixed and unified categories but rather as variable performative stances that make possible a diversity of modes through which love and longing can be played out. The man who visits and the woman who pines and waits, rather than serving

as instances of men's agency and women's passivity, become more amenable to being read as figures of speech, which make possible the performance of stylized gendered positions, working in consonance with and, on occasion, overturning the prescribed trajectory of romance.

Misogyny, subjection, passivity, complicity, agency, rebellion, and resistance: these terms have now become integral to the repertoire that allows us to formulate the "woman question." Likewise, it is "woman" that has become the axis around which the terms body, sex, eroticism, and gender—the terms I have chosen as the central analytical categories of this book—now revolve. These categories I have sought to argue are modern inventions and have a particular history that is rooted in Western thought. However, to the degree that they have now become part of our common sense, we cannot dispense with them altogether, for the questions we wish to ask of texts that belong to another time and place are inevitably driven by our own preoccupations. In charting how these terms came to be within the history of Western thought, and in suggesting some of the conceptual difficulties that they pose in our reading of medieval Japanese texts, I hope to have signalled what is at stake when we embark on acts of interpretation using concepts that may not have made sense to those who inhabited the texts we seek to illuminate.